NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson

Four decades of warm, down-to-earth teaching on mindfulness, the brahmavihāras, and freedom

Carol Wilson

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CHAPTER 1

Four Fields of Craving

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk from the 1988 Three Month Retreat, Carol Wilson offers an in-depth exploration of grasping (upādāna) and craving (taṇhā) as the origin of suffering—the Second Noble Truth. She illuminates how grasping, a stronger form of craving, blinds us to reality and perpetuates the cycle of dukkha, drawing from the Buddha's first teaching in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta.*
>
> *Wilson examines the four classical fields of grasping: sense pleasures (kāmupādāna), views (diṭṭhupādāna), rites and rituals (sīlabbatupādāna), and self-doctrine (attavādupādāna). Through vivid examples—from retreat experiences of "vipassanā romance" to a memorable journey to Gatwick Airport—she demonstrates how grasping distorts perception, creates separation, and prevents us from appreciating what is actually present. She emphasizes that the danger lies not in pleasant sensations themselves, but in our inability to see the clinging that arises with contact.*
>
> *The practical heart of this teaching lies in using the controlled retreat environment to investigate grasping directly. Rather than condemning ourselves when caught in attachment, Wilson encourages welcoming these moments as opportunities to learn. Through patient, equanimous observation of the grasping process itself, wisdom naturally arises, the bondage weakens, and moments of genuine peace become increasingly accessible. As she beautifully conveys, understanding our sense activity leads to stillness and delight—the realization of total calm.*

About a specific quality of mind, a specific mental factor that arises—and that's the quality of grasping.

It also happens to be, along with its sister quality of craving which is slightly weaker, the second noble truth, or the origin of suffering. So it's not a slight quality, and it's one which I imagine we're all somewhat familiar with as we sit here through the days.

Grasping is a stronger form of craving.

When the Buddha was first enlightened, as you know, his mind was not especially inclined to go out and teach. With his capacity to survey the world and see what was going on anywhere he looked, he thought, "This truth that I have discovered is very profound and hard to see. You can't discover it by just thinking about it. The wise person has to experience it for themself."

But what he saw when he looked around, and what he thought to himself—at least as tradition hands it down to us—is that the people in this generation (and I don't think it's changed much) rely so much on attachment, in fact delight in attachment, that it would be too hard for them to see the truth. Because basically, attachment is blinding. And so his mind favored inaction, as they put it.

Now, one of the characteristics of a Buddha is that he has discovered the truth for himself and didn't have a teacher who said, "This is what you do and this is the understanding you will come to." He discovered it by himself. And that was the case because at that time the teaching was not alive in the world. So had he decided not to teach, it could have been a serious decision for all of us, because Buddhas don't come along all that often.

As you've heard the story, a being from a Brahma world came down and begged him to look around and see that while there were beings with much dust on their eyes, there were also a lot of creatures with just a little dust on their eyes. Those people would be able to hear the teaching and learn. And the Buddha saw that, and in seeing that, decided to teach.

I relate the dust on our eyes to this grasping, the tendency of the mind to grasp and thus blind us.

When the Buddha did start teaching, the first sermon that he gave was on these four noble truths. The first one being the truth of unsatisfactoriness or dukkha, which we've talked a lot about—all the various levels of it: grief, birth, death, sickness, old age, lamentation, despair, on and on, the whole list.

The second truth is that of the origin of this dissatisfaction. One can look at it on a moment-to-moment level. And that's this quality of craving in the mind, which produces renewal of being. It's suffering because we're craving what is elusive, what's insubstantial, what can never bring satisfaction. Also, when craving is present in the mind, it blinds one to a clear perception of truth, to a clear perception of reality in that moment. This is suffering. And it leads to a perpetuation of more of the same.

The other two truths—I don't really want to talk about them, but I hate to just mention the first two without adding the second two because it sounds too pessimistic. The third one, of course, is that there is a cessation, an ending to the suffering. And the fourth truth is the path to that ending, this eightfold path that all of us here are on at this moment.

To focus on the second truth: the difference between craving and clinging or grasping can be thought of this way. Craving is similar to someone who's groping in the dark to steal an object—the mind is inclining towards that object. But grasping corresponds to actually reaching out and grabbing it. You're really stealing that object at that time. And that goes on to give rise to concepts of "I" and "mine," of self.

Classically there are spoken of the sixfold realms of grasping, the sixfold realms of clinging. As Joseph spoke of the other night, there are only six types of sense objects that ever arise in our field of experience: eye objects, hearing, smelling, tasting, bodily feeling, and mind objects. They're just changing, one after the other, one after the other, coming and going with incredible rapidity.

Whenever there's contact between any sense object, sense base—such as a sight, the eye, and the knowing of that—when there is that contact of those three coming together, at any contact, that is when grasping can arise. And that is why mindfulness is so important.

When we're mindful of the process, we can see it unfold: there's contact, a smell arises, consciousness of a smell. The feeling arises that it's pleasant. And there's craving—the mind just kind of inclines towards that smell. Recognizes it as bread baking.

With mindfulness, that can be seen, and it doesn't have to turn into any big story. It's a pleasant smell. The mind inclines towards it. And that's all. Wisdom arises, can arise, from that seeing, from seeing the process. And in that moment of mindfulness...

The grasping does not arrive, does not arise, and this is the purification. In that moment of seeing the process, the clinging fades, the craving fades, and the mind is in that moment purified. Suffering then does not proceed to follow from that pleasant sensation.

But when it's not seen, when we don't see that moment so clearly, the craving would tend to strengthen into grasping. "Oh, that bread smells so good. I would really like to have a piece. I'm really hungry. I don't know how I'm going to make it through this sitting." And it can go on and on. The mind becomes really fixated on that particular experience. As one moment conditions the next, the grasping can grow stronger and stronger. We become less and less present. And that, to me, is what the Buddha meant by having dust on our eyes. We don't know what's happening when we're blinded by grasping like that.

The Buddha said, "For some people, contact—the point where sense and object meet—is enthralling. And so they are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But other people can come

to understand their sense activity, and because they understand it, stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does. And so their craving ends, and they realize total calm."

That sounds quite lovely. But a lot of the time it's not so neat and tidy. We don't simply notice, "Oh, I see the contact, I notice craving, no problem, it's gone." A lot of the time we wake up way far down the road, lost in some dream of eating a gourmet meal in a Parisian restaurant, and we have to really think back to figure out how we got there. "Oh yes, there was that smell of bread baking ten minutes ago, and I didn't notice it." Grasping can be very compelling.

What can happen from waking up from a fantasy like that is you go to lunch and bread isn't served. You're having millet and some kind of vegetable stew, and there's incredible aversion in the mind—whereas perhaps yesterday you were craving millet. It does a flip. Not only was one lost and blinded by the grasping, missing what was present during the sitting, but one is unable to appreciate what is actually present at lunch because the grasping to that idea, that smell, is still going on. When grasping is in the mind, we can't appreciate what is present.

It's like the story of the pickpocket in the time of the Buddha. The Buddha was giving a discourse and all these people were sitting there—this was during the time when many of the suttas end with all five hundred people becoming enlightened. It was worthwhile listening to one of his discourses. But the pickpocket could see only people's pockets, because that's what the grasping mind was focused on: wanting the money, wanting people's valuables, totally blinded to anything else going on.

Our practice here, knowing how blinding grasping can be, is not to judge it or fear it or condemn it or condemn ourselves for getting caught in it, but simply to see it, to understand it when it arises. Krishnamurti says, "Unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable." The Buddha also encourages us to understand how grasping works. He says, "There are many kinds of suffering in the world, and all of them grow from the same source: grasping. When a person knows no better, she or he gives way to this grasping and, slow and dulled, goes through one misery after another. So do not create this for yourselves. Use your knowledge to see how suffering begins and develops in attachment."

How can we begin to use our knowledge to see this, except by investigating grasping itself when it's arising? Not hating it, not trying to shut it out, not trying to pretend it's not happening and that we're really equanimous, but by really looking at it. The experiential nature of desire, of grasping, is the only way we'll truly come to understand it.

One way to begin experiencing it is very simply, on a physical level, just imagining what it's like. You're sitting calmly. Objects are arising. There's a thought. There's a sensation. There's the in and the out, the rising, the falling, an image, a sound.

You're kind of noticing and noting, nothing very much. And suddenly one arises and then—*aha*, this one. What does that feel like in that moment? I personally experience it almost as if the body were lurching forward. A tightening, a sense of being off balance. It's not comfortable. The experience of grasping itself is actually unpleasant. It's unbalanced.

And what's happening in that moment when grasping has arisen? Out of that flow of rapidly changing objects of awareness—perceptions, sounds, images, thoughts—one particular one has been isolated and grasped onto. Through that identification with it comes a whole flow of constructions. A whole self-image gets created, a whole sense of separation between me and other. Our perception becomes distorted in that moment. The mind becomes unbalanced, wavering and unsteady. It can't really see so clearly what's going on, never mind appreciating what's going on.

We can't really experience or know the interrelatedness of things—of the world, of life, of our experience—when there's grasping in the mind. Because when something has been isolated and grasped onto, whether a thought, a memory, a sound, or a self-idea, in that moment there's an immediate separation between me and other, me and the world. There's no real sense of interconnectedness. There's just me, the object grasped after, and everything else is in the way.

Two examples. The first uses a very common retreat experience: the VR, or vipassana romance—that person you're just so fascinated by, even though you may never have spoken. Say you're in your usual walking space, walking very mindfully, quite connected with the sensations of lifting, moving, placing. The mind is fairly calm, and this person just walks across your field of vision and walks away.

There's not really an awareness of seeing, but there's an awareness of pleasant experience. And suddenly: *Wow, that person. Maybe they're going to come walk here right next to me. Wouldn't that be far out? Or maybe I'll be able to sit next to them at lunch. Gee, I wonder if they even notice that I'm here. I wonder if I should leave a note on their zafu.* And on and on.

In that moment, what's happened to the clarity of seeing? Are you aware of anyone else in the room? You might be—you might wish they'd leave so that person would have room to come walk next to you. The same when you go into the dining room. Are you aware of the environment? Are you aware even of your own feet touching the floor?

Perception has become very distorted by this grasping after. And it's not even grasping after the reality of a person being there. It was just a pleasant sight that walked by and has been gone for ten minutes, but the grasping mind continues to build on it. When you really tune into that, it's actually quite unpleasant—very out of touch, very separative.

Contrast this with a time when you're walking, perhaps in the same place, but with a very calm mind, very tuned in to just the perception of lifting the foot. Perhaps there's tension and pressure, there's awareness of some thoughts coming and going, and there's that sense of real pristine beauty. You just look up and see the sunlight and there's a sense of how beautiful that is, and then that's let go and on with the walking. There can be this feeling of real calm and perfection just in that moment. Nothing much happening. Very ordinary.

So what's the difference? The only difference can be that there's no grasping in the mind. When there's no grasping, it's possible for perception to be very clear and undistorted. There's no isolating, no sense of having to separate me from there, from other. It's possible to know very clearly what's present and really appreciate it because the mind is free from grasping in that moment. This is a taste of the peace of mind of non-grasping—that sense of completeness in the moment, of nowhere to go, nothing to want, just a sense of wholeness and completeness.

As we continue to investigate, to develop our mindfulness, to see and understand the nature of this attachment, those moments become less rare as our practice continues.

I want to give one other, slightly less subtle example of how blinding and distorting grasping can be—one that's not from retreat, just so we're all clear that grasping also arises when we're not on retreat, although we might not see it in quite such a subtle way.

This was an experience that happened to me when I was in England a couple of years ago, visiting an American friend of mine. I only had a week, and I had to be back here. I had one of those tickets you can't change or you lose all your money. And I had to be back for work, so I felt the pressure to return.

My friend lived in the south of England, and we drove up to London, staying in a friend's apartment for the night. I was going to take the train to the airport the next morning. The friend wasn't there, and our other friends in London were all away as well.

So the next morning I had called a cab. I was getting ready to go when my friend became struck with the idea that he really had to drive me to the airport. It wasn't just a casual suggestion—I mean, he was on his knees begging. Could he take me to the airport?

I said, "It's really fine. It's easy to get the cab. I'll take the subway. It goes right to the airport. No problem."

We had this discussion about five times in an hour, with increasing franticness on his part, until finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I said, "Okay, okay. I'll cancel the cab. You can take me to the airport."

Now, this was his grasping. He wanted to spend a little more time with me. So already this last hour together had been miserable because we'd been arguing about it the whole time. By this point I had about two hours before the flight.

The thing is, he had no idea how to get to the airport, and neither did I. Our friends were all out of London, and the only map we had was one of these London A to Zs, which are great if you know where you are. But they're just little squares—about a hundred pages with only a few blocks on each page. You can find where you are, and then it says to go to page 47. You flip to 47, find where you are, and you're already off it again. It's not like you can just turn page after page; it's scattered all through the book. Plus you have to know which direction you're going—and we didn't.

So we called around. He thought of someone, finally got directions. The person said, "But it'll probably take you a good hour and a half." By this time I had an hour and forty-five minutes. It'll take an hour and a half to get there.

We got in the car. Now he was fine—he got what he wanted at this point. I went crazy. I was just a bundle of tension and nerves, and all I had in my mind was: *I've got to get that plane. I've got to get that plane.* I could hardly talk to my friend. He was just in the way. Any car on the road was in the way. Anything that happened was in the way of just this grasping in my mind: I've got to get that plane.

We managed to zip down through the instructions, and we got onto the motorway. As soon as we had gone about a mile, we came to a total dead-stop traffic jam. There was absolutely no movement. Since we didn't know where we were, we couldn't really get off at an exit because we would have been completely lost. So we were just stuck there.

My grasping came to a total head at that point—and burst. I thought, "Right. I'm going to miss the plane. Well, that's okay. I've never missed a transatlantic plane before. It'll be interesting."

And the fact that the grasping ended, I really settled back. I started enjoying the ride.

I started looking around and saw how the only difference in that situation was the presence or absence of grasping in my mind. And I started enjoying myself. Unfortunately, my friend at this point went into grasping mode, and he was miserable.

Anyway, the traffic moved. We got to the airport with about ten minutes before the plane was supposed to leave. So that got my grasping going again. And everyone in the airport was seriously in my way at this point. I mean seriously—to the point where I was butting in ahead of people, stepping to the head of huge long lines at Gatwick, asking people if I could get in front of them. But not with a sense of genuine interaction with that person. I mean, I said to them, "Excuse me, could I get in front of you?" But it wasn't a sense of real communication. This was an object out there in my world, in the way.

It was a very illuminating experience. I did make the plane. Of course, in the moment I wasn't thinking, "Isn't this interesting, grasping arising in the mind." But on reflecting back, I saw how divisive it is and how compelling that force of grasping was. And it really showed me that when the mind is filled with grasping, no clear discernment is possible. You can't really judge what is appropriate or suitable action. My friend couldn't really judge that it wasn't so appropriate or suitable to drive me to the airport. It was fine for me to take the tube, and a lot easier. The grasping blinded him to that, and my basic grasping at wanting him to be happy and to please him also blinded me. I went along with the whole thing. You just can't see clearly when it's going on.

As we continue to observe day by day here, we see not only is it incredibly strong, but how often does the tendency of grasping arise in a day, in just one sitting? How often does it come up? I think it's really important for all of us to appreciate just how deep this underlying tendency of grasping is, how quick it is to arise, and how really awesome the journey of discovery is that we're on. The importance of patience and equanimity in this process can't be overstressed. It's not that we'll just see grasping arise a few times and be free of it. It's a very, very deep underlying tendency, and we need to have respect for the work that we're doing here and a lot of patience.

It may not seem like a lot when you're sitting there and you become aware that the mind is grasping—say, at a thought of what a good sitting you wish you were having. And on noting the grasping, it fades and you go back to rising, falling. That may seem

like no big deal. But really, that is an important moment because it's a movement in that moment from blindness and distortion of mind towards clarity, towards freedom. And in that moment of mindfulness, it's strengthening succeeding moments of mindfulness. So don't underrate these little moments of seeing clearly. They're very valuable.

Classically, there's talked about fourfold grasping—four large areas in our lives where grasping takes place. The first one is the area of sense desire, which is rather obvious and rather huge. I like this definition of grasping to sense desire: "laying a firm hold on." It implies the inability to shake off a thing even after experiencing great pain due to it and perceiving its many harmful consequences.

I can really see how often I do that. How often do any of us do that? Continue to hold on to, go after something that we've experienced pain from over and over. Just a simple—maybe not so simple—area of eating. How often do I sit and keep eating something when I know I'm full, when I know in half an hour I'm going to not only feel physically uncomfortable but be mentally berating myself, if not a lot worse? And then the next day do the same thing. Or two hours later do the same thing. All the while knowing that that's what's going to happen. But the grasping in that moment is just too strong, and I just don't see it. We all do that very often.

The Buddha spoke a great deal, in very graphic terms sometimes, about the perils of sense pleasures, the dangers that there are in them. He likened them—these are some of the less graphic similes—to something borrowed, because the owner takes it back. Or sense pleasures are like a dream, because when you wake up, they're gone. I want to say a little bit about this: it's not so much to see sense pleasures or pleasant sensation as something bad, or that when one enjoys sense pleasures there should be a sense of guilt or sin, or a lot of our Western conditioning around it. Not that at all.

Or even necessarily that in order to understand, one has to renounce all sense pleasures and go live in a cave in the Himalayas.

I think it's really important to see that the danger is not that pleasant sensation is inherently bad. But when there is contact with the pleasant, with sense pleasure, that underlying tendency of mind to grasp is so strong—it's just so strong—and we're so unused to being mindful of it, it can be so hard to see. It can be so overwhelming that we're so easily cast into blindness from it. It's so easy to get lost in the cycle of grasping and becoming and wanting more and suffering from it. And in doing that, we're unable to see what's really going on. That's the danger.

Just last night, for example, I was driving back home in the evening and it was a lovely clear night. The full moon was just rising in front of me, really big. It was really beautiful—if I had been noticing it. But I was playing a tape on the cassette, and I really only wanted to hear about a one-minute portion on this tape, and I didn't know where it was. So I was going back and forth, back and forth, trying to find this one minute. And I wasn't noticing the moon. I wasn't noticing how I felt. I wasn't noticing the music.

Then I decided to quit going back and forth. I said, well, it must be around here, and I just left it playing. But every time a new section would start, I'd think, "Oh, that's it." "Oh no, it's not." Then I'd sit back, and I didn't enjoy the music that was playing. I would look and go, "Oh yeah, the moon's pretty." And it was a reflex. I wasn't able to appreciate the moon. I wasn't able to appreciate anything because I was grasping after this one little piece of music—one little minute of music. I mean, who cares? But I spent the whole ride doing that. I never heard the piece of music. And I never really appreciated the moon. And this is one little tiny incident in a day of many incidents like that. We like to think that we're a bit more aware, that we're paying attention.

So that's how easily we can get lost in sense pleasures. That wasn't even a pleasure—it was the anticipation of a sense pleasure that I never had. Grasping at sense pleasures just doesn't work. It's like trying to quench thirst with salt water. You just need more and need more and you never get to where you feel satisfied. The danger in sense pleasures is not in the objects themselves, but in not seeing the clinging.

This is a quote from Lama Yeshe: "Most of us do not know what renunciation means. We are disturbed when we hear about giving up attachment to sensual pleasures, which we take to mean having to suffer in order to achieve inner liberation. But renunciation does not mean that we must give up happiness or that it is desirable to suffer. On the contrary, our aim is to achieve a state beyond suffering. The aim of most of our daily lives is to try to satisfy each desire as it arises, day after day, month after month, year after year. We try to achieve happiness by perpetuating something that is essentially transitory. This expectation, stemming from a misconception, can never be fulfilled and is therefore totally irrational."

And so it's also not to fall into the other extreme of fearing contact with something pleasant. "Oh my God, if I experience a pleasant sensation I'm going to be lost in craving and grasping. I have to go and hide." That's just the flip side. That's just as unbalanced as being lost in craving. Rather, our practice is to develop through mindfulness and clear seeing a balance of mind. A mind that is equanimous, that doesn't need to move toward the pleasant and try to perpetuate it. That doesn't need to flinch back in fear

from the unpleasant and try to get away from it. A mind that is steady and not needing to spend its life running back and forth—towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant.

Suzuki Roshi said that renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of the world, but in accepting that they go away. And that's a mind of balance, a mind that's calm.

In our daily life—not when we're on retreat, but in our daily life, in this culture—we are subjected to such a bombardment of sensual input.

And so much of it is potentially pleasant. It's so easy in our lives to move from one pleasant sensation to the next, to the next. If there's something unpleasant, we can usually find something pleasant to move to, to avoid it. It's such a whirlwind. And we can get so lost in this whirlwind of constantly shifting pleasant sensations that it becomes very difficult in our daily life to be aware and see the process of grasping as it arises, to see how it's bringing on suffering. Because it's very easy to skip from one object when we aren't satisfied by it, to skip on to another object, and to not really stop long enough to see that it's the search itself that's bringing us the suffering.

So here, one of the real benefits of being here is that this environment is so controlled. The sense input is so much more restricted than in our ordinary daily lives. True, the mind can find plenty to grasp at. It just kind of moves from something big like wanting to go to the movies to something little like what time shall I have my cup of tea and how many shall I have today? But it's so much more restricted that it becomes easier to see the process. And this is really valuable.

In our daily lives, it's a rare experience when strong craving arises and turns into grasping, that we say, "Well, I'll just sit here and see what this feels like." We're so conditioned—grasping, right, go for it, do something to get away from it. But if you're sitting here, true, many times grasping comes up in the day and you're halfway through a walking period and suddenly find you're halfway out the door and over to the tea urn before you've noticed it. But many other times you might be sitting in here and a strong thought arises: "Gee, I'd really like to go have that snack I stashed away at lunchtime." But you're not really going to bound up in the middle of the sitting, hopefully, and go out and get the little pack of raisins that you saved for three and a half days and suddenly have to have right now. If nothing else, peer pressure will keep you sitting there.

And so that is a great opportunity to actually experience what grasping feels like—to see that whole process, to sit there and be mindful and feel what grasping is like. You might find that it's unpleasant. You might find that it's really unbalancing. And also that

it's okay. It's really not all that terrible. It's quite possible to sit and experience the physical and mental processes of grasping. And from doing that, we learn that we can be with grasping. We don't have to run to a new experience each time grasping arises just in order not to feel the grasping.

And we start to see that a lot of the reason we're driven by grasping is just to get out of that state of grasping itself. What's so pleasant about achieving the desired result? The grasping stops—until the next moment it arises again and then we have to go get something else. So the chance to sit here and be with it, without doing anything about it but just experiencing it with bare attention and mindfulness, is a great opportunity. When it arises, there's no need to curse it but to welcome it as a chance to learn. As we continue to do this over and over, to see this process with mindfulness, understanding begins to grow from this clarity of seeing. And with it also grows equanimity of mind. We begin quite naturally to be able to greet sense objects with detachment.

Now by detachment is not meant a negative quality of aversion or denial, or even a detachment of "Right, I see that object over there and I'm detached from it, equanimous." But detachment meaning really a dissolving of the attachment—that sense of equanimity, of peace. The Buddha said, "Through dispassion one is freed."

The second area of grasping—the first one being sense desire, sense pleasures—is grasping at views. And this also is a huge area. By views is meant the tendency of mind that leads one to think, "This alone is true; everything else is false." And this, again, is blinding. We do it a lot. To hold to any one view, any view at all, limits our world. It limits the possibilities of what we can see, what we can understand, what we can experience and know. Because we tend to accept only the facts that corroborate our already held view. The stronger we're grasping onto the view, the harder it is for us to accept any evidence that goes against it.

It's easy to see how this works in the world of politics. I thought of it a lot watching the presidential debates, where the two men would just sit there spouting out their views, with no sense of a meeting, of really listening—"Oh, well, maybe what you say might be true."

And you'd sit there watching, and they couldn't both be true. One doubted if either of it was true. And there was certainly no sense of trying to open up the views of either person to let in what the other was saying. Just a very rigidly defined world. The whole effort seemed to be to get everyone who was listening to buy into one person's view or the other, without any sense of real questioning. It was scary, actually. I found it scary.

The Buddha told a story about how views can so blind us that we can't see the truth when it confronts us directly. There was a man who was a widower with a young son, about five years old. Once when the man was out and the son was home, some robbers came and burned down his house and the whole village, and kidnapped his son. The man came back and saw this whole ruin, and he found a little charred corpse. He assumed it was his son and was incredibly upset—wailing and moaning, really beside himself. He had the little corpse cremated and had a very nice bag made for the ashes, which he took with him everywhere. He couldn't get over it. He carried the grief and lamenting with him everywhere he went. It felt as though his life were ruined. Eventually he rebuilt his house and continued living, but in total misery.

One night, some months later, his son, who had escaped from the robbers, found his way back to his father's new house and was knocking on the door about midnight. The man was yelling, "Who's out there?" The boy said, "Father, it's I, your son." The man said, "Impossible, my son's dead." "No, father, really, it's I, your son. I've escaped, I've come back." But the man was so locked in his view of what had happened that he said, "No way are you my son. I have my son's ashes here. Go away." He wouldn't come down. He wouldn't open the door. He drove his son away and never saw him again.

This story shows how strongly we can be caught in views that we create ourselves, unable to open to what is true if it doesn't corroborate our view. And we do this all the time in sitting. How often are you sitting here and have a certain kind of experience, and you think, "Oh, so that's what a good sitting is. That's what good concentration means." In that moment, there's a view. All those experiences in that sitting come to mean "good concentration." And if that is grasped onto, adhered to, then all other experiences are going to be judged by that view.

Now, that sitting might have had nothing to do with good concentration—it might have just been pleasant. Or even if it did have to do with good concentration, holding onto that sense of it, that view of it, is going to blind one to any further or different experience, because one is trying to recreate what one views as good concentration. And how often do we do that, just in a single sitting?

There are many stories in the suttas about people coming to the Buddha and questioning him about all the different teachers around at the time, who all professed different views and different explanations of the universe and of teaching and of Dharma. They always wanted him to say which one was right, which one was wrong, which one he agreed with. And he would never get involved in any of them. He would never asso-

ciate himself with any view. He'd say it's because holding to any opinion, any belief, brings conflict. It brings contention. It brings conflict both with others and within our own self.

One thing he said is that people with views just go around annoying one another. Because when you have a view, then you have to prove it to somebody who doesn't agree with you, or you have to uphold it, or you have to convince them, or they have to convince you. And it just leads to conflict. At its ultimate level, we can see it leads to wars. It's really scary, the power of grasping at views.

It leads to conflict within ourselves, within our own mind, too. Just again, back to the examples of sitting and how easily we can form a view from something that happens and grasp onto it.

It can be the view, "I'm not having many emotions arising, I must be suppressing, I'm doing something wrong." It can also be the view, "I'm having too many emotions arising, I'm not mindful enough, I'm doing something wrong." Or, "Oh, finally, here's bliss. This is what it's supposed to be like." And then the whole rest of one's retreat is spent trying to recreate that state of bliss.

As soon as one has formulated a view and grasped at it—and it's the grasping that brings the suffering—one is in conflict with oneself. The view that "this is what my experience is like, I'm suppressing emotions, I'm not doing it right" is in conflict with other views that we hold of how it should be done. They don't go together, and we suffer. We're in conflict. We do this all the time.

As soon as we can see a view and let go of it, the tendency is very strong to adopt another one in its place. I watch this in my practice all the time, on just real subtle levels. I'll be sitting, noting, watching things happen, and I'll hit a certain point where the noting is going very fluidly and it feels good. It usually feels good for a view to arise that "this is how it's supposed to be"—so that's always a good one to watch out for. I think, "Oh, that's it. Okay, now I've got it." And then it won't go that way anymore. It'll start to be more difficult. I'll start to suffer. And in that suffering, I'll look a little closer and I'll see, "Oh yeah, I had grasped onto that as a view." I let it go, and in the next moment: "But now, this is how it really is." I've watched that over and over and over again.

As Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "Sometimes somewhere you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it. Guarding knowledge is not a good way to understand. Understanding means to throw away your knowledge. You have to be able to transcend your

knowledge the way people climb a ladder. If you are on the fifth step of a ladder and think that you are very high, there is no hope for you to climb to the sixth. The technique is to release. The Buddhist way of understanding is always letting go of our views and knowledge in order to transcend. This is the most important teaching."

So again, it's not that views in themselves are inherently harmful or inherently cause suffering. It's just important to recognize them when they arise as views, and not to grasp at them as manifestations of the truth. To see when there's a view in the mind, and to see when grasping arises to that view. When we don't see the grasping, suddenly we have a new truth that we're guiding our life by. This is not a rejection of knowledge, not a rejection of methods of practice. They can certainly serve, and we are certainly using them, as skillful means. But we must see them for what they are and not grasp onto them and get lost in that.

The Buddha said, "One who is freed does not concur, does not dispute with anyone. She or he employs the speech currently used in the world without misapprehending it." So it's not that we say, "Well, I don't have anything to do with views. I don't have anything to do with a sense of 'I'"—and so we can't even relate to people. There's no other way to relate than by using our common speech. But we don't misunderstand and misapprehend a view to be the truth.

In our practice here, it's simply to know when a view has arisen, to see it as a view, to know if there's grasping in the mind to that view or if there's no grasping in the mind. This applies to views about everything—about truth, about practice, about enlightenment. As the Third Zen Patriarch said, "Do not search for the truth, only cease to cherish opinions."

The other two fields of grasping I don't really have time to talk about much; I'll just mention them. The third one is grasping at rites and rituals, which can be explained as having the idea that one can make oneself perfect, and then grasping at external, outward behaviors—rituals, rites—in order to become perfect.

And that's different from a committed investigation of the actual nature of mind and body to come to know the truth. It's simply looking at what's actually going on rather than grasping at a particular ritual to make oneself perfect. This is not obviously to discard method and technique—they're clearly valuable tools—but also not to mistake, in the Zen parable, the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

The fourth field of grasping is a huge one: grasping at the self-idea, the idea of "I," which could be several whole talks in itself. This is defined as considering the ever-changing world in the light of a permanent, unchanging essence—as if there's some

permanent, unchanging self that's considering the world. It can also be seen as the latent, underlying tendency to identify with any experience whatsoever that comes up. It's not as if there's a solid self-idea sitting there, but rather this latent tendency that arises very frequently—to grasp onto something, identify with it, and make a self.

For example, just an easy example in your sitting: there's an unpleasant sound. There's contact—a sound. It's unpleasant. Aversion arises. And that aversion is grasped onto. In that grasping, that feeding of it, the aversion turns into anger. It gets really full-blown. More grasping, and it becomes "my anger." "I'm really angry at that person for moving and destroying my concentration in this sitting." And it can go on and on—either building up to self-justification about what a jerk that person is and how right I am, or the other side, self-condemnation: "They're doing the best they can, I have no right to be angry, I'm such a horrible person after all."

Either way, moving from that grasping, isolating out that particular experience of unpleasantness and aversion, and through that grasping comes all the construction and buildup. How solid has the sense of "me," of self, become in that moment of self-justification or self-condemnation? The "I" is very solid in that moment, constructed through the process of grasping and identifying with a particular experience. This tendency of grasping and identification with experience is so strong. This is the grasping at the "I" idea, the self-idea. As I said, this is a huge topic, and I just want to mention it quickly here.

If that aversion is not grasped at—even if it is grasped a little and moves to anger, but then the grasping is seen and let go—the anger will be there for a while as experience, and then it just kind of dissolves or floats away or turns into something else. And the sense of self is not nearly so strong. It fades out with the identification, perhaps to arise again in the next moment with the next grasping and identification.

Again, I just want to emphasize that this is not about condemning the quality of grasping or judging ourselves when we find that we're really caught in grasping. Actually, at that moment, that would itself be identification with the grasping. What we're doing here is simply using this opportunity that we have—a rare opportunity for most of us—to begin to be able to see this process. To see how powerful it is and to respect that. To see its arising, and through that seeing, and through the times that we get caught, to begin to understand how blinding it is. Through the mindfulness of it, when it arises, through that seeing, wisdom also arises. And the bondage of grasping can begin to weaken. It can begin to arise less strongly.

This is Krishnamurti: "We are forever craving something, and having tasted many things which were mostly unsatisfactory, we now want the ultimate thing—God, truth, or what you will. We want a result, a new experience, a new sensation that will endure in spite of everything. We never see the futility of result, but only of a particular result. So we wander from one result to another, hoping always to find the one that will end the search."

And so it's possible, through this practice of mindfulness, through seeing the process of the search and the suffering that comes from the grasping, to end the search. Through this investigation, through this practice of mindfulness that we're all engaged in.

"Because when they understand their sense activity, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does. And so their craving ends. They realize the total calm."

It really inspires me to feel that this is a possibility for all of us—to really understand through our clear seeing and mindfulness this process. The process of contact. The process of grasping. And to begin to realize calm and peace.

CHAPTER 2

Morality (Sīla)

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this foundational talk from the 1989 Three Month Retreat, Carol Wilson offers a rich exploration of sīla (morality) as one of the three essential trainings in the Buddha's path, alongside samādhi and paññā. Rather than presenting the precepts as mere rules or outer constraints, she reveals how working with morality becomes a fascinating and increasingly subtle practice of investigating our intentions and motivations.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that Buddhist morality is fundamentally about intention—the mental states that accompany and motivate our actions. The same external action can be skillful or unskillful depending entirely on the volition behind it. Drawing from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, she highlights how the Buddha repeatedly stressed that concentration imbued with morality brings great fruit, and wisdom imbued with concentration leads to complete freedom from mental corruptions.*
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> *Through personal examples and reflections on each of the five precepts, Wilson demonstrates how this practice moves from acquiescence to outer authority toward an inner expression of harmony. She explores the precept of non-harming beyond simply not killing, examining how our choices—from dealing with insects to consuming media violence—ripple outward. The precept against stealing becomes an investigation of inner contentment versus the gaining mind. Right speech reveals itself as surprisingly difficult, with subtle colorations of truth, gossip, and harsh words requiring ongoing attention. Throughout, Wilson invites practitioners to use each action as a field of learning rather than judgment, cultivating the peace and clarity that become the ground for deeper insight.*

So it looks like you all survived the first day.

I know something about when we went last night from the orientation period to the period of the intensive retreat. Some staff people were telling me they could just feel the whole energy of the place change in quite a wonderful way. And I'm actually quite jealous of all of you beginning in this amazing endeavor. Whether you've never done it before or you've done it six times before, it doesn't matter, because it's new and exciting and insightful. I really think it's the most wonderful thing one could do with three months of one's life. And it's a pleasure to be here.

Last night, when we opened the retreat, Steve and Sharon offered the refuges and the precepts. We did that not just because it's tradition and a nice thing to do. Regarding the precepts, as Steve said, it's much more than tradition or something to pay a little bit of attention to in order to get on with the real practice. Working with morality—which is a translation we can come up with for sīla, the Pali word—is really a very integral, very important part of the path, part of our practice.

In the Buddha's teachings, there are three major areas of training: sīla, or morality; samādhi, often translated as concentration; and paññā, or wisdom. And in the Eightfold Path, three of those steps are concerned with sīla. So it's not something to be seen as inferior or not as interesting or lesser. For one thing, it's the actual foundation on which our practice is built. And for another thing, I find working with morality, working with sīla, to be a very fascinating, incredibly insightful, and increasingly subtle form of practice.

Often in the beginnings of my own practice—and maybe for a lot of us here in the West—we have tended to want to skip over the morality part of things, the sīla part. Give it more cursory attention and get on to the really interesting stuff: working with concentration, working with wisdom.

One of our Asian teachers has often used an analogy: it's as if we get in a rowboat and really work hard, row really hard to get somewhere, but we forget to untie it from the dock. Working with meditation without giving due attention to our actions, the ground from which we move, is like doing that. It's the ground from which samādhi and wisdom can grow.

In the discourse that's considered his last discourse, called the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta—it's actually a series of discourses that he made as he was going around on his farewell tour—in about eleven out of the fourteen places that he spoke, the Buddha gave a little brief synopsis saying: such and such is morality, such and such is concentration, such and such is wisdom. And he really emphasized that concentration, when it is imbued with morality, brings great fruit and profit. And wisdom, when it's imbued with concentration, brings great fruit and profit. The mind imbued with wisdom becomes completely free from the corruptions of mind—of sense desire, becoming, false views, and ignorance. So let us not miss the significance of the fact that the ground, the root, of this is morality. No part of the path can exist in isolation. It's a very holistic, integrated path.

I want to share some thoughts and reflections about the practice of morality, the practice of sīla, mostly from my own experience. Because I think in itself, it's not a practice we do just to get concentrated—well, if I follow the precepts then when I sit my mind will be calm, I can get concentrated. It's a very powerful and vital and fascinating practice in itself.

My experience of it has been that it's a real practice of the heart. It's moved from perhaps a sense of acquiescence to an outer authority—a sense of the rules that we're told to follow, that makes sense rationally, but is an outer acquiescence—to what becomes an inner expression of greater harmony. Harmony both with the external environment, with other people, and also a sense of harmony in our own being.

As we continue to work with harmonizing our actions outwardly, it leads to a much deeper understanding in our own heart of the interrelatedness of all of us—of me with the world. It comes to be a really deep, inward, personal experience when we begin to move from being out of harmony.

For example, in the beginning one might know: okay, one of the precepts is not to speak harshly to other people. And one tries not to do it out of memory, out of remembering this isn't a good thing to do, conforming to a sense of outer authority. Over time, what's begun to happen for me is that if I'm not paying attention and I speak harshly or thoughtlessly in a way that's difficult or unpleasant, the pain that it causes the other person doesn't exist in isolation. I almost immediately feel, almost cellularly, a sense of something being off—that I've moved out of harmony. That sense of interrelatedness grows stronger because how can one isolate the pain? I spoke harshly. It hurt that person. But it also hurt me. There's not really a separation anymore.

And that sense of inner, visceral understanding comes to get stronger and stronger, so that the power and subtlety of our experience of harmony, of interrelatedness, also strengthens as we work with the precepts. We just naturally find ourselves becoming more harmonized with each other, with the environment, with ourselves.

The Buddhist concept of sila, morality, is not a sense of working with sin or working with judgment. It's not that there's a set of actions labeled as bad—if you do them you're wrong, if you don't do them you're right, and if you do them you should really judge yourself as being a bad person. This is what I love about Buddhism. It's much more straightforward than that and really nonjudgmental, but clearly observable. It's a morality of intention.

What's really important in working with our actions, working with our speech, is the intention, the volition that motivates our actions, that informs our actions. Actions are considered, in Buddhist psychology, either skillful or unskillful—which is a little less judgmental sounding than good or bad, good or evil. The skillfulness or unskillfulness depends purely on the motivation, the mental states that accompany the intention that leads to the action. This is the area where I find it so subtle and so fascinating.

All thought, speech, and action comes from a volitional force. It's moved by a volitional force. And as the volitional force gets stronger, we move from thought to speech to deed. For example, the last time I was on retreat, for some reason the idea of wanting a pair of pink shoes came up and decided to hang around for several days. That's one level of volition—there was some wanting, some greed informing that thought when it would arise. The next strongest level would be coming out of retreat, going home, and telling my mother I wanted a pink pair of shoes. That's a stronger movement of volition, still motivated by greed. And then the third and strongest is when I get in the car and drive half an hour to some store to look around specifically for a pink pair of shoes.

Again, it's not a question of it being bad or wrong to want shoes, but simply to notice: what is the intention? What are the mental factors in the mind that are leading to this series of actions? In this case, the mental factor would be one of greed.

Now, it's also possible to perform the same series of actions without it being an unskillful action at all. If, for example, it's simply clear that your shoes are run down and you need to get a pair of shoes to walk, and it's done very simply, very straightforwardly as the obvious thing to do without a lot of wanting or greed in it, then that's fine. That's just an action of taking care of your needs.

This is what's so interesting about working with morality in this sense. The same action could be a very skillful, wholesome action, or it could be motivated by very unskillful, unwholesome qualities of mind. From the outside, someone else wouldn't necessarily be able to tell the difference. And that's where it becomes such an interesting and powerful practice for us—to begin paying attention to what we're doing in this way, to what's motivating our actions.

Another example of this: there is a sutta where a monk who was supposedly an arhat—which means completely enlightened and therefore incapable of acting out of hatred or avarice—was blind. Doing walking meditation back and forth in the forest, he was stepping on ants and killing them. Some monks were quite puzzled, upset about it, and went to the Buddha saying, "He's supposed to be an arhat and he's killing all these ants. It doesn't jive."

The Buddha said, "Yes, but his intention is completely pure. He has no way of knowing that there are ants there, and there's nothing in his intention that has anything to do with anger or hatred or wanting to kill." Whereas when we're walking, sometimes there's no way to avoid stepping on ants, or we simply can't see them. But there's also a time when one could be walking and there's a line of ants, and you could choose to go around it or just choose to go through it out of frustration or whatever. That's a completely different act. It's an act that has concomitance in the mind—the intention is motivated by some form of aversion. And so the same act can have quite different moral implications.

Another way of looking at it is when there's not actually any intent of aversion, but we might find ourselves conforming to rules of behavior—even the precepts, for example. Perhaps one takes them on here because it's what's expected, because it's what one is said to do, and the motive of taking them on could be out of a sense of wanting to be accepted. It could be out of a sense of deceit—that we do something, any kind of action, in order to fit in with society or to gain respect, when our actual feelings are that it's foolish, or we're actually looking down on that kind of behavior. There are all kinds of ways one can act where the outward behavior doesn't jive with the inner motivation. And so then the intention isn't skillful even though the acts might seem to be so.

But the good news about this is that we're very trainable. Human beings in this realm are very trainable. We're not just stuck with these confusing intentions in our mind that we can't always see. So even if we begin practicing sila, if we begin working with the precepts purely from an intention of wanting to belong, and there's not an inner sense of working with harmony or of wanting to train our minds, and we're using them totally as an outer reference—

I really feel like that's okay, because even at that level of bringing some sense of control, of non-harming to our actions, we begin to develop a great sense of power and control over our body and speech just by deliberately refraining from certain harmful actions and speech. And this sense of power leads to a calmness, a quietness of the mind and heart.

Think, for example, of the difference between when you've just had a big blowout with somebody—you've completely lost it and vented your frustration up and down—and then you come to sit. The mind is whirling with remorse, or if not remorse, with all the things you wish you'd said that you didn't think of at the time. Either way, you're whirling in anger. Having a cool and steady mind isn't very possible at that time.

When we've been working with the precepts, even just as an outer reference point, and we come to sit, that level of remorse and whirling mind simply isn't going to be as present, especially over time. That's actually one of the real values of a retreat situation, the way we have it set up here. Just by default, there are many things you can't do or say that you might have more temptation to do or say at another time. And so it's very helpful for developing calmness and steadiness of mind.

As we develop more calmness, as we continue to act in a way that shows great respect, a great sense of oneness with others—which is really what acting in accord with the precepts is, acting from a sense of our oneness with all beings—we actually begin to have enough quietness of mind to see and experience for ourselves that this is actually true. We experience more the effects of our actions. We experience more that sense of oneness with others, and the clarity and serenity that develops in us as we're not acting so much from rampant anger or greed or delusion.

Even starting out with a motivation that one might not think is so skillful will still lead to a development of the heart and a sense of power and purity. Then it becomes much easier to continue developing right action, because it begins to spring from our inner reference point, from our own experience. Little bells begin to go off when we're doing something out of harmony. And this in turn strengthens a sense of loving-kindness and compassion for others, and it's a powerful ground for the arising of wisdom.

So from dead conforming to an outer authority, it can become a very active participation in learning to live in inner and outer harmony. Very powerful.

What I want to do now is share some of my own thoughts and reflections, and those of others, on working specifically with some of these areas of morality, using the basic five precepts as a reference point. I find it so subtle that as the years go on, it's not nearly as straightforward as it sounded at first. But it's become fascinating, a very rich field of investigation.

In working with not killing, both here on retreat and in our daily life, I've had many experiences over the years of seeing that this isn't nearly as cut and dry as it sounds. Generally, most of us here figure that we're not into killing—human beings, we're not even talking about that, or larger animals. Even with insects, we can agree in principle that killing is not a good idea. We wouldn't want to do it.

But it's much more than just restraining from an aggressive act, a kind of passive sense of action. It expands from not killing to the whole field of non-harming, of including all beings in an active sense, an active understanding of moving from a place of non-harming, which is actively wishing other beings well. It comes around to the cultivation of loving-kindness.

As Robert Aitken says, "The practice of peace and harmony is peace and harmony, not some technique designed to induce them." So the way we work with it is simply in being in a situation: How can I relate to this being, to this situation, to myself, in a way that comes from peace and harmony, that will contribute to peace and harmony?

Even at the level of not killing, this can get much more complicated than it would seem. What about when one is working in gardens and bugs have decimated the garden? There are many inner decisions one has to make about how to work with that. Or cockroaches—we've had over the years varying degrees of infestations here, and hours and hours of discussions in board meetings about what to do. There's no sense of a right or wrong answer. I'm not trying to say what I think is right or wrong, because ultimately there's no one out there who can say, "This is the right thing to do." It's much more of a vital practice when we're connected inwardly with the external situation, the whole situation, seeing what motivates our decisions, what motivates our desires, how we want to act in that situation.

There's the story of a Zen center in Minneapolis, I think it was, that was becoming infested with cockroaches. The students went to the Roshi and said, "The cockroaches are so bad they're crawling all over people when they come into the Zendo to sit. People are stopping coming because it's too disgusting. What should we do? If we don't do something to kill the cockroaches, people will stop coming. But on the other hand, we don't want to kill."

And he said, "I'm not going to tell you what to do. You wouldn't be learning that way."

The real power of sila comes when we're acting from our own connection and understanding.

Similar here, once when I was manager at the center, we owned the house across the street but at the time we were renting it to a couple who had gone away for a while. They had cats, which I guess they'd given away or something. And the place became completely infested with fleas—to where I walked over to check it out, was there really no more than thirty seconds, walked out, and my legs were just covered with fleas. Clearly unlivable. And clearly we had the responsibility to make the house livable.

What do you do? What I did was call the exterminators. And I don't know if that was right or not. I just know that I had to really examine my motivation. There was certainly a sense of aversion to the fleas. There was also a sense of these people can't live here with it like that—so there was some compassion for the people living there. A lot of mix of motivations, and the need to make some kind of decision.

The other thing I find so interesting and helpful about this form of morality, the way it's passed down to us in Buddhism and the way I relate to it, is that each action becomes a field of learning. It's not as if, "Oh, I've broken the precept and that's it for my life, now I'm damned." Rather, if I'm willing to bring real care and attention to investigating the situation—my motivations and intentions, the results of my actions both outwardly and inwardly—then the whole thing becomes an opportunity. Is there a lot of remorse? Did I act too hastily? Do other possibilities suggest themselves later? We can use it as fodder for growth, for the development of compassion and insight and wisdom, rather than, "Well, that situation's done, I broke the precept, okay, forget it, on to the next." It's not separate like that.

And so there's also no necessity for self-blame, or for blaming someone else. Blame just doesn't have anything to do with it. It's much more about investigation, working with a sense of connectedness of the heart. What I've found is there's often no outside answer. No one else in that situation could have told me what was the right thing to do. It was clear that whatever anyone said was just their opinion. And then there was my opinion, and I was the one who had to act.

Some other questions come to my mind in working with this area of non-harming in our lives. Again, these are just questions—I'm not pretending to have any answers.

What are the implications in our minds, in our lives, of the violence in our culture? Of the violence in the movies that we watch? In the things that we choose to put into our minds, or the minds of our children? Is that an aspect of non-harming? Is it harmful to support the making of movies like that? I don't know. These are just questions that arise.

On the other hand, can we ignore that this is the kind of thing that goes on in the world—the degree of violence, the degree of drugs and crime—and just watch movies about Bambi so we don't have to put it in? Even Bambi has some harsh sequences in it. I don't know. These are things that I wrestle with.

What are the implications of living in a culture such as ours, that's so rich, that is using so much of the world's resources? I consider myself a part of that culture—I'm using so much of the world's resources. And is that at the expense of some of the coun-

tries where there's starvation and people are dying? Is that an area where I need to look at working with non-harming? And how far do we take it? Who can say where one draws the lines?

But I've found for myself, as the sense of non-harming becomes more and more imbued in me, so to speak—and certainly I have a long way to go—the implications of my actions seem to ripple out more and more in my awareness. I'm just aware of implications that I never would have even considered some years ago.

And how about killing through indifference? An example I've often used for myself: if I get in a bathtub or take a shower, if I don't have my glasses on and there's a little black dot on the floor, I can't tell if it's a piece of fuzz or if it's an ant or a roach or whatever. And if I just don't feel like bending down—

then it's 50-50. It could be a bug, especially in some of the bathrooms around here. And there are times that I've turned the water on and seen this squiggle and seen that out of a basic laziness and indifference I've allowed something to be killed. And then I wonder, well, does my indifference to certain aspects of the environment help to kill the planet that we're living on? These are questions—I'm not saying this is true—but they're questions that come up in my mind.

So those are some of the things that come up for me around working with non-harm and the precept of not killing. And you can see that to really give attention to our actions in this way, it's much more than a blind kind of dead practice. We become very alive. In whatever we're doing, we're actually bringing mindfulness to our intentions, to our actions, in anything that we're doing. And our life becomes much more vital, much more connected, much more alive.

The second precept is working with not stealing. Again, as with all of them, it's much more than the passive act of not taking something that belongs to someone else. That's a good place to start, but it's much more than that. Again, it's intention. It's moving from an understanding of the oneness of all of us, beginning with understanding that that person likes that article, so I won't take it because I wouldn't like it if someone took what belonged to me.

But it's also cultivating a sense of inner contentment, of really seeing that the self and the world are just as they are in this moment. And in this moment, that's enough. This is a very powerful, very peaceful and connected way to live—much more than just a passive abstention from unskillful action.

And so it becomes not just about stealing objects. When we're working with this understanding of inner contentment, we see how much a sense of gaining, a gaining idea, permeates our experience. Stealing comes from a sense of inner poverty, of "I need something else in this moment to make things okay"—a sense of gaining, a sense of wanting. And in the moment that we're moving from that sense of gaining, we're actually stealing from ourselves the possibility of experiencing contentment in that moment. Stealing from ourselves the possibility of being able to appreciate what's here in this moment. Being able to even see the truth in this moment and appreciate that, because the mind is so busy moving out trying to gain something else.

I'll read this from the Tao Te Ching that expresses this very beautifully to me:

Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill.
Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt.
Chase after money and security and your heart will never unclench.
Care about people's approval and you will be their prisoner.
Do your work, then step back.
The only path to serenity.

This expresses very beautifully what the precept of not stealing, not gaining, is about.

So then again the possible ramifications of working in this way begin to come up into the mind. In our culture—we have a great culture for talking about these kinds of things, but I don't mean to imply that it's only in our culture—it seems though, how does advertising work? The whole point of it is to get our greed activated. If we happen to be feeling content, to do whatever possible to pull us out of that sense of contentment and make us want something else. Just read a magazine, look at the ads, go for a walk in a mall. And if you're just going to CVS to buy a toothbrush, on the way you pass racks and racks of clothes and shoes and records, all displayed so that you can hardly walk by without just being drawn in.

I've taken friends from India who hadn't been to this country before to a mall. And it's fascinating, also painful, to watch. Because to me it was like they were just manifesting what my mind does all the time. But we've been trained at least to restrain it a little because we're so bombarded. But it's like just a kid let loose in a candy store—oh my God, look at all this stuff! And hours and hours in stores.

Literally, one friend of mine spent five hours in a store like Kmart or something. Five hours just going around, looking at things. And it's stuff we're so glutted with that we could pass by now. But if we were taken into some really fancy store, we might do the

same thing. It's just enacting the way our minds work. And so much of our culture is built on this. Is it stealing? Is it taking what is not given? Is it conducive to non-harming?

If our growing perception of our needs or our wants leads big corporations—that we support through buying from them—to take land and resources from other poorer countries and not really pay back what it's worth in a meaningful way... I don't know. And how far does one go in working in this way?

This is what Gandhi said about not stealing: "We are not always aware of our real needs, and most of us improperly multiply our wants and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves. If we devote some thought to the subject, we shall find that we can get rid of quite a number of our wants. One who follows the observance of non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of their own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of the breaches of the principle of non-stealing."

Again, it's certainly not my intention to make us guilty or wrong, or to suggest we should all throw up what we're doing, turn off the heat, and just wear a lot more clothes until it's sub-freezing. I'm not saying that. I'm simply bringing up areas for our own internal investigation—how much of what I want is actually necessary.

And again, it's not about coming down as an outer authority with a club and saying, "Right, you don't need this, you don't need this," and then just sitting there a mass of craving because you're not letting yourself have something. That's not it. That's not where wisdom is going to come from. It's much more about examining that movement of craving, that movement of wanting, and seeing how that movement itself is what takes us away from the experience of inner contentment, from the experience of peace and the ability to see clearly.

So in working with our outer actions through abiding by the precepts, we might actually begin to find—if we do it with awareness, paying attention to the results and our own inner experience—that we do begin to cultivate a much deeper sense of inner contentment and harmony. And that gives us the clarity, the space, the peace to actually begin to see and appreciate the truth of the moment. It's only when we're able to appreciate and even be with the truth of the moment that any kind of liberating insight can arise. As long as we're busy trying to get something else, that's impossible.

Just a little about the other three precepts, for the sake of time. The third one, not misusing sex—of course here for the course of a retreat one is celibate. I just want to say that this is not out of a sense of rejecting sexual energy or looking on it with aversion. But in working with sexual energy outside of a retreat, it comes back again to in-

tention. What is the intention of our acts? Are we moving out of a sense of non-harming, of caring and connection? Are we respecting and honoring our own commitments and other people's commitments? Are we using our sexual energy for a sense of personal power, or to feed a loneliness, or just for fun?

This is not to say this is right and this is wrong, but to use the area of relationship—the area of sexuality—as a very powerful, very important area of learning and understanding. And again, coming back to the motivation, to the intentions in our action.

Here, when we're just sitting, not acting in that way at all, we have the opportunity to simply see what arises in the mind and appreciate the power of that energy. It can be very powerful. As our mindfulness develops and strengthens, we might begin to see aspects of our intention, our desire, that maybe we wouldn't see if we had the opportunity to act. Because it's such a strong energy that—God knows—it's really easy to get involved without seeing everything we're doing clearly. In fact, I don't know too many people who've ever gotten involved with someone else who did see everything about their intentions clearly. It would amaze me if someone told me they had. But here we just get to sit and look at it. A lot can be learned about our motivations and intentions in this area—again, not as a judgment, not as "I'm such a bad person," but just to see the power of the mental factors that drive us, both skillful and unskillful ones.

And again, in working with the precepts, the baseline is not bringing harm to anyone. Often I feel that in working in the area of sexuality, we sometimes forget that in not bringing harm to anyone involved, that also includes ourselves—we're one of the people involved.

The fourth precept, right speech, has several factors to it, several areas. Very, very interesting. And I find in some ways one of the most difficult areas to work with, because we talk so much. I personally find it so hard to be aware of the intention of my speech before it's out of my mouth. I often don't know what I'm going to say until it's out of my mouth. So I find a lot of the practice of right speech is in the actual investigation—sometimes prior to what I say, or during what I say, or after what I say. But again, not as a way to make yourself wrong or bad.

If we can begin to look at these areas as interesting, as investigations, rather than as another way to prove what a rotten person we are, then it becomes much more workable. When we're working with wrong speech and we say, "Oh no, I blew it again," and that becomes another way to beat ourselves up, it's very hard to continue to investigate with any kind of clarity.

The first part and perhaps the most powerful aspect of right speech is of course not lying. Just recently I was part of a retreat that we did in the city—a non-residential nine-day retreat where people would come and sit all weekend but go home at night. Then during the week they would work all day and come to the center to sit every night from six-thirty to ten. As a daily life practice, while people were working during the week, we were all working on the area of right speech.

And we took a different part of it to look at in our day each day, and then we would discuss it when we came together in the evening. Really interesting discussions.

And this one of not lying—I think all of us were a little cocky. "I don't lie. I mean, I don't go around lying to people. I know that." I think we all, no one said it, but I just have a feeling we all thought that. And when we came together to talk about it that first evening, it was amazing. It was so interesting because on some level, in some way, I don't think there was one of us there who hadn't lied. And many levels of subtlety to lying were brought out in the discussion.

First, a couple of people knew that they had lied very consciously because they felt it was required in their job. They were salespeople for a computer firm, and they felt that their job required them to color what they were trying to sell so people would buy it. And they really felt that they were telling outright lies, and that was just the way that the job went. Really interesting, and a lot of nods around the room. "Yeah, that's what it's like. That's what the job is like." That, I have to say, surprised me because I've been living in this environment for so long. But I imagine that's not so unusual.

Other people brought out how they felt they lied through their actions—that they were sitting at work pretending to be really busy so no one would bother them, and actually they weren't doing a thing.

This one I strongly related to. I myself had been in a situation where I knew something about a friend that I was not allowed to tell—he didn't want anyone else to know it. And another friend asked me a point-blank question that specifically spoke to what I knew. It required a yes or no answer. And to say, "Well, I know but I can't disclose it" would have also given the answer. So I told an outright lie. And what was interesting was I didn't really quite get it at that moment that I was telling a lie. I didn't really quite get it until we were talking about it that night. Really, it was quite humbling.

And then, of course, all the gradations of colorations of truth—whether in the way we describe a conversation that we had with someone else to a third party. How strong is the temptation to just slightly exaggerate what one said? Just subtly shift it so that you come off sounding much more wise and balanced than one really was. Or if your

tendency is to put yourself down, you come off sounding like more of a jerk than you really were. Just these subtle gradations. Or a slight exaggeration of something for effect, to make a better story.

And what's the motivation behind these subtle colorations of the truth? It seems really minor and passes by unnoticed quite often. When I start really paying attention to it, sometimes it's appalling actually how easily these subtle colorations can slip out of my mouth. But it's really interesting to just stop—for me to just stop and examine, well, what was the point of that? And often I can see there was some need to protect an image I hold of myself, or wanting to project a certain image onto somebody else of what I want them to think I am. Sometimes it's got nothing to do with me and it just makes a better story. And in telling a better story, it might be at the expense of some other person who's in the story.

Or even if it doesn't involve a person at all, when I watch the tendency to just subtly color or exaggerate, I find that the effect it has on my mind is of slightly less respect for the power of truth. It's like in that moment somehow I'm not quite willing to be fully present with the truth just as it is in this moment. And that willingness to be present with the truth is in some ways the base root of the practice. I mean, the practice is about seeing the truth, accepting it just as it is in this moment, however it is. And I can see how the tendency of my mind to want to just change it a little bit so it's a little more comfortable or a little more interesting—I can see that tendency of mine working in my meditation practice. When one gets really still and is noting, there's a subtle "I don't really want to note that one, I'd much rather note this one." Which things does the mind choose to pay attention to? And why? And really important, looking at the why.

Other areas of speech—harsh speech. Again, a very tricky area, because it's not to deny that anger arises.

But again, it's the motivation. Moving from a sense of oneness. How do we speak to other people? Is our intention one of making ourselves right? Making someone else wrong? What's the effect when we talk in a harsh way, a sarcastic way? I tend to use sarcasm a lot, and when I really look, the intention might be to get a cheap laugh at the expense of somebody else. It's subtle, but it's there.

The same applies to other aspects of speech: divisive speech, fault-finding, gossip. Obviously we would agree we don't want to put people down. We're not here to find fault with people—that's obviously some unskillful motivation. But even gossip, which can be rampant... it's so frequent that I find myself in conversations that are about other people. And often not putting other people down, not with any intention of saying we're right and they're wrong. But it's entertainment. It starts from genuine interest,

and I'm working in the area now of watching when the genuine interest moves into an area of entertainment. If I pay attention inwardly, the whole feeling of my relationship to the conversation shifts at that moment. And it doesn't feel wholesome. It's just a feeling of kind of tightness, of dullness, a slight unpleasantness. It doesn't feel wholesome.

If I continue in that vein, when I come out of the conversation, I'm feeling much heavier, much less clear. And every once in a while I can not only notice this but actually stop having the conversation—which is really nice to know that that's possible.

I've also noticed several times in conversations with close friends where it somehow drifted into subtly saying slight negative things about someone. They were true but not really necessary. And I noticed it and just came in and said something positive that was also true. I was amazed because I found that what that did was just end the conversation absolutely. Oh right, it was over. It was kind of strange—really seeing how that negative energy was kind of feeding on itself in a way that was of no benefit to anyone, especially to me and the person in the conversation.

Again, the sense of oneness, the sense of non-harming. There's no way to put down other people and not have that affect oneself. The person that one's harming the most, the one bringing the most pain and the most confusion to, is really oneself.

This is a contemporary way of talking about the precept of right speech. I want to share these Tiep Hien precepts, which came from a group of social workers in Vietnam who were working with Thich Nhat Hanh during the Vietnam War. They formed a kind of lay order—not monks, but a lay order of engaged Buddhism. These precepts are based on the Buddhist precepts, but they also include other aspects of working with the mind, of working with morality in an engaged way. I'm not going to read them all, just these two that have to do with right speech. I really appreciate them because they offer a contemporary way of grappling with these aspects in the world.

Number eight: Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. All efforts should be made to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small they may be.

Number nine: Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize and condemn things that you are unsure of. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when it may threaten your own safety.

So it's what is true and what is useful.

The fifth precept I won't really go into, but obviously in taking intoxicants that cloud the mind, it becomes very difficult to pay attention to these subtleties of our intention and motivation in the other areas of morality. It's just so much easier to do things that are unskillful, that are harmful to ourselves and others, when our mind is clouded.

We just become heedless.

As we continue to perform wholesome deeds, our actions begin to flow more and more from our own inner understanding. They come less from a motive of personal gain—"if I do this, then I'll have a better rebirth, then I'll get enlightened, then people will like me," whatever it might be. They come less and less from any personal motive, and more and more from a sense of loving-kindness, compassion, and connectedness between all beings. And then the actual purpose does become leading to freedom, to emancipation.

The practice of sila in this way becomes a very powerful purification of our mind and body. It prepares the groundwork for the deeper purifications that come through the practice of concentration and the development of wisdom.

What we call defilements are actually these powerful mental forces of greed and anger, confusion, envy. The really strong forces—the ones that lead us to what are called the defilements of transgression, to perform truly harmful acts like killing someone—these are overcome through our work with morality, with sila. We can become purified to the extent that we won't do these anymore.

But as you sit here, you'll see that these mental forces can come up in another way. The forces of greed, the forces of anger—they'll come up over and over and over as you sit here, in what is called the obsessive defilements. And that's where the power of concentration comes in, because the power of concentration overcomes these obsessive defilements. And that allows us to begin to see what's happening in this moment. And that can lead to the arising of wisdom, which can uproot these forces altogether.

So this practice of sila will lay the groundwork for the practice of our meditation, and hopefully for our further purification, growth, and understanding.

Let's sit for a couple of minutes.

CHAPTER 3

The Power of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 49 min

> *In this talk from the 1989 Three Month Retreat, Carol Wilson begins by reflecting on the Dalai Lama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, using it as an entry point to explore what genuine peace means and how our meditation practice moves us toward that embodiment. She then examines the profound power of mental conditioning—how our minds filter and distort perception on unconscious levels, screening out anxiety-provoking stimuli before they even reach awareness.*
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> *Wilson draws on psychological research to illustrate how greed creates tunnel vision, aversion leads to denial and avoidance, and delusion maintains our identification with constructed self-images. She explains how mindfulness (sati) serves as the antidote to these filters, describing it as "observing power" that springs forward to meet each arising experience without hesitation, anticipation, or manipulation.*
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> *The talk details specific qualities of mindfulness: seeing objects as they arise without choice or clinging; perceiving bare experience rather than concepts and interpretations; meeting all phenomena with non-violence and loving acceptance; and penetrating deeply rather than superficially observing. Wilson emphasizes four key protections mindfulness offers: freedom from heedlessness, protection from the distortions of the kilesas, direct access to truth through personal experience, and the natural extension of this protection to all beings we encounter. She concludes with Solzhenitsyn's insight that true liberation must begin within one's own soul.*

This morning there was a most inspiring piece of news, a rare event: this year the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to the Dalai Lama.

It was really so moving. I still get chills just talking about it. What it said to me was that, not just for his peace efforts in Tibet, but that somehow he is the embodiment of what it really means to be at peace, as far as I can tell—which is kind of what our work here is all about. And it felt like somehow this is a recognition that the world is in some way coming to recognize the value and the power of this. It's kind of hard for me to talk about, but it moved me a lot and I wanted to share it with you.

So, in talking about the level of peace that someone like the Dalai Lama, at least from our projections of watching him, has attained, and knowing that our intentions and our firm commitment is also working in this direction, and yet still seeing how much our

minds continue to be caught in distortions of perception—even though we may have had very clear insights into the painful and distorting natures of greed, hatred, and delusion. We really know it. And then we turn around and we're acting from that again. The mind is caught in that mode again.

So I want to talk a little bit about the power of conditioning. We need to really respect this—not to look at it as though there's some problem with us that we haven't understood, but to recognize that the power of this is immense, and we'll be touching on it throughout the whole retreat. I'm just introducing it a little now. And then I want to explore how the power of mindfulness works to begin to help us see through these distortions, how we can actually use specific ways of employing mindfulness in our practice, and what mindfulness actually means.

A book I read not long ago I found fascinating as regards the power of conditioning, of distorting perceptions in our mind. So often it's not as if we have a conscious choice; the perceptions are distorted on an unconscious level. Certain things never even reach our consciousness—they've been filtered out way before. This book comes from a scientific, psychological perspective, and the author gives a few examples of experiments that have been conducted to show this.

The first, not an experiment but a story, shows how on a physical level we can block the perception sometimes of great pain in a situation where to actually feel that amount of pain would possibly mean the difference between surviving and not surviving. He tells a story of Livingstone—Stanley or Livingstone, one of the two—who wrote this himself. He was being mauled by a lion, conscious, and he lived through it. In recounting it later, he said he just did not feel pain at that time.

Probably most of you have times in your own life you can think of—I know I can—when I've been in accidents and at the moment of impact felt no pain at all, to the point where I could bounce up and be on the side of the road in a tenth of a second, out of harm's way, and within two minutes was unable to move an arm and a leg. Somehow it's like a survival mechanism. The perception of the pain doesn't get through to consciousness.

The author takes this a step further, talking about how the mind seems to be able to screen perceptions so that certain stimuli—now more in the psychological realm—perceived as threatening, anxiety-provoking, or really in some cases maybe literally life-threatening, are also screened out. They never reach consciousness.

Here are a couple of examples. One deals more with the quality of mind of grasping, of one-pointedness on something. Some people were asked to watch about four minutes of a video of a very fast basketball game and were given the assignment to count how many times the ball was passed back and forth. It was very active, and they did that. In the middle of this video, through the court, a woman strolled dressed in white with a white parasol. She just kind of strolled in one side and out the other. At the end, people reported how many times the ball had been passed. No one commented on this woman. In fact, when told about it, they couldn't believe it had happened. They just hadn't seen it. They had to watch it again. Amazing.

The second experiment deals more with stimuli that would provoke anxiety.

And so they showed the subjects different pictures. The pictures had different things in them, but the one that I remember had about half of the picture showing something innocuous—a man reading a newspaper. And then the other half was something sexually suggestive and obviously not fitting with the other part of the picture.

The people were asked to look at the pictures—there were several of them—and then later describe what the pictures were of, what they could remember. But the second trick that the investigators had was some kind of device that could measure where the eyeball looked when viewing the pictures. So they could know not only if someone later said they forgot, but they could also see where their eyes had actually traveled.

People for whom the sexual images were anxiety-provoking or upsetting, when they reported on the pictures, would often just say, "Well, there's a picture of a man reading a newspaper." But what they could measure was that the eyeball had never even looked at the part of the picture that was anxiety-provoking.

How? God knows. But somehow there is a way of pre-screening ahead of time. If this is taken in, it's going to provoke anxiety, so we won't even take it in.

So we wonder why we're living with distorted perceptions, why we feel out of touch and disconnected. We don't know what's going on half the time. We're living with these filters, these distortions on our conscious perception—blind spots in our experience. Certain things we have selective memory for; we just don't remember. Selective perception. We just don't allow the perception into consciousness. And when I say we don't allow it, I don't mean to imply that this is some kind of conscious, willful decision. This is operating on very subtle levels. But it's no wonder that we feel out of touch and wonder why things don't quite work.

These filters—these are the afflictions, the *kilesas*, whatever word we want to use. The most predominant, strongest ones are greed and hatred or aversion, fear, the forms of that. And identification, the confusion, delusion.

When aversion is the operant filter, the way we relate can take many forms: avoidance, outright denial, not even letting it in like I was describing. Just blocking what our experience is. I've seen it done in a way where a person is outright denying that they're perceiving what they're perceiving in front of their eyes.

Once when I was in a hospital, I'd been there a few days and they'd been doing a lot of tests. I was kind of at the end of whatever equanimity I had. They were trying to do some procedure that, had they done it the first time, wouldn't have been that painful, but for some reason they couldn't do it. So about the fourth time, the nurse couldn't handle it anymore and called in a doctor. I knew I was in trouble then, because nurses can usually do these things better than doctors. And so he was digging in my arm, and I started crying. He looked at me and said, "What's your problem? This doesn't hurt."

I thought, *whoa*. That's the most blatant form of denial. And I understood—he couldn't handle that he was hurting me.

Or how often I've seen in relationships where some part of that relationship is so important to me, or perceived as so important, that there is complete denial in my mind of many aspects that are painful, difficult, not working. Only when the relationship actually breaks up and I have nothing to protect anymore do I wake up and say, "My God, I thought it was a perfect relationship, and look at all this stuff. We couldn't even talk." And that's true. It's hard to believe that one could have been so blind—until the next time it happens again.

Greed works differently. It's that tunnel vision, like the people watching the basketballs pass back and forth. When greed is operant, we see the object of what we want. Everything else is either ignored or in the way.

And then identification—and each of these is topics and topics in itself. Identification is identifying any facet of our experience as solid me, unchanging I, something core, a root part of our existence. This is delusion. When we're operating from these skewed perceptions, we're operating from delusion. We're out of touch with our experience, and we continue to suffer, not really quite knowing why.

So this is where mindfulness comes in, luckily for us. As I was reading this book, I kept thinking, "Oh, mindfulness is definitely the cure for this." Because the key to wisdom is being able to see, to experience the actuality of what's happening here and now, just as it is in this moment—not being hindered by our defenses, by our wants, by our anxieties, our expectations.

And the key tool for seeing what's happening here and now is the quality of mindfulness, as we practice and develop it—because it does take a great deal of practice and development.

As mindfulness grows, its light shines equally on each arising aspect of our experience, without discrimination. After a while, as each thing simply arises, we begin to perceive previously submerged aspects of our experience, because there's no discrimination going on. We're not heading toward one thing and keeping away something else, but just meeting whatever arises with a fullness of attention. We begin to see the filters themselves. And when we see them, they become simply another object to pay attention to, rather than some dark force driving our life.

This develops a wonderful spaciousness of mind, great equanimity, great acceptance. The Buddha said that there is no higher happiness than peace. And as we continue to work in this way, we start to get a taste of what that means—a real peace that's not dependent on having our environment be a certain way. We begin to stop trying to control things so busily, trying to order our experience so that the unpleasant stays away and the pleasant comes. We begin to greet all things equally, really learning that peace is not dependent on what experience we're having, but completely dependent on our relationship to that experience.

This is something I feel I can't say enough. I'm saying it to myself as well as to you. It doesn't matter what object is arising in consciousness. It's the relationship to it, the quality of meeting it with mindfulness—with spacious, open, active attention. That's what's important. And that's where understanding will arise from.

I want to discuss some of the qualities of mindfulness as we work with it here in this meditation retreat. The Buddha said that mindfulness is the greatest protection we have in life, and it's also the only protection we need. It protects us in many ways. One of them is that it protects us from being heedless—that way we drift through life as if asleep, not really quite aware of what's happening.

So often, when I'm sitting and my mind finally gets quiet, there arises this sense of loss from so many things that have gone by that I wasn't really present for. Almost every time I visit my family, I go with these great commitments about how present I'm going to be, how loving. And then when I leave, this always happens—I have this sense of remorse for just being heedless in many ways, just not being present.

Outside of retreat, it so often takes a major event to wake us up from this heedlessness. Hearing of Dipa Ma's death this year—actually, that was the strongest effect it had on me. A sense of this wonderful, loving being, and now she's just not here, in the snap of a finger. It woke me up to all the little moments of my life, to simply being present for what's happening now. I know we all have moments like this, over and over.

Mindfulness also has the power to wake us up in this way, very strongly. And it doesn't always take the death of a loved one or something equally traumatic. You know those moments when you walk outside and see a leaf turning red, and it's so exquisite, so beautiful. Or you're drinking a cup of tea, and somehow you're really drinking that cup of tea. You've never tasted a cup of tea—one sip of tea—that was so wonderful. Later you think, "Well, it's just old chamomile. I've had that a million times." This is the quality of heedfulness—being able to be with what's happening in the moment and really appreciate it for what it is. The power of mindfulness, simplicity, slowing down, and the very deliberate practice of attention.

In those moments when experience is so vivid and so exquisite, what's happening is that we're seeing without the filters. We're able to appreciate the moment for just what it is—not needing it to be something else, not trying to get away from it, not spacing out because it's not interesting enough, but just settling in and being there, the way it is.

So that's one way mindfulness protects us. It protects us from heedlessness by bringing clarity of vision, simplicity of mind to our experience—the ability to appreciate what's happening just for what it is.

Often when we talk about mindfulness in conversation, there can be a tendency to think of the actual experience as kind of generic awareness. "I'm aware of this, I'm aware of that. When I walk down the street, I'm aware that I'm walking. I'm aware that I'm going to the lunch line. I'm aware that I'm hungry." We use awareness quite loosely, often interchangeably with mindfulness. But mindfulness is really much more specific and has very particular qualities. The translation we've been using a lot for mindfulness is "observing power." To me, that gives a kind of gestalt feeling.

of what the energy of mindfulness is really like. It's an observing power.

I want to list a few of the qualities of mindfulness, and if you could, when I'm talking about them, also try to listen in an experiential way. See if you can get in touch with how these energies manifest in yourself, because while I'm putting this into words, it's really an active experience. Each moment that observing power meets an object, there's a very concrete experiential phenomenon occurring. I'm trying to use a lot of words to explain that.

The first quality of mindfulness—and I'm speaking now in terms of working in the retreat format—is this seeing of the object that's arising into consciousness just as it arises, as it is. In other words, it's as if you're sitting and a sense of tingling arises. In that moment, it's as if the noting mind, the consciousness, springs up to meet that object without hesitation and without anticipation, either one. There's this very active sense of object and observing power, mindfulness, coming together.

If there's hesitation—a slight sense of, even though it's not time to put it into words, "Well, I don't want to go to that tingling now, maybe it'll wait, maybe I'll go back to the breath"—usually that hesitation is the movement of the distortions, of the afflictions, some sense of choice. Either it's nice and I want to pay attention to that, or I'll wait until something better comes along, or there's that real subtle, unconscious wanting to avoid certain things that might cause anxiety. Springing up to meet the object without hesitation means there's no choice involved, no thinking involved. It's just an active but non-judging movement. Object and noting mind come together. There's an active, energetic quality.

There's also no sense of clinging to whatever sensation or experience is happening. Not "Well, this is kind of interesting, I should see it through to the end even though something else has arisen and is more predominant." Something else arises, and the noting mind rises up to meet it. There's no clinging to the first object. Also no sense of anticipating—"Let's hurry up and get through this one so we can get to one that might be more interesting." There's a full, active participation in whatever experience is arising, and an equal ability to just let it go and move just as fully to the next experience.

That's one reason using the breath as a primary object can be so helpful. If you ever find yourself in a state where you're not sure which object is predominant, or where to go, or you're starting to get confused—rather than trying to figure it out, which unless you're in a very clear state is almost certainly going to lead into some greed or some anger, almost certainly going to be colored a little bit by that—just go back to the breath so that there's not a sense of really having to choose at all. Confusion? Note confusion, back to the breath.

Sometimes, perhaps many of us have experienced, there are times when working with noting, with mindfulness in general, with this quality of not hesitating but springing up to meet the object, it's almost as if we experience a fear and hold back just a little bit. Almost as if we're afraid to put that level of commitment, that level of surrender, into the observing power. There could be many reasons why we're holding back. Fear that I can't do it. Fear of what might happen if we really surrender into the process. Fear of what we might see. Lots of different reasons.

I just want to bring this up because in the slight holding back, that little bit of space gives room for doubt, gives room for the thinking mind to expand, gives room for proliferation. And again, it tends to lead toward more confusion. Whereas when we work —and it takes practice; it's not that you just sit down and immediately you're going to see everything arising the moment it's arising; I'm not implying that—but our willingness to continue that active engagement, as we do that object after object and we miss fewer and fewer objects, the mindfulness becomes very sharp and powerful. We really begin to see at much deeper levels what's going on.

The second aspect of mindfulness, which we've talked about a lot, is that it enables us to see the bare experience—what's actually going on—as opposed to taking the concept, the interpretations of the experience, to be the truth. It's about seeing directly, without the veil of interpretation.

We all know this. We all know the difference between noting "hearing" when you hear the bell ring, and thinking, "Oh, that's the bell ringing. It's time for the sitting to end." And even though we all know it, the concepts can be so subtle or so insidious, or we're so identified with them, so used to seeing them, that it can sometimes be very hard to separate out the concept from the bare experience.

Just to give a very common example: if you're following the breath, rising and falling, and the experience of it is very tight, very tense, very unpleasant and pressured—

And each breath, the thoughts that are going on: "Oh, this is because I'm such a rigid, controlling, ungenerous person. This is just the proof of it." Each falling: "God, I can't believe how rigid I am." And it's so hard sometimes to just know tightness, tension. Each breath becomes proof of how unworthy we are to be in a meditation environment, to live on the planet, to have friends—it just goes on and on.

And when it's not seen clearly, which it often isn't, that movement of aversion to the tension leads into that concept of what a rotten person we are. And that judgment, that aversion unseen, leads into a world of proliferation, so that by the end of the sitting you've gone over every ungenerous, unkind thing you ever did in your life and expanded on it and pretty much got an image set in concrete of what you are.

We all do this over and over. And when you finally say, "Oh, this is just tension, and this is aversion, and this is interpreting," it's so freeing. But it's so tricky, because we turn around and it happens again. So not to put ourselves down for it, but the power of mindfulness—this being able to cut through and be with the bare sensation—noting is really helpful in situations like this. We're able to note the sensation as it is: tightness. And the fact that there's aversion to it: aversion. And the fact that there's a concept forming about who we are. It doesn't necessarily need to go any further. And even if it does, we're not so lost in delusion. We're knowing that this is sensation, this is aversion, this is interpretation and image building. We're connected with what's happening.

So it's not to discard the use of concepts, but to tell the difference. And the more we work with developing the power of mindfulness, the more we find that it's much easier to get in touch with the actual experience in a moment. It's much easier to see how much of the suffering we're undergoing is coming about from an interpretation that might or might not have anything to do with what our experience actually is.

In this way, observing power mindfulness protects us from getting lost in the delusions and confusions created by the mind, by interpretation. We begin to actually relate in our lives to what's actually happening. It's quite a unique event sometimes, and things become so much simpler, so much less troublesome. We're back to being able to appreciate much more when we're relating to what's actually happening and not lost in the veils of interpretation.

Mindfulness protects us in this way because when we're really mindful of what's happening—whether it's tension, whether it's aversion, whether it's the breath—when that power of the observing mind springs forward to meet the object, in that moment there's no room for overwhelming greed or hatred or confusion to arise and overpower the mind. The mind and the object are coming together so completely that there's no space for the defilements, the afflictions, to arise and to overpower as they do.

So that's why we're always going on about really connecting with the object. That's also why continuity is so important, because each moment that we let up the mindfulness, there is room for the distortions of wanting, the distortions of aversion, the distor-

tions of identification to arise. And they're so powerful. They're such habitual reactions of mind that, basically, given an opportunity to arise, these things do arise. They're just so strongly conditioned.

But it's also important, I feel, not to underestimate the power of those moments when the mindfulness is clear, when you feel there's a real connection, there's just the experiencing of an object directly as it is. A clear experience of the breath. A time when you walk outside and the tree is just so vivid—there's nothing in that moment but the experience of seeing, of tree-ness. In those moments of close connection, the distortions, the filters aren't there.

Those moments are important because in the moment of mindfulness, it's a moment of purification, for just that reason. The distortions of greed, hatred, and delusion aren't arising in that moment. It's breaking the conditioning, the power of the afflictions arising. And that's really important. It kind of breaks the chain, even if just for a moment. But each moment that we're deconditioning or reconditioning the responses of the mind is really valuable. So I just like to put it out that it might seem like no big deal, but it is an important part of the practice. Those moments really count.

This sense of purification comes about, this sense of having no space for the greedy mind, for the hating mind to arise—it's not from an energy of repression. It's not from a violent pushing away of these energies. So the next quality of observing power is that it's totally non-violent, non-manipulative, non-controlling. It's a quality of mind that, although quite active, is not trying to change the experience in any way whatsoever—only trying to be there, meet it, accept it very fully and very actively, but accepting it just as it is.

It's been said that spiritual practice consists in reaching out and embracing all life fearlessly with an open heart. And this is the quality that we bring to connecting with each object in our experience, no matter what it is—embracing it fearlessly with an open heart. So observing power has this spirit of kindness, of metta even, to each thing that arises, to oneself. A quality of great spaciousness of mind, a quality like

Like last night, just as it was getting dark, I was walking outside and in the darkening sky—I know some of you saw it—there was a really beautiful crescent moon and the evening star. Exquisite. It was so beautiful.

As I was standing there, I realized I was kind of focusing on the crescent moon and the star, and suddenly my mind just did a flip and I became aware of all the space around them, the whole space of the sky. That's the quality of mind that goes with ob-

serving power—the space that is present for anything that comes into it. It doesn't try to change it. It doesn't manipulate. It doesn't push away. It has no choice. But it cradles, it holds whatever arises into the space. And then it lets it go when it's time for it to go.

This is the quality of mind that we can bring to mindfulness, to observing. It allows the whole range of experience to come and go without a problem. Real sweetness and openness.

Sometimes a specific concept—there are a hundred million, but I just want to talk about this one—gets in our way of being able to meet whatever arises with this non-manipulative, loving quality. That concept is our ideas about what good practice looks like. If we think we know what good practice looks like—whether it's from another sitting we've had, whether it's from anything any of us say, whether it's from the person you've picked out who walks so incredibly mindfully that you've decided that's good practice, you make up what's going on in their mind and then know that's good practice—whatever it's from, once that idea is ingrained and not seen, it makes it really hard to embrace our experiences that don't come anywhere close to meeting our ideas of good practice. And so then we're in conflict.

I mention this because it's one that we all get trapped in a lot. Just notice if that's operating. Notice that—another concept. Embrace that concept and then don't let it undermine the ability to meet whatever's happening with real openness, real non-violence, a loving quality.

Another quality of mindfulness is that it's not superficial. It's very penetrating. When we're talking about aiming at the object and sustaining the attention, this non-superficiality means that the mind springs forward, meets the object, and then completely immerses itself in it. It's not a sense of holding back, not a sense of jumping over to the next. Sayadaw U Pandita uses the example of when you pour water into a glass—it doesn't just stay in one part of the glass, it covers the whole glass. That's the quality of mindfulness, just really sinking into whatever's happening. Not a casual glance and on to the next. And this develops as we work.

To work with all of these qualities that I've been talking about, it's very important to develop the quality of right balance of effort. The quality of learning to aim at whatever is arising in the mind and then springing forward to meet it with an appropriate amount of energy. It takes a lot of experimentation to learn, and it changes all the time—how to modulate the amount of energy we use. We talk about shooting an arrow at a target: you have to aim it, and you also have to shoot it with the proper amount of force.

It's possible often not to have enough energy, and we just kind of note an object, kind of observe it, and things get vaguer and vaguer. The other possibility is that we're using so much force and so much effort—and most of the way I've been talking tonight, I keep talking about springing up, really springing forward, meeting the object—it's possible to do that with so much force and energy that you get really knotted up, rigid and tight, and you're not really meeting the object. You're more trying to club it to death.

It's working with a balance between the active meeting and, when that's too forceful, a quality of alert receptivity. In that space, if you find you're using too much force, it can be helpful to move back into the analogy of the mind being like space—open, receptive, yet very alert. But rather than pushing forward to meet the experience, in that alert receptivity the experience rises up to meet the consciousness. As soon as it rises up, the alert part is to acknowledge it, note it, be with it. But it's not such a striving, pushing quality.

And for all of this, of course, patience is absolutely necessary. Patience and patience and endless patience. Because how many objects arise into our experience in one sitting? And how many times do we space out in one sitting—never mind going through the whole day? And that's okay. That's fine.

It's just this quality of working with continuity, especially this quality of patience. It doesn't matter what's happening. But as soon as we're aware that we've been gone for ten minutes and we wake up, there's something to come back to—whether it's the breath, whether it's your hand feeling the fork in your hand, whether you're bringing a cup to your lips, whether you're flushing the toilet. It doesn't matter what. There's something to come back to: the actual, concrete experience.

And the patience is just the willingness to come back a hundred million times, over and over. That very willingness to come back is strengthening the power of mindfulness, the power of concentration. It actually is part of the practice, not something we have to endure in order to get somewhere. We can look at those moments as equally important as any other moment.

Let me run through the four protections I've named that I feel are very valuable, very powerful—what mindfulness offers us.

One is that when we're working with mindfulness, we're protected from heedlessness, from walking through life in a daze, from not knowing what we're doing.

A moment of mindfulness protects us from being lost in the distortions of greed, hatred, and delusion.

It enables us to see the truth for ourselves. In some ways, I feel this is the most powerful one, because what we've seen, what we've understood for ourselves, nobody can take away from us. No one can say it's not true. Mindfulness enables us to connect with, to experience the actuality of just this moment and just this moment. That's what sets the conditions for liberating insight to arise.

And the final protection is that, as is often said, in protecting ourselves we protect all others. We're not doing this in isolation. As these protections grow, as we begin to grow in wisdom and understanding—as Thich Nhat Hanh says, without understanding we are unable to love—so as we grow in understanding through the power of mindfulness, it's just spontaneous that the power of mettā and compassion grow as well. This protection that's growing in ourselves flows out, affects how we relate to the world, to other beings. It affects ourselves and everyone else we come in contact with. We're not separate from society. And so it's really a very powerful protection.

Just as once we've experienced and understood the truth for ourselves no one can take it away, also no one can give it to us. We have to come to these understandings for ourselves. We have to do the work for ourselves, in whatever form we're doing it. No one else can do it for us.

We can take the Dharma as our refuge, and also take your own practice, take yourself, your experience as a refuge. No one else can give you freedom, just as no one can take it away. What we're doing here is really powerful, very important.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*, talking about the day of liberation when people who had been in the prison camps under Stalin were released. He says: "The day of liberation—as if it were possible to liberate anyone who has not first become liberated in their own soul."

And I would add that it's also impossible to take away the freedom of anyone who's been liberated in their own soul.

So hopefully, that's what we're working on here.

CHAPTER 4

Delusion and Ignorance

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the nature of ignorance (avijjā) and delusion (moha) as the root causes of suffering. She explains how papañca—the mind's tendency toward proliferation—transforms simple experiences into elaborate constructions that obscure reality, and how the kilesas (afflictions of greed, hatred, and delusion) distort even our most basic perceptions. Drawing on the teaching that all difficulties stem from mistaken perception, she explores how we habitually misperceive ourselves as permanent, separate, and autonomous beings.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance for recognizing when ignorance is present in the mind—manifesting as heaviness, confusion, and rigidity—versus when clarity prevails. She addresses the common tendency to identify with these afflictions rather than observing them, which can make practice feel discouraging. Using vivid examples like mistaking a rope for a snake, she illustrates how misperception shapes our entire relationship to experience.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that these afflictions, though deeply habitual, are not our intrinsic nature—they merely obscure the clarity and peace available to us, like clouds hiding the sun. Through sustained mindfulness practice, we can learn to recognize these obscurations, understand their impermanent nature, and gradually allow them to thin, revealing what Kalu Rinpoche calls 'the sun of wisdom and joy shining in the clear sky of your mind.' Wilson concludes with a passage from the Tao Te Ching, pointing toward the natural tolerance and serenity that arise when we realize our true source.*

Tonight I want to talk about the humble topic of the nature of ignorance. Hopefully we'll clear it up in half an hour.

I said the last time I spoke that the Dalai Lama had said all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception, and that's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience and true knowledge. So what brings about this mistaken perception? And what exactly are we even talking about when we discuss perception and mistaken perception?

Stephen spoke the other night of papañca—that quality, that process where a simple experience like a sound becomes so quickly hidden in all the proliferation that follows it through the agile activities of our mind. We end up relating to something that isn't happening at all. This is one way that misperception takes place.

In our complex psychology, sitting here, somebody makes a sound. Even simpler than that, there's just the hearing of a sound. And the papañca immediately starts. It's unpleasant. We associate it with lack of respect. It reminds us of how in our childhood we were treated as not being worthwhile, leading to all the times we are now treated as not being worthwhile, the immensity of the pain that comes with that, the anger. You see what I mean? By this time, the next time that sound arises, it's almost impossible to relate to a sound. We're relating to a whole conglomerate of things that isn't happening except in the thinking process.

This is one way of misperception, and it's fueled, as we've spoken of so often, by what we call the kilesas—greed, hatred, ignorance, delusion. These are sometimes translated as afflictions of the mind, or torments of the mind, or defilements. I don't really like the word defilements, so I'll prefer to use afflictions.

Now this misperception can happen on an even more basic level, and this actually fascinates me. Let me define perception first. Perception is that quality of mind present in every mind moment. It's one of the five aggregates. So with consciousness, feeling, volition, perception, and rupa—material form—it's going to be part of our experience in every mind moment. Perception means simply the quality of recognition or discernment of something.

When the kilesas are present, when they're afflicting the mind, often even this very basic first perception is distorted. That leads to all kinds of confusion, all kinds of reactions based on having perceived something that isn't actually true in the first place. When that sound comes again, the perception could be so distorted you couldn't even recognize it as a sound, as somebody coughing. It might take a whole different discernment in the mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When you look at a pencil, you perceive it"—meaning you recognize it, you discern it. "But the pencil itself may be different from the pencil in your mind." This is the root of our problem: these afflictions that bring about this basic mistake in the way we perceive our experience. I feel that to understand the nature of these afflictions, of these delusions, is really the key to our practice.

These afflictions—greed, hatred, and the root one of all of them, ignorance—these are the tormenting aspects of consciousness that our whole practice addresses. The practice of morality, of concentration, the development of wisdom—these are working together to clarify these aspects of mind, to purify the mind from these tormenting delusions. Purifying means seeing through them, no longer being in bondage to these afflictions, and eventually uprooting them altogether. It doesn't mean hating them or hating ourselves because they arise in the mind.

I used to have a huge resistance to hearing the kilesas talked about, and one hears them talked about a lot. It's really one of the key points of the Buddha's teaching. But I would hear about kilesas, hear them translated as defilements, and I didn't even want to think about it, much less hear talk about it. Even the word defilement—I'd come away thinking, "Oh, I'm so defiled, it's so disgusting." Buddhism sounds so negative when you look at it from this aspect.

The more I would look in practice, of course, the more I would see greed, hatred, and delusion arising. And the more negative a turn of mind I could come to have, so that I would come away from a talk about it feeling like the nature of my disgusting tendencies of mind was just being hammered into me. One comes to wonder sometimes: in Buddhism, is this what we're saying our intrinsic nature is? This continual arising over and over of greed, hatred, and delusion? Obviously not, or we wouldn't be here. But it made me not want to look.

Over the years, I've actually come to flip about it completely. Far from being negative, I find the teaching about working with afflictions and seeing them is incredibly positive. It offers us the possibility to understand and move out of the suffering that we're in.

The reason it was so negative for me—and it's back to delusion again, of course—is that rather than hearing about these as something to learn about, to observe, to come to be familiar with and thus see through, I was identifying with them. So when greed would arise, very often it would be "my greed, I'm a greedy person, I'm disgusting." And that's really different.

The more we come to look, the more we see that these afflictions are actually not our intrinsic nature. They only hide the clarity, the light, the peace that's available in the mind. But we're so used to having these afflictions be the way that we move and react to situations. They're so pervasive, they arise so frequently, that we come to think that's who we are and how we normally relate to situations. It's really easy to identify with them, and sometimes it can seem overwhelming. It can seem really discouraging, because the more we look, the more we see this, the more it reinforces our idea that we're really hopeless—whenever we identify with them.

But we need to know what we're dealing with. We need to investigate and understand the nature of these forces in the mind, learn to recognize when they're present and when they're not present. From this comes the power to see through them, to not be in bondage to them. The mind begins to purify. And this is what we're doing with our mindfulness practice.

Again, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, to understand something we need to have a direct encounter. If we're resistant to or afraid to look at these qualities in our mind, we never can have a direct encounter with them. We'll keep on being led by them, being lost in them.

So, for example, when ignorance is present, when delusion is present in the mind—you're having a sitting where your mind is dull and heavy and vague. You know you're trying. You're really trying to note things, you're trying to come back to the breath, and it's just all this fuzzy, amorphous heaviness. Now, it's probably rare to note, "Oh, there's delusion present in the mind." Much more common to think, "I am really incapable of doing this practice. I blew it. I did something wrong. It was the apple I ate. It was the extra hour of sleep. It was that moment of greed three and a half hours ago. This is it—I blew it." Or to project it outward: "This whole thing is a waste of time."

But when we can say, "Oh right, at this moment I'm heavy, there's cloudiness, there's dullness, confusion—delusion is present in the mind," it's very powerful. From moments of doing this, we begin to see that ignorance is not some monolithic, unchanging, ever-present experience driving our lives. It arises and passes moment to moment, due to conditions, just like anything else.

I find this a very positive understanding. It's a very helpful thing for me to see: "Oh yes, it's not hopeless. It's impermanent."

In this way, meditation is a very healing process—healing the mind of the afflictions, purifying the mind. Often the body comes to healing as well. But in order to heal, we must look at the nature of the disease. We can't hide from it. We can't pretend it's not present and wish it would go away.

So what are some general characteristics of the afflictions, ways that can possibly help us recognize when they're present in the mind? The first is that when there's affliction—when there's ignorance or greed or hatred—it introduces a distortion, a misperception. In other words, it's called an affliction to the extent that we see things not the way that they are. We see them one way and they really are another way, and we just don't know this.

So we end up with this distorted sense of reality. Our perception is out of sync with what's really going on—it doesn't correspond to what's actually happening. And then we build from this foundation and just get further and further away from what is. We wonder why we're confused.

The root of this, the root misperception of ignorance, stems from our fundamental misperception of ourselves, of who we are. This is really the root wrong seeing, wrong view, that gives rise to all the other confusion. Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "The obstacles to clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain. The very freedom from this is the natural state."

Now, the desire for pleasure and the fear of pain—here you have basic greed and hatred—stem again from the basic distortion in our perception of ourselves: from seeing ourselves as some permanent, unchanging entity, autonomous, separate from each other, separate from nature. And once this mistaken way of looking at things has entered into our perception, once it has kind of gelled into how we think we're seeing things, all of our emotional responses, our reactions to situations, the constructions and formulations that get built in our mind—they're all built upon this initial mistaken way of seeing.

So the further we go with our constructions, the further we get away from what's really going on, from what we really are. And we end up feeling confused, alienated, wondering why we feel separate and not quite connected with our experience. We don't quite see—even though we might know it in our mind on a thinking level—that this sense of perception is taking place moment to moment on a very basic, immediate level, not through the process of thought so much.

And so we expect things to be one way, even though in our mind we know they're not. We expect them to be permanent. We keep thinking we're going to find something solid out there, or in here, to give us satisfaction. We think we're some unchanging, abiding self that can be satisfied. And because that's what we think we perceive, our experience is never going to quite work. It's never going to quite jive—because we're in conflict with reality.

It's like a simple example: if we look up at the sky and see some beautiful star, astronomers can tell us that actually that star died ten million years ago and we're just looking at light. It's not there anymore. Or even watching a sunset—they can tell us that just as it's going down behind the hill, actually that happened eight minutes ago. We're just seeing the light because it takes eight minutes to get from the sun to here. We're not quite perceiving things exactly as they are. We're not living in the world we think we're living in. The pencil you perceive may be different from the pencil in your mind.

And so the second quality is this: misperception introduces a quality of disturbance, obviously, because we're in a sense of conflict with what's going on. It's like a friend of mine gave this example: our life is continually spent as if we're trying to pound a

square peg into a round hole. Our mind is the square peg and reality is the round hole. And we just spend our life pounding and pounding and pounding, wondering why it doesn't work—never really stopping to investigate that these two don't match.

And so we keep on having expectations based on something that isn't true. Those expectations aren't met. We don't quite understand what's wrong. And we end up with this pervasive sense of disturbance. It really can be quite deep—not just when there's something obvious creating a lot of suffering, but in little day-to-day routine things. An underlying tone of uneasiness. Something doesn't quite jibe. And it's easy to internalize that as "there's something wrong with me," or "there's something wrong with life," or "there's something wrong with"—you name it, whatever happens to be going on at the time.

Here's an example, just a simple everyday event, showing how not quite seeing things the way they are leads to a sense of being out of touch. This is all too common, unfortunately. A couple of years ago, some of the staff and teachers here belonged to a health club where we could go swimming and exercise. So during the three-month course, after a long, hard day, a friend and I were really tired and in a rather negative frame of mind. He said, "Let's go swimming—we'll really feel good. That'll really help." So we looked forward to it all day, got ready, went swimming, and got there. Now, the way I'm describing it, I was not observing it with this clarity at the time. This is more in retrospect.

It's chilly down there. They don't keep it very warm, and I'm quite sensitive to cold. So there I was getting on my swimsuit and freezing, thinking, "I can't wait to get in the water. This is really unpleasant." I jumped in the water, which was even colder, and just started swimming really fast to warm up. After a couple of laps I warmed up, and then I was just moving through the laps, moving through the laps, thinking, "This is really boring. If I hurry up, I can get into the sauna."

So I did my laps, just kind of dragging through it. "Phew, that's done. Now I can go get in the sauna." The sauna was really nice—for about three minutes. Then the board I was lying on started to get hard. Then I started to sweat. Then I started to get really hot and dizzy. "I've got to get out of here. This is really unpleasant." I went out—it was really cold, which was unpleasant—and stayed out until I'd cooled off. Then I thought, "Let me jump back in the sauna," which was nice for one and a half minutes this time. I could stand it for maybe five minutes. I got out, took a shower, went up, and met my friend. He was in the other locker room. And we both said, "Wow, that was really great."

Then we started talking about it. Had I not gone back and examined it, I would have come away with the perception that it was really great. So how come I didn't actually, deep down, feel really great from this experience? This is, as I said, all too common. We're just out of sync, not looking at what's actually going on. I thought there was some permanent "me" that was going to be made happy and fulfilled, that there was some experience out there that was going to do it, and that being happy was about having all pleasant things around me to begin with. When we don't question our perceptions, we're going to get this underlying sense of dissatisfaction and wonder why.

The third quality of these afflictions is that they are so habitual. They have incredibly addictive qualities of mind. We're so used to seeing in this way. We're so used to the basic one—seeing ourselves as abiding, as permanent, as separate, autonomous. We're so used to acting out of desire and aversion on very subtle levels that it's very hard to break out of it. It's hard to even see that it's happening. It becomes our habitual mode of response when we're not working with mindfulness. When we are working with mindfulness, that's the power, that's the tool that enables us to break out of this habitual nature.

For myself, I've found it very important to respect the power of this conditioning. By conditioning and habit, I'm really using them somewhat interchangeably. What I mean is that the more a particular mode of responding, or state of mind, is maintained or sustained in our experience, it's just that much easier, that much more likely for that particular mode or way of responding to arise again.

Now, of course, this also works for positive qualities—cultivating a sense of *mettā*, cultivating equanimity. It's also easier for those to arise. Cultivating mindfulness. That's why every moment of mindfulness, the continuity, has such power. Because it's making it that much easier for mindfulness to arise in the next moment. And when we're not cultivating mindfulness—as most of our lives we haven't been—without knowing it, we've been cultivating the afflictions.

The Buddha wouldn't, at least from what I've read, ever talk very much about the beginnings of things. It used to drive me crazy. How did we all get into this predicament? Why, if our intrinsic nature is so light and peaceful, are we tormented by these qualities of mind? Why are we so easily prey to these afflictions? He never gave an answer. He would say things like, "The mind has been afflicted since beginningless time." And he would also say, "What I'm teaching you is all you need to know to come out of suffering."

I'm teaching suffering and the end of suffering. And so if you take what he says and put it into practice, we can come to the end of suffering. He was basically saying it's no use trying to figure out the beginnings of things. In fact, there were four things that would drive a person mad to think about them. I can't recall all four, so don't ask. But one of them was the beginnings of things. It hasn't stopped me from thinking about it, but...

Anyway, that the mind has been afflicted since beginningless time—you can take it, as I do, as a symbol of the depth and power of these habits of mind. Not in a negative or pessimistic way, but in a way that invites us to respect it, so that we understand something important: in the moments when we've really seen clearly and we really are free from delusion or greed or hatred, but then it comes back again so strongly later on, we need not be discouraged. It's just been so habitual, so pervasive for so long that it's not going to simply vanish like that.

That's why it's so important to learn to recognize these qualities, to understand these deeply ingrained habits. Because when we don't see them, we're assenting to this view of reality without even knowing it. And the whole society assents to this mistaken view of reality. It becomes the agreed-upon assumption.

A couple of examples from just reading the newspaper the other day—a most instructive way to discover some of the assumptions we're all living with. One was an article about a television advertisement where some attractive woman appeared in close-up. I don't remember what she was advertising, but she said, "I've had it with reality. I want illusion." And this is meant to sell something, so it's designed to appeal to us.

The second one isn't funny; it's quite upsetting. It was a headline in the Globe about a proposal to Congress to ease the assassination ban. This was a serious headline—like easing the milk tax or something. Ease the ban on assassinations, mostly regarding foreign governments. This represents a warped view of reality, of what's real, of what's wholesome and what isn't—that it's acceptable to assassinate in the name of peace.

When we don't take the time or the energy or the care to investigate our perceptions and our assumptions, we're all assenting to this. It's so close that we can't even see it's there, but it's affecting us. We're so accustomed to seeing things this way that even when we begin to look, it's very difficult not to perceive through these afflictions.

Someone told me about a science fiction movie—I didn't see it—where some creatures glommed onto people's faces, and you could see through them. People would see through as if the creature weren't there, but it's right on you, infiltrating and taking

over. It's kind of like that. These afflictions aren't our nature. They're not necessarily part of us, but we're so used to them just sitting there that we think that's what the world looks like.

Sometimes it seems like one of the most difficult things on this path is learning how to step out of seeing in this mistaken way. It's hard, for just the reason I mentioned: it's first hard simply to discern that we are seeing in a mistaken way. And there's another reason—as we begin to move toward a different understanding, a different perception, it meets with great resistance, both internally and externally.

Internally, a simple example: say you're caught in some difficult process—an emotional state, a memory, a whole conglomeration of things—something very painful and difficult, with a lot of suffering. And you're really bringing mindfulness to it, and suddenly there's a moment where you see so clearly: "Oh, it's thoughts and emotions and sensations," with a real sense that there's nothing solid here. In that moment, there's no problem. It's a moment of perceiving impermanence—impermanence of the mind-body process—on a really deep level, perceiving things as they actually are, rather than the solid sense of "me" and "this concept" and "the suffering."

In that moment there's no problem. But so often—not always, but often—the next reaction is one of tremendous threat. The mind will skitter off, back into the problem, even though it means much more suffering, back to the old way of seeing things. It feels safer. It feels solid. It feels like there's something here.

Often it seems as though the tendency to misperceive is so strong, we've gotten so comfortable with it, that there's almost a preference to see things that way rather than to move out into the truth: yes, there's nothing here but changing sensations and thoughts and feelings. Even though the accurate perception is much more freeing, internally, it's scary.

It's often threatening. It means changing one's whole view of the world.

And I've often found externally, when you start to change your habitual ways of responding to situations—your habitual modes of behavior—you find that the people who are your friends become uncomfortable with the new ways you're acting, the new ways you're behaving.

When I first got into practice, for instance, not out of a sense of moralism but just for some reason, I didn't want to drink anymore. So I just stopped. I never said anything about it. I didn't have a sense that it was bad—I was just seeing that it wasn't helpful. And this was very threatening to others. I actually ended up going in a different direction from my friends. This is different from moral railing at someone that makes them

feel like you're on their case. It's just that you're beginning to see through the societal assumed perceptions. Just as it's scary internally when you sit here, it's scary to other people externally sometimes.

So we often don't get a lot of support for this change if we're not with sangha or other people who are working in a similar way. And this again is hard. It makes it tempting or easier to fall back into the old ways of seeing, because they're so deeply ingrained anyway.

That's the habitual, pervasive nature of these afflictions of mind—they arise so strongly and so frequently.

But the fourth quality, and this is really the important one to remember, is that they are not our intrinsic nature. They only obscure it, like clouds obscuring the sun. This is from Kalu Rinpoche: "When you practice the Dharma, the clouds of sorrow will drift away and the sun of wisdom and joy will be shining in the clear sky of your mind."

That's what it's like. The clouds of sorrow will drift away and the sun of wisdom and joy will be shining in the clear light of your mind. It's just that sometimes we take the clouds to be all there is. We take them to be unchanging.

In each moment of our experience, there are certain qualities—these five aggregates—that are intrinsic to the nature of our existence in that moment, to the structure of consciousness: feeling, perception, consciousness, volition, rupa. Those are there. You're not going to have a moment as a human being where one of those isn't happening. But these afflictions—greed, hatred, ignorance—these are not intrinsic. They do not have to be there in every moment of our existence.

It's very important to know this: that they can disappear. They can drift away like clouds. We can transcend and overcome them. Otherwise, practice doesn't make any sense.

When you're discouraged, it can be helpful to reflect on this and also to realize that often it's discouraging because we're beginning to see these afflictions more clearly. Before, these afflictions were so comfortable that we didn't even know they were here. When we begin to pay attention, to work with mindfulness, we see them more and more. This is really the beginning of the healing process. But it's also a very painful part of the healing process—like sometimes taking a very painful medicine.

I have a friend who was in chemotherapy for a while, and she'd say she knew it was good for her, but it made her so sick she'd just sit and look at the pill for half an hour or an hour before she could get herself to take it, because she knew she was going to be in

the bathroom sick the whole night. Sometimes it almost feels that bad, turning around and looking at these things in our mind. But it's the only way to come to understand and be free of them.

So that's the path of our practice: to learn to tell the difference between these obscuring, obstructive qualities of mind and the real pure nature of our mind and heart.

I want to talk a little bit specifically about the quality of ignorance, the affliction of ignorance, because that really is the root one—the root misperception.

First, just to begin to get a feel for it, let's get familiar with what it feels like when our mind is filled with ignorance. It's dark, heavy, confused, foggy, sluggish. I have this description from Nyanaponika that I really like, of a mind strongly under the influence of delusion:

"There's a general heaviness and unwieldiness of the mental processes. Force of habit predominates. Changes and adaptations are undertaken slowly and unwillingly and to the smallest degree possible."

Thought is rigid, inclined to dogma. It takes long to learn from experience or advice. Affections and aversions are fixed and biased. In general, the character proves more or less inaccessible.

I love that description.

So if you ever have a moment—a rare moment—when you recognize any of those qualities, instead of saying, "Oh, I'm a rigid, fixed, biased person," you could say, "Oh, ignorance is present in this moment." Just see if that makes a difference in your relationship to it.

Also helpful is learning to recognize when ignorance is present and when it's absent. When it's absent, the mind is facile, flexible. You can really see what's happening clearly. You can note it clearly—it comes and it goes. Helpful not to say, "Wow, I'm such a good yogi," but rather to recognize that there's not delusion in the mind now. There are other positive qualities present—mindfulness, concentration, energy.

So that's one aspect of ignorance. The other is this wrong view, this distortion. Because of the fogginess, because of the darkness and the cloudiness, we see wrongly.

The classic example given is of someone walking in the woods at twilight. It's not completely dark. You can make out the trees, you can make out bigger shapes, you can sort of see the path. But you can't see little things very clearly. You can't quite tell what's

going on over there in the shadows. And you see a vine or a rope hanging from a tree, and the mind mistakes it for a snake because of the obscuring quality present in that moment.

In that moment of mistaking the vine for a snake, that mistaken recognition leads to a strong reaction of mind—of fear. "I know there's poisonous snakes in this area." You whirl around and see other vines, and they're all snakes, and there's a sense of panic. The whole way we perceive the woods changes based on this initial mistaken perception. It's dangerous. One is scared. The woods are unfriendly. They're dark. They're evil. On and on.

If we think that we perceive a snake due to this cloudiness, we're unable to see clearly. That mistaken perception will inform all our actions. We will behave as though we saw a snake. We'll never know the difference.

But if one, even though filled with fear, kept on going and got closer—or suddenly the moon came up and you could see that that vine is actually a vine—the whole problem goes away. It's like, "Oh, no problem, that's a vine." Now nothing in the situation has actually changed except that our perception has become accurate. Our relationship to the situation is all that's changed. Recognizing it wrong affects everything. It affects our entire relationship to the experience.

There's an addendum that works the other way. When I was in Thailand staying in one forest monastery where there were a lot of poisonous snakes, one would be on the lookout for them. I was walking in the woods one day and there was this big green vine. I didn't pay any attention to it, walked up close, and it actually was a snake. So it works both ways.

This is what we're doing all the time in our perception of our mind and body, of who we are. We're continually mistaking it to be something it isn't. This is basic wrong view. We take the input that we get on a moment-to-moment basis of who we are, what we are, and we organize it in a way that's not correct. And then we act on that incorrect perception and build our life on it.

This changing mind-body process—constantly arising sensations, images, sounds, thoughts—is always in a transitional stage, never in stasis, always becoming.

We somehow reorganize it and perceive it as solid, unchanging, permanent, separate from everything else, autonomous—you know, "I can do whatever I want, nothing affects me and I affect no one else."

Now, while some misperceptions are easier to see through—you get close to the rope and you can see it's not a snake—this one is how we've always viewed the world, and it's not so easy to see through. It's also being recreated, this misperception, on a moment-to-moment level. So just seeing through it once isn't enough. We see through it deeper and deeper, on more and more powerful levels. But since this is how we've organized the world, it is very hard to see through.

Take an example of a time when you've misperceived something. Say you're misperceiving the rope as a snake. Reflect on how real that misperception was. I mean, the mind was absolutely convinced that's the way things are.

Two other examples—and you can probably think of times in your own life. One is from James Thurber, whom I used to read a lot when I was a kid. He had this whole essay—I can't remember most of the details—but he was almost blind, and it was about how he broke his glasses once and didn't have glasses for three days and all the wonderful things he was seeing in the world because he couldn't perceive accurately. The one I remember is he would look out of his apartment in New York, up on the fifth floor or the tenth floor, and this magnificent dog just kept lying on the ledge on the same side of the apartment next door. He kept wondering, what's it doing out on the ledge on the tenth floor? It was so magnificent and it just held its pose, very regal. After three days when he got his glasses, he found out it was made out of stone. Now, for those three days, that dog was absolutely a real living dog in his mind.

Another one is from a friend of mine. He was walking in England with his wife at twilight—good time for misperception. The twilight is like the ignorance in our mind. They were out in the country, and at the far end of a field by some bushes, he saw a whole flock of big white geese walking across the field. They were kind of big and their necks were twisted funny, but he said, "Look at those funny white geese walking across the field." And she said, "Those aren't geese, those are cows." She went on to explain how they're the kind of cows—I don't remember what kind—but they're black on either end and white in the middle. It was dark and they were up against some dark bushes, and so all he saw was the white, and it formed into something that was geese in his mind. They were geese, absolutely geese. And then you know how once you see it as cows, they can never really be geese again. They're cows.

So we do that a lot. When you notice that happening, reflect on it. Notice how the process of misperception happens. It's not that different from how we take this thing to be solid and permanent. Reflect on how real everything was when we were in the misperception, because it's that same way—it's that real that we think we're this separate, solid, eternal being.

Another thing that makes it hard to see through is that often we tend to reject or deny input that's coming in that doesn't fit with our mistaken perception. We've gotten so used to that perception that we just block out or deny or don't trust our perception when we perceive something else.

A simple example: often people have said in interviews, "Objects are coming and I just can't stay with one object very long. I just don't have enough mindfulness. My mind's just too scattered. I just can't stay with objects." And often it's because, yeah, you can't stay with objects long because the objects are changing constantly. It's the absolute bare experience of impermanence.

Nothing is staying long—neither the object, nor the attention, nor the mindfulness, nor the consciousness. It's all changing moment to moment. But we actually deny that experience by making a permanent "I can't stay with the object, there's something wrong with me," instead of opening to the fact that it's all constantly coming and going.

We do that a lot. What's important in these moments is to notice when you tend to reject a certain experience or perception, and to see where that rejection is coming from. It's important to let in these experiences. Often if it's some kind of psychic experience or some sense of interconnectedness, we put it down as weird or far out or kind of a fringe thing—as if, again, thinking that we're really separate, that we're autonomous. It's important to take in, to notice the times when this perception is belied, when you see the other way.

When I was sitting here this summer, one really hot afternoon, I was doing my walking meditation in the Hall of the Catskills. It was one of these days just before a huge thunderstorm, where it's incredibly hot and sultry. You feel like you're walking through a swamp, just walking. It was all I could do just to move. There was this sense of heaviness and something impending. Absolute stillness. Usually people were walking somewhere up and down the hall, coming to their rooms or passing through, very mindfully, but there was always some activity. During this period of about twenty minutes, absolutely nothing. It was like the whole world was dead still. It was all I could do just to keep myself walking. I felt like I was moving against the energy.

And suddenly the thunderstorm just hit. A wild storm. Within ten seconds it was pouring rain, thundering. Within a minute, people were tearing through the hall. Doors were slamming. People that I hadn't seen move faster than a snail's pace for three weeks were running at top speed down the hall, throwing open doors, checking the windows. I myself was filled with energy and having to hold myself back.

I thought, *wow*—it's not like there's a thunderstorm and there's me and those are two separate things happening. It was so clearly one happening, one experience, and not a sense of separation or inner or outer or different people, or "there's nature and it happens to have an effect on me." It was so clear that I *was* nature. So was everyone else. We were all part of the same process. It was a very powerful moment for me. And then it all just kind of died down back to normal—"lifting, moving, placing, separate from this other person who's walking in my way."

So the more that we see these things, the more that we notice, pay attention, come to understand the nature of ignorance, the nature of these afflictions—know when they're present and when they're not—the less we identify with them, the less we move out of a space of confused perception. And then the clouds really do begin to thin out. It really does happen.

And what's so beautiful is that, in a way, nothing really changes. We're always afraid we'll lose something, you know. But it's like when you see that the geese are cows, nothing's any different. The cows were always cows, and they're still cows. The only thing that's lost is a mistaken image of what was happening. Nothing changes, but everything changes.

Because there's a really crucial difference. The way we perceive ourselves as separate, autonomous, unchanging—it feels secure, but actually it's really painful. When we're coming from perceiving ourselves this way, and then relating to life from this place, it makes everyone else, everything else separate. Things become so difficult, so unsatisfying. There's conflict. It hurts. Life is hard.

When we're seeing without that, when we're seeing the changing nature, and there's nowhere to take hold, and there's no solid core—it's like a huge burden has been lifted off. And things are just how they are. It's really so simple.

It's just how things always were. And life can even be enjoyable. Thich Nhat Hanh says that practicing Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life. That doesn't mean every moment you're sitting here you should be enjoying—sorry to say. But the relationship to life can actually become one of deep appreciation and joy, rather than this niggling, ongoing conflict of pounding the square peg into the round hole.

And so when we're seeing without these misperceptions, even the difficult times are okay.

I want to end with this little quotation from the Tao Te Ching:

Empty your mind of all thoughts. Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings, but contemplate their return. Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity. If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kind-hearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you. And when death comes, you are ready.

So we're learning to deal with whatever life brings us.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 5

Non-Greed: Dāna

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this profound talk from the 1989 Three Month Retreat, Carol Wilson addresses one of the great paradoxes of spiritual practice: how mindfulness opens us simultaneously to immense suffering and immense beauty. She invites practitioners to recognize that greed, hatred, and delusion are not the intrinsic nature of mind, but rather coverings that obscure its pure qualities.*
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> *Wilson focuses on non-greed (alobha), which manifests not as passive neutrality but as the active, outpouring quality of generosity (dāna). Drawing from her year as a nun in Thailand, she shares how dāna functions as a complete practice path alongside sīla (morality) and bhāvanā (meditation). She explains that generous action naturally drives away unwholesome mind states while strengthening qualities of non-attachment, mettā, and interconnectedness. The key lies in mindful attention to intention—before, during, and after giving.*
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> *Practical guidance includes giving hand-to-hand when possible, receiving with equal presence and openness, and understanding service as humble acts done with pure motivation rather than grand gestures. Wilson emphasizes that even meditation practice itself becomes an expression of dāna when undertaken with the understanding that we practice for the benefit of all sentient beings. This reframing transforms difficult moments into opportunities for cultivating non-attachment and generosity, giving tremendous strength and richness to practice.*

You know those moments Sharon spoke of in her talk on delusion where you suddenly are sitting there and you go, "Where am I? What am I doing here?" I just had one.

Something that I've been reflecting on a lot lately, something that just seems to be coming up in my experience and to my attention, is what I see as one of the great paradoxes of our lives and of this practice. It's how, as we open, as we become more mindful, we open so deeply to such an immensity of suffering. And at the same time, we're opening to such an immensity of beauty, of love, of joy, of appreciation. The paradox is somehow how to hold both of them—not to let one experience deny the other, and yet continue to be open for both.

I've been seeing this come up a lot. Two small examples came to my mind when I was writing this, and you can see it yourself all through the day.

The first: one of these beautiful golden days we've been having, I went out to a reservoir near here and was walking in the woods by myself. It was so exquisitely beautiful—the golden leaves, the light filtering down, the water. Such a sense of sublime peace and rightness with the universe. It was very inspirational, a sense of surrendering completely into that moment, to the rightness of the Dharma, a willingness to surrender my life to whatever service of the Dharma was appropriate. All those feelings arose, and it was a real experience.

And then the next memory in that moment was of a friend's remarking that the leaves are reaching this height of beauty as their dying gesture. All this beauty is the preparation for death of the leaves, of many of the plants in the forest. And that's not necessarily a depressing thought, but both aspects are inherent in the same situation.

The second example comes from the other side. A couple days ago, a friend on staff told me that Terry Anderson—the man who's been a prisoner in Beirut—it's five years now. She'd heard that he was celebrating his fifth anniversary in captivity, and that he spends most of his time in a cave chained to the wall. Just to imagine that, and the thought of trying to open one's heart to what he might be going through, to send some mettā. In the doing of that, feeling the compassion beginning to flow, the sense of unbelievability at what this person's enduring—but out of that came the beauty of compassion and the sense of all of our connectedness. In a way, that isn't happening separate from us. And at the same time, knowing that the same mettā and compassion must also encompass his captors. That they're also suffering. And that's also a part of our existence.

So you see what I mean—it's as if both extremes are encompassed in many of our experiences, even the most simple.

Because the suffering, both our own and others', can so often seem so unbearable, and we spend so much of our lives guarding against feeling the depth of it. Of necessity, we spend a lot of our practice learning to open to suffering, to face it, to acknowledge it, to see the nature of the afflictions in the mind, how they create more suffering when they're not seen and are identified with. And this is necessary. It leads to this opening of the heart, a great depth of wisdom and compassion.

But at times, it seems like we can get almost unbalanced in our focus on looking at the negative qualities, for use of a better word. We see greed, hatred, and delusion so much that we forget that's not actually the intrinsic nature of our mind. It's easy to identify when we come and think about how much grasping we've seen in a day. It's

easy to think, "My God, it's hopeless. This is the nature of the mind and my existence." We forget that these qualities are covering, that they're hiding the intrinsic pure nature of our mind and heart.

And so that's what I want to talk about tonight—just a reminder to us that our practice, yes, it's about opening to the unpleasant, to the difficult, to seeing its nature with mindfulness, with equanimity. But it's also about acknowledging the beauty, the other qualities of mind, the nature of the mind when it's not dulled by confusion or grasping or anger. Can we learn to equally acknowledge and experience both aspects—the unbearably painful and also the unbearably sublime?

I want to talk about some of the pure, positive aspects of mind tonight. Classically these are described in rather negative terms: non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. But they're really much more than this kind of passive, neutral quality. They're really very active, growing, outpouring qualities of mind.

Non-greed can also be described as generosity, thoughts and actions of sharing, even of sacrifice. It's also non-attachment, renunciation, simplicity.

Non-hatred—again, it's not just this passive sitting still like a rock where nothing's going to incite my anger. It's also the very positive outpourings of the heart: mettā, loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness, patience.

And non-delusion is that brightness of mind that we all experience on retreat when the perception is so bright, so clear. And this leads to growth of great insight, equanimity, and understanding.

I'll talk more about these later.

What's important, I think, for us to continue to recognize as we go through our practice here and also in our life is not to see these qualities as some goal out there, but to recognize that on a moment-to-moment basis they are present in our experience. In moments when the unwholesome states of mind aren't present—when we're not clouded by greed or anger or confusion—these positive qualities, various ones of them, are present. And as our mind purifies more through our mindfulness practice, these qualities shine out even more strongly and more often. I think it's important for us to also recognize and acknowledge them when they're present—not just to acknowledge the difficult. And to know that there are ways to cultivate these qualities, of which of course mindfulness is the most powerful. I'll mention a little about that, but I also want to talk about some broader ways to cultivate these qualities.

First I want to say that often I've found, in my own experience and in talking to other people, that when we discuss the really uplifting qualities of mind—whether it be the possibility of freedom, enlightenment, or the development of a sense of real boundless loving-kindness, of a state of non-attachment—even though it's meant to be inspiring, it often has quite the opposite effect. People will say, "God, just hearing about enlightenment turns me off completely. I mean, that's for somebody else out there. It's not for me." Rather than bringing inspiration and energy to investigate, it brings a sense of, "Well, I can never do it, so what's the point?" A kind of heaviness and listlessness can result. There's always someone better, always someone to compare ourselves to. And so it can serve the opposite purpose. Hopefully that's not my intention.

I want to share an experience that helped me see how this actually could be inspiring. I think one of the reasons that hearing about—I don't want to say goal, I don't even mean goal—but just the possibility in this moment of living with these powerful qualities of heart and mind, one of the reasons it can seem discouraging is this tendency to accent the negative. When we hear about, say, the possibility of cultivating boundless metta, all we see is our boundless anger and hatred. That's all we know. We don't notice the moments when it isn't there.

Think about if you've done something that put yourself out there, and you get feedback from people about something you're unsure about. Ten people tell you it was really nice, it was great. And two people give you really negative feedback. Which ones do you remember? Which ones do you give the most weight to and believe? I know for myself, there are times I'll completely discount the positive feedback. They're crazy, or they're just being nice—anything one wants to say. The negative one believes. It's often like that with our moment-to-moment experiences.

So often when I'd hear about enlightenment, or hear people talk about it—Sayadaw U Pandita mentions it a lot in his talks, he'll often talk about Nibbana—sometimes it's inspiring and sometimes I think, "If he mentions that one more time, I'm going to lose it." Because it's just somewhere else. Somebody else can do it, not me.

This winter I was in Bodh Gaya in India for a few weeks. That's the small village where the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree and came to his full understanding and enlightenment before he started teaching. There's quite a beautiful temple, a big stupa there, and a descendant of the tree that you can go and sit near. People circumambulate the temple, and it's in a little park right in the middle of this village.

I'm not usually very moved or inspired by shrines or temples. It just isn't what moves my heart usually. But we went and sat down in the midst of all the craziness there, started to sit, and I was so moved I started to cry. As I reflected or just kept sitting,

I saw that what it was—it brought what seemed like a myth of this person, the Buddha, some special, unbelievably special person who achieved this miraculous thing—it brought it down to earth. We were sitting in just this place, in this little dirty Indian village, under a tree. And it made the whole thing really human to me, really much more possible. Like, oh yeah, this Buddha—he was a human being with suffering, trying, just like I am, just like all of us are. And maybe it's not some esoteric myth so far away that it has no relationship to my life. Maybe it's something that is really possible.

It was deeply inspiring to me, just in the sense of bringing the whole thing down to earth. And it gave a sense of energy, a sense of real commitment—commitment not to have to go somewhere else and achieve some kind of other state separate from life. Because the other factor of this experience is that this temple is in the middle of the whole show. When you're sitting there, there are hordes of tourists coming through in droves, guides with their microphones, Hindus chattering really loudly, Japanese Zen groups. There were about twenty-five Tibetan monks sitting on the hillside for days, chanting.

Blowing horns. A very mentally disturbed woman who would come running up and scream the whole time you were there, then go away. Starving dogs. Rows of beggars you have to walk through just to get up to the temple in the first place. It's not like you're out in some sublime place.

And I kind of got it. Oh.

The inspiration wasn't a sense of denying or aversion to life, but of being able to embrace the whole without getting lost in it. The inspiration was to be fully present, but to devote one's energy to the development of wisdom—so that one is fully present *knowing* that it's impermanent, that it's insubstantial, that none of the things that happen are going to bring lasting happiness. But for that very reason, one can be even more fully present and participating.

That inspiration comes and goes, but it has stayed with me quite deeply since that time. And since then, I've understood more how talking about the possibility of developing non-greed isn't something to dismiss. It's like—right, this is something that happens in this world. There are many moments of it in my experience right now, if I'm just willing to open and pay attention to those equally.

Sometimes I also feel as if we're almost afraid to open to the power of these positive qualities of our experience. A moment of what feels like really pure love, or forgiveness, or compassion. Generosity—a sense of selfless generosity. Or an upliftment of joy just at the way the foot feels when it lifts off the floor. It doesn't have to be about something sublime.

And sometimes it almost seems harder to open to that fully than to the pain. Some people have said things as if they don't trust that it's real. Again, it's back to the self-negative: "Well, I'm just such a blind, dumb person. I couldn't experience this level of joy or this level of peace. So it must not be a valid experience." We find ways to discount it. So be aware of that. Trust your experience.

The thing I find in myself strongly is that sometimes it seems hard to fully take in these moments of non-greed or non-hatred, of clarity, because there's such a poignancy in them. They're so deep and powerful, but there's also a knowing right away of their impermanence. And that even grasping at this—you know, as soon as the grasping comes in, it's gone. In fact, the grasping actually destroys it. And sometimes it's as if, "Well, if I really open, it's just going to go away. I'm going to grasp, I'm going to suffer more, so forget it."

Let's just be aware of this when it happens. Learn to trust our experience. Really open. Experiment with opening to it, and so grasping comes along—fine. That's the next experience. But we don't have to shrink away from opening to the power and beauty of these experiences.

And in fact, the more we do this, we find that we don't have to be so afraid of grasping. It comes or it doesn't. It's another experience. But in the moment, when we learn to say—in an experience of joy or appreciation—to open to it even more fully, we appreciate it even more deeply *because* we know that it's impermanent, that clinging and grasping is beside the point. And so there's a huge energy, a total vitality of presence, just to experience it as it is. And when it goes, it's gone. That's okay.

So what are these qualities of heart and mind that I'm talking about, more specifically? My intention had been to talk about all three, but I see I'm not going to get past non-greed tonight. So we'll talk about that.

As I said, non-greed is a state of non-attachment, of generosity. It's not at all a neutral, passive state. It's more the state of generosity. It begins with non-attachment—the dissolving of attachments, small attachments in the moment, larger attachments. But it turns into something more like a giving out, a spilling out of that energy into the world, out to other people, other situations. It's no longer just being enclosed in on ourselves.

One way of thinking about the state of attachment is as a state of mind where we compulsively refer everything back to ourselves. What do I want? What don't I want? This is in my way. This is nice. What do people think about me?

How do I look? We refer everything back to ourselves—a state of attachment.

As detachment grows, as non-attachment develops, not only are we free of this exhausting pattern, but the energy that was going into that clinging, into that constant referring back, becomes accessible. It can move outward into a much more generous, open quality of energy, a movement of the heart. Naturally generous impulses, expressions of love, of sharing, of service—these come to be the natural expression of the force of non-attachment or non-greed in the mind.

Now this force arises often and strengthens naturally through our mindfulness practice, which works on quite a subtle level—the level of moment-to-moment arising and passing of our experience. In this level of seeing things arise, seeing the attachment arise and turning our mindfulness to it, often in that very moment the mindfulness itself helps to dissolve the attachment. At any rate, in the moment that we're mindful, the attachment is not being strengthened; the mind is being purified. So mindfulness itself is a very powerful force for the further cultivation of non-greed, for the strengthening of the outflowing of unselfishness, of service. Mindfulness is one way, and maybe the most powerful way, to cultivate this.

I'd also like to talk about another way to strengthen this quality of mind. And again, it's important to notice it when it's present. But by the actual practice of generosity itself, as a practice, it strengthens even more this quality of non-greed in the mind. The practice of generosity is a very powerful practice. In Pali, the word for generosity is *dāna*, which we tend to use a lot, throw around a lot. It encompasses more, in a way, than just the word generosity. It's a practice in itself that can actually be used as a path to freedom from suffering if we're working with it in that way. It can be used as a path to purify the mind, and it's a very powerful adjunct to our mindfulness practice.

In the scriptures, the three trainings of the mind often talked about are *dāna*, the practice of generosity; *sīla*, the practice of morality; and *bhāvanā*, the practice of mental development or meditation. *Dāna* is given a very important place in our path to freedom. It has many aspects, of course—any thought of giving, plus actual giving of resources or money or time, energy, a sense of unselfishness, working with renunciation, simplicity of life and desires. Even our meditation practice itself can be a form of *dāna*.

When we're working with it as a path, it's very important to recognize, as with all our actions, that it's not just the outer action itself that's purifying, that strengthens the non-attachment, but it's our inner intention—the motivation that engenders the action and that follows through with it, the attention we give it. This is a very important point, and of course our mindfulness practice is what enables us to really tune in so well to the intention.

I learned an immense amount about the practice of *dāna* as a practice when I was in Thailand. Somehow my own perception is that in our culture, generosity as a path isn't given as much weight or thought about so much. I mean, generosity is a good thing, and we all kind of applaud it, but to really use it as a way to develop one's mind and heart, to come to freedom—that isn't so much looked at.

In Thailand, it's a very powerful part of the culture. I was there for a year as a nun, and from the moment—even before I ordained—from the moment I set foot in a temple and started to stay there, this outpouring of generosity and support was just overwhelming. And it never stopped. I have endless examples. What struck me the most about all of it is that it was done with such a spirit of joy, of appreciation. I was literally made to feel that I was doing all these people a favor by letting them give me food, or give me robes, or give me a place to stay, or take me to the train station—just an endless series of little things.

And it wasn't just for me. Being a foreign nun, you do get special attention, that's true. But it wasn't just for me. I was staying at a small temple in the north. There were only about five *kutis*, little huts, for the nuns, and it was a practice situation, so all the nuns were practicing. In temples, you never know who's going to come. People just show up. And if twenty people show up, they'll find places to stay for twenty people—joyfully—and food to eat.

Very often a group of nuns would just arrive, and the head nun there, who had been there for some years and was the main teaching nun, would with great joy—and I'm not exaggerating—move out of her hut up into this little cave high above the rocks so that the visitors could have her hut. And because I was a special foreigner, they would never discomfort me by putting someone else in my hut or asking me to move. They would all move out of their huts, all clumped together.

And I would sit there and think, "Gosh, I had just come from—well, no, it had been a few years, but I had been on staff here before that—and boy, find one of us moving out of our room for a yogi!" You know? "We think we're going to double up for a night? Forget it."

And when we're doing real service – it's not like we weren't serving at all. But I thought, whoa, we don't know the first thing about real generosity of heart.

And again, I want to emphasize, it's really the working with it as a path that gives it so much power. It wasn't personal. People weren't being nice because they liked me or they liked these nuns. It was a path for these people – a path of growth in their spiritual

life, of opening the heart, growth in non-attachment, and also an expression of their pure love of the Dharma. And it was the rule, not the exception. Very rare to meet with anything else.

In observing this over and over, I really came to see how, as a practice, you can't act with this generous spirit repeatedly and do it out of resentment or anger. You just can't keep doing it that way. You can do it a few times, but as you continue to act from generosity – even if sometimes it's a little forced – and you're really paying attention to your motivations, you find that you just can't keep the resentment and the anger or sense of being put out going. Because generosity, the actual action of it, works to help drive away the unwholesome qualities of mind, the afflictions. As you continue to act in a more generous way, the unwholesome mind states arise less frequently. They're simply not so present.

And this is true even without what we might consider perfectly pure motivation. It doesn't always have to be, "I must have incredibly pure motivation of giving or else it's no good, I'm just pretending." We can observe this in ourselves even with what they call beggarly giving. They describe three categories of giving, and the first one is beggarly giving – where you give something but you don't really want it anyway, and maybe this person could use it, and then maybe they'll like me. The motives are mixed. But there is a force in that giving. The attachment to that item has been dissolved somewhat, or you couldn't give it. There's some sense of kindness, some sense of affection. We start where we are.

And in doing that, we see that not only can you not really give with a lot of unwholesome qualities in the mind, but the act of giving also drives away the unwholesome while serving to strengthen the wholesome qualities – the qualities of non-attachment, of interrelatedness. To give something, you do have to let go, and to some extent the attachment to that object isn't strong; it has been dissolved, or you couldn't really give it. In the moment of giving, the clinging releases. It might come back later and you'd wish you hadn't given it, but that's another thing. In the moment of giving, it's been dissolved somewhat.

And it's hard to give without some affectionate, loving, caring feeling. You can't just go and throw something at someone – that hardly counts. But with any kind of sincere looking at our motivation, doing it as a practice, being really honest with yourself, if you're feeling, "I hate this person's guts, I do not want them to be happy, forget it, I'm not giving them this" – no, you can't really do it if you're paying attention. So when you give something, even if it's something you don't want much, there's some affectionate, caring, connected feeling going with it. Some non-attachment in the mind.

The act of giving itself strengthens our understanding, our experience of the sense of unity between one another. It's a very connecting act. It also possibly gives rise to metta, to compassion. Often we're giving out of a sense of compassion for somebody else's need. And so we find that giving does, as a practice, help to cultivate these positive, wholesome qualities of mind. You might find that they arise more easily when you're giving in some way, working with generosity, even if they seem difficult or not so accessible at other times.

The very act of generosity, when we're giving with as clear an intention as possible, engenders a happy feeling in the mind, a sense of lightness. It engenders non-attachment and non-hatred, a sense of connectedness, a sense of caring, a sense of clarity. So it's really a lovely practice.

I want to emphasize again that the act of generosity truly strengthens and brings a great sense of unity between individuals, or between people in general. It takes one out of one's self-absorbed, cut-off, little sense of the world – me, me, me. That referring back to me at that moment isn't happening. The energy is pouring out, connecting with another.

I could see this effect that working with generosity over time has in some of my Thai friends. I think of one woman in particular who once, when I was sick, took me into her apartment for a month. She would get up at five and cook me breakfast. She'd come home from work and cook me lunch because I couldn't eat in the afternoon. We spent a lot of time together, and she was just giving, giving with this huge joy. And it wasn't because we had known each other before. She didn't know me from anyone.

She was giving to the Dharma, to support the Dharma. And you could see in her a growing real strength and peacefulness, an easy willingness to give—not just giving things you don't need, but giving where it's appropriate, where there's genuine need. Such a lovely presence, such strength and peace there was about this woman. And her main practice was this.

So in using generosity, *dāna*, as a path, I want to emphasize again that attention to our volition, to our intentions in the giving, is a very important part of this. Because it's possible, as we all know, to be outwardly very generous while inwardly doing it for some totally self-serving motivation—like some really rich person who gives a huge amount of money to something but just wants their name all over it because it will help their business. This isn't what we're talking about in working with generosity as a practice.

But paying attention to our motivation, it won't always be pure. This is where the mindfulness practice is so helpful. We're not looking at the intention to judge ourselves, but just to notice. And in bringing mindfulness to it continually, we'll find that our intentions will purify of themselves.

So some things to work with in an actual act of giving—and when I talk about giving, I also include the sense of service, giving one's energy, giving one's time. The first, as I said, is mindfulness to the volition. Really paying attention to it, allowing it to purify as much as possible before actually giving.

This way of thinking about it inspires me a lot: a way of describing the generous act of the bodhisattvas, who have dedicated their lives to serving all beings. In the giving, to have the understanding that with this act, may all beings be free from suffering—including myself. That gives huge power to the act of giving, whether you're giving a cookie or a year of your life. Doing it with the pure intention: may all beings, including myself, be freed from suffering with the purity of this act.

The next is to see the clinging that we might have to the object, to our time, to whatever it is that we're giving—to see that clinging. And in the seeing, as much as possible, to abandon it. Again, not by forcing or judgment, but just through the power of mindfulness, through the power of seeing.

If it's possible to do so, it is sometimes advised—if it's an object—to actually give it hand to hand. When I first heard this, I thought, well, that's kind of nice. But I had an experience after I sat for two months this summer with Sayadaw U Pandita. Actually, it was from the translator, U Nyanapannika, who said this: you should give hand to hand.

I had given Sayadaw a book while I was sitting, and he asked me to sign it. So I signed it and just kind of put it down. And he said, "No, come over here. Hand it to me." He made me hand it to him. The power of that giving—it was as if it increased twenty times, because there was this real, direct person-to-person contact. Looking in his eyes, it actually made me acknowledge with my whole being that I was giving this to him as an act of generosity, as a movement of appreciation. It was like taking full responsibility for the act.

Very powerful, much more than just giving and putting something down. Having real confidence, real faith in the power of the motivation, the intention of generosity. It's not about saying, "Oh, this book is so wonderful"—it's the actual intention, and really being fully present in it, not doing it half-heartedly. And the *mettā* that flowed between us, back and forth, was very powerful. It was very interesting and very instructive.

So I understand now why giving hand to hand, or in a way that really acknowledges what you're doing—not because you want something back from the person, but for your own being to be acknowledging fully: yes, this is what I'm doing as an expression of generosity.

But please, while you're on retreat here, forget this one. I don't want you knocking on each other's doors saying, "I want to give you this cookie hand to hand!" There's appropriateness to the situation.

Give with your mind totally focused on the giving. Again, this is just pure mindfulness—doing what we're doing with full attention. Afterwards, being aware of our intention again, of any changes in it, as often it will change. Just being aware of that. The whole working with the purification of our mind and heart through intention is not over as soon as the gift is given. It's really being carefully observant after that.

I'd also like to add that another very important part of *dāna*, generosity, which I've been learning, is to apply these same concepts, these same ways of working, if you're the recipient. Because sometimes allowing generosity to flow, being a really fully present, open recipient, is just as much an act of honor or generosity as the giving. And sometimes it's much harder.

So back to even just taking a compliment. How hard is it to really open and just say, "Thank you very much. I appreciate that." To really let that in. And when we can't—when someone tries to give us something and we say, "Oh no, no, I don't deserve that. You shouldn't give it to me"—

On and on it goes. And what's the effect of that? In that moment, in our own heart, what's the effect? We're blocking off a sense of connectedness. We're shutting the door on that outflowing unity of a heart of generosity, just saying, "No, no," actually referring everything back to me—I'm not good enough, I don't deserve it. Separation.

So I've been finding that working with learning to receive—with the same sense of non-attachment and the same full power of presence—is a very wonderful and difficult practice. And it also engenders a power of non-attachment and connectedness in the mind.

One other aspect I want to mention of working with generosity or *dāna* is the aspect of service. Again, it's the same motivation, the same outpouring of the heart, the same non-attachment. What comes to my mind when I'm contemplating a sense of service as a practice of non-attachment, of growth and compassion—some of the aspects are joy, but also a great simplicity, a humbleness.

Again, coming back to the key: it's our motivation. It's not what we do. Often we tend to think that if we're really going to be doing service and have it count as a practice, it's got to be something really special. When I was a kid, somehow I got into reading these books by Dr. Tom Dooley, who ran these hospitals in Vietnam in the fifties. And I would be incredibly inspired—that's what I've got to do! I've got to go off into the jungle somewhere and run a hospital in these really extreme conditions. We tend to think it has to be something that makes a difference, that really makes an impact. But that's not what it's about at all. As a path, it's about our intention, our motivation. And it can be very simple, very humble.

A great inspiration to me in this way is the Dalai Lama. A few weeks ago I was out in California for a couple of days to attend a two-day teaching he was giving. And even though he's such a great man—he just won the Nobel Prize, incredibly developed, very learned—when he speaks, the overwhelming sense one gets is of such simplicity and down-to-earthness, just basic kindness. Nothing so special. One of the things he said when he won the Nobel Prize, when people were heaping up all these praises, was, "You know, I'm just a simple Buddhist monk, no more and no less." And the thing about him is you know that he really means that. It's not just posturing to look that way.

Even though the idea of who he is might suggest someone who has this incredible life and is so special, the reality of being in his presence brings the whole thing down to earth again. Here's a person who lives a life that seems, from what one can tell from the outside, to be completely dedicated to service—the service of all beings, without exception. And the qualities one encounters are just this simplicity, kindness, and down-to-earthness. Nothing so special. Nothing so out of our experience or out of our reach.

We don't have to be Mother Teresa to work with using service as a path of generosity. It's just little acts in the moment.

One story I heard when I was in India really struck me—just somebody off on their own that no one ever heard of, devoting their life to service, even if it's something that seems crazy to us. It was a person who was a devotee of Neem Karoli Baba. He had a house somewhere, and he was just devoting his life to feeding anybody who came by. Now, in India that could be a lot of people. But they said—the person telling the story said—when he sees cows coming, he calls for chapatis. Chapatis are these flat pancakes. And he has twelve people cleaning his house, when two could quite easily clean it. But he'd say, "Well, then I could only feed two. This way I get to feed twelve." Nothing so special, but really inspiring to me. It can be quite simple.

This is from Robert Aitken: "Our task, too, is to respond generously to others. We can take as our models not only Shakyamuni the hermit and our other great Dharma ancestors, but also such humble beings as bushes and grasses. With every fiber, beings of the plant world are guiding others, conveying their vitality to the soil, water, air, insects, animals, and people. This is the harmony of universal symbiosis, and it is also our own way of realizing and actualizing that unity. How do we actualize the oneness of all beings? Through responsibility, meaning the ability to respond, like that of the clover. When clover is cut, its roots die and release their nitrogen, and the soil is enriched."

New seeds fall, take root, mature, and feed other organisms. Clover doesn't think about responsibility. And neither did Shakyamuni. He simply arose from his seat and went looking for his friends to teach them. The clover simply puts down its roots and puts up its leaves and flowers.

And so sometimes I feel like that's one of the aspects of what our path of mindfulness, of generosity, is about. It's not to change into something grand, something special, something else. In some ways we become more ourselves than ever. It's much more about allowing the peace, the truth that's already here in our experience, to emerge.

As Aitken writes, the human being does not become an angel, but rather finds affinity with the silent clover.

So it really can be very simple. We don't have to make it into something grand and unattainable to work with these positive qualities of mind, this state of generosity as a path to our own opening and understanding.

Even our practice itself can become an aspect of service when we're working with intention, with our motivation. Even though often it seems like in practice we're sitting here completely self-centered, just wanting the next pleasant state to come, or wanting please God to be free from this particular suffering that's happening right now—meditation practice can also become a very powerful expression of the sense of dana, and also a great cultivation of it. Because the more we practice, our intention purifies of itself when we're practicing mindfulness with sincerity. We can't help but begin to see that we're not separate from society. As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, when we come in here to sit, we're bringing all of society with us.

And as the Dalai Lama says—I'm paraphrasing—to bring peace, real peace, into the world, it's about finding what real peace is. And that's about developing it in ourselves and from there bringing it out into the world.

When we're practicing with this understanding, which comes and goes but which we're developing, being aware when it is there, our practice itself can become one of the most powerful expressions of interconnectedness, of non-attachment, of generosity that there is. As the Dalai Lama expressed it, talking about the development of the heart and mind of wisdom, one practices for the benefit of all, saying to oneself: "For the benefit of all sentient beings, I will aspire to achieve complete enlightenment."

And that's really powerful—when we feel that we're practicing for all sentient beings, and that includes ourselves. I find it gives such strength, such power to our practice. We become so much more able to be with whatever comes. Because it's not about getting rid of this state so I can have some other state. But yes, even in this moment, as difficult as this moment is, as much as it's not what I would wish to be happening, I'm cultivating a sense of non-attachment, a sense of service, of generosity. And this understanding contributes to the release of suffering of all sentient beings.

It's a very powerful way to practice. It makes it much more rich—as if it could be more rich.

Let's sit for a little bit.

CHAPTER 6

Right Attitude

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this talk from the 1989 Three Month Retreat, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of sammā saṅkappa—right attitude, right intention, or right thought—the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. She begins by showing how right view (sammā diṭṭhi) serves as both the beginning and culmination of the path, with intellectual understanding of the Four Noble Truths evolving into direct liberating insight.*
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> *Wilson presents a fascinating framework from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita demonstrating how all eight path factors are present in a single moment of noting. In this context, right intention manifests as 'right aim'—the precise, unhesitating willingness to connect directly with whatever arises, without preference or resistance. She emphasizes that this same quality of mind applies equally to subtle meditation experiences and challenging life situations, revealing that meditation and daily life are not separate endeavors.*
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> *The talk then examines the Buddha's threefold right intention: renunciation (nekkhamma), goodwill (mettā), and harmlessness (avihiṃsā). Wilson offers practical guidance on working with each, drawing from her experiences as a nun in Thailand and in India. She explains how renunciation isn't about suffering through deprivation but about discovering the profound contentment and clarity that arise when craving diminishes. She explores how intentions of goodwill transform difficult situations from obstacles into opportunities for growth, and how compassion develops through deeply experiencing the universal nature of suffering. Throughout, she emphasizes that cultivating these wholesome intentions is a gradual practice—what we frequently think about shapes the inclination of mind.*

What I want to talk about tonight is the second stage of the Eightfold Path. The first stage being right view or right understanding. And what's interesting about right view is that it's both the first stage of the path and also the culmination of the path. So right view in the beginning stages is somewhat of an intellectual understanding of the Four Noble Truths, some seeing that impels us into being willing to practice. And the culmination of the path, liberation, is the direct intuitive seeing into, understanding, experiencing of the Four Noble Truths. So in that way, right view is both the beginning and the end.

The second stage of the path has various translations: right attitude, right thought, right intention. Sometimes I've seen it translated as right aspiration. It's an interesting one to me because it has so many different levels of application, from looking at what

right intention and right attitude mean in one single noting moment, just in the arising of one moment of noting, all the way to its broad applications in our everyday life. I find it, especially in relating to our broader life, a very powerful aid, a message in how we relate to our experience. A message that meditation and our life aren't separate. That it's the same—the way the mind relates in one noting moment and the way it relates in some confusing situation in our life. It's the same inclinations, the same mind. And so working with right attitude on these different levels I find very helpful.

So what does right attitude, right intention, mean in one noting moment? One of the things that I've liked a lot that Sayadaw U Pandita often speaks of is how in one noting moment the whole Eightfold Path is actively present. For some reason I find this quite a fascinating way of looking at it. And it's present in that the three parts of the path that have to do with action—right speech, right action, right livelihood—are assumed by our yogi status. In other words, we're observing right speech. Basically, if you're not speaking at all, you definitely are. Right action is also assumed, that we are observing the precepts. And right livelihood, he also says that in the moment, devoting your energy and attention to meditation, to understanding, is considered right livelihood. It's talking about what you're doing right now. So that's the moral part of the Eightfold Path.

And then in a moment when you're actually able to connect with the object and note, the factors of right effort are present—the effort to move the attention to the object. Right mindfulness, the observing power, the ability to connect with the object, to focus on it, to see it as rising if it's arising. And of course, right concentration—that there's enough focus of mind to see clearly what's happening. That's all in that moment.

And then we come to right attitude, right intention. And that's considered, in this very narrow sense, to be right aim. It's that precise aiming not to slip from the object, the willingness to aim very precisely and directly at whatever is arising in a moment. That's considered right aim, right thought. And of course this leads to right understanding, which is knowing what's arising in the moment for what it is, very simply. Knowing the rising as pressure, as tension. It's just that bare experience that's right understanding.

So in one noting, right attitude can be seen as right aim. And what this implies is actually quite broad, because it implies no hesitation, no preferences, a sense of constancy, a sense of willingness to aim and connect immediately and directly with whatever is happening. To give everything that arises full energy. Not picking and choosing, not paying full attention to some and kind of half-heartedly aiming at others, not letting the inclinations of the mind rule what's happening, but a constant, ongoing, unpreferential sense of aim.

And expanding that to our life, what it implies to me is that same willingness to greet every situation in our life, whatever is arising, as our practice. That each situation can be met with this full openness of mind and used as an opportunity to learn and to grow. And in a broader sense, this is what I mean when I talk about right attitude.

We're having a lot of chance to learn that here. Learning that happiness is not dependent on having the perfect situation. I can think of many times that I've been staying somewhere, living somewhere that should have been idyllic, that by all external ways of looking at it I should have been ecstatically happy, and I was miserable. Because it's all in the attitude of mind. And times that we've all had here where you've been in a very difficult situation—even if it seemed like a little thing from outside, internally the situation is quite difficult. And at some point, the attitude shifts and you're able to use it as a teacher. Whether it's someone sitting next to you that's driving you crazy, or certain noises late at night in the bathroom or the library, the wrong kind of food, indigestion every day after lunch. Little things looked at from the outside, but internally it's really quite difficult. It's a painful situation.

And so many times people have said to me, and I know I've experienced the same thing myself, that there's a time when you actually become thankful for that situation because of the learning and the sense of freedom from attachment to the pleasant that comes out of looking at it. So that's one manifestation of right attitude.

Right attitude is also a process through which we gradually become more and more clear about what our real values are in life, what our life's about—moving more clearly from that understanding rather than drifting from reaction to reaction without any sense of what's really important to us.

As this develops through meeting situations with a willingness to learn and grow, that sense of clarity, that commitment to really being in our life, to using it, that understanding—it starts to shine through in your being. It starts to shine through just in the way that you relate to life, the way you relate to little situations. It doesn't matter whether it's a subtle experience happening in your sitting that no one else even knows about, or a really frantic experience at work, or an unexpected and painful interaction with another yogi. They're no different. It's the same mind. And we have the possibility of using any situation that arises as manure—to learn, to grow. Or conversely, there's always the possibility that we'll drown in our reactions.

Without working with our attitude, with our intentions in this way, it's true that difficult situations easily drag us down. The reactions of greed and hatred and delusion in the mind are so strong that they just take over. We identify with them—with anger at the person who wrote us a nasty note, with anger at ourselves for being angry, with an-

ger at ourselves because we wrote a nasty note. It just goes on and on. We spend all our energy then in resistance or in denial, trying to rework the memory so it comes out better and it's not so uncomfortable to think about.

When our attitude switches, when we're working with right attitude, we use that energy to meet the situation constructively. It's that same energy of right aim. We meet both the situation and our reaction to it just as they are—without hesitation, without resistance, without trying to make it different. It's an attitude of interested investigation, no matter what's happening. And from this is where we begin to see where the hooks are, why the particular situation is bringing up so much suffering, why it's so difficult. That's when we really start to break free, to learn.

Right attitude is also translated as right intention. I want to say a little about that. Intention—that subtle aim of the mind, the inclination of the mind—is seen as the link between understanding, the degree of understanding, and the next part of the path, which is action. The understanding can only manifest in action through the intentions of mind that make the action happen. So it's a crucial link, because thought or intention is the necessary forerunner of action.

Now, as understanding deepens, it informs the intention, it forms the intention, and this leads to clearer, more wholesome actions—actions that aren't causing pain and suffering to ourselves or to others.

In the mind without understanding of the Four Truths, the intentions that arise—and intentions often arise as thought—are basically manifestations of the three roots of suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion. They manifest as painful thoughts, angry thoughts, greedy thoughts, thoughts of wanting. And they will obviously lead to confused and painful actions, leading to a lot of suffering in ourselves and in the world around us.

As understanding deepens, this will naturally be reflected in a change in the intentions of mind, a change in the thoughts. As there's more understanding—say, of the nature of suffering—giving rise to compassion, it will naturally happen that the thoughts and intentions will be more reflective of this. Thoughts of harming won't come up so much. When they do come up, they'll be counteracted more quickly by a sense of the pain that that would bring.

But the Buddha also recognized—this is one of his pragmatic approaches again—that while only understanding will uproot completely these three roots of suffering and their manifestation as thought, we can also work with them on the level of their manifestation in thought. We can work with greed and hatred especially on the level of intention, how it manifests in our experience as thought.

The roots of greed and hatred surface in our experience as thought, as intention, leading to action of some kind—thoughts of anger, thoughts of harming, thoughts of wanting. At the same time that we're meeting that experience with mindfulness, a clear seeing that allows for wisdom that can uproot these altogether, we can also tackle the thoughts on another level. That's working with the intention itself.

And how the Buddha suggests to do that is through redirecting the intention—not with aversion, but by cultivating actually the wholesome counterpart to these unwholesome intentions of mind.

To do this, he has quite a specific way. He talks about threefold right intention, which we can work at cultivating. The first of these is to cultivate intentions of renunciation. Now, renunciation springs from the wholesome root of non-greed, and this works on the principle that when thoughts of renunciation are aroused in the mind, they basically replace, dislodge thoughts of desire, intentions of greed. So what's happening is, in that moment, non-greed—the wholesome root—is replacing greed, the unwholesome root. It's kind of like a thought substitution.

And this often we actually have the choice to do this. It's very practical because it's based on the premise that contrary thoughts, contrary roots, cannot exist in the mind at the same time. And it's also based on the premise that whatever one reflects upon very frequently, whatever you think about frequently, that tends to become the inclination of mind. So it's giving some attention to what the mind is dwelling on, and when we have the choice, making the choice toward a wholesome intention rather than an unwholesome one—unwholesome meaning simply that it leads us to more suffering.

So working with developing the intention of renunciation serves to strengthen non-greed and to weaken the intentions of greed. The other two parts of right intention are cultivating intentions of goodwill, or mettā, and cultivating intentions of harmlessness, or compassion. Both of those work as an antidote to aversion, the root factor of aversion. And delusion is really seen through more by understanding.

I want to talk a little about each of these three right intentions and some practical ways that we can work at cultivating them.

Intentions of renunciation—now this doesn't mean enforced asceticism, that everyone needs to give everything up and become a monk or a nun. It also includes, positively, the sense of inner contentment that arises when we're not wanting so much, when we're not needing so much, when we're less caught up in acquiring. A great sense of ease and happiness can come with this kind of simplicity.

I noticed this when I was in India this year. After I'd been there a while, I realized I was really happy. On the surface things were nice, but everything is a real hassle there. You can't do very much in a day. You can go to the post office and sit, you can go to the chai shop a couple of times, and it takes up the whole day. Even taking a bath takes quite a lot of time. I realized actually that at first it's a kind of enforced simplicity—I didn't really have a choice. It wasn't like I had gone with a sense of renunciation. But the simplicity, the renunciation that was happening of itself, led to a great sense of contentment, of appreciation of what was happening. And there being not so many things to want, the mind just wasn't wanting very much. Of course also, what it did want were things it could get, so I wasn't caught up in longing in some ways.

That sense of simplicity reminded me of what renunciation can really bring about in the mind. It's a lovely sense of appreciation and inner contentment.

Our culture in general, at least the way I experience it, is not really supportive of renunciation. It's not really the driving value, shall we say. And I guess this is no different from when the Buddha was alive, because he describes his teaching as running contrary to the way of the world, and that the way of the world is desire. My experience of our culture is that it's organized to enhance desire.

Just anywhere I look—for example, the first thing that comes to mind is looking at the Sunday New York Times Magazine, and about the first twenty pages are full-color ads for all kinds of expensive clothes and expensive perfume and expensive coats, with people in seductive poses to advertise socks, say. By the end of looking at it, either I'm really disgusted if I'm in a moralistic mood, or else I'm thinking that I look like a slob and I have to go into New York and really fix up my wardrobe. Either way, it's cultivating aversion or it's cultivating greed. That's just how our desires run, how our culture is run.

I had a friend whom I met when I was a nun. He was a layman at the temple I was at in Thailand, from Australia. His job before he left had been being in charge of Revlon's advertising for all of Southeast Asia. He was a great artist. He described to me very specifically the psychological tricks they use in an ad to draw people in and make them want what's being advertised. It's very calculated. I had no idea—the setting, the colors. Certain colors will make people want things; certain colors will turn them off. The angles, how big something is. Very interesting. I didn't realize how conscious the advertising industry is about how to activate wanting in our minds. And it works.

So in our culture, we tend to think of renunciation as having to give stuff up, as hard, as suffering. Here is a quotation from Lama Yeshe, a Tibetan Lama who died several years ago:

"Most of us do not know what renunciation means. We're disturbed when we hear about giving up attachment to sensual pleasures, which we take to mean having to suffer in order to achieve inner liberation. But renunciation does not mean that we must give up happiness or that it is desirable to suffer. On the contrary, our aim is to achieve a state beyond suffering. The aim of most of our daily lives is to try to satisfy each physical desire as it arises, day after day, month after month, year after year. We try to achieve happiness by perpetuating something that is essentially transitory. This expectation, stemming from a misconception, can never be fulfilled and is therefore totally irrational."

So renunciation isn't about giving up things so we'll suffer. It's actually a turning away from the craving—

Renunciation is a turning away from this desire for gratification, and it's very powerful. It's true that it can be tremendously aided by an outer simplification in our life. This retreat format, for instance, is a great form of renunciation. You've had to renounce a great deal of outer gratification and sense pleasure in order to come and stay here for three months. And you've done it voluntarily—so that's a true renunciation, not one that's forced. You voluntarily choose to stay here, and you can see the power that comes from simplifying your life in that way.

I learned a lot about that also when I was a nun in Thailand. It was voluntary, but the first couple of months were really hell—adapting to the culture, adapting to what it meant to live in robes, to all the things that one can't have or be involved with or talk about or do. At first there's a lot of wanting. But after a while, when you see that there's no way to get what one wants, the energy turns around into looking at the wanting and seeing how much suffering comes from that. It's much easier then to turn away from the craving, from the wanting altogether, rather than spending one's time running around trying to achieve it.

It amazed me that by the end of the time I was there, although the situation was similar, it stays in my mind as one of the happiest, most contented, and vital times of my life. This simplicity gives such a space for appreciation in the mind and for looking at what's happening and understanding. I'm much happier than times when I have a lot but I'm caught in a space of need. No matter how much I have, then I need something else. And it's stultifying.

So I'm not talking about achieving, or expecting to achieve immediately, a state where we're desireless—looking at renunciation as expecting that we need to be desireless. It's not that at all. It's having a commitment to the attitude with which we greet this mind of wanting, this mind of greed. A commitment to watch and see how desire affects our actions, how it affects our attitude to the world, to use the situation to learn from.

This watching—the nature of desire, and how in our own life dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, is inherent in desire, can't really be separated from it—this seeing of this, this watching it, is one of the things that helps our mind incline toward renunciation in a natural way. It's one of the ways to work with developing this part of right intention. So just watching it. Notice how when your mind is in a desire, how it affects our attitude to the world.

You know how when you're hungry and you're walking down the street and all of a sudden all you see are the restaurants, whereas before you never noticed that at all. Or times here when I've been on a retreat and I'm in a space that's really painful, and my mind is just grasping onto the painful aspect of things. I remember this one moment really clearly. I walked into the room I was sitting in—and I love the room. I had a little plant hanging from the window. But I was in this space of negative, negative. All I was seeing was the pain. And I walked in. The first hit was, "Oh, this is a really nice room." Right after that, "Ah, it's just going to be gone in another month." "Oh, that plant's really pretty." "Ah, it's just going to die." Really seeing things from that attitude—the way that wanting shapes our experience.

Working with renunciation helps us sort through the maze of things that we desire. It helps us know what's really important in our lives. And it lends us the strength not to be so sidetracked into running after this and that. That's why I think sometimes making a clear sense of renunciation to oneself can be helpful. Because then we don't have to spend a lot of time waffling, thinking, "Well, should I have this? Shouldn't I have this?" It's not that there's any one particular thing to renounce that's better than another. But I find it a very helpful and interesting practice.

For example, the eight precepts. And I'm not saying that everyone should go on eight precepts—it's just an example. The times I've been on it as a real vow, say the times I was a nun, it was clear there was no way that I was going to eat anything after noon. There was no discussion, there was no waffling, and it left so much more energy to go into the seeing—to see what not eating did, to see how much energy I actually had for other things when I wasn't trying to decide, "Should I eat? Shouldn't I eat?"

Now there have been times that I was on retreat here and I couldn't decide: should I do eight precepts, shouldn't I do eight precepts? And so every day at tea time, every day, I would go through this whole thing. Whether I ate or whether I didn't eat, there was a lot of energy being expended in working with this desire. Having made the renunciation made a lot of space for looking at things in a clearer way.

And this could go on with anything. It could be a renunciation for three days—just to experiment with the space and the clarity that can bring into the mind.

Another thing I've found helpful in working with renunciation is that I'm not as liable to stay immersed in habit. Habit is a very strong thing. Often we stay in habit because it's comfortable, it's easier, because we're just kind of dull—the mind inclined in the same way, we just do the same thing every time because we're not paying much attention. The force of habit is strong.

I want to read this little cartoon I found quite fortuitously. It's a quiz: "What's your philosophical outlook?" It's kind of like a right attitude quiz.

The first little box says: "You wander down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle, solitary yet surrounded. You think, 'These people are...' A: my brothers, my sisters. B: perverts, probably pickaxe murderers. C: I sure could go for a chili dog."

And the second: "Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse..." A: I know what he feels. He feels hope. He feels fear. B: Why is that pervert looking at me? C: Maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

And the last is: "Further down, construction workers are tearing the street to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of..." A: the path of life. B: the highway to hell. C: rocky road, my favorite flavor.

So that's what I mean by habit. The inclinations of our mind are really strong, and they surface whenever we're not paying attention. Working with renunciation gives us more of a chance to see these inclinations when they arise. Because, for example, take the food one—if you're not eating, they can't be satisfied, and there's nothing to think about whether it's satisfying. So you can see the inclinations arising.

We're more aware of that moment of choice, that really interesting moment when you see, say, an inclination to greed arising and you know you have the choice whether to act on it or not. And it's interesting because so much of the time we act on it anyway, even when we know from previous experience that it's going to bring suffering—either that we eat too much, or we didn't eat too much but we're going to berate ourselves for the rest of the day for giving in to greed. Or whatever.

Either way, though, that moment of choice comes over and over. And either way we move with it, when we're working with renunciation and can see it clearly, that's where we have a chance to learn. That's where we have a chance to work with this right attitude. It's not so much about expectations of perfection as about willingness to look and learn.

True renunciation is not from an outer force. Renunciation isn't repression. It's not driving away desire from the mind by filling the mind with aversion and loathing for the desire. You're just substituting aversion for desire—it's not helpful. It's much more about changing our perspective so that the things we inwardly cling to now, when we change our perspective, no longer bind us. We're no longer suffering from that.

As Suzuki Roshi says, "Renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world but in accepting that they go away." And that's very profound, because when we really accept that something's going away, that clinging that binds us isn't there, and there's true renunciation in that moment.

Inclining the mind towards renunciation is also helped, as I said, from seeing the pain inherent in desire and from a willingness to keep ourselves open to seeing that, to looking, to seeing that the world around us is full of inspiration—to see the Four Noble Truths, to see the truth of suffering and of clinging and of the freedom from that.

When our minds are open, when we're willing to look in this way, we can see it everywhere. And I know you've all had moments like this—where you walk outside and can just see so much in the season changing from fall to winter. Or taking a walk and seeing a dead snake crushed in the road. Or hearing children crying. Or a really painful memory, a beautiful sunset. It doesn't matter what. It can be the most mundane things. And holding ourselves open to see the depths of the Four Noble Truths in these is a great inspiration to working with right attitude, to being willing.

It gives us a sense of urgency. It renews our sense of commitment to investigation, to really use what comes our way as our practice.

It's said that when we work with renunciation in this way, it's so powerful—it purifies our conduct. As I mentioned, that clarity of intention leads to more pure conduct. It aids in concentration and also nourishes wisdom. So it's very powerful.

One line I recently read struck me in a new way. It suggested that we could look at the whole course of practice as a process of renunciation—beginning from the first time we sit down and start practicing, and culminating in Nibbana being the ultimate renunciation, the relinquishment of everything.

The second area of right intention is the intention of freedom from ill-will, the intention of good-heartedness. This is metta. It's also cultivating a sense of openness to whatever situation presents itself in our lives—that attitude of being willing to learn from situations, both internal and external, rather than meeting them with resentment, ill-will, self-pity, and the whole chain of possibilities.

From Thich Nhat Hanh: "I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with nonviolence. We do not need to consider anger and hatred as enemies we have to fight or destroy, to annihilate. Dealing with anger in that way would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself. If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate towards others."

So that sense of self-acceptance is really a sense of metta toward whatever is happening in the moment. That's this aspect of right attitude. And we develop it even in one moment with that quality of right aim—that quality of not hesitating, of not preferring, of constantly moving toward and opening to whatever arises. That's cultivating this right intention, the intention of goodwill, a quality of metta toward whatever arises.

When we're working with cultivating this intention of goodwill, difficult situations are no longer in the way, intruding on our practice. They actually become stepping stones, opportunities for growth. Namkhai Norbu, a Tibetan Lama, says that whatever arises as one's karmic vision is used as the path.

And again, this is powerful. Whatever arises—no exceptions—means anything that happens, anything that comes up in our experience, can be used to foster understanding, to foster wisdom. This brings about a great change in our attitude toward things that come up. It's really powerful.

We've all had experiences of this, where we've been really closed, really resistant to something going on continually—the person in the room next to us keeps slamming the door and the resistance is palpable. What are we learning in that state but aversion and closedness? And when we can actually open to the situation as it is, a great sense of learning and growth can come from that.

Here's an example I like very much. I cut it out of the newspaper last year. It's about a woman named Marie Balter, who was seventeen and clinically depressed when she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic and placed in a state mental hospital. She remained inside for another seventeen years. The article describes how, fittingly for a woman whose antidotes to adversity are perseverance and forgiveness, Balter has returned as a full-time administrator in the same hospital.

"I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive," she said in a recent interview. "If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger. Forgiving is a way of reaching out from a bad past and heading to a more positive future."

This is really powerful to me—someone who has suffered immensely in her life, seventeen painful years in that institution, coming out and putting herself back together, going back to school, getting a graduate degree. She got married. Her husband died. She's had a ten-year bout with cancer. The list of what this woman has gone through is amazing. And her strength lies in her willingness to use these situations to grow and to learn forgiveness. This is what good-heartedness, what non-ill-will, is all about.

One can spend one's time lost in recriminations, in self-pity—and we'll all get caught there sometimes. But it's the willingness to make the intention not to stay there forever, to remember that we can wake up and use what comes.

This reminds me of Don Juan's distinction between a warrior and an ordinary person: a warrior sees everything as a challenge, while an ordinary person sees everything as a blessing or a curse. It's really a strong way to look at life.

Just recently, a few months ago, I was in a situation that ostensibly was fine, but somehow it was pushing a lot of my buttons. I was going through emotional difficulty and was basically unhappy. I found myself thinking about how I could reorganize things, what I should change, because the situation wasn't working—and generally getting tighter and tighter. Then one day it just hit me.

Do I just want to organize my life to be comfortable, or do I want to be free? When that question arose, there wasn't really any confusion as to what the answer was. And I realized if I wanted to be free, then this situation was just the way to learn about that. Arranging my life so I didn't have to face it was only going to lead to more needing of comfort and more fear of similar situations. This helped me a lot.

I do also want to mention that clear seeing, without aversion, enables us to recognize that there are situations that are harmful, that are bad for us—physically, emotionally, mentally harmful. Through wise attention and clear seeing, we know: yes, I need to get out of this situation. That's not necessarily done with fear and aversion. It can also be done out of intentions of non-harming and caring. Non-harming also means taking care of oneself, but from clarity, not from fear.

This leads into the third right intention, which is intentions of non-harming, intentions of compassion—as opposed to the second, which is intentions of metta. Partly the way that our intention of non-harming can be developed is through—and again, it al-

ways comes back to this—our own experience of suffering. It's actually another reason that helps me incline my mind towards openness when I'm in a difficult or suffering situation.

The Dalai Lama, when I was out there, said that for the development of compassion—and he's like Mr. Compassion, if anybody is—it's necessary to have deep seeing into the pervasive suffering nature of existence and to feel the unbearableness of it. Now this surprised me a lot because he wasn't kidding. He said otherwise compassion is somewhat hypocritical. So we can begin by contemplating how all beings wish to be free from suffering and yet they still suffer. This is a very powerful contemplation. And it deepens through our own experience of suffering and how unbearable that can be sometimes. This gives rise to intentions of non-harming, to intentions of compassion.

The Dalai Lama also said that what aids this is a sense of the ability to exchange oneself for others—that sense of interrelatedness, that sense of someone else being as important or more important than I am. One way we can work with that is simply beginning to pay attention to the different ways we can relate to a difficult situation that arises here and now. There's a way we can relate to a situation that actually increases a sense of separation, a sense of me and you, without much feeling of compassion. And there's also a way we can relate that evokes a sense of oneness, the sense of being able to replace ourselves with others.

Take a simple example. Say you have a vipassana vendetta here—someone who's driving you up the wall. Now all you have to do is think about them and you're angry or resentful. If you're near that person and they're actually making some sound... it's remarkable right now how sounds are becoming so painful to people. Someone's making a sound, and there are different ways we can relate.

One way brings on a strong sense of separation: that sound should go away, that person should go away, I shouldn't have to be experiencing this—and all the self-righteousness, or all the self-blame for feeling so angry. But it's basically about wanting to make the unpleasant thing go away. The sense of me and other gets really strong. The sense of separation becomes really strong.

And we've all had times here when that suddenly changed around. When we stopped resisting the situation, whatever the situation was. When we just had to give up. Sometimes you can really feel a sense of exchanging for the other person. You suddenly feel their pain. You have a sense of where that action is coming from. And in that, there's not a sense of two separate beings, of that person causing me to feel like this. Just a sense of their pain, and the pain over here, and how it's a mutual situation working together. It's not so personal.

Often people say this leads into a sense of communion with the suffering of the world. The personal suffering becomes a key into knowing that we're all sharing in universal suffering. So sometimes these seemingly silly little incidents can open up our heart and understanding so that we key into the suffering of the world. It's the same suffering, whatever the object. Those times when we can drop the resistance and feel that sense of oneness—that's a real gateway to compassion, which allows these intentions of non-harming to become stronger.

I want to read this one thing from Thich Nhat Hanh about that. I love the way he says things because it's so simple and down to earth. He's talking about wildlife shows on TV, where you'll often see tigers chasing things and snakes eating things. He says: "We long for the well-being of the frog and the antelope, but rarely do we consider that the tiger and the snake must also eat in order to live. We humans eat chickens, pigs, shrimp, fish, and cows. Yet because it is painful to watch, we will take the side of the prey and hope it will escape. In these situations as meditators, we must remain very clear. We cannot take either side because we exist in both."

Some people can remain unmoved or even enjoy the sight of a tiger tearing apart its prey. But most of us, feeling its agony, take the side of the victim. If a scene like this were occurring in front of us, we would try to find a way to save the antelope and the frog. But we have to be careful not to do this just to avoid our own anguish. We must also feel the pain of the tiger or snake deprived of food and have compassion for them. All beings have to struggle to survive. The more deeply we penetrate into life, the more we see its miracles and the more we see its heartbreaking and terrifying events.

We're all developing. We all have the potential for cruelty and the potential for great mettā and great compassion. True gentleness, non-harming, compassion—they need to manifest even in the most difficult, challenging situations. And for that reason, I feel like we need these difficult situations, because it's through them that we see where we're still getting stuck, what is more of a challenge than we're able to meet right now. And that's okay. We have compassion for ourselves and our suffering. But we also can't fool ourselves that we're living in great compassion. There are times that we are, and there are times that it's just too much for us. These difficult situations are a gift to us because we learn where we still need to grow, and we also learn to have compassion for ourselves.

Working with developing these right intentions, right attitude—intentions of renunciation, of goodwill, of harmlessness—like everything else, it's a practice. It's not going to happen overnight. The habits of greed, hatred, and delusion are not too easily dislodged. But as the Buddha said, what we think about frequently, that's what the mind inclines towards.

You'll start to notice—I'm sure you've noticed already at times—if you can really stand back objectively and be honest in this retreat, that the more often we do make the choice to work with right intentions, they do more and more become inclinations of mind. You will find there'll be a time when you're in a painful or angry situation and suddenly the inclination towards harmlessness, towards goodwill, will just arise, seemingly of itself. You weren't sitting there trying to make it happen. It really does happen. Or the inclination to renunciation will just arise spontaneously. You'll see that the mind is beginning to purify, to incline more towards these wholesome roots.

CHAPTER 7

Living in Three Dimensions

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson examines one of the deepest patterns that shapes our suffering: our attachment to views, opinions, and mental constructs. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that clinging to views is even more insidious than clinging to sense objects, she reveals how our need for definitive knowledge and explanations actually imprisons us in what she calls a "two-dimensional" existence—running along the surface of life while missing its depth and mystery.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how this pattern operates at multiple levels: from obvious attachments to opinions about food or meditation practice, to the subtler realm of perception itself, where our mental states color and distort how we recognize experience. Most profoundly, she examines how we construct and cling to our self-stories—the continuous narrative of "me" that we weave from momentary sense impressions, selected memories, and thoughts, mistaking this fabrication for a solid, permanent self.*
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> *The talk offers a liberating alternative: meeting each moment with beginner's mind and wonder, like Suzuki Rōshi's teaching that "in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few." Wilson suggests that true wisdom isn't acquiring a body of knowledge but rather opening into mystery—what Joseph Goldstein calls his favorite mantra: "Who knows?" Through vivid examples and gentle humor, she invites practitioners to discover that putting down our burden of self-description reveals the vastness, compassion, and interconnection that is always already present.*

A theme that comes up often through retreat, and I noticed it some in the group today, could be phrased various ways. One is this issue—this seeming issue—of control, or letting go of control. It's only a seeming issue, since it's really not our choice, but it seems like an issue. Or the sense of opening into the unknown, the sense of life as a mystery, and the alternative ways of meeting that as either wonderful or petrifying, and sometimes both at once.

I know when I began my meditation practice, and for the first twenty years—I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Only the first fifteen—I was really practicing from this deep motivation of understanding, really wanting to understand life and suffering and what things were about. But it took me quite some time to realize that my idea of understanding was basically acquiring a body of knowledge, that I would somehow get the explana-

tion, or the right way to think about things, or the perfect description, and then I would know what things were about. I'd come to some resting place of, "I don't have to think about this anymore, now I know, I got the final explanation."

Or if it was not a series of thoughts or descriptions, I was looking for the definitive experience. Once had, everything is explained, everything is understood, and you just cruise from then on. Or in the practice itself, trying to figure out the right way to meet every situation that arises so that you're doing the practice correctly. You find out, well, what do I do if this happens? What do I do if that happens? And we're acquiring a list, a manual, of the correct response to each situation, which is impossible to ever have.

There's something that seems quite common, quite deep in us, this yearning for a sense of definitive knowledge, understanding. We often—at least I did—equated wisdom with this type of knowledge. And the more we practice, the more we find out that it's not that way at all. As we move more deeply into meeting our experience moment to moment, rather than coming closer to the nugget of how to look at things that's going to just clear everything up, we find that we're moving more deeply into—as our friend and teacher Joseph Goldstein says, his favorite mantra now is, "Who knows?" You ask about something, he goes, "Well, who knows?" We're moving more deeply into the mystery. And sometimes that's scary.

But if we look in our experience, when we are trying to control with knowledge, this sense of explanation, description, having the right knowledge actually creates in us a sense of limitation. We think we've got it covered. But we're covering ourselves in a nice little square box, and that's it. It creates separation, limitation. It solidifies and limits our world to what we can know and describe. And we try to know more and more and describe more and more, but it leaves out everything else that we don't know. We feel as though this is giving us security, but in a way, it's imprisoning us. You know Krishnamurti's book, *Freedom from the Known*? We're imprisoning ourselves in a cage of the known, of what we can know and describe, and really who we are and what we are—the world is so vast.

This is probably my favorite newspaper article of all time. I see it as a metaphor for what I'm talking about now: our thirst for knowledge and discovering the vastness. It's a science article from the New York Times of a few years ago, talking about astronomers. At this point—and I'm sure it's out of date because it's a few years old—they had just discovered the largest galaxy ever detected. That galaxy includes more than 100 trillion stars. The galaxy is 6 million light years in diameter. We know we can understand this, right? And this galaxy, with 100 trillion stars, the newest one, is 60 times bigger than our galaxy, the Milky Way. That's our galaxy, in case you didn't know—we

personally, Earth, own the galaxy of the Milky Way. This new galaxy of 100 trillion stars is located in the middle of a larger clump of galaxies, a thousand galaxies. So this galaxy is in a clump of a thousand galaxies.

Okay, that's just a lead-in. Now, the astronomers in this article are puzzled. I don't even get what they're puzzled about. They're puzzled because there doesn't appear to be enough matter, measurable matter, in the universe to account for all this clumping together of galaxies. And so since they can't account for it with measurable matter, the scientists proposed the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to the prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this missing matter.

That's a true article. That's exactly what it's like when we start to turn our attention to our moment-to-moment experience in meditation. The more we look, the less we can explain everything.

And that's only a problem if we need to explain everything. If we don't, then we're open to discover moment to moment that who and what we think we are, the way we've been living, has been so much less, so much more limited than what is actually available to us.

Our practice is a moment-to-moment exploration of how to meet our experience with this freshness, with this sense of wonder, rather than bringing our preconceived notions of "this is matter, and this is how matter behaves, and if something doesn't fit into that, then we've got to make something up." Couldn't we just leave it open to discovery?

When we meet our experience that way, anything becomes so amazing. You know Thich Nhat Hanh's description—it's kind of classic now—that the real miracle is walking on this earth or taking a breath. Anything, when you bring this beginner's mind... Suzuki Roshi, the great Zen master, used to say, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." We bring beginner's mind to everything, and whatever you look at becomes so filled with wonder. A plant. Our bodies. Falling in love—what's going on there? What's going on with birth, with death? A strawberry. Whoever figured out that the inside of kapok trees could be used to stuff a zafu—that's amazing.

When we bring a freshness to our experience, we move out of what Einstein called an optical delusion of consciousness that limits us to a sense of feeling we're just this mind, this body, these thoughts, these emotions. Really, when we can move out of the expert's mind and meet things fresh... I was actually feeling it today. It's as if when

we're caught in our descriptions, our opinions, our viewpoints of things, we're living in two dimensions, just running along on the surface. And there's this whole third dimension that's available to us to move and breathe in. But we have to let go of our opinions about things and really meet experience with an open heart and mind.

That's what our practice is about. That's what we're learning how to do. And we can learn how to do it. Sometimes it's fearful to the mind that likes to know everything, that likes to have all the descriptions. But that's okay. A little fear is okay.

So I want to talk a bit tonight about some of the ways we—starting very simply with how we use thought, this thinking process, which we will begin including in the instructions tomorrow—how we use thought, and even prior to thought, to construct these limiting descriptions of others, of ourselves, of our life, without even realizing that we're doing it. And once we recognize the way that we're limited by seeking for answers, just the recognition helps us open and move beyond that.

The Buddha, when he spoke about the second noble truth—that clinging, craving is the real cause of our confusion, our isolation, our anguish—mostly we might tend to think of clinging as being to sense objects, with states of mind being a sense object. Actually, he included a second field of clinging, and this, I think, is even more insidious and imprisoning: our attachment to our opinions, to our views, basically to our mental constructs of things.

I think it's insidious because if we're really attached to our opinions, we don't think it's an opinion. It's the truth of how things are. Everyone else is just a little too dull to pick it up, or too stubborn.

So I want to start with the obvious, but build up, because this has huge implications for how we relate to our lives, for whether we really can perceive our basic goodness or not.

Of course we use descriptions, explanations, opinions. Nothing wrong with that. We need them. How else are we going to vote? How are we going to decide what to do when you go home on Friday night, Saturday night? We need concepts to show your passport at the border. We need things like that. It's the attachment that causes the difficulty—this sense of "this is true, everything else is false."

When we realize we're feeling that way about something, is it possible just to let in the possibility that maybe it could be only my personal opinion, and someone else's opinion could also be valid? It's hard.

A good place to look at this, at least in the States—maybe it's not as strong here—is around opinions about what is healthy and proper food to eat, on or off a retreat. I think it's much mellower here. It's fairly intense in the States.

Why is that funny? It really is. People come with strong opinions about what's healthy, and the cooks often have to accommodate a lot of special needs. We have a whole table we call the special needs table. I was teaching one retreat with some environmentalists who didn't usually sit, and at the end of it this rancher said, "Special needs? I think special needs should be bacon and eggs." He had trouble with the vegetarian food.

At the meditation center where I live in Massachusetts, every summer there's a retreat for young adults, teenagers between thirteen and eighteen. Last year there were about fifty teenagers on this retreat, and Michelle McDonald, one of the teachers, told me this story. They had two or three kids, teenagers from the inner city in New York, really from the ghetto. They came, and the food was much like here—very healthy, vegetarian, not much refined sugar—and these kids literally, physically couldn't adjust to the diet. When you come from sugar, fast food, and grease to beans and lettuce, their systems were going into withdrawal. They were literally ill—diarrhea, sick to their stomach.

Michelle went to the cooks and said, "These kids need some sugar." The cooks would not put any sugar out. They would not do it. "All these kids don't need sugar, and all the other kids would eat it," and so on. After much negotiating, she got the cooks to agree to give these three or four kids who were having a problem their own little private stash of sugar, but they had to keep it hidden.

I thought, these kids are from the streets. They must think we're so weird. They come from where cocaine and heroin are out in the open, and here they have to hide their white sugar.

But it's really about seeing. A firmly held belief about what's good could be true for many people. It could be true for you. But when we are locked in, attached to our description, our belief, it's so scary in a way, so uncomfortable to think it might not be true, that there's a way we actually block perceptions that don't fit our beliefs. Has anybody ever noticed that? It's really quite interesting.

The first step is even to be able to recognize some of the beliefs, some of the descriptions we hold. We won't recognize all of them. But just for a moment, reflect. In your practice here, which is a good place to look. In your life. In your description of yourself.

Who you think you are—now that's a loaded one. How you think other people see you. Just hold the possibility it might be a momentary description that in another minute is completely not true. That can be scary.

Our opinions about other people. Just as a daily life example, if you live with somebody else—your opinions about how things should be done in the house, how clean the house should be, who should do which chores—to even hold the possibility that the way I know it should be is only my opinion.

My partner and I went through years of this. He moved into the house after I was already living there, so you know how that is already. It's my house, and he's moving in and changing things around. And I have, I guess I would have to say, a slight neurosis about the white counters, which I wanted to keep white. We both drink a lot of tea. If you don't clean the tea up immediately, it stains the white counters, which of course we can't have. And that is just so obvious that one would think it's simply the facts of life. It's like the first noble truth: when you spill the tea, you wipe it up. You don't sit down and drink the tea.

Now, my partner has another relationship to life, which is to enjoy it. So he's a real tea meister. He makes a lovely pot of tea and says, "Why don't we sit down and drink it with some relaxation while it's warm, instead of cleaning the counter like a fiend?"

I'm a little embarrassed to say this, except that I know it's not me. It's just conditions.

Four years it took before it really entered my heart with some space. Oh, it's an opinion I'm holding. It's possible that his way is just as right as mine. I'm not saying I let go of the opinion, but noticing it makes some space. It really does. I could meet him with some kindness. I could actually meet him.

That's a small example, but actually a small example like that can lead to a lot of suffering. The Buddha said, in one of my favorite quotations, "For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world annoying people." Not only other people—we actually annoy ourselves. It's a lot of suffering.

Notice throughout the rest of this retreat how we relate to our meditation practice. It's a wonderful place to observe how we take specific perceptions—not the whole range, but specific perceptions—and construct an explanation or view out of them. This is good practice, or this is rotten practice, and we simply don't hear or see the balancing views and perceptions.

We get to see this in interviews. It's a real privilege and honor to talk to so many people. We get to see, in a string of conversations with different practitioners, the exact opposite experiences happening—and how we don't let that in. Sharda's teachings about emotions last night and this morning offer a great example. Someone who's having really strong emotions will come and say, "I'm swept away by emotions. I have no mindfulness. I hardly feel a breath. I'm doing it wrong," despite whatever we say up here. The next person comes in and says, "You know, I'm just not having very strong emotions. I'm with the breath a lot of the time, and when emotion comes I notice it and it goes away. I must be suppressing. I'm just not doing it right."

And as much as we talk about choiceless awareness and using the breath as a tool, I've had people come to me after years of practice saying, "Oh, you mean I don't have to be with the breath every moment? It's okay to open up and feel sensations?" I'm serious. After years. We all give the same instructions, more or less. Do you remember Sharda or myself on either of the days talking about continuity? Does anyone remember us mentioning that? Some do, some don't. That's how it is.

On the long three-month course we teach, we go on and on about continuity. I had a good friend—it was maybe his fourth three-month course—and he came up to me one year and said, "You know, it's really great, all this talk about continuity. How come you're mentioning it this year? I don't remember you talking about it before." We didn't just bring it up that year.

Watch how we do this. I'll have a sitting where the breath is really open and free, the attention feels like it's within the breath, and without realizing it, the thoughts come: "Oh, this is what mindfulness feels like." And when it changes, then it's wrong—I have to get back to how mindfulness is supposed to feel. And then it moves to something we like even better, and we think, "Oh, that other one wasn't really it, but this is really it."

Watch how we do that. As soon as the thought can come and we don't have to cling to it, we're not imprisoned. But when we don't see it, it's as if our awareness has snapped shut, and any perception outside of what we've decided is the way things are somehow doesn't register for a while.

She came to me after the fifth day. It was her first retreat. And she said she had just been in agony, sitting cross-legged on the floor the whole time in pain. But the agony was more that she was giving herself a terribly hard time, completely beating herself up, because she couldn't just sit in peace and bliss on the floor cross-legged. And that's what you have to do, obviously, to do the practice correctly. Despite everything we said.

She told me it was the fifth day, and I was talking about something, and she was looking at me and it registered. Oh, she's sitting on a chair. She's been sitting on a chair the whole time. It must be possible to meditate and sit on a chair.

When she really let it in, she let it in. And when she was telling me this, she wasn't really checking with me. But just to see what the mind can do, how locked in we get to our opinions and descriptions. And what's really scary is as soon as we see through it, the mind goes on to the next one. Well, I can sit on a chair, but it always has to be clear and vibrant and alert, or I have to go back to the floor, or whatever. It's just what our minds do.

As long as we see it, it's not a problem. When we don't see it, what's happening? We're freezing experience, as if everything's always going to be the way this particular set of conditions can be described. And of course, it's never really going to be exactly this way again.

So when we are attached to an opinion, a description, an explanation—when we're really attached to it—in that moment, it's like a complete denial of impermanence, of conditionality. Especially in practice: this is the right way to do it. The whole way of working with skillful means, with wise effort, is being able to be open and unbiased to conditions as they are right now. And how they were five minutes ago is already different.

That's why when we say stay with the breath, get really focused, notice the beginning and the middle and really be precise—that's helpful if the conditions are such that your energy is low, you're really spaced out, you don't have a clue where you are. But if you're really tight, if you're holding onto the breath for dear life, if you're hitting each breath with a whip saying get concentrated, get focused, then the instruction to really be precise and notice every feeling in the breath is not helpful. It would be much more helpful to let go of the breath completely and open to hearing, for example.

It's always in flux. It's always opening into a mystery. The last minute might give us some information, but it can never tell us what's going to happen in the next minute. When we can live in this way, it isn't scary. It's wonderful. Life is so alive. We're so present in it.

But the mind doesn't like that too much—the mind that thinks it can know everything. By mind, I mean our thought processes, our emotions, a little mind. It really thinks that by having everything explained and all possible conditions accounted for, we can rest secure. We can rest at ease. And we keep on trying. We keep on trying to do that.

So that's sort of the obvious level of opinions, descriptions, views, and how we get attached. We'll often recognize it after we're attached, when we feel like we're bumping up against a stone wall somewhere. When you're halfway through the retreat and you start feeling really disappointed and frustrated, rather than looking at what's wrong, back up and think: What did I think was supposed to happen? What was my idea? And once you see that, you can just get bigger than it.

On a level down—a more subtle level—a place that our opinions, our descriptions, our views can form and be inaccurate, incorrect, and we still get attached without knowing it, is on the level of perception, just prior to thinking about something.

In the Buddhist terminology, perception is a very specific function of the mind. Our experience consists of our six sense experience: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling with the body, and mental experience—a thought and emotion arising. Those six experiences just happening over and over and over, about which we then expand on and think about and describe. And we think our description is the experience. But the description is the description, and the experience is the experience. It's really helpful not to confuse the two.

So there's a basic sense experience. For example, hearing.

Hearing is an easier one to see this with. You notice how when you're in the hearing meditation and you hear a sound, almost right away the mind goes, "Oh, bird." But once in a while, it might not go "bird." It's just the sound. The perception is that moment of mental recognition immediately following on the bare sense experience. So there's hearing, "Oh, bird call." Hearing, "Oh, that's the bell." Seeing, without even thinking the thought, you know—I know that's a rug, that's a zafu. That's perception. It's really a thought process, and it's based on memory and our prior experience.

So sometimes we might hear a sound, and we really don't know what it is. What's fun, if that happens, is if you can just stay on that level of bare hearing—just play with staying there—so that we can see the perception is the next stage of the experience, but it's not necessarily the same as the sense experience. Do you get a sense of what I mean? Hearing is fun to play with because sometimes you can just hear the bird call and not get off into, "Is that a crow? Is that a pigeon?" It's just the sound.

In that moment of the sense impression—the seeing, the hearing, the emotion—and then the recognition, often in that moment there happens to be some emotion, some mental state that's present. And we perceive the experience as if through the glasses, the colored glasses of that mental state. It can completely color and distort the way we perceive or recognize what's happening.

A simple example: ignorance or delusion would be the baseline state of heart or mind that would distort our perception. A simple example is if I don't have my glasses on, I really don't see too clearly. So if I walk on back to my neurotic house again—and the house isn't neurotic—but if I'm walking around my house and I don't have my glasses on, everything looks really clean, and I feel very happy. We have wood floors. "Oh, the floors are clean. The rugs are clean. Isn't it nice?" Then I'm reading. I walk through the house with my glasses on half an hour later. "Oh my God. Look at that in the corner. Look at this." And I'm not very happy. I get kind of dissatisfied. The perception is distorted. That's one example.

Take it if in your mind is the coloring of the mood or the emotion of worthlessness, self-hatred. I don't know if that's familiar to anybody here, but it's one that I have a lot. It can just color everything. I've learned, actually, to recognize when worthlessness or self-judgment is present. I can feel it physically. I've learned to recognize how it feels, and I know that I then cannot trust my perceptions of experience.

So for example, you're feeling like that at work, or even here. Someone walks in the room, and as they walk in they really frown, and immediately you think, "Oh God, what did I do wrong? They don't like me." You know, here you can project like crazy. A woman was telling me this at the last retreat—at work she'd see some guy really frowning, looking at her, and she went off and did a whole story, realizing later the guy wasn't even seeing her. He was just thinking about a fight he had with his wife that morning. It had nothing to do with her.

You know how we can do that? We can build, can't we? If you don't check it out with the person or with yourself, you could go through the whole day building a whole reality about why that person doesn't like me. And depending on our particular tendencies, go into self-hatred or anger or fear or whatever. And actually, we're making it all up. The perception was inaccurate. We do that all the time.

Sometimes really visibly—like when you're really angry at somebody, or just angry, and someone comes in, they can really look ugly. When you're really in love with somebody, or maybe you just have a crush on someone, everything about them is fascinating, beautiful. You love the way they look. Six months later, when the whole thing's passed, you look at that person and you think, "How could they have changed so?"

It's really great—extremely scary to me sometimes, but immensely liberating—to begin to see the power of our perceptions and to learn that we can't always trust them. It's scary, too, to the mind that wants security, that wants to know how it is. Because here we come to really the most subtle and powerful

unrecognized misperception and constructed wrong explanation of all. And that's the sense—the often unthought, unspoken sense that we carry so frequently, if it's not examined—of who and what we actually are.

Unexamined, it certainly feels to me as though I'm Carol and that's Sharda and I know the difference. I end with this body, and for all the talk of not identifying with the body, when something goes wrong, it bothers us. It bothers me. I'd rather it didn't. It doesn't bother me as much when something goes wrong with Sharda's body as it does when something goes wrong with mine. I feel compassion, but it has a slightly different tinge than when it's mine. The same with our emotions. We feel limited to this frame of these thoughts, these emotions, and we don't know how to look beyond it. We don't question it. And it's really a basic misinterpretation of our perceptions, happening so quickly that it's hard to see through.

Let me give you an example, an analogy of sorts, for the way our perceptions seem impossible to see through—it just seems that's how they are. You know Oliver Sacks, the anthropological neurologist? One of his fascinating articles, perhaps some of you have read it, in *An Anthropologist on Mars*, describes a man who was blind for most of his life and then had an operation. He was blind from the time he was four or five until his fifties, had adjusted quite well, had a job as a masseur, and got along fine. His predominant way of defining and describing and controlling the world was touch. He was quite at home. Then they discovered an operation that could restore his sight.

Everyone was around him as they took off the bandages. They were all so excited—he's going to be so happy to be able to see his fiancée, see his doctor. And of course, when the bandages were taken off, he could see. But none of it made any sense. It was just a blur.

Oliver Sacks goes on from this to say that what we see is so clearly a person, a zabuton, a rug, a clock—we've learned to see by putting together memory and what we've been taught and descriptions of the world. We all assume we see the same way, but actually we don't know how other people see. And it's not that way at all. This man never really could adjust to the sighted world. At times it would get so stressful—like eating or shaving—he just couldn't take it anymore, and he'd close his eyes and eat like a blind person, shave like a blind person. And ah, he could relax again, because that was his way of naming and being in the world.

So just to take in the possibility that the way we see things is only one possible construct of seeing. What about the other ninety-nine percent of undetectable matter? Maybe there's all this stuff right here in this room we can't see or hear. Who knows? Just to let in that possibility.

Because it's really the same with our bodies, with our sense of ourselves as being emotion, as thought. One of the things that can get interesting in a retreat is that we begin to have physical perceptions that don't fit in with what we're used to of our body. Suddenly, some people in the group are talking about how the abdomen feels huge. Suddenly you feel fifty feet tall. Suddenly your hands feel like they're swollen. You feel like you're completely tilted over and you open your eyes and you're sitting quite straight. This stuff can happen. It's no big deal. It's not something to try for. It's got nothing to do with wisdom. I'm just saying sometimes it happens.

When we let it in, how often the mind gets frightened. *No, what's happening to my body?* Nothing. It's just not ever the way you thought it was. This is another way of experiencing it. Sometimes the sense of structure goes completely away and it's just sensations coming and going in space. It's just another way of experiencing it.

Technically, sensations, thoughts, emotions—all these six sense impressions—are just arising and being perceived so quickly that everything seems solid. But you know how when things are so close together it seems solid, but actually it's not.

Sometimes we begin to experience our body that way. Sometimes, as the Buddha said once, if you must identify with some part of your experience and think it's permanent, at least it makes more sense to do it with the body, because the mind is changing so much more quickly. But actually, I find I identify much more with my mind.

So begin to just question—not even think about what your view is and question it, but just hold, as you go through the day: Do you feel like you're the same person, the same you? All your experiences have changed, but sort of, I feel like I'm the same Carol I was yesterday, even though if I look, the thoughts are completely different, the emotions are completely different, my physical sensations are quite different from what they were yesterday. What exactly am I holding to as the description of the sense of Carol?

Watch your thoughts as you go through the days, assuming thoughts are still arising. Notice how many of your thoughts—and I'm sure this is different for different people—how many of your thoughts are a little self-description. I find I'm going through the day telling the Carol story. And by the end of the day, it feels like it's been one Carol, one story all day. But really, look, it's completely changing all the time. One sense impression will arise, out of which we construct a whole story, select memories, select certain perceptions, and say, "Yes, that's me." The next moment, we completely flip.

I remember one time I was teaching a retreat, and my mom was real sick at that time. She'd just been diagnosed with kidney cancer. I was walking in a beautiful place. A memory of my mother came up, a feeling of sadness, just noticing. And then I kind of clutched at the feeling of sadness. "Oh, I'm so sad." Memories came of all the different times in my life I was sad, how sad life is. I was walking in a beautiful place. The flowers are dying. Everything comes to an end. At this time you see the impermanence, but you don't see the beauty of it—just everything's sad, everything's awful, all the times I've been sick. Just this whole heaviness, this sense of Carol.

Five minutes later—not even—that thought had passed. The sadness had passed. I looked up. It was a lovely evening. There were some roses there. I smelled them. Ah, the beauty of life. I'm so fortunate to be able to be in these beautiful places, to have this blessed life where I get to share Dharma with people, to travel. Life is just one big blessing when you open into the beauty.

Totally different experiences. Both of which I embraced equally as being me. And without examining them, I would have said that was one continuous Carol—when it was just a sense impression, the emotion of sadness, the smell of the rose, and a whole construct of specially selected memories and perceptions that bolstered that particular story.

Once I was on a retreat, and I had just seen a movie prior to the retreat. I don't know if any of you did that or have had the experience that you then have to watch that movie a lot for the time that you're sitting, and it was a long retreat. But it hit me halfway through. It would be Harrison Ford doing his number running around. Then Carol would be doing her number running around. Then Harrison Ford. Then Carol. And absolutely no difference. The Carol story wasn't any more real. It was just more thoughts and emotions. The Harrison Ford story brought up thoughts and emotions too. In the moment, that's all that was happening. Thoughts, emotions, memories, sensations. That's it. And everything else we construct, and without looking, it feels continuous and solid.

Can we stand that? Can we stand to be without our self-stories? For some reason it's really scary. Now that's the real paradox of practice, because the source of our most anguish is the same self-story. So putting it down is actually such a relief.

It's this huge burden—all the things I think about Carol and what she does and how she feels. I can just put it down and feel sadness. Fine. Fear. Okay. I don't like it. Okay. Now there's real bliss. Fine. It's just what it is. But somehow we can't stand that. We want to make a story out of it.

We never know what's going to arise in the next moment, despite what we may think. This retreat gives us the illusion, as do our day planners and our lives, that we really have things under control. The schedule's pretty rigid, the bell rings, you all come here to sit—it's a miracle, you know, that it really happens. So we do have this illusion. I know where I'm supposed to be through the end of 1999. But it's an illusion. I don't really know. I don't really know where I'll be in the next moment. Anything could happen.

It's not that we give up plans—we do what we need to do—but we just know it's "as if." Who really knows? We think that's scary, but really this letting go into the unknown is an act of radical trust, of radical acceptance that truth is revealing itself in this moment if I can really just be here for it.

Some friends told me about being at Holy Mountain Arunachala in southern India, where Ramana Maharshi had his ashram. They had climbed up to the top of this mountain in the very early morning hours. Just as it was getting light—it's very rocky with some bushes and branches—there were these mountain monkeys. They were telling me these monkeys are kind of wild, not like the monkeys below that will come into your room if they think you have a banana. These ones are wild, and they said it was amazing to watch because they would be way up high and they would just let go of the rock or the tree and throw themselves into space as if they could fly, with either reckless abandon or total trust that they would come down to some rock or some branch that they could hold onto. And as far as my friends could see, they always did.

It's that sort of abandonment—okay, just dive into this moment. We have no idea what it will provide. But even if we try to hold back, it's still going to be here. It's still the same. We let go into it. We put down the burden and life becomes so alive. We move into that third dimension. We begin to be able to touch, to recognize the vastness—so much vaster, so much deeper, so much richer than all our descriptions and our self-explanations and our thoughts about what truth is. Because its vastness is beyond any thought, any description. Any description limits it, sets limits, and so immediately isn't true.

The only way we can recognize this, rest in this, touch it, is by just for that moment putting down all our descriptions, all our knowledge, all our explanations. You can't think about this. I mean, you can think about it endlessly, but it won't do any good. And it's not to try and stop thought—just to see that awareness is bigger than any thought or any explanation. Use the explanations, but don't try to hold them. Don't try to let them define our reality. Be open with wonder to meet this moment.

That's really all we can do, and that's what our practice is. The moment, the experience, the truth reveals itself. Not only do we not have to do anything, our very doing gets in the way. If we can just, like that monkey, dive with abandon into this knee pain, into this sound, into this fear, into this moment of peace—whatever it is. And when it changes, meet the next one with wonder and openness. That's when we begin to actualize our potential to live in a much deeper and richer and vaster way than we ever could imagine is possible from thinking about it.

Don't hate our thoughts. Use them.

But don't let ourselves be defined by them.

And then we'll see—as John Muir said... it's not that you come to some sense of nihilistic "who cares, nothing matters." It's just the reverse. We find—this is what John Muir said—he said, "I find when I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe."

That's really what we find: that place of compassionate connection beyond, greater than, vaster than the world of knowledge and description.

It's like coming home.

It's not *like* coming home. It *is* coming home.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 8

The Facts of Life

Carol Wilson · 50 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines why we struggle to rest at ease in the present moment despite our deep longing for happiness. Drawing on the Buddha's foundational teachings of the Four Noble Truths, she illuminates how our habitual reactions to unpleasant experience and our constant craving for something other than what is present keeps us spinning in confusion and suffering.*
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> *Wilson explores the First Noble Truth (dukkha) not as a pessimistic declaration that "life is suffering," but as an honest acknowledgment of the facts of human existence—that pain, change, loss, and unreliability are inherent aspects of life rather than personal failures or cosmic mistakes. She shares moving examples, including a passage from Jean-Dominique Bauby's 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly,' to illustrate how genuine presence with difficulty can coexist with profound appreciation for life's beauty. The Second Noble Truth on craving (taṇhā) is explored through practical investigation: Wilson invites practitioners to examine the actual felt experience of desire and notice how the craving itself—not the lack of what we want—creates our dissatisfaction.*
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> *Referencing teachings from Chögyam Trungpa on "basic goodness" and Ajahn Buddhadāsa's invitation to "get familiar with freedom," Wilson points toward the liberating recognition that peace is not something to be created or achieved but is already present in moments when the heart is free from clinging. The talk offers a compassionate reframing of meditation practice—not as self-improvement but as uncovering what has always been here.*

I hope you all don't feel as grim as you look. I actually know that sometimes when I'm practicing and I'm incredibly happy inside, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and I look like I'm at death's door or something. So I know the outside and the inside don't always look the same. It just struck me.

Last night Sharda ended her talk by mentioning that the Buddha said he taught suffering and the end of suffering. She also talked about the habits of mind that keep us from recognizing our loveliness, as she put it. So I thought I'd pick up on that theme tonight, talking about what are some of the habits of mind that keep us from recognizing what Chögyam Trungpa used to call our basic goodness. It's a phrase that I love.

It's easy to come to meditation practice—I certainly did—thinking that somehow if I learned what the truth was, and I learned how to meditate well enough to really live in the truth, I would find some kind of wonderland where I was always happy. I didn't really lay this all out clearly at first, but I came to see over the years that this was what I was expecting freedom to be. We use the word happiness, right? So we think of always being happy. But what do we really mean by happiness? And what was the Buddha talking about when he speaks of peace and happiness?

What I've come to see is that one of the real mysteries of our life, of freedom—one of the sadnesses, really, that I think prompted the Buddha to teach from what we read—is that while all of us deeply want to be happy in some way, even the people doing the most screwed up things, if you really look underneath, somehow it's motivated by some warped idea that it will make them happy. While we all want that, what the Buddha supposedly could see after his awakening was that the very things we do in order to promote our lasting happiness are the very things that keep us spinning in suffering and confusion.

It's said that this motivated him to teach, to spend the last forty-five years of his life sharing what he'd learned, what he'd awakened to, the truth of things. On the other hand, it's said that before he started teaching, when he saw this, he had a moment of discouragement, of thinking nobody is going to get it. "This generation," the translation says, "this generation so relies on attachment, is so wrapped up in attachment that they're not going to be able to hear." I don't think things have changed much in that we rely on attachment. But he did teach. He was luckily persuaded to share what he'd seen, because there are people who can hear.

So the conundrum is that in our deep drive to be happy—and in some ways it's our birthright—we keep doing the things that promote our confusion. Because on some deep level, most of us don't really understand the nature of freedom, the nature of happiness. So we set our sights on some imagined freedom. What else can we do until we know what it is? But we keep looking in the wrong direction. We keep looking for, as I was, some kind of steady mental state of bliss. I'd float on the clouds and I wouldn't have unpleasant experience for the rest of my life.

When you think of freedom, do you think about the people you love dying? Do you think about having relationships break up? Do you think about getting sick? Do you think about just waking up and feeling grumpy? Do you think about sitting here and falling asleep and having your knee hurt? Do you think about coming here for peace and instead having to deal with aversion all the time? Do we have to get rid of all that stuff in order to maybe get close to experiencing freedom?

The answer is no. Freedom, real happiness, real peace of mind, actually has nothing to do with what's arising in our experience. Do you believe that?

Mostly, the place we get hooked is in the reactions of heart and mind to what's arising in our experience. Because on some level, the habit of our mind tends to be that if things are the way we want them, or pleasant, or nice, then it's good, that's on the way to happiness. If it's confusing or painful or somebody's angry or things just aren't working out the way we think they should, internally or externally, the reaction is one of aversion or fear or pulling away. And we get caught in those reactions, the interpretations, the expectations of what Sharda was talking about last night. We get so involved in manipulating, controlling, trying to arrange our reactions that we miss the fact that absolute peace, happiness, ease of being, freedom from clinging—our birthright—is always immediately present. So immediate that we don't notice it, because we're so busy.

It's like we're in prison and we're rearranging the pictures on the walls and the furniture to make it more comfortable, but we don't notice the door is open and we can walk out. It's sort of like that. We're on a self-improvement project.

Enlightenment is not a self-improvement project. It's turning around and seeing that what we're looking for has always been who we are.

But we're so busy looking to fix things, to get what we want, to get rid of what we don't want, that we forget to turn around our awareness and notice the vastness of heart and mind when it's free from the limits of clinging and fear. And it's really hard for us—not just to believe this, but to actually live this way.

This is a poem from a Tibetan teaching:

Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that it is never impaired or improved in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease in whatever happens.

That's what's so hard for us to do—simply to rest at ease in whatever happens. Here, now, in this moment, in your sittings, in your walking, that knee pain, resting at ease in whatever happens. The restlessness, the self-criticism, resting at ease in whatever happens. Why is that so hard for us? Maybe it's not hard for you, but why is it hard to trust that? To trust that when there's the simplicity of complete presence and total intimacy,

something other than this constant manipulating and fearing and clinging can reveal itself—really what Trungpa called our basic goodness. It's never gone anywhere. We're not here to create it or change ourselves.

As Nyoshul Khenpo, a wonderful Tibetan master, says: "All meditation practices work to uncover our innate wisdom and purity—uncovering our innate wisdom and purity by recognizing the obscurations for the changing, insubstantial appearances that they are, thus revealing what has always been present."

I think that's a great description of our mindfulness practice. We're not trying to become perfect mindfulness junkies here. And it's possible to take our sense of having to be better, having to be perfect, having to change ourselves, and apply that to how we do meditation practice—thinking we have to become the most perfectly mindful person.

I teach every year on the three-month retreat at IMS. It's just like this, but it lasts for three months, if you can imagine that. One time there was a man who was, at that point, a little caught in trying to be the most perfectly mindful. He could document, very proudly, fifty-two or fifty-six different sensations in the lifting of his foot during walking meditation. Something to try for. I'm kidding! We had a conversation about different cultural humor, so I have to remember I'm not English, and when I'm being sarcastic like that, you might think I'm being serious. It's not something to try for, recognizing fifty-six different sensations. It's fine if you do—great. So what? It's a matter of being present to one or fifty-six. It doesn't matter. It's the quality of presence. Not for an ulterior motive, but because when we're present, that's when we can recognize our basic goodness. It's so here that we can't be looking in any other direction. The slightest pushing away—"I don't like this"—the slightest reaching out—"I want something else"—completely hides the radiance of our true nature.

So just reflect: how much of our mental energy is spent pushing away and clinging to something else? Or the third option: dulled out, zoned out, bored, disconnected. How much? A fair amount.

The Buddha recognized this. Speaking about why it's so hard, why it's at times almost impossible to rest at ease in whatever is arising, why we keep missing the secret—when he gave his first teaching, and always after that, he spoke about what I call the facts of life from the Buddha: the Noble Truths. The first two are suffering and the cause of suffering. He's simply saying, "Folks, these are the facts of life." Now, I've mulled over why, out of all the things he could describe as useful for freeing our heart and mind from confusion, for allowing us to come home to where we've always been—why did he choose these as the first two things to teach?

suffering or unsatisfactoriness, pain, unreliability in the world. And the second truth is that the cause of our confusion is clinging. Why did he pick them out? In some ways they might seem obvious.

I just want to talk a little bit about, from my experience, how not really recognizing or living from these truths is what can keep our heart and mind spinning in this confusion.

The first one is often described as "life is suffering." That's really not quite right. It's a little crass. Not inaccurate exactly, but not the whole picture. As I understand it, the Buddha was simply laying out the fact, as a truth of life in a human body on this planet, that there are elements of pain—that there's birth, sickness, aging, disease, death, being separated from what we love, having to be together with what we don't love. These things happen.

And we think, well, that's not really new information. That's not a revelation I wasn't aware of. But is it really? How do we tend to relate in our experience here or in the world? Really, our experience on a retreat is a microcosm of our life. The patterns with which our heart and mind respond to situations here didn't just suddenly come up when we got into the silence. These are the patterns of our heart and mind in our life. It's just that the situations, instead of being incredibly complicated, come down to things like: Am I going to be the first person in line at tea? Or, am I making too much noise in the meditation hall? If you really look at it, you see that these aren't particularly significant events. And so that lets us notice the way the mind and heart react more clearly. It lets us shift our attention, and that's the place where understanding can come.

So notice what kind of responses or reactions come up here in life when something you don't like, or that's really painful or sorrowful or scary, arises. Do we say, "Well, of course, this is just a fact of life"? Sometimes. But also, it's so easy to view it as either a mistake—my mistake if we tend to turn it inwards, or somebody else's mistake if we turn it outwards. If we could get rid of that somebody else, then everything would be happy again. Or if we could just fix ourselves, then everything would be happy again. It's a basic level of denial of the simple fact that difficult, painful things happen, and that this is not bad or good. It's just a fact of life.

Often we might miss the fact that this denial shuts us out, shuts us off from a deep connectedness with all of life. It's like we can't shut down selectively. If we could, we'd all probably feel a lot happier. But when we're shutting down to something painful, we're just shut down.

And it's hard to be with pain. It is hard. It's hard to be with sorrow. It's hard to be with fear and anxiety. So we practice little bits to learn it.

I want to give you an example of the effect of being shut down and how common it is. Once I was in the hospital about ten years ago. I'd been there a few days, and they were having trouble getting the IV into my veins. Your veins kind of collapse sometimes after a few days. The nurse couldn't do it this particular time, so she got nervous after a few tries and went and called the doctor, who just happened to be passing. At which point my heart sank, because doctors aren't usually the ones who do IVs. Nurses are usually much more skilled at it than doctors are. And I wasn't, of course, in my most equanimous mental state anyway.

So this doctor comes in, and he was jabbing around, and he wasn't doing a great job either. I was just a little shaky, and a couple of tears came out. That's all. I didn't say anything. And he looked at me, looked at me straight on and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

It's amazing, but I can understand it, because through being able to be in the truth of pain, of difficulty, we're awake to all of life. If he could let in that that was hurting me, it meant he had to let in that he was hurting me, even though his intentions were good.

He wasn't hurting me on purpose. But to let that in—that's got to be hard, to feel like you're doing something to another human being that's painful, when you don't want to.

So, "What's the matter with you?" I just watch. How much do I do that to myself? How much do we all do that to ourselves? And on the level of, if something goes wrong with your body, you're really sick, you're really sad, you're really depressed—is there often somewhere in the back of the mind, "Well, come on, snap out of it, get over it, pull yourself up by the bootstraps, what's the matter with you?" If I could just think the right thoughts, say the right affirmations, I wouldn't be sick. It's proof of spiritual failure that something's wrong with my body. As if we never get sick, we never die. There's some basic level of denial going on here, and it's pretty widespread.

So I think really that's why the Buddha talks about this—so that we can begin to open without feeling that it's a mistake, or that we need to be scared of it, or that we're going to drown in sorrow, in suffering. We don't need to be afraid of the sadness. We don't need to be afraid of the pain.

On the last retreat I was teaching, a man said on the second day—such a lovely insight. He said he'd been going through the usual second day of being caught in the hindrances, those strong emotional states of mind that can really cloud our perception, one of them being aversion. I don't know if any of you have recognized that in the last

day or two. But aversion that just colors everything. And he was just feeling aversive to everything that was coming up in his experience—the people that walked by, the feelings that he had. He was labeling all these things as bad. This is unpleasant. I don't like it. Therefore, it's bad. It's wrong. It must be gotten rid of, out of existence.

And suddenly he stopped and saw what he was doing. And he said, "Wait a minute. If I'm making all these things bad, and it seems like my whole day is filled with these bad things, I'm making my life bad." He said, "I don't need to do that to myself. This is unpleasant. It's just part of life. Not good, not bad. It's just how it is."

And that's the suffering that drops away. It's extra. We can just be with the difficult, with the unpleasant, with the scary, without adding this extra—"It's bad, I'm bad, it's wrong, oh my God, what do I do about it?" It's just how it is.

I know many years ago, when I first heard this First Noble Truth, when I first started practice, I was only about nineteen, and I didn't have a particularly suffering childhood—just the normal confusion. There was nothing horribly wrong in my life. And I had bought into the suburban, American suburban, unspoken culture that really everything's happy, happy. You just keep the unpleasant things behind closed doors and pretend they don't happen. And you come out, and you go to college, and you get a job, and your life just gets happier and happier. I couldn't understand why that wasn't happening yet. In fact, why did I feel so unhappy and confused, and I couldn't really point to any big reason?

When I heard this, it was like, "All right, of course. Somebody's saying the truth." That's just how things are. Sometimes really beautiful, pleasant experiences happen, and then you know what happens? They go away. And something unpleasant or difficult that I don't like happens. And you know what happens? It goes away. That's the second aspect of this First Noble Truth—there's physical, emotional pain, and then everything changes.

When I heard this, it was like, "Oh, right, I can just relax." I don't have to keep pretending everything's great. And I don't have to feel like I'm some kind of freak because I keep seeing that everything isn't great. I can just be with things as they are.

This is the first step of resting at ease in whatever arises—the step that ultimately lets us recognize our true nature.

You know Robin Williams, the American comedian? Someone told me that he already has his tombstone bought and engraved, and it says, "I knew this was going to happen." If we could know that, if we could really know that, wouldn't we stop hassling about so much? We just don't know when it's going to happen.

Another aspect of this opening, this willingness to be with the unpleasant, is what I call not actual unpleasantness, but this underlying sense of the unreliability of things. It's really moving into the aspect of impermanence, which is also part of this First Noble Truth of unsatisfactoriness, of dukkha.

Unreliability in the sense that whenever we're looking to somebody, to something in life, to our own emotional state, to our job, to having gotten everything finally under control in a way we can handle it—it changes. It changes. So we can rely momentarily on ourselves, on people, on our bodies, on a relationship, but we can't rely ultimately on anything because everything is in constant flux.

This is another "duh, what else is new?" moment. But do we really live that way? Do we really live from that place of dancing in the change? The moments that we do, there's such a beauty, such an aliveness to life. Because being in tune with the fact that everything's changing isn't horrible. It really frees up our clinging to allow deep appreciation of the moment. It lets us be really alive.

But something in us seems geared to want some kind of security, some kind of reliability, some place to stand that we can depend on. As the Buddha said once, the search itself for some place to stand is burning. Being able to let go into the unknowing is cool and refreshing.

But it's hard.

Have you ever been in an earthquake where there are a lot of aftershocks going on for the next couple of days? It's very unsettling. I was in one in Yucca Valley in California—not a huge one, but fairly large. It was the desert, and I was just standing out in the desert. Nothing was really harmed. It was kind of cool, you know. The land is moving and everything. Wow, this is kind of far out. That was okay. That lasted for a minute.

It was the aftershocks that came every three or four minutes for the next three days that were unsettling. Because of course they always have to come on the radio and say, "Twenty-five percent chance of the big one in the next three days." It's awful. So it's a combination of just lying down to go to sleep, the radiator starts shaking, everything starts rattling. Is this the big one? Do I have to run? No, okay. Just settling down to sleep again, everything starts shaking. Is this the big one? Oh, no.

It wasn't just on a mental level. By the end of twenty-four hours, physically, cellularly, I could feel that the body had somehow been depending on this earth to hold me up. If nothing else, there's Mother Earth. Well, guess again. She's moving too.

Can't depend on anything for more than this moment. Let that in for a minute. It often brings up sadness, poignancy, fear. And I think one of the reasons we can also be in denial or hide from this is again not being comfortable—or it's our basic habit: it's fearful, it's unpleasant, it makes me sad, okay, it can't be true. We don't say it that obviously, but: okay, I'll think about that later. Yeah, sure, I know my relationship can't last forever, but right now it's going great. I know I'm not going to live forever, but who knows, it feels like it. And so we just don't let it in.

Now, by letting it in, I don't mean living like with those aftershocks in constant fear. That's not the point. The point is that as we begin slowly to let in this fact that everything changes—including us, including our moods, including everything—the clinging to things that can't be reliable begins to let go.

And what is it that allows us to rest again in the vastness of our true nature? The heart and mind flee from clinging. When that lets go, we're actually dancing at ease in the change. In fact, change is beautiful. Can you imagine if nothing ever changed? If those birds never shut up? Would we like that?

I read in the Guinness Book of World Records about the bizarre things people do. The one that stuck in my mind is the world's longest kiss. I think it was seventeen hours. Does that sound pleasant? A minute, okay. Seventeen hours—please, let's have some change.

So even pleasant things going away. Both of these: being willing to rest, at least a little bit, in unpleasant experience. Of course sometimes it's too much and we have to pull back. Of course. That's why we practice it. And being willing to dance in the changing flow. Rather than being dreary, oppressive, depressing, or fearful, it actually allows us to embrace, without clinging but with appreciation, what's here in this moment. Because on some level we begin to get it: all there ever is, is this moment. And in that immediacy of presence, again, something other than just the superficial reality can begin to reveal itself.

Just to begin that sense of appreciation—have you read Stephen Levine's latest book? It's called *A Year to Live*. I haven't actually read it; I just know the concept. And I have friends who meet every week with that premise. Imagine that starting from now, you know you have a year to live. Would that change how you're relating to this moment, to your life? And if so, how? Can it really help us come into, rather than just living in fear for the year, counting down the days, really living in this day?

And amazingly enough, this practice that seems so simple—just come back and feel the breath, just come back and feel your knee pain, just come back and feel the aversion, just come back and feel the joy, whatever is manifesting now—it's teaching us how to really be awake and immediate in this moment, how to open to what's true.

A friend of mine, a man who comes to retreats a lot in California, told me this story last year. He's older, and he's one of many people who are very committed to their spiritual life and practice. He comes to many meditation retreats, and it feels like his meditation is not really going anywhere. I don't know if you've ever had that feeling. "I'm not particularly concentrated. I'm not one of these good, incredible yogis. I don't have all these great experiences of oneness and selflessness. I'm just plodding along, thinking and coming back to the breath, spacing out and coming back to the feet, for years and years and years." But dedicated, doing it.

He told us last year that he had had a very serious heart operation in the meantime. He'd had to have a valve replaced. And after he came out of it and was in intensive care, something went wrong.

He didn't really know what, but there was a moment where all the lights were flashing, all the bells were going off, and they're running from all over, putting tubes in every orifice. Basically, he just felt: I think I'm about to die. And that was what was happening.

And his mind said, "Oh my God, this next breath could be my last breath because I'm about to die." And he said it just came in—he said, "If this is my last breath, I guess I ought to be here for it." And he just came in and was totally present with that breath. And then he passed out. And when he woke up—he did wake up, obviously.

That's beautiful. What else is there to do? And you can't think, "That'll be a good idea. I'll do that when the time comes, and in the meantime, let's just have fun." It doesn't work that way. Although we can have fun being present. That's actually the most fun of all—really being present for whatever's happening. Everything else starts to feel like running away.

I just finished reading a book that I found surprisingly moving, along these lines of really waking up in the present no matter how it is. It's called *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. I don't know if any of you have read it. It's exquisite.

A man had a massive stroke and woke up after some weeks of coma with what's called locked-in syndrome—completely paralyzed, but completely awake. The mind is intact, and in his case, the only thing he could move was his left eyelid. By moving his left eyelid, he dictated this whole book to someone who would go through the alphabet, and when it would get to the letter he meant, he would blink his eyelid.

It's a beautiful book because it's just describing his experience, and he's so vividly alive, lying in that room, blinking his eyelid. He can turn his head a little bit. It's not like a goody two-shoes, "Oh, isn't life beautiful?" He's really describing his experience, and it sounds like amazing suffering.

At the same time, the diving bell describes how he feels—this big invisible diving bell completely pressing on his body, so that he can't move, and he's in pain, and everything's heavy, and he's wrapped in this cocoon. And the butterfly is like butterflies of the beauty of life that just fly through, and he gets to catch them from time to time.

I don't think anything I can say will convey what this book is like, but let me share one paragraph to give you a sense. He's talking about the letters people write him:

"Other letters simply relate the small events that punctuate the passage of time. Roses picked at dusk, the laziness of a rainy Sunday, a child crying himself to sleep. Capturing the moment, these small slices of life, these small gusts of happiness, move me more deeply than all the rest."

The whole book is like that. He'll talk about something awful, and then this will be the next thing. And he's really present in both. It's a man who's really seeing the facts of life. He hates it. I mean, he's not saying, "Oh, I'm so glad I'm paralyzed so I can live vividly in my mind." Really, it's painful. It's awful. It's poignant. It's sad. He misses things vividly. But he's present in that, and so he really appreciates as well whatever's coming through. It's one of the most vividly alive books I've read in a really long time.

That's the quality of knowing the facts of life, so to speak—being able to accept them and really be awake in the midst of it. You really don't want him to have to... He died, actually, the next year after he wrote this.

That's one possibility. Let me read you this other passage. This is another way of not reading the facts of life—from a man who could have everything. This is Marlon Brando, from an interview in a German magazine that a friend translated for me.

I find that heartbreaking. Because it's that movement away from difficulty and into the pleasant. At that time, the only pleasant thing for him was eating. And the belief—we don't even know it's a belief—that happiness is going to come from moving away from unpleasant experience and holding on to pleasant is what keeps us locked in a cycle like that.

That brings us to the second truth: that the root of our suffering, of our confusion, is this very clinging. The clinging only arises because of our confusion in the first place. When we really, just for a moment—and we all experience these moments—when the heart is free from clinging, in that moment you're just resting at ease in what's here. A cup of tea. Looking at the pond outside. Sitting here and feeling your knee pain, but just at ease. There is no clinging. There is no pushing away. That's an intimation of real freedom from suffering. That's the direction that our mind and heart deepen into when we understand things the way they are.

So one way to understand is to investigate the unpleasant, the difficult, the changing, and how we react away from that. Another is to investigate the nature of this craving, this clinging, when it arises in our experience. That's more when we're going after the pleasant. And if we really tune into the clinging, the craving itself—which I find fascinating actually, it's just fascinating to tune into it—then we can also begin to discover how it is the clinging that's perpetuating our confusion and our dissatisfaction.

It's not that we don't have what we want. We think that's the problem. Like Marlon. He doesn't have a hot dog, so he's not happy. He gets the hot dog, he eats it with sauerkraut. Then he wants another one. It just keeps on going. It's not the getting what we want; it's the clinging, the craving itself that keeps us running in this cycle of suffering and confusion.

So our practice here isn't to condemn it, but to get interested in the experience of craving. I want to make a distinction here. When I talk about craving or clinging, in English we have the word "desire" that we use broadly, covering various subtleties of different mental states. In the Pali language, which is what the first Buddhist teachings were written in, they have different words. It's much more precise in regards to specific states of heart and mind. The state I'm talking about, this clinging, this craving—the more accurate translation of the word in Pali is thirst.

So when you're saying, "I'm tired, I want to go to bed," and it's just kind of seeing the body's tired, wanting to go to bed—we might say desire or "I want," but that's not clinging. It's just a neutral desire. But when you're sitting here at two o'clock, and your body's heavy, and you say, "I've got to get to bed, and I don't care, nothing is going to

stop me, I've got to get to bed or I'm going to die"—that's the thirst. That's craving. And that is what blinds us. That's what keeps us looking away from the fact that we're already essentially complete.

What we're looking for in the nap, in the food, in the relationship, in the better mental state, in the body free from pain—what we're looking for is the essential completeness that's already here. And it's the desire, the craving itself, that keeps us from noticing that.

So don't believe me, because believing doesn't do any good. But experiment. Use this time here as a laboratory.

Just notice when you're walking or when you're sitting. Walking is particularly good for this because it's more likely you could actually do something about a desire that comes up. When you're sitting, there's less you can do. So you're walking.

Notice when you're walking and things are just relatively peaceful. Nothing much going on, but you're present. And the thought comes: *I'd really like a cup of tea.* Now, that thought could just come and go. It's just a thought. It could be the same as, *Oh my, isn't that a nice bird?* It doesn't have to be desire. And you just keep going, peaceful.

Then the thought comes back again with a little more oomph. *I really need a cup of tea. Now.* And it becomes compelling. Notice the difference. A minute ago, things were fine. Now—same body, same walking up and down, same nice day—things are not fine. And something has to be acquired in order to make things fine again, or so it seems.

Usually what we do is focus on the thing to be acquired. The thing could be a sense object like tea. It could also be a mental state. It could be another person. It could be an action like a phone call. It could be another really nice thought. It doesn't matter what the thing is. Instead of focusing on that, take your attention into exploring the experience of the desire itself. Feel it in your mind. Feel it in your body. See what it feels like.

For me, it's really as if I go from an open field to something clenched, limited. And not only does this sense of tightness and limitation come in—dissatisfaction—but also the sense of separation. The sense of Carol gets much stronger. And Carol is separated from her tea at this moment and needs to go do something about it. And you get there, and there's a line for the tea, and everybody else becomes the enemy because they're in the way of what I need to experience peace again. Or so we think.

There's something about desire, about craving, that when it's not looked at is almost sweet. Notice when you're in a pleasant fantasy—it's almost as if we really enjoy that wanting if we don't look at it. But look at it. The craving itself really is not very pleasant. And that's why we're so motivated to do something to make it go away.

So what I'd like you to experiment with doing is: don't do anything to make it go away. Just keep walking. If you simply explore it, at some point it will begin to dissipate. When it begins to go away and when it's really gone, keep paying attention. Because the revelation can be that the peace we were really looking for with that tea—it's already here. When the desire goes away and we're not blinded by that looking away, and we're here again, awake, resting with wakeful presence in this moment—ah, peace. There's nothing to want.

Wishlessness, as Thich Nhat Hanh says. The idea is we don't have to put something in front of ourselves and run after it because everything is already here in ourselves.

In that moment of the heart and mind free from clinging, free from aversion—just get familiar with it. Notice what it's like. Just for that moment, clinging doesn't arise, aversion doesn't arise. Not because we think, *Oh, it's bad, it leads to suffering, I don't want to go down that path, it's really not Buddhist.* No. It doesn't arise because it doesn't make sense. We're experiencing the intimation of our basic goodness. From that place, it doesn't matter. We don't need more, we don't need less.

It's just as it is. From that place we can act with intelligence, we can act appropriately. It doesn't mean we turn into some kind of blob, unable to distinguish right from wrong or what's appropriate. Rather, we act from compassion and intelligence rather than from fear and desire.

So the truth is this: freedom from clinging, the heart and mind that's free from clinging, free from aversion—a moment of that is an intimation of real freedom, the freedom the Buddha was talking about. We all have a lot of moments like that. There are no big fireworks going off. You might not be having some fantastic state of mind. It might just be a moment of pure presence in the sitting, in the walking, when you're eating your lunch. Just notice those moments. Begin to recognize the potential for real peace, for real ease in those moments.

The way Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful Thai forest monk, used to say: get familiar with freedom, with nirvana. Get at ease with it. We're looking for something too flashy sometimes, and so we overlook the fact that peace is available. As Thich Nhat Hanh says: please help yourself.

CHAPTER 9

Opening of 3 Month Course

Carol Wilson · 1h13

> *This talk marks the formal opening of the 27th annual three-month retreat at IMS, delivered by Joseph Goldstein and Carol Wilson. Joseph begins by acknowledging the accumulated energy of this practice space and the significance of gathering together during difficult times. He explores the foundations that support extended practice: a deep interest in knowing oneself completely, the quality of mettā (loving-kindness) as simple friendliness toward all experience, and a correct understanding of renunciation—not as grim endurance but as joyful lightening and letting go of clinging.*
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> *Joseph offers practical guidance for the journey ahead, emphasizing that difficulties are part of the path, not mistakes. He warns against 'Vipassanā brilliance'—getting lost in fascinating thoughts rather than cultivating direct awareness—and reminds practitioners that insight arises intuitively through silence of mind, not through discursive thinking. The quality of patience as constancy, rather than mere endurance, serves as the foundation for practice through all the inevitable ups and downs.*
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> *Carol Wilson then speaks deeply about the meaning of refuge in the Triple Gem: taking refuge in the Buddha as our own potential for awakening, in the Dhamma as both the teachings and the truth of each moment, and in the Saṅgha as the community of practitioners supporting one another. She emphasizes that refuge is not habitual routine but a conscious commitment renewed daily. The talk concludes with the formal taking of the three refuges and five precepts (pañcasīla), marking the entry into three months of noble silence and intensive practice.*

Before we begin this evening, I'd like to introduce some people who will be helping to hold the energy of the retreat, the container of the retreat.

Of course, you've met all of the five teachers: Carol, Guy, Stephen, Michelle, and myself. In addition to us, I'd like to introduce Rebecca Bradshaw, who is sitting to the right of Carol. She is a teacher trainee who will be here throughout the retreat performing many supportive functions—sign-up interviews on days off, leading some sittings. You'll be seeing her around, and we're really grateful that she can be here. Tomorrow morning I'll introduce the two IMS resident teachers, Amy Schmidt and Annie Cohn, who will also be here in a supportive role during this retreat.

I'd like to introduce Alan Cooper, who is here all the way in the corner in the back. He is the night contact person in case of emergency. He's a trained nurse, has worked in hospice for many years, and is a longtime and very experienced practitioner of meditation. So again, we're very happy he's here.

I hope you get the sense that you're well supported. There are a lot of people holding this. And it didn't always used to be like that. This is the twenty-seventh three-month retreat, so you're coming into an accumulated energy in this hall and in this place which is really quite profound. You'll be adding to that stream of energy.

We've learned a little bit over these twenty-seven years about how to run these retreats. In the late seventies or early eighties, we came up with the idea of what we called Independence Week, and all the teachers just left. We thought it would be good for the yogis to be independent. It wasn't that helpful. We came back to disaster. So I think in all of these years of doing this we have learned, and I think you'll find the benefit and value of the support of all these people helping you to hold the practice.

Coming together on retreat is always a special time, and it's especially so when people come together for six weeks or three months. That's a significant commitment, and it reflects that deep commitment within yourselves. I could feel it starting Friday as you began gathering. It was like an in-gathering of people from so many different places. As we did the go-around this morning, it was quite amazing—from so many different parts of the world and of this continent and this country, gathering together to join in this, especially in these times, in this very difficult time. There's a tremendous power in the coming together, in the being together, and practicing the Dharma of freedom, the Dharma of liberation.

Joining together in this way is the beginning of an amazing and wonderful journey. Starting tonight as we ring the bell and enter into the silence—three months of silence—we're really entering into a whole new realm, very different than our ordinary lives. We're entering into a realm of silence, of depth, the kind of depth that in our ordinary lives we don't often touch. We enter into a realm of solitude, even amongst one hundred, one hundred twenty-five people. We create a space of solitude for each one of us. And most amazingly and profoundly, we enter a realm where we come face to face with ourselves, where we're no longer so caught up in the distractions of our lives, but we stop and we turn inward and we really see ourselves.

This is a very rare thing in the world, and as is obvious from the events of the last weeks, it's tremendously needed. We need to understand ourselves. In some way I see Dharma practice as being the master game of life, because it is an exploration of life

itself. It asks the most fundamental questions. What is the nature of this mind and body? What is the nature of birth and death? What is the nature of consciousness, of awareness? A great mystery.

Dharma practice is the exploration of the nature of suffering and discontent, both in ourselves and in the world. As you all know very well, this is not a running away or avoiding of suffering. It's a looking into it, into its depth, so we can begin to understand it. And it's also the exploration of the possibility of a genuine and transforming happiness and freedom.

You all know that this journey is not always an easy one. Buddhist meditation practice is not a bliss trip. And so if you have that expectation, please leave a note for one of us, because that's not what these three months are about. We have such strong mental habits of judging and comparing and restlessness and agitation and sleepiness and dullness and doubt and living in the past and living in the future. All of these things are within our minds.

It takes a strong commitment—which obviously you all have, because you're here for this length of time—and it takes a certain fire, a certain passion to be awake, to be mindful, to be aware, because it's in the face of many other habits.

So the question as we start on this journey: Where does this commitment, where does this passion for awareness, for wakefulness, come from? How can we connect with its root, with its source within ourselves?

First, it comes from the quality of a deep and great interest. It's that interest in understanding ourselves, that willingness to know ourselves fully. Most people in the world do not have this. They're simply acting out all of the conditioning of family and education and culture. This is a rare thing in the world—to have the interest and the willingness to know oneself completely.

There's a poem from an eleventh-century Japanese woman poet, Izumi. She's talking about looking at the moon at dawn, solitary mid-sky: "I knew myself completely, no part left out." In a way, that's the challenge to us. As you're here on retreat for this extended time, can we foster that commitment?

It's possible because everything is workable. There's nothing in our experience that is outside the realm of dharma practice. Whatever arises—and many different things will arise in the course of this time—whatever arises within us is workable. We can be with it with that attitude of: let me see, let me understand, let me open to it.

For so many years in the beginning of my practice, I would get into these amazing struggles with myself about all the defilements of mind that I would see arising—the greed and the anger and the fear and the pride and the jealousy, whatever it was. My tendency would be to see it and then feel terrible about myself, or to judge myself, or to be reactive against my teachers for pointing it out to me.

At a certain point there was a major shift, and I recommend the shift to you early rather than later, if you can manage it. That shift happened when I deeply and truly wanted much more to see the defilements in my mind than not see them. It was almost like taking joy in seeing them, because in the seeing, that was a way of working with them. I could also see the transparency and the impermanence and the non-selfness of them.

We don't have to fight or struggle or judge ourselves for what's arising. If we have that attitude of interest and the joy of interest, of seeing it all—"I know myself completely, no part left out."

You are all experienced practitioners, and so you know very well that in the course of this retreat there will be many surprises. There will be many ups and downs, where you're feeling happy and inspired and full of energy, and at other times you feel bored and depressed or angry or fearful—and then it changes again and again. It's all part of this passing show.

The foundation for this interest, for this willingness to open, is a quality of heart that we will be talking about and practicing a lot. But it's helpful to connect with it right at the beginning of this long journey. What supports the interest in this exploration of our minds and our bodies, of suffering and freedom, is the quality of mettā, of loving-kindness. Loving-kindness towards ourselves, loving-kindness towards others.

And it's not some great, fantastic mind state of ecstatic bliss that we're looking for. This quality of mettā, loving-kindness that I'm speaking of, is really the very simple quality of friendliness. Just basic, easy, simple goodwill towards ourselves, towards our fellow yogis, towards the world, towards everything that arises.

There's a line from a Japanese samurai poem. One of the lines says, "I make my mind my friend." That is a wonderful line. If we did nothing in this whole retreat except that—except making our minds our friend—that would be a great accomplishment. We need to remember, we need to plant that seed within us, and know that it's this energy, this quality, which supports the immensity of the journey.

The second support for opening to every part of ourselves is something that Michelle talked about quite a bit last night, and that is the quality of renunciation. I'd just like to mention a few aspects of it that I think are particularly relevant as we move forward. Renunciation is so often misunderstood—even just the English word.

Who wants to renounce? It sounds so gloomy and heavy and burdensome. But that's really a misunderstanding of what it's all about. Renunciation is a lightening. It's a relaxing back into simplicity. It's not being so cluttered in our lives. It's letting go of addiction. When we hear that word, we really want to understand the joy of it, not see it in this heavy, burdensome way. It's about lightening. It's about lightening up on so many levels.

The implication of renunciation in understanding our meditative journey is enormous. Because when we understand it correctly, we see that the meditation practice is not the struggle to get something. It's not to get something that we don't have. It's to let go. It's settling back and letting go again and again and again on the deepest levels. It's about not clinging, not grasping.

Well, that's a huge relief. You can really relax. There's nothing to get. I can stop the struggle. Now it's a question of simply settling back and not holding on. It's a very different mental stance.

This understanding of renunciation really is the power of every great monastery. In some way the great monasteries have understood, in a way that most societies don't, the power of this letting go, the power of not grasping, of not clinging. For these three months it's as if we are creating this great meditation monastery together. And this is the understanding, this is the energy that is at the heart of it.

It's renunciation of pleasure as being the guiding principle in our lives. Mostly in our ordinary lives, that's a major influence. We keep going for what's pleasurable or what's pleasant. This is the normal conditioning of our lives. But on retreat, as we're looking deeply at ourselves, everyone will face at different times enormous challenges and difficulties. They are definitely going to come. The tendency or the temptation would be to pull back from the difficulties and to try to find some more agreeable way, some more pleasant way.

A couple of years ago I was at a conference with some academics who had constructed a study on contemplative experience, but they really had no experience or real understanding of contemplative experience. They had gotten a big grant from a founda-

tion to do this study, and so they went around the country interviewing people about their contemplative experiences. The one that really struck in my mind and stood out for me was this whole report on the contemplation of snorkeling.

I thought, oh, that's the one for me! Snorkeling is great. But this ain't snorkeling. It's not just swimming along in the pleasantness of things. That's nice enough, but it's not really what this contemplative path is about. We want to go much deeper than that. And what that means is really facing the difficulties that will come.

A basic understanding that's necessary as you begin this journey is that difficulties are part of the path. They're not a mistake and it's not that you're doing something wrong. This is part of it. And this is true of any discipline. If you want to become a great athlete or musician or whatever, in any discipline we always come up against boundaries and edges. And it's not about simply trying to find the easiest way. It's trying to find balance. How can I be with what's arising? How can I extend myself?

In the last couple of years I've become a great mountain biking enthusiast. Of course I'm still in the very beginning stages of this, but it's been very instructive. At first, I'd be going with friends, and we'd be going up these hills, and they were all more experienced than I was, and they'd be at the top. Maybe ten minutes later, I'd get to the top, totally panting and out of breath and feeling like I was dying.

And I would only go up these hills if I was pulled along in their wake. When I was biking by myself, I would never think of going up them. But then, as I just kept going out more and more often, I found that my body was getting stronger. It was becoming easier. I could go up the hills with less effort. And it was really a pivotal moment for me in this whole endeavor when I would be out by myself and looking for a hill to go up. Being at that edge, playing the edge with balance.

A lot of what we'll do together is finding that balance. But that's how we get stronger. The difficulties are part of the path. We incorporate them and learn how to be with them skillfully. There might be times to back off a little in order to have the strength and balance to go forward.

So this is the first understanding of renunciation: the pleasantness of the moment is not always the measure of what's valuable.

This time is also a renunciation in a very immediate and real way of family and friends and your familiar life. It might be particularly striking in these times that are uncertain and unsettled. When you come here, it is a renunciation of that. And we begin to appreciate the great beauty and power of silence. This is such a rare event in the world—a hundred people coming together and being together in silence. There's a great

power in that. There's a huge relief in not having to present ourselves to anyone. That's the beauty of the silence and the solitude. We can relax back into ourselves, into being just as we are, so that we can see ourselves clearly with no part left out.

It's a renunciation of pleasure as the main guiding principle in our lives. It's the renunciation of family, friends, our usual support system. It's the renunciation of fixed ideas of ourselves, of who we are. Renunciation of fixed ideas of the spiritual path. If you have any idea of how these next six weeks or three months are going to unfold—renounce. It's going into the unknown, going into a mystery. We can't possibly know, and the not-knowing becomes a source of tremendous energy. We don't imprison ourselves in these little boxes of preconception. Letting go of ideas of self-image, of who we are, of how our practice should be, of how the path unfolds. Just imagine for a moment letting go of all that—the relief and the ease. We just settle back right into the moment exactly as it is.

So a few suggestions as you begin this journey. These are really reminders of things you already know well. Given that it is completely natural to go through all of the ups and downs of practice—the easy times, the difficult times, feeling happy, feeling sad, feeling bored, feeling interested, all of it—given that this is part of it, a quality that serves us so well, and that the Buddha spoke of so often, is the quality of patience. The Buddha said it leads to nibbāna, leads to enlightenment.

But we need to be careful with that word in English, because sometimes we hear the word patience and it has a slight connotation of endurance. "Okay, I'll endure through this." That's not the quality the Buddha was talking about. It's not an enduring. Rather, as Suzuki Roshi used to speak of it, he said it's more the quality of constancy. We just stay with it. We have that kind of patience through all the ups and downs and cycles and rhythms of these days.

You really have one very simple job. You have a secondary yogi job, whatever the particular work assignment is, but your main yogi job is to sit and walk. When you finish sitting, walk. When you finish walking, sit. When you finish sitting, walk again. It's very simple. And if you just keep that constancy of practice, the whole dharma will unfold.

It's important to remember that all of your experience, the whole range of it, is really like the changing weather.

It's just appearances of changing conditions. There's a saying in New England: if you don't like the weather, wait five minutes. Because from hour to hour or day to day, it can change a lot. Well, that's so true of our dharma practice. There'll be some great thunder and lightning storms. Can we open to them? Can we enjoy those as well? Being patient, having that sense of constancy.

The second piece of advice that I'd like to offer you, if you take it, will serve you very well. It will be a wonderful strengthening of your practice. And that is the understanding that meditation is not thinking about things. There are some useful dharma reflections, and we will talk about these later, which can be a help. But what I mean when I say that meditation is not thinking about things—I'm meaning all of those endlessly meandering thoughts.

There's a meditative disease, a yogi disease, which I know very well. I'm a survivor. It's called Vipassana brilliance. It's like we sit and the mind gets a little quiet, and all of a sudden our minds become so brilliant. We have all of these wonderful ideas and we get lost in them. We have these creative ideas about our lives or some project. It could be wonderful new insights we have about ourselves.

At one point in my practice, I was so caught up in the fascination with my own mind and thought process. Because it was fascinating. It was completely interesting. But I was going through this period where I was just lost in it for such long periods of time. I remember saying to myself—it's like I got just disgusted with my mind—I said, "Joseph, do you want to think or do you want to get enlightened?" It jolted me a little bit out of the habit of simply going with it.

It needs a certain understanding and resoluteness from the beginning of the retreat, really the beginning of each sitting, the beginning of each walking, reminding oneself. Because the habit is so strong, so easy. We just get lost in thought meandering, and it's enjoyable, and the hour goes quickly, and we think that was a good sitting. It's not productive from the meditative perspective.

So we need to set a strong intention in our mind from the beginning. It doesn't mean that thoughts aren't going to come. They will come in vast numbers. But it's just to remind ourselves that the practice is really to let go of that meandering, to come back again to a moment of mindfulness, of awareness. And if we do that with some regularity and commitment, it's tremendously strengthening for our practice.

Just in support of that, I'll offer you the first of the many Vipassana mantras that will be suggested throughout the retreat. You can use this just as a reminder to yourself: Nothing is worth thinking about. Whatever you're thinking about, nothing is worth

thinking about—from the perspective of this practice, now. There are times when thought is useful, but meandering, discursive thought? Now it's not. Because we begin to understand that insight and wisdom are not discursive; they're intuitive. They don't come through thinking. They come through silence of mind, where all of a sudden, quite intuitively, we simply drop into a new space—seeing in a different way, relating to experience in a different way. So this is a renunciation of our usual habit. And it opens us to an entirely different kind of space.

The Buddha said that the gift of dharma is the highest gift, the greatest gift. This is the gift that you have given yourselves for six weeks or three months. You're really giving yourself the highest gift in this world. It's the gift of coming back again and again to awareness, to mindfulness, to loving-kindness, to compassion. And out of the silence and awareness,

comes a wisdom that can hold even the greatest suffering. And that's why what we're doing here is so relevant to the conditions in the world now. The Dharma of understanding, the Dharma of freedom, can hold it all. We create a context of meaning and understanding for everything that's happening. It's a wisdom that allows us to break through the cycle of fear, of violence, of hatred. The Buddha pointed this out 2,500 years ago, and it's what we need to find for ourselves, in ourselves, so that we're able to share that understanding and wisdom with the world.

I'd just like to close with a poem that was just published in the last issue of the New Yorker magazine, which dealt with everything that's been happening. It's by a Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski. It's really a beautiful poem. I think it sets the tone as we enter this retreat.

Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June's long days and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew,
the nettles that methodically overgrow the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships.
One of them had a long trip ahead of it, while salty oblivion awaited others.
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere.
You've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.

Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost, and the gentle light that strays and vanishes and returns.

I wanted to make sure that you each had one of these sheets, because as you know, we always begin retreats by taking together the three refuges, the triple gem, and at least the five training rules—five precepts, guidelines of non-harming behavior. And I think it's really important, at least in my heart, that it's not just another habitual routine that we go through at the beginning of a retreat. "Oh yeah, the refuges and precepts, *namo tassa*, blah blah blah," and then into the retreat. Some of you have done it many, many times.

Because I actually, as I sit here, feel very deeply about refuge in particular. In times like now, when things are very confusing, enormously painful, both personally and globally, the sense of refuge, the importance of examining for each of us personally, quietly, in our minds and in our hearts—what really, truly, for me, is my refuge? Where do I go in my mind, in my heart, when things are really difficult? When I'm afraid, or when I'm cranky, or when I'm needy, or when I can't handle the pain that's in me and around me? Where do I look, both habitually—meaning unconsciously—and also consciously when we're awake? Where do I go for refuge?

We start our retreats this way. The Buddha began all his teachings this way. Everyone who came to the Buddha and, after hearing him, said, "Yes, I want to be your disciple. I want to practice this way of awakening"—that was formally begun by the taking of the refuges. So it's by no means an idle tradition. For me, I feel that it's a very deep setting of our conscious intention, our conscious commitment to what is most deeply true and important for us in our life. It's very personal, too.

So refuge, of course, in the English word, means a place of safety, a place we can rely on for peace, for protection—something trustworthy, that we can have confidence in. And so when we talk about taking the three refuges, using the terms that have come down to us from the Pali...

How do we, if that's true for you, that you really feel you can take refuge in this triple gem, how does that translate for you in your heart, in your actions, in your consciousness? How does that manifest in the way that we live, in the way that we take decisions, the things that we do?

I think it's at the core of our whole practice. For me personally, the taking of refuge is something that I do on a daily basis. And when I'm on a retreat, which as Joseph said is not always a walk in the park, during difficult times I might be taking refuge many times a day. I find that it reconnects me with the strength and the confidence and the courage to keep opening to whatever is happening, because of my deep trust in the refuge—that the Dharma is really the truth of this moment.

Let me offer my interpretation of the refuges, and I invite you to consider what they mean for you. This is a time when conscious reflection can be useful.

The first refuge is taking refuge in the Buddha, which can be a sense of encouragement, a sense of inspiration drawn from the historical Buddha. But knowing that Buddha means one who is awake, the essence of the inspiration of this refuge has nothing to do with him as a person anymore, because he's long gone. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we're also taking refuge in the living potential in each of us—that is, our living potential for awakening. Not in some other lifetime, but here and now, just as we are in this situation. It's immediate. It's real.

Taking refuge in one who is awake is recognizing, acknowledging, and establishing some conscious confidence in ourselves that this potential of awakening—and living from the wisdom of who we really are, that Joseph spoke of—this potential is alive in each of us. It's who we are. It's really what we hopefully come to retreat to touch and recognize and trust more and more. In taking refuge, we realize that's true now. You don't have to be a different person than you are for that to be true. It's about recognizing and going to this potential for refuge rather than to some idea or some other not so reliable source of momentary ease or comfort.

Taking refuge in the Dharma, or Dhamma in Pali, encompasses many meanings. It means the doctrine, the teachings of the Buddha, which can be conceptual and serve as a way to help us understand and guide our practice. Dharma also means truth, the way things are—the way things are right now, the laws of nature, which is us, which is the way the whole world is manifesting. When Joseph was speaking about the aspect of meditation in which everything's included, that we can open to whatever it is—to me, that's what taking refuge in the Dharma is about.

The truth of how things are is manifesting right now. How can it be otherwise? It's not about whether we like right now. It's not about intellectually getting some really far-out meaning from what's happening. Taking refuge in the Dharma on a moment-to-moment basis is simply this: Can I trust enough that if I just open into this moment, this

experience, true nature of mind, of heart, sense of awareness, who we are—that can reveal itself? If I can just stop fighting the present moment long enough and be fully here and present.

For me personally, taking refuge in the Dharma is the refuge that gets me through the really naughty times in life or in retreat, because it reminds me that the potential for awakening is here, but I have to open into this moment to be able to recognize it.

Taking refuge in the Sangha, in community. Classically, the Sangha refers to the community of awakened beings, past and present, often the ordained Sangha. And of course we also use it here to include the community of those of us who are practicing this path of awakening with sincerity, with our full-hearted intention and commitment.

Many people in the go-round were saying already after two days that they feel the strength of support that comes from being here together. We catch the mindful effort, we catch the courage, we catch the strength to keep going from each other. It's luckily contagious. On the days when you get up and feel like you just can't put one foot in front of another in one more walking period—maybe that'll never happen to you, that might just be me—but on those days, when you see somebody out there just doing it again, it's contagious. You think, well, if they can do it, I can do it. And you just go do it. It's really wonderful. It stops being so personal.

When we take refuge in the Sangha, it's as if we're taking refuge in the enlightened mind stream that at different moments we all partake of. What would be wonderful is if we could all partake of it at the same moment—wouldn't that be an amazing world? So we're working towards it. Taking refuge in the enlightened mind stream, which we all manifest at times. Taking refuge in Sangha isn't taking refuge in each other's personalities. That's not much of a refuge, really. Can we even take refuge in our own personalities?

Not likely. And so, think of this broader sense of Sangha, of community, and how vital it is. Because imagine trying to do this all alone—three months of sitting, walking, silence. It's really hard. But sometimes, especially in these first days, it can be that after the glow of coming together wears off, there are little bits of thinking: "What's that person doing here? I can take refuge in the Sangha, but *that* person? Part of the Sangha? With that behavior? I don't think so."

Remember then, we're not taking refuge in personalities, but in our mutual intention, our mutual commitment. It's going to manifest in as many different ways as there are people here, which is beautiful. That's how it is. So just holding the bigger picture, remembering that community, Sangha, is one of the three jewels—we'd be lost without it, really, on this path.

I say this because I feel really quite deeply about it. Even though I talk about it a lot, in my heart I feel deeply committed. I know this to me is the true refuge. I find not only in really difficult times like now, but even in times when things seem to be going along okay, when I'm a little mindless and confronted with some sudden unpleasant or difficult situation—how easy it can be for the mind, the heart, to run back into habitual understandings or habitual behaviors, thinking that there will be refuge there.

We don't think it so consciously, do we? I'm making this almost too simple, but just to give you the idea: "If I would go out and get a pint of Häagen-Dazs now, everything would be okay." Or call up a friend, or initiate a new action, or get in a new relationship, or fix an old relationship, or get on the phone, or lash out in anger, or try and fix the world, or go for a drive—whatever it is we do. None of which is in itself necessarily a bad thing. But letting yourself discover, as part of this inward journey of a three-month retreat, where we have unconsciously been placing our trust, our reliance—this is essential. While each of these things might momentarily, or over some short period of time, really ease our life, give us happiness, give us a sense of safety, there's nothing temporal that's going to actually be completely reliable. No other person can be expected to conform always to what we need them and want them to do or be to keep us safe. It's impossible. No situation can.

And this is even in our normal day-to-day routine when everything seems okay. In these last weeks, when we in the United States have been thrust into a situation that many people in the world have been in for quite a long time already—which is certainly not something new in the history of the world—I find it both paradoxical. At times it's so obvious: what else could I look to for refuge than our true nature, than our connectedness, than the natural radiant purity of mind and heart that is who we all are? And at the same time, with each new wave of confusion that goes on, I often find my heart and mind really challenged. Do I really, totally have confidence in this? When so much of the energy and the people we might meet or hear or talk to clearly don't have confidence, when they come from another place, when a lot of the world—and it seems like it always has been that way—places confidence in other ways of understanding, it can be really challenging. Challenging both to stay honest with ourselves—do I really go to these things for refuge?—and also to be honest and okay with the times when we don't have that confidence.

Because I find for myself sometimes it's so clear—there's not one second, not one iota of doubt or confusion. And other times I'm kind of groping: "Oh yes, the potential for awakening—can I touch that again? Can I have confidence in that again?" And I always have been able to. The space of the quiet, the space of the interconnectedness, gives us a chance to recognize it.

So I think taking refuge is essential. Essential, over and over, just from a place as honest and sincere as we can be with ourselves. And I find it really gives the strength, the confidence, to open into whatever it is we need to open into—whatever experience might be presenting itself in our mind and body or in the so-called outside world. We can meet it. And we start not so grandiose, but simply where we are. When we touch our place of refuge, it gives us the strength and confidence to carry into our actions a sense of what's really true.

And so we talk about how to manifest our sense of connectedness, our understanding of non-harming, the oneness of all beings. We manifest that by our willingness to undertake as guidelines for training what we call the five precepts—five aspects of non-harming behavior. Again, we could look at those as just rules: you have to act in this way while you're here at IMS. And you could look at it that way; minimally, at least look at it that way. Please do undertake to live with these guidelines while you're here. But really, these guidelines are manifestations of our inner motivation, our inner intention.

As Sayadaw U Pandita described it once, living with the five precepts is an actualization of our oneness with all beings. In our commitment not to act from harming, not to act from taking what's not ours, not to act in ways that cause harm verbally, emotionally, or physically to others—in our commitment to that, we're actually manifesting our understanding of oneness. By not harming another, I'm not harming myself, actually. We can't separate the two. And this is what's such a fascinating aspect of practice with these precepts.

I'll just name them very briefly to remind you. The first is taking the guideline not to harm, not to kill, basically, other living beings. Other people, of course, but all living beings. Generally here that comes down to insects, which we occasionally have a problem with. It's easier on a three-month course than it is, for example, in May here, when we have these horrific black flies that bite and are little and swarm everywhere. Here it's easier, but it's something to pay attention to. We're taking the precept not to harm other living beings and watching our intention if we do harm another being. Watching it. And if we so-called break any of these precepts, it's not about getting out the whip and lashing yourself. It's keeping attention. In the mindfulness of how it is before, dur-

ing, and after—in that mindfulness of after doing something harmful, we really can't help but notice how much pain that causes ourselves. And we see the interconnectedness immediately.

The second precept is not to take what is not freely given, which I imagine Michelle talks some about under renunciation. But again, it's the sense of whatever I have is enough. The mind space that allows to arise is really one of great happiness and contentment. I don't have this particular food, this particular shampoo, this particular thing I think I need. Oh, maybe I don't need it. There's such a sense of openness. It's lovely.

These two together give what the Buddha called the gift of fearlessness. It's a beautiful thing that we're giving each other here, this gift of fearlessness—a place where we can be, so many people, so close together, and you just don't have to worry that someone's going to take what's yours, that someone's going to harm you. It's really beautiful in this world to live like that for some time.

The third, in terms of lay life, would be not to harm ourselves or another with our sexual behavior. For the terms of the retreat, even though it's usually part of the eight precepts, even with five precepts, the guideline is not to engage in any intentional sexual activity while here on the retreat.

The fourth is not to lie, not to use harsh or abusive speech, not using speech to divide people. But here, obviously, we're in noble silence. That's a big help. Still, just watch what squirts out of our mouth when the occasion arises. Not with judgment. None of this stuff is about being self-judging. It's just about being open and seeing what causes suffering and what leads to happiness.

The fifth precept is not to drink or take any kind of drugs that cloud the mind, that cause confusion, that cause heedlessness. That's obvious—we've come here to cultivate clarity and wisdom. But that doesn't include, if you have a physical condition and you're on some form of medication, that's fine. This is about recreational substances and mind-changing activities. Believe me, you're having more than enough mind-changing activity going on here. You really don't need to stir the pot.

So these are the five precepts, five guidelines for mindful speech and action, for training, for cultivating and recognizing our connectedness. We like to begin each retreat with taking these refuges and precepts. Really think of this as a conscious commitment to yourself. It's almost like we're entering a doorway into these next three months—really appreciating a sense of commitment and dignity for yourself, appreciation for what you're doing.

Dutiyampi Buddhang Saranang Gacchami. Dutiyampi Dhammang Saranang Gacchami. Dutiyampi Sanghang Saranang Gacchami.

Tatiyampi Buddhang Saranang Gacchami. Tatiyampi Dhammang Saranang Gacchami. Tatiyampi Sanghang Saranang Gacchami.

Panatipata Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Adinnadana Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Abrahmacariya Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Musavada Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami. Suramerayamajjapamadatthana Veramani Sikkhapadang Samadiyami.

I thank you all for your deep commitment and dedication. We really wish you a marvelous journey these six weeks, these three months together. Thank you so much for the light you bring into the world.

Just to mention, you see there are eight precepts on the sheet. Sometime later, in a week or so, if you're interested, we'll give an opportunity to take the eight precepts, and we'll talk more about that then.

One other thing: every Wednesday and Saturday at the early morning sitting, there will be another chance at the beginning to take the refuges and precepts together. If there's a second chanting sheet up here and you don't have one, please come and get it at the end of this sitting.

So again, this is really the formal beginning of the retreat. We're in noble silence. Please enjoy.

Thank you so much.

CHAPTER 10

Brahmavihāra - Mettā

Carol Wilson · 29 min

> *In this guided mettā retreat session, Carol Wilson continues mapping the loving-kindness practice by introducing how to work skillfully with different categories of beings. She emphasizes the fundamental principle of practicing with whoever is easiest—whether that's oneself, a benefactor, or a dear friend—rather than forcing connection where it doesn't naturally arise.*
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> *Wilson addresses a common concern about mettā practice: the fear that focusing on someone's good qualities might be a form of delusion or blindness. She explains that mettā is actually inclusive—while we begin by appreciating the beautiful aspects of a person, as we maintain steady practice, we naturally come to accept the whole person, including their imperfections. This graduated approach, moving from easier to more challenging relationships, allows practitioners to discover that genuine loving-kindness brings clarity rather than obscuring reality.*
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> *The talk includes practical guidance on what to do when the mind wanders into the "bugged zone" with someone, how to handle difficult emotions that arise during practice, and the liberating insight that mettā cannot ultimately be contained—even when directed toward oneself, it naturally extends outward, dissolving the sense of separation between self and other. Wilson guides a meditation moving through self, benefactor, and dear friend, offering the traditional phrases while encouraging practitioners to find their own rhythm and not worry about generating particular feelings.*

We'll continue going through the map, the categories of the loving-kindness, the metta practice. Since Steve introduced the metta practice so beautifully last time, we won't be talking so much in these following weeks, but simply continuing to present the whole map.

As far as the structure, we'll begin with ourselves, and then tonight we'll spend a bit more time with the benefactor, and just briefly at the end of the sitting, introduce the next being, which is dear friend.

As we begin and continue to explore this loving-kindness, this metta practice, it's really important that we practice it in the way that's easiest. In other words, picking the being, the person that we are cultivating this connecting, loving, open heart with—picking the one that's the easiest to connect with.

If that's yourself, which oddly enough once in a while it is, then when we move to benefactor or dear friend, if you start to feel lost or there's no energy there, please don't force it. Come back to yourself. Stay with yourself. Stay with yourself all through the week. That's great.

If it's the reverse, and it's really difficult trying to send metta to yourself—either it's just like a stone, nothing, or worse than nothing, anger, hatred, all that stuff—well, that's interesting information, but you may not be the person you should start with. Then really spend time with the benefactor, who for many people is the easiest person.

The benefactor is the person who really opens that heart space of connection, who connects with our own goodness. Although classically it's taught as someone who has been a teacher or to whom we feel grateful or very respectful, that doesn't always work. Many people use their grandchild or a niece or a friend or a pet—a being that just easily opens up that space of well-wishing without a lot of complications. For many people, that's the easiest category. It's meant to be. For some people, it isn't.

For that reason, tonight we'll introduce the next category, which is dear friend. Classically, dear friend would be someone that you're a little closer to than the benefactor, although if you're using a child or a niece or a grandchild, you might be closer to them as benefactor. Dear friend is meant to be, again, someone with whom we can easily open our hearts in connection, someone whose beautiful qualities we can easily tune into, and for whom it is fairly easy to wish happiness.

Generally, a dear friend might be someone we know a little better. This means, of course, we also know all the sides of that person, which is great because so far I haven't met anyone who only has perfect good sides and doesn't have a few little warts here and there.

And that's what's so wonderful about the quality of the Brahma Vihara of metta—well, of all the Brahma Viharas. Even though we practice metta by picking the person it's easiest to feel it for, this connection, this friendliness, and we practice it by deliberately choosing to focus on the goodness of that person. For example, if you're sending metta to a benefactor, you don't think of all the things they did that drove you nuts in order to cultivate metta. You really focus on their beautiful aspects.

This can lead to an almost fearful feeling of being blind, of being deluded, that we're sending metta but we're kidding ourselves because we're not really looking at the whole person. And that's what's so beautiful about metta—it's inclusive. We start by

looking at the beautiful, but as we stay connected, sending all the phrases to that person, the other sides come in. The loving-kindness is an acceptance of all of the person, including ourselves, including whoever.

So you can see why we start with easier ones. We get a sense that the friendliness, the connection of metta is not at all a deluded or blind connection. It's an acceptance that really allows us to see the whole person as we go on with the practice. To be honest, when I first started doing metta intensively, I didn't quite expect the degree of inclusion, the degree of acceptance, and the clarity of seeing of the heart and mind that comes from the steadiness of practicing in this way. I just put that out. Look and see for yourselves how it is for you.

So it's graduated. With a friend you might see a little bit more that bugs you. That's okay. If you notice the mind drifting into—not just noticing, but actively getting into the being-bugged zone—well, you'll notice, okay, this isn't metta. Fine. See if you can put it down and reconnect to the goodness of the person and start the metta again. This is true with anybody you're sending it to.

If you find you're just getting caught up in the bugged zone and you can't get back to the metta zone, that's when we say, okay, let me go to the person that it's easier for. Go back to benefactor, for example, or yourself or whoever it's easier for. This is the standard rule of how we practice.

Even though in these weeks we're taking you through all the categories, it's really more by way of showing you the possibilities and giving you the chance to see for yourself where you connect most easily. There's no sense at all of thinking you ought to get it right, make a success of each category and get on to the next. There's nowhere to go. If you just stayed with yourself for six weeks, that would be wonderful.

And you might find out at the end of that time what's another wonderful secret of loving-kindness practice: you can't just stay with one person. If you only do it to yourself, you find it sneaking out and connecting with other people anyway. You find that sense of separation of me and other goes away.

In a moment of metta, there is no sense of separation. So there's not any way you can really do this in a selfish way, and there's not any way you can do it in a wrong way. So play with it. And if it really doesn't connect with you, you also don't have to do it at all. You can stay with the Vipassana, which is also wonderful. There's no way to lose here. Don't get yourself all worried about it. Just see what happens.

With metta, sit as comfortably as you can while remaining awake. This is not a practice where you need to hold yourself in a strenuous position or where you need to be dealing with pain, if you're fortunate enough to have the choice not to deal with it. If partway through the sitting you're feeling some constriction, some pain in your body, and you know moving a little bit would help, please move. That's really helpful in this practice.

Find as comfortable a seat as you can. Classically, we'll start with ourselves before moving to a benefactor or friend. But within that, feel free to go where it feels the most flowing, the most easy. And if you feel nothing—which is often the case when we're doing metta—don't worry about it. Don't try to evoke a feeling that isn't there. Just be content to offer each phrase as a gift. That's enough. We don't have to get into wanting to feel good as well. We can just offer that to ourselves or to others. It takes a load off, I'll tell you, just to offer it without needing something back.

So please sit at ease. Take a couple of deep breaths so that you can connect with the sense of your physical presence here in this room. Let your attention gently come into your body. See if you can just relax into a kind acceptance, being here with your body, so to speak—coming home into this body, however it is in this moment, not needing it to change. Just appreciate that it's supporting us so far.

Take a moment to consciously reflect on some of your beautiful qualities, some aspect of your goodness. And don't listen to the voice that's uncomfortable with that. Really let it in. It's important. It's a very important practice that we often neglect. It can be small things—any aspect of your goodness. Receive it in your heart and mind. Appreciate it. Imagine how you'd appreciate that goodness in another. Appreciate it in yourself.

Then take that sense of appreciation of yourself, feeling a sense of your presence, connecting with yourself here and now—whether it's physically, a felt sense, holding an internal mental picture of yourself, or connecting with a memory of yourself, perhaps as a child, a memory when you can connect with your goodness, when you can honestly wish yourself happiness and let it in.

From this space, use the repetition of each phrase, one by one, very simply, as a way to carry this appreciation to yourself, to honor your deepest wish to be happy by expressing it through the phrase. Not to change anything. The phrase is simply a carrier to express your friendliness to yourself, your acceptance of yourself.

The classic phrases are: May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy and strong. May I be able to care for myself joyfully in this world. Or, may I live with ease of well-being.

Some people find it helpful to keep it very simple, something like: I love and accept myself just as I am.

Very gently, one phrase from the heart, just feeling each word, offering that to yourself as a heartfelt gesture of friendliness.

That's all. Just settle in and find your own rhythm.

When you wander off in thought, take a moment when you wake up to reconnect with the sense of yourself—the image or the memory. When there's just that sense of appreciation for a moment, then offer the first phrase. Don't rush back to the phrases. Take a moment to regroup, to reconnect. There's no hurry.

May I be safe and protected.
May I be happy and peaceful.
May I be healthy.
May I care for myself joyfully.

Now, if you'd like, bring into your heart or mind a sense of the being you're using for the benefactor category. If it's the one you chose last week and it's been working great, wonderful. If you found you chose someone who rationally should have been a good benefactor but turned out not to be so easy, don't worry about that. Just pick someone else. That happens sometimes.

Bring this being into your heart. See if you can bring up an internal image, a memory if it's someone you know, some visual connection. Take a moment to reflect on their goodness—the qualities of this person, this being, that light up your heart, that naturally evoke this friendliness, this openness, this connection. Even if you don't feel it now, that's okay. Just reflect on these qualities.

When you're ready, offer each phrase as a gift of the heart—not to change the person's circumstances, not even to make us feel good, just a gift of friendliness, our deepest heart wish for this person.

May you be safe, protected from inner and outer harm.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be healthy and strong.
May you live with ease in this world.

When you notice you're distracted or caught up by other thoughts or moods, if it's possible to simply notice and come back to the image of your benefactor and the phrases, then do so. You don't need to fight with or investigate what else is happening. If you're really taken over by anger or fear—which sometimes happens in the metta practice—then you can switch to vipassana for some moments to really meet that emotion with a metta feeling. Acknowledge it, be with it, and then come back to the benefactor and the phrases.

Now, if you'd like, bring into the room, into your heart, a good friend—someone you easily wish well, someone whose goodness and good qualities you can focus on fairly easily. It's helpful to choose someone where there's not likely to be sexually involved energy, because that just makes it more complicated in the beginning.

Connect with an image or a felt sense of this friend. Let yourself appreciate their goodness, the parts of them that light you up. And again, when you're ready, offer each phrase.

May you be safe and protected.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be healthy and well.
May you be able to care for yourself joyfully in this world.

May the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings everywhere, known and unknown, in all directions, in all realms. May all beings everywhere be happy and peaceful. May all beings be freed from suffering. May our practice serve for the awakening of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 11

What's The Breath Got To Do With Freedom?

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this opening night retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses the fundamental question of how the simple practice of feeling breath sensations connects to the profound goal of freedom. She introduces the concept of sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view) — our deeply ingrained habit of relating to all experience as 'me' or 'mine' — as the root of suffering, explaining that vipassanā practice works directly on our wrong understanding of mental and physical experience.*
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> *Wilson illuminates two primary ways we misunderstand experience: confusing our concepts, assumptions, and reactions with the experience itself, and constantly referring everything back to a sense of self. Through vivid examples — from tight breathing to birdsong to sounds in the meditation hall — she demonstrates how we layer interpretation upon bare sensation. The practice cultivates three essential qualities: samādhi (concentration and steadiness), sati (mindfulness as bare attention), and mettā (the friendliness that allows mindfulness to penetrate deeply).*
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> *The talk's most transformative teaching concerns the shift from seeking refuge in pleasant experience to discovering refuge in awareness itself. Wilson shares Ajahn Sumedho's simple phrase — 'sleepiness is like this,' 'anger is like this' — as a doorway to this shift. Rather than battling experience or trying to manufacture ideal states, we learn that awareness can meet and hold anything. This recognition transforms practice from striving into devotion, from frustration into reverence for life as it actually is. As Wilson notes, quoting the suttas: 'The doors of the deathless are open for those who hear, for those who see.'*

So we come to the evening of the first day. Generally, especially if it's your first retreat, this is a really peppy time. You're probably feeling so glad you chose to spend a week like this, filled with energy and enthusiasm. It's usually a great audience to give a talk to on the first night.

So it falls to my lot to try to explain what we're doing here—at least one explanation. Really, every night we try to explain in one way or another what we're doing here. And this retreat is wonderful because while there are a lot of old, familiar yogi faces, there are also quite a few people who are new to this form of retreat, this form of practice. And that's wonderful, really wonderful.

I'm not really joking when I say we want to try the first nights to explain what we're doing, because the first days can be—they don't have to be, but they can be—quite difficult at times, or just kind of plodding at best. And not having done it before, you can have no personal experience, no what we call verified faith of knowing that it's worthwhile. So that's one of the things we try to speak to: basically keep you here long enough until you have some verified faith, and then you're happy to be here on your own. One of my teachers called it the velvet-gloved iron fist of the Dhamma. So tonight will be the velvet glove.

What I want to talk about is how the simplicity of what we've been doing so far today—just feeling the sensations of the breathing, feeling the sensations in your walking, in your body as you move through the day, repeatedly coming out of whatever blissful or suffering train of thought may be going on to come back to the simplicity of yet another sensation of breathing—how does this contribute to the development of wisdom and compassion? How does this open us to freedom? You may well ask. And what do we mean by freedom anyway? Which is actually a vaster question.

This is a quotation from a Burmese teacher, Sayadaw U Janaka, that I was sitting with last year. He opened a retreat with this quotation, and I really like it because I feel like it encapsulates the heart of our practice. He says: We practice Vipassana in order to live in happiness, to be free from suffering. And our suffering arises due to our suffering mental states. Our suffering mental states arise due to our belief in—the word in Pali is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—it means personality view. Our belief in our personality view is what gives rise to our suffering mental states.

By personality view, we basically mean defining or relating to any experience as being me or mine—defining our view of ourselves as a separate personality through experience. And our belief in personality view, in *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, arises because of our wrong understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience.

That's the key line I want to come in on: a wrong understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience. That's the level our Vipassana practice is coming in on, is working on. Our mistaken understanding of the nature of our moment-to-moment mental and physical experience is really a mistaken perception—a perception, basically, that any experience is me or mine. But I'll talk more about that.

The resultant misinterpretation we give to experience, because we perceive it incorrectly, is at the root of all of our confusion, our suffering, our ill will, our greed—all the suffering that the path of the Buddha, the path of meditation, offers us freedom from. It comes about through our wrong understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience.

So that's actually vast. But what our practice of moment-to-moment awareness is working on is to help us learn to perceive and understand our mental and physical experience accurately. That's all. Like Joseph said last night, it's really simple, but it's not easy.

There are many ways that we misunderstand the nature of mental and physical experience. I just want to mention two tonight. I don't want to get too technical.

The first is that we confuse our ideas, our concepts, our assumptions, our reactions about experience with the experience itself. What ends up happening is that we actually don't have a clue what's really going on. And that is really how we spend most of our lives, and we wonder why things don't work. Why do I feel out of sync? It's because —duh—I don't even know what's really happening here.

Just a simple example, very simple. Say there's a loud sound in the meditation hall. I'm making this up; this isn't anything I've noticed happening. Say there's a loud sound, somebody's rustling or making some repeated loud sound in the hall. It's bugging the heck out of you. The perception is the loud sound. What is that person doing?

Who let them in here? Don't they vet people for appropriate meditation hall behavior before they allow them in such a crowded retreat? I can't bear it. That sound is bad. That person is wrong. It's disturbing my practice. Basically, it's a bad, wrong sound. And that would be what our experience is—that sound is messing up my meditation practice, right? Or you get down on yourself for not being compassionate. But whatever it is, we think that's the experience.

The experience is sound vibration. It's pleasant or unpleasant. There are some thoughts arising. There are some emotions arising. We string it all together in this package, and we think that's what it is. We don't even know that we could just be with hearing, vibration, unpleasant, space.

Or that bird call just there—that's a more pleasant sound. That could also just be vibration, hearing, pleasant. But often, and this doesn't seem insidious or bad, it's a subtle way that we still confuse our ideas with reality. We think, "Oh, the chickadees in the morning, I just love that. Spring is coming, the beauty of nature, the chickadees." And what we think is our experience is, "I'm hearing a chickadee singing, sitting on the branch of a tree."

But what are you really experiencing here? In the hall, there's a sound, vibration. There may be a mental image in your mind, a picture of a chickadee. It's not the chickadee itself, is it? The chickadee's not sitting here in the hall in your hand. There's a sound, there's a vibration, there might be a pleasant feeling, a happy feeling, some thoughts, some mental images. You see what I mean?

I'm picking very simple examples. Another: your breathing. The breath is really tight. It's very shallow. You can hardly feel it down past your throat. And this is clear proof of what an uptight, repressed person you are. So each breath becomes another vast field of suffering, another proof of your essential worthlessness, your essential no-goodness—of how even this, such a simple task as feeling your breath, you of course can't do right. And that would be what you'd say is happening.

Instead of, "Oh, tightness." That's it. Tightness. Finished. Just tightness, you know? All the rest of that is extra made-up story. And mostly that's where we live—in the extra made-up story.

That's sakkāya-diṭṭhi. "My breath is tight. I'm repressed. I can't do it right. Why do they pick the breath anyway? In this other retreat I did, we did sweeping—it was a lot better. Don't they know what they're doing?" And on and on. But what's happening? Tightness.

The sakāya diṭṭhi—do you get a glimpse of how much suffering can be mixed up in that? And how when we simply feel tightness, it's gone?

Of course, part of our trip is that on some level we don't want it gone. "Yeah, I'm uptight, but at least it's me. Don't take my uptightness away from me. I want to be uptight and repressed. It's better than being nothing." We don't say that, of course, but there's a place of holding on.

So that's one way we misunderstand experience. We tend to not even know what's happening because we confuse our reactions, our assumptions, our simple ideas and images with the bare sense experience itself.

And then there's the common theme—with most but not all of us—of how does it relate to me? How does it affect me? What does this experience say about guess who? There's only one person: me, me, me. Even how nice the chickadee sounds often has something to do with me. "I really like how nice the chickadee sounds. It makes me feel so happy to be here in the springtime." The chickadee comes back to me, me, me—which is, of course, extra.

These are just the most basic ways we misunderstand the nature of mental and physical experience: an overlay of ideas and assumptions, and making it all either me or referring to me. And it creates a huge amount of struggle and suffering in our lives.

Part of what happens in a retreat is that because we pare away so many distractions, we get to see this up close, raw. That's part of why retreat is often so uncomfortable—not always, but at times—because we're running right up against that pattern, and there's nowhere to go to get away from it. So we're saying come back to that miserable tight breath and see if you can just feel tightness.

That's what our practice is doing. The moment-to-moment attention, coming back to feel the sensations of breath, coming back to feel the sensations of walking, pulling out of those trains of thought—it's cultivating many things, but three of the most basic deserve mention.

First, there's the discipline of coming back. Today we're returning to the same experience over and over, which we'll do for the first day or so before expanding out. This discipline of just coming back to sensations of breath, just coming back to sensations of walking, whenever you notice your thinking—this is the beginning of the cultivation of samādhi, of concentration. Concentration basically means not that your mind never moves, but that there's a unification, a coming together of all the mental energy at one point in one moment.

You may have noticed the opposite today, which is why we might appreciate this coming together. Has anybody noticed the tendency of the mind to go anywhere at any moment, maybe five different places at once? Have you noticed how exhausting it is? You wonder why we're so tired when we first come to a retreat. Is anybody tired today? Of course. And that's normal. If you're new, that's really normal.

Part of the tiredness is simply because our lives are so busy. We stop, and the mind thinks "okay, check out." But part of it is we start to see how truly fatiguing the distractibility and nervous energy and restless quality of our minds in daily life really is when we sit here and start looking at what the mind is doing.

The slightest little thing can make it go off for ten or fifteen minutes. You're just feeling your nice breath. Somebody walks by, and boom—you're on a train of association back to the third grade, into your job next week, the vacation you're going to take in 2005, just because somebody walked by and you caught the tail end of a blue jacket. It takes nothing to make the mind go off like that.

This is exhausting, actually, because the mind doesn't just go—we're reacting. We like it. We don't like it. We get caught up in an angry dialogue with the hotel person at this hotel we're going to stay at in Mexico in 2005, and we're all upset. Then we come back, and nothing ever happened, but we're completely upset about it. This is how we live our lives. It's no wonder we're not happy all the time.

I'm digressing here—which is itself an example of lack of samādhi. The samādhi, the unification of mind, the discipline of coming back, coming back, coming back gently without judgment but with persistence, begins to allow the mind to settle into more of a steadiness. And then the energy that's spent running all over the place becomes available for seeing clearly, for presence, for awareness, for peace, for stillness. It's actually lovely.

But the mind doesn't want to do it because it's in the habit of running all over the place, like a little kid. So the coming back, the discipline, is in the service of this steadiness, this unification, this greater peace—but also a greater observing power, seeing what's actually happening mentally and physically, more accurately, more clearly. It helps us start to cut through the barrage of assumptions, interpretations, and overlay.

And that brings us to mindfulness—which is distinct from concentration, the coming back over and over. Mindfulness is the quality of bare attention, of simply connecting your attention with what's happening and knowing it simply as it is, without confusing it with all the overlay.

So for example, with that tight breath, rather than "Oh, it's tight, I don't like it, it should be better"—just: "Oh, tightness." That's mindfulness. Just knowing what's what, bare attention without the extra.

A third quality is also being cultivated, and it's actually an aspect of mindfulness. In meeting each moment of attention, of awareness—whether it's sensations of breath or walking or a moment of sleepiness, it doesn't matter what—what allows for that bare attention, that clear seeing, is the attitude of metta, really, which we could translate as friendliness. Or patience. Or acceptance. Not the acceptance of resignation: "This is as good as it gets, so I'll try and be here." The acceptance of: "This is how it is in this moment. Let me be wholeheartedly, non-judgmentally present, just as it is." Tightness feels like this. Sound, hearing, is like this. Stepping feels like this. That quality of friendliness, of non-judging patience, is really what allows mindfulness to sink deeply into our experience moment to moment.

And so each moment that you're just noticing you're thinking or feeling the breath or sensations—each of these in itself seems so small. That's when you go, "What am I doing here? What good is this?" But each moment of that is cultivating these three things: steadiness, mindfulness, friendliness, patience, clear seeing. Each moment is counteracting at the same time the deeply ingrained habits of assessing, judging, misinterpreting.

And this we don't notice. We just notice we're feeling another sense of pressure in the breath. We don't also notice, "Oh, in this moment I am not interpreting. In this moment I am not misperceiving." We just go, "Oh, another rising, another falling, another lifting, another placing." But that's cutting through these habits that keep us in wrong understanding, that keep us suffering.

And in that moment of simple mindfulness, you'll notice it afterwards, you're not referring every experience back to me, me, me. You just feel: "Oh, just lifting. It's kind of tight." That's all. When you do refer it back to me, it's not really mindfulness anymore. It's like, "Oh no, the lifting's tight—no, no, I'm so tired." But just lifting. Simple. Lifting, space, silence.

That's really a powerful moment because it's cutting through all the misinterpretation, the misperception, the sakkāya-diṭṭhi. We're not confusing our concepts for reality in that moment. That's powerful.

And moment after moment after moment—the continuity through the day—that's why it's so important. If you just do that once for a moment in the sitting and then go out and play tennis the rest of the day without paying attention, it doesn't quite have the same power. That's why, as Steve said, we sit, we walk, we sit, we walk, we eat—and then we tell you to pay attention when you're eating, and when you're taking a shower—because it's cutting through those habits. We've spent our lifetime building up the habit of misperceiving, of referring everything back to what does it mean about me. So it takes some effort to cut through.

But the actuality is really stronger than our bad habits. We do need to learn to trust the seeing itself.

And this is the other thing that I think is happening—well, I know it's happening—in our continuity of willingness to be mindful, willingness to come back. Continuity doesn't mean that every moment of the day you're precisely, pristinely mindful. We know that. Sometimes when we say continuity, people think that's what it means, and they'll come in an interview and say, "I'm not continuous." We'll ask why, and they'll say, "Well, I had these few moments where I spaced out." No one thinks that every single

moment of the day your mind doesn't wander. Continuity just means a willingness, when you notice you're off in la-la land, to come back and feel your body, whatever you're doing.

So the other thing that's happening with this—and I want to point it out because I also think we don't consciously notice it, at least not at first—is that we're beginning to shift our habit of evaluating ourselves, our life, others. Our habit of deriving meaning and worth for ourselves from experience.

Don't you mostly evaluate, even here, whether your meditation is going well or not, by how often you feel the breath or how good your walking is or how present you are or whether it was a pleasant sitting or whether you're filled with anger or whether you're feeling more happy? We tend to evaluate ourselves, take all of our meaning, our self-affirmation from what particular experiences we're going through. And then we tend to set our practice on a path of trying to achieve certain experiences and get rid of others.

But what mindfulness is subtly doing is undercutting that whole habit, that whole way of assessing our lives. It's saying, basically, on some level, what's happening isn't what's important. Where the value is being placed is on the awareness itself. So when we're saying, feel the sensations of breath, it's not so you'll have better sensations of breath. It's not like you're doing better if that tightness changes to a long, slow, smooth, deep breath. One might be more pleasant than the other, but you know what? Who cares? Awareness doesn't care. But what happens is, whatever kind of breath it is, the awareness is the point of awakening. Awareness is really the gateway to peace, the gateway to freedom. And what we are doing through our practice is more and more bringing in the conditions that allow us to notice the awareness itself.

Awareness is really the mystery. It's the most amazing—it's not a thing, but it's the most amazing aspect of our life. It's really what our practice is all about. So beginning and continuing and increasing our—first even our noticing—awareness, developing a confidence in awareness, really a love of awareness, so that what becomes the key in our whole practice isn't what's happening, but awareness of what's happening. That's actually so much easier to do than to try to make your inner or outer experience look or feel a certain way.

I know that's not going to stop anybody from trying to do that. And we all do. We keep finding more and more subtle ways. I'm here to tell you. You keep finding more and more subtle ways to try and manipulate your experience to match some ideal in your mind of what freedom is. And pretty much always it's going to be pleasant, no?

It's actually quite a useful exercise for you to contemplate, when I'm done talking, to contemplate for a short amount of time what assumptions or ideas you're carrying as to what freedom means to you, or what liberation means to you. Because of course we'll have ideas about that. We don't just come to practice with no ideas, no aspiration, no goals. We're not built like that. "Oh, what the heck, I've got nothing better to do." We come here with some yearning, some aspiration, and that's great. But it's helpful to know what it is.

Because until we're really trusting in the reality of awareness, in the potential of awareness to bring us to freedom, until we're really trusting that on a stronger and stronger basis, we're trying to manipulate our experience to meet our ideas of what either freedom is or what happiness is or just what feels good or comfortable, at the last lick.

But freedom—what do we mean by freedom? The other day, Steve mentioned that at the Forest Refuge there was an open house. But the few days before that, at the end of our month- or two-month-long teacher retreat, we had this blessing ceremony. Bhante Gunaratana was there, who's been a monk for about sixty years from Sri Lanka. He's a very inspiring guy, very sweet, down to earth. Quite a few monks and nuns were present. At one point he said—and it was very funny—you know, he's talking about how we have to take care of our bodies. And he said, "The Buddha was enlightened, but his body wasn't enlightened. It was his mind and heart that was enlightened. The body keeps on doing its thing."

So if you think awakening means you stop having body things—dukkha, you know—and you're going to feel good from now on, well, think again. And also, the Buddha's awakening didn't fix all the suffering and injustice and violence in the world. Enlightenment doesn't mean everything is hunky-dory, inside or outside.

So the freedom the Buddha is talking about—it's something other. It's something different. And it hinges on awareness itself.

But I know, and I'm pretty confident, that each of you has had one or two mental reactions throughout the day, right? One or two mental states have arisen for most people.

Notice how much—not all, but how much—of what might arise in these days in your mind, how much of the habit of our mind, which will lead to actions of body... First notice that: how habits of mind lead to actions of body. How much of it is in struggle or reaction to just what is in this moment? Whether what is is a personal, physical, or mental experience, or whether what is is external.

Say if you're really tired or sleepy—how much sense of struggle might there be with it? How much struggle with wanting a different room, or wanting different clothes, or wishing there were no black flies, or having a better seat, or thinking you should have come another week? Or when things are really good, the sense of struggle of wanting to keep it, or the fear of losing it, or how to get it back again, or how to hold on to it. "What did I do to get this good sitting, and how can I make it be exactly like this the next time?"

Just noticing that. And how in all of this, the focus of our attention, of our reaction, of our identification, of our sense of self—the focus is all on the experience that's happening. The sleepiness, the unpleasant pillow that's too hard, the unpleasant breath, the sense of restlessness, not liking the food or loving the food and wanting more, feeling too crowded, whatever. How much of our focus is on what's happening?

I'm sure we're telling you to pay attention to what's happening. It's good to pay attention to what's happening. But notice how we tend not to notice the awareness of what's happening. And they're both always right there together, aren't they? If you know what's happening, there's awareness. There's no way there's not. The awareness is always accessible, and you don't actually have to do anything to create it.

You heard that clap, right? You didn't have to think ahead of time, "I have to prepare myself to be aware in case she claps." It's just there. We tend to just focus on, "Why did she do that? That was kind of sharp. That didn't feel good. That kind of jarred my heart energy." Blah, blah, blah. Just awareness. Just awareness. It's always accessible. It's always available to us.

When we are present with full-hearted presence—that's what the collectedness of our mental energy is about—knowing what's happening. So we're using, of course, in our practice, experience to bring in our attention, to collect our mental energy. So we're consciously saying, "Pay attention to breathing, pay attention to walking, pay attention to your body, pay attention to your mental states." But it's not to make better experience. It's to allow us to notice with more and more confidence the awareness itself.

So that rather than looking for a refuge, looking for a home, looking for ease in having better experience, we can actually turn around and begin to feel that the awareness itself can be our refuge, can be our home. That the confidence, the place of safety, and actually the opening, the doorway into freedom, to ease, to compassion, to a different relationship altogether to life—isn't in fixing our experience. It's in trusting in the awareness itself.

Usually we're so blinded by our reactions to experience that we don't have time to notice awareness. I mean, it's like not even ephemeral. It's nothing, right? There's nothing you can see. Experience is so much more juicy.

But what's so great about beginning to trust, beginning to find a refuge in awareness, is that it really then doesn't matter what's happening. The refuge is always available. You don't have to wait till you're a better person. In some cases, personally, that could be a long time. Just how you are right now, awareness is available. With your lousy, crummy, tight breath, you can be aware of it. You don't have to wait till you have some wonderful yogic breath. With all your thoughts, with your incredible sleepiness—guess what? You can be aware of sleepiness.

Sally, I think, mentioned Ajahn Sumedho last night, the American man who's been a monk in the Thai tradition for many years.

He has a wonderful way of using very simple language that I have found personally very helpful in making that subtle shift in my experience—from being entranced or reactive to whatever's going on, to just falling into the awareness.

It works by saying, "Oh, anger—I don't like it. Oh, anger is like this." Or "Sleepiness—I can't bear it, another sitting, I'm so sleepy, it's so tight, I should stand up, why should I just..." Go: "Oh, sleepiness is like this."

It doesn't change the sleepiness, and that's not the point. But it shifts the whole dynamic to where the juice is—the freedom, the awakeness, the aliveness really is in the awareness. "Oh, sleepiness is like this." Then we forget, we're back in reaction. "Oh yeah, reaction is like this."

No matter what's going on, taking refuge in awareness is really this capacity to simply meet it, meet whatever's happening, with total presence and trust. The trust not that the thing itself is going to change or get better, but that awareness can meet and hold anything. Like instead of becoming the sleepiness, or instead of becoming the reaction to the sleepiness, it's as if we're the space and silence within which it happens. This is a metaphor—it's not actually like that—but it's more like that. So rather than getting so caught up in reactivity, it's like, "Oh yeah, sleepiness is like this. Hating myself is like this. Being completely spaced out, not even being able to find one breath in thirty-five minutes, is like this."

There's actually nothing in our experience that we can't be aware of, except unconsciousness, when we're awake.

And so what begins to happen is this: we come to our practice with an aspiration, some goal, a sense of what freedom or compassion or more happiness means to us. And this is important—or we wouldn't be here. Aspiration, a sense of inspiration, is very important. It's a way of collecting our dispersed energy, giving us confidence, giving us the energy and willingness to act, directing our energy in a specific direction. It helps us do things we might not do on our own, like get through a meditation retreat. That's hard to do. It is a hard thing. Without some aspiration, some goal, we wouldn't do it.

But because of our habits of defining and assessing ourselves by experience—it's really, for many of us, the only way we know how to evaluate—the aspiration can get subtly subverted. That's why I said to look at what your idea is of your aspiration of freedom. Because then the aspiration—"Yes, I want to practice, I want to wake up"—can shift from a useful motivation to clinging to an idea, an image of what should happen.

And so it becomes, rather than a useful, onward-leading motivation, a form of striving, a source of frustration. It means, "I came here for freedom. It means my practice should be good. It means I should be able to follow ten breaths in a row." And when I can't, I get lost in frustration, I get lost in comparing.

Thus what starts as a noble and useful aspiration turns to clinging, to failure, to self-judgment. And the motivation has shifted from a useful wanting to awaken, wanting to live with more compassion—whatever yours is, I'm not trying to put words in your heart—to clinging, to wanting, to comparing, to frustration. And then we wonder: Why is it so tight? Why am I suffering so much? This practice isn't working.

But what begins to shift, even by itself, simply through these three things I said—coming back with steadiness, with mindfulness, and with that friendly patience that simply accepts this moment as it is—is that we find our motivation of trying to make it be a certain way, that clinging, begins to dissolve. And our practice moves from trying to make experience confirm us—coming here to be a good meditator so I can go home and tell people what kind of far-out concentration experiences I had—to a love of awareness itself.

And this changes everything.

I've seen this happen in my practice over the years. Not every moment, God knows. But in the times when it doesn't matter what's happening, when there's simply the ability to be aware, to be present, to take refuge in that awareness—it actually becomes a kind of devotion almost. It's really a sense of reverence for awareness itself. And whatever the awareness is embracing, it becomes a reverence for life, however life is expressing itself in this moment, and the awareness with it.

So this sense of taking refuge in awareness actually manifests through a kind of friendliness or compassion for life, because nothing needs to be rejected, nothing needs to be shut out. It doesn't mean we don't act or respond or try to help if there's something wrong or suffering, but it's not out of a motive of hating or resenting or pushing away.

So really, we begin to see that our practice here requires enormous effort, yes. It requires an enormous commitment and perseverance, persistence to keep coming back, to keep coming back all day, all night, moment after moment. But when the motivation is not to make it better, not to get something to confirm me, but simply love of being present in this moment—all that sense of striving and frustration falls away, and enormous energy, courageous presence, effort becomes possible. Because you're not pushing to make it different. It's just to wholeheartedly be here.

There are many times in my practice, in my life, where I'll be going through some difficult phase, some difficult mental state, some reaction to something happening in my life. And when I finally go, "Oh, what's happening now? Sorrow, anger, reaction"—and I'm really aware of it—there's such a sense of... it's strange. It's like a happiness. A happiness to be fully present. To be falling into the refuge of awareness rather than battling with experience.

And it lets that experience be fully felt, fully experienced, without adding all this extra stuff on top of it. I can respond much more appropriately than when I'm just in knee-jerk reactivity.

So our motivation shifts from wanting something to just appreciation, or love of awareness itself. And that takes us deeper and deeper into the meditation practice, into the possibility of being here more fully for our life, no matter what's going on.

There's a passage soon after the Buddha was enlightened in the suttas where one of the higher beings came down and was trying to convince him to teach. One line he said that I really like: "The doors of the deathless are open for those who hear, for those who see." You could say they're somewhere else, but they're right here. Awareness is our door to the deathless. Awareness is always accessible. We just need to learn not to be so entranced with our reactions and interpretations, not so entranced with sense experience that we can't notice the awareness of it. That's all.

And it's just this subtle shift. "Oh, hearing is like this. Walking is like this. Mmm, nice tasting pasta. Enjoyment is like this." Just remembering that subtle shift is very, very powerful. The point that includes, as Ajahn Sumedho speaks of awareness—the point that includes.

What helps us develop a recognition and trust in this awareness is the quality of bare attention I was talking about with mindfulness—learning how to see just what's happening without all the hoopla we add to it. That's simply this quality of willingness to look directly. Normally, our interpretations and assumptions and preconceived notions so color experience that we just can't see clearly.

There's a Zen story I really like. In ancient Japan, a vicious, powerful samurai warrior came to a Zen master. This is a common theme in Zen stories. He was utterly uncouth, brandishing his sword, and he kept calling the Zen master a pig. "You're a pig, and all of these monks here are pigs, and you know what I do with pigs like you—I just run my sword through them." On and on he went.

The Zen master simply bowed and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

This brought the samurai up short, because even as well as he thought of himself, he didn't think of himself as a Buddha. He said, "I, a Buddha?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

Yes, it's like that. Until we learn how to meet moment after moment with bare attention, we don't know if we're a pig seeing a pig or a Buddha seeing a Buddha. We don't have a clue. We have to learn how to look. And that's this quality of just meeting one moment of experience freshly, without preconceptions.

Let me tell you another story, this one about Yo-Yo Ma. He's becoming one of my heroes—the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. I think he's a wonderful being. He travels to many different cultures musically, bringing them together, appreciating different musical traditions. It's beautiful what he does.

Once I was in Germany and I was watching a documentary about him on television. Friends were translating because I don't speak German. This was a few years ago. In this documentary, he was flying into somewhere in Central Africa. This was prearranged. He came in a helicopter to a small tribe of bush people. They showed him getting out of his helicopter with his million-dollar cello. Maybe he had a second-string cello, but I'm sure it was worth quite a lot. He was going to meet the senior members of the tribe—I think it was mostly men—the head storyteller, the head musician, who carried a lot of the tradition of that tribe musically.

What I remember of this documentary is them getting together. He was meeting with this chief musician and they were playing for each other. Here he was with his million-dollar cello. And the head musician had a stringed instrument that was basically a

drum made from an oil can, with a long pole and a string attached. The man would plunk on that string—I think it was only one string—and sing. You could hear it and think, well, it sort of sounds like what it looked like, a plunk on a string in an oil can.

But Yo-Yo Ma was listening with completely fresh ears. He just said, "Wow, that's really great, the way you play that and sing." Then he said, "Let's trade instruments." He gives the man his cello, and he takes the oil drum string thing. And he's saying, "I can't play this nearly as well as you can. Show me how to." He's trying to learn how to play it with complete freshness, with this kind of interest, this kind of wonder, no overlay of "I have this great classical Western European music background." It was just, "Wow, you really can do this well, much better than I can, and it's beautiful."

I love that. That's stayed with me for years, and I take that as a quality of mindfulness—that ability to meet each sensation of breath with that freshness, each sensation of lifting your foot with that freshness. It's the only thing happening in this moment. It can't be different this moment than how it is. Can we be here for it?

When we're able to be here for it with that quality of totality of non-judging presence, that's when awareness reveals itself. That's when there's that doorway to open into awareness and take it as our refuge rather than reacting to experience. We can relax into what's happening rather than struggling with it. And that's the doorway to the deathless.

Over time, the continuity of this willingness to meet each moment fresh—without getting lost in our reactions, and when we do, meeting the reaction fresh, "Oh, reactivity is like this," without needing it to go anywhere—the continuity through the day matters. The labeling, if you use it, is simply a way of helping us come into experience. It's not a way to encapsulate it, to say, "This is like this, and I know it already. Lifting—I know it." Labeling isn't meant to do that. It's to bring our attention into the experience. "Oh, pressure feels like this."

This non-interfering yet total presence through the days begins to give space for the actual nature of our mental and physical experience to reveal itself. Not how we think it is, not how we say it is, but just beginning to see what's really happening. And I'm going to tell you things, but don't believe me. Keep meeting moment after moment as freshly as you can.

This changing, insubstantial nature of all of our mental and physical experience—it will begin to reveal itself. It can't help but. Just see if you have any physical experience that lasts very long, any mental experience that lasts very long, that really has much

substantiality past the moment. Working with steadiness through the day, you'll see things coming and going, coming and going. Nothing we can really say is totally reliable in the world of sense experience or mind experience.

When that begins to reveal itself—not because we want to see it, but because we stop wanting to see anything other than just what's here—it reveals itself because that's what's happening. That's not depressing. What actually happens when we see that everything is changing?

There isn't any substance I can grab for my own happiness, for my own sense of self. The heart and mind gradually stop looking to this changing, insubstantial world of sense experience. They stop looking there for lasting happiness because they just get it—it's not possible.

And when we stop looking, we stop putting our trust in this constantly changing world of sense experience. Basically, that's where we go for refuge. We go to some physical comfort. We go to some nice mental state. We go to trying to arrange experience in a way that affirms us or makes us feel good. That's what we look to for refuge. And it may work, but not for long. Even if it works for a year—though I doubt anything works for more than a few moments—that's where we go for refuge, and then it falls apart.

When the mind sees that enough, it stops going there for refuge. It just settles into knowing: falling apart is like this. And surprise—when we stop looking where refuge can never be found, we might discover that there's a peace, a silence, a happiness, a freedom that's always been here, always been accessible. We're just too involved with our reactions to notice it.

And so this simple moment-after-moment practice is really opening us to a much more profound possibility for peace in our lives. A kind of happiness that isn't the personal "I'm so great" happiness. A kind of happiness of non-struggle and total wakefulness that is always accessible to us when we can turn around and notice it.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 12

Seclusion (Viveka)

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this profound talk from the Forest Refuge, Carol Wilson illuminates the Buddhist concept of viveka (seclusion) in its multiple dimensions: kāya viveka (seclusion of body), citta viveka (seclusion of mind), and ultimately viveka as a designation for Nibbāna itself—complete separation from suffering. Drawing parallels with contemplative traditions worldwide, including the Desert Fathers and Christian hermits like Saint Anthony and Thomas Merton, Wilson explores why physical withdrawal from the 'flood of sensuality' serves as the essential foundation for spiritual awakening.*
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> *Wilson explains how retreat practice creates the conditions for our 'demons'—our deeply conditioned patterns of self-judgment, fear, pride, and craving—to emerge in the light of awareness. Citing Ajahn Chah's teaching on enslavement to the senses and Ajahn Buddhadāsa's concept of satipaññā (mindfulness-wisdom) at the sense doors, she describes how naming and recognizing these patterns breaks their power over us. The talk draws on two important suttas where the Buddha distinguishes mere physical solitude from 'perfected living alone'—freedom from craving as one's constant companion.*
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> *The practical heart of this teaching addresses how practitioners can get caught in pleasant states of mental seclusion, mistaking tranquility for liberation. Wilson emphasizes that citta viveka, while refreshing and purifying, must be used as a platform for investigating subtler forms of clinging rather than becoming an end in itself. True viveka, she concludes, naturally flowers into compassion—the solitary standing at the intersection of awakening and suffering humanity.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about the topic of seclusion, which is the translation of the Pali word *viveka*.

Many of you might be familiar with a particular book of Ajahn Sumedho's called *Citta Viveka*, subtitled "Teachings from the Quiet Mind," but which more literally translates as "the secluded mind." I want to talk about various aspects of *viveka*, not only *citta viveka*. There's *kaya viveka*, which is seclusion of body, and *citta viveka*, seclusion of mind, leading into more refined types of mental seclusion. But there's also at least one place where the Buddha, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi, uses *viveka* as another designation for Nibbana. The particular quotation is: someone asked, "Do you know, dear sir,

emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" Bhikkhu Bodhi points out that those are meant as three designations for Nibbana—in that particular reference, seclusion really meaning separation from suffering.

This topic just interests me, so I'd like to talk about different aspects of seclusion, of *viveka*.

Obviously, on the level of *kaya viveka*, seclusion of body, that's a huge part of our practice. It's also, as I'm sure you know, a very intrinsic and respected aspect of most spiritual traditions that I know of—this sense of going into seclusion, whether it's an intensive retreat or simply seclusion in nature, going off alone into the wilderness. Various traditions have this as a central part, at least for the role of the mystic, if not for every single person who's part of that tradition. So a big part of what we're doing when we come on a retreat such as this, whether it's for a day or for six months, is moving into this aspect of the mystical tradition of pretty much all traditions.

I want to read a little bit about the early Christian desert fathers, because it hits on several aspects of what I want to talk about in relation to seclusion tonight. It's from a book about hermits from all different traditions. The author is talking about the desert fathers:

"The desert is the uninhabitable place. It is the region of desolation and solitude that surrounds and threatens the fertile plain." This is in Egypt. "Along the Nile Valley, the desert is a silent presence, always visible to the dwellers in towns and villages as they live in comfort on the rich, dark soil. Its bare hills are the waste howling wilderness of the Old Testament, the haunts of demons. And yet men and women have always been drawn from the comfort and security of their homes in the valley to the barren caves above in search of solitude."

Then they talk about perhaps the most famous of the Desert Fathers, Saint Antony of Egypt, whose life inspired thousands to leave their homes and follow him. He was the son of rich Christian parents who died in his youth, leaving him well provided for with a life of ease. But one day when he was in church and he heard the words of Jesus to the rich young man—that he should sell all he had and give it to the poor—Antony inexplicably felt the words were spoken to him and actually did that, which is rare in this world. He gave everything he had. He went to a local hermit to learn how to live in solitude—went to a teacher. Then he went far, far into the desert until he finally ended up in a deserted fort in Pispyr on the east bank of the Nile. He lived alone without seeing a human face for over twenty years. His friends would bring him supplies of bread and water every six months. Sometimes the friends who brought these supplies would hear terrifying shrieks and groans from behind the locked doors. Eventually—twenty

years eventually—they could stand this no longer and broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. Instead, Antony emerged healthy, sane, and balanced. He went to Alexandria to support the Christians who were being persecuted there and spent the rest of his life alternating between retreats into solitude and emerging to help and advise others.

I love that. It touches on so many aspects of what we're doing here. It's really a huge renunciation. Even just the *kaya viveka*, just the solitude of body. And it's not just for ourselves alone. And it requires meeting all of our demons.

So *kaya viveka*, solitude of body, is where we begin—simply by removing ourselves from the crowds, from so much busyness, from so much input of sense impression.

Why? How is this helpful?

Thomas Merton, who was one of the more famous relatively present-day Christian hermits, just wanted to be a hermit. He wasn't actually allowed to be a hermit that much; he was always yearning to be one. He said the search for solitude is a journey to discover the inner self. The monks fled to the desert to become ordinary. If they had gone there to be extraordinary, this would have meant taking the world with them as a standard of comparison. They lived among the rocks because they wanted to be themselves and to flee a world that divided them from themselves.

This isn't meaning fleeing the world with aversion because we hate everything and everybody, so we're going to go off into the rocks because they at least will leave us in peace—although I certainly, speaking for myself, on rare occasions have had that feeling: thank God I can escape into the silence.

But of course, that's not the ultimate reason. The true purpose is to become ordinary, to discover our inner self. And it's not simply to create some constructed state of inner or outer calm and quiet that we then hold on to for dear life. It's really so that, like St. Anthony, when we emerge, we're actually able to be more present—with compassion and less reactivity—in the world. It's not to leave the world out of hatred.

But just to even begin the inner journey, some seclusion on the physical level is really, really helpful. Seclusion from sense experience, first from all the input of people—of course we know that—and simply to stop feeding the craving for sense desire. Because there's so much overwhelming whirl of sense experience in our ordinary daily life, in our family life, in the flood of information, in the sense pleasures available to us. It's just so much that it's really difficult to even disengage enough to see what else might be possible without physically removing ourselves, just a little.

This is Ajahn Chah talking about the flood of sensuality, which is really what leads us into needing some seclusion. He says: "We are sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations. We're sunk because we look outwardly at externals. We don't look inwardly. And it's like being a slave. Somebody else has control over you. It's as if they tell you to sit, you have to sit. When they say walk, you have to walk. Being enslaved by the senses is the same. No matter how hard you try, you can't shake it off."

And so really, just this first step of physical seclusion—coming to a retreat, just being quiet for an hour, coming here for six months, or fleeing into the desert for twenty years—is simply to begin to take our senses out of this flood of sensuality, to be able to begin to look inward. Instead of being so enslaved by sense pleasure and reaction to it that we don't even know how to disengage.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "We've lost our taste for silence. We don't know how to be ourselves without something else to accompany us. We need a book, telephone, TV. We've lost our taste for being alone. And the first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our best. We need to reorganize our lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us." We don't allow sense experience to colonize us.

And so, you know, of course some of you have just been here a few days, so what I'm about to say is more familiar to you. The rest of you—of course this is so far distant you'll have to vaguely remember. But you know how it is when we first come on retreat, those first few days, and the beginning disengagement from the flood of sensuality is so difficult. The restlessness, the sleepiness, and the endless chattering of the mind—which I know some of you, as I said, are so far beyond. But the endless chattering of the mind in response to sense pleasure, and just as the sense experiences are taken away as you come here, for some days it's as if the endless chattering of the sixth sense, the mind, is brought into high relief. As the rest of the senses quiet down a little, the chattering in the mind can almost get unbearable, right? "Oh my God, if this starts with this story again, I'm going to have to kill myself. I just can't bear it."

And over time, when we stop fighting that, even the flood of the endless chatter begins to slow down. I'm not saying stop, but it begins to slow down. It gets less obsessive. And just in this *kāya viveka*, just in this physical seclusion—without at the moment really having done much else in terms of formal practice—there begins to be some space. The attention, the senses, aren't turned so slavishly outward, externally. We're not in so much reaction to the chatter inwardly, and so it begins to slow down. It begins to open up like a space, or silence, however you experience it—in the mind, in the heart. Okay, maybe itty-bitty at first. But it's the beginning of recognizing that there's

another possibility, another way to be. Just the seclusion of body and senses allows us to begin to recognize the possibility of living more at home in this inner space, this mental space or silence of awareness, with more potential for peace.

Along with the physical seclusion, most retreats—certainly in this tradition, and often when you read about hermits in other traditions—nature plays a big part. Usually, given a choice, the Tibetan yogis go off to some remote, incredibly wild mountain cave. They don't usually pick a little basement apartment in Lhasa if they have a choice. I mean, it's not impossible, but there's something about nature that can be supremely supportive of deepening the *kāya viveka*, the seclusion of body. I find personally that nature tends to deepen in me something that reflects the inner silence, the inner spaciousness of mind and heart. It doesn't tend to feed the incessant chatter but just kind of leads into silence and space. It's as if nature reflects the inner silence and space of awareness, of the mind and heart.

And I think this can be very helpful, as often on retreats, when you're feeling really caught up or stressed or caught in judgment or a pattern or fear, we'll say: just cool out. Go walk in the woods.

Go sit. Go out tonight. Sit and look at the full moon. It's full moon night. It was clear when I came in. There's just something about it that, to me, just brings a stillness.

In fact, two nights ago, I was driving back from the airport, heading east, and the moon was just coming up over the horizon, really huge, right in front of the road. It brought this immediate stillness and silence to my mind—a little too much, actually, because I needed to be focusing on the highway. The moon would completely space me out, and then I'd get right back to driving. But it just has that capacity, and it's really useful to take us out of our chatter.

This is a familiar poem by Wendell Berry, but I want to read it because for me it evokes that inner sense of stillness that nature can help us to recognize:

When despair for the world grows in me and I awake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

That sense of freedom is really the freedom of total awareness and non-clinging. The ultimate viveka—seclusion, separation from suffering—is the peace, the spaciousness of the heart-mind of non-clinging. Just a touch of the silence, the spaciousness of aware-

ness, makes it easier to cultivate more seclusion of body, leading to seclusion of mind, which leads us into the understanding and clear seeing that allows for an even deeper release of clinging, of suffering.

Of course, as we know, coming into the silence, the stillness, the aloneness of a retreat—or the desert, or wherever we're doing it, in our little basement apartment as well—isn't only that the chatter slows down, the heart and mind get expansive, we touch a moment of peace, the space of non-clinging, and that just keeps expanding and expanding until that's all there is. Smooth, smooth, easy. As we know, that isn't exactly the route all the time.

Remember what I read about the desert: "the region of desolation and solitude that surrounds and threatens the fertile plain, the waste howling wilderness." The shrieks and groans of St. Anthony are also part of what arises in the course of our spiritual journey—almost not in spite of the seclusion but because of it. By entering consciously, willingly, into this space where we are withdrawing from the world of the flood of sensuality, withdrawing from our usual interactions with other people, from our usual distractions and ways that we spend our time, it's almost as if this space and silence gives room—calls up, invites—what you could call our deeper personal demons to emerge.

In the first days of retreat, they're more generic in terms of the hindrances: the sleepiness, the restlessness, desire and aversion (which are more than just hindrances), and doubt. As a retreat goes on, or as a period of physical seclusion continues, the demons might turn into something more subtle—or maybe they feel less subtle but more personally tuned to whatever each of our particular life-pattern demons happen to be. As a function of the silence and spaciousness deepening, of the endless chatter beginning to slow down, of us not having our usual flood of sense experience to turn to, it's almost as if we've invited these demons to come up.

There are times in every retreat where we're going to feel like St. Anthony behind those doors in the cave, shrieking and groaning. It might be ways that we're caught that are clear to us—our pattern, our so-called inner demon, whether it's self-hatred, judgment, worthlessness, or lust, or strong desire, or conceit, comparing, pride, the need to be perfect.

Sometimes we don't quite recognize it because the content of the demons, the deeper we go in our practice, often takes the form of how we relate to the practice itself. So we don't recognize it's a demon when we take out the whip and beat ourselves up every time we wander from the breath. Or when we think, "I'm pretty focused on the breath, but by this time it should be a lot better than this. By this time in the retreat, I should have twenty-five percent fewer thoughts than I'm having now"—some kind of insane

thing that we made up out of God knows where and totally believe. That thought can be accompanied by self-hatred or judgment, or it can go the other way: pride. "I'm really doing good. Now look at that person. I've been here a lot less time than they have, and they don't look nearly as mindful as I do." However we do it, the demons very easily take the form of how we're relating to practice—which isn't a bad thing, but just recognize it.

Here's one clue: when the demons are there, we're suffering. Generally it doesn't take a huge subtlety of consciousness or awareness to recognize that we're suffering. We may not quite recognize what the hook is, but you really can tell it's different from lying down in the space of nature, in the peace of wild things. You really know something's changed here. It's not quite so spacious.

Sometimes we start to enter into demons that are not so personal but quite deep: fear of impermanence, total discomfort with instability, discomfort with chaos, trying to control what's happening or what's going to happen or how our practice is. Or, as I've mentioned in other talks, you don't think you're trying to control—you simply think you're trying to have a clear explanation of everything that's happening, why and what it means and how it should be happening. That too is trying to fix chaos into some nice little box. It doesn't work, and we suffer. A form of the demons.

But it's not a mistake or wrong that these demons come up. It's part of it. I think I said this here before, but I love this line from one of my teachers: "In the light of awareness, all the snakes come out of their holes." That's really what it is. We go into the desert.

We really seclude ourselves from our usual distractions. And in the light of mindfulness—which is ultimately non-discriminating, simply heightening our awareness to notice whatever arises—it's as if these old friends appear. We have developed very subtle and useful defense mechanisms not to notice that they're there. But now these patterns seem to say, "Oh great, these mechanisms aren't quite operating," and whoosh, up they come.

This is wonderful, because until we see them in the light of awareness, in the light of day, until we turn around and recognize them—until that time, we're really the slaves, as Ajahn Chah says. We're the slaves of these demons, of these patterns of our mind. When self-judgment says, "Shut up and sit down," we do it. Or we do it in order not to recognize self-judgment. When pride says, "Do this so you look better," we do it, rather than turning around and recognizing the pride.

This is where learning to recognize these demons with mindfulness becomes the second aspect of kāya-viveka—not only being in physical seclusion, but using the attention to bring mindfulness, to have mindfulness-wisdom, satīpaññā as Ajahn Buddhadasa terms it, at the sense doors. In the moment of sense contact, in the moment of recognizing that a sense experience is happening—including the mental, which could include many of our demons: anger, worthlessness, inferiority, whatever—having mindfulness-wisdom at the sense door means recognizing its presence, connecting with mindfulness, recognizing it for what it is. Paññā. Satīpaññā. "Ah, that's mental experience—fear. That's mental experience—pride." Satīpaññā at the sense door is the second aspect of kāya-viveka, of seclusion of body. And this is really what gives us the power of seeing the demons for what they are.

There's a wonderful quotation in the book *Vision of Dhamma*, where the author talks about the power of naming. He discusses how primitive peoples believed that words exercised a magical power. He says that things that could be named had lost their secret power over humans, the horror of the unknown. To know the name of a force, a being, or an object was the same as mastery over it. This ancient belief in the magical potency of names also appears in fairy tales and myths, where the power of a demon is broken just by facing it courageously and pronouncing its name.

In some ways, this is exactly what goes on with observing power, mindfulness, satīpaññā, at the point of the sense doors' contact. There's a vast difference between being driven by self-judgment, by feelings of inferiority, by pride, and being able to turn around and say, "Ah, self-judgment feels like this." Maybe it's not as vast a difference as we would wish—we might wish it would all vanish as soon as we name it. But the power of being able to turn around with the courage of mindfulness and with the clear seeing of paññā and name the particular force—that is really what takes the sense of self out of that particular demon. That's what takes the identification out, and the fear of it.

Eventually that demon doesn't even have to go away. It stops being unknown. It stops being so horrible. It stops driving us. We stop being enslaved to it. And really, there can be moments: "Okay, fear can be here or not. It really doesn't make that much difference." Self-judgment: "Yeah, I recognize this. It feels like this. It'll come, it'll go. It's not who I am." That truly comes from kāya-viveka and the continuity of mindfulness, observing power, satīpaññā at the sense doors.

There's a Jewish saying I once read—I don't know where, but I like it. It says that to name something is to know why God cannot be named. As soon as we name something —"Oh, that's what it is"—it's taken out of the realm of mystery, out of the realm of the

unknowable, of freedom, of peace, of awareness. It's just become this conditioned phenomenon that comes due to conditions, passes due to conditions, comes again—maybe all too soon—due to conditions, and passes again. It's really different from mystery, from God, which can't be named. And this takes the fear, the horror out of these things.

So in kāya-viveka, it's not only a matter of removing ourselves physically from other beings and from the flood of sensuality, but of using this seclusion to cultivate the steadiness of mindfulness. As Sayadaw U Pandita describes it: "At first we remove ourselves from the environment of sense pleasures, but this is not enough. We also become mindful of whatever object arises at the six sense doors, directing the mind towards the object." This is very much the Mahasi style of describing it. As you direct the mind towards the object, it really connects—for that moment only—becomes stable, engrossed with the object, notices, can name what is arising, sense experience of any of the six senses. In that moment, the mind is free from desire, sense desire or aversion or delusion—just for that moment. It's knowing what's what. And that's really what we call restraint at the sense doors.

Doesn't mean we have to hide from every sense experience, but restraint is meeting it with full awareness, with sati-pañña. Moment after moment of this sati-pañña, of just meeting with full awareness without judgment, without aversion, without clinging—this is what then leads to the more stable quality of attention that verges into samadhi, where the mind is more easily and continually meeting each object.

And that's then moving into what is referred to as citta-viveka, where the mind, the heart, is secluded really from the hindrances. In citta-viveka, the mind is free from kilesas that are arising in reaction to sense pleasures. And this is a very pleasant state. Just having a mind free from kilesas just for a moment is really pleasant. The kilesas are burning. They're tormenting. That's one of the translations—torments of the mind. And so the secluded mind, the mind where the kilesas are just kept away through steadiness of moment after moment mindfulness, that's a very peaceful and soothing and refreshing experience.

And when we're trying to get there because we think it'll be nice? Forget that. All we're doing then is cultivating wanting and self-sense. But by the moment after moment of just noticing what's present and naming it without getting involved in liking, disliking, making a story about it, then citta-viveka develops by itself.

So we get interested in noticing how the mind reacts to sense experience. This is from a disciple of Ramana Maharshi, describing how we can recognize all our patterns that we get caught in, our suffering demons. He says, "If you want to pay attention to a special area of danger, watch how the five senses operate"—although I would say six

senses here. "It is the nature of the mind to seek stimulation through the senses. The mind catches hold of sense impressions and processes them in such a way that they produce long chains of uncontrolled thoughts. So learn to watch how your senses behave. Learn to watch how the mind reacts to sense impressions."

This is a whole very interesting aspect of our practice. When we get over hating the fact that as soon as we become aware of a tension in the neck, we go off into some whole long story about what it means. Or as soon as we smell some pleasant smell at 11:30 in the morning, we're off into the world of restaurants and dinner parties. As soon as we stop judging ourselves about that and can just get interested in noticing—oh, smell, pleasant, and the mind goes way out to lunch, literally and figuratively, on the smell—we say, oh, look at that. Come back to sati-pañña at the scent door. Smell, pleasant, really wanting to make something of this. Oh yeah, wanting feels like this—and it stops.

Unpleasant tightness in the neck, and the mind really goes into it: "Oh no, this again, it's how I'm sitting, if I could only find the right way to sit, maybe if I had a higher pillow, maybe if I could go to that good cranial sacral therapist I've heard about, he's only in Barry, I'm sure that would fix me up..." Oh, yeah. The mind is in a way just amusing itself rather than just noticing tension, tension, unpleasant.

But we don't judge this at all. We just get fascinated by watching this process. And in the fascination with it, we really see over and over, we get it viscerally, how these reactions, these habitual reactions of mind to every sense experience that happens, are just feeding our sense of self and the resultant suffering.

And really, it starts to get easier. It's more fulfilling. It makes us happier to meet the sense experience with sati-pañña. At first, it feels like we're really renouncing all the stories that make up the life story of me. And it feels like a real struggle. One of the reasons the discipline of samadhi practice can send our mind into tantrums, like a two-year-old: "I'm not coming back to the breath, and you can't make me. There's nothing you can do. I'm going to think about this, goddammit, and it's going to make me happy." And after about a million times, we get it: oh, this is really dukkha. It's much more pleasant, it's much more peaceful to just come back and feel fluttering, to just feel tension. Oh yeah, tension. There's peace, there's ease because there's no me, there's no story, there's nothing extra added.

And so in this way, the sati-pañña, the steadiness of mindfulness as attention meets each of the six sense experiences as they arise, leads us quite naturally into the peacefulness, the quietness, the calm and coolness of citta-viveka—the mind that's secluded from the hindrances. It's very pleasant.

And as we continue with practice, there can be times where the hindrances, or all the kilesas, fade to become really, really remote. With citta-viveka, we can be quite at peace. But something happens, and the hindrances, they're just lurking around there, waiting for a crack, and they come rushing back in. As the mind at times gets more and more peaceful, the kilesas become as if much more remote. There's a whole Pali word for this, which I'm sure you're dying to know, and I'm sure you want to remember, so I'll just tell you. It's vikambana-viveka. Way, way remote. And this is a place where the body feels light and energized. The mind is soft and buoyant.

And yes, it's nice. This is a place where people often get caught. We can often mistake it for something more than it is. What is it? It's a constructed state where the mind is peaceful, and it's very nourishing because the kilesas aren't there. But if all we do is hang with that, it's nice, but it's not liberating insight. The kilesas, the torments, our patterns, our demons are not being uprooted. They're simply far, far away.

So it's very important, even in this state where it all feels so remote, not to just—well, you can have a few moments of really enjoying it. But then at some point, not to just think, "Well, this is it. There's no more work to do. Time to go home." And we do this. As someone was saying to me the other day, it was quite insightful: they saw how they'd hit this really lovely place of sukha, and everything was really nice. And they saw their mind saying, "Okay, well, I guess it's time to leave now." But they had the insight to see that this is another conditioned state, and it changed—which of course it had changed by the time we were talking.

So there are ways we get attached, some quite subtly and some not so subtly. We can get attached to the subtle state I'm describing, where the kilesas are far away, that state of seclusion of mind and heart. We can also get attached on the level of kaya viveka to the conditions themselves.

Just on the level of conditions, when you find yourself—and it happens on retreats—no matter how quiet it is here, there's some noise that just bugs the heck out of you. "What's this doing here? I need my silence in order to progress in my practice." And we all go there. "There's too many people." I don't think you could really say that here—you'd have to really try. But if the mind is in enough of a snit, you can find something. Somebody's doing something that's annoying you. They're not respecting the stillness in some way. There's some noise. You didn't get it perfect, and something is intruding on the silence, which is upsetting your practice. That's when we're leaning into holding on to the conditions.

But the conditions are only there to help us recognize the silence, the seclusion, the spaciousness, the way into awareness and non-clinging in ourselves. And then to recognize that this is accessible all the time, not only in the deva realm of the forest refuge when nobody's doing anything to bother you.

So we can get attached to the conditions—and that's not so subtle. And we can get attached to the real stillness, the quietness of mind, where it just feels like there are no problems anymore. What's the need to keep practicing? We get caught there by that stopping. That's what Sayadaw U Pandita calls "stopping within." Or we can simply be there, and we don't really feel we're attached, we're not holding onto it, but we stop investigating. We kind of just ride on the tranquility or the coolness, and we don't quite have the energy of investigation—the enlightenment factors that Marcia talked about a couple of weeks ago. It's as if we get content.

I remember a friend who had been a forest monk in Thailand for eight or nine years. He said ultimately he got very happy there, very peaceful. And he ultimately left, came back to the West as a monk—which is really hard—and ended up disrobing. But he told me once that deep down, the reason he left is because it just got too easy. It got so peaceful and calm, but he could intuitively feel that a great deal of it—not all, of course, it's useful—but that it wasn't the end.

Ajahn Sumedho, in his book *Citta Awake*, tells a story about how after meditating for years in the forest up in northeastern Thailand, feeling totally cooled out and peaceful, he'd have to go to Bangkok to renew his visa. It would be as if I told you that you have to go to Gardner, to Walmart, and gave you a shopping list tomorrow. That would be a good test. How really equanimous and peaceful am I in the midst of...

I was in Walmart the other day, which is why I mentioned it. I was with my sister, and I said I call Walmart a vortex of suffering. You go in there to get one thing and you can't get out for hours. It's like a little minor hell realm. My sister, who doesn't really practice, was looking at me like, "What are you, crazy? What are you talking about, a vortex of evil?" But I lose it in Walmart, so I know I still have to keep going there from time to time to test myself.

Anyway, Ajahn Sumedho said he would find that not all of the peace would go, but some of it would. And so that's not liberation. That's not the full heart's release of non-clinging. There's still quite some conditioning: I'm peaceful, but only if nothing bothers me, or nothing new. I've gotten used to the bugs.

I've gotten used to these things. If something new comes in, I'm all shaken up." So that's when my friend said he left the monastery—in order to see that.

There's a quotation from the Buddha, which I'm summarizing rather than giving you exactly. But he said something to the effect that there were two things he never lost sight of. One was really putting out full effort. And the other was never getting content and thinking, "Well, this is good enough. I've put out enough effort, and this is good enough. I really don't need to keep practicing."

This doesn't mean staying in intensive practice forever. It doesn't mean you should never leave a retreat until you've finally achieved arahatship—we're not just trying to keep the place full here. But it does mean you don't leave retreat and think, "Well, that's it. I've done it. That was nice. Now I can cruise." Never thinking, as nice as this is, that it's good enough. But seeing if there are still tendencies to get lost in craving—that's then the use to which we put the seclusion of body and the seclusion of mind.

We're not cultivating citta-viveka only because it's refreshing and purifying and easeful. Those things are good—a pleasant abiding here and now, as the Buddha often said—but not an end in itself, not a place to say "okay" and come to rest. Rather, we use the subtlety of awareness, of mindfulness, of seeing, to then cultivate, to really begin to see and investigate the much more subtle arisings of clinging. The sense of "me" around experience, the sense of conceit, of comparing, of self-importance—to really viscerally experience these on the much more subtle levels. Which is really what's going on for many, many of you here.

You think, "I'm not in some huge demon experience." But then we start to see how much the sense of self arises just around subtle experience—the sense of comparing, the sense of judgment. Not to be discouraged by that. It's great that we start to see it. That's what we use the seclusion from the stronger kilesas for, the seclusion from the flood of sensuality—to be able to explore, as the Buddha talked about it, perfecting living alone.

A couple of suttas. There's one where he's talking to a venerable elder monk. And the Buddha says to him, "Is it true, elder, that you live alone and praise the virtues of living alone?" And he says, "Yes, Lord." The Buddha says, "But how do you live alone? And how do you praise the virtues of living alone?" The monk said, "Lord, alone I enter the village for alms. Alone I return. Alone I sit withdrawn in meditation. Alone I do walking meditation. That is how I live alone and praise living alone."

The Buddha says, "Yes, there is that way of living alone. I don't say there isn't. But listen well to how your living alone can be perfected in its details. Pay close attention." "As you say, Blessed One," the monk replied. "How is living alone perfected in its details?"

Just a minor detail here. "This is the case where whatever is past is abandoned, whatever is future is relinquished, and any passion and desire with regard to states of being in the present is not held to, is not fed." In other words, any clinging, any aversion, any reaction to states of being in the present is not held onto, is not fed. That is how living alone is perfected in its details.

A much vaster, a much deeper and more subtle sense of living alone—much more to do with freedom.

Another sutta where he's talking to another monk on a similar subject says it in a different way. The monk asks him, "What does 'lone dweller' mean? What way is one dwelling with a partner, and what way is one dwelling alone?" And the Buddha says, "There are, Migajala"—that's the name of the monk—"forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, tantalizing." And that could be the inner eye as well, right? "If a bhikkhu, a practitioner, seeks delight in them, welcomes them, and remains holding to these forms, delight arises."

When there is delight, there is infatuation. When there is infatuation, there is bondage. Bound by this fetter, a bhikkhu is called one dwelling with a partner.

And then he goes through all the senses—sounds cognizable by the ear, odors by the nose, tastes cognizable by the tongue, tactile objects cognizable by the body, mental phenomena cognizable by the mind that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, tantalizing. And if we get lost in infatuation in relation to any of these, there is bondage.

Thus, he says, even though a bhikkhu who dwells thus resorts to forests and groves, to remote lodgings where there are few sounds and little noise, desolate, hidden from people, appropriate for seclusion, he is still called one dwelling with a partner. For what reason? Because craving is his partner, and he has not abandoned it. Therefore, he is called one dwelling with a partner.

And of course, the opposite holds true. If one does not seek delight, does not remain holding to any sense object, then the infatuation does not arise. When there's no infatuation, there is no bondage. And thus, released from this fetter, a bhikkhu is called a lone dweller.

And then, even though a bhikkhu who dwells thus lives in the vicinity of a village, associating with bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, with male and female lay followers, with kings and royal ministers, with sectarian teachers and their disciples, he is still called a lone dweller. For what reason? Because craving was his partner and he has abandoned it. Therefore, he is called a lone dweller.

This is really the point of viveka. This is the viveka of freedom—freedom from the bondage to clinging, to craving. And then, ostensibly, we could even spend the whole day in Walmart and be a lone dweller.

And that's the reason for the cultivation of seclusion of body, of the senses, and of the mind. To see that really, on a momentary level, to remember that that piece of non-clinging—the space in the heart and the mind that I personally find at times in nature—our koan really is to recognize that this is available, that non-clinging is what allows us to recognize and really live from this space, and that it's always available, only available here and now. In the silence and stillness and beauty of this retreat center, in the hubbub of our lives.

The retreat is simply to help us really understand how clinging is created in response to sense pleasures, in response to our stories, to experience the suffering of it and lose our fascination with it and let it go.

And here's a great poem by Lala, who was a woman mystic in northern India in the 1300s:

Some people abandon their homes.
Others abandon hermitages.
All this renunciation does nothing if you are not deeply conscious.
Day and night, be aware with each breath and live there.

That's our koan. Just seclusion and awakening from moment to moment. Deep awareness with each breath, and live there.

And then we really see, like St. Anthony, you know, we might go back and forth, but really we emerge—it's never just for ourselves, it quite naturally moves into a sense of compassion and kinship with all beings.

I want to read something from Thomas Merton. He's saying, the solitary is one who is aware of solitude in herself or himself as a basic and inevitable human reality, not just as something which affects him as an isolated individual. Hence, this solitude is the foundation of the deep, pure, and gentle sympathy with all other humans, whether or not they are realizing the tragedy of their plight. More, the solitude is the doorway by which he enters into the mystery of God and brings others into that mystery by the power of his love and his humility.

Or to just end with the words of an Anglican nun I read about who loved solitude so much that she spent eighteen years living in an abandoned cabin that she fixed up on the edge of some remote cliff somewhere. I don't even know where. But she was not

really quite alone because people kept coming to her and bringing their troubles to her. And when she was asked, "Why do you keep being so available when really what you love is the solitude?" she said that she believes that the responsibility of the solitary person like her is to stand at the intersection between the love of God and suffering humanity.

Really, the culmination of our seclusion.

May the beneficial energies generated by our sincere practice today and in these last days—may these be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms, in all conditions of existence. May our practice be the cause for the happiness, the freedom from suffering, the awakening of ourselves and all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 13

Rightening The Mind And Heart

Carol Wilson · 1h05

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common challenge in meditation practice: those times when mindfulness feels contracted, energy is depleted, and the luminous nature of mind seems impossibly distant. Beginning with the Buddha's teaching that the mind is inherently luminous and brightly shining, merely colored by visiting attachments, she explores why understanding this truth is essential for sustained practice.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that bhāvanā (mental cultivation) doesn't stand alone but is embedded in the complete path the Buddha taught, including dāna (generosity) and sīla (ethical conduct). When mindfulness practice alone isn't providing the needed brightness and inspiration, we can skillfully call upon these other aspects of the path. She discusses the four aspects of right effort (sammā vāyāma), noting that two of them specifically address cultivating wholesome states—not as a form of spiritual bypassing, but as legitimate tools for expanding consciousness beyond contracted identification with difficult patterns.*
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> *Drawing on her experiences in Burma, Wilson shares moving examples of how generosity brings immediate joy and connection, cutting through the sense of separation. She offers practical suggestions including actively recalling past wholesome actions, cultivating gratitude, practicing mettā even briefly, and framing our practice within the larger aspiration for the benefit of all beings. These practices, she explains, don't avoid suffering but rather restore access to the spacious, luminous awareness that allows us to meet difficulty without being overwhelmed by identification.*

Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This unlearned people do not really understand, and so do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands. So for them, there is cultivation of the mind.

This luminous reality of the mind, how things are, is often in practice quite naturally accessible. It's not something foreign to us or hard to come by. In times when mindfulness is steady or strong, when concentration is quite steady, when practicing metta, this luminous quality, this luminous nature of mind may be quite readily known. We just know it as part of what we are. We may not even be thinking about it, may not be noting, "Oh yes, there's the luminous nature of mind." It's just so essentially true.

But the interesting part of this passage that I want to talk about tonight is the understanding that sometimes—often, actually—this luminous quality is colored over, hidden by the attachments, by the habits of mind that visit it. And when we don't understand that these are just passing conditioned experiences, habits of mind, that's when we tend to give up. "I lost it. I'm just slogging through. It's over. I can't get it back." And that's when cultivation ceases.

But knowing that the luminous nature of our mind cannot be truly touched—no matter what may be visiting, how long it may be staying, how completely identified we are with our visitor—knowing that the true nature, the luminosity, is not touched: that's what gives us the inspiration, the motivation to cultivate our mind, to develop our mind, to really purify the mind.

What I want to talk about tonight is this essential aspect of our path, what I've been calling in my own mind lately "purifying our inner landscape." Sometimes it may feel like we've been an awfully long time slogging through, trying to purify this inner landscape. A sense of the luminous nature, the freedom of mind and heart, may seem not even a remote memory but some unattainable, imagined experience.

In practice it happens that we can be visited quite strongly by aspects of our mental habits, the particular patterns of our inner psyche, our particular karmic knots. Sometimes we get so lost in them, or so familiar with them, that we get really bogged down. Sati, mindfulness practice, doesn't—for that moment, not forever, but for that moment or some little while—seem to be quite buoying us up enough. We can get really contracted, bogged down, lost, losing our motivation. This quality of brightness of heart and mind, brightness of citta—the same word means both heart and mind—can seem really far away. Even though we're practicing our meditation very sincerely and steadily, it's like we just get more and more contracted, farther and farther away, and it gets harder to practice.

So what I want to talk about tonight is really a reminder. This is nothing any of you don't know—stuff that we all know very well. But remember that cultivation of mind, bhavana, or meditation practices, whether mindfulness practice or samadhi practice or metta practice, is embedded in a whole path that the Buddha taught. It doesn't stand alone. It can't stand alone. And there are times, even deep in a meditation retreat as well as in our daily life, when it can be very useful to actively, consciously call in some other aspects of the path in the specific service of brightening our mind and heart, of lightening it, of bringing back the inspiration, the access to the luminous nature.

Sometimes in retreats particularly, we can get so focused—really sincerely—on our mindfulness that we get incredibly grim. "I missed three steps. I have to go back and do it again. I'm missing so much." It's like you're about to explode. And somehow the incandescent, luminous, empty nature is a little bit missing in that moment. In a very light way, we can consciously call in some of the other aspects of the path.

This purifying of our inner landscape, coming face to face with our psychic patterns and karmic knots, is a huge and very profound work of the path. Tsoknyi Rinpoche once wrote about our particular psychic patterns or knots: "It's the cage we have created for ourselves out of our emotions and our reaction habits, out of our sense of me and other. And in this cage here, we sit day in and day out."

On retreat, it can really feel like that, can't it? Just sitting in some cage of wanting, some cage of judging, some cage of fear. It can literally feel like here we sit, day in and day out—until sometimes you just want to go screaming down the driveway.

This is normal and an important aspect of practice. It may take the form of really particular habits of mind that you recognize from your life—patterns that may come together with memories, with recognizing that how you're relating to something happening here is very much a pattern you've carried with you through life and not seen so clearly before.

It may be something like self-judgment. It may be the reemergence of past traumas triggered by the silence or by something that happens here. It may be habits of anger. It may be something that isn't so obviously a story from your life, but a pattern we never quite recognize.

For example, fear is a very common experience to arise deep in retreat, and sometimes in very subtle ways. I mean, it doesn't feel subtle, and it's not like a huge panic, but it's fear arising at everything, at nothing. Fear to take a step, fear to take a bite, fear to do something wrong—just fear in relationship to nothing. That doesn't feel subtle, but actually it isn't a story from our life. It's just very, very deep patterns beginning to open up.

Sometimes it may be guilt and sorrow over past actions. Sometimes we don't even notice it arising as a psychic knot, we'd say, or a karmic pattern. But it's really expressing itself in the way we're relating to the practice. Striving, for example, is a good example of that—always trying to get things a little bit clearer, a little bit slower, trying to get concentration a little bit stiller, or clinging ever so subtly to pleasant states and just not noticing it.

You get the point. That these things arise is not a problem in the present moment. I know it may feel like a problem, but that arising is really arising as a present moment result of previous karma, of previous actions, of the previous habits—the ruts we've worn, the grooves we've worn in the mind.

Take self-judging, for example. If that's the way our mind has related to much of our experience in life, of course it's going to come up very strongly here. And of course it will come up when we're not so happy with what's happening. It doesn't come up when we're somehow feeling things are going great. Or maybe it can, because then you say, "Well, now I'm being proud. I shouldn't be proud." It can be endless.

That arising is due to past karma. What's purifying about it? That, of course, is all about how this pattern, this moment of mind, this moment of mental experience, is met in the present moment.

And this, again, is obvious. This isn't something new. But in our normal life, or even here, if we're not mindful—if we're kind of caught unawares by fear, by greed, by remorse over past actions, whatever—if we're caught unaware, then our response will tend to be whatever the habit pattern has been in our daily life.

So if you don't like what's happening and your usual response is self-judgment, aversion, and you don't notice that, you heap more aversion on top of it and you dig yourself into a really deep hole and then you get filled with aversion to everything. That could be our normal response. Or we ignore it altogether. We don't even know it's happening. Or we get really aversive to the pattern itself: "I'm sick of this fear. I refuse to be fearful anymore. I will stop being greedy. As of this moment, I am letting go of all desire." Have you tried that one?

In either of these—we don't see it, we run with it, or we're really aversive to it—well, we're still doing what Soknyi Rinpoche said: sitting in our cage. Basically, the pattern is driving the bus.

Once when I was doing some therapy, the therapist was talking about different patterns just like this. She said, "You have a pattern of really being negative to yourself. You need to recognize it with mindfulness. But you don't want to let the three-year-old drive the bus." And I thought, "Oh, yeah, that makes sense." You welcome the three-year-old in. You don't hit it in the face. But you don't let it run the show.

So of course, when we're being mindful—when you simply meet the arising of fear, the arising of aversion, the arising of clinging, for the ten millionth time or the first time—it doesn't matter. That moment of meeting it with mindfulness, with mettā attitude, or with concentration where you notice, say, the hindrance of wanting, don't give

it energy, just come back to the breath and it goes. All of those are shifting the pattern. You could say purifying the inner landscape, purifying the intention of mind, changing the groove really, redirecting the habit.

And so in that way, if you can trust that, it doesn't matter if this habit comes up ten million times. Each time it arises and it's met with mindfulness—great. It's changing. It's purifying. It's not further inculcating the same habit, if you don't take it personally.

So mindfulness is really always our first strategy. And when it's accessible, no matter how painful the pattern may be, no matter how familiar or how new and shocking, when that attention is able to just meet the experience kindly, steadily, without judging, without taking it so personally—oh, yeah, fear is like this. Watch it arise. Feel how it manifests here and now. Notice that it passes. Just like the weather, conditions come together. Fear manifests. Greed manifests. Memories of the past and grief manifest. Kind, loving attention holds it in the present moment. The conditions change. It goes away again.

And then the wisdom of impermanence, of not-self, of the unreliable nature of all of this arises naturally. And with it, again, the accessibility of knowing the luminous, untouched nature of mind. The greed, the anger, the fear never touched that luminous nature. Never can. We never have to be afraid of losing that. And when mindfulness is accessible to us, when energy is accessible, we know that. That's what keeps us going.

But—and this is all the prelude; now the rest is the *but*—for most of us, there are times when this brightness, this energy, this inspiration doesn't seem so accessible. We may really be very sincerely calling up mindfulness moment after moment, but there's no brightness, there's no lightness in the mind, in the heart. And I don't mean just for a moment or two; of course that's going to happen. But there are times when we get so absorbed, really, so focused on the dukkha, the suffering aspect, the personal aspect—identified with it, really—that that's all we can see. We get caught in either the dukkha aspect or our reactivity to it.

And it can just feel like everything gets more and more compact, squeezed together. Energy gets drained. We become very unbalanced in our perceptions, to where we only see the dukkha, we only see the wanting, we only see the fear. Nothing else seems to ever be happening. And it wears us down. It wears us down to where we become like that unlearned person in the sutta I read, the one who doesn't know that the luminous nature of mind can't be touched by passing experience. We think it has been touched. We think all there is is this passing experience. And we kind of cave. We can't keep going.

This is when it's really important to—it might take a moment of thinking, if you can spare a moment of thought here—just remember that bhāvanā is embedded in a path, and consciously call on a few of the things I'll mention, whichever one is most accessible to you at a particular time, to consciously brighten and gladden the heart, to gladden the mind.

Because really, it's a bright, spacious mind and heart that again allows the touching of the way things are. It's not an avoidance of the patterns of mind or psychic knots. It's not an avoidance of suffering. It's more an expansion of consciousness, an infusion of energy and inspiration that allows us to be with whatever's been difficult—but without being so identified. To be with it more from the place of freedom than from the place of reactivity.

In some ways, to me—and I can't speak as a scholar, but from what I know about the Buddha's teachings and the various practices he offered on his path—

It's really a marvel how all aspects of the path are different ways of highlighting, different ways of cultivating the happiness of the luminous mind of non-clinging. And when mindfulness and concentration aren't doing it, there are other ways that all work together in the same path to work towards recognizing the peace of non-clinging that's always available.

So to brighten the mind—that's why there's cultivation. We know that this is possible. Ultimately, both mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom arise out of a relaxed and happy heart and mind.

It doesn't mean we're always happy. I definitely just have to say this. I know you know it, but I have to say it. It's not that if you're doing this right, you go around grinning all the time, happy, happy, happy, and suffering doesn't come. You know good and well that the first noble truth is dukkha. I don't have to go into that, right? You all know it. Sometimes we get a little bit so focused on the first truth being dukkha that we forget that the brightness of mind gives us the strength and the spaciousness at the same time to open more deeply.

This is where the Buddha, when he talked about right effort, the four aspects of right effort—half of it really speaks to this consciously cultivating happiness, brightness of mind. So I'll read you the four, in one of those complicated ways he says it. The first right effort is to awaken zeal for the non-arising of unwholesome states. The second is to have zeal for abandoning unwholesome states that are already arisen. Now that we're more familiar with. We're aware of greed and we have zeal to abandon it. That does not mean aversion—that's another unwholesome state. We often get lost there.

But the third and fourth: zeal for the arising of unarisen wholesome states, and zeal for the continuance and strengthening of arisen wholesome states. In other words, it's not a manifestation of greed or avoidance when we feel that our heart and mind is really contracted and we're lost in fear and we can't really be mindful. It's a right effort to consciously cultivate some inspiration, to consciously call up seeds of happiness, of purity, of generosity. These are really helpful tools in our practice. And so that's what I want to point to for the rest of the talk—just remind us of some of the things we can call up.

Now, in cultivating zeal for the arising and continuance of wholesome states, of happy states, of states that help us abandon identification, remember that the guiding principle is always that wholesome states are not states of clinging. Sometimes we can get a little confused because a wholesome state is a happy state. Wholesome states do bring brightness to the mind. They can be memories of generous deeds, memories or current experience of non-harming behavior. Wholesome states are states of concentration, meditative states, strong mindfulness states. All of those are helpful.

Sometimes we get confused, especially when strong, happy, blissful states arise in practice. They do feel very purifying, very wholesome, very enjoyable. And we'll tend to say, when you come into the interview, we'll tend to say, don't try to keep making that happen. In some way, don't hold on to it. But that doesn't mean the state isn't helpful, purifying, wholesome. Cultivating wholesome states does not mean clinging. It's not self-referential. It's not about having a pleasant experience. It's about cultivating wholesome qualities of heart and mind that are, as the Buddha said, onward leading. Onward leading towards wisdom, to the wisdom of non-clinging, to the wisdom of not identifying, of not creating a stronger sense of me experiencing this far-out state. That's not the point.

And I think you can tell the difference in yourself. Does the sense of me doing good get stronger? Then there's some clinging in there. Does the sense of just a happiness, a kind of brightness, more of an expansion, an opening of the heart and mind and inspiration get stronger? That's really helpful. That's really supportive. It's wholesome. And we don't need to shy away or be afraid of that.

And sometimes that happens. And that's not so helpful. So that's why I just want to highlight a few of these practices.

The first I want to mention is usually spoken about in the suttas when the Buddha talks about taking refuge. That might seem a little foreign or not so much the way we think about things. But if you think of it in terms of when you're having a really contracted time, actively bringing to mind – whether it's the Buddha, which in Asian coun-

tries is very inspirational for people. That may or may not be true for us. But there may be a being, a teacher, someone who manifests some of the beautiful, wholesome, inspiring qualities of the Buddha that you could bring to mind.

Someone mentioned today something that was a beautiful example of this – someone who calls to mind His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He really inspires this person, specifically mentioning the sense that, and I've read this often too, of how he seems to meet each person, to treat each person really equally, really kindly, totally present with each person that he talks to. Just contemplating that quality and what that would mean or what it would feel like inside to be that non-judgmental, to be that kind, to be that present, to be able to see the beauty or the emptiness in each person – that was really inspiring to that person. And that quality of inspiration gives us energy, gives us a brightness. It's really very helpful.

So at times, just reflect on the inspirational qualities, whether it's the Buddha or someone else. It's really about feeling it, not thinking about it so much. And knowing that when we're reflecting on it, it inspires us because it's touching those same qualities in ourselves. It's not some abstract thought, or it wouldn't have that inspirational quality. Very helpful.

And then more classically, to recognize that the classic formulation when the Buddha spoke about the breadth of his path, bhavana or mental cultivation, is always embedded in the trio of dana, sila, bhavana – generosity, moral non-harming conduct, and mental cultivation.

It's interesting – the more I practice, the deeper and deeper is my appreciation for both dana and sila. I'm not saying I've got it down or anything. But the subtlety and the power and the uplifting qualities that a real exploration, a commitment in my heart and mind to dana and sila bring about – it's gladdening the heart, these beautiful factors.

So I want to talk a little bit about dana, a little bit about sila, just pointing for yourself to see what really brings you this happiness, this gladdening, this brightness of heart.

Generosity, as I'm sure you're well aware, the Buddha talked about all the time. It's really essential as a beginning of the practice. And it's not just a should – you should be generous, it's a good thing to do, it helps us let go. All those things are true. But I didn't understand this so well until I spent more time in Asia, especially the last four years when I've been spending more time in Burma, in a country where for some people, dana and sila are really kind of deeply rooted.

Of course, with the government, that doesn't seem – it's a paradox, it's very confusing. But to spend time with people who've grown up and are really committed in a Buddhist culture, where it's more in the culture than here in this country – I mean, people are generous in this country, no question. There's huge generosity. But there's a way, at least how I experience it, the way the generosity is expressed as an expression of happiness. It's not that I should be generous in order to let go, but the act of generosity itself clearly brings and is accompanied with so much happiness of mind and heart, so much brightness of being, that it's absolutely contagious.

And it's a kind of teaching in the power of dana, of generosity, to really open the mind and heart beyond self-interest, to really open the mind and heart beyond the false sense of separation. There really isn't so much sense of me taking care of myself, but this really powerful sense of the joy of being able to give. It's quite beautiful. For me, when I just have to remember little acts of generosity that I've experienced either personally or that I've seen happen any time I go to Burma, the effect of the memory is that it brings real happiness to my heart. It really opens me past whatever particular concerns, self-interest concerns I may have, whether I'm on retreat, whether I'm off retreat. And it's not a thing of thinking it should feel that way. It's an absolute experience of it.

I'll just give you little examples – there are a million of them. There's a young woman Steve Smith talks about a lot. She's kind of a protégé of Steve Smith, and he started meeting her when she was sixteen or so.

She's in her early twenties now. Pretty poor, really quite poor. She got married a couple of years ago. When we went to see her this year, she had just had her first child, a baby that died right after it was born, about a month before we came. And she was heartbroken, really, really upset, kind of depressed. She and her husband live with his family. She doesn't get on very well with the mother-in-law. She's a really bright, lovely being, a happy being, but having a hard time.

We would spend some time and talk, and we would try and do little things for her. We didn't do any huge thing this year. We tried to bring little gifts, tried to just listen, tried to help in some way. At the end of the time when we were leaving, she came up to the monastery where we were staying. She took a day off from work and came up looking for me and Michelle McDonald, the other teacher, and another woman who was managing the retreat. The three of us had spent some time with Chesu. And she had gone out and bought us each a little beautifully hammered tin vase, one for each of us.

Now, for someone like her to go and buy three vases like that—it's huge. And then she took the day to come and look for us, to specifically find each one of us in our little huts, to give it to each of us. And she was so happy giving it to us. It's so beautiful.

And it's really learning that the other side of it is to receive with the same happiness, with the same non-separation. My first years in Thailand, I would say, "Well, I have so much. Don't waste your money on me. Save it for yourself." And that makes sense to us in our Western way of thinking. But in terms of the qualities of openheartedness, of freedom, of luminous mind, that is so churlish to say, "No, take that back and sell it, make yourself a nice meal." No, it just cuts the whole picture.

Another time, another year, I was with two friends, and we were riding in a pony cart back from another monastery to the monastery where we were staying. It was with Steve Smith and another friend who speaks Burmese, a Western guy. We got the pony cart, got in the cart, argued with the driver about how much to pay in the usual way because he wants twice as much. You argue him down, and we're driving back. Then he got to chatting with our friend who speaks Burmese.

At the time, there were two or three Western monks doing the retreat with us. One of them had been living in this area in Sagaing for several years. So the pony cart driver was asking, "Oh, do you know this monk?" "Oh, yes." And he said, "I see him all the time." This monk was doing an ascetic practice—he would never wear shoes, for three or four years. That is an ascetic practice. And the pony cart driver was saying to our friend, "I see him, and I feel so bad for him. He has no slippers, he has no shoes. I think I would like to buy him a pair of shoes. It really makes me feel so bad that he does not have shoes."

This is just an average person you run into on the street. Notice how it can kind of brighten the mind. It gives a space beyond whatever particular little problem the mind is caught up in. It reopens us again to the luminous nature that isn't touched by whatever happens to be visiting us.

So you see, just hearing about generosity—never mind practicing it ourselves—can have this effect. And it can be in our life. It can be here. It's not about going around and starting to find all kinds of things to do to be generous and driving each other crazy. Not that. But just to have the intention in small ways, here in life. And even more, you can actively

call up the memory of times that you have thought, said, or done something generous and see how it brightens the mind, how it brings spaciousness into the heart.

It's really interesting, you know, how the Buddha set up his whole sasana, his whole teaching, around generosity. The whole relationship of the ordained sangha—the nuns and the monks—and the lay people, that they both were linked to each other through generosity. The lay people depended on the generosity of the monastics, and still today,

the monks and nuns depend on the generosity of lay people for their food every day, for their robes. And that's not like lay people having to pay. It's a way of really cultivating and developing the mind and heart of non-clinging.

Remember that it's not a practice of renunciation that makes you miserable. It's a practice of happiness. The giving in itself is a source of huge happiness. And then as well, the lay people depend on the generosity of the nuns and monks to really share their Dharma understanding, to teach and share their being and what they've heard and what they've learned, really freely, with anyone who wants to hear it. So in both ways, this cultivation, this development of the heart of non-clinging, is really the central piece of the way of life that the Buddha taught and lived.

And it's so different from the kind of sense of neediness, the needing to have enough to take care of myself. A friend of mine a few years ago was writing a thesis for a master's or a PhD on economics. She was back in Burma, in the same village, because she knew Burma well. She could stay at the monastery and really explore. What she was exploring was dana as a second economic system in Burma.

And actually, the Burmese economy is a total, complete shambles. The government does not provide much of anything in the way of what we almost don't even think about—like roads, for example, building, whatever. And the dana, the generosity—a lot of money may be given to the monastery, may be given to the Sayadaw. And in my Western way, I think, "Oh, yeah, they really need another building. Somebody comes and gives money and says we want another building built." And we think, "That's not what we need. People need food. People need this." But then that money for the building, the Sayadaw hires the local people to do the building. And they hire local people to get the supplies and to bring in the food. And it really gets the whole economy going. It's all kept extremely local. Dana is really what runs the economy. The whole hospital there is run on dana. It has nothing to do with any kind of government support.

So just notice how in a moment of giving, even having the thought of giving, it brings a sense of unity. It cuts away that feeling of separation. It just seems to cut away the distance. I think that's one of the reasons it's said that if you're having difficulty with somebody, give them a gift. Because if we're really giving it, and in giving, the focus is of course on the intention, just that open-hearted sharing—if you really give something with that clear, focused intention, the sense of separation, the sense of holding them as a problem in that moment, just for that moment, is cut through. It's really a powerful force.

So intention is, of course, the key. And the other side I also want to mention is when we're on the receiving end—to really allow ourselves to consciously experience gratitude. That can be gratitude in the moment of actually receiving, as when Chesu gave us the little vases, to really not only say thank you but to really feel the gratitude, the being touched, the appreciation. Because in that way as well, the sense of limitation and separation is gone in that moment. It really is a whole act.

Something I've found really helpful on retreat, when we're not giving a lot of things and really staying with ourselves, is to call up the seeds of memories of times you've been generous, but also to consciously open to gratitude—either for specific acts of generosity or just for what we have. I found this enormously supportive when I'm on retreat and when I'm getting caught in some kind of negative pattern or dukkha, to consciously cultivate gratitude. Sometimes it's just hitting you in the face and it's beautiful and you don't have to cultivate it. But other times—and as some of you know, I tend to have an aversive type of mind, so I'm not bounding through the place filled with gratitude all the time. That's not the way my mind works.

But some years ago, at the end of the day, I was getting into bed on a long retreat. It was one of those moments when you're getting into bed going, "Thank God that day is over. That's a wipeout day. But maybe tomorrow mindfulness will be back." Have you ever had a moment like that? Just go to sleep and hopefully this will all be gone when I wake up. And it just kind of went through my mind: okay, gratitude.

And it started out, OK, great. I'm really grateful for a bed. I'm really grateful I had three meals today, or two meals, or one meal, whatever you had. And the first three or four, it was grumpy. It was cynical. It was, yeah, sure. But I just kept going. And it was like magic. It didn't take long at all to where that brightness, that spaciousness, that gladdening of heart was real. And then things just started pouring out of my mind that I was grateful for. There's so much. Not a should. Not, you know, you have so much you should be grateful. Not that at all. But just things like the moon, the snow, being at peace, other people practicing. It just goes on and on. I don't need to make a list for you. And the effect is, again, that luminous, spacious purity of mind and heart. It's here again. It's always here. But again, that's what's so obvious, that's what's so clear. It's really a wonderful thing.

In fact, since last March, a friend and I started a practice that we'd heard about through someone else—a daily gratitude practice where at some point, almost every day, we email each other what we're grateful for that day. For both of us, it's been an amazing practice. And we're very different temperaments. She's a person that is always much more effervescent and upbeat, someone you'd think is naturally grateful. Both of

us will come to it and we'll write, and we're really honest. So we might start out writing, "I'm not feeling grateful for anything. I had a fight with my husband and this and this and that." She'll start out like that sometimes. But the intention in writing it is to say what we're grateful for. So we don't pretend. We just keep writing stream of consciousness, and it turns around. Sometimes we come and we already knew what we were grateful for. Sometimes we actively didn't know at all. But as we're writing, just that intention turns it around, and we always end really in a different state of mind—feeling grateful, feeling happy, touching again the infinite brightness, the infinite luminosity. It's really amazing. And we keep saying this to each other all the time.

Right now she's on retreat for a month, and I'll forget about it for a couple of weeks. Just yesterday, I was kind of mumping around the house and I thought, oh, I really miss the gratitude practice. Why do I need to have someone to email to? Why can't I just think about it without that? But, you know, our minds get in a habit.

So, gratitude—and that really goes together with generosity. I also want to mention sīla, non-harming conduct. Because here, of course, whatever you think, just coming here, taking the five precepts in a really committed way—even if it's just out of fear, you have to obey the precepts because otherwise people will see you and hate you—it doesn't matter. Just not acting in harming ways brings what the Buddha calls the bliss of blamelessness. And he says that, in terms of householders, the bliss of blamelessness is worth sixteen times the other happinesses that a householder can know. I don't know where he got sixteen times, but that's what it says. The other happinesses are from debtlessness, possessing things in a wholesome way, the enjoyment of what is rightful. And then the bliss of blamelessness. That's a huge happiness—freedom from remorse, the real purity, spaciousness in our heart, in our mind, the contentment that is possible.

You know how it is when you have one of those periods of practice, a kind of life review, where everything you ever did that was unskillful, that was unkind, that was thoughtless, that was cruel, starts to come up. Have you ever had a time like that in practice? Sometimes it's really...

Hard things that we did that anyone would say, yes, that was a little self-interested. Other times—it's happened to me and it happens to others—people will come in wracked with remorse, really feeling awful about some incredibly subtle, negligent thing they said or didn't say to somebody twenty-five years ago. And they're wracked with remorse for being unkind.

This is a sign, obviously, that our heart and mind is getting much purer. But to see how much remorse and suffering can come even from such a slight thing—then on the wholesome, supportive side, it's also true that a great deal of uplifting can come from non-harming thought, speech, and action.

Just in the not doing of it, sometimes we don't really notice that. It's another thing we may not tend to consciously reflect on or consciously bring into awareness. We do it, you know, in the beginning when we're teaching metta practice. We often say when you start practicing, begin with yourself, really direct the wishes of metta to yourself. It's often suggested as a way to connect with yourself in a wholesome way, to see the good in yourself. And it's often suggested to really contemplate the wholesome things you've done—contemplate your morality, contemplate your non-harming behavior.

I don't know about you, but that's not something I really sit down and do very often in my daily life. And it's often hard—maybe not for all of you, but I know many people I talk to in this culture, and myself included—it's so easy for us to focus on all the unskillful things we've done. I bet if I said make a list of unskillful thought, speech, and action, you could just start writing without any pause at all. You wouldn't have to think, "What have I done that's unskillful?" It's right there. But make a list of the really wholesome things you've done, refraining from harming thought, speech, and action—sometimes that's a little harder. And sometimes we think, well, that's just being egocentric.

But you know, it's not. It's a source of freedom from remorse. Actively contemplating our wholesome past actions can be a source of inspiration and gladdening of heart and mind in the present moment, so that in a way, the memory of past wholesome deeds is like the result of past kamma in the present moment. It's the fruition, the wholesome fruition of past wholesome deeds.

I'll give you a little spontaneous example. I remember it because it's so rare—and it's pathetic that it's so rare—when I spontaneously remembered a wholesome thing I had done many years ago. It's pathetic that that should be so rare, either the wholesome thing or the memory. I mean the memory. I hope the wholesome thing isn't that rare.

It was a day when I used to work, many years ago, in a sheltered workshop in North Carolina. In not very good conditions, with adults who were mentally handicapped. In a sheltered workshop we had very simple little tasks, like put two screws in a little plastic bag. These were really pretty severely handicapped adults, and it was difficult. But there was a lot of love, and I really felt a lot of love for them. And I remember one day I came in and there was just one after the other, a series of connections and expressions of appreciation and love going both ways.

This was a long time ago—I don't want to say how long ago. And one day, the memory of this day just came into my mind, and so much happiness just welled up. Again, the sense of the luminous nature of freedom—it's not self-referencing. It wasn't about "Oh, aren't I great." That doesn't feel luminous. That doesn't feel free. That feels more contracted. But it's the same as with generosity and gratitude—it just opens us up and gives the inspiration to then be with the difficult stuff, whatever it is that's happening. It gives the inspiration to keep going.

Freedom from remorse, our commitment to non-harming behavior—it's not just "I have to do this so I can get concentrated." It's really, as well as dana, as well as bhavana, a path of happiness, a path of non-clinging, a path of freedom. Here and now, in the past, in the present moment, it brightens our mind.

And there's a sutta from the Buddha—I won't read the whole sutta, but he starts with: What is the purpose of skillful virtues? And he says to Ananda that the purpose is freedom from remorse. Freedom from remorse is their reward. And it's one of those suttas that keeps going. What's the purpose of freedom from remorse? Freedom from remorse has joy as its purpose and reward. And the purpose of joy is rapture.

Purpose and reward of rapture is serenity. Purpose and reward of serenity is sukha, happiness. Purpose and reward of sukha, concentration. Concentration goes to knowledge and vision of things as they actually are. Knowledge and vision of things as they actually are goes to disenchantment. Disenchantment goes to dispassion. The purpose and reward of dispassion is knowledge and vision of release.

So in this way, Ananda, skillful virtues go all the way up. Skillful virtues lead step by step to the consummation of arhatship, to freedom. That's pretty powerful. And it's something that we can really appreciate, really call up in the present moment when we need to brighten the mind, to gladden the heart, to find the energy to keep going.

I don't have time to speak about this in depth, but I want to mention that the practice of metta or any of the Brahma Viharas is also a way to brighten the mind, gladden the heart. And it doesn't have to reach the point of absorption or jhana. Just some moments of metta can be very powerful in again expanding the perception beyond our limited, constricted self.

This is from the Buddha: "If just for the lasting of a finger snap, a bhikkhu indulges a thought of metta, cultivates a thought of metta, gives attention to a thought of metta, such a one is to be called a bhikkhu, someone who's practicing, carries out the master's teaching, responds to advice, he does not eat the country's alms food in vain. What then should I say of one who makes much of such a thought?"

So we can all do that. A finger snap of a thought of metta? No matter what's going on, we can manage that.

Calling up what you can be grateful for helps. Actually calling up good deeds of others, the generosity of others, like when I described the people in Burma—that also brings happiness. It's a way of seeing that we're not separate. So if you start spinning into "I never did a generous thing in my life, I never did a wholesome thing in my life," well then, tune into that of others. It brings us the same open-hearted happiness. It's wonderful.

The last thing I'll mention is the sense of just holding the thought of our practice being not for myself alone, but for other beings. You don't have to even feel it, but just holding that thought—like I quoted Sakyong the other night saying that if you just have the correct motivation, in your own experience it turns into bodhicitta, into this vastness of motivation, all by itself.

I've found this really helpful when I'm getting too self-involved in my practice, really spinning down—to just, at the beginning of each sitting, start by taking refuge. This is Tibetan. The Tibetans really advocate practicing like this all the time. Just start a sitting very consciously by taking refuge. And then just for a moment, hold the motivation of bodhicitta. "May my practice be for the benefit of all beings." That's all. Just saying it. You don't have to feel it. But just inclining the mind and heart in that direction—it really does something.

Then you forget about it. Just practice your session. And at the end of the session, they say to always complete it by dedicating the merit of the session, of your practice, to all beings. So again, we're ending our sitting, our walking, our period of practice with a conscious act of generosity, of connection to all beings. And that's quite beautiful.

Then, as well, this being a very generous act—sharing our practice with all sentient beings—make for yourself a pure aspiration. The Tibetans say that this is a really strong generous act, to share the merit of your practice with all beings. To then make an aspiration is focusing your own motivation. For example, we could all have a different aspiration. Say your aspiration is to awaken your mind and heart to liberation in this lifetime. You make that aspiration. It's very important, they say, because if you make the aspiration in combination with our wholesome actions of meditation and generosity, it helps to fuse the wholesome effects of our actions in terms of our aspiration. It's not "I did this good thing and that means I'm going to get chocolate cake for lunch." It's really focusing our intention and then sharing it with all beings. Just a very light way of taking refuge in the beginning and sharing at the end, and clarifying our motivation.

So I think that's enough. Just find whatever way helps you brighten and gladden your own mind and heart.

Thank you.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 14

Anicca: A Doorway To Awakening

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this profound exploration of anicca (impermanence), Carol Wilson investigates why the most seemingly obvious of the three characteristics remains so difficult to embody in our lived experience. Drawing from multiple suttas, she examines the Buddha's teaching that seeing impermanence leads directly to the abandonment of identity view (sakkāya-diṭṭhi) and the end of clinging. Wilson shares the Dalai Lama's insight that we often settle for "long-term impermanence"—accepting that things are born and die—while resisting the radical truth that change occurs moment to moment, with nothing existing unchanged even briefly.*
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> *The talk weaves together canonical teachings with personal reflections on aging parents, practice challenges, and the subtle ways we assume permanence in daily life. Wilson explores how the sense of "I am" that arises with experience can feel deceptively permanent, creating suffering even when we intellectually understand impermanence. She references the Buddha's teaching to the monk Asaji about concentration not being the essence of practice, and the poignant exchange with Ānanda during the Buddha's final illness, where even this devoted attendant needed reminding that "all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable."*
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> *Through stories of Khemā's awakening upon witnessing impermanence, Kisā Gotamī's journey through grief, and Paṭācārā's transformation, Wilson illustrates how facing impermanence directly opens us to courage, responsiveness, and profound appreciation for life. She concludes with Dr. Ariyaratne's testimony that understanding moment-to-moment change brings freedom from fear, even in the face of death.*

Tonight I thought I would talk a bit about the insight into anicca, impermanence. It's a natural following on what I talked about last week—clinging—because the Buddha stressed so often the power, the importance of really understanding, really seeing the impermanence of all phenomena, and also pointing to how that understanding can actually be liberating understanding.

There are many places where he quite explicitly states that seeing impermanence leads to the end of clinging. For example, in one of a million different places where he's talking about abandoning identity view, or sakkāya-diṭṭhi, someone says, "Venerable Sir, how should one know, how should one see, for the view of self to be abandoned?" And he says, "Bhikkhu, when one knows and sees the eye as impermanent, the view of self is

abandoned. When one knows and sees forms as impermanent, eye consciousness as impermanent, eye contact as impermanent—when one knows and sees whatever feeling arises with eye contact as the condition as impermanent—then the view of self is abandoned." And he goes, of course, through the ear and all the relations with the ear, smell, taste, body, mind. Clearly, once identity view begins to be abandoned, clinging to all forms begins to be abandoned. Wrong view, he goes on in that same sutta to say, is abandoned under the same conditions.

I find contemplating and focusing on this insight into impermanence to be quite interesting. I like talking about it because, as much as the Buddha stressed it, when we think about it, it doesn't sound so esoteric. In terms of the three characteristics of existence—impermanence, the characteristic of dukkha or unreliability, and the characteristic of anattā, not-self, out of control—the most obvious of these, the least esoteric really, would seem to be anicca, impermanence. In some ways, at least to me, the concept of anicca isn't really that difficult to twist our conceptual mind around. Whereas as soon as we talk about anattā, something kind of seizes up in many people's minds. With anicca, it's like, "Yeah, sure. I understand that. That makes sense."

So why is it that it's actually so difficult—at least from my experience—to actively live moment to moment from the knowing of impermanence, within the knowing of impermanence? Both on the macro level—the level of world systems, of our own life, of people we know, of events in the world—even on that big level, we can say, "Sure, I know everything changes." But do we really live from that? All the way down to the more micro level, what I just read: Do you live every moment of your life recognizing that the contact which arises when the eye door and the form and consciousness come together is impermanent? On that level, we can say, "Well, yeah, I don't see it." But on the bigger level, what's fascinating to me about studying impermanence is that it should be obvious. And yet, is that really, cellularly, how we relate to our experience moment to moment?

The Buddha says over and over: whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying and could not be seen as me or mine. That's often, in many of the suttas, the ultimate argument he gives. "Well, so you see that's impermanent. Obviously, it's unsatisfying, can't be seen as me or mine, right?" And they all go, "Yes, Bhante."

But I wonder. Does each of us actually believe that? One, do we believe that everything's impermanent? That's one thing. But the second is, do we really, on a cellular level, buy the fact that if something's impermanent, it's inherently unsatisfying? Or do we give it a nod, a conceptual nod? "Yeah, I know it's unsatisfying, but as long as it's

here, I'm really going to go for it. I'm going to enjoy it while it's here. And I know it's impermanent—impermanent, impermanent, anicca." And we're living a complete delusion that we don't really notice.

If this is true, look and see for yourself. What would be the effect on my life, on my moment-to-moment stream of consciousness, on how I related to myself and life, if I truly—truly in my cells—knew that everything I experience is impermanent, including me? How would I relate, or would I relate, to things differently?

And not to take that as a should, or some conceptual answer. Not "I should come up with, 'Oh, if I were free of clinging, if I knew everything was impermanent, then I would be open and flowing and accepting'" or whatever. That's just a lot of baloney. It's just some story we're making up. But taking that as a pointing, an investigation in my moment-to-moment awareness—which is something you have the luxury to do here in this silence, in this beautiful white stillness. It's too cold to want to do anything else.

So that's great. It's going to get really cold tonight and tomorrow. Wonderful conditions to explore. How would I relate differently? Would I relate differently if I really knew that things were impermanent?

And I see in my own life how I know things change, but when something new goes wrong with my body, when someone like my parents or someone I love suddenly gets really sick, some conditions that have been together for many, many years fall apart—is my first response, "Oh, the conditions for supporting a healthy body have changed. That's how it is now"? Not usually. I'm only speaking for myself. Not usually. Sometimes I can get around to that, but it takes a little rubbing against the grain for a while.

I know I've mentioned this other times, but my parents in the last five years have really been declining. And in the last year, another whole kind of leap—both my parents in different ways—another whole leap, and also financial difficulties where they never had that. Not really difficulties, but just having to worry, which we never had before. And it's been really interesting to watch that place when each new shift happens, where my mind just starts—the first response is, "No, this isn't supposed to happen. What did I do wrong? Or what did they do wrong? Or what's wrong with the system?" There's definitely something wrong with the system that we all get old and cranky and die. I mean, definitely that wasn't figured out right.

I have to say I've been happy to see over the last five years that I roll with each new thing more easily. Like I really go, "Oh, it's not something I did wrong. It's not that I should be able to figure it all out so that nobody suffers." It's like, duh. What do I talk about all the time? But to see how that's the first place the mind goes when something goes wrong.

And that's in the big picture—which one really can't argue too hard that I'm never going to get old, one's parents won't get old, the people we love won't get sick, won't die, won't go away. Of course that's going to happen. Yet still there's such resistance to it. And that's fascinating to me, as much as I've been paying attention to my mind and body process and to the processes of many, many people and to the world around me. Still there's that tendency to hold. I think it's really fascinating.

Big picture, little picture. How do you relate to experience today? If you had a really pleasant or a really mellow or a really flowing mindful time and it changed, was your first response, "Well, the conditions that led to that flowing time have fallen apart and now it's like this"? Maybe that would be nice. It's nice when that happens, isn't it? How often, though, we just... "It's that person who walked too close to me. That's what did it." Or, "It's that I ate too many beans at lunch. I should have known better. I should have known better that if I ate the right things, I would have been able to keep my energy and my mindfulness and concentration in balance. It's my own fault for being selfish and greedy and weak, right?" And then you go on a whole downward spiral. It's a trip, isn't it?

The Buddha said, "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." And I see in my mind that the times we really get it—that nothing is lasting for more than a moment, there is no resting place—that is somehow to the mind that likes to control and know what's going on, somehow deeply uncomfortable. And so I, in myself, see how there's a tendency of the mind stream just to want—this is where the clinging comes in—to want to hold on to something as steady. That sense of, even though I know it's not going to last long, at least it's here now. And it gives me, in my experience, this feeling of somewhere to rest, something to hold on to in this sense of being in the middle of an earthquake all the time. The mind doesn't like it, so it tries to hold on. But of course the poignancy is just that—that holding on creates the friction, creates the sense of fear, of being kind of out of sync with how things are.

It's actually what creates the problem. But holding on to a momentary sense of peace and ease seems like a natural response to the total unreliability of life. And yet it's this denial of impermanence that is the suffering.

I once attended a three-day teaching that His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave, and he said something that's obvious about anicca, but that struck me. It's been really helpful in my exploring of it.

Basically, in my words, cellularly we know intellectually that things change. We wouldn't argue about it. But cellularly, we don't really quite believe it. We're still holding, as I said.

And this is what His Holiness said. He said we think that we really understand impermanence, but the way we tend to understand it, or the way we tend to think we're experiencing it, it's kind of long-term impermanence. We know that whatever's born is going to die. We know that in the big picture, if I'm born, I'll die. This puppy's born, it will die. This cold evening is born, it will change. We know that.

But we may have the tendency to think, or not even to think, but to assume: this thing is born, it exists for a while, and then it goes away. And that's the place—"exists for a while"—that's the place we're holding on, where we're not seeing really the radical nature of anicca. It exists for a while, shorter or longer, unchanged, then conditions change and it goes away.

And His Holiness is saying, no way. Change is happening moment to moment. Nothing is existing for a while, stable, and then it goes away.

I find that really, really helpful because all experience is in constant flow, constant flux, constant change. The conditions are always changing. But some part of us really hates this. And so maybe our kind of compromise is: okay, I'll give you things are born and they die. I'll give you I know that mental states change. But in this state here, give me something to hold onto that's not changing.

So maybe the times of stability get shorter. Maybe it goes from the fifty years of my life to the last three years. Maybe it goes from the last three years to this retreat. Maybe it goes down to this day. Maybe it goes down to this sitting. Maybe it's down to just five minutes. But still, there's some way it can be so easy to hold out, to resist really seeing that change is completely momentary.

And when we don't see that, what we're often doing—and this I love to watch in my practice, in my life—is assuming permanence. Just this last month, in various groups and meetings, we've been figuring out schedules for 2006. I was in a meeting where we were saying, okay, on July 12th at 4:30 Eastern Standard Time, we're going to have a conference call. And someone says, I'll be in Hawaii, so that's okay for me, that's this

time, and that's this time on the West Coast, and this time on the East Coast. Oh, okay, 4:30 July 12th, Wednesday. And it may really happen, which is amazing, totally amazing. But how much we do that, often without a second thought.

Or here on retreat, the practice has been going however it's been going, and you're calling it whatever you're calling it—good, bad, boring, slogging, fulfilling, whatever. Isn't it easy when it gets a certain way, we kind of think, well, that's how the last sitting was, and this is how the next sitting will be. I had this kind of experience, and this is how it's going to keep going. Bad or good, whether you like it or you don't, it doesn't matter. You're in a really difficult, judging, reactive mental state, and from that mental state, we project the whole rest of our life. We know it, and we do it anyway. It's amazing.

If you stopped for a second and thought, has this mental state been here for my whole life? You probably, hopefully, could say, no, I don't think so. It feels like it. But I do kind of remember that time three years ago when I had a happy moment—because you're in a depressive mental state.

But really deep down in that moment, there are times when we really believe that this is how it is. This is how it's going to feel.

And the same when the mind is concentrated or happy or blissful. I'm sure you've all heard Sharon's story—I've heard it so many times it's like I remember it better than my own stories—when she was in India back when she was young and she had a period of incredibly blissful, free practice. From that state, she projected that's how her whole life would be. She'd imagine herself floating down the streets of New York, filled with happiness and bliss.

Don't we do that? How many retreats have I done that? I always project how I'll be leaving—the bodhisattva of the world, just filled with light and love. And sometimes I am, and sometimes I'm not. And even if I am, it doesn't last.

Anyway, the sense of how easy it is to just say, "Oh, this is permanent." I want to tell a couple of stories from the Buddha, because it's not like we're the stupid ones and everyone else always got it. The Buddha was talking to people about the necessity to see impermanence all the time. I love reading the suttas, so I want to share a couple of examples.

One monk came to the Buddha. His name was Assaji, and he was troubled—he was sick and tormented by remorse and regret. The Buddha said, "Why are you troubled? Have you done something bad?"

He said, "No, but formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations, otherwise being concentrated. But now I cannot obtain concentration."

He was really upset about this, saying, "If I can't obtain concentration, it occurs to me, let me not fall away." In other words, he was afraid he was losing the path because he couldn't obtain concentration, and he used to be able to. He was sick. I can really relate to that.

The Buddha—I'm going to paraphrase because it's long—basically said that those who think concentration is the essence of this practice, and who believe that failing to obtain it means they're falling away, that's delusion. That is not the essence of this practice. Liberation is the essence of this practice.

And then he goes into the whole teaching: "What do you think? Is form permanent or impermanent?" He goes through everything—a pleasant feeling, is it permanent or impermanent? A neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling. A painful feeling. And he basically says: when you see this is all impermanent, then you understand. "I have a feeling that ends when the body ends." That's how you understand it.

So basically, if you're sick and you can't obtain concentration, you understand: yes, conditions have changed. That's how it is. Essentially, haven't I told you a million times? Everything's impermanent.

And then, even more to the point—and I know you know this story, but I really like it—during the period when the Buddha was in his last illness, there's a whole long sutta covering those days. Ananda, his attendant who was beloved to him and had been with him for twenty-five years, was taking care of the Buddha. He knew the Buddha was dying; they'd had conversations about it.

At a certain point, when the Buddha announced that he had decided he was going to die, Ananda realized he had missed his opportunity. Some weeks prior, he could have asked the Buddha to extend his life, but he missed the hints and didn't do it. So when the Buddha was basically saying, "Yes, now I'm going to die," Ananda said, "No, don't." He asked him three times, and the Buddha said, "It's too late. You should have done it previously, and now I'm going to die."

They had a long talk, and then Ananda slipped away. The Venerable Ananda went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost: "Alas, I'm still a learner with much to do"—he wasn't completely enlightened—"and the teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me." He was basically sobbing and weeping.

Of course the Buddha knew, but he inquired of the monks where Ananda was, and they told him. So he said to a certain monk, "Go, monk, and say to Ananda from me: 'Friend Ananda, the teacher summons you.'"

Ananda came, and the Lord said, "Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable?"

He's not being impatient, but just—how many times do I have to say this?

All things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other. So how could it be, Ananda? Since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away? For a long time you have been in the Tathagata's presence."

And then the Buddha goes on and really praises Ananda. He says, "You have shown loving-kindness in act of body, speech, and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly and unstintingly. Make the effort, and in a short time you will be free of delusion."

But that is really his core teaching. How can it be that whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay, subject to separation and becoming other? How can it be that it should not pass away?

I find it a little heartening—heartening in terms of recognizing that we're not so lost—that even Ananda is quite stricken with grief at the loss, the coming loss. It hasn't even happened yet, which is also interesting. But even this great disciple is grieving for his beloved teacher. The Buddha is constantly having to remind people of the radical, radical nature of impermanence, because we keep getting lost in that, not really seeing it. We keep assuming permanence.

I have a friend who is quite wise, and a few years ago he had gone through a very difficult period, and then at this particular time he was very happy. We were just talking somewhere, and he said, "I'm so happy. I wonder how it will change." Just very simply, because it's true. It will. It did. And then it changes again. We relate very differently, don't we, when we have that cellular understanding. "I'm really happy—I wonder how it will change." "I'm really having a hard time right now, there's a lot of suffering around in people I know—how's that going to change?"

It gives us a real flexibility when we're not holding to something that should be a certain way. We can actually respond to circumstances as they are, to see them clearly. And that's the point. Impermanence isn't fearful or scary. It's just how it is. When that's our experience, when that's what we see, what we know, then there's that living in harmony with how things are. We quit feeling like we're sandpaper going against the grain.

One friend said to me—I wrote down what she said, she's done many years of practice—this was on a retreat. She says, "Oh, all these years of practice. I always thought, 'I get it. Everything around is always changing.' But suddenly," she said, "I see—oh, I'm part of that. I'm also in constant change and constant ebb and flow."

That's quite significant. When we really, in a moment, can have just that cellular knowing, we let go of all ideas and shoulds and assuming permanence, and we're really right there for whatever's happening.

There's another friend—I think I've told this before, but maybe not here—a friend whom I haven't seen for quite some years. He used to come and sit with us in Yucca Valley. At that time, I thought of him as somewhat elderly, though I don't know, he was probably not that old. He was a farmer from the Midwest, had kind of a hard physical life. He would come every year and sit with us.

Then one year he didn't come for a couple of years. The next year he showed up, and he'd had very severe heart problems. I don't think he'd had a heart attack, but he'd had to have open heart surgery. He said he'd had to have one heart valve replaced. They replaced it, I guess, with the heart valve from a pig. This is what he said. And then he had a whole lot of jokes about stopping when he came to cornfields and oinking and stuff like that. But that was an aside—that's the kind of guy he was.

He was describing his experience. He was also someone who felt that, despite being very devoted to practice, he never had any concentration. He felt he was never getting anywhere, never had good states, was never continuous with mindfulness. These were what he thought. Certainly not someone who was like, "I'm an ace yogi," but totally dedicated.

When he came back, he was telling us about his surgery. He said after the surgery it seemed to go well. He woke up in intensive care, hooked up to machines from every orifice and his heart, all these machines going. It seemed fine at first, but then something started going wrong. The machines started beeping and making noise, and the little lines started—I don't know, they either go wild or they go flat, whichever was bad, something anyway. He got it that something really serious was going wrong.

At first, he said, his mind goes, "Oh my God, I don't want to die."

And then the next thought was: if this is your last breath, let's be here for it. And he just felt his breath, and passed out, and woke up—and obviously he was okay. But he said, "I know now something was happening in this meditation. That's really the fruit of it." What's really happening now? Let's be here for this breath. Quite lovely.

But how is it—and this is also interesting to me—that we keep getting, as if it were, fooled again? Pulled back in somehow to relating to, reacting to experience as if it's betrayed me by changing, or not understanding why I'm suffering.

This is the Buddha again. I quite like this sutta. He's talking about agitation:

How is there agitation due to clinging? An unawakened person who regards material form as self, or self as possessing material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form—those are the four different ways that through clinging we grow personality view. The point is, we think we are form. *This material form of his changes and becomes otherwise. With the change and becoming otherwise of that material form, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with the change of material form. Agitated mental states born of preoccupation with the change of material form arise and remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is obsessed, he is anxious, distressed, and concerned. And due to clinging, he becomes agitated.*

Can any of you relate to that? Due to change in material form—our own or others—our mind becomes preoccupied, consciousness becomes preoccupied, and the mind becomes agitated and obsessed.

And of course he doesn't stop with material form. Feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Just a pleasant feeling changes. Does your consciousness ever become preoccupied with that change? Obsessed? Agitated? Perception, mental formations, emotions, states of mind, and consciousness—the five khandhas.

I love this sutta because I can relate it very immediately to my experience, all of it. An emotion we have changes, and we somehow thought it was me. We become obsessed, preoccupied with that change, and our mind gets agitated. We suffer. Feeling tone, consciousness, definitely form—we can't miss that one. And it doesn't even have to be sickness, does it? You could just be having a bad hair day and get obsessed with it, or a no-hair day for some of you. Why did I ever shave my head? That was insane.

Non-agitation through non-clinging is, of course, just the reverse. We don't get agitated when these things change.

These things are happening really often and very subtly. How often is there form, or a memory of form in the past, or a wishing form would be such and such a way in the future, or thinking about the possibility of a mental state now changing in the future—good or bad, either way? And the agitation, the obsession, the preoccupation—how much of our mental energy is spent that way? I'd wager a fair amount when we're not really mindful, when the mind isn't calm.

Something I also find very interesting in my own explorations: there are times when I know, say there's a sense of a mental formation, a sankhara, a particular state of mind, and it's changing. I really see it's changing, and I know it's not me. I know. I'm really aware. It's a compound experience, and it's going away, and it isn't me. And still, there's this real strong sense of clinging, sense of self, the agitation and the suffering. And my rational mind, my conscious mind, will be saying, "What's the clinging here? What's the sense of permanence?"

What is it that's the hook? This is personality view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Where is it coming from? I'm really clear that this mood is not me, or that this thing going on in the body—the body's not me. I'm really clear about that. But still, there's something about this sadness or this fear or this happiness that keeps sucking me in, kind of hooking me. And I can't quite get at it—what is the clinging to? What is it that's somehow being held, not in a thinking way, but subconsciously, as permanent?

Again, this is something to explore if you have a similar experience. I'll just tell you what I often see in myself. It's not so much the emotion at that time, or the thought, or the sense of body, but the subtle feeling of "I am" that comes together with the clinging to that. And that is so subtle. When we're not aware of it, we don't notice it at all, but when we become aware of it, it seems to be everywhere. When we're not aware of it, it can be quite subtle—so familiar, so comfortable, that unexamined it feels very permanent. That's the subtle sense of self that feels like it's always here.

Sometimes I see this in my meditation practice now; it's easier for me to notice there than when I'm busy. I remember one retreat where this image would come up in my mind. I'd notice it—I was pretty concentrated—I'd notice it as seeing. A feeling of real grief and sadness would come with it. I'd see that right away. There wasn't really any clinging to it. There weren't any more stories going on. And still, consciousness would keep getting into this real, real dukkha around it—real sadness. And part of my mind was sitting back, watching, going, "What's the hook here? This is nothing but dukkha. I can see it's just thinking. There's nothing else going on. What is the hook?" It was really a mystery. And it was really suffering, too.

I noticed that because I was so focused on the emotion, the thought—the object, so to speak—I didn't really turn around and notice that subtle clinging, that sense of "me" having that emotion, or being that emotion, or the emotion being in me—those ways that the Buddha describes personality view. Without examination, without investigation, that sense of "me," which is just arising in that moment, feels permanent. And that's really what the clinging is about—that sense of permanent "me." It's subtly pleas-

urable, even if it's arising in conjunction with something that's really unpleasurable, at least in my experience. That's what keeps the clinging and the sense of permanence going.

This is why, I think, because it can be so subtle, the steadiness of mindfulness—moment-to-moment mindfulness in retreat—is so helpful and important. We can really begin to see how lack of continuity of mindfulness actually hides impermanence. Impermanence can be quite subtle.

Here is a simile that was given by the monk Nandaka to some of the nuns. He says: "Sisters, suppose an oil lamp is burning. Its oil is impermanent and subject to change. The wick is impermanent and subject to change. The flame is impermanent and subject to change. And its radiance is impermanent and subject to change. Now, would anyone be speaking rightly who spoke thus: 'While this oil lamp is burning, its oil, wick, and flame are impermanent and subject to change, but its radiance is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change'?" And they say, "No." And he says, "Good, good, sisters. So it is with a noble disciple who sees this as it actually is with proper wisdom."

I love that simile because intellectually it seems obvious, but the subtlety of the radiance—you know, it's easy to feel that as permanent. The subtlety of the sense of self, not looked at, can feel permanent. It's so subtle we don't even know it's there. And so really, the moment-to-moment continuity that leads to steadiness of attention is what's going to help us see this.

The Buddha said again: "Develop concentration, monks. A concentrated monk discerns things as they actually are present. And what does he discern as it actually is present?" Can you guess what I'm going to say? "He discerns as it actually is present that the eye is impermanent and inconstant. Forms are inconstant. Eye consciousness is inconstant."

Eye contact is inconstant. Whatever arises in dependence on eye contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither pleasure nor pain—that too is inconstant. And so through, of course, all the senses.

Now, if your mind has gone to, "That's why I need concentration and I don't have it, and that's why I can never understand impermanence, and that's why I might as well give up"—please see that as a thought and put it aside. Notice that the continuity of mindfulness at times, everyone here... it doesn't have to be fifth jhāna. We can notice contact. You can notice seeing. We notice that it's impermanent. Just bring your attention to seeing. As you walk around, it's changing every second. Bring your attention to

hearing. At the ear door, it's constantly changing. The mind door, it's always changing. The body, the sensations of breath, the sensations throughout the body. Just be content with the steadiness of attention that lets us notice that.

Don't try to grasp, thinking "Now I have the insight into anicca and I am free." Sometimes we want to overlay that. We want some sense of fulfillment. "Now I'm getting anicca." Instead, just be content to notice moment after moment after moment. And it starts to break down the perversion of perception that sees the permanent in what is impermanent. And it happens. You don't have to make it happen. Just trust. Just trust that with the steadiness of mindfulness, it does break down. Sometimes it's more dramatic. Sometimes it's like getting wet in a fog, the way Suzuki Roshi talks about. You never know when you got wet, but you're really drenched.

Sometimes we don't quite realize that we're making something permanent or seeing with incorrect perception. But the actual suffering, the grief, the sadness that comes with the ending of something—Ānanda's sadness when the Buddha got sick and was going to die—rather than berating ourselves for that, I really like to take that as a wake-up call, and actually not be afraid of or judge the poignancy, the sadness, even the grief that comes along on our path.

For me, the fear or the dislike of the grief, the loss and all, is one of those thoughts: "I don't want to feel the loss, so therefore I won't acknowledge that everything's changing." That kind of warped thinking keeps us in denial. But actually, if we're not afraid of that, we can be much more open to things as they are. And I find Ānanda's grief really quite touching and poignant. It humanizes him, but it also becomes the source for looking and seeing: yes, this grief is because I'm not really seeing things how they are. I can feel the grief, and I can use it to let me pay more attention.

There are also many stories where the Buddha used the perception of change or impermanence as a kind of shocking device to wake people up—either people who were already in grief or people who were so much in denial of impermanence that they had a perfect little life put together. And he would break them out of it.

My favorite story in that way is about a woman named Khemā, who at this point was not a nun. She was the truly beautiful chief consort of King Bimbisāra. He had many consorts, many wives, but she was very beautiful, very vain, really enjoyed pleasure, really enjoyed beauty. The Buddha would come around and teach—the king was a follower of the Buddha—but Khemā never wanted to go and hear him because she had heard that he kind of put down sensual pleasure and talked about renunciation. And she basically thought, "I'm not interested in that." So she wouldn't go hear the Buddha.

It's kind of like how we're afraid sometimes. We're afraid to hear how things are. "Don't take my suffering away from me. I think I'm happy."

So the king fooled her. He hired a wandering poet and singer to compose beautiful poems and songs about this particular pleasure grove where he was going to have the Buddha come teach. Khemā heard these poems, this song about this really beautiful pleasure grove, and loving pleasure as she did, she said, "Well, I guess I have to go see it—anything that beautiful."

So he tricked her. She went, and when she got there, the Buddha was teaching to a great crowd of people. And of course, with his omniscient vision, he saw her coming and knew exactly where she was at. As soon as she came in, before she even said anything or before she had a chance to run away, he created with his psychic powers, just for her, the image of an incredibly beautiful celestial female being—like a hundred times more beautiful than Kema.

She just loved beauty, so she was entranced. And as she was watching this, the Buddha made this image gradually, gradually decay and get old and withered—her teeth fall out, her skin get wrinkled, get sick and die. Kema watched all this, and he got her. She said, "Oh wow, if that can happen to such a beautiful being, it's going to happen to me."

And once he had her, of course, he gave her a little Dhamma discourse on how clinging to pleasure is just putting yourself in prison. She's an example—also a good feminist story—because she's an example of a rare lay person, man or female, who in hearing one Dhamma talk became completely awakened. She became an arahant right there, listening to that.

It's quite interesting, isn't it? "Don't talk to me about this stuff. I know how it is." But just by seeing the impermanence, it cut through all her delusion.

There are other stories—and I'm just using stories of women, but it's with men too—of women who came to the Buddha in so much grief. You know the one of Kisa Gotami, whose baby had died? She came to the Buddha, couldn't accept that her baby had died, and just couldn't get there. She was really in denial, carrying around the dead baby with her for days.

The Buddha said, "Okay, well, you bring me a small mustard seed from a house that has not had death, and I will help your baby." So she got all excited. And you know the story—she went from house to house to house to house, and there was no house where there hadn't been death. After a while, she got it. The mind lets go. She came back, put her baby down, was ready to hear the Buddha's teachings and practice.

And just one last one, my favorite, because it's the way the Buddha would so directly speak truth. I won't tell you the whole long story, but the woman Patachara had gone through enormous suffering. She had left her parents. Both her children and her husband died when she was giving birth to her second child. She picked up the baby and her other little baby, started home to her parents. Both her kids died in a raging flood. She got to her parents' home—there had just been a storm that had made the kids die—and the roof of the house had fallen in. Both her parents and her brother had died. All this in a twenty-four hour period. She went mad.

She was wandering around for months or years, naked and crazy, and people threw things at her. Finally she came around the Buddha, and the Buddha's disciples tried to drive her away. "Get away! Don't bother the Blessed One." They threw things. And he, of course, told them to stop. A man gave her a cloak, and the Buddha said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she was sane again.

Then she told him the whole story. This is the translation, so I don't know if it's exactly word for word accurate, but it captures the sense. We might say, "Oh yeah, that's really hard, so much grief." He just said, "Don't think you've come to someone who can change that. Don't think you've come to someone who can help that." He said, "In all your lives, you've cried more tears for the deaths of loved ones than there are waters in the ocean."

Isn't that interesting? Is that what we tend to say to someone who comes in grief? And it's not just this grief—it's endless lifetimes of grief. That sobered her up. "Oh, okay, let me really understand this."

I don't know, just somehow I love it—the sense of not being afraid to really face the radical, uncompromising quality of impermanence.

It's moment to moment. It's always. It's every experience we have. And facing that doesn't take us into more dukkha. It doesn't take us into depression and an unbearable quality of life. We do need to face our grief and our holding on and our sadness. But really, we stop being sandpaper rubbing up against experience. And it gives us the potential to really open into the unknown.

I don't know what's really going to happen on Wednesday, July 12th at 4:30 Eastern Standard Time this summer. I really don't have a clue whether I'll actually be here on the East Coast. So we make our plans and then we're just open to whatever it is that might happen. And that leads, I think, to such a beauty and appreciation of life, of the

moment, of the fragility and the beauty. It allows us to be really present in a tender, open way—as the Tibetans say, ceaselessly responsive to experience rather than needing to control it.

I want to end by reading from two different people who I think really speak to the power and flexibility and beauty, the responsive quality that's possible when we're open to impermanence.

The first comes from the biography of Issan Dorsey, a Zen teacher in San Francisco who opened the Maitri Hospice in the late 1980s for men dying of AIDS. He opened the hospice not really knowing how it was going to work—he was kind of flying by the seat of his pants. This is a quotation from another man who was doing it with him. They said:

"We've always dealt with whatever came to the door. We started the hospice because death came to the door"—a friend of theirs who was dying of AIDS. "You can deal with a complex changing situation because you don't have to control it. You don't have to force it into an ideal pattern. You actually allow it to be whatever it is, and thus you allow yourself to adapt to what it becomes. Because this is the way we proceed—we respond to the immediacy of the situation—therefore, we're very practical."

That's so different from having an idea: this is how it should be, this is how we are, this is what we can do. It's just all a big flow, and we're able to be so much more responsive—and also much more courageous.

I'll end with this, from an interview with Dr. Ariyaratne, the founder and leader of the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka. He's a Buddhist, a peace activist, a social activist working with poor people. Sarvodaya means "the awakening of all," the awakening of the whole person. This is from an interview with him:

"In 1952, a gangster was asked to kill me. I was trying to serve the students in our communities who were in need, and some people's financial or other interests were threatened, so they gave a contract killer some money to kill me. I heard about it. So I went to him, and I told him, 'This is what I'm doing. If you want to kill me, do it now—not in my school or with my students, because then those places would have a bad name after them.' I don't want other people's blood to be shed. At that time, and even now, I have that courage. To let others live, if necessary, you sacrifice. You're not foolish to throw away your life like that. It is a spiritual motivation, because every moment we are born, we exist, and we pass away. Every moment. In our mind or our body, is there

anything that is permanent for two seconds? Without our knowledge, it's changing. Impermanence is a law. And when you understand that, when you practice it, you get a lot of courage. And even in death, you see life."

Obviously the man didn't kill him. He was very impressed and didn't kill him.

So the power of impermanence—to free our heart and mind from suffering and to open us into a life that is so much more connected and responsive and flexible.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 15

Poems of the First Buddhist Nuns

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson brings to life the stories and enlightenment poems of the Therīs—the first Buddhist nuns who practiced during the Buddha's time. Drawing from the Therīgāthā (Verses of the Elder Nuns), she shares accounts of women from all walks of life: queens, courtesans, grieving mothers, and elderly practitioners who found liberation through the Dhamma.*
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> *The talk begins with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's foster mother and founder of the bhikkhunī order, whose perseverance led to women being permitted to ordain. Wilson then recounts the profound suffering of Paṭācārā, who lost her entire family before finding peace through the Buddha's teaching, and Dhammadinnā, whose Dhamma discourse in Majjhima Nikāya 44 (Cūḷavedalla Sutta) was praised by the Buddha himself as equivalent to his own words.*
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> *Particularly moving are the "hard time practice" poems—verses from nuns who struggled for years before awakening. Samā practiced 25 years without peace; Sīhā nearly took her own life before finding freedom; Ambapālī, once the most beautiful courtesan in Vesālī, contemplated impermanence through her aging body. These accounts reveal that awakening often comes through sustained effort and honest confrontation with suffering, offering encouragement to practitioners facing their own difficulties on the path.*

This month, for some reason, when I drive around at night and see the Christmas lights—or the holiday lights, to be PC—I've been appreciating them more than ever. More than I usually do, in terms of the symbolism of the solstice and how the dark time of day has been accumulating more and more. And then slowly, slowly, the light starts to come back in. It's really a symbol of awakening.

The last couple of days, this line has just been running through my mind. In a way, it just feels like a time when I personally need inspiration, and the world could use some inspiration. We all could use some inspiration. And this line that keeps coming to me is a fairly common phrase in many of the first Buddhist nuns' enlightenment poems. I'll just read this paragraph—it's a classic description in these poems of a woman's awakening:

Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed, the great dark is torn apart, and death, you too are destroyed.

That's just been running through my mind. "Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed"—I know some of us don't really want to destroy the love of pleasure. "The great dark is torn apart." That image I love.

Since it's been running through my mind, it made me start thinking more about the poems of the first nuns, and I decided that it makes me happy to talk about them, to tell their stories and read their poems. So that's what I'm going to do tonight.

If we read the suttas, we hear so much about the monks at the time of the Buddha. So many of his discourses begin, "Oh bhikkhus." Over the years, it's been very supportive and inspiring to me to read about and get in touch with the stories and poems of many of the women who were nuns at the time of the Buddha. A few I'll tell stories about were lay women who did not become nuns.

What I like about it is knowing the story of each woman and then having the translation of the poem that she wrote. It takes the whole thing, for me, out of the realm of mythology, of story, because it makes the women really real. They feel like my sisters. All of us—the men too—going through the same difficulties, coming from all different walks of life. Some very easily walking on the path of awakening, some really struggling for years and years. Of course, if we have a poem from them, that means they got enlightened. We don't really have a lot of poems from all the ones who struggled and didn't make it. But that's beside the point. It's more about hearing them and seeing the different qualities—the depth of faith and perseverance and commitment—and the inspiration that comes to me from their poems. It just makes me happy to talk about it, so I want to share it with you all again tonight.

The first woman I have to talk about is the one who's considered really the mother of the bhikkhuni order, the woman because of whom the Buddha actually agreed to ordain women in the first place. That's Mahapajapati Gotami, his stepmother—really his aunt. The Buddha's mother died when he was a week old, and his aunt, his mother's younger sister, was also married to the Buddha's father. Kings had many wives in those days. She raised the Buddha along with her own son and daughter.

The Buddha, as you know, went off and got enlightened and left his family. He came back and was teaching and preaching to his family, and they became followers. When Mahapajapati Gotami's husband, King Suddhodana, died, she faced a situation that was the situation of many Indian women in that time. Women's place in society was accorded to the man she was connected with. She was the daughter of someone when she lived with her father. She was the wife of someone when she lived with her husband. She was the mother of someone and lived with her son. Women were very connected to men.

So when her husband died, her son and her nephew—the Buddha—well, her son had gone off and become a monk. She didn't really have any man to protect her. In another way, she was also free then to do what she wanted. There were many other women at that same time in that kinship group who were also without husbands—partly because many men had gone off and become monks with the Buddha, leaving behind their wives and mothers and daughters. At this time as well, her family and King Suddhodana's family, their extended kin, had a war over water rights to a particular river.

They were so closely related, and yet they had a war, and many men were killed.

The Buddha was called in at that time to arbitrate. And he was so inspiring in calling people to peace that a whole lot of other men then went off and became bhikkhus as well.

So this left Mahapajapati and many, many women. They say 500 women. Andy Olenski, the head of BCBS, who's a Pali scholar, says that when they say 500 people, it basically means a big bunch of people, a lot of people. It's a kind of shorthand.

Mahapajapati was really inspired—just as inspired as her male kin—by the Buddha's teaching and by the possibility of awakening. She had great faith, and she went together with 500 women to the Buddha and asked him, saying that she also wanted to become a mendicant. She wanted to ordain, to become a nun.

And there were no nuns. It was just a wandering order of monks. At this time, it would have been very shocking. It simply wasn't done to make an equal order of nuns.

And the Buddha said no. When she asked him the requisite three times, after the third time—at which point he's supposed to say yes, if he's going to say yes—he still said no. He said, "Enough, Gautami. Don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this." This was a final no. And he took his robes and went wandering off to another town, to Vesali.

So Pajapati shaved her head and put on orange robes. In India, even now, wandering ascetics dress in orange, men and women both. She shaved her head, dressed in orange, and barefoot, accompanied by all these women, followed him to this next town.

Now remember, she was the wife of a king. For her, walking barefoot 200 miles—when she got there, her feet were swollen and bleeding. She was exhausted, and she stood outside the hall where the Buddha was, weeping.

But this wasn't some kind of challenge to the Buddha. She just felt so filled with faith and determination. That sense of urgency: "Yes, I want to really renounce the world and practice the Dhamma." She wasn't trying to push the Buddha; she just followed him because that's where her heart was.

She's standing outside crying when Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, came along. This is one of the many places in the suttas that has the effect of making one really love Ananda, because he was so kind. His motivation always seems to have been: what can I do to help people come closer to the Buddha, come closer to the Dhamma? Kind in a really impersonal way.

Of course he knew her, because Ananda was the Buddha's cousin. He said, "What's going on?" She told him, and he went to the Buddha and said, "Pajapati is standing outside with swollen feet, covered with dust, and crying because you do not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state. It would be good, Lord, if women were to have permission to do this."

And the Buddha says, "Enough, Ananda. Don't set your heart on this."

Ananda asked the requisite three times, after which the Buddha still said no. But Ananda doesn't give up. He knows the way around the Buddha. He said, "Let me think about it a different way. Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" In other words, can they have the same awakening as men?

And the Buddha said, "Yes, that is so."

So then Ananda said, "If women are able to realize perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, nurse, foster mother; when your mother died, she even suckled you at her own breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

And he basically just wore the Buddha down.

So at this point, the Buddha said, "All right, okay, women can enter." And he made eight special rules which drive all contemporary women crazy. I don't want to go into the politics, because who knows the politics of that time. He made rules that basically were for women's protection, but also the first rule being that the most senior nun still had to bow to the most junior monk.

He doesn't explain why he does things, of course. But because he's made it clear that it has nothing to do with awakening—any woman, any man can awaken—my best guess is it had to do with how women are perceived in society, and just trying not to make a ruckus.

So Pajapati, at any rate, agreed with great gratitude and became a nun, as did the 500 women with her.

And Pajapati over time became a great teacher. She was clearly a very committed, courageous, and energetic person, filled with great faith and perseverance—not to be turned down. I could imagine if I had traveled really far after a revered teacher and he kept telling me no, how easy it would be to say, "Oh, okay, if you say so, I'll go somewhere else." And she said no. Of course, she did raise him—there is something to that. But she just wasn't taking no for an answer, really, but in a very loving way.

Something that's interesting, just to know that she had this kind of courage and faith in knowing that women are just as able to awaken as men, and she kept that—not sort of what we'd say trying to push the envelope, but really to the end. It's not talked about much, but at some point later she went back to the Buddha and asked him if he would revoke that first rule, the one that senior nuns have to bow to junior monks. And he said no. He said, "I can't do it. I can't allow it. Even those teachers of false dharma don't permit such conduct in relation to women. So then how can I do it?" We can't understand it. But it's cultural. Don't waste your time on it. But I'm bringing it up to show you the kind of courage and steadfastness of heart.

Also, it is said—and this is a little mythological—but she died very old. They say 120. But when she was very sick, she knew she was going to die. At that point, some of the monastic rules that had sprung up were that a sick nun could not be visited by a monk. All the rules just had sprung up in reaction. The Buddha would make a rule whenever something happened that caused harm to a monk or a nun, or that shook the faith of lay people. And that's really important to remember. A lot of the monks' rules—for instance, this would be one, that a monk couldn't visit a sick nun—it wouldn't be that there's something bad about a monk visiting a sick nun, but that lay people could get the wrong idea and talk and shake their faith. And that's really interesting. The Buddha put a lot of importance on that.

But anyway, Pajapati knew that it was against the rules, but she requested that the Buddha come to her. And he did. So in effect, that changed the rule again by his doing that. He came to her when she was dying.

So I just want to read to you her poem because it brings up some of her qualities:

Homage to you, Buddha, the best of all beings, who set me and many others free from pain. All pain is understood. The cause, the craving is dried up. The noble eightfold way unfolds. I have reached the state where everything stops. I have been mother, son, father, brother, grandmother, knowing nothing of the truth I journeyed on. But I have seen the Blessed One. This is my last body. And I will not go from birth to birth again. Look at the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is homage to the Buddhas.

I love that. Because if you think about it, that last stanza—that's you. That's all of us, the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is homage to the Buddhas.

That's part of what I find so inspiring, reading about and just connecting with the energy of these women. Because just as at that time, down through all these two and a half millennia, it's still so that there are women and men with their sincere effort and energy practicing, in that way giving homage to all the Buddhas. And I think, having spoken with each of you in the last couple days, I felt really inspired by the depth of commitment. For many of you, it's been years and years and years of your life commitment, with ups and downs. And I know a lot of times we really lose touch with what this is all about.

Why am I doing it? But just the being together with sincere effort, with your sincere energy—it is paying homage to the Buddhas and keeping the Buddhasasana alive.

We're really direct descendants of these women.

In fact, one of the things I've loved in the last three or four years that I've been teaching the retreat in northern Burma at Cha Shwa up in Sagaing—there are many monasteries and many nunneries. Right next door to the monastery where our retreat is, there are three nunneries. One of them has about forty nuns, one has thirty-five, the smaller one has ten or fourteen. Nuns ranging from little girls, five or six years old, in their little pink robes—so adorable—up through all ages to really older women. They're just doing it, living the life. It's a hard life, but with great dedication. And of course, a whole range of personalities, a whole range of ways that they are.

But the sense of radiance from some of these women, even as little as we can talk, because we can't talk very well—I don't speak Burmese—but the last couple of years, we've been inviting some of them to come over for our last sitting in the evening. It's at eight o'clock at night, it's dark. And it's work for them. They're studying. Most of them are studying very hard to pass these Pali exams that are given every year. They're really working hard, and they have to go out and get their food.

So they come over to do some chanting at the beginning of our sitting. There's something about that—I can just describe it, but I can't really give you the feeling. It's dark, they come filing in, in their order of ordination. They always walk in order. They come and sit down and start chanting, and it just feels like we could be sitting back there in Vesali twenty-six hundred years ago. They're just so... I don't know, I just get this feeling of timelessness and the power of the Buddhasasana, and the men and women who have kept it alive and are keeping it alive.

So even though we're not in robes, we're part of that.

You can see in reading about the different women, the different nuns at that time, how they came from all different stations of life. Mahapajapati Gotami came from a very privileged class. Some of the other women who became great teachers to the other nuns also came from privilege. But others became great teachers who had very different backgrounds, and still others, depending on their personality, found different expressions entirely.

Just like us—we each express our Dhamma, we each express our insights and our awakenings in the way that's unique to our particular personality, our particular life situation, our particular choices. And that's the same with these women.

Some became teachers. Some became inspirational, like Mahapajapati. She wasn't so much a teacher as a guide and inspiration. Others became very quiet ascetics, just living in quiet, renowned for their asceticism. Some became the women who ran the communities, made things comfortable, made it easy for the women to live together. Everyone found their own way of expressing.

And they all came from such different circumstances: rich backgrounds, enormous suffering, states of great happiness, destitution. There were queens, there were courtesans, there were really poor prostitutes, there were middle-class women, there were women who had been slaves.

What was radical in the Buddha's sasana, both the nuns and the monks, was that once someone became ordained—you know how in India the caste system was so strong, so rigidly applied. The caste you were born in determined your class, determined your life. Once one became ordained, that was done away with. It was all just in order of ordination. Someone could have been a really destitute prostitute and she would be senior to the wife of a king. It had nothing to do with where you came from.

I find that inspiring as well.

So I want to talk about one other example. I mentioned it the other night—one of the women who became the greatest teacher, who brought many other women into the nuns' sangha, was this woman Patachara. I told her story the other night, so I don't want to go into it too much, just to remind you. For those who weren't here: she was middle class, and her parents had arranged a marriage which she didn't want. She had fallen in love with a servant, which was not done. So she and the servant ran away and got married in another town.

But when she got pregnant, she wanted to go back to her parents, to her family, to have the baby. Understandably, her husband really didn't want to go. So they waited until too late. They started out, she had the baby on the way, and they thought, oh well, forget about it, and went back to their home again.

She got pregnant again. Same story. And this time—I'll just make it short—she starts to have the baby again on the way. You'd think they would have learned, but no. So she starts to have the baby again. A big storm starts coming. Her husband goes out to cut some brush to make a shelter. He's bitten by a poisonous snake and dies. She doesn't know what happens to him. She just has the baby. She doesn't know where he is, but gets up the next morning and starts to walk, and finds his body—grief-stricken.

And she keeps on going to her parents' home. She has to cross a really swollen river, and in the course of that crossing, both of her children get swept away and die. So she's almost crazed by now. She keeps going to her parents' home, gets to the edge of the town—and they've had this huge storm as well—and says to the first man she meets, "Where is the home of my family?" And he says, "Ask me anything, but don't ask me that." She says, "That's the only thing I want to know." And he says, "See that smoke? That's from the funeral pyre. The storm caved in the house, and both parents and your brother were killed."

So she loses it. She really goes insane. She wanders for years, and people just throw things at her. She wanders around crazed until she comes finally to the Buddha. And even there, not Ananda, but some of the other lay people around pick up things and throw them at her, trying to drive her away. "Don't bother the holy man." But of course, he says otherwise. He says, "Sister, recover your senses." And she does. She's naked also—she's lost her clothes—so a kind man gives her a cloak. She comes and sits in front of the Buddha.

Remember, this is where I said—I think it was last week—how I love the Buddha's response. She tells him her whole story. And this is where the power of speaking truth to suffering comes through. Not "Oh, too bad, you know, it happens," but: "Patachara, don't think you've come to someone who can help you. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than there is water in the four oceans."

And this helps her. And he then goes on to say that when you come to die, no one can help you. None of your kin can help you. Nobody else can help your suffering. You have to practice and understand for yourself.

And so she does. She ordains and becomes a nun.

Now, what I also love about her story is that it's not one of these—oh, okay, that's what you say, completely awaken, that's the end of it. No, she had to practice quite some time and have some struggles. But her poem is a lovely poem because she's describing in this poem the moment of her awakening. And I can really relate to it. It's just so precise. It could be any of us.

She's saying: "When they plow their fields and sow seeds in the earth, when they care for their wives and children, young Brahmins find riches. But I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?"

"Bathing my feet, I watched the bathwater spill down the slope."

This is a good poem about why being continuous, even when you're doing other things than sitting or walking, is really valuable.

"Bathing my feet, I watched the bathwater spill down the slope. I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed, and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down."

When the lamp went out, my mind was freed.

That's also a kind of pun on the word *nirvana,* because *nirvana* means "going out" in a way. But isn't that lovely? You get the sense of the struggle. And that's something I love about these poems. There are many that reflect the struggle these women went through. It's not all, "Oh, the Buddha said this, and I'm enlightened," like Khema, that queen I told you about. That's a rarer story than the struggle.

But Patachara, because of the enormity of her suffering, what she went through, was able to really help others with great compassion. There are quite a few poems that refer to her without using her name, describing how she helped them. Maybe you can get a sense from this one of her compassion.

This poem is by a woman named Chanda, who had also lost all her family to some kind of plague or disease. Her parents, her husband, her children—everyone died but her. And because, as I said, a woman's livelihood really depended on the male members of her family, there was no one left. She had to wander from house to house begging for food for her subsistence. When she finally came to Patachara and encountered the Dhamma, she had really been suffering for a long time. So this is her poem:

I was in a bad way, a widow, no friends, no children, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered house to house in the heat and cold for seven years. But I met a nun who had food and drink, and I went up to her and said, "Take me into the homeless life." She was Patachara. Out of pity, she guided me in leaving home, encouraged me, and urged me to the highest goal. I took her advice. It wasn't wasted.

But do you notice? The first thing she says is, "I met a nun who had food and drink." In other words, what did this woman need first? She needed food. She needed sustenance. Just get a sense of that natural compassion.

Often—and I may be totally projecting onto you—but often when I would read some of the suttas, and they sound kind of formal, it can all sound very much like the Buddha or the monk is just preaching, and everyone says, "Oh yes, Reverend Sir," and that's it. You don't quite get the human quality. But of course there's this sense: this poor, emaciated beggar woman comes, and the first thing Patachara does isn't preach the Dhamma—it's give her some food. And then the woman becomes interested and wants to learn the Dhamma and asks for instruction. So I quite like that.

Now I want to talk about another woman who became a great teacher. Dhammadina—the Buddha referred to her as foremost in preaching. In other words, in giving Dhamma instruction, Dhamma talks, she was the foremost among the nuns. She came from a very privileged background. Her story is lighter, an easier story.

She was the wife of an important man in Rajagaha, and they had a very happy marriage. So she wasn't coming from suffering at all. But one day her husband had been out hearing the Buddha teach. Actually, it shows up in several of these stories that the wives

of rich men or the wives of kings couldn't get around so much. The men could go hear teachings, and even women's servants often had more freedom to move about and hear the Buddha teaching than the rich women themselves.

So she was home, and her husband came back this day from hearing the Buddha preach. Usually he would come in and they'd sit and eat together and have a very friendly meal. Instead, he just walked by without noticing her. Right away, of course, she thought, "Is he angry? What did I do? What's wrong?" I really relate to that—right away thinking, "What did I do wrong? Why is he not nice to me?"

But then he called to her and explained. He had been so deeply inspired hearing the Buddha teach that he'd had a profound realization. He wanted to renounce the world and become a monk. He realized this left her in a difficult position, but he said he would give her all his wealth. She could do with it whatever she pleased and she'd be taken care of. He was going to go off. She could stay in the home, go back to her family, whatever she wished.

So she thought about it. And she said, "You know what?"

I also want to renounce.

The bhikkhuni order existed at this time. He said, okay, and he respected her wishes. He sent her off in great fanfare, being carried in a litter to the nuns, to the bhikkhuni sangha to ordain. And she did. She ordained and practiced very hard. She was one who didn't have to practice for such a long time to really achieve the highest awakening.

Later she was wandering with some other bhikkhunis and came back to Rajagaha, where she had lived. And lo and behold, her husband had changed his mind and had not become a monk. He was still hanging out in Rajagaha, doing his business, whatever. Just a little dig here—Sayadaw U Pandita often liked to say that women make the best yogis. I just thought I'd tell you that.

But her husband was still quite a devoted follower of the Buddha. When she came back, he went to her—not as his former wife, but as a respected nun—and sat at her feet and asked for teachings. Again, in India of this time, this was revolutionary.

So for Dhammadina, what we have is not a poem. What we have is a whole sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya. Sutta number 44 is basically the series of questions that her former husband asked Dhammadina and the answers that she gave. I'm not going to read the sutta—it's fairly long. The questions are very subtle and complex, addressing the nature of personality view, how to abandon it, the nature of consciousness, all kinds of things. A very subtle sutta. He asks her all these questions, and she answers.

The reason it's in the Majjhima is because afterwards he went and told the Buddha everything Dhammadina had said, which is commonly what happens after someone other than the Buddha has given a talk—it's always reported to the Buddha. And if it made it into the suttas, it's because the Buddha approved. As he said after this: "Dhammadina is a very wise woman. I would have answered exactly as she did. Just what she said, such is its meaning, and so you should remember it."

So he's basically saying that her words are buddhavacana—words of the Buddha. He's giving the stamp that her words are the equivalent of the words of the Buddha. That's really quite a powerful statement in terms of the realization and the power to communicate it of this woman, Dhammadina. And there were quite a few women for whom she was their teacher, their guide in coming into the sasana, into the sangha, and in their practice.

But I want to read a few of the hard-time practice poems, partly because I like them. They seem so real, and they're short. And just because they give us something we can really relate to. Some of them are really, I mean, hard-time practice.

The first one is from a woman known as Sama. She ordained in great sorrow at the death of one of her friends, and maybe I'll tell that story in a little bit. But this is her poem. She was struggling for twenty-five years after she ordained. Just so you know, it's not all like three months or so:

It was twenty-five years since I turned away from home, and I hadn't had a moment's peace.

Can you relate? Twenty-five years—we're not talking two weeks or two months.

I had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror.

That means the Buddha.

Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died. Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert.

To me, that's a pith line, a pith teaching of the Buddha's Dhamma. Because how does delusion work? How does denial work? Because of the pain of things, I love to space out.

Because of the pain of things, I love to distract myself. That's how we live our lives in delusion and confusion. It's really a great heart, a great commitment, a great faith that says, "Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert." Really knowing that awakeness takes us right through the core of the pain, and from the pain out to freedom. But it's not by avoiding the pain. "Twenty-five years I didn't know peace."

Here's another one. This woman's name is Uttama, and this is another very specific poem. She came from a banker's family, so she came from a pretty easy background. She practiced hard, but this is another specific incident poem:

Four or five times I left my cell. I had no peace of mind, no control over my mind. I went to a nun I thought I could trust.

And they say this is Patachara here again.

She taught me the Dhamma—the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, and earth, water, fire, and wind, the elements. I heard what she said and sat cross-legged seven days full of joy. When on the eighth I stretched my feet out, the great dark was torn apart.

We can really relate. She kept going in and out of her cell, in and out of her cell. She had no peace of mind, no control over her mind. We all have sittings like that. We may not all sit for seven days cross-legged, full of joy. But that quality of willingness to persevere—that's really lovely.

This is one of my favorites. Sometimes I don't read it. My friend said I shouldn't read it because it's too depressing, but I like it. This is just not to give you any ideas, though. This is about Sihah. Sihah means lioness—that's her name. She was the niece of a very famous general of the Licchavi sect who would show up from time to time in different suttas. So you can imagine being the daughter of a general, she might have a little bit of striving and a little bit of needing to excel going on.

She heard the Buddha preach, Gautama preach, and then she decided to enter the nun's order. She very sincerely practiced for seven years. Nothing happened. And she got so distressed, so filled with despair, that she couldn't take it anymore and decided to kill herself. This is what I mean about not giving you any ideas. But just notice—it's a mind state. She just had this mind state of deciding to kill herself. She acted on that mind state. Now, this is what we have the wisdom not to do. But she acted on it. She went to hang herself, and obviously, just at the moment she was putting the rope about her neck and about to hang herself, she woke up.

I don't advocate relying on that happening. It's just like trying to pay attention to pain but really paying attention so you know it'll go away—knowing it doesn't work. This is the same. Anyway, this is her poem:

Obsessed by sensuality, I never got to the origin, but was agitated, my mind beyond control. I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace. Pale and thin, I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night. Then I took a rope into the forest and thought I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life. I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree and put it around my neck. Just then my heart was set free.

"Obsessed by sensuality, I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace." That really rings true, doesn't it? It doesn't sound like just some kind of stock statement. You know that sense we have of hitting ourselves against the wall, against the wall—we don't know how to let go until finally we get to the point where we just totally give up, and it happens by itself. That's why we can't fool it, because it happens by itself.

So that's Sihah, the lioness.

This next one is Mita Kali. She entered the order when she heard the Buddha give the Maha Satipatthana Sutta. Can you imagine actually hearing the Buddha give the discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness? I mean, can you imagine that? No, not really, but that would be something. Anyway, that inspired her to become a nun, but it's said that up until then she had the reputation of being a very difficult person—very angry, unpleasant, very self-centered. So she really worked on herself as a nun, but she had some work to do, and it was hard for a while. Again, this is her story, her poem:

Although I left home for no home and wandered full of faith, I was still greedy for possessions and praise. I lost my way. My passions used me, and I forgot the real point of my wandering life. Then as I sat in my little cell, there was only terror. I thought, this is the wrong way. A fever of longing controls me. Life is short. Age and sickness gnaw away. I have no time for carelessness before this body breaks. And as I watched the elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are. I stood up. My mind was completely free. The Buddha's teaching has been done.

That particular image she gives—life is short, watching the elements of the body kind of decay—that's used often. And it brings me to mention that there are quite a few poems of nuns, of women who became nuns when they were quite old in their life. Sometimes people come to practice rather late in life. We run into it often. And it's not uncommon for them to say, "Oh, I wasted so much of my life. I could have been practi-

cing all those years." And that could be whether you start at twenty or thirty or forty. It's easy to get into that: "I wasted my life. I could have been." But that's just not relevant. It doesn't matter.

There are stories of women who became nuns really quite late in life, but through their great dedication and faith and practice, they were also able to really come to some understanding, come to some freedom. In fact, I was a nun for a little while in Thailand quite a few years ago. In Thailand, I didn't run into the same support for nuns, or the same number of nuns and dedication of nuns and nunneries, that I see in Burma. I think there's starting to be a resurgence in Thailand, but the places I was—which was admittedly only two or three places—there were only very few nuns, and many of them were really quite elderly. I really have no way of knowing how they related to practice, but I was told that in some cases, old women would become nuns just sort of like going to an old age home. They didn't have somewhere else to go. And that's kind of sad, but it doesn't have to be that way.

So I wanted to read one poem from a woman who was simply called Dhamma. She was a very good wife, very obedient wife. She wanted to ordain younger in her life, and her husband said no. She had a respectable middle-class marriage. She was very devoted to the Buddha, but her husband said no. And so in the way of a devoted and honorable Indian wife, she respected her husband's wishes, stayed home, and was quite devoted until he died. When he died, she ordained. Her realization experience—again, it's described from one example—happened because of her aging body and the problems with it. She said:

I wandered for alms. I leaned on a stick. My whole body was weak and trembled. Suddenly I fell down and could see clearly the misery of this body. My heart was freed.

I find that quite inspiring. "I could see clearly the misery of this body. My heart was freed."

It's really a different way to go with it than "I can't handle it, it's just all falling apart," bitching and groaning. To really see it—it frees the heart from clinging, from false identification.

Here's another one from a woman named Chitta, the same kind of thing: "Though I am thin, sick, and lean on a stick, I have climbed up Vulture Peak. Robe thrown down, bowl turned over, leaned on a rock, then great darkness opened."

One thing these women possessed for sure, besides faith, was a real strong commitment—perseverance, energy. It may not be the energy of a young person who can go all day, but the energy of steady perseverance. That's quite inspiring. We all have that ca-

pacity. It doesn't matter if we're not as strong as we used to be or can't remember what we used to remember. We can still be present with that faith and perseverance, moment after moment.

I want to mention a couple of laywomen who didn't ordain as nuns, but whose stories make it into this context. One is the woman Samavati. She was the queen of King Udena, one of his queens. She's the woman because of whose death Sama became a nun. Now Samavati was very generous and loving, and she was a great devoted follower of the Buddha. She was said by the Buddha to be the laywoman most skilled in spreading metta. She was a very powerful metta being.

But because she was a queen, the wife of a king, she didn't have the freedom to follow the Buddha and hear his teachings. But—and this I find very interesting—her servant woman, whose name was Khujjuttara, could go about. The servants could go to the market, buy things. They could get around where the higher women couldn't. And so Samavati used to send Khujjuttara every day to the market with money to buy flowers to put in front of her altar.

Khujjuttara was doing this thing of keeping half of the money, only buying half as many flowers as she was supposed to and keeping the rest of the money. She had been doing this for so long, and Samavati just didn't suspect her. But then one day Khujjuttara heard the Buddha teach and was so inspired—in fact, it's said that she had a little awakening. She came back and confessed it all to Samavati, who, because she was so skilled in loving-kindness, readily forgave her and said, "But you have to tell me what this teacher said."

Khujjuttara had this prodigious memory. She would actually go and hear the Buddha talk and come back and share it with Samavati and all of her women friends, to the point that one of the smaller books in the Pali Canon, the book called the Itivuttaka, is said to be poems and prose that was remembered and related by Khujjuttara—the whole book. So both of these women had very profound understanding.

What happened is that one of Samavati's co-queens was very jealous of her because she was so beloved of the king, beloved of everybody. Why was she beloved? Because she was filled with metta. To make a long story short, this other queen got so jealous that she locked Samavati and all of her women in a building and set fire to it, and they were all killed in the fire. So it wasn't all peaches and cream back then either.

But the Buddha said—because with his psychic mind he could tell the destination of people in their next life—he said that all of those women had to some degree awakened. And that was really thanks to the teachings that Khujjuttara was able to share. I find that quite lovely.

I'll just end with one other story and poem of a different kind of woman, and this is a woman who was a courtesan, basically a really high-class prostitute. They had both, you know—poor low-class prostitutes and courtesans. In this society, if you were a very rich courtesan, you were the courtesan for kings and the high-class men of the culture.

This woman's name is Ambapali. She was considered the most beautiful woman in Vesali. In fact, she was so beautiful that she was found under a mango tree. Ambapali kind of means "mango guardian woman." As she grew up, she was so beautiful that all the different rich men and kings were fighting over her. They resolved this by making her the official courtesan of the whole town of Vesali. And somehow that wasn't a shameful thing—it gave her great prestige and great wealth. She was very well respected, this beautiful Ambapali. She actually had a son by a king of the time, King Bimbisara. And there are stories about her in the suttas where she would come to visit the Buddha and invite him and all his bhikkhus to come for a meal with her.

And he would accept and go. There was no shame in it, but he would tell his bhikkhus, "Keep your eyes down. She's very beautiful. Don't let yourself get distracted by her beauty. But it's totally appropriate to appreciate her generosity and her support of the Sangha."

At some point, her son—the one she had by King Bimbisara—became a monk also. And eventually, he talked his mother into becoming a nun. It's said that she came to her really deep understanding by studying impermanence in her own aging body. Now, this is someone who had been very beautiful, whose whole life was centered around how beautiful she was.

Her poem is quite long, so I will only read part of it. I particularly love it because it has a sense of humor—at least to me it does.

My hair was black and curly, the color of black bees.
Now that I am old, it is like the hemp of trees.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

Fragrant as a scented oak, I wore flowers in my hair.
Now because of old age, it smells like dog's hair.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

It was thick as a grove, and I parted it with comb and pin.
Now because of old age, it is thin, very thin.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

My eyes flashed like jewels, long, black—
Now they don't make anyone look back.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

My teeth were beautiful, the color of plantain buds.
Now because of old age they are broken and yellow.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

She goes on through all different parts of her body. And she ends with: *This is how my body was. Now it is dilapidated, the place of pain, an old house with the plaster falling off.*

But that's not coming from a place of complaining. It's coming from a place of awakening—a place of recognizing, "How can I be attached to this?"

I will end with this one poem from Uttama:

The Buddha taught seven factors of enlightenment.
They are ways to find peace, and I have developed them all.
I have found what is vast and empty, the unborn.
It is what I've longed for.
I am a true daughter of the Buddha,
always finding joy in peace.
I have ended the hunger of gods and humans,
and I will not wander from birth to birth.
I have no thought of becoming.

May we all have no thought of becoming.

CHAPTER 16

Practicing Muditā

Carol Wilson · 54 min

In this talk from a Vipassanā intensive, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of muditā (appreciative joy) and its place within the four brahmavihāras (boundless states). She begins by addressing a common misconception—that cultivating joy might be a peripheral aspect of practice—and establishes through teachings from the Dalai Lama and the Buddha that fulfilling our aspiration for happiness is central to the spiritual path.

Wilson draws on the Buddha's teaching that the mind is naturally luminous and brightly shining, but becomes covered by visiting afflictive emotions. She explains that muditā practice helps us recognize and trust this natural state of openness, where appreciative joy arises spontaneously when we perceive another's happiness without self-referencing or comparison. The talk addresses common obstacles including the comparing mind (māna), the near enemies of attached joy and exuberant energy that leads to crashing, and the far enemies of envy and jealousy.

Practical guidance is offered for working with the phrases "may your happiness continue" as a way of inclining the heart rather than magical wishing. Wilson emphasizes starting with easy subjects and trusting the gradual nature of the practice, noting that much transformation happens below conscious observation. She concludes with Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching on consciously bringing up seeds of joy to balance overwhelming suffering, illustrating how muditā strengthens our capacity to be present with all aspects of life.

And why are we doing this? Really, essentially, how does this practice of muditā, of appreciative joy, fit into the whole mandala of our spiritual path, of our spiritual practice?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in his book called *The Good Heart*, wrote that the purpose, in his view, of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness. He goes on to say that all of us humans are equal in this—that we all desire happiness and to abandon suffering, and that we all share equally in the right to fulfill this aspiration. An aspiration, not incredibly greedy desire. An aspiration for happiness.

I say that because it's one way of looking at the point of our spiritual path, and to try to move out of any lingering sense someone might have had that somehow this cultivation of joy, of happiness, is a little bit dubious side aspect to practice. Maybe it's nice

when you hit into some good feeling, but it's not really part of the big picture. There's something a little off with looking for happiness. That's why I chose this particular quotation.

Of course, the big point of our understanding and what we come to understand through our whole lifetime of practice is what exactly that word happiness is really referring to, and that's the subject of many talks. But the Dalai Lama, again in *The Good Heart*, goes on to say that in terms of fulfilling our desire for happiness, when we first think of happiness, often we think of sense pleasure—happiness of pleasant sense experience—which is certainly a kind of happiness that comes and goes. It's not what we're talking about in terms of spiritual aspiration.

He goes on, though, to point out in his very simple and down-to-earth way that while the happiness of sense pleasures can fleetingly bring us happiness, mental happiness and mental unhappiness is generally so much stronger, has such a stronger effect on us than physical sense pleasure. Just giving the simple example: if you're in a really beautiful, lovely place—say it's a holiday you've planned for months, for years—and when you're there, you're in a really upset frame of mind. You and your partner have a giant fight, or you're grief-stricken over something that happened, or you're just anxious about your children the whole time. You could be in the best place in the world and not be able to enjoy it at all because of the mental states that we're experiencing and caught in.

Conversely, when our inner heart, our mind, is in a balanced frame—when we're happy, when we're content, when we're at ease, when we're not afflicted by these suffering mental states—then even when we're in a difficult situation, we're much more able to flow with the difficulties with ease. We still know it's difficult, but there's much more spaciousness, much more ease, much more balance within that difficult situation when our heart and mind is in a calm, contented, happy place.

These difficult states of heart and mind—what the Tibetans call afflictive emotions, that when they're present we feel afflicted—such as greed, anger, jealousy, pride, hatred, violence. You can run down the list. There's nothing too esoteric, and we're familiar with all of them. As strong as they are, and as much discomfort, as caught as we get when these afflictive emotions are present in our heart and mind, we can be so caught—as in that example I gave of being in some beautiful place and being completely miserable. It seems often as if we're the victims, as if there's nothing we can do but just be assaulted by these afflictive emotions, these states of heart.

But what all spiritual paths, and this one too, show us—and hope to help us open to, to really learn to trust—is that as strong as these afflictive emotions are, they are not the purest or strongest or most natural state of our heart and mind. So many of us—I don't mean to speak for you, so if it doesn't apply, let it go—but we give so much credence, so much energy, so much belief to the power of these afflictive emotions. It just seems like that's how things are.

I don't know how it is for you, but how do you feel when you hear me, or you read someone say, that actually the natural state of our heart and mind is one of peace that manifests as compassion or appreciative joy? That this is more our natural state, and these afflictive emotions are more like visitors—yeah, like visitors that never went away, visitors that live here.

The Dalai Lama says the more we accommodate these afflictive emotions, the stronger they grow. Really, a lot of our practice—our muditā practice here, but all our spiritual practices—is seeing for ourselves that this is not the natural state of our heart and mind, and we don't have to just give up and feel like victims. Learning to really trust that because we know it for ourselves, not because anybody else said it.

Pema Chödrön, an American nun in the Tibetan tradition who writes very pithy, helpful books, says: "Pointing directly at your own heart, you find Buddha. Maybe the reason there are dharma talks and books is just to encourage us to understand this simple teaching. All the wisdom about how we cause ourselves to suffer, and all the wisdom about how joyful and vast and uncomplicated our minds-hearts are"—mind-heart being the same word—"these two things, the understanding of what we might call neurosis and the wisdom of unconditioned, unbiased truth, can only be found in our own experience."

In a nutshell, that's how I look at what our spiritual practice is about. This cultivation of joy, of appreciative joy, of connected joy, is one way of accessing, learning to more deeply experience and trust the fact that vastness, that openness, that potential for connected joy is a more natural aspect of our experience than envy and jealousy.

I'll say the same thing in another way. This is a very famous quotation from the Buddha. He said: "Luminous is this mind-heart, brightly shining..."

but it is covered, it is hidden, by the attachments that visit it. This the uninstructed people do not understand, and so for them there is no cultivation of the mind, of the heart. Uninstructed people don't understand that the brightly luminous mind is covered by these visiting attachments.

Luminous is this mind, heart, brightly shining, and it is untouched, unstained by the visiting states of mind. This the noble follower of the way really understands. And so for them there is cultivation of the heart, of the mind.

That's what our practices are, whether it's empathetic joy or metta or vipassana—cultivation of the heart, cultivation of the mind, really learning to see through, not to be so diverted by the visiting afflictive emotions, to be able to trust and recognize the luminous, vast quality of heart and mind. Sometimes all we get is a teeny, teeny little glimmer. Sometimes not even that. But what's amazing, in my experience—take for example being on a retreat, since that's where we are—I could slog through a day, a day and a half, we'll just keep it short like that, it could be longer. Slog, nothing, my mind just saying the phrases, nothing's happening. And then there's a little glimmer, say, of touching joy. It may be when I'm sitting saying the phrases, maybe outside, it may be drinking tea. It just comes unexpected, because you can't make it happen. It may not last long, but the effect it has in the mind stream, in the heart, in the sense of trust—as a teacher of mine said, a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. There's some way we know in our heart when we're touching the truth, and it keeps us going. It's lucky that it's that ratio. It keeps us going through the hard stuff.

Let me say the same thing another way. This is from Dan Goleman's book *Social Intelligence*. He's quoting a scientist from Harvard, Jerome Kagan, who makes a simple point about human nature: that the sum total of goodness vastly outweighs that of meanness. It's a quotation now: "Although humans inherit a biological bias that permits them to feel anger, jealousy, selfishness and envy and to be rude, aggressive or violent," Kagan notes, "humans also inherit an even stronger biological bias for kindness, compassion, love, cooperation, and nurture, especially toward those in need." This built-in ethical sense, he adds, is a biological feature of our species. So that's a more scientific way of looking at it—two ways of coming at the same thing.

Now, how mudita, or the four Brahma Viharas, which are states of mind, states of heart—like I mentioned last night—loving-kindness or friendliness, compassion, sympathetic appreciative joy, equanimity... These four are called boundless or limitless states because they have the potential, when we're really experiencing them, to include all beings. A real moment, say, of loving-kindness, friendliness, is the sense of simply connecting with another person without judgment, without bias, without saying, "I like this, that can go, you're okay, you're not." It's just a moment of open connectedness, non-separation. And it's not some unusual esoteric thing. It's a natural thing that we all experience.

We've used the example of just seeing a small, happy child—you naturally feel connected. You naturally feel, if they're happy, appreciative joy. Metta turned towards happiness or joy takes the tone of appreciative joy. That same connectedness turned towards the suffering aspect takes the tone of compassion, which is connectedness with suffering. Equanimity is the wisdom, a kind of radiant calm of heart and mind that really can be with things as they are, knowing we can't always control the results. It gives the vastness. It's what allows us to really appreciate joy while knowing there's also suffering in the world. How do we hold both? That's kind of a tricky thing sometimes. Equanimity gives us that vastness.

I'm mentioning the four because from the state of the luminous nature of mind and heart, or the vastness that Pema Chödrön speaks of, the simplicity—when in any particular moment our heart and mind isn't all caught up, identified, fighting with these afflictive emotions, when those don't happen to be covering—the natural, unpremeditated response, the way we would respond in a situation, would really come out of probably one of these four Brahma Viharas. If we see someone in need or someone in danger, the natural response of the open heart and mind is to do something, just to respond. If we see someone here and they're crying and we know the space is okay, you leave them alone in their silence. But compassion still feels. Compassionate response could be to leave someone alone, but it's done out of that sense of connectedness. You see what I mean? It's not how it looks, it's the intention inside.

So these states of heart and mind are really natural when we're not all caught up with afflictive emotions. And the formal practice, in this case of appreciative joy, is actually a way to help us stabilize, to recognize more frequently the different ways that state of heart and mind can manifest, to notice what in our particular psyche gets in the way—because I'm sure you've noticed what gets in the way today—to see that still we can come back and connect with that joy, to really strengthen that habit of mind, to actually see that more than we realize, we have a choice where we might let our heart and mind dwell.

Remember what Guy said last night? It's one of my favorite quotations too, from the Buddha: "Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of her mind." So I don't know about you, but when I watch my mind in my daily life,

Where does it go? What is it frequently thinking and pondering upon? Well, just look and see for yourself. And then it's no big surprise what the habits of my mind are.

So here we're really making a conscious choice to come more into the true home of our heart, to learn to recognize, to learn to come back, to learn to trust, to have faith from your own experience—not from what I said.

Someone said today in one of the groups, which I'd have to agree, that culturally, the messages we get consciously and subliminally don't necessarily always support appreciative joy or compassion or kindness. I mean, some do, but there's a lot that don't. It's really incumbent on us. I feel that part of our path is learning with honesty, with clarity, without judgment: What is the inclination of my mind? Where do I go for refuge in my mind and heart, just left to my own devices? Really look and see. And then see, is that the choice I want to make? Then we learn that we do have a choice.

I read this on the BBC online in August from Nanjing, China. It's called "About the Rising Sun Anger Release Bar"—a bar that lets customers smash glasses, rant, and even hit specially trained workers. The owner, Mr. Wu, was inspired to open the bar by his experiences as a migrant worker. Most of his customers, he said, were women working in the service or entertainment industries. The bar employs twenty men who have been given protective gear and physical training to prepare them for the job. The clients can ask the men to dress as the character they wish to attack.

Now, this is a true story. They interviewed people on the street, and very much as it would be here, there were mixed opinions. One woman said, "The idea of beating someone dressed as my boss seems attractive. We get no place to vent anger." Then another man said, no, violence is not the answer—you need to adjust your lifestyle or seek psychological treatment. Just that, you know, places like that could even come into being, and some of us could think, well, that's a good thing to do. That's one of the ways the culture does not support us to really have this deep trust, this deep knowing. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, happiness is available—please help yourself. That's what we're learning here, how to help ourselves.

What we start to see, hopefully, through these practices—today, specifically through the appreciative joy practice, and similarly through all the four Brahmaviharas—is that how in our heart and mind we respond to a particular situation is what allows for the possibility of ease, contentment, and happiness, or for the kind of suffering that comes from being really caught up and divided in our mind.

In terms of the perception of suffering—if somebody's in pain or suffering—how in our heart and mind we respond to that matters deeply. If we respond with fear, with "it's too much, I can't take it in," with pity, with blame, or any of the understandable reactions, that is a distancing response. It really creates a sense of separation. We can either get angry or feel isolated or in despair, overwhelmed with the suffering. But com-

passion, which is just the connectedness of heart with the suffering, just seeing it as it is, takes away that sense of division, of separation. Compassion is one of the beautiful states of heart and mind because there's a connectedness in the suffering.

Similarly, with mudita, how our heart and mind respond in a moment to the perception of another being's happiness, joy, or success can create either a sense of separation, of isolation, of actual affliction in our heart and mind—or it can open us to the happiness of non-separation, of connectedness. Obviously, envy and jealousy on one side, or appreciative joy on the other.

This is an interview I heard on NPR a couple of years ago. I imagine those of you from Massachusetts might remember when the Red Sox won the World Series. We were here in the fall. Even though I've lived here a long time, it's not really the high point of my life, I have to say. But I got it—that it was the high point of many people's lives that fall.

After the World Series was over, they interviewed this Red Sox fan, and this is what he said: "This was the best moment of my life." And the joy—this is a quotation—"was not in the winning. It was in the sorrow and misery in the Yankee fans' eyes." This was said with full-hearted joy, I have to say.

Then they interviewed a Yankee fan who said, "This was the worst moment of my life." And the interviewer said, "Come on, the Yankees win a lot. Don't the Red Sox deserve to win sometime?" And the guy said, "Sure, when I'm dead."

So that's one way of responding. We laugh—it's funny, and it can kind of pump you up. But if you really look at how that guy feels, saying "I'm so happy at the misery in their eyes"—that's not really appreciative joy. It's going to, at some point, bring in some suffering.

When we're doing this formal practice of sympathetic joy, appreciative joy—bringing up a sense or an image of a person, repeating the simple phrase "may your happiness continue"—it's very simple, almost simplistic, actually. And just to say a couple of things: it's not a magic wish. It's not that somehow magically, if I say often enough "may your happiness never leave you," your happiness will never leave you.

This is where equanimity comes in. We actually know your happiness will leave you, because nobody gets nothing but happiness, just like nobody gets nothing but suffering. This is really why they're boundless. Appreciative joy is boundless because it is said that all beings experience some aspect of happiness, of joy, however small. Compassion also is boundless because all beings experience some aspects of suffering.

So we're not saying "may your happiness continue" as a magical wish. It's not a clinging. What it really is, is a way of expressing our inner climate, of inclining our heart and mind toward "Oh, I'm so happy that you're happy." That's another way of saying it. The one we're using—"may your happiness continue"—is more classical. But if that one leads your inner climate into wanting, if when you say that phrase what you feel arising in your heart and mind is some kind of clinging or wanting or pushing, then switch the phrase.

Because the phrase is really just to keep strengthening, or coming back to, that possibility that when I see someone else light up with happiness, my first thought won't be "why them and not me?" There's actually the potential for "Wow, they look happy," and I don't have to self-reference at all. It doesn't have anything to do with how I am. They're just happy. It's a possibility. It's a lovely possibility when it happens. You go, "Oh, wow, where did that come from?"

So each moment we're saying the phrase, it doesn't necessarily mean we feel that joy, but we're inclining the heart, inclining the mind in that direction. And even the saying of it is an expression of intention—the intention to have a thought, intention to say something, intention to act. So just to say the thought "may your happiness continue" is shifting the inner climate.

And every time that we do it during these days, it's like Sharon likes to say: it's like planting a seed. We're not in control of what conditions come or how soon that seed will sprout. The more that we can just leave it alone—plant the seed and leave it alone, plant the seed and leave it alone—the inner climate really does start to shift in its intention and in its habit. And that's really what we're doing in this practice, how it works.

As some people said in one of the groups, it works a lot below the level of our conscious observation. Our tendency—many of us who are kind of scientifically brought up—is to want to say it and get the result right away. "Okay, I've been here for 24 hours. Where's this joy? Where's this gratitude? How many times have I said that phrase? Come on!" We have such a small view, and such a short attention span. "Okay, now or never, I'm on to the next thing."

But there's stuff happening beneath the surface. Like someone said at another retreat they had done—I think it was a loving-kindness retreat—where it didn't really feel like much was going on during the retreat at all. They went home and really noticed something had shifted. That's been my personal experience often. We like to know. We like to be able to chart it, to write it down, to have something to measure against. But that needing to know just gets in our way. Just plant the seed.

May your happiness continue, and let it be. Do it again, and let it be. It's a challenge for some of us. It's a challenge for me—I'm a very impatient person. But as we begin to experience that maybe joy is more of a potential than we realized, it becomes a little easier to trust.

So, just to say a few other things about the practice of mudita. I guess you know by now, though I don't know if we've said it explicitly, that appreciative joy—when we're wishing someone happiness—first involves appreciation of a happiness or success they're experiencing that's wholesome. It's not as though they're doing something that's harming other beings and they're happy about it, and we feel happy for their happiness. That's not really what we're talking about. It doesn't feel good. It's interesting because if you do pick something like that with someone and you start to try and feel happy, it doesn't have that pureness, the simplicity of our vastness of heart and mind. It has some kind of... it doesn't quite feel right.

It's also a kind of joy that has this purity because it doesn't have clinging in it. All of these Brahma Viharas—the beautiful quality of them and the vastness of them, the limitlessness—is possible because there's no clinging, there's no wanting. Ultimately it's not about what am I getting from this. It's not about me at all. Even though we start with "may I, may you, may I feel joy at your happiness," as I think we've said, it moves in the direction of being less about me and you, and the joy is just there. There's no separation. That not-clinging is what moves into the wisdom of the freedom of heart and mind altogether in practice. The true liberation of heart, the Buddha said, is this liberation of mind through non-clinging. Mudita and the other Brahma Viharas are all expressions of the heart, the mind of non-clinging.

If there's really some clinging in it—and a lot of times there will be; this is why we're practicing, this is what we're learning to purify—you'll start to see that it feels different. It doesn't have that purity of appreciation, of contentment, of ease. There's a little too much "me needing something" going on in it. And while at first that can feel like happiness, when you really look closely, it isn't.

So in terms of appreciative joy, what is called the—they use all this warlike language in the commentaries from the Buddhist texts—a state of heart and mind that's close to and sometimes confused with appreciative joy: you could say it's joy with clinging. So it may be that you're happy at someone's happiness. Say a partner—my partner, thank God, finally they're happy. I don't have to listen to their whining anymore. I'm so happy that you're happy. There's some real joy in that, and there's a little bit of something else.

At first it can be hard to tease out the difference. But just here, sitting here over and over and over, you'll feel when you hit that pure appreciative joy. Oh, I'm really just so happy for you. It's very different.

Another so-called near enemy of appreciative joy—and this I did not understand until I had practiced it intensively myself—is a kind of exuberant, really high energy. I don't know if any of you have experienced that today. It hasn't maybe been enough time, but I think as Sally was saying when she was practicing mudita and she just felt like skipping around, that's an example of how the energy gets really... oh, wow! You know, like I said, when I was walking and doing mudita, I felt like I was walking like this up and down the path. I was a little curious what people were thinking because everyone else was schlumping around being mindful, and I'm like, "Oh yeah, may your happiness continue!" That kind of energy comes up.

And when it's not really connected, it starts to feel good. Then instead of funneling the energy back into connecting with the person and the expression of joy, we just kind of get into liking the joy. Wow, this is good. I could sing. I could go out in the woods and just sing to the birds. I could just go out... and you're dancing and singing around. And suddenly that high energy—what goes up must come down. You crash. You drag back into the hall. You're depressed. "I was so happy, and now I have no energy. What I need is a good nap." So that's just a way we get caught. It's also a kind of attached joy.

We're attached to the feeling, but it's all about me feeling gratified by the feeling. Again, it has a different flavor. So just experiment. Notice that.

The so-called far enemy—well, that's obvious: the opposite, envy and jealousy. If we're feeling envy, we don't feel appreciative joy. They're opposites because they don't exist in the same mind moment.

Part of how this practice works is that it brings up the habits of our mind that get in the way. This is one reason we try to start with someone easy—someone whose happiness you can easily see, but also someone you can genuinely be glad is happy. As I said, you don't start with the place where you're going to be most envious, because that makes it too hard. We need to learn what it feels like, learn how to incline and direct our heart and mind to appreciating someone's happiness where it's easy. Then we can tackle the big ones that are really causing us a lot of suffering. It may not seem like we're doing the real work, but it really, really helps to start with little things.

I use different examples a lot. When I think of a friend who is often quite happy—I have a good friend who loves to sing and play the guitar. In fact, you have to sit on him to stop him from singing and playing the guitar at any opportunity. Old James Taylor

songs, old Beatles songs—kumbaya if you're not watching out. Obviously, I don't love to sing and play the guitar myself. But I don't have to. I just have to tune in to his happiness, and I feel really happy. It doesn't threaten me that he sings and plays the guitar. Now, if my life revolved around trying to be a good guitar player and I really stunk at it, then every time he played, it might bring up envy. That might not be the easy one. But if you look, it's really not that hard to find lots of little things about almost anyone you know that makes them happy, and then use that.

This same friend loves to watch Pete Sampras play tennis—well, he used to, since Sampras retired, but he has old tapes. Just last night he said, "I have this old Pete Sampras tape we could watch." He gets really happy. So that's accessible.

Back to the Red Sox game. That guy who was gloating over the sorrow of the others—he could have just been simply happy at winning. The Yankee fan who lost and said, "They only deserve to win when I'm dead"—if he could have looked and thought, wow, look how happy those Red Sox fans are, and actually felt happy for them. That's an option. It's an option. It changes the whole landscape of how we live our life. And we can start in really little ways. It transforms our suffering reactions to experience. That's really what it's about—not having to be victims of these afflictive states of mind and heart.

I imagine if that Yankee fan heard me say, "Why don't you just look in the Red Sox fans' eyes and see how happy they are, and you could be happy too," he would not respond, "Oh yeah, why didn't I think of that? Thank you for your suggestion." Probably not. But we can do that.

How much does it increase our chances of contentment? It opens us to a vastness that actually lets us be more present with all aspects of life. It's not that we're ignoring suffering, but sometimes there's so much suffering in our own lives, in those we're close to, in the world. Just listen to the news—it's easy to feel like you're drowning in it, just overwhelmed. Learning how to open our heart, to actually gladden the heart and mind, to turn to the channel of joy as a way of strengthening and opening—it allows us to be present for all aspects of life.

If we shut down to pain, we shut down to joy. But vice versa too: if we shut down to joy, we also shut down to connection with suffering. We can't shut down selectively, and we can't open selectively.

So you might find, as we really cultivate this avenue, strengthen this intention of connectedness, of openness to other people's happiness, that openness starts to transfer. You might see someone who's looking sad, and instead of thinking, "Oh, I'm only doing mudita now, I can't look at you," the openness will naturally extend to them. You might be quite surprised.

Another thing that can be very subtle or very gross, and is pretty common to all of us—in fact, it's one of the habits of mind that the Buddha said was among the last to go before you're completely awakened—the Pali word is *mana*. It's often translated as conceit, but it manifests as this simple comparing of ourselves with others. Have any of you noticed your mind doing that at all today? Just that constant assessment: they're better than me, they're worse than me, or we're the same.

If you start to look at it, just notice without any judgment, because it's simply what our minds do. Notice when it's happening. And it can be about really big things. Somebody's happy and right away, "Oh, they're happy"—and it goes right back to "they're happier than me." Appreciative joy is going to be hard to come by because they're happier than me, and right away we're back to "poor me, what's the matter with me?"

Or when you see someone unhappy and you think, "Well, I'm doing better than they are"—that's definitely not compassion. That's separation. Or, "Well, we're about the same. I guess it's okay. I guess I'm all right." It's all of it very me-centered, isn't it? It's all about me from that point of view. And it's endless—this constant assessing and reassessing.

My friend Sharon, who teaches retreats, once mentioned that she noticed how her mind, sitting a retreat, couldn't help but suss out everybody she saw, as if making a kind of list of who was better than her, who wasn't as good as her, and who was about even with her—about whatever particular quality your mind picks. Pick anything. Pick how somebody's dressed. Pick what their hair's like. Pick how they sit in the hall. Pick the kind of car they drive. Pick the job they have. Pick how they eat, how much they eat, what socks they wear. I mean, it gets really insane on a long retreat. You should see this stuff.

But the energy that the mind puts into it is just the same whether it's about socks or about what you're doing with your life. And she said, so you do that—you make this whole arrangement: they sit better than me, I sit better than them. You have it all figured out. You know where everybody is. Then somebody new comes in and you have to reshuffle the whole thing because you've got to figure out where they go, and it shifts everything around.

Just play with it. Just notice. Can you walk through the dining room at lunch and see if any comparison happens to arise in your mind? And if you can laugh at it, that's great, because that puts some space around it.

But you see how this leads to restlessness, a kind of real unsettledness, a fear, a sense that there's only so much happiness available in the world, and if you have more, I have less. That's the big thing that gets in the way of appreciative joy. And it's so strange because it's exactly the reverse. What's so great about appreciative joy is this: you're happy now, and I can be happy too. I don't even have to have something good happening in my own life.

I can be happy about something happening in your life. It really does increase our chances of happiness.

So you might just notice—I just drop it in there—the sense of comparing, the sense of scarcity, versus the limitless nature of joy. Just notice when your mind throws that up: "Oh, I don't have to believe that." Reconnect with the sense of someone's happiness and offer that wish and see what happens in the climate, in your inner climate, in your mind and heart.

This mudita is one of various ways to consciously bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy. And it's really an essential aspect of the whole mandala of our spiritual practice. It's true, the Buddha talked a lot about aspects of suffering and freeing our heart and mind from suffering, and the need to understand how we suffer in order to be free from it. We need to see that. A lot of our path is opening to that. But it's just as important to open to the beauty, to the joy, because otherwise we drown in the suffering and it's an imbalanced perception.

You get into what I call a dukkha phase—dukkha is the Pali word often translated as suffering—where all you see is difficult endings of things, dying, everything's wrong. I remember it would be like that. I'd walk in a room and there's a beautiful plant, and I'd go, "Oh, what's the difference? It's just going to die, you know?" A couple gets together and I'd think, "May they be happy, because you know it's not going to last."

That's a little imbalanced, right? It's not so helpful. Yes, everything will die. The plant will die. But right now it's not dead. Right now it's beautiful. Can I appreciate that even more, knowing it will die?

Sometimes, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, we have to consciously bring up into our hearts and minds seeds of joy. And it can be a very little seed of joy to balance this overwhelming feeling when you're drowning in suffering—of the world, of your own, in a really difficult time in your life.

I've noticed for myself this tendency of the mind to go all one way or all the other. If I'm hearing about suffering or I'm in a hard place, the mind just gets consumed by that, as if you can't enjoy anything. Or if it's someone else's suffering and I actually have a moment of joy, I'm cheating. I'm abandoning them. I'm not helping them. I should just be really dismal. But it's not like that. Actually, the opening to these seeds of joy gives our heart and mind the courage, the strength, the vastness to be more present with ourselves and with others when things are difficult.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks about this from his experience during the Vietnamese War. He went back and forth between the two sides, trying to be a reconciler, which of course meant both sides didn't trust him. And when he was out of Vietnam giving some talks during the war, he wasn't allowed to go back again. For him, that was a lot of suffering. He describes one time when a good friend of his died of a heart attack. He couldn't sleep for a few nights. There was so much pain in his heart, and he just couldn't get around it. He had to get up the next day and give a speech, and he just couldn't deal. So what he did was to consciously bring up seeds of joy, just simple things. And that helped to balance his perception and balance his heart.

These are examples he gives. He says, "Most of us ask the question, 'What is wrong?' We forget to ask, 'What is right?' There are many things that are not wrong. When you focus your attention only on what is wrong, you can make the situation worse. So it is wise to meditate on your capacity to enjoy peace, happiness, and joy, your capacity to be in touch with what is not wrong, what is refreshing, healing, and wonderful in the present moment. During the war, we were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage. I would mention these herbs to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

Just something that simple can help to open us out of the kind of funnel we can get into of despair. Each of us has moments of difficulty. When we're not able to deal with them, we ask our seeds of joy to come up. In this way, we counterbalance the suffering.

So this formal mudita practice is just one way to help us begin to look into that possibility.

And as Ajahn Sumedho said, you can also think of mudita as the importance of being able to appreciate beauty and goodness in the things around us. So that's what Thich Nhat Hanh was calling up as seeds of joy—just the beauty of nature. You can call it forth

for yourself. It's something we don't do that much: a conscious memory of wholesome, good things that you've done. Just simple, kind or generous or moral, ethical actions from your past.

We think of that as egotistical, but actually just bringing up a past goodness is like a present moment experience of that past goodness, and it's a kind of joy. It's a kind of happiness. It can really have quite an effect on us—especially when we can't think of anything good we've ever done—to really bring that up. Pay attention to goodness that others do.

I have a whole bunch of stories, but I just want to end with one example of this—from someone in a place of great, really great mental suffering, who was able to reach out to little things to help balance it.

This is from Good Morning America. The woman telling the story is named Lisa Beamer. She was the wife of Todd Beamer—I don't know if you remember his name, but he was on one of the planes on 9/11. He was on the plane that they brought down in Pennsylvania. His name became kind of well known. They said he's one of the guys who said, "Let's roll," and helped to bring down that plane.

So this was after 9/11, and she was on Good Morning America talking about missing her husband and their daughter. And then she told this story:

"I had a very special teacher in high school many years ago whose husband suddenly died of a heart attack. About a week after his death, this teacher shared some of her insight with a classroom of students. As the late afternoon sunlight came streaming in through the classroom windows, the class was nearly over. She sat down on her desk, and with a gentle look on her face, she paused and said, 'Class is over. I would like to share with all of you a thought that is unrelated to class, but which I feel is very important.

'Each of us is put here on earth to learn, share, love, appreciate, and give of ourselves. None of us knows when this fantastic experience will end. It can be taken away at any moment. Perhaps this is the power's way of telling us that we must make the most out of every single day.'

She went on, speaking to the students—and Lisa Beamer was one of those students:

'So I would like you all to make me a promise. On your way to school or on your way home, find something beautiful to notice. It doesn't have to be something you see. It could be a scent—perhaps the scent of freshly baked bread coming out of someone's house. Or it could be the sound of the breeze slightly rustling the leaves in the trees. Or

the way the morning light catches one autumn leaf as it falls gently to the ground. Please look for these things and cherish them. Although it may sound trite to some, these things are the stuff of life—the little things you're put on earth to enjoy, the things we most often take for granted.'

The class was completely quiet. We all picked up our books and filed out of the room silently. That afternoon, I noticed more things on my way home from school than I had that whole semester. Every once in a while, I think of that teacher and remember what an impression she made on all of us. And I try to appreciate all of those things that sometimes we all overlook."

CHAPTER 17

Investigating Anattā: Clinging

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a practical, experiential approach to understanding anattā (not-self), moving beyond philosophical concepts to direct investigation. Rather than waiting for some dramatic breakthrough or treating anattā as a distant achievement, she invites practitioners to notice how the sense of self arises and passes away moment to moment through clinging. Drawing on Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching that emptiness of self is 'truly normal and natural,' she emphasizes recognizing both when 'I-ing' and 'my-ing' are present and when they are absent.*
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> *Wilson explores several domains where clinging creates the sense of self: physical sensations and the body, vedanā (feeling tone), and emotions. She illustrates with vivid examples—from walking in cold wind to discovering a favorite mug on retreat—how self arises through contact and grasping, following the pattern of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination). She pays particular attention to how certain emotions feel like our 'core identity,' making them especially difficult to see as passing phenomena.*
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> *The talk culminates in examining 'self-referencing'—the mind's habitual tendency to locate itself in experience for security. Wilson suggests that liberation isn't about destroying the ego but about withdrawing identification from whatever arises, allowing the natural peace and openness of awareness to reveal itself. She concludes with the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya: when the seen is merely what is seen, 'just this is the end of suffering.'*

So I'm happy to be here. In case some of you don't know me, my name is Carol Wilson. I'm happy to see you all here.

Tonight, I want to talk about investigating anattā. And it looks like it's going to end up being a two-part talk, or else it would be really, really long. So I'll make it two parts.

To the best of my understanding, whatever the Buddha taught, he wasn't teaching in order to have people acquire another philosophical concept. He wasn't teaching a body of knowledge that he wanted people to learn. But as he said over and over, he's just teaching what we need to know to free our hearts and minds from suffering. And that's true also in his teaching about anattā, the sense of no-self.

I say that because so often this particular characteristic of existence—the three characteristics together: anicca, impermanence; dukkha, suffering or unsatisfactoriness; and anattā, no-self—which are just the way that all conditioned phenomenal existence

is, just how it is—of those three, often anattā is the one that makes people crazy. I don't mean literally crazy. We're already crazy. If we understood enough, then we'd be more sane. But thinking about it, trying to figure it out, trying to understand it in a philosophical way—that's how we tend to approach things—that makes us crazy. And that's not how I want to talk about it tonight. I'd like to investigate anattā, or more the feeling of the sense of self, in a very concrete way, using our practice.

The other thing people often tend to do in terms of anattā, if they're not just trying to think their way through it and getting crazy, is to wait. So many people say this in different ways: they're waiting in their practice, or measuring their idea of whether their practice has any benefit, by waiting for some big anattā flash, after which everything's changed, no more sense of self, life is copacetic and there are no more problems. I don't know if that relates to anybody here.

And the other way people relate to this is: "That could never happen to me. That's somewhere else down the road." All of this is really holding the idea of anattā as some state other than here, something to be achieved that isn't already true. And that's just not the case.

As with so much of what the Buddha's teachings reveal, it's simply a matter of recognizing our experience more accurately, and then responding to that more accurate recognition in the obvious way that makes sense. We stop suffering so much.

So rather than waiting around—follow the breath, in, out, in, out, notice the sensations, okay, okay, but when's it going to happen?—rather than practicing like that, it's more like recognizing when sense of self is present, recognizing when it's absent.

Just personally, what I've experienced in my own life is not that there was some big moment after which I got anattā and before which I didn't. It's more the image that Suzuki Roshi gives: if you go out in a rainstorm and you get totally drenched, you know it. It's not like that. It's more like walking in a fog. You're walking in a fog and you don't realize you're getting wet. But when you come inside, you're completely soaked to the bone. Yet you couldn't point to the moment where that happened. That's another way of looking at it.

So what keeps us from recognizing just the way things are, just the facts? Ramana Maharshi once wrote that the idea of self is like a ghost which is caused by the play of shadows. If you look closely, the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So also with the sense of self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is found not to exist.

With our practice, with our mindfulness, with the wisdom—sati-paññā, just mindfulness and wisdom at the point of contact, just noticing what's arising free of conception—we have the tools in any given moment to look more accurately, to recognize more accurately, to really get interested in what am I calling "me" in any particular moment, if there is a sense of me or mine, or if there's not.

There's one sutta where someone asked the Buddha, "What is it that liberated ones know? How would you sum it up?" There are lots of different ways to answer this. But in this particular sutta, he says that having heard that nothing is worth clinging to, the liberated one directly knows everything. Having heard that nothing is worth clinging to, he fully understands everything.

And Bhikkhu Bodhi in his commentary on this says: "He does not cling to any formation by way of craving and views. He does not become agitated because of craving, and thus personally realizes nibbāna through the extinguishing of all kilesas, of all torments of mind, of all defilements."

Does not cling by way of craving and views.

Realizes that nothing is worth clinging to. So yes, we're back to the familiar pith teaching, the core of pretty much everything. If you had to boil the Buddha's teaching down into one little line, that would be it: nothing is worth clinging to.

But rather than going into "oh no, not again, I know I can't give up clinging," what we can do, what I'm proposing tonight, is to explore in our own experience the nature of clinging—and in particular, the clinging that manifests in any particular moment as a sense of me or mine.

Non-clinging, really. Supreme truth, liberation through non-clinging. That's truly at the heart of whatever form of practice we're doing. Whether it's concentration or samatha practice, it's non-clinging. All the brahma viharas, wisdom practice, mindfulness practice—non-clinging is essential. Nothing works when we're clinging. All the practices open up by themselves when the heart and mind is not agitated through clinging.

I'm sure by now everybody knows from your own experience various ways that clinging is suffering. It's pretty clear in some ways. We can kind of get it that holding on to particular objects or particular experiences that are going to change causes suffering. It doesn't mean we don't still do it, but we do have the basic understanding—that's not really rocket science—although we still do it, and that's the interesting thing.

But on a more subtle level, the clinging that perhaps is more difficult to see through—and in many cases, in my experience, is so familiar that it's difficult to recognize—is the clinging to aspects of experience that create the sense of self. Basically, clinging to form, to mind and form, nama-rupa, to the body, to ideas, to perceptions, to thoughts, to emotions, to formations, to views, ideas about ourselves. A lot of these things we don't even recognize are arising, never mind recognize that we're clinging to them—the basic habits of mind that are based in inaccurate understanding, inaccurate recognition of our mind and body.

Tonight I want to give more of an overview and point to some different ways we can explore when we're clinging in that way.

So the first thing really is just to get interested—not afraid of, not aversive to, but interested whenever we notice the feeling of me and mine, of I. Just to meet it as another arising experience, literally the same as you'd notice a sound or any other thought. We need to recognize when it's here.

But also recognize—and this is something that Ajahn Buddhadasa, the famous Thai forest monk who died perhaps fifteen years ago, talks about—the nature of mind when it's not agitated by clinging, when it's not distracted by being caught up in reactions to any particular experience. That emptiness of self, translated as "voidness" in English by his translator (I don't like that so much), but the nature of our heart and mind is naturally empty of self, naturally pure, naturally clear, naturally peaceful.

This isn't some state that we're striving to achieve, where we finally have dug up and annihilated all sense of self and can finally rest at ease. Buddhadasa points out over and over that along with recognizing when we're caught up—when there's this sense of need, this sense of struggle or agitation or conflict—it's equally, maybe more valuable and important, to recognize the nature of heart and mind when this is not present.

That emptiness of self, this kind of natural awareness, peaceful quality, open luminous quality, freedom from self is, in his words, truly normal and natural. Not a state we create when we get to some high level. It's truly a normal and natural way that we are. It's really how things are.

When we can recognize this—recognize when we feel like me-ing and my-ing, and recognize when that's not there—Buddhadasa talks about generating a contentment with voidness, generating a contentment with no sense of self, no sense of me or mine. As I go on, hopefully some of what I say will help point to why it may not be that easy or natural to really have contentment with voidness. As much as we resist our sense of self, we're back to clinging. We really, in some ways, like it, cling to it.

A simple example of how we can see that the sense of me being there or not is just a trick of perception—it's not about changing the circumstances: When I was walking home this morning, the wind was blowing and it was really cold. I don't like the cold. My body doesn't like the cold. So I was walking, the wind was blowing, and I felt my body contracting and shivering. Then the thought came in: "It's too cold. I don't like it. I've got to walk fast." Subtle resistance, sense of me walking fast, needing to get home to where it was warm.

Now, this isn't some huge dramatic suffering, just very mild, everyday experience. But definitely a sense of me clinging to wanting it to be different, clinging to the sense of hurrying home.

But then it can shift just like that. No clinging, no resistance—just walking, movement, the sense of coolness, the sense of sharpness, the sense of constriction. And that's it. There's no resistance, no clinging. Nothing is changed about the situation, but it's just coldness, sensations, walking, breeze. That's it.

In that moment, the clinging to wanting experience to be different, the resisting—which is really just clinging turned around—resisting the sensations creates the sense of me. Looking at that, it drops away.

The actual situation is no different. The sense of self in that moment simply isn't there, and there's no problem. It's still just as cold. My body still reacts uncomfortably to cold. I didn't get home any quicker. It just doesn't matter. It's simply not a problem.

You can see that's not a big deal. And I know, just as Ajahn Buddhadasa said, that everybody has many, many moments like that throughout the day—really noticing. Not like, "Oh yes, I'm having an experience of anattā," because then it's gone; you're back, you're having an experience. But just the simplicity of: "Oh, just this. Just this. It's like this." That's the beauty of our mindfulness practice.

Buddhadasa likes to use the terms in the Pali language: *ahaṅkāra* and *mamaṅkāra*, which translate as "I-ing" and "my-ing." For those of you whose first language isn't English, does that make sense? I-ing and my-ing—making it a verb rather than a subject, which is sort of how it actually is. Something is being created in the moment.

And when I-ing comes up, my-ing comes up, it feels really real, doesn't it? Because it feels as though, unexamined—at least for me—unexamined, it feels as though it's always there, doesn't it? I mean, I am always here. Maybe not "my," but I am always here. It's so familiar, and the more I try to analyze it, the more I try to think about it, the stronger it gets, doesn't it? Because I'm thinking about it, and it just gets into this big knot.

This is from Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. I like this a lot. He's talking about a Tibetan word, *shenpa*, which he says usually refers to the raw experience of the suffering of ego-clinging. He says it's generally translated as attachment, but that's not sufficient. Shenpa is a pervasive discomfort, the experience of I, me, and mine—all the wants, needs, aversions, hopes, and fears that come out of that. The discomfort of shenpa can be vague and subtle, like having a stone in your shoe, or a sour note that plays throughout the day. I love that—just something's a little off and it bugs you. Or when the ego is strongly challenged, shenpa can be the painful charge of the negative emotions. By seeing and accepting the mechanisms of shenpa and self-importance, they no longer have a hold on us.

That's exactly what Buddhadasa is saying. Simply by seeing, understanding, and accepting how this sense of shenpa, of self, is created, it no longer has a hold on us. The main attitude on the path to peace is to accept whatever our experience brings—accept it and also recognize it accurately.

So that's what the invitation really is: to use our *sati-paññā*, our mindfulness-wisdom, to get interested, to notice the presence of I-ing and my-ing, whether just when it begins or however long it's been there. It doesn't matter. Notice it and then really get interested. Bring investigative wisdom, *dhamma-vicaya*, to really explore—not thinking about, but by bringing our attention to the actual experience in that moment that feels like me or mine.

I can feel it personally, and it's different each time, but there's a sense of a kind of contraction, that clinging, that holding on to something. That's already saying too much—holding on to something. But just a little sense of... it shrinks, it limits things. I can feel it.

So the first thing when we start to explore—this is Buddhadasa again—is that we see the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. That's all. This big, seemingly huge, endless monolith we spend all our practice trying to chip away and chip away and dynamite and fight with and hate ourselves over—it's just a momentary condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind.

So that gives us a little hint about how often grasping or clinging arises in our experience—or my experience, I'll speak for myself. I mean, I really get why non-clinging is the centerpiece of liberation. It's merely a condition that arises and passes, born out of contact with a sense object, with an experience, with a mental object.

I use this story all the time because it's so simple, but it really works. Notice the birth of self. It can be really clear. It's great on retreat. You have so much time to explore this. Because when things aren't so busy, when all the activities are kind of stripped away, you can notice in relationship to little things the birth of self. And the self feels just as big.

It doesn't matter if it's born in relation to a little thing.

So here's a story I always use. Once I was on retreat over at the retreat center, a long retreat, and I was pretty quiet. Things were just flowing. I mean, not always, but it was relatively what we misleadingly call a good time in practice. I was noticing things. I liked how it was going. Not a lot of suffering.

And I noticed this one time—over there you walk into the dining room and there's a big shelf with all the mugs and cups and dishes. At that time, we used to have many different kinds of mugs. Now they have more similar ones, but back then they were all different, just what people had left. And I'd just go, take a mug, take my dishes, eat, go.

One time, way into the retreat, I got a mug, I was getting my tea, and as I sat down I started thinking, wow, this mug is really the perfect mug. The good color, it fits my hand, it feels good on my mouth. And right in that moment there is: I like this mug, I want this mug, I want this mug again. It was so clear in that moment—the birth of me. Me. Me and my mug. Very clear.

So I sat there and instead of just being present with the tea, I thought, should I save it? We're not supposed to save it. Should I take it back to my room? We're not supposed to take it. No one will know and who cares anyway. But no, then every time I wanted tea I'd have to go back to my room and then come back here. And at the rate I was walking, that would take half the day, so forget it.

So then I put the mug back. Oh, death of me and my mug. It was just free and easy and fine. Incredibly complicated—that sense of self made everything complicated. It restricts what had been open, easy, just as it is. Everything gets quite constricted, limited. The mind, the consciousness gets limited. Everything gets complicated. You can feel in that moment the sense of grasping, almost like an inner contraction. You can feel that sense of me and then all the complications, the *papañca* that ensues from it. Put it down, went away. It was gone.

But I came back the next day and I looked for it. So already there was complication. And I found it. And I took it. And I went through the whole thing again, even more. And at that point, the suffering of it—I know this sounds ridiculous, like the suffering of

liking a mug—but when your mind's quiet, you can really see it. This is ridiculous. All this planning, all this agitation, all this wanting. And I put it down, and that was it. It was over.

If only it could always be that easy.

But this is exactly dependent origination. This is the birth and death of me-ing and my-ing that happens for each of us hundreds of times in a day. It's a real blessing to notice the birth and notice the death. What we tend to do is notice the me and my mug, but we don't notice the death of it. Then we notice the me that doesn't like the complication, then we notice the me that's putting it back, then we notice the me that's wanting the next thing. And we forget to notice the times when there's no me-ing and my-ing, in between. Really important to notice the birth and death.

This is the dependent origination. This is from the Buddha, talking about this middle part, the continuation of the round of dependent origination: "On seeing a form with the eye"—like the mug—"he lusts after it if it's pleasing, or dislikes it if it's unpleasing. He abides with mindfulness of the body unestablished, with a limited mind."

And that's exactly how it feels. As soon as there's that clinging to something, the me and my arising, the mind feels limited, the heart feels limited.

He delights, and engaged as he is, whatever feeling he feels, he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains holding to it. As he does so, delight arises in him. Now delight in feeling is clinging. With his clinging as condition, being comes to be. With being as condition, birth. With birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

So that's just talking about one moment of contact in this moment of life—that lusting after, that sense of me arising, the constriction of mind, and the whole mass of suffering. Notice when that arises. Notice when it dies. Notice the sense of limitlessness again, of space, of ease, of peace. It's not like some huge light going off. The sense of self simply fades and dies. Anatta is truly normal and natural. When there's no grasping or clinging in the mind, it's just the way things are.

I want to talk about a few areas—I won't by any means cover all of them tonight—but just a few of the grosser areas of our nama-rupa experience, of our mind and body experience, where clinging so easily creates a strong sense of me-ing and my-ing, and where we so often overlook or don't recognize the clinging. With the mug, I use that because it's a simple, obvious example. Of course it's recognizable. I didn't think the mug was me—it was the me who wanted it. But there's clinging to much more from experi-

ence that really seems so like me, where we think, "This is really where the sense of self is. Of course this is me. I'm not clinging to it. It is me." That's where our sati-pañña, our mindfulness wisdom, becomes so helpful.

The first and most obvious area—and in some ways the easiest to see through—is clinging and grasping that arises in relationship to sense contact with rupa, with our body, with physical experience. What I've found really helpful is nothing new; it's mindfulness. It's that willingness, that ability to meet with our attention the bare sensory experience, to see and tell the difference, to recognize accurately the sense experience without confusing it with the conceptual overlay. This is what starts to help us see when there's clinging.

Simple examples: when you're sitting and there's that pain, we talk about this all the time—the difference between noticing burning sensation and the overlay of "my back is hurting" or "I've hurt my back" or "I need to do X, Y, and Z." Just sensing.

Even more subtle is when there's a sense contact—say there's itching, or a lightness, a pleasant physical feeling—and the attention just connects, notices lightness. But do you notice how often there's a visual overlay, just a visual image of the body or that part of the body? Which is fine if we recognize this is seeing and this is feeling, burning or tickling. But when we don't recognize it, when we don't even recognize the seeing, there can be a subtle holding to that image as the description of my body. Do you see what I mean?

When I'm sitting, there can be periods where every single moment there's a lot of physical sensation and there's just a noticing of it. I don't have to be noting, just noticing—tightness or burning or tingling, just there. But with each one, there's a picture of my knee, there's a picture of my back, there's a picture of my whole body, there's a picture of my face noticing. And if I don't recognize that image, there can be this subtle sense of clinging—oh, that's me. It just feels like me. I'm not saying this is true for anybody else. It's just an example. Look and see.

Or "I'm hungry." It's the same as when I was walking in the wind today. The difference between sensations—bubbling sounds, gurgling, a feeling of discomfort—it's just that. "I'm hungry" is a thought. Just a thought. But clinging to the thought or holding to the sensation is immediately a sense of me. And then when you notice the sense of me, don't fight it or try to think about it. Just notice that's the next arising experience. Bubbling, gurgling, "Oh, I'm so hungry," sense of me. Feels like this.

Just notice how it comes and goes. Notice how when you're just breathing and there's just sensations of coolness, you can't even say that's a body—never mind *my* body. At times there's absolutely no form. There's just sensations, and as far as your actual experience, it's sensation arising in space. Can we just notice that? Let it be, or notice if right on top of it comes a sense of, "No, *my* body." And then just notice that. Get a sense of what I mean. Just explore this.

I don't want to say a lot more about body because we really pay a lot of attention to that. But I'm talking about the actual experience, not the idea of the body. The idea of the body, of course, we're much more likely to cling to. But that's actually not the physical—that's an idea. That's mental. That's sankhara.

Another aspect is vedana, the feeling tone. You all know what that is, right? The pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feeling tone. It's a mental experience, rather subtle often, that arises with every sense contact. So every sound, each of us will experience a particular sound as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—every thought, every physical sensation.

And obviously, as we talk about it, because so often it's not the thing we pay attention to, it's often not the predominant experience. But it's very easy for a clinging to arise, an identification to arise, so that we experience, say, the pleasant feeling as being either me or mine—and not recognizing that that little clinging is going on. We can get into quite a little world of identification and complexity based on this clinging to pleasant or unpleasant vedana. Yes, we cling to unpleasant too. And not recognizing that is very easy to overlook.

For example, in the sitting—I just use sitting as examples because that's what we're doing—something's happening, and finally it's going right. Either the breath is smooth and the mind isn't wandering as much as it was before, or that's if you're someone who thinks what should be happening is that you should be with the breath and it should be smooth. The person next to you thinks that what should be happening is open awareness, and you're not even really noticing the breath, but the mind is just connecting with each arising experience and there's no hesitation and there's no wavering and it's really clear and it's really penetrating—that's what they think should be happening. Someone else thinks something else should be happening. I'm just saying this so that you know there isn't one thing that's supposed to be happening. Our thinking that there is—that's the problem.

But anyway, it's finally going the way you think it's supposed to be. So take smooth breath, nice, peaceful, really noticing it, being there with it, the mind isn't wandering, and you even think, "I know this is going to change. I know this is going to change, and I'm not attached to this breath. I know it's going to change."

And of course, it does change. And you really thought you weren't attached to that sensation. So why are you so totally bummed out when it changes? Why?

There are lots of different things that can be happening, but one thing is that we weren't clinging—we could see we were clinging to the breath—but we were completely overlooking the pleasant feeling and totally clinging to the pleasant feeling. That contraction of *me* around that pleasantness. Not even the thought "it's finally going right" prior to that. "This is it. This is so nice."

I remember one time I was on retreat, and I don't even know what was happening, but something in the walking that I thought was really good and I liked it. My teacher—I think it was Sharon at the time—said, "Okay, you have to note 'pleasant.'" That's all she said. I knew what that meant. I went back and had a total little minor temper tantrum because I knew that as soon as I consciously noticed the pleasant, the sense of selfing around it would not keep on being created. You'd think I would like that, but we're attached to that. In some way, the sense of self, the clinging—whether it's to the pleasant or whatever—is so comfortable and familiar that even though we think we want to be free from it, given the choice, and we're given the choice millions of times in a day, we often go, "I want to cling to the pleasant. Don't tell me to notice the pleasant."

I'm going to walk, and I'm going to note, note, note, but I'm going to overlook pleasant. Because if I do that, the gratification of *me* having pleasant goes away. What goes away? Just that sense of me. That's all that goes away. It's really pathetic. It is. How many millions of times have I experienced the ease of—ah, death of the self? And how many more millions of times do I think, "Yeah, but not yet. Let's just enjoy this a little bit."

So, just noticing if something is pleasant or unpleasant, if there's that sense of *mine* or *me* around it. And just have a kind of eye out to explore. As Chokyi Nyima says, really watch the fickleness of the mind, especially in terms of vedana. Notice in our mind how easily it's influenced just by a pleasant or an unpleasant sight, thought, sound, anything. The mind is so fickle. We just have a pleasant sight and it influences us into an immediate mood, and then a whole story comes from it. Right? Then there's an unpleasant sound. The mind goes off into a whole other mood, a whole other story.

If we just notice that series of events, rather than jumping on each one as "yes, this is me, yes, this is mine," just notice. It's amazing. It's amazing how far the mind goes, how fast, based on how little. And if you can just kind of get interested in watching that without hating it, without fearing it, without being afraid to see it—"Oh yeah, look at that *me* arising so strong about the noise that person is making in this sacred hall. Wow, that's amazing." And in that moment of just getting interested, "wow, that's amazing," in a way that's a moment of death of that sense of self, because the energy has moved from the clinging to "I like, I don't like," the pleasant, the unpleasant, to simple awareness. Wow. It's like that. In that moment, that's a death of self.

And it's just—I like to call it like a Tai Chi move. You don't actually have to do anything other than withdraw the clinging, all the identification, from whatever's happening. Say the pleasant, liking the pleasant, holding to the pleasant. "Oh, holding to the pleasant feels like this." We don't have to get rid of anything. We're not here to destroy the ego. We don't have to be afraid of experiencing a really strong sense of me-ing and my-ing. It's just a momentary arising experience, however subtle, however strong. And that freedom from it is just always right here. "Ah, me-ing feels like this." In that moment, that me-ing has died.

Nothing lasts more than an instant anyway. When we're paying attention, we'll see that. We can't not see it because that's how it is. We just, in a way, need to trust that more in our experience. If you feel like you have to set up some kind of amazing conditions in order to create the state of non-self, well, that gets beyond us and way out in the future. But if you really can have the—it's not a faith, it's just knowing that it's already how it is. There is no steady state you or me. There isn't one. So if you recognize that, your world isn't going to fall apart, because it's already like that. That's what's so amazing to me, just to me.

Okay, another huge area, and I'll talk a little bit about it but I don't want to go into too much, is emotions. I find emotions in some ways one of the most tenacious aspects of mental experience—tenacious in terms of really feeling like the emotion is me. So often we think the presence of particular difficult emotions is the barrier to peace, and the presence of the beautiful emotions when we're clinging to them can feel like the barrier to peace. But of course it's not. It doesn't even mean the emotions have to go away. The sense of real suffering from them is this identifying with them, clinging to them, thinking they are me or mine, either one.

So for each of us, I think we each have certain emotions that feel—I was saying to someone today, I forget what words we were using—they feel more like they're really *me*.

Disappointment feels like this. I can notice it. I don't go too far down the road. I know it comes. I know it goes.

For many people, the wholesome emotions are like this—they're ones that they easily see are not who they are. In fact, often to the point that they don't even recognize, "Oh, yeah, well, that's happiness. That's not me. That's going to go." You don't give it any weight.

But the other ones, whatever they are for you—often they're self-hatred, or feelings of loneliness, or the judging voice, or feelings of worthlessness, or for some people a kind of deep sadness, loneliness, whatever it might be for you. And it can be different for each of us. There are certain ones that when they come in, they're often not even recognized at first, because this is really the core manifestation of who I am. And even though it seems like it just arose in this moment, I know that I just haven't noticed it. Because it's been there all along, but I've been being distracted by feeling the breath and noticing this other stuff. But now, here it is. Self-hatred. I'm home. This is really who I am.

And we wouldn't say that we were attached to it. Oh no, we're not attached to this. I hate it, for God's sake. I'm practicing so it'll go away. But in the moments of its arising, this is really like a clinging to—this is me, me and my-ing, my self-hatred. I'm this loathsome worm, whatever your particular way of saying it is.

And the first thing is, this is really one of the aspects of what's called *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which is like personality or identity view—really this clinging to any particular mental formation, any *saṅkhāra* emotion, as me or mine.

So first, just start noticing which ones, which particular emotions creep in under your radar. And then you might notice the sense of me around them, the clinging. But also, even if you don't notice that, do notice when that emotion goes away. You might not notice the moment it leaves, but notice when it's gone—just like I was saying about noticing when there's no sense of self. Notice when these so-called core personality emotions are gone. And really notice that they're gone. If your mind says stuff like, "Well, I'm just not noticing it. It's not really gone because I know it's who I am," just notice stuff like that. When it's not there, it's really not there. When it comes back, it really comes back. That's okay.

But notice how emotions then lead to thoughts like, "Oh, sadness. This is who I am. This is what my life is all about." And then of course the thoughts just carry on and get so complex. I think I'll talk more about thoughts the next time.

But there's the resistance, or the suffering from resisting the emotion itself, and there's also the kind of subtle clinging contraction around it: This is me. This is mine. Notice that. Notice the difference. To use Ajahn Sumedho's language, the difference between "takes sadness"—just sadness—and "my sadness." I'm so sad. This is really the depths of despair. How can I keep going? Whatever your story is.

The difference between "my sadness" and "sadness is like this"—feeling it just as fully, perhaps even more fully. Sadness is like this. Despair is like this. Loathing is like this. Joy is like this. The difference when there's the me-ing and my-ing versus when there's just the emotion as it is, received in awareness—this is really a huge difference.

You see, we don't have to fix our personality. We don't have to analyze any of the emotions. We don't have to get lost in the story about me, and we don't have to push away the story of me. We just notice it. Oh, sadness is like this. The thoughts that arise that make the sadness stronger are those thoughts. How can I feed the sadness? How can I feed identifying with it? Just keep going into those thoughts. Oh yeah, and another thing. Oh yeah, and another thing. This feeds the sadness, feeds the anger, feeds whatever it is. Tuning back to awareness—oh, the sadness is like this. Oh, those thoughts come and go. Sadness is like this. This feeds the awareness, not the sadness.

And we can flip back and forth, back and forth, in every moment. And that's okay. It can be fascinating to do that back and forth—where you're really feeling the me-ness, the I-ness of a difficult emotion, and it's just unbearable. And the next moment: oh, it's like this.

I was sitting, I think it was in Burma a few years ago. It was really one of the more emotionally difficult retreats I'd done in years and years. For some reason, just this really intense despair and dukkha-filled emotions would come up. And I was pretty mindful. I was really watching it. I would notice an image come, I would notice the thought, I would notice the emotion start. I was really aware of the whole train. But each time it came, it kept coming so strong that I would get really caught in the me-ness of it, in the unbearableness of it. The emotion was: this is too much, I can't bear it. That's actually what the emotion was.

And I could see the whole process, but there kept being the sense of me, of mine, in which I really can't bear it. For a while, I just kept going on like that. I can't bear it. I can't bear it. And finally, I got really fascinated. What is the clinging here? I mean, I'm not clinging to that image. I wasn't clinging to the story. I wasn't really, after a while, hating the emotion, but I wasn't holding on to it either. And I kept thinking: I'm really

seeing the whole thing coming and going. What's the clinging that I'm not seeing? Because I know when I really see, "Oh, that's me-ing"—just in that awareness, it might still be there, but the whole texture of it changes.

And this is something I've really been interested in. What I finally saw was what the clinging was to. When that emotion would come up—this is unbearable, this is so intense—the sense of me, not the emotion itself, but just that sense of me, which is very subtle, just that contraction, was so familiar, was so comfortable. That's actually what the clinging was to. It's totally unbearable, but "me"—you know, I'm home.

And that was fascinating, because since then I can recognize so often this subtle sense of me that refers experience back to me, and that little contraction of clinging keeps the whole cycle going until the clinging releases.

So the question that then came up is not so much about how to understand this emotion, how to get rid of it, how to fix it, how to purify my mind—but really: am I willing to be without self-referencing? Am I really willing to just let things arise—emotions, sights, sounds, thoughts, sensations, whatever—just to be so present that there's not even the tiniest referencing back to me?

And it's not a choice I can just make in my mind. But starting to notice that clinging to the habit of self-referencing, and the feeling at times of disconcertion—I don't like to be without self-referencing.

This comes not from a Buddhist teacher, but from one of these contemporary nondual teachers: "Self-referencing is the mind's tendency to locate itself. When it's realized that there's no self apart from the perceiving, then the tendency to try to find oneself in any experience, insight, or concept ceases. What I'm talking about is a condition where the mind has no compulsive need to understand in terms of ideas or concepts or beliefs—a condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, your feelings, or emotions for security in any way."

Just imagine that: a condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, thoughts, feelings, or emotions for security in any way. So immediate. Just what's arising.

The sense of self is not some steady, unchanging thing that we have to get rid of. It simply arises in a moment of misperception, of clinging, and it vanishes when that misperception, when that clinging vanishes—which of course it will in any given moment. This self-referencing, trying to locate ourselves with thoughts, with moods, with feelings, with emotions—it's so familiar. We do it so automatically. And often we're suspicious of when we don't do it.

There's a phrase Ajahn Buddhadasa uses in another context, but I like it in this one: "volunteering for suffering." Do we want to volunteer for suffering? Then we can add on this whole sense of self-referencing.

I'll give you a simple example, and sometimes it pushes people's buttons a little bit—so that's good. One time when I was in Burma teaching, I was sitting and just noticing whatever was happening. I was noticing tickle, tickle, tickle, and just the different things, and then I would notice cough, cough, and then I was noticing heat, heat, and then tickle, tickle. This went on for a while.

You know how when you're deep in retreat, you really do stop referencing yourself? You just notice what's happening. You don't put it together into a story. So I was just noticing these different things. After a day or so, suddenly: "Oh, I've got bronchitis. This is bronchitis. I recognize this." Immediately there was this sense of referencing. This is what it is. This is my history. I've had bronchitis a certain number of times in the last five years. I get really sick. I can't afford to get sick. When this retreat is over, I have all these things I have to do. Total panic. Total me. A lot of suffering.

And I thought, wait a minute—that's a story. Just go back. Tickle, tickle, cough, cough. That whole thing just completely fell away. Tickle, tickle, cough, cough is just what it is.

Then I started playing with it, this volunteering for suffering. I'd think, "But maybe it really is bronchitis and I have to deal with it," and all of the emotions would come back. What am I going to do? I have to go to the doctor. My mind was malleable enough that I could play with it.

Do you get a sense of what I mean? Often we can't play with it. That sense of "I'm going to jump on the description, I'm going to jump on the self-referencing," and once I'm on, there's no way off. Volunteering for suffering.

Are we willing to even explore the possibility of being without self-referencing? The way the Buddha described this—and I'll end with this—was when he was talking to Bahiya. This is really that way of perceiving where there's no self apart from the perceiving.

The Buddha was talking to Bahiya. He said, "When in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the imagined and what is thought in the mind is only that, when in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be with that. When, Bahiya, you are not with that, then you will not be in that. When, Bahiya, you are not in that, then you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

Neither here nor there nor in between the two. When the seen is merely what is seen, just this is the end of suffering.

That's not a steady state. That's in any particular moment.

CHAPTER 18

Investigating Anattā: Personality View

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines sakkāya-diṭṭhi—the deeply ingrained habit of perceiving any aspect of our ever-changing experience as 'me' or 'mine.' Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and the suttas, she illuminates how personality view forms through a chain of perception, thinking, and solidified views that we then believe and defend.

Wilson explores how the Buddha describes four ways we identify with the five khandhas (aggregates): regarding form as self, self as possessing form, form as in self, or self as in form—and how this identification leads to agitation and suffering. She offers the powerful teaching that we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self through our thoughts; the sense of self is intrinsically unsatisfying. Using vivid examples from daily life and retreat practice, she demonstrates how inaccurate perception leads to wrong view and how accurate perception of anicca (impermanence) naturally releases clinging.

The talk offers deeply practical guidance for working with sakkāya-diṭṭhi in meditation and daily life. Rather than needing to deconstruct every identification, Wilson suggests we can simply recognize 'sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like this'—shifting our allegiance from believing in personality to resting in awareness. This disenchantment (nibbidā) with the aggregates isn't revulsion but rather a natural letting go when we see clearly that nothing can provide lasting satisfaction. True liberation, she concludes, doesn't come from wanting to be liberated, but from not being moved by conditions.

So tonight I want to talk about *sakayaditthi*, which is another aspect of *anattā*, usually translated as identity view or personality view.

I don't know if you remember from last week—it's not a test—but I quoted the scripture, the sutta that Ajahn Buddhadasa quoted about all that one needs to know: having heard that nothing is worth clinging to, one directly knows everything. Having heard this, one fully understands everything. And then Bhikkhu Bodhi's note explains that this means one does not cling once one fully understands everything. One does not cling either by way of craving or of views.

Last week I talked mostly about how craving creates a sense of self. Tonight I want to focus a little more on views. Of course, at the bottom of views is craving and clinging—that should go without saying, but I'll say it. But I want to talk more in terms of how views come to be and how we get lost in views, particularly *sakayaditthi*, personality view.

I like the way that Sayadaw U Lakkhana defined this one time. He defined *sakaya* as the stream of *nāma-rūpa*. *Nāma-rūpa* being mind and form, name and form—basically the five aggregates that, in the way the Buddha describes a human being, make up our experience: the aggregate of form, and then the mental aggregates of *vedanā* (feeling tone), perception, *sankhāra* (which is all the different mental formations, including intention), and consciousness. So he said *sakaya* is just this stream of ever-changing *nāma-rūpa*—the six sense objects, really, and the consciousness of them. And identity view happens when any aspect in any moment of this stream of *nāma-rūpa* is clung to or identified with as being me or mine.

As you can imagine, this happens all the time. It's a mistaken view of this compound, ever-shifting process of *nāma-rūpa*, of name and form—a mistaken view of it as self, as me or mine.

So what do we mean by view? How does a view form?

There's just a stream, for example, of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience, awareness of consciousness. That's just going on and on and on. And when any particular one of that is clung to through grasping—much as I said last week—any of that *nāma-rūpa*, in that moment, it's like we pick it up, carry it with us with a perception of what it is. We think about it, we get it more complicated, we remember, we associate. And all of these are mental formations that turn into thoughts, which turn into a view—a description, giving meaning to something. And then we take that description, that view as being true, and cling to it. This can be very simple, happening all the time in any aspect of our mental and physical experience.

Like today, I have a thing going on with my shoulder, so I went to the physical therapist and she did her thing—fine, very nice. Came home, and then this other shoulder started hurting. And I could see, in that moment, my mind going, "No, we so much don't want this to be happening." And it really went there. And then I could see—I didn't actually go there too much—but that was the form, the physical experience, unpleasant physical experience. And then the thought: "No, this can't be happening. It's supposed to be getting better, not going to the other shoulder." And then the thoughts and the memories that make up this whole *sakayaditthi* sense of self-personality—I could see

them starting. "It's always something. It's this shoulder, it's that shoulder, it's my back, it's my knees. Ever since I was thirty, there's always been something wrong with this body." I could just see it going, along with the appropriate emotions.

Now, that could go without clinging to it. You know what I mean? It could just kind of be running, and it could just be aware of, "Oh yeah, that's thinking." But as soon as there was that "No, we so much don't want this to be happening," and then the whole story—the thoughts, the emotions, and the believing that view, "I'm this kind of a person with this kind of a body, this is my history"—right there, you have basically the history of your whole life, so it would seem.

The thing with views, though, and this we really need to notice, is how limited they are. Because of course, that's not a true and accurate reflection of my whole life. It feels like it.

It seems like it in the moment. And in terms of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, the point is really that it felt like me—one solid me going back to whenever, the time I was born, having to deal with this particular situation. Obviously, that's not rocket science. That happens all the time.

I want to give you another definition, the way Ajahn Sumedho talks about sakkāya-diṭṭhi. He talks about it in a couple of ways, and I like the way he discusses it informally. He says you can experience it in either a subtle way or a gross way.

The subtle is something I referred to last week. It's just that subtle sense of me here now—not even a specific thought, not a specific memory like I was describing with my shoulder, but just that subtle sense of me. If you had to put more words to it, it could be "the one who is mindful," "the one who is observing," "the one who is making choices." All those thoughts we get into—"the one who is thinking." That's already going further. It can be much more subtle, just that felt sense of me.

Or on a more gross and complex level, Ajahn Sumedho talks about it as really what we would classically, in regular speech, call our personality: our ideas about our behavior patterns, our memories, our cultural identifications—who we think of ourselves in terms of nationality, gender, race, family history, all that kind of stuff. Our moods, our particular personal history. Like, "I'm a person with limited energy, I'm tired, I can't do any more than this." That kind of stuff comes up all the time, doesn't it? And all the innumerable conditions that are constantly changing, but we don't often notice how much they're changing.

So, for example, "I'm tired, I'm a person with limited energy, I can only do so much"—as if that is the experience every single moment of every single day. Is anything that we're saying is me—"I'm a person who has a debilitating disease"—is that the actual experience every single moment of every single day and night? Or is it sometimes a physical experience, sometimes a thought, sometimes a mood, sometimes completely absent from the present moment experience? This is just something to hold as a question.

The ideas we get into: "I'm someone who could never really be free. I don't even know why I'm practicing because it's clearly hopeless for me." That's a personality view, which we then believe. And then that belief can actually color our succeeding thoughts and how we act.

Again, Ajahn Sumedho talks about how, on one level, we create ourselves with our thoughts. All these examples I gave—a perception like my perception of pain, then another perception of "now my other shoulder, what's she doing?"—and then all the memories, all the thoughts. We're creating ourselves through our thoughts: "I'm this, I'm that, I was this, I will be that, I've always been and I always will be."

And this is what I love that Ajahn Sumedho says. He says we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self. Not that we ever stop trying, but we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self. The sense of self is intrinsically non-satisfying, non-peaceful.

I think that's just an interesting idea to contemplate and see if we can really look at it that way, rather than, "Well, this particular self is unsatisfying and not peaceful, but if I could rearrange it and get it right, then..." And how much of one's meditation, at times, really, when I come down to it, is about getting myself to be a better self so things are more okay?

But this sense of telling ourselves stories, making it up as we go along, creating an intrinsically unpeaceful, unsatisfying self—this is based literally on inaccurate perception, which leads to wrong view. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is one aspect of wrong view. I love that translation, diṭṭhi as "view." In the Eightfold Path, the first step is wise view, right view. To me, it's kind of a literal translation: we're seeing accurately, or we're perceiving inaccurately. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, wrong view, is based on inaccurate perceptions and interpretation of our experience.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said: "Discovery cannot come as long as you cling to the familiar. As long as you have all sorts of ideas about yourself, you know yourself through the mist of these ideas. To know yourself as you are, you must give up all ideas. You cannot imagine the taste of pure water. You can only discover it by abandoning all flavorings."

In some way, what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is, is that we keep putting all different kinds of flavorings into our ideas about ourselves, coloring our perception, throwing out a whole description and taking that description to be the truth—and completely ignoring or overlooking the fact that five minutes later we have a completely different description, a completely different set of ideas, and believing that to be the truth, and believing both of them to be me. We just don't quite look at what we're doing, why we're believing it. Wrong view.

So how is a view formed? There's saññā, perception, which is just the recognition of a particular sense contact. Like if I hit the bell and you hear it and recognize, "That's the bell"—that's perception.

Perception leads to how we think about something—thinking. And thinking then can coagulate, kind of form itself into one big solid glob of a view. This is how things are.

This is a story a friend told me. She was on retreat in a big old house in Switzerland a few years ago. These big old wooden houses without much insulation are really quite creaky and noisy. Once in a while there's a creak outside here and it's like, "Oh my god, a creak! There shouldn't—god forbid—be any noise in this meditation room!" But in these old houses it's creak, creak, creak all over.

She said the meditation hall was upstairs, and right below it was the room used for walking meditation. It was her first retreat. She's Swiss, in Switzerland, and following the schedule, it was the sitting time. She was sitting, getting into the middle of the sitting, starting to feel, "Oh, I'm really getting with the breath now. I'm really getting quiet, starting to get nice." And then she heard creak, creak, creak. "Oh, somebody's walking downstairs. It's making such a noise." It just kept going and kept going.

And she said, "How can they do that? It's not the walking period. It's the sitting period. We all agreed to follow the regulations here and..." She wouldn't mind if I said this, but she's Swiss. You definitely follow timetables. You do it as you're supposed to do it. And she was getting really worried. "They're ruining my concentration! I was finally getting somewhere on this retreat. Really, they're completely wrong. This is the right way to do it."

So it went from perception to thinking about what was happening to a view of "I'm right, they're wrong. This is how things are supposed to be done."

And then she said, "Well, let me just come back and feel my breath again." She felt her breath. And as she felt her breath just being there, she realized she was leaning against the wall. And whenever she breathed, her back went out into the wall and made it creak. That was the sound she was hearing.

Wrong perception, inverted perception, leads to all kinds of thoughts and a view that we totally believe and get emotional about and act on. Then the correct perception—well, as you can imagine, all those thoughts went away. She really couldn't hold on anymore to how bad that person walking was. It's gone. It's free. I mean, she could have added another set of thoughts about what a stupid jerk she was and then got into hating herself for always jumping to conclusions. That's another thing, which isn't accurate either.

But you see what I mean? If the perception is inaccurate, but we don't recognize that, and the thoughts that follow from it we take to be real, and then the thoughts form into a view, and we already believe that—we maybe never even know anymore what the original perception was—and then we're off and running. This is basically, moment to moment, a very simplistic way of describing how sakkāya-diṭṭhi gets created in our mind stream, moment to moment.

It's of course not a steady state thing. It's not like you're sitting here with a solid personality that maybe somehow you're going to change to something else and then you'll be better. It's being created moment to moment.

So according to the Buddha—and I want to use some sutta references tonight—according to the Buddha, he talks about how we practice self-identification, how in the moment we practice creating sakkāya-diṭṭhi, and also ways we can practice that lead to the cessation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

First, one set definition. I know it's a little fiddly, but I want to put it out there because it's the way the Buddha talks about it. He describes the creation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi in any particular moment. When an uninstructed worldling—basically an unenlightened, normal person—in any particular moment, there are four different ways that one could regard form, or any of the other four aggregates, to create the sense of self. He says in any moment, one regards form as self,

Like regarding the body as self. The commentarial example is that form and self would be indistinguishable, like the flame and the color of a candle—you can't separate the two. That would be regarding form as self.

Another way is regarding self as possessing form. These are subtle, but they're different ways we relate. That would be like taking the mind or mentality as self, and it's possessing form the way a tree has a shadow.

The third one is regarding form as in self. That would mean the self is the formless, the mind, and form is within that, the way scent is within a flower.

And the fourth is self as in form, which would mean that the formless is like a self located within form—as if the self was a little jewel inside a box.

You see what I mean? A little fiddly. You don't need to remember all that. I just like to share it because these are slightly different angles that lead to the inaccurate perception of self in any relationship to form—either being form, having form, form within self, or self within form. And then the Buddha applies the same formula to vedana, feeling tone, to perception, to all the volitional formations, the sankharas, and to consciousness itself.

Then he goes on to describe how this brings us suffering and agitation: "How, bhikkhus, is there agitation through clinging?" Here he goes through that same analysis—basically an unlearned, unawakened person regards form as self, or self and form, the whole thing I just described. That form of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with the change of form.

Can you relate to that? Just the slightest change of form and the consciousness becomes preoccupied with it. Agitation and a constellation of mental states born of preoccupation with the change of form remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is obsessed, he is frightened, distressed, and anxious. And through clinging, he becomes agitated.

I love that passage because it's such a straight-out description of what the mind does—well, what my mind does all day long. A little twinge in my shoulder and the mind becomes obsessed with the change of form. A whole constellation of emotions and thoughts arise. It gets agitated. There's anxiety. And then, you know, it stops hurting. The mind forgets all about it, goes on to something else, and starts the same process all over again.

And it might not be about form—it might be about a thought. "Oh, I'm feeling so agitated, and before I was so calm. How did this restlessness get into my practice?" It's just the same thing. It may not be form; it may be a mood, it may be a feeling tone. We do that over and over and over. This is the creation of sakaya-ditti when we don't recognize it—in such a way that one is afflicted in body and afflicted in mind.

This is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation: "He swallows these ideas with craving and views and takes his stand upon them and grasps hold of them."

Really, that's it. We take our stand. We fight to the death. "This is what's happening. I really am this kind of person. My body really is this. It really is my body." It's just so hard to see through the misperception, the thinking and the views.

So our practice really is to cultivate accurate, wise, right view. I mean, obviously, that's the whole practice of mindfulness. It's what we always say: just meet experience as it is, connected, without preconception, without confusing our ideas about the experience for the experience itself.

But we can't make the right perception arise just because we want it. Have you ever noticed that? We can't make the right view come. We can think in our mind, "I know that I'm identified here with these thoughts," but that doesn't really do a lot of good, does it?

I mean, it doesn't really let go of the clinging, because the clinging is there precisely because we're not recognizing accurately.

So the shift of perspective—and again, like I said, we can't make it happen—but I'm sure you know, I absolutely know you all know, over and over, the mystery of that moment when that shift happens.

For example, I'll just make up another particular story. There's an unpleasant sound. There's aversion. Just like my friend, it's bothering one's practice. One gets annoyed. And at some point in there, one's taking some part of that to be me or mine. Maybe it's the annoyance. Maybe it's the anger. And then the memories: "I'm such an angry person. This is my personality. It's because of X, Y, and Z reasons going back to when I was three. I understand it, but this is who I am."

And even when we try to say, "Okay, anger—it's really okay. Anger, anger. I can just be with anger. That's okay." We know the rap. But it's not really working, because at some point we're not seeing that view that really, "This is who I am, an angry person." Or "The anger is mine," you know, sort of like the shadow of the tree. "I'm not the anger, but somehow it's mine." Some way that there's that sakkāya-diṭṭhi, that personality view.

Or we even go to the space of, "It's okay, I'm really equanimous, just being with the anger." And you really are equanimous—but still, you're the person who's equanimous. You're the person.

And you can feel, as Sumedho says, there's no self that the thoughts can create, that our experience can create, that's really ultimately peaceful. So even being the equanimous person—"Okay, so I have this history of anger, that's okay"—it isn't really ultimately freeing. And somewhere back in there, we know it. Somewhere there's that feeling of still being kind of glitched up.

And then what I'm going to say, we all know: that shift that happens, sort of like magic, what we call insight, that aha moment where somehow, magically, the clinging to the view, the belief in the view just disappears. It releases, and it absolutely goes—that shift of perspective, that real shift from "I'm an angry person," or "I'm an angry person being equanimous," or whatever particular view, to just—oh, the way Sumedho says—"anger is like this." Not my anger. "Equanimity is like this." Not my equanimity.

No identification. No need to relate it to past or future. No need to make any story whatsoever. No need to move away. No need to move into. No need to fix. Just the "oh, anger's like this." Just a saṅkhāra arising and passing.

And it's so, as people say, it's so obvious, so simple, so peaceful. Why the heck do we get caught up again? That's to me the big question of spiritual practice. Why, for the love of God, do we get caught up again when it's so peaceful, so obviously free?

It's kind of a shift from being the personality to being the knowing. It's the way Ajahn Sumedho talks—I like it a lot. Nothing has to change. It's not about fixing the personality. But it's kind of a shift of loyalty, maybe, you know? From being so loyal to me being the angry person, to me being anything. "Anger's like this." Nothing to refer back to. Being the knowing.

That moment of insight, that moment where the perception shifts from that inaccurate, upside-down perception—perceiving any arising experience as being "me" or "mine" is one of the inverted perceptions that the Buddha talks about. Seeing anything coming and going as "me" or "mine." And it's one of the most subtle and pervasive, I would say.

And so what shifts, in really not putting our loyalty so much into our sakkāya-diṭṭhi, into our ideas about ourselves, what shifts is—oh, we just recognize more accurately.

And that's not something we can make happen, but it happens through steady, non-clinging attention.

It's just like those magic eye visual games—you know what I mean? They used to be very popular. They had books of them, just a page of two or three colors, graphic art with nothing representational about it at all. It's just design. There's nothing realistic about it. And if you look at it very steadily but without clinging, without focusing, without looking for anything—you just have to look very steadily and softly—suddenly a particular image will jump out. It'll look as though it's three-dimensional. That's part of the magic. And the other part is that where before you just saw little yellow and blue squiggles, little yellow and blue shapes, suddenly there are dinosaurs or hockey players or UFOs or whatever. And you really see it.

Now, it was there all the time, right? You didn't create it by doing something. You just allowed it to emerge through steady, non-conceptual attention. When you go back and look hard, it goes away. Or if you look away and look back, it's gone. But it's still there. Did it really go anywhere? It's still there. Both ways of perceiving are still there.

It's sort of like that when we've been perceiving something as me or mine—my anger, my history, my story—and then, oh, it's just this. All the dynamics might still be there. You could call up the same memories. There's the same physical sensation. You might still be experiencing anger. But that view, the thoughts and views leading to "this is who I am, my personality"—they're just gone.

So that shift of perspective is really what we're talking about when we talk about insight. A shift from being the personality to being the knowing.

I like the way Krishnamurti describes that quality of looking: "When you look totally, you will give your whole attention—your whole being, everything of yourself, your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment, and then there is no room for fear, no contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

You attend with complete self-abandonment. Basically, there's no room for self. It's just what there is.

So how do we keep getting tripped up, seduced back into identity view, into self-view, into the perception of any aspect of experience as self? How can we practice not to create this?

Here's something else from Sayadaw U Tejaniya that I found really interesting. This is from a retreat I sat with him. He was talking about how, in over thirty years as a monk and many years teaching Westerners, in his opinion one of the biggest hindrances for Westerners—really for people with a materialistic upbringing, a scientific type of mind—is self-doubt. Self-doubt in terms of trusting our insights into awareness, in terms of trusting the real liberating power of awareness.

He sees the cause of this self-doubt partly in how strong our personalities are and how strong our belief in and reliance on our personalities is. Even as much as we may not like our particular personalities, in a way it's like our refuge. It's the thing we absolutely believe. The personality, he says, is so often our reference point for who we are, for what things mean. And I would say ditto for our thoughts, which are what's creating our personality.

And so we get caught back into our personality—believing it, reacting to it, trying to fix it, relating to it over and over and over.

A story just came to mind that Steve Armstrong tells, and I've seen this too when I was in Burma. You put your shoes out when you go into the meditation hall. He said he came out once, and he had a really very nice pair of sandals, which would stand out among all the old, rubbery, corroded flip-flops. As Steve came out of the hall, a Burmese man was putting on Steve's slippers, about to walk away. Steve just kind of said, "Oh, what?" And the guy just said, "Oh, well," left them, and went away. He wasn't upset about it at all.

Now, for me at least—maybe not for you—but if I was doing something like that, I would be incredibly furtive about it. Checking around, making sure no one was watching. And if I got caught? Where my personality would go with that... it would be all about me and how I felt. Either way, it would be about me.

But for this guy? Just, "Oh well, I guess I won't take them," and he walked away. No problem. The personality, "who I am," wasn't the center of the world for him.

I don't know about you, but in here, this personality is a lot of times the center of the world. And it's a pretty limited, up-and-down, cockamamie world, I'll tell you.

Why do we choose to make our personality the center of the world? I don't know. Maybe you know somebody with a perfect personality. I don't. Nothing personal—I didn't mean anybody here.

See, don't we right away think it's about me? It's just stuff happening.

So, another sutta from the Buddha. Someone comes to him and says, "Venerable Sir, how should one know, how should one see, for the view of identity—*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—to be abandoned?"

Abandoned.

Now, this isn't going to be anything big that you haven't heard before, but that's no reason not to listen to it.

The Buddha says, "Bhikkhu, when one knows and sees the eye as impermanent, identity view is abandoned." And of course, he goes through all the six senses, but I'll just go through with the eye.

Then he says, "When one knows and sees forms"—in other words, there's the eye and there's what the eye sees, the objects of sight—"when one knows and sees forms as impermanent, view of identity is abandoned. When one knows and sees eye consciousness"—that moment of knowing, when eye and form come together and there's consciousness, that moment of seeing—"when one sees that as impermanent, the view of

self is abandoned. When one knows and sees eye contact as impermanent, when one knows and sees whatever feeling tone, *vedanā,* arises with eye contact as conditioned, as impermanent, the view of self is abandoned."

Then he goes through the same thing with the ear, with smell, with taste, with body and tactile phenomena, with the mind and mental phenomena. So that's pretty much everything. And that's a high bar, right?

But we don't have to sit here thinking, "I have to see everything as impermanent all the time." Rather, it's about having the contemplation, the idea, kind of in the back of our mind—the power of the perception of *anicca*, of impermanence.

He's basically saying here that when one perceives these aspects of our experience—seeing, eye contact, the feeling tone, the form, the eye itself—as impermanent, when that perception of impermanence is accurately perceived, the view of self, or in that moment the sense of self, the personality view, is basically not created. You could say it's abandoned, but it's really more that it's not created.

So this is, again, that inverted perception the Buddha talks of so much. We have such a deep habit to perceive what is impermanent, what is constantly changing, as permanent. To perceive what is not-self as self. To perceive what is inherently unsatisfying as satisfying, as capable of giving us happiness.

Now, I'm saying this, it's a thought—we can think of it. That's a concept. But the concept won't really help us abandon the personality view, the construction of a sense of self.

Because on an intellectual level, impermanence—maybe even personality view, but certainly impermanence—is pretty understandable, isn't it? Not too many people would really argue that eye contact is permanent, or even that their eye is permanent. We can all at least give lip service to the idea that however solid I seem, I know at one point I was born and at another point I'll die. However solid this experience of anger and this personality view seems, I know I go through different moods throughout the day.

But what we're actually perceiving in the moment may not at all correspond with this idea of "Well, I know it's impermanent." We can say that. But what we don't recognize—something I heard the Dalai Lama say once in a teaching—he said, "When we talk about the perception of *anicca*, of impermanence, we may think we understand it, that we can really see things arise, they last for a while, they go away. Arising, persistence, going away. And you think, 'Yeah, I really understand impermanence.'"

But he said, "No. Things don't exist for a while in between arising and passing away. There is no steady state." Impermanence means experience is in constant flux. Constant flux. There is no little stability in between the moments of arising and passing. And that's what we don't often really let in through our perception.

It's too radical. It's too unsettling. And it gives rise to all sorts of questions. We start thinking, well, if everything's impermanent, how can I do this? If there's no steady state at all, how can I get up and walk out of here? Who's walking out of here if it's not the same person who walked in? We go into all of that.

This is the same as the magic eye. It's the same as no self. It's not that things are permanent until we allow the perception of impermanence and then suddenly everything goes into constant flux. It's not that if you allow in the perception of impermanence, you can't find your feet anymore. It's not that everything's just arising and passing in molecules and you can't find your mouth when you're trying to eat.

Things are impermanent. There's not even things—I mean, that's already saying it wrong. "Things" is already taking a bunch of changing energy and putting it together and calling it a thing. I know that's going a little far, but that's what the scientists tell us. And there are moments when that's our actual experience. It's true. There are moments when you can be in retreat, sitting, and really there isn't a mouth, there isn't a body. But most of the time, it's like the magic eye—that's one level of how things are: constant flux.

But it's useful, this conventional perception. Even though this body is in constant flux, I still can recognize it when I get up in the morning. When I walk out of here, I don't get it confused with Viranyani's body. I know what I'm supposed to do. She knows where she's supposed to go. We can go and eat and find our mouths. It all works.

But just because there's this perception of lastingness doesn't mean it's accurate at the deepest level. And so, knowing that it's a convention—a useful convention—we don't need to be afraid of the perception of no self or the perception of impermanence. We're still going to be able to function, because it's only the way things already are.

The only thing that goes away is that burden we're dragging around of me, me, me—everything about me, every thought, every sound, everything that happens connected to my whole history back to when I was in second grade, or before I was born, everything. Who needs all of that? The sense of our personality being so important, the sense of having to fix ourselves, change this personality, get a better one—or at least put on such a good mask that no one can tell how really disgusting you truly are, right? How much of our time do we spend doing that?

In the perception of impermanence, on this level that the Buddha is speaking of—and it doesn't have to be on that level all the time, it doesn't even hardly most of the time—but just let it in as you're walking around: sight is impermanent, constantly changing. Walk out of here and you see a plant, then you see the window, then you see a shoe, then you see the hall, then you see the light. It's constantly changing. You don't have to flip out and get all trippy about it, but you can just notice that. Thoughts are constantly changing. Moods are constantly changing. Physical sensations are constantly changing.

How does it work that this seeing, this perception of impermanence, starts to erode the habit of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, of creating a sense of self? What it does is this: when we see how things actually are, the clinging that arises due to our confusion, our inaccurate perception, simply drops away. Sort of like my friend in the house in Switzerland. As soon as she knew what was true, the aversion and the clinging were gone. The view was gone. You don't have to abandon it. It just goes away.

There's a model that the Buddha uses frequently—you could call it three movements in an unfolding process of insight—where we recognize more accurately, then we begin to see, in terms of the six senses, in terms of the five aggregates: the gratification, the danger, and the escape in any aspect of our experience. He uses this all the time.

For instance, in terms of seeing, the gratification in seeing a pleasant sight is the pleasure and joy that arises in dependence on that. That's the gratification. The danger, obviously, when we see that it's always changing, is that it is subject to change. It's unsatisfactory. We can't place any lasting sense of self or hope for happiness in that experience. And the escape is the abandonment of desire and lust for that form, for that particular experience.

It's not that we have to get rid of anything. We don't have to get rid of our personalities. We don't have to get rid of pain in the body. We don't even have to get rid of anger.

But what goes away when we recognize accurately is the desire and lust for whatever the particular experience is. It's that word that's often translated as "disgust"—*nibbida*—but "disenchantment" is really a better translation.

Just to describe how that works: when we see accurately, "Oh, this can bring me this pleasant feeling, this brings a moment of pleasure, and then it's gone. Placing all my eggs in the basket of more pleasant feelings—completely, it can't do it for me." It's not a "should." It's not "I'm so stupid" or "I'm bad." It's like a disenchantment with pleasant feeling, for example. Seeing with that disenchantment, we go, "Ah, this can't do it," and just put down the clinging.

The description that Andrew Olendzki gives of this in the *Insight Journal*—he wrote a whole piece about *nibbida*—I just want to read the metaphor he gives. He says that knowing things directly as they really are and seeing what is impermanent as impermanent with right view, when one sees as it is with right view, then one becomes disenchanted with the aggregates, with all five aggregates.

What does this mean, disenchanted? Because as I said, as he said, it's often been translated as "revulsion" or "disgust." And often when people hear that—"I should be developing revulsion for the five aggregates, that means revulsion for the body, for forms, revulsion for perception"—no, to us that's subversive. That doesn't sound right. Certainly it doesn't really inspire one too deeply. "Yeah, let me work towards revulsion."

But if you think of it as disenchantment, and then use this simile that's in the texts about a dog that comes across a bone that has been sitting out in the desert for months and months—where it was once a really juicy bone, now it's just bleached white and bare. The marrow is gone. It's just a dried-up old bone. So the dog comes running up to it, all lathering, slathering, happy, starts chewing on it. He's enchanted by the prospect of gratification as he scrapes away furiously at the bone. But when he wakes up to the fact that the bone is empty of anything that will offer him any satisfaction, he becomes disenchanted. He just spits it out and walks away.

There's no aversion necessary in that. No revulsion. It's just, "Oh, this isn't what I thought." Puts it down and walks away.

That, I know, is actually an experience of real equanimity—the equanimity that allows us to recognize our experience ever more accurately. Not push it away. Not distance ourselves. Not have revulsion. But the clinging of wanting anything to last, of perceiving anything as "me," just becomes abandoned in that moment. And more and more frequently, as the perception is accurate more and more frequently, the abandonment of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* gets stronger, gets our loyalty. Our belief in personality view really begins to weaken.

But one point I want to make is in our practice here—and not just on retreat, in daily life—I find this really personally: often I can access this level of seeing. "Okay, seeing the moment of eye consciousness, seeing all the aggregates as impermanent." There are times when that is the level of perception, especially when we're on retreat.

But there are other times when the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—you know, the perception, the clinging, the thoughts, the view—that all happened really fast and quite a while ago. We couldn't even say what was the original perception that led to the view. But we wake up really caught in some personality view. And it might be a really familiar one—any of

the examples I've been giving—but we're really in it. Sometimes you can say, "Well, I'm such an angry person and I can say all of this," or "I've always been unhealthy," or "Wow, I'm really doing great," whatever it is. "I'm this kind of person, I'm shy, I'm introverted," whatever it is.

Sometimes you can't say what it is, but in daily life I'll just start to feel really kind of contracted. I look, and it's all complicated, and I can't tell what the belief is, I can't tell what the perception is, but I can tell that *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* is really strong right now.

And that is actually enough.

In that moment, rather than, "Oh, there's eye consciousness and there's clinging and there's identification"—I can't get there. I can't even say, "Is this anger? Is this fear? Is this back to my childhood?" All I can say is, "Wow, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* feels like this." Just naming it in that way that Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses. And it actually is very powerful.

Instead of getting in there, fighting it out—"Oh no, here I am being selfish, I want to be compassionate, I better start doing the Chenrezig mantra, I better do this, I better sit more"—you know, how we're going to fight? Wait a minute. *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* is like this.

It's not magic—I wouldn't say it's magic—but sometimes it's so powerful. Because just in that moment, you don't have to figure it all out. You just shifted loyalties right then, from total belief in *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* to "Oh, it feels like this." Just that movement into awareness receiving *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Just another complicated, messed-up *saṅkhāra* that's arising in this moment, and it's going to pass away if I don't keep feeding it fuel.

That—you don't need to be incredibly concentrated, and you don't need to be incredibly quiet and peaceful to do that. It's just to have that willingness to recognize, "Oh, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*." Just to have the sense that that's something that arises and passes.

It's not who I am.

Are we, as I said the other night, willing to be without self-referencing? Are we willing not to be our personality? Are we willing just to be with what is without having our personality be the center of the show? Are we willing not to be the center of the show?

Because it's peaceful.

And what's interesting—sometimes we find out peace isn't really the thing we're wanting. A little more action, a little more glitziness, a little more interest, a little more sense of *me*, basically.

So I say, "Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like that." I mean, just in yourself, how did that sound? Really lame? Like, "Oh yeah, right. I'm going to go through life saying 'sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like that.'"

But you know, then what? What are we left with?

Just awareness. Awareness, when it's not colored by craving or delusion or fear or anger—in that moment, of itself, it's pure. It's just this. Just what is in this moment. Nothing to do. Nothing to fix. Nothing to be.

And it's just a moment. It's not some big explosion. It's very, as Buddhadasa says, normal and natural. We all have many, many moments in a day when there's not the misperception of something as self. Many moments when sakkāya-diṭṭhi is not being created or clung to. They're normal, natural, and simple.

So we could just, as Buddhadasa says, generate a contentment with that. And then on the other side, notice when there is the perception of permanence, when there's the perception of self, when the thoughts are creating a view—just notice how that happens. And notice you don't have to go back and deconstruct the whole thing. At any point, we can just go, "Ah, it's like this," and simply step out of believing that whole thing. Step out of the magic eye altogether.

That's accessible to us now, just as we are. You don't have to wait until you're better. You don't have to wait until somehow you've rearranged everything so you can be completely enlightened. It's not some other place. It's right here, right now, no matter what's happening. Just a shifting of allegiance.

I want to close with a short quotation from Master Sheng Yen. He's a wonderful Chan master from Taiwan, from China. He's not so healthy now, but he's really a wonderful being. He said:

"True liberation does not come from wanting to be liberated. In true liberation, there's nothing to want, nothing to discard, no place to go, and no place to avoid. It means not being moved by the environment, not having likes or dislikes. True liberation does not come from wanting to be liberated."

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 19

Investigating Anattā: Power of Renunciation

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson examines renunciation (nekkhamma) as a transformative practice that liberates rather than restricts. Building on her previous discussion of sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view), she explores how clinging pervades even subtle levels of experience, referencing the Khemaka Sutta where a noble disciple describes the residual conceit 'I am' as being like the scent of a flower—present yet impossible to locate in any single aggregate.

Wilson draws from the Buddha's teaching to Tapussa, who described renunciation as seeming like 'a sheer drop-off' to householders who delight in sensuality. Yet the Buddha himself acknowledged that before awakening, his heart did not leap at renunciation—until he investigated both the drawbacks of sensual pleasure and the rewards of letting go. Through teachings from Ajahn Chah, Huang Po, and Sogyal Rinpoche, Wilson illuminates how our minds habitually 'face away from themselves,' constantly seeking completion outside the present moment.

The practical heart of this talk lies in understanding 'unwise attention'—focusing on the attractiveness of phenomena that fuels craving. Wilson offers accessible examples, from chasing photographs of beautiful irises to the subtle grasping at pleasant meditation states. True renunciation, she explains, is not about rejecting life but about bringing sati-paññā (mindfulness-wisdom) to the point of sense contact, discovering that each moment of simply returning to presence is itself the greatest renunciation—putting down all self-images and constructions to find we are already home.

I think it must have been mettā, the feeling. Such appreciation for the Sangha. And looking around here, half the people in here are really good friends. All of you are really dedicated practitioners. I feel like we could just all take turns giving the Dhamma talk. It feels like such a privilege.

When we were chanting the refuges and precepts, I just was flashing on how that's been going on for 2,600 years, just like that. There's a saying that if there was ever one moment where no one was practicing the Buddha Sāsana in the world, it would go out of existence—not the truth, but the Buddha's teaching. And so actively, with us sitting here practicing and committing to the precepts and the refuges, we are part of that. I flashed back on all the nuns chanting in Burma, and this feeling arose that it's the same

as it's been for 2,600 years, and we're all part of that. Somehow my heart just felt really full. I wanted to share it with you because sometimes you can forget that, just sitting here slogging through the day. But it's a beautiful thing you're all doing. All of us.

Those of you who were here last week remember I was speaking about sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, personality belief. My focus last week was on how our sense of self is constructed moment to moment by how we cling to views, to constructions, thoughts, and beliefs that are based on clinging to any aspect of nāma-rūpa—any aspect of mind or body experience. Because we perceive permanence in what is impermanent, we cling to an aspect of the aggregates of nāma-rūpa and construct a whole sense of self moment after moment. Why couldn't I have said it that quickly last week? I ended by saying how it's cut through by the deep and transformative perception of impermanence, of anicca. That cuts through the sakkāya-diṭṭhi clinging to views.

Tonight I want to talk about another aspect of practice that is very basic—you all know this—but it's another avenue of seeing through the delusion that keeps creating a sense of self. It's very simple. Rather than view, the first step of the Eightfold Path, it's wise intention, the second step: attitude. Specifically, the attitude of renunciation.

But first I want to say that this sense of clinging to a sense of self, of creating or somehow just having a sense of self, is so subtle at times. Sometimes it's really gross, but it's so subtle that it pervades through all levels of our experience. This isn't to be discouraging. I actually found this rather encouraging, because sometimes people think, "Well, I should see through these views. Why do I keep having a sense of self? It's enough already." But the elimination of complete belief in sakkāya-diṭṭhi, which in itself seems like it would be huge—the elimination of the belief in sakkāya-diṭṭhi does not completely remove the sense of personal identity.

In fact, I want to read you from the sutta. I want to read a lot of Buddhist material tonight. There's one that I've always really liked, about a bhikkhu named Khemaka. The other bhikkhus thought that he was an arahant, completely enlightened. The sutta goes on with this whole long story of how they keep coming to talk to him, saying, "You're an arahant." And he says no, he's not, back and forth.

But the point is, he says he's not an arahant because he still has this feeling of "I am." And they said, "Well, what is it?" He said, "Friends, I do not speak of form as 'I am'"—rūpa, part of the aggregates—"but at the same time, I don't speak of 'I am' apart from form." He says, "I don't speak of feelings as 'I am,' of perception, of volitional formations as 'I am,' or of consciousness as 'I am.' Friends, although the notion 'I am' has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates, still I do not regard anything among

them as 'I am.'" He doesn't think form, perception, consciousness, volitional formations, or moods are me. He knows this is not me. But at the same time, there's some feeling of "I am" there.

Can't you relate to that? And this person, he's not just some schlump. He's a very seriously practiced bhikkhu.

He says, suppose, friends, there's the scent of a blue, red, or white lotus. Would one be speaking rightly if one would say the scent belongs to the petals, or the scent belongs to the stalk? He said, no, friends. So how would you answer it rightly? Answering rightly, one should say the scent belongs to the flower. So too, friends, I do not speak of form as I am, nor do I speak of I am apart from form. He goes through all of the aggregates in this way. So although the notion has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates, I don't regard anything among them as this I am.

Even though a noble disciple—when they say noble disciple, that means someone who has at least reached the first stage of awakening; when they use that word noble, that's what it means, at least—even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, he's passed the first stage, still, in relation to the five aggregates subject to clinging, there lingers in him a residual conceit I am, a desire I am, an underlying tendency I am that has not yet been uprooted.

I can really relate to this. Not the five lower fetters being gone—I'm not saying that. But this subtle sense, like a perfume, the scent of a flower, just this conceit, this underlying tendency I am, kind of floats around and you can't quite pin it down.

The point I want to make here is how clinging is so pervasive, because all of this residual conceit or sense of I am arises because of clinging. And so that's why clinging is always the core teaching—freedom from clinging.

So tonight I want to talk about seeing through clinging in the arena of the attitude of our heart and mind, working with the second step of the Eightfold Path, which is wise intention, wise attitude.

The direct response to the tendency, the reflex action of clinging—because it seems like that, a reflex—and by clinging, we mean not only clinging for the pleasant, but wanting the unpleasant to go away, sort of like clinging to non-being, so it covers both of those. The direct response is paññā, wisdom, seeing through attachment to views. But when paññā is turned on clinging, with clear seeing we begin to perceive the seductive and delusional nature of clinging. And the natural response is this shift, this

purification of our attitude, where we put our trust. The natural response of the attitude of heart and mind shifts from one of greed, wanting and not wanting, to that of non-greed, of a natural renunciation.

This inner attitude, this purification, is something that we can actually include in our practice through giving attention to renunciation. So renunciation is both an expression of the spaciousness, the coolness, the peace of the fire of greed and clinging having gone out, and it's also a structure, a form of practice that we can cultivate to purify the tendency of clinging.

Uninvestigated, and even partially investigated—what's interesting is if you look and see for yourself. Don't believe what I say, but what I see is that our notions are kind of superficial about both of these two attitudes, about clinging and about renunciation. They are both kind of backwards in a way. Clinging—not if we think about it rationally, but the way we act—is going to bring us happiness. Clinging and wanting and getting things is a way of happiness. Renunciation is kind of dour, unpleasant, a penance at best, but certainly not very joyful and nothing that we particularly want to hang out with.

Two things from the Buddha in this regard. One about clinging. He says: Monks, what is the noble truth about the origin of suffering? Just this—his answer—just this craving, which brings renewal of being, and which is accompanied by pleasure, by lust and emotion, finding delight now here and now there, namely the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for being, the craving for non-being. This is called the origin of suffering.

What I like about this in this particular context is that he points out that craving is accompanied by pleasure and lust and is finding delight now here and now there. That's the way, I think, when we don't really investigate, that's how we relate to craving. Oh, delight over here, delight over there. This doesn't work anymore, never mind, delight over here. And that is superficially what we notice, what is feeding the reflex action to go to clinging as a strategy for happiness, this finding of delight. You could say that's the gratification in clinging. There is pleasure. It brings delight. The danger, of course, is it doesn't last. And the escape is the abandonment.

Now, in terms of the way that we view renunciation—that's kind of upside down to what the real experience of it is when we open into that, that real renunciation of attitude which is freeing, which is so spacious. This is again from a sutta. The Buddha was speaking with Tapusa the householder, who had been talking to Ananda and asked

Ananda some questions. Then Ananda took him to the Buddha. So Tapusa sits down and Ananda says: Tapusa here said to me, Venerable Ananda, we are householders who indulge in sensuality. We delight in sensuality. We enjoy sensuality.

We rejoice in sensuality. For us, indulging, delighting, enjoying, and rejoicing in sensuality, renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off." In other words, that's not attractive, right? "Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline, the hearts of the young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. So right here is where this doctrine and discipline is contrary to the great mass of people—this issue of renunciation."

Can you relate to that? Maybe you're not exactly rejoicing in sensuality, but there's that sense that renunciation means I can't have anything.

The Buddha's answer is interesting. "So it is, Ananda. So it is." He didn't say, "Oh, this foolish man." He agreed with him. "So it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, thought, 'Renunciation is good. Seclusion is good.' But my heart did not leap up at renunciation. It did not grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace."

So we could cut ourselves some slack, if even he as the Bodhisatta experienced this. The Buddha continues: "The thought occurred to me, 'What is the reason? Why doesn't my heart leap up at renunciation? Why doesn't it grow confident, firm, or steadfast, seeing it as peace?' And I thought, 'Well, I have not seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that theme. I have not understood the reward of renunciation. I have not familiarized myself with it.'"

He's always just so straightforward and practical, you know? That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation. Of course, you can imagine he goes on and says that he did pursue those themes, and his heart did leap up at renunciation. Because when we really explore with a clear heart and mind, without getting lost in our preconceived notions, clinging actually isn't such a purveyor of delight. Momentary, maybe. But if we really look...

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj. I know, I'll read from the Buddha too, but I just like this one: "The state of craving blocks all deeper experience. Nothing of value can reveal itself to the mind that knows exactly what it wants."

Can anybody here relate to that in your meditation practice? The mind of clinging is narrow, restricted, limited. The Buddha says this over and over. Nothing can reveal itself to the mind that knows exactly what it wants. That's the danger in craving.

The Buddha often used strong fire images about the burning of craving. You know the Fire Sermon, where the eye is burning, eye contact is burning, forms are burning, they're aflame. I'm not going to read that one, but basically he's saying all our senses, all forms, all contact—everything is burning with passion, burning with aversion, burning with delusion. It's not a light, "Oh well, let's just see how it goes" kind of image. It's saying we are burning.

Here's another passage where he describes clinging. Actually, the name of the sutta is "Clinging." A bhikkhu once said, "In one who keeps on focusing on the attractiveness of phenomena—the five aggregates—craving develops." And this is very important; I'll say it again later too. This is unwise attention: focusing on the attractiveness of phenomena. It develops craving, and craving then, as a requisite, develops clinging. From clinging as a requisite comes becoming. From becoming, birth. Then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. You know that chain of dependent origination.

"The origin of this entire mass of suffering and stress—just as if a great pile of fire, a massive fire of thirty or forty cartloads of timber, were burning, a giant fire, and into it a person would time and again throw dried grass, dried cow dung, dried timber, so that the great mass of fire, thus nourished, thus sustained, would burn for a long, long time."

In the same way, one who keeps focusing on the attractiveness, the allure of phenomena—craving develops, and the whole chain of dependent origination unfolds. It burns for a long, long time.

So basically, it's not that sense objects or any object is a problem. It's that craving keeps throwing fuel on the fire. Craving itself is the fuel that keeps us going.

Renunciation, actually, rather than being a sheer drop-off, rather than being a penance, rather than restricting and limiting our life—it's craving that restricts and limits and contracts consciousness, contracts the mind and heart. But renunciation, the inner attitude of non-greed, the inner attitude of simplicity, of contentment—that actually opens up space to be truly awake. The coolness of a mind and heart that's not burning with the fire of clinging. The spaciousness that actually allows for nature to reveal itself when the mind is not clinging.

This is from Huang Po: "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. But most people are not aware of it and think that the mind is only the faculty that sees, hears, feels, and knows, blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling, and knowing. They don't perceive the radiance of the source."

That's clean, actually. We're blinded by our own sight. It's not the sight that blinds us—it's the clinging to it. It's that looking outward. It's really the crux of our problem, the heart of our ignorance: that in the attachment to forms, to our seeing, to our hearing, to the meanings of our thoughts, to our emotions, to what's happening, to experience, there's this continual looking—as a metaphor, not looking with the eyes, but a continual turning of attention outward, away from what Huang Po calls the radiance, the natural radiance of heart and mind. Looking outward for completion, whether it's to pizza, whether it's to concentration, whether it's to enlightenment, whether it's to the person next to you being quiet—it doesn't matter what it is, whether it's to a different mental state.

The looking outward isn't necessarily outward beyond this body. It's outward from just resting at ease in whatever arises. The looking outward that's fueled by craving, by clinging—it's really the heart of our problem, as if somehow perfection is outside of ourselves.

Huang Po continues: "This one mind, this pure mind, is the Buddha. And there is no distinction between Buddhas and ordinary beings except that ordinary beings are attached to forms"—and by forms he means all of experience—"ordinary beings are attached to forms and thus seek for Buddhahood outside of themselves. By this very seeking, they lose it."

That seems to me really the heart of the conundrum. But it's radical. It's not give up some of the seeking but hold on to this one. Any tiniest little looking outside, we lose the recognition of the pure mind. That's the clinging. You see how pervasive, how subtle it is. And as we all know, just saying, "Okay, I get it, clinging's no good, I think I'll stop now"—no. It doesn't work that way.

So in terms of looking at renunciation as a quality of mind and heart, in small ways, large ways, whatever—playing with, practicing an active kind of renunciation—it's just another way of changing the channel from the constriction of clinging to the spacious coolness of non-greed, of renunciation. It's a movement of deep compassion for ourselves, not of penance, of punishment, of negativity. Real renunciation is a joyful, opening experience—just a state of mind that comes and goes like anything.

So really, when we think of renunciation, rather than thinking of it as a giving up, it's more about learning to renounce this fruitless quest of looking for peace in something outside of here and now.

The way Sogyal Rinpoche said: "The purpose of meditation is to introduce us to that which we really are—pure awareness, which underlies the whole of life and death. In the stillness and silence of meditation, we glimpse and return to that deep inner nature that we have so long ago lost sight of amidst the busyness and distraction of our minds. Meditation is bringing the mind home."

That's really how I think of simply opening to the moment, of putting down the craving, of renouncing the craving in any one particular moment. It's bringing the mind home—withdrawing this looking elsewhere for peace, for wholeness, because it's the looking elsewhere that actually hides the wholeness.

But it's such a deep, deep habit. We really rely on it. And I think, as almost everyone I've talked to here has noted, and as I see in myself all the time, we see through many, many moments of reaching outside or clinging to something—whether it's a particular outside sense object, a particular state of mind, wanting things to be a certain way, or suffering. We see it, we really see through it. And then it may really be peaceful, spacious, open for a while. But some little other something comes into the mind or the experience, and that deeply ingrained reliance on clinging, that reliance on the idea—we don't even hold it consciously—that something has to be different for peace, for freedom. Whether it's the sitting has to be different, this thought has to be different, my experience has to be different.

And as soon as that comes in, it's clinging. Clinging might be in the form of pushing away. And it's so easy for us, especially when it's subtle, to overlook that attitude of craving and get a little bit focused on the thing that we're craving or pushing away. That's looking away. Even when it's something like a mood—we're involved in it, and then, "Oh, there's disappointment. What does that mean?" We're trying to think. Looking away right there. It's so subtle.

But it doesn't mean we're renouncing life or renouncing experience or even renouncing sense objects. As Geshe Rinchen says, having great compassion for yourself is the same as renunciation, because we're renouncing the delusion, the attachment that keeps one bound to samsara.

So what I'm talking about here with renunciation is really this inner attitude—just a willingness to notice the attachments. And you can't necessarily stop it, but we can at least renounce buying it wholeheartedly. The inner motivation of renunciation is, I think, more important than the outer form. The outer form can support us, and I'll talk about that some. But I know it's possible to live very simply or to be practicing very austerely—I know it's possible to be an ordained person and be completely filled with attachment to the form, with pride or arrogance or complete self-judgment, which is

really the same thing, one or the other. It's possible, although it is hard, to be living a completely immersed worldly life and not be clinging. It's harder. It is harder, just because stuff happens so fast. But it's really all about inner attitude, what's in the mind that's noticing.

So as I was saying, we get so habituated to looking away. Almost like one of the ways it feels is: something will make me feel happy when things are unpleasant. But sometimes when things start to get spacious and quiet, that sense of—again, it's a superficial sense of an emptiness, of something lacking, of something needing for completion—and looking out for that. It's a reflex habit. Whether it's for sense experience, the five senses, whether it's to mental experience, emotion, whether it's to ideas and views, views of self—it doesn't really matter what to.

So our practice of renunciation is really a conscious choice for our happiness. It's a conscious choice to break this habit, to consciously see what the mind is doing—the constriction and the burning that clinging brings, and the peace and the space and the joy that a moment of renunciation can bring. It is hard because it's such a habit for our mind to face away from itself, and things happen so fast.

This is Ajahn Chah. He's talking about the flood of sensuality. *Kāmogha*, the flood of sensuality: "We are sunk in sights, sunk in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations, in mental activity. We're sunk because we look only at externals. We don't look inwardly."

And there's so many. They happen so fast. And Sogyal Rinpoche goes on to say: our mind faces away from itself. Our attention, our mind, bends towards whatever we experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, texture, mental experience. Our mind leans toward. The attention is completely caught up by what's happening, and then we get into thoughts about it—the future, the past, the associations—and then we're gone. Out of that comes views. But it's this tendency to lean out.

And then how that leads even more to craving is that unwise attention that I spoke about. Play with this in your practice. When you notice something pleasant—whether it's an image in your mind, something pleasant you're eating, a pleasant emotion, a pleasant sitting, doesn't matter what—the unwise attention, this is what the Buddha said fuels, throws the fuel onto the craving, is really focusing on how attractive this thing is. That's different from noticing pleasant *vedanā*. That's just pure mindfulness. It's more like, "Wow, this really tastes good. This is really so smooth on the tongue." That kind of "This is really gratifying. I really like it."

Unpleasant, of course, is easier to see. When you're annoyed at someone, the mind just keeps going back to those annoying things about that person, every time. You can see it more easily—I can see that one more easily anyway. Each time the mind goes back to what's wrong with that person, you get a little more annoyed. A little more annoyed.

Well, it's the same with the pleasant. They're both unwise attention. Throwing fuel on the pleasant object and the gratification.

So I'm using simple sense experiences, like food. But try a really smooth, light sitting. You're aware of it, and you're noticing, "Oh yeah, this is nice, this is pleasant," but there's this subtle quality of, "Mmm, yeah, this is how it's supposed to be. I'm just really seeing the rapture now. This is really..." And we keep focusing, subtly, on just how nice this is. We don't see the clinging in the background. We think, "I'm really immersed in the beauty of this experience."

Just play with how that happens. I mean, you'll know. We know. We don't always know how we got there, but we know that craving was being fed—sooner or later, when it hits us back in the face. And those are the times when we don't think craving is finding delight now here, now there. We think, "Wow, I was mindful. I was doing it right. How come it went away?" And then we hear ourselves and go, "Well, I know it's supposed to go away. Everything's impermanent. I really know that. But something's wrong. There's something I'm doing wrong." And then we'll find some other rationale or some other reason, because we can't really acknowledge that we're just clinging—that was really nice and I really liked it. I. That sense of me.

Just play with that. It's unwise attention. We do it all the time and get led into whole worlds of *papañca*, of action.

Here's an example. Once I was sitting in a beautiful place in South Africa, and I came out one morning right at dawn. There was this big row, this really beautifully landscaped arrangement of iris bushes. And this one morning, right at dawn, they'd all bloomed. It was really exquisite in my memory—the memory is years ago now. Very subtle lavender and white, extremely beautiful.

And I came out: "Ah, beautiful." You see, renunciation doesn't mean we can't appreciate the beautiful. Renunciation doesn't mean, "Oh no, don't look at that." Renunciation means renouncing the clinging and really bringing mindfulness, wisdom, *satipaññā*, right to that moment of sense contact. That's the place for renunciation.

Well, I didn't do this at that point. "Wow, aren't they beautiful? They're so beautiful." The pleasant feeling in my body—I'm all liking that. "They're so beautiful." And then, you know clinging is going on because it leads to *papañca* of mind and proliferation of action. "My mother would love to see these. She's such a gardener. I wish I had a camera, but I don't. But maybe my friend sitting over on the other side does have a camera."

I ended up running around the place, looking for my friend, bothering him on his retreat, getting his camera, trying to take a picture. Which, of course, when you look at the picture, it doesn't show anything. It just shows some green leaves.

I wasn't appreciating the beauty of those irises anymore. I was running around like a nut, trying to hold on to it. That's just a simple example, but that's how craving leads to complexity, leads to papañca, makes our lives so complicated.

The renunciation isn't "I'm never looking at a flower again." The renunciation isn't cutting down all the irises so we don't, God forbid, get tainted. It's bringing in sati-pañña—mindfulness and wisdom—right at that point of contact. Oh, it's beautiful. You feel the energy going out. Or it's awful. You feel the energy recoiling. Oh, it's like this. That's really the essence of wise attention, of renunciation, right at the point of contact, understanding it.

This is the Buddha: "For some people, contact—the point where sense plus object meet—if you've been right there, that point of seeing, the eye, the iris, is seeing, is enthralling. Contact is enthralling. And so these people are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But others come to understand their sense activity, and because they understand it, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does, and so their craving ends. They realize total calm."

It's beautiful, isn't it? It doesn't sound so harsh or like penance or a restriction of life—restraint at the sense doors. First is sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, at the point of sense contact. When we're able to do that, great. It doesn't have to expand any further into clinging, into papañca. In that moment, that's a renunciation of the clinging, of looking outside, looking elsewhere for completion.

That's something the space and structure of a retreat, the simplicity of a retreat, helps us do. All of you have chosen to come here. It's a huge form of sense restraint, of renouncing complexity, renouncing having things your way, renouncing getting the meals you want, renouncing being with your family—whatever—to be here. It's not that all the things we're putting away to come here are bad, or that those things are keeping us from freedom. Of course not. But the strength of our trust in clinging and

looking outside is so deep, and it rises so quickly. As Ajahn Chah says, we're so sunk in this flood of sensuality, the flood of experience. Even on retreat, it's not as much, but there's still so much going on—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking. That's always going on.

But there's so much, especially in our daily lives, that this is why renunciation as an outer form matters. Often when we say renunciation, people think right away of it as an outer form, whether it's taking robes or renouncing work and busyness for a while to come on retreat. I'm not saying renunciation is merely the outer form, but outer form and structure is extremely helpful to give us the space to explore the burning of clinging, the coolness of renunciation.

It's like Thich Nhat Hanh says: things are so busy and loud, just shut the windows once in a while. You don't have to let every wind come blowing through your house. It's not that we hate the world. It's not that we're shutting out the world. But simplifying just gives us a lot more possibility to notice what's going on. And I know you all know this. None of you would be here if you didn't know it. I'm just reinforcing what we already understand. Clear the decks. Appreciate the simplicity.

But the simplicity itself is meaningless if we're not using the space it creates to really look at what's going on in this mind and heart when we come to that point of contact. So how much form, how much simplicity we want—that's personal. It's something for each of us to explore, and it may change as we go through our lives. But it's really about what helps us be more present at this point of contact.

With sati-paññā we just meet what's happening, and we don't concoct a whole world out of craving, out of clinging. I know you know what I mean. But just later, think back over how many worlds has your mind concocted today based on contact? Contact with a sight, contact with some thought. How many different, incredibly strong personality views have you created in your mind today just based on an unpleasant thought that came up? Based on not liking the way your breath felt?

Or maybe a really beautiful moment arises, and then it goes. They come, they go. All we have to do is watch it.

But you see how fast, how much contact there is. It really, really can help to simplify. It gives us space to recognize what the mind is doing. And the conscious renunciation of outer form—say, the conscious putting down... Take, for example, the eight precepts. Not that people should do it, but one of the things it can do is this: I've made the renunciation of outer form, I'm not going to eat in the evening.

So when I'm on eight precepts, like sitting in Burma, you're just on eight precepts. It's easier, actually, when everyone's on it and they're not putting out tea—I must say, it's a lot easier. But you just watch what comes up in the mind. So hunger comes up. So what? It doesn't really matter. You just watch it. What you put down is that clinging, that urge to do something about it. And it really doesn't matter. I really mean it. You're hungry? Go hungry tonight. Okay. The hunger's like this. There's no "I've got to fix it, I've got to do anything." There's no clinging. So hunger, not hunger. You feel weak, you feel fine. It doesn't matter if there's space. There's coolness. There's no burning in the mind.

That's just a simple example. Sure, at first, with some outer forms of renunciation, the mind kicks and screams. "I don't want to do this! No, don't take it away! I'm going to be so—if I don't have that, I don't want to live without that." Well, most of us have something, maybe more than one or two somethings, that fall into that category. And sometimes it's something really banal that you're too embarrassed to admit to anyone. Often when I go to Asia, it's just some little thing—I'm not going to say what little thing—things I just have to take. I don't need this, but now I've got to have it.

Sometimes it's not banal, and we might not even be able to say what it is to ourselves because it's much closer to home. A certain sense of ourselves. A certain personality trait that we hold to. Or a memory. Or a way that we relate to the past. Or whatever it might be—a particular experience. Sometimes it's a fear of something we don't even have, but we don't want to give up the possibility that maybe someday we're going to have that, you know?

Just watch. Where is the mind? No, not this, not this! It's kicking and screaming. And then realize the problem has nothing to do with having or not having that thing, or that state, or that sense of yourself. The only problem is the clinging. Renouncing the clinging that keeps us bound to samsara.

Again, we get so focused on having or losing the thing, or the idea, or the sense of ourselves. We're looking outside again. We're jumping over, we're overlooking the attitude of mind, of heart. "No, no, I need this. I need this. I need this." And in that moment when we see this—we've shifted to the wise intention of renunciation. We've put down the claim in that moment, just for that moment. And we discover we're already home.

I mean, there's the larger renunciation of form in this particular tradition—people who take robes, nuns or monks. I myself lived for about a year as a precept nun in Thailand. And it's true, my mind was kicking and screaming for a good two months. Everything that came into my vision—aversion, aversion. And I mean, it was my choice, right? No one held a gun to my head.

But really, the mind doesn't just say, "Yes, the coolness of renunciation! I'm so happy." But by the end of that time, I'd adjusted to the life in Asia. I'd adjusted to a lot. I won't claim that everything was wonderful, but the simplicity of that life really suited me. And the sense of space in my heart, in my mind, the sense of ease, the sense of joy—of course, I probably exaggerate in retrospect; we can't trust our memories. But I do know it's true that I was really happy the last few months of that time.

And it's given me a really strong appreciation of the beauty and power of simplicity externally, to just reinforce the possibility of recognizing the simplicity internally. Again, it's not that we have to have a simple external life. It's just easier to turn around and bring the mind home, or recognize it's really already at home. So just have a look for yourself. The mind does kick and scream, like Tapussa the householder said—we rejoice in sensuality, we don't even like to think about renunciation. But that's because you don't know what it is. You don't know how happy it really is.

I think also why monks and nuns are so honored and respected in Buddhist countries is that traditionally the householders have a great respect for the level of external renunciation that's required. And the longer you live like that, in some ways the bigger the renunciation, the harder it is. For me, I knew I wasn't going to live like that all my life, so there was a way in the background where I could think, "I don't have this now, and that's fine." The craving doesn't come up. But you have that little out in the back of the mind: "I know next year..." So it's not like I've given it up forever. I didn't have to look at that. Although that's just a thought, because who knows what's going to happen the next moment.

In some ways, our practice—just our moment-to-moment mindfulness, samādhi, whichever one you do in practice—each moment that you simply come out of a fantasy and feel the sensation in the foot, each moment that you notice disappointment is taking you away and recognize, "Oh, disappointment is like this," you come out of the identification, out of the wanting, and you just are aware with mindfulness. Each moment that we come out of a story, that we come out of a criticism, out of a space-out, and just recognize, "Oh, this is what's happening right now"—in a way, each moment of that is the hugest renunciation of all. Renouncing in that moment all your self-images, your self-ideas, your holding to fantasy, your constructions, your concoctions, your saṅkhāras—just for that moment, it's like, "Ah, just this."

In that moment, just for that instant, you've put down all clinging, all looking outside, all feeling of incompleteness and needing something else, all sense of self. "Oh, just sensations of pressure, tightness, calling it breath. Feeling of self-judgment is like this." I know, it's so simple. It's like, "Yeah, fine, right." The next moment, okay, the habit of

clinging arises again. Concocting a view, concocting a story—it arises again. That's okay. But notice those moments of renunciation. We're already home. It's not that we got rid of something and created peace; we just turned around and saw, "Ah, peace is in here." And I'm not lost in clinging. And I'm not feeding that fire with cow manure. That's what it feels like usually—feeding fire with cow manure.

Anyone can renounce things, people, places, or lifestyles. Okay, we're already at a high bar here, right? Anyone can renounce that. But only a true renunciate renounces interest in her own mind—renounces her ideas, her beliefs, hopes, conditioning, her wounds, her defeats, her victories, her past and her future. That's the moment of true renunciation. Just renouncing the clinging, because in the moment there's no past or future. Victories, wounds—they're all thoughts, they're all imaginings. Just that pureness of presence, that's the moment of true renunciation.

This is what we can practice. In the mindfulness practice, or samādhi too, you just come back to the breath.

Without clinging, without aversion, you just put down the craving, the attachment that binds you to stories or wanting something other than where you are.

And we can also use it in terms of specific forms. If you notice you're really getting caught over and over in a particular thing, you might experiment with putting it down. Really look at how renunciation brings space to the heart, to the mind.

You might notice—see if this is true for you—how when clinging is getting strong, when we're uncomfortable, how when the mind hasn't quite gotten quiet, when something's disturbing it, how quickly the tendency is to fill up the space.

When you notice the ending of a thought: quick, get back to the breath, right away! Not just, "Oh, that's thought, it's over. Just space." No—do something. Do something!

You walk out and you're just walking. Look at the bulletin board. Go do something. "Oh, I have fifteen minutes and I just walked. I'm not ready to sit. It's going to be lunch. I've got to do something." So you read the bulletin board again. You read the back of the toilet bowl cleaner again. You go and wash your hands. You go and do something.

Or even in the sitting, nothing's really happening. You're just there. It's not like there's nothing happening that you can feel good about. It's just nothing's really happening. So you have to do something to fill up that space.

Just notice that tendency. What is it you're drawn to do? What do you get involved in? What do you get caught up in? Experiment with putting it down. Don't read, if that's your thing. Don't look at the bulletin board more than once a day, if that's your thing. If seventeen cups of tea is your thing and you're gagging on it, you don't want any more tea, but there's nothing else to do—put down the tea.

If it's looking at other people—how much do we look at other people? And for what? Don't judge it, but notice. Wanting to look, notice when you look, and notice what's the effect. How often does looking at other people really make you happy? Not too much. Not too much. Just notice that.

But remember that renunciation is a path of joy. It's not that the problem is in the forms, in the externals, or in our moods, or in anything. The Buddha said: "It is not the fetter of forms, or form of the eye, but whatever desire or passion arises in dependence on the eye in the form—that is the fetter. If the sense door, the eye for example, or the sense object, the form, or eating and food, whatever, was the fetter, was the chain, then this holy life for the ending of dukkha would not be proclaimed." It wouldn't be possible. "There is an eye in the Blessed One," he's saying. I have an eye. "The Blessed One sees forms with the eye. Yet no desire or passion arises in the Blessed One. So the Blessed One is well released in mind."

You get the sense. Forms aren't the problem. The eye isn't the problem. Renunciation is not trying to cut off life, cut off perception, cut off experience. That's not renunciation—that's aversion, fear. Renunciation is that *ah*, seeing sense contact with sati-pañña, and just putting down that looking down.

Anywhere else, looking outside to any degree for completion, for fulfillment—when we see the futility of that, what opens up is a great path of joy and space and coolness.

And it requires a kind of surrender, doesn't it? A surrender to just the truth of this moment. A total surrender of our beliefs, our expectations, our desires about practice, our ideas of who we are, of where we're going. A surrender even of our ideas of freedom. Our ideas of liberation.

This is on a moment-to-moment level. I'm not talking about something abstract or far away. We absolutely surrender all the concepts, the self-concepts, the expectations, and just land completely at this moment of contact. Without the mind moving out in any way, then the natural radiance reveals itself.

Can we trust that enough?

The more we recognize the burning nature and the futility, really, of this searching outside for the peace that's already here, the more the heart and mind naturally incline to the spaciousness, the coolness of letting go, of non-greed—or as Ajahn Amaro calls it, the peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of the mind and heart.

Can we just rest in the peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of the mind and heart? That's what renunciation opens us up to.

I want to end with a little poem from one of the nuns from the time of the Buddha. Mittakali was her name. She was turned to the Dhamma when she heard the Buddha give a discourse on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The texts tell us that up until this point in her life, she had the reputation of being a very difficult person—angry and self-centered. But when she heard the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it changed her. She put a great sense of commitment into her life as a nun. And of course, she became an arahant—otherwise you didn't get your poem in this collection.

She wrote:

Although I left home for no home
and wandered full of faith—
so the outer renunciation—
I was still greedy for possessions and praise.
I lost my way.
My passions used me,
and I forgot the real point of my wandering life.

Then as I sat in my little cell,
there was only terror.
I thought, this is the wrong way.
A fever of longing controls me.
Life is short.
Age and sickness gnaw away.
I have no time for carelessness
before this body breaks.

And as I watched the elements of mind and body
rise and fall away,
I saw them as they really are.
I stood up.
My mind was completely free.
The Buddha's teaching has been done.

CHAPTER 20

Ceaselessly Responsive

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses the essential balance between the wisdom of anattā (non-self) and the heart qualities of mettā (loving-kindness) and karuṇā (compassion). She explains that emptiness without compassion represents only half the picture—what Tibetan teachers call 'falling into emptiness.' The awakened mind, empty of intrinsic self, is described as 'ceaselessly responsive,' naturally manifesting friendliness, non-harming, and connected presence when confronted with the need to act.

Drawing on teachings from Nyoshul Khenpo, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Nisargadatta Maharaj, Wilson illuminates how the path from ordinary being to awakening involves the gradual opening from a narrow, self-referential mind to one that instinctively encompasses all beings. She connects this to the Buddha's teaching on sammā-saṅkappa (right intention), showing how intentions of ill-will transform into mettā, and cruelty into karuṇā.

Through compelling stories—including Mahā Ghosānanda chanting the Dhammapada verse 'hatred is never conquered by hatred' in Cambodian refugee camps, and civil rights leader James Lawson's nonviolent response to violence—Wilson demonstrates the power that emerges from truly knowing, not merely believing, our interconnected nature. She emphasizes that our personal suffering, when met with mindful compassion, becomes the avenue into understanding the dukkha of all beings, and offers practical guidance on noticing where we let our minds dwell and consciously choosing openness over contraction.

So the last three weeks I've been talking about anatta, non-clinging, various aspects of the suffering of identifying or clinging to any aspect of experience as self, and hopefully conveying some sense of the freedom of putting down the burden of constructing everything around the idea of me, me, me.

Tonight I just want to speak about the balancing manifestation of non-clinging, of emptiness, which is the second wing of the two-winged bird: friendliness, compassion, benevolence, connectedness of beings.

I know often the idea of anatta, of no-self, or just the idea of not clinging to anything in this world—the idea, not the actuality—can be less than attractive. Most people, I don't think, begin practice thinking, "Yes, let me achieve a state where I just really don't yearn for anything, where it's just that six-limbed equanimity, no movement towards or

against, just cooled out." It actually, to me, sounds lovely. But it can seem unsettling or downright frightening, or it can be misconstrued as a sense of uncaring indifference, annihilation, basic psychotic disconnection. Of course, we all know it's none of that.

But still, if emptiness were the only manifestation, if that was our only aspect of understanding, there's a piece missing, a piece incomplete. Essential right view, anatta, no-self, is not about a kind of cold, indifferent void. Everything's empty of intrinsic self—me, you, and everything else—so nothing makes any difference. That's sometimes called falling into emptiness, and it's a great piece of delusion because it's only half of the picture.

The way the Tibetan tradition describes our empty nature is that it's empty of self, but has that radiant, naturally awake knowing aspect, and it manifests by being ceaselessly responsive. In other words, this empty, awake knowingness, confronted with the need to act, is ceaselessly responsive.

The natural expression of the wakeful, non-clinging heart and mind will be the response of wisdom: that of friendliness, metta, of benevolence, of non-harming, of compassion, of equanimity in the face of nothing one can do—equanimity which is connected but not trying to change that which can't be changed—and of appreciative joy, when that friendliness, that connectedness, that empty knowing connects with the joy of another. The natural response is appreciative, empathetic joy.

The natural expression of the mind, the heart of non-clinging, of this knowing—just in a moment, doesn't have to be forever, but just in a moment of really knowing anatta, no intrinsic self—the natural expression of this is that instead of the contracted, ceaselessly self-referential mode of responding to any experience, that contraction, that closure of me, me, me is gone. The mind of non-clinging, the heart of not clinging, is that of a heart and mind that is not limited, that is not contracted. And the natural expression of that is kindness, friendliness, compassion, or just, as one teacher said, doing the obvious—just responding in the obvious way that can be of assistance.

To me, even just on an intellectual level, never mind experience, it makes total sense. Because when there's that sense of me—and again, we've been talking about this all month—every situation we walk into, there can be that relentless, obsessive self-referencing about everything that happens. And the experience of that gives rise to separation, gives rise to greed, gives rise to fear, gives rise to need, to me and the other.

I can remember telling that little story about sitting in the airplane with the empty seats next to me, perfectly happy until I started realizing that it was an overnight flight, that if no one came and sat in those seats, I would get to lie down. And as soon as I realized that, every single next person getting on the plane was my enemy until they passed that row.

That experience is not totally unusual. I don't think I'm a total psychopath that I had that experience. It's that me-centric quality—it's all about me. Everyone getting on the plane only mattered in terms of what they meant to me. The mind, the heart is constricted, is narrowed. There's a sense of separation. Everyone else is seen only as how they reference me. We can see this all the time.

As soon as I saw what was happening, without getting into judgment, I just thought, "Oh, this is a lot of suffering." I just really felt that. And I was able to just say, "Okay, may you be happy." Let's just change it to metta. I could do that. That self-referencing just really dropped. And then the way that manifested—I didn't get up and hug everybody in the plane or anything. Just sitting there, nothing looked any different. But there was not anymore this sense of the enemy. It was just, oh, here we all are in the plane together.

It's not like a huge deal, but it is. The difference between that need to calculate and separate and protect and fear, and just the sense of "okay, here we are, whatever happens"—that's all. But it's huge. In that space of "well, we're just here together and I don't have to protect my seat at the expense of everybody else's comfort," there's just really not a problem. One does what needs to be done. It's an openness to life, rather than this constriction, this separation.

This is how Nyoshul Khenpo described it—he was a wonderful Tibetan Dzogchen master: "The difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our present deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow. The more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, completely disregarding the well-being, happiness and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings, rather than being concerned only with his own ego and individuality. Thus the entire path from ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of mind. And that is precisely what we call the bodhicitta—literally, to grow and develop that enlightened attitude. The concept of growth is used here for the passing from a completely narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings."

So this natural movement from narrowness to openness—he's putting that down as the whole path in a way. And I really like it. First, it's completely normal and natural: the experience of heart, of friendliness, which you could call metta, of non-harming compassion, of happiness with others' happiness, of equanimity. These are not some incredibly esoteric, distant experiences that we have to endlessly practice to maybe somehow attain. They are a truly normal and natural response of the heart and mind that's imbued with wisdom in a moment. It's the natural, normal response of the truth of who we are.

All this fear and separation and self-concern is a kind of incredibly exhausting something we've learned, very unfortunately, way back somehow in the sands of time. It just takes up so much energy, and we get so involved in it that we don't notice enough, or maybe trust enough, or have confidence enough in the natural expression of the truth—of impermanence, of not-self. The natural expression of non-clinging is metta and compassion, friendliness and compassion, metta, karuna.

They manifest in terms of intention. Remember last week I talked about non-clinging, and that one of the ways we can cultivate, to move our noticing in the direction of non-clinging, is intention—the second stage of the Eightfold Path, samma sankappa. The intention of renunciation, letting go of clinging. The other two aspects of wise intention that the Buddha speaks about are how the intention of ill will changes to friendliness, metta, and that of cruelty changes to non-harming, to compassion.

So again, in this manifestation—this ceaselessly responsive aspect of the fact that there's no one home—the way that manifests is when we need to think, speak, or act. The intention, the motivation in the mind, is fueled by, is triggered by friendliness, compassion, non-harming. And as I said, this is totally normal and natural.

I was giving a talk on metta last week in Cambridge, and the example I like to give, just for how natural metta is: metta is really just the open state of friendliness, of well-wishing, that comes when our attention, our heart and mind, connects with the good, or connects with our common humanness—or common not even humanness, beingness. The natural expression of that is just a simple friendliness, well-wishing.

The example I gave is if you see two little kids playing, or two little puppies, and you're in a relatively open space. In other words, if you're completely self-absorbed in some big problem, you could see anything lovely and it just doesn't register. That's the self-absorption, the small mind, the small world. But if you're just walking out of here, open, present, nothing special, and you see two little kids running by, the natural response is just a kind of happiness, a kind of wishing them well. Your mind doesn't necessarily say, "May you be happy and peaceful and free from suffering"—that's a

trained thought. But there's an "oh yeah," a wanting them to be happy. You don't say, "Hope that little kid—what is he doing?" Unless you're in a bad mood. And the bad mood prevents the connection in that moment. Same if you see a little puppy. It's just normal and natural. It's not some big esoteric state.

And in the same way, that open-hearted connectedness, when it naturally connects with suffering—the normal response is compassion, empathy with the suffering. And if there's a movement or something to do to help, one would do it. Doing the obvious doesn't require rocket science. So if the kids are playing and one of them picks up a two-by-four and starts whacking the other one in the head—hopefully we're not so lost in some mindfulness state that we don't respond.

That's a little missing piece there—missing the connection.

We also wouldn't grab the two by four and hit the kid with it to show him, right? That would be overreaction. But the empathy of attention that connects with suffering—we'd feel the suffering of both. The suffering of the kid getting hit, the suffering of the kid who's hitting. And we'd intervene, one hopes. We would intervene in whatever way: take the stick, do whatever. But with this connectedness, this compassion that can see that there's harm without hating the one, loving the other, making good or bad, and just doing the obvious. This is not rocket science. Not unreachable.

Two things. One is to realize that it's the natural manifestation of wisdom, the natural manifestation of our understanding of practice, of the way things are when our delusion is not in the way. So it will happen naturally and strengthen. But also, through our mindfulness, through our practice of noticing what's going on here and now in this mind and body, we actually will begin to see more and more times that we have a choice where to let the heart and mind dwell. We, more than we know, have a choice to stay in that closed creation of separation and fear, or to choose openness, friendliness, compassion. It doesn't mean we're choosing ultimate, total bodhisattva bodhicitta, but that we do have a choice. Like that time when I was sitting in the airplane—I didn't do some big deal, but I saw what my mind was doing: the separation, the enmity, the fear. And I said, "You know, I don't need to do this. Let me change the channel." Sometimes that's all we need. So one thing is realizing that we do have a choice.

The second is really looking and seeing: Do we each actually have the confidence, the trust? I don't want to say belief, because that's kind of too intellectual—but the actual confidence in the depth and power of friendliness, of compassion, of connectedness out of emptiness as a way to be, to live, to act, to relate in this world. I know from the culture it's not exactly what might have been what I was taught verbally. And there are

many people who act in ways that really inspire and show me this is possible. But I wouldn't say it was the predominant message that comes in from all the different aspects of culture that we're exposed to.

In any case, I think it's just worth a look, over and over: Where do I place my trust, my refuge? Where do I choose to let my mind dwell? And do I really know there's a choice?

One of my favorite lines from the Buddha: "Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind." So just bear that in mind. Without judgment, without negativity, just notice what your mind frequently thinks and ponders upon, left to its own devices. And that becomes the inclination. We're all of us old enough to see there are quite some habits going through this mind. That's one of the things that really shows up in the silence of retreat—the inclination of mind. And what's really being shifted on this deep level through mindfulness, or through metta and karuna if you're practicing metta, is the habit of where we let the mind dwell.

So do we really believe it's a possibility to choose friendliness, to choose compassion, to choose non-harming? Do we think we have to wait until we're an arhat for it to naturally manifest? The Buddha spoke of liberation of the heart, which is love.

I know many of you have heard this story. I just like it because it shows the power of really knowing—not believing, but knowing the actual truth of the unified nature of our being and the expression of that as love. Do you know the story of Maha Ghosananda? Do you all know who Maha Ghosananda is? He's very old now, and I think he's getting kind of senile. He's a Cambodian monk, and he got out of Cambodia during or after the time of the Khmer Rouge, when so many millions of Cambodians were killed. He's a Buddhist monk, and Cambodia was largely a Buddhist country. Since that time, he has been all over the world. He's been a real peace activist.

He's the real inspiration for the Cambodian people, known as a true metta being. He's done peace marches through Cambodia and has been quite an activist.

So he came out of Cambodia into the massive refugee camps where so many had fled from the Khmer Rouge. And he, along with probably almost everyone else in the camps, had had most, if not all, of his family members murdered. He comes to this refugee camp where there are thousands and thousands of people coming out of starvation, torture, murder, terror. They're living in this refugee camp. I can't even begin to imagine what that would be.

He came to the camp—he wasn't so famous at this point, but they recognized him as a monk and a symbol of their religion and culture. He set up a little place, perhaps a small temple, and people came to hear him give a talk.

This is just what I heard: What he did was start to chant. Remember, these people in Cambodia were Buddhists, so they would be familiar with the specific chant as well as with what it was saying. But he just came, and in the power of his heart—what do you say to people whose lives and everyone they love is destroyed?

He simply started chanting: "Never by hatred is hatred conquered, but by readiness to love alone. This is the eternal law."

And he just kept chanting that over and over. After a while, other Cambodian people started chanting it until they were all chanting it together.

To me, it's a lovely story. But the point it brings to me is this: one couldn't go and do that from thinking it's a nice idea. He couldn't walk into and be the carrier of that level of destroyed life, of so much violence and suffering, and chant that and uphold that and bring people together—unless it came from a place of absolutely knowing that it's true. That hatred is never conquered by hatred. This is an eternal law, only by love alone.

Maybe we don't know that every minute, but do we know it in some moments? Can we trust enough to access that level? This is the truth of who we really are. Not some idealistic idea of how we should look, how we should speak, how we should act. That doesn't hold up. It doesn't work. It has to come from our deep understanding. And this is what our practice is opening up to us.

To me, it's one of the reasons sangha can be such a refuge—because of the conflicting messages we get from culture. Well, I do. Maybe you don't pick them up. There are quite a few other messages in all different cultures.

I read this on the BBC news last summer about a new bar in China, in Nanjing. It's called the Rising Sun Anger Release Bar. It's a bar that lets customers smash glasses, rant, and even hit specially trained workers. The owner, Mr. Wu, was inspired to open the bar by his experiences as a migrant worker. He has employed twenty men who've been given special protective gear and physical training to prepare them for the job. Most of the customers are women who work in the service or entertainment industries.

They went out on the street interviewing people. The clients can ask the men to dress as the character they wish to attack. One woman said the idea of beating someone dressed as your boss seems very attractive. "We get no place to vent anger." This place was in the news because it was really taking off.

But they interviewed another man on the street who said, "No, no, violence is not the answer. You need to adjust your lifestyle or seek psychological treatment."

So Mr. Wu's dealing with that too, because for the most stressed-out cases, he has counseling available from psychology students he recruited from the local universities.

That's one message we get—that we have to vent our anger, there's nowhere to do it, and you feel better if you do.

So where are we putting our trust? Where are we taking refuge? Again, it's not a should, but looking deeply and seeing what's really true for me.

And remember, every moment can be different. We can't control externals, but we can begin to take responsibility for our own actions, our own minds and hearts. This isn't a judgment thing. This is really seeing and trusting that the natural response of a moment of awakened mind and heart is metta, is love, is compassion. You don't have to create it, but we do have to pay attention.

You know that story about the two wolves? I'll read it. An elder Native American was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight. It is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego"—and add your own. "The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, compassion, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, faith. This same fight is going on inside you and every other person too," the grandfather added. The grandchildren thought about it for a minute, and then one asked his grandfather, "But which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

That's what I mean about paying attention. The Buddha used that image all the time—feeding and starving. It's very interesting that he used that exact image. Noticing how we pay attention. What states of heart and mind are we feeding? What ones are we starving? Are we taking refuge in states of mind that can create and continue the sense of separation or superiority or self-judgment or fear? Or are we taking refuge in the sense of compassion, of just meeting what's happening without judgment, of generosity, of mindfulness?

There was an interview I heard on public radio the year the Red Sox won the World Series and beat the Yankees. This is baseball. This is American. It's a big deal if you like baseball and you're American. And if you lived in Boston, it was a really big deal because the Red Sox was the Boston team. Anyway, it was an over-the-top big deal.

So this was an interview with a Red Sox fan right at the end of the World Series when the Red Sox had beaten the Yankees. This fan said, "The joy was not in the winning. It was in the sorrow and misery in the Yankee fans' eyes. It's like a dichotomy, if you know what I mean." And this fan said, "This was the best moment of my life." Oh my God—judgment, judgment.

Then they interviewed a Yankee fan. And the Yankee fan said, "This was the worst moment of my life." The interviewer said, "Don't the Red Sox deserve to win sometime? Because the Yankees, they always win." And this Yankee fan said, "Yeah, sure—when I'm dead."

And I'm sure they all thought they were having a good time. I mean, it's supposed to be about a good time, isn't it, sports? So what wolf are we feeding?

When we hear a story or meet someone or have an experience that inspires us—like when I think about Maha Ghosananda and his chanting—I personally feel really inspired. It touches something in me. And for all of us, we all have different things that inspire us.

Another important point I want to make is that that inspiration inspires not just because of that person, but because they are bringing out a truth that's already an expression of who we really are. That we can even feel inspired is proof that this is an aspect of who we are. So rather than thinking, "They're so good and I'm such a worm," it's much more useful to notice: ah, inspiration, appreciation of goodness, appreciation of the possibility of kindness and love. You don't have to jump to "I am" or "I'm not," but just let in the supportive, onward-leading power of that inspiration, opening to it, beginning and continuing to deepen where we put our trust.

And at the same time, we can consciously cultivate friendliness, connection, compassion.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama teaches that compassion develops through two things: deep insight into what suffering is—and that insight arises by focusing on our own experience—and second, compassion strengthens with a sense of empathy, connectedness with all beings, that wisdom aspect of non-separation. Compassion develops and strengthens by deep insight into our own suffering experiences on one side, and also deep connection to our oneness with all beings.

This is one of the reasons why the difficult times in retreat are so important. They're essential. Sometimes I think they're the most growth-producing, most wisdom-producing aspects of our retreat—the difficult times, the times we stumble, the times we're flat up against some really suffering pattern of our mind. And the times we think, "I

know this, I've seen this a million times. Enough already, I'm done with this." And then of course you turn around and it comes up again. Self-judging, arrogance, greed, delusion, whatever.

The fact of its presence—it's arising due to previous actions, previous karma. These are the habits of our mind, where we've been in the habit of letting our mind dwell. Whatever it might be. Self-judgment's a good one. Arrogance is another. Striving is another. Comparing, all that stuff. That it's arising is simply the past karma, the vipāka, karmic result. How it's met in this moment—that's the new karma that's being created.

So our self-judgment comes up. We're really caught in it. It's it. "I've had it. I'm out of here." Oh, right. "I've had it." It feels like this. Just that willingness to be here for it without adding anything extra—that's a huge shift from trusting in the negativity, the separation, the ideas of perfection, all the things that are wrong with me. That's a huge shift from that to friendliness, just like this, compassion.

You really see then that your suffering is the same as the suffering of the world. Seriously, when you're all wrapped up in self-judgment—and granted, self-judgment is totally all about me, it's about the most me-centric thing there is going—but you know what? I haven't spoken to everyone here, but I've spoken to a lot of people. I can tell you, if you're completely caught up in your judging, you are not alone. You're with about 98.5 percent of any yogi I've ever talked to. So you can't even take yourself judging personally. You can't even build up a whole story about how you're the worst person on the planet. It's just another symptom of the dukkha of being a person. It's completely impersonal.

And so if you can meet even self-judging—just feel the pain of that. Wow, how much suffering is that? And then we realize it's just like a stand-in experience for the dukkha of all beings who are suffering, who are judging themselves. There's a way that our personal suffering, when met with just this clear-eyed mindfulness really, friendliness, non-judging, becomes the avenue into this oneness with beings, this natural compassion for the suffering of all beings on the planet.

The suffering, the difficulties, the demons we meet in our practice here—they're very important. This is where we're really understanding emptiness and compassion. And you don't get a nice little sign: "Yes, this is difficulty, and this is what percentage you're learning from it." We don't get self-fulfillment from it. That's why it works. If you really duke it out judging yourself and you had a little thing here that said, "Yes, but if you just stick with it, three more bad thoughts, you're going to really have this much more compassion," right? Would that work? It would just feed our ego totally.

So we have to be in there with nothing personal to show for it, nothing to refer back to, and just surrender. And then it touches that tenderness of the human heart, that tenderness for life. Our suffering is all suffering.

Really start to get a sense of the difference. We can have the idea that compassionate action is good—really sincere, ideal, mean it, want to act from that—from the intellect down.

But it doesn't have the depth, the power, the stay-with-it-ness that comes from really knowing we're not separate. The kind of compassion that comes from really being able to be with your suffering, with another's suffering.

Let me give you an example. Actually, today—this morning—I turned on NPR, the public radio news, and it came on in the middle of an interview with somebody. I was sort of listening, and right away they were talking about nonviolence, the theory of nonviolence. So I was interested. And after just a few lines, I recognized who it was. The man being interviewed started talking about Gandhi and how he'd studied Gandhi's teachings. It was a man named James Lawson, who has always been very inspirational to me for many years.

I actually have something I wanted to read about him, since hearing him talk on the radio this morning made me so happy. They introduced him as a leading theorist on nonviolence, and he has been since the Korean War. He was in divinity school during that time and had studied some of Gandhi's teachings in India. When the Korean War came, he was a conscientious objector. He said, "I just cannot go to war. I cannot commit violence." As a conscientious objector, he could have been deferred for being in divinity school, but he said no—it's not fair. There was a draft at that time, and he said it's not fair for him to take a deferral when other people can't. So he went to jail. He spent fourteen months in jail.

They asked him in the interview what that was like, and he said—this is a quotation from him—"When I was in jail, I discovered a strength and power in me to live out of my own conscience."

Now, where I'd heard of him before: he did discover a strength and power. During the civil rights movement in the late fifties and 1960, in Nashville, when there started to be sit-ins, James Lawson was one of the leaders of that whole movement. He was training the students, because that was a period when a lot of college students—mostly African-American students—were doing sit-ins and being subjected to a lot of violence, a lot of horrible stuff. James Lawson was one of the trainers in nonviolence, because he was deeply, deeply committed to nonviolence based on Christian love.

So this is what I wanted to read today, from a book about that period—an example of his acting from that place of knowing the power, the commitment to nonviolence and love. Not as it *should be*, but from that power he speaks about: the strength and power to live out of his own conscience.

This is a story about the marchers in Nashville demonstrating for the right for African-Americans to eat at lunch counters in downtown stores. They were marching, and a bunch of white motorcycle toughs attacked the two guys at the end of the line while the other marchers were ahead. They knocked one down, and the second guy, Bernard Lafayette, came and threw himself on the first guy to protect him. Then they were beating on Bernard. Jim Lawson saw what was happening and walked over. He didn't rush over—he just walked over calmly.

When he arrived, it shifted the attention of the white toughs from the guys they were beating to James Lawson. The thing about Jim, Bernard remembered, was that he was so self-assured, so confident, as if he were accustomed to dealing with white toughs beating up black demonstrators every day. The leader of the whites was wearing this DA haircut and a black motorcycle jacket. He was really enraged when he saw Lawson's coolness, and he spat at him. Lawson looked at him and asked him for a handkerchief. The man, stunned, reached in his pocket and handed Lawson a handkerchief. Lawson wiped the spit off his face. Then he looked at the man's jacket and started talking to him. Did he have a motorcycle or a hot rod car? A motorcycle was the answer. So Jim asked a technical question or two, and the young man started explaining what he had done to customize his bike.

Amazingly, Bernard thought, these two men were now talking about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. A few seconds earlier, they had seemed to be sworn enemies, one ready to maul the other. By this time, both Solomon Gordon and Bernard Lafayette were back up on their feet, the line was moving again, and Jim and the young man were still talking about the man's motorcycle. In that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject which they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them more human in the eyes of the other.

As they walked away, Jim waved to the man. The man remained still, neither accepting the friendship nor, for that matter, rejecting it. It had been a marvelous example of Christian love for Bernard.

That really inspires me—that power and courage that truly comes from knowing on a different level what's true and what's possible.

It was interesting because in the conversation today, the interviewer kept asking him about violence, about the Middle East, about what happens when someone's trying to kill you. And James Lawson kept saying, "You're asking the wrong questions. You're looking from the wrong angle. It's really about a completely different configuration of power and where real power comes from." That just reminded me so much of the awakening that comes from practice. It's really about a completely different way of looking at ourselves, at life. That's what is true.

So we really look and see: Where do we take refuge? Do we even have the sense that this could be possible? Because if deep in our heart we think, "This is a waste of time, this is impossible, that can't happen"—if that's the story we're telling ourselves over and over—that's what we're going to end up believing, taking refuge in.

That's why mindfulness as a tool, as a practice, is so powerful. A moment of mindfulness—just meeting that thought that says "this is impossible," meeting the fear, meeting the self-hatred, meeting the pain, meeting the disdain you feel for someone else, meeting whatever arises—mindfulness is just totally present without adding extra, without belief or disbelief, without pushing away, without holding on. And because it's not falling into our usual denial system, it just meets whatever happens, it allows the possibility to perceive in a different way. That's what I was talking about in previous weeks: perceiving more accurately allows us to see that it's not all about me.

So if we do start noticing the story we're telling ourselves is "this is impossible, my ego is too strong," whatever—we don't give up. We notice that. That moment of noticing it, that's mindfulness. It's a moment of freedom from that story. And you just have to notice that to see, "Oh yes, a whole other way is possible."

Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The sorrows of humankind become your sole concern."

We all have moments where we can maybe see that I am the world, the world is myself. Our particular sorrows can be the avenue into really opening to the sorrows of humankind—with that connectedness that allows us to care, with the wisdom that allows us to see if there's something we can do to help. Great. If there's not, we don't need to turn away. We can still stay open, still stay connected.

But also, if we don't meet—it's not just about difficulties, it's also about beauty, about joy. And if we don't meet suffering with some wisdom, we can really drown, just as you can fall into emptiness if there's a sense of no-self without compassion. If we go for the compassion without the wisdom, we also fall off the side.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that compassion must be supported from our insight into emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable, our empathy, our sympathy for their inability to pull themselves out of it leads to a more powerful compassion—the same thing Nisargadatta was saying. But without that knowing that their suffering is avoidable, without that emptiness, our compassion may be strong, but it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness, even despair.

I can certainly relate to this. If I look at the state of the world and specific instances—you want to fix this, you want to help this, you want to do that, and of course you can't help everything or fix everything. If that's looked at, even just our own suffering, just the suffering of our family—looking at my aging parents, doing what I can, but unable to take their suffering away—if that's not met with the knowing of emptiness, that it's not just all about the particular personality, it's unbearable. So compassion and non-self support one another. They allow us to deepen in wisdom and love, really from the inside out.

Just paying attention to where you let your mind dwell. When it's on suffering, if it's your own suffering, really meeting it with kindness, with compassion. Knowing that that's your avenue into knowing that we're the world. Sometimes when I'm on retreat or off, I can't get there for my own suffering. It's too much. It's eating us up. We're drowning in it or we're just shut down or we're afraid or we're just in a self-judging loop. So then sometimes I'll switch and just notice, in the big picture—not in a drowning way—but just the suffering in the world. It keeps my heart open and connected.

So whenever I hear a siren going—a police siren or an ambulance siren—I just like to, in myself, stop a minute and let it in. Someone's life is really changing right now. I don't know whose, I don't know how. In the city, how much do we hear sirens? Just little things like that. Whenever you see a crushed animal on the road. Whenever you—well, reading the news, my God.

Sometimes it's overwhelming, and then we need to see that we're drowning in it. But sometimes when I feel disconnected and shut off and I can't open to my own suffering, tuning into that of others, I can really see the impersonality in dukkha, in difficulty. Mine, theirs—it's all the dukkha of the world, and it connects us to beings.

On the other hand, we need to recognize when, as the Dalai Lama says, it's getting overwhelming. Sometimes we get so that we only focus on the suffering—our own or others'. We think the world is in such bad shape that to really cultivate compassion, we need to keep focusing on what's wrong, on the pain. And we drown. We're not balanced. That's not the complete truth either.

So just as here in practice we talk about really using skillful means when you're bottoming out—to contemplate something inspirational, to maybe shift to metta, or maybe to just open your field of perception and notice something beautiful, notice something touching—this is really important because, as Sharon Salzberg writes, it reintroduces us to the fact that completeness and unity constitute our most fundamental nature as living beings. No matter how terrible or wonderful our lives have been, no matter what we have gone through or what we are suffering now, our natural innate wholeness is always present, and we can recognize it.

Oddly enough, sometimes we recognize our innate wholeness through suffering. Sometimes that's too much, and we recognize our innate wholeness through deliberately contemplating the beautiful.

If you can't find anything beautiful because the dukkha lens is on too strong, the Buddha actually recommends—and this is serious—to contemplate your own generosity. Really sit, reflect, and let in all the acts and thoughts and speech of generosity you've offered. Another practice is to contemplate your sila—your non-harming actions, your skillful, kind actions. Not necessarily generous, but not lying, not harming—all the kind and good things you've done.

If it's hard to let that in, if it seems egocentric—it's not. That's a kind of warpedness we've gotten into in this culture. But if you really contemplate your generosity—not like "aren't I a good person," but just remembering a time you've been generous, the doing of it and the receiving of it—happiness comes. A kind of wholesome happiness that brightens our mind, brightens our heart, and allows us to then open again, past creating fear and separation.

So again, really looking at where we choose to let our mind dwell—and more than we realize, we do have a choice.

The last thing I want to say is about the power of mindfulness in all of this. This is Sharon again: "Gratefulness of being, which we might experience as happiness, can also be described as love. To be undivided and unfragmented, to be completely present, is to love. To pay attention is to love."

I want to close with a poem I often read, because it's a great example of this—how everything is here in paying attention. It's by Mary Oliver, called "Singapore."

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain
rising and falling.

A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together,
and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled.
What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps,
with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop
and fly down to the river.

But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't.

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth, the way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So let's sit quietly for a minute.

CHAPTER 21

The Stories and Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns

Carol Wilson · 1h03

In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson brings to life the remarkable women of the early Buddhist Saṅgha through their own words preserved in the Therīgāthā (Verses of the Elder Nuns). She begins with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, whose persistent faith led to the establishment of the bhikkhunī order, opening the path of renunciation to women.

The talk weaves together diverse stories: Paṭācārā, who lost her entire family to tragedy and became mad with grief, yet after meeting the Buddha became the foremost teacher for those suffering loss; Khemā, the beautiful consort so attached to sense pleasures that she had to be tricked into hearing the Dhamma, only to awaken instantly; Dhammadinnā, whose teachings the Buddha himself endorsed in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44); and Puṇṇikā, the slave girl who fearlessly taught a Brahmin the true meaning of purification.

Wilson emphasizes that awakening came differently to each woman—some instantly, others after twenty-five years of struggle. The poems reveal both the challenges and triumphs of practice: Vaḍḍhesī's persistent effort despite decades without peace, elderly Bāhuputtikā's extraordinary diligence despite physical frailty, and Uttamā's realization of 'what is vast and empty, the unborn.' These verses remind us that the path to liberation transcends gender, caste, age, and circumstance, and that we too can be 'true daughters and sons of the Buddha.'

So this seems like a good way to end the year, taking the refuges and the precepts, recommitting.

Tonight I just thought I'd talk about appreciating the Sangha, basically recognizing that what we are doing—as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago—by the act of the commitment that you make in your life, the commitment you're making sitting here, we are taking our place in the line of active Sangha women and men that stretches back, at least in the Buddhist Sangha, 2600 years to the time of the Buddha.

The way I want to share tonight is through some of the stories and poems from some of the women who were nuns at the time of the Buddha. Some of their poems—the women's and the men's, though I'm just sharing the women's tonight—have been saved in some of the suttas at the Therigatha. And of course, there's only poems from en-

lightened women. Many others wrote poems, we know, that didn't get in there. But the poems and also some stories about their lives—some of them we know more about than others.

What I love about this is it takes away, for me, the sense of somehow being distant in time and maybe not real, maybe some kind of mythological thing. To actually hear about, read about the lives of these women and the choices that they made to become nuns—and many of them were practicing the Dharma well before they became nuns and awakened in daily life as well—is very inspiring to me, because the outer circumstances of their lives are of course different from ours, but I can relate to many of the inner circumstances. People don't seem to have really changed that much. It just really inspires me with the immediacy of the teachings, of the truth that the Buddha shared with us, and of our own capacity to understand this, to live from this truth, to really recognize it in our hearts. We're not so different.

These women—I can't talk about all of them—but they all come from very different backgrounds. Some were very wealthy and privileged, some poor. Some came to the Buddha out of great grief and distress, actually having lost their mind from grief. Some were tricked into coming. Some were dying to come and their husbands wouldn't let them, and they had to wait till their husbands died. Some came out of grief at their children having died. Some just happened to hear the Buddha teaching and got lit up. Some became nuns and right away that was it—like the stories you hear where they heard one talk from the Buddha and sixty people became arhats. But others struggled for their whole life and didn't really come to deep understanding until they were old. The whole range.

One of the things about the Buddha is that once someone joined his Sangha, women and men both, there was a radical change in how they were regarded. In ancient India—and it still exists in India today—the caste system was more than strong. It completely ruled your life. If you were born in the Brahmin priestly caste, that was it. If you were born in the lower caste, that was it. It determined who you could live with, talk to, the work you could do. Very segregated.

In the Buddhist Sangha, once you joined, there was no sense of caste. There was no sense of, "Well, this monk used to be a prince, so he should get better treatment than this monk over here who was an iron worker." It didn't matter. This woman was a courtesan. This woman was a prostitute. This woman was a poor slave. This woman was a queen. Once they became nuns, seniority was simply determined by the day that you joined. You were senior to the person who joined the next day. That was really quite radical in terms of the way the Buddha set up his Sangha. Even today in India there's

still a huge movement of people in the lowest caste, the Dalit caste—which is a Hindu designation—to become Buddhists. Many of them for a few generations have been converting to Buddhism as a way of stepping outside of that really stringent caste system.

That's an aside. I just want to tell some stories and read some of their poems as they've been translated.

The first woman one has to talk about—you can't really skip over her—is Mahapajapati Gotami, because she is the one who insisted to the Buddha that he open up his Sangha to women. There had just been monks, men monks, for a while.

Mahapajapati Gotami was the Buddha's aunt, the younger sister of his mother. Before he was the Buddha, when he was Siddhartha Gautama, the young prince, his mother died when he was a week old. His aunt Pajapati Gotami was also married to the same king that her sister had been married to—the kings had several wives, lots of courtesans, it was a whole different scene. And so Pajapati raised Siddhartha as her own son. She also had a son herself, so she was really like his second mother.

At some point, after Siddhartha had left home—he was married, he left his wife, his son, went off, became the Buddha—he came back.

His family came to respect him, many became awakened—his father, many of his cousins, the men in his clan.

At some later point, after his father had died, Mahapajapati's husband was gone, and her son, the Buddha's cousin, had joined the order of monks. This left Pajapati without a male family member to live with. In the India of that time, even higher-class women—unless you were a courtesan or belonged to some special category—their place in society was defined by their relationship to a man: a husband, a father, or a son. And so she didn't have any.

At the same time, many other women looked to her for leadership. She was obviously a strong woman, the head of her clan. Well, she had married into the Sakya clan; her birth clan was the Koliyas. Her son, her grandnephew—they went off to become bhikkhus. And many other men in the clan did the same, just leaving the women behind.

Then the two clans, the Sakyans and the Koliyas, went to war over water rights in a river. These are the two families of the Buddha! So he came and spoke with both sides, established a peace, and eased the conflict between them. At which point, some of the men had been killed in that war, and many of the others were so inspired by the Buddha that they went off and became monks.

This left Mahapajapati and, it is said, five hundred women. As Andy Olendzki notes, when the texts say five hundred, it usually just means "a lot"—not really counted. So a lot of women said, "You know what? All the men are going off and ordaining. Why can't we do the same thing?" They had real faith in the Buddha. They saw the power of his teaching and its effect in their lives. And they said, "Let us go off too."

So they went with Pajapati. And through all of this, some of the qualities she demonstrates are enormous faith, real courage and persistence, a dedication. You'll see what I mean—she just doesn't give up. It's the courage of faith, of commitment.

She goes to the Buddha, whom she had raised like a son, and asks him—I'll read the translation: Standing at a respectful distance, she says, "It would be good, Lord, if women could be allowed to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state under the Dharma and the discipline of the Tathagata."

And he says, "Enough. Don't set your heart on women being able to do this."

She asked three times, which is the requisite three times, at which point if he could say yes, he would say yes. But he didn't say yes. He still said no. And so after three times—that's all you could ask—she left, really upset, weeping.

Then the Buddha went off with the monks to another town, some couple hundred miles distant. So Mahapajapati and all the women with her shaved their heads and put on yellow robes. In India at that time, sadhus or renunciates, men and women, could go around in yellow robes. And they followed him.

When they arrived where he was teaching, it is said that Pajapati, Mahapajapati, was standing outside the door of the hall where he was teaching. Her feet were all dusty and bloody. She was standing out there weeping.

And Ananda, kind Ananda, comes along. Now, Ananda was also a cousin of the Buddha—they're all related—so she was his kinswoman too. He says, "What's going on? Pajapati, why are you standing here all dusty and bleeding and crying? What's happening?"

She says, "The Blessed One does not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into homelessness."

So Ananda says, "All right, I'll go ask the Buddha." And he goes and he says, "Pajapati is standing outside under the porch with swollen feet, covered with dust and crying, because you do not permit women to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless life. It would be good if women could have permission to do this."

And the Buddha says the same thing: "Enough, Ananda. Don't set your heart on women being able to do this."

The same response, three times.

Why? We don't know.

And I haven't personally found it very helpful to go there from this way of looking. But anyway, he said that.

So then Ananda, because Ananda is very persistent in wanting everyone to have access to the Buddha—that's one of the beautiful things about him as an attendant for twenty-five years. He's not trying to keep people away. You know how some attendants to famous people are like, "Get back, don't come too close to the famous person." Ananda's always trying to get everybody in to see the Buddha.

So he switched tactics. He said, let me try asking another way. He says, "Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" Those are the four levels, same as men. And the Buddha says, "Yes, absolutely. They're able. There's no difference."

So Ananda says, "So if women are able to realize this perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your foster mother. When your mother died, she even suckled you at her own breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

And so at this point, the Buddha said, "All right, all right already, okay." And so he allowed it.

As time went on, he made special rules for nuns. And as I say, the special eight rules, the most unappealing of them being that any nun, no matter how many years, was less senior than any monk, even if the monk was a monk of one day. A little known thing is that some years later, Pajapati came back to the Buddha and tried to get him to take that rule back. So I think the women were probably the same then—it's like, "Enough of this. Take it back." But he wouldn't. From what I can tell, it seems more of a social thing. Anyway, who knows?

Anyway, he let women enter the homeless life. And so at this point, as you see, Pajapati had this real commitment and dedication based on faith. When she became a nun, all these other five hundred women became nuns as well. She was really the first

true leader of the women. Many women looked up to her because of her making this happen, but also because of her setting the example by becoming a nun and living the homeless life. It made it possible for many, many other women.

If you read through the suttas, it just comes out that as time went on, the Sangha of nuns became a very strong community—many different communities, really. And you can see within it that women had their own personalities and their own way of manifesting their homeless life and their understanding. Some women became teachers, like Mahapajapati, who brought many other women in. The couple of women I'll tell you about next were ones who, just by dint of their personality, became teachers. But others were the compassionate, quiet ones who kind of kept the sangha together. Others were the organizational leaders. Others were more drawn to solitude and living quietly in silence—all in the way that their particular personalities expressed themselves. There was no one right way.

Let me read you some of Pajapati's poem—not the whole thing, but after she's awakened:

Homage to you, Buddha, best of all creatures,
who set me and many others free from pain.
All pain is understood.
The cause, the craving is dried up.
The noble eightfold way unfolds.
I have reached the state where everything stops.

Look at the disciples all together,
their energy, their sincere effort.
This is homage to the Buddhas.

Maya gave birth to Gotama for the sake of us all.
She has driven back the pain of the sick and the dying.

Did you catch that second to last stanza? That's us. "Look at the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is homage to the Buddhas." It really hasn't changed.

In Thailand, which as you know is a Buddhist country, it has happened over the years that in the Theravada tradition, the bhikkhuni order—which is the status of nuns that the Buddha organized through Pajapati, really on a par with the bhikkhus—ended up having more rules. That bhikkhuni order hasn't lasted in the Theravada. Somehow it

all died out. And so ordained nuns in Burma, in Thailand, in Sri Lanka take eight to ten vows. There are really many more that are subsidiary—not exactly precepts, but many other rules that the nuns live under. But they're not formally bhikkhunis.

In Thailand, there's a woman—this is from the New York Times, just a couple of years ago. She's a Buddhist scholar, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. She taught as quite a well-known Buddhist scholar in Bangkok, married, in her fifties. And a few years ago, with the consent of her husband and her grown children, she went to Sri Lanka and ordained in another tradition as a bhikkhuni, then came back to Thailand. And so she's living now as a fully ordained bhikkhuni, really committed to keeping this line of women renunciate practitioners going. In Thailand, this is very political, and she gets a lot of flack from some of the monks, while others really support her. It's a whole political thing. But that she's doing this, keeping it alive today—I think it's really quite inspiring.

This is just one thing from her. She's talking about the politics. She said, "This is a conflict between ignorance and right understanding." Her name is Dhammananda now. She quotes the Buddha, which he did say: the health of Buddhism, the health of the sasana—the whole of disciples practicing this—the health of the sasana depends on four pillars: male and female monks, male and female lay people. He did say this, that all four are necessary for a healthy and vibrant sasana to continue. Male and female monks, male and female lay people. So Pajapati's commitment has really had a profound effect and continues to.

Now I'll tell you about another woman who became one of the most well-known teachers—one who became so strong in compassion because she came through so much suffering herself. It's said that once she was an awakened nun, she's the one whose name was mentioned the most in the other poems of women as one of the nuns who brought them to the teaching. Her name is Patachara.

She's one of those, you know, going from bad to worse stories. It would be like worse than the worst soap opera on television, where each new thing makes you think, "Come on, it can't get that bad." But this is her story.

She came from a banker's family in Savatthi, so quite well off. When it was time for her to be married—as you know, in India at that time marriages were arranged, and of course within one's own caste, one's own social class—she had fallen in love with a servant. Her parents would never permit that, so they ran off together, got married, and settled in another town.

She got pregnant, and in the Indian tradition, when you get pregnant, you go back to your home village, your parents' home, to give birth. Even so, she wanted to do that. Her husband, understandably, wasn't really too keen to go back. So he procrastinated and procrastinated. Finally, she started on her own. But she was so pregnant that she had the baby on the way. Her husband came after her, found her, and they went back home.

A year or two later, she got pregnant again. The whole cycle repeated. She started off, and this time he caught up with her. She was about to have the baby again, halfway there, and a huge storm started up. So she's having the baby there in the field. Her husband goes off to collect boughs and reeds to build her a shelter. He goes off and doesn't come back. It turns out he was bitten by a poisonous snake and killed while he was off. She has the baby in the rain, doesn't know what happened to her husband, gets up afterwards, goes out, and sees him lying there dead. Pretty intense.

So what is she going to do? Nothing else to do but get up with the newborn and the little boy and start walking towards her parents. They get to a river that normally is fairly easy to cross, but because of the rains, it's swollen with a huge current, and she can't walk over with both children. So she has to take each child one at a time. She takes the newborn, puts it down on the bank, starts back over. She's halfway across, in the middle of the river.

A giant bird of prey comes down and grabs her newborn baby. She starts screaming. The other little boy thinks she's calling him, so he jumps into the river. The baby is gone. The little boy is swept away in the current, and she cannot save him.

She gets up and staggers on towards her parents' village. She arrives there almost crazed, reaches the outskirts, and runs into some man. "All I want to know is where is my parents' house, where are they?" she asks. The man says, "Ask me anything, but don't ask me that." She says, "What do you mean? Don't even ask me." She persists. He says, "Well, there was that—see that smoke over there? In the huge storm last night, a tree fell, knocked through the ceiling of the house. It fell and killed your parents and your brother. That's their funeral pyre."

That was it for her. She lost it and basically lost her mind. Just went crazy. For—it doesn't really say how long—she was just going about mad, walking in circles. People made fun of her, threw things at her. You know how people can be. Her clothes were falling off, becoming rags. And finally, at some point, she came to the Jeta Grove where the Buddha was teaching. She's on the outskirts of this crowd and the people are saying, "This mad woman, get away, don't bother the Blessed One, you should stay away, you're too crazy," throwing things at her.

But of course, he saw what was happening and called her to him. She came up with no clothes on, and some kind man gave her a cloak. The Buddha just looked at her and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did at that moment—just enough to look at him and say, "Help me." He asked, "What's happened?" And she tells him the story.

What he says really touches me because it's just so—this is the truth. Nothing like "Oh, I'm so sorry, that must be hard." Just, this is the truth. He said, "Patachara, don't think you have come to someone who can help you. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than there is water in the four oceans."

It's kind of counterintuitive to what I would think—that he's like, this is the truth. But this made her grief less heavy. He went on to say that when she herself went to another world, no family can help. No family can help you when you die. And you can't help your family when you die. And he spoke of the Buddhist path.

This made her want to become ordained. It wasn't one of these "Yes, I'm completely awakened" moments. But it made her see: okay, there's more to this than I know, and can I become a nun and join your path? So she did.

She had periods of difficulty. She didn't just la-di-da awaken right away and start teaching. She had to struggle for some time. But when she did, her poem is a really nice one. I like it because it describes the exact moment of her awakening—what she was doing. That's kind of cool. It's also a good advertisement for a willingness to be mindful no matter what you're doing, not just when you're sitting on the pillow. Sometimes those in-between moments are when awakening happens. What's going on with her is she's had a period of strong concentration, and then she just relaxes it a little bit, still paying attention but not with that strong concentration, and that's when she wakes up.

So she's saying: "When they plow their fields and sow seeds in the earth, when they care for their wives and children, young Brahmins find riches. But I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud."

"Why haven't I found peace?"

Does that sound familiar? "But I've done everything right."

"Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope. I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed, and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick of the lamp down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

I get chills. I can just see the whole thing, so present. "When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

Obviously, many women were drawn to Patachara once she joined the Order, but especially those who had experienced periods of deep grief. I read somewhere that of the women whose stories we know about, eighteen had been mothers, and six of them came having experienced the death of a child—something that happened rather frequently in those times.

I want to read a couple of poems from women whom Patachara helped. This one is from Chanda. She was originally from a wealthy family, but they lost all their wealth and possessions when she was a child, so they became quite poor. Then a mysterious plague came through—I mean, life was hard. This plague came through and killed everybody in her family except for her. Her grandparents, her parents, her siblings, her entire family, her husband, her children—only she was left. She became a beggar.

So this is her poem: "I was in a bad way, a widow, no children, no friends, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered from house to house in the heat and cold for seven years. But I met a nun who had food and drink, and I went up to her and said, 'Take me into the homeless life.' She was Patachara. Out of pity, she guided me in leaving home, encouraged me, and urged me to the highest goal. I took her advice. It wasn't wasted. There are no obsessions in my mind."

Another point I like about this is: "I met a nun who had food and drink." It's practical, realistic. You care for people. They need to eat and drink. When some starving person comes, you don't just start preaching the Dharma. They need to eat, they need to drink—you take care of people. I like that. This is just one of many examples of people Patachara helped, women that she helped.

Now, this is a different woman who also became one of the most respected teachers. She was said to be foremost in preaching—in other words, she could give a good talk. They always kind of labeled everybody: foremost in wisdom, foremost in preaching, foremost in compassion. This is Dhammadina.

Actually, in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 44, there's a whole sutta that consists of questions asked to Dhammadina. Dhammadina is answering the questions, not the Buddha. It's included in the canon because after this series of questions and answers, the person who was asking her went to the Buddha and repeated it all. And the Buddha said, "Yes, what she said is just what I would have said." That elevates it to what's called "word of the Buddha." So we have a sutta from Dhammadina.

She didn't have a time of suffering. She was the wife of a man named Visaka, who was an important man in Rajagaha, and they had a happy marriage. They were very content together. Whenever he'd come home from his day of business, they'd eat together—which isn't that usual—and talk and share.

One day when he went out, he met the Buddha and got so inspired by the Buddha's teachings that when he came home, he just kind of walked past Dhammadina without saying hello, without sitting down. And she's wondering, "What's the matter? Is he angry?"

What did I do wrong? You know, right away, that's where her mind went. What did I do wrong?

And he called her after a while and said, "No, I heard this man, the Buddha. I'm so inspired. I really want to... I'm thinking of renouncing, becoming a bhikkhu. That leaves you, but I will give you all my wealth. You can really do what you like with it. You can live here at ease and comfort. You have all my wealth. You can go back to your family. It's completely up to you. But I really feel this call to be a bhikkhu."

So she thought about it, and she thought, well, if he can do that, why can't I? I too want to renounce. So she said that, and he supported her in that too. He called for a palanquin and took her to the nuns, and she became a nun and went off and practiced and became quite accomplished. She practiced intensively. She is said to have attained the highest insight and awoke.

Sometime later, after she was awakened, she went back to Rajagaha, and to her great surprise, her husband had never actually gotten it together to become a bhikkhu. Well, what did she care? She was an arahant. She didn't care. And she went back, and actually he was the one asking her all these questions that made it into the sutta, because he realized, wow, Dhammadina is a respected bhikkhuni at this point.

So she doesn't have a poem so much. She has the whole sutta, which I'm not going to read to you. Just one line—when he's asking her, "What is meditation?" She says, "Meditation is the focusing of the heart." So she became the foremost in preaching. And her husband just kind of drops off the map of history. We don't know what happened to him.

One other happy story, because then there are a number of unhappy ones. Although Patachara took the cake for unhappiness.

Khema. Khema is the opposite of Patachara in that she was incredibly beautiful. Khema means "gold skin." Whenever they talk about someone being beautiful, they always talk about them having golden skin. She was the chief consort of one of the famous kings of the time, Bimbisara. Now, consort is not wife. He would have had all his wives and then his consort. She was the chief consort, a position of great respectability, a great deal of fame really, and comfort.

So she was quite conceited, actually, because she was incredibly beautiful. She had this high position. She loved sense pleasures and beauty and everything. Bimbisara was a disciple of the Buddha, and he would try to get Khema to go and hear him, but she wasn't interested. She said, "Look, I've heard. He puts sense pleasures down. He's not really into beauty. I don't want to go listen to that."

So she would never go. So Bimbisara tricked her. The Buddha was staying and giving teachings at a hermitage that was said to be really beautiful, a really beautiful park. So Bimbisara hired a lute player, a poet and singer, to sing about how beautiful this grove was, the beauties and pleasures of this place where the Buddha was teaching. So he went and sang this to Khema, and she couldn't resist it because she was really into beauty and sense pleasures. So she said, "Okay, okay, well then I'll go."

What I like about this is that sense of how we really don't want to hear. I like my beauty. I'm attached to my status.

I don't want to hear anything that's going to take it away from me. I'm happy like this, thank you very much.

So she went, and the Buddha, of course, with his mind that could read what was happening in everyone's awareness, needed only to see her on the outskirts of the crowd to know who she was. And he could also see that actually she was very ripe for awakening.

So what he did, with his amazing mental powers, was project the image of an incredibly beautiful female goddess—like a hundred times more beautiful than Kema. And she loved beauty, so she was completely entranced. She thought, "Wow, that's so much more beautiful than I am." Not with envy, just entranced.

And then the Buddha had this image of the beautiful goddess gradually, gradually go from youth to middle age to old age. Her hair turned gray, her teeth started decaying, her skin became all wrinkled, and she just kind of withered away and died. And then Kema, who was no fool, thought, "Huh, that's going to happen to me."

Then the Buddha gave her a pithy little talk about how some people are devoted to physical beauty, and so they're bound to the world. And people devoted to pleasures of the senses are bound to the world. One who renounces this world of attachment is free in their heart, in their mind. Of course, he knew exactly what to say—that's one of the wonderful things about receiving a talk from a Buddha. They know exactly what to say to touch you.

So Kema is one of the rare occasions of a layperson being completely awakened on the spot—all four stages, right then, hearing that talk. Not for nothing is she considered foremost in insight.

This backfired on Bimbisara, of course. Because as soon as she was completely enlightened, she went and said, "Look, I can't be your consort anymore. I have to go and become a nun." Which of course she did. So she was the nun with the greatest insight, and she was one of the two women who ran the whole order of nuns, kind of in charge.

Her poem is not one of the greater ones, in my totally personal opinion, but I'll just read you a little of it so you hear her voice:

Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed, the great dark is torn apart, and death, you too are destroyed. Fools who don't know things as they really are revere the mansions of the moon and tend the fire in the wood, thinking this is purity.

Here she's talking about rites and rituals.

But for myself, I honor the enlightened one, the best of all, and practicing his teaching, I'm completely freed from suffering. Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed. The great dark is torn apart.

That's the line they use a lot: "The great dark is torn apart."

There's also a story where King Pasenadi of Kosala—who was another very serious disciple of the Buddha, actually more serious than Bimbisara—came looking for the Buddha for teachings, or for a senior monk for teachings, and there weren't any around. But Kema was around. And so without hesitation he went right over and sat at the feet of Kema, and listened to her teachings with the same appreciation and respect as if it was any monk or the Buddha himself.

At that time, that's really something. Just a realization within the Buddha's sangha that awakening insight has nothing to do with gender or status or history or life situation. Really available to all and respected as it is in whoever manifests it.

A very different story, which I also like, is very spunky—based on the commitment of verified faith. This is Punika.

She was a slave, so a very different social experience, the daughter of a slave. Apparently there were many men and women who were slaves, kind of a situation where if their parents were, they were. She was actually a slave in the house of Anathapindika. Anathapindika was the most generous of all the Buddha's supporters, and also a sotapanna. So it doesn't jive with our understanding of culture at all, that someone like Anathapindika could have a slave. But anyway, she was a slave.

In her poem, her poem tells the whole story—she had to carry water down from the river and carry water up. And when she's down at the river one day... Interestingly enough, it seems that women who were slaves or servants often had more freedom of movement than upper-class women. There are several stories, and in this one, Punika the slave is able to go out and actually hear the Buddha's talks, where many of the upper-class women are kept secluded in their houses, in their families, and they can't go out.

There's another story, maybe if I have time I'll tell it later, of another servant, not a slave, who goes out, hears the Buddha's talks, has this amazing memory, and comes back and repeats them all word for word to her mistress. And they all together get enlightened through this woman who actually remembers all of these teachings. Her name is Khujjuttara.

She remembered all these discourses, and actually the ones she remembered and came back and told to her mistress, whose name was Samavati, are collected in one of the small books in the suttas called the Iti Vutaka, which contains the sayings that Kujutara remembered and came back and told to her mistress.

In this case, Punika the slave was able to go out and hear the Buddha's teachings, and she had become a Sotapanna, a first-stage awakened person, at this time. She goes down to the water to bring it up to her mistress and ran into a Brahmin, a Hindu man from the Brahmin caste, who was doing ablutions in the river, like they bathe in the Ganges. The belief was that by washing yourself in the water, you could wash off all your previous bad karma and purify yourself. And she basically, as you hear in the poem, just lights right into him and says, "What are you doing?" Really what we would call speaking truth to power, but with real clarity, just speaking the Buddhist truth.

I'll read you her poem. It's a dialogue poem.

Punika says: "I am a water carrier. Even in the cold, I've always gone down to the water, frightened of punishment or the angry words of high-class women. So what are you afraid of, Brahman, that makes you come down to the water? Your limbs are shaking with the bitter cold."

And this man, whose name is Uddhaka Suddhika, says: "You know why, Punika. I am doing good to prevent evil. Anyone young or old who has done something bad is freed by washing in the water."

Punika says: "Who ever told you that you were freed from evil by washing? The blind leading the blind. In that case, all frogs and turtles would go to heaven, and water snakes and crocodiles and the rest of the water creatures. Thieves, executioners, and other wrongdoers would be freed from their bad karma by washing in water. Also, if these streams carried away all your old evil, they would carry away your virtue too. Just don't do that thing, the fear of which leads you down to the water." She's tough. "Stop now, Brahman, and save your skin from the cold."

And he says—and she's won him over, this is how it happens—he says: "Lady, I was on the wrong road and you brought me back to the great road. I will give you the robe I bathed in."

And Punika says: "Keep your robe, I don't want it. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, then do nothing evil, either openly or in secret. For if you do, even if you get up and run away, you won't escape its pain. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Train in the precepts. This is good."

It's a little mini-lesson on karma.

Uddhaka Suddhika says: "I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I train in the precepts. This is good. Now I am a true Brahman, I am washed clean"—meaning washed clean by the precepts.

There is that sense that when you know verified truth, there's no fear to say what you know, and it carries. The truth communicates itself.

And that's not the end of her story. She did want to go off and become a nun, but being a slave, she wasn't free to do so. She asked the Buddha to help her, and he basically spoke to Anathapindaka, who of course immediately released her, adopted her as his daughter, and she became a nun and became completely awakened.

That aspect of confidence—confidence in our own understanding, confidence in awakening, confidence in awareness—it's really important. It's what gives us the faith, the courage to keep on practicing. It's not something to brush aside with "Oh no, not me, I don't really know anything." What we really know, not ideas but our verified faith, it's kind of incumbent on us to share it. It communicates itself.

Not everyone who became a nun popped awake right away, as I said. Khema, before she even became a nun, is a really rare case. I'll read you a couple of poems that perhaps we can relate to.

One is from Vadesi. She was one of the five hundred who came along with Mahapajapati Gotami; she was actually Pajapati's old nurse. So she wasn't so young at the time they ordained, and she still struggled for another twenty-five years. She had a hard time being a nun.

And it makes it clear that it's not easy for everybody. This was a way that one chose, but that doesn't mean it's just kick back your shoes and be enlightened and cruise under the tree for the rest of your life. It can be really quite a lot of struggle.

So this is Vadesi. Susan Murcott says her persistence comes through, that she really had to struggle for those 25 years:

It was 25 years since I left home, and I hadn't had a moment's peace. Uneasy at heart, steeped in longing for pleasure, I held out my arms and cried out as I entered the monastery.

I can just see it, you know.

I went up to a nun I thought I could trust. They say this was Dhammadinna. *She taught me the Dharma, the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, and earth, water, fire, and wind. I heard her words and sat down beside her. Now I have entered the six realms of sacred knowledge. The eye of heaven is pure and I know the minds of others. I have great powers and have annihilated all the obsessions of the mind. The Buddha's teaching has been done.*

So she clearly attained a lot of psychic powers, which are kind of like a sideline, not the main thing. But it's interesting—after 25 years of not having a moment's peace, she finally broke through. You just never know. It's like trying with a hatchet to break open a stump—you hit it a hundred times, and 99 times nothing happens, and the hundredth time it opens. But you can't discount the 99 times. You can't discount the 25 years.

One other one. Number forty-two. This woman became a nun out of great sorrow. Her name is Sama. Her best friend, her dear friend Samavati, was the high-class woman I mentioned before, whose servant Khujjuttara would go out and memorize the suttas of the Buddha and come back and teach them to Samavati and all her women who were in the court. Samavati was, as the Buddha said, quite awakened, even though she was a laywoman. And she was known as the laywoman most renowned for being filled with metta. She just pervaded metta and everyone loved her—except her husband's other wife. Her husband was a king.

That other wife didn't love her. In fact, she murdered Samavati. Samavati and all her women were in a house, and this other wife caused it to be locked up and then set fire to it. Samavati and all of her women were burned to death in that fire. And this was precisely the point of the Buddha's saying that Samavati had been the most accomplished in spreading metta.

So anyway, this other Sama was Samavati's dearest friend, and she was so upset at this murder—that this could happen to someone so filled with metta and so devoted—that she became a nun. But her mind was always distracted. She didn't have an easy time either. This was another case where that stock phrase appears:

It was 25 years since I turned away from home and I hadn't had a moment's peace. I had no peace because I did not know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror.

That's the Buddha.

Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died.

I love that one. "Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert." She sounds like an aversive type to me, whereas the one before, who was lost in wanting things, was more of a greedy type—both suffering. "I finished with craving. The seventh day since my craving has died."

Alright, just a couple more. There are quite a few stories of women who only became nuns when they were really old. When I was a nun in Thailand, about 20 years ago, there really weren't so many nuns as there were monks. And quite a few of the nuns were really quite elderly. It seemed that they would become nuns sort of when their families were gone and they didn't really have someone to take care of them.

Not all nuns were like that, but you could really see a lot of it.

Well, here in the Therīgāthā there are some women who became nuns when they were quite old—but not in the same way, where they're just hanging around being taken care of because they have nothing else to do. These women were really sincere.

One of them was simply called Dhammā. She's the one I mentioned who wanted to ordain, but she waited until her husband's death because he didn't want her to. Like a good wife, she stayed with her husband. And in her old age, after he died, like a shot she went off to become a nun in the Buddha's sangha.

Her poem is interesting because she actually woke up through experiencing the misery, the unreliability of her old aging body:

I wandered for alms.
I leaned on a stick.
My whole body was weak and trembled.
Suddenly I fell down
and could see clearly the misery of this body.
My heart was freed.

You see, when we talk about really seeing dukkha, it's not to make us suffer more. She really saw, and her heart was freed.

Another old woman wrote this poem when she woke up:

Though I am thin, sick, and lean on a stick,
I have climbed up the Vulture Peak.

That's a really high, rocky hill. So she climbed up it, shaking on her stick.

Robe thrown down, bowl turned over,
leaning on a rock—
then the great darkness opened.

In fact, the nun who was commended by the Buddha for the strongest capacity for effort, who was really celebrated for her diligence, was a woman who only became a nun when she was quite elderly.

Her name was Soṇā, and it's said that she had seven sons and seven daughters, and she was wealthy, and they were all married. When she was old, she said, "You know, instead of you waiting until I die to inherit my money, why don't I divide it equally among you all now, and then I can just take turns traveling and living with each of your families. It's not that long in a year—fourteen of you."

And they said, "Oh, sure, Mother, we'll take care of you."

So that's what she did. But as she traveled from family to family, they became less receptive, less welcoming, treating her like the old mother-in-law in the way. So finally she said, "Okay, enough of this. I'm out of here. I'm going to become a nun."

By the time she joined, she was old and feeble. She couldn't do much. Some of the other nuns had her doing simple little chores, but they made a little bit of fun of her for being so old. She would bring them water and just do what she could.

But she was so committed. She was so committed to awakening.

The story goes that one night, the other nuns were all out, and she was just committed. She was just going to do her walking meditation. She had to hold her hand up on a wall to hold herself up because she couldn't see, she was so shaky, so old—but she was just committed to her practice.

The Buddha saw this with his mind, and he appeared to her like a radiant vision and inspired her. And it so inspired her that she awoke that night. Then, according to the commentaries, she became a complete arahant.

Now, one of the classic rules is that you don't go bragging when you're awakened. You don't show up and say, "Okay, ladies, now I've done it, so a little respect, please." So she'd become an arahant, but the next day she came bringing the water in the normal way.

However, it's really unwholesome karma to insult an awakened person in any way. It's just not a good thing to do. So she came the next day, and they sent her to heat up the water and were about to berate her a little because she was so slow.

She knew she had to do something so they wouldn't have a chance to berate her now that she was an arahant—because it would be really bad for them. But she also couldn't just announce it.

So with the concentrated power of her mind, she caused the water to be heated.

I guess she knew tummo yoga somehow. And she caused the water to be heated. Seeing that, the other nuns knew. They simply knew.

Just like when Ananda, after the Buddha died and there was the council of five hundred arhats getting together to repeat all the suttas, to begin codifying the teachings—they really wanted Ananda because he was the one who remembered them all by heart, but he wasn't yet an arhat. There's that story of how Ananda had to practice really hard

the night before to become an arhat, and he was just giving up, just lying down, giving up. It's always said it happened in the one posture that isn't any particular posture—he was just about to lie down, halfway between standing and lying, when he awakened. So again, the way he signaled that he was an arhat is that he simply appeared, magically, sitting at the table with all the others. And they said, "Oh, okay, you did it." That was the sign.

Just to know, the one who was most known for her energy, for her effort, was Bahupitaka, a really old woman. So age—even health, as long as there is wakefulness—is not in the way.

Just two more. This one is kind of humorous—I find it humorous. A woman who was clearly happy to have left her marriage and become a nun. She is known simply as Sumaṅgala's Mother, not by her own name:

Free, I am free!
How glad I am to be free from my pestle.
My cooking pot seems worthless to me,
And I can't even bear to look at his sun umbrella.
My husband disgusts me.
So I destroy greed and hate with a sizzle.
And I'm the same woman who goes to the foot of a tree
And says to herself, "Ah, happiness,"
And meditates with happiness.

And then I'll end with Uttama, because I just like her poem. She was another one of Paṭācārā's disciples, from a Brahmin family. I don't know too much else about her. This is her poem:

The Buddha taught seven factors of enlightenment.
They are ways to find peace, and I have developed them all.
I have found what is vast and empty, the unborn—
It is what I've longed for.
I am a true daughter of the Buddha, always finding joy in peace.
I have ended the hunger of gods and humans,
And I will not wander from birth to birth.
I have no thought of becoming.

May we all be true daughters and sons of the Buddha.

CHAPTER 22

Mindfulness Has No Preferences

Carol Wilson · 50 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines a fundamental question posed by Sakka, king of the gods, to the Buddha in the Dīgha Nikāya: why do we continue to act in ways that cause suffering despite our sincere intentions to live wholesomely? The Buddha's answer points to our deeply ingrained habit of holding to preferences—our constant evaluation of experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and our compulsive grasping and aversion based on these assessments.*
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> *Wilson weaves together Buddhist teachings with contemporary psychological research, citing Harvard professor Daniel Gilbert's studies showing that humans consistently misjudge what will make them happy. She illuminates how this pattern of 'miss-wanting' reflects the Buddha's teaching on vedanā (feeling tone) and the three root afflictions of lobha, dosa, and moha (greed, hatred, and delusion). Drawing from the Sutta of the Two Darts, she explains how untaught worldlings compound their suffering by resisting painful feelings and seeking escape only through pleasant experiences.*
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> *The practical heart of the talk addresses how these same habitual patterns infiltrate our meditation practice—how we unconsciously evaluate our sitting by whether it feels pleasant, judge ourselves when concentration wavers, and seek confirmation through particular experiences. Wilson invites practitioners to recognize that awareness itself has no preferences; it can meet any experience arising in the six sense doors without needing to change or manipulate anything. True freedom, she suggests, comes not from arranging pleasant circumstances but from resting at ease in whatever arises—just this.*

So, a little bit as I mentioned this morning, or alluded to, it's kind of interesting, or mystifying, or frustrating, depending on your particular mood on a particular day. But I find that most of us have a really clear, sincere intention to live as good a life as we can. To cultivate the wholesome, to cultivate the good, to be good to others, to be happy in our lives, not to cause harm. And still—maybe I'm the only one, but I don't think so—we find ourselves saying and doing things that cause ourselves suffering, cause other people suffering, that aren't really at all how we think we want to live. How does it keep happening?

This relates to the whole path, but I just want to come in from a particular angle tonight, starting with a sutta, a part of a sutta from the Dīgha Nikāya, about when Sakka, king of the gods, comes down to the Buddha. Now, king of the gods means he's living in

one of these heavenly realms that really has quite a lot of pleasant experience and also goodness, not just total sensual pleasure. But he comes down and says to the Buddha, in the middle of the sutta, "What is it, dear sir, that even when we are delighting in the wholesome—and what is the fetter, what is the bond?—that we think, 'May we live free from hostility, free from violence, free from ill will,' we really want to live in a wholesome, good way. What is it that we still find ourselves living in hostility, living with ill will, living with confusion, violence, rivalry—all of that—even when we're trying to delight in the wholesome and do our best?"

Now, this is Sakka, king of the gods, so we could cut ourselves some slack.

The Buddha, of course, gives a complex answer that I'll just speak about a little part of tonight. But he says the bonds, what we're fettered by—the first answer he gives is envy and covetousness. That's our first problem: holding on to things, not being generous, trying to protect for ourselves. And that is caused by holding to preferences, by holding on to our choices for what is dear and not dear, which is a more specific translation. Since when dear and not dear exist in our minds and we hold on to that, we hold on to preferences. This, of course, is fed by desire. Desire is fed by thinking about it. Thinking is fed by the endless papañca, the proliferation of thought.

So that's what I want to talk about tonight: this point of having and holding to preferences. Just one of the many ways we do that. Do we even see that as a problem, as part of the root source of our suffering? That we maybe don't see it as a problem might be part of the problem.

Holding to preferences. Often when one reads this, or we talk about it, it comes up in many people's minds: "Of course we have preferences. We're not just dead slabs of meat. We know what's pleasant and unpleasant. We make choices in our life. The Buddha made choices in his life. We have to vote. We have to make choices when we go through the food line. We have a preference. We know the difference between rice and beans, the difference between cooked and uncooked oatmeal," and so on. The mind can get quite wigged out going through all that.

Remember, it's not the having; it's the holding to them.

Realizing that having and holding to preferences really arises from each of us, from our deep yearning for happiness, for peace. The Buddha said it, the Dalai Lama says it in lovely ways: we all experience an innate inner desire for happiness and to overcome suffering. That's normal. That's not an unwholesome, bad thing—that we have a yearning, a real yearning for happiness, to overcome suffering. That's what gets us on a path.

We wouldn't be here if we just said, "I have no preferences and I don't care. I suffer, I don't suffer, what's the difference? I cause suffering, I don't, what's the difference?" Of course we make some choices. That's what gets us on a path.

But then it's seeing that we don't actually—at least when we begin the path, and this keeps refining as we go along—really understand what happiness is. We want happiness. But the only way, at least in the world at large, as the Buddha uses the phrase "untaught worldling"—he uses that phrase a lot...

For some reason, worldling—puthujjana—trips me up. But that's us, unless someone here is an arahat. We're untaught worldlings, puthujjanas. There's one phrase—I think John might remember—that describes them as simply mad. They're just mad. We just don't understand things in a way that brings us peace and happiness. And in trying to achieve happiness and overcome suffering in our untaught ways, our unenlightened ways—and I don't mean the big Enlightenment, I just mean unenlightened in understanding the way things are—we keep spinning and spinning, trying to be happy by doing what we think will make us happy. But that actually just keeps us in more suffering, because we're so confused we don't know what happiness is.

A few years ago, a friend sent me an article—I think it was actually from the Wall Street Journal—an interview with a man who was a professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard, at least at that time. Together with several other scholars, including a Nobel laureate in economics and another scholar at Princeton, they had been doing years and years of study on the psychology of happiness and how we as humans predict what will make us happy.

Now, the name of this article is "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." So that's going to give you a clue where it goes. I just noticed in the last year that this man, Daniel Gilbert, has a book out—which I assume, though I haven't read it, comes from this work he's been doing. The book is called *Stumbling on Happiness*. Basically, the gist of the article is that we don't have a clue what makes us happy, and we don't understand this. Now, this is just scientific study—it's not Buddhist-based at all, as you'll see.

Their study examined how we as humans predict what will make us happy, how we feel from the choices we make, whether our predictions are accurate, and how we feel afterwards. Gilbert says this is so important because almost all of our actions—the decision to buy jewelry, to have children, to get a new job, to come do a meditation retreat (that's not in the article)—are based on our internal predictions of the emotional consequences of these events. Or, as we would say in Buddhist terms, we're looking for pleasant feeling. We make our choices, as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, ninety-five percent of them based on pleasant feeling—getting and having more pleasant feeling.

That's not what they say in the article, but Gilbert goes on to explain that we make our decisions, our choices, based on thinking that this paycheck, this car, this piece of jewelry, having kids, whatever, is going to make me happy for the long term. And he asks: Do we even know? If we don't know what makes us happy now, how will we know what makes us happy in the future?

It's interesting because he says we basically "miswant," as he calls it. We don't really understand. We think something is going to be pleasant, and we think it's going to make us happy for much longer than it does. Conversely, something we think is going to be really unpleasant, we think is going to make us unhappy for much longer than it does. And he says we make the wrong choices in that way.

For example, if you were asked: Would you rather have a broken leg or a bad knee? Most people think, well, I'd rather have a bad knee because a broken leg would be really a lot of suffering. But actually, the broken leg heals much quicker. The bad knee is like ongoing, niggling suffering for years. Or consider: would you rather have a bad breakup of a relationship or a tense marriage? People say, well, no, I'd rather have the tense marriage. But that's going to drag out suffering, suffering, suffering for years. You have the intense breakup, and things aren't as bad for as long as you think they're going to be—and they're not as good for as long as you think they're going to be. But we never seem to get that.

He says, basically, we just don't understand. We don't have a clue what makes us happy, and we keep overestimating and making the wrong choices.

That's scientific evidence for what are basically the habits of mind I want to talk about tonight—the very basic ones. We tend to react to all experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, the whole range of mental experience, any physical sensation. If it's pleasant, we don't notice that, but we like it. We move toward it. We want it. If it's unpleasant, we tend not to notice that, but we judge it as really bad, wrong, shouldn't be happening—we move away. If it's neutral, we just kind of space out or get bored or look for something more intense. These are really strong habits of mind that we mostly don't notice. And then we make our choices through the veil of those habits. We look through it like green-colored glasses or something.

So when we're making choices—in our life and in our retreat and in our sitting—that's coming from this sincere yearning for happiness.

Just have a look. How many of our choices, how much of our perhaps not very clear idea of what happiness and freedom would be like—how much of it is pleasant? How many of us, when we think about when we finally finish this arduous practice and

we're enlightened, imagine we're happy? And what does happy mean? Does your back still hurt? Are you still forgetting things all the time? Has that really unpleasant coworker who's always in your face suddenly stopped doing that? Has the whole world suddenly, magically started to work the way we wanted it to work?

I know we don't say that, but really, looking at it—we don't awaken into a different world. The world doesn't change. And people, with all their ideas and opinions—well, look around. It doesn't change.

Even the Buddha. And this is how ingrained this sense of assessing things by pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral can be. It was only a few years ago I suddenly realized: look at the Buddha's life *after* he became the Buddha, not even before—after. In terms of his life, it doesn't look like it was a piece of cake.

Sure, he had preferences. He made choices. He chose to live as an ascetic monastic—that's a choice. He made plenty of choices. He chose how to teach. He chose which things to talk about. He chose how to set out the rules and how the monastic life would be lived. He chose who his attendants would be. He made lots of choices. We're not saying there's this gray sameness where you don't have opinions and you don't make choices. It's the *holding* to them, thinking that choice is going to make me happy—that's the difference.

And so when the Buddha lived his life, he walked around India barefoot with a begging bowl for forty-five years. If you read the suttas—not that I've read all of them—but it's interesting to see that he had the same kinds of external beautiful experiences and problems that still exist. He couldn't fix the world. His clan's people on his mother's and father's side went to war with each other over water rights. He could come and mediate and stop the war sooner, but that was really all. A lot of the kings who would come to be his disciples—one king was a disciple, and his son killed him to take over the kingdom. The Buddha couldn't prevent that kind of thing.

And if you read about a lot of the people who come and talk to him, it's just like one big annoyance. If you weren't really equanimous, all these people coming and challenging him and not believing him, the different monks getting into squabbles with each other. There's even one sutta where two sets of monks are squabbling so much the Buddha goes to try and calm it down, and they basically say to him, "Oh, go away, we'll take care of it ourselves." They didn't even listen to him. The Buddha! People are people.

So he had all kinds of what we would call dukkha, stuff that's difficult. His back hurt. He got headaches. His main disciples died before he did, so he experienced that loss. It's just life. And yet he was the liberated one, the peaceful one, heart and mind free from suffering.

So clearly, if we believe that—and if we didn't, probably no one would be here—clearly the freedom, the happiness the Buddha's talking about is not about having external things, including external people, acting in the ways that we want. And we know that on some level. On some level. I don't know if we really know that. Because where do external things stop and internal things begin? And frankly, is it any different internally?

We're just talking about the six sense experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mentality—thoughts and emotions. So whether the object is someone coming and talking to you and complaining about the other bhikkhus and whining and challenging you, or whether the object is the mind as you're sitting on the pillow being reactive—same difference. It's just unpleasant experience arising.

What's the suffering in the unpleasant experience? What are we talking about when we say not having preferences, not holding to preferences? Is it in the external life, but more in the internal life—not holding to preferences that things should be this way and not that way?

Not holding to the preference that I should have a really concentrated mind as compared to a mind that's scattered all over the place. Not holding to the preference that my back shouldn't hurt, and because my back is hurting, something's wrong. Not holding to the preference that I should feel this open, loving, open-hearted experience, and because it's not—it's closed down, it's tight—I must be meditating wrong.

But that's really not very easy for us to even wrap our minds around, never mind actually trusting it. This practice is not about getting things the way we want them. It's not about getting your meditation technique all together and perfect so that you sit down and it just flows every time. Because sooner or later something will happen and it won't flow, I promise you—unless you die. Sometime that will happen. Then something else will flow.

Meditation is sort of designed to bring up, to take us into every corner where there's holding to preference and we don't even recognize it. These habits of mind—judging pleasant as good, right; unpleasant as bad, wrong. The natural recoiling from the unpleasant. The natural holding, identifying, going towards the pleasant. And just the delusion around the neutral.

These, of course, are the three basic torments of mind, the three basic *kilesa* in Pali, the afflictions of mind: greed, hatred, delusion—*lobha*, *dosa*, *moha*. They're the big three. They're like the root from which all of our mental confusion and suffering grows.

In terms of exploring out of genuine interest how these habits are created and acted upon in any particular moment of experience—because this is something that arises and passes in every moment—working with noticing these habits in response to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience is really fascinating. It's a great way in to explore. It's ubiquitous in that with every moment of sense contact, the mind experiences it, feels it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

So *vedanā*, this translation of "feeling tone," is really a process of feeling. We're not going to notice it every moment—don't even try. But in many moments it is noticeable. And noticing how quickly, it's really fascinating, how quickly the mind moves. We know the mind moves incredibly fast from, say, experiencing pleasant to way down the road into a whole complex construction.

Chökyi Nyima, a wonderful Tibetan Rinpoche—he's the brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Mingyur Rinpoche, four brothers—he talks about this. Just watch the fickleness of the mind, the unreliable nature of the mind, how easily it is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight or thought into an immediate mood. And then that mood immediately takes us into a whole world of construction, of creation.

I've been noticing this myself. It's really so much fun if you just approach it as exploring, as seeing how the mind works—how in this contact with pleasant and unpleasant the mind moves so fast. Just watch the construction come up. Watch how if we don't see it, we act on it, we believe it.

I was driving somewhere a couple of weeks ago—maybe it was a couple of months ago because I've been in Europe—but anyway, I was driving somewhere. Just calm, no traffic, nothing going on. I was turning from one road to another, and I was fairly quiet. I didn't have the radio on. My mind was pretty calm.

And I noticed, just as I was turning, that it was on a fast road. The car behind me was just a little too close. That's all. I turned. The car was a little too close, but it didn't turn—it kept going. And I noticed, just in that moment: the car's too close, it felt unpleasant, an immediate little aversion came up. That's not right. They shouldn't be so close. It was so subtle.

And I thought, whoa, what if I had been in busy traffic? That little aversion would come up—they're too close—and then I'd turn onto another road where I didn't really have to react to anything. But if you do that, and there's that little bit of aversion, and then another car cuts in, and there's a little more aversion, pretty soon you've got road rage in no time.

We don't really see how it builds until the poor last person who cuts in front of us bears the full weight of our accumulated frustration. But it starts that quickly—just "too close," then "it shouldn't be like that," then "I don't like it."

Or with pleasant. I was sitting, I think this morning, and just some image came up. You know how that is—just some memory, some image. It may not even have a thought attached that carries any meaning; it doesn't have to. Just some image came up, and I didn't notice "pleasant." I just noticed it felt nice. And right away: "Oh, that's nice." Then my mind brought up another, more pleasant image. "Oh, that's nice." And then it starts. In just two seconds, you're into a total pleasant fantasy, whatever way—it doesn't even matter what it is. Food, sex, vacation, having a nice sitting, whatever. The mind's just concocting things: pleasant, pleasant, pleasant—and poof, down the road you go.

Luckily, we're sitting on the cushion. That's what's so good about it—you hopefully won't act on it. Although here, because the bell doesn't ring on a fixed schedule, you might get up and just go get some oatmeal with hot water. But in our daily life, we can really act on these impulses. Not that the acting is bad in itself. It's the delusion—the acting while thinking this is going to make me happy. And we really think it. We don't even know we think it, over and over and over. "If only that car wasn't so close to me, everything would be okay." That's so deeply ingrained.

And so when we come to meditation—not just a retreat, but the way we relate to meditation itself, the technique, the sitting, the walking, the watching our mind—it's the same mind. Even though we come to the path of awakening really to see through how we suffer, at least when we start, we're starting with the same mind and we haven't even begun to see through it. Everyone here is past this initial stage; I know I'm saying things we all already know. But for me anyway, I keep falling into the trap, more and more subtly, where I'll see: "Oh, I was doing this for pleasant again. I was evaluating by pleasant and unpleasant again."

Just notice: we come to practice meditation and technique, and even if it's just being open to everything, it's a particular mindset, a particular learned activity. We're going to bring the same habits of mind to that activity that we bring to anything else, at least

in the beginning—because that's all we know, and we don't even know that we know it. We don't even know what the habits of our mind are until we turn around and look and get really familiar with them.

So for many people, we come and we're practicing with really great sincerity, commitment, strong viriya energy. But so often that energy—whatever way we're putting it out, whether to feel the breath or to hold the form of sitting and walking or to work through sleepiness—however sincere we are, we don't notice how often we're putting forth that effort to get some reward.

Just check it out. "Reward" might not be the word we use. We're looking for results. How often are the results you're looking for pleasant? How often are the results even static? I mean, if you're looking for a particular experience, we all know everything's impermanent—but somehow not *this* experience, not the one I'm putting out all my energy to attain.

That's what it's all about. How often is the experience or the state we're seeking—and sometimes we're not even clear what it is until we look—somehow going to confirm me, a sense of me? I'm going to feel better.

So sometimes the state we're looking for, or why we think we're practicing, isn't actually pleasant. Sometimes people are really quite happy, they feel better and confirmed, when they start having some kind of emotional meltdown. They think, "Well, at least something's happening." I teach a lot of large retreats, and often someone will start really crying in the hall. That person usually feels embarrassed, feels like something's going wrong with their practice because they're crying when they should be calm and blissed out and concentrated. Meanwhile, the people sitting around them come to me and say, "What's the matter with me? I saw there was a person crying. They're really getting into their stuff, stuff's really happening, and I'm just sitting here noticing my breath and whatever comes. I'd much rather have some big, unpleasant knot of emotion to be working through."

So even though that's going for unpleasant, the sense of confirming me, of getting somewhere, is actually pleasant. Don't think about this a lot, but just notice how ingrained—how deeply ingrained—these habits are of assessing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

I talk about this often. I've been looking at it for years and years. On some level, obviously not deep enough, but on some level I really absolutely know this: happiness has nothing to do with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Dukkha, unreliability, includes all of it—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. But when the mind isn't calm, when I'm tired,

when I'm getting caught on something—struggle, struggle, struggle—somehow when I just let go and see underneath, ah, it's slipped in again. This unpleasant experience is not supposed to be happening.

So I just want to drop in that thought for those of you here. If by chance, as you're here in these days of silence, something you don't like should happen to come up—in your mind, in your heart, in your body, somewhere in these days—notice what the attitude is in the mind that's paying attention.

We tend to get so involved in what's happening. "Oh, my heart is closed like a rock." "Oh, my back is killing me." "Oh, I'm having beautiful free flow of sensations." We get so involved, and we can be mindful. You could name very precisely what's happening and how it's happening. But we forget, or we neglect, or we're so familiar with these habits of mind that we often don't even notice we're looking through them, actually feeding the habits by how we're relating to the object. And it feels like we're being really mindful.

So with painful, "my heart's closed" emotion, the mind is saying, "You're no good, you're no good." And we can see that, we can name it—this is all what's happening. But we forget to notice, and when we turn around and notice, it's not so subtle. Oh, I can name everything that's happening, but you know what? I really hate it. And it's a sign that my practice is going nowhere. That attitude, that really not-so-subtle reaction, is not even noticed sometimes. Or when it is noticed, it's not with mindfulness. We totally believe it. We just totally believe it to the point that we can't let our awareness open and sink into: this is just what's happening.

And even when I say it, I can just imagine when we're in it and someone comes into an interview and we say it—you can see them: "Yeah, uh-huh, right, this is just what's happening, right, uh-huh." We suffer, we be with it, sometimes for a minute, sometimes for hours, sometimes, God knows, for days.

And if we're really fortunate, at some point we notice this reaction in the mind and recognize: oh, hating it feels like this. That's all. We move back and accept the hating it too. That's just another emotional arising. Hating it feels like this.

In that moment—that's Ajahn Sumedho's terminology—oh, it's like this. It's a great way to be really present and not feed the sense of "it's me." Oh, hating it feels like this. Wanting it different feels like this. In that moment, it's moved out of blindly acting from the habit, and the awareness is just noticing it. Oh, wanting it different feels like this. That's all. Awareness, again as Ajahn Sumedho says, is the point that includes.

It includes anything, everything. In the big picture, really the great secret of meditation practice is that awareness doesn't care. It doesn't care one bit what's happening. Anything that's happening—any of the six sense objects—when it arises, that's the chance to recognize it with awareness. That's the chance for awareness to become more familiar, more recognized. So any object is a doorway to awareness.

We tend to get so focused on the object that we don't turn around and notice what's coloring the mind that's paying attention. When we see it as wanting, when we see that it's aversion, when we see that we simply don't know—that's all. That's all we have to do.

Awareness doesn't care, but what strengthens the wisdom, what strengthens the awareness, is the steadiness—not steadiness of the object, but that willingness to show up. To just meet the wanting, to meet the pain, to meet the closed heart, to meet the hearing, to meet the sensation, to meet the smelling, to meet the thinking, to meet the not liking, to meet the judging. It really doesn't matter what it is.

In terms of technique, in vipassanā—not in samatha, which is really about cultivating a one-pointed awareness that shuts other things out and goes deep into one thing—but in vipassanā, which is what I'm speaking about now, the steadiness of awareness is the point. All the techniques of vipassanā are to help collect and balance the attention enough just to notice what's happening. What's happening happens by itself.

So whether we start with feeling the breath, or we start with feeling just what's happening in the body, or if the mind feels more at rest we can simply sit or walk and notice what's happening by itself—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing, emotions, thoughts. And that also includes the reactions in the mind. That's another layer: wanting, preference, not liking, judging. It's all just happening.

The whole direction of vipassanā is to more and more trust the awareness. Less and less get all involved and entranced by whatever object it is and our reactions to it. What does it mean about me? Not much. Just steadiness, moment after moment after moment. The awareness strengthens, the samādhi of mind strengthens, and the wisdom, the understanding, also strengthens—pretty much by itself.

It takes some practice and some trust, right? Because, from what I said before, we want some confirmation. It's hard to trust unless we get some nice lights, if we get some big insight, if we get a sense of concentration. I know from experience, then my self-judgment can let down and I'll think, "Oh, the practice is going well, I'm concentrated, it's flowing, things are nice." And then it does flow better because the wanting, the pref-

erence, the self-judging isn't being fed. But we could learn not to feed the wanting, the preference, the self-judgment even when it isn't going nicely. Because it isn't about going nicely. It's just about awareness showing up for anything that's happening.

Joseph likes to say that our practice is simply coming back into natural wakefulness whenever we get distracted. What I mean by distracted—really the only thing I would call distracted is being completely lost and absorbed in thought with no awareness that that's what's going on. There's consciousness, certainly. Unless you're asleep or in a coma, there's consciousness. But you know how it is. You can be really in a thought. You can come out and go, "Oh, I was thinking." And you could say what the thought was about. So there was definitely consciousness. But awareness is the knowing that thinking is happening at the same time. Do you get a sense of the difference?

You know how if you drive, those times when you're driving and you suddenly realize you haven't seen anything for two miles? That's scary to me when that happens. How did I get here? The last thing I knew, I was way back there. Clearly, consciousness has been going on. The appropriate decisions, thank goodness, have been made. But there wasn't any awareness happening. It can be like that here.

We're really lost in that. That's what I would call distracted. But as soon as we're aware—oh, thinking is happening, hearing is happening, wanting is happening—we're no longer distracted.

So distractedness is not about thinking. Thinking is just as valid an object of awareness as anything else. Distractedness is not about the mind being away from the breath. Distractedness only means when there is no conscious awareness of what's happening. And the second we're aware—oh, I was thinking—again, we're here. There's nowhere else to go. We're here. Awareness is here.

So it's learning to trust that steadiness. Put out less forcing and more sense of trust of whatever's happening. And when we find we're trying to manipulate and change the object and fix what's happening, step back a minute. Just check what's going on in the mind and heart. Oh, I don't like it like this. Okay, not liking feels like this. I know the way I say it makes it sound very simplistic and easy and clear, and I know very well it's not always like that. But it's actually a lot more simple than we can trust somehow.

Someone just said to me at the retreat I was teaching last week—they were practicing and they came in and said, "Is it just that it's really this simple and I just can't believe it?" And it was true where they were coming from. The awareness was quite strong. Not every minute—we space out. But noticing a lot. The mind was getting less reactive. There wasn't so much wanting and aversion. They were really just noticing.

And the more it's like that, the less there is to do. And that's what they were saying: I don't trust this. I should do something. I should make something happen. This way, there's a lot less me.

A lot less doing. When there's no me, there's also less feeling of being confirmed, so we're kind of on different territory. That's great—when you feel like you're in unfamiliar territory, that's fantastic. Because what's familiar territory? Wanting, aversion, and delusion. That's what's familiar territory. We know to push away what we don't like and try to make things the way we want them and space out if it's new. That's what's familiar territory. So when we're feeling all familiar and it's in control, watch out. Check out what's going on in the mind that's paying attention. When we feel like, "I don't know what's happening"—that's great. Then there's interest, not to make a difference, but just to see what's in the mind right now. You don't have to ask those words, but just that turning around, having a look. Oh, yeah.

So back to the fickleness of vedana—how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral changes so much. I want to go back to this article because he's talking about what I was just saying, what the Buddha talked about a lot, really. He's saying that we don't realize, when we want something pleasant, a pleasurable event, and we make a choice for it—we don't realize how quickly we will adapt to a pleasurable event and make it the backdrop of our lives. So when that happens to us, that pleasurable event becomes ordinary. And then through becoming ordinary, we lose our pleasure from it. And we don't recognize that this is happening. And so we go out and look for something else to give us pleasure because that first one lost. Do you notice? Can you relate to that?

And he says we keep moving on to the next thing or event, almost certainly make another error of prediction—not predicting that it will become ordinary—and then another, ad infinitum. Perfect description of samsara.

So really seeing this, seeing how the habit of our life, the way we know to do things, is to move from pleasurable event to pleasurable event, each time thinking it's going to make us happy. I don't think I can overemphasize from my own experience how deeply ingrained this is.

I'd say almost every real conflict that comes up in meditation has something about this at the root. We're looking for something to make us happy.

This brings us to the Buddha's teaching in the Sutta of the Two Darts, where he describes the difference between an enlightened person and an ordinary worldling. When an ordinary person is hit with a dart—a painful physical feeling—then on top of that

they beat their breasts, they cry, they lament, they moan. They basically shoot another arrow at themselves. But an enlightened person, when hit with the first arrow—nothing. Just space. They don't create any commotion around it, no mental suffering.

But the next piece, I think, is what's even more interesting. Under the impact of that painful feeling, an ordinary worldling resists and resents it. And then, in one who resists and resents, the underlying tendency of resistance comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit. On top of that, an untaught worldling doesn't know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense happiness. It's the only way out an ordinary person knows. So then they go and look for sense happiness, and the habit of lusting for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind.

Can you relate? We're feeling upset. We go to the refrigerator. We make a phone call. We go out to the movies. We take a hot bath. None of these things are evil. But it's that sense of, "This is unpleasant. Let me go for something pleasant." That becomes the habit of mind.

And what the Buddha says—to me this is so poignant, really sad—is that an untaught worldling doesn't know of any other escape from painful feeling except to go and get something pleasant. That's samsara.

This is what the habits of mind create, and certainly the culture feeds it. Our world is built on this—going for pleasant holds everything together. Dividing the world into pleasant and unpleasant, good and bad—that's where we're comfortable. That's where we take refuge. That's all we know how to do. Clinging is our refuge.

It's so poignant to me, but it also makes me feel so grateful that we have a path, that we know there's another alternative, there's another meaning to happiness than just the enjoyment of pleasant feelings. Without knowing that, it is just an endless cycle.

I want to read one last thing from this article. At the end, the interviewer is talking to Gilbert, and Gilbert is laughing. He says, "I should have learned more lessons personally from my research than I really have." He's laughing as he says, "I'm getting married in the spring, and that's because this woman is going to make me happy forever, and I know it." He finds it funny not because it's untrue, but because nothing could be more true—this is how he really feels. He says, "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations, that belief that there's good and there's bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the other. I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense." This man spent years doing this research.

So I just drop that in. Not to judge ourselves, but just to look. When we're suffering, how are we relating to the mind, to the practice, to whatever particular object is happening? We're relating to the object. Look back at the mind. Is there aversion to unpleasant? Are we trying to change it? Are we trying to hold on? Are we judging ourselves? Is it all about the object? Is it all about what it means about me? Or can we just step into the awareness that really doesn't care, but can meet whatever's arising at any moment?

That's really mindfulness. That's really what our practice is about. And this retreat is a microcosm of our life—the same mind, perhaps a little more subtle experience, but it's the same way that it works.

She talks about how we go through our life trying to protect ourselves from unpleasant experience, from painful experience. We do, right? We think this is kindness to ourself. But of course, we can't do it. And she says—it's a great line—when we realize we don't have to, we can relax. We can open to the beautiful, to the difficult, to all of life. Then we realize we don't have to spend our life going around tensed up like we're sitting in the dentist's chair our whole life.

It's really a releasing into. The Buddha didn't wake up into another life, but into this life—more open, more present to whatever's arising in this life, just as it is. Because we're not holding to preferences, preferences based on inaccurate understanding of what peace and happiness really is.

So then, even in moments—in a moment when the mind isn't caught in wanting, in aversion, in delusion—it's just here with whatever. Notice those moments, whether you call them peaceful or happy or calm, or you don't really call them anything. It's just, as a friend of mine says, a place of no problem. It's just the is-ness of things. Notice those more. Come to appreciate, to trust, to recognize this purity of awareness, of mind, that's always available when we're not lost in the preferences, the reactivity, and not looking through it. Just notice that.

As the Tibetans say, it's like resting at ease in whatever arises. Just this. Just this.

CHAPTER 23

Viriya - Patience and Courage

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this Forest Refuge retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a nuanced exploration of viriya, commonly translated as energy or effort, but which she reframes as patience, perseverance, and courageous willingness to show up moment after moment. She emphasizes that viriya is ethically variable—neither inherently wholesome nor unwholesome—and its value depends entirely on the mental factors accompanying it.*
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> *Wilson distinguishes between willpower driven by self-identification and true resolution rooted in wisdom, using the Buddha's determination under the Bodhi tree as an example. She guides practitioners to continuously check the mind that is paying attention: Is there wanting something to happen? Aversion to what's arising? Confusion about what to do? This checking back, rather than fixing or forcing, allows wisdom (paññā) to naturally do its work.*
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> *The talk addresses how difficult emotions inevitably arise in intensive practice—the "snakes coming out of their holes" in the light of awareness. Rather than seeing these as obstacles, Wilson presents them as opportunities for purification. She offers Michelle McDonald's RAIN technique (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nature) for meeting afflictive emotions with balanced viriya. The key insight is that moment-to-moment continuity of awareness, met with receptive yet courageous presence, builds its own momentum toward liberation—not through striving, but through steady, wise attention.*

So what I wanted to speak about tonight really came up in my mind after talking to people over the last few days. It's a very common theme, but one that I feel I've certainly never gotten right—which is exactly the point, we don't—and that is viriya, the quality of viriya.

As you probably know, it's often translated as energy or effort, but I just want to talk about some different translations and different ways we can understand and work with this quality in our moment-to-moment experience in our practice.

Working with and understanding viriya is based in a sense of knowing for oneself why one is practicing, why one is on the spiritual path. Not in a broad way, but really: what's the point? In terms of the way I'm talking tonight, I'm using the Buddha's description of a free mind or a liberated heart and mind as being a mind-heart, a consciousness that is purified of clinging, that is free from greed or wanting, from dosa—

aversion, hatred, fear—and free from identification, from confusion. That's like an expression of why we practice, both in the long term but also moment to moment. So that gives rise to the motivation. And you'll see why I want to start by saying that.

Viriya, energy, is essential—of course, essential—to keep us moment to moment waking up on our path. And as I'm sure most of you know, it's one of the qualities that apparently the Buddha referenced most frequently. So it's really important for us to understand this accurately, and I really feel like mostly we don't understand it accurately.

The most common translation is effort, right? Viriya is effort, courageous, heroic effort. But when the word "effort" goes through your mind, just notice what kind of connotations come with it. There's no right or wrong, and it may be different for different people, but just notice. I know for me, effort has the quality of doing, of trying, of achieving, of getting somewhere other than here. It's not actually the best description. It carries too much baggage, at least in English.

Other descriptions or definitions include a quality of mental energy. Another description is this quality of attention, of presence, of not shrinking back. Just a courage in the sense of a willingness to simply be here. Not this kind of "I don't want to be with this"—that actually leads to both aversion and sloth and torpor. It's a not shrinking back, a courage, just a willingness no matter what it is.

And patience, perseverance—much more useful in terms of how we can understand and work with this in our practice to think of viriya as patience and perseverance rather than thinking of it as effort. But thinking altogether about it isn't that helpful. I'm more talking about it in order to help us bring our attention into our experience and recognize viriya: when it's wise, when it's not.

And that's what's interesting about this quality of viriya. This is a mental factor, a quality in the mind. On its own, it's what's called ethically variable. It's not necessarily wholesome. It's not necessarily unwholesome. It depends on what other factors come together with the viriya in the mind, in the citta at that moment, what's kind of motivating it.

When we don't realize it's ethically variable, how many times in practice are we putting out tremendous effort? We just think the more I put out, the better it is, because it's good no matter what. But that's not true. So tremendous viriya—energy, not shrinking back, willingness to show up (that's kind of the way I think about it, a kind of courage, just the willingness to show up)—it can be put out with an amazing amount of steadiness, of effort, using deliberately the word effort. But it is not necessarily wholesome. It really depends what goes with it. It can be for all variety of motivations.

I was watching the US Open tennis the other day, watching the two guys in the finals. Incredible viriya—very, very beyond anything I could even imagine just to get through the match, never mind their whole lives, how much they work. And watching the two guys play is really an example of all these qualities I mentioned: not shrinking back, showing up. Each point is new. You don't hold on to the past.

You're really there. You're fully present. Enormous effort.

Is it wholesome? I don't really know. I don't know what their motivation was. It could have varied from moment to moment. But it could be total greed. It could be completely about "me." It could have been to win the two and a half million dollars. Or it could have been aversion. It could be a lot of different things.

Someone could put out—like we see in these caper movies—tremendous virya, steadiness to commit the perfect crime. Clearly, you couldn't really say that motivation was a wholesome factor, right? That's not wise virya.

So if we think of it as just the energy put out to achieve a result, we're going down the wrong track.

Take it to meditation, since that's hopefully what we're all doing here. How much virya, steadfastness, patience, and persistence—or downright effort—is the mind putting out to make something different happen? Is that wise virya? Or how about sitting through enormous pain, absolutely vowing, "I will not move"? Classically, from the outside, that person's really got some virya. They've really got some resolution—that steadfastness, that willingness to do what we decide.

But you don't know that. It's what is it paired with? It's quite possible to sit like a rock through enormous pain and internally every moment of that is fed by aversion, if not downright hatred. "I will not move no matter what. I will not move." And we're looking at it as willpower, a sense of me, me, me—being the perfect yogi, proving something.

If we don't notice what's motivating, what qualities, what mental factors are coming together with that energy, that effort—and it is effort, that virya—we think we're really practicing on the road to freedom, and all we're doing is feeding sense of self, or feeding aversion, or feeding desire.

You get a sense of how really key it is to both get familiar—more and more familiar—with how we can play with this factor of virya, but even more to keep checking in the mind what's coming together with it, what's feeding it. Because that's really the whole point: to see that willpower is not the same as resolution. Willpower is not the same thing as virya. Willpower is really driven by a strong sense of self.

Resolution is different from virya. It's one of the paramis, one of the wholesome qualities of mind and heart that we can develop in our practice, in our life. It is said that the Buddha, before he became the Buddha in all his lifetimes as the Bodhisattva, was cultivating these ten different qualities, which I won't go into because that's a whole talk.

But resolution is that quality of clarity and firmness, you could say. The classic example is that night after all his six years of strenuous work, the Buddha-to-be sat down under the Bodhi tree and said, "I will not get up until I become awakened. Let my bones and sinews dry up. I will not get up."

There are two things I'd like to point out about that. One, that resolution is not desire or aversion. It's not willpower—"I'm so great, I won't get up." It really comes from wisdom.

The second piece of wisdom about resolution is that it's based in reality. I always like to think he knew which night to sit down under that tree and say, "Okay, I'm not going to get up." He didn't do it for the six years prior. He was ready then.

So you could sit here and make a resolution: "I will not get up until I become a Sammasambuddha, a perfectly enlightened Buddha." Now, I don't know where any of your minds are at. That might be a resolution from wisdom. It might be unwise effort based on desire or self-identification. How do you know? You're the only one who can know. We keep remembering to check back: what qualities of mind are in the mind that's paying attention?

It's putting out the effort. This isn't a big thinking thing. It's just remembering to check back.

Viriya as a path factor—the wise viriya that we use in our practice—needs to come together with wisdom. And that's something that for years I didn't quite think of. Not that I didn't understand it, I just didn't consider it. You think, you know, it's not going well enough, try harder. We're not getting what we want to happen, so push more, do it more, be more steady. But if we don't check back and see what's fueling that effort with wisdom, with paññā, with understanding, then we can really get ourselves all knotted up and not quite understand why. Because we think, well, I'm doing the best I can. And very sincerely, we are doing the best we can. But we're forgetting to look and see what's fueling this "best we can." Is it wisdom, or at least a mind that is not being motivated by wanting, by aversion, by self-interested confusion? And it's not really that hard to tell. This is not some big mystery. It's just that we're so familiar with these states that we can forget to check.

So, for example, this is the way U Tejaniya describes it. Check the mind that's paying attention. This isn't so hard. As you're practicing—whether you're being with the breath or walking or drinking your tea, whatever—as you're paying attention to what's going on, in the back of the mind there, are you wanting something to happen? Are you expecting something to happen that isn't happening now? And that can be very subtle, but check and see. Are you trying to create something? Trying to get your practice to look a certain way? Wanting some experience? Or even ever so subtly trying to nudge things in a certain direction? That's greed, just flat-out greed. It doesn't matter how subtle or how gross it is. And that's not a judgment. It's like, great, see the greed. In the moment of seeing it, the mind isn't feeding it. Ah, that's greed. Right then, you know, it moves back into wise attention, into wise mindfulness.

Okay, are you trying to make something stop happening? Or ever so subtly judging, "This isn't supposed to be here"? Or practicing harder, more steadily, but because you're dissatisfied with how things are going? It isn't quite the way it was on that last retreat, so I better amp it up a little bit. Or I better do something to get rid of this so that it can get back to where it was before, or what I read about, or what I heard about. That's aversion, ill will, anger, hatred. That's all. Just notice it.

And on the third level—delusion—it shows up in different ways. One is that we don't know what's going on. You don't even know where you are. That's kind of obvious delusion. On another level, it's like you're trying to figure it out. You don't know what to do, but you really feel that you should do something. And you're kind of going through the catalog of all the skillful means, trying to figure out what to do to make it right. Just settle down. Notice what's happening right now.

So how does right energy, right viriya, feel when we're working with it, when we're connecting with it? Of course there's a wide range. How can it show up?

It's not forcing. It's not pushing. It's not aiming towards another goal. It's not trying to manipulate in any way whatsoever. And manipulating can be very subtle. But it's just—and this is in vipassanā now, for example, though it works the same way in samatha, in one-pointedness, just with different objects.

In Vipassana, for example, all the six sense objects are naturally arising. Whether you're using the breath as a beginning point—that's physical, that's the body—or you're using sound, that's hearing. Using the whole body is also physical. But all six sense objects—seeing, smelling, tasting, the body, hearing, and of course the mind with thinking and the whole range of what goes on there—they're just naturally occurring. That's

just nature. We're not here to make something different occur. We're not here to have a better object. That's just what's happening. The only job of viriya is to be present, aware, to know what's already happening by itself.

So consciousness—the moment where the sense door and the sense object come together, and there's just the bare knowing of it, of the sound as hearing, of the smell as smelling—that's going on every moment, as long as we're conscious. As long as we're not in a coma—and who knows what's happening when you're in a coma—but that's going on every moment. That's happening by itself. Awareness and energy, awareness is the knowing that that's happening.

We can be conscious without awareness, right? Like those times when you're driving and suddenly you wake up and realize you don't know where you were for the last two miles, but somehow you're still on the road and you followed the stop signs and everything. Did that ever happen to anybody? It's a little spooky. That's consciousness without awareness.

When you're lost in thought here, as opposed to being aware of thought, and you suddenly wake up and go, "Oh, I was gone for ten minutes"—but you could actually say what you were thinking about. Sometimes, and I'm not advocating this, people then amuse themselves by going back, tracing it all back. That's another ten minutes gone, right? But you trace back everything you thought about. So there was consciousness, but there wasn't the awareness, that purity of awareness that knows: this is what's happening now.

So that's awareness. With wisdom means it doesn't have greed, hatred, or delusion in it. And the viriya, the courage, the energy, is that willingness to just meet it moment after moment after moment—not to push into change and not to shrink back because it's not what we like, but just whatever's arising, awareness notices it, and viriya is right there with the awareness. They come together, meeting it, meeting it, meeting it. Receptive in terms of just receiving what's happening, not in there trying to fix it and change it.

That's why working with hearing at times is a lovely way to just sit and be with hearing for a while. It's nice with the insects. Several people have mentioned that because it keeps going. It gives you time to really just drop into this quality of real presence, but it's quite receptive. You're really there, aware and knowing, but that manipulating, that trying to fix or do isn't part of it. So playing with hearing, for some people, gives a real sense of that receptiveness. Receptive but also courageous—that willingness just to show up, not to shrink back, no matter what it is.

So they go together, and this is the delicate dance of appropriate viriya. We tend to easily keep falling one way or the other, even with the best intentions. Receptive, receptive, there's absolutely nothing to do, it's all happening by itself—and there's the receptiveness, but there's not quite the connecting, not quite the showing up. The energy kind of falls out the floor.

That also happens when one is working with concentration in terms of calming the mind, being very steady, always coming back to one particular deliberately chosen object like the sensation of breath at the nose or metta meditation. Because the mind gets calmer and calmer and calmer, often the energy falls out, the viriya falls out. It's just really calm and kind of going on by itself, and that quality of not shrinking back, of showing up, starts to just fall away. So at that time there's receptivity, there's calmness, but there's not enough of the connecting energy, the courageous aspect. And so we need to notice that.

And for us—well, for me, maybe not for you—what can be so difficult is how to cultivate, bring in that courageous connecting energy without doing it from wanting or aversion. It's so easy, isn't it? We've spaced out a little and go, "Oh no, I'm spaced out! Get back to the breath. Connect, connect. Aim and sustain. What does it feel like, you know?" And, "Oh, now how come I don't feel more balanced? How come—" It's like, oh, duh. So we need to keep checking.

It's very tricky—how to let wisdom do the work, not wanting do the work, not pushing or striving do the work. And this is not our habit. It's not, for most of us, the habit of our mind. We let wanting, aversion, pushing, expectation, self-whipping—whatever it is—do the work, and we confuse that with virya.

So that's on the one side: too receptive. And the other, of course, is this trying, trying, doing, doing, and "my practice isn't clear enough, it isn't good enough." So I need to, for example, try to see the breath more clearly. It's too dull. Has anyone ever had that sense? These sensations aren't clear enough. If I try to see them a little more, aim and sustain, aim and sustain, get things clearer. Or I'm getting lost in thought and I will not do that anymore. No more thinking. This is what our mind does. And then we say, "Oh, well, she said don't do this. Okay, no more, no more, no more thinking. I won't do that anymore. I'm just going to be receptive, and everything will balance out."

It's a trip. As long as we're caught in trying to figure it out that way, it's an endless spinning cycle.

When you notice it's getting into this—out of balance, what do I do? How do I fix it? Is it too receptive? Is it too strong?—back up. Open up the field of attention, by which I mean don't try to narrow down so precisely on "how does it feel" with the object. Open up. Feel the body, the mind, and just notice. "Oh, I really want this to get better." Oh, duh—wanting. And you don't have to fix it. You don't have to change it. You just have to notice it.

That's what's so amazing with awareness and wisdom. When the wisdom sees enough of what's going on, the wisdom actually understands and makes the changes. It doesn't have to come from pushing. This takes trust. It takes trust. But I am sure—really sure—that all of you have had this experience over and over in different ways. Not just about virya, but about many things. When we're willing and able to just meet what's arising with awareness, with balanced energy, not shrinking back, with this awareness that isn't colored by wanting, by aversion, we see clearly. The wisdom arises out of the steadiness, the continuity of seeing, the continuity of awareness.

So that's really how working with virya, how the virya strengthens and deepens and then supports the deepening of wisdom and all the other factors—not through pushing harder to see more clearly, but through this gentle, steady connectedness, moment after moment after moment. It's the continuity of awareness, the continuity, the perseverant aspect of virya, the patient aspect that is really the key.

And in some way, all of you who practice a lot, we know that. But in another way, we can easily get sucked into: How good was my sitting? How was my walking? The time in between, I'm sort of, you know, halfway paying attention, whatever. But that just moment-to-moment noticing what's going on in the mind, without a huge effort—so it's not exhausting—it's quite possible then to keep just noticing, moment after moment after moment, all day.

That's the resolution. Not that I will do it no matter what, but that willingness to say, "You know, just when I notice I don't know what's happening, I'm willing to come back." And as soon as you recognize you don't know what's happening, you are back. That's the thing.

There's not a place to go back to. It's here.

So that's the aspect—the steadiness, the steadiness of noticing—that strengthens the whole practice. That's really what develops the steadiness of viriya. And it's from that steadiness of viriya and clarity of seeing, moment after moment after moment, that samādhi really builds. The whole seeing, the whole steadiness of awareness, gathers a momentum that doesn't come from your willpower. It doesn't come from greed or dis-

satisfaction. It comes from how one moment of mindfulness is the proximate cause for the next moment of mindfulness to arise. One moment of viriya—just this receptive, connected, courageous attention—is the proximate cause for the next one to arise.

So at first we have to remember: oh yeah, right, just what's happening now. That's the extent of it, that level of effort. What's happening now? You feel your body as you sit there. It's not hugely effortful. You feel your crossed arms. You notice tiredness in the mind. You don't have to do anything about any of it. You just notice it. Oh, that's not so hard. I could do that the next moment. I could do that the next moment.

And slowly or quickly—or however long, in relation to what is slow or quick anyway—a momentum starts to build. The first day or two on retreat, you're just dragging yourself along, trying to find your body when you're sitting here. A week in, two weeks in, yes, stuff's still happening. It's not all the way you want it. Probably never will be. But it's getting easier. The remembering to know what I'm doing starts to happen more and more by itself. The sense of huge swings of exhaustion and pushing too hard, the up and down—that starts to even out a bit. And that's happening by itself. Also the sense of trying to push and see more clearly—that doesn't work. But the steadiness, the continuity, the moment-to-moment awareness and viriya connectedness starts showing up by itself.

And I know you've all seen this: the awareness starts to notice more. Things start to get clearer. We start to notice, without even looking for it, more subtlety of what's going on in the mind, what's going on in the body, really seeing suffering and what's creating it.

Because that's really the point. What fuels our viriya, our willingness to show up moment after moment, isn't right viriya wanting something to happen, but the quality of interest—investigation. What's going on? How does the mind work? How is suffering created in this moment? How does it come to an end in this moment? What's happening right now? With the intention just to understand out of interest. Not to judge, not to fix, not to make something different happen—just to notice and see how it works.

And that's when intensive practice gets to be fun, because we're not having to fight with what's happening. We're just willing to be there and see: what's the mind doing right now? I'm feeling all locked up and pushed and stressed. Instead of running down a list and judging ourselves, we just turn around and look at the mind. Ah, dissatisfaction. The breath ought to be more steady. Look at that. Look at how much suffering is coming from that. And there's nothing else you need to do. Just noticing that.

This is from Nisargadatta. It's kind of an intense way of saying it, but I like it. He says: "You people want to become supermen overnight." You know, we're all like that. "Stay without ambition, without the least desire, vulnerable, unprotected, uncertain, completely open to and welcoming life as it happens, without the selfish conviction that all must yield you pleasure or profit, material or so-called spiritual."

That to me is a good description of awareness with right viriya.

Really present, open, without desire or the conviction that this is to somehow yield me profit. I'm not saying that's easy, but that's the sense. That's the sense of how we practice. Virya isn't here to say, "This is good, this is bad, and the more we're aware, the better everything gets." It doesn't work that way. It just totally doesn't work that way.

From that sense, I want to move into the courage, a little more about the courage of not shrinking back. Because often what shows up—especially on intensive retreats, though in our life too—are difficult experiences. And these difficult experiences rarely, sometimes but rarely, fit into most people's conceptions or preconceived notions about what's good practice, why I'm here, what awareness and effort and energy are about, how I'm supposed to purify the mind. All of that.

What shows up as a function of retreat are the habits of our mind that cause suffering. That's part of it. If that didn't show up, the retreat wouldn't be working. If that didn't show up, we wouldn't have a chance to explore, to understand, to meet these habits with awareness and virya rather than just being run by them as we are in our normal life.

But usually, when these strong habits show up, we meet them—at first at least—with the same habits of mind that we meet them with in daily life. We don't recognize that this is a chance for us to step out of our unconscious patterns of feeding these afflictive emotions. And that's usually how they show up, as afflictive emotions.

Patrul Rinpoche, the Tibetan teacher, was also talking about the paramis, and he went into some detail about the parami of patience. One of the lines he used is that we need to cultivate patience to bear hardship for the Dhamma. I'm thinking of this patience as virya—that courageous willingness to show up, not to shrink back or shy away or push back or hide from whatever arises.

As Ajahn Chah says, there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. It's all about the attitude of mind, of attention—how we meet that suffering in any particular moment. And so this balanced virya, virya that's fed by wisdom, is so key in meeting and working with this stuff.

I really want to talk about these habits of mind because in the last couple of days it's been coming up for quite a number of people. No big surprise. But somehow we are surprised. It's always amazing. No matter how much we've practiced or looked at our minds, it can still be a surprise when we're settling into the retreat, or we've been here for some time, and suddenly—pow! It's like the pond settles down for a few days and then boom, all this stuff starts coming up to the surface. One of my teachers used to say that in the light of awareness, all of the snakes come up out of their holes.

That's not a problem. That's not something wrong. It is a great place to practice with cultivating and recognizing the attitude of mind we meet these difficulties with—what's right virya, what's right awareness.

In some ways these habits show up as really obvious afflictive emotions, right? Intense desire, strong fear, habits we know we carry from our life of great resistance or self-judging, contempt, blame. All the stuff we have—past trauma, self-distrust, a lot of anger, a lot of sadness and grief, sorrow, guilt. You name it. All of our normal stuff. This at least we notice is happening. We may think it's a mistake, but it's hard not to notice that these things are coming up.

But these same habits of mind can also show up in ways that are not really subtle, but more hidden. They can show up in the way that we're relating to our practice. And this is often where we don't notice them and get really caught in wrong effort.

For example, these big habits I mentioned—judging, comparing with past retreats, wanting things to be different, a real underlying sense of resistance, anger at whatever's going on, real sorrow over how one's behaved in the past. On one level, there's a whole personal story, a personal history. The emotions feel very much about me. On another level, if we just get a little bigger and notice what energy in the mind is fueling these, it really will break down to desire, aversion or fear, confusion, delusion. It's all about me, in the big picture.

I'm not saying we should just wipe out and not pay attention to the emotions. Not at all—I'll get into that in a minute. But for me, it's been very helpful to get bigger and notice. I'm all involved in my resistance—why, back to the past, it's been like this—not noticing. As I get into exploring it, the story, it's about me, I see how it starts and where it goes, it feels like good mindfulness. But if I check back into the mind that's paying attention...

There can be, for example, in my own personal case, really strong motivation in that description of craving, of clinging. I'm really wanting to see what it's all about, and I'm wanting to figure it out so that I don't have to deal with it anymore. So craving fed by

aversion. And if I don't look back at the attitude in the mind and notice that craving, then what I'm taking for wise mindfulness and wise energy—looking and seeing and naming and noting—is actually only feeding craving.

Do you get a sense of that? When you turn around and look, it's not so subtle, but we get so engrossed in exploring and looking at the object that we forget to turn around and see: Is this effort, is this virya, is this mindfulness being fueled by wisdom? By interest? Or by wanting or aversion? You don't have to ask that constantly, but just keep checking, just keep checking, just keep checking. And that's all you have to do. You don't have to fix it. I really found this to make a profound difference in the way that I'm able to just be with what's happening in a much freer and clearer way, moment after moment after moment. And as I said, wisdom starts to do the work, not pushing.

For example, I wasn't even trying to work with anger. I was walking, just taking a walk. I wasn't on retreat. And I started thinking about politics and different political figures and the war in Iraq and all kinds of stuff, and getting really angry. I was watching it happen, feeling the anger, and of course the sense of justification—appropriate, it's appropriate to be angry—which of course just keeps the anger going. So I was really noticing that and feeling it and very present, mindful in the way of being able to notice and say everything that was happening, but not really noticing what was feeding it.

And then at one point, just paying attention, paying attention, I turned around and noticed: Oh, this is just anger feeding anger. That wasn't with any judgment. That was just noticing. And in that moment of seeing, the wisdom did its own work. In that moment of seeing, there arose: Oh, I don't want to add more anger to the world. It just stopped. My opinion didn't stop. The sense that things should change didn't stop. But that anger fueling itself—as soon as the mindfulness just saw, "Oh, this is just anger fueling itself," with wisdom, the wisdom just said, "Don't need this anymore." And it stopped. Doesn't mean it doesn't come back. But you get a sense of how the wisdom does the work.

It's very different from: "This is anger, feeding more anger. I don't want to do this anymore. It's really bad. And I'm a bad person because I'm feeding the anger. So I'm not going to be angry anymore. Stop it. Loving kindness. May you be peaceful. May you be happy." And it's just spinning, spinning, spinning.

I'm not saying every time that awareness with balanced energy sees something unwholesome, it just naturally poofs away—would that it were so. But it starts to happen more and more. And you also get a sense of what balanced virya is.

These habits can be strong emotions like that, but they can also show up in how we're relating to practice in the way I talked about before. There can be a huge amount of judging that what's happening isn't right, that it could be better. A huge amount of remembering and wanting from some other time. And in terms of focused, one-pointed practice—coming back to the breath, coming back to metta—how often is that bringing the mind back done with wanting? How often?

I talked to someone who spent two months practicing a very strict shamatha, one-pointed meditation style—just come back to here, come back to here with the breath. And this person told me later, after it was over, "Wow, I'm looking now and I see I spent that whole time practicing with craving, not noticing that every time I was coming back to the breath, it was from craving." So you might get somewhat focused, but it's not balanced samadhi. It's from craving. And that's what's being fed in the mind.

So that's why I said at the beginning, when we talk about the understanding that fuels our practice, that fuels our virya—if it's the understanding that it's purifying the heart and mind—

Purifying from craving, from aversion, from confusion. Then we know it doesn't matter what's happening. You can get to some really exalted state of heart and mind, but if you've been feeding craving that whole time, what good is it?

Or you're going through the day here and you're noticing the mind, noticing what's happening, and there's that courageous showing up. You're having no great experiences. You're just sitting and walking and drinking your tea and going out for a walk. But you're really noticing. The momentum of noticing is growing. The getting caught and reactive, the pushing and trying to make something happen, is lessening. That's where the purification is really starting to happen. That's where the strength of wisdom and awareness, mindfulness and virya, are all coming together.

So we look back at what's going on in the mind, less focused on evaluating ourselves by object. But I do want to return to the fact that in terms of bigger emotional experiences—like the snakes coming out of the hole—sometimes that's going to happen on retreat, and it really isn't a problem. In fact, often it's kind of a normal, useful circumstance.

I haven't read this for years, but Ram Dass has a great line. He says that as your mind further purifies, as your heart further purifies, the impurities—the greed, the confusion, the difficult emotions—will seem grosser and larger. So you need to understand that it's not that you're getting more caught in the negativity, in the illusion. It's just that you're seeing it more clearly. You're feeling it more vividly. It's really important to see

this and think, "Wow, that's interesting. Let me understand how suffering is created"—not thinking, "Oh God, I'm really falling apart. It's getting worse and worse." We're seeing it more clearly.

So the fact that these difficult patterns arise—that's just the effect of our past karma, the past habits of our mind, the way we're used to relating in our life. No blame; that's just what's happening. How it's met in this present moment of awareness—that's the place, that's the moment where we can see what's being fed and what's being starved, which is a way the Buddha talked about often.

So when a really difficult emotion, say grief, comes up, and it's met with, "Oh no, grief again. What's the matter with me? I've got to figure it out. I thought I worked through this. I've been to therapy for ten years"—that's feeding aversion. That's feeding resistance. That's pushing it away. That's shrinking back. That's not virya. But when it's met with, "Oh, grief. It's like this"—that willingness just to be there—that's wisdom. That's virya with wisdom.

So I want to offer some guidance for those of you who I sense would find it helpful to have a little bit of technique, if you're not used to meeting difficult emotions as part of the practice—not as something to jump over and get back to practice, not as something to get rid of so that purifying means they never come, but as the next arising object.

First is just recognition. Michelle McDonald made up this little acronym, RAIN—R-A-I-N—which if it helps, use it. When a difficult emotion comes, or a happy one too—though we don't usually struggle with those; we get attached to them and don't even know they're there—recognition is helpful. "Oh, guilt. It's like this." "Happiness." "Desire. It's like this." "Self-exaltation. It's like this." Whatever it is, that's all recognizing. The name can help, but the name is to bring us into the experience, not to note distantly, "Oh, guilt is like this. That's nice. Guilt, guilt, guilt."

Let me go back to the breath. Like guilt. Recognize, and the A is for allowing, accepting. Just letting it be, being in non-contention. Oh, guilt feels like this. Accepting, allowing it to be, to live its life.

It's really like the weather. Emotions feel so much like the weather to me. You're just sitting here, minding your own business, and suddenly—whoom—a huge wave of sadness comes in. And you're like, what? I'm just practicing here. Sadness, heaviness. And then we get into all our reactions. But sadness comes in just like the fog, just like the rain. Recognize, allow it.

The I is for investigating or just noticing how it is. I don't mean thinking about it—what does it mean to me? That's not investigation. Just recognizing, feeling how it is. Guilt feels like this. There may be physical sensations. There may be a coloring in the mind. There may be thoughts coming and going with it—all kind of like the package that we call guilt.

We're allowing it, investigating it, not to make it go away. Simply with viriya, to be present without flinching from what's happening. Receptive, allowing, connected. Oh yes, guilt is like this.

And the N is for: it's just nature. Sometimes I'm feeling guilty. Sometimes you're feeling guilty. This is the nature of guilt. Your particular personal story—everybody's guilt has a particular personal story. That's the nature of guilt. Yours isn't any better or worse or more personal than anybody else's.

So to me, there's the cloud, the rain, the fog, the sun, the happiness. It comes. We recognize, allow, investigate. It's just nature. It goes. And that's how the wisdom comes. You don't have to tear it apart to see impermanence. If you just stay, moment after moment, steady, connected, you'll notice: it wasn't here before, and now it's here. You'll notice: it's really here, and now it's gone. And I promise, it will come and it will go. Everything will come and it will go. We don't have to try and see that, figure it out. Just be here, meet it, steady, and that understanding shows up by itself.

So that's really the quality of awareness, viriya, and wisdom. It can sometimes be with very subtle experience, but it's just as valid with the huge difficult emotions that are coming up. Either one, it doesn't matter.

Just notice when you're involved in some kind of reactivity, some kind of trying to change, and the feelings of dissatisfaction with yourself, with the emotion, with how your practice is going. Back up a little bit. Open up a little bit. Just notice what's in the mind that's paying attention. Just notice what's in the mind that's paying attention. And when you notice that, you're already connected again.

Ah, this is wanting.

In that moment, we've stepped out of our normal habits of reacting with aversion or self-justification to these big patterns, and we're shifting the karma. Instead of feeding the aversion, feeding the self-identification, we're feeding wisdom, feeding awareness, feeding virya. And that's really huge. Maybe not in each little moment, but as the momentum builds, as the wholesomeness builds, this is really how the mind purifies itself.

I want to end with a quotation from Pema Chödrön. She's so pithy—I love how she says things:

"We think if we just meditated enough or jogged enough or ate perfect food, everything would be perfect. But from the point of view of someone who is awake, that's death. Seeking security or perfection, rejoicing and feeling confirmed and whole, self-contained and comfortable is some kind of death. It doesn't have any fresh air. There's no room for something to come in. We're killing the moment by controlling our experience.

From an awakened perspective, trying to tie up all the loose ends and finally get it together is death because it involves rejecting a lot of your basic experience. There's something aggressive about that approach to life—trying to flatten out all the rough spots and imperfections into a nice, smooth ride.

We want to be perfect, but we just keep seeing our imperfections, and there's no room to get away from that, no exit, nowhere to run. That is when this sword turns into a flower. We stick with what we see, we feel what we feel, and from that, we naturally begin to connect with our own wisdom mind."

CHAPTER 24

All Skillful Means Are For The Purification Of The Heart-Mind

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates how all skillful means in Buddhist practice share a single purpose: the purification of the citta (heart-mind) from the kilesas (afflictions). Drawing on the Buddha's famous declaration that he teaches "suffering and the end of suffering," she explains that every technique—whether meditation, ethical conduct, or devotional practice—serves to cultivate non-clinging in each moment.

Wilson presents a template from Sayādaw U Paṇḍita showing three levels of purification corresponding to the Eightfold Path's groupings. Sīla (ethical conduct) purifies the gross level of transgression through restraint of harmful speech and action. Samādhi (collectedness of mind) suppresses the obsessive level of torment, particularly repetitive thoughts of greed and aversion. Paññā (wisdom) addresses the deepest latent tendencies—the subtle seeds that sprout when conditions align. She emphasizes that samādhi alone, while valuable, is state-dependent; only wisdom seeing things as they truly are can uproot these tendencies.

The talk includes the Buddha's teaching on directed and undirected meditation from the Satipaṭṭhāna framework, offering recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, one's own virtues, and generosity as skillful means when the mind becomes overwhelmed by afflictions. Wilson weaves in teachings from Zen Master Dōgen and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche to show how devotion and compassion naturally reveal the purified heart-mind. Throughout, she reminds practitioners that skillful means are not about achieving special states but about expressing awakening itself in this present moment.

Well, last week I was talking about virya, energy, and the balance of that. Something that I didn't get to really at the end of the talk was to discuss skillful means, which is really all the different techniques and methods that we use both in meditation and in our life to balance the energy, to help us wake up. So that's kind of the jumping off point I want to start with tonight: skillful means. But really the point being that all the skillful means are in the service of one thing only, which is what the Buddha said he taught, very famously.

The Buddha said, "I teach one thing: suffering and the end of suffering." He said that a lot. And all skillful means, not only meditation but in our life, are to help us understand, to realize the end of suffering—but not only as a goal. In the moment, to actualize the heart and mind of non-clinging. That's a simple way to say it.

I just want to read this little bit from the Buddha just because I like it. This is just little snippets from one of the many suttas where he's talking about the Four Noble Truths. I'm not going to do the whole truths, but he's talking about how he first discovered the profound truth that can't be gained by mere reasoning, by thinking about it, visible only to the wise:

"The world, however, is given to pleasure, delighted with pleasure, enchanted with pleasure. Truly, such beings will find it hard to understand dependent arising, this profound truth. Yet there are beings whose eyes are only a little bit covered with dust. They will understand the truth."

So we can only hope that we're some of those beings whose eyes are a little bit covered with dust.

But I was really reading it because this is sort of how he describes the cause of suffering—that the world and beings are enchanted by pleasure, given to pleasure, attracted to pleasure. That's sort of our dilemma, you could say, in life and practice. No difference. And so when he talks about the ending, the extinction of suffering, it's exactly this attachment to pleasure, this craving that he addresses. So he could talk about the mind, the heart of non-clinging, as one way of saying it.

A more simple way—and that's how I'll refer to it later—but again, I just want to read one of his many descriptions of how that manifests and how it can manifest:

"One who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything whatever in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. This I call neither arising nor passing away, neither standing still nor being born nor dying. There is neither foothold nor development nor any basis. This is the end of suffering."

To me it's inspiring. It's also kind of grand. But we can also talk about it, as he often does, as the heart, the mind of non-clinging. Or another way of putting it, as I've been talking about the whole time, is the mind, the heart that's free in a moment even from any of the internal torments: clinging, aversion—two sides of the same coin—delusion, confusion, attachment to sense of self, which gives rise to the craving and the aversion.

And so any skillful means, any of the forms of meditation that we do, and any of the other aspects of our life are all in service of cultivating the wisdom that ultimately sees through the delusion that gives rise to clinging and aversion. Right? Big picture. All of the different techniques are ultimately for that end.

Whether it's mindfulness and the myriad of techniques of mindfulness, whether it's absorption practice in the way that the Buddha taught it—absorption practice, shamatha practice, absorption of the mind very, very deeply into one object is not the end in itself. It's to cultivate a quality of mind that then comes out of absorption to explore the nature of reality, to understand it. His thesis is: when we understand things the way they are, the way they already are, clinging and aversion will naturally cease because they don't make any sense. And as long as we think they're serving us and making sense—well, so long there's an "us" that we think it's serving and making sense—it just keeps on cycling.

And as he said, the world, people love pleasure. We do. It's very, very deeply ingrained in us, and so we need all these different skillful means at different times. Not to get to some particular state, not to have a better experience, not to get rid of what we don't like—but the skillful means in themselves, even in a moment, are ways of in that moment not feeding the torments, starving the torments. So in the moment, any of the skillful means are also a manifestation of a heart and mind of non-clinging.

So you see what I mean? The means are the end. The end are the means. We can't practice in a way of wanting and hating and trying to get rid of something and fool ourselves that this is the way to understand non-clinging. It just doesn't work.

So that's what all the skillful means share. And I just want to talk about one template that I really like because I find it very helpful, interesting, in the different ways that some aspects of our life of awakening—not only intensive practice—work, you could say, to purify, to cultivate purity of the mind and the heart in the moment.

So in this template, which I first heard from Sayadaw U Pandita (but he didn't make it up), he talks about how this purification—now when I say purification, it's kind of, in my mind, a bit of a loaded word. It's not something I grew up with, purification.

I don't know. In my mind, it has a connotation that's a little holier-than-thou. But I don't mean that. When I say purification, I'm using it because I can't think of a better word. And what I mean is simply this: in the moment, the heart, the mind, the citta, the consciousness, when it's pure, in that moment it isn't clouded by the torments, by the afflictions, by any form of aversion or greed or delusion. Just for a moment. We're not all

the way to never being bothered again by anything in the world, but in the moment—that's what all of our life of awakening is about. Cultivating that purity, recognizing it when it's present, and recognizing what goes along with it so we appreciate it.

So on three levels, this happens in our life and in our practice. And interestingly enough, they're the three groupings of the Eightfold Path: sila, morality; samadhi, collectedness of mind; and panna, wisdom.

They say that with sila, in other words with ethical conduct of body and speech, what we're free from when we're acting from these simple five precepts, from non-harming in speech and action, is that in that moment the heart is freed from, purified from, what's called the torments, the kilesas of transgression—the grossest level. So you see, just as mindfulness and wisdom get more and more subtle, so also do our friends the kilesas get more and more subtle. We start by working on the really gross level. And that's hard enough, God knows. Just keeping our mouth shut and not saying something aversive. Keeping our hand relaxed and not writing something aversive. On that level, when we are refraining, we're purifying the heart and mind from that level of kilesa, that level of affliction. And that's not nothing. That's really what lays the basis for purification on more and more subtle levels, for us to see and understand and see through the need for the kilesas on more subtle levels.

There's a lovely saying that when we are acting according to the precepts, when we're not acting from hatred, from aversion, from cruelty, from greed, watching our speech and actions, we are giving ourselves freedom from remorse. And how many of you have mentioned having stuff come up in your practice—memories from however long ago? We all have them. Stupid or worse than stupid, painful, harmful things that we've done or said, and the suffering, really the remorse. Which is different from guilt. Guilt is like, "I'm such a stupid jerk." That's just adding aversion on top of it. But remorse is that sense of wisdom meeting that memory and seeing the causes and conditions for why we did it, the ignorance of it, but feeling the pain of it. So freedom from remorse and, of course, granting to others in our field of presence the gift of fearlessness, knowing that we're not going to hurt one another. That's already a great thing.

Then on the next level, the next round of purification, the level of samadhi—in the time that there's samadhi in the mind, the level of kilesa or torment that is kept away, that's cleared out, is called the obsessive level of torment. Which I think you might be able to relate to. It's the level mostly of thought and mental energy. Whether it's greed or worry or aversion to something, upset comes up over and over. You know, just like, "Oh my God, why is this happening?"

I want to clarify samadhi. The best description I like is that it's collectedness of the dispersed mental energy. It doesn't have to be one-pointed on one object. Samadhi is a moment-to-moment mental factor, just like everything. Everything's moment to moment. So it's a time when the mental energy—you know how it's just going all over? You're sort of aware of the breath and you're sort of with sound and there's this thinking going on and there's some feelings in the back and you have that little memory. You could kind of say you're aware of it all, but it's not very collected. It's not really very satisfying somehow. A moment of samadhi is when all that mental energy is collected, unified. It's not squirting in all these different directions. That's what we call samadhi.

As with virya, samadhi is not necessarily wholesome. It can go either way. The mind could be extremely focused and totally driven by anger or greed. Let's pick greed. That can happen in life, of course. We get totally focused on how to get whatever it is we want. It can happen here too. If you found yourself totally absorbed in something you really need, or how to be first in line for lunch, or how you can scheme to get the extra pillow or something—totally stupid when you step outside of it. But at the time, it could completely absorb your mind, right? All the energy of that collectedness goes into being driven by greed.

This is not the path factor of samādhi. The path factor of samādhi is, of course, wholesome, meaning that in that moment there isn't greed, hatred, or confusion. So there's that sense of the unification of heart and mind.

It can manifest in what we call absorption states, where attention is unified on one particular object. You're coming back, coming back—whether it's ānāpāna, whether it's mettā phrases, whether it's a light, whatever it is. It can also be what Mahasi calls khaṇika samādhi, momentary samādhi, which is that steadiness, that collectedness of attention just in a moment, but the object could be changing moment to moment. The samādhi isn't about the object. It's about that quality of collectedness in the mind.

We can notice what samādhi feels like, just as we can notice what greed feels like. Samādhi has a stability. It doesn't mean that you don't get distracted or that greed or aversion doesn't ever slip in, but the mind doesn't get carried so far, and it comes back more easily. The stronger and more steady the samādhi becomes, the less the afflictions—greed, hatred, and delusion—arise. Really, in a way, that's one of the reasons everyone loves concentration.

I don't want to exactly equate samādhi and concentration, because we often talk about concentration as this one-pointed focus, getting really deep. And then we don't appreciate the quality of samādhi that can be present moment to moment as we move

around with changing objects—where the attention is collected, the mind and energy are collected, but the objects are changing. When the samādhi is strong and steady, it basically keeps the hindrances, the afflictions, away. They don't have room to slip in.

I remember one time I was on a long intensive retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita where you note every moment, every waking moment. The object of attention is changing, but that steadiness of connecting and noting, connecting and noting, from the moment you get up until the moment you go to sleep—that develops a really strong and stable kind of samādhi.

But I also really saw how that kind of samādhi is very state-dependent. I was noticing that when there was that steady noting, no greed was coming, no aversion was coming—just noticing: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting. And I was playing with it one day. I was noting seeing. The attention was connected to seeing something. Then I deliberately pulled back the attention. I stopped noting. I stopped letting it connect. I just let the mind hang for a minute.

Immediately—immediately—some affliction rushed in. I forget if it was wanting or aversion or what. I saw it right away. It didn't go anywhere. It was like, "Oh my gosh, all this work, and as soon as I stopped—boom—here they come again."

It's not always like that, but I remember that so clearly because I thought, "Somehow this isn't enough. This isn't enough."

And I know now that that samādhi, that steadiness, was strong, but it was suppressing the afflictions. And that's extremely useful. For one thing, it strengthens mind and faith. You get a sense of the brightness, the lightness, what a sense of purity of mind and heart can feel like. Sometimes people say they didn't even know—you don't even know how much garbage is in there. You don't even know that it's possible to have just a moment where nothing special is happening, but it feels so clean and so pure. Sometimes it feels happy. Sometimes it feels calm. But just to notice that.

Over time on retreats—we've done longer retreats with a lot of very steady concentration—there's a feeling of the consciousness being cleansed, moment after moment. It just feels like it's being... sometimes it felt scoured, a little bit rough. Sometimes just like it's being washed and cleared and cleansed, and you feel a lot brighter and purer for a while.

So that's the suppressive level—state-dependent, very useful, not to be confused with liberation.

Also, sometimes with different kinds of samādhi, very strong and wholesome pleasant states arise, like pīti, rapture, or sukha, a real comfort and ease in the body. Those are great. Those are fine. Appreciate them. But those are also states that come and go. They don't have to be there for the mind, the consciousness, the heart to be pure. When it's pure, all kinds of different wholesome states can arise. But they don't have to be present. There could just be calm, which is also a wholesome state.

And so then the third level, that of paññā, of wisdom. And this I really like. It's said to purify the latent underlying tendencies—the really subtle levels of these torments, these afflictions of our mind.

Many of you have talked about this in interviews, using different words. It's as if things are going fine, the mind is really quite mindful, and nothing is really bothering you. Then out of nowhere, seemingly, suddenly aversion arises. Suddenly greed. Suddenly "me, me, me" is just all over the place. And why?

This latent, underlying level is described as if it's a seed. There's not really a seed, okay? There's no concrete thing called a seed of greed sitting in any of us. This is a metaphor. But it's as if there's a seed, and when the latent tendencies are still existing, still coming up in our mind stream, when the conditions are appropriate, that seed can sprout.

That's why when the Buddha talks about different levels of awakening—or the absolute awakening of a Buddha where there are no more seeds—that's what is said: it's no longer possible for those seeds to sprout. They're gone. That would be nice! But for us to see, without any aversion but just seeing how that works, is kind of interesting.

And wisdom is said to be necessary because these latent underlying tendencies can't be seen through by thinking, by right intention, by samādhi, but only by wisdom—by really seeing those moments of insight where we understand some aspect of reality the way it is, whether it's impermanence or not-self, or just seeing the clinging come up, seeing it so clearly, and it goes. That's a moment of wisdom. In that moment, it's dissolved.

Just a little example. I use this a lot because it's so clear in my mind. One night I was driving down Lockwood Road on the way up to the retreat center to give a talk a couple of years ago. Not really late, but you know how sometimes you have exactly no extra minute to spare to get there in time. So I was driving down, and it's a kind of narrow driveway in the middle of the road. I was present, but not one hundred percent. A little bit of rushing back there that I didn't quite see. So those were the conditions.

And then there was some person—I don't know who—walking ever so slowly and mindfully in the middle of the driveway. Did they move when they heard the car? No. Slowly and mindfully in the middle of the driveway.

I was present enough that I saw, just in that moment, this shoot of aversion come up. Just like, "Oh, what do they think?" Like that. And it was so sudden, because there hadn't been any aversion present. And so strong and sudden that I just couldn't not see it. Wow, aversion—look at that!

And that was really a sense of that latent seed—not so latent, right—but the latent seed sprouting in that moment. It was met with... it was so obvious that awareness was right there. It wasn't even judging it, just kind of like, "Wow, look at that. Aversion's like that."

So in that moment, because it was met with mindfulness and wisdom—I wasn't judging the aversion, I wasn't owning it—oh, look at that, it went right... immediately disappeared. That's a simple example of how when there's mindfulness with wisdom, it takes care of things. In that moment, aversion was not being fed.

That's the purification of paññā, of wisdom. Seeing clearly with understanding. Oh, aversion arises due to these conditions. It isn't personal. You see it, the conditions change, it's gone. And it's not like it went back down underground, working here to come up again. That's an inaccurate assumption. It was gone. Another time, another aversion will come, sure. But that one was gone.

And that's really—you get a sense—that's the purification of wisdom. And actually, that level is a lot of what we see on a silent intensive retreat. Until we've tuned into it on retreat, we might not notice it so much in our daily life. Believe me, it's happening. Like that was my daily life.

It happens in our daily life. But to kind of tune ourselves into all these different ways—how we act, how we focus our mind, how we notice and pay attention to what's happening—these are all aspects of purifying our heart and mind, of tuning into the possibility of living with a heart and mind that's free from clinging.

What I like about this template is that it includes the whole Eightfold Path. It's not just about meditation. In terms of skillful means, we're not just talking about meditation. Meditation, despite all the myriad different ways of meditating, is only one of the skillful means embedded in a path—a path of wisdom, a path of sīla, of non-harming conduct, always paying attention, a path of paying attention to our intentions, a path of generosity, a path of friendliness, of loving-kindness. All of these aspects of how we live our life are part of the skillful means of opening.

When we talk about an open heart, or often we use the phrase "gladdening the heart"—that sense of sensitivity, connectivity, of love—all of those are expressions in the moment of a pure-hearted mind. In that moment, it can show up in many different ways.

What I appreciate about how the Eightfold Path works, how this template works, is that each aspect of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, the purification, the wisdom that comes from them, serve as a kind of feedback loop. They keep strengthening each other. Just like with the Eightfold Path, we wouldn't start without some little piece of right view, of wisdom. Otherwise, we wouldn't even set foot on the path. We wouldn't even think there was a problem.

If I read to you, "beings are lost in pleasure and wanting pleasure, and freedom from suffering is freedom from clinging," and you thought, "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. I'm out of here. You're right, I want pleasure. I love pleasure. I'm going for pleasure because that makes me happy"—you wouldn't be sitting here listening to me talk about this. You'd be out there looking for pleasure until finally you saw it's not working, and then you'd come back in again.

That initial wisdom leads to our meditating, leads to samādhi, leads then to how we act in the world. That leads back to deeper wisdom. And it keeps cycling and cycling. It opens up our faith. It opens us up to greater purity, really, in all the different levels. And we just start where we are—on the meditation retreat, off the meditation retreat, doing your yogi job, whatever. We start where we are in that moment. What skillful means will help to starve the torment if it's present, help to feed non-clinging?

This is a story I love of St. Francis, because to me it's inspiring in how, from the story, he started where he was before he was a saint. When he was just Francis living in Assisi as a young man, he was the son of a very wealthy merchant. In the couple of biographies I've read, when he was a young grown man, late teens or early twenties, he was kind of a wild guy—rich, hanging out with a lot of other rich, wild young men. They basically partied and drank and chased women, I guess like current-day rock stars or something. That's how he was, pretty wild. It's not how I ever imagined St. Francis would have started. I think of him as just popping out as St. Francis from the time he's a baby, but not so.

In this story, at that time there were a lot of people in Europe with leprosy, now called Hansen's disease. People who had leprosy were forced by the different townships, the different governments, to live in hospitals or homes—probably not very well taken care of—on the outside of the city, so they wouldn't be among the townspeople. People were really scared because it was contagious; they didn't know how you got it.

They were also disgusted by how people looked with it. So people with leprosy had to live outside the city, and whenever they were walking on a road, they had to always be ringing a bell, so that anyone walking or riding their horse along could hear the bell and avoid them. That's where that phrase comes from—"Are you treating me like a leper?" Completely like you're disgusting, ring a bell so I don't ever have to see you.

And St. Francis was like that too. He was really afraid and disgusted by anyone with leprosy, afraid to even get near them.

The thing that touches me is how he started where he was. Who knows what motivated him, because this was before he had his vision of Jesus speaking to him from the cross, before he moved into great devotion. But something started him. He knew he had to break down his barriers, his fear, his self-centeredness.

So he started one time when he heard someone ringing the bell while he was riding by on his horse. He threw some alms, some money down on the ground for the person. That was the start. Then another time, he managed to get off his horse and hand the money hand to hand, which for him was huge—just to touch someone. And from there, he moved on to really looking the person in the eye, kissing his hand, and then going down to do volunteer work in the place where the lepers lived. That's where he started, and he turned into St. Francis.

We don't know where we need to start. We don't know how it's going to unfold. But I think it's important not to have a hierarchy, not to think that somehow the subtlety of deep samādhi is better than the purification of watching our speech and our actions. All of it, all of the different ways work. In any moment, any skillful means arises out of a heart and mind that's pure and feeds the non-clinging, feeds the non-aversion.

When we're not paying attention—this is a phrase the Buddha uses a lot, feeding and starving—when we're just not really noticing what's going on and just acting, like that example I gave of greed and concentration where we're totally focused on getting what we want for half a day, we're feeding greed. That's basically throwing another log on the fire. "Oh, I could get it that way. Yeah, throw on another log." And that place where the pleasant fantasies feel good—"Let's go for another one"—feeding greed. "I am right. They are wrong. I should be angry"—feeding anger. Not with judgment, but just looking and seeing how this happens.

How one experiences in any particular moment the heart-mind of non-clinging—it can respond or show up in a situation in many different ways. I'm saying this because I know my mind, and I don't think it's alone, has a really amazing capability of taking anything and saying, "Okay, now that's how it is. This is how it should feel. And everything else isn't right. It should feel like that."

I know we often—when I was talking the other morning, some of you were here—about how sometimes with mindfulness we conflate it, we include other qualities and think of mindfulness as always precise. That's what good mindfulness is, for example. And it doesn't have to be. Or we think the purified heart and mind, we experience it maybe most frequently or most noticeably in a state of absorption or deeper concentration. And so we think, "Well, the purified heart and mind means always calm, or always a lot of sukha, or always that glitzy brightness of absorption." Just know that's limited.

The heart and mind of non-clinging just means the citta, the consciousness, the heart-mind. Citta is translated as "heart and mind" into English. In Pali there's not that distinction. The moment of awareness, of consciousness, just means it's not clouded by greed, by hatred, by confusion, by any of the suffering states. So it's clear. Any of the various wholesome states could be there. There could be pīti, rapture. There could be sukha. Or not. There could be calmness. There could be a sense of peace. There could be a sense of joy. There could be equanimity.

Just simple, calmed-out equanimity and clarity. It could be a kind of simple quietness that then responds differently depending on the situation the mind is faced with in a particular moment. This is what the Tibetans call the emptiness that's ceaselessly responsive.

Often we talk about this with people on retreat—that space where people say their heart has really opened, or they're feeling really sensitive and connected. We use different techniques to gladden the mind, gladden the heart. And how does that show up? Often in response to a situation.

So if you're out walking and you see a little bird that's struggling or suffering, the sense of compassion will just spring up naturally. You feel that connectedness. If you see a bird that's just flying and looks happy, a sense of friendliness, of metta comes up, or mudita, appreciative joy. Or often you see some complicated thing going on and you don't know what's happening. It's just equanimity. Okay, that's what's happening.

Like today I was walking down the driveway and there were five or six turkeys—the big adult one and the babies, though they're still pretty big. And there was a cat lurking. The cat was a third the size of the smallest turkeys. The turkeys were pretty much ig-

noring the cat, but the cat was lurking around and charging at them, trying to... And the turkeys would react, and then the cat would back off, and then they would just ignore it. They were walking all around it. It was kind of fun to watch.

At first I thought, should I do something? I've got to save the turkeys. Then I said, come on. They're taking care of themselves. The cat's taking care of itself. I don't know what needs to happen. There was just a sense that this is life living itself. We keep on going.

So ceaselessly responsive, it shows up in all of these ways. All of them are manifestations of a heart, a mind, citta, that is free from clinging, free from aversion and confusion. But we don't need to hold on to any of these particular manifestations as "this is what I need, this is how it should feel." No. See right away—we're back in clinging.

All the skillful means and different techniques of meditation, except for the Brahmaviharas, aren't meant to make a particular state of mind come. I set aside the Brahmaviharas because of course in practicing metta you're cultivating the state of mind of metta, practicing karuna you're cultivating the state of mind of karuna. But still, in the bigger picture, we don't hold on to metta or karuna, because when a real moment of metta or compassion comes, it can only come from a heart and mind that's free from clinging. Otherwise it isn't really metta. There's still that me-ing about it, that limitation.

I'm mentioning these just so we know not to cling to manifestation, but then to see that all of our skillful means might show up with different states yet share the same quality. The goal, you could say, the aspiration, is really uprooting the seeds, freeing the heart and mind more and more of even the tendency for confusion and clinging. But what skillful means share is that you forget about the goal. They are very pragmatic. They express that quality of pure heart and mind right now, in the middle of it.

And that's really how we can evaluate whether the technique we choose in a particular moment is skillful or not. It's not like there's a list saying these are skillful and these aren't. It's really about what it's feeding and what it's starving.

In very simple terms: you're all caught up, just lost in fear. You're noticing fear. It's intense, but you have a sense of "fear is like this." We don't like it, but fear is fear. Fear doesn't change into not-fear. It's fear. But you have a sense that you're not feeding the fear. You're allowing it to be, and there's awareness. That's skillful means. Okay, keep watching it. Keep noticing it.

Another time, same story, similar fear. The energy is lower. The mindfulness is more distracted. And the fear is getting stronger and stronger. The stories are getting stronger and stronger. And you really start to feel out of control. Maybe not so skillful, because

it's not really mindfulness anymore—it's feeding the fear. Maybe more helpful then to get up, go outside, open the senses to something else: seeing, hearing. Redirect the attention. That's not an avoidance out of aversion. That's a movement of skillful means. And you'll know it because then you'll notice that the fear goes down, and either calm or balance or mindfulness is fed. The next day it could be totally turned around again. So it's always about what's happening right now. You do the best you can, you notice what happens.

I want to offer something the Buddha often talks about as a skillful means, which is really working with what you could call the qualities of devotion or gratitude. But again, I want to emphasize that it's not to get somewhere other than we are.

This is from Dogen, the very famous Zen master: "Truth is not far away. It is ever present. It's not something to be attained since not one of your steps can lead away from it. The practice of meditation is not a method for the attainment of realization. It is enlightenment itself."

Just to approach how we practice, how we live our life, how we're meeting our mind in any particular moment, what skillful means we're drawing on—with that attitude. Not to get to some goal, but to express awakening itself in this moment.

The Buddha talks in one sutta about directed and undirected meditation, and I want to show how this moves into a contemplation on gratitude or devotion. In this sutta, he's actually talking to Ananda, and Ananda has been telling him about some nuns who are doing really good practice. So just so you know, this sutta is about the nuns too. Then he's talking to Ananda—the nuns aren't there—and he says, "For one who is abiding contemplating body as body..." You're familiar with this line from the Satipatthana Sutta, the four foundations of mindfulness, which is the classic sutta on how to do mindfulness meditation from the Buddha. The four foundations are the body; vedana, feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral; the citta, the state of mind, the quality of mind; and dhammas, which is a whole list including the hindrances and the four noble truths and the qualities of mind.

He goes through all four, but I'll just work with the body here. "For one who is abiding contemplating body as body, with the mind clear and balanced, it can happen that a bodily object arises, a fever in the body." Bhikkhu Bodhi says that this means a fever of kilesa, a fever of torment in relation to the body, or a sluggishness of mind. It can happen that these arise. And either that fever in the body, that fever of kilesa in the mind, causes the mind to scatter outward—that's the Buddha's words. Either we get completely lost and distracted, or we scatter outward into reactivity to the kilesa, to the torment. Basically, it's no longer mindfulness. We're lost.

So he says at that point, the nun or the bhikkhu should direct her mind to some inspiring sign. What he means by an inspiring sign is to place the mind on an object that inspires confidence, that inspires inspiration, that inspires devotion. This is when you're in the middle of a sitting, for example, or a walking, or whatever you're doing. And it's not just that you don't like what's happening—let us be clear. It's that the mind is really caught in a fever of kilesa, and the more we try to meditate on that particular object, the more the kilesa is being fed. So you deliberately direct the attention to an inspiring sign, to some image, to some object that inspires confidence or devotion.

The example he gives in another sutta is recollection of the Buddha. That may not be the one for us, but in this sutta he says you recollect the Tathagata—that's the Buddha. We could imagine really bringing to mind, in this state, if the Buddha inspires you, great. Maybe there's some teacher you've had, or someone you know or don't know, who really inspires confidence in some aspect of the pure heart and mind of awakening. Maybe it inspires loving kindness, or...

the truth of compassion in you. Maybe it inspires this sense of onward leading. I know people talk so much about the Dalai Lama because he inspires this so much in people.

I remember quite a few years ago, it was the early nineties, I went with some friends to Nepal, and we spent some time with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who's dead now, who was really one of the main Dzogchen teachers—a very revered and respected Dzogchen master. He was wonderful. I didn't spend that much time with him, just ten or fifteen days. I took refuge with him and all. But taking refuge with him, I didn't even realize it at the time, but it made a connection in my heart and my mind, a kind of inspiration. I didn't think about it so much.

But I was on retreat quite a few years later—he was dead by then—and I was on retreat here doing walking meditation. I forget what was going on, but somehow I needed some sense of inspiration. And somehow, I didn't even consciously direct my mind, he just came up. And it brought up such a sense of gratitude and brightness and purity and appreciation and basically love of the Dhamma. It was palpable. It was amazing, actually. It was so inspiring. And not to hold on to that as a happy experience, but the whole point of it is basically to feed the purification of mind so we can then go back to the meditation.

This is what the Buddha says when you do that, when you recollect the Tathagata: "At any time when a noble disciple is recollecting the Tathagata, her mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind heads straight. When the mind is headed straight, the disciple gains a sense of the

Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease, and then the mind becomes collected."

That's the same thing he said in the other sutta I was reading. He goes through the same progression where basically the mind, or we would say the heart, opens to gratitude, to appreciation, to goodness, to faith in the Dhamma, to loving-kindness—whichever it is. And then as it goes through those phases, we're no longer struggling with the kilesas. The heart, the mind is calm again, collected again.

And then he says, "One then reflects: the purpose for which I directed my mind has been accomplished." It's really a very specific, skillful means. So now I withdraw the directed attention from that object of devotion, that object of appreciation. It's not denigrating or putting down the appreciation, but saying even that, we don't just hang out there because it feels good. It's really because it's purifying in that moment. We're lost in kilesas. We can't see through them with mindfulness of that particular object, so we switch objects. It's great to consciously bring in what opens the mind and heart.

I would say for some people, a few minutes of loving-kindness meditation or compassion meditation does that same thing. It moves the attention. It stops feeding the aversion or the greed and starts feeding the openness of unconditional love, of unconditional compassion. And then when that's accomplished—in other words, the mind has stopped feeding unwholesomeness and is now feeding wholesomeness—we can go back to moment-to-moment mindfulness. That's directed meditation.

And then he says "undirected," which is basically just moment-to-moment noticing whatever arises. He understands it's not focused on before or after. I'm just abiding, observing. The body is body. Ardent, fully aware, mindful, and I am content. Just moment-to-moment noticing.

I want to say a little bit more about the gratitude and devotion, the ways it's been helpful. I want to give you the other examples the Buddha uses in the sutta as objects that can help. When you develop this recollection of the Buddha, he says, you can do it while you're walking, while you're standing, while you're sitting, while you're lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children. Basically saying: no excuse that you're too busy, you can't do it.

It's something we can do no matter what.

Other recollections include recollecting the Dhamma. For me personally, that really inspires me more than the Buddha, or as I say, particular teachers. We can recollect the Sangha, the Sangha of the Blessed One's disciples. It might be other people we know who have inspired us.

These next two are interesting because I don't think we do them. You can recollect your own virtues, your own wholesome, kind behavior. This is actually something that's accessible to all of us, and we really rarely do it. We think of that as an ego thing. But recollecting with that sense of the purity, the wholesomeness of our virtues and of our past behavior—that's really a way of gladdening the heart, brightening the mind, and purifying the consciousness at a particular moment. Similarly, you can recollect your own generosity. That's also very lovely. It brings happiness.

And you can see, you can feel when you're feeding the purity, the brightening of the heart. You can feel when it kind of switches over to "Yeah, I really was generous, wasn't I?" Then you notice, oh, we're not feeding purity anymore—we're feeding "me." Okay, put it down. It feels worlds different when we're paying attention.

I want to say something about how this devotion works, this gratitude to beings, our gratitude to Dhamma, our appreciation of our own goodness—it's not about the person. As the Buddha said to someone who kept looking at him and wanting to be near him all the time, who said, "I need to see you. You're inspiring me so much." The Buddha responded, "The holy life is not about seeing the Buddha's person or being with the Tathagata's person. One who sees the Dhamma sees me."

So when he's talking about recollecting the qualities of himself, he's not saying, "Hey, come hang out with me. That's really great. I'm giving you shaktipat." He's not saying that. He's saying it brightens the heart, it brightens the mind, it opens us out of self-concern and self-interest into vastness, into the surrender to the unknown, into just that sensitivity of presence.

This is how Tulku Urgyen describes it: "The present moment method for becoming quickly accustomed to the unfabricated state of awareness is to have devotion to enlightened beings and compassion to unenlightened sentient beings. Devotion and compassion are both love. And in the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly. If in that moment, the moment of love, you can look inwardly, it is like seeing the sun unobscured by clouds. The nature of emptiness is nakedly manifest."

Yet, he says, in the beginning we need the fabricated devotion—consciously thinking of someone, of the Dhamma—because the natural, unfabricated, naturally arising devotion and our uncontrived compassion does not occur immediately. Obviously, we're not

just walking around like that. So great, use the fabricated, what the Buddha is talking about. Consciously bring to mind beings, your actions. Allow the heart and mind by itself to contemplate the goodness, to open through gratitude, through devotion. And just see that empty awareness—the heart, the mind that's purified in that moment—naturally arising together with love, with compassion. They're really both wonderful.

In some ways, I think the bhakti path, which they use more in the Tibetan tradition and Hindu tradition, places a lot of emphasis on finding a particular guru and doing much of the work through total devotion to that guru. I know from standing outside, you might wonder, "How can you see all the faults of that person?" And it's not about the person. It's about opening up that channel of unconditional devotion, of inspiration, of love, of compassion, of trust—that then allows us to be so present, so pure in heart and mind, that we notice, we recognize, and we trust the moments of that citta, of the mind, of the heart, that is free, that is pure.

There are so many moments of that in all of our days. So I'm talking about all the ways to notice it, to feed it, to create it. But also just notice all the times when it's already like that, when the mind, the citta, is not clouded by greed, by hatred, by confusion. And just noticing that is feeding it.

Notice all the different manifestations. Don't try to limit it. Just open into not knowing. As soon as we need to know "it's like this," we know that's wrong. Just being open to discover—through devotion, through compassion, through mettā, through moment-to-moment mindfulness, through concentration, through taking a walk, through looking at the mind. Sitting, walking, standing, lying down, eating, working—not with aversion but with love. With surrender. With really appreciating the infinite possibility that's available here and now, to all of us.

CHAPTER 25

The Roots of Self-Judgment

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this talk from the Forest Refuge, Carol Wilson offers a penetrating exploration of self-judgment as a form of dosa (aversion) rooted in our fundamental misunderstanding of the First Noble Truth. She traces how aversion works moment-to-moment—the pulling back from unpleasant vedanā (feeling tone), the gap where delusion enters, and the proliferating papañca (mental proliferation) that follows. Wilson emphasizes that whatever triggers our fear, anger, or self-criticism is always arising in response to something happening right now, even when we're lost in memories or future projections.*
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> *Wilson examines the three levels of dukkha—dukkha-dukkha (actual pain), vipariṇāma-dukkha (the unsatisfactoriness of constant change), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (perpetual incompleteness)—noting that understanding dukkha means accepting rather than transcending it. She points out how self-judgment flourishes when we hold unconscious views about how practice "should" be, creating idealized standards that generate aversion when reality doesn't match. The talk explores how wrong view solidifies the mind, filtering perceptions to confirm our negative self-assessments.*
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> *Practically, Wilson suggests that when caught in self-judgment, stopping to ask "what's happening now?" often reveals an underlying difficult experience we unconsciously avoided. She shares Ajahn Sumedho's teaching that mettā means witnessing the unpleasant without creating anything around it. The talk concludes with a liberating perspective from a Burmese practitioner: when practice doesn't match expectations, simply "never mind"—no problem, no self-judgment, just returning to what's happening now.*

So tonight I wanted to talk about the habit of self-judgment, which of course takes us into aversion, which means we also need to talk about the first noble truth.

I want to start by talking about how aversion can be experienced in a moment in our practice—just very simple, moment-to-moment, experientially. The function of how a moment of aversion works isn't going to be news to anybody here, I know that.

I'm using "aversion" to translate the Pali word *dosa*, which covers a whole range: aversion, ill will, irritation, fear—all the kinds of retreating and pulling back in the face of the unpleasant. I'm using aversion as a cover-all for those different mental states.

Very simply, when we can meet a moment of aversion arising in any of its forms in our mind, in or out of practice, this is what we can see happening. Basically, it's said that the habit of aversion, anger, irritation, or fear arises in the mind when sense contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental contact like thoughts, moods, emotions—has the feeling experience, the *vedana*, of being unpleasant. Although sometimes when it's neutral, some people actually experience a little aversion too.

The thing that's really fascinating to me, and that you can get really interested in and explore, is that whatever form the aversion is taking in your experience in a particular moment, it's a pulling back that's arising in response to some sense contact that's happening right now. Always right now, in this moment. Any sound, a sight, a smell, a thought—it's unpleasant, and without awareness, or even sometimes with awareness when the unpleasantness is strong, the way aversion works is that the attention, the connectedness, just pulls back. It's like your finger touches a hot stove—without even thinking, you flinch back, you pull back.

In moment-to-moment mindfulness, what I notice is that when there's an unpleasant sound that I don't like, the attention disconnects and pulls away just in that flash of a second. That's the momentary experience of aversion, of pulling back. It could be just a little unpleasant sound, and there's just a slight aversion. Or it could be huge fear coming up—fear about a sensation that projects into the future. We get caught in all this story. But the fear is just arising in response to one of the six sense contacts happening right now.

Even if you have a memory or enormous grief or guilt or fear or sorrow—if you're really caught in a lot of aversion or fear about some past really intense memory that comes up—we can easily get lost in the story, in the past, and it feels huge. The thing we can always know is it's only arising in response to an experience that's happening right now. Huge guilt isn't being triggered by ten years ago; it's being triggered by something arising in this moment. It's a memory, maybe, but the memory is a thought happening now. It's a sensation that reminds us of our past, but that sensation is happening now. The reminding, the thought, is happening now.

I emphasize this because I've found it so enormously helpful when the fear or the sorrow seems like it's really getting out of control—that I've got to do something, it's so much, it's huge, my life, what am I going to do, the future. Wait—what's actually happening right now? Sometimes we can get there, sometimes we can't. Sometimes fear is all we can do, and that's great. At least the fear is happening now.

I'm starting out this way because I wanted to give us a sense that whether it's a very tiny pulling back of aversion or something really huge, it's all that immediate withdrawing of attention, that disconnect from one of the six sense contacts. It's unpleasant, happening now.

How it goes from just a little to huge is that in that flinching back, that pulling back, there's a space that says, "Delusion, please come in right here." When there's not connectedness, when the attention isn't just connected—"Ah, unpleasant memory, I hate it," but seeing it—okay, that's clear seeing. It's unpleasant. We hate it. Hating feels like this. The memory is this. This is what's happening now. No problem. You might not like it, but no problem.

But when the attention flinches back, pulls back, in that moment awareness can't have wisdom in it. It can't see or recognize clearly what's happening. And in that space, which doesn't have to be very big or long—huge, huge. One thought leads to another, to an association, to a memory, none of which we're quite noticing.

The fear has us down the road for the next ten years. And it's just feeding on itself, getting really huge. And the more this fear—fear is like retreating aversion. Anger is forward going. It all retreats. And then anger is like lashing out. Fear is pulling away more. They're both aversion.

But in the sense of this gap, this space, you could say, the habits of the mind—which is what they call *papañca*—it just kind of runs wild. "But if this happens, then that could happen. And what about that last time? And this reminds me of when I was in the third grade and how my father used to treat me." And this really—you're back there. It's huge. And then the aversion just feeds, the thoughts feed on themselves. We're further and further removed, so to speak.

I mean, we didn't really go anywhere, right? We understand that. It's always right here. But in terms of recognizing accurately what's happening, we're further and further removed from being able to just meet this moment with mindfulness. We're getting caught in the aversion spinning itself, in the fear spinning itself.

You know what I mean? It's like Sayadaw U Pandita says—it's like a cow. You know how the cow chews its cud and then it swallows it down and then it regurgitates it up again and chews on it and chews on it and chews on it? Well, when you're caught in an aversion state, it's like that. It calms down. Then a thought: "Yeah, but what about..." And it comes back up and we jump on the train and go, go, go.

So delusion—I mean, aversion really comes from an essential delusion, which I'll get into in a minute. But then when mindfulness doesn't recognize the aversion, the source of the aversion, or can't come in and say "what's happening right now" because of the disconnect, it just kind of feeds delusion. And delusion gets further and further along because we can't recognize or discern accurately. Then the *papañca*, the thoughts just filling up our mind and the world, get further and further afield. And the delusion increases—delusion in the sense of just not recognizing accurately what's happening.

So the essential delusion with greed, with aversion—of course, but here we're talking about aversion—it's kind of the misunderstanding, or maybe the unconscious thought, the pulling back, that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience. The loud, unpleasant sound—like our whole body flinches back and tightens up, as if that helps anything, but somehow as if we're trying to hold ourselves separate. Or: "This shouldn't even be happening." Or: "I should be able to do something to stop this from happening. Clearly, it's a mistake." Or complete, total denial that it's even happening at all. "This isn't happening, and there's no—by the way—aversion in my mind either. We're just going along happy, happy."

All of these are different aspects of the delusion.

Self-judging—how that feeds in here, I mean, it's obvious. Self-judging is a form of aversion. Negativity. Pulling back. Judging. Not liking what's happening, based on these other delusions, and then turning it against ourselves.

So an unpleasant experience arises. And then there might be a thought: "This shouldn't be happening," or "I'm no good." That's already the delusion coming in. Say you're with the breath. Suddenly you're lost in thought. You recognize it. And there's an unpleasant feeling—you don't even see that. Then there's the thought, "This shouldn't be happening." We're pulled back already from the unpleasant feeling. And instead of just noticing—oh, lost in thought, unpleasant feeling—it's: "This shouldn't be happening. What did they say? Let me remember. Let me read this book. And maybe I should listen to that talk."

And let me try and get back. And the mind is just pumping itself with more thoughts and reactions. What's happening now?

So this self-judging just keeps going—it's the way that papañca, that proliferating way of thinking, spreads out. And it takes the particular story: I'm wrong, I'm bad, this shouldn't be happening.

But the main source, in my opinion, of the delusion altogether that gets us lost in the aversion—that the aversion even arises as a habit—the habit is based in not really deeply understanding, in ourselves, all the Four Noble Truths, but particularly the First Noble Truth of Dukkha. So I want to talk a little bit about that.

As you know, when the Buddha talked about the Four Noble Truths, he said the first truth, dukkha, is to be understood. Not to be transcended, not to be changed, but to be understood. And personally, I find in my whole life of practice—of course, many, many understandings, many aspects of reality—we just keep cycling through, seeing new levels of it, new subtleties, new understandings. And with this First Noble Truth of Dukkha, that continues to be the case for me. And each time I reconnect or understand or open to how it is a little more, the experience is one of lightness, of more freedom, of happiness.

So just to again remind us what this noble truth is, in my current understanding: the word dukkha is often translated, and I don't think so accurately, as "suffering." This is where people who don't really know much about Buddhism get the rap that Buddhism means life is suffering—First Noble Truth, right?

Now, I don't know how it is for you, but for me—and I know I'm not alone—the word *suffering*, I can hardly think that word without some subtle feeling coming along with it of a slight aversion, a slight negativity. And dukkha, actually the truth of dukkha, is not about engendering or having anything to do with aversion, or judgment, or even necessarily anything unpleasant.

So dukkha, just the word—this is from the book by Anālayo about the four foundations, one of his little footnotes—he says there are two different ways in Pali the word dukkha could be broken down. Both come to a similar meaning. The *du* part means difficulty. In the first way of breaking it down, the second part would be *kha*. And one meaning of that is like the hole in the wheel, like in the old carts—the hole where the axle would go through. So that's *kha*. It means the axle hole is difficult; it doesn't fit properly. And so from that, he comes to define dukkha as meaning disharmony, friction. Like every time the wheel's turning, it doesn't really work right. It rubs, it rubs. I can relate to that as dukkha.

The other meaning—again, the *du* is difficulty or badness, and instead of *kha*, they take it from the root *ṭhā*, which means standing. So it means standing with difficulty, an uneasiness, an uncomfortableness. And so in that way, maybe one closer word that we often use rather than suffering is *unsatisfactoriness*—the basic unsatisfactoriness that runs through our lives. Unsatisfactory doesn't mean, of course, always unpleasant or painful. It's not just suffering.

As you know, the Buddha talks about dukkha as being birth, old age, disease, and death; being separated from what we love; being together with what we don't love; the five aggregates of clinging. But there are other ways he talks about it too.

Sometimes he breaks it into three levels. One level being dukkha-dukkha, or actual pain—actual physical, emotional pain. That's definitely unpleasant. The second is viparinṇāma-dukkha, which is the dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness, of constant change—pleasant to unpleasant to neutral, and the constant change. That's the being separated from what we love, being brought together with what we don't love, just the fact that everything is unreliable. It doesn't mean everything's unpleasant or suffering in the terms of how we think of suffering. And in fact, it includes the pleasant, the beautiful.

This is interesting if we want to really understand the First Noble Truth of Dukkha—that it doesn't just mean the stuff we don't like. There's one sutta where the Buddha was talking, and Sāriputta was there. And Sāriputta, in hearing the Buddha talking about this, became completely enlightened. He was already partly there. The Buddha was talking about vedanā, feeling tone. And he said it in this one line: "Whatever is felt, whatever is felt is included within dukkha." So not just the unpleasant. Whatever is felt is included within dukkha.

So dukkha means unsatisfactory, unreliable, because always changing. And then there's the third type, sankhara dukkha, which I like the way Bhikkhu Bodhi described it as perpetual incompleteness. Insubstantiality. Sankhara being formation—stuff's always coming together and going apart, coming together and going apart.

Now, within this understanding, it doesn't mean every moment is suffering. It's all dukkha, yes, but it doesn't mean, "Oh, that's beautiful, but it's just going to go to hell with it. Life is dukkha." That's aversion. The First Noble Truth is not aversion. That's the Second Truth—the cause of our suffering, aversion and clinging. The First is just kind of, "Hey, this is how things are."

If dukkha is to be understood, the Buddha's not saying understand this so you can be even more miserable than you already are. He didn't come saying, "I'm here to increase your suffering. Read this and weep." He's really saying that understanding dukkha brings freedom. It brings peace of heart.

And I know for me this is true, and I know for many people I've talked to, that one of the things that first lit me up when I began practicing and hearing Buddhist teachings—and it wasn't until after I'd practiced some that I started to even get the teachings—but

hearing about dukkha was like this huge relief. Because growing up in a kind of middle-class American white culture, you're always pretending everything's okay, basically. You go out and do things and it's all this struggle, and you're trying to have a nice time.

I remember this story. I went with a friend to a sauna somewhere half an hour from here. We were tired. We didn't want to go. We get in the car. We drive. It's freezing out. We're driving in the ice. We're stressed. We get in the sauna, separate saunas. Ah, fine, you know, for a couple minutes. Then you start sweating. Then you're hot. Then you're too hot. Then you go out and take a shower. It's too cold. Then you go back in, and it's nice for a second. Then it's too hot. Then you come out. You stink. You wash. You get in the car, drive back in the rain. And you go, "Wow, that was great!"

You know, that's how half my life was lived. Everything's great! But how come so much of it wasn't great? And if you say that to someone, they respond, "What's the matter with you? You're just a downer. It's wonderful. You're so lucky."

So understanding dukkha is just this: there are beautiful things, there are wonderful things—they're going to change. There's difficult stuff—it's going to change. It's always coming together and going apart, coming together and going apart. Understanding all of that comes just from seeing how it is—not sitting and thinking and making a list, but bringing in our awareness, meeting the moment-to-moment experience, like I described with that sauna.

If I'm just present with all of that, I'll notice, "Oh, it's pleasant. Now it's not." But it's no problem. I'm not needing it to be pleasant to be okay. I'm not going to the sauna to increase my moments of pleasantness, and if it's not pleasant, something's wrong, so we deny it. When we see how it actually is, clinging doesn't have to come. Aversion doesn't come.

That's just how dukkha is. It's to be understood.

The Buddha often used this way of talking about exploring—seeing the gratification, seeing the danger, and seeing the escape in different aspects of experience. He talks about this in terms of the world, and I want to read this short passage because I think it's important to realize that in terms of dukkha, the first noble truth, it includes gratification. It includes beauty. It includes appreciating nature. I'm adding that interpretation, but the point is that this isn't about trying to deny the pleasant or the lovely and just seeing, "No, it's all bad, it all stinks." It's not that. It's seeing the gratification, understanding it, and then understanding the limits of it, the danger of it, and the escape.

He's talking about when he was still a bodhisatta, and it occurred to him: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? Then it occurred to him: whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification. And that's true—it is a gratification. That the world is impermanent, bound up with dukkha, subject to change—this is the danger in the world. The removal, the abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world.

I think that's really important. He's not denying joy, pleasure, or beauty. Just understanding it's only just so much. It's going to change. When there's no desire and lust to hold on to that joy, that beauty, it's not a problem anymore. That's the escape. It doesn't mean we have to kill beauty or kill joy. But it means understanding.

Understanding these different levels of dukkha—and I don't just mean on the intellectual level—this is, in my case, why it keeps going deeper and deeper. Because of course it's in our own experience, and then when we look out in the world, just at the level of suffering, it's huge. At the level of the constant coming together and going apart, the insubstantiality, nowhere we can take a firm stand and hold on to it—in the material world, in our thoughts, in our views, in how things feel, in your meditation practice, God knows. Seeing that, really when we understand that cellularly, and we all have moments of that in practice, that's when the aversion, that's when the clinging, lets go, is seen through, or doesn't even arise.

In my experience, the basic delusion that aversion, fear, and the sense of self that comes with them arises from is on deep, habitual levels—not totally getting, understanding, accepting the fact of these aspects of dukkha. That guess what? There's no way we can hold ourselves separate from the unpleasant. There's no way. It just gets better and better and better. Back and forth, up and down, in and out, together, apart, endlessly, endlessly. That's the sankhara dukkha—endlessly. So that's the level of delusion, the big picture.

Now I'm going to come back to the moment-to-moment picture again in our practice. I'll keep going back and forth.

In the moment, something unpleasant comes up. What feeds it? What keeps the aversion going? Aversion comes—what are some of the things that keep it going? Where do we move from just noticing an unpleasant sound, aversion arising like this, and that's the next object, no problem? I'm not saying it shouldn't happen. It's no problem. But what's the difference between that and—you all know what I mean—running around here, even if you're going slow, but running around like a nut filled with aversion and fear? What can I do? How can I fix it?

There are a few things. I'm just throwing out different things to notice. One thing the Buddha said—one of the things that feeds aversion, feeds ill will actually—is unwise attention to the unpleasant or repugnant aspect of an experience. For example, you're angry at someone. Someone here did something really inconsiderate and stupid, and they're a jerk. Every time you see them, every time they walk by, you're just sitting there. You can't not look at them.

You look at them, and every time you look at them, it gets you more angry. How can they just walk around like that when they acted like that? The more you look, the angrier you get.

Thich Nhat Hanh uses a wonderful example for this. If you have a tooth that's just a little bit rough, a little hole in the tooth, notice how you can't keep your tongue away from that little rough spot. The rest of your teeth are fine. You don't notice the rest of your teeth. But with that little rough spot, you're at it all day, and it just bugs you more and more and more. This is unwise attention to the unpleasant or repugnant aspect of an experience—not quite noticing what we're doing each time. It feeds another moment of aversion. And the first aversion maybe didn't completely go away. You know how the thought's gone, but we still feel a little tightness in the body. We think, "Oh, well, that's gone. Okay." Then we go back. And each time it's stronger and stronger, feeding on itself.

That's one way. Another way is getting really lost in the thoughts about, say, somebody who did something wrong. We're angry. It's unpleasant. We're judging them. We feel ill will. And we can get quite caught up in thinking, "But it's true. They did do a wrong thing." The same with fear: "But it's true. This might happen. It makes sense to be afraid of it." None of those are really noticing what's exactly happening, right? We get lost in the story. It's true. The fear is right.

And fear, particularly, is a very self-justifying emotion when we're not totally mindful of the fear itself. If you're sitting, like several people have said, sitting and really pretty quiet, and something happens—the breath changes, or some experience happens that's different from what we've experienced before—it's almost built in that fear comes shooting up right then. And if we're not right there with the fear, the mind almost thinks, "Well, because fear's here, that's proof that there's something wrong." The fear proves it. It's self-justifying.

Anger can be the same way. "But they did do something wrong, and my anger is justified because of that thing." It just becomes an endless loop until we bring the mindfulness: fear is like this, anger is like this. It's got nothing to do with what that person did. Nothing to do with what that person did. Everything to do with the mind reacting to unpleasant without mindfulness and wisdom and then getting lost in thoughts about it.

The third way that really feeds aversion is what I mentioned before: basic outright denial. Either that unpleasant isn't even happening—which we're actually amazingly adept at doing—or that there's any aversion at all.

A friend was telling me he was sitting the three-month retreat last year. This is somebody who has sat—I don't know how many three-month retreats. We're not talking about a neophyte here. And it's something we're all quite capable of doing. He was sitting in a sitting well into the retreat, and he said, "I felt really pretty mindful and present. I was just noticing, noting what happened, noticing the sensations in the body. And I thought, no, a little aversion came up and I really noticed that. And then I went back. It was just all gone." He got up and was walking to the—it was lunchtime, walking to lunch.

He thought he was being totally mindful. Got in the lunch line and was just overwhelmed with ill will and negativity towards the people, the food, everything. He was completely knocked back. He said, "Oh my gosh, there was this aversion going on in the background the whole time since that first little moment of aversion in the sitting. I just completely overlooked it. Completely."

So there's aversion happening, and you're just noting lifting, moving, placing, rising, falling, touching. And then as soon as it lets up a little bit, it's like you're shooting out: "I can't believe these stupid..." Oh my goodness. A little bit of aversion here. We're really good at that—or coding it all in wanting. Something unpleasant comes up and the mind just moves into wanting right away. We get sidetracked into the wanting. Or outright denial.

I have a friend in Switzerland. She used to cook at the retreat center in the mountains where I teach every year. In the mountains, the weather can change really rapidly. It can be beautifully clear in the morning, not a cloud in the sky. Suddenly at lunchtime a few clouds will come over, and by one o'clock you're having a huge thunderstorm. She came from a flat area of Switzerland where it wasn't like that.

She was telling me this: after three years in the mountains, she loved to lie in the sun in the garden when she wasn't cooking. She'd be lying in the sun, pristine blue sky, and suddenly a cloud would come, rain clouds would gather. And she'd just lie there saying, "No, this isn't happening. It's not going to turn into anything. It isn't happening."

That might sound silly, but check it out. Just check it out.

Resistance. Just that subtle tensing up, holding ourselves away from—no, this isn't happening. We know it's happening. It's not quite total denial, but we're holding ourselves away.

Often all of these are based on a view that we have, based on thought, based on our not really opening to, not really understanding and allowing the truth of dukkha, the radical nature of dukkha. Somewhere there's the view: this isn't supposed to be happening. This shouldn't be happening. If my practice—if I were doing my practice correctly—my mind wouldn't wander more today than it did yesterday. And I'm counting! If I were doing my practice correctly, I would be done with sleepiness by now. Not supposed to be happening.

So this unpleasant thing—we kind of tighten up, hold away, look at it out of the corner of our eye. This is disconnect. But we kid ourselves. "I'm waiting for this to go away, for the real thing to start happening." And the real thing is always a little bit better.

This is where self-judgment really gets a foothold and can start taking over. It's a view—really a wrong view—that operates to the level that we're not, in any particular moment, letting in, accepting, seeing and understanding dukkha. Whatever form of change, of unpleasantness or suffering, of just the insubstantiality, the perpetual incompleteness—when we're not quite recognizing, "Oh yeah, this is how it is."

I don't know if you've noticed, but the mind has a tendency to set up a view, which we don't even recognize as a view. Often it's not even in clear words. But it's essentially: this is how things are, this is what's supposed to happen. In our whole lives we do it, but really, really big time in meditation practice. This is what's supposed to happen in a sitting. This is what's supposed to happen in a walking. This is the direction my practice is supposed to move. This is what it's done before, and that's the right thing.

What's happening now isn't the right thing. It's the wrong thing. And somehow I've got to take it and move it and twist it and get it to the right thing, which is getting better and better and moving in the right direction and generally more and more pleasant. It sounds so silly when I say it, doesn't it?

With self-judgment, something arises that's unpleasant. It could just be a jagged breath. It could be a thought that's unpleasant, and we don't notice it's unpleasant. It moves into, "Oh, I'm thinking too much." But really, that was delusion coming because we didn't notice it was just an unpleasant thought.

With self-judgment, we start to notice the unpleasant, and then the view, the thought comes: "This isn't right. I can't do this," or "I always..." or whatever way your mind says it. And it solidifies into a view. "It's supposed to be like this. I can't do it. It's like that." And then that self-judgment, which is just a form of aversion, while it's in the mind, colors all our perceptions. It slants what we notice. When you're really in the lens of self-judgment, I know how it feels. I can recognize it now. It has a feeling. The thoughts, which are usually not too subtle, even though we're quite able to miss them, we think.

"You're doing it wrong." Is that self-judgment? "No, no, that's just... I'm trying to have some skillful means here. Tighten up. Do it right. Get rid of that thought. This isn't self-judgment. That's just, you know, I've heard the teacher say that, and that's how you practice." It's not—when we really see it.

So learning to recognize the thoughts and how it feels, and then knowing: once that lens of self-judgment is feeding, it sees everything that happens through that lens. It almost only lets in—this is what wrong view does. It solidifies the mind. It almost only lets in perceptions that go along with the view we're holding. The view being, "I'm a stupid jerk and I can't practice. After all these years, I'm wasting my time." Any perception that doesn't match that is discarded, if it's even noticed.

So next time—if ever this happens to you again—notice how you think, "Well, aniccā means everything's coming and going." Yeah, right, everything's coming and going, but better things should be coming and worse things should be going. And it's not happening like that. I'm not trying hard enough. Things are coming and going, but they should be getting more subtle, and they're not because I'm not trying hard enough. It'll just twist everything.

I can recognize now—in life too, it's not just on retreat, God knows—I can recognize just how self-judging feels, sometimes before I even recognize the thoughts. And I know in that space I cannot trust any assessment or any skillful means thought that comes up. I just know that. And then it's fine. Oh, that's what's happening—self-judgment. I know I can't trust what it perceives, and I don't need to. I just notice those thoughts coming and going, coming and going.

But when we don't, the view of self-judgment just covers everything and solidifies and feeds, doesn't it, our aversion to everything that's happening. Nothing's right because we're not right. And the stronger that gets, the more difficult it is for mindfulness with wisdom to meet what's happening, to just experience directly—because we're more and more going to have to fix it, because I'm so bad, instead of, "Oh, self-judgment is like this." Just meeting what's happening.

As Ajahn Sumedho says—I think maybe I've used this before, I love it—he talks about this. He's actually defining mettā, but it's a great definition for mindfulness with difficulty as well. He says it doesn't necessarily mean liking anything at all, but witnessing the unpleasant in yourself

in another, in a situation, without creating anything around it. It's just, oh, unpleasant. It's like this.

Or another way Sumedho talks about awareness being the point that includes. So finding a way, instead of pushing away that unpleasant—whether it's so-called external or internal, whether it's about a sound or whether it's about the judgment of yourself—just finding a way to include that in awareness, rather than staying lost in this fighting, trying to hold ourselves separate, trying to judge what's happening as wrong or bad.

I'll read you a poem. It's funny—I think it's funny. It's an example of how to switch from holding something as bad to including it. From Billy Collins: "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House."

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking. He is barking the same high rhythmic bark that he barks every time they leave the house. They must switch him on on their way out. The neighbor's dog will not stop barking. I close all the windows in the house and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast, but I can still hear him muffled under the music, barking, barking, barking. And now I can see him sitting in the orchestra, his head raised confidently as if Beethoven had included a part for barking dog. When the record finally ends, he is still barking, sitting there in the oboe section, barking, his eyes fixed on the conductor who is entreating him with his baton while the other musicians listen in respectful silence to the famous barking dog solo, that endless coda that first established Beethoven as an innovative genius.

It's interesting, in a way, that we have this almost instinctive reflex of denying—now I'm using suffering deliberately, that dukkha dukkha part of dukkha—of denying suffering, as if it shouldn't be. And as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, it's one of the things, along

with joy might I add, along with friendliness, but suffering, difficulty, pain, sorrow is one of the things that unites us all. It's one of the common things we all share as living beings, as human beings.

And in terms of self-judgment, I find it kind of sad and weird that when we experience something difficult, sorrowful, painful, unsatisfactory, we turn against ourselves and feel more alienated and separate and judgmental and bad, instead of actually—when we meet it with compassion—it takes us through to a commonality, to our union with all beings.

Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about how some Thai abbots start their talks to people—you know, the local people come on the weekends—they would start with, "Dear brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." It just brings us all here together, you know? It can be met in such a different way, not with denial.

Again, Sumedho says to understand dukkha—and I mean all of it, not just suffering—means that we accept it rather than just trying to get rid of it or trying to deny it or trying to blame somebody else for it, which is kind of all the ways that our mind tends to act. And so when we're in those modes, when we don't accept, even on very subtle levels, that painful, difficult stuff's going to happen, that no matter how beautiful our practice is going—beautiful meaning we like it, or it matches some idea we have—it's going to change. And that change is just a law of nature.

The levels to which we don't accept that on some deep level, and turn it against ourselves, means when in our own experience, in our own life, something painful or difficult or unsatisfactory or changing happens, we can't accept it. Can't accept it outwardly in the world, can't accept it inwardly in ourselves.

So really this opening to understanding dukkha is both so-called external and internal. Sometimes it's about bearing witness, really being present with kindness, with mindfulness, with wisdom for our own sorrows, pains, unsatisfactoriness, confusion, constant change, beauty. Sometimes we can't do it so-called with ourselves, but we can bear witness or be present for the sorrows, the pain, the change, the confusion in the external world—or vice versa.

In myself, I've always found it—I don't know why, it's just how my mind works—very inspiring to read about or know about people who have been present in the world, present or part of or witnesses to some of the enormous, endless suffering states, aspects of history that go on. There are endless examples, whether it's a poet, or someone who's involved like Dr. Martin Luther King or Aung San Suu Kyi, or whether it's a writer like Alexander Solzhenitsyn writing about the gulags in Russia, whether it's someone—

like I have several friends with HIV—and just seeing how they're able to be present. I mean, through all the ups and downs, not always like, "Oh, isn't..."—I don't mean being present when everything's wonderful, but being able to keep showing up with mindfulness, with courage, to their fear, to their lack of fear, to whatever it is that's happening. Friends who've worked in hospice, people in my family.

So it can be on the vast field of history. It can be just friends that we know. It can be ourselves. But whenever I read about or meet or hear about someone who's been able to just bear witness without becoming embittered—you know, without having to turn to violence, without having to just shut down—I'm always really inspired. Inspired in a way that kind of opens me up to a sense of the possibility of connectedness, of compassion externally, also internally.

And it's always amazing to me to see, again in the big picture or just one-on-one, how rare it is and how really meaningful it is for someone when they're in a lot of pain and you or a friend is able to just be there with them. Often there's nothing we can do. But to still be there, not with ten million suggestions of how to get rid of it. I mean, if you know something that can help, yeah, great.

But often we don't. I know there was a time when I had a chronic illness that no one knew what to do about. It was really interesting. You can just feel the different degrees of ability people have just to be there. I mean, I know a lot of people, and everyone had an idea what to do, which if you've had a disease, it can drive you nuts. And you can feel the difference when people are coming with, "Wow, that's really hard," and they can just be there with you. There's not an aversion, not a needing to fix to make it go away. And then how other people, really well-meaning, would say, "Try this, try this, try that, try that." And the energy is just, "I can't bear this. It's too much." Well-meaning. But that sense of how powerful it is to just be able to be present in the midst of change, in the midst of the unknown, in the midst of dukkha dukkha. In the midst of joy, without needing to fix, without needing to get lost in aversion and fear.

And we're not ever always going to be able to do that. But just beginning to touch it. And for yourself. That's really what we can do here on retreat. Inside, it works the same outside. It's not selfish. This is really where we start.

So I find for myself, on or off retreat doesn't matter, but when I'm finding that I'm really getting caught in self-judging, a lot of self-judging, or just feeling disconnected, which then leads to self-judging—something's just off and I don't know what, and I'm trying to figure it out, and I'm doing all the things, and let me do my practice, and it just gets more and more intense, exaggerated, magnified—pretty much every time I can remember, when I finally just stopped, whether I'm on retreat or off, sit down, stand,

whatever, and just feel myself, my mind, my body, what's happening now? Not to fix it or understand, just wait, what's going on now? I almost always found that there was something—the disconnection, the judgment, all of that—was a reaction to something obviously difficult or unpleasant happening in my mind, in my body, my emotions, that I just unconsciously didn't even want to be with. And I don't have to fix it or understand it or anything. Oh, that's what's happening.

For example, loneliness. Oh, loneliness. It's like this. And it doesn't mean it's la-di-da. It might be very intense, moving in and feeling it. I know my mindfulness and wisdom has hit what's happening because instead of all this kind of fog of self-judgment and confusion and thoughts and trying to figure it out and reading texts and trying to remember, which is exhausting and it's like a big miasma of what's happening, when I hit the sorrow, or the fear, or the longing, it's like, "Oh, loneliness. It's like this." Just—ah—relief. Oh, this is what's happening. It's just dukkha. It's just life. It's okay. That's just what it is. I don't have to make anything around it, as Sumedho says.

It's not a sign of my intrinsic failure to be a spiritual person because I'm angry. It's not a sign that my practice is going to hell because I'm having all these thoughts, whereas my last retreat it wasn't like that. It's not a sign of anything. All of that is just making up the story of me from some unpleasant experience, or a pleasant one that went away.

So I really find it true, the opening into what's unpleasant. Oh, it's this. The connection's there again. The whole story of self-judgment doesn't have any grounding in anything. It can still be there. It doesn't matter. It's just a habit of mine. But it's not really grounded in anything. That moment of real—the potential of liberation, just for that moment. Liberation not from the unpleasant experience.

Liberation isn't from having things fall apart. Liberation isn't from having things we don't like happen. It may not even be liberation from the thoughts of self-judgment, but it's liberation from *believing* the self-judgment, liberation from the delusion—and now I'm using the word suffering deliberately—the suffering of thinking, "This is not how it's supposed to be, and it's my fault. I should be able to make this better, and I'm a failure, or I'm weak, or I'm embarrassed because I can't." Oh, it's just how it is in this moment. That's dukkha. And there can be peace, ease, in the midst.

Don't go for the biggest, most painful story you have. But just in the midst of the unpleasant sound, of the headache, of the sleepiness, of the sitting where the mind is just going off and back, off and back—not even to intelligent thoughts, but totally stupid ones, and unpleasant—in the midst of that: "Oh, it's just dukkha." The insubstantial, always coming together and falling apart nature of reality. That's how it is. What's the problem? What's the problem?

Just one last thing I want to say about self-judging, something that's helped me a lot, is seeing how one of the things that can really lead to buying into self-judgment and getting caught in it is the tendency of our minds towards a kind of idealization. This view again—wrong view—a sense that things should be perfect or ideal. I don't know if you notice this. We do it with people, with teachers, with meditation technique, with how we should feel, with all kinds of things. And not realizing—again, it's not getting dukkha—how can anything be perfect and stay perfect? That completely obviates impermanence, dukkha, and anatta, that everything's in constant flux.

But this sense of idealizing—and I also notice in my mind—the thinking mind has a tendency toward "it's good or it's bad," "it's this or it's that." Very linear and clear and discrete. And the thinking mind, which is very limited, doesn't know what to do with things that don't fit into these nice categories.

I'll give you two examples. When I first went to Thailand to be a nun, I was staying in a temple with a very famous, well-known Thai abbot—one of the most famous in Thailand. I'd just been there a day, and I hadn't become a nun yet. We were just sleeping on the floor of the little hut, and I had long hair. When I woke up in the morning, a stream of ants had somehow moved into a new pathway through my hair. So I woke up with ants in my hair and all over, and I had just gotten to Thailand. I was freaking out. I hadn't adjusted to the climate, to the bugs. So I went running to the Ajahn, who was this very famous, very well-respected teacher—"What do I do?" you know, because of the precepts and all. And he just had his assistant, who was also a monk, hand me a can of Raid, right there. Raid is an insect killer. I was just like, "What?" It did not compute. I'm here in Thailand with all the precepts, and they said, "Here, go spray the Raid." What do I do with that?

Another time, I noticed this same sense of "you're either all good or you're all bad." When I was a kid, about eleven or twelve, I used to read these books by a man who was a medical doctor and had set up clinics in Laos and Vietnam in the fifties. He's writing about himself and all the work he did. I was very inspired by this guy. Then when I became an adult, I heard that he was also a CIA agent. So in my mind: doctor working in Laos, great; CIA agent, bad, totally bad. Can't compute the two together. You're all good or you're all bad.

I was saying this in a talk once, and a friend came up afterward, an older man. He said, "I used to work in the government, and I knew a lot of CIA agents. They're not all bad people. You can't just think of CIA agents as bad people. Some of them are very sincere, wonderful people."

And my mind just goes blank. We do that with ourselves, with our meditation practice. Just notice when you're getting into self-judgment and comparing and aversion—see if there's some view, some thought. It might not even be as clear as a thought, something we're holding onto without even realizing it, comparing ourselves to, and it's not matching. And just that not matching is the unpleasant experience in that moment that's feeding all the self-judging. So these are just some ways of looking at this and not getting so caught.

I'll end with another possibility, from a friend in Burma. We were on a retreat taught by Sayadaw U Kena, who teaches in the Mahasi method of noting, noting, noting every moment. He'd been giving a talk saying, you know, with noting—for example, anger—if anger arises, note it three times, and then it'll go away, and then you come back to whatever's arising next.

This was a retreat of mostly Westerners. At the end, the teacher left, and one of the people there said, "But I noted three times, and the anger doesn't go away. What am I doing wrong? It's supposed to go away." The whole self-judgment arising.

Later, you know, the teacher clarified: of course it doesn't always go away. You just keep noticing whatever is present. As long as it's there, it's there. No problem. That's what I'm saying. Thinking it should go away, and the self-judgment—that's the problem.

My friend, a Burmese man who had been translating for a while, said afterward, "That was so interesting. I never heard something like that."

I said, "Because for us, it doesn't go away in three notings either. But I never heard that you can just note and that it's not a problem."

He said, "Oh, really?"

I asked, "So when it doesn't go away in three notings, what do you do?"

He said, "Oh, we just say, 'Oh well, never mind.' And that's it. No problem. No self-judgment. No big angst. No 'Oh my God.' Just, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

So I leave you with that. Next time practice doesn't go the way you ideally think it should: Oh well, never mind. What's happening now?

CHAPTER 26

Perception and Thought

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common meditation dilemma: the paradoxical nature of thought. While thoughts are inherently empty and ephemeral—dissolving back into nothing—they possess tremendous power to construct our entire sense of self and world. Drawing from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teachings, she illustrates how deluded thoughts arise like clouds and vanish into the voidness of mind, emphasizing that "in reality, nothing at all has happened."*
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> *Wilson systematically examines how papañca (mental proliferation) develops from perception through the influence of unwholesome mental factors. She identifies four primary fuels: taṇhā (craving), diṭṭhi (view, particularly sakkāya-diṭṭhi or identity view), māna (conceit expressed through comparing), and fear. Using vivid examples—from the famous Joshua Bell subway experiment to dining hall dynamics on retreat—she demonstrates how perception colored by these factors leads to elaborate mental constructions that obscure direct experience.*
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> *The practical wisdom offered here is profound yet accessible: rather than fighting thoughts or considering them problems, we can observe their arising and passing with detached attention. When thoughts become too powerful to simply observe, Wilson suggests turning attention to underlying feelings or bodily sensations. Through sustained mindfulness, wisdom naturally arises, revealing the futility of mental proliferation and allowing thoughts to pass "as a bird crosses the sky without leaving any trace."*

Tonight I want to talk a bit about this paradox, this dilemma of thought. This arises once in a while in interviews, and occasionally it seems to be something of a problem in people's meditation. So I thought I'd offer some thoughts about it.

That's really interesting, right? Because if you just look at a thought, it's nothing. It's absolutely nothing. It's completely ephemeral, empty. "The floor is brown"—just nothing. "I'm a stupid jerk"—just nothing. Just emptiness going through. And yet it's so powerful. Our whole career, our whole world, really our whole sense of ourselves—the whole world is created by thought.

Look at the power of propaganda, for example. That's nothing but thought. I was watching a public television special on Goebbels, the propaganda minister from the beginning of the Third Reich through the Nazi time. Amazing—just how to manipulate, what thoughts to put out, repeating them over and over, preying on emotions. But it's all the work of thought. Quite amazing.

When thought isn't understood properly, that's when we get so seduced. We're seduced by the content, obviously completely wrapped up in it—like, don't like, upset, whatever. We're seduced by the strong mental states and emotions that come along with thought, often seduced by not even seeing them and getting even more involved in the content. Or we think that because there's this strong emotion, whatever the thought is saying really must be true, that it needs to be paid attention to. But generally, I find that's an inverse proportion.

Or in meditation—this isn't so much for people who don't meditate—we get totally seduced by the idea, the thought, that thoughts shouldn't be happening. That thought is bad, thought is a distraction, thought is a sign that your practice is no good, that you're getting nowhere. I'd be a millionaire if I had a dollar for every time someone came in and said, "I'm thinking more, there are more thoughts. My practice was going well, and now I have more thoughts." As if that's the end of the world.

So it's a paradox, a dilemma, right? This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I love the way he puts things—two paragraphs describing both sides of the paradox:

"What we normally call the mind is the deluded mind, a turbulent vortex of thoughts whipped up by attachment, anger, and ignorance. This mind, unlike enlightened awareness, is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning"—did you ever notice that?—"triggered off by such circumstances as an unexpected meeting with an enemy or a friend." Triggered off by any circumstance, right? "And unless they are immediately noticed, met with mindfulness, they quickly take root and proliferate.

"Yet, however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness." Have you noticed that too? "Once you recognize the intrinsic nature of the mind, these thoughts that seem to appear and disappear all the time can no longer fool you. Just as clouds form, last for a while, and then dissolve back into the empty sky, so deluded thoughts arise, remain for a while, and then vanish in the voidness of mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

That's what I love. We can really see that nothing at all has happened. What a relief. End of the story.

Well, I'm going to continue, but that's really all we need to know. Seriously.

So let me talk about some different ways we get so caught up in these thoughts. By now, some of you have been here on silent retreat for a long time. Some of you have just come in the last day or two, but you've all done plenty of meditation before. So I'm sure you must all have the experience of thought that just comes and goes with no punch at all—like "the floor is brown." You can really get that sense.

You may not see it beginning and end, but you really get the sense it comes from nowhere, dissolves back into nothing, and really nothing at all has happened.

So what's the difference between that and the occasional other thought that somehow seems to have Velcro and a lot of other stuff going along with it?

I want to talk a little bit about perception and papañca, which is the process where we get so caught up. And then hopefully a little bit about how not all thoughts are unwholesome, either.

Really starting where thoughts begin, you could say, the way the Buddha spoke about it, is from the point of perception. And you all know what perception is, correct? That's the way the Buddha talked about it. It's a very specific mental factor that arises in each moment of sense contact. Seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, physical sensation, mental activity, thought or emotion—the six sense experiences.

Whenever there's contact—sound, an ear that works, consciousness—when those three come together, that's contact, a moment of contact. And in that moment, according to the Buddha, there's naturally perception, which is simply the recognition factor, the discernment of what is arising in that moment. It could just be hearing. That's already perception, knowing that's hearing. Or it might just be a bird song. You don't even have to say the word, but there's just that recognition, that knowing. That's what's considered perception.

Obviously, perception is based on memory, on our past experience, on what we know. It could also be a perception of hearing something and not knowing what it is. That's also a perception.

This is arising in every moment. The Buddha says what one perceives, one thinks about. So often perception is what places us in a context. Even though we don't have conscious thoughts, a perception generally comes together with the thoughts or almost-formed thoughts, the associations of context and place and meaning.

For example, when you looked at your watch or clock tonight, you saw the minute hand at 25 past 7. That's a whole lot of perceptions already—watch, minute hand, 25 past 7. That's a huge amount of perceptions, and we put it together. It means something. Not only that, you know it means you're here at this forest refuge. It's Monday night. It's time to go to the dharma talk. Again, that's a huge amount of thoughts, a huge amount of perception. All of it useful, extremely useful. We're not saying perception is a bad thing here, and the thoughts are also useful. They give us a context. Not a problem.

Now, often perception—well, almost always perception—that moment of perception, hearing birdsong, for example, in that moment of consciousness, the consciousness is the knowing and the perception is the recognition. In that moment of consciousness, it comes together with whatever mental factors, whatever mental states happen to be present at that moment. And those mental factors can, once in a while, disguise, distort, or actually make the perception inaccurate.

For example, it's like delusion, which puts a cloud over things. A classic example is walking in the forest and you see a snake and have all the reactions as if it were a snake. But when you get closer, you see it's just a rope. So the delusion, the not recognizing accurately, leads to a whole set of thoughts, emotions, and assumptions based on inaccurate perception. That's ignorance clouding the perception.

But equally, desire or anger or fear can color the perception, leading to inaccuracy. And from this, there can be a jumping off place. If we don't recognize that, if there's no mindful awareness with wisdom, then the thoughts, the reactions, the associations are all based on that inaccurate perception.

I remember once I was in the hospital. It was early morning—they come and get you out of bed at 5 a.m. to weigh you, and God knows why. I was out of it; someone had given me some painkillers or something.

But someone told me later there's something called ICU psychosis, where your perceptions become a little wacky, your mind goes a little crazy. Mine certainly was.

So this poor nurse—a nice lady, as I realized the next day—she came in, and I literally saw her as demonic. That's what I actually perceived. And I say "poor lady" because that seeing led to assumptions, which led to how I responded to her. Plus, I didn't want to get out of bed at 5 a.m. to be weighed.

And just like that—the next time I saw her, I could see through it. But a lot of the time we don't know that's happening. We don't even recognize perception as perception; it's just occurring every moment. Never mind whether it's accurate or not, or questioning it, or even having an openness to it.

What tends to happen is there's the perception, we assume it's accurate, and all the assumptions go along with it. We don't even know. And then the freshness of attention snaps shut. We know what it is, we *know*, and we just stop really meeting the experience freshly, moment to moment.

That's what happens with the breath, right? "Enough already with the breath." Or there's a pain that's been there—"I've had this pain ever since I began practice twenty years ago. I know this pain. I don't need to look at it. I know what it is."

Or have you ever had this experience? Those of you who've been here a while may find that without at all meaning to, as soon as someone walks into your field of vision—contact, seeing, perception—there's an immediate sense of all the baggage of assumptions and associations that your mind has created with that person. Do you have any sense of what I'm talking about here?

I've noticed for myself on retreat, I love it when I see how wrong the perception is. For example, over at the retreat center, in the bigger dining room, I'm sitting at the table, not looking up, not looking around. Someone comes and sits at the table. You don't look. I don't turn and look. But I *know* who it is, right? I know. I can just feel it. I know. I've got everybody scoped out.

So they're sitting there, and I can watch my mind go through all the reactions, all the associations this mind has created in regards to that person. Pleasant, unpleasant—they're eating sloppily. I knew they were. That's how they are.

And then I see that person who I thought was sitting beside me walk past way in the distance. It's like, *oh*. It's such a moment of startling, of the mind just letting go. I really had no clue. Let's start fresh.

It's really interesting. I read this article, and I really like this story. It's about perception—how we assume we know what's what, and we don't even meet the world freshly. This is what mindfulness is countering. This is the whole point of mindfulness.

The story is about an experiment in Washington, D.C., that the Washington Post newspaper arranged with one of the world-famous concert violinists, Joshua Bell. He's extremely well-known. They did an experiment where they had him, during the morning rush hour on a Monday morning, get dressed in just a baseball cap and jeans, take his—as they say—$3.5 million Stradivarius violin, and position himself at a really crowded subway stop.

It was at a place where the people coming out of the subway had to go up a long escalator, and he was positioned at the top playing his violin. So they had to hear him coming up the escalator. He just looked like anyone, his case open for money.

He had this incredible violin, and he was playing incredibly difficult, beautiful music. He wasn't playing something anyone could play. One of the pieces he played was Bach's Chaconne, which they say is very, very difficult—one of the most difficult—and fourteen minutes long. He's just playing it incredibly.

Anyone who knows music would recognize it. But they were saying the experiment was really to see if people would just recognize beauty without it being set up.

And they, of course, videoed it all. So it was fascinating because hardly anyone stopped to pay attention. It was six minutes before the first person stopped to even listen.

They could question everybody afterward, because they had it all on videotape. This one man who stopped was coming up the escalator, and he said he was on his way to work. He wasn't particularly a musician, but coming up the escalator, he was just struck by it. He said, "I just felt really peaceful. I felt really happy." So he looked at his watch and saw he had three extra minutes. He went and waited against the wall and listened for his three requisite minutes, gave the guy some money—the first time he'd ever given a street musician money—and went on.

And that was like the maximum that anyone really stayed. Mostly no one stopped at all. A few people would look for a little while, give some money, and hurry on. They said there was no ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed for a minute or who gave money. But there was one absolutely consistent thing: every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, the parent was in a hurry and scooted the child away. Really interesting.

Also interesting was what Joshua Bell said afterward. It was a strange experience for him. He said, "You know, it's a very strange feeling that people were actually ignoring me." And he was laughing at himself. He said, "At a music hall, I'll get upset if someone coughs or if someone's cell phone goes off. But here my expectations quickly diminished. I started to appreciate any acknowledgment, even a slight glance up. I was oddly grateful when someone threw in a dollar instead of change." So he got thirty-two dollars for his forty-five minutes, and 1,070 people hurried by.

Then they had a quotation from Billy Collins, the poet, who once laughingly observed that all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry because the lub-dub of the mother's heart is in iambic meter. Then Collins said, "Life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us." Maybe it's true with music, too.

So I don't know about that, but you get the sense: street musician, know-it-all, I'm in a hurry. We don't meet life freshly. We don't meet our experience freshly. And perception can play a part in this. That's one place where we get caught up and lost—we think we know. We don't even know that we think we know. We don't even know all the associations that are arising, and the mind snaps shut.

I notice this with political figures a lot. Certain political figures will come on the radio or the TV, and I know more than I want to know about them. I'm not even open to hearing one word. I just have to hear the tone of voice—it's over, it's off. And I remember, way back now with Nixon, something came on where they were saying something good about him, and I saw my mind so clearly: "I don't want to know anything good about this man. Let's not be open here. This is how it is, and I don't want anything to mess up my assumptions."

Dilgo Khyentse again: "When sense organs encounter an object—like the ear encountering sound—the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure."

Then Ajahn Chah says it, of course, in his very direct, earthy way. He was holding up a vase. He says, "Look at this vase. You think it's nice, or you think it's ugly."

The vase itself is completely indifferent. It's we who are making ourselves insane. Can you relate? That's how it works.

So starting with perception—when it's fueled by unwholesome states of heart and mind, that's when we get what the Buddha calls *papañca*. And this is how he describes it: What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates—complicates with associations, notions, memories, ideas. This is the manufacture, the creation of *papañca*. And these notions then assail and overwhelm a person. In the commentaries it says it's "the tendency of the imagination to break loose and run riot." I think these old guys were very dour, but it's like that, isn't it?

When they talk about *papañca*, we can actually explore it. We don't have to be afraid of it. We can really use our mindfulness, our cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness, and turn it onto the process of perception, of thought, of this phenomenon of thoughts feeding on themselves, taking off, running riot. We can actually observe the whole process. And in the observing, as we well know, we've stepped out of believing it. We see, "Oh, it's just cause and effect." And again, no matter how intense or how out there the thoughts, the *papañca*, the craziness gets—when we're watching, at some point, no matter what it is, it dissolves back again into the nothing it came from.

You know those moments when you've been just completely crazed for the last hour, and then it's just gone? Nothing happened. What was that all about? Nothing. It's really gone. Let it be gone.

In the classic texts, in the commentary, they talk about three states of mind, three mental factors that most readily fuel this *papañca*, this habit of the mind to go so far so fast. We don't notice them, and we get lost in the content. So I just want to enunciate them a little. You know them all, but I want to talk about them in this context.

The classic ones are craving; *diṭṭhi*, or view, and particularly self-view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*; and the third is *māna*, or conceit, which is most observed in the process of comparing. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, who was a German man, a monk for many years, a Pali scholar and teacher, added a fourth which I find really helpful: fear. Fear really fuels some major *papañca* when we don't recognize it.

Remember, it's not that this stuff is a problem when we see it. It's just the next arising mental object of awareness. We don't have to fix it. When we see what's happening, we don't have to get so caught in believing it. When we don't see what's happening, we're seduced. We're gone.

Craving and fear I'll put together. Obviously we understand—we know what craving is, right? You've had the experience once in a while. Fear is recognizable too. Just begin to notice, or continue to notice, how when craving, when wanting is in the mind, it colors the perception. You know the phrase that Tibetans use, that craving "puts feathers on the object." It makes the object more attractive, more desirable, whatever it is.

I remember—this is weird—but one time I was on retreat and I kept having this thought, a mental image, this picture that would come up of a street corner in Bangkok. Not at all a nice street corner. A corner of very busy streets with all these little sidewalk shops that sold plumbing fixtures and parts. But it would come up together with craving. God knows why. There was craving in the mind, and I'd go, "Oh, Bangkok! Oh, Banglamphu!" And even then I'd think, "What?" But it kept happening like that. And in

the moments when I didn't notice it, I'd go off into a whole fantasy about Bangkok. "I want to go to Banglamphu!" There's nothing charming about Banglamphu—it's just crowds and fighting the crowds. It was so humorous. I could see how the process happened. It doesn't have to make sense.

It's more a problem when it does make sense.

So the whole phenomenon of getting a crush on somebody, on or off retreat—it doesn't just happen on retreat, unfortunately—but when the mind has got craving associated with a person, aren't they beautiful? Aren't they handsome? They walk so sweetly, the way they dress is so lovely, how they eat—everything. And then when the crush is gone, the person hasn't changed that much. You look at them and go, "What was that all about? Thank God we were in silence and I didn't go anywhere with it." The person didn't change. Maybe they changed their socks, but not a whole lot else changed. It's just what's going on in the mind. So craving distorts the perception.

Papañca is then the series of thoughts that, with craving, often move into what I call papañca of action. We act on it. Sitting here on retreat, one of the reasons we restrict what's going on is so there's less you can act on. But how often, if something comes up in the mind, you really think, "That would be nice. I need some long underwear. The fall is coming." Next thing you know, you're on the computer—but no, you can't do this, you can't go on the computer. But next thing you know, you're on the computer surfing, and all of a sudden all these things are being delivered by FedEx: long underwear and gloves and boots. And when it comes, by that time you're like, "Huh? Got a little carried away by craving, by acting." That's papañca of craving.

Or you're just doing your walking meditation, and the thought of tea comes up, colored with craving. Next thing you know, you've finished the tea. You don't even know how you got from the walking meditation to the dining room. You don't remember making tea. You didn't even like it. It's gone. But craving—that's papañca of craving. Pretty obvious when we're looking at it this way. But look back at how much it runs our life. It's actually shocking how much papañca—the thoughts driven by perceptions based on craving leading to action—runs our life.

And we know how much suffering craving brings, how difficult it can be to just be present and mindful with wanting, wanting, wanting, and not go into the thoughts. The thoughts can come, let them come. We don't hate the thoughts, but we don't have to be seduced by them. It's just papañca fueled by craving. And just because the craving is really strong doesn't make the thoughts more true. So just noticing that is really interesting.

There's a little story I like from Andrea Levine, Stephen Levine's wife, about this—how unreliable the mind is in this way, yet how persuasive it is. She says, you know, you're sitting there eating a piece of chocolate cake and there's more, and the mind says, "Oh, have another piece of cake. It's so good. You'll be so happy. It's just what you need to top off the day. Just have another piece of chocolate cake." On and on, papañca, until finally we just eat the cake to shut up the mind. And then you eat it, and the mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you."

So that's papañca driven by craving. Not very reliable, but certainly we can recognize it.

The second one is papañca that's driven by diṭṭhi. Diṭṭhi is the word for "view" in Pali. Mostly we're talking about sakkāya-diṭṭhi, identity view. But I just want to mention how any series of thoughts can coagulate, can solidify into a view—a perception that "this is like this." We believe the perception. And then the series of thoughts follows from that. When I say it hardens into a view, it's that place where our clear seeing, our beginner's mind, has snapped shut. We're not seeing freshly.

We're seeing through the view. And the way the Buddha describes view is the mind that says—although it never says it so clearly—"this alone is true, everything else is false."

So for example, when I was thinking about Nixon, the view was really: this is a horrible man and there can't possibly be anything good about him. And the mind doesn't want to see. That's the view.

Well, we do that a lot. Really a lot.

Just to give examples based on meditation—that's one of the big areas of suffering I see with people on meditation retreats, and even with some people here I've seen it happen—where the mind constructs a view of what proper or good meditation is. You may not even know you're doing it.

But it's really a privilege being on the meeting-with-you-all side of things, because I can see how people can come in with totally opposite views, both completely convinced that this is right and that's not what's happening, and so my meditation's a mess.

It can be: there should just be breath and no thoughts. It can be: there should be really deep access to emotions. It can be: if there are deep emotions, it means I'm not concentrated enough, it's not going right. It can be: I should be mindful every single moment. It can be: whatever happens is fine, I'm relaxed as long as there's no tension. Whatever.

A view is not a problem when we recognize it. It's just another thought. "Oh, it should be like this—that's right meditation." That's just another thought. Unrecognized, as I said, it snaps our awareness shut. There's not an openness. There's not a willingness to just be with the unknown. And it actually creates a selective perception in the mind, like that thing with Nixon: I'll only let in the perceptions that fit the view. Well, of course, we're not doing that consciously so much.

So this is a real example I use often. I was teaching a retreat many years ago in California with another teacher, James, and even then I had to sit in a chair. There were about fifty people at this retreat, and quite a few were pretty new. About the fifth or sixth day in, I was having an interview with a woman for whom this was her first long retreat. She was in agony with sitting on the floor, sitting cross-legged. I mean, we all have pain, but sometimes it's such agony that one is just totally fighting it. And it's basically stupid—it's a waste of time.

When she saw me, she said that the last five days, all she'd been doing was getting lost in aversion and pain and a sense of total failure sitting on the floor. And of course, in the beginning, we said—as we always say—floor, bench, chair, it doesn't matter.

So she said, fifth day, she's sitting there thinking, "I can't do this. The whole meditation's about sitting like this, and I can't do it. I'm useless." And she looked up and said, "Oh, Carol's sitting on a chair." Five days! And we were at every sitting when we were doing that retreat—it's not like I just came in in the evening. It's amazing, the power of selective perception to fit a view.

And the view is often a suffering view, a view of oneself: I can't, it should be like this, and I can't do it.

So that leads into *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—identity or personality view. She was doing that, for example. She was just having the view that proper meditation, the only way to meditate, is to sit cross-legged. That's just a view. The *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality view, was: I can't do it, I'm a failure.

That could just be a thought. "I can't do it. I'm a failure." It's a thought just like "the floor is brown," "the sky is blue," "today is Monday."

It doesn't have to pack any punch. We don't have to be seduced by it. It's not like we have to get rid of that thought—we just see it. "Oh yes, rising from conditions and going away."

But when we really believe it, holding to it, and the papañca continues on and on from it, that's when it's really sakkāya-diṭṭhi, this personality view, this holding on to some aspect of nāma-rūpa, of one of the six sense contacts—a thought, an emotion, a sight, a sound, a feeling in the body—thinking of it as me or mine and kind of carrying it around with us. Like one of my teachers used to say, it's like carrying a dead corpse around with you all the time.

You know this famous Zen story, very famous, of two monks—an older monk and a young one. They're walking and they come to a river that they have to cross, and there's a beautiful young woman who can't get across. So the old monk picks her up, carries her across, puts her down, and they walk on. Nothing's said. After quite a while, a couple of hours, the young monk finally bursts out, "I can't stand it anymore! How could you do that? You know it's against your precepts to touch that beautiful young woman, and you completely disregarded that!" He was really upset. And the old monk said, "I put her down at the river. You've still been carrying her these last two hours."

That's sakkāya-diṭṭhi, right?

So we take any thought, any mood, anything that comes—and we carry it with us through the day. Actually, there's no way you can really carry it all the time, but we think we're carrying it with us. We say, "Is this always here? This feeling of worthlessness, this sense of not being good enough, this angry personality I have"—you know, whatever. Or occasionally, "this incredible, wonderful being that I am." Very rarely, but once in a while, that's the one people carry. "Even when I'm not noticing it, I know it's there under the surface." Are you familiar with that feeling? "Even when I'm just sitting, being with seeing and hearing, seeing the beauty of the leaves, there's a feeling of happiness. It's just that in that moment I'm not noticing the sense of total worthlessness and aversion, but it's there because that's who I am. That's me."

That's sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And I don't think I have to elaborate too much on how much papañca can arise from that.

This is something I love to see, actually. I really love playing with it on retreat—though you can do it off retreat too, of course—to notice how quickly almost any sense contact can move into sakkāya-diṭṭhi, into "it's all about me." It doesn't have to when the mind is clear, but how quickly, with diṭṭhi, with view and craving, papañca just ripples out.

So, for example, walking outside today, I was just walking. The leaves are beautiful, right? I love this feeling of fall. So I'm already there: "I love this feeling of fall." And immediately—it's like there's the leaf, how much I love it, it's so beautiful, the smell in

the air, the memory of so many past falls, a feeling of kind of sadness that comes in the fall. "Oh, me—I'm experiencing that feeling of sadness. It reminds me of all these other falls, another year gone, blah, blah, blah, blah." It could be pleasant or not. It doesn't matter. But I've gone in one second from just smelling—just smelling—to the whole story of Carol's life, you know, poignant and sad and this and that.

That's a pretty neutral example. It wasn't really upsetting. But it could be. It could involve really strong craving, really strong upset. We could get caught in it for a really long time if it's a little more juicy.

How often is it that someone will tell me about an unpleasant sound and get lost in "What does that mean? Why are they doing that? How can they be like that?" And it reminds them of something from their past—"My father used to do this." I remember one retreat where some guy was being driven insane. Okay, I'm exaggerating a little, right? He wasn't really being driven insane.

by someone's loud breathing near him in the three-month retreat. As a friend of mine, we'd talk and talk. It took him weeks to realize—I mean, he was just spinning out with thinking about that person and his life. It took him weeks to realize that the breathing sound had triggered a memory of his father, of some way his father sounded when he was angry with him. And it was just completely spinning him out of control. Papañca.

Often we don't see what associations are coming with the perception, and the papañca just takes off.

So that's the sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And it's mostly—it's Joseph's line. Joseph loves to say, "We're just making it all up." There's just sense contact. It's pleasant or unpleasant. There's a perception. And then the imagination just breaks loose and runs riot. We're just making it up.

As Nisargadatta says, "The world appears to you so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. Cease thinking about it and it will dissolve into thin mist."

And we can notice that over and over. You might also notice you don't really want it to dissolve into thin mist. And that's another thing that keeps us spinning in the sakkāya-diṭṭhi and the papañca of it.

The third aspect, the third thing that fuels papañca, is māna—conceit, conceit of self, as it's described. But the best way to explore it is through this habit of the mind of comparing. Have you noticed your mind doing that at all in these days here? And how much thought that leads to, and what a charge that often has?

So much comparing is with others. First, that sense of how you can't bear to have someone walk by without looking to see who it is. It's a well-known phenomenon, totally bizarre, but it's very well-known. And then as soon as we've looked, immediately the mind goes into comparing. They're this, they're that, they're better, they're worse, we're the same—whatever. How people are sitting, how people are eating, how people are moving. And it's all dukkha, it's all suffering. But it leads to a huge amount of papañca and thinking.

"They're walking so slow. How come? I wonder what kind of practice they're doing. I remember when I was doing practice and I was walking so slow. And now I'm not. I wonder which is better. I wonder if I should be slowing down and noting. I remember when I did that. But no, I really get into striving. Maybe I'll just be free and easy. I'll just walk outside and be free and easy."

And all of this is going on in one step. Gone. Comparing.

We could just be with seeing. Just seeing. Perception. Pleasant, unpleasant. That's all. It doesn't have to go into all those worlds of creation.

We compare with our own past experience, and this is a huge source of comparing. Just notice that. Previously, other retreats, last sitting, yesterday—"it was like this." Just notice that comparing. Notice the way, when we're not aware of it, it leads into a whole series, a whole train of thoughts, construction of self, suffering.

We get really seduced by it. That's mana—that's conceit. It's going to keep coming. Of all the ten fetters in the Theravada view, where different fetters drop away at different levels of awakening, mana is the last one to go. So don't get upset at yourself when you see it happening. But notice it, and then it doesn't have to go into all the papañca.

We compare with each other, with our past experience, with a view—very much a view and idea of what practice should be, or how I should be. "I should always be a compassionate person, and I'm not"—whatever it might be. We compare with that, and the whole sense of not being good enough can get really strong. Or "I'm great"—either one. Again, you're back to sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

Working with mana, with comparing, I find it to be a great dining room practice in a retreat setting like this. It's a good practice in the hall too, but hopefully most people are sitting with their eyes closed and not checking everybody out. In the dining room, though, you have to have your eyes open. You have to go through the food line, hopefully knowing what you're doing, noticing other people. So just be aware when this comparing kicks in. Notice how soon you notice it. Are you way down the road? Has the papañca been running for five minutes? Great—notice it then. "Oh, that's comparing." Let it dissolve into thin mist. Maybe you notice it right away.

Some people have told me, and I have the same experience: I can be walking by myself, no one around, completely calm, serene, present. Then just one person comes into sight—not even close, but way in the distance—and immediately there's a tightness, a comparing, a sense of clenching. Just noticing.

Noticing in the dining room with comparing—make a game of it. Not that we're afraid of it, but just noticing how there can be comparing and it doesn't have to go to papañca. There can be comparing and it does go to papañca. Notice how that works, what the effect is, where the suffering is, where the freedom is. It's not that we have to be afraid of these things, but to cultivate the interest, the willingness to simply explore thought as an object arising together with different mental factors, the perception—and to really see the difference when it's just dissolving into thin mist versus when it's coming with a punch and we're getting caught. Not to judge ourselves, but to get interested, to see how it works. Really quite fascinating.

This is from one of my teachers, talking about thinking: "It does not matter whether thinking stops or not. It's more important that you understand whether your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, appropriate or inappropriate, necessary or unnecessary. Mostly they're unnecessary. This is why it's essential to learn to watch thinking without getting involved. When a thought keeps growing, no matter how much effort you put into trying to simply observe it, you're probably somehow involved in the thought. When this happens, when thinking becomes so powerful, so incessant that you can no longer observe it, that's when you stop looking at the thoughts and watch the underlying feelings or the bodily sensations instead."

From my experience—I don't know if I could say always, but it's close to always—whenever thoughts come with a punch and they're really pulling, and it's more than just one thought, when you're really getting caught, there's an underlying feeling, an underlying mental factor. So we don't hate the thought; we just see the thought. But we enlarge the awareness to notice, to be with that underlying energy—the papañca energies I was talking about: fear, wanting. Just being with it and seeing how that fuels

thought. When we're watching all of that, thought is no problem. It's just another arising experience, just like sound, just like sensation—literally. And when we no longer need to get rid of it or fight with it or hate it or take it personally, it really starts to lose its power.

This is from Ramana Maharshi. He's talking about watching the mind with full attention: "Whenever the mind wanders, just notice it. Notice how thoughts connect with each other and watch how this ghost called mind catches hold of all your thoughts and says, 'This is my thought.' Watch the ways of the mind without identifying with them in any way. When you give your mind your full, detached attention, you begin to understand, to see the futility of all these mental activities. Watch the mind wandering here and there, seeking out useless or unnecessary things or ideas which will ultimately only create misery for itself."

Watching the mind gives us a knowledge of its inner processes. It allows for the wisdom to arise that we become more and more detached from our thoughts. Ultimately, if we notice steadily and long enough, it allows for the wisdom to arise to remain as consciousness, unaffected by transient thoughts.

So it's not that we're trying to get rid of thoughts—simply to understand, simply to see the cause and effect. And the more we see it, you can't help but notice. Wisdom arises in the awareness. You can't help but notice the energy, the unnecessary complications, the unnecessary suffering. And it really does happen by itself.

I'll give you an example from my own life of long ago, when I was so grateful for this wisdom of mindfulness. Almost twenty years ago, I was coming down with some chronic disease that no one knew what it was. It had a lot of effect on my movements. It was quite painful in my joints. At the time, before anyone knew what it was—I just wrote this to someone the other day—I remember so clearly, one day I was leaning down to wash the bathtub or something, and it was really difficult to bend down, it hurt to move, and my mind started off like, "Poor me." And then that jumping into the future from fear, the papañca of fear: "What's this going to be like? If I can't move, I won't be able to take walks. I'll never be in a relationship. I can't even clean the bathtub. How am I going to function?"

And I just saw the mind starting off like that. Without aversion or anything, I saw that happening. And the wisdom just said, "That's completely unknown. There's no point in going there. It's completely useless." And that wasn't said with aversion. That was just totally wisdom-like—boom. And it didn't go there. And from then on, really, it never went there. The mind would start off one or two thoughts, awareness would im-

mediately notice it, and just the energy of it would completely drop out. That wasn't striving. That wasn't willpower. That's wisdom. And it comes from simply just watching what thoughts do and seeing that total emptiness of them.

The most horrific thought in the world dissolves just like the most beautiful one. And the emotions underneath them—we just need to see that. Emotions are emotions, but they're not thoughts. We don't have to get so caught in believing them.

The Buddha said that the end of papañca is the end of conflict. We can notice that just in a moment, like that example I just gave. "Oh, what am I going to do?" Papañca's gone, the conflict is gone. What's happening now is just what's happening now—in very simple ways.

Someone gave me an example today of noticing how mind is in a really calm quantum of space, and say, for example, a pain would come up in her foot, and it would just be that sensation. The mind just doesn't create anything around it. No papañca, no reaction, no creation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, identity view. It's nothing. It's just a sensation coming and going. In that moment, that's the end of conflict.

I want to end with this from Dilgo Khyentse again, because I like when he's on the really challenging "this is how it is" aspect. But it's possible for us to notice that:

All phenomena of samsara and nirvana arise like a rainbow. And like a rainbow, they are empty of tangible existence. Once you recognize the true nature of reality, which is empty and at the same time appears as the phenomenal world, your mind ceases to be under the power of delusion. If you know how to leave your thoughts free to dissolve by themselves as they arise, they will cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky—without leaving any trace.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 27

Seclusion (Viveka)

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this talk from the Forest Refuge, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of viveka (seclusion) and its role in awakening. She begins by noting that in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, seclusion is listed alongside emancipation and release as designations for nibbāna itself. Wilson examines three progressive aspects of seclusion: kāya-viveka (physical seclusion from people and sensory bombardment), citta-viveka (mental seclusion from the hindrances), and the ultimate seclusion from suffering through recognizing suññatā (emptiness).*
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> *Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Chah about being 'sunk in the flood of sensuality,' Wilson explains how retreat conditions support our ability to notice the natural peace that's always available but usually obscured by relentless sense contact. She introduces Ajahn Buddhadāsa's concept of satī-paññā (mindfulness-wisdom) at the sense doors—not as rejection of experience, but as simple presence that doesn't proliferate into reactivity. The talk includes the Buddha's own admission that before his awakening, his heart did not leap up at renunciation until he understood both the drawbacks of sensual pleasure and the rewards of seclusion.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance on working with what arises in silence—including the 'shrieking and groaning' of suppressed material—while cautioning against attachment to peaceful states. Quoting the Buddha's resolve never to settle merely for wholesome and pleasant states of mind, she emphasizes that true seclusion points toward the mind's natural emptiness of clinging, accessible in countless moments each day. The talk concludes with Thomas Merton's insight that authentic solitude leads not to separation but to 'a deep, pure, and gentle sympathy with all other humans.'*

What I want to talk about tonight is seclusion, or viveka. There's a line in the Sutta Nikaya where someone says, "Do you know, dear sir, emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" And Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his footnote, says that these are three different designations for nirvana: emancipation, release, seclusion for beings—viveka.

I'm going to talk about different aspects of seclusion, starting with the most obvious one: the sense of being secluded from people, being on retreat. In all the different aspects of seclusion—and they're not hierarchical—how is it supportive for us in recog-

nizing the natural peace, in recognizing and coming back again and again to the heart and mind of non-clinging? Why and how is seclusion supportive and helpful? And is it necessary? Do you have to be secluded?

The first aspect is going on retreat, this kind of separation from the hubbub, from other people, to the point of living completely secluded. In our culture, and probably even back with the Buddha, it was always somewhat questioned. It wasn't always accepted by everyone. Even in myself, sometimes the feeling arises: why should I need to separate from life and go on retreat? Is awakening, is mindfulness, is being able to recognize how the mind works—do I have to be separated from so-called life? As if this isn't life and that is life. But do I have to be separated? And how does the separation help? Obviously, we think it helps. Hopefully, that's why you're here.

I've read a couple of books about the early Christian desert fathers. If you want to talk about physical seclusion, they really had it down. The most famous one I've read about is St. Anthony of Egypt. His life inspired thousands of people to leave their homes and follow him. When he actually renounced and went off into the most secluded part of the desert in Egypt, it was about 285 A.D., two or three hundred years after Jesus. He was a Christian from a wealthy family. His parents died, and he had a lot of money. But he heard the Christian teaching to give all you have to the poor and follow Jesus. And as one writer said, he actually believed it and did it, gave away everything he had and went to the desert to be alone.

He kept going to more and more remote places until finally he ended up in a deserted fort on the east bank of the Nile, fifty miles south of Memphis. He lived alone without seeing a human face for over twenty years, being brought supplies of bread and water every six months. Sometimes the friends who brought these supplies would hear terrifying shrieks and groans from behind the locked doors. Eventually, they couldn't stand this any longer—it took them twenty years—and they broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. But Anthony emerged healthy, sane, and balanced. He went to Alexandria to support Christians who were being persecuted there, and then he spent the rest of his life alternating between helping people, giving advice, being present for people, and going back into retreat.

I find the whole thing really interesting. Who knows what went on for him in those twenty years. But I think in a little way, we can imagine just a little bit of what we're here for.

So that's the first kind of seclusion—the most obvious, the grossest—actual seclusion from other human beings. And of course, the point of it isn't because we hate other human beings. Hopefully not. Or if that's the point in the beginning, hopefully that doesn't stay the point.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who spent a lot of his life wanting to be a hermit, wrote about this extensively. He said: "The search for solitude is a journey to discover the inner self. The monks fled to the desert to become ordinary. If they had gone there to become extraordinary, this would have meant taking the world with them as a standard of comparison. They lived among the rocks just because they wanted to be themselves." Just to become ordinary. I love that. Sometimes I feel like my biggest aspiration in practice is just to become totally ordinary. Nothing special.

So this is seclusion of body, out of this wanting to discover ourselves—how does the mind work? How does the heart work? That's just the very beginning. It's a lot, just being quiet, being away from people, being away from engagement. But certainly in our practice, that's just the very beginning. The seclusion from other people, the seclusion from the busyness of our lives, is really simply a support to help us be a little more secluded from what Ajahn Chah calls the flood of sense experience.

It's not even just about other people, but about all of it. This is when we talk about renunciation. We come to a place like this, a retreat, where we are with other people but we're not speaking, and we're secluded from so much of the sensory input that we experience in our daily life—the five physical senses and also the mental input. There's so much of it.

This is from Ajahn Chah. He calls it kamogha, a flood of sensuality. He says we're sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations—sunk in them. We're sunk because we look at the externals. We look at these experiences. We don't look internally. It's like being a slave. Somebody else has control over you. When they tell you to sit, you have to sit. To walk, you have to walk. He doesn't mean the people setting up the schedule of the retreat. He means being sunk in wanting sense experience. Being enslaved by the senses is like this.

When we come on retreat, when we have this seclusion of body—this first aspect, kaya viveka, seclusion from people—we're more secluded, of course not completely, from the flood of sensuality. Not because sense experience is somehow bad or wrong, but just because there's so much of it, we're so overwhelmed. There's mostly no space to notice the silence of heart, of mind. There's no space to just notice that we're nothing

but space. There's no space to recognize the quiet of a mind that's not enthralled to reaction, to sense experience. So we need to give it a little external, almost artificial space, just to be able to see, to recognize another possibility of how to be.

We're bombarded by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, information, news, conversation. This was true even when the Buddha was teaching. Now, it's unbelievable. Walk through an airport and notice how many people have cell phones. One in two or one in three are walking through talking on them. "Oh, hi, now I'm walking through the airport." "The plane has landed." "Now I'm at my luggage." "Just called to say hi." God knows we can't be quiet for a minute. We have to know that we exist.

So when we come on retreat, when we seclude ourselves physically from so much, we're just left with the flood of our mind, the mental input. But over the days—in the beginning of any retreat, I don't care if you've sat for thirty-five years or it's your first retreat—it's a rare person whose mind doesn't either fall asleep or get really restless or go all over the place, because it's like an addict coming off cold turkey. Not completely cold turkey, because it can keep creating thoughts and reactions to the thoughts and endless stories and memories, until you just want to throw up from it. And then finally, the flood begins to slow down a little bit.

That's what's so great. It slows down by itself. We might think we're doing something—feel the breath in and out, feel the sensations, walk up and down. But that's not slowing the flood. That is the flood. That's the blah, blah, blah chatter. Finally, we get sick of that. We shut up.

I think if we just came here, sat and walked, shut up, didn't write notes, didn't read, and just stayed here for a while, things would get really quiet in the mind. You don't actually have to do so much. Just stop doing.

So the relentless chatter starts to slow down a little bit in this kaya viveka. We begin maybe to notice there's a little space here. When you say it's in the mind, in the heart, it's not really anywhere. We just start to notice, when the mind isn't obsessively relating to and sinking itself into sense experience. That's what Ajahn Chah means by saying we're always looking out. The attention notices hearing. It sinks into that. What does it mean? It notices a taste. It's really in that taste, exploring it, really in that thought, in the aversion. Everything's external, whether it's mental or physical.

When that obsessive relational activity slows down a little, as Nisargadatta says, in the silence, just be quiet, free from the obsession with what next. And in the silence, something may be heard that's ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception. We start to notice the possibility of peace, calmness, the mind that's non-reactive, the heart that's

not on fire. Or just no special words at all. Just a moment when the mind isn't shouting and nothing much is going on. You don't even think of it as peace. You don't think of it as anything. But these little moments start to be more noticeable.

It's not that they don't happen in life, but they're fast. And we're really good at filling them up. But it starts to happen. This is the first and most obvious supporting reason for kaya viveka, seclusion of body—just separating from so much sensory input.

You've probably noticed, you've all done lots of retreats, how often meditation centers and monasteries tend to be in beautiful, natural places when there's that possibility. And you must have noticed how in some way nature, the beauty of nature just being how it is, the naturalness, the silence of it, is also a huge support for just letting go of the absorption in the flood of sense experience.

Seeing nature, smelling the leaves, hearing the birds—all of that is still sense experience. It's pleasant. Noticing pleasant, that's fine. I'm not taking this out of the realm of sense experience. But somehow being here with the wind and the leaves and the smell of the leaves and the birds brings us into a sense of presence and peace a little different from watching television. Somehow it's different. Being in nature, ever since the time of the Buddha—he's always saying, there are these roots of trees, there are these forests, go sit there—there's a sense of appreciating the stillness of nature. Not stillness meaning nothing's happening, but the stillness that it touches in our mind and heart of non-reactivity.

For me, what being in nature does on retreat is just that: ah, we stop fighting it. We just open. There's no resistance. It brings us into a sense of presence, an appreciation, but a presence that's not filled with desiring, with wanting. It's the silence of non-self-referencing. When you're just sitting outside and there's just that "ah," before it gets to "I'm sitting here enjoying nature"—just the space, the peace, the silence. It mirrors the space, the peace, the silence of mind, of citta. It allows us to recognize this.

Even in the Buddha's time, the monk of his sangha renowned as the most ascetic was Mahakashapa. But he loved nature. People sometimes think that the renunciate ascetic is kind of sour and not liking anything, that you wouldn't appreciate nature because that's just clinging to pleasant experience. But no. This is a poem from Kashapa:

Strung with garlands of flowering vines,
this patch of earth delights the mind.
The lovely calls of elephants sound.
These rocky crags do please me so.
The shimmering hue of darkening clouds,

cool waters in pure streams flowing,
enveloped by Indra's ladybugs,
these rocky crags do please me so.
Like the lofty peaks of looming clouds,
like the most refined of palaces,
the lovely calls of tuskers sound,
these rocky crags do please me so.

You really get the sense of appreciation of the beauty. And being that he was an arahant, he ends it making the point: *There is not so much contentment for me in this five-fold music as in truly seeing Dhamma with a well-collected mind.* The beauty, the pleasure, the peace of nature is the support for seeing Dhamma.

Don't confuse appreciating nature with being sunk in the flood of sensuality. Use the beauty of nature. Use the silence. Use the peace that it helps us recognize in our heart and mind—the lack of self-referencing. If the mind is using nature as a way of sinking into sensuality instead, you'll notice it, because peace won't be what you're experiencing. "I want the leaves to be prettier. I want them to be redder. I want the turkeys to come." That's wanting. That has nothing to do with the peace of the Dhamma. Our mind can do that with anything, but that doesn't mean there's something wrong with nature. It's just noticing.

Using this aspect of kaya viveka is really very powerful and accessible. It's lovely. Those times when you're all caught up in a struggle in your mind and you don't even know what, sometimes I just go outside and stand or walk, not trying to fix it. You've got to give that up. But just go and be outside and let it all go into the world, into the universe. The silence, the peace—that's our natural birthright. It's always available, always accessible. We can just put down the burden, put down the fixing it, put down the ideas for a little bit. Nature's a huge support in this way.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: "Our senses are our windows to the outside world. And sometimes the wind blows and disturbs everything within us. Many of us leave our windows open all the time, allowing the sights and sounds of the world to invade us, to penetrate us and expose our sad, troubled selves. We feel so cold and lonely and afraid. Do you ever find yourself watching an awful TV program, but you can't turn it off? The noise, the explosions of gunfire—it's upsetting, yet you don't get up and turn it off. Why do you torture yourself in this way? Don't you want to close your windows? Are you afraid of solitude, the emptiness and the loneliness you may find?"

That touches an important aspect of seclusion of body, seclusion from the senses, because it's a choice we make. We're doing this out of a choice for our own awakening, our own well-being. It's not like we've been taken prisoner and put into a sensory deprivation tank. It's a choice we're making.

All of you know that in this choice of withdrawing from constant bombardment, withdrawing our senses, the space of peace, of completeness, of quiet is not always the only thing that can arise. St. Anthony's shrieking and groaning behind the doors. Thich Nhat Hanh asks: are you afraid of what you may find if you close the windows, if you turn off the TV?

Sometimes, even when we know in our mind that physical withdrawal, solitude, pulling back from so much sense input is useful, that it's going to support our awakening, support our recognizing the natural peace that's our birthright—even when we know that experientially, there can still be a kind of kicking and screaming.

Even the Buddha, before he was the Buddha, speaks about this. There's a sutta where a householder comes to him and says, "Sir, we're householders. We indulge in sensuality, we delight in sensuality, we enjoy sensuality, we rejoice in sensuality. For us, renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off. Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline, the hearts of the young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. So right here is where this doctrine is contrary to the great mass of people, this issue of renunciation."

And the Buddha says, "So it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, I thought renunciation is good, seclusion is good. But my heart did not leap up at the idea. It did not grow confident or steadfast or firm, seeing it as peace."

Then the thought occurred to him—I like how he says "the thought occurred," giving that sense that the thought's just coming and going—the thought occurred: "What is the cause? What is the reason why my heart does not leap up at renunciation, doesn't see it as peace?" Then the thought occurred: "I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that theme. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation. I have not familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't understand it, doesn't see it as peace."

This is so straightforward and obvious, but I find it encouraging. Sunk in the flood of sensuality, the mind that's really in the habit of wanting and aversion and reaction and amusing itself—it's not really very amusing, but anyway—it's not going to say, "Oh yeah, great, let me just drop all of this stuff and be silent."

We come on retreat, the first day the mind says, "Why did I do this?" Maybe not the first day—the first day it's all nice. Then the second day, the third day: "Why am I doing this?" We start concocting all kinds of things to do and think and talk about and worry about. And then there's some quiet, some space, some peace. We re-recognize the natural state. And then, for many people, not everybody all the time, but for everybody sometime—the moans, the shrieks, the groans. We start to think, "Oh, this is why I didn't want to be quiet." We start to see the things that maybe the incessant sense busyness, the incessant thinking, the incessant input has really been shutting out.

For all of us, it can be whatever our particular demons might be. Self-judgment starts getting so loud. People say, "How could I not have noticed that every single thought I ever have is judgment?" It's not true, of course—no one has every single thought as the same mental state. But we start to notice how often. Whether it's judgment or needing to control or guilt or sorrow or comparing or fear of chaos or worthlessness or pride—whatever your particular ones are, they're going to come up. That's part of it. That's part of what the silence, the seclusion allows: for these things that have been pushed away, but at a price, to come up.

The next aspect of this kaya viveka, seclusion of body, is really our mindfulness or restraint at the sense doors—the moment-to-moment mindfulness. This is what supports us when these demons, when the shrieks and the groans and all the stuff that's been kept down starts to emerge.

Restraint at the sense doors is often talked about as renunciation, but the way Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it, I love. He calls it satipañña, mindfulness-wisdom at the moment of sense door contact. There's seeing, there's feeling sadness, there's hearing, there's thinking, whatever. Sati is of course just our moment-to-moment bare attention, just meeting what's happening just as it is. Wisdom—we can't make wisdom be there, but the moment-to-moment bare attention, just meeting, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body and the emotional, the thinking realm, moment after moment.

This aspect of seclusion, restraint at the sense doors, doesn't mean shutting all the windows, as Thich Nhat Hanh said—you just narrow it down. We're still having the six sense doors and the six sense door contact. This satipañña at the moment of sense door contact is the restraint: you bring the attention, it meets what's happening right at the point of contact, and it just doesn't have to proliferate any further. It doesn't have to judge or compare or remember or make up a story. And if it does happen, that's the next sense door contact—the thought, the emotion, the memory. "Oh, thinking."

There's no sense that whatever's arising is wrong or bad. This aspect of seclusion, of restraint at the sense doors, doesn't mean pushing away anything. It means that mindful, simple awareness right here. Right here, right here, right here. That's what our practice is from the moment we walk in the door, and hopefully the rest of our life too.

That's what is our support when the demons start to shriek, when it really gets wild. In a way, it's good that this doesn't usually happen in the first couple of days, when the mind is just falling asleep and getting restless. We're cultivating, developing the moment-to-moment restraint at the sense doors. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking—just this, just this, just this. It doesn't matter what this is. So when "just this" is suddenly intense, "Oh, yeah, this too, this too." That's also restraint at the sense doors. Satipañña, mindfulness wisdom. The wisdom arises just from the steadiness of bare attention. This is an aspect of seclusion, of restraint, of renunciation.

We're not shutting out the world. We're not shutting off the senses. And this is where this seclusion that helps us cultivate moment-to-moment awareness and wisdom is going to be able to take us back out into the world of people, of more stuff coming in. We're clearing the decks with the physical seclusion so that we can actually have a little space to notice how the mind works, how it gets sucked into sense contact and lost, how with just awareness that doesn't have to happen. But also how the sense contact is not the enemy. It's not a problem. And that includes the mental sense door.

So seclusion is not motivated by thinking that sense experience, human beings, anything is bad. Or that awareness, that freedom of heart and mind, that non-clinging is dependent on not having certain sense things present. That's conditioned. It can't be conditioned. But we're using conditions because we're so sunk in the other way of being and in the reactions that we need to artificially create a little space, a lot of space, over and over.

In a way, when the stuff starts coming up and the demons are shrieking, that's great. That's where we really learn the strength of moment-to-moment awareness, where we learn that it's accessible. Sometimes we're really lost in the shrieking and the groaning and whatever's going on behind those closed doors. But sometimes we all have that moment where, "Oh, it's just this. It doesn't have to go away to know the peace of heart and mind of non-clinging. It doesn't have to go away. I don't have to be different. Nothing has to be different."

The only shift is a shift of interest, of awareness, from really being so absorbed and sunk in the object—even when the object is my emotional crisis, it's still an object—to the awareness of. Awareness gets more interesting, the object less so.

Andrew Olendzki, in one of his articles, put it this way: "As sati, as mindfulness grows, our mental attention is gradually shifted from the objects of awareness to the process of being aware. This comes from an attitude of letting go of the object, abandoning attachment to the object." And as I said, the object includes any of the six senses, including all our stories and thoughts about me.

The mind is a dynamic process. When that mind and attention is stuck on what has arisen, kind of glued to it—as Ajahn Chah says, sunk in sensuality—then the mind seems rigid and limited. But the mind that is letting go moment after moment just keeps opening into the emerging flow. The flow just keeps on flowing. Mind is also part of that flow, moment after moment. Our practice isn't about lining up and changing and getting the right flow of objects so we don't have to be bothered anymore. It's the whole shift from being sunk in any sense experience at all. And viveka, seclusion, is just a support for this.

Moment after moment of simple mindful presence, this restraint at the sense door—just not shooting off—leads to citta viveka, or seclusion of mind. Classically, it's defined as the moment when the mind is secluded from the hindrances. This is often in the suttas when the Buddha says, "Secluded from the hindrances, the mind entered the first jhana." That's often the little phrase that's the prelude to moving into the deep absorptions: secluded from the hindrances.

It doesn't have to be deep absorption states, though. We all experience times of citta viveka when the mind is secluded from the hindrances. There are moments when the hindrances aren't there—times when your moment-after-moment attention is getting more steady, the mind is quieting down, and you're noticing more, even if it's not quite conscious, the peace, the stillness of the non-reactive heart and mind. As that begins to be more felt, more noticed, it becomes a little more likely to occur in consciousness. One moment of mindfulness is a proximate cause for the next moment of mindfulness. One moment of anger is a good indication for the next moment of anger when we're caught in it. So moment after moment of mindfulness quite naturally leads to citta viveka.

Whether it's deep absorption concentration or moment-to-moment just being with what happens, we like it. It's lovely. Those times when you're not thinking, "Oh God, when's anger going to come back? I'm having a moment of peace, but I know craving's going to come." The citta viveka is more like a relaxed space where just for some time, those old hindrances just aren't coming. It feels very spacious, relaxed, light, unified. It's not like you look around and think, "Wow, they're really not here. This feels nice." If

you say all that stuff, then you're gone. But it gets less brittle, more reliable, more flexible. It's not like you have to hold on to your concentration, have to protect it because something's going to come back.

It's really just this: because the peace is more accessible, the non-clinging mind is more familiar, more tangible. And clinging and aversion and being sunk—it just isn't very interesting anymore. The more flexible and relaxed and steady this state is—and it is a state, not the end of things—the less appealing all the regular sense pleasures are. To the point that things you really thought were so important, from that place, you just can't even... Who cares if I ever experience that again? Who cares? It's so gross, so crass. There's just a subtleness.

This is citta viveka, whether it's deep concentration or in a more broad, flexible way. It's not the end of things. It's not what we aspire to. But it is another level of seclusion, and it leads to what Sayadaw U Pandita calls vikkhambhana viveka, a more subtle sense of seclusion, where the hindrances are not only not there, but very far. They're really quiet. There's a sense they just couldn't get in there, even if you tried. The mind is very light and soft and buoyant and pliable. It's nice. This is not freedom, though. We like it, but it's not freedom.

But as the mind gets more and more secluded from being sunk in sense pleasures, from reactivity, from the hindrances, the lightness, the emptiness, the buoyancy, the non-reactivity, and the ability to be with anything gets more and more pronounced, recognizable, familiar. That's the value of this seclusion—not that it's a state to hold on to, because you can't, we can't, it's going to go—but that within it, just as without it but a bit easier, we can recognize that peace, the emptiness, the non-clinging.

But as it gets more subtle, the seclusion is very tricky because we fall so easily into what's called corruptions of insight—upakilesa—where we get basically attached because it's so nice. In the citta viveka, in all its various forms, one big thing that happens is at some point attachment creeps in. Usually we don't notice it right away because attachment isn't there. The hindrances are far away. But gradually, little by little, the attachment can really creep in. It's subtle. We don't recognize it until it's not there, until that nice citta viveka isn't there anymore. We really think we weren't attached. But so much of our practice, even without realizing it, can come to be around trying to get back to that state, that experience. "That's what freedom is. These grosser things can't be freedom. It has to be that." We don't see that this is conditioning. That can't be freedom.

The more subtle level is so much nicer than anything we normally experience that sometimes we may know it's not freedom, but we say, "You know what, it's good enough. I'll settle for this." And that's when we start getting attached to the silence, attached to retreat. We start yearning for retreat or not wanting anything to do with other people. Or on retreat, any sound—God forbid there should ever be a sound. We run around trying to stop all the sounds because it's going to wreck somebody's practice, impede their silence, their liberation.

I've been part of meetings where we're talking for twenty minutes about how sometimes people walk out that door and people sitting in the hall hear it open and it's going to destroy their practice. And I had just come back from Asia, where noise is not exactly the issue. Nobody is thinking there shouldn't be noise. Great, let them slam the door. Let there be some noise.

We can get reactive, obsessive, trying to protect our seclusion of mind, our viveka. Or we get dull—"This is good enough, this is it, this is all there is." Very subtly, something turns off the interest, the investigation. "Okay, now I know. This is it." If we relax in a way that means we don't need awareness anymore, it's going to take care of itself, we tune off into dullness.

The Buddha once said two things he never lost sight of when he was still an unenlightened bodhisatta: one was never to be lax in his energy, and the second was never to settle merely for wholesome and pleasant states of mind. That's a lot more difficult than it sounds. "All this work. This is great." Not settling doesn't mean we have to hate the wholesome and pleasant states of mind, but not to land there as me. Not to land there with clinging. Keep looking. Keep exploring.

I had a friend who was a monk in Thailand for many years, living in the forest. His life was very peaceful. His mind seemed really calm, equanimous, untroubled. You could think, "This is freedom." But at some point, he realized, "No, the conditions are supporting peace, calmness, equanimity. But I don't think it's freedom. I'm just getting dull." That realization motivated him to leave Thailand, come back to the States, and disrobe. And he found out it was true—clinging was still arising in the mind and heart.

I'm not saying we have to look for trouble. We can support ourselves. But not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind, merely for peace.

This brings us to the third kind of seclusion: seclusion from suffering—the way I described it in the beginning, seclusion of beings as a synonym for awakening, or suññatā, emptiness.

This is how Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it. First, suññatā refers to the characteristic or fundamental nature of all things: the fact that the character of all things is voidness, emptiness of inherent self. The second application points to the quality of the mind when it is not grasping and clinging at anything. The character of the mind when it isn't attaching to anything is called voidness also. To know Dhamma means that Dhamma is truly present and that we are aware of it. To know suññatā means that voidness is manifest in awareness.

I encourage you: in any moment that the mind is aware of any measure of emptiness, of voidness, even if it's not absolute or perfect, keep on recognizing it. On any one day, emptiness—remember, the quality of the mind and heart that's not clinging to anything—is there repeatedly in our awareness. Even if it's not the absolute suññatā, it's still very good. As long as we take the trouble to notice it. If we take an interest in this sort of emptiness, this voidness, right from the start, it will generate a contentment with voidness. It makes it easier to practice, to recognize, and to really come to know it more and more deeply.

In a way, that's the point of all our seclusion: to help awareness notice voidness, emptiness, the heart and mind of non-clinging, seclusion from suffering in a moment. It may not be the end of things, but it's still very good, and it's arising really very frequently every day in our minds, especially here.

When we're set on looking for experience or reacting to experience we don't like, we're still caught in the flood of sensuality. We don't notice just the moments of emptiness—nothing special, no reference point to me, no reference point to anything. They're not like big fireworks going off. Nothing special. But over and over, we learn to recognize them. We don't have to generate a contentment with voidness. That happens by itself. It's very trustworthy, this sense of attention moving more and more to the process of awareness and less and less sinking into whatever the object is. The emptiness becomes more and more obvious.

Our task is to learn to recognize and trust that the silence, the space, the emptiness is within, always accessible, not dependent on seclusion—though the seclusion helps us learn to recognize and re-recognize. It's not dependent on any particular experience.

It is easier for most of us to recognize the heart and mind of non-clinging, just little moments of it, to recognize how we're lost in reactivity and sensuality, when we have a measure of physical and mental seclusion. Otherwise there's just too much going on. But we don't have to stay locked in that seclusion. We don't have to be afraid. We have

to find somehow that as long as it's dependent on the situation, it still isn't free. It isn't stable enough. It isn't strong enough. We haven't really stabilized in it. So it's how to take it back into the world.

This is our practice for whatever we do after this. It doesn't mean one couldn't be a hermit or a contemplative or live really silently. That's also possible. But even that won't always be the case.

Thomas Merton wrote: "One who is called to solitude is not called to solitude to cultivate the illusion that he is different, withdrawn, and elevated. He is called to emptiness. And in this emptiness, she does not find points upon which to base a contrast between herself and others. On the contrary, she realizes, although perhaps confusedly at first, that she has

CHAPTER 28

Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this contemplative talk, Carol Wilson examines why the perception of impermanence (anicca), though constantly present in our experience, remains so difficult to truly embody. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates sensual lust, lust for existence, ignorance, and the conceit "I am," she explores what it would mean to live from the cellular knowing that all phenomena are in constant shift and change.*
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> *Wilson identifies three obstacles to perceiving impermanence: basic misperception where we see things as permanent, inattention that contributes to this misperception, and our instinctive resistance to the sadness and loss that change brings. She introduces the Pāli concept of santati—how the rapid continuity of successive phenomena creates the illusion of permanence—and shares a moving account of witnessing death in a Burmese village, contrasting how different cultures integrate or hide life's great changes.*
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> *Through the Buddha's teachings on the five khandhas, stories of Ānanda's grief at the Buddha's approaching death, and poetry from Galway Kinnell and Billy Collins, Wilson illustrates how opening to impermanence—rather than resisting it—actually deepens our appreciation for life and love. She emphasizes that insight doesn't create a different reality but reveals what's already here through a shift in perception. The practice of continuous mindfulness naturally reveals change without needing to conceptualize it, freeing us into what the Buddha called "the supreme state of sublime peace: liberation through non-clinging."*

Tonight I want to talk about impermanence.

The Buddha talks about three doorways to the deathless, really. The understanding—the cellular, the really living insight understanding—of impermanence, and or of dukkha, and or of anatta, the truth of non-self. These are like different doorways into the real opening of heart and mind in a moment, to seeing and understanding life, ourselves, mind and body the way it is.

Recognizing, seeing things the way they are, even in a moment, releases the heart and mind from clinging—only for a moment. It's a good moment. It releases the heart and mind from clinging, from confusion, from all these endless stories of me, me, me. It's a huge relief.

I read this quotation from the Buddha a couple of weeks ago, where he said: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit 'I am.'"

As I told you, that basically means complete liberation of heart and mind—those four phrases together. It's powerful. The perception of impermanence developed and cultivated.

To me, it's a mystery and it's not a mystery, but one of the mysteries of practice is: if this is how it is—and we should say this is how it is, pretty much everything, more than pretty much—things are impermanent. Why isn't that our perception? And how can we develop and cultivate that perception?

It's really quite interesting to me to explore, to keep reminding myself. I'll say a few things tonight—no way to cover the field. But it is difficult to truly, cellularly know, to live, to act from that knowing that all phenomena are in constant shift and change.

What would it be like? These are questions I ask myself sometimes. One is: Do I truly believe, live from, accept that truth? Not "oh yeah, that's right, everything's impermanent"—just conceptual knowledge. It's useful, but not enough. I really mean live from that truth. And what would be the effect of living, really responding, just knowing that that's how things are? How would it affect our responses, our actions, our decisions, how we meet the moments of our life?

Do we even—and this is now at a conceptual level—do we even believe it? Do we believe what the Buddha says quite often? In a lot of his talks, in his suttas, the way he describes the proof of anatta, of no self, he'll go through the sense doors or the five khandhas and he'll say: You see how they're impermanent? And anything that is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying. Anything impermanent cannot be held to as me or mine. He says that often as a definitive proof.

I find it worth exploring myself. Do I actually believe that? Do we believe, even if we know things are impermanent, that this makes them inherently unsatisfying? It doesn't mean not pleasurable—sure, pleasurable in a moment—but inherently unsatisfying, nothing we can hold to for any reliability, any lasting satisfaction.

It's really radical. Radical. Do we live from that? And yet it's in our face, in our perception, constantly.

This is the Buddha again: "Bhikkhus, there is no form, no feeling tone or vedana, no perception, no volitional formations"—which is all the thoughts, the moods, the formations of mind, the motivations—"and no consciousness."

Those are the five khandhas that make up a person. There's no moment of that which is permanent, stable, eternal. Nothing that is not subject to change, that will remain the same like eternity itself.

And then the Blessed One took up a little bit of dirt under his fingernail, and he said to that bhikkhu, "There's not even this much form"—a little bit of dirt under his fingernail—"not even this much form that is stable, that is not subject to change, that is eternal." And he went on through all the five khandhas. Not even this much that's not subject to change.

And he said, "If there were this much form, consciousness, or anything that was not subject to change, that was permanent, then this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of dukkha, of suffering, could not be discerned. But because there is not even this much form that is permanent, then it is possible—this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering, of dukkha."

Not even this much.

Is that how we live? Is that how we respond, relate to life? Do we really have that cellularly in our knowing? For me, there are moments—rare moments—when I actually know that. But there are many moments when that's not the perception.

So I want to talk a little about three different ways I see that we don't let this in. And I'm sure you can recognize other ways for yourself. Hopefully this sparks your own investigation—not thinking about, but investigation.

One is, of course, what I talked about a couple weeks ago: the basic misperception. We see things as being permanent. We just don't perceive the changing nature. "See" could be hear, smell, taste—but we don't perceive the changing nature.

Another way is simply inattention, which contributes to the misperception. We're zoning out. "Oh yeah, this has always been here. It always will be here." We don't even know what is here, but we just think something's always been here. Never going to change.

And another one, I think, is a kind of first noble truth response: our instinctive or habitual resistance, fear, or pulling back from sadness, from the unpleasant, from the sense of loss. The sense of sadness that comes often in our normal lives—we unliber-

ated, not completely enlightened human beings—when we are face-to-face with change. Often, not always. Sometimes change is beautiful. But often when we're confronted with change, it touches this place of loss, of sadness, of fear. And that's the whole second noble truth. We shrink back from that. We just don't quite let it in. As if it's a problem. As if sadness is a problem instead of just being part of life. No, but it feels wrong. Things shouldn't be changing.

Even in really big ways, in our whole culture, there are ways it's enshrined that we don't really include the great changes in the common culture. How old people are put away, sick people are put away in little enclaves. Death—we don't see it so much unless we choose to work in hospice or hospital. It's not so much part of ordinary life.

A couple of years ago, when I was helping to teach a retreat in Upper Burma near Sagaing—which is a beautiful spot on the banks of the Irrawaddy River, with tons of nunneries and monasteries—one day after lunch, the other Western teachers and translators and friends, about five of us, went for a walk along the river. We got about five minutes down the road, and along there was a stone wall looking down over the river, quite big, a broad river. And there were about fifty or sixty people gathered—the nuns from the two nunneries nearby. We knew some of them, along with other villagers.

So we stopped, and with us was the translator who could speak fluent Burmese. We talked to some of the nuns we knew. Mostly older, but there was also the Inyeti—she's like the cutest little nun in the world. She was six at that time, and we'd known her since she was four. So cute in her little pink robes. She came running over and was talking to us.

It turned out what had happened, what everyone was waiting for, was this: three young novice monks—about eleven, twelve, thirteen years old. It's very common for young boys to become monks for a while. They stay in the monasteries and get their schooling that way. These three had been out playing on the river, and one of them—who, it turns out, had just come from a far province a week ago and wasn't used to being near the river—had gone under. And he hadn't come up.

And they were looking for him. Well, it had been an hour, so he pretty much knew.

So they were looking for him, and everyone was gathering around. As we waited for a while, they found his body, pulled it up in a boat, carried it. They were just right on the road, and then right on the other side of the road was a big kind of sala, an open platform that was covered, part of the nunnery that was right there. So they carried him over very respectfully, put him on a bed that was on that platform, did everything they could to try and revive him. Of course, they couldn't—it had been an hour.

And then, seeing that he was dead, some of the monks ran and got fresh robes. They made him all nice. Now, mind you, the whole village—all the nuns and the monks and the laypeople—were all there and part of this. It was carried out really right in the middle of everything. And so everyone was there. This little six-year-old nun also—she was telling us she sort of knew him. He was a little bit of a relative, and everybody knows everybody there. It's very small. People know what's going on.

And so they were really sad, really sad. But everyone was there dealing with it. They sent someone off to his parents, which was going to take 24 hours to get to them. And in the meantime, they made shifts to sit there and chant and be with his body until his parents came. They were sad. People were upset. Little Linechi, she was upset. But it wasn't that the adult nuns were saying, "Oh, no, no, you shouldn't see this. This isn't something for a child to see." She knew everything that was going on. The sadness was there. The care. The including of his death as part of life.

The young monks he'd been playing with—of course, they'd run off. They were scared they'd get in trouble. So the nuns and monks were worried about them too. They went to find them, make sure they were okay, include them. They included us, brought us up. And there was just this sense that was really beautiful in a way—that this is a very touching part of life. The whole village, everyone there, shared it. It was just as sad as it would be for us, but it wasn't weird or something to hide or something to shut off.

And I thought how, here, if someone came up after an hour, when it was clear they were dead—not when maybe they could still be revived, but when it was clear—we'd have to call 911, the sirens, the flashing lights, the heart paddles, the whole thing. And that sense of community, of this being a part of life, wouldn't be there.

It really affected us all deeply. As we were leaving, one of our friends, a good friend of mine, said to me, "You know, I'm 47 years old, American. I'm 47 years old. I have never seen a dead person before." Just living a normal life in Silicon Valley.

I don't know, it just touched me in this way—how kind of split off the major changes are, the major transitions. And this is the big one, of course: birth and death. If we don't even open to that, if it's even hidden from us... never mind the fact that every single moment of our life is a constant transition. We're just not put in the modality to notice that. We have our habits, our attention trained to look for stability, to look for familiarity, to look for comfort. And it's more upsetting when things change.

When I, or someone I know, or even my elderly mother suddenly gets a disease or becomes sick, does my mind go, "Oh, the conditions for a healthy body have changed. Now there's sickness"? That's not the first reaction that comes up in my mind. Even with my elderly mother, even with myself—it's "Oh, no." And then maybe I can get there, and maybe I can't.

But it's just kind of like taking for granted when things are going along in a relatively okay way. Of course, that's how it's supposed to be. And when a difficulty or a change comes, something's gone wrong. So that's part of not letting in the perception that I see—it's kind of threatening, scary, uncomfortable, kept out, not really consciously.

Another thing we don't notice—and this is something I really got clearly one time at a teaching His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave—he was talking about how we assume permanence and we don't notice the momentariness of change. We say, yeah, we really know things change, and we can see something starts, my life starts, and it goes on for a while, and then it ends. Or the day starts and it goes on for a while and then it ends. Or the sitting starts and it goes on for a while and then it ends. But there's no persistence, no starting a period of persistence, staying the same and then change. There's no persistence for more than an instant. It's constantly arising and changing, arising and changing, arising and changing.

We don't tend to really recognize that. And it's true, it's happening so quickly that often we can't literally perceive it. But then on top of that not perceiving, we also don't look carefully enough. That's what a lot of our formal meditation practice supports us in doing—looking more carefully. And then on top of the not recognizing, there's just an assumption.

When people come into interviews and say, "Well, what happened in your sitting?" it's funny because people say, "What happened in my sitting? It was an hour. So much stuff happened. How can I say what happened in the sitting?" And that's right. It's a ridiculous question, what happened in your sitting. It would take an hour to describe what happened in the sitting, because every instant is different. So just in the way we communicate, we make big, sweeping assumptions.

I mean, it's okay to be able to communicate. It's okay that I more or less look the same as I did yesterday, so we can recognize each other. But it's not really the same. The whole thing about bad hair days—your hair is never really, unless it's shaved off, exactly the same day to day, which is a source of distress sometimes and happiness others. Little things, but big.

I was just talking to a friend yesterday who I haven't seen for a few years. He used to come here and sit a lot, but he's been home. And he said, "Well, but I see your pictures, and you look just the same." And I said, "Yeah, it's the same picture for ten years. Of course I look just the same." But he somehow didn't want to let that in. He goes, "Oh, no, it's a new thing that you're doing." I said, "Yeah, new thing, same picture." That's what we like to think—oh yeah, you look just as young as ever. I'm afraid not.

So never mind the big things. The momentariness of anicca, this constant, subtle shifting, is something that first is difficult to perceive, but it's also masked by lack of continuity in our awareness. There's actually a word for this in Pali: *santati*. Mahasi Sayadaw talks about it. He describes santati as mistaking a series of successive phenomena for a single phenomenon. For example, you're seeing or hearing something repeatedly, moment after moment after moment—say I'm looking at that chair, and it seems like it's staying steady, that I'm seeing it over a prolonged period. And so I think the thing I'm currently seeing is the same thing I saw before.

So I think that chair is the same. But it's also positing that this I, this consciousness, this body is the same. And it's all just going along the same until I turn my head. Then I'm seeing something different. But without actually looking carefully, I'm still positing that this I and this consciousness and this body are the same.

So santati, this continuity of phenomena and also the fast continuity of consciousness and of the sense door contact—it causes us to think that the thing we're currently seeing is the same thing we were seeing a second ago. It's a little disorienting to think that might not be true, isn't it? How can we function if this isn't the same as it was before?

The whole world's going to fall apart. How are we going to function? You know, the mind goes off into that trip.

And this is what's so great, because the perception of anicca really frees our heart and mind from clinging. It's not that going to the land of anicca from the land of permanence is what frees our heart and mind from clinging. It's already anicca. It's already that way. So if fear comes up just kind of spontaneously—oh no, how can that be?—okay, we just notice the fear. That's fine. But if you really let yourself get into the thinking about how can we function if everything's changing, and all of that, notice that is a complete waste of time. And just, if it's happening, fine, blah blah blah, but don't give it any energy. It's already that way.

The same is true with no-self. It's not like you have a self and you're going to get rid of it and then you won't know who you are. It's already that way. And this really helps me—I've said this before, but it just keeps coming back. The whole nature of insight is not about creating a different reality. It's about just that little shift of perception that recognizes what's already here in a different way. That's all. That's all it is.

I always use the example of those Magic Eye images that are just geometrical forms with no particular thing you can recognize. And if you look at it—steady but soft, right? You can't look for something. Steady, soft gaze, not trying, relax, and just stay there. And all of a sudden, a three-dimensional image pops out. Now, do you think that it wasn't there and then something happened and all of a sudden this 3D image popped out? Or was it maybe always there? We just needed that little shift of perception. Both ways of perceiving can be there. They both are there.

So in terms of impermanence, the perception of impermanence—even in a moment when we really are experiencing that constant rising and passing, rising and passing, the constant change of things—there might be fear in a moment. But just noticing that come and go too, that moment of experiencing in that way really frees something in that moment, something that we never really knew we knew. And even though that perception doesn't stay, that's probably how we function in the world. We go back to being able to recognize each other, and the room is still the same, and we know what objects are, and the table doesn't move generally. We're perceiving permanence.

But it's different to have a perception that's a conventional reality and useful, and we know that's what it is, and we're using it. That's different from once we know it's in constant change, but we can use the conventional reality. That's great. But when we don't know there's another reality, then the way we relate to the conventional perception of permanence is what leads us to clinging, to holding on, to fear—to basically relating in a way that isn't in sync with how things are. Square peg in the round hole, you know?

Remember that definition of dukkha? Like the axle rod fitting into the hole of the wheel and it doesn't really fit. So it's always not quite fitting—bad fit, not quite. It's a great description of dukkha. Part of that is we're not perceiving impermanence, so we're always relating as though this has got to stay, this has got to stay. Or this is going to stay and I want it to go, oh my God—instead of opening to the mystery, to the wonder.

So the second aspect I wanted to talk about is something that, for me, this is the way I experience it. Maybe it's not so for you. But there's the tendency, of course, to cling to what is familiar or beautiful, what I love, or just comfortable. And there's the sadness, the poignancy, the sense of loss that is a part of life for we unenlightened human beings on this earth. There's no way—no way to not experience loss, to not experience change.

And for most of us, I feel that the sadness that can come, from poignancy all the way to grief, is part of the play of being human in this world. Just like joy is. Just like compassion and love are. Just like anger is. I'm not saying we should feel grief or sadness, but I'm saying we don't need to be afraid of it, or pull back from it, or block the openness of our mind and heart, our consciousness, to recognize change out of a kind of instinctive fear of the sadness.

Clinging is so interesting, so poignant, because in some ways it's our unconscious strategy for happiness. If I hold on to this—this person, this relationship, this life situation, this finally perfect moment of mindfulness after all these months—clinging feels like the natural response. It's going to make me happy. And of course, as we know on this level, clinging is the very thing that actually blocks the ease, the happiness, the peace.

I experience clinging as a kind of intuitive but unfortunately wrong response to the unreliability of life, the shakiness. When I was talking before about everything being in constant change, my thinking mind, even as I say it, doesn't like that. I get a little feeling here. Everything's constantly shifting? No, I need something solid.

It's like being in an earthquake. Years ago, when I was teaching at Yucca Valley, we had an earthquake in the middle of the dharma talk. I was talking and everything went *shhhh*. I'd never been in an earthquake, and it wasn't a bad one. I thought, "Oh, this is kind of cool." But then later we had a much bigger one. I was outside, and because I was outside and no one was hurt, I could just experience it—the ground going, everything shaking.

Then for the next three days, every five or ten minutes, there was an aftershock, some of them quite big. So it stopped being so cool. Every few minutes everything starts shaking, whether you're lying in bed, sitting, eating, whatever. And the radio kept saying, "Thirty-five percent chance of the big one"—making everything sound as bad as it could be. So you sit there, everything starts rolling, and you think: Is this the big one? Do I have to run outside? Wait it out a little more?

You just couldn't settle. It was almost physical. The body just couldn't settle. And I really understood: you can't rely on this earth to be solid. The earth isn't solid. You can't rely on anything never to change, to always be there. It felt actually biological after a couple of days—it wasn't that my mind was so afraid, it was just the adrenaline, the unsettled quality in the body. But I got that sense of how much I didn't like it. I wanted to think there could be some steady, solid thing that I don't have to think about, where I don't have to let in impermanence.

I'm not giving this example as how the wisdom of impermanence, the perception of impermanence, frees us. This is an example of how resistance to impermanence causes this little bit of angst, this dukkha, this square peg in the round hole—it just shouldn't be like this. I want to settle instead of just rolling with it. Yes, it was unpleasant. Half the time things are unpleasant. That's how it is anyway. Half the time they're not.

So I get a sense that clinging is the response, the reaction to that unsettledness. And it's so poignant because it just doesn't work.

Galway Kinnell has a little snippet from a long poem:

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard
as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I have stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
Little Maud, yet perhaps this is the reason you cry.
This the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

I like that line: *as if clinging could save us*. It's really so poignant. But we can open to the poignancy. When we open to that, it's so touching. It opens us into beauty, like he says, *while my broken arms heal themselves around you*. When we don't fight it, it opens us into the mystery and the wonder of the world.

The Buddha said, "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful."

I like to think of this as cellular anicca—the cellular perception of impermanence, just letting it in. It really leads us into a deep connection and acceptance of what's happening now. It allows us to recognize, to be fully present and engaged in just what's happening now. Not holding to what was two seconds ago, ten years ago. Not busily constructing what could happen in the future, for bad or good, some kind of resting place. Not to need one is cool and peaceful, even just for a moment.

And yet it's really natural to resist, and to feel real sadness at change and loss. Even in the suttas there's plenty of it. The most famous example, of course, is Ananda, the Buddha's longtime attendant for twenty-five years. I'm sure you know the story of when the Buddha told Ananda he was going to die within three months. Ananda kind of disappears. The Buddha is sitting there in his assembly, and of course he knows—he can know, if he turns his mind to anyone, what's going on in their mind. So he turns to the other monks and asks, "Where is Ananda, O monks?"

Ananda had gone into his lodging. It's so lovely—the sutta actually gives the posture: "He stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost." He's leaning against his doorpost and crying: "Alas, the teacher is passing away, who is so compassionate to me."

It's really touching. Ananda comes across as very human, very kind, very accessible. He almost embodies what we could relate to if we were partially enlightened like he is. We can really relate to that.

So the Buddha calls him and says, "Enough, Ananda." Now, he's saying this kindly, not "you stupid jerk." He's saying it kindly: "Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So how could it be, Ananda, since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away?" It's just impossible.

He's not saying don't care, but just pointing to the fact that a great deal of our lamenting, our struggle, is really resisting what's already happening. But the feeling of loss can still be there without all the grief, without all the aversion.

There's another place—I may misquote it a little, but it's the right drift—where the Buddha says, after his two chief disciples Sariputta and Moggallana both died before him, he's looking at the assembly and saying, "It's as if this assembly is empty for me." Empty. He meant empty because it's empty of Sariputta, empty of Moggallana. They're nowhere to be seen.

He's not beating his head against the doorpost, weeping and wailing and saying things come together and go apart, the end of every meeting is parting. But he's noticing they're gone. He's noticing the loss.

So for me, I try to let the sadness, the sense of resistance, be a wake-up call rather than something to resist or think is bad or wrong—to just look and see: What's going on now? What's being resisted? And I find when I open into "oh yeah, this is changing"—really, by the time I'm saying this is changing, it probably already changed three days ago—but "oh yeah, this is changing," the holding on lets go. And then by itself—it's not like I say, "now I will open into being more connected"—it just happens by itself.

The response becomes more flexible, more appropriate.

There's the story of a friend of ours, a friend of mine who used to come and sit at Yucca Valley for many years—an older man who lives as a farmer in the middle of the country, doesn't know anyone else where he is that meditates. He would always come every year, one of these people who would say, "Oh, I really can't do it right, I don't know what I'm doing," but really dedicated, devoted. Sometimes he'd call up and share how when he was driving on his tractor, he'd be contemplating the Four Noble Truths or looking at his experience—really quite lovely. But one of those people who would think, "I can't meditate, I can't concentrate," you know, so that's for nothing.

Anyway, he told us that a few years ago he had to have open heart surgery where they replaced a valve. The surgery went okay, but then he was in the intensive care unit that night or the next day. And as he said—he's very funny—hooked up with a tube to every orifice. Then all of a sudden, everything started beeping and going wild, which isn't good. If you're in intensive care on these machines and they start beeping, it's not a good sign. He was lying there going, "Oh my God, I'm dying. Something's going on." And he was really present, he said. He thought, "This might be my last breath." He started panicking, and then the thought just came out of nowhere: if this is my last breath, let me really be here for it. And he just completely surrendered into that breath and then went unconscious.

Obviously, it wasn't his last breath. Later he woke up and freaked out and all of that. But that kind of—we never know. We don't know what seeds we're planting. We don't know when our attention is truly called, when the focus has to be there, and boom, here we are. Impermanence presents itself and the response is appropriate. It's flexible. It's connected. It's nothing we can plan, but we can trust actually that that's how it shows up.

So continuity of awareness, continuity of mindfulness—and I don't mean for two seconds. I mean that willingness we have. Of course we space out, but the willingness to really keep coming back into moment-to-moment awareness all day, every day. It's that continuity that actually reveals change on these quick and subtle levels. Because when we're just noticing moment to moment what's happening—and again, it's mindfulness that isn't conceptual, not what we think we're seeing or what we want to see or what we wish it was or what we think it is, but just what's happening now, now, now, that bare attention—that starts to reveal. You don't even have to think about it. Just keep noticing moment to moment. It reveals impermanence. It reveals the change.

You're sitting, you're walking, you're just noticing sensations in your body. For a while, the conceptual overlay might be "my back is always hurting" or "I always have this knot in my neck." But when you're looking moment to moment, it's rarely the same for two seconds together. Nothing's always. Nothing's always.

And I can't say how many times people come into interviews—and I do it myself—saying, "It's always like this. I always feel that. This is here all the time." And I'll say, "Frequently, or often?" And the person will go, "Yeah, frequently, often, yeah, yeah, no matter." Inside you know—yeah, it's always here, don't tell me. But when we really look, we notice when something's here. We may not see everything end. We're not always going to see things end. Something else starts and we're involved in the other thing. But notice when you're saying, "Well, I always feel this aversion." Right now you don't feel it, but it's always under there. No—notice that right now it isn't here. It's really gone. Notice the gone-ness of things as well as their presence.

A friend of ours, a friend of mine was describing this, the whole sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. Sakkāya—Sayadaw U Lak Khana defines sakkāya as just the flow of nāma-rūpa, the six sense doors, contact going on and on and on. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi—diṭṭhi is view—is in a moment when any of that six sense door experience, the body and the mind, is clung to in that moment, identified with in that moment as "me" or "mine." That's a sense of identity view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. In the bigger picture, the way Ajahn Sumedho uses the term sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like our personality view—our view, our sense of our personality, our familiar, comfortable sense of self. Even if you hate it, it's comfortable, or what we think our personality is.

And it's an effect of not seeing impermanence. We have certain habits that come up frequently—different ones of us may have different permutations of the habits—but nothing is always there. Steady awareness shows this.

I'm leading up to this: a friend of mine was telling me at a retreat, she was cooking at this retreat, and she considers herself a very aversive type person. And as she was saying to me—I've known her a long time—everyone else also says, "Yes, you're a very aversive type person." So she is someone who, at times, can manifest aversion once in a while.

But she noticed that was her sakkāya-diṭṭhi, her personality view: "Aversive type, I manifest aversion, that's the kind of person I am." But she was sitting for a couple of days during this long retreat, and she just brought in steady continuity of mindfulness, of sati—just to notice without prior conception the thoughts, the moods, what was coming up in her mind over and over.

And she said, as she looked steadily, yeah, aversion would come up, but also there were many kind, generous moments, many thoughts of compassion, many generous actions, a lot of just normal boring stuff, some desire—the whole range. She said maybe ten percent of the thoughts and moods were aversive.

So when you really look, you see that the overview, the concept, tends to cling to certain ones, string them together in the mind and say, "I'm aversive. That's what's always going on." The steadiness of mindfulness, when we're really committed to just noticing what's happening now—and when we space out, we're committed to notice again—you don't have to get all "let me see impermanence." That's just how it is. Just be willing to show up for what is without any preconception. The perception of impermanence is going to show up. There's no way for it not to.

And that's the other thing I was saying: just notice the gone-ness of things—of moods, of thoughts. A lot of people have said this to me in the last couple months. They'll be talking about some mood or some habit of mind, and they'll say, "Well, it was there a lot, and then it was gone away, but it was just underground. I didn't notice it, but it was still there."

Notice when your mind makes that assumption: "I didn't notice something, but it was still there." How do you know that? I mean, looking at what we really know, not our assumptions. And our assumptions are so familiar, we don't even notice we're making these assumptions a lot of the time. Again, familiar assumptions are another place we sometimes try to land for reliability, for comfort, for ease. "I may have a rotten personality, but at least I'm familiar with it and I can rely on it."

My friend—she could rely on herself to be aversive. I know she felt a little disoriented to find she had a lot of kind and loving thoughts. "Wait, that's not me."

I know after I did a long mettā retreat and I came out of it—not that I was spewing mettā everywhere; that would have been nice—I was just being me. But I have an aversive tendency, which means not anger, but just I'll notice what's wrong with things. The mind will go to the unpleasant first and go, "Well, that could be better."

And my mind would start doing that, and then completely spontaneously, the next moment, the consciousness would notice something pleasant, something beautiful about a person or a situation. "Oh yeah, but there's this thing." And the first couple times, I would go, "Who said that? Where did that come from? Who is that? That doesn't fit my image."

So we let the image go.

Ajahn Chah offers the practice when we're assuming permanence—notice when we're assuming permanence. He offers the practice of just reminding yourself as you go through the day, in any situation: "This too is uncertain." It could be a little ruffling at times, but just reminding with anything, "This too is uncertain." Not to scare us—and it opens us into actually the beauty of connectedness, of appreciation.

When the Buddha says the fact that something's impermanent means that it's inherently unsatisfying, unreliable, it doesn't mean we can't appreciate what's beautiful. It doesn't mean we don't love or care. It just means we don't look to that experience, that person, that sensation, that mood to give us something it can't give—which is any kind of permanence, any reliability in this world. But that doesn't make it bad or worthless. It doesn't mean we should be afraid of love or beauty.

It actually, in my experience, allows for much more appreciation of life, much more love, much more presence. It's really Krishnamurti's phrase—freedom from the known. That's what our whole practice is. Mindfulness is a moment-to-moment opening into the unknown. We never really know what's going to arise in the next moment. Never. We assume, and a lot of times the assumptions are more or less accurate—which is really too bad in a way, because that's what keeps us assuming.

This is uncertain.

Just in the last two days, I was told two stories—the shocking kind. One friend was telling me about her stepmother, an older woman who woke up one morning with her legs kind of numb, and within six hours was completely paralyzed by some kind of virus, something strange they couldn't identify. This was years ago. She's fought back; she can walk now, for a while with crutches, but she's never really gotten back to normal. Completely—who knows? Someone else told me a similar story about a person who just had a stroke like that, overnight. You're fine, and boom—paralyzed. Who knows?

Now, if we go around scared to death of that, that's not perception of impermanence; that's fear. But when we just open into that—wow, who knows?—it makes me just here, really alive. I can appreciate the poignancy. It actually has a kind of touching sense, that harbinger of change.

I don't know how it is for you, but when I see the geese, when I hear and see them flying over in the fall—I saw a flock today—it touches something really quite deep. It's beautiful. It's kind of sad. It's just this sense of real connectedness, and who knows? Who knows? And I feel so alive in that moment. I'm not looking forward or back. I'm just really here.

Freedom from the known.

It allows us to really open past the clinging, past the assumptions, past the dukkha, to just fall into that experience of the heart and mind of non-clinging. The Buddha's description of the supreme state of sublime peace: liberation through non-clinging. The coolness of not needing to find something to take refuge in.

I want to end with this poem from Billy Collins, because it gives me that feeling. He calls it "Aimless Love":

This morning, as I walked along the lake shore, I fell in love with a wren, and later in the day with a mouse the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

In the shadows of an autumn evening, I fell for a seamstress still at her machine in the tailor's window, and later for a bowl of broth, steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

This is the best kind of love, I thought, without recompense, without gifts or unkind words, without suspicion or silence on the telephone.

The love of the chestnut, the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel. No lust, no slam of the door. The love of the miniature orange tree, the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower, the highway that cuts across Florida.

No waiting, no huffiness or rancor, just a twinge every now and then for the wren who had built her nest on a low branch overhanging the water, and for the dead mouse, still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod, ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail to a pile of leaves in the woods, I found myself standing at the bathroom sink, gazing down affectionately at the soap, so patient and soluble, so at home in its pale green soap dish.

I could feel myself falling again as I felt it turning in my wet hands and caught the scent of lavender and stone.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 29

Compassion (Karuṇā)

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson explores karuṇā (compassion) as the natural corollary of realizing emptiness (suññatā). Drawing from both Theravāda and Tibetan teachers including Nisargadatta, Nyoshul Khenpo, and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, she illuminates how understanding the lack of inherent self-existence naturally gives rise to compassion, mettā, and generosity. When the narrow self-referencing of 'me' dissolves, the heart becomes ceaselessly responsive to the suffering of all beings.*
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> *Wilson connects this understanding to the Buddha's teaching on right intention (sammā saṅkappa) from the Noble Eightfold Path, explaining how wholesome intentions of renunciation, friendliness, and compassion naturally transform from their unwholesome counterparts through wisdom. She emphasizes that the seed of kamma lies in intention rather than results, using the sutta example of the blind arahat walking over ants to illustrate this point. The talk explores how moment-to-moment mindfulness practice purifies the mind stream, transforming habitual patterns into compassionate responsiveness.*
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> *The teaching comes alive through contemporary examples of compassion in action: Martin Luther King Jr.'s refusal to let hatred become his motive, Aung San Suu Kyi's unwavering commitment to justice and love despite years of house arrest, and the Dalai Lama's tearful acknowledgment that he 'cannot be otherwise' than nonviolent. Wilson also shares the Milarepa story of meeting demons with increasingly open-hearted surrender, and offers Dilgo Khyentse's practice of perceiving all phenomena as Chenrezig—the Buddha of compassion—as a means of cultivating this quality in daily life.*

So tonight I wanted to talk a little bit about compassion, karuṇā, in the context of what I talked about this morning in the reflection—the sense of when we realize emptiness, the lack of inherent existence of any phenomena. I read from Dilgo Khyentse this morning: when you realize all phenomena are empty and at the same time appearing, existing, we don't just leave it there, hanging out in nothingness. The natural response, the corollary, the kind of completion—you could say the other side of the realization of emptiness—is the manifestation of the good heart, as His Holiness calls it: generosity, mettā or friendliness, compassion, non-harming. It just makes sense.

This is one of my favorite ways of expressing it, from Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand, and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

Think of that not in a depressing way. It just makes total sense when we consider how concerned and caught up we usually are with the obsessive self-referencing of me, me, me—I'm the center of everything, good, bad, indifferent. We've talked about that a lot. When we're consumed by that, there's not really room to feel with, to have your heart quiver with, to be open to, present for the pain and sorrow of all humankind. We're hardly even present for our own.

The natural effect, the natural response in a moment when the heart, the mind is realizing this lack of inherent self-existence—the flip side is that we're all it, it's all us. What the Tibetans call "ceaselessly responsive" is the response of caring, the response of connectedness. Whether the appropriate response would be compassion in the face of pain or suffering, muditā in the face of joy, simple connectedness, friendliness, mettā whenever we meet anyone, or generosity if that's called for. I like to think of it as a tenderness for beings, ourselves included. Rather than desire and fear—the desire to complete ourselves, the fear that somebody else or something is going to get in the way.

Nyoshul Khenpo said that someone who realizes that all phenomena are empty and who realizes the non-existence of self or ego will naturally have spontaneous compassion for all sentient beings who do not realize this truth of emptiness and so continue to suffer through delusion and clinging.

Have you ever noticed that? In ourselves, of course—it's always easier to notice it in others. When we can see that someone's really suffering through holding on to some idea, through holding on to needing something, and we can just see, not with judgment, how unnecessary that is. When we're seeing that with balance, with equanimity, we don't think, "That stupid jerk, get over it." The natural response is simply, "Wow. So much suffering over something that isn't even real." Like when we're waking from a nightmare—it's the natural response. It's not like we have to do something, crank it up. We can work with that, sure. But what I love about awareness, what I love about mindfulness practice, is that simply by recognizing the truth of how things are, compassion, mettā, generosity spontaneously develop, grow, and manifest in us—starting with thought, moving to speech, moving to action. You don't have to be some special kind of person. It's the natural response.

This struck me last time I was in Burma. This could be completely not true—it's just something I made up—but it struck me in terms of the sense of naturally moving from the constriction of "all about me" and how narrow that is and how self-serving and how much that breeds desire and fear. I was noticing, from hanging out in Burma and with different Burmese people, how my sense of "me"—and also what I experienced with my family, with friends here in the States, in the West—is very much that me is me, like one person. It's about me and my identity and my ego and making my way in the world. It's a one-person sense of identity.

What I've noticed quite often in groups in Burma in particular, and some in Thailand too, whether it's the family group or even a group of people sitting at a table together day after day in a monastery on retreat, is that the sense of looking at "what about me" is really "what about us"—the me being extended to the family group or the group at the table. Just a natural kind of inclusion. Not of everybody, but at least a little bit bigger than just me.

For example, I'm remembering years ago I was on a long retreat at a meditation center in Mobi, actually where Venerable Ariyānani used to live. You'd sit for the meals at the same table every day with the same people, so I sat with three other women.

And they were always so happy to do it for her. It was lovely.

But in terms of sitting—because you share, they put pots of curry out and you share them, you don't get your own plate—I would notice that I'd be in my own little Carol's-meditating-world, taking my curry completely in my own little space. And the other three, all of them, were much more tuned into the whole table. They'd notice if I was running low and hand me more. And I made a point of mentioning that this one woman was kind of greedy and self-involved, because I'm not trying to say she was some especially compassionate person. But that was just more the sense of me extended beyond itself to the group.

Somehow this was like a huge insight for me—that it's a convention. It's just a convention.

And so in our practice, when we simply recognize for a moment that this idea of me is just a thought, just a convention, just a feeling, the natural response that comes from that is compassion, is inclusion. As Ajahn Sumedho likes to describe it, awareness is the point that includes—nothing left out. That's the natural way we move into compassion.

Nyoshul Khenpo also describes this beautifully. I'm paraphrasing here, but he says that the difference between the deluded mind and the enlightened mind is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. A deluded, ordinary mind in our normal life

tends to be very narrow, meaning closed in on itself, mostly concerned with the happiness and well-being of ourselves and those really close to us—our family—not really thinking too much or giving much concern to the happiness and suffering of the vastness of sentient beings. But through our practice, what happens is our mind and heart constantly becomes less rigid, broader, more open, not so narrow. This is really the way of the Buddha, who lived with compassion and care for all sentient beings, no one left out. Our whole path is a movement from this narrowness of self-centeredness and concern only for those close to us, toward considering the well-being of all sentient beings.

I like that.

So the way this shows up in terms of how the Buddha describes the workings of the mind—the connection between emptiness, compassion, friendliness, generosity, and how we are in the world ceaselessly responsive—is this: when you're sitting, or walking, or eating, everything comes and goes. All phenomena come. There's sense door contact. You notice it. It goes. Nothing's more important than anything else. Nothing's to be clung to as me or mine. And in that space—I keep saying awareness doesn't care what's happening, right? Nothing really matters. And that's true on that side of emptiness.

But if we take it without the corollary of ceaselessly responsive, if we take that into the world as "nothing really matters, awareness doesn't care and neither do I, whatever is happening is just what's happening, just what is, and the hell with it"—that's called falling into emptiness. It's actually massive delusion.

Ceaselessly responsive is when whatever factors in the mind or heart coalesce in a moment into what the Buddha describes as intention, motivation. Intention—right intention—is actually the second step of the Eightfold Path, the first being right view, right understanding. So you could say this understanding of no inherent self-existence is right view, one example of right view; the Four Noble Truths, right view. How we understand ourselves in the world forms the qualities, the states in mind and heart that coalesce our energy into intention. And intention is that quality, that factor in the mind, a volition that leads to thought, to speech, to action.

When the Buddha spoke about right intention—sometimes translated as right thought—he was being very specific. The intention of greed transforms, and it transforms naturally through wisdom into renunciation or generosity. The unwise intention of ill will transforms naturally into friendliness or mettā. The suffering, the unwise intention of cruelty transforms naturally into compassion. And I would add that pity or indifference as well transforms into compassion.

This starts by simply being a state of mind, a quality of mind and heart we experience just sitting here in response to thoughts, in response to experience. But it moves—a stronger intention motivates speech, and a stronger intention motivates action.

So ceaselessly responsive: when we talk about compassion, the description of compassion is the quivering of the heart in response to suffering, our own or another's. And sometimes Buddhism gets the reputation of being very passive.

So you might think, okay, so we sit here and let our hearts quiver and feel good about ourselves, and that's the end of it. But of course not. Of course not. That's where we start. But as compassion grows stronger and the appropriate situation arises, that intention will naturally move into speech and action.

Intention is really interesting in terms of understanding action and result—kamma and vipāka—in terms of how the Buddha talked about it. Because kamma just means action. And when he speaks of wholesome or unwholesome action, it's not a moralistic judgment, but rather action that leads to happiness, goodness, to wholesome results, versus actions that cause more suffering for ourselves and others—that's unwholesome. The seed of the action, the determining aspect, isn't the result of the action, because that's not in our control most of the time. The seed of action is the intention.

This is what I've been going on about for two months now—that what we're doing is purifying the mind stream, purifying the heart stream, the habits of our mind. This is what forms our intentions. This is the heart of awakening, the heart of how we move and act in the world. Because the same action seen from outside could come from many, many different intentions. And I know personally that one can really fool others as to one's intention. It looks good. But the seed inside ourselves—well, we can even fool ourselves, but it can't fool kamma. It's just what it is.

The example in the suttas about intention is this: a bhikkhu at the time of the Buddha who was blind was doing walking meditation outside in the forest. He was said to be an arahant, completely awakened, which means in the way the Buddha talked about it, it would not be possible for him to harm living beings. There would be no cruelty, greed, or aversion in his mind. So he's doing walking meditation, and there's a whole stream of ants, and he's walking back and forth across these ants and killing them. Some of the other bhikkhus saw this and went running to the Buddha, saying, "He's supposed to be an arahant, but he's killing ants! What do you say about that?"

If you read the Vinaya, the whole book of monastic rules, it's not meant to be funny, but it's interesting because I really get a sense that human nature hasn't changed very much. A great many of the rules come from bhikkhus running to the Buddha going,

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, he's doing this!" And then the Buddha responds, "Okay, obviously the spirit of it would be this, but I see I have to make a rule." And we won't even get into it, but in the beginning there were hardly any rules and they just keep adding up.

Anyway, the Buddha said, "Yes, well, he is an arahant"—only the Buddha could say that—"but he's blind. He does not know that there are ants there. There is no intention, no motivation, no volition in his mind whatsoever to harm living beings, and so it's not an unwholesome karmic action."

I think that's interesting, just putting it out for us to explore in ourselves. Because our tendency is to think, well, if it comes out to a good effect, it's been good. And maybe it has been good—that's still good. But the seed is really in the intention. Now, once that bhikkhu knew there were ants, if he just said, "Well, who cares," and kept on walking, that's very different. Very different.

So this is the place to really explore in ourselves what it's like when we think, speak, and act from desire—or not. From aversion—or not. And again, what I'm saying, what I really love, is that through clear seeing, through wisdom naturally arising in the mind as a function of moment after moment of clear seeing, our habits of mind, our intentions naturally transform. Naturally.

How many times—maybe even just here if you've been coming for a while, or in your life—just pick somebody who's bugging you. Don't pick the biggest, most difficult person in your life, but just something that's bugging you. You're crossing paths, you're feeling aversion, judgment, blame, the whole deal. And at some point you stop. You stop projecting, you stop buying into the ill will, and there's just this sense of connectedness.

This happens to me all the time. I just stop and let myself look at or feel with or just be there with a sense of that person. Or in my mind I think, "How would I feel if I acted like that? How would it feel to act like that?" Immediately, in that openness to connect—not the hugest thing in your life, okay, but in littler things—in that connectedness, the sense of me and what I think and my views is gone, and compassion naturally is there.

Wow. That would be suffering. There's no more anger. There's no more judgment. There's not even that sense of me and you. It's not about what's best for me—it's what's best for us. And that just naturally comes about. Trying to think what to do in a situation, instead of me and everybody else, it's us. The "us" might be here in this room, here in the center, in the whole world.

It doesn't mean we know what's best for us, right? That's another piece. It doesn't mean we have all the information, and sometimes we'll never have all the information. And it may be that what we really clearly think is best for us, we're not actually able to put into effect.

Okay, then our job, our awareness, the wisdom is: can we keep coming from the compassion, the connectedness, rather than the frustration of all these incredibly dense people not seeing so clearly what's best for us and acting on it, by God.

How we speak, think, and act—mostly when we're not consciously choosing but simply letting whatever comes up arise—is the habits, the old habits we've been talking about. It's beautiful to see them transform. One of my favorite lines from the Buddha is: whatever one frequently thinks about, dwells upon, that will become the inclination of the mind. And without getting scared about it, just explore. What one frequently thinks about, dwells upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind.

A lot of what happens for many people in intensive meditation retreats is that we see, kind of like in neon lights, some of the habits of our mind—some of the not-so-lovely habits, but also some of the beautiful ones. Part of why people are really struggling, when it feels like you're up against the wall or moving through muck, is because habits we didn't even know were habits—they're so familiar, like an old glove—start to stand out in neon.

But seeing them is different from believing them and being them. That's the key. That's the transformation. How we meet what's currently arising in our mind—that's where wisdom and compassion are developing. Not by what's happening, but by how we meet it.

The habits of our mind become who we are, the intentions. I've been spending the last few years a lot of time in nursing homes, assisted living homes, hanging out with elderly men and women with dementia—really a lot of time. I won't say Alzheimer's, because sometimes that seems to eat at the brain and actually change the personality like a disease. But there's a different kind of dementia, which my mom has, where you're essentially the same person, but you're just not remembering so much. And the habits of mind are just so clear. I want to tell you, sometimes it's scary. They're just so clear.

My mother has become much more childlike and enjoying. We'll be on the way somewhere, like the doctor, and she won't remember where we're going or even why. When I remind her, she doesn't even remember that she's sick—unless she coughs. But

on the way she'll stop and go, "Wow, those trees are so beautiful! I just love looking at those clouds." Fifty times on the way: "I just love looking at those clouds." And it's fresh. It's new.

There are other people—Ajahn Sumedho tells this story. He went to some nursing home in England and there was one old lady; the first thing she'd say is, "You're not getting my money." So sad. I mean, that's the reality. My mother, every time I go: "What can I do for you, honey?" That's her thing. It's both beautiful and scary to see.

What I really want to emphasize is that we may not even realize how much the habits of our mind are shifting simply through the moment-to-moment clear seeing of awareness. That's really extraordinary. We're just noticing what's happening, noticing what's happening, noticing what's happening. But in each moment that we notice what's happening, we're not feeding greed. We're not feeding aversion or ill will. We're actually strengthening connectedness, compassion.

In every moment of activity, we are committing to something—the question is, to what? It's not so much the object we're committing to, but the way, what's in the mind that's paying attention, what quality of mind is present in how we meet this moment.

Currently arising experience—say a moment of greed, a moment of love, some memory from the past, some fear—that's the result of previous action, previous karma. That's just what's happening. How we meet it in the moment is the present moment karma, which will create future results. This is why how we meet our joys and our demons in our life, in our meditation retreat here—that's why the difficult times are so important.

And it really doesn't matter the magnitude of the difficulty. Some people at times might have huge suffering, either in their external life or huge trauma coming up, or they're simply a kind of person whose nervous system is incredibly sensitive and it seems like massive suffering. Someone else might think, "Well, my suffering's nothing. My knee just hurts, or I'm feeling a little lonely." But it's not about comparing suffering or the quality or degree of it. All of our suffering, any of our suffering—it's good enough.

It's good enough to awaken with. It's good enough to meet with this openness of heart, of mind, this connectedness that is the response of compassion in the moment.

When we hate what's happening, when we push it away, that's the response of aversion. Okay, next moment—another chance to meet it with compassion. It doesn't matter.

If we just had retreats that go from good to better to best, pleasant to beautiful to sunny, light and bright and peaceful, and that's all that ever happened—it just wouldn't really do the job. But I somehow know, I've never met anyone for whom that's all that ever happened. Some people get more difficulty than others, but it doesn't matter. They still suffer. Don't worry—everybody's suffering. And we get just the suffering we need, you know?

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about compassion, or bodhicitta, which is the ultimate compassion, the noble or awakened heart—the conscious motivation to practice, to awaken, in order to bring all beings to awakening. So our conscious motivation in meeting our knee pain, in meeting our loneliness, is to really meet it with compassion, not only for ourselves, but so that we can be of aid to all beings. It's vast.

But he says, how does this vastness of compassion develop? It starts with insight into what suffering is, what pain is, what sorrow is. And how do we get that insight? He says by focusing on, by meeting our own experience, by really opening to suffering in our own hearts, in our own minds. Where else are we going to learn it? And from that place—and again, this is still the Dalai Lama—that compassion then strengthens as we move into a sense of empathy, a sense of connectedness with all beings.

I love that in terms of meditation retreat, in terms of awareness in our life. Where do we start? We start where we are, right here. How do we start? Simply by meeting this moment with kind attention. Sharon Salzberg likes to say that to pay attention is to love. I really like that. You get the sense when you're suffering, if someone's just really there with you—kind, present, non-judging, not trying to fix, just really there with you while you talk or whatever you need to do. To me, that's a real experience of feeling loved, feeling received, feeling cared for. And in some ways, it's kind of rare sometimes.

So we start by bringing that to ourselves. To pay attention is to love. To love is to connect with, to accept, and from that the wisdom arises that moves into the ceaselessly responsive—whatever is appropriate. We just start simply in this moment right now.

Desmond Tutu, the archbishop from South Africa who won the Nobel Peace Prize, who was one of the instrumental people in organizing and carrying out the peace and reconciliation process after the end of apartheid—he was recently in Boston. I heard a little snippet of what he said on the radio this morning. He was facilitating a group of Israelis and Palestinians. But what I actually heard was a moment where he was taking questions from young women and men, late teenagers in Boston who were coming from schools in areas where there was a lot of violence, a lot of hatred.

One young man asked him, "Bishop Tutu, you say that we learn to hate. We're not born hating. It's not our natural state—we learn to hate. But I'm a student in this violent environment where there's so much hatred and so much fear. So how can we, in the midst of this culture, learn to love? How can we bring that to the culture?"

And Desmond Tutu said, with a great deal of emphasis, a great deal of passion—he said to him, "You can make a difference." He really emphasized it: "You, you, you." And you could tell he was pointing to all the people there. He said it so fervently: "One person can make a big difference. You start with you. Learn to love here and now."

Now this is me saying, so what we can do is you, you, me, start now. Learn to love—at least learn not to hate this present moment, whatever's arising. Beautiful, ugly, scary, boring, not what we need, crappy practice, whatever it is. Learn to love. How do we love? Simply by paying attention. Whatever it is.

This is from Pema Chödrön. She says, "How are we ever going to change anything? How is there going to be less aggression in the universe rather than more?" She says it starts by being willing to feel what we are going through. It starts with being willing to have a compassionate relationship with the parts of ourselves that we feel are not worthy of existing on this planet. If we are willing through meditation to be mindful not only of what feels comfortable, but also of what pain feels like—if we even aspire to stay awake and open to what we're feeling, to recognize and acknowledge it as best we can in each moment—then something begins to change.

Just even aspire. Don't even try to be successful. Just have the willingness, as someone said today, to be here.

And just today, it hit me really strongly. I think I was walking up here, walking somewhere. At the moment, my mother's really sick, and I have to go down there in a few days and go through some whole thing. It was just kind of weighing on me. As I was walking, I could feel that little bit of distance—I could name it, I could feel it, but there was just that little bit of separation. And in the noticing, boom, my attention just really dropped in. I quit trying to hold myself separate.

How many times has this happened in my life? A million, right? That I've been watching my mind and suddenly: *Oh, right.* As soon as you drop in, quit fighting, surrender, quit trying to figure out, just feel whatever it is—you don't have to know what it is—that's the place where compassion naturally arises. The sense of love, the sense of connectedness. Duh, you know? Holding away is separation. Feeling is connectedness. There's nothing else to do.

And also, I might say, the place of freedom. There's no more fear, no more problem. It's just this. I've experienced that a million times. The habit is still to push away. But oh, right—this is the place of freedom. Right here. The place of connectedness.

So really looking at how we meet what's arising, how do we meet the demons that are coming up in our own experience here? I want to read you a story from Milarepa that I like—which is why I'm using the word demon.

You know who Milarepa was, right? The incredible Tibetan yogi, one of the most famous, in his cave for years and years. A great poet. I'm going to condense this considerably.

He was in his cave, and his mind had become very blissful. He'd been there a long time, so he was really tripping out on his meditation. He went out to gather wood and carried some back up to his cave. When he got there, he found seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire. Some were bringing water. Some were grinding tsampa, barley flour. Some sat performing various magical tricks. Basically, they'd made themselves at home.

When Milarepa saw them, he became frightened. So he meditated on his deity. He uttered a subjugating mantra.

He performed a subjugating gaze. He did all the tricks he knew to make them go away. Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness. But he still could not pacify them.

I just love that, because that's the order, right? Do everything you can to make them go away. And then, "Oh yeah, compassion." But they still don't go.

So he thought, maybe these are local deities of the place. And I have been here for months and years, and I have not really praised them. So then he sang them a song of praise, basically saying, "Okay, okay, we can live here together." And at the end he said, "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. So drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone."

And you know, three of them went away. Three of them went away. But he was still unable to make the other four go away.

So then he said, "Oh, I realize your magical obstacles." And he sang a song of confidence in his understanding and in the view. I'm skipping it because it's really long, but it's beautiful poetry of confidence in his understanding, in the view. He ends that with, "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse." So it's like, "Oh, okay."

Three of them vanish like a rainbow. The remaining one performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So then he sang a song of the view, the pinnacle of his realization. He reached into his deepest realization, and this ends with, "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. So Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk out our differences. Ah, Ma, I feel compassion for this spirit."

And then he prays: "Lord Vajradhara, whose essence is Akshobhya, grant your blessings so that this lowly one"—meaning himself—"may have complete compassion."

Thus Mila sang. And with friendliness and compassion, and without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him, and so vanished like a rainbow.

Our steps of compassion. And when we really surrender, really surrender, we find the true compassion and the wisdom and the emptiness. But we can't fool it. We just can't fool it.

I want to come back again to the fact that in the way I'm talking about it, the heart of compassion, of connectedness, of mettā, is in the understanding, in the intention. It's interior, you could say—from the inside out. And for sure, there are many people doing wonderful things in the world, really wanting to help, and this is great. But mostly, if it's from the outside in, from an idea of what compassion is or what loving-kindness should be, it can still do good. I'm not saying that we have to wait until we're absolutely perfect Milarepa before we do anything. But if it's from the outside in, matching an idea, matching a view, for the most part it's not sustainable. And it's not really this depth of wholesomeness.

We all know about peace marches that turn violent, or people really doing active social service work, environmental work—really good stuff that is so difficult that it ends up getting fueled by anger, by despair. It starts to eat the person up from the inside. Not sustainable in that way. That's not complete enough. That's not really the compassion that's coming from the inside out.

I just love to hear about, read about, meet people that do seem to come from the inside out. It's incredibly inspiring. And you see, far from being passive or what we'd call a doormat, there's incredible courage. It doesn't mean they can necessarily fix everything. The Buddha couldn't fix everything.

But you really get a sense of the power of this coming from the inside out, that the wise motivation we can keep drawing from, this ceaseless response, is because it's fueled by really knowing in ourselves the wisdom of our basic goodness.

I see the difference in myself when I'm trying to be compassionate versus when it just naturally springs forth. It's a world of difference. The second one has nothing to do with me. It's just life responding to itself. The first one is all about me. And maybe I do something useful, but there's this tightness, this constraint. It's just very different, and it's not sustainable.

So I'll give some examples because I love them. One that's always deeply affected me is from Martin Luther King. At one point in reading a biography of him, he was talking about the bombing of the church in Birmingham where four little girls were killed—really, really an awful thing. His whole movement, the whole peace movement, was coming from the place of nonviolence. It wasn't just Dr. King. But one place he said, "No matter what people do, I refuse to let hatred become our motive. I refuse to become bitter." That just really touches me. I refuse to act from hatred. I refuse to become bitter.

And another place I read, still about Dr. King, was about this sense of not making someone the other. That's how we get into hatred. That's how we get into bitterness. He was on a plane, and there was a Justice Department lawyer—this was a time when the Justice Department wasn't being very supportive, just kind of trying to work a little in the background. At this point, one of Dr. King's main advisors was a lawyer from New York, a white lawyer who many years ago had some communist connections—you know, in the 50s he'd gone to some communist meetings or something. This was around the early 60s, when it was still a big thing if anyone had been a communist or ever shook hands with someone who was a communist. It wasn't that far from McCarthyism.

So this Justice Department lawyer spent the whole plane trip trying to urge Dr. King to abandon this friend who was also one of his advisors. He kept saying, "Look, this guy used to have communist connections. You shouldn't be seen with him. It's going to look bad for your movement." Dr. King was being very polite and listening and responding. And suddenly this Justice Department man got it. He said, "Oh, this man I'm talking to—Dr. King—he would never shun even the most hateful segregationist bomber. If that person came up to him and really said he wanted to meet him as another human being and shake his hand, Dr. King wouldn't put him out of his heart." That's not this guy's lan-

guage, "out of his heart," but he wouldn't shun him. And the lawyer realized: never mind a friend. So Dr. King is being very friendly to me, but he's not about to make this friend the other because maybe he has some bad connection. He's not about making anyone the other.

Really, how can we do that if it doesn't come from deep within our own understanding, our own way of being? It can't just be an idea. How are we going to act when the chips are down?

Aung San Suu Kyi is another one like that. You know who she is, right? She was still under house arrest for the better part of eighteen years. I read once that she said when she first went back to Burma—she lived in England with her husband and kids—she first went back in 1988, not to be part of the democratic movement and the demonstrations that were happening. They weren't happening yet. She went back because her mother was really sick and dying, and she went to take care of her. So she just happened to be in Burma in '88 when the demonstrations and uprising happened, when the democratic demonstrations were so ruthlessly put down. Because her father had been a hero of independence in '48, '49, she became the figurehead—because of her own strength of heart.

But this is what she said: "I never had any idea to become the head of the democratic movement for Burma or any kind of icon to the Burmese people. I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple that they can't believe it. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it."

The motivation is its own reward. Just that quality. Incredible courage, right? It's not about being a doormat at all.

I have friends who live across the street from Aung San Suu Kyi's house. So mostly for years, ever since I've been going to Burma, that road has been blocked off. But last year—now, forget about it—but last year there was a little short instant where it wasn't, and so they sneaked me into their house for tea. It was kind of cool, just to see, oh, Suu Kyi's over there. I mean, it was still guarded, and it's way in the background. But just seeing someplace gives you more sense of the reality.

And so just driving by her house, which you can't really see, but just down in there, I was talking to my friend Kinson and I thought, wow, just on a daily basis, what must her life be like? She's been locked up in this house with maybe one or two ladies to help cook for her and take care of her, no phone, no other contact, for years, all by herself. What would your days be like? What would your years be like? Her husband died. Her

kids have grown up. What would it just be like on a day-to-day basis? What quality of sincerity, of wisdom and motivation, the willingness to keep coming from? And she does—every time anyone has a chance to speak with her, she keeps coming from clarity, wisdom, and compassion. She's never in any public way given into anger, bitterness, or just "get me out of here." Incredible power of heart and mind. And she said, if there's anything I think needs to be done in the name of love, in the name of justice, then I'll do it.

But in terms of actions in the world, it isn't easy. In terms of just being with ourselves, with the pain of ourselves, it isn't easy. For great karuṇā, for ourselves, for the world, it doesn't matter. And it really moves from self into the world. I know you must have experienced this. I have many times. Well, just like today, when I dropped into that sense of the sadness—the sadness of change and old age and suffering and illness. It stops being about me personally or this particular story. Not even thinking about it—it just becomes the pain of the world. In that moment, there really isn't a sense of differentiation or "why me" or "why my mother" or "why?" It's just like, oh yeah, this is part of life on this planet. And we feel really connected whenever I've been in a hospital or when I've had friends going through difficulty.

This might sound silly, but I'll say it anyway. It isn't personal. But someone was telling me once she was on retreat and she was doing eight precepts and really, really hungry at night. And at first she was having a lot of aversion, a lot of reaction to it. And then it kind of hit her. This might seem like a coddled American who's had everything, but it was very sincere. I thought it was very touching. She said, "I've spent so much time in India where there are so many people who are really starving. And I thought I was compassionate, but I never really let it in. I mean, we can't really know what it's like to be starving, but I never even could let it in what that might feel like. And when I just open to my little simple hunger pangs without it being all about me, it opens into the hunger in the world. I really get a sense—oh, there are people everywhere in the world going to bed hungry, and they don't have a choice."

We never know what way the connectedness takes us in, but really the sense of our dukkha stops being personal and it starts being that of all beings.

So whether it's for here, whether it's in the world, great compassion really needs to be balanced with wisdom, with equanimity—with the equanimity that first knows we can't control all the results. We can't. Like Martin Luther King or like Suu Kyi—how can we stay open? How can we keep connecting when the results not only don't turn out good, but sometimes turn out really bad? How do we not let bitterness become our

motive? Moment to moment, moment to moment. Also knowing that we can act with really sincere compassion and, as I said before, not have the big picture, not be able to have the big picture, but still do what we need to do.

Sister Chan Khong, who is the nun who's a close colleague of Thich Nhat Hanh, talks about in her autobiography during the Vietnam War, when she was quite young then, and still quite a peace activist, a Buddhist activist.

And at one point she was thrown in jail, a South Vietnamese jail, for handing out peace pamphlets, something like that. She was in a big holding cell with maybe sixteen or twenty women of all ages. And she said in that cell there were two young girls, eleven, twelve years old, who had been swept up in one of the sweeps the South Vietnamese did of a village. "These are all Viet Cong," and they threw them in jail. They were just young girls in the wrong place at the wrong time—the wrong place being where they lived. They had done nothing, and they were in this bad environment with some hardened criminals.

Sister Chan Kong got released soon through connections; her family had connections. As she was leaving and having, I guess, an outtake interview with the head of the jail, she said to him, "Oh, by the way, there are these two young girls. They didn't do anything. It's really not good for them. Maybe you could let them out."

And he said, "Oh, so I see that the prisoners are talking to each other. I see that the prisoners are exchanging information. This is not okay. I'm going to really harden up the conditions here. Thank you for letting me know this."

How would you feel? How can we refuse to let bitterness become our motive? How can we keep going? And also, for me, I could imagine being a more passive type. I say, "Okay, that's the last time I ever try to do anything to help anybody. I'm just screwing it up worse." But that's also aversion, despair.

So that's our koan. I don't have the answer. But I do know: moment to moment, moment to moment, how am I meeting this moment? And when it all seems too big, when the vastness of suffering in the world seems too big—I know for me there are plenty of times when I just feel overwhelmed. Listening to the news, or it can be my own life, it can be pick your spot on the planet. Overwhelming. If I keep going into that, it is too much. The wisdom, the compassion isn't strong enough in that moment. But if I can just come back from ideas to meet the moment, then it's possible again.

One thing I want to offer, because it's been really interesting and helpful for me, is a practice that Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche mentions in his book *Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*, which is a lot about Chenrezig, who in the Tibetan cosmology is the

Buddha of compassion. He's talking about imagining that all phenomena are Chenrezig. He says when it's like this, you imagine in this sense all appearances, everything you see, all form is Chenrezig's body. All sounds, whether it's the sounds of animals or the wind or people or machinery, all sounds are Chenrezig's voice, the voice of the Buddha of compassion. All thoughts, all moods, all mental experiences are the blissful unity of compassion and emptiness. Everything is the manifestation of Chenrezig.

Play with that. I was playing with it once when I was on a self-retreat for a month, and it was... no, don't get too trippy about it. But just notice—I especially was doing it with thoughts and emotions. I thought, "Oh, that again." That's Chenrezig's emptiness and compassion. That's just Chenrezig manifesting. Somehow magically I didn't get all upset at it. "Oh, Chenrezig, emptiness and compassion just manifesting." Everything is of one taste, and the response of acceptance and compassion really came quite naturally. It's just a lovely shift, for me, on how I perceive all aspects of the universe. All sounds were Chenrezig's voice, so I didn't differentiate between the dogs, the motors, the sounds I like, the sounds I don't like. What is that? Oh, it's Chenrezig. Hard to get mad at Chenrezig. And it really was quite lovely in the effect that it had.

I just want to offer that.

And in terms, again, of this refusing to become bitter—the story of the Dalai Lama, an interview with him where he's talking about young Tibetan men. He was having a discussion with them, and they were basically saying, "Look, your way of working with the Chinese, with nonviolence—it isn't working. They're taking over Tibet, destroying our culture." The young saying to the old: "Old man, it isn't working. We need to do something else. We need a different procedure, a different way."

And in this interview, the Dalai Lama was weeping. He said, "You may be right. Maybe it isn't working. But I cannot be otherwise. I cannot."

So I just want to end with a line from Adyashanti:

Saving all beings is not something that you do. Saving all beings is a verb that you become. You become the saving of all beings. That's just what you are.

Emptiness and compassion working together.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 30

Habits of Mind

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this profound talk from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson examines the habitual patterns of mind that perpetuate our suffering despite our sincere intentions to awaken. She illuminates how our conditioning drives us to seek pleasant experiences, avoid unpleasant ones, and construct everything around a sense of self—habits so deeply ingrained they feel natural and trustworthy.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Sumedho, and Sayadaw U Janaka, Carol explains how these mental habits operate beneath our awareness, coloring our experience before we even recognize what's happening. She references the Buddha's teaching on the luminous mind from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, noting that the mind's natural clarity is always present but obscured by our attachment to the afflictions that visit it. The practice isn't about making awareness purer—it's about learning to trust it over our habitual reactions.*
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> *Carol offers a radical reframe: liberation isn't about changing experience or achieving special states, but about withdrawing identification from our reactive relationship to experience and resting in the knowing itself. She describes this as a 'Tai Chi move'—shifting from entrancement with objects to confidence in awareness, which she calls 'the point that includes.' Any moment of struggle becomes a doorway back to this recognition, and every appearance serves as a conduit to awakening when we simply notice: 'It's like this.'*

The other day—or maybe it was only yesterday—I mentioned in the morning how it can be helpful just to take a moment to reflect, to connect with our deeper motivation, that faith which keeps us going.

This morning in the instructions, Guy also spoke about moment-to-moment intention, but in the questions I could hear it morph into the bigger sense of our motivation. So I want to begin by reminding us—mostly tonight I'm just talking about things we all know, reminding us of what we already understand—how this practice, both the external form and the internal work we're doing, goes against the stream of society. That's how it is now. That's how it was at the time of the Buddha. He said it himself. It's like swimming upstream against the normal flow of society.

If you've been here for six weeks, there's no question, but even if you've been here for one week, you know that there are times—sometimes fleeting, sometimes quite long—when you really need to be able to reconnect, to call on your motivation, to call on

your faith. Our usual way of thinking, the way of being in the world that we've been taught from our culture—you can't always draw on that to keep doing what we're doing here.

As someone said today, practice is going fine, and then the mind says, "Okay, I'm out of here. Time to go to that beach. Time to do whatever." And the way we're brought up, the way we live, we believe all this stuff. The mind says something, and we go, "Yeah, that's right," and we do it. The next minute it says something else, and we think, "Oh, yeah, that's right too." We do that, and we wonder why we're crazy. But in the world, in the way of normal society, that's what we do. We just follow the habits of the mind.

In some ways, that's one of the great things about an intensive retreat structure like this—the fact that we're all here together. Other times, that's the hard thing. But at those moments when we really think, "What am I doing? It's so hard to just keep paying attention," we look around and there are all these people also doing it. We think, maybe I'm not completely insane.

That's externally. We find something to strengthen our faith, to strengthen our motivation. Whatever got us started in our practice in the beginning, whatever inspired us—it's called bright faith in the way the Burmese speak about it. Maybe someone you met really inspired you, or talked about the Dhamma, or inspired you in how they were. Maybe something you read. Whatever it was, it lights us up. It gives us energy. One of the definitions of faith, or saddhā, is confidence, willingness to do. That gets us here. It gets us started. Sometimes that's what we need to call on in the hard moments.

You might have a little short snippet of something you read—tiny, tiny, little short thing. Not books and books, not forty talks on one CD, but some little thing that inspires us. Bright faith. It reminds us. Or looking at the statue of the Buddha, or reflecting on people that we've known. I think the reason people talk about the Dalai Lama so much is because he's such an inspiring figure in that way. We need this.

We also need to be able to tune in internally to our deepest motivation, as I said the other morning, because external bright faith gets us going, but it doesn't keep us going through the most difficult times. Luckily, as we begin to have more experience for ourselves, the bright faith, the external inspiration, gets verified, doesn't it?

One of the wonderful things about the way wisdom arises in our mind through paying attention, through awareness—you only need one little short second of wisdom, of insight. That can balance weeks of slogging through. Thank goodness it doesn't have to be equal airtime, or we'd really be in trouble. You're going days and days and weeks, and then it's like, "Oh, I see. It's all empty. It's no problem." And it really is no problem.

So the big mystery, really—the big mystery of our life, of how our mind works, the habits of mind, the spiritual practice—to me the big mystery is this: why, when it's so clear there's no problem, when it's so clear that really nothing that's happening matters—you may not agree with me, but in those moments it's so clear it doesn't matter—why do we get sucked in again? Why? Two seconds after we see, "Wow, that's just craving, and the suffering is the craving," why do we turn around and go crazy because the last banana's gone?

Why? And we can watch the mind doing this and go, "But it's just craving. It shouldn't bother me. It shouldn't bother me, but..." We can't kid ourselves. Now it does bother me. And why does it bother me? That bothers me. And then we get spinning, spinning.

So this is the habits of our mind. And that's mostly what I want to speak about tonight.

The faith, reconnecting with our motivation—it's essential. It's inspiring. It takes us out of the known. It takes us out of the normal cultural world, what we've been used to. And that's really what the practice of awakening is: looking at our life, our minds, our bodies from a different perspective. And to do that, we need to create a little space.

But sincere motivation needs to be supported by discerning wisdom. Just the most sincere motivation in the world, the bright faith—it gets us going. But until we start to really have verified experiences, until we really start to see through things for ourselves, even for a second, then with the best will in the world, with the most sincere motivation—"I'm really here to wake up, to serve all beings," whatever—our motivation is very sincere, and we should honor that motivation. Yet it takes just a little turn of the mind for it to morph into, "Well, what am I getting from this retreat? What's this practice doing for me? How is my practice doing? How am I progressing compared to everyone else?" You know all the different ways of that. And it slips in so subtly that we don't really notice.

So without the discerning wisdom, we get caught—really, with the most sincere motivation—practicing for whatever reason we're practicing, but the attitude, the mind that's paying attention, is caught in the old habits. What we're doing is shifting our focus of interest, shifting what we trust.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, "The purpose of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace. We are all equal in wishing to be happy and to overcome our suffering. And I believe we all share the right to fulfill this aspiration."

So he uses the H word: happiness. That's a big word these days. I was in a bookstore a couple of weeks ago, just a regular bookstore, not spiritual, and I was looking at one of the tables where they lay out books to display. It wasn't even the spiritual table—just one of the tables in the middle of the store, many books. So I started counting. There were fourteen books with the word "happiness" in the title on this table. A couple of them were spiritual, but the rest weren't. Yes, we'd like to be happy. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. As His Holiness says, that's normal motivation. The Buddha taught suffering and the end of suffering.

But without wise discernment, without understanding ourselves, the nature of happiness, the nature of suffering accurately, the choices we make—all too unfortunately, in our deep motivation for happiness—are not coming from wisdom. The motivation may be sincere, but without understanding ourselves and the world accurately, it doesn't work. Samsara doesn't work. That's why I think we're all sitting here. If it worked, we wouldn't have to do things like this. We could just follow our intuition, follow our basic instincts.

This practice goes against the stream—the stream of society, the stream of the habits of our mind, habits that are so familiar they feel natural, they feel appropriate, they feel trustworthy. So the real question, and what we're shifting in our practice, is: where do we place our trust? Where do we place our confidence moment to moment to moment?

One of the big places in normal life, in the stream of this culture anyway, is that we really trust our thoughts. Which on another level is laughable, having sat and looked at your thoughts—but we trust them. We trust our explanations of things. We trust our rationalizations of things, our descriptions of things. And when something happens and we can't explain it right away, we don't like that very much. Fear comes up.

So even if on an intellectual level we can all say we know our minds are crazy, we know thoughts aren't reliable, notice how often when you come into an interview or when you're spinning in some kind of struggle, it's because we're either believing in or reacting to our thought process. Our habits, our instincts aren't reliable, but it's hard for us to see it.

I read a review of a book called *How Doctors Think*, written by a doctor. It's really interesting because I don't think doctors think any differently from the rest of us—this just happens to be about doctors. The author says that only about twenty percent of misdiagnoses are accounted for by technical mistakes: machines, not reading handwriting correctly, things like that. By far the majority of misdiagnoses result from habits of mind that cause doctors to make snap judgments or to overlook alternative possibilities. And remember, this isn't just doctors, right? It's all of us.

He gives a couple of examples. The author's own son almost died at nine months old from an intestinal obstruction because the pediatrician, since these were first-time parents, just assumed they were overreacting to a normal virus. The doctor didn't really look carefully, and the baby almost died. Or other times, when a doctor makes a diagnosis and then sends the patient to specialists, because of that first diagnosis, the specialists by far start by already thinking it's that. They're much more likely to confirm than to actually look fresh and see whether it's that or not.

Does that sound familiar? "I already know what this is. I labeled this yesterday. I don't have to look at it again. This is what fear is like, now and always."

Also, diagnoses may be wrong because the doctor stereotypes, paying more attention to the patient's age or race or living habits. I've read a lot about how women's heart attacks are much more frequently missed than men's by doctors, because the assumption is that men have heart attacks more frequently than women. And it isn't really true. Or emotions interfere. A doctor may like a patient too much to consider a worst-case scenario. Or they may not like the patient, and so they don't listen to important complaints. "Just a whiner—I'm not going to really pay attention."

You can see how our minds can do that with ourselves, right? I don't need to draw the obvious parallels anymore.

This is really the power of moment-to-moment mindfulness: this willingness to just meet freshly, without bringing the whole baggage of all our preconceptions. Okay, that's the idea. Simple, but not easy. We don't even know what preconceptions are there half the time. We think we're meeting something freshly, just like the doctors.

This is from Sayadaw U Janaka: "We practice vipassana in order to live in happiness, to be free from suffering. Our suffering arises due to our suffering mental states. And these arise due to our belief in personality view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. And *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, personality view, arises due to our incorrect understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience."

So it just keeps coming down very simply to the nature of this moment-to-moment mental and physical experience. Going against the stream in that we don't even recognize a lot of the time what we already think we know. And so we're looking through that veil. We're not meeting mental experience, physical experience, freshly.

And in our motivation, our real wanting to be happy, we assess, we make choices for our happiness based on misunderstanding what happiness is, what can make us happy—what even we are, never mind what can make us happy. Based on these really deeply inlaid habits of mind.

I just heard on public radio yesterday that it's the ninetieth anniversary of the revolution in Russia in 1917. They were interviewing people on the street and saying how the last decade or so in Russia has been so chaotic that some people are yearning for, have a kind of nostalgia for, the stability of the Stalinist era.

Even though it's known now—it's not a secret anymore—that some twenty million Russians were killed in the gulag. That's not a secret anymore. So this one woman they were talking to on the street said, "Yeah, people say he murdered half of Russia, but still, he had a unique personality." There are not many people like him. You have to be someone special to be able to have all that power in your hands. And this was said in an admiring kind of way.

We think we know what will make us happy. It's chaotic? Okay, I love stability. Take it from Russia to sitting here on the pillow, but you get the drift. It's chaotic. If I could just have everything stay the same for a while, then I'd be happy. Then I'd see how things are. So get rid of all this stuff. We think we know. We don't have a clue.

Bhikkhu Bodhi—do you know who he is? He's an American man, actually from Brooklyn, who has been an ordained bhikkhu in the Theravada tradition for many, many years. He lived in Sri Lanka. Now he lives in the States. He is one of the foremost translators from the Pali into English of the Buddhist scriptures—really extremely learned. He's also very humble, a truly wonderful person.

So he writes this: "Remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes. After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

I want to repeat that. See if you can recognize anything here. Most of our habits—the habits of our mind, and these are the habits that drive our choices, more than our choices, our assumptions about what will make us happy—the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self.

He continues: "When one's personal experience of suffering becomes vivid enough, then it will induce one to become disillusioned or disenchanted with these habits and to begin to place our trust in something else."

He says in the Buddhist discourses on reality—I think what we start in this practice to see and place our trust in is mindfulness, awareness, consciousness itself, rather than placing our trust in pleasure making us happy, displeasure causing our suffering. Rather than placing our trust in everything centering around me, me, me. We don't even know half the time that that's what the mind is doing.

I read this on the back of *The Inquiring Mind* from Francisco Varela, the scientist: "The purpose of calming the mind in Buddhism is not so much to become absorbed, but to render the mind able to be present with itself long enough to gain insight into its own nature and functioning."

That's exactly what we're doing here. Just allowing the mind to quiet enough to turn around and look at itself, to see what is the nature of mind and how does it function. And to do that, moment by moment, we have to be able, just for a moment, to put down our preconceptions, to put down our ideas about what makes us happy, our preferences, and just meet this arising experience as it is, trusting that insight, understanding, discriminating wisdom is a natural function of moment-to-moment awareness.

Do we trust that? Sometimes, maybe. But a lot of times, what are we putting our trust in? These habits. They're so ingrained. They're so deep in our life. That's what the Buddha saw when he woke up—that everyone wants to be happy and keeps doing, in their effort to be happy, just the thing that makes them keep on suffering.

We see something isn't working in our daily life, so here we are, really sincerely. But until we recognize that these habits are the lens through which we're experiencing moment-to-moment reality and making choices—until we start to see that—we come here and bring the same habits to a meditation retreat that we bring to how we live our life. Meditation technique is a learned activity.

Even when we say sit down, just be aware of whatever's happening by itself, there's still a sense we're doing something. You're sitting down. You're shutting up. You're turning your attention inside, hopefully noticing once in a while what comes and goes. Already that's some direction, that's some activity.

And so how are we going to approach any new activity when we're not in the freshness of awareness? With the same old habits. We approach it, we put forth effort in order to achieve a result that is pleasant. I mean, how many of you here are really working with virya in order to experience more unpleasant? Do you think of waking up as including unpleasant experience?

When you really look at it deeply, what's in our mind—isn't there somehow a bias that the more we wake up, the more pleasant everything's going to be? The ending of suffering somehow has a connotation of pleasant. Somehow, even though there's pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, all that unpleasant is just going to fall away, and it's all going to be nice, floating on clouds.

I know, it sounds exotic, but just watch next time you're having a little hissy fit about what's happening in your practice, and see if you're having a problem because it's pleasant. Probably not.

So the effort is usually for some result—because that's what we've learned—usually pleasant. And in any way, it's somehow going to confirm me, a sense of how I can assess myself. It fulfills me. It confirms me. It gives me a sense that I'm getting somewhere, that I'm more empty than I was when I started this retreat. That sense of it's all about me.

And then we trust our thoughts so much. When you sit there and start thinking, "Well, if it's not all about me and there isn't any me, how am I going to do it?" And why do we get so caught in that? Because what's getting stronger? The more we think about that, the sense of me, me, me. I'm losing me. Oh, my God.

So that's our habit. That's what we know. We'll bring the same thing to the meditation, and that's how we get into the striving. It doesn't have to be this way. I'm not saying this is what's going to happen and there's no way out of it. I'm just pointing it out so that we can begin to notice when there's this sense of looking ahead, when there's this sense of striving, when there's a sense of somehow it isn't going right. "I thought I would be further along by now." To see that—oh, what habit's driving the bus right now? It's all about me. It should be more pleasant.

Instead of looking into the experience, instead of trusting in that moment, we're trying to organize and manipulate and arrange experience to meet some cockamamie idea we have that we heard or we read or we made up. Instead of turning around and saying, just trust in this moment, only for this moment, the awareness. The simplicity of just the awareness of knowing in this moment. Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, sensing with the mind. And it doesn't matter what. It really doesn't matter what.

Ajahn Sumedho calls awareness the point that includes. Really trusting that awareness in one moment—not extended in time as some thing existing, but just in the moment—that moment of pure awareness, the consciousness aware of what's happening

without the coloring of wanting or aversion or me, me, me. Just this sensation. Just this hearing. Just this pleasant. Just this unpleasant. Moment after moment after moment. That continuity. It's a very different possibility. And it's so subtle.

Always accessible. So familiar. Even more familiar, if possible, than the habits of wanting and aversion and "it's all about me." But completely intangible—nothing you can really point to or hold on to. Just this. Oh, this.

The practice is really about turning our interest, our trust, our love, our confidence—whatever word works for you, devotion—away from whatever experience or object is arising. You know it's there, but it's going to come, it's going to go. No matter how fantastic or horrible, it's going to come, it's going to go. And when it's gone, it's gone like it never existed. I don't care how incredible an experience we have. I don't care how horrible and fearful it is. It's going to go, and it'll be really gone. It'll be like it never existed.

You know, when you think about it, just get that taste. It happens more as we get older, so maybe you younger people don't have the feeling yet, although it's true for all of us. I see it with my mother; I see it more with me now. All the stuff that happened in my whole life—it's nothing but a thought. It's just nothing. I couldn't tell you if I feel fifty-six or two. I mean, I know how old I am intellectually, but how do I feel? It doesn't really matter. It's just a concept, because it's only now.

And when there's that freedom of only now, we don't have to cling on so much for dear life to what's arising, physical or mental. It's just—ah—awareness, experience in the knowing of it, hearing in the knowing of it, thinking in the knowing of it. And we can come to trust, to have confidence, to love the knowing of it. That's really the shift that this whole practice is about.

And in those moments—those moments like I said in the beginning—when it's really so clear, there's no problem. Sometimes we think there's no problem because we've hit into a really pleasant, lovely state, but that's a problem because it goes and then we see it's a problem. But the kind of no problem where there's nothing special happening, just no clinging, no aversion, it's not me-centric—it's just this thing, nothing special, always available. Those moments are really the heart of this practice.

We lose it. We get caught up again. We get focused back into experience, into manipulating experience, into trying to. And those are the habits that Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about. Fascinating. Fascinating how we keep getting sucked back in. And if we can bring interest to that rather than incredible frustration and dismay, it's helpful. If you can just see—it's fascinating.

It continues to be fascinating to me that I really, on some level, sometimes really get it: nothing that I can experience is going to make me ultimately happy. It never has. It won't last. It really doesn't matter. I know that. And sometimes I really know that. And then I turn around—my thinking knows it, but that's basically useless—and it's like, no, I've got to have this. This headache has to go away and then I'll be happy. And all the resistance and all the wanting and all the sense of struggle.

What's happening? Oh, just this. Just as it is. Because it's not about the experience. Oh, yes—awareness. It's like this. The point that includes. Awareness can be aware with anything. So our practice comes to be more noticing the awareness than the knowing. Noticing when we're not noticing it. Noticing what experiences or thoughts or actions we somehow place outside.

Awareness can't be present if this is happening—we all do it. And then at some point, we struggle. You struggle for an hour. You struggle for a day. You struggle for three days. And something in the mind lets go: "All right, this is just this. That's okay." All the clinging went away. We took confidence again in the awareness.

It's just like a Tai Chi move, you know. When we're caught in relationship to experience—this should be different, this should be better, this should last, this should go away, this means this about me—and that's the big one. When we're caught in that, it's endless struggle. Like trying to rearrange the furniture in prison and not seeing that the door's always open.

But we don't have to change anything. We don't have to change anything. You don't have to be a better person, a different person, have a better personality or a different personality. You don't have to have better concentration. You don't have to walk slower or faster. You do have to be interested. But the awareness is not some special thing that some people have—an awareness power, you know. It's just the nature of how the mind works.

The Tai Chi move is withdrawing the identification, the entrancement with our reaction to what's happening, and just noticing the knowing. Just noticing the knowing. There's nothing you can judge that by. There's nothing you can confirm yourself by. But when there's that withdrawing of relational reaction to experience, that movement into the knowing—just like that, it's completely different.

It's like the Buddha when he woke up. As far as we can tell, he woke up into the same world, didn't he? It's not the world that changed. He's still in a body, still had a mind. He got headaches. He had backaches. He ate bad food, whatever. What changes is the relation. The happiness isn't about getting better experience. It's about the understanding of

the nature of mind and body—the coming, the going. It's not about me. It's not that we just get pleasant. It's not that the suffering is the unpleasant. The waking up is that knowing, knowing, knowing, knowing.

When we talk about emptiness, it's not that there's nothing. It's just that there's no solid, permanent, lasting entity in anything. But everything's still here. It's just that we withdraw our tenacious hold, our relational reactivity, our entrancement with experience and our reactions to experience, our entrancement with what everything means about me or to me.

And if you think I'm exaggerating, just notice as you go through the days—with humor. It helps. Humor helps. Notice how almost everything that happens, how quickly does the mind get it back to what it means to me? Just somebody walks through the dining room on the other side. How quick does that have something to say about me? "Oh, look how they're walking. They look pretty mindful. I'm not as mindful as they are." Or, "That's the person who was breathing loudly this morning. They really bugged me, but I'm so equanimous, it doesn't matter." It doesn't take any time. Somebody puts food on their plate—immediately, how does that relate to me?

Just notice this. And notice the difference when you're caught in "I'm really such a lousy meditator."

Oh, awareness of judging. You don't have to get rid of anything. Awareness doesn't care. I love the way Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it. He says, "You know, it's like this." It's like this. So judging feels like this. "I really am so caught up and frustrated" — this is like this. Sleepiness is impossible to meditate with — sleepiness is like this. There's nothing that needs to be different. Awareness can be aware of anything. Anything.

I don't know if you can get a sense of how truly liberating that is. The thing is, we have to be interested enough. It's not like, "Okay, two moments a day I'll be aware and just have that freedom, and the rest of the time I'll just run around seeking pleasure and avoiding the unpleasant." That strengthens that habit. So what we're doing with this austere structure here is to support our moving into noticing the knowing — just to support that.

If we're willing to have the steadiness through the day, not of striving to make something different, it's really liberating. Oh, all I have to do is just notice what's happening all day. And whatever's happening, we can notice it. Doesn't that feel much more relaxing than "I somehow have to twist and turn my experience and get it like this, and then I can notice it, and then I can feel like I'm getting somewhere in meditation"? Oh my God, that's exhausting.

Someone was just saying to me today how they'd had a day or two where it was just this sense of things happening and the knowing of it, and there wasn't much reactivity or aversion in the mind. And suddenly, when they woke up in the morning, unusually there wasn't tiredness. There was just this brightness, this clarity in the mind, because there's no struggle anymore. All the energy that goes into our running after the pleasant and avoiding the unpleasant and constructing the whole world every moment — making a new construction of the world about me and then reacting to it — it's exhausting. Just think, we don't have to do it.

And you don't even have to get rid of that either. Just shift from our entrancement to the knowing. And then when we're not noticing that again, we'll know, because we're struggling again. Oh, struggle — it's like this. It's just all day long. And it's really a whole different possibility.

So in that way, any appearance, any object, serves as a conduit back to awareness, back to knowing. There's nothing that's a distraction. There's nothing that needs to be a problem. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral — a problem is just another word for struggle, and struggle? Oh, struggle's like this. Really, in the times when I'm knowing that, it's so free, so lovely. And you're just the same old person. You don't get a new personality, but you don't care anymore. Other people may care, but that's their problem.

But I do want to emphasize — I know Guy spoke about right attitude the first night, and that's the point. This love of awareness, confidence in awareness — it's really the quality of knowing that is, you might say, the pure mind, the luminous mind. That's the sutta of the Buddha. I'll read it in a minute. It's awareness that is not colored by wanting, by aversion, or by confusion. There could be other beautiful qualities present. There can be calm, compassion, wisdom, rapture, interest, investigation. It's not like there's nothing there. But it won't be colored by these afflictive torments of the mind, which keep us from recognizing nāma-rūpa — mind and matter — accurately, and which keep us spinning in this confusion.

I just want to read this. I'm sure most of you are familiar with it, but it's really just about the shift. From the Buddha: "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it."

This unlearned people do not really understand, and so do not cultivate the mind. We don't understand, we don't recognize the pure, luminous, empty quality of knowing that is the mind. We get entranced by the attachments, by the kilesas, by the wanting, and that's what we spend our life and our time in relationship to. That's what unlearned people don't understand.

"Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

That's what we're doing—cultivating. When we say cultivation of the mind, it's not that we're making the mind better. The mind is always—that moment of awareness is always luminous and pure. The attachments, the greed, the aversion, the kilesas that come, they come and go. When we're entranced by them, we just don't notice the luminous, pure quality. But even when the attachments are there, it's not that they can ever really stain or affect the luminous pure quality.

When we know that, when we have just a moment of insight, we realize, "Oh, right—just knowing is like this." That touches us so deeply because we recognize that's really how it is. And it's like that in any moment. We just forget.

So when the Buddha talks about cultivation of the mind for the noble follower of the way, it doesn't mean somehow we can control and make that moment of knowing, that moment of awareness, somehow more pure. It's that we learn to have confidence in that more. And we feed the wanting, we feed the attachment less and less and less. Any moment when we're going, "I've got to have this, I need this," there's so much suffering. Then—"Oh, it's like this." That's a movement from feeding the attachment to confidence in awareness. In that moment, we're no longer feeding the kilesa. That's cultivation of the mind.

It's not in our power to make awareness any clearer, any better. It doesn't need to be. We just learn to recognize more and more frequently and to trust that—to trust that over our assessments and our evaluations and our judgments and our ideas about ourselves. To trust that over our deeply rooted sense that somehow if it's unpleasant, something's wrong and I've got to fix it. "Can't possibly be free with this going on." Oh, it's like this.

Even when I say that, probably in the back of your mind you're going, "Yeah, yeah, right, easy for you to say." But when it's really difficult, where do we place our trust? And it's not something we can just have an idea about. It's a deeply experiential thing that cuts underneath these habits of mind over and over and over.

So how do we get so tricked back? There are lots of ways. I just want to highlight something that Guy spoke about in the instructions today.

This sense of vedana, this quality, this feeling quality where the mind experiences a sound, a sight, a smell, a taste, a thought, a sensation—experiences it as being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. That's not something inherent in the experience. That's how

it's experienced in the mind in that moment. The so-called same experience, the sound, you could experience it as pleasant one moment, neutral another moment, unpleasant another moment.

Because we so often don't notice this—and this is one of the subtle experiences that happens almost every moment, it's happening a lot—it's so quick and fast that we often don't even recognize, "Oh, the pleasant or unpleasant is happening." Right away, the thoughts go into "pleasant is good, this is what should be happening," or "unpleasant is bad, this shouldn't be happening." And that happens so quickly.

There's an unpleasant sensation. You don't even recognize it as such. The mind goes, "This is pain. Something's wrong with my knee. What's going to happen? There's five more weeks." And in no time, you're in the hospital. That's gone so far, so fast.

Mingyur Rinpoche has a great way of describing this.

We get into so much pain and confusion by letting ourselves get lost in the thoughts of whatever happens. You project a thought, then a second thought believes the first thought. Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. And by this time, the first thought has become absolute reality. By the time the tenth thought comes—and that's about this much time—it believes that the fifth has always been so. Explore that. And then we're just running on that. No wonder we don't have a clue what's going on half the time.

So this is one way we get tricked with this pleasant-unpleasant-neutral. As the Buddha said, for the noble follower of the way, there is cultivation of the mind. One of the ways we cultivate is by what we're doing here—just our interest, this quality of quieting the mind just enough, as Francisco Varela said, to look and see how it works. Notice, without judgment, out of interest. Notice, as Ajahn Buddhadasa said, how much of what you do is for the sake of pleasant feeling. And notice how long pleasant feeling actually lasts. A feeling, a vedana—like that, like that, like that. It's so quick. But just keep noticing how much of what we do is in thrall to trying to get more pleasant or to get away from unpleasant. Unpleasant also—like that, like that.

Neutral? Well, we think we want calm. People think they want calm. I can't tell you how often people come in and really see—and it's often quite a surprise—it's calm, what's wrong? It's calm, I'm bored. It's calm, what's going to happen to me? It's calm, I've got to do something. And in fact, often people see—I've seen it myself—that the mind will just start creating all kinds of suffering scenarios rather than stay with calm. Neutral? I'm out of here. Back to basic instinct again.

But this is, again, where our practice, our understanding of how things really are, the true source of happiness, runs counter—running against the stream of the world again. This sense of going after pleasant, avoiding unpleasant, it's all about me. On some very basic level we trust it—not reliably, but we trust it. It sort of holds our world together. This is what makes sense to us. This is how we've lived our lives. I mean, when people are really in a suffering state and you talk to them and say, "Oh, great, just notice it's unpleasant"—most people don't respond with, "Oh, thank you so much! That really helped. That's what I came here for."

It holds our world together. And in fact, the Buddha said in his sutta about the two darts that when a normal, unawakened person experiences an unpleasant feeling, an unpleasant vedana, the only escape they know from unpleasant feeling is to lust after sense pleasure. And so when there's unpleasant, we pull away. He says it's as if we're hit with a dart and then we hit ourselves with a second dart. This is unpleasant and this is really bad. I don't like it. I've got to do something. We shoot ourselves with a second arrow.

So we have the habit in our mind of pulling away, of resisting and resenting unpleasant. And then—to me, this is so poignant because it really resonates as true—the only escape normal, regular people know from unpleasant is to go and get some pleasant sense experience. So that's life: running between avoiding the unpleasant and going to get something pleasant. Food, sex, relationships, sleep. Sleep's a big one—a big pleasant experience here especially, right? Food is limited, sex is out, but sleep...

I think it takes a lot of vision, a lot of faith, a lot of courage to step out of that way of being. And I feel so personally fortunate, so grateful every day to know that there's a path, to know that there's another way of being, to know that this isn't the end.

Because really, imagine before you knew there was a path of awakening, and all you knew was to get more pleasant. That's how samsara *doesn't* work. Because sooner or later, it doesn't work. But if that was all there was, how sad would that be?

So here we are. We get lost often in thinking it's only about getting pleasant, only about feeling good, only about what confirms me. But then again, we remember: no, I can turn around again and notice the knowing.

If you went out on the street and said to someone, "Do you know what would be really freeing? If you just noticed the knowing of your footsteps"—I don't think they'd be convinced. But actually, it's incredibly radical. It's freeing. It's available every moment with every experience possible. There's nothing that awareness can't be with.

Ajahn Sumedho says it's the point that includes. And we simply recognize it by, in a moment, letting go of our entrancements and our absorptions with experience, with objects, with our likes and our dislikes.

I want to end with reading something from Ajahn Sumedho to that effect. He's talking about patience and non-clinging:

Buddha wisdom is just this much: knowing the conditioned as the conditioned, the unconditioned as the unconditioned. Buddhas are no longer deluded by any conditions, and so they incline to the spaciousness, the emptiness, rather than towards the changing conditions within the space. In your meditation now, as you incline towards the emptiness, the space—I would just say the knowing—*your habitual grasping, fascination, revulsions, fears, doubts, and worries about the conditions begins to lessen. You begin to recognize them as just things that come and go. They're not self. They're nothing to get excited about or depressed about. They just are as they are. We can allow conditions to be just as they are because they come and go. Their nature is to go away, so we don't have to make them go away. And in this way, we naturally liberate ourselves from the struggle, the strife, and the confusion of the ignorant mind that has to spend all its time evaluating and discriminating, trying to hold on to something, trying to get rid of something. It means that we exist peacefully rather than complaining, rebelling, and causing more friction and confusion and adding to the confusion through believing in our own confusion.*

We recognize the space just by not clinging to the objects and the reactions to the objects in our experience.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said that habit and passion blind and mislead. Compassionate awareness heals and redeems.

CHAPTER 31

Nature of Insight

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the fundamental nature of insight (paññā) and how it differs from conceptual understanding. Using the vivid analogy of Magic Eye images, she illustrates that insight is not something created through willpower but rather a spontaneous shift in perception that occurs when the mind is free from clinging. The moment of insight itself is brief, yet its effect on our understanding is lasting—we can never return to our previous limited view.*
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> *Wilson draws from the Udāna to show how the Buddha skillfully prepared Suppabuddha's mind for awakening through progressive teachings on generosity (dāna), virtue (sīla), and the drawbacks of sense pleasures before revealing the Four Noble Truths. This demonstrates that moment-to-moment mindfulness, while essential, is not the only support for wisdom. When meditation becomes self-obsessed or contracted, we can call upon other practices to brighten and open the mind: the brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity), generosity, ethical conduct, bodhicitta, and gratitude.*
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> *The practical implications are profound: insight can arise with any experience, not just in subtle meditative states. A woman standing with restlessness discovers freedom not by changing her situation but by seeing 'uncomfortable sensation' and 'aversion' clearly. Wilson emphasizes recognizing wholesome states of mind as readily as unwholesome ones, and offers gratitude practice as a powerful way to shift from contraction to openness when we feel stuck in self-referential suffering.*

After Joseph's beautiful talk last night about cultivating the wisdom, the perception, insight into impermanence, I wanted to talk a little tonight about the nature of insight, of wisdom. What is it? How does it arise? What supports its arising?

This is insight meditation, so what do we mean by insight? Insight is really an aspect of wisdom, *paññ*a, a mental factor that comes and goes in the mind stream like any other mental factor. It's not something we can create by willpower. I don't know if you believe that yet, but it's true.

So what actually is an insight? Is it something created new, some new thing or way of being that suddenly comes into existence that hasn't been here before? Are we now somehow different and new, or is the world different and new? Is it some new way of thinking about things? Does the situation change? No to any of that.

Remember the quotation Joseph read where the Buddha said that the perception of impermanence, the perception of *anicca*, leads to the ending of the conceit of self. That's really what insight is. It's a shift of perception. We experience it not as a thought. Insight is basically not thought. It's a kind of aha. Something in the mind shifts and we perceive a particular situation in a new way, from another angle. Has everything changed, or is it just that our view has changed? Really, something in the mind lets go and we're able to see in a new way.

In speaking of the Eightfold Path beginning with right view, sometimes I think that's actually quite literal. Right view: accurate perception, accurately seeing ourselves and the world as it is. It's not thinking. Of course we'll think about it—thinking will come—but that's usually after.

The example I always use, because for me it really works well, of what I mean by this, what insight really is, is those magic eye graphics. You know what I mean. They used to have books and books of them, where you look and it's just little graphic designs. There's nothing, no picture that you can tell what it is. And there's a whole way of looking at it. When you look, it's just red and green, little designs. If you look in the right way—and the right way happens to be steadily, without looking away, but relaxed, unfocused—suddenly out pops some other literal design, like a spaceship or dinosaurs or whatever.

Now, if you go to that and you haven't seen it before and you say, "I know there's dinosaurs, I'm looking for dinosaurs," you won't see it. And some people never really get the knack. But once you've done it once or twice, you see: the steady, steady way of looking, unfocused, relaxed, and boom, out pops the thing. And it doesn't last, does it? It goes back and you see it the other way again. But having had that shift of perception, you know that that's possible. You know that there's both ways of looking at that particular experience.

Once you learn how to do it and you practice, you go through the whole book—oh, this is a dinosaur, this is a spaceship—but you learn how to do it. The first time is amazing. Wow. By the end of it, it's like, oh yeah, well, that's how it is. You don't have to think about it anymore. It's made a shift in your mind stream, a shift in your understanding.

Even though the seeing of the dinosaurs doesn't stay, the knowing that it's that way—the first time it's amazing, but then it starts to have an effect on your mind stream. Until it's just our whole view, our whole understanding that we didn't even know we were clinging to has changed, and we know there's something else in that. And it's no big

deal. You don't have to have an argument with someone about it. You can't show anyone else. But if someone came up to you and said, "No, that's not true," you don't have to get all upset. You're not defending a view. You just know: oh, well, it is.

I'm sorry you can't see it. There's nothing to get upset about.

So that really, to me, works very well with insight—whether it's insight into impermanence, into not-self, whether it's insight into a particular problem, a personality problem, a mathematical problem (not that I know anything about that), or a scientific problem. Something lets go that we didn't know we were holding to. It's like, "this is right," and we don't even know—then suddenly we see it from another angle. That's just a quick aha moment.

And as I was saying, the moment itself doesn't last but a second. I don't know, maybe it's longer than a yoctosecond or whatever it is—it's a little more measurable—but it doesn't last very long. Yet the time is irrelevant. It has an effect on our understanding, on our mind stream. Something has changed. We're never quite so fixed. Yet we can't hold on to that moment of insight, that sense of "ah, it's really different." We try.

First there's just a thought, because for most of us—maybe not everyone—but for most of us, thinking is how we process things. It comes secondary, but it's how we think we're understanding something, or holding on. "Oh yeah, I really do see something. That emotion wasn't here before, and now it's here, and it'll go away. I really do get it that it's all impermanent." But that thought isn't really carrying anything. It's describing, but it's not carrying the freshness of the insight.

You'll notice the first one or two thoughts are kind of "oh, that's interesting," and then it goes on and on. That's when you cut it. Two thoughts is enough. Just go back to what's happening in this next moment. But we say, "No, let me feel that again. It is impermanent. It is impermanent. I'm really seeing impermanence everywhere." And it's long gone. It's just become a concept again.

But the moment of insight—and this is what's really interesting—can happen with any kind of experience. It doesn't have to only be in some really deep, subtle state. It's just that shift of perception. It's about the quality of the mind at that moment, not about the quality of the experience itself.

Here's an example—this is one any of you could have said. Someone told me this at a retreat a few years ago. She was having a very uncomfortable sitting, a lot of restlessness. Not dying pain, but restlessness, really uncomfortable, couldn't sit still. So she stood up to just stand and be with standing. Well, standing, she was still really restless, uncomfortable. And of course, standing, you're one step closer to being able to walk

and just walk right out of the hall. So she was standing there thinking, "This is really stupid. I should just leave and fix it." The problem is this restlessness, this uncomfortableness. Fixing it would be to just get the heck out of here. Of course, she was at the back of the hall, and it was a crowded hall and hard to get out—that probably had something to do with why she didn't leave.

But anyway, as she stood there, just kept noticing, she suddenly became aware—and it was very profound for her. How did she say it? "Oh, it's just uncomfortable sensation. That's what's happening. An aversion in the mind." But really seeing: uncomfortable sensation and aversion, and that's all it is. It's really not a problem.

In seeing the uncomfortable instead of the whole story about "I have to do something, this can't be borne," in seeing aversion where aversion simply becomes another arising mental experience at that point—oh, no problem. And it was really very profound for her, seeing that the freedom, the ease, the peace wasn't about getting rid of the situation.

I mean, that's what we've been talking about the whole time. That's what we each know. But when we have an experience like that for ourselves, it really deepens our insight.

That's a moment of wisdom. And it really deepens our faith, our trust. *Oh, yeah. That really is true. This really might be a way.* And it's very different from someone telling us, from thinking about it. That awakening can happen in any moment, with any experience. It's not about getting a better experience to have a better insight.

So that's where I want to go with this—talking about what supports, what enables this shift of perception, this non-will-powered suddenly letting go of the beliefs, the ideas, the viewpoints we're holding to that we don't even know we're holding. When the Buddha talked about the perception of impermanence, it's not that we're consciously going around saying, "I perceive permanence, I want to perceive permanence." We don't even think in those terms. Unconsciously, we're perceiving permanence and not even knowing it—the assumption of permanence.

When insight arises, when wisdom, *paññā*, arises in the mind, it arises because in that moment the quality of mind, of heart, of consciousness—these are all kind of the same thing—is in a state of openness, of non-clinging. It's interesting when the Buddha said the supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathāgata, namely, liberation through non-clinging. Liberation through non-clinging could be thought of or seen as the end of our path. In a way, that's the experience of the Arahat. But it's not only the end of the path. It's the moment-to-moment unfolding of the path. Wisdom in-

sight arises only in a mind moment that is free from clinging, that is not contracted and closed around the incredible starring role of *me, me, me*—where there's just a fraction of a millimeter of space for something other to be perceived.

So what supports this opening, this purity, this non-clinging quality of mind? That's really, in some ways, what you could say the practice is about. It's not that the experience needs to change. Suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering—in the big picture, these don't really change. But the mind that's holding to something, or that's colored by *kilesa*, by greed, by fear, by aversion, by views, by *me, me, me*—something in it allows it to open. Clinging doesn't arise. Moment by moment, steady awareness—that's what we're practicing here—leads to a kind of stability. The continuity allows for the *kilesas* to be seen and not fed, allows for wisdom to arise.

But that's not the only way, and I want to talk about other things tonight. We tend, especially in a meditation retreat, because that's what we're here for—to meditate, right?—we didn't come here to have everything be the same as our daily life, probably. We came here to meditate for whatever reasons we tell ourselves, and we probably all have different language for it. But one reason is to purify the mind, to free our heart and mind from suffering. Because we're here in a meditation retreat, that's what we talk about, that's what we're focused on—moment-to-moment mindfulness.

I'm not trying to change that focus. It's a good focus, a useful focus. Moment-to-moment mindfulness really is the most direct way to allow for wisdom to arise. But that's the thing: wisdom arises just by our moment-to-moment awareness and interest, not through our willpower, and not through getting the right content, the right experience, the right meditation, the correct way of walking or sitting or breathing, the correct free-flowing attention, the correct choiceless awareness.

We get so focused at times on doing the meditation, just doing it, doing it correctly. I don't know if you've noticed how we can be really sincere and working very carefully, trying not to strive, really doing everything as best we can. But at times it can start to feel very self-obsessed. It all becomes about *my* meditation, right? I mean, I spent a long time in that state. It comes and goes like anything. But there are times when we're really trying, and yet the focus all becomes about how my meditation is doing, getting my meditation better. "This noise is disturbing my meditation." I could feel it walking through the lunchroom today.

Perhaps I'm projecting. But I've been there myself, so you can only project what you know. That sense of walking around the lunchroom so carefully because I'm protecting the cocoon of my meditation—whatever the heck's going on in my meditation.

But there are times—and we all go in and out of this—there are times when there's nothing to protect because there's no meditation. There's just this moment of awareness. Whatever's happening doesn't matter. And in that, there's that openness. There's that possibility for insight to arise.

Now, as soon as I've said this, the mind goes, "Okay, openness... the possibility..." You know, it's just what our minds do. But because insight arises spontaneously, in a moment of really a purity of mind, of consciousness—it's not clinging, it's not self-referencing or obsessed—we can't create that. You just can't. And I don't know why we can't believe that. It would spare us so much suffering. But we can't create it. We can't make insight happen out of willpower. We can't make wisdom arise.

So it's a tricky thing, because we can call on, incline our mind towards the wisdom of what we've already understood or known. Taking impermanence again, there are ways we've all experienced impermanence. We can incline our mind in that way in terms of remembering, reminding ourselves, "Oh yeah, right, stuff is impermanent." But you can't sit down and say, "I will now have an insight into impermanence." You can't. I mean, you can sit down and do that, but you can't say, "I'm going to now notice the beginning and ending of every arising experience." Have you tried that today? I bet a lot of you have. I knew when I heard him say that—I just knew that's what the mind was going to do. And sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't, because guess what? It's not in our control.

So having the inclining of mind toward the wisdom of "yes, impermanence is a truth, and I have experienced that"—that's useful. But then we can't make the wisdom arise again. It's like the letting go—the spontaneous, and staying really present. So usually that's what we talk about as the supports for wisdom, for insight: the steadiness of mindfulness, this bare attention, non-judging without concepts, the non-striving, the continuity, and the stability, the steadiness that grows from the mindfulness that becomes samādhi.

But that's not all we have to call on. It's not like it's that or nothing. When your mindfulness isn't steady, and when you're feeling like I was saying—so obsessed with the meditation that it's just becoming one dismal, dark, new way to suffer... Am I making that up, or have you experienced that? Oh my God, life was bad enough, and now on top of it I have to be the bad meditator.

A good friend of mine was sitting for a few weeks over at the Forest Refuge last month when I was there, and he was talking to me about how we discuss the attitude of mind, just checking the attitude of mind—which is really what I'm talking about tonight. But he said, so really sincerely—this is someone who's been sitting forever and

who knows better, but really sincerely—"So the attitude of mind... I mean, is there ever an attitude that isn't kilesa? Is there ever a moment, an attitude of mind when you check it that isn't greed, hatred, or delusion? Because that's all I ever see."

Which of course isn't true. It wasn't even true for him. But it's as if we get sometimes—and usually when things aren't going the way we like them to, or they're unpleasant—so kind of focused, zoomed into the kilesa aspect, the defilement, the torments of mind aspect.

Yes, they're the source of the suffering. I mean, it's good to notice them. I'm not saying otherwise. And we've been talking about that a lot, understanding them as freeing. I just have to say that's all still true. But there are times we get so fixated that even noticing—like just before when I said that woman noticed the aversion—she noticed it with a mind that was not holding. So the aversion becomes the object. The mind that's noticing it is clear, pure, non-clinging. Aversion's not a problem.

But there are other times—once in a while—when the mind that notices greed, aversion, self-judgment, fear, isn't quite totally pure and non-clinging. It's really, really colored, identified with that particular kilesa.

It's just seeing through it. And the more we really try to be moment-to-moment mindful, the more we really try to let go, it just seems like we're digging ourselves—it feels like at that moment—into a deeper and deeper hole. And you can't figure it out, because technically you're doing everything you should be doing. You're doing the practice right. You're not just sloughing off. But everything's just kind of spiraling, spiraling.

Out of control is okay. Unpleasant is okay. But there are times when the more you seem to be mindful, the more it seems like you're feeding the unwholesome. Have you ever had that experience? It's usually the time when you come into an interview and I say, "Okay, you need to shift the focus of attention." And the person usually feels, "I failed. I have to switch the focus of attention because I wasn't good enough to get through this."

What's happening is that the mind at that point is colored by self-judgment or wanting or attachment to a view, and we can't see it. Far from being bright and open and non-clinging with the possibility for insight or wisdom, it's just contracting on itself.

So at this point, we can learn that there are other ways to brighten, to bring the mind into readiness for insight, you could say.

I want to read part of a sutta that I really like. It made me see that this is how the Buddha worked.

It says that when the Buddha, the Blessed One, was staying in Rajagaha, at the squirrel sanctuary, there was a leper named Supabuddha—a poor, miserable wretch of a person. At that time, the Blessed One was sitting surrounded by a large assembly, teaching the Dhamma. Supabuddha saw the large gathering from far off and thought, "Without a doubt, someone there must be distributing food. Why don't I go over and get some?" So he went over, and then he saw the Blessed One sitting there teaching the Dhamma. He realized, "Oh, there's no one distributing food. That's Gotama, the contemplative, sitting surrounded by a large assembly teaching the Dhamma. Why don't I listen to the Dhamma since I'm here?" So he sat down.

Now the Blessed One, comprehending the minds of the entire assembly with his awareness—this is one of the special powers of a Buddha; there are often suttas where he does this—asked himself, "Who here is capable of really understanding the Dhamma? Who here is really capable of waking up?" Don't you wish we could do that and say the right thing? Sorry—we have to do it ourselves.

And he saw Supabuddha, the leper, sitting in the assembly. On seeing him, the thought occurred to him—and it's always like that, never "he thought" but "the thought occurred to him," it just came through—"This person here is capable of understanding the Dhamma."

So aiming specifically at Supabuddha, the Buddha gave a step-by-step talk: a talk on generosity, on giving; a talk on virtue, on non-harming conduct; a talk on the heavens. He talked about the drawbacks, the suffering, and the corruption of sense desire, of sense passions, and the rewards and happiness of renunciation.

Then, when he saw that Supabuddha the leper's mind was ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated, and bright—then he gave the Dhamma talk peculiar to the awakened ones, that is, the Four Noble Truths.

He very carefully talked about all these other qualities of our life, of our practice that brighten the mind, that free the heart, that open us up out from our self-absorbed tendencies. And then, when he could tell the mind was ready—boop.

And of course, even that wretched, miserable wretch of a person, on hearing this—just as a clean cloth, free of stains, would properly absorb a dye—in the same way, as Supabuddha was sitting in that very seat, the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye arose within him: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." That's one of the little lines that indicates he was a stream-enterer.

I really love that—that sense that it's not always the most helpful or appropriate thing to just hone in with all your energy on getting more precise, on being more mindful, on seeing more clearly, thinking that's going to make insight happen. It just doesn't always work. Yes, it's great, and it's our first line of refuge, no question. But sometimes we can call on lots of other qualities that open us out, that open the mind and heart into the spaciousness, the openness of non-clinging.

He was saying how we tend to really try to see the object of our awareness more clearly a lot of the time. We think, "Oh, it's a cloud. I've got to see it clearly, see it clearly." We get so focused on the object—and the object can be mental too, remember—but we forget that really the path is about purifying the mind.

And so he said, this is what I thought was really interesting, that we can't force the insight. The quality of mind, of consciousness—the state of mind is matched with the object that it can observe. Actually, he said the mind will perceive the object that it deserves. That was his language.

So basically saying that if the state of mind is filled with, identified with wanting, with dislike or aversion, with clinging to views, with "this is all about me," that quality of mind can try as hard as it wants—it's not going to see Nibbana. It's only going to see through kilesa in a moment. And so as long as we're looking through what he calls a "kilesa mind"—let's take a mind that's colored and we don't recognize the wanting, the striving, the dislike, the self-judging, the views—he said that all a mind like that can recognize is concepts. It sees the concept and takes the concept for reality. It's interesting.

So like that woman I talked about standing in pain, she would see through a mind with aversion that this unpleasant restlessness is her problem and she needs to get rid of it to fix it, and that's just how it is. The Vipassana mind, he calls it, can observe things just as they are. Vipassana mind, meaning connected, awake, free from clinging, without bringing in concept, can recognize things just as they are. It can see concept—it can see that concept. "Oh, I thought this is the only way to get rid of this pain, by walking out, but now I see: this is unpleasant experience. It feels like this. This is aversion in the mind. It's like that." Nothing changed but how it's observed. Kilesa mind, Vipassana mind.

So that's when we talk about turning around and just noticing what's the attitude of mind. It is not always kilesa mind. A great deal of the time it's not. It's really, really helpful for us to also recognize that. Recognize when there is wisdom, clear seeing, just seeing things as they are without adding anything extra. Recognize when there's metta,

when there's compassion, when there's sympathetic joy or equanimity. Recognize when there's gratitude, when there's generosity, when there's non-harming moral conduct—which can be of thought, not just of speech and body.

And all of these are also practices that we can call on consciously to brighten, to make our mind more malleable, more elated, more flexible, more open. When we feel that we're practicing as hard as we can and as sincerely as we can and we're just getting tighter and tighter and it's more and more about me, then maybe for a moment we could call on some of these other ways of brightening the mind, opening the heart.

So I just want to mention a few of them. I mean, each of them is a talk in itself, so I just want to touch on a few. But recognizing, again, that insight wisdom can arise in relationship to any experience, and the most mundane experience can be the source of really profound insight. So when we're getting upset because our experience isn't subtle enough, and we're just sitting in fear, and then we get up and go eat, and it feels like our normal everyday consciousness, and we want something special—you know, we're looking out to object, to experience. Turn around and look at the attitude of mind. It's in the little things sometimes that something lets go, like that woman standing there, and really a whole other way of being, of freedom, is perceived as possible.

There was someone else at the Forest Refuge, and she was having lots of insights. And it seemed like most of them, the ones she would talk about, came when she was doing her vacuuming during yogi work meditation.

I love that because it really shows that we're just meeting everything as our path of waking up. We're not focusing only on some particular activity.

Sometimes people don't even know they're striving. You're really very committedly being continuous, not tense. And there could be such a tiny, tiny little bit of wanting or pushing that we really can't even notice it until it drops. Sometimes I know for me it would drop like when you go into the toilet. Just something where you quit trying to be so mindful, and insight can come. Or you're drinking your tea, or she's doing her vacuuming, or whatever. So never give up, but don't try too hard.

Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a very wonderful Dzogchen master, speaks about bodhicitta, the awakened and noble mind and heart. But this is broader than that:

"The difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow. For example, we live alone; we rarely consider the infinity of sentient beings. The more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, disregarding the well-being, happiness, and suffering of others.

Conversely, the enlightened Buddha is one who considers the infinity of beings rather than being concerned only with his own ego and individuality. Thus the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of mind. And that is precisely what we call bodhicitta—literally, to grow and develop that enlightened attitude. The concept of growth is used here for the passing from a completely narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open, loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings."

So all these step-by-step ways that the Buddha mentioned in that sutta to Suppabuddha, and a couple I'm going to mention, they're all moving in that direction—from the narrow, constricted heart and mind centering around me, driven by greed and fear, to the open heart and mind, the mind of non-clinging. Basically non-clinging, open, which will instinctively consider other beings' needs. But it's not that we have to be thinking that. It's just that when we're not centered here, the energy is available to respond to whatever presents itself to us, to respond to other beings. There's not this sense of me and other. It's just this.

And so in support of insight, supports for wisdom are all these different ways that the Buddha mentions, all working towards this brightening, lightening, opening the heart and mind. Mostly they're happy, joyful qualities. But it's not about cultivating them because we want to feel good. That's both the old motivation of how we used to do everything, and then sometimes we get so cautious, so fearful that we might fall back into wanting to feel good, that we get focused on the negative, like my friend. When we're feeling really the happiness of a generous thought that comes up and you feel really happy, the mind goes, "You're just clinging to the pleasant," and pulls back. Instead of the openness that we could really appreciate, it's like, "No, I have to do it right." But we don't recognize that.

So really we can cultivate the wholesome. It's one of the four right efforts: recognizing wholesome states of mind that have arisen and helping them increase, and cultivating unarisen wholesome states of mind. That's a piece of wisdom. That's not, "Oh, I don't like what's happening and I want to feel good." That's not a wholesome state of mind.

So I want to just mention briefly bodhicitta, even though that wasn't in the sutta. Just briefly, relative bodhicitta being a noble or awakened heart-mind. Tibetans always talk about it as a motivation that we can consciously cultivate, if we choose, to feed our whole life, our whole practice. Very simply, you could say it is cultivating an altruistic attitude, cultivating an attitude just as Nyoshul Khenpo said—not only just about me,

but caring for the infinity of all beings. Okay, we can't go that far yet. But just that sense of: may my practice be not for myself alone, but may my awakening be so that I can then be of service to help awaken all beings.

Of course, we don't start out feeling that. At first, it might seem really very far away. But we can cultivate it. In fact, Sogyal Rinpoche talks about it a lot. In one of his books, he says it's really okay to practice bodhicitta. Because in the beginning, he says, this enlightened attitude has two aspects. This is relative bodhicitta, cultivating this sincere wish—and it's not sincere at first, maybe. That's what he means when he says we cultivate it: may I really awaken in order to help all beings awaken. So he says the enlightened attitude has two aspects. One is the urge in ourselves to purify our negativity, to come out of our suffering. And the second is the sincere desire to benefit all beings through our awakening, to awaken in order to bring others to awakening.

It's really compassion for self and others. And always remember with this, and also with all the Brahma Viharas, that when we're connecting with all beings—with metta, with bodhicitta, with compassion—you are one of the all beings. Sometimes people do "all beings" and forget this one here. So compassion to all beings includes oneself.

In talking about cultivating this, at first it may seem, well, that's too highfalutin. I'm just sitting here. It's all I can do to get through the sitting. And when I say, "May I awaken to serve all beings," it just sounds completely phony. So, you know, it's okay if it's artificial at first. It's not what we're used to. We haven't been thinking this way before, so we need to deliberately bring it up. We need to deliberately shift our heart and mind that way. So just try it. If you're inclined, just say it to yourself—beginning of a sitting, the end of a sitting, the beginning of the day. And see what happens. Just see what happens.

So again, he said that if you cultivate the correct motivation in your own heart, just do that. It'll turn into bodhicitta all by itself. And I have found actually in my practice that's true. You may for many years be practicing for whatever your own particular motivation is—to free myself from suffering, to free yourself from a particular pattern that's just too much suffering, to experience more love, to be compassionate, to awaken, whatever. And it's pretty normal that even when it's wholesome, it's pretty much about me in the beginning. I mean, that's all we know.

But slowly, slowly, those motivations begin to open up as the wisdom develops, as the sense of self being so solid begins to be seen through. As impermanence deepens, there are more and more moments of insight, of seeing through the blind, unconscious holding to all the views—"it's all about me and I have to do this to make myself happy." They

just naturally start to get more transparent. You don't have to try so hard to root it out. That's too much me doing. It just gets more transparent. It does start to turn into bodhicitta by itself.

I have a friend—I haven't seen him for a few years, but I think I could safely say he's one of the more aversive people I know. And I know a lot of aversive people. Aversive, sincerely practicing, but very aversive. And with that, really most of it turned towards himself, very, very self-judgmental, feeling like he could never really practice or do anything good, really down on himself. He was talking to me after a three-month course where he'd been just saying this bodhicitta to himself: "May I awaken to be of service, to awaken all beings." And then, you know—wham, wham. "Who are you? How can you even say that? How can you even—" Just so much self-hatred would come up, and cynicism, and "you don't feel anything." And then it just shows you're just... all the stuff you can think of about yourself.

But he said he just kept on doing it. And something really started to change. I've had the same experience, not quite to the negative intensity of his, but where it stops being just words and you start to really feel—not "Oh, I'm so great, awakening for all beings," or that I'm awakened or anything—but the motivation starts to shift.

This is the way Sogyal Rinpoche describes the effect of that, which is really quite lovely. He's funny, but it's also quite lovely. It gives us courage. It opens the mind and heart. When it stops being all about me first, but really, somehow I'm doing this for all beings, then there are times when you feel like, "I've had enough. I'm out of here. The hindrances are too strong." And something comes in: "Well, it's not just for you, you know." And it's not like an ego thing—"I'm going to serve all beings." It's like, okay, just one more step. One more breath.

It expands the possibilities. It expands our mind and heart. The way Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts it is that it's the antidote to our chicken heart. It expands our chicken heart and gives us courage to be here for the next moment, for the next moment, for the next moment.

And it may sound like it's strengthening the sense of ego and self, but it's actually not. It's just the reverse. It's really quite lovely and very supportive, helping us just to keep going. We don't have to know where it's going. We don't get into thinking, "Well, how is this going to help anybody?" That's just thinking. But it's this really deep motivation: May what I say and do awaken me to awaken all beings. Just try it, play with it, and see what effect it has.

Sometimes we can't access it, of course. All of these things I'm mentioning are skillful means. Sometimes we can access them, sometimes not. Sometimes we need to, sometimes not. So we're just seeing which ones are helpful.

I'm going to mention the others very briefly, and we'll talk about them more as the retreat goes on. The four Brahma Viharas: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity. Compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity we'll go through in the evenings here. Loving-kindness was covered in the first six weeks, and most of you are familiar with it.

These practices, even though the phrases we use are about "me wishing for you" and seem very self-and-other oriented, in the moment, in a single mind moment when there's any of the four Brahma Viharas, it actually partakes of the vastness, the impersonal nature of the open heart and mind. When there's any of those four present, there's not clinging in the heart and mind. It is not all about me. The distinctions, the separations break down. And so, in any of these four, it really opens and brightens, makes the mind and heart softer, more flexible. At the same time it's softer, it's also not so brittle—more flexible, not so easily shaken.

You know, when you're really feeling metta, and you walk through the dining room, you don't so much feel like you have to protect anything, do you? It's not like they're all out there waiting to ruin my meditation. It's just: here we are. It's a very different feeling.

Dana, or generosity—this was the first thing the Buddha spoke about to seekers, and really it's pretty much the first thing he seemed to always teach when he started teaching, especially to lay people. We've talked about generosity and we'll talk about it again. The one point I really want to make about it tonight is something I didn't really understand until I'd spent a lot of time practicing in Thailand and also in Burma.

We hear about generosity as a way of creating merit, wholesome karma, wholesome results of doing good for people, of caring. But the great secret about it is that it's actually a source of incredible happiness in our own mind and heart when we're expressing generosity through thought or speech or action. The act of generosity, the intention of generosity in the mind, is a source of real brightness. It brings a kind of happiness, a kind of elation to the mind that I hadn't really understood before I'd seen it in action and experienced the effects going both ways.

I was a nun in Thailand for about a year, many years ago. At first I was really uncomfortable—and the same going to Burma—really uncomfortable with how generous people were to me in little things. I'm not saying everyone's perfect, everything's won-

derful, but there's a quality of generosity in the Dhamma culture, and often in many places in Burma especially just the regular culture, of spontaneously offering time, gifts. I was offered so much support when I was a nun in Thailand—my robes, my food everywhere. People would give me the best kuti, or whatever they could offer for women to stay in. I was treated so kindly, with such care.

And my first response was, "No, not me, I'm not worth it," or "I really don't need it, I have enough money myself, I don't need to take from you." But you see, that just cuts it. There's this open generosity, and I'm wanting to push it back. What one really sees is that in the people offering, there's so much happiness. They're really happy to offer. And when I would open and receive, that happiness would affect me. Then it becomes like a circle.

I noticed at times when I was spending extended periods in different monasteries in Burma or Thailand, in communication with people, I would find certain aspects of my heart getting brighter and brighter and happier. Other things were going on too—this isn't the only thing—but a kind of brightness, a lightness that could open to the suffering. I felt really inspired and uplifted. And some of this was from the generosity.

A friend of mine put it in a good way. She had come to a retreat in Burma a couple of years ago, and she hadn't been there much at all. She was telling me later that she didn't quite notice it at the beginning—it kind of crept up on her. She was an acupuncturist, and she came to a study retreat in Chazwa. Then I took her across the street to the hospital to meet some Burmese practicing acupuncturists. She wasn't training them; she just met them. They were so kind to her and friendly. They took her into Mandalay and introduced her to a really famous acupuncturist from China. Then they took her to meet this wonderful old teacher, a Sayadaw. Then they took her to dinner. And then she met this Chinese teacher that she'd actually studied with in China who happened to be in Mandalay. It just kept happening—all this kind of magical, happy stuff. It's like that sometimes. Sometimes it's just the other way.

And then the guest houses where she stayed, people went so out of the way to take care of her, to be kind. She said she started to notice she was just getting happier and happier, feeling more and more open, wanting to offer and wanting to give and wanting to share. And not out of a sense of "I should." It starts that way because we're not used to it, but really a kind of happiness that opens the heart. The non-clinging is just the natural response, and then the heart is open, it's brighter, you start to see more, you start to experience more, you start to have some insights. But for her, it was just this happiness.

She came home and she saw how her receiving the generosity, and the happiness of that person who gave, made her happy. She saw when she came home that her friends who didn't really know anything about what she'd been doing or her meditation—they really noticed it in her. And being around her, they would start to feel happier, more open and more generous. It can kind of roll like that.

And then she said also that back here it started to kind of go away again. It didn't feel as supported. But there's a lot more to say about generosity. I just wanted to bring out how it functions as a way of brightening and opening the heart and mind.

Even just a generous thought—and here, please, please don't go around doing and saying things to other people, like "I'm going to write everybody a note to be generous" or whatever—but sometimes a generous thought will come up in your mind. What we can do is notice it. Notice, "That's an attitude of mine too." Notice it. Appreciate it. Sometimes when we're really down or kind of tight, you can actually reflect on, contemplate your past generosity. Not as an ego thing, "Aren't I something great?" But just bring up, feel moments when you've thought or said or done something that's really from that open-hearted generosity. And you experience, again, the brightness, the uplifting of that—kind of like karmic result, vipāka. It's really quite helpful.

Similarly with sīla, with non-harming behavior, moral conduct. Certainly it's in order to protect other people and to protect ourselves. But the Buddha talked about the brightness of it as the bliss of blamelessness, freedom from remorse. This is a really happy state. This is a state that really allows us to relax, to open the heart and mind.

I imagine that most of you, in the time you've been here, have had some unwholesome thing, some stupid thing you did in the past, arise in your consciousness. We all have done at least one or two stupid, unintelligent, harmful things. And it's painful when they come up. Even if it's met with wisdom, met with openness—so it's remorse—that remorse is painful. But it's healing if we don't pile on top of it guilt and present moment aversion.

The freedom from remorse, the bliss of blamelessness, is a very profound aspect of non-clinging, of opening the heart and mind, of strengthening the mind, of support for wisdom, for insight.

I have to read this. It's a little aside, but I have to. From a news magazine, under a little column called "Only in America": "A California perfume company has introduced the world's first biblically-themed fragrance called Virtue. From the perfumer: 'It's based on years of scriptural research. It includes frankincense, myrrh, in a blend of 3,000-year-old scents.'"

Retailing at $80 for a bottle, Virtue will enable its wearer to smell like Christ and many of the saints, says CEO Rick Larimore. I won't tell you what I think they must have smelled like schlepping around in the desert all the time, but probably that's not what the perfume smells like.

Anyway, this is the main point. The CEO of the perfume company says, "Many individuals of high spiritual attainment give off a fragrance attributed to their virtue." So if you think that person near you is wearing a scented product, maybe you just don't recognize what it really is.

On a serious note, the Buddha—and I'm not going to read this whole sutta, but it's one of these progressive teachings where this leads to that, leads to that—says: "What is the purpose of skillful virtues? What is their reward?" He says, "Skillful virtues have freedom from remorse as their purpose, Ananda, and freedom from remorse as their reward. And what's the purpose of freedom from remorse?" It goes on and on. Freedom from remorse has joy as its purpose, joy as its reward. And it goes from joy to rapture, rapture to serenity, serenity to sukha, sukha to concentration, concentration to knowledge and vision of things as they actually are. Knowledge and vision of things as they actually are leads to disenchantment as its purpose and its reward. Disenchantment has dispassion as its purpose. And what's the purpose of dispassion? What's its reward? Dispassion has knowledge and vision of release as its purpose, knowledge and vision of release as its reward. "In this way, Ananda, skillful virtues lead step by step to the consummation of arahatship."

I wanted to draw the links very clearly. There are times when we're nowhere near able to be dispassionate, to see things clearly. But we can be calling on our sila, our skillful virtues. And no matter what we've done in the past, skillful virtues, sila, moral conduct can start right now.

Even Angulimala—you know this story, I'm not going to go into it, but the mass murderer who killed 999 people—when he met the Buddha, and the Buddha really helped him see through it, he became a bhikkhu. Even then, he began right then the cultivation of skillful virtue.

There's an interesting little story in the sutta about him. After he became a monk, and he was very sincere—he'd reached first stage anyway—he went into a village for alms and saw a woman giving birth and in a lot of pain and suffering, and he was really touched. He came back to the Buddha and said, "Ah, so much suffering. I wish I could help." So the Buddha says—this was a common blessing then—"Go and say to her: 'Sister, since I was born, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth, may there be well-being for you and your child.'"

He says, "Buddha? Wouldn't that be a lie? I mean, I've intentionally killed many living beings."

The Buddha says, "Okay. Then go and say: 'Sister, since I was born in the noble birth, since I was born in the Dhamma, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth, may there be well-being for you and the child.'" And it says there was.

Just taking a stand on that profound truth. Skillful virtues begin now. Non-harming speech, non-harming thoughts, non-harming action. And in calling on them, we can actually contemplate, reflect on, call up times of skillful virtue as a way to brighten, to open the contracted heart and mind, to support the faith and the trust.

Again, this is something many times we don't do so much in the West, but it really is a source of wholesome happiness sometimes. You might have to get over a little feeling of, "Ugh, this is so egocentric." That's aversion. But when you're purely calling up wholesome things you've done and those memories come, don't shy away or be afraid to look. Feel the wholesomeness. Feel the brightness.

In the one minute left, the last thing I want to mention is gratitude. One time, Sayadaw U Pandita was giving a talk here, and I didn't have the notes so I can't remember all of it, but he talked about five kinds of rare beings, rare people.

One of them was a Buddha, so that's pretty rare. But one was someone who really feels and expresses gratitude.

In terms of opening oneself to gratitude—this is something I actually often practice, both on and off retreat. When my mind and heart feel contracted and narrow, just focused on my little self, or on what's wrong, or overwhelmed with suffering (mine or another's), I consciously call on gratitude. Whether it's gratitude to the Buddha, to your teachers, to our circumstances, gratitude for human birth—or it can just be gratitude for little things. It still brings this openness, this inspiration of mind, this purity of the mind stream.

Sometimes on retreat, I remember getting into bed at night—one of those nights when you think, *Thank God, tomorrow is a new day.* Hopefully things change and we'll wake up and it'll all be okay again. This state will be gone. And I would just start bringing in some gratitude. "I'm grateful for..." and I might start really mundane. Again, like with bodhicitta, I'm not feeling anything at first. I'm grateful to have a bed to sleep in. I'm grateful to have enough warmth. I'm grateful I had enough to eat today. I'm grateful for the dharma.

And really pretty soon, unless it's a really contracted state, some little glimmer of actual gratitude would come, and then things would just start pouring—more than I could even think, things that surprised me. It's not so much about the content. It's just about touching again that attitude, that wholesome attitude of heart and mind, really supporting this quality.

It's not so much about feeling good. It really isn't. Feeling good comes along with these things as a nice side benefit. But it's really about calling on these different ways to enlighten, to support the purity of consciousness, to help support the mind of non-clinging. Here and now as the means to the end of awakening. But it's only in this moment, experienced fully at times in this moment, here and now.

Something we can all be really grateful for.

I wanted to share this bodhicitta prayer from the Twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa Rinpoche. I really like it:

I call on you, my teachers, regard me with compassion.
I sincerely wish to receive your blessings.
Please regard your child's longing desire.
Please bless me with the resolve to attain realization.
Please bless me to have a steady and smooth mind
so that for this life and those to follow,
as a true practitioner whose heart and mind are in accord,
the special intention to help others is spontaneously present.
May I be able to benefit measureless beings.

CHAPTER 32

First Noble Truth and Self-Judgment

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines self-judgment as a specific form of aversion (dosa) rooted in our misunderstanding of the First Noble Truth. She clarifies that dukkha is not simply "suffering" but rather a basic unsatisfactoriness—like an ill-fitting axle—that runs through all conditioned experience, including pleasant states. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "whatever is felt is included within dukkha," she explains that our practice involves understanding this truth rather than trying to eliminate unpleasant experience.*
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> *Wilson traces how self-judgment develops from momentary aversion to sense contact: when mindfulness doesn't meet an unpleasant experience, papañca (mental proliferation) fills the gap, and for those prone to self-criticism, the resulting storyline turns inward. She offers a crucial insight: when caught in self-judgment, no thought can be trusted because dosa distorts perception. The Buddha's teaching on the two darts illustrates how we compound unavoidable pain with mental suffering through resistance and resentment.*
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> *The path forward combines mindfulness and compassion—not to make difficult states feel good, but to peacefully coexist with them. Wilson emphasizes that meeting our own difficulty with awareness creates new wholesome karma that gradually transforms habitual patterns. This capacity to bear witness to our own experience becomes the foundation for genuine compassion toward others and the world.*

What I want to talk about tonight is the subject of aversion—self-judgment really, as a subset of aversion. And that means actually starting by talking about the first noble truth. So as you see, it's a serious topic.

Self-judging is not everybody, but many, many people really suffer a great deal from it in our culture. As I said, self-judging is just a form of aversion, and aversion is one of the habitual responses to unpleasant feeling tone, unpleasant experience. And it's all based in delusion.

Perhaps you've heard the very famous quotation from the Dalai Lama to a Westerner talking about their self-judgment. He's saying, you know, you're just wrong. You're wrong. It's basically wrong, first, because we're believing there's a self—but that's a

whole other talk. It's wrong because aversion, as a response to difficulty, as a response to the unpleasant, is based in delusion. And the very movement of aversion in a moment in our mind increases and feeds delusion.

When we respond by pulling back, it keeps us from being able to recognize accurately what's going on. In that gap of disconnect, that's when there's rife space for papañca to flow—papañca based on aversion. And we just get further and further from what's really going on. So aversion is based in delusion, it feeds delusion, and it just keeps us more and more confused. Self-judgment is just taking that and turning it back on ourselves. So that's kind of the overview.

To start by talking about the first noble truth, the truth of dukkha: I personally find it fascinating, really quite profound. It's a whole lifetime's worth of exploration at least, and really quite subtle and freeing. As the Buddha talked about, the first noble truth, dukkha, is to be understood—not to be changed, not to be gotten rid of, not to be avoided, but to be understood. And so really, on one level, the source of a great deal of our confusion and suffering in life—and I'm not going to translate dukkha as suffering, I'm using suffering more specifically—is in not understanding the way things are. Dukkha is the way things are.

I'm sure you're all familiar with dukkha and the various translations. One of the most common and easiest being suffering, but not such a helpful one really. The kind of shorthand for Buddhism is "life is suffering," right? That's the first noble truth. Now, at least for native English speakers—I don't know what the connotations would be if English isn't your native language—but for native English speakers, if you hear "life is suffering," what kind of mood, what kind of connotations come from that? It's not really inspiring, is it? It doesn't really feel onward leading.

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, when we think of the first noble truth that way, it's almost impossible for a sense of aversion not to come along with it. "Life is suffering"—there's already that tinge of aversion. But the first noble truth is not meant to be something that brings out aversion. When we understand it, it actually frees us from aversion, confusion, and greed. We understand it.

In his book on the Satipaṭṭhāna, Bhikkhu Anālayo—it's really a great book if you haven't read it, he just brings in so many different angles, so many different sources—talks about the Pali etymology, possible readings and interpretations of the word dukkha. One of them is that the "du" part means difficulty, and the "kha" part could be standing for the hole of an axle. In an ox cart, there's a wheel and a hole in the wheel,

and the axle, that pole, goes through it. Based on that interpretation, dukkha means the hole just doesn't really fit the axle. It kind of grinds around with difficulty. It just doesn't really work so well. That I can relate to more as dukkha, as an expression of our life.

Another interpretation: "du" again means difficulty, and "kha" could come from another root, "sta," which would mean standing. So in this case, dukkha would mean standing with difficulty, or standing badly.

Again, uneasiness, uncomfortableness. And I find personally this much more to the point than suffering.

So as Bhikkhu Bodhi then goes on to say, he describes dukkha as "the basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives." That's not saying everything's horrible. It's not saying everything's negative. Just saying there's a kind of basic unsatisfactoriness that runs through our lives.

Part of what opens up in our practice, on and off retreat, is that willingness of the mindful attention, the receptive awareness that stops trying to block that perception, that stops trying to fix that perception. I think of my mother, who has difficulty—always has had—being with unhappiness, with difficulty, with things not working. She's afraid of it, pushes it down. And so for some reason, one time I was trying to explain to her what dukkha meant, which I don't know why we were even in that conversation, but I was trying to explain and she goes, "I'm not suffering. I don't have uneasiness running through my life. Everything's great."

So that level. And then when someone's holding that, it's like, "Don't tell me. Basic unsatisfactoriness running through my life? Did I come here to hear that? I don't think so. I came here to be more at ease, more loving, more happy."

That's why, when it comes to self-judgment, when your practice isn't going the way you think it should, when it's opening up to sometimes a basic niggling uneasiness, sometimes much more obvious, we think something's wrong. Something's wrong when it's more difficult and unpleasant. That's our basic not understanding of the first noble truth.

So then, as the Buddha talked about the three aspects—I don't want to go into them in detail, but just to give some flavors of what we mean—there's dukkha dukkha, which is really what you would call basic suffering: pain, old age, disease, death. No one gets out without it. Basic suffering. Sickness. Not being together with what is loved. Having to be together with what is not loved. Not getting what you want. These are the definitions in the suttas—dukkha dukkha.

Another aspect is that of change. No matter how wonderful or how difficult something is, it's constantly changing. Basically there's an unreliability and insecurity in that nothing can be held to or relied on for lasting satisfaction—or lasting suffering, for that matter. Nothing can be relied on for lasting anything. And when we're not completely at ease with that, it definitely gives this little undercurrent of... it's just not quite... I just want to be settled. It's just not quite easy.

And the third is called sankhara dukkha, which one way is described as a kind of perpetual incompleteness or insubstantiality. There are different ways of describing it. One way is just the ongoing nature of everything. You have to get up and drag yourself out of bed and go pee, and then you have to wash, and then you have to dress, and then you have to eat, and then you have to go pee, and then you have to wash—and it just goes on and on and on. Well, finally, why do we love to go to bed at night if you can sleep? Thank God. It's over. It's over. That's why Joseph used to say that sleep is the worldling's nirvana. Just check out.

So I'm joking. But that doesn't have to be accompanied with aversion, what I just described. The way I said it definitely had a tinge. But it doesn't have to be accompanied with aversion.

And this is what's so interesting: we still tend to think of all of this as insecurity, difficult, unpleasant, nothing can be relied on. But that's not so. The beautiful is included within dukkha, within the first noble truth. It's just that it can't be relied on because there's change.

In fact, there's one sutta where Sariputta, the Buddha's chief disciple, and the Buddha are talking. The Buddha is quizzing Sariputta on aspects of his enlightenment, his awakening. At one point, the Buddha rephrases something Sariputta said. He rephrases it this way: "Another way of saying that, Sariputta, is that whatever is felt"—felt being vedana: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—"whatever is felt is included within dukkha." Is included within this first noble truth.

So the first noble truth isn't about everything being grim and unpleasant. It's about there's pleasant, there's unpleasant, there's neutral in constant, ongoing, unending succession. And it can't be relied on. It's insubstantial. And that is dukkha. So you see why to just have a sense of aversion right away isn't really accurate.

But this is not always so easy for us to understand. The Buddha talked about, again in relationship to this, as with many other things as well—he talks about three aspects of experience in relationship to how we can come to understand this, that all feeling is included within dukkha, in relationship to many other aspects of our experience.

And he talks about it as really seeing and understanding for ourselves the gratification, the danger, and the escape in these things.

The Buddha said—and this is the Buddha talking—he said, "Before my enlightenment, when I was still a bodhisatta, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in this world? What is the danger in this world? And what is the escape from this?" And he said, "Then it occurred to me: whatever pleasure and joy there is in this world, this is the gratification."

This is very, very important for us to see. Because if we don't really let it in—sure, there is gratification, there is pleasure and joy—if we're trying to just pretend it's all neutral, pretend we think it's all empty, nothing is giving me pleasure, then we're not recognizing accurately. And as long as we're not recognizing accurately, we're not going to be able to see the danger and see the escape. We stay lost.

So sure, there's gratification, there's pleasant, there's joy, there's love, there's beauty—all of this. That the world is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change—this is the danger in the world. This insecurity, this unreliability. And the abandoning of craving and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world.

Do you hear? He said the abandoning of craving and lust is the escape from the world. Not hating the world. Not trying to avoid seeing that there's beauty. Not trying to avoid being with the unpleasant. Just seeing. Abandoning the craving and lust is the escape.

So this is really how we need to look—to see accurately our experience and to allow wisdom to arise that does free our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering.

I had to lay that foundation, but now I want to go and particularly talk about aversion in terms of aversion arising in relationship to unpleasant. But as you see, the first noble truth of dukkha isn't only about aversion. What the Buddha is saying is there's pleasant, there's unpleasant, there's neutral. And that's just how it is.

There's nothing wrong or bad about unpleasant experience. Physical and mental experience arises. It's going to happen. It doesn't mean that there's something deeply, deeply wrong with you when you have pain, when you're sick, when things don't happen the way you want them to, when you can't control your experience. It means, hey, welcome to the human race.

But that's not really—when we're not looking carefully—that's not the way the habit of our mind and heart responds.

So just to begin to explore on a very simple moment-to-moment basis, and then we can spread it out. In a moment, we've talked about this: the six sense doors, the sense consciousness—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thoughts, emotions—experience arises with pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. The mind feels it that way.

And just as when there's pleasant, the habit of the mind when there's not mindfulness just leans into it—a little bit of craving, hardening into grasping, hardening into becoming, wanting more—so with aversion, similarly, based on delusion. I mean, I'm saying these words, it's not in the moment, but the delusion is like, "This shouldn't be happening." And somehow by pushing it away, I can either keep myself separate from it, not feel it, or just continue on with the pretense that it's not happening at all.

But in the moment, the mental reflex to something unpleasant—just take an unpleasant sound, let's not take anything too really deeply complicated—the momentary reflex in the mind is just to pull back a little bit. Very mild. If there's mindfulness and you notice it—unpleasant sound, pulls back—then the attention can go right to the unpleasant, back to the sound, and that was just a little blip. It doesn't go anywhere. You just see that.

But say there's that pulling back, and there's not much mindfulness. You don't really know it. In that moment, there's like a little gap. What comes into that little gap? What could it be? "Oh, that sound—that shouldn't be happening. Why is that so loud? That's really going through my whole body." And what was just a little moment of pulling back can just blossom into aversion immediately, really quickly. Unseen, it just kind of cycles on itself. It just feeds on and on and on.

So we have millions of examples of that, but I want to stay on the momentary aspect for a moment. What's interesting, of course, is that we don't always notice on this level. It takes a certain calmness of mind at the moment. And it's also helpful if the sense impingement isn't something that hugely triggers our personality patterns.

But whenever we recognize that we're in some form of aversion—fear, anger, disappointment, rejection, frustration—it started in the moment with an unpleasant sense experience that's occurring now. For example, the content of fear may be about all these horrible things that might happen in the future. But what triggered that aversion playing itself out into papañca? What triggers that moment of aversion that goes into fear is something unpleasant arising now. It may be a memory of a past difficult thing, and then "what if that happens in the future?" It could be a little twinge in your spine—you can't even call it pain, you can barely call it sensation, but it's just mildly, barely

unpleasant. Even intense fear or intense grief over memories of something that happened to you starts by the memory occurring now, a mental experience happening now.

I'm emphasizing this because it has been enormously helpful in terms of giving me a way to trust bringing my mindfulness into the present moment experience. Sure, sometimes it's overwhelming, and we'll get to that. But before it's overwhelming, or when it's just kind of, "Oh, what's all this aversion? What's going on?"—sometimes I'll just sit there a minute, widen my attention, and ask, "What's going on right now?" And I'll see, "Oh, my stomach feels a little unpleasant." Or I'll sit there and suddenly notice, "Oh, I just had this really unpleasant memory. It kind of floated through and I didn't really notice it."

Seeing the cause and effect really breaks down the sense of solidity, the sense of taking it so personally, and the sense of inevitability and unworkability about the aversion. It's just a habit of mind in response to unpleasant. And when we have that courage and that willingness of mindfulness to know, "Okay, unpleasant is like this"—I mean, it's built into us from most of our whole experience: unpleasant, get the heck out of here. So it can be scary. That's why we have to really cultivate the mindfulness. It's not our natural tendency, for most of us anyway. Unpleasant arises and awareness just flows into reactivity without a bubble of space.

But sometimes it happens, doesn't it? And isn't that so peaceful? You can't even tell if it's unpleasant after a while. There's no aversion. And you think—well, you can think all kinds of things, you can think anything. But there's a sense of, "Wow, this is possible. It's another way of being." That's the moment of understanding the first noble truth. Unpleasant is like this. Pleasant is like this. Neutral is like this.

So when the mindfulness comes back and meets the experience, the sense contact, there is again a possibility of wisdom—just knowing it for what it is. "Oh, unpleasant sound." When the mindfulness doesn't meet it, or we don't even recognize it, then delusion and confusion come in with the thoughts: "That sound in the hall, I can't believe it, how could they bring it?" And it just spins and spins, and the confusion, the not knowing what's happening, gets stronger and stronger and stronger—until we're relating with great fear, great self-hatred or aversion to something that basically we've completely made up. It isn't even happening. There was just some moment of unpleasant.

A simple example: someone told me years ago, they were sitting in this hall—a different setup some years ago—and their concentration was good and deep, they were really present. They kept hearing this noise, some kind of steady little noise, the kind that just drives you crazy in the meditation hall. Because why? First, it's a little unpleas-

ant. And second, it shouldn't be happening, right? So we don't just notice "unpleasant sound" and the tightness in the body, which is also unpleasant. Maybe there's not noticing that, but there's a thought.

This shouldn't be happening. And that moment of papañca isn't seen as a moment of papañca—it's taken as an accurate description of experience, isn't it? "This shouldn't be happening. This is messing up my concentration. I need to do something." And we're absolutely believing each of these thoughts.

So the trick is, how soon do we notice what's happening? Three thoughts, we're doing well. Sally was talking about yogi mind last night—three days and we haven't noticed.

Anyway, this person said this went on and on, sitting after sitting, and they couldn't escape it. They were going crazy. Then finally they had a sitting where the sound was still happening, but they just noticed it. The mind didn't get reactive. They just kept being with their breath, their body, whatever was happening. And they thought, "Oh, wow. It's really true what Ajahn Chah says: the sound doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound." It's just happening. The only thing disturbing my meditation was my attachment to the thoughts.

Really noticing this gives us the inspiration, the trust, to simply try and meet what's happening in this moment.

Self-judgment arises when there's a moment or longer of unpleasantness, of difficulty, and the way the papañca goes, the way the thoughts unfold, is that as aversion grows into anger or hatred, the story turns around and comes back on ourselves.

Now, for each one of us who experiences some form of worthlessness or self-judgment or "I'm not good enough"—we each, in terms of our personality and personal history, will have a particular story, particular events in our past, usually starting from a very young age, that could explain the particular flavor of our self-hatred or worthlessness. And certainly, that can be very useful to know.

Sometimes, as you begin to be able to just touch the feeling—and self-hatred feels awful too—you notice: "Oh, okay, unpleasantness feels like this." If we can drop the story and just feel it, we come into being present, bearing witness, showing up for ourselves, for our own experience. That's the expression of mindfulness, the expression of kindness, the expression of mettā. Mindfulness and kindness—mettā and compassion—are really the two tools that bring us out of this habit and into the present moment.

So as we're exploring this here in retreat and in our life, if you're not already familiar—and many of us are—with your particular story and the particular thought patterns that arise in response to unpleasant experience, getting to know that can be very helpful. Sometimes people then choose to explore it further—the storyline, the past history—through therapy, examining how it shows up in thoughts and reactions to situations now. I've found that very helpful.

And then, in terms of the freedom of understanding how the mind works in awareness, at some point I know the story already. I really don't need to keep rehashing it. So when I'm sitting or in daily life, it doesn't matter. I start to notice that I'm also very familiar with what self-judging or self-hatred feels like. There's a tone in my body—and it's not a pleasant tone. Then there's a certain quality that the thoughts begin to take.

It really isn't so subtle once we start tuning in. It's not like it sneaks up on us. It's like, "Hmm, you really could have done that a little better, couldn't you?" Or, "I think that person really doesn't like me." Or I just feel like I'm creeping around, even if I'm alone in the house. You just notice that.

I don't need to sit down and go, "Well, that's because when my mother... and then... and then..." I don't need to know that. I know that already. That's enough. Right now, I know what it feels like. It feels like this. It's simply unpleasant physical and mental experience.

It feels like this. Met with mindfulness. Met with compassion.

There's nothing to fix. There's nothing you need to change because it isn't you. It isn't me. It's just thoughts and unpleasant feelings and sensations. It's just a mental state, as we say.

That's not a put down. When I'm suddenly caught in something difficult in my life and I recognize, "Oh, this is just a mental state"—that's like a huge freedom. Because I know, even though it feels so gripping... Isn't that one of the things about difficult and unpleasant mental states? Even though we know better, it feels like this is how it's going to be forever. This is it. All that other stuff came and went, but this one is different. Four more weeks? I don't think so. This is the root of who I am.

And once you recognize, "Oh, this is a mental state"—because somehow just being able to have awareness big enough to name that—actually, the awareness, the attention, the energy relaxes into the experience of the mental state. When I recognize it like that, without resistance, without so much identification, without making it a problem. "Oh, primal terror feels like this."

Serious. When I get to primal terror, I'm really happy, because all that craziness my mind has been doing since I was two to avoid feeling it—I don't need to do that anymore. "Oh, primal terror is like this." It's a huge relief.

Because who told us we would only have pleasant mental states? Did you think that the more you sat, you'd only have pleasant ones? Pleasant states are important. Wholesome states are important. The arahat maybe only has wholesome mental states. But until we're arahats, if we hate every unwholesome mental state, if we take it as proof of what we always knew—that we're useless and a failure—well, it just keeps on spinning, doesn't it? It just keeps on spinning.

So—oh my, I have so much more to say. What is it then that, once aversion comes in—whether it's fear or anger or self-judgment—what feeds it? I've said how mindfulness and just meeting it as it is helps it to drop, but what feeds it?

One thing Sally talked about last night was wise attention. There's also unwise attention. The Buddha said—and I find this very helpful—unwise attention to the repugnance of an unpleasant object. Repugnance means it's repellent to us, the aspect of the unpleasant experience that just feels yucky. Unwise attention to that is what feeds aversion and really keeps it spinning.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu always gives a very concrete example. If you're really angry with somebody—they've just done something and you're really angry—if you keep looking at them, what does that do to the anger? What effect does that have?

Dosa is the word in Pali for all the different qualities of aversion. I actually want to use dosa because there's frustration and anger and fear and resistance, but dosa covers all of it. I like to use dosa because it takes me out of the minuteness of the story.

So I'm looking at the person, and they did this to me, and the anger is getting bigger. And then dosa in the mind distorts perception. Have you noticed that? Have you noticed that if you're really angry with someone, the more you look at them, they kind of start to look uglier? It does that, you know.

Or if something is uncomfortable—there's some food and you're really feeling sick, you feel nauseated—does the food in front of you look attractive? Does it look good? Maybe. But if you've ever had food poisoning from something you ate, you know what happens. You just know. You can't go near that food for fifteen years. Does it look attractive?

Does it become distorted? And then it just keeps going. We just keep looking at it, looking at it, looking at it.

You know how if you have a little broken tooth—it doesn't even hurt, but it's just rough? Can you keep your tongue away from that? Your other teeth are fine. Do you even notice them? Of course not.

And then it's unpleasant, and then we get more unpleasant, and it just spins and spins and spins. Then you're on edge, so the next unpleasant thing that enters your line of perception—some poor person happens to walk a little too close—and the mind goes, *ugh!* What did they do? Nothing. But aversion feeds on itself.

And if you're inclined towards self-judgment, then it turns back on yourself. "What's the matter with me? I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have had that aversion to that person. I'm so bad." And we don't see—that's just *dosa* in the mind again. So I might be analyzing, "Oh, aversion to them, but no, aversion to me. No, I really shouldn't be like this. This is because when I was a child..." And it just keeps it going.

But if we can simply note, "Oh, *dosa* in the mind feels like this"—it takes the personality out of it. It takes a lot of the identification out of it. The attention is able to really be there. "Oh, *dosa* in the mind is like this, is like this." The *papañca* doesn't have to take off so much.

So one way aversion is fed is through this unwise attention to the unpleasant aspect of an experience that we don't like, and we just can't leave it alone. Another way is just outright denying—consciously anyway—that this unpleasant or difficult thing is happening, externally or internally.

I have a friend in Switzerland where I teach. She used to be a cook at the meditation center there. It's in the mountains, and the weather changes very quickly. You get up in the morning and it's a beautiful blue sky. By noon, clouds are coming over the mountains, and by afternoon, it's raining. She came from a flat part of Switzerland—there are flat parts in Switzerland—and she loves lying out in the sun in the summer. So she'd be lying in the garden, and then the clouds would start coming, and it's getting all dark. And she'd just say, "No, this isn't happening."

We do that when we have the idea we should be perfect. We should be loving. We shouldn't feel angry. "No, I don't feel angry." Has anyone ever done that? "Oh no, I'm not feeling aversion to this. This pain in my back—I'm just equanimous with this." We're walking, we're bored, people are just a little too close. "Well, I'm just equanimous with this. This is just a little, you know..."

And we fool ourselves until suddenly it breaks out somewhere. "I seem a little overaversive to this little thing. What could have been going on?"

So outright denial—and we don't notice it until suddenly it shoots up really strongly.

Or another pattern is just some little subtle background unpleasantness. It could be just a mood of very subtle tiredness, or discontent, very subtle—we hardly notice it. But it's going on.

And it can slowly, not noticing what's happening, the aversion feeds on itself each time.

For instance, in my mind and body, when I'm really tired—and at night I'm almost always really tired—my body is uncomfortable. It hurts a little. And I would get aversive. I didn't really learn this until the last few years, but thank God I finally learned it. At night, I used to get a little cranky once in a while. And if I was doing something with my family, I was much more likely to get cranky. Even now we have teacher meetings and I always say, you know, we should have them in the afternoon. It's really a lot better for everybody because I just get cranky and impatient.

But I notice it much more now. And I see that what it comes from is the uncomfortable, unpleasant feeling in my body and my not bringing awareness to it. So the mind tries to move away from the unpleasant, and in that comes aversion, and then it just shoots out at whatever other unpleasant experience arises. When I just recognize—oh, body feels like this, unpleasant, painful—well, it's really fine. It's really fine. And I don't feel that uncomfortableness, that negativity in myself that I used to feel when I got really tired. If I just remember to notice.

Another form is resistance. Just that sense. And resistance can really fool us. Resistance can come with a really good story about why we shouldn't do something. Take walking meditation, for example. "I'm just feeling so tired right now, and I really think it wouldn't be helpful to walk." Or, "I just feel heavy, and I think sitting is better. Sitting is calmer. Walking is more gross. I don't think I should do the walking."

Resistance can just be a habit. Once you recognize it's a mental state—oh, resistance feels like this—it doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything. You stand there, feel resistance, and start walking. Resistance is gone. Just a mental state. But when we don't notice it, again, because there's not the connection, there's that delusion. We're not with what's actually happening. And the one aversive thought leads to the next aversive thought, and the next thought, and the whole thing spins and becomes really solid.

So all of these forms of delusion that increase through aversion, through the not connecting—this is really how aversion increases. And when it's self-hatred, this is how we get lost in it: by not knowing what's happening.

These habits are very, very deep—these habits of assessing our life, assessing our experience by virtue of how much is pleasant and how much is unpleasant. And somewhere deep down there, when it's unpleasant, it's so familiar to evaluate it as being wrong, as being bad. And that really our life, our journey, is one of having more and more pleasant, more and more good things. If that's how we think, then whenever unpleasant comes, the Buddha described it so well in that sutta, the Two Darts, which I want to read a little more than usual of, because he describes the whole thing.

He says, what an unenlightened worldling—puthujjana, it's easier to say—what they do when they are shot with an arrow. There's a bodily unpleasant feeling. That happens to everyone. An uninstructed worldling, what they do on being shot with an arrow: he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Thus he experiences two kinds of unpleasant feelings, a bodily one and a mental one.

You get the drift. Self-hatred is exactly that. Self-judgment is exactly that. Something unpleasant happens, and we turn around and stab ourselves. It really is—sometimes it feels like I'm stabbing myself in the heart. You're so bad. You're so wrong. This shouldn't be happening. Just complete second dart.

Then he goes on: having been touched by that painful feeling, he resists it and resents it.

So say you're feeling angry. Say you've had good concentration, whatever that means to you, and it's gone. Say you had a really calm day sitting, and now you can't string two breaths together, and you really hate it. That's unpleasant feeling. We resist it, we resent it.

And then in one who so resists and resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance, just a habit of resistance, comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit. Self-hatred is just that habit. Something unpleasant happens, and it's all my fault.

Then under the impact of that painful feeling of that resistance, one proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? As I said this the other night, an untaught worldling knows of no other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

So something's unpleasant. You're blaming yourself. You're loathing yourself. You're sure you've done wrong. So what do you do? You run into the refrigerator at midnight when you think no one will be there and eat a handful of figs. Just something pleasant. But we know where that goes, don't we? Because then your stomach hurts. Or then you have the feeling, "Ah, I was trying to take eight precepts, and now I ate three." And then

we go back to it's unpleasant, and you beat and you beat. And then you know no other way out except the enjoyment of sensual happiness, so you go and read something. And then you go, "Oh, I read," and you beat and you beat.

You get it? This is the weariness with saṃsāra.

But this is broken if we simply have the courage and the willingness to look. You don't have to fix it, but just to have that steadiness of mindfulness, that kindness to just come in and notice what is happening.

If the pain, if the difficulty is unacceptable, we often get a sense like an idealization of how it's supposed to be. We do this in ourselves. We do it in the world. We definitely do it in meditation practice—this sense of not really getting that painful stuff happens. Even though we get it on the intellectual level, on the deep cellular level, when you start beating yourself up, going into hatred because—I don't know—it can be something so simple as your foot hurts, or you ate too much, or craving had the audacity to arise in your mind even after you've been so concentrated. Or, "I really saw through that pattern. I really saw through it. I understood it. Finished, right? That one's not coming back again." And it comes back. Of course it comes back. What do you think?

So we get into this sense of idealization, and that's another place that feeds selective perception. We only see what we think it should be. And that keeps feeding that running and resisting the unpleasant and going for the pleasant.

The selective perception is really a fascinating thing. Sally talked a little bit about it the other night, this idealization. And notice, sometimes it's helpful to actually bring into your mind in words what views you're holding of what the ideal you should be like. "I should never..." If you really say it, hopefully you can realize how ridiculous it is. Because when we have these idealizations, they're really up there.

I should never be angry again. I'm a practicing Buddhist. I only feel metta toward other people. I don't feel angry. If I feel angry, it's because I'm bad, I'm wrong, so I shouldn't feel it. And of course, that itself is dosa in the mind.

An example I use often: on a retreat I was teaching with a friend in California years ago, there were about fifty people, and many of them were brand new yogis. It was their first retreat—a five-day retreat. So we were giving all the instructions about how to sit: you can sit on a bench, on a zafu, on a chair. It's about the posture. We explained everything.

About the fifth day, a middle-aged woman came to me in the interview and said, "I have been in nothing but excruciating pain at every single sitting. I just can't sit cross-legged. I've never done it in my life. I'm a fifty-year-old woman, but sitting cross-legged, all I'm doing is filled with hatred, anger, and aversion, fighting the pain. It's unbearable." This had gone on for five days.

Then she said, either that morning or the night before, "I looked up and noticed for the first time—I noticed, oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe it's okay to meditate sitting in a chair."

It wasn't even the sense, which we all have, of knowing we can use a chair but refusing to really do it because we know deep down that the real stuff happens on the cushion. I know. You all go through that. I went through it myself, until you have to give up and accept reality as it is. But this wasn't even on that level. This was on the level of her not having consciously noticed that I was sitting in a chair. I'm sitting up there talking the whole day.

The selective perception was so strong—this is how it's supposed to be—that we don't even let reality in. It's a fascinating thing.

This is why the steadiness, the continuity of mindfulness, is essential. Not that you can force it, but the willingness to be continuous matters. The selective perception comes in when we click on and click off. We pay attention when we like something, or when we don't like it. We pay attention at certain times and then don't notice when that isn't going on. She would notice whenever she saw people sitting cross-legged. She wouldn't notice me or the other people in chairs. She would notice how painful it was, but the thought would never come into her conscious head to try another way, even though we were saying it. It sounds incredible when I describe it, but this is what we all do.

Self-hatred is a function of this idealization, this sense of perfection. Your practice is never good enough. What's it supposed to be like? "I'm not with the breath enough." What would enough be? "I'm not concentrated enough." The Buddha said one of the four things that drive people mad to think about is the power of a concentrated mind. You're never going to be concentrated enough if your idealization is simply more, more.

This is when the dosa actually distorts what we perceive. We don't perceive accurately, and then our decisions aren't accurate. This is the Buddha: "Brahman, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

So not to hate ourselves, but just to notice when there's dosa in the mind, when it's taking the form of self-judgment. If you don't remember anything else I say tonight, remember this: when there's self-judgment in the mind and you're caught in it,

You can't believe any thought you have. No thought you have can you believe. Because it's all distorted by dosa. And so when you're trying from a place of self-hatred to make your practice better, what are you using for an assessing tool? It's unreliable.

At that point, though, you don't need to do anything except notice: oh, dosa is like this. Dosa in the mind is like this. This is the amazing tool of awareness just receiving what's happening, of mindfulness just meeting experience.

A couple of quick ways. Mindfulness and compassion are really our allies here. They work together. Sometimes mindfulness is enough. Sometimes we need to consciously bring in the kindness, the compassion. So sometimes when you realize you're caught in judging and aversion, it's mild enough that you can consciously bring in mindfulness to ask: what's the sense contact that's triggering this right now? And really come in there.

One time I was in Burma on retreat and had to sit in my kuti, my little hut. And they decided, as they always do, to start a construction project just across the street—not even as far away as the first row of chairs there. That meant from 7:30 in the morning till 5:30 in the afternoon, they were doing some kind of electric sanding, solid. It was really that grating noise. And then they came in with another one on a different frequency and a different sound, and they would go in tandem.

And I saw right then—it starts. The whole thing starts. But I saw so clearly: I have no choice here. I either surrender into, die into the unpleasantness of this sound, or it's going to be a bad scene. And so, knowing that, knowing we can—this is where we say awareness can be with anything—it was like, just relax. And then I'd take a breath, and the other one would start up. Okay. And I could really see: if I just let the attention—and it wasn't heavy—just be with it, relax into it. But as soon as I'd let the attention move away: I can't believe it, it's all over. So you just come back. And you can watch that.

Sometimes that's quite possible. That's with continuity and a light but very committed touch with the awareness. Sometimes it's more about looking at the mental state, being with the unpleasantness. For example, Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks a lot about sitting with a strong pain. Sometimes we'll say just be with the pain, notice how it breaks up. And sometimes, if the mind's calm enough and the samādhi's strong enough, it really does—boom, just go into the sensation. It breaks up and there's no even sense of unpleasantness, no problem. There's no aversion.

But you can't always do that. There has to be the right combination of factors, as you know. You all know you can't always do that. So other times you try it, but it's just not happening. And what is happening in the mind? Then it's much more useful: don't pay so much attention to the physical pain. Actually bring your sati, your mindfulness and compassion, to the aversion in the mind—to the tightness in the mind, the aversion in the mind, the self-hatred, whatever form it's taking. And that's the next arising object of awareness. It's not bad or wrong. We can be mindful of aversion. We can bring compassionate attention to the feeling of self-hatred.

That doesn't make it feel good. That's idealization. Self-hatred is always going to feel like self-hatred—that's its nature. But the aversion to it can actually fall away.

There's a sense that this is actually how the habit begins to change with the two darts. The difficult, unpleasant pain or mental state is there, and the habit is to say, "Oh, this is horrible. I should fix it." And that's just increasing dosa. That's dosa feeding dosa in the mind. "Oh, self-hatred. It feels awful. I hate myself."

But when we can meet it with awareness—"It's like this"—that moment of mindfulness, of compassionate awareness, is actually what's creating new karma. That's the moment of new karma. And that's not dosa. That's mindfulness. That's compassion. That's wholesomeness. That's actually what begins to change the pattern.

So it's not bad that this difficult stuff comes up. It really isn't. How we can meet it in this moment is all there is. It's the whole place of practice. Can we meet it? Sometimes we can with mindfulness, with compassion. Sometimes we can't.

This is Ajahn Sumedho: "If you're being very idealistic and you hate someone, then you think, 'I shouldn't hate anyone. Buddhists should have metta for all living beings. I should love everybody. I'm a good Buddhist, so I should like everybody.' And all that comes from impractical idealism. That's not wisdom. So instead, try having metta for the aversion you feel, for the pettiness of the mind, for the jealousy, the envy. Metta means peacefully coexisting in the moment with these experiences, not creating more problems, not making it difficult or creating problems out of the difficulties that arise in life within our minds and in our bodies." Metta as peaceful coexistence.

Sometimes the energy of the self-hatred, the anger, is really big. And so the mindfulness has to be also really big and almost very gross. It's not always nice and tidy—"anger is like this" and "self-hatred is like this." Sometimes the anger is just spewing, but you can still meet it with mindfulness.

I have invented what I call stomping meditation. One time I was so angry at something someone had said or done outside of the retreat. I went out and I was really with the anger, but I couldn't sit—the energy was so strong. So I was away from people and I was really just stomping up and down, up and down, back and forth, but feeling the body, feeling the energy of the anger just churning in my stomach, and seeing how that just fed the thoughts. And if I went into the story, how much that increased the physical experience of the anger. I learned so much about how anger and papañca fuel one another. And it was not at all a pretty, subtle meditation. I was really out there making sounds and stomping. But that's okay. Mindfulness can also be big. Compassion can take many forms.

I've noticed in myself, in and out of retreat, that the times when I feel most disconnected, alienated, confused—when I can't figure out what's going on, and that may go on for however long it goes on—it's when I finally notice, when I just sit down and ask, "What's happening?" I always see that that sense of alienation, separation, confusion is arising because there's something happening right now in my experience that I'm basically trying to avoid, deny, repress.

And as soon as I recognized, "Oh, it's this primal terror, this unpleasant memory, the pain in my body, the scleroderma coming back," whatever it might be—or the sense of, "I can't believe I did that stupid thing"—as soon as I could say, "Oh, shame feels like this," in that moment, the connection, the sense of wholeness, the sense of aliveness is back again.

In trying to hold ourselves separate, we're shutting ourselves off to so much of life—our own life and the life of all beings around us. By actually finding that courage, that willingness to open into the unpleasant as well as the pleasant, as well as the neither, we're really opening into all the beauty and vibrancy and compassionate connection and love that's available in life.

When Joseph talked about viriya the other night, he spoke about it in terms of courage. I think he mentioned Martin Luther King—the courage, the energy to keep showing up. In the midst of so much suffering, in the midst of such powerful forces of opposition, how does one do it? Yes, there's viriya, there's courage, but I also want to offer that the sense of real compassion and the ability to be with difficulty comes from the deep wisdom that knows difficulty, fear, pain, loss, and violence are part of life. It doesn't mean we like it or we want it. We really can do what we can to change that, but not out of avoidance.

The ability to really be present, be steadfast, to bear witness in the midst of the most horrific experiences—our own, others', the world's—to me, those are the people I find most inspiring, whom I respect and admire the most. And it starts with ourselves. Can you bear witness? Can you accompany yourself in your own difficulties, in the self-judging, in the idealization, in the trying to be perfect? Can you simply say, "No, this is what it is now. I can be with this just as it is"?

Why? It's not just for ourselves. There's no way it's just for ourselves. Joko Beck asks, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and unpleasantness? Why? Because as the Dalai Lama says, why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it's the only place we can know love.

Whatever's happening in this present moment, when you can accompany yourself with compassion, with mindfulness, through the fear, the self-hatred, the unpleasantness, the beauty, the change—then you can be there for somebody else, your friends, your family, whatever situation you might find yourself in, joining the truly inspiring people in this world.

So we're not doing this just for ourselves. We're doing it for everybody. And for me, that really gives a greater sense of aspiration and a little more courage. When I'm really fed up with being with this junk in my mind just for myself, the sense that it isn't just for me—it's for all beings—gives me more energy to be there, more courage to be there, more compassion to show up.

May we all discover love in this present moment.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 33

Unity of Compassion and Emptiness

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential unity between emptiness (suññatā) and compassion (karuṇā), demonstrating that these are not separate qualities but two aspects of the same awakened understanding. She explains that genuine insight into the empty nature of experience—the absence of a fixed self, the impermanence of all phenomena—naturally expresses itself as compassion, loving-kindness, and equanimity. Conversely, deep compassion becomes sustainable only through the wisdom of emptiness.*
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> *Wilson addresses the common experience of feeling that emptiness teachings seem cold or alien, distinguishing authentic understanding from 'falling into emptiness'—a conceptual nihilism that lacks the quality of being 'ceaselessly responsive.' Drawing on teachings from Tibetan masters including Nyoshul Khenpo, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, she describes the natural state of mind as empty, spontaneously knowing, and ceaselessly responsive to suffering.*
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> *Through powerful contemporary examples—including activists in Burma facing 65-year sentences, refugees in Congo, and the process of aging and death—Wilson explores what it means to 'bear witness' to suffering without drowning in despair or shutting down. She shares inspiring accounts from Sister Chân Không and Martin Luther King Jr. as models of sustained compassionate action rooted in wisdom. The talk emphasizes that our meditation practice—bearing witness to our own pain with acceptance—is precisely where emptiness and compassion unite, transforming habitual reactivity and opening us to genuine connection with all beings.*

Unity of Compassion and Emptiness

Unity of emptiness and compassion. The main point I want to make is not that these are two ways of talking about, or two aspects or manifestations of, the same reality, the same understanding, the same wisdom. It's not as if they merely go together. Rather, there's no way that real understanding of emptiness—that no experience is lasting, that there's no specific self in anything—does not manifest as compassion, or loving kindness, friendliness, or equanimity. They just go together.

And conversely, the real depth of compassion, the ability to really be present, that quivering of the heart together with the capacity to be here for one's own difficulties, for another's difficulties—it gets more and more possible with greater and greater depth and breadth only through the wisdom of emptiness. The two really are the same, two aspects of the same thing.

But of course, as life is, as our practice is, as we develop, things don't remain completely balanced all the time. We can, in our mind, put too much emphasis on one or the other, or think one's missing and get kind of upset because it's not all perfectly balanced every moment.

Here, a lot of what we've been talking about includes both, but in terms of the practice of mindfulness, the practice of insight, the teachings of anatta, dependent origination, the sense of non-clinging—really recognizing the emptiness of self, the freedom of heart and mind in non-clinging—as quite a few people have said, there can be moments when that recognition is really freeing, and other moments when some of the words that have been used can feel alien, unfamiliar, uncaring, inhuman.

As Guy said, quoting Trungpa I think: nostalgia for samsara. You just want to get back to it. It feels like we're really in there, in the juice, really. That's really what it's all about. And compassion would be in there with your heart ringing and caring and crying and grieving. Without that oomph, something's missing.

And sure, part of it is that in touching the space, more and more the sense of freedom of heart and mind in non-clinging—it is unfamiliar. Hopefully it gets more familiar, but at first it is unfamiliar. And our habit of not liking the unfamiliar leads us to think something must be wrong, something is missing. Which, thank God it's missing—that's the whole point of our practice. But something does feel absent at that time.

But that's also not all. One of the lovely ways that some Tibetans describe the natural state of mind is that this emptiness also has the quality of spontaneous knowing, as we've been pointing to—just natural cognizance. Like, as Sally was saying, you hit the bell, you hear it. It's immediate. It just happens, out of nothing, going back to nothing, out of the emptiness. That's spontaneous.

The third quality that rounds it out—because there's no shape and no nothing—is that emptiness is ceaselessly responsive. The heart and mind of awakening, of non-clinging, of wisdom, in the real knowing of emptiness, confronted with a situation requiring action, will naturally respond from either compassion or loving kindness or joy or equanimity—whatever is appropriate. Ceaselessly responsive. Not distant, empty, indifferent, cold, void, nothingness.

to kind of fall into a view, a taste of emptiness that does seem alien, indifferent. To some of us, that's a near enemy really of equanimity, but you can kind of—they call it falling into emptiness—where there is not really the ceaselessly responsive nature.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a great Dzogchen teacher: "The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, or emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, and we're obscured by concepts—the concept of emptiness." Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material, concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness." Believing in emptiness because that's just a concept.

Nyoshul Khenpo says, "Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice and through the way of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

I think sometimes this might be what people are afraid is going to happen with just a little taste of non-clinging. "Oh yes, it's all empty, so who cares? It's all empty. It doesn't matter. I can do whatever I want. Whatever happens to you, it's all empty." If, not just in a moment but over time, that's where your practice seems to be taking you, where your understanding seems to be taking you—yes, it's only partial. Something's missing.

But don't get all freaked out, because unless we're really, really strongly attached to the view of emptiness, the concept of emptiness, simply the natural unfolding of wisdom, paññā, awareness, understanding—the mind of non-clinging naturally expresses as compassion. They really do support each other, and you can trust that.

So really, if there's some taste of it that feels alien, unfamiliar, don't freak out. Don't go running away. Give it a little more time. Let it open up. It takes time—a little bit on this side, a little bit on that side. If you trust, they come together, manifest as compassionate.

The understanding of emptiness, the mind of non-clinging, exactly because the energy is released from that contraction, that obsessive self-referencing—all our energy in a way is contracted around the sense of me, me, me. Sayadaw U Tejaniya gives a great example. He says it's like we measure, without realizing, every experience from the felt sense of me. Me here, seeing out there. It's not that we say that, but it's a sense of "this is me, and I'm seeing; this is me, and I'm hearing; this is me, and I'm thinking, 'Oh, how can I help this poor person? How can I be compassionate?' Or 'I'm not compassionate

enough.'" He said it's like you're at the center point. In Tibet, they measure the foundation of a house by picking the center point, using a string, and then measuring all the way around to get the footprint of the house. So it's like that with us—the center point.

And so those moments when that's not there, the energy is all released into tenderness for beings, a connectedness with life. There's not this need to protect and fear and plan and manipulate and control.

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj. I like this a lot. He says, "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrows of humankind become your sole concern."

So that release from self-obsession releases us, you could say, into being the world. And the natural movement of that is compassion, is connectedness—but without that sense of personal doing or personal fear or personal overwhelm. It's really very different.

Just as we can fall into emptiness, into a concept of emptiness—this indifference, this separation, this "oh, it all doesn't really matter," just floating above the clouds, "this is equanimity"—so we can also fall into compassion when it's not held with the real understanding of emptiness, the equanimity that comes from that, the understanding that we don't control. That equanimity allows us to really be here in the face of difficulty. Without that, that's when we can easily start to either drown in the amount of suffering or our reactions to it, or fall into that kind of denial, shutting down.

So many people say, here and other places, "I really want to open my heart." We do. We have this sense often, almost physical, of the heart here being contracted, our sense of connectedness to the world being separate. You can really feel when there's aversion in the mind—that sense of separation, that sense of alienation.

So with the sincerest wish or wanting or intention to be compassionate, and we are—all of this is in degrees, right?—but when compassion isn't supported, really held from the foundation of emptiness, well, at some point we either have to pull back or we get lost.

The question that comes up often is: how do we contrive to stay open in this world? How can we keep connected? How can we even begin to open to the pain in this world? And it's a bombardment, isn't it? Even just sitting here where you don't have to listen to the news or the newspapers or talk to your family members—it's a bombardment.

I just want to share three things from this week that I heard, the ones that happened to touch me out of thousands of stories, just to remind us this is the world and it is difficult. How, without the deep knowing of emptiness, do we expect to really be present without being ground down?

The first story is from Burma. As you know, in Burma last year there were many totally peaceful demonstrations from monks and activists and ordinary people—really about prices getting high. They weren't even complaining about the government at first. But anyway, a lot of demonstrations. In the past year, a little over a year, they've arrested over two thousand people. And two weeks ago they started sentencing them. In the last two weeks alone, they've sentenced over a hundred people to terms like sixty-five years—sixty-five years for things like using a cell phone without a permit, because that's what they can get them on.

I heard an interview on the BBC. The reporter was in Bangkok because he couldn't get into Burma, and he was talking on the cell phone to one of the activists. Her name is Nilar Thein. At that point she was in hiding. It was a very clear connection—she was talking in Burmese but you could hear her voice clearly, and it was being translated.

Her story: she and her husband, whose name is Kyaw Min Yu but he's called Jimmy, had both been in jail after the 1988 demonstrations. She was in jail for eight years and he for sixteen. They came out, got married in 2006, and had a little baby. But they're part of this 88 Generation Students group—a very well organized but very underground movement, totally committed to peacefulness.

When these demonstrations started in August, they both talked about it along with all the others in their group, and they just marched in these peaceful demonstrations. That's all.

At this point, when they were talking to her, her husband had been arrested immediately in 2007. She had been on the run and hiding for months, at first with her young baby, just a few months old. But that got too dangerous for the baby, so the baby was with her in-laws. The government had guards all around the baby, knowing she would try to see it. So she couldn't go to see her own baby.

They're having this conversation with her, and she sounded so clear—not fanatical, not rabid at all. Very clear, very normal, saying, "Sometimes I despair. I really miss my baby. My husband at least gets to see the family. He's in jail, but the family can visit. I can't even do that. But this was my decision. We all decided who would go out and get arrested, who would go into hiding. We're just following that."

The interviewer was asking, "Don't you ever despair?" And she said, "Well, I have moments when I think I could be doing something more useful. But my friends say, 'No, don't give way to emotion.'" She sounded really clear, and she said, "I've been through so much worse." She's also sick—asthma and bronchitis. "When I was in jail and in solitary and really ill, they would bring me these things to sign. I'm just really clear: when you know what's important and what you believe in, that gives me the courage and the strength. And I know I'm not going to despair."

She said, "I've been through worse than this." And she was just so clear and calm.

Anyway, she was arrested a couple of months ago. She just received a 65-year sentence. Her husband got 65 years too, along with over a hundred other people. And they're splitting them all up now. They're not letting them stay in Yangon anymore. They're scattering all these people to jails all over Burma so their families can't reach them. They can't bring them medicine. They can't bring them food.

That's one story. One story, and there are hundreds of others in Burma. I'm sharing this not to overwhelm us, but just to notice where our mind and heart goes with it. That's one example.

Another one. This is just coming at us. This is this world. There's a lot of fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo again. I saw a little bit on the news. They were interviewing a young boy, a 10-year-old, who with his mother and grandmother had to run from their village because his father and his three older brothers were killed, along with many, many people massacred. They were in hiding, trying to get a little food and water from neighbors, but there wasn't much. He had to leave school and could probably never go back. And the grandmother, who was over 90 years old, was out for three or four days walking, sleeping rough, just trying to find some food to bring back to the family because she was afraid they would starve to death. And there they sat, just talking to the interviewers.

That's another story. And again, just notice—can we take it in? Can we be here with this? Does the mind get sad? Does it push it away? Does it blame? Does it get angry? There's no right or wrong. It's just for us, with wisdom, to see what arises, what's compassion, how much we might push away.

A third story, just one of a billion stories of old age. The mother of a very good friend of mine, 91 years old—I know her well—lives in Germany. She's been very bright, very active, slowly getting weaker over time. She had a stroke about two months ago, was in

intensive care for two days, then back to assisted living. Her daughter and son, my friend, came from Asia, and they've been taking care of her. She's been back in the hospital with internal bleeding, then out again.

She's not so clear anymore. She speaks part gibberish and part coherent sentences. Her body's really weak. She's never been afraid of death. But now she's talking to her dead relatives, calling on spirits. She wasn't particularly religious, but she's saying, "Please, I'm ready. Please help me come to where you are. Please help me come to the other side." But her body won't give up. It keeps getting worse. Then she's in the hospital. Then she's back. This has been going on and on. So they sleep there. They take care of her. They wash her. They feed her. What she's going through, what they're going through to be there with her—

Just to know that this is one of however many billion stories unfolding in this moment.

And I watch for myself. When can I be there? I think of her a lot. When does my mind not want to go there? When does it just want to shut it out? Just seeing all of that.

This is what we're bombarded with in this life. And if our idea of compassion is coming on a really deep level from a sense of *me* personally doing something, holding or creating this mental state—that's helpful. Inclining the mind towards compassion rather than anger, rather than shutting down, that's helpful. That's part of what I'll talk about.

But in the big picture, if it's all coming from a sense of self, from a sense of *me*, we can't maintain it. At some point it gets overwhelming. I'm saying maybe it doesn't for you, but at some point, just to be open in this world—without emptiness, we drown one way or the other.

There's a great quotation from James Baldwin I just came across. He wrote, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."

I could see for me, in stories where there's a sense of a political oppressor or people acting in really awful ways, hate might be strong, but anger or blame—that is easier than feeling the pain. That's what compassion calls us to do. And without the *pañña*, the wisdom, the insight—we just start with a little insight—without that, the personal, individual, strength-of-will mind can't hold it.

But when there's that sense, like Nisargadatta says, where we can say with confidence, "I am the world, the world is me," then I don't have to hold it. It's just how it is. And we move from having to be the compassionate person, having to somehow overcome, to just this—the phrase that I really like is a sense of *bearing witness*. Just being able to be here. And we start just with our own pain.

Bearing witness. Or as I heard on NPR, they have a series called StoryCorps, where they just have people write in and tell a short little snippet of some story of their life that's important, that they want to share. And their motto is, "To listen is an act of love." Bearing witness is an act of courage, an act of compassion. It's that willingness, that ability to be present, to see through.

For myself, I'm really inspired by people who've done that with their lives—by many artists, poets, writers—who maybe weren't the activists in the way of marching or political organizing or doing something in that manner, but who had that ability to really bear witness without falling into anger and hatred. And sharing that is a really powerful force for connectedness and compassion in this world, I believe.

A tiny example: the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous poets in Russia in the 20th century. Her life spanned from before the revolution, through the revolution, through the Civil War and the starvation, and then all the purges and the terror of all the years of Stalin. Her friends, her husband, her son were all arrested. Some of them were killed. Some were sent to gulags. She wasn't allowed to write. And then came the starvation in what's now St. Petersburg during World War II. On and on. She was just part of all of that, and she was able to write about it.

Just this little story. She's talking about what was called the Yezhov Terror in 1937, one of the big purges when Yezhov was the head of the secret police. So many people were swept up and sent to jail, and if it was one of your relatives, mostly the women who weren't arrested, they would go and stand in line at the jail in Leningrad every day, hoping to hear where their relative was and to hand over a package of food. Every day.

So she's saying, in the beginning of this whole poem called *Requiem*, covering five years, 1935 to 1940:

No foreign sky protected me.
No stranger's wing shielded my face.

In other words, she didn't leave for Europe as much of the intelligentsia could have.

I stand as witness to the common lot,
survivor of that time, that place.

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day, somebody in the crowd identified me—because she was quite famous. *Standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to all of us and asked me in a whisper*—everyone whispered there—*"Can you describe this?"*

And I said, "I can."

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

And then there's a whole long poem that follows. But it's a beautiful poem. It's filled with heart. All her work is filled with heart, with sadness, with appreciation of beauty, of love, of life. It's not a hateful rant. That's what bearing witness is.

So where do we start? That's what our practice is. Can we bear witness to ourselves? To what's going on in your own mind and body here, sitting here. It doesn't matter if you think, "Well, it's just a knee pain and people are starving." That's denial. That's resistance. That's pushing it away. "No, my pain doesn't count." Pain is pain. Suffering is suffering. We're not so special that our pain doesn't count. So can we bear witness? What is my pain then becomes the pain of all.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks of this when talking about bodhicitta. Of course you're familiar with compassion itself. Karuna translates as the quivering of the heart in connection with suffering, in connection with pain—the natural expression of the awakened heart. Bodhicitta, the awakened heart, tenderly leads us to practice with the intention, with the wish that through our practice we can awaken in order to bring all beings to awakening. That's a vast intention, the most vast aspect of compassion. I'm not saying we should have that. I'm just sharing what the Dalai Lama says about it.

As I mentioned last week, it's a beautiful and very supportive and inspiring aspiration because it gives us the courage to come back and bear witness to ourselves. And the Dalai Lama asks: how does this tender heart, this bodhicitta, develop? He says first, through deep insight into what suffering is. And that arises by focusing on our own experience. Then from that, compassion strengthens with a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings.

But the point I want to make now is that simply by bearing witness in this way, this willingness to be here for our own experience, it naturally opens up to empathy with all beings in that moment when that so me-centricness lets go. What had been my own particular brand of grief or sorrow or back pain or illness becomes simply grief. All beings experience grief.

Pema Chödrön shares a passage from Stephen Levine. She's talking about bodhicitta, this kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, the discovery of our soft spot, the discovery of bodhicitta—a Sanskrit word that means noble or awakened heart, inherent in all beings.

Stephen Levine writes of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness. At the point at which she felt she couldn't bear the suffering and resentment any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others in agony. A starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose in a dirty flat, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. She said she understood that it wasn't her pain, it was the pain of all beings. It was not just her life, it was life itself.

We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. That's what's going on in our practice—opening. So often you feel vulnerable, fragile, so we open deeper and deeper to that.

But you see why. There's also the opening into emptiness, the non-clinging, the recognition that it's not all about me. The two have to go together. They don't always develop completely evenly. Sometimes it's so fragile, so vulnerable, we're so tender, and the mind can't hold it. That's the time when we pull back and work more with awareness. We work more with the sense that awareness doesn't care, that awareness can hold everything. Then there are other times when we think, "Yes, awareness doesn't care"—okay, let's just come back into the tenderness. But mostly it takes care of itself.

And that's why, I think Annie said this the other night, the difficult parts of a retreat—of our whole life—are so important. Where else can we first bear witness to the human state? Not just the human state, but that's the one we know. Where else can we bear witness to it? But also, this is exactly the place where the wisdom of non-reactivity, of acceptance, is changing the habit.

So the difficult stuff that comes up—our patterns, our greeds, our aversions, our self-hatreds—it all feels like, *oh, this is all stuff that's supposed to go away. If I had any understanding whatsoever, this stuff wouldn't be coming.* And then we just get lost in that.

Instead of seeing, *oh, right—kilesas, greed, aversion, fear, delusion—this is the human condition.* Again, you're so special, you know? Three weeks, six weeks, three years of practice and no more of that comes up? No, it comes. It's arising. This is what we're here to see. How the mind meets it in the moment is what's creating new karma. That's creating new patterns.

So in that moment of hating the pain, that incredible greed for the seventeenth piece of cake or the first piece or whatever, the aversion, the self-judgment, the judgment of somebody else, the feeling just awful about yourself because you haven't been kind, the pain in your back, whatever it is—in that moment when we recognize, *oh, it's like this. Aversion. I really have aversion. It's like this. Wanting. I am such a greedy loser*—when we can meet that with, *wanting is like this*—in that moment, in that moment of acceptance, of bearing witness, what's being practiced is compassion, is acceptance.

Just as we say awareness doesn't care in the moment of awareness, it's the same with compassion. First of all, compassion doesn't arise except in response to suffering. That's one thing. So maybe something beautiful is arising, and you meet that without clinging—that's equanimity or the friendliness of metta. But to really see that if you're able, even for moments, to bear witness to the difficulties in your mind, in your body, in the environment, in your memories, in your home life—this is how the wisdom of emptiness, of non-clinging, and the natural response of compassion are coming together and being strengthened. It doesn't seem like much, just sitting there with your nutty mind, but it is. It really is.

The world is complex. Situations are complicated. Compassion, you know, really—this is again why it has to come with wisdom for it to be reliably real. I like to say it needs to sort of come from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

Compassion, wisdom, all of it starts as a nice idea. We start with a concept, and we work from that concept, of course, because that's how our minds are. *Compassion means being with someone in pain, doing what we can to alleviate suffering.* And yeah, that's great. And our tendency is, as we've talked about, intention—the motivation that leads to speech and action—that's the heart of karma. That's the seed of all action. That's really where it begins.

But in our normal life, in the way actions and responses are judged in the normal world, it's more like whether the desired result happened determines if our actions were good or bad, useful or not, compassionate or not. If we help somebody who's suffering, great—we could be compassionate. But if we feel compassion and we try to help and we just mess things up more, we tend not to think that was compassion. We think, *I*

blew it. Compassion should be able to fix everything. Even the Buddha couldn't keep his kinfolk from going to war with each other. Compassion doesn't mean we can fix everything.

And it takes real wisdom, real trust, real courage to keep coming back to our inner understanding, our inner intention of being willing to be here, to bear witness with wisdom and then act in the way that's appropriate—but from a mind of wisdom, not from a mind of wanting to fix, or hating it and wanting to change it.

And this can be very complex. We all know stories—friends tell me—of going on peace marches here a couple of years ago and seeing how many of the activists, for whom this was a really big part of their life, were so angry, so bitter. And at some point, frustrated and wanting to turn to violence and breaking windows. It's understandable.

But that's when the compassion or the wanting to change things for the good of the world—when the motivation doesn't really come from that deep wisdom of emptiness, from that understanding that we can't control, from that commitment really to understanding, to compassion.

We've worked with retreats for environmental activists, wonderful people, deeply committed, doing really important work. One lawyer said he was working hard, but he said he needed his anger. "I can't go into court without my anger. These other lawyers are so vindictive, and if I don't have my anger, I'll just be crushed. So don't give me metta. Don't tell me about all this stuff." But he practiced. And at the end, he saw how you can't just compartmentalize. The anger was eating him up too, spewing out on his family. And he really saw that.

It takes enormous faith and courage to trust that we'll go off, we'll try to do our best, and end up responding from some sense of me, what's best for me, or from anger, or from fear. We'll all do that. Or we'll shut down. We'll all do that. But to see that—okay, anger is like this—and come back again just to our own pain, bearing witness to our own pain, and allowing ourselves to come back into contact with really the mind, the motivation, the intention of compassion, over and over and over, trusting enough not to act until we can get in touch with that.

Joseph mentioned Martin Luther King the other night. There's one quotation from him I like very much on this line. When he was in the Birmingham jail, this is one line he wrote in a letter: "We are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects us all indirectly." And everything I've read of him conveys this sense of never making someone the other. Compassion isn't just compassion for the obvious victim or the obvious person being

oppressed. Compassion includes everybody, includes the world. And out of that one clarity, maybe one can see what seems the best action. But we don't always know. It's this sense of commitment to that motivation.

So King said once, in 1963, after one of the terrible bombings of a church in Birmingham where four little girls were killed, he said after that, "I have come to see even more as we move towards our goal of justice that hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter." I mean, I can't even imagine. "I refuse to become bitter."

Or the Dalai Lama, a few years ago, when he was being berated—you know, his deep commitment to nonviolence, to a nonviolent way of trying to get China to withdraw from Tibet, which of course isn't happening at all. Some young Tibetans were basically berating him, saying, "It's not working, it's not working." And in this interview I read, tears were streaming down his cheeks and he said, "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's not working. But I cannot be otherwise. Maybe I'm wrong, but I cannot be otherwise." He could not abandon his deep commitment to compassion and nonviolence.

It's a complex world. We can't know. We can't know all the situations. We can't control it all. Can we have that faith, that courage, and the willingness to be with the pain of our own sense of failure sometimes? To trust in the power of the pure mind, the pure heart, to act from compassion, from caring, from connectedness?

Without the wisdom of emptiness, I don't see how it's possible to keep doing that. The doubt, the confusion would just get too strong.

This is the Dalai Lama again. He's saying that compassion must be derived from our insight into emptiness. This is where the vast meets the profound. If we don't have that, we fall into despair. Knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable, our sympathy for their—and our—inability to pull themselves out of this suffering can lead to a more powerful compassion. But if it's not supported by the wisdom of emptiness, our compassion may be strong, but it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness or even despair.

I'm not saying this to suggest that if we notice hopelessness and despair, we should jump on ourselves. Of course there's going to be hopelessness and despair. We don't have to be afraid of it. That's again where we come back to bearing witness with ourselves. Oh, hopelessness is like this. But don't confuse hopelessness and despair for compassion. That's where the wisdom and our own self-compassion let us be with it.

And this is a line from Adyashanti I liked a lot: "Saving all beings is not something that you do. Saving all beings is a verb that you become."

So we really need a resilient and flexible heart, a real sense of trust in the mind of non-clinging, and a willingness to keep showing up even when the way isn't clear, even when it seems like we don't even know what to do, and that compassion seems like it's not strong enough.

It seems like the situation is too complicated or too horrible—like the Dalai Lama with Tibet. It doesn't seem to be working.

So then we really find ourselves, we really come down to: What do I really know? Where do I really place my faith? And at this point, having a "should" in our mind—"I should put my faith in compassion"—it's not going to work. But that's okay. And we keep on practicing. We keep on looking. We keep on seeing. This is where compassion is supported by equanimity.

A couple of examples. Without the wisdom of equanimity, we get confused. Because the motivation itself, in a deep sense, can be a true compassionate motivation. It doesn't mean that when we act from it, we get the results we want. The results of actions are out of our control. How hard is it? There's a great story about how we can't control the outcome, we can't control others' responses. And often we try to get as much of the picture of a situation, but often we don't have the big picture.

The story I often tell is from Sister Chan Khong, who is the nun who has worked with Thich Nhat Hanh ever since the Vietnam War. They were both peace activists, but really committed to nonviolence, to compassionate action, and to mindfulness practice. Very sincere practicing Buddhists.

She told this story from the Vietnam War, where she was put in jail for passing out some leaflets in South Vietnam. She was in one cell with a bunch of other women, and in the cell were two young girls, eleven and twelve years old, who had just been caught up in a sweep of a village that the South was claiming were all Viet Cong. They threw them all in jail. But the girls had done nothing, and it was a bad environment.

So Sister Phương, as her name was then, got released because her family knew the chief or whatever. And as she was going out, she had an exit interview with the head of the prison. Very compassionate and very forthrightly, as she is—she's a very strong woman—she said, "You know, these two young girls, they did nothing. Eleven and twelve. This is bad for them. They should be released."

And the head of the prison said, "Oh, I see that the prisoners are talking to each other. They're communicating with each other. And this must stop. I'm going to make the conditions more rigorous." And that was it.

So with all the compassion and wisdom that she could have, doing what seemed right, things got worse. Can we stay open with that? Can we bear witness to our own experience, not get lost in anger, bear witness to our anger or our sense of failure? Can we not give up on the power of compassionate action, of a pure mind and heart?

I know I'm throwing out all these challenges. I'm not saying I have some answer. I'm saying this is a profound exploration for our life. And it's going to bring us up against everything in our hearts and minds and in the world that's in the way of that. It's both seductive and scary and painful. We'll get lost, we'll turn away. But the faith that comes —even just a glimpse of the emptiness of not-self, of the purity of our basic goodness, we can put it that way—the more we learn to recognize and trust this basic goodness of who we are, of the natural mind, then even when we can't quite find it in all the craziness, that's more and more what we come back to. Sort of like how Martin Luther King or Sister Chan Khong does.

So just to say, it's not a one-time thing. It's a life process. Enormous patience, enormous kindness to ourselves as well as to others.

So again, this is Sister Phương. She wrote this during the Vietnam War. She was just in her late teens at this time. Two of their friends, social workers who had been working in a village, had been killed by a grenade attack. This was her eulogy that she said at the funeral:

"We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that people are not our enemies. Our only enemies are ambition, jealousy, hatred, and the misunderstanding that leads to such acts of violence."

Please allow us to remove all misunderstanding so that we can work together for the happiness of the Vietnamese people.

So that's powerful to begin with when your friends have been murdered. But I read this because it's not as if she just sprang forth as this being of compassion and her life simply rolled out like that. It was an act continuing moment after moment—an act of commitment and rediscovery of the place of mindfulness, the place of wisdom that allows compassion and action to emerge.

I say this because she wrote quite some years later—you know, she and Thich Nhat Hanh were both unable to return to Vietnam during the middle of the war, and they lived in France and started Plum Village for many years. In her autobiography, written I think in the eighties, already twenty years later, she talks about her commitment to never act unless she can act from compassion.

She was still an activist, and at the point she was writing, there was a phase when the Vietnamese government was arresting many monks and nuns and artists. She was involved in a campaign—whenever someone was arrested, she would write letters to the government and try to get a whole movement going, similar to what Amnesty does now.

This is her talking about that:

"Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew that I had to do walking meditation. Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted in arresting such a monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

What inspires me is that sense of ongoing commitment and the understanding that it is a continuing process to reconnect with our serenity, our basic goodness. To act from a genuine motivation of compassion and caring is so much. It may get better results, but more truly, it's the expression of wisdom and compassion—and her willingness to wait weeks, if that's what it takes.

For us to know: this is someone who has devoted her life, who is a remarkable woman, and this is what it is. This is what, knowingly or not, we signed up for when we set foot onto our spiritual path of awakening. And it's beautiful. It's inspiring. It inspires others.

Bearing witness to our pain, to our suffering, balanced with the equanimity of emptiness, means we can open to more. We can open to more. And it's not suffering. It really is that beauty of connectedness. With wisdom, compassion opens. With bearing witness to our own suffering and that of others, compassion opens. With the simple intention to act from kindness—not some big thing, but just a willingness toward some kind act—compassion opens.

This is from Tulku Urgyen, who was a wonderful, very powerful Dzogchen master. Well, his son, Tsoknyi, first said it: it works both ways. Compassion naturally manifests as an expression of emptiness. When we understand emptiness, compassion naturally manifests. But also, compassion starts with methods of compassion and kindness. Simply being kind can open us up. Because to be kind, we're touching. And this applies in little things.

I've been talking about wars and people dying, but this is present in every aspect of our life. Nisargadatta says that when we realize we are the world, all aspects of our life are calling us to wake up to our non-separation, to our compassion, to bearing witness.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, in his book *Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*, offers a commentary on a Tibetan text. He speaks about Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion, and I want to share a practice I found so lovely and inspiring, putting it a little in my own language.

Chenrezig embodies the great compassion inseparable from the vast expanse of the Buddha's wisdom—the totality of emptiness and compassion. This practice involves seeing all aspects of experience as the manifestation of Chenrezig himself.

Rinpoche says: Through the blessing of Chenrezig's body, you perceive the whole universe as Chenrezig's Buddha field. Through the blessing of Chenrezig's speech, you perceive all sounds in the universe—the sounds of water, of fire, of wind, the cries of animals, human voices—as the reverberation of Chenrezig's voice.

Imagine that. Next time someone's breathing too loud in the hall, it's Chenrezig's voice. Next time the francolins are calling, it's Chenrezig's voice.

And even more: through the blessing of Chenrezig's mind, you experience all thoughts as the display of Chenrezig's awareness.

Try that. I was practicing on a self-retreat like this, experiencing every thought as the magical display of Chenrezig—

Boy, my relationship to everything was really different. Every animal, every sight, every sound, every mood—this is just the display of emptiness and compassion. This is just Chenrezig manifesting everything. Everything becomes an aspect of emptiness and compassion. It becomes the way that we open up to the world, so that our whole life becomes—not every moment, but just play with that—an expression. Nothing is too mundane. Nothing is too gross.

Let me share a couple of little stories of kindness like that, stories about the power of kindness. This one comes from NPR, from a prisoner who had been in jail for twenty years.

He said: "One day in the prison yard, a scruffy orange cat showed up, and I was one of the first to go and pet it. I had not touched a cat or a dog in over twenty years. I spent at least twenty minutes crouched down by the dumpster as the cat rolled around and luxuriated beneath my attention. What he was expressing outwardly, I was feeling in-

wardly. An amazing bit of grace—to feel him under my hand and know that I was enriching the life of another creature with something as simple as my care. I believe that caring for something or someone in need is what makes us human.

"Over the next few days, I watched other prisoners responding to the cat. Every yard period, a group of prisoners gathered there. They stood around talking and taking turns petting the cat. These were guys you would normally not find talking to each other. Sometimes I saw an officer, a guard, in the group—not chasing people away but just watching and seeming to enjoy it along with the prisoners. Bowls of milk and water appeared, along with bread wisely placed under the edge of the dumpster to keep the seagulls from getting it. The cat was obviously a stray and in pretty bad shape. One prisoner brought out his small, blunt-tipped scissors and trimmed burrs and matted fur from his coat. People said, 'That cat came to the right place. He's getting treated like a king.' This was true, but as I watched, I was also thinking about what the cat was doing for us.

"There's a lot of talk about what's wrong with prisons in America—we need more programs, we need more psychologists and treatment. But I think what we really need is a chance to practice kindness ourselves. Not to receive it, but to give it."

And then one last example of how simple compassion can be, just everyday compassion, from Studs Terkel. He died just this past October—a legendary oral historian. This was his last piece they recorded on NPR. He loved the human voice, and he noticed when it was missing, as it was one day on an airport shuttle train in Atlanta.

I've taken these shuttle trains a lot. They come every ninety seconds, taking you between terminals. So Terkel is on this shuttle train, and a machine-like voice rang out from above, informing him and his fellow passengers that the train was about to leave the concourse. Otherwise, it was dead silent. The pneumatic doors were closing when a young couple pushed them open to get in.

Without missing a beat, that voice above says, "Because of late entry, we're delayed thirty seconds."

People looked at that couple as if they had just committed mass murder, Terkel said. The two cringed, and Terkel spoke up. "George Orwell, your time has come and gone!" he yelled out.

The passengers greeted his attempt at humor with complete silence. "And now they looked at me," he said, "and I'm with the couple. The three of us are at the Hill of Calvary on Good Friday."

"My God, where's the human voice?" Terkel asked the passengers. Nobody said anything.

So he noticed a baby on the train. He went up to the baby. "Sir or madam," Terkel said to the infant, "what is your opinion of the human species?"

And the baby started to giggle.

"I said, thank God—the sound of a human voice."

From Chokyi Nyima: "When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be, spontaneously an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me."

When watching its nature of innate simplicity as it really is, I cannot help but feel wonder and break out in laughter. When watching the one who feels pity and the one who is laughing, both disappear and cannot be found. Now what to do?

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. That's what we'll do.

CHAPTER 34

Insight, Views, and Opening to the Mystery

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this profound talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses a common challenge practitioners face: the arising of deep insight followed by confusion or discouragement when that clarity seems to fade. She explains the three types of wisdom from the commentaries—suta mayā paññā (wisdom from hearing), cintā mayā paññā (intellectual wisdom), and bhāvanā mayā paññā (experiential wisdom)—emphasizing that only direct experiential insight truly liberates.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how insight involves a genuine shift in perception rather than intellectual understanding, and how papañca (mental proliferation) can quickly transform even accurate perceptions into limiting views. She pays particular attention to sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view), showing how we construct solid identities from fleeting moments of experience through selective perception and memory. The talk explores various ways practitioners "hit the wall"—through feeling practice is too much, stopping within when things go well, or fearing the loss of familiar reference points.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from the Buddha's discourse with the dying monk Asaji, Thich Nhat Hanh, and even an allegory from The Lord of the Rings, Wilson encourages practitioners to recognize that the path requires repeatedly rediscovering courage and recommitting to practice. She concludes with the Tibetan practice of the three excellences—taking refuge, practicing with pure motivation, and dedicating merit—as a way to strengthen aspiration and find the faith to surrender into not knowing.*

I've been noticing—not only in myself, but in all of us through the interviews, especially these last couple of weeks—so much insight, so much understanding opening up in a whole variety of ways, different for each person. It can be insights into impermanence, anatta, into dukkha, that level of nature. There are also many insights into how that manifests as our personality patterns, how we get caught, how we can be free. These are powerful and important aspects of freedom, of understanding, of liberation. And it's wonderful. It's so inspiring for us to witness this, even more so when you allow yourselves to recognize that it's happening for you too.

And then there's the other side of it, something I've also been noticing in many interviews. Not exactly a corollary, but it often comes along: a sense that the insights don't stay. You've probably noticed that. They change. And not always, but often, people can fall into a kind of confusion, discouragement, frustration, or even losing a sense of faith

or confidence. You feel like you've really seen through your personality patterns. You've really understood deeply that craving that extra piece of candy isn't going to do it for you. You really let go of it. "Okay, I've got it. I've seen through craving." And in that moment, you really did. In that moment, you really did.

But it's so striking when it changes. We see very clearly, and the mind intellectually knows craving brings suffering, and yet the hand goes out, takes the thing, shoves it in your mouth, you swallow it down, you go get another one—and you're watching the whole thing. Watching it, which only makes it worse, really, right? Because then you can add self-judgment on top of it. "What the heck? Two minutes ago, I was so awakened."

I want to address some aspects of this, because it's a misunderstanding to think that you've somehow fallen away. It's a misunderstanding to feel that way. We're so impatient. And in some ways it's our culture, though not only our culture. There's a famous story Sharon tells: many years ago she got a letter addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society." We see it, we see it once—boss, that should be enough. I'm joking a little, but it can really be quite deeply painful, confusing. It can lead, at times, to a crisis of confidence or just a sense of frustration.

So I want to talk about a few aspects of this—not comprehensive by any means, but just some different things that have come to mind, which I hope are helpful.

One thing to remind you: when you're seeing yourself caught again in a particular pattern that you've really seen, when you know the pain of it and the pattern seems so huge and what you're doing—having that third piece of candy or whatever—seems so enormous, I want to remind you all that you're in a very protected environment. Things are exaggerated in your mind. That helps us see the patterns more clearly. But Sayadaw U Tejaniya loves to say that samādhi magnifies experience, and kilesa exaggerates experience. Put them together—whoa, it's huge.

"I felt this anger at this person. I mean, I felt anger. I really wished them ill."

"Did you do anything?"

"No, no, no. But it's horrible. It's horrible. I'm so greedy."

So just to give you a little bit of a reality check—I heard this on the radio this morning. The day after Thanksgiving is a huge shopping day, right? They were talking about some Best Buy, an electronics store, in Virginia or somewhere. It's a chain. The store was going to open at 5 AM this morning. Five in the morning. You might think, who in their right mind is going to be there at 5 AM? So they sent a reporter to interview

people. They interviewed one man who got in line—the store opened at 5 AM this morning, and he got in line at 10 AM yesterday morning. He stayed in line all day and through the night until 5 AM when he could go in and buy stuff.

You know, it's scary, right?

So then she's interviewing him. What are you buying? Oh, you must have really wanted to get stuff for your family and friends. And he just roared with laughter. He goes, "Are you kidding? I'm getting stuff for me. Who would stand in line that long to get stuff for somebody else?" So really, you could cut yourself some slack. That's just one thing I wanted to say about it.

In terms of really cultivating wisdom and insight, there's a constant deepening. I'm sure you've seen it—it's a spiral. It's not that we see through one thing, that's done, and we see something new. I'm still seeing, and this isn't going to be too inspiring, but I'm still seeing the same old personality pattern from different, more subtle points of view. You know how I'm caught. They're more empty. But it keeps spiraling. "Oh, this again" versus "*this* again." "Oh, now I see." But then we're not really getting the levels of wisdom we think every time. "Now I've got it. Now I see." Oh, this again. It keeps going.

So they talk in the commentaries about three types, three aspects of wisdom. The first is called in Pali *sutamayā paññā*. *Paññā* is wisdom. *Suta* means—it's the same root that the word "suttas" comes from. *Suta* means what is heard. So *sutamayā paññā* is wisdom that we get from hearing or reading the words of others—wisdom that comes in from outside. It's important. You could call it borrowed wisdom. It inspires us.

The second one is called *cintāmayā paññā—cintā* like from *citta*, the mind. This is roughly translated as intellectual wisdom. With our thinking mind, with our reasoning, with our logic, we kind of look over, we contemplate, we test. Does the stuff that we've heard, the *suta*, the heard wisdom—does this seem true? Does it seem real in my experience? We're contemplating it. And that's very useful.

But both of those don't really take us into the depth, into ourselves, so to speak. So the third type of wisdom they talk about is *bhāvanāmayā paññā*, or experiential wisdom. *Bhāvanā*—the word that's used for meditation, for cultivation of mind. So that's experiential wisdom, what's really based on our own experience.

All three of these are useful. Only the *bhāvanāmayā paññā* is liberating.

So when we talk about—when we here talk about—oh, you had a deep insight or a shallow insight or some insight, what do we mean by insight, really? Insight really is on this *bhāvanāmayā paññā* level, this real internal experiential level of knowing, of wis-

dom. What we call an insight is not thinking about something. We will think later, up the wazoo. But at the moment of insight, it's not thinking. It's a kind of aha moment. Really what it is, is the perception shifts. It's a shift in perception.

I actually really like the translation of Sammā Diṭṭhi as "right view," thinking of view as how you see something. It's almost literal—the perception that allows an insight just shifts. We recognize that the perception, the interpretation, the understanding of an experience, of ourselves, of a situation in life, an interpersonal relationship, or the nature of things—impermanence, for example, or not-self—the way the mind is perceiving just suddenly shifts, and we see it from a completely different angle. You can't make that happen. It happens through the process of steady awareness.

What's so cool is that if the perception shifts, the reality hasn't changed. So it's not that we're creating some new reality. It's more like, "Oh, it's like this." You all know that. We all see that. And when that happens, that shift of perception, we may perceive that way for some moments, for some time. It may not last very long, and the more habitual way of perceiving may reemerge in the next moments, which is fine.

But when you really see—take the example I was giving about eating candy and craving. Intellectually, we may have heard that craving is a cause of suffering. Yeah, yeah, okay, maybe let's look at it. We explore it. We really think about it. We say, "That makes sense." You study the dependent origination. You think about it. That really makes sense. And as we know, that still doesn't end the craving.

Then you have an experience like I mentioned, where there's the wanting, the wanting. You're dying for that candy. You sit there. You be with it. It goes. And it's like, "Oh." The peace, the happiness—it's here. I didn't need the candy. That was a smokescreen. Craving holds out—someone said, I forget who, one of you in an interview said—it's like a false promise. It holds out the promise that it'll make you happy. But you were happy before the craving started. You'll be fine after it ends. Craving itself is the thing.

So you see that really deeply. That's an insight. It's a shift of perception. You really see craving from a different point of view. Even though two minutes later or three days later you have that intellectual memory, the craving catches us again. But having really experienced that perception from another angle, even though it doesn't stay, it has an effect. It has an effect on our mind stream. It has an effect on how we relate. At the very least, it gives us more faith. Okay, craving has really caught me now, but I know there are other possibilities.

We may lose the immediacy of the insight, but even having recognized it and opened to it, it opens up the possibilities. It opens up the box we've been living in without realizing it—the box of what's possible, the box of how we think things are. And that's very powerful.

This shift can be a little thing. I mean, craving is not a little thing, but it can be a little instant. Or it can be a huge shift of perception. For example, times when you're sitting and the whole sense of body falls away. The sense of anything permanent is gone. You just experience for moments, maybe for hours, things simply coming and going. There's nothing steady anywhere. The mind might be afraid. It might be relaxed and happy with it.

But it's real—it goes on, and there's a sense of: "Oh, wow, this is really how it is." That's the place I want to go next. The mind goes, "This is really how it is." But for a while, that shift of perception feels definitive—oh yes, that other was one way, this is another way.

And then we get caught in our black and white minds. If this is true, that can't be true. If this is true, that can't be true, right? Why can't they both be? Different perceptions of things—relative and absolute. This is one way we get confused.

So this point of insight, this aha, this shift of perception—that's really what liberates our hearts and minds. We come to understand, "Oh, that's how things are." There's not the struggle. There's not the trying to make things fit some idea. And this is because that perception may change, may fade. The more familiar sense of solidity of body comes back—we've perceived moments of that all our life, and we'll perceive moments of that again. It's useful.

If we get caught in thinking, "But it was like this, and now it's like that, and I've fallen away, I've lost it"—just as I said in the beginning—this is a place where deep and really transformative insight, which it has been, gets disrespected or shoved away, or we start to doubt because we don't understand the depth and breadth and length of the path. Can the other be okay too when it comes back?

We can fall into a lot of confusion, a lot of views. Now, how do we get there, into that confusion, into those views? Just that thing I said—the thought, "Oh, so this is how it is." Papañca. The definition in the commentary says: what one perceives, one thinks about. That's just normal—what one perceives, one thinks about. An accurate perception, an inaccurate perception.

So when there is an insight—"Wow, maybe things aren't so solid"—it's natural, it's normal that we're going to think about it, that thoughts will come and try to explain and help, because that's the way we hold information, the way we process. There's nothing wrong with thinking about it. That's going to happen.

It turns into papañca—I'd give it two thoughts, and then it's turned. Papañca goes on: what one thinks about, one complicates. One complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas. And then these notions assail and overwhelm a person. This is from the commentaries.

This can happen with the most beautiful insight or with the completely stupidest perception you ever had. It doesn't really matter. Once it turns to "Wow, this is how it really is. So now I know that everything's impermanent. Now I know that I'm not so... How am I going to live the rest of my life? How am I going to explain this to people? No, but now my body feels solid. It feels solid. How can it be?"—whatever way you go, you get the drift.

And if we can do that with a really accurate perception and insight, well, I don't need to tell you where we can go from the thought, "I can't do this right." From the thought, "My breath is ragged and heavy—it means something is wrong." Boom.

So what happens with insight? Often when there's an insight, there's a huge release of energy. We feel it as a kind of happiness, pīti. It's a wholesome release of energy. Often that can just turn back into mindfulness—we're just practicing with it. Often it leads to some thoughts about the insight. That's fine.

But sometimes we get a little carried away in the energy and forget about the mindfulness. And that's when it can go really fast from insight into real exuberant spinning, and then suddenly crash. And you think, "Did I make that whole thing up? Now I'm just back in the soup. How did that happen?"

No problem, because you'll be out of the soup again too. Nothing's permanent. But just to notice this movement from insight into thought. Thought is useful—chintamaya paññā, that level of intellectual understanding—but not to be confused with bhavanamaya paññā, with insight. They're not the same thing.

Simply because a thought arises together with strong energy or strong emotion, wholesome or unwholesome, that doesn't make the thought more accurate. This is really important. In fact, I would tend in the other direction. The thoughts arising with really strong emotion and punch—hmm, check it out. Don't land in that story. Just come back and feel the energy that's underneath it.

So this is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking. It's the result of the long process of conscious awareness." Just what we've been saying. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding. That's not to say thoughts are bad. It's just recognizing how we can use them but not mistake them to be able to do more than they can.

One of the ways—or maybe the main way—that we get tricked by thoughts, that they are rigid and limiting, is when there's this papañca, this whole proliferating story. What we perceive, we think about, and we use the perceptions and the thinking to define our world, as Guy and Sally have talked about. That can be useful if we know what we're doing. The bell rings and we know it's lunchtime—that's a perception, that's a thought, time to go eat, totally helpful. You hear "meditate," all those thoughts, totally helpful.

But when it becomes a problem is when the thoughts, the explanation, the defining of our world becomes a view, an explanation. Without recognizing it, views are one of the main fields of attachment, one of the main fields of grasping. We've mentioned this too. And views are so seductive and can be so subtle.

The Buddha describes a view as when the mind thinks, "This alone is true and everything else is false." But what I've found is that views rarely signal themselves that clearly. In fact, often I don't even realize I'm holding a view. This is how we think the world is, or this is how we think I am. The whole idea of personality view, as Guy described—it so clearly arises just with a moment of craving and clinging to any of the aggregates. But it really strengthens into this view of "this is how I am, this is who I am, this is mine," and then the rest of the thoughts that lead to papañca.

A view is like a box that our idea of ourselves and the world is bouncing around inside, but it's a completely illusory box that we don't know is there. It defines, it limits our world. And we often don't even know we have it until some perception arises. Well, you know, the view kind of shrinks our perception. So when you're thinking "I'm doing this wrong" and you're really believing that, any perception that comes in just shows that you're doing it wrong. We've talked about this before—the selective perception. And often the way we know there's even a view there is when we start to feel somehow threatened or fearful or uneasy, when some perception is coming in that doesn't fit the view but that we can't completely block.

A friend of mine was telling me a story about a Tibetan lama he was with a long time ago, Lama Gendun. Seeing through views, this opening into the moment, just having the possibility that how we think things are is just an idea—it's really about this willingness to open into the mystery, into the unknown, into unknowing, you could say. And so often we're not comfortable there.

So he was telling me this story in relation to this idea, on a retreat or a teaching with Lama Gendun. The lama was going on in a really, really long description and explanation about one of the deva worlds in the Tibetan system called the Pure Land, the Dewachen, which is where the Amitabha Buddha resides in that system. It's said that if you want to aspire for another realm to be born into in your next life—this is just a tip—this is a really good realm to aspire to, because it's a deva realm. So it's not too horribly suffering, but it's one where there's dharma teaching, so you don't get totally lost in the pleasure. Can't hurt. Aspire. Aspire isn't the same as greed. Anyway, he's going on and on describing the realm, the Buddha, a very happy realm of practice, very intricate.

And after quite a while, he looked up at this skeptical audience of Westerners, just kind of sitting there, okay, the teacher was on his trip. And he just looked at them and said, "If you think I'm making this up, I've been there." And then he went on with his description.

So just what do we do with that? It's really interesting. That's just an example. Wow. Could be great if I could just let go. Just to see when something kind of rattles our cage, and see how quickly our views spring up over nothing—over nothing.

I was with some friends in Germany at a retreat, and we were having lunch. Two of the people were cooks, and there were mushrooms for lunch somehow. One of them said, "Mushrooms, you know, they're the most easy food to digest." The other one goes, "No, mushrooms are the most difficult food to digest." So that was just starting what could have been an easy conversation, and they each had readings and things that they'd read. We could just see with what intensity—but we could all see it. Okay, who knows? For some people, it's easy. For some people, it's hard. Let's just put it down. But just to see how quickly that can happen about something completely inconsequential—unless you're lethally allergic to mushrooms, then it matters.

So, never mind that the strongest, most seductive, and most limiting view that we get caught in over and over and over is this sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. And it's when we're caught in sakkāya-diṭṭhi, in our view of personality, that we're going to believe these thoughts of discouragement or frustration—that I can't do it, or it should be better by now, or any way that it goes, doubting the practice. It's coming from belief at that moment in sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

It's the habit, as Guy said, of perceiving and thus interpreting any particular moment of nāma-rūpa—mind and matter—as me or mine. And we do this all the time. If we're aware of what's arising in the moment, that's fine. As you know, it goes like that.

I think I used this example last year, but I was doing something that required doing some little thing with my hands, putting something together in the house. And I was having a bit of a hard time, kind of fumbling around. It didn't just go easily. It wasn't a horrible thing, just a little bit of fumbling. And it was unpleasant. So there's a little bit of aversion and impatience in my mind. "You're so clumsy." This is true—I don't have good eye-hand coordination. And from that moment, "You're so clumsy," the aversion to it immediately flowered into this whole view, which didn't feel like a view. It just felt like that's me. That's Carol. She's clumsy. She always has been. She can't play sports. That's why I meditate, because I can't do anything active. You can pick everything wholesome I've ever done in my life, and it all comes from compensating for being a total klutz. And believing it at that moment—that is who I am. That's Carol. It goes so far, so fast.

And then the selective memory, picking out the fifth grade gym class for losers, which I was put into because I couldn't throw a softball further than thirty-three feet when we had the President Kennedy physical fitness tests. These things are deeply traumatic.

This is where, when we see it, it's funny—it's just empty thoughts, it's not a problem, it's not bothering me now. But when we don't see it, we're believing that papañca. That's all papañca. We're mistaking it for what's happening in the moment. I mean, the papañca is happening, but we're believing the content is accurately describing reality.

And this is where we just need to recognize: I don't need to fix it. I don't need to go out and suddenly, after all these years, find some way to become more coordinated eye to hand. I don't have to go to therapy to get over the trauma of not being good at sports. I mean, I could do any of those things.

That's fine. There's nothing wrong with any of those things. But in that moment, it's just, oh, unpleasant feeling. Unpleasant memories. Unpleasant experience of trying to do this. Basically frustration because I don't want to be doing this—I want to be doing something more enjoyable. Let's cut to the chase here. And you just see, okay, it's like this. You just feel that.

This is where the power of our awareness, our mindfulness, our confidence in that, is what we can come to rely on. Not having confidence in our personality. First of all, there is no solid-state personality, which I hope to show. But also, if I was having confidence in my personality, I would have given up a long time ago.

What we see with awareness is that personality is nothing solid-state there. It's just a bunch of thoughts and memories and feelings at this particular moment. At another moment, it's something completely different. That's what we really need to see. And when we see that we're confusing the story, we're making a view and putting it onto the openness, the ever-changing nature of this moment's mental and physical experiences —oh! You don't have to change your personality. You don't have to get rid of it. Oh, it's like this. Physical, mental experience.

Sometimes the story is too complex. The papancha has moved way too far too fast, and you're in the really core personality story of your life, right? We've talked about this before. You're at your core thing, and you can't think it through and dissect it. But I love Ajahn Sumedho's approach. He just says, "Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like this." You know you're caught in sakkāya-diṭṭhi. You can't go any further than that. Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like this. That's fine. I've done that a lot. It's wonderful, because it's that little shift from believing the papancha, believing the view, to recognizing a view is happening. Recognizing that even there's belief, but already the perception has shifted. And that's really the place of freedom.

The real support is the awareness, the mindfulness, but the real support is the steadiness of it. Thich Nhat Hanh said that wisdom comes from the long process of continuous mindfulness. Continuous means continuous intention. Of course we know we all space out—that's a given. But the willingness, no matter what we're doing, the moment we realize, "Oh, here I am," to just notice what's happening—that steadiness, that continuity of awareness is what really allows for the perception of impermanence, for the perception of anicca.

Because otherwise, I was just doing my clumsy thing and then I space out for a while and I don't notice all the other moments when something completely different was going on. I come back and notice the clumsy thing three days later. "Oh yeah, I'm a clumsy person. That's who I am."

A good friend of mine who has been a cook here and at Spirit Rock for many years, a long, long-term practitioner, was telling me one day about sitting on a retreat at Spirit Rock. She said, you know, she self-identifies as an aversive person. And her self-identity is supported by her friends—you could put it that way. "Yes, you are an aversive person," right? Sometimes she's fine with it, sometimes not.

But she was sitting, and she was just really feeling bad about herself. I think she'd just had some aversive interaction or something. But she was really feeling badly about herself. And she said, "I'm sitting. Let me not get lost in the story. Let me just stay steady with my awareness and notice what's happening."

And she said, yes, there were quite a few aversive thoughts. But she said ninety percent—maybe ninety percent—of the thoughts and ideas that came up weren't aversive at all. They were neutral, they were compassionate, they were loving, they were generous, they were interested, they were equanimous. She said, "Oh, so this view, this selective perception was picking out the ten percent and saying this is who I am."

She didn't identify herself as a generous person, although plenty of generous motivations and thoughts came through. Plenty of loving, plenty of creative. You see what I mean?

So the steadiness is really what helps us see the impermanence of the view. It's what lets in the perceptions that don't support the view. And that's why sometimes practice is rather uncomfortable, even though it's opening us to much more comfort and ease in the world, a much more spacious and free way of being. But the intersection—we don't like that so much. It's uncomfortable.

The Buddha said, "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated"—developed and cultivated, he doesn't say have it once and you're done—"when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, it eliminates all lust for existence, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots all conceit 'I am.'"

That's a pretty powerful statement. You recognize those as meaning a completely enlightened person by the end of that. But it's a powerful statement—the perception of impermanence developed and cultivated over and over and over and over.

So this is where we really need to find the trust, the confidence, the re-inspiration for ourselves over and over and over. That yes, something as simple as the perception of impermanence—and that's just one example—that it really has to be perceived over and over and over. And to have the patience, the faith, not get so lost in either discouragement or our stories we tell ourselves or that sense of hitting the wall. "That's enough already, I'm never going to get there, this whole thing's a waste of time, I saw impermanence and it didn't do it."

I mean, a lot of people have moments—I've had it myself, people have said it here—"I almost wish I never started on a path if I knew it was going to be this"—whatever it is—hard or long, or if I had to open to this, or whatever. I think those are interesting moments. They're just moments, but I think they're really interesting moments. The times when our faith might not be challenged, our trust in our own personal ability. Or we're caught in our views, or our aspiration—we can't quite find it. We just get discouraged.

I just want to talk about a few different ways I've seen that happen, and I'm sure you can think of many more. But it's all those times when we need to at least have enough trust to reconnect with our motivation, to have the patience not to just give up.

Now the thing is, I actually think at this point none of us could give up if we wanted to. That's what some people mean by, "Oh, I almost wish I didn't start—I could go back to ignorance." But it's too late. That's the good news. So we can even fall into discouragement and despair and give it up for a while. Something always happens to wake us up again. That's what's so great. Usually it's dukkha. Usually it's suffering. Usually. It doesn't have to be, though.

But there are different ways this discouragement arises. One is just that feeling: "I can't do this. Enlightenment is not possible for me." What I just read about—what the perception of impermanence opens us to—and people say, "That's not possible for me." Or, "To be rid of all sensual lust, to be rid of all lust for existence? I didn't sign up for that. I'm not actually sure I want that."

Don't you sometimes have times when you hear certain teachings and you think, "That can't be right"? I mean, I'm not claiming everything we say is. But I'm saying you think, "Enlightenment? Like that—all dull, gray, nothing?"

I don't know if I want to keep going with that. Or we have a kind of attachment to a particular view that we don't even realize.

I want to give a few examples of this. I call it "hitting the wall." And we will hit the wall over and over and over. That's okay—that's part of it. We have to learn not to take it so personally.

Here's one from the time of the Buddha that I really like. It illustrates when we've had deep insight and understanding, but a view has constructed around it that we don't realize, and then we think we can't get it back, that we can't do it, that it's gone.

There's a monk named Asaji who is very ill and dying. The Buddha comes to talk to him—he does this in a lot of different suttas. He comes and says, "Are you getting better?" And the monk says, "No, I'm not getting better. I'm dying."

The Buddha says, "Well, I hope you're not troubled by remorse and regret."

And Asaji says, "No, I am. I have quite a lot of remorse and regret."

The Buddha asks, "Why? Is it your virtue, your sīla? Have you acted wrongly?"

"No, no, no—my sīla is fine."

"Well, then what do you have remorse and regret about?"

And the monk says, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I was able to keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations. I was able to obtain concentration. And now I cannot obtain concentration. And the thought occurs to me—this thought of fear—let me not fall away."

So he's dying, and he's in a panic because he can't get the samādhi back that he used to have. The Buddha then goes through a whole talk: this is impermanent, that's impermanent. Basically what he's saying is, "Haven't I told you everything is impermanent? Nothing to have remorse about."

I find this quite touching—the Buddha with a monk who's lived his whole life practicing, and still we can so easily fall into that. Remorse and regret. "I can't get concentration back. Let me not die." Confused. And the Buddha just takes him through: everything's impermanent. Nothing. No problem. Just see that.

Sometimes we don't have the Buddha there to remind us, but we might just know when we feel that sense of panic—"Don't let me fall away. Don't let me lose it. I can't get what I used to have." Let that be a little light bulb going off. Wait a minute. I can't get what I used to have. Formerly I could, but now I can't. Impermanence. Perception of impermanence.

Then maybe you can even see what the view is. Sometimes when we put the view into words, it becomes so obvious. When we haven't put it into words, we don't even know we're fighting against it. "Oh, the view is I should have this. Now that I've obtained samādhi, it should be like this all the time." As soon as we say it, we know it can't be that way. So it's helpful sometimes. That's the thinking aspect that can be useful.

Another way we sometimes hit a wall—and we all hit this at times, though sometimes the times seem to last quite a bit—is when it just feels like too much. Too much pain, physical pain. Too much emotional pain. We all hit moments of that, when our mindfulness, our viriya, our energy just isn't as strong as the intensity of the emotional and physical pain. We're worn down.

And then it's skillful means. We need to pull back, regroup, balance. That's fine—I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about something deeper, not just on retreat but in our lives, when somebody hits that moment of "Whoa, this is too much. I don't want to see it anymore. I don't want to know about this anymore."

And we can fall into a great discouragement—not quite denial, because it's too far from denial, but really deep discouragement. That usually spirals into the blanket view that I'm not good enough, I can't do it, I should have been able to work through this, or if I'd really had insight it wouldn't happen. All of those stories about how it should be.

Another similar thing is fear—it's not actually a pain or a sorrow or a loss, but the intimation of something. Do you ever get the sense that something really hellish is about to open up? It hasn't, and you actually don't know that it will. But sometimes there's this sense that some deeply held view holding the world in place is about to be maha-challenged, and I don't want to go there.

On retreat you might notice yourself suddenly getting into distractibility, doing all these important things, a kind of restlessness, a kind of anxiety. In our daily life it happens too. It might be hidden longer or acted out over more time. But still, it can lead to doubt, to self-doubt, lack of confidence, losing your aspiration, a lack of courage.

And those are views you don't need to hold onto because this happens to everybody.

At this point it's really helpful if you can remember and actually call up your deep aspiration. But when we're really falling into "I can't handle this pain, I don't want to know from this pain," and we try to call up our aspiration, the tendency is not to believe it. "Yeah, right, that's really my aspiration. I don't think so. My aspiration is get me out of here." Or: "I'm not good enough to have that aspiration. If I could really have that aspiration, I wouldn't be running from this or hiding from this."

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

Call up your aspiration and just take your stand there—not to make everything better, not to fix the painful thing. Just that. Yes, the aspiration, and the former insight that's feeding our mind stream now, will give us the courage in its own way, in its own time, to show up, to be a witness to whatever's happening, to see through it.

We don't have to stick with comfort, with the known. That's where my mind goes: "Let me just stay where it's comfortable, where I know. I'm just being kind to myself." You know that one. And that stepping outside of the cage can be scary, can be uncomfortable. And we think, "Well, I can't do it. I'm just this puny little old lady. I can't do it. Maybe I could do it when I was nineteen—that was amazing what I did when I was nineteen. Now I'm old and sick."

Just personality view.

This is like a kind of allegory. Recently, a couple of months ago, I had the flu, which is unusual for me, and I was kind of laid out for a couple of weeks at home. Thank God I was home. And I was basically useless—I could just lie around. So one way I passed the evenings, for three evenings in a row, was I watched again the three-part movie, The Lord of the Rings trilogy, which probably some of you know.

And I was really struck—actually quite profoundly—by how the whole story of Frodo felt like a really deep allegory for our practice and for how we keep having to rediscover within ourselves the courage. We have to remake our commitment and remake our motivation. We set our foot on the path and we're wholeheartedly committed. But we don't get to just do that once and then it flies. Over and over.

And so, just a little bit of the story: he's this sweet little hobbit in a kind of perfect world where people are kind. And most of the people there have no sense of an outer world of confusion and violence and evil.

He has a little bit of a sense because of his uncle and the wizard who knows the whole world. And so this evil ring of power comes to him. The wizard, whom he trusts deeply, says, "You have to take it. You have to leave your home turf, the Shire, and go to this nearby place where you've never been, and deliver it. I'll meet you there, and then we'll figure it out."

So that was really scary for him. That was more challenging than anything he had done in his life. But he saw that it needed to be done, out of his basic goodness. He brought up his courage. He trusted the wizard. And he went and did this thing.

Good things happened in that friends came to support him—a kind of mutual goodness and courage. But it was also more scary and dangerous than anything he could have imagined. Those dark riders were trying to kill him. And it really was horrible. They barely made it there. Like, "Wow, thank God. That was an adventure."

And then, of course, it turns out Gandalf isn't there. Black riders tried to kill them there. They have to end up trusting somebody they've never met who seems kind of seedy and sinister. And not only is it not over then, they have to follow this guy Aragorn on a much, much more difficult path to where the elves are—for days, not knowing if they can trust him. And so Frodo has to make that decision. He could have made the decision not to do it. He could have made the decision to go back. But he has a sense it's about more than him.

So they do that. And then he's really almost killed. He's stabbed. And they're having fights much, much closer. And the elves come and take him. And finally, they get to Rivendell, which is like the most beautiful place—like a deva realm, more beautiful than they could ever imagine. Thank God. Here's Gandalf. Everything's okay. "I've done more than I ever could have done. I feel good now. I can go home."

And then, of course, it turns out that's only the beginning. And he has to find in himself the courage when he sees that this ring has to go all the way to the evilest place in the land, and he has no clue where that is or how to get there. He knows by now that he has no clue actually of the danger he's going into. He knows enough to know how really vast the journey is—which he didn't know at the beginning.

And that's like us now. We know enough to know how vast the journey is, and that we really don't have a clue, although we'd like to.

And he has to make that decision. And out of that comes the friendship of all the other beings that go with him—the loyalty and the courage and the humility and the strength and the wisdom. And it keeps going. He finds finally he can't trust anybody. He has to make the decision to go off completely alone, having no clue how he'll get there, how he'll do it. And his friend Sam comes with him.

So over and over, he's having to make more profound, difficult decisions to move toward the difficulty, not away from it. But it's not the same decision, because each time he has a much greater sense of wisdom, a greater sense of faith, a greater sense of the importance of what he's doing. It's less and less about him and more and more about beings in the world. But it never gets easier. In fact, it gets harder. The love between the friends gets stronger. His sense of goodness gets stronger.

But then, even as he gets closer to Mordor—to the really bad place where he must put the ring in the fire it came from—the evil stops being just out there, and it starts to eat him up from the inside. So it really shows that his courage and stamina almost break, almost break. But somehow there's also support and help where it's unexpected.

You never know how it's going to go, and somehow he manages to complete the task—which doesn't, of course, end the growing or end the love or end life.

I just thought that was so great. I really feel like our whole practice is like that. We think, "I really can't do this anymore. This is harder than anything I ever thought I'd have to face." But then we need to turn around and recognize the wisdom, the courage, the compassion, the equanimity. All of that is so much greater than we ever knew we had before. And it's really important to recognize that too.

So when you're in your life and you think, "This again? This pattern, this anger—I see it, I'm still blasting my little kids and I ought to know better," and you feel the shame even more... you think it's just worse than it ever was. What's the point of practice if it's worse than it ever was? But it's not worse. The seeing of it is already a huge shift. The openness to actually feel the pain of the anger, and the shame, the pain of the shame, and the immediate feedback of the pain from somebody else—that's a much deeper level of sensitivity and non-separation than we started out with.

If we stay focused on "this feels worse than ever and I'm still doing this," we're lost. If we let ourselves expand the view and say, "Wow, yes, it's a deeper step into the interconnectedness of all, into the power of habits of kilesa, but also the power of awareness and the importance and power of patience and our motivation and commitment to keep on bearing witness"—at some point, it does happen, over and over. It shifts from just feeling hopelessly caught in the pattern to there's a moment of, "Oh, right now I don't have to do this. I can turn and walk away just for this moment." Maybe next time you're caught again. But that shift comes from the openness to all of the interconnectedness and the deeper sensitivity to the suffering that comes from acting and thinking from greed, from hatred, from confusion. And that's a great courage, that we have to keep opening in this way. It's important to recognize it, because we tend to sometimes just notice how it's going wrong.

Another way we get caught—briefly—is what Sayadaw U Pandita calls "stopping within." It's actually when things are going really well, on retreat or in our life. I've seen it in myself a lot when there's been quite some insight, or I leave retreat in a really balanced place, feeling really alive. The kilesas don't feel so sticky, and the personality view doesn't feel so sticky. Not reactive, more connected. And it's just, "Wow, this is great." After my first retreat, it was like that more or less for a year. I don't wish that on anybody, because there's this feeling, "Well, now that's it. I can just coast." You don't even think you're coasting. You think, "Now that's it."

So that's called stopping within—"Okay, now I got it." Not that we have to try, try, try all the time, but just have that willingness to be awake no matter what's happening. At first, when you're stopping within, the wakefulness is natural. The momentum of awareness is there. You know those times when it's just going by itself? Well, anicca rears its head usually here too. And what seemed so natural stops being so natural. You can't find it.

Stopping within is "this is cool, this is it." Sometimes it's not even that, but just "this is good enough. This is pleasant. I'm not suffering so much. I don't want to rock the boat. I can live like this. This is okay. Good enough." Unlike the Buddha, who resolved never to settle for less than total awakening.

But the problem with stopping within—I don't need to tell you, do I? Nothing is steady state. "This is good enough. I can live like this." Well, you won't live like that forever.

I can promise you that.

Another place we encounter resistance is really around our personality view, what people have mentioned—a fear or resistance at moving out of the familiar. It's really more an idea of losing something familiar about ourselves or about our lives. It's the kind of questions we all ask: Does freedom from clinging mean I don't care about my family anymore? Does freedom from clinging mean I don't appreciate the beauty of nature? Does freedom from clinging mean I can't tell pleasant from unpleasant, can't appreciate art? Fill in your blanks. Freedom from clinging means I don't have a personality anymore. What about my irritability—I like my irritability, I'm comfortable with that. That seems crazy, but we're comfortable with our patterns.

So you might just notice if there's that sense of, "If it means this goes away, I'm not so sure I'm signed on for this." You don't have to land in that either. But just notice—that's another place where we can hit a wall. Or that nostalgia for samsara that Guy talked about. I've felt that often, and really very powerfully sometimes. I don't even know what for, sometimes. Nostalgia is something that's been the fabric of my whole life, and I couldn't even put a word on it. Something is dissolving, going to go away, and I'm going to be thrust into the unfamiliar—and with unfamiliar, read whatever projection: cold, distant, disconnected, inhuman, whatever it is. And this huge nostalgia, this poignancy, this real sadness.

I've seen, especially in intensive practice over years at different points—I could say it's been like a series of deaths. A sense of death. And it really feels like a death of some particular aspect of my personality or some particular way I held myself. Not even how my personality manifests, but some view or some way I related to myself, to my life, to the people in my life, how I thought about myself. When I say it, it probably sounds clear that it's no great loss. And that's actually the truth. But in the moment of seeing it, seeing through it—that isn't who I am, that isn't really accurate, that isn't really how I relate to whatever it is—it's been experienced internally for me like a kind of death, a real giving up.

On the other side of that, it's freedom. It's really freedom. But not to deny or belittle or think it shouldn't be that way. There's sadness, there's poignancy, there's a sense of loss or fear that this is going to go. Fine. Notice that. There's room in awareness for that too. It doesn't have to be a problem.

But in the big picture, which includes everything of our life, awakening—the liberation of heart, of non-clinging—it's radical. It's uncompromising. And we can't know. The mind can't know what that's like because the mind can only know the thoughts that it already knows. It can only know the views that it's expressed. But awakening—enlightenment's not a self-improvement project. It's the standpoint of "me" that gets seen through. So we don't personally get gratified by having some kind of enlightenment experience. It's not about that. That's what creates the sense of loss or death, these little blips—it's like, "Oh, that meaning, not just having so much meaning right now."

Stephen Batchelor says emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all our strategies of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection. And although freeing—it is freeing—it also can evoke a great sense of disconcertion, of dis-ease, even fear. Sort of like being in no man's land without our familiar reference points.

When we see this, there's no stasis. One of my invited teachers, Poonjaji, used to say, "Pick up your foot and then don't put it down again anywhere." I didn't used to understand it, but now I realize that you pick up your foot and there is nowhere to put it down. Because there's no stasis. You put it down, but there's nothing stable there. You pick it up, you put it down—there's nothing stable there. Disconcerting at times, but that's okay. We find a willingness to rest in the confusion, as Joko Beck says. And then we see that this disconcertion actually opens up our cage of view, of self-interest, and—ah, it's like this. It's just like this, as Guy said from the Bāhiya Sutta.

So simple. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking. Just like this. It's so simple we can't stand it.

But when "we" isn't what's being held to, a friend of mine calls it the place of no problem—coming and going.

So over and over, just finding that willingness to commit, to surrender to the unknown. We don't have to know. We can't know what should happen. If we think we know what should happen, that's the trap. Oh, not knowing. It's like this.

And what can really help—just one thing to end with that I find helps me a lot—is a Tibetan practice. It's very simple. They call it purifying our aspiration. Just reminding us of our aspiration, our motivation. And they say, just to cultivate the correct motiva-

tion within your own experience, it turns into bodhicitta all by itself. Are we touching, finding our aspiration by itself? That'll give us the courage to keep going, like poor Frodo, ending up for all beings.

So it's a very simple practice. They call it the three excellences. In any practice period—which could be a sitting or a walking or the whole day—you always start with taking refuge, really connecting with your refuge. For the Tibetans, they would cultivate bodhicitta. But I'd say, cultivate your deepest aspiration while you're practicing. Then you just forget it and practice, just being moment-to-moment awareness. Then at the end, when the bell rings or you stop the walking or you finish eating—whatever is your practice period—you complete it by briefly dedicating the merit of your practice to all sentient beings.

I just want to say for this: if there's the feeling "my practice isn't worth dedicating any merit to anybody"—sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

And along with dedicating the merit, again, making a really pure aspiration. This is something that's interesting to me. If I would dedicate the merit—good. But they say, make the merit a pure aspiration for my own awakening and the awakening of all. So that the merit doesn't just fly out there and get you a nice comfortable job, or you don't have back pain tomorrow, or something.

But anyway, the point of it is it really connects us again to our deepest aspiration. And I've done this a lot, and I go through all that stuff about "Oh no, I'm not good enough, nothing to me, bodhicitta." Just let that blab on. Connect to the motivation. It really does strengthen and deepen by itself. And then in times when you're hitting a wall, you'll remember it. You'll be able to call it up. And it'll give us the faith, the confidence to just surrender into not knowing.

And that's really all we need to do.

So let's sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 35

Wise Attention

Carol Wilson · 1h05

> *In this comprehensive talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common struggle among practitioners: the overwhelming desire to find "the right way" to meditate amidst seemingly endless instructions and approaches. Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she introduces the Buddha's teaching on abandoning the āsavas—the most subtle underlying tendencies of craving, aversion, and delusion—through seven distinct methods: seeing, restraining, using, patience, avoiding, removing, and developing.*
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> *Wilson illuminates the Pāli term yoniso manasikāra (wise attention), explaining it as a nurturing, womb-like quality of mind that supports balanced awareness rather than harsh penetration of experience. She emphasizes that wise attention isn't about achieving particular states or finding correct objects of meditation, but about noticing what qualities are being fed or starved in each moment of awareness. Using vivid examples—from Vipassanā romances to the smell of pizza—she demonstrates how the same experience can be either wise or unwise attention depending entirely on the attitude meeting it.*
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> *The practical applications extend far beyond formal meditation. Wilson explores how we relate to food, clothing, and resources; how patience with difficult conditions can actually uproot aversive tendencies; and when it's skillful to redirect attention away from overwhelming experiences rather than forcing mindfulness. Throughout, she returns to a radical trust: that any object whatsoever can be met with wise attention, and that freedom lies not in what's happening but in the quality of mind meeting each moment.*

I was struck this morning in the questions and in talking to people over the last couple of days by a couple of things. For some people, there just seems like there's been so much information—how to meditate, all our talks, everything. And then listening to the questions today and speaking with people in interviews, I noticed a sense of how our minds want to reconcile everything and figure it all out, figure out which is the right way. There must be some right way. It can't just be all this huge amount of information that's all useful somehow. We just like to have models, plans, to know: do it like this and that happens. This is the right way—really focus. But now there's big mind, and what am I supposed to do if I'm in big mind? If something gets small, but I'm small in the big mind, is this the right way? And how can I do big mind when I'm walking? But what about concentration? And the hindrances are coming back, and it matters—no, it doesn't matter because it's all empty, but how come?

So first I thought I just don't want to talk at all, but I wasn't allowed that option. So then I picked the longest talk I have—that's what they get for making me talk, my long talk.

Actually, what I do want to talk about is just that. I want to talk about a particular sutta of the Buddha's where he is actually talking about the very, very subtlest level of the patterns of our minds, which they call *āsavas* or the taints—the most subtle latent level, and I'll describe it. So he's talking about the most subtle levels of how to abandon these underlying tendencies. This isn't like the gross level, where if you can't do anything else, do what he's suggesting here. This is the most subtle level. And he gives seven different ways of working with this, which is not just about very subtle, quiet meditation. It's about all different ways of our life.

I wanted to talk about this because I want to try to reinforce what's so hard for us to trust: that there is no one right way. Right way to what? As soon as we say "right way," the mind is making some idea, some sense of a state, or how things should look, or how I should feel, or what should or shouldn't be happening. As soon as we think "right way," the mind has come into comparison, making measurements, making limits. As soon as you're thinking, "Is this the right way?" it's all solidified just in that moment.

And it's so hard. This is the same thing I've been saying the whole time, but it's so hard for us to really trust. It's not about what's particularly happening. All the different practices and all the different aspects of the meditation and the Buddhist path they're pointing to—it's not getting some right way of meditating. It's just a tool. Not achieving some state of mind—that's going to change. If you can achieve it, it can go away.

But really recognizing, trusting this moment—that Bhante Vimamsaka talked about last week—of the mind and heart that's really free from clinging. Whether that clinging is in the form of grasping or aversion, sense of self—all of that is clinging. And in a moment, all we can practice, all we can cultivate, all we can pay attention to is: what's the quality of the mind in this moment? That's it. The past is a thought in this moment. So is the future. So is the present. All we can cultivate.

Everything we talk about is ways to help us notice, really tune in: What's the quality? What's the attitude in the mind, in the awareness, in this moment? And so there's millions of different ways. If one doesn't work, another one might for this moment. The next moment is all different again. So you might as well—although I'm going to give you another one—throw out the lists that you go down. And I'm going to give you one. You can write it all down. Then at the end, you can throw them all out and just check what's happening now. Is there wanting? Is there aversion? Is there craving? Or not. Or you can't tell—that's also okay.

But looking, just knowing what's the quality of awareness now—not so focused on the object, the object, the object being sense pleasure, the object being the mind, the object being a state.

So all the methods he talks about in the sutta and all through the teachings, the practice—there's a simile he uses a lot, which is about feeding and starving. When we think in terms of "is this the right way to meditate—spacious, precise, very subtle, more gross?"—it's not about whether it's subtle or gross or spacious or precise. It's about what, in the way we're paying attention, in the way mindfulness is meeting what's happening, what qualities are being fed, what qualities are being starved.

The Buddha talks like this a lot. He talks about feeding the wholesome, starving the unwholesome. If in the way we pay attention we're feeding wanting, and it's getting stronger and stronger and stronger, and the sense of self is getting stronger and stronger and stronger in a moment—that's what he calls unwise attention. So that's what I want to really talk about: wise attention.

But first to this sutta. Andrea read a little bit of it, so I don't have to read that part about why his attention were all the views. But he says, he's talking about these taints—that's the usual translation for *āsava*—or this subtle underlying tendency, and the exhaustion, the abandoning of these tendencies. So I just want to describe what we mean by those.

When Sayadaw U Pandita was here, he talked about what he called the three rounds, or the three levels, of *kilesa*—defilement, suffering in the mind, the way it manifests. Three rounds of saṃsāra, he called it. The first—and also wholesome manifests in the same way—but the first he called "in deeds or speech." So if there's in a moment in the mind, in the awareness, really strongly, for example, greed, desire, and if it manifests on this most gross level, the level of what he calls the level of transgression, we act on it. There's really strong desire, and you act on it. You go in the kitchen, in the walk-in, in the middle of the night and take something, right? None of you, of course, have done that here, but it has been known to have happened. We have everything numbered and charted, and we know. But right, so that's acting out—level of transgression. And that's what *sīla*, the precepts, protect us from. When we commit to *sīla*, that's protecting us on this level of acting out, of transgression of *kilesa*.

The second level he called—the translation to English was—the obsessive level. So take desire again. You're not actually acting it out, but the mind is completely caught up in obsessive thinking: "Oh, I've got to get that date. I've got to get that fig. How could I

get figs? How could I get dates?" Not just a thought here and there—we're talking obsessive, right? You're all familiar with this. We're in the realm of familiarity so far, right?

What protects us on that level is *samādhi*. *Samādhi*, both in terms of the balance of mind—when a thought of desire comes up and the mind just doesn't go there—that protects us. Also the *samādhi*, the *samatha*, the really quiet, one-pointed concentration, also protects against this level of obsession. As U Tejaniya says, it actually suppresses that wanting. After a while, when the mind's really focused on something, it doesn't even come up. That's why we like when the mind gets really focused and concentrated and kind of narrowed down on one point—because the *kilesas* and the hindrances are suppressed. They're kept away. And we find out how really actually lovely it is when those things aren't harassing us in the mind all the time. It's like, "Oh my God, this is amazing." We think it's the best. It's the end. It's enlightenment. We just haven't had a moment that wasn't having this obsessive stuff going on.

But as you may have noticed, if you had some period when it's really quiet or really balanced, whether it's the one-pointed *samādhi* or just more open but really balanced—it changes, right? And have you noticed there can kind of, not always, but be these waves where it's really calm, really focused, craving's not coming much, aversion's not coming much, and it creeps in? "Now we've got it. I've seen through this now, right? That particular obsessive pattern's no longer coming up." And then it changes. The mind gets a little more restless, more things happen. And again, the assault—it can come up. And sometimes it takes a while.

And sometimes—this was amazing to me on one retreat I was doing—I was really very one-pointed, with concentration on changing objects, but with a lot of effort to connect and focus. Like, *no, no, no, connect.* As long as I kept up that effort every single moment, connecting with whatever was arising, there was really steady mindfulness. And even if wanting came, it was just like *wanting*, and I'd notice it as the next arising thing. That's wise attention.

But I started playing with this, and I noticed that when I would deliberately pull the attention back and not note, not land, just kind of pull it back and not be connected—it would just come rushing in, this wanting about anything, just some stupid thing. I was really both amazed and a little bit disheartened, I must say, to see how quickly it arose. Well, what's the point? I mean, there is a point, but at that point I said, *why?* As soon as I pull back—boom—I want this, I want that, I like this, I don't like that.

My only point in saying that is that this samādhi protects us from the obsessive while it's there. But it doesn't uproot. It doesn't possess the wisdom that allows for the seeing through of the tendency, the kind of seeing that really allows the mind to just lose interest, to abandon, to uproot—going all the way to arahat. But even moment to moment, we all have that capacity.

So this third level, which is the one we're talking about—the latent or underlying tendencies—it doesn't mean that there's some stream of craving and aversion that's part of you, always there. It doesn't mean that, even though sometimes it might feel like it. It means that there's a habit, a tendency in the mind stream, a kind of momentum, so that when the conditions are right and there's still that underlying tendency, greed or aversion or delusion-identification might arise.

Here's an example a yogi gave me a few years ago—I mean, there are a million. She or he, I forget who it was, was walking by, and I thought they were being very mindful, walking through the dining room. There was a bowl of fruit there in the late afternoon, and they thought they were being very mindful. They saw the fruit, didn't notice wanting, and thought they were just walking by with no intention at all. The next thing they knew, their hand shot out and grabbed an apple and kept on going. Where did that come from? Just that moment of not quite noticing what was happening in the mind, and there's this underlying—*yes, apple, want, take, go.* It just acts out really quickly.

Or the times when you're walking and very present, and someone cuts in front of you, and aversion or judgment just surges up. You don't act on it, but it's so surprising because it seems to come from left field. Just the underlying tendency.

So this is a very subtle level we're talking about. Sometimes people have described—and many have—times here where suddenly it seems as if you're seeing craving, for example, or self-judging, or pride, as if it were behind almost everything you do, in a way that's shocking. It's subtle but coming up all the time, and you think, *how could I not have seen this before?* But this is really—you don't get it that it's subtle because it seems like everything's like that, and you must have been so deluded not to notice it. But really it's that the attention is getting much more fine, much more subtle, and you're starting to see a very subtle level of wanting or identification or fear behind movements, behind things in the mind, arising just because the conditions are there.

So this is actually a very useful part of practice—not uplifting, really, but very useful just to see it with wise attention.

That's what we mean in this sutta when he's talking about all the tendencies, all the taints—I don't really like that word—all the stains, the āsavas. He's talking about this level. And what protects us from, or sees through, these levels is paññā, wisdom. He says actually that the subtle tendencies are abandoned not by acts, but by wisely seeing—just by clear seeing.

As someone said today, they were noticing in regard to a certain situation that had kept coming up and triggering wanting in the mind throughout the retreat. Suddenly the mind was sort of disenchanted with it. The situation would come, the same seeing, the same conditions, and just instead of going to wanting, the mind would just go, *don't need to go there.* Not an act of will. That's actually the movement of paññā. When we talk about real renunciation—by seeing through with wisdom, the clinging is abandoned. It's not an act of will. It just doesn't come up in that moment.

So it's important for all of us to notice when we do actually have those experiences—because you all do, and probably a lot, believe it or not. And you just think, *well, it just didn't come up this time. Maybe it's because I'm not close enough to the experience. I should be there. Where is it?* Notice. That's the seeing of wisdom. That's the dispassion. That's actually the protection—the latent tendency not arising, being abandoned in that moment.

So that's what he's talking about in this sutta. "Bhikkhus, I say there is exhaustion, abandoning of these asavas in one who knows wise attention and unwise attention." You know both of them. "When one attends unwisely, both unarisen asavas, stains, and arisen ones increase. When one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise, and arisen ones are abandoned."

I want to talk about wise attention, and then I want to talk about these seven specific ways that he mentions in the sutta—different places to use wise attention.

Wise attention he defines very specifically as knowing—well, it's how we pay attention, and that's the main thing, and what we pay attention to. He defines it as knowing what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit. Now, at first, that sounds like it plays right into our idea of there's a right way and a wrong way. Certain aspects of our experience are fit for attention—that means we're doing it right. And other ones are unfit for attention, and if they're there, we're doing it wrong. This is not what it means.

It's really how we're paying attention. When there is right attitude in the mind at any moment, when the attention, the awareness is meeting whatever's arising without wanting or aversion, without delusion, without that sense of me, any object is the right object. It's wise attention. When the paying attention is colored—and we've said this a

million times—with any of these collations, and we don't recognize it, seeing through it, it's unwise attention. It's not so much about the object as about how we're paying attention. But sometimes we can use noticing as we're paying attention to the object and the collations increase—we can use that as a sign: "Oh, this isn't wise attention."

There's no fixed determination in things themselves, in objects themselves. The same experience—for example, aversion—could be a fine subject of wise attention in one moment, and it could be unwise attention in the next moment. It's all in the attitude.

The word translated as "wise attention" in Pali is two words: yoniso manasikara. It might be better to translate it as "appropriate attention," or Andy Olenski, the head of the study center who's a Pali scholar, likes "careful attention." I like the way he breaks down these words. Mana means mind—chitta and the concomitant mental factors with it. Kara is from the same word as kamma; it means action. And so manasikara really means a doing, an action of the mind. Attention—that's usually how it's translated.

Yoniso comes from the word yoni, which is the word for womb. And so Andy likes to translate yoniso as womb-like: nurturing, supporting, protecting, held in protection—as in sati, mindfulness being our protection. He translates yoniso manasikara as an active quality of mind that is nurturing and supporting. Not hitting, penetrating, beating down the object mercilessly, but a quality of mind that is nurturing and supporting. Supporting what? Balanced awareness, right attitude. Just a moment of presence free from suffering, from kalesha—that's nurturing and supporting clear seeing, discerning wisdom, paññā, in this moment. Feeding or starving, very pragmatically.

That's what's so hard for us to absolutely radically trust—that this quality of yoniso manasikara can meet any object whatsoever. No exceptions. That's what's so hard for us to trust. We keep getting pulled into the belief that our problem is with what's happening, and if we could just change it, we'd be doing better, we'd be suffering less. But really, radically, it's about the attitude and the awareness in any moment.

For example—and I fall into this as much as anyone—there's the sense, just the subtle preference, the subtle sense that it's better attention when things that are coming and going, we see them coming and going. They're clear. We usually feel a little more at ease when the attention can clearly notice. The more precise the better—we see what's happening, it's coming, it's going, we're sensitive, we're tuned in, really feeling a sense of presence. That somehow seems much better than when it's all vague and cloudy and chaotic. But even that can be unwise attention because it's in what's in the attitude that's noticing.

I just read this in a news magazine about a guy named Dean Potter. They said he's a legend in the rock climbing world. He's way past rock climbing now—that's boring.

And what he mostly does is two things. One is called highlining, which means walking across chasms on loosely strung nylon ropes. And the other is base jumping, which I've seen in Switzerland. It's pretty intense. You leap off a really high cliff or mountain with this little kind of parachute on your back. You just jump out, go as far as you can, and pull the parachute in the last two seconds or something. It's a special kind of parachute. Very intense. People die doing it.

Once I was with friends, and we were just sitting on a bench near a big cliff, and we heard this whoosh—a guy had just base jumped. It takes like ten seconds. That's it. It's over. And he had to walk in for an hour carrying his gear and walk out for an hour just to plummet down and pull the parachute at the last minute. It's intense.

So this guy, that's what he does. Now, this is what he says about it: "I'm addicted to the heightened awareness I get when there's a death consequence. My vision is sharper. I'm more sensitive to sounds, my sense of balance, and the beauty all around me. Something sparkles in my mind, and nothing else in life matters."

You can almost think that was good mindfulness, right? But I have a feeling that there's something in his motivation that might have a little bit of kilesa in it. I'm not sure. He's going so far as to think that maybe, if he really concentrates and enters a trance-like state, he could fly. He says, "I know it's insane to think, but that's all I can think about—going to a place that's not accepted."

So it's not in how it looks. It's not in the object. Can we be that radical to turn around and look?

At the same time, something that is clearly kilesa and suffering—for example, dosa, aversion, unpleasantness, anger, however you want to put it—that can be a perfectly fine object of awareness when we see it. "Oh, that's just anger doing its job." Just noticing anger, how it acts, how it feels in the body, the thoughts that come. Just noticing that with non-judging awareness. It comes, it does its thing, it goes. Really noticing it, though. Not that sense we can often have with any of these things—wanting, anger, self-judgment—where you say, "Oh, I know it's there. I know it's there." But it's running in the background. And this is where the latent tendency is getting more and more strengthened. We don't really turn around and notice it with wise attention. That's not the same thing. That's how it grows.

So this is what we're talking about with wise attention, what the Buddha's talking about. And then he describes seven ways that with wise attention, these latent underlying tendencies come to be abandoned—different ways we can pay attention with wise attention in our practice, in our life. They can be abandoned by insight, by seeing. Second is by restraining. Third is by how we use things. By patience. By avoiding. By removing things. And by developing. Developing means cultivating the seven factors of awakening, which we talked about the other night.

Abandoned by seeing is largely what I've already described. I just want to highlight a couple of things about how, by seeing, by insight, we pay attention—and that we can pay attention and think we're being really mindful because we're so focused on the object that we miss how we're paying attention. As we think we're being mindful, the greed,

Or the sense of self, or whatever it is that we're caught in—it seems to be getting bigger and bigger and bigger, in a way that we're really caught.

The Buddha gives some examples that I find really interesting. It's the hindrances—I won't go through all of them, but I want to highlight a couple. Notice what's being fed and what's being starved when you're giving attention to an experience. Again, it's very pragmatic. Not some idea of how it should look, but just notice what's happening now.

He gives an example with sense desire. It's not that sense desire in itself is the problem, as we've said several times, but in how we pay attention to it. Something that we often don't notice—I often didn't notice until I read it—is that when we pay attention to something, say something beautiful that we want, if you're having what we call a "VR," a vipassana romance with somebody, whenever you see them, the mind kind of looks at them: "Oh, they look so nice," or "I like their hair, I like the way they dress, they look so self-assured." The mind focuses on the attractive aspect, and it's mostly paying attention to, without realizing it, the sense of gratification we're getting from looking at that beautiful thing.

Let's go down from relationship to the smell of pizza. Let's just keep it very basic. You're smelling—ah, that smells like fresh bread cooking. That smells so good. And there's wanting. You see, "Oh yeah, wanting," but it keeps going. Fresh bread. And you think you're there. You think you're just with smelling. But what's really going on is a sense of, "Wow, that's really nice. I really like it." And you keep focusing on the gratification.

This is kind of subtle, but just notice. If you keep thinking you're present—smell, good smell of bread, smell, good smell of bread—it's getting more and more and more until you're ready to burst into the kitchen crazed. Or you come to lunch and it isn't pizza and it's nothing like bread, and you don't know where that smell was. You smell chocolate cake all day and then it never shows up—has that happened? You just want to die or kill somebody. The transgression—that's when you're happy for the precepts. Then there's a good chance somewhere we weren't just attending with a pure mind. There was wanting in there that wasn't seen. We were attending to the gratification. It's really interesting.

Sometimes in the sitting, when we focus on rapture or sukha, the contentment, we think we're being really present until it goes away and we're so frustrated. We can't understand why, because we weren't noticing the sense of self, the sense of gratification that was going on about it. Gratification is all about the sense of self enjoying—not even enjoying, but the sense of self there.

Don't think about this too much. If it doesn't make sense, just let it go. But pay attention. If anything pleasant that your mind is wanting comes up again while you're here, just explore. If it keeps going, if you notice pleasant, liking, you really feel the liking and it goes away—great, that's wise attention. Liking, pleasant, wanting is a perfectly fine object of attention when you notice it with wise attention. But when you're noticing wanting and it's getting bigger, bigger, bigger, bigger—then check it out.

Same with aversion, and it's just the other side—developed through unwise attention to the repugnant or unpleasant aspect of something. Sayadaw U Tejaniya always uses the example: if you're really angry at someone and you're just kind of churning, you keep looking at them—what happens to the anger? Every time you look at them, it kind of gets triggered again. Or if you have one little rough tooth and all the rest of your teeth are fine, but you just can't keep your tongue away from that rough tooth. And since you're a yogi here and helpless, your mind will then start really freaking out about what you're going to do about the dentist. Unwise attention to the repugnant—it feeds the ill will. You can just notice that happening. Just notice how that can feed it. It's really interesting.

Sayadaw U Pandita says it's like a cow chewing its cud—you know how it swallows and then pulls it up and chews it over again and again. So if you've had any kind of unpleasant experience with anyone here, at work, or anything like that, you notice how later the image comes up, the memory comes up. "Yeah, that really was... yeah, that really was bad. I was bad. They were bad. This is wrong. That is wrong." Like a cow chewing its cud of the unpleasant, over and over again. Notice that.

Then don't judge it. Just notice it. Oh, that's what's happening.

That's unpleasant. And then it becomes an object of wise attention.

So those are just a couple of examples. Oh, just one thing I want to say about sloth and torpor. First, one aspect of it—of course, there's just the tiredness. But one aspect of how sloth and torpor as a hindrance shows up that I found really interesting is this quality of the mind that kind of shrinks back. It shrinks back from experience. It shrinks back from effort. It's the feeling of, "Ah, that's just too hard." My mind goes, "Oh, I just can't do that." And then this picture of getting into bed comes up in my mind. "I'll just go lie down."

But if I focus on that content, it just gets stronger and stronger. "Oh, I can't walk another step." What I don't see in that moment is the sense of identifying with the mental state. But when I realize, "Oh, 'that's just too hard, I just can't do it'—that's a mental state. It's just 'too hard.' It feels like this." In that moment, it's flipped from unwise attention—which was that I was aware of the tiredness, the sloth and torpor, but really identified with it, not seeing that, thinking, "It really is too hard. I really am too tired"—to "Oh, that's just a mental state."

I spent one really difficult retreat when I was in Burma, and this kept coming. It was a really difficult retreat—a lot of painful dukkha stuff was coming up. I'd be walking back and forth on my little porch, and that would arise. This image would come up of me just kind of getting onto the bed. That would be the first image. And then the feeling would be, "Ah, no, there's no way I can keep doing this." And it felt so true. "There's no way. This is unbearable."

And after a few days: "Oh my God, this is just a mental state like any other mental state." As soon as I see that, no problem. It doesn't mean it went away, but we've shifted to wise attention instead of believing it, and that makes all the difference. Then it's a perfectly fine object of wise attention. It doesn't have to get better.

So that's all I want to say about abandoning by seeing.

The next one—the Buddha says, "Abandon by restraining." Here, a bhikkhu, and that's anyone practicing, reflecting wisely—it's always reflecting wisely in each of these, so it's really bringing discerning attention, discerning wisdom—abides with the eye faculty restrained. And then he goes through all the different faculties. "While āsavas and fever of defilement might arise in one who abode unrestrained, there are no taints or fever of defilement in one who abides restrained."

So what do we mean by restrained? Noticing how it's a way of being that actually does not lead onward for these tendencies to arise and to be acted on.

Well, this is pretty basic. I don't have to say a lot because we've talked about it. It follows on the last one. Restraint—it's not so much that you never look or hear or see, right? That's not what we mean by restraint at the sense doors. But rather, bringing in what Buddhadasa calls *sati-paññā*, mindfulness-wisdom, right at the point of sense contact.

Well, this is our whole practice. This is nothing new, right? So I don't have to say too much about it.

But back to the smell of the pizza. Really, when we're fully present with smell—contact, smell, pleasant—or there's the mind thought, "I really like this," liking, pleasant. That's restraint at the sense doors. And of course, it takes a certain willingness and a certain calmness of mind. That's really why we're here meditating.

So this, to begin with, is a meditative form, but it doesn't have to be. It can actually go on into our life where we really notice how, when we're not just present with what's happening—what Sharada talked about—that whole stream of papañca just takes off so quickly, so fast. And what's papañca driven by? All these thoughts, but exactly these latent tendencies. And it's not that it's bad.

Say there's no restraint at the sense doors. "Oh, that pizza smells so good. Let me go sit in the dining room and just smell it some more and smell it some more. Let me think about all the times I had pizza. Let me imagine what they're putting on it." That's not restraint at the sense doors. It's not that it's bad—it's just that you suffer. It's unnecessary, but we think it's taking us into some kind of pleasure. That's how warped we are. So we have to look and see, to keep it simple. But it doesn't mean we completely shut down.

I have a friend years ago who was sitting here, and he decided to really practice what he thought was restraint at the sense doors, so he walked around blindfolded for three days. Everywhere he went, feeling his way around. That's not really restraint. There's no wisdom going to come from that. Sure, it's like really strong concentration—no craving or aversion could arise at the eye door because he couldn't see anything. But that's not really paññā. That's not really wisdom. You take it off, and then you're back where you started from.

So it's not the sense that all sense experience is bad, but it's a sense of really using mindfulness, wisdom, wise attention to see what's leading into more craving, more sense of identification, more becoming in the mind. What leads to more calmness, more quietness, more space, more peace? That's really why we've set it up this way here.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a way of talking about it. He says that our sense doors are like windows. Our senses are our windows to the outside world, and sometimes the wind blows and disturbs everything within us. And he said sometimes we just leave our windows wide open. He asks, "Do you ever find yourself watching an awful TV program, but you just can't get up and turn it off? There's noise, there's gunfire, it's upsetting you, but somehow you don't get up and turn it off. Why do you torture yourself this way? Don't you want to close your windows? Are you afraid of the solitude, the emptiness, the loneliness you might find?"

You don't have to use those words, but how often have we found it? When it gets a little quiet, the mind goes on some kind of rampage. Let's just whip it up. Nothing here is happening. I'll think of the most unpleasant experience in the last ten years and chew the cud of that for a while. At least I know I'm alive.

So in talking about restraint, it's seeing—and this isn't just here, it's in our life—to really look and see. There might be some simplifying that comes, not out of a "should." That's part of what we do here, and I'll talk about that more later in terms of avoiding.

Thich Nhat Hanh again: "A beginning meditator may want to leave the city and go off to the countryside"—like here—"to help close those windows. So there he or she can become quiet with the forest, rediscover, restore herself without being carried away by the chaos of the 'outside world.' The silence, the quietness helps you connect with and remain in awareness."

But when awareness is well-rooted, when it can be maintained more steadily without faltering, then you can return to the city and remain there with less trouble. But before you reach this point, you do need to be careful, nourishing your awareness moment by moment, choosing the surroundings and the sustenance that assist you most.

That's really something we can learn here. And just really small things. What assists us most? Not to hate the world and shut off to it, but to really cultivate trust, this quality of awareness that isn't feeding wanting. Really, and that's what a lot of you have been seeing—really how disturbing getting caught in wanting and aversion and "it's all about me" really is.

In our daily life, with the windows open, with so much going on, we don't even really notice that. And you'll see soon enough, but even now, some little thing happens, and all your sense of self comes up, and all your reactions—I know this happens to everybody—and it's so jarring. If you think about it, you think, wow, this is happening a million times a day in our normal life. How do we get through it? How does anyone get through it? Well, we see how people get through it. Not so good.

So here, in working with restraint at the sense doors, it's just that *sati-paññā* right there at the sense door. Seeing, contact—instead of seeing, judging. Instead of, "Yes, they're doing this. Yes, they're doing it. Oh, I'm judging. That's so bad." Just: seeing, judging. Seeing, judging. It's unpleasant. Unpleasant. That's okay. Just this *sati-paññā* right at the sense doors. It doesn't matter what, but just not jumping on the train and going. And simplifying really can help.

Shankara, who was one of the founders of Advaita Vedanta, says, "We nourish craving and feed attachment by dwelling on the sense objects and seeking our temporary satisfaction in them, in the objective world." The attention keeps going out to the object, out to the object. Wise attention is just noticing the mind that's noticing.

Sogyal Rinpoche writes, "At present our mind faces away from itself." The mind bends towards whatever we experience—the five senses and thoughts of self, past and future—the attention's bending towards that. But one is bound not by perceiving, not by any of the experiences, but by the attachment, by the clinging.

So rather than getting so sucked into the five senses and the thoughts and the mind, just noticing when there's attachment or aversion getting stronger. And just the noticing of it and being there, right there—attachment's like this, aversion's like this—that's wise attention again. You don't have to get to big mind. You can just notice it right here, moment after moment after moment. And here in our daily life is all fertile ground for it. It doesn't have to be any kind of special experience. But it does help us here to keep it a little bit simple.

Shankara again: "When you cease dwelling upon sense objects, peace will arise in your heart." And we call this liberation while living. Just a moment of liberation while living.

So we don't need to be afraid of the sense objects and don't need to be afraid of the contact, but bringing *sati-paññā* right there. Contact's like this, pleasant's like this, wanting's like this. Don't be afraid of anything. Sayadaw U Pandita said that to me once in an interview when I was—I don't know what was going on—but he basically said,

"You don't have to be afraid of anything." And he meant in this term of mindfulness. Mindfulness, awareness doesn't have to be afraid of anything. That's *sati-paññā*. That's restraint at the sense doors.

The next one I like a lot is called, as Ajahn Sucitto describes it, paying attention to the attitude with which we use things. And this is something—he says taints can be abandoned by using.

Sayadaw U Pandita said that to me once in an interview. I don't recall exactly what was going on, but he basically said, "You don't have to be afraid of anything." And he meant this in terms of mindfulness. Mindfulness, awareness doesn't have to be afraid of anything. That's sati-paññā. That's restraint at the sense doors.

The next one I like a lot is called paying attention to the attitude with which we use things. The Buddha says that certain taints can be abandoned by using. "Here, a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, uses a robe only for protection from cold, for protection from heat, from flies. Reflecting wisely, he uses alms food, not for amusement or intoxication of vanity or for embellishment, but just for the endurance and continuance of his body, considering: Thus shall I terminate old feelings—feelings of hunger, feelings of need—without arousing new feelings of greed, of self-interest, and blameless shall I live in comfort and health."

So he's not saying you have to live in total suffering. You can live in comfort and health.

This has been a really interesting one for me—paying attention to the attitude with which we use things. Here on retreat and in our lives: how we use food, how we use clothing, how we use the resources of the environment. Not by comparing it to some model of should—I should keep the heat lower, I should use less gasoline. Not that at all. I mean, that's another question. But in terms of wise attention, we're simply noticing.

If the way I use food is that I go to the store thinking I just need this, but I better buy two more just in case I run out—or you go to the table here, and you're really not very hungry, and you take some food, and then you notice: What if I'm hungry later? I better take more. It doesn't matter if you take more. That's not the point. The point is what's being strengthened, what's being engendered in the attitude, in the mind, by the way you're relating to using food.

For example, times on retreat—and it's the same in our lives—I would think I might be hungry later after tea, so I'll take a banana at lunch and save it. Then I'd have all these rotten bananas back in my room and half-eaten rice cakes because, of course, I wasn't really hungry later. Noticing what was in the mind: it was tight, fearful, troublesome, cumbersome, and then embarrassed and ashamed.

When it came to the point where I could just say, "Oh, I might be hungry later—well, I'll worry about that then," it goes away. And if I'm hungry later, so what? I'm a little hungry, so what? I can feel some hunger, and the mind just notices hunger, and later it goes away. It's so simple, so much more free and easy than trying to guess and figure out every opportunity, save this and save that. When will I eat it? Now I have to walk all the way back and get it, and where can I eat it, and there's crumbs and there's mice and —never mind. I'll be hungry or I won't. I have no clue. It's not a problem. It's so free and easy, just noticing that.

It doesn't mean we don't take what we need. But just notice. It can work in reverse too. You're really hungry, but you look around and think, well, everyone else is eating so little, so I better not. So you take just a little bit, but you're actually filled with either self-loathing or hunger or fear. It looks like you're doing a very good yogi thing of not eating much, but you're actually torturing yourself. You're feeding ill will. You're feeding wanting. Not helpful.

With this attitude of abandoning these tendencies of mind, it's really about noticing how you use things. How you use clothes. I remember one retreat where I had one particular dress I was wearing. Deep in the retreat, I started to notice that whenever I put that dress on, I would want to catch a glimpse of it in the mirror every time I passed—for some reason, my room at this place had a mirror—because I liked that dress. After a while, it got really painful. It's much nicer not to even think about it. When I think about when I was a nun, you just had two or three exact same sets of clothes. You wear one, wash one, one's drying. It's so simple and easy. You're just using clothing for what it's meant for. This isn't about a should. It's about abandoning these latent underlying tendencies.

How we use things in our life, how we use things in terms of the earth and resources —it really moves from being burdensome to a kind of freedom, a simplicity, a lack of fear, less greed, less wanting. But this isn't something imposed from outside. It's from really looking. Look here at your relationship in each moment to how you're using blankets, food, anything—not as a judgment, but asking what feeds purity of mind, what feeds suffering, craving, desire. It's not always what we think. We just have to get interested in that way.

The next one, which is interesting, is patience. A lot of times when we talk about being patient with difficulty, people think we're only saying that because there's nothing else to do—that it's not really good practice.

But he's saying here that taints can be abandoned by patience, by enduring patience. "A bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with flies and mosquitoes, burning and creeping things. He endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life." So pretty much any bodily feelings you've had come under those, to some extent.

This sense of patience—it's not gritting your teeth and just shutting down until things get better. That's not patience. That's not wise attention. It's really being present. Patience is an aspect of mettā, of acceptance, but it's really cultivating non-clinging. It's cultivating the heart and mind of non-clinging.

The story I always tell when I talk about patience, whether internal or external, is where the Buddha talks to his son, telling him in terms of equanimity: develop a mind that is like the earth. Whatever is thrown on it, or people spit on it, the earth doesn't react. It accepts everything. I know we hear that as being a doormat, and the next one we'll talk about that, which is avoiding. But in terms of patience, meeting that which is not going to harm us or kill us, meeting that which arises in our practice without feeding reactivity, wanting, ill will—this actually begins to destroy, to abandon these underlying tendencies to aversion. And I can really speak from personal experience that it can happen, they can lessen. It's really true.

When I first went to be a nun in Thailand for about a year, I hadn't spent too much time in Asia. The first two months were really just one moment of aversion after another, having to adapt to the conditions and to being in robes—all the things he said, the heat and the insects and the food. I was so filled with aversion about so many things. I remember when the hot season started, I was in Bangkok, and I'd see the sun coming up in the morning and think, "Oh, another day of sun." It was so hot in those tin-roofed kuṭis in my long, long sleeves. My mind was so reactive.

It took a couple of months until I really started to recognize, "Oh, everything that happens, aversion comes up. There might be something going on." But the sense of patience—it doesn't just happen like that. I was committed, so I kept staying there. I kept looking at my mind. The circumstances were not ones I could leave, but I'd chosen to be there. So the circumstances were just what they were: bugs and heat and forest.

I don't know if you realize that rainforests are incredibly loud. Talk about silence! Mangoes dropping on the tin roof are like little bombs going off. You'd want to meditate—bang, bang, bang all day. It's really intense. And people love to come up and snap pictures in your face when you're the farang, the farang mae chi. You just turn around and keep walking without feeding the aversion.

But being through that, after a year when I went to leave, I was so happy in the same circumstances. The only difference was that the reactions in my mind really were not being triggered. So this latent tendency means when the situation's there for aversion, it comes up. But now the situation's there and it doesn't come up. And it's not just because I was incredibly concentrated.

I know now when I go to Asia—I've been going every year—and really, I knock on wood because I know it's not going to stay that way. But I used to have to go through an aversive time of adapting to things. And the last few years, it just hasn't happened much.

I don't mean aversion never comes, but stuff that used to trigger it just doesn't happen anymore. I remember being really sick once when I was teaching up in Chazwa in Burma, thinking, "I'm really sick and it just doesn't matter." It just didn't matter. The mind was happy. So I can really see from comparing similar situations that when the circumstances are there but the latent tendency doesn't come up, it's not there in that moment. This is from patience, really. It's a very powerful aspect of wise attention.

Okay, this always happens—I'm going to have to go faster through the last two.

Taints abandoned by avoiding. This, I think, is really important for us to recognize. The Buddha talks about avoiding dangerous things as a way of abandoning these taints—not just as a way of saving your life, but as a way of freeing our hearts and minds.

So it takes discerning wisdom, and he's just so practical. I mean, he talks about things like avoiding a savage elephant, something that's charging you, or falling into a pit. He's like, "Don't be stupid," right? But he's not just saying that in terms of normal common sense that anyone would have. He's saying this can help you wake up.

Now, avoiding doesn't mean we avoid what we don't like—that's just feeding wanting and ill will. But it is practical. He's not saying that, but some people think, "I ought to be able to be totally, perfectly mindful and non-reactive no matter what's going on internally or externally." Right? You're having the most extreme terror, the most extreme rage. You're aware of it, but it's just getting stronger and stronger and stronger. The mindful-

ness isn't as strong. The more you try to be with it, the more you're getting lost. And then the mind says, "No, if I was a good yogi, I could just be mindful of this no matter what happens."

No. Avoiding means to skillfully redirect the mind. Pull out of that intense thing that's going on in the mind, because by paying attention to it, you're just feeding the kilesa. So it's not a failure. It's actually advice from the Buddha to direct your attention elsewhere in order to reconnect, to reestablish this balance of wise attention—awareness that's not colored with kilesa.

One or two of you here could relate to that, right? Just notice what you think when you tell yourself, "I should be able to take this no matter what." Now, that's very different from, "Oh, I don't really like this sound in here. I think I need to go somewhere else so I can have quiet to really deepen my practice." Remember, don't look externally—look internally. When you do that, what's being fed? If it's ill will or wanting, then it's not helpful. The avoidance isn't helpful when the avoidance is feeding wanting or ill will. But staying there and being mindful by gum no matter what is not skillful, is not wise attention—not if that's feeding the fear, the ill will, the terror. So this is really important.

I can't read you this passage because I'm running out of time, but there's a sutta where the Buddha is talking to the nuns and saying, "When you're doing the four foundations—really being present with the body, with the feeling tone, vedana, with the citta, with the mind, with the formations—and the mind gets sluggish or distracted outwardly, or a fever arises in the mind based on the attention to the body, based on the attention to the feelings..." What does he say? He says, "Then you withdraw the mind from that experience and redirect it to something inspiring."

Yes, the Buddha is saying this. Redirect it to something inspiring, or at least something neutral—but get out of there. Direct it to something neutral until it rebalances itself, until it's not so scattered, until the fever's down, and then you come back again to what you were paying attention to. This is avoiding in order to actually abandon these unwholesome underlying tendencies.

And the last one, very tricky, is removing.

Removing means, the Buddha says, that a practitioner reflecting wisely does not endure an arisen thought filled with sensual lust, ill will, or cruelty. He abandons it, removes it. He doesn't endure evil, unprofitable states of mind or experiences. He abandons them.

Now, this is tricky because if you're abandoning it with aversion, that's feeding ill will. So this removal really takes a balance of pañña—discernment—checking the attitude in the mind, and also a kind of resolution that comes from wisdom, a clear seeing. It's like, "No, I don't need to go there."

Say again you have a Vipassana romance or Vipassana vendetta and it keeps coming up. "They're so wonderful. They're so horrible. They did this." It starts. You see it. You feel the wanting. You feel the aversion. And after a while, it's enough already. But not with ill will. Don't have to go there. Don't have to go there. This is really possible when we're seeing clearly.

Years ago, I developed a chronic autoimmune condition. When it first began, I had really strong symptoms. No one knew what it was, it was hard for me to walk, and I had no idea where it was going to go. Thoughts would start coming up in my mind: "I'll never be able to take a walk. I'll never be able to do this." And a lot of fear would come with it. As you know, just from having a twitch in your knee, you understand where that can go from there.

So that was really starting. And I was so grateful for the wisdom and the mindfulness. After a day of that—and the condition went on for a long time before it balanced out—I saw my mind start to do that. And I could really say, "No, I don't need to do that. I have no idea what's going to happen, and that way only goes to suffering."

And that was so clear. It was so clear that to go into those thoughts was completely unhelpful and suffering-inducing that every time they'd start, the suffering was so evident, I could just go, "No, I don't need to do that," and I wouldn't go there.

That's really what we mean by removal—not hating, not getting out the pickaxe, but just with this clear seeing: "No, I don't have to go there." That's really powerful. And again, it's not feeding these underlying tendencies.

The last way I don't have to elaborate on, which is developing the seven factors of awakening, which Sally spoke about the other night. That's what we're doing here.

So I thank you for your patient attention.

With a liberated mind, I say, Sariputta, one is a great person. Without a liberated mind and heart, I say, one is not a great person.

And how does one have a liberated mind? Here, Sariputta, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. As he dwells contemplating the body in the body, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the taints.

Similarly for contemplating feelings in feelings, mind in mind, phenomena in phenomena. It is in such a way, Sariputta, that one has a liberated mind.

CHAPTER 36

Four Noble Truths

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common challenge on retreat: confusion about which meditation technique is "right" or "best." She redirects practitioners to the fundamental context underlying all Buddhist practice—the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha identified as his sole teaching: dukkha and its cessation.*
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> *Wilson offers a nuanced exploration of dukkha, moving beyond the limited translation of "suffering" to its fuller meaning of unreliability, friction, and dis-ease. Drawing on Pāli etymology and Anālayo's scholarship on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, she explains how dukkha encompasses not just unpleasant experience but all experience—including pleasant states—due to their impermanent nature. She emphasizes that this first truth is "to be understood," not fought against or denied. The second truth reveals that our anguish arises from craving (taṇhā), aversion, and the endless habit of "me-ing" and "my-ing" every experience.*
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> *The heart of the talk illuminates the third noble truth: liberation through non-clinging. Wilson shares the Buddha's teaching that the mind is inherently luminous and "free from the attachments that visit it." Rather than creating special states, practice involves recognizing awareness itself—turning attention from entrancement with objects and reactions to the knowing quality that is always present. Any experience, pleasant or painful, can become "the rattle" that awakens us to this ever-available awareness. This teaching offers profound encouragement: freedom is accessible in this very moment, regardless of how our practice appears to be going.*

Listening to the questions this morning and our instructions and in the interviews over the days, I hear a lot of questions, a lot of sense that we've been giving different instructions, different techniques that various of you are doing—all of which is fine. And there's a lot of wondering or doubt about how to do it right, or which technique is best, or you hear instructions for a technique you're not doing and then you want to know how to do your technique but with those instructions. It can get a little confusing, but it's all good.

Tonight I just want to remind us all—nothing new, but remind us all—of the larger context, the reason for any or all of our methods and techniques of practice, why the Buddha taught and why we're doing it. Just to remind us of the bigger picture.

Remembering the Buddha, one of his famous statements is: "I teach one thing and one thing only—dukkha and the end of dukkha." Or as it's sometimes translated: suffering and the end of suffering. Or other descriptions of it: liberation of mind, liberation of heart through non-clinging, recognition of natural great peace, learning to see through our limiting and limited views and ideas about ourselves, about our world, about what is possible, about what happiness and suffering actually are.

This is vast. It's also accessible immediately in this moment, here and now. It's the context, hopefully the ground, the motivation which in some form is—hopefully, I'm saying, because I don't know for you—inspiring all of our practices, all of the techniques and methods, all of our journeys along our individual paths.

To get in touch for yourself, in whatever language, in whatever form works for you, with your sincere motivation and the depth and vastness of it, the breadth of it, is really helpful and essential at times. Especially when we find ourselves getting caught up in niggling thoughts about how it's not going right, or how do I do this, or is this the right way? We get so focused on what we're doing that it's helpful to just reconnect for yourself with the depth, the profundity, or the simplicity—whatever word you want to use—of your motivation. Touch it. At the beginning of a sitting, the beginning of a day, the beginning of a walking—our sincere motivation, the essential energy that keeps us going here, that helps us put one foot in front of the other, that helps us come back and be here for this next moment of greed, for this next breath, for this next unpleasant sound, whatever it is, for this next moment of bliss.

This is essential. It supports our energy and our steadiness—really getting in touch with your motivation over and over, honoring it.

And yet motivation, or wise attitude you could say, is not enough to really start us and keep us going on our path. It needs to be joined with, supported by, wise discernment, wisdom, wise understanding. Or you could even say in a very simple way: just starting with the right information.

As both Sally and Howie talked about in their talks, there's this question of what happiness is. Actually, it's said that part of what motivated the Buddha to start teaching was seeing with his all-seeing mind the fact that most people have wrong information about what happiness is. You could get a sense of that from Sally and Howie's talks—that we all want to be happy, but with our limited understanding, with wrong information actually about what constitutes true ease, peace, freedom, happiness. Happiness is a tricky word. Without that right information about what's possible, about what's really so, just how things are—without that right information, we end up looking for happiness in the wrong places. We end up floating in that deck chair over L.A., one way or another.

Such a great story, because I could really see myself doing that—maybe not that particular thing, but some version of it. That's a metaphor for what we do without the right information. We keep on feeding confusion.

As the Buddha said, his teaching, the path of awakening, runs against the stream of culture. I won't say modern culture—he said it back then. It runs against the stream of culture as to what happiness is, what suffering is, what peace is possible. And not just external culture; it runs against the stream of the habits of our heart and mind—as if we're separate from our culture, but I don't think so. What is our culture but us? The habits of our mind are also, when we just let them run without paying attention, against the stream of the Buddha's teachings.

So we really need to begin and keep referring to what you'd call right information. What did the Buddha say we need to know to begin our path, to stay on our path, to support our awakening?

This really basic context for all of our particular forms of practice or methods, what we need to know, the right information that leads our motivation into discerning awareness, into wise view, into the freedom that comes from wisdom—is what he called the Four Noble Truths. I want to speak a little bit about each of them.

The first truth, which in Pali is dukkha. I want to talk a little about that word and what this truth is. The first truth of dukkha is often translated into English as suffering. I really don't find that broad enough or helpful. I'm pointing this out so that we can see in our own hearts and minds the ideas and connotations that come up when you hear the word suffering. If you're used to translating dukkha as suffering, it'll be the same.

Dukkha—first of all, this truth of dukkha, as the Buddha said, is to be understood. It's really like a broad description of the human condition. That's just what it is. And he doesn't say this truth of dukkha is to be changed, gotten rid of, hated, or overcome. It's to be understood. It's basically: "Hey, folks, this is the way it is. Learn to be with it, and you'll be free."

Keep fighting it, and we're floating over L.A. again.

Dukkha—as perhaps many of you have read in Analayo's book on the Satipatthana Sutta. He seems to be a really interesting translator of Pali as well. He describes two possible definitions of the word dukkha based on different derivations. One of them—and I'm not going to go too deeply into etymology—would have *du* meaning difficulty and *kha* meaning something like the hole that an axle goes through in an ox cart. So ba-

sically the hole and the axle rod don't fit properly. Dukkha is like disharmony, friction, that kind of rub. It's just always kind of rubbing, not going smoothly. That's one derivation.

The other is standing with difficulty, standing uneasily, uncomfortably. So again, dukkha would mean standing badly, so to speak. It's a kind of uneasiness, a dis-ease, being uncomfortable. That's very different from horrible dukkha suffering.

Let me share what the Buddha gave as what comes under dukkha: unreliability, insecurity, that kind of rub. First is *dukkha dukkha*—that there's basic unpleasant experience. And that's usually what we think of as dukkha. I find myself using dukkha as a shorthand for unpleasant, for suffering, actual suffering. Like I step on a thorn, my foot really hurts, and I'll say, "Oh, dukkha." We always use that as a shorthand in this meditation scene. And it's really not helpful because it keeps reinforcing a limited understanding of what dukkha means. So if something's really going badly—ah, dukkha.

That's the first definition: basic unpleasant experience. Being born is pain. Sickness, old age, disease, death, being separated from what we love, being put together with what we don't love. Again, the basic human condition. But all of those we can really relate to—yes, that's the friction, that's not going well, that's standing badly, that's suffering. We wouldn't have a problem calling that suffering. It's part of life.

The second aspect is that everything is in constant change. But this includes all pleasant experience as well as all neutral experience. So the first noble truth is not just about things we don't like. It's that all experience, all the six sense doors, all that we experience arises due to conditions. The conditions change, and it goes away. But within that, there's plenty of really pleasant and lovely experience. It's also dukkha.

Remember Howie last night talking about sukha dukkha? That's what he means. But we mostly don't think of it that way. In our shorthand, which is inaccurate, when something really nice is happening and everything is going well, we don't say, "Oh, that's dukkha." We say, "Oh, no, finally! Finally the universe came together, the stars are in alignment," or "I finally got it, I'm a good meditator, I finally overcame, now the breath is right, now it's how it's supposed to be." Now *that's* dukkha. Because it isn't going to stay like that very long.

So it's to be understood—the change, the unreliability. All feelings, the Buddha said. There's one sutta where he said all feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—is dukkha. It's all unreliable. It's all subject to change. It's all insecure. And that's not saying it's bad. It's just a broad statement of the human condition.

In fact, something to really be aware of: if we find, just in paying attention to our own experience and the way we relate, that when we come in contact with some aspect of this first noble truth of dukkha—the unpleasant, the pleasant, the neutral, the change—do we automatically associate it with some form of aversion? With some form of unpleasantness? Can we even contemplate the first noble truth in a really open, accepting, "oh, that's just how it is" wise way? How easy is it for our mind to slip into the habit of some kind of aversion to it?

I don't know—that's just a reflection, a contemplation to tune into for yourself, because that's a misunderstanding. We can have, and we often do have, reactions ranging from mild aversion to deep despair, to fear, to resistance, to outright, flat, total denial of many aspects of dukkha. And it's a really very profound and subtle truth. It just really touches everything.

I find in all the years of practice, first hearing about the truth of dukkha was actually really liberating. It cheered me up. It was like, "Oh, that's why."

Like when Sally was talking about going on vacation and it's supposed to be so wonderful. And we just ignore all the stuff that isn't. We come back and think, "Oh, that was great. That was wonderful." Like it's supposed to be. We're almost talking ourselves into it. And somewhere in the back, I kind of think, "You know, I'm acting out." This is when I was quite young, but I couldn't have put the words to it. It was as if I was trying to conform to what I thought everybody else was happy about. But really, internally, my experience wasn't "everything's so wonderful, everything's so happy."

I remember when I was younger, when I really kind of got this, I went with a friend—when I was working at IMS—we went to have a workout and a sauna. It was in the middle of winter. So we had to get in the car, really snowy, icy, freezing, drive for half an hour to the health club. Then we go in and we had to separate—he was a man—and it was really cold in that locker room. My body, I hate the cold, so it was really uncomfortable. Went swimming, which was freezing. I was tensed up and I don't like exercise anyway. Got out of that, got into the sauna, thank God I could relax for a few minutes. Then you start to sweat, then it gets all wet and you're sweaty and hot and smelly, and then you get a headache. So you get out and get in a cold shower. I hate cold showers, so I'm in the cold shower, I hate that. But then I can get back in the sauna, it's nice again for five minutes, then stinky, sweaty, headache—I gotta get out, take another shower, get dressed and leave. We both got together like, "Wow, that was so good." We get back in the car and go. That's the story I was telling myself.

That's really more the axle not fitting in the hole. It's always grinding. What's the problem? Things are supposed to be nice. So hearing about dukkha, it was a relief on some level.

But of course, we have to keep discovering over and over that the habit of aversion and just flat-out denial really can be so strong. I read this in a newspaper a few years ago, an article from a small town in Spain:

The mayor of this southern city has banned death. He feels the local cemetery is too crowded for a soul to get decent rest. So the 4,000 residents of this village in Granada province have to remain alive while municipal officials shop for land to house a new graveyard. The mayor issued an edict last week ordering people, quote, "to take utmost care of their health so they do not die until town hall takes the necessary steps to acquire land suitable for our deceased to rest in glory."

I'd call that denial of the basic facts of life and that they're out of our control.

I could go on and on. I'm just giving little highlights about dukkha. It is to be understood. And we understand it, as Ajahn Chah says, just by meeting it right where it arises. Not by this denial in my mind—like me going to the health club. It's unpleasant and there's just this kind of denial. You see it and just kind of gloss over it. You know it's there, but you don't really open into it. You don't really let it in. And then it didn't really happen. You kind of tough it out. It's gone. Okay, now it's the good part.

Ajahn Chah says, wherever it hurts, wherever there's friction, right there we must investigate. Take that thorn out of your foot. Just pull it out.

Wherever your mind gets stuck, you notice it. And as you look into it, you will understand it. You'll see it. You'll experience it as it is. Wherever suffering arises, look into it. Look right into the present moment. Look at your own mind and body. When suffering arises, not so much asking, but just looking—why is there suffering? Look right now. When happiness arises, look at what is the cause of that happiness. Look right there. Wherever these things arise, be aware. Both happiness and suffering arise from clinging.

I read that on purpose because often the happiness, the sukha dukkha—clinging is what causes the suffering of it. That's the second noble truth. The cause of our suffering, the cause of our anguish, the cause of our difficulty is not just the facts of life. It's often given as tanha, the Pali word for craving, intense thirst, wanting.

I'm going to broaden it here, saying that in terms of our practice, in terms of exploring our minds and the dis-ease and unreliability and confusion in the moment, the real cause of our anguish is not only the craving, the holding on to the pleasant, but also the reactions of aversion, the pushing away of the unpleasant. And there's a third reaction of mind—relating to any sense experience, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mental experience, relating to any experience as me, as mine, as all about me. Greed, hatred, delusion. That in the mind, in any particular moment, is the cause of our anguish: the clinging, the aversion, the meaning.

So when Ajahn Chah says, look right there when happiness arises, he's talking about worldly happiness in that way. Clinging is the cause of the suffering around it. Because yes, there's plenty of pleasant experience, of happy experience—that's sukha dukkha. And we don't want to hate it. That's just aversion. Just as we don't want to hold away and gloss over the difficult, the unpleasant, the times that it's rough and not working, we also and equally don't want to say, well, it's going well now, and then do one of two things.

We either don't pay attention anymore—it's going well, it's equanimous, I've got it, I stop in some way, I coast. That's the habit in my mind. Okay, it's fine. And then real suffering, real suffering, wakes me up again. I don't want to hear that the pleasant, the equanimous, when everything's going well, is sukha dukkha. Did you want to hear that? You want to hear that when things are going well and your breath is nice and it's all even, that that's also dukkha? Is that what you came here for? Probably not. And so the habit of my mind is to stop really looking then sometimes.

But another habit that happens with many people, especially on retreat, is to really notice the difficult, what you're doing wrong, the suffering, and actually almost not stop looking with the pleasant, but discount the wholesome, the beautiful. So a moment of real peace arises in your mind and you think, well, that was just a one-off. Or you're really struggling with something and suddenly there's a real insight into it, and you think, well, that was nice, but now that insight's gone and I'm back in dukkha. That doesn't count. Or you're having a good time, many people when it's going kind of calm and it seems to be going well and you're really interested—you come into interviews and there's that little voice in the background: but I'm not really learning, I'm not really getting to the nub of things, I'm not really doing it. It should be suffering. It should be hard. There's a way we don't trust.

Both of those habits miss the mark. And really, Ajahn Chah says, meet it right where it is. Look. Look at the suffering. Look at the happiness. Really meet it as it is with awareness that's filled with interest, not with assumption, not with meaning. Just see right there. That's how we come to understand dukkha.

But anyway, back to the cause of our anguish, our suffering, which is to be abandoned, the Buddha says—this is really exploring these habits of wanting, of clinging, of pushing away, and of me-ing, my-ing, making everything all about me. And each of those is a talk in itself, right? So I'm just going to briefly mention them.

Because as I said, there is worldly happiness. And looking at it and seeing the insecurity in it is freeing. That's not about getting depressed. That's about freeing us to really appreciate and be more fully present in the worldly happiness without looking to it to give us something it can never give.

Ajahn Chah again: "Worldly accomplishments, happiness on whatever level, still leave you in the realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be comes about in dependence on external things. That's not the happiness of freedom—the happiness that does not depend on anything external."

So what is it we depend on? We depend on possessions. We depend on pleasure, on reputation, on praise, on wealth. We lean on all these things, like leaning on a rotting old tree trunk. And then as we lean on it for too long, it breaks and falls, and we fall with it. Such is worldly happiness. I love that image—just sitting here so happy, leaning on the trunk, and just clunk. And it's like that when it changes.

But remember, I said dukkha doesn't mean aversion or dislike of it. So when we hear this, notice if your mind goes, "Well, there's no point in leaning on any of these things, so forget them all. They're no good." Does it go to a kind of judgment or negativity? Hopefully it doesn't, but if it does, just notice that, because that's just aversion, that's just rejection.

Really understanding the truth of dukkha is simply, "Oh, this is how it is." This wonderful praise, this accomplishment, this lovely, concentrated, peaceful, equanimous meditation is just what it is. Just so much. If I don't lean on it to be anything more, we really fully open into it, completely. No part left out, no resistance, no me too related to, no separation. Very different from, "Oh, this is nice, but it's going to pass, so never mind. Forget it."

So opening into the truth of dukkha is actually very freeing.

What's wrong with clinging? What's wrong with aversion? We're not saying they're bad. They obstruct peace. They obstruct recognizing the possibility in this moment of peace of mind and heart, of ease, of clear seeing. Same with me-ing and my-ing. With clinging, it's like, "I want this, I want that." It just takes you, takes you, takes you. It pulls you around by the nose.

My brother has a hound dog. It's a lovely dog, a really nice dog, but he's bred for hunting, this breed. And this dog is literally led by the nose. It's painful to watch him. He comes in the house and he just sniffs any new person, any new smell, anything that comes in the house that's in my luggage that has anything to do with food or dirty clothes or anything that's had any smell of a human or a living being—he cannot stay away from it. They have to lock all the garbage up, all the doors closed. The dog just cannot stay away from it. He's literally led by his nose to the exclusion of anything else that's going on.

And it looks like real suffering. It really feels to me like the essence of craving—this and this. I mean, he's getting nothing from any of it, but just can't stop. It's painful to watch until it drives you crazy. And it's like that with us.

We were taking a walk, walking uphill, and I noticed I get tired walking uphill. Well, one does, and I do. So I was just walking uphill, and my energy was kind of going. Then I noticed a thought came into my mind: "Oh, soon we'll be at a flat point." And craving came up.

I was just watching the mind, watching the craving that arose. And I saw how we can confuse craving for happiness. Because in that moment of craving, it was kind of energizing. "Yeah, I'll get to the flat point!" It almost felt good—better than being tired. And I thought, "That's really interesting. That's how we get led by it."

If I hadn't been watching closely, there was nothing wrong. I just kept walking uphill. It didn't change anything. That craving came and went. I didn't get to the flat point any quicker. And when I got there, it lasted a second. Then it wasn't flat anymore, and we had to go up again. Big deal.

But I saw how the craving itself brought a kind of energy that, if I wasn't really aware, if I wasn't noticing, knowing the craving as it arose, I would have mistaken for a kind of pleasure. The Buddha says in the suttas, when he talks about *taṇhā* as the cause of suffering, he says it is "craving which comes together with delight." So often we mistake the craving for happiness. And that keeps us spinning in it.

Don't believe me. Just explore and see. As I say, there are whole talks about this.

Aversion—the resistance, the not liking what's happening, wanting it to be different, pushing it away. We shrink back. We disconnect. And again, our world, our view, our sense of things becomes really limited.

Do you notice how with that unpleasant experience, it's like you're married to it? It's unpleasant and we're resistant to it, but somehow that resistance keeps us just there with it, like it fills up the whole world. There's one unpleasant feeling in your body. There are many neutral and pleasant feelings in your body too, but what is your attention constantly drawn to? You have many, many thoughts, but that one thought about "My practice was so much better last year, what am I doing wrong?"—that thought gets grabbed hold of and it fills up the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, if you have one rough tooth—a little hole in your tooth and all your other teeth are fine—can you keep your tongue away from that little rough tooth? You just worry it to death. The mind, in resistance to what it doesn't like, gets really caught in it. And again, it limits completely. It's a maker of measurement, a maker of limitation.

Both of these, of course, are all about who? Me, me, me. It all starts from me. It all ends with me. It all goes around me. Any of the six sense experiences, in the moment of knowing them, can almost immediately be brought back to me when that's what's coloring the attention.

Have you noticed that? You're sitting here very quietly and someone goes out and closes the door. It's got nothing really to do with you. But if you notice that—how likely is it that the mind goes: "What are they doing? And how does it affect me?"

Or, "Oh, they're leaving, but I'm sitting here, so calm and still. I didn't leave, you know?" Someone's walking slow, and you think, "Oh, I should be, or I shouldn't be, or they're doing that, and I'm doing the new way—I'm walking fast." Or someone asks about concentration, and you immediately have to compare yourself. Good, bad, neutral—it doesn't matter.

But how much more freeing is it when there's just a sight, a sound, somebody asks a question, and it's just what it is? Space. The mind makes nothing around it. Very freeing.

Notice how quickly, though, the reference is back to me. And notice how entranced we are by all of these reactions. This is really the place that our practice is hopefully helping us learn to see through. Because we're so entranced by our reactions of liking and disliking and assessment and describing—what does it mean about me, my prac-

tice, my life, my past, my future, all of that. We're so entranced by the object of the experience and our reaction to it that that's what causes and keeps us spinning in suffering and confusion.

This is the information the Buddha is trying to give us—to see through, to recognize that this is not really the essence of what's happening, and this is not the way to real peace. Intellectually, probably we all know this, or we wouldn't be here. And the intellectual knowing does us some good. It does. Hopefully, at least it gets us to look. At least it gets us to say, "Something isn't working. Let me try."

But the habits are so strong. I mean, they're just so ingrained. This is why the Buddha talked about our practice going against the stream—because they just feel right. Doesn't it feel right when things are pleasant and things are happening the way you want them to happen? Doesn't it just feel so right that that's how it's supposed to be, that that's good? It just feels like that.

And it just creeps in that it's about me—that I'm practicing, I'm putting out effort, I'm getting concentrated, or I'm not concentrated, or I, I, I. Of course it's all about me. When I'm sitting here, who's the center of everything? Me. Who's thinking these thoughts? Me. Who's meditating? Me. It's just so familiar that we don't even recognize it's happening half the time, never mind looking to see through it.

Bankei said, "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things, with experience, and then your primary being reveals itself in its true form." What does he mean—our primary being reveals itself in its true form? What's he pointing to?

What I want to say is: the Third Noble Truth. That there's a liberation, an ending of suffering, of confusion, an ending of our anguish—namely, liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. This is not talking about a specific constructed state that we work hard enough to manage to create, get there, and stay. It's not an external state, not an internal state.

But moment to moment—there's only this moment—moment to moment, this can be touched, kind of tasted. Given an intimation of the freedom, the spaciousness, the happiness—it's a tricky word to use—whatever: peace, liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging. Not through the state, but in a moment, when the consciousness, the awareness, the mind-heart—same word—is in that moment free from being colored by desire, greed, hatred, aversion, fear, me, me, me.

When these things aren't coloring and we're not lost in them, sunk into them, when we're not identifying with those, when in that moment the awareness, the consciousness, the mind is released from clinging, from aversion, from entrancement really—our

entrancement with our reactions and our self-storying. They can even still be there, but the entrancement is released, the attachment is released. That's when there's a possibility to recognize the purity of our true nature, our primary being.

This famous, very well-known teaching from the Buddha: "Luminous is this mind"—remember, the word for mind is the same as the word for heart—"Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This, unlearned people do not really understand, and so do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This, the noble follower of the way really does understand, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

You get a sense of how both are true, depending on the orientation, the energy, the interest in a moment.

When we don't understand the attachments that visit the mind in any particular moment, awareness, consciousness—if we're not dead, you know, in a coma—is always happening. Always. There's a moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. It's happening every moment. And in that moment of consciousness, there's awareness knowing that it's happening. Sometimes we don't know, there's not conscious awareness. Sometimes there is.

That awareness comes together with various mental qualities, such as the big three we've been talking about: greed, hatred, aversion, or fear, delusion, confusion, me, me, me. So when the Buddha talks about "colored by the attachments that visit it," it means in that moment of awareness, when one of those qualities is in the mind, if we don't understand that actually the mind, the heart, is luminous, unstained, free of those attachments—when we understand that it's free from those attachments, then there's really cultivation. When we don't understand it, that's when we're just sunk in our reactions, thinking that's all it is, that's all life is about. Pleasant, get more pleasant. Unpleasant, get away from it. Arrange, manipulate so that you can get as much pleasant as possible before you die. And don't think too much about you're going to die because that's not a happy thought.

We don't know any other way. That is such a deep, poignant sadness. That's what motivated the Buddha to teach. When that's all there is, then there's no cultivation of the mind.

But what all of our practices come out of, and what I know you all know—we've all touched it many times—is in that moment when there's the bright, luminous, pure quality of just awareness. And it isn't colored by wanting, by aversion, by confusion or

delusion. It's just awareness and whatever object is arising. And it doesn't matter what the object is. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, mental activity, pleasant mental activity like bliss, really unpleasant mental activity like "I'm the stupidest jerk who ever lived." It doesn't matter. There's the awareness. Ah, awareness and object.

And what happens in the mental cultivation is that we change the direction of our interest, the direction of recognition. We change, in a way, foreground and background. We change what's important. So our focus becomes less and less on manipulating all the experience or assessing it in terms of what it means about me or trying to have different experience. And I'm not just talking about meditation—our whole life. Less and less is the energy going into the experience, and less and less is the focus on our reaction to experience. And more and more, the interest, the focus, the love really, the sense of fulfillment is on just recognizing awareness itself. Awareness of anything. We go into the anything, then turn around and just be interested in the knowing of the anything.

And that's really what we're doing. Just the quality of simplicity of wakefulness. Awake, alert, kind of intelligent. Just what it is. It's so simple.

As I said, we've all had many moments like that. Sometimes they're just kind of neutral moments. It might feel peaceful. It's just a kind of moment when you're... It's funny, we talk about mindfulness as remembering yourself, but these moments are sort of like a moment where you forget yourself. I'm not talking about some big, you know, blowing apart, anattā, unity, no sense of self experience. I'm just talking about a simple moment where you're not relating every damn thing that happens back to me. God, it's so exhausting. You're just walking down the hill. And there's seeing and hearing. You can be really, really focused or not. It's not about being really concentrated. It's not about being really blissed out and incredibly precise. It doesn't matter.

That's more about the object. But just those moments of simple—whatever you want to call it—being, presence, wakefulness. And as I say, it might be with just walking. It might be with seeing or drinking a cup of tea. It can be with feeling pain. It can be with feeling sadness. It can be with feeling fear. It can be with a thought. It can be with nothing special, because the object doesn't matter.

Awareness doesn't care. And it cares, you know, about everything and nothing, right? It doesn't care in the sense that some objects make awareness better and some things make it worse. That's what the Buddha is saying. Awareness, the mind, is free from the attachments that visit it, or unstained by the attachments that visit it.

So you've been sitting all day really lost in wanting, wanting, wanting, and then suddenly there's a moment of just, "Oh, wanting is like this." Now, in that moment, it's like a Tai Chi move, right? Wanting—but instead of being so engrossed in it, in our ideas and its media—"Oh, it's like this." That's the awareness. The shift from absorption into the object and our reactions to "Oh, wanting's like this."

Now, is that awareness somehow impaired because so many preceding moments we were lost in wanting? Did that somehow stain or sully or take something away from this moment when the awareness emerged? No. How can it? It can't. I mean, explore for yourself, but awareness isn't a thing. It's always accessible, and no experience or object makes it better or worse. It's not so much a thing of thought, but play with it.

I've been finding this is so freeing. It takes away so much sense of, you know, "My practice, my life, my mind—whatever—is in the pits. I can't do it. I'm getting nowhere. I've got so far to go to be able to get anywhere." It's like, "I need another three weeks just to have a moment of pure awareness"—instead of "Oh, self-judgment's like this." That's it right there.

And then we go, "Oh no, I've got to hold on to it. No, no, no, it's going." Oh, wanting's like this. "Oh my God, I get it!"—and it goes—"and it's so hard." Oh, complaining's like this. And it's like, "Oh, okay. Nothing is a problem." I mean, it's a problem, but being a problem isn't a problem. You know what I mean?

It all has its own flavor. All the experiences, the mind, the reactions, the senses—they all still have their own quality. Nothing is really changing. But what this third contemplation offers us is the cultivation of the mind. The cultivation is knowing that there's this other possibility for how we relate to our life, for how we relate to moment-to-moment experience as it comes and goes. And that's what basically life is—experience, experience, experience, experience. We can't really stop it. Good, bad, indifferent, me, you, whatever.

"Oh, it's like this. It's like this." Sleepiness is like this. "I really hate sitting here" is like this. "I can't do it right" is like this. Bliss is like this. "I love myself" is like this. That incredibly obnoxious noise is like this. Aversion, desire, self-interest—once the

Once the focus, the interest—none of these words exactly capture it. They're all a little too solid, a little too much doing, a little too limited. But once the interest, the love, has really moved from entrancement with objects and experience and me to simply recognizing awareness and what's coloring the awareness at this moment, then things just stop being such a problem.

And that's our cultivation—knowing that this is a possibility, a potential, not fifteen years from now, but right now. This moment, this moment, this moment, no matter what's happening. Vastly freeing.

When I realized that all of life, all of practice, is just moment to moment to moment, it made everything so much more workable for me. Whether I'm talking about recognizing awareness, cultivating more purity of mind, some kind of samādhi-focused meditation, or building up more energy to walk up hills—whatever it is. When I'm looking with my mind, with thought, into the future and some ideal of how it should be at some point, it's really demoralizing. And it's also not accurate, because who knows?

But when we realize there's only this moment, and no matter how completely pathetic our practice or our life or our reaction feels in this moment—in this moment, "Oh, pathetic feels like this"—it's so accessible. Accessible to anybody. It doesn't take a huge buildup of anything, but it takes that willingness to look, to really be here for whatever this moment is.

For me to be in the moment and say, "Oh, self-hatred feels like this"—for that to really be true, I mean, I can say it, but for that to really be the experience, it has to be a completeness of presence with self-hatred. It's not an idea: "Oh, self-hatred is like this." That's back to denial of the first noble truth. "Oh yes, I know, there's just self-hatred and awareness of it, and I'll just be in the awareness. Self-hatred is like this." That doesn't really have the taste of freedom—explore for yourself. It has the taste of delusion, which can be hard to recognize, and we can fool ourselves that it's freedom for a while.

"Oh yes, self-hatred is arising and I'm aware of it. I'm not really caught in it. Self-hatred and awareness, self-hatred and awareness." You'll notice over time there's more disconnection, more distance, more not touching, less and less fulfilling. Until you can't pretend anymore. Something always breaks through. "Oh God, I really hate myself. Oh, I really am useless. Oh, I feel the pain of it." Oh, pain is like this. Land in it.

As soon as I land in it—without resistance, without aversion, without desire—oh, it's like this.

Upandita Sayadaw said to me once, I guess when something difficult was going on—I don't remember exactly what—but he said, "You don't have to be afraid of anything." And that was so supportive to me, because I knew what he was saying. You don't have to be afraid of experiencing anything. The beautiful—don't be afraid of opening into it because you'll get attached. Attachment—don't be afraid to notice it. Aversion, the difficult—don't be afraid.

In that moment of really opening into it without the coloring in awareness of wanting, of aversion, of being—in that moment, the purity of awareness itself is accessible again. The freedom, the uplift, the peace of that.

So the purpose of all our practices, all the various techniques—the ultimate purpose is not to create some lasting state of a harder mind. It's not to create a better or more pleasing object or experience. Short term it might seem like that, and that's where our old habits come back and we get caught. But it's not about having deeper breathing, less pain, always equanimous, always blissful, always peaceful, always concentrated.

All of the practice in our tradition is really to help us see through, understand, and abandon our habits, our fascination with experience, with our assessments, with liking and disliking and me, me, me. With thinking that we can manipulate and control and get everything the way we want it. To see through and abandon those relentless habits of mind that are in themselves the cause of our confusion, our suffering, our alienation.

And we don't try to create awareness or make it pure. We do less and less. Simply get more in the habit of noticing our habits of getting so entranced by experience and our reactions to it. Just notice that's happening. And turn it around, getting more interested in looking at: Is there anything coloring the mind that's paying attention? Getting more interested in the awareness itself.

And really, that gets more and more happiness-producing, more fulfilling. We get less caring what's happening—in some way that's not a kind of disconnected, flat "Ah, who cares, it's all the same, we're just aware of it all, it doesn't matter." That's not it.

It's more like, "Oh, it should be like—no, it's just how it is."

And there's awareness of it. That purity of awareness shines through by itself. When we're not so entranced with our attention, trying to reorganize what's going on, we can just notice the awareness. It's happening. You wouldn't know what was going on if it wasn't happening. Get more interested in it.

Any experience can be—and is, I think Howie said something like this—really can be like the doorway that brings us back home to awareness. One teacher I had once talked about a two-year-old and a rattle. The two-year-old is completely distracted, running around: "I want a cookie! I want a cookie!" And you shake the rattle, and oh yeah, they come back. Well, any experience can be like the rattle that keys us back into awareness, so that we don't have to hate anything. Anything can wake us up in the moment. Sound, sight, smell, taste, emotion, thought—it doesn't matter. Dislike of the thought? Oh, it's like this. And then we're with the awareness again.

So really, all experience can become a gift. There's nothing we need to fight away. There's nothing we need to really get in a struggle with. And then if we are in a struggle, the struggle itself can be the rattle that keys us back into awareness. It's really wonderful, and that's the sense of what our practices are about.

There are lots of techniques, as I said. Without this background understanding, all the techniques are just to help us see the suffering, the futility, the folly really, of these ways of relating—of greed, of hatred, of delusion in mind. Recognize them, see how they work. Not with judging, just really see how they work. And then see if we can get more interested, really start to love awareness itself.

From that background, that context, any of the methods we use—whether it's shamatha, really trying to get very finely concentrated on the breath; whether it's doing metta, which is a kind of one-pointed meditation but also cultivating that feeling; whether it's feeling your breath as the anchor in the body or here at the nose; whether it's not having any kind of anchor but just noticing whatever's coming and going; using the whole body breath—there are many more than that. All of those, when coming from the path, are just to help us steady the attention enough to notice awareness. Awareness of this, awareness of this, awareness of this. It's fine.

But when we're not aware, when we get so sucked into the object again—and we do, because the habits are so strong—when we're doing meditation, back to what I started with in the beginning, we can all of us so easily get focused on whatever we're doing. Am I doing it right? How can I get it better? Often we get sucked into trying to have our meditation take us to some particular experience. And usually it's pleasant, right? Let's face it—how many of you are trying to get your practice to take you to an unpleasant experience? Probably not too many. Or to repeat one.

And then, to do that, we put in a lot of effort—trying, trying, trying—in order to get a particular experience. Forgetting, getting so focused on the object of how it's happening that we forget to turn around and look at what is visiting the mind. The mind is luminous, and it's colored by the attachments that visit it.

So you can really work very, very hard and get very focused on the breath right here and push and push and get to some kind of great experience—and everything's breaking apart and everything's buzzing, whatever it is. And that's a true experience. And you can completely miss the fact that craving was driving you.

Craving doesn't have to be driving us. One can also be just very present, very present, doing the technique, checking back, keeping checking back. What's the attitude in the mind? Just being here, simple patience. Fine. That's fine.

But what's more important? Getting to some great experience driven by craving? What have you practiced in that time? Basically, what's been fed? Craving.

And when, with the craving and the pushing, you finally get that experience—oh, I feel really so sorry. Because then we think, "I'm validated. I got this experience." So that validates that way of doing it. And that's how we all get caught in striving. Everyone—we all do. And we keep on doing it until we strive so hard and the experience doesn't come anymore. And then we're cast into the pit of despair.

So here, all our practices are useful, but keep turning around and notice the attitude in the mind. That's what we mean. Awareness is always available. Notice when it's colored by wanting, by aversion, by meaning. Notice when it's not. Get really interested in the awareness itself, and then all experience, any particular method or technique, is valid, is valuable, is supportive—helping us cultivate deeper and deeper trust in the luminous quality, the luminous aspect of heart and mind.

And it's really true for all of us. Yes, even you. And even in your most pit of worthlessness, uselessness, bad practice—it's still available. Because ultimately, nothing can stain or damage awareness.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 37

Seclusion

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddhist concept of viveka (seclusion) as one of the three designations for nibbāna, alongside emancipation and release. Drawing from both the Pāli canon and contemplative traditions including the Desert Fathers, she illuminates how seclusion operates on multiple levels: kāya-viveka (seclusion of body) encompasses physical separation from others and restraint from the flood of sense experience, while citta-viveka (seclusion of mind) describes the heart's progressive freedom from the five hindrances.

Wilson explores how retreat practice creates conditions for recognizing the pure awareness that exists when the mind is not grasping. She addresses the challenging material that can arise in seclusion—what she calls our personal 'demons'—and emphasizes that meeting these difficult states is essential for developing genuine compassion. Through teachings from Ajahn Chah, Thich Nhất Hạnh, and Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, she distinguishes between wholesome conditioned states and true freedom.

The talk offers practical guidance on working with sense restraint, renunciation, and the subtle tendency to cling even to peaceful states. Wilson emphasizes that the ultimate seclusion—freedom from suffering—is available in any moment when the heart is empty of clinging, and that this inner freedom becomes the foundation for authentic compassionate engagement with the world.

Someone once asked the Buddha, "Do you know, dear sir, emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his notes to his translation, makes the point that these three words—emancipation, release, and seclusion—are three designations, three definitions, three ways of talking about nirvana, freedom. I want to talk about the third of those tonight: seclusion.

Seclusion has various levels, but in terms of nirvana, Bhikkhu Bodhi says it really means seclusion from suffering, being separated from suffering.

When we first hear the word seclusion in English, the first aspect that comes to mind is physical seclusion, being separated from other people. That's certainly an aspect—that's really where it starts. Going through the history of all different religions, the

hermit life has been a central aspect in many of them. Jesus spending years in the wilderness, the Buddha spending his six years in seclusion and then his whole monastic life, many ascetic wanderers. I don't have to go through it all.

I want to start by talking about this aspect of seclusion and move through how it serves our awakening. How is seclusion, how is this aloneness different from loneliness? People who don't really relate to or understand the contemplative life, or even the sense of the hermit life, often accuse it of being really self-centered, self-interested, a kind of passive turning away from the world that is unhelpful. Obviously I don't think that.

I was reading a book some years ago about different kinds of hermits. I don't even remember the author, but I want to read a few things from Thomas Merton and also about the Coptic hermits of Egypt in about 280 A.D.

This starts with talking about the Desert Fathers:

"The desert is the uninhabitable place. It is the region of desolation and solitude that surrounds and threatens the fertile plain. Along the Nile Valley, the desert is a silent presence always visible to the dwellers in towns and villages as they live in comfort. Its bare hills are the 'waste howling wilderness' of the Old Testament, the haunts of demons. Yet men and women have always been drawn from the comfort and security of their homes in the valley to the barren caves above in search of solitude."

That sets the tone. Then the book goes on to talk about St. Antony of Egypt, who is one of the most famous, one of the most well-known even now, of the Desert Fathers. There were apparently some desert mothers as well, but they had to masquerade as desert fathers. Not as well-known.

St. Antony of Egypt was the son of rich Christian parents, quite well to do. His parents died when he was young and left him well provided. But the book says that when he heard the words of Jesus to the rich—that you should sell all you have and give it to the poor—he somehow felt that they were spoken to him, and he did that. He sold everything he had and went into a life of solitude.

First he went to a local hermit to learn how to do the solitude thing. Then he went to live on the outskirts of the village, then moved further away. He finally ended up at a deserted fort on the bank of the Nile, way out in the desert. It said he lived alone here without seeing a human face for over twenty years, being brought supplies of bread and water every six months by friends. Sometimes the friends who brought these supplies would hear terrifying shrieks and groans from behind the locked doors. Eventually they could stand this no longer—it took them twenty years; they had some pa-

tience. They broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. Instead, Antony emerged healthy, sane, balanced, and really full of energy and advice to help people. He went to Alexandria to support Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans and spent the rest of his life alternating between retreats into solitude and emerging to help and advise others.

Something interesting was going on behind those locked doors in the waste howling wilderness. And it wasn't just for himself, because it really served for him to go out and be with and serve all beings.

So what's going on with that? What's this seclusion about?

The first aspect of seclusion is this separation from other humans. That's only the very beginning. It then moves from separation from humans—this is called in Pali *kāya-viveka*, seclusion of body. *Kāya* is body. This is the first aspect of seclusion of body, where we seclude ourselves from other human beings—not out of hatred, not out of fear, but out of allowing ourselves the space to turn inward and really understand more what's going on.

Again, he's talking about the Desert Fathers. "The search for solitude is a journey to discover the inner self. The monks fled to the desert to become ordinary. If they had gone there to be extraordinary, this would have meant taking the world with them as a standard of comparison. They lived among the rocks because they wanted to simply be themselves."

And Thich Nhat Hanh: "We've lost our taste for silence. We do not know how to be with ourselves without something else to accompany us—a book, a telephone, TV, conversation, you name it. We've lost our taste for being alone. So the first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our very best. We need to reorganize our daily lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us."

So that's the first, most basic sense of seclusion in the way of hermits—a period of time of solitude. In a way, it's what we're doing here without communication, to give ourselves some space, some time where we're not accompanied by other people, by our distractions, to turn inward and come to see what's going on. And that's what's happening, right? We don't always like what's going on, but that's an important part of it.

Then comes the next aspect of kaya-viveka, seclusion of body. This is really the reason we would have seclusion from other people to begin with, which is actually seclusion of body from the flood of sense experience. I don't think I need to go into it at length, but in our daily life—and apparently it was the same back in ancient Egypt, apparently it was the same back in ancient India—there's just so much going on, so much

sense experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. And it can be so powerful. There's so much happening that, as you know, we just get lost in the habits of mind of reaction to sense experience. And because it's happening so fast, it's harder to notice.

This is how Ajahn Chah describes it. He calls it kamogha, the flood of sensuality: "Sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations. We're sunk in them because we look at the externals. We look towards the sense experience. We don't look inwardly." We're not saying sense experience is bad—that's life. It's the sense of being sunk. In fact, similar to what Heather said last night from the Buddha, it's like being a slave when we're sunk in sense experiences. Somebody else has control over you. When they tell you to sit, you have to sit. When they tell you to walk, you have to walk. Being enslaved by the senses is the same. No matter how hard you try, you can't seem to shake it off. This is when our attention keeps being directed outward toward the senses. There's a pleasant sight—we're sunk in it. We're so flooded by it, we just move toward it. We like it. We get into liking. We get into the whole story. The next minute, there's something unpleasant. It's too hot. We don't even notice what's happening—there's aversion. I've got to do something. Throw off my robe. Open the window. Get out the door. Write a note. Do something. We go outside.

It's too cold—I've got to go up to where it's warm. It's too noisy—I've got to go to where it's quiet. It's too quiet—I've got to go to where there's some energy. We're just caught in the hound dog thing again. We've talked about this—being sunk in sense experience through the five or six senses. Again, it's not that there's anything wrong with sense experience.

This *kāya viveka*, this seclusion from the flood of sense experiences—we're not talking about going into a sensory deprivation tank where you don't experience anything. We're just talking about a little bit of seclusion so we have half a chance of noticing what's going on once in a while. Just how much seeing goes on! We talked about that the other day in one of the questions. The tendency is for the attention of the mind to just go out to sights, out to sights, never remembering to turn around and look at the mind.

The seclusion, the sense of simplifying, secluding ourselves from that flood we live with in our daily lives—that everyone pretty much lives with in daily life, in the information age, in the traffic age. God forbid you should walk fifty yards without calling somebody or texting somebody on your cell phone. You might be alone. You might not have any input. Somebody might not know you exist.

So we come here. There's still plenty of sense experience, and that's fine, because that's what we learn from. We'll go to that in a minute. But just the physical seclusion of body—we're not in our normal life. There is much more austerity here, I assume. I mean, it's possible you could live more simply than this, sure. But I imagine for most of us, this is somewhat simpler. You don't have control over your food. You're sleeping in a relatively simple, austere room. You only have the clothes you brought. Hopefully you're not doing what happens halfway through the three-month course at IMS in the winter, when suddenly all these mail-order packages start arriving. L.L. Bean and REI, they're piling up in the foyer. Hopefully that's not going on here. Hopefully I didn't give you ideas.

So just this—this simplicity, this little bit of renunciation, this seclusion from the flood of senses. And then there's the flood of senses in our mind, the flood of reactivity, the flood of talking, the flood of endless commentary. You all know that. You've all talked about how the mind just reacts and discusses every single thing that happens. And a lot of you are mentioning—I know it changes—but a lot of you are mentioning that it's slowing down. It's less gripping. There's more of a sense of space. The relentless chatter and commenting can slow down.

This is just the beginning of being able to see the space of heart and mind that starts to have a possibility of glimmering through when we're not so sunk—not so much in the senses themselves, but in our reaction, in being really turned outwards towards all the sense experiences. It's like a little space where something other can be noticed.

There's an article in the New York Times Book Review by a woman about a book written by another woman who was also writing about hermits. She talked about unhappy hermits—people who really go off to be alone out of aversion and hatred and fear and phobia. We're not talking about that. But she says the positive is "an elected silence"—the expression is Gerard Manley Hopkins—"that gives us the possibility of cleansing the doors of our perception so that we might even see the world as Traherne did, saluted and surrounded by innumerable joys."

And that's what starts to happen—joys and sorrows both. But our perception, the doors of perception, get a little cleansed. A lot of you have mentioned the different ways this shows up: suddenly the sounds of the frogs are so clear, the bird calls are so clear, the moon when we come out and the stars seem so vivid. Our sense of the silence and the appreciation is so much more obvious. There's just some space, a little bit of space in awareness, to notice these things when we're not so sunk in this flood of sensuality. And sometimes just this is enough. Sometimes coming home from a retreat, that's the thing we remember.

I remember one retreat, years ago, one of my first retreats, sitting somewhere as a little lizard was crawling over a stone. That was it. I remember that moment. It was thirty years ago. Because the perception was just so clear. There wasn't any reaction. It was just that sense of what it does—it points our awareness back to the spaciousness, the silence of the pure heart, the pure mind. We begin to be able to get a glimmer of this because of this seclusion from being sunk in the flood of sensuality.

And as many of you mentioned, I've certainly found it true—being in nature is an enormous support for many people. Not for everyone, but for many, it's an enormous support to this. It's one of the real blessings, I would say, one of our real privileges to be able to be on a retreat like this, and to be in a place that has beautiful nature all around us. Many of the retreats I teach in different places around the world tend to be located somewhere in nature—not always, sometimes it's in the city, but often there's nature nearby.

Just noticing, so many people here have mentioned the quiet, the steadiness, the peace, various aspects of being here—the space, the sky, the frogs. Somehow, because there's not so much to react to, there's not so much sense of "me" about it. It reflects back to us, if we can notice, that possibility of purity, of silence, of space in mind and heart.

So when you're in nature and you're experiencing that, first just let it in. But then see if your mind tends to posit, "Oh, it's because it's so beautiful, it's out there." And then come back, turn your awareness around again and notice the quality of heart, the quality of mind that's just silent at this moment—silent without all the reactions of liking, disliking, analyzing, me, me, me. Just the frog sound. Just the stillness of the stars.

Just that sense—I know you know this poem, but I'll read it—that you get from this poem by Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me and I awake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water, and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

That peace isn't something that's out there in the stars, in the water, in the wood drake. That's the peace of a heart and mind that's non-reactive, non-clinging, not identified, really awake. It's wonderful we can use the experience of nature to recognize this over and over, but don't give it away to nature. Turn around and notice.

That's one of the beauties, the joys of a simple life of physical seclusion, seclusion from the flood of sensuality. It really makes awareness so much more accessible and available. And you can see, I think, just from what I've said so far, that this seclusion isn't about just creating that kind of state—oh, let me go throw myself down by the still waters and try to get peaceful again, and then hold on to it, come what may. It's not "let me get rid of everybody and then just have some peace." It's not that.

It's that this is supporting conditions to help us turn our attention away from being sunk in reactivity and sense experience and turn back and recognize what the heart and mind in a moment that's awake and free from clinging is like. That's available here and now. We just need to clear the decks a little bit so we can notice it.

So *kāyaviveka* also includes, as I'm saying, the simplification—which is a kind of renunciation, really. Enforced renunciation, then chosen renunciation, just getting less and less involved with needing things, wanting things, doing things.

That's one of the reasons in Buddhist countries and monasteries why the eight precepts are often practiced. I'm not advocating that one should do that, but that's really the underlying sense of it—to just free us up a little more from involvement. So the sixth precept, not eating in the afternoon, it's not to prove something. It's just to see how much time and energy and wanting and dislike goes into eating, and how much time is freed up when we don't eat in the evening.

The next precept about not wearing ornaments or jewelry or going to entertainments—that's kind of obvious. But the other aspect is not wearing jewelry, not wearing ointments. Well, we can't wear much ointment here because we're in silence and you can't smell nice. It's just noticing the time we spend tending to looking good, tending to how we feel. Not that we have to deliberately look bad—it's the same thing, only in reverse. It's just noticing.

I've seen it myself when you're trying to decide what to put on that day. Notice what's going on in the mind, not with judgment, but notice what's feeding more craving, what's feeding more aversion, what feeds simplicity and space. When I was a nun, only having three outfits and they were all pretty much the same, you just took the clean one. It was actually really nice. You just get up and you put it on. And now I can tell I'm having a bad day when I'm sitting there looking, "Oh, what can I wear today?"

Oh, this doesn't feel right. And that one… you know, it's like, oh my God, who cares? Nobody, nobody but me. And it's just all this extra hoo-ha. So there's a sense of renunciation in that.

But another aspect of this simplicity, and this is really where our mindfulness practice begins to kick in and play a part, is what's called restraint at the sense doors. There's the *kāya-viveka*, this seclusion of actually being separated from sense experiences, so it's not even there to pull you. But restraint at the sense doors is really the way we practice with mindfulness and wisdom right at the point of sense contact.

This doesn't mean hating sense contact or avoiding the pleasant. It just means that when there's sense contact—the five physical senses or the mental—*sati-paññā*, mindfulness and wisdom, are right there at that point of sense contact. We see what the sense contact is, and we notice what the mind does with it. That's restraint.

Sometimes a little bit of restraint can help—looking down, for instance—because so much goes out through the eyes. Even the Buddha said this. There's a whole sutta about the way to awakening and the perfect practitioner, so to speak. I'll just read one stanza: "A bhikkhu, a practitioner, keeps her eyes from wandering restlessly with desire."

I can really relate to that. You're doing your walking meditation, but the eyes are wandering restlessly with desire, almost looking for something to connect with, looking for something to like or dislike or judge. In a sense, when you're walking and somebody walks past, you just have to look. You just have to look. Sometimes it's almost impossible not to look, even when you're paying attention. The craving comes. You think, "I won't look. I won't look." You get really determined. And as soon as you let go, you look.

And what comes from the looking? Is it satisfying? Does it make you happy? I would say ten to one, it gives rise to judgment. "Oh, God, right. Why did I do that? I'm stupid." Or "They look better than me." Or "I'm doing better than them." Whatever. "Why did I do that?" Restlessly looking.

So that's the sense of restraint at the sense doors. It can be not just sending your energy restlessly out with your eyes, not just sending it restlessly out with the ears. But it doesn't mean doing what a friend of mine once did. He put a blindfold on at IMS and walked around for three days blindfolded. I would say that's ignorance, not restraint at the sense doors. We're not going to learn from that either.

But this sense of restraint, of renunciation—it doesn't get a good rap in this culture. How many of you thought, "Yeah, great, renunciation! I love that idea"? Maybe you did. I mean, you're already on the far side of the spectrum; you wouldn't even be here otherwise.

But this is an interesting sutta I found, because the Buddha acknowledged this same thing. It's a sutta where Ānanda comes with a householder named Tapussa to the Buddha. And the householder says, "We're householders who indulge in sensuality, delight in sensuality, enjoy sensuality, rejoice in sensuality. For us—indulging, delighting, enjoying, and rejoicing in sensuality—renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off. Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline"—meaning in the Buddha's teaching—"the hearts of the very young monks and nuns leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace."

So right here is where this teaching runs contrary to the great mass of people: in this issue of renunciation.

And the Buddha says, "So it is, Ananda. Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, I thought renunciation is good, seclusion is good, but my heart did not leap up at renunciation. It did not grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace."

So the thought occurred to him, "Well, what's the cause? What's the reason? Why doesn't my heart leap up? Why don't I see renunciation as peace?"

And then the thought occurred to him—I actually love the way this is phrased, "the thought occurred to me," because I just get the sense of the impersonal nature of thought. The thought occurred to me. Although I know that's the English; it wouldn't play that way in Pali.

The thought occurred to him: "I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that. I haven't investigated that theme. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation. I haven't familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't go steadfast, doesn't see it as peace."

Right there we have a real good example of the difference between intellectual understanding and real, deep, intuitive insight knowledge. And so showing that it was the same for the Buddha as it is for us. On some level, you really wouldn't be here if you didn't have some real understanding and trust that seclusion, that renunciation is somehow going to help us. Sometimes we just really love it too.

But as we pursue that theme, as we really investigate it—the joys, the rewards of simplicity, of restraint at the sense doors, of seclusion from being lost in senses—the rewards of that become clear. And as well, and this isn't with judgment, this is with interest: is it true that there are drawbacks to sense pleasures, to being so lost in that? So we explore that, and we see for ourselves.

And that's when renunciation really is—it's one of the paramis, the ten perfections, but it's also one of the three right attitudes or right ways of thinking, which is the second stage of the Eightfold Path. So renunciation is really a deep inner intention, an understanding of mind and heart. We could take everything away from us and just be sitting here burning with desire and hating it that everything's been taken away. That's not really renunciation.

But when the renunciation comes, it's just a little thing. I'm sure you've seen it here. Maybe you always have thirds at lunch or you always go down for tea, and one day you say, "You know, I really don't want that. I don't need it." It's not the "you stupid, you should." It's like, "Oh, I don't need that." The renunciation is really the seeing that the craving goes away and the space opens up. So true renunciation is actually a state of happiness, of simplicity, of joy.

But in our practice of restraint of the sense doors, it's not always, of course, that way. So the restraint is bringing in this satipañña, this mindfulness-wisdom, at the point of sense contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, emotions—not to judge it or say it's bad, but to see how the mind behaves in contact with senses: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

We've talked about this a lot, so I don't think I have to go too much into it, but really this is, in terms of kāya-viveka, seclusion of body, where it starts to move into the next level: citta-viveka, seclusion of mind, seclusion of heart. We begin with the mindfulness of just noticing. Something pleasant comes, we notice it, and we notice what the mind does. Sometimes it just rests there—pleasant. Sometimes it appreciates. Sometimes we're not really quite there, and it goes off into that whole story, like I said before.

We notice with unpleasant. It can hit the unpleasant and just zoom off into a whirlwind of aversion and fear and reactivity. And there's a whole range in between, and it's possible with that restraint right at the sense door to notice the hearing, notice it's felt as unpleasant, notice the little leaning of aversion, and not have to go there.

Same with neutral, which is hard to even notice, never mind the delusion, the spacing out, the who-knows-what's-happened that accompanies it. But boredom is often a response to neutral.

So in this satipañña at the point of sense contact, mindfulness and wisdom, this is where the deep habits of our mind and heart—the ones that cause so much suffering in our life—begin to be able to be seen more clearly.

I know you all know this. Sometimes it's very subtle, sometimes not so subtle. But this is where the seclusion from so much sense input, the spaciousness, the silence of mind, and the awareness we begin to touch serve as support, allowing us to really see how these habitual reactions of heart and mind—aversion, clinging, delusion—how they arise, how they're conditioned, where they go, how they feed our sense of self. And how, when there's mindfulness and wisdom right there, sometimes they simply don't happen. It's fascinating. That's a big part of what our practice is about. We don't have to get obsessive about it.

Sometimes these insights are really quite subtle. The examples I've been giving are relatively subtle—seeing the habits that come from our relationship with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. When the mental chatter has died down considerably and there isn't too much flood of input, sometimes that's just what you're knowing. You think nothing's going on. You're just having these sittings that seem painful and unpleasant, your mind a little reactive. You think, "I'm just tight. I have one sitting where I'm all tight and in pain, and then the next sitting is kind of relaxed and open and peaceful, and then tight again." You think nothing's going on.

But that's huge. Because what's happening there is really moment-to-moment seeing with mindfulness and wisdom. The cause and effect, the nature of physical and mental experiences arising constantly, the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral constantly, and how suffering is created or not in the mind and heart, how the mind relates to it. Over and over and over. We're seeing that moment by moment by moment.

And the part of us that's impatient, in a hurry, thinks, "Well, I've seen it, I get it, it's time to move on. I didn't come here for one month just to have pleasant sitting, unpleasant sitting, pleasant walking. Something should happen, you know?" But moment after moment, this is a lot that's happening.

Part of me wants to go back to the day-blind stars and lie down. But no, you don't get to do that now. You get to walk and notice pain in the leg. You get to sit. "Oh, this is really nice and spacious. I don't have to do anything. Why doesn't it stay like this?" Oh, because I want it to. "Okay, I won't want, I won't want." And we're just watching it over and over again.

But in the space and silence, sometimes—not every retreat and not for everybody, but it really often happens—what comes up is not so subtle. The St. Anthony's demons start to emerge. The wailing, the shrieks and groans of St. Anthony behind the door. Sometimes, as the silence and the lack of our normal input take hold, as our normal conscious or unconscious ways of denial, of diversion, of filling ourselves up, of keeping these things down—as they're not there, and as we're cultivating moment after moment

of mindfulness and wisdom, that accepting, receptive, kind awareness without hierarchy, just whatever's arising coming into receptive, present-moment awareness, as Heather was talking about last night—our denial systems stop being fed.

And so sometimes what comes up, and it can come up slowly about some little incident happening here, or it can come up with a huge rush and overwhelm us, but our sometimes really strong so-called demons start to emerge and overwhelm us for a while. Often the content starts out as something really small on the retreat—some little incident, something you said, some note you got. It could be anything. And your mind is going, "This doesn't make sense. I'm completely lost in terror over this little thing." And we fight with it, thinking "this doesn't make sense" for a while. But it has nothing to do with what's happening. It's just triggering our deep stuff.

So it's not only the five hindrances, which Heather talked about, but often for people it will come to whatever your really deep personal story is. It usually has a story. It may not. But whatever your demon is—self-hatred, terror, pride, fear of chaos, needing to control, sleepiness, worthlessness, helplessness—take your pick. You probably know yours, and if you don't, you will.

One of my teachers said, "In the light of awareness, all the snakes come up out of their holes." Not always, and not all at once.

Don't get into thinking that if it's not happening, something's wrong. Don't get into thinking that if it is happening, something's right or wrong. It's just that sometimes this happens. Rarely do we think, "Great, this is what practice is supposed to be like"—unless you've been really bored, and then you welcome it rather than boredom. And that's not helpful either.

But this is a really important, and when it's happening, essential part of practice. Most of us, on our journey, really want to get over this. We want to come out of the shrieks and groans, like Saint Anthony, balanced, sane, whole, helpful—but really deeply in this world. To truly be in this world, to really be able to be with other people, to be with all the suffering and confusion and hatred in the world, and the cruelty. I don't know—personally, I've got to see that in myself. If I can't meet it in myself, how am I going to be able to be with somebody else with compassion when they're manifesting it? How am I going to keep from just being beaten down psychologically just by reading the newspapers?

So this meeting, for ourselves, for our own freedom, our own ability to be with these demons when they arise without being so afraid we never even get near them—or without having them drive our behavior when they come up in our life, because they're so strong and we haven't really had practice meeting them, learning to understand them, learning to befriend them.

For me, whenever I get to a particular feeling—I usually feel it here—I don't have to go into my story; we all have our own stories. But when I start to get to the reactions of my mind, I start to get to what I call the crazy place, where I can tell my reactions are way, way, way over the edge of what's going on. And I can see that. But I believe in them. I mean, I'm not just going, "Oh yes, over the edge." I'm really feeling them. And I'm starting to feel crazy. "Oh, this is the crazy place." And I'm glad when I recognize that. Because then, when I can just feel the feelings—I don't have to find the story, but the feeling—the closer I get to it, it's like, "I'm going to die if I feel that." That's the story.

Then I'm really happy now. I didn't used to be, but now I'm really happy when I recognize that. Because I know I'm not going to die. And when the attention can just rest for a moment with that, just rest there—it doesn't fix it or anything—oh, it's like this. It's like all that crazy reactivity stuff, just for that moment, dies away, because that was all a smokescreen not to feel it. I didn't know this, but that's what it was—fifty years of smokescreen not to feel something.

So sure, we're sitting here, we're in the seclusion, there's more space for this to come up, and we won't always recognize it. But just know—just know it's an essential aspect of our journey. We need to honor it, respect the power of it, and know really deeply—I really believe this—the less we're in fear of it, the less we need to be driven by it, the more we're freed for compassionate response.

This is from Thomas Merton again, talking about the hermits: "The hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others so long as they were floundering about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power, but even the obligation to pull the world to safety after them."

So in my mind—and I'm only speaking for me—that's really the direction our seclusion is moving us in, the ability to really do that.

Seclusion of body moves into citta viveka, seclusion of mind. The classical definition of seclusion of mind-heart means secluded from the hindrances, the five that Heather spoke of. Often citta viveka is thought of only as shamatha, deep absorption practice on

one object, but it's not that. Citta viveka really has different levels, but as there's moment after moment of just mindful presence, awareness, knowing what's happening—just as I've been talking about, just as we've all been talking about throughout our practice—moment after moment of that simple awareness, noticing the attitude, the pure awareness, moment after moment of that leads to this citta viveka. The mind, the heart, becomes more and more secluded from the hindrances.

Not like you're holding them away—"Oh no"—but you know those times, sometimes for a moment, sometimes lasting quite a while, where you're not putting out any effort, but you just kind of notice wanting and aversion is just not really coming up. And something comes across your field of vision that normally would trigger wanting or aversion, and it doesn't. You're even looking, kind of waiting. Where is it? Am I making this up? And it really doesn't come. Wow. We don't really trust that, but it's nice. It's definitely nice.

So that's the first step of citta viveka.

It comes from the steadiness of mindfulness. And it can deepen. It can deepen whether through one-pointed shamatha practice or through continuing steadiness of mindfulness, where it goes to a place that's not just a little bit secluded from the hindrances, but where the mind gets further and further away from them. It's like becoming more secluded. The hindrances are weak and far away. Wanting and aversion just don't come in so much.

It feels much more stable, this state of mind. And it is a state of mind. It feels much more stable, where you're not so afraid—oh my God, if I do the wrong thing, self-judgment is going to come back. There's a way it's just more trustworthy.

This could be leading into deep absorption practice of jhana, but it also arises in moment-to-moment mindfulness with changing objects, like what Sayadaw U Pandita would talk about as khanika samadhi, momentary concentration, and vipassana jhanas. It's a place where the mind, the heart, feels really light, malleable. It's very pleasant. Mostly, we really like it. And it's useful, certainly, because we get to see what it's like when the mind and heart are non-reactive. We can touch that space of purity. We can really see that it's possible to be with very pleasant experience and not get lost in craving, not even have it come up. Oh, that's lovely.

But really important: keep the light of interest, of investigation, alive and awake in these states. It's really easy for us, especially when we first start to have states like this arise at times—we can't make them come, they just arise—it's easy to mistake that silence, that malleability, that peacefulness, that non-reactivity for something else. It feels

like, "Oh, now I've got it. This is it. This is what I've been practicing for." And I mean, it's very good. Most of us would think, okay, that's good enough. If I could just have this, it would be good enough.

But that's not the point. It's a conditioned state. Don't mistake it for freedom. Don't mistake it for the real seclusion from suffering that is the heart and mind of non-clinging.

I've noticed two things that can happen in that space. You look and see for yourself. One is that we subtly get attached. We're really aware: there's no desire, there's no aversion, this space is nice. We even say, "I know, this is just a conditioned space, I know." But we subtly get lost again in looking at the space and forgetting to just notice the attitude of mind. Wanting can come in. Subtle identification can come in. It's just like, okay, this is good enough. We stop investigating. We get clinging.

Or the other thing is—and this is what I tend to do—we just get complacent. Oh, great. Now it's all here. Nothing else to do. No more craving, no more aversion. I can just coast around. At first it's true, in a state on retreat where you can just do whatever arises. You take a walk. You don't sit. You think it doesn't matter because the mind is clear. There's interest. It's balanced. It's stable. If someone says something to you and goes away, it doesn't rock the samadhi. You think, well, that's it. So gradually you just do more things and more things. And before you know it, you're down in the bookstore buying trinkets and writing letters.

You check and you go, wait. It doesn't quite have that same feeling. It slips up on us. We get complacent.

The Buddha said, "Two things I never lost sight of while I was still an unenlightened bodhisattva. One was never to be lax, never to give up my effort. The second, never to settle merely for wholesome states of mind."

And that's powerful because, you know, mostly given in life, I'd settle for wholesome states of mind. But that's not freedom. It's wholesome states of mind. So he's just saying, keep looking. And that becomes our koan—not to mistake the wholesome states of mind, the peace of the non-reactive mind. Experience that. But a constructed state of citta-viveka, dependent on conditions, is going to also deconstruct when the conditions change.

Sometimes when it's peaceful and quiet, we get kind of clinging to it without realizing, and we think, we impute it to the circumstances. So when there's a noise, we get really upset because it's wrecking my quiet. And the quiet's what's giving me peace, right? Sometimes at the Forest Refuge in Barre, I won't even tell you the meetings we've

gone through because there's this noise that happens when someone walks out the door near the meditation hall and bangs it. And then the people in the meditation hall hear that bang and it really upsets their samadhi. We have meetings about stuff like this. I would say that was misplacing what the real point of citta-viveka is. It's not to hold on to the silence. Don't mistake external silence for freedom or even for peace.

So our koan is to use the seclusion of bodies, seclusion from all the sense inputs, seclusion from the hindrances—to use it to keep recognizing that the silence, the space of freedom, is the silence in that moment of the heart and mind that's awake and free from clinging, free from sense of self. Clinging and sense of self pretty much go together. And that's our calling, to keep discovering that. Whenever we start to impute the peace outward, impute the freedom outward—and outward could be out to a very subtle state of mind—just turn around and notice the purity of awareness of the knowing mind itself.

This is the way Buddhadasa talks about it in his book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, which is a fascinating, really interesting book. He's talking about sunyata, usually translated as emptiness, but Santikaro translates it as voidness. Really he's just meaning it in two simple ways.

Sunyata in his first meaning simply means that all things and all beings are void or empty—how does he put it?—empty of a particular sense of self, just all conditions. He said that's everything: in the mind, in the heart, a speck of dust, a sparrow flying—empty of sense of self.

Then the second application—and that's one we can really look at in our own experience over and over—sunyata in its second application points to the quality of the mind, of the heart, when it is not grasping and clinging at anything. So we can turn around and notice that quality.

This is what he says: "I encourage you, in any moment that the mind, the heart has any measure of this voidness, this emptiness of clinging to anything—even if it's not absolutely or perfectly empty—keep recognizing it." Actually, on any one day, sunyata is there repeatedly. Sunyata as that quality of the heart and mind that's empty in that moment of clinging, of grasping to anything. Actually, on any one day, sunyata is there repeatedly. Even if it's not an absolute fixed sunyata, it's still very good as long as we take the trouble to notice it. If we take an interest in this sort of voidness, this sunyata, that will make it easy to practice and to sink into it, to attain it more and more.

So he says, generate a contentment with voidness. Generating a contentment with just noticing the quality of heart, of mind, when it's not clinging or grasping at anything. No big lights going off. It's not conditional actually on any kind of seclusion. But in that moment, that's the seclusion from suffering. There's no grasping, there's no clinging, there's no identification. It's just this. That sense that Wendell Berry talks about, of just lying there, the peace of wild things. A moment of wakefulness without any grasping at anything, without any sense of me or mine. Just that.

As Buddhadasa says, we all have many moments of that. Every day, if we would just get interested in noticing.

And then if you cling the next moment, just notice that—how it feels different.

Again from Merton, this second-to-last reflection about the Desert Fathers. He's talking about one who is called to solitude:

"One who is called to solitude is called to emptiness. And in this emptiness, she does not find points upon which to base a contrast between herself and others. On the contrary, she realizes that she has entered into a solitude that is really shared by everyone. And so her solitude is the foundation of a deep, pure, and gentle sympathy with all other humans. More, it is the doorway by which she enters into the mystery of God and brings others into that mystery by the power of her love and her humility."

Just a moment of emptiness.

I'll end with one other quotation that's very similar. Again, it's from another Christian, so it's using Christian terminology—a woman who was an Anglican nun. From this book about hermits: an Anglican nun whose need for solitude took her to an abandoned cabin on a cliff, which she fixed up and lived there for eighteen years. But not quite alone, because people kept coming and bringing their troubles to her. She was always welcoming and willing to meet them because of what she believed. She believed that the responsibility of the solitary is—these are her words—"to stand at the intersection between the love of God and suffering humanity."

The responsibility of the solitary: to stand at the intersection of the love of God and suffering humanity.

That's what we wake to. Seclusion from suffering.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

CHAPTER 38

Unity of Emptiness and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential unity of emptiness and compassion as the two wings of awakening. Drawing from both Theravāda and Tibetan traditions, she explains how the pure heart-mind is empty of inherent self-existence, naturally cognizant, and ceaselessly responsive with compassion. Wilson warns against the danger of conceptualizing emptiness without embodying its natural expression of care—what the Tibetans call bodhicitta, the awakened heart.*
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> *Wilson weaves together teachings from Nisargadatta, the Dalai Lama, and Pema Chödrön to show how touching our own suffering opens us to tenderness for all beings. She explains that when the contraction of self-referencing relaxes, the natural response is compassion, mettā, muditā, or equanimity—whatever is appropriate in the moment. Through personal stories, including encounters with a large spider in Thailand and witnessing suffering in a hospital, she demonstrates how shifting from "me" to "our space" transforms our relationship with experience.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that moment-to-moment mindfulness is what allows wisdom to arise, which then naturally gives rise to the three wise intentions of the Eightfold Path: renunciation replacing greed, mettā replacing ill will, and compassion replacing cruelty. Wilson illustrates this integration through inspiring examples from Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights leader James Lawson, showing how true nonviolence stems from a completely different configuration of power—one that emerges from the inside out through trust in our basic goodness.*

Looking out at you, one wouldn't really get it that this is a practice or a path of happiness. A couple of you are smiling. I mean, I don't smile either when I'm sitting, but it just kind of struck me.

Tonight I just want to offer some reflections on the unity of emptiness and compassion. We've been talking about both of these major aspects of the truth, the way things are—especially after Guy's talk a couple of nights ago and the way we've been speaking about awareness, the sense of real emptiness, that all phenomena are empty of inherent self-existence, that in the moment of awareness any object can come and go and it just doesn't matter. That knowing is completely unaffected by whatever is happening.

There are different ways we can take that. On one level, obviously, that can be really freeing, really opening from that constriction of self. But other times that can be heard or felt or experienced, depending on what's going on in the mind, as disconnected, cold, indifferent, really. A kind of gray void. What am I doing this for if nothing's going to matter? Is that what I'm practicing for, so I don't care about anything? In a sociopathic kind of way, it can seem.

What's really important to keep remembering, to keep tuning into, is the way this sense of real freedom, of wisdom, the path of awakening, is spoken of. You know that thing of the bird with two wings—the wing of wisdom, the wing of compassion. Or the way the Tibetans speak about it, which I really like a lot. In knowing the empty nature, really knowing that, it is freeing. But that's only one aspect of the awakened heart and mind. The nature of the pure heart and mind is, yes, empty of any inherent self-existence. They use three ways of describing different angles, you could say.

The second one is the naturally knowing, the spontaneously knowing aspect—which again, when Guy was talking about citta, it's like that. There's a sound, you hear it. That's spontaneous, it happens. It's always awake and always available.

But the third aspect is really key, or we don't in our self experience the totality, the roundedness, the completeness of freedom. And that's that this empty, naturally cognizant knowing is, as the Tibetans say, ceaselessly responsive. The natural response of the awakened heart-mind in any particular situation is that of compassion, or metta, mudita, equanimity. It's responsive. It's not sociopathically, coldly indifferent. And at different times for all of us, in our practice, in our path, we may be more in tune with one than the other.

The emptiness we've talked about—and this is something I ran across from Tsoknyi Rinpoche in his book *Natural Great Perfection*. I find this a little funny, so don't take it as "oh my God, I'm doing something wrong." But he's talking about understanding shunyata, emptiness. He says the danger for many of us is that we hear too much too soon and we think we have understood shunyata, emptiness, and so we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion and are obscured by concepts of emptiness. Has that ever happened to you?

He says Nagarjuna said it is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in the material concrete reality, who don't understand emptiness. But far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness.

I think that's great. You get that—believe in emptiness. It's another concept that it's so easy to put. "Well, it's all empty, so it doesn't matter." Have you run into that in people? It's often—nobody here, of course, and none of us would ever fall into that because we're so clear—but really often it's like people who've done a little bit of reading and really haven't done much practice at all. "Well, it's all empty, so I can do whatever I want," that kind of thing.

This is again how Rinpoche went on: Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the way of skillful means. It's our practice. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do.

So in some ways it's funny, but just for a moment. Remember, we're not going to fall into the abyss of emptiness and get stuck there. And nobody here is stuck there. But there are moments, you know, when it's so clear there's nothing to do. And that's really a wakeful, present, true moment. And then a moment later or an hour later, it's not like that anymore. It's a concept. We remember, "Oh yeah, there's no one here and nothing to do." But it's not the truth of our alive experience in that moment.

It's a memory. It's a concept. And we've stopped—and we all do this—we've stopped being totally present and fresh in that moment. We're remembering how free it was when there was nothing to do, but really that's not what's happening, and we need to use some skillful means.

So playing with it—see, it's very subtle. At that point, it's subtle.

This is the other way, when the wholeness comes from the compassion side, the sense of the ceaselessly responsive. It's another way of saying it, from Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you're free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

It's on the other side. The emptiness is a little bit what Heather was talking about last night. Once you really, just for a moment, see you're everything, in that moment the natural response is compassion, tenderness for beings, connectedness to beings. Exactly because in that moment all the energy, the mental energy, is not bound up in this constant, obsessive, exhausting self-referencing.

So just noticing how much of our energy is in this contraction, this constriction of me, me, me. From that place—and that place is momentary, everything's momentary, remember—we're not always in the contraction of me, me, me. And most of us who are not yet Arhats are not always in the knowing of complete emptiness and natural, spontaneous caring and compassion. We fluctuate.

Emptiness and compassion are indivisible. Emptiness is free from grasping to a self. Compassion is benevolence for all beings. And we can see how those two come together, support each other in big experiences and little experiences here and in our daily life.

So when that contraction, that constriction of me, is basically seen through, released, not happening in a moment, the natural sense is of "I am the world, the world is me"—it's *us* rather than *me*.

Instead of everything being the way Tsoknyi Rinpoche described it once—I really like this—he said the original yardstick, the measurement for samsara, that which everything is measured from, is that feeling of "me here now." He said in Tibet, when they're going to start building a house, the way they lay out the footprint of the foundation is to take a point in the middle and get a string for how wide you want it to be. And from that point in the middle, you measure all the way around, sort of like you're making a circle.

So he's saying the measuring point for samsara, from our place of suffering, that center point is—and this isn't a thought so much, but the feeling sense of—"me here now." You know what I mean? When we're just sitting here, we hear a sound, and the felt sense is: What does that mean about me? That sound is disturbing me. How do I feel about that sound? Or not even the thought, but just the felt sense of me, sound over there, measured from this felt sense.

Of course it's not always present, that felt sense, but much of the time it is. And that's the measuring point of samsara. When that's there, then that self-referencing, that constriction—everything becomes about me and what does it mean about me, me and others. When it's not there, what's naturally expressed is this tenderness for life, this lack of self-centric view. And then the natural response of the mind, the heart, is just whatever is appropriate in the moment. It's more inclusive, more kind.

A simple little example that I just remembered today. A long time ago, I was staying in Thailand, in a little kuti, a little hut in a meditation center. In this kuti, it was my first few weeks there. I hadn't really adjusted to the climate, the bugs, everything. And after a couple of days, I saw a spider. I mean, a really big spider. The body—never mind the

legs—was bigger than my fist. We're talking a big spider. And running around up there... I mean, I'm not phobic about spiders, but I don't love them. And this was big. And I didn't have a mosquito net.

So first, this spider—you've got to get it out of my space. You know, all the normal stuff you'd think.

And then at one point, it just clicked in my mind: actually, the spider was here first, and I'm in the spider's space. And then it shifted further to our space. Just for that moment, there was simply the release of "it's all about me." What's the spider? Oh, it's our space.

Nothing really changed externally, but the whole relationship internally transforms. You can still respond, do whatever needs doing. I eventually did take that spider in a bag and carry it out very kindly. Sorry, I'm taking over your space now. Sorry, I'm bigger than you, and I'm taking it away. But at least I wasn't doing it with hatred in my heart. You can still do whatever. And until I could catch it, I wasn't afraid and hating it.

A little thing. But you get a sense of how just that shift from self-referencing to "oh, just things happening"—this, this, this, not all about me—how the natural response to that emptiness is ceaselessly responsive kindness and compassion.

The good news, really good news, is that in terms of this natural response—ceaselessly responsive compassion, mettā, equanimity, clear seeing—these arise naturally when there's wisdom in the mind, in the heart. And as we've been hammering on the whole time, hopefully, the simple moment of mindful presence with something, aware of what's happening without buying into greed or hatred or delusion, just seeing what Heather was talking about last night, just recognizing experience as it is without a big agenda, without reactivity, without distortions in perception—that moment-to-moment mindfulness is what allows wisdom to arise.

And then quite naturally, like with me and the spider, you don't have to think, "Oh, I should be compassionate. How can I get..." It naturally happens. And our habits really begin to shift naturally through the sati, the mindfulness. That's what we've been talking about.

The Buddha talked about three wise intentions in terms of the Eightfold Path, which begins with right view, as somebody was discussing the other night. The second factor—I spoke about intentions, remember—concerns what's in the mind, in the heart, what qualities, what mental factors give rise to action. That's the seed of karma, wholesomeness or unwholesomeness.

The Buddha is rather specific in terms of the second step of the Eightfold Path, which is variously translated as right thought or right intention. He's very specific that the three right intentions arising through clear seeing represent a switch from wrong intention: greed turns to renunciation, to letting go, to openness. That can then further move to generosity, to dāna. Ill will is replaced by friendliness, by mettā. And cruelty is replaced with compassion. Clear seeing isn't listed as a wise intention because that's the wisdom which actually allows these other right intentions to arise.

So they happen organically with wisdom. But also, we don't have to just sit back and hope and pray. We are cultivating with mindfulness, and we can also consciously tune into when our response of mind and heart arises from separation, from fear, from me-ing, and recognize when it can actually begin to shift.

The Buddha has one of my favorite lines: whatever one frequently thinks about and dwells upon, that will become the inclination of the mind. Interesting. A little scary some days when we see what the mind is thinking and dwelling upon. But also recognizing why each moment of pure present moment attention is so powerful—because in those moments, we're not dwelling in the old habits of me-ing, of fear, of aversion, of greed. Even if aversion is the object of the mindfulness, in that moment of mindfulness, you're not dwelling on the aversion. And this is really very powerful.

So mindfulness is not so self-referential, and that's already naturally cultivating moments of emptiness of self. If it's real clear seeing, real wisdom, it will have that juice. It may not be compassion; it may be equanimity, because it depends on the situation. But it won't be that cold, distant, "it doesn't matter" disconnect. It won't be that. When we're in that disconnection, it's like a partial understanding of emptiness, but it's not whole. It's not complete. Something's missing. So just keep looking. Look again.

I want to talk now about other ways we can consciously tune into and cultivate these beautiful aspects, particularly compassion and mettā. The brahmavihāras offer one approach. I know compassion is described as that quivering of the heart, the natural response of an awakened heart and mind when it comes into connection with suffering—one's own or others', ultimately no different. And the ultimate expression, the—

The total awakened expression of compassion, in the way the Tibetan tradition speaks of it, is bodhicitta—meaning basically awakened heart, awakened mind.

I want to read the way Pema Chödrön describes it, which is quite down to earth:

"This kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, from a distance—this is the discovery of our soft spot, the discovery of bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is a Sanskrit word that means noble or awakened heart, said to be present in

all beings." Yes, even us. "Just as butter is inherent in milk, this soft spot is inherent in you and me. We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence."

In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart and it turns into compassion."

This is really our practice. It's somewhat what Heather was talking about last night—how that willingness to be with whatever opens into wisdom. This is the other side of that: willingness to be with whatever, the beauties and the sorrows, the fragility, the basic, inherent, inescapable fragility of our bodies, of our hearts, of all of life, of everything.

It doesn't have to be scary, but it's so tender. It's so inescapable. And when we touch it, just let it touch our hearts in one moment, the natural response is this compassion, this tenderness for beings.

Pema Chödrön again: "It's said that in difficult times, it is only bodhicitta that heals. When inspiration has become hidden, when we feel ready to give up, this is the time when healing can be found in the tenderness of pain itself. In the midst of loneliness, in the midst of fear, in the middle of feeling misunderstood and rejected is the heartbeat of all things, the genuine heart of bodhicitta."

So the suffering of beings—it may be so-called other beings—also the suffering of this being is quite adequate to discover, connect with, and trust both emptiness and the tender heart of bodhicitta.

This is from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who, as Guy said, is meant to be the incarnation of the Bodhisattva of compassion, so we figure he knows what he's talking about.

The other way bodhicitta is spoken about is that through this heart of compassion, it becomes a possible motivation—the highest motivation, really—for our continued and sincere practice: that we practice with the intention to benefit all beings. Through touching this fragility, this tenderness, this compassion for all beings, it transforms into this deep wish to awaken from the confusion that keeps us circling in samsara, and not just for ourselves but for everybody who's stuck in some sorrow. So that's the other way of thinking of bodhicitta.

His Holiness says: How does it develop? The first is with deep insight into what suffering is. Deep insight. And where do we get that? It arises by focusing on our own experience. Where else will we learn? And that's enough.

Then, as we open to our own suffering, compassion strengthens into a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings. Interestingly enough, opening into our own suffering is a path into empathy and connectedness with others.

Many times I've experienced this—where my own particular suffering in a particular time, when it's finally really met and accepted (and we definitely go through a lot of layers before it's finally really met and accepted), it moves through from my own particular story into the suffering of beings. And sometimes that's really very touching and amazing, how that happens. I can't make it happen. I can remember times it's happened. I can try and kid myself it's happening now. But when it really happens, you really feel it.

The example that always comes to mind was many years ago. I was in the hospital for a week or so, pretty sick. I was lying there in a room with three other women. At one point, it just kind of hit me. I looked around—three elderly women. I was in the orthopedic ward, that was just where they'd had a bed. They were in all kinds of casts and in a lot of pain. And then, just from being with my own pain, I looked and thought, "Oh yes, I'm not here alone."

And then it just naturally—I wasn't thinking this—it spread out to: how many people are in this hospital? How many hospitals just in this little area of Massachusetts where I was? Not even a big city—five or six hospitals. And then it just kept going, trying to imagine how many people in how many hospitals in the world. And that's only the people lucky enough to be in hospitals. It's just vast and endless.

This is where we need the two sides. Without the understanding of emptiness, we drown in that suffering. But with the willingness to just open into "oh, it's like this," it moves from the self-centeredness into the vastness, the tenderness for beings. That's why the difficult times in retreat, the difficult times in life—really what Heather was speaking of last night—are so important.

And even though we say this over and over, and even though in the interviews we say it, and I say it to myself when I'm in a difficult time, somewhere in there it's so hard to trust when we're in the difficult time. "Yeah, yeah, I'm trying to be mindful. I'm trying to have compassion." We give lip service. We try to believe it's really important. But bottom line? We know we have to get through this time to get to the real stuff—the joy, the spaciousness, the emptiness, the *jhāna*, whatever the heck it is. It's really rare that we say, "Well, I know this place, this difficult place of being lost in this obsessive fear, this obsessive anger, this obsessive self-referencing, whatever the story is—guilt, whatever it is—this is the place of juice. This is where emptiness and compassion are going to manifest." Yeah, right.

So learning to trust it. And the difficult times are also important because what's arising—whether it's so-called external or internal—once it's arisen, it's the result of past karma. Our obsessive patterns, for example, are the result of all the habits of our mind. We think about something—God knows how many times. You know how fast the mind is. Think of your age and how many times you've had that thought about how bad you are, how you're no good. How many times? We think we have a couple of thoughts —"may I be free from suffering"—and it's going to go away.

So that thought coming up, very familiar, that's the result of our past karma, of our past intentions. How the mind and awareness is meeting it right now in this moment—that's the present moment karma. That's the present moment intention. And so how we meet each moment of experience, that's the path. How we meet our suffering experience and our beautiful experience, that's the manifestation. If we meet it with simple acceptance, with kindness, that's the manifestation of compassion.

It doesn't have to be that tenderness where your heart's like bursting out of your chest like they have in cartoons, and you're weeping. Sometimes it's like that. Mostly not, which is good, because how could we get through life if every time we touch suffering, we're weeping? "Oh, it's so beautiful." That's lovely once in a while. But something comes up, that sense of "you are so stupid," and the mind goes, "Oh, that's judging." Just like that. Just a little moment of accepting and judging. That's painful. That's compassion. And it's also possible because of the emptiness, the non-self clinging, not building a whole story around it. Both of those are happening then. That really is the path.

Sharon Salzberg likes to say, "To pay attention is to love." And notice, if you're really giving attention—start with someone else, because that's easier than oneself. Just really there. Someone's describing their troubles, their problems, and it's someone you care about, and you're able to just really be there, really open, really listening. In those moments, we're not self-referencing.

There's no room for that. With total attention, we're not even thinking of it. The self-referencing is simply gone. There's openness. You're just really paying attention. That's a quality of compassion, of love, of pure presence. That's what we're practicing. That's what we're cultivating. It's really very powerful.

Taking this back to yourself then, first consider how—if it's ever happened—you feel when you're really suffering and there's someone there who can just truly be there for you. They may or may not be able to do anything. And sometimes that impulse of "let me fix it, let me fix it" isn't actually the same thing as being there and really holding in their heart, in their mind, your suffering as you simply talk about it. That sense of someone just bearing witness, of someone just being able to totally be present for you—

before there's something to do, or maybe there isn't something to do. That comes later. But first, just that total accepting, receiving presence. There's something powerful about it, isn't there?

So can we turn around and offer that to ourselves? In our moments of huge suffering, in our moments of little niggly discomfort—your toe hurts—it doesn't really matter. The power of bearing witness is huge in this world.

I want to read a little snippet of a poem from Anna Akhmatova. I really like her a lot. She was one of the most famous Russian poets of the 20th century, and her life spanned really the whole period of twentieth-century Russia—from before the revolution, which was sort of aristocratic, through the revolution and the civil war and vast periods of starvation, into the whole terrors of the Stalin period. She was part of all of that, watching people—other poets—starve, her husband and son both being arrested in different purges, herself almost starving, and through the Second World War when many people were starving in St. Petersburg and in Moscow. For most of that time she wasn't allowed to be published. But even before she was banned, she was very famous. Russians just really love their poets, and she was beloved. And so by dint of living through all that, that's what she wrote about. That was one of the reasons, I think, she was so cherished.

This little snippet of a poem is from *Requiem*, 1935 to 1940. She's talking about the terrible years of the Yezhov Terror—a period in the mid-30s. Yezhov was one of the people who worked with Stalin; at this time he was head of the secret police. It was one of the periods of huge, huge arrests. Anyone you knew could be arrested for anything, people sent off to the labor camps. Her son at this point had been arrested.

Requiem, instead of a preface:

> In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad.

People would wait every day to get news of their loved ones or to try and bring food.

> One day, somebody in the crowd identified me, called me by name. Standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold who had, of course, never heard me called by name before.

Remember, she was famous.

> Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper—everyone whispered there—"Can you describe this?" And I said, "I can." Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

It just so speaks to me of the power—the ability, the willingness—to really be in it and openheartedly bear witness without shutting down, without blame. It connects us. It's really powerful in this world.

And it's not possible without also some understanding of emptiness. Otherwise we drown. Otherwise we go under. This is the other side. Emptiness needs compassion. Compassion needs emptiness.

Again from the Dalai Lama: "Compassion must be derived from our insight into emptiness of inherent self."

This is where the vast meets the profound. The vast needs the profound.

Without the unity of compassion and emptiness, we can fall into despair. And this may sound difficult to hear, but knowing the emptiness—knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable—our sympathy for our inability to extricate ourselves leads to a more powerful compassion. But without the emptiness, though our compassion may be strong, it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness or even despair.

In my own experience, it can go back and forth between the two poles. There's the emptiness that isn't quite in touch, that feels really free, but there's a little disconnect. And it can flip to the other pole, where there's that sense of real tenderness in the vastness of suffering, but it's not quite balanced in that moment by the emptiness. And we fall into despair, helplessness, hopelessness.

Big picture, it's okay. We're balancing, we're balancing. Small picture, we notice when we're in despair, when it's helplessness, hopelessness. I've noticed in myself how easily that helplessness can switch to anger.

Working with people who have a strong commitment—say, working to save the environment, or in peace marches, or just trying to help someone you really care about—you see that they're suffering, and maybe something in their environment or situation isn't fair. It seems like, why did they have to go through that and not other people? Sometimes we can touch the pain, and sometimes there's nothing we can do.

I have friends who go to a lot of peace marches over the years, and they often say it starts out really upbeat, but sometimes people end up really angry or embittered. Or people working in the environmental movement feel, "I have to really use anger in the courtroom." Lawyers saying, "How can I come into the courtroom without anger? The other people are so angry and harsh. I need my anger." And it can feel justified.

I know in myself this helpless feeling. I have friends in difficult situations, and there really is nothing I can do other than really be there, really hear, really stay open. And then when that moves into helplessness or heads towards despair, I've noticed how a feeling of anger at anything can give me a sense of power, a sense of strength.

Helplessness—I know for myself, and really from talking to many people—it's different for everyone, but for many people, helplessness is one of the bottom-line feelings we really don't like. It's one of the ones that many people have developed really strong defense mechanisms against. So I can see for myself when it's moving into helplessness, I start saying, "Well, it shouldn't be like this." And it's energizing. The anger feels powerful. And it seems like it's getting something done. "You just wallow around in this wimpy helplessness, feeling compassion. What good is that?"

So really looking at this balance—anger may get stuff done. But the real heart of freedom, of real compassion and emptiness, starts from the inside out, not from the outside in. Again, it comes back to that sense of intention we talked about the other night. In our culture, we tend to evaluate ourselves and our actions by the results. If we get good results, it was a good action. We did the right thing. We forget to turn around and see: if we're just getting more and more angry, we got the results we wanted, but we really upset a lot of people and ran over them. And that's not the point.

A peace march where people end up smashing windows and burning cars—there's something missing. There's some missing piece there. Environmental activists, deeply, deeply committed, acting for the good of the planet, and they're getting eaten up by anger—again, there's something missing in the piece of understanding. The same is true for us.

We all have, in our own way, strong defense mechanisms that have been in place for each of us around particular feelings—maybe helplessness for somebody, or a real sense of loneliness, or deep fear, or maybe deep pain from childhood. So far, everyone I've met, including myself, has some really strong defense mechanisms in place that keep our conscious mind from even touching certain aspects of pain.

I'd say for most of us, when these defenses were first created way back in childhood, there was good reason for them. I can see some of my own patterns around feeling real terror, feeling afraid and unloved and abandoned—but I couldn't go there because my mother didn't know, and I had to take care of her. As little kids, these things came up to help us deal, to help us manage, to help us keep going. So we don't hate the defense mechanisms.

But at this point, it's a different story. We learn to recognize them. For me, I remember I talked the other night about when my mind hits that crazy place. I just call it that because it feels so intense. And now I think, great, I'm getting close to one of those. That's great. Because I know, as I said, when I can feel, oh, that's that little kid terror—it's like a sense of relief. Oh, okay. I can feel little kid terror. That's okay. I'm not going to die from it. In fact, boom, back into the tenderness. Tenderness for beings, tenderness for that little kid, tenderness for all little kids, just essential tenderness, only possible because of the sense of emptiness.

Eckhart Tolle put it a nice way. He says, "Compassion arises by allowing, by non-resistance to both levels of pain." We don't resist the so-called outer pain, the madness of the world, and we don't resist the so-called inner pain, our personal reactions. Both levels. When there's non-resistance, but with wise attention, with mindfulness, with clear seeing, that's when we're really open into wisdom and compassion.

And as the Dalai Lama said, our own suffering, our own experience—that's the conduit, that's the way in, that's really all we need, our own particular experience. Gandhi said, "Almost everything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." So in terms of this, just whatever's arising in our experience, it may seem insignificant, but we start where we are.

And this is really where the shift happens. We want, I'm assuming, to be good people, kind people, compassionate people. I'm assuming that's probably something, in one way or another, we all share. Kind to ourselves, kind to others, as well as free—they go together. But again, the sense of working from the inside out, rather than from the outside in—"I should be kind and compassionate, it looks like this"—and then we try to make our behavior match. We know that doesn't work.

Starting from the inside out is where there's the wise motivation that comes from moments of really knowing our basic goodness. Those times when you've really recognized and touched just the simplicity, the purity of heart and mind, which we talk about a lot. No big deal, but just, oh, it's like this. The moments Heather talked about when we just stop fighting whatever's going on and open to it—the ten thousand joys, the ten thousand sorrows. Oh. It's like this. Those moments of touching with the mind, with the heart, are what begin to give us and strengthen the deep trust so that the real heart of compassion and emptiness comes from the inside out, not from the outside in. And trusting enough to act from that.

Different people inspire me in that. I just want to give a couple of well-known examples. One, of course, is Martin Luther King. There's one quotation I read from him—remember in, I think it was 1954, when there was a bombing of a church in Alabama

and four little girls were killed. He said after that, "I have come to see even more, as we move on toward the goal of justice, that hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter." Really touching the heart of deep, deep suffering in a place where I know I would get angry, and justified in the anger, and overwhelmed—and he says, "I refuse to become bitter."

Another person, and this is a little longer, but I love it—this man is kind of one of my heroes, although I've never met him. I've only heard him and read about him. James Lawson. Again, it's from the Civil Rights Movement. I heard him give an interview on NPR around Christmas a couple of years ago. I didn't hear the beginning of the interview. I just came in in the middle, and this man was talking, and then I suddenly recognized from what he was saying who it was—that it was James Lawson. I got really excited.

He was one of the real leaders of the beginning civil rights movement. He's a doctor of divinity and one of the leading theorists even now on nonviolence, on the theory of nonviolence. Back in the fifties, he was very committed—he's African-American, from Ohio—he was very committed to theories of nonviolence. He actually went to India and studied with disciples of Gandhi. Gandhi was dead by then.

During the Korean War, he was a conscientious objector. He could have gotten out of going because of being a minister, but he said that wouldn't be fair, so he went to jail. And he said—this I heard in the interview—that in jail, he discovered a strength and power in himself to live out of his own conscience, to act from his own really deep wisdom and understanding. This is the power of coming from within.

So the interviewer was asking him all these questions: How do you deal with violence? What do you do when someone's being violent? And he just said—and I can't explain it more than this—it just kind of turns it on its head. He said, "You're asking the questions from the wrong angle. Nonviolence stems from a completely different configuration of power." So all the questions about people being violent and what you do about it—he's saying it's a whole other way of looking at the world.

I'll just leave it at that and read this story about him from David Halberstam's book, *The Children*, which is about some of the young people in Nashville in 1960 who started all the demonstrations, the sit-ins and everything. At that time, he had come down to Nashville and was giving the young college student demonstrators workshops on nonviolent action. Remember, they were deeply committed to Christian love and nonviolence. That's where this was coming out of. That's where he was coming from.

So they were marching in Nashville, and as they were marching, a few white toughs suddenly attacked and knocked down a man named Solomon at the end of the line. They were kicking him, and another young man, Bernard Lafayette—this was his first chance to really use his training in nonviolence—came over and threw his body over his friend to draw the attention of the guys beating him up. And so then they started beating and kicking him.

And then Jim Lawson came over. He'd been conducting all these workshops. He did not rush over as to an accident, or even as if to stop a beating. Instead, he walked over very calmly, as if to a long-standing appointment. His arrival shifted the attention of the whites from the fallen Bernard Lafayette to Lawson. The thing about Jim, Bernard remembered, was that he was so self-assured, so confident, as if he were accustomed to dealing with white toughs beating up fallen black demonstrators every day of his life. The leader of the whites was wearing what was the prevailing uniform of the day for toughs—a black leather motorcycle jacket and that big kind of haircut, what they called a DA haircut. When he saw Lawson, he was enraged by his coolness, and he spat at him. Lawson looked at him and asked him for a handkerchief. The man, stunned, reached in his pocket and handed Lawson a handkerchief. And Lawson wiped the spit off himself as calmly as he could. Then he looked at the man's jacket and started talking to him. Did he have a motorcycle or a hot rod car? A motorcycle was the answer. Jim asked a technical question or two, and the young man started explaining what he had done to customize his bike. Amazingly, Bernard thought, these two men were now talking about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. A few seconds earlier, they had seemed to be sworn enemies. By this time, both Solomon and Bernard were on their feet, the line was moving again, and Jim and the young man were still talking about the man's motorcycle. In that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject which they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them more human in the eyes of the other. As they walked away, Jim waved to the man, and the man remained still, neither accepting the friendship nor, for that matter, rejecting it. It had been a marvelous example of Christian love for Bernard.

It doesn't solve everything. It doesn't solve all the problems. But that to me is such an inspiring example of how compassion and wisdom work from the inside out. A real courage, and it's powerful.

The other aspect I want to mention again—of how this courage, this compassion, needs to be balanced by wisdom—is the wisdom of equanimity. Because remember, in equanimity we recognize we can't control the outcome. We can't control the results. So

when Jim Lawson went and talked to that guy, he didn't know what was going to happen. When we open to our own suffering and to others', we don't know what's going to happen. Life is ambiguous. Situations are complex.

Without the vastness of equanimity, the power of equanimity—and this is the emptiness of knowing that all things come and go, that awareness is unstained by all—we wouldn't have the courage and the trust to come from compassion, from love, from equanimity, from mudita, and to let it go into the universe. We can't control. So in equanimity, we can't control others' responses. We don't always have the big picture. And yet we still need to make decisions.

You know, the eight worldly winds come and go. If you've ever had to be the health proxy for someone—like I had for my father the last couple of years of his life, my siblings and I—you understand this deeply. No matter how much documentation is drawn up ahead of time, you can't cover what all the situations are going to be. And you're in the situation: Do you put this tube in or don't you? Do you take this tube out or don't you? You don't know what's going to happen. You don't know what the person would want.

You need to come from as much equanimity and compassion as possible—the equanimity of not knowing, but also the equanimity of recognizing it's not about my fear, my dislike, my feelings. You try and do the best you can.

I remember one time my father had a tube in. He kept getting pneumonia, and the doctor said, well, he hadn't wanted anything special done, so we're going to take it out. We're sure he's going to die. So I was there, and I said, okay, do it. Of course he didn't die. He didn't at all. He got really strong. He kept doing that. The doctors would be completely amazed—how could he come back from this? So then another time they say, well, you shouldn't put in a tube because he's going to die, and it'll just make him linger. But you put in the tube and he gets better. You don't know. You just don't know. And every situation is different. So one does the best one can, with compassion, not holding to a desired result.

All life is like that. It's so complex, so ambiguous.

Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh—I use this story a lot, but it's really touched me. Long ago, during the Vietnam War, she was an activist, as was Thich Nhat Hanh. Neither side, the South or the North Vietnamese, trusted him. So one time she was thrown into jail by the South Vietnamese for having distributed some peace pamphlets of Thich Nhat Hanh. She was in a big cell—this is from her autobiography—

with quite a few other women, maybe fifteen or twenty. And there were also two young girls, eleven or twelve years old, who had just been in a village that the South Vietnamese had swept through, taking everyone there, thinking they were Viet Cong.

Sister Chan Khong got released through her family knowing somebody. That's how things work. And as she was leaving and having her outtake interview with the head of the prison, she said, "Oh, by the way, there are these two young girls here. They haven't done anything. They're not Viet Cong. They're in this terrible environment with all these criminals. They really should be released."

He said, "Oh, okay. I see from what you're saying that the prisoners are talking to each other, and this is not acceptable, so I'm going to really tighten up the conditions here."

So how would you feel? Could you walk out from that and not turn bitter? Not get angry? Not be afraid to keep on acting as best you could from the best understanding you have? It's a koan. It's a koan.

The same is true with ourselves. We meet ourselves with real compassion—our suffering, with compassion. And we try to act not just to make ourselves feel better, but to discover what is most supportive for our awakening. Sometimes we think we're really seeing everything, but there are subtle levels of fear, aversion, clinging we don't see. We're acting as best we can, but it doesn't quite work—we're still somehow feeding our denial system. That's the best we can do.

What do we do then? Say, "Well, I couldn't see clearly, I couldn't do it right, so to hell with it—I'm just not going to try anymore"? Other times we do see clearly. We simply need this trust, this willingness to keep going.

The Dalai Lama, in an interview once, was confronted by young Tibetans taking him to task—the new generation saying, "Look, basically, old man, your nonviolent approach to the Chinese is not working. They're taking over. It's not working. Something else needs to happen." As new generations always do.

In this article, it said that he was really listening, as he does, and there were even tears in his eyes. He said, "You may be right, but I cannot do otherwise. I cannot be otherwise than to act from nonviolence and compassion. That's just the truth of who I am. And you may be right."

That ambiguity. That not having the whole picture. Not getting the results. Not fixing the world. The Buddha couldn't fix the world. He couldn't even fix his own kinspeople—they kept going to war with each other over water and this and that. What do we think we're going to do?

But he also didn't say, "I can't fix the world, so I'm going to go into my pleasant abiding here and now, fourth jhana, see you later in forty-five years." He could have done that too. No, he spent his whole life walking around, sharing the Dhamma. And that's all you can do—share it. Share it with yourself, share it with the world. Meet every moment with this compassionate, clear seeing. That's all we can do.

It's not being a doormat. It's not being passive at all. When we're clearly connected with what's here and now, again, ceaselessly responsive with wisdom, the best appropriate action just presents itself.

Master Sheng Yen, a wonderful Taiwanese Chan master, says, talking about no-self: "One clearly knows how to behave or respond." As another teacher calls it, it's doing the obvious. Something happens—face it, accept it, handle it, put it down. I just love that. Any situation comes up: face it, accept it, handle it, put it down. So simple. So straightforward. No big, fancy, amazing thing.

I'll end with a quotation from Pema Chödrön about bodhicitta: "At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness, our open space."

And this, from Chökyi Nyima:

When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be, spontaneously an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me. But when watching its nature of innate simplicity as it really is, I cannot help but feel wonder and break out in laughter. When watching, the one who feels pity and the one who is laughing both disappear and cannot be found. Now what to do?

Thank you.

CHAPTER 39

Mingling Our Minds With The Dhamma

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *Drawing from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teaching on mingling our minds with the Dhamma until it permeates our whole being, Carol Wilson offers a profound exploration of how Buddhist practice moves from intellectual understanding to lived wisdom. She examines the three levels of paññā (wisdom): sutamayāpaññā (wisdom from hearing), cintāmayāpaññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanāmayāpaññā (wisdom from direct cultivation through meditation).*
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> *The talk illuminates how sammā diṭṭhi (right view) naturally leads to sammā saṅkappa (right intention), which then shapes our speech, action, and way of being in the world. Wilson shares personal examples demonstrating how our larger sense of purpose and aspiration can transform even difficult mind states like self-judgment, shifting our relationship to experience from aversion to wise investigation.*
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> *Particularly valuable is her discussion of kalyāṇamittatā (spiritual friendship) and how wholesomeness is contagious—we both receive inspiration from others and offer it through who we are. She encourages practitioners to trust that wisdom does its own work when we simply pay attention, while also recognizing our responsibility to let our understanding shine forth. The teaching concludes with a contemplation from the Tibetan tradition on perceiving all phenomena as manifestations of Chenrezig's compassion and emptiness.*

There's a line from Dogen Khentse Rinpoche that I really like, and it's sort of the theme I want to talk about tonight. He speaks about the importance of mingling our mind with the Dharma until it permeates our whole being.

He says that the Buddha's teachings are inconceivably extensive and profound, and to achieve an exhaustive intellectual understanding of them would be a rare and remarkable achievement. But that's not enough by itself. Until we also achieve inner realization by actually applying the teachings and mingling them with our minds, whatever knowledge we may gain remains theoretical. Leaving the doctor's prescription by the bedside will not cure the illness. So turn your mind inward and ponder deeply the meaning of the Dharma until it permeates your whole being.

I just love that—ponder the Dharma, practice the Dharma, explore the Dharma until it permeates our whole being. That's really what this path is about, in retreat and out of retreat, no different. When we talk about mingling our mind with the Dharma, in es-

sence one way of looking at it is the Eightfold Path—different aspects of how we live our life. All of our activities, everything we do, from the smallest thing to the biggest thing, can become part of helping us mingle our minds with the Dharma. Nothing left out.

When we talk about the Eightfold Path, as you know, it's really more like a circle than a path. It begins with right view, wise understanding, and of course keeps on increasing, keeps on strengthening. So what do we mean by right view, right understanding, the beginning of the path?

The first aspect is just what Dogen Khentse is saying—the theoretical level. Learning, where we hear something, read something, learn something. That's what gets us to even think there might be another way in this life, or piques our interest, gets us to do a little bit of meditation or begin to look at our mind or even think there's another way to live. So theoretical information is very important. It actually has a word in Pali: *sutamayā paññā*. There are three levels of wisdom, and *sutamayā paññā—suta* really means what is heard, the teachings. We hear it theoretically. It begins to turn our mind in the direction of Dharma, of wisdom.

The second level is called *cintāmayā paññā*—the way we think about things. We've taken in, for example, impermanence. Just hearing "all things are impermanent, they arise"—that's theoretical knowledge. With *cintāmayā paññā*, using our mind, our reflections, our contemplation, we think about it. We can really come to some deep recognition: "Oh yes, that really seems true." We can look, we can see, we can contemplate it. We're actually using the thinking mind in our meditation, in our life, in a supportive way. Thinking is one of the six senses. We don't hate it. Let's learn to use it. This is a deeper level of knowledge. We hear it, we contemplate it, we explore it with the mind, but it still isn't really deeply yet right view, right understanding.

The depth of it is the third level, which in Pali is *bhāvanāmayā paññā*—mental cultivation, or what I would simply call insight. That moment when we really understand in a different way. Insight is basically a shift of perception. I love the translation "right view" because I feel like it's actually literal—we're viewing an experience more accurately than we were before.

Take *anicca*, which is a good example. We hear it, it makes sense. We think about it: yes, I know that. We would all probably say, "Yeah, I really know things are impermanent." But if there's really right view, deep understanding, it automatically leads to the second step of the path, which is intention, wise intention—what leads to the next steps of speech and action.

If we really understood, not just in contemplation but through insight, that everything is impermanent, that impacts our intentions of mind, how we speak, how we act. Sometimes that's how we find out whether our understanding was actually theoretical or coming from really seeing clearly—when we move into the next step of the path of intention and then into speech and action.

Because we can talk up the wazoo. "I really know everything's impermanent." And if you're sitting there having a difficult experience in meditation or in life, saying, "I know this is impermanent, I know it's impermanent"—if we really know it's impermanent, we don't get filled with aversion. We don't get filled with fear. We don't start running around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to do everything to get rid of this experience, because we know it's impermanent.

So when there's really insight, it's like just that shift of perception where we see something that's already here in a different way. The difference between knowing things are impermanent and actually experiencing a moment or period of time—and it can be in meditation or out of meditation, like someone was mentioning today—just really seeing moods, emotions, patterns coming and going, coming and going, coming and going. To the extent that there's nothing to think about, it's just so clear. That's how it is. It's the actual perception. It's not of thought anymore. That's right view in that moment. And that can happen with many, many different things. I'm just using impermanence for an example.

When it's right view in that moment, the intentions that arise, the thoughts, the intentions, the thoughts leading to speech and action—they aren't going to be that of fear or clinging. In those moments of real, accurate perception, insight, deep wisdom, for that moment of right view of impermanence, clinging to stuff doesn't arise. We don't have to talk ourselves out of it. It doesn't arise because it doesn't make any sense. Something is coming. We know—we don't have to think about it—we know it's going. Clinging to it is just laughable. Okay, next day, next hour, that's just a fond memory. And it informs our mind stream. It informs our understanding. But in the moment of the clear insight, in that moment, it's as if really quite deeply our minds are mingled with the Dharma.

That understanding is what leads to intention, is how we think about things, how we relate to experience, which leads to how we speak, how we act, the decisions that we make. It's just quite obvious. And in that sense—this is how I'm interpreting what Ajahn Chah says—in that moment, the mind, the heart, the perception, the right view, the in-

tentions, the speech, the action, it's all mingled with the Dharma, with the truth, using Dharma in the terms of just the truth of how things are. There's no tension in that way. There's no friction. It's just, "Oh, that's how it is."

And we've all—yes, even you—we've all had many moments of that. And then later, as I said, it's a fond memory. Maybe it gets less and less fond as we struggle and struggle to have that experience again. That's why it's a path. That's why a few moments of really mingling gives us a taste. It informs our understanding. That's the beginning, the continuing of the path of right view. But that's why it is an ongoing path.

We use all aspects of our life to work with intention, how we speak, how we act, how we are in this world. It leads to our willingness to use the last stages of the path—of energy, of mindfulness, of collectedness of attention—to pay attention to the other aspects. The whole path becomes more alive, a template through which we can use that template of the path to put on the actions of our life, to help us see when our understanding, our intentions, our actions, our speech are mingling with the Dharma, when they're not. And to help us, because assuming this is something that's a deep motivation for us, to help us further align.

So as we were saying this morning, kamma just means action. And as the Buddha said, the seed, the heart of action is in the intention. So how we understand, how we perceive—that leads to how we think, the intentions in our mind—that leads to how we speak and act.

Remember when Sally was talking about the vipallāsas, the distortions of perception? Again, it's the same thing, back with right view, the beginning and the place we keep coming to in deeper and deeper spirals of mingling our hearts, our minds with the Dharma, with the truth.

So how we perceive something: We perceive permanence, really, a distortion of perception. We perceive impermanence. We perceive something as being me or mine. We perceive, "Oh, just arising and passing, no me or mine." That perception, accurate or inaccurate, distorted or accurate, then leads to how we think about the thing. How we think about it hardens into a view, what we believe. And this actually is on the level of the deep Dharma understandings, the views that we don't often even realize we have—the view that things are permanent, the view that I'm my body, or these emotions are me, or just that I am somehow separate. We don't go around with little neon signs in our mind going, "I am now holding this view that this experience is permanent."

I mean, if we did, it would be helpful. We'd know why we were suffering. But we don't really. We don't just sit there as things are arising and suddenly notice, "Oh, view coming up! I am a separate, eternal self—coming up. This emotion belongs to me." We don't get that. We don't realize we're holding the view. But the view is just a hardening of the perception, the thought, and that's what leads to intention or action.

So you see how it all can go through misperception or through perception. But it all is very logical. And we can see how it affects, how it colors our decisions, our actions in the world—really who we are, how we show up. So how does our right view show up in the world, or our wrong view? How does our mingling with the Dhamma show up—by how we speak, by how we act, but even more just by who we are, who we are as we go through life. You don't have to be Gandhi or someone and do incredible, amazing things. It's just seeing who we are, coming to understand how we perceive and understand, how that colors the intentions, and how this level of intention is really a place that we can include in our mindfulness and awareness practice—not just on retreat, but also in our life.

The subtle moment-to-moment intentions, like before I lift my hand—it's a little easier to see those in the silence of retreat. But the second step of the path, which is variously translated as wise intention or wise attitude or wise aspiration, can also be looked at in a broader application. This is where we've been getting caught up sometimes in the wording, where we sometimes talk about intention, sometimes talk about motivation, sometimes talk about aspiration.

Intention, *cetanā*, could just be that momentary impulse—the "about to" that comes before every movement, before every speech. Aspiration or a sense of motivation could be something larger. In the commentaries under *sampajañña*, clear comprehension, this is discussed. Mindfulness and clear comprehension are often talked about together. Mindfulness is the knowing in the moment what something is. Clear comprehension is the broader context—clearly knowing what you're doing and the context you're doing it in.

This is helpful. Someone was saying you can get really mindful and very concentrated, so focused on what you're doing that you're completely oblivious to everything around you. Has anybody noticed that?

I'll tell you—this is embarrassing. It was a long time ago, so I can say it. I was practicing at IMS many, many years ago. I was walking through this coatroom where you put your coats, and then you walk down a few stairs into an upper walking room, and through that room into the meditation hall. I was walking very slowly and mindfully, noting "lifting, moving, placing"—incredibly focused on the sensations. So incredibly fo-

cused that I just fell down the stairs without even noticing they were there. That was embarrassing. You think, "Hmm, there's something missing." I was mindful, and yet there's something missing. So that's the clear comprehension piece, right? One aspect of it.

In terms of working with intention, it's the aspiration or larger orientation. Remember, when I talked the other night about cultivating or getting in touch with our intention for practice, or the intention of bodhicitta, for example—that's vast. It's not that that's present every moment, but it serves as a wider aspiration that we can attune to in moments. I'll talk more about that in a minute. But just to see how we understand the situation, how we understand ourselves in the world, and what we see—whether it's conscious or unconscious—what we're holding as our larger purpose, our larger aspiration, is really going to affect the decisions we make, the actions we take.

There was an experiment that was talked about in the book *The Tipping Point*, which is really interesting. It has all kinds of little different examples of how we affect one another, how motivation and understanding affect things. This experiment—I don't have all the details—they called it the Good Samaritan Experiment. It was with some seminarians, men and women who were training to be ministers of some sort. I'm assuming, because they're seminarians, that they went there on purpose, and that they must be relatively good people with some sense of wanting to serve.

In this experiment, they divided the seminarians in half. One half had to go from one place to another on the campus, and they were given this very urgent mission—I don't remember what it was, but very urgent. It was really impressed on them how important it was. They had to get to this other place really quickly in order to carry out this very important mission, which seemed like a good thing to do. The others didn't have that extra purpose, but they were also told to go in a hurry to that same place.

But the real experiment was that on the way—which is why it was called the Good Samaritan Experiment—on the way there was someone they'd planted who was really in need of assistance. Not dying-level need, but really in strong need of assistance—distraught and asking for help.

And by far the ones who had been given this very urgent mission didn't stop to help, because they had this other more important urgent thing to do. Whereas the ones who didn't have that bigger goal did stop to help.

So it's just interesting to see how our mind makes priorities and makes choices based on our understanding—consciously or not—of what's really important to us, of what's really important in life. We see how our view affects our intentions, and our intentions affect our decisions about how to act, how to speak.

With right view, paññā, wisdom, accurate seeing, our intentions—both larger and smaller—naturally transform. It just happens by itself. But also, what I think I've noticed in myself is that as our smaller intentions transform, our larger purpose and aspiration hopefully begins to change as well. We may or may not consciously access that, and I'll talk a little about actually doing that, because I find it so supportive and consciously helpful in how we meet our life and how we live our life.

Do we live our life in a way that deepens our mingling our minds with the Dhamma? Or do we just kind of respond haphazardly or by habit to circumstances? Sometimes we do both. But it's possible to tune in much more consciously, with much more caring and intentionality, to what really is true for you as a larger aspiration, as a more compelling motivation. What is your view? What do you really believe is important in life, from your understanding?

Can we consciously—now, later, tomorrow, through the days—take some time to really allow that to bubble up in your heart, in your mind? Don't just start with the first superficial thought that comes up. It may not be the best thought. Sometimes that's true, but sometimes it's like, "Oh, well, I just want to do the best I can, you know, being a loser that I am." But sometimes something much more profound and touching can arise, and it can come up by surprise. It can come, and you think, "No, I don't think so. No way that's possible for me." Don't listen to the habitual disclaimers or the habitual "no." You can feel it—it feels different.

If you just give some space, you maybe already know what it is for you. And it can be changing all the time too. But giving some space to consciously allow that to come from the unconscious into consciousness—it comes again as an understanding, as a view that we can consciously turn to, call in, to work on the level of intention in our life, helping us make choices in our speech, in our action, in our intentions, in what we choose to give importance to, to pay attention to. Because that's really where the rubber meets the road. That's, as I said before, where we find out what we really understand—by how we relate to our own mind and heart, by how we relate to situations in the world, by how we relate to others. This isn't a judgment. If you're looking at this through judgment, that isn't so helpful.

You can see how this step of the Eightfold Path is a kind of template, a list, about how the Dharma, how reality, how our understanding does begin and continue to permeate our heart, our mind, our whole being. How this mingling the mind with the Dhamma, the understanding, moves from concept, idea, information, to a perception, a clear understanding, a view that's based more in reality. And how that view then becomes strong enough to inform our intentions and our actions.

That also leads us to be more inclined towards the mental cultivation, the other aspects of the path—to give more appreciation and value to the energy, the effort it takes just to pay attention to ourselves. It doesn't take growing effort, but it takes some willingness, some interest to show up, to pay attention to what's going on in our mind and heart. The mindfulness, the concentration—by concentration, I just mean the collectedness, the balance, the stability.

And it keeps feeding back, because as our understanding deepens and our intentions begin to purify and we see the effect this can have on how we show up in life and who we are, this in turn strengthens our understanding and our faith. And it just keeps spiraling, cycling deeper and deeper and deeper.

You start to see—I know you've already seen—how our habits of intention, which can show up just as a thought, can show up as how we think about ourselves, how we react internally to experience. You see how they begin to change. How, for instance, the self-judgment or the self-hating or the putting oneself down or the greed isn't always the intention of choice anymore. Sometimes the wisdom comes in and you consciously see, "Oh, I need to—no, I don't," and it's a little bit of consciously doing it. Other times you don't even need to consciously refer to your greater aspiration because—oh, it just doesn't arise.

I'll give you a little example. I noticed today how the shift of intention based on understanding really can change the whole inner climate. This is like a meditation experience because it's so small, but it makes a big difference in life.

I was noticing in my mind—I think it was in the sitting this morning—some familiar negative pattern was coming up, probably self-judgment. That's the most familiar pattern. Recognized, felt, all those things. "Oh yeah, it's not good, don't want it," all that stuff. But there was a tinge of aversion, which I didn't see at first, because the view that it was being met with wasn't really clear. The view was, "This is bad and it shouldn't be here and I don't like it"—basically, not good. And so that was aversion.

So I was sitting there, and then suddenly it just clicked in my mind—it came in, this had all happened by itself—that my aspiration was more in the moment, and through the day, to be able to really be here with people in an open and compassionate way. That just came in. And so in that moment, there wasn't aversion or clinging or greed. And also there was clear seeing. And in that moment, I said, "Oh, so this self-judgment—it's not like it's bad." I could feel how that's in the way of compassionate, open presence.

And that didn't make me hate it. *Oh, that's the aspiration—to be open, compassionate, and present. Oh, I see how self-judging really is a blocking of that.* Isn't that interesting? Let me pay more attention to the self-judging.

It completely shifted my attitude to it. Not that it has to go away or anything, but more wisdom was there, intelligence that wants to understand how these things work. *Oh, self-judgment. I feel it as an obstacle because my motivation is understanding and compassion.* It's not like getting out the baseball bat and getting rid of it because it's in the way. Do you get a sense of what I mean?

The motivation is working kind of behind things. The thought could be the same: *This isn't a helpful feeling to be having.* But the motivation—one was from delusion: I don't like it, it's no good, it's got to go away. The other is from wisdom and compassion based in my larger aspiration. It's a little thing, but it felt like a big thing to me. It's just an example of how that can work for anything in our life.

Our habits really begin to switch. As we begin to understand this, both on the cushion and off the cushion, we can put more energy, work more actively, take more care with this second step of the path—this area of wise intention. Not from a should. Not from judgment at all, but again from getting in touch with your greater sense of purpose.

As they say, it's part of the clear comprehension that's talked about in the commentaries—clear comprehension of your greater sense of purpose, your aspiration. It's sort of not a goal exactly, but what colors our path, what's our beacon, what's our guidepost in times when we do need to make decisions. What's important, what's not important, what choices do I want to make?

So, as I said, if you don't already have a sense of it, or if you haven't really connected with it for a while, I would suggest at some point to take some time and just make it an open, felt question in your heart: What is really, truly—not what should be most important, not what sounds good or bad or whatever—but just really, what is most important in my life? Because that will become a beacon, a guidepost, a support in times of choice. Not to make yourself crazy—should I have chocolate ice cream or vanilla ice

cream? Or should I have ice cream at all? No, I shouldn't, because my... you know. But there are times, and you know when they are, if you open up, that we really can tune into this.

It's said in the commentaries that having a sense of your greater sense of purpose collects our dispersed energy. And it's really true. When we have a sense of what's really important, it's like a way of helping us align our actions and our decisions with that instead of just randomly responding.

When Sally last night talked about Greg Mortenson building schools in Pakistan, he's a great example. His story is a great example of how a sense of purpose really gives us incredible strength. It's sort of the same way concentration collects all the dispersed mental energy and focuses it on something. Again, it needs to be wise concentration—not incredible striving. But in this same way, our greater sense of purpose does help us make decisions.

For all of us, we all have that. We wouldn't be here through a whole month retreat. How many moments have you thought, *What am I doing here? I wish I could be anywhere—home, somewhere else—but not here in this mind, listening to this crap. I want to be out of here.* Is there anyone who hasn't had any moment like that this whole retreat? So there's some greater sense of purpose. Maybe it's just shame, you know—so that might be it. It's helpful to know. Don't kid ourselves. Sometimes public group shame is all that keeps us in a sitting or keeps us at a retreat. Hopefully we transcend that and come to appreciate that it was all for a greater purpose.

But really, I'm kind of joking, kind of not. Hopefully that's not the only reason you're here. You didn't come here out of shame, hopefully. So you see what I mean—the sense of purpose.

If this is the first time for you, perhaps you never thought you could seriously do this for a month. Remember when you went to your first retreat? You thought, who could do this for two days, or ten days? And now maybe you're thinking—some of you are here for two months. Some of you have already done lots of long retreats. And the rest of you who are leaving, I know, are saying, "Oh, I so wish I had another month here. Let me sign up for next year."

But that sense of greater purpose—you see what I mean? We call on that all the time. And sometimes that's all we can call on. We don't have the clear seeing that this really difficult thing is impermanent. I know it, I can sink into it. Sometimes we can't access that. But sometimes we can access just this sense of purpose. I don't feel like I'm doing the meditation. I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere. But somehow I know and trust

this is really what's important to me—whether it's understanding, or developing compassion, or whatever it is for you. And there's some trust that this is helpful, so you keep doing it.

We all have this really strongly, and we can call on it even more. It's like that guy Greg Mortensen—he had incredible resolution, incredible resolve. We all have the power, as Sally talked about, differing strengths at different times. But calling on this sense of purpose is something I have found so helpful. Sometimes I forget about it, and then it will come up when I'm thinking, "Well, should I do this? I don't want to go teach that retreat. I just want to take a vacation." Sometimes you need a vacation. Sometimes a vacation is what's going to help you balance and relax in order to keep on serving. It's not a sense of what's right or wrong in that moment—it's the big picture.

I remember when I first thought of this, and then I forgot about it. And somewhere later, out of nowhere, came up this idea: I just want to love and serve the Dharma. And I thought, who, me? I don't think so. That immediate dismissal. But it kind of came up from somewhere else. You know how that is. These insights, these deep intuitions, they come up and you really can't ignore them without trying awfully hard.

So I advise you: don't ignore it. Don't buy into all the stupid habitual stuff your mind says. Let yourself resonate with it. Let yourself feel whatever it is—it doesn't have to be any particular thing. Let it give you strength. Let it give you courage. Let it give you inspiration to really do things we never thought we could do, and to go in a direction where we never really know what's going to happen.

For me, if I thought ten years ago what I'd be doing now, or twenty years ago, or when I made different choices—did I know where they were going to end up? No way. No clue. In fact, that's one of my favorite things I say to myself all the time: I don't have a clue. It's really helpful. I just have no clue. You let go of trying to have a clue. And then you just make the best decision you can based on the clearest intention, based on the real wisdom that you can access—the wisdom of heart, the kindness of mind. We don't know where it's going to go. So we just do the clearest intention we can. Align with

your reference point, your deep motivation.

In terms of living our life from this place, aligning over and over with what's really our deepest purpose, trying as well as we can to remember to access our purest understanding, our kindest and most accurate intentions—this mingling of our mind and heart with the Dharma is, minimally, a lifelong task. That's the least it is. If we have any

sense of belief that perhaps it goes more than one life, well, this mingling of our hearts and minds with the Dharma, with the truth, just seems endless and opening. But not endless in a depressive way.

Because it's endless anyway. So it might as well be endless and opening to the truth rather than endless in the ping-pong back and forth of greed, hatred, and delusion—liking, disliking, going this way because I want it, going that way because I don't want it. What kind of life is that? That's what we call samsara. Ping-pong, ping-pong, over and over, endless. It feels like that sometimes, doesn't it?

But when it's really this opening to the depth—how deep can compassion get? How wide can wisdom get? How vast is impermanence? How big is emptiness? It's endless. There's always more to see. How subtle is the mind? What's the nature of consciousness? You think you're going to answer that with one talk? I don't think so.

It's opening into endless questions. And that's exciting. If you don't have a clue and you don't need a clue, it's really exciting. Maybe that's my purpose now, just not to need a clue. I know that might not sound too inspiring. But the sense of the vastness, the subtlety, the beauty—that there's always deeper to go in mingling our hearts and minds with the truth—that's lovely.

So you don't have to feel like, "Well, this is my goal, my deep intention, and I haven't done it yet. I'm already seventy-two years old. I've already sat three three-month retreats. What's the problem?" When we just throw that out the window, it's like—just right now. What's in the mind and heart? What intentions are arising? Why am I saying and doing what I'm saying and doing?

Now, that's not a judging question. It's really interested. "Oh, how does self-judging work in the mind right now?" It's interested. It just wants to see and know.

That kind of interest has so much trust—trust that wisdom will do the work itself. We don't have to figure it out. Just get interested. Meet what's happening and trust that right view arises because it's simply the way things are. You don't have to make it be that way. It already is. When our tightness and holding and views are not so in the way, the way things are reveals itself.

Naturally, the intention purifies. Naturally, our speech and action starts to reflect that. Who we are in the world starts to reflect that. We can't stop that. But we can trust it, that wisdom really does that work.

This is where we use, though, the energy, the mindfulness, the samādhi, the collectedness—to keep noticing, to keep paying attention. So we have some choice there, some energy, some effort, but just to pay attention. And really trusting that wisdom opens by itself. And the manifestation, as we've talked about, of compassion or of equanimity or of muditā or of mettā—that shows up by itself as well.

There's one other aspect I want to explore tonight in terms of this path we're on, this mingling of our hearts and minds with the truth. It's the clear comprehension of purpose within the Eightfold Path, but also the recognition that while we can totally trust this process, it is also difficult. It's hard.

As the Buddha said, practicing the Dhamma is like swimming upstream against the main current of the culture. It was the same back then as it is now. We'll have our perceptions, we'll really have some wise understanding, some wise views, some purified intentions. We act from kindness, from understanding, but it's not always met. The rest of the culture doesn't necessarily stand up and cheer and say, "Yes, I'm so glad that you're here. You're renouncing that greed. Yes, I'm so glad that you've stopped acting in that way." It doesn't necessarily happen.

So what's really helpful is what the Buddha called kalyāṇamitta, or spiritual friend—really realizing that we don't have to do this path alone. We aren't on it alone. Here we are all together, and there are many other beings—and I'm not even talking about Buddha Dhamma here—but there are many beings here and in the world who are committed to understanding, to compassion, to honesty, to generosity, to all the aspects of how we are in the world, including wisdom.

We need to tune into how much we affect each other, in both wholesomeness and unwholesomeness. Basically, who we are and who other people are is contagious in a way. We catch things from each other.

Part of being on this path is tuning into both truly wise, awakened beings and the aspects in each of us that offer inspiration. One of the reasons we tell stories about different people that inspire us—people who have done wonderful things or come to awakening—is because when I read about or think about any of these people, like the story I told about James Lawson the other night, it brings up such a deep sense of love, courage, inspiration, a kind of pīti, a kind of joy. That's really important.

You see, someone can only inspire us because it awakens those qualities in ourselves. So touching into inspiration is really important, but then we mustn't leave it as all being about the other person while we feel so unworthy. It can only be inspiring because those qualities are touched and awakened within ourselves.

This is why we talk about all these people—look for that in life, whether it's teachers, reading, listening to Dhamma talks, gathering with other people, articles in newspapers. I love reading about anyone like that.

But it works the other way too. This is why it's like swimming upstream. The power of the media is appalling to me—the power of affecting the mind. I remember so long ago when Iran went through their revolution and they held the American embassy people hostage for four hundred and something days. During part of that time, I was somewhere watching the news on TV every night, which I often didn't do.

The TV news in this country—and this is a personal judgment—really amps things up. It's sensationalist, playing on emotions with those little sound bites. It doesn't have much subtlety. By the end of two or three weeks of that, listening to the news every night, I was becoming terror-filled. I was convinced World War III was about to start. It was affecting my mind states and my judgments and how I thought and felt about things.

When I stopped watching the news, that level of fear and intensity also diminished. I could still read the paper, stay in touch with the news, but without that amount of bombardment. I saw then, and I see now, how much what we hear and see can affect us if we're not aware, if we're not mindful—how it shapes what we think, our mind, our heart.

Both wholesome and unwholesome influences work this way. I remember reading about a big nightclub fire in Rhode Island a few years ago. A lot of people died in it.

I read sometime later that a survivor said at first everyone was filing out quickly but orderly. And then this person said a couple of people really panicked, and their fear and their panic was so immediately contagious that everyone panicked. The reason people died is because they panicked—they were trampled, people couldn't get out the doors. How contagious that fear is, that panic.

Just seeing that, but then seeing that who we are in a wholesome sense, in a beautiful sense, is equally contagious.

In terms of kalyānamitta, in terms of inspiration, we both need to tune in to receive this inspiration from others, but also to recognize that who we are and how we live our lives, how we live our understanding—you're kalyānamitta. Often you're the one inspiring others, and you may not even know it, but it's just as contagious. And it doesn't have to be, as I said, you don't have to be Gandhi out there doing big things. Just in the middle of a conversation.

I remember a few years ago having a conversation with a very wise friend, but for whatever reason, she was in a mood and was just really sniping and putting down a mutual friend. And I just happened to have a moment of clarity—I don't claim I always do in conversations. It's so easy, isn't it, to fall into that? And then you feel kind of dirty and kind of bad later. But for some reason she was doing it, and suddenly I realized. And my moment of clarity was not to say, "What are you doing? Don't you know better?" That's not really so helpful. But I just slipped in something really positive about this person in a nice way. That's all I had to do, because she was a very wise friend. As soon as I did that, it stopped the whole flow. She completely stopped and turned around, and we went into a more wholesome and kind way of speaking.

It doesn't take much. It just takes clarity—understanding what we're doing, what's being fed in my mind and heart, what's being starved—and just to offer, just to be that wholesomeness, that goodness, that kindness. Not with any result needed, but just being that. You being the kalyānamitta, the spiritual friend to others at that point.

And I really feel like we can't wait till we're arahants, or we're St. Francis, or we're Gandhi, or Dr. Martin Luther King. We're going to do lots of stupid stuff—maybe you aren't, but I find I do lots of stupid stuff, lots of stuff from ignorance, from not such helpful motivation. But more and more and more, you're going to do a lot of kind, loving, wise intention, a lot of generosity, a lot of wholesomeness. Shine that out.

I really feel like it's our duty. Buddhadāsa used to say, "Dhamma is duty. Duty is Dhamma." I feel it's our Dhamma duty not to shrink away and say, "Well, I'm not good enough yet to say anything or do anything." I don't mean you have to stand up and proclaim the Dhamma in Hyde Park on a box. I mean just honoring your deepest motivation, tuning into it, and being who you are. Let your light shine, really seeing how contagious it is.

Sally was talking about the pāramīs last night, and really seeing how contagious those are. Generosity, for example—I really learned that from the times I go to Burma, which has been about once a year these last few years. Sure, there's plenty of really horrific stuff that goes on there in Burma, no question. But there's some way that mettā and generosity, in a very natural way, is a part of many of the people in the culture. Along with other stuff—I'm not trying to say it's all magic—but there's some way it's there. And it slips up on you. I know it's not just me. In the beginning, you don't notice it. "Oh, isn't that person nice? Isn't that person nice?" And after a while—"Isn't that taxi driver nice? Isn't that lady in the store? They're so generous."

A friend just told me they came back from a couple of weeks, their first time in Burma, saying, "My heart's so full." This is what you come back with—your heart's so full. You can't pinpoint what it was. It's not like one amazing person, but generosity of spirit, generosity with things, generosity of kindness, just being so happy to see you. And whoever, if you go to see a friend and you bring along someone they've never met —

They're always welcome. There's never this kind of inclusion-exclusion dynamic. I've never run into it. And whenever I come back, no matter what's been going on, I'm happier. I'm happy from that generosity. And that happiness spills out of me and touches other people. Whenever I talk like this, I can see in the room people who've experienced something similar because their faces light up. That's the contagion. And it doesn't have to be Burma—I'm just using that as an example.

Someone told me the other day about how something one of us said reminded them of a really generous act they had done, and it brought so much joy. Don't sit on that. I don't mean you go around saying, "I'm the generous person of the ages, appreciate me." I don't mean that. But as Sally said, feel the joy and let it shine out. Because when you're generous and you're doing it from happiness, that's contagious and it spreads.

Another friend of mine came back from Burma and said, "I was just so filled. I wanted to spread it to the people I met. I wanted to keep that cycle going." Not in a conscious way, but it just spills over. It's a beautiful thing. I find that immediacy not so accessible in our culture, although we're all really generous. But there's some way we don't let the contagion of it out, or we don't appreciate it. So I just hope you can let that in and let that out—not just generosity, but mettā, compassion, sīla, non-harming conduct.

The Buddha often talked about the power of good friends, the power of our companions, how much it's catching. A friend of mine was sitting for several months, and she told me she'd noticed when she came back from that long retreat that when she was with people who were relatively pure—people who had pretty good sīla, pretty wholesome actions, who didn't engage in a lot of negative behavior—she felt it drew that out of herself. She felt more inclined toward that kind of purity of behavior, that appreciation, that subtlety, that honesty.

But when she hung out with people whose behavior was a little more muddled or a little less honest, or just a little more distracted—not evil or bad, but just choosing things that lead to confusion and distraction—she would find that it colored her consciousness, and she would more easily get drawn into confusion and distraction herself.

This isn't a judgment; it's just noticing how we affect and are affected by each other. Sometimes we're the muddled one, and we can look for friends who inspire us and can pull us in their wake a little bit, reminding us, "Oh yes, that's important to me." Other times we're going to be the clearer one, the loving one, the honest one. And not with self-righteousness, but just as a modeling, as a sharing, as a gift to your friends and the world.

"I don't think I want to do that right now." You don't even say it, but in your heart: "I just don't want to engage in putting this person down right now." Or someone says, "Let's go out drinking," and you think, "No, maybe let's not go out drinking." Not saying, "You're so bad," but just, "No, let's not do that. Let's do this other thing instead."

There's a way that who you are—coming from your right view, from your understanding—begins to color your choices and actions. And that feeds back into purifying your heart and mind more and more. We begin to appreciate the wholesome more and more over the years of our path. Until we had moments of experiencing clarity, we didn't even know how murky it feels when our mind is clouded with wanting or aversion or confusion or doubt.

When we have those moments where that's not there—no fancy or great things going on, because then we get into wanting again—many people have said that just moments of quiet, of purity, nothing special happening, calm or not, and the heart just feels like it's getting cleaned a little bit. I get that feeling sometimes, like you've got Windex and it's just getting clearer and clearer, getting washed out in a nice way. And it's like, "That's nice." We incline toward it a little more. We didn't even know before that this was possible.

And that just naturally happens—our heart and mind mingling more deeply with the Dhamma just by itself. Because wholesomeness, compassion, wisdom, beauty—they naturally call us, they naturally inspire us.

Wisdom calls itself. Beauty calls itself. Compassion calls itself. And again, we can really trust that if we're willing to let it in. Just who we are is enough.

I heard an interview with Desmond Tutu—the archbishop in South Africa who was part of the whole reconciliation process after apartheid ended. He had been giving a talk in Boston, and I heard this little snippet where he was talking to some students from a really rough area, high school age or a little older, young men from neighborhoods with a lot of crime, a lot of guns and weapons, a lot of drugs.

He was telling them, "We're not born hating. We learn to hate." He was saying that really, goodness, love, wisdom—that's our truer nature. We learn to hate.

And one of the students said, "How can you tell us, in the midst of a culture of violence, where we grow up with violence, we need to protect ourselves—how can we learn to love?"

And he said this with so much force and emphasis. I could just imagine him really talking right to these young men. He said, with such emphasis: "You—you can make a difference. You, just like you are. One person can make a big difference. Start with you, right now."

It's powerful. Saying "not me, I'm not good enough"—that's delusional. That delusion that I'm not good enough is the delusion of the small, separate self. You can make a difference when you shine forth, when you let the truth shine forth in whatever way it manifests in your mind, in your body, in your personality. Just let it manifest. You can't make it manifest, but we can allow it to when it comes up. Don't shut it down with our little thoughts of "not me, I'm not good enough, blah, blah, blah." Let it come out, because it's nothing to do with you, really. We're only getting in the way. Me, me, me—getting in the way.

I want to end with something that has been a little practice inspiring to me, again from Dilgo Khyentse, talking about—I'm just giving you a taste of it, because it's a whole huge Tibetan practice that I haven't done and don't have the right to be teaching at all. So I'm just giving you a snippet that's been inspiring to me.

He talks about Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion, who simply manifests and embodies the great compassion of the Buddha, inseparable from vast wisdom. And he talks about empowerment where, in his words: "Through the blessing of Chenrezig's body, you perceive the whole universe as Chenrezig. You perceive all matter as Chenrezig's Buddhafield. Through the blessing of Chenrezig's speech, you perceive all the sounds in the universe—the sounds of water, fire, wind, the cries of animals, human voices. Any sound is the reverberation of Chenrezig's own voice, the voice of compassion. Through the blessing of Chenrezig's mind, you experience all thoughts as a display of awareness, as Chenrezig's own mind. Through these blessings of Chenrezig's body, speech, and mind together, you realize that in reality, body, speech, and mind are not three separate entities, but are Chenrezig's one nature—voidness and compassion, inseparable."

Play with that. Imagine every thought is just the manifestation of Chenrezig's mind. Every thought, every sound, every sight is just Chenrezig speaking or manifesting in form or making sound. It's a lot harder to get upset at things. I was playing with this on

a self-retreat once and it was really interesting. Just all thoughts, all experiences, the manifestation of Chenrezig—compassion and emptiness—all here teaching me in a way. It really changes something. The union of compassion and emptiness.

As Dilgo Khyentse says: "What you might formerly have perceived as evil and obstructive forces, you then see as manifestations of the bodhisattva of compassion, through which you strengthen loving-kindness and compassion. In this way, suffering fades away, and the negative forces, obstacles, and difficulties actually serve you to make progress on your path."

Let's end with this from Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

And from Rumi: "On a day when the wind is perfect, the sail just needs to open and the world is full of beauty. Today is such a day."

CHAPTER 40

Perception & Awareness

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson investigates how trusting in awareness leads to freedom from confusion. She begins by examining perception (saññā) as the Buddha described it—the moment of recognition that arises with each sense contact—and how what we perceive shapes our thoughts, which then solidify into views and opinions we mistake for reality.*
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> *Wilson illustrates how quickly papañca (mental proliferation) can overwhelm us, using vivid examples including a meditator who discovered the annoying footsteps she heard were actually her own breathing against a creaky wall. She explores how mental states like aversion or desire color our perceptions without our knowledge, and how attachment to views—even those we don't recognize we hold—creates suffering in ourselves and the world.*
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> *The teaching addresses the three perversions of perception identified by the Buddha: perceiving permanence in what is impermanent, happiness in what is unreliable, and a lasting self where none exists. Wilson emphasizes that insight (vipassanā) is not about creating new experiences but about allowing perception to shift through steady, non-judgmental awareness. Drawing on teachers including Ajahn Chah, Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, and Ajahn Sumedho, she offers the reassurance that awareness can receive anything—we need not fear any experience. The talk concludes with the understanding that when the mind is not colored by greed, hatred, or confusion, wise and compassionate responses naturally emerge.*

We've been talking often about trusting in mindfulness, trusting in awareness. Jack mentioned it this morning. And how is this going to help? Not that I can answer this all in one talk, but how is trusting in mindfulness, how is moment-to-moment mindfulness going to help us unravel this whole confusing mass of concept that we find ourselves in, maybe without even knowing it? Where do we think we need to go? That's the question. How is moment-to-moment mindfulness going to free our heart and mind from confusion?

Often people might think—I often used to think and still do sometimes, maybe without even realizing it—having the expectation that awakening, insight (this is insight meditation after all) is going to take me to some new world or create some new and better self. Not just personality, like someone said the other night; I also always

thought I'll get a better personality. It doesn't work that way. But we expect some new experience or something different, something definitely ecstatic or pretty significant and far out.

Actually, insight and awakening work in quite a different way. I don't want to say mundane, but on a much more simple and direct level. I want to talk about that very simple moment-to-moment level of experience where awareness can come in and actually shift our relationship to life because it shifts our understanding. That's what insight is.

This basic moment-to-moment level of experience where I want to start is perception, which was brought up a little bit this morning in the questions and answers. It's really interesting—insight isn't about something new being created. It's simply a shift of perception and the resultant understanding of our experience. When we perceive inaccurately, all the stories we make up are inaccurate. Well, that's basically our position. And so insight begins on the level of perceiving our moment-to-moment experience accurately.

I want to talk a little bit about perception, which is really fun to explore. In terms of the way the Buddha described our moment-to-moment experience, perception is a mental experience that he says is arising in every moment whenever there's sense door contact. The senses are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensation of the body, and the sixth sense is the mind—thinking, emotions, mental states. Basically, the way he describes experience is that these six sense experiences are happening over and over and over.

You might have noticed in your meditation: you're seeing, hearing, thinking, seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking. What's the point of this? When is something new going to happen? Seeing, hearing, thinking. We don't notice that something new is happening every instant, but it's just within that range of seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling.

Perception is this: when there's sense contact—an eye that works, a visual form, consciousness—those three come together; that's contact. If we're not conscious, we're not going to see. We're asleep. So they come together, that's contact. And then the very normal, natural thing that arises in contact is this quality that the Buddha called perception—that recognition. It's what Meredith asked about this morning: there's a sound, we hear it, and automatically the mind just kind of knows it's a bird call or the bell. It may say the word, it may not, but the perception is simply that quality of recognition. That's based in our previous experience and in the habits of mind.

A sound arises—a bell. We know it's a bell. What we perceive, we think about. And this is where it gets both interesting and wild. What we perceive, we think about. And through those thoughts, if we're not aware that these are just thoughts, we're constructing our world.

For example, when you heard the bell a little while ago, first, in some way, through perception you knew it was the bell. You knew whatever time it was—7:20 or whenever—it's time to go to the talk. Implicit in all of that is the construction of the world: that you're here, you're being a yogi, you're on a Vipassana retreat, we're at Yucca Valley, it's evening, you're coming to a talk. A whole bunch of stuff, just coming from that perception of bell—it constructs our world.

And that's useful. Nothing wrong with that. This is what we call conventional reality, and conventional reality is extremely useful. If that sound went off and every single time, if you didn't have memory, if you didn't have perception—what is that? It's not even memory; you don't even know it's a bell. Bell, but what does it mean?

What do I have to do? If we had to go through that process every time, it would be unbearable. So perception is useful.

But we're so used to it, and it happens so fast, that without really cultivating moment-to-moment awareness—without getting interested in how the mind works—we don't really recognize all that's happening, do we? We just kind of come and sit down, plunk down and wait for the talk, which is fine. I'm glad I'm talking and you're listening. That helps; it places us in a context.

But a couple of things arise here. Sometimes we perceive what's happening, and the thoughts that come—we take those thoughts to be the actual, accurate, total reality, which may or may not be the case.

So you're sitting here, you're feeling the breath, and you're accurately perceiving pressure, tightness, a little difficulty taking a deep breath. It's an accurate perception. And the thoughts that come from it are: the breath should be deep and relaxed; it's not; it's tight; it's unpleasant. Maybe you don't notice the unpleasant part. Then comes: there's something wrong with me; I'm stressed; I'm too type A; I can't do this right; I'm hiding; I'm suppressing some emotion; there's something wrong with me. No, never had that experience.

And maybe we might recognize frustration, but not actually realize that all of those thoughts and descriptions—guess what—they may not be true. It's just a slight possibility that those aren't the accurate descriptions.

The Buddha said what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we then complicate with associations and memories and likes and dislikes. And that happens in the blink of an eye, right? We don't realize that's happening, and we take it all to be an accurate description.

So just in this simple breath example, the power of awareness lies in simply receiving the experience. Tightness is like this. That's it. Just awareness that is not making pre-assumptions. You might notice it's unpleasant. You might notice a thought arises: I can't do this right. But awareness receives that thought.

Without moment-to-moment awareness of the thinking, the mood, the sense experience of the tightness, we might notice the tightness and then all the—papañca is the word the Buddha used for these thoughts and assumptions, these notions that we add on to every sense experience. He says they then assail and overwhelm a person.

So we start from some simple sense door experience: tightness, unpleasant. A few thoughts arise—it's tight, I'm too stressed, I can't do this right, what to do, how can I fix it, I shouldn't be—boom, we're assailed, we're completely overwhelmed in that amount of time. This goes on more than once or twice a day. And not just here, not just here.

But the power of mindfulness lies in the willingness to simply meet what's happening. Oh, tightness. Not liking it. That's what's happening. It doesn't have to go anywhere else.

So that's one big complication that can come from perception when we don't see how fast the whole thing is moving. But even more—or in addition, or along with the whole package—perception itself, the recognition itself, sometimes it's not so accurate. Have you ever noticed that? That moment of perceiving—you know, there's a sound, there's the contact, there's the consciousness, the knowing of sound.

But why do we keep talking about noticing the attitude in the mind that's being aware? Because in that moment of perception, the perception can really be colored, affected by the qualities that are in the mind at that moment.

So for example—and I know at least one or two people have had this experience since they've been here—you start to notice that maybe not everybody here, but a whole lot of people coming through your line of vision, there's something wrong with them. They just bug you. They're walking funny. They're eating funny. You don't like their clothes. They're too close. They're too far. They're too good yogis. They're too bad yogis. And this can go on for a while. And suddenly—oh, maybe there's aversion in the consciousness. And when that aversion is there unseen, it just colors our perception. When we don't recognize that, we take the perception to be accurate.

Or if you're really falling in love with someone—or as we call it here on retreat, we won't dignify it by "falling in love." On retreat, you develop being drawn to somebody who you know nothing about, so they're a great field for projection. And through that desire, they look beautiful. They look fascinating. Even their shoes, even their shirts are so interesting. The Tibetans have a saying that desire puts feathers on the object, kind of paints it up. Then at the end of the retreat, you talk to that person and you go, "What was that all about?" It's gone. And you just see a lot more accurately.

So there can be, and there often is—this is why we're so much pointing to what's in the mind—this misperception based on the qualities that are in the mind stream at that moment. And then that misperception leads to the same thoughts and assumptions, and the whole show is created, but it's not even accurate to begin with.

A friend of mine told me this great story. I've used it a lot, but it's so perfect. She was many years ago in Switzerland—a Swiss woman. She's on a meditation retreat like this in Switzerland, I think with Ajahn Sumedho. And at that time, they would rent facilities like this. In Switzerland, they have these big old camp houses that kids go to for summer camp. So they're really big with a lot of rooms, but they're just wood, no insulation, very kind of old and creaky. So they were having this retreat in a house like that, the kind where the walls creak with the wind and the floor creaks when you walk on it.

She said the room they were using for the meditation hall was on the second floor, and immediately beneath it was the room they were using for the walking hall. So of course, in the walking, it made quite a racket with everyone walking back and forth. But this being Switzerland, when it was sitting time, you sat. When it was walking time, you walked. And people just do that.

So she was sitting in the sitting time, being with the breath—in, out, in, out—being with the breath, getting really concentrated, having a really good sitting. And then she started to hear this creaking. Somebody walking downstairs. And it was really ruining her concentration. I'm sure you can relate. So she'd be sitting—creak, creak—instead of just bringing mindful awareness with sati-paññā, mindfulness-wisdom, to the sound of hearing, which could be no problem.

It was annoying her, the sense of, "This is the sitting time. What's that person doing walking? They know you can hear every single creak up here." In, out, in, out—creak, creak, creak. And she was really getting worked up, going into a whole spin about how she had to go down and tell the person. They needed to start announcing the whole thing. We've got to regulate this better.

And then she said, "Okay, let's just try receiving my moment-to-moment experience with awareness." And she just dropped her thinking, came back to the breath, and really felt completely surrendered into the unknown of this one breath, totally present with that. And as she breathed in and her chest expanded, she realized that she was leaning against the wall. And whenever she breathed in, it made the wall creak. And that was the sound.

Well, as you can imagine, the whole story and all the anger just vanished with that accurate perception, right? You could call that an insight, but that's really the way it works. When the perception is accurate—just what's happening now—all the confusing mixed-up stories and our reactions and our emotions, our engagements, they fall away because they don't make sense based in reality.

That's the shift that happens. When we recognize in a moment ourselves, experience what's happening more accurately, then the reactivity, the dislike, the wanting, the self-blinding—all that stuff doesn't make sense in that moment.

It's not like we have to surmount it, dig it out, root it out, do all kinds of things to become a better person. A lot of our pain and confusion and reactivity is based simply on not perceiving accurately. And so the power of correct perception is huge.

Even on the deep levels—impermanence, no lasting sense of self—it's not as if things are permanent and then you have some big experience and suddenly everything starts to be impermanent. It's not that. You're sitting here with it already. There isn't a lasting, solid self that somehow, if you have the right experience, is going to break into pieces, and then you won't have a self anymore. That's why people get scared: "How am I going to function without a self?" Well, guess what? It's already like that.

To me, this is hugely reassuring. Hugely. The problems are really like a round peg in a square hole—they exist because we're not recognizing accurately. And so this process is at the heart of our spiritual practice, certainly of our meditation here: cultivating moment-to-moment receptive awareness.

It really isn't about getting the right object of awareness or the right experience. That's just based on what we know and what we think, on the assumptions we've made, the views we've created. It's about opening into receiving the unknown experience of each moment, because we never know what's going to arise next. We assume, "I'm going to pay attention to the breath for this sitting." Well, you already know that's a joke if you think you're going to sit down and just be with the breath, right? But we still hold that idea. And when something else happens, we think, "I did something wrong because

I decided only the breath is going to arise in this sitting. There should be no sounds. There should be no pain. I should have no emotions coming up because I've decided I'm going to just be with the breath."

Instead of settling in and letting awareness receive all the different things happening, we glom onto this idea of how it should be, and all this other stuff arises. We don't even let in the perception that there's constant change, things rising and falling. "No, this is all wrong. This is all a mistake because I think this should be happening." Do you ever notice your mind doing that in the practice here? And what's the effect? Suffering, right? It doesn't bring a sense of harmony with the world. It doesn't bring a sense of confidence in awareness or in oneself. It's a sense of struggle, a sense of square peg in a round hole, or vice versa.

So this power of perception—really getting interested in how the mind works and noticing what's coloring the mind in moments of perception—it's fascinating. And it's a huge aspect of freeing us from confusion.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said: "When our sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, and whatever you do is in accordance with the way things are, you experience everything as primordially pure."

Now, have you had experiences of that? I think you probably have, because it's normal, it's natural. In any moment when the mind, the awareness, is not distorted by greed, by confusion, by hatred or fear—when there's just present moment receiving, pure conscious perception—we do experience the world as primordially pure. You might not use those words. But when you're just standing looking at the desert, it's like, "Oh, it's so..."—whatever word you use. Peaceful, beautiful, lovely. Just that. Isness.

We tend to give the power out to the object. "The desert's so peaceful. The desert's so beautiful." We forget to turn around and notice: Oh, the mind is pure right now. The heart is pure. Just for a moment.

Well, my heart isn't pure. Five minutes ago, I was filled with rage. Next week, I know when I get back home, my heart isn't pure. We shrink away from using that word in relationship to ourselves.

But what if it's moment to moment? What's arising in the heart and mind in this moment?

So go out, look at a cactus, just look at the sky, and when you notice that feeling of ease, wakefulness, cleanness, purity—whatever the heck—turn around and notice: in this moment the perception isn't distorted by these states. Get familiar with that, because it happens all the time.

Ajahn Chah, who was so pragmatic in the way he described things, held up a vase and said, "Look at this vase. You think it's nice or beautiful or ugly, but the vase itself is just indifferent. It's we who are making ourselves insane."

Sogyal Rinpoche describes how all this papancha, this proliferating thought, works. We get into so much confusion by letting ourselves get lost in thoughts about whatever happens. It's fine that the thoughts are there. We can recognize them as thoughts. It's when we get lost in them.

He says we project a thought—like that thing with the breath, there's tightness, and we project the thought, "My breath is too tight, there's something wrong." Then the second thought believes the first. "That's true. There is something wrong. And what is it?" Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is by this time already a reality. By the time the tenth one comes, it believes that the fifth thought has always been an actuality.

That's how it works.

But starting to see that, you also see we can play with it. We can see what it's doing and shift around the stories we tell about a perception. It's kind of fun to play with this malleability when you're on retreat and see that as the story changes, the mood changes, the whole thing changes. It's not so solid.

I'll read you this poem that speaks of that to me, by Billy Collins. The title is "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House":

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast,
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking.

And now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section, barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor
who is entreating him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful silence
to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.

We don't have to feel so gripped. We can notice when we're really locked in. But the understanding of what's happening—just, "Oh, this is how the mind works"—sometimes we can play with the story. Sometimes we can come back and really notice with simple awareness: what is coloring the perception in this moment?

When we say, "Just check your attitude," this is what we're talking about. It's as if you're wearing red-colored glasses or blue-colored glasses, and you forget they're on, so everything you see is blue and you start reacting to the world as if it's that. You like it, you don't, you get frustrated. But then when you bring your attention in a little closer, you go, "Oh, blue glasses. That's what's going on." Everything still looks blue, but you're understanding what's happening.

And in fact, with turning around and noticing the distortions of greed—"I've got to have this"—or aversion or fear or confusion, sometimes just the noticing... well, it stops being so strong. It's not that you're trying to get rid of it. You're just noticing it. But sometimes in the noticing, it's as if the glasses start to come off. Very interesting. And we see more clearly.

The next step, the next solidification of these thoughts—as Sogyal Rinpoche said, the fifth, the tenth—by the time of the tenth, you totally believe the fifth. This is what the Buddha talked about as views and opinions: what we perceive, we think about; what we think about, we complicate.

We complicate. And without realizing it, there can be a clinging.

As the Buddha described, one of the four fields of grasping that really causes us to get very lost and brings about a great deal of suffering is this description of reality. "My breath is tight, therefore there's something wrong with me." Or "That barking dog is driving me crazy. The neighbors are sick. I'm going to go nuts if something doesn't change." Whatever it might be. "That sound in the hall is completely ruining my practice. It shouldn't be here. That person should be told to shape up." Because that's how it should be.

And we don't even recognize that the thoughts have solidified into a view, into a description of ourselves, the world, the way things should be—something we absolutely believe, take to be the truth, the truth of how things are.

It's insidious, because mostly the descriptions, the views we take to be the truth, they're so familiar. We so believe them. It's not like we know we're holding them. Some of them we know. When my friend recognized that the sound was her leaning against the wall, that was so clear. That view went away—the view that there was a guy downstairs walking, making noise. Now, her view that nobody should be walking during a sitting period might not have gone away. But maybe.

We use these concepts, you know, like the way I said earlier: the bell rings, and there's that whole perception. It defines and conceptualizes and contextualizes ourselves, our day, our whole world. If we know that's a concept, a conventional reality, that's fine, that's useful. But if we don't recognize it, so often the descriptions harden into views that limit us, that define us, define our world, that bring us into conflict with ourselves. When my breath is tight and my view is that this means I'm not doing it right. That brings us into conflict with others.

I mean, look at the world. How much of the struggle, the prejudice, the suffering, the war is based in different people absolutely knowing "this is how it should be, this is how people should behave, this is how people should believe, this is what I own, this is what you should own"? How much of cultural misunderstanding is based in the way we're brought up, the views and the ways that we imbibed as children—how you relate to people, what this means, what that means—and then you come into another culture that is different? If we don't even know we're holding the view, there's so much suffering, so much struggle.

It really is the basis, I think, for so much of the pain and confusion in the world. Racism, religious fundamentalism, cultural differences. Look at politics. Let's not go down that road too far, but opinions are fine. Views are fine. We need views. We need to

vote. We need to make choices. And I won't go into any specifics, but politics is a gripping one, right? Can you even really openly listen to someone holding in a very strong way the totally opposite view from yourself? Can you listen and be open?

I have a lot of trouble. I remember back—I won't talk about this time, but back years ago—there were certain politicians that would come on the TV and I couldn't stand to listen to the person. I didn't want to know one good thing. There couldn't be a good thing about anything that person said.

This is what happens when there's attachment to views. It's as if our perceptions snap shut. It's so interesting. It's like we don't even know we're holding to this view. And because any alternative view is troubling, shakes our ground, our certainty, it's almost as if we don't even let it in.

This example happened on a retreat some years ago. It was a big retreat like this, and we were going along. It was about the fifth or sixth day of the retreat.

A woman came up to me during that retreat. I was sitting in a chair then, as I do now. She told me it was her first big retreat, and she had been in agony—absolute agony—sitting cross-legged on the floor. We had said the same things we say here, yet she was just dying inside because it was so clear to her that you couldn't meditate if you couldn't sit cross-legged on the floor. That was the only way to do it, and she was suffering terribly. All her sittings weren't about any kind of balance or learning from pain. It was just aversion and dying.

Then on the fifth day, she's sitting there, and suddenly she goes, "Oh. Carol's sitting in a chair." Literally, that perception hadn't made it in. It's amazing. Truly amazing.

This is the kind of insight where steady moment-to-moment mindfulness does its work. The continuity of mindfulness breaks down our unconscious selective perception. You see, unconsciously we choose to pay attention to perceptions that feed and support the beliefs we're holding. And we don't even realize it because we think those views are true.

For instance, on retreat, often the prevailing view is deeply self-judgmental, self-negative. So many of us carry this—a sense of worthlessness, a sense of "I'm not good enough," or "I don't deserve to exist on this planet," or fear of bothering people. All that stuff. And what will we notice? We'll notice perceptions that feed that view. We're completely oblivious to all the times when nothing like that is going on—when we're doing fine, not bothering anyone, or even receiving positive cues. That doesn't count. Only the perceptions that fit our view are let in.

On retreat, in our life, in the world—this is what's going on. So can we even hold the possibility, on a very deep level, that there might be views, assumptions, descriptions of myself and the world that I'm holding without even knowing it?

Sometimes when you get shaken up on a retreat, it's because some of those views are being challenged. And that's great. When you feel confused, when you feel ill at ease, when you feel a little scared—I don't mean lost in terror, just a little scared—that's wonderful. Something's getting pushed at, something that seems so solid, where we think we know how it all is. Well, if this really were how it all is, what we think we know... my goodness, let's open to something new.

A friend of mine told me this story. Just listen and see if we can open to the possibility. He was with a Tibetan teacher many years ago, Lama Gendun. Lama Gendun was giving a talk to a group of Western students, speaking about the different realms of existence. He was describing the pure land, Dewachen, a realm of gods where Amitabha Buddha resides. He went on with this very long, intricate description of this happy realm of practice—what it looks like, what the devas are like, what the Amitabha Buddha is teaching.

After quite a while, he stopped and looked at his skeptical Western audience. And he said, "If you think I'm making this up—I've been there."

That's all. What does your mind do with that?

At another level, I heard on public radio that they just had elections in Bhutan, which is a Buddhist country and a kingdom. The king decided to try bringing in more of a parliamentary system. So they held elections, and one person being interviewed said—let me get this right—"I was really surprised at how aggressive democracy can be. It's not in our way to criticize one another publicly." And that's what the parliamentary system is all about. Well, that's really interesting.

Our deep habits of clinging to views we don't even know, descriptions of the world we totally abide by and then move and act and react from—not seeing these is truly one of the greatest sources, as the Buddha described it, of our confusion and suffering. It's the source of the confusion and suffering we cause in our relationships, in our reactions, in our responses to other people.

What awareness does—the steady, simple continuity of moment-to-moment awareness of whatever presents itself—is allow us to begin to see, to even recognize, "Ah, this view is here." To see it being constructed in a moment, to see it going away. To begin not to get rid of it, but to see through it.

At the very subtlest level of our moment-to-moment experience in the mind, in the way the Buddha talked about it, some of the most subtle, insidious, deeply-felt-to-be-true views we hold are perceptions—starting with misperception. He calls these the distortions, the perversions of perception.

Three perversions of perception in particular I want to mention, and you'll recognize where they are. One is that in what is constantly changing and impermanent, we perceive permanence. We perceive permanence. Remember, what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate and turn into a view. And so on an unconscious level, when we perceive permanence, it moves just like that to a kind of unacknowledged view that, yes, things are not changing. I'm talking about this on a deep level. We might say in our mind, "I know things are changing," but what are we really acting from?

The second is seeing in what is unreliable, in what cannot give us any long-term lasting pleasure, seeing happiness, seeing pleasure. Of course there's pleasure in the world, but it's like thinking that this donut is really going to do it. This relationship is going to solve everything, whatever it is.

And the third is seeing a lasting, separate self where there's not one.

These perceptions—and a perception is just in a moment—lead to how we think about things, lead to the view, and that view leads to how we respond, how we are in the world.

So this is really where awareness begins to show up in all its simple beauty. It's incredibly simple. It's just: what's happening right now? Awareness just receiving whatever's happening on whatever level, open to the mystery, not assuming. Not looking to see through the perception of impermanence, thinking "Now I'm going to see impermanence. Now I'm going to understand not-self. I'm not going to see self." That doesn't work. That's just another view.

But when we can trust enough—this is what the Dalai Lama said, that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perceptions. That's a big statement. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. That's the power of awareness.

As Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about, just awareness receiving. The language he uses is, "It's like this." So in the moment, not saying "I want to look for no-self," just: what's happening right now? It's like this. Sadness feels like this. Anger feels like this. "I don't know what the heck's going on"—confusion feels like this. Subtle sensation of pressure feels like this. Coolness feels like this. Purity feels... just whatever's happening

moment to moment to moment. The thought, "Oh, now that's a moment where the perception's really clear and this feels like purity"—oh, thinking is like this. Wanting is like this. Constructing an incredibly elaborate story and you're lost down there—oh, being caught up in a story is like this.

It's like a little Tai Chi move, I like to say, where it's not that awareness is changing experience or manipulating it or fixing it or trying to move it in the direction of impermanence or not-self or purity. When we talk about trusting mindfulness—and I'm using awareness and mindfulness synonymously at this point, meaning that moment of awareness is that knowing, that conscious perceiving of what's happening, the knowing of it—it's not colored in that moment by greed or confusion or hatred. Awareness receiving.

We trust it. We learn to trust it. We don't have to manipulate or fix or understand or figure it out or come to a conclusion or have an insight. We don't have to do anything. Which is so great, because basically whatever we do most of the time is stemming from misperception, confused thought, and wrong view.

Trusting awareness is something Sayadaw U Pandita spoke of. He was a very fierce Burmese meditation teacher. He could be very demanding, but I always felt a tremendous trust when I'd go into interviews. In one interview—I can't remember the specifics—but you would describe very carefully what's going on, and then you'd start to interpret.

You're out of there.

If I went into him and said, "I had a really good sitting..." Out. What are you talking about? Just describe what's happening.

Well, that's an amazing training because you're just trusting awareness. There's pressure. There's tightness. There's aversion. There's thinking. I don't like it. I notice aversion. I'm feeling tight. There's sadness. I'm crying. I'm noticing crying. You're just noticing each thing. That's awareness receiving. No comment. No problem. No hierarchy. No preference.

And he said to me—I was having something difficult going on, I don't even remember what—he said, "You know, with awareness, you don't have to be afraid of anything." Because awareness—now I'm moving to Tsemedo's language—awareness is a point that includes. Awareness can receive anything. There's nothing that can't be received in awareness, in our experience.

But mostly we're so focused on what's happening and our reactions and the stories and what it means about me. That's the third misperception: what it means about me. Notice, just notice over the next day or so, if such a thought should arise, how quickly does the thought bring anything that's going on back to what does it mean about me?

Somebody drops something all the way across the cafeteria. "Oh, good thing it wasn't me." Or you do something. "Oh, I hope nobody saw that." Or you feel like you're having this great sitting and you get up and you're in the flow and you're walking out. "I hope they're seeing me." Or somebody else is walking by and you can tell they're really with it—yesterday they were all jangling, today they dropped in. "Wow, how can I get like that?"

Just notice. The tortoise. I know a lot of you probably saw the tortoise. And it's beautiful. It's so great to see. Well, I'm seeing the tortoise. Just noticing that. It's a hoot. It's incredible. What does it mean about me?

But awareness just receives all of that. No judgment, no problem, no trying to pull away. And through that, steadiness—steadiness and non-preferential noting. Awareness can receive anything. We don't need to be afraid of anything.

And through the steadiness and the kindness and the willingness to just surrender into the unknown in this moment, in this moment, in this moment—actually, that's what allows our mistaken perceptions to begin to shift. It happens by itself. We can't make insight happen.

So real insight is simply a shift of perception. It's not that the world changes, but how we perceive it and how we understand it—and thus how we respond and act in the world—does change.

An example I like to use often, in terms of how this works, even with something like anattā or impermanence: you know those Magic Eye books that were very popular a few years ago? They would have graphic designs of two or three different colors that were completely abstract. If you just look at it, it's just abstract. There's nothing there. But if you stay with it steadily, in a kind of unfocused way—so it's steady but gentle—and you just stay with it for a while, somehow the perception shifts and a design emerges that looks three-dimensional. It's an elephant in the jungle or a spaceship or whatever. It really doesn't matter what the image is. But that experience is very obvious. You can really see it.

Now, was that not there before, and then something happened and it appeared? No, it was there all along. And then your eyes kind of go into staring, and you look away and look back, and it's not there anymore. So in a way, both of those ways of perceiving

exist. Just the abstract design and colors is there. Or you perceive in a different way and the three-dimensional thing springs out. And after you've seen it, it doesn't have to stay as the three-dimensional thing.

It's rather like how we normally experience everything with a sense of "me" experiencing it. Time all comes from me, space all comes from me, I'm the one seeing, I'm the one meditating. And then there's just a sense of—oh, in the perceiving, there's only perceiving. In the hearing, there's just hearing. In the knowing, there's just knowing. And then, trust me, the next minute it's me perceiving, me knowing, me wanting to have that insight again, me needing to think about it, me needing to figure it out, me needing to tell all my friends.

What's changed? The way reality is hasn't really changed. But knowing it—knowing that the three-dimensional image springs out—even when you don't see it, you understand. It changes something in your understanding, and you can relate differently.

If you've never seen it, and you've tried and tried and tried—my mother was like this, it drove her nuts. She could never see it. And it would make her crazy. So doesn't it, when somebody's talking about some insight they've had and you haven't—doesn't it make you crazy? "I want to see that. I want to see that." We get tight. And the tighter you get, the less likely you're going to see anything, except tightness.

But that's the answer, you see? Oh, tightness is like this. The way into the awakening of insight is simply to relax into what's actually happening. "I can't see this goddamn thing"—that tightness is like this. That's awareness receiving.

And as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, awareness is the doorway to freedom. Just that simple, steady awareness, on its own, without our forcing, without our effort, without our willpower—the awareness shifts.

It's okay if it shifts back. I mean, the perception shifts—it's okay if it shifts back. But that knowing, it changes something in our mind stream, in our relation. And that's why just a little moment of awareness, compared to a lot of moments of just plodding along on retreat, has a huge effect. Have you noticed that? One of my teachers used to say, a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. So it doesn't have to be time equal, which is good news also.

So insight really happens on its own through the steady, kind, non-judging awareness—the real trusting of awareness, that the way things really are will reveal itself on all levels, our psychological problems, on the level of Dhamma. And we can't make it happen. We don't need to make it happen. But something that we didn't even

know we were holding to gets released. And it's like, *ah, that's how that is.* That little aha moment—that's insight. It's not a thought, and then yes, we'll think about it. That's sort of how we know things, but the thought isn't the same as the insight.

From Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It is a result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

Thoughts are great. Thoughts are useful. We need them, and we can understand them and use them. But not let them define and constrict and confine our idea of ourself, our views of the world. Thoughts are useful, but insight and awareness—they're bigger than thoughts. Thoughts are included in awareness. They're fine. We don't have to fight them, but we don't have to be them.

And so, really, in this way, through the trusting of awareness, we get first to recognize just that simple knowing of whatever's happening. Recognize, get interested in: is there anything coloring the awareness at this moment? Just gently, gently, gently. And the trust that comes is that we get more and more content with the awareness itself, less and less looking to a particular experience to do it for us—because we know every experience that comes is going to go.

And this, again—when we don't perceive impermanence, we think we know impermanence, but we don't. Talking to a lot of people, you know, they have a beautiful emotional state, and one part of the mind, the thought says, "Oh, I know it's going to pass." But on another level, quietly, the mind's thinking, "Oh, this is how it's going to be now, finally." And the next day is really difficult and painful. We go, "Oh no, how am I going to get through the rest of the retreat with this state of mind?" Then when we settle back and look, we've had fifty-seven states of mind in the last two hours. And each one was *it*. Each one was going to last.

But we get more and more interested in the awareness. It matters less and less which state of mind, because awareness can receive all of them. And when it's like that, it's interesting—awareness is just so accessible. Again, it can be no matter what's going on. As much as you've got yourself worked up, all worked up is like this. You don't have to go anywhere else. It just takes that willingness, a total commitment really, to surrender to the unknown in this moment, and the trust that awareness can receive that.

It's really what we're practicing moment to moment. We're not trying to figure it all out and get the knowledge and get the answer and wrap it all up in a nice little box. We're seeing there is no box. That all it is is just: What's happening now? Awareness

can receive it. And that whole definition and sense of me and who I am and what I am and how it has to change—in that moment, not even there. It's not relevant or irrelevant.

It's just not there. Sure, next moment it's there. Don't worry. You can retrieve it when you need it, and it'll come when you don't need it also. But you can recognize, "Oh, that's right. That's just a description right now. It's what's happening now."

Awareness is the doorway to freedom, as Ajahn Sumedho says. And any experience in any moment is the doorway to awareness. Anything. The sound of the doves cooing, the heat of the sun, the pain in your back, the frustration arising, the peacefulness of clear seeing, the gurgling of your stomach. Any experience is a doorway to remind us to move into awareness. And the awareness itself is the doorway to clear seeing and the freedom that releases our heart and mind from the need to struggle and fight and react and contend with experience.

And we don't lose the conventional. We don't get into some kind of airy-fairy "who knows what's happening." In fact, when we're just in that purity of awareness receiving —"Oh, it's like this"—when the mind isn't colored in that moment (and it's all just moments) by greed, by hatred, by confusion, then if it's a moment that calls for response, the wise, compassionate response naturally emerges. The natural response of the non-tormented, non-distracted mind and heart will be metta or compassion, whichever is appropriate, or wisdom, or equanimity. It's not that we have to create those. They naturally emerge. So we don't lose the conventional reality. We still function—better, if anything. And we can kind of move between the worlds.

So I just want to end with this little passage from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, speaking about both aspects, the conventional and the ultimate. He says:

"When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be, spontaneously, an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me. When watching its nature of innate simplicity as it really is, I cannot help but feel wonder and break out in laughter. When watching the one who feels pity and the one who is laughing, both disappear and cannot be found. Now what to do?"

So let's just sit for a while.

CHAPTER 41

Shifting The Paradigm

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the radical teaching from the Dhammapada that all experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, and made by mind. She explores how our deeply ingrained habits of liking and disliking—practiced millions of times daily throughout our lives—color every moment of consciousness, keeping us trapped in cycles of suffering even when we think we're meditating skillfully.*
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> *Wilson draws on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and Ajahn Buddhadāsa to illuminate how the three kilesas (lobha, dosa, and moha—greed, aversion, and delusion) operate beneath our conscious awareness, shaping our perceptions and reactions before we even recognize what's happening. She offers Sumedho's simple yet transformative practice of meeting each experience with "it's like this"—whether it's craving, aversion, confusion, or peace—as a way to step out of our habitual self-referencing and judgment.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that purifying the mind doesn't mean attacking our defilements with aversion, but rather developing a steady, continuous awareness that recognizes both confused states and moments of natural peace with equal interest. Wilson explains that awareness of awareness is surprisingly simple—as simple as feeling your hands touching and knowing that you're feeling—and that this quality of relaxed recognition, maintained throughout daily activities, allows wisdom to arise naturally. She encourages practitioners to notice the many moments of "voidness" or non-clinging that occur every day, generating contentment with awareness itself rather than endlessly chasing pleasant experiences.*

So tonight I want to talk about changing paradigms, or stepping out of samsara. We wish.

Last night James spoke so beautifully about the Buddha saying that he taught suffering and its end. He asked, with a show of hands, how many people here actually come to practice because of suffering, somehow wanting to end suffering, to be happy. And of course I said in the metta meditation that I led that the Buddha also said it's our natural birthright, really, to be happy.

The whole point of the meditation, though, is that this understanding of suffering and happiness starts to change, hopefully begins to change. What we think when we come into beginning our practice, and what we may think as we go along—usually we

don't even realize what we think—as to what happiness is and the way we go about trying to achieve that and to end suffering, doesn't work. Just as it doesn't work in our daily life, the same motivations, the same understandings that we have in our daily life, of course we bring to meditation, because that's how we see the world.

And when the meditation really starts to light up, take fire, start to cause us trouble—when everything's exploding and falling down on me today—that's when it's getting good. Because that's when the ways that we unconsciously hold our assumptions about who we are and what the world is and what happiness is are starting to show that they're not working. And of course we don't like that, so we're suffering. But that's really where the rubber is starting to meet the road.

I'm sure you know the very famous quotation from the Buddha in the Dhammapada, where one translation is: refrain from the unwholesome, do good, purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas. This is really essential, and especially what I want to talk about tonight is this last one: purify the mind.

This is essentially the whole work, the whole point, the whole thing that meditation practice, that spiritual practice is about. Whether you want to say purifying the mind, or understanding what pure mind and heart is and how we get seduced away from resting in the natural possibility of pure mind and heart—either way, that's really the place where the whole practice lives: what's going on in the mind.

And this is radical. Even though we may agree with it intellectually, it doesn't really do us any good. Don't believe me. Look and see for yourself.

Again, this is very famous from the Dhammapada, the first two verses. This is Gil Fronsdal's translation: "All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox. All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow."

Mind, heart, citta—translated into English it's the same word. Guy kind of likes the translation "psyche," our whole sense of what's happening in consciousness and awareness in a moment. The whole seed of happiness and suffering is not at all the suffering that the Buddha is talking about when he's teaching what suffering is and what the ending of it is. As James said last night, we're all going to experience pain, we're all going to get old. If we don't get old, it's because we experience greater pain first. Things are

going to go wrong. Stuff happens. The Buddha wasn't teaching freedom from that. But he's teaching freedom from suffering, and the suffering and the freedom from it is all what's going on in the mind, in the awareness.

And this is radical, you know? It's really saying that that's where all our practice is, that's where all our interest, our investigation, our growth, our freedom lies—in this insubstantial, nothing you can hold on to, changing every single moment, mind. And all of our focus on what we like and what we don't like, on our practices and what we're getting in our life and how we're living and our personality and you name it—it doesn't make any difference whatsoever. Whatsoever. It's radical. Freedom and suffering is all in the mind, all the work of the mind.

And really, in my experience, all the different meditation techniques, in various ways—I'm not going to go into that tonight—but in various ways, they are ways of accessing, recognizing the purity of mind or heart, as well as recognizing how we get seduced away from the purity of mind and heart, how we tend to take refuge in what is a corrupt mind. There's no great translation that we feel good about for that word. But corrupt mind basically means when the kilesas, the corruptions, the defilements—forms of greed, hatred, aversion, fear, or delusion, confusion, not knowing, not recognizing accurately—when some form of any of those mental factors arise and pass like everything else, present in the mind, the heart, unrecognized, unseen, that's what he's referring to as a corrupt mind.

Unseen, unrecognized, it leads to how we view the world, our perceptions, our thoughts, our explanations of the world, our views, what we believe is true, the assumptions we make without even knowing that they're assumptions, and then the decisions we make, how we act, how we relate to ourselves, to our own experience, to others.

So I think this is why in the Noble Eightfold Path, the path we follow of practice, the first step is wise view, wise understanding. Not, of course—it's the first step, so it's not totally, completely purified understanding, obviously—but a sense of just beginning to tune in, to notice how we understand the world, how we understand ourselves or experience, because this is so key. Not that we have to change it, but we just need to know, to recognize, to get interested, just to begin with, in the assumptions, the attitudes, the views we have about ourselves and the world. And these are what are so challenged, really, by dharma practice, by spiritual path.

I sat a retreat with Ajahn Sumedho here at Spirit Rock this past summer, and in a group interview—I forget what we were talking about—he always talks about trusting or having confidence in receptive awareness, natural awareness, which I love the way he talks about it, and I use his language a lot.

But anyway, in the interview, somehow we both just kind of fell into it together. It was a kind of transmission moment where we were both simply feeling it, falling into that sense of purity of awareness, to say. And he just kind of chuckled and said, "It's really the opposite of everything we've ever been taught, isn't it?"

And it's true. It is.

Now, that doesn't have to be a problem once we recognize what we're believing and what we've been taught. We don't have to dump it, but we can just have a little space around it. Just maybe have the sense: maybe this isn't the only possible way.

Just a little example of how our assumptions and our views color the way we describe and explain the world, a little story. I was just in Burma, and we were staying at a meditation center with Sayadaw U Tejaniya. We had brought in some money, so we were doing a lot of very formal offerings of food and rice and this and that in different locations. Maybe I'll talk more about that later.

But it's a very photogenic kind of thing. Every time you're doing offerings, someone's taking photos. And most of the people love to have their photo taken and see it. So I was taking photos and two of my friends were as well—three different cameras. Then one of the friends put her camera on the other friend's computer and she was looking at the photos. Several of them, quite a lot actually, had these kind of circular bright spots in different places. There was one that was all over the lungi I was wearing.

My friend who had taken the photos has lived the better part of seventeen years in Burma. She's a nun there, so she's very much in the culture. And the Burmese culture is a Buddhist culture, very traditional Theravada Buddhist, with a strong sense of faith in the traditional Buddhist teachings, which include different world systems. So right away, she thought, "Wow, those are devas." Not that those are actually devas, but the reflection of the devas' energy.

My other friend, who was on the computer, is also a nun, but she was a scientist with a very scientific mind. She just looked at me and rolled her eyes, then said, "Of course there's some kind of moisture in the camera," and offered all these explanations.

Then they brought Sayadaw in and he was looking at it and laughing. I really don't know what he thinks, but he started teasing us all about the devas and how I was bringing devas with me. Anyway, yesterday I looked at the pictures from my camera on my computer and there they were.

Who knows? Who knows? But it's just—we don't have to know. We can simply see in each case that it's a very complete worldview explanation of what it is.

So the first attitude that it's very helpful to bring to our practice is that willingness to not know. Just the willingness to not know. If we could just keep meeting each moment of experience with "I don't know"—what should happen, what this means about me, how it could be better, how my practice is going, how it compares to last retreat, how it compares to the instructions, how it could be better, yada yada yada.

Oh, this is Sayadaw Tejaniya's language: "It's like this." That's all. Burning is like this. Self-judgment is like this. My breath is so tight, I can't stay with the breath for two seconds after all these years of practice. Judgment is like this. Nothing to do or change or fix. No need to construct a story about what it means.

Oh, we almost can't stand it. We want the story, we need the story. Where would we be without the story? Who would I be without the story? Even though—how often is the story a suffering one? How often? Still, though, it's my story. And without that story, it's like, "But... what? Can't be... what?" You know, I have to have some certainty. I have to know.

When we can just begin with that very first attitude, just that sense of not knowing, the willingness to just rest in this moment as it is without needing to add anything to it—that already is cutting against our lifelong habit of wanting, of disliking, of it's all about me, me, me. You know that very clearly.

Let me see what Sayadaw Tejaniya said about this, if I can find it. He describes it kind of pithily.

He says the automatic habit of our mind is that we basically spend every day of our life as sense objects come in and out. And you know sense objects—the six sense doors are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling or sensing with the body. And the sixth sense door is the mind, mental objects. So that would be thoughts, emotions, mental factors like, say, concentration. It's not an emotion exactly, but it's a factor of mind. Wisdom. Ignorance, greed, love—mental factors coming and going.

We've spent every day of our life as the sense objects come and go: like this one, don't like that one, like this one, don't like that one. It's just automatic. Notice sometime when you're just a bit relaxed, just noticing your mind, not trying to control it, not trying to focus. Play with it sometime. When you're walking down to the dining room, or walking through the dining room as you're lining up for the meal, and you're not trying to make your mind do anything—just notice, as you're with the process, how the mind tends to relate in each moment.

It may not be so clear, but I've really noticed it in myself. I'll walk through the dining room and my mind's going: like, don't like. They look nice, they don't. Recoil, go forward. This is pleasant, this isn't. It's not that clear, so we don't notice it. But it's basically forward, back, forward, back. Eh, not worth noticing. Forward, back, forward, back. Eh, nothing. Forward, back, forward, back. And then the next minute: what does it mean about me? What does it mean about me? It's exhausting, for one thing. Exhausting.

And then we see it's exhausting, but we haven't stepped out of the paradigm. We see it's exhausting, we decide it's stupid, so we hate it. Right? That helps. That really helps a lot. But that's the kind of staying within the same paradigm and trying to meditate from that. We bring this liking, not liking, it doesn't matter. Liking, not liking, I don't care. Liking, not liking, it's all about me. We bring the same orientation to the meditation. And then we wonder why it's a struggle.

Because really ingrained there—and I know maybe I'm making it a bit simplistic just to talk about, but I don't think it's untrue for being simplistic—that's why we can laugh. It's good you can laugh. That means there's a little space to see, oh, it isn't always that way. But it's so deeply habituated that when something is slightly pleasant, the mind experiences something as slightly pleasant—that vedana, the second foundation of mindfulness—and without awareness, this habit of liking, disliking, just the liking, wanting, leaning forward ever so slightly, just naturally kicks in.

And it feels so familiar that it feels just natural, doesn't it? So of course I like what's pleasant. Don't tell me not to like what's pleasant. And then it goes off into whichever way your mind wants to go with that. Unpleasant—not even painful, just slightly unpleasant—that subtle recoiling, the subtle not liking, the subtle preference for the pleasant, that's just natural. And as Tejania says, we're practicing that ten million times a day, our whole life. Of course it feels natural.

And then so-called neutral, or something that doesn't make much of an impression—we often just don't notice much at all, or we go off into a story. Or the third way—so that's greed, hatred, or dosa. I like the Pali word that's usually translated as hatred, the second of the kilesas.

The Pali word is *dosa*. I like to use that personally much better than "hatred" because it's broader and not so charged. *Dosa* means not just hatred—it includes hatred, fear, or even just that subtle recoil of not liking. *Dosa* in the mind.

As I get into talking about how our practice is really not about changing experience but just getting interested in watching what's going on in the mind that's observing, without judgment, it gets fascinating. If I'm noticing what's in the mind and I recognize self-hatred, and I label it "hatred"—if somebody walked across my path and I note "hatred"—then right away the mind goes, "That's disgusting. You hate that person?" Well, I did. But if I note "*dosa* in the mind"—oh, *dosa* in the mind, okay, I can be with that.

This is just a sense of how language is actually very interesting to explore. How often the words we use can carry a huge charge or a lot of associations that we don't quite realize. We can end up in a struggle, and if we shift the words—oh, *dosa*, I can be with that—whereas "hatred," that's a whole story about me.

The third one, delusion, as I said, is kind of spacing out, not noticing. But the actual way that I notice delusion that is much easier to notice is the confusion, the misperception, that sense of me, me, me. It all refers back to me. This is basically the underlying corruption, confusion, defilement, *kilesa*—whatever word you want to use—that keeps the other two going.

Because who wants the pleasant? Who likes the pleasant? Who wants to be happy? Who's recoiling from the unpleasant? It's all about me. If there was no reference back to me, pleasant and unpleasant would come and go—well, they do anyway. But pleasant and unpleasant would come and go without it being a problem.

The deep view, which isn't wise view but the view we so often hold of life, is that pleasant equals right, good, happy, and unpleasant equals wrong, mistaken, unhappy, suffering. Even though I talk about this until I'm blue in the face, my mind gets into that habit still a lot. I'll be suffering in terms of feeling like I'm in contention with something that's going on. I can just feel that sense of struggle. It can be subtle—I don't even know what. But as soon as I feel it, I just stop a minute. I don't have to be on retreat; it could be anywhere. Just stop a minute, not trying to figure it out, but just kind of checking what's going on in the mind.

And almost always, when you see something the mind is pushing away, it's almost always a little on the unpleasant side. There's almost always some sense of: it would be better, or it would be right, or I would be happy if this was gone and this was here. Or if

this didn't go away and this never came. It can be really gross, like James is saying—we get into just piling up pleasant experiences, whoever gets the most pleasant things strung so closely together that there's no gaps, wins.

We laugh. We know that's ridiculous, right? On some level, we know. We all know things are impermanent. We see the fleetingness of *vedanā*. How long does that pleasant feeling last? Like that.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful Thai forest meditation master—both Guy and I were at his monastery, Suan Mokkh, when he was there—he would talk about the fleetingness of pleasant feeling. So just notice: if you really start noticing pleasant and unpleasant, just the feeling tone, how long does it last in a moment? How long? Put that pleasant-tasting food on your tongue, and if you're really just with the pleasantness, for me it lasts about a tenth of a second. There's a burst, and then I'm just masticating kind of tasteless food, and the mind is reaching for the next pleasant, right? Why do we overeat? More, more, more, more.

Whatever it is that we do. The pleasant, the pleasant, the pleasant. How long does it last? Not much.

And he says—this is Buddhadasa again—"Just look at all the decisions you've made in your life. See how many of them, your major decisions, were based on going for pleasant feeling." You know, "If I do this, then I'll be happy." But you can't stop at happy. What does that mean? I'll feel good. Things will be nice somehow. We'll get all the furniture arranged on the Titanic just perfectly so that we're happy. We can spend our whole life doing that.

So these are really, really deep habits. It's really quick. And sometimes, yes, pleasant is pleasant. There is gratification in the pleasant. Sometimes people get confused because they say the Buddha says even pleasant feeling is dukkha, the first noble truth. So how can pleasant be dukkha? Pleasant is pleasant. I like it. I'm happy. I do feel good. I like it better when I don't hurt than when my knee is killing me. I like it better when the food tastes good than when there's something I'm really allergic to. So how can you tell me that's dukkha?

But dukkha means unreliable—can't be counted on for any kind of lasting satisfaction or happiness. So there is gratification in the pleasant, and that's often how we get seduced.

The other aspect of the view—and again, I'm really simplifying—is to look in your own experience at what the views are of what brings happiness, what brings suffering in your own life. Not just the conscious ideas, but the ones you really act on, the ones you really take refuge in in times of stress when things aren't going the way you want.

So for instance, the idea: everything comes and goes, it's impermanent, knowing this is the way to peace. Okay, that's a nice thought. Is that where you really take refuge? Absolutely the knowing, when something difficult is happening? We can't kid ourselves. We might try, and that wisdom on the intellectual level can be helpful. If something's difficult and we think, "Oh yeah, it does change, things do change, everything's impermanent," that might give the wisdom to just relax into what's happening. So that's true. That is, in a little way, taking refuge in it.

Really taking refuge in it is absolutely knowing it's impermanent. We just open, it comes, it goes. But then notice, like I say, the times that it slips in underneath. I think I'm just being with what is, but ever so slightly—or not so slightly—I'm leaning towards "it just has to feel good." It just goes down. It's so embarrassing, really. You just want to feel good, for God's sake. It's just so simple. I don't want my back to hurt. I want to be able to feel good about myself, so I want to have some really deep, concentrated, unitive states. And it sounds like so that I can really know anatta, and I want to know anatta so I can feel good about myself, like I'm getting somewhere in my practice. And then I don't have to struggle so much, I can relax. It slips in, it slips in.

Where was I going with this? Oh yes, the third aspect I wanted to mention of the views we may hold is again that sense of me—that sense of me as a separate agent, either being acted on by experience and circumstances and environment and others, or being the agent that's doing the acting. As in meditating: I'm doing the meditation. I'm focusing on my breath.

In a conventional way, of course, this is true. I'm not saying we should lose the sense of who we are as compared to other people, or awareness of our effect on the environment. But deeply held, it's such a strong assumption, such an ingrained felt experience, that it's on the level of not even knowing that it's possible our perception might perceive things in another way.

Often it can happen in meditation—an experience where there just isn't that sense so much of me and other. And it doesn't have to be some huge blowout experience. Sometimes people are just focusing on the breath or just being with pain, and suddenly, boom, something opens up. Just in that moment—it could be vast, it could be focused—but there's simply no sense of me and other.

And very often in that moment, the next thing that comes is a really strong fear. Then people come and say, "I got afraid and I ruined the moment." Again, immediately we own it. But the fear is just that sense of, "Whoa, this doesn't fit the paradigm. I don't know where to put this." In the moment itself, it's actually not suffering, it's not scary—it's just kind of the next moment. But that reaction is just a habit: "This isn't me and others, safe, safe, protected."

Our mind doesn't really like when these deep views are challenged. So when you're feeling in some way uncomfortable in practice or in life—not killer uncomfortable, not overwhelmed, not like you're going to go crazy—but a little uncomfortable, a little fear, that's not a bad thing. Let it spark curiosity: "Oh, this is interesting. I'm kind of interested. What's going on here?" Don't think about it too much, but get interested.

So how does this work? It's obvious, but I'll bring it into meditation terms. These habits are so deeply habituated that of course that's what we bring to meditation. We do something in order to achieve a result. That makes sense. We don't do something for no reason. If we said, "Come here for a month and work really hard for absolutely nothing. Nothing will change, you'll be just the same before as after—you won't really be the same because you're never the same, but really it's not to get a single thing"—even if our mind might say "cool," really deep down we wouldn't show up.

Why do we come to the hall? There are times when you come just to be in the presence of the moment. And that's sublime. That's wonderful—that sense of nothing to do, nothing to have, nothing to be. We love those moments. And then we turn it into something to try and have again the next time, the next time, the next time. Because that's what our mind trusts: "That was right. That was good. That felt pleasant. Now I've got it about how to meditate and know not-self. How can I keep it?"

You see how they come in again? It just comes in again—the wanting of pleasant, the fearing of unpleasant. It's all about me. And the "all about me" also tends to mean I then have to do it. I have to figure it out. I have to do the meditation correctly in order to purify my mind.

Even that language—purify my mind. How many of you, either consciously or not, have felt this: "Oh, my mind is impure"? How many of us start to kind of own it: "Corruption in my mind." Or, "Yeah, of course my mind is corrupt. It's infinitely corrupt. There's no way this mind could ever be purified." Instead of seeing that none of it's personal.

These habits—the greed, the dosa, the confusion, the me-ing and I-ing—it's just the nature of mind. When pleasant comes, the unaware mind just leans towards it. It's just nature manifesting. It's normal. It's natural.

It's not the only way, though. Actually, the mind in a moment that's just open, relaxed, accepting, willing to just be without knowing, without having to make a story, without needing to judge or recoil—that also is really natural. But mostly in our daily lives, in our busy lives, that's not the quality of pure mind that we notice so much. It's not the one we've been trained to see. As Sayadaw was saying, it's the opposite of everything we've been taught.

How many of you were taught to notice that in school? How many of you were taught that in a moment when you're just sitting, someone would say, "Oh, that's great! You're just sitting there really present and aware without trying to impress, without trying to get it right. Just being awake. Wonderful." How many of us was that ever even pointed out as a possibility?

Much more in our culture we need to do, we need to achieve, we need to have some kind of result in order to confirm ourselves or to have other people confirm us, to have a sense of doing okay, of existing.

So taking a simple meditation experience, we can see how the mind moves so quickly. Say you're just sitting and you have a pain. Okay, that's no big deal. Pain in your butt, pain in your knee—it doesn't really matter where. In the normal course of things, the pain comes up, it might be recognized, and there's just that little pulling back right away. Our tendency is, even in meditation, to keep on focusing on the pain and not to so much notice, not be quite tuned in to just that quality of the knowing. So you don't quite see when that simple "oh, this pain is like this" turns to recoil.

The pain gets more tight. And immediately, what we perceive, we think about: "Oh, this cushion is so hard. Why didn't I bring that soft foam cushion? I can't believe I forgot that ear pillow that I always use. How am I going to bear another three and a half weeks of this? And besides that, that person next to me is making so much noise moving. How can I possibly come to any kind of peace?" And then you start self-chastising and wanting and the whole thing, right? Just in that amount of time.

And at that point, which has taken no time at all, how can you even know what's actually happening? In that moment, that pain has obviously become a block to peace, a block to meditation, a block to ease. It's not really questioned—it's just obvious.

Maybe you've heard this from Sogyal Rinpoche. This is a process of reaction and thought. We get into so much confusion by letting ourselves get lost in whatever happens. You project a thought: "Oh, this pain is unbearable." Then the second thought believes the first: "How will I ever last two and a half months?" Then a third, fourth, and fifth thought are projected. The first thought is by this time already a reality. "This pain is unbearable." By the time the tenth one comes, it believes the fifth thought has always been an actuality.

And we just wonder why we don't actually recognize the true nature of peace, the true nature of the heart-mind of non-clinging. Why don't we even recognize how available, how accessible it is? Because we're all caught up in our stories, our projections of mind. It just happens so, so quickly.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, again talking about how this works, said that when we look at pain, it's natural that this dislike comes up in the mind. That's just kind of a natural expression. But when there's aversion in the mind and we don't really see it, how can you understand what's happening? He uses this example all the time: If you're angry at someone and you keep on looking at that person, what happens to the anger? Does it stay the same? Does it get worse? Does it get better?

Does that person suddenly transform into incredible beauty? No, you know, when you're annoyed at someone and you keep looking at them, it just feeds the whole thing. The annoyance gets stronger. And that's what happens when we're with pain or with anything else and we don't notice the aversion in the mind. We can't recognize accurately when the mind is reacting—we need to see that, otherwise our perception is distorted. The aversion colors our whole experience.

So when we're talking about impure mind, so to speak—the mind colored by greed—greed is like thirst. It's this "I've got to have it" kind of energy. It's not the same as a wholesome wanting to do good. The word "wanting" in English covers a wide range of mental states that aren't actually the same. The Pali word *lobha*, which we translate as greed, really refers to this thirst, this leaning forward, this "I have to have it," with the promise that this is going to make me happy. It's a truly deluded kind of state.

When we talk about it coloring the mind, let me try to explain. Andy Olenski, who is the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and a Pali and Sanskrit scholar, loves to examine the quality of mind. *Citta* is the word I'm using, translating as mind or heart. He says that in Buddhism, the mind is not a subject—it's not some thing that has objects as content. Rather, *citta* is the activity or process of cognizing, a flow of events.

You could think of *citta* as a moment, though even describing it as a discrete moment is just a way of talking. It's a moment of activity. My friend in Burma once described how she always thought of *citta* as this little round thing—a moment of consciousness with *mettā*, or delusion, or wanting, or concentration inside it, like little bubbles, like cartoon bubbles over someone's head. But really, mind is something else entirely. It's a moment of consciousness with various mental qualities arising together with it. There's no "in" or "out" of it. There's no consciousness here and then you over there that I'm cognizing. It's all arising together.

Consciousness—that moment of *citta*—includes the *viññāṇa*, the sense consciousness, the seeing or hearing. It includes whatever mental qualities are arising with it: attention, mindfulness, *mettā*, greed, hatred, confusion, whatever wholesome or unwholesome mix is present.

So in U Tejaniya's example, there's a moment of consciousness arising, and the object being cognized is painful sensation—unpleasant, strong, unpleasant sensation. Immediately with that, there's a kind of flinching back, the aversion. And when it's not recognized, the aversion just colors everything. It's like a dye. It flavors that whole moment of consciousness. From within it, the aversion colors how we think, the conclusions we draw, how we relate to that experience. "Of course I hate this pain. I have to do something about it. My knee's going to break. I need to go to the hospital. Of course that's normal."

When I was recently in retreat—a light retreat—I had the same experience with craving. I was just doing some walking meditation, and craving came up for something. I don't even know what it was for, but there was this sense of wanting an object. Then the next moment of consciousness really noticed the craving with interest, not with aversion, and I was seeing how from within the craving itself—this is why it's so seductive—the quality it lends to that moment of mind is this promise that "this is really going to make you happy." It just feels like you could slide into this and everything's going to be okay. And it colors everything.

From within craving, even if the mind can say, "I know this—maybe it was a hot shower—isn't going to make me happy forever," that's just a little voice up here. But the craving in the moment is so powerful—it's its very nature to promise. As one yogi said to me during the three-month course, "It's this empty promise, but we keep believing it, the empty promise."

Sometimes, even when we start to see that getting this object or having this experience isn't going to do it, and we think we're renouncing, we just renounce one object for another. We don't see that it's really the belief in the promise of craving that needs to be seen through. It's not even that we have to stop craving, because that would be aversion.

Meeting craving with aversion isn't really any better. But to just really feel the seduction and simply be watching it. Just watch it. "Yeah, I get this." And feel the whole thing. Then watch it fade away. And keep on watching and notice—oh, this is a moment of clear, pure mind-heart. This is a moment of non-clinging. This is just a little bitty taste of the peace of the Buddha.

What the promise of clinging really is—when we get the thing, the clinging stops and we're at peace. As long as we're focused outward on experience, on objects, on getting, and we forget to turn around and notice what's going on in the mind, then we're just going to stay in this endless circle of samsara, of getting and wanting and trying and doing. But turning around—oh, craving is like this. Nothing to do about it. It's so much more simple in a way. Craving is like this. You don't have to hate yourself for craving. And certainly don't expect it to stop—that would mean you're an arahan if it stops. So cut yourself some slack. But be willing to simply recognize: craving is like this. Dosa—that's my favorite—is like this. This has been really, really important for me. It's like this.

Then it may not be any of those. It may just be hearing, seeing, smelling, pain, quietness in the breath, jaggedness in the breath. "What should I do? How should I meditate?" Worry. It's like this. That's Ajahn Sumedho's language.

The real work of meditation is not so much about getting any technique perfect, acquiring an experience and holding to it. All the techniques are just to help us turn around and notice what's going on in the mind. And in that noticing, the steadiness—the steadiness of noticing and its continuity—of course we space out, but the intention to be steady, I cannot say enough how key that is. Because in the long steadiness of mindful awareness, wisdom arises naturally.

Like that example I gave of seeing the craving—that's just a little piece of paññā, wisdom arising. Not "Oh, craving, I need this," but rather, "Oh, wow, look at the nature of craving. It's like this. It's an empty promise." It doesn't seduce when you see that. And there's a moment of purity, a moment of peace. That didn't come because I decided I had to cultivate a moment of wisdom and get to peace. It came because there was simply: craving's like this, wanting's like this, peace is like this.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a great line. He says understanding—paññā, wisdom—does not arise as the result of thinking. It's the result of the long process of conscious awareness. The long, steady, ongoing process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, so we have an insight and think about it a little bit. But often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding. The main point I wanted to make there is that understanding arises as a result of just the long, steady process of conscious awareness.

And conscious awareness doesn't care what the object of awareness is. That can be so incredibly freeing. Because it really means we don't have to be so worried or controlling about what is arising in our experience—how focused I am, whether I'm experiencing bliss or pain, whether I'm thinking, whether the quality of my fantasies is really disgusting, whether I'm still sleepy. Awareness doesn't care. A long process of conscious awareness. Sitting, walking, eating. Of course you space out.

I'm not saying that. But the willingness to not be so entranced by the objects, by what's happening, by our reactions to them, and to just get more interested in the mind that's observing—this is the key.

This is from Wang Po, who was a Chinese Chan master: "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. But most people are not aware of this. They think the mind is just the faculty that sees, hears, feels, and knows. So blinded by their own sight, by their hearing, by their feeling and knowing, people don't perceive the radiance of the source."

As Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche says, most of our life our attention is turned out, out, out—to other people, to experiences. Or even when we're here in meditation, it's out in a way to how is the breath, how is the sensation, what's happening in the experience, how can it be better? Turn around and notice the mind that's noticing. And in that, the natural state is actually non-clinging, is actually peace. It's just important for us to be willing to recognize that. "Honor" is perhaps too fancy a word, but just to acknowledge those moments when there's wakefulness, sense of presence, and no big pushing, pulling, or "me-ing" going on. It could feel sublime. It could feel just kind of neutral. It could be peaceful. It could be alert. It could last for a while. It could just be for a second. It doesn't matter.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa says—he calls this voidness, voidness of sense of self—generate a contentment with voidness. Just notice it. Because when we bring to our techniques of meditation, whatever technique we do, when we do it with what Tejaniya calls right attitude, which is a mind that is just willing to be with what's happening with the intention to understand rather than to judge—or to use Ajahn Sumedho's language:

"Oh, frustration is like this. Hating my practice is like this. Aversion to the sound of that person stomping up the stairs and hating their guts and writing a letter to the management is like this"—there's nothing that awareness can't notice.

And when you say, "I don't know, I can't figure out what's going on in that confusion"—it's like this. You just step back. To me, actually, I quit trying to name it so precisely when I realize I'm all caught up trying to figure it out. I just get big. Oh, dosa. Wanting. And that's plenty, because it's moved the entrancement from involvement with the object to "Oh, what's going on in the mind that's aware?"

And so our meditation is really—all our techniques are really—about helping us tune in more to both the mind that's confused and suffering and the moments of mind that's pure, that's peaceful, that's non-clinging. It's about access to freedom and recognizing and trusting that potential. It's not always having to be some incredibly deeply concentrated state. It doesn't have to come from some incredibly breaking-you-open anatta experience.

Again, as Buddhadasa says, we all experience many, many moments of this voidness every day. Every day. Just notice. And then notice the next moment: "Aha, 232 moments of voidness." Okay, that's a moment of being. "Okay, another moment of being—7,256,000 moments of being." But it's not, luckily, about numbers.

Luckily, one of my teachers years ago said, "A spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies." And it's true. That's why just a moment of insight is just a shift of perception, stepping out of that limited view, out of the assumptions we don't know we have, and just seeing in a different way. And that has far more power than the amount of time the mind spends in that perception. It just breaks something open.

Many people have talked about insights they've had—some sense of real anatta or some sense of really knowing impermanence. They say, "Well, it's not here right now, but there's a way I can access the memory that isn't just intellectual." It's really like we can kind of re-remember, viscerally, cellularly: "Oh yeah, you know." And that's a useful thing, because we spend plenty of time re-remembering the other way. So that's actually very helpful.

So our practice—we use the techniques. We need to focus sometimes, because how do you watch the mind? How do you even know you have a mind? You're talking about noticing pleasant and wanting. How do you even know that you're here in this room, never mind these subtleties we talk about seeing?

So sure, sometimes we need technique. We need to be with the breath or the body or hearing to bring in some focus, to bring in some stability. We might deliberately talk about opening and being with changing objects. We use technique—but not to perfect technique and not to achieve experience. Technique is just a way to ask, "Oh, what's going on in the mind?" It's like we get more interested. Almost like we fall in love with awareness, rather than being so in love with experience. In fact, love and devotion is sometimes a wonderful way into this opening. We'll talk more about that another time. But learning to trust it is really huge. Really huge.

And this is what we call cultivation of mind. So purify the mind—that doesn't mean get out the pickaxe and start digging away at the aversion and the clinging and start judging yourself. It's not personal. None of it's personal. We're just watching how nature manifests. When this happens and there's no mindfulness, when the mind is wanting, this is where it goes—into clinging. But when all clinging is like this, that awareness is always available. It isn't dependent on deep shamatha or samadhi. It isn't dependent really on anything except remembering. And that's why the continuity is so helpful. First we just remember, "Oh yeah, oh yeah," and then it starts to take on a momentum of its own.

So just a couple of things, a couple of hints in practicing in this way, to make it seem not so esoteric, hopefully. The way Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about being aware of awareness, often that can sound like something really esoteric. We're looking for awareness to be aware of, and it can really get very frustrating—and also become a kind of infinite regression.

So I just want to share the way he talks about it, which is incredibly simple. Someone says to him, "I don't know how to be aware of awareness, I don't know where to put my attention." He says, the mind cannot be found anywhere. Trying to find it is a futile exercise. It's like trying to find your glasses when you're actually wearing them. The mind isn't something you can take hold of and look at. You're getting confused because you're looking for something other than what is there—sort of like my friend looking for the mind, the citta, some kind of thing, some bubble you can get hold of.

So this is his example for awareness of awareness. He says to this person, just put your hands together like this. So try it, if you can bear it. Just put your hands together like that. Okay, can you feel the sensations where they touch? Yes? First, how much effort does that take? Not a lot, right? Just feeling the sensations.

Okay. Now, do you recognize that you're feeling the sensations? Don't double-think it—just, do you recognize you're feeling the sensations? Stay simple, for the love of God. Yes? Okay. That's awareness of awareness. How hard is that? You're aware of the sensation and you know it. That's awareness of awareness—not looking for a thing. Just awareness of awareness, very simple.

So he says, don't try hard to look for awareness. You relax and see that it's already there. We find being aware of the mind difficult only because we lack practice. So that's what he's talking about—being aware of the mind. It's not that hard, right? So when we're being with the breath, or being with the sound, with whatever—there's hearing.

When you know that you're hearing, that's awareness of the awareness of hearing. The next piece is that this just becomes more natural. That quality of effort that was there when I asked, "Do you feel the sensations and know it?"—it doesn't have to be a really precise, driven focus, just a relaxed recognition. That's the quality he talks about maintaining.

Now, the other important piece of this is twenty-four seven, not just once in a while. Once in a while, as we always say with continuity, when it gets difficult or we space out, you don't see change. The steadiness is what allows for reality, for nature to reveal itself, for wisdom to arise.

So in the in-between times—in the walking, in the sitting, in the eating, in the yogi jobs, whatever—sometimes the mind might be more focused and really precise, other times not. It doesn't matter. The key is just this remembering, remembering yourself.

So you're trying to be mindful and feel and do the pots, and you're getting all lost in the mind's irritation. That's it. You don't have to go in there and take it apart and see the pleasant and the unpleasant. In a sitting, in a quiet time, yeah, that might reveal itself. Other times, it's much more general. But it's not the object that matters. It's that knowing. Just that awareness of knowing.

And as we go on with that, it gets a little momentum itself, and then when there's aversion in the knowing or wanting in the knowing, it actually becomes more and more obvious. So then it moves from knowing the sensations to knowing wanting. Fine, fine, fine.

And in this way, it's the same with the samādhi. It's always just like this. It's not about trying to make it different. It's not about meditation as a way to confirm myself, as a way to make myself feel better, as a way to get somewhere. It's just this sense of shifting the paradigm, stepping out of the habit of experience and liking and disliking and hav-

ing experience make me happy and confirm me and getting somewhere and putting in effort to achieve a certain result and me doing the doing—to just recognizing nature's happening all the time, awareness is happening, noticing it.

It really gets to where—oh, aversion in the mind?—I feel happy to notice that. There's just this sense of ease of noticing whatever it is that's happening. Life stops in these moments. I'm not saying it's steady state, okay? But notice, just like Buddhadāsa says, generate a contentment. He says with voidness; I'm saying with awareness. Awareness that's with right attitude, awareness that's just this being with what is, not driven by wanting, by striving, by aversion—generating a contentment with that, almost a love of it.

And then whatever is happening, whatever is happening, is our practice, is our door to awakening, is a door to non-clinging, the heart of peace. Whatever is happening, there's no way your practice can't be good enough. Because it just doesn't matter. Awareness can meet all of it.

That quotation from Sayadaw—I wanted to end with it: when something arises in consciousness and it's seen with awareness, seen as "it's like this," that breaks the habit of self-referencing, of judging, of clinging. So any experience can introduce us once again to awareness. It's always available. That's the miracle of mindfulness, as Thích Nhất Hạnh says.

CHAPTER 42

Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching that when the perception of impermanence (anicca) is truly developed and cultivated, it leads to complete liberation—eliminating sensual lust, lust for existence, ignorance, and the conceit 'I am.' She emphasizes that the key word is 'perception': intellectual understanding of impermanence, while helpful, doesn't free the heart and mind. True insight operates on a cellular level, shifting how we actually experience reality.*
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> *Wilson explores why we habitually fail to perceive impermanence despite its obviousness. She identifies several factors: our mind's craving for stability and familiarity; resistance to the sadness and grief that can accompany recognizing change; misperception that assumes stasis between moments of attention; and simple inattention that prevents us from seeing the constant flux. Drawing on the Dalai Lama's teaching about 'momentariness,' she illustrates how we're surprised when things end because we perceived them as steady in the meantime—like a time-lapse film of a flower that reveals there is never any stasis, only continuous opening.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for cultivating accurate perception through steady, moment-to-moment bare attention—what Wilson calls 'the ultimate renunciation.' She shares the touching story of Ānanda weeping at the Buddha's impending death, showing how even grief at impermanence is natural and human. Rather than leading to fear, she suggests that truly perceiving anicca opens us to tender appreciation for the fragility and beauty of life, allowing us to love 'what is lovely and will not last.'*

Tonight I want to talk about one of the famous three characteristics of existence that the Buddha spoke of so often: impermanence, or anicca.

If you read any of the suttas at all, you see how incredibly often the Buddha speaks about the importance, really the centrality, of coming to understand and truly to have insight into this truth of impermanence. One way he says it: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit of 'I am' when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated."

So those four things are basically saying that's complete liberation of heart and mind: eliminating lust, lust for existence, uprooting ignorance, uprooting all conceit of "I am."

But what I think is really interesting about this particular quotation is the way he says it's the perception of impermanence that we need to develop and cultivate—the emphasis on perception. So I want to talk a little bit about perception, and how accurate perception is really the nature of insight. Then we'll explore the perception of impermanence and ask: why don't we perceive it, if that's how things are?

Perception is one of the five aggregates that arise in every moment, which the Buddha talked about as comprising a human being. The aggregates are a whole other talk, but briefly: rupa is form, and then the mental qualities arising every moment are consciousness, perception, vedana, and sankhara.

Consciousness is simply the knowing. When there's an ear and there's a sound, consciousness—the knowing of the sound—comes together. Perception is that moment of recognition based on memory and experience. So say, if you hear this sound of a bell: there's hearing, and just "bell"—knowing it's a bell. That's the perception. It might be stronger: "Oh, that's the bell in the meditation hall, that's the Spirit Rock bell," or just knowing "bell." It may be in words or not, but that knowing of what it is—that's what's called perception. This arises, as the Buddha said, with every consciousness.

The third mental quality is vedana, this feeling tone, this feeling experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It's a mental feeling activity. And then the fourth is all the other mental formations—sankhara.

So perception arises in every moment of conscious experience, and perception is really key. Remember the other night I mentioned how the Eightfold Path begins with right view, often translated as wise understanding. But personally, I really like the way it works in English as "right view"—like actually seeing. We use "see" to cover all the senses when we mean to understand: seeing accurately, perceiving accurately.

So right view—for example, the perception of anicca, the perception of impermanence—would be when in a moment we're actually perceiving the constant flux, the constantly changing nature of things.

Of course, we're not constantly perceiving this, are we? We're not always even aware of what we're perceiving. Often the perceiving is just assumed in the background, because it's happening every moment. But when we talk about the nature of insight—after all, this is translated as insight meditation, so some of you might be waiting, "When's it going to happen?" It's happening all the time. It's not such a big thing.

Insight isn't that, for instance, until you have it, everything is kind of static and unchanging, but when you finally achieve a certain depth of practice, then impermanence opens up to you and everything starts moving and flowing where before it was static. You know that doesn't make sense, right? The perception shifts, but reality or the nature of things hasn't changed at all. We're just perceiving differently.

So the nature of insight is not a thinking about, not intellectualizing, but it's on the level of "Oh, it's like this." You know when you've been mulling over a problem, trying to figure it out—whether it's in math, or how to do three things you have to do in your day, or any kind of problem? You're thinking, you're figuring, you're writing it down, you just can't figure it out. Then you let go, you put it down, and that's when all of a sudden something goes on in the background, and suddenly you see a possibility that never came to the thinking mind. That's an insight.

A Dharma insight works in the same way, but it's just seeing the nature of things as they really are. It doesn't have to stay, but it changes at least a little bit how we think about things and our view of things—like those trompe l'oeil images, the classic kind of drawing where if you look at it one way, it looks like a vase.

The vase is dark and the outlines around it are white. And then when you shift the other way, it's a profile of two faces looking at each other. Both are there, aren't they, in the thing? It just depends how you look. When you've only seen one and the mind hasn't kind of relaxed, the eyes haven't relaxed and you don't see the other, you only see the one. Once you've seen them both, you've seen them both. And even if you can only look at one at a time, you know the other one's there. It has an effect on how you think about that drawing, how you understand it, the assumptions you make, the decisions you might make. I mean, no big decisions from that, hopefully, but you get a sense of what I mean. So that's how it is with insights.

Taking insight into impermanence as an example—these will be just on some moments, and they can arise in a gross way or in a subtle way in your practice. It's no one way. These kinds of shifts happen all the time. But suddenly you just notice, oh, my moods are changing all the time, things are changing all the time, there's nothing really solid here. When you're really seeing it as an insight, on a deep insight level, there's not fear because it's just, oh, that's just how it is. There's just not a question about it. That's just how it is. When we're first intimating into it—and I'll talk about that later—but when the insight isn't quite there, then sometimes fear does come.

But this level of perception is so key. The Buddha also talked about how it affects our thought and our views. He talks about inverted or perverted, upside-down perceptions that we have a habit of. One of which is the inverted perception that uninstructed

worldlings—which is a word they use a lot, *puthujjana*, uninstructed worldlings, not completely enlightened yet—have a tendency to perceive what is *anicca*, what is constantly changing, as unchanging, as steady.

This distortion of perception that we think about leads to distortion, inversion of *citta*, of mind—how we think about it. Maybe not even consciously, but we're kind of assuming permanence and then that's how we think about stuff. Oh, in two years this is what I'm going to be doing next May. I mean, we do that. Now, we can do that by assuming permanence, or we can do it knowing, as Ajahn Chah says, "This is not certain." Two different ways of relating. But when we're assuming permanence, we're perceiving permanence, we think about it as permanent, and then how we think about things leads to *diṭṭhi*, or view.

Remember, the first step of the Eightfold Path is *sammādiṭṭhi*, wise view. Wise also compares with *micchādiṭṭhi*, wrong view. Wrong in that it's mistaken, thinking that there's permanence.

So in a moment of insight, even a little moment of seeing the face and the vase and seeing, oh, there's two different ways of looking here—that shifts how we think about that picture, and that'll shift our larger view. You wouldn't get into an argument with someone, "No, it's only this way, I know it's this way," because you know it's both ways.

And so when insight arises in this way, it's not that that particular way of viewing, say, impermanence, is then with us forever. Because why is it not with us forever? Nothing is forever, including us. But it has an effect on the thinking, on the mindstream, and on the view. It changes something fundamentally.

But that's also why those of you who've been in practice quite a long time, after a while you think, "I keep having the same insights. When am I going to have an insight into something new? All right, I've seen impermanence, I've seen *anattā*, let's move it along." And there's not really that much new to have insight into. Our personality, please, it just keeps on cycling. But again and again, from different angles, it goes deeper. It cuts through the wrong view, the wrong conceptions, the mistaken perceptions more and more. And the more accurate perceptions become more accessible.

So, on that level, when the Buddha is talking about how it's the perception of impermanence that really liberates our hearts, our minds, from clinging—clinging to sense pleasures, clinging to wanting to become, wanting to become a certain state, wanting to have a certain thing—that eliminates ignorance, that eliminates *māna*, the conceit "I am," which can be very, very subtle. Just, "I am the one who sees impermanence." You know? The mind does that.

And then we go, "Oh, my mind does that." It's just the conceit "I am." The perception.

And this is why practice is so important—because this perception is not something we can talk ourselves into. And we've all, I would imagine, of the three characteristics—of impermanence, of dukkha, of unreliability, of anatta, of not-self—the most intellectually accessible seems to be impermanence. We've all heard ten million talks on it. We could all give ten million talks on it. We could all make a million lists of how everything's impermanent. How much difference has that made in terms of freeing our hearts and minds?

It doesn't work on an intellectual level. That's helpful information. Everything's impermanent—I know that. How come I don't live from that? Maybe you do live from that. How come I don't live from that? Because on a cellular level, I don't always get it. Sometimes I do. But sometimes that perception of impermanence isn't accessible, and the mind is acting and making decisions from—not really recognizing it—the wrong view of assuming permanence.

So we can't talk ourselves into it intellectually. But the intellectual information might give us the stimulus to keep looking, to see what's going on. So I'm not going to give you a million examples about how things are impermanent, because I think we all know that. I just want to talk about other aspects that come up in my mind.

One thing that's always interesting to me—and I'm not trying to tell you anything, I'm just hoping that if any of this is interesting, it sparks investigation, a moment-to-moment investigation into your own experience. You don't necessarily believe anything I say. But what's always of interest to me is: even intellectually knowing everything's changing, sitting and walking and being in our life with so much change, why do we cling? Why is there this habit in the mind of clinging?

We know the classical dependent origination, the one of vedana—when there's not mindfulness and there's pleasant feeling, the mind tilts into it, begins to cling. That's true, that's on one level. But I'm talking on a little more psychological level, maybe, just from my own experience. Because I find it really poignant.

I think Sally said something like this last night—it kind of all blends for us, just like it does for you. It's something about how even if what we're doing doesn't really lead to freedom from suffering, on some level the motivation for our thoughts and actions, and really the motivation for clinging, is this deep yearning for happiness, for peace. We're not setting out to make ourselves suffer. We don't say, "How can I spin in samsara a few more endless eons?" The clinging is an expression of our deep yearning for happiness, for peace. It's an unfortunate expression, but that's where it's coming from. It's not

because we're stupid jerks—it's because somehow we're really trying to find fulfillment and peace and ease in this life. And it's so poignant, because of course it's the thing that keeps the dis-ease going.

Something I've seen in myself—you might see different things in yourself—but someone brought it up also in an interview, just mentioning how the mind likes a feeling of stability. The mind likes familiarity. The mind likes comfort. It doesn't like the sense that everything's constantly changing and there's nowhere to land, and as soon as you notice one thing, the next thing, and the next thing. This sense of everything so erratic and nowhere to land and everything so up in the air—the mind doesn't really like that. Unreliability. You want something to land in. You want something to just take a breath and say, "Let's just stay like this for a few minutes."

Even if it's an unpleasant personality pattern—I think Sally said this too last night—at least, my God, it's familiar. Let's just hang out here for a few minutes. Our response to the unreliability of life is to hold on.

And of course, a lot of our practice is just to turn around and explore how the holding on actually strengthens the sense of dis-ease and the sense of fear. Holding on—"it better not go, it better not go"—clinging and fear, they're right close together. But I find it not a judgment, but really quite poignant. Clinging to any moment, as if for a sense of something to hide the passing, to hide the impermanence.

We actually don't want to see that—the passing of things, the impermanence. Or we cling to our illusion of control, the sense that we know what's going to happen, that at least we know the next thing. We don't want to have this constant opening into the unknown. Give me a break. Let me just know what's going to happen next. Look at the schedule. Know what we're going to do.

Have you kind of sussed out how you spend your day? What's the best time to go to lunch? How's it going to be? When do you take your shower? And it gets totally thrown off if someone gets off rhythm and they're in the shower at the time you decided to take yours. It happened the other morning—"No, no, this is my shower time. No one's supposed to be in." Everyone gets their little sense of familiarity. We do it in life, and we do the same thing in practice.

There's a quotation I love from somewhere in the suttas that I've not been able to find now. People always ask me, and I'm just telling you I can't find it, but I didn't make it up. Somewhere, the Buddha says: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." The search for the resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful.

There's a lovely poem by Galway Kinnell—I'll only read a little of it because I just love how he phrases it. It's called "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You scream, waking from a nightmare. When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard, as if clinging could save us.

As if clinging could save us. That's how it feels, isn't it? As if clinging could save us. But really, it's more that clinging creates us. That's actually the thing. I have a good friend who said, "I want, I need, therefore I am." Look and see.

So when I examine why we don't perceive impermanence, why this perception is so hidden from us, one reason is what I was just talking about—a kind of denial, a discomfort with constant change, and looking to the wrong thing for security, looking to clinging.

Another factor, and this is just something I've noticed in myself, this isn't some Buddhist list: When we completely die into the perception of impermanence, then it's just freedom. It's no problem. But when we're perceiving it a little, kind of back and forth, then for many of us at times there's fear. Or even more often, when something we were really counting on, something familiar, goes away—someone dies, things change—there's often a real sense of grief, sadness, poignancy. And our general habit of resisting unpleasant or painful emotions comes right into the experience.

You see things changing, there's a sense of sadness about it, and then right away comes the micchā-diṭṭhi, the wrong view: "Oh, it must be wrong, because I feel sad. It can't be right. There's something wrong with this scenario." Sometimes we can get caught in that, hiding a little bit from the sadness rather than opening and seeing, "Yeah, it's ending. That's how things are."

But sadness is just part of life too. It's just another arising emotional, physical experience. When we're not afraid of sadness—and I think for most of us humans, until we're really completely free from clinging—many times when some major aspect of life goes away, a person, a situation, or sometimes even an aspect of our personality we were really comfortable with, there's almost a sense of grieving, a longing, a sadness. If we simply open to that, it's fine. It doesn't have to block our perception of impermanence. But if we recoil and shut down attention when the sadness or grief comes, then we've shut down noticing.

I want to read a couple of examples because this is really normal. It's what happens to everyone, this sense of sadness at great change. There's a lovely passage in the suttas when the Buddha has announced that he's going to die in three months.

Ananda was the Buddha's devoted attendant for twenty-five years. He's a lovely figure in the suttas—partly enlightened, but not completely enlightened. Yet he's always with the Buddha. He's the one who remembers verbatim all of the Buddha's sermons. In some of the suttas, if you read them, whenever the text begins "thus have I heard," it's said that that's Ananda's voice, actually, speaking after the Buddha died. Perhaps I'll talk about him another time. I really like Ananda. He's very human. He kind of humanizes things.

So at this point, the Buddha has announced he's going to die, and he's sitting giving a talk when he notices that somehow Ananda has disappeared. He says to the other monks, "Where's Ananda?"—although of course he knew where Ananda had gone. The text says, "Ananda, overpowered by grief, went aside and clasped the doorjamb and wept." He was weeping, saying, "My teacher, who I've been with so long, is leaving. My teacher is leaving us. How will I go on without my teacher?" It's really very touching. This famous scene is often depicted in Buddhist art.

Of course the Buddha called him back. "Ananda, come back." And then he said just what you'd expect him to say: "Do not sorrow, Ananda. Have I not told you many times that everything changes and vanishes? How could something that has come into being not be destroyed? It is not possible."

But it's not like he's chastising him. He's just telling him this is really how it is. And then he goes on to deeply appreciate Ananda: "For a long time you've attended on the Tathagata gladly, sensitively, sincerely, without reserve, with deeds, speech, and thoughts of loving kindness. You've made great merit, Ananda, and you will soon be free." So he's not saying Ananda is foolish, but rather, "Ananda, how many times have I said?" There are other examples of this too that I might mention later.

It's just human nature. When confronted with loss, when confronted with change, sorrow and clinging and fear may come up. We don't need to be afraid of that. That's not a problem. And when we can allow and open into the sorrow, into the fear, a kind of tenderness comes—a tenderness and appreciation for the fragility and vulnerability of all of life, and for ourselves. At times, it transmutes from sorrow into this tenderness that is open to all of life. All of life.

That's only possible when clinging isn't trying to pick out one thing and say, "This one has to stay. The rest can go, but this one's got to stay." That kind of grasping shuts us down, hardens our heart.

So for me, when I notice sadness, I try to let it be a wake-up call. What's not okay in this moment? What's changing? What am I resisting? Not to say, "Oh, you should know better"—not like that. But more like the Buddha said to Ananda: it's not possible that any conditions that came together won't go apart. That's how nature is. And sadness also will come together and go apart. It's just another arising aspect of nature. I use that as a way to help me wake up.

Another way that we don't perceive accurately is just plain misperception—just perceiving wrongly. This isn't always due to clinging, but sometimes due to not really careful presence, not careful moment-to-moment presence. Like I was saying, if we're not used to perceiving impermanence, then the thought that things are permanent operates as a view in the background. We're not consciously thinking that, but for instance, there's an assumption that when I get up in the morning—which is already an assumption, that I'm going to get up in the morning—this hall will still be here. And we walk up and it's still here. Mostly stuff like that happens.

I do have my schedule for 2010. It's a trip. And very often, maybe more often than not, things actually happen as planned. That kind of blows me away. I remember once making an appointment to meet my friend at the Bangkok airport at midnight on some date. And it happened. I flew from Hawaii and he came from God knows where, and we met at the airport in Bangkok at midnight.

How does this happen? Knowing that we don't know it's going to happen is very different from assuming permanence.

So we don't notice—this is the point I was trying to get to—that there's something the Dalai Lama said once in a talk I was hearing: we don't actually notice moment to moment the momentariness of change. So even when we are thinking, or thinking that we're noticing change, it's more like, "Well, this came into being, it lasts a while, and then it goes away." Right? That's change. Okay, this lasts a while—time in the middle? No, there's no "lasts a while." Nothing lasts a while. There's absolutely no stasis. That's what the Dalai Lama was saying. We're really surprised when something ends because we were perceiving it as steady in the meantime. And that's misperception. That's not really seeing the perception of impermanence.

I was having a conversation with someone today just about this. It was a lovely conversation. And the person was saying that they were really noticing there's absolutely no stasis. And what they were remembering—it was like a metaphor for this—was having seen in the past a time-lapse film of something like a flower beginning to grow, and growing, and opening, and budding, and dying. When the film is speeded up, you get to see the whole process. But what was so obvious in that process is it's not like it grows a

little and then it stops. Then it's bud, and then there's bud. And then all of a sudden it goes from bud, and then it's flower. So there's bud and stability, then flower and stability, then dead. No—completely opening, opening, opening, opening every single moment. There is no stasis whatsoever. And in every opening you could say that's the ending of something else, but you can't even say "this is the ending and this is the beginning." That's too solid. That's too separate. It's just opening, opening, opening, opening. That's what really is the perception of impermanence.

And the sense of watching the time-lapse film from here is also not quite accurate. We're watching everything changing, right? What's wrong with this picture? A friend said—I remember quite some years ago, someone who'd been doing a lot of practice for many, many years—she said, "Yeah, for years I've been seeing that everything around is changing. And suddenly, this time I suddenly got it: Oh, I'm also part of that constant opening flow. There's no me standing outside watching it. It's just this. This. All of us, every moment."

When I was trying to describe a moment of citta the other night—just a moment of consciousness, mind arising and everything that's happening within it—that's it. It's just this. There's no inside, there's no outside, there's no this watching that. It's just constant opening, opening, opening, opening. That's it.

From that perception, in that perception, there's no problem. How could there be a problem? What's the problem? What's to want? Wanting doesn't arise at all because it just doesn't make any sense whatsoever. Aversion to what? And what is there solid to have aversion? You're not thinking these things. It's just so obvious how it is.

That perception of anicca really does shift something. Yeah, it goes away again, and then there's me, and there's you, and it's solid, and it's time, and "Is she going to go over time talking?" and "I need my shower," and all of that. And there's wanting again, and there's aversion again.

But then there's the recognition that it was a real perception of nature as it is. This too is nature as it is, but it's not the only way. And that perception—we can't make it happen, but we can remember it. Sometimes just the memory is enough. This is where faith comes in, where verified faith comes in. When it's not like that anymore, when you can't perceive it that way, if your mind starts going, "I made that up"—well, you didn't make it up. You didn't make it up. Just remember: oh yeah, sometimes it's like that. And it's always like that, but sometimes we perceive that it's like that. And that starts to have an effect on the mind stream, on the solidity of our views and assumptions.

So that's part of how we misperceive—by not seeing that there is no stasis, the absolute absoluteness really, of change, of opening.

The third thing I wanted to mention that supports misperception, that supports not perceiving impermanence, is actually inattention. Just how we are. We pay attention for a little while, we're mindful for a little while, and then we're not. Then we come back again, and then we don't. There's a reason we're all talking all the time about continuity, continuity, continuity. It's not just because we want to keep you quiet and working hard. Continuity doesn't mean you don't space out—of course we can't control that. But it's more that willingness to just notice. Notice, notice, notice, very steadily. Because it's lack of continuity of mindfulness—not continuity of slowness, not continuity of any particular experience, but continuity, steadiness of mindfulness—lack of that continuity is what hides impermanence. It's what feeds the perception of permanence, because we don't really notice so much.

Let me give some examples. And again, explore this. Don't believe me or not believe me—well, you do whatever you do—but explore it. Please, I beg you, explore it.

Take emotion. You're having a day, or a couple of days, where a really difficult emotional knot has been coming up, as does happen in practice. Maybe some memories come and you start to open to a particular feeling of rage or pain or memories that hadn't come before—or maybe they had come all too often before, so you couple the emotional knot with total self-judgment and disgust that it's still here. Or maybe it's some kind of happy feeling, some real lightness. It doesn't have to be difficult. But something's coming, quite frequently arising.

And you come in to talk, and sometimes it'll show up—it often can show up when you're talking in an interview. You say, "The last day was just so filled with negativity and self-judgment. The last day I've just been spinning in arrogance and pride." When we think about it back, we really feel like that's an accurate description, because it was frequently there. And then as we think of it—oh yeah, arrogance is like this—as if it's the same way all the time.

Arrogance comes up, some thought comes, and then a different thought comes, and we'll say, "But it's still—don't get into the content, it's all still arrogance." We'll say that, right? But it is different thought, different conditions, different feeling in the body, different intensity, different way it comes, different way it goes. Even if we're really mindful of all that, at some point we get distracted, or we get bored, or we get fed up with it. "I think I just—this is enough with the arrogance. I really need to calm down. I need to shift my attention." Sometimes we do need to, but sometimes it's just: eh,

enough already with this. And then we go for a walk, or we open to seeing, or it's meal-time and we go and eat. And we didn't really have this moment-to-moment steadiness of awareness.

So we're eating, and we're back, and during all that time there was no arrogance, but we're not really paying that much attention. Then we come back, we sit down, and after two seconds—oh, there's that arrogance. My God, all day with the arrogance. But we didn't really notice. If you stay steady, you'll see at some point it really fades, it really goes, and it's really not there. It's really not there when it's not there. Instead, there was hunger, or greed, or happiness, or neutrality, or just hearing. And if we're really present in that moment, we see: others hearing. You don't have to think "there's no arrogance"—you don't have to think that—but you might just notice: oh, that's not here now.

And sometimes we're almost afraid to look. "Oh no, if I look I know it's really lurking underneath." Don't you think that sometimes? "I didn't notice it during the meal, but that's just because I was avoiding it. It was sitting there in a big lump, and as soon as I came and sat again, there it was." So then we assume it was here all day.

Does this sound at all familiar?

And so if we're staying steady, you'll notice actually when you were eating or whatever, it wasn't there. And the thought, "oh, there's arrogance there"—that's a thought, that's not the arrogance.

So with steadiness, we really see the conditions come together, the arrogance comes, but it's a little different every time. It starts to fade away, and we're afraid to look because we don't want to see it again, so we space out. But if you kept looking, you'd notice it really does go away. And when it's gone, it's really gone. And then it comes back. That's okay. The more you know it comes and goes, the less horrific it is when it's there, because you really know it's going to go.

Even though with mental states—I think James kind of talked about this, and I've noticed it myself—one of the qualities of many mental states, really pleasant ones too, but the strong ones, is that from within that mental state, it feels as if it's going to last forever. Doesn't it? I have a certain mental state where I just feel overwhelmed. I just can't. I can't do this another minute. It comes up in my life or it comes up in practice. And the quality of that mental state is that it's really unbearable. Whatever it is, I can't. And I used to totally believe it. It just gave such a good line. It was so convincing. And now when it starts—"oh no, it's unbearable, there's no way"—my mind goes, "oh, this is

a mental state." It still feels the same, but as soon as I can say this is a mental state, I do absolutely know from all these years of watching that no mental state stays. I mean, really. You just have to reflect on one day. How many mental states have you had today?

Although I have a joke with Joseph, I have to say—it just came into my mind, it's so here. Once we were teaching together at a retreat, and we just have very different temperaments. Joseph and I were talking privately, and he said—we'd just been sitting—"So how many mental states or how many moves did you have in that last sitting?" And I thought, well, I don't know, maybe fifteen or twenty. And he goes, "Oh my God." He said, "Maybe I had one." And so we have this joke. If I said, "No mental state lasts—how many have you had all day?" he would have cracked up because he would have thought, "Maybe none. I don't really have any mental states today."

So maybe you didn't have many mental states today. Maybe you're like that. But look back over the last year. Even he, over the last year, right? You had some mental states. Definitely some mental states came. Have they lasted? That's my point, anyway. Have they lasted? Has any mental state lasted your whole life? Even a week? I want to challenge you to say if it even lasts a day, if it even lasts an hour, if it even lasts five minutes without changing.

And so the steadiness, the willingness to keep coming back, keep coming back just to this moment, the steadiness of mindfulness, the continuity—that's when I said the wisdom arises, paññā comes by itself. It does. It's not like you have to spend every minute thinking, "Let's see the beginning, let's see the end, let's see the change." That drives me crazy. But if you just stay steady, steady, steady—what's happening now? What's happening now?

What's the mind noticing now? Anicca is simply how things are. That's how nature is. We can't help but notice it—that's just how things are, if we give awareness a chance by cultivating the steadiness of it.

When I talk about awareness, about mindfulness, it's that sense of not looking for impermanence, not looking for anything, but that bare attention that's willing to just die into this present moment. Whether it's burning, whether it's arrogance, whether it's thinking, whether it's fear, whether it's joy, whether it's boredom, whether it's just sensation, whether it's hearing—just now, free of concept, free of the story. If there's story, it's all about me. That's the next arising thought. So nothing's extra but just that immediacy of present moment bare experience.

Sometimes I think of that as actually the ultimate renunciation, moment to moment. Just renouncing all the stories about me and our descriptions and what's more interesting and what I should do—just burning. Just lifting if you're walking. Just rising if you're breathing. Just hearing. Just that. Just that. Just that.

That quality of present moment, open, surrendered attention is what allows nature to reveal itself. When we're looking for something, when we think we know, all of that just gets in the way. You know Krishnamurti's famous line—that's really what awareness practice is about. In any moment, freedom from the known. Just that willingness to die into whatever's arising now and let nature reveal itself.

This sense of continuity and the willingness to look can show us—using arrogance as an example—but it can be very interesting when we come to see the ideas and the views and the opinions we hold about ourselves, our whole personality belief system. That's called identity view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi in the Pali. I think it was Sally who was saying how often we hold on to even a negative or suffering idea about ourselves just because it's familiar. Often I've seen people wonder, who would I be without my restlessness?

As I said, I've seen often in practice over many years that there are times when a particular view or image or idea I'm holding about myself—that I didn't even know I was holding—becomes visible. "Oh, I'm this kind of a person," or "I'm that kind of a person," or "I couldn't possibly ever be awakened because I'm too hopeless." That's a big one. And when some certain view, just through the steadiness of attention, you see how often it's not there, and it starts to fall apart. At times I've really felt like it's a series of small deaths, really, and it's like a mourning—back to that sense of sadness or poignancy. Mourning some stupid idea I have about myself that only causes suffering, but still, it's who I am. You know—who I am. The steadiness of mindfulness can reveal this stuff.

A friend who was working here one time gave us a great example. A person who self-identified as being an aversive type person, an angry type person. And not only did she self-identify that way, other people said, "Yeah, it's true. You are an aversive type person. You are an angry type person." A long, long-term meditator. She said one time she actually came in here and was sitting during one of these retreats, and it was just this: I'm just going to watch my thoughts. And it was in the back of her mind, "Yeah, I'm really an angry, aversive type person."

So just through one sitting, she just stayed very steady without blaming herself or judging, but just watching moment to moment to moment what was coming up in her mind—the emotions, the thoughts, the moods. And she said, yeah, there was aversion, maybe ten percent of the stuff that came up. There were also many thoughts of generos-

ity, many just kind of neutral thoughts, many thoughts of kindness, of mettā, of compassion. And she came out saying, "Well, that self—I'm an aversive person—completely inaccurate. Limited, wrong view." That's a kind of assuming a solidity, a permanence that just isn't there. We write these stories for ourselves and put ourselves in like the cage of this idea of who we are based on selective perception.

A lot of people, not everybody, but a lot of people, especially in this culture, tend to notice there's a lot of self-judging. I don't know if any of you have ever noticed that, but sometimes we can really get into self-judging. And that's like being hypervigilant for whatever particular thing your mind has decided to judge yourself about. Every time anything remotely touching on that comes up—"Oh yeah, jerk again, oh yeah, again, again." Then you walk out and there are moments of peace, moments of joy.

You go, well, that was nice. That was a pleasant little fluke. But back to the self-judging—that's who I am.

That's what we call selective perception. Picking out the perceptions—not consciously, of course—but picking out the perceptions that fit the unconsciously held view while completely ignoring or overlooking or discounting other ones.

This is the power of moment-to-moment bare attention. We're not picking and choosing, because we can't trust how we would pick and choose. It's just what's happening now, happening now, happening now. That willingness to be present, the insight, the shift of perception, the wisdom—it comes by itself. It really does. We have to do so much less than we think we have to do. But what we do have to do is keep showing up, keep being willing. Can I just meet this moment? And sometimes we can't. That's okay.

Another way we perceive permanence—and this comes about through lack of continuity of awareness, but also because some of the constant change is very subtle and fine. Mahasi Sayadaw speaks of a word in Pali called *santati*, which refers to the continuity of phenomena. He says we mistake a series of successive phenomena for a single phenomenon. Things happen so fast that they seem like one thing, not changing. We think we're seeing one thing and don't recognize that it's constantly changing.

I'll give an example. If I'm not really making seeing the main focus of my interest, of my awareness at a certain time—just walking around—seeing seems kind of steady state. Seeing, seeing, seeing. It appears fairly continuous. But if I tune into seeing, like we sometimes tune into hearing, actually every single second the visual field is different. It's like a different seeing arising in every single second. It's not the same for two

fractions of a second together. But we mostly don't look that closely. It's kind of in the background, taken for granted. And so the assumption we're not even aware of is this steady state of seeing.

Or with sound—this is one you can really notice—where a sound might seem very steady and lasting. When we really tune in, you can feel how it breaks up, rises and falls. You hear the vibrations, feel the vibrations, and you really hear. It's a completely changing, moving phenomenon, even as it seems to be the same sound lasting.

So explore where you might notice this: the sense of phenomena happening seemingly so steady that we don't notice—because we're not looking that carefully—that it's changing.

How do we cultivate the perception of impermanence? The main thing is what I just said: the moment-to-moment willingness to just meet this moment with bare attention. You might also notice, sometimes with a little reflection—not too much thinking, but a little bit reflective from time to time—when we're assuming permanence.

You might look back over the day. How did your mind relate to different experiences? If something comes up and we get locked in fear or dread—oh no, this is going to be going on all day, I can't do two more weeks of this, no way—in that moment, we're assuming permanence. Or we cling to something pleasant and assume ownership of it. Now this is how my practice is. Now this is who I am. Now I'm the person who can concentrate. Assuming permanence. And even if we don't think we're clinging, if when it goes away we suffer, then we know: clinging was there. That's okay, but just knowing what's happening.

Or do we try to repeat a particular experience? Now I've figured out how to meditate. If I come into the hall early in the morning before everybody's here and sit down, then when they come in I can really tune into the hearing and go into this peaceful place, and if no one turns on the lights and if no one coughs, then I can get back into that real... you know what I mean?

As if you could ever replicate all the conditions. Conditions are constantly changing because it's that endlessly opening flow.

And again, even this happened in the time of the Buddha. There's a sutta where a monk who was quite well practiced, named Asaji, was very ill to the point of being about to die. The Buddha went and asked him—it was kind of a common thing they asked—"I hope you're not troubled with remorse or regret in terms of your sila, in terms of your morality."

And he said, "No, not my sila, but I am troubled."

"What are you troubled by?"

He said, "Well, formerly when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations. In other words, I could get really concentrated. But now I cannot obtain concentration. And as I cannot obtain concentration, it occurs to me, 'Oh no, let me not fall away. Let me not fall away from the path.' I can't get concentrated." It's really upsetting. The guy's dying.

And the Buddha basically said, "Haven't I told you that conditions are always changing? If you think awakening is based on concentration, it's not." I'm paraphrasing here, but this is basically what he's saying. "Is form permanent or impermanent? Are mental factors permanent or impermanent?" Basically, the conditions are different. Now you can't get concentrated. That's not the point. Insight is the point. So notice the conditions are always changing. Can we just die into this moment's conditions with awareness? Oh, now it's like this. Now it's like this. Now it's like this.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche says, "Watch the changeable nature of the mind." Using vedana is a good example. Just notice how much vedana changes—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—and watch how a pleasant vedana can come along and sweep us so quickly into a whole world of thought and pleasure and imagination. Just notice that. And notice how an unpleasant vedana can come along and we're swept into a whole world of judgment and recrimination and disappointment. All just based on this little moment of pleasant or unpleasant.

Now if you can not judge it but just watch how that happens, the constant changing—that's samsara. But you really see there's nothing steady state.

Ajahn Chah has a great practice: to just go through your day gently saying to yourself, "This is uncertain. This is uncertain." Okay, tomorrow I'll get up and I'll come here and sit early in the morning—and this is uncertain. Not to get all intense about it, but just, yes, this too is uncertain. You really never know.

When I was going to Burma, I got an email from a good friend. He said he was really sick and in the hospital, but he'd be better soon and go to Hawaii. I got home and got an email that he died. You know, this is uncertain.

A good friend, long-term marriage, very happy. His wife went out shopping. Her car skidded on ice and she was killed. I mean, you just wake up in the morning and go shopping. This is uncertain.

We all know a million stories like this. Not that we get lost in fear, but just the knowing of we don't know.

So the last question might come up: Why would we want to perceive in this way? Why would we want to live a life where every time our partner's going out shopping, we think, "What if they skid and die?"

No, that's with fear. That's with negativity. But opening to the reality of this perception is not opening into fear and trauma and nowhere to land and "I can't bear it." It frees our hearts and minds to really land with openness, with appreciation, with love—as I said—for the fragility of life, for the beauty of life, for whatever it is that's arising in this moment. Because this is all there is. This is life, in this moment.

It's a kind of radical trust that just right here is the only place truth can be. It's actually a much more alive and tender and connected way to live. Of course it's connected, because there's nothing separate. It's the clinging and the fear that makes it so hard. So we need the willingness to go through that. But really, it's not opening to some horrific "oh my god, everything's just going to die." It's opening to a great appreciation for life as it is.

I want to end with this poem that a yogi reminded me of at the three-month retreat, by Mary Oliver. It sort of gives the feeling—it's not exactly, but it gives the feeling:

Oh, to love what is lovely and will not last.
What a task to ask of anything, or anyone.
Yet it is ours,
and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

One fall day I heard above me,
and above the sting of the wind,
a sound I did not know,
and my look shot upward.
It was a flock of snow geese,
winging it faster than the ones we usually see,
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun
so they were, in part at least, golden.
I held my breath
as we do sometimes to stop time
when something wonderful has touched us,
as with a match which is lit and bright

but does not hurt in the common way,
but delightfully,
as if delight were the most serious thing you ever felt.

The geese flew on.
I have never seen them again.
Maybe I will someday, somewhere.
Maybe I won't.
It doesn't matter.
What matters is that when I saw them,
I saw them
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 43

The Joy of Generosity

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson illuminates why the Buddha consistently taught generosity (dāna) as the first of the three pillars of practice—dāna, sīla, and bhāvanā. Drawing on Bhikkhu Bodhi's scholarship, she explains how dāna serves as the foundation for the entire path to liberation, appearing as the first topic in the Buddha's graduated teachings, the first of the ten pāramīs (perfections), and the precursor to the Noble Eightfold Path. The essence of generosity lies not in what is given but in the purification of intention—cultivating non-clinging, connectedness, and the weakening of greed, hatred, and delusion.*
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> *Wilson shares deeply moving personal experiences from monasteries and nunneries in Burma and Thailand, where generosity permeates daily life in face-to-face, joyful exchanges between monastics and laypeople. She recounts stories of Burmese nuns caring for orphaned girls with boundless dedication, villagers immediately offering back rice they had just received, and a young boy solemnly presenting her with a tiny flower. These encounters reveal how generosity becomes contagious—brightening the heart of giver and receiver alike until the distinction between them dissolves.*
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> *The talk also draws on canonical sources, including the story of Anāthapiṇḍika, the Buddha's foremost lay supporter, whose generosity flowed from profound faith rather than expectation of reward. Wilson concludes with the Buddha's teaching on recollecting one's own generosity as a meditation practice that purifies the mind, bringing joy, calm, and collectedness—preparing the heart to receive the deepest Dhamma.*

Sally mentioned last night how in the way that the Dhamma has been taught largely in the West, we tend to focus on kind of the end of the three pillars: Dana, Sila, Bhavana. We've tended to focus more on Bhavana and kind of throw in Sila and Dana later on. So I thought tonight I want to actually talk about generosity, about Dana, and the way that the Buddha brought it into his teaching.

I read the short refrain in one of my talks: "Refrain from the unskillful, do good, purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas." And of course we think of meditation practice—both insight and shamatha absorption meditation practices work towards purifying the mind, which means changing the habits from greed, from aversion, from hatred, to purifying those habits. But really everything the Buddha taught

was towards awakening, towards purifying the mind. As far as I can tell, nothing was extraneous or just for the heck of it or about something else. Everything is about purifying the mind. It's not only meditation.

As Sally said, the three pillars are Dana, generosity; Sila, conscious non-harming, virtuous conduct; and Bhavana, mental cultivation. I want to talk about generosity tonight.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is one of the great scholars and translators of the Pali into English of our generation, just knows all the suttas, basically. He talks about the practice of giving and the special place it has in the way that the Buddha speaks about it as being, in a sense, the foundation, the seed of our spiritual development. And it really is the foundation. It says in the suttas, which we read over and over again, that talk on giving was invariably the first topic that the Buddha talked about to people. There are many suttas—and I'll read part of one later—where when he first meets someone, he gives what's called a graduated exposition, basically bringing their mind into enough clarity and upliftment until it's actually ready to hear the deepest dharma. And he always starts with generosity.

The aim of it isn't to say, "You should be a generous person." We all think, "Yeah, that's good, help people in need, let's give, that's good." But it's not just that. It's really a way—the foundation of the pure-hearted mind—that allows us to open, to unfold into freedom, into liberation.

Bhikkhu Bodhi points out that giving, generosity, Dana, is not one of the steps in the Eightfold Path, which seems more the actual moment-to-moment practice of looking at the mind. But he says it is actually the precursor, the foundation, the preparation that underlies and quietly supports the entire endeavor to free the mind from confusion. And then he just goes through the lists. It's not on the Eightfold Path, but it's the first topic in the graduated teachings, which the Buddha always gives. It's the first of the three bases of meritorious deeds. It's the first of the four means of benefiting others. And it's the first of the ten paramis, or perfections.

These paramis or perfections, as you know, are the virtues, the beautiful qualities of mind that are cultivated in the Theravada tradition. They're cultivated by all beings who have the aspiration not only to awaken but to come into birth as an awakened Buddha who can then so benefit others. And generosity is the first. I just wanted to point out how the intrinsic importance of generosity is talked about so much.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says—and I also wanted to point this out—that generosity takes the form of giving of material things, of our time, of our care, lending an ear, whatever form of giving. But the perfection of generosity, the quality of generosity that brings in this brightening, this uplifting of the mind, isn't about the action. Of course all action comes from the motivation, from the intention. And so it's this intention of giving that cultivates non-clinging—I mean, obviously—but it actualizes non-clinging. It also cultivates, and I'll talk more about this, non-separation, a sense of mutuality, the experience of connectedness. And just in the doing of it, it's weakening the habits of greed and hatred and confusion or separation.

So generosity may be the foundation for the Eightfold Path, but also in the practice of it, in the doing of it, in the opening to generosity, it is an actual practice of non-clinging, of connectedness, of non-delusion.

What I also want to talk about from my own experience—if there were secret teachings of generosity, I mean, it's probably obvious, but to me, I didn't really understand this on a personal level—is that it's an absolute practice of joy and happiness. It's such a happy way to be in the moment in the world. It's such a joyful way to be with other people, this generous heart and mind which naturally moves into metta, into connectedness.

In this culture I grew up in, and I think this is a very generous culture in terms of offering, taking in, whether we're in a church or a synagogue or a temple or a mosque in our religious traditions, but also just in the lay culture. We all get seven billion requests from organizations a week in the mail. And most people I know really give a lot in that way. So that's generosity. And I feel good about it, but it's not that same quality of real joy that I've experienced over and over and over in Thailand and in Burma. Because it's like a face-to-face immediate quality of being that really permeates the culture, that permeates simple interactions between people.

Of course, it's not just in Thailand and Burma. That's just where I've done a lot of practice. And being Buddhist cultures, the sense of generosity as the foundation for the whole of Buddhist practice is very deeply inculcated in the culture. But of course, generosity is everywhere, and Buddhism doesn't own generosity. I'm just talking from this perspective.

I'm sure you've heard a million times how the Buddha, when he set up his Sangha of monks and later of nuns, really based it on generosity, on the mutual nature of generosity, so that the Sangha, the ordained ones, depended on the lay people, and the lay people depended on the monks and nuns.

Neither side could just kind of exist in isolation. This is from the Buddha himself, speaking to his monks:

"Brahmins and householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicine in times of sickness. And you monks are very helpful to Brahmins and householders, as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, and you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, monks, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

Just the sense that we're all in it together.

From our Western mind, the idea of monks and nuns going out every morning with their bowls and begging for food—I mean, that's the word we have, *begging*—it has a whole different context, doesn't it, than this sense of mutual support and respect, this understanding that we can't exist without each other.

Even now in Burma and Thailand, every morning in a monastery, the monks line up early, always barefoot, always in order from the most senior to the most junior, carrying their alms bowls. In silence, they go out into the local villages and walk in line barefoot for an hour, an hour and a half. They just have their route. They don't look up. It's not about going someplace and asking. They just walk with their eyes down, and if someone comes and wants to offer, they open the lid, the food is placed in, and they keep going.

I don't know what it is—early morning, just after dawn, something about the stillness in the air—but so often when I see that lining up and going out, sometimes it makes me cry. I feel like it's 2,600 years ago or something. It's timeless. It's a beautiful thing, and begging doesn't have anything to do with it. It's not begging. People who give, they give because they're happy to give. There's that sense of mutuality.

So generosity is very, very present in the culture. But the sense of happiness, the joy really, the feeling that after a while you don't know who's giving and who's receiving because it's just joy and metta all around—this hits me and strengthens in me every time I go to Burma or Thailand.

I first noticed it when I was a nun in Thailand for about a year, a long time ago. I just went la-di-da, I want to be a nun, practice in the woods, not have to pay anything, see what it's like. And that's how we are. But I was so struck from the beginning with how

generous people were to me as a Westerner. In Thailand, at least where I was, there wasn't such a sense of poverty. Burma is a whole other story. But people were incredibly generous and so happy to be able to do anything to support my practice.

The remembrance I have in terms of the joy of generosity and the way it opens the mind and heart to freedom, to letting go, is from a forest monastery I was staying at for a while where there were monks and nuns. I was on one side of the river with some little kutis for nuns, and the head nun there was a young woman, a very sincere and dedicated practitioner, that was clear. There weren't that many kutis, little huts, for nuns. And the way it is in these monasteries or meditation centers is you can let them know when you're coming and they'll have a place for you, but at any time, any day, people can just show up. That's just how it is.

So in this little nunnery in Thailand, you could be settled in your little hut, and one day ten women could show up. You just never know. I would notice in my mind—and I came from having been on staff at IMS and Barre—there was always this little fear: Oh no, people are coming. I'm going to have to share my hut. I'm going to have to give up my hut. I have it, you know. And I would just notice that tightness in my mind.

But if anyone, any woman came, the first person to give up her hut was the head nun. Absolutely. I was never even approached to share, never mind give up. As soon as people came, she would move out into the cave, share with another nun, whatever—happily, joyfully, immediately. That letting go, that sense of community, that sense of connectedness. And I would see how I was: No, don't come here.

I think about how we did this whole room game at IMS, where the more senior you were on staff, the more you got to have the room you wanted and keep it. You get there, you dig in, you hold on. That's what seniority is about. And over there, the more senior, the more generous, the more open. Hmm, which way is the Dharma practice going here?

When I was in a good space, it was inspiring. When I was in a bad space, it was like, "Oh, you're stupid." But anyway.

The last seven or eight years or so, I've been spending about a month a year in Burma. The first time I went, I was doing a retreat at a meditation center for about six weeks. I knew some people who were there—the nun who was taking care of foreigners, a Swiss woman who's been a nun there for years, a friend of mine. So it was all very nice, very well taken care of. And it took a while for it to surface in my consciousness. Something was going on, but I couldn't quite put it into words.

After some weeks, I began to notice. I was having a hard retreat—just stuff that was going on for me, not the environment. The way they do the meals at that place is you go into the dining room and all the meditators—Burmese men and women, laymen and laywomen, foreigners from all over the East and some Westerners—the women and men sit at different tables, but you have little round tables that hold three or four people, and everyone has an assigned seat. The monks, of course, eat separately too. You could pick a table, you could be vegetarian or not, which is already huge generosity. At your seat, as you sit down, the places are set, and then little bowls of food are put on the table for whatever there is that day. The food was lovely, there was always plenty—really, it was like a great restaurant in a way.

I was at a table with a couple of nuns, Indonesian women I believe, and one of them just kept asking for this and that. "I want some hot chilies." And the women who were working in the kitchen—some were laywomen, some were nuns—they would come running and say, "Oh, you want chilies?" And they would go running out, I don't know where, to the garden or somewhere, and they'd come running back with the chilies. I'm thinking, "She's a nun. You're not supposed to want extra stuff. That's what renunciation is about." And every day she'd be complaining. She'd ask for this, she'd ask for that, she'd want more butter on her bread.

And unfailing kindness. Not just with a pretense of a smile, but happy. They were so happy they could bring her the extra butter. They were so happy they had some chilies they could find wherever they found them and bring to her every day.

It kind of slowly sank into me as I came out of my grouchy self-involvement that this generosity of heart in supporting the practice, and the happiness it was bringing the people who were offering the generosity—it starts to rub off on you. You can only sit there grouchy and grumpy for so long. "What's the matter? They're so stupid." Finally you realize, "They're really happy. Who's grouchy? Who's grumpy? Who's separate? I'm just sitting here eating."

It starts to rub off on you. I started to see—I was in silence, a yogi, so there wasn't that much I could do to interact. But even just in the silence, the generosity and the mettā start to brighten one's heart and mind. They start to support one in one's practice. You're having a gloomy day, you could just look around and see the ladies working in the kitchen and how generously they were serving, and the nuns and how generous they were with their time and energy. And it starts to soften the heart. It starts to brighten the mind. Okay, take a breath. I can keep going with my practice for today.

So that was my first experience where I consciously began to notice it. And since then, I've seen every time I go to Burma that it's both in the monasteries and nunneries between the ordained Sangha and the laypeople, but it's also just deeply imbued in the culture. And yes, this is a culture with probably one of the worst, most horrific, violent, hateful governments in the world, so I'm not saying everything is all peaches and cream. I'm saying that within this culture there's this spontaneous generosity and the joy that comes with it that is absolutely contagious. After a while, as I said, you really can't tell who's being generous and who's receiving. You give and give and think, "Wow, I'm just so happy. I wish I could give some more."

Just some small examples. When I went this year, because of the cyclone in May, there was huge destruction of many villages down on the lower delta, southeast of Rangoon, Yangon. Mostly foreigners can't go there these days. Some NGOs can. I don't want to get into all the politics of it, how the government didn't want to let people help, but there's still huge need down there—food, shelter, rebuilding schools, all kinds of things.

So this small nunnery we went to visit—again, a tiny little bamboo house. You walk in and half the floor is so rickety that a couple of big guys who came with us one time to visit basically broke the floor. I'm not kidding.

There are two nuns there, Ma Uttaratangi and Ma Uttamatangi—two sisters, one in her early forties, the other in her mid-thirties. They were telling us about their life when we went to visit them. These two sisters are running the nunnery. There's another grown nun, and then there are about ten girls ranging from a teenager down to six years old.

When you see these children—they're orphans, or they have one very poor parent. They all came from the Delta two years ago. These two nuns, and there are many, many nuns in Burma doing this, have basically taken in either orphan little girls or little girls from such poor one-parent families that the family can't provide for them. Since it's a nunnery, the girls become nuns. And they wear pink.

So there are these little ones—you can't believe how cute they are, you can't bear it. They're this tall, in their little pink robes with their little pink sash. And they sit there, and they're so cute you just can't stand it. They're all over Burma.

The first time we went, Ma Uttamatangi—she's very outspoken, very bright—was describing their work. Ariyañani could translate, and she spoke with so much passion. She said, "These little girls, I just really want to give them a better chance in life."

So they're educating them. She's teaching them Burmese. She's teaching them Pali. She's teaching them the Abhidhamma. You walk into this crummy little bamboo shack and there's a blackboard covered with Burmese, Abhidhamma, and English lessons. The girls get up at four, start studying at six, study all day—but they're happy, you know, they're having fun. They're not beaten down.

And she was speaking so passionately: "Little orphan girls in Burma just get abandoned, or they get sold into servitude. I know what it's like to be poor. I want them to have a better chance in life."

She and her sister have completely devoted themselves to taking care of these little nuns, educating them. She was explaining, "If someone offers us a robe, a pink robe, that's really good—because if we cut it up, we can get fifteen little blouses for the little girls." You could just see how practical and tender it was. She talked about how they lose their slippers, they lose their umbrellas, so you have to be offered many more slippers than you would need for grown nuns. Just day-to-day stuff, but spoken with such passion.

Turns out later, it seemed like maybe she'd taken that on as her mission in life. But later, when she was telling us her whole story, it really wasn't that—that wasn't how she started. There's a whole other story of how and why she became a nun, which if I go into, I'm never going to finish this talk.

But she and her sister became nuns when she was really sick. Her parents were about to sell everything they had to take care of her. She heard this in her mid-twenties and said, "No, that's no good. What can I do?" She said, "I'll become a nun." And her parents, far from thinking, "Great, get rid of her," vehemently opposed it. No, no—even though they would have had to sell everything. But she insisted. Her sister agreed to ordain with her. Turns out her sister had always wanted to be a nun.

And she said she was so sick when she ordained that she would be lying there, and if she had her hand on her chest, she couldn't move it off. Or if her hand was lying down, she couldn't move it onto her chest. She was that sick. Two days after ordaining, she was all better. Stories like this all over—who knows?

Anyway, she and her sister came from the Delta up to Yangon, and they were in a study monastery for a few years, which is what nuns do. They really study very deeply all the Pali scriptures, and there are tests all over Burma where nuns and monks take examinations. Once they've passed these tests, there are some really very educated nuns, and they come and teach other little girls.

They were doing that, but then the two sisters decided they really wanted to go meditate. They wanted to just dedicate themselves to awakening. So they were going to go to a meditation monastery. That's what they wanted to do. But just at that time, the Sayadaw from their home village who'd been supporting them died. And I didn't quite get how this followed, but there were a bunch of little poor orphan girls—this was only two or three years ago—and he sent them all up to these two sisters. "Now you have to take care of them."

And totally, they turned around. They dropped what they were going to do, found this piece of land, built this house themselves with their own hands, and are completely dedicating themselves—with passion, with love, with affection. You can see it when you're talking to them, the affection in taking care of these little girls, without any resentment, with total mettā and dedication. You just feel it hanging out there.

When you go and offer—so we were visiting nunneries and offering some of the money—you do it in a very formal way, face to face. You turn, you offer the money hand to hand. There's usually a photograph taken. So it's very formal. And then just as you're doing that, the nuns all chant, or monks would do a mettā chant, a long mettā chant and a kind of blessings chant—even the tiny little ones. And they all know it. It's so moving. There's this sense of real communion, of being connected. You go away feeling like, "Wow."

Like I said, who was giving, who was receiving? It's just this flow, this mutuality of mettā and dāna. Everyone is giving, everyone is receiving. It's not that sense of "me offering so much." Your heart lightens, it makes you happy, and it just keeps on going. It keeps on going. It's just how the culture is.

So when the cyclone hit and the government doesn't do much, you can see how so many monks, nuns, and lay people—anyone who had the opportunity—their spontaneous movement was to find how they could go and help. It's just in the culture.

Just a couple other examples—I could go on forever. I mentioned how Sayadaw U Tejaniya organized some rice dānas, some food dānas. One place was right in the village around where we were staying at the meditation center. And the way it worked was very structured: each house would get a little chit, and then people would come in, give their chit, and get the rice. But it was, again, in this real formal, loving way. People came kind of dressed up. It was a big event.

And for the people offering, it's not like you just say, "Here's the rice, take the rice." They really—Sayadaw would say, when I was taking a photo, he goes, "No, give me your camera, Carol. You go offer the rice." He hardly even speaks English, but suddenly he

said that, because if you're the one giving, part of the giving is the actual face-to-face offering. It's so different from sending a check in the mail. I can't tell you. People were kind of dressed up, and you come and offer the rice.

didn't even have a crummy little plastic bag to put the rice in—some crummy plastic bag that had been used a hundred times. Some people came and they were putting it in their shirt or their lungi. That's how poor people are.

So then they went away. That was just it. And then the next day, a friend of ours—a Mexican man who was a monk there, so he spoke English—he would go out on the bindabat, the alms round, every morning. He had been doing that for some months. Going on the alms round, you go the same route, you get to know the people and who offers. There's a regularity to it.

So he told us the next day after the rice offering, he said it was so, so touching. He said there were people who had never offered before—really a lot of them—who were out offering rice the next day. Because now they had rice to offer. Immediately they turn around and offer it back. It's just so beautiful. And he said there was a little line of children, which he was sure someone organized, but still—the little kids, very formal in their giving. He was just full when he came back. And we were so happy that he could tell us, because we wouldn't have known. It's just there in the culture.

A year and a half before, when there were the demonstrations and, as my teacher said, the government was shooting monks as well as other people and throwing them in jail, the biggest insult the monks could do was to refuse to accept offerings from the generals or from the military. That's a huge insult. There were times during the worst period when, in the totally state-controlled newspapers, there would be big pictures of the high generals offering something to some prominent monk. You knew it was just for show. But many monks, for a long time—they called it a strike, I don't remember the exact term—they refused to accept offerings. That is so damaging to those who are refused. Some of the monks were even arrested for it. But it's a huge thing to do—to stop the flow of mutuality, to not allow someone to give.

So as I said, it's not just wealthy people giving to poor people. Everyone wants to share, like the people sharing back the rice.

I was walking down a village road between one meditation center and the other—about a ten-minute walk. There are lots of different kinds of little houses and cottages. It was late in the evening, about six o'clock, so the children were all out playing. The little ones would see me and laugh and run away—just kids being kids.

But as I was walking, a little boy came up to me. A very nicely dressed little boy, very solemn. So sincerely he came up to me with this tiny little flower and bowed and handed it to me. It was so touching. That was all. He didn't want anything else. I just said thank you and he went off. This is what the children are learning. It's really so beautiful.

A friend of mine who had spent some time in Burma said it creeps in. You don't quite notice how the generosity and kindness work their way into you—just in little ways like that. It's no big deal, just offering a little flower. But it's still with me now. I felt so happy, so touched. It was kind of the high point of my week. And I'd had a nice week. Still, when I think about it now, it brightens my mind and heart.

I'm going to get to this—that sense of recollection is really important. It creeps in, but then you start to notice how it enters you, and you start sharing that, wanting to share, coming more from metta, from generosity, quite spontaneously. It really is contagious.

My friend was saying that when she got back home to Massachusetts—where people are kind, but it's not quite in such an open, spontaneous way in the culture—she noticed something. You come home in this open space, and it fades a little bit. You have to look harder to find ways to be generous. You don't just drop in on people. Over there, you just drop in. Anyone drops in. No one is going to walk up to me if I'm walking in Fairfax—a little eight-year-old boy handing me a flower. I'd fall over in shock if that happened. It's just a different way. People are kind, but people are busy. We're all so busy doing our things. We send our checks. I'll call you up—you're on my list. I really should call my friend who's suffering. Maybe I can get to it in five days. I'll have five minutes.

We mean well, but there's not quite the flowing. It's not quite so alive. She was just saying she noticed that, and I do too.

But I want to say, it's not just Burma. It's absolutely not just Burma. Notice whenever you hear of someone being really generous.

Let it in and notice how it affects your mind, how it affects your heart. It brings happiness. It doesn't have to be us doing the giving—just hearing of generosity lights something up inside.

But again, the most important aspect isn't what's given or how we give, but the motivations behind our giving. Those generals having their pictures taken while offering to the monks—that's not the power of generosity. It doesn't matter how much you give. It's not about that.

This is from the Buddha: "Even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or pond, thinking, 'May whatever animals live here feed on this,' that would be a source of generosity, a source of blessings." So it's not what we give—it's how. It's that open-hearted connectedness, that generosity of heart.

This shows up very clearly in some of the stories from the time of the Buddha about a layman, a very wealthy man named Anathapindika, who was the foremost supporter of the Sangha during the Buddha's time. I want to read a couple of short stories because they're very much to the point about the importance of motivation.

If you've read suttas at all, you've noticed how many of them begin with "Thus have I heard"—which means Ananda is telling it—and then continue, "On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi, in Jeta's Grove, the monastery of Anathapindika." So many suttas begin this way. Out of forty-five years of teaching, the Buddha spent nineteen rains retreats in Anathapindika's monastery.

Anathapindika met the Buddha in the third year of the Buddha's teaching life. I want to read just a brief synopsis of how they met, because you can see that his generosity came out of a huge faith—a huge brightening of devotion and love—not out of a should, or because it would be good, or because people would think well of him, or because he'd have a better life in the next world.

The Buddha does talk often about generosity in terms of merit. It's frequently spoken of that way: if we do wholesome deeds now, we will experience the results of wholesome karma later in this life and in future lives. He talks about it that way quite a lot. But if you spend time in Burma or Thailand, or even with Anathapindika's story here, you see that while it might sound mercenary, the actual movement of generosity isn't about thinking, "Oh, if I do this, if I offer to the Buddha, I can be reborn as a deva." That's not where Anathapindika was coming from. It was this welling up of faith.

So the story goes that Anathapindika hadn't even heard of the Buddha when he went to his brother-in-law's house. His brother-in-law, who was also wealthy, was preparing some huge feast. Anathapindika asked, "What's going on?" And his brother-in-law said, "The enlightened one is coming for tomorrow's meal."

Anathapindika stopped. "The enlightened one? Did you say the enlightened one?" He just got so excited. It hit him right there. He felt, "Oh, even the sound of that is rare!" He just became so happy. He asked, "Can I go see him now?" And his brother-in-law said, "No, no—tomorrow would be good."

So Anathapindika went to bed, but he was so excited he kept waking up all night. Is it time? Is it time? Finally he got up way in the middle of the night and started walking in the dark, far out into the country where the Buddha was staying. It was dark, and he became overcome with fear and started to feel doubtful, thinking, "I should go back, I should go back." But the story says a spirit came and whispered in his ear, "Go forward, householder, go forward. Going forward is better for you. Don't turn back again."

Whether it's a spirit or our inner intuition, sometimes something tells us we have to go forward. And he went. The light began to rise, and he saw the Buddha walking in the distance, and his heart just opened. He fell at the Buddha's feet, so overcome he couldn't think what to say. Finally he just blurted out, "Did the Blessed One sleep well?"

What do you say to this person? And the Buddha, of course, gave him a beautiful verse in response: "Always indeed he sleeps well, the brahman who is fully quenched, who does not cling to sensual pleasures, cool at heart, without acquisitions. Having cut off all attachment, having removed care from the heart, the peaceful one indeed sleeps well, for he has realized peace of mind."

You see, it really doesn't matter what you say—you're going to receive something precious in return from the Buddha.

Then he taught Anathapindika, and this is an example of what the Gubboni was discussing: the gradual, step-by-step teaching. The Buddha spoke to him on the virtues of giving, on sila—virtue—on the perils of attachment to sense pleasure, on the benefits of renunciation. And then, as is often said, when he saw that Anathapindika was ready in heart and mind—the mind was pliable, uplifted, serene, unobstructed—and he saw he was ready, then he gave him the teachings special to the noble ones: the Four Noble Truths. And Anathapindika understood: whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of cessation. He had understood the truth of the Dhamma. He had overcome doubts.

He was now self-dependent in the master's dispensation. He had realized the path and fruit of stream entry. That's how it's described.

You get that sense, and it takes us back to the giving, that the recollection, the bringing of the quality of generosity to our heart and mind, is one way in that actual moment of purifying the heart and mind, of its becoming unobstructed, uplifted, serene. Really very helpful—both the giving, the actual service, the generosity, the receiving, the metta, and even just recollecting, which I will come to in a moment.

From that moment, Anathapindika became the most generous supporter. He invited the Buddha and five hundred monks—it's always five hundred, just as Andy Alinsky says, that means "a lot." Whenever they say five hundred, it means a lot of monks, a lot of nuns. And then he said, "Let me offer you a monastery." He went back and searched and found this Jeta's Grove, bought it at a humongous price, and offered it. He became the biggest supporter.

But then—and this is again about the importance of motivation—his motivation was real faith, upliftedness of heart and love, with no self-involvement or self-return at all.

There's a story later that after he established the monastery, when the Buddha and monks would be living there, Anathapindika was always completely supporting them. He would send rice gruel in the morning. He would send them medicines and clothing and supplies in the evening. And every day, every day for the main meal, he would have several hundred monks come to his house. So his place was always filled, it says, with the saffron robes and the perfume of saintliness.

He lived in the realm of King Pasenadi, who was also a devotee of the Buddha. When King Pasenadi learned of Anathapindika's generosity, he wished to imitate him. So he also began to supply alms and food for five hundred monks every day. But one day, he learned from his servants that the monks would come and be offered the food, but then they would go into the village and hand the food that was offered from the king to their supporters, and then the supporters would give it back to them.

King Pasenadi said, "What's going on? Why is that happening? There's nothing wrong with the food. I'm supplying the best, most tastiest, most refined food you could have."

But the Buddha explained. He said that in the king's palace, his servants, his courtiers, distributed the food without any inner engagement. They were just doing it as a job, like cleaning out the stables. And some of them, in fact, even thought, "These monks, they're just parasites, and we're doing the work." He said, "Nobody can be comfortable accepting anything given in that spirit."

So the monks would take the food—not to do the harsh thing of refusing it, because that's not generous—but then they would give it to their devoted supporters, who would give it back with faith, with real generosity, and then they could accept it. So even the richest, most generous person—it's not about how much he gave. It was about the spirit, about the heart. That's really the practice of generosity.

Once I heard a talk from a Nepali monk, Upannika, who was teaching with Sayadaw U Pandita at IMS one year. He gave this lovely talk on generosity, and he offered about seven little points of practice—how you actually practice bringing awareness to times when you're offering, whether it's service or time or material goods.

The first is obvious: attention to the volition, attention to your motivation in giving, so that you really purify it before giving. "I should give this here"—really purifying it. The generous act of the bodhisattvas is: "With this act, may all beings be free from suffering." It can even get broader, but really tuning into that. And also, whatever you're giving, really be in the giving. That's the same thing—you're purifying the motivation, really abandoning the clinging to it. Really be happy that you're giving it. If it's your time, if it's money, whatever—be happy that you're giving.

And then U Pandita said—and this is what I've really learned from times in Burma—if it's at all possible, directly giving and receiving, face to face, in person. It brings such a more powerful sense to it. It increases the awareness of your interrelatedness.

He actually gave me a personal lesson in this. Sometimes I would be almost embarrassed to give someone a gift—either it's not good enough, or you don't want them to... you don't know what, just kind of embarrassed. I had bought him a gift when I was on retreat and had someone else give it to him. When I came out of retreat, he called me over and said, "No." He made me give it to him hand to hand so that he could really receive it wholeheartedly. And he said also, so that you're giving it with confidence, with real faith, with real generosity. It brings a real power of confidence into the act.

And again, as I described with the nuns, when you give something and they all stand there and chant for five minutes, you just get goosebumps. It's beautiful.

Give with the mind—this is obvious. When you're giving or talking or sharing, do it with the mind, with the heart focused on the giving. Just being mindful, being present. That's obvious. And as I said, there's a way in the formality of how it's done in Burma that really enhances this, that really helped me see: when you do it, you really are doing it with this real sense of the beauty and the power of the whole act—the giver and the receiver, the power of it for both. You don't just say, "Well, here's the money, see you later."

And it's taught. It's taught to the kids.

In one of the dānas that we did, we went down to some small villages in the upper delta. In one of these villages, we went to the small schoolhouse, because Sayadaw U Tejaniya apparently loves to give what he calls "candy dāna." He loves to buy candy bars and then give one out to each of these little kids. So he was getting a total kick out of it.

The schoolhouse was this crummy little wood structure with nothing in it. There might have been sixty or seventy little kids, from tiny, tiny little ones to maybe eleven or twelve years old. There were three or four young women teachers. We went in, and the kids were all sitting in sort of an age order, sitting very carefully. We would line up—one of us would have a little sucker candy, another would have a little candy bar—and then we'd rotate so that everyone had a chance to give and receive.

The teachers would have each kid come up one at a time, and you could see this is really where they're learning it. Even the tiny little kids would come, and some would be all distracted, just wanting to grab it and run. The teachers would very gently correct them. Others came up so sincerely—they'd approach very solemnly, look at you, take the candy, and go away. But you could see how they were teaching it.

Another place we went that same day, the same kind of candy dāna, but it was offered just in the monastery, and all the village kids came running in. It wasn't under the auspices of the school or the teachers. And somehow the whole town felt a bit wilder. So it was the same thing—first we couldn't even get the kids to line up. Finally we got them to line up, but it was like this fever of greed over just a lousy little candy bar. They'd run to the back of the line and get in line again. There were so many of them, we couldn't tell. Some had these little rubber bands around their wrists, and my friend would say, "I've seen that rubber band before. He's been here before." We couldn't tell. Finally we had to make them all sit down and stay sitting down, and then go down the line. And you could see they hadn't really learned it. It was different—just kind of a mob scene.

This brings up another point: there needs to be clear comprehension of the giving in the broader context. Giving what doesn't hurt oneself or hurt another. What's really of value. What the giving and the receiving is in terms of fostering wholesomeness, not unwholesomeness.

At the end of this, we had a few little candies left, and somehow the structure broke down. And it wasn't the kids—it was the adults. One of my friends was standing there holding this little bag of hard candy, just nothing. And the adults, they started by kidding, but then it wasn't kidding, and it just felt like this frenzy of greed. It felt awful. It really felt awful to me. I felt like this isn't really right generosity, because what it's feeding is greed. And you could just see it didn't feel the same at all. No mettā. I mean, no big deal—it's just a sucker—but the difference between the two feelings was palpable.

And so the sense of formality and the sense of understanding, the clear comprehension from the Buddha again: how a person of integrity gives a gift. These are five qualities of a person of integrity's gifts. Which five? A person of integrity gives a gift with a sense of conviction. A person of integrity gives a gift attentively. A person of integrity gives a gift in season. A person of integrity gives a gift with an empathetic heart. A person of integrity gives a gift without adversely affecting himself or others.

A gift in season—just to tell you what that means. Five seasonable gifts: one gives to a newcomer; one gives to one going away (which I've noticed—when you leave a monastery, everyone comes with little gifts); one gives to one who is ill; one gives in time of famine; and one sets the first fruits of field and orchard in front of those who are virtuous. These are the five seasonable gifts.

Lovely, isn't it?

And not adversely affecting oneself or others. There's another story from Anāthapiṇḍika, who was incredibly generous to the Buddha and the Sangha. Also, because he had so much faith, he was really virtuous and lived a very pure life.

And as I said, it really affected his whole family. It affected all the people he came in contact with. The whole sphere around someone who's generous starts to affect the people around—purity, happiness, love. It's contagious. And so it infected his family and his friends, and he was generous to all of them.

But he also had this sense of giving where it's appropriate, where it's useful, at the right time and not to the detriment of others. So there's one story of how, out of all his family, he had one nephew who inherited a huge fortune but squandered it all on drinking and gambling and womanizing. Then he came to Anathapindika and asked for a thousand gold pieces to start a business. Anathapindika gave it to him—and he squandered it all. Then he came back again a second time, asked for more, this time without a single condition. Anathapindika gave him five times as much—and he squandered it all again, completely squandered it all.

He came back a third time with no shame, begged for money. This time, Anathapindika gave him two pieces of clothing, but he squandered those too, sold them for everything. Then finally, the fourth time he came, Anathapindika told him to leave and gave him nothing. If he'd been just a beggar, he would never have left the house without anything. If he'd been just a hungry person—but the money wasn't for alms, just to squander.

And so his nephew just kept on that way. He wasn't willing to beg, and he died wretchedly outside the gates of the village. Of course, Anathapindika felt terrible. What should I have done? I should have been able to save him. He went to the Buddha, told him this whole story, and asked, "Should I have done differently?"

I think it's interesting. The Buddha said, "No, no. You couldn't have done anything different. That nephew belonged to the fortunately small number of insatiable people who are like bottomless vats. He perished because of his reckless behavior. You wouldn't have been able to save him."

I find that quite striking. It's just interesting how even someone as generous as Anathapindika and as powerful as the Buddha—generosity can't save everybody. There's that sense that at some point there's discernment in generosity. I just find that quite interesting.

So just to end, the last thing I want to say is about this contemplation, this way of using the contemplation, the practice and the recollection of generosity to brighten, to uplift, to purify the mind, and then to support our discerning practice.

There are a couple of suttas that point to this. The Buddha said that if the heart is corrupted, then all actions, words, and thoughts get tainted also. At one point he's talking to nuns and then to Ananda, and he gives this example—I'll condense it—where if a person is abiding contemplating body as body, this is the four foundations of mindfulness: body as body, feelings as feelings, mental states as mental states, mind as mind—ardent, fully aware, mindful. So this is straight from the Satipatthana Sutta.

But as this is happening, it can occur with body or any of the four that an object arises, or a bodily distress that's unpleasant, or mental sluggishness, or some unpleasant experience that scatters the mind outward. Have you ever noticed that? Then the monk or the meditator should direct her mind to some—this is translated as "satisfactory image"—and I'll say what that means. It doesn't mean just, "Let's think about eating chocolate cake." It means something wholesome.

And from this directedness of mind to a satisfactory image, happiness is born. From the happiness, joy is born. With a joyful mind, the body relaxes. A relaxed body feels content. The mind of one content becomes collected. And then the meditator reflects, "The purpose for which I directed my mind to this satisfactory image has been accomplished. So now I will withdraw."

It's basically calling in a particular wholesome, uplifting contemplation to help collect and uplift and bring serenity to the mind when we're just lost—not that we just don't like what's happening, but that we're lost in what's happening. And then, no

longer focusing on that, inwardly mindful of whatever arises, content. Not directing the mind outward, understanding, not focused on before or after, just present with what's arising right now: "I am mindful. I am content." That's undirected meditation—more like what we're calling choiceless awareness here.

So take that sense of some satisfactory image and put it together with this other sutta where the Buddha talks about six very helpful recollections: recollecting the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, your own sila or morality, your own generosity, or the devas. I'm just going to talk about generosity—just say what he says about it. It's this exact same thing of calling up the satisfactory image.

When you recollect your own generosity—and even the generosity of others will do the same thing—you think, "It's a great gain for me that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home." So this teaching is for lay people, not just monks and nuns. "I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests."

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind heads straight, based on generosity. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones gains a sense of the purpose, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. The body grows calm—the same progression. One experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes collected.

So you get a sense how powerful this is. The recollection of your own generosity is not an ego trip. It's actually, in this moment, purifying the heart and mind, making it pliable, uplifting it, ready to open to the true Dharma.

The Buddha concludes by saying, "So you, Mahanama"—the layperson who asked him—"you can develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children." In other words, no excuse not to do it. And why would we want to not do it? It brings happiness. It opens us to the purity of the Dhamma.

I'll just end with a story. The man who would cook for us at these retreats in Chazwa worked so hard—getting up at two in the morning, cooking all day, traveling an hour into the market and back just to get special food for the Westerners on retreat. Not a spiritual guy; he was a cook for a big bakery in the city. But he was so filled with metta.

And we'd say, "Don't work so hard, don't get up so early, take some rest." And he'd say, "No, everything we do is from dana intention, from metta intention—everything we do." And that gave him and the kitchen staff so much energy and so much love.

So it brings virya, it brings this open-hearted uplifting of mind, and it brings happiness to oneself and others. A great source of joy and goodness in this world.

CHAPTER 44

Exploring Craving

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson reframes our relationship with craving (taṇhā) and clinging (upādāna), inviting practitioners to explore these mental states with curiosity rather than aversion. She emphasizes that craving is not something to hate or fear, but rather another avenue for bringing wise attention and developing insight.*
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> *Wilson carefully distinguishes between different Pāli terms for desire—taṇhā (thirst/craving) versus chanda (wholesome motivation or zeal)—clarifying that Buddhist practice isn't about eliminating all wanting, but understanding the specific quality of mind that constitutes suffering. She explores the Buddha's teaching on liberation through non-clinging, the four types of clinging (to sense pleasures, views, rules, and self-identity), and the three-part framework of gratification, danger, and escape. Drawing from the Sutta on the Two Darts, she illuminates how untrained minds seek escape from painful feelings only through sense pleasure.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing craving's seductive quality—how it "puts feathers on the object desired," narrows perception, and promises exactly what it cannot deliver. Wilson discusses sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view), showing how the sense of self arises moment by moment through grasping at experience. Throughout, she encourages direct investigation with satipaññā (mindfulness and wisdom), revealing that the peace we seek is always available when clinging releases itself.*

So last time I spoke, I talked about generosity. I thought I would talk about the opposite this time, which is exploring the experience of craving and clinging.

The whole point I want to make is not that we hate craving, not that we're afraid of it, not that we're some kind of failure if you happen to notice it on the odd occasion arising in your mind. It is actually simply another avenue of exploration to which we can bring wise attention, right attitude. It's just as much an object of exploration and a possibility for opening into wisdom as anything else, if we meet it with right attitude. That's the way I want to frame it and, hopefully, inspire that in you.

It's true that the Buddha talked about the experience of awakening. He said, "The sublime truth has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging." That's really quite a profound and powerful statement: liberation through non-clinging. I just love that way of speaking about liberation or awakening because it's

not pointing to a specific state. It's not as if non-clinging is some static state. It's more a moment-to-moment activity of mind and heart where clinging either doesn't arise or is released. It's a moment-to-moment experiential possibility. It's not about thinking of some state of bliss and holding on, trying to get there. No, that's not liberation through non-clinging.

Liberation through non-clinging is not so sexy sounding, really. It doesn't sound so exciting. In fact, it's hard to actually make up in our minds what that might feel like or look like—which is great. Because when we make up in our minds what something should feel like or look like, we're immediately caught in trying to make that happen. Clinging. Forget about it. Liberation through non-clinging.

So I want to talk about specifically what, in my understanding, we mean in Buddhism by the experience of craving and clinging, and what we don't mean by it, and how we can explore it with sati-pañña, with mindfulness and wisdom, right at the moment of its arising, at the moment of seeing it. Not that we have to throw up our hands and hide in the corner thinking, "It's hopeless, I'm hopeless, all I'm seeing is so much craving, forget it." A moment of non-clinging is only as far away as that. I don't want to say there's hope because I don't think hope is particularly helpful—that's looking into the future. But the potential is in any moment if we're willing to really explore, to get interested.

The moment clinging kind of releases itself, or when our mind just stops making sense of it—the wise intention the Buddha spoke of that's the opposite of craving, of greed, of clinging—is renunciation, which of course moves into generosity in a more active way.

In our culture, our regular secular culture, it's funny: if you talk about wanting or craving and renunciation, it's almost as if, without exploring, we hold backwards views of both of them. Wanting—well, of course I want this and I want that, that's normal, that's where happiness lies. We can almost imagine or impute, without looking, a kind of pleasure inherent in wanting, which is of course sick, as we know when we look at it more closely. But when we don't look, it's as if it's leading us in. And renunciation is like, "Oh, you know, dried up old stick, avoidance, aversion"—as if that's the best you can do, some kind of penance, suffering basically.

That's exactly the distorted perception the Buddha was talking about. Because it's the craving, the clinging, that in itself is the source and experience of suffering if we look at it. You don't even have to say it's going to make us suffer. It in itself is actually a state of suffering. This is my opinion, and I hope it inspires you to just look for yourself.

And renunciation, which isn't like, "Oh bad, I can't have something," pushing it away with aversion—renunciation is the opening into non-clinging. It's actually an experience of great simplicity, joy, peace, release. It's a very wholesome, happy moment, renunciation. In a way, the culture has it all backwards, and that's kind of what we've grown up with.

In some of the interviews, a question that comes up often is a kind of conceptual confusion about what we mean by wanting, what we mean by craving. We might say, "Well, if craving's bad, if clinging is the source of suffering, what's wrong with wanting to have a better job? Or what's wrong with wanting to take care of my family? Or even what's wrong with loving to be in nature?"

You see in those questions, the first thing is all the focus is outward, on the object. "What's wrong with wanting this particular object?" The answer is: nothing. It's got nothing whatsoever to do with the thing wanted. That's one thing.

The second thing is that in English, the words "want" or "desire" actually cover various mental states. In Pali, the language the Buddhist texts were originally written in, the words are much more specific, talking about really particular states of mind.

The word that is usually translated as "craving," as in the second noble truth—the source of suffering—is described this way: "Just this craving, which brings renewal of being and is accompanied by pleasure, by lust, finding delight now here and now there." I love that description because that's how craving is. It's accompanied by pleasure, finding delight now here and now there. That's how we get seduced into thinking the craving itself is the thing bringing us into happiness.

That word translated as "craving"—the Pali word *taṇhā*—is a very specific mental factor. The closer translation is "thirst."

So when we're talking about the wanting or desire as a form of suffering in the second noble truth, it's this quality of mind of thirst—leaning into what comes after pleasant experience. The mind leans into it. *I want it. I need it. I've got to have it.* That quality.

And clinging—there's a description somewhere in the suttas that craving, this tanha, is like a thief entering a dark house at night and searching for an object to steal. And the clinging, upadana in Pali, grasping, is like actually grabbing the thing. So when we talk about craving and clinging, craving is that thirsting, that *got to have it*, leaning into it. And the grasping is holding—*now I got you*—holding on for dear life, which leads to a sense of becoming, the person who has this thing, renewal of being, and then suffering.

So the craving, which I just read in the second noble truth, continues: with the arising of craving, there's the arising of clinging. With the cessation of craving, there's the cessation of clinging. And then the Buddha talks about four areas, four big areas of clinging that we can explore. Just one of his nice ways of breaking experience down.

I'm only going to talk really about three. Clinging to sense pleasures, to sensual pleasures—that's obvious, maybe. Clinging to views and opinions, which is huge. Clinging to rules and observances, which I'm not really going to talk about too much, but this refers to things like bathing in the Ganges to purify all your past bad karma. The Buddha is saying that's not really worth clinging to. So don't go bathe in the Ganges and think it's going to help. And the fourth is clinging to a doctrine of self, basically clinging to sakkaya-ditthi, which is identity view, personality view. So clinging to views and clinging to personality views. I'll talk about that more.

But first I want to elaborate a little about the attitude that we hopefully bring to all of our mindfulness practice. If already, just in hearing me read this about craving and clinging, or the different kinds, you notice any reaction or recoiling from it, or a sense of *I can't ever understand this*, or just any kind of reactivity like that—just notice it, that's all.

But hold the open possibility that we can really bring the spark of interest, investigation, to what it's like when there's craving, when there's clinging in the mind, in the heart, in our experience. What it's like when it's not. So that we can actually get interested in seeing for ourselves. Because that's the only way wisdom really arises—seeing for ourselves. Is it true that craving and clinging is a source of suffering in your mind, in your heart, in your life?

Just taking it on because the Buddha says it must be true, as we know, might get us looking. But it doesn't really cut it in terms of freeing our heart and mind from the habit, the seduction of craving—this going with pleasure now here and now there, landing with delight now here and now there. That is so seductive, and it gets so subtle, that we keep getting kind of tricked by it again and again, even when we've seen for ourselves. So it's really worth exploring.

And the way to explore it—I think it was Buddhadasa, the Thai teachers often talk about meeting any moment of experience with sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom, at the sense door. Mindfulness is just that bare recognition of what's happening. Wisdom is that attitude of mind that's interested, without judging, without assuming, without craving or aversion. *Oh, clinging. It feels like this. Oh, clinging again. Clinging feels like this.* Not *clinging and I like it, so we're not going to look too closely.* No. *Clinging feels like this.* This is the whole wise attitude that is our entire practice.

We can actually meet even the so-called source of suffering, craving, with mindfulness-wisdom, so that it simply becomes our practice of freedom. It's not like we have to get rid of it. We can bring that awareness so that we're actually practicing non-clinging in the very moment we meet the experience of clinging. That's where our freedom lies—right here, right now, in how the mind and heart is meeting experience.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, the last time I saw him, he gets on different rants. So this was a particular rant he was on, because every time I saw him this last month, he kept saying the same thing. He does that. But this is a clear little thing. What's the difference between someone who practices and someone who doesn't? Someone who practices, a practitioner, meets or regards every object, every experience that happens as: *What can I learn from this?*

Something to learn from. And he was in the middle of a very ongoing, complicated, very difficult, very painful situation about his whole life in his monastery. So he wasn't just talking through his hat—well, they don't have hats. He wasn't just saying it for the heck of it. He was in the middle of a very difficult situation, saying, "I'm really interested to see how my mind reacts to this. I'm really interested to see." He said, "It's like an exam. It's an exam. It's a really difficult situation to see how free my mind is." And he meant it. He said someone who's not a practitioner, someone who's not really used to looking, they meet or respond or react to every situation with greed or hatred or delusion, or a combination. So that's really the attitude we bring—the interest.

When we begin to explore and continue to explore craving, the main thing is to recognize, to turn the attention around. It's about the state, the mental state, the emotional state in the mind and heart—not about whether this object is worthy or appropriate to cling to or not. That's how we get completely sidetracked. Then we get into those discussions: "Well, but it's appropriate to take care of my family. It's appropriate."

So again, back to different words. There's another word in Pali: chanda. It's ethically neutral, meaning dependent on how it's used, it can be a kusala—wholesome, skillful—state of mind, or an unskillful one. Chanda is complicated—there are two huge pages in the English-Pali dictionary—but I'm just cutting it down. It roughly translates as excitement, as willingness to do, the energy to do something. So it can be just kind of neutral. There's chanda to do what you need to do. That's not the same as craving or clinging.

In a wholesome way, chanda is one of the four bases of success, and it's translated as zeal—this real energy and willingness to do, together with concentration, together with virtue, to really explore. That's a wholesome quality, this zeal.

Now, in an unwholesome way, the same word chanda is put together with kama—not karma, but another kama, which means sense pleasures. And so this kama-chanda is translated as the excitement of sense pleasures. So guess what? That's not particularly skillful or wholesome. It's actually the first hindrance—kama-chanda. It's not just huge desire. The first of the five hindrances is actually this excitement of sense pleasures, the craving that comes from that.

But this word chanda, I think, can cover a lot of the times when we're thinking, "But what's wrong with wanting to enjoy the beauty of nature? What's wrong with it?" Nothing's wrong with it. No one's saying there's anything wrong with it. But even as there's chanda, or just a simple motivation to act, to do what needs to be done out of compassion, out of generosity, out of wisdom—the same object could also be related to, in a moment, with huge craving or clinging.

So take dinner. Take enlightenment. Either one. Yes, there's chanda—the body's hungry, it's time to go eat. And there could be a sense of it being pleasant; that's fine. It doesn't have to be thirst, it doesn't have to be craving. The body needs to eat; that's normal. But of course it could be craving, couldn't it? And in that situation, I'm imagining that you can all even call up in your mind what the difference would feel like, right? When you're really craving for the meal versus when it's just hungry and time to go? You can feel the difference—yes? That's not too esoteric, right?

Now, take the idea of enlightenment, because that's all it is—an idea in the moment. Sometimes there can be a huge craving, like a real craving, and it's huge suffering. Believe me, I've been there—the suffering of "I really want to be enlightened." And you come in and talk about it, and I say, "Well, what's wrong with wanting to be enlightened? That's why we're doing this whole stupid practice."

How can you say that that's a source of suffering? And you see then it's not about enlightenment. It's not about following the teachings. This is where we turn around and look at what's the state in the mind and heart right now. That's when you see the difference between *chanda*, between interest, between motivation—and craving or clinging.

So we really want to explore. And to explore, it really is to bring in this mindfulness with wisdom. If you're exploring while already judging—"Oh no, I'm craving for enlightenment, so forget it"—there's no way to see clearly. That's one of the drawbacks. That's one of the dangers, you could say, in craving. When it's coloring the mind that's observing, we don't see clearly.

In terms of the opposite of craving—the natural state that it transforms into—is the wise intention of renunciation. Again, it's not something that we need to force through aversion. "Oh, I have to give up everything." Renunciation is the natural expression of wisdom in the moment when the mindfulness, the wisdom sees through. Say it's wanting enlightenment. You see, "Oh, that's craving, craving, craving, craving." It drops away. It's got nothing to do with whether you get enlightened or not. The craving just drops away. And there's a renouncing. You're not renouncing enlightenment. You're not even renouncing—it happens by itself. That's what's so great about wisdom. It sees through, and when the delusion drops, it sees accurately. The Tibetans like to say things self-liberate. The craving vanishes because it doesn't make any sense. It's just, "Oh, right, there's no need to crave that." And there's peace. The natural peace and ease, as Sylvia likes to quote Ajahn Amaro, that's always available.

What's so poignant about craving is that it hides this peace. If we weren't caught in the craving—"Oh, it's just like this." But then, "How can I hold it?" And it's gone. "Oh, it's gone. See, it couldn't stay. That just shows I've got to work harder. I've got to hold on to it. I've got to practice." Or, "It's just like enlightenment. I've got to just let the question go." And there's peace and ease. And then the mind goes, "But that didn't solve it. I'm not enlightened." And it all starts up again.

So, continuing to be willing to bring in this quality of interest, of exploring, of investigation. "Oh no, craving again—it feels like this."

The Buddha often speaks in terms of exploring craving and the suffering and the ending of it. Bhikkhu Bodhi described it as three movements in an unfolding process of insight. The Buddha talks about this a lot, and I think it's really helpful to explore it in our own experience, on retreat, off retreat. He talks about seeing with wisdom, as it really is, the gratification in clinging to sense pleasures, views, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—the gratification in clinging, the danger in the clinging, and the escape from the suffering. Not to hold this as a view or an opinion,

but to really look, because it makes a lot of sense. The Buddha says, "If, monks, there were no gratification in the world"—and here he's talking about sense pleasures—"if there were no gratification in the world, beings would not become enamored with the world. But because there is gratification, beings become enamored. If there were no danger in the world, beings would not become disenchanted with the world, would not suffer. But because there is danger, beings become disenchanted with it. If there were no escape from this suffering, beings could not escape. But as there is an escape, beings can escape."

It sounds obvious, but it's really quite a useful template for exploring our experience. Especially when we start talking about clinging to sense pleasures—we tend to jump right away to the danger of sense pleasures, which the Buddha talked about endlessly. This skips over the fact that of course there is gratification. And if we haven't really acknowledged to ourselves, really felt the gratification, then when we start looking at the dangers we somehow don't completely buy it. It doesn't completely sink in, because—but, but, but—it *is* nice. It *is* lovely to have chocolate ice cream, unless you're allergic to chocolate and don't like ice cream, and then you can have soy coconut or whatever. It is lovely to go out in nature and appreciate it. I don't have to enumerate the sense pleasures; you all know them well enough. Including pleasant states of mind, including all the wonderful things in life.

The Buddha's not saying that stuff doesn't bring pleasure. It does. It gratifies us. And so part of bringing mindfulness, wisdom, and really exploring is to start right there with the gratification—to see how and why the clinging starts, because it feels good. We've talked about it. It feels good on that very basic level. So being willing not to jump over it—thinking, "No, it shouldn't feel good," or being afraid to feel good because then we'll get caught in clinging. You can't skip that piece. It's really just seeing as it is, the gratification. Yeah, it feels good. Then the danger, the escape.

The gratification I will leave you to explore by yourself. I'm sure you can figure out how to do that.

The danger is—again, I'm saying this stuff so it's conceptual, but in your experience, not. Don't bring in some idea of danger. "Yeah, it's bad, it's going to go away, so therefore I shouldn't enjoy it." That doesn't help. That's a view. That's an idea. That's a description. I'm talking about just moment to moment, bare attention to just what happens. What happens as you're really enjoying the gratification of something?

There are different dangers. The one that's always mentioned is, of course, the one we've talked about before—that nothing lasts. So there's gratification. It's lovely. It goes away. Now, if the mind is completely free and at ease, there won't be clinging around the gratification when it goes away. That's not a problem. The danger is just to the clinging, to the suffering mind. When there's no clinging, change isn't a problem.

So that's one danger—that we tend to rely on feeling good. And when we don't feel good, as we know, maybe we at least have a little hissy fit, if not worse.

But actually—and this is me now, what I see for myself—what I think is really more of a danger, more subtle, more broad, more comprehensive, is the addictive, delusory aspect of craving when it's not seen in the mind. It colors the moment of awareness.

Just what I was saying about reading the definition of the second noble truth—craving, coming together with pleasure, delighting in this, delighting in that—without just noticing wanting as it is, it bears the promise that it's going to be the avenue to happiness. And then we tend to focus outward on the object desired and think, "Well, that one didn't do it." So we think, "Okay, I'll renounce this or I'll renounce that." But that seduction of the wanting, of that being the path leading us onward—to me this is one of the delusory aspects that leads into the addictive quality of it.

The other thing it does—the Tibetans have a lovely phrase for how it colors our perception. They say that wanting, clinging, "puts feathers on the object that's desired." It kind of colors it up. When you really have this desire for something, doesn't that thing, or person, or job, just seem so wonderful? How many expectations and fantasies have you had about some future thing since you've been here? Not even way far in the future—it could just be lunch. Or it could just be how nice it's going to be to take a bath at a certain time.

And if you've really gotten into how pleasant a fantasy can be – you may have had unpleasant ones too, but just staying with the pleasant – if you really get into it, and then you get to do the thing, does it really, really, does the thing at all come up to the promise of the fantasy? You probably keep looking, right, until you find one that does. But keep looking, don't believe me.

I know now when my mind starts saying, "Oh, it'll be like this, and then it'll be like that, and then this will be so wonderful," painting it out in twenty-five different ways – I know that whatever way my mind makes it up, it's going to be other than that. It never, ever comes out the way my mind has made it up. But that sense of the desire itself makes the object or the experience desired look so incredibly wonderful.

Even deep meditative experiences. You're waiting for *pīti* to arise, rapture to arise, and then it starts, and it's on and on and on, and finally it's like, "Please, God, make it stop." That may sound like I'm exaggerating, but not really. Everything gets old by repetition. And so you need something new if we're under that promise of clinging making us happy.

And even more, there's the delusion, because craving and aversion only arise in a moment of mind and heart when there's delusion. I talked a little about delusion today. Delusion always goes with craving or aversion, which are like two sides of the same thing. Aversion is like not wanting something to be happening. Because there's the delusion of me – without me, there's not anything to crave, right? Or to be aversive to. And also the delusion that it will make me happy.

So the real poignancy of craving, I think, is what I said before: it actually hides the peace, the ease, the freedom that the heart and mind is really looking for, although maybe it doesn't know it.

Huang Po wrote: "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. The one mind is the Buddha, and there's no distinction between Buddhas and ordinary beings except that ordinary beings are attached to forms and thus seek for Buddhahood outside of themselves. By this very seeking they lose it."

Even take it away from Buddhahood – just non-clinging, just a moment of freedom, of ease, of peace. We really do look for it outside of ourselves, don't we? To people, to objects, to experiences, to a different mental state, to anything. And by that very seeking, by that even very subtle leaning into something else, it hides the natural peace and ease. And so to me, that is the real danger of clinging. It promises us exactly what it cannot deliver because in its own essence, the essence of the mental state is that it hides peace.

What I love about the fact that experience is just this moment opening up, just this moment opening up, is that whatever this moment is like, now it's opening up. And so there's always the potential – you can be totally caught in craving, and then in this moment, "Oh, craving is like this." Always that potential. It doesn't have to be ten years from now or when you've cultivated a certain level of absorption. It's just that recognition: oh, craving is like this.

The escape in a moment – not the escape of the arhat, who has so thoroughly seen through the seduction of craving that it just stops arising because it doesn't make sense – but we can know moments of that. And how do we know it doesn't make sense? When we notice clinging.

This is what's great to experiment with on retreat. You start going, "I shouldn't want this," or "I'm not going to look around," or "I shouldn't go eat." Not feeding the craving is helpful. But it's not like a friend of mine who decided to really practice restraint at the sense doors on retreat, so he walked around blindfolded for three days. That's not really seeing through the dangers of craving.

When it arises and you recognize it, never mind what the craving is about. Never mind, it doesn't matter. Turn the attention back around. See: oh, craving feels like this. Notice how you even know it's there in the mind, in the body. Notice what effect it has on your mind, on your perceptions, on your choices, on how you feel about things. Just really explore it.

Sometimes in walking meditation, sitting meditation, eating meditation, working meditation, you can just watch it arise and get so strong. It's so strong that it's telling you if you don't have this, you'll die. Some people have brought this up – it can be as simple a thing as wanting to look at the person walking next to you. Have you felt that? It's so strong you want to look. Like, you just can't not do it, right? For what?

So you can judge, right, basically. So you can look at them and have a judgment. That was really good. I'm glad I did that. The wanting though—it's killer. So it's understandable to see why we're driven by it.

So explore it. Wanting. "I'm going to explode!" You just stand there with it and watch it. At some point it ebbs. I'm not saying how long, but at some point it ebbs. At some point it really goes away. Notice it's really gone. Sure, another one's going to come because that's the nature of the habits of our mind. But we can really see, oh yeah, this is really interesting. What does it do?

And one of the things it does that I've noticed, besides putting feathers on the object and making the thing look so—if I just look at that person, everything's going to be so much better. It doesn't make sense, but never mind. If we just had, I don't know, some certain thing for lunch, then you have it. You don't even like it. You're not even hungry that day, but never mind.

But another thing wanting does is really narrow. It really constricts the mind so that what we see is the object of desire and everything else is in the way, sometimes. So again, it engenders a displeasure, a discontent with the perfection of now, with now at all. Now isn't good enough.

And this example I've used often, because it's funny and it's easy to see. I was once sitting on a plane—I travel a lot—and it was an overnight flight to Europe. I was sitting on the aisle with two seats empty next to me. I can't sleep on these flights where you sit up all night, and I'm a wreck when I don't sleep. So I was waiting, people getting on, getting on. And it was getting close to the end, and I noticed no one was in the two seats next to me. That was just a perception. I just noticed that. And immediately, the thought arose: maybe I'll get to lie down. And with that thought, I really saw this incredible clinging, a craving to lie down and the clinging to the idea.

Before, I had just been sitting and watching people come in. And from that moment, everyone who came through the door of the plane—I was looking at them. I was feeling, you know, not hatred, but definitely aversion. Then they'd go past me. Oh, may you be happy! And this is true.

Actually, I noticed I really don't remember what happened. I probably didn't get to lie down. I really don't remember. But watching what the craving did to my mind, the effect it had on my experience, on the people, on how I related to everything in my experience—there's no question that it's suffering, much more suffering than lying down or not. That may be debatable. You have to explore that for yourself.

Ajahn Chah says, *kāmogha*, a flood of sensuality. We're sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations. And we're sunk because we look only at externals. We don't look inwardly. So our whole practice is this learning to look inwardly, not to judge, not to try and make it different, but to understand, to get interested, to explore, to see how it works.

Shankara, who was a seventh-century Indian philosopher, one of the main teachers of Advaita Vedanta, said—and it's really true—he said craving is intensified when we let our thoughts and our attention dwell upon sense objects and seek temporary satisfaction in the objective world. The Buddha says the same thing. He says what feeds unwise attention, what feeds the growth of the hindrance of sense desire, is to keep focusing our attention—and this is why it's unwise attention—to keep focusing our attention on the gratification, on how good it feels, basically, of the sense pleasure.

So, just a simple example, like my thing with the airplane seats. As long as I'm thinking, "Oh, that would be so nice to lie down," then immediately, "No, no, no, you can't!" Every person who came in becomes the enemy. Yeah, it really would be nice to lie down. But if you don't focus on that—you had that thought, "it would be nice to lie down," but you just withdraw your attention from focusing on that—it doesn't feed the sense desire.

It doesn't mean you can't lie down if you have the option. It doesn't mean you can't go choose what you like to eat. But we don't have to keep focusing: "That would be so nice. This tastes so good. Let me have more." So explore. That's what the Buddha calls unwise attention—it feeds it.

This habit of unwise attention is what has fed and so deeply made these deep ruts of aversion to the unpleasant, of clinging to the pleasant, and just spacing out with delusion in the neutral. We can see this in our present moment experience.

There's a sutta on the two darts that has so much profound teaching in it. The Buddha is talking about how if you're hit with a dart—an unpleasant feeling—an awakened person is just hit with that dart, that unpleasant feeling. An unawakened person beats and screams and yells and laments, adding a second unpleasant feeling, basically mental distress to the physical.

But then he goes on from that. Having been touched by a painful feeling, an uninstructed, ordinary worldling resists it and resents it. So then, in one who resists and resents a painful feeling—can you relate to that at all?—the underlying tendency, the habit of resistance to the painful, comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit.

And under the impact of that painful feeling and the habit to resist it, the person proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense happiness. I think that's really quite profound to explore in ourselves. When there's an unpleasant feeling, we go for sense happiness because that's all an uninstructed person knows.

So then the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind. The person does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings—not saying they're bad, just knowing that pleasant feelings arise and end. Does not know, according to facts, the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. So in one who lacks that knowledge, the underlying tendency to ignorance regarding neutral feelings also comes to underlie the mind.

I've found that in my own exploring so useful—just to see, and again, not with judging. All of this exploration is really to see how the mind works, how these habits get fed, how they get starved, and whether we really experience suffering, disconnection, confusion as a result of them. If we're judging them or ourselves, there's no way to see clearly.

So look in simple ways. The body hurts and the mind goes into a pleasant fantasy. Right there. Painful feeling—let's check out, let's go take a beach vacation. You're home and you go to the refrigerator. You go have a cup of tea. You go make a phone call. No one's saying any of those things are bad. See how our mind goes, "Oh, that's bad. You shouldn't do it. I should renounce." That's just aversion. Explore.

You go and get a bite of ice cream—I must want ice cream tonight, it keeps coming up. Well, how does it unfold? You start with one bite and you end up eating the whole carton of Häagen-Dazs because when you finish that bite, the body hurts again. So you have to have another bite, and the body hurts again, so you have to eat the whole carton. Then your stomach really hurts and you can't eat anymore, so there's something else to do.

Just explore. Is that true sometimes? In the face of the unpleasant, the mind—the uneducated mind—knows of no other escape than to go for the pleasant. So what we're saying is: turn around and look.

There is an escape, and it isn't about going for the pleasant. It's simply bringing clear attention. "Oh, wanting is like this. Desire is like this. Burning, burning, burning, burning." And then, "Oh, okay, now it's gone." Then notice—ah, the peace and ease.

Really, you know, when we get what we want, there's that sense of relaxation, that peace and ease. But we mistakenly think it's because we got what we wanted. Actually, it's because the wanting went away.

It's a lot easier not to have to run around. My brother has a hound dog with such a finely developed sense of smell. The poor thing is just driven by his nose, absolutely driven by it. He comes in the house, and any piece of food, anything that's ever touched a human body—they have to hide the garbage, they have to hide everything, because he just can't stay away from it. It's painful to watch. Sweet dog. That's what it's like. He just can't stop. Sense pleasures.

Well, I don't have so much time for views and *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, so I'll move through them briefly. Attachment to views, and then *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* as personality view.

A view is really a formation of thought, and on one level it's pretty obvious. We can start with, say, a political view. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see how a certain political idea gets held as right or better, while another one is deemed wrong. My god, this last year—it was inescapable in this country. Look how much vehemence, how much anger, how much hatred really goes into the supporting of one's view and the attacking of the other view.

So this is not subtle or esoteric. It's really easy to see. We're all different in terms of politics, but I know many people in this country, including myself, who knew it was a view, yet were sincerely and deeply attached to that view as being right. That's attachment to a view—a description of how things are, what it means to me, what's right.

We all have views about many, many things. That's not a problem. The attachment, as it's described, is thinking "this alone is true, everything else is false." But of course, it doesn't quite present itself that way. We just think this is how it is.

In terms of obvious views—philosophical views, religious views, political views, views of your family, views of how other people should behave, views of what's appropriate behavior in your partner, views of who's right and who's wrong—you can sense how much suffering there is when there's attachment, when there's holding to a view as absolutely right.

So that's the big, obvious picture. But views also form out of thoughts based on perception. Not even getting to personality view yet, but just subtle views of what's happening right now—views of the solidity of the body, views of what causes suffering or not.

I'll give a very simple example. A friend of mine—and it's a good example of perception, the construction that our thoughts make of it, clinging right away to that construction as being true, and then all the thoughts and reactions and suffering that come from that.

She was sitting on a retreat in a rented facility in Switzerland many years ago, in an old creaky wooden house. The retreat was with Ajahn Sumedho, I think. On the second floor was the big room that served as their meditation hall, and right below it was the walking hall. It was one of those houses with no insulation, and you could hear everything that went on.

They were in a sitting period, and she said she was getting very concentrated, very quiet, just with the breath. In and out. One of those really peaceful sessions where it's going really well. Then someone started doing walking downstairs, and it was just all this creaking. You know how we are—god forbid there should be a sound when we're meditating. Also, this was Switzerland, so during the sitting period, you sit; during the walking period, you walk. You don't walk during the sitting period. My Swiss friends would be okay with me saying this, right?

So she was getting really agitated. "They're ruining my concentration, and they shouldn't be doing it. It's really clear what you should do." Okay, back to in, out, in, out. But she was getting more and more angry and distressed. Back to in and out. Finally she thought, "Okay, I'm just going to be really present with my breath." So she really zoomed in on it.

And then she widened her field of awareness and realized that she was sitting leaning against the wall. Every time she took a breath in, her back pressed against the wall and made it creak. That was the sound she was hearing.

So you get a sense.

There's perception. We think we know what it is. We make up a whole story. We then have moods and emotions that go with that, and a sense of me, and we can get quite distressed.

Now in that case, with clear seeing, the whole thing dissolves. The anger—she could have made up another story about how stupid she was, I don't know, she didn't say that—but the whole thing dissolves with accurate perception.

That's how views are formed: from a perception, a thought about it, not recognizing that thought, another thought, a mood that goes with the thought, then selective perception. We just notice the perceptions that fit the view that's been formed, and it just goes on from there.

So I just want to drop this in, in terms of noticing self-judging whenever it comes up in your sittings or your walkings. First noticing it—that's helpful. I would say almost always there's some view operating in the background that is feeding the judging. The judging is comparing something to something, right? And whatever you're comparing, it isn't good enough or you wouldn't be judging. So there might be a view of what good practice is, or how the breath should be, or "I shouldn't be clinging," or "my life should be more about service," or whatever.

So you might just notice—it's so often there are views operating in the background that we're not even recognizing. This is one place where awareness of thoughts can be really useful. I'm not saying think about it, analyze it, go to your room and write seventeen pages about what your views are of proper sitting. But just have a sense—when the self-judging comes, you might just notice one or two of the thoughts that feed it. "Oh, I'm just spacing out. I'm not with the breath as much as I used to be." That's a sign right there. There's a view: how often one should be with the breath, how the breath should feel, a comparison to the past, and selective perception. Because how many times have we said it doesn't matter how much you're with your breath? But the mind doesn't remember that. The mind remembers the discussion about absorption and never moving from the breath. All the other teachings it doesn't remember. Because that's selective perception. That's attachment to view.

Do you get a sense of what I mean? This is happening all the time. We don't have to hate views, just like we don't hate clinging. When we see them, we don't have to cling to them. "Oh yeah, there's that view, that it should be like this"—and the mind opens up.

But also, there are other times when they say practice just has so many different things arising, and you're just noticing that. Oh, yeah. But then the mind says, "If you should notice it every single second, and I'm spacing out, so that can't be right." Just notice the views when there's judging.

In terms of sakkāya-diṭṭhi—diṭṭhi again just means view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi means personality view—it operates in exactly the same way. The perception of my friend, the perception of the sound, the interpretation that somebody's walking, the aversion to that, the view that everyone should follow the schedule, the view that this is spoiling my meditation, the sense that it's unpleasant and not recognizing that. There's a whole sense of herself in that.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is basically that picking up of any particular perception. As we sit, as we walk, as we go through the day, as we've said, it's just a whole flow of nāma-rūpa, of the six sense doors. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, or emotions. If you really look, that's all that's happening, over and over and over. Sometimes people say, "Is this all?" Yeah, actually. Seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, sensing, thinking, over and over. That's what's happening.

Once I went in to see Sayadaw U Pandita, who was a very tough teacher. I don't actually remember what I said. That's noting—that's a noting practice. You just note everything that's arising. So you're just noting seeing, hearing, thinking, touching, seeing, hearing. And I must have been complaining. I remember he just looked at me. He was really good at busting me. I kind of liked it.

He goes, "So what do you want? Other objects to note?" Because that's all that's going to happen. You can change these objects for those objects. It really doesn't matter.

So sometimes people have mentioned here it feels like they're in the flow. Things are just going and just noticing, and yeah, that feels great. Why does it feel great? Either because it's pleasant and you're attached to it and not noticing it and it's delusion—that's one way it feels great. When it changes and you're suffering, then you'll know that's why that felt great. Or because things are just coming and going and there's no clinging in the mind. There's no making up a story. There's no making a sense of self. It's just how things are. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Going, going. That's all. From the time we're born until the time we die. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Over and over and over. When there's no clinging, it's no problem. Suddenly, though, it's a problem, right?

So Sayadaw U Lakkhana described it as sakkāya—his description of sakkāya just means this stream of experience. And when at one moment any particular perception, any particular experience is suddenly grasped, it's as if the mind suddenly goes, "This one is me or mine." Right then, there's the sense of personality identity, personality view. This is me or mine. Unfortunately, the mind doesn't usually say it quite that clearly, does it? It's like, "Oh my God, this pain is unbearable." So right then, something's become me or mine. And we can't always tell exactly—is it the pain? Is it the unpleasant

feeling? Is it the thought, "This is going to lead me to the hospital"? Is it the aversion? Sometimes we can't tell because all that stuff happens so quickly, so altogether. But right there, you can feel that contraction, that glitch, that ball of twine of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view.

So we can explore it. Just notice when it's there and when it's not. And any sense impression grasped can lead to the whole arising of the sense of self, the sense of personality, just like that. If you explore it with interest, it's really fun and funny and pathetic. And then it goes away.

So you can be walking, and a memory just comes. How many memories just come and go with this one? Some memory of embarrassment in the third grade. So a memory comes of how embarrassing some horrible thing you did in the third grade, and there's clinging to it, and that sense of shame goes over you. "Oh, God." And then right away, all the other memories that contribute to proving that that's really true—suddenly you're just doing walking meditation and you say, "I'm not even walking right, people are probably looking at me," and you know how you teeter a little bit, you lose your balance, you think, "Oh God, they're all seeing me, I can't even do walking meditation right." All of that, just from a memory that was grasped. Whole sense of self coming and going in a moment, right?

This goes on, as I'm sure you know, all day long. But if we don't look, we keep thinking it's the same sense of self, but it's not. Different ones are coming. First, there's that embarrassing one in the third grade. Then there's the one who went to lunch and ate too much, and now their stomach hurts, and you're like, "God, I'm pathetic, I can never control myself." There's that one. Then there's the one who goes and has a pretty quiet sitting and says—

Even though I was tired, I came and sat. I have a lot of virya. I have a lot of faith. It's really going well, you know. And then you remember all the times it went well. That's another one. And then there's the bored one walking out. And then there's the really calm one. And then there's the one who feels old and the one who feels young and the one who feels—it's endless. It's endless. But they're all different.

So Ajahn Buddhadasa said the self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. A ball of gunk in the mind—it comes and it goes. You can just look at it. Come, look at it, go. What's the big deal?

We hate it. That's one big deal. The other thing is we don't see it, and we're back like that hound dog, running after pleasant, running away from unpleasant, trying to gratify the sense of me. We're rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, trying to have a better sense of me.

Fine. Use your meditation to have a better sense of me. That's what we do in the beginning because that's all we know. If I could get concentrated, I can feel better about myself. If I can really have some insights, I can go out of here and astonish everyone with how open and compassionate I am. I was waiting for twenty years for everyone to get astonished, but now I've given it up. It's a lot easier when you give it up. That's the freedom. I used to just really want to understand, and now I don't anymore. And that's the freedom.

The Buddha talks about agitation through clinging. Explore and see if that's true. Agitation through clinging. We're just sitting here minding our own business. A thought arises, a pleasant sensation arises, a memory arises, a sound arises, there's a thought that's clinging to it. The whole sense of me right there. Agitation.

Ajahn Sumedho says we're constantly creating our sense of self by thinking about it all the time. And you can't create a peaceful self. Explore and see. But whatever arises dissolves. So that's why it's actually fun just exploring.

Attachment to view—see it clearly. Ah, that's releasing. Sense of self—sometimes you can see what it's about, sometimes not. Just, ah, sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like this. I do that a lot in my daily life. I can feel a sudden grip. What is it? Is it aversion? Is it clinging? What am I clinging to? Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. It's like this. The personality, feeling of shame or whatever. It's like this. Not pushing it away, but just stepping into the awareness, stepping out of the constricted mind of clinging into the unrestricted mind, as the Buddha says, of non-clinging. Non-clinging even to sense of self.

It doesn't have to go away. A sense of self is like this. Clinging is like this. For just that moment, there's a taste of what the Buddha was talking about—liberation through non-clinging. Just a taste.

Luckily for us, just that little taste of the Dharma is enough to really spark the trust, the faith, to keep us looking. One of my teachers said, "A spark of truth is enough to burn up a mountain of lies." It's true. Because when we touch it, we know—oh, that really is the peace and ease that's accessible. Even when we forget it, we know we've forgotten it. We're caught in our stories and all of that. But it's always there—oh, it's like this, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—that potential is always present.

I just want to end with a short reading from Master Sheng Yen, who died just a couple of weeks ago. He was a really wonderful Chan master from Taiwan. I sat a couple of times with him. He was a lovely man.

He says: "One does not practice to become enlightened, but when it happens, it's like waking from a dream. True liberation does not come from wanting to be liberated. In true liberation, there's nothing to want, nothing to discard, no place to go and no place to avoid."

And this is Adyashanti: "Those who are free don't want anything. They don't want anything from their mind. They don't want anything from their emotions. They don't want anything from anyone, and they don't want anything from life. They don't want anything. If you don't want, all that's left is an incredible sense of being free. Not wanting is not the same as aversion. Not wanting is freedom."

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 45

Compassion and Emptiness

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson investigates the essential unity of wisdom (paññā) and compassion (karuṇā), presenting them as inseparable aspects of the awakened heart. She explores the central paradox of spiritual life: how to remain open-hearted in a world of both extraordinary beauty and unbearable suffering, while simultaneously understanding that everything is simply arising and passing away.*
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> *Drawing on the Noble Eightfold Path, Wilson explains how sammā diṭṭhi (right understanding) naturally gives rise to sammā saṅkappa (wise intention), which manifests as non-harming, goodwill (mettā), and compassion. She references teachings on bodhicitta—the awakened heart—through Pema Chödrön's description of it as 'tenderness for life' that emerges when we can no longer shield ourselves from vulnerability. The talk includes Nisargadatta's powerful insight: 'I am the world and the world is myself,' pointing to how this recognition frees us from fear while making us wholly responsive to suffering.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance on cultivating compassion through deep insight into our own dukkha, emphasizing that every moment of mindful awareness is itself an act of wise intention. She warns against both drowning in suffering (compassion without equanimity) and falling into emptiness (wisdom without engagement), illustrating through inspiring examples from Martin Luther King Jr., James Lawson, and Aung San Suu Kyi how authentic practice manifests as courageous, non-violent action rooted in purified intention.*

I want to talk tonight on the broad theme of the unity of wisdom, of emptiness and compassion. I often talk about this because the questions it raises in my mind are really the heart of my practice, the heart of the conundrum or the paradox of life for me in spiritual practice. So I'm always looking at it.

It's the question of how to open the heart and mind, how to remain or keep opening the heart and mind in this complex and painful and sometimes really insane world—with both incredible beauty and love and unbearable suffering to even hear about, never mind witness or participate in.

On the one side there is this. On the other side, the absolute knowing that everything's just arising and passing. As someone said today really beautifully—I'm not going to get her words exactly right—it's all just part of one arising and passing flow.

There's nothing separate. From that place where there's almost nothing to do, nothing to have, nothing to be, from that knowing: how to continue to respond in this world? How to respond when the motivation isn't fear or greed or self-interest?

In a way, to me, those are the two questions. How to stay open in this world, how not to drown in the suffering—that is the compassion that can't really be deep compassion without the wisdom of emptiness. They have to come together. The second question—how to respond from the place of knowing everything's just coming and going and there's no separate anything and it's all just happening—that's the wisdom of emptiness that manifests quite naturally as compassionate, kind action. They go together.

Of course, they're not always equally strong. They're not always even accessible at all. But that's, to me, the deepening koan. Sometimes it seems completely unintelligible to me. Sometimes it's so obvious that they arise together and there's no question whatsoever, nothing to even talk about. It's just so clear how it is. And then all the shades in between.

I'm just offering some reflections and not in any way saying I've got the answers here. But to me it cuts to the heart of the whole reason for spiritual life, for any life, really.

The wisdom of no self, of emptiness, of no separate self, of nothing being more important and lasting than something else, the wisdom of not needing to have preferences—you can have them, but not being attached—the freedom of the heart and mind, of non-clinging. That's one side. The other side naturally arises when the mind and heart isn't clinging: the natural response will be one of wholesome, skillful action.

Just how I was thinking about it tonight—you know those moments we talk about a lot, and you all have them. I call them moments of recognizing the purity of heart or mind, just a moment of simple presence. You know those moments. It's often in nature because nature's easier, especially here. It's not bugging us. In fact, there aren't bugs and nobody's telling us anything. It's easier to just open without our own defenses and sense of self.

I read a book once called *Alone*, and the only thing I remember from it is a line that said: it's easy to be with nature because nature has no subconscious. There's not this subconscious stuff bugging each other. Just walking in the dark now and seeing the stars and hearing the frogs—those moments when you stop, and there's no particular self-referencing at all. You're not sitting there going, "Oh, a moment of purity, no self-referencing." You're just in that place of whatever you want to call it—perfection or love or simplicity or completeness.

In that place, in that moment, a thought of harming could not arise. It doesn't compute. In that moment, in that place, if a response was called for, it would be one of what the Buddha talked about as the wise intentions—I'll talk about them in a minute—that is the natural manifestation. Non-harming, compassion, goodwill, generosity: the natural manifestation of the pure heart and mind. They go together.

This is what could be called bodhicitta, the awakened heart, the awakened mind. I want to read a little from Pema Chödrön because I love her very down-to-earth description of bodhicitta, the awakened heart, the noble or awakened heart—what bodhicitta means. Guy spoke about it the other night. She calls it the soft spot inherent in all of us. She calls bodhicitta simply a tenderness for life that awakens when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In the words of the 16th Karmapa: you take it all in.

You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion. Compassion, tenderness for life, the appreciating from the touching without separation, the knowing of the fragility and the beauty of life. Compassion or kindness or non-clinging is the natural response. It's not even like, "Let me think about how to respond." It just naturally flows. They're two sides of the same coin.

Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world and the world is myself,' then you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

Responsible for the world—not meaning that you personally have to fix it all. That's where we go with our self-cherishing: "I'm responsible for the world, and I'm sure not doing a very good job." That's not what it means. But once we know with confidence—and just for a moment, not once and for all. Don't wait for the once and for all. It goes back and forth. So in those moments when you can know with confidence, "I am the world, the world is myself," in that moment we are free from desire and fear, and the senseless sorrow, the sorrow of humankind because of ignorance, does become our sole concern. That's the tenderness, the fragility, the beauty that touches our heart and elicits a natural compassion, a natural expression of connectedness. I love that particular quotation, actually.

So this is really what I want to talk about in different ways—these two sides of the same coin, just different ways of going in. Another way of seeing how they need each other, how they have to be together, is often when we talk about anatta, which we've

talked about quite a bit this retreat: the sense that there's no intrinsic separate self, and all the myriad of questions that the questioning mind comes up with that I do not need to recap, because you all know.

But one of the fears, one of the ideas the thinking mind throws up—an idea that's not based on actual experience, but that arises in many of our self-centered thinking minds—is that the idea of a life of non-clinging or of no separate self doesn't really sound appealing. And all the "what about" and "what if": "What about pleasure? What about love? What about preferences? What about just knowing who I am? Why would I want to live like that?" It's almost as if the idea is that the epitome of wisdom, of emptiness, is some kind of dull, cold, gray void—void of everything, void of happiness, void of everything. That obviously, hopefully it's obvious, isn't true.

Because as I was saying, it's not that at all. It's just the potential for response when response is called for. And the response that naturally arises—and this is the beautiful part in the way the Buddha breaks things down. I mean, he was certainly an organizational genius in terms of organizing how the mind works. Amazing, really. Can you imagine sitting down and coming up with all this stuff? It's amazing.

So in terms of talking about how this penetration of the truth of no separate self, of not self-cherishing, of non-clinging—how that manifests in the world is right there in the Noble Eightfold Path. The first step in some ways is samma ditthi, right view, right understanding, which would be this wisdom piece. Really seeing there's nothing separate, knowing that in a moment. Samma ditthi leading to the next steps, which are translated variously as wise thought or wise intention. And intention, remember we've talked about that—intention being that urge, that mental movement that leads to thought, speech, and action. So wise intention leading to the next steps of the path, which are wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. And then into the meditation piece, although it's not really separate.

And the really cool thing, if you really look in your experience and hopefully see that it's true for you sometimes, because that helps us trust it more—the really cool thing is that with the deepening understanding, just those little purity moments I was talking about, you don't have to have the big flash-bam-it's-over. Just the little purity moments. And you don't even have to have a really brilliant thought that lets you know you own it. You can trust. In those moments, what starts to happen, what actually does happen, is the habits of our mind, the intentions, the unwholesome ones—our big friends greed, hatred, and delusion. But in terms of intention, he speaks more about greed and hatred.

They naturally start to transform. The wise intention—or the intention of greed—naturally transforms in the light of wisdom into non-greed, which manifests both as renunciation and as acts of generosity. And hatred is broken into two things. There's ill will, which naturally transforms in a moment of purity into friendliness, into goodwill or metta. And the other aspect is cruelty, which can take place internally. Cruelty can be a kind of anger, a striking out, all the way to real cruelty and hatred. And that transforms into compassion, into non-harming, into really caring for and wishing to alleviate our own and other people's suffering.

It's remarkable because this is the natural movement. You'd have to fight not to have this happen. And it makes sense, really, even on the intellectual level—which is useful. I'm always talking about dropping under it, but using our thoughts, as Sally talked about last night, thoughts aren't to be hated. If we can just understand what a thought is, we can use it quite helpfully, instead of having it run our lives, which is more what happens.

On the intellectual level, it even makes sense when you consider the energy that is bound up when so much of our thought, our selective perception, our motivations, and what we do is caught up in self-referencing. You've noticed that, right? Once in a while, how much of our thoughts are about me, how much of the day is about me, how much of whatever happens in the dining room is about me—and then we have to have all our reactions and our responses and then our self-judging for our reactions. No wonder we're exhausted at the end of the day. It is exhausting. It's really exhausting.

So in those moments, have you wondered why, when that's not going on, the energy's better? There's more because all that energy is released into presence. It's released into awareness. It's available, instead of being bound up in this junk that we call our self-story and our life.

So just explore, just a tiny little way. I'll give you a tiny little example that isn't even anything judgmental or bad—just a small illustration of how the shift works. Here at mealtime, there's a sign for dana where people can offer for the meals, which they do in Burma really every day. It's quite nice to see. At IMS we have that too, but the way it works there is you walk into the dining room and there's a wall where you get your plates, and right on that wall there's a big whiteboard calendar with maybe half the month, the dates up, and then if there's a donation that day, it shows who made it and the dedication. So you walk up and you see about fifteen days at a time. Half the time, I never even look at it. Other times I glance. But this one time, a couple of years ago, I had made a donation for some day. And I remember walking in, and as soon as I walked in,

I immediately looked at the board, and I didn't see anything else. I just wanted to see my day. Where's my day? What does it say? Just that sense of the narrowing and the tightness and the self-referencing.

And then I saw, "Oh, yeah. Oh, look at all these days. Look at all these lovely dedications. Look at all this generous stuff." As soon as that was just let go of, naturally there was the expansion and the appreciation of people's generosity, and a kind of friendliness. Goodwill came, quite naturally.

That's a lot of our practice, right? Just the tightness, experiencing it. "Oh"—there's a piece of wisdom, a piece of seeing it. How many times have you noticed, please say at least once, that it naturally kind of opens up? You see that. You have to see it, by God, after three weeks. At least once. But it does happen.

So the thing about intention—and what I'm sure Guy will be talking about a lot more—is that intention is really the seed of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of action, thought, speech, and action in the way that the Buddha understood it. And as we've said before and will say again, that goes a little counter to our normal societal ways of assessing the benefit or the usefulness or the success of an action. Usually it's based on whether that action achieved the desired result, which is typically some kind of measurable or observable result. Of course that's reasonable, but that usually determines whether something was a good action—what I wanted to happen, happened.

But what we may forget to look at—or I was certainly never really taught to look at—is how the Buddha understands the purity, the wisdom, the deepening compassion, the habits of our mind and heart. What's being fed? What's being starved? The whole seed of the action is in the intention.

So something may achieve a seemingly good result, but we were driven in the doing of it by total greed or total anger. In terms of looking at what's being cultivated, what's being fed—it's greed, it's anger. Now, take away "feeling greed is bad, anger is bad, so therefore I'm bad." You have to not go there. But just be exploring: does greed and anger, as it gets stronger, increase my sense of happiness or unhappiness, suffering or unsuffering? Does it increase the ability to be present with myself and others in difficult circumstances? Does it increase a sense of separation? Does it open to more of that place of connectedness and beauty?

This is to explore for ourselves, not just to say, "Greed is bad, I'm not going to do it, I'm so bad." That's separate, separate, separate. But this is a really interesting place of exploration—that the natural result of wisdom, of clear seeing, of non-self, of emptiness, is that these wise intentions of non-clinging or generosity, goodwill and compassion naturally grow and strengthen. Our habits of mind and heart really change.

And again, even in little things. I know if you contemplate back—not when your mind is filled with judging, because we can't trust any assessment that's made with a mind colored by greed and aversion. You can't. You can't trust any thoughts that come as a clear assessment. But when your mind is relatively balanced, just contemplate, reflect, and I'm sure you'll come up with moments where somebody was driving you crazy. You were filled with anger or blame or judgment, or you turned it against yourself—wherever we go with those things. Really in it. And something just shifts. It gets down. You really look at the person.

So many people say this. You just look at the person and something about them goes in. You open to them and feel their pain, and the whole story of me and them and their being bad and anger—it's gone. It's gone for that moment. Just the willingness to move out of the self-referential state, where it's all about me and this is bothering me. Oh wow, look at that. It's another angle. It's us, not me and you. I mean, that's saying it verbally, but it happens on another level. That piece of non-separation—immediately, cruelty changes to compassion, ill will changes to goodwill, wanting to keep my things for me changes to a letting go.

Yeah, it might be only for a second. We're not talking about steady state. But just notice this. See if this is really true for you at times.

I think Sally—somebody read this quotation from the Buddha—that whatever one frequently thinks about and dwells upon, that becomes the inclination of their mind. That's just common sense. This is why, of course, the brahmavihāra practice is so valuable—it's obvious that we're actually substituting verbal thoughts. So that's good. That's when I think Sally quoted me at some stupid thing I said one time about fake mettā being better than real aversion.

But what I meant, if I think back—I'm not really sure what I meant. But if I think back, it's like even saying "May I be happy" when I don't feel it. But I don't mean "You stupid jerk, you scum of the earth." At least I'm saying, "May I be happy." A friend of mine was talking about a Tibetan teacher who was discussing acting compassionately, and one of his students said, "But I don't feel it. I don't feel compassion." He said, "I'm not telling you to feel. I'm just saying act compassionately." And sometimes—it's not hypocritical—but sometimes it actually can go that way.

Anyway, where I was going with this: the brahmavihāras are more obvious on the level of actual thought. But even more powerful and profound is every moment of mindful awareness. Because mindfulness, those moments of clear seeing, is pure citta in a way—pure mind. Real mindfulness isn't colored in that moment. It's not corrupted by aversion and greed and confusion, just recognizing what's happening.

So you're just sitting and there's earth element in your butt. And it goes from being some whole story to, "Oh yeah, hardness." That's a simple moment of mindfulness. That's a moment of wisdom, of non-self-referencing. That's a moment where the intention is shifted from unwise, suffering intention to wisdom, to non-harming, to friendliness.

That's why the steadiness, the continuity of mindful awareness has so much power. But it's also why we often don't notice what's happening.

Because it's not any big bells and whistles, but it's steady, steady, steady—opening us to wisdom and changing the habits.

And habits are powerful, right? Habits are powerful. I won't go into it a lot. I'll just say that in the last maybe four or five years, I've been spending quite a bit of time in various nursing homes and assisted living facilities because of my various parents in various places. And so you really get to see a lot of different people, basically in various stages of dementia.

One of the things I would say that goes on in dementia—and it's different for different people—but one of the things is that your personality defense systems, where you're trying to put on a good face but it's not really your big habit, you can't quite remember that one anymore. And so the real habits just start coming out. And you can really see.

There are some places I go in—and there are more women than men usually in these places, but men too—where someone is just really very friendly and affectionate and kind. And every time you go in, she's saying, "Oh, I'm so happy to see you!" And it's not about me. I mean, she doesn't know who the heck I am. But there's just this friendliness. You can tell this is a kind, friendly person.

And then there's someone else sitting there, and you're trying to say something, kind of saying, "Leave me alone." You say, "Do you want to go to this meal? Do you want to go eat now?" And they're all just, "No, I don't want to go eat, you can't make me." And I say, "You're right, you're right. You don't have to eat if you don't want to eat, sorry."

But you never know. And you really can see the habits of a lifetime. What we've cultivated.

I want to set aside certain things—I think Alzheimer's can actually affect the brain in a way that changes the habits, and that's a different thing, right? There's nothing we can really do about that. Parkinson's too, and things like that. But I'm talking about—and I'm including my mother in this—I can really see that the organic kind of mind is still there, and her personality is still there. I've known her, and if anything, her sweetness has come out more. Luckily, my mother's sweetness has come out more. But it was always there in ways.

I want to tell you, for me, it puts the fear of God into me. What's it going to be like? I better get working now.

It's not so funny. Think about it. It's not so funny.

So while these qualities—and I'm going to use compassion as sort of a stand-in for all three of the wise intentions, because in some ways compassion or non-harming, caring, kind of includes all of them—compassion in the way the Tibetans speak of bodhicitta, this tender, awakened heart whose highest manifestation is the sincere wish to practice and awaken so that one can help awaken all beings. I feel this tenderness for life can manifest in many forms.

This happens naturally through our growing understanding and insight and wisdom, through growing trust in awareness and less trust in the painful habits. And also, we can consciously incline the mind with wisdom, with interest. What are we feeding? What are we starving? Sometimes we can't make a choice, but sometimes we can. There's some book called *Choose Love*. Sometimes we can. Choose compassion.

Sometimes we'd like to and we just can't. But even in those times, we can usually choose mindfulness. We can usually choose awareness of the fact that I totally hate everybody and everything and I can't change that right now—but I'm aware of that.

I'm not kidding. No, no, I'm not kidding. That's something.

Awareness, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, is the point that includes. It includes everything. Awareness is not colored or stained or damaged by anything. Awareness can even include hatred. And when awareness includes it more and more, and we begin to take our trust and our stand in awareness, hatred's not being fed anymore.

It may seem really strong and overwhelming, but there's a back and forth. Something starts to shift. It really does.

The Dalai Lama, speaking about cultivation—cultivating compassion—said something that's really key. He said compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is. And that arises by being present with our own suffering experience. Where else is it going to arise?

We think—I often think—I should be working in a refugee camp, I should be somewhere where there's really suffering. But look at your own mind and heart. There's plenty of suffering and confusion and pain. This is the place we can start to bear witness. This is the place we can learn what compassion and kindness and being present in the face of suffering really is. It's our best laboratory and workshop.

This is why—and I mean this, I know people don't believe us when we say this in interviews, but it's really true—the really difficult aspects or times on a retreat are so key. Because this is the place where the deep suffering, habits, and confusion are really coming up in the light of awareness. As I think I said, one of my teachers used to say, in the light of awareness, all the snakes come up out of their holes. That's what happens. But there's more awareness, there's a little more trust, and there's a commitment. It's in our life too. It isn't just on retreat at all. But retreat is such a valuable opportunity. It doesn't mean we're going to fix it all. That's not what compassion's about. But it means we can bear witness with kindness, with presence. That's really what learning about compassion through our suffering is.

So that's the first piece he says: compassion awakens through deep insight into suffering by opening to being with our own suffering. And then, through this opening to suffering, to dukkha, compassion strengthens as it moves into a sense of empathy or connectedness with other beings and with all beings.

That can also start right here. People give examples of this—just little examples. Having back pain, or having a sense of deep grief, and really struggling with all of it: the pain, the reaction, the aversion, the frustration. But at some point—and for many people this happens—it's not that the pain lessens, but the sense of it being all about me somehow drops. And there arises this recognition: so many people in the world have back pain, or worse. It's not a finger-shaking thing, but it's like, oh, my back pain, my grief is a stand-in, a representative for the grief of the world. It isn't my grief or my back pain. It's like, this is the world. I am the world, the world is myself. We all take turns manifesting different aspects of suffering and beauty.

In this way, what's going on here in retreat—and we can bring the same attitude into our life, of course—it's just more structured here. We have less to distract us. That's why the pains and difficulties seem so big. We have less to distract us. That's done on purpose.

What's arising? That's what's arising. You could say that's the vipaka, the result of previous karma, previous cause and effect ripening right now. How that's being met in the moment—that's the intention being cultivated. So when what arises, no matter how beautiful or difficult or how lost we seem, just that conscious intention to be mindful of it. You don't even have to think "compassionate," just mindful. Just, as Sylvia keeps saying, being friendly with whatever's happening.

That's huge. Every moment, how we meet what's currently arising now is the cultivation of compassionate intention. It's the cultivation of wisdom and it's the manifestation of wisdom. It's really extremely powerful.

So we get so—just like with intention and action—we tend to look so much into the result of action and miss the intention. And similarly, on our retreat, hard stuff is happening, physical, emotional, dukkha in whatever way, and we tend to either focus on what's happening and how to fix it, or how we can't fix it, or how we're not meeting it properly. Instead of just looking at what's the attitude in the mind that's meeting it. Just to have the potential.

I was reading a book recently about nonviolence, different aspects of nonviolence through the ages in history. And there's one line from Dr. Martin Luther King that I really liked. It says, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, you refuse to hate him."

Compassion, this cultivation of compassion as an expression of deep wisdom, it's that level. Not just refusing to shoot a man, we refuse to hate a man. It's refusing to hate any aspect of our experience. It doesn't mean you have to love it either.

So I want to balance that with Ajahn Sumedho, the same thing in his very down-to-earth way. If you're being very idealistic and you hate someone—or yourself, or you hate something that's arising in your experience here, just to keep it on that level—then you feel, "I shouldn't hate anyone. I shouldn't hate anything. I'm a Buddhist, and Buddhists should have metta for all living beings, and I should meet everything with metta. I should love everybody if I'm a good Buddhist." He says all that comes from impractical idealism. Instead, try having a little metta for the aversion you feel. Recognize aversion for the pettiness of the mind, the jealousy, the envy. Metta meaning peacefully coexisting, not creating problems, not making it difficult or creating problems out of the difficulties that arise in life, in our minds and bodies. It means the stuff happens, and we hate them, all of that happens. We don't have to go the extra step, or when we see

we're going the extra step, just let your awareness get a little bit bigger and include that too. Oh yeah, look at that habit of hating the hate. Look at that habit of just, "This shouldn't be happening and I should know better." Look at that.

And in that moment, that's a shift of wise intention, of wisdom—from hating the hate, blaming, to "Oh, it's like this." I love that saying, "It's like this," because you can't really go there without somehow dropping the deep identification and resistance. Oh, it's like this. What do you do with that? Nothing. It's just like this. Okay. A step back into that, at least in the direction of that natural purity.

I'm not saying—and you know already, right—that this is easy or simple in any way. In any way. We wouldn't have to practice so hard, we wouldn't be so... spiritual practice wouldn't be both so central to our lives and so difficult, and we wouldn't have so much inspiration, really, and be so deeply touched by people who can manifest this if it was just run-of-the-mill easy. On the other hand, I feel if we didn't really know, already know below the level of thinking, the truth of this, then we also wouldn't be deeply touched and inspired by people and beings and acts of compassion and wisdom. We just wouldn't even recognize it.

But I'm not saying in any way that it's easy. Our denial systems—well, that's what you've all been seeing, part of what you've been seeing: our particular personal denial systems, our personality denial systems when we come in contact with certain aspects of personal suffering. And in a few interviews today, people were kind of laughing where we go, "Oh, this habit of my mind, I never saw it before." Well, actually, I did see it, but you kind of go, "Oh, I see it, but I'm not really doing that. That's not really happening." And we come back. And then suddenly some veil drops and you go, "Oh, I've been completely blaming myself. I've been completely filled with guilt all the time." And there's a part of your mind that goes, "Yeah, I know. I've been seeing that forever." But not really. The denial, delusion—it's an amazing, fascinating force, really, I think, the force of denial.

So I'm not in any way saying it's easy. One way of denial is just absolutely pushing away physical, emotional suffering altogether, right? The denial of what I read the other night—going for the pleasant, running away, doing something.

We all know that pattern. And that's part of what the structure of retreat doesn't let us do as much. But there are many other forms of denial.

Self-judgment is a huge form of it. *This shouldn't be happening. In fact, it's not happening. It's only happening because I'm a loser. If I could do it right, this wouldn't be happening.* Or blame or anger. Find your own denial systems. They're really strong. Some is just plain, outright denying that suffering is even happening, because it's too painful to touch.

I've told this story before, but I'll tell it again. I was in the hospital once, many years ago, and I'd been there a while. I was having to get a lot of IVs, where they have to stick the needle into your vein. After you've been there a while, your veins kind of start depleting, and it gets harder to get the thing in. So this one day, a nurse was trying to do it and she couldn't. They tried two or three times and couldn't get it in. It's not killer pain, but it's not nice. And I wasn't in the best space.

Finally she said, "Okay, I'll go get the doctor." And I thought—no disrespect to any doctors—but I thought, *now I'm really in trouble.* Because the nurses are the ones who do it all the time, not the doctors. So she went and grabbed some doctor walking by. I didn't even know the guy. He comes in, and it's the same thing—poke, poke, poke. A little tear came down, because I was being a good girl, but it really did hurt. And he goes, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

At the time, I didn't think, "Oh, that'll make a good story." But it has. I've gotten much more use out of it than those couple of minutes of pain.

But that level of denial—I really could actually understand it. His intention was not to hurt. He wasn't being cruel. That's where you can see that stabbing someone could come from many different intentions. His intention was trying to help. And trying to help, and seeing that you can't control the result and you're hurting someone—that's hard to deal with sometimes. We want it all to be nice. We want it all to be good. We want our good intentions to manifest. But it's not so clear-cut. Life isn't like that. It's ambiguous.

This is where compassion really needs the wisdom of equanimity. The vastness of emptiness. We can drown in our own suffering. Then try just reading the newspapers on a bad day and you think, *I can't bear that.* I go through periods where I listen to the news every day, and on some days it feels like I'm drowning. I can't possibly open to this.

That's when—and just being here in your own stuff when it's really strong—that's when the compassion is touching the suffering, but you're getting sucked in, drowning in it. It's too much. It's overwhelming. And there's still the me, the *me* in there. This isn't a judgment.

It's just seeing that the compassion isn't balanced at this moment by the wisdom of equanimity.

Equanimity functions in many ways—there's the vastness of no particular self, the recognition that it's all coming and going and that we can't control outcomes. But equanimity too can fall out of balance. It's not exactly denial, but more like a delusion, what's sometimes called falling into emptiness.

You know those times where there really is a sense, when you're sitting or walking, that everything's just coming and going, coming and going. Nothing lasts. Nothing seems more important than anything else. And you think, out of this, how would you act? What difference does anything make? In this place, nothing really makes a difference. And then that's the place where we find the impulse to act disappearing—falling into emptiness. It can turn into a long period of delusion. It's not our main problem, but it can happen.

Nyoshul Khenpo, the teacher Guy spoke about the other night, warned about this. The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood emptiness or sunyata, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, obscured by concepts. "Everything's empty." Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those people who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness." Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do.

Don't misunderstand this. You can hear the difference when we say "there's nothing to do, nothing to have, nothing to be" and that comes from real wisdom in the moment—there's a natural response if there's something to do. But we can sort of know it intellectually and sort of get lost in the ideas. Somebody comes, somebody's suffering. "There's nothing to have, nothing to do, nothing to be." Disconnect. So that's when wisdom needs to be balanced with compassion. This is why they really, together, are the strength of awakening.

I'm not saying it's easy. And in some ways what it really calls from us is what I think everyone here already has, or you wouldn't be on this path, you wouldn't have been doing so much practice in so many different ways, you wouldn't still be here. But it's really about tuning into your deep aspiration, a commitment really, tuning in over and over and committing ourselves over and over to whatever form the aspiration takes—whether it's a commitment to awakening or to compassion or to integrity or honesty or wisdom, whatever form it takes for you.

We need to sometimes consciously call on it, because the denial system and the overwhelming capacity of so much pain and suffering, so much in this world—and so much of it clearly needless—make it so easy, from what seem like the best intentions, to engage in action. And there's so much, you know, it's endless what any of us could do that really starts from the sincere intention to help, to serve, to come from wisdom, to cultivate love, whatever it is for you. There are a million different ways.

But if we can't keep coming back to staying in touch with that deep inner intention, springing from wisdom, springing from non-self-cherishing, then however wonderful the things we do, it starts to be that the good intention is from the outside in rather than from the inside out. And it starts to get a little off, a little twisted. This is really where the Buddhist emphasis on the purity of intention matters—it starts from the inside.

We all know stories about peace marches where people are marching for peace and the thing turns violent. Where it gets so lost in frustration at people being clearly vindictive, harmful, angry, and the only way we can think to affect change is with anger, with hatred. It's kind of sad that sometimes the main way we know to call up energy is through greed or anger. Sometimes people have said to me, "If I give up greed, what am I going to do, just sit in my room the rest of my life?" But that's the thing to learn. Action can come from other intentions. Real compassion is a great source of action and courage when it comes from the inside out, from not just an idea but from our understanding. When understanding supports compassion, it's so transformative.

But this is really, I think, the koan part, the part that's the whole practice of a lifetime for me. The world is so complex, so ambiguous. Even coming from the inside out, even if we can really get in touch with the depth of our wisdom and motivation, it doesn't mean there's any guarantee that our actions are going to affect the result we want. Can we still take refuge in the depth of our understanding and our commitment to nonharming or compassion? It gets really hard, doesn't it? To trust enough to keep coming back to that.

And then there are times when it's just ambiguous and you don't have all the information. You don't have all the information, and it's so painful.

You just might want to shrink away. How do you stay open in that?

Have you ever had to be the medical proxy for somebody who can't make decisions for themselves, and you have to decide whether the doctor should do this intervention or not? Keep them alive or not? And believe me, whatever things they said to do, something different always comes up. You make the best decision you can. You think, "Well,

they would want this to happen," and you do it. And then there's so much suffering that comes from that which you couldn't have known. You think, "My decision put them through these extra three weeks of this suffering."

Can we stay open in that without blame, without judgment, and without needing to say, "It's too much. I don't want to be here"? It's not personal. But we can't control the results of anything. And we don't have all the information a lot of the time.

Can we make a resolve, over and over? Ajahn Sumedho—I was on a retreat here last summer, and he was talking, maybe to the teachers afterward—and he talks so much about having total confidence in awareness. Just trust in this thing. That's his confidence in awareness: awareness can be with anything.

Then he was talking about a really difficult period at his monastery at Amaravati, not so long ago, maybe a few years before. He's the head of the monastery, so he was coming under a lot of criticism. They were having long meetings. It was just one of those long, organizational, really painful periods. And he was getting all the blame.

He said, "I hate being blamed. My personality hated it. I'm thinking, I'm trying to do the best I can. Don't you get that? And everyone's hating me." He was really starting to get caught, he said. And then he stopped. After this had been going on for weeks, months, he said, "I just stopped and I saw I was really getting sucked back into fighting it, resisting it, blame. I thought, I just have to make a determination—an absolute determination—to trust awareness."

This is not an idea, but a deep, heartfelt intention to really trust it, even when you're doing the best you can and everything's going to hell and everybody's blaming you and you know you're just trying to come from wisdom and compassion. Even then, can we take that deep refuge? For him, it's trusting awareness. For each of you, it might be something else. But to keep trusting, to have confidence in the truth of how things really are, to spring from that, and not to get so sidelined into thinking, "The way I want it to be isn't happening, so this must not work. Let me try something else."

For me, it calls up everything, and I fail in it a lot of the time. That's why I get so inspired by people who can model that for me.

One, of course, is James Lawson, who has been a Christian minister for many years but was also a very strong leader in the civil rights movement along with Dr. King. Before the civil rights movement, in the early fifties, he was very deeply committed to nonviolence, and he was a conscientious objector in the Korean War. Because he was a

minister, he could have been excused from going to jail. But he said, "No. If other people have to go to jail, I will too." So he went to jail for it. After that, he went to India—Gandhi was dead by then, but he studied there.

This is the point I want to make: afterward, he became one of the teachers of the civil rights movement, teaching how to carry out all the really powerful demonstrations and civil disobedience from a deep understanding of nonviolence—which is, as Martin Luther King said, not just not being overtly violent, but not letting yourself hate.

Lawson said, "When I was in jail, I discovered a strength and power in me to live out of my own conscience." That's really what I'm talking about. How do we find that strength and power in ourselves to live out of our own conscience? And it leads not to being a doormat, but to incredible acts of courage. It doesn't always get what you want, but it really can bring out that inspiration, that sense of possibility in other people.

And Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest in Burma for going on seventeen years now—she's a very potent symbol in Burma of the democratic movement.

People really love her – all normal people love her – but they can't even say her name. But she stands for nonviolence. And she says over and over, "My purpose is to purify the mind and heart." She said, "I never meant to become the leader of the democratic movement in Burma. I just try to do whatever's right in the name of love or in the name of justice." She says the motivation is its own reward.

You can't say that what's actually happening is good, or that it even looks like it's going in a good direction. But out of this place of commitment to what seemed true and just, and purifying her own heart, she's been willing to stay. She could leave the country at any time – she could just never go back. So she's been willing to stay there while her husband, who was English, died of cancer, while her two adolescent sons have grown up. She really has no contact – she's really under house arrest. But she knows in some way that she's the heart of inspiration to so many people. And she really is.

One year I was teaching up in Chazwa, in this monastery up in North Sagaing. We visited some little nunneries nearby. We went into one where we often go – it's a poor little one, and they have a little outside patio. Then they took us upstairs in their crummy little building. They have a room where they roll up their mats in the day, and maybe all fifteen nuns sleep there at night. Very crummy, falling-down wood. They took us around, and they had this tiny, crummy little bookcase with the doors closed. They opened it up, pushed aside some books, and whispered, "Look." They had a picture of

Suu Kyi, of Daw Suu Kyi. And they were so proud – just these little, almost uneducated nuns. They had to hide it like that, but they were so proud of it, so happy. It's like that with everybody.

So she knows it in some way. But she's not saying, "Oh, I'm the leader." And also, it's not, "It's not working, so I'm out of here." It's finding that sense of deep commitment from wisdom and compassion. Not a doormat. But just knowing that who we are and how we act has an effect, whatever the actual thing that happens is.

And even in very simple ways – I'm not saying we need to be Martin Luther King or James Lawson or Aung San Suu Kyi. Just little actions. All our actions, where we're coming from, has an effect.

I heard this on the radio – John Sununu, who was the chief of staff to the first President Bush. He was talking on the BBC about presidential transition after the last election, choosing team members, and how important it is to choose team members. About foreign policy, he said people may think that the work and the interaction in the State Department and with foreign diplomats is all based on the greater vision. But really what it comes down to is personal interaction. That's the driving force. So it's really important who you get on the team.

And that does matter. It's like the world is just people. Where people come from ends up showing up in what they do, how we act over the long term.

So in terms of cultivation, mindfulness is our strongest tool. It's our strongest reliance, absolutely, because moment after moment of awareness opens us to see the truth clearly. No question about that. But also, just small, simple acts have a huge effect for us. Just the willingness to have this commitment to our deepest aspiration, and to just do a small act of kindness, just a small act of non-hatred towards ourselves, towards others. Either way, you see that we're not separate.

So I think I'll just end with a story that I heard on the radio – one of these people giving their stories.

And it's from a prisoner who'd been in jail for 20 years, convicted of second-degree murder in 1985. He's saying, "Caring makes us human."

I won't read the whole thing, but he's talking about how a small, scruffy cat showed up in the prison yard one day. "I was one of the first to go and pet it. I had not touched a cat or a dog in over twenty years. I spent at least twenty minutes crouched down behind the dumpster as the cat rolled around and luxuriated beneath my attention. What he was expressing outwardly, I was feeling inwardly. It was an amazing piece of grace

to feel him under my hand and know that I was enriching the life of another creature with something as simple as my care. I believe that caring for something or someone in need is what makes us human.

"Over the next few days, I watched other prisoners responding to the cat. Every yard period, a group of prisoners gathered there. They stood around talking and taking turns petting the cat. These were guys you wouldn't usually find talking to each other. I even saw sometimes an officer in the group—not chasing people away, but just watching and seeming to enjoy it along with the prisoners. Bowls of milk and water appeared, along with bread. The cat was obviously a stray and in bad shape. One prisoner brought out his small blunt-tipped scissors and trimmed burrs and matted fur from his coat. People said that cat came to the right place—he's getting treated like a king.

"This was true. But as I watched, I was also thinking about what the cat was doing for us. There's a lot of talk about what's wrong with prisons in America—we need more programs, more psychologists, treatment of various kinds. I think what we really need is a chance to practice kindness ourselves. Not receive it, but give it. After more than two decades here, I know that kindness is not a value that's encouraged. It's often seen as weakness. The culture instead encourages keeping your head down, minding your own business, and never letting yourself be vulnerable.

"For a few days, a raggedy cat disrupted this code of prison culture. They've taken him away now, hopefully to a decent home. But it did my heart good to see the effect he had on me and the men here. Simply by saying, 'I need some help here,' he did something important for us. He needed us. We need to be needed. I believe we all do."

Ashanti Davis said, "When I do something for the sake of another, no feeling of conceit or amazement arises. It's as if having fed myself. I look for nothing in return."

Let's sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 46

What If... Shifting the Paradigm

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this opening retreat talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to question deeply held assumptions about the nature of suffering and freedom. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "I teach suffering and its end," she suggests that liberation isn't about escaping to a different world where suffering doesn't exist, but rather about shifting the paradigm of how we understand ourselves.*
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> *Wilson explores the Dhammapada verses on mind as the forerunner of all states, reframing the concepts of "pure" and "impure" mind without judgment—simply as moments colored or uncolored by greed, hatred, and delusion. She poses a radical question: What if the natural peace and ease we occasionally notice—during a simple cup of tea or an unremarkable step in walking meditation—is actually our baseline state, while our habitual patterns of craving and aversion are the aberrations?*
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> *Through teachings from Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Chah, and reflections on Gandhi's concept of satyāgraha (truth force), Wilson illuminates how mindfulness practice is really about the quality of heart and mind meeting experience, not about the experiences themselves. She emphasizes that awareness practice is an active, engaged nonviolence toward our own experience—meeting each moment with honest, non-judging interest rather than resistance or grasping. This quality of open investigation, she suggests, is where wisdom can reveal itself and where true refuge is found.*

You've all seemed really settled, and it's been remarkably quiet and still in the hall, which is unusual for the first day of a retreat. Not that we expect it to stay that way—it doesn't need to stay that way. But I'm just commenting and appreciating all of your sincere commitment in being here. I know sometimes the first day can be a little long, and sometimes by the first evening you can be a little tired. That's okay. It's just normal.

I want to talk a little tonight about meditation practice. The Buddha famously said—I'm sure you will have heard this—"I teach suffering and its end." I used to wonder, well, why does he have to teach suffering? That part seems obvious. The ending, of course, we do want. We sign up for that.

But really, the angle I want to explore tonight is the sense that what he was talking about, and what our whole spiritual path is about, isn't about getting to somewhere else where suffering is not—changing our circumstances, getting to a different world, basic-

ally. That doesn't happen. If you look at the Buddha's life, even after he was awakened, he couldn't stop wars. He couldn't stop death. He couldn't stop his kinsmen from fighting. He couldn't even stop one of his cousins, a monk who was jealous, from trying to kill him. His awakening didn't stop all the rotten stuff that goes on in the world.

Teaching suffering and its end is about shifting the paradigm of how we understand ourselves in the world, so that we recognize what suffering actually is, how it's created, and how it comes to an end. Perhaps it's a different kind of suffering and a different idea of freedom than we might have assumed from our normal context.

The Buddha said over and over that suffering and its end arises and ceases in our mind, in this mind and body, nowhere else. So our practice of understanding, of freeing the heart, isn't specifically about reorganizing structures in the world. Although when we think and speak and act from clarity, from compassion, then the way we interact and engage will have the effect of changing structures. We won't be feeding the normal paradigm.

There are two famous stanzas: "All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. Just as the wheel of the ox cart follows the hoof print of the animal that draws it, so suffering will surely follow when we speak or act impulsively from an impure state of mind. All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. As surely as our shadow never leaves us, so well-being will follow when we speak or act with a pure state of mind."

Mind is the forerunner of all things. This is really a powerful possible realigning of the way we may consciously or unconsciously think we understand ourselves in the world, and what brings us happiness and what brings us suffering. Our meditation practice here is the work of the mind.

These words "pure" and "impure"—they're not usually a big hit in our culture, to talk about having a pure mind or an impure mind. Our habit is to jump on these words, just like "good" or "bad" or "good" or "evil," with a kind of judgment, a criticalness, a self-judgment. If we think "I have an impure mind," already there's something a little disgusting, a little recoil. Or if "I have a pure mind," it has some quality of—I don't know—Ivory Soap, 99 and 44/100 percent pure or something. Although I used to wonder as a kid, pure what?

I want to redefine what he's talking about when he speaks of acting with an impure mind or heart. Take away negativity or judgment and bring in, in listening to this, just the quality of interest. Oh, what does that mean, pure and impure? How does that function to cause suffering or happiness? That quality of interest without judging is the seed of awakening, is the seed of our whole practice.

When he talks about speaking and acting with an impure mind, it's very straightforward. It's when our thoughts, our speech, our actions, our states of mind are motivated by greed; by its reverse, negativity, which could be hatred, fear, aversion—that whole range; or by confusion, delusion, basic denial—just getting everything all wrong. We're acting as if it's this way, but it's really that way.

Or the deepest level of delusion, confusion, is thinking that it's all about me. That's all it means. And it's not like we're bad if we're doing that—it's just a habit of all our minds. But it's not always present.

So what if our whole meditation practice is really about cultivating, recognizing, coming to trust, almost taking refuge in—as we talked about the refuges last night—this so-called pure heart-mind? Which is simply a moment of awareness, of consciousness, of wakefulness, when our awareness, our consciousness, the heart and mind is not colored by one of these difficult states. That's all. That's all.

So what if the real thrust of our meditation practice is not to create some kind of pure state of mind, but rather to actually recognize that this is the baseline—the more natural, normal state of heart and mind? Innate purity, goodness. What if we could learn to recognize and trust that, and also learn to see how greed, hatred, self-judgment, and confusion arise based on misperception, based on misrecognition of experience, and then telling ourselves stories or having views of what life is about that don't match the way things actually are?

So what if the real truth, and our more natural self—not self, okay, that's the bad word in Buddhism—but our more natural sense of being is actually the pure heart and mind, the mind that's free of craving, of clinging, of aversion, of self-judgment? And so in some way, what if our work in practice isn't to create some other amazing world and get rid of all this gunk, but rather to recognize—along with recognizing the suffering, "I teach suffering and its end"—all the moments, because experience is only moments, all the moments when this pure mind and heart is manifesting, is recognizable, when we can learn to trust it, to feel it?

I'm pointing out that it's little moments, little moments that we tend to overlook so easily because they get hidden by the intensity of something pleasant or the intensity of how unhappy we feel—or just intensity, period. Those little moments when you're just having a cup of tea and there's nothing special, but there's a sense of peace or contentment or ease. Or you can pick a word. It could be happiness. It doesn't have to be happiness. It doesn't have to be joy. It could be joy. It could be peace. It could be calm. It could be just a simple sense of is-ness. It's like this. In that moment, you're not analyzing it. There's no leaning into the future or connecting to the past. There's no big story about, "This is the most amazing cup of tea I've ever had." Then it's not like that anymore, right?

Or you're just taking a step in the walking meditation. Maybe the last step you were bored out of your mind. Maybe the next step you're saying, "Get me out of here." But this step is just a step. There's just space, nothing created around it.

Notice those moments. We all experience many of them in a day. Natural peace and ease of the heart and mind.

And then the habits—the habits, which we tend to take more for granted, think they're the baseline—is to jump in. "Oh, natural peace and ease of mind and body. Now I've got it. How can I keep it? How can I have this step again? How can I have this tea again?" Or, "Oh, now it's gone. Oh, I blew it. That was just a fluke." And of course, this one—which one do you trust? I mean, bottom line, which one do we really think is me?

The Buddha also said that his teachings go against the stream of society, like swimming upstream against the natural current—even in his time. So same here. In some ways, any kind of profound awakening path, not just Buddha's teaching, tends to run against a society of consumerism, a society of greed, a society of having and doing and being and comparing and achieving.

And I'm sure most of you know, coming on a retreat—maybe your family and friends have gotten used to it if you've done it a lot—but the first time, it's rare that the people we know go, "Great!" unless they've been doing it and they're the ones dragging you. But if your friends and family haven't been, and you say, "I'm going on a week of silence"—"What?" I was telling someone, a friend's mother, last year, and she goes, "Silence? You mean like... you don't watch TV in the evening?"

You really don't talk the whole time? It simply does not compute.

So in that way, retreat practice obviously runs against the culture. And that's just the retreat form itself. But on a more subtle, yet actually much more profound level, our path of exploration, of interest, of awakening, is helping us step outside or move up-

stream against the habits of our own mind and heart, our own assumptions. Not even our conscious ways of thinking, but the assumptions themselves—how we perceive ourselves in the world.

This is part of what made the Buddha so brilliant: he understood that how we perceive something leads to how we think about it. How we think about it constructs the views we have of the world and what makes sense. And often we don't even realize we have those views. We just think that's how it is.

So our awareness practice, our mindfulness practice—instead of just running along with the stream of our views, the way it's set up with the sitting, the walking, just noticing what's happening every moment—gives us a structure to simply not be carried away by the views. It's almost like you step to the side and look: How's the mind working right now? What's causing discontent? What's causing dissatisfaction? What does this experience of non-dissatisfaction, non-clinging feel like?

I actually love this sense of just recognizing how perceptions and explanations define our worldview while we don't realize how we're carried along. I'll give you a recent example that I found amusing.

I was in Burma in January with some friends. We were doing different things—offering food and supplies to different villages in different places. This was organized from a monastery, very traditional Burmese Buddhist worldview. Two of the friends I was with were European and American women who are nuns over there.

So we took a lot of pictures. One of the formal ways generosity is offered is when someone's offering and there's a receiving. It's a very formal, happy occasion, and there's always a photo. We have like a million photos.

One of my friends who's been a nun there for seventeen years, a European woman, was putting some photos from her camera onto the computer. On some of the photos—on different people's skirts or in certain situations—there were these perfectly round, bright, shiny circles. They looked like circles of light all over.

She looks at them, and really being immersed in the classical Buddhist worldview, which talks about different realms of existence and what we might call angels—*devas* is the word in the Pali language, beings living in more ethereal, happy realms—she right away goes, "These are devas. These are the manifestation of devas." Which I would never have thought.

Then my other friend, who's also a nun there but is a scientist—she has a PhD, she's a biologist with a very scientific mind—she immediately goes, "That is some moisture that has gotten caught in the lens and is having this effect. That's what it is." Boom.

I thought that was great. I mean, who knows? I don't know. I thought, well, it'll be interesting when we see from another camera.

When I got home and put some photos from my camera on my computer—different camera, different computer, similar pictures of the same time and place but different pictures—mine also had bright circles, the same type, but not exactly in the same places.

Who knows? Maybe it's devas.

The point isn't whether it is or it isn't. What I love about that is the quality of the open mind and heart: Well, what if? Who knows? When we know how things are—boom—the mind and heart snap shut. When we don't know, but we're interested, we're present without bringing along assumptions. That's when the quality of interest and wakefulness and the steadiness of being present with that quality of openness—who knows, but what's here now?—that's when the truth can reveal itself, over and over.

I love those moments. Who knows? Let the mind open.

So in terms of the deep-rooted habits that the Buddha talks about—this greed, this hatred, this confusion—again, looking at what if we shift the paradigm of what we assume. I won't even say believe, because for most of us it's beyond belief. We don't even know that this is how it is.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American man who's been a Theravada Buddhist monk for many years, is one of perhaps the two foremost translators presently alive now of the Pali language Buddhist texts into English. He says this: "Remember that the Buddhist teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes. After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

Does that sound at all familiar to anybody? You might think, well, what's wrong with a desire to enjoy pleasure? Given a choice, what's wrong with wanting to avoid pain? And then to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around ourselves—we might fudge on that one a little bit. We might be able to say, yeah, maybe that's not so good. But look, just watch your thoughts over the days. With honesty, without judgment, how much of it is me at the center and everything going on? It's all about me.

So without jumping into right or wrong, Bhikkhu Bodhi is saying these are our assumptions, our attitudes. Then he goes on: "When one's personal experience of dissatisfaction, of suffering, becomes vivid enough"—I like that, vivid enough, meaning you can't ignore it anymore—"it may induce one to become disenchanted by these habits and then to begin to place our trust in the way the Buddha talks about reality as guidelines for liberation."

But until we actually even just begin to get a glimmer that maybe these responses, these reactions to life, maybe these strategies aren't working—first of all, we have to even recognize that's a strategy that's going on, that that's not just the obvious and only way to act. As long as we really deeply, beyond belief, but know that happiness rests on getting as much pleasant experience as possible, then that's going to be what rules our life. And as long as we deeply believe that the way to end unhappiness is to be separated from anything that's unpleasant—which we know is impossible, but that doesn't stop us from trying. As long as we somehow believe that suffering means being together with that which we don't like, and the ending of suffering means that doesn't have to happen anymore. As long as our idea of freedom and liberation is floating on white clouds and everything's pleasant and rose-scented in the air, if you like rose scent, then that's going to be the underlying worldview that guides not only our choices and decisions, but our attitudes in our mind. It's going to guide how we do our meditation practice. It's going to guide everything.

And until we learn how to not hate it—that's just the same thing, right? Not tell yourself you're stupid, because that's just the same thing—until we learn how to step outside, step back and just have a look: Is this working or not? Is this present or not? A pleasant experience comes, I start wanting it—does that work or not for happiness? With interest, not with judging. Until we start to look that way, we're never going to be able to see what's really bringing ease and peace. We'll never even be able to recognize ease and peace.

Because another thing about these little moments of ease and peace—for many of us, when we're not quite present with them, they're just kind of boring. Calm. "I came for some juice! I mean, enlightenment, satori—it's supposed to be this big shakti kind of hit, not just smelling my tea. Give me a break. Not lift my foot, put it down. Yeah, that sounds really nice, but I want some juice. I want to be enlightened. It should confirm what a spiritual person I am. Not just this simple, nothing-special moment of non-clinging."

So learning to recognize that. But as long as we're still caught in not seeing that, the mind's idea of happiness is pleasure, intensity. And we're not going to recognize another possibility.

And it was just about nonviolence as a political way of relating in different periods in history. But the most interesting part that I want to bring up here was really in the introduction, part the Dalai Lama and part the writer.

Just the word itself—nonviolence—similar to *ahimsa* in the Sanskrit or Hindi. *Himsa* is the same as violence. So nonviolence is really just a negation of the word violence. The book was about how nonviolence can be a profound and engaged, really radical way of relating—very alive. But the word "nonviolence" doesn't convey that. It just conveys a kind of abnegation of violence. So when we hear "nonviolence," what our mind goes to is violence. Violence is kind of like the real thing, and nonviolence is when this real thing happens not to be there.

How powerful words are. How they reflect the way our mind works. And so he gives another example. He said, what if, in English, there was no word for war? The only word for war was "non-peace." You see what I mean? It really, really changes things. We don't even understand the levels of assumptions we're making in the way that we experience ourselves in the world. So if peace is the norm, war is the aberrant experience. It still happens—it's not saying it doesn't happen.

Turning this inward, the idea of nonviolence not as just a negation of violence, but as an active, proactive way of being. What if, in our experience, when we talk about suffering, when we talk about greed, hatred, our discontent, our dissatisfaction, our self-judgment—what if that's not the bottom line? What if that's the aberrant way of being? What if the natural peace and ease, whether it's non-clinging or calm, the simple isness of things without needing to believe all the stories and ramifications—they come, they're thoughts, they're fine—but what if this natural peace and ease is actually the real thing? And the habits of chasing after the pleasant, getting really engaged in pushing away the unpleasant, and all the confusion and delusion around "it's about me"—what if these are mistaken habits based on misperceiving our experience, misrecognizing things over and over and over?

That's a question I posit, and that's kind of a question that's behind our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice. If we start and we just practice thinking, "I'm going to sit, I'm going to be with the breath, I'm going to get to the breath, I'm going to hold on to the breath, I'm going to get more and more breaths so I can do better and better, and then I'm going to get to the state of concentration or the state of no-self, and I'm going to

understand"—because it's like this, it's already snapped shut, right? We already know it's the moisture on the lens. We already know what's happiness, what's suffering. I've got to get from suffering to happiness, and this is how I do it.

What if we don't know? What if we bring that quality of really tender, wakeful interest to just this moment of mind and body and see how it opens up, what happens? And this moment, and this moment. When we feel that there's suffering, instead of going, "Oh no, bad, I've got to do this, what did they say?"—what does it feel like right now? What's the suffering? When it feels easeful, what is this like? What's happening in the mind and body right now?

So our path is really to rediscover, to look in another way—both by recognizing the habits, the reactions, how they arise, how they strengthen, how they work, and also recognizing and seeing if we can just allow our conscious thinking mind to let in the moments when these habits aren't present. Not that they're in the background, buried somewhere deep inside and you just don't notice them right now and it feels kind of good but you're fooling yourself and they'll come back. No. They're not present. Sometimes this is true. You need to really look and notice that.

So our meditation really is not about what's happening. It really isn't. It's about the quality of the heart and mind that's meeting whatever's happening right now. That's really the difference. Our tendency so much, in terms of self-confirmation, in terms of achievement, just in terms of doing—we only know how to do stuff by me doing it, right? I do this and X happens.

That's just what we know. And so the habits of going after the pleasant and really judging pleasant as good—I'm not saying pleasant is bad. I'm also not saying it's good. It just is pleasant, that's all. Unpleasant doesn't have to be bad or good. Just unpleasant.

Can we even open to the possibility that we're sitting here and your back's really hurting and your mind's all over the place and you're feeling grumpy, and it's just what it is? Just fine. That even then, without creating anything around it, it's just this. Grumpy mind is like this. Really, it's possible. It's still grumpy mind—don't get me wrong. It's not "grumpy mind is like this" with the angels singing. Grumpy mind is grumpy mind. But it doesn't have to go into all the elaboration: "I've got to get rid of it." Then you've magnified it a hundred times.

Grumpy mind is like this. That's shifting the paradigm. That's stepping out of the habit. Just noticing, oh, look what happens. Grumpy mind is like this. It can be with unpleasant. And that's not the source of the suffering. The relationship of hating, of fearing, of trying to change, of violence—really violence to ourselves—is the source of suffering.

So nonviolence, as you're saying, is not like a passive negation of "okay, whatever." That's not nonviolence. That's passive giving up. But nonviolence is really that quality of, "Oh, this is what's happening." You don't hate it. You don't hold onto it. But you're really present for it.

And this is a trick for us because so many of us are so used to relating to the object—whether it's a material object or the experience that's happening—as the source of pleasure or suffering. Somebody's making a noise. Somebody's making us feel good. "You're making me angry," that kind of thing. We're so used to that, that we have to retrain ourselves. That's really what the discipline of meditation is about: retraining ourselves to get more interested in what's going on in the mind that's observing—the pure heart, the impure heart.

Ajahn Chah, who was a great Thai monk and meditation teacher, said in one of his books: "When I was a young monk just starting to practice, I would sit in meditation and sounds would disturb me. I thought to myself, what can I do to make my mind peaceful? So I took some beeswax and stuffed my ears with it till I couldn't hear anything at all. All that remained was a humming sound. I thought that would be peaceful, but no. All that thinking and confusion didn't arise in the ears after all. It arose at the mind. That's the place to search for peace."

So that's what we're really learning. Not this external thing or that external thing. Search in the mind. Search for suffering. Search for the end of suffering. And the only way we can search is when there's that quality of open interest without knowing already what we're going to find. If we know what we're going to find, the search is dead. There's no space for wisdom to arise.

One of my Burmese teachers, whom I just saw when I was there, had what you might call his teaching theme at the moment. He asked me, "What's the difference between someone who practices awareness and someone who doesn't?" I said, "I don't know, what?" He said a practitioner meets every experience, every object, everything that's happening with interest as a chance to learn. And a non-practitioner responds or reacts to every situation or object with either greed or aversion or confusion. Sometimes we're one and sometimes we're the other. It's not about trying to be perfect.

But I know it's really true for myself that even when the most difficult situations are going on—and I just want to point out again, meditation practice or spiritual life doesn't fix the world. It doesn't stop people we love from getting sick and dying. It doesn't stop relationships from breaking up. It clearly doesn't stop war. It doesn't make everything turn out okay in that kind of way.

But it really does mean that even in the most difficult circumstances, when I notice in my mind that I'm really caught, fighting, struggling, I look and I see there's fear, there's aversion, there's a sense that this shouldn't be happening. Or on a deeper level, there's this feeling that I ought to be able to make it better—especially if it's somebody else you're trying to help. I ought to be able to make it better. As if we're in control. We were just talking about this today in different situations of working with family members or people in prison. We see people struggling, and we think we ought to be able to help. And if difficult things happen or they fall back into old habits, somehow we weren't good enough. Talk about me being the center of everything!

But anyway, what I see when there's suffering is that. But in that same difficult situation, when I meet it with "Oh, what's going on now?"—I might actually feel more tenderness in my heart. I might feel the other person's pain in a closer, more intimate way. It's more a quality of compassion, really, rather than this urgent feeling of "I've got to fix it so I don't feel it." The sense of suffering, of something wrong, the sense of dissonance is gone. There's just the sense of what's happening now. What can we see in this, what can we learn in this—for ourselves and for how to be of more benefit to others as well. But that's not coming out of "me-ness"; it's coming out of an openness to learn. It's really a vastly different way of meeting experience, meeting our life. That's really active nonviolence.

Speaking of nonviolence, they say Gandhi invented a word for his whole nonviolent way of political protest against the English: satyagraha. It never really caught on. We all remember Gandhi and what he did, but his word didn't really catch on. Satya means truth, and they say the basic translation of satyagraha is "truth force" or "holding to the truth." That really is the quality of nonviolence as well—the quality of interest and wakefulness that mindfulness practices. It's truth force, holding to the truth. Not that we know the truth, but that willingness to have that non-judging interest and to be totally honest about whatever's arising. Not to make me look good, or to prove that I'm useless, or to somehow hope that we're getting somewhere. Not "Oh my god, this again. I can't believe how much crap." Not "No, this isn't really happening."

Have you ever noticed? My mind does that. I love to look at denial. Something will come up—I noticed this, I think, last week. I was angry a little bit. Not huge anger; you can't pretend that. Well, maybe you can, but it's harder to pretend it's not happening. I was a little angry at someone. I noticed anger in my mind because I'm used to really watching my mind. But then: "I'm not really angry." And the mind wanted to believe that. "No, it's really fine. I'm not angry." And just go on. It's as if that's a habit. As if we can pretend we're not angry, or we're not jealous, or we're not lonely, or we're not really wanting this thing to happen.

Do you ever sit in meditation, if you've been meditating much before, and it's calm? You're being with the breath, for example, or changing experience, whatever. And it's going well, whatever we're calling well at the time.

And the mind has a little thought. And I keep going. No, I'm not thinking that. Oh no, I don't want this. I'm really just accepting that it comes and goes. Have you ever noticed that? I mean, we can't kid ourselves, of course, because if the clinging is there when the thing goes, you know the clinging is there, because you suffer. It really doesn't work. But it's such a trip to see how we do this.

So this year, I made a kind of resolution. I just want to really, really open to total honesty in my mind. Whatever's arising, just see it. That's the path of freedom. Whatever it is—oh, that's what it is. It's okay. It's really much more okay than "Oh no, that's not happening," and then you get into the whole dance. Oh, that's despair. Feels like this. Okay. And you know, it really is okay. That shift of paradigm.

So this is really what our practice is. Bankei, who was a seventeenth-century Japanese Zen master, said, "If you don't set yourself into confrontation with things, into confrontation with experience, then your primary being reveals itself in its true form."

When we talk about meditation as being the work of the mind, or purifying the mind, or recognizing the pure mind, sometimes we can recognize those moments of purity. Often, though, we're recognizing and exploring how the confusion is triggered and takes root—how wanting or aversion or "it's all about me" springs up in relationship to a particular experience, and how thoughts feed it and strengthen it. This is fascinating. It's great to explore. It's really interesting.

But what it's based on is the description of mind or heart itself. This is Andrew Olendzki's description—he's the executive director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and he's a Pali scholar. I like the way he puts things. He said, in Buddhism, very simple definition: the mind is not a subject. The mind is not some solid-state object that's sitting here like a lump, staying the same while things come and go within it. It

feels like that, doesn't it? We're watching, and the breath comes and goes, and wanting comes and goes. But it's not. It's not something. It's not a subject that has objects as content. Rather, the mind is the activity or the process of cognizing a flow of events.

The mind is an activity. The cognizant—just that moment of knowing. There's hearing, right? The mind is just that moment of knowing hearing. And all the mental states, the qualities that come along in that moment of knowing hearing—it's an activity. It's arising and passing in every moment. It's alive. It's constantly moving.

That is maybe unsettling to our ideas of wanting stability. But that's what makes a moment of freedom possible. That's what means we can be completely caught in some stupid wanting this or disliking that or whatever, and the next moment—ah, it's just this. It's always just that close, because the mind is a constant activity.

So the way it works is this: in a moment like that, the moment of cognizing arises—there's hearing—and whatever other qualities, mental states, factors are going on at the same time color that recognition, color that perception, and lead to how we think and act.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "When the sense organs encounter an object"—like ear and that sound, that's hearing—"the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness." From then on, as your mind reacts to that object, reacts to that sound, for example, it's influenced by all the accumulated habits and past experiences. The whole process is entirely subjective.

So when your mind is full of anger, the world seems to be a hell realm. Have you noticed that? You can be in the most wonderful situation you've been waiting for for weeks, but you're filled with anger—you can't enjoy it. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, and whatever you do is coming from a place of non-greed, non-hatred, you experience everything as naturally pure.

Don't jump on yes or no, but see if you can just hold openness to explore that.

Or as Ajahn Chah says in his very practical, down-to-earth way—he was holding up a vase and he said, "Look at this vase, look at this cup. You think it's beautiful or it's ugly or whatever you think, but it is indifferent. It's you who are making yourself crazy. The vase is just the vase."

That's the quality of just a moment of arising mind colored by experience. That's why a sound can be neutral one moment, beautiful or nostalgic the next, and then drive you crazy and feel so unpleasant another moment. Different mind moments, different experience. It's a different mind.

This is what we're really learning to explore moment to moment in our practice here. We're talking about using the sensations of breath, or of body, or of hearing as a way to collect our attention—just to be able to have all the activity going on in any one mind moment calm down enough so that we even have the sense that we can actually notice there's a mind moment and that there are different qualities in that mind moment. Mostly we're just so engaged in the habits of hating and wanting, desiring and aversion.

But it's not that the breath or the body or hearing are somehow better objects. They're just tools to help calm the mind down. Then you notice each breath. The sensation of each breath is different if you're being with the breath. And the way the mind is being with the breath is different. And so the quality of noticing—when it's peaceful, notice the peacefulness in the mind, the mind that's being with the sensations of the breath and isn't wanting, isn't aversive.

Notice how when it starts to feel that little bit of "oh, it's getting better," and that little bit of leaning in—we often don't remember to turn around and look at what's happening in the mind. "Yeah, this is it. Now let me get closer. Let me get closer." And we don't recognize that wanting, that greed.

Greed is very seductive. It's like holding out a promise that if I follow this greed and get this thing, it's going to do it for me. And we get the thing or we don't get the thing. If we don't get the thing, we think, "That's why I'm not happy." We don't recognize the greed is the seducer. If we do get the thing, we're happy for a little while—and it's a lot littler of a while than we care to acknowledge. But then we didn't also see that the greed was the seducer. We believe what it's telling us. It's almost like the greed just finds another thing to want.

When greed's in the mind, it really colors our perception. The thing desired or the experience desired looks so much more wonderful, lovely, doesn't it? When you have a crush on somebody, don't they just look amazing—how they dress and how they walk? If you get them, then you find out that wasn't true. If you don't get them, eventually the crush dies and you look at them and think, "What was I thinking? What was that all about?" That was craving in the mind.

Aversion, hatred, fear—the same kind of seduction. You're sitting here, and someone's making a noise in the hall, and you're saying, "If they could only stop it, if they would only stop, my sitting would be better." And that's so believable, so believable. "Only if I could fix it all. Everything would be okay."

So our practice is to turn around and feel: "Oh, hatred in the mind feels like this. Wanting in the mind feels like this. 'I'm the most important thing in the universe'"—unfortunately, it doesn't usually come through that clearly—"feels like this."

But the mind that's noticing isn't judging any of these things. It's just interested. How does wanting work in the mind? How does it feel when it's present?

How is it when it's absent? Where's the suffering? How is aversion and hatred in the mind? How is self-judging in the mind? Oh, self-judging is like this. Sleepiness is like this.

That's how Ajahn Sumedho talks about it. It's like this. So that every moment—feeling of breath is like this, hearing is like this, hating being here is like this, wanting to go to sleep is like this.

And over the steadiness of this practice, we gradually, or less than gradually, begin to realize that our refuge isn't in what's happening. The refuge is in the awareness—that moment of interested, non-judging awareness itself. That's always available to us when we're not running away from experience or trying to hold on to experience. We learn to rest at ease in whatever arises.

It's the way Krishnamurti describes it: When you look totally, you give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself, just in a moment, just one moment—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You attend with complete self-abandonment, and then there's no room for fear, no contradiction, and therefore no conflict. Just this in a moment is the end of fear, the end of desire, the end of conflict. This complete self-abandonment in interested, kind, full attention. Just for a moment. Don't stretch it into the past, into the future, think you can't do it over time. Just right now. Pain in the back, boredom, tingling, hearing, breathing. We get lost in a story—fine, thinking. It's never further than this. It's always, always right here.

And so what develops is what Ajahn Sumedho calls a real confidence in this natural, interested, non-judging awareness. He calls it intuitive awareness, to distinguish it from thinking about things. But it's a natural confidence that develops. Just like I was saying—I'll be in the middle of some difficult situation and I'm struggling. And it's like, oh, what's happening? Despair. That's a movement, a shift of paradigm, from me and fixing it and wanting it pleasant to, oh, awareness. Awareness can hold anything. Awareness is always available. It's like this. That's the movement from suffering to the end of suffering.

Our job, in a way, is to recognize that, to trust it, and really learn to know it for ourselves. Don't believe anything I say—that won't do you any good anyway. And maybe I'm wrong. Look and see for yourself in any moment, in every moment. It doesn't matter what your experience is. It's always available.

I want to end with a little poem. To me, it gives the feeling of how this sense of isness and peace is available in any moment. It's by Mary Oliver, called "Snow Geese":

Oh, to love what is lovely and will not last. What a task to ask of anything or anyone. Yet it is ours, not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

One fall day, I heard above me and above the sting of the wind, a sound I did not know, and my look shot upward. It was a flock of snow geese, winging it faster than the ones we usually see, and being the color of snow, catching the sun, so they were in part at least golden.

I held my breath, as we do sometimes to stop time, when something wonderful has touched us, as with a match, which is lit and bright, but does not hurt in the common way, but delightfully, as if delight were the most serious thing you ever felt.

The geese flew on. I have never seen them again. Maybe I will, someday, somewhere. Maybe I won't. It doesn't matter. What matters is that when I saw them, I saw them as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

So that's our task—seeing through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

There's about thirty-five minutes or so for walking, and then at nine, the last sitting, which will be short. At that sitting, we'll also have some short chanting together—a loving-kindness chant in the Pali language, which is a lovely language for chanting. We'll have chanting sheets you can read along with. You don't have to chant if you'd prefer not to; you can simply listen. But it's a nice, energizing way to end the evening. And loving-kindness is never a bad thing to put into our minds and hearts. So I urge you to come.

CHAPTER 47

Shifting Paradigms

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to fundamentally shift their understanding of meditation practice. Drawing from the opening verses of the Dhammapada—"Mind is the forerunner of all states"—she illuminates how our habitual reactions of craving (taṇhā), aversion, and delusion (the 'impure mind') are not actually our natural state, but rather aberrations from an ever-present peace and ease.*
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> *Wilson challenges the common assumption that spiritual progress requires forceful effort to eliminate unwanted mental states. Instead, she suggests that the 'pure mind'—citta free from greed, hatred, and confusion—is always available in any moment we simply notice what's arising without judgment. She explains that cognition is not a static container holding experiences, but a momentary process of knowing that arises fresh in each instant, offering continuous opportunities to recognize awareness itself.*
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> *The practical guidance offered is deceptively simple yet radical: rather than focusing exclusively on meditation objects like the breath, notice the quality of mind that is aware. When difficulty arises—whether physical pain, restlessness, or the five hindrances (sense desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt)—the practice is to recognize "it's like this" with gentle, non-violent awareness. Wilson draws a parallel to Gandhi's concept of satyagraha (truth force), suggesting that this steady, non-judging presence is itself an expression of active non-violence that allows wisdom to arise naturally.*

to talk about what I call stepping out of samsara, just momentarily. But that's good—momentarily is good.

One of my current teachers likes to say all the time that meditation is the work of the mind. It seems obvious, but sometimes we forget. We get so caught up in trying to make things happen. By "work of the mind," he means, as the Dalai Lama says, that all happiness and suffering begins in the mind, in the heart. The word we're using, *citta*, for mind means both mind and heart in the Pali language. It's not a differentiation that's made.

His example makes this obvious: happiness and suffering begin and end in the mind. If you're in a really depressed space or you're in grief, you could be on the most lovely vacation of your life. You could be in a wonderful situation, and you're not really happy. You don't enjoy it. The external circumstances don't necessarily bring happiness.

And the reverse—again, this is obvious, but we forget it—when you're feeling balanced, feeling good, or you just fell in love and things are great, something difficult could come along and it doesn't fluster us the way it might at other times. We might notice that in passing, but we might not really quite remember or see the radical nature of this.

The text for the talk this evening is a short one that I'm sure most of you are familiar with: those first two verses from the Dhammapada, from the Buddha, saying, "Mind is the forerunner of all states." Other translations say, "Mind is the forerunner of all things. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind, and trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. Mind is the forerunner of all things, of all states. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable."

I actually think this is a really radical and profound statement, pointing to the real nature of what we are, what creates happiness, what creates suffering, what creates our whole idea of the world. I wanted to talk about that a little.

I deliberately chose a translation that used the words "impure" and "pure," which are not always words that, at least in this culture in the States, we really vibe to. We don't like to think of ourselves as impure. It brings along a certain negative, aversive quality. But in these terms, it's very specific.

Talking or acting with an impure mind simply means—not so simple, maybe—but what it means is a moment. Just a moment. Remember, don't stretch it out into past and future. Then it gets untenable, unbearable, overwhelming. We realize that it's always only just this moment. So we think or act with an impure mind in this moment—this simply means a moment of consciousness, of conscious knowing, that is colored by the qualities of craving, clinging, of aversion or fear. Hatred is the kind of shortcut term for that. And the bottom line: confusion, delusion—it's all about me.

When consciousness is colored by one or more of those qualities, and not recognized, it's as if our awareness is looking through greed-colored glasses, me-colored glasses, hatred-colored glasses, not recognizing that. So focused outward, through the greed, through the hatred, through the confusion, we're speaking or acting. And all it creates, basically, is trouble and confusion.

We don't always tend to get that. It feels so normal and natural. I hope it doesn't—I hope you're not agreeing with me. But in my experience, the reactions of desire, that clinging that says "I've got to have," of aversion to what's unpleasant, of the discontent

Rodney was speaking about—both of which are founded deeply in the sense of me. There is no desire or aversion without the sense of me in a moment. That can be so frequent, so familiar, that it feels like it's just normal.

When we don't stop and look at it, the impure mind feels like the normal thing. The pure mind, which is simply a moment of conscious awareness that isn't colored by greed, hatred, or delusion, can seem like some ideal, really far away, because we're so impure and disgusting. We start looking at how frequently wanting or aversion or discontent arises—which is what I would call noise when Rodney was talking about it. Not every thought, but these reactive qualities. They can seem so frequent, and we get so caught up in relating to them, that the ideal of a pure mind becomes something to strive towards. Our practice can turn into a striving, effortful activity based in either aversion or greed, trying to get me to be pure.

That's never going to happen from that motivation, from that intention.

So what I'd like to look at is this: how about if we open our minds to the possibility that these habits of relating to experience, to objects, to the world—from wanting and greed toward the pleasant things, from pushing away and aversion and discontent when things aren't the way we want them, to having it all be about me—

What if those are simply habits? They're not actually the norm. They're not actually the place that we can rely on. They're not actually needing to be our deepest refuge. They're natural in the sense that it's just nature—when we're perceiving inaccurately, we respond in this way. And if we don't learn how to look more clearly, if we don't learn that, then we keep acting in these same ways because we don't really recognize that they're not working.

So what if our practice is not about trying to get out the pickaxe and dig up all the impurities with aversion? "Let me get rid of that greed, get rid of that aversion. I'm here sitting two days and all I see is how much aversion is arising in my mind, and I've got to get rid of it. I've only got six more days." And we forget to notice what the attitude in the mind is right now. Ah, that's aversion.

What if that's all we have to do? What if it's not my job—since I'm not the center of the universe—to control every mind moment and make sure nothing difficult arises? What if all we have to do is shift the perspective, shift what we notice, from being so engrossed in the object—the breath is calm, my mind is filled with aversion—to simply the knowing of what's happening? Aversion feels like this.

What if that's actually the norm? What if that's actually all that's necessary to begin to recognize, to land in, to trust what Rodney called the silence, what I would call from this text the pure mind or heart? What if that's actually more natural to us, but we're just in the habit of not recognizing it?

You know how the Buddha often spoke about his teachings, even back then, as going against the stream, like swimming upstream against society. That's obvious; I don't think I need to go into that so much, although it's different from twenty or thirty years ago. Thirty years ago, when I would go on these long silent retreats, if I was sitting next to someone on a plane and they asked, "What do you do?" and I said, "I teach meditation," that usually ended the conversation—unless they were a fundamentalist Christian, and then I was sorry I ever said anything.

But nowadays, if I say that, most of the time people are really interested. They have no real understanding, of course. They say, "Oh, that's what I need to do. I need to relax and just be happy." That's what they think you're doing. They have no clue. But the attitude is one of interest. Still, it's not really the norm in society.

More important than that, though, is what I want to talk about tonight: moving upstream against the habits and views in our own hearts and minds, the way we've been taught to view ourselves and the world that we don't even recognize.

This particular aspect of how the mind works really fascinates me—how the way we think, how our thoughts construct the world. And when we reiterate those same thoughts, those same views, or when everyone around us holds the same view, we don't even realize that it's a view or a description. It's just how it is. These views might be useful, so it's not that we dislike them, but just to know: this might be a view.

Let me give you a small example. I was in Burma in January with some friends, and we were going around to different nunneries and villages, giving dāna, doing various things. There were several of us, and you always take pictures, so there were lots of photographs. When we were back at the monastery where we were staying, one of my friends—a Swiss woman who's been a nun there for seventeen or eighteen years—had taken some photos with her camera, and we were looking at them on the computer. On some of them, like one of me on my skirt and on other people in other places, there were these perfectly round, bright light things appearing in different spots.

So this friend who'd been there for seventeen years, and who's really become very Burmese—it's a very faith-based society, you know, in the Buddha's teaching—immediately said, "Oh, these are devas." She totally believed they were devas. She called us in: "These are devas!" She went to the senior teachers: "These are devas!"

Then another friend there, also a nun, but her background is as a scientist—she has a PhD, she's a real scientist—immediately said, "Those aren't devas. That's just some moisture that collected on the lens."

Well, you know, who really knows?

So I thought it would be interesting when I got home, because I had pictures of a similar time and people from a different camera, to put them on my computer and see. And the pictures weren't exactly the same, but on some of them there were these round circles.

Now, is that devas? I don't know. But I'm bringing it up because what I love is that space where we just hold open. Who knows? Not just saying, "Oh, that was a world of devas. What? That's so crazy." But rather thinking, "Who would have thought? Oh, maybe that's a possibility." Just maybe there are many different explanations for things, for phenomena in the world.

So rather than focusing on the explanation, we can get familiar with that inner feeling of openness, of not knowing. The willingness to meet experience in any moment fresh. So not just noticing the experience—the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the touch, the thought—but also the quality in the mind that's being aware of the experience.

We can notice the aversion, but we can also notice that quality of open presence—without being colored by me-ing, by hating, by fearing, by wanting. Awake and present, without judgment, without assessment, without knowing. That allows for reality to reveal itself without our unknown views twisting our perceptions to meet what we think.

Do you get a little sense of what I mean? I'm just playing with that.

In terms of how the habits of the so-called impure mind work, how easily in a moment the impure—I'm just going to keep using that word, I even cringe a little from it—but the habit of wanting when something's nice and we think it will make us feel better. The habit of judging, of pushing away when something's unpleasant or makes us not feel good or makes us feel bad about ourselves. The habit of, as Bhikkhu Bodhi says, trying to keep the delusion, the illusion going that everything revolves around me.

You might not consciously think that if you were challenged, but just start to notice as you go through the days, without judgment, with interest. Notice just the kind of thoughts that come up. Not every thought's going to be about you, of course, because actually—this is a secret—we're not really, each of us is not really the center of everything else in the world. There actually isn't really a solid us that's not changing.

But it's a trip, isn't it? Each of us here in this room, say there's a loud noise that goes on. Each of us can have our own reaction, and it's about me. "Who made that noise? It's affecting my meditation. Why are they doing that?" Or, "Oh, no, I'm really cool. It's not bothering me at all. My concentration's firm." Or, "I can see, oh no, my concentration isn't good." "Why is that person—so glad it wasn't me!" "It was me, but I hope nobody noticed."

All of us, with our own little story, from pleasant, from unpleasant, from liking, from fearing, from "what does it mean about me?"

So what if that's just a habit? We can learn to put our reliance, our trust, on the pure aspect of heart and mind.

I read a book recently about the practice and philosophy of nonviolence. I want to share this part from the introduction because I found it interesting in terms of how we look at things, how we language things, how the thoughts we use can really affect our perception in quite deep ways. Anyway, it hit me that way.

He's talking about just the word "nonviolence." In that word, the main aspect that attention is drawn to is violence. The "non" is just a negation. So the main concept you get from that is violence. And he's talking about how, in terms of it as a philosophy, nonviolence is actually a very active, proactive, engaged approach to situations and to life. But when one hears "nonviolence," it just tends to feel kind of passive, like you just don't do anything. It doesn't really do justice to that quality.

He says it's not just in English. In Hindi, for example, *ahimsa*—it's the same thing. So he said, just play with the idea: What if the only word for war or conflict were "non-peace"?

Doesn't it just change a little bit, the whole idea? Non-peace then—in that, peace becomes the norm. The thing that we're used to. Non-peace becomes the aberration.

So in the same way, as Ajahn Amaro likes to say, what if the peace and ease of the mind and body is the *natural* peace and ease of the mind and body? What if the pure mind that isn't contracted in response to situations with greed, with fear, with me—what if that natural peace and ease is actually the reality, the norm? What if the habits of the so-called impure heart and mind—of greeting, of needing, of aversion, of making it all about me—what if those are actually the aberration? What if we could begin to recognize, begin to trust, begin to give our interest more to the recognition of the natural peace and ease? Not as some distant thing that's going to happen in fifteen years and then never change, but as something momentary, momentary, momentary. What if we really gave a lot more interest and trust to recognizing those moments, that possibility?

I actually think that's a huge part of our practice, of our path. Meditation isn't really about creating some steady state, whether it's concentration or choiceless awareness. It's not about me creating some state out of forcing some wisdom and holding on to it. You can't hold on to anything. But it's really about allowing us the space, the quietness in the mind and heart, to recognize what's always available when we stop being so entranced by our reactions, by the reactions of mind.

So the natural peace and ease—notice it. I talk about this a lot through the days. It doesn't have to be a big deal. If you're waiting for the big blast of unified bliss that's going to really shake your world and you walk out of here a different person, I'm not talking about that. Maybe that'll happen. May it be so. Maybe it won't. But if we're waiting for that, then everything else isn't good enough, is it? Everything else is just more samsara.

Instead, recognize simple moments when you can tune into the awareness, to the knowing of whatever's happening, and the mind isn't in reactivity, the heart isn't in reactivity. And you'll see it doesn't matter what the activity is or what the experience is.

Take sitting in meditation and being with the breath. Sometimes one is with the breath and you feel it quite easily. Sometimes one is with the breath and it gets very refined and subtle. Then all of a sudden that becomes very tight and tense. So what if, just in the moment that you're feeling the breath—it's not super concentrated, it's just easy, no big deal, you don't get into some story about how wonderful the breath is, there's just a sense of being present with it—what if then we could not give so much focus to the breath, but just notice how that peace and ease in the mind and heart feels? It's not really a physical feeling, but we just start to recognize it more.

In the walking meditation, sitting on the toilet, drinking a cup of tea, standing out and hearing the birds—generally we might tend to notice it more frequently, or in the beginning, with pleasant things. But it's not about pleasant things. It's got nothing to do with pleasant things. It can be when you're sitting there and your knee is just killing you, and you're fighting and struggling, and then there's just that moment where it's just sensation. The moment where it's just sensation, before you go into, "Wow, I'm doing so good, it's just sensation." The moment when it's just that—if you can notice how the natural peace and ease manifests.

We learn to recognize it, recognize it more and more. You see, it's not some really abstract, far distant thing that we have to create. We can't create it. The act of trying to create is actually what hides it. Not that it's an "it" that's sitting here, but that in every

moment, every moment of what we call mind—Andy Olinsky, who's the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, a Pali scholar, and I like the way he says things, talks about describing what we call mind.

He says the mind is not a subject, not a thing that has objects as content. I know it can sound like that—the mind that has aversion sitting there as content, or peace sitting there as content. And we think of the mind as a steady state. It's not that. It's an activity, the process of cognizing, the process of knowing a flow of events.

So when I'm talking about a moment of mind, a moment of *citta*, it's as if—a simple kind of description—it's a momentary arising of the quality of consciousness, of knowing, of cognizing. Arising and passing, moment to moment. There's no steady state there. So it's birthing and death in every moment.

And in any moment, that process of cognizing—so for instance, right now, I'm seeing. I'm seeing all of you. It's a moment of seeing, that cognizing. Coming with it in that moment are whatever qualities, whatever factors of mind are present. So that could be a moment of calmness and liking. It could be a moment of greed. It could have a sense of me—how do I feel? Or sadness or joy. Any of the qualities of mind come with it. You see what I mean? And that's fine. That's just how it works. And every moment is new.

What I love about that is when we begin to not get so focused on the object. Say, back to that knee. When you're sitting and there's pain, and if it's pain you're trying to be calm with, but it's pain, it's tight, it's tight, it's tight—and you're not noticing the momentary arising of the known, you don't notice that it's colored with aversion. You keep looking at the pain. The aversion is getting stronger and stronger, and meanwhile you don't notice that.

But because it's arising, the cognizing, the knowing is arising every moment, the stepping out of *saṃsāra*—what I'm calling this—is always available. As soon as we go, "Oh!" It's as if we turn around or widen our field of awareness and include the aversion. Oh! Aversion. Aversion. I know I make it sound so nice. I know it doesn't feel so nice. But even recognizing the aversion, that's a shift. That's a new moment of knowing. And it can really be that there's aversion, and the next moment of knowing it is really a moment of peace and ease. And we don't need to fix it. We don't need to get rid of it. We just need to recognize, "Oh, this is aversion. Aversion is like this."

Ajahn Sumedho—you probably must know who Ajahn Sumedho is—he uses that languaging a lot, and I love it. Really, what we're learning to do is not be so interested in whatever's arising and all our reactions to it, and how do we feel, and what does it mean, and how is the breath, and how calm is my mind, and am I getting concentrated, I'm still superficial, I'm not deep—all of that. Or in life, anything.

Instead, we get more interested in what's the quality in the mind that's aware. And it's like a Tai Chi move, sort of. "Oh, I'm like this and how can I get a better job?" Oh—discontent is like this. In that moment, "Oh, it's like this." That's moving our trust, our reliance, into the awareness, into the knowing. And that's always available.

When we're mucking around, liking and disliking, me and what does it mean about me and how can I make it better—we're overlooking the natural peace and ease.

So a big part of our path, really in some ways all of the different forms of meditation, are about setting a foundation to help us recognize the pure mind, natural peace and ease, and to support us to continue to shift the paradigm, to realize that that's more the norm rather than falling back into our reactions. And as Rodney was saying last night, it's very subtle. It doesn't matter how long we've been on a path.

It's very subtle and tricky, this sense that it should feel good. It should make me feel good about me. It should somehow fulfill me—some sense of achievement, some sense of getting somewhere. It can get more and more subtle. It's hard for us, and this is the shift, this is the moving upstream against society, against our own habits, to say that it really, really, really doesn't matter what's happening. The point of the meditation isn't to get some particular experience. There is no experience that lasts more than that moment. There can be varieties within it, and sure, some experiences are nicer than others. Some experiences help to cultivate calm. Some experiences cultivate aversion. There's all the skillful means we talk about.

But none of the skillful means are useful if the attitude in the mind with which we try to carry them out is impure. All the skillful means in the world, practiced out of aversion, cultivate aversion.

So when I say it doesn't matter what's happening, can we learn to trust enough the natural awareness, the quality of the natural peace and ease? That no matter what's happening, we can just recognize, "Oh, it's like this. It's like this."

Sometimes that's not so hard to do. Sometimes it's so hard to trust it—even when you know, even when you really know deeply. For myself, when I'm really caught up in something, my mind can be pretty clear. I'm really looking very carefully at my experience. But a particular suffering personality pattern may be coming up, a sense of identi-

fication with something. Or I may be having a memory or a plan or some discussion I had, some relationship thing, whatever. And it comes up with a strong pain or a strong sense of me or a strong sense that I need to do something about it. It comes up with some oomph, right? You can notice the oomph. You're aware of the oomph. "Oh yeah, oomph." Maybe that's not the way you name it, but it's like this.

But it keeps on going.

To have that radical trust that the practice is—"Oh, totally caught up in hating this and needing to fix it"—is like this. And that you don't need to do something about it. That the wisdom actually arises by itself through the steadiness of this non-violent, non-interfering, but very present awareness. That's really hard to trust because we think we have to do. That's what we've been taught.

Just to sit and notice and say, "Well, it really doesn't matter what's happening"? Where does your mind go with that? "Well, that doesn't make sense. It doesn't matter what's happening? Why are we busting ourselves sitting and walking and being quiet and following the breath and noticing calm and all of this? They tell us all this stuff and then they say it doesn't matter. It doesn't make sense."

It doesn't really make sense. Not in the way we think of sense.

Because the bottom line is this: once the mind is pure, we speak or act with a pure mind, then all the skillful means make sense. But when we're speaking and acting really caught up in the wanting, in the aversion, in "this is about me," we can meditate till the cows come home with strong, vigorous effort. And I imagine many of you have done this. Just meditate your heart out. Rising, falling, lifting, placing, noting, noting, breathing, silence—until you just feel like you're going to snap in two. "What am I doing wrong?" You can be incredibly mindful, noting every single sensation in your breath, in your leg, every movement in your mind. And I've done this, believe me. I'm not speaking theoretically. And it's just getting tighter and tighter. I'm talking weeks now, months on retreat.

I'm not just talking a couple of days. I'm noting every single damn thing that's happening, no matter how quick. And it's getting tighter and tighter and tighter. Because what? I'm not noticing the attitude in the mind that's meditating.

In that particular instance, the attitude was "not good enough." I'm not good enough. I have to try harder. But another way striving manifests is through wanting—you know, "I want enlightenment. Enlightenment or bust. I will feel this breath." And you're really sincere. You're putting out tremendous effort. It's actually too much effort. But you're looking through the red glasses and not seeing them. That's what we've learned, and

you can press like that and create experience. Absolutely. I know—I've done it. And experience can be useful. It's not like it's bad. But it's so hard to trust, to really trust, from that place.

I just have to notice the attitude in the mind. What's happening right now? Right now. Right now. Gentle. Relaxed. Around the clock—you know, continuously. Not every single moment, but it's like, okay, just remember yourself.

This quality of effort that my teacher describes—he often says, "If you don't mind doing this, if you can't bear to move, then don't do it. But if you don't mind, just put your hands together." Can you feel where they're touching? Yes? Not too tough, right? Pretty easy. That quality of effort. That quality of effort.

It's actually not daunting, not difficult. It actually becomes, as Rodney keeps saying, "Have fun"—it does become enjoyable. Because we're just noticing what's the quality in the mind and the heart right now, without judgment, without needing to say it should be different. Just noticing.

So part of our practice is really learning to recognize and trust—and more and more be able to trust—the pure mind and heart. And the other half is recognizing when there's so-called impure greed, aversion, or confusion in the mind. But as soon as we recognize them with interest, without judging, without taking it personally—it's just how nature is—"Oh yeah, that's wanting." Maybe it was five weeks before I noticed the wanting. Maybe it's a second. But it doesn't matter. As soon as you notice the wanting, that's all that needs to happen. Over and over and over. You don't have to get rid of it. You don't have to blow it up. You don't have to do something to yourself to never want again. Just notice.

And when that trying to make everything better, trying to make me better, trying to achieve some end, goes away—even just for a moment—"Oh, I'm completely knotted up in pain and aversion. It's like this." Stuff stops being such a problem.

You go through the day and it's not like you have to make yourself pay attention as some onerous duty, because it gets interesting. Because we stop judging everything that happens. "Oh no, I did that walking, it wasn't good enough, I was thinking, and then—okay, I've got to try it again." I wonder why I hate walking meditation, you know? Instead, we might say, "Oh yeah, there's a lot of thinking. Thinking's like this." Or, "I'm really not enjoying this at all." Not enjoying's like this. It really doesn't matter.

So you're just noticing, with that gentle but persevering quality of attention, what the attitude in the mind is that's noticing. And don't make a big thing about it. Don't turn around and look and go, "What's the attitude?" It's not a big deal. Sometimes it's just calmness. Sometimes it's just peace. Sometimes you don't notice. Fine. Then notice the breath, the body, the thought—whatever is predominant.

As soon as it starts to be a problem—something's a problem here—that's kind of the sign. Oh, okay, check out what's going on in the mind. A very easy way to see is as you're sitting, as you're walking, as you're eating, as you're showering, just to notice: are you wanting something to happen? That's wanting. It's not any big subtle thing. Are you wanting something to stop happening? Aversion, fear. Or do you not actually have a clue what's happening? And sometimes we don't. "Oh yeah, I'm meditating, I'm here at Gaia House." But I would add to that: is it all about me? Whatever's happening, is it all about me?

None of this is with judging—it's just with interest. Just with interest. Let interest do the work, not wanting.

So in meditation we're learning to recognize and trust just those moments of is-ness, of purity, of natural peace and ease. It's natural for all of us. It doesn't only come with deep concentration. Just notice it. Trust it. Really learning to trust your own insight, your own connection to truth. No one else can give that to you, but no one else can take it away either.

And then really getting interested in and recognizing how we get seduced by these habits that obscure. I want to talk a little bit about playing with recognizing and noticing a couple of the strong habits, particularly craving and aversion, because they're so strong. Also, in terms of early days in retreat, you know how the so-called hindrances—I really don't like that word, hindrances to concentration—but difficult emotions come up. They come up anyway, but they come up really strongly in the first days of a retreat. Different ones of us have different ones that arise, and they can just take us away.

So the specific of craving is really sense desire, and the second one is aversion or ill will. Not just a moment of aversion, but you really start hating everyone, everything's wrong. Or with sense desire, you're just sitting there: "I could have this for lunch, I could have this for dinner, I wish I brought a different pillow, I wish I had a different room..." I have a friend who used to fantasize about his wardrobe. If he had a shirt he liked, he'd fantasize about getting it in five different colors. He'd spend hours in sittings doing this. On that level, we're in the hindrance of sense desire—just a little over the top.

Then there's sleepiness, tiredness, sloth and torpor, dullness. The fourth one is the flip side of that—the mind's just spinning, spinning, spinning. We're all thinking a lot, but I mean spinning with some kind of obsessive worry, where your body energy is really restless, where you feel like you want to jump out of your skin or run screaming out of the hall.

And what goes with most of those is doubt.

Doubt usually manifests as thought—doubt in yourself, doubt in the practice, doubt in the time. It can also just be a wavering, an indecision. Should I be with the third or the fourth way of being with the breath? Which one is helpful for me? Is the breath helpful for me now, or is it better to be with the body? What works for me? Joseph said see what works—but what does it mean, "what works"? That's doubt.

And especially when it takes the form of thinking about the practice. Then we think we're practicing, but we're just thinking, thinking, thinking. That is so much suffering, I tell you. But to recognize any of the hindrances—oh, that's doubt—just don't go too far down that road. It's like they say about the donkey between two bales of hay: it can't decide which one to eat from and starves to death. So if you're like, "Is it the body? Is it the breath? Is it calming the breath, the helpful one? What's that third one? If only I could remember that third one, that's probably it"—drop it. Just feel the damn breath. Feel your body or your butt, it doesn't matter. Just connect with something that's happening now. That's actually the antidote. That's all I have to say about doubt.

But I was going to go into craving, desire. I just want to say a word about the word itself, because in English, the word "desire" or "wanting" covers a wide range of mental states that in the Pali language these teachings come from is more specific. And Joseph is going to talk a lot about that, I think, whenever he talks tomorrow, so I dare not go too far into it or my name is mud.

But I just want to say that when I'm talking about craving, *tanha*, it's a particular quality of mind and heart. "Thirst" is the closer translation. "I want this"—you can almost feel the contraction around it. And so there could be what we would say in English is desire. "I desire to take care of my children." You say, well, that's a good desire. Actually, I was going to say I hate that framing—that's not really helpful, is it? But that's how my mind works. I don't think it helps that we label this a good desire and that a bad desire. That just perpetuates this way we have of looking at the world in terms of good and bad.

But desire, *tanha*, as a form of *kilesa*—torment, impurity—it's not about what the object is. It doesn't matter. It's about that quality of thirst. So that thirst could be for pizza. That thirst could be for enlightenment. The thirst could be for anything. But say you say enlightenment or taking care of my family—that's a good thing. Yeah, it is. And one can have an intention, a kind of willingness to do that which we might call desire in English, but which isn't that thirst. Do you see what I mean? It's this thirst that blinds us, that keeps us locked onto the object, that keeps us in *samsara*.

Because the thing with craving is it has this promise—it's so seductive. The wanting, we tend to overlook it, but doesn't it have that seductive quality, just whispering, "If you can only get this, you'll be happy"? I mean, it's not so obvious, because we can hear that it doesn't really work. But still—just this next calm sitting, or if I had a sweater, or if this pain wasn't here, or if I had a new job, or whatever the heck it is.

The seduction of craving is precisely this: when I get this thing, I'm going to be happy. And we don't tend to look at the craving itself—we look at the thing, the object, whether it's a mood or a physical thing or whatever. When the thing actually happens and the craving goes away, there is natural peace and ease. But we don't tend to notice the natural peace and ease. We notice we have this thing and we're happy. We impute it to the thing. We impute it to the state. We don't recognize that the peace and ease is what's here simply because we're not clouded by craving in this moment.

But then the seduction continues. We start to feel dis-ease again because craving comes up. Well, okay, now I have this, but what about the next one? So what we need to do is simply start to look at how craving itself feels in the mind, in the body.

I was recently having a discussion with some friends about the quality of craving, about this promise it carries, and how when we really look—really look—we can start to see the suffering of craving. But when we don't look, we don't notice it. This friend said, "Well, it's like this"—and this is a person who really likes cookies. The person was saying, "You know, there's the craving, but then I get the cookie, so this isn't really suffering, right?" We get the craving and then we get the cookie and it's all fine. And then the craving comes and we get the next cookie, it's all fine.

So I asked, "Okay, but then what about when you don't get a cookie?"

"Oh, but I always get the cookie."

That's samsara. That's why we keep on spinning it. We always get the cookie. And if it's not this cookie, then the mind is really good at thinking up something else to hide that we didn't get that cookie. That's how we stay spinning. Samsara actually means this round of birth and death, of wanting and dying and wanting and dying, moment to mo-

ment. And when we don't stop to look, we think it's making us happy. You stop and look and it's unbearable. So then we don't want to look anymore because it's unbearable. So we go back to, "Okay, never mind, I'll just keep getting the next cookie. I don't have to deal with it too much." It's what they call rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. But at some point, the Titanic's going to go down.

But we don't have to wait for that point. Because when we actually can just know—oh, wanting feels like this. Honestly. We really just recognize: wanting is like this. Next time you're doing walking meditation is a good one for this, because if there's a thing you want, in walking meditation there's the illusion that you could stop walking and go get it. So in sitting, at least there's social pressure. But if it's wanting a state, you can't make that state happen, so then it's clear that the wanting is suffering—but not really clear, because you tend to jump over it and just say, "Oh, I'm a useless meditator," and then you go to aversion.

Try it in walking. Wanting comes up. Maybe you just want to stop walking. You want to hear the birds. It doesn't matter what you want. And there's nothing wrong with the thing you want. But see if you can just do that Tai Chi move: oh, wanting is like this. Notice how it functions in the mind and the heart. That's all. Not with judging—with interest. How does it function? Notice if there's a feeling in the body that can help us just stay present with it.

Just keep on noticing. Keep on noticing. At some point—I promise, I'm not saying how long—but at some point, it will go away. Because everything goes away. Stay really present so you can notice it gone. Don't just jump to the next thing. Hang out there and notice the gone-ness. Notice the gone-ness.

And the same applies for aversion. Just notice the gone-ness. That's all. Maybe there's a natural peace and ease. Maybe it's just that much of a moment of gone-ness and the mind whips up another one. Playing with this really starts to shift our relationship to experience.

At this point, whatever's happening is interesting. Whatever's happening—even wanting, even aversion, even me-ing—is a doorway to recognizing peace and ease. You don't have to get rid of it. *Oh yeah, wanting is like this.* At that moment, we've stopped being so seduced by the object. Wanting becomes the next object. And the mind is simply aware of it. Awareness can be with anything.

The same applies to pain—physical, difficult sensation, but also emotional, or a sound that's bugging you, whatever. When the mind is really balanced, the attention can be with that unpleasant sensation, and it's fine. But as soon as you notice reactivity

or tightness in the mind, don't give so much attention to the sensation. Notice the aversion, the fear, the pulling back. That's fine. There's no saying you have to bear it. We're not here to cultivate aversion. We're here to cultivate awareness.

So when you're aware—*ah, aversion is like this*—at some point you may need to pull back, because we don't want to just cultivate aversion. That's a skillful means. Then when the mind is balanced again, when you're in touch with awareness again, the difficult thing may arise. Can you really be present with it?

The whole thrust of the practice isn't to last through things, but to get more and more trusting in recognizing: what's the attitude in the mind right now? That's the effort we put in—to really trust the steady, non-judging process of awareness.

This non-judging process is really radical. Martin Luther King said, in terms of non-violence: "Non-violence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate him." That same level of pure, kind awareness, non-judging awareness with whatever is arising in our experience. Non-violence. Active presence. But that gentleness—*it's like this, it's like this, it's like this*—steady. We learn to trust that the wisdom, the deeper seeing, the subtlety, it arises by itself when we are willing and able to trust the steadiness of this non-judging, gentle awareness. It's really manifesting active non-violence.

I want to end with something Gandhi said. He invented a word for non-violence that was more active: *satyagraha*, which translates as "truth force." I like to think of our awareness practice as truth force. It's really about honesty. In any moment, the knowing mind arising, and a willingness to be totally present and truthful with whatever is. It's almost like we learn to love the awareness without reacting so much to whatever is happening. And then whatever is happening becomes the doorway back into natural peace and ease.

One of my teachers said to me—actually a really tough teacher—he said, "You know, there's nothing you need to be afraid of, because awareness can be with anything. Awareness doesn't care."

In that way, you really can enjoy your practice, your life. Practice and life—same, same.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 48

Generosity

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the profound teaching of dāna (generosity) as a powerful path of awakening that extends far beyond formal meditation practice. Drawing from her extensive experiences in Burma and Thailand, she shares how the Buddha established generosity as foundational to spiritual development—often the first teaching he would offer newcomers before introducing the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha designed the monastic sangha to be completely intertwined with lay practitioners through daily acts of giving and receiving, creating what he called 'mutuality.'*
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> *Through vivid stories—from devoted Burmese nuns caring for orphaned girls to villagers immediately offering back rice they had just received—Wilson demonstrates how generosity transforms consciousness in the moment of giving. She explains that authentic dāna is rooted not in obligation but in purity of intention, faith, and wisdom. The teaching emphasizes that even small acts, like mindfully pouring water for plants, can purify the mind when done with wholesome volition.*
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> *Wilson offers six practical points for the practice of giving: attending to one's volition, abandoning clinging to what is given, giving face-to-face when possible, maintaining full attention during the act, continuing mindfulness afterward, and giving with clear comprehension that doesn't harm oneself or others. She concludes with the Buddha's teaching on recollecting one's own generosity as a powerful meditation that overcomes greed, aversion, and delusion, leading naturally to concentration and joy connected with the Dhamma.*

Last night Joseph mentioned at some point in his talk that all of the different teachings of the Buddha deal with transformation of the mind. And so what I want to talk about tonight is really that all the teachings do.

Here, of course, we're on an intensive meditation retreat. Most of what we talk about and look at is the aspect of the teaching of mindfulness meditation, of concentration, and really the cultivation of mind in that way, which is, of course, you could call it the apex or the highest fruit of the practice. But we also can get a little myopic at times, like we're looking so close. In the times when your meditation practice isn't working, it feels hopeless because there's no concentration or mindfulness and you're just spinning in negativity or self-doubt—if any of you have any sense of what I'm talking about. And we say "be mindful of it," and you think, "Thanks a lot. That really doesn't do much."

It helps to remember that meditation is not the only form of teaching the Buddha gave, and that all his teachings are in support of liberation of heart and mind. So tonight the particular teaching I want to talk about is generosity—the word dāna in Pali—because I feel like I've learned a lot about the joy, the reciprocity, the purifying quality of generosity, receiving and giving in heart and mind, in the last few years. I've learned a lot more about it experientially, a lot from traveling in Burma, but not just that. And I feel like maybe we don't talk about it enough.

As an active path for brightening the heart and mind, generosity actually cuts through clinging and ill will, and also cuts through that locked-in sense of me, separate from the world, that I need to protect and fear. An act of giving—of time, of energy, of caring, of physical things, it doesn't matter what—counteracts all of the kilesas in that way. It's a powerful practice. So I just want to talk a bit about it.

As probably most of you know, generosity was usually the first thing that the Buddha would talk about when he would meet somebody new who would come to him. Particularly with lay people, but also with monks and nuns, generosity was one of the first things he talked about, always.

This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who says: "Generosity serves as a basis and preparation which underlies and quietly supports the entire path of freeing the mind from the defilements." The Buddha really taught it that way, as a practice of freeing our hearts and minds from defilements, but it also has the power of supporting and underlying the whole path of awakening.

The Buddha chose to live as a monastic, as a renunciate. And so he had an order of monks and later an order of nuns. But the way he set it up—he was making it up, right? He was making up the order. He was making up the rules. He could do whatever he wanted. He could teach in whatever way he wanted. And the way he chose to set up the order of monks and nuns was in a way that was completely through generosity and reciprocity, what he called mutuality, that was daily intertwined with the life of lay men and women. He set it up in such a way that monks and nuns couldn't have food or money, that they're completely dependent on lay people.

Here's how the Buddha expressed it: "Monks, nuns, Brahmins and householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms, food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness. And you monks are very helpful to Brahmins and householders, for you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end. Thus, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support between ordained and lay people for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

Basically, he set up the way the Sangha works so that monks and nuns are completely dependent every day on the generosity of lay people. Even now, in Theravada Buddhist countries, every morning the monks—and in some places the nuns—line up early in the dawn time and go out every day for alms round. They have a big bowl and lay people come and put in food, whoever wants to. They can't keep food overnight, so that's the food they have for the day. This is a huge living activity in all the countries I've been in, mostly Burma and Thailand. It's a way that there's always contact. The monks and nuns couldn't completely withdraw from connection with lay people and feel themselves superior or better. They're completely intertwined by generosity.

And the lay people, even now, come to the monasteries, to the nunneries, for teachings, for festivals, once a week to practice, to take the precepts, to hear dhamma talks, for their inspiration—like we try to do with a sitting group or a retreat. But this is a monastery or a wat in Thailand, sort of like a church, that there's one in every village, and it's the center of the spiritual life of the village.

In Burma, during the cyclone last year, in many places it was the monasteries where the monks would really be the ones who could safely go out and try to clean up the damage and have food, and the villagers would come to the monasteries because they felt safer there. So that's a real living reciprocity set up on generosity, set up on mutuality. It cuts through the sense of separation.

I always knew it was set up that way, and it seemed nice. And of course, the idea that to be generous is a good thing isn't really a far stretch—pretty much all spiritual paths have that. But what was kind of experiential for me was as if it were a secret teaching, because I never really experienced it so directly until I started spending time in Thailand, quite a while ago now. And then in the last eight years, I've been at least a month or so every year in Burma, where the spirit of generosity and friendliness—metta and dana—just permeates the culture. Not only the monks and nuns, but the regular people as well. It permeates everything, so you pick it up.

And what was kind of secret, what I didn't realize, was how incredibly joyful it makes one. How much lightness and spaciousness and brightness and joy this sense of generosity brings—whether you're receiving or giving. It's like a circle, a mutuality that goes both ways. How much joy it brings to the heart! It really energizes one, uplifts one.

At first, in my Western way, if someone would be generous to me, I'd think, well, then one should give something back—kind of like quid pro quo. That's the way we do it, and it's still generous. But in terms of the Buddha's teaching, of course, this like everything isn't about outward appearance or the object given or how much or anything like that. It's all about the quality of heart and mind.

And so the conscious practice of generosity—giving, receiving, being really present with the receiving as well as the giving—has a quality of transforming the habits of our heart and mind. It has a power. Sure, nothing's permanent, but really a power to, when we're in a generous moment, we're not experiencing ill will or greed. We're much less feeling a sense of me, self, others, because there's that connectedness that's really quite palpable.

And so this was kind of—I could say it was the secret that seeps in, and all of a sudden you realize, wow, generosity is such a happy aspect of life, and one that, looking at it from the internal way, we can really consciously cultivate, call on, and recollect in our life, in our practice. Not just kind of work, work, work, mindful, mindful, mindful. Do generous acts and then think, well, if I think about it, that's just being egotistical. Play it down. It's very different there.

So let me give you some examples, partly to give you a sense of this, but also for me—just when I think about some of the little acts of generosity or qualities that I've met in people, I get really happy. And it's interesting to see. Some people have been talking in the interviews about how to change the channel in the mind when we feel that we're drowning in negativity or stuck on some particular personal or life issue. Not that you can just say, oh boom, it's gone. But we can actively sometimes change the channel. Metta is that. Sometimes it doesn't work. But actively speaking or sharing in some way—your time, your energy with someone else—in a very conscious way of being generous can also do that. Even just reflecting, recollecting your own generosity or the generosity of others also has the power to brighten, enlighten the mind and heart.

So really, everything I'm saying tonight, I'm just trying to offer as another aspect of widening and broadening our path, our practice of awakening.

So just a couple of stories to give you a sense of this. This winter I was staying at a small meditation center, and in the area where it's located, about a half an hour outside of Yangon, within like a ten-minute walk, there's at least fifteen or twenty very small nunneries. Very small means there could be like two nuns up to three or four adult women nuns, and often with eight or ten or in some places even up to forty really small little girl nuns.

When you see these little nuns, they're all in pink—Burmese nuns wear this lovely pink color. Their heads are shaved. People who see these little girl nuns, that's it. It's all over. They're just so cute. You can't stand it. The first time you see one, you think, oh, she's so cute. And then you find out they're everywhere.

So anyway, these nunneries—all of the ones in this area are very poor, very poor. So I just want to tell you about one particular one we visited. We were going around looking, just meeting different women, different nunneries, and seeing ones that we could offer some little support to. So this one we went to—we were really drawn because it was two sisters.

One was 42, one was 37. And they had eight or ten young nuns—small girls who were either orphans, or had only one parent, or whose parents were so poor they couldn't support them and the children had ended up on the street. So these little girls ranged from about six years old, maybe this high, up to fourteen.

They were living in a little—I can't even describe it—one of these shaggy places made out of bamboo. It was smaller than just this space up here, maybe half as wide, going back there, with a little kitchen outside, a little brazier outside, made of plaited bamboo. And ten or twelve of them were living in this.

We walked in, and there was just such a feeling of metta and lightness in this place. We walked in, and on this little crummy floor, there's a tiny bookcase with Pali books and Burmese study books. There's a big blackboard, and on it, in Burmese script—but we asked what it said—they're teaching the little girls Pali, which is the language the Theravada sutras are written in. They're teaching them Abhidhamma. They're teaching them Burmese in this little crummy place.

They get up at four. They pray, which means meditate and chant for a while. They all have breakfast together. And then the two sisters start teaching these little girls until they all get together, have their showers, have lunch. Then the oldest sister, who really wants to study, goes away for the afternoon. She manages to scrape together enough money to take a bus into Yangon so she can study more. Meanwhile, the other sister teaches these little girls all afternoon, and then the oldest comes home. This is their life, except for two days a week when all the nuns have to go out—they don't go out every morning for alms round because they wouldn't get food the way the monks do.

So what a lot of the nuns do is twice a week, every week, at like five in the morning, they all get on a bus and go to some designated part of the city of Yangon. It seemed like all the nuns in the area had their own space, so they don't all go to the same place. And all day, from five a.m. until night, they walk around with their little bowls, and they get raw rice and a little bit of cha, a little bit of money. When they come home, if they have money, they can buy the other food. Sometimes they get too much rice and then they sell it to the rice stall guy down the road and get money for their other food.

So this is their life. And we were talking to these two sisters who, as I said, were filled with life. They were so strong about how important it is to help bring up these young girls because life without parents, life without an education—it's so hard here. They could end up servants on the street. It's so important that they have a chance to better themselves. They were so filled with care for them. They said, "When someone gives us a set of robes, we think, wonderful, because now we can make fifteen little blouses out of these robes for these little girls. That's the way we think."

We assumed this was because many women become nuns and have the idea to start schools—we figured that's what they wanted to do, that was their plan. But no, not at all. They were acting from total generosity.

These two sisters had only become nuns in their early twenties. One, because she was so sick—she was almost dying for two years. She couldn't even move. She said if her hand was down on the ground, she couldn't raise it to her chest. If her hand was on her chest, she couldn't lower it. Her parents had been a little bit well off, but they had lost their money. She heard them talking about how they were going to have to sell their house to take care of her. And she thought, no, I can't have them do that. I'll become a nun.

She told her parents, who immediately said, "No way, you can't be a nun." Even though they were going to have to sell their house to take care of her. So she struggled and fought, and they said, "Okay, if your other sister comes with you."

So we asked the other sister, "How did you feel about that?"

She said, "Oh, I always wanted to be a nun, but they wouldn't let me."

So it was a big struggle with the family, but they were allowed to become nuns. This is one of these wild Burmese stories.

Two days after they ordained, the sister who had been so sick could get up and walk. She could start talking—she hadn't been able to talk before. She said she's a little weak again now, but it's been fifteen years. That kind of magical occurrence happens a lot there.

Anyway, they came to Yangon and studied. Just two years ago, they didn't have these little girls yet, and they were really deciding what they wanted to do. What they wanted was to go to a meditation center where they'd been studying—to really dedicate themselves to meditation, to practice, to become liberated.

But just at that time, the Sayadaw in their home village, way down in the delta, died. I didn't quite understand what happened, but somehow he died, and he'd been taking care of all these little girls. So just before he dies, he sends them up to the two sisters. "Okay, now you have to take care of these girls." This was never anything they wanted to do or had thought about.

And what did they do? They just immediately made a 180-degree about-face: "Oh, okay." With the help of their family, they got this little piece of land. By themselves, with the help of their brother, they built this house. And now they're completely dedicating themselves—as I described their life—to raising these girls and helping them have a better life. With not a trace of "I have to do this," but rather love and affection. You could see it in the way they related to the little girls and the way they related to each other. There was just a real buoyancy and mettā in that place.

That's not an uncommon story. That's a kind of normal story, especially with the nuns—that's why I like visiting them. This incredible generosity of spirit and heart, together with this real mettā, this real kindness, without the kind of resistance of "okay, I'm stuck with these little girls." They just change the mind.

And it's not blind either. She said, "In ten years, once they really learn, if they want to disrobe and go live a life, great. They'll have good values. They'll know how to live a good life. That's wonderful. We're not trying to make them nuns for life. But if some of them stay nuns and they can teach, that's even better, because then we can finally go up and meditate." So they didn't forget that, you know.

But there's just this quality of not just me, but us. And the "us" suddenly changed from the two to the ten, and their activities changed accordingly. So that's just one example. And as I said, just being there—we're getting this through translators—you just come away feeling so happy. It's very contagious in that way.

And it's not just, as I say, a kind of mutuality. It's not just with the nuns or with the monks. It's really there in the culture—the sense of the joy of receiving. There's no shame in being on the receiving end of generosity. If you give something to nuns or to lay people who are hungry, the receiving is done with a real dignity, with a real face-to-face presence, just as the giving is done. It's always a little ceremony, and pictures are taken, and it's a joyful time. There's no sense of "this poor homeless person needs something"—it doesn't have any of that.

At the same time, in this little meditation center where we were staying, the village around had been affected by the cyclone of a year ago. The people were still quite affected; there was quite some hunger. So the Sayadaw, the head of the monastery—we

had brought in a lot of money that people all over the world had donated—one of the things he did was organize what's called a rice dāna, offering rice to each of the households in the village, which was about 1,200 households.

And they know exactly. It's all extremely orderly. Each household gets a little chit, and on the day of the offering, they pile up the rice. Each person comes with their chit, and then you hand them the bag of rice. The women all put it on their head, these giant bags, and go walking off. Again, they're dressed up and it's lovely doing it. But it's fast—it's not a leisurely thing. You're handing out this heavy rice, they take it and go. It really moves.

Anyway, my point is that these were all the villagers from that village, and this is where the monks in that meditation center go for their alms round every morning—just this immediate village. The next morning, there was one Mexican monk among the mostly Burmese monks, and he was kind of talking to us. He told us that when they went out for the alms round, having been there several months, you kind of always go on the same route. You get to know the route, and more or less the same families, more or less the same people come out and offer the rice or the food. It's always done with this great dignity. People stand and wait for the monks. They step out of their shoes. They kind of bow and give. There's something about it in the early morning—it's really beautiful.

But what this monk told us is that the next morning, after the rice dana, when they went out, there were families and people giving rice who had never been out there before. It's because now they had rice to give. It's so touching to me. The first thing they did on receiving rice was turn around and offer it back again—not all of it, but some of it. There's just this sense of the movement, the joy. It was so touching to hear. This monk who received it was really deeply touched, uplifted in his heart. And then you want to be more generous, and it's like a flow. But also there's a sense of the happiness of the people who then can offer something. It's a real living thing, and the longer I spend just watching it—not even being part of it—it starts to affect our hearts and minds.

Joseph said last night that violence can be contagious. But all of the moods are contagious. The wholesome, the beautiful states are really contagious, super contagious, like an infection—because it's touching that place of truth, that place of beauty in us. That's why it's so touching.

As I said, it's just in the culture. Later, we took food down on some boats into the delta to even poorer villages. It was a whole organizational thing—Sayadaw organized all of this, which was really quite a lot. He's a wonderful guy, very kind and caring. Anyway, we were doing the same thing, just offering some food. But it was all organized

through the monasteries in these villages, so the villagers knew that the Sayadaw was coming with food. When we got there, the villagers had all brought things to offer back to the Sayadaw, to take back to his monastery—beautiful plants that they had grown, or fruit that they had. It was this really joyful thing where they all took their offerings in a big procession down to the boats, whatever they had that they could offer back. There's this sense of giving and receiving and joy all around. It's a very alive thing.

And it's so central to the culture that—what was it, a year and a half, two years ago? I don't know if you remember when there were big demonstrations again in Burma, and again it was shut down, of course. But one of the things the monks did was refuse to accept offerings from the military, from the big generals. The generals would come to the monastery and want to offer, and they would do it for show. They would come with cameras so there could be pictures in the newspaper of the generals offering to monks, which was a way of trying to keep their spiritual legitimacy. If the generals came to offer, or even on alms round, what the monks would do was simply turn their bowl upside down. That's all—but it's a huge insult. Huge. And if it wasn't a really well-known or protected monk, they were arrested and thrown in jail for that. Simply for refusing to accept generosity.

And what they're refusing recognizes what's really the truth about the way the Buddha taught generosity: the heart of it is in the intention, in the purity of intention, in the faith, in the kindness, in the connectedness. And so when someone's coming and offering not from that place, they don't really want to receive because it isn't really what generosity means in that circumstance.

So, as I said, it's so intrinsic that even the little kids... I was walking one day just between these two meditation centers. It's like a ten-minute walk on the road, just before dark. All the kids are out of school. It's a very poor little village there, so all the kids are just kind of running around wild. And I was just minding my own business, walking back. Suddenly a little boy—and he was still in his cute little school uniform, his little green shorts and his shirt, he looked kind of neat compared to the others—he came up to me very solemnly with this tiny little white jasmine flower. With great dignity and attention, he came up to me and bowed and handed me this jasmine flower. It just made me cry, you know, it's just so lovely. And I just bowed and thanked him in Burmese, one of the like three words I know. And that was it. That was all. You don't need to make a big deal about it. But just that sense of how that's in the culture and the connection it brings and the happiness, the upliftedness it brings—it brightens my mind and heart now, just to think about that little action.

So generosity has really far-reaching effects, whether we're giving, whether we're receiving. It doesn't stop with that little action.

I was trying to think of an example of this, and I remembered the book—if you've read it, it's been on the bestseller list in the States for years—called *Three Cups of Tea*, by an American man, Greg Mortensen. He was a mountain climber, climbing K2 in the Pakistani part of the Himalayas. Coming down, he somehow got separated from his friends and lost. He wasn't like, you know, out there dying—he was lost and in trouble—and he kind of stumbled into a Pakistani village. It's actually up in that part now, the northwest, that's having so much suffering and so much pain from the fighting.

Anyway, a family and the village head took him in. They were just kind to him, cared for him, gave him tea. The three cups of tea refers to a saying there: if you have three cups of tea with someone, then you're friends for life. He was so moved by that. I mean, he's an unusual guy, okay, it sounds like from this book. He swore that he would come back and help them build a school, and he went home.

His whole life has become about raising the money. He went back to build this. It took him forever to raise the money. He worked as a nurse in an emergency room. At one point—this is why he's unusual—he lived in his car so he could save the money it would cost to have an apartment, in order to go back and help build a school. I think he spent a year, he got the money, he went back, and got there, his way out. And they said, "Well, actually, before the school, what we really need is a bridge to go across this river here, because otherwise we can't even get the materials." He goes, "Oh, okay, then we'll build a bridge." And he didn't know what he was doing. Anyway, it just mushroomed and mushroomed, until now he has this huge foundation and he's building schools all over, and he goes back every year. From just a simple act of hospitality and kindness, it just keeps cycling. So we don't know.

A friend was talking to me a couple of years ago. She had been in—I guess it was Burma again—for a retreat for a couple of months. And she was talking to me about her experience coming back. She said how she didn't really notice at first. I mean, she noticed that people are really kind—the people who run the guest house where she was staying just go out of their way to do little things for you. She's an acupuncturist. She met some acupuncturists, and they were so kind in taking her all over Mandalay and took her to see really big Sayadaws to work on them, and dinner. It just goes on and on. It's just like that. And she said at first, you know, she was appreciating it, but she didn't really notice what an uplifting effect it was having on her heart, on her mind.

But after a month or two—and it was the same for me the first time I went—I started to notice that I was not always happy, but happier. When difficult things happened, I would feel like I had some support, some sustenance, some pliability of heart and mind, some resiliency. I could actually notice the metta around me, the generous field around me, and you can call on that to give you the wherewithal to be with difficulty. So it's not like you're just happy, happy all the time. I don't mean that. But it's a real strengthening and uplifting.

She really noticed it. And when she came home—and I keep experiencing this too—we come back to the States and people are really generous. People are really generous in the States, and I assume here too. I'm not saying we're not. But she said it's not the same for her, and I've noticed this too. That kind of natural, spontaneous extending of ourselves to others isn't quite so free-flowing. Back in the States, it's almost like there's a little hesitation—you don't want to intrude on somebody's space, you don't want to seem like you're offering something that they could be offended by, or whatever other reasons we have. It's just not so naturally free-flowing. A little more closed in. We're generous, but we get all these letters in the mail and we write a check, or we do this, or once a week we go to the soup kitchen—which is all great, I'm not saying it's not. But there's just some immediacy of face-to-face connection, some natural free-flowing spontaneity that isn't quite as completely embedded in the culture. She just started to notice the difference.

In terms of how the Buddha talked about generosity, I want to give some examples, some stories about a man who lived during the Buddha's time and was seen as the most generous supporter of the Buddha: Anathapindika. Stories about him show up all through the suttas. I'm taking particular ones that highlight the teachings, the quality of the practice of generosity as a freeing practice, as a supportive practice for our path of liberation. What these stories really highlight is the importance of the inner motivation, not at all what's given.

Anathapindika is seen as the most generous, and he did happen to be rich, so in that way you could say he was the most generous because he had the most to give. But really, he was the most generous in terms of the motivation, the generosity of his heart, which arose not out of a should, but out of faith and joy and wisdom in the teachings.

If you've read the suttas at all, you probably know how many start out with, "Thus have I heard"—that's Ananda talking when it starts like that—"On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi, in the Jeta Grove, Anathapindika's monastery." It really shows up a lot in the suttas. The Jeta Grove was this beautiful grove monastery that Anathapindika bought and donated to the Buddha and his whole Sangha. They

spent nineteen out of forty-five rains retreats there. A rains retreat is like three months a year in the rainy season when the monks and nuns weren't wandering. They moved from place to place, but three months of the year in the rainy season they would stay in one place. Mostly they'd do their meditation and live a more secluded life, but also so as not to harm the crops that were growing. So again, the mutuality—not wandering around through the fields and harming the crops.

Just a little bit about how his faith arose before he started being generous. For me, it just speaks to how the beginning of generosity isn't a should or a wanting or what would be nice, but the deep inner movement of connectedness, of faith, and of real wisdom in the path of awakening.

Before he'd ever met the Buddha, Anathapindika came to his brother-in-law's house to visit. Usually they were so happy to see him, but this time something was going on and they were just, "Oh, hi, hi," and everyone was busy. He said, "What's happening?" His brother-in-law said, "We're inviting the Enlightened One, the Blessed One, for a meal." When he heard that—"Enlightened One"—it just shot a bolt of lightning through him. He said, "Who? The Buddha? I've got to go see him." His brother-in-law said, "Well, tonight's not appropriate. You can go in the morning."

He was so excited he couldn't sleep. He kept waking up—you know that feeling—"Now is it morning? Now is it time to go?" Finally he couldn't wait, and he just went out in the dark and was walking way far to find the Buddha. But he got so scared.

He got so nervous, just completely overwhelmed. And he got so scared that he thought, "I better go back. I better go back."

And as often happens, an invisible spirit urged him on. We can see that as an invisible spirit, or we can see it as our own inner intuition: "Better for you to go forward. Keep going forward." So he kept going.

And then, just in the dawn, he sees this serene person doing walking meditation in the distance. Of course, we know who that is. He sees this person, but he's afraid—too shy. But the Buddha sees him and calls him by name: "Sudatta"—which no one called him; only his family knew that name—"please come."

So he knew he was in the presence of the Buddha, but he was so nervous. You know how it is when you meet someone you really want to meet and you're so nervous you just can't think of what to say? So he threw himself at the Buddha's feet and said, "Did you sleep well last night?" He felt like an idiot after that. But the Buddha doesn't care.

So, of course, the Buddha gave him a whole teaching. This appears often: "The Blessed One gave Anāthapiṇḍika a step-by-step teaching." And this shows up in many other suttas, and I'm bringing it in because it relates to generosity.

When the Buddha meets someone who hasn't really seen the Dhamma, isn't really quite in tune with the teaching at all, he gives instruction step by step to bring the heart, the mind into readiness—into a state of openness to hear, to understand the depth of Dhamma. You can't just blast everybody.

And he starts by giving talks on generosity. So he begins by talking about the virtues of generosity, and then the power of virtue, of non-harming behavior. And from there he goes to the perils of vanity and getting lost in sense pleasure. He talks about the benefits of renunciation. And then—I love this line—"when he saw that Anāthapiṇḍika was ready in heart and mind, pliable, unobstructed, uplifted, and serene."

That's really what happens when we're transforming consciousness, working with generosity, working with virtue, working with renunciation. It has the power to affect this transformation in our heart, in our mind. Even momentarily, our minds become uplifted, unobstructed, not clouded by hindrances, serene. That's really important.

And then the Buddha gives him a teaching on the Four Noble Truths, because now the heart-mind is open to take it in. It's just very practical.

And at that point, "the dust-free, stainless eye of truth opened for Anāthapiṇḍika. Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of passing away." He had understood the truth of the Dhamma, overcome doubts, and was without wavering. He was now self-dependent in the dispensation. He had realized the path and fruit of stream entry.

That's, in the Theravāda, the first level of awakening. And I love that sense of "self-dependent." It doesn't mean one is completely, totally, forever free of greed, hatred, and delusion. But there's that sense that you can rely on your faith, your understanding. Yes, we get lost again and again and again. But you can rely on the trust and faith to find the way again, to call on the tools you need.

So at that point, when his faith and his wisdom were really alive, that's when the generosity came forth. From that moment, he invited the Buddha to eat, and the saṅgha to eat. And later he paid a mint for Jeta Grove because the prince didn't want to sell it—just many stories of his generosity.

But the point I wanted to make is that it begins with that upliftedness, that joy, that real love of the truth. It isn't personal to the Buddha. He's supporting the possibility for this truth of Dhamma to keep on being shared. That's really very important.

And there's actually another story right after this about Anāthapiṇḍika that highlights again the importance of motivation—that it's not about the object, or the time, or what's given, how much or how little. It's all in the motivation. That's what liberates our heart and mind. That's what uplifts consciousness.

So after a time, the king of this area, who was a follower of the Buddha, quite devout—King Pasenadi—he heard how generous Anāthapiṇḍika was.

Anathapindika would have five hundred monks and nuns come every day and offer them food, and everyone felt so filled with light and serene in his house. So Pasenadi said, "Yes, I want to do that too." He decided to offer a wonderful, delicious meal to five hundred monks every day.

But after some time, he learned from his servants that after the monks were offered the food, they would take it with them and go to their supporters in the city. The monks would give the food to their supporters, and then the supporters would offer it back to the monks.

So King Pasenadi asked, "What's up with that? I'm giving you really good food—what's going on?" He brought this question to the Buddha.

The Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, the courtiers and servants distributing the food did it without any inner feeling at all. It was just their job—give out the food. They could have been following orders as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court. Those were the Buddha's examples. They lacked faith and had no love in the doing of it.

And so when anything is given in that spirit—this is from the Buddha—no one would feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal was made of the most delicious food. So the monks would take it to their supporters, and their supporters would offer it back with a purity of inner intentions. That's the act of generosity. Even though the supporters didn't originally give them the food, it was that purity that makes the receiving and the giving really alive.

There's another statement from the Buddha that emphasizes this same point: "Even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or a pond, thinking while they do it, 'May whatever animals live here feed on this'—that would be a great source of generosity and merit."

We can all do that, right? Pour out our water and say, "May these animals, may these plants live." The mind is being purified in that moment. The heart is being uplifted. Throughout the pouring of water: "May all beings have fresh water." That's all it takes. Over and over and over. You can see how it really changes the way we relate to life and each other, how we recognize that we really are connected in that place. We're not just about "me." It really does bring in an openness of beauty that is very, very powerful.

I wanted to offer something from a talk I heard from Bhante Jnana Panika, who came many years ago to IMS with Sayadaw U Pandita. He was a Nepalese monk, and he gave this talk on generosity that I loved. He offered six points—just six points for the actual practice of giving. I found them lovely, and I want to share them here.

The first: when you're actually giving something—and it could be a book, it could be just your time to listen to a friend, it could be anything, it could be pouring the water on the plants, whatever it is—the first thing is to give attention to the volition with mindfulness. This is all acts of mindful presence with ourselves. You consciously get in touch with a pure volition. So, for example, when pouring water, we can just do it automatically, or we can take a second and reflect, "May I really offer this." That's all. Give attention to the volition. With this act, may all beings be free from suffering. That's a practice. As we wash our hands: may all beings have clean hands. With this act, may all beings be free from suffering. Just try dropping it in over and over and over. See the effect it has on how we feel, how we relate to the world.

The second point: whatever one is giving, take a moment to see if there's any clinging to it, and see if you can just abandon that clinging. If there's a hesitation—should I give this or not?—just take a moment and feel the clinging, not with aversion. Notice the clinging, and sometimes we really can abandon it so the gift is given wholeheartedly. Sometimes not. There are no shoulds.

But just taking that little moment to see, to abandon the clinging.

This third one is interesting—not always possible, but I think it's part of what makes dāna so alive in Burma and Thailand. When it's possible, when it's appropriate, to have the giving and the receiving be direct, face to face. That's really powerful because it increases so much the awareness of the interconnectedness, of the joy, of the love, the mettā that's moving back and forth.

Sayadaw U Pandita made me do that one time. We were on this retreat, and I'd heard him say he wanted a book—kind of a simple book in English, he was learning English—about Jesus, about Christianity. He wanted to learn. So I was sitting, but it was at IMS, so I had a lot of friends, and I had a friend buy the book and give it to him. And also, I

have to say, I was a little shy. I sometimes see myself being shy about giving a gift—it's not good enough, or whatever. So I was hiding a little bit. I was on retreat, I mean, I couldn't do it, but I was also hiding a little bit.

And he could really tell what was going on, a lot. When I came out of the retreat and I was just kind of paying my respects to him, he said, "This book—you take this book, you hand it to me." He said, "It's a wonderful book. Face to face."

So he made me really hand it to him. And then it was like a real teaching, because he took it, we were both holding it, and he was really present. And it's really what they do in Burma and Thailand when you offer dāna or receive—really there. Not like, "Oh, you're so wonderful," but accepting it one hundred percent and saying, "May this gift be a cause for your awakening, for your enlightenment."

Can you imagine giving—and this happens a lot—you give somebody a little thing and they say, "May this be a cause for your... may you realize Nibbāna in the shortest possible time." That's what they say in Burma. Can you imagine being somewhere, you give somebody a Coke, and they say, "May you realize Nibbāna in the shortest possible time"? It's another culture, but it's nice, you know—you want to give them a Coke again.

Again, that nunnery I mentioned to you, that was so kind—the one I was telling the story about. It was another example of the giving face to face. Our friend Jack Kornfield was leading a group this winter. He brought about fifteen people to Burma, kind of on a tour, but they'd all donated a lot of money to a foundation that Jack's on the board of—a project foundation for the people of Burma. So it was really a way to raise money. He actually raised like three hundred thousand dollars; these people had donated to build houses for people who'd been in the cyclone and such. So he was taking them around, and he came to where we were in the monastery. It was their first day, and he knew I was there. He'd call me up and say, "Carol, so can we go see some nuns? Just something—go see some nuns." He wanted to go see this other teacher who wouldn't let him come. So we went to see these nuns, and Ariyañāṇī and Vīrañāṇī, my two Western nun friends, and I thought this was the best place to take them. Of all of them, it's really little, it's really poor, and there's this great mettā feeling.

So we took them there, and we told them, warned them. This group of like fifteen people crowded in. First of all, these big old Westerners crowded into this little room I told you about, and actually started cracking the bamboo floor. I mean, it was a scene. So we're all crouched there, and the little nuns are kind of standing up because there's no room to sit. And they're just talking and telling their story, this and that. That's all.

And then at the end, kind of talking to the head of the group, they wanted to donate some money. They went out, and Jack had said to me, "Oh, we'll give you some money to give to them." I said, "No, no—you give the money to them. That's the whole thing." He said, "Okay, okay."

So they went out, got the money, came in, and offered it, which you do—you just hand it over in an envelope. And they do what they do, and we knew this would blow them away. All the nuns, including the little ones, are standing there, and they chant a mettā chant for like five or ten minutes. These little six-year-olds, they know it, and they're putting their heart into it. And by the end of it, these guys were just... they were gone. They were crying. "Let's give more money!" "No, no, no—that was already a lot. You'll see many, many more people."

You don't need to give more money.

And they came out, and I'm not exaggerating. I saw Jack two months later, and that was the first thing he said: "You knew it was going to be like that, didn't you?" It was just wonderful. They were like floating. It's hard to explain. It's just some little bit of chanting. But it's that face-to-face encounter and the reciprocity—you leave having given, feeling like, who gave? Who received? You received so much more than you gave in terms of the beautiful qualities of heart.

So that's the third recommendation: get face-to-face.

The fourth: when you're giving, and this is obvious, give with your attention, with your mind focused on the giving. Really do it wholeheartedly. This is something I've often noticed in myself—"Oh yeah, yeah, you can have this." But instead, it's really about not making it offhanded, but truly feeling, "Oh yes, I would like to offer this to you." That lets in the moving out of the sense of self. It lets in the absence of ill will, the absence of delusion, the absence of offhandedness. There's that real heart-to-heart generosity. Just mindfulness as you do it.

After giving—this is the fifth one—continue to be mindful of your motivation, your volition. Because you know how sometimes you give and then think, "Oh, I wish I didn't do that." Or you say, "Oh sure, I'll be glad to spend some time with you," and then you go home thinking, "I've got so many other things to do." So continue to be mindful, because it might change. And if it changes, you can again get back to that place of generosity.

The sixth, and this is again important, is the aspect of clear comprehension with all of our mindfulness—to be aware of the broader context. So that when we give, we give in a way that doesn't harm ourselves or harm others. We give in a way that's appropriate. This is an aspect of wisdom.

And there's another quotation from the Buddha about this: "How a person of integrity gives a gift. Five ways a person of integrity gives. Which five? A person of integrity gives a gift with a sense of conviction. A person of integrity gives a gift attentively. A person of integrity gives a gift in season"—meaning at the appropriate time. "A person of integrity gives a gift with an empathetic heart. A person of integrity gives a gift without adversely affecting himself or others."

So there's that aspect of wisdom, very similar to compassionate action—we can't always know all the effects, but there are times we think we want to help, yet it could cause more trouble. The same with giving.

And there's a story, again from Anathapindika, that I really relate to, as it could happen today. Do you give a junkie money, if you know they're going to buy more drugs? I'm not saying we know what the answer is, but there are real ethical questions about what to give.

So Anathapindika, remember, was incredibly rich, and his kindness spread out to his whole family, his whole household, his servants. His family members were all serene and generous, and it spread to his friends—not by teaching, just by being who he was. The generosity and the happiness were contagious.

That said, he had a nephew who inherited a huge fortune but lived a wild life—drinking and gambling, squandering his wealth on entertainers, women, and needy friends. When he spent through his whole inheritance, he asked Anathapindika, his uncle, for money.

His uncle said okay. He gave him a thousand gold pieces, but said, "Use this to start a business. Use it to get yourself going again."

But he didn't. He just squandered it. Then he came back to his uncle again and asked for money. This time, Anathapindika gave him five times as much—five thousand—but said, "This is a severance. This is it. Make something of yourself. No more."

He squandered that and came back again. And this time Anathapindika said he would give him clothing, but nothing else.

Even that he squandered. And the next time he came back, Anathapindika said, "No, I'm sorry, I'm not going to give you anything."

It ended up that he didn't want to be a beggar, and he died wretchedly. His body was found outside the city wall and thrown into the refuse pile. That's pretty wretched. And of course Anathapindika felt terrible and went to the Buddha and said, "What could I have done?"

We have these kinds of situations sometimes in our families, with our friends, with people we know. And you try, you try, you try. So even with the Buddha, even with Anathapindika, there was a point where the giving was adversely affecting them. It wasn't real generosity.

And the Buddha said—so we don't ever know. He could see everybody's lifetimes and history. We don't know that. But he said that Anathapindika really couldn't have done anything. It would have just gone on and on like that. His nephew belonged to the fortunately small number of insatiable people who are like bottomless vats.

I just think that's interesting. Not that we can't all change, but that some of us can just get so inured. So that's the sixth kind of giving: giving aware of the broader context in a way that doesn't adversely affect oneself or another.

The last thing I want to say about the teaching of generosity as part of our path of awakening is this: just as I explained how the Buddha used it as a graduated teaching, when you see your heart and mind is closed, or dull, or dark, when you're caught in clinging or craving, and you listen to the Four Noble Truths, or you think about some teachings that have been so wonderful, and it's just like—you can't get there—call on generosity. Call on virtue, non-harming behavior, which I didn't talk about, but which has the same kind of qualities.

Sometimes in the actions—even the small actions of throwing in water, offering something to a friend, clarifying your motivation, really paying attention—so, actions. But this is something I think we really don't think of or use enough in the West: not only the actions, but the contemplation of our past actions is a very powerful source of brightening and freeing the heart and mind.

The Buddha talked about this. He spoke of six wise reflections. In another place he says that when you're meditating and your mind gets really caught, pulled inside, spinning in something, then consciously call up a wise reflection, a beautiful reflection. Change the channel. Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—those three reflections, which are powerful for people in countries where that arouses a lot of faith. That may or may not be true for us.

But the fourth reflection is to recollect your own virtues, your wholesome, non-harming, kind behavior. The fifth one is where you recollect your own generosity. You consciously remember times that you have been generous and really reflect, let it in, on what a wonderful thing it is for your clarity of mind, awakening of heart, that you have done these generous acts.

We don't tend to do that, right? We sit and think, "Oh, that's really an egotistical thing, to run over all your generous acts." But this is what the Buddha said:

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed at that moment. It's not overcome with aversion. It's not overcome with delusion.

This is exact pointing to the moment-to-moment transformation of mind or heart, simply by recollecting your generosity.

And when the mind is not overcome with passion, aversion, or delusion, her heart heads straight based on generosity. And when the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the goal, a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. And in one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

So, you should develop this recollection. You should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home, crowded with children.

When we recollect generosity, our heart goes straight. We realize the goal, a sense of the Dhamma, and we experience the joy connected with the Dhamma.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Shantideva said, "When I have done something for the sake of another, no amazement or conceit arises."

It is like having fed myself. I look for nothing in return.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 49

Insight

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this Dhamma talk from a full moon observance at IMS Forest Refuge, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of insight (vipassanā) and the conditions that support its arising. She distinguishes between three levels of knowledge found in the suttas: sutamayā paññā (knowledge from hearing), cintāmayā paññā (knowledge from reflection), and bhāvanāmayā paññā (knowledge from direct cultivation)—emphasizing that true insight belongs to this third category and cannot be achieved through thinking alone.*
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> *Wilson uses the vivid analogy of Magic Eye images to illustrate how insight works: just as the hidden image appears only with relaxed, steady attention rather than effortful looking, genuine insight arises through non-clinging awareness rather than striving. She addresses common misconceptions that insight requires subtle or special experiences, demonstrating through practical examples how liberating understanding can emerge from any moment—including restlessness, aversion, or familiar personality patterns—when met with clear mindfulness.*
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> *The talk examines three essential supports for insight: sati (mindfulness) as non-judgmental awareness that receives experience freshly; viriya (energy) understood as patient, courageous persistence rather than forceful striving; and samādhi (concentration) as flexible stability rather than rigid one-pointedness. Wilson draws on teachings from Sayadaw U Tejaniya to explain how a mind colored by kilesa (afflictions) sees only concepts, while a mind free from greed, hatred, and delusion perceives things as they truly are—opening the door to the direct seeing of anicca, dukkha, and anattā.*

Tonight, what I want to talk about is a little bit of Vipassana 101, so I hope you can bear with me. I want to offer some reflections on the nature of insight and what supports the arising of insight. This is, after all, insight practice, vipassana practice.

A lot of times people come and say, "So where are the insights already?" There's a real sense of struggle, of looking for something, waiting for something, practicing in order to acquire. So let's look at what is actually the nature of insight. What are we talking about when we talk about insight?

In the suttas and also the commentaries, three levels or three types of knowledge are spoken of, all of which are valid and useful when we know how to use them together.

The first level or type is what you could call information—in Pali, *suta maya paññ̃a*, that which is heard, that which is learned. This is important; we need the right information to begin to do anything, to support us in what we're doing.

The second level, called *cinta maya paññ̃a* in Pali, means really using that knowledge with our intelligence through thinking, reflection, and contemplation. This is also extremely useful and helpful. The information isn't just something that's retained without any meaning, but rather we've really reflected and contemplated, coming to have a deeper intellectual understanding of it. *Cinta* still means using thought.

Now, for many of us, that thought level, that reflection level of *cinta maya paññ̃a*, presents a challenge. Either we've grown up basically thinking that this is how you learn everything, so we're really stuck there. Then we come to practice and see that we're stuck there, so we start to hate that level and think we don't want to contemplate, we're not supposed to think. Both of those, of course, are exaggerated reactions. To understand how to use thought, reflection, and contemplation with accurate information is very helpful.

The third level, *bhavana maya paññ̃a*—where *bhavana* really means mental cultivation—is the level of insight, of insight knowledge, of deeply understanding what is true.

You can see in this way of delineating three different levels, three different ways of understanding, that insight knowledge is different from thinking about, contemplating, or using our intelligence. We often think of insight as either some experience to get or some kind of knowledge or information that we acquire, understand, and can hold on to.

But I like the translation of *sammā diṭṭhi* as "right view." To me, it's quite literal: viewing accurately, perceiving accurately. It's not holding some idea that everyone else agrees with, but actually perceiving in a moment things the way they are. This shift of perception is one of the ways I like to describe insight, and it's been very helpful to me. It's not a result of thinking.

You all know those moments—you could call them "aha" moments—where suddenly you just perceive something from another angle, in a different way. You didn't get there by thinking about it, though of course we think about it afterwards, which is fine.

So it's some knot or tangle or view in our mind—how we're looking at something, perceiving an experience without even knowing it—that somehow unknots. And it's, "Oh!" You're trying to solve a problem in life, and suddenly you see it from a different angle. That's a moment of insight. It's a radical shift of perspective that then may have an effect on our mindstream, on how we understand, and on how we respond to situ-

ations. It doesn't mean that moment of shift of perspective stays that way. But it's opened another door, another way of perceiving that maybe we didn't even suspect was possible. And it can change everything.

A very simple example that I like to use—no example is ever quite full enough, but this gives a sense. You know those Magic Eye graphic drawings? They have whole books of them, just different colored graphic designs. If you look at it long enough in the right way, suddenly out of this graphic design a specific image will spring out, appearing like a 3D image. What was just graphics and nothing special suddenly becomes two hockey players, or a dinosaur, or a flying saucer.

How do you do that? You can open the book and say, "I want to see the dinosaur." It doesn't work. When you first try to do it, we're trying, we're looking, we're trying to see—and we don't see it. In fact, my mother, bless her, could never see those things. It used to make her so crazy because she'd keep trying. "What's in that one? I can't see it, I can't see it." And she'd get tighter, tighter, tighter. Does that sound familiar?

And how does it work? When there's a steady attention—you can't look away and look back, look away and look back. It has to be a steady, connected attention, but relaxed. Without trying, without looking for a particular thing. Just relaxed, steady, focused attention, without any wanting, without any assumptions. And suddenly—boom—there's the dinosaur.

Now, what I find interesting, the way it relates to Dhamma insight: the dinosaur was always there, right? This shift of perception didn't make something be there that wasn't there. Did it? Or did it? I don't know. Don't believe me. But then when we stop looking in that way, it goes away again, and there's just the graphics—red and yellow, whatever it is. But having seen that, we know there are at least two different ways of perceiving that particular flat piece of paper and colors. And if someone else comes and says, "No, you're crazy," you don't have to get upset about it. You know there are two different ways.

So it doesn't have to stay. The insight doesn't mean it has to stay that way. In fact, it won't stay that way all the time. But seeing that there's another reality, maybe a more accurate way of perceiving—that's the "Oh, that's what impermanence is like!" That's "Oh, that's how I could solve this problem." You all know this, right?

And part of our problem is we then think it should stick, it should stay. Because of course, even though, as I said this morning, we talk about impermanence, really we think, "I've had one insight, I've seen it—okay, that's it." You've seen through that personality pattern, well, maybe a hundred times by now. Aren't you convinced? It's

enough already. It should go away. You've seen how painful craving can be, and I'm sure more than once. Sometimes on some level it can keep being a surprise that we get caught again, because there's a sense that once we've seen it, we're finished.

Or else there's the fear that if I really perceive the impermanent, unsolid nature of everything, every moment—how am I going to function?

If I really perceive that there's no intrinsic, unchanging, self-existent being here, how am I going to be able to find the bathroom when this ends? I'm not going to be able to function in the world.

But that's what's kind of cool about the way insight works. Both levels of reality, if you will, are still perceivable. It's just that mostly we've been going through our life only perceiving in the one way, not even having a clue on a deep level of what other perceptions are possible. If there are only two—though there are many millions.

So we can't hold on to the actual perception of insight. As soon as we start trying to hold on, the clinging in the mind tightens everything up. As soon as you try to hold on to seeing that dinosaur, everything just clocks back into how it used to be.

But it has an effect. That clear seeing has a deep effect on our mindstream. And we trust it. We know it. This is really what we call verified faith. We know for ourselves, this is how it is—even when that's not our perception.

I know for myself that one way of perceiving this body is as a completely fluid arising and passing of moments of sensation, with no shape, no boundaries, no self at all. I know that. Is that my experience right now? Definitely not. It's really very solid, all too solid, all too here. But I know this is one perception, and that reality is not bound up in or limited by that perception.

So it has a very strong effect. Something has changed. With each moment of insight, our views, our assumptions, our unconscious description of ourselves and reality is not quite so fixed. And there might be more of a possibility to respond appropriately in the next situation.

Now, of course, when an insight arises like that, often a huge amount of energy comes with it. It's quite natural, and nothing's wrong, that then the mind tends to think about it, describe the insight, explain it, connect it with things in the past and the future. To some extent, that's fine—that's just normal.

But it's helpful to keep aware of the energy and the thoughts, and notice when it's turned from the useful quality of wisdom, of reflection and contemplation, where the thoughts are really in service of understanding the insight better—and when it shifts to just energy spinning. If you're paying attention, you can feel the difference. "Wow, yeah, everything's impermanent! Oh wow!" It starts to get disconnected, the energy is all over, you're actually not perceiving impermanence at all. You're just spinning. "Oh, that was an incredibly neat insight! How can I explain it to my friends? Let me get on the email..." Wait a minute. What's happening now?

So the thing with insight, that aha moment, just like anything, is to be fully present with it. Notice the effects. Notice how it affects the mindstream. And let it go.

I mean, it's going to go. It's already gone. Letting it go really is a misnomer. We talk about letting something go that's been gone forever. How long? Let go of the idea of thinking it's still here, and wake up again in this moment.

In terms of insight, of course, this can happen with anything. In terms of the Dhamma, it's all in support of what the Buddha said: he taught suffering and the end of suffering, dukkha and the end of dukkha. One of his proclamations, one of his ways of describing that, very familiar to all of you: "The supreme state of sublime peace that has been discovered by the Tathagata—namely, liberation through non-clinging."

That state of heart and mind, a moment of citta, that in that moment is minimally free from clinging, but also supported by mindfulness, by perseverance, by energy, and by samādhi, by collectedness of mind. Those are the three particular supports I want to talk about tonight.

But a moment of insight—that sudden seeing differently—is only possible in a moment of mind that is not clinging, that doesn't already know what it's looking for, that doesn't already know what it wants. There's a great line from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Nothing of value can happen to the mind that knows exactly what it wants." Hard to trust that, though, isn't it?

In terms of our practice here—and I know people are doing all different forms of practice, and that's fine—one place where this sense of non-clinging, of trust, of seeing how this quality of insight arises, is to recognize that it's not dependent on having a particular experience or situation. It's not that insight is only the deep, deep opening into anattā, and anything else is just some little nothing, unimportant. The place where we can see clearly how the mind works, how suffering is created and how it's released through clear seeing—that kind of insight can arise with any experience as its object.

Now, we get a little highfalutin sometimes and really down on ourselves when our experience isn't subtle enough, when we're spending our time spinning out in our personality patterns. Well, the spinning-out part isn't so helpful. But when the main object of our meditation through the day is sometimes our historical personality patterns, we think, "Well, I've got to get over this to get to the possibility for insight, freeing insight."

I've got to get to subtlety. But the insight can reveal how the mind works in all kinds of situations, anything through the day.

One example I love: a woman told me this on a retreat a few years ago. It was a two-week retreat in a pretty crowded room in another country. It was set up sort of like this, except the door would be behind me and no door there. A really crowded room, and she was at the back, having an extremely restless, uncomfortable sitting. She was sleepy. She was tired. Her body was physically uncomfortable—not like pain, but that restlessness and jumpy legs and unpleasant feeling, which she was very aware of.

She just couldn't stand it, so she stood up. Well, once she was standing, of course the thought came: why don't I just leave? That would solve the problem. The problem is I can't be here with this unpleasant, restless mind and unpleasant physical sensations. And the only way to fix it, to get rid of that suffering, is to get the heck out of here.

But because it was so crowded and not with good pathways... social embarrassment often keeps us staying with something long enough to actually see it in a different way, which is what happened to her. That's what the structure of retreat can be helpful for. We don't just run on our habits. The only way out of unpleasant? Get the heck out of here. That's what we know.

So she stood there. And then because she didn't feel comfortable to leave, she started paying attention. And all of a sudden—just that simplicity of steady paying attention, being mindful of what was there, instead of just thinking, how can I leave? How can I leave?—she said, okay, what's happening? Unpleasant sensation, aversion in the mind, and suddenly: oh, it's just uncomfortable sensation. What's the problem?

You can't talk your way into that. You can't really think your way into that. And you can't make it happen again when it's happened before, as I'm sure you've all tried. But we can when there's just that steady mindfulness that let go of the clinging to wanting it different, that let go of the view—probably unspoken in her mind—that the only way, only freedom from this suffering is to get rid of the unpleasant experience. She was able to just rest at ease in the arising of that unpleasant situation. Oh, uncomfortable sensation is like this. No problem.

She told me this because it was really a huge insight for her, really very liberating. And you see, that kind of liberation is not really about just liberating one from the unpleasantness of the moment. It's so easy to slide back into the almost subconscious idea or view that freedom or liberation basically means getting away from that which we don't like. And then that which we don't like becomes the problem. We get into struggle with that. And then our whole practice becomes how to get rid of this so I can experience some insight. Or maybe you don't even want insight—maybe you really just want to only have pleasant feelings. Good luck.

So, in terms of the possibility of insight arising, I just want to make this point again: it can arise through any experience. You practice, and you'll know this. Those of you who've been here for some time or who will be here for some time might see how the practice can go in so many different directions. Sometimes each retreat has its own flavor. Sometimes if you're on a long retreat, just as you're settling in and thinking, ah, now this is how it's going to be—it's pretty calm, I'm just with the breath, there's not much emotion, and now I've got the sense of it—

And suddenly, from out of nowhere, something happens—or nothing happens. Just some memory comes up and you're thrown into really deep-seated and painful historical personality patterns. And you think, "Well, this is hindrances. I just need to get rid of this, get back to the breath, and get calm again." And we're caught in the struggle. "This is in the way of my practice. I came to this really refined retreat center for a couple of months to experience subtlety, to experience calm, to finally get somewhere in my practice. If I just wanted to spin in my stories about my childhood and being hurt and how much I'm striving and how worthless I am, I could have stayed home and done that very well at home."

You know the drill. It's easy not to trust that. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's not about getting past anything.

Insight arises into seeing how the mind and heart work to create suffering in this moment when it's seen accurately—whether that's seeing impermanence, whether those personality patterns come and go due to conditions. We don't need to fight them or hate them or own them. We stop struggling and just see: "Ah, it's another arising experience. I can see why this personality pattern arises. I know my whole history. It comes up in this situation. When it comes up, there's fear. Fear feels like this." Mindful. And it goes away. And then it's lunchtime and I'm hungry. That's the next thing to notice.

Huge liberating insight can arise from just being willing to rest at ease in our old familiar personality patterns. Often they come up not about the past but in relationship to the meditation experience itself. And this is often where we see them really deeply—our patterns of striving, our patterns of discouragement, our patterns of not even realizing we're trying to make a certain thing happen until we've hit our head against the wall for three months and realize it's not happening and something finally lets go. "Oh, that's what it's like to relax." We can't make it happen. But in any context, it can happen.

There are many examples. This one I'm making up from another retreat—no one here said this. Just so, in case it happens to match your experience, you don't have to feel like I'm using your story, because I'm not using anyone's story. But where someone is just feeling, every time they see somebody, a huge aversion at the way someone walks or at a particular behavior that person does. And maybe noticing the aversion and trying to work with it—which means maybe noting it, trying to feel it, or maybe more likely judging it, or trying to pretend they don't feel it, or trying to send mettā, or all the different things we do that sometimes work to get rid of the aversion and sometimes don't.

Until finally there's that moment of, "Oh, aversion's like this." You feel it, and unbidden comes a huge and really deep rush of compassion, of connection—a sense of that person, the sense (of course it's a projection, but the felt sense) of the suffering that would lead to such behavior that's driving you crazy. And in that compassion, there's no driving you crazy. It's connectedness. It's non-separation. It's just so clearly a truer way to be in the world. It's not even about me and other anymore. That's a huge insight that arises quite spontaneously through the willingness to be present with something that we think we should be beyond by now.

That's just one of a million examples. I don't have to give more. I want to talk a little bit about what supports this arising of insight. There are many things. As I said, I just want to briefly touch on sati, samādhi, and viriya—mindfulness, collectedness, and energy. The meditation aggregate of the Eightfold Path, you could say. But there are other things that also support insight arising in different situations. I'm not going to go any more into it tonight because there's not enough time. But remembering that the insight is in the service of understanding suffering and what leads to the release of suffering.

Suffering is based on confusion, on delusion—on recognizing inaccurately and responding inappropriately in ways that we think will make us happy, but that actually increase our confusion and delusion. That's samsara.

A big part of our habit, and I've already alluded to this quite a few times, is that we tend to look outward—to the content of our experience, to the subtlety or grossness of our experience, to the depth of our experience, to getting our practice to match a certain idea. If we came to cultivate one-pointed concentration and what we're getting is something different, it's so easy to fall into thinking, "I can't progress, I can't cultivate wisdom and insight until I get it back in line with the idea I had." It's so easy to look outward, thinking a better object will give us deeper insight.

But insight has nothing to do with the object.

Our whole practice is really about the purification of heart and mind, isn't it? The definition of a completely awakened being is one in whose heart and mind there's no more arising of greed, of hatred, of delusion. And all the various techniques of our so-called meditation practice—but really of our life of spiritual awareness, not just meditation practice—all the different skillful means exist to incline our mind more towards non-hatred, non-greed, and non-delusion, rather than reinforcing the habits of wanting, the habits of dislike or fear, the habits of delusion. Delusion shows up as either not knowing what's going on, or else imputing everything that's going on to being about me—two forms of confusion.

So our practice isn't about getting the correct object. It's not about trying to see the object more clearly. It's not about looking out at what's happening at all, but about learning to recognize and trust. This is where awareness, mindfulness itself, is our indispensable support and tool—recognizing the quality of the citta, of the mind itself, in any one moment.

We may not be arhats—probably we're not. It's only imagination, perhaps, what it would be to live without greed, hatred, and delusion. But for sure, we all experience many, many moments of heart and mind, of citta, of conscious awareness that are not colored by wanting, not colored by hatred or fear, not colored by confusion or fogginess or making everything revolve around me.

We may not notice those moments so much. We may tend to notice the greed, the confusion, the aversion more. That's okay—the noticing of it is also mindfulness. The real problem is when we not only don't notice the moments of pure heart and mind, but we also don't notice the moments of kilesa, of the afflictions—greed, hatred, delusion. Then we're looking at experience through a conscious moment that's colored by that. Colored by wanting. Colored by "it's all about me." Colored by fear. And when we don't recognize that our consciousness is colored in that moment, our perceptions are off.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya has an interesting way of talking about this that I like very much. He uses very down-to-earth language. He says the quality of the mind is matched with the object that it recognizes. In other words, insight comes to the deserving mind. I know that feeds into "I'm good" and "I'm bad," so try and throw that away. But what he's saying is really interesting: a mind that is colored by kilesa—by greed, by hatred, by confusion—that we're not recognizing, that moment of mind, of citta, that moment of recognition will observe through the kilesa. And so that mind, he calls it kilesa mind, will only see concept, will take the concept to be reality.

So when that woman was standing and feeling like she couldn't stand it—thinking her problem was this unpleasant feeling and the only way out was to get away from it—that's taking the concept to be reality. When I'm sitting and there's a burning sensation in my knee and I think, "My knee is killing me, I can't bear this another moment, and that's just the way it is"—that's kilesa mind taking concept to be reality.

Now, concepts are useful. But taking the concept to be reality—that's what the Buddha talks about in his inverted perceptions. There are three, really four, where we see what is changing, what is impermanent, and we perceive it as permanent. We perceive what is not satisfying as being satisfying. We perceive what is dukkha as being reliable, as not dukkha. We perceive what has no intrinsic self-existence as being me or mine. We actually perceive the world this way. And it really seems true, right? We know that it seems true.

And we may have the heard information that everything's changing. We may have the *cintā mayā paññā*, the level of reflection and contemplation, where it really makes total sense—we really do know everything's changing. We wouldn't have an argument with someone who said, "No, everything's not changing." We'd say, "No, it's changing." And we've even had insight on the third level of the constant change, but the insight comes and goes.

So in the moments when there's delusion, not seeing accurately, when there's some clinging to sense of self or wanting stability or comfort—and this clinging can be on a subtle level, we don't even know it's there sometimes because we're looking out—that's when we perceive permanence. And that's seeing concept.

The second level, what he calls *vipassanā* mind, I would call a mind with clear mindfulness. Just a moment of awake mind, awake consciousness. There's mindfulness, there's energy, and there's not greed or wanting, and we're not telling a story about me. In that moment, then we see things the way they are. We can see the concept, but we also can see underneath it, recognize. I'm just using "see" as a way to talk about all different modes of perception with all the different senses.

So he says *vipassanā* mind, without greed, without hatred, without delusion, observes things as they are. And that's a moment you could call *vipassanā* mind, a moment when insight is possible.

So what supports that? Again, I've talked about mindfulness and what I mean by it—you all know what mindfulness is. I'll just say very simply, that power of a moment of awareness, in a moment of consciousness, knowing what's happening without assumption or judgment or comparing. That willingness—it really just feels like a willingness to be. As Ajahn Sumedho says, his language is so great: "Oh, it's like this," whatever it is. Resting at ease in whatever arises. Oh, burning is like this. Fear is like this. Discouragement, thinking my practice is no good—thoughts are like this. Discouragement feels like this. Subtle, subtle *sukha* is like this. *Mettā* is like this. Words of the *mettā* just spinning, spinning, spinning in my mind and feeling aversion—is like this. Memories from my past—is like this. Whatever.

That quality of mindfulness brings that sense of trust and freshness to whatever's arising. Not looking for anything, but as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, awareness receiving experience. No clue what the next moment's experience will be. As soon as there's a sense of leaning into what we're looking for in the next moment, there's a little subtle wanting there, a little subtle judgment. It's like all the freshness, all the openness, all the mystery snaps shut.

It's fascinating to explore that. Fascinating. And then we get interested in it, because even that's just another moment of wanting, and awareness snapping shut—it's like this. There's nothing that awareness, a moment of mindfulness, cannot be present with.

And so when we get, at times, kind of caught up in seeing the *kilesas*, the defilements—I don't like that word—the afflictions, seeing greed, seeing how much aversion there is, seeing how every second thought is about me, we can actually get reactive to that, thinking, "Oh no, it's hopeless." Or we can just bring mindfulness to that. Oh, wanting feels like this. And in that moment, the wanting is simply another arising appearance. Aversion is just another arising appearance. The sense of self, another arising appearance. No problem. Nothing awareness can't be with.

So that's the mindfulness. I'm just very brief on these three, because each of them is like three whole talks. The mindfulness, and then the way I want to talk about *viriya* tonight in this simple context, in this really broad context—*viriya* in the sense of energy. It's not a physical energy, it's a mental energy, but *viriya* in the sense of gentle, patient persistence. Really the aspect that we often talk about in our practice as continuity.

But try not to jump when you hear "continuity" to thinking that means I have to be mindful every moment, and if I'm not, I'm not continuous, and therefore I'm a failure. I don't mean that. But the intention, the willingness to just—every moment we wake up, no matter what you're doing all day, twenty-four seven—to just show up with mindfulness for this moment.

Relaxed yet persistent awareness.

This is really huge because it's this continuity of awareness that allows a natural momentum of mindfulness to begin to develop. You know how, as you practice, at first it's remembering to bring awareness to this, bring awareness to this, bring awareness to this—and it gets easier, right? You've all experienced that it does get easier. I'm not saying it stays easier, but it gets easier. And there are times when that momentum actually takes off on its own and you don't feel like you are putting in any effort at all.

It's the steady, gentle continuity that allows this momentum to happen. And it also allows the opportunity to be here for the completion as a whole process unfolds, where we actually might see—this is what allows insight to arise—see a process begin, go through all its moves, and actually end. See the effects of that process. See the causes of that process. It's only continuity of awareness that allows this aspect of reality to present itself.

So in terms, for example, of anicca, these vipalasas, these inverted perceptions that the Buddha talked about—take anicca. It's kind of the most obvious one: seeing permanence where there is no permanence. Even though we know the mind is doing that, it's still so difficult to see through. Because the habit of imputing permanence and the perceptions of imputing permanence are just so deeply habituated that it's easy to miss the impermanence.

And one of the really strong supports for the insight into impermanence—for all the insights—is the continuity of awareness, the steadiness of awareness. We don't have the conscious power, would that we did, to decide "Now I'm going to see impermanence." Or "Today I'm going to work on anatta, and by this evening I will be perceiving moment-to-moment arising and passing away of all phenomena." Would that that worked! I'm sure we've all tried it one way or another. It doesn't work. "Now I will move into deep samādhi. I have the deep intention not to move from my breath." Good luck.

It takes effort, but not the effort of striving. Not at all. When I'm talking about virya here, I mean patience, persistence, the willingness to keep showing up—this moment, this moment, this moment. But virya in terms of wise energy is patience. You really have to see what's the attitude in the mind that's feeding that energy. And this is where we so often get into knots in our life and here in our meditation practice.

Again, this is the way Tejaniya talks about it because it's very simple. Wise virya, when it's coupled with mindfulness, when it's coupled with a moment of mind and heart that isn't fed by, colored by confusion, wanting, or greed—and it's actually really simple to notice if we remember to notice.

So when this energy of gentle, persistent patience, willingness to be with what is, whatever is—that's real virya. That leads to continuity. When we have enormous energy, we're pulling it up, it feels like resolution, it's really strong willpower, you're here for every moment—but you check. And all that energy trying to focus, trying to see clearly, when you really look: what's feeding it? You see that you're wanting something particular to happen. You're expecting something particular to happen, or you're looking for something.

One thing I've seen myself do a lot—and I even think I'm just being mindful of whatever's arising, whatever arises is fine—but I need to see it more clearly. Behind that needing to see it more clearly, I spent a whole retreat discovering: wow, that's nothing but craving. I thought I was completely choiceless, whatever arises, but "see it clear, that's not clear enough." Lots of virya. Wise virya? No. Craving.

Ah, that's craving. Craving is like this. Unclear is like this. And there's no problem. That's the insight.

That's the release of suffering in that moment.

Or the reverse. We're bringing up all our commitment and we're kidding ourselves. We don't quite let ourselves see that we're being with this experience to make something stop happening—to get rid of something. Okay, pretty clear. That's aversion. That's dosa.

Or confusion. Well, confusion—we forget to check because that's the nature of confusion. At one level, the basic level, you don't even know what's going on. You don't know what mindfulness is being with. You don't know what awareness is with. Okay, that's confusion. That's moha, delusion.

But also, the more subtle and even deeper level of moha is making it about me. What's happening is either me or mine. Wrong view. That's another level of confusion that will lead us into one of the other two. Because it's me or mine, it either needs to get better or it needs to go away. So you don't have greed or aversion without confusion. You can have confusion without greed or aversion—just like, "Duh, I don't know what's going on."

So this quality of virya—not trying to make things turn out the way you want them to be, but this total willingness to be totally present with this moment, every moment, without expectation—that's an enormous and amazing power that leads to the steadiness of awareness that actually allows us to see through these inverted, these confused perceptions about sense of self. Which is a great place to see it: ideas we have about ourselves, ideas we have about our practice.

A story I tell a lot. A friend who was a cook—well, she cooked a lot, she used to cook a lot at retreats—and she was known by herself and by her friends as being, quote, an "aversive person." A lot of anger, a lot of critical mind. And so she came one day and was saying to the other cooks what an aversive personality she has. And they were all going, "Yeah, it's true, you really are." Even though that was her sakkāya-diṭṭhi, her personality view, it was still a little demoralizing to have everyone agreeing so fervently.

So she came to one of the sittings on the retreat—it was just a one-hour sitting. She told me this later and said she sat down. She'd done years and years of practice. So she sat down and said, "Okay, I have this view: I'm aversive. I'm just going to be present moment by moment by moment with everything that comes up"—watching her mind, watching her emotions, watching her ideas.

And she said it was fascinating. She said, yeah, quite a few aversive, critical thoughts came up about herself, about others, about what was arising in the moment. She said, but that was maybe only ten percent. There were plenty of generous thoughts. There were moments of love. There were lots of times of calm and concentration. There were moments of all kinds of stuff. She said, how come she picked those ten percent of aversive thoughts—and they weren't all in a block either, you know—and said, "That's who I am"?

What allowed her to see through that was just the mindfulness and the virya in the sense of patient, persistent willingness to be here, be here, be here for whatever's arising, without judgment.

That quality of virya—and one other definition of virya I'd like to add—is courage. Courage meaning not shrinking back from the difficult. It's actually one of the commentarial descriptions of virya: not shrinking back from the difficult. You know, we kind of go, "Ah, that's too much." That moves into sloth and torpor, actually. It's just a little too hard. But virya—that doesn't mean get out a hammer and hit what's happening.

It just means that willingness to be here. So mindfulness supported by virya is not discriminatory, not choosing "I'll be with this and not with that." The steadiness of continuity is what allows for deeper aspects of reality to reveal themselves.

I read a line by Colette recently where she said, "Look long at what pleases you, and even longer at what pains you." I like that. I just feel like if you add "and also at what you don't notice as being pleasant or not," it becomes a lovely description of mindfulness—non-discriminatory, non-hierarchical, just what's happening now.

And the steadiness of virya and the steadiness of mindfulness, when they start to get that momentum, cultivate and turn into samadhi, often translated as concentration. But here again, in this broader context, I want to talk about it not only as the kind of absorption-focused, one-pointed deep samadhi. That's often what we think about when we talk about concentration.

In all these years of talking to people who meditate, I couldn't even begin to say how often—out of all the qualities being cultivated in the practice, all the experiences, all the insights—how much people pick out this one factor of concentration. And I'm using the English word on purpose because it has all kinds of connotations for different people. How often people come in and say, "My concentration isn't good," which tells us basically, as a teacher, nothing except that the person is judging. That's about all it tells you. Or "My concentration is good"—that also tells you very little. Good compared to what? Bad compared to what? And why is that the one thing we single out?

I'm saying this because often concentration is thought about only in terms of absorption, in terms of deep one-pointedness. In this level of samadhi that I'm talking about, in terms of feeding insight, it isn't always necessary for that deep level of one-pointedness. Samadhi is also translated as a stability of mind, a collectedness. But the collectedness can be a steadiness, a stability that doesn't fall into reactivity with whatever's arising—that steadiness of awareness on objects that can be changing with greater or lesser rapidity.

The Pali word that Mahasi Sayadaw used was khanika samadhi, momentary samadhi. In terms of the mindfulness and that gentle perseverance of no matter what's happening through the day, it cultivates quite naturally the steadiness, a peaceful, relaxed quality of mind, but one that is stable—stable in that things don't throw it off so much. You can feel it. It takes a little longer to develop because you can't develop it by forcing. And so just that moment to moment to moment to moment. After a while, the mind becomes non-distractable in that nothing is a distraction; everything can be included.

As Ajahn Sumedho says about mindfulness, mindfulness is the point that includes. This quality of samadhi is a flexible, light, stable quality of mind that just isn't thrown off. It's not fragile, it's not brittle, it's not heavy. And when we do get thrown off, it comes back really quickly.

Just a quick example: I was practicing with U Tejaniya in Burma, and in his meditation center there's not silence. People can come up and talk to you, and you're practicing in a very open way with just whatever's arising, not deliberately focusing on any anchor at all. I was doing walking meditation and just being with whatever, and someone came up to me and started talking. I'd been there long enough that at least I didn't get into aversion. It really takes us Western heavy-duty vipassana meditators a little bit of time to get over the sense that my practice is being bothered when someone comes up to talk. So I was past that. They came up and talked. I turned and talked and then went back.

And very interesting—my mind actually was more present and settled after the talking rather than less. I really got this sense of this flexible yet stable, non-distractable quality of samadhi that develops.

These qualities of mindfulness, of this flexible samadhi, and of continuity, persistence, patience, that steadiness of awareness—these are qualities that allow for this non-clinging shift of perception, what we call insight, to arise.

I'll just end with a short quotation from Francisco Varela, the scientist: "The purpose of calming the mind in Buddhism is to render the mind able to be present with itself long enough to gain insight into its own nature and functioning."

Just learning to be present with our mind, no matter what it's doing. Wisdom arises by itself. We don't have to create it—in fact, we can't. If we can just trust the steadiness of awareness, wisdom arises by itself.

It's actually a huge relief.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment, and then we'll close with chanting together.

CHAPTER 50

Anything Can Happen: Faith & Confidence in Awareness

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *Drawing inspiration from the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall on its 20th anniversary, Carol Wilson offers a profound exploration of saddhā (faith/confidence) as understood in the Abhidhamma. Rather than faith in something stable or known, she presents saddhā as the active quality of "placing one's heart upon" the present moment—a willingness to trust awareness itself amid the mystery of not knowing.*
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> *Wilson examines how our background assumptions and personality patterns create a cage of familiar suffering, and how we habitually return to these constructions rather than resting in moments of natural peace and ease. Drawing extensively from Ajahn Sumedho's teachings, she suggests that liberation isn't about getting rid of anything, but about shifting our refuge from personality to awareness. She references Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching on "Nibbāna for everyone"—those ordinary moments of coolness when greed, hatred, and delusion are temporarily absent—suggesting these occur far more frequently than we notice.*
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> *The talk addresses a key obstacle for Western practitioners: the tendency to doubt our own insights and moments of freedom because our personalities feel so solid and believable. Wilson encourages practitioners to investigate the simple arising of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings that underlie our complex stories of self, and to develop confidence in awareness that doesn't require understanding, achieving, or landing anywhere—just being fully present with what is.*

Tonight, today, it's all over the news—the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It's been all over the news and all over Europe. They're celebrating it. And I remember, and this actually touches me deeply. I don't know why. I was never even at the Berlin Wall. But I remember the time when that happened. Twenty years ago, we were in the middle of teaching a three-month retreat, so I remember it really clearly. And the sense of it being so unexpected, so unknown, how it just kind of happened all of a sudden and actually by chance, as we find out now.

So in honor of that, I want to talk tonight about the reality that anything can happen. I want to talk about faith and confidence in the mystery of unknowing. Because we don't know.

It turns out, I just read this now, that the night they took away the restrictions and people started just going across, it hadn't been planned at all. The East German government hadn't planned it. There had been a lot of demonstrations for days, and the government was shaky, and the leader had been taken out. But a spokesman for the government was speaking on the radio, and they heard it in East and West Berlin. He said, without realizing that it wasn't true and he didn't have the authorization, that the travel restrictions were going to be lifted on East Berlin and West Berlin people going across the wall—that you could go across. When the interviewer asked when, he said immediately. It turned out he didn't have the authority to say that at all. But everybody heard him on the radio, and that was it. They just all ran to the wall and started going back and forth, and that was it. That was the end of it. So you never know. You never know. It's just so amazing.

That's what I want to talk about. *Saddhā*, the word in Pali that we translate as faith or confidence—it is, in the Abhidhamma manual of mental states, the first of the beautiful mental factors in the list of all the beautiful mental factors. We tend to think of faith in the normal English way of speaking, of having faith or confidence in something particular—in a person, in a belief system, or in knowing something is true, some kind of stable, static thing or understanding that we can rely on and have faith in. And of course, that's not the meaning of faith at all.

Saddhā is, as all mental factors are, active, changing, arising and passing in a moment. It has the characteristic of placing faith, or one of the translations I like—I don't know how accurate it is—of placing one's heart upon. It's really this active quality. It manifests as confidence, as resolution, as the energy to do, as Sayadaw U Pandita likes to say, as non-fogginess, to set forth as one might set forth to cross a flood. These are all things I'm reading from the manual of Abhidhamma.

So it has this energy, this brightness. It has the function of—now I'm talking for myself—uplifting and brightening the heart and mind. That's really the quality of faith. It's easy for us to think of it as an intellectual investment in something to give us stability and safety. And it does give us stability and safety, but not in something. That's the way I want to look at it tonight: the sense of a quality of confidence, but not in a deluded way.

This is where we come into how the Buddha often spoke about practicing his teachings as if to swim against the flow of the stream of society and culture, or against the flow of the stream of our own so-called personality, habit patterns, ways that we think. And this is where it gets really interesting, where really anything can happen, where we don't know.

How we perceive and think about things—sort of what I talked a little about last week, about insight being a shift in how we perceive an experience, and that shifts how we think about it. But how we think about the world and ourselves, how we perceive, is so often taken for granted. We're so used to it that we don't even notice those inverted perceptions I talked about, where we perceive what is in constant flux and change as being stable and solid. And that's just so normal—normal because habitual—that we don't even think about it. We don't even recognize what the ideas are, the views, the constructions, the explanations that are sort of in the back of our mind, the way Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about. What are the ideas working in the back of the mind that are actually guiding the way we experience and describe our life, ourselves, and our practice?

We all generally operate in the world with a sort of accepted understanding of things: that things change, but only later; that of course there is a self; that if we can get more pleasant things, we'll be happy; that I have a certain personality—whatever our beliefs are. And awareness practice, our awakening practice of just exploring what's happening, what's arising and passing in this moment, is very much a stepping outside of our comfortable—comfortable because familiar, maybe not even pleasant, but familiar—stepping outside of our comfortable views and explanations and understandings of the world.

And not stepping into another one that we're creating. Years ago, I was with Poonjaji in India for quite some time, and he used to always say, "Pick up your foot and don't put it down again." I used to think, what the heck is he talking about? He meant pick up your foot out of one construction and don't put it down in another. Can we just have confidence in that mystery of not knowing—that alive, awake, vibrant, fragile moment?

So just to give an example of how the way we're used to thinking, the ideas in the background that we don't even know we have, how they color our perceptions, let me tell you a little story.

I was in Burma last winter with several friends. We were traveling to two or three different nunneries and monasteries and offering some food, some dāna, to villagers who were still suffering from the cyclone of the year before. And as you do in these situations in Burma, you take a lot of photos. There's always a lot of photos of giving and receiving—it was a whole big thing. So when we got back to the monastery where we were staying, two of the friends, both Western women who were nuns, one of them put her photos from her camera on her computer.

This woman had been a nun for many, many years in Burma. So even though Western, she had absorbed Burma's very faith-based culture. And by faith, I mean faith in the teachings of the Buddha, in the cosmology as it's described in the suttas—different realms of celestial beings and human beings and suffering beings. That was really working in the background for her.

So she put her photos on the computer. There were a lot of them. But several of them, more than one, quite a few, in the same kind of locations, had these really perfectly round, brilliant spots that look like spots of light on some of us, right on some of our bodies. And I just kind of said, "Oh, that's interesting." And this woman said, "Oh, those are devas." Not like maybe or I think—that's what it is. She went and showed the Sayadaw.

Then our other friend, also a nun, but with a scientific background, a very scientific mind—immediately she said, "That's a little kind of moisture that collects on the lens and it's just refracting the light."

And I thought, well, who knows? I don't know either one. It will be interesting.

So I got home here and put my pictures from a different camera in. And in the same scene, but the pictures were different, these same kind of spots of light appeared in different ways. And I thought, hmm, who knows?

First, I just love that space: Who knows? And notice how our mind likes to come down somewhere.

Then I told this story at IMS last month, and it got to be quite fun because it engendered a whole kind of—not exactly debate, but different experiences. One guy who works over there immediately said, "Oh, there was another photo this summer from a Vipassana teacher meeting in England." And of many photos, this one photo was sent around on email of three people, three of the teachers who were kind of directing that day. One of them was Ajahn Sumedho. And on him, there was this exact same round, bright spot. The people sending the email around asked, "Well, what could this be?" I just didn't go there. I just left it alone. But later, he said, "Oh, that often happens in photos of him."

So I mentioned that, and then this friend who works over at IMS said, "That's ridiculous. That's not devas. You just have to look in that photo—you can see there's a glass of water, and the light's refracting off that water. That's what it is."

I said, "Okay."

Then Kathleen, who works here, said, "I've got to show you my photo of all the devas in this grove at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's." And she brings me a photo of what looks like the Jeta Grove or something—all these trees, and it's kind of dark, and there's all these monks and people, and there's these spots of light all over the place.

And then, just to top it off—I know I'm going on, but I'm enjoying it—just as it happens, the scientific-minded friend happened to be visiting for a few days recently.

And she told me, "I don't know, I may be coming around to the deva view." Because she had just been in Tiruvannamalai, which is Ramana Maharshi's ashram. She was there on the August full moon, when a few Indian pilgrims come to walk around the mountain. A few—like two and a half million. I'm not exaggerating. Two and a half million people walking around that mountain. She said it's completely solid, wall-to-wall people around the whole mountain the entire night. It's a trip. India is so much fun. That's just a few people showing up in India.

So they did that, they walked around the mountain. And then she said, "I just went out and took some photos. There were no lights. There was nothing you could say was refraction." And when she looked at the photos, they were all over the place—these orbs everywhere.

So who knows? And I love that. Can we just rest in that space? That vibrant, open, connected space that doesn't have to land in explanation and knowing. It doesn't have to shut any doors. There might be one explanation that's accurate, but that's not really what's important. It's that quality of awakened, connected interest that doesn't need to limit the experience by knowing what things are.

This is really the opening into confidence and faith—not faith in some explanation, but the confidence and trust to be able, at times, or willing, to open into that vibrant place of unknowing. Which means to be able or willing to be just totally here, to place one's heart upon reality as it's manifesting in this moment, without ever knowing what's next, or without needing to have a whole explanation about it.

As Ajahn Sumedho says—and I'll be quoting from him quite a bit from this one article, if I can find it... I put it somewhere special so I could find it again. Here it is.

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is simply about knowing these things fully, that they are what they are at this moment."

It's radical, but just at this moment, things are as they are. Awareness is just putting one's whole being, really—energy, whatever you want to say here—without needing to evaluate, to judge, to self-reference, to understand.

So it's really helpful and interesting in our practice, as we keep noticing moment after moment what's happening, to recognize the ideas, the views, the self-judgments, the expectations, the assumptions that are working in the background, so to speak. I think this is why Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts so much emphasis on the right attitude or having the right information. What I'm saying here is: let's just notice what information we're believing, what information we're using to drive the bus, where we're trying to take it as if we even know. Because that's going to skew our perception. It's going to skew what we're trying to make happen. It's going to warp things if we're not aware.

We can be aware of the views—that's fine. Of course we have views and opinions and explanations. That's not a problem when we just know it. But when we don't recognize them and take them for the truth, that's when we're running up against the brick wall.

So this is actually a kind of skillful attention with thought. When you feel that you're struggling, when you feel you're in confusion, when your practice doesn't seem to be going well, or you're feeling like you're failing, or you're feeling discouraged—you might just stop and actually look, for a bit, at the content of the thoughts that are feeding that mental state. The thoughts that are convincing you, that are giving you such good evidence that you're basically a loser, that you're doing it all wrong, that it's hopeless.

Instead of just saying, "No, bad, I know that's not true," sometimes say, "I know it's not true, but let's see actually what it is that's not true. What am I believing here?" Just for a short time, that kind of skillful investigation of thought can be quite interesting.

Sumedho gives the example of something like: we believe "I'm someone who grasps and has a lot of desires, a lot of aversion, a lot of self-judgment, and so I have to practice in order to get rid of these things. I have to practice in order to stop grasping. I'm somebody who has to do something to become enlightened in the future."

You could probably agree with that, right? Just notice what we might be thinking, without needing to construct a new belief in its place.

It's all here right now. Just watch the mind that does that—the sense that somehow reality is somewhere else, freedom is somewhere else. We have to do something to get there, or we have to get rid of ourselves to see it, or whatever the heck we have going on back there. Just notice it.

It's also interesting to me looking at how language both can show us our limiting views and ideas, and can also reinforce those limiting views if we're not really aware of it. I've used this example before, but I read a book about nonviolence sometime, and the interesting part that stuck with me was the author talking about the use of the word "nonviolence"—or in Sanskrit, *ahimsa*—and how in that word "nonviolence," the operative word is *violence*. The "non" is like a negation of this thing, violence. So in "nonviolence," the main thing your mind goes to is violence.

He gives the example: What if the only word for war were "non-peace"? Doesn't it just shift things? "Oh, there's non-peace happening in Zimbabwe now." And you get a sense—maybe it doesn't do it for you, but for me there's this sense of—what if the norm is really other than what we've been assuming? And we don't even know what we've been assuming. It's where the attention gets drawn. In nonviolence, the attention gets drawn to violence. In non-peace, the attention gets drawn to peace.

So in this possibility of having confidence in the unknowing, in the not needing to land, just hold the possibility that rather than "I'm someone who has to get rid of the *kilesas*, the defilements, in order to reach nirvana"—and it would seem to be true from our experience that greed and hatred and delusion and the hindrances, that's the norm. Of course we have to struggle to get rid of them. And we may not buy into nirvana being somewhere else—we may believe that pure mind and heart, the nature of mind, is here. But really, we think, I can't experience it very much. I know it's here, but I'm still hopeless and can't get there. Even if it's here, I know it's here—I still can't get here. I'm somewhere else, whatever.

But just what if we could imagine shifting the paradigm? Just imagine that really the natural peace and ease of mind and body is the norm, is the truer, more real experience. What if we're just so not in the habit of noticing that we absolutely don't notice? Not that there's something else to do, but that we could actually learn to shift our refuge, to shift where we really have confidence.

And of course we can't do this by willpower. I'm just saying this as a what if, okay? What if? Don't land in any "this is how it is." But just what if our path is not to get rid of anything—not even to get rid of our so-called false sense of self—is not to change our personality, but simply to discover, rediscover, a shift of refuge, a shift of interest, a shift of what we really place our confidence, our heart on. A shift from fighting with or having faith in all the difficult aspects, the so-called me, me, me, to just actually recognizing and trusting natural peace and ease.

No big explosive experience am I talking about. Just what Ajahn Buddhadasa calls—and it's a little playful—he calls it "Nibbana for everyone." Ajahn Buddhadasa was one of the most famous forest monks in Thailand in the last century. He died in the nineties. I spent some time there when I was a nun, spent some time with him. He liked to be a little bit poking, a little provocative for Thailand. And so in one article he's talking about how *nibbana* in Thai means "cool." He's saying that nibbana, or freedom, liberation, the liberation of non-clinging—he said it's the coolness that results from the extinction of the defilements. Defilements are greed, hatred, and confusion, right? Greed, hatred, delusion.

And so he says, where there's this extinction of the defilements, there's what may be called nirvana, whose meaning is cool. And then he goes on to say that of course, if you look at greed, hatred, delusion, they're mental factors. They are compounded—the *sankharas*, compounded things. And so they come into being through conditions and pass away through conditions. In other words, they're just as impermanent as everything else.

And impermanence, remember, doesn't mean that things come into being and last a long, long time—your whole life—and then go away when you die. No. Impermanence means arising and passing in every moment. To the mind that wants permanence, that's shockingly scary. But to the mind that's simply present—wow, this moment's arising and passing.

It's like someone was telling me they had looked at one of those slow-motion time-lapse videos of a flower growing and blooming, and how you can see from nothing the stem comes up and it's slowly growing, and there's the leaf and the flower, and then it's decaying. There's never one moment that's static, and there's never one moment you can say "now that's the leaf" or "that's the flower." Each moment is a death and a birth, a death and a birth. That's impermanence. And opening into that is always a mystery, because no matter what we think we know, we never know what's going to happen.

No one knew the Berlin Wall was going to come down that night. No one knows what's going to happen in the next moment. Every time we sit down or walk, you never know what's going to happen the next second in your mind, do you? We like to think we do, for good or for bad. We like to think we know. We hate it when we find out we have no control. But if we could just say, "Yeah, I don't have to have control. It's just exhausting trying to control this anyway." We just dance in the flower, growing and dying.

So he says the defilements are rising and passing like anything. And since the defilements, when the conditions aren't present, become extinct—although this extinction is temporary, maybe even momentary—in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily, he says this phenomenon has the real sense of nibbana, even though it's not the lasting one. A real sense of coolness. And I like that—just, it's cool.

He says the fever of the defilements—anyone can see that if the defilements (and I know that's not such a great word, but think of greed, hatred, and delusion, confusion, me-ing about everything)—anyone can see that if they were with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand it? He says under such conditions, living beings would either die or become insane. And he's not exaggerating.

So let us consider well, he says, these periodical moments of coolness—what he calls nirvana for everyone—these moments of what I would call purity of heart and mind, citta that's free in any moment of greed, hatred, and delusion. These moments happen many, many times in a day. He says we survive because of the nourishment of these moments of coolness, of nibbana. This is the nourishment that keeps beings alive in terms of the mental realm. We couldn't stand it otherwise.

So just notice when we have periods—mentally—of feeling relaxed, refreshed, cool. No matter what's happening. It's not about what's happening. It's just that quality of coolness, non-burning from greed, hatred, and self-delusion in the mind. Perhaps that's much more natural than we give it credit for. We're just so interested in all the stuff that we don't really stop to notice. It's not whoop-dee-doo enough. It's not great enough. It doesn't, for one thing, in any way reaffirm me. And that, in some ways, might be the biggest habit we've got going at all.

So let's say our practice, then, can become re-recognizing, rediscovering, and learning to have faith, to place confidence in these simple moments of coolness—in the awareness that allows the recognition of these moments of coolness—no matter what's happening in the mind or the body. It doesn't matter. And as well, a lot of our so-called practice also becomes, with this awareness, as Ajahn Sumedho mentions, not judging, not making up value judgments, noticing the assumptions, the stories, the ways that we get sidetracked and confused again when we don't notice or trust at all the natural ease and peace of body and mind—and get reabsorbed, re-caught up again in sense experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking and emotions, making up a big story of me about any of it.

This is also, in a way, a doing. It's a way of looking. As I said in an interview the other day, it just came into my mind—Master Sheng Yen, who was a wonderful Taiwanese Chan master who just died this January, really a wonderful man. He said one time that

our meditation practice is an illusion, but it's an illusion that we use to replace our other illusions. So it's not to say that sitting and looking and watching the thoughts and emotions is something fixed—that's also just something happening. It comes and goes and changes, nothing to hold to. But that illusion replaces our other illusions. It's like the Buddha said: his teachings are the raft across the stream. When you get across the stream, you don't need to keep carrying the raft on your back.

But we use it. We know how to use it. So our practice can become that—rather than a thing in itself to succeed at, or a thing in itself to achieve the result of getting rid of ourselves or anything. Just awareness.

Ajahn Sumedho—I've done a few retreats with him, and I've found his way of talking, just very simple but quite profound, has been very helpful to me. One time he was meeting with a few Spirit Rock teachers, and he was talking about things he'd noticed in teaching Westerners. He was speaking about how strong our belief is—Western educated people in particular—because I suppose he did a lot of his practice under Ajahn Chah in Thailand. He speaks Thai. He taught Thai people for many years.

But he says that we—well, all of us—we create ourselves, our sense of ourselves, with our thoughts, over and over and over. We're creating who we think we are. And we can't create a peaceful self. You can take that as a challenge. See if with our thoughts we can create a peaceful self.

What he says, and it certainly seems to be true in my limited experience with myself and people I've talked to, is that for us, the thoughts and stories about our personalities are so central, so strong in the way we view ourselves, in the way we construct our background assumptions about life, that everything becomes so personal. Such a sense of me is just succeeding or failing—everything's about me.

Ajahn Sumedho said that in his experience, he sees the biggest hindrance for Westerners in terms of awakening, in terms of trusting their insights, is self-doubt—self-doubt in their own insights and liberation. I would say self-doubt into these moments of coolness. The fact that this is even true—I can't say how many people I've talked to who say, "Well, I had this experience ten years ago or yesterday, but now everything's back. The personality's strong. I really doubt it. I'm the same jerky person I was. That couldn't have been true."

He thinks that Westerners doubt this because our personalities are so strong and believable. We give so much emphasis and so much belief to our personalities, our thoughts, our ideas about ourselves, that we get so caught back into them. That's actually where we put our confidence—in our personality. We may hate it, but when the chips are down, what do you really believe? What's the voice you're really believing?

There's just peace, just isness, just the rain falling and the crickets and the tea and your back hurts—and it's just this, and there's no reference point, and there's no me. And then "I" come rushing back, and my back hurts, and why can't I be with it? I could before, and now I can't. Which do we believe? "That was a nice moment. It was an aberration. This is now—back to what I know." This is where we're comfortable. And we are comfortable. It's like putting on an old cloak, and it stinks, and it has holes in it. We don't like it, but it's just so comfortable. And at least I'm here in it.

It's really interesting how to just trust in that not knowing. To even see it's possible not to take our personalities so seriously.

An example—I don't know if it works for you, but to me it illustrates different ways of holding. Gen was in Burma helping to teach a retreat with Sayadaw U Lakkhana. He teaches in a strict Mahasi style where you're noting every moment of experience. This was a retreat for Westerners, but the man translating was a Burmese friend. Sayadaw was saying that when fear arises, or when anger arises, you just note it: "Fear, fear, fear." And in three notes, it'll go away. And the translator was just translating. Later, when the Sayadaw wasn't around, the other teacher and I would do questions and answers. One of the participants raised his hand. He said, "It doesn't go away when I note three times."

And we said, of course it doesn't. It doesn't always go away when you note three times. The approach we would give here is that you just explore.

So then Ulamang said to me later, privately, "Oh, I was so interested to hear what that man asked, and what you said—that it's not how Sayadaw says, and it doesn't go away. And it was very helpful what you said."

And I said, "Well, what about you?"

He said, "Oh, it doesn't go away for us in three notes either."

I said, "Well, what do you do?"

He said, "Oh, we just say, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

I thought, well, that's refreshing. We laugh, but that's like—it couldn't appeal to us. The teacher said this is how it's supposed to work, and I do it, and it doesn't work. Oh well, never mind. Not so likely for us, because we're so caught up in getting at our personality. It's just really interesting.

But not holding to the assumption, not being caught back into our personality, doesn't mean denying it or hiding it or not believing in or not seeing those thoughts. It just means being aware.

This is Ajahn Sumedho again. He's talking about non-grasping. And he says, you know, it can just be another statement that we grasp and hold on to—non-grasping, liberation. And how often do people say, "Oh, I'm letting go of this, I'm letting go of that." I'm highly suspicious, I have to say—and in my own mind too—of the phrase "letting go." If I'm letting go, forget about it. I'm not letting go. I'm throwing it away because I don't want it. That's different. Just letting be with awareness. It's going to go by itself, whatever we do.

So anyway, he says there's the catch-22. No matter how hard you try to make sense out of non-grasping—"I should not grasp"—you end up in total confusion because of the limitations of language and conception. You have to go beyond language and perception, and the only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them. The way to go beyond them is into them with awareness—through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion, through awareness of the body, without value judgment. Without making a "me" out of it.

The island that you cannot go beyond, which is being used as a metaphor for Nibbāna, is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware. So saddhā—faith, confidence—is really the confidence, just in a moment, to be awake and aware, no matter what's arising in this moment. It just doesn't matter.

We use these thoughts about ourselves, these stories, our personalities—and they seem so fixed, so solid. As Sogyal Rinpoche said one time, we've created a cage for ourselves out of our emotions and our sense of personality. And here we sit, day in and day out. Doesn't it feel like that sometimes? Just sitting in this cage of emotions and personality.

But the thing is, it can feel like we're sitting here only because we're not noticing how thought is recreating it over and over, and this is the assumption that we're taking to be true: "I have to get out of this cage." And as Ajahn Sumedho says, the way beyond is simply awareness in. This emotion is just like this. This thought is just like this.

And another assumption—and this you all know, but I just want to point to it again—is that really, when you break it down, maybe not to the absolute bottom line, but when we start really looking, when I start looking at the thoughts and storyline of my personality and my past... but really it's all happening right now. When I look at the personality patterns that catch me—meaning I'm suffering or reacting or not liking or wanting or whatever—no matter how complex the story may become, when I notice how it begins in a moment, I'll say almost always (just because I'm leery of ever saying always), it comes down to the movement of lobha, greed, in the mind, or of dosa, which is some form of aversion or fear in the mind, and some form of confusion. There's always confusion when there's greed or dosa in the mind, although there can be confusion without greed or dosa—confusion in the sense of delusion.

And so often that simply starts up from an experience of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality that isn't noticed. And that is so simple and basic that it almost feels too simple, embarrassing even. There's no way my whole complex suffering personality could just be reactions of thought to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Excuse me, but I don't want to break down the whole human experience to just that—surely there's much more than that. Okay, so that's a thought. That's a concept. Never mind. Just explore and see. It's fascinating.

So you all know this, but we can just start noticing again how I'm in some whole story about me and feeling good—I had this wonderful interaction with this person, and blah, blah, blah. And I tune in, and there's just a memory of a conversation, and this pleasant feeling comes up with it. That's it, folks. Pleasant feeling coming up. Yes, me. It fulfills me. It reaffirms me. It's all about me.

Unpleasant, just the same. Of course, it can be something as obvious as a physical pain, a thought that comes up, a memory that has an unpleasant connotation, an unpleasant feeling with it. Something even so subtle we hardly notice it. And from that, into a whole world.

I'm not at all meaning to belittle or dismiss our really deep and profound traumas and personality habits and memories. Sometimes they come up too strong to notice at their inception. You can't say, when you're having huge post-traumatic stress, "Oh, it started from an unpleasant. Let me just notice the unpleasant." The energy of the emotion has gotten way too strong by then. So often we can't notice on this level.

But on a retreat, when you're here for a long time, there will be times you can notice on this level. And then it's really interesting.

I've seen for myself certain habits that brought up a lot of fear and suffering over my life. And now when they start to come, when I start to feel that primal terror, I can say, "Oh, I recognize it." Whereas before I'd go into the stories about the past, or what do I do about it, or what's wrong with me, or I've practiced all these years and this is still coming, and my practice is no good and I need to do some other kind. Now it's just, "Oh, primal terror. I can feel it. It's unpleasant. It feels like I'm going to die." That's it. That's all. It's a feeling. It's an emotion. Vedanā. It comes and goes, and I know that. I know that. That's all that's happening.

And when we don't see that—which is a lot of the time—then it goes into the stories and something about me. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or really neutral, it somehow morphs into, "What does it say about me?"

And that sense of me is just so reaffirming. Often—maybe not often, but sometimes—when there is that sense of just the coolness, just the is-ness of things, or in a particular experience that's maybe been really difficult but there's a strong sense of me, a strong personality pattern, and I suddenly see, "Oh, it's just this, just unpleasant fear feeling"—it can feel so odd, so unfamiliar, that we're kind of at sea. We don't know what to do. And we're not so comfortable.

This is, again: can we be at ease in that not knowing?

Part of how our sense of self reconnects, comes back so strongly, why we buy back into the personality so completely, is because we're in the uncertainty of, "But if I'm not this fearful person, who the heck am I?" We may not even say that, but that's the feeling. So back again. Better this loser than... nothing? And we go off into that fear of the unknown.

So this entrancement with our thoughts, with the stories, with sense of self—it's so deep that "good" means it's pleasant. It's so back there, so embedded in the stuff that's working in the background, that if it's painful, scary, unpleasant, it's wrong, it's bad. No way freedom can be here with this scary, unpleasant experience. If it's pleasant? Well, then I'm really on the way. The more pleasant it is, the closer I am.

And neutral? We just don't notice.

But the other aspect of neutrality is making it all about me, this sense of self. And so this cycling, this needing to land somewhere over and over and over—this is really samsara. It's the creation of a sense of self in every moment. It's not some solid, steady-state thing.

And when we start to have the faith to shift the refuge—to shift the refuge from the seeming comfort of the patterns to the willingness to simply say, "Okay, I don't know what's happening now," to just surrender into this moment—it takes faith. It takes confidence. It takes a willingness to trust.

Two things I want to read. One from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking." If only we could believe that. "It is the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

In this way, he's talking about understanding not as a piece of conceptual knowledge, but as that confidence, that trust. And as he says, the long process of conscious awareness—just meaning the surrendering of conscious awareness into just now, over and over and over, with no goal, with no "so that," with no conscious awareness *in order to* understand. That's already too much. Just dying into this moment. And it takes trust. It takes learning to trust.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche again: "The principle of an awareness that you can't get beyond—it's very simple, very direct, and you cannot conceive it. You have to trust it. You have to trust the simple ability that we all have to be fully present and fully awake, and begin to recognize the grasping and the ideas we've taken on about ourselves, about the world around us, about our thoughts and perceptions and feelings. We have to trust. There's no way we can think our way into it or do our way into it or remember our way into it."

Every moment is a moment requiring active trust, surrender, opening to this moment. This is really what we call confidence in awareness.

And it's hard because of our discomfort with not knowing, because of how deeply habituated we are to what seems like a need for self-affirmation. We want to know that we're doing it right and getting somewhere. "I'm just being aware every moment, but I'm not getting more concentrated. I'm not having huge insights. I'm just being aware as I'm fluffing around all day." It's really hard to trust. I'm not saying you should just fluff around all day, but... you can if you want, as long as you're aware. You can fluff around all day and watch your mind. That's okay.

Because through the long process of conscious awareness, reality is already real. It reveals itself. We don't have to figure it out.

It's hard because of the unreliability, the untrustworthiness of everything we take to be self. This is from Mae Chee Kaew, a nun in Thailand from the last century, supposedly an arahant—I mean, who knows? No one knows. You can't know. "Everything that makes a person unique changes continually and eventually disintegrates. Each personality is constantly ceasing to be what it was and becoming something new."

Notice that it doesn't cease and become nothing. It's ceasing and becoming something new constantly. "Those factors one tends to conceive of as self are impermanent and fleeting. Everything about bodily form and the mind's thoughts and feelings is without intrinsic stability and bound to dissolve. For that reason, clinging to body and mind is a major source of pain and suffering."

And when we're just trusting in that, there's that freedom, that wakefulness of this present moment awareness. But when there's the clinging, that's scary, that's uncomfortable. Everything we conceive as me is in constant change and flux, and we're not used to hanging out in that not knowing. The habit is to look for something. And what we tend to look for is to go back to the assumptions, looking for stability, looking for what feels comfortable.

Even Ajahn Sumedho, again in this conversation with the teachers, gave an example that really touched me.

I don't know if I can convey it accurately, because he's always talking about absolute trust and confidence in this awareness, no matter what. When he uses language like "fear is like this, pain is like this, sense of self is like this"—that phrase "is like this" really means awareness receiving. And there's nothing that arises that cannot be received in awareness. Nothing. It's radical.

So he's always talking about this. And for how long has he been doing this? Thirty years? Thirty-five years? He described one period at his monastery, Amaravati, some years ago. He's the head abbot of the whole community. It was an extremely difficult time interpersonally with the monks and the nuns. There was all kinds of difficult stuff going on, and they were having meetings. It was one of those horrible organizational dukkha kind of times. And he said it went on and on.

Being the head abbot, he was of course the focus of a lot of the blame and criticism and judgment. He said it was really, really hard for him. Because, he says, like most people, "I really want to be appreciated. I want to be loved and respected. I don't want people hating me and blaming me and pointing the finger." And he said it really started to get very difficult for him. It went on for some time.

And then suddenly, he realized it was this faith. He said, "I just made a resolution, a very clear resolution. I absolutely determined—I made a determination to trust awareness and not my personality."

I just love that. So strong. Because trusting his personality was getting sucked into "oh no, this is too hard, I can't do it." An absolute determination to trust awareness. And that doesn't change the dynamics of what's happening interpersonally. But it completely changes where he put his refuge, the whole experience—the fact that freedom really is available here and now.

That's that quality of saddhā. To me, faith is kind of like love. It's a sense of putting my heart onto the present moment. The way it feels to me, it's like living in the heart of life instead of a little bit removed, trying to reorganize it the way I want or figure it out. Just die into this moment just like it is. No reservations, not needing to understand. Byron Katie calls that loving what is.

So I'll just end with this, one last quotation from Ajahn Sumedho:

"As one begins to realize or recognize non-grasping as the way, emotionally one can feel quite frightened by this. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart. And this can be frightening. But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions and simply allow things that arise to cease—the emotional reactions to appear and disappear according to their nature—then we find our stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Being awake. Being aware."

CHAPTER 51

Silence of the Non-Reactive Mind

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this Forest Refuge talk, Carol Wilson investigates the profound silence that emerges when the heart-mind ceases its habitual reactivity and fabrication. She introduces the Pāli term atammayatā—non-fabricating, non-concocting—as pointing toward a state where the mind remains independent of greed, hatred, and delusion, no longer constructing any sense of self in relationship to perception.

Drawing from Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro's anthology 'The Island,' as well as teachings from Luang Pu Dun (a disciple of Ajahn Mun), Wilson presents a striking reformulation of the Four Noble Truths: 'The mind that goes out to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering; the mind seeing the mind clearly is the path.' She traces how paṭicca samuppāda operates through sense contact, vedanā, saññā, and mental proliferation (papañca), showing how quickly pleasant or unpleasant feeling triggers perception and the elaborate construction of self, other, and world.

The talk examines three sources of papañca—craving, attachment to views, and māna (conceit/comparing)—with particular attention to how deeply conditioned the perception of 'wrong' or 'bad' becomes linked to unpleasant vedanā. Wilson encourages practitioners to find willingness to rest in confusion and unpleasantness rather than fabricating escape routes, suggesting this openness reveals the stillness of non-fabrication and genuine connection with all life through compassion.

So yesterday I found myself musing about silence, stillness. It was just such a lovely day when I would walk out of here in the morning and be looking outside, and I got that reflection back of the silence.

I really mean not external silence. And I don't mean the silence of deep samadhi, or of no thought exactly, but that silence of the non-reactive heart and mind. That stillness, that peace when the mind and heart is not concocting something, is not picking up something—any perception—and making something of it. I just kept musing about that quality of silence.

Yesterday I was reading in this book called *The Island*, which is a great book—a new anthology by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro where they put together basically all different sutta references and many other references pertaining to Nibbana in any way. It's very well put together, a great compilation. I was reading a particular chapter about

a word that I love: *atammayata*, which basically means non-fabricating, non-concocting, non-identifying. It's really, in some ways, the state or non-state when the heart, the mind is independent—not affected by greed, hatred, or delusion. That pure state of heart and mind is not involved in concocting any sense of self or any sense of anything in relationship to any perception.

Of course, in the highest, most profound level, that's Nibbana, freedom. But this is also following on a theme I was talking about last week. We can explore what that silence means in our own moment-to-moment experience—not to pick up anything, not to make anything of anything, but not to try and stop experience. Even more, we get the chance to explore how the concocting and fabrication happens, to observe the process. Sometimes it's even quite possible to observe the process of fabricating without actually fabricating anything around it, if that makes sense.

A couple of different people have given me examples in the last two days of seeing a perception and a whole amount of anger coming—a whole pattern that they're used to, that they've seen a million times—and the whole thing's going, and the heart-mind's just watching it without being involved. You get a sense of your personality running its show, but the mind's just observing: "Oh yeah, it's like this," and it just bubbles up and disappears. It's quite possible to do that, so we can explore.

I love this passage from *The Island*. It's from one of their Thai teachers, Lungphu Dun, who was a disciple of Ajahn Mun. It's his way of re-describing the Four Noble Truths. Just take it in terms of this mind constructing and making suffering.

He says: "The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering. The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering." So that's the second truth and the first truth. "The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering."

I just love that. Very simple, but I could really feel it—that way of putting it: the mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering. And the effect that we experience when the mind and heart goes out and constructs a whole *mishigas* in relationship to its moods—that's suffering. Probably we wouldn't argue too much with that second one, that that's suffering. But just to explore that sense that it really feels like the mind reacts to something, goes out, creates the whole story, creates the world, creates suffering.

So how does that happen? That is the exact definition of this mental proliferation, or *papañca*. This is from the suttas:

Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of these three—eye, forms, and eye consciousness—is sense contact. With sense contact as condition, there is feeling, *vedana*: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With such conceptual proliferation, *papañca*, as the source, the heart is beset by mental perceptions and notions characterized by the prolific tendency with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye—so too with ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

So we know that, but that's clear.

Simply contact, seeing arises. With seeing, there comes feeling. It's felt with the mind as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. And feeling and perception come together. What one feels, one perceives. We perceive it as good, as bad, as this or that, and the whole show unfolds just like that. Over and over and over.

What one feels, that one perceives. It happens so fast. We know this—none of this is news to anybody. But I'm wanting to go over it, to explore this really amazing process by which the mind goes out in response to, in reaction to, feeling and perception.

And we all know the reverse. When there's wisdom, when there's mindfulness, just the simple being present with what is, without reactivity, without liking or disliking, when there's wisdom to just see it, the tendency to go out is sometimes consciously restrained. Or if the wisdom and mindfulness is even stronger, the tendency to go out just doesn't arise at all.

That's the heart and mind at peace. That's that sense of what you could call silence or stillness. And when it's like that—what's the problem? Because the tendency to go out and make up a whole story just doesn't arise. Sometimes people say they're almost looking for it: "Come on, where's the selfing in that? The wanting must be here somewhere." And they can make a whole story of that. But without going that far, you kind of look, and it really isn't arising. Pure mind, pure heart in that moment. The stillness of non-fabrication. Beautiful.

Of course, there are many ways to explore this fabrication. I'm just going onto the train my mind was working on the last couple of days, which is on this level of vedana and saññā—of feeling tone and perception—that arise together at the point of contact, that as the Buddha says, feed... Well, actually, that wasn't the Buddha who was saying that. That was Mahakassapa. But the Buddha said, "I would have said the same thing," so it counts.

Every now and then, the Buddha would give a short talk. The monks would say thank you, he'd go away, and then they'd look at each other: "What was he talking about? That was too complicated. Who can we go ask?" And they would go ask one or another of the senior monks, and occasionally a senior nun. Then the whole sutta is this other monk or nun talking. At the end, of course, they all go back to the Buddha and say, "We asked him this, and he said this—what do you think?" And the Buddha says, "Yes, just as they said, so I would have said, so you should remember it." So then it gets into the suttas—if it was one of those. We don't know about the times the Buddha said he was really off. That didn't make it in.

So, to explore the sense of vedana and saññā, and how quickly and how deeply the habit of perception is linked to vedana. This again we all really know, but I keep getting amazed at how deep and subtle this habitual saññā, this perception, can be. When at contact the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the feeling, the thought, the mood is pleasant, the perception of it—first we perceive it as pleasant, but the perception is on some level "right" or "good" or "how it should be." And when it's unpleasant, so close is the saññā, the perception, that it's "bad" or "wrong" or "need to get away from this."

We know this, but it's just so deeply in there that so often we don't even recognize it. We may recognize the vedana, we may not. We often don't recognize that perception. And that is exactly where the proliferation begins to take off.

This is from Santikaro, translating Buddhadasa, who used to talk a lot about rising above positive and negative.

So I don't want to talk about being above, but this is just where this language is coming from. He says, "Human beings instinctively feel and perceive—so vedana and perception—experience as being either positive or negative." It's just our deep habit. And so this leads to evaluating and judging those experiences, which turns into liking and disliking those experiences, which in turn fosters craving, attachment, and selfishness—the whole mass of dukkha and misery. The mind that has, as Buddhadasa termed, gone beyond positive and negative, cannot be pulled into this conditioned arising of dukkha.

I don't like so much this language of going beyond, because that feeds into our striving mind. There's somewhere else to go. And right away, we want to go beyond because already positive and negative is bad. You see how fast we go there? "I need to go beyond it because that's wrong." We're right there—in the vedana and saññā, perceiving it as bad, wrong, should change. When we're just not caught one way or the other, not needing to evaluate, that's when there's this non-fabrication, this stillness.

As Buddhadasa says, though, it's such a deeply conditioned habit. Talking to people and watching my own experience, I see how often the mind, as Ajahn Dunn says, goes out in response to moods and creates suffering. How often the trigger for that is the perception of something unpleasant, disliked, or held with the idea that this should not be happening. Usually it's unpleasant. If it's not unpleasant, then it doesn't conform with an idea we're holding of how things should be.

I'm talking about our practice right now, but this is the same as in our life. In practice here, how much of the suffering—the mental striving and trying to fix and reorganize, all the self-judgment—comes from some sense that this should be different, that it's not quite okay? Rarely is it pleasant when the mind goes there, though it could be. But how deeply ingrained is this belief that I can somehow hold myself separate from this unwanted experience, or that this unwanted experience is proof that something's wrong, that I'm bad. Something needs to be different for there to be peace, for there to be silence, for there to be stillness.

Somehow this deep sense arises that peace and freedom—keep looking in your mind because it gets so subtle—somehow comes back to this entrancement with the positive, to use Buddhadasa's language. This subtle sense that liberation is a movement towards more and more pleasant, away from the unpleasant. And when something's going well and it's pleasant and clear, and then it changes and contracts and gets cloudy and all kinds of junk is happening and you can't notice what's going on—well, that's a problem. Now we've hit a problem. Something's wrong because it's supposed to be this other way. That's what practice is about. That's what life is about.

I don't remember if it was the Buddha or Sariputta who said this, but whatever is felt is included within dukkha, included within the first noble truth. Not just unpleasant vedana is included within dukkha while pleasant vedana is down there in the third noble truth, cessation. I don't think so. Whatever is felt is included within dukkha—in terms of unreliable, in terms of not self, in terms of not bringing us any kind of reliable satisfaction. But the habit is so strong.

There's that sutta from the Buddha about the two darts, which I love. He describes how these habits come to underlie our heart and mind. The setup is: if someone has a painful feeling, and the unenlightened worldling—there was a translation I saw that rendered this word, which is often translated as "unenlightened worldling" or "ordinary person," as "thickster." I loved it. A thickster. So when a thickster is touched with an unpleasant sensation, they beat their breast and lament and grieve and wail. It's like shooting yourself with a second arrow. So they experience two kinds of feelings: a bodily and a mental unpleasant feeling.

The thickster, having been touched by that painful feeling, resists and resents it. Then in one who so resists a painful feeling, the underlying tendency of resistance comes to be a habit in the mind. It becomes a habit to resist unpleasant feeling. And under the impact of that painful feeling, one proceeds to search for and enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness. Then, in one who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency of lust, of craving for pleasant feelings, comes to underlie the mind.

One does not know, according to how it is, the arising and ending of these feelings. One doesn't know the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings, doesn't see them clearly. And so in one who lacks that knowledge, the underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings comes to underlie the mind.

So when he experiences either pleasant, painful, or neutral, he feels it as one who is fettered by that feeling, who is chained by that feeling, simply through not seeing it as it is.

I actually find this personally really poignant—this sense of how deep the habit is when touched by something unpleasant or painful. We get into resistance, and some with the aversive temperament tend to notice the resistance more, tend to kind of muck around in that mental state for a while. But from that, you could say the more desiring temperament or the habit of mind in some is stronger, and it just zooms into looking for something to lust after, something that's more pleasant. And then that becomes the habit that underlies the mind.

As the Buddha says, what the mind frequently dwells and ponders upon, that is how it will naturally incline. And so just this very simple experience that's happening to us with every moment of sense contact—that's pretty much every moment we're awake: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, contact—there's feeling and there's perception. And so often when there's not mindfulness, and sometimes even when we are watching, this speed of concocting moods, our whole story of self and other and past and future, comes to be. Just like that. Just based on vedanā and saññā.

As you know, the three sources of papañca—this is from the commentaries—tend to be craving, attachment to views, and māna, or conceit, the subtle sense of self, the subtle comparing. But you can see, just starting with craving papañca, how we think of papañca as just lots of thoughts coming really quickly, but how really it is that perception and those thoughts are creating our world in that moment. Many worlds, over and

over, with every new construction. But this is really the confusion, the delusion that keeps us kind of off balance with the world, with ourself, with what's happening, because we're basically making it all up.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says: "When our sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness." So when there's the sound, that sound is the object, your ear works, there's hearing of it. Perception would be "bell" or whatever perception you had. "From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective."

And we know this really, if we look at it. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure.

We know this, don't we? Isn't it like that? I can't remember, someone was telling me how they just were having a bad morning—this was wrong and that was wrong. And then you notice the mind was clouded with grumpiness, and then every single thought was something else that was wrong. If we're not really watching that, it really is that the whole world becomes a hell realm. And you walk in the dining room the next morning and it's all so beautiful—the sun, the people, they're so lovely. Everything is primordially pure. That must have been a dream yesterday.

Ajahn Chah is wonderful on this. He holds up a vase and says, "Okay, cup. Look at this cup. You might think it's nice or ugly or indifferent. It's just a cup. It's you who are making yourselves insane. A cup doesn't care." And it's like that with anything.

So right at the point of contact, mindfulness wisdom at the point of contact, at the point of perception and vedanā—that's the fount of freedom, the fount of all wisdom. But it's so easy to miss that point of contact and get completely into this concoction, so quick, so fast. And then the mind flips. We wonder why we're confused.

In terms of this craving papañca, Tibetans have a great saying that craving puts feathers on an object. Craving colors our perception. The thing craved looks so much more attractive. And this is really the way the mind moves away from the unpleasant, from craving.

A few weeks ago, I was talking to someone in an interview, and the person was saying, "I'm seeing craving all the time, but I really want to see aversion. I know I have this aversion, and I can't see it. I want to see aversion." I bit my tongue because I could have

said a lot of things, but we kept exploring. We'd come to what work they did, and I asked, "Well, how long do you walk?" Somehow that came up. They said, "Well, I walk ten minutes or fifteen minutes." I said, "Oh, really? And then what happens?"

"Well, then I think of something really much more interesting to do, and I go and do it."

"What happened just in that moment before?" I asked.

"Well, I think, you know, the walking's not so great. So I go."

And as we talked, we could see that in many different areas of his life, as soon as just the slightest unpleasantness arose, the mind immediately created something so much more desirable—which could have been anything, but it was desirable—so that the unpleasant wasn't even noticed. Never mind the aversion; just zoom into desire. And whatever whole worlds that particular desire created, whatever concoction or fabrication.

It's fascinating. As we explored together, he thought, "Oh, wow, that's interesting." And then, of course, I never got to talk to him again. I have no idea if he could keep exploring that or what. But just seeing this—that's exactly the papañca of craving. Exactly what the Buddha was describing: the way the mind avoids the unpleasant and never knows that's what's happening.

So as long as we're seduced by this promise of pleasure, as long as we're seduced by this subtle or not so subtle perception that the difficult, the painful, the grief-stricken, the sad is wrong, bad, a mistake, something to get rid of—as long as we're seduced by the perception of the beautiful being the right way and the other the wrong way—so long we're going to keep being entranced by samsara.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, who is the brother of Mingyur Rinpoche, gave a teaching I heard once—which of course I can't find now. He talked about renunciation as really being what he called weariness with samsara. And by weariness, he didn't mean aversion. When I hear "weariness," my mind goes to aversion, to not liking. But he meant a weariness with samsara that comes from just keep watching the fickleness of vedanā—the untrustworthiness of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how quickly it changes, and how quickly our mind is seduced by just a moment of pleasantness into a whole mood, into a whole story of us and other and life and past and future and what's going to happen and how good I'll feel and how will I do it and what will they say and when I get home. All of that from just one moment of pleasant feeling. Or unpleasant feeling. Or neutral feeling.

And somehow, when we're not weary in a moment yet with that, there's that promise of, "Yes, yes, this concoction, this fabrication is really how it is. This is really going to bring me to peace." And then we change.

Andrea Levine, Stephen Levine's wife, wrote about how the mind is so untrustworthy. She described eating chocolate cake and the mind going, "Oh, have another piece. It won't hurt you. It's really tasty. Have another piece of chocolate cake. Be kind to yourself." Then you eat the second piece of cake and the mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you."

And we keep on believing it. We keep not noticing. Just one concoction after the other.

Ajahn Chah has a lovely way of describing how the mind concocts reality. He says we are determining things into existence in every moment—this concoction, this fabrication. The Buddha talks about the tides of conceiving sweeping over a person, being a source of endless suffering. Ajahn Chah writes: "The tendency to conceive, to make things up in terms of self, is the source of happiness, suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions."

This is what he means: appearances are determined into existence because they don't intrinsically exist. For example, a simple example—suppose somebody wanted to make a marker. They would take a piece of wood or a rock, place it on the ground, and then call it a marker. Actually, it's not a marker. There isn't any marker. It's just something that we've determined into existence through the use of conventional concepts. Very helpful when we know this.

In the same way, we determine cities, people, cattle, everything. We determine these things into existence because intrinsically it isn't like that. They aren't these separate things. It's like having an empty dish—you can put anything you like into it because it's empty. This is the nature of determined reality. Men and women are determined concepts, as are all the things around us.

If we know the truth of determinations clearly, we can be at peace. It's not a problem. We know how to use them, but we need to understand them. Good and evil, high and low, black and white—all determinations. The trouble is that mostly we're lost in determinations. That's the truth.

But when we see that everything arises and then ceases—people are born, then they die; bad moods arise and then they cease; good moods arise and then they cease—we begin to understand. As Ajahn Chah asks, have you ever seen anybody cry for three or

four whole years without stopping? The most you might cry is a whole night, and then the tears dry up. In their passing is peace. This is really peace—to be calmed of proliferations, calmed of this concocting, calmed of the burden of self.

Because as the Buddha says, even what the world calls self is in fact unsatisfactory. For no matter upon what it constructs its ideas of identity, the fact is ever other than that. The sense of self is a moment-by-moment fabrication based on contact, vedanā, and saññā in any particular moment. And because the actuality is always other than that, as Ajahn Sumedho says, you can't construct a peaceful sense of self. There's no solid sense of self anyway, and whatever we construct is based on reactivity to moods, to saññā, to vedanā. And we wonder why it doesn't really work.

So how do we—we know this, but in terms of this place of vedanā and saññā—how can we begin and continue not constructing? How can we just be so present that construction doesn't need to happen? Again, what I've been noticing the last couple of weeks is how often it starts from that moment of perception of unpleasant or bad or wrong, and that immediate construction to change, to get away, or to go into and blame oneself. That construction, that inability or unwillingness—or not even noticing—to just be completely at ease, at rest, even in the difficult.

As Joko Beck says, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and unpleasantness? And it's true, sometimes we can find a willingness but not the ability. I want to acknowledge this. We can have some really strong concoction come up—a terror, a mood, an aversion, a sense of self-judgment, or incredible lust. And you sort of know what's there. You can say, "This is incredible lust," but that's as far as you can go with mindfulness. The energy of the kilesa, the energy of that mood, is so much stronger than the energy of mindfulness. This happens once in a while. It might happen to you.

So when you notice that, it's also wisdom to see that at this moment—and this is what we call feeding and starving—you're trying to be mindful of the lust, and it's getting worse and worse, and you're about to act on it. You realize, "Okay, too strong." At this point, you really need to change the channel. You need to back off. That's not an unwillingness. That doesn't mean you're a hopeless failure in mindfulness and practice. It means with wisdom you see the energy of mindfulness, the strength of it, just doesn't meet the strength of the kilesa at that point. We've got to choose when to be present and what skillful means when it's time to change the channel.

But often it's not that there isn't an ability—there's not a willingness, or even, as I was saying in the beginning, the perception that "this is wrong" is so deep and unquestioned and maybe not even noticed that we're engaging in a huge fabrication to change, to fix, to get away from, and we don't even know it. We don't even know that's what's going on.

Our mind, as quite a few people were saying in the last couple of days—the word rationalization kept coming up over and over. "But I can rationalize this," or "There's a really good rationalization." Yes, our mind can come up with thoughts and constructions and explanations for anything. My God, just listen to politicians—they can explain anything. And when you're listening, you go, "That's a bunch of crap," right? Now, if only we could listen to ourselves in that same way. As soon as I hear my mind going, "Oh, yeah, yeah, that's really good"—okay, thank you very much. What's going on? What's going on? Come back here. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in the unpleasantness, to just rest in the unpleasantness?

A French writer, Colette, wrote once, "Look for a long time at what pleases you, and for a longer time at what pains you." It's like that as an expression of mindfulness. Mindfulness, a willingness to be aware, isn't hierarchical. And it isn't choosing which things are more worthy of our awareness than another—whether worthy means pleasant, whether worthy means I think I'll learn more if I look at this than if I look at that.

Worthy means this is what's supposed to be happening, that's not what's supposed to be happening. If I look at this thing that I like longer, it'll get better. If I pretend this isn't happening, it'll go away. I don't know why we keep thinking that'll work. Denial is an amazing force—but that's a whole other talk.

Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the unpleasant and the difficult? This is a place, I think, where we encounter the deeply inlaid habit of self-judging that so many people carry. It comes from particular personal circumstances. Each of us who has that can perhaps trace in our biographical history reasons why self-judgment or self-hatred, fear of annihilation, being unloved, abandonment—we each have our personal story with it.

But what I keep exploring in myself is how, on this very basic level, this momentary level of experience, the sense of self-judging and worthlessness pretty much only comes along with something that's happening that's unpleasant, or that I don't think should be happening. When I'm feeling really concentrated or filled with love, when my body doesn't hurt, when there's a sense of stillness—am I judging myself? Not so likely. But

when that goes away: Oh, what did I do wrong? And then we start judging, because I was so filled with ego about that good thing, and that's why it went away. I could give you ten million examples. You can all make up your own.

But I've seen how much the sense of self-judging is, again, a sign of not really deeply understanding the first noble truth—the sense that bad stuff isn't supposed to happen. And when it does happen to me, I'm a failure. Getting sick, getting old, getting angry, not being able to concentrate, not being able to do open vipassana, not being able to do whatever your mind made up as the way things are supposed to be happening—not seeing that our mind made it up, trying to make our experience fit. It doesn't fit, and that becomes another sign of failure. Somehow not really clearly seeing, as Chökyi Nyima said, the fickleness of vedana, of perception, of samsara, the constant changing nature—as if anything could stay the same. As if, if we get it right, the sense of self will never arise again. And when you think you've really seen through it and it arises again, that's just further proof that you're hopelessly, hopelessly deluded. You might as well just give it up. We land in there, not really understanding.

All my life—well, since I was old enough to read—I always found myself most deeply inspired by reading or hearing about people who have somehow been present in periods of great suffering, either through big cataclysmic events in the world or in their own lives, and have been able to be present with that, to bear witness to that suffering—their own, others', or both—in a way that is both bearing witness to what's happening and yet ennobling. A way that meets suffering with compassion and understanding, without dehumanizing the people who are suffering, the people who may seem to be creating the suffering, or oneself for being in it.

I remember when I was maybe in high school, I compulsively read all of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's work—all of it. The Gulag Archipelago and all of his novels. Looking back, I actually still have it lying next to my bed. When I try to read it now I think, God, this is horrible stuff. How come I was always wanting to read it? Because it's long, and it's a lot of detail about what went on in Stalin's Russia.

But when I think back, it's the fact that—I mean, he had anger; I'm not saying he was like a bodhisattva—but there's a way he bore witness to his own experience and others' experience that kept finding the humanity and the goodness and the decency in people. For him, going through the horror of being in the labor camps actually woke him up more to the depth of life, to the beauty and the suffering, to what life's all about. Instead of just living on the surface, it opened him to depth of connection—connection with life, with suffering, with compassion, with human beings.

There's a way that suffering—I always forget if it was Buddhadasa or Ajahn Chah who said this—there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering, depending on how we meet it, how we relate to it.

Somehow this has always touched me so deeply. Solzhenitsyn is just one example. Or Martin Luther King, when you read some of what he said about facing suffering and violence and horror and racism and murder, saying: I refuse to become bitter. I refuse. And he refused to turn his back, refused to make anyone else "the other"—being able to be present and awake with wisdom, with compassion, with a wholeness of presence, in the midst of suffering that you don't even want to watch on television. And he's living through it.

So many people like that, in big places, in big events in the world. But for each of us, in any moment, that same possibility exists—that this willingness to simply be fully present for whatever it is becomes the opening into the stillness of non-fabrication, the opening into connection with all beings through compassion.

I know for myself I've seen this a million times, on retreat and off retreat—it doesn't matter. But you have to keep rediscovering it. I can't just tell myself; that doesn't work. I have to really rediscover it from my gut, so to speak.

When I'm going through periods where I start to feel alienated, disconnected, alone—just that sense that something's wrong—the more I'm trying to figure it out, the more disconnected, the more alienated I feel. Whether it projects outward and I start perceiving people as being weird or not acting right, or whether it turns around and goes inward with thoughts like "I'm a hopeless failure," whatever way it goes, that just leads to more alienation. I'll say always—this is an always question. I always find that somehow at the root of that is a trying to avoid, to move away from some difficult, painful, unpleasant experience. It could be so-called internal, so-called external; it doesn't matter.

It could be a huge, unpleasant experience of something going on with my family that I feel helpless to help with, that really triggers a fear and an anger, and I don't want to be with the whole thing. So I unplug my phone so I don't get a phone call, just pretend the whole thing isn't happening. Yeah, that really helps.

Or it could just be something I don't even know what. I just sit down or stop walking. Or if I'm driving, just kind of tune in with my eyes open. Just tune in: What's happening? Sometimes it just comes down to a tightness in the chest. It's not even some huge event necessarily, but just some unpleasant, icky feeling. And the mind and heart is con-

cocting a whole fabrication—the whole world is turning into an alienated hell realm—not to feel this. It's not to feel this. You feel and go, "Oh, if I feel this, I'm going to die." That's how it feels.

But you feel it. Not only do you not die, it's like, "Oh, that's just what's happening." The whole concoction stops. Self and other, no problem. Just this-ness. Quite amazing. Quite amazing.

From that, just the willingness to rest in the unpleasant, in the confusing, in the difficult, is the potential for this opening into connection and tenderness with all life that's not based on separation, that's not based on concocting, that's not based on fabrication.

Well, I was going to talk about the other two papañcas—craving being the first—but I think I won't. I'll just mention them. The second source of papañca, the source that feeds the concocting, is our attachment to our views, which I've been alluding to: our views of what's right, of what's wrong, how someone should act, how something should be. You can already get a sense of how far we can go with that. And the third is this māna, conceit, comparing.

We have a couple of minutes, so I'll just give some examples of that, because it's really, really interesting to look at this on retreat, just because you have more time and the mind is a little quieter.

Māna, often translated as "the conceit of self," is in one way really obvious. It's happening a lot; it isn't that subtle. When you start noticing it, you think, "How could I not have seen this?" But on another level, it's really very subtle. In terms of the ten so-called fetters in the Theravada system—the phases of awakening as various torments and confusions are attenuated and released from the mind, so gradually there's less craving, less aversion, not the strong belief in personality—in fact, one of the first fetters that's supposed to be seen through is sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality belief. That doesn't mean sense of self goes away. Māna, conceit, this subtle sense of self and other, is one of the last ones to be seen through.

And so one of the ways this subtle conceit of "I am" manifests is through a grosser or more subtle comparing of the mind. I'm sure you've noticed your mind comparing once in a while. Just better than, less than, equal to. Start tuning into it—it's a trip. You walk into the dining room. Sometimes when I'm on retreat over at the retreat center, I haven't done it for a long time, and when it's really crowded there, I think of the dining room as hell realm meditation. There's just so much going on.

And when the mind is really quiet, not concocting, not reacting, it's not a hell realm. Let's be clear—the hell is not the dining room. The hell realm is in the mind and heart that's reacting, that's fabricating, this concocting.

But how much of that comparing goes on? It's not all comparing, of course. There's other stuff too, as you all know. But just notice the comparing. How do they eat compared to me? How much do they take? How do they walk? How do they sit? How do they chew? They're better than me. They're worse than me. They're the same as me. They're eating more. They're eating less. They come late. They go early. They're so greedy. I'm so greedy. Who's more greedy? It's just endless.

Who sits longer? Who sits shorter? Who walks longer? Who walks slower? Who's that walking by me? Isn't it remarkable how much you have to look when somebody's walking by you? As if it makes a difference. Has it ever really brought peace to your heart and mind when you looked? It brings the peace of the end of craving, yes—it does bring that peace. But we could have that without satisfying the craving too. That's a big insight. But it generally then adds the un-peace of that person, whoever they are, and whatever particular judgment or comparison the mind makes.

So if it's someone slumping by, making a lot of noise, and you finally look and think, "Oh, it's that person I thought was better than me—and look at them now!" Or someone's going so slowly, and you look: "Oh no, it's that person I thought was the one person worse than me, and they're doing better now." And every time a new person comes, you have to reorganize the whole order you've got everybody in.

Comparing is an endless source of suffering. It's a wonderful source of increasing our sense of worthlessness and self-judgment—it's really good for that. It also, in a twisted way, shows the interconnectedness of all of us. Because you can't compare without me and you and them and other. You can't compare all by yourself. There has to be something there. Everything anyone else does affects us, in a twisted kind of way.

But anyway, it's a great practice, a great group practice, a great dining room practice to simply notice. Notice when the mind has zoomed out—just as Ajahn Dun said, zoomed out after a mood and created a whole world based on comparing. See if you're still there, if you can just notice the point of sense contact. Did the comparing start with seeing? Can you come back and just be with seeing? See if you notice whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. See if you notice the perception—seeing, "Oh, they're no good." Seeing, "Wow, aren't they doing well." Seeing, "Oh, I'm no good." Just noticing. Seeing the contact, the vedanā, how it feels, the perception.

Not in order to achieve anything special, but simply to explore and to see if it's possible—and it is possible—to, from time to time, come back to this level of immediacy of experience. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, vedana, perception. Yes, that's happening. Thoughts might come. That's also happening. We don't have to buy into the construction.

And then there's stillness—that stillness of the mind not needing to reference other or self for anything, not needing to reference time, not needing to reference space. No movement to locate, to compare anything. Just the stillness of this right now.

This is the Buddha. He's describing the end of papañca, but he's really just talking about himself: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. He does not conceive of something unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer."

Do you understand? And he goes through all the different senses. He does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight—the famous teaching to Bahiya: "In the seeing, there's only the seen." There's no seer seeing something. There's not something else somewhere else to go and be seen. There's not someone seeing. There's no visible thing apart from sight, no audible thing apart from sound. He goes through all of it. "He does not conceive about one who cognizes. Thus, whatever is seen, heard, sensed, or clung to is known as truth by other folk, but amidst those who are entrenched in views, one who is thus, like the Tathagata, holds none of these views as true or false."

You don't need to take a stand on the view at all. And this is the end of papañca—the end of resorting to weapons, quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice, and false speech. Here, these harmful, unwholesome states cease without remainder.

The end of papañca, as the Buddha says, is the ending of conflict.

Adyashanti has a quote I like: "Self-referencing is the mind's tendency to locate itself. So when it is realized that there is no self apart from the perceiving, then the tendency to try to find oneself in any experience, insight, or concept ceases. I'm talking about a condition where the mind has no compulsive need to understand in terms of ideas, concepts, and beliefs. A condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, feelings, or emotions for security in any way."

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "Just sit quietly, free from the obsession with 'what next.' And in the silence, something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception."

CHAPTER 52

Ānanda

Carol Wilson · 1h05

In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson shares her deep appreciation for Ānanda, the Buddha's personal attendant during the last 25 years of his life. Known as the 'Guardian of the Dhamma,' Ānanda's extraordinary memory preserved the Buddha's teachings—every sutta beginning with 'Thus have I heard' comes from his recollection at the First Council. Wilson explores his distinctive qualities: unwavering devotion, profound kindness, humility without pride, and his role as a bridge rather than barrier between people and the Buddha.

The talk illuminates Ānanda's humanity—he remained a stream-enterer throughout his time with the Buddha, only fully awakening after the Parinibbāna. Wilson recounts touching moments: his grief at Sāriputta's death, his weeping against a doorpost upon learning the Buddha would die, and his instrumental role in establishing the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha through his advocacy for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. The Buddha's admonishments to Ānanda about attachment to togetherness offer profound teachings on the balance between connection and renunciation.

Wilson also introduces several remarkable women disciples—Dhammadinnā, whose teaching appears in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44); Khemā, who awakened upon seeing impermanence; and Puṇikā, a slave who taught a Brahmin the true meaning of purification. The talk concludes with the inspiring story of Anāthapiṇḍika, the Buddha's greatest lay supporter, whose dying request to Sāriputta ensured that profound Dhamma teachings would be available to laypeople, not just monastics.

So lately, for some reason, the last weeks or months really, I've been hanging out with Ānanda a lot. He keeps popping up in my mind, in my heart—Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. And he inspires me a lot. He's an easy way into the human face of the whole period of the Buddha's sāsana.

I keep thinking I want to talk about Ānanda and maybe some of the other people at that time. And I keep not doing it because I think, well, why should I just tell stories? But then I decided, what the heck, I just really want to talk about Ānanda, so I'm going to.

It can happen that we are so seriously practicing in this Buddhist tradition and teaching of the elders, and we hear about the Buddha, we hear about how he gives talks and five hundred people immediately become arahants. It can all seem a little beyond our possibility, or almost enter into the realm of the mythological, even though we're always talking about how Buddha was a human being.

In the suttas and in the commentaries—but more in the suttas—you really can get a sense of the personality of quite a few of the people. And for many, Ānanda is the easiest way into that. He has a very distinctive personality. Quite a lot is known about him comparatively. And to me, he's really quite inspiring.

So I just want to share a few aspects that are probably common knowledge, but they bring me in touch with the human, the alive, the immediacy right now—people just like us. Well, maybe not just like us, but close to being like us, I could imagine.

Ānanda was called the Guardian of the Dhamma, one of the names that the Buddha gave him. He had many wonderful qualities. The one that comes to mind first—when I mentioned that I might talk about Ānanda today, someone immediately said, "Oh great, I love Ānanda." And I asked, "What's the quality you love so much?" The first one she said is the first one for me too: his devotion, his faith.

For the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life, Ānanda was his attendant day and night, every day for twenty-five years. But his devotion wasn't just to the Buddha as a human being. It was really to the Dhamma. The Buddha made the statement that if you see the Dhamma, you see the Buddha—there's no need to see him as a person. And you really get that from Ānanda: his dedication to the Dhamma played out in his love for the Buddha.

He was also a very kind person. He did many acts of kindness, showed much mettā, much integrity. And he liked people. He was, in relative terms, a very social monk—relative to Mahākassapa or Anuruddha, who went off and never wanted to talk to anybody. Ānanda was very friendly, very caring to both ordained and lay people, and very helpful. He was much beloved by lay people and monastics alike.

How he became the Buddha's attendant is interesting in itself, because it really shows his personality. When the Buddha was fifty-five years old, he addressed all his senior monks and said, "In my twenty years as the father of the Sangha, I've had many different attendants. None of them was really quite right. Some little sense of willfulness would become apparent after time. So I'm looking now for an attendant for my last years."

Of course, all the noble disciples—when it says noble disciples, it means fully enlightened ones—immediately offered themselves to be the attendant. Only Ānanda modestly held back. And the Buddha didn't pick any of them. The other monks turned to Ānanda and said, "Well, you should offer." So he did, and the Buddha chose him.

When it came out later and they asked, "Why didn't you offer?" Ānanda said—and this is why his faith was so great—"The Blessed One knows what he needs and he knows who would be the best. What is it for me to offer?"

He will choose what he needs.

And he was always like that—just complete faith and no sense of willfulness or putting himself forward in any way.

So he agreed, of course. He wanted to be the attendant, just like all of them did. And he agreed, but he gave eight conditions. He requested eight conditions from the Buddha, conditions under which he would be his attendant. And these really show both his lack of putting himself forward—he just had no pride, no sense of thinking himself special—and also his love for the Dhamma.

So he had eight conditions. The first was that if the Buddha received a gift of robes, he would never pass it on to Ananda. The second was that the Buddha would never give Ananda any of his alms food. The third, that if someone gave the Buddha a special dwelling place, he would not give it to Ananda. And the fourth, whenever the Buddha received a personal invitation to a special meal, that he would not include Ananda in that. Ananda said later this was so no one would think that he was personally profiting by being the Buddha's attendant.

And then he had four other wishes. That if he, Ananda, were invited to a meal, he asked for the right to transfer the invitation to the Buddha. If people came from far away to see the Buddha, he asked the Buddha for the privilege that he could always lead the people to see the Buddha when they came to look for him—which is, I think, a lovely thing. If he, Ananda, had any doubts, any inquiries about the Dhamma, he asked for the right to ask the Buddha at any time. And if the Buddha gave a discourse during Ananda's absence, Ananda asked for the privilege to have the Buddha repeat it to him privately. Since Ananda wasn't going to any of the meals the Buddha was invited to, where he would always give a discourse, the Buddha must have had to repeat a lot.

But this last one is very significant, because another thing about Ananda was his incredible memory. The reason the Buddha repeated all the discourses is because Ananda remembered them all word for word. So when you read the suttas, how many of them start with "Thus have I heard"? That's Ananda. Every one that begins "Thus have I

heard"—that's Ananda after the Buddha died, at the first council, recollecting the sutta, the talk that he heard the Buddha give, and then reciting it. I know we can't even remember the seven factors of enlightenment. He remembered them all.

So the first four conditions were so he wouldn't benefit, but the second four were so that he could truly fulfill the duties of his post in order to serve all beings.

And so for twenty-five years, day and night, he served the Buddha. At the end of the Buddha's life, he said, "For twenty-five years I served the Lord with loving deeds, loving words, and loving thoughts. When the Buddha paced to and fro, I paced along behind."

And it was really like that. His duties as attendant were myriad. Part of it was just being present, taking care of the Buddha's physical needs—washing his feet, helping him get a place to lie down, making sure he had food. He was like a social secretary, organizing all the different things, making sure people could come and see him. He often served as a go-between, when lay people would come to Ananda and ask a question, and he would go to the Buddha.

One of the beautiful things I always think about in reading how he served this role—because he was the gateway to the Buddha for twenty-five years—is that I know in some spiritual scenes nowadays, when there's the big charismatic teacher and hordes of people wanting to get close and come and see, there's often this sense of an in-crowd. And the in-crowd's job, or what usually happens with the in-crowd, is making sure they stay the in-crowd by keeping other people the out-crowd. And Ananda was just the reverse. That condition about if people come from outlying areas, requesting always the privilege that he could bring them to see the Buddha—his goal was to help people hear the Dhamma, not keep them out. He genuinely cared for people, he was really kind, and he served as a bridge rather than a barrier between people and the Buddha. That was really a beautiful quality.

For twenty-five years he was the perfect attendant, meaning that he didn't ever show any aspects of willfulness. Really perfect devotion to the Dhamma in thought, word, and deed.

Another interesting part about Ananda gives us insight into the human element. Besides the fact that he was social—that's kind of why we know more about him, there are more stories about him—he was not a fully awakened arahant. Most of the other monks and nuns that you read about, you read about them because they became fully awakened arahants pretty quickly. And Ananda didn't. He was a stream-enterer. The eye of the Dhamma had awakened in him. But then for the twenty-five years that he

was with the Buddha day and night, listening to every sutta, every talk the Buddha gave, and so much discussion, he never completely awakened until after the Buddha died.

And yet the Buddha himself said, even though Ananda is still on the path of higher training, it would be difficult to find someone who equals him in wisdom. So just to know—you don't have to think, "Oh, only stream entry, not good enough." It's really quite a deep wisdom. There are many suttas where Ananda is shown to be an excellent teacher, partly because of his affinity with people.

He really tuned into people. He could say what was appropriate at the right time. Well, the Buddha could do that too, but that's because he was omniscient—he could read what was in people's minds, like that story about the leper last week. But Ananda, it was more that he just had the human empathy. His heart could tune into people and say what was helpful.

Sometimes the Buddha would ask him to teach. There's one story, and I like this too because it shows even the Buddha is human. The Buddha and Ananda were with a big assembly of the Sakyans, the Buddha's clan. And the Buddha was giving a long talk most of the night—most of the night. I know you guys think an hour is long! And then after a while, the Buddha said, "Ananda, I've been talking a long time. My back is really hurting me, and I need to stretch. So you now give a talk to the Sakyans. Talk to them about the disciple in higher training who is practicing the path. My back is aching, and I will go and stretch."

So he went off, and Ananda then gave a whole talk, at the end of which the Buddha sat back up again from stretching his back and said, "Excellent, Ananda, excellent." There were other times where he said, "If you had come to me with this question, I would have said the same thing." That's called Buddha Vachana, the word of the Buddha. When one of the other monks or nuns gives a talk or answers a question, the people they talk to would always go to the Buddha and say, "This is what they said." You always wonder, why didn't they just ask the Buddha in the first place? But anyway, they'd ask, "This is what he or she said." And the Buddha would say, "Yes, excellent. Had you asked me, I would have said the same thing." So he said that at this point about Ananda.

He also said at the time of his death—well, before he died, at the time when he announced he was going to die—the Buddha said that Ananda has four remarkable and wonderful qualities. This is at the end of the 25 years. What are they? "If a company of monks comes to see Ananda, they are pleased at the sight of him. And when Ananda

talks Dhamma to them, they are pleased. And when he is silent, they are disappointed. And so it is too with nuns, with male and female lay followers." So basically, Ananda was well beloved for teaching the Dhamma and for his kindness.

He was a great supporter of the nuns, Ananda. In fact, in the beginning there was no nuns sangha—there was just the sangha of monks, of bhikkhus. I don't want to go into the whole story, but the woman who was Buddha's aunt, who had raised him because his mother died when he was a week old—Mahapajapati Gotami—later in life she wanted to become a nun and begged the Buddha to start a sangha of nuns. And he resisted, which is never really explained why, but he resisted.

At one point, Ananda, again in his role as bridge, not exactly interceded, but he spoke up when the Buddha had three times refused Mahapajapati Gotami. Technically, you could ask the Buddha for something and ask him up to three times, and the third time he would say yes if he could. But this time, he didn't say yes. So it's said Ananda thought, "Hmm, let me ask in another way."

So he came in, speaking on the side of the women, and he asked the Buddha two questions. He said, "Lord, is it true, is it possible that women can awaken to the same wisdom that men can?" And the Buddha said, "Absolutely, no question." So then Ananda said, "Well, looking on…" He then interceded in a personal way, and only he could have done this. He said to the Buddha, "Lord, look how much she has done for you in your life. When you were young, she suckled you, she fed you, she raised you as her own child. She is so sincere. It would be good, Lord, if women could become nuns." And at this point the Buddha agreed.

So there's a way that Ananda, in his kindness, was really—I wouldn't say a protector of the nuns, because they had the Buddha as their protector—but he was a great favorite with the nuns, which once in a while led him into a little bit of trouble. Just because he was so open and friendly, sometimes he would get overenthusiastic, but I'll say more about that in a moment.

In the same way, the nuns and the monks lived in separate communities. The monks would go to the nuns and teach, and later the nuns developed their own teachers. I'll mention some of the women teachers a little later—I won't talk about Ananda the whole time. But he also had this same quality, this ability to connect with laypeople, laymen and laywomen.

And you just get the feeling that women really trusted him in a way—that he was kind to them, not so aloof.

One story about this involves King Pasenadi, who was one of the kings of the area and a great devotee of the Buddha. Apparently the kings at this time had many wives and many consorts, whole harems of them. And these royal women were actually kind of prisoners; they weren't allowed out of the harem. You read in different suttas where the royal women wanted to go to the Buddha and get teachings, and they weren't allowed to. They couldn't wander freely. In fact, slave women had much more freedom of movement than the royal women.

So all the wives of the king begged him to ask one of the Buddha's teachers to come teach them. King Pasenadi, of course, agreed. He said, "Well, who do you want?" And they all conferred and immediately said, "Ananda. We want Ananda." So Pasenadi went to the Buddha and asked him, and the Buddha agreed. And then on a regular basis, Ananda would go and teach the king's wives.

One time when he went—and this is just a story of his willingness to get involved in the lay level of difficulties that happen, and his wisdom in dealing with them—one time he went to teach these wives and they were all upset and couldn't focus because someone had stolen one of the king's really important jewels. Everyone had been searched and they couldn't find it, but everything was in an uproar. Everybody was mistrusting everyone else, not just the women but in the whole court.

So Ananda came up with this ingenious plan, which King Pasenadi adopted. He said, "Set up a tent in your courtyard that has flaps so no one can see in. And inside, put a big pot of water. Then have everyone who's a suspect go in singly, one at a time. And whoever has the jewel can just drop it in that pot of water." So at the end, after all the suspects had gone in and out, the king went in and there was the jewel.

Ananda accomplished three things. He ended the crisis, so the king got back his property. Nobody was blamed. Nobody was punished. All suspicion was done away with. He was praised by the king and also by the monks for restoring the peace through gentle means. And that was an aspect of his kindness and his wisdom and his ability to tune in—to restore the peace by gentle means.

Another example of his kindness that I've always loved comes from the Agamas, which is a later collection, but it sounds really true. It sounds like Ananda to me. This is from Jack's compilation.

Ananda was being sent somewhere by the Buddha on a mission, so he was on a long walk. He passed a well on the outside of a village and saw Pakati, a young outcast woman, and asked her for water to drink. Mostly monks could not ask for food or anything, but they could ask for water. But she was from the lower caste. And she said, "Oh

no, I'm too humbly born. I can't give you water. Do not ask anything of me, lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste." That's the way it was at that time in India for the so-called low caste, the untouchables. The belief was that if you took anything from them, a higher caste person would be contaminated. And that's how she thought of herself.

Ananda replied, "I'm not asking about your caste, but simply for water."

The woman's heart leapt joyfully, and she gave Ananda water to drink. He thanked her and went away, but she followed him at a distance. She'd heard that he was a disciple of the Buddha. So she went to the Blessed One and said, "Oh Lord, help me. Let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells so that I may see him and minister unto him, for I love Ananda."

And the Blessed One understood the emotions of her heart. He said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you do not understand your own sentiments. It is not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice towards yourself, and practice it towards others."

I love that, because that's the way Ananda seemed to affect people—by his kindness, just by not accepting that she was low caste and would contaminate him. And that was an aspect of the Buddha's radical teachings, actually. When he set up his sangha of both monks and nuns, within the sangha it had nothing to do with caste, which was so rigidly stratified in Indian society at that time.

But in both the monks and the nun Sangha, the hierarchy was dependent on when you ordained. So an outcast person like that woman, Pakati, could have ordained as a nun. And she would have been a nun ahead of the next nun who ordained, even if that next nun had been a wife of the king. That was really radical. And that's what Ananda was showing just in his sense of accepting someone just as they are and meeting them with kindness. He had no pride.

But sometimes, just as this woman misunderstood his kindness and turned it into a personal love for Ananda, he got into a little bit of trouble with the nuns. It's not that he did anything wrong, but sometimes he was just so kind and so enthusiastic. He was really—I don't know if you could say impulsive about any of these monks, but close to it, as close as you could get to impulsive in that time.

So there's one story when he was admonished by Mahakasyapa. Now, Mahakasyapa is one of the great disciples of the Buddha. He's renowned as the most ascetic of all the Buddha's great disciples. I won't go into his whole story, but he sounds like he was a bit of a rough guy. He didn't really like hanging out with people too much. He loved being

extremely ascetic, loved being out in nature. There's actually lots of poems where he's extolling how much he loves nature, which is really nice to hear. But he wasn't perhaps the most personally empathetic, as Ananda was. But he was, again, an arhat.

Once the nuns that Ananda used to visit and teach frequently asked Ananda to have Mahakasyapa come and teach. Kashyapa resisted—he didn't want to go—for a couple of times, but finally he came. And he went, and Mahakasyapa gave a whole discourse to the nuns. He talked the whole time. When he finished, one of the nuns, who clearly really liked Ananda, blamed Mahakasyapa for doing all the talking. This is the quote that comes from this: "It's as if a needle seller was peddling his wares in the presence of the needle maker." She's saying this about Kashyapa—you know, you're doing all the talking and the really good guy is sitting here in silence. And then Ananda immediately jumped in and begged Mahakasyapa, "Oh, please forgive her, please forgive her."

What's interesting is that Mahakasyapa actually admonished Ananda for that. The nun was clearly off—that's obvious. Remember, he's an arhat. In terms of really generating wholesome speech or unwholesome speech, putting down an arhat is not really the greatest thing to do. "Mahakasyapa, oh my God, we have to listen to him when we could have Ananda." And then Ananda's basically jumping in and saying, "Oh, don't be mean to her." He's almost trying to block her learning what she did that was unskillful, which to us often we can hear as being kind. Ananda jumps in and goes, "Oh no, forgive her, forgive her, leave her alone." But that's not really the way the Buddha Sasana works.

We'll learn about and later say how the Buddha admonished Ananda. Admonishment isn't out of anger or saying, "You're bad, you stupid jerk." That's how we hear admonishment. Admonishment is saying, "You know, this isn't so skillful. This would be more skillful. This other way would be for your own well-being and happiness." And so for Ananda to jump in and say, "Oh, no, no, no, forgive her," is actually blocking that.

Kashyapa actually—and he was a little tough—admonished Ananda, saying that in his zeal to teach the nuns, he was overlooking possibly the dangers and the effects of their becoming too attached to him. I think that's just really interesting. He's so wanting to help that he gets a little too close sometimes. And that's where you can see he's still one on the path of higher training. It's what makes him lovable, of course. And for us, I find that a very delicate and powerful teaching. Kind, generous, almost impulsive.

The one other time that the Buddha actually admonished Ananda again comes out of his really being such a social person. But the Buddha's admonishing I also think is interesting in terms of Dhamma teaching. It's said elsewhere in the suttas that one who is easily admonished is a really beautiful and wholesome quality, because that's how we learn.

That's how we're letting go of our sense of self. And remember, admonishment isn't delivered with anger or blame. Admonishment is simply, "Oh, you know, this isn't so helpful. This would be more in line with wisdom." One who is open to that, who is easily admonished, is free from pride and open to learning, not caught in self-centeredness.

So when we react with, "Oh my god, you're right, I'm so bad, I'm so stupid," that's all about me, me, me. And then you notice, "Oh yes, it is about me, me, me," and that becomes another layer. But to be open enough to think, "Look at that. What I did got in the way. She was too attached to me and I didn't see it. That's interesting. Next time I'll see it, because it will be for her good, it will be for my good, it will be for the good of both." Such an open way.

So one time, the occasion when the Buddha admonished Ananda for an action rather than words—he often admonished him for saying things that weren't completely true. The most famous instance being after Ananda had been meditating on paṭiccasamuppāda, dependent origination, which is a very central and complex teaching. Ananda went to the Buddha and said, "Oh, paṭiccasamuppāda, dependent origination is just so clear, so obvious." And the Buddha replied, "Not so, Ananda, not so. It is very difficult to understand."

But this particular admonishment concerned action. Another thing Ananda was apparently good at was sewing. The monks have to sew their own robes, patch them together, sew the hems—there are different techniques for all of this. Ananda, again, was very skilled at this. He was a man of many talents. The Buddha praised him for how well he could do it and said he should teach the other monks how to sew.

Later, when they were at a certain monastery, the Buddha came and asked Ananda how many monks were living there. He saw that Ananda had set up a huge circle—as if we put all the cushions into a circle—where all the monks would sit. Ananda explained it was time for them to learn how to sew their robes properly. It seemed he'd arranged a kind of evening sewing circle, where the monks would all come together and sit around sewing their robes. And basically, it had turned into a time for indulging in frivolous chatter—just sitting around shooting the breeze, as far as that happened for monks at that time.

Now, this doesn't seem horribly frivolous to us, right? But in terms of that context, the Buddha admonished Ananda quite strongly. I'll shorten it, because the passage is actually quite long, but he says: when a monk enjoys socializing, finds contentment in socializing, is attached to togetherness, finds his whole happiness in togetherness—he will have no access to the bliss which exists independent of the desire for togetherness.

So the Buddha isn't saying togetherness is bad, but how this evening sewing circle was leading into attachment, into contentment with togetherness. He said that for a bhikkhu to attain the bliss of renunciation at will, the bliss of solitude, the bliss of tranquility, the bliss of awakening, in their totality—while pleased with and finding contentment in togetherness—this is impossible.

He's basically saying, not that we can never be together, but that until we have no attachment at all to the contentment of togetherness, to socializing, only then can we truly, completely taste the bliss of freedom. That's a hard teaching for those of us who enjoy the bliss of togetherness.

And remember, this is why the Buddha was always very direct with Ananda. I know in our culture it's easy to rationalize: "Well, what's wrong with togetherness? We don't all have to go off into the wilderness." He's not saying that. He's simply saying don't indulge in it. Don't set up a situation, Ananda, because you're an important teacher, that feeds people's attachment to togetherness.

He gives a whole long admonishment. Then at the end—what I really love—he speaks directly to Ananda out of his love for him, basically saying, in shorthand, that he is admonishing him so that he can attain the highest peace. "I'm admonishing you because I know you love me, and I know you love the Dhamma, and I want you to be free."

He says, "Therefore, Ananda, have amity, friendship towards me, not hostility. For long will that be for your benefit and happiness." And explaining why he admonishes him, he says, "I shall not treat you, Ananda, as a potter treats his unfired pots."

That analogy—an unfired pot is one that's been formed in clay and dried but not fired. It's very brittle. As Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, saying he won't treat Ananda like an unfired pot means he won't walk on eggshells around him. "You're very sensitive. You're very touchy. If I tap on you too hard, you'll break." But he says, "I'm admonishing you. I'm not treating you like an unfired pot. Repeatedly admonishing, I shall speak to you. Repeatedly testing."

And one who is sound will stand the test. So he's making it clear that he's holding nothing back with Ananda, because he really knows that his love of the Dhamma, his faith in the Dhamma is so pure that he won't be crushed by that.

And it's true—Ananda didn't really have any pride, and he had no enemies, which they point out is actually pretty amazing. To have no enemies! No one was jealous of him because he didn't have pride. And Helmut Hecker in *Disciples of the Buddha* points out, well, it's easy for someone like Ananda's cousin Anuruddha, who was an arahant, to have no enemies because he didn't hang out with people at all. He just stayed out on his own. Ananda was more with people than almost any other monk, and still he had no enemies.

And the other piece of his humanness that I really love is there are two times that he really expresses grief in a way that's so human. The Buddha, when someone dies, always just says, "How many times have I told you? All that comes together has to come apart." But Ananda really expresses grief. To me, he's like our stand-in for how it feels.

The first time, his strongest friend was Sariputta, the Buddha's main disciple. Ananda and Sariputta would often go teaching together or go visiting other disciples together. And Sariputta died a while before the Buddha died. And Ananda, it's said he was just... he felt like he'd fallen into an abyss of depression, of grief. And this is the poem in the Theragatha that he's said to have exclaimed at the time of Sariputta's death:

All the directions are obscure. The teachings are not clear to me. With our benevolent friend gone, it seems as if all is darkness. For one whose friend has passed away, one whose teacher is gone for good, there is no friend that can compare with mindfulness of the body.

Remember that next time you're in grief. There's no friend that can compare with mindfulness of the body.

The old ones have all passed away. I do not fit in with the new. And so today I muse alone like a bird who has gone to roost.

Ananda missing his friend, Sariputta.

At that point, the Buddha consoled Ananda with one of his peppy Dhamma talks. But the point he made was he said, "Did Sariputta's death take away your virtue? Did that take away your wisdom? Does Sariputta's death take away your meditation? Does it take away your liberation?" And Ananda said, "No, of course not." And he said, "So this is where you take your refuge. No friend can ultimately be our refuge."

And of course, preceding his own death, the Buddha said the same thing. That's a very famous scene of grief, when the Buddha announced that he was going to die in three months. He was with a whole group of people, and Ananda kind of disappeared at that point. Later, the Buddha—of course he knew where he went—said, "Okay, where's Ananda? Somebody go find Ananda." And they found Ananda, and he was leaning against a doorpost, weeping.

I read somewhere that there are many pieces of artwork that depict this—this devoted twenty-five-year attendant hearing that the Buddha is going to die in three months, leaning against the doorpost, weeping. And he's saying, "I'm still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away who is so compassionate to me."

So the Buddha calls him, and he says what you'd expect. First he admonishes him. He says, "Enough, Ananda, do not weep and wail. Haven't I told you?" And then it's the usual thing—that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other. How could it be that I should not pass away?

But then he really praises him. He says, "For a long time, Ananda, you've been in the Tathagata's presence, showing loving kindness in acts of body, of speech, and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly, and unstintingly. You have achieved much merit, Ananda. Make the effort."

In a short time, you will be free of the corruptions.

And then he turns to all the monks. "Monks, all those who were fully enlightened Buddhas in the past have had just such a chief attendant as Ananda. And so too will those in the future. Monks, Ananda is wise. He knows when it is the right time for monks to come to see the Tathagata, when is the right time for nuns, for male lay followers, for female lay followers, for kings, ministers, leaders, and their pupils." And that's when he goes on to say that Ananda has these four remarkable and wonderful qualities—basically, that all are pleased at the sight of him.

And so that's Ananda, the guardian of the Dhamma, twenty-five years following one step behind the Buddha with thoughts, speech, and action of loving kindness, but without excluding anyone. Loving the Dhamma because he loved the Buddha, and doing everything he could to make it accessible to everyone else. Really, to me, a very inspiring being.

I want to talk about a couple of women disciples. As the nuns' sangha grew more mature, the monks continued to teach, but the nuns also developed their own teachers—their own women who had their own stories and their own wisdom. They were really quite equal in the way of wisdom and freedom to the monks.

Since we got into the women from Ananda, I'll give a short account of a couple of them. The one who was considered the greatest teacher was named Dhammadina. And again, all these are just like regular people that we can in some way relate to—their lives, their stories.

She was the wife of a man named Visakha, middle class and quite well-to-do in Rajagaha. They had a very happy marriage. This is one of the stories where it wasn't enormous suffering that brought the woman to the Dhamma, which is often the case—that women became nuns out of enormous suffering. That's still often the case now in Thailand and Burma. Even when you talk to some of the brightest nuns, you find that when they first became nuns, there was a lot of suffering going on. But not Dhammadina. Her marriage was very happy, and they were very close. They would always eat together.

But one day, her husband came home from the market, and instead of being friendly and talking, he just passed by her, abstracted, and went into the next room. This is so human—she thought, "What did I do? He doesn't love me anymore. What's the problem? What's happening? Our marriage is on the rocks." And she got very upset.

Finally he came to her, and what had happened was that he had heard the Buddha and gotten quite inspired. He said to her, "Dhammadina, I'm inspired. I want to become a monk. I will give you all my wealth, and you can stay here or go back to your family. I give you everything I have."

She thought about it. She said, "Well, you know what? I want to renounce also. I'd like to become a nun."

He said, "Okay." So before he became a monk, he gave her a big send-off. He arranged for her to go in a grand palanquin with people carrying her, and she went and ordained.

Once she ordained, of course, you don't see your family anymore. She practiced and became completely awakened. She also became one of the women with the highest insight, and she became a great teacher.

Later in her wandering, she came back to Rajagaha where she'd lived, and found out—guess what? Her husband never managed to make it to becoming a monk. He was still hanging out in Rajagaha. But he was still inspired by the Dhamma.

This is what Sayadaw U Pandita often says: "Women make the really good yogis." Nothing personal.

He just says that sometimes.

So he hadn't become a monk, but he was very interested in the Dhamma. So he went to her, but as a seeker, not as her husband, and said, "Sister Dhammadina." And he asked her a whole series of questions. This is actually one of the suttas in the Majjhima Nikaya, the Lesser Series of Questions, that is all about Visakha asking questions to Dhammadina and her answering. There are not that many places in the suttas where a teaching is elevated to the same equality as a teaching of the Buddha. Being in the Majjhima Nikaya, it is elevated to that.

"For what is meditation?" she says. "Meditation is the focusing of the heart." And he keeps going on and on, finally asking her about Nirvana. And finally she says, "Okay, now you should go talk to the Buddha. Go ask him." And again, it's one of those occasions where the Buddha said, "What she said, that's exactly what I would have said. She answered exactly as I would have." So she was considered one of the foremost teachers of the Dhamma among the women, Dhammadina.

One of the other foremost women in the Sangha, one of its two leaders, was Kema. And I just like her story of how she became a nun. Probably not likely to happen to any of us, but it's one I love.

She was the chief consort of one of the kings, Bimbisara, who was sort of a follower of the Buddha—not quite as devoted as Pasenadi, but he was a follower. Kema, however, was extremely beautiful and extremely conceited. She loved pleasure and she loved sensuality. So even when the Buddha would come to the beautiful park nearby, she wouldn't go to hear him, because she said, "I've heard that he talks about the dangers of sense pleasures and he advocates renunciation." And frankly, she didn't want to hear anything about it. She loved her life and her beauty and everything about it.

So Bimbisara, for some reason really wanting her to go hear the Buddha, organized a kind of enticement. The Buddha was teaching in a particularly beautiful park, so Bimbisara hired a musician to walk around singing a song extolling the beauty of this particular park, knowing that Kema would be seduced because she loved pleasure and she loved beauty.

So she went. And then when she got there, of course, there was the Buddha teaching. She couldn't help but hear it. And there was the Buddha with his all-encompassing mind that could know just whose mind was ripe to hear the Dhamma and just what to say to hook them. As one of my earlier teachers, a character named Robert Hover, used to say: the velvet-gloved iron fist of the Dhamma.

So what he did was create, with his psychic powers, an image of an incredibly beautiful goddess, far more beautiful than Kema. And because she loved beauty, she was completely attracted. "Wow! Oh, that's incredible! What beauty!" And then he had it gradually decay. He had her beauty kind of gradually wither and turn to middle age, and the teeth started to rot, and the skin started to sag, and the hair fell out, and gradually she died.

And Kema got it, right? "Oh, it's going to be the same for me." And then he gave a whole talk about how people devoted to physical beauty and sensual pleasure were bound to the world, while those who renounced were free of attachments, were free. And she is one of the rare laypeople that is recorded as having, on just hearing this one talk, become completely awakened. She became an arahant. That's why I said it's not so likely to happen to us.

What I like about her story is the fact that she was so ready to hear the Dhamma but completely resistant to it. She just needed to hear one teaching. It's sort of like being just on the edge of, "No, I love my pleasures, and I don't want to hear about anything else. Let me hold on." And when it's just on the other side of that, there's this complete freedom. She had what Chögyam Trungpa used to call nostalgia for samsara. We just love it. "No, I want my pleasures. Don't make me give them up"—not imagining the freedom and beauty and peace on the other side.

So she became one of the great teachers. I'll read you part of her poem:

Everywhere the love of pleasure is destroyed,
the great dark is torn apart,
and death, you too are destroyed.
Fools who don't know things as they really are
revere the mansions of the moon
and tend the fire in the wood,
thinking this is purity.

That's talking about some of the Brahminical rituals, thinking that's purity.

But for myself, I honor the enlightened one, the best of all,
and practicing his teaching,
I'm completely freed from suffering.

Okay, one more woman, and then just a little bit about Anathapindika, because I love him too. This other woman, Punika, was a slave. She was actually the slave of Anathapindika, who was the Buddha's most generous supporter, and also partially awakened.

So, who can figure out the society norms of the time? The kings had all these wives and mistresses and slaves. Anyway, Punika was a slave, and she used to have to go down to the water, the stream, in the early cold morning and draw water for the family. She was apparently really clear in her faith, in her understanding of the Dhamma—it's kind of like speaking truth to power. As a slave, she had more ability to get around, and she had heard the Buddha teaching. She had really understood the Dhamma and had great faith in it.

So one day she was down drawing water, and she had such confidence that her poem is really a dialogue. She's talking to a Brahmin man who comes down, a Brahmin of the high caste. He came down because there was the belief at the time—maybe still to some extent—that if you washed yourself off in holy water, it purified you of all your sins. So he was there, washing off all his bad karma in the water. And she basically says, "What do you think you're doing?"

This is her poem talking to him. She says, "I'm a water carrier. Even in the cold, I have always gone down to the water because I'm frightened of punishment or the angry words of high-class women. But what are you afraid of, Brahmin, that makes you go down to the water? Your limbs shake with bitter cold."

And the Brahmin says, "You know why, Punika. I am doing good to prevent evil. Anyone young or old who has done something bad is freed by washing it in the water."

And she says—and this is the sense of the confidence, just the confidence of knowing the Dhamma—she says to him, "Whoever told you that you are freed from evil by washing? The blind leading the blind. In that case, all frogs and turtles would go to heaven, and water snakes and crocodiles and the rest of the water creatures." She goes on and on: "Thieves, executioners, other wrongdoers would be freed from their bad karma by washing in water. If these streams carried away all your old evil, they would carry away your virtue too. You would be separated from both. Rather, just don't do that thing, the fear of which leads you down to the water. Stop now, Brahmin, and save your skin from the cold."

That's kind of tough, huh? Speaking to a high-caste Brahmin. And he hears her, of course, because she's speaking with such confidence. He says, "You're on the right road. You brought me back." Then he says, "I'll give you the robe I bathed in."

She goes, "Keep your robe. I don't want it. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, do nothing evil, either openly or in secret." She just gives him a whole Dhamma teaching.

And then he says, "I take refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, in the Sangha. I train in the precepts." This is good. So she basically turned the man on to the Dhamma.

And then later—she clearly was gutsy—she went to the Buddha and said, "I want to become a nun." But slaves were not allowed to become nuns or monks, and the Buddha was about to leave the area. She goes to him and says, "Well, wait. Would you just go talk to Anathapindika and have him give permission that I could become a nun?"

And the Buddha said, "Okay." He went and talked to Anathapindika, who said, "Never mind. She's freed. I adopt her as my daughter." And she became a nun.

So just know there were all these different ways that women became involved in becoming nuns and powerful teachers, with strong faith in the Dhamma. There are lots of poems by the women. This book, *The First Buddhist Women* by Susan Murcott, is really quite inspiring, with a lot of the stories of the nuns and their poems.

So just a few more minutes—I want to tell a couple of stories of Anathapindika. He was the man who was the greatest lay supporter of the Buddha, very rich.

And again, besides his incredible generosity, what's inspiring about him is his enormous faith—just enormous faith. And that faith colored his generosity. There are great lessons on generosity from Anathapindaka.

From the very first time he ever heard about the Buddha, he was visiting his brother-in-law, and the house was in an uproar. He said, "What's going on?" And his brother-in-law said, "Well, the Enlightened One is coming. We are getting ready for him tomorrow." And Anathapindaka said, "The Enlightened One? Is there an Enlightened One?" And he just got so excited. He didn't even know why. He couldn't sleep all night. Then early in the morning, he just had to go running out really early to meet the Buddha.

It's like when you get that intuitive sense of something that's going to change your life and you don't know what it is. I love that. It's so naive, and he just acts on it. And he goes running out, and he gets really afraid on the way to the Buddha, not knowing what's happening. He goes to turn around, and then it says an invisible spirit came and urged him on. Whether the invisible spirits are our own inner intuition—we say, "No, I can't do this. This is too stupid. What am I going to say?" And the intuition says, "No, go. This is far more important."

So finally he went and saw a figure walking in the distance, which was, of course, the Buddha. And he stopped. And the Buddha called, "Kamsudatta," which was a name that no one else called him. He was surprised the Buddha knew it. He went up, but he was so off balance, out of presence, just so excited to be in the presence of the Buddha that

he just fell down at his feet. He stammered, "Oh, did you sleep well? Did the Blessed One sleep well?" Just not knowing what to say. And of course the Buddha said he always sleeps well—the Brahmin who is fully quenched—and went on to give him a whole talk.

And for Anathapindaka, the Dhamma eye opened. He understood the Four Noble Truths. It says, "The dust-free, stainless eye of truth opened for Anathapindaka. Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of cessation"—the beginning of awakening.

From then on, he devoted himself to supporting the Buddha, supporting the Sangha. He went back to Savatthi and asked the Buddha if the Buddha would accept if he bought a park and gave it to him to make a monastery. And the Buddha said yes, he would accept that. So Anathapindaka went back, and at enormous expense—a whole long story—he bought the Jeta Grove from Prince Jeta at a huge amount of money.

Now so many suttas begin, "Thus I have heard"—that's Ananda—"on one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi in the Jeta Grove, the monastery of Anathapindaka." The Buddha ended up spending nineteen of his forty-five rains retreats there.

Anathapindaka not only bought the monastery and offered it, he had buildings built. He would bring the monks robes every day. He made sure they had food every day. He made sure they had medicine all the time. And he also invited hundreds of monks every day to his mansion to feed them. It just goes on and on, his generosity.

But the important thing about his generosity is that it came from total faith—that real generosity is this open-hearted faith and happiness producing, not about result.

There's a great story about King Pasenadi, who again was a devotee of the Buddha. He heard of Anathapindaka's generosity and how he was having five hundred monks every day. So he said, "I, too, want to do that. I, too, want to imitate."

So he gave orders to his servants: every day I'm inviting 500 monks, cook and serve them. And he started doing that.

But then he was walking in the city and heard from his supporters that the monks would come to his house and be offered the food, but then they would go into the city and each monk would offer his bowl of food to one of their other supporters, who would then offer it back to the monk, and only then would the monk eat it.

King Pasenadi said, "What's that about? This is the best food, the richest food, the most well-prepared food. Why is this happening?"

And the Buddha explained to the king that in his palace, his servants who distributed the food had no inner feeling about it. They were just following orders, as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court. They just did whatever the king told them to do. They lacked faith, and they had no love for the monks. Many of them even thought the monks were parasites living by the labor of the working population. Anything given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal was of the most delicious food. So the monks would take the food and give it to one of their devoted lay supporters, who would offer it back again. And then it was really a true dāna.

So Anāthapiṇḍika embodied this spirit of real open-hearted faith and generosity. It's really quite beautiful.

Now, just the last thing—I know we're running a little over, but I have to tell this final story of Anāthapiṇḍika because it inspires me so deeply. When he was dying, it was kind of his last act of generosity, in a different kind of way.

He was ill and dying, and Sāriputta was very close to Anāthapiṇḍika. So Sāriputta and Ānanda together went to visit him. Sāriputta asked, "Are you getting well?"

And he said, "No. My painful feelings are increasing, not subsiding. It is as if my head were being split open with a sharp sword." The man was not feeling too good.

So Sāriputta gave him a very profound teaching. I'm going to extremely shorten it, but he gave him a teaching on not clinging to anything. He said, "You should train thus: I will not cling to the eye, the ear, the nose, the body, the mind, or consciousness. My consciousness will not be dependent on these. Householder, you should train thus: I will not cling to forms, I will not cling to sounds, to mind objects, to tangibles, and my consciousness will not be dependent on mind objects. Householder, you should train thus: I will not cling to eye consciousness or any of the sense door consciousnesses. Householder, you should train thus: I will not cling to contact, I will not cling to feeling born of eye contact, ear contact, or mind contact. My consciousness will not be dependent on feeling. Householder, you should train thus: I will not cling to the earth element, to the water element, the fire element, the air element, the space element, or the consciousness element. My consciousness will not be dependent on the consciousness element. Householder, you should train thus: I will not cling to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness—the five aggregates. Householder, you should train thus: I will not cling to the base of infinite space." And he goes through the higher jhānas. "You should train thus: I will not cling to what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, encountered, sought after, and examined by the mind, and my consciousness will not be dependent on that. Thus you should train."

When this was said, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika wept and shed tears. And Ānanda asked him, "Are you foundering, householder? Are you sinking? Are you dying?"

He said, "I am not dying, Venerable Ānanda. But although I have long waited upon the teachers and the bhikkhus worthy of esteem, never before have I heard such a talk on the Dhamma."

And Ānanda said, "Such talk on the Dhamma, householder, is not given to lay people clothed in white. Such talk on the Dhamma is given only to those who have gone forth, to those who are ordained."

And Anāthapiṇḍika replied, "Well then, Venerable Sāriputta, let such talk on the Dhamma be given to lay people. There are clansmen and women with little dust in their eyes who are wasting away through not hearing such talk on the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand this Dhamma."

And then, saying that, he died.

So in a way, we have Anathapindika to thank for the subtlety of the Dhamma teachings being available to all of us laypeople—in its depth, in its entirety, in its totality.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 53

Putting Your Trust in Awareness

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to examine their deepest expectations and assumptions about practice. She explores how the path of awakening goes against the stream—not merely the external stream of society, but more fundamentally against our deeply held views and beliefs that we don't even recognize we're holding.*
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> *Wilson illuminates a radical reframing of practice: rather than chipping away at defilements to create peace, what if natural peace and ease of heart and mind is actually more normal than we realize, and our clinging, aversion, and self-centered thinking are the aberration? She emphasizes cultivating trust in awareness itself—that open, curious, loving attention that can meet any experience, whether pleasant or unpleasant, without needing to make it about "me."*
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> *Drawing on teachings about the kilesas (defilements) and the nature of dukkha, Wilson offers practical guidance for recognizing when greed, hatred (dosa), and delusion color our experience. She shares Ajahn Sumedho's teaching that awareness is about knowing conditions fully without judgment, allowing what arises to cease according to its nature. The talk emphasizes that liberation arises not from what's happening, but in how we meet each moment—every experience becoming a potential gateway to freedom when met with interested, non-clinging awareness.*

Maybe it's too soon for you to have started asking yourself this in any serious way, but it's a reasonable question that comes up, consciously or not, for most people at some point: What do I want out of this retreat? What do I expect to get from this retreat?

Put that way, it sounds rather bald and greedy. But I think if we let ourselves honestly begin to notice what ideas are working in the back of our mind, at some point we might notice that question arising. What am I going to get out of this? Why am I here? Cut underneath all the high-sounding stuff that we say and get right to the deep chase—not in any kind of critical way.

As you know, and I'm sure many of you have heard, the Buddha described his teachings and the path of awakening as moving against the stream, going upstream against society. And of course, that's rather obvious just in this form. Coming to an intensive retreat for a month is certainly a little bit counter to the external norms of society. In

that way alone, it can be rather difficult, rather challenging. And as I'm sure you all know, the form of the retreat itself—the simplicity, the sitting, the walking, the silence, the commitment to really show up for whatever's arising in our mind and body, like it or not—that can be really challenging. There are many moments when a retreat is rather uncomfortable, to say the least. It's partly because it goes against our normal external habits.

But I think even more deeply, when the Buddha talks about this practice, this path of awakening going against the stream, more important than the external stream of society—that's almost secondary. The stream that our practice of mindful attention, of loving presence without discriminating what we like and don't like, goes against is the stream of our deep-set habits of heart and mind, and in many cases our deeply held views and beliefs. These are the ones we don't know we're holding because it's just the way things are.

When I was talking about getting down to the nitty-gritty of what we really want out of this, on that level the answer will come from what we really deeply hold and believe to be true, without even knowing it. Not what we wish, not some view in our intellectual head, but where we take refuge, where we really have confidence, what we trust.

One of the reasons we begin a retreat with taking the three refuges in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—sure, it's a tradition—but it's also a way of reminding each of us in our own particular way. For me, it gets deeper and deeper. It's a way of reminding me that this whole path is about learning to shift where I have confidence. The beginning and end of the path is wise understanding, right view—what we really know to be true, accurate perception of ourselves and the world around us.

As the Buddha describes so clearly, we perceive ourselves to be a solid, separate, eternal being. What we perceive leads to how we think about the world, which leads to the beliefs we hold, what we trust. And those beliefs then form the ideas and perceptions that we carry forward into the world.

This path of practice, of awakening, is at times uncomfortable because it's really taking us into a direct, face-to-face examination of what we've believed to be the truth about ourselves and the world. And we discover on a cellular, moment-to-moment level—it just ain't so. This is not an intellectual pursuit. This is really a moment-to-moment lived experience.

Mostly, the views we've taken for granted feel safe because we've taken them for granted. Our practice is really a stepping outside of our comfortable—although it doesn't work, it's still comfortable—definition, description, idea of ourselves and the

world. Stepping outside of that view and opening up not to another view, but to not knowing. Opening up to "what if." Opening up to the willingness to be actively engaged and really present without needing to make a conclusion about every experience, without needing every experience to reaffirm me: "This is about me. This will make me better. This will whatever."

Awareness practice is stepping outside of our comfort zone—not only on the physical level. That's the easiest part, although that's the one we might consciously fight. That's the easiest part. But the deep-held beliefs.

I'll give you an example. Not about practice, but about how our views of the world color how we understand what's happening. Can we just have the potential of not being so sure? It's a great place, this open, interested place of not knowing. It's alive. It's connected. Knowing—"Oh, that's what that's about"—wham, it all slams shut.

So, this example: I used this last fall at IMS and it sparked a whole discussion with all the staff people because it got interesting. Last year I was in Burma in January, and several of us were with a Sayadaw. We had raised some money and we were going down to a village in the Delta, a couple of villages, offering dānas of food. These are very formal occasions where food is piled up, you stand in a row, people come, you pass it out, and photos are always taken. It's a very joyous occasion, but there are tons of photos. So we got back to the monastery where we were staying, and one of our friends—she's a Swiss woman who's a nun, she's been a nun there for seventeen or eighteen years...

She speaks Burmese. She's really not part of the culture, but quite immersed in it. And you should know that in Burma, it's a largely Buddhist country, and so the culture really accepts the suttas and the way the Buddha described the world as the way it is, including all the different realms of existence, for example. That's just accepted.

So she was putting her photos on the computer, and quite a number of them had on our skirts in different places, when we were standing, these bright, perfectly round circles of light. Immediately she said, "Oh look, these are the Devas." Devas are celestial beings. She was absolutely sure—these are the Devas. And she's telling the Sayadaw, "Oh look at the Devas," and he was laughing.

Then another friend who was also with us, also a nun there, but her background is as a scientist—she's been a scientist for a very long time. Immediately she said, "Those aren't Devas. That's condensation on the lens of the camera. That's what it is. You can tell." And she was sure. The other one was sure. I thought, well, who knows? I would never have thought Devas to begin with, but I don't know about condensation on the lens either.

So we thought, okay, whatever. I'll look at my pictures when I get home on my computer. Different camera, different computer, different photos, but the same situations. And not as many, but some of the photos did have those perfectly round circles. I thought, well, that's interesting. Who knows, right? Could I just stay with the "who knows"?

And so when I talked about this in the fall, the staff all got going. Immediately one guy who's the IT person, the computer guy, very certain, says, "Look at that. There's no way. It's obviously condensation." And then we saw another photo taken that summer of a teacher meeting we had at Gaia House in England. There's one photo of three of the teachers sitting there, but one particular one, who's a monk, has this exact same round, bright thing right on his chest. And when he was asked about it, he said, "Oh, often pictures of me have that."

So we showed Eric the skeptic this photo. He goes, "Well, you can see right there, there's a glass of water, and that's exactly what it is—it's just water reflecting." He was so sure. And then all these people started coming to me with different photographs from different places with these really wild images. Someone brought me a photo of a forest grove in Burma with people sitting there at dusk, and these round, particular lights were all over up in the top. I swear, I just thought, this has to be like Anāthapiṇḍika in the Jeta Grove after he died. That's the first thing that came to mind. It just really looked like that.

And then my friend, the scientist nun—this winter she came, not sheepishly exactly, but she came with a photo she had taken in August in Tiruvannamalai, which is Ramana Maharshi's ashram in southern India. She spent a month there. And one night, the full moon night—as you know, it's a done thing, you take a perambulation around that mountain, the holy mountain Arunachala, which takes a few hours. On the full moon night in recent years, it's become a big thing for Indian disciples to do; they didn't used to. So they went out that night, and it was packed. In India, a few people coming to walk around the mountain means two and a half million people. Two and a half million people show up to walk around this mountain on the full moon. Complete solid people, she said, the whole way around—having a party, talking on their cell phones, people selling things. She said it was a great atmosphere.

So she went out and took pictures. There were all these lights everywhere, and there weren't street lights. She showed me the picture. It is filled with these bright, perfect, like Deva lights. Who knows? And she said to me, "Okay, who knows. I'm putting down the moisture-on-the-lens theory. I really don't know."

So I'm just telling this to give a sense of how the beliefs that we automatically assume, that we don't even question—scientific or the different realms of existence—that we use to describe our world, those are going to be how we describe experience. Maybe that's correct, maybe it's not.

It certainly can be useful. I'm not saying we go around not knowing what anything is. But can we, rather than having to land on an answer, be willing to cultivate, to recognize, to become familiar and comfortable with this active, engaged, open energy of heart and mind, of really being present? But who knows? Yeah, it looks like moisture on the lens, but who knows?

This is really what we're talking about when we speak of the quality of mindfulness, the quality of awareness that we're cultivating, hopefully, in this retreat. This is what we're cultivating. We're not here to find an answer to your question. The answer is going to shut everything down. We have more answers than we need. We're here to cultivate that open connectedness that doesn't even need to go around the question. Just this. Just this. Without needing to reference past or future and lines of experience. Just this. Really present. And who knows?

It's an active, awake quality of energy, of heart, of mind, of attention. It's not stressful. It's not exhausting. It's engaging. It's enlivening. And it's not something that wears us out, just meeting moment-to-moment experience that way. It doesn't frustrate us. It doesn't make a day of mindful presence seem endless and tormenting. Because it's just now. What's going to arise in the next moment? Who knows? You think it's going to be a certain kind of feeling of your breath? Well, who knows? But the more we think we know what we want, the more we'll get locked in struggle.

But this isn't, for most of us, the natural habit of mind. Again, my scientist friend—I think she wouldn't mind if I said this, we talked about it—she's a botanist. We used to go walking, and as we're walking wherever, she's naming every tree and every bird. It used to drive me nuts, you know? And then as we talked about it, we realized it's not that she was showing off or something, but that was her way of controlling the world. Knowing what's going on. You name it and you know it and you can reference it. And everything's kind of safe and secure. Not knowing—there's not such a place to put your handholds.

That doesn't mean we're not going to have the questions: What do I want from this retreat? Or what is it that's going to bring me happiness and peace? Or what is happiness and peace? Nothing unusual or wrong with having those questions. It's when we think we have to get an answer that's going to stay the same without changing that we get lost.

So what do I want from this retreat? The Dalai Lama says that the purpose of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace. Nothing weird or wrong about wishing for happiness or peace. I mean, if we didn't, for sure we wouldn't be doing this—unless you're really just masochistic. I guess that's always an option.

We are all equal in wishing to be happy and to overcome our suffering. And I believe we all share the right to fulfill this aspiration. It's a sincere, appropriate motivation. As the Buddha said, one of the things that unites us all as human beings is our deep wish for happiness, for peace. That's normal. Nothing wrong with that. But where it runs into trouble is where it meets our unseen, unexamined assumptions about ourselves, about life, about what happiness is.

When we don't stop and really look—what's actually bringing peace and happiness in a moment? What's actually contributing to confusion and suffering in a moment?—we miss what's right in front of us. To see it clearly, we have to learn how to look free from our assumptions. Otherwise we're looking through a veil. We already think we know what makes us happy, and through that veil we keep trying to do the very thing without seeing that it isn't working. We all know this, but it's so subtle.

So what do I expect from this retreat? Asking yourself that question honestly and seeing what surfaces—do it quietly. You don't have to be embarrassed about it, because really, when I do this and let the real thoughts come up, my dhamma mind that could tell you everything about right understanding is ashamed. I just want pleasant feeling, by God. I just want to feel good. I want to float on clouds. I want to feel compassionate. I want the pain in my back to go away. I want to really impress everyone.

Just be really honest with yourself—not to shame yourself, not to be judgmental, but to see what ideas are working in the back of your mind. Once we see them, we're not driven by them or fooled by them anymore. When we don't see them, when we don't recognize them, that's the lens through which we're evaluating our experience. That's the lens that drives striving. That's the lens that feeds disappointment. We're only disappointed when we're not getting what we expect, right? Which is always a good sign when you're disappointed, because then you can stop and say, "Okay, great, there's some expectation here that isn't being met. What is it?" Bring it up into the light. We don't have to be afraid of this stuff.

So looking to see: what are we placing our faith in? What are we placing our heart on? What are we consciously or unconsciously looking to in order to bring us happiness? I find myself over and over and over—even though I know better, and on many levels I know better, and sometimes I completely know better—but then the next moment or the next year, I discover how often my attention or my sense of what will make

me happy is outward directed. Or it comes to a certain state of mind or heart. That's what I'm going for. And when that state of peace or that state of happiness or just the state of not being in pain—we'll take that, just the state of the back pain going away, that's good enough, you could call that a mini-nibbāna—that would be good enough. Some state. Knowing all the while that every conditioned state dissolves, and really quickly.

But there's still that view in the back of the mind that this external or internal state, or this object, or this situation, or this particular experience will change me forever. Experience is a big one. Do you find yourself waiting for some particular experience? If you have a cessation of experience, then you're finished, right? So just let that cessation experience come, and you can quit all this sitting and walking. You can quit experiencing greed and hatred. You've read about it. It'll come. It's all over, right?

It's impossible. Any experience that comes, goes. And when it's here, it's here. This seems so obviously stupid, but when it's gone, it's really gone. A level of insight is present when it's here, and when it's gone, it's gone. It's not something we can make into a chart—"I had this level of insight"—and walk around with it like a diploma. But that doesn't do any good. It's just another thing we're holding on to.

The suffering is the holding in the mind in this moment—right now, in this moment. And as long as we're subtly or not so subtly looking outward to things, to experience, to people, to states, to anything that comes and goes, we're lost in saṃsāra. That is saṃsāra. We're spinning in saṃsāra.

As long as we think we can get something and hold on to it, as long as we think there's a view—and I spent twenty years at least deep in thinking, "I'm practicing to understand the truth of things." But on some level, I thought, once I get some understanding... I never really thought it so obviously as "I could write it down, this is the truth of things, and then all my suffering would be over." But some sense of, once I understand the truth of things—and that was the energy behind it—once I understand the truth of things, it'll all be okay. It'll explain everything. It'll explain samsara and why I keep suffering and why I keep going back into these same old habits that I've seen ten million times.

Has that happened to anybody? Yeah, once or twice, right? And you think, "I really saw deeply through this." And you did, in that moment. But the moment doesn't last. And isn't it easy to feel completely discouraged after that? "I really saw it. So how come I'm turning around and doing it again?" And it's even worse because not only am I do-

ing it again, I know I'm doing it again. I know that I've seen through it. So it's twice as painful because I can add judgment for my stupidity on top of doing it anyway. And I can't stop.

We have unreal expectations.

This practice isn't about getting rid of one view to take up another view—not even the Buddha's view. You know this, that he said even his own teachings are to be used as a raft to get across the river. It's useful, it's helpful. When you get across the river, you don't take the raft and carry it on your shoulders for the rest of your life. So all views are useful, are helpful. And even anything I'm saying now is intellectual information. If it's helpful, great. If it's not, let it go. But nothing is anything that we can hold on to and say, "This is the truth."

So this practice isn't about putting down one view in order to take up another view. It's about learning to recognize, to shift our trust from views and explanations and experience and steady state moments and sense of self—to change our trust to that willingness to just surrender wholeheartedly in one moment into the not-knowing presence of awareness, of mindfulness. Just awareness of what's happening now. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, emotions. That's the basic range that we experience over and over and over. But "over and over" is already a concept, because there's only just right now. Seeing happening now. Feeling happening now. Thinking happening now. Pain happening now.

Our way of talking, our way of trying to teach meditation, our way of trying to teach anything, carries a sense of "me doing." So we talk about me being mindful of sensation. It's language. We have to use language. And the view we have is me doing things. But really what happens is sensation arises, awareness arises, just like that. Hearing arises, the knowing of it arises, just like that. We're not doing anything. We say we're showing up to be present for it, inclining the mind in that way, but what we're really cultivating is that open not-knowing, that willingness to just meet with open-hearted attention whatever happens to be arising in this minute—and notice it's going away, the next, the next, the next.

We are so trained to look for things leading in a certain direction, for experience to confirm "me." Now my breaths are getting better. Now my sensations are getting more subtle. Now my thoughts are getting louder and more gross. So one is bad and one is good, these judgments. But it's not about what's happening. What we're really cultivating is that moment-to-moment quality of open, curious, loving—you could say—attention. Really loving the awareness itself. And any object, any experience that's arising is the gateway to help us recognize awareness itself.

So really, we don't believe this because of our deep views.

It doesn't matter what's happening. And in those moments when we actually know this—when we truly know it doesn't matter—there's such a relief.

When practice is a burden, when you're slumping through the day thinking, "Oh my God, three and a half more hours until I can go to bed without hating myself"—those are tough days. But look at why you're slumping. It's probably unpleasant. We rarely slump along like that when the experiences are all pleasant and the mental states are lovely and our body doesn't hurt. Then it's like, "Yes! I'm one step away from bodhisattva-hood."

But when your body hurts, when you're feeling moody, when you're wishing you had taken that vacation instead of coming here, when you thought you were doing good but then it all crashed—and that person next to you, that person who you thought wasn't doing any good, is suddenly really doing good. You thought you were the inspiring one, but now you're the person really struggling. And then you think, "Okay, I'm out of here."

That's when you're slumping along. Because you're looking at experience as a confirmation of self—of good or bad, of getting somewhere.

But in those moments when there's just that open loving of awareness, of mindfulness, of just being present for its own sake, you're not slumping along because it doesn't matter. The day's long, the day's short—it doesn't matter. Your back hurts or it doesn't. Sure, you have a preference. I'm not saying you don't have a preference for your back not to hurt. But it doesn't really matter.

And this is a whole different angle from the way we're trained, the way we're so deeply ingrained to take all experiences and ask, "What does it mean about me?" Really deep-set habits.

I read a book called *Nonviolence* a while ago. One really interesting thing the author said stuck with me. He was talking about the word "nonviolence" and saying how in English, the main word is "violence." So the concept "nonviolence" is just a negation of violence. When you hear that, violence is kind of like the norm, and nonviolence is seen as something aberrant—something weak or passive. In Hindi it's the same: ahimsa. The same thing—*a*, negation of *himsa*.

But he said—and this is what struck me, just thinking about how language can reflect our views, but also shift them—he said, "Just think: what if the only word for war were 'non-peace'?" So whenever we're talking about a war, we're saying, "Oh, there's

non-peace happening in Zimbabwe right now. There's non-peace starting to occur in Afghanistan." It would make a subtle shift in how we experience things, how we think about things.

So one way of thinking about our mindfulness practice—about learning to have confidence in awareness rather than in things, in objects, in experience—is a shift like this.

What if—as Ajahn Amaro talks about—the natural peace and ease of mind and body that is natural peace and ease, what if this natural peace and ease of heart and mind, what if non-clinging of heart and mind, is not some obscure state that we need to create over many years, if not lifetimes, of intense struggle? What if non-clinging heart and mind, natural peace and ease, is actually more normal than the norm—but we're just not used to recognizing it?

What if the fear, the clinging, the aversion, the spinning all the world around the idea of me, me, me—what if all the frustration, the internal suffering and sense of separation that seem to create us, to encompass us, to be the cage we have to break out of, that seem to hold us back from freedom—what if these are actually the aberration? But we just keep giving our attention, our energy, our trust, our refuge to the wrong place.

Think about it. When you're really down and out in moments of intensity, you don't have time to think through what's the proper Dharma perspective. You're off center, not really balanced, and something difficult happens. Where does the mind go in that moment for refuge?

It can be different places; I'm not saying there's only one. When I'm really balanced and something difficult happens, sometimes there's just a sense of, "Ah, that too." And then I think, "Wow, that's nice. I can see that." But there are times when I'm really unbalanced or tired or stressed, traveling and about to miss my connection at the airport, and somebody's in my way. That's a real test for me, I have to say. Somebody does something slow, and aversion just shoots out.

Okay—that was the refuge in the moment. That was the trust: if I can be pushy enough, I'll get on that plane.

Which, by the way, doesn't work. But just to see for ourselves.

And what if our path isn't so much the moment to moment effort where we've got to chip away the clinging, chip away the aversion, make a little mark on the blackboard each time we've chipped something away, try to hold on to some state, try to create

some experience of peace? What if our path is much more about rediscovering the natural peace and ease? Learning how to re-recognize it, to have more confidence in it, to trust it more, no matter what's happening.

This is really something. When we're looking at practice from this angle, it has a whole different feeling. It really becomes fun. It really becomes quite delightful because there's nothing going on that we need to fight away. We wake up and we're filled with rage. Okay. Rage is like this. You can actually meet rage with interested awareness.

And that's the key—interested awareness. Rage is like this. When we meet rage with "oh my god, I'm so horrible," when we meet rage with rage, we're buying into it again, aren't we?

So all of you have, I know, many times in any day—on retreat we have more chance to notice—but many times in any day when the mind is not filled with greed, when the mind is not filled with aversion or self-hatred or judgment or fear, when the mind is not running that endless story of "what about me." Okay, maybe there aren't many, many moments, but there are some when the mind isn't running that story. And those moments we often tend not to notice because we're more tuned into "what about me," good or bad. "What about me" is often a story of how bad I am, how useless I am, but it's still all about me.

Just notice those simple moments where—what is it the Third Zen Patriarch said?—where nothing is missing, nothing is lacking, and nothing is in excess. And we're not relating anything back to me. Just this. The "just so" moments.

And it doesn't matter what's happening. In the middle of a sitting, there's just a moment of just breathing. And then later we go, "Oh, there was a moment. It was just the breath. The breath was just breathing itself. Oh my God—" Okay, that's not it anymore. But the moment when there's just breathing. Or hearing. Just hearing. Or thinking, but it's really just thinking. Or having a cup of tea and there's just heat. Or hearing a bird. Or feeling the fog. Or just standing.

But there's awake. You're awake. This isn't a moment when you're asleep or in a coma—that's not what I'm talking about. There's wakefulness, there's presence, but it's not filled with greed or aversion or any particular me-story. It's just this.

Notice those moments. You don't have to put a word on them. Any word is already too much. They're not huge—the neon lights don't go off, everything isn't suddenly different. And that's why we often don't notice them. We want the one big experience to be

done with it all. And that's just more wanting. That's coming from the same place of me wanting something big to change me so I'll be different—I'll still be me, but different and better. Can't think it through that way.

The little moments of nothing special, but that exquisite presence. There's no me hanging around right then. Nothing to want, nothing missing.

Your back hurts or it doesn't hurt. It doesn't really matter in that moment. Your knee hurts, you're cold, there's a loud noise, or you wish it was bedtime. It doesn't really matter. Just little moments. Notice them.

We really need to give these moments the attention, the energy, the sense of re-re-cognizing, so that we can learn to shift where we have confidence, to shift where we put our trust—as I say, when the chips are down. That's a big part of our practice here.

And the other part, of course, is what we spend a lot of time caught up in: recognizing the habits, the reactions from the belief systems that seem to hide from us this natural peace and ease. You know what the habits are, right? The deep belief that if something is pleasant, it's good. That's so deep. It's good, it's right, it's the way it's supposed to be. If something is unpleasant—an unpleasant sensation in the body, an unpleasant sound, an unpleasant thought about yourself, an unpleasant perception, you think someone's looking at you cross-eyed because you did something wrong—you feel bad. Unpleasant equals bad or wrong. Something wrong with me.

The pleasant is to be gotten more of. The unpleasant is to be gotten rid of. And the neutral we don't even notice, to be overlooked.

But even more, in the sense of the delusion, is that relating it all back to me. It's pleasant, it's good, because it fuels my feeling good about myself. It's good for me. The unpleasant is bad or wrong only in relation to some sense of me that has the deep-set idea that peace and happiness is associated with pleasant feeling.

I'm not saying we aren't going to prefer pleasant feeling to unpleasant feeling. But really look deeply: how much of our life choices are posited on "this will get me more pleasant feeling"? How much of the way I even practice? I keep finding it over and over. I think I'm just being open and present. And then somewhere there's a little sense of struggle. I look, and ever so subtly, I've started to try and steer things in the direction of pleasant. *Oh, that's the way it's supposed to go.*

Do you ever have doubt about your practice when you're feeling good, when the experiences are smooth and pleasant and lights are going off? You come into the interview and we say, "You're just caught up in the defilements of insight." You don't want to hear that. You think, *They don't know what they're talking about.*

When you're caught and you're really seeing greed arising in a moment with every sense impression and you come in and say, "Oh my God, I'm hopeless. I'm just seeing craving in every moment"—and we say, "That's great. You're really seeing the truth of things. This is freeing to the heart and mind." You say, "Freeing? I don't think so. This isn't what I signed up for. I didn't come here to see greed and aversion arising in every moment. I came here to be peaceful, to feel good, to get into the jhānas, which keep greed and aversion away." And if we could stay in the jhānas from now until we die, that would be very nice. But we can't. And then greed and aversion come back.

So our job here is, from the confidence in that not-knowing, that open, loving quality of awareness that can just be with whatever—the confidence that that's accessible no matter what the experience is—this gives us the faith, the energy, the confidence to then meet even aversion, even clinging, even our self-judgment with this open-hearted mindfulness. Even our deepest demons. And yes, we have to work with them in different ways—I'm not saying you just dive in and go for it. But even our deepest demons, we can meet with mindfulness. They can be part of our gateway to freedom.

There's nothing, as one of my Burmese teachers said, there's nothing you need to be afraid of because there's nothing that mindfulness can't be with. There's nothing awareness can't be aware of. Nothing.

When we place our trust more and more in awareness through our own experience, you start to know that. You start to have confidence in that. And that freedom of mind, of heart from clinging, just begins to naturally, more and more, show itself.

We get a sense for what that means. It's not a state—it's a moment-to-moment activity. There's no state to reach. But as we trust that moment-to-moment activity, this loving, open, non-judging quality of mindfulness, the more we trust it, we come to see that even when we feel deeply spinning in some story, deeply spinning in some reactivity, somewhere we increasingly know: just like that, just like that. This whole spinning mess—oh, it's like this, as Ajahn Sumedho says.

We're aware of it. Not that it goes away, but that we shift our confidence from "this is who I am and I have to do something to get rid of this and this is unbearable, I can't stand it another moment" to simply: oh, it's like this. The unbearable nature of pain is like this.

It's still the unbearable nature of pain, don't get me wrong. But the shift of interest, the shift of trust has moved from the me experiencing unbearable pain who has to get out of it at any cost, to awareness of the unbearable nature of pain. It's like this. We really learn to love awareness—to trust it, to have confidence, to know that this is accessible. Awareness is truly the doorway to freedom of heart and mind, to freedom from suffering, to freedom from causing suffering for others.

So that's really the work of our meditation: to rediscover in many, many moments, over and over and over, the natural peace and ease of mind and body when the mind and heart isn't colored by wanting, when it isn't colored by hating, when it isn't colored by me-ing. And there are many such moments in our days. From that place of trusting and confidence, we can then explore the many moments when we feel really caught in reactivity, in fear, in wanting, in "it's all about me"—when it just feels so solid. It doesn't even feel solid; we just know this is how it is.

Sometimes it's only an intellectual remembering. "Oh yes, I remember I was able to be aware of aversion." We can't quite bring it in; it's just intellectual. But sometimes just remembering that can really help.

On a retreat I was just teaching last week in Burma, a young woman came who was going through a huge difficulty in her life—a major ending of a relationship, with all the external suffering and confusion and questioning herself that brings. You can imagine coming on retreat in that state. She was filled with aversion, she said. Aversion everywhere she turned. It was becoming unbearable. She was on the floor of her kuti, her little cottage, just sobbing.

And then suddenly—she'd been practicing a while, other retreats—suddenly she said, "Oh, right. This is just aversion." It sounds silly, perhaps, but she said it was just aversion. It was like she was in this well of aversion, but it just didn't stick anymore. It wasn't a problem. None of the situation changed. She saw all the aversion. She didn't push it away. She just recognized: "Oh, right. This is aversion in the mind." Awareness of aversion—aversion is like this.

In that moment, we're trusting in mindfulness. We're trusting in awareness again. It's not always possible. Sometimes we're too caught in the story, too caught in belief in the aversion. It's too strong. Or the energy of greed is stronger than the energy of awareness. Sure, plenty of times. That's what we're practicing for. But it's never lost. It's never hopeless. It's never further away than that.

And this is what we learn to trust for ourselves. Me telling you doesn't make any difference. But learning to really know that for yourself—that's everything.

The times when, like that young woman, when suddenly she said, "Oh, it's just aversion. Everywhere I look, but it's just aversion." And she was free. She felt so happy in that moment. And she was filled with aversion. That's not an aberration. That's possible. It happens for all of us sometimes, and it really fuels our trust.

So we recognize and strengthen confidence in the natural purity of heart and mind by recognizing those moments when the heart and mind is pure, and by recognizing what it's like when the heart and mind is colored by *kilesa*, by these distortions. They're suffering always, but it's not rocket science. One of my teachers makes it very simple to notice in our minds. We get all twisted up, but he said: In our practice here, if you're wanting something to happen, that's greed. It's not so hard to tell. You're trying to stop something from happening, or you want something different to happen—that's aversion, that's hatred or fear. Do you not have a clue what's happening? Well, that's delusion. But the other aspect of delusion is: are you relating everything that's happening as being me or mine? That's delusion. My knee, my aversion. Somebody's making a sound halfway across the room and it's bothering *me*. Just notice that.

So it's not rocket science. You're wanting something to happen—greed. You want something to stop happening, you want something different—aversion, hatred, or fear. You don't know what's happening, or it's all me or mine—delusion.

The trick is recognizing those. This isn't a judgment. I'm happy when I see aversion or *dosa*. I say *dosa* now because it's the Pali word that covers aversion, hatred, fear—all of it—and it makes it really impersonal. So I might be being really subtle, and I'm noting and noticing all these things, and suddenly I realize: oh, I'm trying to push that away. Oh, that's *dosa* in the mind. In that moment, the mind isn't colored by *dosa* anymore. It's become aware. Oh, *dosa* is like this. The trust has gone into the mindfulness.

Oh, wanting feels like this. We don't have to be afraid of wanting. We don't have to be afraid of pushing away, of aversion. We don't have to be afraid of delusion—that's just adding *dosa* on top of delusion. All we have to do is trust awareness enough that we can recognize.

And when awareness is being fed, when we're loving awareness in that moment, we're not loving the greed. We're not loving the aversion. When we're buying into it —"It is aversion and I am so bad"—that's feeding the aversion. "I am greedy, but that would really solve everything if I could only get it. This will be the last one." That's feeding the greed. "Oh, this will be the last one," and you're watching. Yeah, just watch. Is that the last one? Go ahead and eat that.

Does that end all greed? Funny, it didn't seem to do the job.

That's awareness. Always available, always accessible, and not so difficult.

One of my teachers asks: What's the difference between someone who practices mindfulness and someone who doesn't? He says a practitioner regards every object, every experience that arises with interest, as a chance to learn. A non-practitioner reacts with greed, hatred, and confusion.

From this perspective, every experience that comes is a chance to learn. We're not here to try to have better and better experiences. Every moment is an opening into awareness, and every moment of awareness is a potential gateway to freedom in that moment. And there's only this moment. The past moment is over, the future isn't here—there's only this moment.

Liberation arises, the purity of heart and mind arises, not from what's happening, but in how we meet this moment. So even the most ugly, fearful, painful experience, met with interest, met without fear—that's a moment of cultivating non-clinging. The most beautiful, sublime, subtle experience, met with "Wow, now I'm really getting somewhere"—that's cultivating greed. Recognizing "Oh, that's greed" is cultivating awareness again.

It's just like that. We're never more lost than this. And there's nothing we need to be afraid of. Nothing.

Byron Katie has a great line: "Loving what is." I like to think of awareness as being like that—our mindfulness practice. Just loving what is. And only when the heart and mind is clear in that way can we recognize accurately what is. It's the accurate recognition of what's really going on in our mind and body moment to moment that ultimately frees us from our wrong ideas, our inaccurate perceptions. As long as we perceive wrongly, we're going to keep building the world in an inaccurate way. We can only perceive accurately in those moments when the citta, the mind, the heart, is not looking through confusion.

So recognize this. Trust in it. Have confidence in all those little moments of just this, just this. And no matter how much you seem caught in fear or confusion, know that just recognizing that is already a moment of potential freedom, of feeding the heart and mind of non-clinging, no matter what's happening. Every moment here is the moment that can free our hearts and minds. There's no other moment. There's only this moment.

I'll end with something from Ajahn Sumedho:

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is about knowing these things fully, that they are what they are at this moment. What I found very helpful was learning to be aware of conditions without judging them. In this way, the resultant karma of past actions and speech as it arises in the present is fully recognized without compounding it, without making it into a problem. It is what it is. What arises ceases. As we recognize that and allow things to cease according to their nature, the realization of cessation gives us an increasing amount of faith in the practice of non-attachment and letting go."

CHAPTER 54

Yathā Bhūta: Things As They Are

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this talk from a month-long retreat, Carol Wilson examines the profound Pāli phrase yathā bhūta (things as they are) and its centrality to Buddhist practice. She explains how yathā bhūta ñāṇadassana—knowledge and vision of things as they are—forms the ground for liberation, since in moments of truly perceiving reality without distortion, clinging and aversion naturally fall away.

Wilson offers a nuanced exploration of the First Noble Truth, clarifying that dukkha extends far beyond mere suffering to encompass the inherent unreliability and friction of conditioned experience. Drawing on the etymology of dukkha as a poorly-fitting axle hole creating friction, she illuminates how even pleasant experiences are included within dukkha because of their impermanent nature. She emphasizes that understanding dukkha is not meant to generate aversion but to reveal how our habitual reactions of craving and resistance—rooted in ignorance—perpetuate confusion and obscure clear seeing.

Through practical examples from retreat life and the Buddha's own post-awakening existence, Wilson demonstrates that awakening is not an escape from life's difficulties but a transformed relationship with experience. She guides practitioners toward bare mindfulness—attention beneath concept—where sensation is met without the overlay of 'my knee' or elaborate stories. This accepting, loving presence with what is allows reality to reveal itself, releases energy bound up in reactivity, and opens space for genuine compassion and appropriate response.

So now we're about a week into this retreat, however long you're going to be here. And a week is enough time to find out that maybe what you thought was going to happen isn't happening—to find that everybody's practice is starting to develop in your own particular way. People start going into different areas, and that's exactly as it should be happening. But it's also a time when some people are just going along, while others, without realizing it, can find themselves struggling in some subtle way with "this isn't really what I thought it would be like. I don't know how I thought it would be, but not exactly like this."

What I want to talk about tonight actually feels like the same talk over and over. But that's okay. There's a phrase in Pali that appears often in the suttas: *yathā bhūta*, which means "things as they are, reality as it is." *Yathā bhūta.*

One of the deep, high insights—an insight, an understanding that's the ground for liberation—is in Pali *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*. You see that a lot in the suttas, and it's generally translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are." So this seeing things as they are, reality as it is, *yathā bhūta*, is really the core, the essence, the seed of our whole practice. It's basically what we're yammering on about all the time: seeing things as they are, *yathā bhūta*.

This knowledge and vision—just in a moment, when there's a real kind of opening, let's call that insight, that *ñāṇa*, that wisdom of knowledge of things as they are—it leads to liberation. Because when the perception, when the mind, when the heart is truly perceiving things—self, others, sense experience, whatever arises in a moment—as it truly is, seeing it as it truly is in that moment, the wisdom of that releases the mind and heart from clinging, from aversion, from the sense of "me." Those reactions, those responses to life are based on our ongoing misperception and misunderstanding of things as they really are.

So that's what's so simple but also magical about the Buddha's understanding and about our practice. We say it over and over: we're not here to create some other reality or to get out of this one. We're here to actually find out what this reality actually is. I just love that phrase, *yathā bhūta*.

And what allows for our accurate seeing of things as they are in a moment? Mindfulness, of course—clear perception. And what allows for clear perception, for mindfulness, is the quality of acceptance, in just one moment. To see how reality is in this moment, it's necessary to be fully present with total acceptance of things as they are in this moment.

I want to elaborate on that a bit—on *yathā bhūta*, on what hides things as they are, and how mindfulness can help with that. Acceptance of things as they are, with mindfulness, with clear connectedness, opens the mind and heart to the liberation, the freedom of non-clinging. And that allows for—not passivity, this acceptance is not about passivity—it allows for a clear, compassionate, appropriate response, because we're actually responding to what's actually going on rather than our ideas and constructions and delusions about things.

But don't believe me.

When we talk about the roots of our suffering, our confusion—when they're spoken of as the *kilesas*, the qualities, the factors in the heart and mind in a moment of greed, of hatred or aversion or fear, of ignorance, confusion, delusion—we say these are the

seeds of suffering. On one level, at times, that's obvious. Usually it's more obvious with aversion and hatred and fear than with the others. It's obvious that in themselves, we don't like them too much and that they seem to be causing us suffering.

But that's not really the most subtle, most pervasive way these things cause us suffering. They contribute to, they're the causes of our confusion, of our delusion, because when greed, hatred, and confusion are in the consciousness, coloring our heart and mind, coloring our perception, we cannot perceive or recognize accurately. When greed or hatred or fear or ignorance or confusion or the "me" story is clouding us—when we don't recognize that it's present in the mind and it's clouding, coloring our perception—we can't see accurately. There's no way.

And so what we respond to isn't what's happening at all. It just keeps self-perpetuating, like a rolling snowball. We get further and further from what's really going on and wonder why our actions, with the best will in the world, just don't seem to achieve what we want.

What I want to talk about mostly here is the first two noble truths. I think it's really interesting, and the more I've practiced, the more I've come to really appreciate that when the Buddha decided to describe to the world, to people, what we need to know to actually recognize things as they are—what we need to know to free the heart and mind from anguish, from confusion—the first thing he picked, his first truth, is this truth called *dukkha*.

I want to talk about that, because I think it's profound. If it was as obvious as it seems to be, why would the Buddha need to lay it out and say that this truth needs to be understood? That's the action he recommends for the first noble truth of *dukkha*: the truth of *dukkha* is to be understood. Not to be avoided, not to be transcended—it's to be understood.

I want to talk a little about my understanding, my limited understanding, and the things I've read that help give a sense of the naturalness of this truth of *dukkha* and how understanding it contributes to recognizing accurately, and how that contributes to ease, freedom, peace of mind, peace of heart—a heart and mind of non-clinging.

So, to be understood: *dukkha*. We all know this word, and it's generally translated in shorthand as "suffering." Often when we hear the first noble truth from non-Buddhists in particular, they say, "Well, Buddhists say life is suffering. What a down thing. I'm not really interested in that." And then so-called Buddhists also say life is suffering.

The first noble truth is dukkha, often translated as suffering. But this is far too narrow an understanding for the depth of the first noble truth.

Dukkha is a word that can be used in different ways. One is dukkha as pain—dukkha-dukkha. When the first noble truth is written out, one aspect of dukkha is simply this: flat-out unpleasant pain. In the suttas, when the vedana—the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling tones that Andrea talked about today—the unpleasant physical one is named dukkha. So the word is often used to mean plain unpleasantness, suffering.

But in terms of the first noble truth, understanding dukkha as mere unpleasantness is far too limited. When we think of it that way—which I often do too, using the word dukkha specifically to relate to unpleasantness—we speak of "dukkha times" in retreat. We don't mean the times you're lost in rapture, do we? We mean the times when it's just *ugh*. But that's not the first noble truth.

You're good, just laughing about dukkha. That helps. It lightens things up. Don't put it in a little hole.

One of my teachers pointed out that when we think of dukkha as suffering, as soon as we contemplate the first noble truth, isn't there a tinge of aversion? You think "first noble truth," and then "dukkha, suffering"—you don't go, "Wow, how freeing is this!" And that's not helpful. The Buddha's not saying, "Let's get down with aversion. That's what I'm all about." I don't think so. As soon as we're into *ugh, first noble truth*, we're not getting it. We're not broadening our view.

What I have to say may not exactly lead you into bliss. But just to get a sense: the understanding of the first noble truth has nothing to do with aversion. It has everything to do with freeing our heart and mind from confusion.

The derivation of the word dukkha is illuminating. If any of you have read Analayo's book on the Satipatthana—which I think is a great book because he pulls together so many different strands with really good scholarship, and if you read the footnotes, they take you in all different directions, and he's fairly balanced about bringing in different opinions—just a little plug for that. When he describes the etymology of dukkha, I love what he says. One etymology suggests disharmony, friction. He gives the derivation of *duh* as difficulty, and *kha* as the axle hole in the round wooden wheel of an ox cart—which they still use in Burma. It's this big round wooden wheel with a hole through which the wooden axle goes. If it's not properly fitting in its hole—and mostly it's not, these aren't exactly highly streamlined machines—there's friction, some rubbing every time the wheel turns. That's dukkha: this kind of friction.

Another derivation he offers is "standing badly"—uncomfortable, uneasiness. That's really more the sense of dukkha. Not that it's good or bad, but simply calling us to notice accurately in our lives that so much of the time there's this sense of things not quite fitting.

It's not that everything is awful suffering all the time, but there is that—and that's part of it. The dukkha-dukkha part acknowledges: yes, there's pain. Birth is pain. There's old age, sickness, and death. None of us gets out alive, right? That's part of it. Not all of it, but part of it.

Yet even that, obvious as it seems—someone was just saying today, and we all do it—well, it's obvious, but my mind goes, "Okay, to other people." It's obvious I'm going to get sick and die, but not now. Really notice this. I noticed it in my own mind recently. I don't know, it wasn't anything serious. Nothing horrible was happening. But I was lying down somewhere, and things got really fuzzy, like my blood pressure dropped or something, and I almost fainted. I could see my mind going, "Oh—"

Well, I wonder if this is the thing. You know, who knows? I wonder if this is the thing that's like dying or that's really starting something. And that was a moment of just open curiosity—well, I wonder. Immediately followed by, no, not now. Not me. Not going to happen now. And it wasn't, you know. But just to see how the mind does that. Yeah, sure, we know, but...

And that's the obvious part, the most obvious part of the first noble truth of dukkha.

I'll get to say what we do with that as I go on, but there's that. There's another aspect, the secondary aspect of dukkha as a noble truth. Of course, there's pleasant experience. There's beautiful experience. Dukkha isn't just about unpleasant vedana. It's about the fact that there's pleasant feeling, there's neutral feeling, there's unpleasant feeling, and they're all constantly changing. That dukkha part is that there's nothing that we can, or anyone can, rely upon, hold to—really, for more than a fraction of a minute—for any kind of lasting happiness or suffering. So it's this unreliability of things that he's calling dukkha.

Remember, that doesn't mean aversion. The aversion comes in the second noble truth—why we suffer from this. But the fact is, there's one place where the Buddha says, in terms of feeling tone—some conversation I think he was having with Sariputta about Sariputta's awakening—he says, "All feeling..." Let me say exactly: "Whatever is felt"—and by felt he's talking about vedana, feeling, this sense of pleasantness, unpleasantness, neutrality, which is a mental experience, experience of the mind—"whatever is felt is included within dukkha." Not because it means it's all unpleasant, but because

whatever is felt, whatever arises due to condition, ceases. And he's calling that the first truth of dukkha because we can't hold to it for any stability, for any lasting peace, sense of self, or pleasure, or reliability. Just nothing's reliable.

When we understand that—in those moments, you know, and we all have moments. I keep saying moments because everything's moments. If you're waiting for the lasting understanding that you never have to look again, we tend to discount... First, that's never going to happen because nothing's lasting, but we then discount it because, as I said last week, it's just moments. So in a moment, when you're really seeing, "Oh, that's nothing I can hold to"—you will have moments of that—in that moment, craving and clinging doesn't arise, or if it's there, it just goes away because it doesn't make sense. It just doesn't make sense. You don't have to talk yourself out of it. It just doesn't make sense because yathabhuta jnanadasana—when we're seeing things the way they are, just the reality of things—clinging doesn't make sense. It's not some huge renunciation. It's a moment of opening to how things are, of tenderness, connectedness to life as it is. No need to push away what's difficult. No need to hold on to what's pleasant to try and confirm a sense of me.

But as is everything, those moments are also fleeting. And then here we are again, and ah, no, it's so hard.

So pleasant is also included within dukkha. And that's to be understood. That's not to be hated. This is just to see how it is.

The Buddha, saying to really understand this, says, "Before my enlightenment, oh monks, while I was still a bodhisatta, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? And what is the escape from the world? And then it occurred to me: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world."

He's not saying we hate pleasure and joy, open to dukkha and never smile again. He's not saying that. He's saying the pleasure and joy there is in the world, the pleasant vedana, this is the gratification. That the world is impermanent, bound up with dissatisfaction, and subject to change—this is the danger in the world. The abandoning of desire and lust for the world—by the world, he's just meaning any of the sixth sense experiences—the abandoning of desire and lust for the world, this is the escape from the world. He's using "world" in that way.

We may hear "escape from the world" as somehow zooming off to some other realm, as if you don't have to live in this world. That is not the Buddha's awakening. What he's talking about is: what's the danger? There is gratification. We enjoy it. We appreciate it.

But we just, as Eckhart Tolle says, appreciate the beautiful. We just don't look to it to give us something that it cannot provide, which is some sense of lasting anything—happiness, pleasure, sense of self. A moment of pleasure, a moment of love, a moment of ease, a moment of unpleasantness. We don't look to any of it to be more than just what it is in that moment. It is to be understood.

In this understanding, we start to see—just from this *yathā bhūta*—it opens us into seeing that the second noble truth, which is often said to state that the cause of suffering is *taṇhā*, thirst, craving, really needs to be expanded. Because there's no craving without ignorance, without not seeing clearly, without delusion. Really, that's the aspect of ignorance, of delusion. It doesn't mean we're stupid jerks. It means we don't recognize accurately. We perceive wrongly, and on that wrong perception, we have thoughts and emotions and reactions, and we create a whole world in two-tenths of a second based on one perception, and then start suffering from it.

So the cause of our anguish is all these reactions of heart and mind—the clinging to the pleasant, the fear, the aversion, the pushing away of the unpleasant *vedanā* or experiences we rate as unpleasant. And both of these are fueled, only arise, when there's ignorance, confusion, delusion in the mind. We'll talk more about that.

Now, these reactions seem natural. I mean, it seems instinctive, doesn't it? If there's an unpleasant sensation, or if there's a hot flame and you stick your finger in and it hurts, you pull your finger back. We're not saying you don't do that. That's normal. That's obvious. That's what our mind does with unpleasant—it pulls back and goes, "Oh no, that shouldn't be happening." That just seems normal. Of course bad things shouldn't be happening.

When something is pleasant, we like it. Here in your sittings, in your walkings, when the body's at ease, you think, "Yeah, right, that's how it should be." Relax. Now I'm relaxed. That's right. That's correct. That's how it's supposed to be. Then the pain comes in the back. That's incorrect. That's wrong. And this just seems normal. That's how we live our life. You see why the first noble truth is so profound.

The delusion part—one aspect is we just don't know what the heck's going on. But that's actually the most obvious type of delusion. That one we wake up from eventually, one hopes. The more subtle delusion is the misperception, the not seeing, and that fueling the sense that it's really all about me. Because if we're reacting with greed to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, that's only because it's me here. I'm not really reacting with such aversion if you get stuck with a fork. That's all, "Gee, I'm really sorry, that must hurt." But if it's me, it's like, "Oh my God, this is unbearable."

Actually, that's why—just moving from that into compassion—compassion is actually an expression of the non-deluded heart and mind. Because compassion is: she's stuck with the fork, and I feel it. It doesn't mean empathetically that I physically feel it, but there's that sense of it's not worse because it's happening to me than because it's happening to her. There's just this sense of, "Oh, this pain, this suffering is suffering." The heart's open to it, whatever the source, because there's not that delineation, that separation of, "Well, I'm sorry for you, but let's keep things straight—it's all about me."

You were laughing because it does seem normal that unpleasant stuff is wrong, and that's where our mind goes about it. We blame ourselves. We blame the world. We think we've got to get it. Really, really deep down, enlightenment at some level is about things should get more pleasant.

Enlightenment is not about thinking, "All this back pain I'm having, these traumatic memories that are coming up, these unpleasant feelings—they're in the way of my practice. They must go away so that I can see what's really going on, which is subtle and refined and concentrated and hopefully blissful." No. *Yathābhūta*—things as they are, now, in this moment.

I was going to read this later, but it seems to be coming up now. This is actually from Adyashanti, and I really like it. He's saying "abiding," but I'm using "acceptance," which is clear mindfulness meeting what's happening just as it is:

"Accepting means letting everything be as it already is, no matter what it is. If you're feeling good, let that be as it is. If you're feeling bad, let that be as it is. No matter what your emotional, physical, or mental state, let it be as it is, not wishing for it to be otherwise."

And I'll add: if you're wishing for it to be otherwise, notice that and let it be as it is.

If you want it to be different from what it is, that's not acceptance. You're picking and choosing and trying to control your experience—which of course we all do because it's so deeply ingrained, so natural. That's why we don't understand the first noble truth, why we think unpleasant is the problem, why we imagine awakening is somehow going to rid us of this problem.

Recognizing and understanding the truth of dukkha leads us to being able to see how these habits of reactivity—of aversion, of grasping and clinging, of delusion, of making it all about me—feed the confusion, the dissatisfaction, the pain. Because everything we're doing to try and fix the pain, to try and feel happy, is predicated on not recognizing things as they are.

Something that really helped me—and it was pretty far into my practice when this happened—was realizing that I would think I was just being with what is, being with what is. I really believed I understood. And then I'd find that little niggling seed back there: "Oh no, I'm going for it. It should be pleasant. This bad thing shouldn't be happening. This unpleasant thing shouldn't be happening. It's wrong, it's bad, it's my fault, or it's your fault, or it's the weather's fault, or it's somebody's fault—because it's not supposed to be happening." Or, "I'm a failure." That's the other way we turn it back on ourselves, right? You're doing good when it's pleasant. When it's unpleasant, you're a failure. You can't do this practice. It isn't working. All of those things.

What helped me—and this is not profound, it's more of a "duh" moment, as in dukkha, but a "duh" experience—was looking at the Buddha's life after he was enlightened. Fully enlightened. The fully enlightened one, freed from anguish, freed from suffering. No more greed, hatred, or delusion arising in his heart, in his mind. That's one of the ways a freed mind and heart is described, and I have to say, that does sound pretty nice, doesn't it? No more reactivity to experience. Without greed, hatred, or delusion—just pure being with things as they are. Wakeful, but not resisting.

But looking at his life after enlightenment, it wasn't... if you try to just imagine living the life he was living, it doesn't sound like a birthday party. Unless you hate birthday parties. He spent forty-five years after he was awakened walking around India barefoot, teaching, eating one meal a day, going begging for his food, forming a sangha of monks, a sangha of nuns. And if you read the suttas, if you read the Vinaya, people were the same then as now. You listen to the politics, you listen to what's going on in the EU when they meet, you listen to any kind of group of people meeting and trying to come to decisions. Take it to meditation centers—I've got news for you, it's the same thing.

You read how all the rules in the Vinaya came about. The monks are always going, "Oh, he's doing this, she's doing that." And the Buddha said, "Okay, I have to make a rule. You don't do this, you don't do that." Trying to keep the peace. Trying not to have the lay people lose their faith.

Anyway, looking at his life: he had the choice when he fully awakened. He could, at will, spend all of his time in deepest samādhi, in complete bliss of peace. Or he could put his mind into nibbāna, into cessation, and just hang out there. And you'll see suttas where he said, "I've just come from a calm day's abiding, from a pleasant day's abiding."

He could have spent his whole life doing that, but he didn't. Motivated by compassion, by a sense of seeing the unnecessary suffering of beings, he chose otherwise. But his life was not one of comfort. It was not one of ease. It was not one of pleasant vedana, particularly at all.

He could have chosen any way to live. He chose the life of a renunciate. He was willing to be a teacher, which had both all the joys and the beauty of sharing the Dhamma and the Sangha difficulties. And just being in India with all of these wanderers coming around, haggling with him all the time. There's lots of suttas like that. He gives his teaching, and they shake their heads and go away. Rivalries. His cousin Devadatta tried to kill him and take over the Sangha. There were sorrowful things where some of his clan's people got involved in a war over water rights and many of them were killed, and he had to go help pacify that. His most beloved, favorite disciples died shortly before he did. And they're just saying he was aware. I mean, he wasn't prostrate with grief, but he was aware of their being gone. And he said, "Look, I see the Sangha is empty, empty of Sariputta and Moggallana." You get that sense of loss.

In other words, he awoke into this life, not into some rarefied Deva realm. He was in a body. He died of food poisoning. He had headaches. He would have to go lie down. He was living a life in a body like we are now. Yet he was free of suffering. He was not free of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral vedana. He was not free of the fact that everything changes. He was free of seeing things inaccurately and needing for things to be different in order to be at ease. He was really awakened fully into this world, fully engaged in this world with people, with beings. And he didn't just stay with people, but with beings in all realms, of all walks of life.

And so when I looked at that, I thought, whoa, this awakening isn't about escaping from life, and it isn't about getting rid of my body pains, my personality. We'd like to, maybe, but here it is. It's about understanding—understanding where the suffering really is and where the freedom is. And it's right here. The freedom's here and the suffering's here, because there's only here. But the freedom is in that recognizing accurately, yatha bhuta, the reality of what's happening in mind and body in this moment.

So I want to talk a bit about how greed, hatred, and confusion distort the perception—just a little bit—how they cause our suffering and increase it and perpetuate it, because they're so familiar. They're so familiar. And then our familiar reaction—like when we see clinging or grasping, for example, or we see aversion—and then we have the intellectual understanding, "Oh, this is the cause of suffering." It's so ingrained that what's

our usual reaction to that? Aversion. "Oh, there's aversion. I shouldn't be having aversion." This is just a natural, ingrained response. Clinging. "Oh my God, all I'm seeing is clinging. It's hopeless. I'm hopeless. I'll never be happy." Aversion to the clinging.

And when we come in and we say, you know what? That's great. Seeing clinging arising in every moment, that's fantastic, because that's the way to freedom when you really see it. I'm happy when I see clinging in my mind, because when I see it, it's not coloring the show. When I don't see it, that's a whole other story.

When I recognize aversion, I'm glad to recognize it. I'm not saying I'm glad it's there. I'm not saying, "Oh great, welcome aversion, let's kiss it, we love it." I'm not saying that. But I'm glad to recognize it.

It's just nature. Clinging is just nature. It's just the way our minds are habituated. Delusion is just nature. You're not some special person more filled with clinging than anybody else here. Nobody gets points for being the most clinging person, or the most aversive person, or the most deluded person. We all have all of it. We take turns being the most, being the least. It's just nature manifesting and changing all the time. Don't take it so personally.

Clinging comes up, and we make a whole big story about it. Me, me, me. And then we're suffering. But clinging comes—oh, clinging is like this. Okay, I don't like it too much. Oh, aversion is like this. Wow, it's all about me. Me is like this.

I'm serious. I know it's not always that easy. But notice the place that you stop—the place that the moment-to-moment noticing stops. Because that's the place where we've landed. And it's not always a pleasant place; sometimes it's an unpleasant place. But that's where we've landed and started to really get into the story of me, whatever it is. But again, recognizing is just that Tai Chi move. Oh, story of me is like this. And then it all starts flowing again.

So how do these habits obscure? I'm just going to give some simple examples, obvious ones, starting with clinging, with craving, which is, as Andrea said this morning, the habit of mind that follows unpleasant when there's not awareness, when there's not attention. But we don't have to be afraid of it. We just watch to see how the mind works. Yathābhūta—how the mind works, both with delusion and with clear seeing.

One thing with clinging: when, say, there's craving for an object—a good kind of food, or for lunch, or you saw someone put their spare pillow back there and you noticed it, and the whole sitting you were just clinging, thinking, "How can I get out of here first and get to that pillow before someone else does?" That's clinging. Simple. The suffering of that is relatively obvious, isn't it?

But not always. Clinging is sometimes hard to separate—the attachment from the object we're clinging to. Especially for people where clinging really comes a lot with pleasant objects, and you can go and get the pleasant object. When you get the pleasant object, the clinging goes away, you have the pleasant object, and you feel peace. And you think, "Well, what was the big problem with that?"

In fact, someone at the last retreat I was teaching was asking this. He was saying, "Well, if I move and then it doesn't hurt, that's fine. So what's the problem with clinging? I think I want to not hurt, I move, it doesn't hurt. Are you saying you just never do anything?" Of course we're not saying that. But it's learning to tease out the difference between clinging and the object clung to—that's what makes the difference.

The Tibetans have a great phrase for this: a kind of clinging puts feathers on the object.

It kind of brightens it up. You want something and it just looks so great, so wonderful. You can't see clearly. And then the clinging narrows our field of perception. It narrows our mind. It narrows our heart. You can almost feel it like that.

In fact, the Buddha said that clinging and aversion are makers of measurement in the mind, in the heart. And you can really feel that. How does it feel when you're just doing a walking meditation, you're just walking and very present, and the lunch bell rings? Is there a change in the mind, in the walking? Just notice that.

It doesn't have anything to do with whether the thing wanted is bad or good. We're not saying there's anything wrong with clinging to lunch. You need lunch. Everyone needs to eat. What's the problem? Don't get into that rationality thing. Notice the effect when there's clinging in the mind. It's got nothing to do with any kind of value judgment of the thing clung to. The thing clung to could be a piece of pizza or the idea of enlightenment. It's nothing about what's clung to. It's that quality of clinging, craving in itself. It's a particular factor of mind that narrows.

I'll give you an example. A few years ago I was teaching a retreat in Yucca Valley, which is in the desert in Southern California. I really love it—it's a wonderful desert with Joshua trees and animals. Everyone loves walking out in that desert. And one of the thrills, the things that people love if they're walking, is to get to see one of the big tortoises. There are a few out there, but they're shy and they hide and you don't necessarily get to see them.

This one year I was out walking, and I just loved being in that desert. At that time, just walking, present, whatever's there—there wasn't a sense of measurement. There wasn't a sense of me or other, just being. And then it popped into my mind, "Oh, maybe

I'll see a tortoise." That was just a thought, but it turned into craving. "I want to see a tortoise." And my walk changed. It's like the scope narrowed. I got tense. I'm looking for a tortoise. I'm walking a little and I'm looking. And my mind is going, "Not tortoise, not tortoise, not tortoise." You're just looking for the thing. That's what clinging does. That's what clinging does.

Notice that it's a maker of measurement. Often we can get the thing clung to, and that hides the fact of the suffering of clinging. It's the suffering of measurement. It's the suffering of making difference. And then we go on to create whole worlds. I don't have to describe how we create whole worlds out of clinging, out of wanting.

So here, when we notice clinging, we don't talk ourselves out of it. We turn around, look back at the wanting mind itself. Experience it. See if what I'm saying resonates with your experience. Do you feel that sense of tightness, that sense of narrowness? Hang with it. Instead of going to get what you want—we get what we want and we feel happy. Why? Because the clinging went away. That's why we feel happy. The Buddha's brilliant insight is that we could be happy without getting what we want, simply by noticing when clinging arises. "Oh, clinging's like this."

This is how clinging is experienced in the mind and the body, *yathā bhūta*. Clinging is like this. It's simply a mental experience, with some physical expressions perhaps. I often feel a physical tightness. And it's just another arising experience—nothing to hate or fear. Clinging is like this. It will go away because everything does. And then just notice: peace, until the next clinging arises.

Aversion is much the same, only it manifests more as either a lashing out, a pushing away, or a pulling away. But it's the same kind of experience in how it distorts our perception and our judgment.

It's interesting because with aversion—*dosa*, usually translated as hatred—it's about some unpleasant sight, sound, smell, taste, mental experience, or touch that's happening now, because there's only now. Even a memory of something horrible in the past is a memory arising now. You can experience the unpleasantness of it, and aversion springs up: "This shouldn't be happening." That reaction really comes from not understanding the first noble truth. This unpleasant thing shouldn't be happening, and there's some way I can either stop it or get out of here and not have to deal with it—or blame somebody, or fix the world, or zone out completely, or take a pill.

I'm not saying we don't take pills when we're in pain. I'm not saying that. But notice how aversion completely distorts our judgment because we're so fearful of the unpleasant. We're so aversive to the unpleasant that it's almost like we're afraid to even go there. And we can do all kinds of crazy things not to feel it, or to fix it, or to make it go away.

Aversion can actually distort our visual perception. If you're really angry with somebody—really angry and caught in it—and you keep looking at them, how do they look? Do they look nice? Do you think, "Oh, I really like their hair today"? No. Your mind goes to everything that's wrong with them, things you never knew were wrong with them. When the mind is in aversion, it seeks out the unpleasant, and it just riles itself up. It spins in it.

It's like when you have a little jagged tooth, a small piece that's broken off. It doesn't even hurt. Can your tongue leave that little jagged piece alone? All your other teeth are fine. Is your tongue noticing your other teeth? No. But this little jagged tooth—you're ready to go mad after a day. Why? Just a little unpleasant experience that we fixate on.

The Buddha said, "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will"—and that's how it feels when we're caught; it doesn't mean forever, but even in a moment we're obsessed, oppressed by ill will—"and when one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is. One doesn't see one's own good or the good of others or the good of both."

I would say the same for craving. When we're obsessed with craving, when we're obsessed with ill will, we can't see things as they really are. And when we need to act, we can't see what's good for ourselves, what's good for others, or what's good for both.

So acceptance—this quality of mindfulness that simply meets what's happening, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, not for any result but just to see what's happening now—that quality of acceptance is not passive. It's what allows for clear seeing, the clear vision of things as they are. And that allows for appropriate response, clear decision.

The Buddha lived a very active life. He made clear decisions about how to live, not passive at all. But those decisions can be based more on reality.

A simple example: a friend of mine who lives in Massachusetts was invited by a very close friend to come teach a weekend in Washington, D.C. It was an eight-hour drive, and she really didn't want to do it. She was already busy, already stressed. Cramming in this weekend would push her over an edge. It wasn't something that would save all beings—she genuinely didn't want to do it.

But this friend was a dear friend. And so whenever my friend would think of saying no, it felt so unpleasant. She felt so bad at having to decline that the very thought of it—she was aversive to that thought. She didn't even want to go near that unpleasant feeling. So in order to avoid having to face it, she came extremely close to agreeing to go do this thing that would have really put her over the edge. Just to avoid one unpleasant feeling of saying no to her friend, she would have gone into a whole stressful weekend and subsequent probably illness. It's crazy. We can't see clearly.

Thankfully, she caught herself. She said, "Oh, that's what I'm doing. I can just call my friend and with all the love in my heart say, this is the truth of my situation. I can't do it right now." And of course, her friend was totally fine with that. It was all a manufactured story.

But we can't see clearly when our mind is obsessed with wanting, when our mind is obsessed with not wanting. And both of them, of course, lead to the mind being obsessed with: it's all about me. Me, me, me. This is where the thoughts and the whole creation of a world just springs out—from a reaction of holding onto pleasant or pushing away unpleasant.

Again, don't believe me. See if you notice.

Since we're all here in this room together, going through all different kinds of experiences, a very common example is when someone else in the room is making a noise. Our story is they shouldn't be making that noise, or it's ruining my concentration. That's the story. Or somebody's moving, or they come in late, or they leave early, or somebody gets ahead of you in the lunch line. It doesn't take much to find something.

And to see how, in the beginning when it first happens—there's a sound, it's unpleasant—there's an immediate story about it, isn't there? They shouldn't be doing that, or they're doing it because of this or that, or this is the effect it's having on me. Should I move? Should I not? I shouldn't move because then they'll know. Or I shouldn't move because I should be a better yogi than this. A whole world is created, isn't it?

And even if you try not to do it, you have a whole idea of who that other person is, their life story, how completely insensitive they are, how they shouldn't have been allowed on this retreat. And I mean, no one here has said this, but I've been in retreats with people whose minds go to throttling the other person, hitting them over the head. It gets out there. Thank God you're in silence.

When the hindrances take over and you're talking—oh my God.

So that's the whole world. And when we're not recognizing what's actually happening—there's just a perception of a sound, it's unpleasant, and then how that relates to me, I don't like it, and then thoughts start—that's what's happening.

At some point, maybe the thoughts change. Maybe the mind quiets down, and the same sound comes again, and this time it doesn't register as unpleasant. It registers as neutral. Oh. And then all those thoughts don't come that time.

It's just hearing. Neutral. Another thought arises, kind of like, "Well, what now?" And then the mind generally makes up another story, which is just as plausible to us. But what it means is, "Oh, I see—I made that up, but now it's not that way. Ah, this person's really not how I thought, and I'm actually much wiser than I thought." And so it goes. And maybe we notice that, and maybe we don't. If we do notice it, fine, great, because *yathabhuta*—that's what the mind does. Mindfulness can simply notice that. We don't have to stop it. That's aversion. That's what the mind does. "But I don't think it should do that. It should do—" No. *Yathabhuta*. How does the mind work? When there's pleasant and we don't recognize, it goes into wanting. It makes up all these stories.

Joseph likes to say we're making it all up. And he's not exaggerating. Watch that. But with humor, just say, "Wow. Make it up." And sometimes do it on purpose. Notice you're wanting something, and just with real awareness, watch the story the mind creates. But watch it. And then take your attention right back to the sense door. Say it was a smell at lunch and it got hunger going. Just go right back into smelling, smelling. Notice if it's pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That's not in your control. It just arises. But that can change from moment to moment.

Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral is not inherent in the object. It's a felt experience in the mind. Something that I, in this moment, experience as pleasant, someone else might experience as neutral or unpleasant. Something I experience as pleasant now, I might experience as unpleasant or neutral at another time. There's nothing steady-state here.

So when you've got a whole story going and you notice it, just come back. If there's some experience arising again—a smell, a sound, a sight—come right back into seeing, right at the eye door. Smelling, right at the nose door. Notice if there's pleasant, unpleasant, neutrality, and then see if any story comes. How does that affect me? That's how the story starts. And see where that goes with awareness, just watching it. The more we watch it, the less energy it has.

It's amusing. Sometimes the stories are useful, but we know we don't have to believe them all. And in the middle of one, you go, "Wow, that's really quite a story. And I really believe it too." And then you just feel, ugh, you know—aversion. And that's just what's happening right now. Aversion. You don't have to fight it away. It's really fascinating.

So the escape—the escape from unpleasant, the escape from the aversion, from the clinging to delusion—is simply this quality of mindfulness. Acceptance. Bare mindfulness means mindfulness of just what's happening, not of our concept about what's happening.

That is so key, and that's what we're pointing to so much in the interviews. When we say, "What's happening?" you say, "Oh, well, you know, the breath is like fire, and it's swirling." Yeah, well, what does it feel like? "Well, you know, it's like this, and the air, and the pressure." Yeah, but what's the sensation? "You know, pressure." I mean, it's kind of deflating, isn't it? But that's *yathabhuta*.

Oh, yes. Pressure. And if you look, it may be deflating, but it's also quite peaceful. We're addicted at times to our endless stories, even though that's where the suffering is. Who would I be without my incredibly obnoxious personality? But that's just fear. It won't go away—I really won't. But that sense of "oh, it's just this, just this," free of concept, is liberating.

It's about noticing just what is, not our concept of what is. And this is very tricky. For example, there's a burning feeling—"there's a pain in my knee." And that might be said not with aversion, but simply, "Oh, there's a pain in my knee." But that's already concept. If you recognize "a pain in my knee," my knee is an idea. It's a useful idea—I'm not saying it's wrong—but are you actually experiencing "my knee"? What is that? What you're experiencing is a particular sensation. Maybe it's burning. Maybe it's tingling. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Just that one sensation.

As soon as we go to "my knee," measurement has come in. It's a knee belonging to me. And if you look—if you're really with the sensation—for it to be "my knee," there's a reference back to some sense of "me," some looking outside that bare experience to something else. Comparison: *my* knee. And immediately it goes to "how will I make it through the sitting?" It goes right into the future. "My knee" goes right to the whole story of my health, my whole life, the skiing accident I had twenty-five years ago. "How am I going to make it through the rest of this month? I have to go to the managers. What about the hospital?" That far away from the bare sensation of burning—that far away from "my knee," right?

Burning. It's just burning. I mean, it's *just* burning. That's peace. It's still burning, but it's peace. There's just not all these constructions.

So that's really what we're talking about with this sense of bare mindfulness—mindfulness that accepts what is, just meets whatever's happening without resistance, without pushing away, without holding on, without picking and choosing, without making a meaning for it.

Sharon Salzberg likes to say that to pay attention is to love. This mindfulness, this accepting quality of mindfulness, is really what Byron Katie means when she speaks of loving what is. Whatever is arising in this moment *is* what is. Loving what is doesn't mean "Oh God, loving really isn't about me"—loving is this quality of accepting, open, connected attention. Just being here with what is. And that allows for reality to reveal itself. It's just nature, how it is in this moment. It allows for the clear seeing—the *yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*—this mindfulness beneath the concept, allowing whatever is arising in this moment to reveal itself. Loving what is.

And it's really only when this clear seeing in a moment is present

A moment of allowing whatever's arising to simply be as it is—really embraced in the energy and the light of clear awareness, kind awareness, truly loving what is. It's only then that real compassion and real love become possible.

Without that clear seeing, we can go through the motions. But real compassion, real love, a genuine opening into life in a whole other way—this is only possible when we're seeing things as they really are, with this quality of active, engaged, accepting presence. Not passive at all.

Just like that sense of burning I mentioned rather than "my knee." In that burning, it's simply what it is. Not referring back to me, there's no problem. There's no making of self and other. This clear seeing opens us to a really different relationship to life, to others.

Like the Buddha—he opened into life. His awakening was full engagement with life, but not from a self-centered perspective. And we all experience that in moments when we feel real compassion, real love. We all do. It's not some esoteric thing. We all know this, we all experience it. And if your mind is going, "Well, not me"—no, no, no, no. See that that's just a story in that moment.

When we're not engaging from this self-centered place, other people and the world are no longer about somehow gratifying us. It's not about needing other people to be any particular way to make us okay. It's not about needing anything from anybody else. But it's not like, "Oh, I don't need you." It's not that. We don't need, but we can be there.

So much energy goes into this construction—the delusion, the aversion, the clinging, the sense of trying to make things okay for ourselves, the sense of trying to fight away the unpleasant, the stories. And the story here turns into a story against yourself because you don't want to have the stories and you don't want to be doing this, so then you just pile aversion on top of that: "I shouldn't be doing this." Same thing.

So much energy goes into that. So sometimes when you have an insight—a moment, some moments of just seeing *yathā bhūta*, as it is, nothing special—so much energy is released, is available. And that energy is available for appropriate response, for compassion, for generosity, for kindness, for acting in the way that's appropriate, that isn't about serving me.

We don't get there by thinking about it. But it's not so far away—for a moment. And we're not going to live there all the time. But we all know it in moments.

CHAPTER 55

Compassion and Emptiness

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the inseparable relationship between emptiness (suññatā) and compassion (karuṇā), showing how genuine insight into non-self naturally gives rise to tenderness for all beings. She addresses common misconceptions about emptiness—the fear that it leads to disconnection, indifference, or nihilism—and explains what Tibetan teachers call 'falling into emptiness,' where concepts of emptiness become obstacles rather than liberating insights.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra, and contemporary teachers including the Dalai Lama, Pema Chödrön, and Stephen Batchelor, Wilson describes how when the 'closed sense of self' dissolves, we don't vanish into nothingness but rather 'fall into the midst of everything.' This openness naturally awakens bodhicitta—the tender, awakened heart that responds spontaneously to suffering. She explores the three levels of wisdom (paññā): learned wisdom (suta-mayā paññā), contemplative wisdom (cintā-mayā paññā), and the transformative insight wisdom (bhāvanā-mayā paññā) that arises through meditation.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance for working with difficult emotions during retreat, emphasizing that suffering met with kind awareness is precisely where wisdom and compassion develop. Using examples from Sister Chân Không's activism and Nelson Mandela's long walk to freedom, she demonstrates how compassion married to wisdom manifests as skillful action rooted in intention rather than attachment to results. The talk concludes with Nisargadatta Maharaj's teaching that direct realization of our interconnectedness brings both freedom and total responsibility for the world.*

So tonight I want to talk about how the wisdom of emptiness is naturally expressed as compassion—really the unity of emptiness and compassion as wisdom.

A lot of what's been talked about the last couple of evenings, and what's been coming up in many people's practice, is seeing this sense of just *this, this, this*. No past, no future, no reference outside. And our habitual mind—our linear, logical, rational mind, the way we think about things—doesn't tend to find a lovely idea in our projection of what life would be like if we were living from the understanding of no self, if we were living from within the wisdom of emptiness. Often the intellect projects something quite unappealing.

Words people have used with me are *alien*, *disconnected*, *inhuman*. What Trungpa calls a kind of nostalgia for samsara: "I'd rather be caught in my stupid patterns, but at least it's me doing it, and I'm familiar with it." Or *uncaring*—this fear of a dry, gray kind of emptiness where you can't tell the difference between beautiful and scary, where you don't care if you have peanut butter or sauerkraut, where it doesn't really matter.

On another side of that is when we taste the freedom, the liberation of emptiness. And of course, for all of us, it's not complete all at once. There's a way that then the thinking, rational mind can own that, making a description of it that is no longer the living experience. And that's the kind of emptiness where you can tell the difference between peanut butter and sauerkraut, but really, nothing matters. It's all empty. So what I do doesn't matter. In some way, those are the words we use—awareness doesn't care—and we turn that into "nothing matters, so whatever I do..." That's also a real misunderstanding, a misconception. It's what the Tibetans sometimes call falling into emptiness.

I want to read a couple of things from Nyoshul Khen. This can actually be quite subtle, and it can be a place we hit in our lifetime of practice. Remember, we're always looking at it from a certain angle, as long as we don't stop and think this is it.

The danger in falling into emptiness is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, obscured by concepts—concepts of emptiness. Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material, concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness."

Let me give you Stephen Batchelor's translation of that same verse: "Buddhas say emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable."

Back to Nyoshul Khen: "Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the way of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

You can hear all the spiritual material that's around, and sometimes you can hear how—when we're not following someone or some path the whole way, when we just read snippets—it just says nothing matters, there's nothing to do, there's nothing to have, there's nothing to be. Buddha dasa, right? And when we take that and make it a concept—"Well, there's nothing to have, there's nothing to do, there's nothing to be.

You're saying whatever's happening, just notice it. It's fine. It doesn't matter"—there's a piece of that which is accurate, but when we turn it into a view, we've fallen into that abyss.

Now, don't be afraid of that. Because what I'm wanting to say with the unity of emptiness and compassion is that the real moments of trustworthy glimpses, experiences, understandings of emptiness—or the non-separateness of things—naturally give rise to compassion or tenderness of heart, as Pema Chödrön puts it. These are the natural effects. We respond appropriately.

So that's something we can kind of check out in ourselves. I'll give you an example from Stephen Batchelor writing about Shantideva, who wrote *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*—one of the Dalai Lama's favorite texts. Stephen should know about it since he translated it from the Tibetan many years ago. He's writing about it in his preface to his translation of Nagarjuna.

He says that when Shantideva, this great Bodhisattva, when his closed sense of self dissolved—*closed*, that's really what it's like. Sogyal Rinpoche says we're closed in this trap of our emotions and thoughts and personality. Here we sit day in and day out in this little closed-in space. So when Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolved, he did not vanish into the abyss of nothingness. He did not. But what happened is he saw that to be empty is no longer to be full of oneself.

And that's what's so exhausting. Quite a few people have mentioned in the last few days, listening to Winnie's talk and Howie's talk, they're saying, "I'm just seeing every thought about me and my stories and my views—it's so exhausting." It takes a lot of energy to maintain this little cage that we're sitting in, our ideas of ourself. But when that dissolves, we don't go into nothingness.

I want you to listen to this—not exactly a poem, but Howie read it last night. Hear it again, this Zen nun's words, from the sense of how the openness into emptiness of any separate self is the same as compassion. See if you can hear how these two things go together. Maybe you don't, maybe it's only me, but see if you can get a sense of how these two things are united.

Togetsu saw that arising arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this, nothing more than this. No ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane that she held. Nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

We don't fall into the abyss of nothingness—we fall into the midst of everything. And the inescapable, natural response of that is the tenderness of heart, of metta, of compassion. It's an aspect of wisdom, appropriate response when response is needed.

This is again Stephen Batchelor talking about Shantideva: "For his insight into emptiness does not merely change the way he views the world, but it also transforms the way he feels about it. His heart is opened to the anguish of others, which prompts a spontaneous longing to assuage their suffering"—which is really the seed of bodhicitta. But it's not a kind of crazy, disconnected longing. Shantideva also acknowledged the irrational nature of such a passion, knowing that just being relatively a limited person, there's no way he could assuage the suffering of all beings. "I don't even know myself," he said. But still, that's the natural effect of opening to emptiness, falling into the midst of everything.

It's natural when we see how much of our energy, our thoughts, our emotions are so self-referential, and how this really does create a limiting separation that seems so real only because it's being recreated moment to moment in the mind. The self-referential sense—just to notice it. Not to stop it, just to notice it. It's just another thing to notice.

Sogyal Rinpoche describes it in a way that I personally really love because it's vivid. He says that this felt sense of me—not an intellectual idea, not talking about ego and this and that, but just as you're sitting here, the felt sense of *me*. Can you connect with that? No, not because there's no me—can you connect? It's not any big whoop, it's just a little *ugh*, you know?

He says that felt sense is like the original yardstick of samsara. In Tibet, when they're making the footprint for the foundation of a house, they start from a point in the middle. They have a long string of however wide it's going to be, and from that point in the middle, they measure with that string all the way around. You get the footprint of the house. So that referential center point that everything's referring back to—he's saying that's the sense of *me* when it's arising and we don't quite realize it. He calls that the yardstick for samsara.

Our job is just to notice it, not to try and get rid of it, but just notice it. When we don't notice it, that becomes the seed for all this incredible energy that goes into creating and maintaining what we wish we didn't have to create and maintain. We're trying so hard to get rid of it—but "I'm" still trying so hard to get rid of it, and "I'm" creating—and we forget to notice this little sense of *me*.

And when we think about it not being there, it's really scary. Back to that sense of a fall into the void of nothingness.

Because the mind can only know what it already knows. And what it already knows is severely limited. So that's why we're always talking about trust.

This relentless, obsessive, exhausting self-referencing—quite a few of you have mentioned just noticing, even for a moment, sometime when it's not there. And people have said, "My gosh, I didn't realize how exhausting this burden is." And then it comes back. You want to shoot yourself. But when it comes back, you don't have to take that personally either. You don't have to take it personally.

In just that moment when self-referencing isn't the center of the world, we fall into the midst of everything, and what naturally awakens is what Pema Chödrön calls this tenderness for life, tenderness for beings. The way she describes bodhicitta is she calls it noble or awakened heart. This bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, awakens naturally without our doing when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. When the pain of the world touches your heart, it naturally turns into compassion.

It's really not something we have to do. "I have to be the compassionate one." Not that we can't incline the mind—I'll get there later—but at this point, I just want to keep pointing to how the recognition on a deep level, a cellular level, even though it comes and goes, of emptiness, of no self, of not-separate-self—that is the basis for what Stephen Batchelor calls a spontaneous empathetic responsiveness. Or he actually calls it this: emptiness is the basis for the ethics of empathetic responsiveness.

And this is how Shantideva says it, very basically: "When I act for the sake of others, no amazement or conceit arises. It's just like feeding myself. I hope for nothing in return." Just like feeding myself.

Stephen says that when he realized this idea of a separate self was just an idea—but when we're caught in that cage we create, the spontaneous concern for others does arise. We all feel some compassion, some spontaneous concern for others. But when we're in the midst of that house created by the yardstick of samsara, then that spontaneous concern for others is limited, right? It's felt for those who fall within the range of what is mine—me and mine and those I love and those I can let in somehow, where it feels safe. The pain of those outside this range can be treated with indifference or disconnect, or on occasion we're even kind of happy to see someone else suffer.

What goes away is this range of inside-outside. It's just like having fed myself—I look for nothing in return because there's not this boundary where we only care about what's within it.

Now, the other side, though: for the vastness of compassion, also the vastness requires wisdom. Just as the wisdom of emptiness is naturally trustworthy when it has the compassion, the non-separation aspect, the natural tenderness—which could manifest in many different ways, but people know it, many people have described it, you can tell—it's not indifferent, it's not disconnected, it's not "oh, who gives a..."—it's really there.

But in the same way, the vastness of real compassion, deep compassion, is only possible with the wisdom of emptiness, of no separate self. It really requires that. Our intellectual and really heartfelt, sincere wish to be compassionate, our understanding of it and having that as an intention, a goal—that's really useful. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that's not helpful. It's wonderful, because it will incline our mind towards more wisdom, and the more wisdom will incline our heart towards more compassion.

But you can see the limits of acting from compassion when it's not married, when it's not really met by the depth of wisdom, because we don't have all the information in a way. We're still looking from within the self-interest, trying our best, but we don't realize how narrow that little box is.

I heard a great example. Well, to me it's an example—maybe I'm stretching it a bit. But I heard this on the radio in the fall, I think. It was actually an economist talking about the economic theories that if you act on rational self-interest, it'll be for the good of everybody—which already we can see doesn't sound so great in Buddhist terms.

But anyway, the example he gave, I loved. He said there was recently—I don't know how recent, in the last few years—some new bridge that was built in London over the Thames. I don't know if it was a footbridge or also for cars, but he was talking about foot traffic on this bridge right after it had opened. So many hundreds of people were walking across this bridge, and it was new, but it started really shaking and trembling, I guess particularly on one side—which, you know, not so great. It just opened.

So all these people, it started shaking and trembling. Each person did what seemed like, for themselves, a rational thing to do, which was they moved to the other side from where the shaking was. But everybody did that, because everyone was just acting in their own little world of rational self-interest. So all several hundred people moved to the other side, which of course made the whole thing a million times worse.

So you get the sense. We do what seems appropriate, logical, useful. But without the wisdom, we can't see past. We don't even take in the big picture without consciously thinking, "Oh yeah, let me think." Just because we're limited in space and time—what Einstein called the optical delusion of separation in space and time of ourselves. So the

wisdom of emptiness allows for clear seeing, accurate recognition of the bigger picture. Not everything. We're not going to always have all the information, but a much bigger seeing of what's going on, which allows for more possibility of an appropriate response.

Another aspect of how emptiness is essential for the vastness of compassion is what we all probably feel at many times—which is when the tenderness, the suffering, the fragility of the world is touching our heart. We do feel quite deeply and sincerely that tenderness for beings, for ourselves, for others. And we can be with it a while, and then suddenly it's like we're drowning. It's too much. And God knows there's so much suffering in the world once we start opening to it all.

The question, as it often comes up in my mind, and as many people I've heard say, is: how can I stay open to the suffering in this world? Or how can I hold all the suffering? And in the question itself, you can see the seed of the problem. I can't. It's not about me as a separate being holding some concept of all the suffering in the world. There's no separate me anyway. There's no one to hold it and there's nowhere for it to be held. It's just arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing.

The rational mind says, "But that's negating suffering." No, it's not. But the sense that I have to hold it is exactly where we drown. It's not possible. And we'll all come to that place many times—not to judge it, but at that point see, "Oh wow," feel the constriction, the overwhelmingness, the overpoweringness of that sense of trying to hold it all, and just bring compassion to that. That's all. Don't try to figure out emptiness, but just recognize, "Oh wow, this is unbearable right now. Unbearable feels like this." Seriously.

Ajahn Sumedho has a great line he'd say a lot. He was talking about something different—something unpleasant, sweating through his robes in Thailand or something. But I keep remembering this line he said. He said, "I'd be with it so long. It'd be just unbearable, unbearable. I think this is unbearable. I can't bear it another moment." And then I'd find that I could. Because that's just a moment. "This is unbearable." When I feel that, then I go, "What's actually so unbearable about this moment?" And it turns the awareness in, and then I start looking again. And it's usually, okay, that was a mood. "I can't bear it." But that's an aside.

So when you're feeling like, "I can't bear this. How can I hold it?"

It's too much, the suffering of the world. This is exactly the place where we begin to, and continue to, learn how to recognize, cultivate, and strengthen compassion in our own experience—here, now, this moment.

It's what the Dalai Lama says in talking about the cultivation, the development really, of bodhicitta, this noble or awakened heart. How does it develop? It develops through deep insight into what suffering is. Not what you wanted to hear, is it? Deep insight into what suffering is. And this arises by being present with, opening into, our own experience. This is from the Dalai Lama. This is where we start.

And he didn't say this, but as some people say, each of us, the suffering of our own personal—and yes, we're still in the realm of the personal, the relative, the conventional. The absolute, they go together. One doesn't negate the other. The conventional me suffering here, now—this is the place compassion can begin, that wisdom develops, that we recognize the emptiness, the falling into the midst of everything. Nowhere else.

And he goes on to say that by focusing, by being with our own experience, this is how the bodhicitta begins to develop. And then the compassion strengthens as it moves into a sense of empathy, of connectedness with other beings.

This is what all of us at different times experience. Not all the time. I'm not saying every moment of our practice should be opening into the experience of deep suffering. Definitely not. All different kinds of things happen. So if that's not your experience now, don't go out of here thinking there's something wrong. "I should be suffering." You'll have your chance. Don't worry. But sometimes other things are developed. It's moving in many ways.

But quite a few people, just in the last couple of days in interviews, are in different ways and following different routes finding themselves in the middle of some kind of deep unpleasantness, some kind of suffering. It could be physical. For many people, it's kind of running into emotional patterns—not so much stories from life, but the way the mind is relating, the patterns that come up in relationship to actually doing our practice. Which is where they really catch us, actually. When it comes up about our past, it's really painful and we suffer, but we can also see it easier. When it's about how we're relating to practice—self-judgment, for example, like what he talked about—when we don't see the agendas, we're just beating ourselves up. "I want to be more concentrated. I want it. So what should I do? I should try harder. I should focus more. I should get more concentrated." We don't see, "Oh, that's just wanting." And we do see, "Well, how can I get rid of the wanting? Well, if I got more concentrated, I could get rid of it." And we just cycle, cycle. We all do this all the time.

And because it's about what we're doing now, and it can be quite subtle, it's easy to miss. It can come up very subtly, and we don't notice it for half a day or a day. And then suddenly you feel like your head's in a vice, and you just go, "What happened? I was

just minding my own business, and now it's intense." It's amazing. And you'll go, "Oh, it's that judging mind again. I've seen it a million times, but it snuck up on me. It took a little turn. It moved into more subtlety."

But anyway, my point is many people have been saying this and really saying, "Oh, and I see, I'm really getting it this time. This is the practice." Which of course makes me really happy to hear. Yes, concentration and samadhi are really important, and sometimes that's the direction of practice. Sometimes experiencing on a subtle level the seven factors of enlightenment is practice.

Sometimes what practice is about is the purification of memories and remorse. None of this we choose—it happens as it needs to happen. But many different people have been saying that practice has suddenly taken this turn into really being in these habits with some awareness, enough awareness to see the habit. But we think it's not enough awareness, because if it was enough awareness, it would just stop and be done, right?

But the way we learn that these habits are suffering—this is my particular rule of thumb, but it certainly seems to be true—is by really suffering in them over extended periods with awareness the whole time. Which just seems to make it worse. "Oh God, I see it. I really see it. Okay, I really see it. Now I really get it." And then it goes away for a while—a week, a month, a year—and then you're back at the next occasion. "Oh, I forgot about this, but now I really see it."

But anyway, my point being: this is why the so-called difficult times of retreat, when we say it's so important, we're not just trying to be a cheerleader and get you through it. It's really the place where emptiness and compassion open up from. When people come and say, "I'm really seeing this is what is, what's arising now—just this is all there is," this is the practice. It's not to get through the difficult to get to bliss. It's not to get through the mediocre to get to the difficult. It's not to get through anything to get anywhere else. It's to be totally here without reference back or forward to anything. And when here, right now, is really suffering and difficult, this is just as much the place of awakening.

When it's difficult and we really are bringing awareness to it, it's messy awareness. I think I said this the other night, but samsara is messy. Awareness of strong, difficult emotions is not going to be all nice and tidy. "Oh yes, anguish, anguish, tightness, contraction. I note it and it goes away." That's how they talk. It sounds so nice when they say it. "Oh, anguish is like this. No, no, I'm just floating on a cloud." No—it's messy. It hurts. And when we notice it and drop into it, guess what? It's even more tender because we're not fighting it anymore. We're not resisting it. We're actually feeling it. But the feeling with awareness is our protection. It's the opening into wisdom.

So these difficult times of retreat—that's what it's about. The Dalai Lama says this is where compassion for ourselves begins and where it naturally moves into empathy with beings.

People have mentioned this, not just here but all the time. Take grief—grief's a good example. There's a personal story, you're feeling the grief, it's really strong, and you're starting to really be able to be with it and feel it. There's the story and the grief, and you're being with it, and suddenly it gets—I don't know—deeper. It changes. Even though your story's still there, nothing takes away the story, but people can feel it's like a qualitative change, and you couldn't really call it suffering anymore.

Because—and the way I can best say it for me—it's kind of changed into the grief of the world. It's like this story is the representation of the grief of the world. And the natural movement of heart and mind with that is compassion. And compassion is one of the beautiful states. It's weird. It's weird because it comes out of suffering. It's weird to our logical mind. But compassion is one of the beautiful states, and it feels qualitatively different. You're connected with the suffering, the grief, the sadness, the pain, but it stops being mine. It is mine also, but not only mine.

And what makes—this is me talking, not from the suttas—but in my sense of what the vastness of all the brahmaviharas is, what makes them vast, what makes them beautiful, is exactly that there's not that constriction of me. It's the vastness of knowing we are in the middle of everything, whether it's suffering or whether it's joy. And that vastness is experienced as beauty, as peace, as ease, as brahmavihara—the divine abodes. That's what brahmavihara means.

So how does the difficult open into the wisdom of non-separation, the vastness of compassion? Really, again, it's only in this moment. It's completely determined by how we're meeting, how the mind and heart is meeting currently arising experience.

Because as we know—as we all know now, because we're all adepts—we all know that whatever's arising is out of our control. We're born with that in some way. I didn't cause this pain to arise; it's just happening, even if this understanding is only intellectual. And even how we meet it isn't totally in our control. But the way that compassion and wisdom are developing is exactly that kind, clear, non-judging awareness is the expression of wisdom and the deepening of compassion right there.

The pain comes up, and it's simply, "Oh, burning is like this." It doesn't feel like any big thing. You don't really notice, "Oh, I'm developing compassion, isn't this great?" Just: burning is like this.

But that moment—as the Buddha said, and I'm sure it's been quoted here—what we dwell and think about, that becomes the inclination of the mind. We've spent plenty of time dwelling and thinking, "I hate pain," or "I don't like this pattern," or "I want to be a better person"—yada yada, that's what Winnie talked about. But the moment of meeting—"Oh, pain is like this. Oh, incredible stabbing in the heart. Wow, that's really painful, feels like this"—that is the expression of wisdom. That is the cultivation of compassion in that moment. Where else could it be? Nowhere else.

I think Sally told this story about Sayadaw U Pandita, saying it happened to Kamala, but it didn't—it happened to me. I was in a hugely judgmental frame of mind, which I didn't tell him. These teachers, they just know. I was simply describing what was happening, and he was basically saying, "Wouldn't it be better? It's a silent retreat. Wouldn't it be better not to talk to yourself in that tone of voice?" And it wasn't critical. That was said with so much compassion. Because right here, how we're meeting present moment experience is where wisdom and compassion arise, are strengthened, and developed.

Just what's happening now is all we need. We don't have to have some big, huge, amazing experience. How we meet the conditions arising and vanishing is the path. Just small moments. It doesn't have to be huge, heart-cracking open, Martin Luther King moments. We can just be very simple.

Sharon has a great line: to pay attention is to love. By love I don't mean, "Oh, you're so wonderful, I love you." Love is just that open-hearted friendliness, acceptance, non-separation. This is just how it is. To pay attention. Just to pay attention—steady, steady, steady. The wisdom of falling into everything and the compassion naturally open by themselves. We don't have to create it. We can't. We can't create wisdom, which should be a huge relief—that just through the steadiness of kind awareness, steady, steady, steady, wisdom arises by itself.

People have noticed that all of a sudden there's wisdom, but it was so effortless. "I didn't do it." Exactly. Exactly. And can we trust that we're only getting in the way?

Notice too when there is a time that in your heart, in terms of compassion, some piece of information, some piece of suffering comes in from somewhere else, and you feel like there's just that natural meeting with compassion. It's interesting—and this is in daily life, not just here—just to notice what are the qualities in the attention, in the mind, in the heart at that moment that makes the receiving and the compassion naturally come forth.

It may not work for any of you, but again, I was listening to the radio. I like listening to public radio because you get lots of interesting snippets of life. The interviewer was talking to a man who had been a war correspondent for a long time for some network in Britain. But now he wasn't, because he had discovered that he had something called Huntington's disease—a genetic disease, a degenerative nerve disease, really bad. You get it and it starts to manifest when you're in your mid-40s, and you just gradually, gradually, everything deteriorates and you die. And it's genetic.

So his father had had that. And he and his mother and his brother had to watch his father deteriorate and die in his late middle age. Then you could get tested for it. It passed more through the male line. So his brother got tested and had it. And now his elder brother was in the middle stages of it. So then he got tested, and he has that gene. And in terms of medicine, if you have that gene, you're going to get this thing. And of course, they have no clue how to help it.

So he was just talking—so far he had no symptoms. And he was just describing this very clearly. And for some reason—and this is the more interesting thing, because there are a million stories like this—something enabled me to just receive it in that way. I was just listening, eating my breakfast. You know how you do. I wasn't like, *ah*—just eating my breakfast and sort of listening. And then something let me let it in.

And there are different ways you can let it in. You can let it in with *oh my God, it's horrible*, and you're in despair. And I'm not calling that the wisdom of compassion. I'm calling that overwhelm. It's touching us, but then we close around it. *I can't bear it*, and we're in overwhelm. And maybe it's because it comes too close to something. We're not comfortable with feeling that pain in ourselves, so we have to push it away.

Or the other time, if we hear it, we go, *oh, that's a shame*. You know how we do that. *Oh yeah, that's really a shame. Poor guy.* And we sort of mean it, but we're distracted. We're in our own little world.

But this time, I was just sitting there looking, and I realize now what opened it to me was the details he gave that allowed for empathy. And this is the detail he gave that really—*oh*, I get what that would feel like. Because I didn't know until then. I don't have a genetic disease that I'm aware of that I know is going to hit. And he's in his mid-40s. You know it's going to happen.

He said, now every time he goes out to the store—he stopped his job, he wants to be with his kids and his wife—every time he goes out to the corner store to get the newspaper or something, every time he takes a walk, his mind kind of wanders. And he didn't say this heavily. This is just how it is. *I always wonder, is this the time I'm going to first stumble? Is this going to be the day that I feel the first little tremor in my arm?*

I thought, *whoa*. That went in.

So my point with this is that that simplicity of describing experience hit a place where I could really have empathy. And the empathy is—you just feel how that could be. Without adding a whole big story, positive, negative, or anything, it's just, *oh yeah*, somewhere we're all in that boat. You don't have to go further. That's already making too much story.

But my sense is just that—how that just being present without expectation or story or self-reference—the empathy naturally arises. And with the empathy, we care. *Oh, the poor guy.*

That's really a shame. We do care. But it's not really the tenderness for life, the compassion of falling into the midst of everything.

Let me read you this Mary Oliver poem. I read it a lot because I love it—about how simple mindfulness naturally opens wisdom and compassion in the midst of everything.

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain
rising and falling.

A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.

The woman turned—I could not answer
her face, her beauty and her embarrassment
struggled together, and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps,
with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop
and fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?
Of course it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life.
I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth.
The way her smile was only for my sake.
I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

As Colette says, "Look long at what pleases you, and even longer at what pains you." The wisdom and the compassion are the natural effects of our willingness to just be present with things as they are.

As I was saying, we don't have to—in fact, we can't—create wisdom.

I want to talk for a minute about wisdom. There are three levels of wisdom talked about in the suttas. The first level, and they're all useful, is called *sutamayā paññā*—wisdom that's heard, that's learned. The stuff that we read, the things we hear people say, information that comes in. This is definitely useful. It's important to have correct or useful information.

The second level of wisdom, called *cintāmayā paññā*, is really thinking, contemplating. We take the information and turn it over, use our intelligence, really look at it and see: Does this actually make sense? This is also really useful.

But for most of us—and certainly what I've learned—that's the level where we basically operate. We think this is where everything happens, this middle level. But the third level, called *bhāvanāmayā paññā*—and *bhāvanā* is the word for mental cultivation, used for meditation—this is really the level of insight, of deep transformative knowledge or wisdom, which arises through insight, through meditation.

We can use the second level to help us incline our attention, incline our memory toward re-recognizing on the third level, on the insight level, when we've actually experienced it.

This is the way Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche talks about it. He says we study, we learn the teachings, we contemplate—all really important for all of us. So if you're listening here every night, that's giving you information that hopefully on some level meets your inner intelligence, and you see if it's helpful or not.

But then he goes on to say about this third level: "Unless we also come to some inner realization by actually applying the teachings and mingling them with our minds, the knowledge remains theoretical. So we ponder deeply the meaning of the Dharma until it permeates our whole being."

That's really what we're doing here. Pondering, yes, but also paying attention, being with moment to moment experience until the meaning of the Dharma—the emptiness, the compassion, the freedom from clinging—permeates our whole being.

In that way, it's not that we create wisdom—compassion arises naturally. But when we remember it, if it's useful to incline the mind, we can use this second level of contemplation, understanding, intelligence to incline the mind in the direction that deepens us into the third level of wisdom, of insight, of really mingling the teachings with our mind.

Just to give a couple of examples: it takes patience. At first it takes some insight into—and everyone has had this, believe me, we're not talking earth-shattering insight—the emptiness of separate self, the non-doing nature of things just happening, and the natural effect of recognizing that: our connectedness, our caring, our tender heart. Even just for a moment, we see that.

Then when we're not actually contacting that insight but it's a memory on the second level, that can still be useful. We can use our understanding, all the skillful means we have, just to incline our mind back in the direction of cultivating compassion rather than impatience, cultivating compassion rather than self-hatred.

It just takes patience. Patience.

You know Sister Chân Không, the nun who's been working with Thích Nhất Hạnh? She used to be Sister Phượng, ever since she was sixteen during the Vietnam War.

Now she's older. They were working with social work, with young people. They were basically kicked out—they left the country during the war and couldn't come back because both sides hated them because they wouldn't take sides. She's totally committed. I read her autobiography. From the time she was sixteen, she's been committed to mindfulness, to compassionate action, to activism. Living in France, she's still committed to this. She practices every day.

But it's not like, "Oh, now I see. Now I know. I don't have to do anything anymore. The compassion just flows. I never get caught." It's this quality of commitment to our understanding, and patience.

She talks about a period—this was a while ago, but many years after she left Vietnam—when a lot of nuns and monks and activists and artists were being arrested in Vietnam. And she was involved in organizing a letter-writing campaign to the government. She said, "Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew I had to do walking meditation."

Is that the first thing you would think of? "I'm angry. They did this thing. It's so wrong. I need to do walking meditation."

"Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

I love that. I use that all the time because it's the sense of knowing that compassion doesn't mean passivity. Compassion can mean real proactive action. But compassion married to wisdom means that compassion is all about the intention in our heart, in our mind—not about result.

And this is, again—I know we've talked a bit about intention—but intention is the seed of action, the seed of karma. And compassion, the way it shows up in the Eightfold Noble Path, is as the second factor: wise aspiration, *samma sankappa*. Three specific wise intentions are mentioned: greed transforms to renunciation, ill will transforms to loving-kindness or *metta*, and cruelty and aversion transform to compassion. It's one of the wise intentions.

When we're really cultivating, really inclining our mind towards compassion out of wisdom, out of our own experience—but of course, until we're completely awakened, our experience is limited. It goes back and forth. There are times when the compassion is just that natural flow. We're not really thinking about what's going to happen and what are they going to think and what can I do. It just arises spontaneously.

But when we're not quite in touch with compassion as intention, we can easily get into an idea about how compassionate action should look, or what we should do. And often, when we're not in touch with intention, our idea of the action being right or appropriate tends to go to whether it gets the result we want. That's how we judge actions: Does it get the result we want? And that's the one thing that's completely out of our control.

In our practice, in our daily life, in every action that we do, every way that we live, when we're working with inclining our heart and mind towards compassion and just noticing when it's present—the cultivating isn't about what it looks like from the outside in. The true compassion comes from the wisdom, from the inside out.

We can start from the inside out, really feel compassionate—like Sister Chan Khong—and really want to take proactive action in the world. We can start from really feeling compassion and connection and caring. But it's so easy, isn't it? The world is so frustrating. The world is ambiguous, no matter how much we care and how much we might know.

She says, "I know they acted unfairly." It's so easy for us to slip into frustration, into trying to make the result come out a certain way. And when that doesn't happen, we get lost in either frustration or self-judgment or whatever. And it can get really carried away—like people who are opposed to abortion because it's killing, and then they kill doctors who perform abortions, and don't see any kind of disconnect in that. And that kind of thing has gone both ways.

It's easy, when we're on the ideologue level, to still think that's compassion, right?

But we're not in control of the externals. This is what James was talking about last night regarding the "iddy-potties" – getting in tune with what has become the Dalai Lama's refrain: our sincere motivation. That's what we can trust. That's our reward. And he should know, my God.

There's a story from an interview with him that has touched me deeply for years. His whole commitment to nonviolence, especially in terms of the Chinese overrunning Tibet – he's so profoundly committed to nonviolent response. But externally, it doesn't really seem to have helped at all. In fact, the Chinese have increasingly overrun Tibet, and the culture is being more and more destroyed.

So in this interview I read, some young Tibetans were talking to him. He's like the old man now, in his seventies. And they're saying – perhaps in a kind way, but essentially: "It's not working. It's not working. You speak about nonviolence. Okay, we respect it. But old man, it's not working."

And he said – this is a touch of openness, not "I'm right," but the compassion, the falling into the midst of everything – he said, "Yeah, I hear you. Maybe it's not working." And then they said tears were running down his face. He said, "But I cannot be any other way."

To me, that is incredible courage. Because he's not blocking anything out. He's hearing all the pain around him. He's returning to his motivation. As Dr. King said one time, "I refuse to become bitter. I refuse. Hatred must never be our motive" – taking a clarity of intention. Now, of course, you could drift into bitterness, but we recognize it with kind awareness. And in the recognition, there is its own transformation. We don't have to create the compassion, just fall back into that willingness to be present. It doesn't mean being a doormat.

So I want to close with a story that inspired me about the vastness of wisdom and compassion, and the ambiguity of life. We just don't know.

This is a common story, but two days ago, on Thursday, I was listening to the BBC in the morning. They said it was the twentieth anniversary of the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison. I don't know if Sally talked about him the other night. Twenty years. And they played a little snippet on the radio – so you couldn't see it, but you could hear – the moment when he was released. They described what they called his "long walk to freedom" from the jail cell where he was held into town.

You could hear people cheering and the commentators talking, then parts of his speech in different languages, some in English. It was so moving to me. You could feel, just in hearing it, the energy – how much people were touched by it. Of course, having

twenty years of hindsight, knowing what's happened in the meantime, and having seen that movie *Invictus*, which I did see and found really interesting – to witness how he came out of that experience able to bear witness to so many years of personal suffering and so much suffering of others. Not only the people in jail with him, but of the whole country.

And to have that breadth of vision, which he seemed to carry through into his period of leadership – the breadth of vision that we're all in this together. He could really seem to see that the suffering wasn't only among the black people and people of color, but that through their hatred and separation, the Afrikaners and white people were also suffering in a different way. It was just one big mess of suffering. The compassion – it isn't about going easy. It's really being able to be straight, to do what his heart and wisdom told him to do in all different kinds of situations. He couldn't plan it all out.

That movie was about using rugby as a way to bring the races together, because rugby was an Afrikaner white sport and blacks mostly hated it. In fact, they wouldn't go to rugby matches, but when they'd hear about them, they'd cheer for whatever team was playing against the South African team. They just hated it – the white rulers' sport.

So Mandela decides to use rugby as a way to bring them together. Very practical, using what's right in front of him, calling on people. And he got so much flack, called to meetings with all the other black leaders saying, "What, are you crazy? We're not going to do this."

And he would just stand up and say, "No, this is really what we need to do. This is what we need to do." He had so much stature because he wasn't coming from hatred or ideology, but really from this depth of compassion that was fed by the wisdom of interconnectedness. There were just example after example after example of that.

And it's inspiring. For me, and I'm sure if not this particular story then other things would be inspiring to you, because it touches what we know is true as our potential as human beings. I mean, if it were just so different from us—oh, he's amazing, but he's some kind of freak of nature—our intellectual mind might say that. But the inspiration, which brings brightness, which brings energy, which brings vigor, which brings willingness to do, arises because it's touching on that deep wisdom and compassion that's the essence of what's true. Somewhere down there we know this. We've all glimpsed it.

I think the reason I love just looking at huge figures—people, famous people, or people you hear on the news who manifest this—is because it helps us to trust it more, instead of believing our little small minds, our little separate self.

So I just want to end with a short quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of our favorites:

Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, "I am the world, the world is myself," you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern.

So let's just sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 56

Hitting the Wall of Sakkāya-diṭṭhi

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a universal experience in meditation practice: hitting the wall. She describes the natural sine wave of practice—periods of insight and flow alternating with times when we become caught in our habitual patterns and personality views. Drawing on the Pāli concept of sakkāya-diṭṭhi (identity view or personality view), she explains how this fundamental misperception causes us to grasp at the stream of mental and physical experience as 'me' or 'mine,' leading to suffering and self-doubt.*
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> *Wilson references Ajahn Sumedho's teaching that self-doubt is one of the biggest hindrances for Western practitioners, largely because our belief in and reliance on personality is so deeply ingrained. She shares the story of the monk Asaji from the suttas, who even while dying worried about his inability to concentrate, illustrating how even experienced practitioners can fall into this trap. The talk explores various ways we hit the wall: believing 'I had it but now it's lost,' feeling despair at seeing our patterns return despite awareness, or experiencing what Chögyam Trungpa called 'nostalgia for saṃsāra.'*
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> *Using the vivid allegory of Frodo's journey in The Lord of the Rings, Wilson illustrates how the spiritual path spirals deeper—each challenge requiring greater courage, met by deeper wisdom and faith. She concludes with the inspiring image of an elderly Tibetan nun who, after enduring tremendous hardship, spends her days spinning her prayer wheel with prayers for all beings, reminding us that we can do this because ultimately, awakening does itself.*

Today we had a little teacher meeting after lunch, as we sometimes do, and we were talking about our sense of the flow of the retreat. Of course, everybody's completely different, so in some ways it doesn't really make sense to speak of "the flow of the retreat." But at the same time, we always do that, and there's a sort of sense we pick up on.

The sense we had, which really matched what I've been feeling the last couple of days, is what we're calling the sine wave. If you look at everybody, there's a sense that people's practices are going up and down—different people at different places, each of you at changing places, and at any one time all in different places. The sine wave describes those periods when you're having insight, when it's flowing, when there's not much velcro and nothing is sticking. It's really quite tender, or the mettā is flowing—

just no problem. You really understand, you're seeing, "Oh, these are the patterns," and you see they're patterns, and they come and go, and you really know that. The anicca that Andrea was talking about—you're really seeing, "Yeah, that's really how it is."

And then in the trough of the sine wave—which is equal, because you need both, that's the thing—we're watching it slowly deteriorate with full awareness. You can really see how a little thought came in and it was a little stickier, even though it was the same thought. A kind of mood came in, and this pattern which you've seen a million times, and you know it's not really... you know it's just a pattern, and yet... just a little bit, but not quite. You watch it go down to the trough and all of a sudden it's stuck. It's solid. We really believe it. And we get riddled with either frustration or doubt or fear. It's what I call hitting a wall—not just a little bit of a hard time, but a big-time wall. We all have that. We all hit the wall.

That's what I want to talk about tonight: that place where we really lose our trust, if not our motivation, not our commitment. There's this really deep believing of whatever personality view arises—really, that's all that's happening in that moment. But it's the personality thing that we bottom-line place our faith in, and it's come back. We're riddled with frustration, with doubt, even though we've seen it more, seen it coming in, can actually describe the causes and conditions, how it starts, what triggers it, how it comes in. We're seeing that we're in it, but somewhere deep in there, it's not okay. And not that it should be okay—that's part of believing it, that it's not okay.

When this happens to someone who's been practicing quite a bit—not just new practitioners, and none of you are new practitioners—these are things that happen over and over to all of us as part of our path. The crests and troughs of the sine wave are equally valid parts of the path. There's no such thing as only up and no down. The down isn't some kind of mistake to get rid of so we can have just ups. They're equally the path.

I want to talk a little bit about the different ways we hit the wall. Hitting the wall isn't just "Ah, I'm so sick of this." Hitting the wall is "I can't do this anymore"—or more like "I won't do this anymore." And I don't mean just a mood, a little five-minute mood. We all have those. I mean a deep level of despair or doubt, where your motivation drops out or whatever.

What's really going on—and this goes on the whole path—is that our views are being challenged. This came up a lot this morning. Our personality views, the views that Winnie talked about the other night about what we want to happen, but even more, subtly held views about what is and is not the path, what is and is not supposed to be our practice—views we don't even know we have.

It's hard. It's hard for everybody. No one doesn't experience this sometimes, because that's how it is. In those times when it's free and open and we really know—even if it's for a tenth of a second—we really know it doesn't matter what's happening. Absolutely no exceptions. It doesn't matter. There's consciousness, awareness, and things happening, and that is it. We really know that.

And then in this trough, it's like you thought you knew it. You can't get there, and this really is... use your own words for what it is for you. But it's something to really consciously bring in a little bit more.

When our views are being challenged, first know that it's a paradox: no thought, no view can adequately hold or describe reality. It can't. Impossible. And yet our main tool is thoughts and views. As Andrea was saying this morning, we use views. No one's saying we don't use views. It's the attachment to them, the belief in a view that we don't even know is defining our world—that when it gets challenged, it just sends us around the bend.

And the main one—I don't want to talk about views too extensively, but the main one I want to refer to, of course, is *sakaya-ditti*. *Ditti* means view. *Sakaya-ditti* is translated as identity view, personality view. This is the kind of big view that gets us attached to all the other views we become attached to, kind of in service of our identity view, our personality view.

When it's talked about in the suttas, in reference to so-called stream entry, they say the eye of the Dhamma is awoken in her or in him. One of the things that's seen through is *sakaya-ditti*, personality view. Seen through. It doesn't mean it stops arising. Seen through. Not completely held to and believed without exception anymore.

I want to give a very brief description of it. Sally is going to talk more about the five aggregates, which is really at the core of it, in another talk. But identity view—Sayadaw U Lakana, a Burmese teacher Andrea and I were teaching with last month, defines *sakaya* as the stream of mental and physical experience, or the mind and matter flux. He kept saying that this time: the mind and matter flux. I love that. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience. Just these things happening over and over and over. That's all that's happening. And we're making these huge stories about it. That's all that's happening.

Those times when the natural phases of life, the natural phases of practice—expansion, contraction, expansion, contraction, the day and the night, the tides, the weather—that's just how life is. In the so-called expansion phase, there's spaciousness, non-clinging, no problem. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking—it's coming, it's going, it's pleasant, it's unpleasant, whatever it is, that's fine. No problem.

Then in the so-called contraction, *sakaya-ditti* arises in any moment when any particular seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience, emotion, thought, feeling tone—whatever—is clung to, is identified as being either me or mine. In that moment, identity view is born. And that can be quick, or mostly what happens is this: there's a sense of being out walking. There's smells, sounds, the sensation of the breeze. There's pleasant or unpleasant. It's just whatever. It can be very finely noticed or more broadly noticed—that's not to the point. Things are just coming and going. You're walking. It's whatever it is.

And suddenly, the coolness of the breeze is felt as unpleasant. Maybe noticed, maybe not. And there's a sense: unpleasant. *I'm cold.* Right then, identity view is born. My unpleasantness, my cheek, I'm cold. This experience of cold is happening to *me*.

Well, that doesn't have to be a big deal. We can just see that. But generally, it doesn't stop there. It goes on. I'm cold, and I need to do something, and why is it like this, and blah, blah, blah. And then the whole propensity of thoughts and emotions, the whole story of me, arises out of that moment. You can see that happening sometimes.

But that's just what happens. It's okay. We can just notice that. That's part of the expansion-contraction. Expand, expand, expand. Whatever it is. And it's always something different, but we neglect to notice that.

Expansion, contraction—that's what identity view is. And we can just watch it happen. It doesn't have to be a problem.

But when it becomes a problem, identity view, personality view—I'm using these terms a little bit differently now. It's exactly the same thing, but I'm going to talk about personality view in the way that Ajahn Sumedho discusses it. We're moving from that moment when there's just a contraction of clinging around unpleasant sensation or pleasant thought—oh, it's almost lunchtime, pleasant thought. I'm hungry, I need to go eat. And then the whole story that gets created: "Oh, I'm hungry again. What's the matter with me? I'm so greedy. All I ever do is eat, and I should try to renounce." All of this stuff, all your history, all of that—that's what I'm going to call personality view. "I'm this person who has these patterns around food, and I always do, and here I am again, and everybody's watching me." All of that stuff—personality view.

So it's with any particular moment where there's clinging, there's grasping at any of the sixth sense door experiences, and then it leads to thoughts and emotions, what we call our personality. Now, this is in our common parlance, not so much the Buddha's way of speaking. It would be that the more habitual patterns and emotions and reactions come up. I mean, I think I'm assuming, but most of us, if you were asked, "What's your personality like?" we could pull out a few threads of particular patterns that come up a lot. Yes? You can think of a couple. I don't have to say them, but we could think of a couple. They may be nice ones. They may be not nice ones. That's not the point. It's not about good or bad.

And then we think, "That's me. That's my personality." And we believe that deeply on some level. And when the sine wave goes down into the trough, when something's unpleasant and something's identified with, the sense of identity view is there—the particular patterns and thoughts and emotions that get triggered, that catch us, are usually one of these familiar strands that we would pull out, that we're familiar with.

Generally, it's not going to be "Oh yes, all is as best as it can be in this best of all possible worlds," and we're lost in frustration. Probably not the identity view we pull out at that time. It's more like, "I can't do this. I'm hopeless. I knew I was hopeless. And I had this good time before out of the grace of God, but now it's gone, and now this is what I really know."

And I'm saying it like it's sort of funny, but we know it's not the least bit funny when it's happening. Even when you can describe that it's happening, and you know it's happening, and you're watching it happen, and you can be aware that it's happening—but it's still really me it's happening to, isn't it? And it's hard.

This is where Ajahn Sumedho says something that I think has really been interesting and helpful to me. He was talking about teaching Westerners—because he practiced in Thailand, he teaches a lot of Thai people—but he was just talking about working with Westerners, American and European culture. He said that for him, he sees self-doubt as one of the biggest hindrances for Westerners in our practice. Self-doubt about our insights. Self-doubt about the insights and experiences of awareness and the liberating nature of insights that we've all experienced, the liberating nature of awareness that we've all experienced.

And he said he thinks—this is his opinion—but he thinks in part we're so prone to this, so really riddled by this self-doubt, and it takes such a grip of us because, in Western culture, our personalities are so strong. Our belief in and our reliance on our personalities is so strong. It's almost like that's really our bottom line belief system. That's where we go for refuge—the kind of steadiness of our personality. Even if we

might hate our personality. We're totally practicing to change our personality. Really, bottom line, isn't it? But it's all about the personality. And when the going gets tough and we're caught back in really believing the personality, there's some way that's almost our refuge, he's saying. That's what we get caught in.

That's the belief system. That's the sakāya-diṭṭhi on a really deep level, where we can talk a good line, but somewhere in there we're so caught in believing it. And so he says we just keep getting tricked back into this sakāya-diṭṭhi, this belief.

This is the place of reference from which we'd be, what I say, hitting the wall. It's not the experience that's happening that makes us hit the wall. It's that reference point of sakāya-diṭṭhi—"this is happening to me, I'm doing this, I'm not doing this, I can't do this," whatever.

We all keep saying this all the time, but just noticing that. So many people have talked about and experienced just moments—not even experience—of such profound tenderness, sensitivity, or ease, or relaxation, or quiet, or all kinds of things going on, but it's just no problem. Just seeing what's happening. Even seeing the personality patterns come and just seeing them and going, "Yeah, look at that. I see how the causes bring it about, I see the effects, it goes, no problem."

And then when we get somehow really caught, you can see it coming in because there's a lot of awareness. You can see: "Oh, this thing triggered, and this thing triggered, and my energy was low, and my back was hurting, and there was a little bit of aversion, and I was a little tired, and I didn't quite notice this thought and that thought and that thought, and the next thing I knew—boom." It's like you can make the whole recipe, and we can see it.

And that even undercuts our trust more, because we believe so strongly in personality that if I see it, that means I should be able to stop it. I'm in control here. Not. So we then don't believe, we don't trust the wisdom from the tenderness, from the spaciousness, from whatever it is. It could be any experience—there's no particular experience I'm calling good and another one I'm calling bad. But the times when the Velcro's not so strong, that one isn't about our personality view, and we don't trust it.

That's what Sāmedo's saying. We get caught back into believing in our personality, really believing in it. And it gets more and more subtle, and there's no way we can describe or have a view that encompasses the breadth of our path. What should happen? What shouldn't happen? Everything's going to happen. And all of it's the path. And it's completely different for each one of us. Yes, there's movements we can see, there's patterns, but the particulars are completely different for everybody.

So there's nothing to really compare it to, to prove how useless you are. What's happening is all that could be happening. There's no way it can be outside of our path. But our personality view is not a reference point from which we can see that or trust it. So that's so limiting.

This is from a book about a Thai woman in the last century who was apparently greatly realized. Mei-Chi Cao was her name. She said, "Everything that makes a person unique changes continually and eventually disintegrates. Each personality is constantly ceasing to be what it was and becoming something new. Constantly. Those factors one tends to conceive of as self are impermanent and fleeting. Everything about bodily form and the mind's thoughts and feelings is without intrinsic stability and bound to dissolve."

Just what Andrea was saying last night. But even if within our moment-to-moment thinking and thoughts and emotions and personality we can see the constant shift—we can see that, we know it—there's a way that views, when we don't see them, we see the inner change. But the big view is that's all changing, yet the big picture is it's all coming back to that same self-judgment, which is my bottom-line core pattern, or whatever it is.

And it's something Luang Por Jamnian said once. He said, "Only two things are not impermanent: nibbāna and a concept." You get it? Because a concept freezes. The concept solidifies what the concept is of and doesn't let it change. So our concept of our personality does that.

So notice when the sakāya-diṭṭhi comes in, when it's just starting or when it's strong. Notice when it's not there. And notice, as Buddhadāsa said, "The sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind." That's all.

It's just another arising appearance. There's grasping and clinging—boom, sense of self. Fine. That's the effect of grasping, so what? The grasping and clinging goes away, the sense of self goes away. A hundred million times a day, so what? We breathe so many times a day, fine. Coming and going. But we make this big commotion because of this kind of belief in our personality.

So I just wanted to talk then about a couple of examples of hitting the wall. As I said, you can all come up with your own. And again, it's not just that it's hard, but when we really somehow feel so discouraged, we're losing our motivation and really believe "I can't do it."

That's one of the big ones, the first one: "I had it, but now it's gone. I knew how to do it, but it's gone. It just proves I can't do this. I really can't do it." That's what vicikicchā is talking about—self-doubt.

There's a sutta from the time of the Buddha that I really like because it points to something quite profound, about a man named Assaji, a monk, a well-realized monk who was very ill, probably dying. The Buddha comes to him and asks him a series of questions, but the gist is that he's saying, "I hope you are not troubled by remorse and regret," as he's dying. "I hope your mind and heart is clear."

And Assaji says, "I actually have quite a lot of remorse and regret."

The Buddha says, "Is it about your virtue? Something you've done?"

"Oh no, it's not that."

"Then why are you troubled if you have nothing to reproach yourself for in regard to virtue?"

And Assaji says, "Well, formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was ill, I was able to keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations"—in other words, he could get calm and concentrated—"but now I cannot obtain concentration." The man is dying, and this is what he's upset about. "And as I do not obtain concentration, it occurs to me, 'Let me not fall away.'" He's really afraid. He's falling away from the path because he can't get concentrated while he's dying.

You can relate, can't you? It's really quite something. And when our personality views are turned towards what's happening in our practice—which is what starts to happen here—it's magnified. It's like, "Oh my God, this is the most important thing to me and I can't do it. This is proof I can't do it. What am I going to do?" So it's huge. And he's dying, so add that on top of it—your last moments and you can't do it and there's no other chance.

Of course the Buddha says, "Assaji, those ascetics, those Brahmins who regard concentration as the essence and who identify concentration with asceticism, with the path—failing to obtain concentration, they might think, 'Let us not fall away.' What do you think, Assaji? Haven't I told you? Is form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent."

"Therefore, seeing this, one understands this cannot be relied upon. There's no more of this."

And he goes through all the aggregates—form, which is the body, pleasant feeling, perception, consciousness, mental formation. They're all impermanent. You can't rely on any of them. He's basically saying, "Okay, so you can't concentrate. That's just a mental formation that comes and goes based on conditions. It doesn't mean you are falling away from the path. It just means conditions have changed right now."

We don't always have the Buddha to come and remind us. But the fact that even at that point, a monk who had been practicing with the Buddha and had a lot of understanding could still fall into that when he was close to death—it just shows how deep this pattern can be. It's not a small thing to keep deeply running into the identification and the power that this identification can have with our deeply habituated self-doubts, fears, and pains. You don't just see it a couple of times and you're done. It's going to keep on showing up in different ways.

That's not something you're doing wrong. It is the path.

So that's one way we hit the wall: I can't do it, and I could before.

Sometimes, again as I was saying, we've seen our patterns, our really suffering patterns, quite a bit. We're quite familiar with them. And they come again. And as I was just saying, we see the whole thing. You can label the whole thing. But not only is it happening, it's happening with awareness. And so not only do we feel the pain of it, we feel the pain of knowing that I shouldn't be doing this anymore. I've seen it enough. So we add the pain of humiliation. And we add the pain of "I can't do it properly." And it's just, I don't even want to look at this anymore. I can't face this another moment—as if there was anywhere to go, and there's not.

So that's really the despair, because if you walk out of here, it's walking out with you. But there's this sense of, I can't look at it anymore. And there are times, of course, when everything—the fear or the pain or the frustration, whatever—is, as we say, overwhelming, stronger than the mindfulness and its skillful means to change the channel, to do metta or brighten the mind or take a walk. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about on such a deep level, it's hopeless. I just can't do it anymore—like hitting a wall.

This is where patience comes in. The three types of transcendent patience: patience when wronged, patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma, and patience to keep meeting the profound truth without giving in to fear. The profound truth doesn't always look beautiful and lovely. The profound truth could be plumbing the depths of your despair in a particular moment as well.

Another place we hit the wall is sometimes it's just an intimation. It isn't obvious. You're not recognizing what the pattern is. But things have been going well, and then it changes. Okay, this happens all the time. And usually a lot of thinking starts. Things get really scattered. You get really confused. You don't know what's going on. And you know you didn't do anything different. I like to call that a transition time, when usually something is about to come up. We never know what. It's usually something we'd rather not know about. But sometimes it's just this intimation of either a pattern or a fear or a grief—just something about ourselves. We don't really know what it is, but the habit of our life has been to keep it down. The habit of our life has been around denial of this, which may have been skillful at the time. It's nothing about skillful or not, but for now, that's not needed. But the habit of denial, the habit of "I don't want to feel this, I don't want to be it," is so strong that all kinds of behaviors have been promulgated over our life to basically distract the mind from feeling this thing.

And so when it comes up—and it could be some kind of primal fear, it could be some deep loneliness, it doesn't necessarily have to be a traumatic memory, it could be, but it doesn't have to be that at all—it's just something that our so-called personality patterns have been built around. I don't want to have to feel that. And for me, I noticed the thought was, "I'll die if I have to feel that." That's as if. And then all these basically stupid, not very nice behaviors to keep myself from having to feel it. You get into all kinds of arguments with people and running away from things and doing this and doing that and creating all kinds of complications in one's life—not to feel a feeling, which when I actually feel it, it's like, oh, well, that's really intense. Okay, I can feel that. It's like a huge relief.

But anyway, when it's just there and we don't know what it is—the mind doesn't know and we don't have any kind of clear intellectual understanding—the sense is, "I'm out of here. I'm so out of here. There's no way I want to get anywhere near this." And we can't even quite say it clearly.

Or something really difficult comes up and we know it, but that personality view arises: "I can't. I just can't be with this"—which is the old belief system. "I can't. There's no way." And it's almost as if at that point, the sense of our limitations, our personality limitations, are so strong. "Well, I just can't do that. There's no way I could meet that." You know, that sense of the box that we make for ourselves out of our sense of ourself. "Well, I just can't."

And we don't almost have the courage to really own our aspirations, to really own our motivation, to really say, "You know what? I can. I don't know how or when or how it's going to show up, but I can come back and be here for it." Almost like sometimes

we're afraid to really consciously acknowledge to ourselves the power of our motivation and commitment, because then what if we've really acknowledged we're going forward with everything we have and we still fail? So almost better not to try. I mean, it isn't better not to try, but this is the story. Better just not to really open to it, because I know I can't do it anyway. So why even beat my head against the wall? And I know. So let's just keep on kind of practicing around the edges. And it's pretty good, and it's good enough.

And that's actually another place—"it's good enough." Sayadaw U Pandita called this "stopping within." He would always say, don't stop without—like it's too hard, we want to give up—and don't stop within, which means, "Okay, it's pretty nice now."

And many of us, when we first come to practice, of course we have no clue what we're getting into, because who would if you knew? But we want somehow to be happier, more at ease. That's normal. And so not even knowing the vastness perhaps of what we're getting into, of course our motivation is going to be somewhat limited. That's normal. And it might be some personality thing, some sense of ease, some particular suffering goes away, whatever. And it may be that that actually happens. Life gets easier. Or you understand something. Or it's just enough equanimity. It's mellow enough. "I can deal now." And the motivation just drops out. Okay, stopping within.

And that can be on many levels. That can be just "it's good enough for now. I'm not suffering too much." I spent years like that. "Oh, I'm equanimous. Things are equanimous. I'm kind of practicing"—but not really with that complete abandon, so to speak. But of course, luckily, something always happens to prick the bubble if you're just somewhat awake.

And so the stopping within can be all the way up to really deep levels of absorption and really strong insights. And I think James referred to that in his talk, where the Buddha said one thing he never lost sight of was never to be satisfied with less than complete liberation of heart and mind. And so we may not know—we may think we have complete liberation of heart and mind—but all we have to do is just keep noticing, just keep being honest, just keep being aware. And that's what we would do anyway. Liberated or not liberated, that's what we're going to keep doing. And if we keep doing it, sooner or later, if it ever happens that greed or aversion or confusion arises again in your mind, you'll notice it.

And then, great. You're noticing it. You're happy to notice it. We keep on paying attention. So that's stopping within.

One last thing I want to mention—I don't think I can quite explain it. It's sometimes what I've called, using Chögyam Trungpa's phrase, "nostalgia for samsara." It's not when we're in deep, deep difficulty, but rather as practice is going along and you're really quite deep in the practice, no longer feeling the sense of struggle so much. There are periods where you just start to feel the possibility, opening to moments when that personality view isn't really so operative.

And even though the moment in itself is just what it is—peaceful or joyful or whatever, it doesn't matter—when we kind of come back a little into the personality, there can often be this sense of, "Oh, but what about..." All kinds of projections arise. "I don't know if I want liberation if it means I have to give up my family." We didn't have a family, so now I have to give up my family? Or I can't be in a committed relationship, like someone said today. Or it means I can't appreciate art anymore. I can't be creative. Or I'll never like chocolate again. That's kind of silly, but it's there—this "Oh no, I don't want it."

It's just our mind making stuff up and projecting it. And then it's like, "I want to go back to the pleasure garden. I don't want to renounce this stuff. I don't want to give up this stuff, and you can't make me." Nostalgia for samsara is just all the dull grayness.

I've found in myself, often in different periods in my life, it's almost like a grief, like a mourning. It really feels like that for some—I couldn't even say what—but some aspect of my personality that feels so familiar. It doesn't even go anywhere, that's the thing. But it feels like something, some attachment to it, is dying. Some deep belief is getting less. And it's almost like an old, comfortable cloak, and we just want to hold on to it, even though it's ratty and moldy and stinky. "No, it's just so comfortable." It's almost like a mourning of something. There are times I've really felt that. That's okay. Mourning is like this. Just that nostalgia for samsara—don't want to let it go, even when we don't like it.

People often say they see they're in a deep suffering pattern. They recognize it. They can name it. But there's just some little piece that's like, "But still, who would I be without this?" Sometimes it's really bizarre how we're holding on. So we just notice all these ways.

The last one I want to mention is one we've already spoken about in some of the impermanence talk as well. It's the kind of fear that comes up after an insight into "there is nowhere to land, everything's changing, there is no self"—whatever form it takes. Sometimes that's very liberating, and sometimes fear comes up with it, and sometimes

we get lost in the fear. But mostly people hear that and think, "Well, that's the one I want. I want to have that kind of fear." But that can stop us too—if we start thinking about it, with all the projections of annihilation.

And the other one, in terms of practice, is when we have an idea of choiceless awareness, when it's just things coming and going, that openness I was talking about—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. It's very nice, or it's fast, or whatever, but there's a way we think, "Oh, now this is what it is. This is how things are. Everything's just coming and going and there's no me, and now I know how it is."

And it's going to stay this way. And then it doesn't stay that way. It gets completely chaotic. You think, well, this isn't choiceless. This isn't how it is. It's chaos. It's not supposed to be chaos. It's supposed to be orderly, flowing smoothly. Or else really concentrated. Not stuff all over the place in chaos. And I can't tell what's happening. This can't be right. I can't do it. And we're back there again.

But that's the other thing I like to say: *saṃsāra* is messy. It's not going to get all neat and tidy because we meditate. You just see how chaotic things are. In terms of a reference point of me, we never know what's going to happen. That's what Andrea was saying—it never stays the same, ever. Doing your practice right doesn't mean now stuff stays the same. It doesn't mean even the patterns stay the same. Constant flux, expanding, contraction.

And so it's so hard sometimes. Freedom from clinging, which is really the seed of freedom—freedom from clinging is uncompromising. It's not freedom from clinging to most things, but a few things kind of can stay familiar. Freedom from clinging is completely uncompromising, and we can't imagine what it's like because we can only imagine what we already know. You know, Krishnamurti's famous phrase: freedom from the known. Or the Buddha saying, in terms of a sense of self, it's always unsatisfactory because whatever way you conceive of it, the fact is always other than that. Whatever way we conceive of our sense of self, the fact is always other than that.

But we keep on, this personality wanting to land somewhere and falling into this, hitting this wall—me hitting the wall. I just don't know.

Enlightenment is not a self-improvement project. Nothing about non-clinging confirms and justifies and props up the sense of me or my personality. And we can't imagine from the view of our personality what that's like. And so when we're in that hitting the wall, knowing that that sense of personality is always the reference point when we're feeling we're hitting the wall like that—we're looking at what's wrong, what's

wrong. Nothing's wrong. We're just evaluating it from some standpoint that's completely unreliable. But it's so familiar at times, and subtle. That's what Sayadaw says—we're so caught back into it, we don't recognize it.

Stephen Batchelor, I love the way he says things. He says emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, and seeming protection. And although freeing, this falling apart of all our strategies evokes great disconcertion, dis-ease sometimes—like being in a no man's land without reference points.

And here in practice, all our strategies, our personality patterns of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection—these are coming into play around mostly your actual meditation practice. And we can easily tend to overlook that that's what's happening and get so focused on how we're practicing and what we're doing and what's arising. We forget to say, oh, right—I can't trust any view I have about what should be happening and what I can do and what's right, when I'm caught. I don't mean we can't use skillful means. Of course we can. But that's not with this view of: if I do this, then it's going to be like that. If I do this, I'll get rid of this frustration. If I do this, it'll get back to openness. You can feel it—it's not the words, it's the energy in the mind from wanting, from aversion, from it's all about me getting it together. Unreliable.

We can't trust any idea we have of skillful means when the motivation is greed, aversion, or me, me, me. We just can't see clearly. That's all.

But this is hard for us—that our strategies all fall apart. And still, we somehow have to find the motivation, find the trust, find the commitment to keep on opening with total commitment into this next moment of the unknown. And it *is* unknown. As much as we up here talk about the way and the path and the way it can go, and all the things we read—that can support us, that can be information. But again, it's completely different in each moment for each of us. And all we can do is say, how can I summon up the courage, really like undaunted courage, to open again into this moment with total commitment?

And sometimes it's the one thing we think we don't ever want to be with, the thing we're practicing not to ever have to be with, that is the thing we have to open into. Because that's what's happening. That's our path at this moment.

Maybe a lot of you saw that movie, *Touching the Void*. It was a recreation of something that happened maybe twenty years ago—two friends who were mountain climbing, really high mountains in the Andes in South America. They were coming down together, roped to each other, and they kind of slide, and one of them falls over the edge,

hanging over this huge void. The other guy's trying to pull him up for hours, can't pull him up. He's getting slowly, slowly dragged over to the edge himself. And so at some point he made the decision, and he cut the rope.

The guy who cut the rope went over and looked down—his friend had fallen into a deep crevasse. There was no way he could get to him. So the guy who cut the rope went on back.

Then what happened? The guy's in the crevasse, this big, big hole in the ice. It looked as if it was the Himalayas—that level of mountain climbing. He's in this deep crevasse, and he'd broken his leg, so he's in a lot of pain. He's on a little ledge, and it keeps going down, and he's on this ledge for hours—twelve hours, twenty-four, I can't remember. He can't get back up. No way he can get back up. And he's just there. No water, no food. Broken leg.

And he said, after twelve or twenty-four hours, "What do I do? I've got to do something." He said he had such a deep, primal fear of going down deeper into that crevasse. He just could not imagine ever doing it. But he said, at the same time, "I can't just abdicate. I have to do something." And the only thing he could do was with his rope—kind of secure it and lower himself deeper into the crevasse.

So he did that. No idea if it was just going to go on forever, if he was lowering himself into the thing he feared even more than the position he was in now. And he did it. He said, "I can't abdicate."

And as it turned out, he went down and he hit ground and he could kind of go up a slope. Remember, he has a broken leg. He's had no food or water for like twenty-four hours. It's an amazing story. It takes him two or three days to drag himself over boulders and through horrible terrain. He's completely out of it, hallucinatory by the end. But he just barely manages to make it back before he dies. And his friend had been waiting four days, never thought he was alive, and was just about to leave.

It's really an intense movie, but it really happened. And they have the two guys who did it kind of talking too. But that sense of—you know, the most scary, self-perpetuating experience. Sometimes it's like that. Do we just open into it, or do we just freeze on the crevasse?

And I just want to say: nobody here is freezing on the ledge, because you're still here. And awareness is going. You're not creating awareness. Mindfulness is happening. You're noticing what's happening. You don't have to fix it. You just have to keep being willing to be awake. Everything else is doing itself.

But sometimes that being willing to stay awake is really, really hard. And so we have to find—how do we find that? I don't advocate giving up. We find that way to really make that commitment. And then—and I'm not trying to be discouraging, I'm trying to just be straight—over and over we need to do that. It's not just once. And it's about all different kinds of things.

Even Ajahn Sumedho, who talks so much about having trust and confidence in awareness—that's kind of his thing, he's always talking about it—we were meeting with him, some of the teachers, a couple of years ago. And he was describing a period some years ago at Amaravati, where he's the abbot, where it was an extremely difficult time between all the sangha members—the nuns and the monks and him. And a lot of it, because he was the head and making decisions, he was getting a lot of blame, a lot of criticism. And he said, "My personality hates that. I hate being blamed and criticized." He was just shrinking and fearing it, doing what he needed to do, but a little bit getting caught in it.

And he's always talking about, as I said, having confidence in awareness. And he said—this really went in for me, I don't know if it will communicate to you—he said at some point through this whole process, which went on for weeks and weeks, he realized something. He said, "I just made a determination, an absolute determination, that my confidence is in awareness, not in my personality."

And he knows this and has been talking about it for years. But at this point, in a really heavy time, he called up all his clarity, all his clear intentions, saying, "My confidence is in awareness, not in my personality." Just reminding oneself. We have to keep reminding ourselves. It doesn't go on automatic pilot. And I don't know, somehow that really inspired me.

And so, as I said, I don't mean to be discouraging. It's like the expansion-contraction. We come to a place where we have to lower ourselves into the crevasse. We find that commitment to just open into this next unknown, just wholeheartedly, and let it be what it is. It might be fine for a while, the regular ups and downs. Then we come to another one. But it's not the same us coming to the same place.

Because what I've found in this practice is it keeps going. It may even be harder as we keep going. We're hitting into more difficult stuff that we haven't been able to see before. But it's met with a deeper faith because there's a deeper wisdom, a deeper understanding. Sort of like people say, "I keep coming to seeing these same things I've seen before, but in a different way." It's kind of spiraling deeper and deeper.

I don't know if this helps, but to me, this is kind of like an allegory that helped. A couple of years ago I had the flu for a few weeks, and all I could do was just lie around on my couch, so I was watching a lot of videos. And I ended up watching the Lord of the Rings trilogy again, just all three of them. I'm sure most of you are familiar with it. But what I was so struck by, more than before, was what an allegory Frodo's journey is for our spiritual path, for our practice—how it keeps spiraling deeper and deeper.

So I'm just going to go into it a little bit, if you'll let me. And what are you going to do?

So, in the beginning when Frodo has to take that ring of power and Gandalf the wizard comes and tells him he has to go outside of the little hobbit town he lives in and go to Bree—he's doing that on bright faith, what you'd call bright faith, because he trusts Gandalf.

He doesn't have a clue what's going on in the world, or really what the danger is, or anything. But Gandalf tells him this, and he trusts Gandalf. He thinks it'll be an adventure going outside of Hobbiton. He goes with his friends.

And before he even gets to the little town of Bree, he's already run into danger like he never even knew existed in the world—in his safe little world. These black riders are coming and trying to get them. And they finally get to this place, and he's like, "Oh my God, that was a huge adventure. But finally I can hand this thing off to Gandalf, and I'm done." Right?

And of course, he gets there and Gandalf has disappeared. And he has no clue what to do. There's danger all around. And he has to make the decision to trust some weird guy—he doesn't know who he is. And he does some things that are stupid, and the guy is threatening him, and they almost get killed that night. And finally the guy, Aragorn, says, "Okay, you have to come with me. We have to go to the elves."

So they go out again, and they're really being pursued this time. It's really dangerous, and they're having to actually fight. These little hobbit guys—they never fought. And they're having to actually fight with swords against these huge black wraiths that can't be killed. And Frodo is stabbed. He almost dies. And it's more than he ever could have imagined that he could ever live through or do. And somehow, really almost having no choice, just getting carried along. And finally Aragorn gets them to the elves, and they're in a place of more beauty—like a deva realm—than he never expected, never thought was in the world.

At this point, good and evil are so obvious. The elves are so beautiful. Rivendell is so beautiful. The black riders are so evil—the horses are all foaming. It's pretty clear who's good and who's bad, so far.

So he gets to the elves and he's like, "Oh, I've done the hero's journey more than I could ever do. And now I'm in this more beautiful place." And he meets his uncle, who he thought was dead, and all this stuff. And then it turns out it's just beginning. It's just beginning. And this ring has to be carried to the land of evil to be destroyed. And it turns out he's the one who has to do it. And he has to volunteer to do it. No one tells him he's the one to do it—it becomes really clear.

So at this point, he has a bit more wisdom as to the importance of good and the importance of what he's doing, and also of the threats facing him. So he has more courage than he ever had in the beginning to stand up and say, "Okay, you guys are all arguing. I see I have to do it." Still not really having a clue, but a little more sense that this isn't just a lark.

And then the seven guys come—they're all going to help him, go together. So you have a sense of togetherness. And right away, the leader disappears—Gandalf. And they go through all kinds of more and more difficult stuff until finally one of the company turns on Frodo. And he sees he can't even trust the company he's with. And then he has to make the decision to go completely by himself, off across the river into this land of Mordor—this little guy, no clue what he's doing. But he knows enough now to be scared to death and to know he has no clue. And he's exhausted. He can't trust anyone.

But his faithful companion comes with him, so they go. And it just keeps going from bad to worse. Every day, once they're in Mordor, he has to keep making the decision. They get up off the rocks and the steam, with that slimy Gollum following. How to keep going? It's not a one-time decision, and each time it's harder, but the stakes are higher.

Somewhere along the way it becomes so clear—he really gets it—that he's never going to live through this. At some point it starts becoming clear that the only way he can keep going is because his motivation has shifted to really caring for the world. It's no longer about being the hero or having a lark or not letting down his friends. He's really seeing that for some reason this is where he is, and he has to do this for all beings, basically.

And at the same time as he's going, the evil outside and all the good stop being so separate. The difficulty starts turning inward on him, and after a while it starts eating away at him from the inside. So there's no longer this separation of the evil out there

and the good ones going to do this thing. It's turning in, and the ring is taking over, and he can't see clearly. He turns on his friend, believes the lying voice of Gollum, and is just barely dragging himself up there.

But the only way forward—the harder it gets, the deeper he has to go into his own experience of confusion and delusion and evil and anger and fear. Yet there's still a deeper faith and wisdom that keeps him going, keeps him going, even when he knows he's going to die.

And then even at the very end, when he's going to throw it in, he can't do it all by himself. It really isn't about him doing it by himself. He kept sparing this creature Gollum when his companion wanted to get rid of him, when everyone else wanted to get rid of him. He kept sparing him. And Gollum turned on him and almost had him killed. But at the end, if it hadn't been for that creature coming and trying to take the ring and biting off his finger, he never would have been able to let go.

So you never know. The unknown—you never know.

I just loved that sense of how the deeper you go, the more you see you never had a clue when you started. And it gets harder and harder, more and more touching us internally. It takes so much more courage. But the courage is there because the faith is stronger, because the wisdom is deeper. That's how our practice keeps going. Our life keeps going like that. And for each of us, it's going to take a different turn. We never know which turn is around the corner for us—how to keep finding the wisdom, the courage, the humility.

Just remember that it's different for everyone, and it's hard for everyone. Buddhadasa likes to talk about Nibbana for everyone. But it's hard for everyone. When we get too lost in hitting our own wall, just widen your gaze a little and realize this is just this particular personality representative of all beings. This is my difficulty I'm coming up against, but it's just representative of all beings in all our different ways. Can I, just for this moment, find the courage to open into it again?

I want to end with an example of how it's hard for all beings and we don't know, we never know what manifestation our path is going to take—how our deepening wisdom and compassion and courage and difficulty is going, what direction it's going to take us, how we're going to show up in the world. There's no template of how you should act or how we should live or how our awakening should manifest. But it does.

Some of you may have seen this film called *Blessings*, about Tsoknyi Rinpoche and some women going to see some nuns in Tibet—the Nuns of Nangchen—whom Rinpoche had been kind of responsible for. They traveled to this remote area of Tibet, just in the

last couple of years, where there had been a series of forty nunneries with all these nuns doing really heavy-duty practice. During the Cultural Revolution, all forty nunneries were destroyed. The nuns had to disperse. Some were killed. Some went back to their families or regular life. Some were sent to work camps. A few went way, way higher up into caves in the mountains and just did their practice in hiding.

But for all of them, it was really tough times. Starvation. The ones who went back to their families had to act like normal people and be like secret yogis. They couldn't show that they were practicing, but they were committed. Very tough, horrible conditions, a lot of starvation, a lot of difficulty.

Just in the last few years, they've been able to start coming out. The nuns who were up in the hills have started coming down. The ones living with their families have started coming back out.

And by hand, they're rebuilding nunneries to live in. The film showed this, and it's pretty intense—they're dragging all these materials up huge mountains. I can't even imagine the suffering they had to go through. That was their particular path.

But I just want to leave you with this image from the very end of the movie. They go up to meet what they say is one of the oldest of the nuns, the one they think is the most realized. They climb up to some little hut where she agrees to see them.

She looks ancient—ten million lines in her face. She's had a really hard life. She could be 120, or she could be 35, who knows? She'd been through starvation. She was lying down; you couldn't tell if she was actually disabled and had to lie there or if she was just resting. And she was just spinning her prayer wheel.

And of course, since she was the oldest, most realized nun, her eyes were filled with light. Her face was filled with light. She's just spinning her prayer wheel nonstop. It seems like she lies there all day spinning her prayer wheel. She said, "My mind—all that's in my mind is just prayers for the happiness and well-being and freedom from suffering of all beings."

I thought, wow. What a way to spend your day. What a way. Who knows how her circuitous path took her there, buried somewhere way up in Tibet where nobody knows. And she's just there, every moment of the day, spinning her prayer wheel and sending out prayers for the well-being of all beings.

We never know. But stuff like that helps me refine my commitment. When I feel like I can't do it—we can do it. Because we don't have to do it. It does itself.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 57

An Unhesitating Generosity

Carol Wilson · 16 min

In this intimate conversation, Carol Wilson reflects on her transformative visits to Burma over many years and how encountering the country's rich Buddhist culture has profoundly shaped her understanding of the Dhamma. She describes how the meditation traditions taught at IMS—stemming from Mahāsī Sayādaw, U Ba Khin, and other Burmese masters—are just one facet of a broader spiritual culture where dāna (generosity), sīla (ethical conduct), and mettā (loving-kindness) are woven into daily life.

Carol offers moving descriptions of the nuns she has come to know in various nunneries throughout Burma—from large established communities where nuns study for years to pass the rigorous Dhammācariya examinations, to tiny startups where two or three nuns build their own dwellings while caring for orphaned girls. Despite living under an oppressive government, these women manifest what Carol calls "unhesitating generosity"—a reflexive kindness extended equally to strangers and friends that she finds deeply purifying to witness.

The conversation illuminates how meditation practice, while precious, exists within a larger ecosystem of supportive conditions. Carol reflects on how Western practitioners often encounter the Dhamma primarily through meditation instruction, without the cultural context that naturally cultivates qualities like generosity and loving-kindness. She speaks of how Burmese people—taxi drivers, young families, elderly nuns—embody a reciprocal generosity that isn't calculated but flows naturally from the heart. This teaching offers a valuable reminder that awakening is supported not only by formal practice but by the cultivation of dāna, sīla, and bhāvanā as an integrated way of life.

An Unhesitating Generosity

As many of the yogis here probably know, some of the forms of meditation that we teach come from Burma. Goenkaji, my first teacher, was coming from a tradition out of Burma—U Ba Khin, who was Burmese. Mahasi Sayadaw, U Pandita, Sayadaw U Janaka—they're all Burmese, coming from a form of meditation that Mahasi Sayadaw began.

But for many years I wasn't interested in going to Burma. When I did go to Burma to do a retreat for myself, it was in 2001, I think. So I wasn't going anymore looking for the tradition or the lineage. Something just drew me to go do a retreat in Burma.

And it completely took me by surprise and crept up slowly. But there's some way that after I spend time in Burma, my heart and mind feel a little bit purified. I come back often uplifted. There's really a sense of being cleansed out, and I did not understand that for a long time because Burma is a very conflicted country. It's a country of great opposites.

What I've come to see is that what uplifts me and purifies me is being in this field. The nuns, the monks, and many of the lay people that one comes in contact with are filled with a kindness, an unhesitating generosity—to strangers, to friends. It doesn't have to be that you're someone coming to meditate. It could just be the guy who's driving the taxi. There's just this mettā-full generosity and kindness.

And at the same time, the government is violent and brutal. Everybody in that country has to deal with that on a daily basis. It colors, it invades, it intrudes on everybody's life. So everyone is living in the face of compromises with a really brutal government that does nothing for the people—compromises and ways of finding ways around it, how to take care of each other. They really have to take care of each other because the government doesn't. And personal compromises that you don't hear about but that you know people are having to make.

There's no way anybody escapes that ugliness, that brutality, that fear on a daily basis. And it's not something that's shared. That's not what you see. It's taken me years to start to even feel into it. I still have no clue how much that's coloring people's lives. We can't imagine it sitting here safe and secure in Barre, in our middle-class, seemingly safe world.

And so many of the people that one comes across—I think it's seeded by the nuns and the monks. I think it's seeded by Buddhist ways of looking at life. But it's actualized in how people meet you: with the friendliness, with the kindness, with the generosity, with having so much faith in goodness and faith in meditation practice, faith in practicing mettā and sharing that with each other.

You don't notice it at first. Our mind can see some of the practices as being too faith-based, simplistic, ritualistic. But you start to see how it affects people's lives on a very deep level—their psyches, their hearts.

I know I'm not alone in this experience. Many people I know come out feeling, "Wow, I just feel so much more willing to be kind, to be generous, to have mettā for people." It just is contagious. So that's the best I can say as to why I keep going back.

One of the things that I've gone back to in Burma year after year is in fact visits with the nuns in various monasteries. Burma is basically a traditional Buddhist country. It took a few visits, because the first couple of times I just went to a meditation center to meditate. Usually those are run by a Sayadaw who is a monk, and there are monks there. There would be nuns practicing as well, in general. The more you go to Burma, you see monks all over the place—although less obvious in Yangon after their troubles a couple of years ago. And nuns in their beautiful pink. You just see them everywhere on the streets.

And if you go up to Sagine, where I went for a few years to help teach a retreat at Chazwa, there are hundreds of monasteries and nunneries—and they're different. Monasteries and nunneries for the nuns. They generally keep separate, though meditation centers can bring them together. But generally nuns will be in their own nunneries, and each of them is very different from the other. There's not just one way.

For example, just around the area in Yangon near Shwe Oo Min and Chanmyay Myaing, two meditation centers where I've spent a lot of time, there are probably twenty, twenty-five, maybe more nunneries within a couple of miles. Some of them are rather large, with twenty or thirty nuns, established for a few years. Some are very small, like startups—two or three nuns building a place by themselves, bricking it by themselves, putting up the bamboo walls by themselves. And as soon as they get it going, they bring in several small girls who become nuns, whom these older nuns, who have done some studying, then educate. They really take them on, take them in.

Many of the nunneries consist of a few older nuns and a lot of young girls who are either very poor or orphans, or some who just want to be nuns from the time they're young. Others, like those up in Sagine, are older, more established. There's one right next door to where I used to teach, and I know the nuns there pretty well. I was just talking to one this year, my friend Yuzina, and she told me the building had been there over a hundred years. There were forty-two nuns there. She herself is very bright, very with it, with a great sense of humor. She's been there since she was seven. She wanted to be a nun from that age, and her parents didn't want her to, but she talked them into it. She's been in that place since she was seven. You'd think she'd be really isolated and out of it, but she's very savvy, very together. She's in her late thirties now.

There are forty-two nuns there, and now that she's older and has finally passed her Dhammacariya—which is a very difficult period of study that takes years and years—she's become quite accomplished. Many of the nuns are study nuns. They don't meditate as much; they study a lot. She will have studied for years and years to learn Pali and Burmese to pass this exam. And at the same time, she's getting up early, doing the

chanting, doing the cleaning, doing the cooking, spending two full days a week going out on alms round where they receive raw rice and a little bit of money. They have gardens—this huge amount of work alongside this intensive study. Then once they finally pass, which is extremely prestigious and hard, they start right away teaching young nuns. I noticed there were a lot more young nuns there this year because she passed her Dhammacariya last year.

There are also huge places in Sagine, in Mandalay, in Yangon that are more established, where the nuns focus more on studying. There are places where nuns go specifically to meditate. And then there are tiny nunneries with just two nuns, really poor, hardly having anything to eat. You don't always know if they became nuns because there was nothing else to do—and I will say that's part of how it impacts their lives. Or perhaps they just don't happen to have the support, because many nuns don't. Yet they still manifest this generosity, devotion, kindness, friendliness—completely dedicating their lives to taking care of these young girls. It's really so beautiful to see. And this is throughout Burma. There must be tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of nuns. They're really part of the fabric of life.

So if we were to take all of this rich experience you've had in Burma and try to understand how it might speak to us—how would you describe that? How would you translate it, if you will? Or can you?

I think partly, for me, you notice I keep talking about the qualities, the broader qualities. I'm not so much talking about meditation, which is of course a huge part. But here, coming up in the West, we learned meditation as part of Buddhism, and it is the jewel. I'm a meditation teacher—it's the jewel of the Dharma. But it's not the all of the Dharma.

I really feel that for me, coming out of this Western system, we needed to bring up the meditation, but it doesn't have a culture to rest in. In Burma, you see that the culture naturally supports, encourages, and brings out the really important qualities that go along with practice: *dāna, sīla, bhāvanā*—generosity, ethical conduct, and meditation. That's resting in the culture. The *bhāvanā*, the meditation, is enormously respected in Burma. You get in a taxi, and some young guy driving you asks, "What are you doing here?"

I came to meditate. And this is a normal experience. "You came to meditate? That's so wonderful. I wish I could meditate, but I have to take care of my old mother." Not said with resentment—just, that's how it is. There's both the respect for meditation and the understanding that you take care of your old mother with love. You're generous. You take care of people.

You have nothing. There are poor people, and you offer them something out of dana. Or you offer the nuns something. There's not so much a sense of greed. The nuns will stand and chant metta to the people who've given, and I have seen this happen—people are crying from being so touched by the gratitude, the blessings. The nuns are really blessing you for your generosity, hoping that this will be the cause for your awakening, inspiring metta. You leave feeling a million times better than when you went in to offer the thing. You think, "Who's giving what to whom?"

I don't feel that we have quite learned how to manifest that yet. And it's so natural there. And it's not just with nuns. I know young families that some of us have come to know over the years, and we might offer them some support. There is one family we offered support to this year—a young family, just some money. We have a long-term relationship with them. The next day they show up. I mean, often there's not money for food, but they will always show up. They arrived with huge bouquets of roses to give us, just out of such happiness. You just always reciprocate. And it's not like a tit-for-tat, "I should." It's an expression. You can feel the metta. You can feel the dana. And it just reverberates through the culture.

So I feel, for me, it's really broadened and deepened my internal understanding of Buddha Dharma. Of course, I always knew it wasn't just meditation—and sila, ethical conduct, of course. But there's a way it's more vibrant, more alive. I feel it as a natural, almost reflexive action of mind and heart. Not like, "Oh yeah, dana—that's good. I should give." Or, "Oh yeah, right—moral conduct. Oh, metta—okay, let me try and feel some metta." It's just there.

And people are messed up, and people are greedy, and believe me, there's weird stuff—I'm not saying otherwise. But there's just a way that these qualities are so much more seeded in the culture, among good people, and it has affected me deeply. I'm trying to find how to bring that more into my own life and teaching.

I know when I'm teaching a retreat, sometimes if I give a talk educating about dana as the movement of the heart—which I feel as a teacher, we feel that—the real educating about dana comes in the face-to-face. You're sharing your love of Dharma. People are sharing their inner practice. That's beautiful. That's dana. People support with finances. That's beautiful. That's dana. We offer. That's dana.

So sometimes on retreat, when I talk just a little bit about a story of this nun or that nun, or some generous person in Burma, I can see it in the yogis. First, I can tell who has been to Burma because they get this look on their face—their face starts to glow. You can see it's touching that place of metta, that place of generosity, the beauty of it.

It brightens our heart and mind. You can see it in the audience. And then often many other people are touched. Stories help, you know.

Well, Carol, just seeing the way they have lit up your eyes and inspired you, obviously there's something very powerful that's there. And I do hope that you'll find a way to tell their stories, to learn their stories, to tell them, and that it has the same impact on the rest of us as you transmit those stories to us.

So thank you for taking the time with us. We really appreciate it. I hope it was helpful in some way.

CHAPTER 58

Awareness Is The Path

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this profound talk from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson illuminates how awareness—not any particular experience or state—constitutes the very path of practice. Building on Joseph Goldstein's teaching about mindfulness and clear knowing (sampajañña), she explains that all Vipassanā methods exist simply to support our recognition of and trust in the luminous quality of awareness itself. The Buddha's teaching that the mind is naturally luminous, only temporarily colored by visiting attachments (kilesā), turns our ordinary assumptions on their head: the peace and ease we seek is what's actually natural, while greed, hatred, and delusion are adventitious visitors.*
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> *Wilson grounds these teachings powerfully through her experience visiting the Dachau concentration camp memorial, reflecting on how the same mental forces we observe in small moments on retreat—fear, greed, denial, wanting things to be different—can manifest with devastating consequences when unexamined. She draws on Einstein's description of our sense of separateness as an 'optical delusion of consciousness' and the four agati (wrong courses of behavior caused by desire, hatred, delusion, and fear) to show how these mental qualities literally distort our perception of reality.*
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> *The practical instruction is both simple and demanding: rather than trying to change our experience, we turn toward awareness itself. Through Ajahn Chah's teachings on sati, sampajañña, and paññā, Wilson shows how wisdom (paññā) arises naturally and inevitably when we stop feeding reactive habits and instead nourish awareness. The suffering in any moment—whether physical illness or emotional struggle—dissolves not through fixing but through the simple recognition: 'It's like this.' As Ajahn Chah says, saṃsāra and nibbāna are like the front and back of the hand, known by the same awareness.*

Last night Joseph was talking about mindfulness, the difference between just being in the present and mindfulness, actually knowing clearly what's happening in this moment. The difference between awareness and just kind of hanging out.

In some ways, all the different techniques, the different methods that we've offered here—and there are many, many more—all the methods of Vipassana are not about trying to create some better state or to make you good meditators. They're all methods to support, to enhance our recognition, our familiarity, our trust in awareness itself, in the purity of awareness. The way we come to understand how our minds work, as Joseph talked about, is not by sitting down and figuring it out and making charts and graphs,

though God knows that's been done enough. It's by the moment to moment, absolute surrender with total commitment into awareness of whatever happens to be arising right now.

So in a way, awareness, mindfulness with clearly knowing, is the path. Not even talk about goal—but moment to moment, it is the path. Awareness that is mindfulness is all about the attitude, what qualities are in the mind, in the consciousness at the moment with awareness. This is really what I want to talk about.

We're not here to cultivate a particular experience. I mean, you might be here to cultivate a particular experience. And maybe you'll get it, and maybe you won't. And then if you do get it, you'll find out it really didn't matter. It came and it went. And then here we still are. Here we still are with—I don't want to say task, that's the word that comes to mind, but that's not inspiring enough—here we are with the joyful and at times daunting and vast life path of exploring the nature of reality, the nature of suffering, and the nature of peace and freedom. We find that the recognition, the understanding of both—freedom and suffering—is right here, right now, in what's arising in this moment, in how it's observed through the quality of the purity of mind of awareness or through the confused, deluded mind. And we take turns experiencing one or the other.

That's what we're studying. We're studying the deluded mind, as Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche said once, and we're studying the awakened mind. It's not like all the delusion is here and somewhere else is the awakened. It's back and forth, back and forth.

We're here to reintroduce ourselves to—there's no "our," of course—our own awareness, just the natural, pure knowing quality of mindfulness. When the knowing faculty, when consciousness is not colored by, when we're not identified with the qualities of confusion, of wanting, of craving, of ill will, of fear. They could even be present, but not when we're identified with them.

When purification of mind or cultivating the pure heart or mind is spoken of, I used to not like that term because it brings up all that pure, impure, good, bad. But if I think of pure as squeaky clean—which is how someone once in an interview described it to me. She'd had some moments of just this really pure moment-to-moment awareness, and that's how she described how the experience felt, just like the mind and heart is squeaky clean. Whatever is arising is just this. Nothing in excess and nothing lacking. Just this, with wholehearted presence.

This is not some unattainable, esoteric state up on Mars somewhere, because something that really makes this whole path workable for me is the understanding, the knowing that there's only moment to moment arising and passing experience, that there's nothing that lasts for more than a fraction.

Knowing that, what we call "my mind at this moment, my mind filled with greed"—have you had that experience at all of your mind being filled with greed? Yes. And how one might characterize it: "I'm such a loser. My mind is filled with greed." That's become very solid, very temporal, lasting in time, and something really difficult that we have to do a lot of stuff to change—to become a person whose mind is not filled with greed. Of course, the trouble is really as long as I'm a "person who," that's really the source of it. But we'll get there later.

If you notice, in that moment what's happening is that in a moment of what we call mind or consciousness, this knowing quality arises in a moment. And all different mental states or mental factors come and go with it. So a moment of greed is really that: a moment of consciousness, a moment of other mental factors. Coming together in that moment, there's also greed. That doesn't mean it's a steady state. Now, if we get attached—"Yeah, I do want that, I do need that, let's really crank it up"—well, that moment of greed strengthens the next moment of greed. But it's very cause and effect, very rational. If with awareness we notice, "Oh, greed feels like this," what's being fed in that moment? Not the greed.

In that moment, the interest, the attention, the ardency, if you will—the love—is going into the awareness. Wow, awareness of greed. Greed feels like this. And greed doesn't last so long in that moment because it's not being fed. The awareness, the mindfulness gets stronger. And you might very well discover the next moment is a moment of just this. And then the next moment is, wow, I had a moment of no self and no greed—I want another one! And then there's a moment of greed. That's how it goes.

How can we take this personally? And yet we do take it personally—that's why we're all suffering here. We react to each of these moments: Oh, what does it mean about me? I'm so bad. I'm so good. I'm so liberated. I'm so lost. It's exhausting. It's a moment of greed, a moment of pure mind, a moment of delusion. I mean, it's not so clear cut, I realize that. But it's not unattainable. That's what I'm trying to say.

And our path is this ardency Joseph talked about last night—of total commitment, of interest. I like to use the word love, really. Love of awareness, of this process of just being willing to be totally here and see what's happening without our interference. It sounds easy. We know it's not, because we are schooled to interfere. We're schooled to

think that somehow we can fix it, that we can decide to be a better person, that we can decide to stop being greedy. We know that doesn't work, right? Because if it worked, we wouldn't have to come do this. But we don't really know it doesn't work.

So as Joseph said last night, what we're doing here—we're quite privileged to have this opportunity. Privileged also in that we're interested, that we care enough to explore this way. Because, as you already know, it's not always enjoyable or easy. It really requires, in some ways, the strongest commitment of our life. Because everything's included. Everything. There's nothing outside of this exploration. How can there be? Because in each moment, everything is here. That's all there is. Anything we try to exclude is delusion pushing away the reality of the moment.

So we're privileged. And it is somewhat rare. But what I really wanted to get to tonight is that it may be rare, but it's not some esoteric thing that's somehow divorced, separated from the way we live our lives, from the way everyone lives their lives in the world. What we're watching and learning about—hopefully—and suffering from and feeling joy with in our own minds, here in little things, is the exact same processes that go on in all human minds. Which is both beautiful and, to me, extremely frightening.

I think Sally read from the Dhammapada. I just wanted that last line: with our minds we make the world. This world, this whole world—with our minds, we make the world.

This summer, I was in Munich for a few weeks, and I was there longer than usual. So I had time to do something that I've wanted to do for many years but never had the personal time to do: to visit Dachau, one of the concentration camp memorial museums from the Nazi wartime. This was for me a really powerful experience. Grounding—very grounding—and unexpectedly so. It kind of brought me home even more deeply than usual to the vastness of the human mind, the vastness of what we're doing here, and the reality of what the mind can create in the world. It aligned me with what's really important in this world, and how completely out of whack the world can get.

And it's not just about concentration camps in the Nazi time. I don't have to even run through the list of things—I'll mention some in a minute.

But the site is actually a really quite lovely park, and it's really big. That's one thing that surprised me. There's a couple of buildings that are still standing, and in one of them, they made a museum. I think they did a really good job. It's just lots of big bulletin board placards with different information—different aspects of Dachau all through the years—and really very broad, almost too much information to take in because it was room after room.

But the way they did it that I thought was so skillful was that they'd give an overview—maybe medical testing, maybe that one was about that—and they'd give an overview, but they always made it individual. There was always a picture of some particular people. It would say their names. It would say a little bit about them. Whether it was a guard or whether it was an inmate, there was a way that it made it—you couldn't just say, "Oh, it's some vast other thing over there." It's a really individual person, after person, after person.

I think that's what grounded me in what's really important in this world, in this life, and not in some kind of la la la, "Oh yes, compassion is the natural state of the pure mind." I say that all the time. In a place like that, looking at the vastness of how many people were involved, I can't just so easily go, "Well, as soon as you see how much suffering aversion causes in your own mind, the wisdom naturally arises and compassion is there." I mean, I do believe that. I have experienced that. But that's rather glib in the face of whatever we might be confronted with. And we never know what we're going to be confronted with in life.

So when I say the vastness beyond the individuals—that's why I thought the museum's approach was so wise. Because otherwise, you just get lost in the bigness.

Out behind, there were just the foundations where other barracks had been, but they were gone, so it made it like a nice park. It was huge. I don't know, twenty or thirty barracks had been there. And when I came back into Munich and talked to friends, they all said, "Oh, that wasn't even one of the big ones." And that just—I don't know—it made it all more real.

In my life, I've done tons of reading about the whole gulag system under Stalin, a lot about Chechnya, Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, racism and sexism and bigotry in this country. I mean, you can look around anywhere. It's not a one-off. And when you look and see how many people and individuals were involved, there's no way my mind could say, "Oh, these are just the bad, weird people. These were all monsters." Can't be so. So many people involved in so many ways—they have to be pretty much regular folks, most of them.

And it makes me look in myself. I don't know what I would do if I was in a situation where each person has to make, in some situation, a small choice. We can make choices from greed, from fear, from denial, from looking around—"Well, everyone else is doing it, it must be okay." Or the denial where we just don't see what's too painful to see. I'm sure you've recognized that in your own personal experience. And you can't see it till you see it. You can't talk your way out of it. Or fear, or wanting to protect someone, or being afraid of losing something. Who knows?

And each decision might be as good as one can make, not knowing how to work with greed or fear or denial. We don't know what we'd do in a situation.

It makes me think of a book I read a few years ago by a doctor named Hassan Bayev. He's a Chechen, and he had come back from Russia—he's a surgeon—during the height of the war between Chechnya and Russia, to just work in the hospital. And he was the only surgeon in all of Grozny, doing operations on people from both sides of the conflict, for some years.

It's quite a story. Because he wasn't taking sides—even though he said, "I'm a Chechen, I'm a patriot, but I'm a doctor first"—things became very intense. The name of his book was *The Oath*, the oath being his oath as a doctor.

I don't have time to get into it anymore, but the thing I always remember him saying was that his oath was to cause no harm, to help as a doctor. And he said, "I was in a situation I'd never been in. I'd never held a gun. I'd never been in the face of violence." He was threatened and attacked from both sides. And he said, "When you're in a situation you've never been in before, you don't really know ahead of time how you're going to act, how you're going to respond."

I really can relate to that. I don't know how I would respond.

Somehow, being in Dachau and connecting with all these other strands of study grounded me in a way that actually gave me a stronger sense of commitment to this path and commitment to understanding our mind. I saw even more profoundly the strength, the power of these habits in our mind—of fear, of greed, of wanting power, of ill will, of aversion. So much of that impulse to get rid of a whole group of people comes out of fear of the other, out of wanting something the way it used to be. Doesn't that sound familiar?

Seeing the vastness of it, rather than getting completely discouraged, was like: yes, let's get real about this. I know that we don't have to be driven by these forces. It's possible to be filled with anger, filled with fear, filled with greed, and really feel it and not act in that way. But the only way this is possible isn't to have some idea that I want to be a good person and won't act from anger anymore. I tried that one. The only way is by really knowing—fearlessly—how greed and hatred and anger and fear work. How do they arise in our mind and heart? How do we experience them? How strong can they be? What's the effect of acting on them? And the only way we can know that is by being so interested, with awareness, with kindness, that we just sit back and watch it all happen here.

Granted, we're in a situation where we're not going to be challenged in a life-threatening way. We are in a special situation. The situations that come up where we feel filled with fear and filled with greed are not going to be as intense as being life-threatened or having your family threatened. But that doesn't make the way these habits work in our mind any different.

So don't just say, "Oh well, I'm filled with greed, but it's just about wanting another helping for lunch, and it ran out, so I'm just a greedy person." Sit down. Don't judge it. Watch how it's about a stupid thing, but that's not the point. Watch how strong it can get. The greed can be so strong that even though I have the full intention to be fully present with "oh, greed is like this, greed is like this, I'm feeling it in my body, I'm noticing the thoughts"—suddenly I'm out in the parking lot with my car keys thinking, "Where can I go get some ice cream?" How did I get here? I think greed was kind of the intention. But then at least, thank God, I noticed it.

So it's little. And it's okay that it's little. But the force of how these habits work is working in the same way.

And seeing how even an example like that—the greed, or the not getting what we want, really. If there's greed and then we can get what we want, we don't have to actually look at how much suffering there is in the greed, because we got what we wanted. That's how samsara works. You want it, you get it. You want another thing, you get it. Or you get it, and then it's not doing it anymore, so you want another thing. And you can get that, and samsara just keeps rolling.

But you don't get it, and you're stuck here on retreat, so you can't really distract yourself. You have to just sit there and feel: greed feels like this. Then you start to see why most people don't want to look at greed.

Better to act on it than feel it. My god—talk about masochism. And greed is nothing compared to how much suffering there is in hatred and fear. Greed gets under the radar, though. Don't kid yourself if you're a greedy type rather than an aversive type that you're somehow better. Don't kid yourself. It gets under the radar, and you think, "Oh no, everything's just nice." Everything's just nice until you can't get that thing. Then you're in trouble.

So what we're doing here, it may be relatively rare, but it's, in my opinion, so important. We can't change anybody else's relationship to their experience. We know that. I mean, within our close intimate relationships, we may not know that—we keep trying

—but you can't. What we can work with is understanding our own. And then that's what we can bring to the world: who we are and how we respond and how we relate. And it does make a difference. So it's so important what we do.

When I was telling some of these guys what I was talking about tonight, they asked, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Oh, you know, awareness and Dachau." That's kind of a leap, isn't it? But I don't think it's a leap. At all, I don't think it's a leap. I think that's what this world is. And what we're doing here isn't just some intellectual, interesting thing we're doing because we have a few months. This is really the heart of freedom and suffering, not only for ourselves, but for what we can bring to the world.

I say that because hopefully when you touch into that for yourself—if you believe it, you don't have to believe it, it's up to you—that gives me, when I remember that, when I believe that, when I know it's true, the courage that it takes to keep waking up into this moment. Because at least fifty percent of the time, it's not going to be a pleasant moment. There are phases when there's more pleasant than unpleasant. But if you think awakening is about getting more pleasant moments and less unpleasant moments, you can throw that idea out the window.

Because that's really where these deep habits come from. It sounds so clinical and technical. How can the sense of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral lead to concentration camps? That's the genius of the Buddha, in my humble opinion—that he was brilliant and obviously had quite a bit of mindfulness, that he could really see this moment-to-moment way the mind was working and the cause-and-effect relationship. But we don't have to be Buddha. We can take what we've learned, and then just take it on trial and look in our experience and see: Is it so? Does this happen for me? As I said, it's on a smaller scale, but it's the same habits. And they're just as strong. So we really need this ardency, this commitment, this courage to show up with this simple, non-judging, committed awareness.

Our path isn't to make ourselves different. Awareness is our path. This pure, simple awareness of what is.

I know you're probably all familiar with this quotation. It just kind of turns things on their head, the Buddha. "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it." And I say the attachments, the aversions, the kilesas, the torments, the distortions of mind. It is colored, this luminous mind, by the attachments that visit it. "This, unlearned people do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really does understand. And so for them, there is cultivation of the mind."

To me, that kind of turns our unexamined assumptions—what I'm calling the unexamined assumptions of the world—on their head. What the robot mind acts on, what the normal world acts on.

Right, get it. Greed is good, right? But if there's wanting, that means you need it. If you get it, you'll be happy. And that's just the normal way of things.

That with unpleasant experience, naturally there's ill will and aversion or anger or fear. What else? Unpleasant is bad, and pleasant is good, right? That's just the unexamined assumption about things. And if something is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, well, we just don't even notice it. That's delusion.

The other aspect of delusion, and again the unexamined assumption, is that basically it's all about me—what we call identification. The pleasantness, we want it because it gratifies me. Unpleasant, ill will comes up because it's not nice for me. And even neutral: I'm bored. I need something to happen. Because it's a little scary if there's not something to react to. Then there's no me to really suffer.

So what this quotation is saying is that the attachments—which I'm calling greed, hatred, and delusion—they visit the luminous nature of a moment of awareness, a moment of consciousness. But they do not touch it, color it, stain it, harm it in any way.

But the kleshas—the greed, the wanting, the aversion, the fear, the me, me, me—are basically so much louder, you could say. So much more obvious. We're so much more trained to give all our interest and energy to that, that that's where we go. We forget to notice: oh, greed is like this. Well, that's not... what good is that? Greed is like this. Give me a break. Ill will. Ugh, ill will feels like this. Yeah, well, something better should be happening than that. We want to get in, focus on the experience, focus on what we can get, focus on what we can get rid of.

Turn around. What we're doing here is turning around and recognizing a moment of awareness, a moment of pure conscious awareness. That's all. It's not about changing the experience. It's just about re-recognizing, over and over and over and over, mindful awareness—and the steadiness as we're doing.

And that's what we're doing here. I'm sure you know that anything we're talking about is trying to support us to actually do this practice. And at first, it's some work, and we forget. And we don't know how to just let awareness notice what's happening. We think we have to do it. That's why it's so exhausting. You're trying to relax and be present with just this. No, not this, this. I'm trying to be present with the breath. No, not

that way, this way, right? No, I don't want to be present. If I was really present, this wouldn't be happening. This would be happening, right? And then you wonder, how come we're all knotted up?

But awareness is awareness—of what doesn't matter. Whatever's arising does not stain or color or tear or damage awareness or mindfulness in any way, in any way. That's what's turning it on its head, so to speak. Because the moments of mindful awareness, they're not flashy. Much more subtle than all this stuff that's going on—beautiful, ugly, lovely, whatever.

It's just much more subtle. But available in any moment, regardless of whatever experience is happening—pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Sense of self, no sense of self. Sense of self is just another arising experience in a moment.

So our practice is really to strengthen this interest. That's why Joseph was talking about last night: ardency, clearly knowing, mindfulness. Then whatever is arising—as I was saying, mindfulness is difficult in the beginning—but gradually we learn how to just be here for this moment, be here at this moment, with a little less striving. And you find, magically, the awareness starts to get a momentum of its own. If you're doing metta practice, it's the same. The awareness of the metta starts to get a momentum of its own. And in that more steady—not one hundred percent steady, like Sally said, but more steady—wisdom, paññā, arises by itself.

It's not our job to figure out what wisdom is, how it should arise, and make it come. No way. Because we can only think about what we already know, or what we've heard, or what we think wisdom should be. Actually, it would be helpful if you look in your mind and see what thoughts you have about what wisdom should be, so you know what not to believe. Because any thought is too limited. Any thought is too limited.

So our doorway to wisdom, our doorway, is just this simple, steady awareness that allows for accurate recognition of the way things are in this moment to arise.

The habits of wanting that come with pleasant—we're caught in it, but that's fairly observable, no? At times when the mind is somewhat quiet, we can see we're not really wanting unpleasant experience. Just noticing: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thoughts, moods—they can have a little tinge, as the Buddha said, of being pleasant or unpleasant or neither one to us. We mostly don't notice this. It's a feeling, a mental quality. It's not like a thing in the experience. But we experience any sense experience with just that tinge. It's quick. It's gone. It's very fleeting.

And the habits are so strong that when it's pleasant, the mind just leans in a little bit once more. And that assumption—"Oh, this is right, this is good, this is the way things are supposed to be"—it's just so ingrained.

It can be a little bit unpleasant. A sound just comes. You experience something really strong and shocking, or even just mildly unpleasant. And it's not the same for everybody. It's not the same for any one person all the time. It's changing in every moment. A little bit unpleasant, just the tendency to shrink back a little bit. If it's stronger, a tendency to get rid of it. And if we're really lost in it, it goes into ill will or it goes into fear.

We're not saying you should go and make yourself suffer or hurt. We think, "Of course it's normal. It's unpleasant. It should be gone. That is just the way of things." Of course it's suffering. And in the neutral, we just space out, go to sleep, or look for more intensity, or make up a daydream.

The assumption is that it's these experiences that are in the way of peace or happiness or freedom, right? And I don't have to tell you that we get caught in the same patterns in our meditation. Do I? I talk about this stuff all the time. On a mental level, I really know it, but that's not enough. On a cellular level, sometimes I really know it. And then the times that I don't really know it—because everything is only this moment—I find I'm practicing away, or I'm in my life, and all of a sudden I'm suffering, I'm struggling, and I go, "What's going on?" Then I realize, "Oh, I think this thing shouldn't be happening."

There's a teacher, not a Buddhist teacher, in California—Byron Katie.

She has a great line. She says, "When you fight with reality, you lose." It shouldn't be happening—but it's happening. This is what's happening. Oh, it's like this. And then it's okay.

The block to the freedom, the peace, the ease—the natural peace and ease, this luminous mind—that's what turned it on its head. What if, as Ajahn Amaro says, this luminous mind, the natural peace and ease of mind, is what's really natural? We just don't remember to notice it. And the kilesas, the attachments that visit, that color, that seem to block the natural peace and ease—they're adventitious. They come and go. We don't need to give them all the attention. We can notice them, but come back and turn around and notice the awareness, the natural peace and ease in this moment. We can really learn to shift.

And so when the Buddha says that for those unlearned people there's no cultivation of the mind, you're just like a victim. It's unpleasant—it's bad, what can I do? It's pleasant—I need more, I can't get it, what can I do? And it's all about me. There's no way out of that. But this is offering us a chance to just really turn that on its head and explore.

So the work of our mind, the work of meditation, is to see both how the mind's working when the natural peace and ease is observable, accessible—and when it's not, what's going on? How does suffering arise in the mind? How does it cease? And we can see this moment after moment. When we get caught in hating the suffering and taking it personally and blaming ourselves, we're missing—just in that moment—we're missing: oh, look how it works. But then you're blaming yourself, and suddenly you go, "Oh, blaming myself is like this. That's aversion." And here it is again: natural peace and ease available. That's our path.

So the assumptions that pleasant is good, unpleasant is bad, neutral we don't see, it's all about me—they're not subtle. And we do get caught. But in some ways, I think they're easy to recognize. Sometimes they're easy to recognize. It's certainly workable.

But an even more profound and subtle level of the way that these kilesas, these distortions of mind, work when we're not aware of them is that when there's wanting, greed in the mind, and we're not aware of it in a moment of consciousness—when there's fear or aversion and we're not aware that it's there—when there's delusion, confusion, and we're not aware that it's there—it actually colors perception so that we do not perceive what's happening in this moment accurately.

And when we talk about the delusion that it's all about me, that I'm a separate, lasting, temporal entity—it's not like that's an idea we can talk ourselves out of. I bet you've tried. Doesn't work, does it? In fact, the more you think about it: "Yes, yes, I really get it. It's all conditions. It's all just arising. We're all part of the great net of Indra, and there's no separation here. Therefore, from now on, I will just respond with compassion, knowing that we're one." And then, you know, two minutes later somebody gets in front of you in line and you're like, "I can't believe—oh, I'm responding with compassion, responding with—" and then, "Why can't I respond with compassion? I'm so greedy, I'm so deluded, I'm so selfish." And then you're beating yourself up. All this in service of seeing that there's no self, right? Because it comes right back, recycling it all around me, me, me.

Because it's not something we can talk ourselves out of. It's a deeply rooted, moment-to-moment perception—because there's only moment to moment. It's the perception that without wisdom, we don't perceive accurately.

And we can't will ourselves to perceive accurately, because we don't even know we're not perceiving accurately.

This is another really quite famous quotation from Einstein that exactly fits this. Einstein wrote: "A human being is a part of a whole called by us 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. She experiences herself, her thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of consciousness."

It's exactly that—an optical delusion of consciousness that we're something existing in time and space, separate from other things. He continues: "This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for the few people nearest to us." He goes on to say, "Our task is to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

But I will also add that the simplicity and commitment to moment-to-moment pure awareness—when it's possible, and when it's not, in the next moment we remember again—also frees us from this optical delusion, from this prison. Because the prison is a delusion of recognizing wrongly. The genius of the Buddha was to see through this.

I'll give you an example of all the delusions. There's something called the four agati, the four wrong courses of behavior or prejudice, from the Vinaya, from the rules of the monks in the Pali canon. The first is called chandagati, which is prejudice or seeing wrongly that leads to wrong action caused by desire, by partiality. We see wrongly. The desire causes us to perceive inaccurately, that causes us to have prejudice, that causes us to make decisions that aren't based on the way things really are—that limitation, that optical delusion.

Dosagati is the same thing—prejudice caused by hatred, enmity, ill will. Mohagati is prejudice caused by delusion, by not seeing clearly. And the fourth one, bhayagati, is fear—prejudice and wrong action, wrong choices, wrong decisions caused by fear.

When you say it, this is kind of obvious, isn't it? When we're really afraid, really afraid, doesn't everything look fearful? And even if you tell yourself it's not, it's the actual perception. You really can't tell what's what. They say of a Sotapanna, when they have a first taste of awakening, that those four prejudices are seen through.

The genius of the Buddha—mohagati is the one that really underlies all of them—continuing to have that optical delusion of me, the center of everything. Don't judge it, but notice how it acts when it's here, when it's not. How any sense experience immediately becomes "me hearing." Or "What does that sound mean about me?" You see somebody walking in the distance, and right away it's like, "Oh, they're walking better than

me. What does that mean?" Or "They're sitting. Oh, I'm sitting better than them." Or "Oh, that's a really pretty pair of socks. I wish I had them. Oh, I'm so greedy." Me, me, me, me. Just noticing that.

The genius of the Buddha was to see through this. In the moments when there's not that "me and other," when there's just not "me the center of things," there's accurate recognition. It happens by itself. We can't will it, but it happens quite naturally because the perception, the clarity, the awareness isn't colored by confusion. But we can't do it from some ideal, even with the best of intentions.

There's a great story I heard on the radio. They were talking about economic policy and "enlightened self-interest," which as we know doesn't work, but they were using this example, which I loved. I guess it's true that some footbridge had been built recently over the Thames River in London, some big footbridge. Soon after it opened, hundreds of people were walking over it—maybe right after it opened, just getting used to it. I remember the radio said it was like two or three or four hundred people on this bridge. And the whole bridge started to really shake. It was like too many people on this bridge. Of course, everyone got kind of scared. And each person did what seemed like the appropriate thing to do—it was shaking this way, so each person stepped over that way. All four hundred of them stepped over that way, which of course made the whole thing worse.

You're acting from the best of intentions, but it's limited by just "me." And we can't will ourselves out of that. In a moment when there's what sampajañña is—what Joseph was talking about last night, clear comprehension, the whole big context—mindfulness in that context would say, "Oh, what's going on here?"

It's shaking. Some would go that way because it's not this reference point of me, which is our natural reference point. So that's an example of sampajanya and how it happens quite naturally when we're not locked into this optical delusion.

I just wanted to offer this. I read in this great book that came out recently from Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno, who are two Western monks in the Ajahn Chah tradition. They brought out this book—it's a compilation of sutta references and some material from Ajahn Chah. It's called *The Island*, and it's all about aspects of awakening, of nibbana. It's quite wonderful. They've done a great job of compiling all these references. And of course, it's for free distribution if you write to them.

This is from Ajahn Chah talking, in his very pithy, earthy way, about the relationship between sati, sampajanya, and pañña—sati being mindfulness, sampajanya the clearly knowing, and pañña wisdom, which Joseph talked about last night. I liked it. It sort of fits in here.

He says sati is like the hand—like our hand that simply picks things up and cognizes them. Sampajanya, clearly knowing, is like the arm. The arm is what enables the hand to reach for objects, to move objects around. So sampajanya refers to seeing an object in its bigger context, how it relates to its surroundings. And pañña, he says, is like the life source—it's like the body. For him, pañña is the seeing of things in terms of anicca, the impermanent nature; dukkha, the unreliable, unsatisfactory nature; anatta, that there's no intrinsic self-existing separate entity here. Seeing things in that way—that's pañña.

He says that while a hand and arm have their functions, without the body they are powerless. And it's like that with sati and sampajanya. That's what we practice. The pañña—seeing clearly, knowing, seeing through our optical delusions of permanence, of "this thing is going to make me happy," of separate entity—that happens naturally and spontaneously, because that's just the nature of things. We don't have to create it. It's how it is. We're just setting up the conditions where we stop feeding the habits, and instead we feed the awareness. And it allows the Dhamma to reveal itself. In that self-revealing Dhamma, our heart and mind is free.

There's still unpleasant in the world. Don't think there's not. The suffering, though—the suffering doesn't have to be there in that way. And we can experience this just in a moment. Whether you're hurting, or you're down on yourself, or you're just feeling lousy—in that moment, "Oh, feeling lousy is like this." And all that extra just goes away.

Someone was telling me about feeling really sick. When they were trying to be mindful of it, they were really caught—knowing they were caught, feeling kind of reactive to the symptoms and the physical experience, noticing that struggle. And then at another point, they just completely opened into, "Oh, heat is like this. Tingling is like this. Burning is like this." Not even getting put together into a sense of "I'm sick," but just experience. There was no more suffering about it. And then there were even moments when you couldn't even say you were sick. You didn't even feel sick at all. There are moments when you're sick, moments when you're not, and it's just what it is. That's quite knowable for all of us.

This wisdom, to me, is like such a huge relief—to know that with the steadiness of awareness, wisdom is inevitable because nature is how it is. We don't have to create it, thank God. In fact, we only make a mess when we try to create it. All we have to do is settle back, bring our interest, our love, our commitment, our courage, and just let it rip. It's ripping anyway. All we're doing is showing up and being here with it.

Ajahn Chah says, "Be the knower, the knower of experience, not the owner of experience." Just loving the knowing, loving the awareness. It's like a Tai Chi move from being caught in this.

"Oh, it's like this."

That's John Semedo's language. "It's like this." It's helped me so much—in daily life, in meditation, it's the same. You're all caught. You're liking, you're not liking. You can't even say what's happening, but you know something is going on that you wish wasn't. What is it? Oh, I don't know. It's like this. That's all. Stop trying to fix or own or be or figure it out. It's like this. It's really powerful.

So I just want to end with another statement from Ajahn Chah, which I'm dropping in for your reflection. I'm not saying I totally understand it. You'll hear what I mean—just see how you think about it.

He says, in his way: samsara and nibbana are like the front and back of the hand. They happen in the same place and are known by the same awareness.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 59

Mettā

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates mettā (loving-kindness) not as something we must laboriously cultivate, but as a natural expression of wisdom already present within us. Drawing from the Abhidhamma, she explains that mettā is an aspect of adosa (non-hatred), one of the beautiful mental factors present in all wholesome mind states. Rather than being a sentimental emotion, mettā manifests as genuine connection, spaciousness, and the sincere wish for the welfare of all beings without discrimination.*
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> *Wilson shares the inspiring example of Mahā Ghosānanda, the Cambodian monk who lost his entire family to the Khmer Rouge yet dedicated his life to bringing mettā back to traumatized refugees in border camps. She also draws on John Lewis's powerful testimony about nonviolent love during the Civil Rights Movement, demonstrating how mettā enables us to see the humanity in those who oppose us. These examples illustrate that mettā is not passive or blind, but rather allows for clearer seeing of things as they are.*
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> *The talk addresses common obstacles to mettā practice, particularly the near enemy of desire (which masquerades as love but actually reinforces separation) and the far enemy of ill will. Wilson emphasizes that formal mettā practice trains our intention moment by moment, gradually shifting the deep habits of mind that create perceptions of fragmentation and isolation. As the Buddha taught, what we repeatedly think and ponder becomes the inclination of our mind—and mettā practice offers a practical path toward recognizing the immeasurable, connected quality of heart that is our natural state.*

So tonight I want to talk about mettā, loving kindness. There are some reflections about the state of mind as well as the formal practice—making the choice, making the determination for love.

And it's really not so much that we as an individual, which since we know from last night there is no such thing, make the choice for love, but wisdom makes the choice. Mettā is described as not its own particular mental factor, but it's an aspect of the larger mental factor of, in Pali, adosa, which is non-hatred—quite a large mental factor, one of the beautiful factors. So whenever there is a so-called beautiful mind state, a state of wisdom without delusion, a state that isn't colored by any of the kilesas, adosa is always present. It's one of the universals in all beautiful mind states.

So there can be non-hatred, which is clear what that is, but it's not necessarily mettā. But mettā is an aspect of non-hatred. And as such, it's an expression of the heart and mind that's clear from confusion. It's an expression of the heart and mind, the consciousness of wisdom. And so rather than thinking it's something that we somehow have to find a way to cultivate—in this culture we don't really trust it so much, and it's weak, and this and that—it's really more to discover, to learn, to have confidence in mettā, in this non-individual love as a power of mind and heart, as an expression of wisdom. And even though I know probably most of us think it's a good idea, it may not be what we really deeply trust.

Let me just read some of the teachings you've heard a million times, really basic stuff from the Buddha, where he's talking about the power of mettā. It's from the Dhammapada:

"When we hold fast to such thoughts as, 'they abused me, mistreated me, molested me, robbed me,' we keep hatred alive. If we thoroughly release ourselves from such thoughts as, 'they abused me, mistreated me, molested me, robbed me,' hatred is vanquished. Never by hatred is hatred conquered, but by readiness to love alone. This is the eternal law. You too shall pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?"

And then just one last one that I like: "There is no fear if the heart is uncontaminated by the passions and the mind is free from ill will. Seeing beyond good and evil, one is awake."

I really like those, especially that last one, because that's an expression of mettā. We often think it's blind, just seeing the good. But seeing beyond good and evil, one is awake. That's a great expression of the power of mettā in the heart, in the mind.

Really, on a deep level, the work is to keep looking in yourself. I look and I ask, do I really, truly believe that? I mean, believe it in the way that that's where my mind goes when I'm feeling someone has abused me, mistreated me. Though I don't want to hold on to these thoughts—that just keeps me suffering. Intellectually, okay, I can go there. But really, in ourselves?

And so this is why we have a training. It's not that one has to cultivate mettā as the intensive practice, as we've been doing in the afternoons, as the only way to experience it. Of course not. It's a really common everyday experience of our mind and heart. But we can learn to recognize it. We can learn how powerful it is, and we can learn to train our mind and heart to really take refuge here in this wisdom. It's a choice. We can begin with ourselves, begin where we are, and learn how to trust, how to incline the heart and mind in this direction.

I'll give you another example, a current example: Maha Ghosananda. You may know who he was—the Cambodian monk. He died in 2007. Actually, he died in Northampton. He was staying out at the Peace Pagoda a lot during his last few years, in Leverett. He was a Cambodian monk who, during the Khmer Rouge years, just before the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia and began really the genocide of the Cambodian people, happened to be in Thailand studying. So he missed the Khmer Rouge. But they killed all of his family, something like eleven or twelve family members.

After he heard what was happening, there were so many thousands and thousands of Cambodian refugees who had managed to get out of the country, living in refugee camps on the Thai border. And as with Maha Ghosananda, many of the people in the refugee camps had lost everything. But even besides losing everything material, for many people their families had been killed. They'd just been through the killing fields—a horrible situation you can't even imagine.

Maha Ghosananda was really committed to his path of awakening, but he was committed to it from the basis of loving kindness, of mettā. And so, as the story goes, he went into these refugee camps. Over and over, he spent years really trying to bring Buddhism back to the people, because most of them were Buddhist, had grown up in a Buddhist faith.

But again, most of the monks and nuns and temples were destroyed also in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge. So Mahagosananda went into these refugee camps to help in what way he could.

The thing that he did—two things. One, he would go and build a little bamboo temple, just a little bamboo shack for the people to come. And then he would start chanting these metta phrases that I just read. That's what he started chanting. Amazing, isn't it? Amazing. And the people would know this. Most of the people would be familiar with these words. And after some time, it's said, other people would start to chant with him.

He spent years going around giving out copies of the Metta Sutta, the discourse on loving kindness, just trying to revive the goodness in the depths of people's hearts and minds, knowing that that's really our truest nature when the mind isn't clouded. The best way he felt he could help was to reconnect people with metta.

But thinking about it—to go into a situation where everyone is in such a state of loss and trauma and bitterness and fear and grief, and to start chanting, "If you hold on to thoughts that 'he beat me, he robbed me,' then you're not really practicing"—it's really amazing. And he spent years doing this.

When he died, there was an obituary in the New York Times. I just want to read a couple of lines from that. Scott A. Hunt, a professor of Buddhism at the University of California in Berkeley, wrote that "Mahagosananda's ability to forgive those responsible for the murder of his entire family is incomprehensible until one heard his explanation of Buddhism." Mahagosananda said—and this is written for non-Buddhists—that he "does not question that loving one's oppressors, Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge, may be the most difficult attitude to achieve." But he then added, "It's the law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle." Reconciliation, he continued, "means that we see ourselves as the opponent. For what is the opponent but a being in ignorance? And we ourselves are also ignorant in many respects."

Just an example. It's a high bar, you could say. I realize it's a high bar. So don't let your mind go into "Well, it's hopeless." It's a high bar. But this is someone who's been living in this world as it is, in some of the worst ways that it is, and knowing deeply that metta as an aspect of wisdom is really the deepest expression of wisdom—how we can live with ourselves and with each other as human beings.

I'm bringing up this high bar on purpose just to let it get in, to let ourselves—not in a judgmental way at all—but just to really explore in ourselves over these days: Do I really have any confidence, any faith, in the power of love, of non-hatred, of kindness as an aspect of wisdom?

Again, this really has to be approached without judgment. Not "Well, if I really had faith, I'd never feel aversion again. If I really had faith, I'd go around loving all the time." Not that kind of stuff. But just seeing if somewhere in the background—way, way back—there are beliefs operating that, well, loving kindness is nice, but when the chips are down (that's an American expression that means when the going gets tough), then one needs to get tough. Is that what one believes? When the going gets tough, when the chips are down, I need my anger. I need fear. That's the best protection. Of course, we're not going to say "Oh, yeah." But just look at what's operating in the background sometimes.

And so as a formal practice of metta, as an intensive practice, but also just inclining your mind to recognize the qualities of metta in your vipassana practice—we do this as a way to really see for ourselves. To move from the concepts of loving kindness and wisdom ("It's nice, it's good, yes, I'm committed to it") to the deep experience on the insight level of both how loving kindness can manifest in my mind—in relation to the beautiful, in relation to the difficult, in relation to the boring—and also what gets in the way. A lot of our exploration in practice is learning what habits block my recognition of loving kindness, of connectedness.

So it's not that we actually have to create so much as just begin to trust, to uncover the possibility of this natural state of mind—this connectedness, this caring for others, this friendliness.

So I just want to talk a little bit about what the heck is it anyway? What is metta? Just some descriptions.

As it's described in the Abhidhamma, metta is an aspect of non-hatred—a very powerful wholesome state. We talk a lot about hatred, we talk a lot about greed, we talk a lot about delusion, but they have their opposite wholesome states: non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. These are factors of heart and mind that are actually more powerful.

Metta manifests as the sincere wish for the good and welfare of all, without discrimination. It's not personal love. It's not personal affection. It's not any kind of sexual love or affection. It has an aspect of inclusion, meaning not these people but not those people—that's not metta.

And again, as I said before, I really like to recognize that everything is just moment to moment. So I don't have to think that my mind and heart need to be filled with all-embracing, cosmos-pervading metta all the time before I can begin to have a sense of what it might be. That's possible—the Buddha talks about that, and I'll read that in a minute. But you don't have to wait. And it's not helpful to denigrate or put down what arises: "Well, maybe that was metta, but it really wasn't very good or very strong. It was a little bit of caring for all beings, but not really vast. It's not good enough." That wasn't metta talking, that line.

In a moment of metta, you can just really feel it. It doesn't have to be this incredible emotional state. In fact, it doesn't have to be an emotional state at all. But it's a quality of heart and mind that's inclusive. Whatever the attention turns to, the proximate cause, the immediate cause for a moment of metta to arise in consciousness, is seeing the good—seeing the lovableness in anybody. Then in that moment of metta, the mind just opens and connects with the whole of what it sees.

To me, the essence of metta is really connection. Not a kind of holding back, and not saying, "Well, this part is good, but let's not look at that over there." So the proximate cause for metta to arise is seeing the lovableness in a being. But then when the attention turns to that being, the metta spreads out and includes everything—a being out here, or even a being in here.

Metta is inclusive, connected, very simple, and non-judging. It discards ill will. Ill will is the far enemy, you could say. When there's metta in the mind, there's not ill will in the mind. They don't coexist.

Metta also has the quality of spaciousness. The example often given in the suttas is this: if you had salt and you put it in a cup of water, you'd have extremely salty water. But if you take a spoon of salt and put it in the pond around there, you don't even notice it. So the quality of mind of metta is just spacious, including, not causing trouble about anything, not pushing away and not saying, "Yes, I need this." Just connected, inclusive, spacious, kind, not discriminating. And it's really normal and natural.

The example I always use, because it just really works for me, is this: if you walked out here and you saw two little kids, three-year-olds, playing with each other, laughing and bouncing a ball, what would be your normal feeling? Assuming you're not in a really aversive yogi mind, and it's just a normal day—you walk out, the kids are laughing, they're cute or they're not cute, but they're just little kids. It's like, ah, don't you wish them well? It's just appreciated. It's not rocket science. It's not some big esoteric state that you have to crank up intensive meditation for three months to feel. You just walk out and go, "Oh, yeah." You may not say, "May you be happy and peaceful, may you be safe and protected," but you feel that sense of how the mind and heart just expands, connects, includes all of them, all of the kids.

And it's not blind. It doesn't mean you can't act. So the kids are playing. And if, as happens with three- and four-year-olds, they go from being friendly to getting into a fight, and one of them picks up a big stick and starts hitting the other one over the head, you don't go, "Oh, aren't they cute, la la la." You also don't go, "Well, I hate them. Look at those kids. They're so horrible."

You kind of take the stick away, out of metta, right? You still have this sense of appreciation, friendliness for the little kids. That's metta. It sees the whole situation with friendliness, with inclusivity. It acts appropriately, but your mind and heart isn't troubled. You're not filled with rage and hatred because, "Oh no, look at that! You can see the evil of human nature right there." One could go there, but that wouldn't really be the choice.

So metta is not rocket science. And on that simple level, we all know it. This is the simple level we bring to our own experience. Acceptance is a huge aspect of metta, just what Melanie spoke about the other night. This quality of simply bringing all our attention right here, whatever's happening, seeing it clearly without adding anything extra, without adding hatred, without pushing away. So that's an aspect of our Vipassana practice as well.

But metta—all the wholesome states, but especially all four Brahma viharas: metta, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity—all four of them can become really unbelievably powerful forces in the heart, in the mind. And you can sometimes even feel it. You almost feel like you've walked into a metta field around certain persons, or sometimes at the end of a metta retreat when people have been practicing metta for a week together. You can kind of feel it.

There's a quiet, lovely Sayadaw, a Burmese monk and teacher in Sagaing up in the hills that we usually go to visit—U Jayanta. He doesn't speak English, and he seems very simple. His monastery is small. It's always impeccably clean. There are only ever a few monks there. We go up to visit him every year. I love it. And I've told him this, because I just feel the sense of metta and peace whenever I walk in there, whenever I come and we just talk to him. He's simple, and he remembers us, and loves it if we have a dharma question. There's no big amazing thing going on, but it can just feel like walking into a field of purity, a field of metta, because it touches that in oneself—just living a simple, quiet life.

Although I have to say, my friend Greg, who goes every year too, said that last year his illusions were shattered because U Jayanta was on the cell phone when he walked in. Which doesn't mean you can't have metta. Let's not go there.

But metta can become a powerful force in the mind. This is from the Buddha, describing metta when it's really moving into a force:

"That disciple of the noble ones, thus devoid—or empty—of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unbewildered, alert, mindful, keeps pervading the first direction with an awareness imbued with goodwill, an awareness filled with goodwill. Likewise the second direction, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. Thus above, below, and all around, everywhere, in its entirety, he keeps pervading the all-encompassing cosmos with an awareness filled with goodwill—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, without hostility, without ill will. This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind, the immeasurable deliverance of heart."

So metta is a simple, really accessible, normal and natural state. And it can also, when it comes together with wisdom and real purity in our heart and mind, open into the immeasurable deliverance of mind. It's really extremely powerful. Immeasurable—without measure.

So what does obstruct or hide or keep us from recognizing the measureless quality of mind, of heart? What keeps us in these perceptions Joseph was speaking about last night—the perceptions that seem to lead to and increase fragmentation, separation, limited mind, limited heart, affection for myself and a few? What feeds the fear?

And really, it's not like there's some monolithic thing. Moment to moment, the sense of fragmentation in our heart, in our mind, the sense of isolation, the sense of separation—that perception is created moment to moment. It's not something we're carrying around with us that maybe someday, if we're lucky, will go away. There are plenty of moments when it's not being created. A moment of acceptance without any judgment, presence and awakeness—that's a moment of non-fragmentation, when one can almost intuit the measureless quality of heart and mind. Until we think, "I have experienced it," and boom, measurement is back, limitation is back. Fine. Notice that.

So these habits—the habits of seeking pleasure, the habits of wanting, the habits of fearing the unpleasant, of pushing away, of aversion, of ill will, the habit of shutting out certain aspects of our experience: "I don't want this to be part of me. I don't want this to be happening."

I don't want to know about this. This is undesirable. This basically cannot be happening.

All of these habits—and these are just the ones we talk about all the time—but this is really the essence of why these habits are the source of suffering for ourselves and others. They're creating, in the moment, this sense of insufficiency, of separation, of isolation, of neediness, of fear. And then we believe it. And then we tell ourselves a story that feeds that. And then we act on that. And then we act with somebody else on that. And they respond. And then it just keeps on going, boom, boom, boom.

A friend of mine was just telling me he had been doing a retreat somewhere else, and he came out of it with a big insight into the basically empty nature of thoughts—a lot of what Joseph was talking about last night. He was telling me, "I came out of the retreat and was visiting friends I hadn't seen, and they would say, 'Tell me your story.' And it was sort of like they'd talk to me—all these thoughts, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts—and then they'd hand it to me. And then I'd say my story—thoughts, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts—and hand it to them. And then our thoughts are kind of meeting in the middle, la la la la la." He said, "It's just also nothing. It's just also nothing. We could just sit here and be here together, and that's fine."

So a lot of our practice, our cultivation of metta in the direct way and also through the attitude in the mindfulness, is through recognizing the qualities of metta and also recognizing these habits of mind and perception that feed the sense of limitation, that feed the concept of separation.

They say the word metta has two root meanings. I like both of them. One is *gentle*, and the example often given—very appropriate for today—is that of a gentle rain that's just falling everywhere. You know how it was gentle this morning, just coming down? I love it when it's like that. It falls everywhere in a particular area. Don't go scientific on me. But if the gentle rain is falling, it's not like it says, "I'll fall everywhere, but I'll just miss that lilac bush over there." Just gentle rain on everywhere. It doesn't select and choose.

And the other aspect is *friend*, friendship, friendliness. A true friend is someone who, in happiness and in difficulty, doesn't reject you, isn't envious, doesn't rejoice when you're unhappy, is always present without judgment, without picking and choosing. So these are two qualities of the mind of metta, the heart of metta.

And I really feel that with metta practice and in noticing the metta in the vipassana, it's gentle. There's no way to be with metta other than gentle. You just can't say, "May I be happy" without gentleness. It has to be gentle. And we become a friend—a friend to ourselves, a friend to our minds and hearts, a friend to each other, a friend to the world. We start to see through the perceptions and the habits of mind that feed separation, that are not inclusive.

I'll read you this little story a friend of mine uses and gave to me, from a nurse who said:

"During my second month of nursing school, our professor gave us a surprise test. I was a conscientious student and I went easily through the questions until I read the last question, which was: 'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?' Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired, and in her fifties, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count towards our test grade. 'Absolutely,' said the professor. 'In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say hello.' I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Dorothy."

That's metta.

Whatever's here, it deserves our attention, even if all we do is smile and say hello.

And the subtle habits of exclusion—sometimes they're very subtle in my mind, sometimes they're not so subtle, but sometimes they're very subtle—these habits of exclusion. Whether it's about what's happening internally or externally: "Well, these people are more interesting or more important." Or in some subtle way, "These people don't count," or "I just don't have the time." Just to notice that quality of mind that picks and chooses.

In the formal practice of metta, as we've been doing on the Tuesday afternoons, as some of you are doing more steadily through the days here—Sharon says she'll go to her grave saying this, and I'll say it too. I don't know if I'll go to my grave saying it, but I'll say it: The practice of metta is not about creating and holding on to a great emotional feeling. It's not about holding on to anything. Metta has a wide variety of how it manifests. It's not necessarily about trying to feel anything.

The formal practice of metta is really the practice of training our hearts and minds through the cultivation of thought, the use of attention, to cultivate our intention—the motivation, the movement of mind. As I think Melanie said, that very famous line from the Buddha: what we naturally think and ponder upon becomes the inclination of our mind. Well, metta practice—what is the mind saying over and over and over?

People say, "Well, it's boring." Okay, it's boring. How really fascinating is the other stuff your mind is saying? "May I be happy and peaceful. May you be happy and peaceful" is a lot better. "I don't really feel it." Who cares? Just come back. The intention to say it, the intention to connect with the sense of the person—just that is strengthening the intention, is inclining the heart and mind. And it does have an effect.

Wanting to feel good. Now let me see, does wanting to feel good sound like metta? Does wanting to have a better experience sound like the quality of open, connected, well-wishing for all beings? Or does it maybe sound like wanting, which is the near enemy of metta—which I'll get to in a minute.

Through the cultivation of intention, every moment that we can connect—whether it's with ourselves, with benefactor, with friend, with all beings, with whoever—ultimately it doesn't matter. Because in the moment, whether it's yourself or benefactor, when there's that phrase of wishing well, "May you be happy and peaceful," and you don't feel a huge emotion, but in that moment there's some connection with it, and there's really no ill will in the mind just for a second. I know sometimes you could say the phrase with ill will; I'm aware of that. But we're talking about a time when there's not ill will. In that moment of metta, it's a little metta, but it's metta.

It doesn't really matter whether it's for you or benefactor or whomever, because the moment of metta in itself has this expansive, inclusive quality. It's just that moment of metta—you just feel, "Oh, may I be happy, may you be happy." That's one reason we say start where it's easy, if yourself isn't easy, and come back, because once the metta is there for a moment in the mind, it's easier to include the self or the difficult person.

So we're working through the cultivation of intention to really stop feeding the habits of mind of resistance, of greed, of aversion, of separation—to stop feeding those perceptions and instead to strengthen the intention of well-wishing, the intention of spaciousness, the intention of inclusion. Just very simple, very matter-of-fact, very practical, moment after moment after moment. And a lot of moments, that's not what's happening. Fine.

But every time you're trying to wish well to someone, and your mind goes off—"Well, they would be happy if they'd only do what I said," and "I've been doing this all day"—and you say, "Okay, that doesn't feel like metta," and you just come back, reconnect, say it again: that's powerful. Instead of going on the whole train, you're seeing—maybe you don't use these words—but you're seeing, "Oh, that's the habit, the perception of separation, of not good enough or something lacking. Let me not feed that right now. Let me just come back to: May I be safe and protected."

It doesn't seem like a lot, because we're always looking for some big, juicy something or other. But this is the level, the subtle moment-to-moment level, that is really changing the deepest habits of our mind. When Joseph was talking about concepts last night, I'm sure—well, I'm not sure, I'm not sure of anything—but maybe you got a sense of how fast and subtle the concepts are that give us a sense of self. It's not something we can think our way out of.

So the effects of those concepts are gross and with us a lot. But the creation in a moment of perception and concept is so quick and so subtle, isn't it? And the habit of mind is so quick. So it's the subtle habits of mind that really, in some way, represent the deepest level of freedom and the deepest level of ignorance.

It doesn't always have to be this big blowout experience, but just this willingness, this determination to cultivate friendliness, loving-kindness, gentleness, inclusivity over and over. This is really what we're cultivating here.

And the part we don't like so much is that a big part of the practice—whether it's the formal metta or the vipassana too—is the recognizing, learning to see and understand these habits that get in the way. We've talked about those a lot. I don't want to go into them too much, but just a little bit in terms of metta.

The two biggest habits in terms of metta, of course, are desire or lust and ill will. Desire, or lust, is called the near enemy of metta because it's often confused with, mistaken for metta. It masquerades as metta. It can look like metta—which, when we're really caught in lust or desire and we recognize it, it doesn't actually seem like metta at all, does it? It's kind of surprising that we can confuse lust or wanting for metta, but we can.

One way is because metta, when you're feeling it, when you're just inclining towards well-wishing to someone, it's pleasant. And pleasant, when there's not mindful awareness—when the awareness kind of drops—the habit of mind is to move from pleasant into wanting something, isn't it? Often in metta, it can move into wanting more about the person you're sending metta to. And so then we don't quite recognize it.

"Oh, may you be happy, my good friend." I remember when I was doing metta and would feel so much well-wishing for her and happiness for her. And then these little thoughts would come in: "We really should spend more time together." "Oh, may you be happy." "Really, why doesn't she call me more?" "May you be happy." "Maybe when I get out, I'll call her up. We'll go into town. We'll go to that good restaurant." And then it's not so subtle anymore—you're off. But it's very easy to kind of slip over into that. And when it's connected to the person, we sometimes don't quite see it.

Another way that we can really get into wanting with metta—classically they say it's lust, that you actually get into sexual desire for the person. I think that's actually a lot less common than the wanting something back.

So with metta we can also start wanting the feeling, right? "May you be happy." How do I feel? "May you be peaceful." How's the heart doing? "May you know..." And you're always checking it out. Is it open? Not quite open. It was better yesterday. "May you be happy. May you be peaceful." Maybe if I go slower...

And you have to look and see: What's the motivation right now? Is it metta? Metta is a complete generosity of the heart. Just wishing well for the person. Seeing them, the energy goes out, includes them, spreads out. "May you be happy." Do I feel good yet? Oh, okay. Maybe that's not metta. Just seeing. The near enemy is still bound up. It's still all about me. And you can see that.

The sense of me is still a reference point when we're in the near enemy, when we're in wanting, whether subtle or gross. And that's just something you can really notice.

As I said, when I really look at wanting in its essence, it doesn't look like or feel like metta at all. The essence of wanting, of craving, is separation—I'm wanting something else. It's a sense of insufficiency, of inadequacy, of incompleteness. I need whatever it is

to feel okay, to feel peaceful, to feel happy. We don't say it that grossly, perhaps, but the craving and the wanting itself creates a sense of separation, of insufficiency, and actually increases it, feeds it. The more the wanting there is, the more this sense grows.

When wanting is present in the mind and not seen, that's really the perception that keeps this sense of me and other going. Metta, when there's a moment of metta, that perception of separateness, of insufficiency, of neediness, of inadequacy, is not here. A moment of "just as you are, may you be happy"—just that. There's no sense of "I need something else in this moment." You're not even thinking about I. Even though we're using the language of I and you, in the moment of metta it's just: may you be happy. That's it. Simple, expansive, inclusive. Nothing is lacking. Nothing is in excess.

Wanting is just the opposite of this, whether it's wanting outwardly or inwardly.

This is from Mark Epstein. He's talking about the sense of unworthiness. He says, "When we have a sense of unworthiness, it is easy to feel deficient and to see the love of another person as the only possible solution to this plight. Meditation tends to work against this assumption of deficiency by restoring the capacity for connection from the inside." In doing this, meditation challenges the common assumption of our culture about where connection comes from. We see that connection is already present. We are not as separate and distinct as we think we are. Connection is our natural state. We just learn to permit it, to allow it—I would say to recognize it, actually. You can't stop it. We just learn to recognize that connection is already present. There's nothing to want from outside. And love, metta, is an expression of this wisdom. It then strengthens our trust in this reality, in this aspect of reality. Just open-hearted, simple connection.

The Buddha said that lust is a maker of measurement. Hate is a maker of measurement. Delusion is a maker of measurement. In one whose taints, whose poisons are destroyed, these are abandoned—that's an arahat. But in terms of the near and far enemy of metta, lust or craving, far enemy ill will—these in themselves, when we don't recognize them, when we believe them and identify, and there's the sense of me doing it—these are makers of measurement.

You can feel measurement in the mind, rather than the immeasurable mind that the Buddha speaks of with the brahmaviharas. This maker of measurement—you can almost feel everything shrink, contract. It comes down to me and other, whether it's wanting or aversion. Suddenly there's this measurement, and I'm the center that everything's measured from. The mind contracts. The world contracts. Our view contracts. And that in itself is a form of suffering.

So the far enemy of metta—and I'll say a little more about this—is ill will. Well, that's obvious. We're not going to mistake ill will for metta, I hope not. And metta is said to be the antidote to ill will. The Buddha gave lots of advice to his son, Rahula.

One of his teachings was: "Rāhula, develop meditation on loving-kindness. For when you develop meditation on loving-kindness, any ill will will be abandoned." They don't coexist. They simply don't coexist.

So ill will is the far enemy. And as we practice mettā, just as we practice vipassanā, sometimes you might feel like it's bringing up more ill will. I think it just highlights it, because the ill will starts to seem so abrasive, so out of sync with the mettā, with the vipassanā, with the acceptance. It's just so much harsher. But we still believe it often, still get caught in it.

And in terms of what I said earlier—do we really have confidence? Do we really know that the strongest aspect of wisdom, the strong heart, manifests as mettā, manifests as compassion? Or do we, as people so often say, think we need our anger, need our fear? "If I'm just full of mettā, I won't be able to function. I'll just sit passively by while people walk all over me. How can I protect myself?" These are reasonable questions given the culture we grow up in. That's why we sit and look and see what's really true.

I've told this story often, but I'll tell it again. At a retreat quite some years ago—I think it was with Joseph, up in the mountains of New Mexico—specifically for specially invited environmental activists. People who weren't necessarily Buddhist practitioners, and some of them hadn't done much meditation at all. It was a ten-day silent retreat, very intensive, and we were doing a regular retreat like this one. Once a day, just like we do on Tuesdays here, one sitting every day, we would teach the mettā practice. And we had discussion groups.

These environmentalists were lawyers and activists, really on the front lines, living very intense lives. Actually, it was billed as a retreat for burned-out environmental activists. They were pretty stressed, I tell you. Working very hard. Very smart people—it was a little intimidating, extremely smart.

So we started teaching the loving-kindness. In one of the groups, about the second or third day, one of the men said very sincerely, "I'm in the middle of this huge, acrimonious, anger-filled court case. I have to go into court. These other lawyers will stop at nothing. They're angry. I need my anger. I can't get into this mushy mettā, weak stuff. I need my anger."

But he was sincere. He kept on doing the practice anyway. And at the end of those ten days—I don't know what happened after—but at the end of those ten days, he was really so touched. He said, "I really see from this time, from working with the vipassanā and the mettā, that anger was eating me up inside. It's not like I can just have the anger and take it in and throw it at those other lawyers in the courtroom, and then everything's okay. It's coming out at my family. It's eating me up inside. It's making me sick. It's just taking over my life."

It was so touching. But I know he had to walk back into that court case, surrounded by it again, and our old habits spring up. We know that. We've seen that here in these three weeks. So I'm not saying it's easy—to find in ourselves, over and over and over, the trust that comes from wisdom, from seeing your own experience.

And then we almost make a resolution, an adhiṭṭhāna. It's one of the ten pāramīs—resolution. I'm resolving to choose love when I can. And when I can't, meeting that with mettā too. That's also mettā.

I was just on the phone with a man who stays in touch once in a while. He's in his late 70s. He's been doing this meditation for years. He's a welder farmer from Kansas—just a very down-home guy, the kind who says, "You know, I can never really do this practice." But he's completely dedicated. He said to me yesterday, "You know, I've really been doing metta practice for the last two years. You told me to do that." I actually don't remember, but anyway, that's good. "You told me to do that, and it's really making a change."

I said, "Well, what? What change is it making?"

He goes, "Well, you know, when I walk down the street, anyone I see, I really try to send the metta. And if I can do it at that moment, that's great. And if I can't do it at that moment, then that's okay too."

I thought that was just a perfect example. Metta outward, metta inward, when we can't be perfect. Okay, that's okay too. This is how it is right now. May I be happy.

Ajahn Sumedho has a wonderful way of expressing metta in terms of the difficult—in terms of scary, frightening, violent situations. That's when we think, "No, I need my fear, I need my anger. Metta's blind, metta's weak." Sumedho says, "With metta, one is not blinding oneself with an ideal." And that's where we can often go. You're not blinding yourself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, a thing, a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it.

I just love that. One is witnessing wholeheartedly the unpleasantness in a situation, in a person, in a thing, or in oneself. Just witnessing without creating anything around it. Just space. It's like this. That's Sumedho—the one who always says, "It's like this." That is an aspect of metta.

So my friend is walking down the street. He tries, he can't send metta now. Okay. You don't have to make up a big story. Acceptance, presence, spaciousness—it's like this. Those are aspects of metta.

This is especially true, much as Melanie talked about, towards your own internal experience. There's an interesting transition that occurs naturally and spontaneously. We begin to find that to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves—the willingness to look, to look directly at our own hearts—and to the degree that there is kindness towards ourselves, there is confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world.

The only reason we don't open our hearts and minds to other people is that they trigger confusion in us that we don't feel brave enough or sane enough to deal with. To the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we can feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes.

Sharon likes to say, "To pay attention is to love." And also listening—there's a slogan on public radio. They have a series of stories where they go around getting people's stories, and their slogan is, "Listening is an act of love." And I think it's James Baldwin who said that an enemy is someone whose story we have not heard.

With this ill will, in the face of the difficult, of course we do want to be separate from violent people, from people that are harming us, or that we don't like, or that we don't agree with, or who get us upset. The tendency of our mind in that ill will is to create the sense of me and other, to put the other in a box—these bad things they do, these scary things they do—and to just disconnect. That can seem safe. But first, it's not true about them that they're just all this bad thing.

When Bush was president, I couldn't stand to even think of anything good about him. I didn't want to hear anything good. Now, that's not reality. I just wanted to stay in this hostility. I was feeding hostility. That's not so helpful. It keeps me in the prison of hostility and separation. And it's not seeing accurately—it's delusion. Delusion keeps the perception of separation going.

Non-delusion, clear seeing, the mind that's alert and free—this sees well beneath the separation, beneath the box of "that bad thing" we put people in. And it's incredibly powerful. So I just want to read two examples, current day examples, nothing to do

with Buddhism, about the power of this clear seeing that comes from metta, from loving-kindness. Metta, far from being blind, actually allows for a clearer seeing of things as they are.

The first is from Tracy Kidder's book *Strength in What Remains,* about a man named Deo who had escaped from Burundi at the time of the huge genocide in Rwanda and Burundi. Through a series of events, he managed to escape as a very young man in medical school, get to New York, and went through years of hell there. It's a great book, actually—really uplifting.

Kidder writes that Deo had spent a lot of time in Manhattan classrooms—he was going to Columbia—thinking about the catastrophic violence in Burundi and Rwanda. He had come to believe that the misery of the people, while not the sole cause of the mayhem, had been a primary cause, a precondition too often neglected by scholars: that there was little or no education for most people. Many people had lessons in brutality, toil, and deprivation—hunger, disease, and untimely death, including rampant infant mortality.

As an example, Deo said, "Almost everyone has got worms. They're there since they were born, and worms will be their friend—intestinal worms—until they die. Can you imagine that kind of life? It's terrible. So how are you going to think right with pain everywhere? It's been really hard for me to blame the people who have been slaughtering each other, although I do blame people all the time. They were not themselves. They were something else."

Tracy Kidder says his stance is remarkable. How many people in his place would have divided up the world into good guys and bad guys, Hutus and Tutsis, and left it at that? But somehow he had found a way around the self-poisoning of hatred. He kept his mind flexible. And in that flexibility, you see more clearly. That's an aspect of metta. It's not just loving—it's seeing deeply, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, and not creating anything extra around it.

The second example is from John Lewis, who was a congressman from Georgia for over twenty years—an African-American man who was in the early days with Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights Movement. He was one of the young college students in Nashville in the late fifties and early sixties, one of the early Freedom Riders, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and deeply committed to nonviolence—not just the idea that you don't fight back, but a very deep and profound way of life, internally and externally.

This is from his autobiography, where he's talking about nonviolence. He was beaten many times on the Freedom Rides. He's not talking theoretically here. This is a man who put himself on the line over and over and over. They trained with Jim Lawson, another African-American who had studied in India, studied Gandhian principles.

I want to read this from John Lewis, because to me, this is metta. He's talking about the suffering—the suffering of being beaten, the suffering of racism and violence. He wrote: "The suffering is nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering. This is a difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence.

"We are talking about love here. Not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us—even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy. This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, can turn a person toward anger and hate."

It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence.

One method of practicing this approach when faced with a hateful, angry, aggressive, even a despicable person is to imagine that person—to actually visualize him or her as an infant, as a baby. If you can see this full-grown attacker who faces you as the pure, innocent child that he or she once was, that we all once were, it is not hard to find love and compassion in your heart. It is not hard to find forgiveness.

And this, Jim Lawson taught us, is at the essence of the nonviolent way of life: the capacity to forgive. When you can truly understand and feel, even as a person is cursing you to your face—if you can understand and feel, even in the midst of critical and often physically painful moments, that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his anger and fury—then you are well on your way to the nonviolent life.

This is to me one of the best expressions of the incredible power of a commitment to continue working towards metta, towards compassion. Only wisdom can give us that strength. But there is wisdom, and we can really trust the depth and the power of this force in our heart and mind.

CHAPTER 60

Simplicity of Non-Reactive Mind

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson illuminates the transformative power of simplicity—not the absence of thoughts or perceptions, but the non-complication of direct awareness. Drawing on the Pāli term atamaiyatā (not made of that), which Ajahn Buddhadāsa called "the ultimate Buddhist concept," she points to those moments of being prior to subject-object duality, where awareness rests without fabrication or self-reference.

Wilson examines how papañca (mental proliferation) cascades from perception to thought to suffering, referencing the Buddha's teaching that "what one perceives, one thinks about; what one thinks about, one complicates." She explores the three seeds of papañca—craving, attachment to views, and māna (conceit/comparing)—showing how each generates endless trains of thought that "overwhelm and assail" us. Through Luang Por Dun's reformulation of the Four Noble Truths, she emphasizes that "the mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering."

The practical invitation is to trust the simple ability we all have to be fully present—not becoming awake and aware in some future moment, but simply being awake now. Wilson encourages practitioners to notice how perceptions are colored by mental states, how views snap shut our open awareness, and how comparing mind generates suffering. The path lies not in stopping thoughts but in recognizing them with the simplicity of yathābhūta—things as they have come to be—resting in the non-reactive awareness where, as the Buddha taught Bāhiya, "in the seen there is only the seen."

Tonight, what I mainly want to speak about I think of as simplicity—simplicity of being—or alternatively, the silence of the non-reactive mind, taking off from Guy's talk last night.

When I talk about simplicity or the silence of the non-reactive mind, I don't mean the simplicity or the silence of no thoughts, of no perceptions, of nothing happening. Not that we have to get rid of anything, but the simplicity of non-complication. As Guy spoke about last night, an example of that simplicity would be that moment of resting between vedana and tanha, craving. But it doesn't have to be just that little moment. There's the sense of non-complicating.

I think freedom of heart, freedom of mind really is a matter of simplicity. As we've been saying over and over, the essence of awareness is just the simplicity of being with things just as they are right now—nothing added, nothing taken away.

At least in the way most of our minds and culture seems to work, the trouble with simplicity is we're just not used to it. Our minds are obviously rather complex. The world is complex. We're used to complexity. Just look at how the body works. Pick any system of the body. Pick the whole structure of science. The more we know about science and the more science comes to be the trustworthy reference point in our culture—and the way I was trained in school, though I'm no scientist—the complexity of systems is endlessly fascinating. Of course, if you follow the complexity all the way down, it breaks up till everything is connected. And if you keep following the complexity of physics all the way down, which believe me I have no clue about except what I read, you follow it all the way down and you end up with nothing. There's no there there. But mostly, we're seduced. We're fascinated. We're just entranced by the complexity.

I loved what Guy said last night on how the Buddhist teaching is really about our condition as human beings, the quality of consciousness of our own minds. From that point of view, the complexity we get seduced by is the complexity of our thoughts and our personality. We're continually seduced, fascinated, entranced by this seemingly endless—nothing's endless—this endlessly renewable energy source of thoughts, over and over and over, and personality. We can get lost there. So the simplicity is not perhaps quite what we know how to recognize or trust.

There's a word in the Pali, *atammayatā*, which I've liked for a long time. Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was in the last century one of the most well-known Thai forest monks and scholars—and for the Thai Sangha, he was a little bit radical, the most radical who could stay within it in terms of scholasticism—he called *atammayatā* the ultimate Buddhist concept. It's a concept, still a concept. What it basically translates to mean is "not made of that," which is like non-fabricating, non-concocting, not making something out of anything. Non-identification is another way of saying it.

But it's the experience, that sense of the simplicity of heart and mind in the moment, just in a moment prior to the subject-object duality concept arising—or maybe that doesn't arise at all. Just the simplicity of just this, without a me, without an other, without a subject perceiving object. Just this. That utter simplicity, that silence. Not made of that.

I like the word concocting, but I know if English isn't your main language, you probably haven't heard that one. It means fabricating, making something up, constructing something out of nothing. You get the drift—concocting.

So a lot of what Guy spoke about last night, what he pointed us to, was the silence of the simplicity of heart and mind in a moment that is not fabricating, that's not concocting. But also, as you know, we spend a lot of our time in awareness exploring not only the simplicity, the silence, but also from the simplicity we can notice how the fabrication occurs. And then it simply becomes another thing that we don't have to fabricate on top of—if you know what I mean. You don't have to go into infinite regression about it.

This fabrication is the mind going out and creating a reality about any perception, any experience. And it does this endlessly. It's in *The Island,* but before that book came out, I saw a little pamphlet from another Thai forest Ajahn, Luang Por Dun. He was a disciple of Ajahn Mun, who was in the last century this very fierce, very revered Thai forest monk, the teacher of Ajahn Chah and that whole lineage.

So this Luang Por Dun—this is his reformulation of the Four Noble Truths, and it fits the way I'm thinking tonight. He says: the mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering.

The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering. That's the second noble truth. The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering. That's the first noble truth. The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering.

Don't try to remember all of that. You get the drift. The mind that goes out is basically making all the problems. And the mind seeing the mind is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. He didn't say the mind that hates the mind, the mind that gets rid of the mind, the mind that deadens the mind, the mind that stops functioning. I didn't hear anything like that. The mind that sees the mind clearly is the path to the cessation of suffering. And so that's our path here. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods—well, this is not a surprise to us. We're very familiar with it. As Guy spoke about last night, he gave great examples in terms of the dependent origination, where the craving turns into grasping, turning into becoming. That's an example of the mind going out to satisfy its moods.

The way I want to talk about it tonight is mostly in the realm of thought. Not that thought has to be a problem. When the mind sees the mind and how it works, when thought is simply another arising experience like sound and sight and everything else, and there's just the simplicity of awareness noticing it—no problem. But when thought

becomes the agent, so to speak, as if the thought is going out and constructing a reality around any particular perception, and then we try to do something about that reality, and then we suffer from it—well, that's what we call papañca.

Just to read the way the Buddha describes this: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises." That's what Guy said last night. "The meeting of the three is sense contact. With sense contact as condition, there is feeling." We're up to speed on that, right? With sense contact as condition, there's feeling. And what one feels, that one perceives. So perception, which is also one of the five aggregates, arises with contact just as vedanā, just as feeling tone does.

Now, here's the salient point. See if you've noticed this. "What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one complicates"—mentally proliferates with concepts as the source. "The heart is beset. The heart is overcome by mental perceptions and notions that then overwhelm and assail a person."

He's just describing the solution to this cascade of troubles. That wasn't the Buddha, the solution to this cascade of troubles—but doesn't it feel like that? What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates with notions, associations, memories, comparisons. And then these notions can overwhelm and assail a person—assail, like attack. Don't you often just feel like you're the victim of these thoughts? The thoughts have somehow become so strong.

And so as much as we say, just notice—a thought is a thought, it comes and goes, the sky is blue, I'm hopeless, the thought is a thought—somehow we can't quite... We know it. We've experienced it. But that was yesterday, which is now only a thought.

And that thought is strong. Yesterday I could do it. Today I can't.

So seeing how this papañca gets triggered, and how we can work with it—not to hate thoughts, but the path to freedom is when the mind can see the mind just as it is. Seeing things just as they are. Another great Pali phrase is *yathā bhūta*, which is often translated as "things as they are." But I've heard it's more precisely, in terms of the right tense, "things as they have come to be"—which gives it the moving sense, because things as they have come to be right now won't be like that in the next moment. Things as they have come to be.

And that simplicity of awareness can meet thoughts, can meet this whole cascade of troubles, and stay in the simplicity, rest in the non-fabrication, in the silence, in the non-reactivity.

So the beginning, of course, is just understanding, seeing. I always hesitate with "understanding" because we use that as thinking. Seeing is a way of perceiving the nature of thought itself. Again, as I said, we know it's ephemeral, but then we don't know it. So really, first looking at the fact of how much we trust thought to explain things.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Understanding, wisdom, that kind of understanding, does not arise as the result of thinking." Let me read that again: Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking. If only we knew that. "It's the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

Yet we're so seduced, as I said. So used to just trusting, really having our faith in the power of thoughts, that we often don't even realize this whole train of fabrication has gotten going.

So let's go back to the point of perception. This is the Dalai Lama: "All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception." That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge. I mean, our whole practice, right, is emphasis on just what's happening now, that simplicity of awareness, that just being totally present with what is. That's the only way for accurate perception.

So we've spoken about perception—I actually can't remember if we've spoken about it here or not; it all blurs. But perception, that quality of recognition in the mind. Yes, Joseph talked about it, that's right. So perception, that recognition: this is a bird, this is a bell, this mood is sadness, this is a mood—all of that is perception. And how we perceive, we then think about and describe.

That doesn't have to be a problem. It can be extraordinarily useful, right? When you hear the bell and you think, "Oh, now it's five o'clock, time for tea." So there was the perception of bell, there was the thought about it, the perception of the time. And the thoughts about perceptions are how we construct our world. A great deal of the time, we're constructing enough of a similar world that we're all sort of functioning here together. So that just makes us think that our perceptions are completely accurate. But as I know has been pointed out, our perceptions often are not accurate.

The perception is colored, is affected by the mood, by the mental state in the mind, particularly when we're not aware of what the mental state is. So for instance, I was practicing in Burma—usually sunny, but then there's one really cloudy day. And I noticed at two different points in the day, one time I went out and my thoughts and my mood were kind of a little heavy. There was a little fear, a little unsettledness. And when I went out, the clouds looked threatening and ominous and heavy. Then later in the day,

I was in a bright, calm mood. I walked out, and the clouds were cozy, and it was nice to have the sun blocked. Both of those perceptions—that was what I really perceived at that moment. To think that my perception is an accurate description of reality? Not so trustworthy.

Or when there's delusion in the mind, we don't even know accurately. So say, for example—if this has ever happened to anyone here—after lunch you go to take a nap, or at two in the afternoon, or some odd time.

And you think you're just going to lie down for 15 minutes, but you totally conk out. One of those really heavy sleeps where, when you wake up for a minute, you don't know who you are or where you are. The bell rings, and you're thinking, "What is that? Is it breakfast? Is it tea?" That moment when you just don't know—that's delusion. But at least you know you don't know, so that's wisdom. If you don't know you don't know, and you think you know but you don't know—that's delusion. And a lot of the time, it's like that.

For me, a good example is when I don't have my glasses on. I don't like to wear my glasses all the time, but I really don't see so well without them. So when I'm in my cottage without my glasses, everything looks really clean, and I'm happy when things are clean. It's really nice. Maybe I don't need to vacuum this week. Then I'll be working, and I'll go into the bathroom with my glasses on, and I'm sitting there going, "Oh, God." My whole mood shifts.

That's the papañca. The perception is just, "Okay, well, it's not so clean as I thought." The papañca is when I think about it. "Look at that. I thought it was clean." Then the mood follows, and more thoughts about it. "I'm so lazy. Why don't I clean? What am I going to do? This is depressing." And then it just starts rolling. In no time at all. Those are the thoughts that overwhelm and assail a person, in no time, because we're jumping on the train and going with it. But see how it comes from perception. That's the first place it starts.

I find it fascinating to explore perception, especially when we don't even notice it. We just assume it's accurate and go from there, then wonder why things are a little out of sync.

A woman some years ago, in another country, told me this story. She had gone to work, her regular work in an office. That day, without realizing it, she was in a state of feeling bad about herself—low self-esteem, worthlessness, self-hatred. So she was working, and she saw one of her colleagues, someone she didn't have that much to do with, across the office, frowning at her. "What did I do to him? We didn't even speak today.

Why is he frowning at me?" Going back to her work, and all day, that thought keeps coming. "What did I do?" Feeling worse, getting angry, then feeling bad about herself. The whole day, building, building, building.

And of course, you come to find out: first, he wasn't frowning. Second, it had nothing to do with her. He hadn't even noticed her. He was just having some thought about something that had happened at home. No correlation at all.

Have you noticed anything like that ever happening here?

Just to see—it's not about bad or good. Just notice. The mind can get so complicated when I talk about it, but the moment of awareness, just noticing, is quite simple. I'm not trying to fix it. Just watch how it works. "Oh, look at that. This whole cascade of perceptions and thoughts and story and mood."

"Oh, it's like this." Honestly, just that simple awareness of it is enough. We don't have to take it all apart and unpack it and fix it and put it back, get back to the original perception and see what's right. That's making another big story. Just, "Oh, it's like this." This whole story—"I'm no good and they all hate me and everybody here is getting together secretly at some time when I'm sleeping and making a plan to kick me out"—it could be paranoia. Maybe so. But anyway, it's like this. You don't have to figure it out. Just, it's like this.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was a great Tibetan teacher, said: "When our sense organs"—so it's not just seeing, but hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking (remember, a lot of our perceptions are mental ones of moods and thoughts)—"when the sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to begin the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all of your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure."

And that's just what Guy was saying last night. We tend to look out, look out, but it's all... And this is even a concept, out and in—I mean, that's just some idea too. But looking back at the mind itself.

Ajahn Chah said—he's so pithy with his examples—he held up a vase and said, "Look at this vase. You think it's nice, or you think it's ugly, or you think the flower arrangement should be different, or whatever. But it's just itself. It's just a vase. It's neutral. It's you who are driving yourselves insane."

So it's just to see that our emphasis, our interest can see the process, but it really comes out of all the investment into the perception, the vedana. Because vedana, the feeling tone, is not inherent in an object. For example, that vase—I could hold it up, and the sight could be pleasant to you and unpleasant to you and neutral to you. And tomorrow, it could all change around again. It's not an inherent thing at all, but rather a quality of feeling tone in the mind that's influenced by, as he says, our accumulated habits, past experiences, and things as they have come to be in this moment.

So the emphasis, the interest comes back to the simplicity of awareness—of just simply noticing without needing to give so much energy to all this concocting, to all this fabrication. Not trying to stop it, but we can withdraw the fascination, the belief, the sense that this is what's holding our world together. You may not want to withdraw the sense that this is what's holding your world together. And that's another story. That's also something we could look at.

So atammayatā—this simplicity. Not of hating or fearing or fighting with thoughts, or of loving our thoughts, or of making a world of our thoughts, or of needing to change anything. The simplicity of simple awareness.

I'll read you from Ajahn Sumedho. I just love the way he talks about the simplicity of awareness. He says, "The only way to go beyond being caught in thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them, through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion. The island that you cannot go beyond"—which Guy read last night—"is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware."

I love that. Any moment, be awake and aware. You're never going to become awake and aware. That's always a concept somewhere else. But just right now, it's like this. You are awake and aware.

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or our emotions or our actions or our speech or anything. Awareness is simply about knowing these things fully, that they are what they are at this moment. It's very simple, very direct, and you cannot conceive it—awareness. You can't conceive it."

You have to trust it. You have to trust the simple ability that we all have to be fully present and fully awake. Trust the simple ability we all have to be fully present and fully awake, just for a moment. Don't let your mind project "fully awake" into the future, never spacing out again. Just for a moment—this ability to be fully present and fully awake.

And begin to recognize the grasping and the ideas we have taken on about ourselves, about the world around us, about our thoughts and perceptions and feelings. Just recognize with awareness. That's all. You don't have to fix it. You don't have to change it.

And then, as I was saying before, as you begin to realize and recognize this non-grasping, sometimes emotionally one can feel frightened by it. It can seem—it doesn't have to, but it can at times seem—like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, can feel like it starts to fall apart. And that can be frightening. As I said, when we know the ideas that are constructing our world, it can feel frightening.

But if we have the faith to continue bearing with—in other words, faith and awareness to continue being with these emotional reactions—and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Stability in being awake. Stability in being aware. Just the stability in the simplicity of awareness—of the non-concocting, non-involved, non-reactive mind. I think I used that word last night: stable.

And so in doing that, part of what we do is continue to explore the nature of thoughts so we're not so afraid of them and we get less and less caught in them. It's not a bad thing that you're seeing so many thoughts here, really. We do seem to need to be hit over the head a little bit. We can't just see something a couple of times and get it. We wish, but no.

But the amount of thoughts you've had—how many thoughts would you say you've had since you've been here? Impossible to tell, right? And how many have we believed? A lot. But how many have we not believed? A lot. And so we really start to see the nature of them. Underneath that, we start to get it.

This is, again, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "The mind is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning"—have you noticed that?—"triggered off by circumstances. And if not seen clearly, they quickly take root and proliferate," just as we've been saying. "Yet, however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness." No matter what you do, they'll eventually dissolve. Try to hold on to a thought and don't let it go from now until the end of the evening. It's going to dissolve. "Once you recognize this intrinsic nature of the mind, these thoughts that seem to appear and disappear all the time can no longer fool you. As clouds form, last a while, and then dissolve back in the empty sky, so these deluded thoughts arise, remain a while, and then vanish in the emptiness of the mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

That's what I love. This whole story and world, and it's gone. In reality, nothing at all has happened. Awareness isn't touched or stained, and all that world we went through —gone. Nothing has happened. There's no logical reason to be so driven by thoughts.

In terms of how we get so seduced, of course there are many ways of talking about it. But one classical way, found really more in the commentaries, is often called the three papañcas—three particular habits of mind, none of which will be a surprise to you.

But it's not just greed, hatred, and delusion. It's a slightly different list, although those are a subset—the tendencies that feed papañca, that just take off. I mention them because I find it interesting to explore, and it gives me a little bit more to notice. It helps cue me: "Oh, yes, right, that's what's happening." And you can just see the process.

What tends to really fuel this papañca, this tendency for thoughts to take off and construct a world, is craving, attachment to views, and māna—conceit. I'll say a little about each of these, although we've obviously talked a lot about them already.

The craving I think I need to say the least about. You know what it is. But it's interesting to watch how craving—this wanting, this thirst for whatever, it doesn't matter what it's for—operates in the mind. When there's not awareness of it, when it goes out towards some idea, some object, a sense object, a mind object, whatever is perceived as pleasant, and when that isn't seen, the energy that goes into concocting, into fabricating a whole world is really amazing, isn't it? I'm sure you've all seen this.

It's interesting to observe, at times, without judgment. The only way to watch any of this is from the motivation of interest, or just the simplicity of awareness. Judgment—that's just the backside of craving. It's just aversion. And you can't see clearly with judgment. When you're judging yourself, it's just the nature of the mind. This is how the mind is working for everybody, not just you.

So just watch the machinations that go on when there's desire in the mind. And here, with little stuff—if you have a seat that you like in the dining room, have you gone through all kinds of contortions to make sure you get that seat again? And also that nobody should notice you're doing it? Or when to have your shower time? How to sit, how to walk, all that stuff. It gets so complicated here.

You start saving food and then discover how much work that is, how complicating it is to save food and then put it somewhere. Then you want it later, but you're all the way in your room. Do I want to go back? But I can't do it at four—everybody will see me. When can I do it? I get up at three in the morning so I can eat this food that I saved. Meanwhile, it rots there in the yogi refrigerator, which, by the way, they would like you to clean out if you have little pieces of moldy food in there. The cooks have asked us to

ask you to please, for God's sake, clean it out. And as you're doing it, you might notice: what's in my mind when I put this little piece of whatever—I don't even know what it is anymore—in here?

The craving runs us. And it's so believable when this is the perception. Craving colors perception, so that the object, whatever it is that we want, the thought—it looks like a beautiful thought. A person looks like the most beautiful person you've ever seen.

I used to have this thought come up, God knows why, of some street corner in Bangkok that I was at years ago. Now, that street corner was a really busy intersection of little stalls selling plumbing parts. There was nothing attractive about this street corner. But for some reason, in certain moods, it would come up, and my mind would go, "Bangkok. So lovely." And then it would add all this beautiful stuff about Bangkok. And then I'd spin into a whole story. You can spend hours like this.

You wake up and nothing at all has ever happened, which is lucky. Because the other option is you go online, book a ticket, fly to Bangkok, get out of the taxi at three in the morning and think, "Why did I come here again? What was it about Bangkok that I liked so much? I forget."

Choki Nyima Rinpoche, who is a brother of Tsoknyi and Mingyur Rinpoche, once talked about this. He said, "Watch the fickleness." Fickleness is like unreliability.

We say "fickle" in English—someone who falls in love with one person, then another, then another. Unreliable. Untrustworthy. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche says to watch how easily the mind is influenced by just a pleasant or unpleasant sight or sound into an immediate mood. And then out of that mood, we construct a whole world. And we believe it.

At least here on retreat, the papañca mostly ends with thoughts. But as I said, in the world, it can go on into actions. You might make a career choice based on papañca. You might—hopefully not—get married based on papañca. "Oh, I'm a little bored. Let's have kids." Then what are you going to do?

It's really about watching this. And what we have the chance to observe here is how craving, as the Tibetans say, puts feathers on the object. It makes things much more beautiful than they are. If we don't see that the perception is unreliable, we're gone. We see that over and over, and then we wake up—oh yes, in actuality, nothing has happened. The more we see that, we start to develop a simple recognition: these thoughts, they're not really anything.

There's this seduction of pleasant thoughts, this promise of craving, the promise that more pleasant thoughts will finally make me happy. And we'll sit here with our knee hurting while we're off in some daydream, and if we stop and examine it—okay, I really know I'm probably not going to have that dinner party when I leave, but maybe, yeah. I spent a three-month retreat planning all these dinner parties, the menus, the recipes. You wake up—oh yes, right, here I am. And I never did any of it. I don't even like dinner parties. But that was the promise, that it was going to be so pleasant. Or the reverse—the fear of the unpleasant.

So we start to see: we wake up and it's nothing. The thoughts are going nowhere. It's just a thought.

What helps us trust awareness again is what Chokyi Nyima calls a weariness with saṃsāra. Not a weariness of aversion, because that's just flipping from craving to aversion, but the weariness of this word *nibbidā*. It's sometimes translated as "disgust," but that's not a good translation. Disgust for us has this negativity and revulsion. But nibbidā—the best way of describing it is that you kind of lose one's taste for something. The example given is of a dog chewing on a bone, but the bone is completely bleached out by the sun and there's just no juice there. There's nothing there. So you lose your taste for it, not out of disgust or revulsion, but because it just doesn't offer anything. It's really a movement of wisdom, a freedom of heart and mind in the moment, a turning away from something that isn't offering us anything anyway.

Nibbidā, this sense of turning away—it's not only from seeing that something doesn't give us what we hoped. "Oh yes, these thoughts, they're really not so great. Come back." The turning away is also just a releasing of the idea that this is going to bring me happiness, simply by seeing with awareness the actuality of it. A thought is just a thought, and it will never be more than that.

But nibbidā can also be developed by attention to the positive, the wholesome aspects of peace in heart and mind. So it's not just a negative thing. In your practice here, in your daily life, as you're walking around—those moments when you're just touching things as they are, *yathā bhūta*, things as they have come to be. Just that. The simplicity, where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess. And the mind is not concocting any story about anything. It's just this—that sense of peace.

I think Guy talked about last night how we don't tend to notice it enough. But when we do, it's so much more—I don't know what the word is—refreshing, attractive, fulfilling, nourishing, than getting lost in thoughts about dinner parties. They don't really compare.

And so the wholesomeness, the peace, the satisfaction of the heart and mind that's pure, that's simple, that's non-reactive, that's not involved in the moment—this becomes so much more vivid and real that the attention turns away from getting lost in daydreams. Not out of aversion, but out of just seeing: oh, there's really another possibility.

This is one of the attractions of samādhi, of the mind that's collected and balanced—whether it's one-pointed or in a steadiness with changing objects. That sense of the collected mind, the secluded mind. *Citta viveka* is the secluded mind, secluded from the hindrances for a time. The first time you experience it strongly, or sometimes after, we don't even realize until then what it feels like not to have all this stuff in our minds all the time. Like, wow. What's going on? Everything's just so pure and clean. The world is so amazing. No—just for a moment.

There's no great hatred and delusion coming up in the mind. It's like, wow, that's nice. Oh, maybe that's a possibility. Maybe that's more attractive than thinking about the vacation I'm going to take next month. So it's not a should, but it's seeing the drawbacks of samsara and the peace, the nourishment of the heart and mind that's at ease.

So that's craving papañca. The second papañca is the papañca of views—views and opinions, and attachment to them. Obviously it's attachment to them, but a view is really a description of the world, any description we have that we take to be actually true, holding to it: this is true and everything else is false. Although, of course, we don't usually think of it in those terms. And in fact, we don't even know we have a view.

But it can be a view of who you are, what your personality is like. It can be, obviously in the world, political views—we all see where that goes. It can be views about how someone else should behave. It can be views about how we're all supposed to behave here. It can be views about what the appropriate kind of food is. It could be views about what's right practice.

A really sorrowful source of views is Dhamma views. What's the true Dhamma? What's the inaccurate Dhamma? Who has the true Dhamma? Which way of practice? Which teacher? Is it the Thai forest tradition? Is it the Burmese Sayadaws? Is it the Tibetans? Is it the Zen? I mean, does anybody even know what anybody else really holds as a view anyway?

Views are an enormous source of suffering. But really, at this level, we're talking about a concoction of thought. Have you noticed that? Huge. I think views are much more gripping and seductive even than craving for sense objects. This is what's happening, we take it as the reality. And we stop looking. We stop noticing. Our perception kind of snaps shut. It's like this.

That's why the mindfulness is this non—not picking and choosing. Just mindfulness, awareness, meeting whatever's arising. Not just the things we like, not just the things we think we should pay attention to.

Have you noticed how much we try in the instructions or in interviews, and we say, "Well, what are you noticing?" And how often the response is, "Well, this. That's happening, but that's not what's supposed to be happening. This is what's supposed to be happening." Or, "Yeah, I'm noticing lots of changing objects, but that's because I'm not concentrated enough. I should just be with the breath." Or, "I'm only with the breath, and that's because I'm not able to do choiceless awareness, which I know is really where it's at."

You can have people come in one after the other, with completely opposite experiences, and suffering because it's not happening the way they think it should be happening. But they don't think they're just thinking that. They know that's how it is.

And how much thought gets engendered when you're holding to a view of what practice should be, or what right practice should be. Or you're feeling fine in your practice, but then you see someone else—they look a little better, they're doing something different. And one of us up here says something that completely doesn't match your experience. And you don't know whether to hate us or hate yourself, but one of us has to be wrong, and you better figure it out or you're going to go crazy. And the mind just starts spinning, right?

How do the question periods affect you in the morning? Does your mind just go, "Okay, fine, that's not my experience, never mind," and you keep going? Great. May it be so. Because otherwise you have to figure it all out. How can it all fit in? Views, views. So much thinking comes from that. So much getting caught.

Sogyal Rinpoche has a great line about this. He says we get into so much pain and confusion by getting lost in what happens. And this, to me, is a good description of how views form. You project a thought, and then the second thought believes the first thought. Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is, by this time, already a reality. By the time the tenth one comes, it believes the fifth has always been an actuality. That's it—views, views. And we just don't even see it.

Nisargadatta said, "The world appears to you so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. Cease thinking about it and it will dissolve into thin mist." I would say, you know, I feel so real because I'm thinking about me all the time too. We think, "But I don't want to dissolve into thin mist. I'd much rather sit here and stew about the fact that my practice isn't going right and I'll never be able to do it the way those other people are than to dissolve into thin mist and simplicity."

So views are an endless source of papañca—not only the thought, but this concocting a whole world, believing it, suffering, and acting on it. Remember the example I gave a couple of talks ago about a friend of mine who felt that she was so aversive? That was the view she had of herself: "I'm an aversive person." And the view everyone else had—they all agreed she was aversive. That's a perception, all agreeing, and we think, "Okay, that could define the world."

And then when she sat down with open, balanced mindfulness, deliberately seeing that as a view and not buying into it, she noticed that aversive thoughts were maybe ten percent. There were all kinds of other thoughts. And then in the long run, she wasn't any of the thoughts anyway. That's the difference between the simplicity of awareness without a preconceived notion of what we're looking for or what's already here. The preconceived notion can completely blind us to open perception.

It's an example I give a lot, but I'll give it again because it was so vivid. At a retreat I was teaching quite some years ago in California with a friend, James, there were about fifty people, a retreat like this, but maybe a week long. Many of the people had never sat an intensive retreat before. And then as now, I had to sit in a chair. I sit in a chair. We taught just the way we teach this, and we described how to sit just like we do here.

This woman, about the fifth day, had an interview with me. It was one of those times when she had just broken through something. She said, "I've been in such agony, physical agony, for the last four days. Just sitting there cross-legged was absolutely impossible for me—so much pain. I've never sat cross-legged before." She was a middle-aged woman; it was killing her. But clearly that's how you have to sit. There's no way you can meditate if you don't sit cross-legged. She'd just been fighting with pain, no mindfulness. "I don't even know what's the point of this."

And finally last night, the fourth night, she said, "I looked up and I thought, 'Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe it's okay to sit in a chair.'" She sat in a chair, and she could actually meditate—actually notice what was happening. That's how strong views can be, and how the papañca not only of the thinking about it can lead to actions.

So that's the second source of papañca. And the third is that of māna, translated as "conceit of self." It's a subtle sense of self, but the way we mostly notice it feeding endless trains of thought and belief is in this comparing. I think Sally talked about that, where somebody walks by and they're better than me, they're worse than me, or we're equal. But just this subtle—it's a sense of I am-ness.

It's brought about by the perception of seeing, for example. We don't notice seeing. We don't notice the perception that "that person looks so mindful." They're mindful, I'm not. I'm not doing well. And then the endless thoughts about everything you haven't done well in your whole life cascade forward.

You're walking, and then you slow down, and finally you're really slow, and someone comes rushing past, and you think, "Ah, I'm really doing well. I'm so mindful." Again—seeing, perception, fast—not seeing at all. Just going, going, going. There's this comparing that's extremely subtle, and don't be judging yourself about it. Just get fascinated by it. Wow, look at all this that gets going—completely extra!

If you could imagine thought balloons from all of us in the dining room at lunchtime—oh my God, it would feel like a nightmare. "They're good. They're bad. They're eating like a slob. They're eating so great. They're eating too much." It's like, oh please. So comparing to each other.

Comparing with our own past experience: "Well, this is the third week and the fourth day, and in the last retreat on the third week and the fourth day, I was doing a whole lot better than this. Is it my fault? Is it the teacher's fault? Is it the other yogis' fault? Is it the weather? Is it because I'm old? Is it because I'm young? Is it because of my health? Is it because of the food?"

It's like—cool it. Yathabhuta. Things as they have come to be right now. It's like this.

How simple is that? How free is that—from that whole world of comparison—to "it's like this"? Oh my God, what a difference. But the mind goes, "Hey, that's almost like being a simpleton." In the big world, if you say about someone, "She's a really simple person," it's not usually a compliment, except in certain spiritual circles. It's not really a compliment to be that simple.

Am I doing better or not? Should I be going slower or not? Are they faster than me? Are they slower than me? Well, maybe there's a reason... "It's like this." It's almost like that fear of annihilation Sumedho was talking about. The whole thing just falls apart. But we don't need that whole thing. We're just dragging that around and suffering.

Ah, the simplicity. Atamayata—not concocting.

So comparing to others, comparing to ourselves in the past, and again, comparing with a view, with an ideal. This is what practice should be like. This is how much I should eat. This is how much I should sleep. This is how I should dress—whatever it is. And then comparing to that. Source of endless, endless thoughts.

Just notice that. To me, this is a great dining room practice. Because when I'm on retreat, I tend to stay more by myself. But it could also be practiced in the meditation hall. Just walking into the dining room and being in your body, being aware of seeing. Seeing, seeing. And if it comes up—ah, judging—notice it. The judging, the comparing. No need to do anything about it. You don't have to concoct anything around the comparing. Just notice it. Seeing, comparing. It's like this. Seeing, comparing. It's like this.

We don't need to fear it. We don't need to try and push it away. It's also just another thought. Every thought is just another thought. No matter how puffy it is or how much emotion it comes together with, in that moment there's always the potential for the simplicity of awareness. It's like this—awareness of thought and emotion. And it will remind us that just because a thought comes together with really strong emotion, that doesn't make it more true. In fact, more likely less true.

So just noticing that. These are the three—they say—seeds of papañca. Not the only ones, but the main ones: craving, attachment to views, this māna, this conceit, this comparing. And not to stop it, but just to notice the process. In noticing the process, we've kind of stepped back into the simplicity of awareness, which is always available—the stillness of not self-referencing, of non-concocting, of yathābhūta, just things as they have come to be right now. Nothing extra. Not referencing back to anything else or forward to anything else. Just the willingness to be so simple.

I just want to end with a quotation from the Buddha describing himself, his mind. So this is the Buddha describing his mind to the bhikkhus. He said: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight." In a sense, there's seeing. The Tathāgata does not then conceive of a visible thing—there's just seeing. "He does not conceive of something that is unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer."

To balance it, in the famous sutta where he's talking to Bāhiya, giving him this little pithy instruction—he only had three minutes to give him an instruction to enlighten him—he said: "When in the seen, there is only the seen. In the heard, there is only the heard. In the sensed, there is only the sensed. In the cognized, there is only the cognized. This, Bāhiya, is how you should train yourself."

That's what he's saying. In the seen, the Tathāgata does not conceive, does not think about something visible as apart from the seeing. There's only seeing. He doesn't conceive of a seer apart from something seen. There's only seeing.

"When, Bāhiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When, Bāhiya, there is no you there, then, Bāhiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

There's only seeing. There's only seeing.

"When, Bahiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized—then, Bahiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When, Bahiya, there is no you there, then, Bahiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 61

Courage and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this heartfelt talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the intense ups and downs practitioners experience as they deepen their practice. She observes how the sine wave of expansion and contraction—moments of flowing insight followed by periods of identification and doubt—is simply the nature of things, not personal triumph or failure.*
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> *Wilson explores the teaching of sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view) and how our tendency to take refuge in our sense of self becomes the source of much suffering. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, the Dalai Lama, and Sogyal Rinpoche, she explains how compassion naturally arises through deep insight into suffering, beginning with our own experience. When we meet our particular pain with mindfulness and kindness, we discover it is not isolated but representative of universal suffering—connecting us to all beings rather than separating us.*
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> *The talk addresses those moments when practitioners feel they "can't do it anymore"—whether facing physical pain, difficult emotions, or the disorienting groundlessness of impermanence. Wilson encourages stepping back from the narrow view of "me" to recognize these experiences as opportunities for cultivating wisdom and compassion. She concludes with an allegory from The Lord of the Rings, illustrating how courage and wisdom strengthen each other as we face increasingly difficult challenges, ultimately transforming personal motivation into bodhicitta—the aspiration for the awakening of all beings.*

In the last week or so, I've been really struck—and this tends to happen to me about this time, four or five weeks into most long retreats—by the diversity of what each of you come in with. Actually, each one of you comes in with a diversity. You never know who's going to walk through the door; it's so changeable. At this point in the retreat, I'm struck by how intense it all is and how much you're all going through in different ways. Up and down, contraction, expansion, contraction, expansion.

It's not overwhelming, but sometimes it's really inspiring to me. Sometimes I just have a sense of amazement—it's extraordinary that you keep going. Other times, the intensity is on the side of lots of energy, lots of inspiration, lots of openness. But what I'm struck with is the commitment, the energy, the courage that it really takes to keep hanging in there like you are and to meet what's occurring in all the different realms.

I know sometimes that's difficult. It can change so much. Sometimes the insight is just flowing. It's relaxed, spacious. You just see things coming and going. It's so clear that there's no problem, never has been, never will be. And then the next time it's like, "Oh my God, I'm never going to see through to the end of this. It's just hopeless. It's never going anywhere." It goes from profound ease and insight to profound identification—sometimes in the same day, sometimes over a series of days.

The whole retreat is like life itself. It goes closing and opening, closing and opening, like the breath, or like the tides, or really like the energy of the universe—like a sine wave, up and down, up and down.

Part of what's great about a longer retreat is that hopefully you start to get it a little bit: that's just the nature of things. Instead of each up being your personal triumph and each down being your personal failure, you begin to see the pattern. Though perhaps you think, "Okay, maybe the up isn't mine, but the down is certainly my personal failure."

When Joseph mentioned emptiness and compassion just the other night—how compassion is the natural expression of wisdom, of the heart-mind of emptiness, of when all the energy isn't coagulating into a sense of me—there's so much space for empathy, for compassion. In the up periods, in the expansion periods, that just seems obvious. Of course compassion and wisdom are the natural state of things.

In the down periods, I know sometimes never mind even just compassion, but moving into even the mention, the possibility of bodhicitta—of the aspiration that my practice, my life, be a source of awakening for all beings—it's like, "Are you kidding me? What does that have to do with my sitting here, lost in aversion, at this tingle in my back? I'm ready to kill. I know it's a little overreactive, but I don't get what this has to do with compassion or bodhicitta. It doesn't really seem too connected."

I want to talk a little about the ups and downs and the sense of how when it's about me, it's much more difficult. You know that, but I'll explore it some more. In terms of how our path unfolds—and each of our paths is different—we never know how it needs to unfold, even tomorrow, even in the next minute.

Something I've learned I really trust, except when I forget it, is that even when it seems like my particular suffering, my particular pain, my particular story, and I'm really caught in the personal nature of it—each of our so-called particular stories is just our individual experience as a representative of the suffering of all beings, so to speak.

In the particular, when we continue to simply be with it, open to it, meet it with kindness, with compassion, with courage—just to bear witness to our own incredibly painful or incredibly stupid pain—when we just bear witness to that over and over, that's the cultivation of compassion and wisdom. We really see that this is just the particular expression of what is universal.

Ajahn Sumedho used to say when he would start a talk in Thailand, "Welcome, brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." We're all in it together.

Our tendency at times can be, when you're in the down cycle of the sine wave, when you're in the contraction, of course it's about me. That's part of the contraction. But that's not when you feel connected to all beings, is it? That's when we either want to go off and hide.

You don't want to come to an interview because you don't want to have to really admit how completely you're failing at the moment, even to yourself—never mind to us. You don't even want to say it. "Oh, it's not going well. I've completely failed. It's all about me." We don't tend to feel connected.

But actually, any particular suffering—you think whatever you're going through, you're the only person who goes through it? No. Maybe you'd like to be, but no. And instead of it being an isolating experience, simply by meeting our confusion or suffering with mindfulness—of course, the kindness of mindfulness, that's a quality of compassion—non-judging, not having an assumption about what should happen, just the courage to keep showing up, the wisdom arises by itself. And by itself we start to... the expansion comes again, the opening into the fact that even though it seems like my individual little poor me, even this can be the avenue into connection with all beings.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about compassion a lot, obviously. Compassion is described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering, feeling with—it's just empathy, really, not a pushing away. And His Holiness says, how does it develop? Through deep insight into what suffering is. And guess how we get that deep insight, he says: it arises through focusing, through opening to, through being present with our own experience. And then the compassion strengthens through continually being open to our own experience. It strengthens with the empathy to ourselves, and naturally moves into empathy with all beings, connectedness to all beings.

As Sogyal Rinpoche says, just cultivate the correct motivation in your heart, just the compassion. It turns into bodhicitta all by itself. But this talk—I'm not concerned with bodhicitta because it'll happen all by itself. I just want to talk about what he's saying

here in terms of the opening, in terms of the acceptance, in terms of the strength that it takes, which is enormous, to be present for all this stuff. It's enormous strength, over and over.

But that's why the difficult times in life and the difficult times in retreat are so important. They're key to someone who's on a path of awakening. And if we're on a path of avoid, repress, deny, the difficult times aren't so key. But for the path we're on, they're so important. And so I just want to talk a little bit more about that tonight. Hopefully it's a little bit of a pep talk, but you never know.

As I mentioned, watching the ebbs and the flows in your own practice—even though each thing that's happening is so immediate, everything's so intense—your world has both really shrunk in a way to this area, these four walls, a lot more than you even realize. And so incidents that happen here reverberate hugely. Have you noticed that in your mind, in your heart? Hugely.

Because all our conditioning is still popping up. It just happens to all be focused here. Like my teacher said once—someone said to him, "Oh, you're a monk because you're giving up all desire." And he just cracked up. He said, "Don't kid yourself. A monk can take all that craving you have in the world, and that same amount of craving, bring it down to two things: food and their robes. But the amount of craving can still be the same." So in a way, sometimes that's what's happening here.

So when you're in the midst of an intense, open, beautiful experience, even though intellectually you go, "I know. I know it's impermanent. I know it comes and goes. I'm seeing the mind that says, 'Oh, finally you've got it.' I'm seeing it. I'm not clinging to this." And when it goes—which it does—we say, "That's okay. It's all right. I know it's going." It's kind of okay for a while. But somehow the next day, suddenly everything's just wrong. And it's so intense. And each time, this is how it is. This is how it is.

It's so up. It's so down. And even if you sat and looked back over these four and a half weeks, you might not even be able to remember how many changes you've gone through. You may be able to remember some of them. So we get the sense a little bit. But still, when you're in them, it's everything.

When insight and wisdom are there, they're so strong. And then they go. And we're so caught—but with the added little extra goody of being able to see that we're caught, to actually know that we're caught and identified, whereas before we didn't know that. And since we know we're caught, and yesterday we weren't, clearly we shouldn't be caught now. We're caught because I'm useless. I can't do it. I did something wrong. You know the whole thing.

So doubt comes up, impatience, frustration, and whichever particular way your personality is inclined, it can go to doubt or self-doubt or frustration or impatience or out the door. I can't imagine why you're laughing.

We're also coming up against—as many of you have expressed—whatever views and expectations we hold about our abilities, or the practice, or what should be happening. And even when we think we know what our expectations are, often there's really some subtle one in the background. I can't count how many people have said in the last few days, just as a passing reference and not a big deal, "Well, at this point in the retreat, blah blah blah." It should be or it shouldn't be, compared to another retreat, compared to what? But "at this point"—even that we're thinking anything indicates some subtle expectation, as if we know what should be happening.

So our views, our ideas about ourselves, about practice, about what's going on are constantly being challenged. And really, day after day, even if it seems familiar to you, it's not. It's unknown territory. The conditions are never exactly the same as they were that other retreat when you experienced the breath in this particular way and you know what the next thing should be. And then it isn't that. Oh my God, what does this mean? It's better. It's worse. It's this. It's that. It's like—give it up. We don't know.

We're always being challenged. But we like to have a framework, a path that we can compare ourselves to, even if that makes us feel bad. At least we can have a path to compare ourselves to. Or it makes us feel good. That's even worse. I mean, it's both the same. It's both a trap.

But it's really difficult. We get into the frustration, into the comparing, into the doubt, the self-doubt, when the reference point is me, is all about me. When the changes are just happening—you know, it's really calm, you're really present with the flow of changing objects, choiceless awareness is peaceful—and then it changes but there's just really no clinging, it's no problem. That can happen. And then you're tired and things are not so clear, but the mind isn't really reactive—it's no problem.

But the reverse—when suddenly it's been all cloudy and it opens up. And I'm not saying choiceless is better and cloudy is worse; I'm going by what people tend to judge themselves about. People don't usually say, "Cloudy—great! Choiceless flowing—I'm blowing it." Usually not.

When it goes from a way you like it, that feels effortless and flowing, and it changes—there's the sense of, what did I do wrong? How can I keep it? How come my concentration and mindfulness, which were proceeding very steadily for two and a half weeks, how come now it's all over the shop? What am I doing? How can I fix it?

And it's really—we're always looking to some reference point, some pattern we can put it in—but the suffering here, the thing that feeds our doubt and confusion, is the sakāya-diṭṭhi, the personality view.

We've mentioned this before. Diṭṭhi is view. Sakāya—well, Sāriputta defines sakāya as just the flow of the six sense experiences that we've talked about a lot, just the six things coming and going.

Sakāya-diṭṭhi—well, actually, let's go to the Buddha. "This is the way leading to the origination of personality." One regards—and in parentheses it says "all phenomena," but that's just shorthand—one regards any one particular of the six arising experiences as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself."

It's just a fast little moment. You go outside, it's chilly—"I'm so cold." Or you're sitting here and there's a little sound and you go, "I don't like that unpleasantness." Or there's a pain in the back—"my back hurts, this is mine." Or you see someone else walking and that comparison arises, that māna—"I'm so this, I'm so that." It's really just a clinging, the movement of clinging. But it comes and goes in a moment.

This is the Buddha again: "This is the way leading to the cessation of personality." One regards any particular sakāya, any particular sense experience, any of the five aggregates Sally talked about—which are also sense experiences—one regards thus: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

Sometimes that's just theoretical. Sometimes saying that doesn't connect. But sometimes when you're feeling relatively clear but a little caught up, you might just notice in relation to whatever's arising and go, "Hmm, this is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." It's interesting. Not with judgment, just... "Hmm, this pain in my knee—oh, my knee—actually, where's the knee? There's sensation. The sensation is not me. It's not mine. It's not myself." You can just drop that in from time to time.

But when it's all about me—my story, my failures, my beautiful experience—it can be overwhelming. And when it tanks, when it goes in the wrong direction, or it's suddenly really intensely overwhelming, or you just feel like, "Ah, I can't do it, it's just too much, I can't do it"—stop a minute.

First of all, we don't even know what the "it" is that I can't do. But "I can't do it." Open to the bigger picture. The sakāya-diṭṭhi has narrowed down to "I've got to somehow do it better, I've got to somehow whatever it is."

Just the big picture. This really helps me a lot. When I'm with something—and sometimes it's not that I can't do it, sometimes what's arising is just so difficult—you really kind of know what to do, open to it, be with it, but something in you just says, "I can't." You know, "I can't do it."

That's when I find consciously bringing in the bigger picture helps. This is the particular representation of this particular aspect of suffering in the world. That doesn't make it go away or better, but sometimes it gives me more courage, more motivation to be with it.

I want to say I don't mean it in the way that some people have said, as a way of denigrating your own suffering. "Well, I feel this pain, but what about all the people who are in the hospital? So I shouldn't be complaining." You might notice what that attitude is in the mind, right? It's aversion. We're not talking about aversion.

We're talking about, "Oh, okay, let me just for a moment be the representative"—even of something like hunger. "How can I be hungry when people are starving?" No—I'm hungry. That could actually bring us into empathy with people who are really hungry, or people who are really lost in confusion.

This practice is a continuing call to the courage to open into the unknown of each moment, to meet things we never thought we could meet. When we fall back into our personality beliefs—well, this is beyond me, I'm just a simple soul, I thought maybe I'd have a few nice meditation experiences, but I could never be enlightened. I mean, I come, I practice and all, but for me to really be free? If I really look at it, do I hold that possibility? Of course, as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, it's not the personality that's enlightened, which is actually a huge relief.

Ajahn Sumedho said something really interesting in a retreat we were on once. He was talking about Westerners, people with a Western education and cultural upbringing. He said he feels that for people with a Western education and upbringing, one of the biggest hindrances is self-doubt—self-doubt in terms of not having confidence or faith in our own insights, our own experiences, those momentary experiences of the potential of freedom. Absolute moments of freedom—really seeing, say, the emptiness of personality view, or just seeing that something you were really suffering from is no problem. I mean, you've all had experiences of seeing impermanence, seeing the uncontrollability, and the freedom that comes with that.

He says that for our insights into awareness, our liberating insights, in part our self-doubt is so strong because—this is Sumedho's view—our personalities and our belief in our personalities is so strong that we really rely on and take refuge in our personalities in a powerful way. Our personalities become our reference point. So when something doesn't go the way we think it should, we're back in our personality.

Let me give you an example. When in a relaxed, non-grasping mode of practice, there's not much velcro, not much clinging, things are just happening, the sine wave is just going—then it might be really obvious, as Buddhadasa says, that the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all. Just a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. Clinging to anything—clinging to this thought, clinging to a view, clinging to a pleasant feeling, clinging to an extra piece of toast, whatever it is.

And that can also be noticed. Sense of self arises. Sense of self vanishes. It's really no big deal. Just another thing to notice. There's no personality view really going on at that time. Even so, emotions can be coming, thoughts are coming, our personality patterns can still be running. But we're just seeing them as causes and conditions. I know if I walk into a particular situation—say I'm by myself, on a retreat, and I've been in my room sitting just by myself, and then I walk into the dining room—unless I'm incredibly still in the mind, as soon as there's seeing, little judgments start to come up. But that can just be seen as cause and effect, cause and effect. It just goes into empty space. There's no big personality view around that.

It's fine. There's a tenderness. There's a peace. This is how it is. You can just really see it coming and going. No problem.

And then, as you know, the contraction starts. You can't quite say why it changed. You can see it's a little more sticky. There's the judgment coming. Judgment, but it's okay. It's a little more sticky, but you're still seeing it. It gets stickier and stickier, and then no problem. And then all of a sudden, it is a problem. A big problem.

"I am so judgmental. Why doesn't this stop? It was so clear. How can I get caught back in this again?" I, I, I. And we're back in.

This is what sakkāya-diṭṭhi means. We really believe this view of "I did this. I shouldn't be doing this. I should be better. But of course, this is the type of person I am. What do I expect? I expect to be enlightened." You know, "Okay, I'll schlep through another day, another week, another month. I'll keep doing it because what else is there to do? But we all know, where is it going to go? Nowhere. Because my personality is so strong."

And this one we really believe. We really believe. We take refuge in our personality so much. It's the default reference point. And from this place comes what makes it really hard sometimes to keep going.

Let me just give you an example of how it could be different. A friend of mine, a Burmese guy, was on a retreat with me in Burma, and he was translating. He hasn't done too much practice. He's very intellectual, but still different conditioning. He was translating for U Lakhana, and the instructions were the noting practice where you note whatever's arising. As U Lakhana described it, he was saying if anger arises, you note "anger, anger, anger," and it goes away. If this arises, you note "sadness, sadness, sadness," and it goes away. And then he left.

Sometimes the other teachers would take questions. And one American—Canadian guy—said, "Well, I note it three times and it doesn't go away. What am I doing wrong?" And he's really upset. "What can I do? It lasts longer than three times!" And we're all saying, "Of course, never mind," all the stuff we tell you.

Later, my friend who was the translator said, "Oh, that was so interesting, because it doesn't go away in three times for us either."

I said, "Oh, I didn't hear what you said. Well, what do you do when it doesn't go away?"

He said, "Well, we go, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

You get a sense of the difference, the suffering that comes from each approach.

I was listening to a talk, a talk on a CD by Pema Chödrön.

I was just driving in my car, listening to a talk by Pema Chödrön about compassion. What I remember most is her point about how in life and in retreat both—though retreat is just magnified, intensified—as we stay on a path of practice, a path of awakening, anyone who stays on the path of really exploring their experience, their mind and body in a steady way, we're going to come up against that which we really, really, really don't want to have to face, one way or another.

This is a lot of what starts to happen at this point on retreat. It might be some huge trauma from the past. A lot of times it can just be irritation, or discomfort, or sleepiness. It doesn't have to be some huge thing—it might be, but it doesn't have to be. It's some pattern of mind that we've almost unconsciously structured our lives around not having to totally be there with. We can move away.

And here, as the spirals deepen—I say sine waves, but it's also like spirals—have you noticed you keep seeing the same insights over and over, deeper and deeper? "But I saw that one. I got it already. I know this is a habit. I'm ready to be done with it." No, you're not. Down and down, spiral, spiral. It's got to come in a deeper, more subtle way.

That which we really don't want to be with can take many forms and different intensities at different times. But just know that it's not a mistake. It's what requires so much courage and steadfastness and faith and compassion—to just continue to show up in every sitting and every walking.

By this time, you know you're more or less aware as you're moving through the day, as you're doing things. You really have got it that your mind and body is going with you wherever you go. You really can't get away from it too well.

And so when we're in the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, patterns can come up. It can be unworthiness. It can be loneliness. It can be the groundlessness of impermanence, the chaos of no control. It could be the judgment of no clear progress. It could be aggression. It could be boredom—massive boredom. It could be anything or all of the above, different things at different times. But when it comes up: "I can't do it."

Pema Chödrön was saying she had noticed in all her years in the monastery and working with people that so often people come for longer retreats or shorter retreats, or she's seen them working through their lives. They can come and practice for a few years, coming and practicing but mostly getting the goodies. Come to feel a little bit better, come to have some nice meditation, come to feel better in their life—which there's nothing wrong with. Feeling better in our lives—everybody around us feels better if we feel better in our lives. I'm not putting that down.

But she noticed how when, for some people, it hits this place that we don't even know we don't want to go there—but we don't—they're out the door. Just out the door. "Oh, this isn't what I signed up for."

I'm not saying anyone here is doing that. You're all still here. Maybe right now you're in a space where you're going, "Oh, this is great. I'm in the dessert phase." That's wonderful. We need to have some dessert phases so that we can go back and ask, "Now can I find the courage? Can I find the wisdom to meet this new thing with compassion and to really trust that this isn't something going wrong?"

This is really the depth of identification, of personality view, opening up to be met with wisdom and compassion. How we meet this difficult experience right now is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. Compassion isn't something that happens out there.

It's like meeting this experience right now without aggression, without pushing away, without needing to change. This is what we've been talking about the whole time. There's nothing new about that. But noticing—it's not about making the experience better, but just the fact that for a moment you take a breath and you go, "Okay, fear. Fear is like this."

Quite a few people have mentioned they've been able, just for a moment, to recognize: fear is like this. That's so different from when fear's driving the bus, when fear's telling us all the stories, all the stuff we do not to feel fear. Or aggression, or greed, or loneliness, or grief, or impatience—you name it. We all have our particular ones.

And so, as Ajahn Chah said, it's like many people are out the door. I just want you to appreciate that you're not out the door. We may take a little hike in our heads, but then we wake up and we're still here. That's okay. Because this isn't about pushing, but it's about finding that motivation that comes really from love of awakening, from kindness, from courage. The courage actually comes from the wisdom, the faith, that gives us a stronger courage to keep going.

And that's why, as you go along, it both gets easier and more difficult at the same time. Have you noticed that sometimes? It's like what you're going through maybe the last couple of weeks, you think, "Oh, this is just what I was going through in the beginning." But it's not. It's so much more intense. You really would have been out the door in the beginning. But now people are coming in and describing this intense stuff, and I'm just starting to think, "Well, how are you doing?" And they go, "Oh, but I'm really fine. I really have the balance. I have the courage. I have the wisdom to be with this." And you do. That's huge. That's amazing.

And that's a movement out of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—to see we have no clue what's really possible, not to limit ourselves with our personality beliefs.

So just some examples of when we get to this place of, "Okay, that's it. I don't have the motivation to keep going." Just to recognize those and see we can find it. Again, one is the strong thing of "I"—it's all about me, I can't do it, it's not going right, I had it but I lost it. That doesn't sound like much in the beginning of practice, but as you're getting deeper in, sometimes the fear that the way the meditation is going is a sign that you're never really going to be able to do it—that can be terrifying. The thought "I'm really never going to understand the truth" can be totally terrifying.

There's a sutta where a monk named Assaji was sick and dying. The Buddha came to him and said, as he was dying—and this was a common thing he would say to monks—"I hope you are not troubled by remorse and regret in regard to your actions, in regard to your *sīla*."

And Assaji said, "I do. I have quite a lot of remorse and regret."

The Buddha said, "In regard to your virtue?"

"No, no, not that."

"Well then what? If you have nothing to reproach yourself in regard to virtue, why are you so troubled by remorse?"

And Assaji said, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations. But now I cannot obtain concentration. And as I cannot obtain concentration, it occurs to me: let me not fall away. Let me not fall away from the path. Let me not fall away from awakening."

So he's dying, and he's in this deep panic because he can't concentrate, thinking he's lost the path. Lucky he had the Buddha there. Because the Buddha said, "Hey, those ascetics and brahmins, Assaji, who regard concentration as the essence and identify concentration with asceticism, who fail to obtain concentration—they might think, 'Let us not fall away.'" But then he gives him the whole teaching: "What do you think? Is form permanent or impermanent?" Going through all five aggregates.

You know, the consciousness of the whole five aggregates that Sally talked about. He goes through the whole thing of everything's impermanent, including mental formations, which concentration is. So therefore, if you understand it, there's nothing to fall away. You're not falling away.

But see how even someone who had been practicing with the Buddha and was quite attained can fall prey to that sakkāya-diṭṭhi of "I've lost my concentration, it's all over, and I'm dying without having awakened." Panic, total panic. And the Buddha says, no, that's not true.

So here we're practicing that, practicing it over and over and over. When you say, "Oh no, I've lost it," right then, that's where you bring in the awareness. "Oh, 'I've lost it' feels like this. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi feels like this." And there's awareness there. That's all. You don't have to fix it or talk back to it or rearrange it or get a new personality or anything. "'I've lost it' feels like this." And you're back with awareness.

Another place we kind of hit a wall, where we just think, "I've really worked hard, but I can't do it one more time," is often when we're with physical or mental experience that is actually very, very difficult—very painful physical experience, very painful mental experience. Many of you have been going through that. And it gets harder, especially when it's a difficult habit of mind, when we not only keep getting caught in it but we also see that we're getting caught in it. "I'm actually more neurotic since I started meditating than less. I not only get angry and yell at someone, I also deeply feel the shame of being angry. And I add on the shame of being a bad meditator on top of it." And it's like, "Oh, great." Or the pain and the reactivity, whatever. "I just can't handle it anymore."

Sumedho also had a great line talking about something else in Thailand. He was sweating through his robes in the hot season. If you haven't been in a hot season in Asia with all these robes on, it really is like being in a tin roof baking. It's like you're in a hundred-fifty-degree oven in the sun. And he said he would just feel like, "I can't bear it. I can't bear another moment." And then he'd find that he could.

And that's really how it is. I get to a place of physical pain, or more often it's aversion in the mind. Not that you're pushing, but the mind just kind of shuts down. You go, "I can't bear this anymore. This is unbearable." And I ask myself at that point, "Oh, really?" And this isn't a judgment. "What's so unbearable about it?" It's a way of getting into what actually is so unbearable about this right now. I usually can't find what's unbearable about it. Although a hint: there's almost always aversion in the mind. Pretty much always aversion.

That doesn't mean, as we've said, that when you're having strong emotional memories, trauma, fear, whatever, and at times the energy of the emotion is much stronger than the energy of mindfulness and you're just getting swept away over and over—the skillful thing doesn't mean push through it. That might mean you back off. You change your object of awareness. You go to mettā. You take a walk. But that's not saying, "I can't do it." That's saying, "Oh, okay, let me find a way to balance the awareness and strengthen the heart to keep on exploring." That's very different. That's skillful means. That's wisdom. We all do that.

Sometimes, again, it's just that sense of, "I've seen this so much, this is such a strong habit, I'm never going to get free of it." And we're back in that cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, where we don't trust beyond our personality view, where we don't trust the depth of our own aspiration, of our own motivation, of what's possible, where we think we know but really we have no clue.

When you first started meditating, however long ago that was, would you ever have imagined you'd come on a six-week or a three-month silent retreat? You think you could bear it? Most people's first retreat is really hard, and if it's not, then your next retreats are even harder. So we really have no clue what's possible.

Another place I want to mention, and this is a little different—not exactly that strong suffering, but as you start to see some intimation that freedom from clinging, or opening to the groundlessness of change, the groundlessness of no stable place to rest... we start to get a sense, some idea, that I'm going to lose some sense of myself. Something—you don't even know what. I use this kind of feeling of some sense of your personality that's comfortable. Or it's often a projection, not actuality, but a projection: "I'm just not going to care about beauty anymore. I'm not going to care about my family." And even though Joseph was talking about how we still appreciate pleasantness, it is different without the clinging. We're not so driven by it. And it does happen that things that were so incredibly important aren't so important anymore.

And then I go, "But I don't know if I want to give up whatever—fill in the blanks. I don't want everything to be old, dull, gray. I can't tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant, between beauty and garbage." You know, if a leper's finger falls in my food bowl, I don't care—which is one of the stories of Mahakashapa. Okay, I'm not aiming for that one, I don't think.

But it can, in a subtle but quite profound way, be like a sense of dying to something. And we don't want to die to that. There have been many times in my practice where I've felt a deep sense of real grief, as if some part of me—this is a concept, but some part of me, some sense of Carol personality, I couldn't even say what—is dying, is going away, is being lost. And there's this sense of wanting to hold on to it. Why? God knows. It wasn't so lovely. But a sense of wanting to hold on to it—a comfort with the familiar. Like it's an old cloak, an old shabby cloak we put on, but it's me and I'm familiar with it and I don't want to look into these other possibilities. It's just a habit, but it's like a series of small deaths. So we mourn them and find the courage, find the willingness to step up again, to be present, to see we really don't know where the next step is going to go.

One of my teachers used to say, "Pick up your foot and then don't put it down again anywhere." It's kind of like that.

So sometimes in practice, the places that get the most unsettling as you practice more and more—maybe the most likely to make us want to roll up the mat and leave—is when we're experiencing the deeply unsatisfactory nature of things. There are times in practice when the so-called dukkha lens reveals that nothing's really satisfying. That's

the first noble truth. There are times when that's just so obvious, and there's nowhere to go to get away from it. It's true, but it's not complete. It's not where we stay. But there are times when we just see that there's no home—in the mind, in the body, in the world.

I went through a phase where I knew that was true, but it would come up: "There's no home." And it was terrifying. There was no home, and it was terrifying. And my mind would go, "I can't bear it." And I'd ask, "What actually can't you bear?" "I don't know, but I can't bear it." And it would keep going on and on. It's a phase. But it's frightening. It's disconcerting.

Or the no control—everything gets chaotic. At times, choiceless awareness is open, spacious, peaceful. And then all of a sudden, it's not. You still think, "I was doing open choiceless awareness, but now it's chaos." Everything is going like crazy.

It's not that I can just notice what's happening. It's all over. It's chaos. And yes, samsara is messy. It's not all nice and tidy. It doesn't mean anything's wrong, but it's very disorienting.

Stephen Batchelor says emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, of seeming protection. That's why it's so scary sometimes. And although it's freeing, it can also bring up great disconcertion, confusion, dis-ease, even fear. It's like being in no man's land. We're losing our reference points.

That's when we want to go back to the sakkāya-diṭṭhi, our reference point. You know, that cage, but it's our reference point. But you don't have to even think about all this. Just that willingness to notice fear. Fear. That's all we need to do. Meet that with karuṇā, with compassion.

And we find we have the courage to recommit over and over and over to—what? We don't know. When we started out, we might have had some idea what we wanted, where we were going. We have to have some idea; we wouldn't have started without one. And I imagine you're finding your ideas of what this path is about, what freedom might be, where it's going—changing. I bet for sure your ideas, even your ideas of who you are and what you're capable of, have really changed.

But then we solidify new ideas. Yet as the wisdom grows and the compassion grows, so the faith grows. And even though what we open to is even more unknown, more disconcerting, with fewer and fewer landmarks, there's a stronger faith, a stronger wisdom to meet it. So practice gets both more difficult and easier as we go along.

But there's no way to really avoid, as Pema Chödrön said, that thing we really don't want to meet. What we do find is that we have more wisdom and more compassion and more faith and courage to actually meet that thing, whatever it is, a little bit at a time.

I want to share a story, an allegory that I really like. I've used this before, and it gives me a sense of how we have to keep making choices over and over. Every time you show up again when it's difficult, you've made that intention. Or rather, you haven't made it—the intention has arisen. Let me be here for this moment. That's an intention of wisdom, of courage, of resolve, which is one of the pāramīs, of compassion. Let me just meet this moment. I don't know where it's going, but let me just lift up my foot again.

Over and over, we're making that commitment. We're re-motivating ourselves. It's not just a one-time thing. That's why I have so much respect for all of you being here. On the hard days, it's like you have to make that commitment every moment almost, just to stay in the sitting, just to get up. You get up and your mind says, "I'm out of here." And then you find yourself in the walking room doing walking. You're walking, and at the end of this walk you think, "That's really it." And then you find yourself in the sitting, doing the sitting. You're showing up.

Because the faith gives you the energy to show up, and that energy gives more wisdom, that gives more compassion, that gives more courage, that gives more faith—and it just keeps spiraling and opening deeper and deeper into the unknown.

A couple of years ago, I had a bad flu and was home for a couple weeks. I couldn't read or anything, so I was watching videos, and I ended up watching the Lord of the Rings trilogy—the whole thing, all in a row. I'd seen it before, but watching it straight through struck me. It's really an allegory, and probably many of you know the story. What struck me was how the courage of choosing is strengthened by wisdom, how we go into situations we never thought we could face. And then it not only strengthens our courage—it strengthens our wisdom and compassion.

And it has a momentum all its own.

So this little being Frodo, this hobbit, gets involved in this whole quest because he has faith in a wise, older wizard. The ring of power, which is evil—the wizard tells him about it, but Frodo has no clue. He's just given this task in his little safe hobbit world, kind of like a perfect English countryside where there's just not really suffering. And he has to take this ring out of his hobbit world to a nearby place he's never been and give it there. He's told it's dangerous. Don't tell anyone. But some friends go with him.

So he's nervous, but it's an adventure. He's never been out. He's trying to do good, and he has no clue—no clue what he's getting involved in. He couldn't even imagine if he wanted to.

And so this trip to this little nearby town outside of hobbit town is a million times more dangerous than he thought. These dark riders, these wraiths—ring wraiths—like ghosts on horses, trying to kill him and his friends. They barely make it to this place in the pouring rain. They get into this establishment that's kind of coarse—not evil, but really rough men. And they're completely out of their element.

"Thank God, here we are. Gandalf's going to be here. We can give him the thing." Well, Gandalf isn't there. Nobody's heard of him. They don't know what to do. And then some of these riders come again and start trying to kill these little guys. Meanwhile, the hobbits have no sense of how much trouble they're in, so they're acting in inappropriate ways—calling attention to themselves, acting out. They're almost killed.

"What do we do now?" And they have to place their faith in this kind of weird-looking guy they've never met or heard of. He says, "You have to come with me. We have to go even further away from your home to this elf land." They don't trust this guy, but they've got nothing else to do. What else can they do?

So they go on this journey of a few more days and they're attacked by these riders, really almost killed. Frodo almost dies. He's stabbed with this magical knife. They barely manage to get him to the elf land of Rivendell before he dies. He's there for weeks. They manage to pull him back.

So here he is, and it's been ten million times more scary and frightening than he ever could have imagined—more evil than he ever thought existed in the universe. But they've also shown a lot more courage than they expected. And now here they are in this elf land, which is like a deva realm. They've always heard about elves, these beautiful, good people.

Up to this point, good and bad has been really very clear. There are clear delineations. You know who's good—the elves. You know who's bad—the ring wraiths. Okay, Strider wasn't clear at first, but once you get to the elf land, you know he's good. And so they're in this deva realm. "Wow, this is amazing!" Better than they ever thought anything could be—after worse than that.

"So this is it. Now we can turn it over and this was a wonderful adventure and I see there's beauty in the world. Now we'll go back home and la la la, everything will be the same."

No way, right? No way.

It turns out that this ring—they have to figure out what to do with it. It has to be taken to the most evil, dangerous place in the whole universe to be destroyed. And who can do it? They're already fighting about it. So little Frodo realizes he has to do it. Again, he knows this is far worse than he ever thought. And he doesn't think he can do it. But no one else is stepping forward. At the same time, he still has no clue what he's signing up for. But he signs up for it. And a band of friends come to help him.

So he thought this beautiful deva realm was the end of it. That was only the beginning. Only the beginning. And then begins this whole three books' worth of a trek with the seven friends through all kinds of dangers. Gandalf, the leader, gets killed. After a while, this band of seven starts to be torn apart from within. The evil in the ring begins to infect one of the people. And Frodo realizes it's getting stronger. But he's just this scared little guy. He can't even trust this group of people anymore. He has to go alone—over to the evil land of Mordor, which is just belching smoke and evil beings. He has no clue how to get there. And he has to go by himself. His faithful friend goes with him into the land where the evil head of everything is getting ready for war. There are tens of thousands of evil orcs. And he has to walk into the middle of this without any battle skills or anything, by himself, because now he can't trust even his friends.

His one little friend goes with him. And as they're getting over and walking, walking, walking for days into worse and worse and worse, trailed by a little kind of evil being who's always trying to ingratiate himself and steal the ring—then the evil stops being just from outside. It starts to eat up Frodo from the inside. He starts not trusting his most devoted companion, who never really had any kind of badness in him. He starts to trust the evil little guy that's following them. And it starts to be that you can't tell what's good and what's bad, what's evil and what's wholesome. It all starts to reveal—as Solzhenitsyn said, Alexander Solzhenitsyn—it's not that some hearts are good and some hearts are bad, but evil and beauty is like a line that goes through all human hearts. And Frodo is finding that.

As he's getting closer and closer, he starts to realize something. First he was doing it because it seemed good and adventurous. Then he was doing it to save his world and make his world okay. Then for his friends. But as he goes on, he realizes: there's no way I'm going to live through this. It becomes so clear he's only doing it because it must be done for the benefit of all beings. He's getting more and more eaten up by the evil in the ring, but the strength of this goodness, the only thing that drives him on, is completely impersonal by this point. There's no way I can survive this. But he keeps on going, keeps on going. And it really is turning into bodhicitta there.

He goes right to the end with no clue of what could happen. And in the end, he can't do it all by himself. Even at the very end, that little seemingly evil twisted being—because that's there, it makes it possible. It bites off his finger and throws the ring, and it falls with the ring into the fire, because at the last minute, Frodo just couldn't let go of it. Just couldn't let go. But then he didn't need to, because events came together in such a way that it happened.

I love this story because if Frodo knew from the beginning where it was going—no way. No way in the world would he have taken it on. But as it goes on and on, the horror brings out a courage and a wisdom and a compassion and a love that just gets stronger and stronger and stronger, giving him the strength to be with more and more difficult things. And the motivation moves from being all about me and my happiness to just really what's for the good of beings. I didn't say it that way at the time, but it was like that. We see the same things but not in the same way.

So I want to end with a quotation from Pema Chödrön about bodhicitta, noble or awakened heart: "We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 62

Buddha's Advice on Becoming Free from Latent Tendencies

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), the Buddha's discourse on abandoning the āsavas—the deep underlying tendencies of sense desire (kāmāsava), attachment to being (bhavāsava), and ignorance (avijjāsava). She frames these teachings within the context of the three vaṭṭas (rounds of saṃsāra) and how sīla, samādhi, and paññā protect us from different levels of defilement: transgression, obsessive states, and latent tendencies.*
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> *Wilson presents the Buddha's seven practical methods for abandoning these latent tendencies: through insight (seeing clearly), restraint at the sense doors, wise use of requisites, patient endurance, wise avoidance, removing unwholesome thoughts, and developing the seven factors of awakening. She emphasizes that the key throughout is wise attention (yoniso manasikāra)—not what we attend to, but how we attend, noticing what feeds or starves the kilesas.*
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> *The talk offers rich practical guidance for daily life and retreat practice, using vivid examples from the speaker's experience as a nun in Thailand. Wilson encourages practitioners to observe without judgment whether their attention is feeding greed, hatred, and delusion or allowing wisdom and compassion to naturally arise. The teaching emphasizes that patience, contentment, and gratitude are not obligations but powerful tools for liberation.*

So as we have said in various ways this whole time, this whole week, all aspects of our path, all the different techniques and focuses of our path are really about freeing our hearts and minds from the influence, from the drive of greed, of hatred, of confusion. Wisdom and compassion naturally arise when our mind isn't so obsessed with these things, when it's not holding fast to whatever it's holding fast to—holding fast to anything.

As Joseph said last night in his talk, when we purify, when our own hearts and minds are purified or are not so enthralled to these kilesa, these torments, then wisdom and compassion are the natural expression, naturally arising. Larry Rosenberg said once—I really like him, he cracks me up—the best thing we can do for others is to develop wisdom and compassion, ease within ourselves. Then we stop bothering other people.

Tonight I want to talk about a specific sutta of the Buddha that I really like. It covers a lot of ground. The Buddha is really working with how it's not only just the focused meditation, but all aspects of our life. We can be working with how our minds are either feeding the kilesa—how the way we're relating to our experience feeds wanting and aversion—or how it starves them. And I think Guy or someone mentioned that this is a metaphor the Buddha uses a lot: feeding and starving. All aspects of life are part of our path.

There's something called the three vattas, the three rounds of samsara, or the three rounds of purification, depending on whether you want to look at it as half full or half empty. The three vattas are sila, samadhi, and paññā.

The first round is deeds or speech. When we act from kilesa, we experience the torment, the kilesa of transgression. We've actually transgressed to the point of acting or speaking in a way that brings harm to ourselves, harm to another. Sila is what protects us from the torments of transgression. Sila, which of course requires mindfulness, requires paying attention, requires good intention, requires wisdom.

When we are protected by sila, we naturally experience freedom from remorse, because remorse comes. Many people have said they've been experiencing memories of even very small, unwholesome things they said or did in the past—not even giving themselves a lot of trouble about it, but just experiencing the remorse, the sadness, the pain of that. "Oh, I didn't understand then. I could have acted better." We're free from that when we're protected by sila from the torments of transgression. And we offer others the gift of fearlessness. That's one of the lovely things here—more or less we're giving each other the gift of fearlessness.

The second level of the rounds of samsara is the obsessive kilesa, the obsessive defilements—when we're not acting on it, but just completely caught up in spinning. I don't know if you've ever had that experience of just spinning in greed or self-hatred. Take your pick from your choice of favorite ones. But "obsessive" really describes it. We're protected from that by samadhi. When the citta, the heart, is collected—and you've all experienced that too, whether you want to acknowledge it to yourselves or not—when the mind and heart is not so distracted, when the attention is more unified and collected, it's as if the obsessive quality of kilesa doesn't have room to get in. There are many, many levels of this purification, but that's one of the lovely things about a more collected, unified mind. It just feels so peaceful not to have all this stuff yammering at us all the time, not to be driven by that. So samadhi suppresses these obsessive torments.

The third level of the round of samsara is called the latent. Latent means underlying. It's not in evidence at the moment, but it could arise at any time. I don't want you to feel like Big Brother is watching you. The latent is described as the underlying potential for kilesa, for these torments of mind to arise given the proper conditions. I'm not saying this to breed fear—you know, like, "Oh my God, I'm working this hard, but at any time it could attack me from any side." But haven't you sometimes noticed this?

Actually, you notice this level more at a point like this in a retreat, when your mind is calmer and you're not as caught up in the huge stuff that was there in the beginning. People come and say, "Oh my god, I'm just seeing clinging all the time now." But it's on a much more subtle level. You walk into our favorite place, the dining room. You can be feeling quite mindful, quite present. You're not off in a train of thought. And it doesn't take much, right? Someone gets in your way, someone slops some food, someone sits in your place, someone who knows what.

And sometimes the mindfulness is strong and no reaction arises. And it's like, wow, notice that. At that point, even the latent underlying tendency wasn't functioning. Wisdom is getting stronger.

But other times, when you're just minding your own business and something happens—boom, a burst of anger so quick, or a burst of greed so quick. Someone told me years ago about their experience with this. They were really mindful and had been working with greed, and it wasn't there. They were walking past—probably at tea time—walking past the food table with no intention to take food whatsoever, very, very mindful. And then they saw, as in a dream, as they walked past the bowl of oranges, their hand reached out and took an orange. Whose hand is that, taking that orange? Just small ways.

So this underlying potential—this is where we can get discouraged. But this is seen through by paññā, by wisdom. The Buddha said that greed, hatred, and delusion at this most subtle level aren't abandoned completely through acts, but through wisely seeing.

This latent underlying level is like a seed. When the seed is there and the conditions are ripe, it can sprout. That's why so many times when you're reading the suttas and the Buddha is talking about his full awakening, he says it's cut off like a palm stump. No more can grow from it. He's kind of alluding to this—nothing else can grow.

One of the definitions of complete, full enlightenment in the Theravada system is that these āsavas are abandoned. Āsava is the word for this latent underlying potential. It's not like something is really there, sitting in you like a big ball of sludge. It's just that when the conditions are right, something could arise.

So imagine that you walk into the dining room and the most annoying thing that always makes you crazy happens, and your mind just goes, "Uh-huh, may you be happy," and keeps going. Lovely. Imagine it was always like that. That's what they're talking about. It's possible. They wouldn't tell us we could do it if we couldn't.

But we can notice it now—notice the times it doesn't arise, notice the times it does arise, with interest.

To describe these āsavas, I'll draw from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is quite the most well-known of the current interpreters and translators from Pali to English. He has a whole series of talks on each sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya—it's a lot of talks. I've only listened up to four. And he's talking about this sutta, the three āsavas.

They're defined as three specific ones, and it's not greed, hatred, and delusion for a change. It's a little more subtle, actually. The āsavas, he says, are the three deepest, most fundamental tendencies or drives that can keep the process of saṃsāra in motion when we're not aware of them—the most likely biases of mind that arise when we're not paying attention, when we're just in robot mode.

The first is kāmāsava, sensual desire, sense desire. The second is bhavāsava—bhava meaning being—attachment to continued existence. And of course, avijjāsava, ignorance, seeing things wrongly. These three.

One interesting thing Bhikkhu Bodhi said is that you'll notice dosa, hatred, is not listed as one of the āsavas. So for all you aversive types out there, finally one little piece of hopeful news: hatred is not considered one of the qualities that binds beings to saṃsāra. He said it's not a wholesome thing, but it causes so much suffering that we see it more quickly.

So these are subtle: sense desire, bhavāsava—attachment to being—and ignorance. These are considered the three āsavas.

And again, it's not the state itself, but these tendencies, these seeds that could sprout given the right conditions—which usually include not being present, not being mindful, include a mind that's confused.

I want to mention again that there are plenty of other wholesome seeds that are also easily sprouting given the right conditions. And that's what we've been cultivating here all this time. It's not just that we're in these hopeless rounds of samsara and should forget about it. We have actually been spending a lot of time—not just here, but throughout your whole spiritual path—recognizing the wholesome, feeding the wholesome.

So you walk into the dining room, someone does something totally outrageous in your mind, and your response is, "Okay, may you be happy." That's a wholesome seed—wisdom, non-aversion, or loving-kindness sprouting. Notice that. Or you walk into a situation where normally you'd feel really self-judging, really shy and embarrassed. You walk in and there's just nothing—just calmness. That's a big deal. Notice that.

The sutta I want to talk about is called "All the Asavas." The Buddha actually lists seven different aspects that we can pay attention to. Very practical. It's nothing new, but I really like it because it points my attention in different directions, all of which function to purify our heart and mind of these habits. It's not just "get into the deepest samadhi you can and stay there." That doesn't work. It's not "stay there until you finally become an arahant." Actually, we can work with other aspects.

All of these are based in wise attention, which Sally talked about. The sutta begins: "Bhikkhus, I say that there is an exhaustion, an abandonment of taints"—that's one of the ways asavas is translated—"in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention."

This is a thread through the whole sutta. When one attends unwisely—and this is also the shorthand for wise effort—it feeds an arisen unwholesome state. The things he's going to talk about give us ways to look at that. Unwise attention can even bring unwholesome states that aren't present into existence in the moment. When we attend wisely, if there are unwholesome states present, it starves them. It doesn't increase them. And wise attention can bring more wholesome states into being without arousing unwholesome states. Actually, just stick with feeding and starving—that's easier. Don't make yourselves crazy with it.

The first category—and I'm not going to list all seven because then you'll just try and remember them, so I'll go through them one at a time—the first is asavas that are abandoned by insight. This is obvious. This is what we've been practicing here: seeing clearly the way things are.

But what I want to highlight is his description of wise attention. He says one who is unskilled in the Dhamma, undisciplined, does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are not fit for attention. This is a really interesting concept to me, because if you don't understand this, you don't attend to the things that are fit—you attend to the things that are unfit.

What tends to happen in my mind is to think there's a list of things that are fit for attention, and a list of things that are not good to pay attention to. But it's not that, of course. It's not in the object at all. It's not inherent in any particular thing that that thing is not fit for attention. The fitness or unfitness is in the wise attention itself, the quality of attention.

This is what we've been saying all along in terms of noticing the attitude, the quality in the mind that's paying attention. And if you can't tell that directly, you can tell by the effect. If what you're paying attention to—not just in the first moment, but over a longer period of time—results in sense desire, wanting to be, and ignorance arising and getting stronger, then there's some way in how you're paying attention that constitutes unwise attention. If they lessen or don't arise, then there's some way you are paying attention that is wise attention.

The example he mentions here, which Sally used in her talk, was very much about views of existence or non-existence—this kind of thinking, which she read about.

I'll just briefly read how he attends unwisely: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I? How was I? Having been what, what did I become? Will I be in the future? What will I be in the future?"

You can get the drift. That doesn't seem like rocket science—it's obviously not going in a helpful direction, right? But when we're in it, it's fascinating, isn't it? "Now let me just think about this. How will I be at the end of this retreat? What's going to happen?" And how many of you have already been thinking about—whether you're leaving tomorrow or in six weeks, I don't care—"How amazing am I going to be at the end of this retreat? How can I impress people with my incredible insight?" That's on a good day, in a good moment. Bad moment, end of the retreat: "God, how am I going to hide from people? I'm worse of a mess than when I arrived. How will I ever...?" That's the same thing. Not so fit for attention, not so fit for attention.

But let me give you another way, more basic, that I personally find fascinating—not just on the level of thought, but on the level of sense experience.

Say there's a sound here in the hall. Maybe it's a ticking clock. This happened years ago at some retreat. I think the clock we had up here ticked. And some yogi was telling me for days this sound was just driving them insane, nuts, ruining their concentration, ruining their practice. The more they paid attention to how it was ruining their practice, the worse it got. They thought, "I'm being mindful of how upset I am and how this is ruining my practice." But really, the attention was unwise attention to the repugnant,

the unpleasant nature of the object. Unwise because you just keep focusing: "This is so unpleasant. This is so unpleasant." And what's getting stronger? The aversion, the ill will is just getting stronger and stronger. But we think we're being mindful.

Now, sometimes we'll say turn back and notice the aversion in your mind. But sometimes that doesn't work. In this case, what worked is she just really connected to the purity of the sound itself—just hearing—just really dropped the resistance into hearing. And the whole rest of it dropped away. It was just hearing.

So sometimes you have to explore. Does giving full attention to that painful sensation feed the hindrances? And as you pay attention to the aversion in your mind, does the wise attention come back, the hindrances get starved? Or does just paying attention to the aversion ramp it up and make it stronger? And if you come right into the sensation, does the mind calm down? Sometimes you have to explore.

This very handy measure of what's being fed and what's being starved—it's not about "I'm good, I'm bad, there's a right, there's a wrong." It's very experiential. You just pay attention to what's happening, not with judgment or "I'm good" or "I'm bad"—just "let's do this, I'm paying attention to this, look what happens... whoa, maybe not so helpful."

In terms of these three āsavas, it's said that what feeds or sprouts the āsava of sense desire is attending to the gratification in sense pleasure. You get a sense of that? Not only is it pleasant—all of these have a "me" in them, right? "This is really pleasant. And I'm noticing pleasant, pleasant..."

So how come all of a sudden I want more? And I'm noticing wanting. And it feels so nice. There's nothing wrong with enjoying pleasant—which there's not. But the gratification, unwise attention to the gratification rather than just being with the pleasant. Just with the sensation itself, or with the sense of, "Wow, liking feels like this." This is subtle, but explore it.

What feeds the seed of being, of wanting continued existence, is the same attending to the gratification in what are called exalted states—the gratification in your meditative states that are really pleasant. And of course we're going to be gratified by it. We just need to really notice that.

It's actually called, in one form, the corruptions of insight. There are stages, experiences in practice that are very pleasant. The mind could be very collected, or whatever. Maybe it's choiceless or whatever—it doesn't matter what it is. But it's pleasant. The

mind is pretty present. You know it's, quote, good practice, whatever the heck that means. You're noticing pleasant. But there's just that subtle, "Yeah, now finally I've hit into the good place."

We're all going to get caught in it sometimes. Don't take it personally. But start to notice it. The corruption of insight is when we don't notice it, and we can just be spinning in that for an extra period of time until it decays—which it will. And then you'll know you were caught because you're really, really bummed out. That's how you know you were caught. No problem, but we can see it sooner.

And what feeds ignorance, of course, is—they say—attending to any mundane thing, which is anything, anything that arises in the, quote, wrong way. But that's actually just when there's delusion in the mind, when we see through the upside-down perceptions, when we're perceiving anything as permanent. The stuff we've talked about: perceiving anything as me or mine, perceiving what can't give us any lasting satisfaction as being reliable, trustworthy, somewhere I can rest and find my home. And the fourth one they always say is seeing what is not lovely as being beautiful, something to hold on to.

So any time we're perceiving in this inverted way, it's both a function of ignorance, but it also feeds further ignorance. You can see these are subtle.

Attending wisely on this one is what leads to insight. It's simply this: noticing the attitude in the mind. Is there wanting? Is there aversion? Is there confusion? If you can't notice the attitude, notice what's being fed. Maybe not the first moment. I mean, if aversion is what you're noticing, and you can be aware of aversion and go, "Oh no," then aversion's getting stronger. That's wrong. But you can be with it. Be with it. And you can see it isn't really going crazy. You might see more of it, but it's not overwhelming you.

Do you know the difference? Just like I said in the beginning, as you're starting to see perhaps more and more and more clinging, and you think, "I should have less clinging after all this," but you're actually seeing much more subtle levels that we never even noticed before. And in the seeing of it, you're not being driven by it so much. The seeing, that wise attention, does actually keep the seed from sprouting. Mindfulness is absolutely our protection in this.

So that's the first one: abandoned by wise seeing, by insight.

The next four are a little more specific. None of these are news to you, but I just want to point them out. The second one is abandoned by restraining. The sutta says, "Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely..." And it always says "reflecting wisely." There's a sense that

we can use a little bit of our reflective mode just to notice what we're doing. When we notice we're getting caught up in a lot more sense desire, we can kind of reflect, "Hmm, what's going on here?"

Reflecting wisely, one abides with the eye faculty restrained, and then all the faculties restrained—the nose faculty, the ear faculty. And while taints and fever of defilement might arise in one who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no taints or fever of defilement when one abides with the eye faculty restrained.

So what does restraint really mean? It doesn't mean going around blindfolded and with earplugs, not letting anything in. I have a friend who tried that once. But that's not exactly it. What it really means is mindfulness and wisdom—*sati-paññā*—right at the sense doors. So that when we're with seeing and we have mindfulness and wisdom at the sense door, we see seeing, we see form. When we don't have that presence, it's judgment and the whole story, that whole *papañca* within two seconds. With hearing, when we're right there with *sati-paññā*—like that woman with the ticking clock—when she was right there with mindfulness and wisdom: "Oh, hearing, unpleasant," right at the sense door. It doesn't have to go into feeding the *kilesas*. It doesn't have to go into all that *papañca*.

I want to read from the Buddha, this great sutta that perhaps many of you are familiar with, where he makes an analogy of the six sense doors. So we all know what the six sense doors are, including the mind. He makes an analogy of them to six animals that live in different domains: a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, and a monkey. Six very different animals. And he says, if you tied each of those animals with a rope, and then you took the six ropes and tied them together in the middle, so those six animals are just tied to each other in a circle—then it's wild, right?

He says these are like the six sense objects. "Monks, when those six hungry animals are all fighting against each other, when they grow weary, then whichever one was the strongest, they would all have to give way to that one. They'd be pulled along by whichever animal was the strongest, going to look for its food."

"In the same way, monks, whenever a bhikkhu, a bhikkhuni, or a layperson fails to practice and develop mindfulness of the body, the eye struggles to draw her towards attractive objects while unattractive objects are repellent to her. The nose, the ear, the tongue, the body, the mind struggles to draw him towards attractive objects of thought while unattractive objects of thought are repellent to him."

Do you get a sense of that? We're walking around, and all six sense doors are competing—which is the most attractive? Whichever one is strongest pulls us that way. Or which is the most repellent? Whichever repellent thing is strongest pushes us away, whether it's a thought, a physical sensation, or a sound. "This, monks, is lack of restraint at the sense doors." The sense doors are all just open. We go to the pleasant, we're pushed from the unpleasant, and it just pulls and pushes us around like that our whole life.

So what is restraint? "In this, seeing objects with the eye, a bhikkhu is not drawn to attractive objects and is not repelled by unattractive objects." Truly this mindfulness is this protection, this equanimity at the sense door. "He remains with firmly established mindfulness as to the body, his mind being boundless, unrestricted. He knows in truth that liberation of the heart, that liberation by wisdom."

Just being present with mindfulness and wisdom at the sense doors, not pulled toward the pleasant and repelled by the unpleasant. Present with pleasant and unpleasant, but just not this, you know—the eyes are open, "Let me see what I can see. Let me do some walking meditation," just looking all around. "Let me hear." Different from hearing, just being with hearing, but instead: "What's that? What's that bird in the distance? What's that sound? Maybe there's something... maybe I could... What's that thought? Let me examine my thoughts. Which one is the most repellent? Let me get all caught up in that."

And then he says, if instead of having the animals just looped together, you took a really stout post and tied each of the animals to the post, they'd all pull on it. And when they got tired, they'd calm down and lie down. That post is mindfulness.

Mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the four foundations of mindfulness. Wise attention, really. So this is sense restraint.

And it's true we might make choices—not to just see if I can meet all pleasant and unpleasant objects with a calm mind, with satipañña. "I'll just open." Thich Nhat Hanh says you don't have to throw open all the windows and let in everything and try to be balanced in the middle of it. So here we do practice some restraint, but not because things are bad—rather to strengthen the satipañña, the mindfulness-wisdom, at the sense door, to learn how to do that.

We've been talking about this a lot, so I don't think I have to go into it too much more. When we don't practice this restraint, we're off in the papañca, the reaction. But one other hint I did want to give from the Buddha that I also think is interesting—on restraint, again on a subtle level. He's talking about seeing here, but it could be anything.

So on seeing attractive forms with the eye: in this scenario we don't have complete satipañña at the sense door, but we're sort of mindful. We can see—say there's a person here that you find really attractive, really beautiful, really handsome, and you keep getting drawn into looking at them. So you're sort of mindful: "Oh yes, seeing, pleasant," and you're falling into it. But you're not completely mindless.

Then the Buddha says: on seeing a form with the eye with real restraint at the sense doors, one does not, in that form, grasp at all the features, grasp at all the signs. You don't go into it so deeply.

Like an example with a beautiful person. Maybe there's some woman you think is beautiful. You go, "Okay, beautiful, falling into it." The grasping at the signs would be, "Well, look how nice the hair is. Look at the clothes. I love the way she walks. Oh, doesn't she seem dignified?" And so you're sort of present—you see what I mean?—but really getting seduced into looking at all the nice things about it. And that's sucking us in, feeding the sense desire with the details that catch our attention. Not that we hate those things, but we just come back: okay, seeing, mindfulness-wisdom right at the eye, seeing pleasant. It's contact, seeing. Like Joseph says, just not hating or pushing away, but exploring that difference between it all being out there and just wisdom-mindfulness being here. Keeping it simple really helps in terms of restraint.

As they say about Thich Nhat Hanh: don't throw all the windows open. It doesn't mean we don't appreciate the beautiful. But again, Thich Nhat Hanh has a great line where he says we can tell the difference between obsessing and getting lost in sense pleasures and appreciating what is beautiful. And what's the difference? It's back to wise attention.

He says—I think I have it here—we have to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. How to tell the difference? Attachment to sense pleasures brings about suffering and entanglement—basically what's being fed: more wanting, more desire, more discontent, both in the present and in the future. The joy and happiness of a peaceful mind brings neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others.

That happiness can sometimes arise from being with a beautiful, pleasant experience. But it just doesn't have the Velcro. It doesn't lead to further wanting, further wanting to be.

So that's all I'll say about that. Oh, just this last line from Ajahn Chah: "When the nose smells an odor, let it be. Leave it at the nose." You can take that with any of the sense doors. Just let it be. That's all it is. Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, thought. That's all it is. So that's back to that whole papañca talk. We'll have to go into that more.

Okay, the third method—and I like this very much too—in the sutta it's translated as "taints that can be abandoned by using."

But it's really attention to the attitude with which we use things—with which we use food, with which we use clothing, with which we use what supports us for a safe and comfortable life.

Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely uses a robe only for protection from cold, for protection from heat, for protection from contact with gadflies, flies, wind, burning and creeping things. So he's not saying you've got to go sit in an anthill. You can protect yourself. And for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience.

The same with alms food. And this is actually something that monks say when they are about to eat their food. Reflecting wisely, he uses alms food not for amusement or for intoxication or feeding vanity or for making yourself beautiful, but for the endurance and the continuance of this body, for ending discomfort, for assisting with the holy life, considering: thus shall I terminate old feelings—like old feelings of hunger—without arousing new feelings, new feelings of greed, and blameless shall I live in comfort and health.

Nothing wrong with eating to be comfortable. Nothing wrong with wearing clothes to protect ourselves. I live in comfort and health. The same with using a resting place for the purpose of being comfortable, for the purpose of your retreat, for the purpose of protection. The same in terms of using medicine. So these are the four requisites of an ordained person—using medicine in a way that's for the benefit of good health. It's quite sensible to be comfortable, to not have difficult feelings of hunger, of being bothered by insects, or conscience, or for good health.

For us, it's the same. We're lay people, so of course we use more things. It's not that we need to restrict ourselves to the four requisites, but to really look with wise discernment at the way we use things in our life. What's feeding greed? What's letting greed be abandoned? What's fueling more a sense of me becoming? What makes life just be more simple and a joyful flow?

I find it a really fun thing to play with—attention to the attitude with which we use things. Certainly now, I mean it's been a long time, but in terms of the whole environment. And this is not to say, "Oh, I shouldn't use things," and then the attitude with which you're using things is negativity. That's also not helpful. But to see: do I take more than I need? Not a should—that's not it—but really looking and seeing.

Here on retreat is a great place to explore it. Do I take—I think I talked about food the other time, because that's such a big hit on retreat. Just noticing. I noticed in myself the "in case" mind. Let me just take a couple extra pieces of fruit, in case. And not only do they rot back in the room, but noticing what's being fed in the mind. It's not too long before I could see it's feeding anxiety. Then every moment: should I take more? Should I take—am I going to be hungry later? Should I eat more now, even though I'm not hungry now?

When I realized I'm not hungry now, just don't eat now. So what if I'm hungry later? Big deal. I'm a little hungry—so what? It's so much more simple. It's so much more peaceful. Life is just a flow. You eat when you're hungry, and when you're not hungry, you stop.

That's one of the things in the ordained sangha—they can only go out for alms once a day and can't keep food overnight. When I was a nun in Thailand, nuns don't have the same amount of rules, and you could keep food overnight. So I had several male friends who were monks in this one monastery, and I ended up with this giant white tray with a moat around it—because ants would get in, so you have to have water all around it—with all these extra fruits and extra sweets that I could then go and offer to my friends the next day. It was a little anxiety-producing, complicating.

It's just so simple when we take what we need and let it go. We're not afraid of being a little hungry later—I'll have something to eat tomorrow. Or for me, I'm always worried when I go somewhere: am I going to be cold? Extra blankets. I go running around the place, collecting all the extra blankets. Where if I was cold, I could just go find an extra blanket.

I really don't need to go collect all the extra blankets. Maybe I don't even use them. Just notice what's being fed in the mind.

Consider the way we dress. I don't mean externally, that there's some judgment about dressing, but I remember one retreat many years ago in Australia with Sayadaw U Pandita. For some reason, the room I was in—it was some weird place—had this giant

full-length mirror. Not a great idea on a retreat. And I had this one dress. I don't know why, but I really just liked it. I liked the colors in it, the flowers. It was bright. You just need something bright somehow on a retreat, or so I told myself.

And I noticed—there's nothing wrong with a dress—but every time I wore that dress, I couldn't walk past the mirror without looking at it. And then you don't just look at the dress. You look at yourself, and then the complications begin. I like it, I don't like it, how do I look, how could I get more, maybe I shouldn't wear it—on and on. Completely unnecessary.

The time I was a nun for a year, we wore white in Thailand, and I had three outfits: one to wear, one washing, and one drying. It was so great, so wonderful, just not to have to get involved in all this complexity.

I remember when I came back home, living upstairs here, and I had this image in my mind of standing with my closet door open, trying to decide what to put on that day. Like, oh my God. This is really, really complicated. It's just so much suffering, such a waste of mental energy. Obviously, I got over it, but just to experience the possibility of how burdensome it can be.

So notice that—how it complicates. Ajahn Sumedho once said that the mind states of contentment and gratitude are really supportive for awakening. This sense of restraint, of paying attention to the attitude with which we use things, seeing what's feeding greed and putting it down—not because it's bad or good, but because who needs the greed?

This leads to contentment, and contentment leads to gratitude. Instead of not having enough stuff or the right food or enough blankets, it becomes: wow, I not only have a bed to sleep in, I have a blanket, and there's heat. I'm not in a tent in the mountains of Pakistan two years after an earthquake. Just not feeding in these simple ways—it's much more powerful than just not feeding greed. It actually strengthens the wholesome, the beautiful states. It gives space for them to arise.

The next factor is called Enduring, which I like to think of as patience. "Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, and contact with gadflies, flies, wind, burning, and creeping things." You get a sense of their life. "He endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words and bodily feelings that are painful, wracking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life."

So patience. But you'll see from the next factor, which is avoiding, that the Buddha isn't saying you must be patient with absolutely everything no matter what. It's with wise discernment. But generally, the sense of endurance, of patience—we've talked

about it a lot. It's an aspect of not bringing anything extra, not bringing ill will or negativity. Just: okay, this is how it is right now. Reflecting wisely, I can be with this difficult experience without adding anything extra.

And even though I go to Pakistan in the cold winter tents, even being here on retreat, on the physical external realm, you have to put up with things that aren't the way you'd have them at home. Maybe by now you've adjusted a lot. Hopefully you're tasting a little bit of the joy that can come from simplicity, the gratitude and contentment. But still, we've had to bear with, to be patient or impatient with things—physical experiences, people not acting the way we want, not getting what we want. God knows our meditation doesn't go the way we want much of the time.

See how patience is just this willingness to be here. Not because you should, not because that's the right thing to do to be a good meditator, but because we're not feeding these underlying tendencies—the craving to become something better, the wanting of sense pleasure, the ignorance.

It's like, okay, this is how it is. Not just because I've got to get through it, but because patience is actually a way to strengthen wisdom, to cut through the habit of feeding the kilesas. It's not just, "Okay, I'll be patient until something better comes along." It's a very proactive, powerful way to strengthen wisdom. It's a big axis of practice.

I'll give examples from Asia, since I'm being a nun, because Asia's great to practice there. It's great just to have examples like this. But the point is not about war stories of what tough times we went through. That's not the point. What's energizing about it is being with the difficult experiences—and they're difficult to me because I'm not used to them. For the people who live there, they're less difficult, but they're also difficult. The Buddha's talking about gadflies and creeping things all the time.

What's energizing is learning that a situation which had been so unpleasant, so difficult, so overwhelming—when we start to meet it with patience instead of aversion, instead of trying to fix it. And that's the real American mind: "Let me just fix this. We could get rid of all this stuff." No. You run into that all the time in Burma and Thailand. I was a nun in Thailand. "Let's just do this. We could fix it. We could get rid of this." No, this is just how it is. "No, we could have better food. We could do that." This is just how it is. "Why is everyone being so obstructionist?"

But you realize, no. It's actually very powerful practice to be in the same situation a few months later and be absolutely happy with the same circumstances.

I'll just give a couple of simple examples. I was in Bangkok in the hot season. In the nun's clothes, you have like three layers—an undershirt and a long-sleeved blouse, and then another thing that goes over it. Of course, polyester, because that stays un-wrinkled, which is somehow very important. And I was in a little kuti with a tin roof. So when the sun comes up, you're baking in there. I mean, it's like an oven. And there's nowhere else to go. There's no fans. There's no electricity most of the time. You think, "Well, this could be air-conditioned." This was a very well-to-do temple. "We could have some AC in here. We could have some fans." Forget it.

I remember seeing the sun coming up in the morning and just going, "Oh. Another day." And there's nowhere else to go. Nowhere to go. Where are you going to go? Go out in the sun or into your kuti. That's it. There was nowhere. And it just wore me down. The food was making me sick.

Then I went up to the forest, and that was cooler. Then it was cold. I could kvetch about that. And on the tin roof of that forest hut—the jungle, they're incredibly loud. You think it's loud here. And this didn't even have loudspeakers like someone was talking about.

But just the sounds in the jungle, and the tokay lizards, and there are snakes all over the place, and the bugs, and the tokay is incredibly loud. And then it came to be mango season, and I had a mango tree right over my kuti. And tin, you know, very loud. And the mangoes would drop off when they were like hard little rocks. So I'd be sitting there, mindful mind, you know—WHANG! I'd jump about ten feet, you know. Mango, mango—WHANG! And that just went on sporadically. You can't time it, you know, for days.

What are you going to do? You have two choices. One of them leads to a lot of suffering. The other one is patience. This is how it is right now.

This is Ajahn Sumedho again. I would call this wise attention. He's calling it metta; I'm calling it wise attention. An attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or faults of any situation, inside or outside of oneself. One is not blinding oneself with an ideal —"Oh, everything's perfect, everything's lovely." Not that. But instead, one is witnessing the unpleasant in a situation, a thing, a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. You simply don't let the mind go into thinking, "I hate it, I don't want it." Just not creating anything around it. This is wise attention. This is patience.

And as I say, the mind truly relaxes around experience. It's not just like, "Okay, I can bear it." That's not patience. It's really this open, connected, relaxed state of heart and mind that truly accepts what's happening. And really, I came to be, in many moments,

truly happy and at peace in situations that had just driven me crazy. And not just for a couple of days it drove me crazy—I'm talking a few months. And so to really see that it really is not the external situation.

And the patience—I guess what was great about practicing in Asia is that you've made the commitment, so you stay there. And to stay there, you either have to deal with the stuff or just be in an aversive snit the whole time. And so it forces us to look at this.

I just want to mention three aspects of patience on arousing bodhicitta from Patrul Rinpoche. I don't want to talk about them at length, but I would remember these three a lot when I'm on retreat. They inspire me. All of these three are to help arouse bodhicitta.

The first is patience when one is wronged—patience when wronged. In other words, not giving rise to anger.

The second is patience to bear hardships for the Dharma, which you're all doing here when you're sitting there and your butt is killing you and you say, "Let me just be with it a little longer." Patience to bear hardships for the Dharma.

The third is patience to face the profound truth without fear. That doesn't mean fear doesn't come, but it just means we're willing to gently, gently reconnect again.

Patience when wronged. Patience to bear hardships for the Dharma. Patience to face the profound truth without fear.

The next one, and this shows to me the practicality of the Buddha, is taints that can be abandoned by avoiding—by avoiding difficult, painful, unwholesome things. And this, I think, is so practical, not idealistic. I mean, the things he says to avoid are obvious, but aren't there times we can get in our practice and something is just so intense, or you're hurting your knees sitting, and you think, "No, I need to be with anything." You're having extreme pain, and there's this idea in the mind: "If I was a good practitioner, my mind just wouldn't move. It just wouldn't move, no matter how intense the pain is, no matter how much I enjoy something. Therefore, I'm not going to avoid it. I'm going to go right in."

So he says, "Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, avoids a savage elephant." Okay, he's talking about big things. A savage horse, a savage dog, a snake, a stump—

A stump, I guess, so you don't fall over it. A bramble patch, a cesspit, a sewer. Reflecting wisely, he avoids going to unsuitable places or frequenting bad companions, unwholesome companions.

And so in a way, it's sensible. The kind of idealistic thing is, "I should be the wise companion always, and I can be with whoever, and they're not going to bring me back to being more greedy or being more aversive because I'm stronger than that." Well, we're not always stronger than that. It's really noticing, without any kind of self-judgment, what's feeding the hindrances, what's starving them.

And so here, what we avoid may not be a savage elephant, but it may be a savage elephant in your mind. You know how we've said sometimes a huge emotional storm can come, and sometimes there's enough mindfulness to be with it. It's intense, almost overwhelming. But in not a really long time, you can see it doesn't go, but there's some balance. You can tell there's a little bit of mindfulness in it—maybe not a lot, but a little. But then there are other times when it's so strong you're just completely swept away, can't be present. It's just getting stronger and stronger and stronger—the fear, the aversion, the grief, whatever. And we'll say, back off. You need to turn the attention elsewhere. This is really helpful and supportive. That's what the Buddha is saying. Not just to think, "I should be able to be with anything." No. What's helpful?

The energy of the fear is so much stronger than the energy of mindfulness. Then redirect the attention to something that can help balance, that doesn't keep feeding the fear. That's unwise attention at that point. You keep paying attention to the fear, and it's getting worse and worse and worse, and then everything looks dreadful, and you're afraid to step outside, and you're afraid to open your door, and you're afraid—wait a minute, I need to redirect my attention. This isn't wise attention here. And that's what the Buddha is really saying.

And sure, we make choices too here. We've avoided in the way we set this place up. We're not in the middle of Times Square. We don't have TVs playing like they do in the airport, CNN news running twenty-four-seven. In fact, we go to great pains to keep you from finding out anything that's going on, to support the practice. We're avoiding. We're not saying you should be able to do this anywhere, anytime, and if you can't, it's just because you're too weak. No, we're saying, what supports our wise attention here?

So we don't have super comfortable accommodation, but it's comfortable enough. We don't have incredibly rich gourmet food, but we have really good food—almost on the edge of too good, almost on the edge of feeding greed too much. So wise avoidance. We're not saying, why don't you go out shopping when you're feeling a little bored? I think it's good we're in Barre. If you've gone shopping, you know. Once will do it. You have to be in a really bad way to think of something in Barre that you really want. You can do it, but...

I mean, I've whipped up things, even not on retreat. I make it up in my mind. "Oh, I remember that aisle in the supermarket, that row that has this thing." I did that the other day. I completely made it up. The supermarket didn't have that thing. It never had had that thing. It didn't even have that whole category of things I was looking for, which was cake pans. I envisioned the whole row in my mind. Driving around like an idiot looking for this stuff. So save yourself. You don't need to do it.

Wise avoidance really supports our practice.

The last practice—well, there are two more, but I'll tell you that the seventh one I'm not going to discuss because it involves developing the seven factors of awakening, and Guy has fortuitously talked about that already. That's the seventh one that, of course, cultivates wise attention. When the seven factors of awakening are developed completely, we are awakened. That's why they're called the seven factors of awakening.

So the sixth one is called removing. The way the Buddha describes it is: "Reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu does not endure an arisen thought affected by sensual desire, by ill will, by cruelty. He abandons it."

This points to a very important sutta called "Two Types of Thought," which is really fascinating to me. It's one we use a lot, where the Buddha is talking about before he was the Buddha, when he was still practicing—speaking about his own early practice.

He said, "What if, while doing walking meditation, I divide my thinking into two types?" One type is thinking that leads to his own affliction—thinking colored by sense desire, by ill will, by cruelty. The other type is the opposite: wise thought, where sense desire transforms to renunciation, to non-greed; ill will changes to non-ill will or mettā; cruelty changes to compassion.

But what's interesting is how he describes working with this. He didn't set up these two categories and then say, "Okay, this is good, this is bad. It should be like that. I hate myself whenever these bad ones come." He walked, and with this interest, with this wise attention I've been talking about, he said, "Let me just notice what happens." This is where, if we can simply notice, we see for ourselves that the abandonment of the unwholesome ones comes naturally from wisdom, because they cause us suffering.

So he said, "Let me notice. As I remain heedful, thinking filled with sensuality arose. And I noticed: thinking filled with sensuality, sense desire, has arisen in me." Noticing how it behaves, he said, "I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, to the affliction of others. It obstructs discernment. It obstructs clear seeing. It promotes vexation. It doesn't lead to freedom. And as I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, it subsided."

He didn't say, "I took out the whip and hated myself." As he was noticing it leads to affliction, it subsided. As he noticed that it leads to the affliction of others, that it obstructs discernment, promotes vexation—it subsided. And whenever thinking imbued with sensuality had arisen, he would look at it this way with wise attention and abandon it.

Sometimes it just goes by itself. And sometimes, as we've seen more clearly with certain types of thought—ill will thoughts, cruel thoughts—we know we can't abandon them by trying to get rid of them with aversion. That's not looking in the same way. But when we just look and see, "Oh, when I follow this thought, this is what happens," and we see that clearly without negativity, without taking it personally, we can bring in a quality of resolution. In common parlance: I don't need to go there.

I experienced this very clearly quite some years ago when I first developed a condition—it's actually the reason I sit like this—that affects my joints. When it was first happening, people didn't know what it was, and I was getting much more ill, much less able to move than I am now. Of course there was all the fear: "What about the future?" I was seeing doctors all the time, and they were always offering their wonderful ideas about what horrible thing it could be.

I could notice, because this went on for some months. I really saw what was happening in my mind. I remember one time going down to try and clean the bathtub. It was really hard to get up and down, really hard to stretch like that, and my mind went, "Oh my God," with this fear. "I'm never going to be able to take a walk. I'm never going to be able to do this. I'm never going to..."

And I saw my mind start, and I just thought—I saw so clearly, and I was so grateful for the Dhamma, for mindfulness, for the capacity to watch thoughts. I saw those thoughts, and I said, "You know what? One, who knows? And two, I don't need to go there. I really don't need to go there. Just come back and feel the arm moving on the tub. It's a little stiff. It's a little sore. And that's all that's happening."

And I really could do that over and over. It was amazing freedom—not feeding the fear, not feeding the aversion, not feeding the wanting for something to be different. And it wasn't the whip. It wasn't "you're so bad." It's wisdom.

You all have that ability, when we look and just see what's feeding these āsavas, what's starving them.

I think this is just a really helpful tool—feeding and starving, not taking it personally, whether we're on retreat or whether we're in our daily life.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 63

Trusting Awareness or Yathābhūta (Reprise)

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson invites us to examine what it truly means to trust awareness as our refuge rather than our habitual patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion. She explores the Pāli term yathābhūta ñāṇadassana—often translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they really are"—offering a more nuanced understanding: recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment. This subtle shift reveals the radical nature of present-moment awareness and its transformative potential.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how the three kilesas—lobha (greed), dosa (aversion), and moha (delusion)—function as "makers of measurement," constricting our hearts and coloring our perception. Through vivid examples, from the sound of someone swallowing in the meditation hall to a hunting dog enslaved by its nose, she demonstrates how these habits of mind narrow our world and lead us away from accurate recognition. She emphasizes that awareness itself is never damaged or exhausted by difficult experiences—it can be present with anything.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for shifting our refuge from habitual reactivity to steady, non-judgmental awareness. Wilson shares Ajahn Sumedho's phrase "awareness is the point that includes" and suggests a gentle "Tai Chi move" of meeting experience with curiosity: "Oh, this is like this." Drawing on Dīpā Mā's teaching that freedom brings freshness to every moment, Wilson reminds us that this practice of purifying the heart is not separate from life in the world—it is essential for how we meet ourselves and others with wisdom and compassion.*

In the way that we have been presenting the formal practice, it's quite obvious that the central factor, the essence, is really awareness or mindfulness. So I want to talk a little bit about that—really the radical nature of trusting, truly trusting awareness, mindfulness. Basically, shifting our refuge from our normal habits of mind, including in the meditation, to really trust the transformative power of steady awareness.

We go on about awareness, and it's not a thing. It's not some state we're trying to get to and stay at. It's really an activity, moment to moment. And that's all there is—moment to moment. I love that. Whenever you find yourself trying to create a state of mind, and somewhere in the back there's the unspoken belief that then it'll be like that forever—no, impossible. But also, what's great about it is when you find your mind

filled with self-judging, or you see how much greed is coming up, or you say, "Oh, I'm hopeless, I'll never be concentrated," whatever your deal is—it's only this moment. No matter how unbearable it is, it's only this moment. That's amazing.

So when we try to think about what the potential of freedom from craving might be, you don't have to jump to the arhat never experiencing it again. Try opening to the possibility of a moment right now of pure awareness, total presence that's free from craving. It's totally within all of our experiences, many times a day. We tend to overlook it because it's quieter than the obnoxious habits that we tend to put our trust in.

This awareness that's a moment-to-moment activity—it's like it's so nothing, right? We do overlook it. And so often, the tendency is to have in the background a sense that when we talk about this total non-judging presence, accepting what's arising in the moment, there's a quality of passivity, of non-doing, that has a little bit of a negative connotation. How can this nothing that's completely non-interfering transform anything? How can we trust that?

One thing that I love about the Buddha's teaching, the way he talked about what really frees our heart and mind and what liberation is—as Andrea was saying last night—it's not about adopting a new, an old, or any set of beliefs. It's very simple and elegant. Yes, there are dense, endless books, and it can be extremely dense and complicated too. But the way I like to look at it—and maybe just because I'm too simple—is that the essence, the heart of freedom, begins and ends with right view.

Right view—sometimes we say wise understanding, but right view. As Joseph was saying the other day, he was giving a talk somewhere and talking about right view, and somebody asked about wise understanding. He said, "Let me just be obnoxious for a minute. I didn't say wise understanding. I said right view." I love that because I think, for me, it's very literal.

When the Buddha is talking about what's so simple, what's so elegant, what frees—in a moment and more and more—our heart and mind from the habits of believing the stories, of clinging, of aversion, of me, me, me, me, me, what frees us in a moment from believing that is accurate recognition of things as they are. The freedom of the Buddha isn't about getting to another world. It's about waking up into this one, actually recognizing what the heck is going on in our mind, in our body, instead of just making it all up because we don't recognize accurately.

So right view, the beginning and end of the path—it's so beautiful. What frees our heart from clinging in a moment is recognizing accurately the way things are. And when we recognize that, clinging doesn't make any sense, because it doesn't work. Clinging to what?

Recognizing the self and the world as it is in any moment—how we recognize an experience, how we think about it, how we respond. It's obvious, very simple, how seeing accurately can change that.

Here's a very simple example: a sound occurring in the hall. A similar sound arises over and over at irregular but steady intervals, and you hate it. Then the sound comes. It's unpleasant. You may or may not recognize the unpleasant. But it's a human sound, which always bugs us more than if it was just some random external sound. So we can be aware there's a sound, there's the annoyance—we can be aware of the annoyance or not. But basically, we're really buying into the belief that sound should not be happening. Doesn't that person know better? Or even if they're coughing or burping or swallowing—which, by the way, at some point everyone starts going crazy with their swallowing. Just do it now and get it over with. Don't worry about it. You swallow, we're all swallowing. It's okay.

But you see what I mean when there's that sense of "the sound is really bothering me, it's messing up my concentration, they shouldn't be doing it." Or even if I can think, "They can't help it, but it's messing up my concentration. It's messing up my practice. How can I..." You know the whole deal.

That leads to—that's already action, the action of thinking about it. What to do? Should I move? Should I write a note? Should I leave them one of those metta notes on their cushion? Should I write a note to the manager? Should I complain to my teacher? Should I beat myself up for not being compassionate? Should I sit in my room from now on? And then it takes up your whole day.

You get a sense that we're really taking refuge in, believing the story about how it's messing up my concentration—as if my concentration mattered in the first place, as if that's what it's about. That it's that sound, that that person can't help it, and on and on and on. That's such a simple example. Multiply that by how many sense experiences do we have in a normal day. Multiply that by everybody in the normal world not even stopping to look at their minds. I mean, it's amazing the world isn't in worse shape than it is. It would be possible to get in worse shape than it is. It's amazing it's not.

Recognizing accurately—this is the power of simple mindfulness. I know it can drive people crazy. They come in with whatever story and I go, "Okay, so are you just noticing hearing?" "That doesn't help." "Are you noticing irritation?" "Yes, I'm really aware there's irritation." Yes, we know you're aware. Are you really aware? Aware means not owning, not judging, not hating, not clinging—just noticing. Irritation is like this.

You think, "Yeah, thank you very much. I came here for that." But you try it, because ultimately you've tried everything else that's socially acceptable. So you're sitting here, there's 35 more minutes, try the damn mindfulness—or run out screaming. You just bring awareness to hearing. Just hearing. You come to: "Ah, that's a sound. Oh, that thought—they shouldn't be doing that. Ah, it's irritation." It doesn't necessarily change that pattern, but it takes all the heat out of it because you're seeing accurately. Just this series of things.

And then what often can happen, through just being with the experience without jumping over to the story, is an even more accurate recognition of something you couldn't see before. Say, for example, if it's about another person—suddenly, "Oh, that must be really uncomfortable for them, whatever it is that's going on." Say they have a cold and they're sniffing. "Oh. That must be really uncomfortable." And compassion just naturally arises. Not because it should, because then you'd be a better person. It's just the actual understanding, which isn't accessible when we're lost in the reactivity. It comes by itself. It's not "I should sit here, I should look, I should get to how can I be compassionate—metta, metta, metta." Sometimes that works, but that's not what I'm talking about. Just being with what is. It's like, "Oh, okay, it's not a problem."

Very simple, but this goes on all the time. This recognizing accurately affects the way we think about something, the stories we tell, the views we have, the actions we take here and in the world.

There's a phrase in Pali—it's one of the lists of different kinds of insights with different names. There's one level that's called yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana, which is a pretty so-called powerful level of insight. It's often translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they really are." Ñāṇa-dassana means knowledge and vision; yathā-bhūta is often translated as "things as they really are." But as Gil Fronsdal pointed out to me—he's quite a Pali scholar—a more accurate translation of yathā-bhūta would be "things as they have come to be in this moment."

I'm adding "in this moment" to that translation. And I think that is so perfect. *Yatā bhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment. Recognizing that it's only for this moment, that it's nothing we can hold on to. Now I know—just in this moment. This

requires a total open-hearted presence, free from agenda, assumption, liking, disliking, or "what does it mean about me?" It's that recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment.

This phrase gives us a sense of the complexity of all the causes and conditions that come together to create this moment just as it is. It can't be any other way. And the next moment, the causes have changed and it's different already. This ineffable, unholdable essence—things as they have come to be in this moment. Recognizing that in a moment is the doorway to freedom in that moment. Because there's nothing to hold, and you can't even label "things as they have come to be in this moment."

What causes and conditions had to come together for you to be sitting here? If you start calling all of them up, you'll never come to an end. You can start with your health. You can start with having the financial resources, the family that supported you, the fact that there is a center here, the fact that you have an interest, the fact that we're not at war in this moment, in this place, in this country. The fact that thirty-five years ago people went to India and came back and someone donated money to open this place. The fact that you've had enough to eat for most of your life. The fact that farmers were growing the food. It goes on and on forever.

How do we think we can somehow control and hold on to all of this? And why on earth do we think—which we do—that it's all about me in this moment, when me sitting here is the momentary, constantly changing result of everything coming together?

I just love this: *yatā bhūta ñāna dassana*—knowledge, recognizing things as they have come to be accurately, just for this moment—is the really elegant doorway the Buddha talks about into freedom.

And so in this particular way of practice, we're emphasizing the awareness, the steadiness of cultivating this mindfulness, this awareness—whether it's precise, whether it's broad—that allows by itself for many, many moments of recognizing *yatā bhūta*. We don't have to figure it out in advance. You can't. And that's what's so crazy: we try to think, "How will we get it so the next moment's clearer? How can we control this moment so we know how it'll be in the next moment or the next sitting or the next day?" And anything can happen in any moment. So our only real viable option, if we could trust it, is to just surrender into total presence without resistance, without clinging. Easier said than done, I know—to just being here right now. So that's what we're practicing, because it is easier said than done.

The Buddha often would talk about this, and the suttas say: this is dhamma, visible here and now. As André said last Sunday when he quoted the invitation, "You too, come and see this dhamma, visible here and now." At one point the Buddha asked, "To what extent is this dhamma visible here and now?" And he answered: to the extent that greed, that hatred—which includes aversion, resistance, fear, sadness, all the negativity—and delusion, confusion, are not present in the mind-heart, in the *citta*, in a moment, are not coloring the mind that's noticing what's happening.

I want to talk a little about these three—not so we hate them, but so we recognize them. Because really, our *bhāvanā* practice, the meditation practice, is about the work of the mind. It's to really learn to recognize accurately how the mind is working. It's to learn to recognize how we recognize *yatā bhūta*, and how we can know when we're not. How we can know when our judgment, when our *citta*—that moment of consciousness that comes together with whatever mental factors are present—when that *citta* is colored by wanting, colored by aversion, colored by confusion or delusion, and there's not recognition of that—that's when we don't recognize accurately.

But in the moment we recognize, for example, "Here's craving"—that's a moment of recognizing accurately again. Craving simply becomes the next object of recognition. So it's about learning to get interested in exploring this.

The Buddha talks about this all the time. I know you're all familiar with these, but just to remind us very simply: wanting, clinging, desire, aversion, hatred, fear, confusion, delusion, "me, me, me"—the recognition is all we need to do. But when we don't recognize, these are such deeply ingrained habits that arise so naturally and spontaneously in our minds, in our hearts, in response to any sense perception, any sense contact. They're so familiar that we often don't recognize them, because it's just... familiar. We think, "Yeah, it is right—that person is making a noise and that noise is messing up my meditation, and that is the problem in this sitting. Anyone would agree with that."

So it's really learning to see where the suffering is. Because suffering begins, arises, in our heart and mind in a moment. It's abandoned, it vanishes, in our heart and mind in a moment. I love that. I keep emphasizing "in that moment" because it makes it all workable. You don't have to do it forever. This moment—it's workable.

So learning how these habits obscure our clarity. The Buddha also said that greed, hatred, and confusion—or delusion—are makers of measurement. Makers of measurement in our heart, in our mind. And you can actually feel that: the kind of constriction, the limitation of our heart, the sense of me and other, distance and separation and neediness. That arises when we're taking refuge in greed, hatred, and confusion, when we're believing in them.

So just very simply, when there's wanting in the mind and we don't notice it—or we notice it but we're believing it—this is how it turns all our attention outwards towards the thing wanted.

My brother used to have a hunting hound dog, a very sweet dog. But these dogs are bred so that their sense of smell is incredibly sensitive. And this poor dog, he was like a slave to his nose, to smelling. He would come into the house every time and we would have to hide all the wastebaskets, all the garbage cans. Whenever I would go to visit, I would have to zip up my suitcase because anything that had anything to do with food, or had any scent of human being or animal on it—like if you had a dirty shirt—he would smell it. He couldn't keep his nose out. He'd go in the room, go in the suitcase, go through everything, pull out that dirty shirt because it had animal smell on it.

He would come in the house and just couldn't go lie down. He had to follow his nose around. The poor dog. He'd go outside and have to run around the whole yard smelling everywhere an animal had been. And it just seems to me like a great image for craving. The next thing, the next thing, the next thing. It's going to do it. It's going to satisfy. And it never ends. Then he'd just flop down exhausted and sleep for about ten hours. I never saw a dog sleep so much. Usually dogs are up early, but this dog was sleeping late. Nine in the morning, you're like, come on, get up and go for a walk.

So I'm joking, but you see how it does this to us. We're looking outward, going to the next thing. And when this thing doesn't satisfy, craving has this seductive promise: oh, but the next one will.

In fact, I was talking to someone the other day about how you can even, by not noticing the craving, think that the craving itself is a kind of pleasure. The Buddha says in one of the places where he's talking about the second noble truth—as Andrea mentioned, the cause of suffering is taṇhā, often translated as craving, though closer to thirst—he says, "craving accompanied by delight, searching now here and now there." And that's what we do. Oh yeah, wanting—how great. What's our problem?

But then some daydream comes up and you say, oh, that would be so nice if I could go do that. I'll plan it. And then you spend about twenty minutes cultivating craving, cultivating wanting, really thinking you're having a nice time. Then you wake up and here you are sitting on your pillow. There's twenty more minutes. There's peanut butter and rice cakes for tea. What good did that do you? Oh, but it was so nice. It was so pleasant.

That's taking refuge in craving. We do. I could go into much more, but I just want to touch on these briefly.

**Dosa — aversion.* Dosa *is the Pali word that covers aversion, fear, resistance, all of those states. I like to use* dosa *personally rather than the specifics because it gives the breadth of it, but it also helps me not go into the specific stories. I really find that helpful if the* dosa* you're getting caught in is a kind of self-judgment or self-worthlessness. Because otherwise you go, "Self-worthless, judging. I'm judging again. Can I stop judging? Oh, that's so aversive. It's hopeless. I'm so aversive."

Just *dosa* in the mind. It's not all about you. You're not the only person here with *dosa* arising in the mind. It's the human condition. Just as craving comes up, so does aversion.

In the same way, when aversion, when resistance or fear is present in the *citta*, in the mind, as a response to an immediate experience happening here and now, and we don't recognize it — we're seeing through it again — it shrinks our world.

Take that unpleasant sound in the hall. Doesn't it seem like some little nothing when you're not really caught up in it? But when you're married to that sound with aversion, doesn't it just take over the world? It's *so* loud.

The swallowing thing — it can happen where you start noticing your swallowing. "My God, everybody in the hall is hearing me swallow. It's humiliating." I'm really not making this up. This happens to almost everyone.

I remember one time years ago I was sitting here. I'd been living here. I knew this place. Somehow I got into this sensitive space, and the radiators used to make this popping sound. It just got so loud. I felt like it was machine gun fire going on. It was unbearable. And I was convinced — it leads to action — I was convinced there was something really wrong. The maintenance guys, I knew them. They're very different ones from now. I knew them. I knew they didn't know what to do. Even if something went wrong, they wouldn't know how to fix it.

So I was really running around — don't you do this — I was running around down in the boiler room, trying to see what was wrong with the furnaces because they were making this unbearable sound that was taking over the world. It was no different from how it had always been for five years. It was just my mind.

But aversion takes over and it limits everything. That became my whole experience — how to fix this sound. Enormous suffering.

I'm making silly examples, but you can extrapolate, right?

Or the example Thich Nhat Hanh always gives, which I love: if you have a rough tooth or a tooth that hurts, can you keep your tongue away from it? How much have you been trying? Oh, God. And all the thoughts. What about all your other teeth? Do you notice them?

They don't hurt. They're fine. No. Before it was rough, did you notice them? No. But now this tooth has taken over the world. That's what we do. That's what happens when we don't see.

Aversion in the mind shrinks the consciousness, narrows it, and leads us to actions not based on yathā bhūta—things as they are. Recognizing things as they are doesn't necessarily mean the aversion or the clinging goes away. It means recognizing that's what's happening. "Ah, this is aversion." Being able to hear the sound of the radio. "Oh, it sounds really unpleasant. I don't like it. Here's this thought." That's all happening. Fine. Awareness can be with all of that. That's the radical nature of awareness. We're not saying it has to change everything. We're saying it's able to include, to be totally present with anything. Just letting it be like it is, but with total presence. And total presence doesn't mean, "If I do this for a minute, then it'll get better." It just means yathā bhūta—things that have come to be in this moment is the place, the only place, that suffering arises and that freedom is recognizable. It's the only place. As long as we're resisting or limiting or looking to some other moment, then that's the one thing we can't recognize—how things actually have come to be now. Where's the suffering? Where's the freedom? It's only right here, right now.

And the third hindrance is delusion, confusion, which is of course often harder to recognize because—well, that's its nature. But the obvious aspect of delusion is when you just don't have a clue what's going on. And that, okay, that's great. At least we wake up from that daydream of twenty minutes and think, "Oh yeah, right, I wasn't aware at all." And now I am—appreciating that moment of awareness.

But the underneath, the more pervasive—I don't want to say it's subtle; it's not really subtle—the most pervasive refuge, the most pervasive entrancement of this area of delusion, is the sense of it being all about me. The sense of ownership. The sense of either "this is me," "this is mine," "what does it mean about me"—this sense of measurement.

Sogyal Rinpoche gave a great example. He said in Tibet, when they're setting out the footprint, the foundation to build a house, they just start from a point in the middle and they have a rope to make the diameter. So they just stretch the rope in all directions from that center point. And he said—I don't know if this makes sense, but I like it—he

said the sense of me is like that. Everything begins from that, not an idea, but from that felt sense of me now. And then everything is kind of related back to that or out from that or compared to that. Not everything, but many things.

So for example, James or someone gave the simple example of dropping a fork in the dining room and it makes a clatter. It doesn't immediately trigger, "What does that say about me? Everybody's going to be looking at me." You know, just fork, whatever. But often—me.

Or Joseph has a great story, which I'm sure he wouldn't mind my telling since he tells it, where he was in line on retreat, waiting for a meal, like the second person in line. A lot of people had lined up. And the first person reached for one of those big pots, lifted the lid off, and dropped it—just made a heck of a racket all over the floor.

You can imagine, right, with everyone just standing there bored, waiting for the meal. I know you're really aware doing standing meditation, but maybe there's a little expectation. And Joseph said his first thought when he heard this clanging noise was, "It wasn't me."

This sense of self is our most pervasive experience, the most familiar, the most—well, we don't question it because, obviously, it's about me. I mean, if we followed it through thinking-wise, we wouldn't really say that, but we don't. So it feels so real that we may not recognize that it's there, and we see everything through it.

Back to sitting there: there's that noise, it's wrecking my concentration. Do you see how that relationship to "me" and "my concentration" works? How I feel about the noise, about the concentration, some idea I have of how it should be compared to the past, compared to the future—but it's basically all about me getting something I want. All the time. Not all the time. Much of the time.

This sense of me-ness can be noticed just like anything else. It's not something to hate. It's something to recognize, to get interested in, to notice how when that's in the citta, in the moment of recognition—and we don't recognize it—there'll be maybe not huge recognizable suffering, but some little sense of it being a little bit off. Sometimes it's big, noticeable suffering, but sometimes it's just a little bit off, because it's a maker of limitation, a maker of separation.

And so it's very important to recognize in our practice that these are habits of all of our hearts and minds that we've practiced a lot. It's not personal. The sense of me-ness is not personal. It's just a habit of mind in response to all the six sense door contacts happening over and over—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, sensations in the body, moods, emotions.

We spend, as Tejaniya was saying—it's so obvious—all day long, on or off retreat, it doesn't matter, it's the same mind. These sixth sense experiences are happening every second. There's a seeing, a hearing, a smelling, a tasting, a thought, a mood, an emotion, over and over and over and over. And when there's not quite awareness, when we're just going through our daily life, the habit that is so familiar, that we take such refuge in, is simply: I like this, I don't like that. We may not even say that, but it's pleasant or unpleasant. Oh yeah, this is good. This isn't good. That's not worth paying attention to. This is good. This is not worth paying attention to. Over and over and over.

And then from that, we think, we make up our stories, and we act. So it's incredibly familiar. It feels so normal that sometimes—say, for example, when it's not present—we think, "But this is weird. What's wrong?" Like Andrea's story last night about "Where's the anger? Where's the anger?" This is unfamiliar. This is too weird. She didn't say that—she was happy there was no anger, it sounded like. But we go, "Oh, where's the self-judgment? There must be something wrong. Where's that sense of me? Oh my God, how can I function without a sense of me?" And it came back pretty quick, didn't it? God forbid it should not be there for very long.

So all day long. But it's not personal. It's just nature. And that's really important to remember, to hold in your heart and your memory, because we want to explore when these are present—when we see aversion coming up a lot and going away a lot, when we see wanting and desire coming up. If we're interested in seeing how it's working: "Oh, that's desire. It feels like this." Notice the thoughts. Notice how it narrows the mind. Get interested in all of that. That's the scientific experiment.

How has it come to be in this moment? Desire is just another condition that's arising, yathabhuta, as it's come to be in this moment. We don't need to be afraid of it. We can explore it. We can bring full attention to wanting, to aversion, to self-judgment, to just that sense of me. None of it's personal. And it's not that we want to bring aversion to these habits. That's just doing the same thing. And isn't that what we do? "Oh yes, these are bad."

So it's really about purifying the mind. And then the next time you go out of here you think, "Oh my God, purifying the mind—all I see is greed and aversion. And since I've come here, I only see more. It's hopeless. It's hopeless. So I'm going to do some really strong concentration practice so I can get rid of this greed and aversion." That's the same habit, right? I trust you recognize that that's the same habit of mind. That's how we know how to act.

That's why working with effort is so delicate, so tricky. Because we can put in enormous effort to achieve some state, to get concentrated, to be mindful every moment, to walk slow, to do whatever—and if that effort is being fed moment to moment by "by gum, I'm going to get rid of this," it's the same old thing. Practicing for fulfillment of me. Practicing to get rid of the unpleasant and get more pleasant. That's what we've learned as the way to peace. But it isn't the way to peace. And yet it's so deep in there.

The way to peace is that yathabhuta ñāṇadassana—recognizing accurately things as they have come to be in this moment, with total presence and interest, and not even wanting wisdom out of it. Just that willingness, that radical trust in moment-to-moment awareness, no matter what's arising. Because awareness doesn't care. Awareness isn't stained or damaged or tired out or exhausted. "Oh, there's so much difficult stuff coming up, so the awareness is going to get too frayed at the edges. I need to give it a break." We might get frayed at the edges—that's true. It may be that the energy of awareness isn't strong enough and we're getting lost in the fear or the aversion. Sure, that can happen, because that's our habit.

And when we recognize that, that's when we talk about using skillful means to back out a little bit. If you're forcing the sitting, go and do some walking. Go outside and open up the senses. But it's not the awareness that is having a problem. It's that these habits of mind—of wanting, of aversion, of "it's all about me"—have just gotten really strong again. And that's nature. That's natural. That's going to happen.

What we really keep learning to trust is that at some point, at any point, the awareness comes back again. It doesn't matter if you're sitting, if you're walking, if you're going to the toilet, if you're taking a walk outside. At any moment, just that willingness to radically trust awareness. "Okay, I can't be aware now. I'm so distraught. I'm so distressed. I'm walking up and down. I'll go walk in the woods. I'll do whatever." You're doing that—and there's a smidgen of awareness still there, you know, moment to moment. You're not just hanging it up, getting in your car, and going home. There's a smidgen of awareness, and that's enough. All of a sudden you feel your feet. "Oh, okay, that's what's happening." All of a sudden you realize, "I'm completely lost in this story." But that's awareness.

Completely lost in this story, and I recognize I'm completely lost in this story—that's awareness. Anything awareness can notice.

What we're doing here really, what I hope I'm talking about anyway, is learning to shift where we go for refuge. Learning to shift what we trust, consciously. And it's radical. It's really hard—and for me too, often—to trust awareness.

Sometimes it's not so hard for me now when it's something really difficult, because I know there's no other way out. The more I think about it and worry and try to fix it, the worse it gets. But if I'm really in grief or really upset, okay, just be with it. Just totally be with it. I know that's fine.

Where it's harder for me now to trust awareness is when it's just like, "Oh, la la, thinking about this." I'm walking up and down, I'm thinking, "Oh, it's a la la la." No, that can't be awareness. Awareness means it's sharp. It's clear. It's quiet. It's connected. Awareness can't be awareness with not a lot of energy. There can't be awareness if the mind is cloudy. How could there possibly be awareness if you're sleepy? There could only be awareness if I'm really focused and concentrated.

Awareness is so much more pliable, available, all-inclusive than that. So if you ever find your mind in any way saying awareness can't be here—as soon as you have that thought, there's awareness. It doesn't have to change what's happening. And that's the thing. That's the radical trust. It brings us more into what's happening. We may not like to be more into what's happening, so then we jump back off on the aversion train.

But really, the shift of refuges—it gets to be more and more reliable. Fulfilling is not exactly the right word, but it's the closest word I can come to. Like I said, when I'm in a lot of grief or sadness or sorrow and the mind's doing its thinking, I know: just totally feel it. Sorrow's like this. Thoughts are like this. These are the situations in the world, not going to change. It's totally okay. It's still sad, and the situation's still what it is, and it can't be changed, and my body's doing what it's doing.

Awareness doesn't necessarily change what's happening, but it lets us be fully present with what's happening, and the suffering is gone. The unpleasantness might not be gone, but the suffering of the mind that's in contention with reality is gone. And that's a peace that's very different from pleasant experience. It can be pleasant—you can be fully present just as much with joy as with sorrow. But it's not dependent on pleasant or unpleasant, or liking or disliking it. It certainly doesn't have to mean anything about me.

So what we're doing here is practicing moment after moment after moment, just learning to recognize this simple mindfulness, this simple awareness—to recognize it, learn to trust it, learn to surrender into it.

The kilesas—kilesas is the Pali word for these so-called greed, hatred, confusion, these obstructions of clear seeing of heart and mind—the kilesas are a lot louder than awareness. We're more used to them, but they also call for attention. They're clanging and banging and carrying on. Awareness is just kind of, "Oh yeah, clanging and banging and carrying on. That's fine."

You're probably thinking, "So what? What is that?" The shift from all the energy and attention that goes into the object, that goes into trying to fix everything—and even our mood can be the object—the interest, the attention, the identification (that's not the right word, but it feels like that)—shifts into just being the awareness. And whatever's going on, after a while the awareness just gets so much more interesting in that moment than what's happening.

And this isn't just a meditation and retreat thing.

This is really in our life. Ajahn Sumedho used to like to say, "Awareness is the point that includes." Point, because it's just right now, just right here, an arising experience right now, not a thing. But it includes everything right now without preference, without being stained or harmed or damaged in any way.

So it's really quite radical. It's really quite radical, learning to trust this. How can the steadiness of awareness be so transformative? How can it lead to wisdom? It seems so nebulous. I'm saying, okay, the kilesas are clanging and banging, and you just be aware—clanging and banging. It's like, okay, so what good does that do?

But I think Andrea's story last night about the anger is a really great and very accessible example. When she talked about the first anger and the thought, "Okay, maybe I can just pay attention to the anger rather than going with it"—that was a kind of awareness that had no conceptual overlay. She didn't have a lot of experience, so she wasn't trying to make the awareness be a certain way. She didn't have some idea of what's going to happen if she paid attention. She was like, "I give up. There's nothing else to do. So let's just be with the anger."

That quality of simplicity, of innocence you could say, beginner's mind—just to begin to see that anger, dosa, is taking over. Same for greed, same for "me, me, me"—it's a quality arising in the mind at that moment. It isn't everything. Awareness can notice that too. So that makes it simply another arising mental experience, another thing that can be recognized. And that's very different from the sense of "this is who I am."

So just the noticing—she said, "Oh, okay, well, that's different." And then she didn't even know how it happened, but suddenly she could go back to work on the computer. The energy going into the awareness—often, the energy comes out of the kilesa at that

moment. Not always. If you do it wanting that to happen, it doesn't work. Like we say, it knows. But really, it's because it's not mindfulness. It's not pure awareness. The citta is not pure. The awareness is colored with wanting. "I'll be aware so that..." Oh, that's wanting. It isn't bad. We just want to turn around and recognize what's actually happening. That's all. What's actually happening.

And that steadiness of noticing—this is another thing I love—wisdom arises by itself from the clear seeing that's possible through the noticing. We don't have to create the wisdom.

So again, that example she gave with cutting the apple and just seeing so deeply the thought arising and about to go off into the anger—and the wisdom, the wisdom is another factor in the mind that rose and really made the decision not to go there. And the aversion just was abandoned in that moment. There was wisdom. You really get it from that example. It was not an act of will. It's not a sense of willpower. "I need to look. I need the wisdom that understands why I shouldn't be averse, and then aversion will stop."

How many of us have tried that a million times? "I get it. Greed causes me suffering. I really see it. So I'm going to stop having greed arise as of now."

It doesn't work because that's willpower. It's more *wanting*. But through moment-to-moment seeing, there will be moments when you think, "Oh, look at that food. There should be greed." And it doesn't come. It doesn't come. Wisdom is saying, "Okay, that's okay. You'll get the banana or you won't. Either way, tomorrow, it won't matter." It's gone.

So learning to trust that through the steadiness of awareness, the wisdom, the clear seeing—when we recognize accurately the greed, the aversion, the sense that it's all about me—these things can just kind of *poof* away. They'll come back again in another moment, but that's why it's okay that it's all moments.

But if I'm trying to make it happen, to meet some insight that I've read about in all the Buddha's teachings—those teachings can inform us to pay attention, but if we're trying to make this moment match some idea, you get it? That's not total surrender. How is this moment? What is happening right now? That radical surrender into awareness is very, very powerful.

So it's really that the purification of these habits of mind, the purification of the heart and mind, allows greed, hatred, and delusion to begin arising less frequently. All the different kinds of practices and all the aspects of the path the Buddha talked about

—I think all have in common that in one way or another, they're working at helping us recognize the suffering of greed, hatred, and delusion to begin with, when it's present in our heart and mind, and moving to shift those habits.

Generosity, non-harming behavior, sīla, really focused samatha practice where we get deeply concentrated on one thing until the mind becomes completely absorbed—that is a kind of purification in those moments where the mind is so focused that there's no space for greed, hatred, or confusion to arise. That's why really deep samatha practice is so pleasant. You actually experience this. You see how nice it is when the heart and mind isn't colored by greed, by aversion, by clinging.

But that's not only available in samatha practice. And that's not what we're doing here. There are millions of kinds of practices. Vipassanā practice, which uses enough steadiness of mind to notice the changing sense experiences over and over and over and over, including the mind—that's what we're cultivating in the way that we're teaching here. There are many different forms of that, but it's also, as I've been saying, through the steadiness of awareness, recognizing these habits of mind without aversion, without hating them, without identification, trusting the awareness over and over.

And it's in the way that we actually pay attention in this practice—it's the way we meet the moment—that the purification is happening.

So as I've been saying, in the moment of awareness when greed is arising, there can be, "Oh, wow, that's greed, really greedy right now." Or there can be a habit of, "Well, that's greed, and what can I do to stop it, and I shouldn't be greedy, and let me think about renunciation, or maybe if I do some method, maybe I can push it away." But that's not what we mean by purifying the mind. That's still a lot of willpower.

Notice greed. Awareness that isn't colored. "Oh, greed is like this. Greed is like this." Whether the greed goes away or not, that moment of awareness—the energy has shifted. That moment of awareness is not greedy. That moment of awareness is not aversive. And it's also not about me. "Oh, greed is like this."

So the cultivation of moment after moment after moment of this simple, pure awareness *is* the purification of our heart and mind. It is the practice. Not so much focusing on the object, but getting interested in the quality of the heart, the mind that's paying attention itself. Getting interested in that is always available.

It's sort of like a Tai Chi move. Ajahn Sumedho has a line that I use all the time because it's been so helpful. Say we're lost in anger, lost in self-judging. And sometimes we think we're being mindful—"Well, self-judging, self-judging, this story and this story"—

but there's a kind of pushing. There's still judging the self-judging. The Tai Chi move, the movement into awareness, the way that Sumedho languages it helps me a lot: "Oh, self-judging is like this."

Deep despair. Your heart's bleeding. Oh, heart bleeding is like this.

Just that little shift. It's not to change the experience, but to change the interest into the awareness. It's subtle, but it's really powerful. And over the steadiness of cultivating and trusting that, the transformation is profound. Not the transformation of our outer life—that's what I was saying when I mentioned that the Tibetans say this urge to correct is samsara. It's not about correcting. Can it be so radical, our trust in awareness, that we give up our willful trying to correct and instead trust that through the presence—that open-hearted presence with whatever's arising—awareness can be with anything?

Sayadaw U Pandita, who's a very fierce teacher, said something to me once when something difficult was going on. I can't remember what it was, but he said, "You don't need to be afraid. Awareness can be with anything." It really can. At some moments it can, but then again, it can. And so just that subtle Tai Chi move: "Oh, this is unbearable. This pain is like this." Not to correct, but to trust that through steady awareness, when we recognize accurately, wisdom arises, and we can respond in a much more appropriate way. It's not about not responding in life, as has been said, but it's about not responding when we're trying to fix it, fix it, fix it—rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. That's not really the place where our attention is most useful.

We're very privileged to be able to sit here and look at these relatively subtle movements of our mind and heart over and over, all day long. It doesn't need to be a lot of effort, but it's that interest. Let interest do the work.

It may often seem like this doesn't have much relevance in our life. But learning to really see how our minds work, to understand, to recognize when we're coming from habit in our responses, and knowing that we don't have to be afraid of seeing that—the seeing of it with awareness is what makes the change. This is how the world works. This is how all our minds are working. It may seem like really small, insignificant things here, but it's what we take into our life.

I've used this example a few times over the last couple of years. Last summer, I was in Germany for several weeks, and at one point I visited Dachau, which I'd managed never to go to before. It's a museum now; it was one of the concentration camps. It is

what it is, but it had a very interesting effect on me in terms of deepening my faith, deepening my trust in just what we're doing here—in the absolute essential necessity of it, for my own life and for the world.

The sense I got from the way the museum was set up, which I thought was really well done—I mean, of course it's horrific—and it's not just Dachau. Pick so many places in the world even now where one group of people is being so unbelievably horrific to another group of people. Our individual lives, smaller groups—there's so much hatred and fear and discrimination and economic bullying and racial and gender discrimination. It's endless. And in many places there's so much violence.

I'm not saying this is just about Dachau. But the way it was set up, there would be different large posters with examples of different aspects of the whole thing: the people who were there as prisoners, the people who were there as guards, the people who worked there, the people in the village, how people got there—just everybody. They'd have a broad story, like doctors doing experiments, but then they'd also have pictures, photos of an individual for each category—maybe a doctor, maybe a person who was an inmate, maybe someone who ran the trains, maybe someone who was a guard, someone who was from the Roma community who got interned, someone who was gay who got interned, Jewish people. There'd be the broadness but also the individuality: a photo, a name, and a little bit of a story.

That made it both vast and personal. And what was so clear to me—this is obvious, it's not rocket science—is that it's not like a few weird, horrible people. It's mostly relatively normal people caught up in something, and each person is confronted with something they don't know, have never been in before.

You have no idea in 1932 or something what's going to be going on in 1941. So you're confronted in whichever place you are with little decisions that we have to make. And if we don't understand how our heart and mind work, if we don't understand when we're seeing inaccurately, then we'll make a decision.

We might think, "I would never do something like that. I would never be part of mass hatred of another group. I would never consciously do something to harm another, or to take food when there's not enough food to go around, to take for my family and not for them." We can say all these nice things, just like you can say, "From now on, I'm giving up craving." But it doesn't work. We have to understand. It's for all of us—we make a decision based as best we can, but it might be from fear, from protecting our family, or just a knee-jerk reaction of hostility without realizing it because it's so familiar. And then that leads to another decision, and another, and another, all over the world.

It's the same mind that gets us here rushing to the head of the line because there might not be enough bananas for breakfast. Elbowing the person—I know you don't do this—but elbowing the person out of the way. Okay, it's not a big deal, but here's the thing: it's not that we think "I will never do that," but rather that we learn with love, with kindness, with interest. We understand when these tendencies are arising in our mind, how they function, how they color our experience, how we can be free even within them.

This is not dissociated from life, from what's going on in the world. I really have felt—I felt it before anyway, obviously; I spend my life doing this—but I feel more, I don't know, more committed than ever that this is where we can start. This is a whole life practice. It takes enormous courage and commitment and faith, as Andrea was talking about. And it's radical beyond anything our mind can understand in terms of transforming not the externals, but how we recognize ourselves in the world and others, how we meet ourselves in the world and others. And that transformation is going to affect everyone we come in contact with because we're not separate.

Yathābhūta ñāṇadassana—seeing how things have come to be in this moment. Each moment affects the next moment. Each moment of trusting and awareness makes it a little more easy for the next moment. Each moment of clear seeing, of clear recognition, has an effect. It's one of the conditions leading into the next moment.

I just want to end with something Dipa Ma said. Dipa Ma was this really amazing, tiny Indian woman who was quite realized. She said one time: "There's so much sameness, sameness in ordinary life. We are always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. But once greed, hatred, and delusion are not present, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now every day, every moment is full of taste and zest."

Just a little carrot. But then put it down and recognize that this moment is fresh and new and full of taste and zest.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 64

Emptiness and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential unity of wisdom and compassion in Buddhist practice. She addresses a common misunderstanding: that emptiness (suññatā) and non-self (anattā) teachings can feel distancing or nihilistic when approached only intellectually. Drawing on teachings from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, and Nāgārjuna, she explains that genuine insight into emptiness naturally expresses itself as mettā and karuṇā—not as something we must construct, but as the spontaneous response of a mind no longer bound by self-referencing.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that when our energy isn't consumed by the exhausting habit of "me-making," the heart becomes "ceaselessly responsive," offering friendliness, compassion, or equanimity according to what each moment requires. She quotes Śāntideva's famous teaching: "When I act for the sake of others, no amazement or conceit arises, just like feeding myself." The talk also explores how the brahmavihāras are called "immeasurable" precisely because in moments of pure loving-kindness, the separation between self and other dissolves.*
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> *Practically, Wilson addresses how to work with difficult mind states on retreat—grief, self-hatred, loneliness—not as obstacles to "real" practice but as essential opportunities for developing genuine compassion. She shares the powerful example of civil rights leader John Lewis and the Freedom Riders, illustrating how deep understanding of non-self can manifest as extraordinary courage and love in action. The talk concludes with Nisargadatta Maharaj's teaching: "I am the world, the world is myself"—pointing to how personal suffering, met with kind attention, opens into universal compassion.*

What I think of as the unity of wisdom and compassion—really, tonight I want to focus on how it relates to our practice here. Later, perhaps I'll talk more about action in the world, but here I really want to talk about practice.

Our practice cultivates wisdom. It also cultivates compassion. Wisdom and compassion go together. They're like two bundles holding each other up.

We've talked a lot in the dharma talks about different wisdom aspects of practice—investigation, understanding and exploring our moment-to-moment experience in ways that reveal the impermanent, changing nature, the not-intrinsic-self nature, the five aggregates. We've talked all about that. And this is true. This moving into the experiential

understanding of emptiness—not just an intellectual understanding, but experiential, even just for a moment—is essential to the experience and understanding of freedom, to living in freedom.

But so often people hear about it, read about it, experience it a little for themselves, and a question comes up, or they have a particular response to anatta or no-self: "It's just these five aggregates changing back and forth." It's not really inviting. Sometimes people feel it's distancing, alien, a kind of disconnect, a kind of non-caring. It can be really scary too—unsettling, sometimes frightening. Or people think it's veering into indifference, annihilation: just all aggregates coming and going, what difference does anything make? And we sit up here and say, "It doesn't make any difference. Mindfulness doesn't care."

I think, okay, so that doesn't quite seem whole somehow. It doesn't quite seem complete. And that's true, because that's only half of the equation. Emptiness is completed with compassion. Compassion is completed with emptiness. Or put together, you can't really separate the two in wisdom, in wholeness.

This is from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Dzogchen master. He died just a few years ago. I like this quotation. He says, "The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, or emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, and we are obscured by concepts. Nagarjuna said, it is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the ways of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

When someone says, "Oh, everything's empty, nothing I do matters," and gets into that as a belief rather than an experience, that's incomplete. As Rinpoche says, far more pitiful when we believe in emptiness.

So the wisdom of emptiness needs compassion—karuna, metta, all loving-kindness. And the great thing is, it's not that we then need to somehow think about how to construct this or add it in. It's the natural expression of the mind-heart that's not clinging—not clinging to self, not clinging to views. That sense of the deep experience, or just a moment of emptiness.

The Tibetans have a great way of putting it. When realizing this emptiness of self, of intrinsic separate self-existence, they say the mind, the heart, is ceaselessly responsive. It means that when there is a situation, something to respond to—maybe just hanging

out in emptiness and spaciousness with things coming and going—but when there's a need to respond, the natural, unplanned response of the wise mind and heart will be of friendliness or metta, of compassion or of equanimity, of appreciative joy, of wisdom, according to what's appropriate. It's this appropriate response, ceaselessly responsive. And it makes total sense.

When our energy is not bound up in this obsessive, ceaseless, exhausting self-referencing—have you noticed how much energy that takes? And then you hate it. Have you noticed how much energy that takes? Because that's the same thing: "I hate that I'm self-referencing." That's an endless loop; it goes on forever. But when a moment is just put down, so much energy is released. And when it's with wisdom, the response is appropriate to the situation.

Compassion also is completed through wisdom. The wisdom of emptiness—emptiness of particular self, emptiness of it being all about me, emptiness of thinking I have to know everything ahead of time—but total presence.

This is from the Dalai Lama about this. He's, of course, Mr. Compassion. And he's saying that compassion must be derived from, must arise from our insight into emptiness of inherent self. Because this is where the vast meets the profound—the emptiness of self, the profoundness of compassion for living beings. Only those two, both profound experiential understandings, support one another.

He's saying that without the wisdom of emptiness—and even just momentary, let's keep it momentary, not jump into Arhat—without that wisdom, compassion can so easily fall into despair. Have you noticed that? Knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, knowing that my suffering is avoidable and is based on confusion, but without the wisdom of emptiness, we really can fall into a quality of hopelessness, even despair. So while the compassion may be strong, when it still has some element of me-ness in it, it's limited, and we fall into despair or hopelessness.

With all balancing acts, with all our practice, sometimes one side's stronger, sometimes another side's stronger, but they really serve one another. And we don't actually—my point is—have to sit around and think, "Should I work on wisdom today or should I work on compassion and metta?" No, you don't have to think about it at all. It's natural. And what we're doing here is cultivating both. I really hope that's the only point I'm trying to get across tonight.

As I was saying, when our energy isn't bound up in this relentless self-referencing, so much is released. Stephen Batchelor is a British writer who has translated a lot of Tibetan writings. He translated the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by

Shantideva. This is actually from his introduction to Verses from the Center, his translation of Nagarjuna, which is all about contingency—really all about emptiness, the emptiness of any single inherent existing thing. Contingency is his way of expressing what I was trying to express with yathabhuta: that as things have come to be in this moment is all these different conditions coming together. And now this moment, new ones coming together and changing. You can't pull any condition or experience out of that and say, "This is solid, unchanging."

He's talking about emptiness, but he's talking about Shantideva when he spontaneously spoke this Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. He said, "When Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolved"—that's a good way of putting it, isn't it? A closed sense of self, me and everything else out there, just for a moment. The next moment it may not be there. But when it dissolved, he did not vanish into the abyss of nothingness.

That's what's important to remember when it feels a little frightening, that emptiness. You don't vanish into the abyss of nothingness. When you're in despair, maybe you would wish you would vanish into the abyss of nothingness—that's called nihilism. But you don't.

Batchelor saw, he knew, that to be empty is no longer to be full of oneself. I love that. To be empty is no longer to be full of oneself. That's all. Doesn't it just sound like a relief, even if we imagine it?

And then the natural expression—this very famous line from Shantideva: "When I act for the sake of others, no amazement or conceit arises, just like feeding myself. I hope for nothing in return." Acting for the sake of another is just like feeding myself. Empty of oneself, opening to all. And it's the natural expression, ceaselessly responsive.

It's lovely, wonderful, amazing actually, that it's the natural response of the mind, the heart, in the experience, in the cellular understanding of emptiness, of non-self. To be free of self is to be empty of self. We can reflect on it—I'm talking about it, that's the intellectual level, and you're hopefully listening. We may reflect on it, and we can notice aspects in our actual deep experience. That's the main thing. But then we just really need to keep practicing—mindfulness or metta practice, both—and trust. Not turn it into a view where we try to think our way into what should be compassion.

Just like asking, "What should I be seeing with wisdom?" And then you beat yourself up because you're not seeing some idea you made up. Same with compassion. We have to trust that the depth of compassion and wise response can arise from no longer being full of ourselves.

This example I've used before—I really like it. I'm assuming it's true, but you never know anymore. Even when you hear stuff on public radio, you still never know. So I heard this a couple of years ago. They were actually talking about economic philosophy right after the crash in 2008. They were discussing the economic philosophy of acting in rational self-interest, and they were going, "Duh, it didn't really work." But the example they gave is what I like.

So this, I'm assuming, is true. But even if it's not, it works. There was a new footbridge built over the Thames River in London. When it was opened, people were walking over it, kind of inaugurating the bridge—hundreds of people. It was a big deal. So whatever, four hundred sticks in my mind, but I don't know. People are walking over this bridge on the inaugural day, and there's so many people that it starts shaking. Really shaking and vibrating. Highly embarrassing for the opening of a bridge. But anyway, that's what was happening.

So it's shaking, kind of leaning. Each person, acting in rational self-interest—thinking, doing what's for the good of all—stepped to the other side from the way it was shaking. But all four hundred of them stepped, because each person was acting for herself in rational self-interest, thinking, "If I act for my own good, it will also be for the good of others." I mean, we can sit here and go, "Duh," but how often do we do that? So everybody moved to the one side, and the whole thing just got worse. That didn't work.

My point is, even with our best of intentions—"I want to be compassionate"—when we don't understand accurately, we can still do good things. Don't get me wrong. It's not like I'm going to go sit in my room and never do anything helpful until I'm an arahant. I'm not saying that. But we don't have the big picture, and sometimes we can't tell. That's all just to know that, just to see how the deep understanding of emptiness makes compassion so much more vivid and real—and vice versa.

Without the emptiness, we have this sense of, "How can I keep opening to my own suffering—never mind the suffering of the world—just my own suffering?" It's like, "How can I hold all this without drowning?" That's a question that would often come to my mind. In my own story, or listening to the news, or there's phases where you hear, and we each have phases, where a lot of people you know are suddenly really sick or going through difficult times. You know how there's phases like that? You just kind of go, "Ah, I want to be there. How can I hold this all?"

And that's the question of the me, as if I could somehow hold it all. No. Nor do we have to. It's just suffering arising in emptiness. "The winds of change blow across emptiness—whom can they harm?" The sufferings arise. Being open to it is just that willingness to connect, to touch, to be present, just as it is. Sound familiar? This is a huge aspect of our practice.

And the way our minds work—our minds work with making distinctions. And that's useful, not to put it down.

And the way we talk, the way we do particular practices—in our habit of making distinctions, we can talk about wisdom, emptiness, karuna, compassion, metta, as if they're two different sides of the same thing. But we can think of them as two different things. And in our practices here, there are various specific techniques, specific practices.

Mindfulness practice, which is essentially what we're doing here—moment-to-moment kind mindfulness—I really, really hope that you've heard at least once from one of us, in the way we try to describe mindfulness, that a moment of sati has a quality of kind attention in it. Does that sound familiar? The quality of metta, the quality of compassion.

But essentially, mindfulness—steadiness of awareness of just what is—we've been talking about it as the condition for wisdom, for clear seeing to arise, accurate recognition, seeing into emptiness, seeing into non-self, and then that allows for compassion. And then once a week, we're cultivating the specific metta practice, which can also be done with compassion, with appreciative joy, with equanimity. In that practice, we're really specifically inclining the mind through practice to that particular quality of mind and heart of metta, of compassion.

They can seem like two very different practices, and they are specific practices. But big picture, in terms of our work here, in terms of our life, I want to say: sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom practice, and karuna-metta practice—both are cultivating wisdom. Both are developing kindness and compassion just by the very nature of both aspects.

The Buddha, in talking about Brahmavihara practice, says—he calls it "pervading," and I'll read the whole thing—with loving kindness, with karuna compassion, with appreciative joy, with equanimity, these are called immeasurable deliverance of mind, measureless deliverance of mind. He goes on to remind us that lust is a maker of measurement, hate is a maker of measurement, delusion is a maker of measurement.

I've read these before in relationship to the purification of mindfulness. Now he's talking about it in relationship to the immeasurables, to the Brahmaviharas. He talks about the immeasurable deliverance of mind: "Here, a bhikkhu abides pervading one quarter, sending out one quarter with a mind, with awareness filled with goodwill. Likewise, the second, third, fourth quarter, all the directions above and below, around and everywhere, with an awareness filled with goodwill and to all as to himself. He abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind, with an awareness imbued with loving kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility, without ill will." This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind, immeasurable deliverance of heart.

This is a description of the potential of loving kindness as a deep cultivated practice, of compassion as a deep cultivated practice. Immeasurable, one, because they are developed towards all living beings and thus have a potentially limitless range. We're really just not picking and choosing, but developing loving kindness, compassion towards all living beings, including yourself.

But I would also say they're immeasurable, measureless practices because in a moment of pure mind imbued with loving kindness, or with compassion, or with any of the Brahmaviharas, in that moment there's a real falling away of the concepts of me and other. Even though in the formal practice we use phrases of sending loving kindness to me, to this other person, and visualizations—we use the relative, we use concepts, of course—notice how it moves, that there's this potential of loving kindness equally to all beings. Because in that moment of loving kindness, it's not about me cranking up this good feeling in my heart and sending it to you. It's because the separation that comes about through lust, through ill will, through delusion, drops. And so there's the boundlessness. These practices also open us to this boundless quality that's empty of self, that's empty of separation.

I know personally for me, a lot of this kind of wisdom has arisen in formal metta practice—which I was thinking for years, "No, no, no, I'm into the wisdom side. I don't want to do metta. I won't get any wisdom from that." Huge wisdom. From seeing the concepts that the mind constructs, that we believe, that keep us separate.

And of course, just as wisdom arises in the metta practice, certainly in our mindfulness practice, cultivating mindfulness and wisdom, metta and compassion arise together spontaneously, inseparably from the ongoing momentum and deepening of mindfulness. You can't really separate the two.

Sometimes in the way our experience is unfolding here on retreat—what's going on for you in the sitting and the walking and what you talk about—one or the other side of the coin may be more obvious. Or you may be looking for one or the other and upset because that's not the one that's happening. You know, the sense of wanting to see the subtleties of vedana leading to papañca, and how the papañca creates the sense of self, and what's the difference between consciousness and the contents of consciousness, and how does saññā work with vedana, and is saññā also a mental formation, and all that stuff—really wanting to see cause and effect. Sometimes that's just naturally what's arising, and it's fascinating, and it's just clicking along.

There are the other times. Have you noticed? The other times when, as much as you may want to—"Yesterday I was seeing this subtle vedana and it was so far out, so I'm really going to work on that today and get to the next level of it"—you wake up, and from the moment you wake up, you are just filled with... fill in the blank: grief, self-loathing, grumpiness, boredom, hunger, self-hatred, loneliness, wanting.

You fill in your own blank. But this is in the way. How can I get rid of this and get back to that subtlety? And you know where it goes from there—just spinning, spinning, spinning.

And you come and you talk to us, and we say, "Well, it's really important to meet this with kind attention." And maybe you don't say it, but often people go out thinking, "Right. That's really second-tier practice. When you can't do the real thing, meet what's happening with karuna. It's better than hating it. I guess intellectually I can see that." But underneath, we know it's not the real thing, right? So we'll do it until finally this junk goes away and I can get back into whatever we think we want to get back to that's giving us so much wisdom. In the meantime, we'll mark time.

And I really beg you to know: this is not second-tier practice. It's essential. Essential. It's not like, "Oh, we'll develop compassion because at least we've got something to fall back on." This is an essential part of our waking up.

And how do you think compassion develops? You know what I'm going to say, but unfortunately for us, it's true—from the Dalai Lama. How does it develop? Through deep insight into what suffering is. And how does that develop? The Dalai Lama says this arises by focusing, by opening into our own experience. Where else?

So it's like the first step of really opening to compassion is by opening into our own suffering experiences. That's the personal level. But what's far out again is that the personal opens to the universal. It opens beyond the personal. And again, you're com-

ing into the emptiness of the small self. The Dalai Lama goes on to say that the compassion then strengthens into a sense of empathy, into the real experience of connectedness with all beings.

So really, it can happen—not every time, but it can happen—that when, with whatever little sati we can muster, some little memory of what mindfulness is, we just meet this with kind attention, opening into our own personal suffering becomes the avenue to empathy, to opening into the connectedness of all beings, the emptiness that is also the fullness of caring and compassion for all beings.

That's why the difficult times of retreat, the difficult times of life—we don't wish them on anybody, but nobody gets out without them. That's why they're so important, whatever the difficulty is, because this is right here, the crucible for learning, for experiencing, and for deepening the habit in our heart and mind. The trust, the faith in connectedness, in compassion, in clear seeing as the avenue of freedom and the avenue of real non-separation from beings in the world.

Everything that happens is useful in this way. Not to get rid of the difficult times, but to really see: this is the place. Like Dogen said, "If you can't see the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" When this goes away? No—right here, right now.

Sure, sometimes it's too much for us. Of course. Not having the mind go, "Okay, open to this suffering—boom—now I'm open to connectedness with all beings, compassion, emptiness, la la la." Of course not. But just to know that whatever's arising in this moment, in our mind, in our body, is arising due to all the infinite causes and conditions. In this moment, the past is out of our control. What's arising now, we really can't make it different in this moment, can we? Do you believe that? No, we're going to keep trying, but we can't. This moment is what it is.

How the mind and heart meets this moment is the creation of present-moment habits. And so if what's coming up is your deep habit of self-hatred or loneliness or aversion to somebody else or whatever you can't bear—that's what's coming up. How we meet it with just that intention of clear mindfulness, that's actually an intention of wisdom and compassion. "Oh, it's like this." Not that it goes away or that we understand or anything—just that connectedness in a moment is the development, the strengthening, and the heart and mind coming to find more of a refuge, more of a trust in the wisdom, but also in the compassion to meet whatever's happening.

And far from weak, it's maybe the most powerful. It gives so much strength.

Chögyam Trungpa wrote once that true fearlessness comes from the tender heart. From the tender heart. Not when we're closed and fighting and warrior-like. The tender heart. Just touching this. So tender. And we don't need to be afraid of touch.

Even Sayadaw U Pandita, Mr. Warrior himself—he told me once when I was in an interview with some horrible thing going on, I don't even know what, it didn't matter—and he said with so much compassion, I always felt so much compassion from him, he said, "You know, with mindfulness, with awareness, you don't have to be afraid of anything."

I think they're both the same, the tender heart. The tender heart is where true fearlessness comes. That's the compassion way of looking at it. With awareness, with mindfulness, you don't need to be afraid of anything because mindfulness can hold it. Two different ways of expressing the same thing.

Sogyal Rinpoche said, "The times when you are suffering can be the times when you are open. And when you are extremely vulnerable can be where your greatest strength lies. When you can say to yourself, even for a moment, 'I'm not going to run away from this suffering. I want to use it in the best, richest way that I can so that maybe I'll become more compassionate, more helpful to others.' Suffering, after all, is what teaches us about compassion. If you suffer with awareness"—I'm saying, with tenderness—"you know how it is when others suffer. And if you're in a position to help others, it is through your suffering that you will find the understanding and the compassion to do so."

This is not a second-tier aspect of our practice. It's just as much about the courageous presence, the courageous opening to what is, as mindfulness is.

I want to share a story from the world about the power, the incredible courage that comes with this deep understanding and commitment of non-personal love—to really meet suffering in a different way, in a way that I could never have imagined from my own ideas.

This is really about two people. One is Jim Lawson, whom I haven't met. He's one of my heroes—an older man now. He's an African-American minister, and in the 1950s he was deeply committed to the practice of nonviolence. He went to India and studied with followers of Gandhi, who had died not that long before. His commitment was so deep that during the Korean War, he went to prison as a conscientious objector. He said he could have gotten out of prison because he was a minister, but he didn't feel that was fair if other conscientious objectors had to go to prison. So he's a person who really walks his talk.

In the late 1950s, when the Freedom Rides were about to start coming out of Nashville and the beginning of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was forming there, Jim Lawson was the one teaching workshops about the theory of nonviolence and how to work with nonviolence—not as an attitude that's put on, but as an inner expression of your understanding of your heart, of who you are in the world. As Martin Luther King said, nonviolence means you not only don't shoot a person, but you refuse to hate a person.

What I want to read comes from the biography of John Lewis, who was one of the original Freedom Riders, one of the young students in Nashville who later became head of SNCC. He's been a congressman from Georgia since around 1988. In his autobiography, he's writing about their first marches, but it's really about mettā and compassion and courage.

He says: "Suffering puts us and those around us in touch with our consciences. But suffering can be nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice toward the inflictors of his or her suffering. This is a difficult concept to understand. It is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence.

"We are talking about love here, not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that accepts the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy.

"This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence."

These are powerful words, because this is a man who was beaten severely, numerous times—on marches, on the freedom rides—thrown into prison over and over. This is where he's coming from. He's not talking off the top of his head.

This is the power of this love, metta, compassion that sees through individuality. "The spark of the divine" is Christian language, but it points to the spark of truth beyond our personal self.

Taking this back to our practice for ourselves, we can recognize that our own fear and pain and ugliness and anger clouds that recognition of the spark of the divine, you could say—of the natural emptiness, the pure heart of goodness. It clouds the recognition of that in ourselves, doesn't it? Until we feel that we're just that little, narrow, limited self, feeling these really difficult feelings, and we meet it again with anger.

And when we say, "No, meet that anger"—okay, you're meeting it with anger, great. Anger feels like this. That doesn't fix it. That changes everything. That's the movement from buying into the small self where the spark is hidden, where I am the anger. It's the movement from that into the vastness of emptiness. Anger's like this. It's an expression of the suffering of the world, in my particular experience.

The personal, as the Dalai Lama was saying, can move into the universal. But first we have to find that moment of full-hearted, wise connecting with the personal suffering. We don't get to jump over that piece. We don't get to jump over it. But our own suffering is good enough.

There are amazing people like John Lewis and all of the Freedom Riders—amazing. But it doesn't mean that if we're not doing that, we're not doing the work. Meeting it here, meeting what's going on here.

Joko Beck asked the question: "Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?" Whatever it is. And don't let yourself talk yourself out of a confusing and painful situation just because you don't like what's happening, or you didn't get what you wanted for breakfast, or the person you work with—you don't like working with them. That's nothing compared to a Freedom Rider, right? So no, don't dismiss it. Suffering, here and now.

Can I find it in myself, a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Not the story, but that feeling of whatever it is—loneliness, sadness, self-judgment, wanting, "I'm not good enough," "I can never do it," doubt, whatever it is. You can't name it, it's just ugh. Okay, ugh. It feels like this.

That connectedness—just a moment of connectedness. To me, that's the essence of metta. That's the essence of karuna. The heart-mind, the citta, the consciousness is completely open, turned toward connecting. Spontaneous compassion and understanding springs from that.

Here's a small example from a couple of years ago. Again, I was listening to public radio—you learn a lot of things listening to public radio, though you have to wade through a lot of stuff too. They were interviewing a man about a disease I was not familiar with called Huntington's disease, which is, as I understood from the interview, a

genetic disease passed along the male line from father to son. If you have the genes for it, you're basically going to get it. It comes on in middle age. You'll be fine until middle age, and then it's a severe nerve deterioration, and you die. A really intense, difficult thing.

They were interviewing this man whose father had died of it, and whose elder brother had just died from it as well. He himself was just coming into middle age. He had no symptoms of it, but he was entering the time when he would get it. And he was just talking about it. This man was in London, and he had been a war reporter for the BBC or wherever, all over in these really horrific situations. But he was saying that in some ways, this was the most frightening.

Just talking, and he's speaking very matter-of-factly. And my point is, I was listening. You know how you listen, and you go, "Oh yeah, shame, oh yeah, that's really..." I mean, not like blowing it off, but going, "Oh, that's really hard, that's really sad." It's kind of... you know, we're a little bit open, sort of compassionate. "Oh, yeah, I'm really sorry, it's hard for you." It's not a bad thing, but you know what I mean. It's kind of, "Oh yeah, that person's making a lot of noise. They must be suffering. Metta, metta." And so I was just listening and really thinking, that was pretty tough. And we all have our problems. No, no, it wasn't that bad. I was kind of open.

But I guess being a journalist, he was very clear. They were interviewing him well. And then this one line—it just hit me. It just went in. Because it was so connectable. I really connected.

So he was saying, "Every day when I go for a walk down to the corner store to get the newspaper, or I'm just going for a walk, every day as I'm walking, the thought comes up in my mind: Is this going to be the time when I feel the first sign of weakness?" Assuming, from what all the doctors tell them, that it's going to happen. I mean, you never know, but assuming that. So every day he's just going for his walk, but is this going to be the first day that he feels it?

And just the... I don't know, something about that is so accessible, isn't it, as an experience? I was like, whoa. And then I really felt the compassion, which can have the edge of poignancy, the edge of feeling. Compassion means feeling with the suffering. It doesn't mean despair. But it doesn't mean, "Oh, la la, isn't that suffering?" And really, I felt so clearly that that's my situation. It's all of our situations.

We may not have such a clear forewarning of "this is the thing that's going to get you"—which it still might not be. But for all of us, really, every day, it's true as I'm taking a walk. I'm not saying take your walk going, "Is this the time I'm going to have a

heart attack? Is this the time?" I don't mean that. But the unknown, the not knowing. And in fact, as Spring talked about with impermanence, yeah, all of us. Is this the time? Is this the plane ride that the plane's going to go down? I don't know. You wake up in the middle of the night in some weird state. I mean, I never used to think this before, but now I think, "Well, what if this is like a stroke or something?" And I don't get scared. I go, "Wow, I want to really be here."

Well, that's really all of our states. But what opens into compassion is just that open-hearted connectedness, like listening. Just like mindfulness is like listening to our mind, listening to our body—just that subtle quietness of hearing. And compassion, karuṇā mettā, really is too. Just listening.

I read a lovely quotation from James Baldwin, the writer. He said, "An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard."

So coming back to ourselves, those aspects of your experience that at times are the enemy—just listen. Hear its story. I don't mean the whole story of your life and this and the third grade and your mother. Maybe that comes with it.

But I mean, just let it exist in your loving awareness right now. Grief feels like this. You don't have to do anything about it. Just that gentle touching of it. Let it tell its story, just how it is now. Self-hatred, doubt—whatever it is. Just bearing witness, courageous witness, to the suffering of the world in the particular form of my story of loneliness right now.

And it starts with me, but that's okay. As we're able to be with, for example, my loneliness, at some point—either you don't even realize it—but you're with a friend who's feeling so lonely, and you can say, "Yeah, I know what that's like." You don't have to fix it. You can be there with them.

Have you ever had a period where you're really sick or really suffering—some loss or whatever? And people care. They want to help. But you get the difference between someone who wants to help, meaning make it go away, which can't be done, or someone who's been there before and can just sit with you, be with you while you tell your story or cry or whatever. To me, it's a vast difference.

How do we know it? From being with ourselves.

So sometimes it manifests in that way later with a friend, a person, or anyone who's suffering. Sometimes it actually occurs as we're sitting here, being with what's going on. It's not our natural tendency. And we've talked about that a lot in terms of the vipas-

sanā, haven't we? The tendency to flee from the unpleasant. Of course. When we say just hear the story of the suffering state, the mind goes, "Hey, I don't want to make friends with my violence. I would like it to go away, thank you very much."

But remember, it's that connection—it's that connection that opens us to the truth.

John Samedo has a lovely way, I like it anyway, of describing mettā in connection with the difficult. Because mettā—the proximate, the immediate cause for a moment of mettā to arise—is focusing on the good. That's why we start in the easy way. But it doesn't just stay with the good. Mettā isn't "I like this good part of you, but that part has got to go." It spreads out and includes everything as a mental state. It's a beautiful state. So it starts by seeing the good, and then it includes everything.

Samedo says, "With mettā, one is not blinding oneself with an ideal." So it's not "Oh, everybody's lovely, everything's lovely, you're so lovely, may you be happy." No, you're not blinding yourself with an ideal. It sees more clearly. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, in a person, or in oneself, without creating anything around it.

That I love. That is the emptiness of wisdom. Just witnessing, that tender witnessing of the unpleasant, let's say in ourselves, without creating anything around it. Not a story about how useless you are. Not getting into all the memories of how it should be different. Not a story about "I can't bear it." Not a story of "Again, for the four-thousandth time." Not a fear about where it's going to go, "Oh, this is unbearable." That's just it—don't create a story around it.

Unbearable. Although, as you know, Samedo has this great line about when he was practicing in Thailand, sweating through his robes in the hot season.

And believe me, it's pretty much unbearable over and over for years. I just get to the point where I say, "This is unbearable. I can't bear this another instant." And then I would see that I could.

That's what I love. It's actually one of the lines I say to myself. I'm going, "I can't bear this." And then I ask, "Well, what actually about this moment can't I bear?" I get interested. So far, I've never been able to find what it was, because "I can't bear it" was a mental state. "I can't bear it"—what? Well, I don't like how my knee feels. Grief is really unpleasant. Okay. Look and see. We can bring humor in. What helps us be present?

So our particular experience, even here, can often open into the universal—in small ways, in large ways—where your feeling of sadness, of grief, begins to transform. Many people over the years have reported this, and some here too. It's personal, and you have

your story and all, and it is your personal story. And suddenly, there's a moment when they really open into the grief, the sadness, the loss, and suddenly it's like, "Wow. This is experienced by everybody at some point. Everybody."

And it really is a whole different feeling from "I can't bear this," or "poor me," or even whatever story we're telling. This is one of the things we share as humans on this planet. Not every moment. We also share joy. We also share love. But sometimes I think when there's a moment of deep loss, for example, or a moment of insecurity, or a time when we really don't know what's going to happen, or we're really getting sick—and it just spreads out. Whoa, how many people right now are experiencing loss? Think about people going through war, or so much hardship.

And this isn't a judgment. Thinking this with judgment isn't helpful. But thinking, "Well, this is so hard for me. How is it for people who've lost three kids in a war?" And then not to answer that question, but just to hold, "Oh, this is all of us." I'm kind of feeling the particular that opens into what all of us are going through. And this is the opening into compassion and the opening out of our small sense of self.

So that we really start to see: we are the world. We're each a unique, specific representation of the world, of all humans, of the nature of mind, of the nature of body. We all experience sorrow and loss and joy and love, just like we all experience greed and aversion and boredom and mindfulness and wisdom. Kind of like you can look out here and —something James likes to say—it's like everyone's taking turns, you know, being the wise one, the compassionate one, the sleepy one, the concentrated one. And then the next day it's like it all shifted, musical chairs or something. We're all just partaking in the nature of life at different moments.

And so sometimes when it's too much internally, I open up and just let the world present the nature of the world. Let the suffering of the world wake up my own mind and heart to compassion. Whenever I hear a siren go—a police siren or an ambulance siren—I can feel that somebody's life is changing radically right now. Another time, that could be me. Other times, it has been me.

Go out and just be with nature and the beauty and the joy and the suffering and the unknown quality. All the chipmunks running across the road—have you seen them? You're not driving, but they like to shoot out running across the road. And it's really hard. Try not to hit them. But sooner or later, you see one that's been hit. You just never know.

Nature is beautiful. Nature is cruel. Nature is just how the world is. There's suffering and joy and beauty and happiness. Let it all in.

I love fall.

It's incredible. It's alive. The colors are so beautiful. And they're beautiful because the leaves are dying. The leaves have to die. There has to be winter so they can come again the next year. Nature's like that.

I'll tell you a little nature story about change. I was sitting in Switzerland a couple years ago in this beautiful chalet—just a beautiful spot that friends of mine have. It was June. I hadn't been there in June before. There are fields, small fields all around, and lots of cows up and down the hillsides. So the fields were quite high, filled with wildflowers. The whole air everywhere smelled like honey. I was in raptures. It was really like I was just ecstatic with the beauty. That place makes me really happy anyway. The air is clear, you're up high looking at the high Alps. And the air just smells like honey and the fields are filled with wildflowers and it's incredibly beautiful.

And then after a week or so, it was going to rain. The farmers all came. They worked really hard and cut down all the fields—they make hay for the cows. And then they did this really Swiss thing, which if you haven't been there, you don't know this part of Switzerland. They spray cow manure all over everything. They don't just spread it on. They have a machine that sprays it in particles in the air all over everything, all over the fields. I've been through this before. And when it started, I said, "Oh my god." You can't be outside. The field is right there on all sides. Got to run, close all the windows, and keep them closed for the whole day. It's really intense. You don't want to go out. So I didn't quite make it, but almost. And then I'd go out, and the honey smell was gone. A very different smell was there, quite pungent for several days.

But this is life. The flowers are beautiful, you cut them down, they feed the cows, the cows make the manure. You need the manure so they can grow the fields, so you can have those beautiful flowers the next year. How can you separate any of it? Some is beautiful and some really stinks. And some is in between. All of it. Nature tells us all of it. Just open up. When you can't stand it internally anymore, externally open up. You'll see someone else suffering. That can arouse compassion too. And then come back to yourself. There really isn't any separation.

I'll close with a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

Free from desire and fear on the one hand, and totally responsible for the world on the other. "I am the world, the world is myself." Karuna, metta practice, mindfulness, wisdom practice—two sides of the same thing.

Either one, both of them—we can't escape from recognizing this truth.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 65

Investigating Personality View

Carol Wilson · 1h03

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson offers a practical and accessible exploration of anattā (not-self) and sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view), inviting practitioners to investigate rather than fear these central Buddhist teachings. Drawing from the Vacchagotta Sutta, she illustrates the Buddha's skillful refusal to answer whether there is or is not a self, pointing instead toward direct investigation of experience.

Wilson uses the metaphor of a magic show to describe how our sense of self operates—seeming solid and real only when unexamined, but losing its fascination when we look behind the curtain. She explains how sakkāya-diṭṭhi arises through the process of paṭicca-samuppāda (dependent origination): from contact to feeling to craving to grasping, culminating in what Ajahn Buddhadāsa called 'I-ing and my-ing' (ahaṅkāra and mamaṅkāra). Through vivid everyday examples—from shower curtain struggles to meditation hall sounds—she demonstrates how quickly perception leads to elaborate stories of self.

The talk emphasizes generating contentment with moments of suññatā (emptiness of self) and recognizing atamayyatā—the non-fabricating, non-reactive quality of mind. Wilson encourages practitioners to notice the gaps between self-constructions, to appreciate the 'place of no problem,' and to trust their insights into awareness rather than taking refuge in familiar personality patterns. The teaching concludes with Ajahn Sumedho's reminder that awakening is not about becoming aware but about being awake and aware in this moment.

So tonight I want to talk about investigating the sense of self, the idea of self—that anatta thing.

As hopefully you know by now, or believe, as far as we can tell, all the Buddha's teachings he taught not as philosophical concept, not as some kind of doctrines that we should discuss and try to understand and add to our collection of the way we understand the universe and have arguments with each other about. Everything he taught was to directly point our attention, our experience, to accurate recognition of things as they are. And that recognition, over and over, is what frees our mind, our heart, from confusion and from clinging—that is, from suffering.

And so too with the teachings on anatta, so-called not-self. But we think so much in philosophical, conceptual terms. While it's actually a very fascinating thing to explore in our practice—not some huge, big, monolithic, horrible thing that we somehow have

to get through or get crazy thinking about—it's just something really fascinating to explore. But often just even mentioning anatta or not-self, everyone kind of tightens up or goes into whatever your reaction is.

This was true in the Buddha's time too. There were lots of spiritual seekers of different philosophies, different groups wandering around India, just like the Buddha and his nuns and monks were wandering around India. There are lots of different suttas where one or another is coming and talking to the Buddha, where they're having these dialogues. At the time, there were two kind of opposite views. One is eternalism—that I am a self and it will last after death. The other is annihilationism—that everything's gone, that when you die, there's nothing. But there were views and opinions.

People would come to him, and this is what we do too. We try to think about it, or all these questions come up: What happens to myself when I realize no self? What happens to the self that's here now? If there's no self, then who's eating the oatmeal? If there's no self, who's making these decisions? Who's sitting here? Who decided? On and on.

So some of us can make ourselves a little bit crazy thinking about it a lot and getting all worked up. If there's no self, who's sitting here stressing out, trying to figure out what does this mean about no self? And the more you think like that, the stronger what gets? Sense of me, right? "I've got to figure this out—it's impossible."

The other thing that a lot of times happens—I'm making broad strokes here; hopefully this is meant to be a practical talk, but right now I'm making broad strokes—the other thing that I see in myself or in talking to people is kind of putting the conceptual stuff on the side or trying to say, "Okay, I can't figure it out. So I have this self and I just have to keep practicing until finally I get rid of it." And you're waiting for that big, mind-blowing experience that blows the self away. You finally realize anatta, and you're finally free forever from this sense of self.

Do you get how both of those are coming from a sense of self that's got to change, and then it's gone, and then we will be free? "I will be so happy when I no longer have a sense of self. But in the meantime, I've got to suffer and dig and I can't do it right."

It's not like that. It's not like that at all. It's more about—first we can just explore, it's fascinating—but on the conceptual level, can we be willing to just open into not knowing? Just not knowing. That space, that alive, curious space that doesn't have to land on any definition, on any experience for more than a second.

I want to read you one of the suttas, just a little short one, of one of the wanderers who came to the Buddha—Vacchagotta, who kind of shows up a lot. He never really quite gets it, and he wanders off.

So the wanderer Vacchagotta approached the Buddha and said, "How is it, Master Gotama, is there a self?" And this isn't like the first time he ever heard the Buddha's teachings. And the Blessed One was silent. "Then, Master Gotama, is there no self?" A second time, the Blessed One was silent. So then the wanderer Vacchagotta rose from his seat and departed. He didn't get much.

Then Ananda after that said, "Well, how come you didn't say anything? Why didn't you answer one way or the other?"

And so this is just kind of the subtlety of the Buddha. He said, "If, Ananda, when I was asked by Vacchagotta, 'Is there a self?' I had answered 'There is a self,' that would have been taking the side of all those Brahmins who are eternalists." Because that language—"there is a self"—fed into that view. "If, on the other hand, when he said, 'Is there no self?' I had answered, 'There is no self,' that would have been taking the side of all the ones who are annihilationists." So there's no way he could answer without feeding into the current concepts.

Then he keeps going—that's not all. "If, Ananda, when I was asked by Vacchagotta, 'Is there a self?' I had answered 'There is a self,' would this have been consistent on my part with the arising of the knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?"

So here he's saying all phenomena is not self, and Ananda replies, "No, venerable sir." And if, when asked by Vajagata, "Is there no self?" the Buddha had answered, "There is no self," the wanderer, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, "It seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now."

I can kind of relate to that—maybe not, maybe it's only me—but I can relate to some of these confusions. And the subtlety of the Buddha: he's not interested in propagating some doctrine that "this is how it is." If saying "there's no self" or "all phenomena is not self" is going to fuel a view in the listener's mind, or get them more confused, he doesn't say it. It's really fascinating. I love that because it really points to what he's teaching.

This whole thing I want to talk about tonight is to explore—just to explore—when we notice the experience of a sense of self, or a little bit broader, sakāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, which is talked about a lot. Can we, rather than jump onto whatever view we have—it is, it isn't, it should go, it shouldn't go—just surrender into not knowing, but with awareness, with interest, and actually explore?

The sense of self, the arising of sakāya-diṭṭhi, view of personality, is simply another saṅkhāra, another mental formation arising in a moment. It lasts a little bit. It passes. That's all.

I think Guy read, maybe in his talk on the aggregates—anyway, one line from one of the suttas where the Buddha says that consciousness is like a magic show. And I think to talk about the sense of self or sakāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, that's a really good way to think about it. It's like a magic show.

There's a lovely little pamphlet from many years ago from the Buddhist Publication Society by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda called *The Magic of the Mind*. He uses this metaphor of how it's a magic show. I remember years ago reading that at the very beginning of my practice when I didn't know anybody who practiced. I would just get these books from the Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka. They kind of saved my life, kept me from thinking I was really nuts.

Anyway, just using this image—and it's a great image for the sense of personality view or the sense of self. If there's a magic show and someone's in town doing all this magic, when we just see the externals, we know somehow there's a trick, but we don't see it. So we think, "Wow, that's great! That's amazing!" But when you see behind how the trick is done, all the magic falls apart, doesn't it? It becomes mundane, obvious. You can see—I don't know exactly how they do it—but how he pulls the rabbit out of the hat or whatever. It's okay. It loses its fascination. You can see how it's done.

It's exactly like that with our sense of self. It seems so real, so solid, so taken for granted, so impenetrable, so inescapable—because it's unexamined.

This is from Ramana Maharshi: "The idea of self is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look closely and the ghost vanishes. It was never there. So also with the self or ego"—he's using that word. "So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is not found to exist in any way of separate existence."

So just tonight, a few aspects—because there's so much one could say—but a few ways of using our practice, and it's all stuff we've talked about already, to look behind that curtain of the magic show. Not just once, but ten million times. To really look behind the curtain, not just stop with, "Oh yeah, sense of self again. When am I ever going to get rid of this?" We've stopped looking right there.

Sakāya-diṭṭhi, translated as personality view—in the formal way of talking about the Theravāda stages of awakening, it's said that belief in sakāya-diṭṭhi is seen through at the first level of awakening, stream entry. The belief in personality view. It doesn't mean it doesn't arise anymore. It doesn't mean sense of self doesn't arise anymore. But some of the solidity, some of the magic goes out when we remember to look.

Sayadaw U Lakkhana, a Burmese teacher in the Mahāsi tradition with whom I've taught a few times in Upper Burma, gave a description of sakāya-diṭṭhi that I liked a lot. He defined sakāya as the stream of sixth sense door experiences, the stream of nāma-rūpa. What we've talked about a lot: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, cognizing with the mind. As we've said, just six things happening over and over and over.

Cognizing with the mind encompasses a lot. But that's all, right? Just different things happening.

And so, *sakkāya* is that. And when it's just going along—when people come in and say, "Well, I just had such a great open awareness sitting. Things just coming and going, and it was so nice." Why was it so nice? Because stuff was just coming and going. Just the *sakkāya* going along.

What makes *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, personality view—and this we can notice also—is like seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking. Something comes, and it's as if that internal hand of grasping in the mind comes up and goes, "I. Am. Mine." A thought, a perception, a sound, an unpleasant or pleasant feeling tone. We may not notice what's being grasped, but it's as if everything's coming and going and suddenly—oh. This one is me or mine. Not telegraphed so clearly as that, but it just starts to feel glitched up. And then the whole story of me is created in like a second, which I'll describe in a minute, although I'm sure you're quite aware of it.

So really seeing over and over: some aspect, some phenomena that's just coming and going is mistakenly viewed as me or mine. And that leads, just like that, to a whole series of thoughts and associations and further graspings—birth of sense of self ten million times a day. But without exploring it, it seems like it's just always here.

It's like the story—I'm sure you're quite familiar with the story of the two Zen monks, an older monk and a younger one. They're walking together and they come to a stream that's really quite rapid water. There's a young woman there trying to get across and can't. So the older monk picks her up, they all walk across the stream, he puts her down, and they walk on. Nothing is said.

After quite some time, the younger monk, who has apparently been seething this whole time but hasn't said anything, turns to the older monk and says, "What are you doing? You broke your *sīla*! You broke your precepts! You know you're not allowed to touch a woman, and you just picked her up!" And on and on. The older monk says, "I put her down at the stream. It seems you've been carrying her this whole time."

That's a good example of *sakkāya diṭṭhi*. The younger monk was carrying that perception, the thought about what should be, a sense of self-righteousness and aversion. You can see how it just goes and goes—the sense of him and what's right, the other guy and what's wrong. So strong, so real. We get so seduced into the story and the feelings that we may not notice how that clutching to whatever it was—with the second monk, maybe the idea that's the wrong thing to do and I'm right—we don't even see the *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, the creation of personality view, of a sense of self in that. We can think we're quite mindful but be more involved in the specifics.

Have you noticed that your mind ever does that? Ever noticed?

I'll give another very simple example. I had it in my notes. I'd forgotten it, but it's just a good little example of how our mind does this all the time when not investigated. See, that's the thing—our investigation tends to snap shut and go, "Oh, me again! I'm so..." fill in the blanks.

So I remember I was trying to fix some little thing in my house. I'm not that dexterous with eye-hand coordination. It took me fifty years to figure that out, but I'm not. So I was just trying to put up the shower curtain or something, and it was just taking me a while. I'd just get it, it would slip. I'd just get it, it would slip. And I was getting a little frustrated.

And the thought comes in, "Ah, I'm so clumsy." I mean, that's just okay. But that sense of *me* around the "I'm so clumsy"—like what I just said, "I don't have good eye-hand coordination"—and then memories started coming of all the different times in my life when I've been clumsy. Maybe not all of them, but some of them. Back to when I was in the remedial gym class in fifth grade. And that really set a whole tone for my life. That's who I am: the clumsy person who was in remedial gym class, scarred for life about that.

And I saw this happen. I saw *how* that happened. That took like a second, right? Wow, that's sakkāya-diṭṭhi—sense of self so strong, the clinging to the aversion to not doing it well, to the thought "this is who I am." And then what selective perception! The memories come that fit that perception. Every moment of my life have I been clumsy?

Probably not. Have there been other things going on in my life that had nothing to do with that? Yeah, once or twice. But those particular memories come, it solidifies, and we tell ourselves the story of who we are.

This is broader than just a little oomph of self. It's the story of who we are, based on grasping at a particular perception, a particular sense or experience, and then all the stories spun around it.

Often, that's the place investigation stops. "Oh yes, really caught in this sense of me." It's like awareness snaps shut. Or even if we're being mindful—and we are being mindful—we could be mindful of the specifics: the sensations in my hand, the tightness when the thing would drop, the pressure in my mind, the aversion going on, the images coming up. I could be mindful but still fascinated by all the objects and not quite turn around and notice that sense of grasping at *me* in all of those. Memory is me. Clumsiness is me. This thought of my life history is me.

And then if you start thinking, "But it *is* me—who else had that?" That's thinking. That's just another thought. You're just talking moment-to-moment experience. You can think you're mindful but not see the bigger background grasping that's coloring the perception at that moment, which is the sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the sense of me.

But we can just keep on looking. This isn't about hating it or getting rid of it. We notice, "Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi here right now." Instead of saying, "That's who I am, a hopeless klutz, that's it," we see how it's constructed and arising in that moment, and how it passes. Yes, a new one comes, often pretty quickly, but keep on looking, keep on staying with the steadiness of mindfulness, of awareness. Even if the thought comes up, "Oh, it's hopeless"—just another thought. Because the magic show starts to unravel.

And it all starts with perception. The whole nature of insight, as I think we've said, isn't like getting to some new place. It's a shift of perception, where the perception is no longer colored by confusion, by greed, by wanting, by limitation—where the perception is more accurate. And then the way we think about it and the way we act becomes more appropriate.

So there's a story I've used before because it's so perfect for illustrating how perception leads to how we think about ourselves and the world, and how that thinking then leads to the view, the description. This would be personality view arising really quick, in a moment. If we can watch that over and over without identifying, without getting all upset because it keeps happening—just watch how it happens over and over—the

seduction of the magic show starts to fall away. It can be fascinating to watch, but more on the level of, "That's how you do it, that's how it's put together," rather than, "I don't know how this happened, but here I am again."

So this little story my good friend in Switzerland told me. Many years ago, she was sitting a retreat, one of her first retreats. Not in a retreat center—this was before there was one in Switzerland—but the people putting on the retreat would rent a house, like we used to do here back in the seventies or early eighties.

And they have many big old houses in Switzerland that they use for children in the summer—I don't know what you call them, like summer camps. We would think of them as a big scout house or something. They're large, but they're not really insulated. They're old, made out of wood, very noisy and creaky. You think it's creaky on the floor here? Forget about it.

So this old creaky house. It was a ten-day retreat, very strict schedule like here. The room they were using for the meditation hall was upstairs, and the room for walking was down below on the ground floor. It was like this, but without all the insulation in between.

So it was a sitting period, and she was sitting and just starting to get a little something going with her breath, you know, finally. Finally a little bit of concentration, finally. And then she heard someone walking downstairs, and she could hear because the creaks were so loud—like I said about the radiators the other night, like gunshots going off.

"God, it's completely ruining my concentration."

She started getting more and more annoyed. I don't know if any of you can relate. But she started to get more and more annoyed. And then, see, it was fed by: "But this is a sitting period. People shouldn't be walking in the sitting period. This is only a short ten-day retreat." And nothing personal, but it was Switzerland. So this is the sitting period—this is when you sit. And in the walking period is when you walk. It's very orderly. There's something very nice about it. You know what you're supposed to do at the time you're supposed to do it. And people actually do that. The Americans might like to know—people actually do that. It's very refreshing. I like it.

Anyway, so there's this creaking, and it's driving her crazy, and her mind is going, "Oh, what's the matter with these people?" And it was just getting more and more blown up. Finally she said, "Okay, getting out of control. Let me just come back to the breath." So she tried to come back to the breath, really just feeling the breath coming in and going out.

And then she realized her attention came back to her body, and she realized she was sitting leaning against the wall. Every time she breathed in and her abdomen expanded and her back hit the wall, she was making that noise. That was the noise she was hearing.

So that's a perfect example: perception inaccurate, leaping to conclusions, unpleasant—and the whole story of, you know, "This is what's supposed to be" and "It's ruining my concentration" and on and on into the anger—that's the whole story of me. And you see how when the perception became accurate, that whole story went away. Just gone.

But what maybe we don't notice when that happens is how quick the next story starts. And we don't notice that it's two completely different *saṅkhāras*, two completely different formations.

So I can imagine—she didn't say this, but knowing her, I can imagine the immediate next story would be: "How could I have been so angry and thinking that? I'm so rigid. I'm so uptight. Why can't I relax?" Can you imagine it going off on a whole new one?

Somehow that's what's called *papañca*, right? Take the grasp, the perception, and run, basically. Somehow the mind just really seems to love doing that. Have you noticed?

Most of the *papañca* is the creation of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Notice that.

Not just one sakkāya diṭṭhi, many. And if I say that and you think, "Oh God, yes, it's true. What's wrong with me?" Same thing, same thing. We don't have to get rid of that. This isn't about needing to get rid of it. It's about understanding how it's working.

When there's accurate recognition, the fascination goes out by itself. When my friend recognized that the sound was coming from her breathing, she really couldn't work up anger at the unknown person walking anymore. You just really can't do it. It doesn't make any sense. So in that moment when I saw that whole sakkāya diṭṭhi about being clumsy in the third grade and all of that, it's just kind of, "Oh, okay, fine." There's nothing to do about it. And the next moment it's gone, and you're into a new one. There's nothing we have to fight. We can explore how it happens.

So part of the exploration on this level of thought is just to notice that. Really make it fun. Make it interesting. It's not something to hate. When we're feeling, "Oh no, I don't want to see sense of self again," when we feel so victimized by it—well, that's a pretty big one. That's just fear. We're never going to see clearly from that place. That's when awareness snaps shut.

As Sayadaw U Pandita said, and I've mentioned this before, with awareness we don't need to be afraid of anything. I love it when I see a sense of self. I may not love the story that it's telling. But when I see, "Oh, that's sakkāya diṭṭhi"—sakkāya diṭṭhi's like this, to quote Ajahn Sumedho—it's great. Sometimes we can see it really small and specific, like I just traced through with my friend. Sometimes it's all spinning and you realize, "Oh, I'm back in clumsy remedial gym class sakkāya diṭṭhi." Didn't quite see how I got there, but I can feel it. Oh, sakkāya diṭṭhi's like this. Feel it, notice it. The phone rings, you're into something new.

I'm not saying there's only one sakkāya diṭṭhi, then the next, then the next, with no gaps in between. Otherwise it would be hopeless. But I'll get to that in a minute.

So first, just discovering—as Ajahn Sumedho says, we create our sense of self with our thoughts over and over all day long. And he says we cannot with our thoughts create a peaceful self. So of course when we're locked in that sense of self, it's a little bit unsettling, even when it's a happy one. It's still a little bit, or a lot, unsettling because it's really like a square peg in a round hole. It's not really quite fitting with reality. And even the good ones—it's just some idea that's going to go.

But we don't have to be afraid. Just watch how it happens. Watch how any sense contact—and we can be calm, present, awake—and any sense contact, there can suddenly be a sense of grasping and suddenly it's triggered into the story of me. It could be anything. The most neutral, mundane thing or something really awful, it really doesn't matter what. It's so fun. It's really fun to just explore. It's like looking at a puzzle. How did this one get started? Don't make yourself crazy with it, but how did this one get started? And notice when it stops.

Notice how in "I'm the sad person," "I'm the lonely person," all the things are coming up, all the memories. You feel it, you're exploring it in your body. Again, as I say, we can be quite mindful but without quite noticing what's the attitude in the mind, or what's the belief, that's the sense of self that's feeding it. I am the lonely person.

It's always been like this. Here I am. Who but a lonely neurotic misfit would come on a three-month retreat where you don't talk to people? Who else is here? Maybe everyone else is a neurotic misfit too, so then maybe we're not misfits because we're all here together. But I don't want to just be like everyone else. I really want to be special. That's why I'm... and on and on and on.

Then at the end of the day, you think, "Well, it's been like that all day." Stop a minute and see. You stopped being the neurotic misfit maybe when you heard the lunch bell. You became the hungry person pretending not to be hungry. You became the person

wanting to be at the head of the line but going to the end of the line so no one else can tell how greedy I am—as if anyone else cares, because they're all doing their own number. But we don't notice that.

Then there's a time when you're just the person standing there. You're not even a person. There's just hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting. You walk, you sit down and go, "Ah, I'm the person so embarrassed to have all these people around me while I'm eating. I'm just a neurotic misfit." Yes, because I am a neurotic misfit, and that's what I've been all day. Not noticing all the other ones—they don't count.

And it doesn't have to be neurotic misfit. It could be that you're the Maitreya Buddha in hiding, and you're almost there because you're having good sittings. That's the next day, right? Have you noticed it goes Maitreya Buddha one day and neurotic misfit the next day, and then it kind of goes back and forth? That's how these things work. That's how the retreat works. That's normal.

So notice all of them. I'm making them funny on purpose. They're not all funny. Sometimes it's really painful. I'm not belittling the pain. We can bring our tender awareness to all of it—the beauty, the pain, the boring, the neutral—just noticing this magic show as it's going on. We don't need to land as "me" in any of it. And when we do land, we can see that as just another arising appearance.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote in his book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, which is a great book on anattā and sense of self, he says the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all. It arises when there's clinging. It goes into all this story that creates the personality view. And when the clinging goes, the whole thing's gone. A new one comes, but they're different. Each one is arising, each one is passing. Sense of self is not a steady, unchanging thing. It comes and goes, comes and goes. If we stay steady with our interest, with our mindfulness, we can't help but see that sometimes. And that gets even more interesting.

So this habit of papañca, as the Buddha described it: what one perceives, one feels. Perception and vedanā come right together. What one feels, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates with perceptions and associations that then assail—which means attack—a person. Like the story of the monk who drew a tiger on the wall of his cave, and it was so realistic it scared him. That's what's going on with papañca. This kind of concocting is this great word.

Concocting means kind of putting stuff together. If English isn't your first language, it's maybe not a word you'd hear that much. It means creating, putting together, manufacturing. But to me, in English, "concocting" has a little bit of the sense that you're

really just kind of making it up—you're just imagining, putting it together. Let me concoct some kind of a stew from all these ingredients that happen to be in the refrigerator. It's kind of haphazard.

It isn't even that the thinking is the problem when we can be aware of it. It only becomes a problem, we get lost in it, when we're not recognizing the whole process and we take the content to be the reality. Take the content to be true. But when we can just notice the whole process and see how it works, we don't have to land in any of the content as being true. Even my memories—yes, but that did happen—that's just a story right now.

I got this really clearly one time when I was on a long retreat. I was watching a lot of different stories of Carol, and now Carol's doing this, and now Carol's doing that, and so on. Do you have that, where you're narrating: now I'm getting up, now I'm taking a step, now I'm serving the soup? Watching the whole thing. But I had—I don't know if it was a mistake—just before the retreat I had seen a movie, *The Fugitive*. I don't know if you remember it—a very thrilling movie with Harrison Ford, a lot of action.

So if any of you have had the experience of having to relive over and over, like James with his song, a movie that you saw or some TV show—I would be sitting, the Carol thing would go, and then the fugitive would start, and the memories and the emotions would come, and it would go, and then I'd stop and go back. I think I was even doing metta at the time. And then all the Carol stuff would start.

After a while, I realized both processes were exactly the same. Sometimes the image of Harrison Ford came up and the story went off in that direction. Sometimes the image of Carol came up and the story went off in that direction. It was exactly the same process. One of them wasn't more real than the other. A few did have a little more interesting content. But one wasn't like "me," you know. It was both just perceptions and feelings and thoughts and emotions coming and going, coming and going.

Try that next time, noticing sakkāya-diṭṭhi. You don't have to give it a movie review, but just watch it like that and see what that's like.

So the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. As such, a saṅkhāra—just another arising phenomenon that arises in awareness, that awareness can be with, that awareness can see dissipate, just like anything. It's not something to get rid of. It's just to watch it come and go. So what? It comes, just like craving. You don't need to be afraid of craving. We see it come. We see how it acts. We experience the suffering, and it goes. Same, just exactly the same.

Ajahn Buddhadasa again talks about it in terms of dependent origination, which Guy spoke about the other night. He's so down-to-earth, Buddhadasa, in the way he would talk about things. In the same section of dependent origination Guy discussed—where contact, the sense perception, leads to vedanā, to feeling tone, which leads to taṇhā, to craving or not wanting, which leads to grasping at something—Buddhadasa, in terms of talking about this sense of self, describes this place where the craving, just the subtle leaning forward, moves to grasping. He describes the grasping as the feeling of "I" and "mine."

And he calls it—I love this—in Pali, well, in English it translates as "I-ing" and "my-ing," because it's a verb. "I" isn't a thing. It's simply an arising experience, yathā bhūta, due to conditions in this moment. I-ing and my-ing—ahaṅkāra and mamaṅkāra in Pali. I just like that. You don't need to remember it, but I just like it. So the grasping is the feeling of "I" and "mine," the formation, the coming together in that moment of I-ing and my-ing.

And it gives rise—the next step is *bhava*, having and being. So I-ing and my-ing, having and being. Having these thoughts, being this person. It's a little more solidified in the view, in the mind at that point.

And then having and being what? That becomes birth, *jati*. That's the next step—birth, the birth of me in that moment.

Now, this can be a really simple thing. Again, I had this written down from another retreat. This is incredibly simple: just walking through the dining room as a yogi, because we notice these things more, and there's a bowl of candy out. Not an eight-precept little hard sugar candy, but some nice thing—something more tempting to me anyway. And there's a bowl of candy and I'm just walking, pretty present, relaxed, pretty mindful. No big thing going on, no big sense of me.

And there's the seeing of the candy, the pleasant feeling, the arising of wanting, and right away the sense of I wanting the candy. And right then you can feel the birth of self. That's me, and that's the candy, and I want it. And the hand goes towards it and starts to pick it up. It doesn't matter whether you take it or not. But I remember this particular time, I was like, "Oh," just put it down, and walked on.

The candy was out of sight. The whole sense of birth—that was the death of that self right then. Didn't carry the wanting the candy with me. Just gone. And then you walk on, and that's gone. That's over. Birth and death of self just in a flash like that.

There's nothing to be scared of and nothing to worry about, but we can explore it like that. See how it comes. See what keeps it going. What makes it last longer? How it gets put down. Really, when the craving is released, there's that death of that sense of self at that moment. But just explore it. Don't hold the sense you've got to get rid of it.

And in terms of what I just described—noticing the perception, noticing the *vedana*, and noticing the wanting—as I said before, sometimes it's a lot faster than that. All of a sudden, we're in me and *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* and the whole story. We didn't get to notice all these little subtle quick things happening, right? I grabbed the candy, or I didn't, either one. And I walk on. Okay, I didn't take the candy, but I walk on going, "Ah, I wish I'd taken it. I should have taken it. Maybe I'll go back when no one's looking and I will take it." Or I didn't take it and I'll go back when they are looking so I can just be humble and let people see me take it—whatever it is. The sense of self growing and growing and growing, because the craving is growing and growing and growing.

But that doesn't mean it's hopeless. It's just that sometimes it goes really fast. I read from Ajahn Chah once describing that whole chain of dependent origination. We give all these twelve links like we just did. But it happens really fast. He said it happens so fast it's like falling out of a tree. He said, if you fall out of a tree and you go down, and on the way down you hit all twelve branches, but it's just like—whoa, boom—and there you are. You land in *dukkha*. You didn't really have time to notice each branch on the way down, but you land in *dukkha*, the twelve steps of dependent origination.

So sometimes it's like that. I'm back in my room, just dying, because I either did or didn't take the candy. No way to win either way. Okay, this is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*.

Sakayaditti is like this. Remember some of those phrases—"it's just like this." Awareness is always available.

It's not like, "Oh, here I am in sakayaditti and I didn't notice where the papañca started or the vedanā. It's hopeless. How did I get here?" Oh—hopeless. Sakayaditti. It's like this. And just feel it. Big picture. That's fine.

That's a movement from landing in the story and believing it, to saying, "Oh, that's the process." I don't see all the little ways the magic show is working, but I do see that it's a magic show. This is this particular moment of sakayaditti—the shift from identifying to recognizing the concocting.

And the more the magic show is seen through, the less fascinating it becomes. I bet that's true now for all of you. Have you gotten a little bit tired of your stories yet? A little bit, huh?

Now, we cannot move into aversion with that, but there can be that sense of nibbidā, that sense of disenchantment. So here comes this story of "I'm so greedy." Oh yeah, here comes that story. I see how that started. Okay, let it just poop out. I don't need to get involved. Disenchantment.

Here comes the story about being the next Maitreya Buddha because I was able to stay mindful for two steps. Isn't that great? Yeah, that's fine. Sakayaditti. It'll just poop out by itself. You don't have to do anything about it. Just watch it. It loses its fascination.

And then we start to notice what Buddhadasa again talks about in this book: suññatā, or emptiness, which he's specifically using to mean emptiness of self. "Voidness" is how this translation renders it—I don't know, it doesn't really roll off the tongue—but emptiness of sense of self.

And he says over and over that emptiness of self, emptiness of sense of self, moments when there's not I-ing and my-ing, when there's not sakayaditti being created and held to—these are really normal and natural. There are many, many, many moments every day that are empty of the clinging of sense of self, that are not sakayaditti created. Many moments where there's just the simplicity of non-clinging. We've talked about that before—the simplicity of not-self, when we're not caught up and fascinated by the relationship to what's arising and what does it mean about me, when we're not in clinging.

So he talks about how it's really important for us to generate a contentment with this emptiness. First recognizing that it's really normal and natural—again, just little moments all through the day. If you're waiting for the big bang, forget about it. Notice these little moments, sort of what Guy was talking about—what did he call it, the sweet spot or something? But not even a spot, just moments that are empty of the clinging of self, of any story that we're clinging to of sakayaditti. There can be thoughts, but there's not the belief, the personality belief.

So we can recognize this and generate a contentment. And that's really important because it may not be as fulfilling as we might think it's going to be. In a moment when there's no self, guess what? There's no one there to feel fulfilled. There's just nothing special.

So noticing that—just as the sense of self arises and passes many, many times in a day, birth and death of self hundreds of times—notice in between the birth and death. Notice the silence of the mind in a moment that's not concocting, that's not fabricating, that's not having to go out and get involved in whatever's happening.

There's a great Pali word for this: atammayatā.

Again, from Buddhadasa—he said toward the end of his life, apparently, he talked about this a lot. He said atamayata is the ultimate Buddhist concept. That was just Buddhadasa talking. But what it really means is non-fabricating, the mind that's non-fabricating, the mind that's non-concocting. That's just not making something out of anything.

As it's described, Ajahn Amaro talks about it a lot in this book, *The Island*. He's trying to describe it. It's pointing to moments of citta, moments when the heart or mind is independent, when it's not affected by wanting, by aversion, by delusion. It's not nibbana, but it's, as we've talked about, the pure heart and mind that's not affected by greed, hatred, and delusion. The quality of mindfulness is what allows clear seeing to arise. But just the experience of this atamayata—the times when you're awake and the mind just isn't involved in making some big deal about anything. There can be thinking or not thinking, but there's not that clinging. It's not concocting. The silence of the non-reactive mind is a way you could put it.

When there's insufficient mindfulness and wisdom, Amaro writes, the mind goes out and attaches itself to stuff. The bowl of candy, the unpleasant sensation, whatever it is. It attaches to perceptions, attaches to moods. Then there's the whole thing of papañca, the whole creation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. When there's this non-concocting, these moments of emptiness that Buddhadasa is talking about, a contentment with them, to just appreciate when seeing is just seeing, when hearing is just hearing—then this whole papañca is not created and the heart rests at ease.

This is one way the Buddha describes himself. I like this a lot, one of the Buddha's descriptions of how his mind is: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing separate from sight." Do you get what that means? There's seeing, but he doesn't think about some visible thing, me seeing it. There's just seeing. He does not conceive of something not seen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer, about someone who's seeing. You get a sense of that? It's back to "in the seen, there's just the seen." The mind just doesn't concoct anything else. It's just seeing.

So if I'm sitting here, there's seeing, and I think I'm seeing you—that's a concoction. I think, "Well, I wonder what's outside that I could see"—that's a concoction. Something about me, something about you—concoction. Just seeing with nothing extra. And then he goes through all the different sense bases—seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata is just like this, such-like, in regard to all phenomena seen,

heard, sensed, and cognized. Whatever seen, heard, sensed, or clung to is known as truth by other folk. Amidst those who are entrenched, who are stuck in views, I hold none as true or false."

You get a sense of this. Whatever is seen, heard, sensed, or clung to, the ordinary person holds as truth. And he's saying, "I don't cling to any view at all." There's no need to make up a view about anything. Anything. Can we stay in that? That simplicity, just this. It says "such-like." The Tathagata is such-like. It's just this. The silence of the non-reactive mind, whatever's arising.

There's a nice reformulation of the Four Noble Truths by Ajahn Dun along these lines. He says, "The mind that goes out to whatever's arising in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering." You get a sense of that? It goes out to whatever's happening. "I need that candy to satisfy my mood"—the cause of suffering. "The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering"—the first noble truth. So whether I took that candy or I didn't take the candy, all the hoo-ha that was going on, that's the first noble truth. The mind seeing the mind clearly

is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. That's what we're doing here—the mind seeing the mind clearly. The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering.

I love that because that's really our job. Not to get rid of something, not to give ourselves a new sakkāya-diṭṭhi, not to change our personality—but to see the mind clearly, to see how it works, to really begin to recognize these moments of simplicity, the silence of the non-reactive mind, these moments of suññatā, of emptiness. Just recognize clearly.

You know those times—we've talked about them a lot—when there's no clinging, when you're not even thinking about it. You're just sitting here and it's just peace. I'm not talking about some big cessation moment, just no concocting, nothing extra. And you'd say later—a friend of mine calls it "the place of no problem." Everything was fine and it didn't matter what was happening, whether you're drinking tea or walking outside or feeling your breath or there's an ache in the back. It doesn't matter. And I know you all know those moments. You go, "It didn't matter, but now it does." Why? And that, of course, is one of the big mysteries.

So generating a contentment with emptiness, really letting it in. But then the question—we only have four minutes—the question is, why do we keep getting tricked back into sakkāya-diṭṭhi? Doesn't it feel like that sometimes? It's so peaceful, you think there could never be a problem again. Have you had that feeling? "I'm never going to believe that again. I see through it so clearly." How do we get tricked again?

So just two ideas. One is something Ajahn Sumedho said once that I found so interesting. He was talking to a group of Vipassana teachers, we were just having a discussion, and he was saying—in his opinion, having been teaching for thirty-some years, both Thai people and Westerners—in his opinion, the biggest hindrance for Western meditators that he sees is our self-doubt. Self-doubt in regards to trusting our insights into awareness. Westerners tend not to trust our insights into the potential liberation of awareness. Not that we don't have them, but we don't trust them. And he says, in his opinion, why we don't trust them is partly because in this culture, our personalities are so strong, and our belief, our reliance, our taking refuge in our personalities, is so strong. That's what we believe.

When you're spinning—"Oh, I'm like this and I'm like that and I can never change and this is my personality and how can I change it?"—and it was just this moment of real peace and emptiness, but now again I'm caught because really it's hopeless for me, isn't it? With this personality and what I've been through. And that's what we really believe.

I just think that's a fascinating idea to drop in and look at. The personality is so much our reference point that it's just so comfortable, we get caught back into it again. Just notice when that's happening. And just that shift—"Oh, personality views like this"—that's a huge shift. In that moment, that's an unhooking from the total belief and refuge in "I am this personality," the I-ing and my-ing. So just awareness noticing: coming and going, different personality all the time.

Impermanence is also very important. When he was asked, the Buddha, how should one know, how should one see for identity view to be abandoned, he said: as impermanent. When one sees the eye as impermanent, the view of self is abandoned. Identity view is abandoned. When one sees forms, eye consciousness, eye contact, and feeling—whatever feeling arises with eye contact—as impermanent, identity view is abandoned. And with all the senses, of course.

So again, it's the steadiness of awareness, of mindfulness, that allows the perception of impermanence to be recognized. Coming and going all the time, steady awareness can't help but notice it.

So noticing impermanence, the perception of impermanence, generating a contentment with this emptiness, with this voidness—and noticing when there's not the contentment with voidness, when that sense of the personality view, the sense of me, you see the death of it. And there's just a moment where there's not a new arising of me happening. Just notice that. Or do you notice in that there's a dulling out, a kind of zoning out, until some new thing comes and grabs the attention, often a clinging or an aversion? Or sometimes it's neutral, but we're quite awake, and there's a feeling of a little bit of disquiet, a little bit of discomfort, almost like we're waiting for the next thing to happen.

And we think we want—and that's our problem, of course—but we think we want the experience of recognizing the death of self, the moments of peace, emptiness when there's no identity view being clung to. But often that's uncomfortable.

We're so attached to that sense of me. Even when it's a suffering me, for many people—I notice in myself—there's a kind of comfort of familiarity. You know, like putting on an old bathrobe that's so old and comfortable, even though it's all ratty and a little bit dirty, but you just feel soothed.

So have you noticed your mind going back to cling even to a suffering sakkāya diṭṭhi? It goes away, and you go, "But what about my loneliness? Let's go back to that one, because otherwise..." What? There's nothing happening. It's a little—not even scary—but just a little unfamiliar.

You know, we don't like this. The mind wants security. It likes familiarity. We want to go back to what we know. That's why we like to have views about what the doctrine is and hold to it, rather than just this willingness to open into the unknown in this moment, without a place to land, without a view to hold to, without a sense of self to say, "This is who I am."

So notice those moments of voidness. Notice in between experience. Maybe thoughts end and a new thought hasn't arisen. Just stay awake there. Notice if you jump to the breath or you jump to the body so—God forbid—there should be a space. Notice between activities. You know you're finished eating? Just sit and be quiet. Don't jump up and go do the next thing. We have to note, note, note, note. Nothing's happening. No, what am I going to note? What's going to... Something!

Just incline the mind to nothing special, to emptiness, to voidness. Give it a chance to recognize the empty nature of awareness. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do. Nothing to have.

You don't create anything. I don't create anything. We're not getting rid of some sense of some self in order to be no self. We're just noticing how the magic show works. And when we see through it, we don't have to suffer from it anymore. It doesn't have to keep tricking us.

I'll just end with this from Ajahn Sumedho: "It's often said that the Buddhist way is not to grasp, but that can become just another statement that we grasp and hold on to. It's a catch-22. No matter how hard you try to make sense out of it, you end up in total confusion because of the limitation of language and perception. We have to go beyond language and perception. And the only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them—through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion. The island that you cannot go beyond"—the name of this book, *The Island*, the metaphor for Nibbāna—"is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware."

So let's just quietly be awake and aware.

CHAPTER 66

Determination: Support for Wise Seeing

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines adhiṭṭhāna (determination or resolve), one of the ten pāramīs (perfections), revealing how this quality serves as the foundation for all other wholesome qualities. Drawing from her personal practice experiences in Burma and the traditional story of the ascetic Sumedha's vow before Dīpaṅkara Buddha, she illuminates how determination differs from willpower, striving, or aversion.

Wilson explains that wise determination comes together with four qualities: wisdom (paññā), truthfulness (sacca), relinquishment, and calm. She offers practical examples of how to recognize determination as a mental factor that arises naturally—from simple moments like getting up for early morning practice to staying present with overwhelming emotional states. The talk addresses common challenges practitioners face, including 'hitting the wall' when expectations meet reality, and the temptation to abandon practice when confronting unfamiliar territory.

The teaching emphasizes that determination is not about forcing outcomes but about aligning energy to be present for whatever arises. Wilson shares Ajahn Sumedho's teaching on trusting awareness rather than personality, and concludes with inspiring examples of the Nangchen nuns who maintained their inner resolve through decades of persecution. The Buddha's words frame the aspiration: not shrinking from struggle while seeking unshakable deliverance of mind.

Tonight, what I want to talk about is a particular quality of mind, one of the wholesome qualities, that in the last few years I've been exploring more in my own life, in my own practice, that has just been really useful to me. Would that I'd explored it more in the earlier years. So I just wanted to try and share a little bit about that in hopes that maybe it will be helpful to you. Nothing you haven't heard about before—the quality of determination or resolve.

This is one of the ten paramis, one of the ten perfections of mind, wholesome qualities that it's said one perfects in one's heart and mind in order to become a Buddha. Often the ten paramis are spoken of as ways to practice, things to pay attention to in cultivating the path in our daily life, but in our life here on retreat as well—not any different.

I'll just read out the ten wholesome qualities to you in the order they're usually given: generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, equanimity. Those all sound familiar, right? And you can see how all of these are wholesome qualities. All of them are naturally being cultivated through our mindfulness practice here, and also just through taking the Eightfold Path, trying to practice a life of awareness, of waking up.

Determination is defined very simply as resolution or steadiness of purpose. Several different teachers have said this—Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Sitagu Sayadaw, who is a real big shot Sayadaw in Burma, and some others—that even though determination, adhitana in the Pali, is listed eighth in that list, it can be regarded as the foundation for all of the perfections, the foundation for cultivating all of the ten perfections, because without a firm determination, one cannot fulfill the other paramis. Without a sense of determination, of resoluteness, we don't really do anything. So it's really, in some ways, the basis for all of them.

Personally, I've never heard it talked about in a way that had been helpful to me. Another definition describes it as unwavering—this is the energy of resolution, of determination. That's how I want to talk about it: in the big picture, but also, as with everything, seeing it as a mental factor that arises in our experience now. What we can really do is learn how to recognize it, learn how it supports our wholesome practice, and how we can, in noticing the wholesome, feed the wholesome, learn to trust in and call on determination more.

One description of how it feels is unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. See how that could be helpful if we want to keep practicing.

Determination is described in vast proportions over time, over eons—sort of like with intention. Remember in the beginning of the retreat when James talked about cultivating our aspiration, our wise intention? It can have the sense of the vast aspiration to wake up, for example. And then it has the moment-to-moment quality of intention in the moment. Determination or resolve is often spoken of in the same way. So we're recognizing how it functions here and now, how we can use it for strength, for energy, for courage—again, to be with disappointment, to keep going.

Most of us—me anyway—seem to know how to do things, how to bring up energy, how to keep on practicing by striving. We make up something we want to happen, and then we push, push, push to make it happen. And this whole retreat, we've been trying to say: relax, observe, allow. And we all say, "Yeah, good idea, good idea." But then what do we do? Just fluff around? If we're not striving, if we're not pushing, how does anything get done?

When James was talking the other night about the different ways to work with thought, work with difficult thought—five different ways of doing it—the question comes up, especially with the last one, pressing down. When do you say, "Okay, here's this difficult thought, and I'll just say no, not now. Just ignore it." Just a simple example of skillful means. When is that skillful? How often do we not know how to bring up the energy for that skillful means if it's not with striving to make something happen? It's with aversion. "No, not now. Not going to be with that thought. Bad thought. Let's do some metta." And even though it looks like we're doing skillful means, the tool, the mental quality that we're calling on is unwholesome, is kilesa. And that's what we're practicing: "I won't have this bad thought."

I will be metta, metta, metta. Yes. I wonder why it's not working. And it feels strong. Just like in our life, anger can be such a strong energy. That's where our refuge can be.

So in practice, in learning to trust mindfulness and not to strive, but still with great steadfastness, be present for whatever's arising. And sometimes I would be left wondering, well, how do I do that? Without willpower, without gritting my teeth, without really forcing, without striving, without aversion. And as I said, it's kind of like we just relax, observe, fluff around, and hope everything will turn out for the best. Is that how we're practicing? It doesn't really work, does it? Because when it's like that—well, la la, I guess I'll just go take a nap, a good long nap, and maybe I'll feel better when I get up. Get up, not better. Well, okay, you know where it goes from there.

So starting to understand resolution as a quality, a wholesome quality, a natural quality that arises in our mind often. But we often don't recognize it. I'm naming it so we can recognize it, turn to it, use it. It's a quality that really brings strength, like it aligns the energy. It cuts through all the dithering. Should I do this? Should I do that?

I'll give you a very simple example of how I've been noticing it. I was sitting on retreat in Burma last year, and when you're in the monasteries there, it's a long day. You get up at three in the morning, and you go to bed whenever. But by three in the morning, okay, you haven't eaten since eleven in the morning the day before, because your last meal is at ten-thirty in the morning. So you're tired, you're hungry, and you're in a room. No one knows if you get up at three. They don't come around and check. So it's really—you're lying in bed. One is lying in bed when the alarm goes. Should I get up? Who'll know? I'm really tired. Maybe you can relate. Well, it's only four o'clock. The bell didn't go yet. I just need a little extra sleep. Should I? No. Maybe it'd be good to get up. You can think this. You can think that. You can try to decide—is it good? Is it bad? Will I be tired? What should I do?

None of that's resolution. And none of that is really helping you see anything clearly. It's just dithering. What decision do you make from that space? And you can kind of feel that wafted-around energy, not very steady, la la la.

And resolution in the mind—I mean, I've really been playing with this—you can actually recognize it. It's just a quality, very calm and peaceful. It's not a harsh quality. And the energy just aligns. You look at it, almost like you're looking at a resolution. Just get up.

You just get up. You just do it. And all that dithering simply stops. That dithering is a complete scattering of energy. But when resolution comes, instead of "Oh, should I? No, the resistance..." you align with resolution. You just get up. You don't think about whether it's good or bad, this or that. You get up, you pay attention, and wisdom comes. If it was too early, you know the next time. Very simple.

It is very simple when we learn to recognize and trust this quality of mind that's really an aligning of the energy.

That's the little picture. In terms of the big picture, we're talking eons and eons and ages—a really big picture of how determination is presented in the Buddhist background. This is the story of the ascetic Sumedha, and how our Buddha, the one we know historically as Siddhartha Gautama, came to be according to the Jataka tales. Do you remember? Spring told the Jataka tales, that whole series of stories about the so-called previous lives as animals and as people of the historical Buddha. And that whole history begins four incalculables and one hundred thousand eons before our present age. Big picture.

There was another Buddha named Dīpankara Buddha. At that time, there was also an ascetic, a practicing ascetic—not a monk—named Sumedha. He was practicing very sincerely, and when he heard that there was a Buddha, a self-awakened one nearby, he traveled and found the Dīpankara Buddha. He wanted to learn from him.

Sumedha was so touched just on seeing the Dīpankara Buddha, on hearing him, seeing his tranquility, his wisdom, and also how much he was touching people, how much good he was doing for them. Sumedha himself was already committed to waking up, to becoming an arahant. But he received this deep inspiration on seeing Dīpankara Buddha—that as useful or wonderful as it would be to become truly free for himself, to become a Buddha, a self-enlightened one who could be of such great service to so many beings, would be incalculably better to offer.

So on seeing this, he made a vow, a resolution, to do whatever it takes to develop his heart and mind to become a Buddha in a future life. This is really a huge resolution, a deep commitment. In that moment, it's a deep resolve—and then not just through a few sittings and a few years, but through eons and eons and lifetimes upon lifetimes, keeping coming back to this resolve.

What he saw the resolve meant was this: he went to a cave to reflect on what he needed to do to make this vast journey to become a Buddha, because it requires an even deeper purification and cultivation of wisdom than becoming an arahant. On reflection, he saw that it was to develop ten qualities called the ten perfections. These are perfections in the heart and mind, and when they're brought to completion—all ten brought to perfection—those are the qualities that can give rise to a Buddha.

So that's the story. You get a sense of the depth of resolve, and how that in the big picture can feed the willingness to connect with resolve, to connect with commitment in the smaller picture.

Through all his lifetimes, it's said, and those are all the Jataka stories—take it or leave it—but they're interesting as illustrations of cultivating the different perfections. Even in the lifetime we have the story of, there's that larger overarching resolve to become a Buddha that was supporting the foundation for the choices the man Siddhartha Gautama made in his life.

And then there's the way one can make a smaller resolve, a smaller resolution—for example, to come on a retreat and really be as

committed as possible. It's a more time-bound kind of resolve. Or an even smaller resolve—you could sit down in a sitting and say, "I really resolve to be as present as possible in this sitting." Not that you can control how present you are, but you can make that resolve. This sitting, I'm really going to be here as much as I can.

For example, when you're sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, the way that one has to report in interviews is very specific. It's a practice where you're noting every moment what's arising. You start with feeling the breath at the abdomen and then you notice what happens. When you go to an interview, you're meant to describe quite specifically—not your interpretation, not what you think about it, not how you like it, not how good you think your concentration is, not your dreams. Not your thoughts, just what arose in the sitting and how it was noticed. What was the process? Very, very specific. Same in the walking.

So after a while, we would have little notebooks, because who can remember? Just to remember five or ten minutes of a sitting—try it. "The rising breath, and then I became aware of thinking. As I noted thinking, it continued. As I noted thinking again, it faded away. Then sensation arose. As I became aware of the sensation, aversion arose. As I became aware of aversion, I got lost in thought. I was lost in thought for a while. When mindfulness came back, I noted thinking, and it went away. Then I became aware of the rising. In the rising, I felt pressure, tingling, burning." That's how you practice in that form—sitting, walking, and in between. It's far out when you do it. It's far out.

But to go to report, you don't go into Sayadaw U Pandita and say, "Well, I took a breath and then I don't really remember what happened." You don't want to go into him with that. So you have a report.

I noticed—and I know I'm not the only one—that the sittings where I would sit down and say, "Okay, this sitting I'm going to report on," there was a little more clarity of attention. You could see it, not tight, but just: I've got to be here. That little more resolve, a little more determination, a little more commitment. It's a kind of steadiness. My energy is more aligned.

And then sometimes I'd notice halfway through, "Oh, this sitting stinks. Forget it. I'm not reporting on this one." And the quality of attention would really change. You really see what's possible with determination. When the determination goes—ah, who cares—it's gone. That's very interesting to see.

What's possible with determination is much more than we might expect. When there's that resolve, that commitment—and here I'd say, if I had to name an overarching resolve, it's simply to cultivate awareness, to cultivate this quality of mindfulness just for this moment. To show up, to be here with mindfulness, with awareness for whatever's arising now. That resolve, moment after moment after moment.

And so much more becomes possible than you would have thought you were capable of before you started practice. If this is your first long retreat, did you think you'd make it this far? Did you think you could sit through and be with some of the stuff that's come up? And is some of the stuff that's come up what you thought you were here for? No. But so much more is possible when the energy is aligned through resolve, through determination.

Again, just a moment, another little example from my practice, but just a momentary one. Another retreat I was doing some years ago, it was in Burma again. And for some reason, it was just one of those retreats where really extremely difficult, painful emotional patterns or states were coming up at the time.

I remember there was one particular state that would come. I was walking back and forth on my little porch, and the conditions are always a bit more difficult there, which wasn't really the problem. But it's like you're not just all comfy and cozy—"Oh, I don't like it, let me just go have a candy and make some tea and get under my blankie." I don't think so. So there's really nowhere to go and nothing to do.

I'm walking back, and this state would come, which I recognize now is overwhelm. It would come and just become so strong. "Ah, this is unbearable. So much suffering. I just can't deal with this another moment. It's unbearable." But like a hundred times more than I just said it. And it would keep coming over and over. But there was nowhere to go and nothing to do. And I would get the image: "I'll just go lie down on the bed." Like, what would that do? Maybe I tried it once. It didn't make any difference.

So the state would come. And the resolve, the determination, isn't to get rid of the state. It's just, okay, you can just be here. I remember Ajahn Sumedho saying, "I would think this is unbearable. I cannot bear this another moment. And then I see that I could." That's the resolve. "Oh, this is unbearable. This is—oh, mental state." That resolve to just be present for it, and then the wisdom would come in. "Oh, it's a mental state." And through the wisdom that resolve strengthens—wisdom strengthens resolve; they go together—then, "Oh, I can be with this mental state." It wasn't like, "La, la, la, it feels so nice." A horrible mental state. But mental state. And that's just what it is.

All the energy aligns in that moment of determination, in that moment of resolve, just to be here for it. It's not a harshness. It's not an aversion. And it's not expectation or leaning into it. It's just aligning to be here. And that can change everything.

So resolve comes together with wisdom. It strengthens faith, and faith strengthens resolve, and it brings energy. They kind of circle around each other: faith, energy, resolve, and wisdom.

As a mental factor—now I'm not talking as a pāramī, but as one of the fifty-two mental factors in the Abhidhamma—resolve is said to be ethically variable. So it's this quality of determination, but whether it's wholesome or unwholesome depends on what other qualities are in the mind. I mean, that's clear. You could have a huge determination to do something really harmful or unethical, and really follow it through.

But in terms of a pāramī, in terms of wholesomeness, it comes together with four qualities. This is in one of the suttas, and then Thanissaro Bhikkhu puts it in a little easier language.

But resolve comes together with four qualities, the four qualities of wise determination, the Buddha says. It comes together with wisdom, with wise discernment, with seeing clearly. It's supported by truth, by a commitment to truth, to honesty with oneself. It comes together with relinquishment. And it's also supported by, comes together with, and leads to calm, to peace.

That might sound highfalutin, but I'll give you a really simple example. Not that you have to remember all these four, but in terms of when you wonder for yourself—for example, if you say, "I'm going to do this to make my practice better," and you can't really tell, is this a clear resolve or is it just some wanting, trying to make things better? You can check in with these qualities as you're doing it and see if they are present.

A simple example: say you decide, "I feel like maybe going through the day I'm really quite comfortable. My mindfulness seems good enough." But it's almost so comfortable that you wonder if you could just be a little more present. You can see how that could be either from wanting, from some expectation, or it could really be from seeing clearly—"Yeah, I'm kind of cruising a little bit. Let me look and see."

So one very simple resolve—I've often made this myself on retreat—is: "Okay, from breakfast time until lunch, I'm just going to be very steady. I'm just going to sit, walk, sit, not do any extra activities. Make it a special time to just cultivate moment-by-moment mindfulness." That's a resolve, a kind of small, in-the-moment resolve.

How to tell if it's really wise discernment? It will come together with these four things. First, it comes out of wisdom, wise discernment—the sense that this could be a wholesome thing, strengthening mindfulness. And also a sense of: is it realistic? If you said, "From the moment I get up, I am not going to have one moment of getting lost in thought until the end of the night"—that's not really very realistic. Maybe it is for somebody here? Anyone here for whom that's totally realistic? You could really do that? Not so much. But one could maybe say, "I can really just focus from eight to twelve. Not that I won't get lost in thought, but I'm making this my mindfulness time." So it has some wise discernment in it, both in the purpose and in what's actually possible.

In terms of truth, honesty with oneself—again, this is an essential quality in all of our practice. In fact, it's said that in all the pāramīs that the Bodhisatta was developing in all those lifetimes, the one he never really broke was truthfulness. Because truthfulness with what we're recognizing, not what we don't see—we can't help that. But when we recognize it, it's just what's here. Not with judging, but simply: "It's like this."

So truthfulness in our willingness to abide by our resolve. When we're in it and we say, "Yeah, it's not working. It's enough. This is good enough. I'm sort of being mindful, but never mind. I know I said I wouldn't do extra, but I'm going to go have a cracker and a cup of tea, and I'm being mindful enough." If you're truthful, you can see that waffling, that wavering coming in—in this particular example, when it was a wise thing to do. So truthfulness means really seeing what we're doing and why.

And relinquishment—that's kind of obvious. The resolve, the determination to collect one's energy in a certain way, means you're relinquishing or giving up certain other possibilities at that time. Maybe for that eight-to-twelve time, you're relinquishing your ten-fifteen cup of tea for that day. That might be a big relinquishment or a little one, but there's something we're relinquishing. In the Sumedha story, in all of those lifetimes cultivating all the qualities to be a Buddha, he was relinquishing a lot. You've all relinquished, I would imagine, a huge amount to be here for five weeks. It's not a relinquishment of negativity; it's relinquishment in service of a deepening and strengthening of resolve.

And the last part: peace or calm. I think this is really important. It's one of the great ways I can tell, because the resolve can be really strong. So this simple thing of just not doing extra activities between eight and twelve for a day—I make the resolve to myself: just for today, whatever comes up, for this time I'm going to be with it. And maybe something really difficult or unpleasant comes up in my mind, and I think, "Oh, but there are all these other skillful means, and I could do this, and I could do that." No. I'm just going to be with it for now. And that isn't like, "You've got to do it!" with tension and striving. It's just: "No, I'm simply going to be with it." It's calm.

It's calming. It doesn't lead to more fluttering and worry and doubt and this and that, which all the thinking and analyzing and comparing does. No, just for now, I'm going to be with it. If it's like this, okay. If it feels like my practice just goes to hell in a handbasket while I'm doing this, okay. It's just what I'm doing.

And then ultimately—and this is what we see with all skillful means—it's not that from doing that, from then on, total peace. I'm not talking about that. But you can see that if it was a wise resolve and it's supporting our awareness, there'll be some sense of calm or peace with it and after it. Not the sense of sitting through a sitting and no matter what happens, you're going to sit there and you're gritting your teeth.

Have you had sittings like that where it feels like resolve? "I'm not going to move no matter what." And you're sweating bullets, and your teeth are gritting, and you feel like you're going to bust your jaw. And at the end of the sitting, you just want to die, and you never want to come in the hall again. But by gum, I stayed with it. And we did stay with it.

That's not resolve, though. I mean, it feels like it's a resolve. Okay, maybe it's not wise, discerning resolve. It's willpower. And sometimes in our life that can be useful, but it's not the wholesomeness of resolve.

Several people have described to me over the last days different kinds of sittings like that, where things are really difficult in the mind, in the body. And sometimes you say you're going to stay with it, but it's like I just described—and at the end of it, it's not calm. It didn't really feel wise. You relinquish some things, okay, but somehow it's willpower. It's wanting. It's striving. It's expecting.

And another time, stuff's just as difficult, but the mind just isn't making a big deal. The mind just goes, "I'm just here." Somehow it's not a struggle. The mind's just here. And you go, "Why? How? What did I do?" You didn't do nothing.

But notice the qualities in the mind. Notice the wholesome qualities. And just as we've said, when we cultivate the wholesome—I think James or several people have quoted this famous line from one of the suttas—what we frequently think about and ponder upon, that becomes the inclination of our mind.

So that's really why we talk about recognizing the wholesome. Recognize mindfulness. Recognize samādhi. Recognize calm. Recognize resolution. The more we recognize... You're sitting there and, oh, I don't want to move. I can't. And then the resolution's there. You can tune into it. It aligns the energy. It strengthens. And then it starts to fade and you start thinking, "Oh wait"—there's the resolution again. We can incline towards it. We can call it up. It's a huge support.

I've just been finding it so useful. Whereas before I was trying to think, "Is this good? Am I tired? Do I need a rest? I really can't tell." And trying to figure it all out.

When resolution comes, boom, you just do it. Like that Nike ad—just do it. It's like that. You don't have to analyze. It's just so simple. There's so much energy behind it.

You could take the example again of the Buddha, the Gautama Buddha. We know after all of those lifetimes, in this lifetime that we read about, all the practice and the ascetic practices that he did, and the famous night when he sat down under the Bodhi tree and made that famous resolution: "I'm not getting up. I either die or I awaken."

And I always thought, well, somehow he knew the right night to make that resolution. He didn't make it when he first went forth from homelessness. He didn't make it in all those six years of incredible asceticism.

So there's a sense of this huge resolve, but with discerning wisdom that knows what's wise and what seems possible. Truthfulness, calm, relinquishment. It's not saying you don't have resolve if you make some incredibly impossible resolve and then don't live up to it, and you think, "Well, see, that just proves what I always knew—I can't do it." It really requires wisdom and clear seeing.

Another place we can get confused with determination is to confuse it with expectation. Joseph often says, don't confuse effort with expectation, trying to make something happen. Same with resolve. Same with determination. So with mindfulness, for example, our determination to be present isn't moving into a determination to have a specific result. The determination is, "Okay, I'll be here." And then open to whatever shows up.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu had a good description of this, I thought. He's talking about determination and resolve, and he's talking about it in life. He's saying often in a meditation retreat, sometimes it's not so helpful to have a specific goal because we get so goal-oriented and striving. But we've talked about that the whole time. Once we understand that, and once we understand the wise use of resolve and the difference between resolve and expectation, we can use it here. So don't think you can't.

But he's giving a good example of how we misuse it. He says sometimes people come on a retreat and they set a focus, wanting a particular result so that they can say, "I just spent two weeks at the monastery and I came back with the first jhāna"—like a trophy. And he says you usually end up, if you get something that you call jhāna when you go home, with an unripe mango. You've got a green mango on your tree and someone comes along and says a ripe mango is yellow and it's soft. So you squeeze your mango to make it soft and paint it yellow to make it look ripe. But it's not a ripe mango. It's a ruined mango.

So you get a sense of the difference. Even with determination, it can start to slide into wanting. It's not the same thing. And that's where we bring in *sacca*, truthfulness. This isn't that unifying, that solidity, that uprightness of energy. It's starting to lean in, starting to try and make something happen.

In the smaller picture of our practice here—never mind eons and eons and lifetimes—but in our practice not only on this retreat... I'm assuming, even though some of you I don't know, you wouldn't be here if in some way, some part of your life, you were not

committed to waking up, to purifying, to cultivating compassion. It's not just about this retreat and then you're going to walk out and blow it off. Well, maybe you are, I don't know! But even just on the retreat, it takes huge resolve, doesn't it? Over and over, this determination to be here for this. Be here for this. Be here for this.

And I've noticed often on retreats, and I've noticed in the last few days talking to different people—we say that retreat's always kind of going like a sine wave. Everyone's not all in exactly the same way, but it'll be going whatever it is for you. Open, things are expanding, and then it contracts again. Then it's open and flowing in whatever way, and then you think, "Okay, now..." and it contracts again. And sometimes we start to see: okay, that's just the ebb and flow of life, isn't it?

The waves, the seasons, the universe—although maybe the universe is just expanding and expanding. We don't really know if it's going to contract again.

Often, when we're back in a contraction, and it keeps doing that, just like the breath—it can't just go one way. But anyway, I've been noticing over the last few days, it feels like for some it's going into another kind of dip. The place where I call "hitting the wall," where we've really been sincerely working, being present, cultivating awareness and mindfulness and metta, opening to difficult stuff, whatever. But then it hits a place—and it's different for each of us, and for each of us at different times it's different—where the mind just says, "I can't do this," or "I don't want to do this," or "If this is what freedom's about, no thank you very much." I call it hitting the wall.

Sometimes it's like, "Okay, I see my bad habits, and this is a big one. I really get it. Selfing happens a lot. I'm seeing craving everywhere I look. And the more mindful I get, the more I see it." But it's worse. Not only do I see it, I feel the pain of it. And because I feel the pain of it and I see how unnecessary it is and how much delusion it is, I'm really lost in self-judgment about it—because I ought to be over this by now. And it's ten million times more painful now than it was before. I can't bear it anymore. Have you ever had a moment like that? Longer than a moment.

Sometimes it's like that moment I was talking about in Burma—"Oh my God, it's overwhelming. I just can't be with this." I can't do it over and over and over. And then we believe that mind state. You know, forget it. Or sometimes it's just opening to another level, and it may be a subtle level, of the painfulness of our habits, or of our past conditioning, or just seeing something very subtle, like comparing, but seeing it everywhere. So it's so disgusting, you just can't stand it anymore.

Someone said to me once—I thought I was being really nice in the interview, but she said, as a friend, "You know, it's like you're saying to me so nicely, 'You're completely covered with green slime.'" I was just trying to point out wanting. I wasn't taking it personally—wanting, yeah, it comes. And she's like, "Ugh, green slime. You're totally identified." And then the mind says, "I don't want to be with this. I don't want to look anymore."

Or various ideas come into our mind at a certain time. "If freedom means I don't love my family anymore, forget about it." Or "If freedom means no more appreciation of the beautiful"—and that's something we get into a lot. "It means I can't have pleasant experience anymore. I don't want that. It's just dull, gray, boring—forget it." And then we're off into reactivity.

Or sometimes it's even getting caught in what I talked about the other night—our personality view. "Well, freedom, I really would love it, but it's just not possible for me in this lifetime. I'm too..." fill in the blanks. In fact, tonight when I've been talking about determination, if your mind goes, "Yeah, well, that's fine for someone, but not someone as weak as me, not someone as tired as me, not someone as..." whatever, fill in the blanks, "I couldn't do it"—notice that.

Notice that at times when we hit the wall, when it's just not what we expected. And this is usually a big one: the expectations we have in the background. Pretty much, it's an extremely rare person who doesn't have some expectation going on. You come to a retreat—I mean, you're lucky if you even know what your upfront expectations are. But often about this time, the ones we didn't know, or that we knew but we pretended we didn't know—which is amazing, isn't it? We saw it in the beginning. "No, no, I don't really think that."

No, no, no, that's not really operating. But now it's like, "Okay, where's the bliss? It's been five weeks. Huh? This isn't what I signed up for. Another dip into wanting and aversion and sense of self? No, no, no. Three weeks, okay. Five weeks—I'm ready for some samadhi." And samadhi does not mean noticing changing objects that are unpleasant. Samadhi means heading for bliss, thank you very much. The sense of self? Okay, I've seen it. *Chalo*—goodbye. We don't need it anymore. What's going on?

Or we have some idea of how open our heart should be, how we shouldn't have these unpleasant or aversive or cruel thoughts. Or some idea of how our body was going to open up and purify. We all have these. Maybe you don't, but look and see—if you're hitting a wall, there's almost always some idea back there. And as embarrassing or puerile or foolish as it might seem, it's really helpful to pull that idea out of the shadows and bring it into the light.

I remember last year when I was sitting on a retreat in Burma. I was doing walking meditation, and it was pretty quiet. Things were really quite fine—no big deal was going on, and I was quite happy. I would just notice a little leaning forward. And then I pulled out the thought in my mind. It was like, "Oh, it should be a little bit better than this." Whatever this was, it should be a little bit better. And then I saw—yes, there's this belief: this is samsara. And I'm still trying to fix samsara. And that's the whole point about samsara: it isn't fixable. It's just going on and on and on.

Actually, for me, it was a very funny moment. I was walking in this place, and I saw that. Just—ah, samsara. Then I went into this feeling of just everywhere wanting and not getting, and you get it, and it goes, and trying to make it better, and it's never enough. And it's just so heavy. I was walking outside in this place I liked, and I just kind of looked up—I really was looking up, thinking I'll get some openness, some sky. And it was still trying to improve samsara. The place I chose to look up, there was a little overhang from the building I was walking next to, which I'd never really noticed. This cement overhang in the tropics—it was so disgusting. It was filled with old cobwebs and mold hanging down and dead bugs and flies. It was the most disgusting thing. I thought, "Oh yeah. Samsara—give it up." It was great. It just broke the whole thing.

Sometimes we hit the wall because it's actually going well. And our sense of comfort, our sense of self, our sense of what we're familiar with starts to be broken apart, starts to come undone. It's almost like—I don't know if Guy used this phrase, I think at Solis he talked about a nostalgia for samsara. So when you see aspects of your personality—that lonely aspect, that greedy whatever it is—and you see moments when awareness simply sees it and you don't buy into it, and then it's gone, you go, "Oh, but that's me." It's like putting on a nice, warm, cozy coat, and we want it back. Like, "No, who would I be without my whatever?" This pull of nostalgia for some familiar suffering. "Oh, I can't do this."

I don't want to do this. I don't want to be nothing and nobody. It's a very unfamiliar sense of myself.

And so this is where determination, resolve, really supports us—in the form of courage. A courage that's willing to show up for that discomfort, that dis-ease, that sense of unfamiliarity. Realizing that freedom from clinging is completely uncompromising. It's not freedom from most clinging while you get to hold on to a few things. It's freedom from clinging that transforms our views of ourselves, our views of the world, our comfortable and even uncomfortable little standpoints that we have. They all start to get seen through. And even though that's freeing, it can also be quite unsettling.

If we just want to stick in our minds—what we think about it, what should we do—we can really get swept into doubt and confusion, or we hit that wall. Resolve is just: okay, be with this. Unsettling is like this.

Because enlightenment, waking up, it's not a self-improvement project. It's not about fixing our personalities. As Ajahn Sumedho said, it's not our personality that gets liberated. It's seeing through all the standpoints. We can still use our standpoints, our views, but it's seeing through them all.

I love this quote from Stephen Batchelor. He says realizing emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It's more a falling apart of all our strategies of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection. And although freeing, it can also bring about a great sense of disconcertion, confusion, dis-ease—like being in what he calls a no man's land, where nothing is familiar for a while.

And that place of unfamiliarity, it's uncomfortable often. So this is where we really call on our resolution, our commitment—not to make it be a certain way or get out of the discomfort, but just: okay, show up for this. Dis-ease is like this. That willingness to just open into the unknown. Whatever this next moment is, we don't know. Resolution just unifies our energy and allows us to do that. Moment by moment. Not willpower, not forcing, not expectation, but as Sayadaw U Tejaniya has written all over the place: never give up. Don't push, don't strive, but never give up. Just being here for this.

Maybe I've used this example before, but it's a good one to me of never giving up. Some of you may have seen the movie—it's been out a few years now—called *Touching the Void*, about two men that were mountain climbing together in the Andes in South America. It's a recreation of something that happened maybe twenty years ago. It's very intense, so I'll try to make a long story short.

They're mountain climbing together, just the two of them, and they're roped together way, way up high in snowy mountains. They're descending, and the one ahead somehow skids and falls off a ledge. So he's hanging way down, and they're roped together. For a really long time, the guy who's still up is trying to pull the other one up. He can't get him up. There's this huge void down there, this huge abyss. For hours they can't get him up, they can't move, they can't do anything.

So finally, the guy who's up there cuts the rope. That was his decision, what he did. And certainly in mountaineering, you never do that. But that's what he did. He cut the rope and went back to their base camp. Waited to see what happened.

So the guy whose rope was cut fell into a big crevasse in the ice. He falls down into it, so it's dark and narrow, and he lands on a kind of shelf. And he'd broken his leg. So he's on this shelf for—I don't remember how long—quite a long time, twelve hours, longer. And he said later, he's terrified of this dark, of this crevasse.

And he's way down there. He can't get up. He's way down. And it keeps on going down further, and he's just on this little shelf. So he's there for twelve hours, twenty-four, I don't know how long. But at some point he said, "I couldn't just abdicate. I had to, all of a sudden, make a decision." And the only thing he could do was lower himself further down into that crevasse, which completely, completely terrified him. And he had no clue if it just went on forever or what would happen. But he said, "I could not abdicate. I had to do something."

That's the quality of resolution—just opening into the unknown. Amazing. Well, I don't know. In some way, maybe it's not so physical. But there are times in practice when it's that level. And we think we can go back to our little cozy nest. But we bring up the resolve, just be here, and it will open by itself.

So anyway, obviously he made it out. He said, "I had to make a choice. I may be wrong." So what happened—he lowered himself. His leg was broken. But he hit ground, and it kind of went up, and he could see daylight. And he managed to crawl out. And it took him three or four days on his broken leg to crawl over this incredible terrain—mountains, sliding down, rocks—to get back to where the base camp was.

And by the time he got back, the other guy had been waiting for days and was just about to leave. He had burned all the other guy's clothes, was about to go. And the guy had just—I mean, it's amazing he was still alive after these four days. He said he was so—nothing to drink, nothing to eat—really delirious. And when he was getting close to the base camp, the only thing that kind of snapped him back out of delirium enough to know he was close was the smell of urine from where they'd been peeing when they were camping there. That smell was so strong, it kind of woke him up and brought him into his mind enough to get back to the base camp.

It's a very intense, very intense story. But can you imagine the temptation? "Well, I'll just hang out on the crevasse. I'll just hang out here on the shelf because it's too scary to do anything else." And sometimes we feel like that in our practice. But really, we can't abdicate. And you don't want to abdicate. Never give up.

There's a great story. Ajahn Sumedho was telling us one time—I think we were meeting with him again, a bunch of Spirit Rock teachers. And he was talking about, just in his own life of practice, a period. He was the abbot of Amaravati for many years. So he's

talking about a period of about ten years ago when there was great difficulty at the monastery, a lot of interpersonal difficulty, a lot of upheaval. And he, being the abbot and also the one who kind of ran things, he was getting a lot of blame. People were really—and these are all people who live together and know each other well. So he was getting a lot of blame, a lot of anger.

And he said, "My personality hated that and feared that. I want to be loved. I want to be liked. And everyone's blaming me, and I'm having to still stand up and take it all and still make the hard decisions. It was horrible for my personality." And he was starting to really feel beaten down.

And then he said he realized, oh, he was buying into his personality. And he said—and he used this word—"I made a determination to trust awareness." I love that.

Like the time when we're really in our stuff. And we can see we're in our stuff, but it's so real. We say, yes, I'm really believing the personality, sakkāya-diṭṭhi, is what is true. And he just made a deep resolve on trusting awareness, which is trusting mindfulness, intuitive awareness. Personality still arising, blame still arising, hating the blame still arising—awareness of it like this. The trust is in the awareness, not in the personality.

That's a huge resolve, one we can make over and over and over again in our practice. Doesn't mean we know how it's going to turn out. Doesn't mean that it's the same path for each of us. And we make the resolve over and over and over again, don't we?

I want to end with a story about this quality of resolve and commitment and how strong it can be in lives. Maybe some of you have seen the movie about when Tsoknyi Rinpoche and some Western women went back to Tibet to visit a group of nuns called the Nangchen nuns. Their story is that they lived in the remote mountains of Tibet—about forty nunneries during the Cultural Revolution of China, after China had taken over Tibet. It was in 1959, but then there was the Cultural Revolution in the seventies. And at that point, many of the monasteries and nunneries were destroyed.

So these nuns, the Nangchen nuns up in the remote mountains of Tibet—all their nunneries were destroyed, and the nuns were scattered. Different things happened to them. Each had to find a different way, but they held their deep commitment, their resolve in themselves of being nuns. That was their path. Some of them had to go back to their nomadic homes and live with their families. Some of the nuns didn't survive this period when the nunneries were destroyed. Some were sent to work camps. Some man-

aged to go deep, deeper into the mountains and live like hermits in caves. But all of them that survived, in their own way, really stayed true to their internal resolve of living as nuns.

What happened was that in recent years they were starting to be allowed to come out of hiding, to come back from their families and begin to rebuild these nunneries—which already was huge. They were dragging the stones and the wood up these giant, giant mountains by hand to rebuild the nunneries. But they were saying the ones who had been living with their families had to disrobe. So they were like secret nuns. They would do their practices in secret, in their minds, in silence, even keeping it from their families sometimes. They would look like they were living a normal life, but they were doing hidden practice—committed to being nuns inside, over and over and over.

So when they could come back out and come together as nuns again, even though externally... you have to use discerning wisdom. You don't know what conditions are going to be presented. Resolution isn't about it's always going to be like this. It's about our hearts and minds aligned with truth, and whatever we need to do to cultivate that commitment to truth and wakefulness in ourselves.

So when Tsoknyi Rinpoche and these Western women were visiting, they went back again and were starting to see these nuns come out of hiding. Some of them had starved to death. Some had been close to starvation for twenty years while they were in hiding up in the mountains or with their families. And now they were so happy to be able to come back.

The culmination of the whole movie—they took the visitors up to visit this old nun really at the top of this tiny, tiny little cabin up on the top of the mountain. Really old. And they said they thought she was one of their most awakened ones. The movie shows her. She's just lying in a bed. She's got so many wrinkles. She looks like about 120, really. Who knows? And her eyes are just so bright, beaming. She's just lying there. It doesn't look like she can even walk or get up. She's just spinning her little prayer wheel. And they say to her, "So what are you doing?" She says, "Well, all my waking hours, all that's in my mind are wishes for the happiness and freedom from suffering of all beings." She's just lying there, so bright, spinning her prayer wheel every moment she's awake.

So who knows how our resolve is going to show up.

But to end with something from the Buddha, where he says two things: "Two things I never lost sight of—not to shrink from the struggle, and not to stay contented merely with wholesome states of mind."

Don't sell yourself short. Don't be afraid to own your aspiration.

The Buddha: "This holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, nor the attainment of virtue for its benefit, nor the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or even knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its essence and its end, its heart-wood."

So don't sell yourself short. Don't abandon your resolve.

Thank you. Let's just sit.

CHAPTER 67

Stories of Some Buddhist Nuns: Then and Now

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson weaves together stories of awakened nuns from the Pāli canon with accounts of remarkable Buddhist women she has personally encountered in Burma and Thailand. She begins with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's aunt and step-mother who became the mother of the bhikkhunī saṅgha through her determined persistence, and draws parallels to Bhikkhunī Dhammānandā, who is courageously working to restore full ordination for women in Thailand.*
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> *Wilson shares the dramatic story of Paṭācārā, who lost her entire family through a series of devastating tragedies before finding liberation through the Dhamma, and connects her teaching legacy to Dīpa Mā, the beloved Indian laywoman teacher whose own profound suffering transformed into boundless mettā and incisive wisdom. The talk also highlights Dhammadinnā, praised by the Buddha as foremost in expounding the Dhamma, and the contemporary Burmese nun Daw Yuzana, who teaches large retreats while simultaneously running a school for orphaned girls.*
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> *Through these parallel narratives spanning 2,500 years, Wilson demonstrates that women's capacity for awakening has always been equal to men's, as the nun Somā declared to Māra: 'What difference does being a woman or a man make when the mind is well composed?' The talk offers both inspiration and practical encouragement, showing how suffering can become the doorway to liberation and how awakening manifests in diverse ways—from quiet hermitage life to active teaching and compassionate service.*

So tonight, in this kind of changeover period, I thought it would be story time.

But really what I want to talk about, we don't hear so much about the women in the history of the time of the Buddha and also now. So I want to talk about some of the nuns who were enlightened nuns at the time of the Buddha, and also some nuns that I know today who remind me of similar stories.

I feel it's really important to remember that there's quite a rich place in the texts where there are poems from enlightened monks and poems from enlightened nuns. And then we have a little bit of the story about some of the nuns. It's really wonderful to read them because it brings them alive. Just as if you read the suttas you might think they feel very dry and dull, but you start to get a sense of the personalities of the different monks, and so also with some of these nuns.

I only have time to pick out a very few, just to give you a sense of the range. But what I love about it is that I really feel like I can relate to different personalities, different situations in life before they became nuns, different ways that they awoke—quickly, slowly, good horse, bad horse, all of that. It's very accessible to how we are today. And it brings it alive for me, from just being some distant, "Oh yeah, and there were some women too," kind of fluffing along, doing their best. It's not like that at all. It really gives a sense of the power of the women just as much as the men, yesterday and today.

So first I want to read a translation by Andy Olendzki from the Study Center. He likes to translate poems from Pali to English. And this is a poem of a nun, Soma, with Mara. Mara is the personification of delusion, the personification of kilesa, of temptation. There are often these dialogue poems with both nuns and monks and the Buddha, where Mara comes and tries to say, "What are you doing? You're wasting your time. You're too stupid. You'll never do it." Whatever he thinks will seduce them.

So in this poem, she enters this grove to practice and Mara comes and wants to make her waver and abandon her commitment. Mara says: "That which can be attained by seers, the place so hard to arrive at, women are not able to reach since they lack sufficient wisdom."

And Soma thinks, "Who is this? I see you, Mara." And she answers—she's not thrown off at all. She says: "What difference does being a woman or a man make when the mind is well composed, when knowledge is proceeding on, when one rightly sees into Dhamma? Indeed, for one to whom the question arises, am I a man or a woman, or even am I something at all? To them alone is Mara fit to talk."

These women, these awakened women, they're tough and clear and strong just as equally as the men. And as Andy says, he thinks this is a definitive statement in the Buddhist tradition about the equality of the sexes in terms of awakening.

These women whose poems we have—of course we only have poems from the enlightened ones, same with the monks—they come from all walks of life and they manifest their awakening in all different ways. There's not one way to be, either before you begin your practice or after. Some became great teachers, well-known. Some lived quiet lives of a hermit. Some were just happy to run the community or just live quietly in the community. Some were reclusive, just as with the monks, living in all different ways.

One has to start with the woman who's kind of like the mother of the nun sangha—you can't really skip her—Mahapajapati Gotami, who was the aunt and stepmother of Siddhartha before he became the Buddha, because his mother died when he was a

week old. His mother was the queen married to King Suddhodana, and her younger sister, Mahapajapati Gotami, was also married to the king. The kings had various wives at that time. So she really raised Siddhartha as her own son, and also his son, Rahula.

After he'd gone and become the Buddha, she was of course living with her husband the king. During this period, many of the men in the Buddha's family were leaving to become monks. Women at this time in this society defined their social status by their male relationships. They were somebody's daughter, somebody's wife, somebody's mother.

So when her husband King Suddhodana died, and then her son also went off to become a monk—Buddha was already the Buddha—there came a period where both sides of the Buddha's family, the Sakyans and the Koliyas, the two clans, got into a battle over water rights of a river. And they had a big battle.

And so, again, a lot of men were killed. The Buddha came to try to help them bring an end to the conflict. He gave such an inspiring Dharma talk that the fighting ceased, but then many of the men who weren't killed also went off and became monks with the Buddha.

It was actually at this time that Pajapati, being the queen and a natural leader, found herself along with many other women left without male relatives. So they started thinking, "Why don't we too renounce the world and wake up?" Not just because there was nothing else to do—which sometimes is why people ordain as monks and nuns even today—but really out of genuine aspiration. They too wanted awakening.

At that time, there was no order of nuns. As we've mentioned, during that period in India there were various wandering ascetic orders and loose cannons wandering around being ascetic as well. But the orders were all those of men. It simply wasn't done in that society. In a way, it was seen as a real threat to society to set up an order of renunciate women, because of course, the women hold society together. So no, that couldn't be permitted.

Mahapajapati went to the Buddha and asked him very sincerely if she might ordain. He listened, but he said, "No, sorry, Gotami. Please don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this." She asked the requisite three times, after which if the Buddha were ever going to say yes, he would have. And he didn't. He still said no. Then he took his bowl and went with his monks to another place on their regular tour, about a hundred miles away.

So Pajapati, along with quite a few women, cut off their hair, put on saffron-colored robes, and barefoot, followed the Buddha and the monks to the next town, to Vesali. They weren't accustomed to walking barefoot on the roads as the monks were. It's said that when she arrived at Vesali with a number of Sakyan women, she was standing outside the hall where the Buddha was teaching, her feet swollen, covered with dust, looking pitiful and crying.

This is where Ananda steps in. Ananda is also a cousin of the Buddha, so in some way related to Pajapati as well. They were all related back then—it wasn't such a huge scene. Ananda, having been the Buddha's attendant for twenty-five years, comes across as perhaps the most human of all the monks. He's kind, he's friendly. But whereas sometimes these days, if you encounter a great spiritual teacher, their attendant seems to serve the function of keeping people away, Ananda served the function of trying to get as many people in to hear the Dhamma from the Buddha as possible. He was always kind.

So he intervenes at this point. He asked, "It would be good, Lord, if women were to have permission to do this." And again the Buddha says no to Ananda: "Don't set your heart on this."

So Ananda thought, let me try asking in another way. He says, "Are women able, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" These are the levels of awakening. And the Buddha says, "Yes, Ananda, they are able." It's really clear throughout—there's absolutely no difference in potential for awakening.

Then Ananda goes on to say, "Since they can realize perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your foster mother, she even suckled you at her breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

And the Buddha goes, "Okay, all right." And at this point began the Sangha of Bhikkhunis.

What really comes across, of course, is that within the structure of the time, Pajapati was clearly a woman of huge faith—faith in awakening—but also real determination, a willingness not to simply go along with what she was told, which was how women were supposed to be at the time. She should just agree. But it was a very bold request. And she didn't say, "Okay, well, I'll just give it up and go back home." She was clear and strong in her faith, in her determination, and in her wanting to wake up.

So she became really the mother of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. From the time that she and all these other women were ordained, she was obviously the first teacher, but also a very powerful and popular one. Many women came to her. She's said to have lived to be a hundred and twenty years old, and when she died, the Buddha came to be with her. It is said—and this is in the mythology—that there were earthquakes and flowers falling from the sky. Second only to the death of a Buddha were there such miracles occurring on the earth to mark her passing. It's a way of acknowledging the strength of who she was and what she did.

Her poem says: "Homage to you, Buddha, best of all beings, who set me and many others free from pain. All pain is understood. The cause, the craving, is dried up. The noble eightfold way unfolds. I have reached the state where everything stops. I have been mother, son, father, brother, grandmother, knowing nothing of the truth I journeyed on, but I have seen the Blessed One. This is my last body and I will not go from birth to birth again. Look at all the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is true homage to the Buddhas."

That's you, you know—disciples together with your energy and your sincere effort. It's homage to all the Buddhas and the potential Buddhas that each of us are. And I get a sense from her of how she's really the holder of the community, that what she looks out and sees is how all the disciples are paying homage through their sincere practice.

Just as in that time the societal structure really held women in a certain place, the Buddha recognized that in terms of awakening, in terms of the practice that's possible, there's absolutely no difference between men and women. That was already quite radical. And once he agreed to have the sangha, as I said, just as with the men, so with the women. He kept them quite separate, which was really essential in those days. It wasn't like mixing up. The bhikkhunis had their monasteries, and the bhikkhus had theirs. The bhikkhunis had their own teachers. They could come and hear the Buddha, and some of the monks would go and teach with the bhikkhunis, but they had their own systems.

Within the bhikkhuni order, the same as with the monks, the class structure of India at that time was absolutely rigid. Whatever caste you were born into, that's the caste you had to live in your whole life. They couldn't mix. There was one really low caste called untouchables, where if you were from a higher caste, you couldn't even take water from an untouchable person's hands. That stratified.

And once in the Sangha of either nuns or monks, the Buddha completely did away with that. The only sense of hierarchy within the nuns was when you ordained. Each person who came in—every ordained nun was junior to those who had already been there. Same with the monks. It didn't matter if the one who came in had been a queen

and the one who ordained two minutes before her had been a prostitute or a beggar. It didn't matter. The prostitute, the beggar, was senior to the queen. This is radical in that time.

Who came to mind when I was thinking about these stories is a Thai woman named Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. Her Thai name was Chatsuman Kabilsingh. She was a professor in a university in Bangkok. When she was in her fifties—and I don't want to go too much into the politics—but in Burma and Thailand, the bhikkhuni order has fallen away, and the nuns only have eight or ten precepts, so they're not on a parity. Without getting into the politics, it's believed in the political system, and the monkhood is mixed up with the political system to some degree in Thailand and Burma, that bhikkhunis must have bhikkhunis present in the ordination ceremony. And since there are no bhikkhunis, they can't ordain new ones. It goes like that. And they don't recognize the Mahayana lineage—some do and some don't.

So Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, some years ago, went to Sri Lanka, where there are bhikkhunis who have been ordained in the Mahayana tradition. She came back to Thailand and began to open a nunnery. Now, this is really more than a political hot potato. But she is very well known and was quite a scholar. She wasn't just some person they could ignore or mistreat.

This is from an article, actually from years ago in The New York Times. It says the government and conservative monks and laymen accused her of intentionally creating problems to further erode the religion, which was plagued in that nation by numerous sex and money scandals in recent years. Just like everything, there are good monks and bad monks, good nuns and bad nuns. Don't be too idealistic.

But anyway, she said—and this is great—she said, "This is a conflict between ignorance and right understanding."

And she quotes the Buddha, who said very often that the health of the sangha, the health of the Buddhasasana surviving in the world, depends on four pillars: male and female ordained people, and male and female lay people. These are the four pillars of the Buddhasasana.

And so she said, "You know, I'm not trying to cause trouble. I just hope that allowing female ordination as bhikkhunis will strengthen women's status, strengthen the Buddhism." And she has no plans to seek official recognition. She said the recognition comes after trust. "I will prove that bhikkhunis are really a boon to Thai Buddhism. This is my mission in life."

So now she has this huge center outside of Bangkok. I was on the webpage last year sometime. She speaks English really well. She has talks online, and she's been ordaining temporary bhikkhunis, just tons at a time. So she's just in her not-so-quiet way, but steady way—she really is, in a way, trying to be the mother of the new birth of the bhikkhuni sangha in Thailand. So this is someone who's quite active today, in a way similar to Mahapajapati.

So back to the Buddha's time. The kinds of women and the stories of how they became nuns—they're all very different. First I want to tell another story, of a woman named Dhammadina, who after she became a nun was recognized by the Buddha as the foremost in teaching the Dhamma, the foremost in expounding the Dhamma, in preaching.

She was the wife of a man named Wisaka, a very important man in Rajagaha. They were quite well off—not a king, a businessman, but quite well off. And they had what was a very happy marriage. There are plenty of other nuns who had really unhappy, oppressive marriages and wanted to become nuns for that reason. Of course, their husbands wouldn't let them. But Dhammadina had a happy marriage.

One day, however, her husband had been out and heard the Buddha teach for the first time. When he came home to lunch—usually he would come in and they would chat, sit down and eat together—but this time he just walked by her without saying anything. Her reaction, as it's told in the story, is so typical. She goes, "Oh, he's angry. What did I do? Why is he angry at me?" And she got all worried.

But then he called her and said, "No, no, I'm not angry." He was so inspired by hearing the Buddha teaching that he'd had some kind of realization. And he decided he was going to renounce the world and become a monk. So he said, "I'll give you all my wealth. You can stay here with my wealth. You can go back to your family—I'll really take care of you. But I'm going off to ordain with the Buddha."

So she thought about it. It had never even occurred to her that this was a possibility before. But she said, "You know what? I want to do that too. I also want to ordain." So he said, "Great!" And he sent her off with great fanfare and a golden palanquin—you know, where you're carried—sent her off in all this state to become a nun.

And so she did. She went off, practiced intensively, became an arahant, and was this great teacher. Then she was going back to Rajagaha, where lo and behold, it turned out her husband never went to become a monk after all. He was still just hanging out there in Rajagaha. But he was still really interested in the Dhamma. She just had more energy and more faith.

So when she came back—and this isn't just a poem in the Therigatha, but actually a whole sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya—she comes back to Rajagaha and her husband, her former husband Wisaka, comes up and he's eagerly asking her all these questions. Very subtle questions, just one after the other after the other. And she's answering them as best she can.

And he's just pounding her with questions. She says meditation is the focusing of the heart. He says, what are its outward signs? She says its outward signs are the presence of four kinds of attention; four kinds of right effort are needed. And he kept on going and kept on going, and finally she said—and this is a whole sutta—"You will never get to the end of your questionings. So go, if you have more questions, go and ask the Buddha."

So he went. And of course, when you've been questioning another monk or nun, you always go and report to the Buddha what you asked and what they said. So he did that. And the Buddha praised Dhammadina, saying, "Dhammadina possesses learning and great wisdom. Had you asked me, I would have answered exactly as she did. Her answer was correct, and you should treasure it accordingly."

This is actually a very high form of praise—but more than praise, it's a statement. They call it a buddhavacana, the word of the Buddha, which is really a rare example of saying there's an equivalence in this statement between her wisdom and the Buddha's wisdom. It's a very strong statement about her.

So that's Dhammadina. And the person she reminds me of, whom I wanted to tell you about, is a nun who lives in Burma today. Her name is Daw Yuzna. I've met her quite a few times. She is a very serene, calm, and very strong person—maybe mid-forties, I would say. She's a teacher in the Mogok Sayadaw tradition, which is a different technique and emphasis from the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition. Those are probably the two main strands of Vipassana meditation styles in Burma, with Pa Auk Sayadaw perhaps being the third.

She lives in a monastery where the Sayadaw, a male monk, is the abbot. But she is really the well-known one, the famous one—Daw Yuzna. People come from all over to ask her questions, to ask her advice, to make offerings to her. She's a very strong teacher, very calm. I've never seen her flustered or upset. She can be very friendly and loving—joking around is perhaps too strong a description, but there's a warmth to her.

She has these dogs that bark like crazy when you come. They're just barking and barking, and they come and be quiet, but only for her—not for anybody else in the monastery.

She told us once her story. She wanted to become a nun, but her parents wouldn't let her. Finally they agreed when she was about nineteen, but only for a year. After that year, she really wanted to stay, and her father was actually quite mean to her, even beating her, trying to get her to stop being a nun. But her will was so strong, her commitment and faith so strong. She just loved the Dhamma, loved practicing, loved sharing. You can feel this sense of power and strength and calm inside of her—it's just how she is. She emanates that quality. She simply loves the Dhamma.

And she has amazing energy. We went to visit her one time on her birthday, which is often when people will offer a big feast. So we arrived, and she's cooking. She's offering a feast to everyone in the monastery—cooking it herself, making the dessert. And then out of the meditation hall come about one to two hundred yogis, men and women. Oh yes, by the way, she's teaching a ten-day retreat to these yogis, just her. The Sayadaw wasn't teaching. She's teaching it, making this meal, hanging out with all the visitors. That's what she's like.

It's not common for a nun to be teaching huge retreats to mixed populations like that. It's a statement of the power of her understanding.

And then after Cyclone Nargis, which was three years ago—which was really sort of like Katrina here, in the southwestern part of Burma—just hundreds of villages were destroyed. People died.

Lots of young kids were orphaned, or their parents lost all their way to support themselves. And so she just got the clear message in herself that she's in Yangon, that she needed to start a school for orphaned and poor girls—just for girls.

She is such a force of nature. She didn't just build a little shack, which some other nuns we know have done. She does have a few more resources because she's so well-known. She starts raising money. She built this huge three-story building. She said she wants to make it a school that's really good. So she's hiring really good teachers, paying them much more than the public school pays the teachers. She had about 200 girls from young all the way up to 10th standard, which is like graduating from high school—which not that many Burmese kids get to. And now she's even hiring some computer experts and looking for computers to help the few girls who finished the 10th standard to learn some more. Amazing.

And this is all on dāna. She has a very precise budget. She showed us her budget—our friend Ari Anani translated it; it was all in Burmese. Very precise, complex as it would be for such an undertaking, because half of the girls live there. So it's not only the building and the teachers and the materials, it's the food and the clothing. All on dāna.

So for instance, we came and gave her from some of the dāna various people had offered us, maybe $200 or $300. And she said, "This is great, now I can meet my payroll this month." It's like month to month. She needs something like 300,000 kyat a month, which is in the neighborhood of $300 to us, but that's really a lot of money over there. Every month she needs that. And she's just completely serene, trusting it's going to come. "Great, okay, good, I can pay the teachers this month." She knew if it hadn't been us, it would have come from somewhere else.

And she's still teaching retreats, and she's still seeing people. This is just one example of a really powerful woman teacher who's also trying to support young girls as well as she can. And she's kind of fun to hang out with.

She told us this last time—there were just a few of us, and she was talking in Burmese, so she was really speaking from her heart. She was talking about this school and how she, of course, wanted to help the young girls who didn't have parents, didn't have a way to schooling. But she said, and she just seemed so sincere, "Of course, my motivation in all of this is the Dhamma. Behind everything I do is the love of awakening and wanting to be able to offer to these girls the chance to really understand the Dhamma and awaken themselves. Everything else is extra, but that's why I do everything that I do."

She's really quite an amazing person. So that's Daw U Zana.

There are many nuns in the suttas who became nuns not like Dhammadina—just "Oh yeah, sure, why not?"—but from amazing, really intense suffering in their lives, where they were just at their last wit's end. And of course, afterwards, when they awaken, they have so much compassion and understanding of suffering that they become powerful teachers for other women in suffering.

I'm going to really condense this next story. But this is one of those out-there stories where you think it couldn't get any worse and then it gets worse, and you think it couldn't get any worse and then it gets worse again.

This woman was named Patācārā, from a well-to-do family, but she fell in love with a servant. Of course, in those days it was arranged marriages. But she fell in love with a servant, and they ran away and got married, which was just beyond not done. So they had to go to another town and never see her family again.

When she got pregnant, she wanted to go back and see her family. But understandably, her husband wasn't so thrilled with that idea. So he put it off and put it off, and she had the baby. The second time she gets pregnant, same thing. He keeps putting it off. He doesn't want to go. But finally, she's just about to have the baby, and they start walking to the other village. She's some distance away, maybe a couple of days' walk. But she was too pregnant. She starts to go into labor in the middle of a field.

And it's about to start storming. So her husband goes off to get leaves and brush and build a shelter. But he gets bitten by a poisonous viper and dies. So she's lying there having the baby. She doesn't know what happened to him. She has the baby, stays there, and then she doesn't know what to do. The next day, she gets up and starts walking, finds his body, filled with grief. Really nothing to do but walk on to her family.

Because it had rained so much, she comes to a river that's way swollen. And she thinks, how can I get across this river with the newborn baby and her little two-year-old? So she decides, okay, I'll leave the baby on this side, walk across with the two-year-old, and then come back.

Yes, you're right. The two-year-old gets swept away. She's completely losing it. She looks back and a big bird of prey has come down and taken the little baby while she's in the river.

So she's pretty much losing it, but goes on to her family's village. She gets there and sees smoke rising up, and she says to someone, "Where's my parents and my brother?" And the person says, "Ask me anything else. Don't ask me that." She said, "That's the only thing I want to know." They had all just died in a fire.

You see, it couldn't get worse.

So she went crazy. She just went completely mad. And her name, Patachara, means "cloak walker." Her clothes just dropped off. She's just walking in circles. She's just mad. And people, being how people can be, would chase her away and throw clods of dirt at her. They didn't want her around.

At one point, she came to where the Buddha was preaching. And the people tried to push her away, make her go away—she's naked, she's embarrassing, she's crazy. But the Buddha went and got in her way. He went deliberately up to her and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did. Then someone gave her a cloak so she wasn't naked. And she said, "Help me, please help me." And out poured her whole story.

And it said that the Buddha said—and this is really this kind of powerful teaching—he didn't say, "Oh, you poor thing." He said, "Don't think you have come to someone who can help with that. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than the water in the four oceans."

And this actually calmed her down a little bit. Then he went on and gave more teachings about how when we ourselves die, no one else can help us. No one can be with us. Even when we're alive, in the depth of our suffering, even our kin, our family, cannot take our suffering away from us. This is how it is.

And then he preached the Dhamma. And she really was back in her right mind. She said, "Yes, may I become a nun." And the Buddha says sure. He takes her, goes with her to the Sangha of Bhikkhunis. And the Sangha of Bhikkhunis ordained her.

She had to practice for a while. She wasn't one of these who in five minutes completely woke up. But she became, obviously, a very powerful teacher. It's said that she's the one who's mentioned the most in other poems as someone who's helped.

And her awakening poem—I like it because it describes her moment of awakening.

So I feel the immediacy of it. Also that it wasn't so easy for her.

She says: "When they plow their fields and sow seeds in the earth, when they care for their wives and their children, young Brahmins find riches. But I've done everything right. I followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?"

Can you relate?

"Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope. I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

She wasn't even in meditation. She was walking into her room, sitting on her bed, pushing the wick down on her lamp—just being here. Her mind was freed. And she became a great teacher for those in suffering.

Here's one of the poems by another woman named Chanda that Patachara helped: "I was in a bad way, a widow, no children, no friends, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered house to house in the heat and cold for seven years. But I met a nun who had food and drink, and I went up to her and said, take me into the homeless life. She was Patachara. Out of pity, she guided me in leaving home, encouraged me, and urged me to the highest goal. I took her advice. It wasn't wasted. There are no obsessions in my mind."

Notice that food and drink. The first thing Patachara did was feed her. She was hungry and ragged and cold, and Patachara fed her, then taught her the Dhamma and supported her. Metta and karuna flowing directly from understanding suffering, combined with really straight teachings. It's a great one-two combination.

If you want to think of a current-day person, Dipa Ma is absolutely the best example of exactly this combination. She wasn't a nun, but she embodied this path of becoming a practitioner and awakening through meditation, of incredible suffering in her life that took her almost to the point of death and madness, and then becoming such a loving and really strong teacher.

Her story, incredibly shortened: little Indian lady, married to an Indian man in a very loving marriage, but for maybe twenty years they had no children, which was really devastating in that culture that was all about having children. They had moved to Burma where her husband was working. Finally, after twenty years, she got pregnant, but the baby died. Then she got pregnant again, and Dipa was born, who survived. Then she got pregnant again, and that baby was born and died very soon. She went into such a depression, actually started having heart problems. Then her husband died. She went into not just depression but became so sick with her heart that she was just in bed. She could hardly get out of bed for months, for years. She could barely take care of her daughter. She was really on the point of death.

She had wanted to go to the Mahasi Center to meditate when she was married, but her husband always said, "Wait till you're older." But finally, on the point of going crazy and dying with nothing else to do, she went. It's said she was so weak that she almost had to crawl up the steps to get into the center to sit. She starts sitting, and of course, she's one of these "in one week" people. She had such strong samadhi and such amazing paramis that she had some enlightening experience within a week. She went home, took care of her daughter Dipa, and went back again after a while. Amazing, amazing paramis. She really transformed. She had very, very deep depths of awakening.

After some time of her practice, those who knew Dipa Ma were fascinated by her transformation. She had changed from a sickly, dependent, grief-stricken woman into a healthy, independent, radiant being. Dipa Ma herself said, "You have seen me. I was disheartened and broken down due to the loss of my husband and children and due to disease. I suffered so much. I could not walk properly."

But now, how are you finding me? All my disease is gone. I am refreshed and there is nothing in my mind. There is no sorrow, no grief. I am quite happy. If you come to meditate, you will also be happy. There is no magic. Only follow the instructions.

That might be our problem. Only follow the instructions.

Okay, so she has some paramis. We'll give her that. Amazing suffering leading to really quick awakening on her part. And then, as I think I was saying, she was renowned for just beaming love, just being so filled with love for whoever was there. But not only love—this really straight teaching as well.

The first thing is she was really clear that it's not just about sitting meditation. It's not just about being on retreat. That waking up, that the practice is about everything we do. She was really clear about this. So she didn't become a nun. She had Deepa, and she went back to India, and they lived together in this tiny little one-room apartment in Calcutta for the whole rest of her life with Deepa and Deepa's son. And she would just welcome anyone who came, all day, every day, and teach them. She said, "As long as they want to come, let me share the Dhamma with them." She was, again, like a mother to all in the Dhamma.

This is one example of how she believed that awakening is possible in any environment. She devised practices that her students could do at home. So one woman who was trying to raise six young children alone, with no way she could even sit down and meditate, never mind go to a meditation center—Deepa Ma taught this woman to notice very steadily the sucking sensation of the infant at her breast with complete presence of mind for the duration of each nursing period. This amounted to hours each day. And as Deepa Ma had hoped, Malati attained the first stage of enlightenment without ever leaving her home.

Cool, huh? We've got no excuse.

So this is love and commitment, but also she was really strong in her teaching. No mincing words. This is another story from another Indian woman who was one of her students, Sudipti. And this is very straight:

"When my son died in 1984, Deepa Ma shocked me with her words. It was a hard teaching I have not forgotten. She said, 'Today your son has gone from this world. Why are you shocked? Everything is impermanent. Your life is impermanent. Your husband is impermanent. Your son is impermanent. Everything is impermanent. Your money is impermanent. Your building is impermanent. There is nothing that is permanent. When you are alive, you might think, this is my daughter, this is my husband, this is my property, this car belongs to me. But when you are dead, nothing is yours. Sudipti, you think you are a serious meditator, but you must really learn that everything is impermanent.'"

Coming from someone who knows, and from a field of boundless metta, it's not like it's easy to hear. But the conditions are there to let it in. And it's really, really powerful to just be in the presence of someone with this degree of compassion and this level of understanding and the ability to share it.

Than one other suffering story, from another nun I know. Not such a brilliant attained person and not a known teacher, but one who is a representative, I would say, of many, many of the nuns in Burma who have enormous purity and faith and compassion and dedication. And I'm sure it's the same from the time of the Buddha. Most of the nuns and most of the monks, we don't know anything about, but they are enormously dedicated fields of purity and wisdom.

So this nun, her name is Uttara Tengi, and her younger sister is Uttama Tengi. They have a little nunnery near one of the meditation centers where I sit. Again, after the cyclone Nargis, a lot of nuns moved to this area in the outskirts of Yangon and started building. They would get a little bit of land that someone would buy for them, and they would build. So these two nuns, with the help of their brother, their actual brother, built for themselves this little shaggy nunnery. The walls are plaited bamboo, which lasts about a year, and the floor is plaited bamboo, which lasts six months as a floor. They just suddenly show up there, these two sisters and ten little girls that are nuns.

So we got to know them. We got to know them because we were going around trying to see what some of these nuns needed—there are lots of nuns in this area—offering support to the ones that just somehow through their vibe, or through talking with them, felt really sincere, with some sense of purity and commitment. And they just had such a sense of love and purity when we would hang out in their little place that we just got to know them better, offering them support.

And then we came to know their story. Again, because we were with Aryanani, who can speak Burmese and translate—it really helps.

So Uttara Tengi, who is the older one, just has this brightness. You can just feel it. You're drawn to her. You just kind of light up. She and her sister, along with some other siblings, were living down in the delta area. Their family were small farmers, but okay, well enough off, could hire a few helpers. But slowly over the past few years, they'd gotten poorer. She didn't really say why, as have many people in Burma. But they still had their land and they were still working.

But she began in her late teens to develop some kind of illness. No one knew why, but she was getting weaker and weaker. After some time, she was just in bed all the time. She couldn't work, and the family was struggling. They were selling their jewelry to try and get doctors and find out how to take care of her. She said she got so weak it was to the point where if her arm was lying next to her on the bed, she couldn't lift it up and put it on her chest. She could hardly even talk because she was so weak.

But she heard her parents talking, saying, "Well, we have nothing else, but we need to get more money to take care of her, so we need to sell our house." And she heard them. They didn't know she heard. She said, "No, no, no, no way. Let me become a nun. Then you don't have to take care of me."

But instead of saying, "Oh, yeah, good idea," the parents said, "No, no, we don't want you to become a nun. Please, let us take care of you."

But she insisted. So they said, "Well, only if your younger sister becomes a nun with you can you become a nun." The sister was sitting there, so we asked, "Well, how did you feel about that?" She said, "Oh, I always wanted to become a nun. So this was great for me."

There was a Sayadaw in that village that they really respected, and he agreed to ordain them. She said on the first day after she became a nun—within two days—she got so much strength back that she could start walking. Just two days after becoming a nun, and she could start talking. She just got better and better.

I was telling this to Jack Kornfield. He goes, "Well, what she needed was good therapy." Then he stopped a minute and goes, "Oh, I guess she did get that."

And so, just a side story: We were in their little house. Every nunnery, every monastery is going to have a little shrine area with a Buddha statue and flowers.

And they had this beautiful little shrine where they would bow and do their chanting every morning with the young nuns they were teaching. She pointed to it and said, "Do you see that Buddha statue?" It was a sweet little statue. "Well, when we ordained, we both had really beautiful long hair, down to our knees. And of course, we had to

shave it all off. So we sold it." I guess there's a use for hair. And with the money from selling their hair, they bought that Buddha statue. Ten or fifteen years later, they still have it. Their grandmother and family were all crying when they shaved their hair and became nuns, but the two sisters were so happy.

They went to Yangon to study. Many nuns in Burma study extensively—they learn Pali, study the suttas, study Abhidhamma. They take this series of examinations, the same tests as the monks. It's a five, seven, ten year process, and when you finally pass them all, you become what's called a Dhammacharya. These nuns were studying intensely, going on alms round, and practicing.

After studying for some years, they were thinking, "Well, now we're ready to go to a meditation center and really learn—to wake up." But just then, the Sayadaw from their home village, who had been supporting them and was their teacher, their guru you could say, was getting old and sick. He had been taking care of some young orphan girls. So he wrote to these two nuns: "Now you have to take care of these ten little girls. I'm sending them to you."

They were like, "Whoa, we didn't think of that. We were going to go and meditate."

But as they're telling us this, we're sitting in their little monastery with the ten little girls they've been living with and taking care of for the last two or three years—teaching them Pali and Burmese and English, sewing their clothes, teaching them chanting. They just did a complete turn. They said, "Oh, okay. This will go fine."

They came and built this tiny monastery with their brother's help. And they were totally committed to taking care of these little girls who become little nuns—very, very cute little nuns, various ages, sweet, laughing. There's so much love. They're all sitting there while we're talking.

And again, Uttara said with such sincerity, "We really want so much to be able to offer them the chance of a decent life. Otherwise they'd just be on the street, somebody's slave, somebody's servant. Here we're teaching them to read and write, teaching them the Dhamma, teaching them what it means to be a good person. And when they grow up, if they want to stay nuns, great—then they can take care of and teach the younger ones, and we can finally go off and meditate. And if they don't want to become nuns, that's fine with us. At least they know how to be good people." They said, "We're totally dedicating our life to this."

This was spoken with so much sincerity. Joy—not just "okay," but joy to be able to offer this.

This is one of countless examples of nuns raising orphan girls like this, or girls whose parents are so poor they beg the nuns to take their children even if they only get to see them once a year. When you come out of there, you're just so filled with light and happiness. And these are quiet people. No one's ever going to know them. They're examples of probably hundreds. I could name you ten other nunneries with similar kinds of stories—maybe not the story about the sickness, but really very inspiring and very alive. You can feel it's like a realm of purity, of sīla, that you really can feel when you walk into a place like that.

So that's another suffering story. Just two more.

Khema, from the time of the Buddha, offers perhaps the most striking example of immediate awakening. She was the consort of King Bimbisara—not the queen, but a consort, which was nonetheless a very prestigious position. Kings had many wives, many consorts. And Khema was very beautiful, very rich, and very conceited.

Bimbisara, the king, was one of the Buddha's followers, and he would try to get Khema to come with him to listen to the teachings. But she refused. "I don't want to go hear that," she said. "He's talking badly about wealth and beauty and sense pleasures. I'm not interested."

So Bimbisara decided to trick her. He hired a singer and poet to compose songs about the beauty of the grove where the Buddha was teaching—this beautiful park, this exquisite setting. Troubadours strolled around singing where Khema would hear them. And of course, she couldn't resist. So she went.

What I love about this story is how relatable it is—the way we resist hearing the very thing that's going to bring us happiness and freedom. We hold on to what's actually keeping us suffering. For Khema, it was her beauty, her love of sense pleasure.

So she arrives, and of course the Buddha knew how to teach everyone. Using his psychic powers, he created the image of an incredibly beautiful woman—a hundred times more beautiful than Khema. She saw it and thought, "Wow, she's really beautiful." Then, slowly, slowly, he had the image age and decay. The woman grew old, her teeth rotted, she fell apart.

Khema got it. Really got it. "Oh—that's going to happen to me too."

The Buddha said, "People devoted to physical beauty are bound to the world by this attachment. When you renounce this world of attachment, you're truly free."

And she understood. Khema is a rare example of a layperson who became an arahant on the spot—right there, listening to a dharma talk. She became known as the nun with the greatest insight, and also a great teacher.

This reminds me of someone I want to tell you about briefly—Sister Dipankara. She is a nun trained by Pa Auk Sayadaw, the teacher who's currently at the Forest Refuge. His method involves very deep absorption jhana as a foundation, then using that concentration for vipassana. It's a program that many of us could never complete, and if we do, it takes months and months. He's there for four months, and when we asked him how it was going, he said, "Four months isn't really long enough."

We met Sister Dipankara some years ago when she was visiting here. She was describing the whole process, which we didn't know. Several of us three-month teachers were sitting there listening, our mouths dropping open. She described this amazing process—the depth of samadhi and jhana, then vipassana, watching the kalapas in the eye, the earth, air, fire, and water breaking up in each tiny molecule, on and on. Then she mentioned that she had completed all of this in a week.

Sister Dipankara is a force of nature.

She now has a meditation center in Maymyo, in northern Burma. We visited her last winter—quite a lovely spot. She teaches there two months a year, offering retreats for Westerners, for foreigners. The rest of the year, she travels around the world teaching. She speaks excellent English.

When you're in her presence, she's loving and kind, wanting to make sure you have enough to eat. She invited us for this wonderful meal, but she didn't eat with us—she went off to be by herself. So she comes out, totally loving, kind, thoughtful, and then she's off, and who knows where she is, in the day's pleasant abiding. A force of nature.

There are still women and men like this today—with such deep and immediate understanding.

I just want you to know that this is existing in our world today. It's not just something that happened at the time of the Buddha.

I'll end with one poem from the Buddha's time, from a woman named Uttama:

The Buddha taught seven factors of enlightenment. They are ways to find peace, and I have developed them all. I have found what is vast and empty, the unborn. It is what I've longed for. I am a true daughter of the Buddha, always finding joy in peace.

So let's just sit quietly and find joy and peace for a moment.

CHAPTER 68

Mindfulness with Right View

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this heartfelt talk from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson reminds practitioners that all of the Buddha's teachings—including meditation techniques—serve one purpose: understanding how suffering arises and ceases in each moment. She emphasizes that awakening doesn't mean external circumstances become pleasant, but rather that we see clearly enough that confused reactions simply don't arise.*
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> *Wilson explores the concept of yathā bhūta (things as they have come to be) and how accurate recognition differs from intellectual understanding. Using the simple example of a child learning to match shapes with holes, she illustrates how insight works: when we truly see clearly, the frustration and reactivity naturally fall away without effort. She discusses sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view)—the habitual tendency to take experiences as 'me' or 'mine'—showing how this fixation creates suffering even with ordinary sensations like heat or sound.*
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> *Drawing from teachers including Ajahn Sumedho, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, Wilson emphasizes that wisdom cannot be forced through willpower but arises naturally through persistent, moment-to-moment mindfulness. She encourages practitioners to trust the simplicity of present-moment awareness, recognizing that reality reveals itself when we stop overlaying our ideas onto experience. The talk concludes with a reminder that this entire practice unfolds one moment at a time.*

Sometimes years ago when I was traveling by airplane in Myanmar, between cities, before it was more open, the domestic airlines were rather unreliable. Often they would just leave fifteen minutes early. You'd just miss the plane because they felt like leaving early.

Just coming in, I was sitting here for a moment or two. As I was walking in and seeing some people doing walking meditation outside and in here and sitting—as many retreats as I've taught or sat, which is quite a few—it still really touches my heart. It's not every moment, but when I was walking in here, it really touched my heart: the sincerity of all of your practice and what it takes to come here. Just the sincerity of intention to give six weeks or three months of your life to this, let's face it, really kind of strange activity in the normal world. It takes such dedication and commitment to hang with it. So I just really had a moment of appreciating that.

I think I can speak for all of us when I say that when we offer these Dhamma talks in the evening, it's really with the simple intention, the wish that something we say may be helpful, supportive in your practice—to help invite you into really opening your heart and mind into this moment, to explore and understand the Dhamma, your own heart and mind, more deeply.

So here we are, a few days in, maybe two or three, beginning to settle in, finding some sense of ease or just finding your space, beginning to find your rhythm. It was nice for all of us, I think, to start meeting with people today. We start to feel some sense of connection as there's just this sea of people. And also maybe you're starting to see—which is normal, what happens—that already three days in, maybe it's not going exactly the way you thought it ought to go. Maybe something's coming up that wasn't in the game plan. Might be something lovely, might be something difficult, might be something unbelievably boring. But it might be that you're just settling in and starting to work with the instructions, the technique, the skills, and that's great, that's wonderful, that's what we're here to do.

I just want to remind us of the context within which we're hopefully doing all this, of which the Buddha taught. I find for myself that it can be a little bit easy to get thrown when things aren't happening according to our memory of the past retreat or what we thought. Or we can be really engaged in trying to get the instructions, the technique right, trying to get it to work correctly, trying to do it right, whatever it is.

Just to remind us: all of the Buddha's teachings, the heart of his teachings—it's not about how to meditate well. That's not the end point. The instructions he gave are in support of, as he said again and again, helping us understand how we suffer and to free our hearts and minds from confusion, from suffering. That's really the deep motivation of his offering, his sharing all those years of his life, and the motivation of all the people who've carried the Buddha's teachings through all these centuries.

Hopefully we can keep remembering this, because I know at times I can certainly forget and get caught up in the minutiae of either the technique or fighting or trying to make something happen or trying to figure out what it all means. But to remember to connect for yourself with that deep inner motivation, the sense that the context of all the Buddha's teachings is to really free our hearts and minds from the habits, the confusion that keeps us re-emerging and spinning into suffering.

He said sometimes—I like this quotation—he says, "Do not settle for anything less, not even wholesome states of mind." I know I can find in myself, when there's been a struggle and somehow it gets cooled out, I come out of retreat and think, "Yeah, there's not so much aversion going on. There's more equanimity, there's more loving-kindness. This is really pretty okay. Good enough." He's saying no, don't settle for good enough.

This isn't to make us miserable. When we think about the potential, when we take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—the potential of each of us as human beings—when using these techniques, all the different Vipassana techniques (and there are many; we can just offer some), they're all in service of activating the quality of wisdom, of clear seeing, of accurate recognition in our heart and mind. When the mind is meeting this moment of life with clarity, without confusion, that's a moment when suffering is not created. That's really the depth of what he's offering and what we're doing here.

So saying not to settle for less, don't settle just for wholesome states of mind—that's not to put down wholesome states of mind. We like wholesome states of mind. Wholesome states are good. We choose wholesome over unwholesome, usually, except when we don't, and that's why we're here practicing. But it's meant to be, and I experience it this way myself, actually a huge inspiration, a strength. It gives confidence, the sense that this is our potential as human beings: to really understand how suffering is created in a moment in our heart and mind, and how suffering ceases in a moment in our heart and mind, and to really at some point come to the end of that.

That can give us the confidence, the strength to hang with it when it's not going the way we thought it ought to go or the way we think it should, to hang with it when it gets a little bit tough. And you're here for six weeks minimum or three months. If it doesn't get tough—

Something's wrong. There's no way it's just pleasant, pleasant, pleasant. Life just isn't like that.

Okay, you don't have to raise your hand, but just think: how many of you really believe, if you look secretly in your heart and mind, that waking up means it does get pleasant, pleasant, pleasant? All this unpleasant stuff—that's because you're doing something wrong, right? If you really got it down, all these difficult mental states, these unpleasant sights and sounds and physical sensations, not to mention unpleasant other people—that would all cease. Because enlightenment, freedom from suffering, means everything we don't like goes away. It sounds silly when I say it out loud, doesn't it? But just check in your mind. Next time your mind is going, "This can't be right, I can't do it," just check what's the idea back there. "No, this shouldn't be happening. If I could really meditate, this wouldn't be happening. This can't be part of Buddha Dharma."

So anyway, the sense of the potential to free our heart and mind can serve as a huge support, a refuge. In whatever way it works for you at different times when you're finding it difficult, take time to just reconnect. Go inside, see what's motivating you, what keeps you going. Just remembering that's really the heart of what the Buddha was teaching.

So what does that mean practically? Understanding how suffering is created in a moment, how it goes away in a moment. What's he talking about in terms of suffering, which we know?

First, to say that in my understanding—my limited understanding—everything the Buddha shared, which as you know is tomes and tomes of teachings, was to free our hearts and minds, not so that we think we have to embrace and memorize a new philosophy. It's not about just taking in more information and then saying, "Okay, now I'm a Buddhist and I believe X, Y, and Z." Because that doesn't help us at all. The information can be useful, I'll get to that, but that's not what he's sharing. He's not saying, "You've got to believe this."

There's a very well-known phrase, maybe you've heard it many times, from the Buddha: *Ehipassiko*. It's an invitation. He's saying, "You too, come and see." He's offering all these different ways of describing how he experiences being in a human mind and body, how he experiences suffering arising, how he experiences suffering ceasing—so many different ways. But he's just offering that as a piece of information inviting you to turn around and look at your own mind and body experience moment to moment to moment. And see if it's so. See if it's true.

That's what Thich Nhat Hanh means when he talks about the miracle of mindfulness. Maybe you've heard him say that. It really is a miracle—this simple quality that Guy spoke about last night and that we will be speaking about in different ways, probably mentioning it once or twice the rest of the six weeks at least. This quality of simple, total presence with what's arising, but what's actually arising now—not our ideas about it, not our memories about it, not what we think about it, not what we wish it was, not our assessment. Just simplicity of what's happening now, which isn't so easy to do.

The power of that to cut through the confusion, the distortions of perception we don't even know are operating, and allow for accurate recognition, for clear seeing—the power of this simple quality of heart-mind is amazing. It doesn't make rational sense, really, so forget trying to figure it out. You'll save yourself a lot of grief.

One definition I like—not of mindfulness, but of Vipassana meditation—comes from Sayadaw Tejaniya. He says, "Vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and the body directly from moment to moment"—and that's mindfulness—"with the right understanding, with wise understanding, with right view." That's the quality that comes in with mindfulness. When Guy said last night that mindfulness can have a quality of wisdom, that's what we mean: the quality of total presence of awareness, of knowing what's happening without being distorted by the overlay of our ideas about it. And this is so much not the way we live our life. It's just somehow not the way most of us have been conditioned.

So, when the Buddha was talking about suffering—the suffering that we can come to understand, the suffering that clear seeing can free our hearts and minds from—what was he talking about? He says it's not externals. If you look at the tales we can read about the Buddha's life after he was awakened, and for some reason it took me years to kind of notice this: he woke up, the peaceful one, free from suffering, into the same world. When he got up from that Bodhi tree, he was still there in Bodh Gaya in India, needing to walk around barefoot and eat and figure out what to do with his life, dealing with the heat and the bugs. And there was still...

war and violence and oppression and hunger and racism and unfairness and injustice and beauty and his family—the whole deal. None of the externals changed.

And not only that, he was still walking around in a body that had headaches and backaches sometimes, had to go eat every day, had to go out every morning, walk around in the village with the alms bowl and get some food. Not always so easy. He just goes, you know, it's nice. Who knows? Some days the Buddha got a lot of food. But it's even said that what he died from was some food that was given to him that was unknowingly tainted, poisoned, and he died from that. But we're all going to die from something.

When you look at that, I think there's that secret mind back there imagining that when you wake up, everything's going to be nicer externally. No. So what was the suffering he was freed from? What was the difference?

And of course, I'm not in a Buddha's mind. I can only say what I can understand from his teachings and my experience. But really understanding that the suffering he speaks about, the root causes of suffering—and you've heard many times—the *kilesas*, the torments of mind, the root causes being habits. Mental states, mental qualities that are habits. Not the essence of our being, but habits of confusion that lead to clinging, to greed, that lead to hatred, to aversion.

These habits of mind arise when we don't recognize what's occurring in this moment accurately. They arise in response to, in reaction to, whatever particular experiences are going on. And when we respond or relate to an experience with one of these distortions in our consciousness, when we don't recognize accurately, our response may be a little bit off and it can kind of escalate. Have you ever had that when you're having an argument and you each keep misunderstanding the other person and it just keeps spinning out of control? It's sort of like that.

What changes is the suffering that arises from misperceiving experience and then just kind of goes off into orbit with all our reactions and responses. That suffering, when there's accurate recognition—oh, it's like this now—that other stuff doesn't arise. It's really quite amazing.

So our job, or one of our jobs, is with this *ehipassiko*, with this interest, this willingness to watch moment to moment what's going on in our mind and body here. That's what this is—a laboratory. Same mind and body we have outside of here, but all the extra distractions are gone so we can see the habits, how the mind and body works. We start to see what are the causes of suffering, what are the causes of the cessation of it.

As Mingyur Rinpoche says, we can start to recognize this interplay of cause and effect in our mind, in our experience, how cause and effect conditions our mind and shapes our experience. If we want to be happy, we must figure out which causes and conditions lead to well-being. Similarly, if we do not have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how could we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?

What the teachings are saying is that it's perfectly natural—we do all want to be happy. But without even quite recognizing when the confusion is present, when the misperception is going on, we don't really deeply see or understand what are the causes of happiness and suffering. So with all the good will, the good intentions in the world of trying to make ourselves happy and others happy, it keeps not quite doing it, right? I mean, if it really did it, you wouldn't be here. But sometimes it does it.

Years ago I studied—way back, a long time, another eon—when I was in college, I studied behavior modification. And they said the thing that keeps behaviors going the longest is when it's rewarded in an intermittent way. So if it's always rewarded, if every time we misperceive and think this is going to make me happy and it always makes you happy, and then suddenly it stops, then it stays stopped, then we learn it doesn't work. But if it works once in a while—you get the thing, it makes you happy, that craving really worked for you, it made you happy—never mind the next seven thousand two

hundred and thirty-five times it doesn't. The next time, it makes you happy again. And so we keep thinking, oh, that's what happiness is. Because we haven't cultivated this quality of moment to moment to moment interest, loving, kind attention.

Mindfulness isn't to change anything. It's not to create a different experience. It's to be as present, to really surrender into this moment just as it is.

Physical experience, mental experience—and just see, it's like this now.

So we're not creating a new reality. Far more simple. When we talk about right view, the right understanding—I like the translation of *sammā diṭṭhi* as "right view." It works in English for my mind because I think of it as very literal: right view, accurate view, accurate recognition of this moment of experience, free from the distortions. And then the suffering reactions drop away.

So I've been using this simple example all summer. Those of you who heard me this summer, you're going to hear it again. I have a young nephew, and it's been fun watching how kids learn, because he's the first nephew in my family at my age. It's really fun to watch.

So this example—you know, he's only three. You know wooden blocks, right? One of those things where there's a big tray with different shapes: triangle, circle, square. The kid has the blocks in each of those shapes, and you put the right block into the right hole. In the beginning, he'll see me or his parents put the triangle in the triangle, but he just sees block going in hole, looks like fun, but doesn't get the shapes. So he tries to put the triangle in the circle and the square in the triangle, and it doesn't work. And it moves into little kid frustration, right? Big frustration.

Of course, you can't enunciate too much at that age, but I could imagine taking this simple example into stuff we do, like: "What's the matter with this? There's a secret they're not telling me." Or: "I can't do it right. What's the matter with me? They can do it right, but I can't. There's something wrong." Or: "This whole game is completely messed up." All the frustration, all the stuff that comes from it. And the more he can't do it, the more frustrated. I've had friends who say about their computers, "You just want to take it up and throw it out the window." Many of us have felt like that sometimes. Well, a little kid might do that—pick up the wooden thing and throw it against the wall.

So all of that reactivity, that's clear suffering. And then you keep doing it, and one day, maybe it seems like a mistake at first, the triangle goes in the triangle. It's like, *wow*. The square goes in the square. It's like, *wow, that's great*. He doesn't really see how. But then it twigs, you know? This is just normal learning. All of a sudden, the per-

ception clears. It's like, "Oh, I see this shape. I see that shape. They go together." And it's just so simple and obvious it isn't even fun anymore—but it also isn't frustrating anymore.

So you see how when you see clearly, all that reactivity just vanishes. We don't have to make it go away. We don't have to overcome it. It's not arising in that moment. And don't think because it's not arising in the moment, it's really sitting there, a quagmire pool deep in your heart of frustration and negativity. No. When the seeds are planted, they can come out again until we're completely free. But it's really, when it's not there, it's not there. Be really mindful of that too, really experience. In a moment, everything's only this moment. Moments of frustration, but also moments of the cessation of frustration.

So you get a sense of what I mean with accurate recognition. When we talk about insight—insight, insight meditation—to me that's a really good metaphor for how insight works. Insight isn't about getting more information. Insight doesn't have to be that you have this amazing, light-filled experience and everything's blown out. Sometimes it happens, and it'll go away again. But insight is the moments that the *kleshas*—the greed, hatred, delusion, the torments—aren't clouding perception. There's clear awareness, and wisdom can come.

It's like, *ah, it's like this now.* Aha. And something is understood. Something is known, to use the language that Guy was reading from the sutta—it's known in that way. Not intellectually, but cellularly. *Ah, right, the square goes in the square.* It's just laws of nature. You don't fight it anymore; it's like trying to fight gravity. It's just the law of nature, it's how it is.

So insight isn't like, "Oh, now we're going to see something that didn't exist before." It's that in a moment, the consciousness clears and we see more accurately: *Oh, this is how it is. This is how it's always been.* We just didn't see it clearly before.

When we talk about the steadiness, the collectedness of attention and the steadiness of mindfulness—I think I mentioned it last night as well—with steady awareness, part of what we start to see through is the characteristics of all phenomena: of being impermanent, of being unsatisfactory, that there's no lasting happiness, of being not me or mine, that there's no inherent self-sense.

It's not that now things are permanent and if you have an insight into impermanence then everything starts changing. Right? You know that, right? But we don't really know that. Because we act often as if things are permanent. We certainly—well, maybe you don't, but I certainly act many times as if there's definitely a solid Carol, or this is Carol's, or this is Carol. It just feels so obvious.

So it's not that that stuff changes, but we recognize more accurately the way things are, and then the suffering, confused reactions—they just don't arise. When you see something's really just ephemeral and falling apart, in that moment, when you really are getting it in your gut, clinging to it for happiness doesn't arise because it's so clearly confused and a source of suffering. But when we know it intellectually yet haven't really got it in our gut, we say, "Oh, I shouldn't cling to this because I know it's going to go away"—but that doesn't really do us a lot of good, does it?

I want to give a simple example of why we can't think our way into accurate recognition—into seeing, "This is how things are now, this is the way things have come to be." That's one very classic phrase in the Buddhist teaching: *yatha bhuta*, things as they have come to be in this moment. I love that because it gives a sense of not-steady-state. In English, "this is how it is" gives a sense of stability, doesn't it? This is how it is. This is Carol, a solid, steady thing.

But "things as they have come to be in this moment"—to me, it brings all the different conditions, innumerable conditions. If you start trying to enumerate all the conditions you can even think of that came together for you to be sitting here now, you really can't ever stop. It goes all the way back to the Big Bang. Really.

But just this moment is just how it is. And with all those conditions, this particular moment couldn't possibly be different. How could it be different? Because it's like this now. But now this next moment's already a different moment. So there is no steady state at all.

But that's so often not how we perceive. And I can't, with an act of will, decide, "Okay, now I'm going to really recognize accurately that everything's shifting, everything's impermanent." I can think that, but that level of insight perception where, *oh yeah, it's a triangle*—and all the confused reactions just fall away—you can't think your way into that, even when we know.

That's why we have this steady practice. That's the miracle of steady mindfulness. It's setting up the conditions for reality to reveal itself. It's not for me to sit down and decide, "Now I'm going to be mindful, mindful, mindful of breath, breath, hearing,

hearing, now I'm seeing impermanence, seeing impermanence, going to see impermanence." It's not that. It's just to be really present, moment to moment. And reality is how it is. It reveals itself—if we would quit trying to put our ideas on it so hard.

But we can't do that with an act of will.

Here's a simple example I like of how all the conditions in our life affect our perception—how we perceive something, whether we like it or don't like it, even if we want to perceive it differently intellectually.

There's a musician I really appreciate, a classical cellist named Yo-Yo Ma. Perhaps you've heard of him—he's very well known in the European classical style of music and lives in Boston. I really appreciate his music, but even more I appreciate what I've seen of his being, because he seems very open, very inclusive, meeting each new experience with this sense of open wonder and interest, which to me personifies mindfulness. Like, "Wow, what's this?"

Quite some years ago, he organized a group he calls the Silk Road Project. Some of you probably know about it. The Silk Road, of course, is that whole area of the world from the Middle East through Turkey and Central Asia through to China—what used to be the trade routes from the Middle Ages between Europe and China. What he did in organizing this was getting musicians together from all these different countries: musicians who play instruments, who compose, who sing, bringing them together to play.

But it's not as if they say, "Okay, now here's a Mongolian piece of music, and we'll all play this Mongolian piece. Now here's a North African piece, we'll play that. And now here's a European classical piece, we'll play that." It's not that at all, not that sense of separation. Rather, they get the musicians together in different groupings, and someone writes a piece specifically for those particular musicians. You might have someone from Central Asia, from Turkey, from Mongolia, from North Africa—they may all be together. Someone writes a piece for them, and they'll be playing the different instruments from different places, different vocalizing like Mongolian overtone singing, different tones, different scales, working it together, making something completely new.

I love the idea. I think it's so far out. I keep buying the CDs. I really, really want to appreciate and enjoy listening to it. And I don't. I keep trying. My mind loves that he's doing this, that these people are working together, making something new. But the conditioning of the kind of music that this particular mind-consciousness enjoys hearing isn't that. The different tones, the different rhythms—it's like, "Oh." So every few months I try again.

It's not that it's good or bad or that you should or shouldn't enjoy something. I'm just giving this as an example of how the conditioning of our lives affects our perceptions—what we find pleasant, what we find unpleasant. And we can't just change it because we want to.

Something like that is just interesting to see. But on the level of these really basic habits of perception—not recognizing impermanence, or the unsatisfactoriness that arises because things go away, or perceiving a sense of solid self where there isn't one—that's so deeply ingrained. We've practiced it so much that it doesn't even feel familiar; it just feels like the way things are. We don't even recognize when those particular misperceptions are operating. Certainly not when we're just going around in daily life, if we haven't developed the habit of bringing mindfulness to our body and mind.

But if we keep bringing mindfulness to our moment-to-moment experience here, we'll start to see it. And the thing is, when we start to see these things, not to think, "Oh no, here's sense of self again! When am I going to get rid of it?" No, no. I mean, you can think that if you want, but it's not helpful. Instead, you think, "Wow, yeah, look at that. That's how sense of self arises in a moment. This is the effect it has." Mindfulness, awareness, can notice that as well as anything else.

There's nothing in our experience that need be outside the field, the realm of mindful awareness. If you find yourself saying, "I can't be mindful because this is happening," let that be a clue. "Wow, this feels like this." Don't do anything about it, but widen the field of mindfulness. "Oh, this is happening. It's like this now," to use Ajahn Sumedho's language.

So insight doesn't come through an act of will, but through the long process of steady awareness.

I want to talk a little bit then, in terms of wrong view—the misperception—just in a light way, to say a few words about what is in some way the core one: the sense of wrong view called *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, translated as personality view, sense of self. This is a perception that arises in many moments of presence, one that takes any particular experience that's occurring as being me or mine.

When we talk about our moment-to-moment experience here, breaking it down the way the Buddha talked about it at the most simple, elemental level—and I think someone may have talked about this already—there are six sense experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching with the body, and all mental experience. As your awareness begins to get a little more steady, you notice that's what's happening all day long. There's a thought, mental experience. There's seeing. There's hearing. There's sen-

sation in the body, sensation of breathing. There's hearing, seeing, a thought, an emotion. All these six sense experiences are just arising and passing, arising and passing all day long. Have you noticed that? There's no time all day long that they're not happening. There's always something awareness and mindfulness can notice. If you ever attempt to come in and say nothing's happening, we're not going to let you get away with that. There's always something going on.

Now, if there are thoughts, sights, sounds, sensations, we're not taking each sight, each sound as me or mine. That would be—I hope you're not, because it would be unbearable, wouldn't it? I mean, how many sights and sounds and thoughts and physical sensations have you experienced today? Can you even come close to a number? I'd say millions, who knows? If every single one of them was me or mine, can you imagine? You'd just be tossed around—oh, that sound is me, I don't like it, oh, this sound, no, this sound. Well, we do that with enough stuff. I don't know how we get through life, really.

And you see this here when you're just walking. If you're doing walking meditation outside, there are many sights and sounds that come and go. You're more or less aware of them, and they're just coming and going, no big deal. And suddenly one sound arises, or one sensation arises, and somehow the attention and energy of mind isolates it, fixates on it, even if just for a second. Not the fixation of clear recognition and mindfulness, but fixation with a kind of gripping: "Oh, this sound isn't okay." It's already gone into "my hearing isn't happy with this sound," or a sensation.

It's easier to see this with sensation. When you start to get quiet, you'll notice there are lots of sensations, just little bloop, bloop, bloop, bloop coming and going all day. And suddenly there's one that's really like, "This is my knee," you know, or whatever it is. That sense of privileging a particular perception, a particular experience, as being me or mine.

Of course, we don't announce it. We don't get a big neon sign that says "*Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* rising, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* rising, watch out." We don't, because it just feels normal. So we go, "This sensation—this isn't okay."

Let me take something more—not pain, but say, earlier today when I was down at my place looking at this talk, and suddenly it just felt so hot and humid. Normally I like the heat, but it was just so hot. So I was sitting there. I wasn't noting because I was thinking about this, but I was aware of hot, heat. And then all of a sudden, "Oh my God, it's so hot." You get a sense of the difference? By that time, it wasn't just the attention identifying with the heat. It had already, in that amount of time, gone from heat to unpleasant to "it shouldn't be this way" to "it's affecting me" to "I don't like it" to "what can I do?" Really fast, there's a whole story going on—the reaction, the heat, what can I do?

And then when I walked in here, "Oh, it's so cool in here. How nice." If I'd remembered it was air-conditioned, maybe I would have thought, "I need to go up to the hall, it's air-conditioned."

We want to do something, we want to fix it. But it's not that you can't do something about it. The suffering that was going on—it was the same heat that it was the moment before the attention glommed onto it as "my body feeling uncomfortable." The same heat. The suffering wasn't the heat. The suffering is all those reactions that come when there's a moment of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, taking anything as being me or mine. It goes on all the time. The attention gets glued to the object, and then the whole series of reactions happens in no time.

Don't waste time judging this. This is fascinating. Just to see this is the habit of how our human minds work.

When we say *ehi passiko*—come and see for yourself—don't believe anything I say, and don't dismiss it either. Look and see. And when we see sakkāya-diṭṭhi rising like that, that's great. Awareness can notice, "Oh yes, sense of self is like this." Keep the steady awareness going and notice the effects of it. What are some of the effects? You keep noticing. Because the more there's accurate recognition through mindfulness, that's when wisdom can come in and the reactions that cause suffering start to drop away.

You can often do it like the example I'm giving. I whipped it up a little bit—I wasn't really in horrible, terrible, suicidal suffering. It was just, "Ugh." But then I could see that happening because my mind had been quite fine a minute before. I could ask myself, "Do you really want to get all whipped up about this?" Sometimes you can really notice that and recognize, "Yes, this is aversion. No, heat is like this." Just come back to the heat, don't feed the aversion. It's fine. Sometimes it's much bigger and we can't do that. But we can keep the mindfulness going to see what's really bringing happiness, what's bringing suffering.

Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche says we want happiness, but the causes of happiness—understanding selflessness, loving-kindness, compassion—we don't always give so much attention to these qualities. Instead, the habit of our mind is to get more involved in the suffering, in the difficult states of heart and mind. We get more involved in the reactions. It's more what we're used to. It's more what feels real. Almost like it's so habitual we take refuge in the wanting, in the aversion, in the sense of self, just because it feels like home. As we know, home isn't always comfortable, but it's home.

So start to explore this as you go through the days. Just see. It's just hearing, seeing, touching—and all of a sudden, "me." Notice the effect.

Lama Drimé describes it beautifully. He says when we're just being present with things as they are, it's all nature. We aren't separate from nature. There's whatever's arising due to causes and conditions—the sound, the sight, the sensation, the bird singing—it's all arising, and we are part of it all. But as soon as that sense of self, that fixation on a particular experience comes up and isn't seen, everything starts to solidify. When we hold to a certain experience as "me," he says we go from the vastness of things as they are to getting locked into the narrow bandwidth of "me, human being, separate from everything else." Just feel that sense of narrowness.

The Dalai Lama speaks to this in a book I was using a lot this summer called *The Book of Joy*, which captures a series of conversations between him and Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. You all know who Archbishop Tutu is? Both are Nobel Peace Prize winners, and Archbishop Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Council after apartheid ended in South Africa.

In these conversations about dharma, about joy, the Dalai Lama says the paradox is that although the drive behind excessive self-focus—and I'm translating "excessive self-focus" as the mind just fixating on something as "me" or "mine"—is to seek greater happiness for yourself, it ends up doing exactly the opposite. You become disconnected and alienated from others when you focus too much on yourself. With too much self-focus, when it's all about me or mine—and at times it's like that for all of us—our vision becomes narrow. And with this, even a small problem appears out of proportion and unbearable.

Have you ever noticed that? That's a big thing that comes up on retreat. Some little thing is just so unbearable, so exaggerated. That's okay. We have a term for it here—we call it "yogi mind." When suddenly there's wanting or aversion that's so strong and so important that it takes over your world for a while.

We call it yogi mind. It's exaggeration. Someone bursts into the office and says, "I've gotta have Tom's toothpaste or I'm just gonna die," with that kind of energy. So this narrowness that comes.

And then Bishop Tutu, what he adds to that—he comes soon to the concept that we have at home in South Africa, the concept of Ubuntu. The concept is that a person is a person through other persons. You realize that in a very real sense, we're part of a profound complementarity. I could not speak as I am speaking without having learned it

from other human beings. I learned to be a human being from other human beings. We belong in this delicate network. It is actually quite profound. Unfortunately, in our world, we tend not to recognize we're part of this network until times of great disaster.

He gives examples about how that can happen. I was just listening today to the news on the radio. They were giving examples of these horrific hurricanes that happened in the last couple of weeks. And of course, you can hear all kinds of stories about horrible things—violence and looting and all—but you also hear uplifting stories. I just heard one today that's exactly what he was talking about. I thought I'd share it because it's just sweet. But why does it have to wait, he said, till times of great suffering to feel, to recognize that we're all part of this network, not just me and you?

So this is in St. Thomas, in the Virgin Islands, where ninety percent of the homes were damaged or destroyed. Ninety percent. Unbelievable. And this story is about a small nursing home where only twelve elderly people live. All but three of them were not able to get out of bed, were not able to walk. So when the hurricane was hitting, in the rooms the ceilings were being blown down, the walls were being blown down, glass was shattering, flying into the rooms, and they couldn't get up by themselves. The few people working there—one of the nurses said, "We were just trying to hold the door shut so it doesn't blow in. There were just the three of us to try and move everyone."

But right next door to this nursing home was an institution, a lockdown institution for adolescent boys—young men who had either committed crimes or were in trouble, like a pre-jail kind of thing. They were in this place next door, locked down. But I guess they opened it up. And several of those young boys, seen as criminals or whatever, they came over and in the dark with no electricity, they moved all the elderly people into the dining room where they could all be there together. And then they stayed with them in the dark all night because there was no electricity, protecting them because the windows had shattered, glass was flying everywhere, the wind was flying everywhere. So these young guys stayed with these elderly people and protected them all night.

They were talking to the woman who was running the nursing home, and also the person running the lockdown facility. They were both so moved, so touched. And we are too when we re-recognize—it's like re-recognizing what's already been true—that we're not so separate.

So in little ways here, it's not about that, but in little ways just watching how the sense of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* comes up, and when it comes, notice that sense of separation or just the sense of suffering, if it's there. Notice when it's not there. We don't have to wait for a disaster. We can really watch, moment to moment to moment, because the truth reveals itself.

That's what I love about the Dharma. It's not that we have to figure it all out in our mind and then do the right thing and make that happen. We can't. If you could give that up, you would do yourself so much good. And just trust, moment to moment to moment, simple awareness. That's what I love. The wisdom arises through the steadiness of awareness, and the way things are—*yathā bhūta*—it reveals itself. We actually don't know how it is, so we can't think our way into it. We just really trust again and again the simplicity and honesty of moment to moment: What's happening now?

"I'm so confused."

Oh, confusion is like this.

You think, "What? I came here to say confusion is like this? I don't think so. I came here to get really clear."

Oh, wanting is like this. That's happening. Oh, sensation of breathing. Tightness. So what? The breath was like this before. I get it. Let's have a new breath. Let's have something to... Ah, that's wanting. Wanting is like this. Again. Again. Again.

Just this moment. All there is, is this moment. Sati, mindfulness of just what is occurring in that simplicity, in that moment, is a stepping out of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. It's a stepping out of reactivity, a stepping out of misperception, and just being present with this moment. You don't have to make a big story—just being present with things as they are.

Sometimes we think—this is something Ajahn Sumedho says. He's an American man who's been a monk in the Thai forest tradition for forty or fifty years. I find him quite inspiring. In terms of talking about this sakkāya-diṭṭhi, this personality view, he discusses noticing this tendency to fixate on an experience, a sense of self. Often we think we shouldn't talk about this stuff or look at this stuff until we've been practicing for quite some time because it's so difficult, so subtle. And it makes people crazy.

But he says—and this I really believe, which is why I'm bringing it up—just to look at it lightly. He says, "Why should I practice for twenty years from delusion? Why should I spend twenty years practicing from that motivation of achieving something for me, which is so confused?" We can start practicing, we can start to recognize sakkāya-diṭṭhi now. A lot of the time we won't, but sometimes we can. It's just another arising experience, a way that the mental factor of clinging or aversion relates to a particular experience. Notice how it behaves. Notice when it's gone. And even with sakkāya-diṭṭhi—don't take it personally. It's just a habit of mind.

We all have personalities. And guess what? I kept waiting to get a new personality. We don't really get a new personality. Maybe it kind of gets a little mellower around the edges or something, but we don't get a new one.

So this is our meditation. This is the work of our meditation. All the techniques and the tools are to help us cultivate the simplicity of present moment mindfulness. But the steadiness, the clarity, is really where the power comes. So that's why we say—and when Guy was talking about the connecting and sustaining—that's just in one moment. But it's that sense... let me put it in completely different language, in case you didn't like that language. Or maybe you don't like my language, then ignore my language and listen to Guy. That's why there's all different ones of us; we all speak differently.

Thinking of connecting, think of it as just completely relaxing with presence into the experience. It's like this now. And the sustaining is just being there with interest and noticing how it changes, if it changes, how it behaves. That's it. Sustaining is just keeping the attention with what's happening. It's not trying to sustain the experience—that's not seeing impermanence. Sometimes people say, "I'm trying to sustain this sensation, but then something else arises." I go, "Yeah, hello, that's what's happening. That's what's happening."

What we cultivate as we expand the instructions over these days is the moment to moment to moment steadiness of mindful awareness. Even if the objects are changing, the collectedness and the steadiness get stronger and stronger and stronger. And it's this steadiness, this continuity, that reveals the confused habits of mind. If we're just mindful here for a minute, then we space out, then we're mindful here—

I mean, we do that now because we're just learning. It takes setting up the conditions for the steadiness to come. But if we don't understand why we are going on about this steadiness, this persistence—if we don't understand why—then we think, "Okay, that was a good sitting. I deserve a holiday now. I'm going to go do whatever, not pay attention, and then I'll come back and I'll walk and I'll really walk and I'll really do it. Okay, that was good. I put in my effort. Now I'm going to take a little holiday."

And you can do that. It's tiring. It's not so satisfying. More satisfying is the steady relaxing into this moment. This moment. As Guy said last night, you put your fingers together—how much effort does that take? Not much. But this moment. This moment. This moment.

And again, the beauty of the way things are, the Dhamma, the laws of nature, is that the truth reveals itself when we're able and willing to be steady with our kind and loving attention. Not to make it be a certain way, but simply to see: oh, it's like this now. It's like this now. It's like this now.

So this is really our practice.

I want to end with two Burmese sayings. First is from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "As mindfulness is remembered more and more frequently, gradually it develops its own momentum." We don't have to keep remembering—it starts to do itself. We come to appreciate the moments of awareness. We come to appreciate them more than our entrancements with the reactions of mind to whatever is arising. Steady mindfulness is the condition for wisdom and insight to arise.

And from Sayadaw U Pandita, the same thing in a different way: "When mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of body and mind."

So that's our practice. But it all boils down to only one moment—not the whole day, only right now.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 69

Aspiration and Courage

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the challenging moments that arise when our expectations about practice collide with reality. She explores how our unexamined views about what meditation should look like—wanting pleasant experiences, expecting quick results, believing insights should be permanent—create suffering when practice doesn't conform to our ideas.*
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> *Wilson examines the Four Noble Truths (cattāri ariyasaccāni) through this lens, emphasizing the radical nature of the Buddha's teaching on dukkha and taṇhā (craving). She highlights a crucial insight: when consciousness is clouded by kilesā (mental defilements), we cannot trust our assessments of practice. Rather than trying to figure out what's wrong, she suggests simply recognizing this clouded state and continuing to practice steadily.*
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> *The heart of the talk focuses on the practice of reconnecting with aspiration as a refuge during difficult times. Unlike goal-oriented craving, genuine aspiration turns the mind toward the wholesome, bringing brightness and energy without the narrowing quality of wanting. Wilson shares inspiring stories—from Burmese nuns caring for orphans, to Gandhian nonviolence, to a Tibetan refugee who spent seven years practicing in caves near Mount Kailash—illustrating how aspiration provides the courage to open into the unknown moment after moment. She closes with Śāntideva's bodhicitta aspiration, inviting practitioners to find what genuinely re-inspires their own commitment to awakening.*

So tonight I want to just offer some thoughts about reconnecting to and motivating our aspiration and courage.

At this point on the retreat, I'm talking to various people, and it's totally the normal time when some people may be starting to notice that this practice can be challenging. Have you noticed that? And not in the way you expected it to be, which is really the main challenging part.

This is really normal. The first most obvious way is just that second week, third week, the hindrances come up, as John talked about last week. I don't want to go into those a lot, but that's just really kind of basic what happens. The way I think of it is like a two-year-old having a temper tantrum. You're saying we're going to sit and walk and pay attention to what's happening, and it's like, "No, I'm not going to, and you can't

make me. I'll get angry, or I'll get into desire, or I'll just get restless or sleepy or doubt"—whatever, just sort of like that. And we just kind of go, okay, okay, okay, fine. You have your little tantrum. We keep on going. We keep on sitting.

So that's the least of it. The hindrances are the least of it. That's obvious, even though it's a lot of suffering.

There are lots of ways practice becomes challenging, but what I want to talk about tonight is that some of the ways it starts to be challenging is that really our ideas, our views—maybe not quite realized—our expectations of what practice is or how it should be going or what's good, they all get challenged one way or another. And we tend to take that personally and not recognize quite what's happening. This is why I want to talk about aspiration.

I could give the whole talk just giving examples of how that happens, but I don't want to do that because you each have your own examples. But just two simple ones that I've noticed from talking to people the last couple of days.

One way is sudden change in the practice. You're going along and you think, finally the mindfulness got more steady, or the mind got more calm, or things were happening fast, or whatever. In your mind, there's the view that this is good—either it'll definitely be more pleasant (we never think it's going well when it's less pleasant), or it's more easeful, or it's matching some idea you have. And then suddenly, through no fault of yours, it changes. It just changes. You're going along fine. You didn't do something wrong. And suddenly the clarity's gone. You don't know what's happening. Everything's flying all over. That calm and peace is restless. How many of us go, "Okay, that's what's happening now"? For a moment we try that, but secretly, we're trying that so it goes away, right? No, that's what's happening. Then we think, "What did I do wrong?" That happens.

Another way that people are seeing too, and we will more and more, is you're going along and you're really seeing things—you're seeing impermanence, say, in different personality patterns. Or just take something simple: the habit of wanting. Just wanting to be first in line for breakfast, for example. And seeing that, and the suffering of it, and really—the awareness really sees through it, feels the suffering of that wanting. In that moment it lets it go. And you think, "Wow, I really see in all the ways in my life I need to be first," the whole nine yards. "Yeah, I really got this."

I understand it. The suffering of craving and my personality patterns." And, you know, that's great. Really, there was wisdom seeing it.

And then the next day at breakfast, you're dying because you've got to be first in line. And you go, "Why? I saw this. I know this. It's over. Why is this happening again?" Or you come back to another retreat and you think, "Again? This? Again? Didn't I go through this to a great degree of suffering the last time? I got it. I've handled this." Apparently not.

You get a sense of what I mean, right? I'm not just talking off the top of my head—how we suffer from that, not so much from what's happening, but from the idea that it shouldn't be this way. Somehow I did something wrong in practice, or I understood it. Why is it back? There's a way we take it personally. And then what comes? Doubt. Huge doubt. In yourself or in the technique or in the Dharma or in what we're telling you or in whatever. And then the whole thing can start to spin.

It's not going to stay that way. This is normal. But I just want to speak to it, because what really could be starting to go on here—this is different from just the hindrances which simply come up—is in each of these simple examples, the big suffering is, of course, not wanting to be with the unpleasant and wanting the pleasant. That's almost always the bottom line, along with identifying with it. But it's also our views. Maybe we don't quite recognize they're in the background of what practice is supposed to be, how it's supposed to work, and then unrealistic expectations arise.

This, I think, is big time—certainly for me. Our tendency in this speedy culture is to expect results quick, quick. We're not getting it: this is a whole life process. And that's already quick. If you look at how the Buddha talked about it, he's talking about eons of lifetimes. We'll just stick to one. But Sharon always talks about the first year IMS was opened and they got mail addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society." That's kind of what we think. Okay, I saw it, I got it, it's over. Let's move on. What's new? What's interesting? Greed again? No, I'm not interested in greed anymore. I got that one.

I'm making this sound simple, but I think it's really about the radical nature, the profundity of what the Buddha is talking about—what real freedom from suffering is. We talk about it in the Buddhist context, but I'm not an expert on any other religion.

What I know of other traditions suggests that at the heart of any mystical aspect of religion lies the same kind of radical seeing through the normal, culturally conditioned habits of our mind on a very deep level. As I think I said the other night, the Buddha always said his teachings take us against the stream of the current—against the main part of society, not everyone, even then. And of course, externally, just coming to do this practice is really not the normal thing in the big picture.

What I want to talk about now is how we come up against the wall where our expectations aren't being met, where ideas we don't even know we're holding are being challenged. This is so unsettling to us. It's in the really subtle—well, sometimes they're gross, but also very subtle—habits of our mind that suffering is being created moment to moment.

The Buddha's teaching is radical. Radical in looking at this. It encompasses all aspects of our life. His teaching is that the real freedom of heart-mind comes in a moment, or altogether, when the heart-mind consciousness is free from the greed that is clinging—whether it takes the form of greed or aversion—and free from the delusion of not recognizing accurately, of taking it personally.

This brings us to the Four Noble Truths, which could be a whole series of talks on their own. The radical nature of the first truth is the fact of dukkha—the unreliable, unsatisfactory nature of all phenomena, all existence. This doesn't mean everything is bad or unpleasant, but that nothing is reliable in terms of lasting satisfaction. Everything. Just looking at life this way is profound. Most people don't even want to think that. And it's so radical because it's not just the unpleasant things—it's everything.

The second truth names the cause. The Buddha offered us tools to understand the cause of our suffering, and the understanding itself will free us. The word in Pali is *tanha*, which literally translates as thirst—this quality of craving that can manifest as greed wanting something, or as pushing away the unpleasant. It's not about the object; it's about this quality in the heart-mind, in consciousness—this leaning forward, this pushing back that clouds and distorts pure perception.

The real suffering of craving is that it keeps us from recognizing accurately. But more than that, when it's present and unrecognized, it keeps us from recognizing the liberating truth of the pure heart and mind, that radiant nature of heart and mind. Someone read that quotation about the potential of recognizing non-separation—that it's not me against the world—that Ubuntu I read from Desmond Tutu last time, the sense of connectedness. The real pathos of craving is not only that it's unpleasant in the moment, but that we hold on to it, and it's what keeps us from recognizing the truth. And the truth liberates. It's not that we have to figure something out.

The third truth is that there is an ending of this dukkha, this unsatisfactoriness, this moment-to-moment suffering that arises in our heart in a moment and ends in our heart in a moment. This is often called nirvana, and it's frequently described by the Buddha as the mind-heart in which greed, aversion, and delusion are not arising. The

arahat, the so-called completely enlightened model, is one in whom even the tendency for greed, hatred, and confusion to arise has been cut off at the root—completely gone, not arising at all.

But along the way, even as Sayadaw U Pandita would say, a moment of mindfulness when those *kilesas* are not present—I'm going to use that word *kilesa* so I don't have to keep saying greed, hatred, and delusion, and I don't like the word "defilements"—when they're present and unrecognized, we can't see clearly. But in a moment when they're absent and there's mindfulness, wisdom, we can call that a moment of freedom. We can taste that. We can recognize as we go through our practice here: a moment of clarity, and then the next moment the wanting comes up, the aversion comes up, the sense of it's all going wrong comes up. That's why there's the fourth truth—the path, the way of practice, the way of life to work with this, to come to understand it. Because it's radical.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, for whom the Four Noble Truths was really the major practice of his life: "Living the Four Noble Truths as a daily practice and understanding them as a profound reflection provides a context for your entire life. But to sincerely live in this manner is not easy in modern life with its conflicting push-pull forces and confusing cultural messages as to what is valuable."

I don't think it's just modern life, because the Buddha wasn't living modern life and he was saying the same thing. But as Bhikkhu Bodhi has said, it's a lot harder in an age of easy pleasure. I like that phrase—"an age of easy pleasure." The values of really understanding the Four Noble Truths, of renunciation and compassion and wisdom—it's a harder sell these days.

What I'm saying is that the radical nature of the Four Noble Truths and the subtle habits of reaction in our mind—the second noble truth, the craving, aversion, and wanting coming from identification with anything—these are so familiar. They just feel like the way things should be. It's cozy, like an old bathrobe you put on. That's where we take refuge. We recognize it sometimes in big things, but not when it comes around and starts to impact the way we assess or think about our practice.

And this is a sutta I love. Actually, I think Bhante referred to it—the two darts—the other night, where we hit ourselves with the second dart, aversion to something unpleasant. Well, the Buddha goes on in that sutta to describe how these habits of aversion and clinging and delusion are moment to moment arising and strengthened through this not recognizing what goes on, the ephemeral nature of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral sensation, just coming and going.

So he says very simply, whenever there's an unpleasant and the person beats their breast and laments, as Bhante said, then it comes to be an underlying habit in the mind of resistance to unpleasant. It just feels normal. You go up to anyone—not just on the street, anyone here—and you say, "Your hand hurts and it's unpleasant. Shouldn't you move away?" Yeah, right. Why should I stay with this when I can move my hand? Give me a good reason. And you can't really give a good enough reason when there's that mindset going on. But anyway, it becomes the habit.

And under that underlying habit—this is the Buddha again—of resistance to the unpleasant, the only escape a regular person, a worldling, knows is to go for some pleasant sense experience. That's the only escape an ordinary person knows from the unpleasant. So you experience something unpleasant, and we go to some pleasant experience. In the world it could be pick up the phone, turn on the TV, have some ice cream, go to your video, whatever it is. Here it might be the pleasant fantasy. Doesn't matter, but just to see—and to me that's so sad—that the only escape a normal person knows from unpleasant is to lust for pleasant. And so that becomes a habit, he says, that underlies the mind, this craving for the pleasant experience. And then he says when that's going on, in terms of neutral—you don't even notice neutral. What? And so then the delusion underlies from neutral.

So this is one example. We can see it in the big experiences, like my little story I made up of craving to have breakfast. We can see it, and then we're surprised when it comes back again. But as the Buddha was saying, as Ajahn Sumedho was saying, we're noticing a moment or two of this real mindfulness, really seeing through, being able to hang out for a moment of awareness with the unpleasantness of craving.

Wanting in itself is an unpleasant experience. So what do we do to get rid of it? We get the thing we want. Is it the thing we want that's making us happy, or is it that the craving went away? Check it out. You can just sit and be with craving, craving, craving, craving. It'll eventually go away. I promise. Because everything does. Keep paying attention. Often you feel that sense of peace. Oh yeah, because the craving's gone. Yeah, it'll come back.

But we may not recognize—well, we won't, because there are so many mind moments—how familiar these underlying habits of mind are. It's unpleasant. That informs, for so many of us, when there's not wisdom, it informs our worldview, really. When we're not quite aware, it shapes what we think is good, what we think is bad, what we think is good practice, what we think is bad practice.

And when you hit one of those moments I mentioned in the beginning—you know, it's going along fine and suddenly it all goes wonky and you think, "What did I do wrong?"—most of us, the mind's just going to start coming up with analysis. It just does that. That's okay. We can recognize that. But mostly, we sort of recognize it, but we're sort of in it. And mostly, the analysis itself is going to be informed by, if we don't quite recognize it, the worldview. You're looking at it through the lens of pleasant is better, unpleasant is worse. Something's wrong. And so already the confusion is distorting the analysis, and we go deeper and deeper into confusion and doubt.

That's why I really got this. Tejani is the one who first pointed it out to me, but I really see it so clearly now, and it's such a relief when I can recognize it—that once I recognize that my consciousness in a moment, my awareness is... I can be aware there's doubt, aware there's aversion or greed. But you know how sometimes the mindfulness really notices aversion, but you're really noticing it.

You can feel that the attention, the mindfulness is clear. You can trust that. Other times... not so much, right? There's aversion, but as someone said today, you also feel like you're embodying it. It's really here. Or doubt. Or greed.

When you know that, the thing that really is so freeing to me is this: because whatever thoughts are coming, whatever analysis, whatever you're trying to figure out is moving through that lens of kilesa, you can't rely on anything it says. It may be true, it may not be. You can't trust whatever assessment comes up because it's through the lens of kilesa.

Knowing that, for me, it's like a huge relief. The mind says, "I've got to figure out what to do. What's wrong with my practice? It's not like this." Oh God, you're totally in kilesa. It feels like this. All I can do is just sit and walk and notice as best I can and trust that steady awareness takes care of itself. "No, I've got to do something. I've got to fix this. That's not good enough." So just knowing that—okay, I just can't rely on anything the mind says right now. It'll keep on trying, you know. Okay, can't rely on it. That's really so relieving. If I could hand you that, I would love to.

So starting to see how quickly... I have to move along here, because what I want to get to tonight—there's many different ways to go with this. But when we're in the phase, at different times, of running into this kind of hitting the wall, not just that it's difficult, but you're feeling that sense of something being shaken up, something untrustworthy, you don't really know where to stand, your assumptions aren't really matching reality, your unrecognized views of practice are being challenged—it's really unsettling.

And sometimes, usually, it's unpleasant. What's occurring may also be difficult—physical pain, emotional trauma—so that's also difficult. And so you just don't feel like you have a handle on anything, right? For a moment, it changes.

But the point I want to talk about tonight, because over the last few years it's been more and more helpful to me—something I didn't used to call on so much. And that's to, at these times, rather than trying to figure out how to practice correctly—because it's through the lens of kilesa, you can't tell—just keep going steady. But tune into, reconnect with and tune into, what's your deep, your real motivating aspiration? In your life, in your practice.

There's no right or wrong. You can't do this wrong, okay? It's a way of—it can start with a reflection, but it's not like intellectually thinking. That may be how you start. And it's not that there's a right way it should feel. But when I find myself feeling shaky, worn down, low energy, I'm trying to remember to practice but maybe thinking why, or maybe it's just dry and dead, then I just take a moment. Really just get quiet with yourself. It can go different ways, but start by just remembering or tuning in to aspiration—how you began your practice, why you're doing it now.

Now I want to backtrack and say what I mean by aspiration. Aspiration is a form of intention, a form of motivation. The intention that just arises in a moment with any particular action of thought, of body, of speech—that's one intention. Aspiration is a more overarching, broader sense of deeper purpose. What's really important to me? It can become a support, a reference point, give us a sense of resolution and courage to keep being with difficulty for a larger purpose than what's immediately in front of us.

For example, not even particularly dharmic, but we all know that if you have children,

There's plenty of times—assuming you're a halfway decent parent—when you do something that wouldn't be what you would normally want to do, or that's really hard for you, or scary for you. But you do it without question, because it's for the well-being of your child, out of love for your child. You get a sense of what I mean? It's a bigger purpose, not just the moment-to-moment thing.

So in terms of aspiration in our practice, it's about tuning in. And this can change as we go through practice, as we have deeper understanding, as different things motivate us.

But how is aspiration different from craving a goal? The thing with aspiration, the way I'm talking about it, is that it's supportive in terms of turning our heart, mind, our consciousness to the wholesome. Say, for example—and it could be anything—at times

my aspiration would be to really free the heart and mind from kilesa, to be of benefit to all beings. Those are the words. When there's a moment that my heart and mind are really in touch with that—wow, that might be a potential in this world—when it's an aspiration, the mind isn't looking forward, leaning forward, one eye on the goal. Because then you feel that sense of tanha.

Tanha can be for awakening, or it could be for an orange. It's the quality in the heart-mind that makes it tanha, not the object. And so you can feel when aspiration isn't wholesome—when you feel that narrowing, the frustration, the "I could never do this, I'm a piece of garbage." That's not aspiration. That's wanting and aversion.

But aspiration—it may be this sense of, "Wow, is that really possible?" And thinking, for example, the Buddha often said, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." Just think that. And so then it comes back as aspiration, bringing a sense of brightness, of lightness to the heart, to the mind. It can energize. It simply says, "Okay, I can be with this another moment." That's how aspiration is different from expectation, from wanting—which leads to doubt, frustration, and self-involvement. You can flip back and forth, but it's worth exploring. None of us would be here without some sense of aspiration.

As I say, the words I just spoke as an aspiration can really inspire me at some point. Or I could be lost in an aversive, self-judging mind state, say the same words, and go, "Yeah, fat chance. Who do you think you are?" Then it's not working at that moment. So I just want to say: find ways that work for you.

As you go through the days, it can be a kind of wise reflection to take time—at various moments—to reconnect with your aspiration. It may be words, or it may be something else. For me, this is what I've been doing more and more lately, and it really helps. It turns the mind to the wholesome, takes me out of self-identification, and brings in this real sense of: yes, this is the potential of this path. It does go against the stream. We need support in our aspiration.

With wise reflection, you can bring in a sense of what helps you reconnect. For me—and I'm just giving examples; you find what's true for you—at times it's different people I've met who are manifesting various aspects of purity of heart-mind, or different aspects of devotion. Different things that rekindle that quality in my own heart-mind. We're not inspired by somebody else, really. We're inspired because their example is touching that wholesome quality in our own mind-stream. Otherwise, it just misses us. We don't know what they're talking about.

Sometimes it's just remembering. When I'm with something a little difficult and I'm thinking, "I'm sick of this already. Let's move on to something else." I just remember: I really have a commitment to awaken, not just for myself, but to be of benefit to beings in this world. That gives a resolution, a sense of willingness to hang out with the difficulty another moment. It broadens things. If it's just for me, okay, a little aversion is good enough—not too bad, let's move on. But if it's for all beings, then no, that isn't good enough. That little bit of aversion comes out in something I say, and I can see it reverberate in the other person—which is, you know, me and the other, not different.

It's not okay—but in a way without judgment. Rather, it's a call to come back and be with whatever is arising.

I remember something Ajahn Sumedho shared about his early years in Thailand as a monk in his robes. You can imagine what those robes are like—they're not cool, not at all. And in the heat of Thailand, in the hot season under a tin roof, you just cook. I've known this from personal experience: you cook. And so he was sitting there, just sweating through his robes hour after hour, day after day. He said, "I just couldn't bear this another moment." And then he'd find that he could. In those moments when I feel I can't, I often say to myself, "What's so unbearable about this? Just for this one moment." And I find I can be with it.

That sense of tuning into the aspiration—not just for myself, but for greater benefit in the world—that brings courage, brings resolution, which is one of the paramis. This quality of willingness to engage in a wholesome way. So that's one approach.

Another way, as I was saying, is thinking of different people at different times who can inspire wholesome qualities of awakening in us. I'll share a couple of stories, but you'll have your own, whoever that person might be for you. And it doesn't have to be Buddhist, and it doesn't have to be that the person is totally perfect. If we're waiting to be inspired, to have our aspiration renewed, only by a completely awakened, perfect person—well, those are few and far between, aren't they? But wholesome, beautiful, awakened qualities are actually much more present here and there if we open to notice them and then take them in. They can really inspire us.

So, a couple of stories. I've been going to Myanmar nearly every year for at least a month since 2001, and I've come to know many nuns. There are many, many nuns in Burma. Most of the ones I know are relatively simple in their way of life. This one woman, Daw Uttara—Daw is just an honorific; women are Daw, men are U—she became a nun when she was around twenty because her health was really bad. She came from a farming family, a little bit poor, not desperately so in Burmese terms, but she was very

sick. She realized her family was about to sell everything they had, including their house, to pay for her medical care, and she didn't want that. She had always felt drawn to becoming a nun anyway, so she ordained.

She had such faith. She'd had really long, beautiful hair. When she shaved it, she sold it, and used that money to buy her first Buddha rupa, her first Buddha statue. Many of the nuns I've met have Buddhanussati—recollecting the qualities of the Buddha—as their main meditation practice. This brings them great faith, great inspiration. It's not my practice. I find it beautiful, but it doesn't move me in that way. Yet being around the nuns who are devoted to this practice, seeing the quality of devotion and faith they bring into their lives—that helps to deepen my own aspiration to purify the heart-mind.

So Daw Uttara was a nun and eventually moved from her home village down in the Delta—she moved after a big cyclone when people lost their land and their lives. She was living near Yangon. She and her sister nun went to a meditation nunnery because they really wanted to focus on practice. Not all nunneries or monasteries are meditation centers, but that was really what she wanted to do.

Then her head sayadaw, her teacher in her home village, called and said, "No. There are these ten orphan girls. We're sending them to you to take care of." This is what many nuns do—they take care of poor girls and orphan girls from their home villages. There's no safety net, no other place for these children. Sometimes parents send their daughters because it's the only way they can get an education, or because they'll be taught good values, or simply because they'll be looked after. The young girls are sent, the nuns take them in, they become little nuns themselves, and the elder nuns care for them.

So Daw Uttara and her sister did a complete U-turn.

Her commitment was wanting to wake up and meditate. But now she had these ten little girls—now there are fifteen or twenty. And what I saw in her was this complete U-turn, not like "Okay, got to do this, I'll make the best of it." But a turning around in faith, in devotion—"Okay, now *this* is the life. This is what life is presenting, and this is the path of awakening." No question about it. And you can see there's so much love and so much friendliness and so much care for these little girls. It's not an easy life. But just to see that.

When I think of her—and I'm not saying everything's all perfect—but when I see that willingness to embrace whatever's coming with a heart of devotion, to stay true to one's commitment to awaken, yet recognizing *this* is what it's about right now: loving and caring for these little girls. She says, "Okay, when they're grown, and if they don't want

to stay nuns, that's fine. But they've had these years where we've really taught them how to be a good human being, and we've kept them safe. They don't have to go out on the street, and they can choose whatever life they choose, but they've had a really good foundation." And then she can go off and meditate.

So that's one way. That inspires in me that sense of faith and surrender. It inspires me, and that's what practice is—not about getting it the way I want, but this willingness, this ability of total trust and surrender to how things are right now.

Sometimes I think of just a person, just their being. There's another teacher, a monk up in Sagaing named U Jatila. Very simple. He's the sayadaw of a very small monastery, only about three or four monks, up in the hills of Sagaing. We go to visit him every year. In fifteen years, he doesn't look like he's aged a day. He lives this quiet life, and he doesn't know too much English, but he's just so... you walk into the place and it just feels peaceful. He's a real metta being. And that's all. It's not like we have these great wisdom discussions about the Abhidhamma. Just this simplicity—kind metta, metta, peace. I just love being there. We go and hang out, we sit with him, we visit, and after fifteen minutes there's nothing really to say. He's had his visit, so then we go on our way. But I have his picture on my desk. I'll just look at it, and it will spark that quality in me, and that deepens again my aspiration, my willingness. Okay, let's keep on with this practice. Let's keep on with this awareness. It turns the mind to the wholesome.

Okay, here's another example—completely outside of Buddhism, a daily life one. Actually, it was just last week. One morning I was listening to the news. I can, as you imagine, get downcast. Sometimes just listening to the news or seeing how things are, I think, "What am I doing on this planet?" I feel like everything is the opposite of what seems important to me.

I don't know—I was telling Guy this and it didn't really go over with him, so maybe you'll also think this is a weird story. But anyway, here it is from last week. The last piece of the news was about a big ceremony in Moscow. They were unveiling a new statue, and over 200,000 people came to this ceremony. The statue—huge, as they do in Russia—five meters tall on top of a giant pedestal, honoring Kalashnikov, who died a few years ago. Kalashnikov, who invented the AK-47 and other such lovely weapons. They were really honoring him as someone who brought honor to the fatherland with his creativity and his integrity, on and on, with all these people gathered.

But that's not just about Russia—that's kind of not abnormal. And they said he wasn't around to see this, but he had been a little disappointed. He was proud of what he did, but he was a little disappointed that some of the people who used the AK-47 weren't the right people—like drug cartels used it, and criminals used it. He wasn't so glad about that.

So I'm just listening, and I find myself wondering: what world am I living in? Actually, that took me in a somewhat dejected direction. It was not deepening my aspiration in that moment. It was more like... huh?

But that same day, not long afterward, in my email inbox came a daily writing from a Christian mystic society. And it was talking about Gandhian nonviolence. The same day! I thought, you know, I just want to read a little of it because it's like, oh yes, this is also here. We just have to open—I just have to open my eyes and see it.

So it's from a longer work, and I found myself reading where he's talking about Mahatma Gandhi saying, "Love is the strongest force the world possesses, and yet it is the humblest imaginable. Living a nonviolent life is no easy task. It requires courageous love drawn from the very source of our being."

Then he quotes Thomas Merton on our dualistic mind: "See, evil is very cut and dried. This is good. This is evil. And the only solution is we've got to eliminate all evil." And then, this is from Merton: "Nonviolence, on the other hand, comes from an awareness that I am also the enemy and my response is part of the whole moral equation. I cannot destroy the other without destroying myself. I embrace my enemy just as much as I must welcome my own shadow. Both acts take real and lasting courage."

Gandhi, as you may know, coined the term *satyagraha* because "passive resistance" didn't capture the active and powerful nature of nonviolence. *Satyagraha* combines the Sanskrit word *sat*, which translates as "being" or "truth," with *graha*, which translates as "holding firm to" or "remaining steadfast in." So *satyagraha*, nonviolence, is translated as "truth force"—holding steady to the truth coming from within—or "soul force."

And that brought to mind, having read a lot about Martin Luther King, that "soul force" is really the language he used for the whole depth of nonviolence. This really courageous, incredible way of meeting horrific circumstances from an inner place of love that is only possible when it springs from connection with truth—whether you want to call it God or we'd want to call it Dharma, just the way things are. Reality is like this. When we're connected with that, in a simple moment when there's not *kilesa*, the thought of harming doesn't arise. The assumption that the only response to difficulty is aversion or harming—it's so clear that's not true. In that moment, you know.

And again, the soul force—there are people doing that, living from that, acting from that in the world now. John Lewis, the long-term representative in the House of Representatives from Georgia, in his autobiography talks a lot about this. He uses "soul force." He was one of the original members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which led the Freedom Rides in 1959 and 1960 and helped organize the March on Washington in 1963. Just this sense of people now in the world still connecting to and acting from this depth of understanding.

"To create peaceful change, we begin by remembering who we are in God." This is the Christian language, but who we are in truth. Gandhi believed the core of our being is union with the truth. From this awareness, nonviolence flows naturally and consistently.

So again, this sense for me of finding in different places—and I write them down and I'm saying them to you—but as I say, it's because it re-inspires in me my own aspiration. And that aspiration is, in terms of my practice, just to find the courage, the willingness, the humility in a way, just for this next moment to show up. Not to figure it out, but to actually have the courage to know we're not going to figure it out. It's exactly not about our figuring it out. It's just the opposite of that. It's about freedom from clinging.

This freedom of heart and mind is absolutely uncompromising. There's not some part we get to exclude. And so as we practice, as the mind becomes more subtle, we're landing in our views. It includes all views, all our ways of understanding. Even with our most sincere intentions, our sincere practice, we're going to be challenged. We have to be, if the practice is working. That's why when you're having these difficult times, we know the practice is working. You think it's not, but we know it is. If everything's all nice and safe and secure the whole time, going just as you like it—nah, it's not really happening yet.

So with our most sincere intentions, we can't imagine what it's supposed to look like, how it's supposed to be.

You know, we want to know ahead of time. We want to know the path. We want to chart ourselves on the path. We want to know exactly where we are, even if that makes us feel like garbage because we're not where we think we should be. And even if we've read about the path, you've read the Progress of Insight, you know it all—that just makes it worse. Because you never really know where you are, and we want to know. And you can't. You simply can't.

So these times of confusion, they're really valuable. They're important moments in our path of awakening. Because what's required—we want to know where it's going to be, but what's required is this commitment, this willingness, this determination, this *adhiṭṭhāna*, which is just a moment of: "Okay, I can just be with this now." Like when Annie talked about it the other night, what Joseph calls "the sword of wisdom," where you just go, "Not now." It's not with aversion or clinging, but it's a kind of collecting of the energy: "Okay, I can just be with this for a moment."

That's what's required—just to be with what is. This full commitment to open into the unknown. It's not going the way we think. We have no clue where we are. We've lost a sense of path. We're not feeling safe and secure. Great. Just take a moment and say, "I can just be with this now." Trust in the awareness. Trust in that simplicity of just meeting what's happening.

Awakening, enlightenment—it's not a self-improvement project. It doesn't make us feel all better about ourselves, secure and safe. And I know, it's the sense of self. It's not like there's a self we're getting rid of. But the sense of me—when I try to imagine what awakening is, of course we imagine from the sense of me: "I'm going to feel so good. I'm going to be floating down the street, the essence of Kuan Yin, the goddess of compassion." In a subtle way, it's kind of feeding us, confirming our sense of me.

But non-clinging—it's radical, it's uncompromising. The sense of me is what gets seen through. It's not what gets confirmed. And so at some point, all of the subtle holdings are going to be challenged. Sometimes it's scary, and then it'll be, "Oh wow, it's so freeing." And then, because these habits are so pervasive, the next day you thought you were free and they're back again. Okay.

"I thought I couldn't bear it, but then I found that I could. It's like this now. How can this be? What's happening? It's like this now."

This is really the courage, the determination to just moment to moment to moment open into the unknown.

I've found that without continually coming back and seeing what helps reconnect with my aspiration—there are times, for all of us, we just don't have the energy to do it. It's like that. But find what helps you, what re-aspirates, re-inspires, re-reminds you of what's really important to you in life.

So again, for me, I'll end with one more story. A friend was just telling me—a friend of mine, a long-term meditator and yogi—she has been involved for some years in what's called the Tibet Oral History Project, something the Dalai Lama actually asked

her to do. What she does is interview Tibetan refugees, really elderly Tibetan refugees in India, in the States, wherever, just to get their stories down. He wants all the different kinds of people—not necessarily teachers or nuns or monks, just ordinary people.

She actually gave me the whole interview. I'll just pick some highlights of this particular woman, an elderly woman she interviewed when she was seventy, in 2013. She's been living in the States now for many years. So I'm really condensing here. This is one of those stories where you read it and you think, "Well, this is the kind of stuff you read about Milarepa, or what people did in old Tibet, these fantastic practitioners from long ago. But today? We couldn't possibly do that." And so this is her brief story.

She came from a nomadic family, well-to-do. When the Chinese were invading in 1959, her whole family was trying to flee. They got involved in a firefight, and her family was killed, along with many people. She was shot in the leg. She was captured and taken back to her village and kept under house arrest, just living in her village.

But she had this deep commitment to escape, to get to India. Her deep commitment was that she wanted to be able to offer prayers for her parents. One must offer prayers when parents pass away, and there was no opportunity to perform prayers there. She also wanted to study and practice the Dharma. That was her deep commitment.

So she managed to escape. The whole long story—it took her almost a year. She was wandering. Some people helped her. She was freezing. She didn't have food. But she managed, a year wandering around in Tibet without much to eat. It was a year after she was wounded, so she could walk okay.

She gets to Mount Kailash with a friend. She's not in India. She's at Mount Kailash. And she really wants to practice. So she stayed seven years at Mount Kailash, living in caves and practicing the Dharma, doing prostrations all around Mount Kailash.

She ran into a lama who showed up after she'd been there a while. He sounded like he was really a tough lama—not like, "Oh yeah, you're doing a good job, keep going," but a radical sword of wisdom lama that really inspired her practice.

Let me share a couple of things he said. He says to her, "You really have to cultivate love and compassion as well as wisdom to really awaken. So how do you relate to the Chinese?" She said, "Well, to be really honest, I feel like they're my enemy." And he says, "Yes, of course you do. And you're doing really good practice. But you keep practicing like this, the enemy will not be the enemy but like your relatives. If you can love your so-called enemy without any degree of difference, if you can learn to not make this difference, this is really part of what you need to do to really be free."

So she goes, "Okay." Well, she put in a tremendous effort to do this. It was really hard. She's not saying, "La la la, it was easy." It was really hard. "I exercised again and again, even while eating and doing pilgrimage and prostrations around the mountain, meditating, putting in every effort I could, concentrating single-mindedly on this. I couldn't do it for almost two years." Imagine—just like, "I couldn't do it for almost two years." But somehow she did.

So now she's in the States, an old woman, just describing. She said, "I can't really talk in great detail about the Dharma and the practice because no one will really understand. It's so subtle. But what I understand is the important benefit of peace. Through practicing peace, one realizes that the problems I suffer are also felt by the other person. When I face difficulties like illness and pain, when I feel happiness, I feel that is also felt by the other person. The suffering I experience is felt by the other. Whatever I feel, the other has the same feeling. If one understands that perfectly, the feeling of wanting to harm another person, of being spiteful and other things, just disappears automatically."

That's the sense of it—in a moment of wisdom, the hatred doesn't arise. That's just how it is. You don't make that happen. Take it as moments, not as you have to be that way all the time. That's how I do it.

But she's really seeing that, you know? This is how she lives. And what my friend said when she met this woman—what she was really impressed by, before she even heard her story—was just her great kindness. A great sense of love. She came in and the woman was just doing whatever she could to make my friend comfortable, offering her things, and this very simple, down-to-earth kindness and wisdom. You can feel that sometimes in people.

So that's another story that inspires me. This is a real person, not reading about Shabkar in the 18th century.

See what's true for you, what helps you. If this is helpful—to re-inspire, to reconnect to your aspiration, to give you the energy and courage and uplifting to open into the unknown again for this next moment.

I'll close with this from Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, quoted by the Dalai Lama. This is a vast bodhicitta aspiration, but it brings up that aspiration, that inspiration, that energy in me. So I'm reading it for myself, because it makes me really happy:

And now, as long as space endures,
As long as there are beings to be found,
May I continue likewise to remain
To soothe the sufferings of those who live.

The pains and sorrows of all wanderers—
May they ripen wholly on myself.
And may the virtuous company of bodhisattvas
Ever bring about the happiness of beings.

May the teachings—the only remedy for suffering,
The source of every bliss and happiness—
Be nurtured and upheld with reverence,
And throughout a vast continuance of time endure.

May precious bodhicitta take its birth
In those in whom it has not taken birth,
And where it has been born, let it not cease,
But swell and increase ever more and more.

Thank you for your patient attention.

CHAPTER 70

Perception, Papañca, and Sakkāya-diṭṭhi

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines how personality view (sakkāya-diṭṭhi) arises through the interplay of perception (saññā), feeling tone (vedanā), and mental proliferation (papañca). Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that the five aggregates are like a magic show—form as foam, feeling as bubbles, perception as a mirage, formations as a coreless banana tree, and consciousness as a juggler's trick—she demonstrates how our sense of self is continuously constructed and deconstructed in each moment.

Through vivid examples, including a powerful story of a meditator who blamed someone for walking during sitting meditation only to discover the sound came from her own breathing, Wilson illustrates how perception distorted by the kilesas (greed, hatred, and delusion) leads to inaccurate recognition and subsequent suffering. She explores the vipallāsas (perversions of perception) and how we habitually perceive what is impermanent as permanent, what is unsatisfactory as satisfying, and what is not-self as self.

The talk culminates with the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya: when there is only the seen in the seen, the heard in the heard, the sensed in the sensed, and the cognized in the cognized, there is no 'you' in connection with that—and this is the end of dukkha. Wilson encourages practitioners to notice the arising and passing of self-stories, to recognize moments of simplicity empty of self-construction, and to develop contentment with this natural peace rather than waiting for the next interesting experience to confirm a sense of self.

Tonight I want to talk about perception, saññā, and papañca, and the concoction of sense of self—deconstructing that, exploring that.

I love talking about perception because it's fun to talk about, and it's arising in every moment, so it's really at the core of the whole construction of sense of self. I hope this isn't too wonky of a talk, but I can only get down in there. This is one way of talking about sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

So let's talk about the personality view, the sense of self, and how with anattā, the big anattā understanding is that there is no intrinsic separate self. Yet, of course, in our experience, personality view, identity view, sense of self is certainly something that we experience in an ongoing way. This isn't a whole anattā talk—it's more about perception—but perception fuels the false sense of self.

A lot of times when we bring up anattā or not-self, people's minds just kind of turn off. Like, "Oh god, I'm just waiting for the big insight when the self that's here goes away." It's here, here, here, but when the insight finally comes it'll be gone, right? You're waiting for that, and it turns into this big deal when it was never here in the first place. So stop waiting for some mind-blowing insight.

Instead, and this is where it really gets interesting, with the simplicity of steady awareness, we can begin to get interested and recognize how in a moment the sense of self arises, how it's concocted, how it's constructed from the building blocks of the five aggregates—saññā, perception, being one of them. Unexamined, it seems really real. With steady awareness, we just start to see it deconstruct and go. This can just be interesting to watch. Instead of waiting until it all blows out and it's gone forever—which, like I said, don't hold your breath—we can see it coming and going, coming and going, and actually, you can stop taking the sense of self personally. That's really very freeing.

Ramana Maharshi says the ego—or I'm going to say sense of self—is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. If you examine closely, the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So it is with the sense of separate self. So long as one does not examine it closely, it continues to give trouble. But when one searches for it, it is found not to exist.

The Buddha's way of talking about the five aggregates—and this isn't a five aggregate talk either, it's a saññā talk, but that's one of the five aggregates, and they're all linked up—is through a very well-known sutta where he talks about consciousness as a magic show, the whole thing like a magic show. Form is like a mass of foam, just empty foam. Vedanā, feeling tone, is just an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage. Saṅkhāras, mental formations, are like a banana tree—you know, the banana tree trunk is just leaves, there's no core there, there's no there there if you take it apart. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick entire.

I really feel like the whole sense of self is like that, like a magic show. When we don't explore it—he goes on to describe how if you come to a crossroads and there's a magician doing tricks and you're looking at it, you go, "Wow, that's amazing, it's so wonderful." Then if you go behind the curtain and you see how it's done, you go, "Oh, okay." And then you come out and watch it again and everyone else is going, "Wow, how wonderful!" And you're like, no big deal. You just do this and this and that's how it happens. So that's what he's comparing this to. It's a magic show.

How does saññā, perception, contribute? How does it do its job? How does it contribute to this magic show when there's not recognition, not mindfulness?

As I said, all of the five aggregates, perception included, arise in every mind moment of consciousness. Perception is described as the quality in any mind moment of recognition, of discernment. So if I ring the bell and you hear it—the recognition of bell. Obviously it's based on memory and has to do with whatever our previous experiences have been. So it's a concept. It's extremely useful. No one's saying we're going to get through life without perception. It's really how we construct our world. One perception can immediately give the whole sense of the world.

When you hear the bell, even if you were somewhat spaced out or not fully aware of it, everything kind of jumps into place. You know it's the bell, you know it's time for a talk, you know you're here at IMS, you know where you're supposed to go. You came in here, you knew you were you, which was your zafu, who sits up here and who sits down there. You're quiet, I talk—we know the whole thing. The whole world arises with perception. Extremely useful.

The thing is, as our perception is informed and flavored by all of our life experiences, without real awareness we don't tend to question it. We think, "Well, that's how it is. It's describing reality." But it isn't the same for everybody.

There's a simple example I really liked. I was visiting Sally a few years ago, and I said, "Oh, I'm a little chilly. Could you hand me the blue blanket on the back of your couch?" She looked at the couch and said, "What blue blanket?" I said, "That one there." She said, "Oh, you mean the green one?" And then I really looked. "No, no, it's blue." She said, "No, it's green." We could have gone further with it, but the thing is, I really tried. I said, "Oh, really, green?" Couldn't see it as green. She couldn't really see it as blue.

That's not life-threatening, but there's this sense—doesn't the mind kind of wonder, "But which one is right?" As if there's an accurate, exact thing out there. It's blue or it's green, or you have to find aquamarine because that's the right perception. Rather than recognizing perception as a conditioned phenomenon like everything else. When we're not recognizing this, we can so easily assume that's what's really going on.

Blue-green—conditioned by whatever our past conditioning is. But it's so easy to hold on to our perception as right, to really get into struggle about it, or fear when our perceptions are threatened. And so often the perception that arises is actually inaccurate when it's distorted by kilesa. If there's aversion flavoring the perception, the citta, the consciousness in that moment, or greed flavoring it, or delusion—that distorts perception. We don't recognize accurately at all. And if we don't recognize the kilesas are there, we don't know we're not recognizing accurately.

Sometimes with steady attention this is seen through immediately. A simple example: I was at a meditation center in Burma some years ago, walking down this path. There was a big Bodhi tree growing there, with a circular path around it. I was walking down the path, and I saw a Burmese nun walking around the tree, circumambulating it—which is a thing you do—with her hands in añjali. I thought, "Oh, how nice, the faith," this lovely feeling. I kept walking, got closer, and she was texting on her phone. That was just funny. The perception—you see through it right away.

That was delusion. I just didn't have all the information. How much of the time we don't have all the information, there's delusion, not seeing clearly. But believe me, the mind just jumps in and there's some kind of perception. It's rare that we say, "You know, I really don't exactly know what's happening here. I don't really know what that person's motivation was when they did this really stupid thing. I really don't know. I'll just stay open." Moha, delusion, jumps in and makes a story.

And then—this is the concoction part—pretty much most of the time, it doesn't just stop with perception. Even that little story about the nun was not a big deal, but I didn't just see, "Oh, walking around the tree." There was a sense of it being pleasant, a sense of "Oh, the faith of the nuns, isn't that inspiring," and a whole little world bubble got created in the two seconds it took me to walk up to the tree. Then that whole world bubble got deflated. But I thought it was funny, so that was okay, it was over.

But when there's greed or aversion really flavoring it, and the story's gone a lot further, it's a whole other thing. That's papañca—the mind that proliferates based on perception.

So this example—and I use this example a lot, I'm using it again by request of a particular person here from other years—but it works very well. How perception can explode into a whole story and suffering based on inaccuracy.

It was her first retreat. It was in another country, in a rental facility—a big house that was used for summer camp for kids. So it wasn't really well constructed. The room being used for the sitting meditation was on what we would call the second floor, and the room used for walking meditation was right underneath it on the first floor. But not so well constructed as here—one of these old wooden houses where every time anybody walked anywhere you could hear it creak, creak, creak, creak.

So she was sitting during the structured time, the sitting period, trying to be with the breath. Finally, on her first retreat, she had a moment of feeling the breath—a moment of feeling like she was doing it right. And suddenly she heard this creak, creak, creak. It was loud and it really messed up her concentration. She thought, "Well, somebody's

walking downstairs." You can hear how that creaking happens with walking. And immediately the thought arose: "This is the sitting period. You're supposed to be sitting in the sitting period, not walking. This is wrong. That shouldn't be happening. How can that person be so insensitive? And besides, it's ruining my meditation." Really annoyed.

The mind was spinning, but it was her first retreat. She wasn't a manager or anything, so she didn't have the nerve to go downstairs and give that person what for—but she would have liked to. There was nothing else to do, though, but try to feel her breath again. So she came back, tried to feel the breath, and at some point managed to connect again. The story went into the background as she really connected with the breath, just feeling it.

And as she was present again, feeling the breath, she noticed that as she breathed out—she happened to be leaning with her back against the wall—her back hit the wall, and *that* was making the creaking sound. Completely from her breathing hitting the wall. It was like, "Oh my god, how could that be?"

The minute she saw that, of course, this whole concoction—this whole story, the anger, the aversion, and everything that came with it—at that moment it vanishes. This is, in a way, the nature of insight. Steady awareness, when it recognizes accurately what's happening, allows the reactivity based on aversion and self-story and greed to drop away, because it doesn't make any sense given what's really happening in that moment. That nature of insight is not something you think your way into, but that's what happens when there's reality, when we really see it clearly.

I want to use that story to refer to the different steps of it, describing how perception and papañca work to create this whole, enmeshed sense of self.

So, one thing: as I said, it doesn't just stop at perception. This is the well-known description of the Buddha of what's called papañca—proliferation of thought and emotion based on perception, inaccurate perception:

"Dependent on the eye and forms, or the ear and sounds, dependent on sense contact with any of the six sense doors, there's sense contact. With sense contact as condition, feeling tone—vedanā—arises. This just happens. What one feels, that one perceives. So there's vedanā, saññā—they're happening quickly. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates, one complicates with associations, with memories. And with these proliferations as the source, the mind, the heart is beset. The mind, the heart is assailed with mental perceptions and notions and thoughts about the past and the future and the present, and we suffer."

That's the classic description of papañca.

So this example from my friend—the whole thought arising from that perception that somebody's walking, and all the story about how this shouldn't be happening, and what can I do, and it's ruining my meditation—all of that is papañca being fueled by aversion, not recognized.

What one feels, one perceives. This is how the concoction of suffering and sense of self happens so quickly. It's again from—well, this isn't from the Buddha, this is Sariputta. But he is considered, when he speaks pieces of wisdom, equal to the Buddha. So we don't say, "Well, only Sariputta said it."

He knew.

So Sariputta says, "Feeling, perception, and consciousness, friend, these qualities are joined. They come together. You cannot disjoin them. It is not possible, having separated the one from the other." As I'm doing now—I'm talking about vedana arising and that leading to perception—but it's not possible to really delineate the difference among them. For what one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one cognizes.

In other words, it's all happening so quickly. The feeling tone, the perception, and the cognizing is the knowing of that. So if that moment is distorted by aversion, by greed, by delusion, it's happening so quick—boom—off in a whole world in just a second.

This is what Guy was talking about last night regarding the suffering born of craving. Craving being either the movement toward or the movement away from. We've talked about before, in some of the other talks, how the feeling tone—being perceived as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral—is so habitual for our minds. When there's not the clear, non-deluded recognition of "this is unpleasant" or "this is pleasant being perceived that way," the habit is so strong to feed into unpleasant, boom. The perception's unpleasant and off into a whole world, like my friend here. Or if it's pleasant, off into a whole world of greed.

And without the tool of steady mindfulness—because this is happening every mind moment, so quickly—what we wake up noticing is the sense of me involved in this particular concoction of self. Of sitting here trying to meditate and having it ruined by this thoughtless person walking downstairs. That's what's happening. That's the mind bubble that's been created.

If you wanted to, I'm breaking it down, kind of deconstructing. It happens so fast, but there's sitting, there's the hearing. The hearing is perceived, and that just happens effortlessly. Hearing arises and there's a knowing of it. Nothing one has to do—she wasn't planning. But whether the hearing itself was unpleasant, or whether the fact that it pulled her away from the breath and was perceived as a distraction was unpleasant,

either way there was an unpleasant feeling tone. The perception immediately coming of someone walking, and then the whole world of me suffering in aversion. Just like that.

The real poignancy of how suffering is born of craving—this guy described it. On the many ways it manifests, this is one: when the craving, in whichever form—for it or against—is flavoring, is distorting the perception and is fueling the papañca. When that's in the perception and unrecognized, it has the effect that perception is not accurate. We misperceive. We don't recognize reality the way that it is.

And that's so poignant, because we're thinking the craving is what's going to make us happy, and it's the very thing that is obstructing just the simple recognition of reality as it is.

Sogyal Rinpoche, just describing how we get so lost so quickly: "We get into so much suffering and confusion by letting ourselves get lost in whatever happens. You project one thought, then the second thought believes the first. Then a third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is by this time already a reality. By the time the tenth one comes, it believes the fifth one has always been an actuality."

And this is fast. You notice how fast—I'm hoping you notice how fast thoughts come. How solid our thought bubbles, our world bubbles get. And how much of the time is there "me" sitting in the center of it? Not really me, okay, but the sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the sense of me. That's often what fuels it.

And it doesn't matter how fast and how far that thought bubble has gone. So back to the house again—my friend noticing it. Whether it was three seconds that she was lost in this aversive story (I think it was longer than that), whether it was forty-five minutes, it really doesn't matter. The time when the attention was brought back to the simplicity of present moment awareness—just dropping all the stories, just being with the sensation of breathing, without preconception, just with that open-hearted "okay, what's happening?"—just being with it. And then the perception, not being distorted at that point, is open to recognize more accurately.

Oh, that's what's happening. Breathe out, there's the sound, and everything drops away. The suffering drops away. That whole bubble, however long it had lasted, doesn't matter. In the moment of the purity of awareness, of citta without being distorted, that one moment of clear seeing—all the rest vanishes in that moment. You don't have to slowly talk your way out of it. It vanishes in the light of direct perception, which I think is very encouraging to all of us. That's why we say you could have been lost for an hour, but the moment the awareness comes back, it's here, just as clear and good as ever.

So the Dalai Lama says all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge. You may have noticed that's what we're going on about all the time—direct experience or true knowledge. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. With this direct connection, the magic show falls apart. And this is not an act of will. It's not by rationalizing about it, thinking about it.

If you notice, you can be really caught in a story or in a sense of self, and you're telling yourself all the things we've learned: "But I know this is impermanent, I know there's identification here, I know this is unpleasant, I know this is just a creation." But that's just on the intellectual level. That might serve to get us to meet the experience again, but it doesn't cut through it. The moment of direct connection, awareness, the simplicity of awareness and total presence—reality reveals itself. Boom.

So this is Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding wisdom does not arise as the result of thinking. It is the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes wisdom or understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

Our thinking mind doesn't believe that, because that's what the thinking mind does—it thinks. It puts all the eggs into that basket of thinking, and it can't think its way out of that. But let it think. Thinking is very useful. We don't hate thinking; it's useful when we know how to use it and not have it run us. So just beginning to have more and more trust in this quality of simple awareness that cuts through all the confusion—all the confusion and sense of self that comes from mistaken perception, fed by pleasant-unpleasant vedana not being recognized, and boom, boom, boom.

As the Buddha said, this is just a very deep habit of our minds. All of our minds. I'm pretty sure all of us here, you know? It's not something you are doing because you're so hopeless. It's not something that's happening more to you because you can't meditate. That's sakaya-ditti. That's personality view arising out of an unpleasant experience.

So when a moment of consciousness is flavored or distorted by greed, hatred, or confusion—the hallucinations, the vipallasas of perception—we just can't recognize accurately. The Buddha talked about it a lot in relationship to perceiving what is in constant change as being permanent, perceiving what is unsatisfactory or dukkha as being satisfactory and happiness producing, perceiving what is no sense of separate lasting self as being me or mine, and perceiving what is not beautiful as beautiful.

Here I'm just talking about the vipallasa of perceiving any experience as me or mine, how fast that comes from this distortion of perception. We just can't recognize accurately.

Again, the Buddha: "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor recognizes as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both." The same applies when the mind is impassioned by lust or bewildered by delusion, by confusion.

He says "on that occasion" because the mind moments are constantly arising and changing—thank the good Lord, or it would really be awful. Imagine being oppressed by ill will and that's it, from now till the end of eternity. Well, it feels like that, doesn't it? Or as Tejaniya would say, that's how the kilesa is doing its job. When you're caught in a strong mental state, its job is to say, "Yeah, and you're going to feel like this for the rest of your life." Every thought that comes up is colored by that ill will.

You imagine your vacation, but because of the ill will, it's like, "Oh, it's probably just going to be hurricane season. It's probably going to be too expensive. I'm probably going to break my leg. My partner and I will probably have a fight. Why should we even go?" Then when the mind is impassioned by lust, it'll be, "So great! In fact, I'm leaving the retreat now to go on that vacation because it's going to be so fantastic!" We can't recognize accurately. We can't tell our own good or the good of another or the good of either.

But when we can recognize that one of these qualities is circling around in there, coloring the perception, we can remember, "Oh yeah, I can't recognize accurately." You can't push through it, but you can know. And it's been such a gift to me to really understand that when I see there's ill will in the mind, aversion or doubt or confusion, I think, "Oh, I have to figure out what's the right thing to do now." Don't you? When your practice isn't going right, you think, "Well, I've got to figure out what to do." And you forget to notice that all the thoughts are coming through a perception that's distorted by aversion, because you've already decided it's not going right. Probably it's unpleasant. It's usually unpleasant when it's not going right—rarely is it really pleasant when it's not going right. And so it's unpleasant, there's probably a little bit of aversion, there's the whole idea that comes up of "I can't do it," and so on, and then we decide what we should do to fix it.

You come in and talk to one of us: "I've decided I'm going to do this. I've got to get more concentrated. I've got to get less concentrated. I've got to get more precise. I've got to get less precise." And we go, "What's in the back of your mind there?" You go, "What do you mean?" "Maybe there's some aversion." "Oh, right. Aversion."

I mean, it's the same thing for me. I say, "I'm looking for craving. I can tell everything's tight. I'm looking for craving. I can't see it. The mind's balanced. The mind's clear. I'm just going to—oh, wow. Oh my gosh. Totally filled with craving. Distorting every perception for the last half hour. Duh. Okay."

But I do know, once you recognize, you don't know what exactly is happening, but you know: I can't trust this. Whatever the mind says, it can't assess accurately. So just relax back into the steadiness, the long process of conscious awareness, without trying to come to any conclusion about your practice, about yourself, about what it means, about good or bad. Just the long process of conscious awareness. Can we take refuge in that?

It's an amazing thing. You just quit trying to do it right and say, "Well, am I sitting and walking?" "Yeah, but not right." "Continuous?" "No, there was that moment I spaced out." "Are you going into town for pizza?" "No." "Are you more or less sitting and walking?" "Okay, that's it." Sooner or later awareness will come back because there's really nothing else to do. We set it up that way. That's why there aren't TVs up here like in the airport. You've got to come back to awareness because it's the only show in town. Then it gets interesting again. Thank God, it gets interesting.

Okay, that was a sidetrack.

So these vipallāsas, these distortions of perception—taking any experience as being me or mine—is really how sakkāya-diṭṭhi comes up, and the perceiving of it in that way. But it's also not just this. We can see that process here, and this is very subtle. But in the grosser or wider way, in the world, the whole sense of perception being informed by our history, by our past, by the media, by our culture—and not recognizing that it's a selective perception, and that other people's is different—is really how we get into all this struggle, all this conflict, all this "I'm better, you're wrong," and all the pain and the racism and the homophobia and implicit bias based on perception that is fed from our conditioning.

You know those tests they have for implicit bias about all different kinds of subjects?

I don't know if you've ever taken one. They come on the computer and show an image alongside different words – it could be about gender, nationality, race, or anything else. The image appears with words, and you have a set of words to match, but you

have to match them really quickly, going with the first thing that comes up. The screen moves so fast you don't have time to think about the way you ought to respond – the way I think as a good person I would respond – because it goes so quickly and keeps speeding up.

And so the perception that's down there in our unconscious gets highlighted. It's really fascinating, and I think really important for all of us to see: this is how it works. It works in these bigger ways in the world, and it's also working moment to moment to moment, every moment of our life, in terms of this concocting of a story, a sense of self, a personality view – sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

Anaïs Nin, the French writer, said, "We see the world not as it is, but as we are." That's a great example of how perception feeds our whole description of the world. And once we identify with a perception, once we hold on to it without realizing we're clinging to it, something happens. I call it selective perception. There's a description of what's happening, and without even recognizing that we're doing it, the mind tends to just notice the perceptions that feed that particular view, that are in alignment with it. We can completely ignore other perceptions that don't fit in. We don't even know we're doing it.

A simple story someone told me at a retreat at Spirit Rock recently illustrates this beautifully. She was laughing about it – I had talked about perception and she came to me saying, "Wow, this is a great story." She had woken up in the morning, lying in her bed, and she could hear this gentle rain falling. She thought, "Ah, just a lovely gentle rain. It's so nice, so peaceful." She was really appreciating it, just lying there in bed listening to the rain.

And this is where, with any sense contact, the whole sense of personality view can come up. So she's lying there listening to the rain, and the sense of how cozy and nice it is in bed, how she can just lie there, how peaceful it is – memories of childhood and all the rest of it, right?

Then she got up, getting dressed to go to the meditation hall early, thinking she'd just walk over in the rain since you have to go outside there. As she's getting dressed and can see outside her window, she's going, "It must not be raining too hard because people aren't using umbrellas or raincoats. I guess they're just very hardened." So she goes out thinking, "It's so lovely, the cool morning. The rain is so fine, I'm hardly noticing it."

Until she got to the meditation hall and realized it wasn't raining. It hadn't been raining. Whatever sound she'd heard that she was perceiving as rain, she had no clue what it actually was. She said, "I could just go into don't-know." But she had, for I don't know how long – even seeing everybody walking around without raincoats or umbrellas, even walking outside herself – she was going on about the rain and how nice it was. It took her until she'd been outside for some minutes before she really got it: it's not raining.

She thought it was great, and it is great – this is how strong perception can be. This is really where the sense of personality view gets constructed in a moment. But this is what we can see: how it gets constructed, concocted out of vedanā, out of saññā, and out of the papañca. It arises in a moment, can get really strong, but then dissolves again. And it's really gone.

Really noticing how this happens is important, because it can be very strong. Any sense experience can give rise to this "taken as me" – the whole story of me, suffering or happy, all the memories that fit with that particular story. The sense of me is really strong. It comes up all the time.

But in retreat, and sometime about now for many people, you could have – I'm just making this up, this isn't anybody's story – say, a particular experience of being cold. Feeling cold, like my body doesn't do well with cold, and it tends to shrink. Being cold and feeling kind of tight, then noticing aversion, then feeling I can't really practice well, and what's the matter with this body, and a whole story starts. All the memories come up that feed that particular story of me – someone who doesn't fit in, someone whose body doesn't deal with the cold.

Someone whose body doesn't deal with the heat. Someone whose body doesn't deal with anything. Someone who has aversion to something as simple as cold. And all the times in my life when I haven't been there—the whole litany unfolds.

And then, the next day it's hot. Like, "Oh my god, so hot. I can't deal with the heat." Or maybe you like the heat. You go, "Oh, I can relax. There's no aversion. Everything's flowing. It's going so well. Warm, pleasant awareness, steady awareness. Wow, I'm really such a good yogi." And all the stories come—you remember all the insights you've had, all the times it was so pleasant. And then more pleasant things come, and more pleasant comes, and the mindfulness starts to drop away and you're back on the beach in Bali.

But right now, in Bali, they're waiting for the volcano to blow. So, "Oh no, I'm in Bali and the volcano's going..." It just keeps going, going, going. And then suddenly, "Oh, what's happening now?" Stepping. And that whole bubble of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* is gone.

Noticing, noticing how *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* can arise from any sense contact. *Vedanā*—pleasant, unpleasant—the perception of what it is, and then all the thoughts and associations and the memories of past and the thoughts about future and the assessments about the present. That's *papañca*. That's the arising of a sense of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*.

Notice, as Ajahn Sumedho describes it: so then the self arises. Just can be from hearing a sound of rain, or a feeling of cold, or a sense of "my breath is too rough." It could be anything. "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears, my desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho."

You notice that? Sometimes we don't—we just think that *is* the world, that's how it is. When we look at it, we go, "Am I really the center of everything?" Well, it sure feels like it. "It takes off into orbit, my views, my feelings and my opinions. I can get caught in that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness. But if I recognize that, then my refuge starts to no longer be in being a person. Then it can vanish. The world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. That doesn't mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends or that I'm unconscious. In Buddhadharma, the world is the world that gets created in consciousness. That's why we can be living in different worlds. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same as the world you create. But that world arises and ceases. Both of the worlds arise and cease. And that which is aware of the world arising and ceasing can transcend the world."

So this is really what we can notice: how the birth and death of the story of self, the sense of self, happens hundreds of times in a day. Really noticing how there can just be sense perception occurring, and it can just be what it is in the light of awareness, and then suddenly it can coalesce into the story of me, and then back again. You can call it—I'm using something Ajahn Buddhadasa said about something else—but I call it volunteering for suffering.

A good example: once I was on a retreat, sitting very peacefully, and I had a little cough. So I cough, cough, and then I felt a tickle in my chest. Tickle, tickle, cough, cough. Other things are happening. Tickle, tickle, cough, cough. Suddenly the thought comes up, "Oh my god, I've got bronchitis." So that thought—I'd had bronchitis previously. So that was a memory. I'd been really sick. Not like the day before, but a long time ago.

But that thought came up. So that was a perception: "This is bronchitis." It came up, and it was unpleasant. It came up with fear and aversion. And everything just coalesced into this: "Oh my God, I've got bronchitis. What am I going to do? I'm on retreat. I can't go to the doctor." Volunteering for suffering.

And then I went back to practice. Well, you can't see clearly when the mind is filled with aversion. Should I leave the retreat? Should I go to the doctor? Okay, what's happening now? Cough, cough. Tickle, tickle. That's all that was happening. That's all that was happening.

And then I could see the mind go back and forth between just being present with that and—boom—the whole balloon of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* and my past and bronchitis and what to do. And then it would go away again with steady attention. That's what I call volunteering for suffering. I could watch the mind get a little bit bored with this tickle, tickle, cough, cough, hearing, hearing. It's like, "Okay, I'll suffer. Oh my God, I've got bronchitis."

So the world arises—of Carol—and then that world ceases, that particular world of Carol.

Now, on the retreat I was on, I was seeing this happen: the world of Carol coming and going, all these different worlds, these different thought trains. And I had, previous to the retreat, watched a movie. I don't know if any of you have had this unfortunate experience of having to re-watch some movie that you had the misfortune to watch before you came on retreat. Once, on my first three-month retreat, I had to relive every episode of a sitcom that I'd watched as a younger person. Every episode. Another one would start, and I'd go, "Please, God, no." It would start—Dick Van Dyke—it would start again, and I'd go, "Oh no, please." It's all in there, as Joseph would say.

But anyway, I had watched this movie, so it would be running in my mind. It was some suspense movie—Harrison Ford, the good guy being chased, innocent and wrongly accused. So it would be the Carol story, whatever it was, and then there'd be *The Fugitive* for a while.

And then, when I stopped being resistant, I was just noticing: seeing and thinking and sensation and pleasant and unpleasant. It was exactly the same. There was a thought and an image and a perception and a pleasant and unpleasant. One was the Harrison Ford movie and one was the Carol movie. But neither one had—in that sense of just perception, just what was happening—any more reality. Because the Carol movie was made up, like the bronchitis. That wasn't really an accurate description of what was happening.

So when I saw that, it was really cool. We really can just not always jump into the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which feels so real and so accurate. We can notice how it comes, how we suffer, how it goes. The pleasant ones we suffer from too, because there's still that sense of me, that *vipallāsa*, that hallucination of perception that's in the way of recognizing—as Ajahn Amaro likes to say—the peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body when it's not distorted, when it's not troubled by identification with *kilesa*.

So, starting from perception and the *vedanā* that can fuel it, just noticing when the whole world of you—or Adam Sameera, or Harrison Ford, or whoever it is—arises, and when it dissolves again. The magic show goes away. And then keep on with the steady awareness, because we can see not only the coming and going, but then when the magic show goes, we can notice just moments of calm, of peace and ease, of no big anything going on.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa likes to talk about, these moments of—he calls them moments of emptiness—empty of sense of self, empty of personality view. Put it that way: it's just not arising.

And Ajahn Buddhadasa says normally we don't notice these moments, because the habit of our mind and our interest is to get so involved with whatever particular sense object is arising. We get involved with the experience and with all the concoctions, all the creations that come out of it. Then we're fighting against: "No, I'm really not a worthless person because I stubbed my toe and I tripped and that just proves what a klutz I am." And then, and then, and then. That was just a moment. We notice that go away again.

We normally don't notice when it's gone, because we're so entranced by the concoctions and the interpretations. But when it goes again, stay present. There are sometimes just moments of space, or calmness, or simplicity, in between the next arising of sense of self.

And what many people have noticed—you'll see this often—when we're not so used to that spaciousness, it's not interesting. Here's again the sense of neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant vedana, giving rise to a perception that's distorted by moha, by confusion, by not seeing clearly. "Oh, nothing's happening."

Do you ever find yourself waiting for the next interesting thing to occur? Just check it out if you notice it. Does the interesting thing that finally occurs, even when it's unpleasant, have anything to do with some kind of sakkāya-diṭṭhi? You know, like just being here—Buddhadasa talks about generating a contentment with this emptiness of self, generating a contentment with just the simplicity of non-concocting, of non-papañca.

It's like... nothing. Waiting. Nothing's happening, but I'm waiting for the next thing. And even a suffering sense of self is preferable to just this moment of simplicity. Just simplicity.

The Buddha said the end of papañca is the end of conflict. The end of papañca—just in a moment, don't think end forever, but just in a moment. Like my friend when she was just with the breath, the end of papañca was just: this is what's happening. Oh, that's that sound. Same sound, maybe still unpleasant. No conflict. That's what's happening. Just this sense of steady, moment-to-moment presence with whatever's arising, just as it is.

So simple, we can't stand it. Because we're not there—we're not there. As T.S. Eliot says, it's "a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything." The everything it costs is simply the concoction, in a moment, of the me-story. And when it's really that present, that simple, it really is the end of conflict in a moment, the end of confusion, just in a moment.

And I'm sure you know the Bahiya story. I'm not going to tell the whole story, but just this teaching—I decided at the last minute to share it.

Bahiya is so urgent to get a teaching that he's grabbing the Buddha on his way to alms round, saying, "Please, just give me something." So the Buddha gives him this pith instruction. This is it, all you need to know, three lines:

"So, Bahiya, you should train yourself in this way: In reference to what is seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to what is heard, there is only what is heard. In reference to the sensed—like the physical sense—only what is sensed. In reference to the cognized, what is known by the mind, only what is cognized. That is how you should train yourself."

There's another sutta where the Buddha says that when he's seeing or hearing or whatever, he does not conceive of another thing to be heard. There's just the hearing. He does not conceive of someone who is hearing. He does not conceive of another thing that's unheard that could be heard. He's not conceiving of anything. There's just the hearing.

So he goes on to Bahiya: "When for you there will only be the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of dukkha."

Just for a moment. There's no you. There's just what's happening. A condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 71

Meeting Dosa with Mindfulness and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this comprehensive exploration of dosa—the Pāli term encompassing all states from hatred to mild irritation, fear, and resistance—Carol Wilson offers practical guidance for working skillfully with aversive mind states. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching in the Salla Sutta (the Dart Sutta), she illuminates the mechanism by which unpleasant feeling tone (vedanā) triggers habitual resistance, leading to proliferating thoughts (papañca) and deepening suffering. Wilson emphasizes that dosa arises from not fully understanding the First Noble Truth: that unpleasant experience is to be understood, not hated or avoided.*
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> *The talk provides a detailed examination of how aversion distorts perception and judgment, using vivid personal examples from intensive retreat practice in Burma and daily life. Wilson explains how mindfulness and wisdom (satipaññā) can be brought directly to the point of sense contact, interrupting the chain of reactivity before it spirals into full identification with the story. She addresses both subtle background moods of dissatisfaction and overwhelming storms of fear, anger, or guilt, offering graduated approaches for each.*
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> *Particularly valuable is Wilson's discussion of skillful means when difficult emotions overwhelm our capacity to be present—knowing when to shift attention to neutral or pleasant experiences to refresh awareness rather than drowning in difficulty. She concludes with a moving personal account of working with chronic illness, demonstrating how present-moment mindfulness becomes a refuge that opens into compassion and clear decision-making, pointing toward a peace not dependent on pleasant or unpleasant feelings.*

Tonight I want to talk about exploring dosa with wisdom. Dosa, as I'm sure you know, is the Pali word often translated as "hatred"—one of the three unwholesome roots. But let's use dosa here to encompass all the many states of mind, mental states, and emotions that come from either pushing away the unpleasant from an angry side, or fleeing from the unpleasant through fear. So it ranges all the way from hatred to mild irritation to grumpiness to resistance—the whole show.

I deliberately use the word dosa rather than "aversion" or any other specific term, partly because it's broader, but partly because it helps me have fewer unhelpful associations. It allows me to look at it as simply a habit of heart and mind that the Buddha talked about extensively—something we can explore as habit, rather than identifying

with it and either blaming ourselves, hating ourselves, or totally buying into it. But it's definitely a frequent visitor in many of our experiences of heart and mind. In all its different forms, we can relate.

When Guy spoke about the second noble truth, tanha—that thirst, that craving—he described its two sides: the greed for the pleasant and the pulling away from the unpleasant. Dosa encompasses all the different ways of pulling away. It's a deeply conditioned reaction of mind to unpleasant sense experience at any of the six sense doors—to just leap away almost immediately.

In some way, it's sad, because dosa really arises from our not fully understanding the First Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth includes the dukkha of regular unpleasant, painful experiences; the dukkha of pleasant things changing; and the constant, ongoing insubstantiality and unreliability of all experience. As the Buddha said, each of the truths has an action that goes with it. The First Noble Truth is to be understood—not to be hated, not to somehow be avoided, but to be understood. And this understanding doesn't mean we then live in a quagmire of the unpleasant more than before. Rather, it frees our heart and mind. It frees us from the suffering of living in disharmony, in contention with so many moments of life.

The real suffering of dosa is obvious on a superficial level—it's unpleasant. So-called aversive types, those for whom dosa may be the first thing that arises (though we all have all of it, don't get me wrong), sometimes say, "I want to be a greedy type because that seems more pleasant." But being a dosa type myself, I'd say greedy types are just more lost in their delusion. They think it's pleasant, but they're just lost in craving and acquisition. The dosa types, at least we know we're suffering. We may not know why. We may blame somebody else. But we really don't miss it—except when we do. And that's what's really amazing.

The tragedy of not understanding the First Noble Truth, the real tragedy of the power of this reactive dosa to unpleasant experience, is that it solidifies our sense of separation. It keeps us lost in this unreal world of me and you, other, good and bad—the whole thing.

One Zen teacher—I forget who—said that dosa, this reaction of fear, anger, or aversion, is rooted in perhaps an unspoken belief in our mind that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant, unwanted, or painful experience that's happening right now. And that's really the heart of it: somehow I don't have to be with this. The fact that it's here means there's something really wrong.

So much wasted energy in our lives goes toward trying to hold ourselves separate, trying to deny this moment of reality as it is. It's impossible, because this is how it is—and we get into so much confusion and suffering trying. We can't shut down selectively. If I can hold myself separate from this, if I can somehow shut down and not feel, not know, do something else not to feel it, then everything will be okay. But as Pema Chödrön says, we end up spending our lives tensed up, trying to hold ourselves away from unpleasant experience. She says it's like we walk around our lives tensed up as if we were sitting in the dentist's chair. I love that image. They tell you to relax—they haven't even started yet. Just the sound of the drill, even hearing it in the waiting room.

So I want to share some examples from my experience of working with dosa in different ways—a nuts and bolts kind of talk. And then hopefully you'll have ten million of your own.

This is an invitation to bring sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, to any moment that we recognize some aspect of dosa as the quality present in the mind and heart. It is simply another arising, conditioned experience.

It doesn't have to be something we hate or fear or are afraid to look at, or something we so identify with. It's simply another arising conditioned experience.

As far as I can tell, the most immediate moment-to-moment mechanism for its arising in a moment of experience is what we've talked about before in that sutta called "The Dart," where the Buddha was so clear. That mechanism whereby an unawakened worldling—that's probably most of us—when an unpleasant feeling arises in the body, they get all upset in the mind. You shoot yourself with a second dart. But then the Buddha says that the habit of resistance to unpleasant feeling tone comes to underlie the mind, the heart.

This to me is the salient point. When unpleasant feeling tone arises, the habit is so conditioned from how many mind moments in our life. When you remember that there's something like seventeen million mind moments in the blink of an eye—who knows, who counted those, I don't know—but it's a lot. In every mind moment there's contact. How many of those involve unpleasant feeling tone, and how many involve that knee-jerk reaction of bouncing away? It's so habituated that, as the Buddha said, it becomes to underlie the mind. And then the only response we know, the only way to get out of that, is to crave for the pleasant. That's how the wanting comes to underlie the mind. It starts so quickly.

As we've seen from having the wonderful opportunity to be so quiet, to really turn our attention on our hearts and minds, to see how the mind works, many of you are seeing this at times. But we also see how quick and subtle feeling tone is. In daily life, how often would we notice it? I don't think I ever would have noticed it in my whole life if I hadn't read about it from the Buddha. I don't know how he sat down and figured this stuff out. It's amazing.

Mostly we don't go, "Oh, there's the habit of resistance to unpleasant that underlies the mind. I see the attention jumping away from this unpleasant sense contact. And now I see the papañca that fuels aversion starting." But sometimes we can see that. Mostly, we don't.

As Tsoknyi Rinpoche's brother says, notice how easily the mind, the heart, is influenced simply by a pleasant or unpleasant sight, sound, thought. So quickly into an immediate mood. That's the thing—it goes boom, just like that, from unpleasant into an immediate mood. And that's often the first place our awareness can pick it up. But sometimes we can really notice the process where it begins, and that to me is really interesting, because it doesn't have to then flare into such a huge, overwhelming state of heart and mind.

So this is an invitation to explore this with interest. As U Tejaniya says, just see how does dosa do its job? It's just doing what it does. What is its job and how does it do it? This takes it out of the realm of the personal. Just really seeing such a cause and effect relationship. Like, "Oh wow, look at that."

When we can, at times—of course there are times we're identified—but at times when we can bring our interest in and just be watching it, really, and this is from personal experience, sometimes you can just bring in and see what's actually happening. It's still unpleasant, but the whole story that of course gets fed from "me, me, me" can dissipate, can stop being so real, and we can just see what's going on. That's my invitation tonight.

So, just some different ways to invite us to explore. Remembering that when we talk about mind or heart, a moment of citta, consciousness with whatever mental factors—as Guy talked about last night with the five aggregates—arising moment to moment. Each moment of arising consciousness with mental factors is a new moment, which is the only way that makes any of this workable. It also means when we're talking about what's arising, it's what's happening right now. There's only ever this moment.

Starting from that, I want to talk about bringing satipañña to the sense doors. Ajahn Buddhadasa used to talk about satipañña at the sense doors a lot—just being right at the point of sense contact with mindfulness and wisdom, with the wisdom of not adding extra liking or disliking or association. Just what's happening right now.

This has helped me so much, and it helps me in daily life too, when I remember that the resistance to unpleasant and all the emotions that come are arising from that habit of jumping away from unpleasant sense contact, feeling tone right now. That's the thing to really look at. Whatever's fueling the resistance, the aversion, the dosa in whatever way is coming up—it's beginning from some sense contact that's happening right now.

It's easier to see if it's a sound that triggers unpleasant feeling, or a sensation in the body, or a smell, or a taste. But quite frequently the sense contact is going to be mental—a thought, a mood, an emotion. And even so, recognize it's happening now.

Take fear, for instance. When fear comes up, there are all the thoughts about the future, and the fear is saying all these things that are going to happen. We can get really lost in that world. But the fear arises to begin with from some sense contact that's arising in this moment.

Maybe a memory came up. The memory came up with really painful, unpleasant feelings—moods, not feeling tone, but feelings. Really unpleasant, really scary, and boom, you know, it jumps really quickly away into fear. And then the fear is saying, "Oh, this is going to happen and that's going to happen."

Fear also has this quality. One of the jobs of fear, I think—this is me saying this, I haven't read this in the Abhidhamma—one of the jobs of fear is saying, "Because I'm here, because fear is here, I wouldn't be here if something really, really bad wasn't about to happen. Because I'm here, you should believe me." And yes, in the fight or flight response when we need to protect ourselves, sometimes that's true. But when it's this spinning, spinning, spinning, and we're lost in the story, in the future, in the past, sometimes just take a moment to see: what's the sense contact happening now? It's a thought, an unpleasant thought, and a mood. It's happening in this moment. We can explore that.

Sorrow, guilt, fury, regret—they're all different flavors of dosa. And as they bounce away, they pull away from the original sense contact and into all the stories. Often you can't think your way back into it. But you can land in—say it's way deep in guilt. You know this story, but at some point it's like, what's happening right now? You hear how we're always saying when there's strong emotion, see if you can just feel what's hap-

pening in your body, or notice what the mental miasma of it feels like rather than the story? That's because that's what's happening now. The thoughts are happening now too; the content of the thoughts is not.

When we land on what's happening now, often—for me—the physical associated sensations that come with a strong dose of emotion are extremely unpleasant. So you touch it, bring the awareness in, just touch that unpleasant, and then the resistance habit gets doubly strong, right, and bounces back into the story again. But come back. Come back. This is where mindfulness wisdom can help us move in the opposite direction from the habit of just running for your life when there's unpleasant experience. It's like, come back. Okay. Just feel this. Guilt feels like this. Oh, that's awful. Okay. It's awful. Guilt feels like this. "No, no, this and this and I did that." No, no, no. And we'll spin in it for half an hour. I think that's actually more awful than just coming back and feeling, "Oh, guilt feels like this."

We can't always do it. But just recognizing that the dosa mood arises from some unpleasant sense contact now—and noticing then what the attention does. It's like a knee-jerk reaction; it pulls away. Just that "go away from it," whether it goes to the pleasant or just gets lost.

In that moment-to-moment experience, in that gap where the awareness, the attention, is not connecting with just what is—say it's an unpleasant sound, let's keep it simple. And it's like, "Oh, I don't like that. Why is that person making that sound?" In that gap where mindfulness isn't just connected, all the papañca fueled by dosa comes flowing in. Can you notice that? You've seen this happen. This is not rocket science so far.

It happens because the attention just kind of went away, and there's not sati right now, there's not mindfulness right there. Because it jumped away with a little bit of resistance, boom, then that dosa is subtly flavoring the perception, subtly flavoring the thought, and it just starts spinning more and more. The papañca is fueled by the dosa. And then the more it goes, when there's dosa flavoring the mind, flavoring the perception, we can't recognize what's going on accurately. The new perceptions and the new papañca all start to have this flavor of just something wrong.

Have you noticed—people say they're sitting in the dining room and they think they're fine, and suddenly they recognize that every person who walked by, some horrible negative judgment came up. Or maybe that's only me. And after a while they go, "Huh. Maybe there's dosa in the mind." What's surprising is how long it can take. First, it's just, "They look slumpy."

Their socks aren't matching. I can't believe how much noise they're making taking the fork out of the thing. And after a while, they go, "Hmm, seems like I'm being a little bit picky here. A little bit aversion going on."

So what we're really doing here is learning not to always just give the focus to the object, but really getting interested in the quality of the mind that's aware.

When this cycle of aversion fueling the papañca and then flavoring perception comes on, it can really get on a roll. And it's a lot of suffering. I'm sure many of you know that, because we either judge ourselves, or the aversion itself is suffering, or we really believe it and then wonder what's wrong with everybody else. But dosa is a very unpleasant experience because it's so separating. We know we're not really quite landing somehow, but we don't know how.

The Buddha said that once arisen, ill will or dosa actually strengthens through unwise attention to the unpleasant—or it's actually translated as the repugnant aspect of something. You know the example Thich Nhat Hanh always gives: if you have one tooth that's a little bit rough and all the rest of your teeth are fine, where does your tongue go? Again and again and again. You're not feeling all your other teeth all the time, are you? But you're just sitting there. It just has to go there. It just has to feel that roughness. It's not a big thing, but it's a habit of mind.

And so we've often said, if you're really annoyed at someone, you keep looking at that person, and it just kind of spikes the annoyance. But do we want to look at that person? For whatever reason—I mean, it's not helpful, but we do that. And then it solidifies whatever the view, the explanation: they're bad, or I'm bad, or it shouldn't be happening, or whatever. And that flavoring, that distortion of the ongoing perceptions grows and grows and grows.

Dosa in the mind as it's growing can distort even sense contact that might have been kind of neutral at another time. I remember one retreat—I don't remember the story, it doesn't really matter—but definitely there was dosa in the mind, had been for some time. And it got to where just a sound would come and I would hear it as unbearable. I remember the radiators used to make a lot of little pinging noises in here. It's gotten a lot quieter. And it would ping and I'd literally hear it like an explosion. So unpleasant.

And then I remember one time, I had been on staff here, and I found myself—don't do this—running around down in the basement in the furnace room, saying that there's got to be something wrong with these heaters, that they're making this kind of noise.

Like I know something about heaters. So I'm running around. There's these giant heaters. I'm going, "This can't be right. This can't be." The dosa was just distorting everything.

It leads to action. As the Buddha says, we can't see clearly our own good, or the good of another, or the good of both, when the mind, the heart is obsessed with ill will, with dosa. The least we can start to do is just recognize. It's like I'm running around there before I can recognize—oh yeah, maybe it's just aversion completely distorting the perception of the sense contact. I don't even remember if I recognized that. I think I just gave up because I didn't know what to do to fix the furnace. And I did know better than to write a note to the maintenance. So you too, when you're running around like that, just know better than to write a note to the maintenance, because it would have been embarrassing.

It distorts. We can't see clearly. We can't recognize accurately. It distorts our judgment as to what to do. And it's such a habit to really interpret the unpleasant as wrong or bad. It's so ingrained to avoid it, to do whatever we can to avoid it, that sometimes—not realizing and not having clear recognition of what would be for my good or another's—we can make all kinds of crazy decisions in order to try and avoid a projected unpleasant feeling.

For example, a friend told me quite some years ago about her own experience with this. She had a very busy life and did some Dharma teaching on weekends. A very close friend of hers, very dear to her, requested that she come to another city—quite some hours' drive from here—to teach a weekend.

But my friend who told me this story, it came at a time when she was completely busy. To even fit in the time to go to that city, drive down there, and do the teaching would have stressed her out. It was almost crazy to even think she could fit it in. She could maybe just barely do it, but it would have been crazy.

But when she thought about telling her friend no, the fear arose of how unpleasant that would be. Her friend would be hurt. But it wasn't even really that her friend would be hurt—it was more how she would feel at thinking that her friend was hurt, that she'd let her down.

So it took her weeks to actually get real and say, "This is impossible. I love you, but I can't do it." The friend, of course, was fine. It was all projection. But when she saw how close she came to doing that—creating a whole lot more unpleasant experience than

just the saying no—she realized we can't tell clearly. That deep ingrained sense that unpleasant is bad, and so we should be able to avoid it, that drive to hold ourselves separate from uncomfortable and unwanted situations—it distorts everything.

So that's one aspect. Meeting whatever place mindfulness notices the dosa arising, whether it's right at the sense contact or way off into fear or fury—this is the middle way, the Buddha's middle way, bringing mindfulness and wisdom right to the point of recognition.

Our two most common habitual responses when we recognize or experience unpleasant dosa emotions are either more dosa towards ourselves, or avoidance. We get really aversive to ourselves, thinking, "What's wrong with me?" A lot of self-judgment arises, a lot of stories about all the aversive things in the past. Or we think, "This shouldn't be here," and we avoid, deny, repress the whole thing.

So often people are having some experience of dosa—maybe not huge—but the self-judging mind comes in around it. And then they say, "Well, it's all these multiple layers of dosa," and you get lost in each story. There's this thing going on, and then there's the self-judging, and "Why am I self-judging?" And you see it's from your history. "Oh, my history, but I shouldn't be thinking of my history. I'm really self-judging, and that's also bad." And we're lost in all the little stories.

Just get big and notice—that's just dosa flavoring all the thoughts. You don't have to land on and believe the self-judging any more than you have to believe that the maintenance guys don't know how to take care of the furnace. That's just dosa fueling thought. It's just that the self-judging one's a little closer to home.

So that's one way—the dosa way of dealing with dosa. Hate it, blame yourself, blame others.

The other way is that sometimes we really embrace it, as if our anger or fear is a really important, real emotion that can lead to action. That's kind of like the greed way of really going for it. Sometimes anger, even fear—fear doesn't feel good, but they're energizing. They bring up a lot of energy, especially if we've been repressing fear or anger and all that energy has been stultified. So sometimes when it comes up, there can really be a lot of energy.

The misperception we can make is to think that energy is only available through the dosa or the greed, as if it couldn't come another way.

I've more than once had people say to me, really sincerely, deep in practice, "You know, if I give up greed and dosa"—as if we could just give it up, that would be nice—"if I give up greed and dosa, then what am I going to do? Just sit in my room the rest of my life? How am I going to do anything?"

I always find that so sad—that the only motivations for action are greed and dosa, that you can't imagine something other.

The Dalai Lama was once asked about why there seems to be such a lack of compassion in human society.

And he said, perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as emotional states, fueling and reinforcing them.

So this isn't the Dalai Lama now, this is me. But when we're really hating, when we're caught in fear and anger, we're giving dosa all the power, not really seeing what it is.

The Dalai Lama again: if we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement—and by reinforcement, I simply mean what James was saying the other night, that wise attention and mindfulness to the wholesome is reinforcing it—if we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

And not only compassion. We can act from wisdom. We can act from determination. We can act from caring. We can act from generosity. There are all kinds of wholesome motivations that we can act from.

So again, it's just conditioned. And dosa is such a strong force at times that it does take us over. We don't know how to move out of it. And so it's like, "Wow, this is so real. This is what we know." It's hard to trust the other. It's hard to see that being able to step aside from the dosa and move from wisdom, move from connection, can sometimes have a really strong effect.

There's this story I heard on the radio about something called "non-complementary behavior." But I take it as acting not from fear and aversion, not from dosa, when that would be the normal way to act.

Two families, somewhere in the States—it sounded like a suburb because they were outside, kind of in the backyard of their house but away from the house, having an evening dinner together at picnic tables, enjoying a nice meal and wine. There were some woods around, some forest.

Suddenly into the middle of that, a man came with a gun out of nowhere. They didn't know where he came from. He held the gun on these people and said, "Give me your money or I'll shoot."

Of course—panic, fear, aversion, the whole thing. But first they said, "Well, we don't have any money. We're out here in the middle of nowhere. We don't have any money."

He was getting really angry. "I don't care. Give me your money."

The first response from someone was kind of angry: "What would your mother say if she saw you here?"

That didn't work. He said, "I don't have a mother."

So they were getting scared. But then suddenly one person just had this sense—probably didn't think it through—but could move away from the hatred and the fear and just looked at this guy and said, "Would you like a glass of wine?"

He said, "Oh, okay."

So he took the glass of wine and sat down at the table with them. I don't know what they were feeling, but they're drinking the wine with him, they start chatting back and forth. They're chatting for a while. And at one point, the man says, "Well, I see I've come to the wrong place."

So he gets up and wants hugs. Then he says, "Okay, I'm leaving."

They offer him a glass of wine. He leaves with his glass of wine. They run like hell into the house and lock the door. I mean, they weren't idiots. They ran like hell into the house and locked the door.

But then later, when they went out, he had very, very carefully placed his empty wine glass outside the door and gone away.

You wouldn't think that would work. But sometimes it does. Not always, of course, but just to know—sometimes it does.

So, sati-pañña: meeting with simple awareness as it's showing up now.

As Sharon says, opening to the truth of things as they are is what frees our mind from fear and selfishness. However things are.

So now I'll give a couple of examples from my own experience, and you can find your own different ways of bringing sati, bringing mindfulness wisdom, at whichever point you might notice the unpleasant or the aversion.

The first example is easiest in a way—when the sense contact that's unpleasant is really obvious, but it's not something you can fix, and it keeps on going. It's really driving you nuts. You can be seeing the aversion, but you're really spinning in it. When you're actually able to say, "Let me try to just bring mindfulness wisdom right to the point of contact, just with the hearing, and see what happens"—try and watch that whole cause and effect chain that the Buddha described.

A simple example: practicing in Burma. I have ten million stories of practicing in Burma. In terms of noise, it's a great place for stories.

The first time I was ever practicing there in my little hut—I had to sit in my hut because in the meditation hall there were no chairs in those years, and I can't sit cross-legged anymore—so I had to sit in my hut, which was okay, but that's part of the story. I couldn't go back to the hall. And across the little road, not even as far as the back of this wall, there was construction. That goes without saying. If you're in a meditation center in Burma, there will be construction.

Just across the way, they decided partway into my several-weeks retreat that they were sanding long, long strips of wood with an electric sander. Do you know what an electric sander sounds like? Do you know how noisy? From 7:30 in the morning until 5:30 in the afternoon. Really loud, really close. Sometimes they'd take a little break, but you didn't know when, so you couldn't count on it.

You go through all the things—"I'm just an equanimist"—but underneath, if we don't notice the pulling away, because that's what it is, the pulling away, not wanting to be there with that, then the resistance grows and the aversion grows. You don't quite notice it, you think you're present, until suddenly you're going bonkers.

Then after a few days, they brought in a second sander that was in a different key. So they'd both be going all day.

And finally—it's usually "finally" because we try everything else—you realize the only thing to do is totally surrender into the point of contact. Hearing is like this. Just totally surrender. No attention pulling away even a little bit. Hearing is like this, unpleasant. And then it's just what it is.

Like the thing I quoted from Ajahn Sumedho: "I can't bear this another moment"—and then I found that I could. Something like that, which isn't really hurting you—I wasn't in danger, there was nothing I could do other than go out and yell at the workers, there was nowhere else I could go—you just die into this sound, that point of sense contact and unpleasant, and see the whole thing. In those moments, it's really quite okay. The whole sense of story and struggle is gone.

Sure, there's a later moment when the mind is tired, you forget, and the habit of jumping away from unpleasant comes up again. But then mindfulness recognizes how much more complicated that makes everything, and it's actually easier just to come back and be. Okay, that's unpleasant. Sounds like that.

We were once in another place in Burma—never mind, I'll never finish if I tell that story. I could give you so many examples from my life; you don't need them all.

So that's one approach: you can go right to the point of sense contact.

Of course, a lot of times we can't do that. Sometimes what we miss isn't a huge storm going on, but something's just off a little bit. Often what we don't recognize is a more subtle, pervasive background mood. I think I might have mentioned this in instructions the other day—we don't quite pick it up, but somehow everything seems a little off. You go out to look at that beautiful moonlight last night—I don't know if you saw it, it was incredible.

If you're in the right mind state, that moonlight is incredible. If you're not? "Ah, the moon. What is it?" When we're attuned, there's so much joy. "Let me have some tea." But then, "Ah, the tea." And you go, "What's going on?" It all started with just a background mood. So then the question becomes, well, what's triggering it? What was the sense contact? This can actually be quite fun to explore.

A friend told me he was on retreat here and had a day exactly like that—this subtle, off, little background dose of something he couldn't identify. Finally he thought, "Let me just sit here and bring full attention. What's happening now? Quit trying to figure it out, just be with what's happening now." He brought his attention into his body and mind and realized—the sweatshirt he had on was a little bit tight. When he moved in a certain way it pulled, and it was unpleasant. He hadn't noticed. That's all it takes sometimes. It doesn't have to be the horrible things of the world. If things are a little tight and you don't notice it's unpleasant, the mind leaps away and dosa comes flying in.

Really interesting to see. It takes the personal out. You don't then need to go, "How stupid am I?" You just go, "Wow, look at that. Cause and effect." Dosa is doing its job. But mindfulness can do its job and come in to say, "Oh, that's what's happening." And then wisdom does its job, which is to say, "Okay, tight movement feels like this." And all the other stuff doesn't have to go on.

Or with a thought, like the thought "I'm no good, I can't do this." You kind of know it's there but kind of not. It's so familiar that we are believing it and not recognizing that the thought itself is perceived with unpleasant feeling tone. We don't quite know it—we just think, "Yeah, it's unpleasant, but it's unpleasant because I'm so bad, I am bad, and that's unpleasant." We don't recognize that the arising thought itself is actually the sense contact leading to the mind jumping away, feeling the aversion.

So again, noticing the state in the mind. Noticing sometimes the idea in the background, the view—"I just can't do it right," "It shouldn't be like this." A number of people have mentioned to me noticing some little idea in the mind: "It could just be a little bit better than this. This just isn't quite good enough." And when they look at the idea, they wonder, "What isn't quite good enough? I don't even know. I'm just walking in the forest and present, but somehow it's not quite good enough."

When we can notice that idea in the background, we recognize, "Oh right, this is coming with unpleasant vedana." Just see it. That's all.

And then, of course, there are times when this subtlety is not within the realm of mindfulness or recognition, and we simply find ourselves in a huge storm of fear or anger or disappointment—whatever form of dosa it is. Still, at whatever level mindfulness can come to meet it, let it meet it as it is. Not the story, but really letting awareness come in and be with that energy—the energy of that difficult feeling. Say it's anger. Say it's fear.

The alternative is that we totally embrace it, which means we go off into the story and just keep feeding it. That's not what I'm talking about.

But it's also not saying anger shouldn't be here, fear shouldn't be here—push it away and let me just feel my foot pressing on the ground. That's impossible because it's just too strong. But we can bring the awareness in to notice the quality in the mind that's being aware. It isn't subtle, but we can really learn how to bring mindfulness in a big way.

So maybe sitting when the energy's too strong and you keep getting lost in the story—go out and walk, walk really fast. Not so much analyzing, but feeling that roiling energy, for lack of a better word. Just feeling that mental state, that aversion, that dosa, just swirling, swirling. But mindfulness is there with it in the big picture.

In fact, sometimes I call it stomping meditation. You go out and you're just walking, walking—anger, anger, anger. So it's not tidy. It's not all neatly noting "anger, anger, unpleasant sensation, negative thought." It's messier than that. But it's still mindfulness when you're not just going, "Yeah, and they did that, and by God, I'm going to get them." Instead, you're feeling: anger feels like this. Let it rip. It's not going to do anything if you really don't have to be afraid of it. We start to actually see the nature even of this strong anger—the wisdom of being with whatever's occurring, even with the unpleasant. At some point, with steady mindfulness, wisdom comes in and we start to see things as they really are, even a huge, strong mental state.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He's saying "I" is just a thought—we've been through that, now you all have that covered. "Thoughts and feelings, thoughts and emotions have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When a thought, a mood of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is that anger actually holding a weapon? Can it burn things like a fire? Can it crush things like a rock? Carry them away like a violent river? No. Anger, like any other thought or mood or feeling, has no true self-existence, not even a definite location. It is just like wind roaring in empty space."

I love that. Let it roar in the empty space of mindfulness and wisdom.

So instead of allowing these wild thoughts to enslave us, we realize their essential emptiness. "When you see through this energy of hatred within, you will discover there is not one single enemy left outside. Otherwise, even if you could overpower everyone in the whole world, your hatred would only grow stronger. Indulging it will never make it subside. Examine the nature of hatred"—or any of the dosa states—"you will find that it is no more than a thought and a feeling. And when wisdom sees it as it is, it can dissolve like a cloud in the sky."

I know it's not that easy, but sometimes that happens. The only way this clear seeing of wisdom can come about is through the steadiness of just simple presence with what's occurring, with the difficult, with the unpleasant. It's the opposite of what our deep habits are. But this is the avenue not only into understanding with wisdom the nature of difficult emotions, but also what opens us to understanding the nature of reality in all the different ways.

The jewel in the heart of the understanding of the First Noble Truth, in the heart of the ability to just be with the difficult, to bear witness, is the movement, the natural expression of bearing witness into compassion, into love, into generosity, into recognizing the insubstantial nature—which doesn't mean a cold emptiness. It's more that sense of non-separation, the connectedness of all of us. What I mentioned in my earlier talk that Archbishop Tutu calls Ubuntu: we're all connected.

I have so much more to share, but let me say two things quickly.

First, of course, sometimes when it's a real storm of fear, guilt, or anger, even what I just said to do—stomp, let the wind roar in empty space—even touching it, the storm is just so much stronger than the energy of mindfulness at that time. That's not a failure. Just recognizing that you open for a moment into the really difficult and you feel it's overwhelming, completely identified again. Even though intellectually we have the tools, at that point the mindfulness just isn't the equal of the strength of the dosa.

So we recognize—and we've talked about this a lot—when by bringing attention to the difficult, the dosa just grows and grows, then that's when we skillfully shift our awareness to something more neutral or something pleasant. So that we don't drown in the difficult situation.

I have another friend who used to do retreats years ago, and she had a lot of really difficult emotion and trauma that would come up. She said she really learned something from her grown sons. They would tell her about going to the ocean in Hawaii or somewhere with big waves. She would go out in the waves, and when a big wave would start coming, she'd always turn her back to it and run. And of course, that just knocks you over.

Her sons would always say, "Ma, no, you've got to dive into the wave, not turn around and run." But she'd always turn around and run and get whacked. And she said just once she was able to simply dive into the wave.

So it's sort of like that. We're diving into the wave. But sometimes all we can do is put a toe in. Just put a toe in. And then boom, it's whacking us. So turn your attention to something neutral.

Really, we're taking care of the awareness. We're taking care to re-recognize, to refresh the awareness so it can come back into being able to be present without all the distortions of the flavoring. So it's really important, as Tejaniya says, to take care of the awareness, to adjust your attitude first, to see when it's really too strong like that.

So it's not about forcing yourself to go into it and drown. But again, it's mindfulness wisdom to see, to recognize that the awareness isn't strong enough right now. So shift to something neutral or even pleasant. It can be helpful when I find there's just this total, total flavoring of aversion, but big time. And it seems little, but it can really help to consciously open up awareness and just see what other sense contacts are arising now that are neutral or even pleasant. They don't have to be as important as the big one that's fueling the dosa, but it really helps.

Thich Nhat Hanh would say—and when I first read this I thought, "But that's ridiculous"—but now I know what he meant. During the Vietnam War, he worked with young social workers who would engage with both sides, with people in the villages, with people that were suffering, so much suffering in the middle of a war. And of course they'd get overwhelmed. We get overwhelmed with the suffering, with the difficulty in ourselves and in the world. No one's saying we don't.

And he would say, "I would tell the young social workers to go at night out into the field and smell the fresh smells of the herbs and the flowers." And I thought, they're in the middle of a war, and he's saying go into the field and smell the fresh herbs at night? What is—I mean, but that's it. That's an intellectual resistance. What he's doing is just this, just what Tejaniya says: taking the attention that's glommed into the dosa-filled state and doesn't know how to get out, and shifting it to something neutral, to something pleasant, not as a running away, but to refresh the awareness, to come back to wisdom, to come back to balance.

So just little things. And try—I don't know, I have a very critical mind in that way. I just say, "Oh, that's stupid. Okay, I'm really suffering when I think about the suffering in the world. I should go out and look at the beautiful moon." And then my mind goes, "Yeah, you can look at the moon. You have the right to look at the moon. You're lucky you can look at the moon. What about everything else?" That's just dosa again.

Just connect. Just allow the mindfulness, the quality of the citta, to refresh itself. Because really what we're doing is moving from our obsessive relationship to each object that arises, not using each object to give us a sense of self or good or bad or self-justification. Just the objects, whatever they are—they serve the function of opening us into the quality of mindfulness and awareness again. So this is really more of what we're doing. And then when the awareness is balanced, we can come back and be, perhaps, with the difficult experience.

I've found in my own life that often the times when I've been feeling disconnected—not lost in aversion, not noticing that, but just feeling disconnected, either isolated or kind of off. It could be in daily life or on retreat. And I stop and look over time, and I

often see that there's some difficult emotion, either that's present that I'm trying not to see, or there's a thought that it might be coming and I don't want to feel it. Just something the mind doesn't want to feel. And in trying to not feel that, there arises this sense of being alienated and disconnected from everything, because we can't shut down selectively.

I remember once someone in my family was suffering a lot. Nothing I could do about it. And just thinking about it was so painful. The sadness and the sense of helplessness. Helplessness is a really unpleasant feeling to feel. It was so painful that I'd kind of pull back—"Oh no, let's not go there." Not consciously, but just a little bit pulling back. So then you pull back from everything. And when I could see, "Oh right, that's what's happening"—wow. Really feeling helpless is like this.

It feels crummy. Being helpless doesn't suddenly transform into feeling good—don't get me wrong. It still feels crummy. But that steady willingness to just bear witness with mindfulness, with wisdom, to your own personal experience or to what's happening in the world—that steadiness of being present—at some point it does open. Out of the alienation, you find again the sense of connectedness with life, the tenderness of life, the beauty of life, the sense of appreciation also of the good.

We can't do that with an act of will. And it's amazing how that comes, at times. Then we forget again. But with the willingness or the ability just for moments to be present, to bear witness with the difficulty, something shifts.

Let me share one more story about this. It's kind of a simple story—not about huge suffering in the world—but about how we can work with these teachings on retreat.

Some years ago—actually, a long time ago, many years ago—I started to have some symptoms that turned out to be an autoimmune disease. At that time, it was quite painful. And once they figured out what it was, that didn't help, because there was nothing they could do about it. These conditions can go in all different directions, as you know.

The way my mind related to it at the beginning—and this is common—first there was denial. "This isn't happening. What can we do?" Then just trying not to feel. Then self-blame: "This is my fault. What did I do wrong? I was in the wrong place. If I were really a good spiritual person, I would be able to have the right thoughts and not get sick." Have you ever had that thought? "If I could really figure it out..." I mean, Louise Hay—she's got a lot to answer for.

But then at one point I thought, "Hmm, Ramana Maharshi died of cancer." He had something going on with understanding things, you know. So, hello—everybody gets sick. Everybody gets sick and dies.

But anyways, this whole self-blame thing. And then the fear, the aversion. "If I can't walk very well now, I'll never be able to walk. I'll never be able to do this. What's it going to be like in the future?" All the fear and negativity mushrooming. And then everybody coming and saying, "Try this, try that. How are you going to live your life? What should you do?" There was a lot of suffering and a lot of confusion because, you know, with the ten million things to try, what should I do?

Cold is really hard for me. People said, "Well, you should leave here and go live in Arizona, and you should not eat any more gluten, of course. And you should give up caffeine and sugar, and that's going to fix you." I actually tried that. It did not improve my mood, and it did not improve my physical experience either.

So I was trying all these things. But at one point—at one point—I recognized that present moment mindfulness was such a refuge. The present moment of just landing in the body, being really present. Then you'd feel there were lots of moments of pain or stiffness or unpleasantness that weren't killer. But the not being with it led into all this future thinking and blame and confusion about what to do—no way to see clearly.

Present moment mindfulness. Oh, whatever's going to happen in the future, who knows? It's like this now. And from that, I learned so much. The mind would start off into the future. I'd be trying to clean the bathtub and could hardly bend over to do it. What's happening now? It's like this. It's unpleasant, okay.

So freeing.

And out of that, really this genuine sense of compassion arose—not "I decided I should be compassionate." That has never worked for me. But just being with it, this sense of compassion for the body, which didn't really feel like "me"—just taking care of it instead of hating it. That seems obvious. And then from that place of being really present, the attention kind of cleared, and I was able to make decisions about what to do—not based on fear, not based on wild hopes. You try things. I tried the diet. I could see it didn't make me happy, plus it didn't work. So I stopped doing that diet. Go to Arizona and hide in the corner? I don't think so.

Maybe I'll go with my friends to India. That's what I did. They were with me. They helped me up and down into the tuk-tuks. And I went back to drinking a lot of chai and eating chapatis, and I was really happy. I didn't get worse.

You can make decisions not based on fear or aversion when you're being clearly present with what is. I could see if something made it worse. You could take care. I could see if it didn't matter. You could take care. But just the ability to be present with the unpleasant—it frees our heart and mind from all this unnecessary suffering and confusion of separation.

There was one line from Mingyur Rinpoche. He speaks of a peace that is not dependent on the presence or absence of any pleasant or unpleasant feeling. Peace is dependent on just our total presence of mindfulness wisdom in this moment. Whatever this moment is, it's the moment that reveals the truth.

As Dogen said, if you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?

Thank you for your kind and patient attention.

CHAPTER 72

Purifying Habits of Our Mind: Dāna and Sīla

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this talk from the Three-Month Retreat, Carol Wilson examines how dāna (generosity) and sīla (virtue) serve as powerful tools for purifying the mind's habitual patterns of greed, hatred, and delusion. Building on the Third Noble Truth's teaching of the cessation of craving, she emphasizes that all of the Buddha's teachings—not just meditation—are designed to help us recognize and cultivate moments of freedom from the kilesas.*
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> *Wilson introduces a framework of three levels of kilesa: the transgressive (addressed through dāna and sīla), the obsessive (addressed through samādhi), and the latent (addressed through wisdom). Drawing on Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching that temporary nibbāna is available to all of us whenever kilesas temporarily cease, she encourages practitioners to appreciate the coolness and brightness of mind that arises through wholesome action.*
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> *Through personal stories from Burma and America, Wilson illustrates how generosity transforms both giver and receiver, cutting through the sense of separation and self. She explores the seven aspects of mindful giving taught by Sayadaw U Janaka Paññā and discusses how sīla—restraint from harmful action—builds confidence and purifies consciousness. The talk concludes with a sutta on wise reflection, encouraging practitioners to recollect their own virtue and generosity as a path to concentration and joy, available in all circumstances of daily life.*

Around this time you might be wondering how we can possibly keep having more things to say. But we do, and we will.

I want to move in a direction from what Guy was speaking about last night—the Third Noble Truth, in case you forgot—the remainderless cessation, the relinquishment of craving, of clinging, as the Buddha described it: this unshakable deliverance of mind. This is one of my favorite quotations, and I think he read it: "That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the essence of the holy life. That is its goal." Just to remember: this unshakable deliverance of mind and heart.

It stands to reason that if this is the essence of the holy life, of the Buddha's teaching, then everything he taught was in service of helping us purify the heart and mind. It's the pure heart, the pure mind that can recognize Nibbāna in a moment—the complete relinquishment, or even these momentary moments of freedom. All of his teachings are to help us purify in this way.

From the Dalai Lama: "When the mind, the heart, is completely free of negative emotions and tendencies—we could say kilesa—it understands and knows all phenomena. It is only because there are obscuring veils between the mind and its object that we are unable to know all things. When these veils have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing or recognizing and being aware is the nature of the mind, the heart itself. As long as the mind exists, it has the ability to know. But this ability does not reveal itself until all obscurations have been removed. This is what it means to realize enlightenment."

What I want to talk about tonight is this: in terms of utter relinquishment, but also moment-to-moment freedom, recognizing that the whole range of the Buddha's teachings—all the activities of our life—can be in service of recognizing when there's kilesa, and of cultivating qualities that purify the heart and mind. This isn't only accessible in the very subtle levels of meditation. Everything he taught serves this purpose.

Remember, Guy mentioned the sense of momentary freedom. The way Ajahn Buddhadasa speaks about that—he has this great talk called "Nibbāna for Everyone." He was talking to Thai lay people quite some time ago (he's no longer with us), because there had come to be a sense that Nibbāna was just meant for when you were dead, or it was just for some other people. And he's saying no, Nibbāna is for everyone.

Just this little part: he's saying we look further to the fact that kilesas are also saṅkhāra dhamma—compounded phenomena. In other words, kilesas are things that have birth and death. So when the kilesas occur, the causal conditions are present. And when the causal conditions that bring about the kilesas cease, they simply become extinct, just dissolve. Just as Guy was saying—the sense of the coolness of Nibbāna, the flame just blows out. The kilesa in that moment ceases to exist.

Although this extinction is temporary—in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily—the phenomenon has the real sense of Nibbāna, even though it is not the lasting one. Hence, temporary Nibbāna does occur for those of us who unavoidably have some impurities left. Should there be any of us with one or two impurities rolling around?

This is really what I'm basing this talk on, and what the Buddha's teaching is based on: the whole aspect of practice is not only meditation, bhāvanā. Often when the teachings would be talked about, it's called dāna-sīla-bhāvanā—the three pillars: generosity, virtue or non-harming behavior, and meditation. All of those are part of the path.

When I was first introduced to this practice in India many years ago, doing ten-day retreats with Goenka, of course it was a meditation retreat, so it was really about meditation—although he talked about dāna and sīla, generosity and virtue, a lot. But the meditation was what we were doing, and that's where the fascination was.

When we came back to this country, the Westerners who brought it back were taking Buddhist meditation out of the context of Buddhist cultures—the Theravāda out of the context of the cultures in Sri Lanka, in Thailand, in Burma. The meditation aspect was emphasized more, because it's really what's interesting, and where the real subtlety comes, where we can truly recognize how the mind works and what freedom is.

The teachers would talk about the importance of generosity, the importance of sīla. I'm not saying this was the teachers' view, just how I heard it—but I know I'm not the only one. It was kind of like: that stuff was good, that was nice, and you needed to have some sīla, some generosity, so you could meditate and really get there, right?

There's the famous saying of Munindraji, one of Joseph's teachers. When he came over, he said, "You know, you guys here—you're like you're in a boat rowing as hard as you can, but you forgot to untie it from the dock." You've got to pay attention to dāna and sīla. These are really important aspects.

More and more over the years, I've come to deeply appreciate—not that we've got to do that to prepare the mind—but that these aspects of the path are aspects of transforming consciousness. They're ways of living that are part of our path of liberation. All aspects of the path, everything the Buddha taught—he didn't teach something extra just because it would make you feel good. Everything is, as he said, the essence of the path: freeing the heart and mind from the habit of kilesa—of greed, of hatred and aversion, of delusion.

I want to talk a bit about all of this tonight, and probably into my next talk as well. Starting to see that all these different ways can help us cultivate, can help us transform the habits of our consciousness. Because different aspects of our experience are available at different times, depending on the conditions. Here, when you're deep in a retreat, there are times when that subtlety Guy was talking about last night is really available, and you can really appreciate it. But even on retreat, is that available to you all the time?

And you think, well, okay, now I've just got to slump along because nothing really good is happening, but I've got to slump along until I can get there and see the gap. That's really wasting the opportunity—not understanding that every moment offers us a chance to really see what's going on in the heart and mind and to work on transforming our habits of consciousness.

It's no secret, I don't think, by this time, how these kalesa habits operate so often beneath the level of conscious awareness. You know how they just suddenly pop up when you really think, "I'm done with that one. Things are going fine, things are going well." And all of a sudden it just comes roaring up. You've seen through this thing, but suddenly greed or aversion or whatever just reemerges. That can trigger doubt if we don't really understand how subtle and deep the habits of the kalesas are. If we start to understand that and recognize all these different ways that we can really be purifying these habits, then we don't get into doubt. We just see, "Okay, what's up now? What's available?"

Mingyur Rinpoche describes meditative awareness—because sati, mindfulness, is the thread that runs through all the different aspects: dana, sila, bhavana. Nothing's really possible without mindfulness, without recognizing. He describes meditative awareness as becoming cognizant of, or knowing, the quality of the mind—not just the phenomenon, the object that's perceived by the mind, but really becoming more and more tuned in to the quality that's present in the mind that's aware in any particular moment. That's really the level we're working on with all these different ways of purifying and shifting the habits.

One model I want to refer to tonight and next week involves three levels of kalesa, or of purification, that come up in our experience. The first, in terms of kalesa, is called the torments, or the kalesa of transgression. This deals with actions and speech—when the kalesa is so strong, it comes up so strong or so unseen that it gives rise to intention and motivation that leads to action or speech. On this level, we're working with dana and sila to counter and purify this level of kalesa of transgression.

The second level is called the obsessive. I think you all have a sense of what that means—obsessive kalesa. Maybe you're not acting it out, but again and again, in the mind, in the mind, you just can't put it down. Maybe you don't even recognize it, but that is where collectedness of mind is what really begins to protect and purify, on this level of obsessive kalesa.

The third level that's talked about is called the latent—the underlying potential for kalesa to arise given the appropriate conditions. That's when you're minding your own business and everything's copacetic, and suddenly, out of seemingly nowhere, zoom, it

comes up. They say it's like a seed that has the potential to sprout if it's given water and sunshine and all the appropriate conditions. The Buddha says this level—this latent level of greed, hatred, delusion—is abandoned not by acts, but by wisely seeing, by wise attention, by wisdom. I'm going to talk about that one next week.

Tonight I'll start by talking about this first level of transgressive torments, and about dana and sila, and see how far we get.

So, starting to talk about generosity—not just as a nice thing, a good thing, what we should do for people less fortunate, which is how I was brought up. That's not bad, but it's a certain distancing kind of a thing. Instead, I'm thinking about dana as a transformer of consciousness, a transformer of the habits of heart and mind. With all of these things, our interest is really in the quality in the heart and mind, more than the outer appearance. It always comes down to intention.

Generosity, dana, as I'm sure you're aware, is something the Buddha talked about a lot. Usually when he first began talking to lay people, generosity would be the first thing he would discuss, and then go on to sila. In a way, he laid it down as the foundational quality of the whole sasana, the whole system he set up of nuns and monks and lay people living together and supporting one another. It's this really ennobling quality of the heart on our path of awakening.

Many times when the Buddha would be meeting either one person or a whole group of people, with his all-seeing mind he could recognize someone who he thought could be ready to hear the true Dhamma. But he would begin by talking about dana, talking about sila. Not as "this is what you should do," but because when the heart and mind tune into the quality of generosity, it brightens the heart, brightens the mind, uplifts, and brings the happiness of the wholesome. It's really interesting—even just thinking about generosity can do that, whether one's own or another's. Not trying to, but just noticing, is really quite powerful.

For example, just this morning before I came up here, I was having breakfast and reading the headlines on the BBC, which is never a very uplifting experience. I was reading the headlines and I could notice my consciousness, my heart, getting heavy, more contracted, just from reading. And then at the end of whatever news, it's like everything's reported: this was said on Twitter, that was said on Twitter. It's just like everybody on Twitter is out there putting down everybody else who has a different point of view. I'm thinking, "And this is the news?" So-and-so said this, and so-and-so said that, and they think this. It's like one giant papañca that's taking over the world.

It's really kind of shocking.

So after ten minutes of that, I was feeling heavy and contracted. I just needed to look at my notes for the talk. I wasn't even trying to think about it—I was just looking at the dāna section. I hadn't decided which stories to use, so I was just picking them out. Five minutes, that's all I did, just looking. And when I put it down, the whole tenor of my consciousness had completely shifted. I was feeling really happy, really appreciative, just from reading little stories—which I already knew—of other people's generosity. It just touches that place of generosity and wholesomeness in one's own mind stream. And it's really like an uplift.

So happy, but not like the happy of "Oh, I feel happy, I feel so good, this is pleasant." Yes, that's true, but that's incidental really. The happiness is that the mind is bright, the heart is energized, because it's the happiness of that coolness of a moment of no kilesa. That heaviness is just gone. And there's the happiness of generosity, of non-clinging, of appreciating, of connecting—it brightens the heart and mind. It's really quite remarkable.

Because if you were to go out and try to feel happy, try to feel good, that's a different thing. But to see the power of this is really very strong.

Generosity has a motivation and intention in the heart-mind. Obviously, it's transforming—in a moment of generosity—the habit of greed or holding on or needing something. But it also, interestingly, in that moment is transforming the kilesa of ill-will. There's a saying—I didn't understand it for a long time, but it's kind of commentarial—if you're feeling really not good about someone or annoyed with them, give them a gift. And I thought, "What's that about?" But it's assuming you give a gift not in a spirit of "Here, take this and be happy," you know—but that you're actually really giving it from the heart of generosity. And you can't be generous without it cutting through the sense of separation, without the sense of me and others dissolving. It's like, "Oh, please take this." And it really cuts through ill-will and that sense of separation, the separate fearful self. It's a very interesting quality.

So again, it's not so much about what's given or what you should do, but this motivation in the heart and mind.

Another aspect of it is that when we're really consciously tuning in—the mindfulness—you might notice greed, and you might consciously tune into generosity. And there are like three different moments of happiness about it, or three different ways we experience the happiness of the pure heart and mind.

One is in the moment of motivation, where you really just take the moment to tune in. "Yes, I have this time or this thing I want to give"—whatever it is—and tuning into that motivation of offering. And that really brightens and uplifts the heart and mind.

The second is in the actual doing of it, either the giving or the sharing of your time or whatever it is, the actual doing of it—assuming all of this, we're doing it consciously, doing it with awareness.

And third is in reflecting afterwards, wise reflection on that act of generosity. This is something I'll read a sutta about later, but we often don't do this. To think, even at times of small generous actions that you've done, when you're having a hard time, is a way to really transform the consciousness. It's something we often don't do. We have such an idea that it's just being egotistical—"I'm so great." But if it is egotistical, if you're thinking "I'm so great," it won't have the effect of brightening the heart and mind. You'll be able to tell. But sometimes just to look and think, "Oh yeah, there was that time..." And you're remembering it in a feeling way, in a motivational way. You can just remember that moment of sharing, that mutuality. And again, the wholesomeness of it just arises. It's what you could say is kamma vipāka. Vipāka is like the result of a moment of kamma, a moment of action, a moment of intention. So the kammic result of wholesome action—it comes up in memory.

Have you noticed this sometimes here on retreat? Perhaps you've noticed it in the other direction as well—you're having all these memories of the unwholesome things you did in your life, and waves of remorse arise. I know many people experience this. That's also a kind of vipaka. But there can be times when a memory might come up of some wholesome act of generosity you performed. And you can just feel and appreciate that. Let that in. That's a wholesome moment too.

As I said, when I grew up, the sense of generosity as being good and appropriate was always there. Certainly, I find in many ways this culture here in America is a very generous culture. A lot of people offer a great deal of time and money and support in many ways. But what I never understood—and this might have just been my loss from how I grew up—is that generosity was always more outwardly directed toward the result of what you give, which reflects our focus on the object, on the phenomenon.

What I didn't understand, really until I spent a lot of time in Thailand and Burma practicing in meditation centers and monasteries, just being there in a culture that deeply values generosity, was the joyful, contagious aspect of tuning into this quality of generosity—both in the offering and in the receiving. I really didn't grow up understanding or experiencing that at all.

But to really see how wholesome goodness, the wholesome qualities of heart and mind, are truly contagious. So too are the kilesas, of course. But in some ways, as I mentioned, just this morning reading a few stories, the whole mind really transformed in that moment without planning it. Because goodness kind of touches goodness. It lets it come up and manifest. It's really in some ways more our truest nature—truly transformed consciousness.

I want to share that the Buddha in a way set up his whole sasana so that generosity was the foundation. This is from the Buddha:

"Bhikkhus, Brahmins and householders are very helpful for you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness." Those are the four requisites that bhikkhus and nuns can accept from lay people. "And you, bhikkhus, are very helpful to Brahmins and householders as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, with the correct meaning and wording. And you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

There's a way that this practice of going out every day for alms food—monks in particular aren't allowed to keep food overnight—means you can't completely isolate yourself from lay people. This mutual aspect of generosity is really at the core of supporting each other to cross the flood. I love that this is there.

Even today in Thailand and Burma, even if in some of the monasteries or meditation centers where I stay there's cooking—where the food is offered but cooked on site—even so, the monks will go out every morning on alms round with their bowls. Even in very poor areas, very poor neighborhoods, not everyone participates, but people know they're coming. There's always a little novice running ahead ringing a bell in Burma so people know they're coming.

I've watched, I've gone along and observed. People come running out—and a lot of people don't—but the ones who want to, they come running out, sometimes with their little children, and they stand there. What they can offer might be a spoonful of rice, or two spoonfuls of rice. Often it's just that. But there's this sense of appreciation and respect on both sides. The monks don't acknowledge it personally. It's not like a personal gift. It's an offering to the whole Sangha, to keep it going. But there's this sense of such deep appreciation.

One time, years ago, after a big cyclone in Burma had really destroyed a great deal of people's homes and much of the rice crop, people in the area around this meditation center where I often stay really didn't have—they had much less than usual, and usual isn't very much. But then some group had offered a lot of money for what's called a rice dana. Each household would come and receive a big fifty-pound bag of rice to take home. A friend of ours, a monk from Mexico, was staying there. So the next morning, he said, when they went out on alms round—

So every day when they'd go out on alms round, there were the usual families that would come and offer. You kind of knew who was going to be there.

But this next day, after the rice dana, so many more people were out there offering—people who hadn't been able to before. And the first thing they wanted to do was simply offer a little bit of rice back to the Sangha.

This sense of mutuality is profound. My mind can go, "Well, big deal, three spoonfuls of rice." I mean, it's so pathetic that my mind could even go that way, rather than just appreciating how this generosity—both the giving and the receiving—is in that moment really purifying habits. It's bringing real happiness to people on both sides, just to be able to offer like that.

I want to share a few little things that I like, because maybe hearing about generosity can bring this kind of happiness to our heart and mind. And recognizing it's not the happiness that comes because it's about you—just the hearing itself. And if it doesn't bring that happiness, you say, "So what?" Just notice that.

I cut this out years and years ago from the New York Times. This man, Matt Dawson, was at the time 78 years old and still working for the Ford Motor Company in Detroit. He'd been working for them for 59 years, driving a forklift and doing as much overtime as he possibly could just so he could give most of it away. He said he had donated more than a million dollars to schools and charities since 1994. He said, "I get joy, happiness out of this. I can go home and sleep good."

He only got as far as seventh grade in Shreveport, Louisiana, came to Detroit in 1940 and started working. And he said, "No matter how much you make or how little you make, you've got to save a little of that. I was raised like that, to help others. I have more than enough for myself."

More than enough didn't include vacations. He drove an old Ford Escort, had a one-bedroom apartment in not a very nice section of Detroit. "It's a big house, a big car—that doesn't excite me." And he earned about $100,000 a year.

The first recipient of his donations was the United Negro College Fund, which got $50,000. Since then, $180,000 more. He gave $200,000 to Louisiana State University, $20,000 to the NAACP, $112,000 to churches in Detroit and Louisiana—and on and on. Amazing, isn't it? It just makes him happy to do this.

Here's a note I got a few years ago from a woman who's been on retreat here. She said, "I have been on the verge of quitting a job I no longer need, wondering if or how this job serves me. I've decided to keep the job for five or six more months and give all the earnings away to causes that I love." This cause—donating to some nuns in Burma—was the first of many. "Thank you for the chance to offer this money," she wrote, "because this gift brings me great joy and opens a whole new chapter of work as dana to the world."

That's the sense of it. It's not "I'm doing such a great thing." It's "Thank you for the opportunity." That's something they say in Burma a lot—"opportunity for dana." It's a very common phrase. "Oh, there's an opportunity for dana." Do we think like that? Do you think like that? "Wow, here's an opportunity for dana." But in Burma, that's a very common phrase and expression.

Another story. This is a nun I've known for quite a few years. She had a small nunnery near Shwe Oo Min, another poor nunnery, just barely pulling it together. When we first met her, there was no electricity, and a friend of ours donated a few hundred dollars to get electricity connected. So a few years ago, she came to the meditation center. Some friends were staying because generous people offer money that we take in and distribute to different nunneries and schools. She knew this—I mean, everybody knows everything that's happening.

So she came, and we knew her for a while. We'd never—you know, she's nice enough, seemed a little bit depressed. Nothing, didn't really seem to have any kind of special spark, you could say.

But anyway, she came and she said, "I really want to start a school—a school for the really young children, grades one through four." There was a nunnery school that a lot of the poor kids go to, kids who can't afford all the hidden fees in the government school. But it's about a forty-minute walk. So all the little nuns and all the other poor kids walk up there. But in the rainy season, it's just a sea of mud, and they really can't make it.

So she said, "I want to start this school for these little kids."

And we're like, "Really?"

And she said, "You know, I just—I can't sleep. I just want to find support so I can do this. My mind is so urgent. I can't sleep well. I can't eat well. I just want to start this school."

So we're like, "Okay, well..." We did have some funds—we could offer some money, a few thousand dollars.

Then the next year we came back, and it was amazing what you can do with not that much money. She's built just kind of a lean-to, just a shelter. She already had 130 little kids.

You've got to realize what that means. It means not only does she have to build that, invite the kids, but also hire teachers and pay regular teachers—all on donations. So it's not just the donation to start it; it's money she has to keep raising to pay teachers every month to keep it going.

Also, because there's only a tiny bit of land—there were twenty-four nuns in this nunnery—they'd had to tear down one of the buildings they lived in. They had a building to eat, buildings to live in, and they tore down one of them and were all crowded into this other little building to eat and live so that all this space could be for the school.

So she—wow.

But the really interesting thing was when she came to talk, she looked radiant. She looked so happy. She looked like a completely different person in her mind. And she said, "You know, even though now I must work really hard to raise the money every month for the teachers and to keep building new buildings—and then you need toilets, you have these kids there all day, you've got to build a bunch of toilets, and then you have to build a water tank and make your well deeper..." I mean, it just keeps going. All of this has to be donated money. Plus, never mind their food and all.

She said, "But now I feel so happy. I'm sleeping well. The energy to this school—my mind is calm and happy. I'll be so happy if I can just do this for the rest of my life."

That was a few years ago. She's still doing it. Sometimes she looks really tired. It really is a lot of work. It's not like la, la, la—it's an incredible amount of work. It's an incredible responsibility, because when there's a nunnery, the head nun really is the one who carries all the weight. But this sense of inner calm and happiness, this radiance that comes from it—it was really palpable. Just seeing that, this quality of generosity.

Okay, one last little story. Again, it's from Burma. Some years ago, before the country was so-called open and before they had regular money changing—now you can change your money in a normal way, you can actually go to a money changer place. But before, it was a trip and a half. It was all so-called black market, but that's what everybody did.

Because we'd bring in donations, we'd have a fair amount of money. And at that time, a thousand kyat note was about equal to a dollar, and sometimes you could only get five hundred kyat notes. So if you were changing ten thousand dollars, you would literally have a pile like this—it was crazy. And then you'd have to contact the money changers and have them come. You'd have to meet them somewhere.

We'd meet at a friend's place, and they'd come with all these stacks of money, and you'd negotiate. Sometimes it felt like a sleazy drug deal, except that this is what everyone did.

So this particular time, we were just doing the transaction and talking. They were kind of young guys, and it really felt more like that than usual—like a sleazy drug deal. Then we left, and our friend, a woman who owns a B&B who had been the intermediary, later gave us the money and said, "Oh, and here's another $400."

We said, "What's that from?" She didn't want to say, but we pressed her.

As we'd been changing the money and the guys were doing their thing with their computers, we were just talking back and forth amongst ourselves about how we could use this to build toilets here, support the nuns there. We were just chatting, but they were listening.

So after we left, they went to our friend, the intermediary, and said, "What they're doing—this is great. We want to offer $400." They didn't want thanks. They didn't even want to be known. They were doing it anonymously, just this sense of wanting to offer from people you would never expect it from. And that sense of the happiness of it—it's really a lovely thing.

Another aspect that I want to acknowledge is the sense of mutuality, not just the offering. It's not just about money; it's about time, it's about a smile, it's about whatever. But also the same openness to receiving—with dignity. The offering with dignity and the receiving with dignity, and not wanting to shut it down or say, "Oh no, no, no, you keep that for yourself, you need it more."

Sometimes in a place where I feel like I have so much more and someone wants to offer, the sense is to say, "No, no, I don't want to take that." But that's not the spirit of generosity at all. It creates a block in the whole thing.

Another simple example: some nuns we were visiting wanted to invite a few of us to a meal, to a lunch. So we go, and they make this huge spread. I have photos of a table with like twenty-five different little plates of curries and fruits and this and that on it. And we know this is more than that whole nunnery has to eat for a week. We're well aware of that. And there's a sense of, "Don't do this. This is crazy. Take this food and eat it. We don't want it."

But then you realize—no, there's so much happiness and dignity in being able to offer. To receive with appreciation and dignity keeps the whole cycle going, the whole circle going. The sense of "no, not me" is really a sense of self. It's not the purity of heart and mind. So exploring that more and more too.

This is from Ajahn Pasanno, but he's commenting on a sutta of the Buddha:

"When one is generous and delights in giving, in offering, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyous. This supports development of virtue, as a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. So the meditation progresses more smoothly; the mind, the heart naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are."

It's really the whole essence of the practice, right? So it is important to recognize this tendency—that wholesome qualities foster further wholesome qualities—so that we nurture the appropriate causes for the results that we are seeking.

In times when the conditions, on retreat or off retreat—and you really get it, this isn't just about retreat—when subtlety of attention isn't available, attention to actions and generosity is always available. And it's not just to be good. It's really the act that we can do to purify the heart and mind. And it's the pure heart that recognizes Nibbāna in whatever aspect, on or off retreat. So this is really what we're doing.

All right, we have a little time. I just want to say this quickly and then talk a little bit about virtue. Once when U Pandita was here teaching, a Nepalese sayadaw was here with him—U Jānapanika.

He gave a lovely talk on dana, on generosity, and out of that talk came seven aspects of the practice of offering, of giving. I just want to quickly mention them—not that you have to remember and clock through all of them, but just to bring them up.

So first, when we're giving—and again, it doesn't have to be things, it can be time, it can be caring, whatever it is—we begin by really giving mindful attention to the motivation, to the volition, really purifying before we give. The Tibetans would say it's like

the generous act of the bodhisattvas: "With this act, may all beings be free from suffering." That's a great purification. But even just, as I said, not throwing the gift casually —"Oh yeah, here, have some rice"—but really purifying, tuning in, bringing mindfulness to the motivation.

And then, in whatever one is giving—time, service, money—recognize if there's any clinging, if we're really holding on, and see if you can abandon that. Abandon it not by thinking "this should go away," but by tuning into the happiness of the giving. Then in that moment, the clinging isn't there. You really can feel that.

The third aspect is something Upandita said that's not appropriate here on retreat. But if possible, giving and receiving directly, face to face. That's something built into the way it works in the nunneries and monasteries in Thailand and Burma. There's something really beautiful about it, even though it's a formal ritual.

You go to a nunnery and offer, say, a pile of money—these huge piles that look much more impressive than they actually are. But there's a real form to it. They get a tray. You put it on the tray. You hold it. They hold it. You hold it together. And then you chant. They chant a blessing. You chant together. And then often all the nuns or monks will come and chant a whole gratitude metta sutta. It's really very beautiful and touching—even the little nunlets. There's a sense of really appreciating in both directions. It's so different from writing a check and mailing it off.

Here, of course, I can't go down to Amnesty International and meet somebody and say, "Please, take my check." That's just how it works in our context. But doing that face-to-face really has a power—not on retreat, not writing each other notes, but when it's appropriate.

The fourth is that when you're giving, again with mindfulness, really being focused on the giving. Of course, mindfulness is the thread through all of this—just knowing what we're doing as we're doing it.

Fifth, after giving, continuing to be mindful of the motivation, of the intention. Sometimes doubt comes up: "Oh, should I have really given that? Maybe I could use it in ten years." Then just bringing in mindfulness, re-clarifying the intention.

The sixth is interesting: clear comprehension of the broader context of giving. Giving a gift that, as well as you can tell, is appropriate. I don't want to go into the whole story, but if, say, you're giving something to someone who's an addict and your gift is just going to take them deeper into trouble, that might not be the gift to give. You can't always tell, but if you can, see what's appropriate.

And seventh, receiving in that same mindful, open, connected way. This sense of self and other is really cut through with generosity.

So the second aspect of these kilesas of transgression is sila, non-harming behavior. You're much more familiar with this. But to really see how the precepts work—they're kind of like guidelines. If the kilesas, the wanting or the ill will, come up really strongly and are about to drive us, sometimes just the intellectual idea of the precept will help us bounce back and not act on it, hopefully. But again, the precepts are meant to be guidelines to tune us into the motivation, the quality in the mind and heart.

So obeying the precepts while hating them and not really looking at motivation—I mean, it's better than hurting people. It's better than nothing. But that's not truly purifying in this way of working with the kilesas of transgression. We need to really look and see. And there's something I think we don't always realize.

You know, we see the sense of greed coming up really strongly, and you just—I don't know—you want to take some shampoo that you know isn't yours, and you think, well, no one will care. But you manage not to do it. You restrain yourself. That restraint is a wholesome action.

For me, I would always tend to focus on, "Well, I wanted to do it, I'm so bad, I shouldn't have had that wanting." But noticing that moment of restraint, that moment of abandoning that strength of wanting—maybe there's still wanting in the mind, but that level of transgression wasn't strong enough; you didn't act on it. Same with ill will. When you bite off hurting somebody, when you manage to keep your mouth shut when something really unpleasant is about to come out—all the different ways.

This quality of restraint is actually working to transform the habits of consciousness on this level. So we're still going to notice greed and ill will; it's not getting rid of them. But it is weakening them.

And maybe, hopefully, you've noticed—probably many of us have a commitment to living with the five lay precepts in our life anyway. But even here on retreat, taking them, and as the mind gets more subtle, I bet there are times when you've really noticed this coming up. The ill will or the greed and the wanting to act on it seems more obvious. And the sense of restraint maybe arises more easily. Or it comes up and you just know you're not going to act on it.

There's a real happiness that can come as you begin to have more confidence in the habit of sīla, of virtue, in your heart and mind—that you can learn to trust that more. Not that you're always going to be perfect, but that you can really rely on it. It really is a lovely, lovely quality, and it is truly transforming consciousness.

Just a simple example. I use this a lot, but it was a funny story. I was with a friend at Spirit Rock. It wasn't on retreat. And we're in the bookstore—if you've been to Spirit Rock, you know this bookstore, this Maha bookstore. There's so much stuff in it you can buy. I'm glad we don't have something like that here.

Anyway, we went in, this friend and I, and I wanted a particular little statue that I didn't see in the bookstore. But she sometimes volunteered there, so she knew where there were these closets somewhere else just filled with statues. She took me there, knew how to open it with the secret magnet opening. So we're opening it and it's just shelf after shelf after shelf of all these statues. We're piling through, looking for this one particular Tārā that I wanted. Which is fine—there's nothing wrong with this.

But we each, at the same moment, pulled out a different one. It's a Mañjuśrī one, which has this little sword. And both of us, we just barely touched it and the sword broke. Each of us at the same time. So we're holding it with this broken sword and we just kind of looked at each other. We didn't say anything. And then we said, "Oh, well, I guess we have to go tell Marianne we broke this. We'll have to pay for it."

But later we both saw how in our minds, just for a fraction of a second, the thought went through: we could put it back and no one will ever know. No one would have ever known. We both had that thought, and it was so clear in both of our minds that that was going nowhere. That was never even an option.

And we both could feel—not like, "I'm so great," that's not the happiness of purity—but this sense of: Wow, it's so lovely to have confidence in just knowing I'm not going to steal. You can kind of trust the heart and mind. You can really see that, can feel the purity of that.

So we did. We went off and told our friend—she's a good friend who runs the bookstore. We felt like two bad little girls going to the kindergarten teacher. She didn't care. "Ah, we glue it on. We sell it half price. It happens all the time." Just so you know, check it out if you're buying something. If it's half price, check carefully. Don't tell Marianne I said that.

But there's real appreciation in this.

And another thing that really supports sila is restraint at the sense doors. There are two ways of understanding this.

One form of restraint is the sense of keeping things more simple here. Not restraint in the sense of avoiding everything that may elicit greed or aversion, because that's impossible. And that's not purifying—that's avoiding completely. But we make it simpler

here, and there's a support in that. That's restraint at the sense doors. When your mind is all over the place, sometimes it's helpful when you're walking not to look around constantly. Just keep it simple. When you're sitting in the hall, don't be checking out what everybody else is doing, because you can see it just leads to greed, just leads to aversion. Restraint at the sense doors.

But another level of restraint at the sense doors isn't so much about not looking at all. Rather, you bring, as Buddhadasa says, satipañña—mindfulness and wisdom—right at the point of sense contact. So there's seeing. "Oh, that looks so good. Maybe that juice looks really good. Let me go have some juice. Nobody's looking. Nobody will see." What's happening? Seeing. Just come right back to seeing. Mindfulness and wisdom at the sense doors. There's seeing, it's pleasant, there's wanting. You're just right there with it. You don't have to go off into all the papañca, the proliferation, the moving away from mindfulness, which tends to lead into acting out of kilesa without recognizing it.

So this restraint, the satipañña at the sense doors, is what we've been talking about in terms of mindfulness. It's not hating experience. It's just knowing it for what it is. Because as we move into the world, we're not going to go through life never seeing things we want, never hearing things that elicit ill will. Stuff is going to happen. God knows, right? It happens here. So this sense of restraint at the sense doors really supports sila, really supports not acting out of kilesa.

And again, noticing, really bringing mindfulness and wisdom to the feeling, the appreciation of the wholesomeness. Recognizing, as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, those moments of coolness when the heart and mind is free of kilesa—not waiting until you can get concentrated enough to have a really subtle sitting. If that's not happening, cultivating qualities of dana, qualities of sila, of virtue, is always available. It's not like second best either. Everything, all aspects of our life, all aspects of the teaching are in support of purifying the habits of heart and mind to recognize things as they really are.

I just want to end with this sutta from the Buddha about really wise reflection, just on this part of it. This is a lay person asking, "You teach all these deep teachings, but what about clans people like us who are living at home? We can't practice like you." So the Buddha gives six reflections, but these two are the main ones:

"There's the case where you recollect your own virtues. They are unbroken, unspotted, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, conducive of concentration. At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting virtue, her mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind heads straight, based on virtue. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the goal, a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connec-

ted with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated."

"Then furthermore, there's the case where you recollect your own generosity: 'It is a great gain for me that among people overcome with possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being magnanimous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms.'"

And the same thing—at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, hatred, or confusion.

This is not just about feeling good—this is the transformation of the habits, the transformation of consciousness.

And the same pattern unfolds: one has a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma, and the same progression follows.

And then at the end, the Buddha said, "So, Mahanama, you should develop this recollection of generosity, or this recollection of virtue, while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children."

In other words, anytime it's available to us. No aspect of our life is outside of this quality that can really transform our consciousness to the pure heart and mind which sees Nibbana.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 73

Majjhima Nikāya Two: Purifying the Subtle Suffering Habits of Mind

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson continues her exploration of the Buddha's teachings on purifying the mind, focusing on the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), which presents seven methods for abandoning the āsavas—the deepest, most latent tendencies toward sense desire, becoming, and ignorance. She explains how these subtle defilements differ from gross transgressions (addressed through sīla and generosity) and obsessive mental torments (temporarily suppressed through concentration), representing instead the underlying potential for suffering that can arise given appropriate conditions.

Wilson systematically examines each of the seven methods: abandoning through seeing (insight and wise attention), restraining (mindfulness at the sense doors), using (relating wisely to requisites like food, clothing, and shelter), enduring (patience with difficult conditions), avoiding (knowing when to step away from what's too intense), removing (the determination to abandon unwholesome thoughts), and developing (cultivating the seven factors of awakening). Throughout, she emphasizes that wise attention—yoniso manasikāra—is central to all methods, helping us discern what feeds versus what starves our habitual patterns of craving and aversion.

The talk offers deeply practical guidance for both intensive retreat practice and daily life, illustrating through personal stories and traditional teachings how these methods work together. Wilson concludes with Dīpā Mā's description of life without the kilesas: fresh, new, and full of zest—offering inspiration for the ongoing path of purification.

I want to continue the second part of the talk I began last week, exploring how all aspects of our life and path—everything the Buddha taught—is in service of the steadfast deliverance of heart, the unshakable deliverance of mind.

Another way we can understand this is that all these different teachings offer various ways of helping us purify the habits of mind, shifting from being caught in greed, confusion, and hatred toward the wholesome, toward wisdom.

You may remember that I spoke about the three levels of kilesas. I discussed the transgressive ones and how cultivating the heart of generosity, cultivating sīla and non-harming behavior, are really powerful liberation practices for shifting habits in all different aspects of life.

The second level, the obsessive kilesas, is mitigated by the collectedness of mind, by concentration. Guy spoke about this last night, so I don't need to say too much about it. But there's this sense that when all the energy of the mind—which has been running here and there, often falling into habits of confusion and greed without recognizing it—becomes more collected, coming together in a wholesome way, then as that gets really strong, it becomes like a protection from the kilesas. They don't get in. There's a sense of purity, which is one of the reasons concentration can be so pleasant. It's the peace and ease of a mind that isn't being tormented by kilesas in that moment. That's important to appreciate.

Anyone who has experienced this happiness, this sukha of the concentrated mind, can recognize that it exists because the mind is free from kilesas at that time. Appreciating what that feels like—that peace, that happiness of a heart that's not tormented—is valuable. But it's very conditioned. As anyone knows, when the collectedness begins to disintegrate, you find out that the kilesas aren't uprooted. They were held at bay. That's useful, but often we've thought they were uprooted and we're disappointed to find them coming back. We don't know what we did wrong.

Sometimes, as the collectedness disintegrates, a kilesa comes flying up really strong just at that moment, and you get a bad mix. The concentration isn't completely gone, and as Tejaniya likes to say, samādhi magnifies—we see everything so much more clearly. Meanwhile, the kilesas exaggerate, making everything seem out of proportion. You put those two together and it's a difficult combination. When things become so intense on retreat, that's often what's going on. In that moment, you didn't do something wrong, but it can be overwhelming and certainly surprising when it happens like that. Understanding the power of the collected mind and heart to keep away the obsessive kilesas is very important. That thinking, thinking, thinking about something just isn't arising. Many of you have described experiencing this during retreat.

What I want to talk about for the rest of this talk is the third level, called the latent kilesas. This is the one that really surprises us and keeps surprising us. It's described as the underlying potential or possibility for these tormenting mental factors to arise given appropriate conditions. It's basically like a seed, although it's not really sitting there—kilesas aren't just sitting there waiting. They're arising and passing due to conditions; it's just that certain conditions may come more frequently sometimes.

The metaphor goes like this: if a seed lies dormant for years and then gets water, sunlight, and the right kind of soil, it sprouts. The latent torments are like that—the potential for them to arise exists. Though I should emphasize it's just a metaphor, because the kilesas aren't really there as fixed entities waiting.

This is why the commitment, the interest in using all the different aspects of our life to see how this works and to cultivate the wholesome—all these different ways of purifying the heart and mind, not just through deep meditation retreats—is so important. It's not only on retreats that these latent kilesas come popping up, as we know very well.

Annie offered a beautiful response this morning when asking about how we can see a certain level clearly, have a real insight into dispassion, for example. Does it stay like that? The answer, of course, is no. The insight comes and we really understand. But every moment of consciousness is a new moment.

The mind is always arising, consciousness and the different mental factors always arising and changing. So even moments of deep insight, when we're really recognizing on what feels like a cellular level—for example, that there's nothing to want, and feeling the peace of that—or really, the mind is just turning away from some old habit that brought us suffering, and that's so clear, we can't imagine going back to it... and then, you know, it comes up again.

Once you've been through this like a hundred million times, you start to understand this is just how it is. It's not something I'm doing wrong. Getting all reactive to it is both useless, inappropriate, and brings a lot more suffering. We start to see: oh, this is how it is. This is how things are. This is where we're talking about the latent underlying tendencies.

Until we really start to trust that, it can certainly bring up a lot of dismay, discouragement. And then, of course, that inevitably is followed by doubt. Doubt that I did something wrong, doubt about what's the point of this practice—I've been doing this and this stuff is still coming up, it's hopeless. That kind of skeptical doubt. Not the doubt where, after retreat is over and you're not in that intense space, you might want to really reflect—especially if the practice is new to you—you might want to reflect and say, "Does this seem helpful? Does this seem appropriate?" Of course we do that. But that's not skeptical doubt. That's different. The skeptical doubt is just this: oh no, this is happening, it can't be right, everything's wrong, everything's bad. We've talked about that a lot.

So we start to go through this and see how it works, see how we can access mindfulness in different ways, in different conditions, and see that these latent kilesas can spring up—sometimes more frequently than others—but that mindfulness can be remembered, that the wisdom, the insights that were there, maybe they're not always right there in the perception, but they're accessible in a way. Sometimes we can remember our way into them. I think Guy talked about that. Sometimes it's not even conscious,

but it's like—I like to say cellularly or something—you know, you're really caught in greed, but there's something that knows: oh, caught feels like this. It's a little bit different.

So I want to talk about these in terms of a particular sutta from the Majjhima Nikāya that I really like. I think it's considered one of the more important suttas. It's the second one, called "All the Āsavas." Āsava is the word that's usually translated as "taints," like stains. I think Guy used that the other night. There's not a great word for it. But it's basically referring to the underlying latent, this latent level of kilesa—the taints.

Guy mentioned what they are. They're talking about three very specific ones: the potential for sense desire to arise; for bhava, for becoming—this sense of grasping, becoming a particular self in a moment; and the third is for ignorance, avijjā. These are the most subtle underlying tendencies.

This sutta, called "All the Āsavas," is where the Buddha talks about seven different ways or seven different methods for bringing wise attention to the arising of these—I'm going to use āsava just because I don't like the word taints—the arising of one of these āsavas when it's present, and then the wise attention to see what kind of attention, what we pay attention to and how we pay attention, what's feeding and strengthening the āsava and what's starving it. You'll recognize that from the wise effort—the way they describe it, you know, what feeds and what starves.

What's really interesting is that wise attention is at the core of each of these, but these seven different ways... and this isn't like, okay, the first one is insight through wise attention, and then there are six others. It's not like he's saying, okay, you losers, if you can't do the insight, here are these six other ways. All of them, he's saying, are for really uprooting these tendencies and coming to the complete end of suffering.

And you'll hear—that's why I said there's a lot to cover going through all of these—these are ways we live our life. They're not just about retreat aspects, but they're all appropriate to retreat. It's really about how we live our life. And that's why I find this really very useful.

I've been returning to this sutta over and over again for many years.

I'm not going to read the whole thing, but I'll keep referring to it. The Buddha talks about how these asavas can be exhausted. "Exhausted" means come to an end, so that's code for complete awakening. He says this happens "in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see." Here he's using "see" to mean understand.

What is wise attention and unwise attention? When one attends unwisely, both unarisen asavas arise and arisen ones increase. This is that formula. When one attends wisely, unarisen asavas do not arise and arisen ones are abandoned. So we're familiar with this. This is wise attention.

Then he goes through the seven. I'll take each one in turn.

The first is abandoned by seeing, which means abandoned by insight. Here he's really talking about wise attention. He says that a person who is unskilled does not understand what dhammas are fit for attention and what dhammas are not fit for attention. And so they don't attend to the things that are fit, and they attend to what's unfit. And then we attend in a way that is unwise.

To put it in my own language: it's noticing that if we're paying attention to something and the asavas—the sense desire—keep getting stronger and stronger, there's something about the object itself, but more likely it's the way we're paying attention that's increasing that tendency. With wise attention, reflecting wisely, we're always noticing how we're paying attention and what's the effect, what's the result.

It's not that the fitness is inherent in the object. When we say sense desire arises from giving attention to something beautiful, our tendency can be to think, "Well, I should never look at the beautiful because then desire will arise." You know how then we go into aversion, which if you're noticing, is also a taint. But it's not about the object—it's how we pay attention.

Let me read you this passage I really like. It speaks simply about the hindrances, about sense desire, which is also one of the hindrances, something we can relate to. A way that we pay attention unwisely: you could be really focused on an attractive object, but the unwise attention is that the focus is really attending to the gratification, to the beautiful aspect and the sense of personal gratification in that.

Say you're thinking about something—you smell something for lunch. You smell lasagna and you really like lasagna. And so you keep smelling, but really smelling. "It's so nice." And we just, subtly, keep doing that. With wise attention, reflecting wisely, as the Buddha says, you'll start to notice that the desire, the sense desire, is getting stronger and stronger. Then we can see, "Oh, that's unwise attention." Some of the other methods are ways we can work with that. When you've noticed it, though, I'll just say simply: we come back to mindfulness of smelling, or if you're too caught, we divert the attention to something neutral.

Ill will. We've talked about this as well. It grows. It's cultivated when the attention is unwise. We're focusing on an unpleasant object, but the attention keeps getting drawn into—this is from the sutta—the repugnant aspect. There's someone that's bugging you and you just keep looking at the thing that bugs you, the thing that bugs you, the thing that bugs you. That's unwise attention. It's not saying there's something wrong with what you're looking at. But we're seeing that the way we're paying attention is feeding the asava.

With wise attention, we notice that tendency in the mind.

We say, okay, let's shift. Let's stop doing that. And if you can't quite tell in the moment how the attention is unwise, then shift to something else, something neutral. You get a sense then how that works.

So when we're paying attention in the wrong way, the old habits are so strong, they just come shooting up. So that's one way.

The second way of unwise attention—and this feeds sense desire—but unwise attention, this is from the sutta, that feeds bhava, is when there's a sense, maybe in a deep meditative state, where again the attention is subtly on the gratification. And if there's gratification, there's also the sense of self. That's kind of me getting a little stronger in that moment. And so that bhava, that sense of becoming—it's also bhavatanha, it's a kind of craving. And that can also be, doesn't only have to be with beautiful meditation states.

The Buddha gives examples of how we attend unwisely, just how we're thinking about stuff in relationship to me. I won't read this all, but how one attends unwisely: thinking about some experience, well, how was I in the past? Was I in the past? What was I? How was I? Having been what in the past, what will I be in the future? Or will I not be in the future? Or how will I be in the future? Or what shall the future happen? And on and on, as you get totally caught in a thicket of views. Basically, as I say, that's all about me. We think we're paying attention, but we're really caught into this sense of becoming, becoming, becoming.

And the third unwise attention is how delusion, moha, comes. This is when one is attending to any mundane thing, any object whatsoever, through any of the vipalasas, the perversions of perception. So again, Guy was talking about that last night. We're not seeing through wise attention through the lens of the Four Noble Truths. Unwise is recognizing, thinking something's permanent, or perceiving it as permanent, perceiving it as giving us some kind of reliability, seeing it as self or belonging to self.

So you can see those unwise attentions happen a lot. And certainly this is on the level of our deep meditation, where we're really starting to be able to see these subtleties of wise and unwise attention. I'm not going to go into it more because I want to just mention the other ones. But this is something we've talked about, and I think you can really understand.

Seeing how subtle it is, I hope it can not be discouraging, but rather feed faith that every time there's wise attention, that's shifting the habit. You know, you don't get a big neon light: "Habit shifting! Habit shifting!" But each time it is shifting something. So that's the insight, the first one. And you can see how that can really purify.

As we know, on retreat or off retreat, that's not always available to us. So these are some of the other things the Buddha's saying. And he has a list, but he's not saying one's better than the other, just depending on circumstances.

So the second one is what can be abandoned by restraining. And this is restraint at the sense doors. Let me just read the beginning of what he says:

"What can be abandoned by restraint? Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, abides with the eye faculty restrained, the ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. While asavas in fever of defilement might arise in a bhikkhu who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no asavas or fever of defilement in one when they abide with the senses restrained."

Again, I mentioned this a bit—by restraint we really don't mean hating all sense experience, okay? The optimum sense of restraint is restraint at the sense doors: bringing satipañña, mindfulness and wisdom, to meet what's happening as close to the sense contact as possible. And so reflecting wisely, and he always says this, reflecting wisely...

One brings in restraint through this wise reflection.

So the first level of restraint is quite simple—take the eye door or the ear door. Not just wildly looking around at everything. I think we've all recognized how this works here, how the seclusion of retreat is really supportive. Dining room practice, of course, is particularly good for this. Just going in and noticing how when you're really unrestrained, when you're not being mindful of seeing and you're just looking all around, the judgments and the *papañca* and the stories start. They begin feeding on themselves and you get really far really fast.

Pretty much the *papañca* is usually fed by *āsavas*, by *kilesas*. But restraining this doesn't mean becoming afraid to look, afraid to hear, not wanting to taste because if you taste something pleasant you'll be lost. It's not that at all, because that would just be cultivating aversion.

Rather, it's really about simplifying—just being present with the pleasant taste and not trying to have ten million options. You go to the buffet and think, "This could be good, that could be good, let me try every single thing in the little bowl for the salad because each of those could be good." You can just watch that wanting and simply let it go. Simplify. Restraint in this way means you don't have to follow every sense desire. You can notice it and just simplify and be present.

So these are two ways of restraint. Keep it simple. Otherwise, it's a bit like—I've sometimes had the sense of cravings just looking for something to land on. Sense desire just looking for something to land on. I call it mail order catalog mind. You used to get these mail order catalogs. You don't want anything, but you're looking through it anyway. And then after a while you realize you're looking for something to want, just because it's there. Restraint means closing the catalog, putting it down. You don't need to do that.

So it's not about judging from the outside which things are good and which things are bad. Again, it's always with wise reflection, wise attention. Look and see: is the sense desire habit being fed right in this moment as you're looking around all over the place? Maybe it's not. Maybe there's a lot of mindfulness wisdom and you're really seeing how seeing arises, how perception and thought arise, and it's not creating more *āsava*. Then fine. It's not like it's always one way. It's really bringing in this wise attention and seeing what's feeding the wholesome, what's feeding the unwholesome. Out of compassion for yourself—not out of trying to get it right, but out of really seeing—this is another way to begin to purify these suffering habits.

It's not that we don't pay attention to pleasant sense experience, all six of them. Pleasant experience can be very helpful to brighten the heart and mind. But just knowing the difference—as Thích Nhất Hạnh says, when we're obsessed with sense pleasures, we suffer. When there's the happiness of a peaceful mind that really brightens us, there's no complication, no suffering. That's supportive and onward leading. We can really tell the difference more and more. Not making yourself bad or good, but just bringing in this wise attention in terms of restraint at the sense doors.

You can also restrain so much that you're feeding aversion and fear. That's also not wise attention. So just exploring this.

On the most simple level, as Ajahn Chah said, when the nose smells an odor, let it be. Leave it at the nose. Or another time he said, sound doesn't bother us—we go out and disturb the sound. So just exploring this.

This is obviously something we can do a lot in our daily life. It isn't just about being on retreat. And it's not incredibly subtle—it's quite accessible.

So that's abandoned by restraining.

The next one, and I like this one a lot, is abandoned by using.

How are *āsavas* abandoned by using? Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely—this is talking about a monk, but this would be the same for us—uses a robe, uses clothes, for protection from cold, for protection from heat, for protection from contact with insects, wind, burning, and so forth, and for the purposes of concealing what disturbs conscience. That's put very tidily.

Reflecting wisely, one uses food neither for amusement nor for vanity nor for making yourself look good or for embellishment, but for the endurance and continuance of this body, for ending the discomfort of hunger, and for supporting us in our life, in our holy life. "Thus shall I terminate old feelings"—old, unpleasant, difficult feelings of hunger—"without arousing new ones," without arousing greed, "and blameless shall I live in comfort and health."

So living in comfort and health, eating, and also how you deal with medicine, how you deal with where you live—

But in general, spreading it out is really looking at how we use, how we relate to all the requisites of our life. And of course, it's really interesting in terms of the whole environmental aspect of our planet now. But we're not talking about having a view and saying you should do this, you shouldn't do that, and everybody else should do that as well, because that's attachment to view. We're talking about really looking for ourselves: How am I relating to buying new clothes? How do I decide what to wear today? How do I decide what to eat, or how much I eat? Not from an idea of should, but really watching—in this moment, is the way I'm using feeding greed, or feeding bhava, feeding becoming, feeding a sense of self?

It's really interesting. We're all different, so there's no right answer. But looking and seeing, you know? Using what we need and not needing more brings a real sense of contentment and peace in ourselves. It's an aspect of simplicity, an aspect of—I don't want to say renunciation, but it's similar. As Guy said last night, the renunciation is on a different level, but it comes out of the ease of non-clinging, not needing to become.

So I was thinking about this. There are ten million examples, but I was thinking about the eight precepts, and it's not at all that everyone should take them. It's not appropriate for everyone. But one of the ways it's interesting—if it's appropriate for one's body or if one is just interested in doing it, and some people have mentioned this to me in interviews—is taking the eighth precept, which of course involves not eating after midday. And then seeing: maybe all the fears about what was going to happen, or how it would be if I don't eat, don't manifest. Instead, a couple of people have told me they discover, "Wow, all the stuff that went on in going to get that food, a tea, and I wasn't even hungry. I don't even miss it. In fact, it's a pleasure." I call it—this is totally me, okay?—the hell realm of the dining room, in the middle of everything. Like, oh my God, just not to have to go there. It's so wonderful.

But really seeing—it's just a place to explore. Some people find that they don't eat and they have a real idea they don't want to, and it's really bad for their body. They actually need to eat, not even particularly wanting the food or feeling hungry, but they actually need to eat for health reasons. That's also important. It's not always about not eating. It may be about eating. You're eating for health, for comfort, for the sustaining of the body, for living at ease.

I have the same thing. Every night I just go and have half a rice cake or half an apple with peanut butter. And I do it without thinking about, "Oh, should I have this this time or should I have that?" All of that just feeds the wanting. But my body gets a little weak without it. So I just take this, take that, go eat it, finished. Some nights it's pleasant, some nights it's not. Some nights you're doing it really out of wisdom, clear seeing—this is what's needed.

It can be really interesting to see how we relate to things. I remember one retreat a long, long time ago. I had one particular dress with me. And I started to notice—you know, on retreat you have what you have, you just wear whatever you brought. It was a long retreat, and whenever I put on this one dress, it really generated something. I really liked it. And the room I was staying in had this full-length mirror, so every time I'd go by, I'd look at the dress. And then I started to see how this wanting to look at the dress, wanting to wear it—not noticing that this was unwise attention—was really feeding something. Then wanting something else, and something else, and sense desire would get stronger, and then bhava tanha would get stronger, because then I'd think about... I guess I thought I looked good in it, or I wouldn't have liked it. You don't like things you think you look horrible in. Anyway, just to see how all that happened. How am I relating to this?

And then I remember when I was a nun in Thailand for about a year. There's something really so nice—you just wear white there. You have three outfits, that's it. You wear one, you wash one. It's drying, you wear the other one.

And there's nothing to think about, about it. It's what you need. It's more than what you need in the heat—much more than what you need, as Bhante was saying—but you've got no choice. All this extra kind of wanting and meaning around something as simple as what you wear wasn't there. And that's such a relief.

I remember when I came back and was on staff here after that. I was standing one morning looking in the closet, having to decide what to wear. And it was so unpleasant. I was also caught in it—the wanting. What should I wear? Should I wear this? Should I wear that? Oh my God. It was so nice just to have three outfits and not even think about it.

But you notice I didn't stick with that, did I? It's possible I could just— When my mother was getting— now I'm going out there— the last few years of my mother's life, she had progressive dementia. But she was always, up until almost the end, very ladylike somehow. She took good care of herself, always looked really nice. So we called it "the uniform," my brother and sister and I. She always had a pair of black pants and a nice blouse—just a bunch of the same ones, because with dementia, it's really hard to make choices. She could just put on the same thing. We called it the uniform.

So you notice I didn't go that way. So we look at these things. And I do look at it. Some days I just grab something and put it on. And some days there's an "oh, and this and this and that." This is where we bring in our attention. We notice: how do we use things? Give awareness to that. And this is what can bring in, at times, just a simple sense of contentment—not using more than we need, using things not out of aversion but for the comfort, the ease, the continuance of this body and for your support in your life and in your practice. Attention to how we use things.

The next one is āsavas abandoned by patience—or the word used is sometimes "enduring" or "tolerating." I prefer "patience." I find it more helpful. Patience is one of the pāramīs. It's a really powerful force in our mind, something that we can develop whenever there are difficulties, on or off retreat.

"Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with flies and wind, burning and creeping things"—remember, they're sitting outside in the woods—"and bodily feelings that are painful, disagreeable. And while pains and fever of defilement might arise in one who was not patient, there is no defilement arising in one who is patient."

So what does that mean? We've all been working with this the whole retreat, right? Being with difficult aspects, whether external or internal. And we all know there are times we're not patient. I don't like "enduring" because that has a little tinge of disconnection—"This annoying sound is going to... I'll just endure it." But we kind of pull down, pull away, shut down, and wait for it to go away. That's not patience. Patience is really, as Suzuki Roshi would call it, the long-enduring mind, the heart—the sense of really just being present without reaction. Equanimity.

The Buddha said to his son Rāhula, "Develop a mind that is like the earth. For when you develop a mind or meditation that is like the earth, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain." And he says all kinds of stuff is thrown on the earth—beautiful stuff, ugly stuff, disgusting stuff. The earth is not horrified, humiliated, or disgusted because of that.

And he goes through all the different elements, giving the same advice for each one, including space. But this sense of "it's like this now" — the long-enduring mind is a big aspect of practice.

We have tons of stories about practice in Asia in terms of patience because the conditions are just so different. There's a lot that happens where you have no control whatsoever. And if you want to keep being there, you have to either develop patience or you just go nuts.

The thing about these stories that's energizing isn't like, "I'm so great, I made it through this as some kind of warrior." Sometimes you feel like that. But it's more that as we learn patience, something can really be with us. The heart, the mind, it truly relaxes, accepts what's happening without being so aversive, without being so caught up in it. And we can find we can really be at peace in the same circumstances that were causing us so much distress before.

Just little, simple examples. I'll go back to when I was a nun in Thailand. It was really hot in the hot season, and I had to stay in my kuti, which has a tin roof. I remember when I'd see the sun coming up in the morning — and you have three layers of clothes, long sleeves and underwear and long sleeves and a robe over, like Bhante has, and they're usually polyester — I'd see the sun coming up and my heart would just sink. "Oh gosh, will I make it through another day?" This is when I remember Ajahn Sumedho's line: "I can't bear it another minute, sweating through my robes." And then I'd find that I could.

Or one of the places I stayed at that time, quite some years ago — a Western woman being a meichi there, a nun, there weren't very many in the country. In a lot of the wats, the meditation centers there, they're also like parks. People use them like you would use a synagogue or a church here. So on weekends, a lot of people come, sometimes in buses, to hear a Dhamma talk, to take the eight precepts, to walk around in the beautiful surroundings.

I'd be doing my walking path and I'd turn around and someone would be right there with a camera in my face, taking my picture. You can imagine. Or they'd come up to my kuti and just stand in the door and stare in. "Oh, what's she doing?" "She's meditating." I didn't understand Thai, but I could tell that's kind of what they were saying.

So first it's like, "How can I stop this? They can't be doing this!" All the usual stuff. But you have to surrender. What are you going to do? You have to surrender to it. And then really finding that it's possible. It wouldn't be your optimum conditions, but it's possible to find the sense of patience.

Again, it's really bringing wise attention. What was fueling the kilesas? My sense of how it should be and how I could fix it and what I could do — that was fueling maha dosa and unhappiness and becoming. The patience allows the way to a peaceful mind and heart in that moment. And so that's really what we work with a lot of the time.

There's a saying from Patrul Rinpoche, who was a great Tibetan teacher. He talks about the parami of patience and describes three types of transcendent patience. I just want to name them because there's one retreat where those three would just keep coming through my mind and really inspire and support me.

The first is patience when wronged, when somebody treats you wrong. The second is the patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma — which we're all doing, patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma. And the third is the patience to face the profound truth without getting too lost in fear. It says "without fear," but fear will come. It's not abandoning facing the profound truth because of fear.

And at different times, that would just give me a little energy to keep going. Not that you should be perfectly patient, but it just gives a little energy to keep going.

The next one I find really interesting because it's kind of like the matching pair with patience. Because sometimes we think the Buddha is being very—or we can get very idealistic: "I should be able to be with anything." Have you ever had that thought? Usually when you're not able to be with something, right? "But I should be able to be with anything, and that was what the Buddha was saying."

But this next one is the asavas abandoned by avoiding. Avoiding what's too intense. He gives examples: a bhikkhu reflecting wisely avoids a savage elephant, a savage bull, a savage dog, a snake, a stump—okay, a stump, you don't trip over a stump—a bramble patch, a cliff, a cesspool, a sewer, frequenting or hanging out with unwise friends, evil companions.

I love this. Because he's not saying just be with anything. It's reflecting wisely. We look and see what is fueling, what is feeding the growth of the asavas—of sense desire, of becoming, of ignorance, self, self, self, confusion.

And so, okay, maybe we don't have savage elephants here, and the dogs that bark are always behind the fence. We have savage mosquitoes, but you can't avoid them too much. But often here, what is really intense, what we need to avoid, is when something too intense and too strong is coming up inside of us. And we've talked about this a lot, where what's coming up—the energy of the kilesa, of the trauma, or the fear, or even greed—is so strong. We're trying to be mindful, but the mindfulness energy just is nowhere near as strong as this really difficult thing.

And you know how we keep saying: then the wise attention sees that even in trying to be mindful, the kilesa is just growing and growing. That's when—I mentioned this a couple of times ago—Thich Nhat Hanh says, go look at the herbs at night. We say, sometimes that doesn't do it. Sometimes it's got to be a lot. So then we have to completely move away. Completely avoid.

There's no right or wrong in this, but it's really looking and seeing what supports. What supports coming back into a balance of heart and mind—not continuing to do what we think we should do if it's actually fueling the kilesas. So not to hold on to a view, but to use wise attention. And this is all mindfulness-based, to see what's really going on. It's very practical.

Therefore, that's why we're not doing this in Times Square. That's why we say, please give up your cell phones. It just makes it so much harder for no good reason. That's why so much of the time we're telling people, take your attention away from what's happening. Sometimes you even need to stop doing formal meditation altogether and just spend a couple of days taking walks, being quiet, drinking tea. Because that's actually more supportive of our ongoing freedom of heart and mind.

It's not always about doing formal practice. It's looking at all these different ways. What's feeding the kilesa? What's feeding the wholesome mind? In all these different areas of our life.

So sometimes the avoidance itself is difficult, because what I've discovered for myself is sometimes the thing I need to avoid isn't unpleasant. I've noticed if I'm really too comfortable, that can feed the sloth and torpor of just, "Ah, I just don't want to be with this difficult thing." And it can also feed sense desire. I'm not saying to create real unpleasant suffering, but I've just noticed in myself that too much comfort is actually not helpful, and I would avoid it. I think in some ways, the Eight Precepts' high and luxurious bed piece is along those lines. If you're just too comfortable, we just kind of start lolling around.

Looking and seeing and avoiding doesn't mean it's just what we prefer not to be with. If you're avoiding something and the avoidance is actually feeding aversion, you notice that as well. Okay, maybe avoidance isn't the thing. Maybe patience is the thing. What's helping to support the kilesa diminishing or not arising?

This isn't to make you crazy that you've got to go through it all, but it's really just to see there's all these different means, all these different methods, and the Buddha is offering all of them.

Okay, just two more and I'll say them quickly. The next one he calls removing. We've mentioned this as well. A bhikkhu reflecting wisely does not endure an arisen thought of sense desire or ill will or cruelty. She abandons it, does away with it. So again, we know this means what we've talked about as determination, as the sword of wisdom.

It's not always possible. So it's not done with aversion, but when with wisely reflecting, and there are times we can really do this. We've talked about it. We see that this particular line of thought is leading to nothing but more wanting, more fear, more agitation about the future. It's often agitation about the future, agitation about the past. And oftentimes we can go, "No, not now." That determination from skillfulness, not from aversion, not from pushing away. If it's pushing away, then just divert your attention to something else. But sometimes we can really say, "Not now."

When I talked a couple of weeks ago about having this autoimmune disease and seeing how the papañca and the future and the worrying was taking over so much—I really saw how with mindfulness wisdom, when it was present, and there'd be some unpleasant sensation in my body, the mind would go, "Oh no, how's this going to be next week, next year?" And I could say, "You know, not now. I really don't know. I don't know that. Let's just be present." And it was amazing. That could really happen. When there's enough mindfulness, wisdom, and you really see, "I don't need to do that now"—that's removing. That's abandoning. Let's think of it as abandoning.

If you're trying to abandon and the whole thing's just getting more and more ramped up, then you know it's not being done with wise attention, it's being done with wanting or aversion. So then you choose something else. Then it's usually really taking your attention away from that object altogether and moving to something completely neutral. Redirect the attention.

This is a place where the four brahmavihāras can be useful. You know, where we talk about sometimes substituting a thought—say you're annoyed at somebody and you substitute a mettā thought. Now, we all know half the time that doesn't work. You're saying mettā filled with aversion, right? And you can notice that with your wise attention and go, "Okay, the words are mettā. What's being fed is aversion." Shift to something neutral. You just look and see.

But sometimes, and the more we practice, it can surprise you. Someone was telling me the other day that it really works. Someone was bugging them and they just switched to muditā. And they were like, "Oh my goodness. It really happened." It's not even so much that you have to feel such a great thing, but first you're choosing a wholesome thought. So even if you don't feel the muditā, but you're not feeling the envy, that's already good. That's already good. Instead of, "Oh, no, no, I wish I had that"—"Oh, may your happiness continue." Even just flat, it's not feeding the kilesa.

So this is the place that you can explore in terms of abandoning these unwholesome thoughts that are really fueling the āsavas—you can explore using the phrases of the brahmavihāras, and sometimes you find that the phrase actually brings in something real, that you actually mean it, not expecting to.

And the last one, which is of course a whole talk in itself—don't worry, I'm not going to give it—is developing, because John already gave it: developing the seven factors of awakening. A bhikkhu reflecting wisely develops the seven factors of awakening.

So I'm just going to name them all. John spoke of them all. And they develop naturally through our meditation, but they also, even in daily life at times, we can tune in—like mindfulness, we can always remember mindfulness. So the factors are mindfulness; investigation of dhamma, this interest in what's occurring, not thinking about; energy, viriya, not shrinking back from the difficult; pīti, this kind of joyful interest Guy spoke about last night; tranquility, again Guy talked about last night.

Samādhi, collectedness, and equanimity. So those are the seven factors.

And as the Buddha said—this is actually in his Mindfulness of Breathing Sutta—mindfulness of breathing, repeatedly developed and cultivated, fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness, developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect the seven factors of enlightenment. The seven factors of enlightenment, developed and repeatedly practiced, fulfill true knowledge and deliverance.

So these are the seven ways he's talking about. All of them are different ways of how to live, how to really look and get interested—out of love for yourself and all beings—to see what's fueling the kilesas, the āsavas, and what's not, in this moment. And there's always some way that's available.

I'll end with a short quotation from Dipa Ma, who apparently had one of the more pure mind-hearts that we know of. I mean, you never really know another person's, but she says:

"There is so much sameness in ordinary life. We are always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. When greed, hatred, and delusion are gone, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now every day, every moment is full of taste and zest."

Zest is kind of like perky happiness.

So even in moments free from kilesa—and hopefully, as hard as it is, those moments give us the faith, as Annie said today, to keep on the path in all the aspects of our life.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 74

Perception Of Impermanence Leads To Awakening

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson offers a deep exploration of anicca (impermanence) as one of the three characteristics of existence, alongside dukkha and anattā. Drawing from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, she shares the Buddha's powerful teaching that even a fingernail's worth of permanence would make liberation impossible—it is precisely because nothing is stable that the holy life leads to freedom.*
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> *Wilson distinguishes between three levels of wisdom: suta mayā paññā (wisdom from hearing), cintā mayā paññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanā mayā paññā (transformative insight wisdom). She emphasizes that intellectual understanding of impermanence isn't enough—only through moment-to-moment mindfulness does the perception of change become truly liberating. She illustrates this through the touching story of Ānanda weeping at the Buddha's approaching death, showing how grief is natural while wisdom points us toward freedom.*
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> *The talk addresses practical obstacles to perceiving impermanence: our resistance to loss and grief, our assumptions of permanence in changing conditions, and our inattention to moment-to-moment flux. Wilson encourages practitioners to notice when they're assuming permanence—whether in difficult emotions they believe will last forever or pleasant states they try to recreate. She concludes with the inspiring story of Dr. Ariyaratne, demonstrating how deep understanding of anicca gives rise not to indifference but to profound courage and compassionate engagement with life.*

I think when I spoke about the First Noble Truth last week, I may have mentioned that the Buddha described three characteristics to all phenomenal existence, to all experience. One is dukkha, the unsatisfactory quality or nature of experience. One is impermanence, the constant change and flux. And the third is not-self, anatta.

So tonight I want to talk about anicca, impermanence. Sometimes these are called three Dhamma doors, you could say. Sometimes anicca is the experience, the perception that's just much more obvious to you, showing up frequently, and that becomes your way into reality. Sometimes it's the unreliable, the dukkha aspect. Sometimes it's the not-self aspect. Not to worry, because they all come together in how things really

are. They're all connected. But tonight I want to talk about anicca in particular—the perception of impermanence—because this is really how the Buddha spoke about it, about how it's freeing.

Here are two quotations from the Buddha, from the Samyutta Nikaya. "Bhikkhus," he's talking to practitioners, "there is no form, no rupa, no feeling tone, no perception, no volitional formation, no sankharas, and no moment of consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain the same just like eternity." Nothing, he's saying.

Then he took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail—like the handful of leaves teaching—and said, "There's not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change. If there was just this much form that was permanent, this living of the holy life for the complete ending of dukkha could not be seen, could not be understood. But because there is not even this much form that is stable, permanent, unchanging, this living of the holy life for the complete abandoning of dukkha is understood, is discerned."

That's a powerful statement. And in the big picture, as we go through life, of those three characteristics—the change, the unreliability, the not-self—the aspect of change, of impermanence, in a way seems the most obvious. Probably no one's going to really argue that things change. So I'm not here to give you all these examples of how things change and talk you into it, because that doesn't work.

This is the next statement from the Buddha, a little farther on: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, this perception eliminates all sensual cravings. It eliminates all craving for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all mana, all the conceit of 'I am.'"

Those four things mean completely awakened. When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

This, to me, is really the way in, the avenue to really explore both why it is that we don't recognize impermanence, and why it is that if we really understood it, it's not transforming our understanding, it's not uprooting all of these things. As the Buddha says, it's really not that things are permanent and then if we have a great opening experience, everything starts changing. Obviously, there's not even this much that's permanent. But we don't perceive.

Perception—and Annie's going to talk about this in much more detail in a couple of nights—but perception, the way the Buddha talks about it, is a very specific function of mind arising in every moment of sensed consciousness. Perception is that quality that

recognizes what's occurring. If I ring this bell, we recognize hearing, and then the mind knows it's a bell. That's based on memory, based on culture, based on a lot of things, which I'm not going to go into because I'm sure Annie will. But it just arises naturally. We name it bell, but maybe we don't recognize what that is. We hear a sound and we don't know. Half the time when we don't know, our mind just makes something up, and we think that's accurate. We don't really recognize how frequently our perceptions are not accurate.

Just to stick to impermanence, that's what the Buddha is saying. When the perception, moment to moment, of change, of constant change—when that perception is developed and cultivated—that opens us up into recognizing reality as it is. And that recognition, that wisdom, is the doorway to freedom, to liberation from dukkha, from confusion. That's what the Buddha is saying.

I want to talk tonight about some personal ruminations on the perception of impermanence and some of my own musings about perhaps some of the aspects that get in the way of our accurate perception at times.

The nature of insight, really one of the ways insight occurs, is simply that the perception shifts and we recognize things as they are. The Buddha spoke about three levels of wisdom, all of them useful, but different levels.

The first one, called sutta maya pañña—pañña means wisdom—is wisdom of what is heard, what is learned. This is helpful. If we never heard the Dhamma, we wouldn't be here. It's some information. I'm here talking to you; that's what is heard. To some extent, that's a level of wisdom. When we take it in and hear it, when we're able to hear.

The second level, cinta maya pañña, is described as our intelligence. The teaching goes in, and we mull it over. Not just thinking about things, but it's rolling around in our system. Like about impermanence—maybe you're thinking, "Well, yeah, I know things change, and that makes sense," and maybe you're not listening to me anymore, and you're clicking through your mind how things change. It goes in, and so it's a deeper level of using our intelligence, our experience. We understand it. But this is a level where often we think we know something. We all think we know impermanence, and it's not changing a thing in the way that we crave, the way we react.

Because it's not the third level of wisdom, *bhavana maya pañña*, which is really the insight level. *Bhavana*, you may recognize—I think Guy mentioned that's the word for mental development, mental cultivation. So we can't think our way into *bhavana maya pañña*. And if you could just believe that, you would save yourself so much agony in the next four to ten weeks.

Guess what opens up *bhavana maya pañña*? Just guess. What could it possibly be? Moment to moment, steady awareness of just what's arising in the whole field of experience.

So *bhavana maya pañña* is transformative. To me, it's like this insight where suddenly something shifts and we actually recognize on a deeper level. I kind of think of it like a cellular level. Wow. Everything's changing. Everything's moving around. And I don't like it very much. But it's a different level.

All three levels work together. But I think the confusion between the second and the third is when we think we really know something, but we keep getting caught: "I know, I understood that. How come I'm still craving? It doesn't make sense." We're impatient. That's another thing. Very impatient. It's been two weeks, folks. If you're already thinking, "Where am I? What's going on?"—put it down. Save yourself some grief and just be present here and now. The momentum's just beginning to build. Use that. Use that just to relax into this moment now. The next moment's going to be different. That's the rest of the talk.

So of course the misperception arises because of delusion. One of the ways I've noticed delusion shows up is in regard to not recognizing change and impermanence. On one level, change is obvious—disease, death, old age, losing things, winter. It's obvious, and still we're taken by surprise sometimes. This is where our mind knows it, but still it's like, "What? Now? Me? Can't be."

Especially for large changes that we feel as loss, as grief, I've noticed that part of the resistance comes out of what I spoke about last week: our habitual resistance, our instinctive pulling back from the unpleasant, the difficult. So we have this resistance to really feeling loss, to really letting in even the possibility of loss and change—not in a way of whipping it up, but just the loss, the sadness. There's a resistance to that, as if feeling sad is a bad thing. It's part of life.

So there's the misperception, the actively perceiving permanence in something that's changing. And there's just the inattention, this moment-to-moment inattention. The Buddha talks about this—perceiving permanence in what is changing. We actually perceive it wrong. And then on that perception we base how we think about things, the decisions we make, how we act.

And this is how we get so confused in life, and why we're suffering needlessly—because we're responding to what isn't really true and wondering why it doesn't work.

So I just want to share some thoughts on those three areas.

The first one: the sense of impermanence. It's so clear—this is what I talked about last week—that everybody in this world suffers loss. Grief, sadness. People and things we love go away for a whole variety of reasons, not just sickness and death. Circumstances change, things fall apart, and we really experience grief and loss.

And there's such a tendency that we don't want to know about that, that we just pretend it's never, never going to change. Then suddenly it's over and we're just thrown back. But this is really part of being human. To think that if I don't understand impermanence—because I feel grief when my partner and I split, or when I know someone is ill and going to die—or to pull back from that and think, "Well, if I was really a good Buddhist, I would just say, 'They will not be seen by me again,'" which is what the Buddha could say. And you think, "I can't do that." And so this whole thing seems crazy, twisted.

Of course we feel sadness. We do. It's human. It's human. And I actually personally feel that until we're complete arahants, there's going to be sadness. There's going to be grief at loss. We don't need to be afraid of that or resist it. It's simply an arising, really understandable experience of mind and heart.

And in some ways—I mean, it's because we're not completely awakened—but when we really can allow it, in my experience, when I could really allow grief, it has a kind of purity to it. Not the grief of "I shouldn't" or "they shouldn't," but just absolute loss. It's like this. You can't pretend it didn't happen. The grief comes. When there's no resistance, you just let it move through. There's a kind of sense of... it comes also out of the love that was there, and it just moves out again because it's also impermanent.

I experienced that a lot when my sister died quite suddenly. It was one of those things—you can't pretend it didn't happen. You can't get into wishing. That's just how it is. And so for some reason I had no resistance to the grief at all. It would come really strong at all different times of day for months and months, but I would just let it move through. I can't say it was sweet. Grief is grief. It's not pleasant. But there was really a sense that it was just an expression of the love. Sure, it had attachment, but that's okay. And it would move out. It never lasted that long. I could be laughing and happy the next minute. It would come and go. It's just part of life.

One of my favorite stories from the suttas is about Ānanda, who, as many of you know, was for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life his devoted attendant. Ānanda—he's a lovely guy in the suttas. You can really identify with him. He makes mistakes. He isn't completely awakened. He's friendly. He's relational. I don't mean to imply others aren't, but you just get a sense that you can relate to him. He's pretty up there—I mean, he's not a doofus.

One of the stories I like is in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, when the Buddha is telling his monks and nuns that he is going to die in a certain amount of time, three months or so. They're all having this big discussion about how to carry on the Sangha, what they should do with his remains, all of this. They're sitting there talking, and then all of a sudden the Buddha looks around and says, "Where's Ānanda?"

Ananda was always there when the Buddha was giving a talk. Where's Ananda? And he sent a brother, "Please go find Ananda."

And Ananda had gone to his lodging, and they describe it—he was lamenting, leaning on the doorpost. He was lamenting and crying: "Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away who is so compassionate to me."

Andy Olinsky told me—I didn't know this yet—this is a very well-known image. Later, when images were drawn of the Buddha's passing, there was Ananda lamenting against the doorpost, just crying.

So the Buddha of course said, "Go, monk, and say to Ananda: 'Friend Ananda, the teacher summons you.'" So Ananda comes to the Buddha, and the Buddha said—kindly enough—"Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So how could it be, Ananda—since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away?"

But he's saying this with great compassion. He's not dismissing him. He's saying, "How could it be, Ananda? Haven't I said?"

And then he goes on to really uplift his mind. He says, "For a long time, Ananda, you have been in the Tathāgata's presence, showing loving-kindness in act of body, speech, and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly, and unstintingly." So he's saying, just make effort, trust—in a short time you also will be free. And then he goes on and on to praise Ananda some more.

I share this to get that sense of how human it all is. And the Buddha knows that. But it's not like, "Oh, it's okay, it's okay, go ahead and cry." He'll never say that. He'll always say, "This is how it really is." And yes, you're crying now, but just have a look at how it really is, and your mind and heart will open to freedom.

I just love that story because we're all in it together. We're all human. So not to flinch away, or pretend we don't feel sadness or grief, or be afraid to really look unflinchingly at what's going on because it might change. It not *might* change—it *will* change. But in

this moment, just in this moment, it's how it is. Not to be afraid to love something because it might change. It will change. But if we're afraid of grief, then we're afraid to love. And he's not saying that. He's saying just see how it is, but still be human.

This understanding can really lead us to a much deeper acceptance of life, and a flexibility and openness. We don't stop caring. Maybe there's a more deeply held, less attached caring—but a more deeply connected caring—when we can really respond, when we're not trying to hold on and keep everything static. There's more flexibility to respond in an appropriate way.

This is from a book from some years ago called *Streets In* by Issan Dorsey. He was opening a Zen hospice in the heart of the city where many people with AIDS were coming. He writes:

We have always dealt with whatever came to the door. We had no formal plan for starting this hospice. We started the hospice because death came to the door.

People who were dying of HIV would come to the door. So he said:

You can deal with a complex, changing situation because you don't have to control it. You don't have to force it into an ideal pattern. You can actually allow it to be whatever it is, and allow yourself to adapt to what it becomes. Because this is the way we proceed, we have the ability to respond to the immediacy of the situation. And therefore, we have to be very practical. We can be very practical.

So that's taking this understanding into the world, starting a hospice. But this comes down to our moment-to-moment experience as well. And I'll get into it a little bit more, but how much are we trying to control our sitting to meet some ideal—whatever that is, whatever your mind has made up as the way it's supposed to be—and trying to force it into that mold? And then when it shifts, when we talk about skillful means, that's exactly this adaptability: "Oh, before it was like this, now it's like this. What's helpful?" Rather than, "No, before it was like this, and that's how it's supposed to be."

Let's get back there. Something's wrong. We don't recognize it. We're not open to how things actually are.

There's another sutta from another monk, just so you know they had to go through the same thing. This monk's name is Asaji. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove, and Venerable Asaji, who was a long-term bhikkhu, was sick, afflicted, gravely ill—basically, when they describe it like that, he was sick and dying. And he was really upset. He said he was filled with regret and remorse.

So the Buddha went to visit him and asked, "Are you reproaching yourself? Have you been lax in virtue, lax in your practice?"

He said, "No, no, no."

The Buddha said, "Well, if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to your virtue, in regard to your life, Asaji, why are you so troubled by remorse and regret?"

And Asaji said, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations." In other words, he could get concentrated. "But now I do not obtain concentration. And so it occurs to me—let me not fall away."

Can you relate to that? He's filled with remorse because before, when he was sick, he could get concentrated, and now he can't. "Let me not fall away" basically means, "Oh my God, I've lost it all. It's all gone."

Have you ever had that feeling here? "I've worked for two weeks and now all these thoughts—it's all gone. It's over. Let me not fall away." This is just that same experience on a bigger scale.

The Buddha responded, again, "Have I not told you? All that is subject to coming together is subject to falling apart." And he gave Asaji a whole discourse on anicca. The conditions are different now. And he says—I'm paraphrasing here—"By the way, in my teaching, concentration is not the essence. The essence is the insight, the path, the fruition of wisdom, of understanding."

So, get over it. It's like this now. The situation is different. Of course the conditions for concentration aren't present. But the conditions for wisdom are—seeing what's really true, recognizing the fact of change.

Change is inevitable. Whatever arises, arises due to conditions. All those conditions are constantly changing. They change, the effect changes, and then that changes into the next moment. There's no way to avoid this.

One of the good things about retreat is that in moment-to-moment practice, we have more chance to notice this on a more subtle level. Right now I was talking on the larger level of death and loss. It's a good place to start, because already, even in the most obvious cases, we don't really, really cellularly know it—or we wouldn't resist it.

Sometimes we wonder, why do we cling? When we see more and more frequently throughout a retreat—going in on the middle level and even on the bhavana-maya-pañña level—the fact that clinging is suffering, many people notice this. They're saying, "I keep clinging onto this, and actually it's just suffering. Why does the mind keep doing it?"

There are many ways to explore this, and we'll talk about it from different angles. For now, I'll address it in relationship to what I'm discussing tonight. This clinging, in terms of impermanence—impermanence is really the sense of constant flux and change, really no solid ground any time, anywhere.

And most of our little minds don't like that too much. We want the clinging—yes, we want the pleasant to stay, of course, and we don't want the unpleasant. But for me, I find underneath that, there's this sense of wanting some stability, looking for that stability in some external or internal experience, some sense experience, including experience of the mind—even though we see that they're changing moment to moment.

But a good one comes along, and it's like, "Okay, shut up. This is it. Steady, steady. This is peace. Now I've got it. Before I was confused, but now I understand." Don't you see how the mind does that? It's such a trip. "Oh, that was a view. I see through that. But now I know. It's like this."

But again, I feel the clinging in one way is a subconscious response to the unreliability of life, the out-of-controlness, the wanting somewhere stable. There's this from the Buddha in the Sutta Nipata, I believe: "The search for a resting place is burning." We burn from that search. "Not to need one is cool and peaceful." The search for a resting place—that's this: "This is it. This is it." The resting place means it keeps on not changing. Not to need one is cool and peaceful.

There's a Tibetan instruction: just rest at ease in whatever arises. Sometimes I think of that as our choiceless attention instruction. You're really recognizing and resting at ease in whatever arises. And just let whatever arises keep changing, because it will.

I just want to read you two short little stanzas from a poem by Galway Kinnell:

You scream, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard
as if clinging could save us.

I love that line: "You cling to me hard as if clinging could save us."

I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I've stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake screaming from,
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

And that's how it is to the mind that's looking for something to be stable—we are in the pre-trembling of a house that falls, and there's a kind of "I don't want to know," that resistance.

But when there's just the openness to this moment as it is, there's like a—it's not even surrender. It's just the ability, like with Issan Dorsey, to respond appropriately, to be as it is, and change comes as it will. The presence is with that. If there's some resistance, the presence is with that. That's simply another arising experience. Just not so trying to control, not so fearful.

But we can't do this with an act of will, by thinking about it. This is really where our practice, our moment-to-moment practice, takes us to explore this. And we all have moments of it, with this choiceless attention. Just a moment where, as the Buddha says, "One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." One abides—abides means to rest, to stay, to live; I'm saying that for non-English speakers. One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere. So we say, "Oh, here I am living"—it's already moving into the next. But we can't talk our way into it; just see.

This doesn't mean we don't care.

It doesn't mean that when we sense the pre-trembling of a house about to fall, we don't want to feel it. As I said before, you don't pull back, you don't stop loving, you don't stop caring. Actually, you become much more present, much more responsive.

The Buddha often used these images—the sense of impermanence, of death—as a way to wake us up, but not to suggest we don't care. Because we're really not fighting, not trying to control, no longer shrinking away from the possibility of tenderness or loss, that actually takes us more deeply into connection and caring. We're not so afraid of it, and we know it will go.

One short haiku that I really love, from Issa—he wrote this on the death of his young daughter. He said: "This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet." I just love that. That's how it is. And yet. It's dewdrop, gone like that. And yet. And that's, to me, our paradox as human beings. I don't know what it's like to be an arhat, but this is our paradox as human beings.

But with the courage and the wisdom that comes from the Dhamma, from really knowing and trusting, recognizing accurately the way it is—this only leads us into more ease and freedom. We don't have to land in "I don't want to know about impermanence." We don't have to land there. We can trust. We can open. Just meet this moment. Let the next one take care of itself.

So another way we don't quite perceive impermanence accurately, or we assume permanence, is partly from misperception and partly from inattention. I was once at a talk by the Dalai Lama, and he was talking about impermanence. He said—this is obvious, but I remember how he said it—he said, one of the reasons we keep being surprised by the endings of things is because we don't notice the momentariness of change. We think things arise due to conditions, last for a while, and then go away. But no, there's no "last for a while." Things arise due to conditions and every mind moment they're changing, but we don't quite recognize that. This is what I'm talking about—shaky ground. Not just everything's nice for a while and then it goes away. When we think that way, we really are shocked by the ending, because we didn't see the flux as it was going on.

So this is just what we start to explore. You don't think your way into it, but this is one of the great benefits of a long mindfulness retreat. We're just being mindful, bringing attention to whatever arises. And as you saw in the instructions the other morning, when the mind's somewhat stable and just unhooking from any particular experience, attending to whatever arises—keep on with this: sitting, walking, eating. There is no way, if there's any kind of steady mindfulness, that you can't notice stuff is changing all the time. There's no way.

You say, there is a way. Denial is a powerful force. People come in—no one's done it so far now—but I'll be on a retreat and someone comes in and says, "Oh, I'm just sleepy all the time. It's unbearable." And you know, it's really suffering. I'll say, "Really, all the time? Every sitting?" "Well, it was the sitting early before breakfast and then after lunch a little bit." Right, that was "all day." "Oh, no, maybe. But sometimes it was really a lot."

Or someone says, "I'm just having this emotion." And emotions can be strong. Part of what difficult emotions tell us is: "This is how it is. Even though I wasn't here before, I'm here now, and I'm going to be here for the rest of your life." Right? Doesn't it feel like that? "This is how it is. It's never going to change. Get used to it." We're going to be in disappointment, in grief, in fear, in heaviness from now until the end of November. How can we bear it?

I'm not exaggerating when I say that's what the mind starts to think.

So we begin to really look and see. We don't even have to look for endings—just stay present. How many sense objects arise and pass in just one sitting, just in one walking? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, thinking, seeing, hearing, feeling. How many in one sitting?

Sometimes people come and say, "Oh, there's too much going on." Too much for what? Something's wrong? There's so many things happening—it's supposed to just be quiet. Is it? Is it?

Once I went to Sayadaw U Pandita when I was sitting with him and all this stuff was happening. I knew—I don't know how I knew it from other retreats—that he would tell other people to keep coming back to the breath, to keep coming back to the breath. And I would go in and I would take one breath and then all these things would be happening. I would just be noting, noting, noting, noting everything that was arising. I was afraid he'd tell me to go back to the breath because it would have been really difficult with all this stuff happening. I was so afraid that I finally brought it up to him. I said, "You know, should I be at the breath more? I'm noting all this stuff. It's so much."

And he just looked at me and said, "Are you making this stuff happen?"

I said, "No."

He said, "That's anattā—out of control. That's what's happening. Note it."

This is part of what we start to notice. I think Guy mentioned just tuning in from time to time to seeing, awareness of seeing—not so much caught in the object that's being seen, but awareness of seeing. To me, that has been so helpful moving around through the day. Don't make a big deal about it. Just relax and notice that seeing is the process. Don't make it a big thing. It's really easy. But if I'm walking and just aware of seeing as the process, every moment it's different. You're just walking, and every moment the object seen is different. We don't notice that change because we stay with a sense of permanence, a sense of me, or we string it together with a story. But it's changing every moment.

When we're in this immediacy of mindfulness, just with what's happening now, this change, this momentary change starts to reveal itself. It's just how it is. No stasis, ever. No stasis, ever.

Some years ago on retreat, in a teaching with Joseph, a woman who was a longtime meditator with a lot of insight said to us, "Oh, I've been seeing for a while that everything changes all around me. All the experience is always changing. For years I've

seen that. But I finally got it—oh, I'm part of that." On this side of things too, it's constantly changing. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking—constantly arising and passing, different experiences.

I think of it like time-lapse photography. Say you're having a time lapse—they had one this spring, a camera pointed at that center garden there the whole time I was teaching. What is that doing there? They told me it was filming one of the plants.

I never got to see what they did with that. But that kind of time-lapse photography—if you plant a bulb and then just leave it, and it's slowly growing but looks fast, it comes up and little leaves emerge and it shoots and then the stem and the blossom and then it falls, dies, and goes back into the earth. There's never one moment where it's just this one thing. Each moment different, the preceding moment leading into how this moment can be, and this moment leads into the next moment. It's all part of the same process, but there's no moment that *this* is the thing. In constant flux, in constant change. That's us. That's everything.

There's no solid—see, this is how it leads into *anattā*, no separate self-existing entity, constant arising and changing. Thinking about it, that's where the mind might not be so happy. That's when the clinging comes in: "No, I want something steady." But not thinking about it, just being aware—it's like this, it's like this, it's like this.

The Buddha said the perception of impermanence, when it's developed, when one perceives impermanence, the perception of not-self is stabilized. And when the perception of not-self becomes stabilized, one who perceives not-self uproots the conceit "I am"—the *māna*, the comparing "I am"—which is nirvana in this very life.

So the perception of impermanence, not something you have to think about or make happen, is just a natural effect of perceiving impermanence again and again and again. It stabilizes the perception of not-self.

I've been talking about a moment-to-moment level of arising sense experience. On the slightly larger level of our personality, it's the same. This is from Mae Chee Kaew, who was a Thai nun from the last century, really a student of Ajahn Mun, which means she was a tough cookie, extremely. She says: "Everything that makes a person unique changes continually and eventually disintegrates. Each personality is constantly ceasing to be what it was and becoming something new. Those factors one tends to conceive of as self are impermanent and fleeting. Everything about bodily form and the mind's thoughts and feelings is without intrinsic stability and bound to dissolve." Everything bound to dissolve. For that reason, clinging to body and mind is a major source of pain and suffering.

That last part we know. But it's all bound to change.

Years ago—I always tell this story, but I like it—a friend of ours was a long-term practitioner. She used to cook a lot on retreats. So on this one retreat she was cooking, and she had a day off, so she was going to sit for that day. She told me later that the other cooks, who all knew each other well, were basically telling her what an aversive personality she was. Which she also agreed with—often aversion came up. But that's how we tend to do: "I have an aversive personality." So that's what she's being told. And we think, "I'm a fearful person," whatever our stories are. We might have a couple of them.

So she went to sit for this one day, and she said, "I'm just going to look really carefully." Because she knew how to practice. So she was just being present with her aversion—really steady with her mindfulness, not trying to pretend she wasn't aversive, but just being steady. Just sit down and walk and let whatever arises arise, just as we're doing here. And noticing, as she's being careful, what kind of thoughts and emotions came up.

She said, yeah, some aversive ones came up. But as she looked carefully, there were many, many kind, generous thoughts, many moments of generosity, many calm moments, many loving moments, many just spaced-out whatever moments, and then some aversive times. That's how it is. But then we take certain ones and go, "This is me." And other ones we completely ignore. "Well, that was a moment of *mettā*, but that was some weird freak of nature that had nothing to do with me, just because we practiced it. Left to my own devices, it's back to the aversion. It's back to the fear. It's back to the hopelessly dull, torpor-ridden, hopeless meditator." That's who I am.

This is why steady awareness matters. This is why continuity is your friend. Continuity is what allows clear recognition. And so yes, at times there's nothing to hold to, shaky ground. But more times than we realize—thank God you don't have to hold on to this. It's moving, it's changing.

Just notice how it is. Resting at ease in whatever arises, not having to take ownership.

In myself, I think when practicing—or not—but particularly when we're mindful yet caught up in a personality-driven scenario: "Oh, my aversion, what can I do?" We're mindful of it, but kind of caught in it, like we've talked about before. We think we have to think our way through it. Again, I know I've said this five times, but I'm going to say it again: you never have to think your way through it. You have to stay with it.

Sometimes the great renunciation is just to bring your attention into the simplicity of what's happening in this present moment. Just feel the foot on the ground. Just feel the breath. Just notice, "Oh, there's all this grief." Just notice the heaviness in the chest. Just this renunciation of surrendering into this moment. The story can just hang out there, but just let it be. That's like the great renunciation into freedom—taking refuge in awareness rather than keeping refuge in these stories we tell ourselves.

Ajahn Sumedho—I love the way he describes things—at one point he's talking about how we have ideals about what reality is, but reality... he was chuckling, and he goes, "The real isn't what you're expecting, I tell you." Just really look. And he says, "With steady awareness, we do recognize the nature of conditioned phenomena. Conditions are continually arising and ceasing in consciousness." Continually arising and ceasing in consciousness. And when with awareness we recognize this, we start to awaken out of our confusion and our delusion to the way things really are.

So here we're noticing again and again: conditions arising and ceasing and known in consciousness. This is arising and it's known. It's gone and it's known. This is known. This is known. Notice the endings. Notice the comings. Notice the constant change. And it's known. Taking refuge in the awareness, not in the story, not in the object.

In many of the suttas, when someone first awakens, becomes what's called a stream-enterer, there are different things they say—specific lines that indicate that. And one of the most well-known is, as they wake up: "I really see whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation." That's like the lion's roar of awakening, knowing it. "Oh, I see. Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation." It's a lion's roar of freedom.

So just a couple of ideas that come to my mind. Just noticing when you're assuming permanence. Because we have this misperception—we're saying notice the perception of impermanence, but notice when you're perceiving, assuming permanence. Anything you experience today: fear, anxiety, self-doubt in the mind—"How am I going to deal with this in the next sitting?" Any pain that came up: "Oh no, five more hours of this." Or when you had a good sitting yesterday and now it's not like that, and we spend, even though we pretend we're not, we spend very subtly trying to guide it back to how it was yesterday, because that was the right way, the better way. Never noticing that the conditions are completely different right now. Like Āsaji—he's sick and dying and he wants to be like how he was when he was twenty-five, sitting for fourteen hours at a stretch. Okay, I made up that specific detail, but the conditions are how they are now. Assuming permanence.

Ajahn Chah used to say, just say for whatever you're doing: "This is uncertain." When we think, "Oh, I wonder how I'll like lunch"—this is uncertain. "Tomorrow I'm going to be practice leader"—this is uncertain. "I wonder whether I'll sleep tonight"—this is uncertain. "Will I even get up and make it back to the room?"—this is uncertain. I mean, don't go nuts with it, but just have that sense, to notice when we're just assuming.

And yet we plan. It's not that we pretend, "Oh no, I'm just in the moment. Don't ask me to plan." No, we plan. We ring the bell. We come in here. We know what's going on, and we know it's uncertain. Anything can happen at any time.

To me, the more amazing thing is that I have all my stuff booked out for 2021. I mean, what a joke. It's uncertain that I'll even be alive in 2021, right? But still, we do that. We work with the relative, but we know this is uncertain. Just noticing that.

Another thing I notice sometimes is when you've been with something—difficult or pleasant, doesn't matter—and it leaves. We don't always notice the endings of things. Sometimes we do. But when you've been with something a while and it's gone, notice it's gone and kind of stay with noticing the gone-ness.

This is an example I always give. It seems silly, but actually it was a big insight for me. I was being really mindful while eating—being mindful and chewing, chewing, chewing, that kind of very slow, steady mindfulness. And if you notice, it doesn't taste good after about two bites, right? It's mush, mush, chew, chew, chew. Neutral, neutral, unpleasant. Just being with it, swallowing it, following it all the way down, feeling this movement. Then I said, "Oh, that was a concept." My mind was saying that's the food going all the way—that's a concept. The experience in the mouth when I swallowed, that was gone. It wasn't "this is an experience that's now down in my stomach." That's an idea. The sensations in the mouth were completely and totally gone. Notice that. That seems silly, but notice that. Notice how we assume permanence by creating these constructs of thought, saying, "Oh, this is all the same thing moving along"—like that time-lapse of the flower. It's different every moment.

So sometimes just notice gone-ness. When you go to bed thinking, "Thank God this day is over. It has been such a heavy dukkha day"—take a moment, if you can, to move aside from that aversive lens. Just reflect on it. And you'll notice all kinds of neutral, pleasant, other kinds of moments that went on. Just break that assumption of solidity and permanence.

The last thing I want to say is what I alluded to before—how when there's really this deep perception of impermanence, it's far from making us think, "Oh well, everything's impermanent, who cares? Whatever." It's almost the opposite of that. When there's

really the understanding of things as they are, instead of this resistance to life, resistance to experience, fear of the unpleasant, there's a complete ability to just open—just open fully into this is how it is in this moment. There's a real sense of opening to the wonder, the mystery, to vibrant presence. There's nothing to try and hold onto in the past or fear in the future, just totally here. As Byron Katie says, loving what is—just in this moment, awareness of what is and loving it. And from that, the response to life can actually give us much more responsiveness, the Brahma Viharas that Jill talked about, courage or willingness to meet in a much more flexible and sometimes courageous way because of the understanding.

I want to end with a little quotation from Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne from Sri Lanka. He's in his eighties now, his high eighties, but since the fifties he's been running a project called the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, which is really working in rural areas based on Buddhist understanding. Working with really poor people in rural areas, it's based on the Four Noble Truths, nonviolence, anicca, anatta. And he says it's based on the realization that "the impermanence and interdependence of selves in society and nature entails the deepest respect for all."

So he's really basing this work that he does, which he describes as political empowerment of villages—and these are really poor village people, rural people in Sri Lanka—on rural development through Buddhist principles, a nonviolent spiritual revolution to replace the structural violence and inequality that forms the basis of social order. He's really quite radical, but he's basing it on helping the poor rural people from a sense of understanding our interconnectedness, from understanding impermanence.

And I give you all that just so you understand this quotation from him:

"In 1952, a gangster was asked to kill me. I was just trying to be of service to students in our communities who were in need, and some people's financial or other interests were threatened, so they gave a contract killer some money. I heard about it, so I went to him. And I told him, 'This is what I'm doing. If you want to kill me, do it now, not in my school or with my students, because those places would have a bad name after that.' I didn't want other people's blood to be shed.

"So at that time, and even now, I have that courage. To let others live, if necessary, you sacrifice. It's a spiritual motivation. Because every moment we are born, we exist, and we pass away. Every moment. In our mind or body, is there anything that is permanent for two seconds? And when you understand that, when you practice it, you get a lot of courage. And even in death, you see life.

"So the killer, he was so good. Not only did he say, 'Oh, what a crime I would have done.' And one lesson he taught me: against our conscience, we don't kill. 'I was told that you are a very bad person, misleading students. Because we didn't have teachers like you, we became criminals.' And he changed from that day."

I just love that story. But that's really the sense of it—when we really understand anicca, the suffering of holding and clinging and narrow self-interest is seen through. It's really the doorway to freedom.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 75

Exploring The Experience Of Taṇhā (Craving)

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to bring satipañña (mindfulness-wisdom) to the direct experience of taṇhā—the thirst or craving identified in the Second Noble Truth as the origin of dukkha. Drawing on a teaching from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, she frames the entire practice as discovering both the nature of the non-deluded mind and understanding how the deluded mind works.*
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> *Wilson clarifies important Pāli terminology, distinguishing taṇhā (craving/thirst, which is always unwholesome) from chanda (ethically neutral desire or enthusiasm that can motivate skillful action like dhammachanda). She emphasizes that craving is not about the object itself but about the mental state arising in each moment—the narrowing of awareness, distortion of perception, and the tunnel vision that accompanies wanting. Through personal stories, including a memorable pursuit of a milkshake during retreat, she illustrates how craving seduces us with feelings of aliveness while actually blocking the peace we seek.*
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> *The talk explores the Buddha's teaching on four types of clinging: to sense pleasures, to views, to rites and observances, and to personality view (sakkāyadiṭṭhi). Wilson guides practitioners through Bhikkhu Bodhi's framework of recognizing gratification, danger, and escape in relation to craving. Rather than fighting or suppressing desire through willpower, she encourages steady mindfulness that allows wisdom to naturally dissolve attachment—revealing the unbounded peace available when the heart-mind is awake, present, and free from clinging.*

Last night when Jill spoke about the cycles of practice, purification and purity, it reminded me of this quotation from Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Dzogchen Lama. He said, "The main purpose of these Dharma teachings is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, as well as how the deluded mind works."

I love that because it's like both things are what's going on. I find that's kind of like all the noble truths. What's the nature of the non-deluded mind? The third and the fourth. As well as how the deluded mind works—one and two. Meditation practices work to uncover our innate wisdom purity by recognizing the obscurations for the changing, insubstantial appearances they are, thus revealing what has always been available.

I've always loved that quotation. I feel like it describes the whole breadth of our practice. Everything that goes on in our practice fits in one of those categories. Sometimes we're talking about and seeing the nature of the non-deluded mind, and other times we're exploring, investigating, learning about the nature of how the deluded mind works. So that's the level I'm talking about tonight—how the deluded mind works. But exploring it, bringing sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, bringing interest to the experience of these obscurations that he's talking about—exploring it with mindfulness and wisdom is what reveals the reality and lets these obscurations dissolve. Not hating them, not trying to get rid of them.

What I want to talk about tonight is the second noble truth: taṇhā, craving, thirst. The Buddha taught: "This is the noble truth of the origin of dukkha. It is this craving"—the word in Pali is taṇhā, and I'll get to that because it's quite specific—"which produces renewal of being, repeated existence, and is bound up with delight and lust, and seeks pleasure now here and now there. Namely, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, for becoming, and craving for non-becoming, non-existence."

I love that teaching because I think it really encapsulates part of our entrancement with craving—because it is bound up with delight and lust and seeks pleasure now here and now there. Oh yes, let's look here, let's look there. What's the problem with that? That's how to live a life! So the three kinds are craving for sense pleasures, craving for becoming or states, and craving for non-existence or non-becoming. Some teachers describe craving as not just greed, not just the clinging, but also the pushing away, the aversion—both sides of that on this level of the second noble truth. Tonight I'm going to be talking about exploring it as taṇhā, as thirst, as craving, as clinging.

I see this talk as an invitation to us to really get interested and bring our wisdom mind, to bring mindfulness and dhammavicaya—investigation of states, which is the beginning of wisdom—to bring this into the experience of craving and clinging whenever we notice it. Just as you might bring it to calm, as you might bring it to an interesting sound. Really no difference. And that's how we really start to see its nature.

I want to first talk a bit about language. Taṇhā, thirst—this word used in Pali as the cause of dukkha in the second noble truth—we translate it as craving or clinging. When we're talking in general in English, we speak about it as desire, as wanting. This is a very broad word in English, and it covers a range of states of heart and mind. Taṇhā, quite specific, translated as thirst, is kind of the closest to it. To me, anyway, this has been really important and helpful.

Often I hear people talk about skillful desires and unskillful desires. Using the word "desire" or "wanting" in English, they might describe a skillful desire to cultivate the Dhamma or to take care of your family, and an unskillful one—well, you know, make up the list. But to me, this completely misses the point and it's incredibly confusing, because the quality of taṇhā, of thirst in the mind, is not about the object itself. It's the state that's arising, the mental state arising in the mind and heart in a moment. That's the obscuration that limits, that distorts perception, that limits the range of mind, that disrupts, that hides peace. But as long as we focus on the object, we don't really get that. We keep looking out. And then we get really confused.

So let me go into the language a little bit. Thirst is this very specific yearning, leaning in, wanting. And it strengthens. I read somewhere in a commentary that craving is like a thief going into a house and leaning in for something. When they grasp it and take hold of it, that's clinging, that's grasping. So craving into grasping happens pretty quick. When we're talking about attachment, that's grasping—but it starts with the thirst.

Sometimes people say, "Well, what's wrong with wanting to take care of your family? What's evil about wanting to go on a vacation or wanting to have a nice meal or wanting enlightenment?"

And that's where we get all confused. It's as if, well, if we don't have thirst, tanha, how can we do anything? We would just sit around without wanting or aversion. You might laugh, but I can't tell you how many people have asked that question, as if craving were the only motivation for action. It may seem like it sometimes, but it really isn't.

There's another word—and there are many words; I'm not a Pali scholar—but there's another word in Pali: chanda. Chanda is ethically neutral, you could say. Whereas thirst, tanha, is never skillful—there's no such thing as "skillful tanha," it's one of the distortions—chanda is ethically neutral. This quality can be like a desire to do, an excitement, a willingness, an energy to do something.

So it could be dhamma chanda—the excitement, the interest, the willingness to practice the Dhamma. Dhamma chanda, enthusiasm for the Dhamma, is totally wholesome. Chanda can serve as a motivation for doing neutral things one needs to do, like taking care of the family. And it can also be unwholesome, unskillful. It can be the excitement of sense pleasures.

Actually, when we talk about the hindrances, the first hindrance is quite specific. It isn't lobha, greed. It's kama chanda, which is the excitement of sense pleasures. Kama is sense pleasures; chanda is this excitement, this enthusiasm for sense pleasures. That's the first hindrance, and that's definitely not skillful.

So just to give you a sense, chanda is another motivation, a mental quality that motivates action. And the intention—that moment of intention in the mind, the mental factor that gives rise to action before any action—is accompanied by and fed by various mental states present in the cetana. We could do something out of greed. We could do the same thing out of compassion. We could do it out of a neutral chanda, taking care of the family, all kinds of things.

So you get a sense of what I mean. When we say, "Well, what's wrong? It's a good desire to want X, Y, and Z," we're really missing the boat. The point is to look inside and see what's going on here. Let's explore the quality when it arises in the heart and mind, in the body.

This is the invitation to us: to bring in the potential to get interested, rather than fearing or hating or not wanting to see. Craving, thirst, lobha as the overarching kilesa when it arises—when we recognize a moment of this thirst, this craving or pushing away, we turn the attention back. We explore: what is its nature? How does it arise? How does it behave? How do we behave when we're under the thrall of craving? Just to keep watching, to keep noticing. Why and how do we get so seduced, so enchanted? Or are we actually seduced or enchanted? This is really the invitation to us—to explore this.

And as we do, just bearing in mind, we're only exploring. We're not saying we hate craving and we're going to stop it with an act of will. Because first, that doesn't work. And second, that would mostly come from aversion: "I'm not craving anymore!"

When we think of renunciation, of giving up the things craved, in my mind we tend to have, just superficially, a backwards notion of craving and renunciation. Our idea, as it's described in the way the Buddha articulates the Second Noble Truth, is that we think of craving as accompanied by delight. We take refuge in craving, finding pleasure now here, now there. This is where we...

habitually go for refuge when we're not happy or when we're looking for happiness. Without realizing it, we just go. Let's get this next good thing. Let's get this next nice thing. And we're looking for the thing and not noticing that little movement of wanting. I want this, I want this. It doesn't have to be so strong it blows your head apart, but sometimes it does.

Upadhyaya said once—and I'm going to say it, Jack Kornfield hates it when I say this, but Upadhyaya said, and I think it's great—he said, "Lust cracks the brain." When you're really feeling it, when you're really driven by it, that's how it is. And I mean lust for anything, not just sexual lust. "I've got to have that last piece of chocolate cake or I'll die." It cracks the brain.

But without recognizing that, without turning around and looking, this is our refuge for pleasure. And yet this is what leads us into complications, confusion, and suffering.

Renunciation sounds like penance—dry, dusty, non-joy, punishment. Something like, "I have to give up this thing I love and I'm going to be miserable." But renunciation isn't about the objects. It's about renouncing the greed that keeps us bound to samsara. When it's wisdom that renounces, not an act of will—when wisdom sees clearly and just puts it down—ah. The simplicity is joy. It's peace. It's ease. The renunciation is a movement of the motivation, not external. The greed, the craving has gone. So you don't miss the thing because you don't want it anymore. It's peace. It's really a whole different thing.

Let me offer some thoughts about exploring this. Coming back again to any object that we want—to use the English word—what's wrong with wanting to experience the sunset? What's wrong with wanting to have dinner, or take a walk, or have enlightenment, or have another piece of chocolate cake? What's wrong with any of that? And as long as we stay in that kind of rational mode—what's wrong with the chocolate cake? Nothing. What's wrong with the sunset?—we're missing it. And that's our habit.

So when you just feel it, turn around and see, because it might not be craving. It might be just a sense of the sitting's over, you walk outside with a sense of ease and presence and appreciate the sunset. You go out and tonight there are clouds. There isn't a sunset. You don't beat your head against the wall. You don't say the day is ruined. "Oh, okay, it's like this now." You come in.

But if you go out thinking, "This is the best part of the day," and there's no sunset—that's a clue. A clue that there might have been thirst. We need clues like this.

And at that point, not to start berating or judging yourself. It's, "Oh, great"—turn around and notice. Bring your wise attention. What does it feel like in the mind, in the body? What's the experience that we could be calling thirst, or craving, or wanting? What does the state feel like in the heart, in the mind?

Bring *satipañña* to it—mindfulness and wisdom—just the same as you would any mental state. Don't make it somehow more different. It's coming and going. It may come a lot, but it goes as often as it comes. Absolutely, as often as it comes, it goes. So you can really notice that.

Some of the things I notice about it—and not only me, and you might or might not—so these are ideas I'm throwing out, but look and see for yourself. That's really the thing.

When there's craving, this thirst, or grasping in the mind, we don't recognize accurately. I think we've said that before. The Buddha says that about *dosa*, ill will, aversion, and clinging, and delusion—we don't recognize accurately. The perception is distorted. We can't see clearly. We can get a kind of tunnel vision. We just don't really see what's happening, and our mind gets narrowed. Our field of awareness can go from just peaceful and fine to narrow, focused, and "me and other" very, very quickly, very strongly.

I can feel physically almost like the mind and the body are leaning forward, or if it's the craving of pushing away, pushing away. But I can feel a tightness. You may not—I'm not saying—but really looking to see what it is and noticing that sense of contraction, of narrowing, of not seeing clearly so we don't recognize the object clearly. We think whatever we're wanting...

The Tibetans have a saying that wanting puts feathers on the object, you know, kind of makes it all pretty. Have you ever noticed that when there's wanting? The thing wanted—it seems like it's so nice, whether it's a person or a piece of fruit or a vacation or whatever. It looks so pretty. When you first get into a relationship with someone, everything looks so... they're so nice. A friend of mine was saying years ago, she'd been with her husband for a while, and I asked, "Well, how is it now?" She said, "It's good, it's okay, but the love eyes have fallen off." She didn't mean they didn't love each other, but the perception—everything's beautiful, everything's nice—that craving piece wasn't there.

So, starting to explore that. Tejaniya describes how craving and also aversion distort perception. I like the way he puts it. He says *pañña*, or wisdom, recognizes the natural characteristics—the three characteristics—of any object, including craving. So when something's met with wisdom, any object that can be known through mind or any of the five other physical senses, when met with mindfulness and wisdom without the distortions of greed, hatred, and delusion, that is how the three characteristics—the impermanent aspect, the not-self aspect, the unreliable, unsatisfactory aspect we've spoken about—start to reveal themselves. Because that's an aspect of any object when met with

wisdom. That's why, in terms of the steadiness of awareness leading to wisdom, we don't have to have a special object for that to happen. Wisdom reveals the natural characteristics of the object.

Delusion—any of the three roots of suffering—covers up these natural characteristics. That's what Annie was talking about with the *vipallāsas*, the distortions of perception. Delusion covers up the natural characteristics, but it does not cover up the object. So we still see that piece of chocolate cake without recognizing its inherent unreliability—that it's going to be gone really soon, and we may not feel as good after it's gone as we think we're going to feel, especially if it's our second or third piece.

I heard Andrea Fella saying once how you can't rely on your mind. She said your mind will say, "Have another piece of cake. It's good for you. You'll be happy." So you have another piece, and then your mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you."

Delusion covers up these characteristics. We see permanence. We see beauty where there's not. We see satisfaction where there won't be. But the object we still see, and that's where we get confused. When the insights come and wisdom's there, those scales drop off.

So seeing how wanting, how craving, limits the mind, limits the perception, narrows our field, and leads us to all kinds of actions based on misperception...

The Buddha said that greed, hatred, and delusion—we're talking here about the taṇhā, the craving—may be understood as a maker of measurement in that it imposes limitations upon the range and depth of the mind, of the citta. It narrows everything into this object and what we want.

Let me give you a story as an example. A friend today was asking for one of my "top ten" old moldy stories. This isn't one of those, but it's of the same vintage—one I normally would have retired by now, but it really fits here. It fits perfectly for seeing how craving distorts, how it limits, how it gets us involved in all kinds of activities based on wanting.

This may have been thirty years ago. I was teaching in Yucca Valley in the desert of Southern California with friends. We used to teach there every year; I really liked it there. One afternoon during what was then a three-week retreat, it was quite hot. Another friend who was teaching with me and I were sitting and talking, and someone had come to visit us—I have no memory who, but someone from outside, not one of the meditators. We were sitting, having a perfectly friendly, nice conversation.

At one point, this person mentioned they had just driven through Joshua Tree, a nearby town, and there was a new little restaurant. They'd had a milkshake there, and it was really incredibly good.

My friend and I were sitting there. We didn't say anything. We just looked at each other. We knew we had about an hour before the next sitting. And without saying a word, both of us—our energy and interest in the conversation with this third person—ended. Really ended. Without being completely rude, we ended the conversation and ran to the car, heading to Joshua Tree.

As I remember, we got there—it was only five minutes or so—at about five past three, and the place had closed at three.

So we're like, *ugh*.

But this is where craving really takes over. It had already taken over; it had already narrowed everything. What had been a perfectly pleasant, peaceful afternoon became driven by a goal.

Notice this—this is one of the things I notice about craving: it feels enlivening. It feels really natural. "Oh, great, I have a mission!" Have you noticed that? "Now I have a mission." Well, sometimes the mission is compassion, but a lot of times it's just greed.

You're having a quiet afternoon at home. "Oh, I could go to the store and buy that thing. Oh good, I've got something to do." Notice that. Or notice when you're just sitting and it's all peaceful, and then: "Let me check the tennis scores." There's not even a tennis match happening that you care about, but let me just check. Just for something to do. Something to want. It gives a feeling of being alive. This is one of the seductions.

So that was already going on. Anyway, the place was closed. So we said, "Well, let's turn around and drive past the center and back into Yucca Valley. Maybe there's something there."

We had both been coming here for many years. We knew very well there was nothing there. We knew, but still. So we're driving. I was driving. He was looking. As we get into Yucca Valley, and our time's getting short because we have to be back for a sitting, he looks over and goes, "Oh, great, yogurt cafe. Go over there. Go over there." And I looked. Where? He pointed. It said "Urgent Care."

This is a true story. You're laughing because you can recognize. This is what craving does.

Lungpho Dan, who was a Thai forest monk, a disciple of Ajahn Mun, gave a sweet re-interpretation of the Four Noble Truths. He says, "The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering"—the Second Noble Truth. "The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is dukkha"—the First Noble Truth. The mind going out to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering. The result that comes from all the hoo-ha of running around to get your milkshake is the unreliable, the dukkha. "The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of dukkha"—the Fourth Truth. "The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering"—the Third Truth.

That's what we're doing here with our practice: seeing the body and the mind clearly, moment after moment. And in a lot of moments, there's beauty—the wholesome states, the seven factors of awakening, and so forth. In a lot of other moments, there's craving or aversion. The moment of mindfulness that can lead to wisdom can meet them both equally, really being present. Because as we've said, mindfulness that isn't distorted by kilesa feeds the wholesome. Mindfulness that's really present with kilesa—present with the clinging, the wanting—but where the mindfulness itself isn't distorted by wanting, that's not feeding the craving. It's starving it.

That doesn't make it go away. And this is where we can get confused—we think mindfulness is the agent that dissolves. It's not. It's wisdom. It's wisdom that sees through the kilesas, that really stops feeding them their causes, and they dissolve. But steady mindfulness is the condition that allows wisdom to arise.

The Buddha spoke about these areas where cravings strengthen, and I want to go into this a little bit. He talks about four areas of clinging. There are these four types: clinging to sensual pleasures, which we've talked about a lot; clinging to views; clinging to rules and observances; and clinging to sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. These are four really common moment-to-moment experiences that we get caught up in clinging to.

The first one, sense pleasures, I'm not going to talk about much because we've really mentioned it quite a bit under the hindrances. But even though we're quite aware of how seductive the movement into clinging to pleasant sense experience can be, we still can sometimes not recognize when that's happening. We don't quite see, as I was saying before, how we can fall into that kind of unaware taking refuge in sense pleasure for happiness, for ease, for peace.

When we talk about renouncing, we often talk about renouncing the pleasant sense objects. And that's certainly a path of simplifying, so there's less things to want. We may be able to notice—I'm saying wanting. I should be saying thirst, or craving.

Notice it more. But again, it's about what's going on in the heart-mind.

Tejaniya—I just remembered something funny. Someone was saying to him, "Oh, after you became a monk, after you had lived a full life, such a renunciation, living so simply." And he won't put up with that kind of romanticizing. He just said, "Hey, you can be a monk or a nun, and maybe there's only two or three things that you're able to want, but you can have the same degree of clinging to just those two or three things as you had to everything else in your life." You can get rid of the objects, but if you don't look at the clinging, it can still be going on. Or you can get rid of the objects and just sit there wanting what you don't have.

So turning around and looking, renouncing the desire, the attachment that keeps one bound to samsara—that's what it's about. That's where the freedom comes in.

In terms of exploring craving and how it works, Bhikkhu Bodhi—well, the Buddha talks about this, but Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it as three movements in the unfolding process of insight around craving. It applies to everything, but we'll start with sense desires. It's the gratification, the danger, and the escape—three unfolding aspects of exploration, of wisdom, really bringing sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, to the experience.

Next time you notice some real wanting coming up about any sense desire, explore this. And it could be as simple as wanting to look at somebody. I mean, really simple. That's a sense desire—seeing. Have you had that experience where someone's walking past and you just want to look so badly? You can't stand not to look. Have you had that experience? Sometimes you really can't not look. And then you look. And did that make you happy?

My guess, based on some extensive experience, is that more often than not it led into māna, conceit. "Oh, that one—they're better than me." Or "Oh, that one, look at them. Oh no, I'm doing much better than I thought." Or we just say, "Oh, look at that. They had nice socks." And then, "Oh, look at the bees! Look at the bees."

It's rare that you look and go, "Oh yes, craving... yes, pleasant... yes—it's gone, gone."

So that's a little side effect. But noticing the gratification—in that seeing there wasn't so much gratification. So maybe pick something where there is some gratification, because there is. Of course we appreciate the beautiful. We've talked about this before, so I'm not going to beat it to death, but we're aware of that. And I love that the Buddha recognized this. Of course there's gratification. Of course there's sense pleasure, or we wouldn't crave it. We wouldn't get attached. He's very clear about it.

And the danger—of course, we've talked about that too. The danger being the impermanent, unreliable aspect. That's one danger, the danger he talks about. You can't count on it.

I'm adding another danger. Not exactly danger, but it's really delusion—that when we're in the thrall of clinging, we don't recognize the natural peace and ease of mind and heart. We can't. The clinging is what blocks it. We're clinging, we're wanting because we want to be happy, and the clinging itself is blocking it. Recognizing that—that's really the poignant nature of clinging.

So I'm putting that under danger. It keeps us looking in the wrong direction for the peace and ease that's available when we're really awake and aware and present and just fully here in the moment.

Why are there moments when there's a sense—you're just mindful, you're just walking, nothing special, and it's not like a big neon sign going off—but it's just so... fulfilling isn't even the right word, but I think you know it. It's just so nice. What is it? It's the heart-mind that's really present and not clinging and not aversive and not needing anything else to make this moment complete.

That's available anytime there's wisdom and awareness in the mind and we're not lost in clinging. Clinging can be an object that mindfulness wisdom recognizes, the same as recognizing a foot lifting.

It's possible. So I'm saying this so you don't become afraid of or aversive to recognizing clinging or aversion. Just recognizing it—the mind that's clearly recognizing in that moment of mindfulness—the mindfulness itself isn't clinging. It's recognizing. When it is clinging, that's when we're all caught up and we don't know.

So the gratification, the danger, and the escape. But back to the danger—another danger. There's a really addictive quality. Delusory, but also addictive. It reminds me of the way certain things work. My brother used to have a hound dog. It was just a pet, but hound dogs are a certain kind of dog that's really bred for hunting. Of course, this poor dog lived in downtown Atlanta. It didn't get to hunt. But its nose, its sense of scent, was so highly developed that when he let it out in the backyard, it would just be running around the border with its nose to the ground, smelling everything that any animal had left there, completely driven. And in the house too—if anyone new came in, or if they left any piece of food or any kind of dirty clothes anywhere he could get into, his nose would just take him right there. And you could see it wasn't like he was a bad dog. It was just that pulling, that pulling of the nose. It just ruled him.

And it feels like that to me with wanting. Yes, what could I want? What's the next thing? What could I want? It keeps us leaning into samsara. I think maybe someone has said there's a Tibetan description of samsara as the urge to correct something. Let's just get it a little better, a little better, a little better—and that's endless. A little better, a little better. Well, this is good, but if you just did that, it could be a little better. And we keep believing it, even when we know. We keep believing it.

So another little story. I was talking with a very wise friend who's well aware of everything I'm saying and more. This person has a habit of having a couple of cookies every day after lunch—certain kinds of cookies, only certain kinds. Of course, we all like what we like. And we were joking around about clinging. He said, "It's not clinging. There's no suffering in that. There's no danger in that." And I said, "Well, what about when you don't get a cookie?" He goes, "Oh, I'll always get a cookie."

That's what we think. I don't have to look at it too closely because it's all going to come around. I can always get another one.

The escape? The escape isn't getting rid of all the cookies in the world. The escape is the steady mindfulness that allows for the clear seeing of what's going on—having to have that cookie. If there's a day I get up and I can just feel that wanting, the driven quality of needing the cookie, and there's no cookie, and I can just be with it—steady mindfulness, mindfulness, mindfulness—at some point the wisdom can arise: Oh, look at that. The suffering is the wanting. It's not not having the cookie. It's the wanting.

And at that point, the escape is really when that wisdom just dissolves the wanting. The wanting dissolves, not as an act of will. I can refrain from eating the cookie as an act of will. But I can't make the clinging to it, the idea of it, go away as an act of will. By really tuning into the wanting—feel it, be with it, watch it—often, often it dissolves from the wisdom. Oh, that doesn't make sense. And either the wanting dissolves or it stops arising, because it doesn't make sense in the light of wisdom.

And this is a huge relief. It's really something we can trust because it doesn't mean you have to be incredibly on top of everything, figuring it all out. You just have to keep being mindful morning, noon, and night, really interested in everything that's coming up—the beautiful and the difficult. Reality reveals itself. This is the escape: the dissolution or the putting down of the clinging.

So the next time you notice you're caught in wanting—not just a passing moment that came and went, but you're really caught in it—like wanting to look at somebody or something that's not huge, not the biggest thing in your life, but some little one that

comes up here. I heard several people today, I must say, discussing where they like to sit at lunch. And it sounded like they all like to sit in the same place. I'm hoping that's not true, but that's how it sounded.

Okay, that's a good place to just look at the clinging. If it's coming up—it may not, but when it is—or you're walking and you want to look, or go have tea, anything like that where you can really feel the thirst arising, the wanting, the world narrowing. Instead of just the walking, it's all about the milkshake. It's all about the tea. It's all about that place at the picnic table.

So just stand there or sit there with awareness, gentle awareness, and let the wanting do its thing. Let it run itself out. See how it feels in the body. See how it acts in the mind. See what goes on. See if you're going to die from it. Probably not.

And at some point, I promise, at some point—whether wisdom comes in or not—it will go away. It might come back again, but it will go away because everything goes away. Keep paying attention. Turn back and see. Stay with it until it's gone, and then notice what's happening in the mind and heart. Unless another wanting arose in a split second, if there's some space, some quiet, you might notice the peace. The ease, the peace that comes when the mind and heart is awake and present and free from clinging.

Ah, this is the peace we wanted in the first place. All this hoo-ha—we think it's making us happy, but it's just trying to get rid of the wanting. And here that peace is available twenty-four seven.

So it's really worth exploring, turning around. The peace is right here.

The Buddha, talking to some nuns, praising one for her mindfulness, said: "Her mind remains firmly established in mindfulness, and thus her mind is unbounded. She knows in truth that liberation of the heart, that liberation by wisdom."

So even just for a moment—maybe it's not completely unbounded—but notice the difference between that tunnel vision on looking at something, or the seat, or whatever it is, and the peace of presence without any reference point. Unbounded because there's no reference point of anything, of me and other. It's just thisness, wakefulness. Just notice that.

Anandamayi Ma—she was from a different tradition, an Indian saint—she was laughing once when people were saying, "Oh, you're such a great renunciate." She said, using different language of course: "It's you who are the renunciates, renouncing the great joy of divine presence."

Yes, I'll pick wanting over the great joy of divine presence any day. And we do, again and again and again.

Now, in terms of this exploring when wanting comes up, sure, there are times—plenty of them—when you're mindful and present, but the wanting is just so strong you can't not follow it. Have you seen that happen? And again, we're not talking about big harmful things—hopefully the precepts hold—but just minding your own business.

I remember years ago, someone was telling me they were walking past the food tables. I guess after breakfast or sometime, the meal was over and there was a bowl of fruit there. They weren't aware of really wanting the fruit. But as they walked by, their hand just shot out and grabbed an orange. "Whoa, that's not me! Bionic arm or something, nothing to do with me."

So sometimes it's like that. But other times we can see it clearly—that wanting to look, you know. You just can't bear it, so you look.

Okay, bring awareness along with you when that happens. Don't think, "Oh, I blew it, so why bother paying attention." No, bring awareness along with you. Still notice, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, notice how wanting does its job. Notice how craving is doing its job. Its job is to lead you by the nose like a hound dog. Notice what the effect is. Keep on paying attention.

Like when I was giving the example of looking—if you keep paying attention, you do it and... nothing. It becomes pretty obvious that it's not really very supportive of anything other than distractibility and more anxiety in the mind. Sooner or later, the penny drops, if there's steady attention. If there's not, if we stop paying attention when it's not going how we want, we don't get the chance to see. That's why steady attention and natural awareness reveals the truth.

All right. Well, talking about attachment to views and attachment to sakkāya-diṭṭhi—each of which is a whole dhamma talk. So I'm not going to go deeply into them. I'm just going to mention two lines about each.

Views—this is huge. Attachment to views. What do we mean? What does the Buddha mean by views? It's really thought. A thought of "this is how it is" and attachment to it. So he describes it as thinking, "This alone is true, everything else is false." Unfortunately, our views don't quite come that clearly stated—but that's how we feel. And of course we have views and opinions. It's not saying don't have them, same as it's not saying don't appreciate sense pleasures. It's the attachment that's the issue.

I don't think I have to go very far to illustrate how this plays out in the world—with politics, with property, with religion, with all kinds of views. The suffering, the anger, the hatred that comes from attachment to views.

I just want to briefly mention what we can explore here on retreat: attachment to views about how practice should be, how *your* practice should be. I'd be really surprised if there was someone here who didn't have some views like that. But often they hide from us. We're not really recognizing that we have a view. And you'll be in some feeling of dis-ease or discomfort, in struggle with what's going on. You come in and report to the interview teacher what's happening and how bad it is. And we're like, "Well, that's just what's happening. What's the problem?" But you feel it should be like this, it should be like that. That's a view.

The breath should be like this. How often I should be with the breath. Choiceless awareness is really the higher practice. Choiceless attention is for lazy people.

And really being with the breath is the appropriate practice. How it was in that last sitting—that was it. I finally got it. And now it's not happening, so it's all gone to hell.

But often these views aren't really... we don't quite recognize them, but we're actually in conflict because we're attached to them. A lot of the self-judgment that Jill spoke about can arise from something unpleasant that's happening, but often it arises from a view that there's attachment to—we really believe it's true without recognizing it. And sometimes they can be changing. You see through one: "Oh, I get it. That was just a view." And now I know how it is. I watch the mind do that all the time.

Once I was practicing in Burma and I was doing walking meditation. It was fine. Everything was fine. And I just started to notice a little dis-ease. Something not quite right. I stopped and said, "Okay, what's the thought in the background there?" I just got quiet and opened the awareness to see. And it came up. It comes up because: "Oh, it should be better." That was the view I was attached to. That's a hopeless one—"it should be better," whatever that means. And I was suffering from it because of the conflict with what was actually going on.

So I just want to mention this—to tune into views. There's perception, and immediately there's a thought about what that person's doing or what it means or what's happening, and right away there's a view and an attachment to it. You can see this is a huge topic, but I just want to bring it up to start tuning in. When you're feeling a sense of struggle with experience but you think you're present, just check: is there some idea that I'm really believing about how it's supposed to be in practice right now? Seeing it, bringing it into the light of day, the light of awareness, is really helpful.

Sakkāya diṭṭhi means personality view. And it's really—again, this is a huge talk, I'll only just mention—it's taking in a moment, because it arises and passes moment to moment like everything. In a moment, it's taking any aspect of experience—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, sense experience, any of the mental factors—taking it as me or mine. It's really a grasping, a sense of craving, leaning into, and then grasping. Whether it's "my hearing," "my aversion," "my sensation," just the whole sense of me, all the thoughts that we have.

I think Jill talked about it a lot last night, describing ourselves. But thoughts can come and go and just be empty. When there's clinging to them—"Yeah, that's really true"—and you say, "I really am such an angry person," clinging to those thoughts and not noticing the others... that's sakkāya diṭṭhi.

I talked a little bit about that when I spoke about impermanence last week, about my friend who everyone was telling she's an aversive person. That's sakkāya diṭṭhi, yes. "Those aversive thoughts are who I am. That's me." Assuming that there's any kind of unchanging, steady-state entity here, rather than seeing that yes, there are arising thoughts and feelings and sensations, changing and arising and changing in every moment. So when she sat down and looked, that's what she saw—not a big ball of solid aversion, "this is who I am, unchanging."

Even the body. When you sit and feel sensations coming and going, coming and going... "this is my knee"—it's very different. Get a feeling for the difference when there's just thoughts coming and going, and suddenly it's like, "That memory when I was in Girl Scout camp—now that's me." And you get a whole sense of me and an idea through your whole life, but it's just a thought that's coming up now, and there's grasping at it. Sakkāya diṭṭhi. Coming and going.

This is incredibly brief for something that's very complex, but I'll just put it out. Explore it. Play with it. It's another thing to investigate when we're feeling stuck. And for us, a lot of time here, it will be with thoughts, with memories, with descriptions of ourselves. "I'm an angry person." "I can't meditate." Or "I should be more with the breath."

"Or I don't have any concentration." Or take your pick: "I'm hopeless"—all the stuff Jill was saying. Or, as I was saying to someone today, "I'm going to be the next Dalai Lama." That's the other side of it. "It's going so good. This is really how it's going to be." That's the same thing—sakkāya-diṭṭhi. It just doesn't matter what the story is. It's that grasping, the holding to it.

Watch. It's really fun to watch when you bring in mindfulness and wisdom and see it's a process arising and passing, and it isn't personal. As soon as we're clinging, it feels personal. "What do you mean it isn't personal? It's me, right?" But then watching the process come and go, how can that be me?

There's just a seeing, and it's pleasant or unpleasant. And there's a thought: "Look at how they're walking. They're walking so well, and I can't even put one foot in front of the other without getting lost in thought. And it's the third week. Why don't I just hang it up?" Notice that. What triggered it? Just seeing and unpleasant. Then you remember all the thoughts of how useless you've been in all these years of meditation and before, back to kindergarten, everything bad. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

And then you forget about it, right? Because you get lost in another thought. And then you wake up and, "Oh, it's so nice. I feel the grass. I feel the wetness, the breeze. I'm so present. It's so lovely. I'm so awake and aware. It's amazing. I am going to be the next Dalai Lama." Sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

And we're thinking it's the same me. Where's the same me there? It's changing completely—again and again and again. Really fun to explore. The me who needs that seat in the dining room where I can't possibly enjoy my lunch. The me that thinks, "If I just sit in this proper way and tilt my head like that and hold my hands like this, I'll have that great sitting like I had before." This is attachment to rites and rituals, by the way—how to make it be a certain way.

So I'm afraid I'm going to stop here because otherwise it will be too much time. But these areas of grasping, just explore them. I'm just dropping it into explorer mode.

I want to read one thing from the Buddha about clinging. "Agitation through clinging"—I love this:

"How, bhikkhus, is there agitation through clinging? Here, the uninstructed worldling"—that's the puthujjana—"who is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form."

He gives those four ways of identification. That form of ours changes and alters, right? You're feeling good and then you get a headache. The form changes and alters.

With the change and alteration of form, her consciousness becomes preoccupied with the change of form. Agitation and a constellation of mental states born of preoccupation with the change of form remain obsessing her mind. Because her mind is obsessed, she is frightened, distressed, and anxious, and through clinging becomes agitated.

Can you relate to that at all? I hope so. We're doing this all the time.

Regarding feeling—vedanā—as self, perception as self, any volitional formation, any mental action as self, or consciousness, the knowing itself as self. And when any of those change and alter, when we're regarding it as a self, we become preoccupied with the change. Agitation and a whole constellation of mental states, born of preoccupation, remains obsessing the mind. And we get all involved in what's the change and how can we fix it.

Turn around and notice the clinging. Instead of getting into the whole story of what can I do—oh, clinging is like this. Clinging feels like this. And I find for myself, even just coming into "clinging feels like this" already, the peace of steady mindfulness and wisdom starts to be palpably available. Clinging is like this. You don't have to fix it. Just really be with it.

And just moment after moment, there's the opportunity to rediscover the nature of the non-deluded mind, to re-recognize, as Ajahn Amaro says, the peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body when it's not obscured by craving, clinging, confusion.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 76

Courage and Trust In Our Path

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses a central paradox of Buddhist practice: how to maintain undaunted courage and total commitment to liberation while simultaneously cultivating absolute non-clinging. She explores what she calls "hitting the wall" moments—those times when practitioners feel shaken in their motivation, doubt their progress, or resist the unfamiliar territory that deep practice reveals.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from Sayādaw U Paṇḍita, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and Mingyur Rinpoche, Wilson examines how our views and expectations about awakening can become obstacles. She discusses the "cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi" (personality view) that limits what we believe possible, and Trungpa Rinpoche's concept of "nostalgia for saṃsāra"—our attachment to familiar patterns even when they cause suffering. The Buddha's teaching that "nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as me or mine" serves as both inspiration and challenge.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that the path requires a fundamental shift in motivation—from wanting awakening as an attainment to simply loving awareness itself, moment by moment. She illustrates this through a moving story of Master Sheng Yen, whose unwavering commitment to being a monk sustained him through ten years in the army. The talk concludes with the Buddha's teaching that "unshakable deliverance of mind" is the true goal of the holy life, reminding practitioners that if we cannot find truth right where we are, where else do we expect to find it?*

When I was thinking about what I wanted to talk about tonight, I kept finding my mind going in two different directions. I wanted to talk about two things, but they're like opposites—complete opposites of each other. How could I put them together? Then when I was sitting this morning, I had a revelation: this is one of the many paradoxes of the Dhamma. They totally belong together; they just seemed like complete opposites to me.

What I want to talk about really is what I call undaunted courage—not fearing freedom, the sense of the vastness of the path and the totality of our commitment that's called up again and again and again. And this motivation that is called up is absolute non-clinging. How to have total commitment and motivation without any striving or

clinging. That's the paradox, but that's our path. I'll share my thoughts, but basically you have to figure it out for yourself. This is one of those talks where I'm actually talking to myself as much as I'm sharing with you all.

We've talked about the Four Noble Truths, and really the fact that the path is vast, is profound. It encompasses every aspect of our life. There's nothing left out if we're really seriously taking this path to heart. When we talk about what the Buddha talked about—the third noble truth, the ending of suffering—one would think that is why we enter in and what inspires us to keep going on the path. But here's where it gets interesting: Is that really something that is an inspiration, a motivation for each of us?

It's talked about in different ways. I'm not going to give a whole talk on that, but sometimes it's described as the sense of the heart and mind completely freed from greed, hatred, and delusion. Or the deathless, the unconditioned. Or as the Buddha often said, the mind of non-clinging. Absolutely nothing is worth clinging to. Nothing can be clung to. "One who knows that nothing is to be clung to directly knows everything"—that's a quotation from a sutta.

So with this, does one's mind open to that as a possibility? Sayadaw U Pandita, who was a very strict teacher, very embedded in the Burmese Theravada modality of the scriptures and the commentaries—he used to talk about a moment of pure mindfulness, real presence of mind, free from kilesa, free from the torments of greed, hatred, and delusion. He would call a moment of mindfulness a moment of freedom. And then there's the idea that absolute freedom is the complete liberation of a heart and mind where greed, hatred, and delusion no longer arise. But even a moment of freedom from clinging, from greed, hatred, and delusion—a moment of mindfulness, a moment of freedom—this is something that's accessible to all of us.

What the Buddha was saying, really, in terms of the vastness of this path and what it calls out of us—it calls out commitment, it calls out everything. But at the same time, as Ajahn Buddhadasa was saying (he was a Thai forest monk who died in the late 1990s), in a talk he gave to Thai people that's now well known in the West because it was translated by Bhikkhu Santikaro, he speaks about Nibbāna for everyone. That's what he's really saying: Nibbāna is for everyone. That's what the Buddha said. "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. But it is possible, so I ask you to do so." Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as me or mine. It's like a clarion call.

We start out thinking, "Oh, be nice, maybe I'll get rid of some stress." And we find we're moving into a whole other depth and direction that we may not have had any idea of when we first started. I find this potential of cultivation of the heart-mind both deeply, deeply inspiring, really motivating, and also at times—depending on the mind state—extremely daunting, extremely challenging.

Freedom from clinging—yeah, I got that one down. We're headed that way. You know, you've been here just about a month now. You're getting adrift, right? It's not quite so straightforward, right?

So this actually really motivates and inspires me to think of the uncompromising way that the Buddha spoke and shared his awakening, and that this is possible for us. In this motivation, the Buddha never lost sight of two things in his practice: not to shrink away from the struggle, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. So here we're in the "don't shrink back from the struggle." And the next I'll get to with absolute non-clinging.

Don't shrink from the struggle. This is the paradox.

What I find really interesting in my own practice, in my own life—because practice is our life, it's not just the retreat—and in talking to so many people over so many years, I see it again here. Four weeks into practice, you're all in different places. Each person's particular path is unique, even though the processes and the truth of things are the same. Each person's process is unique. But everybody is really in there, going through so much stuff.

From now on, you're probably getting a sense of the sine waves of practice. It's not that you're doing something wrong, that it keeps going up and down and up and down. People come in and say, "Well, what's going on?" And now people say, "Well, I don't know. I don't know what to say. What was happening yesterday—well, that's over. I don't know. Yesterday was incredible, but today it's horrible. I don't know what's going on." And I think, great. You're really here now. This is really dying into the practice. This is what's happening.

And so you can see, sometimes you're seeing a lot. There may be a lot of insight into particular personality patterns, difficult or suffering personality patterns. You may be noticing more and more wholesome states arising—the Brahma Viharas, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom. You may be seeing different aspects of the three characteristics. And it doesn't just come up in neon lights: "Now you're getting an insight into impermanence." It kind of slowly seeps in. Sometimes you get a hit, but it's kind of slowly

seeping in. The fact that you start to notice you've had fifty-two emotions in the last three hours—"What's the matter with me?" Nothing. It's not you. This is impermanence. Just sit back and let it roll.

So sometimes we're really having a lot of insight. And we think, even if we try not to, back there we go, right—yeah, it's clicking. This is how it's supposed to be. And then, right, then either... "I understand impermanence now. I've got it. That's in the bag, right?" We all know this. "I don't have to go further with it."

The next day, a mental state comes up and you're like, "This is how I've been my whole life." Every memory that comes up is from that mental state. "This is how I'm going to be the rest of my life. It's completely hopeless." You come in, the teacher points it out, and you kind of nod and go, "Yeah." But you walk out and go, "What do they know? I know. This is how it is."

And then at some point we wonder, but what's the point? I'm going through all this. I see it so clearly. And all this stuff comes back, at least as strong as before, if not stronger. What am I doing here? What are they talking about? This doesn't make any sense. And I could be watching the baseball game.

A friend on staff was just saying, should I go to Joseph's group? Should I go to Carol's talk? Should I go home and watch the baseball game? I said, this could be your night to get enlightened. He said, you think I could get enlightened watching, rooting against the Yankees with aversion in my mind? Slim chances are slim.

This is a moment of our life. What we all have is sometimes you think, I'm going for the baseball game because what's the point anyway? I could sit on the cushion and watch aversion, or I could watch something enjoyable and feed aversion. Either way, you know.

Okay, I'm not advocating that. But we start to really see. It gets hard to trust. And this is just normal. Honestly, this is normal. This is how it is for all of us.

But what gets interesting to me, the piece I want to talk about, is the vastness, the uncompromising nature of our commitment—which of course you can't make a commitment and have it stay; it's coming and going all the time. Our understanding of what we're doing deepens as wisdom grows. Our motivation ebbs and flows, comes from different places. Aspiration may change.

So sometimes over periods of practice—and this is a good long chunk of four weeks—I want to talk a little bit about what I call times of hitting the wall. And I don't mean hitting the wall where it's just really difficult and hard to be with, as Jill was speaking

about last night. No, that feels like hitting a wall, but you're still practicing with it. That's not what I mean. That's part of it. But there are times when, for different reasons, something happens and it may shake not just doubt as a hindrance, but it may shake your sense of motivation or sense of purpose. Sometimes people say, "Oh, if awakening includes this, maybe I didn't really want it," kind of thing. And it's poignant. It's just a passing thing.

But I want to highlight a few of these because I think it happens to most of us at some point, where you feel a little shaken. The kind of thing where you're just in a mind state, looking back over years of practice, and you think, I've been practicing for X number of years and this is what's going on. This hindrance is still taking over and I believe it. And it's not just that momentary, normal aversion, but somehow deeper in that moment.

I want to pinpoint a few of these because I think they're fascinating and important to recognize, to include as part of all of our practice. Because once we recognize, oh yeah, this happens, then we can look and see. It's a rare person who doesn't come up against this.

And much of this sense of shaking your motivation, shaking your commitment, the sense of "well, this can't be right"—a lot of it is due to whatever idea or view you might be holding in the background of your mind. Often not recognized: ideas about what's supposed to happen, or how practice is supposed to be, or what the trajectory should be. You all know how we do this. But it can be a really deeply held belief, and when it just isn't aligning with the actuality of our experience, it can breathe this sense of "well, this can't be right, I can't do it."

It's a rare person who doesn't experience this. There's a line from the Buddha where he's talking about sense of self, and he says, "But in whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." I want to say that about whatever ideas our mind and thoughts might have about what freedom and awakening are going to be like. In whatever way we conceive, the fact is ever other than that. This mind—what we know—we can't know what we don't know.

We can't imagine from this vantage point. Those of you who are older, in my age group, will remember Krishnamurti. Some younger people don't know who he was, but he was very well known in our day. His famous line was "freedom from the known." The known is an idea that we project—what awakening is like, what a mind of non-clinging means. All kinds of stuff gets projected. We want to know. We want a sense of where we're going. And we all talk about it, but really, at heart, we can't know. We simply can't know.

I want to give a few examples that came to mind. The first one I mentioned in a talk the other night—it's really obvious. When we have known how things have been, when we know how practice works, we don't recognize changing conditions and we take it personally. I mentioned in my talk on impermanence the story of Bhikkhu Assaji, who was ill and dying and really upset because he couldn't get concentrated anymore. And the Buddha's response was essentially, "Hey, conditions have changed. And anyway, awakening isn't about concentration." But that's something we can all relate to—taking it personally. It's sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, that we're putting on it. "I am not able to do this thing"—this thing being concentrated, or seeing through impermanence, or whatever it is. "This thing is what has to be happening for the path to develop toward freedom. And I can't do it, although I used to be able to. So clearly I've gone backwards. I'm failing." Not far from "what's the point, I can't do it." As Assaji was saying to the Buddha, "Let me not fall away." And there's a lot of suffering in that.

If we can see, "Oh yes, there's a view here, I'm comparing to impermanence"—fine, it's recognized and it's gone. But sometimes it goes deeper than that. There's this insidious sense: "I can't do this. I can't do this." Maybe I could before, or maybe it's something that's talked about or we've read about or heard about, and it hasn't occurred in our experience. And very deeply the sense can come in: "I can't do it." Again, this is sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. It's like a cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the cage of personality view, where we're viewing it all through our personality and the ideas we have about this personality, this body and mind. We just think we know how it is. "It's like this, and obviously I can't do this. I've done everything to the best of my ability, and this is how it is. It's over."

But we don't even know. We don't even know what's possible. We don't even know what directions the practice might go, and we don't know what's possible in the experience of this mind and body.

I know in my first long retreat—I'm a person without a lot of energy, and many people think you need to sleep a certain amount. In daily life, maybe you do. But then something happens here. A lot of people have been saying they're waking up really early, filled with energy, and the mind goes, "Oh, but I need so much sleep." They go back to sleep and actually wake up feeling crappy—because you don't need it. And even if you do, who knows? We're in the cage. This is a simple example. There are things much grosser than this, and much subtler. We're in the cage of "this is what this mind and body can do, it can't do anything outside of that, so why even try?"

And then it can go further: "Well, don't push outside your comfort zone." Sure, when you're really suffering and difficult stuff is coming up, the idea of pushing outside the comfort zone, colored with aversion, is not helpful. But when we're interested and there's energy and the practice is going along, and we think, "Oh, I'd better go to bed now because I might be tired tomorrow"—

No, you have no idea. You have no idea what's happening now. I can remember many times I'd think, "I've got to go to bed now, I'm falling asleep on my face," and I walk out into the dining room, and then my body just starts walking back and forth. I feel like the dhamma took over. My mind wants to go to bed, my body's going to do walking meditation. So the mind might as well come along with it.

And that's a simple example. But just not to die into the idea of "this is all that's possible." Look and see. I don't know. We don't know. We just don't know.

Don't be afraid of your own aspirations. When things aren't going well and you're running into one of these walls—"Well, I just can't do this. This is what concentration should be like"—for some reason, concentration is one of the bugaboos that people often get really caught on. We'll say, "But there's a lot of mindfulness." "I don't care. There's not concentration." "What about calm? There's investigation." "Anyone can investigate, but concentration proves it's going somewhere, right?" And there's nothing you can say to bust through that. If you just keep going, keep going, you'll see through it.

Don't be afraid of your own aspirations. Don't say, "Well, it can't happen for me. I'm just a nudnik and I'm doing my best. But I'll never experience freedom from clinging. The best I can do is shuffle through the retreat and maybe feel a little more at ease at the end and have some nice moments. But nothing's ever going to happen for me." The cage of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the cage of believing that—just see when it's like that. Who knows? Die into this moment. See what's happening.

So that's one kind of hitting a wall.

Another one is what I alluded to earlier: when we're starting to see painful, suffering habits of our mind. Maybe personality habits that we're starting to see—self-hatred, for example, or any personality habit, greed. Or dhamma habits of clinging. And we really have time where we're seeing it coming up with interest, really experiencing the deluded nature and the suffering aspect of it. And you think, "Wow, that's so interesting. I really see." Whether it's the personal pattern or the clinging pattern, you really get it.

And then it keeps on coming, more and more. And then, especially if it's a painful personality pattern, you not only experience it, you not only get angry and yell still, but you exquisitely experience the shame of it because you're much more aware through the whole process. And people have said, "What? This is making me more neurotic, this practice. I'm just more aware. I'm suffering."

It's a phase. It's not making you more neurotic. But you think, "This isn't how it's supposed to work." And it can shake our faith if you let yourself keep believing that.

Sayadaw U Pandita used to talk about "don't stop within." Don't stop within. One aspect of that is not being satisfied merely with wholesome states of mind. It's something we can experience when there are really beautiful, wholesome states—whether of collectedness or joy or mindfulness or interest or calm. Of course, the habit of mind is going to cling some. I'm not talking about that. I don't call that stopping within.

We just watch that. That's exploring how clinging works and how it kind of freezes things.

But sometimes it can be quite a profound experience—deep equanimity, not just some moments on retreat, but in your life. I'm not just talking about retreat here. You come out and you feel, for me, for example, much more equanimous, more balanced, much more at ease and open and flowing with things. And I can see this part of the mind goes, "Well, that is good enough."

Sometimes we can see for ourselves—and this just requires a lot of honesty as we go through our life of practice—how as we begin practice, most of us just want to get rid of some suffering. That's normal, and that's all we know. So the motivation will deepen and widen as our understanding deepens and widens. And sometimes you might really see, and it takes honesty—no one else has to ever know. You just look for yourself. You say, "Oh, actually, really my motivation was just to get more comfortable." But now I am more comfortable. Sometimes people feel a sense of the urgency or the motivation kind of going out. Okay, you can cruise. This is good enough.

But when you really have the Dhamma bugging you and the wisdom is growing, that won't do it for long because nothing stays. That sense of balance—you still have more, but it'll come and go. The wisdom will keep waking us up, will keep looking, will reassess, will reconnect with our motivation and really find that sense of looking. Yes, do I truly trust that at moments it's possible to free the heart and mind from clinging? Is that a possibility? Do I think it's just a lot of hogwash, or do I really believe this? Find the way to motivate ourselves again in whatever way. Don't just stop within in that way.

Another thing that I found really interesting in myself, frequently on long retreats particularly: as your practice is deepening, the sense of clinging is so strong, seeing a lot of habits of personality view, and they're getting shaken up. And sometimes there's a resistance, a fear—this is the best I can put it, maybe different for you—at losing a sense of myself, a sense of some kind of identification with a particular personality or how I feel about myself. It's hard to really put it in words because when I lay out my personality, I think, "Well, am I attached to that?" But there's something that can come, a sense of... it's working too well.

And sometimes the mind starts throwing out ideas of how liberation might be, though we really can't know. But if liberation from clinging means I don't love my family anymore? If liberation from clinging means I don't care about my grandkids, or I can't enjoy music, or I can't tell the taste of good food from bad food, or I just won't bother—whatever our mind makes up—everything's just going to be a dull gray blob and I don't care about anything. Is that what we're talking about? That's not too enticing, right?

So our mind makes something up and it can create this sense of shaking. If I'm not going to care about engagement with the world, I don't want to do it. Notice when that comes for you. See what it is and don't believe the thought, because the mind can't know.

I did notice one point on a retreat when I was in Burma. I was really in there, but I saw how the mind was really happy to give up all the unpleasant aspects of my personality and things of life. But it wanted to somehow hold on to the pleasant ones. No, I can still get to have all this stuff! Remember what I was saying about craving, *tanha*—it's not about the objects. It's about the quality in the heart, in the mind. "No, if freedom from clinging means I can't have music, I'm not going there." And again, we've missed the picture.

But it's interesting just to see how our heart can come up against these kind of walls. And for a while, we bounce back and go, "Uh-uh, no thanks, not me."

Trungpa Rinpoche calls it—I think someone mentioned this—nostalgia for samsara. Even though there's so much clearly unnecessary suffering in the reactive formations of my personality, the way I react to things when there's wanting, when there's identification, when there's fear, there's still some kind of comfort. Comfort with just feeling comfortable with the way we're used to being with ourselves in body, in mind. That's what I call a comfort zone. It feels a bit like putting on an old, tatty, dirty bathrobe that

you've been wearing for forty years. You just love it and put it on. It looks like crap, but you just don't want to get rid of it. Nostalgia for samsara. In the cage of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the mind creating moment to moment.

So just moments of moving out of the familiar—it's uncomfortable. The mind likes to be familiar. I've felt in myself at times, more noticeable in deep retreat but it can happen in life too, that it feels like a series of small deaths.

A death of—I couldn't even say to what—but it feels like a death to some aspect of belief, of my personality, or some way I'm so familiar with being. I'm really familiar with being this cranky person. Who would I be if I was friendly to people? That's exaggerated, but it just feels familiar. We just want to hunker down there. And the practice is calling us actually to open into the unfamiliar, into the unknown, every single moment.

Nibbāna for everyone.

It's a rare person who doesn't come up against some of these challenges or many others. These are just the ones that came to my mind. It's challenging. It's demanding for everyone. No part left unexamined in terms of all aspects of our life.

But these times when we're butting up against the discomfort, moving out of the comfort zone of body or mind, or just saying, "No, this isn't familiar, this can't be right, I don't know where this is going"—those are really, on retreat here, the valuable, juicy moments. Not to get something, just to open into, to practice stretching our trust, our motivation, our commitment.

Commitment to what? Not to any result. And this is the paradox. We're totally motivated, committed to awakening from suffering. Yet any idea of what that should be like and leaning into it is striving. So what do we commit to? What's the motivation?

Freedom from clinging is absolutely uncompromising. So what's required—this is how I think of it—what's required is moment-to-moment total commitment to open fully into the unknown of this moment right now. This moment right now is all there is. And the complete willingness to trust, to open into it with awareness, is the commitment that's called forth from us again and again.

It shakes us up. Awakening shakes us up, shakes up our views of the world. Enlightenment doesn't confirm us, gratify our sense of self, make us feel all comfortable and nice and secure. You know the feeling of how nice it'll be when I'm enlightened? Guess what? Guess what isn't around for that? The sense of "me" is what gets seen through.

You don't have to get rid of it. It's just seen through as a construction that arises and passes moment to moment. Another sankhāra, another mental construction. It's seen through.

And so all of our views, beliefs, attachments, ideas, strategies of self-interest—they're all going to be challenged. And a lot of the holding and a lot of the discomfort we feel, often subtle and unconscious, is around that. Just some subtle sense of who I am and what I want is being challenged. But we can't think our way into this. Don't even think about it. Our support is simply moment-to-moment awareness.

I'll read this from Ajahn Sumedho:

"As one begins to realize or to recognize non-grasping as the way, then emotionally one can feel quite frightened by it. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real starts falling apart and it can be frightening. But if we have the faith"—and faith I say as confidence—"the willingness to continue being aware, to continue bearing with these emotional reactions, and with awareness allow things that arise to cease"—I just want to say, as if we could stop that—"to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Being awake, being aware."

So the way my mind works, what really is the again and again motivation—I don't say total motivation, but it's just called up from us again and again and again—is this willingness to trust and surrender into this moment, awareness of just what's happening. How do we continue to discover the courage, the wisdom, the humility to do that?

It's really a shift of motivation. Not the motivation to awaken, but a shift away from our habitual, worldly way of doing anything—to lean in, imagine, try and get there, try and make it happen—all the stuff that turns into striving. It may begin as some vega, as real urgency, a lot of energy. You bring it to practice, you know how—

As practice goes on, you can come and be really present at the beginning, putting in a lot of energy that's balanced, and then somehow it gets all screwy and striving comes in. Have you noticed that? There can be enormous commitment and energy without the striving, but just given the habits of our mind, sooner or later we start leaning into some idea or some experience, and the striving comes in.

So the motivation, for me—and again, this is my personal way of thinking about it—shifts from attaining to what Ajahn Sumedho says: to being aware, to being awake. When? Only right now, in this moment. It's all in the motivation. It kind of shifts from wanting awakening to just loving awareness—not in order for anything else, but just because that's life in this moment.

I'm going to read a couple of different voices about this. This is Ajahn Sumedho again. He said, "We have an ideal in our mind of how reality should be, but that's not how it is." I heard this on a talk, and he was laughing as he was saying this—the ideal versus the reality. "Life is fair and unfair. There's pain and pleasure, success and failure. It just keeps going like this. With steady awareness, we begin to recognize the nature of conditioned phenomena—conditions continually arising and ceasing in consciousness. When with awareness we recognize this, we start to awaken out of confusion and delusion to the real. We recognize the real." And he says, "Awareness is not a state, not something we get behind and observe. It's a recognition. It's a verb." And then he says, "Because the real isn't what you're expecting, I tell you." And he starts laughing.

Now from Andrew Olendzki, who used to be the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies: "As sati grows, as mindfulness grows, our attention, our mental capacity, gradually shifts from the objects of attention to the process of being aware. This involves an attitude of letting go, of not holding on so much to the object, abandoning attachment to it. The mind is a dynamic process. When the mind is stuck on what has arisen, it is rigid and limited. But the mind that is letting go moment after moment keeps opening to the emerging flow." Just opening into the moment. Opening into the moment.

Now Mingyur Rinpoche: "We give attention to the object of meditation to support the recognition of awareness. The target is not the object. Awareness is what's being cultivated." Remember, we've talked about this when we talk about choiceless attention. It's the steady attention, the steady awareness that we're cultivating, not the object. And if you're doing metta or samadhi practice, even though the object is ostensibly steady, it's really the steadiness of awareness that we're cultivating on the one object.

Back to Mingyur: "We recognize the quality of the mind, not just the phenomena perceived by the mind." So we've said that there's whatever's arising in the knowing of it. We begin to recognize more and more the knowing, the quality in the mind. Mingyur continues: "Discovering our own awareness allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of the mind, which is independent of the conditions and circumstances and independent of our emotions and moods. Awareness does not increase or decrease whether we are happy or sad. We don't attain awareness; rather, we learn to recognize it." The same thing Ajahn Sumedho just said. "And again, as we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness, we start to recognize that awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind. This allows us to discover a sense of peace and stability that is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feelings."

So you get a sense of this—just opening, exploring, exploring this awareness of what? Of whatever's arising in this moment. And for me, it's really helped. I'm not being aware of this pain so it gets better. I'm not being aware of this pain to get more concentrated. I'm being aware because this is what's occurring now.

And when you're really focused on the object, you don't notice the mindfulness, the awareness. But the more and more we really begin to trust—okay, awareness with whatever's occurring, whatever's occurring—then we start to recognize, as Ajahn Sumedho says, how conditions come and go. We start to get, at moments, just an intimation of this potential of ease and peace that is not dependent on what's occurring. But as soon as we're being aware *so that* we can feel that, it's moved again into wanting, leaning forward. And you can feel the difference.

So I just want to talk a little bit about this sense of really just loving awareness as awareness—not to get anywhere, just to surrender into the unknown of this moment, because that's all there is.

There's a story I've told often before, but it's been a very helpful image for me, even though it's about someone else and is, of course, complete projection of my mind. But it works anyway.

I was staying at Ramana Ashram, Ramana Maharshi Ashram in southern India at Arunachala, Tiruvannamalai. It's a big ashram, very well run, and there's a building that has in one part what's called his samadhi—different from how we use the term; it's the marble tomb. One of the things people do is circumambulate that. That's the practice. And in the other half of the room, separated by a small barrier, you can sit and do whatever you like.

Every evening, for half an hour before the meal is served, the people who live and work and run the ashram—the women and men—come and sit and do Vedic chanting. Many of the people staying there come and just listen.

So I was there one night listening to the chanting. And at other times, of course, I'd walk around the samadhi. It was really interesting to see and be part of all the different energies of the people walking around. Sometimes you could just feel the wanting—maybe more in the Westerners, because I could relate to wanting to really see what Ramana was talking about, wanting to really be free. Other people were prostrating with such devotion. Others were walking around talking with each other, not paying any attention at all. But it's this walking around the samadhi—it's the practice.

So they were doing the chanting this evening, led by the president of the ashram. The way meals work there, you sit in rows—I don't know how many people at one time, maybe a couple hundred. They're very clear about who belongs; they know if you're meant to be there. And when it's your day to leave, you couldn't get in to eat because they know you're not there anymore. It's amazing how they know who you are.

You line up sitting on the concrete floor in rows facing each other. For a plate, you have a banana leaf—no utensils. And the people who run the ashram, led by the president, come by with big pails and give you the food. He does this every night, the president. He comes and serves everybody the meal.

So they were doing the chanting, and now comes my projection. At the end, it finished, and he got up—just so simple. He got up and walked around the samadhi, and it just felt very simple and present. Then he went off to serve the meal.

To me, this is an example of the simplicity—the simplicity of awareness and presence. Not having to do some big showy thing, not needing some amazing, interesting experience that's worthy of awareness. You can see how much I've projected, but it's really helped me so much—this sense of the shift from wanting and needing awakening, the shift from wanting to understand, to just the simplicity of total awareness with what's happening now.

You get up, you walk around the samadhi, and you go serve the people there. Whatever's going on in your mind and heart, you take it with you. To me, that's like this shift from wanting something to simply loving awareness.

And whatever's occurring now is all we need to surrender into, to open into, to bring us back, to help us re-recognize awareness. You don't need anything else. Just opening into the unknown of what is.

It's radical, really. When you find yourself somehow in a struggle, when stuff isn't good enough, and you come to us, we just say, "Well, just look at continuity through the day." And you think, *No*. But just get up and brush your teeth and walk into the hall with full loving awareness of that.

Awareness doesn't care if it's aware of how the toothpaste feels on your teeth or if you're having some incredible, beautiful bliss experience. Awareness isn't better or worse depending on the object. And so the simplest, most simple activity—just completely surrender into it with awareness—brings us back to recognizing awareness.

Every aspect of our phenomenal life exhibits the three characteristics. They're not more or less present in something really painful or something really beautiful or something really mundane. Anywhere we can see.

So it's really this willingness to just open into what's happening now.

Whatever's coming up is the moment.

From Dogen Zenji: "Truth is not far away. It is ever present. It is not something to be attained since not one of your steps leads away from it. When you have thrown off your ideas about mind and body, original truth can fully appear. Zen is simply the expression of truth. Therefore longing and striving are not the true attitudes of Zen. If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"

I love that line. I tell it to myself so frequently. If you can't find it right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?

So nothing in our life is excluded. The path is lifelong and all-inclusive. And the total commitment is this surrendering into the unknown. Again and again, we don't get to have some "so that." If I do this, then this will happen. We keep renewing our commitment. We don't know how it's going to show up in our life—we can never know. But this sense of commitment, this sense of really being fully present with how it is, then the wisdom, the trust, the faith arises to help us see how in what is now we can keep opening to the truth. This is the real resolution, the determination, the depth of motivation that can come as we keep renewing and looking into this.

I want to tell you a story to give you an example of this resolve, this deep commitment—an awakening that can come not out of getting where you want to go, but from how you meet each moment and use each moment of a difficult life by surrendering into it and seeing what emerges.

Perhaps you've heard of Master Sheng Yen. He was a wonderful Chinese Chan master who died perhaps ten years ago. He had a very large following in Taiwan. I met him in Switzerland at a retreat, and then he had a place in upstate New York where I did another retreat. I only sat a couple of retreats with him, but I found him a wonderful being—really wonderful, with deep, deep understanding, very relational, very kind.

He was leading a retreat in Switzerland, and we didn't quite understand—he's like the Dalai Lama of Taiwan. He was hugely loved and had a gigantic following, and we had no clue. He came to teach in Switzerland, and there were just eighty of us. It was amazing he came to do it. He was just wonderful.

He wrote an autobiography called *Footprints in the Snow*. Let me give you a brief synopsis of his life, because when we met him, he was quite elderly.

He was born in mainland China in great poverty and became a monk at a young age. He wanted to be a monk, but being a monk didn't guarantee any kind of easy life at that time in China—this was probably the 1920s or so. He practiced deeply, but he suffered greatly. He was hungry often. Life was very, very hard.

Then the whole civil war came in China, lasting from around 1925 up until 1949, when Mao and the communists were finally about to win. Throughout all of that time, life was enormously difficult, but he remained truly devoted, committed to his life as a monk.

In 1949, when it became clear the communists were about to win, it was also obvious that being a Buddhist monk was no longer going to be possible—he might not even be allowed to live, let alone continue his practice. At that time, Chiang Kai-shek had gone to what was then Formosa, now Taiwan. Sheng Yen knew he had to get out and reach Taiwan, but there was no way.

He had no money. He had no way. And the only way he could get there was to join Chiang Kai-shek's army. Then they would take him to Taiwan.

So he joined the army. He'd been a monk for something like twenty-five years at this point. And he joined the army. They took him to Taiwan. But then he couldn't simply say, "Thank you very much, I think I'll go now. Nice of you." He was a monk, but he couldn't just get out of the army.

So he said, "I was in the army, but in my mind, I am a monk."

For ten years, he was in the army. But he said, "In my mind, I am a monk." And he never deviated from that. He did what he had to do. And he said that somehow, very fortunately, he was never put in a position where he had to kill people or do harm. You think perhaps karma takes care of such things.

He was essentially a vegetarian as part of his way of being a monk. Well, that was impossible in the army. But he would avoid eating meat as much as he could until he was almost starving. Then he would eat some meat. He lived like this for ten years with this deep resolve: I am a monk, no matter what.

At that time, nobody got out of the army. There weren't ways of getting out. But somehow—I won't go into all the details—he did happen to meet on a week off a Buddhist master who was living there, and he connected with him. And somehow he managed to get released from the army after those ten years.

Immediately he went into seven years of solitary retreat under the tutelage of that master. And he said that even later in his life, he always did many prostrations because that was one way of really purifying his mind and body of all the unwholesome actions he felt he had to perform while in the army.

But he was the most beautiful, deeply realized being.

So externally, it is what it is. But his commitment—I am a monk—and then being fully present, not resistant, but fully present with the situation as it presents itself. How do we surrender with awareness into this and see what presents itself? It really inspires me.

I'll end with two things, one from the Dalai Lama and one from the Buddha.

From the Buddha: "This holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end."

This unshakable deliverance of mind. Don't settle for anything less—without striving, with total trust. If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?

And the Dalai Lama, speaking to some Western nuns and monks: "One day you will become bodhisattvas in reality. So whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

And it always just comes down to loving awareness in this moment. We can always do that.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 77

Stories of Early Nuns and Modern Women Teachers

Carol Wilson · 1h02

In this engaging talk, Carol Wilson weaves together stories of remarkable women practitioners across twenty-five centuries, beginning with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's aunt who persistently advocated for the establishment of the bhikkhunī saṅgha. Through the Therīgāthā—the collection of enlightened nuns' poems in the Pāli Canon—we meet Dhammadinnā, renowned for her Dhamma teaching and featured in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44), and Paṭācārā, who found liberation after devastating loss.

These ancient stories find contemporary parallels in modern women teachers: Venerable Dhammanandā Bhikkhunī, the first fully ordained Theravāda bhikkhunī in Thailand, who continues working to revive the fourfold saṅgha; Upāsikā Kee Nanayon, the foremost Thai woman Dhamma teacher of the 20th century who lived as an eight-precept laywoman; Dipa Ma, who transformed from grief-stricken illness to radiant awakening; and Daw U Zana, a Burmese teacher dedicated to practice and educating young women.

The talk illuminates how awakening transcends gender, class, and circumstance—from queens to prostitutes, from the privileged to the enslaved. Wilson emphasizes that the path requires faith, determination, and persistence, qualities demonstrated by each of these women. Their poems and teachings remind us that liberation is available to all who "put forth effort, self-controlled, always with strong resolution."

So I thought tonight, a little bit of story time.

I want to talk about a few of the nuns, the enlightened nuns from the time of the Buddha that we know about because of the Therigatha, which is in the Pali Canon—a book of the enlightened nuns' poems. I want to tell the story of two or three of them, and then tell the stories of a few more modern women teachers whose lives remind me of these ancient women. Some are dead, some I know. I find it inspiring to share these, and fun as well, because mostly we only hear about the monks and the men, since they write the history.

Before I say anything much about the nuns from the time of the Buddha, it's important to know that it was quite a while after the Buddha started his sangha of monks before there were nuns. It was just monks for a long time. Many of you are familiar with this story, so I'll tell it without too much detail.

The woman who is really responsible for getting the Buddha to finally agree to begin an order of nuns was Mahapajapati Gotami, who was actually his aunt, but who raised him. When the Buddha was a week old, his mother died, and her sister took in the Buddha-to-be and raised him. Both sisters were married to King Suddhodana, so the big family could stay together easily.

She was both his stepmother and his aunt. After the Buddha left and became awakened, at some point he came back to his family. His father, his son Rahula, his aunt Mahapajapati Gotami, and other cousins all became deeply interested, became disciples, and came to some degree of wisdom and understanding.

As time went on, King Suddhodana died. Even among these high-class people, the culture was set up so that a woman's identity was mainly derived from either her husband, her son, or her father—by the male she was connected to. So her husband had died, and her sons had gone off with her nephew to be monks. There were many other women in this situation as well. That was one thing. Also, of course, she was very inspired by the Dhamma.

Then another thing happened. There was a big dispute coming to war about water rights between two clans: the Sakyan clan, which was the Buddha Gautama's father's clan, and the Koliyan clan, which happened to be Pajapati Gotami's clan. These two clans got into a big fight about water rights—even back then, what we're coming to now. Many men were killed. Someone went to get the Buddha to come help resolve this, as he was part of both clans. It's said that he came and gave such an inspiring discourse that many more men went off with him and ordained.

So now all these men were going off and ordaining. Pajapati Gotami was left somewhat alone, as were many other women. Both because of her natural personality as a leader and her position, they would turn to her. Together, they all decided that they too wanted to follow the holy life as renunciates.

So they went to the Buddha where he happened to be at the time. From her story, you can see the power of faith, the energy it takes, the courage, the persistence, the determination. We know this is required of all of us, but for women at this time in particular, it took much more determination.

She went to the Buddha and asked him, saying, "It would be good, Lord, if women could be allowed to renounce their homes and enter into the homeless state under the Dhamma and discipline of the Tathagata."

He said, "Enough, Gotami. Don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this."

She asked the requisite three times. Usually at the end of the third time, if he was going to agree, he did. But he didn't agree. He said no, and he didn't really explain why. We don't really know why even today.

After some time, he left with his monks and set out for another town, Vesali. But she didn't give up. Pajapati cut off her hair, and with five hundred women—which just means a lot; as Andy Olendzki, the director of the study center, says, when the texts say five hundred were enlightened, it just means many—they all set off together, walking barefoot as the Buddha and the monks would have been doing, and went to Vesali.

I don't know how far that was. It sounds far.

When they got there, they went to the grove where he was staying. And it's said that she and the women stood outside the sala where the Buddha was, with swollen feet and all dusty from walking all those miles. She stood outside the hall there, weeping.

And here Ananda comes in. I don't know if you remember I mentioned Ananda. He's always the kind of intermediary—he was the Buddha's attendant. But instead of being like some gurus' attendants who sort of keep everybody out and control the inner circle for the special people, Ananda was just the reverse. Whatever it was, he would try to get people to come and hear the Dhamma. It's beautiful, really.

So he came, and Ananda was also the Buddha's cousin, so he was related to Mahapajapati as well. He came and said, "Why are you crying?" And she told him.

So he said, okay. And he went in and talked to the Buddha. First he simply said, "She's standing outside on the porch, her feet are swollen, covered with dust, crying because you do not permit women to renounce. It would be good if women were to have permission."

The Buddha said the same thing—"Enough, Ananda"—three times.

So then Ananda also, with faith, determination, perseverance, and great devotion, said, "Okay, let me ask it another way." And this is what I love. He says, "Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returner, non-returning, and arahantship?"

He said, "Yes, Ananda, they are able."

This is exactly what goes through all the teachings. There's no difference between gender or class or how one lives as to the potential for awakening. It's for all of us.

So he said yes. And then Ananda says, "Well, since that's possible, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your foster mother. When your mother died, she even suckled you at her own breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

So he goes, "Okay. Okay, Ananda. Okay."

And then he made eight special rules that women have to follow. So in some way there was a difference. And there are other kinds of rules. But basically, in terms of practice and awakening, the bhikkhunis were on an equal level with the bhikkhus.

So the eight special rules—we really don't know. I really don't know how much of that's cultural, how much of it was him trying not to shock the lay people, because at that time there weren't equal nuns in other systems. I really don't know. I'm not trying to explain it.

But anyway, she was absolutely the one who, through her faith and determination and just love of the Dhamma and awakening, persuaded the Buddha to establish a community of nuns. And so she, of course, became one of the first teachers. Many, many women followed her because of her position, and the community of nuns grew and grew and became very stable.

So I just want to read her poem as it's translated by Andy Olenski, who was for many years the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Not all of it—I'll read some of it.

"Praise to Buddha, you foremost among all beings. You who have released me from pain and so many other folk too. All suffering has been understood. The source of craving has withered. Cessation has been touched by me on the eightfold noble path. I have been mother and son before, and father, brother, grandmother too. Not understanding what was real, I flowed on without finding peace."

But now I've seen the Blessed One. This is my last compounded form. The onflowing of birth has expired. There's no more re-becoming now. See the gathering of followers, putting forth effort, self-controlled, always with strong resolution. This is how to honor the Buddhas.

So that's you. She's talking to the nuns there, really, but that's you—the gathering of followers, putting forth effort, self-controlled, with strong resolution. This is how to honor the Buddhas. And Buddha really means the awakened heart, the awakened mind. We just have to honor that.

So, Mahapajapati Gotami.

As the Bhikkhuni Sangha grew, it really showed—as with the Bhikkhu Sangha—that in terms of societal structure, Buddhism was quite radical in many ways. Once a woman entered the order, and it was the same for bhikkhus, any element of society was welcome. Once you became part of the Sangha, the only ranking was seniority based on when you joined. There were consorts to kings, queens, middle-class women, really poor women, prostitutes, wealthy courtesans, beggars, the young, the very old, some who were utterly miserable when they became nuns, some who were filled with faith—the whole range, even those who had been enslaved or were servants. All different kinds of women.

I'm not going to talk about all of them because I want to focus on others, but the awakened poems are representative of all these women. It's not just the rich queens and consorts who awaken. Background has nothing to do with it. Just like that story I told—maybe I didn't tell it—the Buddha looked over a group of people to see who was ready to hear the Dhamma, and the one who was ready was the poor leper who had just come because he thought they were giving out food. You never know. It's the same with the women. Awakening is the potential of everyone.

The present-day person I thought of is, of course, not quite on a par with Mahapajapati Gotami—because who could be? Who else is the aunt of the Buddha? But today in Thailand, I want to talk about Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni. She's a Thai woman whose lay name was Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. She was a very well-known professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok, with a PhD in philosophy and religion. She's still alive.

Just a quick synopsis of her life: she was born in 1944, and her mother, Voramai, was very devout. After Chatsumarn was born, her mother ordained as a precept nun. In the Theravada tradition at this point, the full bhikkhuni ordination had died out, although in the Mahayana tradition it still exists. So especially in strict Theravada countries—Thailand and Burma in particular, where Buddhism is also the state religion—women can ordain as eight or ten precept nuns, but not as full bhikkhunis on a par with bhikkhus. That is not recognized. This is starting to change, and Venerable Dhammananda is a key mover in that change in Thailand.

Her mother was very devout, and in 1971 she went to Taiwan and ordained in the Mahayana tradition as a bhikkhuni. She came back to Thailand and founded a temple, a meditation center called Songdhammakalyani, which means "temple where women uphold the Dhamma." So this is the atmosphere that Chatsumarn Kabilsingh grew up in.

I noticed, as these women came to me to talk about, they're all from Thailand, Burma, India. I don't mean to say awakening is only possible if you grew up in a Buddhist country. But what I feel is the support—really growing up with the sense of faith strong, having that embedded in the culture. You don't have to kind of...

The faith in the Dhamma, the faith in practice—even many people who don't practice have great faith in it. And so growing up in a country where that faith is woven into the culture... For me, in a country where I didn't know anything about Buddhism, where it certainly wasn't taught, I didn't have natural faith. There's a whole other level of having to find your way in that you simply don't have to navigate there.

Anyway, so she grew up and taught for 27 years at the university, then took early retirement. In 2001, she went to Sri Lanka and became a samaneri, which is like a novice bhikkhuni. Then in 2003, in Sri Lanka—where they had reestablished some bhikkhunis—she took full bhikkhuni ordination and came back to Thailand.

So in the Theravada lineage in Thailand, she was the first woman ordained as a bhikkhuni in that tradition. But you must understand, this was completely controversial in Thailand—and it still is, even though this was 2003. Coming back, many monks and laypeople were very opposed to her, even saying it was illegal. Because this is part of the Theravada religion as opposed to practice and awakening—it's part of the political religion of the country. There's a whole other set of laws and rules that get involved, different from Burma but similar in nature.

So she faced huge resistance. It was very controversial, with many people really angry. But there was also support, and not just from women. There were plenty of monks who supported her as well.

She's still there. She went back to Songdama Kalyani, settled down, and really began practicing and teaching. She's very vibrant and speaks excellent English, so if you go online you can hear talks by her—very lively and vivacious. She's been working tirelessly to reestablish the Theravada bhikkhuni lineage in Thailand. That's what she's been doing since 2003. The temple has grown, and she's also very well known as a scholar around the world.

If you go to their website, it says at the top, "Everything begins here in our hearts." That's what she says. When I was just searching for information about her, I saw that BBC listed her among the 2009 hundred most influential women in the world. So she's become quite well known. That article mentioned that now, all over Thailand—not just

at her place—there are 270 bhikkhunis nationwide. Slowly, slowly, it's growing. At her center, they're also attuning to ecological awareness, social awareness—just different times.

A couple of years ago, she organized a special period—I can't remember if it was two weeks or a month—where hundreds of women could come and ordain temporarily, practice for a few weeks, and then return to their lives. So very, very powerful, and having a huge effect in these days.

Let me read one quote where she's explaining what she's doing: "I do not choose to be ordained because I want people to recognize me. I did it because I want to carry on the heritage of the Lord Buddha. I'm trying to revive the four pillars of Buddhism"—something the Buddha talked about often—"the fourfold Sangha: bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen that will sustain the religion into the future." And the Buddha did say that if you have those four pillars, the sasana will continue. She goes on: "I don't mind if some people hold different opinions about bhikkhunis. The public will be the ones to judge our worth."

That's just a typical example of how she speaks. This really takes a strong heart and a genuine sense of dedication, but she is truly doing it and having a tremendous effect. So I just wanted to mention her.

Now, there are so many to choose from, and I can see I'm never going to get through even what I thought I had really narrowed down. So the next awakened nun from the time of the Buddha that I wanted to mention is one whose name was Dhammadinna. After she was awakened, she was considered—they all had little taglines describing their particular excellence—the foremost in preaching, in expounding the Dhamma. In fact, there's not just a poem but an entire sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 44, called the Shorter Set of Questions and Answers, where she is the one speaking. Questions are asked of her, and she is the one answering.

And of course, at the end, the person keeps asking questions, and she said, "Well, go ask the Buddha." And he went to the Buddha. It's already unusual that a man is coming to a bhikkhuni for teaching. So he went to the Buddha and reported everything. And the Buddha said, "Just as Damodina has said, so I would have said." Her word is called buddhavacana—the same as the Buddha's teaching. So that's really powerful there in the Majjhima Nikaya.

Her story is that she had a happy marriage. Her husband's name was Wisaka. Fairly important, fairly well-to-do—not a suffering life. He was an important man in Rajagaha. And when he first encountered the Buddha, he was off one day and heard the Buddha's

teaching. When he came home, he was really moved by it, very inspired. But instead of being his normally friendly self, coming in, eating together, he was just kind of distracted. He passed by without even noticing her. He seemed in another world.

She asked, "What's wrong? Are you angry?" You can relate, right? "What's wrong, honey? Are you angry?"

He said no, he had just been thinking about things. But he said, really from his heart, after hearing the Buddha, "I'm really called. I really want to renounce the world. I want to go and join his Sangha of bhikkhus." And he said, "So I support you in whatever you want. I'll give you all my wealth. I'll support you in whatever you need."

So she thought it over. And she said, "You know what? I want to renounce also"—because the bhikkhunis obviously existed then. So he said okay, and he put her in a golden palanquin and sent her off to the bhikkhunis, and she joined up. And then, you know, you would not be in touch with the home. So she became a bhikkhuni, and she practiced, and obviously, since she's one of the arahant nuns, she became awakened.

After some time, she happened to go back to Rajagaha. And it turned out her husband hadn't become a bhikkhu after all. He got—oh, you know, whatever—he hadn't. But he was still really interested. So he's actually the one who went to her for teachings, who's asking the questions in the sutta. He could see she was awakened, and he had really deep respect for her. So it's kind of a cool story, that she really went. Motivated by him initially, but she just had more energy, more faith.

I won't read you the whole sutta, just my favorite line from it. He's asking her, "What is meditation?" And she says, "Meditation is the focusing of the heart, or unification of mind." He keeps going on and on until he's asking about Nibbana. And finally she says, "Go talk to the Buddha. Go talk to the Buddha." But it's a very deep wisdom sutta and very inspiring.

Sayadaw U Pandita used to often say that women make the best yogis somehow. It wasn't that women are more able, but just somehow in his experience—and this is mostly Burmese people that he'd be working with—the women just had some kind of commitment or steadiness or something that was more frequent, maybe for whatever reason. Just putting it out there.

So I want to talk about two great women teachers. One is no longer alive. I mentioned her the other night: Upasika Kee Nanayon.

And she's the one whose talks make up this book, *Pure and Simple*, that he just quoted a little bit from. This book, *Six Talks*, is put together and translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu from Metta Vihar. Very interesting. I thought I'd give you a little bit about her life, to make her feel like a real person.

So she was Thai, born in 1901. Thanissaro Bhikkhu says she was the foremost woman Dharma teacher in Thailand in the twentieth century. She remained a lay woman, living as an eight-precept lay woman—so that's kind of like all of you here, those who are keeping eight precepts but not taking robes. That's how she chose to live her life.

She was born in Rajburi to a merchant family. Not super rich, but they had small shops. The eldest of five children, her mother was somewhat religious, so she grew up with a sense of faith in the Dhamma—not really heavy duty, but it was familiar.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu says that she reported how seeing the suffering of her mother during the birth of her siblings, just witnessing how much suffering that was, along with her parents' painful separation and the suffering that entailed, convinced her that she never wanted to marry. So she didn't.

Through her teens and early twenties, she ran a small store, using it to support her elderly father in his old age. She studied the Dhamma a lot in her spare time. In her mind, she was working and saving up until she had enough to go off and live a quiet, simple, secluded life—to just practice for the rest of her life. Her aunt and uncle at this time had a small forest hut not far away at the base of a mountain, and sometimes she would go there and practice, so it was a familiar place.

At the end of World War II, when the war had ended and things were starting to settle down, she decided this was her chance. She handed the shop over to one of her younger sisters, and she and her aunt and uncle went off together to stay at this little piece of land they had at the foot of what's called the Royal Park Mountain in English, or Khao Suan Luang—I'm sure I'm pronouncing that wrong in Thai, but that's the name of the place. She stayed there the rest of her life.

When they first moved in, it was a lovely forest at the foot of this mountain, but they were living in an old, abandoned monastic dwelling—very frugal, very Spartan. Obviously people weren't coming to support them much. They just dedicated themselves to meditation, and that was it for the rest of their lives.

Gradually, they made the place a little more livable. As she kept on practicing, people would come—mostly women—drawn to practice with them for a while. When she was feeling well, she would give little Dharma talks, and more and more Dharma talks. More and more people were drawn, and it really became a center where many women came to practice.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu says it's still in existence today. Even though she died in 1978, her sister took it over for some time until the nineties when she died, and now it's run by a group. But it still exists, and many women come and practice there.

Living a very simple life, she mostly practiced on her own. She didn't have one in-person teacher. She learned a lot from books—both the Pali Canon and also books by contemporary Thai teachers. But much of her practice was just there on her own.

I don't know if you got a sense of her from the reading—incredibly straightforward, no-nonsense, calling it like it is, always speaking the truth, always oriented toward awakening. Really dedicated and just down to earth.

I'll read a couple of things to give you a feeling. The first is her describing when they first went to the forest:

"Coming to the forest and living very simply, I came to feel lighthearted and free. Seeing nature all around me inspired me to explore inside my own mind."

And a little poem:

"With no struggling, no thinking, the mind still will see cause and effect vanishing into the void. Attached to nothing, letting go, knowing that this is the way to allay all stress."

With this book, you can just pick it up anywhere and look at it.

I could go on, but I don't want to let this become too much. It's just straightforward teaching. No nonsense.

Okay, one more. I just enjoy reading her words.

Here she's talking about stilling your mind:

"When something succeeds in distracting you, it will fool you into seeing it as right, wrong, good, bad, and so forth. Eventually, you have to come down to the awareness that everything simply arises, persists, and then disbands. Make sure you stay focused on the disbanding."

Disbanding means coming apart. If you watch just the arising, you may get carried off on a tangent. But if you focus on the disbanding, you'll see emptiness. Everything is disbanding every instant. No matter what you look at, no matter what you see, it's there for just an instant and then disbands. Then it arises again, then it disbands. There's simply arising, knowing, disbanding.

So let's watch what happens of its own accord. Because the arising and disbanding that occurs by way of the senses is something that happens on its own. You can't prevent it. You can't force it. If you look and know it without attachment, the mind will be unaffected by the confusion that comes from joy or sorrow.

Just pure and simple, straight to the point. She was a really powerful teacher in the 20th century.

So back to the enlightened nuns. The next one is another very famous figure, one of the most influential nuns and one of the most skillful teachers. She's mentioned in the Therīgāthā, referenced in the other poems, more than any other of the nuns. And she's one who came to the Buddha and the Dhamma from enormous suffering. I mean, it's one of those stories that you can't think could really be true because it's just too much. But I'll tell it.

She was from a wealthy banker's family in Sāvatthī, and they were arranging a marriage for her. But she happened to fall in love with one of the servants, which of course would never be allowed. So they ran away, got married, and went to another area. Her family disowned her. She got pregnant, and when she wanted to go home, they started walking back. But she had the baby before they got there, so they went back to where they'd been living.

She got pregnant again, and they kept putting off the journey home because they didn't exactly expect a warm welcome. Finally, they started again when she was quite pregnant. And again, she started to have the baby along the way.

So picture this—she's having the baby in a field when a huge monsoon storm starts. Her husband goes off to cut down some rushes and try to make a little lean-to shelter. He gets bitten by a poisonous snake and dies.

So he never comes back. She has the baby alone in the storm. Then she struggles on with a newborn and a little one- or two-year-old, making her way to her parents.

She gets to a river that normally you could walk across, but because of the huge storm, it's become a raging torrent. How can she possibly get across? She couldn't manage it holding both babies. So she tells the toddler to wait, takes the newborn across and leaves it on the other bank, then comes back to get the toddler.

This is where it really starts to get out there.

The newborn is on the bank, and a giant eagle—a bird of prey—swoops down and takes it. She's halfway through the water with the other child, sees this happen, gets completely distraught, tries to run across, loses her grip on the toddler, who gets washed away. Both children die.

She's crazed at this point. But it's not over. She keeps going, makes it to her home village, and sees smoke rising from somewhere in the distance. She asks, "What's that smoke? What's that fire?" The people recognize her, and they say, "Don't ask us that. Ask us anything but that." It was her parents' house that had just burned, and they had just died.

This basically snapped her mind. She spent years just wandering around, truly out of her mind. Her name is Patachara—it means something like "cloak walker." She just walked in circles.

At some point, perhaps years later, she came to the Jeta Grove where the Buddha was teaching. She was mad, walking in circles. Some of the people there—not Ananda, but others—started throwing rocks at her, trying to keep her away from the Blessed One. But of course he sees this and goes to her. He speaks to her and says, "Sister, recover your presence of mind."

Which she did. The Buddha, remember.

"Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did.

Then she told him her whole story. And this is, again, the power of hearing the truth—absolute hearing of the truth. No candy coating, but coming from someone you know speaks the truth.

It's said that he told her, "Don't think that you have come to someone who can help with that. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than the waters in the four oceans." Literally telling her: this is the first noble truth. And when we ourselves die, no one else can help us. Even in this world, no family can really end our suffering.

Then, of course, he preached the Dhamma. She was deeply touched and asked to ordain. Together they went to the community of nuns, and she was accepted as a bhikkhuni.

Incredible suffering. And the Buddha not simply saying, "Oh yes, that's really tough," but rather, "Yes, this is how it is." There are many examples where suffering really is the catalyst to see through our confusion and wake up.

Patachara is said to have become one of the most accessible teachers, one of the better teachers—someone who truly affected many women.

So I thought I'd read her poem. This version is a new translation and interpretation that hasn't come out yet but will soon, by a friend of ours. I like her poem because it's one of the few that actually describes her moment of awakening. Right at the end, that's what she's describing:

Farmers turn up the soil, plant seeds, and wait.

All by itself, water pours down from the sky and turns earth into food. I keep all the precepts and always wake before dawn. I don't pretend to know more than I do, and when others ask for help, I do what I can. Yet after all these years, where's my harvest?

Late one evening, I was washing my feet after another long day of sitting and walking. The water poured over my feet and onto the ground. I let my mind go, and it flowed downhill with the water toward my little hut. I went inside, sat on the bed, and lowered the wick of the lamp. All by itself the flame went out.

All by itself the flame went out. She doesn't mean the lamp, right? You understand—it's a metaphor. But because of her life, she had deep, deep compassion. And so many of the women who joined and became bhikkhunis could really go to her for teaching and understanding.

So I want to tell you then about Dipa Ma, because she came to the Dhamma through huge suffering. And she was a ball of energy, I'll tell you.

I first met her in 1980, I think, when she first came here with her daughter Dipa and her grandson Rishi, who was just two or three and deep in the terrible twos—a holy terror. And I can still remember her. She was maybe four feet tall, a tiny little lady with gray hair pulled back in a bun. I can see her now, with all the love in her heart and good humor, running after Rishi, trying to catch him, her white sari flapping as he ran all over the place because he never sat still for a moment. She was really a lot of fun.

Her life—she had a happy marriage. She was from Chittagong, from the Indian Barua family, which is a Buddhist clan in India. At some point, she and her husband moved to Burma, where he was working. They really wanted children, but it took many years. Finally her first two children died as babies. Then at last they had one who lived—that was Dipa. But the deaths of those children left her so distraught.

Even though Dipa was still alive, she became ill for years, just depressed and bedridden. Her husband devotedly took care of her. But she was lost in grief and illness for a long time.

Then in 1957, her husband had a heart attack and died. And she really just sank down. She was in her mid-forties. Dipa was seven years old. Her health continued to deteriorate. She was just lost, lost in grief and confusion for years.

Earlier, many years before, she had wanted to go meditate. Her husband had said, "No, no, you're too young." This was before she sank into all the grief. So in her mind, she really hadn't practiced at all. But she had this deep faith that she needed to do that. Yet in this state of grief and illness, she just couldn't get it together.

But finally she did. She started thinking, "I'm going to die. What can I take with me?" She looked at all her possessions, even her daughter. She said, "I can't take any of this with me."

She went to a meditation center. A Buddha appeared in a dream, and she knew she must practice. So she went to one center, and obviously she had strong paramis. She got incredibly, deeply absorbed in just a couple of days—three days.

The story goes that she was doing walking meditation, and suddenly she couldn't move her leg. She thought, what's going on? For the longest time she couldn't move her leg. Finally she looked down, and a big dog had its jaws around her leg. She hadn't even felt it or noticed. This is another realm, right? But anyway, they came and took the dog off. She was worried about rabies, so she went to start the series of rabies shots. Because it was at a certain time every day, and in the meditation center you only had one meal a day, she was missing the meal every day. She got very weak, and she was weak to begin with, so the monk said maybe she should go home. She went home that time, and it was another few years.

Then she heard that a friend of her family's, another member of the clan—Anagarika Munindra, who we've spoken about—was in Burma, living at the Mahasi center, Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha. He came and visited her, and knowing he was a family friend who spoke her language, he said, "Yes, you must come and meditate."

So then she went to the Mahasi center and again got so deeply into the practice, so quickly. By the third day she was sitting so long that Munindra came and said, "No, you're getting unbalanced. You've got to get up and go to the talk." But she was so weak—she was still really weak. Then she wasn't eating because she got so into practice. So don't do that. She had to crawl up the stairs to get to the Dhamma talk.

But anyway, as these stories go—which is very much like the Arhat nuns—she had very deep, deep awakening very quickly. Very quickly.

And this is what she said. Just to read one thing she said: Those who knew Dipa Ma were fascinated by her transformation. Almost overnight, she had changed from a sickly, dependent, grief-stricken woman into a healthy, independent, radiant being. Dipa Ma told those around her, "You have seen me. I was disheartened and broken down due to the loss of my husband and children and due to disease. I suffered so much I could not walk properly. But now, how are you finding me? All my disease is gone. I am refreshed. There is nothing in my mind. There is no sorrow, no grief. I am quite happy. If you come to meditate, you will also be happy. There is no magic. Only follow instructions."

She always said that: "I didn't make it up."

As I said, she was a real bundle of energy, even in her old age. She and Dipa and Rishi lived in a very small, crummy little one-room apartment in Calcutta. She had really very little money, but she was a really powerful, powerful teacher.

So as I said, I met her in 1980, and the last time I saw her was 1989. Several friends—she was not so healthy, and I think she died like the next year maybe. We went to Bodh Gaya, and she was there at that time with Dipa and Rishi. We went there to visit her because we knew we wouldn't see her again. And this is—again, she's little and old, but you can't even imagine that she was so sick and weak like that.

I remember two things from that time. One was that just a few months before, I had developed a kind of autoimmune disease that was very much affecting my movement. It was hard for me to move, and traveling in India, I couldn't have done it without a bunch of friends.

So she's like, oh, you must exercise. And she bounds up and runs over to the wall, puts her hand on the wall, and starts vigorously swinging her feet around, doing all this exercise. "This is what you must do!"

And then she said to Joseph, who had been her student for many, many years and knew her very well, "Joseph, you should sit for two days." He goes, "Oh, I often do." She says, "No, sit down for two days." Which she would do, you know. Joseph being Joseph, of course he just laughed. He said, "Yeah, right."

But that's how she was, you know. Filled with love, but not what we would call, "Oh, compassion. Yeah, that's tough. You shouldn't sit for two days. It might strain you." Come on, sit for two days! Oh, you can't walk? What do you mean? Jump up. Exercise. Come on, let's get on with it. Really quite an amazing person. Really amazing.

One last quotation from her: "There is so much sameness in ordinary life. We are always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. When greed, hatred, and delusion are gone, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now every day, every moment is full of taste and zest."

So don't be afraid of no greed, no hatred, no delusion. Don't be afraid of it.

Now, in terms of another nun I wanted to tell you about, one who's alive now in Burma. She didn't come through so much suffering, but she's also a very well-known teacher there. Her name is Daw Yuzana. She's not a bhikkhuni, because in Burma they don't allow bhikkhunis, really. She's an eight-precept nun. But she's a teacher, very well-known, and she's been practicing sincerely in the Mogok style of meditation, which we in the West don't know that well, but it's equally popular in Burma as the Mahasi style. Many, many people practice it.

I haven't practiced it myself; I've just been around her when she does it. They're both cultivating samatha and vipassana, but in any retreat that's in the Mogok style, they use the dependent origination—the wheel of life, dependent origination, up on display.

She's a very deep practitioner, really dedicated. She told us her story one time. She only speaks Burmese, but we go with friends who can translate. She really wanted to become a nun when she was a teenager, but her parents didn't want her to. She told us later that her father would beat her when she would try to go off and be a nun. But finally she managed to ordain.

Where she lives now is her own kind of house and meditation hall, but it's on another Sayadaw's monastery—a monk's monastery. She was the one, and we've known her for some years, who was really well known for her depth of practice, her deep devotion, and also, she's kind of psychic. This is the other side of things.

You know Nagas, which are the great snakes that protected the Buddha. She has a real connection to spirit Nagas. As you come in before her house, there's a big fountain. All over Burma you'll see statues of a Buddha with a big snake protecting him, its cobra-like hood spread out, shielding him from the elements. That's a very common Buddha image. And she has lots of Naga imagery around her.

statues around. And she actually has Naga spirits that talk to her. She's quite psychic, so many people go to her for that. She'll happily, if you come and really ask about people you love, speak to the Nagas and tell you what they say. But her true love is the Dhamma. And again, she's a profoundly committed teacher.

One time, with some friends, we went to visit her on her birthday. On your birthday, it's common to offer a meal to a nunnery or monastery. She happened to be teaching a retreat of about a hundred people—men and women, not just women. It was a residential retreat, and she was teaching it alone. She was offering the lunch meal. Not only offering—she was cooking it. So we came in, she's cooking the lunch meal, the hundred yogis come in this slow line to get their food, and then she hung out with us and invited us to eat. Amazing energy.

When we talk to her, her sense of the Dhamma is this very straightforward, no-nonsense approach. She's often saying, "I just wish I could just go off and practice, just meditate." But she can't, because in 2007, when there was the huge Cyclone Nargis, which I think I mentioned last week, she felt compelled—and maybe the Nagas told her, I'm not sure—but she felt compelled to start a school. I mentioned that many nuns have started schools, but she did it on a whole other level: a beautifully built building, hiring the best teachers on a level with the best schools, which is much more expensive. She started with two hundred girls. I think it might be about four hundred now. Many of them live there. Some are nuns, not all. And she has it all the way through tenth standard, which is the highest you can go.

When we go and talk to her, she's so grounded. She gives us more sense of what's really going on in the society than almost any other person I've talked to. She has deep faith. She's totally committed to having the school and helping these girls really have a life, but also to bring them to liberation. That's foremost in her mind. She can't go off and practice because she's the sole earner of the dāna. It's all on dāna, and it's a huge amount every year to run the school, to hire the teachers, to feed the young girls. That's a lot. She'll show us incredibly detailed and carefully kept accounts—of course in Burmese, I can't read it, but my friends can—with each donation and how much it was throughout the whole year.

She's so dedicated, and sometimes she's just so tired. Some years there's been difficulty with the Sayadaw. Probably, I think, because she was more famous, more known than he. But anyway, it got petty and nasty, as these things do. So now in this whole ground that was her nunnery and his monastery, there's a fence down the middle. But she's still living there and practicing and taking care of these young girls. And she would just say sometimes about the school, "I just wish I could just go off and practice."

A few years ago, Steve Smith tried to bring her over. We were going to have her and him teach a month at the Forest Refuge. She couldn't get a visa—this was years ago. Couldn't get a visa to the US.

And this was like 10 years ago. A single unmarried woman—they're afraid she's going to come and get married here. For a monk, they don't think that. But for a nun, it didn't really register. And she couldn't get in twice, two different times. Her visa was refused. So she's kind of given up on that.

But she's also very funny. Again, she's so direct. We were talking, I think it was last year, and she's just describing some of the stuff that's going on in Burma—some of which is horrible. Never mind the Rakhine crisis, which is really horrible, but even just as the country opens up, there's more sex trade than there ever was, as it opens up to other countries and money, just as it goes. She sees that, because she's working with young women up until about sixteen. She's really tuned in.

So we were just talking about how crazy the world seems somehow, and how people are doing things that seem so horrible, and they seem so proud of it. And she goes, "Yes. It's as if people tied up their mother and father, and they're beating them, and they think, *this is a really good thing to do*." She's just saying people are crazy.

So she's a very powerful woman, and a lot of fun to hang out with, and very inspiring.

I'll just read you two more short poems from this collection of the first Buddhist nuns. Again, this is from the new translation by Matt Weingast. So another Uttara, and this one is addressed to Patachara:

I asked Patachara, what is the path?
Patachara said, just see all thoughts, words, and actions arising all by themselves, not from some imaginary point within.
I only partly understood, but I took a seat.
As the sun was setting, I saw the endless line of one thing leading to another that had brought me to the cushion that night.
As the moon was coming up, I saw the arising and passing away of all things in every dir-

ection.
As dawn was breaking, wisdom rose in the east and set fire to the long dark night.
But don't take my word for it.
Set fire to the darkness within.
I promise it's like nothing you've ever seen.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 78

Aspiration and Resolution: Saddhā and Adhiṭṭhāna

Carol Wilson · 51 min

In this talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson offers a profound exploration of two essential qualities that sustain meditation practice: saddhā (faith, confidence, trust) and adhiṭṭhāna (determination, resolution). She begins by acknowledging that the path includes everything—pleasant and unpleasant alike—and that freedom doesn't come from eliminating difficulty but from meeting it skillfully.

Wilson distinguishes aspiration from expectation, explaining how aspiration uplifts and brightens the citta (heart-mind), while expectation contracts consciousness through craving and leads to disappointment. She introduces the Buddhist teaching on "bright faith"—the inspiration that comes from teachers, experiences, or recognizing wholesome qualities in others—and "verified faith" that develops through direct experience. Drawing on moving examples from Burmese nuns she has known, Wilson illustrates how faith gives rise to extraordinary generosity, surrender, and commitment.

The heart of the talk examines adhiṭṭhāna as a pāramī (perfection), describing it as a wholesome quality of steadiness and aligned energy that differs fundamentally from willpower or aversion-based striving. Wilson explains how this determination comes together with discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and calm. She offers practical guidance for recognizing and cultivating this quality—from ending the "dithering" that delays our practice to simply meeting whatever arises with presence. The teaching concludes with encouragement to embrace aspiration fully, remembering that the path is lifelong and everything in our experience belongs to it.

So I thought tonight I would talk a little bit about aspiration, inspiration, and resolution, or resolve. Or you could say saddhā and adhiṭṭhāna, if we want to go into the Pali.

Saddhā is usually translated as faith, confidence, or trust. Adhiṭṭhāna is one of the pāramīs, one of the ten pāramīs, translated as resolution or determination.

Hopefully, you're beginning to realize—I know this doesn't sound hopeful—but you're beginning to realize, after hearing Monica describe so well the five hindrances, which you all recognized, right? They weren't unfamiliar, and they will continue to be familiar. I hope you're starting to see, even though it's only been a few days, that this

path is vast and all-inclusive. It includes all aspects of our life, all aspects of our mind. And it's not just a nice trajectory—nicer, nicer, nicer, nicest. It goes up and down, up and down, and everything's included.

There are plenty of times when what happens or arises is something unexpected, something we didn't think was possible for us, something beautiful. And just as frequently, the next day or the next sitting, it all just goes bonkers. "I had the most peaceful sitting ever, so quiet. And then the next time I sat, it was just thoughts all over the place. What did I do wrong?" As if it were in our control.

All of life, everything is included in the path. And that's reflected in our meditation practice. So much comes up frequently that can be challenging or difficult, and that's going to keep happening in different ways. That's not wrong. That's really where so much of the learning and the freedom arises—learning how freedom arises in the midst of the unpleasant. Freedom isn't about getting rid of the unpleasant. If we could all only really get that one thing, we'd save ourselves so much grief. Freedom's not about getting rid of the unpleasant because you can't. That's life.

My point is that there are plenty of times when what comes up is difficult. Sometimes the mind, the heart is really in balance, and we can meet it with practice. And there are other times when that's just not quite the case. What comes up is either stronger than the mindfulness at the time, or there are times we're just—let's face it—fed up. There are times we're bored. There are times it's stronger and we're overwhelmed.

This calls forth from us again and again a willingness to recommit. Both Dawn and Monica mentioned in different ways, suggested how helpful it can be to consciously tune into your own personal deepest aspiration. Not what you want your sitting to look like, but the deepest aspiration—what's really important, most important in your life.

This can be really helpful, to consciously connect with it every day, but particularly in times when we're feeling a sense of struggle or a sense of being lost. Sometimes we're struggling and it's just fine, but sometimes it's like, "I just can't face this," or "What the heck am I doing here anyway?" That would happen to me sometimes. It wasn't really struggle. I'd just be walking, and whereas walking before I was loving it, in this particular walking I'd think, "What am I doing? Lifting my foot, putting it down, and feeling it? What's the point of this?" That can come and go, but you follow that too far down the road, and you really stop doing it. You have to reconnect.

I want to talk a bit about what aspiration is. It's different from expectation. Aspiration is an aspect that feeds faith, trust, confidence, willingness to do. Aspiration is really tuning in for yourself to the bigger picture. It's looking at a sense of what's really possible.

What really inspires you? Why are you doing this? And it can be vast. Don't be shy or think, "Well, I can't possibly have an aspiration to awaken because I'm just a stupid jerk. Maybe I can have some nice sittings." Don't. No. Aspiration is really opening to what's true for you though—not what you *should* have as an aspiration. It has to be true for you. But when we tune into it, it's a big picture of what is possible.

It's a wholesome quality of heart and mind. When we tune into aspiration, with greater or lesser degree of course, it uplifts the heart and mind. This is actually a quality of how faith affects us. It's uplifting, it brightens, it energizes the citta, the heart and mind. It strengthens our willingness in that moment, our commitment to just fully be with whatever it is that's arising. You could say it strengthens faith. Sayadaw U Pandita would say that faith gives the willingness to do. It strengthens resolve. And so tuning into aspiration in this way can be so supportive.

And it's a moment of thinking. It's a contemplation. That's fine—using wise contemplation. It's not like you're thinking about it for five and a half hours. It's just a tuning in. You can kind of feel it in yourself.

And yes, it may be conceptual. Say one's aspiration is to awaken and cultivate compassion. One can think, "Okay, that's looking at a result. That's looking at a goal. Doesn't that feed striving and all of that?" But when it's aspiration, when it's wholesome, it's not about wanting. It's just about recognizing: wow, it's really possible. And that's important. Otherwise, what the heck are we doing? That's important.

But for many of us—probably all of us at some time—it can switch to expectation, or maybe we don't quite understand the difference. So expectation could verbally say the same thing: "I'm really here to awaken and cultivate compassion." But the quality of mind, of heart, is very different. It's got like one eye on the result. "I'm here. Am I there yet? I'm here. How much longer? I'm here."

Expectation is definitely coming together with greed, with craving. Whereas aspiration has the quality of uplifting—maybe not all the way to the sky, but a little bit at times—and brightening and strengthening the heart and mind, when there's greed, when there's that wanting, it feels so different. It narrows the consciousness. The Buddha said once that greed, hatred, and confusion are makers of measurement. I could go into a lot of things about that, but just right now—a measure we can feel when

there's that wanting, that expectation. The citta is contracted. It's narrower. There's the wanting, and so consciousness is narrow, and it leads to disappointment and frustration and comparing and doubt and the whole nine yards.

Probably you're not familiar with any of that, but it can happen if there should be, by some chance, expectation arising in your heart and mind. Not that any of this is bad. This is all impersonal. There's cause and effect. But when you start to feel this sense of contraction and dis-ease and disappointment when you think of awakening, it's not awakening's problem.

It's the sense that the quality in the mind has come into wanting. So then just bring awareness to wanting. That's fine. But don't confuse it with aspiration. Also, don't be afraid of aspiration because it might move into wanting. Good chance it will. Good chance everything moves into wanting one time or another, right? If you try to avoid everything that wanting might arise from, just hang it up. It's impossible.

But we don't need to be afraid of wanting. Mindfulness is quite happy to be mindful of wanting. It's no problem. It really is no problem if we're mindful of it.

Getting in touch with and remembering our aspiration—just at times when we think, "What do I do now? How can I keep going?"—just take a moment to connect with your aspiration, that's all. It's not like it's going to fix everything, but it begins to just connect us a bit again to faith, so that we don't get so overwhelmed, so we don't get lost in that.

And frankly, the more I've practiced, the more I appreciate this. I think I do this much more than I used to. I used to think you just have to practice and do it and do it yourself. But there's nothing wrong with inclining to the wholesome. There's nothing wrong with bringing in aspiration, and as I'll say in a minute, inspiration—even from others.

The path is difficult. It is challenging, a lot, because as Monica said last night in that very well-known statement, the Buddhist teachings kind of go against the stream of the majority of culture. It's like swimming upstream. But it's not only against the stream of culture. It's against the stream of our own familiar habits—habits of mind, of personality, of perception, and how we describe and define the world.

One of the reasons that at times the continuity of our mindfulness practice is so challenging is because perceptions will arise that are other than what we're used to, that we haven't really opened to or seen before. We're stepping outside of our familiar worldview. This isn't a thinking thing; it happens by itself. And so that stepping outside of the

familiar worldview, or of our comfort zone—sometimes we need some support for that. If we're just relying on, "Okay, well, I'm out of my comfort zone," we don't know where it's going.

So just connecting with aspiration, and in a minute I'll say with some inspiration, can give us the strength not to figure it out, but to simply surrender again into the totality of presence in this moment—without needing to understand it all and know where it's going, or like it, or feel comfortable in it.

I'm a comfort wallah. I like comfort. Give me a choice, I go for comfort. A lot of us do. But seriously, if we stay within our level of comfort, we're not going to learn. Because a lot of comfort is actually just coming from familiarity with—basically wrong view, a lot of the time. We'll be talking about that in many different talks. But being comfortable isn't necessarily your best reference point for how things are going. Being uncomfortable doesn't necessarily mean there's a big problem.

Learning to be with discomfort, with unfamiliarity—that's a lot of the practice. It's a lot of life. And so just being willing to ask, "What can support, brighten the heart and mind, give a little strength, give a little willingness to do, willingness to meet?" I find this really helpful in terms of starting with the aspiration.

But not only aspiration. The next thing I'll talk about is faith. Faith, of course, is the first of the five spiritual faculties—five wholesome qualities of mind that develop as we're meditating and that are very supportive. The first one is faith. It gives rise to vīriya, to wise effort, to energy, to mindfulness, to samādhi—collectedness of mind, steadiness of mind—and to wisdom. Those five all work and support one another.

As I said, Sayadaw U Pandita would say faith is really what launches us. Without some faith, we're not going to have the willingness to do. And by faith here, as I'm talking about it—this is just me—I don't at all mean a belief in something, like believing in the Buddha's teaching in some conceptual way. But it could be a kind of trust.

A sense of confidence, which is different from just believing something. A sense of confidence that gives us the willingness to put the practice into practice.

So faith—one of the ways it's talked about is that the first arising of faith, and we all need some kind of arising of faith or confidence to start on a path, to come here to meditate. You don't just say, "What the heck, I've got nothing else to do." You have to have some kind of faith to get us here. So in the beginning, this first arising of faith is called bright faith.

Bright faith comes, you could say, from outside—something we've read, someone we know who really inspires us. It can be an experience. Sometimes you have an experience, you don't know where it's from, but there's a real sense of "Wow, there's a whole different way of being." A sense of the mind-heart without kilesa, how that feels. You don't even know what it is, it's so unusual, but you want more of that. Bright faith inspires, it brightens, it uplifts the heart and mind. It's a beautiful quality.

So tuning into bright faith, again with the aspiration, but not thinking we have to do it all by ourselves. It can be when we're feeling really flat and dull and we can't find our way—taking a moment to reflect. It may be a person who originally inspired you or someone who's inspiring you now. It doesn't have to be a big teacher. It could be anything. But something that touches a quality in ourselves. That's how bright faith works. It's not faith in that person exactly, but recognizing their great generosity or their compassion, or somehow being in their presence you feel a sense of calm—whatever it is. It inspires us because it touches that quality in ourselves. Oh, something other is possible.

Bright faith then strengthens into what's called verified faith. And I know we all have verified faith to some extent, because believe me, you wouldn't last four days here without it. Verified faith comes from our own experience. We know something is true. Even though I don't always have the perception of impermanence, I know that everything's in constant change. That's verified faith—confidence in that. It doesn't mean you always recognize it, but you know it. If someone came up and tried to convince me, "No, everything's really solid," it just doesn't work.

But bright faith—we can draw on it. Sometimes when I'm feeling flat, when I can't find the aspiration, when my energy is low and I don't know what to do, I take a moment and reflect. I just want to give you a few examples because it makes me happy to talk about, and I get to do that since I'm the one talking. But I want you to see how much I've learned about the power of faith to give strength to wholesome qualities of mind—resolution, willingness to do, generosity, energy.

I've learned a lot about this from spending time in Burma and meeting many different Burmese nuns in various aspects of life and different circumstances. Because these nuns, compared to the complexity of the Western mind, are perhaps more simple. The ones I'm thinking of are not highly educated in the university sense, but they have a great deal of Buddhist education and understanding. Basically, I'm thinking of two in particular who have tremendous faith—really strong faith, faith in the Buddha. One particular nun, Daw Tha was her name, had huge faith in the Buddha. This is living in Burma, in a Buddhist culture.

So it's much more part of things in that culture.

When she first became a nun, when she was about 20, she had a debilitating illness. The doctors had given up and thought she would die. And so finally her parents let her become a nun. She had so much faith that within six months, somehow that just strengthened her heart and mind and she became healthy.

She and her sister then—they lived in a small village several hours away from the main city, Yangon, a very simple village—came up to Yangon and they were in a meditation center where the Sayadaws were teaching. She was telling us her story at our request. Her goal in life was liberation. That's what she wanted. And they were just really dedicated, these two sisters.

And then, as so often happens with a lot of the nuns while they're still young, in their early 20s, the head Sayadaw from their home village reached out to them. In these small country villages, sometimes the head Sayadaw is kind of like the big chief—the guy who made good. He's really respected and in a way almost runs the village and does a lot of things for the people.

So anyway, he sent up maybe 10 or more young girls who were either orphans or whose parents were very poor and couldn't take care of them. There was no good education in the village. This story could be repeated 10,000 times. This is just one that I know. The Sayadaw just sent these young girls up to these two sisters, Uttara and her sister, and said basically, "These are for you to take care of and educate." Not for a couple of weeks, but until they're grown up.

This happens all the time. A lot of the nunneries are almost like the safety net for young orphan girls, for poor girls, so that they have somewhere to learn a good life. They become nuns when they're sent there.

So the Sayadaw sent these little girls to them, and the sisters accepted without a murmur. They said, "Okay, well now this is our life." Their faith is so strong. Their practice is what's called Buddhānussati, which is reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha.

This is interesting to me—this is how bright faith works, what I've learned about it. I see that in them. That particular practice, it doesn't light me up, you know what I mean? It's nice and all, but that practice of Buddhānussati, just going over and over the qualities of the Buddha, it's just not my way. But being around them and seeing their faith—their faith touches the faith in me. Or in others of us, I know I am not alone. That's really what's inspiring, to see the faith. Being around them really brightens my faith, really gives me a lot more energy and willingness to do, seeing not only their faith, but then how that serves to manifest in their life.

So back to the story. They left the meditation center. They found a little piece of land, which they somehow borrowed the money for and started building a little bamboo shack. That's what they all do—move into it with these 10 little girls or however many. And there would always be a few more every year. Everything's done on donations. They don't have money. They get donations to slowly, slowly build a place to live. The girls all become nuns. They're sending them to school. They're educating them.

Talking to Uttara, she described how it was like a 180-degree turn in her life—completely opening into it with faith and surrender, total commitment. She would tell us she's really committed to these young girls, and you could see it. I mean, we've been seeing her over the years. There's affection there. They're taking care of them. You can tell by hanging out with them that they're really connected, and there's a lot of affection. And she's really clear: now this is our path. Sure, when they're all grown up and gone, we want to go back and meditate more. But for now, this is the path—a total surrender, a total willingness to do, because it's a huge amount of work. And it's what they do. This is from their faith, and it deepens their faith.

She said, "We just want to give these girls a chance to see that they can learn sīla, learn a right way to live. It's not that we expect them to stay nuns their whole life."

When they're eighteen, they can do what they want. This keeps them from a worse possibility, but also allows us to teach them how to be truly moral, beautiful human beings. And you could see she meant that.

So to me, that's one way I've really come to appreciate the power of faith to help us genuinely use whatever life is giving us. *This* is our path. This is our path of awakening. This is a path of cultivating metta and compassion. Not "How can I get out of this? How can I go back to the meditation center?" I'm sure my mind would have tried that out. So yes, that's one story that's really inspiring to me in terms of faith—loving what is, embracing reality as the path, and giving everything to it.

Or here's another, completely different way that bright faith can touch me. And I'm sharing this to invite you to see what's true in your life. It doesn't have to be some great teacher. It might be a friend whose generosity really lights up that quality in you and gives you the willingness to do, the willingness to commit.

There's a monk, a relatively simple monk, quiet, who has a small monastery up in the Sagaing Hills. I have a little picture of him that Greg took, which I often take with me on retreat. He's pretty simple. The monastery's small. But he's just very peaceful, very calm, and he radiates metta—but in a simple way. He's not some big teacher giving

lots of Dhamma talks. We go to visit him when we go there every year, and just hanging out, walking into the monastery, there's this sense of calm and peace. It's very tidy. He puts out food for the dogs and the deer out in the woods.

I just love being there, even though we can hardly talk to him—he only speaks Burmese—but there's this radiant kind of peace. We've known him for at least fifteen years. More. Since 1997. He doesn't even look any older. I keep saying he's this young guy, but he can't be. He looks the same. We were shocked when he first came out with a cell phone—"Oh my God, he has a cell phone!" But that was the year all the sayadaws got cell phones.

Anyway, I just think of him, and it brightens up that quality of serenity, of a simplicity of metta, in myself. It gives me the faith, the energy, the willingness—not to try and be like that, but to meet whatever life is throwing at me, whatever practice is coming up right now. Because this is the only way to understanding and awakening: what's happening now. We have nothing else but what's happening now. So that's another way that bright faith is really lit in me.

One last example of seeing how faith can give unexpected people the energy, the willingness to do something that would never have seemed possible.

This is another nun, Sumanachari, at Appamata. She came to us some years ago. She had a nunnery with about twenty-four, twenty-five nuns. She always seemed, to me, kind of depressive. There was the nunnery, and they were there just living like a nunnery. Not a lot of little nuns, mostly grown nuns. She's lovely—she would invite us over for mohinga—and she was nice, but she just seemed a little depressive, not much energy.

And then this one year she came over and was telling us how she was so unhappy in herself, she couldn't sleep at night, because she had realized that what she needed, what she really wanted to do, was to open a school—a free school for young kids. A lot of kids couldn't... this was before now, I don't even want to talk about how it is now, but this was some years ago, maybe ten years ago. There were government schools that are supposedly free, but there were all kinds of hidden costs. A lot of young kids—their parents couldn't afford to send them. So some nuns and monks would open schools in their monasteries and nunneries and make them free for the kids.

She wanted to do that for young kids up to about grade four. That means not only having a space—and the school just starts by being like a roof with desks, think of that as the school—but also hiring teachers, regular teachers.

All of this has to come from donations. They don't have any money. But the teachers are regular lay teachers that get paid a salary. So she needs to somehow raise the money to build this place, to hire teachers, to make room for it. And honestly, we really couldn't see how she could do it.

But we donated some, and a lot of people donated, I guess, because when we came back the next year, she'd done it. We went over to the place, and it had two buildings that the nuns lived in. One of them was gone, and all the nuns had crowded into this one building so that in the other area, she'd built this huge open space with a roof, filled with desks, hired some teachers, and over a hundred little kids were coming now every day. And that's just been growing over the years.

A huge amount of work. A huge amount of generosity, giving up how they lived. And she came and she was radiant. She was transformed. She said—let me see, I think I wrote it down—she said, yes, she's really tired. It's so much responsibility. You have to raise the money, pay the teachers, get the buildings going, sometimes provide the food. She says, "I'm exhausted, but I'm radiant." She says, "Now I sleep. My citta is peaceful. My heart, my mind is peaceful." And she's just kept going. This was some years ago.

So to me, when I think of it, that's a great example of how faith can lead to the willingness to do, and the sense of resolution—which is what I want to talk about now—the adhiṭṭhāna, the willingness, the resolve to just keep doing. Because once she started that school, you couldn't go, "Well, I don't feel like doing it anymore," right? Even in our meditation, even in our life.

I want to talk about adhiṭṭhāna, the pāramī of determination, resolution, because as a pāramī, it's a mental state. It's a mental factor. It's something we can experience in our hearts, in our minds. We can experience it here. We can learn to recognize this quality and incline our minds to it because it supports doing. It supports commitment.

Sometimes people say to me—a lot of people have said this—"If I give up wanting and aversion, as if we could, but if I didn't have wanting and aversion, how would I do anything? Would I just sit in my room?" I mean, that's heartbreaking, seeing that the only motivations for actions that we know are greed and aversion. So adhiṭṭhāna is a wonderful motivation to help us in intention.

It's a mental factor, and I want to just describe it, the ways it's described in some of the commentaries: resoluteness with steadiness of purpose, just really steady, unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. Another example that's given is like steadfast, unmoving, like a stone pillar. Okay, that last one sounds a little inflexible

—stone pillar, by God, I'm doing this. It's not like that. But it's really useful to explore and get familiar with. I've been finding it so helpful in practice and in life. So we can learn to recognize it.

As I said, we know how to do difficult things. We all have, not just coming to a retreat—that's difficult enough. Raising a family, going to work, taking care of elderly parents. We've all done things that are difficult, things we have to keep having some commitment to do. And I'm sure some of the time the motivation might be this adhiṭṭhāna, this form of resolve, which I'll describe more.

But a lot of the time—and we see this when we come to just being with the breath—the way we know how to do stuff is by pushing, striving. A lot of times people say, "I don't know how to do stuff other than that."

All this receiving, this doing of non-doing—what the heck are you talking about? We just know how to do things by striving and willpower. And we get stuff done that way. Like the people who say, "What do I do, just sit in my room?" We haven't really learned how to recognize consciously these other qualities, so we tend to use force. We tend to use willpower, aversion, or wanting.

And this can feel strong. Often people say anger, aversion—it feels strong. It helps you meet something difficult. It can help you overcome. And that might be true. But the quality in the heart-mind is not calm. It's not clear-seeing. It's the kilesas. It's a suffering quality—not just because it's unpleasant if you look carefully, but the real suffering of the kilesas is when they're present in the citta, in the heart-mind, without mindfulness recognizing them. They distort perception. We don't recognize accurately.

I think Monica might have said this last night, and the Buddha said it too: whenever any of the kilesas are present in the heart-mind and you don't see them, you can't see clearly. You can't see your own good, you can't see the good of another, you can't see the good of both. And so maybe we're pushing through with wanting, with aversion, we're getting stuff done—but it's coming together with this unwholesome confusion that increases greed and aversion and confusion.

Adhitana, determination as a parami, is wholesome. The inner experience is that you're present with great steadiness, but without aversion, without wanting, without this willpower sense of "me doing it, I'm so great." It's a beautiful quality, really. How do you say? It's like it aligns the energy. There's a sense of collecting the energy. It's calm. And we can learn to recognize it in our minds.

Several people have described how when we're lost in thought, the thought comes and then we see it. And often our habit of coming back to the breath is "get back to the breath!" And you get back to the breath, but there's a lot of aversion. But when you can say, "No, not now"—it's clear seeing. It's not "not now" with a hammer. No, not now. The energy's aligned. It's clear. "No, I'm just not doing that now. Come back to the breath." And you may do that ten million times, but feeling, learning to recognize how that quality of aligning energy feels, how that steadiness feels—it really calms the mind. We can learn to recognize it and incline the mind towards it, actually call it up.

A simple example—I've used this before in other talks, but in my daily life, every morning for two or three years, I've been liking to do about fifteen minutes of qigong exercises. When I do them, they're actually pleasant, and I almost always feel better. My energy kind of balances from doing them. But not every morning, almost every morning, I just don't feel like doing it. It's like, "Time to do the qigong." No. I don't really feel like doing it. And there's no good reason for it. It's just, "I'll just sit here. If I don't have to be somewhere, I'll have another cup of tea. Then maybe I can do the qigong. Or maybe after breakfast, then I'll do the qigong."

You know how that goes, right? "I've been trying to sit every morning..." I don't know—you English speakers, is this word your first language? "Dithering." It's a good word. Maybe I will, maybe I won't. I'll do it now, no, I'll do it later. Let me just rest a little bit first. But the rest isn't restful, because your mind's going, "Oh, I should..." Every morning, ridiculous, right? It's just—when you just get up and do it, it's so much easier. Even if you dithered, when you finally do it, it's nice, because the dithering's over.

One morning, I just noticed it. I started with that familiar "ah," and I said, no, just do it. And you can feel—I can feel—the energy just aligns. It's just, yeah, get up and do it. You stop with all the rationalization and this and that and the other. You just forget all of it. You just get up and do it.

Sometimes Sayadaw U Tejaniya would hold up the Nike swoosh—their slogan is "Just do it." He would just hold it up. But that's what adhiṭṭhāna is. Very gently, the energy aligns and you just do it. It's a relief. It's not about willpower. It's not personal. It's not about "I'm doing it." It's a relief.

And so that day when I recognized that, I thought, oh, right. It's so obvious. When I start with "should I," I can just know: adhiṭṭhāna. I'm going to do it. Oh yeah, adhiṭṭhāna. The mind collects, you just get up and do it.

Play with that here on retreat. You can see how it really supports our practice. It's simple. Notice places where you're dithering. We can rationalize anything, you know. But notice you're rationalizing. We'll get to that.

For example—I think maybe this morning, it all blends—but yes, when Dawn was talking about the precepts and saying, I felt the last one is like, if you wake up in the morning and it's half an hour early, but you're really awake. "No, I don't have to get up. The sitting starts at five. There's no need..." and on and on. Should I, shouldn't I? I roll over. I can see I'm not the only one who's ever done that.

Dithering. Adhiṭṭhāna—you pull it, you get up. That's it. It's so much easier. We think somehow we're being comfortable. This is how we're so deluded. You're lying there for half an hour, and then you finally get up. You're more tired. You don't feel good about yourself. You're rationalizing all the reasons you needed the rest. It's just—oh, yeah—trying to get up is a hundred times easier.

So there are all kinds of ways you can play with this. Steadiness—sometimes as the days go on, take a chunk of time in the morning and just follow the schedule. Just sit, walk, sit, walk. Not "should I walk now, or should I start now?" You just do it.

You don't think about it. It's so much easier, so much calmer. So just play with it.

The "not now" quality—I mean, it's not always available. No wholesome state is always available. But learning to recognize it, I always wish I'd learned about it more. It wasn't talked about too much in my early years of practice. As we get more familiar with the wholesome states, we can just bring them up. As someone has said, wisdom mind inclines to the wholesome. When wisdom is present, when there's mindfulness and wisdom, it's almost like you ask yourself: would you rather be with wholesome determination, or would you rather be with wanting and dithering? Wisdom will choose the wholesome if you just give it half a chance. Start to tune into that, because on retreat it's very supportive.

And it can help—though it's different from striving. It can move into striving and a determined "No, I have to do this, I should do it." And then it doesn't feel so wholesome anymore.

So there are four qualities that come with adhiṭṭhāna. Adhiṭṭhāna, this sense of the collectedness of mind and just doing it, is what's called in the Abhidhamma an "ethically variable" quality. That means you could have this quality of getting the mind collected and doing something, but you could do something unwholesome with that. It's ethically variable, depending on what other qualities are present in the mind. But as a pāramī, it's wholesome.

This quality of adhiṭṭhāna, as I've been talking about it, comes together with and is supported by wisdom. This is from the suttas: it says adhiṭṭhāna comes together with four qualities—discernment, a quality of wisdom; truthfulness; relinquishment; and calm.

I'll just say a little about each. Discernment is somewhat obvious. The sense of having a determination, a sense of what I'm going to do, what needs to be done, bringing it together—there needs to be discernment that the conditions are appropriate, supportive for that. The example I think of is the Buddha. The story goes that when he sat down under the Bodhi tree, he made this strong determination: "I don't get up until I completely awaken." Well, he'd been doing really strenuous—beyond strenuous—renunciate practice for six years before he took that determination and sat under the Bodhi tree. So somehow he had a sense that the conditions were supportive for that.

This is the discernment, the wisdom of really seeing what is. We don't always know, but we look carefully at what's supportive. For example, if I were to say now, "I'm going to go into the staff dining room, sit down, go into the fourth jhāna, and not get up for two days"—the conditions of my mind and body at the moment would not make that possible with some discernment. I'm exaggerating, but not really. For some people, that would be possible. It's not an impossible thing. But for me, at this moment, that wouldn't be adhiṭṭhāna. That would be some stupid expectation—stupid because I know better.

So discernment. You bring in: Is it realistic? Discernment takes some ability to look at what the conditions actually are. If you make a clear resolution that in this sitting you're not going to have any thoughts anymore—mostly, there could be a time when that might be possible, but for most of us, it's not. It's a wish. It turns into willpower, into striving. Adhiṭṭhāna isn't just deciding you're going to do something and doing it. It's this quality of seeing what's realistic.

But I could sit and walk every morning and try that for a week. And then when I don't feel like doing it—no, just do it and don't dither. You could do that. So explore for yourself.

The first quality that supports adhiṭṭhāna is wisdom, this discernment.

to assess realistically. And the second aspect is truthfulness. Truthfulness helps you see what's really possible, but also simply not kidding ourselves. You know what I mean? "Oh yes, I'm making this resolution, but I can't really do it. I'm too tired," whatever it is. Truthfulness is just being truthful with ourselves, not kidding ourselves, discerning realistically, and seeing as clearly as we can.

Relinquishment, of course—whenever the adhiṭṭhāna says "just get up," you're relinquishing lolling around in bed. When I say I'm going to sit, walk, sit, walk for the morning, I'm relinquishing doing other things. Relinquishment doesn't have to be suffering. It's not a suffering state, but it's just recognizing that to just do it, to bring all the energy in line in a certain way, is relinquishing doing something else. That's just obvious. But noticing that comes with it.

And the fourth—that all of these together bring—is calming. Working with and noticing adhiṭṭhāna, it's like you just do it. As I described with the qigong, it brings calm to the heart and mind. Not an incredible calm necessarily, but all that back and forth—should I, shouldn't I—the unease, the confusion, the wondering, the worry, that drops out. You just do the thing. It doesn't have to be a pleasant thing. It may be that fears are coming up and "how do I work with it?" Just be with it. It's like this. It's scary. It's unpleasant. But the adhiṭṭhāna, the determination, lets us be with it without fluctuating too much. So it's really supportive and it really brings calm.

This is not a should. None of this is a should. But start to tune into this as a wholesome quality of heart and mind that's available to us, that really supports our practice. And when we use aspiration and bright faith, this resolve comes out of that. It really supports us to continue with our practice.

This appears in another place in the suttas as well: adhiṭṭhāna comes with wisdom, it strengthens faith, and that brings energy. The Buddha said these circle around and support one another—wisdom, faith, energy, and commitment all circle around and support one another.

I just wanted to offer that for you to explore. And back to the beginning, I want to say again: don't be shy about aspiration, about really acknowledging to yourself what's truly important to you. Don't get into all the "me" and "it's not possible" and all of that. That's just story. What's really important to you? And remember, the path is lifelong. Everything in our life is part of the path.

I want to read this from Ajahn Chah:

The Dhamma that we need to see and to know can be seen right here within us, every moment of every day. We ask, "When will we see the Dhamma?" But it is right here, to be seen in the present. In a nutshell, the point of the teaching of the Buddha is to transform one's view. It is possible for it to change. It only requires looking at things and then it happens. These things are right here. We don't need to look up at the sky or down at the earth.

And back to: "The Dhamma that we need to see and to know can be seen right here within us, every moment of every day."

And from His Holiness the Dalai Lama: "One day, you will become bodhisattvas in reality. So whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

And as the Buddha said, don't settle for anything less than the sure heart's release.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 79

The Dart: Understanding Vedanā

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Carol Wilson offers an in-depth exploration of vedanā—the feeling tone that arises with every moment of consciousness. Drawing primarily from the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6), known as "The Dart," she illuminates how an untaught person experiences two darts of suffering when touched by unpleasant feeling: the initial unpleasant vedanā and the mental anguish of resisting it.*
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> *Wilson explains vedanā's crucial position in both the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) and dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), showing how feeling tone gives rise to craving, which hardens into grasping and ultimately leads to suffering. She explores the Buddha's teaching on gratification, danger, and escape—how pleasant experience genuinely gratifies, yet its impermanent nature and our addiction to it constitute real danger, while the abandoning of desire and lust represents true escape.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for investigating vedanā in daily life—while eating, walking, or experiencing temperature changes—and reveals how steady mindfulness allows us to see the difference between vedanā itself and our reactive patterns. Wilson emphasizes that awakening doesn't mean escaping unpleasant experience, but rather finding the stability of awareness that isn't tossed about by reactivity to pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings.*

So tonight I was going to talk a bit more about vedanā, because when Vance introduced it so excellently this morning, I thought, well, in five minutes he said everything that needed to be said, but somehow I'll find an hour's worth in it.

It's actually such an essential experience. It holds a key place in several of the maps the Buddha spoke about that bring us into suffering on a moment-to-moment basis. And yet it's something that, until I heard about it from the Buddha's teaching, I never would have noticed. Would you ever notice it? To me, this is one of the more incredibly brilliant things about the Buddha—that he actually could have the clarity to see this arising, because vedanā happens so quickly, and then to see how it works, how it functions. So I'll talk some more about it because it's so fascinating, so often unrecognized. And it happens so quickly that even when we're thinking about it or kind of aware, we're often not going to notice it. So I hope you didn't make yourself crazy today trying to notice it, because it's arising in every moment of consciousness. Cut yourself some slack, but do notice it at times.

Vedanā is key—it is the second of the four foundations of mindfulness for that reason, as Vance described so well. It's a key link in the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination, how a moment of ignorance goes through these twelve links, culminating in suffering. That's a whole complex teaching I'm not going to give tonight. But in the middle sections, the six sense bases give rise to contact, which I'll talk about more. Contact gives rise to feeling. And this is how suffering works: feeling, vedanā, feeling tone, gives rise to craving. Craving can be going toward or going back. Craving gives rise to grasping—it hardens into reaching and grasping. That gives rise to becoming, which is even more settled in. And that gives rise to birth, birth as whatever the particular grasping thing was.

Ajahn Chah said once, going through the twelve links of dependent origination, it's not like a slow thing where you can kind of watch each one. He said it's like you fall from a tree and on the way down you hit twelve branches. I like that. He's so funny, Ajahn Chah. But it's like that—boom, and you wake up in suffering. That's how it works.

This is that central point where we can actually, with steady mindfulness, see how it works. This is what's so great about our practice—not trying to avoid it. Once we understand again and again and again, seeing how it works, that's when the wisdom, paññā, comes in, and we don't have to pick up the craving every time there's feeling tone.

As Vance also said, vedanā is kind of a key player in the arising in the mind of the three unwholesome roots: greed, ill-will or dosa, and delusion. Again and again, the Buddha speaks of these three unwholesome roots as basically the source of suffering. They're unwholesome not just because they don't feel so good—they don't, they torment our mind—but often in the texts, liberation, nibbāna, is spoken of as the heart-mind that is free from greed, hatred, and delusion in a moment. So they're not just things that are a pain in the neck. They're actually the deepest level of torment, because the mind's non-recognition of their presence and the identifying with them and perceiving through them is actually what blocks our recognition of ultimate peace of heart and mind. They're roots of suffering, big time.

As Vance said, we see how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral vedanā, unrecognized, lead into these unwholesome roots. That's a lot of what I'm going to talk about tonight, referencing a sutta of the Buddha where he talks about this, which I have found so helpful.

First, though, just to describe the situation we find ourselves in as human beings—or at least I do. One way the Buddha described the world, or our world as a human being, is simply the six sense experiences. So when he talks about the world, he's talking about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and the whole mental experience. Very ba-

sic. All day our experience, again as Vance mentioned, is one of sense contact. Every moment of consciousness, there's some sense contact. Sight comes together with the sight organ that works, and there's consciousness, knowing at that moment. Those three come together—that's called contact, phassa. Now, how many contacts all day long? Every moment that we're conscious, there's sense contact.

And leaving aside vedana, because we're not normally going through life noticing that—but our habit is that some of these sense contacts we like. We don't think, "Oh, pleasant contact." We just like it. We don't even think that, but that's how it is. Some of them we really don't like. Obviously a mistake—somebody else's or ours. But that's how we take it. Many, many of them, as Vance said, we don't even notice. Nothing's happening. But there's never nothing happening. There's stuff happening all the time, but it's not worth our attention. Have you found yourself at all during this retreat waiting to be mindful for something worth being mindful of? There's always something happening.

So, contact. That's what's going on all day long. And mostly in life, without steady mindfulness, without our Dhamma understanding, the experience—we like it, we don't like it, we don't even think that—but our attention is, you can almost say, entranced by the experience and by our reactions to it. "Oh, what a beautiful sunset, that feels so nice," and then wherever it goes from there. To us, that's the experience. That whole thing. We're kind of entranced by it, by our reactions. And we tend to get involved in whatever the object is. And the object is very often mental—our moods, our emotions, our thoughts. We like it, we don't like it, it's good, it's bad, or whatever. And this is really how we live our life, not recognizing this habit.

So when we like something, it's pleasant. We don't notice that. When we don't like it, there's something wrong. Neutral, we don't notice. And really, I think almost all of the accepted worldview is that pleasant is the way it's supposed to go. I mean, not pretending—we know otherwise. It's just, this is where we have to be honest and truthful with ourselves, because we see: unpleasant. We don't notice unpleasant. We just notice we don't like it. And as I said, something is wrong. People kind of giggle at that, but that's it.

You're having a really nice sitting, and then it all goes to hell in a handbasket. What did you do wrong? Because once it's pleasant, of course that's right, and it should stay that way. And if it doesn't, it's because you've done something wrong, or someone else did something wrong and messed up your meditation. But that comes to be kind of an underlying assumption—that we shouldn't have other experience. And when we are discontent, when things aren't going well, the response is how to get a better experience. And behind it all is one we like. Pleasant. That's just kind of a given.

And if you think it's not, just over the days, over the months, notice how that slips in the back of your mind. When you're feeling discontent, you think, "Well, the practice is going well. I know it's impermanent, blah, blah, blah." But there's this little discontent. Just check it out.

One time I was doing walking meditation at Shwe Oo Min. Fine, I was present, I was with whatever was going on. Nothing special was happening, but I was there doing it. And I just felt this discontent. So I thought, "What's the view in the back of the mind?" How it should be—that we don't quite recognize is there. And when we don't recognize it, it gets this little dart in. If you recognize it, it helps. So I said, "Okay, what's the view?" The thought was: it should be better. What should be better? Anything.

This moment should be better. There was nothing wrong with it. But you can't win with that one. Because it should always be better. It can always be better. That's the tendency to evaluate ourselves and the world, and it really becomes a guiding principle of our life—how to get it better.

Ajahn Buddhadasa said once—we've referenced him a few times; he was really a great scholar and teacher and quite a character—anyway, he said once: When you do something, when you make a decision, just do something and see why. He says, maybe it's an exaggeration, I don't know, check it out. But he said you'll see that ninety-five percent of everything you do is for pleasant feeling. You can throw away that number, but have a look. It's a little bit scary when we start to see it, and how far down the road we go with that.

Because what that does, as I think I said before, is that wanting is wanting. Wanting more pleasant—it's a maker of measurement, the Buddha said. It narrows our world to me and the pleasant experience, or to me and the unpleasant experience, or how to get a better pleasant experience. All the involvement is about me. And our life really becomes evaluating a sense of self, a sense of meaning from whatever object's happening and how pleasant it is or not. Maybe I'm simplifying a little bit. But honestly, I don't think as much as you might think I'm simplifying.

So it's challenging. This is the definition of saṃsāra. It keeps us leaning, looking into the next thing, the next thing. This one's pleasant, but it goes away. How to get another? Or it's pleasant—but notice, sometimes something's pleasant, pleasant, and then it becomes neutral. You've got to ramp it up a little bit more. Look at media these days. Look at the intensity. I can't bear it, mostly. I used to like movies, but everything—they have to ramp up the intensity to an unbearable level, because we get dulled out. And neutral doesn't count. So even when things are good, they could always be a little bit better.

I think I mentioned that one of the Tibetan descriptions of saṃsāra is the urge to correct. You can always just fix it a little bit. Just a little bit, it could be better. And so we get focused on the object, focused on what it means about me. And we're tossed in our life between pleasure and pain, liking and disliking—like ping pong, back and forth, back and forth. And reactive to that, of course.

So in our practice, that's happening, but we have the capacity—the steadiness of mindfulness and the curiosity of Dhamma—to look and see what's really going on. Not just buying into the assumption.

But the way we toss back and forth—I remembered an example when I talked about this. I don't know, it speaks to me. It's from American football, which I know little about and care less. And for you Europeans, I mean football, not soccer. So I was watching the Super Bowl, which is the big finale, which again, I could care less. But I was with a bunch of friends, and that's what we were doing. And they cared. So I was watching. It was toward the end, a few years ago. Those football fans, I'm sure I'll get this wrong. Please, I don't want any notes about how I got it wrong. I'm just trying to make a point here.

So the Patriots were playing – that's New England, Tom Brady, very famous quarterback. And it was just right near the last two or three minutes of the whole game, and they were behind. They were about to lose. I don't have to go into how the game is played, but they cut to him because he wasn't playing at that moment – the defense was playing, so he was on the bench.

The look of total, total dejection, depression. He was practically crying. He looked completely down. And you just feel – this is the mind in unpleasant experience. This is the mind totally submerged in it.

And then some amazing thing happened. This is what I know I'll get wrong, but somehow I think one of the Patriots made an interception and ran all the way the length of the field. Some amazing thing happened, and they made a touchdown and won in the last two minutes, which never happens. And they cut to him, and he's screaming and yelling, so happy, jumping all around.

This is like two minutes. Completely immersed in each one. That's how we live our life. It's exhausting.

And given the chance, I'm sure he'd do it again. He'd go for more high, more high, and the highs are measured by the lows, and on and on. So you get the drift. This is how our life can go. Without recognizing how pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant affects all our reactions, we're just going to keep ping-ponging back and forth.

So now I want to talk a bit about vedana, feeling tone. I'll read through and keep commenting on this sutta, this discourse of the Buddha. I like it because of how he starts it. It's called the Sallata Sutta, the Dart.

"An untaught worldling" – he says that a lot; that's most of us – "bhikkhus, experiences pleasant vedana, they experience unpleasant vedana, and they experience neutral vedana. A well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral."

So if you're still secretly holding out the hope that when you get enlightened, unpleasant feeling is a thing of the past, hang it up right now.

So a well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences. What's the difference? What's the distinction that exists between a well-taught noble disciple and an untaught worldling? Interesting, no? Gets the attention. What is the difference if they're still experiencing sense contact and vedana in the same way?

This shows the Buddha didn't wake up into a different world, and nor will we. It's the same world with all the same junk going on. So what's the difference in terms of vedana?

"When an untaught worldling is touched by an unpleasant" – now he's using bodily vedana, bodily feeling, but it could be either – "bodily vedana, they worry and grieve, they lament, they beat their breast, they weep and are distraught. Thus they experience two kinds of vedana: a bodily unpleasant and a mental unpleasant."

Can you relate to that at all? At all, right?

"It is as if a person were pierced by a dart, and following the first piercing is hit by a second dart." Oh my God, my knee hurts, I can't believe it, it's so horrible – the two. "So that person will experience vedana caused by two darts. Similarly, with an untaught worldling, when touched by an unpleasant bodily feeling, they worry and grieve, lament, beat their breast, weep, and are distraught."

Sayadaw Tejaniya calls this "double dukkha." And that's what we do with unpleasant—it's wrong, it's bad, how do I get rid of it? We're entranced by that reaction. We totally believe it. We're totally caught up. And there's a whole storm we don't notice.

But this is where it gets really interesting to me, because he's explaining how these habits of sense desire, aversion, and delusion come about moment to moment. They're habits.

So, having been touched by that unpleasant vedana, they resist and resent it. Can you relate to that? Resist and resent it. Then in one who so resists and resents that painful vedana, an underlying tendency, an underlying habit of resistance against unpleasant feeling comes to underlie the mind.

Every moment of consciousness, if there's a moment of resistance, that's what's being practiced in that moment. It strengthens the tendency for resistance to arise in the next moment. If mindfulness is present, it makes it a little more possible for mindfulness to arise in the next moment. It's just cause and effect. It's just science.

So he's saying that resisting the unpleasant comes to be a habit that underlies the mind whenever there's unpleasant.

And then he goes on. Under the impact of that unpleasant feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy, to look for sensual happiness. Why does one do so? An untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feeling tones except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

That to me is such a powerful and poignant statement. If we look around the world, ordinary people who aren't paying attention—the only escape they know from unpleasant is to go find something pleasant, whatever it is. It could be something simple or something twisted, whatever that person finds pleasant. It's so sad. It's so sad that that's all someone knows to escape to.

So in one who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feeling tones comes to underlie the mind. They do not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feeling tones. They don't see the impermanence, nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feeling tones.

Only knowing how to go for sense pleasure, not understanding the impermanence, not understanding the gratification, danger, and escape—when one lacks that understanding, the underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feeling tones comes to underlie the mind.

Since feeling tones are arising every moment, how many moments are there of unaware practicing of these habits? No wonder the habits of wanting, of ill will and aversion, and of delusion are so strong in our minds. They arise so frequently. It's not something you're doing wrong. This is how our lives have been conditioned. It's impersonal.

And I appreciate how he's describing it. He's not saying you're a stupid jerk because you're doing that. He's saying this is what's happening when we don't understand.

So when such a one experiences a pleasant vedana, an unpleasant vedana, or a neutral vedana, they feel it as one fettered by it, as one chained by it. We're caught by the pleasant, by the unpleasant, by the neutral, caught because of the ignorance. Such a one, O monks, is called an untaught worldling who is fettered, who is chained by birth, by old age, by death, by sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. He is fettered by this suffering—this I declare.

You could say it's intense, but I say it's actually a fairly accurate description of a great deal of life without awareness.

So let me talk a little bit about what he's describing—that we don't know of any other escape, we don't see the impermanence, and we don't understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape. That's a nice way to talk about it.

First, just understanding the impermanence. Watch how with just a pleasant feeling or unpleasant feeling, our mind just takes off into story and sense of self and all of our life. It can just go wild.

This is from Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, actually the older brother of Tsoknyi and Mingyur Rinpoche. He's talking about renunciation as what he calls "weariness with samsara" – this endless cycling. And he's not saying we hate it. We're just saying, "Really? Again? Again? Again? Do I need to keep doing this?" And we don't.

He says, watch. Watch the fickleness of the mind. Do you know fickleness? Fickleness is often used in terms of when you're in a relationship and you're fickle – you don't really stay committed to one person. You go to someone else, you go to someone else. The mind is fickle. It isn't steady.

So he says watch how easily the mind is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight or sound into an immediate mood, into a whole world. Do you notice that? You're in a good mood, so that's pleasant vedana, which we didn't notice. We walk outside, all set to look at the sunset, and a big dark cloud comes, and it gets really cold, and suddenly we're miserable.

Do we notice? When we're mindful, we might, and then we can just laugh at it. But you see, that's a very simple example. Take a bad mood. Take your meditation tanking. Take something that's really spinning you out, a really difficult emotion. We don't tend to think, "Oh yes, that's an unpleasant emotion." No, no – it's me and this, and what can I do? A whole world.

And then it vanishes. It does, right? It's just gone. And do we notice? "Oh yes, unpleasant has vanished, and now it's neutral." It's like, "Oh thank god, it's gone, I got through it." No, no, no – a whole other world. That's what he's talking about.

We don't want to simply recognize, "Oh yes, pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling." The Buddha said: "Before my enlightenment, oh monks, when I was still a Bodhisatta, it occurred to me: what is the gratification in the world? It occurred to me: whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world. That the world is impermanent, bound up with suffering and subject to change – this is the danger in the world. The abandoning of desire and lust for the world – this is the escape from the world."

"If, bhikkhus, there were no gratification in this world, beings would not become enamored with the world. But because there is gratification, beings become enamored with the world."

Again, he's being very reasonable. He's not saying there's no such thing as pleasure. He's not saying there's no such thing as beauty. And he says, "the abandoning of desire and lust for the world." He didn't say abandoning the objects.

"If there were no danger in the world, beings would not become disenchanted. But there is danger, so beings become disenchanted. If there were no escape, beings could not escape."

But there is an escape, and beings can escape from the suffering.

So I want to talk a little bit about that, because I think sometimes it's perhaps a bit misunderstood. Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about gratification, danger, and escape—something mentioned frequently in the suttas in different contexts. I like the way Bhikkhu Bodhi speaks about these three as three movements in an unfolding process of insight. It's not like something we have to get, but rather something we explore. As I think we've said before, hopefully everything we say is an impetus for you to explore, not to memorize. Memorizing won't help. So it's an invitation—three movements in an unfolding process of insight.

Gratification. There is gratification. There is pleasure. What does gratification mean? I looked it up in the dictionary: to satisfy or please, to give pleasure by satisfying desires or humoring inclinations. So pleasant experience is gratifying. What I pick up from the sense of gratification is that it feeds a sense of me appreciating what's happening.

In talking about the hindrances, the Buddha said once that what increases sense desire is unwise attention. You keep paying attention to the gratification of the pleasant. You're not just noticing it's pleasant, or "this is a lovely cup of tea." It's unwise attention to the beautiful aspect—"Oh, that's so nice. That's so nice. Oh, this feels really good. This feels really good." Unwise attention to that aspect keeps us spinning in the gratification, feeds sense desire, feeds the sense of me. Attending only to the pleasing sign, the pleasing aspect.

You know how sometimes it's talked about when you first get a crush on somebody—maybe not even really falling in real love, but a crush. Whenever you look at them, you don't see all the junky stuff and the dirty socks. Later you see that when the crush-eyes go away. But in that moment, you only tune in to the beautiful stuff. Even if it's not there, the mind is projecting it. That's unwise attention to the pleasing sign. "Ah, look how they walk. Oh, look how they sit." We all know that. We know that's all down the path to suffering, but that's never stopped anyone yet.

So noticing the gratification, that's all. Noticing how it works. Sometimes people think, "Oh yes, pleasant feeling. I get attached. It leads to suffering." So they try to shut down, not have pleasant, not experience pleasure. All pleasure is bad. Beautiful things are bad. That's just aversion. That's not helpful. But yes, there are times you shut the sense doors. You're so sucked into the beautiful thing, you might think of turning your attention in another direction. We can take some wise decisions. But understanding how gratification works—this is where coming back to notice that pleasant feeling matters. It's not all about how the person looks. It's like there's a pleasant feeling. There's seeing and a pleasant feeling. Seeing and a pleasant feeling. It's so nothing. A pleasant feeling just comes and goes.

And if we're noticing that every moment—pleasant feeling gone, let me look again so I can have another pleasant feeling—that's what we're doing. And when you stop getting that pleasant feeling from looking at that person, then it all goes in the wrong direction. I'm not getting a pleasant feeling. I need to go somewhere else, get a new pleasant feeling, look at someone else, look at something else—all for the sake of pleasant feeling.

But there is gratification in the world. And that's why we become enamored. But when we see and start to tune into just that pleasant feeling leading into it, it takes the mystery away. Maybe you don't want to take the mystery away—you're welcome not to. We'll keep on going like we are. But if you bring in the steadiness of awareness, you'll see: oh yeah, pleasant feelings.

The danger—the obvious aspect of danger—is of course just the impermanence, just on that level. The impermanence of pleasant feeling tone. Also the impermanence of unpleasant feeling tone. Vedanā. The impermanence of everything, right? But leaning into any experience to give us happiness when it's based on having pleasant feeling tone is, of course, completely unreliable. So that's the obvious danger. And I think intellectually we can understand that. But we need to have steady attention where we can see: oh, that pleasant feeling tone's gone. And leaning into looking for another one—to see that change.

Another danger is the addictive, delusory aspect. Again, not seeing the pleasant clearly, but just thinking, "Oh yeah, this is really what it's about. I feel good." And when we feel good, we can say, "Well, they talk about having a calm, balanced mind. That's how my mind is now. It feels good. I'm not suffering. It's calm. It's balanced because I've got what I want." And there's a moment with no wanting. That's why it feels pleasant.

Notice that. When there's not craving, or aversion, or delusion in the mind, it's really peaceful and stable. Notice that. Why does it feel good when we get what we want? Because the craving drops away. It's not about the thing. The craving in the mind, in the heart, is torment. But we get so confused—we mistake it for pleasure, or taking us into pleasure, you know.

So just the steady looking: the craving drops. You get the thing and you don't get the thing—it doesn't matter. The craving's gone. There's peace. There's momentary peace.

And the other danger, as I said, keeps us looking in the same direction. It keeps feeding the danger of going after pleasant feeling, avoiding unpleasant feeling, ignoring the neutral. It keeps us feeding the habit of the kilesas—of greed, hatred, delusion. It keeps those habits going. That's just what he's saying. And that is the real torment of suffering—of mind and body leading to our actions and thus creating more confusion and suffering in the world, in our relationships.

Just recognizing with awareness the inner instability and dis-ease that's present in our citta, our mind, our body, when there's strong kilesa—when there's greed, when there's ill will, aversion, when there's delusion—and not recognizing when we're identified. We're looking out, we're looking to the object, you know, to get it more pleasant. But what's the suffering? It's the presence of kilesa in the heart-mind.

All the teachings, in a way, are ways to help us understand this—to stop feeding these kilesas, these habits. To stabilize, to learn to recognize and trust the wholesome qualities of mind. And mindfulness, and the steadiness of mindfulness that leads into steadiness of samādhi, of clear seeing—these are the conditions that allow for this wisdom, this paññā, to arise. It's not that we, as an act of will, decide to stop doing this stuff.

That's just more delusion. But wisdom sees how things actually are, how they already are.

When we start to see and recognize—oh yes, look at that—this pleasant feeling leading into suffering, all this resisting the unpleasant, everything I'm doing not to have to feel unpleasant vedanā. Look at all the suffering! We start to see it. And not be afraid of unpleasant feeling tone. Not be afraid of losing pleasant. Not ignoring completely all the moments that aren't juicy enough to pay attention to. We start to see accurately. The wisdom comes in, and you might think, "Oh, what can I have another?" It doesn't matter. There's peace. Just for a moment, recognize those moments. It really feeds the wisdom.

So the escape—and that is how the Buddha described it—the obvious escape is not that you have to enter some gray world of no beauty, but the abandoning of desire and lust for the world. This is the escape.

Again, we so often conflate the desire, the wanting, with happiness that it's really quite common for people to say—and not just at the beginning of their practice—that they're coming up against some experience that's really beautiful and lovely. You can feel the clinging in there, but it feels so intertwined, as if the clinging is part of it. So we confuse the clinging for ease, for happiness. And people say, "Well, I don't want to keep on this path if it means giving this up." That's just another mind moment to explore. But look at it—we get so conflated with the clinging, the craving, with what's lovely and beautiful.

And yes, there's no way around awakening without also finding the willingness, the ability to be really present with the unpleasant. Equally present. That's really the mind of equanimity. That's what we're exploring here.

Honestly, I know you probably know this—maybe you don't—but I say this often: the really difficult parts of retreat, when you're still practicing, still being here, being mindful, those difficult parts are really the gift of the Dhamma. That's where the learning is going to come. Steve Armstrong used to say something about nothing ruining your day like a good sitting.

I have a good friend whose first retreat was all wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. I swear, for ten years afterward he couldn't get through a retreat because it was never all wonderful again. Because that experience feeds our misconception that it's all about nice and beautiful and wonderful. If that happened to you and you're just floating in bliss but without wisdom, without clear seeing, how do you think we learn what the Buddha's talking about here—about how the habits of greed, hatred, and delusion arise? Not by listening to me talk about it, not by reading about it, but by being it, by learning it, by really feeling and seeing how it happens.

And luckily, you will have ten million opportunities. So if you miss one or two little moments of pleasant or unpleasant feeling, you'll probably have another one pretty soon. And you usually can't tell what you're learning at the time.

Sometimes I feel like our job as teachers is just to keep you going. Just keep you going. "Okay, it all stinks. It all hurts. Fine. Take a step. Notice the sensations." "Oh, you're really unhappy? I'm sorry. How does it feel? Pleasant? Unpleasant? You may notice." That's what we do. We try to be empathetic, but then keep going, keep going. Because that's where the wisdom's going to come.

Mingyur Rinpoche says, you know, part of the escape is being willing, just in a moment, to put down that craving, that clinging, that lust for the pleasant, that fear of the unpleasant.

We start to recognize, at times, that we can feel pleasure—a sense of peace, as Mingyur Rinpoche describes it—that arises from the stability of awareness. This is awareness that is not dependent on the absence or presence of unpleasant or pleasant experience. Peace comes from the stability of awareness, the stability of knowing that isn't being jerked around by reactivity to pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. He says awareness itself is inherently calm.

This is something interesting to notice. And as the practitioner was talking about concentration and how this sense of calm and peace comes in—it's not only there. As I was saying, one of the real ways we experience calm and peace is when the mind is really present and awake and there's not kilesa coloring the citta. That could be just for a moment. One of the reasons the unified mind of wholesome concentration is so pleas-

ant is because those kilesa are not activated. That's one of the reasons. But it's also that you can feel the stability of steady awareness, the wisdom that comes, and that inherent calm or peace when we're not being tossed around by the kilesa.

I say this to perhaps give a little more interest in exploring: How does feeling tone work? How does it arise? Let me see for myself. The absence of torments is really a powerful thing, and we can notice many moments of that.

So then, taking this into practice, into our mindfulness practice, I've nothing amazing and new to say except steadiness of awareness and, from time to time, tuning into vedana. I just want to say it's very subtle and quick. So often it's so quick that many people, when they experience aversion, don't even feel the difference between unpleasant vedana and aversion. It comes so fast. Or of course there's wanting—it's pleasant, it's wanting. They're so intertwined. So it does take a little steadiness to explore.

I'll offer some hints about times when you might investigate—not when you're all in an uproar about something, but when you're kind of interested, nothing much is happening. You might have a look and see. When something's going on that's maybe kind of easy to feel, often in the body, pleasant or unpleasant, maybe that's not overwhelming, that maybe is a little bit repetitive. You can just notice: you go outside and it's cold. It's cold. Once you get over that, just kind of feel cold. See, the mind goes right into aversion. That's where I go with cold. Maybe you like cold. Maybe your mind goes into aversion with heat and into liking with cold. Either way, it doesn't matter. But keep noticing—your mind goes off into story, but there's the cold again. Just keep coming back, playing around, coming back with a conscious awareness that this is a choice of wisdom. Just go right to the cold. Not even looking for it, but just right to the sensation itself. Again and again. Maybe it's right off into the wanting again. Maybe not. Sometimes then, just in little things like this, you can feel that subtle sense of pleasant or unpleasant. And it could change, either way.

Or when you're eating, perhaps the taste of the food is pleasant. Or you know it's pleasant because you're liking it, so you can assume it's pleasant. So explore. Take a bite and just really be there for that burst of flavor. Take another chew. See if you notice the pleasantness. I haven't noticed, but the third bite is just like mush, mush—no flavor at all, right? So you hurry it down to get to the next pleasant experience. Notice that. Mush, mush—unpleasant.

Something's still happening. Maybe it's more neutral. Watch and see. Or maybe the unpleasant is often a thought—"Oh no, the tongue wants some more." Often, what is giving rise to the vedanā is a thought, and we can easily miss that. So explore in ways like that.

I remember one retreat I was doing, walking meditation, pretty slow. I was doing this style in the days when it would take me literally half an hour to walk the length of one of the upstairs halls. So I was doing that, really into it. And a fly came, you know, and was walking on me. Not a biting fly, just a fly. This is where noticing intention becomes interesting—to move my arm up to brush the fly away would be three times slower than I just demonstrated it. Too much trouble. So I wasn't doing that. I was just noticing. Because the fly kept going and I was really present.

So then I just started noticing the little feet. And because it kept going and my mind was pretty present, that's when I really saw—oh, the unpleasant! And I really saw the difference between unpleasant and aversion. It's not the same thing.

Now, a very smart teacher says, and so I have to acknowledge he may be right—so keep looking, don't just believe me—he says that as soon as we label vedanā as unpleasant, there's already a tinge of aversion. So look and see how it is for you. For me, that little experience with the fly, I don't think there was. I could tell the difference. But we're all different. Look and see.

Something repetitive that's going on that's really pleasant, that's unpleasant—you can see when you notice the vedanā, and then when you go off into the story about it. Just exploring, not to get it right, but to see how this works. This is really where the freedom comes in.

This is from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. You've heard this: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows: I feel a pleasant feeling." That's it. "When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows: I feel an unpleasant feeling." Okay, what do you do when you feel a neutral feeling? "I'm feeling a neutral feeling." That's it.

If you're looking for more, then we're looking for some gratification, some juice, and that's what we don't want to give up. That gratification that feeds that sense of me, that makes me feel so alive.

Just a couple more things I want to read. This is again from the Buddha, giving instructions: "Having seen a form with mindfulness muddled..." You know what muddled means? Just all murky and unclear. "Having seen a form with mindfulness muddled..." I know that never happens to any of you, but should it... "Attending to the pleasing sign, one experiences the pleasing thing with infatuated mind and remains tightly holding to it."

Which could be something as pleasing as the sight of two more brownies on the plate. Pleasing sight. One holds to the pleasing thing with infatuated mind. "Many feelings flourish within, originating from the visible form, from covetousness and annoyance as well." Which could come up. "And one's mind becomes disturbed."

The visual, the brownie—I want it. There's only two and those two people are getting it. All this stuff flourishes, comes up from a pleasant sight. One's mind becomes disturbed. "For one who accumulates suffering thus, Nibbana is said to be far away."

In that moment—remember, it's all only moments.

Now contrast this: when clearly mindful, steadily mindful, one sees a form. One is not inflamed by lust for forms. One experiences it with an unattached, a dispassionate mind and does not remain holding tightly. "Oh yes, pleasant sight, two brownies." One fares mindfully in such a way that even as one sees the form, and while one undergoes a feeling—pleasant feeling tone—suffering is exhausted. In that moment, suffering is let go of. It's not built up.

"Exhausted"—she's not saying you pushed it away. It's exhausted because it's not being fed. This is where the kilesas in the mind... it's not that we have to hate them, but they're arising moment to moment. The kilesas, the wanting, the suffering, is fed by that attachment to the pleasant and by that leaning into it. When we don't feed it, it's exhausted. It goes out. This connects to the image of nirvana as a flame going out because the fuel isn't feeding it anymore. Just in that moment.

"While one undergoes a feeling, suffering is exhausted, not built up. For such a one, Nibbana is said to be close by."

You see, that's what the Buddha is saying. It's really all happening in the moment.

I want to end with a little shift, some words from Pema Chödrön, putting this into more day-to-day language:

"The essence of life is that it is challenging. Sometimes it is sweet, and sometimes it is bitter. Sometimes your body tenses and sometimes it relaxes and opens. Sometimes you have a headache and sometimes you feel 100% healthy. From an awakened perspective, trying to tie up all the loose ends and finally get it together is death, because it involves rejecting a lot of your basic experience. When we wake up, we can live fully without seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. We can live fully."

We think we're living fully holding on to pleasure and avoiding pain, but this is really what's blocking full life. We can live fully without recreating ourselves when we fall apart. We can let ourselves feel our emotions as hot or cold, vibrating or smooth. We can give up on being perfect and instead experience each moment to its fullest.

That's really the escape. We're so lucky that we're learning there is an escape, that we're not caught, that the only thing we know how to do isn't simply lust after pleasure.

May the calm and peace that arises in our own hearts and minds when we're free from confusion be shared with all beings. May our practice be a cause, a condition for all beings to awaken from suffering and confusion.

CHAPTER 80

Exploring Sense of Self

Carol Wilson · 51 min

In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson explores one of the most fundamental misperceptions in Buddhist understanding: the belief in a permanent, separate self (sakkāyadiṭṭhi). Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, she explains how saṃsāra is not a place but a process—the tendency to create worlds through our thoughts and then inhabit them, driven by the distortions of perception (vipallāsa).

Wilson offers practical guidance for investigating the sense of self as it arises in meditation. Rather than trying to think our way into understanding anattā (not-self), she encourages bringing steady mindfulness to notice how the sense of 'I, me, and mine' gets concocted from ordinary sense experience through grasping and clinging. She illustrates this with vivid examples: how a simple cricket sound can spin into elaborate stories of nostalgia or despair, how walking meditation can trigger either grandiose fantasies or harsh self-judgment, and how the same news heard in different mental states produces entirely different responses.

The talk emphasizes that moments empty of self-sense are completely natural and occur hundreds of times daily—we simply don't notice them because we're habituated to attending to what's louder and more dramatic. Wilson invites practitioners to develop appreciation for these moments of simplicity, to notice the space between thoughts and activities, and to trust that when clinging releases, wholesome qualities like compassion and equanimity naturally arise. The practice is not about annihilating the self but about recognizing awareness itself as refuge.

So the other night, Sally spoke about delusion. One major aspect, one major way that delusion shows up is misperception. This is what Vance spoke about when he mentioned the *vipalasas*, the distortions—sometimes people translate it as the hallucinations of perception. Due to *kilesa* in the mind, the mind simply recognizes something wrongly. And then we think about that and we act from that. Unfortunately, that's what we're doing a lot of the time.

One of the major ways that insight actually works, what insight actually is, is a shift of perception. It's not that the way the Dhamma is or the way reality is changes, but the perception shifts, the *kilesas* go, and perception comes into alignment with how things actually are. That gives rise to appropriate response, to appropriate understanding.

Sayadaw U Pandita said once that when delusion, when *moha* is operating in the mind, we don't see what is here and we do see what's not here. It's really true.

The Dalai Lama has said many times—actually Thich Nhat Hanh, many people say the same thing—but I like this one from the Dalai Lama: "All of our difficulties come from mistaken perception. And this ignorance is at the root of the 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations." You think you've had a lot of destructive emotions so far—84,000, and cognitive obscurations! But we can narrow it down to greed, hatred, and delusion, and that's just fine, because they're all subsets of that.

The Dalai Lama goes on to say that when our hearts and minds are not clouded by confusion, what he believes are our true human values—wisdom, compassion, generosity, *metta*, equanimity—these qualities of heart and mind are what naturally manifest in response to life when the mind and heart isn't clouded.

So our path of awakening, our path of *sati-pañña*, mindfulness and wisdom, as we've said a million times—I'll say it again—it's not to annihilate the 84,000 destructive emotions. It's not to push them away. It's not to try and force clear seeing. But the simplicity of steady *sati*, the simplicity of steady mindfulness, actually allows for the perception to shift.

What we're really doing is bringing our attention. It's not that we have to get rid of the deluded mind, because how do we get rid of it? With more aversion, right? It doesn't work. But a lot of our practice is simply the steadiness of awareness, seeing how the deluded mind works.

So you've had a lot of practice with that already. You'll have a lot more. Instead of thinking something's going wrong, you can think, "Great, this is an opportunity to really watch with kind awareness how the deluded mind works." I'm not kidding. That's a so much more helpful attitude than, "I can't believe this is happening again. I've seen it. I know it. I can't believe it." How is the deluded mind working in this moment?

This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, talking about *samsara*—speaking of the deluded mind. This is my current favorite quotation: "*Samsara* literally means wandering on. Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live, the place we leave when we go to *Nibbana*. But in early Buddhist texts, *samsara* is the answer not to 'where are we?' but to 'what are we doing?'"

We're samsara-ing so much of the time. So *samsara*, he's saying, is not a place but a process: the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, you create another and go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds. Sound familiar? Then we wonder why we don't understand each other, why we don't even understand ourselves.

Ajahn Sumedho then takes us a step further, talking about *samsara*: "*Samsara* and *nirvana* are not places to go. They are modes of perception."

Samsara is samsara. We're *samsaring* when we're believing and looking through the perception of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—of personality view, of belief in that moment in a sense of unchanging separate self. That's the basic misperception, the delusion that keeps the whole samsara going.

So that's what I want to talk about tonight. I think of this very simply as an invitation to explore, to demystify this sense of self. Because for sure, we all experience it, right? Anyone here who doesn't experience a sense of self? You wouldn't dare raise your hand even if you didn't.

Talking about not-self or *anattā* can be this really loaded concept where we think we want to think our way into it. But the Buddha, as we've said, didn't teach anything as a philosophical concept to add to the burden of all the other stuff we have to think about and try to figure out. And if you have ever—and I bet you all have—spent any time in your thoughts mulling over and trying to understand through thinking, not-self, and really experience it, how far have you gotten? I find the more one thinks about it, what gets stronger? *I* can't understand this sense of not-self. *I* must be able to think my way through it. The Buddha didn't teach any of this for philosophy, and nothing to believe, but as an invitation to explore and really see.

So I just want to offer a few tips tonight as an invitation to investigate: What is this experience in any moment when awareness notices there's an experience that's being called I, me, or mine? What is the experience? And what are the moments when there is no sense of I, me, or mine? Or as Ajahn Buddhadasa would call them, moments that are empty of sense of self.

Ajahn Sumedho, who talks about not-self and exploring self all the time, said that when he first started practice there was a sense—or I know people say—you've got to wait until meditators are pretty far along to bring it up because it's such a subtle and confusing concept. And he thinks, and I agree with him, why? Why not start with the basic misperception that's feeding all the others? Why spend twenty years practicing

from wrong understanding? Why practice for twenty years with a view, "I am going to achieve *nibbāna*"? Wrong view, completely. So why not begin to explore just this simple sense of self, this belief in personality view?

As I said, it's certainly something we experience, right? Sense of self. But often, by now, probably you all are bringing awareness to it when you notice it, because it's simply another arising and passing momentary experience. When we don't include it in the steadiness of mindfulness, when we don't examine it, the assumption is that we know: "Here's sense of self again. It's always here." We're waiting for the big bang, right? When it finally—thank God—goes away, and we really get it, and we're just floating without resistance through all the arising and passing experience, and there's no sense of self, and we're happy as clams in the water.

But it's not like that. As long as we're thinking that way, we're thinking, "Oh no, here's self again." And instead of just recognizing an arising experience, it has all this stuff around it. All I'm saying is include it in the awareness. It's a concoction. Unexamined, it's assumed to be real—"Here's a sense of self." But with careful attention, careful mindfulness, it's just another physical or mental, or possibly both at different times, experience that can simply be noticed.

Ramana Maharshi said the ego, or the sense of self, is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look, examine closely, and the ghost vanishes because the ghost was never there. So also with the sense of separate self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one searches for it, it is found not to exist.

Try to think your way into it—spare yourself the trouble and don't. But bring steady, steady awareness. Whenever there's a sense of self, what is it? Turn the awareness and see what it feels like. How is it showing up?

It's simply a concoction arising and passing in any particular moment. There's nothing steady state about it.

So I just want to highlight tonight a couple of the manifestations of this sense of self. But let me mention also: when you just notice self—if the awareness is kind of steady and quiet, not a big hoo-ha going on, but you're just being with things and a sense of self comes in—you can just note it. What is it? And not idea-wise, but what's the actual experience?

I spent a long couple, three months with Sayadaw U Pandita, and the noting was very steady. A sense of self would come up. Sometimes it's like an image, just a mental image—like you're seeing out from your eyes, or an image of the face, or sometimes a little sense of contraction in the chest, or whatever. So I would just note "self, self."

I tried to explain this to Sayadaw. It did not go well. There was no way. You know, it's through translators and stuff, and I was trying to explain how I just noticed this sense coming and going, and I would note it as "self." And they got hysterical because they thought, "Oh, she thinks there's a self, and she's noting self all the time!" I gave that one up.

But really watch and see. What is it? Oh, there's self again. Turn around. What is the actual experience in the moment that's being called self? It's a physical or mental experience. That's all there is.

So one way—maybe the most obvious way—we notice the manifestation of a sense of "me" is in thoughts. Ajahn Sumedho again: "We create ourselves, our sense of self, our personality view, through our thoughts. And we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self."

It's just watching and seeing how much of your thoughts are about me. Majority, maybe? More than one or two? That's not bad or good. It's just noticing. We're telling ourselves the story of me all day long.

But how does it happen? One very simple process. As we've talked before, what's going on all day? Just the six sense contacts: feeling, perception, consciousness. All day long—seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, thinking—all day long. Have you noticed that? And that's, as we said, how the Buddha defines the world.

Now, as we go through the day, you can start to notice: how does the sense of me get concocted in a moment? It happens like this. It's just conditioning. It's just habit—deep habit, familiar habit.

But not every single sense experience is felt as me or mine, is it? I mean, that would be beyond unbearable. It's unbearable enough. But if it was every single seeing, hearing, smell—"oh me"—unbearable. So many just go by. But there are some, whatever, for whatever reason, that attention kind of unconsciously prioritizes. And there's a sense of something like you pick it out and grasp it. It's me or mine. And there's a reaction to it. It's kind of grabbed out of everything. This is me, or this is happening to me, or I feel like this about that.

And it doesn't just stop there. It goes immediately into whatever the story is—longer or shorter story about me that we tell ourselves. Just watch it. It's a basic and recurring misperception. I could give ten million examples.

Walking meditation: just walking, being with whatever arises. You're not in some big empty space, but there's no big story of me happening. And then someone cuts in front of you. In the scheme of things, that's nothing. Someone cuts in front of you. If the mind is really balanced, there might be seeing, unpleasant, an aversive thought. It goes. There's nothing. That doesn't have to create a sense of self.

But quite likely, it goes and we don't notice the unpleasant. We notice a sense of aversion. We notice the judgment about the person and how insensitive they are. "They're not respecting me. What's the matter with them?" I don't have to go further down that road, do I? It's like that.

This is not something your mind is doing because you're stupid and useless. This is just the conditioned habit. This is how these things work. So rather than getting all fussed about it, at whatever point in that process you catch it—just, "Oh, awareness, look at this. Me, me, me. They're disrespecting me. They should be doing this. I feel like that." And then the whole story of your entire life could come in, right? In two seconds.

Just noticing how that happens, and how it can go away again so quickly. We can do this. It's kind of fun to watch. I really think this exploring of sense of self coming and going, if you get interested in it—I find it really fun. Except when it's not. But much of the time, if you're really looking at how it gets created, you start to not be able to take your personality view too seriously. You really can't.

So watch how we tell ourselves stories. We describe and define ourselves all day long, right? Not from every sense contact, but just like that little example I just gave. That's happening all the time.

Some sense experience comes. There's a reactivity, or there's a perception. There's a thought about it. There's a clinging to it or an aversion to it—which is also clinging. The whole stream of our life starts, and we don't notice. Then it changes, and we don't notice. We think it's just me having these weird emotions, but surely there's some steady me in the background.

Really looking at the process with steady awareness, you see it truly arises and passes.

I always use this example, but it's just very simple—walking again. Walking is fun. Somehow you can really see these stories coming and going while walking, with a little more sensing involved.

So you're walking. This time there's not a sense of self, just feeling the sensations or hearing, whatever. Mindfulness is steady. There's a sense of pleasantness, and you're aware of that. It's going on and suddenly, without realizing—because there have been all kinds of comings and goings of perceptions and sense contact, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting—all of a sudden: "Wow, it's really going well." Just a thought, a pleasant thought. It could keep going, but no—it's going well.

So the grasping, the kind of pulling it out, may not be to the thought itself. It may be to the pleasant feeling. It's fast. And from there: "I'm really getting this," right?

And the whole story starts. In two seconds, you're planning either to abandon your life and enter a monastic situation, or you're planning your next three-month retreat. You're planning how you're going to meet the Dalai Lama, and he's going to be so amazed because he's never met such an amazing yogi with so much insight as you. And it takes no time. If you see it, you notice how fast it happens. But it just feels like me.

And then suddenly, "Oh my God, I am so conceited!" Another thought with a different feeling tone. And this one feels equally compelling: "This is what I always do." Whereas before you started having all the memories of all the successes in your whole life—your whole sense of "me" was in there, your whole life going to visit the Dalai Lama, everything you've done, all the amazing stuff—now suddenly it's "Oh my God, I didn't even see the greed. I didn't see the conceit in there." It feels pathetic, and you go totally down the other way. And every memory of all your failures comes flooding back, to that time in third grade when the teacher called on you and you didn't know what seven times five was and you felt humiliated, and on and on.

And that feels just as real. They're both "me." Because we're sucked into the misperception of story, assuming this steadiness behind it. But seeing it, this is going on all day—the different worlds that Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about. We're believing each one. When we're in an "amazing yogi" world, if we had to communicate with someone, we'd communicate in one way. If we're the worst piece of nothing in the universe in terms of trying to meditate—"Why am I even doing this?"—we communicate in a different way. And without steady awareness, we think it's the same "me." But it's just conditions concocting in that moment.

It really is like a movie. I don't know if you've had the unfortunate experience of having watched some kind of movie before you came on this retreat. You know what I mean? I was on a long retreat once—I'll spare you the title, but I had watched some adventure movie before I came. I cannot tell you how many times the thoughts, the images, the feelings of that movie would come up—Harrison Ford and all the stuff going

on. I'd be noting: seeing, excitement, wanting, noticing what's happening. Then that would go away. And then the Carol movie would start: "I'm doing so well, I'm doing so bad, what's going on?" Noting, seeing, hearing.

And I realized it's just the same, exactly the same. One story, another story—one wasn't more real. That was really interesting. So I quit hating the Harrison Ford intrusions. I quit making a big deal out of the Carol narrative. It's just seeing, hearing, perception, liking, not liking, sensation. That's all that's happening—the six sense experiences.

And now the thinking mind pipes up: "Well, how am I going to function if it's nothing but the six sense experiences? And all I do is that? And I don't know if it's me? And I don't know if I'm Harrison Ford? How am I going to be able to function?"

Put that thought down. That's a worry thought. It's not coming from actual experience. It's not a problem. I have not for one moment confused myself with Harrison Ford.

Nisargadatta said, "The world, the self is so real because you think of it all the time. Stop thinking and it will dissolve into thin mist."

Just let that sit a minute and see what comes up. "There's no way I want to dissolve into thin mist. No way."

Let me concoct a whole story of me. I don't care if it's suffering—at least I'm here suffering. I don't want to dissolve into thin mist.

Well, if that's what we want, that's what we'll get. We know how to do that. We know how to concoct stories and get caught in them and spin out a whole narrative of me. We know that very well. So let's explore how that happens and see how it stops.

Ajahn Sumedho again: "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit. My views, my feelings, and my opinions—I can get caught into that world, that view of me that's arising in consciousness. But if I recognize that, if awareness recognizes that's what's happening, then the refuge is no longer in being a person. I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or my views and opinions. And so in that moment, the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends."

Just explore that. And it's interesting to consider not taking refuge in my personality. We do this, you know. We may think that we really dislike our personality. There may be a lot of things about it we wish were different. But just notice how, in a way, we take refuge. Comfort is familiar.

So I let go. The world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. It does not mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. In the Buddhadharma, the world is the world that's created in consciousness. That's why we can be living in different worlds. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same as the world you create. And that's just what Pañasara was saying. But that world arises and ceases. Our refuge then is in this awareness, rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do it. Our refuge is just in this conscious awareness.

So getting interested in seeing how the world of you arises, what it's like, and how it ceases. And another world arises, and it's not the same world, and it's not the same you. Joseph Goldstein has lots of good one-liners, and he used to say often, "We're making it all up." And it's true.

Here's another example, perhaps from that same retreat. It illustrates how there can be a sense contact, the clinging to it, the identifying with it, and the whole world of memories that follows. One day, very simply, it was about this time of year probably. I was sitting in my room and outside there were crickets—you know, these little insects in trees—which for some reason in my mind are associated with autumn and nostalgia and things passing.

So this whole mood came up: memory, crickets, and different autumn periods in my life when things were ending. This kind of sadness, but a little bit sweet, and all about me and my life. And then it went into loneliness and despair and the crickets. I was totally in it.

And then awareness came in, just noticing. Noticing each mood, noticing the thoughts, noticing each time the cricket sounded, there was that connection. Oh, yeah—going into the whole story.

So then I thought, well, let's just consciously shift it. What I actually did was this: the cricket would sound, and I'd change the thought consciously. "How lovely. Here it is, the autumn. And the trees are beautiful. And I'm in this really protected space, practicing the Dhamma. How wonderful!" I don't remember exactly, but I went into some story in the other direction. And it became just as real. The moods came with it.

The feeling tones came with it. The happiness came with it. The gratitude came with it. The actual situation was just hearing and the perception of crickets, and then this whole story arose. They were equally powerful—or equally empty, whichever way you want to look at it. I thought, "Wow. And I go through life believing all this junk." Oh my God, I'm sad. But the crickets—it's nothing but crickets and hearing, pleasant or unpleasant, and some thoughts coming that are memory. That's it. And then they go away.

Can we bear to look in this way? I tell you, it's so much more freeing.

I've been noticing lately—just as an aside—noticing in my daily life that whenever I'm speaking or acting from a strong sense of self, it's suffering. The only time I'm suffering, I check in and there's always some strong sense of "me" going on that I'm not seeing. And I'm responding from that. I'm not saying this as a judgment. It's just like, "Wow, yeah, right." This misperception really causes havoc in the mind, in the world. And it's habits, driven from misperceptions, driven from greed, from wanting, from just not seeing clearly, not looking clearly.

And then there are the personality habits, because we all think, "Well, my personality is different from your personality." It is. We have different habits. But that doesn't make it more real or true or a sense of self. Just as we each have different physical manifestations, we also have different mental habits based on all of our conditioning and experiences, which are slightly different. But it's still arising from conditioning and cause and effect—this whole concoction arising in a moment. That we can see.

So it's about getting interested in seeing personality habits. But we don't have to fear them. We don't have to identify with them. We just notice when we are. "No, but that's me. I have to work this one out. I have to get rid of this, really see through it. And when I no longer have this aversive tendency toward this person, then I can begin to make some progress." But an hour later, there's no aversion arising to that person. That doesn't count, though, because you're carrying around in your mind, "I'm always this aversive person toward them."

Noticing it comes and goes. We don't have to always just get sucked down in. We can bring awareness and see how it's working.

I was listening to Anam Thubten, who's a Tibetan Lama living in Richmond in the Bay Area of California. During COVID, when I was home more—I mean, I live much of the time in California, and he's just over the bay. Do I ever go to see him? No. I went once. Once. I think I met Walt there, the only time I ever went. But I started listening to

him and thought, "Well, he's really great. I really like him a lot." He starts very simply and then it would get, to me, quite profound at some point. And he gave this example that to me fits in here—maybe it doesn't to you.

But as we're developing steady mindfulness, we see that the object is always changing.

We learn not to look for stability, not to look for refuge or a sense of self-worth in any object. Not to look for self-worth in personality patterns. Not to look for stability in things that are constantly changing. That frees up the clinging, and the awareness becomes available to really be present with things as they're coming and going.

So this is an example Mingyur Rinpoche gave that I liked—seeing a habit we might not normally notice. He was saying, especially in these challenging times (this was last year when everything was so intense), we are easily overwhelmed, pulled into a whirlpool of worry, of fear, of anger, self-blame, blaming others. All of this is swirling in the world. There's so much going on, and we're easily pulled into it. And whether we turn the blame inward or outward, it's the same thing.

He says, notice when this is the case, when we're sucked into this—it's just a habit. Stronger or weaker in different people. Maybe some people get sucked into fear, maybe some into worry, maybe some into blame, whatever it is. But notice: when we lose touch with present moment awareness, we lose touch with our natural dignity, with love and compassion.

So he says we practice to re-recognize awareness. Sound familiar? Just to re-recognize awareness—not to fix all this stuff. To re-recognize awareness and its access to our deeper nature. It opens us to the potential for kindness and compassion. And that's what we can then offer to the world. This is guidance for people in daily life. It's not about trying to go in and fix everything, but rather seeing when the habits of attention draw us into "Oh my God, what's going to happen with this? Oh my God, who's to blame?" Whatever it is—just rediscover the awareness. "Oh, that's what's happening."

This seems like magic sometimes, but it's not that magic makes everything okay. What I've noticed is that in moments when I'm operating from a sense of self or sucked into a habit pattern, the experience is one of narrowness, one of unpleasant suffering. In the moment of tuning into awareness—"Oh, that's what's happening"—to a greater or lesser degree depending on how clear the awareness is, that clinging lets go. And then compassion for the suffering people are going through just naturally arises, instead of "Who's to blame? How do we fix it?"

You know how sometimes in news media, something terrible has just happened to someone and they stick a microphone in their face and ask, "Who do you blame for this?" I've seen that so many times. It's heartbreaking.

So, just re-recognize awareness. That's why we practice—to recognize its access to compassion and kindness and clear seeing.

Ajahn Buddhadasa has a book called *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, translated from Thai, which I read many years ago and really enjoyed. It's all about anattā, not-self, looking at it and exploring it. And he has a wonderful line: "Self, the sense of self, is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind."

So simple. The sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. Clinging to what? Anything. Physical sensation, an image, a memory, any of the five sense experiences. Grasping at perception. Grasping at vedanā. Grasping at intention. It doesn't have to be a huge grasping. Just that person walking in front of me—"They're being aggressive." That's the perception. "Yeah, they are."

Don't tell me they're not being aggressive—that's clinging to it. Or perhaps the perception shifts: they're not aggressive, but they're completely deluded and mindless. That's a perception. Or "I'm completely selfish"—that's a perception we cling to. But you can see how we create the world with our thoughts, with this moment of clinging.

A condition arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind, concocted from any experience. As Ajahn Buddhadasa said, this concoction of self arises hundreds of times in a day—birth of self. But then equally, hundreds of times in a day, there's death of the sense of self. Many, many moments throughout the day there is either the letting go—not even letting go, that sounds like someone doing it—but the dissolving of the sense of self. It's just seeing, "Oh yeah, it's gone." And then noticing there's no sense of self in that moment. Hundreds of times a day. It's just an activity of mind.

We can notice this, though you may not always think, "Right, attachment to perception, sense of self arising." It won't be that clear much of the time—it might emerge from a lot of thinking. But sometimes, for me at least, I can often feel a sense of contraction in the mind that comes with clinging. It's not always sense of self, but often. I can just feel that.

And noticing the effect when we're coming from sense of self—it's something to look at and see for yourself. I'm giving my opinion, but don't try to make your experience match what I'm saying. Just look and see. It's like a narrowing of the world. When it's about "me," of course, everything starts from here and refers back to here. I don't know if you've noticed that.

I'll use an example I often use. It's Joseph's example, but he's not here, so I can borrow it. Very simple. He was standing in line on retreat—second in line. That's essential to the story. He was second in line; someone else was first. The bell rang, the person ahead of him stepped forward, but the lid was still on the big pot. So the person lifted up the lid, but it dropped and hit the floor. You can imagine the noise it made in the silence.

And you all are wonderful here—you don't have huge lines for lunch. We really notice and appreciate it. We're putting it down to your incredible practice and dedication. But sometimes on other retreats, people are standing there for fifteen minutes in line, waiting for the meal. So there's a big line, then this huge crash.

Joseph says—he's tall, right?—so he stands up and notices his first thought was that he wanted to turn and say, "It wasn't me." That's what we do. It's all about me. A real narrowing of the world.

And when that's not there, the beautiful qualities naturally arise. A simple example from my own life:

I was sitting quietly at home when I heard—someone must have told me—about a really good, kind thing a friend had done for someone else. At the time I heard it, clearly the mind was in a "me" mood, a little down, a little negative about myself. Just in this subtle, self-judging framework. So it was about me.

I heard the story, and my first thought was: "Wow, I should have done that. I didn't think to do that. Why didn't I do that?" This comparing, this māna in its negative form, all about me.

Somehow it happened that later—not the next moment but the next day or something—I heard a similar or the same story fresh. I wasn't thinking about it at all. But my heart and mind was just really present and awake, and there was no me-ing going on. And the immediate mental state that arose was muditā. "Wow, how lovely! How fantastic that they did that!" Such a world of difference.

Now, don't take that and get down on yourself: "Oh God, I'm so concerned with me." That's just the same thing. But notice the truth of the fact that when there's clinging around "about me," the stories give rise to more suffering. When that's not there, the natural response of heart and mind is compassion, or appreciative joy, or equanimity.

We can trust this. As someone said, wisdom inclines toward the wholesome. It's not like we have to remember and do it. Our job is just to keep refreshing the awareness. Wisdom inclines to the wholesome. If we could trust this and quit trying to fix everything all the time, it would be so much more pleasant. The whole practice would move along. But that's not how it is, and we have to deal with how it is.

So back to Ajahn Buddhadasa—just noticing the arising birth of self hundreds of times a day, death of self hundreds of times a day. He has a whole section on what the translation calls "moments of voidness" or emptiness. But what he's specifically talking about is moments of consciousness when there's no sense of self arising.

This is not some amazing esoteric experience. Ajahn Buddhadasa says it's truly normal and natural—hundreds of times in a day when there's no wanting going on, when we're not distracted but really present. There are many, many moments of no sense of self arising. It's important for our steady awareness to also notice these. We get so distracted or pulled into the sense contacts and what we think about it and me—that's the habit. Yet it's really normal that there are many times when that's not going on.

The sense of self is a process, not a thing that's here all the time. Again, Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it as a verb: *ahaṅkāra* and *mamaṅkāra*—that's Pali. I-ing and my-ing. That's what's going on: I-ing and my-ing. A process that arises and goes away. We can just notice that like we notice anything else.

The next step is recognizing and trusting how normal and natural these moments are—what he calls voidness. It's not such a great word, because now you're going to think there's nothing happening and it's empty. It's not that. It's just the absence of a sense of self.

But he talks about generating a contentment with this voidness. And guess what is one of the doorways in? Our old friend, neutral vedana. Nothing special is going on. Can we generate a contentment with calm? Nothing's happening. Or are we uncomfortable? We've talked about this before—that sense of nothing's happening and the habit of "let's cook something up." Because there's no me here going on. As soon as we think that, we've already cooked something up.

So just starting to notice. You don't even notice a sense of emptiness of self, but just nothing—just really present. And there's a sense of so often waiting for the next worthwhile thing to arise. As we've said before, how often the next birth of me, the habit of mine, is so uncomfortable—even just for a minute of waiting—that it creates, and I've seen my mind do this plenty of times, a whole story, a suffering story, of something that might happen at some point in the future when you go home, if this person's there and

if they did that, and if you say that and then they say that. And then you're totally in anger. But that's better. At least I'm angry. We'd rather be there and angry than in just this moment of simple is-ness. Nothing going on.

So just have that in the back of your mind. You can take an interest—take an interest in the moments between births of sense of self. Sometimes you can, this is just an example, but just have a sense of space. Notice if being with some object in the sitting and it vanishes, and you feel like for dear life you have to get back to the breath immediately. God forbid there should be a moment of—no, I'm losing it! Back to the breath, back to the breath. Nope, nope, nope. That's helpful—helpful technique—but not when it's coming from the sense of "oh no, there's nothing." It's awareness, simplicity, just being like this.

You might notice space between thoughts, space between activities. Notice when you're eating. Can you just let your fork rest for a tenth of a second before you load it up and shove it in again? Just a moment of space. The minute you finish eating, you have to jump up and go do something. I'm not saying you do, but just notice this sense to fill up the space. Just start to incline the mind to notice the space in the room, space around thoughts, space between activities. Just a chance to notice the simplicity of awareness without needing to complicate it. Normally we don't notice the emptiness because we're so involved with experience and concocting thoughts and stuff about it—views, interpretations.

So just don't make it a thing, because that's already me doing something. But just notice when nothing special is going on. "Ah, emptiness." Okay, now that's a sense of me catching. Fine, that's the next thing. Let's notice. Nothing outside of the sense of steady awareness.

As Ajahn Sumedho says, taking the refuge just in a simple moment-to-moment awareness—not in personality, not in particular experience, not in getting rid of particular experience, but in just, "Ah, it's like this now." Appreciating those moments of awareness. And more and more, it starts to come in. There's already many moments when there's no sense of self, but a lot of times we don't really notice them because we're used to noticing what's louder and more vivid. So inclining to the neutral, inclining to the sense of space, that simplicity of non-concoction.

I read this before, but just two quotations. From Mingyur Rinpoche: "It's not dull, empty void. We start to recognize the sense of peace that arises from the stability of awareness and which is not dependent on the absence or presence of unpleasant or pleasant experience."

And then just one last little thing from a Thai laywoman from the last century, Upasika Kee. There's just one little book of her. Very strong practitioner. Tough. She was tough. Anyway, she just says: "What is, is."

What is not, is not. There's no need to add anything extra. If we could just do that, our heart and mind would be at peace.

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So thank you for your kind attention. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

May our sincere motivation to practice, to awaken our hearts and minds from suffering—may the beneficial energies created by that be shared with all beings everywhere. May all beings live free from suffering and delusion.

So just have fun playing with this.

CHAPTER 81

Morning Questions and Answers

Carol Wilson · 15 min

> *In this Q&A session from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson offers profound guidance on working with strong emotions that arise during intensive practice. She addresses the common experience of tears and difficult emotions emerging during meditation, explaining how to bring mindfulness to these experiences without suppression or indulgence.*
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> *Wilson introduces the important distinction between what practitioners call 'purification' and simply spinning in habitual emotional patterns. She shares a personal story from a six-week retreat with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, illustrating how deep sadness arose connected to visual memories, and how maintaining fresh, moment-to-moment noting prevented the experience from devolving into a self-referential 'poor me' narrative. This teaching illuminates how we truly come to understand the first noble truth of dukkha—not through intellectual analysis, but through direct experience met with steady awareness.*
>
> *The talk offers practical wisdom for recognizing when mindfulness is genuinely present versus when we've subtly shifted into either feeding difficult emotions or pushing them away. Wilson emphasizes that strong emotions arising in practice are not mistakes but essential fuel for the Dhamma. When emotions become overwhelming, she suggests skillful means like shifting attention to physical sensations. The teaching reminds practitioners that nothing is outside the realm of what can be met with mindfulness, and that this meeting—neither grasping nor averting—can fundamentally shift our relationship to challenging mind states.*

So just so you know, there are so many questions that there's no way we can ever answer them all. Don't feel—well, feel however you feel, and don't take it personally.

I'm actually really glad this person asked this question, so we can expand on this topic a bit. They're asking us to talk a little bit about how we relate to crying in the practice, in general and in the hall. This person finds that tears come more frequently when they practice on their own, which I think is pretty common. And when they arrive in the hall—I like the way that's said, "when they arrive," you know, it's just what's happening—they're a bit self-conscious and don't want to disturb others.

That's totally normal and natural. I want to expand it to a bigger picture, but first, just to say: of course, always, tears are very normal and natural. Going through strong emotions is a big part of the practice. It's not a mistake or something wrong. What we learn is how to bring mindfulness to the experience.

To answer the specifics about crying: sometimes tears will come in the hall, and in general, most of us are more self-conscious there. You don't want to wail and sob and carry on in the hall—it does kind of get everyone all riled up. So if you have a choice, cry silently in the hall. Outside the hall, it's fine. When tears come, they come. This is normal. And for most of us, we all have a single room, which is a real gift, so you can go and just let whatever's happening happen, with mindfulness.

This is the piece I want to expand on a bit. At some point, most of us, in our periods of practice—not just this one retreat, but in longer periods of intensive practice—there will be times when really strong, difficult emotions come up. Tears can also come when you're really happy or feeling really touched, but that's also a strong emotion. Not all strong emotions are unpleasant; they're still strong emotions.

In terms of the practice, I don't know if we've spoken much about this. We used to call it—and this is just shorthand, don't take it for anything more—the difference between purification and just spinning in our patterns.

It's very common that at some points, and it can be a day or it can last for some time during our intensive practice—and actually this is about the time, two, three, four weeks in, not at the beginning—where it may be triggered by a particular memory. It may not even have much content. It may be some memory or some experience that you know very well. You think, "Oh, I've dealt with this." And it comes up, and there's, with mindfulness, awareness of it—the memory, the story, whatever. But a really deep emotional concomitant can come along with it. It can be really deep sadness or grief or self-loathing, just whatever it might be.

It doesn't mean that's a problem or wrong when we allow it to come up into the field of mindfulness, same as with any strong emotion.

I'll describe the differences. When we call it so-called purification, it means a memory may be coming up—for example, a memory of a time that you felt really sad or hurt, whatever it is. The memory comes, but then the feeling, the emotion comes. And with mindfulness, you're really feeling it. I gesture like this because that's just where I feel stuff. Really strong sadness, for example. Aware of the thoughts. Crying may come. But with mindfulness, we're allowing the sadness to live and move as it does.

Our experience at times, when what we call purification is coming up, is that you think, "Oh, I know this." That's just a thought. Let it come. And when it's coming into the field of mindfulness, allowing with wisdom, sometimes the emotional experience is actually stronger and deeper.

than we've experienced before, or that we remember. And our intellectual, personal minds are going, "What the heck is going on?" That's just a thought. It's coming up into a field. As our mindfulness awareness is getting steady and more continuous, the more subconscious patterns of avoidance aren't functioning so much, because we're not so much picking and choosing what's worth paying attention to.

And so stuff that we've kind of maybe acknowledged—"OK, I see that, fine, very good, take a hike"—it starts to come up. But we allow it with mindfulness. And you can feel it quite deeply. Don't get the idea that, oh, you feel it deeply, good, it's gone, it's over. No, that's not mindfulness. But to say: this is a really big part of practice for most of us at some point. Not for all of us and not in every retreat, but it's important not to think there's something wrong or off, and that if you're properly mindful, this is going to be, "Oh yes, sadness, sadness, la la la, tears, tears, yes, back to emptiness," right? No. Emptiness isn't somewhere else. Whatever's happening is the fuel of the Dhamma, is the fuel of the practice.

This allowing things up in mindfulness—it's really a different way of relating, even from many types of therapy where we've seen it, we know it. It can kind of come up in a deep way. So our practice, how do we relate, is, as with any strong emotion, learning how to meet it with mindfulness. And that's the difference between not getting all lost in the story and completely overwhelmed with story, while really feeling it. You know the story, but you're being with the feeling, letting it live its life. If there's tears, aware of tears. Of course, the mind goes into the story—that's part of it. But allowing the sadness or grief or whatever, self-hatred, just to be as it is in the field of mindfulness.

The other way we're not quite mindful is: "OK, I see it, fine," and we try to shut it down again. Because mindfulness means just noticing whatever arises. "But not this." Well, it's noticing whatever's arising. "This should be over now." Because choiceless means things are going boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. It doesn't mean that. It means choiceless. This is coming up, not your choice. We bring awareness to it. It's an essential part of practice.

I'll give an example from my experience. It just popped into my mind this morning because I learned so much from it. I was sitting a six-week retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita some ages ago. It was in the middle of the retreat, and my mindfulness was quite stable and even and strong, so I was able to note whatever came. And it started with—I

remember, even now I can remember—this visual memory would come up. A note: seeing. It was a particular time in my life that I hadn't really thought about much for quite a while. And then a whole field of sadness came up with it, overwhelming. Overwhelming just meaning I couldn't just go la la la, sadness. I had to feel it. But quite noting: sadness. Seeing the story. Seeing, seeing, because it's all visual. Feeling the sadness. Noting the sadness. Seeing the thoughts. And this would not last all day, but it would be quite strong. And it was happening every day at some point.

Now, when you're meeting with Sayadaw U Pandita, he is like zero interested in content, which is helpful, because this isn't about the content. It's about letting the whole process arise into mindfulness. So I would describe it to him—the noting and just what would come up, the image and the noting and this—but just in terms of "this arose, this arose, this arose." And for days, because this went on for days, he would be, "Yeah, very good. Very good, yogi. This is dukkha. This is how we understand dukkha, the unreliability, the unsatisfactory quality of life." And he was completely supportive. And in case you haven't heard it before: the first noble truth, dukkha, is to be understood.

We don't get to understand it by thinking about it, by saying, "Oh yeah, that makes sense." We go through it with awareness, with steady mindfulness, again and again in many different ways. And at some point we go, "Yeah, this is dukkha." Wisdom comes in and understands how it's created. So it's not a mistake. But our job is to keep coming back into the mindfulness.

He was really supportive. But I started to notice that after it would begin to peter out or change, the image would come again, and I would note that, then the feeling of sadness, then the noting, and see the thoughts. At one point I noticed I was just allowing it, and the thoughts would change to "Oh, poor me." The whole feeling tone became completely different. It was like a little moving away from mindfulness into "Oh, poor me, I have to go through this." It felt completely different. So I would just notice that, mindful again of the feeling.

When I reported to Sayadaw—and again, you don't give him content, just reporting the process—it had started to change. Looking back, it had started to get a little bit of a habit. We were getting a little bit of a jag with it, like, "Oh, I know," and the mindfulness wasn't quite fresh. We were thinking it's how it was a couple of days ago, but it's already changed and we're not quite fresh with it. We think, "Oh yeah, I know what's happening." It's really interesting—Sayadaw could pick up on this. He was amazing that way.

So this one day I went in, I described what sounded like the whole thing, but he picked up that it started with the image, and he said, "You weren't mindful enough with the image. You didn't note it." That's not a criticism. That was absolutely true. And as soon as the mindfulness wasn't there, the whole thing turned into a "me" story, a "poor me," and then it just went on and on. You can feel the difference.

None of it's for judging, but it's really to see and allow. We're going to have these periods where strong emotions come up, strong memories and such. It's part of practice. Nothing's outside of the realm of what's possible to be mindful of. And of course, with all skillful means, there are going to be times when the mindfulness isn't balanced enough and the thoughts really do take over—you can't quite be mindful. So as we've always said with any emotion, at that point, notice that. And if it's possible, with skillful means, shift the attention elsewhere. Go for a walk. Feel the sensations of your feet. It's not about just spinning in the story.

Or sometimes we're spinning in the story, but there's really a sense of self-gratification. We kind of like it, feeding the "poor me." Noticing that, we shift the attention. Or sometimes we've decided subconsciously, "Okay, that's enough now, I'm going back to practice," and we get into a subtle aversion, pushing it away. That's also not quite mindfulness. And you'll find out if you're doing that, because it'll turn around and let you know.

These are the balances. We call it purification because it's coming up into awareness in a way that isn't trying to push it away but isn't feeding it either. And it really can shift our relationship to the particular story, to the particular mood or emotion—so that there's nothing we need to be afraid of. That's something Sayadaw also said to me one time.

I just wanted to say this is going to be part of practice. It's not a mistake. It doesn't mean something went wrong with your practice. This is where we learn how to bring in mindful awareness—just to see what's happening, not lost in the content, but allowing the emotion to live its life. And when it's gone, notice it's gone. You don't need to bring it back again.

Notice it's gone. Yes, it may arise another time, a different moment. It's not just sitting under there unnoticed, waiting to erupt. It's gone. This is present moment mindfulness.

So I wanted to bring that up and hope you can include it in your practice. And yes, sometimes the crying comes loud, and it's fine in your room. In the hall, of course, we all feel a little self-conscious—that's normal. So if we see someone crying silently in the

hall, give them their space. This is a normal part of practice. It's not like we have to go fix it. Please don't go fix it. Leave them alone. We leave each other alone to go through what needs to happen.

At this point in retreat, all different things may be coming up in your practice. We take refuge in the steadiness of mindfulness—not looking to experience for self-gratification or a sense that what's going on is important. Just check: Is mindfulness here? Am I aware? That's our refuge. And then whatever arises due to causes and conditions can be met with mindfulness, and that leads to wisdom.

Thank you for your practice and your presence.

CHAPTER 82

Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching that when the perception of impermanence (anicca) is fully developed, it eliminates all craving and uproots the conceit of 'I am.' She explores why, despite our intellectual agreement that everything changes, we continue to live as if permanence were the norm. Drawing from suttas where the Buddha declares that not even a fingernail's worth of the five khandhas is permanent, Wilson identifies key obstacles to accurate perception: our instinctive resistance to loss and grief, the perceptual distortion (vipallāsa) that sees the changing as unchanging, and simple inattention.*
>
> *Wilson shares personal reflections on grief following her sister's death, illustrating how fully opening to sorrow—rather than resisting it—can transform into compassion and honor the love we feel. She recounts the touching story of Ānanda weeping before the Buddha's death, and offers Ajahn Chah's humorous teaching that aging bodies are 'divine messengers' constantly revealing impermanence. A powerful story from Burma demonstrates how a community's open, loving response to a young novice's drowning taught Western teachers about embracing death as part of life.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes that steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness is essential for perceiving the momentary nature of change—not the arising-abiding-passing we imagine, but constant flux. Wilson offers practical tips: noticing when we assume permanence, recognizing the 'gone-ness' of experiences, and maintaining continuity of awareness throughout the day. She concludes with the Zen poem about 'falling into the midst of everything'—the freedom that comes when we stop fighting impermanence and open fully to life's vibrant, ever-changing presence.*

Tonight, following on Roxanne's talk last night, I want to talk about impermanence—particularly the perception of impermanence.

We've mentioned quite a few times the three characteristics: impermanence, not-self, and dukkha, unreliability. Intellectually, it would seem to me that understanding impermanence would be the most accessible. Probably none of us would argue with the fact that things change and nothing is going to stay the same. So how come we don't live that way? Why don't we really understand it?

If we did really understand it—the Buddha talked about the centrality of understanding impermanence. This is from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual craving. It eliminates all craving for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'" That's basically the way he describes complete awakening: when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

I really appreciate that emphasis on the *perception* of impermanence, because to my way of thinking, perception is at the heart of insight. When we think of what an insight is, really, it's not that reality has changed. The nature of insight—all different kinds of insight—is that suddenly our perception shifts; we're able to perceive in a different way, which, according to the Buddha's teaching, when it's an insight, that new way of perceiving is more in accordance with the way things are. So there's not such a sense of struggle.

There are all levels of insight, from a personal problem to awakening—like what he's talking about with the perception of impermanence. When Roxanne talked about the five aggregates, I think this is one of the reasons perception is broken out from sankhara: because it's so key to see how and why we don't perceive impermanence if it's all around us.

I want to talk a little bit about some personal reflections on things that prevent us—or why we don't always, or even often, really perceive impermanence on a level that's transformative.

Back to the Buddha, and this is from what Roxanne was talking about last night—again, the centrality of impermanence, the ubiquity of it: "Bhikkhus, there is no form, no feeling tone, no perception, no volitional formations, no consciousness"—you recognize that list; short memory time, only last night—"that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself."

Then he took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said to the bhikkhus, "There's not even this much form"—and he went through all of the khandhas—"not even this much form, the amount under my fingernail, that is not subject to change and that will remain the same. If there was this much form that was permanent, this living of the holy life for the complete abandoning of suffering could not be seen, could not be understood." Basically saying: not this much. So that's serious perception of impermanence.

"But because there is not even this much form in all the five khandhas that is permanent, this living of the holy life for the complete abandoning of suffering is possible, is discerned."

That's a really powerful statement.

So I want to talk a bit about impermanence and, in my mind, some of the things that get in the way of accurate perception. None of this will be new to you. I'm just putting it together in this particular form.

The first thing that comes to my mind that blocks our perception of impermanence is our instinctive resistance or reaction to unpleasant, unhappy feelings—the first noble truth—or instinctive fear of loss and grief, instinctive resistance to loss and grief, or the idea that something's wrong, this shouldn't be happening. The first noble truth. I'll talk about that in a moment.

The second and third go together: we misperceive. This is the vipallasa, the distortion of perception—we perceive what is constantly changing as being unchanging, and we don't quite recognize that level. Part of that misperception comes about because of inattention. Delusion, but inattention—lack of steady awareness. Those are some of the things I want to touch into tonight.

Just again reminding us: when a moment of insight occurs, a shift of perception, reality doesn't change. It's not like if you finally have some big blowout insight—I talked about anattā the other week, now I'm talking about anicca—then suddenly everything's changing, whereas before it was all steady state, and so now that everything's changing, there's no way you can function because there's no ground anywhere. Well, that's what we think. But it's already always changing. That's how it is.

When our perception actually comes in line with reality, at first it shakes us up because it's uncomfortable. But when we're not in conflict with it, that's what opens our heart and mind to really living fully.

I say a lot of stuff, but it's coming to that.

So, first, just to talk about particularly when we think of impermanence on the bigger level—of course, loss, grief, death, separation, those are the first obvious ones. And I imagine none of us can really get behind saying this sense of separation and change is not going to happen. But still, when someone we care for goes away or dies or gets sick, or we lose something that's really important, being human and not completely awake, it's really natural that we feel sorrow or we feel grief.

And it's also a really deep habit that we don't want to feel sorrow or grief. This is the whole first noble truth of the unreliability—that we tend to think the unpleasant is wrong and bad, and we recoil from it. But this grief, the sorrow at loss, it's part of being human. It's part of being human. And so our trying to push it away, or even unconsciously thinking something's wrong with it, is actually what blocks just opening into the fact of change. That is human.

There's a very famous story from the suttas, and probably most of you have heard it, and you're going to hear it again now, with Ananda, who was the Buddha's cousin and his attendant the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. In general, Ananda is really a very friendly presence in the suttas. He is very kind. He really took great care of the Buddha, but he didn't try to keep people away. He would always try to help people come and hear the Dhamma. He was a great proponent of sharing the Dhamma.

And he had this amazing memory. He could remember word for word every discourse the Buddha gave. In fact, when you're listening or reading any of the discourses that begin, "Thus have I heard," that's meant to be from Ananda reciting it. And there's a lot like that. In fact, when he first agreed to become the Buddha's attendant, he made some stipulations, and one of them was that any Dharma talk of the Buddha's he didn't hear, the Buddha would repeat to him later so that he could remember it. So he was a great guy. He's more accessible to us. He's not like this amazing arhat.

So anyway, the story: The Buddha, when he knew he was going to die—I think it was about three months before—he told Ananda, he told his close disciples that this was going to happen. And then he was sitting, talking with disciples, and he noticed Ananda wasn't there. So he says to the other bhikkhus, "Where is Ananda? Please go find friend Ananda." And it's said, of course, that he knew where he was because he could see. But anyway, they found him leaning against a doorframe, weeping, weeping.

And they said, "Friend, the Blessed One calls you. And why are you weeping?"

And he said, "Because the Blessed One is leaving us. I am still a learner with much to do. How can we go on? How can we teach?" And he was just so overcome with sorrow and grief.

So just know this is our natural response. The Buddha called him, and of course, in a kind way, he said, "Ananda"—first he asked what was going on, and Ananda told him what I just said. He said, "Ananda, haven't I told you, everything that's subject to arising is subject to cessation, to coming apart? How could it possibly be that this doesn't happen?"

But it wasn't chastising him, because then he went on to really talk about Ananda's faith and Ananda's kindness, and he really brightened his heart and mind. He didn't just leave him with, "You stupid Ananda, haven't I told you, get over it." That's not what he was saying. He said, "I've told you, that's the teaching." But he brightened his mind, appreciated him and his kindness and his faith so that he could keep on going. "And soon you will also understand completely."

I love that story because it just makes it human. It's part of our path. It's part of life. Grief, sorrow—it's not something wrong. It's going to happen, and it doesn't help to push it away, and it doesn't help to think, "I should, as a good Buddhist, say, 'They will not be seen by me again.'"

No, we feel sorrow. Feel it. Open into it. Allow it.

This is a little personal, but I'll share it. Some time ago—maybe ten or eleven years ago—my only sister died unexpectedly. Well, not entirely unexpectedly. She had been ill, but it was still very sudden. We were close, and yes, I felt a lot of grief for quite a while.

It was surprising how strong the grief was. But also, in a way, because of the circumstances—her death was unexpected, yet there was nothing to do about it—there was nothing to make me think I shouldn't feel grief. It was obvious that of course I would feel it. There wasn't anything to try to go back and change the past so I wouldn't feel the grief, or to pretend things would change in the future. That's something about death: the person is really gone. You can't pretend.

And so I just, for some reason, was totally open to it. For months and months, the grief would come really strong. I'd feel it. It would go. It wasn't every day for months, but when the grief would arise, I just wasn't pushing it away or in denial. I really allowed it.

Sometimes it was just grief. Sometimes I could really feel—without even thinking about it—that by not pushing it away, it would move into compassion. Not for anyone in particular, but just for the suffering of the world. This is how samsara is, you know? And I really felt, not at the lofty level of the Buddha, but on our personal level, a kind of purity of grief in just allowing it. I felt that for me, it also reflected the love. Sure, there's attachment, or we wouldn't feel grief. But I felt that allowing it was also honoring the love.

It was a profound experience. I learned a lot from that. By not trying to do anything—just recognizing "this is what's happening"—the grief would come through strong and go away. It didn't last all day. It came and went at any particular time, and that was

okay. I really learned about how whatever is arising, that's what's happening. Opening into it is the way of opening into life, not shutting things out. It doesn't deny love. It was a really deep learning for me.

The Buddha often used impermanence, change, as a powerful teaching tool—kind of letting the resistance or the sadness or the difficulty be a wake-up call to pay attention.

Now I'm shifting gears here. This is Ajahn Chah talking to people in Thailand, using impermanence, using life as a wake-up call—the suffering of change. But he's funny.

First he starts talking about how meditation is easy for old people, and then he goes into why:

"Meditation is hard for youngsters. Their teeth are strong, so they can enjoy their food. They sleep soundly. Their faculties are intact, and the world is fun and exciting to them, so they get deluded in a big way. For the old ones, when they chew on something hard, they're soon in pain. Right there, the divine messengers are talking to them. They're teaching them every day. When they open their eyes, their sight is fuzzy. In the morning, their backs ache. In the evening, their legs hurt. That's it! This is really an excellent subject to study. This is seeing the body in the body and sensation in sensation. Are you seeing these, or are you running away?"

And he goes on and on. I'm skipping around. But he said, you have to see it within yourself. When you sit, it's true. When you stand up, it's true.

And this isn't only old people. So you young people don't think you're getting a pass. It's happening now, right? That's what retreats show us. Everything is a hassle. Everything is presenting obstacles. And everything is teaching you.

When you're young, you can just stand up and walk, going on your way. When you're old, every time you stand up, it's *oy*. Isn't that what you say? *Oy, oy.* Every time you move, you learn something. So how can you say it's difficult to meditate? Where else is there to look? Divine messengers are telling you something. It's most clear. Sankhara are telling you that they are not stable or permanent, not you or yours. They are telling you this every moment.

He's funny, but he's getting right in there. They are telling us this every moment. Why don't we notice? Why do we think that something's wrong when we notice? This is where we're starting to trust the actual perception rather than all our ideas and our interpretations.

So maybe that concept sounds familiar—bringing attention to the actual experience as opposed to all the interpretations. Have you heard that since you've been here? That's why we're practicing that moment after moment after moment. You think nothing special is going on. You're just feeling sensation. You're just feeling this. We want some big insight right now.

But every moment that the mindfulness and the mind is being really present just with what is, without adding some story, without mistaking our concept for the reality—that's practicing inclining the mind towards more accurate perception. We spend the rest of our life practicing inaccurate perception. Really? So here we're learning to have that. And then suddenly, it feels like an insight. Suddenly it shifts and you recognize, oh my gosh, everything's changing. And then it goes back again. That's why we have to keep practicing.

So Ajahn Chah used this as a powerful teaching tool. Powerful.

There's a sense of denial on the big level. But even on the smaller level, just the habit—we talked about this a lot—the habit of clinging as the way to lead to happiness. It's so poignant. I said that a couple of weeks ago: Why do we cling?

In terms of this perception of impermanence, this is my take. Part of the clinging is, yes, for pleasant experience, for happiness, but also wanting some sense of stability, some sense of permanence, some sense of somewhere to land, something steady. So our strategy for happiness is to cling to sense experience, to ideas, to views about things, about people, about the situation, about ourselves, about our personality—to any experience, to give some sense of landing somewhere.

But that's what the impermanence is pointing to. There's nowhere to land but this moment, and then it's changing, changing, changing. But our systems don't really like that so much.

Sally was there. I can't remember if Guy was there. And actually, I was giving a dhamma talk when there was an earthquake. It was a fairly strong one, but not overwhelming. Then a couple of hours later came a much stronger one. I'd never been in an earthquake before, and it's unsettling, right? It's unsettling.

But the more unsettling thing to me—because I was in a safe place when the bigger one came, I was outside, so that wasn't traumatic. It was more difficult for people who were trapped inside; that was a little more scary, though no one was really hurt. But the next couple of days, there were all these aftershocks. So you'd just be settling down to

sleep at night, and of course the radio was announcing, "Ninety-two percent chance of the big one"—this is Southern California—"eighty percent, eighty-five percent chance of the big one." So helpful.

And so you'd just be settling down to sleep, you'd hear the radiator go *shhhh*—do we have to get up and run outside? Is this the big one? No, okay, it's over. And an hour later—do we have to get up and run outside? Just this sense of... the Earth is supposed to be stable. We take refuge on the Earth, but even that.

It was interesting. Now I can say this, right? I didn't like it so much at the time. But that is how I relate to this sense of response to unreliability—to hold on, even just for a moment. Even to something unpleasant: "It's going to be like this. It's going to be like this." Even though I hate it and it's miserable, I cling: "No, it's going to be like this. Not like that."

I'm going to read just part of a long poem by Galway Kinnell, an American poet. I read it a lot; I love it, about clinging. It's called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You scream, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard, as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down."
I have stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die,"
little Maud.
And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake screaming from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

It's like that. And it doesn't have to be horrible. We don't have to wake screaming from a nightmare when we're not fighting it, when we're not resisting it.

This is from the suttas. Somewhere—I've never been able to find it again, the location, but I know I saw it somewhere, I think it's probably the Sutta Nipāta: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful."

And a Tibetan saying: "Resting at ease in whatever arises."

Another teaching moment, using the reality of change as teaching. This is a more true story. Again, some years ago—I don't know, maybe fifteen years ago—I was helping teach a retreat in Burma, in a small village near Sagaing, in the Sagaing Hills. The monastery where we teach is along the Irrawaddy River, and there are some different nunneries nearby that we know; the nuns would go and visit. So one day the teachers—this is Westerners teaching together with the Burmese, teaching Westerners—we were walking along.

The teachers and our friend translator were walking along the river, and at one place just down in front of the nunnery, two doors down, there was a whole crowd of people sitting on the wall looking into the river. That was unusual. So we said, "Well, what happened?"

And then a little nun that we knew—Haiti was her name, is her name—came running up to us and could talk to us because our translator friend was there. She was about maybe six years old, something like that. And she said, "Oh, it's the three young novices." These are young boys who are ordained as novice monks, maybe eleven, twelve, thirteen years old. They had gone out in a boat swimming in the river, and one of them had fallen out, and they couldn't find him. People were looking in the river, assuming he had drowned because it had been an hour since he disappeared. And so they were all there.

We had to go back, but eventually they did find his body and brought it up. And this is the teaching point.

He had only been in that area a week or two. He wasn't used to the river, whereas the other young boys were. He came from somewhere that was a long twelve, twenty-hour journey away. So they sent for his parents, the monks and the nuns did. He was from a monastery a little higher up, but this part of the river was right outside the nunnery. They all took his body to this sala that was just across the street at the foot of the nunnery. A sala is like a big open room with a roof and no walls—a large place where they might do chanting or have different kinds of meetings.

So they took him into this large open sala and put him on a nice bed, went and got him a change of clothes. And then the nuns and the monks and all different villagers, including the little nuns—and Haiti's not the only young nun—they all went and, well, they sent for his parents. It was going to take them a day to get there. They spent the time chanting metta, sending metta—just the whole community. People would do shifts.

It was just so natural. It wasn't like calling 911, having them brought away in an ambulance where you don't see it. And they didn't tell the little nuns, "Oh, you shouldn't see this, go back to the nunnery." They were there. They were part of it. It's part of life.

It was really a powerful teaching for us, so different from the way we had always seen it in our culture here, how I had been brought up and also the other teacher. Yes, it was really a powerful teaching to look and see—this is part of life. It's being met with love and openness, not hidden away or something to hide from or to protect the kids from knowing about. But it's done with love.

So that one aspect of our tendency—wanting to shy away from seeing unpleasant things, or change, or loss, or feeling it in ourselves—really opening into it is what opens us to the truth.

The other aspect of misperception comes from inattention as well. We assume permanence, or we don't notice the momentariness of change. There was a teaching once with the Dalai Lama—I think Guy was there—where he was talking about the momentariness of change. He said we tend to think, even when we understand that everything's impermanent, that something arises, it abides for a while, and then it passes away. He said there's no "abides for a while." Change is momentary.

This thinking—"Oh, it's going to last," whatever it is—we think things arise due to conditions and then hang around for a while. My knee pain—solid state. Birth—I was born, I'll last all these years, and then I'll die. As if there are two moments together that are exactly the same.

So it's just this not seeing the momentariness. Part of that is that it's happening so quickly we don't actually perceive it. Having the quiet and more steady awareness allows us to recognize the subtlety. But it's not only that. Part of it is just our habit of assuming permanence, of not really looking carefully, of inattention.

So you might notice as you go through the day, or you have a sensation, just noticing it. Really, the more present with it, you see it's changing all the time. But when concept takes over, it feels the same.

He said once—I don't know if you'll get it—he said there's two things that don't change: Nibbana and a concept. So look at that. "Oh, this pain's been the same all day." Total concept. I mean, nothing's even there all day, right? Notice how often we do that.

Another place I play with it sometimes is seeing. When we're walking around, we just think "seeing"—steady state seeing. But the actual seeing is different every single second. Not that you have to get lost in the content of seeing, but it's never the same two seconds. But we just go, "Oh yeah, seeing. I'm always seeing." Or we just don't really notice.

You know when you see time-lapse photography? Those nature programs with a time-lapse of a bulb being planted, and then it pushes up through the earth and grows into the flower or the tree or whatever, and then the leaves fall off and it dies and goes back to the earth. When you see it all moving like that, you see that there's never any place you could stop it and say there's a stasis—that now it's bulb and now it's flower. It's just changing every moment. But it's slower than our normal eyes can see. Speeding it up like that gives a sense of how it really is.

It's not just outside. It's also inside. A friend, a longtime meditator, was saying, "For years I've seen everything's changing, everything's changing. Why don't I get it?" And suddenly she saw, "Oh, I was thinking everything around me is changing. But also here, inside me, I'm constantly changing too." And that's the thing. There's actually not really any insight outside like that.

Once there were five of us—it must have been at a retreat teaching—and we would meet for dinner every night. Once we were just laughing about it and saying, "We feel like the same five of us are meeting every night. But actually, it's a different five every night." We're always different. You're in a different mood, or your body feels different. It's a completely different bringing together. But we just assume we're all the same. We don't look at it.

So this is where it gets really interesting—this lack of continuity of awareness. When people come into interviews at retreats, they say things like, "I'm just sleeping all the time," or "I've been sad all day." And we really think that. That's how our mind assumes permanence. It draws this veil over everything. "It's always been like this. It's always going to be like this." And we don't notice the arising and passing, the coming and the going.

There was something else, but I don't know what it was—so that's change. The mind doesn't hold things anymore.

I was reading a short description of a meeting some years ago between Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche.

And it said they were just sitting somewhere quietly for hours, just sitting. And then suddenly one of them pointed to a tree and said, "They call that a tree." And then they both just laughed uproariously. They said, "Everything is a verb." Everything is a verb. So we go "tree." I mean, it's functional—don't get me wrong, it's functional. But this assumption of permanence is where we get stuck. So just seeing that.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." So just noticing that.

I read somewhere a very simple description of right view. It's very simple, but it's very helpful to simplify. Right view simply means a view that's in alignment with things as they are.

In terms of different kinds of insights, there's one I like to talk about in Pali: *yathā-bhūta-ñāna-dassana*. That's a particular insight that could be translated as insight seeing clearly into things as they have come to be in this moment. And that's considered a very profound insight—recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment. "Have come to be" rather than "are." Someone made that distinction to me in terms of the translation. "Things as they are"—again, we're back into unchanging steady state. "Things as they have come to be" gives me that sense of conditions coming together, and they change, and they go away again. But in this moment, that alignment of perception with things as they have come to be is actually a powerful insight.

How does that happen? Steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness. That's really why continuity, why we talk about it so much. As soon as there's not the continuity of mindfulness, we don't see the arising, we don't notice the endings, never mind the momentary change.

The steadiness of awareness and then, you know, *sammā-sati*—right mindfulness, meaning mindfulness that isn't clouded by wanting or aversion, because then we don't recognize accurately what's going on. But just steady, steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness. Why we're always talking about continuity so much.

I ask a lot of times in interviews, "How is it in the in-between times?" It's not to judge you like a teacher—it's nothing like that. Because we all space out a lot. That spacing out, that not having steady awareness, is exactly what prevents accurate recognition of impermanence. Because in the space out, we come back: "Oh, yeah, I'm sad. And I've been sad all day." We forget. You were hungry. You were tired. You were sleepy. You were bored. You were this. You were that. Now I'm sad. And so with the steadiness, we see it changing all the time, all the time.

It's like a tip I often give people wondering about effort in practice and all different things. And you can't really tell. Rather than trying to tighten up in the sitting or the walking, have a wider view. Kind of cast your balanced mind—not your aversive striving mind, but your balanced mind—over the day. And just see, are there places you're just kind of ever so subtly blowing it off? Not meaning to, but just thinking... When I'm wondering if I'm really being one hundred percent, I just look at my continuity. Not that you can control the continuity of mindfulness. Of course you can't.

But I can control my physical action to some extent. I can control how much—if I'm sitting, if I'm walking, if I'm going to my room—am I really doing it? Am I including it as part of the practice? Where am I saying, "Enough of this already"? Or there are just subtle things that I think don't count. So that's the place we can always look.

And a lot of times, things change. Have you noticed in the practice you don't get to have the same wonderful experience all the time? So when it goes away and you start thinking, "What did I do wrong? How can I get it back?"—don't go there. I just look and see, okay, am I staying steady? Sitting, walking, in activities? That's what I can do. That's not striving. Trying to get it back—that only causes suffering. Because nothing ever comes back. It's gone. It's over. Every moment's new. You can't get the last moment back. Maybe a better moment will come, whatever "better" means to you. And that'll go too. Because that's how it is.

The suffering isn't that it goes—it's that we think it shouldn't. Or we wish it went sooner. Either one.

So the Buddha said, cultivate a perception of impermanence, of anicca. Just a few little tips come to mind. Not going around crazily looking for it. Not striving. "Oh, I see the ending." Little things at times.

One is something from Ajahn Chah, which is just at times—broadly, when you're going through life, when you're going through the day—noticing from time to time: "This is uncertain." Just, "Oh, this is uncertain." When you find yourself thinking, "I'm going to get banana for breakfast today," you just might go, "This is uncertain." When you think, "I'm going to go in the refrigerator and get some eggs," you think, "This is uncertain." We never know.

That's not to make a big deal, but just to remind ourselves. And if you do that, it kind of highlights, "Ah, I was assuming. I know how it's going to be." So that's just something to lightly look at.

Another thing I like to notice is when we're assuming permanence. This, of course, we've talked about. You can see it in your practice here all the time. Just today—just today—if you think back later, how did you relate to different experiences in the last couple of days? Difficult experiences: fear, anxiety, self-doubt, the difficult ones. Were there times when part of that emotional quality, even if you're kind of mindful, was like, "It's going to be like this always"?

It's kind of part of what some difficult emotions say. They say, "It's going to be like this always." And we know it's not true, but we kind of believe it. Just noticing that—assuming permanence.

Or it goes away. You don't quite notice the going, but you notice it's gone. Yet we think, "Well, I'm not noticing it right now, but it's down there waiting." And when it comes back, you say, "Yeah, I knew it. It was always there. I just wasn't mindful enough. Here it is again. It's always like this."

Notice that. Because it isn't always like this.

And then with the beautiful or the positive or the ones that you like—with the clinging, you try to hold onto it, of course. Do you try to get it back again?

Now I know how to meditate. They talked about there being a path to samadhi. This is it. This is how I sat. This is how much I slept. This is what I ate. This is how I held my hands. How can I get it back again?

Just noticing that—don't make yourself bitter about it, but that's assuming permanence. It's really gone. How much more suffering is there in trying to get something back than just letting it go and being fully present here in this moment? That's so much easier, but we can't stand it. We can't do it. We just can't be that simple. We've got to complicate everything, hold on to something that's over, and project this pain in the knee into the future, into the rest of our lives. How can I ever do anything again with this pain in my back, with this sadness, with this crick in my neck, with this headache, with whatever it is? It's over. It's always going to be this way.

And then it ends and we think, "Yeah, right, everything's impermanent," la la la. And then something else comes and we do the same thing again.

So not to judge ourselves—this is just human nature. Steady awareness starts to show us this. And it can be fun, you know? It can be. We don't take ourselves so seriously. "Yeah, right—assuming permanence again."

And then when something we've been holding onto goes, really notice the gone-ness. It's really gone.

I use this example. I know it seems silly, but somehow it was a big insight. Sometimes the big insights come through little things that are happening. I was eating lunch very slowly and mindfully. You take the bite. You feel the burst of flavor. You're chewing. In two bites, the flavor's gone, and you're just masticating this glob of stuff. Then you swallow and you're feeling it going down. I noticed my mind was saying—as I felt the swallowing—that's the food going down. But then I went to the direct experience. That wasn't experience; that was concept. The sense of the food in the mouth was gone. It was really gone. There was a sensation in the stomach, but to think "that's the food in the mouth" was just some idea that gives a sense of permanence. When I really looked, the food was totally gone. And now there was just this experience.

I know this seems silly, but actually noticing that gone-ness is really interesting—noticing cessation just of little things like that. I don't mean go around being crazy, looking for endings of everything. I'm really not trying to say that. Or "I've got to see the beginning, I've got to see the ending." No. Notice what you're actually noticing. That's good enough.

When we bring continuity of awareness, we can't help but notice impermanence. Why? Because that's how it is. But looking for something we're not exactly seeing, we're stuck in concept and striving again.

So I'm dropping these in as things to notice when they're actually noticeable, not to make you crazy trying to see something that isn't here.

And then again, noticing how conditions change, how conditions affect other conditions—like noticing how the weather changes. Maybe your mood changes. I certainly notice that. And some of you think, well, no, who am I to be affected by the weather? We're not different from the weather. Notice that. A gray, cold, cloudy day, a beautiful sunny day with the leaves—the mood might be different. How does the breath feel when you have a cold, when you don't have a cold, when you're tired, when you're not? The conditions that come together and create experience are always changing. This is how conditionality works, and again, steady state awareness really reveals that.

There's another story from the suttas about this, a monk named Asaji, who had apparently had really good practice and concentration, and he was very sick. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove, and Venerable Asaji was sick, afflicted, gravely ill. So the Buddha went to him and was talking to him. Asaji was quite upset and really feeling regret. The Buddha was asking him about his

virtue, his sila—are you regretting, having remorse? And he said, no, no. So the Buddha said, well, if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to your virtue, Asaji, why are you troubled by remorse and regret?

And he said, formally, venerable sir, when I was ill in previous times, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations—in other words, getting really concentrated. But now I do not obtain concentration. So it occurs to me, let me not fall away. The conditions have changed, he can't get concentrated, and he's really upset about it. The guy's dying, and he's upset.

And the Buddha, of course, gave him a whole talk on impermanence—on the fact that, first, the impermanence of form, the impermanence of vedana. He said that in his teaching, concentration is not the essence; the essence is insight, path, and fruit. And so really seeing—with form when it's changing, when vedana is changing—he understands: it's changing, it's going away. When he feels a feeling tone terminating with the body, he understands: this feeling tone is ending with the body. When it's terminating with life, he understands: it's ending. He understands this is just what's happening. It's not about trying to get that concentration because that's not possible under the present conditions. But the freedom is from the understanding. Everything's changing.

This discernment, this understanding of impermanence on the visceral, cellular level—not intellectual understanding; we all have that, thinking about it. The middle level of understanding, yes, we ponder it, we go deeper. But the transformative level of insight—I really think of it as cellular level, when we really perceive again and again.

It's not suffering. There are moments, yes, that shaky ground we don't like, fear can come up on the way. But don't be afraid of that. Really, the deep understanding, as Roxanne was saying, opens us to the wonder, to the mystery, to the beauty of life. It releases our mind, our heart, from the habit of obsessing with looking for happiness, fulfillment, self-confirmation in any experience. That's like a huge relief. Not to need experience to confirm your sense of self or value, not needing experience to do anything, but just to open fully, moment to moment, into this vibrant presence—totally here. It's not like you don't care about everything. You're totally in everything.

Many of you probably know this little poem, but I like it because it feels like just what I'm saying. It's attributed to a Zen nun named Tejitsu.

Whether that's true, I'm not sure. She says:

Standing on the small porch of Hakujuan, she saw the shadow of a little bird cross the footpath, followed by the shadow of a hungry crow. And she saw that the little bird arose, abided, and fell away. And then she saw that arising arose, abided, and fell away.

Abiding arose, abided, and fell away. Falling away arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this—no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

Into the midst of everything. That's really how it feels—not like nothing matters, but totally in the midst of everything. The beauty, the mystery, the wonder of just this moment, nothing needing to block. And this brings us a great flexibility of response to situation. It doesn't mean "who cares?" You're totally present. Without holding to prior concepts, you can really see what's appropriate, what might need to happen.

I'll end with a little story illustrating this, from a book called *Street Zen* by Issan Dorsey, who was a Zen master. First he was a drag queen in San Francisco, then he practiced Zen for twenty years, and then he founded the Hartford Street Zen Center. He meant it as a Zen center, but he said men with AIDS kept showing up at the door, so he turned it into a hospice—Maitri Hospice—for AIDS patients.

Just this little line of how that happened, because he never meant it to be a hospice. He said: "We always dealt with whatever came to the door. We started the hospice because death came to the door."

You can deal with a complex, changing situation because you don't have to control it. You don't have to force it into an ideal pattern. You can actually allow it to be whatever it is and allow yourself to adapt to what it becomes, because this is the way we proceed. We respond to the immediacy of the situation, and therefore we're very practical.

Opening into everything, falling into the midst of everything, allows for truly appropriate response to everything. We don't need to be afraid of impermanence. It really allows us so much freedom to appreciate the beauty in life, as well as opening to the difficulty.

Thank you for your attention. Let's just sit quietly a moment.

So assuming permanence, we assume that in thirty or thirty-five minutes you'll do walking meditation, the bell will ring, we'll all come back in and chant. What's amazing is how often that really happens. But notice—we never really know.

CHAPTER 83

Morning Sit and Q&A

Carol Wilson · 14 min

> *In this Q&A session from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses common confusions about Buddhist terminology that arise when practitioners encounter multiple Pāli terms and English translations. She carefully distinguishes vedanā (feeling tone) from mood, explaining that vedanā refers specifically to the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality accompanying each sense experience—a subtle and quick phenomenon quite different from moods or states of mind. Moods belong to the third foundation of mindfulness, citta, which encompasses whatever qualities are present in a moment of consciousness.*
>
> *Carol then clarifies how the five aggregates (khandhas) relate to other terms practitioners encounter. Rūpa includes all material form, including the body (kāya), while the remaining four aggregates—vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra, and viññāṇa—all arise within citta. She notes that the Buddha may have highlighted vedanā and saññā separately from saṅkhāra due to their particular importance in understanding dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda) and the arising of craving.*
>
> *The talk also addresses the practice of brahmavihāra when someone is ill, exploring the difference between mettā and karuṇā. Carol emphasizes that karuṇā naturally arises when attention connects with the suffering aspect of a being—described as the heart quivering in response to suffering. Importantly, she cautions against practicing with attachment to results, as wanting to 'fix' someone subtly corrupts the purity of compassion. The session concludes with practical advice about not getting caught up in analytical frameworks when direct, choiceless awareness of present experience is what's needed, reminding practitioners that 'reality has no direction.'*

How is feeling tone different from mood? If I wake up on the wrong side of the bed and everything pisses me off, is feeling tone primarily a way to avoid personalizing—using "me" or "mine"—or is it something else entirely?

This is an important question. I think the English word "feeling" leads to some of the confusion. We try to use "feeling tone" now because vedana used to be translated simply as "feeling." But we use "feeling" in English for moods and states of mind, and vedana is not that.

Vedana is that very specific, subtle feeling of each sense experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, experienced in the mind very quickly. It's only that. And as I've said—I gave a whole talk on this—without recognition, without mindfulness, vedana can so easily lead into wanting or aversion or confusion, and that can give rise to all kinds of moods or states of mind.

Moods and states of mind belong to the third foundation, citta. That's really whatever qualities are present in a moment of consciousness. So knowing the citta means knowing the mind that has samadhi present or the mind that doesn't, knowing the mind that's pissed off with everything or the mind that's not.

So mood is different from feeling tone—they're separate, different things. And mood itself can be pleasant, wholesome, unpleasant, or neutral. Being mindful of the mood in the moment when you wake up feeling all grumpy: each moment of grumpiness, that mental mood, might come with an unpleasant feeling tone that's perceived or not. When it's not perceived, it's just grumpy, grumpy, grumpy.

Using feeling tone to be present without personalizing is a great tool. But we can also cling to feeling tone. As Roxanne spoke about in the five aggregates of clinging, vedana is one of them. It's true, it's a little less personal. "I'm so grumpy, the world stinks, and it's everybody else's fault"—that's a little easier to identify with than simply noting "unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant." But we can identify with anything if we try hard enough.

So tuning into feeling tone first makes it a little easier not to personalize, but the key thing is helping us see the whole cause and effect: how vedana leads into wanting or aversion, how that leads into mood, how that leads into a sense of "me." Seeing that whole cause and effect with mindfulness is what really helps cut through the personalization. In any moment, any experience recognized clearly with mindfulness doesn't have to have a "me" or "mine" in it.

Hopefully that clarifies the difference between vedana and mood, the mental states. You'd see mood in citta.

The second question follows on from this, about the five aggregates. Someone named them as Roxanne did: form, consciousness, perception, feeling tone, thoughts and volition. This person says, "I don't see body, kaya, nor heart-mind, citta, in this list."

This is just another word thing. Rupa means all material form—the body, the five physical senses, and all external rupa. That is kaya, that is body. It's in there under rupa, all material form. Kaya is another word; I'm talking about our particular physical body, but rupa is all material form.

"I don't see heart-mind, citta, in that list." All the other four aggregates are citta. Citta is—I think Guy likes to call it "psyche" sometimes. It's really like a moment of consciousness arising in every moment. And citta, the third foundation of mindfulness, is recognizing in that moment of consciousness what concomitants are present, what's arising together with that moment of consciousness. All of the other three—the sankharas, perception, and sanya—are arising in that moment.

I don't know why the Buddha broke out sanya and vedana from sankhara, but they're arising as sankhara. Maybe just to highlight the importance of their function, to help us notice them.

So citta, heart and mind—we've been using "heart and mind" just because that's a kind of Western division that isn't there in citta. It's not saying the mind is thinking and the heart is emotions. It's not that.

Citta is a moment of consciousness with whatever's arising. Whatever states of heart and mind—perception arising, sanya arising, vedana arising in every moment, some sort of volition and thoughts and moods in a moment of consciousness—all of that is citta. So it's just a different way of describing the same thing. I hope that helps a little bit.

The one thing I do want to say is this: we offer these lists, these different angles of looking at our experience, really breaking it down, and of course they can at times depersonalize it. They do help us, when the attention is steady, to see more clearly the cause and effect relationship. And at other times, it drives you bonkers. You're looking for all these different things and really what's happening is a big feeling of fear. And you're trying to go, "Oh, I fear," and it's huge, and you think, "No, but I've got to notice the citta, I've got to notice the vedana, what's the perception?" and you're making yourself nuts. What's actually happening now? It's like this.

So sometimes the more subtle lists are really interesting. They naturally draw the attention. Maybe some days you're just naturally noticing vedana. But then the next day you think, "I should notice vedana," but that's not what's happening, and you're trying.

Choiceless awareness is really what's happening now. Allow your mindful attention to just drop in, without resistance, to what's happening now—really subtle and fine, or big and gross. And you think, "Oh, I'm going backwards." No, there's no forwards. There's no backwards. There's one line from Sayadaw U Tejaniya that I really like in one of his books. He said, "Reality has no direction." So if you think you're going forward or backward—total concept. Because it's only now.

So use these concepts, these pointings. They can be really helpful. But if you're getting all caught up in the mentality of it at that time, no. Let yourself just drop into, with your awareness, with your attention, what's actually happening now. Very simply. We all go through different times in practice.

One other question that I think is important: "When someone is sick, is it better to send metta or karuna? Do you think it can have an effect on them?"

I think this is something we really wonder about. First, in terms of the formal style of Brahmavihara practice, karuna practice is practiced in the same way as we've been offering the metta. The difference is that they are different qualities of heart-mind, different mental factors. They feel a little different. They're both beautiful. Don't think, "Oh God, I shouldn't be feeling metta, it's karuna." They're both beautiful. Take either one that comes.

But the way they work—like metta, as we say, its proximate cause in a moment, the immediate cause of it arising in the next moment of citta, is seeing the good and appreciating it. With karuna, compassion, it's said to be in this style: that quality of open, connected attention—you could say met attention—connects with the suffering aspect of the being. Instead of focusing on the good, the suffering aspect is apparent, and that's what this open kind attention connects with. That's the proximate cause for karuna to arise, sometimes described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering.

So there are different qualities of heart and mind. You can experience the difference. Both are good. You might see what's easier for you. For me, if the suffering aspect of someone is coming up, my attention connects with it, and karuna is what automatically comes.

But you can explore and see for yourself. That's the difference. If I'm feeling that somebody's sick and my attention goes to them, karuna would naturally come. Even if I were using metaphors, karuna is the feeling that comes. But don't try to make it right or wrong. Just explore.

And this next question: do you think it can have an effect on them? This, I think, is an important question, and I hope I can explain it clearly. It gets into what we're doing when we offer metta or compassion. We're focusing—it's all in us, right? There's the idea of a being, and as if sending something to them. But the motivation isn't sending something to them to make them different. The motivation of cultivating these qualities is to deepen, to recognize that quality arising now in our own mind and heart.

It's not a selfish thing. You know, sometimes people think, "Oh, it's selfish if I'm not sending it to them." But then the motivation isn't quite metta. It isn't quite karuna. There's a little offness. There's a little wanting some result. And as soon as there's wanting some result, there can still be some metta, some karuna, but it's not that purity. It's not quite it. It's not about the result.

This is tricky because of our language. I'm saying, "May you be free from suffering." Yes. But it's the heart and mind that's connected with the suffering, that's quivering with it—not demanding that it be fixed. That doesn't mean in life, if we really feel someone suffering and there's something we could do, that we shouldn't act. That clarity of karuna without any wanting in it can be the motivation that gives rise to appropriate action. And we can recognize what's appropriate action much more clearly when it's not me wanting them to get better. You can do something really thinking you're helping, wanting them to get better, but that little bit of wanting gets in the way of seeing clearly.

So when we're doing this practice, it's not to make something happen. Whether they can feel it or not, who the heck knows? We all have opinions. I do think sometimes it happens, but as soon as you want it to, you're off, right? So that's the trick. Remember, it's really purifying the habits of our own mind and heart. And if the thought comes up that this is selfish, that's a habit of negativity to notice. That's what we're purifying. Don't believe it. Don't believe everyone else should have metta but not you because you're the worst being on the planet and you're just being selfish sending metta to yourself. So you'll take this grumpiness, this negativity toward yourself, and send metta to everyone else, but behind it is this negativity toward yourself. No, bring it into yourself, for God's sake. Start there. Go back there.

It is said that if the mind is really, really super concentrated—like Buddha level—that one could actually send metta. There's a story that the Buddha sent metta to a charging elephant and it felt the metta and stopped. I don't think we're at that level, so let's not try it. Let's just stay real. But the power of this practice is beyond our imagining. Still, don't get woo-woo—don't get all magical thinking about it. What's happening now? Right now? Simple karuna is a beautiful, beautiful thing. So is simple metta.

Sensation. *That's so boring*—I want all this amazing stuff! But pressure. Tingling. Coolness. Curiosity. That's it. All day long. Enjoy.

CHAPTER 84

Bringing Mindfulness/Wisdom to Our Actions

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses how the Buddhist path encompasses all aspects of life, not just deep meditation states. She emphasizes that the mundane moments of daily activity are equally important opportunities for practice and purification of heart-mind.*
>
> *Wilson explores multiple frameworks the Buddha offered for understanding wise action. She discusses the ten wholesome and unwholesome actions rooted in the three roots of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha), explaining how right view (sammā-diṭṭhi) includes understanding these roots. She examines how cetanā (intention) is the heart of kamma, quoting the Buddha's teaching that "action is intention." The talk covers the three rounds of kilesa (defilements)—transgressive, obsessive, and latent—and how they are respectively protected against by sīla, samādhi, and paññā.*
>
> *A significant portion addresses the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), which outlines seven ways āsavas (taints) can be abandoned: through seeing, restraining, using, enduring, avoiding, removing, and developing the seven factors of awakening. Wilson offers practical examples for each—from sense-door restraint when walking past others, to examining our relationship with food and requisites, to knowing when patience serves versus when avoidance is skillful. Throughout, she emphasizes that wise attention (yoniso manasikāra) means noticing what feeds unwholesome states versus what starves them, transforming every moment into practice for liberation.*

By this point in the retreat, for some of you—or perhaps all of you—it may feel like we're offering a lot of information, a different talk every night. I know from conversations and from my own experience that sometimes the talks land beautifully, and other times it feels like enough already. Too much information, depending on what's happening in your particular practice at the moment. So I just want to normalize that.

Different ones of us have different ways of processing information. The way we as teachers talk and access things may come from approaches that speak to you, or they may not—we're all different. Sometimes what we're offering may land and be really helpful. Other times it feels like too much, or whatever's going on in your practice isn't quite in alignment. That's natural. Just don't twist yourself into a pretzel trying to make

best use of every single talk. This isn't an apology for my talk, but there is a lot of information in it. Take what's useful, but don't twist yourself up. We can't all be in the same place at the same time.

One aspect I really value about the Buddhist teachings as they've come down to us is their all-inclusive nature. Even with—not even though—the absolute commitment to full awakening, to liberation, to purifying the heart-mind and the habits of greed, aversion, and delusion, which is really the heart of the practice, that commitment or value isn't reserved just for really deep meditation. That value shoots through all aspects of our life in the way the Buddha taught.

His teaching includes all aspects. It's not that we have to just hang out in the mundane and schlep through it as best we can, waiting until there's enough wisdom to open into a moment of freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion. You already know that's not true. But the times we're in the mundane aren't second best either. It's so easy for our minds to think that—as soon as we've made it "okay, but it's not really it," something feels missing. So I want to talk tonight about the more mundane aspect of the teaching and how that also relates to purifying the habits of mind.

Probably many of you are quite familiar with at least the end of this quotation from Padmasambhava: "The view is recognizing nibbāna as the most important thing. However, do not let your actions slip in the direction of the view. If they do, you will fall into the evil views of demons, prattling on about how goodness is empty, evil is empty. But do not let your views slip in the direction of action either, or you will be caught in materialism and ideology."

So what do we do? You don't land on anything. Here's the famous part: "That is why my view is higher than the sky, but my attention to actions and their effects is finer than grains of barley flour." It's not one or the other.

I'll add just one more thing from Nāgārjuna because it amuses me. Nāgārjuna said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness." It's the *believing in* aspect, folks.

So I want to talk about the action side tonight—different ways from the Buddha's teachings that we can relate to actions, and how that way of relating is itself the practice of purifying, of shifting these habits toward clear seeing, leading to nibbāna.

The Buddha was very clear that the awakened heart-mind manifests in our actions. I read this often: "Bhikkhus, a fool is characterized by their actions. A wise person is characterized by their actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's discernment shines, that one's wisdom shines."

He's not neglecting this aspect in any way, just in terms of importance. In the long descriptions in the suttas of Right View, the first step of the Eightfold Path...

There's mundane and supermundane right view—that's a whole huge discussion in itself. But I just want to touch on this one aspect of mundane right view that's included in the Buddha's teaching. One of the definitions of right view is understanding the ten wholesome actions and the ten unwholesome actions.

When a noble disciple—it's not just the actions themselves, which I'll mention and they're fairly obvious—but what makes it right view is when the noble disciple understands the wholesome and the root of the wholesome in the mind, when a noble disciple understands the unwholesome and the root of the unwholesome in the mind. So the ten wholesome actions arise from understanding the root of the wholesome that leads to them. Refraining from the unwholesome, which are just the reverse, comes not only because one shouldn't do it, but really from understanding the wisdom of the roots of the unwholesome—which are, guess what? Greed, hatred, and confusion.

So the wholesome actions: three of body—not killing living beings, not taking what is not given, not causing sexual harm. Sound familiar? But it's understanding the wholesome roots that matters.

Four of speech: abstaining from false speech, from lying, from malicious speech, from harsh speech. Malicious speech also means using speech as a way to divide people—like when two people get together and talk badly about a third person. Even if it's true, that's not the point. It's malicious, and the root of doing that is unwholesome. So understanding the wholesome root of refraining from false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and idle gossip—which we've talked about before. That's the hardest one, right? We've mentioned the word, and I have to say I just love it: *samphappalāpa*. That's the word for idle gossip and useless speech.

But you know, if we really cut that out, isn't it a relief not to be just blabbing all this garbage all the time? I mean, our mind's bad enough, but usually we share this junk in our mind with other beings out of all the love in our heart. Isn't it nice not to do that? Thank God.

So four of body, and the three wholesome actions of mind: non-covetousness—not wanting other people's things or things that other people have, so it's a form of non-greed but more specific—non-ill will, and right view. Of course, that covers everything.

The Buddha is saying here, in terms of right view on the mundane level when we're living our normal life, understanding these wholesome roots that lead to these wholesome actions—that's right view. That's the first step of the Eightfold Path. So actions and

understanding what leads to them is so important. It's part of how we use all aspects of our life from this deepest motivation of recognizing the truth, of abandoning confusion and greed.

Speaking about action, then, we need to be very clear about what the Buddha means when he talks about action—which we've discussed before, so I'll just highlight it. First, the word in Pāli that simply means action is *kamma*, or *karma* in Sanskrit, which we tend to think means this whole big thing, but specifically it just means action—*kamma*.

As the Buddha said: "Action is intention, I tell you. Intending, one does action by way of body, speech, and mind."

So the intention—that's the heart of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of an action in the way that the Buddha is talking about it, in the way that he's referring to the wholesome and unwholesome roots. We've talked about intention in terms of our practice, just that *cetanā*, that little about-to moment. But that's arising, of course, as part of conditioned arising, as everything is. So in this form, the intention that's the seed of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness in the action is the quality in the mind-heart that gives rise to that moment, that *cetanā*. You could say the motivation, a little bit bigger. But understanding, really, that all action springs from the mind.

The Buddha in the Dhammapada: "All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted or impure mind, and suffering follows, as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox. All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind."

Speak or act with a peaceful mind, and happiness follows like your shadow that never leaves you. Just cause and effect, not an act of will.

And so, as we've been emphasizing the whole time now, the practice is really about tuning in more and more to what's going on in the mind—particularly in terms of what leads to speech and action. As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says, actions are the servants of the mind. We can use actions to help us reflect back and see what's going on in the mind.

As you know, our tendency is to think an action is wholesome or not by how it looks, by what the results are. But in terms of how the Buddha describes it, that's not it at all. For example, we could do an action—giving something that seems really generous, really kind—and the internal motivation could be many different things, couldn't it? So it's not our job to just do the generous thing. It's to really be looking and seeing.

You could give with this open-hearted quality, just wanting to offer the happiness of generosity. Or it could be, "Maybe it would make me look good." It could be, "I should, it's the right thing to do"—so there's a little generosity and a little bit not, but that's okay. It's mixed, and you can see it. Or it could be, "Maybe if I give them this, then they'll owe me," and you want them to owe you. So it's actually not a wholesome action at all. You get the sense. There are examples like that with everything.

This isn't about judging. It's about getting more and more in the habit of tuning in, noticing what's motivating this action, this speech, even thoughts—but that's harder to see, so don't worry about it. We can just see from actions and speech.

And as we've all noticed, how often when we're not mindful or aware, or we're taken by surprise, our old friends and habits frequently arise as the motivation for speech and action. You know our friends—they're friends: greed, hatred, and confusion. But they do arise. Someone quoted Ajahn Chah saying something about seventy-five or eighty percent of our practice is just being aware of craving arising and not being able to do anything about it. But we are doing something—we're being aware of it. That's what we can do.

Because a lot of people are seeing this. Mindfulness is getting more steady, the mind is getting more collected. And some people think, "I'm seeing craving all the time. What's the matter with me?" Nothing's the matter with you. You're getting more aware. This is what's driving the bus half the time—craving and aversion. So seeing it is already the first step of wisdom, or the second and the third.

We're learning to recognize how when we're not aware, habits are strong. We use them. Someone gave the example: if we're driving on the highway and go to shift lanes, there are actually many small actions required to do that. If you were being super mindful—first I look in the rear view mirror, seeing, seeing; then I look at the side mirror, seeing, seeing; then I check the blind spot—I mean, seventeen cars have passed by this time! We can't do it that way. So we do it instinctively, and a lot of that is habit.

So habit is just a natural thing. It also comes up when we're comfortable and not paying attention, or in moments of stress. We can begin by not taking it personally, but simply seeing how frequently the habit can come springing up and we don't know why. Have you ever had the experience where you have a clear, wholesome intention—something like, "I'm going to go into the dining room and just take a very moderate amount of food and eat it with awareness"? Very clear. You're not kidding yourself. But then you sit down and you've got this pile, and you think, "How did that happen?" You're legitimately puzzled. "How did that happen? I had this clear intention"—which

you did, many moments ago. But cetanā is arising every single moment. The mind moments are changing. Sometimes we can be aware that greed came up and we acted on it, so there's awareness seeing how it worked. Other times, not. "How did that happen?"

Once someone asked Sayadaw U Tejaniya a similar question, and he said, "Weak wisdom, strong kilesa." The wisdom is there, but then we lose the mindfulness and the habit takes over. This isn't meant to scare us, but to wake us up—to not take it personally, but to see why the steadiness of mindfulness is so important, why the lack of steady awareness gets us in trouble. We can see this in life too. Even though we try to be good, when we're under stress, when something unexpected happens and we're not quite present, old habits can spring up in not very helpful ways. Crimes and such could be committed.

There's a line from Dr. King: "The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy." I offer that not as a view about how we should be, but as an observation about the ultimate measure of how the qualities of heart and mind, how the wisdom, is coming and being purified. There will be times when, in moments of stress or comfort, the unwholesome doesn't arise and the wholesome does arise. You've noticed that at least once, right? It does happen. Let it in. You think, "Where did that come from? That wasn't me. I was the greedy one who took too much food. I'm not the one who said, 'Okay, that's enough now,' and just put it down." You're not either of them, of course. But noticing how, through steady attention, the habits are starting to shift—that's our practice. Attention to motivation as we go through the day.

From Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "When we're not mindful, we're not aware. So many of our intentions, thoughts, speech, and actions may be governed by, ruled by the defilements—the torments of greed, hatred, and delusion. It's mostly delusion because everything is on automatic. Delusion is boss." Back to the street gang again—delusion is boss. "However, when we train our mind to notice what we are doing first, then what we are doing next, we're training our minds to see that detail. When I see the mind's intentions in this way, then it's possible to consciously choose whether to act or not act in a given situation. One can choose to do what is skillful and leads to ease. In that way, one avoids acting out of pure habit that always does the same thing, even when it causes suffering."

So the practice is simple, nothing new. I'm just highlighting it from a different angle. Going through the day sometimes, not when there's something big calling attention, but when you're thinking, "What should I pay attention to now? Nothing's happening"—you might notice just intentions for little actions.

Just notice your intention to look. Notice your intention when you walk into the dining room. Do you go to the food first, or do you go to save a place? I think you're not allowed to, right? But you find some secret way to do that. Do you go and try to save a place, or do you figure out how to sit there until everyone's eaten so you can have the place? Whatever it is, notice why you're doing what you're doing. Do you go for a walk? Where? When you get up and walk out of here, do you turn left or right?

Little stuff. You say, "Oh, I'm just following the Dhamma," but somehow left leads to the tea stall, and you're making some tea. "Oh, I'm just following the Dhamma, just turned left." Nobody else is in there looking. You don't have to be good for somebody. We want to understand what's going on to free our hearts and minds from confusion. So don't be afraid to see this stuff. It doesn't mean you're a hopeless loser. It just means you're human. And this is what we have to work with, to understand.

Just noticing these little choices—it kind of gets to be fun. When I get up, which shoe do I put on first? I mean, you could go nuts with it, okay. But just starting to notice when something comes from habit, and then you can bring awareness in and see.

The Buddha spoke to wise intention in the second step of the Eightfold Path—sammā saṅkappa, another word translated variously as wise thought or wise intention. We've spoken of it before. But he defines what becomes wise intention rather than unwise—greed, hatred, confusion. As Greg mentioned when he talked about the sutta on the two types of thought, wise intention transforms through wisdom, through our practice.

The intention of greed naturally transforms from lobha to renunciation, and even then to generosity. Not as a should—yes, we can practice these things—but starting to see with steady mindfulness and wisdom, I'm sure you've seen moments when greed started and then there was a natural renunciation, renouncing the craving that was leading you into it. Whether it's a big thing or a little thing, it's not about the object. It's renouncing the craving. Wisdom just puts it down sometimes. Notice that. It's worth noticing. It's happening naturally, this transformation to wise intention, sammā saṅkappa.

Hatred naturally transforms—in the Theravāda, to non-hatred, but you could say mettā, friendliness. And cruelty transforms to compassion. So these are the three wise intentions. Delusion transforms through wisdom, not through action.

Noticing when the kilesas are driving the bus is important, but also notice that through our steady practice—and that's lots of moments where you're just mindful, nothing special going on, but mindfulness in that moment being present, wise mindful-

ness, not distorted by greed or aversion—you're not having some big insight moment, but many, many moments where the wholesome is being fed rather than the unwholesome habits being fed through inattention and mere habit.

That's why you don't notice anything happening, and then suddenly someone goes by and the old feelings of judging and ill will arise, and suddenly the mind goes, "Oh, but they're doing the best they can," and the whole thing drops. I remember the first time that happened to me—I really thought, who's in my mind doing that? But it happens. Let it in. This is the second step of the Eightfold Path, sammā saṅkappa, those three qualities. We've talked about them in detail, so I'm not going to say more, but we've explored renunciation or generosity, friendliness or mettā, non-hatred, compassion, non-cruelty.

Notice them. Notice how this naturally occurs. You can see it. It's all part of the whole path, purifying these habits of mind.

Now shifting to another way, the Buddha talks about how we see in our practice these habits, how we're transforming. Because everything is really about the heart of the practice—this pure citta, this pure heart-mind. That's what sees nibbana, that's what recognizes the truth. And all these different ways are just to say you don't have to wait until something fantastic is happening. These are all ways the Buddha gives for bringing in this awareness, bringing in this understanding. And they're all just as good as each other.

So first, let me talk about what's called the three rounds of kilesa. This is something I heard Sayadaw U Pandita talk about frequently. I liked it. These are kind of three levels of how kilesa manifests in our experience. One is called the transgressive level, one is the obsessive level, and one is the latent underlying level. Don't get discouraged. This is just a way to look at our experience.

The transgressive is just what it sounds like. When the power of the kilesa—aversion, greed, delusion—is so strong in that moment, remember it's only moments in our mind, that it leads to actions of speech and body motivated by ill will, motivated by greed, motivated by cruelty. Of course that happens in little ways, but transgressive really means in a big way. And it's protected by sila. The quality that we cultivate that protects our heart and mind from the transgressive kilesa is said to be sila.

So we're talking about gross transgression here. We're not talking about a tiny little moment where greed arises and you act on it—"Oh my God, I've transgressed!" We're talking about the serious ones. Sila does protect us from that. We get really angry, but we come up against, "Oh, don't say it." That's the sense of sila protecting us, and protecting others from the torment and from spreading the torment.

Mingyur Rinpoche puts it beautifully: our behavior, how we relate to the world around us, even in very difficult situations, becomes the most reliable means of protecting our mind and heart from anxiety and frustration, from remorse. So this is really talking about this level of kilesa that leads to truly transgressive actions. We're all familiar with it. It happens to all of us sometimes, but we're beginning to tune into that.

The second level is the obsessive torments, with which I have no doubt we are all very familiar. Obsessive is the spinning, tormenting thoughts—whether they're thoughts of self-judging or revenge or greed or worry or fear or whatever. The suffering is pretty obvious, right? But we tend to get lost in the story often and not recognize: this is just greed spinning, spinning, spinning. This is ill will spinning, spinning, spinning. The obsessive defilements.

We're protected from this level by collectedness of mind-heart, by samadhi. It can be the samadhi of one-pointed samatha, but it doesn't have to be. The collectedness that develops through the steadiness of our mindfulness practice, through khanika samadhi—on changing objects but with steady awareness—that collectedness of mind. Sayadaw U Pandita would talk about this a lot, that unification. It's a protection. When the mind is so collected, it's almost like there isn't room. The kilesas just don't have room. The mind's present, present, present. And in a moment of samma sati with this collectedness, the kilesas aren't there.

So whatever level of concentration, whatever level of collectedness—one of the reasons that collectedness is so pleasant is because we're experiencing that purity of heart and mind without kilesa. And it's lovely. Sometimes people say, "Oh, I had no idea what it feels like to just be with a peaceful heart and mind." This is not the same as temporary nibbana that Guy was talking about, because it's a constructed state. Collectedness of mind is a constructed state. But you're tasting what it feels like, recognizing how really lovely and peaceful it is when kilesas aren't running the show, driving the bus.

The absence of torments, the absence of clinging mind. It's a constructed state, and of course it goes away. That's okay. Sometimes people notice, if there's been a period of time where the mind's been more collected—whether on changing objects or whatever, doesn't matter—and it's been that kind of peaceful time without a lot of kilesa, or not much at all...

And then, you know, it changes. The collectedness goes away. The mind starts thinking. Stuff starts happening. And sometimes it's like a rebound effect, right? The kilesas were off, they weren't around, but they're waiting for the party to come. The walls went down and the parents went away, and boom, here they come. That doesn't mean you did something wrong. It's simply cause and effect.

But really seeing and tasting, appreciating that sense of the peace of pure mind—it can also at times give a sense of faith, a sense of confidence. A feeling of, "Oh, you know, this really is a path of purity. There really is something to this." They're not just talking blah, blah, blah about how greed is bad, aversion is bad. You really kind of get it. It gives us confidence, a willingness to do the work, a sense of the path being onward leading.

But then when the collectedness changes or falls apart, don't land in owning that. Don't think that because kilesas arise again, you blew it. Don't own any of it. Just see the cause and effect. That recognition, rather than being "bad, bad, bad, here they are again," can actually serve as motivation. These guys really do create suffering in my mind. Let's explore what's going on. Let's remember how we pay attention and what we pay attention to. We can really see what supports feeding the kilesas, what supports starving them, what supports feeding the wholesome.

So that leads us into my next topic. The third of the three rounds of kilesa is what's called latent or underlying torments. Okay, don't get depressed. This is like the potential for the torment to arise given the appropriate conditions. It's not that they're sitting there—I know it sounds like they're sitting there waiting to come. Even though we say they're gone, they're gone, they're not sitting there. But now you might think I'm saying they are sitting there waiting. It's not like that. But they do give the example of a seed that, if it's watered and has earth and all the appropriate conditions—hello—greed pops up, ill will pops up. Of course, one of the appropriate conditions is lack of awareness, lack of mindfulness.

So this is, again, not meant to discourage us. In a way, I find this—well, I say encouraging, but it's realistic. Rather than having all these unrealistic ideas that after a couple of three-month retreats, it's all gone, all the kilesas are gone, and then when that doesn't happen feeling really discouraged—that's just unrealistic. The reality is seeing how subtle these habits are, but also recognizing that we have the tools and the wisdom and the understanding to continue to explore, to continue to make choices that feed the wholesome and starve the unwholesome.

So given the appropriate conditions, you can notice how they sort of come up when we least expect it. Little things. I remember one yogi told me—not at this retreat, a long time ago—but something similar. They were walking through the dining room. There was a bowl of Halloween candy or something. They were walking through, quite aware, having no intention of taking the candy. They were really aware, but just when they got to the candy, their hand reached out and grabbed it. And they said, "Who's doing this?" Up until that moment they were aware, and then after, but it's like someone else came in. Just a little moment where it springs up. In funny little moments like that, you can notice.

Just in the blink of an eye. But we can see how when we're not paying attention, these tendencies can spring up.

I'll share an example from summer. I was on a retreat in Switzerland, a self-retreat at a place where I teach often and visit frequently. I'd been sitting for a couple of weeks. I was in a pretty balanced, spacious state, paying attention. Nothing much was going on. I was out walking down the road in a more wide, open kind of awareness, not particularly concentrated, but the mind was fine and balanced, not in kilesa.

A person walked toward me. Generally there, people are out hiking and everyone just says hello, you say hello back, and that's it. Very friendly, but that's all. But this person came up to me holding a pamphlet like this, out toward me. I didn't know what it was. The latent kilesa came up. For some reason—I look back and see I associated it, unrecognized in my mind, with something from my childhood. I hope I don't offend anyone, but this is what I associated it with: people would come around with the Watchtower, these religious tracts, banging on your door and trying to force it on you. I wouldn't want it.

So that came up, and I said something in English. I could have said something in German, but I said, "No, I don't speak German." Boom, and I walked away. Total aversion. It just came up like that.

And then as I walked away: what was that about? The whole mind and body was stirred up from the aversion for a long time. It leaves like an ash afterwards. As I reflected on it, I had no clue. The poor woman was probably—could it have been a map, just asking me for directions? I mean, something. I'm sure it was something quite innocuous. But this just comes springing up.

When that happens, beating oneself up doesn't help. But seeing it—it's kind of like, "Wow, look at that. Look how suddenly this can come." Bring awareness in right away. See what's going on. It's really interesting.

So latent greed, hatred, and delusion are not abandoned by sīla or by collectedness of mind, but by wisdom—by paññā, by wisely seeing. So we're back to our steady mindfulness practice. Can't get away from it. It's there for all of it. But this is where we really start to see through.

And as I said before, notice when you have moments where in the past—like that example for me of aversion coming up, which would tend to arise because I don't like to be intruded on—it just doesn't. Notice the times it would come up and it simply doesn't.

Someone gave me an example: a friend seeing how the habit of seeing leads to comparing, leads to judgment, leads to aversion to the whole mess. A friend told me this, but half of you here could have that experience. Me too. It gets so annoying. And then another time, seeing came up, comparing came up, and then suddenly: oh, everything's in constant flux. There's nothing to compare. And the whole thing just dropped away.

That's an example, in a moment, of wisdom suddenly seeing what's happening and the latent kilesa just dropping. That's a moment. That moment doesn't last the whole rest of your life. That's a moment.

But notice that. Notice how wisdom, which comes from clear seeing, really can dissolve even in the moment these deepest habits.

So he's so practical. I want to go to one other sutta of the Buddha's that I like very much because he's giving different examples of ways to work with wise attention to feed the wholesome and starve the latent underlying tendencies.

This sutta is the second one in the Majjhima Nikaya, called the Sabbāsava Sutta, or "All the Āsavas." Āsava is a word that's sometimes translated as "taints." I don't like that. We can think of it as the latent tendencies. The latent tendencies here that he's talking about, the āsavas, are very specific: sense desire, becoming, and ignorance—the most subtle ones underlying everything.

In this sutta, he's talking about wise attention, how wise attention in various situations can really show us how we pay attention. If we pay attention to how we pay attention, as you've been saying, we can see how it either is feeding and strengthening these underlying tendencies, the kilesas, or starving them. This is like bringing this quality of wisdom into all different actions of our life. I like it because it's so practical. It really shows the Buddha's practical side. I could talk for hours about each of them, so I can only go through quickly.

But he says to introduce it, "Thus have I heard, for I shall expound to you a discourse on the restraint of the āsavas. Listen and heed what I say." He's talking about when one attends unwisely, both unarisen kilesas arise and arisen ones increase. When one attends wisely, both unarisen āsavas do not arise and arisen ones are abandoned.

So he's talking about attending wisely, and then he gives examples of different situations. The first one is what you would expect, that taints can be abandoned by insight, by seeing clearly. But how he's describing wise attention here is paying attention—he said unwise attention is paying attention to that which is not worth paying attention to, which is most of our thoughts. He gives examples of attending unwisely to: Was I in past time or wasn't I in past time? How was I? How will I be in the future? What is happening now?

But I would say, because I'm going to make these quite simple, actually Sally was talking about this this morning in the Q&A with, I think it was the really vicious judging that goes on in the mind. The way one attends unwisely, and we all do it, is by being present but giving the attention to the content, to the meanness of it. Is it true that I can't do it right? No, it's not true. And this shouldn't be happening because I shouldn't be having kilesas. I'm giving attention to that. Unwise attention. Notice that as the attention is given to that content, are the kilesas increasing or no? This is how we tell what's wise attention.

So as we're giving attention to that—I'm so bad—aversion is growing, growing, growing. Unwise attention. He's just being practical. And we say this over and over: give the attention to something that's more concrete. Okay, feeling the unpleasant aspect, being with that. It's unpleasant, but you can see the kilesas are not increasing. Mindfulness is increasing. It's not always so clear cut, but this is the way it works.

So wise attention, you see, is what's worth attention, what helps to support clear seeing. What's feeding the kilesas, that's not wise attention. In terms of thought, that's the example I want to give for that.

The others are more concrete experiences in our life. And this I love—you might not think the Buddha would mention them all. The second one is taints that can be abandoned by restraining. "A bhikkhu reflecting wisely abides with the eye faculty restrained. While taints and fever of defilement might arise in a bhikkhu who is abiding with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no taints in one who abides with the eye faculty restrained."

What do we mean by that? It doesn't mean going around blindfolded. There was once a friend of ours who was on staff, and he decided to go around for three days here blindfolded. That's not really the same thing.

This is a very simple example of eye faculty restraint. And it's not that this is a "should." Don't make a list of shoulds—"I can't look around." That's not wise attention. It's seeing and learning from wise attention, from mindfulness, what's creating more suffering.

A simple example: eye faculty restrained while walking. Someone's passing. There's this huge desire to look. You're aware of it. You keep looking, and what happens? There's no way that was a supportive thing to do. Either judging comes up—of them, of you, of you for judging them. Either way, there's comparing, there's *māna*, or you just judge yourself for looking. Either way, you've gotten lost in thought, and before, you were quite present.

Eye faculty restraining—I don't need to look. Not out of some harsh "should," because that's just more aversion, but out of clear seeing what's actually supportive, what's not feeding the *kilesas*. And so you do it, and you pay attention, and it's like, ah—there's a sense of ease and peace rather than feeding the craving by looking. Otherwise you feed that craving, and then you feed the next craving, because we just get in the habit of feeding craving.

But this is something to explore. Again, not from "should" or "you're bad," because that's aversion, but from really seeing what wise attention is, what starves the *kilesas*.

Just little things. You smell something pleasant. Something's cooking for lunch. The mind goes, "Pizza." I know nothing about lunch—I'm not saying there's pizza. I'm just saying one smells something. The mind goes, "Pizza." Off into all kinds of *papañca* about it.

What's the unwise attention? There's nothing wrong with smelling it or thinking "pizza." Wise attention, restraint of the sense door, would be: that's enough. But then we smell it again, smell it again. It's like unwise attention to the pleasant aspect, the gratification—"Pizza, ah, the pizza!"—or off into thought. That's unwise attention. We think it's pleasant, but notice what's being fed: more wanting, more wanting. And you can't have pizza, so you go off into some story about the next time you go to Italy, and you remember that best pizza you ever had in that little place in front of the post office in that little town up in Umbria. That's a true memory—best pizza I ever had. And I'm off, you know, off in Italy there.

And it seems pleasant, until I say, "Oh, what's happening now?" Well, I'm sitting here and my bum hurts. And having fed the *kilesas*, the mind's a little bit more uneasy when it comes back. You kind of disrupt the continuity of presence.

So not judging, but noticing this and trusting wisdom to incline toward the wholesome. That's taints abandoned by restraining.

The third—and I could go on for fifteen minutes about each—the third I like as well: wise attention to the attitude with which we use things, with which we use requisites. How can taints be abandoned by using?

Reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu uses robes for protection from cold, for protection from heat, for protection from gadflies, and only for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience. In other words, use alms food for a good purpose, but not for amusement, not to feed craving, not to feed ill will.

I found this really so interesting when I started paying attention to it in my life. How do we relate to our clothes, for example? I like clothes and pay attention to clothes, but I remember a year when I was a nun, and by the end of that year, just having three same outfits that you simply change—it's so much more peaceful.

But it's not about the outer form. You can get totally into having the right outfit and the right kind of material, this top that's better than that top, wearing it so you look good. It's not about the external. It's about how we relate. How do we relate to food here? Do we eat what we need and then just put it down? Or do we relate to it out of fear or out of need? Again, it's not bad or good. It's seeing what serves, what's strengthening in the mind.

For me, I remember being on retreat and thinking, "Oh, I might be hungry later." So I would save a couple of rice cakes or a banana or something. I never ate it. It would sit there and rot on those shelves back there. And what was being fed until I started noticing this was feeding the greed, feeding the fear, and feeding a sense of complication—because I somehow had to deal with that stuff I'd saved and then didn't want, so I saved something else.

Then when the time came, I would say, "Just take what I need, and if I'm hungry later, so what?" A little bit of hungry. We're not in starvation station here. A little bit hungry—it's just sensations. And there's food the next morning. It's so simple. So I'm going to just start coming late. What if one of the dishes has run out? There's two other dishes. There's plenty of food. Just that shifting of the relationship, seeing, "Okay, I didn't get what I wanted, but the mind and heart is at peace"—versus making sure I get what I want, feeding the craving, relating to the requisites in a way that feeds fear.

It's fun, really, to explore this, something we might not have thought of. And the Buddha is saying, why attention here? This is helping to abandon these subtle underlying tendencies that are at the deepest root of our suffering. He's not just saying this is something good to do in the meantime. This is really how we relate to actions in our life to free our heart and mind.

The next one is called "enduring" in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation. I would say patience, which is pretty obvious. We've talked about that a lot. But I like the way he describes it: "Here, a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, and contact with gadflies, with flies, with wind, with burning and creeping things." They're sitting outside under trees. "They endure ill-spoken, unwelcome words. And arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life." He's not messing around.

What I would say is that reflecting wisely, one bears things that are here and can't be changed. He's not saying everything. He's not saying make yourself a doormat. But difficult stuff that happens, unpleasant feelings in the body, a lot of noise going on, the person in the next room makes noise, you don't like the heating in here, the windows are closed and you want them open, the windows are open and you want them closed—endless, right? We all have great stories of cultivating patience from practice in Asia. Endless stories about that.

But it's really true. It's not about patience just so you don't have to suffer. The cultivation of patience is really about seeing that you can be in a difficult situation and the kilesa doesn't come up. It's really quite remarkable. But you don't get there by wishing. You have to be there and see the suffering that comes.

So, okay, quick story. Noise in Burma—that's always a good one. When they have weddings in villages around monasteries, and every meditation center has villages all around, just right outside, like across the street here. When there's going to be a wedding, they rent these speakers—gigantic speakers—and play music, loud music, so the whole village can share in the joy, twenty-four seven, all night.

So this one time at Shwe Oo Min, U Tejaniya had told us in the morning—and it was unbelievable, the racket—he said, with glee, "There's four different weddings going on at the same time." And he's like, "This is great practice for you guys." And it was true. He meant it.

So it went on. There's no way to get away from it. It goes all night. There's no way to get away from it. Either deal or go crazy, right? And so it takes a while, but at some point you're really seeing: this is how it is. This is how it is. And I remember something Ajahn Sumedho said about something else: "I can't bear it another moment. And then I found that I could." That's what happened. And then I found that I could.

You really have to start again next time, but really, before midnight, my mind was quite equanimous with it. It took a while, okay. Just to have that experience that it's not essential that there's kilesa, that we can't blame it on the object, that it's really possible. We all have that chance here. And it's not just to prove you can sit with it. It's really, again, as the Buddha said, it's to abandon taints and fever of defilement. We're really doing it for liberation, not just to get through a bad day.

The next method, and this might surprise you, is abandoning by avoiding. I like this one because he's being really practical. He's not saying you should be able to be patient and present with every single thing. We're paying attention to what feeds kilesa, what starves it, what feeds wisdom, what starves it. And some things are to be avoided—okay, different things than we would avoid.

Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely avoids a savage elephant. We don't have to think too much about that. Maybe Greg does, but avoid a savage elephant, a savage bull, or a savage dog, or a snake, or a stump. You don't just walk into a stump. A sewer, a cesspit. It's like you're not an idiot.

You avoid wandering to unsuitable resorts, hanging out with unsuitable, unwholesome people. He's being quite realistic, not idealistic. So it's not, "I should be able to be with anything." For example, we say be with piercing experiences, but say you're sitting in a way that's damaging your knee—not just that it hurts, but you're damaging it. Well, for the love of God, change position. Don't keep sitting that way, but do it not out of aversion, but out of not feeding kilesa.

There's a reason the retreats are set up like this and we don't have CNN running in all the corners like in the airports. There's a reason we say put down your phone.

We're avoiding what's going to really stir up the mind and feed kilesa, to support us being able to see clearly. In life, we can't avoid all of that, but we can make many more choices to avoid what feeds kilesa than perhaps we do. And when it comes from this sense of wholesomeness, seeing what supports peace of mind—not avoiding out of fear, but out of seeing what really supports—it's quite interesting. The Buddha was really not being idealistic.

The next one is abandoned by removing. This is really more adhiṭṭhāna—removing unskillful thoughts with resolution. It's not that you push them away or hate them. But when we get into, say, a vipassana romance thought, again and again and again, at some point we go, "That's enough." And we have to do that again and again. We say, "No, I'm just not going to go there. Just not going to go there." Resolution, adhiṭṭhāna, coming from wisdom—seeing that going into that is just feeding craving. We can't always do that, because it has to be without aversion, but having that intention, knowing it's possible to abandon that thought, to remove that tendency.

And the last one, which I don't have to elaborate on because we already have, is cultivating the seven factors of awakening. Mindfulness, dhamma vicaya—investigation of dhamma, that brightness of mind—energy, pīti, rapture or interest, samādhi, tranquility, and equanimity, as Guy talked about them. Cultivating all of these, using all these aspects of our life, really looking and seeing how we're paying attention. What's feeding the wholesome? What's starving the kilesa? What's feeding the kilesa and starving the wholesome? So that everything we do becomes a source of potential wisdom, a source of really learning, a source of inclining the mind and heart toward wisdom and freedom. Nothing is outside of our practice.

I'll end with one quotation from the Buddha:

"Abandon what is unskillful, bhikkhus. It is possible to abandon what is unskillful. If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so. If this abandoning of what is unskillful were conducive to harm and pain, I would not say to you, abandon what is unskillful. But because this is conducive to benefit and pleasure, I say to you, abandon what is unskillful."

And then he says the same thing about developing what is skillful: "It is possible to develop what is skillful, or I would not tell you to do so."

It helps to remember that it is possible for all of us.

Thank you for your long, enduring attention. Let's just sit for a moment.

Another way this goes together—the Dalai Lama says, "Every morning I practice to calm and quiet my mind, and then the rest of the day I use that to serve humanity." Wisdom and action are part of the same thing.

So just noticing why you get up or not, whether you walk or have tea, just noticing what's going on in the mind with interest.

CHAPTER 85

The Way Things Have Come to Be

Carol Wilson · 51 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from a month-long insight retreat, Carol Wilson introduces the Pāli term yathābhūta—things as they have come to be in this moment—as the heart of liberation. She explains that meditation is not about changing reality or achieving particular states, but about recognizing accurately what is arising in each moment of consciousness. When we see clearly, without the distortion of greed, hatred, or delusion (kilesa), clinging simply doesn't arise because it no longer makes sense.*
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> *Wilson explores how the mental defilements operate with a kind of inertia, coloring our perception and decision-making in ways we often don't recognize. Drawing on her experiences practicing in Burma and visiting Dachau concentration camp, she illustrates how these same forces of confusion operate in ordinary human minds with potentially devastating consequences. This understanding underscores why practice matters—not as an esoteric pursuit, but as essential work for ourselves and the world.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance on distinguishing between aspiration and craving, explaining that the difference lies not in the thought itself but in the mental factors accompanying it. Wilson emphasizes that wisdom arises naturally from the steadiness of clear mindfulness—our only job is to take care of awareness. She encourages practitioners to trust this simple presence with whatever arises, recognizing that the shift from confusion to clarity happens moment to moment, requiring not effort to change but willingness to see.*

If you remember last night when James suggested that you just take a moment to reflect on your motivation, your intention for being here, I thought I'd share mine in a simple way.

I'm here, as best I can, to share and represent the Buddha's teachings as I've come to understand them in my own experience. But not so that you have a good time or a bad time. Not so that you get to have a new fantastic experience. Not to help you achieve a particular goal or any experience whatsoever. Rather, my hope is that whatever we can do to support your practice—and practice isn't just sitting, isn't just walking, it's every moment of every day exploring how our minds work—might help you come to understand more deeply, to trust more radically, the fact that freedom isn't about changing or getting something. Freedom and peace are available in our hearts and minds when, in any particular moment of consciousness, we recognize reality accurately.

Meditation isn't about changing reality. It's not about changing your idea of yourself. It might do that, but that's not going to free you. It's not about setting up the idea that you will every day let go of one thing you're clinging to, and by the end of a month you'll be thirty percent—oh, it's February—twenty-eight percent more free from clinging than you were before. If we could just think of an idea of what we need to do, how we need to look, what we need to think—if thinking would get us there, we'd be there. And we are there, because it's not there, it's here. But thinking doesn't help us see that.

My deep intention, my motivation, is to support all of us to keep recognizing in any moment things as they have come to be in this moment. There's a phrase in Pali, *yathā bhūta*, translated most accurately as "things as they have come to be in this moment"—meaning they could not be any other way. They've come to be this way in this moment through an intricate and, to a complete extent, untraceable series of conditions, all interrelated and connected. In this moment, things could not be otherwise because this is how they are.

Freedom comes not from changing how this moment is, not from making *yathā bhūta* look different, but from a moment when consciousness is clear of confusion, of distortion, of seeing and understanding inaccurately—and then acting on that and compounding that. When there's clear seeing and wisdom, the heart and mind is free. Seeing things how they are frees us from the confusion of clinging, from the distortion of ill will and fear, from the deeply, deeply compelling but unfortunately completely wrong idea that "I am"—I am, and I am somehow the center of the universe. Each of us is the center of our own little universe, somehow acting with intention. Taking that delusion into our meditation, we could sit here and meditate with a lot of sincerity and a lot of energy and a lot of ideas and a lot of technique and a lot of good experiences. But as long as I am doing it in order to get something, we're just continuing the pattern. And we can't stop that pattern by deciding to. God knows.

So my deepest intention is just, in any moment, to do what we can to support you to keep rediscovering—because you must know it already or you wouldn't be here—to keep rediscovering that deep trust and faith in radical presence, radical awareness, a radical acceptance with awareness, with presence, of whatever is arising in this moment.

One of the names, in some forms of practice, for one of the deeper insights is called *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, which means "knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be in this moment," of phenomena as it is in reality, as Anālayo describes it.

In a way, to me, that's a huge relief. We're not here to try and create something or make ourselves better or somehow finally get to the fourth jhāna. You can write that off your little list of things. You get there, you don't get there—it's over anyway, sometime. But knowledge and vision of things as they are? Well, they already are. It's nature. You don't, and in fact can't, create it. We don't have to. Wisdom arises as a natural effect of the cause of the steadiness of clear mindfulness. We don't even create wisdom.

So take a huge breath and relax. As one of my teachers said, our only job is to take care of awareness. Take care of our awareness. What awareness is noticing.

Not up to us. We keep trying to make it up to us. "This isn't good enough. That should be better." Right there, right there is the cause of all our suffering.

Well, it could be a long night, folks. But that's really what we're here for. And all the forms of practice, the techniques that we practice—they're useful, and there are many different ones. There's basic mindfulness at the six sense doors. There's cultivating mindfulness by beginning with a particular base experience, a more neutral experience such as the breath, in order to develop a steadiness of attention so that we can actually notice: one, that there is a mind; two, that it's working; three, how it's working.

To begin with, even when we've been meditating a while, when we first sit down—or for someone who's never really meditated—you don't really have a clue what it means to watch the mind. I was just sitting in on a lot of interviews with a teacher of mine in Burma, group interviews. He was talking to all different people—all people who spoke English, but from all over the world, all who had done a lot of meditation before. Each one was different; I don't mean to clump them. But it was really interesting to see how for many people who had done quite some practice—for some people over twenty years, and for some people newer than that—when they came in and talked about being lost in thought, he'd say, "Well, could you be aware of that?" And they'd say, "Yes." And he'd say, "Fine, that's watching the mind."

And that was something they could not relate to, couldn't accept. That watching the mind includes learning to see how the mind works all the time—not only watching the mind when it's doing what we want it to do, and the rest of the time trying to cut that out with ill will, with "this isn't happening." Watching the mind with interest, not to change it, but just to see how it works. Actually, it's so much more fun than trying to make something else happen. And as I said, through the steadiness of mindfulness, just watching what the mind's doing moment after moment after moment, wisdom naturally arises.

We're doing all kinds of techniques. Maybe you're doing samatha practice, loving-kindness practice, just cultivating loving-kindness. Some people may be cultivating a more focused attention on the breath or on loving-kindness. All of these are very useful techniques, but not an end in themselves. And our habit of mind is so much to make whatever we do an end in itself. I mean, that's just what we know. We do something to get a result. Why else would we do it? It doesn't even make sense otherwise.

So when we talk about what we want to cultivate—being fully present with total interest and attention, complete acceptance for whatever happens, for no other reason than to be present—it just doesn't really fit our learning. But that is what we're cultivating.

And the reason it seems, and let's face it, at times is, so difficult to recognize yathā bhūta—to just be at ease in things as they are and recognize accurately—I know, I make it sound like la la la, that's all we have to do. And everyone here has spent a lot of time trying to do that, and at times succeeding. And then when it goes away, really thinking, "What did I do wrong?" And you're here for another two weeks, twenty-eight days, two months to beat your head against the wall of trying to just totally relax into how things already are. I know it's difficult.

And the reason—at first, when I began to hear the Buddhist teachings or read about them, and they talk about the need to purify the mind, or the torments, the kilesas—greed, hatred, delusion, confusion—as being the sources of our suffering, I thought, well, it sounds good. I didn't really have an argument. But over the years, I have come so much to absolutely know in my own experience, and to have a very strong respect for the power of these habits in the mind, in the heart. The power to arise—they're just inertia.

You know inertia: how a body at rest tends to stay at rest, a body in motion tends to stay in motion. It seems to work the same way with qualities, with factors in the mind. So when you're feeling in an open, loving place and somebody comes into your vision, even if it's someone you don't like that much, you tend to feel more loving toward them. The moment of loving—kusala, wholesome mind state—it's easier for the next moment to be like that, isn't it? When you're generous and you give something to someone and they're so happy on seeing it, then they feel happy and you feel happy and it just keeps rolling on. Inertia.

Well, I started with the pleasant, with the wholesome, didn't I? It happens to work very strongly with the difficult states of mind, the difficult factors in consciousness—with greed, with hatred, with confusion. When there's confusion in the mind, it clouds how we see things. It clouds our decision-making. And so what we do and what we say is a little more confused, and it leads to more confusion, right?

When you're angry and you look at the person you're angry with, what tends to happen? Do you feel the anger go away? No—you look at them and think, "That stupid jerk. How could they do that?" And then perhaps, "I shouldn't be angry. I shouldn't be angry, you stupid jerk." You look back at them, back and forth, and the whole thing is just turning into a volcano. It's not you doing that. That's just the nature, the inertia, the momentum of that state of mind.

And these states are also very subtle. We're so familiar with the worldview, moment to moment, that is colored by gross or subtle forms of wanting, of ill will or aversion, of confusion, that really, very often, we don't even know it's there in the mind. You may say, "Speak for yourself." So I'm speaking for myself—very often I don't recognize it's in the mind, even when I'm looking for it. But I just want to offer that to you as a very worthwhile exploration during this retreat.

And it isn't personal. It's just nature. It's not you having a lot of ill will and therefore there's something wrong with you. That thought is just another movement of the ill will, isn't it?

So what we're doing here, really exploring, taking this time to look inward—a month, two months—it's so important, not just for our own greater peace and well-being, but for everyone we come in contact with. I think James also said that. And I know, teaching the three-month course at IMS most falls, Joseph was saying in his introduction about how privileged we are to have this opportunity. And we are incredibly privileged to be able to be here for this amount of time, to be here in such a—frankly—luxurious situation. I just came out of ten weeks in Burma. Believe me, this is luxurious.

To care, to have the interest—there are many people with opportunity but without interest—and to have the peace, the safety, enough food, hot water, enough health. It doesn't mean you're perfectly healthy, but you have enough health to be here. All these factors—family support, whatever it is—incredibly privileged.

And that doesn't mean it's some esoteric mind game, something to do only because you're bored with the rest of your life. Really, of course I've spent my life with this, so I'm biased. But in my opinion, there's nothing more important we can do for the good of ourselves, for the good of the world.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with that most famous couplet in the Dhammapada, one of the teachings of the Buddha. It's really what the Dhammapada opens with: that with our mind we make the world. When we speak and act with an impure mind—and impure does mean when the consciousness, the mind, is clouded by greed, by ill will, by confusion—and we don't know it, we don't recognize it, so it colors our perception, it colors our decision making. When we speak or act in that way, suffering follows us. In the same way, with our mind we make the world, and when we speak or act with a pure mind, happiness follows us. I'm sure many of you are aware of that.

It's not just some esoteric, subtle thing. Really, look at this world. Look at this world. It's inhabited by six billion people, more or less like us inside, different external circumstances—and it's a mess in many ways. And there are beautiful things. But look.

This summer, I spent some time in Munich, and I had time one weekend to go out to Dachau, which I'd never had time to do before—one of the concentration camps during World War II. And somehow it was a very... this is going to sound strange. I want to say uplifting experience. That's not right, but it was grounding. It really brought me back, more clearly than ever, to what I understand to be of truth and value in this world. And that was just by seeing how horrible things can get. I don't want to put it all on Dachau, on Germany. Pick your place. But it's set up as a museum, and it happens to have really lovely grounds.

And in one of the buildings that remains, the museum part, they have large poster boards describing all different aspects of the camp from every perspective. They would describe something about the different countries and groups of people incarcerated there. They would have a poster describing, say, the Roma. But they would always include at least a photo of one real person and the name of that person. So it made it real. And likewise, if they were talking about the guards or the people who worked there or someone who kept the trains running—whatever the different aspects were—they would have a whole story and photos, but always a picture of some one person and a name.

When I reflected on it later, I thought that was the most brilliant thing. Because for me, watching people's reactions—of course it's very intense—but people were really present with it and really touched. It wasn't just something like, "Oh, how horrible," and move on to the next thing. And it wasn't like, "I can't stand this," and running out. It really brought people, all different kinds of people, fully there. I was watching them as they went through, and also myself. This sense of: this is the human condition in its most horrible form.

And again, it's not limited to Germany in World War II. But to see that the forces of hatred and fear and greed and denial and confusion and violence—they operate in the mind of normal people. So many people were involved on all aspects. There was no way to walk out and say a few monsters made this happen, or one group of people made this happen. Even though it's another culture and another generation, there are plenty of examples from this culture and this generation. Think about Guantánamo. We can say, "Well, I'm not involved." And maybe I'm not, particularly. But just thinking about how things happen in the minds of ordinary people, not monsters. The little decisions we make, the small choices—we don't know where any choice is going to lead.

The ignorance in terms of not knowing, which is out of our control. I'm sure in the beginning of Hitler's regime, no one could have had a clue which way it would go. And you make your decisions based on the best you can. But how much do we not know when our decisions are influenced by fear, influenced by greed, influenced by denial? "Well, I'll do the best I can for me and everyone else. I can't take care of that." Whatever it is. How do I know how I would act in such a situation? I really have no clue. I certainly know how I'd like to act, but that's a thought. That's a hope. I don't know unless I'm in that situation.

And somehow, they say it wasn't exactly uplifting, but it was like: yes, this is why I practice. This is why I spend my life sharing this—just to help people get interested enough to keep looking at our minds and our hearts. To see that freedom from fear is not going to come from the external situation. Momentarily perhaps, but we don't know what's going to change. Freedom from fear and freedom from ill will, freedom from delusion—that's available, and only available, in the peace of our own heart and mind that recognizes accurately. Because when we recognize accurately, clinging just doesn't arise. It doesn't make sense.

And when we recognize accurately, fear may arise, we may act from fear. But we know what we're doing. That makes a big difference. And sometimes as we know what we're doing, we're able to make another choice. Sometimes we're not. And we notice that we're not, and we meet that with compassion. That's our practice. But if I go into a situation with the idea, "I will never act from fear," that's completely disconnected from what's really going on.

And so seeing this—this is really the edge that we all face, all the time, in our lives.

We just don't know when we're going to find ourselves in a world-changing situation or when it's just in our own little particular circumstance.

There's a book I read years ago by a man named Khassan Baiev, a Chechen who was working in Russia as a surgeon during the 1990s when Russia and Chechnya descended into a really violent and cruel civil war. Of course, I wasn't there. I don't know who was the aggressor—reading his book, because he's Chechen, it sounds as though Russia was, and everything I've read suggests that, but I don't know. Anyway, he came back from Russia to be a surgeon in Chechnya during the war, in Krasny. The book is about how he was the only surgeon there for a few years in this horrific conflict. He was treating anyone who would come to the hospital—either side, Chechen rebels or Russian soldiers, high brass or ordinary people. And so, of course, both sides distrusted him. He was attacked by both sides. He actually ended up having to leave the country, quite damaged. He was kidnapped by Chechen rebels because he was helping Russians, was badly wounded, and had to flee to save his life. He came to Boston.

One thing he said in the book stayed with me: you're in a situation you've never been in before. He said, "I was never in a war. I never held a gun. I was never near people who had guns. You don't know how you'll behave. You don't know." His point was that he had this oath as a surgeon to help people, and that's what saved him—that he could always align himself with that oath. That sense of commitment to goodness was so strong.

So I'm hoping—although hope isn't very reliable—that the depth of all of our continuing commitment to simple awareness, our willingness to be present with our mind, with our heart, with our surroundings, moment to moment to moment, not to get something out of it but simply because this is life—only here will we open to the truth, only here is peace—that this commitment and its natural results will serve us. Magically, there seems to be a greater access to compassion, a sense of—my mind isn't working too well—I want to say intimacy, but more the sense of being able to exchange oneself for another. That's what compassion is: you can feel someone else's pain as well as your own because we're not limited by "me" and "the world out there." This is the natural effect of wisdom.

So my hope is that through our continued, ongoing, moment-to-moment presence—just in little moments, our willingness to be present, our willingness to have confidence in awareness rather than in our habits, our willingness to let this moment of life be as it is and be present with it—that strength, that faith, that understanding will show up in the choices we make, in our relationships, in the way we choose to live our lives.

Yes, we're privileged to be here, but this isn't some esoteric game that only well-to-do people can play. This is the heart of life.

I was just in Burma for a while, practicing some, and I spent all ten weeks there in different monasteries. It's such an interesting country because it's so filled with Buddhist practice—so filled. Men and women, lay and ordained, just everywhere you go. Nunneries popping up, monasteries everywhere. I'm not saying everyone in the nunnery or monastery is a being of light—they're people. But besides that, there's great generosity, incredible goodness of heart. And yet there is such—I want to say evil, but—the government is so harsh, disconnected, uncaring, selfish, cruel, oppressive. There's no way to live in that country without somehow having to accommodate that, unless you're willing to go to jail. That's just how it works. It's really such a place of paradox. So much goodness. And it's one of a few countries where Theravada Buddhism has been really held and shared and taught. It's very much alive there.

It's wonderful, and at the same time, each particular teacher has his—maybe her, but mostly his—own way of teaching. You go from one meditation center to another. I have a friend who was a monk there for about thirteen years. He was a character, but this is relatively true: he'd spend a year or two at one monastery, then decide he didn't want to be there anymore and would move to another—something foreigners can do much more easily than the Burmese. He said every time he'd go to a new one, they'd say, "Oh, you were at that one? Well, everything you learned there is wrong, because *this* is the way to do it." And it's just subtleties of technique, little differences that to someone in the bigger world would seem trivial—come on, get over it. But no, these are huge holdings, and ill will, and "I'm right and you're wrong." It's the human mind. It's everywhere. Great beauty.

And still, what creeps in is our confusion, our sense of self, our wanting, our aversion. These habits of mind are so insidious, so familiar. So it's not to hate them, but a lot of our practice is simply this: let's learn how it works. Let's get really interested in it. We don't have to stop it—just get interested in it. That already changes the equation.

Let me give you an example. Last night when James asked you about your aspiration—what's your aspiration?—I'm not going to ask you what it is, but did you think of something? And maybe you didn't, and that's okay too. I'm just using this as an example.

So say, for example, one's aspiration came up as, "I'm really here to free my mind from greed and confusion." Or you really got in touch with: "My deepest commitment in this life is to live a life of compassion." Whatever it was, I'm sure whatever your aspiration was, it was an uplifting thought. And it was a thought, right? It's a thought. It might come together with a feeling, some qualities in the consciousness.

Now, sometimes people will ask: How is having an aspiration like "I'm here on this retreat to cultivate wisdom" or "I'm here to cultivate compassion"—how is that different from wanting? How is it different from thinking, "I want to be more compassionate"? And then we say the freedom the Buddha taught is the heart and mind that's free of clinging. And if I want to be more compassionate, that's clinging. We're back in paradox land, which, of course, the practice always is.

And so this is an example—I hope this makes sense—of how when the kilesas are there, it distorts. What makes it an aspiration or craving isn't the thought itself. It's not the object of attention, that thought "I want to cultivate more compassion." That's just a thought. In itself, it's just that—a thought. It could be completely empty. "I want to cultivate compassion. I wonder what's for lunch." It could have no energy behind it.

As an aspiration, it would come together in a moment of consciousness. Consciousness is just the quality of mind, a natural quality that knows what's happening. It knows hearing or seeing or thinking, tasting, smelling, touch—the six sense doors. Consciousness is simply that knowing that this is happening. Consciousness is going on all the time without our interference. It's nothing we do intentionally.

And so in a moment of consciousness, that moment of mind consciousness arises, and along with it—you could say in it, but it's just arising and passing—comes together with different mental factors, different qualities of mind. Greed, confusion, hatred, ill will—those are mental factors. Loving-kindness is a mental factor. Wisdom is a mental factor. Sati, mindfulness, awareness, is a mental factor. Calm is a mental factor. Faith is a mental factor. You see what I mean?

So a thought comes: "Oh, I wonder what's for lunch." And there's just equanimity, no to-ing or fro-ing about it. "I want to cultivate compassion"—it could just be equanimity, no connection. But as an aspiration, it will come together with qualities of faith. It brightens the mind. There comes some energy, some interest, some willingness to do. And you can feel that.

So it's like learning to recognize what's going on in the mind, in the mind that's knowing what's happening. "Oh, I really want to cultivate compassion."

You feel there's some energy. The mind is more open, brighter. You feel encouraged. There's more willingness to do something. You can tell—you don't have to check whether this is wholesome or not wholesome, whether this is a torment or something useful. You know. You can feel that it's not just that it feels good; feeling good isn't really too reliable. But you can feel that it's giving you energy, that it's onward-leading. "Let me really look at this next moment of fear." You can feel that.

And if you can't feel it, explore. It's possible to feel.

The next moment or the next day, you're sitting and feeling very, very sluggish. Your back hurts. The sitting's just been five minutes, and you want to throw something up here at the bell to make it ring. You think, "I'm never going to make it through twenty-six more days." And then you think, "Cultivate—I want to cultivate more compassion." And look at you, cultivate more compassion! It's hopeless. How can I cultivate anything? And you go off into the whole thing: "There's no way I can cultivate compassion in this rigid, dukkha-filled, sluggish mind, all the years I've been practicing," on and on and on.

In that moment, is that functioning as aspiration? It's not really inspiring you, is it? Inspire—get bigger. This is more like, "Oh God, shoot myself. Compassion, never mind. Compassion for myself would be to get up, walk out the door, and go home. That would be compassion." No, it wouldn't be.

So it's the same thought, but completely different mental factors in the consciousness. Qualities of ill will, aversion to your physical experience. You feel lousy, you feel tired, your back's hurting. You're not really recognizing it's unpleasant—there's aversion to that. The thought comes up, "I want things to be different. I want to cultivate compassion. I'm sitting here with my back hurting." That ill will, the inertia—it gets stronger and stronger. You think, "Oh well, then this isn't really an aspiration. It's just clinging. And clinging to wanting to be compassionate when in fact I'm sitting here like a slug with my back hurting—it's just clinging. So what's the use?"

But it's not the object. It's not the thought that makes it an aspiration or makes it clinging. It's what's happening in the mind that's noticing. That's where freedom arises, and that's where suffering arises—moment to moment. And thank God it's moment to moment, because in the next moment it can be different. We're not stuck with anything.

So you're sitting there sluggish, your back hurts, and you're kind of clinging to wanting to be compassionate. "I'm filled with ill will. It's hopeless." And suddenly you go, "Wow, look at that aversion. That's really interesting. Look at how aversion functions in the mind. It's even got me hating the idea of compassion. Isn't that interesting?"

In that moment, you see how the whole thing has shifted. And the shift is not that your back stops hurting. You're not really more compassionate. You still have only five minutes—maybe five minutes and ten seconds—into the sitting. But the mind has changed from not recognizing the ill will to mindfulness. "Oh, ill will is like this. Aversion is like this." You're interested in it.

That's our path. The interest—let interest do the work. Not thinking, "What do I have to do to get to compassion?"

Just what's happening now. Really being here with what's happening now. That's *yathabhuta*. Oh, aversion has this effect in the mind.

And then, you know, it goes back to aversion. You can kind of watch the whole thing, not with self-hatred, but with fascination. Oh, this is how the mind works. This is how it gets caught in aversion. This is how it takes it all personally. And then you go off on how great you are watching it all. And then when you wake up, you're in a whole other movie, a whole other me, a whole other self. Maybe we recognize that, maybe we don't.

But tomorrow, or even today when you go to bed—I know somebody said don't analyze your sitting. That's true, because it doesn't help; it's over. But also, the practice is not just about sitting. Everything we do is just to help us get in the habit, the interest, of just watching how the mind's working. Sitting, walking, eating, doing your *yogi* job—it doesn't matter. What's going on in the mind? Notice when there's peace. Notice when there's suffering. When there's suffering, notice what qualities are there. I guarantee you there'll be some kind of craving, some kind of hatred, or some kind of delusion. Delusion, of course, is very hard to see.

But even delusion—it is hard to see, but we can start to see it. One of my teachers says something I find really interesting. He says what's happening in the mind at a particular moment in consciousness determines how we see reality, how we recognize things. So the mind, the consciousness that's colored by *kilesa*—by greed, hatred, confusion—and not recognizing it, that's seeing through *kilesa*, and it can only see concept. Concept would be: "My back is killing me, this is useless." Can only see concept. The thoughts about things.

The mind that is pure in a moment—pure meaning just free from being colored by those *kilesas*—can see things as they actually are. And there are lots of different levels of this, but as they actually are in this example would be: "Oh, there's the thought, 'I'm not able to cultivate compassion.' I recognize the pain, the unpleasant sensation in my body. I recognize the thoughts about 'this is useless' as a thought. I recognize the ill will, the aversion, as aversion." It's recognizing what's happening rather than believing the whole story that's created as a concept: "I can't do this."

Of course, there are more levels of that. So that was just a long example of how grossly and subtly greed and confusion and ill will can come in and color experience.

And if, even in that example I just gave, our mind ever so subtly goes, "Oh, that second way—when you're saying, 'Oh, this isn't really craving, it really is an aspiration, I really can't do it'—that's wrong. The first way, when the mind isn't colored, that's right"—we're already back in. We're already back in making differentiation. It should be like this and it shouldn't be like that. And as soon as we're saying "this shouldn't be," the *citta*, the consciousness, isn't pure. We can't recognize accurately. As soon as we're saying "this is better than that," we can't recognize accurately. But as soon as we recognize, "Oh, the mind is saying this is better than that"—oh, that's how it is. Fine. Fine.

So we just kind of get a respect for how subtly these habits creep in. But also, I find it really energizing and encouraging that the seeing of them is just the other side of the coin. You don't have to get rid of anything. You just kind of shift.

That Tai Chi Wu that Ajahn Sumedho always talks about—oh, thinking this is better than that feels like this. Being filled with aversion for compassion feels like this. Oh, aversion in the mind. That's all you have to see. The whole story, that whole concept, that can go. Aversion in the mind feels like this. That's all we have to see. It's really not so difficult.

What is difficult is trusting. Trusting over and over that it's that simple. Because for me, the thing that slips in the most is that deeply ingrained sense that I should be doing something. That things are a mess in the mind right now.

I bet today you had a few moments where your mind was not too collected—a little bit of so-called wandering mind. And I imagine, unless you're really a very free being, that once in a while you had a little judgment about that. Even if you say, "I know, it's just natural, the mind wanders," somewhere back there lurks the thought: "But I didn't come here for twenty-eight days with a wandering mind. I know better than this." Somewhere back there: "Okay, I came here to do open awareness, but the mind's all over the place. I can't trust this open awareness junk. I'm going back to the breath, and I'm not leaving that sucker until I can stay there for two hours without moving." It just slips in.

It's so hard to trust that the steadiness of awareness is the condition that allows wisdom to arise—not our pushing, not our trying to control, not our trying to create. It's hard to trust because, you know, it's all about me. And if I'm not trying to create, and if it's really okay to just sit here with these stupid thoughts going all over the place, falling asleep out of my chair, and then I get up and slam the door and think, "How embarrassing—and I'm a meditation teacher!" Then, you know, it's just hard to trust because it keeps coming down to somehow it's all about me.

But it's not. It's not.

And yathā bhūta, things as they have come to be in this moment, doesn't mean only really far-out things as they have come to be in this moment. It doesn't mean only great meditative insights as they have come to be in this moment. The truth reveals itself. Wisdom can arise when there's mindfulness, this presence of mind, awareness of even the silliest things, of the most mundane moments. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. People have great insights while peeing. When Sally talked about Ānanda's mind opening as he laid down to sleep—it's really because he stopped trying. And we're talking on his level, where the level of trying is so subtle. I mean, I look for it and I can't find it. But you feel the tension; you know it's there.

So we're challenged really, again and again, sometimes by what happens. A lot of unpleasant, unacceptable, difficult things arise in our practice, in our minds and bodies. Sure, that's the first noble truth. Not only on meditation retreat, but we're just more here, more present, more noticing it. Sure. And a lot of beautiful, pleasant, wonderful things arise in our minds and bodies on meditation retreats too.

But how to trust? Yathā bhūta is equally present in whatever's arising now. So to trust that enough—just the simplicity of present moment awareness, that radical acceptance, that willingness to be here with interest, not with judgment, for whatever—and have the trust that wisdom arises by itself. Our trying to create wisdom is actually the thing that gets in the way, right? Because that's craving, that's wanting.

So it's a conundrum. It really is a paradox. If you're here, you're dedicated, you're working really hard. Believe me, I know how hard it is. It goes against all our habits. In Burma, the wake-up time is three-thirty in the morning. People who know me think, "You get up at three-thirty in the morning?" But you just do it.

It's just what's happening. And then you don't eat. Lunch is at 10.30 in the morning. That's it for the day. It makes for a long afternoon, I want to tell you. And there's no dharma talk. So about 3 in the afternoon—the first two weeks, after that the mind clicks in—but those first two weeks, 3 in the afternoon, I'm walking up and down. I had this one walking spot I loved. I always would get there and I just noticed my mind, about the second week. It wasn't big suffering. I mean, it was really there, but it was just kind of subtle stuff. Just something—God, *anything*, you know. A cat goes by. Wow. Look at that cat. How fascinating. Just something to happen, please, instead of walking up and down and up and down, just being with, noticing what the mind's knowing and not doing anything. Not even trying to get concentrated, just being present.

It's long. It goes against our habits. Just okay, keep doing it. Now I'm really wanting something to happen—fine, you know. I know what it's like.

All of that, just to keep rediscovering the fact that when we can fully inhabit with interest, really in a way with love, but without resistance, and with awareness, with wakefulness, totality—this present moment—take care of our awareness. That's our job. And that's only our job. Wisdom will do its job.

Yathā bhūta—we will see. We do, moment to moment, we do recognize accurately things as they have come to be. And just for a moment recognizing that, there isn't clinging, because clinging doesn't make sense when we see how things are constantly changing, not about me, nothing to rely on. Oh, yeah, right. What's there to cling to? And that's peaceful. That brings a kind of ease.

And then the next moment—the next moment, mind you—the mind is going, "Yeah, but maybe the juice today will be that kind I like." In four hours, that little cup of juice, maybe, you know. And there's clinging again. All right, clinging is like this. Clinging is like this. Not "I shouldn't be clinging. I had a moment of freedom and now I'm clinging. Oh my God, it's all over." No. Clinging is like this.

Can we trust that much and be that simple? That's really my aspiration, my wish for all of us here on this retreat.

I think that's enough. Thank you.

CHAPTER 86

The Power of Generosity

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this talk from a February monthlong retreat, Carol Wilson illuminates generosity (dāna) as far more than a moral virtue—it is a foundational practice of awakening that directly transforms consciousness. Drawing from suttas where the Buddha gave graduated teachings, she explains how the Buddha would begin with talks on giving, then virtue (sīla), before presenting the Four Noble Truths, because the mind must be "pliable, free from hindrances, uplifted and bright" to truly receive the Dhamma.*
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> *Carol shares vivid stories from her experiences in Burma, where the mutual relationship between monastics and laypeople creates a living culture of generosity. She describes how dāna operates as a continuous flow—giving and receiving becoming inseparable—and how this practice directly counters the isolation of self-referencing. The talk includes practical guidance from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita on six aspects of practicing generosity: attending to motivation before giving, abandoning clinging to what is offered, giving face-to-face when possible, remaining present during the act, continuing awareness of volition afterward, and applying clear comprehension about what is truly helpful.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes that generosity's power lies not in what is given but in the quality of heart behind the giving. Even small acts performed with genuine openheartedness purify consciousness and cultivate the brightness of mind necessary for recognizing things as they truly are (yathābhūta). Carol concludes with the Buddha's instruction to Mahānāma on recollecting one's own generosity as a meditation practice that overcomes greed, hatred, and delusion.*

Once at a three-month retreat, deep in the retreat, it was just a group that liked to laugh, and definitely they were desperate. I came in once—I think it was in the morning—and I said, "uh," and that's as far as I got. They all cracked up.

As I'm sure you've heard, there are different ways to describe, in a nutshell, the heart of our path of awakening. One way to talk about it is that what we're really doing—not just on retreat but in our whole life—is transforming our consciousness. We talk about purifying our consciousness, transforming the habits of consciousness.

We've explored this a great deal, mostly in terms of the actual meditation practice. Whether we're doing one-pointed samatha practice, where the mind gets more and more collected and the hindrances, the kilesas, are kept at bay—that sense of collected-

ness is part of why it's so lovely, because there's also a purity in the consciousness at that time. Just seeing what it feels like not to have any hindrances is extraordinary. It's lovely just to know it's possible.

The same is true with mindfulness. The steadiness of mindfulness, that momentum that builds, is the condition that allows wisdom to arise. It's not that we create wisdom, but the momentum of mindfulness sets the conditions in consciousness that allows wisdom to arise.

What I want to talk about tonight is the fact that it's not just meditation. The Buddha, in all of his different teachings, at the heart of all of them—they work to transform the habits of our consciousness from being lost in negativity, craving, and self-referencing to wholesome qualities. In Pali, *akusala* means unwholesome, *kusala* means wholesome—the wholesome qualities of mindfulness, wisdom, energy, equanimity, calm, and all the others.

There are many different suttas where the Buddha gives a graduated teaching. I'll share one that I particularly like, though he does this often. Rather than simply saying, "Here are the Four Noble Truths, start abandoning craving now," he recognizes that one's mind needs to be in a receptive, appropriate state. When our mind is in an unwholesome state, we can't even recognize or hear the Dhamma accurately. As I mentioned the other night, when the citta is colored by the unwholesome, we can't recognize accurately.

All the different teachings of the Buddha are equally important, and they're all grounded in freeing our heart and mind from confusion, in brightening the mind in order to recognize the truth accurately. Because we're on retreat, we can get so myopic, thinking it's just about bhavana, just about meditation practice, and everything else is lesser—or that we only turn to other practices when we're hopeless in meditation. That view is far too limited. This is about our whole life.

This story comes from a time when the Buddha was at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove. At that time there was a leper named Supabuddha, a poor, miserable wretch of a person. This poor, miserable wretch saw a huge gathering—people coming to hear the Buddha teaching—and thought, "Without a doubt, someone must be distributing food over there. Let me go and get some." So he went over, sat down on the edge of the group, and saw that the Buddha was teaching. He thought, "Oh, no one's distributing food here. He's teaching the Dhamma. Well, why don't I sit and listen?"

So he sat on the edge to listen. The Buddha, with his all-seeing mind—when he turned his attention to it, he could perceive the minds and hearts of everyone—looked through the assembly and asked himself, "Who here is capable of understanding the Dhamma?" He could sense whose mind was ripe. He saw Supabuddha and recognized, "Here's a person capable of understanding."

So he gave a step-by-step talk. This appears in so many of the suttas—a step-by-step talk. He began with a talk on giving, on generosity. Then a talk on virtue, on sila, non-harming conduct. Then on the heavens. Then he described the drawbacks, the vanity, the corrupting influence in the mind of giving in to sensual passions and craving, and the rewards of renunciation.

Then, when he saw that Supabuddha's mind was ready—pliable, malleable, not stiff, free from hindrances, uplifted and bright—and this phrasing is used in most of the suttas where he gives this graduated talk—when he saw the mind and heart was free from hindrances, uplifted and bright, then he gave the Dhamma talk particular to the awakened ones: the Four Noble Truths.

This is not a throwaway line. This is really important: there are many ways to cultivate brightness and clarity in the mind so that the mind can actually open to wisdom.

The metaphor given, the simile, illustrates this beautifully. So he gave a talk on the Four Noble Truths, and just as a clean cloth free from stains would properly absorb a dye, in the same way, as Supabuddha the leper was sitting in that very seat, the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye arose within him. Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation.

That statement—when the Dhamma eye arises, when someone sees that—is said in the suttas to mean the first stage of awakening. So the mind is bright, just as a clean cloth free from stains can properly absorb a dye. In a moment when the mind is bright and clear and open and not caught in craving, it can properly absorb, recognize the Dhamma, recognize things as they are—that yathabhuta we talked about the other night.

So tonight what I want to talk about is just this first one of the graduated teaching: dana, generosity. Because it's really something at the foundation of the Buddha's teachings. Whenever he talks to lay people, he almost always starts with talking about generosity. It's something I've been learning more and more about. In the more Buddhist cultures in Asia, it's still more formally rooted in the way relationships between ordained

monks and nuns and lay people are set up. Because of that, it's more ingrained in the culture in a certain way. But of course, we're generous here too. I just want to talk about it as a practice that supports our awakening.

Not as a good thing to do, not "we should be generous, good people are generous"—I grew up that way, and there's nothing wrong with that. But generosity as a practice of awakening, as a way of setting the foundation for freeing the mind and heart from clinging—it's not about an external should. It's actually a practice that cultivates this brightness of mind and heart, a really powerful source of joy and connectedness and non-self, really. Not holding to the isolation of me. And it's fun. It's really fun.

I'm sure most of you are aware, but when the Buddha set up his Sangha, his group of monks and nuns, he was basically making it up. There were a lot of renunciates all over India at that time, more men than women, but some women. They wandered around; there were different sects. So when the Buddha set up his sangha of monks and later of nuns, he was using what existed in the culture, but he also set it up in his own way.

At the very heart of it was this: there are four types of people—ordained men, ordained women, laymen, and laywomen. He always said that the Buddha Sasana, his Buddhist teachings, to remain vibrant and alive in the world needs all four types of people. So even though often in the suttas he's talking to monks and nuns, there's never a sense that they're the only ones and the lay people can just come if they want. They depend on each other. He set up the way monks and nuns lived and the way they relate to lay people—and at the heart of it is generosity, dana, the word in Pali.

Bhikkhu Bodhi—you know Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the foremost translators into English of the Pali texts, an American monk who lived in Sri Lanka for many years and is now back in the States—he writes about the importance of generosity in the Buddha's teaching. Believe me, he knows the Buddha's teaching. He says: "Viewed as a quality, generosity has a particularly intimate connection to the entire movement of the Buddha's path. For the goal of the path is the ending of greed, hate, and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly weakens greed and hate while facilitating that flexibility of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion."

So the practice of generosity, not just in action but in intention, in mind, in heart, directly in the moment weakens greed and ill will and hatred. And it brings this flexibility, this brightness, this pliancy of mind that allows for the opening into seeing, recognizing things as they are.

When the Buddha set up his Sangha, he really made it so that monks and nuns and lay people were mutually supportive of one another. They mutually supported each other's awakening. It's pretty widely known that monks, and also nuns, would go out for alms round every morning with their bowl—a little smaller than this—and lay people give food. This still goes on in Thailand, in Burma. I don't know about Cambodia or Sri Lanka; I haven't been there. But it still goes on, and lay people go out and give what they can.

In the places I've been in Burma now, it's often only a little bit of rice. That's really all they can give, and the meditation centers cook. But there's still this sense of mutuality, and it's really important. When the monks are going out, someone goes ahead—a little boy ringing a bell, a little bell—and the people come out and stand there waiting, some nuns or lay people, men, women, just to give their little bit of rice. And you can see they're happy to do it. They don't have to do it.

The monks just walk without looking up. It's not a personal interaction—the laypeople simply give. And the Buddha set it up so that monks, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, couldn't keep food overnight. You can't store anything. It's not like you can accumulate a lot and then say, "Okay, now I don't have to deal with people." Every day they have to go out and receive their food.

So even though the Buddha talks about being a recluse, about living alone and going to the roots of trees, the monastics could never completely divorce themselves from connection with lay people. They remain dependent on them on a daily basis—for food, for medicine, for shelter, for their robes. Those are the four things that renunciates could have.

And in turn, their gift of generosity to the lay people is this: because the monks and nuns have more opportunity for the subtle meditation practices—sure, lay people could practice too, but clearly renunciates have more time and more opportunity—their dana, their generosity, is to freely share their understanding and the Dhamma whenever asked or whenever the opportunity arises. Not to be stingy with it.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi translates at the end of the Buddha describing this relationship: how monks and nuns are helpful to the householders—you teach them the Dhamma—and they are helpful to you—they provide you with the requisites that you need. "And so, monks, nuns, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

Mutual support based not in any kind of should or pressure, but based in the quality of open-hearted sharing, open-hearted generosity.

Now, generosity can become corrupted. One might think, "Well, let me give this monk this good thing, and maybe this monk's a better monk. He'll give me a good Dhamma talk, and maybe I'll get something in return." We can turn it toward selfishness. But again, in the way the sangha was set up, one of the reasons that when monks and nuns are going on alms round they don't really look at the givers, they don't say thank you, is because it's not meant to be personal. If something's offered in the alms bowl, in many of the places I've been, they go back and share it all with everybody. When you're offering something to a monk or a nun, you're offering it to the whole sangha. It's meant to take the personal getting or giving out of it.

And it really counters this false sense of separation—that fearful "I need." A monk gets good food, and the temptation might arise: "I'm not going back to the others. I got a good curry this time. I'm going to go off and hide in my hut." They don't do that. They just all come back together and share.

Even today this is very present in the culture in Thailand and in Burma. And it's this immediate, face-to-face quality that I think gives it the power—a power I hadn't experienced in the many, many examples of generosity in Western culture.

I think I first noticed it many years ago when I was a nun for a short time, maybe a year, in Thailand. At one point I was staying in a meditation center with nuns and monks up in the northern jungle region. On the nun side of the river, there were only a few kutis—maybe five or six small huts for nuns to stay in and meditate.

The way those wats work in Thailand, and it's similar in Burma, is that it all runs on dana, on generosity. People show up, whether they're monks or nuns or lay people. In Thailand they just show up. You could have a day when thirty people arrive and say, "We want to stay here." At least back then, they didn't have computer bookings. People just showed up, and you'd find a place for them. Maybe you were in a little hut by yourself, and then the next day ten women show up, and suddenly you have five women moving into a hut that you thought was small for one.

There's no charge at all. Even now today, you go to meditation centers and monasteries in Burma or Thailand, there's no charge. Sure, it's made known that the place runs on dana. It needs money for electricity, for food, for maintenance, for the workers, for everything. So it's clear that support is needed. But no one comes around and knocks on your door saying, "Hey, you've been here a month. When are you going to offer some dana?" Nothing like that.

So in Thailand, as the Westerner, the guest, I started to notice something.

So I was treated very kindly, with a lot of generosity. And after a while, when I came out of my self-involved attempts to organize how I could be comfortable there, I started to notice something remarkable. When several women showed up, not only did they not place any pressure on me in my kuti, but the first person to give up her place was the head nun—a young woman, about thirty, really dedicated to meditation, deeply committed to awakening.

When people came, it wasn't like she was the head with seniority, right? The way we think here, that would be the last person to have to move. The junior ones would have to deal with it. But she would be the one to give up her kuti or move in with someone else. And I started to notice—that's really interesting. The sign of greater practice is actually a more open, generous heart. Less holding. Maybe I read that somewhere.

It's been more in the last few years in Burma where I've really experienced a huge opening, a huge learning, an incredibly joyful one—the power of generosity. I don't even want to say it's a practice because that sounds like forcing. But the power of generosity to affect both the giver and the receiver, to where you sometimes can't tell, in terms of how one feels, the qualities in the mind of brightness and openness and non-clinging and metta—who's giving and who's receiving.

The quality of this open-hearted generosity is not about what is given or how much. It's that openness, that letting go, or not even holding to this sense of separate self—just that metta that wants to share. It's so vibrant and so contagious that after a short time in Burma—and I know I'm not the only one with this experience—and I don't mean to idealize. There's plenty of weird stuff going on. I'm not at all trying to idealize. In fact, the more I've gone over the last ten years, the more I see the distortions that come from living under such a repressive government, people who have to navigate it. No one can really escape it. All of that's true in a strange way.

And yet the power of this—it's not even a commitment to generosity, it's just a quality in the culture—is so contagious and so happiness-producing that the longer I'm there, the more it becomes a way of being. I never knew, and I never really learned it so deeply before, how much that goes towards purifying the heart and mind, the consciousness at the times it's happening, how energizing it is, how connecting it is.

The last couple of years, I think I've mentioned before, I felt really grateful, really blessed in a way, to be one of a few people who serve as representatives of many friends who've offered money in a very generous, open-hearted way but aren't able to go and actually hand either the money or the equipment to people face to face. That's part of the nature of our world—where we know so much suffering and pain and disasters going on in so many different places. Every month something happens. There's

such generosity in so many of our hearts. Okay, there's Haiti, and then there's an earthquake in Pakistan, then floods in Bangladesh, then floods in Australia, an earthquake in Chile, the cyclone in Louisiana, the cyclone in Burma. It just goes on and on.

So many people donate so much money. We send a check, we use a credit card, we look at pictures. And that's really deeply generous. But that's all we can do. We can't all go to Haiti, to Chile, to Pakistan every time there's a disaster. We just can't. So we have the generous impulse and the generous giving, and we feel—when I do that I feel some sense of happiness from it. But it doesn't have the strength, the completion, the kind of interrelatedness that I experience when there's person-to-person sharing, that contagion, because you don't get to be present with the receiving.

What I really learned in Burma is that the receiving is done with such happiness and dignity. And then as soon as there's something to receive, something wants to give back. It's just a way of being. The receiving is beautiful. The giving is beautiful. To be on only one side ever is kind of limiting. It's a cycle that keeps on flowing.

So I felt really grateful to be a representative for so many people who don't have the chance to be face to face. The six of us who do this work have a commitment, for those who are interested, to send around letters and pictures and describe the actual interactions. Whenever we've done that, people say, "Oh, it's so wonderful to hear about the actual connection. It comes alive."

That's how I personally feel generosity as a practice of awakening our mind and heart—out of torpor, out of confusion, out of self-interest, out of clinging. It brightens the mind and heart, makes it stainless, able to absorb and see reality as it is, to absorb the Dhamma. And it just so happens that along the way, wholesomeness is really pleasant. But we're not cultivating it for pleasant feeling. That's what we mean when we say don't just go after the pleasant. Not that there's anything wrong with pleasant—pleasant is nice. But when we go for pleasant feeling, that feeling is just evading, gone like that. And we want more and more feeling. That turns into craving.

But when we recognize the wholesomeness—which happens to be pleasant, bringing great joy—it's a joy that creates brightness and non-clinging open-heartedness in the mind, something that's actually onward-leading, that allows us to recognize more accurately. We were going around for a month, offering support to different nunneries, to an HIV orphanage, to some schools, rebuilding villagers' houses. You see a lot of suffering. So I'm not idealizing, saying, "Oh, isn't it nice we give this little drop in the bucket."

And the negative mind could go into, "Well, what good is this? You rebuild their house, and the next month they're going to be in just as bad shape. You might as well not even bother." That's one way to go. Or you say, "Well, you help these few people, but there's so many others. You're just going to engender greed in other people's minds, so you shouldn't do anything." You see all of that. It's not that it's hidden.

And yet there's still this sense of face-to-face generosity and receiving that opens the mind and heart beyond ourself and is really energizing. So I feel really, really grateful to be able to have that opportunity. And we noticed it was exhausting, as I think I said the other time—a month of just go, go, go. But we really started to notice how it felt purifying. We'd come back to our meditation center, really exhausted, but the mind, the heart feels cleansed a little bit.

And then when I come back here and say, "Oh, I'm just tired, I think I'll watch a movie"—I'm not saying that's bad, but I don't come out of it feeling cleansed. I come out of it feeling like, "Well, that was nice," or "That wasn't a nice movie," or whatever. But it's not the same thing. There's not this vibrant, wakeful joy that comes from wholesomeness, from purity.

I just want to give you a sense of how, in that culture, generosity is so implicit, so alive. I'll give you a couple of examples because it's so amazing.

One nunnery we visited, we've known them for a few years. The head nun, Daw Etengi, has been there about six years. Three years ago, there were about thirty or thirty-five nuns who lived there and a few buildings. Then about a year and a half ago, she thought she needed to start a school because there are many young nuns and poor children—not nuns or monks—who can't afford to go to the regular schools. They claim there's no fee, but there's all these hidden fees for books and uniforms. It maybe comes to twenty dollars a month. There are so many kids whose parents can't afford that.

So she thought, "I need to start this school." A free school, hiring teachers. This is a nun. She has no ongoing source of support, no steady income. So she started a free school for the little nuns in the area. And this year when we went back, all the little nuns within a half hour walking distance would walk up there to school through the eighth or ninth standard, about thirteen or fourteen years old. She started with 160 kids. And there are so many in the area—she just couldn't say no. Now she has 370 kids in the school.

Every square inch of her place is turned over to the school. Mostly they're under this outdoor space with just a bamboo roof, no walls. She's paying the teachers every month—not a lot, but every month. Once a week she feeds the kids, which costs about five

hundred dollars to feed them one meal. Food's actually quite expensive there. And she says when she feeds them, they eat a lot because she can tell they're really hungry. And so 370 children—she can't say no. These poor kids, absolutely free. And this is just in one little area, a suburb of Yangon. This could be replicated anywhere. And she's just doing it on faith and generosity.

So we go to visit, we see what she's doing, we offer something. Maybe it'll keep it going for a month or two. Maybe. She needs new buildings, she needs all this, but she's just totally happy and bright. She was telling us when we were visiting how she was so happy because it was her birthday soon, and on her birthday she could make a little party for all the students, give them all ice cream, make some little game. She was so happy to be able to do this. She must have told us three or four times. I mean, she's already given them the whole school.

Plus the 38 nuns who live there—they just have to basically turn over their whole space all day, every day. And then at night, they roll out where they sleep.

So that's just one example, not a really unusual example. It's the incredible generosity, the faith that it will be supported by people's generosity, and the happiness. I mean, I could imagine myself, if I was doing that, thinking, "Where am I going to get the money? I can't believe I started this—300 students!"

But she didn't have anything like that. Smiling, happy. She said, "Yeah, 370, it's a lot. So we have to have two sessions, morning and afternoon." That's it. No "I wonder where the money will come from." Just happiness to be able to offer.

And this is really, as I say, not at all unusual. I could give you many other similar examples. And it's not just among the ordained people—it's really endemic in the culture.

Another time, a couple of years ago, right after the cyclone, there was real starvation. People's houses and food sources had been destroyed. When we went, a few months later, we offered the Sayadaw where we stay—a teacher—and he wanted to offer a rice dāna to the two villages on either side of the meditation center, which means each household gets a big bag of rice. In Burma, you have to be registered. They know exactly how many households in each village, how many people in each household, who's poor and who's not. It's very organized.

So we offered this to each household, and people would come and we'd give them this huge bag of rice. The women would take this—it took two of us to lift it up—they'd plop it on their head and go walking off. Quite amazing.

The next day, some of the monks were going on their alms round. There was one Western monk, a Mexican friend of ours who had been there a few months. When he came back, he said he was so touched. On the alms round, each monastery goes the same way. The villagers know which route they'll take. The same people generally come out—it's a kind of ritual. People who can and want to come out do so; people who don't want to don't have to.

I went on that alms round this year, and I really saw what tiny little bits of rice people give. They're really poor, but they're so happy to do it. This monk said that the day after the rice dāna, there were so many more people out offering rice, because now they had a little extra they could offer. That's the first thing they did with it—they went and offered it. "Now I can give something."

The ability to give brings so much happiness. It's not about how much. And so the receiving is necessary for the giving. It has to go together.

It's so endemic in the culture that by the time one has been there a while—and I've talked to so many people, not even those staying in monasteries—it becomes a natural response. People want to give. By the time you've been there a while, it starts to seep in. You start to feel happier. At first it's like, "Oh no, I have so much—don't give me anything!" But then you start to see that's actually selfish, because we're uncomfortable. "No, no, don't give me anything. You keep it, you need it more than me."

What does that do to someone who wants to offer you a bowl of rice? "Oh no, no—you keep it." It really stops the flow. Instead of allowing that person to experience the joy, the openheartedness, the non-clinging of giving, they're told, "No, you need to hold on to it. You need to take care of yourself. Don't give anything away because you might not have enough." Feeding fear and feeding a sense of "I have more than you."

It just feeds differentiation.

So it's really a great learning and a very powerful one.

And you even see it in the little kids. One time I was walking on this little street between two meditation centers, just by myself, walking from one to the other. A little boy came up. He still had on his little school uniform. He was in a poor area, but he looked very tidy somehow. He came up to me with a little tiny jasmine flower, very formally bowed, handed me this jasmine flower, and ran off. I'd never seen him before. I never saw him since. He didn't know me from anybody. It was just such a pure act of connectedness, of generosity. I mean, I'm still happy when I think about it.

And that's another thing with generosity that I'll get to later. It's in the motivation in our mind before we do an act of generosity. It's in the doing of it. And later, the karmic result, the *vipaka* of our generous act, is that we can recollect it to cultivate wholesomeness in our heart and mind. That's really important and something we don't do that much. "Let me reflect on my generosity"—don't we think that sounds a little bit full of ourselves? But it's completely the other. Bring up the wholesomeness. Contemplate it. It brightens the heart and the mind.

In the Buddha's teaching and in the suttas, the heart of generosity, just as the heart of all action, is in the motivation—not in the actual action, certainly not in what is given. The heart of it is in the motivation.

You can see this in some stories from the time of the Buddha about Anathapindika, who was called the most generous of the Buddha's supporters. You read many suttas where he appears; he's very devoted. So many of the suttas that begin, "Thus have I heard"—that's Ananda speaking—"on one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi in Jetavana, the monastery of Anathapindika."

Anathapindika, when he first met the Buddha, was so moved by faith that he bought, at a ridiculously exorbitant price, this beautiful place in Savatthi and offered it to the Buddha and the Sangha for their monastery as a place to stay. It's said that the Buddha spent nineteen of his forty-five rain retreats in that place—he stayed there more than anywhere else. So you read about Anathapindika a lot.

What I want to highlight at the moment is how not only was he hugely generous, but what was important about it was that the seed of his generosity came from faith, from happiness, and from wanting to support the Sangha. That's really what matters in terms of generosity.

When he first met the Buddha, he was so excited. He heard there was this enlightened being, and he was so excited he couldn't sleep. He was at his brother-in-law's house. Finally he got up in the middle of the night and started walking towards where he heard the Buddha was. Then he got really scared—"I don't want to go. No, this is too intense. Oh no, I can't do it." He started to turn around and go back home. But they say some unseen being spoke to him, said, "No, no, householder, go forward. You need to go forward." Sometimes we just know something's going to be so life-changing. And even though our intuition's telling us this is for our own good and the good of all, it's scary. We pull back.

But he went, and was so much in awe when he first saw the Buddha that he just fell at his feet. Then he stammered out the first thing that came to him, which was, "Oh, how did you sleep last night?" And then he thought, "Oh, what a jerk. 'How did you sleep last night?' That's the best I can do."

But of course the Buddha said, "Having cut off all attachments, having removed care from the heart, the peaceful one indeed sleeps well, for he has attained peace of mind."

So it doesn't matter what you ask the Buddha—you're going to get a good teaching. And then he led Anathapindika step by step, speaking of giving, of virtue, exactly what I read about Supabuddha. And Anathapindika woke up.

And he was so filled with faith. He was a real faith type in wisdom that he immediately invited the Buddha and all five hundred of the Sangha to come for a meal. And he bought this grove, the Jeta grove. And then he just kept on supporting. Every day he would make a meal for five hundred monks and nuns, and they would come and he would offer this meal. Just so filled with faith.

Then the king of that area, King Pasenadi, heard of Anathapindaka's generosity and wanted to imitate him. If Anathapindaka can have five hundred monks, I can too—I'm the king. So he supplied alms for five hundred monks daily. But one day, as he was on his way to talk with the monks, he learned from his servants that the monks were taking the food he had given them away and giving it to their supporters in the city, who would then offer it back to the monks.

King Pasenadi was mystified, for the food he gave was very tasty—much higher quality food. Why were they doing this? So he asked the Buddha.

The Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, his servants distributed the food without any inner feeling, just as if they were taking orders from the king, as if they were cleaning out a barn or doing any other task. They had no feeling. In fact, some of them had no love for the monks at all but thought they were parasites. The Buddha said, "When anything is given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it, even if the meal is of the most delicious food." So the monks would go to the faithful householders and give the food, and the faithful would offer it back.

The Buddha said that Anathapindaka and Visakha, a woman who was his equal in giving, welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend would be worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in a truly generous, open spirit.

So that's really the heart of generosity—the motivation.

Again from the Buddha: "Even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or pond—just washing it, rinsing it and throwing the slops into a pond—thinking, 'May whatever animals live here feed on this,' that would be a source of great generosity, a source of merit."

It's what's going on in the heart and the mind. Which is obvious, because that's what's going to brighten and purify the heart and mind—the motivation, the quality in the mind, not just the outer actions.

Once in a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, the monk who was teaching with him, a Nepalese monk named Nyanaponika, gave a talk about practicing generosity. I had notes of six things to pay attention to that I've really liked a lot, so I'll share them.

The first is obvious. When the thought of giving comes up, give attention to the motivation, to your inner motivation. You could say, purify it before giving. I was listening to a Tibetan teacher, Kilung Rinpoche, and he was talking about how you could spend a long time just practicing giving in your mind. Imagine someone and imagine giving something to them. It can start with someone you love, like metta practice—go through people you love to people you feel ill will toward. Just begin with the idea of giving in your mind, purifying that motivation. Not "Oh, well, I guess I better give. Okay, here." Really looking and seeing, because it's about the motivation.

I've heard a Tibetan teaching, which I kind of like although I haven't done it, that if it's really hard to let go of something in a material way, you could practice giving it from one hand to the other. Really let it go and give it to this hand. That's just a way to play. Try it and see.

And in terms of giving, I'm not just talking about material things. Giving of our time, giving of our services, giving of our care. Just being willing to sit and listen to a friend talk about some problem they're having when you're in a little bit of a hurry.

So start by paying attention to the volition, to what's the quality of motivation in the heart and mind right now, and hang with it, let it purify. Of course it's not perfect. You don't have to wait until it's perfect, but at least notice.

Then, whether it's time, service, or material things—whatever you're giving—notice if there's still clinging to it, and see if you can abandon the clinging so that you're really giving. Not "I'll give it, maybe they won't want it and I'll get it back."

I notice this when I'm booking phone conversations with people and have to figure out the time. I'll book the time and then think, "Oh, maybe they won't call today." That's not generosity. I see that. What am I hoarding the time for? I don't even have something

I want to do with it. To just look at that and feel that contraction, that separation—and then connect with the person, connect with why. That open-hearted willingness to be present is lovely.

It's not so much about doing it for them; I'm doing it for me. Opening my mind, opening my heart from the clinging.

The third aspect Sayadaw U Pandita also spoke about, and this is where I really felt the power of this practice from being in Burma, is when it's possible—and it's often not possible in our culture, and not on retreat either—but when it's possible to directly give and receive face-to-face, with real presence.

I noticed this with Sayadaw U Pandita actually. One time I was on retreat and heard he wanted a particular book. Since I was on retreat, I had someone buy it and give it to him, saying it was from me. When I came out of retreat—this is how he was just so constantly teaching—he said to me when I went to pay my respects, okay, he got the book, now hand it to me face to face. And I saw how shy I was, how I felt this isn't good enough or something. Just self, selfing. And it's nothing. You just hand it. He received it. Blessed you for it. May this be a cause for your awakening.

That's something they often say in Burma. Even lay people—you hand them something and they say, may this be the cause for you to reach Nibbana in this lifetime. Can you imagine? You're sitting in a monastery, you offer something, and someone says, may you reach Nirvana in this lifetime. It's so beautiful.

Can you imagine you're in a supermarket and you let someone go ahead of you? May you reach Nirvana in this lifetime. It really sets your mind in a different way than ours. "Okay, thanks." "Yeah, right, I do only have one thing—I should go ahead of you." Really different. You see how it's contagious, how it opens us up.

In Burma, for example, when you're giving—and it's not only to monks and nuns, but we were giving a lot to nuns—it's really quite formal. If you're handing money, nuns can take money directly; monks cannot, so it would go to an attendant. But you may be offering something substantial. We'd find out that they needed toilets, and believe me, some of those nunneries needed toilets. We'd give them six or seven hundred dollars—it's not nothing to build a couple of toilets or a well. You should see the disgusting holes they're drinking water out of.

So we'd be giving money for that, and it's always formal. You get a tray, you put it on a tray. The people who are receiving and the people who are giving all hold it together. And then they always take a picture—they love pictures, always taking photos. You're holding it together, and then they chant. They'll chant a metta chant, a gratitude chant,

a blessing chant. You sit there on your knees holding it while they're chanting. It's beautiful. Even the little nunlets, like five-year-olds, they all stand there and chant the chant of blessing.

By the end, it's not just, "Oh, here's some money." You feel blessed. You are being blessed. And you're all together in this energy of faith and happiness and generosity. You think, well, who's giving what to whom here? It's just lovely.

This face-to-face dimension is something I really miss in this culture. As I said, some of it is just how things are set up—we can't do it. And here on retreat, please stay in the noble silence. Please don't all start going face-to-face, giving each other things.

But just to notice, not to shy away. That sense of receiving with dignity and beauty is really, really important. It completes the circle.

And I feel like I want to be a transmission for the people who've offered to these nunneries, just to show how it really works. Here's an example. Two people here—and I've talked to each of them, it came up in different ways—were part of a group that donated some of this money to one of the specific nunneries. And in both of them, they kind of said, "Well, what happened?"

And I could say, "We gave this money to these nuns, told them who it was from." They had a photo from last year of two of the people who were spearheading that donation. So we showed them their photo. "It's from this group of people." Because they want to know. They want to know specifically if they can. They'll put the names of the people—I have my name on a couple of toilets, I'm very proud. And you know, they want to know. They send blessings. And it was specifically for building a stone brick room instead of these bamboo buildings that fall apart every six months.

And then the next day I could tell them—the next day we were out walking on this dusty road and this truck came by. And the sister, one of the two nuns, was in the passenger seat. She stopped to say hello to us. And it was a truck filled with cement and bricks. They had gone out immediately with that dāna to buy cement and bricks to start building the room.

So when I told each of these two people separately this, they got so high. I could see. They weren't just saying it. Their faces lit up. They were so happy. It's like having that connection, that completion. It's not a completion because it's bringing happiness, and then from that happiness you want to do something for somebody else, and it just keeps on going. It's really a profound and enlivening practice. So the face-to-face is wonderful when it can happen.

Then obviously the next upanisā, uddāna paṇika said, when we're giving time, materiality, energy, whatever, be present for it. You know, it says "with the mind focused on giving." It's not like, "Oh yeah, right, I wanted to give you this thing," and then I'm going to go have some tea. And how often do I do that?

I remember some little thing I gave a friend once, and he later said, "Oh, from your casual giving"—but that particular thing has been really useful to me. He wasn't chastising me, but I felt chastised because it was true. It was a really offhand, "I don't need this, if you want it, you can have it." So different from, "Oh, can you use this? You can have it." That's not to aggrandize myself, but it's just to be present with the giving. To open to the connectedness, to the interrelatedness, is so much more powerful—in my mind, than it would have been in his.

After giving, continue to be aware of your volition. Because, you know, sometimes we regret it, right? "Ah, damn. Why did I do that?" Okay, if that comes up, it comes up, but notice it. Don't have to keep going into it. You know, don't have to shut down again. I did give it. That was a good thing. Be mindful of the volition.

And clear comprehension, awareness of the broader context—there are times when we give something that isn't really appropriate or helpful. You know, the classic example is if you give someone who's an addict, you support their habit. You know, it's maybe not the most helpful thing.

And there are the stories in the suttas about it, again with Anāthapiṇḍika. He was incredibly rich, and he had a nephew who was a real wastrel, who would just keep wasting money. So I won't read the whole story because it would take too much time, but the nephew would come and ask Anāthapiṇḍika for like three thousand talents, whatever. He would give it. The guy would go off and gamble it all away. Then come back and ask for four thousand. Anāthapiṇḍika would give five thousand. He would go off, spend it all in raucous living, gamble it all away, come back and ask for more. So Anāthapiṇḍika went through this a couple times. Then he said, "This is a warning. This is the last I'm going to give you." But of course, same thing.

The nephew came back again. So then Anathapindika said, "Well, I'm not giving you any money, but I'll give you some clothes to take care of you." Of course, the nephew just went off and sold those, then came back again. And finally, Anathapindika said, "No, I'm not giving you anything more."

The nephew went off and continued in his wastrel living. He didn't even want to beg, which was an option, and he died what the texts describe as a pitiful death. Anathapindika felt terrible and went to the Buddha, asking, "Should I have done something different?"

I can really relate to this—the question of what's the difference between real generosity of heart and codependence, where you feel "I have to do it" even though it's not really generosity. The Buddha said, "No, you shouldn't have done anything different. You did what you could, and he was one of the fortunately few people who are like a pit, a money pit, who would just take and take and take and couldn't better himself. There's nothing you could have really done."

I find this so interesting. Dana or any of the wholesome qualities—they come together with wisdom, not some idealism. It's not "give till it hurts, then give more, then give until you're destroyed." It's not that. There's clear comprehension of whether what I'm giving is actually helpful or harmful to the person or to myself.

In terms of how this can support our practice here and now, this sense of purifying and bringing wholesome qualities to mind, of changing the channel when we're caught in fear, ill will, or aversion—sometimes we say, "Why don't you try doing some metta?" when the mind seems really locked into a suffering, unwholesome place. It's the same idea. Metta is just one way, not the only way.

There's a beautiful passage from Ajahn Pasanno in the book *The Island*. He writes: "There's a naturalness to this gradual training. For example, when one is generous and delights in giving, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyous. This supports the cultivation of virtue, of non-harming, because a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. Meditation thus progresses more smoothly and the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for recognizing things as they truly are."

That's the key. Only the mind-heart that's free from clinging, even for a moment, can recognize things as they actually are—*yatha-bhuta*. All of these different practices—virtue, generosity, the Brahma-viharas—are different ways of bringing in and strengthening this clarity, brightness, openness, and freedom of heart and mind.

For our own practice, both here and in daily life, when you notice you're really locked in clinging or self-judgment or negativity or depression—anything that's all about me, me, me—try just doing some generous act, simply to see how that changes

the channel. It busts us out of, even for a moment, the self-involvement. Give something to somebody. Do something for somebody. It can be a small thing. But do those things of really clarifying the motivation and doing it wholeheartedly.

You'll notice that "I'm doing this for my own good" is part of the mixed motivation. But get in touch with what it actually means to offer this thing, this time, this service, whatever it may be. Feel the happiness, the uplifting that can bring. Don't be shy about really settling into this wholesomeness. Not "Oh yes, that's wholesome, la la la, don't want to get too caught in the pleasant." No. Settle into the wholesomeness. Really feel the difference between the wholesome mind and heart and the unwholesome. We can tell the difference. We know when we're suffering, but we can also know when we're not, when the mind and heart is bright, and what feeds that. Really, really helpful.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we can cultivate as a contemplation—and the Buddha talks about this—contemplating our own past generosity as a way of changing the channel when we're caught. There's a sutta translated by Andrew Olendzki called "Directed and Non-Directed Meditation." It describes how when one is practicing the four foundations of mindfulness, contemplating body as body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, leading away from the unhappiness that comes from wanting the things of the world—it can happen, maybe you've noticed this—a physical object arises, or a mental object arises, or bodily distress arises, or mental sluggishness arises, and the mind becomes scattered outwards.

You ever notice that? The mind goes outwards.

So the Buddha says you don't have to just be mindful of that—sometimes we can, but sometimes the mind is too scattered. And then he says: direct the mind. This is directed meditation. Direct it to some inspiring object or subject, some inspiring image. Metta is one example of that. Another example he talks about is contemplating our generosity.

There are actually six contemplations he discusses: our generosity, our virtue, the devas—though that may or may not apply to you, and this is much more commonly practiced in Buddhist countries. I don't know how much it works for some of us. But also contemplations on the qualities of a Buddha, on the Dhamma, and on the Sangha. All of these can bring real wholesome energy into the mind.

But I just want to read the passage on generosity. Here he's talking to laypeople too:

"Furthermore, this is the case where you recollect your own generosity. 'So it is a great profit for me, great gain, really wholesome for me, that living among people at home, among people who are overcome with the habit of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness. Freely generous, open-handed,

delighting in being generous, responsive to requests.' And at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting their generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, is not overcome with aversion, is not overcome with delusion. Her mind, her heart heads straight based on generosity."

This is the key: anytime you're recollecting your generosity, the mind is not overcome with greed, hatred, or delusion.

"When the mind, the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. And one who is joyful, rapture arises. And one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. And one whose body is calmed experiences ease. And one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated."

Just this sense of cause and effect—not willpower.

"So Mahanama"—this is the layperson he's addressing—"you should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children."

In other words, whatever we're doing, it doesn't have to be on a meditation retreat. We can recollect our generosity, we can practice our generosity, and it's a great gain for us—a great practice of freeing the heart and mind from clinging, and a great source of joy and happiness.

So may we all experience the happiness and freedom that the cultivation of generosity can bring into our minds and hearts.

CHAPTER 87

Exploring the Nature of Craving with Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson offers a deep exploration of taṇhā—the Pāli term for craving that the Buddha identified as the second noble truth and the origin of dukkha. She clarifies the crucial distinction between taṇhā (a thirst-like grasping quality that distorts perception) and chanda (a wholesome energy or zeal that can motivate action without suffering). Wilson explains how craving operates not just toward sense pleasures, but also toward states of being and even enlightenment itself, always promising happiness while actually creating contraction and suffering.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching about gratification, danger, and escape, Wilson emphasizes that freedom from craving doesn't require eliminating pleasant experiences or forcing renunciation. Rather, it involves turning attention toward the quality of craving itself—noticing how it feels in body and mind, how it narrows perception, and how it naturally dissolves when met with mindful awareness (satipaññā). She illustrates this with vivid examples, from wanting a cookie to hoping for an empty row on an airplane, showing how craving colors our perception of others and distorts our relationship with experience.*
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> *The talk also addresses sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view) and how the sense of self arises through moments of grasping at perceptions. Wilson concludes with the Buddha's description of how an awakened one perceives without adding anything extra—simply knowing seeing as seeing, hearing as hearing—and a poem from the Japanese nun Togetsu pointing toward complete release.*

So as we know, there are really many different ways of recognizing the truth, of understanding how things are, of our minds coming to freedom. There isn't only one way. In the suttas, in the texts, there are various ways that the Buddha describes the way we suffer, what the mind that's free from suffering is like, and how to recognize what that free mind is.

Tonight I want to talk about a very basic approach, and that's simply to explore together the experience of craving—which is really one of the most fundamental things that the Buddha spoke about, making it the second noble truth, the cause of dukkha. One of his statements was that the sublime truth has been discerned by the tathagata, meaning himself: namely, liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging. This is a very powerful, very sweeping statement—that he discovered the liberation of mind, of heart, through non-clinging.

I want to explore how non-clinging is not some state that one achieves, but is rather a moment-to-moment activity of mind, because mind itself is a moment-to-moment activity. Let me define how I'm using "mind" tonight. I'm using it to mean the moment-to-moment arising of a moment of consciousness together with the mental factors that come with it. The word used in Pali is *citta*. There's a moment of consciousness arising, and together with it are all the aggregates—perception, *vedana* (feeling tones), *sankharas*, all the other mental experiences. Every moment of consciousness includes perception, *vedana*, and all the different mental factors that make it wholesome or unwholesome. There could be mindfulness, there could be wisdom, there could be *metta*, there can be craving. There can be aversion, there can be delusion, there can be equanimity—whole ones mixed together. So when I'm saying mind, I'm really referring to *citta* and what's in it, and this is arising and changing from moment to moment—which thank goodness.

Because if it were a steady state, there would be no practice. Can you imagine if you just had the same mind state for your whole life? But that's what you're craving, isn't it? You're craving some mind state. You maybe touched one once, or you made it up—you never even had it—and you're craving it. "That's what enlightenment's going to be like, and it's going to just stay like that forever." We're so deluded.

I want to talk about craving because it's not "we" who are deluded—that's one of the effects of craving. When craving is present in the mind and we don't recognize it—which is, let's face it, a lot of the time, not all, but a lot—it colors our perception. We recognize what's happening inaccurately, we build our descriptions of ourselves and the world on that, and then we don't see the craving. We keep wanting whatever the thing is, and we just get further and further from any sense of harmony with what is, because we don't even know what is.

When the Buddha talks about discerning the heart and mind of non-clinging, he didn't say *creating* the mind of non-clinging—he said *recognizing* it. When craving and its corollary, aversion, and of course delusion (because craving doesn't arise without delusion) aren't present in a moment or in a series of moments, that's what mindfulness is helping us see. Then, when there are more steady moments of non-delusion, the potential is there as a condition for wisdom to arise. Wisdom is another mental state. And when wisdom arises, perception is accurate. When perception is accurate, when we recognize accurately, in that moment, for that moment, craving just releases—because it doesn't make any sense. It's a strategy that doesn't work.

But because we don't turn around and look at it, really recognize how it's manifesting and how it's not working and how it thinks it's working—because we don't really explore it but rather let it run the show so often—we don't see that it doesn't work. We think, "I have to somehow get rid of all this craving, and I'm so deluded and I'm so hopeless. The more I practice, the more craving I see, or aversion, just the flip side. Or delusion. I see so much more. I'm so much worse. There's no way I'll ever get rid of all this craving. It's just a mountain—ten thousand mountains of craving. It's hopeless."

But how many moments of non-craving have you had? Do they match how many moments of craving you've had?

Luckily, it doesn't work like that. It's just this close—a moment of not seeing accurately. Oh. In that moment, craving doesn't make sense.

So that's kind of the spirit I hope we can look at it in. This is really bringing wise attitude, satipañña. Ajahn Buddhadasa, the Thai monk I think I mentioned, would talk about sati, mindfulness, and pañña, wisdom. He would speak of satipañña—mindfulness-wisdom at the sense door, at the moment of perception. So there's hearing... Mindfulness and wisdom at the sense door recognizes things as they are. It recognizes sound as sound, for example.

Bringing wise attitude, this recognizing the quality in the mind in the moment that's observing—wise attitude is just interested in seeing what's happening. It's what we've been talking about the whole time. Can we bring that attitude to exploring the experience of craving, and its stronger movement into grasping or clinging when it's present, instead of hating it or missing it or loving it? Let's just see what it is, how it manifests, how it works, what's the effect in the heart, in the mind, in my actions.

And in that moment, when satipañña—mindfulness, wisdom, right attitude, a moment of mindful awareness—recognizes, "Oh, craving is like this," in that moment, craving has just become the next mental object, the next sankhara. It's not a problem. I'm just talking experientially now, not theoretically. But experientially, it's as if in those moments—"Oh, that's craving. It feels like this"—it really is an object. It's as if the awareness, the satipañña, is recognizing it, and the craving itself is not functioning then as a hindrance. It's not really coloring, and we're seeing it. So in that moment, the citta, the mind, is clear. It's pure. There might even be wisdom. "Oh, look at craving. It's like that." And it doesn't go anywhere. It's not like, "Get out the hammer!" "Craving is like that"—that's not satipañña. That's aversion, the flip side of craving, of fear. "Oh, look at craving. Oh, look at wisdom. Oh, look at hearing. Oh, look at thinking." It's simply another arising experience to bring that quality of awareness, mindfulness, interest to it when we can. And when we can't, we notice that.

Craving, when it's seen through, when it releases like that—in a moment, I'm just talking about a moment—that releasing of craving is what's referred to as renunciation. And I think it's kind of odd in our culture when we read about craving or wanting or desire. Instead of craving right now, I'm going to say desire because that makes it more confusing. No, I'm doing it on purpose, because one of the problems a lot of people have—and I've heard questions about this here—is that "desire" is a word in English that covers a lot of different mental states. The word taṇhā for craving is very specific, and I'll get to that in a minute.

But when we think of desire, so many times people think, well, desire has an almost pleasant connotation. Desire has the promise it's going to make us happy. That's why we like it. People say, "How can I live without desire? Why would I want to?" So desire has this connection with the pleasant, with getting things we like. And that has a sense of somehow being connected with happiness.

Renunciation? Not so much. See, you're laughing. Why?

What do we think of renunciation? I'm putting this out as something for you to explore—we're not into you believing stuff. The truth is, it's actually the reverse of what we assume.

Renunciation, or *nekkhamma* in Pali, doesn't mean something dry and aversive, shutting everything out of life. Renunciation doesn't mean throwing things away with aversion. Remember, in the Eightfold Path, wise intention is the second step, where the intention of greed under wisdom naturally transforms into renunciation.

I don't even like the phrase "letting go," because letting go sounds like *I'm* letting *this* go—too much me, too much pushing. Rather, it's that the wanting just stops. It dissipates because it doesn't make sense anymore. And in its place, there's actually the peace of just being as we are in the moment, the peace of simplicity.

Renunciation as an outer form can have many different manifestations. But when I'm talking about renunciation here, I'm not talking about the outer form. I'm talking about the inner intention, the wise intention when the clinging releases. The renouncing of that clinging may or may not involve renouncing a particular object—that's not really the point. The clinging dissipates, and what we're left with is peace, actually.

You can have the outer form that looks like real renunciation and be riddled with craving. Someone asked one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, about becoming a monk. He did most of his practice as a householder, and he's been a monk only about

fifteen years, which in Burma is unusual because most of the Sayadaws were monks since they were seven. They don't have much of a clue about what it's really like to live a household life. But he does—he's been through a lot of stuff.

So someone was saying he became a monk because of the renunciation and the freedom from craving, being really idealistic about it. And he just cracked up laughing. He said, "You know, it's not like that. You know how many different things you crave in a lay life? There are so many different things to crave. So you become a monk and there are only two things you can crave, but you put all that same amount of craving into those two things." And definitely I've met monks and nuns who can do that. Not all, but some.

So it's kind of reversed from our society's way of looking at it. Both misconceptions—thinking of desire as leading us to happiness, and renunciation as being the way of dried up, depressing Theravada Burmese Buddhists—exist mostly because the emphasis is on the object. Without desire, I won't get nice things or states or whatever. With renunciation, I have to live without whatever it is I think is so important.

But the whole matter of craving and freedom from it has nothing whatsoever to do with objects. Craving is a quality in the mind, a mental quality. And the suffering of it is the effect it has in the mind. We're not seeing it on the basic level of how it keeps us running in samsara, wanting this, wanting that. And on the deeper level, we're missing how it colors and distorts perception. As long as we're locked in craving—even craving enlightenment, it doesn't matter what—the craving itself hides the peace that's actually available. It's so poignant.

And it doesn't matter if you're craving pizza for lunch or you're craving that incredibly blissful state you had yesterday. If you're looking at the object and not at the quality in the mind, we're missing the whole picture.

Back to a little vocabulary. I'm using the word "craving" deliberately to correspond with the Pali word *taṇhā*, which is the word the Buddha uses in the Second Noble Truth: "This is the noble truth of the origin of dukkha—usually translated as suffering—which is this craving, this *taṇhā*, which produces renewal of being, which is bound up with delight and lust and seeks and finds pleasure now here and now there." I really like that phrasing: it seeks pleasure, it finds pleasure here and there.

There are three kinds: craving for sense pleasures, which is obvious; craving for existence or being; and craving for non-existence. Briefly, craving for existence—the main way you can see it in your experience, and this is really visible on meditation retreats—is the craving, the *taṇhā*, for a better state, a different state. I see this so much in my own practice. Sense pleasures are obvious.

Craving for a better state—we just think that's practice. We just think that's true. It should be better, or it should stay. And craving for non-existence, in the simple moment-to-moment way that Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it, would really be aversion. It's craving for something to stop existing. That knee pain, for example—would that just stop existing?

So this word *tanha*—I'm not a Pali scholar, but they say the closest translation is more like "thirst." I like that because it gives a sense of what that quality feels like in the mind and body when it's present. We can learn to recognize it. It's thirst. It's really like, "I've got to have this." As it strengthens into "I've got to have it," that's grasping. That's just the next step in the dependent origination. It's pleasant, but we don't notice it's pleasant. The habit of the mind is to lean into it. Yes, I want. This will make me happy. And then it strengthens into grasping, holding on, attachment, clinging. Those are all synonyms for the Pali word *upadana*.

So when the Buddha is talking about *tanha* as being the cause of our suffering, he's talking about this quality in the mind of thirst. We'll get to exploring that in a minute.

Oftentimes people will say, "Well, what's wrong with wanting to take care of your family? What's wrong with wanting to enjoy nature on a beautiful day?" You can go through the whole list. I'm sure you've come up with things for yourself. What's wrong with wanting that? What's wrong with desire? If there was no desire, who would ever do anything? In fact, somebody said to me once on retreat, "If I didn't have desire, what would I do without it? Just sit in my room for the rest of my life?"

First, let me say there are other qualities of mind that can give rise to intention to act other than desire and fear—such as compassion, such as wisdom, such as this next word I'm going to say, which is often translated as "desire" from the Pali: *chanda*. It's a broader, different word. *Chanda* is often translated as "desire" into English, and *tanha* is also often translated as "desire." So that's really confusing.

I looked up *chanda* in the Pali-English dictionary, which is this huge book. It has two whole pages on *chanda*. It's describing a quality of mind that's ethically neutral. It's described variously as desire to do, a kind of willingness, an energy that comes up to do

something, almost an excitement. And it's ethically neutral because depending on what other mental factors come together with it, it could be just kind of a neutral thing, or it can be wholesome, or it can be unwholesome.

Chanda can come up in a wholesome way. It's in one of the lists of the Buddha called the *iddhipadas*, which I'm not going to go into in detail, but they're the four bases of power for concentration. *Chanda* is listed as one of them, so it's very wholesome, and in that context it's often translated as "zeal"—this real arising of energy to do something. We would say, "Yeah, I really want to do it. I have a lot of energy."

But you can look and see the quality in your mind, in your heart, and we get to become familiar with when it's wholesome or not. When it's wholesome, there's not this sense of contraction. There's not this sense of narrowing. It's not like, "Yeah, I really want to do it, and if you're in my way, I'm just going to run over you." That's what craving does. Nothing else matters with craving. When it's wholesome, you see more of the big picture. There's some wisdom.

So *chanda* is this excitement, this desire to do, and it can be directed toward wholesome, helpful things in our life, in our regular day-to-day life, and we often call it desire. But it can also be unwholesome. The word for the first hindrance is actually sense desire, and the Pali term for that is *kama chanda—chanda*, this desire, this real wanting, this excitement about sense pleasures. So you see how it gets confusing.

And you see how we can't just look outward. That's how we get confused. But we can learn to keep getting interested. Just get interested in turning the attention into what's the quality in the mind, in the heart right now, in the mind that's aware. And we're doing it not taking it personally, not with judgment, just with interest to see how the mind works.

So when you're thinking about that, play with the difference. Just do a little thought experiment. Imagine you just want to take a walk. It's a beautiful day. Imagine it is chanda—this kind of, we won't even say zeal because that's so much, but just a real interest, enthusiasm, this energy to take a walk. And it's wholesome. There's the energy to take the walk. You're a little tight. It's a beautiful day. You're not frantic. You have the energy. You're going to take a walk. You're going to be present. And many people describe that actually in taking the walk, their mindfulness, their sense of presence got much more balanced. You could say, "I had the desire to take a walk." Fine. That's not unwholesome. That's not tanha. What's the suffering in that? There isn't any. Don't confuse it with tanha.

Tanha is when you're sitting here. It's five minutes into the sitting, and you're thinking, "I don't really like what's going on now. I want to take a walk. I really want to take a walk. I should have done it before, but I didn't. And now they were talking about walks. It's a beautiful day. It's going to get cold and rainy tomorrow. This is my last chance. I've got to take a walk. I don't care if it's the 9 a.m. sitting and all the teachers are here—I'm out of here." And you almost can't stop yourself. Maybe you don't stop yourself, and you're out taking that walk. And if you're not looking at the state in the mind, you're just looking at the walk, it carries this kind of seductive quality. "Oh, you'll be so happy if you take this walk." That's the promise of craving. "Just do me, do this thing, and you'll be so happy."

I remember reading this from Andrea Levine, where she was describing how the mind says, "Oh, just eat that second piece of chocolate cake. It'll make you so happy." And then you eat it, and the mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you." But do we pay any attention to the fickle, inconstant nature of the mind? No. The next time craving comes up, we just follow along.

Yeah, right. That's right. This will really make me happy. Because we're always looking out at the object.

So did you get a little sense of the difference between chanda and craving? Think about whatever your idea of enlightenment or the really great state of awareness would be. Can you get a sense—and don't tell me you haven't thought about it—can you get a sense of what craving for that could possibly feel like? Starting with tanha is actually easier.

Yes, it's subtle. But do you get a sense of how the craving can be there and we don't even notice it because we're so familiar with it? It has an energy that feels as though it's onward leading into the thing that we want, just like the chocolate cake or dinner or the walk. Yes, if I lean into it, I'll get it. Almost. I'm almost there. One more breath. If I just sit through two sittings like yesterday, it'll come.

Sometimes we even think we know we're striving. We say to ourselves, "I'm looking for striving. I'm not striving." And we come out of our sitting with our shoulders about to break, and we're looking for it but we don't see it. It's so familiar.

Now, any idea we have of what awakening would be like is going to be too limited anyway. But that same sense of having a memory or an idea of something that seems wholesome and useful—there can be a chanda, a wholesome way, a zeal, a willingness that isn't the same as the narrowing, the leaning into, the grasping of craving that's trying to make it happen.

There's a sense that this is what gives us inspiration. This is what gives us the faith to do. Saddha is often translated as confidence or a willingness to do, and that's a wholesome state. So chanda can be knowing what it's like when the mind is clear and the sense of awareness is really trusted. I know that sense of when nothing's a problem. A friend of mine calls it the place of no problem, although it's not a place. I know that feeling.

Chanda can be the willingness—yes, I can't make it happen because I know it's antithetical. Wanting to make it is exactly what prevents it, what blocks it. But chanda could be just the awareness of that possibility. Not the wanting of clinging, but something that can give me the energy to come back and be here in this moment with the fact that it's not like that right now. It's like this. And being with it like this is actually the only place that purity of mind and freedom can ever be discovered, because there is nowhere else.

So that's another delusion of craving—it's always looking to the next moment to be better. And there's nothing but here.

When you find you're looking towards the object, whether it's a sense pleasure or a state, just turn around and see. We can learn to explore for ourselves the quality in the mind. It's not personal. It's just that the nature of craving is to crave. The nature of mindfulness is to be mindful. It's not like you are personally a failure because craving keeps coming up. It's the way things work when there's not awareness.

There are three movements in the unfolding process of insight—that's the way Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it. I find it helpful to look at this framework, especially in terms of craving, not just sense pleasures but all the cravings. The Buddha was brilliant, as Winnie said the other night. Amazing. He talks about gratification, the danger, and the escape. Our process of insight can consciously explore these three areas.

What I think is so brilliant is that he includes gratification. In terms of craving and in terms of how it strengthens into grasping, I'm sure you're aware he talks about four areas where we really get involved in grasping and don't recognize it. The obvious first one is sense pleasures.

The next one is views and opinions, and this is huge. Views in Pali is *diṭṭhi*. As you know, right view or wise view, *sammā diṭṭhi*, is the first step of the Eightfold Path. Wrong view, *micchā diṭṭhi*, you find frequently in the suttas—like when Guy was reading that sutta where the Buddha was saying "you misguided man." I forget exactly what it was about, but that would have been addressing wrong view.

But attachment to any view, even right view—attachment to it leads us into delusion because of the narrowing, distorting quality that attachment brings to consciousness. Beyond views in general, there's *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality view or identity view. And the third area of grasping is attachment to rites and rituals, or thinking that if I do a certain thing in a certain way, that will bring me peace. This was prevalent in the Buddha's time when, for example, many Hindu Brahmins thought that if they bathed in a particular river, that would wash away all their previous bad actions, all their previous bad karma. That kind of rite and ritual. So none of us think anything like that, do we?

The Buddha talks about this: "Before my enlightenment, while I was still a Bodhisatta, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? Then it occurred to me: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world."

I love that, because as Guy said in his first talk, when the Buddha talked about happiness, there is happiness of sense pleasures, of being with family, even the happiness of higher states. There's gratification in all of that. Sometimes we try to jump over this and think that to let go of craving means we must be almost afraid of the pleasant. Either we love craving or we're afraid of it and we're afraid of the pleasant. But no—there's gratification, and we need to recognize that. We shouldn't pretend it's not gratification or that there's something wrong with us if we're gratified. If we get into that denial, we're just getting further and further away from seeing. We have to allow, with awareness, that there's gratification.

"That the world is impermanent, bound up with unreliability and subject to change—this is the danger in the world. And the abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world."

The world, you know—he's really talking about the six sense experiences, because that's all we can ever experience. He's not saying hate everything and get away from it. He's really saying the abandoning of the desire, the craving, the *taṇhā*, for experience. And again, when we hear this we think, "But that's like pushing everything away. That's renunciation. What would life be? Some dull, gray mass of nothing?"

That's not what it is. When things are seen accurately, when the danger is seen accurately, the craving naturally releases because it doesn't make sense anymore. And what we're left with, as I said before, is peace.

There's a quotation from Nisargadatta. He says: "Do not be afraid of freedom from desire and fear. It enables you to live a life so different from all you know, so much more alive and interesting, that truly by seeming to lose all, you gain all." It's just a different kind of happiness that the craving mind can't know.

So the danger really is not that there's gratification—that's fine. The danger is that we rely on the gratification. Of course we attach to it, we don't know it's going to change. We're all aware of that; we've talked about it a lot. Even though intellectually we know it, and intellectually we also know that even though we know it we still go ahead and grasp at stuff that we know is going to change, right? Like that mental state you had that was so pleasant earlier. Or the chocolate cake, or your relationship, or your body not hurting tonight.

The danger in the gratification is that if we're not mindful, if we're not simply aware of how the gratification functions, we really fall into it, we rely on it. In the deluded mind fed by craving, that becomes the only way we know to be happy. That's the seduction of craving, as I've said before: "Just follow me, it'll make you happy." And it distorts our perception.

Just with sense pleasures—haven't you noticed that when you really have that thirst for something, the mind's eye, the perception of it, makes it seem so much better than it ever really is? Say you have a piece of cake from three days ago stashed in your room. Already it's disgusting, right? Stashed in your room. You're craving, craving, craving. Finally you go back and eat it. Does it come up to expectations? How many fantasies have you had since you've been here about future great things that are going to happen?

They're great, aren't they? I mean, it's all going to be wonderful.

One time on retreat—I can't say I kept track of all my fantasies, that would be ridiculous—but there were a few that kept coming. And I really kept thinking, "When I go back to this situation, it's going to be like this. And it'll be so great." Or, "Oh no, no, it's going to be like *this*." And I finally realized that no matter how many fantasies I had, how many different ones, the one thing I knew was it wouldn't be like any of them. And that's true. You can never know how it's going to be. It may be better, but mostly it doesn't live up to the promise craving tells us. We just don't notice that.

The Tibetans have a great saying that craving puts feathers on the object, dresses it up, makes it look just so wonderful. You know when you have a crush on somebody—just the most fascinating person, until the crush goes away, right? "What was I thinking?

That person? No, no, no. They must have done something different. They must have really changed." Perception, recognition—completely unreliable, but we totally believe our perception. So the danger is we really believe the seduction of craving.

I was having a little discussion with a very wise friend. We were talking about craving, sort of joking around. He really likes cookies, this guy. Just a couple of cookies in the afternoon. Very restrained, very balanced, but got to have two cookies in the afternoon. So we were together joking about this, and he said, "There's no suffering in this. There's a desire. I see it. I eat my cookie. It's really good. And then the desire is gone and I'm happy. Where's the suffering in that?" And that's how it works, isn't it?

I said, "Yeah, you don't have to deal with the suffering until you can't get a cookie."

And he goes, "Oh, I can always get a cookie."

That's exactly where we're caught, whatever it is. Substitute whatever for cookie—and not just sense pleasures, but states of mind, the way our life's going to be, views and opinions, all of that, how I'm going to be a better person, whatever it is.

But we don't have to get rid of the cookie either. He doesn't have to stop eating cookies. Instead, just turn around and notice when that quality of craving is in our minds. Turn around and explore it. Not to get rid of it, but to see: what's the freedom from craving? It's not that we have to get rid of all the cookies in the world—we'd probably just crave more. What's the freedom from craving? Just turn around and say, "Oh, craving's like this." Explore it. How does it feel in the body? What's the effect in the mind? Does it actually feel like a wholesome, happy state? Does it feel like a suffering state?

Look for yourself, because it doesn't matter a damn if you believe what I say. It's only when awareness sees things as they are. Like—uh-uh. The craving. We're walking along, things are very peaceful, and up into the mind it pops: "If I go down to tea a little bit early, maybe I can get the good seat."

How relaxed is the rest of your walking? You're still just walking. "No, no, I'm renouncing. I'm renouncing the seat." You may renounce the seat, but that doesn't matter if you don't turn around and look at the craving. We can renounce the seat and walk back and forth with steam coming out of our ears from craving and not notice it.

So turn around. Craving's like this—sensations in the body, constriction in the mind. That's how it is for me. You look for you. And it's just like this. And that's okay. You can be with it. Mental state, physical expression—there's nothing but mental states and

physical phenomena, nāma and rūpa. That's all that's ever happening. It can be craving or it can be joy or it can be boredom. It really doesn't matter. Awareness is just noticing that. That's okay.

At some point, I promise, at some point, if you're just walking with it, the craving will dissolve—because everything does. I'm not saying it won't come back, but it will dissolve. Just keep walking after it dissolves. Not "Oh yes, I got rid of craving! I'm so great." That's a new one. But just keep noticing how it feels when it dissolves. It's like, "Ahh, now it's nice."

Now if we could just notice—why is it nice? Not "How can I capitalize on it?" But just, now it's nice. Because it's peaceful. Why is it peaceful? Because craving isn't present. It's the craving that narrows and constricts. As the Buddha said, craving and aversion are makers of measurement.

And I can actually feel how the mind—you know, that meditation this morning, that moving in the direction of just the vastness, the limitlessness, just the potential of not feeling anything to do with space or boundaries—did you notice how when wanting something comes in, there's fixation? That's the word the Tibetans use. Grasping. And we do. It's like contraction, expansion, contraction, expansion. Kind of like the movement of life, isn't it? But just notice that. Just notice how it feels. Notice how it functions when craving is in the mind.

And have you ever noticed when you want something, how it affects the way you perceive other people? Other things become obstacles in the way.

I've used this example before, but it's a good one. I was on a plane—I fly a lot—and we were just loading. I always sit on the aisle, and it was an overnight flight. I can never sleep on overnight flights, so I'm always really wasted when I get there, and I don't like it. So I was sitting in my seat on the aisle, and the planes are always crowded these days. People were coming and coming, and it was getting pretty close to when the doors were going to close. I suddenly noticed that I was in a row with nobody else.

I went from just sitting there, la la la, to "Oh, I'm in a row with nobody else." And the craving really came—I could lie down if no one comes. That would make such a difference. And my mind just went like that. What had been—I was a little spaced out, but relatively peaceful before—then it was tight and contracted. And every new person who started walking down the aisle... "No, keep going, keep going, keep going. Thank God." Every single person.

I couldn't relax. Each person became the enemy. Oh, they went by—okay, may you be happy. Oh, no, another potential enemy. I wish I were exaggerating.

I did, though—and this is one of the joys of practicing mindfulness—I did actually notice what I was doing, what the mind was doing, and the suffering of it. Not in the sense of "Oh, you're a bad person," but rather, "This is really suffering. This is the suffering of wanting." And so I really did start actually just noticing it, noticing my contraction, and doing metta to the people who came in a real way—not the kind of bypass where I'm pretending, but genuinely shifting, changing the channel.

And I honestly don't remember whether I got to lie down or not. Probably not, because you never do. But I like it that I don't remember, because it means I really did shift the channel in that moment.

That's a good example, I think, of a very simple experience and how craving completely changes the dynamic of how we perceive experience and how we feel. It feels lousy. We overlook that. When we get what we want, we feel great, so then we think craving is a good thing.

But the escape isn't necessarily—in fact it's got nothing to do with—getting what we want. The escape is recognizing what's happening with mindfulness and wisdom at the place where it's arising in the mind right now. And often the craving just dissolves. Even if it doesn't, there's that unhooking of it being about me. Because craving is, of course, always about me. That's really the delusion that's the source of all the suffering.

And mindfulness-wisdom of craving is like this: in that moment, I've just recognized it as another arising experience, and the suffering of it being about me is gone. The narrowing is gone. It's just what it is. In that moment, there's a moment of freedom from craving—a heart and mind of non-clinging. That's the direction of escape.

But the habits are so deep. The Buddha talks about this in that sutta—I'm sure many of you are aware of it—the teaching of the two darts, where he describes how a person is hit with a dart, like an arrow, and it hurts. That's one dart, and that's just normal. But then an unawakened person gets all upset, cries, beats their breast, laments, becomes completely distraught. That's like shooting yourself with a second dart. And that's what we're always doing—shooting ourselves with a second dart. An awakened person, they're shot with the first dart and then they just don't create anything around it.

But this part I find really interesting, as the Buddha goes on talking about the unawakened person: "Having been touched by that painful feeling, he resists and resents that painful feeling." And we do this, right? "No, this shouldn't be here." And so in a person who resists painful feeling, the underlying tendency of resistance comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit, a tendency.

And under the impact of that painful feeling, he then proceeds to look for, to enjoy, sensual happiness. Why does he do so? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

That just touches me. It's so poignant. It explains a world where when something is unpleasant, we don't know any other way out except to go get something pleasant right now. And the stronger we want it, the more we're going to be completely disregarding the effects it has on us, on others. We just think, "I've got to get that pleasant thing right now to escape this painful feeling."

So in him who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie his mind. He does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. So in him who lacks that knowledge, the underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings comes to underlie his mind. When he experiences a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, or a neutral feeling, he feels as if fettered by it, chained by it—as though we're the victims of these feelings.

I don't know, that just really speaks to me. And I feel such sadness for the habits of so many people in the world. At the same time, I feel so immensely grateful that we all have had the possibility to see that there is actually another way—that we have a path, that we have a possibility. That the way out of the suffering, the resistance to painful feelings, isn't just to mindlessly follow craving. And that craving might be for chocolate cake or for sex or for concentration or for enlightenment or for violence or for whatever.

But following the craving is just that habit.

The willingness, the ability—which comes from wisdom and faith and energy and all the factors—you all have it, you know. Tons of it. You've been here all this time. That willingness to go, "Whoa, what's happening right now?" That willingness to say maybe the mindfulness, the wisdom, the willingness to just turn around and look at what's happening in the mind now. That the way out of this confusion isn't by rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, but by cultivating, by allowing the quality of mind to become pure. Not to feed the craving, not to feed the aversion, but to actually feed the awareness, the mindfulness. And that's just by our willingness to turn around and meet what's happening. That's all. That's all we have to do—over and over and over and over.

The wisdom really grows by itself, which is so amazing. If you feel like you have to create the wisdom—no, we can't. That's more wanting. Wanting gets so subtle on this level. *Bhava tanha*, craving for states, craving for wisdom and thinking, "I'm the one

who should do it." No, we don't have to. It's actually a huge relief. You just notice what's happening, notice what's happening. The mind goes, "Oh, but if I do this..." Oh, that feels like craving. How does that feel? Just feel it. Notice it. Notice it in the body. Notice it in the mind. Notice the thoughts it sends up. Notice how you can't stand it. Notice how that passes. Notice how the whole thing passes. And then there's a moment of peace, of wakefulness. Then there's a moment of boredom. Then there's a new craving. But it's a new one. And it doesn't matter. It's just another arising experience we can meet with awareness.

So that's the escape, really. And in terms of what the Buddha talked about there—the gratification, danger, and escape in terms of the feelings, in terms of *vedana*—I just want to say a word about that. We've talked about it a lot, and a lot of you talk about it. I know you're aware of the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality. Remember, as *vedana*, as Sally talked about, it's one of the aggregates. It's a mental quality.

So when there's any sense experience—hearing, for instance—consciousness just knows hearing. The perception would be "bell." That's just the memory of what comes up. If I rang the bell, it would be "bell." But the *vedana* isn't something that the sound possesses. It's not a thing in the object. It's a felt quality in the mind. It's really an activity in the mind, almost like a subtle movement, almost of liking or disliking or neutrality. And experiencing it like that—by the time we've said or labeled "pleasant," "unpleasant," "neutral"—that's actually perception again. The perception of "that was unpleasant."

I know for myself, in the way we talk about it—"oh, that's an unpleasant sound," "this is a pleasant taste," "this is an unpleasant sensation"—it's as if it's a quality that's possessed by that object, forgetting that it's actually an activity, a very subtle activity in the mind, arising with each sense contact, with each perception. I say this because when we realize we're getting into a whole reaction based on pleasant or based on unpleasant—but let's stick with pleasant since we're talking about

tanhā. As I was saying, there's nothing wrong with the pleasant experience, but turn around and notice how much of pleasant experience that we crave—what we're really craving is that pleasant feeling.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa again says, really start to notice pleasant feeling and how—he says 95% of all the decisions you make in your life are about how to get more pleasant feeling, or are based on moving towards the pleasant feeling. And then turn around and look at that feeling, that sense in the mind itself. It's so incredibly ephemeral. It's like so nothing.

When I look at it, how can it keep creeping in that I'm basing so much—and I'm not just going on this because Buddhadasa said it—basing so much of my decisions on this? Or when I get caught in craving, the mind leaning towards... I was talking the other night about trying to practice and ever so subtly trying to just make it a little better. That's all about pleasant feeling. But when you actually get it better, don't stay in the object. Turn around and notice the pleasant feeling. It's like that. It's just gone, gone, gone, gone.

I was on this last retreat, and it was some personality thing—I don't even remember what. Feeling bad about myself, blah, blah, blah. I was just noticing the feelings in the story; I wasn't so much in the story. And then there was a shift. I said, "Oh, I feel better about myself." And then I thought, well, what's wrong with feeling better about myself? Because then came the thought, "No, you shouldn't. It's not about feeling better about yourself." So what's wrong with feeling better about myself? Nothing. It's pleasant. There's nothing wrong with feeling better about ourselves. It's not like we prove anything by being filled with self-hatred.

But then I saw the place is not to stop there. Let me explore the actual pleasant feeling of feeling better about myself. And it's like nothing. Okay, so I felt better about myself. Pleasant feeling gone. Next moment. Do I want to spend my whole life trying to rearrange my thoughts so I can feel better about myself, in pursuit of pleasant feeling? No.

I'm not saying we don't want to shift our habits of self-hatred or harming ourselves. I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying let's just not stop there. Say, okay, good enough. Keep exploring. Explore how much of pleasant feeling is running. Are we getting caught in craving? Just stop and look at what it is. Maybe you'll look at it and go, "Yeah, this is great. It's worth running my life on." Maybe you'll say, "I can't even find it. What the heck is she talking about?" But just have a look. Have a look and see.

And then see when there's just the peace of it—it can be pleasant, it can be unpleasant, it can be neutral. We all have moments like that. Again, not so much noticing the object, but notice that quality of non-reactivity, of wakeful stillness in the mind that's not to-ing and fro-ing, needing any experience to make itself okay.

Well, I just want to mention *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. I can't go through all the four kinds of grasping, but *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* is personality view. And it's basically—well, view is really when we take any perception. A perception is just a recognition, right? Like, that's a bell. I'm talking.

You look at me, you go, "that's Carol." If your perception is distorted by wanting or greed or delusion, you might look and go, "who is that?" Or you think you see me, but it's really Sally or something like that—there was just a distortion. The perception was inaccurate. This happens all the time.

Well, what we perceive—and this is from the Buddha—what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we get all confused with assumptions and comparisons, and this is what turns into papañca, all this whole story that we make up. And then from that story, we develop a view: "This is really how it is." We attach to that view, and from that view, we then act. Politics is a great example of that—I'm not going to go into politics, but we think my view is right and that one's wrong.

What I love to play with is to see when perception arises, what comes from the perception, and then when you see the perception is really wrong and what comes from that—it just shakes up the solidity. And I love that.

So I'll give you a simple example. When I was in Burma, at the monastery where I was staying, there's one place where there's a big Bodhi tree—the kind of tree the Buddha sat under—in a big well, and there's a path walking up to it. So I was walking up the path, and I saw a nun walking around with her hands like this. My first thought was that this was that gesture of respect they always do, toward Buddha statues and toward people. So it was a kind of reverence, and I thought she was probably just respectfully circumambulating the Bodhi tree. My first perception was that, and it was pleasant. I thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely? There's so much faith here."

And then my mind kept running. This turned into papañca. I thought, "But it's just a tree. I mean, it's not even the tree the Buddha sat on. It's just a tree. So she's walking around this tree—is faith like that really useful? How do I feel about that kind of faith?" And this whole thing unfolded, and it was getting unpleasant. "How do I even feel about this country, this culture?"

And I kept walking up. I got up to her. She was texting.

So first, I really loved it. I laughed. Then my mind goes, "What's a nun doing texting?" Then I went off into a whole other thing. And this is saṃsāra. This is what we're doing all the time. This is how we're creating—and I can't go into it anymore because time is running short—but that's how we're creating the sense of self, moment after moment after moment. Some perception comes up, a sensation in the knee, and the mind goes, "My knee is killing me." And from that, whichever way it goes, all of that is what's called sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view.

As Buddhadāsa said, the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all. It arises when the clinging is present; when the clinging evaporates, so does the sense of self. It arises many, many times in a day. Because we don't look, we assume a steady state. But it's coming and going all the time.

So I'll just leave you with that, to explore.

How is it different for a Buddha? He explains in his own words—I like this a lot—with perception, the way a Buddha is different is he doesn't add anything extra.

This is the Buddha speaking:

"Thus, Bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight."

There is seeing—not "me seeing that." Just seeing. That's what's happening.

"He does not conceive of an unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer."

And he goes through this with sounds, with all the sense doors, including the mind:

"He does not conceive of a cognizable thing as apart from cognition. He does not conceive of something uncognized. He does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing. He does not conceive about one who cognizes."

And then he says:

"Thus, Bhikkhus, the Tathagata is suchlike in regard to all phenomena—seen, heard, sensed, and cognized."

It's just this. Nothing else. It's so simple we can't stand it. The mind wants more.

I'll end with this lovely poem I'm sure you've heard, from the Japanese nun Tōgitsu:

Tōgitsu saw that a rising arose, abided, and fell away.
She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away.
Then she knew there was nothing more than this.
No ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held,
Nothing to lean on at all, and no one leaning.
And she opened the clenched fist in her mind
And let go
And fell into the midst of everything.

CHAPTER 88

Emptiness and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential unity of emptiness (suññatā) and compassion (karuṇā), warning against the spiritual pitfall of 'falling into emptiness' where insight into not-self (anattā) becomes disconnected from responsive engagement with life. Drawing on teachings from Nyoshul Khenpo, Nāgārjuna, the Dalai Lama, and Padmasambhava, she explains how genuine understanding of emptiness naturally expresses as compassionate action, while compassion without wisdom leads to despair or burnout.*
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> *Wilson uses the image of Green Tārā—seated in deep meditation yet with one foot ready to respond—to illustrate how equanimity and compassionate responsiveness are not opposites but complementary aspects of awakened mind. She emphasizes that in moments of pure presence, harmful intentions simply cannot arise, making ethical behavior a natural expression rather than imposed discipline. The talk explores how opening to our own suffering with acceptance becomes the doorway to genuine empathy with all beings.*
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> *Through stories of Martin Luther King Jr., Aung San Suu Kyi, civil rights leader John Lewis, and her own teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Wilson demonstrates how this integration manifests in daily life. She offers practical guidance: rather than trying to act compassionately from outside in, we cultivate understanding from within, trusting that wisdom and compassion develop together through sincere, moment-to-moment awareness practice.*

So tonight I want to talk about the unity of emptiness and compassion.

We've been talking a lot about the quality of awareness or of mind—to use Guy's way of talking about mind—as this naturally knowing nature: natural knowing, this sense of naturally awake, and also being empty of any intrinsic, lasting self-existence.

Another way of talking about that emptiness is anatta or not-self, which we've been alluding to all along in the way that we point to how mindfulness simply notices whatever arises. Whatever arises also passes and is not, as the Buddha said, fit to be considered me or mine. Or another way we've talked about it, a phrase I often use, is: awareness doesn't care.

Now those aspects, that way of talking about the nature of mind or emptiness or not-self, can sometimes not be so appealing to people. Sometimes there can be a reaction—well, what is this? If awareness doesn't care, is it just some kind of cold, gray void of

emptiness, or a sense almost of an alienating kind of experience? If awareness doesn't care, what's the point of being aware of everything to get to the point where you don't care about anything? Is that what the culmination of our Buddhist practice is about?

Of course not. But sometimes an incomplete understanding of emptiness or not-self can seem like a deep understanding. We can have deep insights into emptiness, into the no intrinsic lasting self-existence of anything, or the ephemeral nature of all the sense experiences. Nothing happening, as Guy was saying last night, but the six sense experiences over and over and over and over. After a while, it's like it doesn't really matter which one's happening. They're all just coming and going. Sayadaw U Pandita said to me once—I must have been complaining—"So what do you want, different objects to note?" Basically, it doesn't matter.

So on that level, that's an incomplete understanding of emptiness, because the third aspect of the nature of mind, the nature of knowing, is that the pure heart-mind in a moment is also, as the Tibetans say, ceaselessly responsive. In a moment of wisdom, the pure mind and heart, when confronted with the need to respond, the natural expression is either compassion if it's in the face of suffering, metta if it's just a sense of connection, mudita if it's joy, equanimity if it's something that there's nothing one can do about, or just calm, just wisdom.

But it's actually not uncommon to do what Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche called "falling into emptiness," where we can intellectually or even experientially have a deep understanding or experience of not-self, of emptiness, of the sense that awareness doesn't care, and think that's the whole picture.

I want to read this from Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a really wonderful Tibetan master. He's talking about this danger: "We hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, emptiness. We err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion and are obscured by concepts."

This is really easy. The experience of no intrinsic self-existence can so easily slide into a very subtle conceptual overlay about it. We think it's still the experience, but it's thinking about it. And that's very different.

Nagarjuna—this is Khenpo again—said: "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the ways of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

It's very subtle, but we can quite fall in. Or as Nagarjuna said in Stephen Batchelor's translation: "Buddhas say emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable." The difference between belief and our actual experience—what's so fascinating is how subtle that difference can be. This is what we would call falling into emptiness, and it's not a complete picture.

This third aspect, ceaselessly responsive, which is usually described as compassion, connection, tenderness for beings, an appropriate response—this is really the necessary counterpart. Compassion and emptiness go together. One without the other is not holistic, not a whole understanding. They have to really support one another.

To me, it's easy intellectually to understand how the experience, the understanding of emptiness, of not-self—this sense even in a moment of release from this obsessive, exhausting self-referencing of every experience—how that naturally leads to compassion. I mean, this self-referencing takes a lot of energy, doesn't it? Have you noticed how exhausting it really is? And in those moments when it's not happening, so many people say, "Oh my God, it's such a relief." There's just space to notice something else other than "what about me?" There's lots of other things to notice too.

So there's so much energy just naturally available in the mind stream, in the physical and mental experience, when it's not all bound up in this relentless, obsessive self-referencing. That energy naturally expresses in doing the obvious, whatever is appropriate for the welfare of beings, whatever being happens to be right in front of us.

Sogyal Rinpoche gives a great description of this relentless self-referencing. He talks about how in Tibet, when you're going to start to construct a house, when you lay the footprint, the foundation, they start from a center point and have a long rope or something, like a yardstick, and then from the center point measure all the way around to get the circumference of the footprint for the foundation. He said, in a way, that's the original yardstick for samsara, this original measuring point for samsara. It always starts from the sense—not the idea, but the sense—of me here now. I'm the center of it. And from this felt sense, not even an idea but this felt sense of me, everything is measured in samsara.

I'm seeing, I'm hearing, I'm seeing that person walking. This happens over there, but it's seen from this angle. You know what I mean? It just seems natural to us.

And then, on the occasional—or less occasional and more common, the more we pay attention—you start to notice the moments when it isn't all from that particular angle. Like, oh. It doesn't have to be from that. And when it's not all measured from me, me, me, me, me, huge other perceptions are available and appropriate response can natur-

ally arise. We can see the whole situation in a much clearer, more balanced way. We're still part of it, but we're not the center of everything. And all assessments aren't made by what does it mean for me.

This is just a natural effect of a moment of experience or understanding—either the not-self sense or just the natural arising and passing of phenomena, the sense of contingency. Everything arising, as I said in the first talk, that yathā-bhūta understanding of things as they have come to be in this moment, the effect of innumerable conditions and causes. We couldn't even list them all. If you want to list the causes of your sitting here now, it's endless. We'd have to go back to the Big Bang. It's endless. And then the effect keeps on going out and out too.

When we're not the center, there are so many other perceptions available. And this is what maybe you know and trust, and maybe you don't yet, and maybe you think it's not true. But my real deep faith and personal experience, as far as it goes, is that the natural result, the natural manifestation of the pure mind and heart—of the mind that's not colored by kilesa, the mind that's not seeing from the point of me—the natural response of that manifestation, that moment of pure mind, is one of compassionate attention, natural response to what needs to be done. It's not that we have to go out and create it. It's the natural effect of seeing that it really isn't all about me.

Because what does being about me create? Wanting and fear and needing to protect and needing to prove. Well, you know the whole deal. You've been sitting here looking at it for a month. You know all too well. It's just a misperception.

On the other hand, though, the ceaselessly responsive quality of compassion, this tenderness for beings including ourselves, this natural responding to ease suffering or to do whatever's appropriate—this also needs the balance of wisdom. Compassion without wisdom, without the wisdom of equanimity, without the wisdom of not-self, of the vastness, of the "mindfulness doesn't care," without the wisdom of seeing that it's not about our preferences—that's when we get lost. Either we don't have the clarity, the big enough picture to act appropriately (not that we always will anyway), or that's when we drown in the suffering. Because I'm not big enough to hold it.

We can have an idea about wanting to help, about wanting to be present with my own suffering or with others, about wanting to do good. But the idea not supported by the wisdom and the reality of how things are can't take us far enough. At some point we get lost.

Here's one way to describe this. I heard on the radio—I think I mentioned this last year—they were talking about the economic meltdown of the last couple of years and about a particular economic policy. I'm no economist, but this policy of rational self-interest. Well, we all know how well that's been working in terms of the banks and the stock market. But that was actually, apparently, a really thought-out policy.

The example that was given, and I'm assuming it's true, was of a footbridge built recently in London over the Thames. Some big footbridge, and when it was first opened with a lot of fanfare and there were hundreds of people walking on it, rather to the embarrassment of the builders, it was really shaking from all the people. Too many people were on it. And I guess it was kind of tilting to one side—not really a great thing.

So the people on it, each person acted—this was the example of rational self-interest—trying to do the best thing, but from me, where the center is me. It was tilting to one side, so people moved to the other. But they all moved to the other. And so since everybody, all four hundred people moved to the other side, the bridge just crashed over the other way.

That's like a sense of trying to do the right thing but seeing only from my perspective. There's not the wisdom, there's not the vastness to see more accurately a bigger picture.

He says, when we know that people's suffering is avoidable, our empathy for their inability to extricate themselves leads to an even more powerful compassion. But if that's not balanced with the vastness of emptiness, we really can fall into a quality of hopelessness, of despair. Can you relate to that? Sometimes it's not even thinking people's suffering is avoidable, but just the vastness of how much suffering there is in this world. When I'm trying to process all that, I can't. Really, if I think I should be able to fix it, or I should be able to be present in the midst of all of it without flinching away—it's easy to fall into despair.

So you can see how the two naturally balance, but they are two sides of the same thing. The wisdom of not-self, of emptiness, and the ceaseless responsive quality of compassion—both need each other for the vastness and the profound nature of them. Luckily, through our practice, they do grow together. I just want to talk a little bit about each of them and their balancing.

Recently, I was in Fairfax early in this retreat, and I was early for a meeting I had with somebody. So I was just hanging out in this little Tibetan store there, and they were playing the Om Mani Padme Hum chant. It was very peaceful and pleasant being in there, so I hung around longer than I normally would. In the back, they had lots of

different statues—different Taras and Buddhas and this and that. I've seen a million statues. I don't usually buy stuff like that at all. But this one green Tara just really spoke to me.

Green Tara is one of the manifestations, the expression of wisdom and compassion, of compassionate action—the green Tara woman, a Tibetan manifestation of compassion. I just loved it, but it was expensive and I didn't buy it. I went away and thought about it, and it kept coming up for a few days, so I went back and bought it. I have it now sitting in the teacher room.

I didn't really think it through very much—I just liked it. But now I've been looking at it every day, and I realize what I like about it. Well, what my mind's projecting into it, right? It's a statue. But what I like about it is that, to me, this particular statue really does manifest this union of equanimity, this serenity of emptiness, the wisdom of that, with the capacity to respond as appropriate.

If you know the iconography, the green Tara is sitting in meditation, but one foot is resting on a lotus so that when there's some compassionate action that needs to happen, she can just stand up right away and go do it. But it's not like a woman sitting there all leaning forward, "Okay, is there something I can do? Let me go help." It's completely serene—like in deep meditation, no sense at all of being pulled out or bothered by anything. A little bit the way Guy described Buddha Dasa last night: really present, but everything's just coming and going in the field. And the eyes are open, so it's also not this sense of meditation where we pull in and the world's a little bit of a bother. No separation—that's really what I get out of it. The deep compassion, the deep serenity and peace of emptiness, with the foot out to respond when it's appropriate. But not looking for trouble either. I really like that sense of balance.

This is from Padmasambhava, quoted from *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche. I'm sure you've heard this before. He's talking about how the view is the most important thing—the view of emptiness, of freedom, of not-self. However, he says, do not let your actions slip in the direction of the view. If it does, you will fall into the mistaken views of demons prattling on about how goodness is empty, evil is empty. That's the same thing about falling into emptiness.

It doesn't matter what I do. Good is empty, evil is empty, everything is empty. He says don't let your actions slip in the direction of the view. But on the other hand, don't let your view slip in the direction of action either, or you will be caught in materialism and ideology.

So does that make you crazy? Then you have to like... but if you're thinking about how to do it, forget it. It's not something we think about or figure out. "Now I'm going to hold the view, but I've got to keep my actions in check." No, that's just thinking. Trust in the sincerity of our motivation and trust in awareness. The clarity and the balance of these two arise naturally if we're just paying attention.

Padmasambhava continued, and this is the famous quotation: "My view is higher than the sky, but my attention to my actions and their effects is finer than grains of barley flour."

And that's exactly what we're cultivating—the steadiness of mindful awareness, or all the different ways we talk about it. Guy was speaking today about resting in the heart and just seeing what pulls us out when we don't need to be pulled out. That's the view of emptiness. But our attention to our actions is so present and sensitive and careful—our actions and their effects.

If it's just the view—"it doesn't matter, it's all empty, whatever I do"—you just cause suffering because you don't realize... even though you didn't treat someone well, "that's your problem." That's not the view higher than the sky. So action, respect for cause and effect, remains as fine as grains of barley flour. But as I said, the natural effect of understanding emptiness is compassion.

Just a little example, if you can relate to this. The times when you've had moments—and I know you all do, many—as Guy said, just the moment of real presence, what I would call the purity of mind, heart, nothing special. Maybe it's on one of those frosty mornings and you're just standing there looking at the frost, but not with clinging, and it just brought you into a sense of... *ahhh*. I saw people standing like that when I was walking up the hill the other morning, and I could feel it right away. Oh yes, just this.

So that sense of *just this*, but with pure presence. Not wanting anything. And in those moments, you're not thinking about yourself. You're not comparing. "Is this moment of presence, is this frost as nice as it was yesterday?" It doesn't make any sense. Just this. Or you're having tea, you're taking a step, and in those moments it doesn't matter what—you know what I mean, I can see you understand.

In those moments, can you imagine doing something harmful in that space? Could the thought even arise? Just in that moment, someone walks by and you think, "Look at that jerk"? It just doesn't arise.

Sometimes people say they're afraid of opening to this awareness that doesn't care, because then what if we don't pay attention to our actions? What if we do hurt people? This is our worry mind, not coming from actually trusting the experience in that moment.

And this again is from Padmasambhava. Someone once asked him, "Once we've realized emptiness, does it still harm us to commit negative actions?" Padmasambhava says, "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative." Absurd. You can't even imagine it. The thought doesn't arise.

That's actually the beauty of it. We don't have to make ourselves perfect. The perfection is naturally part of the pure mind. We just have to learn to trust it, to recognize it, more and more and more.

How compassion manifests in terms of speech or action or thoughts is very different for each one of us, and that's a whole different question. There's not a particular way it should manifest. But notice those moments of peace, of clarity, and the fact that nothing—it's absurd to even think anything negative. And notice how that's a different experience from a subtle kind of near enemy of it, like the near enemy of equanimity, which is, "Yeah, that's right, it's pretty, everything's empty, nothing matters, it's all coming and going"—and it's just a little bit disconnected. It's like, "I don't care." It's not so much that awareness doesn't care; it's more like *I* don't care.

I'm not here, so I don't care, and whatever happens, I'm sorry for their suffering and I'm sorry for mine. Oh well, it'll all take care of itself in the end when the world blows up. No, that's my New York mind.

But you can feel the difference. You can feel the difference. It's both subtle and worlds apart. And we can start to notice it for ourselves and really trust the purity and the natural expression of it. It's not something we're creating with our personality or that we need to create or that we can create or that we need to hold onto. We don't need to prove we're a compassionate, good person. This is natural. Our job is just the moment-to-moment awareness that allows for perception to clear enough to actually recognize things the way they are.

In terms of our mindfulness practice here, in terms of how we live our life, it's also true that compassion as an intentional response of the mind, of the heart, is developed and cultivated by the way we pay attention. By the deliberate focusing of our thoughts on, say, the compassion practice—shifting the intention of mind from ill will or cruelty to compassion.

Here's the Dalai Lama again, talking of course about bodhicitta, which is the biggest kind of compassion—the awakened or noble heart, kinship with the suffering of all beings, that sense of motivation to awaken in order to bring freedom to all beings, to benefit all beings. That basically is compassion. And when the Dalai Lama talks about how it develops, he says it develops this empathy with beings, this deep aspect of compassion, through deep insight into what suffering is.

And guess how we get that? This is still from the Dalai Lama, not me. Guess how we get that? It arises by being present with our own experience. Nowhere else.

As we open into our own experiences of suffering—he's not saying our experiences are only suffering, but when we are experiencing suffering—that willingness and the wisdom that gives us that willingness to be present with our own suffering, then compassion naturally begins to deepen. Compassion strengthens from just being present with our own suffering to a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings. So it moves from the personal to the universal.

I know from talking to people here and at other retreats that this is something quite a few of you have actually experienced. It's not really that esoteric. A sense of whatever your particular suffering could be—it could be a headache, it could be feeling grumpy, it could be that you're hungry, it could be really strong physical pain, whatever it is. Grief, sorrow.

And first we fight it. We do all the numbers of how to be mindful to make it go away. We know all of those tricks. And then when we finally say, okay, I'll really open to it—but still in the back of our mind—okay, if I open to it, it'll go away. Until finally there's no other option. There's nothing else you can do, and it isn't going away. You know even if you leave, it won't go away. So then the mind just has to let go and just touch it. Just touch that heart of grief or that physical pain or the aversion in the mind or the sorrow or the grumpiness, whatever it is.

There are times when just by really opening with complete self-abandonment really, surrender, tenderness into that particular suffering in whatever way it's manifesting—so often people find it's my story at first. My particular history, my memories, my physical pain, my worry about the future, whatever it is. But as the awareness just continues to touch, to be with it, often it just naturally moves into a sense of: oh, so many people in the world experience this.

And it really moves at that moment when you've really hit compassion, when actually the suffering is still there but the state of mind that's touching it is really that beautiful state, that brahma vihara of compassion. Where the personal, our personal

dukkha, our personal suffering becomes like a representative of the universal. And really it always is. Each of us is just a particular conglomeration, representative of the universal. So we have our stories, but grief is the grief of the world. Physical pain, the pain of the world. Loss, sorrow, sadness, grumpiness, whatever it is. There's nothing that really only I, the only person who ever suffered this.

It feels like it. We can feel so alone in our suffering sometimes. That's actually a big thing about it. Once I was in the hospital for some days, caught up in my own little story. And then after a few days I started to open. I was in a room with three other elderly women. And I just thought, oh, look at these ladies.

They're really suffering. And then I thought, how many rooms in this hospital? How many people just in this hospital? How many hospitals in this city? How many cities with how many hospitals just in this country? I mean, it just goes on and on and on. It's mind-boggling.

And so that's not to diminish one's own suffering. Rather, it's that opening into the suffering of the world. This is really what I think the Dalai Lama is talking about—where the willingness to bear witness with courage, with kindness, to be present in the midst of our own difficulties, our own suffering, becomes the avenue into empathy with beings, the avenue into this depth of compassion.

Do you hear how in that is also the sense of not-self? It's not about a little separate self. The compassionate self naturally opens into a sense of communion with beings, not separate individuals.

In terms of our practice—and I don't just mean on retreat, but since we're talking about retreat—this is why the difficult times, the times when everything isn't going the way you think it ought to be going, are so important. We say that, and I'm sure people think, "Yeah, you just say that to keep us here, to keep us going through another day. Oh yes, that's really the best time of retreat." But it's so, so important.

Whatever's arising in this moment, as I was saying before, yatha bhuta—it's the effect of innumerable causes and conditions. It's arising right now and cannot be changed. We can't go back in a time machine and change the causes so this moment is different. It's here, it's over, it's this. You could say that's the result of past actions. But how our mind and heart meets this moment of experience right now—that's present moment action. That's the seed of present moment karma.

So the most beautiful thing could be arising, the most boring thing, the most painful suffering mental state or physical experience. When, just for that moment, it's met with the clear intention of mindfulness or compassion, just compassionate acceptance—that's what's being cultivated in the moment.

Really, it's not about getting rid of or looking for trouble either. But it's also not about trying to eliminate these unpleasant experiences so there's smooth sailing, and that becomes the proof that our practice is progressing. Rather, how the heart-mind, how the moment of mind and the factors within it, meets this moment of conditions as they arise and change and vanish—that is the path.

This moment of mindful presence, when we're not judging, when we're not putting anything extra on it, has just that quality of acceptance. It may not be what you actively feel as compassion, but it's this total accepting presence that can see clearly what is. That is both the expression of wisdom and compassion and also the further cultivation, the further development of wisdom and compassion—just that ability. We can't always do it, but the willingness to surrender into this moment with clarity and without fighting. It's what we've been talking about the whole time, so I don't have to elaborate. But to recognize that this is both the manifestation of wisdom and compassion and also the further development of it.

As Ajahn Sumedho said once, years ago, the suffering of our life, our normal life, is all we need to be enlightened with. And I would say it's all we need for the development of deep compassion. We don't have to think we need to save the world. I mean, it would be nice if we could. Even the Buddha couldn't save the world. We do what we do, which is our own particular path. But how this moment is being met, what's the quality of consciousness meeting this moment—that's really the place where all the awakening and all the confusion is happening, right here.

Retreats are so important, and we don't always get a good sign saying, "Great, you met this moment with wisdom and compassion. Good, you're that much further along." Unfortunately, we often don't even know. You can be in those spaces—I've talked to people about it, and I've shared that I've been there too—where you're just in some psychological or physical suffering. It seems like it's going on and on. You recognize it, you can see your mind getting caught, you can see how it's getting caught. And it's still getting caught. You can feel that it's caught, and you're getting aversive to the fact that it's caught, and you're getting despairing that it's caught. Then you get up and go through another day, and it started out okay, but then here it is, caught again. And you think, "Why am I doing this? What is the purpose of this? This is insane." It feels like you're spiraling downward. We get so lost in the reaction to getting caught.

And you also can't chalk up every moment of mindfulness. You don't really know how many moments there's actually mindfulness and compassion meeting it, because it still feels lousy. You don't think, "Great, that was a moment of compassion with this being caught. Good, one score on the compassion side. Okay, three strokes on the getting caught side." It doesn't work like that. You're in it, you're in it, you're in it. For six weeks, you're in it.

Who knows how long? And then, like for me, sometimes I'd come out, and you don't come out and go, "Oh, now I see—I've burned through that one." You don't. But somehow later you realize... you know what? When this comes up, it's got a lot more holes in it. It's a lot more transparent. It's not catching me so much. And you can't say when that happened. But the quality of wisdom and compassion has developed so much just by that willingness to keep showing up.

We don't get self-confirmation because it's not about self-confirmation. It's about the abandoning of the need for self-confirmation. That quote from Dogen that I've already said two or three times that I love: you may not necessarily know about your own enlightenment because it's not a self-confirmation process.

This sense of how we pay attention—I think James said this from the Buddha: whatever one frequently thinks about and dwells upon will become the inclination of the mind. So when you're noticing getting caught, you're just noticing all the negative. But you're not noticing how often what the mind is dwelling upon is mindfulness, is acceptance, is really some level of compassion and wisdom—because we're so selective in our perception toward what we don't like. Notice these others. That's what Guy was saying last night too.

And so we don't need to look for huge experiences. And it is a real exercise—well, you see how hard this practice is—an exercise in moment-to-moment trust and faith, not just on retreat but in our whole life. I keep trying to point all of us to recognize these moments of intrinsic purity, of freedom, of goodness—and that compassion and love and wisdom naturally arise without our having to do it. We keep pointing to that because it really takes a great deal of faith, of confidence in the truth, in your own understanding, to keep on showing up.

You see how hard it is here, and it only gets harder in our daily life where so much stuff is bombarding us. And so to have the confidence—okay, I just have to meet this. I don't have to fix it all. But to keep showing up, and trust that the wisdom and compassion are continuing to develop. It takes a lot of confidence because life is sometimes so hard.

And in terms of our best ideas about acting in a compassionate way in the world—I would imagine, without knowing everybody, just people that are dedicating their lives to awakening, to practice, as you are here—basically, you're pretty decent people. Pretty much the people that can spend this amount of time here, you know, you like compassion. You're into love. You'd like to help people. We have a deep commitment. But as we see, the mind is not so tractable sometimes. And the world doesn't always go along with our plans. I don't know if you noticed that. The world tends to not behave—never mind the world, other people—tend to not behave in the way that we would like them to.

And so with the best of intentions to act, to really do good, to act from compassion towards ourselves, towards others—if we don't keep finding in ourselves, keep coming back to our motivation, our internal motivation, and the faith and confidence that feeds it, and the wisdom that feeds it, it's just really easy to get sidetracked.

So basically what I'm saying is that compassion, supported by wisdom, really needs to come from the inside out. It's a matter of our deepest motivation and intention arising from wisdom, rather than trying to figure out how to act what we think should be the compassionate way to act and then trying to do it. We have to work first at really cultivating, really seeing how compassion comes from our understanding, from our deep inner intentions.

We see in the world all the time where activists or people who are really trying to do good end up getting really bitter, or there's so much arguing about different views—even though both views come from people that want to help. But so much attachment to views, and the mental states that can get fed by that, are ones of anger and hatred and really fighting with each other. It can really get out there. You know, when people who are anti-abortion—so they're pro-life, right? Everyone else is anti-life, but they're pro-life—and then people who are pro-life kill doctors who perform abortions. It's like, you know, it's crazy.

We can sit here and say it's crazy, but that way of "I really want to help" and getting so fastened onto the view and missing the fact that our intention has changed, that it's not really compassion—in the moment, it's actually anger. And this is where our willingness to be present with our own suffering without blame, but with this level of honesty, of integrity with our experience—this is what the practice requires. This is what all of you are doing all the time. We wish it were otherwise, but actually it's like this. This is how I'm really feeling. That is wisdom.

And so it takes this real commitment—a commitment to honesty and compassion, and purifying our own heart and mind and intentions.

Let me read a couple of examples that really inspire me. One is Martin Luther King, who says it so clearly: "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit."

You not only refuse to shoot a man, you refuse to hate him. That's the level of real compassion, of real clarity of intention.

Or Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who said she's surprised that people think she's so extraordinary, because she says, "I'm just very simple. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it. The motivation is its own reward."

That's kind of like the Green Tara movement. You act from the clearest motivation you can, knowing that we cannot control results. We can't control how other people respond, even when we act with the clearest intention and motivation. We may not see the whole picture. And still, how do we stay open and connected? It has to come from our own understanding, our own wisdom—both of emptiness and uncontrollability—and the importance of compassion as a sense of connectedness with beings.

We can't just do it as an idea. This, again, really inspires me. It's coming from the autobiography of John Lewis, who was a congressman from Georgia for twenty-something years, representing Atlanta. But back in the early sixties, he was a student in Nashville and one of the original students who started the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They were doing the Freedom Rides and were really committed to nonviolent action for integration. They were taught by a man named Jim Lawson, who had studied Gandhian principles of nonviolence. Very, very courageous people.

This is from his autobiography, and he's talking about what nonviolence really means to him:

"One of the most fundamental principles of the Gandhian notion of satyagraha—nonviolent action—satyagraha really means 'truth force.' And that's really what he's talking about: that it is not just a technique of achieving specific goals, it's not just a tool to achieve unity and freedom in the world around us. True satyagraha, as Gandhi taught it, is about a fundamental shift inside our own souls. It's rooted in the achievement of inner unity, of inner freedom, of inner certainty. It's a place we find within ourselves, a calm, sure place. And once found, that place is not swayed or disturbed by the thousands of details of the world around us that bombard us every day."

Doesn't that sound just like how Guy was talking about Ajahn Buddhadasa last night?

But then he's not just talking theoretically, because as I said, he was one of the freedom riders, he was beaten up often, he was really on the front lines for years of this struggle. And as he goes on, he says:

"This is a difficult concept to understand. It's even more difficult to internalize. But a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering has everything to do with the way of nonviolence. We're talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who we might call our enemy. This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark in anyone. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence."

That level of understanding—it can't be an idea. It's really a transformation on a deep, deep level of our understanding of ourselves and the world. He's saying an ability to see deeper into a person. So it's not uniquely Buddhist, obviously. He's deeply Christian. But the truth doesn't have a label on it.

And clearly this is not an easy thing. So to come back to what I was saying earlier: we don't need to look for huge experiences to test ourselves. Moment after moment, the experiences of our life—this is where we really look. Rather than trying to be compassionate from the outside in, we start inside and let our understanding reflect in our actions.

And it can be really very simple. As the Dalai Lama said, to trust in the sincerity of one's pure motivation. The world is complex, and we don't always have all the information, and we can't control results. Can we still stay open with ourselves, with other beings, when it didn't go the way we think it should? Can we not get into blaming ourselves?

An example that comes to my mind: if you've ever been the health care proxy for someone who's aging and ill with a little dementia—which I was with my siblings, for both my parents—you have to make decisions. Even if you've talked about it with them ahead of time and you think you know all their wishes, the situation is always different, more complicated. You can't possibly go through every conceivable alternative while they still can make the decision. And then you always have to make a decision that you

didn't know what it was going to be. And it always has to be in a hurry. And you have as much information as you have, but not all of it. What would they want? What would be the least suffering decision?

And you make the one that you think is most in line with their wishes, but you can't know—even doctors can't know all the medical ramifications of what's going to come from that decision.

So often we would make a decision. And the siblings have to agree—that's another thing. But we'd make the decision, and that wasn't too bad in my case; we would usually agree. And then there'd be some other medical thing that would happen, and the decision that seemed to be the most compassionate, the one that would cause the least suffering, would turn into something that added two weeks of a different kind of really seemingly unbearable suffering—suffering that wouldn't have happened if you'd made a different decision.

How do you stay present and open with compassion for yourself, with compassion for them, with compassion for the doctors, and awake in that? We can't control circumstances. It's not about getting the result we want. It's about the sincerity of our motivations. Our wisdom—the wisdom of emptiness, the wisdom of the conditionality of things—is what gives us that vastness and strength.

If it's all about me doing the kind thing, making the right decision, making it all good for somebody else, that's just not going to last very long. It's going to crash and burn as soon as things don't go right, as soon as I'm in a grumpy mood when I should be doing the compassionate thing. But when it's bolstered, supported by the understanding of not-self and the vastness of emptiness and the fact that everything's just coming and going—conditions coming together—and my decision is part of the conditions but not all of them, we can stay open. We can stay present, or more present. We show up again when we go away.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw Tejaniya—a couple of years ago, he's a character. If you met him, you wouldn't think, "Oh, what a wonderful, compassionate, loving being," the way you might with some Tibetan teachers. Tejaniya is great, but he's not like that. He's like a character. That's why I like him.

A couple of years ago, he was supposed to come to the States and Europe and do some retreats, and he canceled everything. It was because of some really weird political stuff going on in his monastery. Not just in Burma—the country has horrible politics, and it reflects sometimes in what goes on in monasteries, just so you don't get too idealistic about what can happen there.

I don't want to go into the whole thing, but basically, another abbot—Tejaniya is the main teacher, and his teacher, Shwe Oo Min, who is revered in Burma, had appointed him to be the teacher. But he wasn't the abbot. The abbot is the head monk, kind of the organizational person. He's usually the most senior monk. It's rare that the main teacher would not be the abbot.

So of course, over years, there came to be some friction. The abbot basically wanted more power, more recognition, and he started getting really weird and doing strange things—trying to get control of the money that the lay people organized, telling yogis they couldn't come, making them leave, not letting them see Tejaniya. It was just really bizarre and felt awful.

I wasn't staying there; I was staying somewhere else, but I'd go chat with Tejaniya and he'd tell us what was going on. As it got weirder and weirder, some of Tejaniya's supporters bought land nearby for him to start another place. I said, "Well, why don't you just go there?"

He said, "Shwe Oo Min, who he reveres—this is his place, and he wants me here. I'm not just going to cede it. I'm not going to abandon it as long as I can be here."

But he was hardly doing any teaching. He was just staying in his house. And the other abbot was making things really uncomfortable and negative—bad-mouthing, all kinds of bad stuff going on. The other abbot was also talking to the lay group that oversees the monastery and the senior monks, saying all this bad stuff about Tejaniya.

I said, "Why don't you go back and tell them this other stuff that's going on?"

He said, "No, I don't want to add more akusala to the situation." Akusala means unwholesome. He was just watching his mind. He said, "I'm not going to go with an unwholesome mind and bad-mouth people. I really trust that whatever needs to happen will happen."

The other thing that was interesting is he just loves watching his mind. He said, "On the other hand, it's really interesting. This is like an exam for my mind. How does my mind deal with this? With all this negativity, with all this stuff being taken away—I'm just really fascinated to see how it goes, how my mind deals."

He really couldn't leave, because if he left, the other guy would take it over. So, long story short, after some months when it was really getting bad, some senior overseers of the whole monastic system—monks up in Mandalay—came down, checked out the whole scene, and they had the power to decide: this guy or this guy.

And so just going around talking to everyone, I mean, it was obvious. So the other guy's gone, Tejani is in charge, and now he's the abbot and the whole place is completely different. But I was really impressed by that, you know—the deep motivation: "I'm not going to add more akusala to the situation." Because all he had to do was just say the truth. But going looking for people to put the guy down? That's not the same as passive indifference.

Because when the time came and the monks came to check out what was going on, he told the truth. He wasn't just giving up. It wasn't like, "Okay, never mind, I'll leave." He was staying there, but just not adding more akusala. I was quite impressed by that.

And so that quality of commitment—in whatever way it shows up in our own life, it can just be little things. It doesn't have to be an amazing, everyone's-so-impressed-with-the-compassionate-work-that-we're-doing kind of thing.

Sylvia tells a story that I really like, about herself. Some years ago, she was at a luncheon where they were all sitting at different little tables, and she was at a table with some people she didn't know. And they were just doing kind of gossip and putting down—you know, just criticizing everything and putting down other people and whatever. She's sitting there feeling uncomfortable, thinking, "What should I do? Should I join in, to kind of be part of things?" That didn't feel right. "Should I give a little rap on wise speech?" That didn't really feel like it would go over too well.

So then she did—and this is what I love, it's so simple—she just started talking, and as you know her, she just happens to be a very positive person anyway. She just started saying true but wholesome things. Like, "Oh, this chicken salad's really quite tasty, isn't it?" You know, little simple stuff. But wholesome. Wholesome and true. And she said in not that long a time, it really changed the tenor of the conversation.

I've tried that sometimes when I remember. And it's really true, because basically goodness feels better. We appreciate it more. We don't even realize we're falling into negativity. That's an act of wisdom and compassion. It doesn't have to be an amazing thing. So we just show up however we show up. We don't know how it's going to turn out.

It may turn out that our whole life changes from doing the obvious. One teacher calls it just doing the obvious. I have a friend who, after Katrina, didn't have a job—he was between jobs. He thought, "Well, I'll just go volunteer for Habitat for Humanity for a few weeks." How long ago was that? Five years. He's still there. Habitat for Humanity hired him. He's living in New Orleans, working really hard. He doesn't like New Orleans

—he's a real Boston kind of a guy. He's not a party guy, and this is a party city. He goes, "I'm in AA. I don't want to be partying." But he's down there just serving, and really happy to be doing it.

We never know. We never know. So we just do the obvious. Take that little step off the lotus when there's something that presents itself to do. And when there's not, just really resting at ease in whatever arises, with wisdom and compassion.

So I'll just end with this. From Master Sheng Yen, who was a wonderful Chan master—he just died, was that last year or the year before? He was talking about how the sense of no-self, the understanding of no-self, transcends subject and object. But one clearly knows how to respond or behave—doing the obvious. And this is his way of saying it: something arises. These are his four steps.

Face it. Accept it. Handle it. Put it down. I love that. Face it, accept it, handle it, put it down. It's over.

At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness, or open space.

So let's just sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 89

A Wise Person is Known by Her Actions

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson presents sīla (ethical conduct) not as a prerequisite for 'real' meditation practice, but as a profound path of awakening in itself. Drawing from the Buddha's advice to his son Rāhula, she outlines the practice of reflecting on our actions before, during, and after—examining whether they lead to affliction for ourselves or others. This careful attention to intention (cetanā) and motivation becomes identical to the mindfulness we cultivate on the cushion.*
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> *Wilson explores the Buddha's teaching that "cetanā, intention, I tell you, is kamma," explaining how the seed of wholesome or unwholesome action lies in the mental qualities present at the moment of intention. She discusses the four agati (wrong courses of action) from the Vinaya—prejudice caused by desire, hatred, delusion, and fear—and how these color our choices when we're not fully aware. Through personal examples, she illustrates how mindfulness naturally reveals the suffering inherent in unskillful states like anger, leading to their natural subsiding without forceful suppression.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that non-harming includes oneself, and that even refraining from unwholesome action is itself wholesome. Wilson reads from the Cetanā Sutta, showing how virtue naturally leads through joy, rapture, serenity, and concentration to liberating insight —"no act of will" required, simply "the nature of things." She concludes with the Buddha's instruction to recollect one's sīla as a way to brighten the mind, reminding practitioners that this reflection itself frees the mind from greed, aversion, and delusion.*

A few talks ago, when I was talking about generosity, I began by describing an incident with the Buddha when a man with leprosy was hanging around the edge of his teachings. The Buddha saw he was the one person whose mind could hear the Dhamma, and he gave graduated teachings—which he gives in many different places—to brighten the mind, to make it more purified, malleable, and receptive. The first of those teachings was generosity. Tonight I want to talk about the second of those teachings: virtue, or *sīla*, non-harming conduct.

Of course, we've talked about this all along, but I want to point to it again. When we have a habit of acting, speaking, and even thinking in ways that don't bring harm to ourselves or others, that brings us some kind of happiness. Probably we could all agree on that—it's not rocket science. But what I want to talk about is the way we explore our actions, really understanding, really turning our attention to working with *sīla*, which

is a whole lifelong process. Instead of just going out and blaming ourselves because we did something stupid or harmful, what I want to emphasize is how the practice of attention to our motivations and our actions *is* the practice of wakefulness. It's the practice of mindfulness and wisdom. Just as the practice of generosity is also a practice of awakening, of non-clinging.

Sīla is not an isolated or lesser practice. Often on retreats we take the precepts and talk about how virtue and non-harming conduct are necessary as a base—a basis of non-remorse so we can get on to the "real stuff" and have some good meditative states and make progress in our practice. But I'd like to put forward that if we would just be interested, really committed to exploring our actions and speech and why we do what we do and what the effect is, wisdom would arise naturally of itself. This practice of itself is a practice of purifying the heart and mind. And purifying the heart and mind is really the abandoning of *kilesa*, which is what allows wisdom and awakening to arise in any moment. Working with *sīla* is a wonderful practice. It's not separate from our awakening, not separate from our life, not separate from how we act.

There are many different suttas that I really like to refer to. In one, just the first line, the Buddha says: "Monks, a fool is characterized by his or her actions. A wise person is characterized by his or her actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's discernment shines. Through the activities of one's life that one's wisdom shines."

I think that's so beautiful. We can really start to trust and value for ourselves that our natural wisdom, and the wisdom that develops naturally through our willingness to be mindful of our actions, will naturally manifest in how we act in the world. This is so important. I'm not talking about it in some grandiose way—I'm talking moment to moment. Our thoughts, our speech, our actions as an avenue of awakening. As the Buddha said, this is really how our wisdom shows up: how we act. It's not a little thing. The training in this is the training of awakening our mind.

Let me clarify what we've spoken of before in terms of action. "Action" is the translation of the Pali word *kamma*, the Sanskrit word *karma*. *Kamma* just means action. And the Buddha said that *cetanā*—the word in Pali that we translate as "intention"—is central to understanding this.

When we talk about intention, as Sally did last night so beautifully, really movingly, about our wider intention, our aspiration, our purpose in life—intention is one of those words in English that can apply to a range of mental experience, like love or desire. The broader aspiration, the purpose, as the second step of the Eightfold Path—that is, in

Pali, *sammā-saṅkappa*. It's not *sammā-cetanā*. *Cetanā* is a very specific Pali word also translated as intention. It refers to the mental factor of intention, or sometimes motivation.

When I'm saying intention tonight, I mean *cetanā*. *Cetanā* is that moment, a movement in the mind, that gathering of mental energy, the collecting of mental energy that leads to speech or action. When we talked about noticing intention as an instruction in the retreat, we mentioned that maybe there's a little intention before you move your arm, before you open your eye—just a little "about-to" movement, as Joseph likes to call it. That's the mental action we're calling intention, *cetanā*. In terms of how the Buddha described it, it arises as the immediate cause of every action of body, speech, or mind. Are we going to see it all the time? No way. Don't even try. But it's just part of the cause-and-effect process. Ethically neutral, of course—just this little movement. But as it arises in a moment of consciousness, a moment of mind (*citta*), it arises together with other mental factors, just as we've talked about with other things.

When the Buddha talks about what's skillful or unskillful *kamma*, first he says—and this is from the Buddha—"*Cetanā*, intention, I tell you, is *kamma*. Intending, one does *kamma* by way of body, speech, and intellect."

This is what's so brilliant, so workable for us about the Buddha's teaching: he's saying the seed of action, when he's talking about *kamma*, about skillful or unskillful—where he's looking for the heart of the action is in this moment of intention. What makes it skillful or unskillful, wholesome or unwholesome, is the qualities, the mental qualities arising along with it.

We cannot tell from looking at an action what the intention is of someone else, although we think we really know. Actually, we know we don't even know what our own intentions are half the time, never mind somebody else. But the seed of it being in the intention means the same act from the outside could arise from very different intentions.

A simple example: if you have some supportive feedback you want to give a friend, there could be so many intentions behind that. It could really be out of love for this person—they're doing something you can see is unwholesome, unskillful, and you know they don't really want to be doing it, and it's causing unskillful ripples, hurting people's feelings. I had this experience recently with a friend. I really thought about it for three weeks before I told her, a friend I was with in Burma for a while. I was very aware of my intention before speaking—speaking's a tough one. I really waited. I got in touch with my *mettā* and my caring for her and the sense of honesty. I picked the right time, we were both settled, and I communicated in what I thought was a really good

way. She heard it well and was appreciative. I thought, that's a wholesome speech and a wholesome reception. I really did what the Buddha describes: reflect on the intention, the motivation for speaking.

But that's maybe one in a million. It's so easy to fool ourselves and say, "I want to give you this feedback for your own good," but it's really because they're bugging us and we want them to stop. So there's aversion, or a sense of "you'd be so much better off if you'd listen to me"—all those kinds of things. It could be straight-out hostility, couched as "let me tell you this for your own good," and you can feel the hostility coming at you. Someone comes in and says, "I want to give you some feedback. Can I give you some feedback?" No, no.

All of it could be the same words. Another way is you can really get in touch with your intention—as far as you can tell, it's really a *mettā*-caring intention—but you don't look at the bigger picture. You don't choose an appropriate time. You go in and say, "I've really got to tell you this right now." There's this sense of urgency, and you don't notice that the person is really stressed out, has had a horrible day, is at the end of their tether, can't take another thing. And you want to give them this helpful feedback. So there's a certain delusion in that intention.

Of course it's complex, so we're not going to get it right. But just starting to see how intention is the seed of wholesome or unwholesome action—we tend to judge by the effects of our actions, which are most out of our control. With my friend, I did really the best I could, but I had no control over her reaction. Knowing her, I thought she'd want to know, but I could have been totally wrong. Or I could have thought it was a good time, not knowing what she'd been doing all day, what state of mind she was in, whether she'd just gotten bad news five minutes before. There's all kinds of stuff we can't know.

Being able to tune into the intention—that's a place we can actually see for ourselves. It's not in our control, but it's in our awareness. It's actually going to be affected by the quality of our mind, our consciousness. The more wholesome acts we do, that affects the consciousness. We get more wholesome consciousness. The more wholesome consciousness, the more wholesome acts we do. You can't really separate the two.

Even when we can't see clearly our intentions, even with the best will in the world, when a moment of consciousness is colored by *kilesa* and we don't realize it, we're just not going to see clearly. That's just how it is. But our willingness to keep looking, to keep reflecting—before, during, and after an action—that willingness to bring mindfulness and wisdom right to the point of intention, to the point of action, and to the point of

effect, is going to continue to deeply cultivate our awareness. It's going to allow for natural wisdom to grow, and it's going to be a source of deepening happiness in our lives, in the world, certainly for the people around us who know us.

Just as in meditation, when we're paying attention to our actions, consciousness can still be colored by *kilesa* that we don't recognize. Here's a list I really like, from the Vinaya—not from the suttas, but from the book of the monks' rules. These are the four *agati*, the four wrong or unhelpful courses of behavior or prejudice, which are abandoned with wise seeing.

First, *chandāgati*: prejudice caused by love or desire, partiality. When we have partiality toward someone, we don't see clearly; we can act or make choices based on not being able to see the whole situation clearly, our own acts or another's.

Second, *dosāgati*: prejudice caused by hatred or enmity.

Third, *mohāgati*: prejudice caused by delusion—just not knowing what we're doing, just "sounds like a good idea, let's do it," or just not having all the information.

Fourth, *bhayāgati*: prejudice caused by fear. We can relate to how we could do all kinds of things from fear. Even little fears can get magnified. Just walking and hearing a dog bark—without even realizing it, fear comes and I turn and walk the other way. That's not horribly unskillful, but the intention is just delusion and fear, not paying attention to what I'm doing. It doesn't hurt anything in terms of outer action, but in terms of really noticing what's coloring my *citta*, my mind stream right now—that's interesting to see. Because then when I can notice the fear, I have a choice. Do I want to keep walking straight? Do I want to turn around? In the big picture, it doesn't make a difference. But these are good places to play with it, where it doesn't really matter.

When there's a decision about how to help a friend and helping brings up fear—how to be with someone who's really sick, for example—I've noticed that being with someone in a lot of pain or suffering is where compassion is so beautiful and where compassion is difficult: when it brings up fear in us. Or aversion. It's just hard to be there. We can come up with all kinds of rationales: "I really want to help, but I have my family to take care of. I have to go to work. I'm too tired." Tune into the motivation. "I feel a fear right there." Okay, fear's happening.

Just as in our practice sitting here, we bring that same quality of awareness, mindfulness, wisdom—not "I should do this, I should move through the fear, I should be the perfect person." No. Just bring the mindfulness to the fear. "Oh, fear is like this. These are the actions that start to come up from fear." You do it or you don't do it, you keep paying attention.

This is where the Buddha is so brilliant—we really learn what causes affliction or suffering to ourselves and others, what doesn't. In the silly fear example of turning around when a dog barks, that's not causing affliction to anybody else. The dog certainly doesn't care. It doesn't seem to cause affliction to me externally. But if I'm paying attention to my mind and I notice, "I ran from fear," and I notice that's the moment where fear was basically driving the bus—if I don't recognize that, it's feeding fear. Not that I hate myself for it, but I really see how that's helping the reaction of fear get stronger. In that moment of contraction and fear and turning away, my senses shut down, the mind is contracted—it's subtle, but it is a kind of suffering, of separation being fed, being strengthened by my inattention.

If I pay attention while I turn around from the fear—just the same thing we've been saying here, exactly the same process—recognizing and feeling the fear as I turn around. "Fear is like this." In that moment, mindfulness is what's being cultivated. In that moment, acceptance, clear seeing. There's no "okay, you've got to turn around and face the dog." Maybe I will, maybe I won't. Maybe it doesn't really matter. But what does matter is that quality of being willing to use the motivations, why I'm doing what I'm doing, as a path of awakening. Without a "should," we keep exploring.

There's a sutta where the Buddha is giving advice to his son Rāhula, the seven-year-old. He talks about honesty first, but this part about reflecting on actions is what I want to share. The whole point is the quality of care and attention we bring, the attitude we bring to these reflections.

The Buddha says: "What do you think, Rāhula? What is the purpose of a mirror?"

"For the purpose of reflection, venerable sir."

"So too, Rāhula, an action with the body should be done after reflection. An action by speech should be done after reflection. An action by mind should be done after reflection."

Then he breaks it down: "When you wish to do an action with the body, you should reflect upon that action in this way: Would this action that I wish to do lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or the affliction of both?" Notice he's saying "my own affliction" too—not just the affliction of others. Really looking and seeing: what's the motivation, and as best I can tell, what would be the effect? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, painful results?

If on reflection that's obvious—and what's surprising is how often it might be obvious if we really reflect—he says, "Of course, definitely you should not do that action."

But if you reflect and know this action you wish to do would not lead to your affliction or the affliction of others or both—it's a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results—then you may do it.

Here's the interesting part. He says: "Also while you are doing the action with the body"—and the same with speech, the same with thinking—"while you're doing the action, reflect upon it in this same way. Is this action I am doing leading to my own suffering? Is it leading to the suffering of others? Is it leading to the suffering of both? Is it unwholesome for myself, for others?" If you see it's having painful consequences, then you should suspend that action. You should just stop. But if not, continue.

And after you've finished an action, again reflect on it. Did that action lead to my own affliction? The affliction of others? The affliction of both? Was it unwholesome? Unwholesome results? If so, really tune into that, see what the effect is. The Buddha, talking to a monk, says to go and confess it in the bi-weekly meetings they have. For us, it would be to really reveal it, lay it open to your heart. If you're confused about something, talk to a teacher or wise companions in the holy life, and then undertake restraint for the future.

So: with body, with speech, with mind, reflect before, during, and after.

This is the important thing, though: it's not just if it's unwholesome. Also notice if it's wholesome. Notice what's the effect during it. What's the effect after it? When you reflect, if you know this action that you did did not lead to your affliction or the affliction of others or both—it was a wholesome bodily action, speech action, or mind action with pleasant consequences, wholesome results—then you can abide happy and glad, training day and night in wholesome states.

That's what I really want to emphasize: *sīla* is not just about looking at how bad we are and trying not to be bad. It's actually tuning in—just as with generosity—to the happiness of heart, the gladness of heart, when we act in a way that doesn't cause ourselves or others suffering. Training day and night in wholesome states.

Even just restraining, refraining consciously from an unwholesome action—that is a wholesome action. I bet we often don't realize it. "Oh yeah, I better not do that. Oh, I was about to do that. I'm so dumb. I'm so greedy." But we don't do it. Could we actually appreciate the wholesomeness of not doing it before we jump into beating ourselves up for having thought about doing it? We could actually move into the joy, the happiness, the wholesomeness of refraining from affliction.

This is the way the Buddha talks about it: really noticing how our willingness to do this over and over is actually the same practice of mindfulness and wisdom at the point of contact with awareness that we're going to do something or want to do something—a thought, a motivation, an intention. That's the same mindfulness and wisdom we're cultivating in our meditation here. It's no different. That willingness to just meet what's happening and to explore with interest—not with judging, not thinking "this is a list of what's good, this is a list of what's bad." That's not the way it works. It's that willingness with beginner's mind to see: what's the effect of this action of speech, of body, of mind? What are the causes that bring me to do it? How does it seem when I'm doing it? What's the effect when I'm done, both for myself and for others?

And it's equal: not harming yourself or not harming others. I know I've said that three times already, and I'm going to say it again, because non-harming includes you. It's not just about everyone else in the world, but you. That's where we start.

When we do see the cause and effect, when we've done something and see it was unwholesome, it caused some affliction to ourselves or others—the way the Buddha says to abandon it is interesting. He doesn't say, "When you realize you've done an unwholesome action, grovel, hate yourself, really go over and over and think about what a bad person you are and get filled with guilt and remorse." No, he doesn't say that.

He gives an example about someone telling lies. He says to Rāhula that speaking untruth is almost the most unskillful thing we can do. So lying is really not a good thing. But if someone sees, "There are lies that I have told to a greater or lesser extent"—if someone's reviewing this in their mind, "that was not right, that was not good"—that's a neutral way of saying it. But if you become guilty, remorseful, with a negative self-judging tinge, if you get lost in guilt for that reason, that unwholesome deed will not be undone.

Have you noticed that? No matter how long you spend hating yourself for something you did yesterday or a minute ago or last year, it doesn't undo it.

So reflecting thus—and this is where it sounds easier than it is—he abandons right then the telling of lies and in the future refrains from telling lies. This is how there comes to be the abandoning of that unskillful deed. This is how there comes to be the transcending of that unskillful deed.

Take it as a teaching, not as if we see it once and it's over. But he's saying: really, you look and you see with mindfulness wisdom, with this attitude that's really interested in how the mind is working. What were the intentions? Why did I do it? What was the effect? How did that work for me? How did that work for others? We can only see in this

way if we're interested—and that interest is the quality of pure mindfulness, of awareness not colored by self-hatred, by wanting, not trying to make it look better than it was or worse than it was.

In that moment of reflecting, what we're doing is purifying the mind, just in the paying attention. Even before we've gotten to "maybe lying is not such a good thing," just in the looking we're cultivating mindfulness and wisdom, cultivating that quality of awareness that can be with anything. When we say awareness doesn't care, it means it just wants to see how it is. It doesn't have a presupposition about whether this is wholesome or not. It's looking to see what's really the effect.

When we're looking in that way, that's how, when we're doing something unskillful, we'll only abandon it first when we really get it for ourselves that it was causing us harm, causing another harm. As I'm sure you know by now, usually one time isn't quite enough to really get it. Would that it were, but it's not. But it does start to sink in when we're continuing to meet what's happening with this attitude of interest and non-judging.

We do get to know—and you all know this from being here—we know it and then we don't know it the next day. But we really do get to know deeply and personally for ourselves the afflictive aspects of so-called unskillful action. And that's what's meant by unskillful—not that there's a list of things, you do them you're good, you don't do them you're bad, and we don't have to think about it anymore. That's better than nothing, I suppose. But that's not the way this deep understanding of suffering grows.

As that deep understanding grows through paying attention, through really feeling it, a lot of you are in that phase now where you notice so much more clearly when you speak or act or even think in an unskillful way, colored by *kilesa*—but you keep doing it. You're feeling the suffering of it so much more than you did before. When someone asked this morning about just wanting to go back to delusion, I can understand that. As we begin to wake up and become much more sensitive to what we're doing and why we're doing it and the effects—just in ourselves, never mind others—it's so painful. But somehow the attachment that keeps us doing it might still be there, and we keep experiencing the pain so much more deeply. Parts of us say, "Let me not have to see this anymore."

But I'm sure you know now, it's too late. It's way too late for all of you to go back to delusion, because it's not the safe refuge. I see my mind wanting to say, "Please, I don't want to see anymore." But then it sees that, and it's just another passing moment.

It's difficult. That's why compassion is so key for us. There are times when we're so much more sensitively tuned in to the painful effect of even our unwholesome thoughts. We're so sensitive. And here on retreat, it's so magnified. Stuff we're in agony over that we did that was unskillful—that other people wouldn't have noticed here. You go out in the world and tell someone, "Oh my God, I just pushed in front of this person in line because I really wanted that particular muffin. And I just feel so terrible. I know they knew it. And I can see them flinch." It's a huge thing, and you're really suffering from it. And the other person maybe is too—they come in and say, "I just feel so disrespected. They just pushed in front of me. It's like I don't even exist. And now I'm filled with hate for them. And I feel horrible."

You try to tell someone outside: "I feel so remorseful because I stepped in line in front of somebody and took a muffin." They're like, "Excuse me? Have you read the newspapers recently?" But we really are this sensitive. This really is how the mind and heart begin to understand deeply, and the wisdom—because we can't create wisdom, wisdom arises naturally.

I'll tell you one experience. A few years ago, when we had our former president, the last president, and he was doing something I didn't approve of—some big thing he'd done—I was just walking up and down on the country road near where I live. I could see annoyance, I could see anger, but I really got into the anger in a way I don't often do. I was just filled with this rage, but the kind of rage that's righteous indignation, that has a certain sweetness if you don't look carefully. "Yeah, right, the jerk, how could he?" It was building and building and building. And all my thoughts were right, of course, and everyone I knew would totally agree with me.

So I was doing that, really caught in it, until suddenly—and this is just thank God for the habit of mindfulness and wisdom, because it just arose by itself—suddenly just mindfulness. "Wow. Anger feels like this." And it felt terrible. It was just like on fire with rage, burning, one angry thought feeding the next angry thought, my energy getting stronger. I saw I was about to have to go off and do something, and if anyone had come up and talked to me just then, I would have snapped their head off. Whatever it was, the anger would have just gone over. If it was someone who agreed with me, we would have gotten together and bad-mouthed the president. But if not, if someone just got in my way a little bit, I could see the hostility starting to grow.

The mindfulness just felt that—not with a "should" or "you're bad" or anything—just felt how that felt, what the effect was on the mind stream, how it was going to affect my speech and action. And just right then, wisdom came by itself. The wisdom just comes from the steadiness of seeing. "Wow. Nothing's worth it." I mean, I wasn't doing any-

thing helpful. That anger wasn't helping the situation in any way. And it was so clear at that moment that nothing is worth feeding anger like that in my mind or adding that anger to the world.

And just then, the anger went away. It doesn't mean it never came back, and it doesn't mean we don't act. But acting from that anger wouldn't have been in any way helpful. I remember it because it was such a strong, clear seeing, and the wisdom was completely nothing to do with me. It just arose from the mindfulness, from the awareness noticing anger and feeling it. And that arose from the habit of awareness for so many years.

The wisdom—I love it—it's just so wonderful to see that it's not something we have to remember and call up: "Oh yeah, anger, suffering, yeah that's right, it's not good, I think I'll try not to do it." It's just right there. When there's awareness, it's just right there. That's what we can really learn to trust, and that's what we're cultivating. And in that restraining from the anger—well, that just happened effortlessly. But there's still an intention to abandon anger, and knowing that's a wholesome action. Not doing harm is a wholesome action. Really appreciate that. You don't have to go out and be Mother Teresa. Refraining is wisdom.

Sally mentioned last night, in talking about the second step of the Eightfold Path—wise intention, or wise aspiration, usually translated as "right thought"—there's a sutta where the Buddha is using this same type of mindfulness wisdom, just reflecting, exploring with interest his types of thought and the effects of his thought. That's how he came up with this sense of wise thought and unwise thought. I like it because it brings the same quality of exploration, rather than just saying "this is bad, this is good." He's looking and seeing what's the effect. Skillful and unskillful are really determined by effect. And we're only going to learn that for ourselves.

He's talking about when he was practicing, before he became awakened, before he became a Buddha—which I always find interesting. He says: "The thought occurred to me"—he never says "I thought," it's always "the thought occurred to me," which gives the sense of how thoughts just arise—"why don't I just keep on dividing my thinking into two sorts?" So he decided whenever he had thinking with sense desire, thinking filled with ill will, or thinking filled with harmfulness, he would look at that as one type. And thinking with renunciation, with non-ill will or *mettā*, and with harmlessness, as another type.

"As I remained heedful, ardent, and resolute"—and I want you to hear this: he's not the Buddha yet, but he's no slouch. He's practicing. He's heedful, ardent, and resolute. I imagine his heedful, ardent, and resolute is pretty serious—"thinking imbued with sen-

suality arose. I discerned: thinking imbued with sensuality has arisen." And he looked at how it affected him. He said: "It leads to my own affliction or the affliction of others. It obstructs wisdom. It obstructs clear seeing. It promotes vexation. It does not lead to liberation."

"And as I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, this thinking subsided. As I noticed that it leads to the affliction of myself or others, it subsided. As I noticed that it obstructs clear seeing, that it promotes vexation, does not lead to liberation, it subsided."

Isn't that interesting? He's just really noticing with clear mindfulness what's arising and how it's acting and what the effect is. He's not saying "I hate it." Later he talks about rooting out, abandoning, dispelling. But the first way it's talked about is: as I noticed it, and as I noticed it led to my vexation, it subsided. That's like what I was talking about with that anger example. As the awareness—and it's not a person, not "I noticed, I'm so great"—it's just mindfulness wisdom, a mental factor arising, seeing clearly that this sense desire thinking is leading to my own vexation. And seeing that, just steady with mindfulness wisdom, for that moment it subsides.

Try it. You've been doing that the whole time. But start really having faith, confidence in the power of mindfulness and wisdom and the willingness to just be honest, to bring this honest interest into seeing what's going on in our mind, what's the motivation for doing this.

And then the same thing for thinking filled with ill will or harmfulness. Just when you notice it leads to vexation, to affliction of yourself or others, doesn't lead to freedom—it subsided.

And then, this is that famous line we always use, from this sutta: "Whatever a person keeps pursuing with his thinking and pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness." We just notice that. If you keep pursuing thinking imbued with sensuality, abandoning thinking filled with renunciation, then the mind becomes bent toward thinking about sensuality. Just what we've noticed.

So when you're bringing mindfulness—even mindfulness of sense desire, mindfulness of thinking filled with ill will, mindfulness of thinking filled with harmfulness—what the mind is being bent toward is the mindfulness, is the awareness, not the ill will. When we jump on it and go, "Yeah, I am so bad for thinking about ill will and I do need to do something to stop it"—that's pursuing thinking imbued with ill will. Mindfulness of it just watches the cause and effect: "Oh yes, this does cause me suffering. Let's see how that works." That's really very powerful.

Then he went on to notice: "Thinking imbued with renunciation has arisen in me." And looking at it, he discerned it does not lead to his own affliction or the affliction of others. It fosters wisdom, clear seeing. It promotes lack of vexation, more ease, contentment, leads to freedom. "If I were to think and ponder in line with that for even a day, for even a night, even for a day and a night, I do not envision any danger that would come from it—except that thinking and pondering a long time would tire the body."

Have you noticed that? Even wholesome thoughts—you ponder a day and a night, it tires the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed. And a disturbed mind is far from concentration. So he's also noticing the effect on the body. "So I steadied my mind, settled, unified and concentrated it. Why is that? So my mind would not be disturbed."

You get a sense of the difference. He's not hating the thoughts. But he's still, even with wholesome thoughts, really following it out: "A day and night I can think about renunciation. No problem. But the body gets tired. The mind's a little bit disturbed. It would be more helpful to steady the mind and drop the thoughts." But it's not because the thoughts are unwholesome.

So just this willingness to keep exploring and to see what leads to contentment, to ease, to happiness, what leads to suffering—and really to see for ourselves over and over and over. And to really get that it works both ways: wholesome states of mind obviously breed wholesome actions. When *mettā* is what's in the mind, that's going to be the motivation for action. But it works the other way too: cultivating wholesome actions also supports the arising of wholesome states.

Hence the usefulness of having the precepts. When we know we're not in a wholesome state of mind and we don't know what to do, and there's this precept—"don't take what's not given"—and we don't do it, even if the motivation isn't really that sensitivity of wisdom, just in the refraining from taking what is not given, there's a wholesomeness. It is that freedom from remorse. Later, even though it wasn't a totally pure motivation, you can reflect, "I didn't take that thing." And a sense of contentment, a sense of ease, a sense of freedom from remorse can arise from that reflection.

It's really important that we can reflect on our non-harming conduct as a source of happiness, as a source of brightness in the mind.

There is a list the Buddha gives, from the Discourse on Right View. He's talking about Right View—the beginning of the path—and he

CHAPTER 90

An Appreciation of Awareness

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers an intimate exploration of what she calls her 'love of awareness'—the simple yet profound capacity to be fully present with whatever arises in each moment. She addresses the paradox at the heart of practice: how awareness can be completely life-transforming while simultaneously nothing really changes. Drawing from the Dhammapada's teachings on heedfulness, she emphasizes that appreciative awareness leads to life, while heedless avoidance is the path to death.*
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> *Wilson explores the Pāli term 'yathābhūta'—things as they have come to be—explaining how this phrase captures the conditioned, contingent nature of each moment. She describes how right view (sammā diṭṭhi) isn't about acquiring correct ideas but about perceiving reality accurately, free from the coloring of greed, aversion, and delusion. When awareness is pure and uncolored, wisdom arises naturally; we don't need to create it. In that clear seeing, harmful states simply don't make sense and don't arise.*
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> *The talk takes a powerful turn as Wilson connects inner practice to outer action, sharing her experiences in Burma witnessing poverty and her visit to the Dachau concentration camp. She reflects on how the same mental habits we observe in meditation—denial, fear, confusion, self-protection—can manifest in devastating ways when left unexamined. This grounding perspective reveals why purifying the mind through awareness practice isn't selfish navel-gazing but essential work for reducing suffering in the world. Wilson closes with an invitation to trust this simple capacity we all have to be fully present and awake.*

This is meant to be Dhamma encouragement, hopefully. It will at least keep you going for the rest of the night. I just want to share a little bit of my—it sounds silly—but my love of awareness, really. I wish I could transmit to you all how simple, accessible, and completely life-transforming it can be as we begin to strengthen our trust and confidence in just surrendering into awareness of whatever's happening now.

And at the same time, as it's life-transforming, nothing really changes. That's the paradox. We are so conditioned by our culture and the way most of us are brought up—we're inured to doing something for a result. If we want things to get better, we need to change things. Why would we do anything if everything was going to stay the same? You didn't come here to struggle for nine or ten days and then leave with everything exactly as it was before, did you? Maybe. Good. Then you can just put down expectation.

But mostly, we don't work that way. And of course, it isn't that nothing changes. Everything changes, and everything stays the same. That's really hard to explain.

Talking about awareness is also strange because the use of language—awareness as a noun—makes it sound like a thing. If there's a thing, then it should be existent in time and space, something we look for and can get and hold on to and have and be in relationship to. None of those descriptions are accurate. The closest we can come is that to be with awareness is an activity that arises in the mind in a moment, as all mental activity arises in a moment and passes in a moment. But still, for the use of language and communication, awareness functions as a noun—how to recognize it, how to feel it in our experience, how to trust what pure awareness is.

I'm just sharing some thoughts. I'm in no way giving you the big overview as if I know it all. I'm just trying to share some of my experience and love of this. When I think about my motivation—I can't really speak for Steve or Franz, but I assume they're similar—my motivation to keep coming here and leading these retreats and trying to share with all of you is really just a sense of loving the possibility that we can, for moments (I only know it for moments), be so completely, fully present and alive to whatever's arising in this moment without holding back, without needing it to be different, and without having to make it be all about me. That one is so exhausting, so limiting, so much struggle.

When just whatever's happening is arising, and there's the quality of mind of awareness that's simply fully here without barriers, just knowing—"Oh, it's like this"—no stories, no complications. It doesn't actually sound like such a great thing. Just to be with hearing. Just to see. Pretty sunset, wasn't it? It's like this. Feeling happy with the sunset. It's like this. Sun's gone, what next? What next is like this. That's what I mean—nothing changes.

But just that, just this, to have moments of a life—the regular moments of a regular life—and to be so present, just for those moments, without all the complication, without all the stories, that's the beginning of a taste of freedom. Even if it may not be what we thought we were looking for. We thought it was somewhere else, in bliss, in pure consciousness. Let's get rid of these bodies. Let's stop having any kind of displeasure or unpleasant experience. I kept waiting for years and years. When would I float away on this cloud of compassion and beauty, and my personality would really change once and for all?

I'm still waiting. But without quite so much expectation that it's going to happen.

But you know what really has happened? Often, not always, because nothing's steady state—this personality is just much more at ease with itself, because I realize this is it, folks. This body, this mind, this personality—that's what's arising from moment to moment. Just being at ease with things as they are, but really awake with things as they are. Not being at ease because we're kind of checked out, a little bit deluded. "I'm at ease with that because I don't really have to engage." I'm also familiar with that kind of being at ease. We call that delusion. There are times it's quite comfortable. I see my mind would really like to just check out. Sleep is a good one, unless you're having horrible nightmares. Let's just check out for a little while, have a little bit of rest.

Was it Munindraji who used to say that sleep is the worldling's nirvana? Let's just check out and cruise. But that's not what we're talking about.

Another reason awareness is strange to talk about: the way we've been giving instructions today or in the groups or in the Q&A, we say, "Oh, I was so angry"—I'm making this up, no one actually said this to me—and we respond, "Great, great. Did you notice anger? Anger's like this. Good, good practice." That's awareness. What's so great about that? It sounds pretty passive. Whatever happened, you say, "Oh, awareness can just notice. It's like this. No need to change it. No need to fix it. Freedom is just being totally here with it." Our normal let's-get-things-done, let's-fix-it mind hears that and thinks, "That sounds more like being a doormat to me. I don't really get the freedom in that."

But actually, the steadiness of pure awareness has the power to completely transform our understanding of ourselves and the world. Not the power—that's just what happens.

This is from the Dhammapada, teachings of the Buddha, in a poetic translation from Ajahn Munindo. He translates it as awareness; often you'll see it translated as heedfulness. Just two stanzas:

"Appreciative awareness leads to life. Heedless avoidance is the path to death. Those who are aware are fully alive, while those who are heedless are as if already dead."

Remember, we're only talking about a moment at a time—not that you're aware and then it's forever, or you're heedless and you're doomed. It's a moment at a time.

And the second stanza: "The wise, being fully alive—in other words, being fully aware—rejoice in appreciative awareness and abide delighting in this capacity."

That would be my motivation, if I could articulate it: that somehow we could all learn to trust, to rejoice in appreciative awareness, and to abide delighting in that capacity.

It's as if we're talking about a shift of refuge. Remember, we took the refuges last night and this morning. We took refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. In Buddha, it's really like refuge in the capacity for the awakened, the aware heart and mind. The Dhamma is refuge in things as they are, things as they have come to be in this moment, as the place—"place" is the wrong word—where freedom and ease of heart and mind can only arise when we completely take refuge, when we rejoice in that awareness.

It's a shift of refuge where instead of looking to the particulars of experience to give us happiness or freedom or ease—the particulars of experience will never last for more than a short fraction. Even if something seems to last for a year (and what lasts for a year? what really lasts for a year? what lasts for two minutes if we're looking?)—but even when external situations seem good and last for a year, that's an eon. Nothing really lasts in terms of looking to experience for ease, freedom, or comfort. But that's where we tend to go for refuge—our moods, our thoughts, external experience.

When we start to shift our trust, when we start to shift our refuge to this delight in awareness, it really can be that something's coming up in your mind that's unpleasant, one of your familiar unpleasant habits. You feel the effect in your body; it's unpleasant. And there's this delight in the awareness of it that really is no problem. What's happening is no problem. The next minute, okay, we forget the delight in awareness and we're back in the old habits—the habit of inertia, the habit of "I don't like this, it should be like this, I'm going to fix myself right now." Then: "Wow, wanting to fix myself is like this."

I know I keep saying that, and I know it might sound kind of lame. "Oh yeah, wanting to fix myself is like this." But in the moment that you really are imbibing, really touching with mind and heart that quality of wholehearted presence—awareness that's not colored by greed or aversion or me-me-me—that allows us to recognize accurately. That's where wisdom arises.

Wisdom arises by itself when there's accurate recognition. Which is also a huge relief—we don't have to create it. We can't. I mean, we're trying to make something up, "wisdom." We don't know. It arises by itself when there's accurate recognition, when there's pure awareness. And in that wisdom, that's where freedom comes. Freedom from the suffering of reactivity. You still might have that same silly personality pattern.

But you know what? It's okay. You might even see a moment when you love it. "Oh yeah, look at that, isn't that so..."—whatever word you want to substitute there. That's just how it is. Causes and conditions coming together.

The Buddha talked about the path of awakening as beginning and ending as a path, more like a circle. What he talks about is wise view, right view, or right understanding. In our normal way, we think of understanding as acquiring a body of knowledge, a set of ideas. And I'm here talking, blabbing away, giving you ideas. In our normal way, we think right view is: "Okay, I see the ideas I have that are wrong." We have plenty of ideas that lead us into trouble, plenty of ideas working in the back of the mind that aren't really so helpful. Part of our awareness practice will help us see those. That's true.

But right view isn't about getting another set of knowledge and then holding on to that for dear life. It's not about that at all. Right view, wise view, means actually the way we are perceiving and understanding the world is accurate—not "right" as in "this is good and this is bad," or "this meets certain standards," not that. It's like *yathā bhūta*, a word in Pali. You most often see it in the Buddha's teaching as part of a very profound insight: *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, often translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are"—which is very close to awakening, to nibbāna. That's all: knowledge and vision of things as they are. Not "let's get the heck away from things as they are and get to somewhere where we can wake up." What wakes us up is recognizing things as they are, as they are right now, no matter how they are.

Yathā bhūta is the part of that phrase usually translated as "things as they are." But I was using that phrase a couple of months ago, and a couple of friends who are much more scholars of the Pali language told me that the grammatical construction of *yathā bhūta* would be more accurately translated as "things as they have come to be." And that's really how it is—things as they have come to be in this moment.

What that brings in is the fact of conditionality, contingency—the fact that things as they have come to be in this moment is the effect of innumerable causes coming together. Innumerable situations of physical and mental factors, your own particular experiences, others', the past—all coming together in this moment, unable to be separated. You can't really ever figure out all the causes and conditions for this moment. And because of how it's coming together in this moment, it can't be any different, can it? It's already here. How can it be different? It's what it is.

How much of our time do we unconsciously or habitually spend either trying to pretend this moment isn't the way it is—have you ever noticed yourself doing that?—and then pretending that we don't notice that we're doing that? This is denial. I am in awe of

the power of denial in the mind. It's amazing, actually. Because when we break through the denial, we see: "But I knew I was doing that for ten years. I knew I was doing that and somehow pretended I didn't know." It's amazing.

Have you ever known yourself to either pretend this moment isn't the way it is, or try to make it be different, or be afraid and project this moment infinitely into the future—"It's always going to be this way"? There is no way it's going to be this way even next moment. Impossible. The conditions are already different for next moment than this moment. Even talking about "next moment" is just an idea.

So *yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment—gives the living, moving, unstable, vibrant, alive nature of life in every moment. What frees our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering, is simply wise view, wise understanding, which is the recognition of the reality of how things actually are in this moment. Not every single cause and effect, but just the reality of our mind, of our body in this moment. Free from the confusion, the overlay that's put on top when we don't realize that the awareness greeting this moment—first, if there's any awareness at all that we even know we're in this moment, that's good—but the awareness, if it's colored by wanting it to be different or hating how it is or thinking it should be like this and trying to nudge it, all of that gets in the way of actually recognizing how things are.

So right view, what frees our heart and mind, is so elegant. It's not that we have to somehow get rid of the greed, the hatred, the confusion, as if there's this huge mountain inside of us, although it may feel like it. A huge mountain we chip away one little chip every hundred years, and maybe sometime in some future life we'll have managed to dig out all the greed for a second. It's not like that.

It's fresh every moment. And what's so elegant about the freedom of heart and mind is that when there's an accurate recognition of this vibrant, changing, unstable nature of cause and effect—of all life—in that moment of clear recognition, of pure awareness, the wisdom arises of "Oh, this is how things are." And in seeing how things are, greed doesn't arise because it doesn't make any sense. Trying to hold on to something that's already going is so clearly suffering. You don't even have to think about it.

Like that sunset. Did you sit there thinking, "Just let it stay still for two more minutes so I can enjoy it"? Maybe you did. Our mind is capable of anything. But pretty much we know the sun's going to go down. Pretty much we know that's going to happen. We can appreciate the beauty or how it's making us feel. Hopefully we can let it go. If you couldn't let it go, that's a great place to say, "Oh, that's the suffering—holding on to something that's already not here anymore." Or if you start thinking, "Okay, twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes, maybe only fifty-four, and I can watch the sunset to-

morrow"—it's so clear that's nuts, right? It's so clear that's suffering anyway. We let it go. Still enjoying the beauty—that doesn't have to be done away with. But it's so clear it's gone.

So greed doesn't arise. Hatred doesn't arise. Me being able to change that, needing to change it, doesn't arise. Seeing, beauty, appreciation—the next thing arises. You hear the bell. It's the next arising thing. "Oh, time to go sit"—a thought. You turn and walk in here. You think, "Damn, I don't want to do that." You notice aversion. Whatever. It doesn't matter. *Yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment.

That's what's so elegant: the clear, deep seeing automatically frees the mind. The wisdom comes from that.

So what makes clear seeing? What are the conditions that allow for this wisdom to arise? Awareness. Mindfulness. First, the willingness, just this sense of being fully present just for this moment. In this moment, it feels like nothing, right? "Here she goes again, be present with whatever." Because we're focusing on the thing, on the object—the mind state, the sound, the idea, whatever.

Just start to notice: awareness is like this. The steadiness, the continuity—that's really key. It's not just one moment and then we go off in our habits, our refuge in delusion or wanting or making up stories as a way to pacify ourselves. Or more likely, we make up stories as a way to get ourselves really upset. Have you noticed that? Things are fine, you don't feel so good maybe, or something's going on you don't like, but it's okay. But the mind spins out into the future—it's going to be all day and ten days, and what am I going to do, and oh my God—and we're all upset. What's happening now? Actually, sensations, thoughts, it's okay.

The continuity is really the key. Not that we can be continuous—we're going to forget all the time because the habit is to forget. But remember what we talked about this morning and last night: the remembering. As soon as you think, "Oh yeah, I was spaced out," you're already not. That's what's so easy. That's what we want to learn to trust, to actually delight in.

For a lot of us, not all of you, but a lot of us, our mind has such a habit of self-judgment or self-blame. Have any of you noticed that? When you're walking or sitting here, and suddenly you realize, "Wow, I didn't know what was going on for however long"—how often is that followed by the thought, "Well, you're supposed to be continuous now. Come on, what's the matter?" Some kind of judgment.

That makes the whole thing so much heavier, doesn't it? If you believe that—"I should have been more mindful. I've been here a whole day, and look how much I'm spaced out. This is exhausting. They said it was easy. They said it was relaxing. I don't think it's relaxing. I think it's heavy. I think it's exhausting." Be mindful all day—and you're projecting already. "Oh, aversion's happening now."

When we're not fighting with it, it's just this. Actually, that becomes delightful. I don't mean aversion's delightful. Aversion's aversion. It's not delightful. But the awareness of it can be delightful. And it's just that simple. It's learning to trust that that's really enough. We don't need to add that extra—how can I do it better, how can I have better mind states? When you notice that, okay, that's just the next thing to be aware of. But even that—when we see, we don't have to be in contention with anything in our experience.

When you start to really believe that about meditation, both for new people and old people... I've been practicing meditation for—I won't tell you how long. But so much of it, and it's been extremely beneficial, all of it—but for so much of the time, there's been subtly in the background the sense of how to do it right. And if there's a way to do it right, that means there has to be a way to do it wrong. And for sure, if there's a way to do it wrong, every time I don't like what's happening or what's happening doesn't fit whatever idea I have of what "right" is, in comes that judgment—"you're bad, you're wrong"—the heaviness. And then when I think about wanting to be mindful, it comes with heaviness, with aversion. "I can't do it right."

Can you actually even let in the trust that we don't need to be in contention with anything in our experience here? Awareness doesn't care what awareness is aware of. Any object of mind or body—and let me know if you can find any object that isn't of mind or body—is a perfectly wonderful way to recognize awareness. Because awareness can be with anything.

When I start to realize this—and I have spaces of time, on and off retreat, because when we're talking about just noticing in this relaxed way, you notice it doesn't require a really strong, focused, one-pointed samādhi. That's something we can build up on retreat. But just noticing you're aversive, for example, you're greedy—I know, a lot of times we don't notice it, but I actually did notice it—you don't really have to be in an incredibly subtle state of mind to notice that, do you? Not always, anyway. It can get by us, but this we can do in our daily life.

To actually know that whatever's arising is really fine—meditation becomes fun because you're not fighting anything. You can't do it wrong. And then the willingness, the mindfulness, the awareness begins to develop a momentum. Yeah, you have to put in some time. That's not going to happen in a day. Our habits are strong. But it comes to be: "Oh, whatever's happening, I can be aware of that. Awareness can be with that."

And then as the awareness begins to get a momentum, as the continuity begins to become stronger, that's what allows for the recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment to arise more accurately. Out of that, we start to see cause and effect.

For example, my silly example of the sunset. There's some awareness through the whole thing. You're watching the sunset. You're appreciating the beauty. You notice your mind going from really liking that into some fantasy—some really happy fantasy. You got from this sunset to a sunset somewhere in the Caribbean with somebody you haven't met yet but that you really are going to be spending the rest of your life with. How fast can that happen? Does any of you notice anything like that ever happening today? Maybe not that particular one. Or it could be negative. It could go either way.

And then you're aware of that. You notice the happiness of that. Then you think, "Oh my God, I'm here and I should be mindful." You notice the aversion. You notice from the aversion how it makes the body feel heavy. And then you notice in the heaviness—this is because there's some continuity of mindfulness—that when the body's heavy, you don't want to be there anymore. Suddenly, from being really with the sunset, your mind is going, "You know what? I'm going home. It's enough of this. I'm out of here." Five minutes before, it was the peak of your life.

The steadiness of awareness—we start to see the cause and effect and how it works together. We go, "Wow, look how the mind works. It's so interesting. It's fascinating." And then you see: this is how suffering is created. This is how freedom from suffering arises, right here, in this moment. Suffering comes to be when we're fighting with experience, in contention with experience, denying experience, wanting it to be different, all caught up in me-me-me.

The awareness comes: "Oh, look at that. I wanted to go away. It's just like this." And you turn around and walk in the hall without any more story. Just that simple.

In the Zen ox-herding pictures, those ten pictures that depict pictorially the path of practice and awakening, the last one is after he's awakened—he picks up his bundle and goes back into the marketplace. In any moment, we just... all that poofs away. You

turn around and walk in here and sit down. So simple. Because it's that simple, our thinking mind says, "I'm afraid that's not really going to do it for me. I need something a little more." Oh yeah, thinking wants something. Thinking, wanting—it's just like that.

All I'm encouraging you to do is trust that simplicity. Just notice. Notice when it's present. Start to notice. You can palpably feel when that simple awareness has that quality of purity—not colored by greed, by wanting. Not a sense of struggle, but a sense of presence. We don't have to create the wisdom, the clear seeing of things as they have come to be. We're not trying to figure it out. We don't have a clue. But the truth just presents itself over and over and over.

Quite a few people have mentioned today, in different ways, seeing aspects of how their mind is relating to certain problems in life here or at home, and seeing a way that the mind kind of amps it up, makes it more complicated. That just comes by steady awareness. It's a wonderful thing. An amazing thing.

I want to switch gears a little bit, though it's really the same thing—appreciating this.

I remember in the three-month retreat this year when Joseph Goldstein, one of our friends and colleagues, was giving a talk. I think it was at the beginning of the retreat. People were doing just what we're doing here, but for six weeks or three months. He was just saying how much to appreciate the opportunity to do this. He was saying how really fortunate we are, how privileged we are to be able to have the time, have the interest, have enough space in our life, have the good fortune to be able to do this.

That's true. Whatever our life situation—both us as teachers and you—it takes a huge commitment and sacrifice for many people to be able to take nine days like this out of what everyone's life is, so complex and busy, with so many different strands and so many different people. It's hard. Some people are saying today that it's really difficult at times to step out of that. Sometimes we have the support of friends and families. Often we don't. They think we're abandoning them. It makes it hard. So many people don't have a sense that it's okay to do this for themselves. "It's just being selfish"—that's our cultural misunderstanding.

I want to say yes, we are incredibly privileged. No matter how difficult it was for us to get here, there are many people in the world who don't have the physical possibility.

I was just in Burma for some weeks, and so was Steve. We were doing different things. But in terms of our privilege, no matter how hard our life is—and I'm not saying this as a guilt thing at all—it's more a sense of gratitude, to appreciate the possibilities of what we can do here.

I was in Burma, and one of the things we were doing: someone had given a few of us friends a couple of thousand dollars and asked us specifically to go through the village around the monastery where we were staying and find some of the worst, most tumble-down shacks where people were living. Believe me, it's really hard to pick out the worst because they are pretty bad. We're talking about little bamboo shacks with thatched roofs full of holes. A house that only has two walls. Four ladies living in this community in a house with two walls, completely open to everything, with only one little latrine for seventeen houses way over there. The floor is these bamboo poles with huge holes in between them. And that's not even the worst.

In terms of doing this, which in some way was lovely to be able to do, seeing not just the poverty but the quality of people's lives—seeing how different people in similar situations can be so different. There are some people where the husband had died, he was an alcoholic, the sixteen-year-old daughter had to leave school in the last year—which is a really hard thing, to get to the last year, to have enough money to do it, and then have to leave to work in a factory to support the other kids—and the mother's cooking little fried things outside the house. And this family was so filled with light. They were so beautiful, so loving in this situation.

And then there are other families just completely beaten down, just completely dulled out. An old granny—I don't know how old—taking care of her four grandkids because the mother, who knows where the father ever was, was out doing really hard physical labor all the time. The granny was just barely relational. A lot of Burmese old women smoke these old cheroots, these thick stogie cigars. She'd just sit there smoking it and hand it to the three-year-old to put out. The six-year-old would light it for her. We were telling them about a free school, because a lot of these kids don't go to school—they can't even afford the school fees—and some nuns had started a free school up the road. So we're telling them about the school, and they just look at us with dead eyes. Too much to even figure out how to tell the kids to just walk up to the school fifteen minutes up the road.

Similar situations, but just to see. There are people who have no way to practice or look at their mind, or who have the chance—in Burma, there's meditation centers two feet down the road everywhere you are—but no interest, no energy, no possibility.

So that we're here, that we have the interest—I just want to say it's a wonderful thing. Appreciate that in yourself. Please let yourself feel grateful for the opportunity and for your interest.

The place I want to go with this is to say that some people actually don't understand what we're doing, think it's just some kind of—the classic thing—"Oh, he's just off meditating, staring at his navel for seven days." Have you heard people say that? Just kind of completely self-absorbed, selfish. Or some kind of esoteric mind game. The world is in such a state. There's so much suffering. There's so much cruelty. There's so much greed. And we're sitting here looking at the little subtleties of the movements of our mind. When my mind's in aversion, I can look and say, "What? Why don't you go out and do something useful? Just sitting here looking at how there's a little bit of aversion when somebody steps in front of you in line, and oh, I'm so upset about it." It's like, "Come on, get over yourself." That's aversion. "Get over yourself"—that's aversion.

I just want to say, for me, it's not a little esoteric mind game. These habits, when we don't see them—the greed, the aversion, the confusion, the self-judgment that show up here—when we don't see them here, when we don't have the awareness, when we don't trust awareness, when we fall into these habits, when we have wrong view, not understanding things as they are, that's going to impact how we understand the world, the choices we make, and how we act.

Look at the world. What's running the decisions? Pick a government, any government, pretty much any government. Are you inspired to look at how it goes about its business? We're in the US. Definitely not inspiring to me how they go about their business. I don't get a lot of wisdom and compassion coming out of it. There's some beaten down efforts, but pick anywhere.

To me—and of course I've spent my life doing this, so I'm biased—to me it's so important. Because when we understand things as they are, when we're in a situation in our life, we can see it more clearly. And then with the wisdom, the natural effect of wisdom... We were reading that thing last night, I forget exactly how the translation went, but you know the usual one: "Do good deeds, avoid causing harm, and purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas."

The effect of purifying the mind—and that's what we're doing. Any moment of pure awareness is a moment of purifying the mind, purifying the consciousness. In that moment, just in that moment, when there's not this confusion, this self-involvement, this greed, the thought of doing harm doesn't arise. Just like greed makes no sense, selfishness makes no sense, causing harm makes no sense—it doesn't arise. The natural actions of a mind and a heart, just in the moment that it's pure, will be more of compassion, connectedness, caring, or just equanimity, non-reactivity, just doing what needs to be done in the moment. Not thinking it out. The next moment we might be confused again.

Seeing how this is true for all of us, the small little habits here can really manifest in a big way.

This summer I was in Munich for a month or so. I often go to Germany. But this summer I had more time there than usual, and on one Sunday I was able to go to visit Dachau, which I had never had time to do before. That was one of the concentration camps in World War II, just outside of Munich. You can get there quite easily on the rail line. They made it into a museum. I'd never visited another one. I went by myself, which was really great.

In a weird way, it was a very powerful experience, of course. But it was—it's hard for me to find the words when I try to describe it—it was very grounding. It really reconfirmed in a very powerful way the importance of this practice, the importance of purifying the mind.

It's set up, I think, very well. The grounds are beautiful, and mostly the buildings are gone, but there are a couple of buildings that were left as samples of some of the dorms. Then it's set up like a museum. You go in the building and they have big placards, posters, with writing and photographs of all different aspects—the people who came here, different things that happened, the people that worked there, all kinds of things you wouldn't have known about.

For example, in one room there would be a big poster, one for each of the different nationalities or ethnic groups of people that were in this particular camp—Dachau. Many different groups: the Roma, people from Czechoslovakia, people from Hungary, the Jews, gay people, all different. What I thought was brilliant was that it wouldn't just be writing. They would have photos. They would describe a particular scenario. And then they would have a picture of a person and a name. There was a way that they made it real, that they allowed the mind to connect. Whether it was guards, whether it was people who were working there in different ways, or people that were helping the trains run—all different. So there was a sense of real human beings, and vastness. It was vast. There had been so many buildings. My friends told me, "Oh, this is one of the little ones."

What struck me was this sense that made it human. You see different people. And when you see a person, you can't just go—I couldn't just go off into—"Oh, this was some monsters who did this." First of all, this kind of cruelty targeting one group against another—we all know that didn't just happen in Germany in World War II. You could really see... What's going on in the Congo. What's going on in Guantanamo. What's going on in Sudan. What happened in Cambodia. Look at the Burmese government against its own people.

Looking at the way they made it human for me—I was watching all the different people going through, all kinds of normal people—and I would watch how this way of making it real was intense but not overwhelming. There was some way it was really accessible. I could see how people would start to look, and then they would get really moved, but not turned off, really there. It was really drawing people in. It was very touching.

But what it did for me was this: this is the human condition. Who knows? I don't know what I would do if I were in a situation where... We don't know the power of denial in our mind when we have to make choices.

CHAPTER 91

Ongoing Awareness and Resolute Aspiration

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this dual teaching, Carol Wilson and Steve Armstrong address the essential question of how to carry meditation practice into everyday life. Carol shares insights from practicing with Sayadaw U Tejanīya, emphasizing that sustainable awareness doesn't require intense effort but rather genuine interest in watching the mind without judgment. She illustrates how this relaxed yet curious approach naturally reveals the difference between a mind that is aware and one that is not—and how this recognition itself becomes the motivation for continued practice.*
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> *Steve Armstrong introduces the rarely discussed pāramī of adhiṭṭhāna (determination or resoluteness), beginning with the story of the ascetic Sumedha who made the vow to become a Buddha upon encountering Dīpaṅkara Buddha. He explains that true resolve is not about gritting one's teeth or forcing effort, but rather a continuous remembering and realigning with one's chosen direction. This mental capacity can be developed like a muscle through practice.*
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> *Both teachers emphasize that awareness in daily life doesn't require special conditions or withdrawal from activity—it can be a 'secret mission' undertaken anywhere. The key is trusting that wisdom naturally arises through steady, non-judgmental observation, and recognizing that the seed of all action lies in intention. They encourage practitioners to make the resolve to sustain awareness throughout life, meeting each moment with presence rather than striving for distant goals.*

So tonight we're both going to speak about different things that come into our minds about awareness in daily life—or basically a life of practice—which is, of course, as Steve talked about last night, a vast topic.

I'm just going to say a few simple things about this particular style of watching our mind, of noticing experience that we've been talking about and trying to give you time to explore these days.

I found—and I think I've said this to some people—after sitting with Sayadaw U Tejaniya for a while and practicing in this way, I was really surprised to find the effect it had in carrying into my daily life without a lot of trying, without any big ideas. Just how quite naturally this quality of interest in watching my mind arose without judgment. And that's what's so key.

Not watching my mind thinking, "I've got to be mindful, I've got to be good," because then right away you feel oppressed as soon as you think about it, right? The mind's not going to be so great when you watch it. We know that now. So if I think, "Oh, I've got to watch my mind," and when I see it, it's like, "Oh, it's all full of all this gunk—forget it, it's useless, there's no point in practice, why did I even do it?" It's hard to keep practice up if we have some model like that.

But this simplicity of just watching what the mind is doing with an interest to learn, and with this trust that wisdom naturally arises through the steadiness of awareness—I was really surprised and very heartened to find what an effect it's had in my life and how easy it is to access. It's really become quite natural. It's not such a leap.

If you've been practicing mindfulness Buddhist meditation for a long time, it's nothing you don't know. It's almost like you just have to stop trying so hard. Stop trying to be mindful in your daily life and then getting upset when you can't because things are so busy—so then you just screw the whole thing. It's really something much more interesting and less stressful.

But there are two things. I think the two key things are that it has to matter to us—we have to want to pay attention. And then there's the sense of relaxed remembering without judging.

I want to read you something from Tejaniya, a question and answer. Someone was asking him, "Can you give us some advice on how to practice outside the retreat center?"

So he says: "How do you want to live in the world out there?" You know, as if out there different things are happening—same mind. Did you notice that? Do you think you had a different mind here?

"If you really want to continue the practice, the mind will find a way. Only when there's a measure of true appreciating of the value of awareness, of mindfulness, will the mind be prepared to make a consistent effort in daily life. No matter how many techniques you know, unless the mind has the true interest, the true desire to practice in the world, you won't be able to apply any of those techniques out there. A mind that has understood the benefits of practice will find time and skillful ways to apply what has been learned on retreat. People who are really interested in the quality of their minds will watch that quality all the time. If you can clearly see for yourself the vast difference between the quality of the mind when it is aware and the quality when it is not aware—if you can see that for yourself—you will naturally want to be aware more and more often."

To me this is both so obvious but so really right on. Instead of all this "try this, try that," it puts it squarely back on us. We have to be interested enough. You can tell someone ten million little tricks of how to be aware, how to remember to be mindful, but it has to be that we notice the difference in our life, in our mind, just when we're aware. That's all. That's the first most important thing. And no one can give us that. That really comes from noticing for ourselves.

He goes on to say: "I really want to encourage people to think for themselves. You have all been practicing for some time. You have the basic tools. So you just have to understand the benefits of it."

So the motivation to pay attention really comes from within. If your heart is not in it, you never really give your best. You never fully develop your inner potential.

That's the first most important piece. But do you hear even that as I read it? I'm projecting—I don't know what's in any of your minds—but I'm wondering: if we hear even that and bring in this tendency of comparing and self-judging, did anyone think when I said "if your heart's not really in it, you'll never reach your full potential"...

Did anyone think, "Yeah, that's true. That's why I've never reached my full potential—because my heart's not really in it, and I'm hopeless"? You see, there's that possibility. But we don't want to develop that tendency; we know how to do something different.

As the Buddha said, what the mind frequently thinks about and ponders upon, that will become the natural inclination of the mind. So you've all had a chance to see in these nine days some of the natural inclinations of your mind. Scary, isn't it? But what we're doing is shifting the natural inclination toward appreciation of the simple awareness of what's happening.

My point is that we have to really care. The inner motivation has to come from us. But what also makes that possible is that we're interested in seeing how the mind works—not to judge it.

I'm going to paraphrase what Nisargadatta said: we pay attention out of interest, not to judge. And that is what makes the whole motivation possible—the willingness to just watch how our mind is working all through our life. It's really fascinating. And it's completely accessible because, as you've seen, it doesn't require a super deep level of samādhi. Someone was saying today, when we were talking, about noticing all these subtle, quick movements of mind—you can't keep up with that in daily life. No. But we can keep up with noticing when there's aversion, for example. We're just noticing something has come in, the mind has somehow contracted. You can notice that. And just get interested.

If we feel that because we've been practicing, or we're on a spiritual path, or our ideal is to cultivate compassion—which is true, these are good ideals—but then we use that to judge every time negativity or defilement or greed arises in the mind, what are we doing? We're using a beautiful ideal to cultivate aversion.

This is really where, when Ajahn Chah is talking about not looking down on the defilements, he means don't dismiss them. But of course, as we've said, it's not just about noticing defilements, but about getting interested, seeing why we do what we do, and trusting that if we're willing to see the messy, painful stuff along with the beautiful stuff—the more we're willing to just observe—wisdom shows us that acting from anger and feeding anger in our minds, or greed, wisdom shows us the suffering of that. We don't have to beat ourselves up about it as well. In fact, that doesn't work.

I want to give an example of this—just simple, how natural it is. This is a little example from my life; I don't know if it even makes any difference. But anyway, I was driving around here, on these country roads, driving back from Amherst. It's a long two-lane road, and there wasn't much traffic—not like driving in the cities, completely different. I was driving along, no one in front of me. Then a car pulled out in front and went ahead. Now, they didn't cut me off. It wasn't like a pull-out where I had to put on the brakes, but it was a little bit close—just enough that I noticed aversion came up in my mind. "Why did they have to? Couldn't they have waited? There was no one behind me. People always do that." So I noticed aversion in my mind. That's all.

And then I noticed as he turned—again, I felt another little surge of aversion. "This guy, he's just turning!" And I noticed that and I laughed.

And I thought, if I was driving in the city, this kind of stuff is happening every two seconds. And if you're just not noticing—and I wasn't doing any big examining—if I just wasn't noticing that aversion, it would keep piling on itself. And that's how you get to road rage in no time, really.

So just to see how simply noticing what's happening—that's all, not saying it shouldn't be happening—can really lead to a shift in understanding. And it really gives us a lot more space. So that's just a very simple example.

That's the motivation, the non-judging, that interest doing the work. And it really does just get so interesting. This already comes from the wisdom of understanding that it's just nature. It's just *kilesa* doing their job. It's just delusion doing its job, wisdom doing its job, the body doing its job. Don't take it all so personally. And then again, it gets much more interesting.

And then there's this quality of steadiness, of persistence—remembering whenever you remember throughout the day, but not with some huge focusing effort. That's another thing. I know how to be mindful in my movements. I can go incredibly, incredibly slowly, but even not slowly, there's always this feeling like I'm doing something. It's like, "Okay, now get mindful." Do you know what I mean? Just a little—sometimes it's subtle, sometimes not so subtle—but there's something more I have to do to be mindful. It can be a subtly oppressive kind of feeling.

But in this way, as soon as you think, as soon as you remember yourself, you're here. You don't have to get *more* mindful. As soon as you think, "Oh, my body"—you're here. That level of remembering is really natural and easy. It is not stressful. It's not demanding.

After a while, it's not that you're always there. Sure, you space out, you notice you're thinking. It's just no big deal. But after a while, it just becomes more and more the natural habit. We still space out, but before you know it, you're noticing the body, you're noticing what the mind's doing. You're not trying to change it. Trusting wisdom to change it.

So if I was thinking, "Oh, if I see anger in my mind, if I see greed in my mind—oh no, I have to do something," then I'm back in struggle. But if I'm willing to notice it, if I'm trusting awareness enough and trusting the wisdom that's developed in my own understanding through my own experience, and also the external informational wisdom—I can trust that if there's ill will or if there's craving, I may say something stupid, but I'm not going to act out of control. We have some sense of wisdom and some sense of trust in the wisdom of awareness.

So it's not just like, okay, free ride. It doesn't matter what you do. Go out and steal and run amok. As long as you're paying attention, it's all okay. I'm not saying that.

If you pay attention, you can trust the wisdom that sees, "I don't want to create more suffering for myself or others." That's what's so trustworthy. We're so tight. We're so afraid we're going to do these horrible things. But if we trust paying attention, we trust the tenderness of the mind and heart that's open to seeing things as they are. We trust that metta and compassion for yourself and others are more accessible. Compassion when you see your mind running in these same old habits, same old habits.

Anybody had that this retreat? Did you have compassion for it at all? At all? Even a second? Yeah. Okay. It's a start.

It's painful, isn't it? Look at the world. Running, running, running. It's the same old habit since the beginning of recorded history, as far as I can tell. So here we have a chance. This is the only place we can work—in our own heart, in our own mind. We can only do it with interest, with kindness, with compassion. We can't do it with getting out the whip. Remember yourself. Get interested in your mind. And then watch why we do what we do. Just watch it.

Did you read the very first page in this book? I just read the last section of it because I think it's great about the defilements. It goes through mind, speech, and body. So I'll just do body: Have you ever knocked really hard on someone's door, or refused to enter a room simply because someone you dislike was in there, or jumped a queue, or used the shampoo someone left in the bathroom, or made a private call using your employer's phone line, or done any similar actions? I always think, if you've done anything where you think, "No one's going to see me, so it's okay if I do this"—all sort of unthinkingly? All these actions are motivated by defilements. Just be aware of it.

So my point is not, "Ugh." My point is noticing what's in our mind, because what's feeding the qualities in the mind, the factors in the mind, are what give rise to speech, are what give rise to action. And the heart of action, the seed of karma, the seed of wholesome or unwholesome action is not in the result. That's out of our control. The conditions externally are out of our control. The seed of action is in the intention, the motivation, what's originating it in our mind and heart. That's the only thing we can really notice, pay attention to.

So here again, it's not to set up an ideal, because then you're just feeding aversion. But notice when there's ill will in my mind, and I think there's a lot of ill will in my mind, but still this person needs to—you know, they really need to be set straight. They really do need, for the good of all beings, to know what's right. And I'll say it in a nice way. And you really may mean that. So there's ill will, there's delusion, and maybe a little piece of trying to do the right thing. We just can't tell. That's the thing.

Knowing when there's kilesa, when there's defilement in the mind, the wisest thing we can do is nothing. Because we can't see straight. We just can't see straight. Sometimes you have to do something anyway, for sure. But at least, if you don't have to, wait. Let the confusion clear.

But the seed is in the intention. So you're thinking, "Okay, I'll say it in a nice way, and it's a useful thing to say." And maybe it is a useful thing to say. And maybe you say it in such a way that they don't pick up that you're really filled with ill will. Small chance, but maybe. Maybe they're really deluded and it doesn't come through. But even if all of

that works out, and it's useful, the fact that you were filled with ill will while doing it—that's the seed of that action. That's feeding the tendency of ill will in your own mind. You're suffering from that, even if you don't think so.

This is the great message of Buddhism: if you don't know you're suffering, you are suffering. That's why it's such a popular teaching! But really, the seed is in the intention. This is why watching our mind and seeing how intentions change is so powerful. It's really how we change ourselves. We don't do it—wisdom does it. This is how we change how we relate to other people, how we change how we are in the world.

It may seem like it's just some small thing. I remember, I think I was talking about this the first night, how I went from saying this isn't just some esoteric mind game for privileged people, and I jumped from that to Dachau. I make these leaps, but it's true. So just watching your mind as you go out and binge on three packages of M&Ms or something—that's not the end of the world. Stupid maybe, but not the end of the world. Watch yourself do it instead of turning off. Watch what goes on in your mind with interest. That's all. What's motivating doing it? How is it while I'm doing it? How is it after I'm doing it? So that we learn from everything. Everything becomes something to learn from.

When we're in a situation that's really busy, when there's a lot going on, we think, "Well, I can't possibly be mindful." But we can still blip in in little ways and learn from what's going on.

Here's another example from Sayadaw U Tejaniya about this, just to give a sense of how we don't have to be so precisely mindful when we have the right attitude. It comes into all aspects of our life. So someone is saying, "I need a job that doesn't put me under any pressure or stress, then I could be mindful." You want to say, "Yeah, good luck with that." But that's not what Tejaniya said. He says, "Yes, when there's a lot of pressure, a lot of stress, practicing paying attention becomes more difficult. It just does. That's how it is. But we can try to learn from the difficulties. So try to learn from the difficulties at your workplace. What makes the mind agitated?" We're just watching cause and effect. What triggers the agitation? Why do you lose mindfulness? When do you lose mindfulness? Why does the mind become eager? Why does the mind want to make something happen? Is it necessary to hurry? How does it feel when you hurry? Investigating this way will help you deal more skillfully with difficult situations. And as you notice this, it will prevent unwholesome mind states from taking over so much.

So this again is coming back to this real trust in the awareness, rather than the idea that we have to control all the mind states, which, as we know, isn't possible. But it is possible to just keep feeding the interest.

Someone wrote in one of the questions the other night, asking something to the effect of how can you be aware in daily life without kind of withdrawing—because you have to withdraw to practice. And of course, I think you get a sense of what I'm saying: it just really becomes natural and easy to be present with yourself while you're in relation, while you're doing things. It's a practice, but it's not about doing some extra heavy mindfulness.

There's one way I like that Tejaniya was talking about his practice in daily life. As Steve said the other night, he did a great deal of his practice as a layman. He was running his father's business through a big clothing stall in the market—a very busy life, regular life in downtown Yangon. But he said he was just by this time so interested in watching his mind. This would be after he'd worked through that depression.

He said, you know, nobody else has to know what you're doing. You don't have to make a big deal—"Oh, I'll come with you, but I'm watching my mind." He called it secret mission, like you're a secret agent. So he said he'd go with his friends to the kickboxing match, but he'd just be sitting there with them watching the thing while watching his mind. How was his mind reacting to what he was seeing, to the friends or whatever? That was just much more interesting. So he didn't say, "I can't go with you, I have to go home and meditate." He was just present when he was working in the clothing stall. Customers would come and he would be aware of how he felt, the emotions that arose when he saw someone coming. If they were aggressive, he'd be aware of the reactions that came up in him, how he responded. Just in a very global but very interested way.

I love that. Secret mission. So we can all take up secret mission.

Really, it's true that once you're interested—and that's our trick, to keep refinding your interest, keep refinding your inspiration, and that's why we always talk about sangha and such, and we can talk about that more tomorrow morning—but once you find your interest, you can really trust that being present with awareness doesn't take a million techniques. There are many more techniques you can learn and you can use them in daily life, and doing sitting every day helps. It definitely helps. We can talk more about specifics tomorrow too.

But the main thing is: find your interest, find your motivation, and then really trust the secret mission level of interest and awareness in your mind. There's no way you can say, "I can't do it, I don't know enough, my practice isn't strong enough, my dharma isn't deep enough." None of that.

I think you've seen here in the moments that you're just present with what is—that's all there is to do. And wisdom will arise by itself. You don't have to already know it all. If we already knew it all, we wouldn't have to do this. But actually, there's not an "all" to know. The less we know, the better off we are, because then we can just surrender into what's happening right now.

So I guess that's the best I can explain right now how I have felt this has really been accessible in daily life. I hope it's of some benefit to you.

Franz recently reminded me of an old Taoist sage's wisdom. It goes: Some people make things happen. Some people watch what's happening. And some people at the end of their life ask, "What happened?"

It's your choice. Each one of us has a choice as to how we are going to approach what's happening. So often we find ourselves quite carried along in the stream of events of our life, feeling more like a bubble on a stream than a pebble at the bottom. And yet when it comes to dharma practice, we can see even from our efforts here that yes, we have to make an effort. We have to be here. We have to attempt to be aware, to remember to be aware. But we've all overshot and tried too hard. And we've probably seen the other end of the spectrum where we really have cruised, tried too little.

From my experience, it seems that the whole path of practice is trying to find the middle—that place between trying too hard and not trying at all, not trying enough.

I want to speak about one of the paramis that I introduced last night. It's not one of the usual or familiar ones, but rather one of the more obscure and rarely mentioned. I want to introduce it by telling a story.

It's said that hundreds of thousands of eons ago—like a long time—there was an ascetic named Sumedha living in what is now present-day India. He had so perfected his practices of austerities and concentration that it is said if he had heard a single word of teaching from a Buddha, he would have become fully enlightened. That's how clear his mind was. That's how much integrity he had in his life. How prepared his mind was for right view.

One day on his alms round, he went to town and saw that everyone was in a big hubbub. He realized something was happening and inquired what was going on. He was told that the Buddha of that day, Dipankara Buddha, was coming to town, and the village people were preparing. He got excited and wanted to see the Buddha, so he went to the side of the road where the Buddha would be coming and prepared a section of the pathway.

When Dipankara Buddha came towards him on his trip into town and the ascetic saw him, he saw the essence of the Buddha—the radiance, the purity, the serenity, the steadiness, the compassion, the clarity, the wisdom. In his clear mind, appreciating what he saw, what he knew of the Buddha, he made a vow that one day he too wanted to be a Buddha in order to help other beings free themselves from suffering.

Dipankara Buddha, having the mind that he did, noticed that this ascetic on the side of the road had just made a vow. He checked out the vow, checked out the karmic record of the ascetic, and realized that he had all the requisites for awakening—that if he did indeed undertake the additional practices to become a Buddha, he would one day become a Buddha. So he acknowledged to that ascetic that he knew of his vow, and he confirmed to him that one day in the future he would become a Buddha.

The ascetic Sumedha did not at that time receive the Buddha's teaching. But for the next hundreds of lifetimes, he took birth in all of the realms known to Buddhas, in order to meet the conditions that would challenge him to perfect the paramis—all those qualities that I spoke about last night. To perfect the paramis to such a degree that he could become a Buddha, he willingly undertook hundreds of lifetimes being challenged to practice generosity and renunciation, developing energy and patience and loving-kindness and truthfulness.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, there was a prince born in India, Prince Siddhartha, who, as the story goes—and you probably know—at age twenty-nine left the palace, undertook six years of austerities and practice, and became the Buddha upon realizing the truth. He became the Buddha of our day and age, Gautama Buddha.

As a Buddha, after his awakening, he taught what he had realized for forty-five years. He taught men and women, monks and nuns, royalty, peasants, beggars—the whole spectrum. And those teachings have been carried down for more than 2,500 years to arrive in Burma and Thailand and Sri Lanka and the US and Europe today.

One of the conditions giving rise to this event, that makes this retreat possible and explains why we're here, is the vow of that ascetic Sumedha in ancient history. Without that vow, and without our Buddha, we wouldn't be here doing this. That is a condition we don't know of, we don't see, we're not aware of it, it's not in our memory—and yet we can see that it's true.

That vow was extraordinarily powerful, and it has had consequences for the ascetic, the Buddha, and everyone who has heard the Buddha's teachings since then, even in our lives. How did such a vow become so powerful?

We too, today, in this retreat and in our lives, have had inspirations, aspirations. Maybe we have made vows, have had wishes, have had interest in doing something—whether it's baking bread, writing a book, raising a family, learning how to drive a car, speaking a foreign language. It all takes a decision and following through.

Now we've been practicing. We have heard the Buddha's teachings and we have learned about awareness. Even in the short time that we've been here, for those of you who are new to practice and maybe doing your first retreat, you can see that in seven or eight days, this kind of practice really is powerful. It really shows you something about yourself that you can't find or get anywhere else.

The question for you is: has it impacted you enough to aspire to a life of awareness? Do you see the possibility, do you see the value of awareness in your life? And if you do, the subsequent question is: what can I do about it? Because now we have the clarity of mind to see, to value, to aspire, and then to wonder.

One of the paramis, one of the forces of purity residing as a potential in our mind, is the power of resoluteness. In the Pali language, it's called adhiṭṭhāna—determination or resoluteness. If we make the resolve to live a life of awareness, no one can stop you. Nothing can stop you. But that's if you properly understand what a resolve, what the power of a resolute mind, truly is.

So I want to speak about this parami, this parami of resoluteness or adhitana.

Because the Bodhisattva made the resolve—or the ascetic made the resolve and became a Bodhisattva—and fulfilled that resolve over hundreds of lifetimes to become a Buddha.

Resolve or resoluteness involves both understanding, inspiration, aspiration, energy, faith, effort, patience, equanimity—in fact, all the other paramis. A firm and clear and decisive resolve is possible because of the other paramis. They're all interdependent, we could say.

But right resolve sometimes, or determination sometimes, seems to imply a tight, contracted, gritting your teeth, hunching your shoulders, clenching your fists, scowling your face, pushiness. And that's not balanced in any way. That's not really required for determination or resolution.

Because right resolve, as I said, or right determination, or a firm clarity about the direction we're going in life—it's like a commitment. You make a commitment when you get married. Some people make a commitment when they join AA. It's not a one-time thing. It's not like you say, "I'm married, that's it. I can relax for the rest of the

journey." And we all know that. But it's a commitment that's valid, that works, as long as you invest in it. And as soon as you stop investing in it, it's not there. It has no permanency beyond the current investment.

And the same with resoluteness. It takes a continuity of remembering. Remembering is awareness. Remember? In talking about awareness, awareness is remembering, presence of mind. Adhitana is a mindfulness practice. Resoluteness is a mindfulness practice. Remembering where you're going. And in any moment, what right resolve means is remembering the direction you aspire to.

It's not about accomplishing anything. It's not about grabbing, reaching, hurrying, rushing, getting frustrated, disappointed, and judging. It's only about remembering the direction you've chosen to go and realigning yourself with it in this moment. It doesn't take any more effort than that. It just takes the persistent continuity of doing that in every moment.

So when you find yourself impatient or frustrated, disappointed, judgmental, critical, distracted, multitasking, or any of the other impediments to a resolute mind—and you notice that—you let go. You remember, you realign, and you meet the moment.

The importance of resoluteness in our life is that it reaffirms our aspiration. It gives us strength and stability of mind. And it really guides our life toward the values we have seen and appreciated and selected in our clearest moments. We're not always clear. We're not always able to affirm it or confirm it or re-experience it. And so we want to take our clearest experience of what we aspire to, to remember that, to make the resolve, and to work to fulfill it.

So what prevents us from making this resolve to follow our interests, to be aware, to wake up, to see the way things are, to free the mind from its habits? All of the usual defilements, all of the usual hindrances come to interfere. You might say sometimes our resolve is contaminated by doubt. Doubt is that wavering mind—yes, maybe, but no—multitasking dispersion of energy.

After I'd done one two-week retreat, I came here on staff a few months later when it first opened, or soon after it first opened. One of the first days I was on staff, I was in the attic of the Catskills Wing over there with another staff person, Rodney Smith, and we were insulating the ceiling in order to keep it warmer during the winter. And we were having a discussion about Nibbana, of which we knew nothing.

Rodney reminded me a couple of years ago that at that time I said to him with utter and absolute conviction, "I have no doubt that in this lifetime I will realize the Dhamma."

I didn't know what I was saying. I didn't know what was going to be involved. But that doesn't prevent or interfere with the clarity and the commitment to the direction you're going.

It, in fact, is a statement of willingness to endure, to put up with, to face whatever comes, no matter what. And I felt that. I knew that, even though I didn't know how hard it was going to be.

So the clarity of the direction and the faith in your understanding of it, your commitment to it, is not dependent on knowing the terrain. It's dependent on knowing your heart and really seeing and acknowledging what you see in your heart as being of value—to you, to others—and what you really see as the best possible for you. It's our choice. No one else can make it for us.

But there have been plenty of times since that resoluteness when my efforts and my determination were impeded, obstructed by laziness. Because sometimes you just don't have energy, or you don't think you do. Sometimes you don't know how much energy is required to meet the conditions you're facing. As I've said, sometimes we apply too much and exhaust ourselves. Sometimes we apply too little and we're overwhelmed. It takes a lot of experience to really feel confident in a willingness to meet the present moment with whatever energy it requires.

And I think this is one of the great fears we have when we leave a retreat, which is so protected and so singularly pointing to awareness and awareness practice. When we enter the mainstream of our life with all of its distractions and all of its requirements and all of our obligations, we just feel like it's exhausting. Well, it's exhausting to even think about it, let alone to do it. And we feel like, where am I ever going to get the energy to practice?

But as Carol said, if you have the interest to watch your mind, there isn't anything you do in your busy life where your mind isn't there. Everything you do, your mind is already there. And what this awareness practice asks of us is to know the mind. It's only that much energy.

So as we continue with our practice, we really clarify what our aspiration is, what the direction is, and we grow an understanding of just how to do that, how much energy is required and how to meet the moment.

I'm reminded of a story that Joseph tells about one of his teachers, Dipa Ma. Now, Dipa Ma, as probably many of you know, was an Indian Bengali woman who was just an extraordinary yogi, both in developing tranquility and concentration, as well as in

developing liberating insight. Just extraordinary. And she was the most loving and gentle and kind being. She came to the States two or three times and taught here and stayed over in the house across the street.

And one time she said to Joseph, who had studied with her some, "Joseph, you should sit for three days." And Joseph thought, sure, three-day retreat. I can do a three-day retreat. But she didn't mean that. She meant, "Joseph, you should sit down and not get up for three days." And then she said, "Don't be lazy."

She could do that. She could sit down and maintain her mind for three days until she got up. And so she knew. She wasn't just speaking hypothetically. She was saying, it takes energy. It takes willingness.

But sometimes we let the fear of discomfort hold us back. And believe me, comfort is not a goal worthy of your efforts. We know there's going to be some discomfort—some discomfort of the body, some discomfort of the mind—and we must have the courage to meet that discomfort in order to stay aligned with our aspiration to be awake, to really meet the moment, to see what is going on, to see the mind in all of its range of possibilities.

If you live in the comfort zone of your life all the time, you don't grow. Imagine you go to first grade, you learn your lessons—or at least eighty percent of the lessons—you get your summer break, and you come back in the fall to the first grade again. And you go through your lessons and you learn ninety percent of the remaining twenty, and most of the time you're bored. Summer break, and you come back the third year into the first grade again. If you keep going over the same turf in your life, in your practice, in your commitment, you don't grow.

But what the path of practice involves is growing in capacity, growing in awareness, growing in commitment, growing in energy, growing in understanding, growing in patience, growing in equanimity. And these only happen when we bump up against the challenges, the rough edges, the peaks and troughs of life and meet them. Then we strengthen the mind.

Often our aspiration and our determination, our resoluteness, is besieged by attachment. We have so many interests. We have so much to do. We have so many fantasies. We have so much distraction that we forget where we want to go.

We forget the direction that we have valued in our clearest moments. And so it is awareness that reminds us, that remembers. And it is letting go, or the practice of renunciation, that releases that which does not support our highest aspiration.

Now oftentimes we think, "Oh, letting go is really painful. Renunciation, letting go—I don't want to let go of what I'm hanging on to." But we have let go of so much in our life already, and it hasn't been painful at all. Do you remember that doll, that bike, that ball, that sport, that stamp collection, coin collection—whatever it was that you had when you were a young kid that was the source of your happiness and activity for days on end? Where is it now? Well, it may be in the attic or it may be in the cellar, but it's not in your heart. Somehow your heart has let go of that, because it no longer serves your purpose. It no longer serves your aspiration. It no longer makes you happy. It no longer is of value to you. And we let go of all kinds of things unknowingly.

But when we come to Dharma practice and we see the path ahead, we see the direction we're going, I would invite you to do a kind of look through the attics of your life and see what it is that you've been holding onto—plans and goals and friends, behaviors, beliefs, intentions—that no longer serve your highest aspiration. We have them, but once we get clear that awareness and the value of awareness in our life is the direction we want to go, then we can let go of a lot that doesn't support it. And yet we have to look. We have to really take a review, kind of clean out the closets and intentionally let go of what no longer is supportive.

Sometimes we're impatient, sometimes we hurry, sometimes we don't believe it's possible—hanging on to an old self-image that just feels inferior or incapable.

There was a time I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma. I was practicing concentration practices at the time, which is not Vipassana practice, but concentration practice. And one of the goals, one of the tools for developing concentration, is to develop this quality of mind—the *adhitthana*, the resoluteness of mind. The understanding is that resoluteness is a mental muscle which, when identified and exercised properly, gets stronger, so that it can be used as needed in your life.

The challenge, as Sayadaw was instructing me, is to make the resolution to attain certain meditative experiences quickly, for a certain length of time, and to come out of them. You learn to guide the mind through clear resoluteness. So I was going along doing the preliminary steps, and then one day Sayadaw says to me, "Now I want you to make the resolve to do X, Y, Z."

When I heard that, I just burst out laughing. I said, "Well, that's ridiculous. I don't even believe it's possible, and certainly not for me."

And he said, "That's okay. You don't have to believe it. Just try it. Just make the resolve and forget it."

I was so skeptical and so disbelieving that I almost didn't even give it a try. But he's my teacher—do what he says. I went to my room, sat down, and almost half-heartedly said, "Okay, may the mind attain XYZ."

Instantly, in a split second, the mind was there. I could not believe it.

And I realized then that, indeed, resoluteness of mind is not a personal attribute. It is a capacity of mind that can be developed. And when developed, it is available for use. Not just for me, but for any mind that makes the effort to train this capacity, to develop this mental muscle of resoluteness. If we don't exercise it, it won't grow. If we do exercise it, it will. And it can be a powerful support in our effort to just be awake, to just be aware moment to moment, day by day, in any activity, whatever we're doing. If you make that resolve, and you practice sincerely, the resolve will come to support you.

There is so much that could be said about resolve, but I think you begin to see that these paramis are the vehicle for our awakening. They are the foundation, the support.

They prepare the mind for that liberating knowledge we gain, that wisdom we gain through clear insight. Resoluteness is involved. Equanimity is required. Continuity, persistent energy, and sustained interest. They're all a package, really. And they are possibilities for us every day.

There isn't a day that goes by where we aren't called upon—if we recognize the opportunity—to be a little more patient, a little more energetic, a little more truthful, a little more understanding, a little more accepting, a little more generous. And that's all that's required: just a little more. A little more, practiced many times over, really adds up.

As I mentioned, on a retreat like this—nine days, even though the conditions are very special, we're in seclusion with a singularity of purpose, all of the teaching has been directed towards developing awareness and all of the mental muscles that support it—we can see in seven, eight, nine days that it really makes a difference in our life, in our mind.

I invite you to consider making the resolve to sustain your awareness for the rest of your life. Let's just make the resolve. That's all. Which means that you're willing to realign yourself when you notice that you're off, when you notice that you're not aware. You simply make an effort to arouse the awareness to meet that moment.

What did you call it? A stealth mission? A secret mission? I call it anonymous arahant. Nobody needs to know you're practicing. And yet if you practice in this way, day by day, no one can stop you. And the goal only appears moment to moment to moment to moment. You don't have to grit your teeth. You don't have to sweat. You don't have to clench your fist. You just have to remember: this is the direction I've chosen to go.

So let's sit for a moment and let the words quiet down.

These are the four resolves, the Buddha said: the resolve for wisdom, the resolve for truth, the resolve for generosity, and the resolve for peace. One should not neglect wisdom, one should preserve the truth, one should cultivate generosity, and one should train in peace.

CHAPTER 92

Things As They Have Come to Be

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the elegant simplicity at the heart of Buddhist practice: the recognition of yathābhūta ñāṇadassana—knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be. She emphasizes that this Pāli phrase captures the dynamic, conditioned nature of each moment, revealing how everything arises through innumerable causes and conditions in constant flux.

Wilson explores how the Buddha's path begins and ends with right view (sammā diṭṭhi)—the capacity to recognize accurately what is happening in this very moment. She explains that freedom doesn't require creating different experiences or adopting new beliefs, but rather seeing clearly how greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) distort our perception and create suffering. Through vivid examples—from searching for tortoise holes in the desert to her visit to Dachau—she demonstrates how these mental distortions narrow our world and drive reactive behavior.

The talk offers practical guidance on trusting the simplicity of mindfulness (sati). Wilson reassures practitioners that awareness of any object—whether breath, fear, wanting, or boredom—cultivates the same purifying quality of presence. She encourages recognizing moments of natural peace that arise throughout daily activities, noting that mindfulness cannot be damaged and is always immediately accessible the moment we remember to be present. This understanding, she suggests, is not merely an esoteric pursuit but essential for responding to life's challenges with wisdom and compassion.

The best way I could introduce what I want to talk about tonight—which is simply mindfulness—is to share in a simple way what to me is at the very heart of our practice, and why I spend my life trying to share and teach this.

There's something about the Buddhist teachings that, despite the tons of teachings and all the lists and suttas and the Vinaya, when you get to the very heart of it, what the Buddha is teaching is so simple and elegant. He's teaching about understanding how our mind works.

You may have noticed that meditation is essentially the work of the mind. Our body comes along, it's useful, it helps us. But the seed of suffering and confusion arises in the mind stream, in the mind or the heart, here, now, in this moment. And the understanding that leads to peace—to recognizing the natural peace and ease of the mind and body

as it is, to freedom from suffering and confusion—also arises here. The seed and the experience of it arises in this mind, in this heart stream, in this particular moment. They're not both happening at the same time, mind you. But it's always now, in this moment, in this mind, in this heart.

The heart of our practice, the heart of this work of the mind, the key catalyst you could say, is this attitude of mindfulness that we have been talking about and will continue to talk about. Mindfulness or awareness: simply, with full presence, knowing what's happening just as it's happening. That's all it is. It doesn't seem like much. We actually try to add too much extra to it. It doesn't seem like much, yet it's the seed of transforming our suffering to wisdom, to freedom. In itself, it's the catalyst for transformation.

The question may arise: what exactly is transformed? And this, again, is where we come to what I find so elegant about the way the Buddha taught.

The deliverance from suffering, from confusion, the experience of freedom—what we're trying to share in our understanding of that here is not about taking on another set of beliefs or another faith. For sure, there's wisdom, there's knowledge, there's information that we're sharing that you take in that's helpful. But freedom isn't about buying into the information and having another set of stuff that you believe and can say and can write.

Everything we say is trying to be helpful—not that you have to believe us, but to support your gathering interest to turn your attention around and look at what's going on in your mind, in your heart, right now. To really begin to get a sense of how interesting that is, how exciting that is. When you're not trying to make a certain thing happen, but you just want to see how it works, the whole world is our playground for exploration. Anything that comes up in your mind can be the object of mindfulness. No exceptions.

So the freedom of the Buddha isn't about adopting a set of beliefs. And it's also—and this sometimes is harder to get in meditation, because meditation is a weird activity—we come here, we sit down, we say watch your breath, and it feels different from our life. So we think something different should happen. When you sit and your mind does its same old, same old stuff, you think there must be something wrong, that you're doing it wrong.

But actually, we've set up this very elaborate support so you can sit and walk and, as Jack said, spend two more hours with your own tedious thoughts. We've got nine days not to end them, but to really start to recognize how they work. Because they were there before, they're here now, and they'll come up again later.

The meditation looks like we're trying to create a new experience, a different world, that freedom has got to be something other than this. This can't be it, right? This mind, this body sitting here sweating all day—is this freedom?

Guess what, folks? Freedom isn't about changing the externals. And it's also not that we're going to get to and create a really wonderful mind state that's going to last. Wonderful mind states will come and they'll go. Horrible ones will come. And you may not believe it, but they'll go.

Really boring, calm ones will come. You may notice them, you may not, and they'll go.

And the freedom the Buddha's talking about is not about awakening into some other world. And this is the part that I love, that's so elegant. In the way he describes it, the beginning of the path, what gets us going, is some kind of right view. It's called right understanding, but I like the translation of right view. It gives the sense of recognizing accurately. And the end of the path is right view.

What is it that allows for the wisdom that arises in our mind that frees us from suffering? It's not being somewhere else. It's recognizing accurately the way things have come to be in this moment and this moment. The Buddha's not saying we have to change things. He's saying we don't have a clue what's really going on. And that's our problem. And we don't know that we don't have a clue. That's our bigger problem.

The fact that you're all here, that's the beginning or well into the middle of the path. Right view is the first beginning of "wait, there's something else going on." Because how I respond doesn't really seem to meet the situation. Everything I do is for my own happiness, and somehow I didn't get there yet for very long.

There are lots of different names for different kinds of insights that come and go in different models. You don't need to know them right now. But one of them, the Pali word is *yathābhūta ñāṇadassana*, which is usually translated as knowledge and vision of things as they are. This is a very profound level of understanding, just on the edge of freedom.

I've been told on good authority from a couple of different friends who are much more Pali scholars than I, that the word *yathābhūta*, often translated as "things as they are," has a more accurate translation in terms of the grammar: "things as they have come to be."

It's great, isn't it? Because what it gives is that sense of movement, the sense of cause and effect and conditionality, and there is no steady state. Things as they have come to be in this moment—and the accurate recognition of that is what opens our hearts and minds to peace, to freedom. That's what's so cool. We don't have to create something else, and you don't have to change your personality. Good luck anyway. But it's about learning: how come we don't see things the way they are? *Yathābhūta*—how come we don't, and how can we? Guess what? Mindfulness.

But "things as they have come to be" is such a living phrase. It really takes one into the experience that we don't recognize. Because one of the ways of understanding things as they have come to be is recognizing that each of our experiences in this moment is the effect of innumerable causes and conditions, isn't it?

In fact, if you start thinking—okay, you can think for ten seconds while I talk, I know you're doing that anyway—but if you start to think about what are some of the causes and conditions that allowed you to be here? You might think: you could get time off work, you had enough money, you're healthy enough, your spouse let you go. But if you keep going, where can you stop? Where can you stop? Everything runs into everything. You go back to the food and the farmers who grow the food and the trucks that transport it and the people who drill the oil and back to the dinosaurs, because otherwise there wouldn't be oil. And it goes, and everything is completely connected. You can't pull anything out and say it's separate.

Things as they have come to be in this moment cannot be otherwise. And this next moment they will be otherwise, because things as they have come to be, the conditions are always changing. Even as we're talking, the words I'm saying are different, the sensations in your body may have changed, a different thought is there, a different mood is there. You hear me, you don't, you're somewhere else. The energy in the room—every moment it's changing. Things as they have come to be now and now and now.

And so the ability, the willingness to be so present for that without trying to fix it, even just to recognize that's what's happening—because do we really recognize that most of the time? Recognizing it in terms of right view is different from thinking, "Oh yeah, that's how it is." I mean, I can say that.

We can say it. We can think it. That may not be how I'm perceiving in the moment.

But that's the elegance of the Buddha's teaching. We awaken into this world more fully, into how things are. And what makes that possible? It's this quality. It's not the only thing, but it's our big avenue in, our big key in—this quality of mindful awareness. This quality of seeing, just being present with fullness of attention for whatever's arising.

And this, of course, is what makes it wise mindfulness, what makes it mindfulness at all. In that moment, there's not a clinging to make it stay. There's not an aversion trying to push it away, or fear. And there's not the sense that whatever's going on is only happening because it's all about me. Or at least we know when that's happening. Or we don't know it's happening—that's delusion.

There's a statement from the Buddha. He said, "This Dhamma is visible here and now." He's talking about the truth, the way things are. But to what extent is it visible here and now? To the extent that greed, hatred or aversion or fear, and delusion or confusion are not present in the citta. Citta is a word that encompasses mind and heart.

So to the extent that these are absent—and in a moment, not that you have to somehow experience a mind and heart that never again feels greed, never again feels aversion, never again feels delusion. That's said to be the mind and heart of a completely awakened being. But as has been said before, it's moments. So any moment that there's real presence with this clarity of mind that isn't colored or distorted—and I'll talk more about how that works, the distortions of greed, of hatred, of delusion—in that moment, there's the potential to just recognize accurately what's happening. Whatever it is that's happening, no big whoop.

And the steadiness of this mindfulness—this is really the key—is the continuity. Not that every single moment you're aware, of course not. But the sense of willingness to just come back, be here, be here, be here. At first, you have to consciously remember all the time, right? But those of you who've done retreats before and have incorporated this in your life know, I hope, that the mindfulness begins to get its own inertia. Inertia meaning a body in motion keeps going in motion.

Just like anger, for example, has its own inertia. Have you noticed? If you're really angry and not aware of it, you keep thinking about the person you're angry at and what they did. What happens to the anger? The more you think about that stupid jerk and what they did to me. Or you just look at them. Someone here bugs the heck out of you. You don't even know them, and they're sitting way on the other side of the room. You know nothing about them, but you just look at them when you're angry. In fact, you're calm, and you're scared of calm, so you look at them so you can get angry. Something could happen, right? It gets its own inertia. Then whatever next poor sucker walks into

your line of vision—then you go to the group interview, then you think about that unfinished business you had with your partner, and you know, "I'm going to write that letter right now. I'm going to clean this up." It just gets its own momentum.

Well, luckily, the wisdom factors also get their own momentum, and that's what we're cultivating here. The mindfulness, just the sense of willingness to be present, starts to remember itself. And that's why there's sitting, and that's why there's walking, and that's why there's noticing what you're doing when you're eating and when you're taking a shower and when you're doing your work meditation. Because it begins to get its own momentum. And when the mindfulness is there, if we notice greed or hatred or delusion, fine. That's the next arising object of mindfulness.

When seen clearly, it's no problem. It might not be pleasant, but as the Buddha said, we're not awakening into a different world. So perhaps you've noticed that not everything is pleasant in your world. Does anyone have a life where every moment is pleasant? No one would be here if they had that.

Is there somewhere in the back of your mind—and I've had this for years, it keeps slipping back in—the unacknowledged, unspoken idea that actually freedom means everything unpleasant goes away? That no more unpleasant thoughts will arise? That your family is going to start acting right? That you're not going to get fired from your job? That the weather will cooperate? That people will start behaving the way we think they ought to? I can tell you the answer to that. It's a big no way.

If you look at the Buddha, who we often look to for inspiration, for looking at how it is—when he awoke, his awakening is often described as this sense of interconnectedness, the dependence, the cause and effect. What I was saying: things as they have come to be, this constant movement and interconnection, really getting that that's all there is. But then how did he spend his life? He still had a body with headaches and backaches and got sick. He spent his life walking barefoot around India in the heat, begging for food, living in the woods. There were definitely some unpleasant physical sensations going on with that, one meal a day. His clan's people got into wars over water rights and killed each other. His different monks would get into battles—not physical, but verbal. "No, this is what the Buddha said." "No, that's the right way." There's one sutta where he comes and tries to mediate, and they basically say, "Go away. It's okay, we can take care of it." This is the Buddha. They say, "No, no, no. We don't need your help. We can take care of it." He goes away and says, "Foolish, misguided men." He had to deal with organizational problems, people not getting along. There were tons of people who came to challenge him, basically trying to show him up. It's not my idea of a pleasant life, if I was thinking of one. But a peaceful one? So clear.

The world he awoke into—he was more present, moving out of compassion for the welfare of all beings. The freedom is all about this: when we understand through accurate recognition, our whole relationship changes. We respond, don't we? We don't react—we respond from how we perceive a situation to be.

Have you ever had a time when someone has done something that either really hurt you or made you angry, or you think they're so insensitive, so selfish? You get all worked up in whatever way. And then later, either you really tune into them or you find out another piece of information, and you discover that the story you made up about why they did what they did was completely and totally wrong. Totally wrong. And I want to point out, this happens a lot more often than we might know. When you know the reason, you go, "Oh, they were in so much pain at that time. They couldn't help it. They couldn't even see past themselves. They didn't even know they hurt me. There was so much pain." And that whole anger just shifts to compassion, which is the natural expression of wisdom, of clear seeing. Yes, you were still hurt. But when we understand, it just becomes part of the bigger picture, and there's a natural compassion. It's a simple example, but you get a sense of what I mean.

How we respond is based on how we understand. How we understand is based on how we're really present, what we can perceive. So this is really, really powerful. *Yathābhūta*—things as they have come to be.

The heart of our mindfulness practice isn't about trying to get to a certain place. What are all the instructions, all the techniques—not only the ones we've given here, but all the different instructions and techniques just within the so-called Vipassana tradition, which isn't really an accurate label, but within the Theravada Buddhist tradition? Many forms of meditation coming from different angles. But the heart of all of it is to give us the interest, the willingness, the courage, and the capacity to be fully present with this moment however it's manifesting—not to make a different moment.

As soon as we're going for a different moment, there's no way to recognize *yathābhūta* in this moment, because we've already jumped over it, dismissed it, disliked it. "No, I want something different. Something different's better." Well, what's actually here? "I don't know, but something different's better."

Just to say a bit about the instructions we've been giving here: when talking about feeling the sensations of breath to help collect and steady the mind, there are forms of meditation that would completely focus on one experience—say, for example, sensations of breath. Whenever there's thinking or hearing or whatever, you might notice what it is, you might not even notice what it is, but you come right back and very gently just keep surrendering moment after moment only into that experience. This is called

either samatha meditation or absorption, one-pointedness, and it can develop a very strong power of mind. Other things happen along the way, not so pleasant. And that concentrated mind can then be used to investigate what's happening. But that's a long road.

Vipassana meditation—so-called insight meditation—is more accented on the wisdom side. What we're doing here is Vipassana. So when we're talking about feeling the sensations of breath, being with the breath as something arises—really, that's only the beginning. The breath is a tool. And it doesn't even have to be sensations of breath. It could be sensations in the body. It could be hearing. It really doesn't matter.

In terms of mindfulness—and if you really can believe this, it saves so much suffering—mindfulness awareness can be aware of anything. In terms of cultivating the steadiness, the purity of mindfulness, it absolutely does not matter what the object of mindfulness is. Mindfulness doesn't care.

Being mindful of breath when the mind is filled with greed—that actually isn't mindfulness. That's cultivating greed. "I want to feel the breath. I want to feel the breath." If we turn around and notice, "Oh, that's wanting"—that's mindfulness. Wanting is like this. And the mindfulness of it is just seeing how it is.

If you're coming to be with the breath and you feel clutching, clutching, and then you notice the clutching—it stays or it goes. That's not our job. Mindfulness's job is not to change it. It's just to see: what's the nature of wanting in this moment, and this moment? In that steadiness of seeing clearly, that's what allows wisdom to arise.

Wisdom comes. We don't have to make wisdom. This is a huge relief, because actually we can't. All we can make up is what we already know. Mostly we sit here and make up something we think should be happening, and it doesn't happen, and then we think it's wrong because that's what should be happening. We get all twisted in a knot.

All you have to do is notice, "Oh, this is fear in the mind." That's all. Doesn't feel like enough, does it? "I didn't come here just to get all twisted up and notice, 'Fear in the mind.'" Fear is like this. This is how fear behaves. This is the nature of fear.

But what we're doing is cultivating awareness—awareness of fear. That awareness is just as good as awareness of bliss, or awareness of the sensation of breath, or awareness of a step, or awareness of calm, or awareness of joy, or awareness of mettā. Awareness doesn't care. And so we can learn to bring awareness and interest to anything. And when there's interest, there's usually not fear or aversion or clinging.

How does that work? That's interesting.

But it's hard to trust this. Hard to trust this.

So we're cultivating. We've been using the sensations of breath in the instructions just as a tool to help the mind get a little bit steady, so we even have a clue what's going on at the other sense doors. If we were to say, "Come in, notice whatever's arising—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, emotions—just notice without distortion of greed or hatred or confusion. Just notice it. Stay steady. Go." Five hours later: Am I thinking? Am I aware? Is there a difference between thinking and what's happening?

So we get a little bit steady. But then we open up. If you're sitting with the breath and hearing comes and you note "hearing," then really be with the hearing. That's what's happening now. Notice the hearing. Notice how effortless the awareness of hearing is. Did you notice that? Hearing comes. You don't have to plan: "In a minute that bird's going to make a sound, I better be ready." No.

You're sitting and a burning pain arises in your knee. Now, if it happened yesterday, you might be thinking, "That burning pain is going to arise and I better be ready." But that's not the burning pain, is it? That's fear, which you didn't plan on. Oh, this is fear. That's what's happening now.

Same with the breath. The sensations of breath arise in their own time, and mindfulness can be with it. So whatever's happening—sensation, emotion, thought—it arises, mindfulness meets it, notices.

But when we're really lost, kind of lost, don't know what's happening, everything's just too shaky or confused, then we have our friend: the sensations of breath or body or hearing, to help recollect that quality of receptive clarity, clear undistorted mindfulness. Because that's really our friend. That's really what we're learning to recognize and trust and really get.

It's so simple and so accessible that we're looking for something too big.

So right now, however you're sitting, can you feel your hands? Yes? No? Yes? Yeah. Wasn't very difficult, was it? Did it take much effort? As soon as I said "feel your hands," you could feel it, right? Just feel some sensations. That's mindfulness. That is mindfulness.

It doesn't have to always be incredibly focused and precise. Sometimes it is. But sometimes, when you're really trying to feel the breath, to feel the sensations, to feel the foot, to hold on—that's not mindfulness. That's a certain kind of extraness, I would say, in the mind. Wanting, striving, pushing.

Notice it. Ah, pushing feels like this. That's mindfulness again.

It's hard to trust. We want a little more oomph. But this is really where we begin to see that steadiness is more accessible when you don't feel like everything has to be so incredibly focused and precise and clear. We can't keep that up. You can do it for a while, and then you're exhausted, or you get a headache, or you just say, "Well, to heck with this. I'm taking a couple hours off." And then I'm coming back.

Notice your mind going, "To heck with this. I'm taking a couple hours off." That's mindfulness. You notice that. "I've had it with this." It feels like this. It's not so hard. It gets really interesting.

So it's not unattainable or esoteric—recognizing things as they have come to be, learning how our mind works, really beginning to trust. In a moment, we can see, when we're learning how our mind works, how the source of suffering comes up, how it fades, how the sense of peace comes up with wisdom, how it fades. They're just like the back and forth of the hand, this close. Suffering, suffering. "I don't want this. I don't like it like this." Oh, not liking is like that. It still doesn't feel good—it doesn't start feeling good. But it's a shift from being caught in the distortion to the awareness of it. And that awareness is what we're cultivating.

So even awareness of, say, aversion—if we recognize, "Oh, aversion feels like this"—in that moment what's being cultivated is a pure consciousness, pure mind that's not filled with aversion. You see? So it's always just that close.

I think it was this fall during our three-month retreat, Joseph was welcoming people, and he said something that kind of stuck with me. I hope it's useful. First he was saying, you know, this is a great privilege that we all have, to be together, to have this time and space to actually explore how our minds work. And sometimes it can seem—you know, I'm talking about these little subtle movements of mind—it can seem rather esoteric. I know a lot of people, some people even today said, people outside don't really understand what we're doing. The classical dismissal of meditation is staring at your navel, that it's a waste of time, that you should get out and do something.

So let me say: yes, whatever our situations in life are—and I'm not saying everyone's in a great situation—but compared to the vastness of the world, that we have this time and this space and enough health to be here, and most of all, the interest, the courage to really look at, to keep meeting what's happening in the mind—we are really privileged.

But I'm not saying this to invoke guilt. Someone went right to guilt when they heard that. We're privileged, but I'm not saying it for that reason. I'm saying it in a much more positive way. We can really feel a sense of appreciation, of gratitude for the opportunity

and for your interest and your courage, because this is an uplifting quality. Yes, it is an incredible privilege. That's a wholesome state to appreciate. It can uplift the mind and heart, give us a little energy, a little willingness. It is a privilege. Don't take that to beat yourself up. But when you're thinking, "Oh, my mind—I came to look at this junk"—yes, actually, yes. And it's a privilege. And here I am.

We don't have to deal with what so many others face. I've spent a fair amount of time in Burma in the last few years, and that's a beautiful and very messed up, incredibly suffering country. And the sense of privilege—I think in some ways there's so many people who are so poor that they can barely get enough to eat, or not even, plus the horrific oppressiveness of the government.

And even within that, Burma is a country filled with meditation centers and meditation teachers. It's ingrained in the culture. To stay in a meditation center is completely on generous donations—there's no charge. So technically, anyone could go.

I was there with a group of friends, and at one point some people had sent us money to offer to villagers to help rebuild the most decrepit houses. When I say decrepit, we're talking beyond decrepit. I can't even explain—bamboo mat walls. Four ladies were living in a house with only two walls, completely open in a compound with many other families, so they had absolutely no privacy. The floor was just bamboo rods with about this much space between them. That's it. That's their house. Incredibly neat and tidy. That was one of the ones we rebuilt.

In doing this, one of our friends speaks fluent Burmese, so we'd get a sense of the people's life situations, which of course weren't good. In one family, the father had died—he'd been an alcoholic. The sixteen-year-old had to quit school in her last year, which is really hard to even get to. It gets more expensive as you go. She quit to work in a sewing factory. The mother was frying little foods to help support the other three kids.

Then there was another family with an old granny sitting smoking her stogie cigar, and four little kids, none of whom went to school even though there was a free school within walking distance—which we told them about. The mother was out working heavy labor.

I bring them up because similar circumstances produced such different responses. In the first family, there was so much light, so much mettā, so much generosity. The older girl who had to quit school was dying to go back, but with total love was supporting her family. As soon as we could offer some money to fix their house, they insisted we come over for breakfast so the lady could cook her things for us. And they sit and watch you eat—that's the way it works—with the monk who was helping us.

This monk was so happy to help. He said, "I usually can't give things to people—as a monk you receive. But I can go." And he organized the work. He ordered all the supplies and had them bill us. He spent the whole day there making sure it was all built right. And he was so happy. That was great.

So we were with the monk, and this family was so filled with light, so beautiful, coming to the meditation center. The other family with the old granny—just completely beaten down by life. Even when we mentioned the school, you could see... Some people have the conditions that allow them to really use what's available. We all do, at some level. Some people don't. Similar circumstances, such different responses.

So really, I mean it—appreciate your courage. Or maybe it's naïveté if you've never done a retreat before. But if you stay to the end, it will turn into courage. Appreciate your interest. Not every moment will feel inspired. You'll feel beaten down at times.

But you're here. You're looking. It's a whole other way of being. Really, call on that uplift. Sometimes we need it.

And in speaking to the sense that we're looking at these subtle movements while there's so much difficulty in the world—it can seem rather esoteric. But I had another experience this summer that somehow re-deepened my commitment to what I see as the absolute necessity of understanding that when we recognize things as they are, it's the only way we have a chance to act with greater and greater compassion and wisdom—for ourselves, for the world. It just really deepened in me: yes, this is the way to live. This is worth spending my life doing.

I was in Munich for a month, and one day I had time to take the little suburban train out to Dachau—one of the concentration camp museums. I'd never been to one before. I went by myself, which was great. And of course I've read a lot. But this is not just about Germany and World War II. This is about our human nature—that's the point I'm trying to make.

I thought it was really well set up. It's in a nice country area. Two or three of the buildings are still standing, and they've made museums in them with very well-explained placards throughout. In the back, there are just the foundations where all the other buildings and dormitories were. To me it seemed huge. I don't know—somehow I was amazed at how vast it was. When I went back to the German friends I was staying with, they said, "Oh no, that's one of the little ones."

But this experience actually inspired in me a greater depth of appreciation for this practice, this understanding of what we're doing. The way it was set up, many of the rooms had big placards, each one describing a different aspect of life in the camp—how

people were transported there, some of the things that happened, all the different groups of people who were interned. The Roma, Jewish people, gay people, people from Hungary, people from Italy. It just went on and on, all kinds of ethnic groups, things I didn't know about. Other placards described scientific experiments, or the people who lived in the village, or prisoners in the camp—some acted really nobly, some not so nobly.

But each placard, in my memory, would present something general—all the Roma, for instance—but there would also be a picture of at least one real person with their name and a little story. It made it all human. Instead of just this vastness, each thing was human.

I couldn't come out of it thinking, "Well, that's just some monsters under Hitler." There were too many people on all the different sides. These were normal human beings. Some really disturbed individuals, okay, but mostly normal human beings—individuals caught in vast, huge forces of politics and circumstance, each person having to make their own decisions based on their own particular story, to the best of their ability. And decisions catapult.

Whether decisions based on denial, or fear, or trying to protect your family, or greed, or delusion, or hatred—whatever the motivation—that was so strong in me as I walked through.

And as I came out, I could really see: pick any place on the planet in just the last fifty years. It doesn't only happen then. How many people are involved in hatred and genocide, in trying to get rid of "the other"? Whether the other is immigrants or another ethnicity, another culture, another political persuasion, another social class. What about the way people were treated at Guantanamo? What about the Congo? What about the Balkans? What about Soviet Russia under Stalin? The Burmese government is doing atrocious things to its own people right now. Human beings.

I came out of it thinking: I could have an idea in my mind—"Oh, I would never do something like that." But if I don't know intimately, if I'm not able to be with my heart and mind in any situation and know how it works, know how it's responding, recognize when I'm acting from greed, know when there's fear and what fear actually feels like instead of getting lost in it—I don't know how I would behave in a situation I've never been in. I could have all kinds of nice ideas: "I would never do that. I would be compassionate." But I don't know.

I really don't know.

But I do know there's nothing more worth doing with my time than learning to know how the mind works and where freedom is. And if I'm afraid of being with the unpleasant, if I'm afraid of fear, if I'm afraid of pain—then if I don't recognize that, I'm going to act out of it. And that action could have... well, we never know what the consequences will be. But if I know how to get in touch with, "Oh, this is fear," then I can look at the bigger picture and make a wiser decision.

This doesn't come from wishing or hoping or waiting. It comes from sitting here and walking here and going home and learning how to really be interested—with wisdom, with love, with mindfulness—to just see what kind of tricks the mind is getting up to now. Over and over and over. How does greed work? How does delusion work? How does wisdom arise? Are the distortions in the mind of greed and aversion and confusion actually suffering? Well, you have to see if it's true for you. Don't believe us.

Mostly, we don't think wanting is suffering. We think not getting what we want is suffering. But watching closely, you see that wanting is kind of leading us on to happiness, you know.

So I say half of this practice is learning to recognize these distortions. And I'll give a couple of simple examples of how they distort. The other half is recognizing when there's the wisdom mind, when there's peace in the mind, when there's love, when there's brightness, when there's faith. It's not just about focusing on the negative, but it's also not about running away from it. It's not about thinking that anything uplifting that happens is a freak of nature and nothing to do with you. It *is* nothing to do with you—but then again, the other is nothing to do with you either, because it's all just things as they have come to be in this moment, how they act.

A couple of simple examples. When the Buddha said that the Dhamma is visible here and now, in those moments—and this is my paraphrasing—in those moments when there's no greed, not hatred or confusion arising in the mind. It's not personal that those happen; that's just habits of mind and how they cloud. Recognizing accurately means seeing that they distort our perception. They narrow our vision, and we don't recognize accurately when we don't see that these qualities are distorting our understanding of things. We see inaccurately, we understand inaccurately, and then the whole ball gets rolling.

Simple examples—because that's what's great about a retreat. It's a laboratory. Everything, little things that happen, get really blown up in your mind. Have you noticed that yet? It's only the second day, you know. You're like, "I'm so upset about this!"

And your rational mind comes in and goes, "It's not a big deal." Okay, so they ran out of oranges. I think you'll live. "No, I've got to have an orange *now*. I'm going to die without my vitamin C in the desert!" I think this is exaggerated. Maybe.

You're mindful if you think it's exaggerated. You don't always catch it. But in a way, it's good that it gets exaggerated, because sooner or later we notice, "Oh, this might be wanting. Ah, maybe this *is* wanting. Could I notice how wanting feels?"

When there's wanting, it runs us. My brother had a hunting hound. Well, it didn't hunt, but it was that kind of breed—really a lovely, sweet dog. He just lived in suburban Atlanta. The poor dog didn't get a chance to hunt. But that's what he was bred for. He's led by his nose.

Really, the nose was so sensitive that when he'd come in the house, he was simply enthralled to it. His nose would take him to every new thing in the house. If I had come to visit, he'd be in the room, in the suitcase—anything that any human had touched, he'd pull it out, rip it open. The garbage, the suitcase, anything. He'd go out in the backyard and just run with his nose along the ground the whole time.

It looks like suffering, doesn't it? But to me, that's craving, wanting. It's just pulling us. "Yes, this next thing will do it. This next thing will do it. This next thing will do it." But do we notice that?

The Buddha said craving and hatred are makers of measurement. In our mind, they narrow the whole world.

Let me give an example. I used this one a few years ago—it happens here. It happened here the other day. It happens here all the time. You go out walking in the desert. I love this desert. It's one of the reasons I like to come here. The space and the kind of smell in the air—it just feels like it purifies my mind. I love it.

So when you're walking out and you're just with whatever's arising, you see a little chipmunk, you see some birds. You see, you hear, you smell, and there's just this sense of isness of things. Notice that—not just in the desert, but it's a good place for it. That sense of isness, I call it—just being. In that moment, there isn't greed. There isn't aversion or wishing things would change. You're not thinking, "I am having such a great moment of smelling the smell in the desert." You're just there. No biggie.

This is a moment that inclines toward freedom. Totally present with things as they have come to be, not needing to describe or explain or reference or anything. Just this. It's so simple. Someone else said the other night—no, we all have moments like this all the time. We don't notice, or we're looking for something more.

But in that moment, just notice how many moments there are here. And many of them will not be in the formal sitting or walking. They'll be when you're drinking tea or standing in line or going to the toilet. It doesn't matter what. When the mind at that moment is pure, notice it.

So we want to understand the distortions, but we also want to recognize and trust—really trust—those moments of wakeful purity when the mindfulness is present.

So you're walking like that. I was walking like that in the desert the other day. And suddenly I remembered how last year and the year before, I knew exactly where three tortoise holes were. So right away, I said, "The tortoise holes! Can I find the tortoise holes?" And everything collapsed. What had been really pleasant—I got tightness in my chest, which I recognize as wanting from watching it for thirty-five years. I started pressuring. I'm looking for the tortoise hole, which, by the way, I couldn't find. So don't ask me. I can't remember this year. I'm wondering, "Was it that tree? Was it that tree?" I know there was one tree out there.

There's three trees together. Try to find three trees together. Everywhere there's three trees together! And it was under that tree. And the search was completely unenjoyable. I noticed that.

So I thought, okay, stop. Just walk. La, la, la—pretending to be relaxed. But really I'm scanning: that's not it, that's not it, that's not it, that's not it. Pretending.

Then I acknowledged, okay, this really isn't pleasant. I did have a moment where I said, okay, forget it. And guess what? Just then I saw a tortoise.

Now that's bad news, because what do you think that did? Right? Oh, I just have to relax and I'll see a tortoise! Everything happens the way we want it. That's what we were joking around about with the managers—that's a sign the divine is taking charge. As soon as I relax, there's the tortoise. It's all about me. That's the third hindrance, you know.

But anyway, this is how we make measurement. Everything else is not what we want, and that becomes what we want. And if we don't notice that, we think we're having a good time. Yeah, I'm looking for a tortoise—far out.

So notice that feeling of wanting, how it distorts. We can't see what's accurate. What was accurately happening? Smelling, tasting, hearing, and tightness. And wanting feels like this. As soon as I recognize wanting feels like this, it's still there. But what's being fed in that moment is mindfulness, is purity—not feeding the wanting.

Explore that. That's what we get a chance to explore here. Don't believe me. See.

Aversion is more obviously suffering. But we can still easily jump over the aversion itself. We think the suffering is that thing that shouldn't be happening. When that's gone, it'll all be okay—as if we're going to somehow manipulate the whole world. But somehow we keep thinking we're going to manipulate the whole world. Rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. We're missing something.

Have you noticed—Thich Nhat Hanh talks about this—if you have a toothache, it takes over your world, doesn't it? That's all we notice. But how many teeth don't hurt? How often do you notice when you don't have a toothache? Or even not a toothache, just a little rough spot that doesn't even hurt. Can you keep your tongue away from that little rough spot? Is your tongue running over all your other teeth? No.

Is there a sound you don't like? Have you noticed how when you're lost in aversion and don't notice it, that sound takes over your entire world?

Once I was on a retreat at our center, IMS. I'd been living there for years, way up in the attic. And I got into what we call "yogi mind"—this really exaggerated wanting or aversion. There was this sound, like a low humming. I started going nuts. I was running down into the furnace room, running all over the building. It was the heat. The heat had been running all winter for several years just like that. There was nothing wrong with the heat. I was losing it. "I can't stand it. There's no way I can practice if this sound continues. It's absolutely making me crazy. There's no way." I mean, I was really out there.

If you start to notice that kind of thing happening in your mind about anything, you might want to check in. What's happening in the mind right now? Don't keep focusing on the object. "Oh, that's aversion." And as my teacher in Burma says, aversion is just doing its job. But mindfulness is doing its job too—noticing aversion.

And the third mark of measurement—well, delusion is when we just don't have a clue what's happening. That's when you wake up and think, "Oh, thinking. Maybe I'll feel the breath." But the other aspect of delusion is what I was describing earlier: that every sight, not every one, but many sights, sounds, thoughts, smells somehow get referred back to "What does that mean to me?" It's all about me.

I'll give you a good example from Joseph. He told us this a few years ago. Joseph Goldstein, one of our colleagues, was on a retreat somewhere, sitting in line waiting for lunch—second in line. You know how it is, everyone lined up in the cafeteria. I call it the hell realm of retreat, actually, because there's so much going on. You notice everybody's minds and thoughts flying around that room.

Anyway, he was standing there, and the person in front took the lid off a giant pot, and it dropped and made a heck of a racket—clang, clang, clang, clang! And Joseph said his first thought was, "It wasn't me. You can all see it wasn't me." First thought, right? That's the sense of self. So inundated with comparing everything to me, me, me, me—we don't even notice it.

So just for fun, for the rest of the night, the rest of the retreat, notice if that ever happens. Not that you drop the thing or the person in front of you does. But notice. And this is with interest: How does the mind work? Somebody's walking along—"Hmm, not as good as me." Somebody else is sitting—"Oh, they're doing better than me." Is this pleasant? Is this uplifting? Is this onward leading? Is this what you'd call freedom—comparing ourselves to every other person here?

Better, worse, equal? It's exhausting. It's really boring. And you'll do it over and over and over again.

Don't take it personally, though. Because every mind is doing that. I know yours is doing it the most of everyone's mind. Everybody's mind is doing it. That's the nature of identification.

But mindfulness doesn't care. Mindfulness can also be with identification. Nothing can stain or harm or damage the quality of awareness and mindfulness. We can forget about it, but it's just right there. As soon as you remember, "Oh, I wasn't mindful," you are already mindful. As soon as you think, "Oh, I was lost in thought," you're not anymore.

Recognize that moment of awareness, that moment of mindfulness. Being mindful, remembering—that moment isn't hard to do. Trusting it, really trusting the power of mindfulness rather than "I have to fix it, these things are wrong, I want to get here"—trusting that mindfulness and the steadiness of it is enough—that is hard to do. Because we think we are in charge, despite all evidence to the contrary.

So that's just my encouragement to you: to recognize that awareness of anything is like this. To appreciate and trust awareness. And don't despair, because however long you haven't been noticing what's happening, as soon as you notice you're not noticing, you're here again. It's always accessible, and nothing can damage it.

And the steadiness of mindfulness is the cause and condition for wisdom—wisdom of how things have come to be in this moment—to arise naturally. You don't have to make that happen.

Huge relief.

CHAPTER 93

The Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines anicca (impermanence) not as an abstract concept but as a doorway to liberation through accurate perception. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings about vipalāsa (distortions of perception, thought, and view), she explores how we habitually perceive permanence where none exists—and how this misperception underlies our suffering.*
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> *Wilson unpacks the Buddha's powerful statement that when the perception of impermanence is fully developed, it eliminates sensual lust, craving for existence, ignorance, and the conceit 'I am'—equivalent to complete liberation. She discusses saññā (perception/recognition) and how our failure to recognize the momentary, changing nature of experience leads to clinging and suffering. The talk addresses three manifestations of delusion: inattention, denial, and misperception itself.*
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> *With characteristic warmth, Wilson acknowledges the poignancy of impermanence—sharing the story of Ānanda weeping at the Buddha's approaching death, and Steve Jobs' reflection on mortality as a tool for clarity. She emphasizes that opening to impermanence doesn't mean suppressing sadness or loss, but meeting these experiences with tender awareness. Drawing on Ajahn Chah's teaching to simply recognize 'it is uncertain,' she invites practitioners to sustain moment-to-moment awareness of the way things are, discovering that accurate perception leads not to despair but to wonder, freshness, and freedom.*

So tonight, I wanted to talk about anicca, impermanence. I was thinking with the weather lately, I hardly need to talk about it—it's really quite obvious. But I want to talk about it from the point of view of how the Buddha speaks about accurate perception being the doorway to liberation, to understanding.

When he talks about the nature of insight, freeing insight, the nature of insight is not about creating some new reality—that if we meditate hard enough or study hard enough, somehow we create a different world that's better and impermanent and not-self and all. It's not like we're moving from permanence to impermanence. We just don't recognize accurately. And the nature of perception, when the Buddha talks about right view, the translation into English—right view—I like that translation because it's almost literal. We're viewing accurately the way things are. We're recognizing the way things already are.

In terms of the three characteristics, as you know: anicca, impermanence; dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness, unreliability; anatta, not-self. All three of them—and I think I'm going to give a talk on each of them this month—but all three of them, the way we're caught and why we suffer is that we resist them, we don't understand them. But on the deepest level, we don't understand them because we don't recognize accurately.

And what gets in the way of recognizing accurately? Our old friends, the kilesas, you know: greed, wanting, hatred, aversion, and delusion—both not having a clue what's going on, not paying any attention, or making it all about me.

So I want to start by talking about the perception of impermanence. These distortions of perception, the Buddha talked about them. He calls them vipallasa, distortions of the mind. There are four. I'm only going to talk about three this month.

"These four, O monks, are distortions of perception, distortions of thought, and distortions of view: sensing no change in the changing, sensing pleasure in what is unsatisfying, assuming self where there is no self, sensing the unlovely as lovely. Gone astray with wrong views, beings misperceive with distorted minds. Bound in the bondage of Mara, these people are far from safety. They're beings that go on flowing, going again from death to birth."

This is Andrew Olendzki's translation, "Distortions of Mind." I'll go into it a little more specifically in a moment.

But I find it fascinating—in particular about impermanence of the three characteristics. To me, it seems like on an intellectual understanding level, impermanence is the most obvious. People here wouldn't really argue that our bodies and minds are permanent. In an intellectual discussion, I'm assuming we could agree: yeah, stuff's changing all the time. That's right. And I may or may not be comfortable with it, but it's something that intellectually we can get.

But do we really? What would it mean if we were actually living from the cellular knowing of the way things are in terms of impermanence—the fact that no experience of mind or body lasts for more than a split second? That's the level at which impermanence is how things are. What would it mean to live from that?

And our mind that isn't quite there isn't really thrilled about that idea. Even when I think, "Yes, I understand impermanence," if I then think, "What would it be to live from it?"—the Buddha often said that whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying. If we really recognize the changing, impermanent nature of something, we so deeply see

it that we can't cling to it to satisfy our hearts and minds, because it just doesn't make any sense. He says that often. Do I really believe that? He doesn't say you hate everything because it's impermanent, just that we know it's inherently unsatisfying.

And he also says over and over: can whatever is impermanent, can that be self? He says this in many suttas, and the monks and nuns always respond, "No, Revered Sir, it cannot be self." And that's always presented as proof that there's no self. But I think, do we actually live from that? Do we believe that? Just because the Buddha said it, do we believe it?

So I think part of our practice, our exploration, is not to try and make ourselves believe another view. That's not freeing or helpful. But instead, to look and see what we do believe, how we do act, and then start to explore and cultivate what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence. We do cultivate the perception of permanence all the time.

Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence—all wanting for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'

That's a really powerful statement. Those four things are equivalent to arhatship, complete liberation in the Buddha's teaching. The perception of impermanence, when developed and cultivated, eliminates sensual lust, lust for becoming, ignorance, and uproots all conceit of "I am." That's incredibly powerful.

And what I love about it—I love exploring perception anyway. I think it's a fascinating place of study. What we mean by perception is simply this: with any sense contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, moods in the mind—the perception, *saññā* in Pali, is what the Buddha described as the recognition faculty. On a gross level, perception would be "paper." I see this as paper. Knowing I'm seeing is a kind of perception. Seeing people is a perception. A name is a perception. Those are obvious perceptions.

But he's talking on a subtle level—that we don't perceive, we don't recognize, the constant subtle changing nature of experience. We literally perceive things to be solid and permanent. I could do a whole other talk on perception itself, but I'm not going to tonight. Instead, let's explore the power of this perception of permanence and perception of impermanence, and start to bring mindfulness to this area—not to make ourselves right or wrong, but to recognize: what are we perceiving?

The Buddha talks about distortions of perception, of thought, and of view. This is another thing I love about exploring perception. How we perceive—like perceiving paper, or perceiving a certain person—that's *saññā*. And the distortion of perception, say, perceiving permanence, leads to how we think about something. That's what he calls a distortion of thought. We don't recognize that we're thinking about something as permanent, but that's how we perceive it.

See if this happens to you at all, ever in the day: "Oh no, this terrible mood. How am I going to get through the rest of the day with this mood like this? How am I going to get through the rest of the retreat if it keeps on raining like this?" Or: "Finally, finally I've hit that place of smooth samādhi, and now it's going to be smooth sailing for the rest of the time." Or we try to recreate an experience. All these thoughts become distortions of thinking.

And that then leads to distortions of view, of *diṭṭhi*, which would be wrong view rather than right view, where we don't even recognize that we're assuming the permanence of anything. Perception is quick and subtle, but it's extremely powerful when we don't recognize it. It's a fascinating place to explore. That's why he's saying: cultivate the perception.

Again, the Buddha: "There is no form, no feeling tone, no *vedanā*, no perception, no volitional formation—meaning intention or any of the actions of our mind—and no consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself. None."

Then he took up a little bit of dirt in his fingernail, and he said to the bhikkhus, "There's not even this much form"—the amount of dirt in his fingernail—"not even this much form that is stable, that is permanent, that will not change." He said, "If there was even this much form that was permanent, that was stable, that was eternal, then this living of the holy life for the destruction of suffering could not be discerned."

So there can't be even a little bit. Not that there can't be—there isn't. There simply isn't. Or we couldn't see through. Because what frees our heart and mind is seeing how things really are. And then clinging, for example, doesn't make any sense.

The stuff that we really know—like this sunset—pretty much all of us have seen quite a few sunsets in our life, right? Pretty much, we let it go. You may cry because it's so beautiful, but you're not like, "Oh no, come back, come back, come back, sunset."

No, don't go, don't go.

We were talking today about this changing of season and how hard it might be for some of you who are from warmer, sunnier climes to come here in the fall when the days are getting shorter and shorter and shorter. And we started thinking, what must it be like in northern Sweden? You know, or Finland or something like that. So now I was just thinking, based on that conversation, maybe on the last day that the sun's going to show up for four months, maybe you do go, "No, no, no, no, don't go away." But you know it's hopeless.

So I want to talk a little bit—just various thoughts I have—about how the delusion that gets in the way of perceiving accurately in terms of impermanence, some of the ways it shows up, some of the ways it manifests. And I'm sure you can come up with other examples and other ways it manifests in your own experience. I'm by no means thinking this is exhaustive.

But I saw an interesting list somewhere. I can't remember where—I've looked—but I like it. It seems true wherever I found it. Three ways that *moha*, or delusion, can manifest in our experience, particularly in terms of impermanence.

The first is just plain inattention. Delusion—we're just not even noticing what's going on. La, la, la, la. This is what mindfulness is really here to help us with. I've noticed personally, I have an aversive type temperament, which really notices everything. What's wrong, what's right, how it should be. And that's been getting less. And guess what? Delusion's coming up. I walk into a room: "Oh, has that picture been here? Is that a new picture?" I say to people. And they look at me and say, "No, Carol, it's been here ten years." I mean, I'm not making this up. It's embarrassing, you know? But that kind of just inattention—and I gather you might be familiar with that sometimes happening. We just don't really notice what's happening, accurately or inaccurately.

The second is denial, the quality in our mind. Sometimes we can even see ourselves doing it and pretend it's not happening. But the mind is basically going, "No, that's not true. It's not like that." That's on the most gross level. In terms of what I notice with impermanence, especially in the bigger aspects—of things we love going away—is both the denial in terms of "This shouldn't be this way, it's not supposed to happen," and the resistance that can come with that. The resistance to the change itself, or the resistance to the sadness or the loss or whatever way that comes up for us. I'll talk about that in a minute.

And the third, on that level of *vipalasas* that I was talking about, the distortions of perception—the third way that delusion, that *moha*, manifests in our experience is by misperceiving, by just recognizing wrongly. Someone was telling me today about his experience, giving me funny little examples of how he saw somebody and his mind com-

pletely made it up: "I know this person. This person's sick. This is all going on with this person." And then recognizing later that he was completely and totally wrong. His mind had just made it up. Well, I love it when we can at least see that, to see how that process works. Because until we're really awakened, when we're suffering, that process of really just recognizing wrongly is going on a lot of the time.

So I want to talk about these ways for a moment, how they might show up in our experience with impermanence. The not recognizing impermanence, or even more the resistance, the denial, the sadness—I don't think this is news to anybody. The kind of strategy that seems to be the habit of our mind, and is certainly what the Buddha was pointing to in the Four Noble Truths: our strategy in the face of the fact that there actually is no stability anywhere, that there is no steadfast reliability of anything. And when we hear this and we're still looking for reliability, mostly we don't like that too much.

This is actually an interesting thing to me about all three of the characteristics—that when we're not quite seeing through them... and we all have moments of seeing through them. It's not like you see through them once and it's over. We see through them.

Everyone here has seen through them all. You wouldn't be here. And then we get back in the misperception again.

But what's interesting to me is that all three of them—impermanence or unreliability or not-self—the times we're not seeing through them, the thought of them, it's not pleasant. It's not uplifting. It's not, "Oh yeah, great, there's no reliability or stability anywhere. Let's hear more about that. That's great. Nothing in this world gives satisfaction. Wonderful. That's why I came to practice."

But when we understand them, they're the source of freedom and joy and a much deeper way of being—like living in three dimensions instead of living in two. That's how I think of it. That's how it seems to me. The seeing through them, the accurate perception, is the source of a much more beautiful, sensitive, connected, free life. But we resist it with every cell in our body half the time.

The main way we resist—this isn't news to anybody—with impermanence is through fear, denial, and clinging. It seems to be, as the Buddha pointed out in the Second Noble Truth, that our strategy to find some stability, to try and hide from impermanence, or deny it, or at least somehow find a place of safety within it, is to cling. The mind that tries to hold on to anything—to sense pleasures. We all know that; that's the obvious one. To views, to ideas, to experiences, to relationships, to family, to situations, to

comfort in our body, to whatever, to our ideas about who we are, to our personality. We may hate our personality, but we'll cling to it come hell or high water. Don't give me someone else's personality; I just want to hate my own.

But it's so poignant to me, really touching, because the clinging—in a way, the deepest clinging, I feel, is this clinging to really be free, this yearning for wholeness, for connectedness. And what we experience with impermanence is the constancy of loss, as long as there's a sense of me trying to hold myself separate from all the changing experience. It gets like that sometimes with impermanence—everything else around me is changing. But then it's just constant loss. We forget to turn it around and say, "Oh, this part's changing too."

But it's so poignant because it can really be a response of deepest yearning—for understanding, for freedom, at least for peace. And that's the misperception: that the peace will come if I can just hold on to this, whatever. And you all know whatever it is in your life. It could be something really simple. It can be something really complex.

Again, I know you know this, but I just need to say it. Seeing that clinging brings suffering because it's based on recognizing wrongly does not mean that we hate the things that we cling to. It's the clinging that's the source of suffering because it keeps us from recognizing accurately. But it doesn't mean, "Oh, I shouldn't cling to relationships, so forget about relationship. What do you mean not cling to family? Are you saying I shouldn't love my family? What do you mean?" That's not what I'm saying at all. It's not the object. It's the process of trying to hold on to what's already gone by the time we notice it and think, "Oh yeah, this is going to make me happy."

And of course—duh—this is the same pattern that we bring into our meditation, don't we? You've probably noticed that, all the ups and downs. By the time the thought comes, "Now I've figured out how to have a good sitting," it's over. By the time you've had that thought, you're into wanting. You may not notice it for a while because you want to pretend you're still back in that really peaceful sitting. But as soon as it's, "How can I make this happen again?" it's gone.

That's why we're saying: What's here now? What's here now? What's here now? And clinging, when we don't recognize it, is what freezes our perception, freezes our experience, is what keeps us from recognizing what's here now. It's so poignant because really the clinging is in the service of bringing us peace and happiness.

I read somewhere in the suttas that the search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful. But we cling, thinking it will bring us happiness.

This is a fragment of a poem from Galway Kinnell called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You scream, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard as if clinging could save us.
I think, you think, I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I have stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
Little Maud, and yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake screaming from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

I love that because I get the poignancy and the love and that subtle undercurrent. We're all in the pre-trembling of a house that falls—whether it's about sense experience, whether it's about our external situation, whether it's about our body, our life itself. And this denial, this clinging, is a kind of pretense: just hold on, hold on, hold on.

So when we can't resist or avoid acknowledging change, we're just overwhelmed by the sadness, by the suffering. The mind doesn't like uncertainty. I heard on the radio today something that really made me laugh. They were talking about the European debt crisis—ongoing, not fixed somehow yet—and the news person was discussing the effect of this on politics and governments. This is a quotation of what they were saying: "Politics now in Europe is being driven by the stock markets. And the stock markets hate uncertainty."

Like, what world do they live in?

So they pressure this or that government, this or that political figure to stay in office or resign or to do this or that. And I just was cracking up thinking, what do they expect? They hate uncertainty, so they think if this happens, there'll be no more uncertainty? If this political figure resigns, if this bank does this, if this government decides that, then there will be no more uncertainty? It's nuts. And it was said so straight-faced: "Oh, they hate uncertainty, so they try to do this to stop it from being uncertain."

It's just so poignant, this clinging. And then there's the other aspect: opening to change when we can no longer hide from it, in whatever form it's taking. Usually when it's a problem—we don't mind change when something we really hate is going away, do

we? Then we all go, "Yeah, impermanence, that's great." So I'm talking about the denial that arises when change comes in ways that are really hard for us—the loss, the sadness, the fear.

Again, why does the stock market—not that the stock market is a thing—why do people on the stock market hate uncertainty? Okay, because of greed; they want money, that's true. But on a deeper level, we don't want to face the truth that every step is into the unknown, that every moment we don't know what's going to happen next. And that is just so unsettling to us.

But when we start to really get it cellularly, it doesn't mean—as far as I can tell, until we're completely awakened—it doesn't mean we don't feel the poignancy, the sadness, the sense of loss. This is only my own personal feeling about it, but I actually think part of our practice, part of opening to the truth of things, is to also open into the sense of loss. When someone dear to us becomes ill and dies, it's not like we can simply say, "Okay, they will not be seen by me again." Maybe the Buddha could say that, but we're most likely going to really feel a lot of things—sadness, loss, anger, whatever.

That's okay. What we've been saying in this whole practice of mindfulness is simply to bring kind, non-judging attention to whatever is happening. So when there's loss and there's sadness, we can be with the sadness. It's part of our humanness.

But we tend to be so resistant to the unpleasant, right? Unpleasant means something's wrong. So this shouldn't have happened. This illness shouldn't have happened. This loss shouldn't have happened. This death shouldn't have happened. Something's wrong. Instead of saying, no, this is life. There's beauty. There's love.

There's beautiful things coming. And there's loss. There's beautiful things going. And there's sadness. And all of this—opening to all of this—is what opening into impermanence is about.

Even in the suttas, I'm sure most of you know this story about Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. I haven't read all the suttas, but in many of them, different monks and nuns appear, and you start to get a little sense of their personalities. They pop up. Some of the main ones pop up a lot. And Ananda, being the Buddha's attendant for twenty-five years, and also having been present for and remembering every discourse the Buddha gave, is very present in the suttas.

He's partly awakened, but he's not a complete arhat for all those twenty-five years. And with Ananda, one often gets a sense of just his humanness. You can almost feel like he's a stand-in for us in some way. Maybe he's a better stand-in. But anyway, you can

relate to him often. He'll make mistakes, and the Buddha will go, "No, Ananda, that's not so." One time he was saying, "Oh, I understand dependent origination. It's so obvious. It's so simple." The Buddha goes, "No, Ananda, it is not simple. Do not say that."

So when the Buddha was announcing that he was going to die in a certain amount of time—this was when he was eighty years old, and I couldn't find the sutta, but I can paraphrase it, I remember it—he's sitting there talking to people, and suddenly he realized Ananda had disappeared. He says, "Friend, go find Ananda and ask him to come here." So the other monks go and find Ananda.

There's this image, which Andy Olendzki tells me appears in Buddhist art often, although I haven't actually seen it myself. But it's described in the sutta very specifically: Ananda is standing in the doorway of his hut, leaning up against the door frame, just weeping in such deep sorrow, saying, "The teacher who has done so much for me is leaving. What will I do? And I still have so much work to do." He was just weeping from sadness that the Buddha was going to pass away. This is after twenty-five years of listening to all the Buddha's teachings—so we can cut ourselves a little slack that we're not perfect yet.

The Buddha, of course, calls him—and you can imagine—says, "Ananda, Ananda, what's going on?" Of course, he knew what was going on. And he just says, very kindly but very directly, "Enough, Ananda. Have I not told you? Everything that is subject to arising, everything that comes together by conditions, is going to pass away when the conditions change. Enough of your grief. That's just how it is. Not good, not bad. That's just how it is."

I love that about Ananda, because it's just—yes, that's our human reaction. We don't need to be ashamed of it, and we don't need to push it away. Because when we try, "Oh no, no, I don't want to feel sadness, so let's not acknowledge that change is happening, let's not even go there"—but no, we can actually, I find, use the sadness, use the resistance when you become aware of it, as a wake-up call. Oh, something's not quite... what's actually happening now?

It is said that when the Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, died within a week of one another, and when they were gone, he looked out—he could tell the difference. It wasn't like he didn't know the difference. He looked out over the assembly and said, "This assembly feels empty to me now, empty of Sariputta and Moggallana."

So loss is part of life, and we can use it as a wake-up call. You all know Steve Jobs died recently, right? Oh, right, you've been on retreat for three months. He did. Anyway, he had cancer for several years.

And she was kind of shocked, you know. And she was saying, "Why did this happen?" And I said, "This is called life." And she said, "I know, I know." But you can feel the shock of it.

So we can use all of that just as another opportunity to see more clearly, to open. We don't have to be afraid of those experiences. The sadness, the compassion, the tenderness of heart—these are beautiful qualities. They're part of being fully alive.

And when we stop running from impermanence, when we stop trying to freeze reality into something permanent and controllable, something wonderful happens. We start to taste life directly. Not through the filter of our fears and preferences, not through that constant comparing and grasping, but just—this moment, as it is.

Every moment is new. Every moment is fresh. That's really how it is.

When we cling, we actually can't see clearly. The clinging creates a kind of fog, a distortion. We're so busy trying to hold on to what we want or push away what we don't want that we miss what's actually here. But when we relax that clinging, even a little bit, the world becomes vivid again. Colors are brighter. Sounds are clearer. People's faces are more alive.

This is what Deepa Ma was pointing to. It's not that awakened beings live in some special realm. They're seeing the same world we're seeing. But they're seeing it without the distortion of greed, hatred, and delusion. They're seeing it fresh, moment by moment, without the film of habitual reactivity.

So use whatever is arising in your life—the changes in your body, the losses, the uncertainties—not as problems to be solved, but as doorways. Doorways into this direct perception of how things actually are. That's the practice. That's what we're doing here.

And she said, now it's getting to where every week, people in the group are putting up on the blog, "Oh, add to your metta prayers my cousin, or my partner, or my mother who's in the hospital, or my niece who has this disease," or whatever. And she's starting to see—she's like, every week there's something new.

I was just thinking about it and thinking how most of us, there's periods in our life when we see it, but most of us have a smaller circle of intimates. So we can go for a fair amount of time without it being so immediate. We hear about it on the news all the

time—and for sure, sometimes it's too much—but it's not like every week another intimate person got cancer or got sick, or their child had some accident, and on and on. And that's what my friend's experiencing right now.

So when we have the strength of mindfulness—not to get overwhelmed by it, not to get lost in negativity, but the strength to see, "Oh yes, that's how this life is"—we really, really never know. It can take us in the direction that Dipa Ma was talking about. Or as Steve Jobs said, that we can make the decisions that are important to us, or that we realize this moment now is the only thing I really know and can really count on. And as Dogen said, "If you can't see the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?"

So that's one aspect of our resistance and denial, of not recognizing our perception of permanence as a perception of impermanence—because it's just painful, scary, unsettling, and we're not comfortable with that. The other side, of course, is the beauty and the mystery. I'll talk about that again in a minute.

The third aspect of misperceiving is the level where we don't even know. Not even denial or resistance, but we don't even know that we're perceiving permanence. I just want to talk about that a little bit in terms of our practice here. This is one of the gifts of having the interest and the time to come on an intensive retreat. We can also bring this into our life, but this gets kind of subtle sometimes, and that's why intensive retreat can be helpful.

One way we assume permanence—I heard this from a talk that the Dalai Lama was giving once—we tend to think, "I know things are impermanent. Like, I'm impermanent. I was born, I lived for a while, and even though I can see changes, I feel like it's still been me all this time, and then I'll die." So things come together, they exist for a while, and then they go apart. And we think that's impermanence.

But the Dalai Lama was saying, no, no, no. What we don't recognize is what I've alluded to—the momentariness of change. There's no "exists for a while, the same, and then goes away." Change is happening every moment, every moment.

One place you can see that is in the experience of seeing. If you were really just paying attention to the eye door, to seeing, it's different every single instant, just slightly different. But it's useful conceptually, in order to function, for our mind to put it together in a way that looks steady, that looks solid. Actually, everything's changing every single instant, and we don't notice it.

Just today—and I don't know brain science, so I'm sure this is extremely superficial, and if any of you know it, please don't be offended by my superficiality—but someone told me this yesterday. We were talking about change, we were talking about death. It

was somebody's birthday party, so what else do we talk about? Change and death. Then we started apologizing, and she, the person whose birthday it was, said, "No, no, I love to talk about death. What else is there?"

But anyway, in this conversation, one of the guys who's done a lot of study about brain science and the way the brain perceives things—not from the Buddhist perspective, but from a scientist's perspective—said specifically about sight and about thoughts that from various experiments, these scientists have come to believe that the way consciousness or the brain can perceive, can actually see, is only because of the change. That if there was absolutely no change, if there was no movement whatsoever, the eye could see, but the brain couldn't interpret it as seeing. And they've done some experiments—I don't know what, I don't want to know what. And the same thing with thoughts: if it's just a thought that never moves, that never changes, we don't even recognize it.

I, as I said, don't know how they figured that out.

Because we'll never know a thought that doesn't change, will we? And the sight that doesn't change—it's changing every second. That's the only way that we can perceive.

But because the change is so rapid, our mind puts it together in some way that makes it look like a steady state. That's useful. It's not that this perception is so wrong that we want to throw it out. It's not that when we open to impermanence, we can't tell anything apart anymore.

You know what I mean? Sometimes people get afraid of that. "Well, if I see there's no solidity to this body..." And there are times in meditation when that's your actual perceptual, physical experience—there's no solid anything. There's just sensations arising in space. And then you think, "How can I function? How can I stand up? How can I eat? If there's just sensation and there's no solidity, where's the food going to go?" We can go into all kinds of stuff about that.

So in one way, conventional reality is useful. It works. That doesn't have to go away. But we can recognize, when we perceive the actual changing nature, that this is a conventional way that works, but it's not the way things always are. So you can kind of see both—like those images where if you look at it one way, you see a profile, and if you look at it another way, you see two vases. Both ways of seeing are in that same picture. It's like that.

And so really, the impermanence that the Dalai Lama is talking about, and the impermanence that it's so hard for us to see in our speedy lives, is the fact that there is no stasis ever.

Someone mentioned this at a retreat a couple of years ago. I thought it was a great image. She was seeing it herself. She said it's like time-lapse photography. If you see a time-lapse of a plant growing—there's just the dirt, and then you see the little leaf begin to push up from the soil, and the whole plant grows, and then the flower blooms, and then it goes away, and then the flower drops, and the fruit, all of this. They're making that fast, so you see the whole thing. But in that you also see there is no place where it's just the flower or just the leaf or just that. There is no place where it stops and says, "Now we're just going to be flower for a while." It's always the conditions coming together, and they make the condition for this moment. And then this moment is the condition for the next moment.

A phrase I use a lot—it's one of the insights in the Vipassana—is *yatha bhuta ñana dassana*. It's in the suttas a lot, usually translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are," which gives a kind of solid feeling to things. But friends who know Pali better than I have said that a much better translation is "things as they have come to be just in this moment." Knowledge and vision means recognizing accurately things as they have come to be in this moment. They've come to be, and only for an instant is it like this. And then it's changing, and then it's changing, and then it's changing. There's no—as they say—there's no there there.

And that to me isn't scary. That opens into the mystery. What else is there to do but really appreciate, as best we can, the mystery and the wonder of right now? And the fact that everything that's happening right now is part of the condition for things having come to be as they are right now. Nothing can be left out.

You start to think about what conditions came together for things as they have come to be right now—that we're all sitting here together in this room. If we start enumerating conditions, you can never stop, can you? Just the conditions that kept each one of us alive, and the food that we've eaten, and the people that supported us, and the farmers that grew the food, and the drivers that drove the trucks, and the people who owned the farm, and their parents who gave birth to them. It can't ever come to an end. There's no separation anywhere.

I hope this makes sense. It does to me, but sometimes the language is a little complicated.

Ajahn Pasanno is talking about the experience of stream entry, *sotāpanna*, and one of the lines that's often given in the suttas when somebody recognizes the Dhamma. The phrase is, "The eye of Dhamma is open," and the line often continues, "I see all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing."

Ajahn Pasanno goes into a more accurate translation. He says what would be more accurate from the Pali to the English, instead of "all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing," would be "whatever arising dhamma, cessation dhamma"—dhamma meaning thing.

He goes on to say it's not good English, but it's great Dhamma, because English grammar requires a subject and a verb. So we say "all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation"—something arises and ceases in English. So dhamma comes across as a thing that arises and ceases. "I've seen the Dhamma, this thing that arises, and then this thing goes away."

Do you get it? If there's a thing, there's that moment in there where there's that thingness that the Dalai Lama is saying no, that's not so. A thing has existence in time. So whatever thing arises or is subject to arising then subsequently ceases. But if we consider stream entry as something profound, it would be useful to consider the experience to be one in which the very process that brings things into awareness is seen into. In other words, the mind is experiencing an event stream, a dynamic of arising and ceasing that rules out substantiality.

Really, in talking about emptiness, it's this emptiness of thingness, this emptiness of unchanging existence in time. And that is what impermanence opens us into.

So, cultivating the perception of impermanence. A very simple but profound teaching from Ajahn Chah:

"With everything, just recognize to yourself: it is uncertain. This is uncertain. Sustain this reflection on impermanence as you meditate. Every single sense object and mental state you experience is impermanent, without exception. In the course of meditation, reflect that the distracted mind is uncertain. When the mind does become calm with samādhi, it's uncertain just the same. The reflection on impermanence is the thing you can really hold on to. You don't need to give too much importance to anything else. Don't get involved with the things that arise in the mind. Let go. Even if you are peaceful, you don't need to think too much about it. Don't take it too seriously. Don't take it too seriously if you're not peaceful either."

Viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ—have you ever read that anywhere? It means sense consciousness is impermanent. Have you ever heard that before? How can you train yourself in relation to this truth? How can you contemplate when you find that both peaceful and agitated mind states are transient? The important thing is to sustain awareness of the way things are.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Just sustaining awareness moment to moment on the way things are. Reality is how it is. It reveals itself. We don't have to think, "Now I'm going to go out and really see impermanence." Just sustain awareness on the way things are, and you'll notice when we're assuming permanence—when we're assuming now it's going to be like this for the next hour, for the next day, for the next moment. When we're trying to repeat an experience, thinking, "Let's get all the conditions exactly the same as they were yesterday at this time"—knowing that's impossible. Every moment is just its own perfect moment, and it's gone. Can't recreate it. Conditions are always changing.

Notice when we can just rest at ease in whatever arises. So just explore this: it's uncertain.

When the mind's in reaction, don't take it too seriously, but meet it with awareness. When we're seeing that things are always changing, a sense of that willingness to open into the mystery. Don't take that too seriously either, but just notice it.

I want to end with a poem by Hafiz, the fourteenth-century Persian poet, about this. This translation is called "Deepening the Wonder."

Death is a favor to us,
but our scales have lost their balance.
The impermanence of the body should give us great clarity,
deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes
of this mysterious existence we share
and are surely just traveling through.

If I were in the tavern tonight,
Hafez would call for drinks,
and as the master poured,
I would be reminded that all I know of life and myself
is that we are just a mid-air flight of golden wine
between his pitcher and his cup.

If I were in the tavern tonight,
I would buy freely for everyone in this world,
because our marriage with the cruel beauty of time and space
cannot endure very long.

Death is a favor to us,
but our minds have lost their balance.
The miraculous existence and impermanence of form
always makes the illumined ones laugh and sing.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. Or you can laugh and sing internally.

CHAPTER 94

Understanding Dukkha

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a nuanced exploration of dukkha—the second of the three characteristics and the First Noble Truth. Moving beyond the common translation of "suffering," she presents dukkha through its Pāli etymology: an axle that doesn't quite fit in the wheel's hole, creating constant friction. This understanding reveals dukkha not as something to resist but as a fundamental unsatisfactoriness woven through all conditioned experience.

Wilson examines the three types of dukkha found in the suttas: dukkha-dukkha (obvious suffering like illness and loss), viparināma-dukkha (the suffering inherent in change, which includes even pleasant feelings), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (the subtle oppression of constant arising and passing). She emphasizes that the Buddha's instruction regarding the First Noble Truth is that it "is to be understood"—not resisted or denied. Drawing from the Sutta of the Two Darts, she illustrates how we compound unavoidable pain with mental resistance, creating additional suffering through our untrained reactions.

The talk illuminates how denial and aversion—the primary ways delusion manifests—prevent us from seeing clearly. When we stop being "in contention" with experience, meeting even difficult moments with open-hearted presence rather than resistance, something remarkable happens: our particular suffering opens into universal compassion. Wilson shares the wisdom of Congressman John Lewis and the Freedom Riders to demonstrate how this understanding of dukkha, met with "a graceful heart," becomes the foundation for transformative love and genuine freedom.

Tonight I want to share some thoughts about the second of the three characteristics. Last week I talked about anicca, so tonight I want to talk about dukkha—not exhaustively, but just sharing some things about it.

Dukkha, as a second characteristic, is also of course the first noble truth. It was really given a very central place in the Buddha's teachings, among the things he thought essential to address. And so, just to understand it, really.

I know many of us have been in this scene for a while and tend to use the word dukkha, even though we know "suffering" may not be the best translation. I certainly do, and I notice many other people tend to use the word dukkha as a shorthand for unpleasant things we wish weren't happening. Like if someone comes in and says, "Oh, I'm

having a real dukkha day." Well, according to the first noble truth, every day is a dukkha day. But we take it to mean everything's going in a bad direction—I'm suffering, I'm unhappy, and things are bad.

When I say I want to talk about dukkha, just notice for yourself if some subtle or not-so-subtle quality of aversion pops up. "I really don't want to hear about this." Realizing the first noble truth or understanding dukkha as a characteristic has nothing to do with cultivating aversion. It's not about aversion. As soon as we think, "Oh, life is suffering, everything's suffering," as soon as we translate it as "suffering" in English, it is so easy to move into that connotation of all the bad stuff.

Remember, the first noble truth as dukkha—the Buddha said the first noble truth is to be understood. To be understood. And why? Why does it seem that he shared anything? Why do we practice? Do we understand it so that somehow we can be right, or it would be better for us, or we have to take our medicine? No. To understand it is to free our hearts and minds from the actual suffering of recognizing wrongly. Same with impermanence—not recognizing accurately, not understanding this truth of dukkha. And it's profound. I have no idea that I'm explaining it all tonight. I'm just dropping in some different ways of looking at it.

But just notice, even as we start, if the habit of your mind tends toward subtle aversion, or a little shutting down, or "Okay, I'll listen." Notice that. Notice that veil, notice that little bit of bias, because that is a good example of how we mostly meet a lot of the aspects the Buddha talks about in the first noble truth in our life. It's not about aversion.

The definition I currently like best—two ways of describing this word dukkha—comes from Bhikkhu Bodhi, where he breaks down the actual word in the Pali. He gives a couple of examples. One is that the "du" part can mean difficulty, not quite working right. And the "kha" part means an axle hole, like the big ox carts at the time of the Buddha, with a big round wooden wheel and a hole in the middle that the axle would go through. So dukkha actually means the axle just not fitting properly in the hole. Every time the wheel turns, there's a kind of disharmony, a kind of friction—it's just not quite working right.

Another explanation he gives, a different way of parsing the word, is that "du" can mean difficulty, and "tha" is standing, so it's kind of standing badly—uneasy, uncomfortable. Or as Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it, the basic unsatisfactoriness, the basic "just not quite"—a little bit of friction running through our lives.

If you're sitting there thinking, "There's no friction running through my life," may you be happy. My mother used to say—she didn't really understand this, but once she came to visit the retreat center, and it says "Metta" up above. Somehow she knew: "Metta, that's like the opposite of dukkha, isn't it?" I don't know where she got that, but I thought it was very nice. I was trying to explain dukkha as this friction running through our lives, and she said, "Well, I don't have any dukkha." That's one of the ways delusion works, if you remember from last week—just flat-out denial.

Let me tell you a story just to cheer you up about dukkha and axle carts. This last year when I was in Burma, we were in a little village up in upcountry Burma, a couple hours out of Sagaing, visiting with our Sayadaw. We were setting up a little fund for the fifty-some-odd kids in that village who couldn't afford to go to school. The village basically made sure what we were doing every moment of the day. You can't just say, "I'll take the afternoon off and go for a walk"—forget about it. So they decided that this morning we all had to go for a ride in an ox cart—there were six of us—out through these deeply rutted pathways into a giant watermelon field.

So it was just like this ox cart, big wooden wheels, a little axle thing going through the hole. It was definitely friction, disharmony. I cannot tell you how uncomfortable it was riding in that ox cart through those ruts and bouncing, and the dust was coming up. I'm not exaggerating any of this—higher than the cart, and it's tilting down. Never mind springs. Every time it would hit a rut, we'd fly up and wham back down.

And then we got out at this watermelon field, like, so what? We don't want to see this watermelon field. It took us 45 minutes, and we had two nuns with us, Western nuns. We got there at about 20 minutes to 12, which meant that they were serving us lunch in like five minutes. And if they didn't make it back for lunch, they didn't get any food for the rest of the day. And it had taken us 45 minutes to get there in this dukkha cart. That surely was a dukkha cart.

And then they unhook the oxen, and they're off there showing us the watermelon fields. And we kind of said, okay, something isn't going to work about this. This is sankhara dukkha. It doesn't work. And we started walking really fast back, which of course freaked the guys out who were driving us, because it was their job to take care of us and we had just abandoned them. They hooked up the ox and came running after us. But meanwhile, we figured out this is on the edge of a river, and the river was flowing, and here was the village, and we'd come this really long, complicated way. So we thought, we'll just walk back along the river.

And they got the ox and came running for us and said, "No, you must get in. You must get in. We must take care of you." We said, "No, we only have 10 minutes to lunch." So we walked back along the river. It was less than a 10-minute walk along the river. It was like one of those experiences.

So that whole experience is dukkha, but I just want to say the sense of the friction of the axle not fitting in the hole of the wheel of the ox cart is a very apt description of this—just this sense of friction running through our lives.

In the suttas, the Buddha mentions three kinds of dukkha. I'm sure you're familiar with this. I just want to mention them and then talk about how we can misunderstand.

The first one, you all know: dukkha dukkha, which is your basic unpleasant, difficult experience. This is the one that we all just kind of label everything dukkha. We think of this. And this is the classic definition I'm sure you've heard: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. I'm using "suffering" on purpose now because I would say these things are suffering. Separation from what is pleasing, union with what is displeasing, and not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, clinging to the five aggregates is suffering. The five aggregates is nama-rupa—mind of consciousness, perception, vedana or feeling, and sankhara or mental formations, and form. You really could say, in other words, clinging.

So that basic dukkha dukkha—the problem with that, as I'll talk about it a bit more later—that's just the first one, dukkha dukkha.

The second one is called viparinama dukkha, and it's basically the fact of change, which I talked about a lot last week. It's also included under the sense of unsatisfactoriness, of things just not quite working right, basically that there's nothing we can rely on, as I said last week. And it's under this one, viparinama, that in the commentaries, this is where pleasant feeling is included. So we tend to think of dukkha as a characteristic of all phenomena, being that we can't rely on it, and our mind, as I said in the beginning, tends to go to the unpleasant, thinking of unsatisfactory as bad. But here the Buddha is saying pleasant feeling also is included within dukkha. We'll talk more about that in a minute as well.

And the third one, sankhara dukkha. Sankhara, you know, is the word that's sometimes translated as mental formations, but it's really any formation. Sankhara is anything that is formed or fashioned by conditions. Whatever comes together goes apart.

That's sankhara. In terms of the five aggregates, sankhara is used as intention, as really all of our mental formations. In terms of this sankhara as dukkha of the first noble truth, it's often talked about as the fact that whatever comes together is going to come apart. And this is constantly going on.

The way it's described in the commentaries is that when we're experiencing sankhara dukkha, it's recognizing that there's a sometimes very subtle, sometimes not, quality of being oppressed by the constant rise and fall of everything. Just this fact that there's nowhere to rest and that it often doesn't quite work. This sense of subtle disconnect, this unsatisfactoriness running through life that Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about.

And our struggle with that—there's a Tibetan phrase I've heard Guy use, so I asked him about it. I thought it was Trungpa, but he said no, he doesn't know who it's from. But I really like it. I think it describes our unawake response to sankhara dukkha: the essence of samsara—rounds of birth and death and wanting and suffering—the essence of samsara is trying to correct, trying to just make it a little bit better, this moment, this moment, this moment. To me, that's the best feeling I get of sankhara dukkha—just not quite totally settled in this moment.

So I'll talk a little bit about each of these. And you get it: this is including dukkha as the first noble truth to be understood, as a mark, an aspect, a characteristic of all phenomena. It's really a radical understanding. That's why to stop with the sense of dukkha as unpleasant, or things we don't like, or actual physical suffering—it's so limiting. We really need to open ourselves to explore, to try to understand. It's quite radical that when he's talking about all aspects of phenomenal existence being dukkha, having this thread of unsatisfactoriness in it—that's not to make us suicidal. It's to free us. But it has to be that radical to free us. Otherwise, the mind is always trying to find some kind of happiness and ease where it can't, not recognizing accurately, and that little bit is what keeps us spinning.

And so, as with everything he taught that I can understand, the understanding of dukkha, even when we have moments of understanding—it frees us. And personally, I find it really inspiring and energizing. Not at all depressing, but sort of like, "Oh, right." Instead of everyone going around with the emperor's new clothes, someone saying, "Yes, the emperor has no clothes on." That's an old moral tale.

Anyway, when I first began to hear about this, sometime after I started practicing, I didn't hear much. You just hear what we're ready to hear, right? So I'm sure it was talked about, but I didn't hear it for a while. But when I first heard this sense of this

thread of unsatisfactoriness, and nothing, even the beautiful, can be relied on—I felt such a sense of relief, of wholeness, of things coming back into balance. Like, "Oh, I'm not crazy."

And I don't know, just taking very simple examples: you go somewhere with people to the movies, or you go out to dinner, and "Oh, this is going to be so great, we're going to have such a nice night." Then when it's over, people say, "Oh, that was so wonderful." You hear people the next day saying, "That was such a nice night." And my experience would have been, well, some of it was nice. The car ride there was kind of long, a little bit cold, a little bit cramped. But it was okay, we didn't have a crash. We had some nice conversation, but then the radio was too loud. And it wasn't like I was so thrilled when I got out of the car.

And you go in the restaurant. You're looking, and you're talking, and you wait, and you're sitting there, and it's a little bit noisy. And you order some food, but it's not really what I had in mind—I was kind of more in the mood for seafood. But okay, this really tastes good. And I'm not being negative, but everyone's saying, "This is so great, this is so great." But then, well, okay, the peas are a little mushy. But this is really great, this is so good. And you have a conversation. And part of the time you're bored. And part of the time you're thinking about what if you were back home in time to see that movie on TV. Or this is good.

But oh, it's an hour's drive home. And it's so cold tonight. And I wish I would have just stayed home in the first place. Oh, no, no. This is great. You get home. And the next day, everyone goes, "It was wonderful." And I'll think, well. You know, it wasn't like it was bad, but it wasn't really wonderful either. It had moments of everything. You know what I mean?

And when I saw, oh, I don't have to—there's not something wrong with me that I'm not getting completely thrilled with all these things that everybody's saying is great. There's not something really twisted about my mind that I keep waiting for everything to be perfect, like I read about in the books, and it doesn't happen. I kept thinking something was wrong with me. But no.

That's not the same as saying everything stinks, and life is all suffering. It's not saying that. It's saying, let's look at what's really going on. What's really going on. It's not depressing at all. It's like just saying, oh yeah, that axle hole is rubbing. And if I don't need it to be different, if I'm not expecting to be driving in a Peugeot, if I know I'm driving and it's a friction axle hole, okay, that's fine. I don't get different expectations. I'm not looking for it to make my day. It's fine just as it is. We can really appreciate life.

So those same qualities, the way delusion shows up that I talked about with impermanence, are also true for understanding—or maybe not understanding—dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, this friction that's just not quite right. Or as Ruth Dennison used to say, it's just the little hole in the canoe. You know, you're paddling, everything's fine, but there's just this little hole in the canoe. It's always just leaking a little bit, or sometimes more than a little bit.

So the main one's denial, just flat-out denial, and we're all very familiar with this. And the other is the misperception, the not perceiving accurately due to the holding back and the aversion in the mind. I love exploring denial. I was talking to somebody about this, I think, because it's such an amazing quality in the mind. You can almost see the mind going, "That's not happening, and I don't see it." Or, "I'm just not going to look at that, and I'm just going to pretend everything's fine."

So denial of, first, just flat out dukkha dukkha. And this is what's amazing. The fact that old age, sickness, disease, and death happens to everybody. It's the same with impermanence. We go, yes, sure, but not me, not yet. And when something like that does happen, it's because there's not that complete understanding and acceptance that this is just the nature of whatever's compounded—is going to change, is changing right now.

It's not quite deeply seen that when something really difficult, just in the dukkha-dukkha level, happens to us—separation from what is loved, having to be together with what is unloved. Well, how often does that happen? A lot. It's easy to turn it into either pretending that's not happening or thinking it's a mistake. It shouldn't happen. And if I would have figured things out right or done stuff differently or taken vitamin C or whatever it is, this wouldn't be happening. There's something wrong with me, or there's something wrong with you, or there's something wrong with something somewhere, because this shouldn't be happening.

Instead of just bringing this clear, calm, uncluttered attention to just notice how things are, like I described going to dinner. Without judgment, just noticing this is a pleasant moment, this is a not pleasant moment. This is pleasant, but my mind's wanting it to do more. Oh, that's the suffering, just noticing it. No problem. When we don't notice it, we don't know how to respond appropriately because we don't even know what's happening. And we get more and more confused and more suffering.

I read a book a few years ago called *Unquiet Ghost*, where the man who wrote it had gone to Russia in the 1990s after the end of the Soviet Union. And he talked to a lot of people who had been there during the era of Stalin, those years when something like twenty million people

Russian citizens were put into prison camps, into the gulags. Perhaps it was twenty million who died, and more than that who passed through them. But there were periods in the thirties and forties when so many people were arrested, often for doing nothing at all. It was immense. Those years were called the years of terror.

So this writer went to Russia after the end of the Soviet Union, when people could begin to talk about it a little—though it still wasn't talked about much. He was interviewing people he could find who had either been in the gulag and lived through it, or family members, or neighbors. It was fascinating, but there's one quotation from it that particularly struck me. It almost felt as if the book was a meditation on the power of denial in our minds and in society.

What he discovered from talking to many people was that during the periods of terror, people who tried to avoid arrest by lying low and moving from place to place—basically running—actually had a good chance of success. The KGB at that time was good at arresting people but wasn't so good at searching and finding them. However, people rarely tried this. Despite mass arrests, almost everybody believed, "It won't happen to me." Because people deny bad news since it implies worse news. If I'm about to be arrested, that would mean the whole system has gone mad. I know I've done nothing. Therefore, it can't be true that I'll be arrested. Anyone else who was arrested must have done something bad—until they come for you.

George Orwell talked about the courage of perception, the power of facing unpleasant facts. I would call understanding dukkha not only the power of facing unpleasant facts, but simply facing facts in general—which is, as you might recognize, mindfulness. It's not that we need to become negative and look for the unsatisfactory aspect of everything. It's the same as with impermanence. If we simply rest with steady moment-to-moment awareness, noticing what's presenting itself in this moment without bias, without preference, the fact of change and the fact of unreliability—this thread of nothing really being stable, nothing really doing it for us—will be obvious. The thread that unpleasant, difficult things do happen, not only to others but to me, not only to me but to others, becomes clear.

And we start to see that the real suffering our understanding can free us from is the suffering of a mind and heart that doesn't understand and stays lost in denial, in aversion, in blame, in judgment. It's rooted in a misunderstanding. I remember reading somewhere—I forget if it was Joko Beck who said this—but the feeling is as if I can somehow hold myself separate from this unwanted experience. And in fact, if you think of it as an unwanted experience rather than just an unpleasant experience, that brings it closer to what's really the problem in the moment.

My knee's hurting. It's unpleasant, but really, it's unwanted. And the subtle, unseen—maybe not so subtle—habit of our mind, both flat-out denial and basic aversion to the unpleasant, this pulling away, is rooted in the belief that I can somehow stay separate from it. It's happening over there. If I can't stay separate from it, then there's a way I can stop it and make everything okay again.

When you can't stop it, and you can't stay separate from it, but you're still lost in aversion to it, that so often turns to even stronger aversion, whole levels of self-judgment, even despair, depression. I've seen this often for myself and with others—some kind of chronic illness or chronic pain, a knee, a back, or some chronic condition. We might in moments be with the unpleasant, but overall there's this sense that I should be able to be separate from it, or if I could figure out what I did wrong and how to fix it, I could get rid of it. And when we can't, this subtle or not-so-subtle turning of aversion back on ourselves—because of not understanding the truth of dukkha—becomes "What am I doing wrong?"

This shows up in the whole New Age thing: if I had the right thoughts, I wouldn't be ill. Do you remember years ago, there was this writer named Louise Hay who wrote all those books about proper thoughts? Certain thoughts lead to certain sicknesses. I remember that certain thoughts would give you warts on your feet. It went on and on like that. When I first developed my chronic disease, I got a little sucked into that thinking—if you have the right thoughts, you won't get sick.

And I started thinking: Ramana Maharshi died of cancer. What about Ajahn Chah, all those years, eight or nine years, where he needed complete care? What about the Karmapa who died? Wait a minute—they all died. All the most amazing people died. Even the Buddha died. There might be something that isn't quite in alignment with reality about that way of thinking.

This came up in an interview, I think today, again from the Buddha's teachings, but these are the habits of our mind when we don't understand the truth that unpleasant, difficult things happen. They simply happen. And pleasant experience isn't the source of all our happiness.

So the Buddha is talking about this in what's called the Sutta of the Two Darts. You experience something unpleasant—say a pain in the knee—and you shoot yourself with a second dart. The unpleasant sensation is the first dart. The second dart is: *What's the matter with me? I don't like this. This should go away.* And so it's like you have an unpleasant physical feeling and an unpleasant mental feeling.

But in this paragraph, he's describing how our minds get into habits without seeing clearly: "Having been touched by that painful feeling, he resists and resents it." Does that sound habitual? Normal? What we do?

"Then, in one who resists and resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance against painful feeling comes to underlie his mind." In other words, it gets to be a habit. And so it just seems normal, doesn't it? With an unpleasant, painful feeling, of course we have aversion to it. Of course we resist it. That's normal. I'm not saying it's bad—I'm just saying look and see. That's normal.

"Then, under the impact of that painful feeling, he proceeds to look for and enjoy sensual happiness. Why does he do so? Because an untaught worldling, oh monks, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

That makes me—I just find that so poignant. And so true. Because when we have something painful going on, someone was saying today, "I saw it in myself—I go off into fantasy, some pleasant fantasy." Here on retreat you can't do much else, so the mind goes to find some pleasant feeling as seemingly the sensible way out of unpleasant feeling.

"And then, in him who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie his mind." So now there's the habit of resistance to unpleasant, the habit of lusting for pleasant. "He does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings."

And then he goes on to say that the tendency for ignorance in regards to neutral becomes the next habit.

That is what I really want to talk about—the gratification, the danger, and the escape. To look and see what's really going on. Because when we don't look, when we're what he calls an untaught worldling, that's some sorrow. We spend our life just ping-ponging back and forth: unpleasant feeling, need to find a pleasant feeling, that one goes away, need to find another one. Needing another one and not finding it is unpleasant, so then we get another pleasant. Then it's neutral, and we really have no clue what to do with neutral. We either fall asleep or we make... People here have even made unpleasant fantasies. God forbid—it's better than neutral! At least I feel like me, having a suffering, unpleasant fantasy. It's better than calm. It's better than nobody home. So we're ping-ponging back and forth.

There's another phrase somewhere in the suttas: that dukkha either ripens as confusion, ripens as bewilderment, or it ripens as search, ripens as investigation. So here, with the untaught worldling he's talking about, there's unpleasant, you just run to the pleasant. And we spend our whole life doing that. That's dukkha ripening as bewilderment. Or we get really lost—we get really lost in the aversion. That's ripening as bewilderment.

But ripening as search—that, I know, is what we're all doing here at moments. You can tell the difference. Like, *Wow, what's really going on here?* Not assuming that my sense of suffering, of dissatisfaction, of something not just working—the square peg in the round hole—is because of this unpleasant feeling. We stop. We look. We explore, just with this moment-to-moment mindfulness. And it reveals itself.

So this is where we start to see that even pleasant feeling is included within dukkha. And this is the point where people say, "Why do I need to know this? Give me, please, somewhere to go to have a moment of pleasure!" But that's when you're thinking of dukkha as suffering, only suffering—when you're thinking of it with aversion.

We're thinking, even pleasant is dukkha, means even pleasant is unreliable, is unsatisfactory. Look and see, as he was saying, it just doesn't last long.

There's one sutta where Sariputta is saying this. This is actually a sutta like Sariputta's lion's roar of his attaining arhatship, of his complete enlightenment—which didn't happen after only two weeks; maybe it took him a couple of days. But he's talking about, to the Buddha, different ways he would express his understanding, his freedom. And this is one way:

"If they were to ask me this, venerable sir, I would answer thus: Friends, there are these three feelings. What three? Pleasant feeling, painful feeling, neither painful nor pleasant feeling. These three feelings, friends, are impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is dukkha. When this was understood, delight in feelings no longer remained present in me."

Then the Buddha says, "Good, Sariputta, good. This is another method of explaining in brief that same point. Whatever is felt is included within dukkha."

Whatever is felt is included within dukkha, included within unreliability, included within the sankhara—the sense of formations that come together, go apart.

And that doesn't mean that we start to hate unpleasant, I mean hate pleasant, or fear pleasant. It doesn't mean—and this is where sometimes people go with this when they start to look at it or start to hear this—they start to think... And I did this for a while

myself. I thought it was very clever. "Oh, everything's dukkha. Everything's suffering. So there's no point in feeling pleasure or appreciation for anything." Just, "Oh, so it's a beautiful plant. Never mind, it's going to die." "It's a pretty day today, but so what? Tomorrow's going to freeze. It's Massachusetts in November. Don't get all excited about it." Go out to dinner and say, "Okay, it's a nice dinner, but so what? It's just going to turn into junk in my stomach, so why don't I just bolt it down and stay home and eat zwieback? What's the difference?"

And I went through a phase like this. We used to call it, years ago, the dukkha club. We'd kid around about dukkha, which we thought was very clever. I mean, for me, it's my sense of humor with the other friends too. And it would help us laugh rather than be aversive. But I can see now where it put that lens of "nothing's worth appreciating, it's all dukkha, it's all..." And you hear it goes into aversion. And that's not wisdom. That's not paññā. That's not clear seeing.

I remember, this was on staff years ago, this couple got together, a man and a woman. They got together as a couple, and they were a very cute couple. They were walking down—I was watching them walk down the driveway hand in hand. And I forget who, but another one of our dukkha club, we turned to each other and said, "They're so happy. Give them six months. It'll break up. All meetings end in parting." And all that stuff's true. But it doesn't have to have that tinge.

Well, twenty years later—I haven't heard from them for a while—but twenty years later, they were still together, very happy. So it took longer. That is not understanding.

That's not understanding the truth of dukkha. That's moving into a kind of fear of the unpleasant, a kind of despair. It's not understanding.

The way the Buddha talked about understanding is to bring in investigation. What he said about gratification, danger, and escape is a really wonderful model to bring into all kinds of aspects of your experience when you're investigating. Because he's not saying pleasant is bad and horrible and not good. He's saying there's gratification. Of course there's gratification.

He said, "Before I was a Buddha, when I was still a bodhisatta, before my enlightenment, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? And I saw whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world—this is the gratification of the world." And he says later, "I set out seeking the gratification in the world, and whatever gratification there is, that I have found."

So it's very sensible. It's very in touch with our experience. There is gratification. There is joy. There is appreciation, even just of sensual pleasure. There's gratification in that. But don't stop there. Keep steady with our awareness, and then we'll see what is the danger: that the world is impermanent, bound up with unsatisfactoriness, bound up with unreliability, and subject to change. This is the danger in the world. So if we're putting all our eggs in the basket of any particular moment experienced for gratification, that's the danger, and we're going to suffer.

And the removal, the abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world. He's not saying the removal of the world, but the abandoning of the lust, stopping that running back and forth toward pleasant feeling every time something isn't quite pleasant arises. This is the escape from the world.

To quote Eckhart Tolle, because I like the way he says it: it doesn't mean that we no longer appreciate pleasant or beautiful things or conditions. Understanding dukkha does not mean we stop appreciating beauty, love, joy, or even the nice taste of a mango lassi—why did that come to mind? But to seek something through them that they cannot give—an identity, a sense of permanency and fulfillment—to seek that is the recipe for frustration and suffering.

So it's really just seeing the facts as they are. It may seem like everything gets all flat, like we're losing something. But we're not. That's when we're putting all our eggs in some pleasure thing, and like the emperor's new clothes, telling ourselves, "This is making me so happy," and fighting like crazy to deny all the moments when it's not like that, and wondering why we might be a little bit confused.

The other aspect of delusion is not recognizing accurately this incorrect perception. Same as with impermanence—we perceive permanence. Similarly with dukkha, with the unreliable aspect of all experience, we don't recognize it and we see it as reliable. Another way of misperception: when our perception, our consciousness, our mind is colored with aversion, colored with denial, with resistance.

This is one of the tricky places in terms of understanding this truth, this quality of dukkha in experience. Because of this deeply ingrained habit the Buddha spoke of—of pulling back, of aversion, of disconnecting from unpleasant experience, either from fear or by just pretending we're not there, or by lashing out with anger and blame—when that aversion is coloring the mind, the citta kilesa, we can't recognize accurately. It's sort of like a catch-22, a cycle that keeps going until we stop and recognize the aversion.

This is from the Buddha: "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good or the good of others or the good of both."

We just can't see straight when aversion, when dosa, when ill will is coloring our mind. And so the deep habit of our mind to meet unpleasant, unwanted experience with some form of resistance or ill will makes it just that much more tricky to recognize without that reaction—to simply acknowledge, "Oh yeah, difficult things happen. It's not my fault. It's not something wrong. It's just how it is. This is difficult."

But when there's a moment—or more than a moment—of that mindful, clear awareness, just simply meeting the difficult experience: the pain in the knee, the cramping in the joints, the fear of getting old, the sense of loss, the feeling of loneliness, the feeling of grief. Just meeting it as it is in that moment without ill will. It's still a feeling of grief or loss or cramping in the joints or growing old, but it doesn't have to lead to this sense of isolation, the sense of something wrong.

It doesn't have to spin us into this whole sense of being at odds with life as it is, believing that something bad is happening to us. Instead, we can simply meet it: "Oh yes, here it is."

Bankei, the Japanese Zen master, said at one point, "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things. Then your primary being reveals itself in its true form." Don't set yourself into confrontation with things, and then your primary being reveals itself in its true form.

So in those moments when we're not in contention with our experience—not in contention with sorrow or loss or illness or unpleasantness or anger—when the mind is fully present and willing to simply meet this as it is, then our natural being does reveal itself in its true form. That's when there are those moments of what I call "just is-ness," the times when we can recognize an intimation of the natural purity, the natural luminosity of mind, of consciousness.

We all have those moments. There's nothing special happening—there's just this, and the mind is not in contention. You can be drinking tea. You can be walking. You could be feeling comfortable or cold or hot. You could be feeling sad. You could be feeling anxiety. You could be feeling contentment. Your body could hurt. You could be hungry. It doesn't matter what's happening. But when there's fullness of awareness and presence, and we're not in contention with experience, then there's a sense of seeing

through. We're not looking to experience for reliability, for happiness, for ease. The sense of fighting with what's happening is gone. There's actually a sense of understanding the truth of dukkha in that moment.

Denial of dukkha—denial of even dukkha dukkha, of the unpleasant stuff that's happening, all the things I've mentioned: illness, loss, fear—thinking that there's something wrong, that it shouldn't arise. Have you noticed that when difficulty happens to us and we believe something is wrong, we either blame ourselves, as I did with that illness, or we try to hide it? We feel that other people don't want to know about it, or we're embarrassed, or we just feel really isolated. Have you ever had a time when you were in deep depression, or grief, or illness, or loss, and you felt really alone with your experience? In a way that's aversive, that's depressive, that is truly isolating? The sense of suffering makes us feel more and more alone, as if there's something wrong with us.

This is really not understanding the truth of dukkha. Because the reverse of it, the jewel that arises when dukkha is understood, is this: when we're not in contention with experience, that sense of wisdom, of clarity, the purity of heart and mind arises. And the other jewel is that it manifests in our heart and in our relationships as compassion.

When we're not in contention with difficulty, with unpleasantness, when we're not running to the pleasant to escape, when we're not meeting dukkha with aversion, the experience of life is not one of isolation but of recognizing our non-separation. Suffering—and now I'm really using suffering as suffering—rather than being a modality that enhances our feeling of weirdness, of isolation, of shame, of self-judgment, is actually one of many ways through which we can experience our commonality with all beings.

This is really the jewel in opening into the understanding of this characteristic of dukkha: the natural response of compassion. The Dalai Lama has said that compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is. And this comes from being with our own experience, really being with it—not with aversion, but with lack of contention, with open-hearted presence—just to see what reveals itself.

I've seen it many times in myself and of course in other people: how our own particular experience, whether of physical pain, of not getting what we want, of being separate from what we love, of frustration, loss, illness, trauma arising—whatever it is—has the particular form of our story, our particular physical and mental memories and experience. Of course it does.

And at first, when we're still in denial, when we're wrestling with it, when we're trying to keep it away, we're personalizing it. There's so much extra suffering in that, isn't there? First the resistance, the denial, and then so often the sense of self-blame.

What am I doing wrong? I shouldn't be suffering from this so much. It's shameful. Everyone else on this retreat seems like such great yogis, and here I am, stumbling through, filled with grief over something that happened twenty years ago. What's my problem?

We become isolated and alienated. But it's this personalizing and this resistance that's actually creating the sense of separation where it doesn't exist.

It's creating the sense of alienation—"This is all my story"—where it doesn't need to exist.

And in that moment, and many moments, when we suddenly stop resisting... Of course, we can't do this with willpower. We all know this, but we still try. When suddenly we just stop resisting, we stop being in contention—"Oh, grief is like this. Just like this"—totally open to it. And maybe not in that second, but it does happen, over and over, that it moves from the particular to the universal. It still can be our own particular story, but it becomes so clear that my grief is the same, in a way, as the grief of all beings in the world. Every being goes through grief. Every being goes through loss. Everyone experiences illness.

And when we stop fighting it, when we stop trying to fix and just open into it with this clarity, this wisdom, this non-contention—"Ah, it's just what it is"—and we really see it... It doesn't mean it's not grief. Grief is still grief. Grief is like this. But you couldn't—and I mean this is my experience with grief or with illness, with pain—in those moments of pure presence and non-contention, it could be enormous grief, but I couldn't say it was difficult. I couldn't even say it was particularly suffering. It's just what it is. Times I've been really sick, and there's presence and non-contention, I could say, "Yeah, I'm sick, and this and this and that." I couldn't really say it was difficult. It's just what it is.

And then there is contention, right? Experience is not difficult. Then suddenly the personalization comes in again. No judgment—it just does. There's some resistance to it: "Okay, that was great, but now it's enough already. It should be over." And that's like such a world of difference in my mind. It's going to be so subtle, but okay, but that's enough now. That's enough. Get over it. And then it's personal. It's alienating. It's suffering. There's resistance. Like they say, "The smallest amount of judgment, heaven and earth are set infinitely apart."

Exploring that, exploring that jewel of compassion in the heart of all suffering, in the heart of all dukkha.

So I just want to end with one example of that which quite inspires me. Again, remember the saying of dukkha that leads to bewilderment and dukkha that ripens as search. This is from John Lewis, who was a U.S. congressman. He was one of the original Freedom Riders in 1959, 1960, out of Nashville. A group of students from the university there, African-American students, began sit-ins and Freedom Rides. They formed the beginning of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And he and many others—I mean, it's amazing. These were kids, nineteen-, twenty-year-old kids. The marches they experienced, lots of violence and beatings in the Freedom Rides—unbelievable, the violence they put themselves in. And they kept going back and going back from a deep, deep commitment to nonviolent action. Everything they did was rooted in nonviolence, not as some external idea, but as a deep manifestation of transformative love, of Christian love. It's a really very profound way of self-transformation as well as social action.

I just want to read what he wrote. This is from his autobiography of a few years ago, just a little snippet where he's talking about that. He said:

"Suffering puts us and those around us in touch with our consciences. It opens and touches our hearts. It makes us feel compassion where we need to. Suffering, though, can be nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart."

This is different language, but to me it says the same thing.

"Without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart—an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering."

This is a difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence. We are talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy.

This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence.

I think of that as really non-contention with presence and acceptance—something that takes us past the personal, past the needing life to serve us in a certain way, and into truly, just for a moment, touching the truth of non-separation. It opens us to the luminous, non-suffering aspect that is available to us in any moment, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, whether wanted or unwanted. It is always accessible, just now.

CHAPTER 95

Anattā: Investigating the Misperception of Self

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this intimate fireside-style talk, Carol Wilson explores anattā, the third of the three characteristics of existence, alongside anicca (impermanence) and dukkha (unsatisfactoriness). Rather than presenting not-self as a philosophical concept to debate or memorize, she emphasizes that anattā describes how things actually are—our confusion arises from misperception, from not recognizing accurately.

Wilson draws on the sutta where the Buddha remains silent when the wanderer Vacchagotta asks whether there is or is not a self, illustrating how this teaching transcends both eternalism and annihilationism. She explains Ajahn Buddhadāsa's insight that the sense of self is "merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind," tracing how the dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda) unfolds rapidly from contact through feeling, craving, and grasping to the birth of self-sense—thousands of times daily.

The practical heart of this teaching lies in generating what Buddhadāsa calls "contentment with voidness" (suññatā)—noticing the many moments each day when no sense of self is present, rather than constantly recreating identity through habitual clinging. Wilson shares teachings from Ajahn Sumedho on how our strong belief in personality becomes our reference point, and offers Ramana Maharshi's observation that the idea of self "is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows—look closely and the ghost vanishes." The talk concludes with the understanding that realizing emptiness naturally gives rise to compassion and total responsibility for the world.

So tonight I want to talk about the third of the three characteristics. If you thought I was going to talk about thanksgiving and gratitude, forget it. I'm talking about anattā—really more about investigating this idea of self, this sense of self. Think about this as a little fireside chat, not some big philosophical disquisition.

As I said with the other two characteristics of existence, anicca (impermanence) and dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), the same is true with anattā. It's not that it's some different reality that we need to achieve. It's just a description of how things actually are. Our confusion comes about through recognizing wrongly, recognizing inaccurately. Those of you who were here may remember when I talked about the inverted perceptions—that we see things opposite from how they are.

With anattā, in my personal experience (and mostly I'm just talking from personal experience, not declaring this is how it is, but hopefully just getting you a little interested to keep exploring), with this sense of not-self, it's not so much that it's a philosophical concept that we need to understand and discuss and remember and debate. Basically, that doesn't really get us very far.

It's a sense of seeing—I think with anattā more than the other two—that the sense we have, and we do have a very real sense of "me here now," is worthy of investigation. It's not like we don't feel that. We feel it. It seems really true. And because it's not investigated, we just assume it's true. It's a basic misperception that's so frequent and familiar and cozy, kind of comfortable in a twisted way, that we just keep on believing it.

In this way, the whole sense of recognizing not-self, whenever we first start talking about it—as I mentioned—the Buddha didn't seem to teach for us to memorize more philosophical concepts. At the time he was teaching in India, there were clearly lots of wanderers and ascetics with all different points of view and different spiritual backgrounds. They really went around debating each other quite a bit, very philosophically. The Buddha was really not teaching to add another line to the debate.

There were even times when people would come to him—I mean, he taught about not-self, "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." But if we just take that up as a philosophical view, as one of my teachers said, people go around saying, "This is not me. This is not myself." But it's *they* saying, "This is not myself." They're just throwing it in as another line. "Oh, I know this thought is not me. I know this thought is not me." And they don't really look carefully.

The Buddha really wasn't teaching to try and get us to have another philosophical concept. There are even suttas where some of these wanderers would come and ask him questions. Even though he taught very clearly over and over about not-self—that none of the sense experiences, no aspect of nāma-rūpa can be thought of as me or mine—there are suttas where wanderers come. There's one in particular who shows up a lot named Vacchagotta. He always shows up and walks away shaking his head and looking confused. Just so you know, not everyone who met the Buddha got it. Plenty of people would walk away going, "Okay, if you say so," then they'd go off.

One time this Vacchagotta came and said to the Buddha, "Is there a self?" And the Buddha remained silent. Then he asked, "Is there not a self?" And the Buddha remained silent. So Vacchagotta went away dissatisfied and confused.

Ānanda said, "Why didn't you answer him?"

The Buddha said, "Well, if I said that there was a self, I would be siding with all the people who are eternalists, because that's the background he comes from, and that wouldn't be helpful. But if I said there's no self, then I would be taking the side of what he would think of as the annihilationists—'this self of mine is going to be destroyed'—and that would also not be true."

Then he said, just on the personal level, "If I said to him there is a self," he asked Ānanda, "would that be commensurate with what I've always taught and what I've known, that no aspect of nāma-rūpa can be considered a self?"

And Ānanda said, "No, that wouldn't be true."

And the Buddha said, but if I said to him there is no self, then he wouldn't understand it. He'd go away thinking, "Oh, so it seems this self of mine must come to an end." And he would be even more confused. So I just didn't tell him anything.

This story shows just how confusing this topic can be. And in talking about it, I find that the more one tends to think about it, for most people, it's just not helpful. We can't think our way into this because it's a misperception. So what helps clarify the perception? Just what we've talked about all the time—the steadiness of mindfulness when the mind, the citta, the consciousness in a moment isn't clouded by wanting, isn't clouded by aversion, isn't clouded by confusion.

Of course, the catch-22 is that the sense of self is itself a manifestation of confusion and clinging. But still, we can begin to observe that itself, rather than just stopping looking. When there's a sense of self, how do I get rid of it?

When we begin talking about this again, often besides trying to think your way through it, some people go into, "Okay, I'm waiting for the big blowout experience of anatta, of no self." Finally, like that last way he said, Vacchagotta would think, "Finally this self of mine will be completely destroyed, and I won't have to deal with all this craziness anymore. And I'm waiting for that." So now there's self. But when anatta really comes, or I get there, or whatever way the mind says it, then there won't be self. You get that sense of positing something that we're waiting for to go away. And we're waiting for the big bang for it to happen, too.

So I want to say, for most people, forget about it. Quit waiting for the big bang. Quit waiting for what's here now to go away, and turn around and see what's actually true. That's, again, what I said before, what I love about the Buddha's teaching. Liberation comes not from getting rid of something, but from seeing how things are arising in this moment accurately. Accurately.

If we're afraid of our sense of self, if we hate it when ego arises, well, then we're not going to be able to recognize it accurately, are we? We're already in contention with it. But we can just begin to explore it the same as any other arising experience, because that's all it is—another arising experience.

So it's neither annihilation, getting rid of something, where everything just becomes a dull grayness. "If there's no me, who decides what to eat for lunch?" All those questions come up when we take questions the next morning after an anatta talk. "Well, if there's no me, who decided to come to this retreat?" And all that kind of stuff. "If there's no me, how am I going to function in the world?" And see, all of that comes from the thought that there is a me that has to go away.

But this is the thing. There is no solid self now, before, tomorrow, or ever. There's nothing to lose but confusion. There's nothing to be afraid of. Not that we're in control of whether we're afraid, because we're not in control of anything.

Sayadaw U Pandita said once to me in an interview—I forget what was happening, obviously something was going on I didn't like, or I was afraid—he said, "Well, are you making that happen?"

I said, "Well, no, I can't make it happen."

He said, "That's right. It's out of control. That's anatta, out of control."

I thought, oh, that's a nice definition. I like that quite a bit, because the sense of control is always about some "me," you know, the little person in the head. Like, did you ever see *Men in Black*? I don't know what was coming into my mind, but there's this little being, this little alien inside somebody's head that's running the body. And I thought, yeah, that's really so much what it feels like—just in here pulling all the levers, "I'm the one."

Well, there's no one in there doing that.

So really, it's this sense of misperception, of not recognizing accurately. There's a sutta somewhere where the Buddha compares the way consciousness works to a magic show. When we don't see how the magic is done—like someone on the side of the road performing magic or working puppets—when we don't see how it's done, it's fascinating, amazing. And then when you see behind the scenes how the magic is done, it loses its power. It isn't magic anymore. It loses the mystery.

The way that our thoughts and emotions and associations and clinging all come together around any particular moment of consciousness—the sense door contact and awareness—the way that all comes together and creates this seemingly real, palpable, and somehow to us unchanging sense of self is just like that. It's like a magic show. And it seems so solid only because we don't really look. We don't let that arise into a space of awareness like anything else.

Ramana Maharshi said the idea of self—or he used the word ego; I'm not using ego just because that brings us into psychological terminology where the sense of an ego structure as a way to navigate conventional reality is very useful, so I don't want to confuse things—but he said the sense of self, the idea of self, is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look closely and the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So also with this sense of solid self: so long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is found not to exist.

So it should be so simple, shouldn't it? Why it's so complicated, I don't really know. But that is really the key. It seems to exist because it's not investigated. Investigated really with mindfulness, with dhamma vicaya—one of the seven factors of enlightenment—investigation, interest. Not investigated with fear or greed or trying to make experience match some philosophical concept. But really, when the sense of self is there, turn around and notice. Just bring your awareness to it the same way you would a sound or a sight.

Because for sure—I mean, I do, and I don't think I'm the only one—the sense of me, self, is a palpable experience that arises, oh, say ten million times a day, right? We know there's a sense of me, or of me watching, or me hearing, or me thinking. Or else it's my pain or my thought. But often that felt sense of me—we're sort of aware of it, we have sort of mindfulness with it, we're really aware of it—but we tend not to turn around and actually notice: sense of me is like this. Feel or notice in this moment what am I calling "sense of me"? Don't bring in the thoughts, but bring in this quality of interest, of attention.

And for me, it could be just a little physical feeling at that moment. Another time, it might be an image. Another time, it might be like a sense of an image, like of looking out through eyes—that's just another image. It could be all kinds of things. And the thing to notice is this sense of self, however you're experiencing it—we assume, without looking, we just assume, "Oh, here it is. How am I going to get rid of it? Here's the ego again causing trouble." We just assume it's some solid thing, instead of turning around and noticing as it arises, noticing as it passes.

But often right here is where our awareness snaps shut, where our perception is inaccurate. So here our practice is first to just become aware: sense of self is here right now, in whatever way—there can be different ways. And then just to keep on being aware, being mindful of that, just the same as you would of anything else. Anything else. Keep on looking. Because what keeps the magic show going is lack of attention. And lack of attention leads to inaccurate misperception.

So again, it's not that something that's here has to go away, but rather we recognize it a different way. Conventional and ultimate reality are both still here. It's not like we stopped existing.

The example I often use—I've used something similar in another talk—is about perception, accurate perception. I don't know if it's so popular anymore, but a few years ago there were all these posters and books of something I think they called Magic Eye. Each page would just be symbols of different colors, maybe red and yellow. If you looked at it, it didn't have any picture of anything—just geometrical shapes all blended together. They'd have a whole book of these different ones. If you just looked at it flat out like that, without looking very carefully, without a lot of attention, that's all you saw.

But what was magic, so-called magic, about them is that if you looked in the right way—which was sort of steady but not focusing, not looking for something, but relaxed and present and steady—your perception would kind of shift. And suddenly in that field of just symbols, just shapes, would suddenly jump out what looked like a three-dimensional picture of something. Maybe of a spaceship, or maybe of an elephant, or maybe of two hockey players, or whatever. What it was was usually pretty mundane, not that interesting. But it was always fascinating for people to see how this flat bunch of colors suddenly had within it what really looked so real—a three-dimensional representation of people or animals. And then if you kind of looked away or stopped that steady, relaxed focus, that would go away again and it would just be the flat image.

So you couldn't say that that representation of the hockey players wasn't there. As far as we can tell, it's there all the time, right? But you don't perceive it all the time. Some people could never perceive it. They just never got the knack of how to look right. You'd tell them, "Well, there's these hockey players in there." And they'd say, "Well, I can't see it. I can't see it. I can't see it." The harder they tried, the less likely they were to see it—looking for the hockey players, everything just getting tight. But even when you know how, sometimes you're looking in a certain way and you see it, other times not. It's just the flatness. So both ways of perceiving are available in that particular experience.

To me, it's a little bit analogous to what it's been like in my experience with this sense of self, with identification or non-identification. I'll say in a later minute what I mean by identification, because that's a word we throw around. "I'm identified with that." Well, what the heck do you really mean when you say that? It's something that's really easy to say, but what's the actual moment-to-moment experience? What are you really experiencing when you say "I'm identified with that"?

So both pieces are there. That's been my experience—that the sense of experience is coming and going, including the sense of self. And it's just what it is, coming and going. And then other times, it's the same experience, but the perception has shifted. And somewhere there's that sense of ownership or beingship. And everything's a lot stickier, isn't it? It really does start to be a problem. Or you think it's really fantastic—it's not a problem. And then that goes away. And then it's a problem.

But in one way, it's just so simple. Stuff's just happening. And the same things are happening. And you function just as well as ever—frankly, better. And then it just switches. And it's me. It's mine. It's rough. It's ugh. You're back with that dukkha axle hole grinding against the cart.

It's not that there was no self and now there is a self. It's just not recognizing accurately.

And then how do we respond? Back to that moment of perception—how an experience is perceived, how it's named, how it's labeled. That colors how we think about it, how we view it, and then that becomes our description, our view that describes and defines our world, without even recognizing that's what's happening.

This is really what happens in terms of a whole sense of personality view, which is one aspect of sense of self. It's not the only sense of self; there's a more subtle sense of self too. But this sense of perception and then how we label it leads to how we think about things, leads to our emotions, leads to our actions, leads to a deeper and deeper story about ourselves. Have you ever noticed that?

And it can be just in regard to anything, anything. You can walk outside and it feels cold. It can just be coldness—just unpleasant or pleasant or whatever you think about cold. But you can also walk outside: "Oh, it's cold. Oh, it's November. Why is it so cold? I didn't bring the right clothes. I never bring the right clothes. And I have this particular physical condition that really can't be good for me to be here." And then all the memories and all of that. "And look at those other people—they have the right clothes. How come I never do bring the right thing? What's the matter with me anyway?"

This is mundane. But how many times a day might we do that? It goes just from "it's cold and not so pleasant" to the whole story of our life, seemingly the whole story of our life. Five minutes later, it could be a completely different story of your life. Walking by —"Wow, look at that nice lunch."

And here it is Thanksgiving. God knows what you all went through about Thanksgiving, being such a big family holiday. It's a day that can often just trigger a lot of thinking about stuff. And now you're sitting there thinking, "I didn't think anything. What's the matter with me? I'm not a good family person." It's hopeless if you're going to take all this seriously.

But this is the sense of concocting a whole story—not just the sense of self, that little clinging, but the whole personality view, the whole story of self. This is a whole personality view, which is a sense of self, but also more elaborated than the more subtle senses of self that arise all the time.

Ajahn Sumedho said: "So then the self arises." The cold, the food, the whatever. "I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears, my desires. And the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit—my views, my feelings, and my opinions. I can get caught into that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness."

And that's a view based on perception, based on thoughts. It turns into a view that arises in consciousness. "But if I know that, then my refuge is no longer in being a person. I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or my views and opinions. Then when I let go, the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends."

So just notice how many times in a day the world of whoever we are arises, based on anything. And rather than hating it, explore it just like that. See how it arises. See what makes it. See what that sense of self is. And notice how it ends when we take refuge in awareness.

He says: "It doesn't mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. In Buddhadharma, the world is the world that we create in consciousness." That's why we can be living in different worlds. Have you ever noticed that? It's like we're all living in our own little world. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same as the world you create. But that world arises and ceases. And that which is aware of the world arising and ceasing transcends the world.

"Our refuge then is in this awareness, rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge—because you can't do it. So trusting, resting in this conscious awareness is what I refer to as coming home, or our real home."

So just in simple terms, when we notice this whole psychiatry, personality view, identity view arising in a moment, or we wake up and it's well arisen, instead of getting into "Oh my God, and me, and this and that, and I've got to change my personality and then I'll be better"—that's the same thing. Just that Tai Chi move of recognizing: as soon as you see all that personality stuff, just the recognition of it is mindfulness. It's awareness.

So he's saying you don't have to get rid of it even. Just let your refuge shift to the mindfulness, to the awareness. And if that sounds too highfalutin, just appreciate the mindfulness in that moment. Mindfulness of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, fine. Mindfulness of the whole story of Carol and her whole life arising out of coldness—fine. It's a story just like any other story. We don't have to hate them. We don't have to take that one so seriously as "me," especially when you notice it changes ten thousand times a day.

Quite some years ago, I was doing a couple months retreat. I was doing the practice, and you know how the story of you just keeps going and going, even when it doesn't spring up with something cold—just that commenting: "Now I'm doing this, now I'm doing that, now I'm walking, well now I'm walking badly, now I'm going to do this," and on and on, until it comes up stronger and then your whole past and future appears.

I happened to see a movie just before I came on the retreat. I don't know if you've ever had the experience, but whatever movie or song or whatever you might have had the misfortune to listen to or watch before a retreat—let's hope you liked it, because you're going to see it and hear it again for quite a while. So I had watched The Fugitive with Harrison Ford, this kind of thriller.

After some weeks on the retreat, this Fugitive story would come, and I'd notice it, and then get going on Carol's story. And after a while, I realized they were exactly the same. I mean, the stories were different, but the quality—the Fugitive story would start, it'd come in image, there'd be Harrison Ford, there'd be the emotions, the music, and that would go on for a while. The reactions in my mind would go on, and that would stop. Then practice, practice. Then Carol would come up—"Oh my God, and why is this..."—and that would go on for a while with the emotions and the thoughts, then that would stop.

After a while, I realized they were exactly the same process. Exactly. This isn't a metaphor—exactly the same process. And it was really quite funny.

And the Carol story, really, it's pretty boring, isn't it? I mean, you know my Carol story's boring. But your own stories—this isn't anything you say to me in interviews, I'm not commenting on my discussions with you—but really, isn't most of your own story

pretty boring? Over and over and over. So The Fugitive was actually a little bit better, a little bit more exciting. But it's really on that level. This is what we call, and this is the whole sense of, personality view.

I'll say something else interesting about this, and then talk about the step underneath it that starts the sense of self in a moment. Ajahn Sumedho talked about one time when some teachers were meeting with him, and he was discussing teaching. He had taught for twenty or thirty years in Thailand to Thai people—he speaks Thai—and then he was living in England and taught a lot to Westerners.

So he said at this point—and maybe he would have changed his mind later—he felt that the biggest hindrance for Western practitioners and meditators is a kind of self-doubt regarding their own insight into awareness, a self-doubt regarding the liberating experiences that Westerners had with awareness. And not like the big bang, everything's over—quit looking for that. But just moments, like the example I just gave of "Oh, that's the same process!" And awareness of that is really quite liberating. You don't have to stop it. You just shift the refuge.

And he says Westerners have so much doubt, self-doubt, about their own insights into awareness. This is his opinion—he believes that's partially because our personalities are so strong and our belief in and reliance on our personalities is so strong. The personality, he says, is so often a reference point.

Think about it. When you're having doubt, how often does it become, "I couldn't really do this, because of past history or whatever." But there was a moment where it really seemed like you got it—that there's nobody here doing it, that it's just so simple. There was a taste of freedom. And then the next day or the next year, "Well, that couldn't have really happened. It must have been something I read, because clearly, here I am with my personality, and it's still so steady. There's no way I could step outside of it." We just so believe it. We use it as our reference point.

So he says we keep getting caught back into our personality. If it's a choice, basically he's saying, between really having confidence in awareness and having confidence in our limited personality, nine times out of ten we go for the personality. It's just what we really believe. I just think that's interesting. I'm throwing that out as something to chew on. I'm not saying I'm sure if it's true or not, but I think it's very interesting.

In some ways, this is the easier part of the sense of self to notice—when it's arising and how it's created. Easy just because it's a bit more obvious. But again, if we want to really explore for each of us the sense of self, just to get interested in exploring it, we can go back to something that Ajahn Buddhadasa says. Over and over he said that the

sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. That's it. Merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. I have a friend who said that translates to, "I want, I need, therefore I am."

The sense of clinging can be really strong, but the much more subtle clinging that can arise around any sense experience—just the little contraction of clinging, of wanting—that can be quite subtle. And from that, it becomes like, "This is my experience. This is my unpleasant feeling, the cold weather. This is my thought. I am this thought. I am this feeling." It's not telegraphed so clearly as that, just kind of a little contraction around it.

If I go outside and there's a contraction of cold and it's unpleasant, it's not so clear. I can say it in retrospect—it's unpleasant, I don't like that unpleasant. Right there, there's the contraction, the clinging to the unpleasant as mine, as me. And then from that, the aversion and the whole sakkāya-diṭṭhi starts.

But there are other times I can go outside—you get it that I don't like the cold, right?—I can go outside and it's cold. You see it and it's just cold. It's just cold. There's nothing else about it. There's not a sense of me-ing or my-ing about it. There's not a sense of liking or not liking. It's just what it is. It's just not a problem. It's nothing, because there's nothing to compare it to. There's not this little sense of clinging that creates a sense of self. So merely a condition that arises and passes.

This is, of course, the whole of dependent origination, which I'm not about to try and explain right now. But to say it very briefly and succinctly, the chain of twelve links that the Buddha described over and over: when there's not wisdom in the mind, when there's ignorance and there's not clear seeing—I won't go through the whole thing, but the ones we can see most easily are how mind and matter leads to contact, that moment of sense experience, feeling. Say it's coolness, staying with the cold—the body that can feel, and consciousness that's aware.

When those three come together—the body that can feel, and consciousness that's aware—that's called contact. Any sense experience we have: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Every second, some sense contact is arising, and consciousness is recognizing that. Mindfulness is recognizing that recognition.

But with contact, right away there's a feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The mind feels that contact. When it's not recognized, that often leads into *taṇhā*, this kind of thirst. It's either leaning into the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant. And this is all really fast.

Then it goes on. That leaning into creates a kind of grasping—grasping to hold onto something, grasping to push it away. This is still really fast. And that grasping leads to, in terms of the dependent origination, *bhava*, which is having and being, into birth, into sickness, old age, and death.

That can be thought of as lifetimes. But the way I want to talk about it—and I'm coming from Buddhadasa again here—he's talking very specifically about exploring how the sense of self is merely a condition arising when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. It takes all the personal out of it. It takes all the problem out of it. It's a conditioned arising like everything. We can just explore it.

So he describes contact, feeling tone—say it's pleasant—then the *taṇhā*, the leaning into. And then the grasping—Buddhadasa calls it the feeling of I and mine. And the feeling of I and mine leads to *bhava*, which he calls having and being. You see, we're getting more and more real. And then comes birth, *jāti*—birth of the sense of self.

And then sickness, old age, and death—the death of that sense of self. Thousands of times a day.

I'll give you a very simple example from a long time ago. I was on a retreat at IMS—this retreat center. We used to have, where you go to take the mugs, back in the good old days, all different kinds of mugs. Any kind of mug people had bought and left here—we loved all those old mugs. Now they're all exactly the same and green, but anyway, there were all these different mugs in different sizes. I would come in, get a mug, just have my tea and go. I was, I think, a little bit proud that I wasn't getting caught in it at all.

Then one day I came in, grabbed a mug, and as I was getting my tea, I thought, "Wow, this mug just really feels perfect in my hand. I love this mug." And it's like, "I want to use this mug."

Right then—that was the contact. It was pleasant. The feeling moved to grasping. And right away, the sense of having and being. I have this mug, and I'm becoming someone who wants this mug. It was birth of the sense of self right then—me and my mug.

Just a little thing. It's not like something we hate, but to really feel it—the difference between coming in, getting a mug, having my tea, and going, versus coming in thinking, "Ah, this mug! How can I keep it? Should I get—no, okay, never mind, put it back. I'm not going to keep it." Put it down. Then I walked away and it was all gone. Death of that sense of self.

It's just a little thing. Next time I came in though, I sort of looked for that mug. And it was there. The whole thing started already. The whole thing was there—the sense of self. You see, it's not a horrible thing, but it complicates everything. There was the birth of self as soon as I saw that mug. I picked it up and sat down.

And then I really started planning: how can I save it? I'll take it back to my room. I mean, there are plenty of mugs. I know other people save things, and on and on. And then I started thinking about it. Well, what does that mean? That means every time I want tea, I have to go all the way to my room, clear on the other side. And I'm walking really slow, so that's like an extra hour every time I want tea. Okay, put it back. Put it down.

And that time, it really died. Stayed dead, because it was just too complicated. But that's a simple example. That's the whole dependent origination right there. And it's fast.

As Ajahn Chah described it once—I love this—he said the dependent origination is like falling out of a tree. You're at the top of a tree, and you fall down. All the twelve links of dependent origination are like twelve branches on that tree. You fall down past them really fast and just hit the ground. You don't get to stop and go, "Oh, that's contact. That's feeling. That's tanha. That's upadana." But sometimes it does slow down in retreat. That's one of the interesting things. But mostly it's like, "Oh, how can I save this mug?" You didn't quite see the whole thing going. Whap—you just hit the bottom. You're in dukkha.

But then the sense of self dies and it's gone. So the magic trick is seen through at that point. And if you can just get interested in exploring it rather than hating or fearing it, it really gets quite interesting. It starts to lose its magical power. "Oh my god, the sense of self again with this mug, and I'm suffering, what can I do?" Instead of putting it down and walking away and noticing—wait, that self just died. It's gone now.

And again, this is from Ajahn Buddhadasa. He talks about shunyata, emptiness. In the translation from Santikaro, he translates shunyata as "voidness," which sounds—I don't know, it just sounds strange to us. But to me, okay, it sounds strange to me. But he's talking about one way he's using shunyata, or voidness: that all phenomena—not just me and you—all phenomena are empty of intrinsic, lasting sense of self. They're all void, empty in that way. That's how it is, not somewhere we have to get to.

And so he talks a lot about not only noticing this birth and death of self—what conditions cause it to arise, what conditions changing cause it to die—which is fascinating to see. But also to notice, as he says, there are many, many moments in a day when there

is no sense of self at that moment. There are voids. He talks about many moments that are empty in that way—empty of a sense of self. And he talks about how important it is to notice these many moments of emptiness and to generate—this is his language—generate a contentment with voidness. Generate a contentment when there's not this birth and death of self, when there's not this strong sense of personality view.

And I think that's very interesting advice, because often—there was a time a couple of weeks ago, it's not happening here so much now—where it was a kind of phase where a lot of you were coming in, you who were here then, just saying, "Nothing's happening." It's either boring or too dull or calm. Or some people even reported they noticed their minds kind of bringing up angry memories so they'd have something to work on. Or bringing up some kind of unpleasant, difficult past—sort of like bringing up the fugitives so you'd have something to chew over. Instead of generating a contentment with those moments when there's no big sense of me, I've seen it in myself how often the mind jumps to a suffering scenario because the sense of self is there.

And you look around—what is that sense of self? It's just this little contraction, just this little moment of clinging around a sense experience, around a thought, around a feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Just like this. It seems gross, but often when we look, it's very quick and very subtle. But I keep seeing this over and over in my practice, in my life: the more subtle ones are the ones that are harder to see, and they're really driving the bus.

The big ones cause suffering, certainly. This big personality view where we're all caught in it, and I'm no good—yes, we're caught in it, but it's not really unobserved. We do notice it's there. Even if we believe it, it's easier to observe. But I've noticed this sense of generating contentment with voidness—at times when that sense of self dies and no other sense of self arises. Sometimes that's lovely. And I know you all know that. We're just present with the is-ness of things, that place of no problem, as one of my friends says. You're quite awake. Things are just so simple. What's the problem with that? Nothing.

But there are other times when the mind is just not quite so awake, and there's not a sense of self. It's a little bit like it's calm, the mind maybe a little dull or a little bit like, "What now?" Sometimes that sense of emptiness opens into fear. I think Stephen Batchelor—I don't have the quotation here—says the sense of emptiness isn't just this beautiful oceanic bliss. Emptiness in the big picture is a falling apart of all our strategies for self-congratulation and self-protection, all our ways of getting through the world. All those strategies fall apart. Sometimes that brings up a little fear.

But sometimes this contentment with voidness is just nothing special. And I've seen—that's what I was saying—so often just the subtle clinging, the sense of that contraction of me, even around some stupid, unpleasant, or difficult story. It's almost as if it's just cozier to have this sense of me. And "sense of me" is even too strong a phrase. It's just a little—that's the best I can describe it. But it's almost like putting on an old, cozy, fuzzy bathrobe that you just feel comfortable in. And without it, what? There's nothing here. "Oh, yeah, that's right. I'm not really doing it right. I feel so much better now. I'm familiar. I know where to go from that." But this—what? "Well, if there's no one here, who's doing it? Okay, I'm afraid. Okay, that's better. I can put back on my cozy bathrobe."

It's really interesting. To me, at least—you might think I'm loony, so look and see for yourself. But as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, many, many, many times a day there's also this experience of voidness, this kind of emptiness that's empty of sense of self. So start to notice it. Not me looking for it—that's wanting. Just moments of neutral, moments of space. Don't make a space, but just notice moments of space between activities. Or notice how if you're sitting and the thought ends, the mind says, "Get back on the breath quick before something else happens." God forbid there should be a space. Or you finish an activity and immediately we have to do another activity.

And it's like I have to jump up and do something else right away. I'm not a particularly energetic person, but I can't just sit down and be for a moment. I've got to do this, do this, do this, do this. That sense of compulsion—just notice the space. Notice if there's space between thoughts. Notice if there's space between breaths. Finish eating, and before you jump up from your eating and go do your walking, just be with the stillness.

Just start to notice when there's nothing special going on. You don't have to dull out. You don't have to space out. You don't have to create something to feel like you're doing it. Just start to incline towards the voidness. And then when the sense of self arises around the next thing to do, or the mug, or whatever it is, instead of recoiling, just notice—that's the next arising condition. Fine. It might be a sound, or it might be the sense of self, or it might be a smell. What's the difference? Just notice it arising.

Buddhadasa again: normally we don't notice these moments of shunyata, of voidness, because we're so involved with experience and concocting conceptual thoughts. And we do—that's part of what Sayadaw said. We get pulled back into the personality, the experience, the conceptual thoughts. But here, don't hate the thoughts. Just shift to awareness of the concocting. "Oh yeah, look at that—making up a whole story. Oh yeah, it's like that. Personality views like this, the stories like that." We don't have to make

anything be different. Just bring in interest, that quality of "what's happening now?" That confidence, entrusting the mindfulness, entrusting the awareness. And the truth of things will unravel by itself.

You're not here to create no-self—that's impossible. You're not here to discover some other world. It will reveal itself. The misperception is seen through with the steadiness of awareness, with the steadiness of mindfulness.

Reality doesn't change. And even our personality—it may change a little bit, but mostly it doesn't seem like our personalities change a whole lot. And that's not what it's about. It's about just honing the mindfulness, the awareness, and trusting it to the point where we see through the whole show. The sense of self, that subtle little clinging around any experience, a little craving, or the whole full-blown story—we just see it as appearances arising and passing, just like any other experience that arises and passes.

And in those moments where it's void of self, as Buddhadasa said, but also quite awake—it's like someone was saying in an interview today: it's just so simple. Things just arising and passing. It's so simple, I like to say, that we can't stand it. The mind that wants to think about stuff says, "How can you function like this?"

But this is from the Buddha. I really like this, and I hope it makes sense. He's talking about how things are in his mind. He says: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight." In other words, there's just sight. He doesn't conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. He does not conceive of something that's unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer.

You get that? So apart from sight, there's not a thought, there's not a concept about "that object is being seen" or "this seer is seeing that object" or "there are other things that aren't being seen." He's not conceiving about anything—just seeing. There's just seeing. Not *he* seeing. There's just seeing. Similar for hearing, for cognition: "It is not conceived about one who cognizes." Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata, being such-like in regard to all phenomena seen, heard, sensed, and cognized, is just thus. Just thus. Nothing else. Like that Bahiya Sutta: in the seen, there's only the seen.

Let me read you something similar, I think it's from Adyashanti: "Self-referencing is the mind's tendency to locate itself. So when it is realized that there is no self apart from the perceiving, then the tendency to try to find oneself in any experience, insight, or concept ceases."

We don't make it cease. It's just like when we see clearly—the concept about someone seeing, that ceases.

What I'm talking about is the condition where the mind has no compulsive need to understand in terms of ideas, concepts, and beliefs. A condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, feelings, or emotions for security in any way. No compulsive need to understand. Things are just as they are. And it's so simple. And there are moments we all know that. And that's the sense of emptiness.

Buddhadasa talked about emptiness in another way too. He talked about two kinds of shunyata. The second meaning of shunyata points to the quality of the mind when it isn't grasping and clinging at anything. The character of the mind, when it isn't attaching to anything, is called voidness also.

So the first meaning of shunyata points out that all things are void, all phenomena are void of intrinsic self-existence—that voidness is the inherent characteristic of all things. The second meaning points to the mind that isn't grasping or clinging at anything.

In a way, the closest we can get, an easy way to access this, is through that sense of simple, pure mindfulness, simple, pure awareness. In that moment when it moves from "Oh, and me, and this" to "Oh, it's like that"—that is a movement into the intimation of that quality of mind or heart that isn't clinging to anything. Rather than trusting the story, just start to recognize that. That's another kind of contentment with voidness that we can generate, that we can pay attention to.

And it doesn't lead to annihilation. It doesn't lead to non-functionality. It doesn't lead to a disconnect where who cares about anything. I think you all know that.

So I'll just close with a couple of short readings you've probably heard. One is a description of a Japanese nun named Togetsu. Togetsu saw that arising arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew that there was nothing more than this—no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held. Nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

And falling into the midst of everything doesn't mean you don't care.

This is from Padampa Sangye: "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

And let's end with this from Nisargadatta: "Once you say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself'—falling into the midst of everything—you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

So let's just sit for a moment and generate a contentment with voidness, or recognize non-voidness with contentment, as the case may be.

CHAPTER 96

Awareness and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the profound relationship between awareness and wisdom, drawing on teachings from Sayādaw U Tejaniya and the Buddha's description of Nibbāna as directly visible. She explains that right view (sammā diṭṭhi) is not about adopting new beliefs but about accurate perception—seeing things as they have come to be (yathābhūta ñāṇadassana). This recognition, when unclouded by the kilesas (greed, hatred, and delusion), naturally gives rise to wisdom without our having to create or force it.*
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> *Carol addresses the common misconception that practice requires fixing ourselves or eliminating defilements through willpower. Instead, she points to the radical simplicity of turning attention toward the quality of mind that is observing, rather than fixating on objects of experience. When awareness is pure—free from wanting, aversion, and self-reference—accurate recognition arises spontaneously, and the sources of suffering simply don't manifest.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing moments of pure awareness, which often feel unremarkable yet represent genuine freedom. Carol emphasizes trusting this capacity rather than measuring progress by experiences or states achieved. She concludes with readings from Ajahn Mahā Bua and Dīpa Mā that point to the gentleness and freshness that characterize an awakened mind, reminding us that this potential is available in every moment.*

Sally was talking about mindfulness and wisdom, Satipaññā, the other night, and then last night James was speaking about the steadiness of awareness that's imbued with relaxation, interest, and—what was the third one? Very good. That awareness imbued with those three things. I think he said something right at the end of his talk about how just with the steadiness of that, there's nothing else you have to do. Everything happens by itself. So I wanted to pick up from that.

Coming out of something Sayadaw U Tejaniya, one of my teachers, has been emphasizing recently: he talks a lot about reminding us that the beginning as well as the ending of the whole circle of the path is right view, right understanding. When we understand correctly, that leads to how we think, our intentions, our attitude of mind. Those are the first and second steps of the Eightfold Path.

The way he talks about beginning our practice with right intention is basically giving some information about why we're doing what we're doing, or the way I say it, how it works. What I hope to do now is just talk a little bit about why the steadiness of awareness that's not colored by confusion, by distortions, why that is the key to everything happening by itself—and what do we mean by everything happening by itself, anyway. In other words, some background on why we're doing what we're doing, what the point is. When we understand a little bit, whatever technique we're doing, we can meet it with right attitude, with appropriate attitude.

Our tendency can be to focus on: I'm doing this technique, I'm doing that technique, I'm looking for this experience, I'm looking for that experience. We can do any technique very sincerely, with enormous effort or willpower, commitment, with a lot of good qualities, but also colored with our confusions, the distortions, because we haven't really seen behind what's the purpose, how to practice.

Of course, when we say everything happens by itself, or ask what's the point of practice, I'm sure you would all know that the Buddha talked about what he taught as suffering and the end of suffering. That's really the point: to deliver our minds, our hearts, from the confusion that generates what we experience as suffering, as disharmony, as pain in our hearts, in our minds.

What I personally love is the elegance and the simplicity of the way the Buddha described his awakening, his understanding, the simplicity of the essence of his teaching. I realize the teachings are very complicated, so I'm probably doing a disservice, but there's a certain elegance of simplicity that has been serving me enormously in the last few years in my own practice. That's what I said in the beginning: the beginning and the ending and the whole of our path is contained in the sense of right view.

What I love about right view in terms of that translation is that I think of it as a literal translation. Right view is not about buying into a different set of beliefs from the set of beliefs we have now, although it can sound like that when you read the suttas at times. You know, you should understand, you should know that there's impermanence. But that's not a belief system. It's a perception, an accurate view of things as they are, which is very different from a belief.

The elegance of right view is this: what frees us from the confusion, from the conflict, from the disharmony, the whole thrust of our practice, is simply to recognize in any moment—and in more and more moments—things as they actually are right now. The thrust of our practice is not about fixing samsara.

There's a quotation from the Tibetan tradition: the essence of samsara is trying to correct. How much of your time today, in even little things, was the quality in the mind trying to correct? Trying to correct your practice, your breath, your attention, other people, the food, the sounds, our memories, our future plans—trying to correct. When we don't get it that that is actually just a movement of wanting, that that's the source of our suffering in the moment—it's not the answer to it, it's the cause of it.

When we think of samsara as trying to correct, we see that right view is recognizing accurately things as they are. There's a phrase in Pali, yathā bhūta. It appears in one of the kinds of insights you can have, called yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana, which is usually translated as knowledge and vision of things as they are. But as I've often said, friends have told me a better, more accurate translation of yathā bhūta, in terms of the grammar, is "things as they have come to be" in this moment.

I love that because it has that sense of movement and no separate thing-ness. Things as they have come to be in this moment. What I get from that is like recognizing accurately all the conditions that have come together to create things as they have come to be in this moment. There's no separation there, is there?

If you pick any experience you had today and start trying to draw in, remember, all the conditions that made that experience possible, there's nowhere to stop, is there? You know, like Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching about holding up a sheet of paper and how on the sheet of paper you see the world. Because there's the trees, and there's the sun, and there's the rain, and there's the soil, and there's the people who cut down the trees, and the people who fed, who grew the food that was shipped to the people who cut down the trees, and the people who shipped it and built the trucks, and the stars in the sky and the Big Bang. You just can't keep anything out.

Things as they have come to be in this moment cannot be any different, and in the next moment won't be the same. That quality of all-inclusive everything, but no separate lasting entity-thingness—you get a sense of that. And we all have moments where we recognize that the perception of that is accurate. In that moment of accurate perception, any thought of "it's all about me," or clinging to the moment, or hating them, just doesn't arise. It's not in that moment, "Oh, this isn't good enough, this as they've come to be, how am I going to fix it?" Because we see there's no way it can be different, and whatever we do is just part of the next moment, part of the whole big picture.

So when there's this right view, in any moment—and in many moments we all have it—the sources of our confusion, of our suffering, that trying to correct just doesn't arise. And we get a tiny little window into the potential, into the possibility for a greater life, a sense of the peace and ease that's possible. The peace and ease that's a natural

condition, really, of mind and body, when we're not caught up, when the mind is not caught up in trying to correct or trying to make what we perceive as reality fit what we're holding as how it should be.

Because we don't know we're doing that. That's our problem. If we knew we were doing that, that would be one thing. But we don't know, and that's where we get caught. And that's where awareness comes in.

The Buddha's teaching, as is often said, goes against the stream—against the stream of the mores and beliefs of the culture, against the stream of our own habits of mind that we don't even recognize as habits of mind. They're so familiar. Or we recognize them, but not quite without identification.

But it's not about taking up another view, another explanation. Views can be useful. Explanations help us. Everything I'm saying tonight, all these words and concepts, hopefully one line of it will be helpful if in a moment it helps us drop a holding and just see more clearly. But then if we take that and say, "Yes, this is how it always is," and try to graft it onto the next moment, it's all frozen solid again. No explanation is final.

Where the teachings go against the stream, where it gets tricky, where our practice and where the teachings of freedom, of non-suffering, are so radical, is that it's a stepping outside of the system of beliefs and views altogether. And that can be a scary place—just not holding to any view. Not "I'm right and you're wrong," "you're right and I'm wrong," "can we find a middle ground?" All that is useful in our relative world. But to have that quality, that pure awareness—and I'll describe what I mean by pure in a moment—that's just present for what's arising without any distortion, that gets us confused again, that gets us in conflict with how things are. That's rare. It feels wonderful when it happens, but it's rare and not quite easy to talk about.

Mostly, on the deepest level, the most subtle level—and the subtle levels are the ones that really get us—are the views or the explanations of reality, the way we think we perceive things, which leads to how we think about things, which leads to our actions and our choices. We don't get it, that it's a view. We just think that's how it is.

To me, that's one of the interesting things about traveling, being in different cultures. It's also one of the things about all the different cultures within our own country here. When you don't realize that different cultures look at things in different ways and have different belief systems, and when we first go into another culture without realizing that, there's often this kind of friction. It can also be really interesting. But we start to see, "Oh, I thought that's just the way people should behave. No, that's just this particular cultural group."

I've used this example before, but since I just got back from Burma, I thought of it again. Burma is an essentially Buddhist country, and I've been spending a lot of time talking to nuns and monks and people who are particularly Buddhist, which is tons and tons of people in that country. They have a very strong faith, not only in Buddhist practice, but in the Buddhist teaching and in the whole cosmological description that's in the suttas. It's all taken very literally. One time, a few years ago, I was with some friends and we were visiting nuns and doing a lot of different things, taking a lot of photographs.

And in one of the photographs—we were in a room down in a monastery in the Delta, distributing a lot of food at this place, with many people present—in one of the sets of pictures, there were these kind of round, exactly round, strange light-shaped images on several of the people and in between them. They were scattered all over the picture, just in certain pictures.

What was interesting was to see the interpretation that different ones of us came up with out of our culture, out of our conditioning. When we first saw them, one of my friends—a Swiss woman who's been a nun there for about nineteen years and is kind of half Burmese—she looked and said, "Wow, look at that. That's devas"—celestial beings—"all over the room, all over the picture."

Then my other friend looked at it. She's also a nun, but she's been a scientist. She had a PhD in biology, a real scientist. She said, "Devas? Don't give me devas. It's clearly just a little bit of moisture in the lens and refraction of the light"—and then the whole scientific explanation.

Then I got home and looked in my camera, which was different. And in that same grouping of people taken at the same time, there were also those little light things. Who knows? Who knows? And that's the place of seeing—well, who knows what's true? Not holding to a view. But we didn't even know there was a view.

This time when I was just back there, the scientist friend had been to Tiruvannamalai a couple of years later, which is where Ramana Maharshi's ashram was. One night, one of the full moon nights, people from all over India come to do pradakshina, to walk around the mountain. It's considered very sacred. She said literally two million people show up on buses to walk around this mountain that night. It was unbelievable. She took a million pictures, and she sent me one. And there were these—I'm thinking of them as devas now too, I don't know what—all over the place. It was nighttime, and they were all over that picture.

So this year, I was just there again, and we were taking some other photographs. And this time, she's just going, "Oh yeah, look at the devas in that picture. Oh yeah, there's devas between you, Carol, and that other guy."

And the views change. We know they're views. That's fine. That's just to give an example.

The space of the purity of awareness is like, "Well, who knows?" It can be interesting to take up this perspective, interesting to take up that. They're both fine, but we don't have to land somewhere. We don't have to land in a knowing, in a certainty, because once we do, that leads to our thoughts and how we define the world and ourselves. Useful when we know that's what we're doing, but when we don't—that's exactly the process that hides yathābhūta.

In a moment when the citta, the mind, the moment of consciousness, awareness, knowing what's happening—that simple knowing, you could call it the mind. When there's a sound and there's an ear that works, and there's that consciousness, that simple knowing of sound, you don't have to think about that. It's not particularly mindful. It's just that if you're conscious, there's a knowing of sound. That's a moment you could call mind.

And that comes together with all different qualities, mental states, emotions that might be present in that moment as well, that color that knowing. So if you're feeling, for example, really irritated right now, or super sensitive, and I clap my hands—there might be an unpleasant sound. You could just notice it's unpleasant, or you could go off into a world of story. But just how you perceive it is colored by the qualities in the mind.

You might have quite an equanimous mind. You might be in one of these states just filled with love, and everything you hear is beautiful, and all the people here are glowing, and the night outside is incredible. And that seems like our accurate perception.

The perception is colored by what's happening in our mind. We can be aware of that, and that's fine. That's just part of how the mind works, how being human works. It's not a problem.

Where it becomes a problem, where it contributes to and keeps us caught in confusion, is when we don't recognize that this is happening—and when the qualities that are present and coloring the mind are our old friends: greed, hatred, confusion, the so-called defilements, the *kilesas*. I actually prefer that word. "Defilements" has such a pur-

itanical, Victorian quality to it. It gets quite negative, and as soon as something becomes negative, we're in aversion. Aversion is aversion, but it isn't the right response. It's not helpful.

So how do we recognize accurately and thus respond appropriately? In any moment when the attention is really present and collected and not distorted by greed or hatred or confusion. And the Buddha spoke about this. He described that as freedom.

Someone was asking the Buddha, "It is said, Master Gautama, that Nibbana is directly visible. In what way is Nibbana directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see?" In other words, immediate—right here and now.

And he says, "When, Brahman, a person is impassioned with greed, depraved through hatred, bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated, then he may plan for his own harm, for the harm of others, or the harm of both. He experiences in his mind suffering and grief. But when lust, hatred, and delusion are not present, he does not experience in his mind suffering and grief. In this way, Brahman, is Nibbana directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, to be personally experienced by the wise."

The common definition or explanation of an *arhat*, a completely awakened person, is one in whom greed, hatred, and delusion are not arising in the mind. But we don't have to jump to that. I mean, don't put it out of your mind entirely, but any moment that greed, confusion, aversion, and bewilderment are not present, are not coloring our awareness, and we're awake—not just zoned out but really awake—that's a moment of what we could call pure awareness, pure mindfulness if you're paying attention. And in that moment, accurate recognition can arise.

What is the power of the steadiness of mindfulness? We can just pay attention in this moment, and that's wonderful. But where's the insight? Where's the wisdom?

The steadiness of mindfulness with those qualities James spoke about—which are ways of pointing to non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion—means that through that steadiness, the mindfulness, the awareness, the pure awareness begins to get its own momentum.

Have you noticed that in the couple of days you've been here? Not that you're mindful every moment, of course not, but does it get a little easier? Are there times when you're walking and you're zoned out, off somewhere in your thoughts, and then suddenly you're really feeling your feet? Or you're eating and feeling the taste, and then

you're gone somewhere, and then suddenly you're back? And you didn't have to beat yourself up. You didn't have to go through a whole thing. Attention is just back again. Awareness is back again. Does that ever happen?

Notice that. And don't think, "Oh wow, that's amazing! I didn't do it. I should try harder." No, you shouldn't try harder. You should trust that. Because it starts to happen more and more by itself. And the steadiness of this so-called pure awareness is actually the condition that allows wisdom to arise.

This is something I love. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it a lot, and I've come to understand it more than I used to. It's not my job to figure out what wisdom should arise and try to see it and try to make it happen. That's like reading, and that's another view. Even the Buddha Dharma is a view if you're holding onto it as an idea. "Now I need to see impermanence. Let the wisdom of impermanence arise now." Have you ever tried that? Does it work? "I see things are changing."

The bell rang. Okay, it's changing, it's changing. But we're still looking out. We're still looking at the object. We're still looking at what's happening. And what's happening is changing in every moment.

The radical nature of this practice is that, in a way, as someone was saying, we turn around—and that's just a figure of speech. There's not really a here and there. It just seems like that. We notice the quality of the mind that's observing. Over and over and over. And in the big picture, that's all that matters.

So it's not about getting impermanence stuck into the mind. It's not about achieving some experience of no-self. It's turning around and simply seeing: what's the quality of the mind that's observing? Is there wanting? Is there steadiness? Is there boredom? Just seeing without judging, without taking it personally, just looking and seeing and trusting.

And it really happens. There's a growing momentum where the—well, I'm going to use the word purity just because I can't think of a better word. I hope it doesn't trigger you too much—where the purity becomes more and more natural. And in that, the wisdom will come by itself. We don't have to create it. And in fact, we can't. It's like a huge load off. You don't have to try so hard. You don't have to chalk up some kind of chart of how much wisdom you have relative to your last retreat, or relative to the person who asked that question. They sound like they've got a lot of wisdom and I don't have that much, and I used to know this and now I've forgotten it. That's all just ideas, concepts, stuff.

And you think, well, my experience is so mundane. Lifting, moving, placing. Where's the lights? Where's the explosions of unity? Where's the rapid arising and passing away? It's just lifting, moving, placing. Tightness, burning, itching. For God's sake, could something happen? The breath—okay, there's a new sensation in the breath. Big deal. I want something big, because then wisdom will come.

And the amazing thing is, wisdom's not about the object. It doesn't matter. Because everything, every phenomenal experience, is part of impermanence, is part of unreliability. Experience is not me, not self, has no intrinsic separate reality. Everything—including the experience of aversion in the mind, or greed in the heart, or bewilderment, or delusion. Those can be recognized with awareness just like anything else. And they're just as good an object to clarify the pure awareness as an incredibly stoned, blissed-out experience. Maybe better, because you can get lost in the incredibly stoned, blissed-out experience. "I'm not identifying. Oh no, I know it's going to change. I know. I know." And you don't come back because now you've really got it. It's just a little more subtle.

James doesn't agree. That's the difference between a greed type and an aversive type. We see things clearly and they just get a little... I'm going to pay for that, don't worry. But you might as well know what goes on behind the scenes.

So this sense of wisdom arising—we never know how or where, but it's possible at any time, anywhere, with any experience, because it arises from the quality of the pure mind-heart in any moment. And so when we say this practice is about moment-to-moment presence and acceptance of whatever's happening, that's right. It's not that what's happening is good or bad or whatever. The acceptance is that purity of citta, purity of mind, purity of heart that will allow accurate recognition, right view, to arise.

I'll say it again: I just love the elegance of this—that freedom comes from simply recognizing accurately, not from making yourself different.

When that accurate recognition, that moment of wisdom is present, these deep habits—the deeply ingrained habits of clinging, of greed, of aversion, of fear, of trying to correct, the delusion that it's all about me—incredibly deep habits, yes. But they are only our habits. It's not like we have to get rid of them one by one. Because in the light of recognizing accurately, in that moment they don't arise. They don't make any sense in terms of how things really are.

We cling to them—we don't even know we're clinging to aversion, to wanting, to bewilderment—because in our twisted way, that's our refuge. We think that's the source of happiness. We think that trying to correct is going to make things better. And in a

relative way, sometimes we do make things better, and sometimes we don't, because so much is out of our control. But they're deeply ingrained habits that in a way we take refuge in without recognizing.

Before I talk about those habits more, I want to say something important. Even as we talk about getting caught in habits of wanting, habits of aversion or self-judgment, habits of "it's all about me"—we must recognize that it isn't personal. You see how deep the habit is? "Oh, look how much greed there is in my mind. It's my fault." Right there, it's met with aversion and selfing. It's all about me. And that just feels right.

You think, "Yes, the Buddha—the freedom he talks about is freedom from clinging. Look how much clinging I have. Therefore, I need to get rid of this clinging to become free." Very sincere, very dedicated, a lot of faith, and not recognizing, not turning around and looking at how even clinging is just another habit that doesn't have to be a problem when it's seen with the pure mind.

I'll read this from Ajahn Sumedho. You know this book, *The Island*? It's a great book that Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro put together—a compilation of references in the suttas to enlightenment, to awakening. It's wonderful.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho's introduction. He's talking about how the island is used as a metaphor for awakening:

"The only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them, through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion. The island that you cannot go beyond is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware."

That's what we're practicing—just being awake and aware. Aware of what? It doesn't matter. Being awake and aware.

He goes on: "In meditation classes, people often start with a basic delusion that they never challenge: the idea that 'I'm someone who grasps and has a lot of desires, and I have to practice in order to get rid of these desires and to stop grasping and clinging to things. I shouldn't cling to anything.' That's often the position people start from. So we practice from this basis, and sometimes the result—actually, he says many times—the result is disillusionment and disappointment, because our practice is based on the grasping of an idea. Eventually, we realize that no matter how much we try to get rid of desire and not grasp anything, no matter what we do, we end up feeling disappointed because the basic delusion has never been recognized. The delusion that I'm someone who grasps and I have to change it."

"This is why the metaphor of the island that you cannot go beyond is so very powerful. Because it points to the principle of an awareness that you can't get beyond. It's very simple, very direct, and you cannot conceive it. You have to trust it."

I'll say that again: you cannot conceive it. You can't conceptualize about it, describe it and hold it. You have to trust it. You have to trust the simple ability that we all have to be fully present and fully awake, and begin to recognize that the grasping and the ideas we have taken on about ourselves, about the world around us, about our thoughts and perceptions and feelings—these are just habits.

My thinking mind doesn't like that. "You can't conceive it, you just have to trust." But what strengthens our trust, our confidence—and Sumedho uses that language a lot, confidence in this pure awareness—is simply manifesting it, recognizing it over and over and over again.

So you have—I'm not a mathematician, some people would be able to figure out how many seconds you've got from now until the end of the month. I don't know, but it's a lot. That many potential moments. A ton of moments go by when you're lost in some fantasy or filled with greed and you don't see it. But in the moment when you recognize, "Oh, greed is like this"—

It doesn't matter how many other moments there were. In that moment of recognizing what's happening, that's the moment of pure awareness. It's always available. It's always possible.

It's not, "Oh, I can recognize accurately when this greed is gone, so I just have to get rid of the greed, and then maybe I can see clearly—but it's so hopeless." No. "Oh, self-judgment is like this."

As we're learning to trust, I often talk about it like a Tai Chi move. All our interest and focus is on the self-judgment, or on the idea. Maybe we don't even notice the self-judgment, and our interest is on the thing we're doing wrong. We don't even recognize the self-judgment. It's all in the object, in the experience. So you go, "Ah, self-judgment is like this." You still know it's self-judgment, but without trying, without making it a big thing, in a subtle way the interest, the energy, is really about the awareness—the quality of mind that's aware in that moment.

Notice that. Notice, without getting into a lot of thinking—I mean, I have to use words to talk—but when you're really caught up in something and suddenly you see it, it just feels like such a relief, even though the thing's still going on sometimes. Don't think about it, but let yourself really feel, with awareness, the quality of that mind-heart that's in relief. Feel what that's like.

We need to learn to recognize the moments when awareness is present and pure. It's not big lights going off. It's just, "Ah." Recognize what it feels like when there's not wanting, when there's not aversion, when there's not bewilderment in the mind, when it's not all about me.

Bewilderment is one aspect of delusion—you're just like, "Duh, I don't know what's going on." That one's even a little easier to recognize. Another kind of confusion is when our perception is completely wrong or partially wrong due to the confusion in our mind. That's a little harder to recognize, but we can. But the hardest to recognize... I forgot. I had it there, but then I sidetracked. That's a sign of the first kind—duh, I don't know what's going on.

Well, I know it has something to do with "it's all about me." That kind of delusion is really harder to see because it's so subtle—the delusion of just having a little sense of self-referencing.

In the moment when it's just the pure mind, there can be attention, awareness, there might be love, there might be concentration—there can be any wholesome qualities—but there's not the self-referencing, there's not aversion, and there's not greed. It's not always big lights going off, and mostly it's not. It's just—as one of my friends said—squeaky clean. Like windows that are squeaky clean. It's just what it is.

There are many, many moments like that, which we often don't notice because our attention tends to turn toward what's happening. It's such a habit to evaluate our practice, our life, ourselves, each other, by what's happening or how we look. This is the radical nature of the freedom the Buddha is talking about: it's just not about what's happening.

It's so hard to trust. I sit up here and talk about it, but it's hard for me to trust it too—when I really don't like what's happening, when it's really uncomfortable or scary. But then that moment: "Oh, scary feels like this." It doesn't have to change. The movement is from the identification, the me-ing, the making of that scariness into a thing in itself. Instead of that, we see yathā bhūta—in this moment, things as they have come to be. The habit of this mind, this particular configuration—it all comes to be. Scariness is like this, and then the next thing arises.

It's a constant, endless coming together and changing and going apart. Coming together and changing and going apart. I'm not somehow separate, outside of that, watching it. We are that.

When the shift isn't about making what happens better, but into the "Ah, like this. It's like this. It's like this"—to have confidence in that ability to be aware, as Ajahn Sumedho talks about it. And to see when we start wanting: "Oh, but I want it. Maybe I'm not doing it quite good enough." "Oh, wanting is like this."

It's radical. There are no exceptions. No exceptions. And that's really hard.

Last year when I was practicing for some weeks, I could often see it like that. But then there'd be a moment where I was just spacing out all over the place, walking up and down, thinking about this and that. I was noticing wanting and aversion. I could see the sense of self. I was just spacing out.

I really ought to be putting in a little more effort, you know, just a little. I mean, I want to *do* something, for God's sake. I can't just walk up and down and wait for wisdom to come.

And it's true, there are skillful means. It's true. So to trust so completely—and then see that thought arise, "I should put in a little more effort"—oh, that's the delusion of me. *I* put in effort and *I* will get a better result. That's not actually so subtle, but it felt subtle in the moment. But trusting this understanding is hard. Trying to be—not trying—*being* that radical.

But there needs to be, for that level of radical trust, some momentum with the mindfulness. To just walk up and down and actually not know what the heck's going on—I mean, to really not know—there's not mindfulness. You're just lost in greed and hatred. "Oh, it's okay. Wisdom will come when it comes. La, la, la." I mean, there is a reason we have techniques and practice, and why we're talking about this.

The difficult part is for us to know, "Okay, there's enough momentum to trust," and then to see when we're really lost, "Okay, let me bring in a little bit of technique." But understanding that the technique is simply to help us re-recognize the quality of pure awareness—not to get to some state that makes us feel more fulfilled, that justifies our sense of self. "Now my practice is okay, and now I can relax."

Have you ever noticed that? I noticed with myself years ago when I was practicing in a certain very concentrated way. I'd get to a certain point—I had the idea that I can't concentrate, so that's the belief I'd operate from. I'd get to a certain point where pīti, or rapture, can have certain physical effects. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. But it would get to this one where the floor seems to be rolling. So I'd get there, where the floor is rolling, and then my mind would relax. "Okay, I'm doing it good." And then the mind would relax. And the relaxed mind was actually what let wisdom come. The reas-

on it relaxed wasn't so skillful, but anyway, it relaxed and quit wanting and quit doubting. And then the awareness just gets stronger and stronger. So we can learn to trust without having to do it in an unskillful way.

So again, knowing that the habit of these kilesas arising is, as Tejaniya always says, it's just nature. It's not personal. He says things like, "Aversion is doing its job. Wanting is doing its job. Mettā is doing its job. Mindfulness is doing its job." They're all just different factors of nature doing their job. So if we can begin to meet it that way, then we can explore how these qualities, when they're in our mind, color our mind, how they color our perception and our decisions, how they cause suffering—just with awareness, as a scientific kind of exploration to see: Is it true?

I mean, I totally believe this, but is it true that we can't really trust any perception or thought or views that are guided by, that are led by, greed, hatred, or delusion?

For me, I know as much as I know that that's true. And so when I'm believing something or thinking—even in my daily life, "This is what I need to do" and "How do I need to relate to this person?" and there's some kind of problem—I look back at the mind and go, "Ah, there's a lot of fear." What I know then is I just can't trust the perceptions and the thoughts and the conclusions I'm drawing. I don't have to take that personally. It isn't personal. That's how fear works in the mind. It colors perception, it colors conclusions. You can't trust it.

And that's the moment of awareness. Okay, that's awareness. It's not like you have to figure it all out. We just learn to keep moving. That Tai Chi move from lost in the subject, lost in the experience, to just noticing what's happening.

I'll give you an example.

I wrote this down from last time I was practicing, just to see, for example, how aversion can color perception without our recognizing it. It's the same with greed, and the same with "it's all about me."

There's some resistance in the mind to something or other, unrecognized, and you'll notice that can lead to thoughts—either "I'm not doing this right," or "this place stinks," or "if only I had different food," or "my experience isn't good." It can go to "I'm no good, I'm worthless," or "you're no good," or "nothing's any good." It can change to anger or disappointment, whatever the habits of your mind. At some point you recognize, "Oh, okay, that's self-judgment." But you don't quite recognize the *dosa*, the aversion—that mental factor of negativity called hatred. You don't quite see it.

I was noticing this while sitting in some beautiful place in Switzerland. There was this little subtle aversion still arising moment to moment in the mind, and it would color my perceptions. I'd look out over the scenery, which that morning had been so peaceful and sunlit, and this time it was like, "Oh, it's so melancholy. It looks so sad." The scenery went from peaceful to sad. Scenery isn't sad—it just is what it is.

Or you look out at animals, and when there's love in the mind, you say, "Oh, the deer are so filled with love, they're such beautiful beings." And then there's aversion in the mind, and you go, "Oh, the poor deer, that coyote's going to eat him. Life is suffering in the animal realm." You look at the turkeys and they're regal, or they look really stupid, or they're just... whatever. And that's our perception at the time.

I'm making simple examples, but from this, we can go into really all kinds of decisions about our life. It's scary, actually, if you want to look at it. And this is the way the world functions.

Do you remember, was it last year when there was that big oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico off Louisiana? It went on for so long when that thing blew up. I remember in the news at the time feeling, "Oh gosh, what a weird world." One of the criticisms of Obama was that he wasn't angry enough. People wanted him to be really angry—come on the news and... I don't know what they wanted. I thought, "Wow, is that what we want? Someone making decisions that affect the country and the world to be blinded by anger and hatred? Is that really our idea of what a good leader should do?" That scared me.

But that's what people want. We think that's strength. Because the *kilesas* are so common, we're so used to them. In one way, as I said, they're our refuge. We think they're going to make us happy—anger, wanting, fixing, "it's all about me." It just feels that way. So somehow we've got to arrange the whole world to make it okay for me, which doesn't work for more than a fraction of a second, if that.

And the *kilesas*, in my experience, they're louder. They're more obvious than, say, a moment of pure awareness, of pure mind, a moment of pure mindfulness. There may be lights, but often it's just that squeaky clean quality—there's no wanting, there's no aversion, it's just the is-ness of things. It's not making a big noise. Easy not to notice. Easy not to trust.

The *kilesas* come and they're screaming in your mind—wanting, aversion, "that's wrong!" Whether we believe them or whether we fight against them—which is just fighting fire with fire—it's easy to keep looking in that direction.

So really my whole point tonight is just keep remembering to look back and notice the moments of pure awareness. Many, many moments without greed, hatred, or delusion. Then notice when there is wanting, when you are trying to push something away, when you are thinking it's all about me or taking experience personally. And notice not that there's something wrong with you, not that that's personal, but explore it. See if it's true that that leads to more suffering and confusion. Don't believe me—look and see if it's true.

See if it's true that when you're caught in it, and you can say, "Oh, wanting is like this," you can get a little flavor of the freedom that comes when we are not glued to experience, to wanting, aversion, and delusion by identification. "Ah, wanting's like this."

The freedom to be fully awake, fully present without fearing any experience whatsoever is an amazing place to be—because it's so normal. It's really the potential for all of us.

So let's see, there was something I wanted to read.

This is from Maha Bua, who just died recently. He was a really powerful Thai meditation master, a forest monk, kind of like a brother lineage with Ajahn Chah. I remember years ago when I was in Thailand, a lot of the foreign monks were afraid of him because even though he was way out in the forest, they were afraid that he could read their minds, even when they were in Bangkok. And you know what? He probably could. He was a pretty powerful guy.

If you've read some of his books, he talks about sitting every night through the night without moving, to the point that if there was any pain worse than death, death could not bring any more pain than this. He sounded like the toughest guy. I'm giving you that background because then to me it's surprising what he writes.

He's writing about *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*—things as they have come to be. He says:

"Then the mind knows and sees things as they are, within and without, through and through, and then it stays put with purity. If you were to say that it stays put, it stays put with purity. Whatever it thinks, it simply thinks. The body is simply a body. Feelings, labels, thought formations, cognizance are each simply passing conditions that we use until their time is up. When they no longer have the strength to keep going, then we let them go in line with their reality. But as for the utterly true nature of our purity, there is no problem at all."

Then this is the surprising part: "Those who have reached full release from conventional realities of every sort don't assume themselves to be more special or worse than anyone else. For this reason they don't demean even the tiniest of creatures. They regard them all as friends in suffering, birth, aging, illness and death, because the Dhamma is something tender and gentle. Any mind in which Dhamma is found is completely gentle and can sympathize with every grain of sand, with living beings of every sort. There is nothing rigid or unyielding about it. Only the defilements are rigid and unyielding, haughty and vain. Once there's Dhamma, there are none of these things. There's only the unvarying gentleness and tenderness of mercy and benevolence for the world at all times."

And then I'll read you one different description from Dipa Ma, who was a very realized little tiny Indian lady. She said:

"There's so much sameness in ordinary life. We are always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. Once greed, hatred, and delusion are gone, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now every day, every moment is full of taste and zest."

We only have to start with this moment. It's like this, always available.

So let's just sit quietly with taste and zest.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 97

Compassion and Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a seeming paradox at the heart of Buddhist practice: how can mindfulness that 'doesn't care' lead to genuine compassion? Drawing on T.S. Eliot's line 'Teach us to care and not to care,' she illuminates how non-clinging awareness and heartfelt compassion are two sides of the awakened mind. When we're not caught in relentless self-referencing, the natural response to suffering—whether our own or others'—is karuṇā, the quivering of the heart in the presence of pain.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that compassion develops through deep insight into the First Noble Truth (dukkha)—not as something to resist, but as the basic unsatisfactoriness to be understood. She challenges practitioners to recognize that difficult times in retreat are not 'marking time' but precious opportunities for cultivating compassion. Each moment we find willingness to rest in confusion or pain without aversion, we are actively developing both wisdom and compassion. Citing the Dalai Lama, she explains that compassion strengthens through genuine connection with our own suffering, which naturally expands into empathy with all beings.*
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> *Through a moving personal story from Burma about encountering a monk serving impoverished children, Wilson demonstrates how openness to suffering creates connection that ripples outward in unexpected ways. She concludes with Nisargadatta Maharaj's teaching that direct experience of non-separation transforms the 'senseless sorrow of humankind' into our sole concern—not as burden, but as the natural expression of an awakened heart.*

Tonight the topic I want to share about is compassion—just sharing some thoughts, really reminding us all about compassion. Generally, it's a good thing.

I've been saying a lot that mindfulness doesn't care. It's really very freeing when we realize that whatever's arising, mindfulness can be with it without being damaged or stained, without preference, without making a big story of "me" around anything. That's incredibly liberating when we not just intellectually know it, but when we experience it.

And yet, to our intellectual minds, that understanding can seem troubling—this sense that in some ways nothing matters. Everything matters, but nothing matters. Mindfulness doesn't care. We think, "Hmm, I'm not sure that's really the wisdom I signed up for." The heart-mind of no clinging, which is really one of the Buddha's de-

scriptions of freedom, isn't particularly juicy when we think about it. Which is good—juicy isn't particularly helpful. But the idea that mindfulness doesn't care can lead our associations into a sense of disconnect, a kind of not-caring that has a tinge of distance, a tinge of passivity, or of nihilism.

Of course, the freedom of the heart and mind that's not clinging, the mindfulness that doesn't care, isn't about taking us out of the world of connection or out of caring for other beings. But it's a different kind of caring.

The phrase that's been going through my mind for the last three days is just that one line from the poem by T.S. Eliot, from "Ash Wednesday," where he says, "Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still." To me, that's a great pithy description. The not-caring is really the essence of understanding selfless emptiness—that no experience can be held to be existing separately as about me or mine. Mindfulness doesn't care, and so it can be present. We can be present with all things equally, but not equally disconnected—equally connected.

Out of that lack of obsessive, exhausting, relentless self-referencing for every sense contact that arises—have you noticed that? It's exhausting. Totally exhausting. Everything that happens has to refer back to me. It's sort of like six degrees of Kevin Bacon, only it's more like two degrees: how many thoughts before it refers back to you? Not many. It's fun if you can laugh at it. But mostly we're believing it, we're hating it or loving it or buying into it. It's exhausting. Don't believe me—check it out.

When our heart, our mind, when the energy of consciousness is not bound up in this relentless self-referencing, when awareness is equally present with whatever's arising, resting at ease in whatever arises, then the natural response of the awakened heart and mind, the appropriate response in the face of suffering, is compassion. Because when we're not so concerned about me, me, me in that sense of separation, then when there is suffering or pain in ourselves or another, rather than the flinching back of "Oh no, I can't handle this" or "This is wrong"—there's presence. The natural response of the awakened mind and heart is to be present with whatever's happening. And if there's suffering, compassion is the natural response.

So it's two sides of the awakened heart and mind: the non-clinging, the non-constructing about "me," and that allows for the clear seeing of things as they are. Teach me to care and not to care. The not-caring is the emptiness, and the caring isn't a caring about me and you as what you mean to me, but the spontaneous, impersonal, yet very tender caring for life as it presents itself.

Because there's wisdom, and we're not blinded by our self-referencing, if there's something one can do to alleviate suffering, one tries to do it. Many times there's not something one can do, and one doesn't have to turn away or flinch back or say it's too unbearable, that I can't fix this.

One of the ways compassion gets confused in our daily life—the near enemy of compassion, you could say—is grief or pity or being overwhelmed. And before we get to that stage, often I find in myself, and someone was telling me they saw it in themselves the other day with really a lot of insight, that someone will be suffering and the impulse comes to do something about it. It might still be a good thing to do; it might be a way you can help that person. But if you really look inside yourself, the impulse is one of aversion. It's too unpleasant to feel this discomfort seeing you suffer. So let's, for God's sake, fix it. There might be something useful to do.

It isn't compassion. It isn't compassion.

That's why the real depth, the natural, spontaneous depth of true compassion comes together with this wisdom of emptiness, this wisdom of awareness that doesn't care.

So sometimes when people say, "How can I hold all the suffering in the world?" We can't even imagine all the suffering in the world. "How can I hold all my suffering? How can I hold the suffering of my friends?" And exactly—that wording is exactly why we can't. We don't hold anything.

When we're in our unseen or familiar concept of me and my heart, and this is just too much to be with—yes, sometimes that's our experience, of course. But when it's about me somehow holding, of course not. It's the I, that limitation of separation, that is actually in that moment the cause of the inability to be present. This isn't to judge or anything. It's just to explore and see how it works.

Because when we're holding to me, that limit of me creates immediately the sense of other. And then right away we have that duality and we can hold this much but not more. But we don't have to hold anything. Just as someone said to me, just let it pass through. Let it go through. The question: through what? Nothing. Nothing. Just passing through emptiness.

But when we can't see with that vastness, even though we may act with as much caring as we can—and we still should act. Let's not wait until we're all arhats before we do anything wholesome or helpful for somebody. I'm not saying that. But just to realize that when we're still caught in the delusion of self or the resistance to pain, we'll do the

best we can. And please, we do do the best we can. But we can't see clearly the whole situation because of being blinded by clinging to sense of self, by self-cherishing. Those are kind of catchwords—don't make them too heavy.

Like this example I've used a few times, something I heard on the radio a couple of years ago about a new footbridge that had been built over the Thames in London. When it opened, people were walking over and it was some big deal. According to what I wrote down, a few hundred people were walking over the bridge and it started to shake. It started to sway to one side, which is very embarrassing for a newly built fancy bridge. So it was swaying, and each person acted in the most sensible way to stop the swaying, which was to move to the other side. Of course, all four hundred of them moved to the same other side, which just made it sway even more the other way.

It's that kind of sense—we're doing the best we can, but we can't quite see past this self-created boundary. And that's not a judgment, it's just to look and see the moments when that's not there.

The spontaneous action—like when you see a statue of Green Tara, a Tibetan statue. She's one of the embodiments of compassion. In the statue, she's sitting in meditation. The statue I have, her eyes are open, so there's this sense of connectedness, which to me is the essence of compassion: wisdom and connectedness. And one foot is always kind of up on a lotus petal, so she's sitting at ease in meditation, but always about to get up and do what needs to be done. Not planning it out, just the spontaneous expression of wisdom and connectedness. That's how compassion shows up.

So tonight I just want to talk a little bit about how we can explore this in our practice here, more than about action in the world, which is a whole other topic. But since we're in the middle of retreat, this is the way I want to talk about it tonight.

Sometimes thinking of compassion as the natural result in a moment of the awakened heart and mind can be really inspirational. Sometimes not. Sometimes it can just feel like it's so far away. And I also know there are times we can turn anything against ourselves, right, if there's enough negativity and self-loathing in the mind. We can turn the whole concept of compassion against ourselves.

Have any of you ever done that?

There's no way I could be compassionate. I want to be compassionate, but I'm just so selfish.

Say you take what I said earlier about looking at how many thoughts it takes before it gets back to me, whatever happens. And instead of laughing at it, you're having a bad day. So you look at that. In two thoughts, it's back to me. *I am the most selfish, uncompassionate, self-centered person in this room, on the retreat, on the planet. There's no way I could ever cultivate compassion. I came here to cultivate compassion, and instead these angry thoughts are coming up. I'm hopeless. It's horrible. And in fact, the longer I'm here, the more angry thoughts I'm noticing.*

And if you come and tell us that, we'll say, "Oh, that's great. That means mindfulness is getting stronger, right?" And you walk out and think, *What a crock. These guys will say anything to keep us going.*

Okay, sometimes. But I don't think we outright lie. We do want to keep you going past the hardest patches. But I think pretty much what we say, we think it's true.

Sometimes also—and these are all different things our minds can do; we're not all doing all of it—but sometimes when we're cultivating vipassana here, most of what we talk about is mindfulness and insight. We've been doing loving-kindness practice once in the afternoon, and we'll be starting with karuna, compassion practice, tomorrow.

I know for me, just by the nature of how the mind works, it easily can set up duality. *Doing wisdom practice, insight practice—what about compassion? I can't do them both at once. So I do a little karuna, I do a little metta—may you be happy, may you be peaceful—but I really came here for insight.* And then Carol just said if I really understand emptiness, then I'll have compassion. *So let's get back to the insight. Push, push. That's really where it's at.*

Or you could do it the other way around too. *It's all about metta and compassion, and this other stuff—forget about it. If I open my heart completely, then wisdom will come.* And we make it like we're doing one or the other. That can get confusing. It's a completely unnecessary dualism.

Sure, in terms of a specific practice, you're doing vipassana or you're doing the form of metta or karuna practice. But in the days here, in what you've been going through with the mindfulness practice—not "just," I mean, this is really quite profound—there are times when paññā, wisdom, really feels like that's where the energy is. That's where the juice is. Not that you're having insights popping off every two seconds—I know you wish—but the mind is more noticing how things change, or more noticing cause and effect, or the first and second noble truth, or just investigating the five aggregates, or perception, or vedanā. Just in that modality of interest in what's happening.

And when that's happening, everything's cool, right? That's when it's going good, when there's interest.

What about those other times? Sometimes you have other times when it's not quite so interesting. When the suffering personality patterns emerge. Once in a while that happens, right? They show up. You notice them with mindfulness. They get stronger. You notice them with mindfulness. You get really caught. And then we start to just spiral.

Come in, I was caught in this thing for three days. I couldn't be mindful." We get frustrated. We get lost—whether it's fear or aversion or self-judgment. We get taken up by loneliness, or we're fighting sleepiness. You know all the different things. Fill in the blanks.

And isn't it easy at that time, somewhere in the back of the mind, to think, "Okay, they say I'm cultivating mindfulness through this. I'll say fine." But really, we feel like we're marking time until the practice really starts clicking in again. "So I'm being with self-loathing for three days. Yeah, that's... right. Okay. Yeah, I'm mindful of it. Yeah, I really see how that's cultivating mindfulness and wisdom. I have a lot of faith in that. Thank God Aaron talked about faith because I really forgot why I was here at all."

This happens over and over and over. And if we're just focused on insight in that way, if we've somehow put all our marbles into the idea of it's all about wisdom, we really do feel like we're just marking time until the practice gets good again, until it reemerges. We think, "Well, I only have two more weeks and these are three lost days. What am I going to do? Three lost days."

Well, this is not marking time. Marking time would be if you get in your car, go out, have a pizza, and go to the movies. That is a lost day in terms of practice, that is marking time. So a lost day is possible. I remember years ago, at a three-month retreat, somebody was so caught up in the World Series that they went to a motel so they could watch it. I call that marking time.

But when you're hanging out with this other stuff, when it's painful and you're suffering from it, but you're hanging with it—this is actually how compassion is being developed and cultivated in the moment. Compassion—I don't necessarily mean it as a huge, heart-opening emotion. It can be, but it doesn't need to be. Compassion really, one of the definitions, is the quivering of the heart in connection with pain, in connection with suffering. It's really just that sensitivity of awareness, of presence, of heart that doesn't have to run away and doesn't meet the difficulty with aversion, with clinging to me.

So just a moment: "Okay, self-loathing feels like this." We keep saying that over and over. "Give me a break. Self-loathing feels like this." But I'll try it because there's nothing else to do. And there's one moment—and I don't mean the lights go off and you have a huge insight and you're overwhelmed with love for the world. Just a moment where there's no greed, no aversion, no referencing back to self. Yeah, self-loathing feels like this. Just that sensitive presence for a moment—that's compassion. That's just the beginning of cultivating compassion. It's happening in the midst of our mindfulness practice. It's happening all the time. It's the furthest thing from marking time to really notice this.

The Dalai Lama, in talking about compassion—and of course he's the reincarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, over and over—speaks about it as tender heart, noble awakened heart.

And of course, the Tibetan tradition talks about compassion taken all the way to the bodhisattva intention of wanting to awaken, not only for our own sake, but in order to awaken others.

But the Dalai Lama talks about the cultivation of compassion. We don't just sit back and wait. And he says two things really happen with this. The first is, how does it develop? Through deep insight into what suffering really is, the experience of suffering. And guess where we get that? That arises through stillness and wholeness by focusing on our own experience. As Ajahn Sumedho often says, your own experience of suffering is enough to get enlightened with. We don't have to go looking for any extreme suffering. It finds you. It finds us. Our own suffering is enough for compassion to develop with.

And then the Dalai Lama goes on: as we learn to open into our own experience of suffering, the compassion strengthens into a sense of empathy and connectedness with the world, with all beings. In my language, I would say what's happening is that as mindfulness doesn't care, as awareness doesn't care, it's just present in that purity with suffering—then that self-referencing, that prison of self-referencing, isn't being created in that moment. The sense of separate artificial boundaries isn't being created in that moment. And so our own experience of suffering does broaden into a quite natural sense of empathy and connectedness with the world.

So really, we start here. We start where we are. We don't have to go work in some NGO or live in a favela in Brazil in order to really prove that we're compassionate. And it can feel, when we talk about compassionate action in the world—which, as I said, I'm not focusing on tonight—when we talk about compassion and our mind goes there, our intellectual mind, to the suffering in the world, the immensity of it... how much am I doing? And then it can easily come back to: here I am, sitting on my butt, thinking about

my knee hurting, and "Oh, I'm cultivating compassion thinking about my knee?" We can turn it into real negativity. What am I doing? It's completely self-centered, blah, blah, blah. Notice that that's aversion.

Really starting to explore and see if it's true, what the Dalai Lama says—that compassion does begin to develop through learning to be with our own suffering, with wisdom, without pushing it away. That's why the difficult times in retreat are so important. As I said, our tendency is to just wait the difficult times out, to not realize that these are actually the jewels. We think the jewels are the big insights we have, because they make us feel great, we like them—but they last two seconds and they're gone. The difficult times, when we're willing to really meet them with presence, these are where the jewel of understanding can arise and deepen.

So just that willingness to bring the same quality of attention. The Dalai Lama again, when he was asked one time about what looks like such a lack of compassion in human society and what he thinks about that—because he always talks about our basic goodness—he said perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we tend to really embrace hostility and anger as emotional states. We get really involved in them, fueling and reinforcing them. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

So part of our practice here in the difficult times is that by bringing this quality of pure, tender awareness, mindfulness, to the difficulty—your difficulty—we are reinforcing compassion, presence, acceptance.

So why don't we do that more? Why do we have to talk about it so much? If it really is a natural result of wisdom, the natural expression of understanding, why is it so difficult for us at times to be present with our suffering? I mean, when we go, "Yeah, well, it hurts. Who wants to be here where it hurts?" Right, exactly. That's deep, deep, deep conditioning.

I can't talk about compassion without talking about the First Noble Truth that the Buddha spoke of. I want to mention that briefly because I feel the deep-seated tendency we have—which has been talked about, I think, by Pascal in the first talk—to move away from the unpleasant. We've talked about that a lot. You've all seen it. The body hurts, you can't get away from it, so we go into fantasy. Deep, deep conditioning. And we're sort of getting that it doesn't bring us happiness. But we're not really getting how being with suffering brings us happiness either, are we? It's kind of like, okay, there's just not really another option.

But Pema Chödrön, in a talk I was listening to, made a distinction I like. We tend to talk, when we're talking about compassion, about life in retreat, about being with the difficult. She said, what if we think about it not as learning to be with the unpleasant, or learning to be with suffering, but rather that at some point, we all come up against having to be together with that which we really don't want?

And it's more that I don't want this to be happening. Rather than saying it's bad or even unpleasant, the more accurate way of talking about it, as Pema is trying to say, is that we're with something we don't want. And that's not to blame, but to help us look back and see what's happening in the mind right now around this difficult experience that's creating the suffering.

So this is where I need to talk about the first noble truth. As you know, we will give a talk later on all four noble truths, but you're aware of the first noble truth, right? You've all heard that—the first noble truth being dukkha.

Now, often that's translated as suffering. And one of the reasons I don't personally think that's such a good translation, especially into English anyway, is the connotations that it brings. The first noble truth, when the Buddha talked about it, he said it's to be understood. And as soon as we say "suffering," unless you're in a really clear space, isn't it easy for just a little tinge of aversion to come in around that? Oh, the first noble truth of suffering. Great. Yeah. Right. Already we're not understanding it, because that's not what he's saying. The first noble truth is to be understood.

I could give a whole talk on this, but the way Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it—like one line to describe what the Buddha is saying in the first noble truth—is "the basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives." That's Bhikkhu Bodhi's definition. It doesn't mean everything is horrible. There's plenty of beauty. There's plenty of pleasant feeling, and it changes, right? It's that it's basically unreliable, basically unsatisfactory.

And why is that a problem? Then you get to the second noble truth. It's a problem only if we're clinging to it and trying to make it be satisfactory—if we're thinking, "this shouldn't be happening."

So that's where I want to go in terms of seeing how compassion develops and what gets in the way of compassion, what gets in the way of our being present with difficulty—whether it's physical pain, whether it's emotional unpleasantness, whether it's loss, whether it's having to be together with what we don't like, whether it's having the pleasant go away. All these things happen, and that's just the way it is in this world. Again, it's not rocket science if we look around, just like when I talked about impermanence. It's obvious, except somehow it isn't.

So in this realm of the first noble truth, on some very deeply conditioned level—not a place in the mind, but a habit of mind—there is the sense that some pains we can be with, some difficulties we can be with. But the ones we all hit in practice and in life, particularly here on retreat because it's magnified when you're looking at it, is that thing of "this is wrong." This is bad. What did I do wrong for this to happen? It shouldn't be happening.

We do that in life too, but particularly here. Often when you like your meditation and it changes—what did I do wrong? When the difficult stuff I was just talking about comes up, when you have to be with loneliness, when you have to be with despair, when you see old conditioning that's really painful, you think, "Well, I should be past this by now. Why is this coming up? What did I do wrong? I was so concentrated, and now this stuff is coming." It's all, as one yogi used to come and say to me, "going to hell in a handbasket." I have no clue what that means or what a handbasket is, but it gives you a sense.

And so the first noble truth—why did the Buddha say, of the four true things, if you understand these, you'll be awakened? He says there's a basic unsatisfactoriness running through life. He's not saying, "Okay, let's stop being happy. Let's get really depressed." No, the understanding of it frees our hearts and minds. The understanding of the first noble truth takes us out of delusion, takes us out of a relationship to this basic unsatisfactoriness—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, change, difficult—takes us out of a relationship to that experience that's based in delusion and denial and confusion. That's where our suffering comes from.

And I think the reason that compassion develops from being with suffering—the reason we have to develop it, let me put it that way—is because our knee-jerk reaction is "let's get out of here," or "something's wrong." And also, don't we often, in times of suffering, feel even more isolated than before? Kind of alienated or shamed, like something to hide? You know how people often say, "I look around and everyone else is sitting like a Buddha"—and they even know it's not true, but everyone else is doing so well, and only they are lost. And that's kind of how we feel.

So the difficulty, the suffering—in this case I'm using suffering as unpleasant, difficult experience, which is what compassion arises in connection with—the suffering has the effect of increasing our sense of self-cherishing in a strange way, of limitation, of isolation, of aloneness. And it also strengthens the sense that something is badly wrong.

And in some subtle way—do you ever find this? I find it all the time in my meditation practice. Even though I totally know better, I somehow keep equating pleasant with right. And that's just the Buddhist teaching saying, no, we don't understand. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. The mind keeps changing every second.

So the First Noble Truth is to be understood—not to engender aversion, not to engender fear, not to serve as further proof of our strange separateness, of something wrong with us. But rather, it's something that is a commonality of all beings. So when we open to a moment of real difficulty and the mind is totally present, the heart is really present, that's why it can open into a sense of connection with all beings—because all beings suffer.

Ajahn Sumedho says he used to start talks in Thailand with, "Welcome, brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." And we are all brothers and sisters. Sometimes we experience wonderful stuff. Sometimes we experience suffering. It takes turns. But it's really a way of opening into tenderness for all of us.

But the delusion that comes when we don't really understand the First Noble Truth—and it's a profound understanding, not simple, I'm not meaning to say it's simple—the delusion is rooted in the misunderstanding, as Joko Beck says, that somehow I can hold myself separate from this painful and unwanted experience. Do you get a sense of that ever? Have you felt like that? If I could just get it right, I could watch it, but it's over there and I'm over here. I don't have to really feel it. And if we do it right, we'll stop it.

Even though you all know this—we've said it a million times and you even know it yourself—don't we often say, "Well, I was mindful of it, but it kept on happening"? Somehow mindfulness means it should go away. The pleasant stuff we're mindful of should keep happening, right? You don't say, "Oh, I was mindful and it went away." With the unpleasant stuff, we think mindfulness means it should go away. But no, it's just being here with it.

And it's such a deep habit that it leads into... we can't see clearly. We can get into real denial. But just this subtle aversion—I want to hold myself separate—means that in that moment the mind, the consciousness, the awareness isn't just connecting completely with the experience. It's a little bit pulled away. And that delusion and that aversion or ill will, as I said before, colors the perception. And then there's no way we can accurately perceive what's going on.

This is the Buddha: "Again Brahman, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

We just can't see accurately—not even our own good. And so we can really get lost in thinking that the further I get away from this unpleasant thing, the better it is for me. Not seeing that that's just strengthening the tendency of aversion and denial and separation and alienation and suffering. And it can lead into total denial.

I think I mentioned the other night that I love denial. I just love it because it's such a powerful force. I read a book a few years ago called *Unquiet Ghost* about the author who went to Russia in the 1990s and was interviewing people still alive who had been part of the gulags under Stalin—which was twenty to forty million people in the gulags. I think twenty million people died there. So many people were arrested. Family members were arrested for no reason. It was really like a reign of terror. And it was never talked about, of course, at the time, because all you had to do was say one bad thing about Stalin and someone would report you. That was it—you'd be in the gulag for ten years.

So Adam Hochschild went in 1990 and was just talking to different people who were still alive, and they could talk about it at that point, after the Soviet Union had come apart.

Anyway, it was a really interesting book, and in some ways it almost seemed like a meditation on the power of denial in the mind.

One thing he quoted—Adam Hochschild quoted George Orwell on what he called the courage of perception, what Orwell calls "the power of facing unpleasant facts." It takes a lot of courage for us to face unpleasant facts on a moment-to-moment basis, just here in our practice.

One example of how that played out in the period of Stalin—this is from the book, from talking to a lot of people. He said the people who tried to avoid arrest by lying low, by moving from place to place, by kind of hiding out, they actually had a pretty good chance of success. The arresting mechanism was really strong, but the searching and finding mechanism wasn't that strong. But people rarely tried to do that. Because despite mass arrests, almost everybody believed, "It won't happen to me."

He said people believed it because people deny bad news because it implies worse news. If I'm about to be arrested knowing I did nothing, it means the whole system has gone mad. And so people just thought, "It won't happen to me. It won't happen to me."

That sense of fear, or sometimes our absolute inability to face unpleasant facts, really leads into this deep habit of just not recognizing accurately what's happening. And that's so poignant and sad because accurate recognition, as we've been saying, is what frees our heart and mind from suffering.

So can we find in ourselves a willingness—and I think this is from Joko Beck too, I love this sentence—can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Again, just for a moment. Don't project it into the whole day, into your whole life, but just for a moment. If you're feeling sorrow or confusion or fear or pain and your mind is going, "No, what's wrong?"—just, can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Just now.

In that moment, that attitude is the practice of compassion. We're cultivating compassion by how we meet each moment of experience. What arises in a moment in our practice is the result of all the previous conditions—you could say the vipāka, the karmic result of all the previous conditions. In a way, it's just arising. The present moment habit that's being created is how that particular experience is met in the mind.

This is not to scare you; it's meant to be encouraging. Sure, sometimes we can see the habit of our mind, as I'm saying here with denial, is to meet unpleasant experience with "I'm out of here." And that's feeding the habit of fear and aversion and denial. But every time we go, "Can I rest? Can I just find the willingness to rest?" Or in the language we've been using, "Can I just meet this moment with kind awareness?" That seems like nothing much, but it is changing the whole habit of your mind. That is an actual manifestation and cultivation and development of the attitude of wisdom and compassion. That's why these moments are so important. It doesn't feel like much, but it's huge. It's huge.

And true compassion, karuṇā, really can only arise with connection. It's not an idea. I mean, we can have the idea, and that can help us have the willingness to rest in this painful and confusing situation. The idea can guide us. But the actual spontaneous compassion that arises—it only really comes with connectedness. We're just willing to be fully present with this without having any other reference point or assumption, just for an instant, just for a moment.

I want to give an example. This has kept going through my mind because it seems like a good example of how connection with a difficult, painful moment led to compassion. But I'm not 100% clear—I'm not sure it actually conveys it. So I'm sorry if it doesn't. But to me, it just happened recently and it really did.

When I was in Burma last month, several of us were visiting different places, offering some dāna, some support that many friends had given to offer. We had heard about a new school. Many kids can't afford to go to the government schools—I mean, there are so many, it's unbelievable. And many nuns and some monks have begun starting their own schools that local kids—both little nuns and monks, but also regular children—can attend for free.

It's amazing. We know some nuns who started a school three years ago just for the local kids, and they thought maybe a hundred would come. Now, three years later, there are over five hundred children. I could name you five schools in a ten-minute drive area that are like this. And they start with nothing. They do it on dāna.

They hire good teachers and pay them, just relying on receiving dana every month to cover the salaries. They don't even have decent buildings—just lean-tos. But anyway, there's a lot happening like that.

So we were seeking out some of these schools. We can't give a lot of money, but some—a couple thousand dollars at each place—and also perhaps tell some other friends who have greater resources. We heard about this one school that was way out in some remote area, and we went. The taxi driver we often traveled with knew us; he knew the monastery where we stayed.

We'd heard about this monk who'd started a school like this. We drove a long way, and it was really hard to find. The route took us through the poorest area any of us had seen so far—really crowded, way on the outskirts of Yangon. There were all these shaggy bamboo houses built over this really fetid, swampy water, just on stilts. The floors were bamboo slats with big holes in them. Even the taxi driver kept saying in English, "Oh, they're so poor. They're so poor." It was just intense.

We got to the monastery and met the monk who was doing it. He was a youngish guy, early thirties, and he was one of these beings who just radiated goodness, you could say. He seemed like a bodhisattva. He had come from another area of the country because, he told us—one of us could speak Burmese, so we could talk with him—he just wanted to help the poor children. He was educated, with a Dhammacariya degree, which is what monks and nuns receive after studying the Pali scriptures for many years. To have one of those at thirty-three means he was really quite intelligent and quite assiduous in his studies. He'd come there and built this little school with a hundred kids.

We were really open to listening to him and talking with him because he was radiating so much sincerity and goodness and sweetness. But he lacked managerial skills, I must say, based on the state of his little monastery and school. It was right in this really

poor area, and the place was so... I mean, we're used to poor, but this was just shabby. He told us how because of all this fetid swamp right around, in the rainy season—which is like three or four months a year—the water would rise this high.

He took us into the little shack where the young monks lived, the samaneras. They were like seven, eight, nine, ten years old. He would have these young boys become monks so they could stay there with him and he could take care of them because they didn't have anywhere else to stay. A lot of the other kids stayed at home. He said in the rainy season, the water rose up to the level of the beds they were sleeping on. It wasn't the rainy season, but it was just such a mess. And the latrine was nearby, and he said, "Oh yeah, in the rainy season, the water from the latrine flows..." You get the drift. It was just a mess.

Then he took us to the school, which was right there. The school was actually nicely built, and the kids were there, and he'd hired teachers. That was really where he'd put his first energy. But the whole place was just so pitiful. We all were—like I said, even the taxi driver was going, "Whoa, this is so much suffering."

But we were really somehow not shutting down to it. I think because we were so open to him, to his beauty, to his sincerity. And he was saying, "I'm out here and nobody knows I'm here. Please tell people about me." Because he, like all of these monks' and nuns' schools, subsists on dana. And he wasn't getting any. It was really at the end of nowhere. No one was going to happen on it by accident.

When we left, seeing again the state of the village, it really made an impression. We visited a lot of different schools and nunneries and monasteries, and we'd seen a lot of poverty. But this just really hit us all—both the goodness and the poverty and the lack of skill. Because some of it was just lack of skill. We've been to nunneries that were poor but neat and tidy. We've been to other nunneries that were poor and just a mess—like my friend said, "Some overwhelm is going on here."

So we left. And leaving, I could just feel it reverberating in me for a few days.

So that's just the openness to suffering. I'm not saying that's particularly compassion or wanting to help, but just the openness. And I can see how that openness came from tuning into his goodness.

The next day or so, this is just a little thing, but I really noticed it. I don't think I would have normally been so open. I was in the monastery where we stay, and I needed help filling a big bottle of water—I can't carry it by myself. The guy who usually does it in the office wasn't there, so the nun called one of the workers. There's always construc-

tion work going on in these meditation centers. You might as well know that up front. If you ever want to go sit in Burma, there's going to be construction work going on, or loudspeakers, or both. That's just how it is.

So he was one of the construction workers. She called him over, and he came to help with the water filter—you have to do a certain thing, run the special filter and wait and do all this stuff. He was a young guy, probably early twenties. And I was just standing behind him, looking at him. I could see he was taking such care, because most of the time the locals there don't pay any attention to how the water filter works. They don't need it—they drink the water. But he was so meticulous and careful.

I was just standing there behind him, you know, because it's awkward. We can't talk and he's kind of shy with me. And I saw later that I was still really open from the experience the day before. Instead of just waiting or being lost in thought, I was tuning into him. That's the connection that allows compassion. And tuning in, I just saw how very simply he was really intelligent and really caring and really knew what to do. Then we had a little nice connection. He was a lovely guy.

And immediately, in a sense, I felt it—so many of the young people in Burma have nowhere to go. He's really smart. He clearly doesn't have any chance to go to university. He's working this crummy construction job, earning about two dollars and fifty cents a day. And he clearly has so much potential. Just that sense of connectedness, which on another day I wouldn't have really noticed. It would be like, yeah, another young guy who isn't really having much chance. It's a shame. But there wouldn't be that open-hearted connectedness. And I really credit that to really being there in the pain, in the sorrow the day before.

From that, we got the idea—I asked the nun about him, and she knew his whole story, of course. "Oh yeah, he's really smart. He's really good. He comes from this other state. He wants to learn how to drive." And then we thought maybe we could help him learn how to drive. Then they told us about another young guy who is only nineteen and really smart. He passed tenth standard. He should be able to go to university, but he has no money. He has to support his family. We had money that friends gave us. We could maybe support him to go to college. And it just kind of moved from thing to thing, just from the simplicity of being opened to suffering. We never know where it's going to show up.

I don't know if that communicates, but that to me was such a simple little act of connection. And it can actually have far-reaching effects, because then we just started looking around and seeing more young people. Some of them don't want the support. Some of them it's not feasible. Some of them it is. That one young guy—not the one I'm talking

about, the one who was only nineteen—when we met with him and talked to him about whether we could support him to go to college, the smile on his face was so wonderful. We all just were five feet off the ground, just from muditā, from sympathetic joy, that maybe some of our friends' money could help support him through college. Who knows what will really happen?

You never know. We never know. Compassion comes from very simple little moments of connection. It can come from very simple moments of connection with your own suffering, right here. That's really the point I want to make—because it doesn't stop with you.

When we're not, as Bankei, the Zen master from the 1600s in Japan, said, "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things, and then your primary being reveals itself in its true form." So just notice when you're feeling in confrontation with what's happening now. Instead see: can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusion, just for a moment? Just for a moment. And don't go looking for it, but you may find it happen. Looking for it—that gets in the way.

Notice how in that moment of real connection it opens up past your own particular story of suffering and begins to see that this is the particular experience of the universal experience of pain, or sorrow, or confusion, or loss. And that doesn't have to be overwhelming. That actually is the other side of seeing that we're not separate beings at all. We're not separate at all.

Vincent Van Gogh said once, "I wish that people could understand that the boundaries for compassion don't lie where the world draws them." And the boundaries for us don't lie where the world draws them. But it arises quite naturally, the sense of non-separation, just from touching our own suffering.

Tara Brach quotes Stephen Levine, who writes of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness. At the point at which she felt she could not bear the suffering and resentment any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others—a starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose in a dirty flat, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. She said she understood that it wasn't her pain, it was the pain of all beings. It wasn't just her life, it was life itself.

And this is Pema Chödrön saying, "We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence." In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

Again, we don't have to try and hold all the pain of all the world. Our own pain is a representative of the pain of the world. And when we touch that, it turns into compassion. It naturally begins to move into the pain of the world.

I'll end with this one short quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj—second only to the Buddha, and I don't disagree with that: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

Then the senseless sorrow of humankind—which includes you—becomes our sole concern.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 98

Generosity: A Foundational Practice for Awakening

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson invites us to reconsider generosity (dāna) not as a preliminary practice or moral obligation, but as a direct path to liberation. Drawing from her extensive experiences in Burmese and Thai monasteries, she shares moving stories that illuminate how genuine generosity—whether giving or receiving—purifies the mind of greed, aversion, and delusion in the very moment it arises.*
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> *Wilson explains the Buddha's graduated teaching approach, where discourse on dāna and sīla (virtuous conduct) naturally opens the heart and makes it pliable, uplifted, and serene—conditions ideal for understanding the Four Noble Truths. She references how the Buddha established the monastic saṅgha with generosity at its core, creating mutual support between lay practitioners and monastics. Through vivid accounts of rice dānas in cyclone-affected villages, spontaneous offerings from unexpected sources, and nuns transformed by their commitment to helping children, Wilson demonstrates how wholesome states feed wholesome states.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for purifying motivation in acts of giving: clarifying intention before giving, abandoning clinging to what is offered, being fully present in the exchange, and honoring the complete circle of giving and receiving. Wilson concludes with the Buddha's instruction on recollecting one's own generosity as a meditation practice, citing how such recollection naturally leads to joy, calm, ease, and concentration—making generosity a complete practice for awakening.*

Last night when Sally was talking about the Four Noble Truths, she mentioned that the fourth truth, the Eightfold Path, is so brilliant because it's really about our whole life, not just about meditation. I'm not talking about the Eightfold Path tonight—we're saving that for Pascal, unless he changes his mind. But I do want to take a little turn and not talk specifically about meditation tonight.

I want to remind us that as far as I can tell, everything the Buddha taught was in the service of transforming our consciousness, transforming the habits of our mind from unwholesome to wholesome. Basically everything he taught was part of our path of awakening. Of course, we're in a meditation retreat, and that's mostly what we're look-

ing at. But I want to remind us that other aspects of his teaching, such as dana or generosity and sila or non-harming virtuous conduct, aren't just nice things to do to get yourself ready for meditation, or a byproduct, or a should.

Tonight I want to talk about generosity, but in the way of really seeing, really opening in our own experience to learn to see and deeply trust that the practice of generosity in all its different forms is actually a deep practice of liberation—not just the preparatory work, not just the waiting room.

In some Buddhist countries, because the Buddha always did start by talking about generosity, then virtuous conduct, then mental cultivation in that order, the practice of dana—supporting nunneries and monasteries, supporting each other (it's not only about nuns and monks)—sometimes remains just in the field of merit: "I'm doing this because I can't meditate, and if I'm generous, I'll have a better life next time around." There's an element of that in the teachings.

But when I talk about generosity as a practice tonight, I want us to really see how in a moment where we experience a generous heart-mind, that's a moment of real purity of consciousness. It liberates us from greed, from possessiveness. It frees the heart and mind from ill will in a moment of generosity. And of course, it moves past the false sense of separation of self—that kind of holding, of possessiveness, of clinging, of trying to protect.

The generous action, which can be of thought, of word, of deed—it's not just about giving things or money, it's about any kind of generous sharing. And also receiving, because there's no giving without receiving. Open-hearted receiving completes the circle. The open-hearted act of generosity, even just in thought—that's an act. It highlights the connectedness, the non-separation. So instead of coming from fear and protectiveness and possessiveness and I-ness, it's a movement in contradiction to that, when we're really present with it, when it's really being practiced as an awakening practice.

This probably isn't news to anybody. We all know that in all of our different cultures, generosity is a very appreciated and deeply taught practice in whatever religious tradition, and just in general life too. It doesn't even have to be a spiritual tradition.

What I've really been learning in the last few years, mostly from my time in Thailand and Burma—maybe being in a different culture from this one (and I have to say, people are really generous in this culture, I'm not saying we're not)—somehow being in an essentially Buddhist culture, in both Thailand and Burma, spending most of my time in nunneries or monasteries or meditation centers, but also traveling a lot... I've experi-

enced both that very deep generosity and, in the same way, the more superficial kind that's just for merit, which is everywhere. But also, over and over, so often, a quality of spontaneous, heartfelt, natural generosity that is so joyous it has a quality of contagion.

This was a quality I never really learned from how I grew up, or even from all the generosity I experienced here and in my life. But the quality of real joy that comes from this open-hearted generosity—I found it has a quality of really seeing, really feeling how contagious it is. The actual practice of generosity becomes not just second nature but truly natural to us, where one wants to be generous because it's such a source of immediate happiness.

That was kind of like a secret teaching that I hadn't really learned. Yes, generosity is good. We feel better when we're generous, and we should be generous, especially to those less fortunate. But there's room for other moods to come in there.

In Burma, where I've been going for the last ten years, every time I go there are so many big and small spontaneous movements of generosity that it blows me away. At first, when you receive generosity, you think, "Oh no, I can't accept that. I'm so much better off than you." And then you feel how churlish that is—how that completely stops the circle of interconnectedness. That response is all about me: "Oh no, I can't take your generosity."

But when one really opens to it—for example, in the last few years I've been going with a few friends, and many of you here know that people offer us dana, money that we take, and as the vehicle for all the dharma friends here, we share with different nunneries. We've made funds for children to go to school who can't afford it, or rebuilt some houses, or whatever comes up. We've been to one meditation center where I've been staying, and there are many poor nunneries all around, and every year more. We go back—we can't give to all of them, but there are certain ones we've connected with that we give to, and other people may offer dana. We return the next year and see how it's been used, and it's usually been used wonderfully, and we can offer more.

But any time we even just show up—we're not even offering anything, we just come to say hello—immediately there's a lunch invitation. There are four, five, six of us depending. My friend Aryanyani and her friend Mimi—Mimi is Burmese, Arya speaks Burmese, so there's a lot more communication. There's always a lunch invitation. And the first years, we were like...

No, you know, they'll make a lunch for us that's ten times better than any meal they ever have. And it's embarrassing because you go and sit and eat and they watch you eat. They're not eating. That's how it always is.

In meditation centers, you know, every meal you see the meal dana. That's the thing coming from Asia. In every meditation center all over the country, the meals are offered every day by different people. So it might be if I'm staying in a meditation center, one day I'll offer the meals. And if it's a big one like Shwe Oo Min, last year it was four or five hundred people a day—it's not nothing. And you see so many Burmese people come. They signed up months ahead to offer the meal dana, and they'll come on their day with their families, all dressed up, and they watch you eat and take photos. So that takes some getting used to for us.

But you're just a yogi, so you just eat, you don't interact or anything. So we know it's like that. So when the nuns invite us, we'll go to their nunneries, which are really poor, and sit at the table on the floor, and they'll have a table groaning with twenty-five—I'm not exaggerating—different kinds of curries. Then they'll have another table that's groaning with fruits and little desserts. And they don't eat like that ever, ever. And when we're done eating, they'll take what's left and they may take a few days—the six of us, twenty-five of them—they may take a few days to eat off of the leftovers of what we didn't eat.

So there's that disparity. And if we say no, it just cuts the cycle. Or if we go and feel embarrassed—you know, they're so happy, they're so thrilled, they love to be able to offer. So can we go and be so happy to receive? And when both sides are like that, it's a beautiful teaching. It's a beautiful opening of the heart and mind. It makes one want to be more generous, not as it "should"—first it's like that, well, they were good to us, so we should give them more money. But it really isn't like that at all. What happens is you just go, "Wow." It's so beautiful and you just want to give. It may not be to them. It may be you walk out and someone else comes across your path and the heart and mind is in this open, receptive space. And if there's something to be offered, you just offer it. It's really contagious, and it starts to be not a practice but a way of being.

It is particularly highlighted in the monastic tradition within Buddhism, for sure. The Buddha set up the monastic sangha during his time so that generosity was at the center of it, at the core of it. The whole thing depends on generosity.

This is from the Buddha. He says, "Monks"—he's talking to his monks—"Brahmins and householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness." And just if you don't know, those are the only four things a monk is allowed to accept, what they're offered: robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicine. And they can't keep food overnight, so it's just the food for that one day.

So still, in Buddhist countries, the monks go out every morning at dawn on this barefoot alms round with their bowls—not that big—with their bowls and get food. Now, in many places, all they get is a little bit of rice because the places are really poor. And so then often the monastery or the meditation center will actually cook for the monks and nuns. They'll use the rice that's donated. But then that food that's cooked is also offered by other people. But they keep the alms round up because—and I'll tell a story about it in a minute—it's an opportunity for generosity for the people that come out and offer rice. And to stop doing that is actually an act of selfishness, of taking away that opportunity for dana.

It's not so much the way we think, but that's a common phrase: "Oh, this is an opportunity for generosity." Sometimes loudspeakers will be going through a village: "An opportunity for generosity!" You know, in my Western mind I hear, "Yeah, right, someone's out there trolling for money." But it's really felt as an opportunity for generosity.

Buddha again: "And you monks are very helpful to Brahmins and householders as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end with the correct meaning and wording. And you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and purity. Thus, monks and nuns, the spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

And so the Buddha really set it up that way—that monks and nuns couldn't just withdraw and be separate from lay people, that they're linked together through generosity, through support of one another. Lay men and women and ordained women and men.

Those are the four types of people that are important in the Sangha, and their link is generosity. Generosity with things, generosity with time, generosity with the Dhamma. This is at the heart of sangha, so of course it shows up prominently in Burma, in Thailand, in the nunneries and monasteries. But it really seems to have become quite intrinsic in the culture.

Every year when I go, I know this now—it's not like magic. People have their stuff. It's not some kind of magical, wonderful culture, as you well know from reading the news. Things are just kind of normal for a while, but after a few days or a few weeks, each time we keep running into some little unexpected gesture of such deep quality of generosity and metta that it blows us away. One of my friends, Mario, calls it a "piti opportunity"—where something will be so touching at the depths of someone's generosity that we just come to tears.

And that is touching us, and that's the point I want to make. It's not about thinking, "Oh, these people over there are so wonderful. I couldn't be like that." Rather, it's about what happens with the wholesomeness in our heart and mind when it's generated. Have you noticed how wholesome feeds wholesome in your own self? Unwholesome can also feed unwholesome. Both are lawful. Wholesome feeds wholesome. And we catch it from each other because it wakes up the natural goodness, the natural wholesomeness in the mind that isn't colored by confusion.

Let me share a couple of stories to give you this sense of the spirit of joy in the giving and receiving of generosity.

A few years ago there was a big cyclone in the lower delta region southwest of Yangon, and really thousands upon thousands of people died. The farms were destroyed. It was a huge devastation, and the government, of course, did nothing. Many Burmese people naturally went to try to help. Any Burmese person who had anything tried to load up their car or their boat and go down there, even though the government was stopping them.

A couple of years later, some of us were with Sayadaw Indica at the meditation center where I've been staying. He organized a dana of food—from the money people had donated, he bought a lot of rice and oil and onions and beans and staples. He's an organizer. He arranged these big boats, and we took all this food down the river to a few little villages in the delta, then very formally offered the food. The villages were quite poor and really happy to receive. It's all done very formally, with a kind of ceremony, a kind of honoring of both the giving and the receiving. It's not like, "Well, here you are." "Oh, we'll take it, we're ashamed." It's a real honoring.

Then the villagers all came in a row with whatever beautiful plants they had, because it was a very rich area for growing things. They offered all these potted plants for us to bring back in the boat to plant at the monastery. Of course, you know, you think about how you're going to get all these plants in the boat and schlep them up there, and the Western mind wants to say, "That's too much trouble. Thanks a lot, you keep them." But you don't do that. You accept it with great joy, and then you go back and figure out what you're going to do with all these plants. You put them in the boat even though there's no room for you, and you schlep them up there and you plant them. There's a sense of really honoring the whole cycle. Something truly beautiful in that brings much more depth to the generosity and the receiving on both sides.

That same year, right at this meditation center on the edge of Yangon, the villages around it were also affected by the cyclone and didn't have much food that year. So we decided to organize what's called a rice dana, where every household in every village is

registered. People can't live somewhere without being registered, so they know every house, they know how many people are in every house. Everyone would come and we'd all fill these big bags of rice—huge bags.

So they'd get a little chit and come and stand in line. And it would take two of us to heave this giant bag of rice up. These little ladies would go, "Okay," plop it on their head, and walk off—maybe carrying a couple of babies. I mean, I'm not kidding. I have pictures of ladies with two babies and this giant bag of rice on their head.

So they all took their rice and went off. It was a nice day, kind of like a picnic day. And then a friend, a guy from Mexico who was a temporary monk there, told us the next day about the alms round. Every morning when they go out, they walk the same route, because then people know when the monks are coming.

The way the alms round works, there's a little novice monk who goes ahead of them ringing a bell. Then the people who want to offer know they're coming, and they come out and stand by the side of the road. The monks come silently and walk up to them, and then the monk will take the lid off the bowl and they put in the food. The monks don't say thank you, and it's not meant to be personal. It's not me giving to you personally. It's supporting the sangha, supporting the sasana, supporting the Buddha's teachings. So the people come out when they hear the bell.

This monk said basically every day it's more or less the same people. You know which families are going to come out. But this day after the rice dana, when every family had rice, he said so many more people came out to offer because now they had a little rice that they could give. They didn't have it before. Sure, they kept some to eat, of course, but that was the first thing they wanted to do—and they were so happy to be able to do it. It's just so touching to see that over and over again.

And the sense of joy in dana isn't just with monks and nuns. Another example from this year: the whole money-changing scene there is a little weird. It's kind of half legal, half not legal, and it's not really through banks. You have to get money changers to come out to where you are, especially if you're changing a lot of money.

So we were changing a lot—maybe twenty-five thousand, thirty thousand dollars—and it was organized through a friend. These young guys kind of come up, not really sleazy, but businesslike, you know, on an edge. A step up from drug dealers, but sometimes there's a little bit of that sense. They look at every single bill, and if there's the tiniest dot, they won't take it. So you're there a while. It's a whole process. And then

they give you all these piles of money, because Burmese money is big. You hand over two thousand dollars and you get a pile like this of things that crumble to dust when you touch them.

So we were there for a long time, changing the money, and it was all just straightforward. The guys were not unfriendly, but not chatty or anything. And I don't even know how—I think somehow just at the end, the woman who owns the B&B, the Burmese woman who was kind of the intermediary for us, just said something like, "Oh great, now you can build a lot of toilets for the nuns," which was part of what we were doing. That's all. No one was asking what we were doing with our money.

There was about six hundred dollars still kept back for some fee. And the lady from the B&B called us a couple days later to say, "Okay, now I have that. It's been released. And someone here donated another three hundred fifty dollars to bring it up to a thousand."

We thought it must be a yogi who stays at that B&B—a lot of Western meditators come through there that we know. We got there, and she said, "No, it was the money changer."

We were all completely blown away. When he heard how we were spending that money, he just wanted to donate. Three hundred fifty dollars for a Burmese person—that's a lot of money. And it was done in a very anonymous, not wanting any kind of recognition way. He just added three hundred fifty dollars to that.

That was a real pīti moment. You just never know. You think, "Oh, some sleazy money changer." Not the case. That seed of goodness and generosity is really blooming in that person's mind. The first chance they act on it—who knows what other good things he's doing.

So it's very, very institutionalized in the culture. I could tell you ten million more stories, but I'm running out of time, so I won't.

But one point that I want to make in terms of the contagion of generosity—not only how it spreads to others, but how it functions as deepening us into liberation. It's not just about feeling good about it, the joy of it, though that's certainly the case. But it opens the heart and mind to more wholesomeness, to see more clearly.

The Buddha often talked in this way. There are many suttas where he begins with what he calls a graduated teaching, where he sees someone and thinks, "This person could hear the Dhamma," but first he'll give them a talk on generosity, a talk on *sila*, to open the heart and mind, to make the heart and mind more pliable.

So I just want to give a couple of examples again from this year of how you can see it happening in people—first in terms of how the generosity comes in the culture at this place we're staying.

The monks, of course, have nothing to give other than teaching Dhamma. But the few monks who live at this meditation center, aside from the Sayadaw—I've been back there a few years now, and my two nun friends live there half the year, so they know all the monks. And the monks are so wanting to support helping people.

In the past, I've had the impression—not with these particular monks—that monks tend to want to help each other, that they look down on nuns or don't really think about them so much. But that's just not true here.

There are quite a few schools that have been started by nuns because they see there are so many poor kids that can't afford to go to the government school. One started just nearby where we're living, by a nun that we had known for a few years. We thought she seemed a little bit depressive, actually. And her nunnery was nothing special—fine, and we'd support them some, but they weren't particularly bringing up a lot of orphan girls, which a lot of nunneries do. They were just doing their thing, studying.

But she came, I think it was last year, to Ari and Yanni and said, "I really want to start a school." There was another nun school started about a ten-minute drive away, which that nun began three years ago. She just said, "I have to do something. There are all these poor kids that can't go to school."

So they just decided to do it. They build a lean-to, a roof building, and start a school. Somehow they get enough *dana* to hire a few teachers. And that's it—they start a school. She said, "Okay, well, maybe I can have a hundred kids." We went back the next year: 350 kids. We went back this year: 570 kids.

And so this other nun came last year and said, "In the rainy season, all the little nuns and all the little kids around this area go to that school, but it's so far to walk—it's a forty-five-minute walk. In the rainy season, which is pouring monsoon, it's too hard, so the little ones don't go."

She said, "I want to start a school around here for the little ones."

She asked for about $3,600, which is for us a lot to give all at once. We didn't really think she could pull it off. But we said, "Okay, great, do it."

Well, we came back this year. She did it. They had two little buildings, not a lot of land. They demolished the main building the nuns all lived in. They all moved, cramped up into this other little building. They eat there. They sleep there. They do everything there. And with the money we'd given, she built one of these long lean-tos, hired some teachers. It has 150 kids who are going there—all the little kids.

And then another company, some chemical company—a Burmese company—came and saw what she was doing, so they built another school. And then some other friends of ours came and they built some toilets. And it's like it attracts more and more.

So this year, we saw how she had done that. And then she was talking to Ari and Yanni, and it's really wonderful to be able sometimes to just sit down and have a conversation, because this is where these little gems come out that you don't get even from seeing what she did, which is amazing. But she came and was just chatting...

First of all, as I mentioned, she had always been somewhat depressive. But as she was sitting there talking with us in the little kuti, her face was just radiant—so bright. She was saying that last year, when she came with the idea for the school, the idea had been growing so strongly in her mind. "I just want to help these children," she said. And it got so strong that she could hardly eat, could hardly sleep. It was just such an overwhelming feeling—she had to do something to help these children.

And now, she said, the school is built, and it's so much work. It's so hard, because everything falls on Dana. To hire teachers—regular, government-approved teachers—means every month they have to somehow find the funds. Dana has to come up with whatever donations happen to come in from people who visit, to pay the teacher salaries, to pay for the desks, to have a well that works and toilets that work, all kinds of things. She said it's so much work and they're all cramped together.

And then she said, "I'm so happy. I'm so happy. It's hard. All the energy is for the children and the school." She said her mind is calm and happy, whereas before it had been filled with worry. All the hard work notwithstanding, her mind is so happy, and she would be so happy if she could just do this for the rest of her life.

We could see—sure, it comes and goes—but the transformation through this genuine commitment to generosity of her time and energy, this really stretching to help others, has brought much stronger peace and happiness and contentment to her mind. And that's then available to see more clearly.

This onward leading doesn't just end with the generosity. I'll read this from Ajahn Pasanno—this is essentially his commentary on a sutta. He says it's just nature, it's lawful, that generosity, the foundational quality on the path of awakening, lawfully opens into deeper qualities of awakening.

This is Ajahn Pasanno: "There's a naturalness to this gradual training. The cultivation of these foundational qualities leads naturally to deeper qualities. For example, common ways of teaching emphasize dana, sila, bhavana—generosity, virtuous conduct, mental cultivation. When one is generous and delights in giving, the heart is satisfied and joyous. This supports the development of virtue because a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. Then meditation progresses more smoothly because the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are."

Do you get a sense of that? Part of the reason I keep telling different stories is that even if just one of them resonates with you, you get a sense of how the mind or heart naturally brightens. And that brightness leads to a pliancy, a suppleness, an openness. We're not clouded by kilesa, and there is more potential to see things as they truly are.

Let me give you a different story. This one is not from Burma, but I heard it on YouTube—someone showed me a little clip from one of those talent shows, like American Idol. I never watched them, so it wasn't American Idol; it was some British one with that guy—you probably know him—one of the judges, the mean one. Simon something or other. He seems like really not a very nice guy, but he's always the judge, so that's all I remember.

The young man who was singing was a teenager, seventeen or eighteen, of Iraqi descent, but he'd been adopted by an Australian woman. He and his brother had both been adopted, and they had both been really severely wounded—I think by bombs or something during part of the war in Iraq when they were really young children. Wounded to where their limbs were gone. I can't remember the specifics, but he was certainly missing arms and legs; both of them were.

This Australian woman had gone to Iraq and fallen in love with them both, adopted them both, and brought them back to Australia. That's the backstory. But first, the audience didn't really know any of that. They just introduced him, and he comes on—just so bright, missing arms and legs—and starts singing.

And he was really good. But of course, everyone's heart was completely open. He was really good, so he's singing, and then at the end he turns—his mother was there and his brother was there. And this is what was really so moving. He turned to them just with so much love and appreciation to his mother, just for her love and generosity. And then you see the brother there. And she's saying, "This isn't generosity, you know, it's just love." But it was like a love fest, just so much purity.

And I tried to imagine what a generous heart that woman would have to adopt two kids so wounded, who could never really... and how beautiful they all were. Even that mean guy, Simon, had tears in his eyes.

The thing I want to bring out—it's a beautiful story—but just seeing that generosity and love, the kind of generosity where you don't think, "Oh, I'm so generous." It's just a natural sharing. Why does it touch us? Because it opens that same potential. It opens in our own hearts and minds that brightness, that movement beyond the sense of me.

I might think, "Oh, I couldn't do that. She's so great." Well, that isn't really very touching, is it? But when you don't go there, it's just, "Wow, look at that." You're not thinking, "I should be like that" or anything like that. Just "That's so amazing." That expression of generosity and love is so beautiful. We can appreciate it because it's natural to us too. And so opening to see it acted out through other people is really a great way in for us. It begins to open us to a deeper practice and deeper understanding.

In the Buddha's stories, in the scriptures, there's one man who was known as the most generous. He was a huge supporter of the Buddha—Anāthapiṇḍika. When he first met the Buddha, he was so filled with faith that he just basically fell in love with the Buddha. And he's one of those people that when the Buddha first met him, he gave him—I just want to read you this line because this is one of these ways they introduced this graduated teaching.

So the Buddha met Anāthapiṇḍika, who had never met the Buddha before, never heard the Dhamma. And step by step he saw he needed a step-by-step gradual discourse. So he spoke to him of generosity, of virtue, of the heavenly realms, of the perils and vanity and the nature of sensual pleasures, of the joy and benefits of renunciation. And when he saw that Anāthapiṇḍika was ready in heart and mind—the mind and heart was pliable, unobstructed, uplifted, and serene—then he explained to him the teaching that is unique to the enlightened ones, the Four Noble Truths.

So specifically, when I'm talking about generosity tonight, not only in how we do it, but noticing the effect it has in our hearts and mind—any wholesome state does—it brings... it makes the mind uplifted, serene, pliable. In that state, it's more able to recognize things as they really are.

I'll read another sutta towards the end of the talk, but there are times here in practice when practice is going fine, great. There are other times when whatever's coming up is so difficult and so overwhelming. Maybe you're really getting overwhelmed by fear, or physical pain, or self-judgment. And not just that it's there, but you're just lost in it, or fatigue. And you think, "I just can't do this anymore." Everyone thinks that. You more than think it—you really think it's really true. "I can't do this anymore."

And if the only option... and I know I'm always saying, I'm going to keep on saying: have total confidence in mindfulness. I'm not backing off of that. I have total confidence in awareness. That's always the first way to go. But sometimes you're like, "What mindfulness? What awareness? What confidence?" You say mindfulness doesn't care what's happening, but I care. And I can't look at this thing one more second.

That's when you can remember that there are other aspects of purifying our heart and mind. Generosity is one.

And it doesn't mean you have to run out and do something generous. You can—and I'll say more about this at the end—simply bring to mind acts of generosity from your own past. It can even be thoughts, or remembering the generosity of others. Like even this little story I was just sharing—contemplate it. Recognize gratitude. Tune into that quality of openness of heart and mind and notice what happens. It changes the channel. It can really bring some uplifting to your heart and mind.

That's not cheating. It's really not cheating. It's actually shifting out of feeding the unwholesome by just spinning in negativity, and opening into what is an authentic aspect of moving beyond greed, hatred, and confusion on the path.

I want to give you another example of how this onward leading happens naturally too. This was another powerful moment for us. One of the monks at the place we were staying likes to help people. He goes around and talks to everyone, and he would point things out—"Oh, this young guy, he's really smart. He could go to school, but he doesn't have any money." Or he'd say, "This person's house is really falling down, and they're really virtuous. Maybe you could help them." It's so sweet to see this.

So he told us about two monks he had met just over on the other side of town in this dusty little compound. He said they were two men who had become monks in their mid-thirties. They'd only been ordained a few years, and they didn't really know what

to do with themselves. They were just living in this compound as monks, not really studying, not really meditating, not really doing much of anything—just kind of hanging out there.

He suggested to them, "Why don't you do something useful with your life?" I think he said it in a nice way. He went to them and said, "You're just sitting around, and you're educated." One had been a businessman and the other had been a captain in the army, so they were both somewhat educated. He said, "There are all these poor kids who can't afford school, and you could help them with tuition."

The way it works in Burma, even if you go to a government school, even in the younger grades, you somehow don't learn enough to pass the tests. Most kids have to have after-school tuition, which they need to pay the teachers for. And that's also the only way the teachers can survive, since they don't get paid enough in the schools. It's this whole system. So there are lots of kids who maybe scrape by in school but can't afford tuition. These monks decided to help with that.

So Upanyaloka, the monk, told us about them, and we went over to visit and see. It was such a trip. It also cut through our views. Because you get into views of good monks and not-so-good monks, sincere monks and just-hanging-out-doing-nothing-much monks and nuns.

We went over, and these two men were living in just this poor little compound with a couple of shacks. They didn't look like good monks. They were just kind of there, and they chewed betel nut, which is not a good look for anybody once it has become your habit. You know how it looks—it dyes your mouth red and your teeth start to rot. But it's addictive. So when you see a monk who's chewing betel nut, right away you kind of judge. Which is superficial, right? You don't know.

But they had about a hundred little kids there in the afternoon that they were teaching. Then we had a conversation about what they needed. They needed a well. They didn't have any water. They were hauling it in with buckets for all these little kids and for their own daily needs. Very poor circumstances.

We talked more, and one of them had only been a monk for three years, the other for seven. The businessman was the younger one, more talkative. He had been working in the alcohol, cigarette, and beer trade. Then he did a meditation retreat with Pa Auk Sayadaw and wanted to ordain. His parents wouldn't let him, and he had to keep working until they finally relented. He ordained maybe in his mid-thirties.

So he was telling us, just talking away, and we were kind of, ah. And then we started really listening.

He said, you know, first he told us this parable. He said that a frog is sitting on a lotus flower, but he's so close he just doesn't even notice the lovely fragrance of the flower. But then bees come from far away, and they really enjoy the scent and the nectar of the flower.

So he's saying this to us. He says, "You're foreigners. You're like the bees that come from far away." He said, "I, a Burmese person, I live here in a country where the Sasana, where the Dhamma is flowering. But for the first thirty-three years of my life, I didn't even enjoy the fragrance. Whereas you foreigners come from far away and enjoy it."

He said, "But now I've discovered—I feel like I have a new life." He feels like he's reborn from helping people. He said, "Now, to be able to help these kids, I feel like I'm completely reborn, like I have a new life. So I feel like I wasted the first thirty-three years of my life, and now all I want to do the rest of my life is—if these kids grow up, we'll move somewhere else and then start another tuition and help those kids."

It was just so beautiful. And he was also—that was deepening him into his love of the Dhamma, into his wanting to practice more. It's just like a whole circle.

And it was really good for us because we were so touched. It's like, okay, we thought they weren't good monks. Delete that one. So what if they chewed betel nut? So what if they were sitting there not knowing what to do? As soon as they got the idea to help, they were like transformed beings. It was so beautiful. We went and watched them with the kids, and they were just so tender, so kind with these hundred kids running around. We talked to families in the neighborhood whose kids were going there, and you could just see it all spreading out.

But that's just an example of how generosity, when it's really done wholeheartedly in whatever way, is the natural unfolding into deepening and deepening our understanding, our freedom of heart and mind.

So the point the Buddha makes very strongly in the suttas with Anathapindika is that the heart of generosity is—guess what, just like everything we do—in the intention. The motivation in our own mind and heart. It's not about who gives more, who gives less, or even what. It's not about giving things. It could just be a thought of generosity.

There's a saying in the sutta: even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pond thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this," that would be an act of generosity. And you can see how it just shifts our mind and heart from throwing the slop away to thinking, "May this be of benefit to beings." That's an act of generosity. So it's this intention at the heart that really makes the difference.

And there's a story from the Buddha with Anathapindika that illustrates this that I really like a lot.

Anathapindika, as I said, became the Buddha's most wealthy supporter. He bought the Jeta Grove, where—if you read the suttas—more suttas than anywhere else take place in that grove. The Buddha spent a lot of rains retreats there.

So after he established that monastery, Anathapindika would keep supporting the Sangha. When they were in the area where he lived, he would invite the Buddha and all the monks and nuns to his house for the noon meal—up to five hundred. Andy Olinsky says five hundred when you're reading the suttas basically means "a lot." It doesn't specifically mean five hundred. So five hundred monks would come daily, and he would give them alms, give them food, and his home was filled with robes and the ambiance of saintliness—okay, that's not in the sutta, that's from a writer.

Then the king of the area, King Pasenadi, who was also a supporter of the Buddha, heard of Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him. Basically, he was jealous of him, right? Well, if he gets five hundred monks, I can do that too. I'm the king, after all. So he started supplying alms for five hundred monks daily.

But one day, when he was on his way to talk to the Buddha, he learned from his servants that after he offered the monks their meal, they were taking the food away with them into the city, giving the food to their supporters in the city, and then the supporters would offer the food back to them. The king was mystified. He said, "I'm giving them very tasty food. It's much better than Anathapindika's. What's that about?"

And the Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, he just had his servants, his courtiers, distributing the food without any inner feeling—just following orders, as if they were cleaning out a barn.

So they lacked faith. They had no love for the monks. It wasn't an act of generosity. When anything was given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal was made of the most delicious food.

In contrast, the faithful householders of the city, like Anathapindika and Visakha, a woman who was also known for her generosity, welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends, appreciating that they lived for the welfare and benefit of beings. A humble meal provided by a friend would be worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in the right spirit.

So the purification, the joy of the generosity, the onward leadingness to free our hearts from clinging, from holding, from possessiveness—it's really all in the motivation. It's not about who gives more, but simply about keeping tuning in, tuning into your motivation.

So I can quickly share this practice of purifying motivation—a little seven-fold practice. Don't make a big deal about this. Don't even try to remember it all, but just let whatever goes in, go in. I got this from a talk by Sayadaw U Pandita. It's just practicing in the act of giving.

The first is you really tune in to your volition, to your motivation. When the thought comes up in the mind—"I want to give this" or "I should give this" or whatever—don't think "should I, shouldn't I." Tune in to the motivation and really purify it before giving. I heard a Tibetan teacher say that if you actually can't imagine giving a thing or your time or whatever, just imagine it in thought. That's enough to start with. Just imagine being generous in your thoughts. Just imagine spending time with your sick friend. Or as another Tibetan teacher said, if you can't give something, just take a rock and give it from one hand to the other, and practice letting go like that. But just play with it. Purify the motivation.

And as you're doing that, obviously you abandon the clinging to the thing that you give, whatever it is—your time, an object, clothing, a meal. In that moment, really let go of clinging to it.

The third, which isn't as workable here but is common in Burma where giving to monks or nuns is very formal—it's done face-to-face, not casually. Not "oh, here's this, okay, thanks, see you later." I remember a friend told me once that I had something I didn't really want, and he kind of wanted it. So I said, "Yeah, sure, take it." It was like that. And he said years later, "You know, that thing you gave me—some kind of pillow—I use it all the time. Your casual generosity turned out to be so useful." He didn't mean that in a critical way, but it really went in because that's exactly what it was: completely casual. I didn't give it any attention. "Yeah, sure, take it." It's not like you're building yourself up by giving it attention, but it's honoring the motivation and the connectedness of generosity itself just to do it with yourself being present and the person being present.

So when we go to nunneries and we offer, even if it's just money, it's always done formally. You get a tray—any kind of tray, there's always a tray lying around somewhere—you pile the money on the tray, or if you were giving cups or food or whatever. Then some of the people offering hold the tray, someone representing the nuns receiving holds the tray, and they chant a whole really lovely metta chant. Different lengths—

sometimes it's short, sometimes it'll go on for ten minutes. And if it's a big nunnery, even the little girl nuns, like four years old, they know it. They stand there and completely do this chant. It's so beautiful. The chant's not always so melodic, okay? But it's so touching. You can go through whatever you go through, but it's a real honoring of that whole movement. It's so different from "oh, let me put this check to Amnesty in the mail." But even writing a check to put in the mail—do it really with your mind fully present on what you're doing. Abandon the clinging, clarify your motivation, and do it fully present.

Then after we're giving, again, purify the motivation. Have you ever had that experience? "Oh, why did I do that? That was too big of a check." Or "I gave that away, but I think I might wear that in two years. I want it back." Have you ever done that?

Should I give this? I haven't worn it for ten years, but I don't know. Okay, I'll give it. No, no, maybe no one took it yet—I'll go get it back. So that's not so great. Notice again.

And the other practice is really to be aware of clear comprehension of the broader context. Sometimes we don't fully know the situation, but the classic example is if someone is an alcoholic and they want to drink—is it generosity to give them a drink? Maybe not. So really tuning in, we don't know all the circumstances, but it's important to tune into the broader context as well as we can. It's not that sense of "I should be generous, and whatever anyone asks, I should give"—all these shoulds that we bring in. Notice how that shuts down the mind and the heart? That's not at all the open space of generosity, either giving or receiving. So as much as you can, be aware of the broader context. Clarify your motivation.

And then I've added what I mentioned before: to receive in as connected and open-hearted a way as possible. And if in the receiving a big sense of self comes up, just tune into that with kindness. But don't land on that. Don't let that get in the way of letting the circle of giving and receiving be complete.

As a practice here in quietness—and this comes from the Buddha—we can use thoughts and recollections of generosity, our own generosity and others', to brighten and purify our own mind and heart in difficult times, or just in sleepy times, or just because it's a lovely thing to do.

Here's an example. In past years, I was spending a lot of time with my aging parents when they were alive. And I really noticed, as many of you know, it's very demanding, lots of choices. And whatever one does never feels like enough, because you can't really make the situation the way you wish it were—like how it was twenty years ago. So I would notice how easy it was for the mind to focus on: I didn't stay long enough, I didn't

do this, I forgot to do that, I got impatient about this, it's not enough, I have to leave them alone. But that's not helpful. If you can actually turn around and focus on all the many moments of pure-hearted generosity involved in that, it changes everything. So that's with parents, with your children, with your friends. There's stuff we don't do that we could do—yes, sure, I'm not saying go into denial. But it's so easy for us not to really appreciate the generous acts and thoughts and deeds, the goodness, the non-harming behavior. And to actually bring that into heart and mind is not an ego trip. An ego trip would be "I'm so great." No, no, no. You'll notice the mind doesn't get brighter with that. It doesn't get more supple. It's not onward leading. It just feels the limitations of self coming in. But when you actually use it as a practice—and this is from the Buddha—it's extremely helpful.

This is from a sutta, and the Buddha is talking about six different recollections. One is sīla, one is generosity, one is the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. He talks about the devas and other things. It's all the same pattern, but I'll read the generosity one:

"There is the case where you recollect your own generosity like this: It is a gain, a great gain for me, that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms. At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed. Her mind is not overcome with aversion, is not overcome with delusion."

Did you hear that? At any time one is truly contemplating, recollecting generosity, your mind is not overcome with greed, with aversion, with delusion.

"Her mind, her heart heads straight based on generosity. And when the mind, the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm."

In one whose body is calm, experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

So, you should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children.

If we can recollect it when we're resting in our home crowded with children, perhaps we can recollect our generosity now, just for thirty seconds.

Recollect your generosity.

And thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 99

Mindfulness and Full Awareness: Sampajañña

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the often-overlooked quality of sampajañña—variously translated as clear comprehension, alertness, or full awareness—which the Buddha consistently paired with sati (mindfulness) in his teachings. Through a memorable personal story of falling down stairs while meticulously noting each moment, she illustrates how bare attention without broader awareness misses the complete picture of practice.*
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> *Wilson explores the classical commentarial framework of four aspects of clear comprehension: awareness of purpose (motivation), suitability (context), the domain of meditation, and non-delusion. She emphasizes how examining our intentions before, during, and after actions—as the Buddha taught his son Rāhula—becomes the mirror for purifying heart and mind. Drawing from the lives of Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Dalai Lama, she shows how moment-to-moment purity of motivation itself becomes the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations.*
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> *The talk addresses how practitioners can shift from wanting awareness to loving awareness, from effortful striving to natural surrender. Wilson explores the interconnected nature of our actions, noting that "in every moment of activity, we are committing to something—the question is, to what?" She concludes with the inspiring story of Tibetan nuns who maintained their practice through decades of persecution, demonstrating how our deepest aspirations manifest uniquely through each individual while affecting all beings.*

Meditators don't look very happy. But I know that's just perception, and I have no clue what's going on.

Tonight I want to talk about a word in Pali: *sampajañña*. Usually when you talk about mindfulness, *sati*, it comes together with *sampajañña*. *Sati* and *sampajañña* are often discussed together. I want to speak about this not as a corollary but as a support, a broader aspect of mindfulness, to help round out how we come to awakening—just looking at all different angles.

Last night Sally spoke so beautifully about the transcendent dependent arising and that very precise, subtle, and specific way that the heart and mind can open up to freedom. That's not just in retreat, of course, but that specificity, that subtlety is certainly more accessible when we're in the silence of intensive practice.

Sometimes, though, as I talked about with generosity, all different aspects of the path are each in themselves a way of awakening. Deep in retreat, we can start to confuse mindfulness with the very narrow, focused, precise, magnified kind of attention that comes with deep stillness, with concentration. And often when that's not available—if by now you ever have a moment when that's not available—it means you've failed. So what I'm saying is second best. I'm kidding. I'm kidding.

But when that quality isn't available, isn't that what you think? "Well, now I failed. I had it and now it's gone." So you do whatever, but you're kind of waiting until the goodies come back. It's easy at times, and also when we leave retreat, to think that mindfulness needs this really highlighted, specific, narrow-focused, laser-like quality. And it doesn't.

Sampajañña is often translated as "clear comprehension"—that's the classic rendering. But Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "alertness." *Sati* and *sampajañña* are used together often in the suttas. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it, and I like this even better, as "full awareness." Full awareness. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu describes it, coming together with mindfulness: be aware of what you're doing in the movements of the body and in the movements of the mind. Knowing what you're doing—not just this tiny little bare attention. Yes, that's mindfulness. But in the broader context, wise discernment, knowing what we're doing, that's clear comprehension.

I wasn't going to say this—it's an embarrassing story—but it gives a good example of the difference between laser mindfulness lacking clear comprehension and how clear comprehension, full awareness, is really necessary for understanding.

Years ago, many years ago, I was on an intensive retreat at IMS, one where I was really, really slowed down, noting every moment, very committed. I was walking extremely slowly, noting every little subtle step. At IMS, there's a coat room you walk through to get to the upper walking room, which you then walk through to get to the meditation hall. Those of you who've been there know how this is. So I was walking slowly through the coat room, and I had my zafu—that's how long ago it was, like a *suññatā* zafu. I put it down. I'm noting the whole thing: taking off my shoes, picking up the zafu. This is taking like five, ten minutes. Then I turn, noting incredibly carefully.

It so happens that right where the coat room meets the upper walking room, there are three steps. I lived there. This was not unfamiliar to me. I just walked right off that top step, noting every moment, and fell flat on my face. I forgot to notice the bigger context. There are steps. Hello.

This is a lack of *sampajañña*, a lack of full awareness. You can see how narrow attention doesn't really get the whole picture, right?

So I want to use this broad template to talk about whatever I feel like talking about tonight.

But classically in the commentaries, things are broken down quite precisely. There's a very nice grouping of four aspects of full awareness, of alertness, that we need to notice. I want to use these as a sort of outline.

The first, and I'll just name them all, is full awareness or clear comprehension of the purpose—the motivation of one's actions. The second is full awareness of the suitability, the appropriateness, the broader context. The third is full awareness of the range, the domain of meditation, which basically means not abandoning your meditation during your daily activities. And the fourth is full awareness of non-delusion in life, which is described by Bhikkhu Bodhi as simply being aware that there's no abiding self. But it's really about seeing how all aspects of life come to be shot through with non-delusion.

This is broad. Of course, they always give the highest potential. But I just want to say how if we give a little attention to each of these areas, it really deepens and broadens and stabilizes both our practice—in retreat and out of retreat—and our understanding.

So the first: full awareness, clear comprehension of the purpose, the motivation of one's actions. We've talked a lot about intention. This is basically intention, so I don't have to describe it at length because Guy did so clearly. Cetanā—that impulse that leads to speech, action, and even thought, that comes together with whatever mental qualities it comes together with in a moment—that's the seed of karma. You remember that? We've talked about noticing that "about to" intention in our practice.

But the seed of that—this is so key. Mindfulness gives us the bare attention, the simple recognition quality that gives us the tools to recognize a moment of intention. Full awareness, clear comprehension, brings in something more—really on two levels. Our willingness, our remembering to pay attention, to notice what the motivation is, why we're doing what we're doing, over and over—to really bring this into deep awareness is key to purifying our heart and mind, to freeing our heart and mind from suffering.

As Guy talked about, we can notice that the same action can come from many different qualities of intention. So we can't judge someone's intentions by the results or by their actions. And even for ourselves, we may think we have the best intentions, but that doesn't mean we can control the results of an action. Really, the results of actions

are pretty much out of our control. What we can notice is the intention. And so we start to bring our awareness into the subtlety of why we're doing what we're doing. To do that, it takes interest, non-judging, and awareness.

The example I always give—it's very basic and simple—is this: if there's someone you care about and they've been doing something unskillful, something that bugs you, that brings them suffering though they don't know it, and you really want to give them that feedback. You can already see the many different ways that could play out. And much of what determines the range of outcomes comes from our intention in the moment, doesn't it?

In your mind, you can say, "I really want to tell them because I love them and it's for their own good." That's a thought. But in the moment of saying it, it might be when they've just done it again and you're really bugged, and you say, "Yeah, I'm just telling you this for your own good. Let's have a talk. I want to give you some feedback because I love you so much." The words are right, but they're not really conveying the true intention, are they? The true intention leaks out. Nobody's fooled there. Maybe you're fooled. The person you're talking to—they're not fooled. Because we forget to check.

But another time, you could really stop, see that intention, and not say it then. You wait and get in touch with mettā, compassion for that person, and actually feel it. Then you sit down, and from the mettā, you say it. You can play with this. You can really see the difference.

Another time, you may feel it, feel the mettā, but you're completely oblivious to the circumstances of the person at that moment. As if it's all about your intention. This is where it moves out into suitability—the second aspect—which I'll talk about more later. But it's not just about my intentions. Mettā is completely overlooking the fact that the person just stumbled into the house after twelve hours of a really difficult day at the office, people were on their case, they're totally exhausted, and their dog just died. And you say, "Let me give you this feedback with all the mettā in my heart." And somehow they can't hear it.

I think, "Well, it's hopeless. They can't hear it." But you see, there's again that quality of missing the big picture, like me falling down the steps.

These are just simple examples, but you get a sense of how the quality in mind that comes with the intention is really what's key. As Guy said when he talked about kamma, that's what forms the seed of kamma, of wholesomeness, of unwholesomeness. And it's

powerful. Even when we're not aware of it, that doesn't make it less powerful. I don't want to say it's scary, but it's not something to be underestimated, the power of intention.

I heard this—I was kind of half listening to the news, the BBC, a couple of weeks ago, and I didn't get all the details, but I think I got the main gist. This was a little scary to me. They said in the U.K., the military was talking about the possibility of experimentation with drones—you know, those drones they have that they fly and bomb people from a distance, operated by computers or whatever. So, okay, that's bad enough. But they were thinking about somehow beginning to experiment with drones that would respond to the operator's thoughts.

Yes, exactly—whoa.

So you know, the person might think, "Well, I didn't actually push a button to make it bomb, but I just had the thought and the thing did it." It would really be easy to feel, "Well, the thought just popped in my mind. I didn't really even want to do it. Never mind." I'm really hoping I heard that wrong, because that's really scary.

It's something to look at. But that's not to make us scared. It's not to make us afraid to see unwholesome intentions arise. In fact—and this is again still part of the clear comprehension of motivation on the moment-to-moment level—this is where we want to look out of interest, out of what's really freeing. What brings us suffering? What brings us happiness? What brings people around us suffering? What brings people around us happiness? Hating ourselves and being afraid to see unwholesome intentions doesn't bring us or anybody else happiness. But the interest to look does.

There's a very well-known sutta where the Buddha is talking to his son, Rahula, who joined the order of monks as a novice when he was a young boy, about seven. In this sutta, the Buddha asks Rahula, "What is a mirror for? And why is this important?" And Rahula says, "Well, it's for reflection." The Buddha responds, "Yes, just so. And just like a mirror, what's really important is to reflect before actions of body, before actions of speech, before actions of mind."

He goes through each one individually, starting with action. Let me read just the way he phrases it to make it more precise:

"When you wish to do an action with the body, reflect upon it thus: Would this action lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome action with painful consequences, painful results? When you reflect, if you know that it is painful, then you definitely shouldn't do it. But when you reflect, if

you know this action would not lead to my own affliction or the affliction of others, it's a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results, then you may do such an action."

And then he goes on to say—because of course we don't always reflect before we do it—"If you're in the middle of an action and you recognize you're in the middle of an action, reflect upon it in the same way: Is this action that I'm doing leading to my own affliction or the affliction of others?"

Notice it's my own affliction and or the affliction of others, not only the affliction of others. Sometimes we forget that we're also included. And sometimes we don't even notice what we're doing in the middle of it.

So then the Buddha says, "After you've done an action, reflect on: Did it lead to my affliction, the affliction of others, the affliction of both, or not? And if it did lead to affliction, then you should reveal it, lay it open to your teacher or to wise companions in the holy life." In other words, don't try to hide it away, hoping nobody saw. Lay it out, and then try to refrain from such actions in the future.

The same applies with actions of speech, the same with actions of mind.

Now the mirror part is really important because he's not saying reflect on it, see that you're doing an action that might lead to your own affliction, and then hate yourself, beat yourself up, beat your breast and tear your hair and say, "What a bad person I am." He just says, notice it. Like a mirror reflects what's put in front of it.

This is the quality of mindfulness, of sati—recognizing just what's happening without judging, without aversion, without clinging. Clear seeing. How else are we going to see what leads to our own affliction or the affliction of others? What leads not to affliction, but to pleasant circumstances for ourselves and others? Only by this willingness, this interest to explore, without any judging. That's how we learn—before, during, or after.

So it comes to be really interesting, much more natural. We just keep on noticing what's the attitude in the mind. Does that sound familiar? This is exactly what this is. When we're doing something, before we're doing something, after—we just check what's the attitude in the mind. "Oh, I'm filled with aversion. Maybe this isn't the time to tell that person that incredibly important feedback." We start to notice that. We don't have to analyze it, but you can just start to tune in more and go, "Okay, there's aversion. Not the time to do it."

As we begin to notice cause and effect, we don't look so much to what's going to happen if I do it, whether I'm going to get the result I want. Because big picture, we never know. But we look to what's this speech, this thought, this action coming out of. Is it as clear as I can be? And then we start to see, as Ajahn Pasanno says, we start to nurture the appropriate causes for the results we're seeking.

So if the result we're seeking—and this is assuming we're embracing wholesomeness, that we're coming from a place of wanting to foster our own happiness and the happiness of others, our own wholesome heart and the wholesomeness of others. If the result we're seeking, back to that simple example of giving someone feedback because they're doing something that's bringing suffering to themselves and to me too, all of us suffering. If, without tuning into intention, the result we're seeking is just to make them stop doing that thing, you might just go blat them over the head—"Stop doing that or I'm not going to be your friend"—blackmail, whatever, because you don't care about the motivation. You just want that thing to stop. But you're not tuned into the fact that that's leading to more suffering for both of you.

If we want to nurture the results we're seeking with the appropriate cause, then what we're really seeking is the happiness of that person, the well-being of both of us, out of a sense of caring, out of a sense of mettā. So the appropriate cause for that is to speak out of a sense of mettā, out of a sense of connection, out of a sense of caring. And then that person will hear it or they won't. They'll act on it or they won't. That's not in our control.

This is kind of a big leap to make from a small action, a small motivation in our mind, but my mind does make this leap, so I'll put it out there. Knowing in little actions of speech, body, and even thought—when we have the choice—how our mind works, how we get lost in suffering and greed and wanting and negativity, how we can see that and not act on it. Knowing how the mind works is the cause that's going to nurture the effect of being able to live our lives in the world of not causing harm, of cultivating wisdom, of cultivating compassion.

I'm making a leap. I'm assuming that's something that's interesting to you, to live in that way. I am making that assumption, but not everyone has that as a result they seek. But just to say, "I want to live in a compassionate way" but not pay attention to how and why I'm doing what I'm saying and doing—it doesn't work. It's sort of like the motivation of what I'm doing and saying is the result. It is destiny, really.

So the leap I'm making is—and I've told this in other talks—a couple of years ago when I was in Germany, I go every summer, I went to visit the museum at Dachau, which had been one of the concentration camps. It was very well set up, with big bill-

boards describing all different aspects of that whole period, all different people from all different walks of life. People who worked there, people who came there, different populations that were incarcerated in Dachau—different ethnic groups and gay people and different religions and different cultures. Different people who worked there, different things that went on there, people in the community. It was very, very broad-ranging.

They would tell a story, but they would also usually then have one person, like a picture of one person. So if they were talking about Roma who had been incarcerated, they might have a photograph of one person who was Roma and their name and a little of their story. It made it personal. If they were talking about guards, they might have a photo of one guard and their story.

What that did for me was—it just shows there's so many people involved in so many ways. I couldn't walk out of there and think, "Well, just a few really rotten eggs, really evil people did this."

Vast amounts of people, vast amounts of people. And I couldn't walk out of there and think, well, if I'd been living in Germany, I wouldn't have had anything to do with it. I couldn't think that.

I really got the sense of how so many people were incarcerated, and among those who were incarcerated, some would act heroically, some would act cowardly, some would just mind their own business, some would help people, some would snitch on people—all different ways. Same with the guards. Some were awful, some tried to be kind. Same with people in the community. Some knew nothing, some just did what they did and pretended to know nothing. All these different ways.

And I thought, I don't know what I would do if my family was threatened, or if I thought my family was threatened, or if I thought my life was threatened. You really don't know. And I realized it was just normal people, and each little decision we make is a little decision we make. No one could really have imagined where that was going in 1933. I can't even imagine it now—how could no one see where that was going?

So everyone would make whatever little decision they would have to make in the schoolroom, or as teachers, or if someone was taken away. Do you say something about it? Do you pretend it didn't happen? Do you deny it? Do you talk to people? What do you do? If you feel your family is threatened, what do you do?

And I saw how each little decision that's made, we do the best we can. You never know what the results are going to be, and it could end up as something like Dachau. So it was actually one of many wake-up calls for me to recommit in a way, to deepen my faith in awakening, in the Buddha Dharma, in the power of love, of awareness, to really pay attention to what's going on in my mind.

I might say I would never do something like that. But I don't have a clue. If I don't know when my mind is reacting from fear, when I'm acting from fear, if I don't know how to be with aversion without acting from it, if I don't know how to be with a sense of wanting to blame people, wanting to put it all off on somebody else, if I don't know how to be with that without acting on it—then I can't say I'm going to do the good thing, I'm going to be the bodhisattva. I don't know.

We have to really know how our mind and hearts are working, and we only know that by loving attention, by the courage it takes. That's what you are doing here, moment after moment, day after day. Those hard times—I've said it before, we've all said it—that's not the waste of time. That's where we're really learning. Because stuff like that, that's not just Germany. Pick your country, pick anywhere in history in the last two hundred years. It just keeps going back. It seems to be that horrific things keep popping up in human society. And great, beautiful responses keep coming up in human hearts.

So all we can do is really have that commitment, that caring, that trust to keep looking in our own heart and mind. And not be afraid when we see aversion. Great! We see it. Not be afraid if we see hatred or fear or greed. I mean, have you ever, just with greed, seen yourself want to—for something stupid, like a piece of chocolate cake when there's only one left—knock everybody in front of you out of the way to get that piece of chocolate cake? It's horrific! I've seen my mind do it. Social shame is a good thing because it often keeps us from acting on it. I'm not saying it's wholesome, but it keeps us from acting.

So this sense of being willing to look, not just in the big things but in the little things—this is what the Buddha was talking to Rahula about. It's not just about looking good. This is about freeing our heart and mind.

I'll give you another simple little example. A friend of mine emailed me and said, "Oh, this is a good talk example." I said, "Oh yeah, you're right, it's a good talk example." Earlier this retreat we were down in the bookstore. We can go in the bookstore because we're not on retreat. I don't even want to know how many of you have been down in the bookstore. But anyway, we were down there, this friend and I. She helps there sometimes. I was looking for a particular statue that I remembered from last year, a small statue of a White Tara that I wanted to buy.

And as she picked up a different statue to get the one I wanted—it was Manjushri, I think, with a little sword—she just barely touched it, and the sword snapped off. And then I was putting one down, and I mean, I really just touched it like that, and the sword snapped off.

Now what?

And just for a nanosecond, just for a fraction of a nanosecond, it comes into mind: this must happen all the time, and I didn't do it on purpose. Let's just put it back and close the door. No one will know. I could see that in my mind too. We're both like, oh God, now we have to buy this.

And it was so great because just to see that—as soon as we saw it in our mind, right away there's the suffering. Not even the suffering that would come from acting on it, but the suffering of even just having the thought, you know?

So immediately, no, no—we took it out, closed the cabinet, went to Marianne's office, and started writing out a whole explanation. We took care of it. And then Marianne came in. She caught us like two little girls. "What are you guys doing?" And she said, "Oh yeah, that happens all the time. No problem. We just glue it back together and sell it half price." Oh, good. Okay, that ended well.

But just to see that little second in the mind—that is what's so great to see. Don't gloss over it. Be really happy to see it, because that's where the purification happens, that's where the choosing of wholesomeness comes in, and there's a happiness from that. We were just lucky it ended up good, that we didn't have to buy it. It doesn't always end up good. Maybe you have to buy it. That's okay.

So that's the moment-to-moment aspect of motivation, of clear comprehension, full awareness of purpose—why we're doing what we're doing.

There's also, especially as Nyanaponika Thera talks about in his commentarial work *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, motivation in a larger aspect, our broader aspiration in life. It's a little bit like on the very first day of the retreat when you went around and spoke your intention for the retreat. But I would say in an even larger way than that—a sense of your greater aspiration in life, your greater purpose. And it can be very useful to clarify for yourself what that is.

It's said that without that, we tend to just go through life—even if we check our moment-to-moment motivation and it's wholesome—but we can easily just drift from one situation to another. Well, this is okay, or maybe I'll do that, or this seems nice. And we don't really have a broader overarching focus.

The way Nyanaponika describes it, a sense of tuning into your broader purpose, your deepest aspiration, has the function in our life—not just in a moment—of collecting our dispersed energy. It's sort of like making priorities, you could put it that way. And then we can align our moment-to-moment decisions with our broader, deeper aspiration.

Now, this serves in all aspects of life. It doesn't necessarily have to do with Dhamma. It doesn't have to be wholesome. Just to give a pretty obvious example, take professional athletes—which is really far from any realm of personal experience that there could be. But I happen to really enjoy watching professional tennis. And as I've watched it over the years, and read about some of the tennis players, the amount that their whole life, from the time they're young, comes to be directed at playing professional tennis is remarkable. I was reading the biography of Andre Agassi, which is quite interesting—he's an interesting guy. Sometimes it's forced by the parent, but from very young, the decisions of how you live your life, of what you do, are based on what's going to support you to keep on playing professional tennis.

And a lot of these guys didn't even finish high school. Andre didn't finish high school, which led him now to really use all his time and money to raise money for the school that he started in Las Vegas for underprivileged kids, with the commitment that every kid that goes there goes to college. It's really a great thing he's doing.

So he didn't finish high school because he goes to a tennis academy. And just one example, even later in life—he's married, he has two kids, but he's still playing and he wants to play another couple of years, even though his body's getting old. And he says everything he does, he has to evaluate. Going to the beach with the kids: if I sit on the beach for an hour, how will that affect me? It'll affect my energy too much. I'll get too hot in the sun. I won't have the energy to play tomorrow, so I don't go to the beach with the kids. What do you eat? How do you sleep? Do you go out at night? What do you do? Everything is focused on being able to keep on playing tennis. It's a huge commitment, huge renunciation, but because of that focus and then aligning your decisions with it, you're able to do all kinds of things you never would have thought you could do when you're just kind of drifting along in response.

For example, sitting here for a month. When you first started, whenever you first started your practice, could you have imagined sitting here for a month? It was just impossible at that time. So for whatever reason, this has become enough of an aspiration that you have made many choices in your life to support your being able to be here, because it was important enough for you.

You see what I mean? Tuning into what really is your greatest aspiration, your deepest aspiration—I think to do that consciously is extremely important because it really can serve as a guideline, as a beacon, both here and in the choices we make in our daily life.

So I would advise—I was going to say do it now, but I think it takes more time. Take some time if you don't know or you're not sure. Just hold that question, let it settle. Not go write pages and pages about it. It's not so intellectual. It's like, what really bubbles up from the depths? Just set the question. It may not come for a while, or maybe you already know. And it could be something quite deep and profound, and then your judging mind may say, "Oh no, that's not possible for me," or "I'm not good enough for that," or whatever. Don't pay any attention to that, because it'll be a feeling. It won't just be, "Oh, I want to be a nice person." It's some really deep intuitive sense. It's important to let yourself really honor that, because then it can serve, and it does serve.

I know you all in some way have that, or you wouldn't still be here. It can manifest as faith. It can manifest as courage. It can manifest as confidence, or it can just manifest as how you choose what to do.

But I bet many of you, if not all of you, have had at least a couple of moments here where you very seriously thought, "I need to leave, like right now. There's no way that I can stay." And you do stay. I mean, you have so far. I've had that many times on retreat. Sometimes it's just a passing thought, just aversion. But sometimes it really has that hook—like, this is really not the right time, or I'm too hopeless, whatever story you make up.

So I'm assuming it's not that you stay because you don't have a car and it's too much trouble to rebook your flight. That's not deepest aspiration. We're not talking about that. I'm talking about when you really take a breath and you go, on some level, "Okay, this is really hard, but what's really important?" In whatever way you say that to yourself. And you take a breath and you feel the next footstep, or you feel the next moment of aversion, or you go out and be with hearing the birds for a while and your mindfulness gets a bit balanced, but you hang out with it. It's not like you have to put a veneer on it—"I'm so great, I'm living my deepest purpose"—but it informs your moment-to-moment choices.

And sometimes when we've lost sight of it, being able to call it up can help us—in little things and in big things.

So the purpose—and again, I'm making the assumption here that we're coming from really the love of peace, of freedom, of compassion, whatever way it is for you—in that case, the purpose or the result or the aspiration you have is fulfilled by the way we meet each moment. That's back to the mindfulness of the motivation, of how we're meeting each moment. And that's what's really so inspiring, because we affect one another in that way.

I'll give you a couple of examples of how the purpose really becomes the motivation—how the moment-to-moment purity of motivation is actually the acting out of the purpose.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who as you know spent at least twenty years in Burma as the symbol of hope and courage for the people—she said one time that she was really surprised that people think of her as an important person. And this is a quote: "I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they cannot believe it. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there is something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I will do it. The motivation is its own reward."

You never really know where we're going. She didn't go to Burma saying, "Now I will become the icon of democracy and hope for the Burmese people." Just moment after moment of purity of motivation.

Another example: Martin Luther King. Certainly he had an aspiration of integration and nonviolence, but in terms of the whole ethos, the whole way of living and practicing nonviolence, he said nonviolence doesn't just mean you don't hurt a person or kill a person. Nonviolence means you don't let yourself hate a person. It's really from motivation. And at some point after one of the worst bombings, where little girls were killed in that church in Birmingham, he said, "I refuse to become bitter. Hatred must never become our motivation."

Some of the most inspiring acts—and both of those people I find tremendously inspiring to read about, to see old speeches of Dr. King, to see speeches of Aung San Suu Kyi—yes, it's what they've done or what they've achieved, but really what the inspiration is, is that sincerity, that purity of motivation in action after action. It doesn't mean you don't make mistakes. It doesn't mean we don't blow it. And it doesn't mean that things turn out the way we want. But there's that depth of aspiration and then the moment-to-moment willingness to keep looking, to keep aligning. It's a lifetime of work, a lifetime of sati sampajañña—mindfulness and full awareness.

One last example: the Dalai Lama. There was an interview a few years ago where some young Tibetan activists were talking to him—basically the new generation speaking to the old generation. As you know, he stepped down as the head of the Tibetan state, the political wing. But up until recently, he had been both the spiritual head and the head of the Tibetans in exile. And he's always preached nonviolence towards China, nonviolence in all ways.

These young Tibetan activists were saying, "Look, old man, it isn't working. China is just destroying the Tibetan culture in what has been Tibet. It isn't working. There has to be another way. Your nonviolence isn't cutting it."

In this interview, he was—I was reading it, I didn't see it—but they said he was really weeping, saying, "Maybe I've been wrong, maybe it isn't working, but I cannot be otherwise. I cannot abandon the sincerity of motivation."

To me, that is so powerful. And who knows what's right or wrong? Who knows how anything's going to turn out? We don't. We can't.

But you get a sense of how, when we abandon the willingness to align ourselves with non-harming, with wisdom, with mettā, with compassion in the moment—when we say, "Okay, but it's not working, let me jump to the result"—we've lost it all.

The freedom of heart and mind is here now. It's not in some future result.

So when the question comes—how do we continue to stay awake, to wake up in the midst of our own actions, in the midst of a confusing world, just in the midst of our busyness—how do we find the motivation to continue to explore like this? To say, like the Dalai Lama, something isn't working and you have to keep looking at your motivation. How do we find the trust not to abandon?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who's been my teacher the last few years, talks a lot about just cultivating this appreciation of mindfulness, of awareness. It doesn't have to be focused, but the appreciation of it here, in daily life. How do we continue to wake up? It comes to our motivation. He says when we appreciate awareness enough, we notice what our mind is like when it's aware, what our heart is like when we're aware, and we notice what it's like when it's not. When we start to appreciate, when it's important enough to us that we appreciate awareness enough, that's when it's going to become our priority.

The way I phrase it—this is my language, not his, he would never use this language—is this: I used to practice because I wanted to know the truth. I wanted it. It was a deep yearning, but it was a want and a sense of me needing the truth. It could bring great ur-

gency, could bring a lot of energy, but it also brought frustration, it brought separation, it brought incomplete feeling. But the shift is when we start to love the truth, or love awareness.

When I go home thinking "I need to be aware, because I should be aware, and I wasn't aware in that last hour, and I should have been, and I lost it"—you know all of that. Even when we have a deep yearning for truth, like "I'll be aware because I want to have that better experience, I need to be aware"—tune back, don't judge it, the mirror not the judge, but tune back to what's the quality in the mind and heart. That subtle or not so subtle yearning, wanting, fuels a subtle discontent and then the judging of yourself when it's not happening.

But when we just love awareness, that opens into surrender. Surrender into what's happening in this moment. And awareness is right there. It's not about trying to make something else happen, but that faith, that trust that Aaron spoke about a couple of weeks ago. For me, when I really think of loving awareness—yeah, I see my mind that wants to say, "Oh, let me just hide that statue." And then there's awareness of it, and the love of that. It trumps everything. Because awareness can be with anything.

So the motivation and the willingness to notice the motivation comes to underlie everything. It strengthens and deepens our practice, it supports our aspiration, and keeps us going.

I read years ago in a dharma book—I forget who wrote it now, but it stayed with me. The person said, in every moment of activity, we are committing to something. The question is, to what? And again, that's not with judgment, but that mirror. Every time we're doing something, that's a commitment, that motivation. So get interested. In what?

When we first begin practice, we first begin our spiritual path, we have really beautiful—maybe you do, maybe you don't, hopefully you did—beautiful ideas about how we want to be, and we're really inspired and lit up. We also, of course, have goals and idealizations. But then our moment-to-moment way of being can seem really far from that, can't it? Just in our little things.

For years, I was always kind of berating myself. You shouldn't watch TV. You shouldn't do this. It's not dharmic. Get back over here. With this kind of negativity. But if I just look without judging—in every moment of activity you're committing to something, to what—so just look and see. It gets really interesting. In this moment, I'm committing to dulling out and watching this really stupid TV show because I'm just too tired. Okay. No judging around it. Just look and see.

That was a lot easier than all the years of judging. And the more I do that—oh, look, I'm really committing to this—after two minutes, my mind goes, "I really don't want to do this anymore." And I get up and leave.

I hardly make it through things anymore when I'm on my own, especially. And it's not at all about judgment. I'm just noticing: What am I committing to? The mind starts to get dull, and I notice it's not interesting. I get up and leave. It's no effort. It's not even renunciation. It's actually moving towards the pleasant, moving towards wholesomeness. It becomes much, much easier, not more difficult.

Now, very quickly, because this is important: the second quality is suitability, which is really looking at the larger situation. This is crucial because what it's really pointing to is the fact that we're not separate beings. We can't act in isolation. Or another way of saying it is: nothing ever happens twice. Every situation is different.

The other morning there were questions about energy—how do we affect each other with energy? The notion that this is me and that's you and we're two separate beings with our separate energy—that's just a concept. The fact is that everything that's come together to be as it is, *yathā bhūta*, things as they have come to be in this moment, in this room, the effect of all the past conditions is just as it is. And anything any of us does affects everything.

Right now I'm talking. If one of you got up and started screaming, it would have an effect, wouldn't it? It would pretty much affect everyone in this room. Different effects, because there would be different qualities going on in the different particular individual mind streams. But we all affect each other.

So when we talk about skillful means in practice, when people come in and ask, "What's skillful means? What's right effort? I want to know. Just give me the list of right effort," we always say, "I can't tell you because it depends." Some days it's like this, some days it's like that. Should I take a walk? When should I do mettā? When should I move away from the unpleasant and practice mettā? You want a list. We get this question all the time. But the answer is always: it depends on what's going on in the mind. It's always different. Nothing ever happens twice.

So some days the mind is really tight and contracted, and you're trying to be aware, but you're just getting more and more frustrated. The more you try to be aware, the more you get lost. You can see there's no mindfulness. You take a walk outside with seeing and hearing, and the mind balances. There's more presence. It's useful.

So the next day you think, "I might get frustrated, so I better take a walk outside." And you take a walk outside thinking, "Oh, look at the deer. Oh, when am I going to feel this calm again?" You come back all jacked up, filled with restlessness, and wonder, "Why didn't that work?" As if it was the same situation. They're two completely different situations.

This is a sense of suitability—looking at what's going on in this mind and body, what's going on in the broader situation. If you're in a relationship or interaction with someone else, you try as best you can to understand what's going on for them, but you'll never really know. Heck, we hardly know what's going on with us, do we? Never mind with the other person. But seeing, really, that we affect and are affected by each other and all the conditions.

Weather, for example. Have you noticed? It's been pretty nice weather, but when it's really rainy, pouring weather, it often affects our minds. And then we think, "Well, it shouldn't."

Why shouldn't it affect us? As if we're separate from the weather? In some essential way, we *are* the weather. So really starting to see this interconnection—that's clear comprehension of suitability, of interrelatedness.

The point I want to make about this in terms of our practice concerns this whole sense of spiritual friendship, of *kalyānamitta*—realizing that just as unwholesome qualities can be contagious, so can wholesome ones. Propaganda, for example. When it's really well done, broadcast on radio or television, putting out negative or positive messages about someone... You're all being spared for at least a month from the presidential campaign—nothing but propaganda. But the ad campaigns are rather brilliant in how they try to twist things to get people's minds to think what they want them to think. We're all very influenced by each other.

But just as much as the unwholesome influences affect us, so do the wholesome ones. When I talked about generosity the other night, the point I was trying to make was how goodness and happiness are contagious—it goes both ways. In all aspects of life it's like that. Why does hearing about Aung San Suu Kyi or Dr. King or the Dalai Lama inspire us? I think this came up in the questions the other morning. It inspires us because it opens up those same wholesome qualities in our own mind and heart, in our own mind stream.

This is why the Buddha made a big point about who you spend time with. If you have a choice, choose to be around wise people, wholesome people, because we affect each other. But also recognize that often you're going to be the person who serves as the

spiritual friend, the *kalyānamitta*. You're the one who, simply by your willingness to be present with yourself with integrity, by your willingness to see when you do something unkind or foolish or greedy—"Oh, wow, look at that. That's greed"—brings wholesomeness into being. That brightness of your sincere intention, your generosity, your morality, your love of awareness, your wanting to cultivate compassion even when you're not one hundred percent—that affects people.

It's not about going out and proclaiming, "Now I am the Kuan Yin of the ages, let me show you." It's simply about who we are, moment to moment, in really small ways. And that looks different for each of us.

I'll end with one story. Perhaps some of you have seen a movie that was made, I think it was called *Blessings*, about some Western women who traveled with Sogyal Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama, back to Tibet to visit nuns in an area called Nangchen. It was about these nuns of Nangchen.

These Tibetan nuns had lived there for many years. Then, perhaps twenty years earlier, after the Cultural Revolution in China, when many nunneries and monasteries were destroyed and nuns and monks were either killed or forced to leave, these nuns—quite a few of them who had been living in caves or in this large nunnery way up in the hills of Tibet—were disbanded and had to disperse.

What they shared was their sincerity, their greater aspiration. Most of them didn't want to stop being nuns. They were deeply committed to the life of a nun and to their spiritual awakening. They couldn't live there anymore, but they didn't all respond in the same way, even though they shared this deep aspiration.

Some of them simply stopped being nuns. Some went back to live with their families but thought of themselves as secret nuns—wearing regular clothes and acting normal, but in their hearts being secret nuns living outwardly ordinary lives. A few of them went far off and hid in caves way up high, living for those twenty years lives of great privation, starvation, and difficulty.

They all responded in different ways. When Sogyal Rinpoche and these women returned a few years ago, the nuns had been allowed to start coming out again. The women who were still alive and hadn't given up their aspiration were coming back together, rebuilding the nunnery stone by stone, dragging the stones with their bare hands up incredible hills, building the nunnery again.

They had each found different ways that were suitable for their particular temperaments, their particular ways of being. There wasn't one right way. But each honored her deep aspiration, and when they had the chance to come back together in that form, they did.

I want to leave you with this sense: our aspiration—we don't know how it's going to show up. The suitability for our own particular circumstance cannot be compared to anyone else's. We really have to honor it with our own wisdom and our own integrity, and trust that. Trust your own love of freedom, of compassion, of awareness—whatever word works for you. And moment by moment, hold to that.

And you don't know what kind of effect you're going to have on others. You may be doing something where you interact with a lot of people, or you may live in a way that is really reclusive.

The movie ended with them climbing way, way up to visit the oldest nun among them. She looked about 120—I don't know how old she really was; maybe she was 40 and had just had a really hard life—but she was truly old. Way up high they climbed, and they said she was the most awakened, the most enlightened of all of them.

She couldn't really walk anymore. She just lay in her little bed in this tiny hut way up there, all day and night. And she said she spent her days and nights spinning her prayer wheel. "All I do," she told them, "is send out my love and prayers for the happiness and well-being and awakening of all beings." That's simply how she spent her days and nights.

It's amazing, isn't it? A mind like that. In some way it touches us when we hear about it—but who knows how it touches us when we don't hear about it?

So there are seven billion different ways to show up, to follow the deepest aspiration, and seven billion different ways it will manifest. But what remains constant is the deep devotion, the deep trust, the moment-to-moment willingness to meet this moment with full awareness. Knowing what we're doing in our mind. Knowing what we're doing in our body. And knowing that we all affect one another—meeting that truth with love, not with fear.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 100

Working with Wise Thought and Intention

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the profound relationship between right view (sammā diṭṭhi) and right intention (sammā saṅkappa) within the Noble Eightfold Path. She emphasizes that liberation isn't about escaping the world or forcing change through personal effort, but rather about recognizing experience accurately through the steadiness of mindful awareness. When we perceive clearly—seeing the impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and not-self (anattā) nature of experience—wise intention naturally emerges without struggle.*
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> *Wilson explores how the three unwholesome roots of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) distort our perception, creating elaborate stories and suffering. She offers accessible retreat examples showing how misperception leads to mental construction and emotional turmoil, while clear awareness dissolves these fabrications. Drawing from teachers including Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Ajahn Chah, she explains how mindfulness itself—non-reactive, non-judgmental, accepting—is free from these distortions and naturally reveals things as they are.*
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> *The talk culminates in describing how the three wise intentions (nekkhamma/renunciation, mettā/loving-kindness, and karuṇā/compassion) are not qualities we must manufacture, but natural expressions of wisdom when the mind recognizes accurately. Through touching stories of Burmese monks discovering the joy of generosity and Tibetan nuns maintaining pure intention through decades of hardship, Wilson demonstrates that wholesome action flows naturally from clear seeing, manifesting uniquely through each person's life circumstances.*

I thought I'd talk a little bit about both aspects of thought and how thought manifests as intention. These are huge topics, so I can only really touch on a small part of them.

To talk about wise thought or right intention, I have to go back to the so-called first step of the Eightfold Path. It's actually a circle, though that's still the way the Buddha talked about it—as a place where you kind of enter into it. Jack spoke the first night about wise understanding, wise view, and I want to start from there.

But the first thing I want to say is how much I love the format of the Buddhist teachings as a way of supporting us to understand how our mind works and to come into harmony with reality. Even though it may seem really complicated when you look at all the books and the lists and everything, in some way I find it incredibly elegant and simple. Not easy, but simple.

To my understanding, the liberation of heart-mind that the Buddha is talking about—that we're cultivating this practice to recognize—isn't a liberation from the world. It's not a liberation to get away from life and ourselves. It's a liberation, a freedom, from our misunderstanding of the world, of ourselves, of what's really true.

This misunderstanding stems very basically from misperceiving, from not recognizing what's happening in a moment, from recognizing our experience inaccurately. And then, from the way we recognize experience, we think about it and we construct the world and we act and react and have emotions. Can you relate to that?

One of the translations of the first entry into the Eightfold Path—the Eightfold Mandala, if you want to call it that—I actually really love in this context is "right view," because I find it quite literal. The Buddha is saying that when we recognize accurately, when our view, our perception, our recognition of experience is accurate, when it's aligned with how things are, without any effort the natural result of that is wise thought, wise intention, leading into how we act in the world.

The support for that, the key to recognizing accurately, is of course mindfulness, supported by concentration, supported by energy, supported by effort.

The elegance I love is that the freedom, the liberation of our heart and mind, isn't about getting rid of, changing, digging up, hating, clinging, or figuring it all out. It's not about striving and gaining wisdom and digging out all the defilements. It's about the commitment of mindful awareness moment after moment after moment, and then learning to trust that through that steadiness of clear awareness, the way things are reveals itself.

Because of course—it's already how it is. It's not like we're permanent and if we practice hard enough we become impermanent, and then we're free. We're scared. We don't want to be impermanent. But already, that's how it is. So our not recognizing is what keeps leading us into confusion.

Buddhism isn't about learning and adapting a new set of beliefs. God knows there's plenty of information and plenty of beliefs, plenty to take on. But the question is: does this help me? Does this lead to freedom in the moment of heart and mind? Does this lead to more happiness and peace, or does this lead to more confusion and suffering?

The ultimate knowing is right here in our own hearts and minds. We're not trying to make our experience match some description. We take the descriptions as a tool, as advice, as a reference, and then try it for ourselves. I just love this because it's really so simple.

We're putting in huge effort, it's true, but there's actually much less that we need to do. Because if you think you have to personally, with your little brain, figure it all out, absolutely understand it all, get it all logical, and then put it into practice moment by moment and actualize impermanence, actualize non-self, actualize unreliability—you don't even know what the heck it means, but you've got to actualize it moment to moment—dig up greed, get rid of hatred, cut through delusion, and get going, and every time those things come up it's because you've personally failed... my god, it's exhausting. And it's also impossible.

But what's it like to start to have the trust that if we can just commit our intention to cultivating a steadiness of this loving awareness, of mindful awareness, that things as they have come to be in this moment reveal themselves naturally? We don't have a clue how they are. So quit looking. Settle in with open heart and mind, and the truth reveals itself. Just moment after moment after moment.

It's actually so much more trustworthy.

So in terms of how right view works, accurate perception leads to wise thought or wise intention, and into wise action, and into wise mindfulness. Let me just talk a little bit about thought in general.

I know we talked some in the instructions this morning in the guided meditation. It's one of those where really opening into that space of awareness where things just come and go—thoughts, sensations, moods, sounds, whatever's coming and going. The thought arises like a little star, and then it's gone. No thought matters.

And sometimes people ask, well, if no thought matters at all, how do we do anything? What thought does matter? And if no thought matters at all, how do we get into such a mess? So both: How do we get into such a mess? But also, how do we use thought? Because we do have to make decisions. We do act, as Larry talked about so beautifully last night.

So to start describing a little how thoughts work, first I want to read this great description of thought from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

"This mind is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning, triggered off by circumstances, and unless seen clearly, they quickly take root and proliferate, reinforcing the habitual predominance of hatred, of ill will, or attachment in the mind. However, however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness."

Have you noticed that? Did you notice that this morning?

"Once you recognize the intrinsic nature of the mind, that empty, wakeful, aware nature, these thoughts that seem to disappear and appear all the time can no longer fool you. As clouds form, last a while, and then dissolve back in the empty sky, so deluded thoughts arise, remain a while, and then vanish in the voidness, the emptiness of mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

Can you get a sense of that? Or if it makes you crazy, get a sense of that? In reality, nothing at all has happened. So that's from the level of this kind of ultimate level, where it just... So then what happens? That we get so carried away.

And I love how this works. The Buddha taught that it all starts with this element of perception, of recognition. So anything that happens, there's a sound. We hear it. We're aware of sound. Fine. And perception's a natural mental function that almost immediately will know: it's a bird, or that's a motorcycle, or I don't know what it is—and you know you don't know what it is. Just that recognition. It's so simple.

That happens with pretty much everything. It's useful. It's functional. It helps us kind of know where to come and sit when you come in here. It helps you actually find your way in here. It helps you know what we're doing. It helps us communicate. It's very useful.

And often, it's not accurate, the perception. Have you noticed that? What we perceive, the Buddha goes on to say, we think about. What we think about, the tendency is to complicate with views and assumptions and connections and memories. Then we start to have the feelings and the emotions that go with that complication. And then that leads into a solidification of view, of describing our world. The thoughts describe our world, both for useful and not. And then from that, it coheres into a thought that leads to an intention, a movement, an about-to, that leads to action.

So it's useful that the thoughts can describe and define our world. As I said, you hear the bell, you know "bell." You have a sense of the time of day. You're a person here on a retreat in Yucca Valley, and it's 7:20, and it's time to come into the meditation hall and listen to a talk.

That's a huge amount of thoughts describing a whole experience, isn't it? Useful. Nothing wrong with that when we know that's what's happening.

But often—and I'm going to use mostly simple retreat examples here because I deliberately want to give a sense of how what we're doing here, just paying attention to our thoughts and our movements and our sense perceptions over and over and over, really is extremely profound, very powerful in opening our minds and hearts to recognizing reality in a more accurate way.

Very often the perception may not be accurate, but we don't know that. A simple example: I remember another retreat, although similar things have happened here, a three-month retreat where the interview schedules go up, same as here. There was a person I knew who really had this thing about being overlooked for interviews, not getting interviews when she was supposed to—a whole story about being a person who was ignored.

So twice in a row, she would go on her day, look at the interview sheet, looking for her name and not see it, and get really upset. How could they overlook me? Again, even after last time I talked to her about it—really upset. Can you relate? And then, how could they do it? The thoughts and the pain and the sadness and the blame and all of this stuff. Writing notes to us: How could you do it?

And then we have a conversation. We said, "No, your name's up there."

"Don't tell me. I looked. I looked."

And if it's too late, if the paper's gone, you'll never convince the person. But sometimes you know the paper's there. You say, "Come on, let's just have a look."

"Oh my god. How could that be?"

And as soon as she sees her name, all of that story, all of that construction is gone, right? Because it was based on an inaccurate perception. Of course, a new one comes in: "I am so stupid. I am so embarrassed." A whole new story comes in.

Well, this is one of the ways thought is working a lot during the day. Have you noticed that at all? And what the Buddha goes on to say is that when it's inaccurate and we don't recognize it, that's when we get into so much trouble and confusion.

Now, the stories, the descriptions of our reality are, of course, based on our own personal experience. We all have our personal histories. And as Larry was talking about last night, we all have our different cultural histories. A group of people—a great example being your board of directors coming together—there's nothing right or wrong,

but people each have a very different set of history that's going to affect their perceptions and the description they make of the world, what they think is the useful thing to do, and how that's going to affect their decisions.

Well, there's seven billion of us doing this. What's more amazing is how often we kind of get on the same page enough.

Knowing that this is what is happening is fine. There's nothing wrong with that. Knowing this—and the Buddha talks about not being attached to views—so we might think, "Well, this is really how I think it should be based on all my experience, and I'm sure of it." But knowing that my perception is colored by my past experience, my views, the things that I like, and knowing someone else's is different—coming to agreement is another thing, but at least having that awareness.

But what the Buddha is talking about on a very subtle, pervasive level—not all the time, but pervasive—is a set of misperceptions that we really don't see through. We don't recognize they're there. And so our unconscious description of ourselves in the world really isn't accurate. This is where we can fall into suffering and confusion.

I like Ajahn Chah, who's so earthy. He picks up a vase—pretend this is a vase—and he says, "You know, you look at this vase and you think it's really beautiful or it's really ugly or it's boring or whatever. It's just a vase. It doesn't care. It's you who are making yourselves crazy about everything."

There's a Zen story.

I have to share another Zen story. I don't know if it's true, but it's a typical kind of Zen master story from Japan. Some wild, aggressive samurai warrior came to this Zen master, just wild and abusive, carrying on and basically ending up saying, "You are a pig! You're a pig!" — which is a huge insult — and threatening him. The Zen master just stood there, the way they do, or supposedly do, very calm, and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

Well, that stopped the samurai for a minute. "I'm a Buddha? How can that be?"

And the Zen master said, "A pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

Yes.

So the basic misperceptions — and Wes mentioned this the other night, and I'm sure if you've done any practice or any reading of Buddhism at all you're familiar with them, but I feel I must mention them — begin with the impermanent, changing nature of all experience. Not that things are kind of the same for a while and then later they'll go away. Constant flux. Constant flux is the way things are.

One of the labels for a powerful, deep level of insight is the recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment — as they have come to be just now. All the causes and conditions that come together in this moment for each one of us to be sitting here, with these particular sensations and particular thoughts, the way that you feel, the moods, the clothes that you're wearing. What causes and conditions come together for that? Start trying to enumerate them and you can never stop. It includes everything in the world that came together in this moment.

And now this moment's already different, isn't it? Your sensations are subtly different. The words you're hearing are subtly different. Whatever moods are arising, whatever's happening, it's again a little bit different. Things as they have come to be in this moment are like this — and now like this.

But our habit, the misperception of not perceiving just this changing nature, leads to assuming permanence. I was going to say "all the time." See, that's how we talk! "All the time we're assuming permanence." Nothing's all the time. Nothing.

Remember the other morning when someone was talking about accepting and saying, "Well, I don't know how it feels. I accept it, but then later it's grumpy." Because we tend to think, "I've done it. It's over. Finished. Now I understand." Right? Have you had a seeing-through, an insight where it felt like something let go? And then even if we know, even if we know, somewhere back there the mind's going, "Finally. I'm done with that one." And when it comes back: "Oh, I wasn't clinging. It's okay. I know it came back. Yeah, that's fine." Now, after ten years, you say, "This is coming again? I've worked on this in therapy. I've worked on this in Rolfing. I've been through this on so many retreats."

I really love what Wes was saying about our personality. Ajahn Sumedho says it's not our personality that gets enlightened. We're going to keep on seeing this stuff. But it's coming and going, coming and going. Still, we assume permanence.

When you're having a really lovely sitting, and then that little niggling pain in the back starts — the one that was there the first two days, the one you thought was going to make you run out of here screaming, but it went away for a while — and now here it is again. Does your mind just go, "In this moment, the arising of burning"? Maybe, great,

for a moment. But doesn't it start to jump ahead? "Oh my God, how much longer in this sitting? There's no way I can be with this pain for the rest of these days." The mind just does that. So noticing it.

The same with the unreliability, the sense that...

Pleasure is so fleeting that if we're putting our sense of happiness, of peace into pleasure—pleasant sensation, pleasant experience, getting—we've talked about this. And again, we know it comes and goes, do we? We know that peace isn't about only getting pleasure, do we? On some level, yes, but it keeps getting more and more subtle. That's my experience—more subtle, the ways I find it.

"Oh no, I'm really equanimous. Comes and goes—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That's cool. I know. It comes and goes." Right? "I'm just in equanimity..." until something really doesn't work. Okay, I guess the equanimity is gone—which is fine to see.

But that unreliability, that unsatisfactoriness, arises if we try to get something out of changing experience that it simply can't offer, because it's always changing.

And the third reason we can't get satisfaction out of changing experience is because we're not here anyway. There's no "me"—anatta. There's not some solid, unchanging, internal entity called "me." Intellectually, don't even try to think about that right now, because thinking about it can make you crazy. I don't mean really crazy, but a little crazy. Has that ever happened? You start to think, "How can there not be a me?"

Now, the more you think about that, what experience gets stronger? Doubt. Yes, doubt—that's a good one. That gets stronger. For me, what gets stronger is the sense of me. "How can there not be a me? I feel me really clearly. No, there's not me. There's an 'I really want to understand why there's no sense of me.'" And this just gets... anyway, explore it.

I'm going kind of fast here, giving a huge overview, but the habits—the tendencies that we have been exploring here, that we can really see more easily moment to moment—these habits arise in our mind at times, not always. And when they're not seen, they have the function of basically distorting perception.

Again, it's Dingo Khentse: "When sense organs encounter an object"—sort of like this glass or the vase or a sound or a body sensation—"the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in the consciousness." So there's this that initiates seeing, and there's consciousness. "From then on, as your mind reacts to the object influenced by the accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely

subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world can seem to be a hell realm." Have you noticed that? "When your mind is peaceful, free from clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure."

And so that's just really an interesting thing to explore simply with awareness, because awareness can see this. And if you don't take it personally, but rather approach it like, "Wow, this is an investigation into how perception and how the mind works"—what's clear recognition and what's not? What's suffering and what's not? Not out of some personal failing, but out of interest—it's just fascinating.

So of course, the main things we can notice are when there's clinging or greed in the mind, when there's ill will, hatred, some form of aversion or fear in the mind, when there's "me, me, me" at the center of it in the mind. Just to give very simple examples. Because these are arising—they're habits. They're arising for all of us much of the time. It's nothing we need to hate or be afraid of or identified with, but really see how it works. As one of my teachers says, we can just see, "That's just greed doing its job. Mindfulness doing its job. Anger doing its job."

So what's greed's job? When greed is there, wanting in the mind, it's just that sense of "this is going to make me happy," leaning towards the pleasant. We've talked about that. But the function, its job, is to kind of blind us, to bring us into a kind of tunnel vision.

My brother used to have this hound dog, a really lovely, very sweet, friendly dog. But it was bred for hunting, so its nose was so sensitive. And it was just enthralled to that nose. It had no freedom from being caught up in scents. I really felt for the dog. So when it would come in the house, if I was visiting, I had to hide anything in my suitcase and zip it—anything that had any kind of human scent on it, or any kind of garbage. Every time they went out, every wastebasket, every garbage, every food had to be locked away because that dog would come in the house and its nose would just pull it to every new scent, to every kind of food, to every kind of human thing. Dirty underwear? It's in the suitcase ripping it out. Serious. You leave it alone, it's in the wastebasket, ripping up every piece of Kleenex and toilet paper. It was like it had no choice. It had no training—forget about it. It had no choice.

I really feel like that's craving. That's craving. And the promise of it is that it's really going to make us happy. And the delusion is we don't see it. We don't see that.

I have a very good friend, a very wise friend, who is a self-admitted craving type, meaning that's where the mind tends to go when left alone. And this person loves cookies. Just a couple of cookies after lunch. Got to have those couple of cookies, but that's

all. So one day we were sitting having a discussion about this, basically about samsara—which is like wanting and getting, or not getting, and either way you're not happy anymore, and wanting again and getting or not getting, and either way you're not happy again, and on and on and on. That's one description of the hound dog. That's one description of our lives. That's one description of all the rounds of rebirth, if you want to go that far. It's not really uplifting.

But we don't tend to see the big picture. We just stay in "this cookie's going to make me happy." So I say to my friend, "Yeah, but this is samsara. This is greed." He goes, "What if you don't get the cookie?" He goes, "No, I get the cookie. I eat it. It's over. There's no craving. It's fine." I said, "Well, what if you don't get the cookie?" He says, "I'll always get a cookie." I don't even know what he was saying. On one level, he meant it. And that's it, isn't it? "Can I get this one? I'll get the next one. Let's not look too closely at this thing."

So that's actually greed or wanting's job. It seduces us with its promise. And it keeps us from seeing accurately. I'll get into that again in a minute.

Aversion, dosa, resistance, fear—just the opposite, isn't it? The attention tunes into something that's unpleasant or we don't like, and then it can almost get fixated on that.

We think about what we think about. We form views and opinions, and this leads into moods. And we're really lost in that whole world of ill will, whether it's towards ourselves or towards another. Have you noticed that?

It happens a lot on retreat, just as wanting does—which, thank God, we're in silence. But with roommates, with other people in the room, we know all of this. What's great about having several days in a retreat, where you can't really get out of the situation, is that sometimes it becomes a wonderful way to learn. And I'm not just saying this pie in the sky—someone really said this to me today. I'm not making it up.

Days and days of aversion and self-blame, or thinking the roommates hate you because you're bothering them, or you're hating them because they're bothering you. They're doing it on purpose, or I'm doing it on purpose—you know, all of that. And when you feel like that, when you're really believing the story, don't we? The story's either that they're really bad, horrible people, or the story is that I'm a bad, horrible person, or the story is that it's Spirit Rock's fault for putting us together. There's some story, and we believe it.

And then ill will subtly keeps the attention focused on that unpleasant experience, which then feeds the negativity. We get lost in that. And just like Dingo Kenzie says, the whole world becomes a hell realm.

I notice times when I'm kind of grumpy, walking up somewhere, and he says, "Nice sky." Yeah, look at those ants. Ah, cold. Okay, the sun is setting. Another sunset. Come on. What are you all looking at the sunset for? Give me a break. Last night it was so beautiful, the sunset, and tonight it's just—eh. Or like Wes was saying last night, "I was sick of all those beautiful red sunsets. I'm loving this one that's just kind of gray and cloudy."

But when that ill will goes away—and this is what can happen—suddenly the perception clears. And we see, oh, first of all, the noise the roommate's making is just noise. It's not even unpleasant after a while. All the reactions in the mind fall away because the stories, the thoughts about it, fall away. We stop resisting the unpleasant, and the world becomes primordially pure.

In a sense, if you go into the dining room and instead of thinking, "Oh, these people, they've got to fight," you see that everybody's just doing the best they can, trying to eat their oatmeal, whatever it is they want. They're getting oatmeal all together. I just love everybody sharing this pot of oatmeal. The world becomes much purer. Did the situation change so much? But the space in our mind did.

And the third—the delusion aspect—part of it is just not noticing at all, when we're spaced out. Obviously, we don't know what's going on, so we're not going to recognize accurately. But the other delusion aspect, the one that's really more at the bottom, underneath, subtle but pervasive, is this tendency to perceive experience and the world—not every moment, because nothing is every moment, but frequently—through the lens of me.

You might notice that thought is a really good way to observe this, because it shows up in thought a lot. Just see how many thoughts after a perception before it's about me. Let's see how many: "That sunset's so beautiful. Here I am looking at the view."

It's not bad, but we can just notice it. Yet we don't notice it. And someone said today, "What do you mean when you talk about our self-story?"—as if there's one story. I just want you to check tonight, tomorrow. It's fun.

It's not about a good or a bad thing. It just can be fun, because even this self-story—don't take it personally. Everybody's mind is making up a story. How many different stories? About one per perception.

"Oh, here I am looking at the sunset." Maybe you go further in real thought: "I'm so peaceful." Or maybe then you go, "Oh, I'm so grumpy and I'm not appreciating this sunset. I've been so grumpy all day. In fact, my whole life is one of grumpiness because I'm such a person filled with ill will"—and all your memories and associations pile on. And

you walk in here and sit down, and you've forgotten all of that within three minutes. Maybe you're still grumpy and there's a sound and you go, "Oh, that person, how can they do that? It's bothering me." But that's a new story. Or it's just calm. Or there's some wanting—there's a potential of a cookie. Or you're thinking about something else. Or often it's just quite innocuous, like "Here I am looking at the sunset. I wonder what's for lunch. What am I going to wear tomorrow? Oh, this skirt reminds me of this and that."

I've seen times when my mind's bored and I sit in a room wherever I am—I'm always in a lot of different places—and I'll kind of go through all the objects that are mine in the room and see which objects have to do with which people in my life. Like, so-and-so gave me this, and I bought this skirt when I was with so-and-so, and this is from my mother, and I remember when Gavin painted that. Sometimes it kind of warms my heart, because I really get this sense of interconnectedness. But it's also telling myself my Carol story. It's just innocuous, but just notice it.

So notice the sense of me, me, me, and see how it's impermanent. It's changing. There's nothing wrong with it. It's functional. But when we don't notice it, we assume it's steady state. We assume it's the same me. How many different stories have you been through in these six, seven, however many days it's been? Millions, probably. I mean, it's hard to imagine you've just had one story running the whole time. But if we don't look at it, it doesn't feel that way—"Well, I'm the one thinking all these stories, right? What are you talking about? I'm the one thinking all of these." But then there's plenty of times when you're not aware of "I'm the one."

Our tool here—we don't have to figure this all out. I'm bringing it up not so you figure it out, but just to help us drop in a seed of noticing. Because what's so amazing about the tool of mindfulness, of awareness—we've been calling it just kind awareness—is that awareness itself, becoming aware of that wanting mind, that hound dog mind, becoming aware of maha grumpiness, becoming aware of fear, becoming aware of me, me, me—mindfulness itself in that moment isn't grumpy. Mindfulness isn't filled with greed. Mindfulness isn't me, me, me. It's really just pure, like a mirror that reflects what's happening with kindness, with acceptance, without judging. And mindfulness can recognize anything, anything.

So often our habit is to give all our attention to trying to fix things. "Too much me here—I want to get rid of the me." "Too much wanting—I'm going to stop wanting as of now." "I've decided ill will is really suffering. I get that. So I'm giving it up. I'm giving up ill will for Lent." How long does that last?

But mindfulness can simply notice all of it. All of it.

The point I'm trying to hammer home is that through the steadiness of this mindfulness—and I hope you understand that this is what the whole retreat has been cultivating. Has that been coming through? I hope it has. The steadiness of mindfulness, this non-reactive, non-judgmental, non-adding-anything-extra attention, this fullness of attention to moment after moment of experience, physical and mental, is what creates the conditions that allow wisdom, right view, wise understanding to emerge by itself.

Things as they have come to be—the causes and conditions for wisdom arising in a moment in the mind—require the steadiness of mindfulness, the sincerity of intention. It's out of our control. But it absolutely happens. It's just natural. It's just nature. That's how wisdom works with the steadiness of attention.

Moving from thought to wise intention now: with the steadiness of mindfulness, the wisdom that arises in the face of greed, in the face of ill will or fear, or in the face of cruelty, is that these habits—which are called unwise intentions, unwise not because you're bad, but because they bring further confusion and suffering when we're identified with them, when we're caught in them, and then when those intentions lead to action. When greed leads to action, it brings further confusion and suffering.

Now, don't believe me. You have to bring in mindfulness and just look. Watch greed doing its job. Watch the thoughts in the mind. Watch what actions it leads to. And see for yourself, over and over. It's the looking that lets us see how things are. It's not deciding greed is bad and I'm a bad person. We have to really see it.

And what's so cool—this is what I love about the elegance of it—when there's that steadiness of awareness, I'm just watching: wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting. And it's easier to do this with little things on retreat. You have more space. You're not so scattered. And things do seem a little more important here than they might at home. You know, if the salad runs out, it's a lot bigger of a deal. So you can notice the wanting. Here, the job is just to bring steady, steady, steady mindfulness. And through the steadiness of mindfulness, it starts to break up because we see, oh, it's always changing. It's always changing.

When we see the changing nature, when we recognize over and over the ephemeralness, the fleetingness of pleasant experience—yes, pleasant experience is pleasant. There's lots of pleasure and gratification and happiness. Sure, that's true in life. We're not saying there's not. Appreciate it. Enjoy it. I'm talking about sensual pleasure, and even the deep gratification of wise intention, of compassion, of mettā, of generosity. But just getting that nice salad when you're hungry and eating it and appreciating the taste—nothing wrong with that. We're really present. Then you chew, and it tastes good. And how long does that taste last? If you're really present, pretty soon you're just gumming

that food and swallowing it because you want the next bite. It doesn't last long, the flavor, does it? Do you ever notice that you're going for the next fork and you haven't even swallowed yet?

So we're just noticing that. As we start to see, just naturally, that ephemeral nature of pleasant, the changing nature, the clinging of thinking "this is going to do it for me" naturally eases out. Not because we think it should, but because it doesn't make sense. When we recognize things as they are, in that moment—and just in that moment, it's not forever—but in that moment, clinging lets itself go. Because it doesn't make any sense.

So for instance, I'm standing in line, and there's no more salad. You think, well, it's easy for me—I'm a teacher.

I can go get some if I want. That's true. But on retreat, too, I remember my first three-month retreat. I was very young, and we'd all go for the food at lunch. That was a big deal, you know. And there was one guy who would come strolling in twenty minutes late every day. Some stuff would always be out. Some would be there, but some would be gone. And I would think, "God, this guy must be enlightened." That's really what I thought—he must be enlightened. Just come strolling in twenty minutes late, and this is gone, and that's gone.

And sometime later, now I can see there are times I'll be in line and I see that whatever it is—the bread's about to be gone. And there are more people ahead of me than there are pieces of bread. And I can watch the wanting. I'm not saying I should or shouldn't. I'm just watching. I'm not even watching—awareness is watching. And the wanting, it's so unpleasant. It's so painful. And the mind recognizes the bread doesn't matter. The wanting doesn't matter. It doesn't say all that, but it just lets go. And there's peace. There's peace. The bread wouldn't really give you peace anyway, trust me. You eat it, you want more, or you ate too much, or it's gone. You're allergic to gluten and you ate it anyway, whatever. That peace that comes from seeing clearly is priceless. And that's available at any time of any day. We don't make it happen. But the steadiness of mindfulness allows it.

So anyway, the three wise intentions. I've got to at least get to them before the end of the talk. With this clear seeing, naturally, greed transforms through renunciation to this natural releasing of wanting, to generosity. It's a natural manifestation of wisdom. And then we can choose to cultivate, and I'm not dismissing that, but I just want you to really trust: when the mind is recognizing accurately, letting go and generosity are our natural response.

In the face of ill will—aversion to something, ill will toward something—with clarity, with wisdom, with the steadiness of awareness, that naturally transforms to friendliness, to metta. And the same with cruelty, which naturally transforms to compassion. The cruelty doesn't have to be that you really want to go out and hurt somebody. It can just be that when someone's in pain, you subtly want to get out of there. This naturally transforms to compassion—the ability to be present with an open heart and mind, present with suffering, your own or another's, with that sense of connectedness. This is the natural response of the wise mind and heart when recognizing accurately. This is really what's so beautiful, I think, about the way the Buddha figured this all out.

So as Larry spoke so beautifully last night, the intentions with which we act really transform the world. And we can bring our awareness to intentions, absolutely. I'll talk about that in a minute. But I want to keep emphasizing that even though the wanting and the ill will and the sense of me, me, me are so familiar—they seem so normal and natural—it's often where the tendency of our mind and heart may go for refuge. I'm unhappy, I want something. Things are wrong, ill will naturally comes up. It's a habit, but it's not the deepest nature of truth.

The tendency for intentions that lead to thought, speech, and action to come from generosity of heart and mind, to come from friendliness and metta, to come from compassion—this is really the much truer reflection of our nature. And when we talk about thoughts just coming and going and the emptiness of mind, you might think—

How do we function? I'm moving into intention now. When a thought coheres, when it comes together with that little movement—intention is this little movement of heart and mind that leads to speech and action. You can sometimes feel it, that little urge. There's a word in Pali, *cetanā*. It's talking about a particular mental state on a moment-to-moment level—just a little urge. And that can come together with love, it can come together with mettā, it can come together with wanting, it can come together with generosity.

When the Buddha talked about skillfulness or unskillfulness, wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of action, he often said, "By action, by *kamma*"—*kamma* just means action—"I mean intention." The seed of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, the very juice of any action of speech, mind, or body, is in the intention. Our tendency is to look at and evaluate by the results, isn't it? Because that's what we see. But that's the thing that's really out of our control. The intention—what's the motivation for doing something—is really where the alignment with the way things are or the misperception and confusion and suffering lies. That's what leads to more peace or what leads to more suffering.

So when Larry spoke last night about doing something with the overarching intention to bring more good into the world—maybe to do something for homeless people, to work with the environment—in our mind, the idea is to really do something good. But somehow we get so caught up in anger, in fear, in self-righteousness, that the actions themselves, the motivation with which we're doing them, is leading into more anger, leading into more greed, leading into more hatred. Even if the result seems to be what we want, in terms of what's really opening us to peace, to liberation from suffering, that's not a wholesome action, because the intention is increasing hatred and greed. The exact same action, from looking outside, as Larry said so well, could really be done from mettā, from compassion, from kindness. A world of difference.

So to bring it back here, because I just want to use the retreat as an experiment: do something simple like walking from here to the dining room. Wait until the lunch bell rings. If you're always first, wait five minutes. If you're always last, go first. Really see what it's like walking to the lunchroom with that wanting, with whatever it is you feel. If you hate going, go right away and hurry and see how that feels. Another time, do the same walk to the lunchroom, but just with a sense of appreciating your body for being able to walk. Just a sense, for that moment, of feeling the earth—not to be mindful, but just to appreciate that we're alive and we can walk. The action's the same. The intention's so different. Just noticing that as we move through the day can really start to have a profound effect.

When the unwise intentions of greed, of ill will, of cruelty naturally transform, that, just as with thought, naturally leads to action. And when we act from wise intention—just as when we explore these unwholesome states, if you're really looking, this is what I know, but you look for yourself, don't believe me—it leads to more suffering. When we act from generosity, from mettā, from compassion, when we're really there in it, it's onward leading. It brings so much happiness that we want to do more.

Just a little story. I was in Burma recently with a few friends, and we went to visit some monks. One of the monks where we were staying told us about two monks who had just started their own little monastery just down the road. They were interesting because these two men had become monks in their middle life, in their thirties. They had this little poor dusty plot of land. They didn't have much of anything. And the monk who was our friend said he had gone and talked to them. They'd become monks, but they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They didn't have a real teacher. One had been a businessman, and the other had been a captain in the armed forces. They weren't kind of what you think of as these spiritual guys, really.

So our friend the monk said they were just sitting around in this really dusty, poor place without much of anything, being monks and not knowing what to do with themselves. And he said he suggested to them, "Why don't you? You're both educated men. You've been to college. And there's lots of poor children in this area."

And in Burma, most children need after-school tuition just to be able to pass, even in grade school. And they have to pay for that. These poor children mostly can't even afford to go to school, never mind pay for the tuition. So our friend said, why don't you offer some free tuition to the children?

So the monks kind of said, okay, okay. And we went to visit them, and they had started doing this. They had over a hundred little children who would come every afternoon when school got out at about four, and come early in the morning. We went over, and it was so wonderful.

These two men—if you'd met them without knowing this story, they would have looked like what I used to think of as a schlock monk. They chewed betel nut, and betel nut, it's not a good look. It rots your teeth. You're dripping red juice all the time. You just look really... I mean, really. And so monks and nuns that chew betel nut, you kind of immediately—and this is a perceptual thing, right? One of my friends, she has such a thing about any monk that chews betel nut. Immediately: bad monk. Her mind just does that. So this was really good for her. Bad monk? These guys are just sitting there with a hundred children, and they were loving it, and the two men were loving it.

We were talking to them because my friend Daria speaks fluent Burmese. The younger one was more vocal. He had been a businessman selling, I think, beer and other things. And he'd had to get his parents' permission even at age thirty-nine to become a monk.

And he was saying, "Oh, now I see. To do something for others, this generosity—it's making me so happy. I feel like I wasted the first thirty-five years of my life." He was like born again, but in a really beautiful way. He said, "I never knew how wonderful it is to be able to do something for others. And so I'm so happy to help these children." The children were happy, sitting there as the monks taught them. And he said, "If there's no more I can do here, I know I'm going to spend the rest of my life finding another place, and I'll go there."

They were living in dust. They didn't have a well. Just a little lean-to shack. They had nothing. And then he came over to visit us later, because we offered money to build a well. He came with very detailed plans of how much it was going to cost. And just going on again about how his whole life felt like it had purpose, how happy being able to offer

something made him. And from that, he was appreciating the Dharma more and more. He hadn't really studied Dharma much, but he was appreciating it more and more. That happiness of generosity leads to more generosity, leads to more mindfulness, leads to more wisdom. It's just a natural flow in that way. The same with mettā, the same with compassion.

I had so much more to say, but never mind. I guess all I want to leave you with is this sense of trusting the profound, amazing nature of this simple moment-to-moment awareness—that things are already as they are. You are already... your true nature is free from greed, hatred, confusion. The natural effect of wisdom is to act from generosity, from kindness, from compassion. And there's no one here or anywhere that is somehow so weird or twisted a person that that's not their nature.

When we sit this morning and it's just thoughts coming and going in the space of awareness—that's just an opening into exploring that. That's not just true for some people and not for others. But when the mind is caught in greed or stories about me, we can't notice it, that's all. But we can notice the greed. We can just be aware of the greed and notice that awareness isn't greedy.

And knowing, in terms of wise action, in terms of acting from wholesome intention—there isn't any one way it's supposed to look.

You know, it's not like the results should look a certain way, or be the same for each of us.

So just to end with this one story, from a video I saw of Sogyal Rinpoche going to visit some nuns in Tibet—maybe some of you saw it. I think it's called *Blessings*. He went with some Western women, and they went to visit what are called the nuns of Mangchen, in an area high in Tibet where a whole series of nunneries had existed for hundreds of years.

During the Cultural Revolution—maybe twenty years ago, thirty years ago—the nunneries were destroyed and the nuns had to leave. They were very committed nuns. And different things happened to them. Some of them were put in prison. But some of them, the way they chose to respond was to run and hide in caves way up in the hills where they were hidden, where the Chinese Communist government couldn't get to them, because it wouldn't allow them to remain nuns. They destroyed the nunneries, ripped them apart.

So some went and hid. Very tough twenty years. Some died of starvation and hardship. Some barely managed to survive. Others were in prison because they wouldn't disrobe. Others had to disrobe and maybe they went back to their families. And they

said they felt that they lived as secret nuns. They were just living a normal life, disrobed, acting in normal ways. But in their hearts, in their minds, they considered themselves nuns.

And so just when Sogyal went back, things had kind of loosened, and all the nuns were now allowed to come back and start rebuilding their nunneries. They were all coming back—from being secret nuns, or hiding and starving in the hills, or being released from jail. And so they were just documenting how now they could put on their robes again, come together as a community, as a sangha, and rebuild these nunneries. I mean, they're dragging stones up these giant mountains by hand, rebuilding.

But there was no one way that they should have acted. They had this depth of pure intention, a deep aspiration of what was really important for them, and that was the guideline in their life. How they manifested and brought their actions into alignment with it was different for each one. But there's such a thread that runs through, and you get a sense of what's really important.

And then they ended it—and this was all in the talk—by saying, "Okay, we can take up the cameras and visit the most senior nun, the most enlightened of us, who lives in some little hut way up at the top." And they go up to see her.

And I know she looked about a hundred and twenty, just really—I mean seriously—just lying in a bed, spinning the prayer wheel. And her eyes, as I remember, so bright and so clear. And she said, "You know, all I can do is lie in this bed. Can't walk, can't do anything. So what I do—I'm spinning my prayer wheel, and all day, all night, all I'm doing is generating thoughts of: may all beings everywhere, may they be happy, may they be peaceful, may they be free from suffering."

What a life.

I'm not saying it should be our life. But there are as many different ways to manifest as there are people. And it comes from the intention—right thought, right intention, seeing accurately, right view—and then it will manifest through us as our personalities.

So may we all, may all beings, be well, peaceful, and free from suffering.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 101

Investigating Craving

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to investigate craving (taṇhā) directly through mindfulness, rather than trying to eliminate it through force or avoidance. Drawing on the Buddha's bold declaration that he discovered liberation through non-clinging, she emphasizes that freedom is not a static state to achieve but a moment-to-moment quality of awareness unclouded by greed, hatred, and delusion.*
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> *Wilson introduces the Pāli term yathā bhūta—often translated as 'things as they are' but more accurately rendered as 'things as they have come to be'—highlighting the dynamic, conditioned nature of all experience. She distinguishes taṇhā (thirst, craving) from wholesome qualities like chanda (interest, willingness) and adhiṭṭhāna (determination), clarifying that the problem lies not in the object desired but in the contracted, grasping quality of mind itself. Using everyday examples from retreat life—walking meditation, the pull to look at others, anticipating meals—she shows how craving narrows awareness and obscures the peace already available.*
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> *The talk explores the Buddha's framework of gratification, danger, and escape as tools for investigating attachment to sense pleasures, views, and the sense of self. Wilson emphasizes that the escape from craving is surprisingly simple: turning attention from the object of craving to the awareness itself. Quoting both Ajahn Buddhadāsa and Dipa Ma, she encourages practitioners to get curious about craving rather than fighting it, discovering that awareness itself—when uncolored by craving—reveals freshness, peace, and zest in every moment.*

I've come to really love the Buddha's teachings and this practice because I find that what he says and where it can take us is really so profound.

One of the Buddha's more profound and bold statements, at least as far as we can tell from what we can read, is that the sublime truth has been discerned by the Tathagata—how he referred to himself. Namely, liberation of heart-mind, this word *citta*, through non-clinging. Liberation through non-clinging. "It's been discovered by me." Quite a bold statement.

So what I want to talk about tonight is actually an invitation to use mindfulness awareness to explore what's the problem with clinging anyway. A lot of times we may hear a statement like this—liberation through non-clinging—and where does one's

mind go with that? I know some people can think of liberation as meaning we're going somehow to achieve some amazing state of mind or heart, a steady state that you get to hang out in. And I guess non-clinging is there, clinging isn't there, and we're free. But it's not about a state at all. There is nothing static. There is nothing steady state. One way you could think of liberation through non-clinging is just non-clinging as a moment-to-moment activity of mind, of heart. That's all there is anyway.

This whole exploration we're doing of mindfulness wisdom is really using this quality of mind, this quality of awareness uncolored by confusion, to explore and understand how the mind works. How does it work to create suffering? How does it work to allow freedom and wisdom to arise? And what's so far out is both of those trajectories are lawful.

One way that the freedom of heart and mind is described, or when the Buddha describes the path of awakening, is that it begins and ends with right view. *Sammā diṭṭhi* is the word in Pali. Right view, wise view. "Right" is actually a little bit more accurate translation than "wise." We like "wise" because we don't like right and wrong, being told what to do, black and white. Wise is nice. But as I think I said the first night, I like "right view" because "view" is actually more literal. Right view could be described as seeing or recognizing things as they actually are. Things being all the objects of our experience—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, all the activities of mind—recognizing also with mind things as they actually are.

What allows for, in a moment, the arising of the heart-mind of wisdom, which is a mind without clinging, isn't getting to some esoteric, far-out, blissful state. More likely, that'll give rise to clinging. Rather, it's when in a moment, this moment's experience is recognized really accurately without distortion. Clinging makes no sense. It's not that we have to get out a pickaxe and dig all the moments of clinging out of our mind—forget about it, that's not going to happen. We can understand how clinging works, just like we can understand how to run a recorder. It's lawful. We can get interested in it. We can discover the true nature of how clinging works in a moment, just like anything else. And in exploring that—exploring clinging with wise view, with right view, with mindfulness wisdom—that can be a moment giving rise to insight, just like anything else. Clinging is a perfectly valid object of investigation, of awareness, to wake up from.

So it may sound kind of simplistic, seeing things as they are. Another way of describing that—I mean, there's many, many ways, I'm just being very simple here—is recognizing things as they are, being that it's all lawful process of cause and effect, that everything that's happening is a process. There is no static, self-existing entity anywhere.

One of my favorite Pali expressions the last couple of years is *yathā bhūta*, which is often translated as "things as they are." And there's a phrase for one of the high levels of insight, *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, which is often translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are," seeing things as they are. But I've been told by good friends who are Pali scholars that a more accurate translation is "things as they have come to be" in this moment. And I love that because "things as they are"—we're back in static and things, right? Things as they are, boom, it's all solid. "Things as they have come to be" gives to me the sense of the infinite causes and conditions that have come together to be as it is in this moment. And now in this moment, new causes have come.

Things as they have come to be in this moment becomes a cause and condition for things as they have come to be in the next moment. There's no way you can pull anything out as a self-existing entity—including, guess who? Each of us.

So the causes and conditions, the process of things as they have come to be in this moment, that we are all here sitting together in this room—infinite, isn't it? Just start thinking about even the causes and conditions that you know about, never mind the ones we don't know about. The ones you know about that allowed just you to get here. And where can you ever stop? You start by getting time off from work, by having enough money, by having your health, by having read something about it somewhere, by having enough interest to come, by having family that supports you and a way to get here. And that this place is even here—how did this place even get here? Well, you heard in detail from Grove the other day. But then that's just you.

But then how did you even get here? You have to go back to all the food you've been eating and the clothes you've been wearing and all the things that happened to you in your life. That time you slipped on the ice but didn't fall through. You survived that illness. Your parents were both alive and made you—and if your parents hadn't been alive, you wouldn't be here. You can't stop anywhere. And that's just you. Then it's all of us—infinite. There's no way we can know all the causes and conditions.

But things as they have come to be in this moment, seeing with right view that it's this process, and it's a lawful process—so it's not that we have to understand or know every single cause and condition, but getting it, that causes and conditions have their lawful effect, and beginning to see accurately is what actually opens the heart and mind from the habits of clinging and aversion and confusion.

The Buddha even asked, what's the problem with clinging? When we don't recognize it, we can't see accurately. We can't recognize things as they are. The Buddha talks about this Dhamma—remember, the Dhamma means laws of nature, the way things are. This Dhamma is visible here and now. That's something monks chant: *ehipassiko*, come and

see, visible here and now. And someone asked him, well, to what extent is this Dhamma visible here and now? And he said, to the extent that greed, hatred—which is a form of aversion—and confusion, delusion, are not present in the citta, not present in the psyche. Remember, moment to moment, not steady state.

Just to the extent that greed, hatred, and confusion are not present in the mind, to use that word simply, in a moment—that is what allows for accurate recognition. A moment of awareness that isn't distorted by looking for something specifically, wanting this to happen, that isn't distorted by saying this shouldn't be happening, get out of here, or by complete confusion, fogginess, or it's all about me. When those things are there, we can't recognize accurately.

But many, many moments—what we've been talking about as mindful awareness, awareness with mindfulness—what we mean by that is just a moment of pure mind, of pure citta, I would call it, when there's not greed, hatred, or confusion coloring it. And there are many moments of that, more than we might realize. We're not looking for that. In fact, mostly we're forgetting to notice what's going on in the mind, the awareness, at all.

This is how one of my teachers describes it. It's experiential—this isn't Abhidhamma language, but it's an experiential way of describing what we're doing here in meditation that I find personally very helpful. She says one way of describing our experience of meditation is this: in any moment of experience—whatever's happening, as I keep saying, all it can be is at the sixth sense, the physical seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, or any mental experience—whatever's happening, any experience has two aspects, the way she talks about it.

One aspect is the object. She uses this word a lot. The object would be the sight, the sound, the smell, the thought, the mood, the emotion—whatever we're aware of, that's the object. The other aspect of the experience is the mind knowing it. These things arise together. You can't separate them. It's just a way of saying two sides of a coin. They arise together, but they have different natures, so to speak.

Whatever object is arising—the sight, the sound of my voice, seeing, a mood that comes up, a pain in your knee, whatever—the nature of that object, in terms of this way of meditating, is simply to be known. Whatever's arising that can be known, it's an object. And the awareness, the mind, has the function of knowing. It sounds simple, but it's actually quite transformative if you keep paying attention in this way.

They arise together, and when it starts to be that any object can be known, our tendency in life—because this is not just in meditation, in life, you know, whatever's happening can be known—our tendency is to get so involved with the object, whatever it is that's happening, with the experience, if you don't want to use the word object.

And often when we talk about meditation, we go, "Well, what was happening?" We ask you what's happening. That's already saying, "Tell me what experiences are arising." And we get involved in this knee pain or this back pain or this mood or this thought, and we like it, we don't like it. We get so involved in the experience that's happening that we forget often, even when we're being mindful, we forget to notice the knowing part, the aware part, the mind that's knowing. And so we can think we're being really mindful, really focusing on whatever experience is happening, but not noticing the mind that's aware or what's going on in that mind that's aware.

And so when we're aware—like, I hope God doesn't mind, I will use as an example his story from last night. He doesn't know I'm going to use this. His story from last night of when he got really angry at that guy when he was doing walking meditation. And as he said, he thought he was really mindful. He was walking down to that spot. He saw the guy. He's aware of stepping, stepping, stepping. He was aware of his thoughts. But the stepping was the object. The thoughts were the object. Seeing the guy was the object. Aware, aware, aware. Completely not noticing the other half of the equation—the mind that's knowing, and what mental qualities are arising in that mind. Aversion. Aversion.

And when he did—"Oh, this is aversion"—right? In that moment of noticing aversion, aversion itself becomes the next object, the next experience. And then it's fine. Because awareness doesn't care. It really doesn't care what the object of the experience is. When awareness is not tainted, not distorted, in just a moment. Remember, it's all moment to moment. We don't have to hold on to anything.

So a guy's walking, his awareness is filled with aversion, aversion, aversion, which we think we're clear-seeing when there's aversion. And then suddenly the awareness recognized the aversion. And in that moment, in that moment, was no longer colored by the—oh, aversion's like this. I say that I use that a lot. Aversion's like this. And in that moment of pure mind, pure citta, that's fine. That's a moment of clear seeing. That's a moment of yathā-bhūta, recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment.

And aversion is just as great an object of awareness as a state of bliss, as a subtle, subtle sense of breath, as a gross sense of confusion and nothing's clear, or a really, really subtle experience. Because we're always focusing on the object, but the objects

aren't what wake up. The objects aren't where wisdom comes. It's from that clarity, that purity of mind, the steadiness of awareness that isn't colored by greed, by aversion, by confusion—that allows the clear seeing. And it's lawful.

I can't tell you how many moments in a row you have to have. It's not that. Seven million trillion moments of pure citta without any greed, and boom, you're enlightened. Sorry, you know, it's not so straightforward. But it's lawful.

So insight is not like, "Well, we put in our time, we put in our effort, and we hope to God that sometime"—well, I can't, there's no God—but somehow some magical moment will occur and we'll be free. It's lawful. It's lawful. And all we have to do is take care of our awareness, not try to figure it all out.

All we have is this moment. This moment is all there is right now. What's happening? And what's the quality of the awareness that's meeting it?

He says this regarding ill will, but it's the same for craving, the same for confusion. When one dwells with a mind oppressed by ill will—or oppressed by craving, you could say—and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will or craving, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both.

I love this teaching because he's saying we don't see clearly, but he's also pointing to what clear seeing actually is. It manifests in seeing the good for oneself and for others. You can see he's not making this into something subtle and esoteric—"I just see this for myself and then I'm separated from the world." It's seeing what's good for ourselves, what's good for others.

So this quality of knowing, whatever the object is—what I want to suggest is that we can take that quality of the knowing, and when it's not colored by greed, by aversion, by confusion, we recognize things accurately. And when we're recognizing accurately, craving doesn't make any sense. What we can also recognize accurately is craving itself.

A retreat, as Guy said last night, is where things are more simple. When it's not quite so complex, it gives us the space and the time, and the mind's a little bit quieter. Yes, it is, believe it or not. It gives us the time and the space to actually explore the nature of craving, to see if it's true or not. Don't just believe what I say. Don't believe what the Buddha says. Take the quality of clear seeing and look for yourself. Is it really true? What's the problem with craving? Is it increasing suffering? Is it keeping me lost in confusion? Start to look and see.

Now, when I first start talking about craving, I want to clarify what that means. Often—and maybe many of you already have a lot of experience, so perhaps you don't have this reaction—but often people find quite some reaction arising in their mind when you talk about craving, about the heart and mind liberation of non-clinging. They start to think of non-clinging, and again, we're focused on the object. Well, what's wrong with wanting to enjoy the beauty of nature? What's wrong with wanting to take care of my family? What's wrong with wanting enlightenment? What's wrong with wanting ice cream—or fill in the blanks for yourself.

The other extreme one can go to—and sometimes it's subtle, we don't realize we're going there—is to think, "Well, I know that when it's pleasant, the habit of mind is to lean into it, to want, to hold on to it. So if wanting is bad..." We've already gone to bad and good, which isn't what he's saying. He's saying it causes suffering, not that it's bad and good. "If it's bad, and if freedom, enlightenment means no clinging, then a good way to not cling is to never get close to anything pleasant. And if I start enjoying something pleasant, then I'm in trouble."

I'm not putting forward either of these as useful or helpful, but it's often what we do. In a beautiful place like this, it's a great spot to explore the subtleties of this. Because we're not saying craving and wanting is suffering, it's bad, therefore we should avoid all beauty, all pleasantness. That's impossible. Every experience that comes has a flavor in the way our mind experiences it—being somewhat pleasant or a little bit unpleasant or kind of neutral. That's not in our control. It arises moment to moment with the mind. It's one of the factors that arises in the mind, this perceiving of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It just keeps going like that.

Like I said, we wouldn't have any suffering if everything was pleasant. Although, I wonder—actually, I think there still would be, because it would still all be impermanent. It would just be cling, cling, cling, cling. But it's pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Awakening, freedom from clinging, doesn't change that. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. If we think we're getting to some enlightened place where it's pleasant, pleasant, pleasant—forget about it. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—and a lot faster than I'm saying it. How many thoughts have you had? How many sensations arise in your body? How many sounds? How many sights?

All of them are pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. We mostly don't notice it. When we don't notice it, that's when the mind leans into the pleasant.

So the point is, it's not about setting up an environment where there's never any pleasant—you can't do it. But it's also not about setting up an environment where every moment of pleasure can be fulfilled. Because although a lot of us in this Western culture have far more access to try and do that than in many other places, it doesn't make us happier. It makes it harder to see through the suffering of craving.

Now I want to talk about what's wrong with wanting to take care of your family, what's wrong with wanting enlightenment. I want to talk about what this word *craving* means. It's very specific, as with many of the words the Buddha uses. He uses this word craving as a translation of a Pali word, *tanha*, which is more literally translated as thirst.

In English, we tend to use the word want or the word desire, and it covers quite a wide range, doesn't it? This word *tanha*, thirst, is talking about not the object that's wanted. Remember, this is just what my teacher was talking about. We go to the object: "What's wrong with wanting enlightenment?" It's got nothing to do with enlightenment. It's got to do with the quality. It's a mental factor, a mental quality of *tanha* that we experience in the mind, in the heart, in the psyche. And that quality, when it arises in relationship to any object—thirst is a pretty good translation. It's that quality of *gotta have it*, right? That gotta-have-it can arise in relationship to anything.

Now, there are other words in Pali and there are other experiences that we might say in English as want. Like I said, "I want to take care of my family." "I want to eat." "I want something really good to eat." It changes. There's a word *chanda* in Pali, which kind of means willingness to do. It can be interest, excitement, energy to do. And there are other ways that "I want to take care of my family" might manifest. It could be a kind of compassion. It could be a sense of "this is something really important in my life, I need to do it." It's a quality that's called *adhitthana*, determination, which is a wholesome quality.

But *tanha* is very specific. It's this quality of thirst. Explore for yourself—you can kind of feel it. It's almost like it narrows your vision. It's like the sense of clinging. And very quickly, it moves from *tanha* to the next link, *upadana*, which is translated as clinging or grasping. It's like "I want this," and the mind just kind of fastens around it. And then we start making choices based on that.

So here—because it's not about the object—take an example: see how it comes up for you tomorrow, say when it's time for lunch. Now, there can be a sense that you're hungry, the body's hungry. You feel hunger. That doesn't have to be *tanha*. You feel hun-

ger. There's a sense it's time to go eat. And we would say in English, "I want to go eat." But notice not the food, but the quality in the mind. The mind is aware of what you're doing. "I want to go eat." But you're present. You go eat. That's not *tanha*.

Now you're sitting here, and you can have the same feelings of hunger—or you don't even have feelings of hunger—but the image of pizza comes up in your mind. You think, "I really want pizza. I'm really hungry. I really need pizza." That's already into grasping, right? Can you feel the difference?

Then notice, maybe you're not going to get pizza, but you smell something at lunch. You're walking up to lunch, thinking, "When's the bell going to ring? I hear them banging around in there. I smell that garlic. It's time." You're walking to lunch. What's the quality in your mind, in your heart as you're walking?

When there's tanha, you can feel it like you're being led by the nose. My brother used to have a hunting hound dog, and to me, that dog epitomized—it's like a metaphor for how craving works in our mind. Really sweet dog, but bred so finely to smell things. It wasn't a bloodhound, but it had that kind of really fine scent. And the poor dog was in thrall to the scent, to the nose. If you let it out in the backyard, his nose was on the ground, and he would just have to run around the sides, into all the bushes, and smell everything—anywhere a possum had been, or a squirrel, or whatever. He just had to. He couldn't just go out and lie down in the sun. He had to smell everything. Every time he came new into the house, any new smell of food or a new person or dirty clothes or dirty tissue—anything with human or animal smells—he had to go smell it. It was painful to watch.

And I thought, this is what craving does. You get that idea of pizza in your mind, and we don't turn around and look at the craving. But can you see the difference?

This is one of my own particular bugaboos. Often I hear people talk about—teachers too—having good desire and unwholesome desire. I think that's very confusing, because they'll say, "Well, good desire—desire for awakening, or to care for your family, or desire to practice—is good. But desire to eat pizza and just get lost in craving is bad." That's pointing to the object. It's got nothing to do with the object. Craving as a quality of heart and mind is what brings us into confusion and gets in the way of seeing clearly. It's got nothing to do with what the object is.

So I could have the thought of freedom from clinging. What I just read—the Buddha said, "I've discovered liberation through non-clinging." I could hear that in a way that's uplifting. Yes, that's inspirational. That's possible. And it brings energy. And then I could say in English, "I want to be free," but it's not that craving.

I could also—and I certainly have, and I bet some of you have too—sit there and go, "When in God's name am I going to be free from clinging? How can I ever be enlightened?" Right? That's craving. That's grasping. It's not about the enlightenment; it's the quality in the mind.

The moment of mind is the seed of freedom. It's the seed of suffering—what's arising in the heart and mind right now. And so taking that attitude of interest, we can really begin to explore how craving acts when it's arising.

The way I was just describing it—watching how you're walking in to lunch when there's craving or when there's not—that's how we bring interest, wisdom, clear seeing, *satipaññā*, mindfulness-wisdom, into our practice. We don't say, "Oh, I hate this. Craving's bad." We tend to do that. "Oh no, I've seen so much clinging since I got here. It's just hopeless."

It's not personal. It's just a lawful process of nature. It's the habit of minds—not just yours, all of ours—that when there's not much awareness and when something pleasant comes up, and often it's a pleasant thought, the tendency of mind is to go into it, to lean into it, and clinging arises, wanting arises.

But in the next moment, just like Guy with the aversion, awareness can arise. And instead of hating the clinging—that's just jumping from clinging to aversion. As one of my teachers says, aversion is really thwarted craving. You don't get this, so you're aversive. That's not any better, not helpful.

But to bring that moment of mindfulness: "Ah, clinging. It's like this." And to really explore—how does it feel? How does it act? What's the effect in my mind? What's the effect in my choices? Really, just to see moment to moment to moment, and it's that steadiness of awareness that is the condition for wisdom, for insight to arise. That steadiness of awareness on any object.

Just take care of the awareness. You don't need a better object. Craving is a great object, really, to explore. And it gets fascinating when you don't take it personally. Because it's amazing, unbelievable—the power of craving itself in our minds at times. Have you ever seen that? Have you noticed that? And not just in our few little minds, at least we're looking at it, but the power of craving in the world.

So to explore it, the habit—it's so seductive. Have you ever noticed a time when... just to explore it when it comes up here in little things. That's what's so great about a retreat. Walking meditation I find a particularly good time, sometimes, to explore when wanting comes up. So you're walking along. See the difference between when you're present with just what's happening and then when wanting comes up.

Okay, it might be the example of food. One that often comes up is just the desire—someone's starting to walk past and there's this craving to look at the other person. Have you noticed that yet? I don't know if you've been here long enough. But sometimes on a retreat, especially inside when they're more like in the same room, the craving to look at the person walking by can be so strong. It's unbelievable.

And so you say to yourself, "I'm not going to look. I'm just going to be with the craving and see what gives rise to it. What's the effect of it?" And sometimes it's so strong, you can't not look. You can't. The craving is just so strong. We can't be with it. The mindfulness isn't strong enough. The craving is stronger. So we look.

Not that it matters. And then we look and go, "Well, that really did us a world of good, didn't it?" Because what comes from the looking? Some judging, right? They're better, they're worse, or all these ideas about them, or ideas about you, or why, or your ideas because you looked, or whatever. Then you just get lost in thought and you're thinking, "Oh my God." And then you come back and you're restless and bored. "Why should I bother walking anymore anyway? It's almost over." No, it's not. "But it's over now. I'm out of here," right?

Keep paying attention. Even if you can't not look, keep paying attention. It's not as if the craving has won, so give up. Never. Just take care of your awareness.

Again, my teacher Tejani was saying—he's very funny—he said, so you're watching craving, you're watching how your whole world shrinks as soon as craving comes into the mind. You're walking totally at peace and that craving for whatever the heck—craving to think about something, craving to go running, craving to have pizza, craving to stop walking, whatever—everything else is just not very enjoyable. It was beautiful before, but who cares now? You just want to go do this other thing. The whole world has shrunk. Notice that. Keep noticing. That's all.

And then you can't not do it, so you do it. You stop walking, you go in, you have the tea, you wait for the peace that comes—because the seductive message of craving is "just follow me and everything will be so nice." So you go, but you're not noticing what's going on. You're waiting for the peace to come. And there's a subtle moment of peace, but it's not about the tea or looking at the person. You don't even notice the peace because too much other stuff came too quickly. But if you come in and have tea, there might be a moment of peace—but it's not the tea. It's because the craving stopped. Oh, so briefly, but it stopped. And if you keep paying attention, you'll notice that.

That's what's so fascinating—that the peace and ease is not about getting what we want. It's about that moment of no craving. And that moment of no craving is available a whole lot more when we're willing to just stop and look at the craving.

So what my teacher says is that we tend to think, "Oh, I failed," so we stop paying attention when we're acting on it. But if you keep paying attention, he says, okay, so you did the thing, craving got its way. But you were paying attention, so you also got your way—because there was a steadiness of awareness even when acting on the craving, and so wisdom is coming from that. Just take care of your awareness.

So just noticing different ways the craving comes up. Now when I start to see it come up in my experience, I don't go, "Oh no, craving." Well, I might. But mostly it's like, "Great. It's a chance to explore it again." Because believe me, it's going to keep coming.

There's a reason when the Buddha taught his Four Noble Truths and the second truth being the cause of our confusion, our suffering, he picked taṇhā. Out of all experience, what could he pick as the cause of suffering? Taṇhā. So I'm not just picking this for the heck of it as one to look at. It's really very central to our confusion, to our disease, to our sense of unsatisfiedness. And what's so seductive about craving is it's telling us it's the thing that's going to bring us satisfaction, but it's actually the thing that increases dissatisfaction.

There's something the Buddha talks about that Bhikkhu Bodhi describes as three movements in the unfolding process of insight. It's a way to explore anything, but here we want to use craving and grasping—which is to, with our steadiness of awareness, notice the whole process with craving of gratification, danger, and escape. I like those three because, again, the Buddha is so pragmatic. Often people think he's saying, "Well, nothing is worth clinging to." He does say that. And so then, because we don't understand that, we jump to him saying that means everything's bad.

Everything's crap. Nothing's worth clinging to. The world is just dull and gray. And who wants to live like that anyway? And what about passion? And what about beauty? And what about—and then we're gone.

But he's saying there *is* gratification. Notice it. Be aware of it. See what it is. And when he talks about craving moving into grasping, he speaks of several areas. One, of course, is sense desire, which I spoke about last night. That's an obvious one—sense pleasures, experiencing the gratification.

Again, being here with the beauty. It's great to see. What is the gratification? Explore that for yourself. When you go outside and there are beautiful sights, experience the pleasure of it. When there's a concept of something about nature and you're having a

thought about it, or a memory, or some idea, and it's a pleasant thought, there's gratification in that. When you feel a sense of just the appreciation of the beauty and it's not clinging, but a wholesome kind of joy, there's gratification and appreciation in that.

So noticing that, just with the steadiness of awareness—that's not the same as clinging. But mostly, when we're not aware, it moves so quickly into clinging. Mostly we don't notice that, but if you're paying attention, you'll see the difference. Because as soon as the wanting, the clinging comes in, as I said before, the whole thing narrows.

I don't know if you've seen this. Sometimes when I go outside and I'm just not thinking about it, but just being there, not trying to see beauty. Do you ever go out and try to see how beautiful it is? Isn't it different from when you just walk out? It just hits you. Or you're just being there, kind of quiet, and just a smell of the freshness comes through, and it's just so lovely. It's just a moment of pure loveliness. The mind isn't colored with wanting anything. It's just a moment of pure pleasure. That's the gratification.

What's the danger of that? Because there is gratification with sense desire. The danger is, of course, that we come to rely on that gratification. That gratification—not just a sense of pure beauty of the smell and then gone. That's fine. There's no danger in that. That's gone. That's gratification with wisdom. But mostly, the next step is either, "That's so nice. How can I get more?" And the relying on the gratification for our sense of self, really—for a sense of feeling okay with ourselves, or just for a sense of, "I need more pleasure, that's the only way I can bear it in this world." It comes very quickly.

If I go out and look at the beauty, then, "Oh, I want to see more." And if I walk here, maybe I'll see this tree. And if I walk here, maybe I'll smell that smell. And I saw those little goslings yesterday—maybe I can go see them again. And what about the robin? And it's different from just the appreciation. There's that taṇhā, that craving, that pulling. And the beauty isn't gratifying, actually, then. It's like, it's not enough. I need more. I need more.

I need more.

And the danger of gratification is also that none of these experiences last more than a fraction of a second. So if we're relying on the pleasure to be okay—or even on the most subtle level, the gratification feeds the sense of me, "I'm the one being gratified"—not that that's bad, it's just not accurate. Just notice that.

So the danger is the gratification and the seduction of the craving itself. Because even the Buddha, when he described the second noble truth, said it is "just this craving accompanied by delight, which seeks pleasure now here and now there." That's the way he described it. It's so seductive. The craving seems to be accompanied by delight when

we're not really looking at it. And so it's saying, "Yes, this gratification is really the best it's ever going to be. This is as good as it gets. So let's have some more. This is delight. This is happiness."

But when you haven't looked—like we were talking about before—when you look at the craving itself and see that when the craving ends, the peace is there, then we know this story of seduction is not true. That's the danger of it. But mostly we forget to turn back and look at the mind, and instead we go, "Yeah, that's right. That'll make me happy." And the more often that gratification can be fulfilled, we forget how brief it is because we lean into the next one.

A little story: a very wise friend of mine who totally knows everything I'm saying—and knows it better than me—we were sitting talking, and this person really likes cookies. They have a routine they like to follow. Every day after lunch, a little bit of milk and two cookies. Good cookies. So we're in one place together, and this person is having their cookies. We got talking about craving, just this subject, and I said, "Okay, so... this is craving."

The person says, "No, it's not suffering, though. What do you mean there's craving?"

I said, "There's craving. You want the cookie, you get the cookie, the cookie's fine, the craving's gone. There's no suffering there."

They said, "Yeah, but what happens when you don't get the cookie?"

The person says, "I'll always get a cookie."

That's the seduction of craving. "I'll always get a cookie."

And if we don't get a cookie, rather than rest in that, it's "Oh no, oh no, now what?" The mind makes up something else to want. It's almost like we're afraid to turn around and look and see that peace is already here.

Huang Po, who was a Chinese Zen teacher, said, "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection." Just in a moment. "This one mind is the Buddha, the awakened one. And there is no distinction between Buddhas and ordinary beings, except that ordinary beings are attached to forms, attached to experience, attached to objects, and thus seek for Buddhahood outside of themselves. By this very seeking, they lose it." By this very seeking.

To me, the most poignant aspect of craving, of grasping, is that the promise it's giving us is happiness and ease and peace. And that happiness, that ease, that peace is already available in this pure mind, this pure moment of wakeful presence, of awareness that's not colored. It doesn't matter what object is coming. We turn around and look. But the craving, the grasping itself is what hides that.

And craving isn't a pleasant experience. So our deep habit of only wanting to go to the pleasant works against turning around and just sitting or walking or standing with the craving itself.

So play with it. I promise you, craving won't kill you. It won't. And pick a little one, okay? Don't pick the biggest one in your life. And sooner or later, you'll just be able to stand there with it or sit there with it and get interested in it and see what thoughts feed it and what it feels like in the body and what sensations arise and what thoughts make it stronger and what thoughts make it weaker. Notice when it's gone how it feels. Notice how it comes back again.

It will go because everything goes. It's never even steady for one moment. As Rilke said, no feeling is final. Craving comes and goes, comes and goes, comes and goes. There's no need to be afraid of it.

Sometimes it'll run us, but often it won't. Awareness is much stronger than craving. And when we start to taste that peace of the craving, we can just really play with it. No, I don't have to act on this necessarily. Just because craving's here, I don't have to act on it. Sometimes we will—okay, just keep on paying attention.

So one other aspect of grasping I want to talk about. The Buddha talks about sense pleasures, and that's an easy one to see. The next one is views. And the third one is the particular view of personality or sense of self.

Views are really fascinating to explore. A view is simply an idea, a thought, or a way of seeing the world that we may not even recognize we have. The grasping is basically what you'd call believing. "Yeah, this is true. This is how it is."

Now, at least you can see how painful it is even when we know it's a view. Take politics. I mean, we're not going to talk about politics, but just take it as an example. Even when we absolutely know—right, we know that we're right and those other guys are completely misguided morons. We know that. We know we're right. We may not even quite be able to get there to say it's a view. But maybe you could see that they believe something completely different. Both of those are views. It's not about right or wrong.

Of course we have opinions. Of course we have views. Of course we're going to vote. It's not that we don't hold these things, but it's this sense of "this is right and you're wrong" that leads to—well, the political situation you have in this country and not only this country right now, where opposing sides can hardly talk to each other. There's not an openness to explore when there's attachment to a view, when there's grasping. Just as with sense pleasure, when we're grasping, our awareness snaps shut. We see what we expect to see. We see what we're looking for.

The view in our mind—it's easy enough to see when it's politics. And you see how much suffering there is in that, right? I imagine you can see that. But in many, many ways, this view is happening.

A view will color how we perceive an object, and then how we perceive it—perception is just how we identify something—will lead to how we think about it. How we think about it will become our description of the world and our actions and reactions in our mind.

I'll give you a very simple example that I like. It's funny when you can see through the attachment to the view right away.

I was sitting in Burma, I think last year, on a retreat at a meditation center. One day I was walking up a little path toward a Bodhi tree—which is the kind of tree that the Buddha sat under when he was enlightened in India in Bodh Gaya. So there's a Bodhi tree, not too old, a young one, in a kind of cement well, and you can walk around it. I was walking up the path toward it, doing walking meditation, seeing and just being aware. And there was a Burmese nun walking around it with her hands held together.

Right away, my perception was—and you don't even think, "Oh, this is my perception," you think this is what's happening—"Oh, she's walking around it with devotion, with an air of faith and devotion to the Bodhi tree." So that was my perception. And immediately the thought that came from it was, "Oh, that's so lovely, that expression of faith." And the next thought that came was, "It's just a damn tree. I mean, what are you walking around holding your hands like that for? It's just a tree. It's not even the one the Buddha sat under."

And this was all in like two seconds.

So I'd gone from faith to judgment and aversion in an instant. And then I got up closer. She was walking around texting on her cell phone.

Quick reset of the perception.

It totally cracked me up. But then I realized that whole worldview, my first perception, was entirely built up on my assumptions about the faith of Burmese nuns. I know a lot of Burmese nuns, so I know something about their devotion, but in this case, that worldview simply wasn't true. Then I went the whole other way with my judgments.

So you get a sense of how this works. This is a time when noticing the thoughts working in the back of the mind—particularly attachment to views—can be really useful. It's something that comes up constantly in meditation, not only here but in life.

When you're starting to feel frustrated about your practice, for example, whatever that means, you might just look. It's a helpful time to notice what thoughts might be working in the background. Thoughts about what good practice should look like, or what's supposed to be happening. "After three days, I should be past this by now. This shouldn't be happening."

Well, *yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be—this should be happening. Why? Because it is happening. Because it's happening, it should be happening, and it could not be otherwise. The next moment, how that moment of happening is met, is a new moment.

When we can bring mindfulness and awareness to what's occurring without getting caught in the reaction, without attachment to the view—"I think it should be like this, but it's like this"—okay. When we meet it with that freshness of awareness that isn't colored by attachment to a view, then there's the possibility to see accurately.

Do you see how when there's a view we're attached to and we don't even know it, there's not the space to see clearly? Often that view is a kind of self-judgment. Most self-judgment comes out of some view, and you can look and see how it got planted there. But it's arising in the moment: "I'm not good enough. I can't do it. This is happening and it shouldn't be happening because I'm no good."

This is a time when it's useful to just stop for a minute and ask, "What thought is going on back there?" Sometimes when I do that and I notice, I'll call up the thought, and it will be something like, "My experience should be better than this by now." And I think, "That's inane. I can't be believing that. That's a stupid thought."

But "stupid" has nothing to do with it. Knowing intellectually that it's not true has nothing to do with it. What matters is looking at it clearly and recognizing: "Oh, in this moment, I'm really believing that. I believe it should be clearer than it is." Once you see the view, the attachment can be broken.

So again, it's just another form of craving, another form of clinging. And when that clinging is there, this is the danger: it blinds us to seeing clearly.

What's the escape? This is what's so wonderful, and it's just what I've been saying. The escape isn't sitting down and figuring it all out. The escape is that Tai Chi move—from believing, from being absorbed in the object (the object at this point being the view, or not liking what's happening, or thinking this should be different, or "I love this, I need this")—moving from the object to the awareness itself.

Oh! I think I can't do this. I think I'm no good. I think it should be like this. I think all nuns have beautiful faith—whatever it is.

As soon as we move from involvement with the object—liking, disliking, getting lost in wanting—to looking at the wanting itself, that's the escape. It's not that we have to give up all pleasant objects.

It's not that we have to give up all views. It's not that we even have to give up the sense of self. The sense of self is also another view that arises based on clinging.

I can only touch on this briefly, but just look and see. Any sensation that comes in the body—aren't there times when there's just a little sensation, a little ping, it comes and goes? There's no big whoop. It's not suffering, pleasant, unpleasant. It's just what it is. There's no particular sense of self about that.

Then another sensation comes and there's a click: "Oh my God, this sensation in my knee—it means I can't... it's going to be like this forever." That is, of course, aversion and clinging, wanting it different. But notice how the sense of "me" got really strong. That's what's called personality view.

Any particular sense experience—a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste—often it's thought. The thought that "this shouldn't be happening, it's happening because I can't do it." It's just a thought. But the clinging to it, in that moment of clinging, it becomes "me." And that's the moment of the arising of the sense of self.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa said, the sense of self is simply an experience, a passing experience that arises whenever there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all.

The escape? Just turn around and notice the clinging. Notice the sense of self. It's just an experience that comes and goes like anything. The escape isn't to uproot it all. The escape is to take our interest out of rooting around in the experience and instead take care of the awareness. "Oh, wanting it different is like this. Attachment to this memory is like this. 'I can't possibly do this practice, it's hopeless'—thought is like this."

We get more and more interested in taking our stand in the awareness. And that lets us see how craving works, how clinging works. You don't have to figure it all out. You don't have to believe anything I said. You don't have to remember any of it. Just get interested in noticing. When craving arises, what's the object of the craving? What's the experience in the heart and mind? Stay with it. Notice how it behaves. Notice as it passes.

And keep noticing the state of calm, the state of peace, the state of ease—and the state of dis-ease because we don't like calm and peace and we want something a little more intense and we've got to get something going. Watch it. Over and over: the gratification, the danger, and the escape.

Someone today was talking about calm. Calm is the way into peace. Notice how often we don't like it. We think it's uncomfortable, it's unfamiliar. That's okay. Get used to it. Notice craving. Craving stops. It loses its seductive story, and we start to notice more and more how it blasts away the peace. You don't have to stop it. You just have to open to the awareness.

I'll close with a short quotation from Dipa Ma, since Guy mentioned her last night, with her amazing mind. She's little—

She was about four feet tall—an amazing little lady. She said, "There is so much sameness in ordinary life. We're always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. But once greed, hatred, and confusion are gone, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now every day, every moment is full of taste and zest."

Taste and zest. That's what craving promises, but it can't really deliver. Awareness can.

CHAPTER 102

Awareness in Daily Life: From Retreat to Continuity of Practice

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this practical talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of the most common challenges meditators face: maintaining awareness practice when returning to daily life. Drawing extensively from the teachings of her Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she emphasizes that awareness need not be narrow or concentrated—it can be as simple as knowing you're doing the dishes or knowing you're talking. The key insight is recognizing the difference between when awareness is present and when it's not, and discovering for yourself that you prefer how life feels with awareness.

Wilson explores the concept of sampajañña (clear comprehension), particularly the importance of understanding intention (cetanā) as the seed of wholesome or unwholesome action. She references the Buddha's teaching to his son Rāhula about reflecting on actions like a mirror—without judgment—before, during, and after performing them. Through vivid examples including her own radio-listening habits and a story about accidentally breaking statues at Spirit Rock, she illustrates how watching our motivations with genuine interest naturally leads to wisdom.

The talk culminates in a discussion of how compassion develops through the willingness to be present with suffering—our own and others'. Citing His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Wilson explains that awareness of aversion is not itself aversive, and this quality of non-aversive presence is what opens the heart to genuine compassion. She concludes with a moving story of Tibetan nuns who maintained their practice through tremendous hardship, illustrating that there are as many ways to manifest wisdom and compassion as there are people.

One of the ways I find helpful to think about or tune into what we want to call practice—awareness practice—is making the shift from intensive retreat to daily life. For those of you who've done lots of retreats and lots of daily life, hopefully what I have to say is really familiar. For some of you, maybe not so familiar. And even if it's familiar, I know I get caught in it.

Even though we're talking on retreat about how awareness doesn't care what the object is, that we can bring awareness to everything—of course, we get lost. We don't always succeed. But when we leave retreat, and even just like now, today, we forget. Things get busy. And then we will talk, in general, about how to keep practice going. Do I sit every day? What do I do?

But what often happens, consciously or unconsciously, is that some view, some idea has formed in our mind—and it's going to happen to everybody—about what we think practice should be like, or mindfulness should be like, or how mindfulness should look in our daily life. When you leave here, especially if it's your first retreat, you may find that you're actually much more sensitive and quieted down than you have any idea. You might have gotten that sense during speaking practice, where it feels like "whoa" when you come back from a little conversation.

Sometimes people find themselves thinking that if this practice is working, that means somehow we carry with us a sense of calm and it should stay. Or you'll remember what it felt like to be mindful in the times when it was really spacious and the difficult stuff wasn't bothering us. You think that's how it's supposed to be if you're practicing correctly. We forget about all the garbage stuff that happened.

In fact, many people come back to retreat because they remember what it was like at the end. And then they're sitting the first two days and it's really common for them to say, "I forgot about this stuff. I forgot what it was like in the beginning." The hindrances and the pain and the aversion—it's as if that's not part of it.

And so also the emphasis, which we have not been emphasizing, but so much there's an emphasis on concentration as a more focused quality of attention. It's often the case that we leave a retreat, and in our life when we think of mindfulness, we tend to think of it in the calm, focused kind of practice. So if we say, "I need to be mindful while I'm doing the dishes, I need to be mindful while I'm on the computer," it's impossible—because we're trying to be really specific, or really precise, really kind of narrow. And that's one way of mindfulness.

But as we've been saying, awareness can have many flavors. So I want to share a little bit about the way one of my teachers, my Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, talks about awareness. Although he's a Burmese Sayadaw, he did most of his practice in his lay life, with a family, running a little market stall that his father owned. When he talks about cultivating awareness no matter what you're doing in your life, he knows what he's talking about because he's done it.

The thing I have to say that I've learned that's helped me so much, just in these last few years, is this sense of bringing real continuity of awareness. I don't mean every second—we don't mean that by continuity. That's a nice idea. But the willingness, the remembering that no matter what's happening, awareness can be here. We just have to remember. He's helped me so much.

First is by tuning into how simple and accessible and spacious awareness can be. You remember, I think Guy reminded you the other night, when I said the first night: Can you feel your hands? And you all said yes. How hard is that? Not too hard, right? That quality of awareness is all we're talking about to start with. That's all we're talking about. No one can really tell themselves, "I can't do it." You can't really get so caught up in "I'm not concentrated enough, too many thoughts are coming."

People will say that to him: "Too many thoughts." He says, "Oh, did you know there were thoughts?" Yeah. "Okay, that's awareness."

But if you know what's happening, that's awareness, that level of awareness. That's where we start.

For example, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, towards the end of his retreats, has periods where people practice talking—not because the retreat's going to end, but as part of the retreat itself. Then in the interview groups, he'll ask people, "How was that for you?" And mostly we get caught in trying to be too focused, because that's what we've learned. People would say—and these are people who've been practicing a long time—"I'd start talking, I'd be aware of listening, but then I'd kind of lose track because I'd be feeling the sensations and I couldn't follow. There's too much going on at once. I can't follow what they're saying and the sensations in my body—it's too much."

And he would say, "Okay, can you just know you're talking?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Can you know you're listening?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

Can we remember to do it—that's the trick. But when we think, "Oh, just know you're talking," that level. And recognizing the difference—this is key—for yourself, between when there's awareness and when there's not.

So when you're talking to someone, you're blabbing away—like I'll say when I'm in an interview with someone, I'm blabbing away, or you're blabbing away—and suddenly I just go, "Oh yeah, right, hearing." I don't even say that. There's just this shift. Awareness is here. Then it's gone, then it's here. Notice for yourself the difference. Is it different?

Because the most key, essential thing—and this is obvious, but it can't be emphasized too much—the thing that we have to tune into that's going to support us to continue cultivating a practice, a whole path of awakening, beginning with awareness as our key, is that it has to matter to you. Not as a good idea. Not as a should: "I should be aware, and it's a good thing to do, and then I can cultivate compassion, and maybe I'll be a better person." All of that's true, but when it's a should or a thought, it's the beginning—it doesn't hold. Because we forget. "Well, I try to do it, but I can't, and I don't feel any better, and there's as much greed as ever, so to heck with it. I'll wait till my next retreat." I mean, we've all spent many years doing that. I advise you not to do that. Don't wait.

But if it's not a high bar of awareness, if it's just noticing—you're doing the dishes and suddenly, "Oh yeah, aware of doing the dishes." You don't have to be precise. "I can't feel the precise feeling of the water on my fingers." Never mind. Knowing I'm doing the dishes. Appreciating that sense of awareness.

It's a flavor. It's a feeling. Don't look hard for it. It's not like an object you can look at. As this guy said this morning, it's not an object—but just that sense of awareness. Notice when it's there. Notice when it's not, which you'll only notice because you wake up and remember it's not. Without any judgment or goal.

And as he says, it's really true: when you start to appreciate for yourself that you, in a way, prefer how it is for you when you're aware than when you're not—and you really get clear about that with yourself—that makes all the difference. That's going to be our motivation. Then we go to retreats, we practice every day, we do whatever: we work with sīla, with conscious conduct, with non-harming behavior. We do all the different things we do, and we'll all have different paths.

But the heart of it is first knowing the simplicity of awareness. It's available to any of you, any moment you remember. And then really let yourself feel into: Do I appreciate it? Is it important to me? And pretty much, of course, I have an opinion about what you'll find.

And it takes all of our practice to help us continue to find that. But that, I really think, is the main thing. It's really the main thing.

Once we start to trust, to just touch this simple quality of awareness over and over and over—just as we've been doing here, but it won't be so refined, it'll be more general a lot of the time—something happens. Not from your willpower, but just by the frequency of remembering, the awareness starts to get a bit more momentum, just like on retreat. In daily life too.

So you can be in the middle of a meeting, all this intense stuff going on, and suddenly you just feel the clenching in your gut. Awareness. You don't have to say, "Oh, I'm aware of clenching in my gut—tightness, tightness, tightness." There's no time to do that. But you don't have to. The awareness just starts popping in. And it can be in the middle of being all caught up. It feels like this: confused, I don't know what the heck's going on. Awareness of not knowing what the heck's going on.

And that's what's so beautiful about it. It's not with any kind of judgment or preference that we'll be aware only if good stuff is happening. Many people I've talked to over the years, myself included, who have been trying to cultivate some kind of steady sitting practice in their daily life, find that one of the big things leading to abandoning a daily sitting practice is the sense that what happens in the sitting isn't good enough or clear enough. We find we're sitting for experience. We say, "All these things come to mind to do—why don't I just get up and do them? Because I'm getting nowhere in the sitting."

But the sitting isn't to get somewhere. It's just to remind ourselves what awareness is like. So that maybe when we do get up at the end of the sitting, awareness will be more easily remembered. It starts to remember itself, in a way, when we're not putting these big demands on either how precise and clear the awareness needs to be, or how clear our experience needs to be.

I can't tell you—well, I can tell you, I don't know if I can communicate it—what an amazing relief it's been not to try to be dharmic. Not to try to get rid of greed and be generous. I know I was talking about how wonderful generosity is, and that's true. But that's different from trying to get rid of greed and be generous, trying to stop having aversion and be compassionate. It's a setup. It's a total setup.

I used to spend so much energy thinking I should be the bodhisattva of the ages, and every time aversion came up—once a year aversion would come up—there would be this judgment. And then you don't want to pay attention because we have this ingrained habit of pulling away from the unpleasant. And so then the whole thing goes down the tubes. I'd say, "Well, I'll wait till the next retreat. I can't do it."

It's such a relief to cultivate this quality of interest—not to be better, because the wisdom will come by itself—but interest in how the mind is working right now. What's going on? When I'm filled with greed, rather than going into denial: "Oh, greed is like this." Like I was saying in my talk the other night, maybe I act on it, maybe I don't. Either way, we're fascinated to watch how it functions. What's the effect? How does the mind work?

That's one way of strengthening the awareness. It's making the tendency for awareness to pop in stronger. No matter what's happening, we can be aware. And two, with the steadiness of awareness, even watching greed or aversion play out, we keep being aware.

And this is what I love: the freedom of heart and mind comes from recognizing things as they are. You keep being aware. Pretty soon, it's pretty clear that acting from aversion isn't really making me or anybody else happy. And that's different from a judgment that I shouldn't be aversive. Do you get the difference? The wisdom comes by itself.

So the instruction is always saying, just take care of your awareness. Take care of your awareness, just in this moment. Just take care of your awareness.

That's the first thing I want to offer and encourage you with today, tomorrow, as you leave here. Take care of your awareness. Keep exploring it. Just see how it is for you. Can you connect with it? Is it something real to you? And give it time—time enough that you trust it, that you notice it, that it matters to you. Time enough that you see a difference in your life, in how you feel and how things are, how you function, the choices you make when you're aware and when you're not.

Because that's the only place it starts from. No one can do it for us. No one. The Buddha couldn't do it for anyone. We have to want to cultivate a life like this for ourselves. So that's the first piece.

Going along in the same direction—I might be jumping around a little bit because this is kind of two or three different talks combined into one, so I'm not going to go into the depth I would want with any of it, or else we'll be here quite late. And I know you don't want that.

One of the ways in the texts, especially in the commentaries, that this broader sense of mindfulness is spoken of—a slightly more classical way than Tejaniya talks about it—is when we discuss mindfulness and wisdom together. We've mentioned *sati-paññā*,

awareness with wisdom, not exactly the same, but as I was just describing, with the steadiness of awareness, the wisdom naturally arises. You're like, "Oh, there's a sense of understanding. That's how that works."

In the commentaries, this wisdom is also spoken of as *sampajañña*. So the two are often put together: *sati-sampajañña*. *Sati* means mindfulness or awareness. *Sampajañña* is often translated as clear comprehension.

The two aspects I particularly want to speak about tonight go together naturally. Clear comprehension, since it comes from classical texts, is presented in a very orderly way. But it's essentially saying that mindfulness isn't just narrow—it includes the broader context in which things are happening and the motivation or purpose for which we do things. Not just a kind of blind moment-to-moment mindfulness, but seeing the appropriateness, the suitability, the whole situation rather than just our own little piece of it. It's a natural broadening of awareness.

And then there's tuning into—and I'll talk mostly about this—the factor in our mind and experience of intention, the motivation that gives rise to speech and action and even thoughts. This is such a key aspect driving our lives. Awareness and mindfulness of intention is a huge area for cultivating wisdom and a tremendous area for the natural shifting of our suffering habits of mind—of confusion, of greed.

Aversion or hatred or fear naturally transforms, in the light of clear seeing, to wisdom. Greed naturally transforms—not immediately, but moment to moment—to renunciation, which is simply a dropping away of clinging and attachment, and then to generosity.

Ill-will naturally transforms in the light of awareness and wisdom to friendliness, to *mettā*.

And cruelty—we may not think we're cruel, but notice some of the thoughts that come up toward yourself sometimes. Cruelty naturally transforms through awareness, through wisdom, to compassion. This is moment to moment, not forever. It's not like once you see clearly, cruelty never arises in your mind and only compassion remains. We get so black and white, so perfectionistic—forget about it. There's nothing perfect.

But tuning into intention—I want to discuss this because it's such a powerful practice of awakening in our lives.

So this *sampajañña*, this clear comprehension, involves noticing motivation and seeing it within the bigger context of what's appropriate, what's suitable.

Now, motivation in English has a kind of broad sense. "My motivation to come to retreat was to feel better." "My motivation in having my job is to take care of my family." Kind of broad strokes. And in that broader way, that's one use of motivation or aspiration.

But there's another way—obviously from Buddhist psychology—that's much more specific. At times we can notice a mental factor called *cetanā*. You won't see this mostly, but I want to describe how it works. It's a little "oomph" in the mind.

It's a mental factor that leads to speech and action. They say even thought, but for our daily life, let's stick with speech and action. The body doesn't move without an intention arising first.

And just as with mindfulness, which comes together with whatever factors are present in the citta, the psyche, at that moment, so too does intention arrive colored by the mind's current state. If you're paying attention to something and there's a huge amount of aversion in your mind that you don't recognize, you kind of see that object through an aversive screen. Someone was just saying this today in an interview. Even as beautiful as it is, they notice when the mind is averse—if they look at something and think, "Oh, another tree, look at that, yeah." And they knew they thought it was beautiful earlier. The perception gets colored. This isn't personal. This is just how it works. It's wonderful to be aware of it, to watch it without judgment, without taking it personally.

So with intention—the intention, the seed that gives rise to action, is fueled or colored by whatever particular mental states and qualities happen to be arising with it. This is so key because in terms of how the Buddha described action, what's wholesome and unwholesome, what's skillful and unskillful, whatever word you want to use, is not about the result. Which is how we pretty much judge everything, isn't it? We do things for a particular result. If the thing we wanted to happen happens, we think, "Oh, that was a good action." But that's the thing outside our control.

The Buddha says the seed of karma—and karma simply means action—the seed of wholesomeness or unwholesomeness in terms of what's helping to purify our hearts and minds, or what's feeding the demon wolf from that story last night versus what's feeding wholesomeness, isn't what happens with the action. It's the quality that is motivating the action. And so learning to explore, to pay attention to motivation, is really huge.

We can hardly tell our own motivation half the time, and it can be complex. We certainly can't tell from watching another person's action what their motivation is, although that doesn't stop us from imputing it.

Take an example—I always use this one because it just comes to mind. Say you want to tell someone you know well that they do something that's really not for their own good and it bothers other people. When you're not around them and you're not triggered, you genuinely want to tell them this out of kindness. You're thinking, "Let me give you some helpful feedback already."

And someone comes up to you and says, "Can I give you some feedback?" How many ways do we hear that? How many ways can it be meant?

The same seeming action could come from metta—a genuine feeling of "I really want to tell you this out of caring," and you're actually feeling that at the time. Or we can be telling ourselves we want to do it out of metta, but really we're annoyed as anything at them when we say, "Let me tell you this for your own good." And of course you can feel it underneath, right?

Or you come in thinking you want to say it, but you're not paying much attention and you're not even noticing the situation the person is in. You arrive all caught up in yourself, ready to give this good feedback, and you don't notice they've just staggered in the house from a horrible day at work. They're completely stressed out, the kids are screaming, they're feeling a little sick—and you say, "Let me, with all the love and kindness in my heart, give you this feedback." And you wonder why they can't hear it.

Same action, completely different intentions. Or you could consciously be wanting to hurt them. All different things.

So you can perhaps get a sense of how the seed of what's wholesome and the seed of what's unwholesome lies in our intentions, in what motivates the action for us. To begin to explore this, just to tune in, is a wonderful practice. As I was talking about with upekkha, we approach this with awareness, not with judgment. We simply want to see what's happening. If we think, "Well, I don't want to see when it's an ugly intention"—and we do that, right? We just shut it down. That doesn't work. We have to be willing to see the whole show with kind awareness. Then we really learn.

And when there's that mindfulness just noticing what's giving rise to an action—try it with little things—it can become a moment of choice. I think I mentioned this at the last retreat. I started to notice a habit of mine: sometimes when I get in the car and I'm driving—where I live in Massachusetts, it's an hour's drive to anywhere, sort of like here.

Not quite as remote as here, but I get in the car, and if my mind just gets a little restless, a little scattered, I reach out to turn on the radio. Just do it. And if I notice that—just notice it, not having the idea that I *shouldn't* turn on the radio, because that's putting a kind of negativity on it—but more just watching: what am I doing?

So I watch it. I'm really clear. My mind gets restless, a little bit bored. I can feel it. And so the hand goes out and turns on the radio. And then if I notice that, sometimes as I tune in, I go, "Actually, it's much more peaceful without it." And I just turn it off. That's the wisdom coming in. That's not "you shouldn't listen." Because if I say I shouldn't listen and I turn it off, two seconds later the same thing happens again, right? But when I tune in—oh yeah, it's much more peaceful without it.

Or if I go ahead and turn it on, keep watching. I notice I turn it on. Well, there's never anything I want to listen to. So I turn it on, I don't like this, and I start punching the buttons. Well, this—I go ten seconds, ten seconds. Then I put it on the one that jumps from station to station. So it's jumping from station to station, going for ten seconds. Do I want to listen? No, I don't want to listen. I'm driving off the road, meanwhile. By the end of it, I'm getting more and more restless and agitated. And I go, "Why the heck am I doing this?"

If you can just watch this stuff, we learn so much. We learn so much about the habits of the mind. It's a kind of restlessness that leads to wanting some kind of input, just some kind of input. But does the input make me happy? No. It's feeding the restlessness. It's feeding the agitation. So just to keep watching—we learn so much. And then there's that moment of choice where I go, "Ah, turn it off," and there's peace. That doesn't mean the whole thing doesn't start again in five minutes.

But when we're taking our stance in the awareness—like Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, awareness is your home, stay where you belong—when you take the stance in awareness, it's fascinating just to watch that whole process. Many, many years ago, in the first years of my practice, I would always have these ideas, as I said, of being dharmic, how I should be. And listening to crap on the radio wasn't it. So I would be listening to crap on the radio and judging myself the whole time. You're doing it without awareness and adding negativity and aversion to the mix.

Bring in awareness at that point. Because we so much don't really like being with negative states, we don't really want to bring in awareness at that point. "Oh no, this is going to go away." So this is where the structure of our practice and the wisdom of understanding—for example, the Four Noble Truths, or understanding impermanence, understanding unsatisfactoriness—comes in. Because that borrowed wisdom, that

heard wisdom, gives us a sense of, "Yeah, okay, this is uncomfortable. Let's get interested in seeing what's going on. What's feeding the confusion here? What's feeding the agitation? Where's the peace?"

I wouldn't really be saying all of that internally, because I'm just kind of gently watching what's happening. But there's that quality of trust in the awareness and wanting to really see peace. Because I really trust the stuff I've read, the stuff I've heard, the stuff I've practiced—the Buddha's way of describing.

I mean, just totally. It does not make sense to doubt it. It's real in my experience, everything we've described. And so when I feel myself getting more and more agitated, I know for an absolute fact from my own experience that somewhere the mind is being strengthened by some kind of greed, or some kind of aversion or fear, or some kind of delusion. Well, delusion always goes with greed or aversion, or stands alone. I know that's there. And my interest is: let's see it. Let's see what's going on. Let's see how the mind is getting seduced. Let's understand how it's working.

Back to Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He has a mind like that. He was just fascinated by what was going on in his mind, no matter what. He said he'd go out with his friends, and they didn't know what he was doing. But he said, "I'm always watching my mind. What's going on in the mind?" He calls it his secret mission. He said, "I'm going with my friends to a bar, whatever they call a bar in Burma, or a kickboxing match or something. And I'm just watching my mind."

He was telling a story, and this is great for watching our intentions. He said he used to love going to boxing matches. And he hadn't gone for a long time, so finally he said, "I'm going to go." And his mind kind of said, "Oh no, you shouldn't." But he said, "No, I'm going to go." And he's watching his mind. So he watched how much trouble it was to take the time off from his work, close down his stall, get on a public bus in Burma—which is hot and crowded—and endure the long journey because he lived in Yangon. By the time you get there, you're totally worn out. Then he goes in and all these people are screaming and yelling at this big sports event. It's really loud and unpleasant. And then the boxers start and these guys are pounding each other. And he's right in the front row. And he goes, "What the hell am I doing here?" That's exactly what he said. And he said that was the last one he went to.

In a way, he enjoyed that whole thing because the enjoyment is the wisdom. The enjoyment is, "Wow, look at how this is working. Look at what we're doing when we're not paying attention." So beginning to get interested in watching our minds, watching as best as we can when we're about to do something.

The Buddha said to his son, Rahula, who became a monk when he was seven years old. And as I said, Rahula became completely enlightened—I think also at seven. So the Buddha did have some kind of... well, it was nice having a Buddha around. Let's put it that way.

But there's a very well-known discourse where he's talking to Rahula about noticing, about really exploring your motivation for any action. And the sutta starts by saying—and this is important—he says to Rahula, "What is a mirror for?" And Rahula says, "A mirror is to reflect, just to reflect." And the Buddha says, "Yes, just so, Rahula. So just like a mirror, you should reflect on your actions—any action before you do it, of body, speech, or mind."

The reason I want to bring that in is that the mirror reflects. It doesn't judge, does it? The mirror doesn't pop up and say, "God, you look like heck today. What are you doing?" The mirror reflects just as it is. That pure awareness is just like that. So you're reflecting not with judgment, not to say you're good or bad. He says you reflect on your action before you're doing it, if you can, to see: is this going to lead to harm or pain for me or others? If so, refrain from it.

If you don't notice before the action and you notice in the middle of the action, reflect. This is how I would put it in my own language: check what's your motivation. Because we don't know the result of the action, but we can tune in and say, "You know, there's a lot of aversion in this. Maybe I could wait and do it when the mind is clearer." In the middle, reflect. Or if you check it and go, "As far as I can tell, this seems to be coming from a clear mind." Maybe it's coming from compassion. Maybe it's coming from just simple recognition that it's time to do this—the obvious thing to do. Maybe it's coming from metta. Maybe it's coming from joy. Maybe it's coming from a sense of duty, but without negativity. And you do it.

If you don't know until after it's over, still tune in, reflect, check what was the motivation. After it's over, you actually have more of a sense of whether it brought some kind of harm to yourself or others. And if that's the case, the Buddha does not say take out the whip, tell yourself how horrible you are—guilt, guilt, guilt. Guilt actually isn't something he ever talks about. He says, in another sutta, if you see that actions you have done in the past have been unwholesome, have led to your own suffering or the suffering of others, when you see that, then you say to yourself, "Okay, now I won't do that anymore." He doesn't say, "Oh my God, I'm so horrible. Sit here and torment yourself." But you feel the remorse. "Oh, that lying, that wasn't helpful. I'm really not going to lie anymore."

So this quality of looking at what's our motivation, just like a mirror, just to see—is really incredibly powerful. And from this is where we start to see for ourselves when we talk about what's wholesome or skillful, what's unwholesome or unskillful. Sure, there are lists. There are lots of lists. There are the five training guidelines we took: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie or use harsh speech, not to harm others or ourselves with our sexual activity, not to take drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and cause heedlessness and lead us to do other harmful things. But those aren't meant as external rules that you just blindly follow. They're reference points.

Really, when we see what's skillful and what's unskillful, it's by tuning into our own experience as we do something, after we've done it, how we do it, how it affects others—and seeing what actually leads to the happiness and freedom from suffering of others, to happiness and less suffering for ourselves. So it becomes not borrowed knowledge and not just having to obey some rules, but we know for ourselves. We experience the goodness of non-harming.

And when a mind that's not clouded by confusion experiences that goodness, it prefers it. Even though the habit of going after the pleasant and pulling away from the unpleasant is so strong, when with conscious awareness, with a wise mind, we actually experience the wholesomeness of—I want to say goodness—of non-harming, there's such a sense of higher happiness that even our sense of self prefers it. It just feels lovely.

I'll tell you a little story. A friend of mine told this at the last retreat, but it was just an example of how you prefer it. This is Spirit Rock, which some of you have been to. They have a big store—much bigger than ours—a giant store. They sell all kinds of things. I was teaching there in February, and I wanted to go down and get a little statue, a White Tara statue that I'd seen the year before. Because you go and buy it, it's just self-service, like here. So I went in and was looking all around but couldn't see it. I happened to run into a very dear friend of mine who was just coming through that day, who from time to time has worked with the person who runs the store. She said, "Oh, I know where the statues are kept in these closets outside. And I know where the secret little magnet is kept that opens the closet doors"—because you couldn't open them otherwise.

So she did that, and the two of us were rooting happily through these closets. We finally found the one with tons of statues. We're going through all the statues, finding the little one I wanted at the back, and we get it out. Then she's putting back another little statue—it was a Manjushri statue with a little sword. She barely touched the thing, barely touched it, and the sword snapped.

And she said, "Oh, no." And then I said, "Oh." And then I was holding one. I put it back. And the same thing happened. We're both like, "Oh."

She sent me an email later, because without saying anything, we both were looking at each other, and it just flashed through. She said, for a nanosecond, both our minds went to: *just put it back, no one will know.* And I'm thinking, *I don't want to buy this Manjushri statue.* We're both thinking, *I don't want to buy this Manjushri statue.*

So that went through our minds, but we saw it immediately. And there was no question, right? We could have—no one would have ever known. But no, we can't. So we took them out, locked up the closet. Then we went over to Marianne, who runs this place, to her office, like two little bad girls going to confess. She wasn't there, so we're writing out a whole sheet, you know. And then she came in and goes, "What are you two doing here?"

We really felt like little bad girls. "Here, we're confessing. We have to buy these."

And she goes, "Ah, that happens all the time. We just glue it back together and sell it for half price."

That was great. But the sense of—you know, it's a funny story now, but she reminded me. I wouldn't have even thought about it. But that sense of so appreciating the quality of awareness that would just see that little moment arise. And it's so clear. It's not even a conscious choice. It just feels so off. And the appreciation for honesty is just right there. The wisdom is right there.

The more we pay attention to all the ways our mind is working, the more it moves in that direction. It's not like we're such great people or something. It's nothing personal. But wisdom prefers non-harming. It just feels better. If you just want to stay on the level of me, of personality—it feels better. Sometimes it works out nicely like that too. It doesn't always, but it doesn't matter because that's not the point.

I said before, and that was a little example, of how the steadiness of awareness transforms unwholesome qualities—the torments of mind, the habits of greed, of ill will, of cruelty—naturally transforms our motivation. And this is really true. It's really true.

I just want to talk a little bit about it. Maybe I'll talk about it in terms of compassion. Because for many of us, one aspect of cultivating mindfulness practice is to wake up, to be free. And another aspect—not for everybody, but for many people—is really wanting to act and move in the world through compassion, through a motivation of compassion rather than *it's all about me, me, me,* right?

This also gets to where the seed, the truest essence of an action, isn't in how it looks or its result, but in the movement in the mind, in the heart that gives rise to it. This is also very true with compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh likes to give very simple examples where the natural effect of understanding a situation will bring the mind into compassion when we were perhaps annoyed. He gives an example of a brother and sister, or two friends, and say the sister is younger and being really fretful and whiny and bratty, and the brother's getting really annoyed and upset and going down a bad road.

And the mother explains to the brother, who's a little older and can understand, that the little girl is sick and hurting and in a lot of pain, and she can't really help herself. She explains it in a way that the brother can understand. And when he understands that, the sense of blame and aversion, even in a child, can go away.

And there's just this sense of—it doesn't have to be like the bodhisattva of the ages—but this sense of, "Oh, you're hurting. I'm really sorry." I'm sure you've all experienced that. Even to yourself. Just this sense of moving from blame, moving from ill will, moving from "Oh, how could I do that? That was so bad to say." That sense of self-forgiveness: "I couldn't have done any differently at that time." And a sense of compassion comes in, a sense of understanding. I'm giving very simple examples, but that's really how it works.

Compassion is described or defined in the Theravāda as the quivering of the heart—you could say, the quivering of the mind—in connection with, in response to pain, in response to suffering. Another way of describing it, in terms of our mettā practice: when you feel a sense of mettā, not some huge flood, but just that open connectedness with a person, or that open acceptance—"just as you are, may you be happy"—that open presence, that connectedness. When that quality of friendliness connects with the suffering aspect of yourself or another, particularly the suffering aspect, the quality of heart and mind that is elicited in this open, wise space is compassion. It just feels a little bit different. It has a slightly different shading. It's a tenderness, really, of heart that is willing and able to stay gently present with the pain, with the sadness.

It may or may not be able to fix it. If there's the movement to alleviate the suffering, that's wonderful if it's possible—coming from compassion, coming from a being-with the suffering, not from a hating the suffering. That is not compassion. Compassion is the ability to be really present with it. If there's something to do, great, we do it. If there's not, compassion has this open, tender quality of wisdom and non-judging mind that can still be with the person or be with the suffering.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is always reborn as the manifestation, the embodiment of compassion—I was at that teaching in California where he was talking about how compassion develops. He says it develops from deep insight into what the experience of suffering actually is. And how does that insight develop, you may ask? By being present with our own experience when there's suffering, when there's physical pain, when there's emotional pain of any sort. Bringing this same interested awareness, this careful awareness, allowing the mindfulness to just gently touch—whether it's physical pain or aversion in the mind, or a whole self-judging story, or a memory that in this moment brings up a sense of shame, whatever it is. Or it's rage and despair at what's going on in the world.

Whatever it is, it's an experience arising in your mind and body right now. The thought may be about the past or the future. The thought may be about somewhere on the other side of the world. But it's a thought arising right now. It's a sensation, a feeling arising right now in your mind-body experience. And awareness can touch it. Awareness can meet it. And that quality we bring of simplicity, of kindness, of awareness—that is, in that moment, shifting the habit of mind from resistance and aversion toward the suffering to openness. That's what allows compassion. It's not that we have to think about how to cultivate it. It's just that moment, even if it's just a moment, where you can touch that burning pain and just let it be as it is—just for a moment, and then it bounces off. That was a moment of openness in the mind, of non-aversion. Non-aversion opens into mettā and compassion.

So it's not that we have to jump from being lost in reactivity to being the Dalai Lama. But this is how moment-to-moment awareness is actually cultivating compassion. Awareness of aversion is not aversion. Do you understand what I mean? The aversion is aversive. The awareness of aversion is not aversive. Awareness of suffering, when it's not colored by aversion, is actually how we open to compassion.

And as the Dalai Lama then goes on to say, as our compassion—our ability to just be with ourselves with clear awareness and suffering, even little sufferings—as that strengthens, then it begins to automatically, just moment to moment, turn into a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings, and then too with all beings.

And I'm sure you must have seen how this works. If you've ever been really sick—I had years ago developed an autoimmune disease, and it's one of these things that everybody and their brother has something you should do for it. Try this, try that. All well-intentioned, though maybe not wisely, but well-intentioned.

But can you feel the difference? When somebody comes and says, "Do this, do this, do this," and you can feel underneath it, there's trying to help, but the motivation is actually fear or aversion or real discomfort with being with you while you're uncomfortable. If we can't be with ourselves when we're uncomfortable, it's really hard to be with someone else when they're uncomfortable. And even if we're trying to do the compassionate action, the internal seed of the action is not compassion—it's discomfort or fear or aversion. So we get interested to see that.

And have you ever been with someone who can just come and be with you? Maybe they've got nothing to offer to fix it, but they're just there with you in the difficulty. You can feel, to me, a real sense of compassion—the sense of being present without needing to blind oneself or look away. Then if something occurs to do, you do it. Sure, there's all that energy to act. If there's not, you can just be there, really open and together. It's a beautiful thing.

There are a lot of nurses here. I'm sure you know more than I exactly what I'm talking about because you're manifesting that all the time. And if you've ever been in the hospital and had a nurse who wasn't manifesting that—it's rough. I've got to tell you, it's rough. So to the nurses and doctors, I bow. I really bow.

Joko Beck, who was a Zen teacher, has a wonderful way of saying it: Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness when we're going through something? Even a little confusion and unpleasantness. This is really where awareness brings wisdom, and the wisdom naturally transforms our fear of suffering, our dislike of suffering, into compassion, into connectedness with ourselves and with all beings. It takes trust, it takes practice, it takes real courage sometimes—even to be willing to look and see and to begin to trust that we can act without trying to do so much all the time.

There's so much suffering in the world, I don't have to tell you. And being quite active in all the different realms, the results can be doing a lot of good. They can be. But if the motivation is coming largely from anger—which of course is going to happen, we're not perfect beings, and stuff is so difficult—it starts to eat us up. So this is where we want to pay attention.

I can tell this story because this is the perfect place to tell it—it happened here. The first retreat I taught here, and it was one of the first retreats at Spirit Rock, if not the first. There's a photo on the wall in the dining room of all the people who were at that retreat. I was teaching it with Joseph Goldstein. This place had just opened, and the re-

treat was billed for burned-out environmentalists. So most of them had no sense of meditation or dharma practice at all. It was before even stress reduction and MBSR got so big. Grove really pulled them in from environmental activism.

Yes, it was a tough bunch. A tough bunch. Really smart lawyers and activists, burned out for sure. High-powered and willing, you know—open but with a sort of "prove it" attitude, though interested. I was a little... what would you say? I was a little like, okay, let's see.

So we taught about a ten-day retreat, and we did mettā every afternoon like this. When we first introduced it, we were talking about it, and one man—I don't remember his name—but people generally were saying, "Are you kidding? Mettā? Soft? Accepting? Open to people? Do you know what it's like in the courtroom against these big corporations? They hate you, and they're attacking you, and they're doing everything they can to get you. You have to have your anger. You have to have your energy to go in and fight back. That's what you need. Don't tell me mettā—it's too mushy."

Okay, but you're here.

Just do it. I mean, they did it. To his credit, this one particular guy was very much involved in some very difficult, angry lawsuit, right in the middle of it. And at the end—I'm not exaggerating—at the end of the retreat, just talking, he was actually crying a little bit. And he said, "I had no idea how that anger wasn't just coming out against the other lawyers. It's eating me up. It's coming out in my family. It's coming out everywhere I go. It's not just at the lawyer—it's everywhere."

I never saw him again, so I don't know what effect it ultimately had. But just stopping to look, to turn around and look—it's a huge thing we're doing.

We're practicing it here, and it may feel like, well, we are really privileged to be able to be here. But we can meet that with gratitude rather than guilt, because it's not so esoteric. It's not that we're just sitting here so that we can look inside our own hearts and minds and feel better about ourselves, really getting into emptiness and compassion and subtlety. Yeah, that's fantastic—I love all that stuff. But how does it affect our speech, our actions in the world?

This awareness, this mindfulness, this understanding of how greed and confusion and hatred bring suffering to ourselves when they guide our actions and we don't know it—when we don't know it and try to blind ourselves to it, these forces run our actions. Just to have this tool of mindfulness and wisdom, the willingness to apply it over and over, the willingness to see how when these defilements are active and stronger than awareness, the suffering they cause us. To see how wisdom comes in and the mind nat-

urally, habitually, moves toward awareness. The actions of compassion, actions of friendliness, actions of non-harming, connectedness with other beings—how we manifest in the world affects everybody we come in contact with.

There's no way we can say this is just an isolated, separate, esoteric little practice. We're learning these tools to go out and do whatever you do, whether you do some kind of environmental activism, whether you stay home and take care of your family, whether you're working in an office, whether you're being a nurse—it doesn't matter. Whatever we're doing, we come in contact with people. And how we act, and the motivations of our heart and mind, are contagious. They communicate. Just like when you're around someone really angry, it's a lot easier to get angry. When you're around someone that's angry and you can tune into the anger building in yourself and say, "Maybe I don't need to do that right now"—that is huge. I really feel like it's a huge gift to the world.

And how we show up—there is no one right way, right? How we manifest.

So I'll just end with a story from a movie, a little hour-long documentary that was made with Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who is a pretty well-known Tibetan teacher in this country now. He was going back to Tibet with some Western women to visit some nuns up in an area called Nangchen. And one of the women was filming and put together this documentary.

These nuns in Tibet had been there for many, many years. And during the Cultural Revolution, twenty or thirty years ago, they were forced—well, the Chinese came in and forced them to leave their nunneries. Some were killed. Some were put into prison camps. And the ones who weren't had to make a choice. All of them had to disrobe. Some of them went way, way up into the mountains, into the caves, and just hid, trying to stay nuns secretly and do their practice. Some of them starved to death. They had really difficult times—we can't even imagine.

Other ones went back to their families, and some of them just gave up and went back to normal life. But a lot of them, though they looked like they were having normal lives, said they were secret nuns. They were wearing their normal clothes. They had to seem to take part with their family. But in their heart, they never abandoned being nuns.

And when Tsoknyi Rinpoche and these women went back just a few years ago, things had eased a bit. The nuns that were still alive were coming back together. The ones who had almost starved but lived had come back down. The ones that had been with their families had come back.

They'd taken robes again, and they were rebuilding their nunnery, high up on a mountain. They were dragging timbers and giant stones by hand, rebuilding this sacred place.

You see, they all had this deep commitment to their awareness, to their awakening, to goodness. How they carried it through this difficult time was unique to each of them. Then when it was time, they came back together, each doing different things.

And this is where I want to end. These Western women were taken up to meet someone special. The nuns said, "This is our oldest, most senior nun. She's the most realized of all of us."

They took her up, and there she was in this tiny, tiny little shack way up high. She looked like she was 150 years old—I don't know how old she really was. She'd certainly been through a lot. She was lying in a kind of wooden bed. She couldn't get up anymore, and she just lay there all the time. Her eyes were so bright—one of these old awakened beings with incredibly bright eyes. And she was just spinning a prayer wheel.

She said, "All I do all day is send out prayers of loving-kindness for all beings. I just lie here for twenty-four hours"—except when sleeping—"just saying, 'May all beings be happy and free from suffering. May all beings be happy and free from suffering.'"

I thought, wow. What a life. What a mind. What a cultivation.

You could say, well, nobody knows. It's just some little lady up there and nobody else knows it. Like I said about that nun in Burma who chants metta—who actually I know who he meant, but I hate to tell you she died. But this other nun's still up there chanting.

So there are as many ways as there are people to manifest wisdom and compassion. Take care of your awareness. It's really the most precious gift we have.

And thank you all for being here, for your commitment, and for your caring for yourselves and the world.

CHAPTER 103

Three Jobs Of The Yogi

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *Drawing from the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Carol Wilson offers a clarifying framework for meditation practice centered on three essential tasks. The first job is cultivating sammā diṭṭhi (right view)—understanding why we practice and recognizing that freedom from suffering is possible. This includes seeing experience accurately as yathā bhūta, things as they have come to be through causes and conditions, rather than as personal or random.*
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> *The second job is simple sati (mindfulness)—bare awareness of what's happening now without trying to fix or improve experience. Wilson explores how the kilesas (mental torments) of greed, aversion, and delusion color our perception and obstruct accurate recognition. Through vivid personal examples, including her own suffering while watching tennis, she illustrates how wanting and aversion distort our relationship to experience and how mindfulness reveals the natural lawfulness of cause and effect.*
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> *The third job is steadiness—the perseverance to maintain moment-to-moment awareness. Wilson emphasizes that wisdom cannot be forced or manufactured; it arises naturally when conditions of sustained, relaxed attention are present. She offers Joseph Goldstein's practical tip of prioritizing mindfulness during daily activities over formal sitting, recognizing that the mundane moments of life are precisely where profound understanding unfolds. The invitation throughout is to trust the simplicity of awareness itself rather than constantly seeking something more interesting or meaningful.*

So tonight what I want to talk about is, hopefully, a way of simplifying things, which isn't really the way my mind works. But we give so many different instructions. So I'm borrowing from one of the ways that one of my teachers, Sayadaw Utejania, talks. I find he has a very pithy and, to me, amusing way of putting things. And so what I want to talk about, borrowing from him, is the three jobs of a yogi. That's you, and me, and all of us—the three jobs—which is hopefully to simplify.

So of course, all beginning by recognizing, which hopefully we do, that meditation is the work of the mind. The three jobs are the work of the mind.

The first one, the first job, our job, is to begin not only our meditation but our whole spiritual practice with some form of right view. Now, right view in the way that the Buddha speaks about it in the suttas is a vast topic, encompassing so many different things. And just for this beginning way of our first job, I want to talk about it very

simply, not complex—all the ways you have to understand what's wholesome action and what's unwholesome action. You could go on and on, and we probably will over the next few weeks because it's fascinating.

But this beginning aspect, our first job, is simply having some sense of knowing why we're doing this. That there's a possibility for less suffering, if you just want to put it that simply. To have some basic understanding that what we're doing is in a good cause, that there's something behind it. We're not just kind of sitting and walking and following the breath and being aware. You know how sometimes you're just doing it without really any sense of why. So right view is just knowing that it's possible to come to a different way of relating to our life. It's possible to have—not that we know it yet for ourselves—but this sense of a direction or the sense of a potential to live with more peace and ease. That's my language. You find your own.

That's why, for myself, I think I've always loved and why I spend my life sharing the teachings from the Buddha. I mean, there's so many different ways in this world to practice for awakening, to understand our life better. But I've always loved the way the Buddha describes things. His teachings are complex, but at the core, at the heart, I feel —this is me now—he's just taking us into the core of life, the core of experience.

What he says is that he started his own journey by just seeing how this life is. Why do we suffer? This life with all its beauty and all its marvels and so much sorrow. Why is there this suffering? Why do beings, starting with himself, suffer? Why are we unhappy? Why are we discontented? And then his whole trajectory of practice was not sitting and railing against it or trying to think about it, but setting out in an exploration of his own experience, his own mind and body, to really look into, to really explore and see. Does it have to be this way, that there's so much discontent, dis-ease, suffering? Is there another way? Is there a cause? Is there an end of it? What is it?

So you can hear the whole Buddha's teaching in that. And I'm staying simple tonight with that sense of not just going out and following the stream or going by what was taught before, but looking for himself.

And so what he offers—all the Buddha's teachings—are a path: what he discovered, what he shared, what he can offer us. But in the end, as I think someone has already said on this retreat, one of the core ways he teaches is the word in Pali, *ehipassiko*, which is lovely. It means "come and see for yourself." You too, come and see. He's saying, "I can see this. I know for myself that it's possible to awaken from this dream of confusion and delusion. This is how I did it. This is what I understand. Come and see for

yourself." It's an invitation to explore, an invitation to really make good use of this precious life. And as he said in many different places, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so."

So that's what I've always loved, what I continue to love—this invitation. Because it's necessary that we look and see for ourselves at this very salient point of life.

And the most essential thing, again, that I really love is that when, as far as we can tell from reading, when the Buddha awakened and claimed his full awakening, he did not awaken into a different world. He awoke into the same body, the same physical conditions. People didn't start suddenly behaving better. There were still wars, there were still famines, there was still stupidity, there was still all the stuff that we experience.

And this was like a "duh" moment for me, somewhere way, way into my practice, where I thought, "Oh, the Buddha's life after he awakened still had all this stuff happening." It wasn't like floating on a cloud somewhere of everything lovely.

So what was different?

And of course, as we hopefully have some trust and faith in—or you wouldn't still be sitting here, I'm pretty sure—is the sense that the seed, the core of suffering, and the seed, the core of freedom from suffering, of peace, of ease, arises in the mind and the heart in any particular moment. And so this freedom that he is inviting us to come and explore is not in having the world change, but in our understanding of what's happening changes, so that the way our heart and mind relates to experience is completely different. And this is really the freedom he talks about.

So the first aspect of right view I want to say as our job is this: just having some sense—of course not complete, but some sense—of why we're doing it. And this gives us some energy, some motivation to get us on the path, to keep us on the path.

Let me read you this little story I just read that I enjoyed. It sort of fits in. Lama Surya Das spent a lot of time with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, the great Tibetan Dzogchen master—Joseph mentioned him the other night. So Surya Das tells this story of being in France. Khenpo was in France, and he was an older man at this time, having lived all his life in Tibet and India. He was traveling in France, and at some point he ended up at a beach along the French coast. He'd never been at a beach—they don't have beaches in Tibet—or seen how Westerners behave on a beach.

So he came back and he was describing his trip. But then all of a sudden he started talking about the beach, how they'd gone to the edge of the ocean. At first he said, "Wow, it's so big!" Can you imagine never having seen the ocean? It's huge. And then he

described what he had seen. He said, "There were these people there, and instead of sitting and meditating or doing yoga, these people were just lying there, almost naked, doing nothing. And when they were tired of lying there, instead of doing something, they just turned over. Then they lay there again for another few hours."

Khenpo was truly, genuinely perplexed. It was sort of like *Third Rock from the Sun*, that TV show about aliens coming to Earth. He said, "Why were they doing that?" He asked over and over. He couldn't understand it. He had so much compassion for them. How could they waste their precious human existence? This life that is so short, so tenuous, so precious, so valuable, so necessary. A life to be used impeccably and usefully for our own welfare and the benefit of all—not just to lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard.

He was impassioned now. "I just wanted to go wake them up." And he had noticed a big white chair, probably the lifeguard's chair. He said, "But there were two young people sitting there, so I couldn't go up. But I wanted to badly, because I wanted to climb up there and announce to everybody that it was time to wake up."

So in our own way, that's a sense of right view—something. It's time to wake up. And the Buddha's having followed a path and saying, "Yes, it's possible" is really helpful to keep going.

The second aspect of right view—and I just want to talk a little about it because this is again vast—is another reason I love "right view" actually as a translation of *sammā diṭṭhi*, as a literal translation of viewing rightly, or recognizing accurately, accurate perception. What actually serves as the mode, the catalyst, of insight—of freeing insight, the insight that even just for a moment releases the habit of the mind and heart of clinging or confusion or aversion, just in a moment—it's not like some willpower: "Now I will stop this." It's a sudden shift of perception where we recognize things as they are accurately. And when we recognize accurately, the response is appropriate.

And this, again, is a vast topic. But recognizing accurately—seeing that one way you can say that everything is natural. I think Guy, or someone, said this the other night: that basically everything's a process.

Causes and conditions lead to a lawful effect. We're not going to see all of the causes and conditions and all of the effects, but there's a lawfulness. It isn't random. For example, if you plant a mango seed, we know we're not going to get an apple tree. It's not a random thing. Or the so-called law of gravity—that's what I mean. It's not like if we wish hard enough, if I throw this up, it won't fall back down again. We'd say, well, that's stupid, right?

Well, the way things work—cause and effect in our mind and body—is just the same. But until we see this, we kind of just keep wishing it would be different. "I just wish that I didn't have these unpleasant habits of mind. I wish I wasn't sixty-one years old." That will change, but not in the direction I wish. And that will also be natural cause and effect. But it's not personal.

So just in a nutshell, when we recognize accurately that everything is causes and conditions, there's a word for it: *yathā bhūta*—recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment. It's a phrase often used in the suttas, sometimes translated as "things as they are," but more accurate is "things as they have come to be." You get a sense of how that's process-oriented.

So in this moment, however it is for you sitting there, is how things have come to be in this moment—as this momentary result of infinite past causes and conditions that you actually couldn't separate. If you start trying to list all the causes and conditions for your being sitting here right now, well, it goes back to your birth and your parents and the universe and the food and the farmers and the weather. You can't separate anything out. Just in this moment, things are as they have come to be. *Yathā bhūta*. This moment couldn't be different. How could it? It is as it is. Next moment will be different—the causes and conditions change again.

Right view on this aspect of recognizing things as they are, as they have come to be in this moment—it's a huge shift. It's the seed of insight. It's not so much about having some amazing experience and living in some other realm of reality. It's like waking up to what's actually going on now.

I'm simplifying, okay? Just know I'm simplifying. But the reason the seeds of suffering and confusion—of clinging, of grasping, of resistance, of delusion—keep arising in our mind is that we don't recognize what's happening in the moment just as it is. And then our response isn't really aligned with reality.

I'll give some examples as I go along, but as you know, take clinging. Clinging to something that's already changed. Why does it not work? When we see it, it's so obvious that we don't have to groan and grunt and give up clinging to that thing. The clinging doesn't arise anymore because it so obviously doesn't make sense. We say, do you cling to the sunset as the sun's going down? "Oh please, sun, don't go down." Maybe if something really bad is going to happen when the sun goes down. But you know what I mean? We don't. It doesn't make sense.

So in this way, the sense of ease, of freedom of heart and mind, is truly natural and normal. It's not like some amazing thing we have to create through willpower. It's the natural effect of the cause of right view, of accurate recognition.

And so this shift that hopefully our formal practice helps us with is this shift from putting so much of our attention, so much of our looking to experience and objects for meaning and fulfillment, for the source of suffering and for the ending of suffering—change the object, change the experience. Our shift here, our second job, is that of simple awareness of what's happening now. And I'll talk more about that. So the second job is *sati*.

awareness, mindfulness, interest in how this mind is working in the moment, rather than how can I manipulate and fix what's going on so everything's a little bit better. But that's our habit.

So another aspect of this, another way of describing this right view, what helps interest in the process arise, is just starting to see, just for a moment, how maybe our strategies haven't quite been working. We know it on one level, or you wouldn't be here. Because this is, as someone said, no one's idea of a vacation—maybe some people's, but not most people's idea of a vacation. So you're here for some reason.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He talks about three attitudes of practice, the first one being renunciation, but he means it in a different way. Renunciation, kind of the root of all the subsequent stages of the path—he's using it to imply the strong wish, the strong motivation to free oneself, not only from life's immediate sorrows, but from the seemingly unending sufferings of samsara. Samsara being that seemingly unending cycle of conditioned existence. There's this cycle of wanting and needing and getting and wanting and needing and becoming.

When we start to just see that, with that comes a heartfelt weariness, a heartfelt disillusionment, disenchantment with our endless quest for gratification, for approval, for profit, for status. It's not like we're saying, "Oh, these things are bad, and I'm bad for wanting them." It's not going from one extreme to the other, but seeing through the process itself.

And this doesn't have to be some incredibly esoteric experience. I'll give you an example that was another "duh" experience for me recently. It's a little embarrassing, but I think it's a good example. Samsara, just this endless wanting—get it a little bit better, a little bit better. There's some Tibetan teacher, I think it's Trungpa, I'm not sure who, defining samsara as "the urge to correct." I could really relate to that.

So anyway, it doesn't have to be esoteric. I noticed this: I happen to be, I don't know why, a tennis fan, a real fan of professional tennis. I don't know why because I'm so non-sports oriented, but I really love following professional tennis. I just enjoy watching the people play, I follow the tournaments, and of course, if you do that, you end up having particular players that you root for. Mine's Federer—someone who wins a lot, me and ten million other people.

But when I'm watching a tournament and he's playing, it's so much suffering for me. I'm so stressed. Sometimes when I can see he's making a lot of unforced errors, he's not getting in his first serves, I can see this is not going in a good direction—sometimes I have to stop and go take a walk. Sometimes I can't even watch and I'll get Joseph to record it on his TV. And then I check who won. I know you shouldn't do this. And then if he won, I'll go watch it. Other guys I can watch and just really appreciate, even if I have a slight preference. And it's just wanting. I mean, it's all made up. I don't know this guy from anybody. And I probably wouldn't like him. And why do I care? What's happening? They're hitting the ball back and forth, making a million dollars whether they win or lose.

But anyway, I think I'm enjoying it. That's the point—no one's making me do this. So this summer, this was the "duh" moment. This has been going on for a few years, this is not new, but this summer—

So it was Wimbledon, which if you don't follow tennis, that's one of the biggest tournaments, one of the most prestigious. Roger had been number one for many years, but he hadn't held that position for a while, and he hadn't won a major in a couple of years. He's thirty, now thirty-one, so everyone was writing the death sentence.

Anyway, he's playing Wimbledon, and again, the whole thing—so tense. And he won it, which was amazing. He won Wimbledon. He set a new record for the most tournaments ever won. He got back to being number one, which no one ever thought he could do.

So long story short, in terms of that world, in terms of my wanting it, that's the best that could possibly happen. It couldn't be any better.

How long does one stay happy from that? A day? Two days? Then you've got to start worrying about the Olympics. Well, they're over—he didn't win that. Then you've got to start worrying about the US Open, which just finished. And I'm even seeing, okay, he got to the quarters. First I'm disappointed. And then it's like, well, thank god. I don't have to worry. The next three days I can just relax and watch the tennis and not suffer.

Now, when I say it like that, it's obviously really stupid that you get so caught up. And the samsaric part is that without really looking, that passes for enjoyment, that passes for excitement, that passes for something that's really worth doing with one's time. And I'm only talking about me—I'm not talking about the tennis players or anyone else.

When I start to see how that is, it's such a perfect example of samsara. There's the lure of the next thing, the next thing. This is good; the next will be better. This isn't good enough—never mind, there's another chance. This was great, this was fantastic. Oh, now it's over. So we've got to look to the next. Always looking out, always looking next, never just really present and content with what is—not for more than a few moments. This is samsara.

It's not a matter of saying it's good or bad. What makes the shift is mindfulness. My habit kicked in a little late, but my habit of just paying attention to what's going on in my mind—I mean, it wasn't so subtle, but actually really paying attention: I'm really not enjoying this very much.

So it's not saying tennis is bad or good, or watching is bad or good, or I should stop, or anything like that. Just the simple awareness of what's actually going on. Wisdom reveals itself. Wisdom comes just from the awareness.

So I'm maybe watching a little less. Okay, not much. A little less. I'm noticing when I'm not enjoying and just turning it off or not following—not because I should or shouldn't, but because when we really see what's happening, the appropriate response that leads to ease and freedom arises.

That can be applied anywhere. So this is our second job: simple awareness of what's happening now.

Of course, we've been talking about this the whole time—simple and easy, and yet not, right? Just simple awareness of what's happening now. So why do we lose it so much?

I've been talking for about twenty minutes now. Have you been aware of hearing? I mean, you're hearing—you know you're hearing—but have you been aware of the hearing process? Probably not. But probably as soon as I said it, right? It didn't take a lot of effort, did it? "Oh yeah, right—hearing." Are you aware of seeing? You've been seeing. Most of you have your eyes open. When I said "see"—oh yeah, seeing, right? It's not rocket science, but we just forget over and over and over.

One of the really simple reasons why we forget is the ordinariness—just the ongoing repetition, which is another aspect of samsara, of our experience. You're sitting here seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing—every second that your eyes are open. I'm not saying you need to catch it every second, but it's happening over and over. Hearing is happening over and over and over. Sensations in your body. Different thoughts coming and going, or moods, when you're sitting and walking and doing walking meditation.

Why do you sometimes find walking meditation so boring? Oh, another step, another sensation. Lifting, pressure, tingling, burning. Lifting, pressure, tingling, burning. Lifting, pressure, tingling—please, God, stop. And then we just zone out.

And so it's not even in formal practice, but just in our life going through it. It isn't hard, but we just—through the mundanity, the ordinariness—we somehow stop paying attention, waiting for something worth paying attention to. Have you noticed that at all? We're looking for something that's more interesting, that's more worth our time here, that offers the potential of some insight. Not just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—but something juicy.

But this is it, folks. What is life? What is it we experience? I mean, someone said this over and over—the six things, right? The six sense doors, the six sense objects, consciousness coming together. All that's happening: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, sensing in the body, and mental experience. We can give all kinds of different meanings and labels and interpretations, which is mental experience. But that's all that's happening, over and over. And so much of it seems so ordinary that the habit of this interest quality that comes with mindfulness, with awareness, tends to drop out.

Again, it's kind of like back to the tennis—that's how samsara works. It has to be worth paying attention to, so the interest, the worth, we place in the experience, in the object. And the shift of refuge, the real radical shift that this second job of ours of mindfulness brings up, is this shift to just the interest in that moment of awareness—the mind itself. The aliveness, the interest, the curiosity, the sense of totality of life—it's not about the experience being better.

Because just like I said, sometimes in walking you're so bored. Other times in walking, it's just amazing, right? Is your walking better then? Just we're present. Not "we," but there's that mindfulness, that interest, that aliveness, that the mind isn't fragmented. It's not waiting, trying to correct, needing something.

This sense of simplicity of awareness—that's our second yogi job. Just simple mindfulness. Not to make things better or different, but to recognize accurately what's already happening right now. And not even to recognize—that's already a doing. The only way of recognizing accurately is by this moment, just pure, simple awareness. It's like this right now. Nothing's too mundane. Nothing's too ordinary.

Dōgen, the great Japanese Zen master, said one time, "If you cannot discover the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" The mundane, the ordinary—this is where the most profound aspects of reality are revealed, because this is it. There is nowhere else. Like I said, the Buddha awoke into this world.

There's another aspect that really helps to keep mindfulness complicated. Well, not mindfulness itself, but how we get so sidetracked, how it seems to move from the simplicity I just described. "Just be with what is." And we all go, "Yeah, right. How come we can't do it?" Besides the habit of checking out when it's not interesting enough, there's another complication we've talked about a lot and will again.

Another way of describing experience is that in every moment there's an object arising and a mind, an awareness of it. This is a simple way of describing it—again, it's the way the teachings often speak. In any moment of mindfulness, we might say: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience—some object arising. And with awareness, there's the knowing of it. These happen together, like two sides of the same experience, but with different functions. You could say anything that can be known is an object—smelling, hearing, tasting, thinking, unpleasant experience, whatever. And the mind, the consciousness, that recognition and awareness, the factor of mindfulness, knows: "Oh, that's just what's happening." It comes together.

Again, our tendency is to always be looking toward what's happening, the object, and assessing: Is it good? Is it bad? Is it this? Is it that? What does it mean about me? Endless stuff. That keeps us going in samsara forever. What we're doing with mindfulness, with our practice, is expanding—I don't want to say turning around, but expanding—the awareness to also recognize and be interested in the process in the mind.

Here's how we get confused, what obstructs accurate recognition. In a moment of what we think is mindfulness, or in a moment of knowing—say there's a sound and the knowing of sound, hearing, very simple—when in that moment of conscious knowing the awareness is colored by wanting something, by dislike, fear, aversion, dosa, or by confusion, delusion, and we don't recognize it, there's not an awareness of those, it's like that distorts our perception, our assessment. It can distort the whole way we experience things, and we don't see that's what's happening. That's what keeps us bound. It arises and passes, arises and passes. But this is such a deep habit, just habits of mind.

A sound—all day long, the six sense experiences arising—say a sound arises. Over and over and over, just with habit without awareness, as you know, it might be felt in the mind as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither one. We're not labeling it that. We're not even aware of it; it just has that kind of subtle resonance in the mind. And it doesn't have to be the same for everyone. Say some of the loud sudden sounds outside with the guys working—for one person they might not notice it much at all, it's just kind of neither pleasant nor unpleasant. For someone else it's really jarring, and the mind just has this registering of it as unpleasant. Just the habit.

And as you know how fast our minds are working—so fast—it goes into a liking or a disliking, it goes into a thought about it, an assessment about it, and what does it mean about me, about them, or what can we do about it, or whatever. I don't have to tell you how far and fast that stuff goes. If mindfulness just starts to notice those thoughts, the pleasant, the unpleasant, the aversion—fine. Those are simply the next arising objects. Then it's not a problem. We may not like it, and then we're back into not liking. When we're not recognizing it, that's what we call identified.

So the habit—all day long: I like this, I don't like this. What does this mean? How can I fix it? How can I get something different? No wonder we're exhausted. This is how our lives are lived, not just here. When we're not practicing with awareness, we don't even notice that's how our lives are lived. It's almost like that way of reacting and describing and defining things—that almost becomes our refuge. You know what I mean? When something really nice happens, the natural thing is to want more.

When there's some pain, some discomfort in the body, the natural thing is to want to get the hell out of here. And we try to say, no, why don't you stay and look at it? The response comes, why should I stay and look at it if I can move? That doesn't make any sense at all. And on that level, it doesn't. But we never really learn what's going on.

So that becomes our refuge. We cannot recognize accurately because we're overlooking. We're so focused on the object and how to fix it and what does it mean about me that we're overlooking how the mind is working. The fact that the seed of the suffering, the discontent, isn't about that sound being too rough or at the wrong time, or that I'm too sensitive, or whatever. It's the reactivity in the mind—unrecognized, identified with, and persistent. This is our habit.

And these states—greed, confusion, aversion, delusion, called the *kilesas* or torments of mind—I would say they're louder. They're more obnoxious, you could say, than the wholesome states of mind, such as mindfulness, such as interest, such as faith, such as calm, such as *mettā*. Although any of these can be strong and beautiful, and we really can recognize them as well. It's not only torments arising in the mind. But the *kilesas*

make a big fuss. They get our attention. And our habit is to really believe the story they're telling, which is why our habit of mindfulness gets derailed. But it's also why mindfulness is so powerful.

Like with my tennis story, when I started with awareness, it was no big deal—no "now I'm going to be aware." It was just kind of sitting there watching. And instead of just being so focused on the game, I was noticing what was going on in my mind and just noticing it with no assumption of what should happen. And again, it was not subtle. It was like, whoa, this is really actually unpleasant. This is suffering. This is stress. And then just starting to observe the whole process. Not saying it should stop or it's bad, but getting interested. Okay, this is stress. What keeps it going? If the thought comes up in my mind, "Oh, I want this to happen," the stress goes up. If it doesn't matter, if whatever happens happens, the stress goes down. I mean, not just saying it and pretending, but really seeing—okay, I can be with things as they are.

Just that exploring, it's a shift of refuge. It's much more radical. And what helps us to explore is, again, the aspect of right view—realizing none of this is personal. It's just nature. Just like if I throw this up, it's going to come back down. And it'll probably make a sound. It's just nature. And wanting it to be otherwise doesn't change that. And blaming myself for it doesn't change that. Just exploring—steady, steady, steady—seeing.

So what we do and continue to do here, and I'll talk more about this or one of us will later, I can only mention it now, is to explore, to get really interested in the nature of wanting or greed when it's arising. Not hating it. Somehow we think that's better. "There's so much craving in my mind—that just shows what a bad person I am, what a bad meditator, how hopeless." As if somehow substituting hatred for greed is good. Yeah, we believe that. "Oh yeah, now I'm doing good. I'm beating myself up. I'm seeing everything I'm doing wrong, so I'm on the right track." And you see, we believe it.

Or sometimes when it's just interested. You see, sometimes you start to see a lot of wanting coming up. And people will come and say, "Oh, I just see so much wanting." And I'll say, "Great." Because it's coming up. There's some reason the Buddha picked craving as the second noble truth, as the cause of suffering. I don't think he just pulled it out of the air. And I don't think it's because it only happens once in a while in really bad people. I think it's pretty much a really subtle and ongoing, easily arising aspect of experience. So great. Mindfulness doesn't judge. Mindfulness gets interested in exploring it.

So when we see wanting come up, don't believe that it's what obstructs clear seeing. Don't believe me. Explore and see what happens.

I'm just going to give a couple of simple examples. You're walking in walking meditation, and the bell rings for lunch. You're still walking to lunch—what's the quality in the mind, especially if you're hungry? Is the quality in the mind any different? It's not going to always be, but sometimes it is. Explore and see, especially if it smelled good before. Just that kind of narrowing of our field. Before, just being present, walking, whatever's arising, arising. If there's some mindfulness, just being with what is. And suddenly, "Ah, got to get there." Or you want to get to the sitting. Or you want to get to your room. Or you want to get to bed. For me on retreat, that's a big one. Please, let me get to bed.

But noticing. It's not a good or bad about the thing wanted, but what's the quality in the mind? How it goes from just being at ease and relaxed to narrow, restricted, me and other. The Buddha said that wanting and aversion and delusion are makers of measurement in the mind. They limit. They constrict and make the sense of me and other—something needed with wanting, or something that must go away with unpleasant, a sense of problem. Without that, it's just what is. Explore and see, that's all.

And when there is wanting—again, look and see if this is true for you—and we're not recognizing it, in the beginning it may be a little bit in retrospect. But then you can kind of see it happening as it's happening. Notice how, especially if it's a strong wanting—maybe you're having a strong, pleasant fantasy about what's going to happen in the future, or your next vacation, or how great your next sitting is going to be, or whatever. It doesn't matter. You're really in it. There's a little modicum of mindfulness, awareness that at least you sort of know there's a fantasy happening. You kind of vaguely know it's pleasant. Every once in a while you can pull out, but then boom, back in.

Exploring that pleasant, explore how the story of it is, "This is going to be so wonderful, so amazing." I used to plan dinner parties, or you're planning a vacation, and very conveniently, all the kind of difficult, grunt stuff that has to go on—that isn't part of the fantasy, is it? It's going to be amazing. "I'm going to have this dinner party and have this food." You forget about the shopping and the cooking and the food burns and the people can't come and you get nervous and it's so much work and you have a headache. None of that stuff. It's just going to be fantastic, because wanting just shows us how wonderful something is. So we don't see the wanted object accurately. And anything else that's kind of in the way—that's what everything else is. It's in the way. So we're also not recognizing that accurately. It skews our perception. Things as they have come to be—accurate recognition is impossible.

Same with aversion. Same with when an unpleasant, uncomfortable experience arises.

And right away, it seems unnatural. Let's get rid of it. And as we know, it can lead to annoyance, blame—the whole story can unfold. It can go on for weeks. It can run our lives sometimes.

But here, just explore. First, it's more obvious, usually, that aversion, dislike, fear, unpleasant experience—it's more obvious that it's unpleasant. I have friends who are self-identified so-called "greed types," meaning that's kind of the first movement of mind for them, seeing the pleasant and moving toward it, and they try to pretend that's not really suffering. But on the aversive side, you can't really pretend. Occasionally, you can have some good righteous anger, and that feels good. But basically, you can feel the burning. And anyone else around is quite happy to tell you, "Yes, this is bad, and you're suffering."

But explore it for yourself and see: does it obstruct clear seeing? How is it suffering? How does aversion and dislike work? Not just saying it's bad—explore it. See the nature of it. It's fascinating.

And it is personal. We're making it personal. Then right away, it's really hard. As soon as it's there: "Oh, I'm so bad. I shouldn't be like this." And we're sucked into the story. That's just story too. Pull out and recognize, "Oh yeah, that's just aversion." Aversion is coloring the consciousness. It's coloring the perception. And at that moment, any thought that comes up is going to be seen through the filter of aversion.

This is the reason why, in terms of practice, if you're in a real doubting or self-aversive phase—have you ever experienced that?—and then you're trying to remember all the different techniques and skillful means. You're thinking, "Well, I'm too sleepy, or I'm too dull, or I'm too tight, or I'm too loose, or there's not enough breath, or there's too much breath," or whatever you're choosing. And you're trying to think, "What can I do to fix it?" But you're not quite saying that. You're saying, "Hmm, I'm a little bit off. How do I fix it?" Meanwhile, the coloring in the mind is: "I'm worthless, no good. This stinks. I stink. This is wrong. How can I fix it?"

And any fixing thought that arises at that moment, when you're not recognizing that aversion is coloring perception—any fixing thought is going to be colored by aversion. Completely unreliable. Completely. "Oh, I should take a walk. That'll be it." Then you realize, "Oh, I should just practice harder." That's usually the way it goes. "I'll just stay with the breath until..." And we somehow miss the aversion. Why doesn't that work? We don't see it. Explore, explore.

And the third aspect: delusion. Of course, both of those are delusions. One way delusion shows is just: I don't know what's happening. That's the obvious one. We don't have to take that so personally.

The other way—and this is one of the ways Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it—one of the ways delusion shows up is in making assumptions and believing those assumptions as descriptions, as accurate descriptions of what's going on. We don't even recognize we're doing this.

So he gives an example, again, a simple example of someone you've just met. And here, you can kind of notice this with people you've seen but don't really know. Our mind makes up all kinds of stuff about them, assumptions, which sometimes we know we're making up, and sometimes we don't. You think, "Oh, that poor person. They're just such a sad person. I really feel so much compassion." You have no clue. Or you pass someone on the street and go, "Wow, he's an angry person. I'm glad I don't have to have anything to do with him." Or you see someone and think, "Oh, she looks a little crazy." And we're doing this all the time. We talk about judgments. Sometimes it's obvious, and that's great, but sometimes it's not. And we just quite believe it.

Well, in our practice here, we can explore that. It's the same thing. And it can get quite subtle. It's probably happening for most of you. It happens for me a lot. I'm mindful. I think I'm mindful of what's happening. And there's kind of a subtle, sometimes it's just a subtle commentary. Or it's a kind of description: "Oh, this is what's happening. And this is why it's happening. And this is what this means," right? We kind of think it's true. It's not when it's a big thing, but just a little. We think it's true. We think it's mindfulness. And it's actually thinking, describing, assuming. The thoughts can be subtle, and we can easily mistake them for simple mindfulness. That's all. Just noticing that. That's a form of delusion. A subtle one.

And usually, this isn't so subtle—it's all about me, me, me. Just notice how long it takes for any of the sixth sense experiences that arise in known to somehow have something to do with me. What does it mean about me? Or what do they think about me? Or what is this going to look like? How do I look? It's endless. Explore it. It's not personal either.

Oh, just an example of a little thing that happened to me—a difference between assumptions, not quite seeing, and thinking it's mindfulness. Not so long ago, after some conversation I'd had with somebody, not any big deal conversation, but somehow I felt in myself later like an uncomfortable residue. And you can relate to that, right? Not some big fight or anything, but just kind of an uncomfortable residue left. And when a memory of the conversation would just pop up, I would just feel this kind of... I remem-

ber it wasn't quite shame, embarrassment, discomfort, sadness—I mean, quite what? But I'd feel stuff here, so I was feeling that. It would come, and I thought I was being quite mindful, not investigating what does it mean in my past, but just feeling it. That's what I thought. And just going about my day whenever it would come up. I'd be aware of the visual memory—that's how stuff comes up, as visual memory. And I wasn't noting.

I'm going through the day, aware of the unpleasant residue. And then there'd be a thought: "Well, I wonder, what's the hook here? Because it keeps coming, so there's a hook." I wasn't analyzing a lot, but I'd notice that thought: "What's the hook?" And you feel like you have to figure it out. It keeps coming, so I must be wanting something from that person.

I was really thinking that was mindfulness. I mean, I was aware, but it wasn't the clear awareness of mindfulness.

Then at some point I thought, "Why does this keep coming up?" This was a little thing—it wasn't some big suffering. But through the day, why does this keep coming up, this little thing?

Finally, I was just sitting there or lying there or something. Oh, unpleasant, uncomfortable feeling. Try feeling it. Just feeling it. Not all of "what does it mean?" or "I'm connected with this." Oh yeah, uncomfortable feels like this. With no "so that"—not to get rid of it, not to understand it, just because that's what's happening.

That's the simplicity of mindfulness.

So I was just feeling it. And then—this is the steadiness of awareness, our third job, the steadiness of mindfulness, the willingness to remember, to try and remember moment after moment, the perseverance—the steadiness is what allows wisdom to come.

Just feeling unpleasant, like, "Oh." The whole sense of struggle around it was gone in that moment. And then the understanding came just from being with it. Oh. It wasn't all about "what's the hook" and "I want something" and yada, yada, yada. It was just simple aversion—subtle aversion to just feeling the unpleasant, uncomfortable feeling. As simple as that.

I can't tell you how often it's as simple as that. But our "it's all about me" doesn't quite trust that it could be so simple.

Even now, if you're thinking, "But maybe it was important that she knew what it was about, right? Well, it was really important. If she wants something from that person..." You know what? If I'm working with steady awareness, if wanting something from that person arises, guess what? I'll notice it—instead of trying to go and figure it out.

This is subtle. I don't know if I'm quite making it clear, but this is really where it's a radical shift—to just trusting the simplicity of awareness of what's happening now. Not for anything else, but simply trusting the simplicity of mindfulness itself.

Our third job, and this is essential, is the willingness—of course we can't stay continuous—but the willingness, the understanding of the power of the moment to moment to moment steadiness of the simplicity of mindfulness. Without that, it's not meaningless. But where the reality, the profound and the mundane, where the wisdom can grow, the conditions for wisdom to arise, is through the momentum of steady awareness.

Because that's where we really see what's what, where we can really see how the causes and conditions come to be. Without the steadiness, we see something happen, then we pull away. Then we go, "Oh, every time I'm walking, this happens. I don't know why. I better do something else." But if we just pay attention, we start to see.

Let me read a little example Sayadaw U Tejaniya gave. Very basic, but it's probably clearer than if I tried to make one up.

So, only with steady awareness: you might, for example, feel quite relaxed and calm while walking to the meditation hall, and then you notice a subtle restlessness during the sitting. The mind is now aware of the restlessness, accepts the experience, and starts getting interested.

This is the key to all of it. We're interested. How does nature work? It isn't personal.

The question may come up, "Why is there restlessness?" But then the mind, the awareness, simply stays with this question, with the interest in the experience. At the same time, the mind also notices and feels the physical tension, which you know is somehow connected to the feeling of restlessness—for example, a tightness in the stomach. Then suddenly, there might be the understanding that there's an accumulation of small incidences of stress, frustration, or feelings of elation that lies behind this restlessness and the physical tension. In other words, wisdom starts sorting things out.

Do you get how that wasn't thinking about what this could be? It was just: this restlessness is like this. Feeling the restlessness, getting interested. How does it feel? I wonder why it's here. How does it feel? Feeling the body. Steady, steady, steady. Simple mindfulness is the condition that allows for clear seeing of the whole cause and effect process. Wisdom starts sorting things out.

And that's so hard for us to trust, because we feel like we have to cultivate the wisdom, don't we? One of the reasons we talk about all the right views—and if I'd gone into it, we'd think, "Well, I have to somehow start seeing all this in my practice." And right there, there's the wanting. We miss the wanting in trying to see the right thing. But steadiness of mindfulness isn't choosing what's better to pay attention to. It's just choosing what's here now. Steady, steady, steady. But relaxed. Aware—Guy said "aware" like a verb. And perseverance. Steadiness. Or as Tejaniya says, "Never give up." Which means when we space out: "Oh yeah, am I aware?" You're here again. What's going on? Seeing. We're here again. That simple, that relaxed, that mundane, over and over and over.

Really starting to trust that we don't—we can't—make wisdom arise. That's just some thought. We don't even know. We can't make accurate recognition or clear seeing happen, because that wanting is exactly the thing that distorts perception.

This is so obvious, but I found it really helpful. In practice, when you're really trying to be calm, or really with sincere intention trying to keep coming back and stay with the breath, or you're really trying to have your awareness stay steady through the whole walking period—somehow, back there, we think (we wouldn't put it this way) that if we want it hard enough, it's going to happen. And when it doesn't happen, it's like somehow we didn't want it hard enough.

Instead, with a steady awareness, we see: what are the causes and conditions that allow this to happen? What are the conditions that bring calm to the mind? Wanting harder? I don't think so. But we have to look and see. The more I want, the more restless the mind gets. Just keep watching. That's fascinating. It doesn't matter what's happening—it's going to reveal the profound truth if we cultivate steadiness.

So two last things. One is a tip from Joseph that he came up with at the last retreat we were teaching, which might help with this sense of continuity. He told me to say this. But it's a good one—people really liked it. Notice in practice how we may tend to have this subtle sense of priority, even though we all say there's not.

The priority being that the sitting is really the most important, where it's at. And if you can only do one thing, you do the sitting. The walking—okay, some people are learning to like it, and we do it maybe a little bit grudgingly, but we know that's not

quite the whole thing. And the daily activities, the work meditation, the taking a shower, the eating, the going to the toilet—yeah, okay, that's third. When the rest of our practice is going okay, then maybe we can really give some attention to that.

So Joseph's tip is: reverse all of that. Turn it on its head. Make the most important priority the daily activities. Not to do them right, but to just remember this simple awareness. So you're scrubbing the floor, right? Do I know I'm scrubbing? That's all. It doesn't have to be feeling every molecule in your pinky as you're scrubbing and being aware of pleasant, unpleasant. It could just be really broad. Scrubbing feels like this. That's mindfulness. And mindfulness is what we love.

Just this simple awareness, learning to love it. Not knowing what's going to happen, what's going to happen next, but having that openness to discover, that openness to explore. Not having to have an explanation and a description that defines our world, but just being willing to see: oh, uncomfortable feeling feels like this—without needing to know what's going to happen next. And then we're present for what happens next.

So the three jobs: right view, simple awareness, never give up. But only moment by moment. You can't never give up tomorrow—only this morning.

CHAPTER 104

Generosity: Foundation of the Path

Carol Wilson · 1h02

In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson presents generosity (dāna) as the foundational quality of the Buddha's path to liberation. She explains how all Buddhist teachings work toward purifying the mind from greed, hatred, and delusion, and how generosity directly counteracts these unwholesome states while cultivating joy, contentment, and a sense of non-separation.

Drawing from extensive experience in Burmese and Thai Buddhist communities, Wilson shares moving stories that illustrate the transformative power of dāna: nuns joyfully giving up their meditation plans to care for orphans, a money changer spontaneously donating to help build wells, and elderly villagers receiving support with profound dignity. These accounts reveal how generosity operates as a complete circle of giving and receiving, where both parties experience the happiness of the wholesome heart-mind.

Wilson offers practical guidance for developing generosity as a meditation practice, including six points from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's teachings: attending to motivation, abandoning clinging to what is given, giving face-to-face when possible, giving mindfully with focused attention, maintaining awareness of wholesome intention afterward, and applying clear comprehension to the broader context. She concludes with the Buddha's teaching to the layman Mahānāma on recollecting one's own generosity as a powerful contemplation that purifies the mind, brings joy, and leads naturally to concentration—a practice available in all circumstances of daily life.

As Joseph mentioned the other day, I'm going to talk about generosity, the practice of dana tonight, which is one of my favorite things to discuss. It makes me happy, mostly because I get to tell stories that make me happy, and that's fun.

To start: as we've said many times, the liberation, the freedom of heart and mind that the Buddha speaks of—the simplest way we've described that is the heart and mind of non-clinging. As far as I can tell from my limited understanding, all of the teachings, all of the different ways of teaching that the Buddha offered, were about this. Nothing was extraneous, just for the heck of it because it's kind of interesting. And none of it was simply, "Well, if you can't liberate yourself, do this instead."

All of the teachings tend towards purifying the habits of our heart and mind, transforming the habits from suffering—so-called unwholesome habits—to wholesome, to pure habits. They work toward weakening the habits of greed, hatred, and confusion in our mind while feeding and strengthening the wholesome. And this matters not only so that at some future moment—which is true—only the pure heart-mind can see Nibbana, but also for what's accessible here and now. What we learn, hopefully, and what many people are already coming to trust more and more, is how to recognize when, in a moment, your consciousness has cleared from being identified with aversion or confusion or wanting.

Several people have given this example of noticing aversion in the mind and experiencing that shift—that Tai Chi move to awareness of aversion, which is itself not averse. It sounds nice, but when you really experience it, there's a sense of "oh." There's a happiness in that. Aversion is still the object, and there's a happiness in that. It's not incredible bliss where you're dancing around—just a little kind of piece of happiness. If you're not looking so hard for the big bang, you'll notice. This happiness, this joy almost, or calmness, is the happiness of the wholesome heart-mind. Just a moment of it reveals the peace of the purified mind.

There's a saying—I don't really think it's a Buddhist saying—but: there's no way to happiness; happiness is the way. And that's really what I feel in all of the different ways that the Buddha taught, as different approaches to purifying our heart and mind, experiencing this happiness, joy, and peace here and now, while also strengthening the habits so that this will continue in our mind and heart stream in the future.

Being here on a meditation retreat, of course our emphasis is on meditation, on bhavana. But in my first years of practice, I didn't really understand this so much, and I'm still learning about it. Meditation, bhavana—it's like the most interesting thing. It's as if we get really deeply pure in our heart and mind, we'll understand, we'll see the truth. But it's not all about bhavana. All the different aspects of the way we live our life are equally purifying, ennobling, and important. They all work together.

The practice, the way of life, is often described as generosity, sila (conscious conduct, moral conduct), and bhavana (the word for mental cultivation, development)—all the different kinds of meditation with their various techniques. They come from different angles, but at their core, they still share this quality of purifying the habits of mind.

I want to offer that framework as context for sharing some of my own reflections about the habit, the way of life, the happiness of generosity. Calling it a "practice" makes it sound too automatic, too dull—something you have to do. But I've really begun to imbibe, kind of by osmosis, from spending time in cultures that are primarily Buddhist, in

Thailand and Burma. Not everyone there is walking around enlightened, of course—it's as messed up as anywhere, just in different ways. But one aspect I've really absorbed, the more time I spend there, is that the teachings of the Buddha are simply more inculcated in the culture, sometimes with real understanding and sometimes not, like anywhere. But generosity as a value, as a way of life, is just so woven through the culture with such a sense of joy that whenever I spend time in Thailand or lately Burma, I can't help but pick it up, even if at first I don't quite notice what's going on.

Generosity is really the foundational quality, the foundational ennobling quality at the heart of our awakening path, at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Many, many times in the suttas, when the Buddha begins to unfold his teachings to people, he begins with generosity—bringing in, brightening the heart and mind, purifying the heart and mind, even in the listening. It turns the mind and heart in a wholesome direction.

Even on an intellectual level, this isn't surprising. If you just think about generosity, it seems quite understandable that as a practice, as something we continue to strengthen in how we relate to our lives, ourselves, our things, and others, it naturally counters greed and possessiveness of objects, of time, of views—whatever.

It counters ill will, interestingly enough. Try giving something wholeheartedly to someone while feeling ill will toward them at the same time. It doesn't work. When there's truly a wholesome mind state, wholesome and unwholesome cannot exist simultaneously.

And of course, generosity counteracts self-cherishing, the sense of separation and alienation that arises when there's a sense of "me" holding on to whatever. The act of generosity of mind, speech, and body is an expression of non-separation. It also, I find, strengthens that understanding—you feel it in different ways, this sense of our non-separation.

And I found that the more the mind inclines toward generosity, it also strengthens a sense of inner contentment. In a way, we can't give anything if there's not some sense of inner abundance, of inner non-clinging—that's clear. But also in the giving itself, in the circle of giving and receiving and joy and non-separation that comes from that, I find the sense of inner contentment is strengthened and the neediness really just weakens. The happiness of generosity is so much more enticing than the unpleasantness of neediness that the mind starts to incline toward the wholesome.

I don't know who figured it out, because even though we say awareness doesn't care—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—it turns out that the kilesas are unpleasant and wholesome states are generally pleasant. So our job is not to cultivate more aversion and

clinging to those, but it's a good situation that as the mind inclines more toward wholesome states, there's much more inner happiness and peace. So generosity—it's great. I recommend it, practicing it.

The Buddha, as you probably know, when he had to set up his way of living with the monks and the nuns, was of course in India at a time when there were lots of different sects and probably lots of different ascetics, more men than women. Still, the Buddha was setting up his own group of monks and nuns with his own rules. This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, a quotation from the Buddha describing how he set up his monks and nuns, how they would relate to laymen and women—all on the basis of generosity, the mutuality that comes from generosity:

"Bhikkhus, householders and Brahmins are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness." Those are the four requisites that nuns and monks are allowed and need to have. "And you bhikkhus are very helpful to Brahmins and householders, as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, and you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, monks, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

As you probably know, he really set it up so that monks and nuns are not allowed to keep food overnight. Not only can they not eat after noon, but they can't keep food overnight. So the monks and nuns had to go out every day with their alms bowl—as in the story of Bahiya last night—every day, eat the food that they receive, and that's it. Then the next day again. So even though there's a great emphasis with the monks and nuns on meditation and seclusion—"here are these roots of trees, go meditate"—they also couldn't completely isolate themselves from the lay people because there was this mutual support. The lay people were generous if they felt inspired by faith, and the monks and nuns were generous in offering the Dhamma, not only through their lives but through sharing in whatever way with any lay people who came. He set it up so that you couldn't just live in isolation, because these four groups of people—ordained women and men, and lay women and men—are all necessary. It's said even now that these four groups are necessary for this particular Buddhist sasana to stay alive. We need all four.

So he set it up that way. And in Buddhist countries, as I mentioned, it still exists, especially with the monks. They still go out every day on alms round. They can't keep food. But the peace that I mentioned before—this has been a revelation to me—comes from being immersed in a culture where generosity is such a deeply ingrained way of

being, such a value that it soaks in by osmosis. And it's not just the monks and nuns and Buddhists. The revelation to me is the incredible joy and happiness involved in most acts of generosity, in the giving and the receiving. It's not only monks and nuns; it's lay people. It's really in the culture. And it's contagious.

Of course, I grew up in this culture, and people are very generous. I'm not saying only Buddhist countries are generous—please don't get me wrong about that. It's just that this is where a lot of my learning as a Buddhist practitioner and the joy of it comes from. But there's a slight difference. The way I grew up, sort of Christian, more or less Christian, there's certainly a sense of love and compassion and sharing what one has, usually with people who are needy. Well, of course, you tend not to give to people who have more than you—but time or effort, whatever. There could often be, at least the way I learned it, a slight sense of levels, of subtle superiority in giving. That's not always the case, but it could be. And one could feel good about it—nothing wrong with feeling good about it—but the sense of real joy and dignity in it? Sometimes, I didn't really grow up with that sense. Even if I was offering something to a homeless person, I would tend to feel more embarrassed or ashamed rather than a sense of joy and dignity.

And if the person receiving it accepted it in this really open, dignified way, that was like a wonderful gift. But it wasn't often happening that way.

When I first began to get a sense of this, it was a long time ago when I was at a forest nunnery monastery in Thailand. There were just maybe a few little huts for the nuns, for the women to stay in. I had a little hut, and there was a head nun who was a young woman around thirty, a very strong practitioner.

In nunneries and monasteries in Thailand, people just show up and come. You could have three nuns one day, and then fifteen nuns could just show up the next day, and you have to find somewhere to put them. It's just like that. It's not like you advertise ahead of time, "No, there's no room, you can't come." People just come. That's how it is.

So whenever there were more people than there were kutis, the first person to move was always the head nun. She was happy to give. She'd go stay in this cave filled with bat guano—I'm not exaggerating—up high. I think she liked it a little bit for the aesthetic idea. But still, there was this great joyful generosity of moving out.

I had just come from my early years on staff here, where there's what we would call the room game—what room would the staff people get to live in? And believe me, it doesn't work that the most senior person happily gives up their place to the most junior

person who comes. It doesn't work that way. It's all seniority, and we all accept that. So this sense of the most senior being most happy to give—I just kept noticing that over and over, and I was quite touched by it.

Then quite some years later, the first time I went to sit at a monastery, a meditation center in Burma, I didn't really know anyone there. I was just doing my practice, and I was there for quite some weeks. You're in your own world, getting yourself all settled, and finally, after however long, you manage to come out of your own world a little bit to kind of notice what's going on around.

Like, do you notice how lovely the flowers are? That's somebody's generous mettā heart, someone in particular, who made it so lovely. She could have just thrown a couple of daisies in there, but no, she made it really beautiful. And then she changes the water when it's funky, even though it's a drag for her, out of generosity. Well, noticing that—we can let it in. There's a joy in seeing that, in appreciating the small generous acts around.

So I started to notice this in the meditation center. For example, the way most of them are set up, you come in to eat and have a certain set seat at a table—about four or five women at a table, the monks at other tables—and food would be put on the table. There are young women who work there, not nuns, who come and work. Really, they're hardly paid. Some of them aren't paid at all. They just volunteer their time and work a full week's work. They're just kind of waiting, making sure there's food and all.

I started to notice that some of the meditator women, even nuns—foreign nuns—were incredibly demanding, asking the young women, "Well, I want some hot chilies. I want more salt. I want this. I want that." And with me watching, I'm thinking, "My God, you're a nun. Aren't you supposed to be renunciant?" I had, quietly, a little bit of an attitude. But I was just sitting there watching.

The women who were working really hard—first they would try to meet each of these requests. They'd go to a lot of trouble to try and meet them. They'd go out to the garden and come back so happy they could pick a few little fresh chilies. Happy—that's the key. They were so happy to try and do whatever was asked, to try and offer that generosity. It felt really unfeigned, because I was sitting watching it for weeks.

After a while I thought, well, which is better? Sitting here grumpy and judging, or kind of opening to the joy of that heartfelt generosity about little things?

I mean, it doesn't really work to think, "I should be appreciating this." But it just starts to come in through osmosis. You simply start to notice it. And the wholesome qualities, if we're not completely covered in delusion in that moment, they're contagious. We feel them. They light us up—our heart and mind. It's really a gift just to sit there and watch the generosity of these young women.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of how uplifting that was, because I was having a difficult time. Some of those periods were difficult in my practice. And without having been told to do so, I just started to notice that when my mind was in a dark funk, if I simply did something like notice, "Oh, look at those flowers—that's somebody's generosity," something would shift. It wasn't a false thing, but the generosity and the mettā behind it would uphold me. It would bring some brightness, some faith into my mind and heart. And that would give me the strength to keep going.

So overall, the wholesomeness, the happiness of the wholesome mind shows us that our happiness really is not at all dependent on external circumstances. But it doesn't mean we can't recognize our mutuality, our non-separation—and that's one of the great things about sangha here. Of course, you're projecting. You don't really know what each other is feeling. But sometimes you just get a sense. Someone's walking by, and they seem really mindful. You just get this hit of happiness or mettā from them. Great. Don't go into big thinking about it. Let it touch you. Let it be contagious. We're not so separate.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of it. And now I'll share a few stories about how the mutuality of generosity is so imbued in the culture and how much I just kept watching. I keep watching. I just have to think about being in Burma, and believe me, this is a place with incredible poverty—much of it government-induced—incredible oppression, lots of fear. So it's not like a paradise at all. And yet, there's so much joy of generosity and kindness, a kind of generosity of heart, mettā, in the culture, in so many people—not everybody, but in so many—that I just start to think about it. Memories start popping up, and my heart just gets really open and happy. It's interesting.

Let me give a couple of examples of seeing this. One time I was staying at a meditation center right after the big cyclone a few years ago, which was like a hurricane, similar to Katrina. It had an even more devastating effect on a whole area in the southwest of Yangon and on Yangon itself. So we were staying at a meditation center just outside of Yangon. All around it was a relatively poor village. Many of the houses, which were just little bamboo shacks, had been destroyed. A lot of the crops had been destroyed, both down in the delta and in this area. So poor people were even a lot poorer.

This was a time when the government, of course, didn't do anything and actively tried to stop other people from helping down in the delta—not in Yangon—where the generosity of the average Burmese people was so manifest. So many Burmese would actually brook danger or jailing by the government to gather food together and somehow sneak down to the delta on boats or whatever to pass it out. Just your normal person, any of us—but a lot of people did this, because the government wasn't doing anything.

Anyway, at this time, a few months after the cyclone, some friends and I had gone to Burma. Other friends had known about the difficulties and had sent money with us to share with people who needed it. The Sayadaw, the abbot of this monastery, said, "Why don't we buy a lot of rice and offer a big bag of rice to each household in this village? Because that's the staple, and now it's so expensive." And he organized the whole thing. We gave the money, and he organized everything—he's a great organizer. It was something like eight hundred households.

And again, the way the generosity is done there is different from how we would do it. We would say, "Okay everybody, bag of rice here. Come get it. Bye." But there it's done really face to face and with great dignity. So they brought in trucks of rice. There's this whole room piled with rice. And then the monks in the monastery, who can't offer money, offered their time and bagged all the rice in big bags.

And then Sayadaw came and got us—me and my friend, the Westerners—and said, "You have to come and offer it. You can't just give the money and go away. That's got no heart in it." He didn't say it quite that way. He said, "You have to stand here, and each person that comes, you hand them the bag of rice."

So this was an all-day affair. The bags of rice—we're talking fifty-pound bags of rice. It would take two of us, me and my friend, to carry them. We're struggling, I can hardly lift the thing. And this little lady would come, and we're going *ugh*, straining with the weight. She takes the rice, throws it on her head, and goes walking out. They all do. The women carry it on their heads. The men throw it on their shoulder. Some of the women—and I have photos, I'm not exaggerating—a kid in both arms, the rice on the head, and they go off.

But there's this face-to-face exchange. It has a sense of dignity, a sense of immediacy to it. And the cycle of the joy of generosity and the joy of receiving goes both ways.

This, of course, is the area where the monks go on their *piṇḍapāta*, their alms round, every morning. They go on the same little routine. So one of the monks—there are only about twelve in this monastery—one of the monks, a friend of ours, a guy from Mexico, told us the next day what happened. He came back from the alms round that morning

and said, "We go the same round every day, and more or less the same people come out and offer us rice. They're poor, so mostly they only offer rice. It's pretty much always the same families, the same little ladies."

He said the next day, after this rice offering, so many more families came out and offered rice—because they had a little bit extra, and the first thing they did was offer it to the monks. And then there were a few places where the families brought out their little kids, because it goes down through the generations. It was like a real treat for the little ones to be able to take a spoon of rice and put it in each monk's bowl. Just so touching, the cycle of generosity, and so normal there in that culture.

But the cycle of the happiness of generosity really runs not only within that culture, but from any kind of giving, any kind of receiving.

Another example: some other friends had, a few years before, come and visited one of the nearby nunneries, which I'll describe in a moment. They went back home, and the next year they sent a check to offer to these nuns who were trying to build a decent building to live in.

The nuns—just to describe—there are many, many nunneries around this area. More since the cyclone, when groups of two or three or four nuns would move up from the Delta because they couldn't live there anymore. Somehow they would get a little tiny plot of land, and they would build these little platted bamboo structures—like a woven wall of bamboo. You can make it in about three hours if you know how, and it lasts four or five months. The floor is just bamboo poles laid out with big holes in between. That's common. So many nunneries are like that.

This particular one was two sisters. Some years ago they had come up from the Delta and were living and studying. Many nuns study Pāli and Buddhism, and these two had been studying for some years. They were in their early forties, with a younger sister in her late thirties. At some point, the Sayadaw who was their teacher down in the Delta said to them, "There are these ten little girls, orphan little girls, and I can't take care of them anymore. I'm sending them to you."

Now, as it turned out, they told us later, they didn't have any way to take care of these little girls. They were living in a study monastery, and their plans were to go the next year and meditate, to really dedicate the next few years to their practice. But instead, they got the news: here come ten little girls.

Many nuns take on little girls—orphans, or children whose parents are really poor—and they educate them, clothe them, feed them, completely take care of them. And that's what these two sisters did. When we went to visit, they had found this little plot of land. They had built themselves this little crummy shack. And they were living there with ten little girls, describing it all while filled with light.

They didn't tell us until quite some time later that they'd really wanted to go off and meditate. We were talking through a friend who speaks Burmese, just so we could understand this properly. And they were just describing how dedicated they felt to giving these little girls the possibility of knowing what a good life is, what a life of virtue is, what a life of generosity is. They said, "If they decide not to be nuns when they're older, that's fine. That's up to them. But at least they'll know good values. They'll know how to live as a human being." Plus, they're rescued from the street, rescued from some kind of servitude.

They would laugh about how everything they have is on dāna, their food, everything. If they're given clothes, the head nun was saying, "Well, if someone gives me robes, that's wonderful. I can cut it up and make fifteen little tiny robes" — for these little cute girls in their little pink robes. They're very cute. And she was laughing, saying, "If someone gives us a little money, we can buy fifteen little sets of slippers." And these little sets of slippers are lined up. There was so much affection and dedication. She was teaching them Pali in the morning, and they all get up and chant.

At the end it came out that they really hadn't wanted to go off and meditate. So they just did a 180-degree turn for the next ten years of their lives — with joy, with so much lightness and happiness. It was really amazing to see.

So anyway, when these friends gave the check and I came back the next year, I had gone to California where they were, and I had some photos of these nuns receiving the money. You can't just hand it over — you have to put it in piles. It's like huge piles of money worth not very much, so you put it on these trays. It's always face-to-face, a very dignified offering, and there's chanting. If you offer, the nuns will all chant — a whole mettā chant, a gratitude chant, a blessing chant. It's really very beautiful and formal.

So there were photos of that. And then the next day, we ran into the nun. She'd run out, and they'd bought concrete and bricks. She was coming back sitting in a truck filled with all the building supplies they'd just bought. We could take a photo to show our friends. When I showed them the photo, it was like the completion of the circle, because they were so happy. I was just watching them. "Here's the photo. This is what we did." And their faces just lit up with the happiness of generosity.

So you're happy when you think about being generous, when you're doing it, and afterwards, reflecting on it. The Buddha really talked about this as a wholesome act. It's really beautiful, quite catchy. As I said, it's really in the culture.

I'm mostly giving monks and nuns examples because that's where I've been hanging out. But here's a simple example. Last year — it's complicated with the money, bringing in money and changing it, it's just complicated. The way it worked out, it came through a bank and a money changer. The money changing is like pseudo-black market, just put it that way. Now it's changing, but you didn't go into a bank and change money. That didn't even exist. So a guy, a money changer, would come with — and I'm not kidding — huge mounds of these kyat, and look at every single foreign bill. If it's a little bit wrinkled or has one red dot on it, they won't take it. So it takes hours. They're going through everything.

This is going on, and it's not quite like a drug deal. There's a little sleazy quality. It's not like the room is filled with light and devas, really. But it's also not illegal — it's what everyone does. One time we were doing it right in the office in the middle of the monastery.

And he said they were kind of hanging out. They were monks, but they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They had been there a while. And so Upanyaloka said, "Look, why don't you do something? You guys both have an education. There's all these poor kids around."

The way school works in Burma—elementary and even high school—even if you can go to the government schools, which have a lot of fees so many kids can't, but even if you can, you don't learn enough to pass the exams. And everything is predicated on the exams. So kids basically have to hire the teachers for tutoring in the evening. The teachers, that's how they make enough money to live, because they're paid almost nothing. And so poor kids, even if they can barely scratch together enough to go to school, they can't afford to hire anyone for tutoring.

So Upanyaloka said to these two monks, "Look, you have an education. You're just sitting around here. Why don't you start tutoring? There's a lot of poor kids around." And so they had started doing that. And now maybe a hundred kids came every evening to get tutoring.

But the thing that was so touching was what they said when we sat with them. What happened, they told us, was that when they first became monks, they were just there. They became monks and they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They didn't have a lot of purpose. But when they started working with these kids, when they

started giving, their whole experience of being a monk changed. They said the joy that arose in them from giving was so much greater than anything they had known in lay life. The businessman, the captain in the military—both of them said this was happiness on a completely different order.

So we went over to see them. And it was really a great teaching in assumptions and also the happiness and the transformative quality of generosity.

You walk in—and you don't really walk in, there's no "in"—but it's just this barren, dusty land with a kind of shelter, a lean-to. That's what a lot of places are. We went in the afternoon and there really were a hundred kids there, these two monks tutoring them, and the older kids helping the younger kids. It all felt very friendly and jovial.

The two monks were... not impressive looking, shall I say. They just looked kind of schlumpy. They had clearly been chewing betel nut all their life. If you've seen that, it's this somewhat addictive thing, and if you chew it for long, it dyes your mouth and your teeth red, it rots your teeth, and you're always spitting this red. It's not really a happy sight, but it's very common. A good monk or nun wouldn't chew betel nut—and women chew it too just as much. So these guys have betel nut, just kind of standing there. Uwe Bassa and Uwe Bola.

But we started talking to them, and the younger one, the businessman, turned out what he'd been in business in was beer and liquor. That was his trade. But he finally had to beg his parents when he was thirty-three to let him be a monk.

Anyway, he starts talking to us. They'd been doing this teaching now for some time, and he was like... born again, in a good way. He said he felt like he'd wasted—he was so bright, so happy as he was saying this—he felt like he'd wasted the first thirty-three years of his life. He said, "I feel like I have a new life now. I'm giving my energy and my life to helping others, to helping the children." He said, "Really, it's like I have a new life. I want to be able to do some form of helping for the rest of my life. This is it. And if it turns out there's nothing else to do here, I'll go somewhere else and help somewhere else."

He was just filled with happiness and joy from this helping others. It was so touching.

And for us also—one of us had quite a judgmental attitude toward monks. As soon as this person would see a monk with betel nut, it was like a door slammed shut in her mind. So this was really for all of us a reminder: "Oh, yeah, maybe I have to drop that." To see the purity of heart, and to see the transformation through simple acts of generosity.

One last story in that vein, about a nun at a different nunnery nearby. She had been there a few years, maybe thirty nuns living there, not particularly bringing up orphans or running a school—they study, but nothing in particular. The head nun, Daw Sumanachari, seemed nice. She made good mohinga soup but seemed a little bit depressive, maybe.

Then she came a year before last, just after I'd left, and she talked to Daw Aryanyani, who speaks Burmese. She knew that sometimes people funneled money through her and said, "You know, there's a school that a nun started ten minutes' drive away for poor kids who can't afford public school. Now five hundred kids are going to that school." I'm not kidding—all on dāna. They have to raise money every month to pay the teachers, to feed the kids, plus the nuns have to live on dāna too.

Anyway, this nun who came to see Aryanyani said, "But the little children around here have to walk half an hour, and in the rainy season it's too hard for them. So I want to start on my place a school for the really littlest ones." She had a plot of land with two small buildings on it.

We kind of thought, "I don't know. Can she really get this together?" But what the heck? So we offered what we could.

We came back the next year, and she'd really done it. First, they pulled down, they demolished the main building that the thirty nuns were living in, and they all moved into the smaller building. That's all they have to live in. And they had the money to build a really long lean-to roof, hired several teachers, got blackboards. Then she got another company—a Burmese company, many Burmese companies support this—to build another lean-to. And she had a hundred and ten little kids coming.

And she'd hired really good, qualified lay teachers from outside. So when she came back to us, we were really impressed.

But the point is this: she came and was talking to us later that fall, describing everything that had happened. And her demeanor—even though I couldn't understand Burmese and she was speaking through a translator—her demeanor was completely different. She was radiant. She was just filled with light, so light and joyful.

What she was saying was that the year before, it was just eating at her. She couldn't sleep because she so wanted to start this school. It had just come to her that she had to do this, but she didn't know how. She was so worried about it. But now—and I wrote this down, I'm not making it up—she said, "Now the worry's all gone. Before I couldn't sleep or eat, but now I'm so happy because it's happening." She said that even though

she has to work so hard to keep it going, to get the dana, to keep the teachers, to take care of the kids, and they all live in this little building, she's just so happy. She said, "All of my energy is for the children and the school, and so my mind is calm and happy."

And she looked like that. It was really quite transformative.

As the Buddha said—and the great story illustrating this comes through his disciple Anathapindika. I think someone mentioned that Anathapindika was one of the Buddha's most generous disciples. When he first met the Buddha, he had so much faith in the Dharma, in the Buddha, that he just became filled with appreciation and generosity. Right away, he offered the Jeta Grove, where many suttas that you read take place.

This story about Anathapindika is meant to show that the main aspect of generosity is not about what or how much. We tend to look at the result. But as with everything, it's the motivation. The heart of the generous act of mind, speech, or body is in the motivation, the intention to offer time, material goods, freedom from whatever—and the tuning into that, the non-clinging. That's where the joy comes from, and that's what gives generosity its power.

So Anathapindika, one of the things he started doing was every day he would invite all the monks from the Sangha in the area—like five hundred monks, which means a lot. That's what Andy Olendzki says: when it says five hundred, it means a lot. Every day he would feed them with a great meal.

King Pasenadi of that area, who was also a disciple of the Buddha, heard about Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him—or probably do better than him. He said, "He can do it, I can do it." So he decided he wanted to give alms and food to five hundred monks every day, and he started doing that as well.

But then one day, as he was on his way to visit with the monks, he learned from his servants that they would give the monks the food, but then the monks would take the food and go into the city and give it to some of their personal supporters, and then the supporters would offer the food back. King Pasenadi said, "Why are they doing that? I'm giving great food. I'm giving better food. I'm giving really good food—why are they doing that?"

The Buddha explained that in the palace, the servants distributed the food without any inner feeling, just following orders as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court. Some of them even thought that the monks were parasites, or had negative feelings. They lacked faith and had no love. The Buddha said that when anything is given in that spirit, no one can feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal is of the most delicious food.

In contrast, in the households of Anathapindika and Visakha, another generous woman, they welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend is worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in a really generous, open spirit.

So this is where you see it's about the joy and the purification of heart and mind, not just about giving a lot and being seen as generous. In fact, in another place the Buddha said that even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or pond, and does so thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this"—that would be a great source of generosity, of merit. It's that movement of heart and mind. Sometimes you have water you're going to throw out, and if you just pour it on a plant and think, "May this be for the benefit of the plant," that's a mental act of generosity—something we're all quite able to do.

Once when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching, there was a monk teaching with him, U Nyanapannika, who was a Nepalese monk. I remember he gave a talk on generosity that I really liked—I mean, I took notes from it. I wouldn't remember one word if I hadn't taken notes. But it was a long time ago.

He talked about the practice of giving as a practice, and he gave six points. I'll just mention them, because sometimes that might be helpful. Not to make it too rigid, but just to illuminate the different aspects.

The first, of course, is that when the thought of giving anything arises, give attention to the motivation, to the volition. Really purify it. This goes together with the second point: whatever one is giving, see and abandon the clinging to it. So that it's not just this casual, "Oh, here, take it."

I have a friend who once used this word in describing something I'd given him – something I hadn't wanted. I'd said, "I don't want this," and he replied, "Oh yeah, I'll take it." "Okay, here." So that didn't really feel like an act of generosity. I never gave it another thought. But some years later, he mentioned it. He said, "That thing – I use it all the time, your act of casual, thoughtless generosity." He wasn't being mean or critical; that was an accurate description. It was casual, thoughtless generosity. And so looking at it, okay, it's more generous than not giving, but it's not really the generosity of giving attention to the volition – not "I should be generous." That's not it. Rather, it's this openness.

I heard a Tibetan teacher once say, you know, there's generosity of mind, of speech, and of body. So perhaps the thought comes up, "I'd like to give this," but then, "Oh, I just can't." He said: practice in your mind. Practice giving it in your mind. If you can't even do that, then no, okay – so we just practice there. Out of loving-kindness, out of generosity, not out of a should.

Another Tibetan teacher suggested practicing by taking a rock and giving it from one hand to the other. Just practice letting go. It's the act of letting go. We can play with it. We start to see what holding on and letting go feels like viscerally and in our mind. Sooner or later, we notice the letting go feels better. But it's not a should. So we can practice that.

Or another way of thinking about this – just of the mind, with whatever one does. I read this from Geshe Rapton, who was a teacher of one of my good friends, Fred Von Allman, and he's been dead a long time. A generous action of mind is simply this: with whatever you're doing – turning on the water, making some tea, washing your hands – just thinking, "With this act, may all beings be free from suffering." That's just an act of generosity of heart and mind. So simple. So many different ways to practice – with mind, with speech, with body. See and abandon the clinging. And whether that's time or service, it's not just about things.

The third point is to give when possible. It's not possible here when you're on retreat in silence, but when it's appropriate, to give face to face. That's the way they do it.

And the fourth is to give mindfully, with the mind focused. We're really collected, attentive to both the motivation and the act of giving. It really gives it a power and a beauty.

That face-to-face aspect – that's again something I've learned from the way it's done when you're offering to monks and nuns in Asia, and not just to them, to lay people too. It's this very formal thing. The giving is done with a real sense of appreciation, and the receiving is done with great dignity, great respect for the whole process. I find it quite ennobling on both sides, as well as joyful.

I remember one time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here, and he had been – I was on retreat – he had been talking about wanting to study Christianity and wanting to practice his English. So I got a friend to buy this very simple English book about Jesus's life or something like that. And then I'm shy – giving face to face. There's this sense of self and shyness, and "What do they think?" and all this stuff that isn't the happiness of generosity, this whole kind of self-cherishing that's rather strange. Why is it like that when it's such a joyful thing?

So I had this friend give it, and I went on my retreat here. Weeks later, when the retreat ended and I went to say my goodbye bows, he said, "Wait." And he had someone go get that book.

And he gave it back to me. He said, "Now give it to me face to face."

It was really far out. And I was like a little nervous wreck. But he was really present in the receiving, very formal. And then they say, like a blessing. Even with lay people—when he gives us some little thing, they go, "May this be a cause for your complete attainment of nirvana in this lifetime."

Imagine you give somebody a little towel and they say, "May this be a cause for your attaining nirvana in this lifetime." I mean, it's beautiful. We just go, "OK, thanks." Or, "Do you have a better one?" No—"May you attain nirvana in this lifetime." Try it. It's really a wonderful thing.

So this sense of giving with the mind focused on the giving—it ennobles both the giver and the receiver.

Another example with lay people: someone had sent money to rebuild some houses after the cyclone. And these neighbors, really poor neighbors with their own tumble-down houses, came to us and said, "There's this elderly couple with a son who's off and doesn't take care of them, and they don't have enough to eat, and their house is falling down. Could you help them?"

So we went, and they were in their 80s. The woman was almost deaf, and the man was almost blind. He can't really work, but she grows things. Their house was spick and span, so clean, so tidy. She grew little plants outside and in back. And on the days that she was well enough to walk, she would take these plants to the market to sell. That was their only income. It wasn't enough, and neighbors would give them rice and such.

So we gave money to build a house, which is not much—it can be done in a day. Then we found out they didn't have enough money for the rent. In Burma, poor people own the house, but you rent the land. And if you get kicked off, you have to leave—take the house with you. Their rent was a year overdue. This was like sixty dollars for a year, this rent. I mean, that was nothing, right? So we paid that.

Then we went back—the neighbors all said, "You come back." We went and paid the landlord, came back. And they were so dignified and elegant, really, but also happy. The man had this greatest smile, and he had a kind of homemade mandolin that he took

down and was playing and singing for us. The wife isn't so smiley, but very serious. And he was doing some kind of dance. It was just this appreciation of the whole situation, this great sense of happiness and dignity.

There's no space for that shyness of giving or the shyness of receiving, or saying, "Oh, I'm not worthy to give or receive." That cuts the mutuality. It cuts the circle. But to give or receive with this dignity and this face-to-face presence is really ennobling, and it really strengthens the joy.

The fifth factor is: after giving, to continue to be mindful of our motivation. Have you ever had a time when you give and then later you go, "Ah, damn, why did I give that away?" So keep on being mindful. Remind yourself when that happens. You don't want to go there. Re-immerse yourself in the happiness of the generosity while you did it. That's really quite accessible.

And this is important: having a clear comprehension of the broader context. In other words, if an alcoholic comes and wants help, you give the help you can, but you don't give them twenty dollars to go down to the liquor store and buy more.

But generosity with intelligence applies to everything.

And I added the seventh quality, which is also receiving with the same openness. Because when someone gives and we respond, "Oh no, I'm not worthy. I have so much more than you. Don't give me anything" — that creates its own problem. Every time you offer something to people in Burma, no matter how poor they are, they're going to come and offer you something back with huge joy and dignity. And not to take it is a lack of generosity. To say, "No, no, I have so much more, don't give me that" — that doesn't work. And it's not happiness producing.

So just the last thing I want to say: there's the happiness of contemplating generosity, there's the happiness of the act itself, and there's the happiness of contemplating our past acts of generosity. This is something we don't do so much in this culture — not only with generosity but also with our wholesome sīla.

At times, when you're in a difficult space and you look around and think, "Well, looking at the flowers isn't doing it for me. Nobody's walking by filled with mettā. The leaves are falling and they're all brown and dead. I need something to bring some light in. I can't find one moment of mettā. What could there possibly be to brighten the mind and the heart?" You could contemplate your past acts of generosity of mind, speech, and body. You have to have done at least one, right? Somewhere? If you haven't, go wash your hands and think, "May this act be for the benefit and well-being of all beings everywhere." And then you can contemplate that later.

But this is from the Buddha himself. And it's a wise use of thought, a wise use of contemplation. He's talking to a layman, and it's embedded in a sutta where he gives other contemplations. But I'm just going to share the dāna one because we're running out of time.

So this is the case where you recollect your own generosity: "It is a gain for me that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness — freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms."

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones — and that's all of you, whether you like it or not — at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. So just the recollection of generosity wholeheartedly is a moment of purification of heart and mind.

And when the mind is not overcome with aversion, delusion, or greed, her mind heads straight, her heart heads straight, based in generosity. And when the mind, the heart, is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, a sense of the Dhamma, and experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. And in one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calm experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

Thus, Mahānāma, thus the person should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children.

In other words, no excuse not to. And it makes us happy, so why not?

Let's just sit for a moment. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 105

Exploring Grasping at Views

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson offers a penetrating investigation into one of the four fields of grasping (upādāna) identified by the Buddha: attachment to views and opinions (diṭṭhi). She illuminates how this clinging operates from gross levels—political opinions, cultural beliefs—down to the most subtle levels of personality view (sakkāya-diṭṭhi) and our moment-to-moment descriptions of meditative experience.*
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> *Wilson explains the Buddha's three levels of wisdom: heard or acquired wisdom (sutamaya paññā), contemplative wisdom where we explore teachings in our experience, and the transformational level of insight (bhāvanāmaya paññā). She describes how genuine insight involves a shift of perception rather than logical deduction—something lets go that we didn't even know was being held, and we suddenly perceive reality in a completely different way. This understanding helps explain why insights must deepen repeatedly; the subtlety of delusion means we keep discovering views we didn't know we were clinging to.*
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> *The talk traces how perception, when colored by greed, hatred, or delusion, leads to inaccurate descriptions of reality that harden into views. Wilson draws on teachings from Dzigar Kongtrul, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Ajahn Sumedho to show how our awareness 'snaps shut' when we grasp views, engaging in selective perception that only allows information confirming what we already believe. She encourages practitioners to find refuge not in personality or views, but in awareness itself—generating what Ajahn Buddhadāsa called 'contentment with emptiness.' This radical trust in not-knowing, while freeing, can also be profoundly unsettling as cherished self-views dissolve.*

The essence of what I want to speak about tonight is an exploration of attachment to views and opinions.

Since we were mentioning clinging, *upadana*, today—there are many places where the Buddha spoke about four fields of grasping, he called them. Just four big areas where grasping comes up a lot.

The first is pretty obvious: sense desires. The next is grasping at views and opinions. This is a huge source of confusion and suffering. Third is *sakkaya-ditthi—ditthi* means view, so it's actually grasping or attachment to view of self, sense of self. Really, both of those are views, so I'm going to conflate them. And the fourth is rites and rituals, which is really talking about believing. It's almost back in the Buddha's day where there were

beliefs—for instance, certain religious beliefs that if you washed yourself in a certain river, that would wash away all your previous bad karma. So he's saying attachment to that is not helpful. But we could think of it almost as magical thinking, our little personal rites and rituals.

I'm not speaking about all of those tonight. I just want to talk about attachment to view, because I personally find it really fascinating. Just a warning: I can go on and on. But I won't. I find it fascinating.

I want to start with something the Buddha spoke about: three levels of wisdom, three levels of understanding, which I think can be really useful if we realize that things are happening on all three levels.

The first is called acquired wisdom—something we've read, something we've heard, something someone's told us. Extremely useful. I mean, that's what we're up here doing, and what you read in the suttas. Acquired wisdom. Of course, because we don't know for ourselves, we don't really know what's true or not, but it's extremely useful.

The second level is sort of putting that information to use. We contemplate it. We explore it in our experience. It's a kind of using the thinking mind in a useful way. We start to understand it. Take impermanence, for example. We first hear it and think, "Yeah, it could be. Makes sense." At the second level, we're thinking about it, consciously noticing it. "Yeah, yeah, pretty much. That seems like I could accept that." But that level still isn't transformational.

The third level is *bhavana-maya-paññā*. *Bhavana* means mental cultivation. You could say that's the level of insight when we talk about insight meditation. That is the level where it's transformational.

So what's happening in a moment of insight—of dhamma insight, insight in your experience, or even insight into some personal problem or a mathematics problem or anything? It's not like you're sitting thinking about it and it goes, "Yes, that makes sense. That's the rational answer." It's a kind of aha moment. Just all of a sudden, you recognize something in a different way. It's not an experience of thinking.

The way I talk about it is that it's really a shift of perception. We recognize something in one way—that's just how it is. And suddenly, something lets go that we didn't even know was being held, and we perceive something in a different way.

You know those images where if you look at it one way, it's two vases, and then if you shift your perception, it's two faces? Both perceptions are there in that phenomenon. It's not like you get rid of one piece of paper and bring up the other one. Both ways of perceiving are there. One isn't true and one isn't false, but they're different modes of perceiving. That's a simple way of talking about it.

But really, to me, it feels like that's what's happening with insight—on a gross level or on the most subtle levels, something lets go.

And so reality doesn't change—maybe even this particular situation isn't ostensibly externally different—but because of this perceiving in a completely different, unexpected way, it opens up a whole different understanding, a whole other possibility of response.

Hopefully in some sense you know what I'm talking about, and I'm not just making this up. What the heck is she talking about? Never happened to me.

So we're waiting for the huge insight that's going to end it all, and meanwhile we're having all these little ones. "But I saw this. I really understood that craving comes and goes. And when the craving for that banana is gone, it's really gone. I don't need the banana. The freedom from craving is freedom. I really got that." So how come, two seconds later, "I've got to have that banana"? Like, I really got it.

I'm choosing something simple, but on deeper levels—deep personality patterns of real suffering—don't you sometimes feel frustrated? Like, "I really understood this. Why?" And maybe not just this retreat. People have said, and this is not unique at all, "Now I'm seeing the last retreat. I went through this. I really understood this, and somehow I forgot it." And now it's like, "Oh, right. That. I'm having to learn it again."

Well, yes. That's why it's practice. And it's also because of the subtlety—the subtlety of levels of delusion. So we keep having insights again and again and again. I'm saying this not to be discouraging, but to be encouraging. We think, "Well, now I saw it. It's over." But the perception shifts back again. Yet once we've recognized something in a different way, even when it shifts back to the other way, you know—doesn't it change something in the mind stream? There's another possibility now.

And so with impermanence, the simplicity of really getting that the suffering in something isn't not getting what I want, but the craving itself—on some level, absolutely, I know that. Maybe not absolutely; okay, absolutely for the moment, then relatively I know it, and then we forget. But that experience of really knowing—that shift of perception from "gratification comes from getting the thing" to "it's just being okay with the craving and then it's gone"—that changes something radically in my understanding.

You can't give that understanding to anybody else, right? But at the same time, no one else can take it away from you. This is the level of insight wisdom that's really transformative to us.

So how does it come about? That's what we all want to know.

You may have noticed by now that it doesn't occur through willpower. It doesn't occur from wishing it. "Okay, now today I'm going to sit under this tree, and I'm going to see to the depths of impermanence. Boom." Okay, the Buddha could do that—that's a different thing. That's adhiṭṭhāna, based in wisdom of knowing what's appropriate. That's a whole other talk. But it's not like just wishing for it. And it's not by thinking about it. Something lets go that we didn't know was clinging.

There are many different ways, but what I want to talk about tonight is clinging to view, to an idea, which at the level of our insight wisdom can get very subtle. In the world, it's not so subtle. The suffering of clinging to views—the conflict, the pain, the hatred, the violence—is appalling and shocking. Well, it's not all the other guys; it's the same pattern, right down into our practice here. So that's what I want to talk about.

So say someone told me this example a few years ago. They were in a sitting and the body just got so restless, so unpleasant, so difficult that they couldn't stand it. They stood up, and it was in a different place—they were in the back of the room and you could only get out by threading your way through all the people, and it was really, really crowded. So social shame kept them there.

But standing there, the experience she was telling us about was this: the vedana is so unpleasant, so horrible. This is causing me so much suffering. This is just horrible. I can't stand these sensations. And she was just getting completely worked up. But standing there, rather than running away, there was some modicum of mindfulness. And at some point, it shifted. *Oh. This is just unpleasant. That's all that's happening. And it's not really what's causing the suffering—it's just my mind going wild.*

And it changed the whole experience. It was still restless. It was still unpleasant. But the belief that this restless experience is unbearable, causing me so much suffering—that belief, that view—was just suddenly seen, and it dropped away. And so the experience itself was perceived and responded to in a radically different way.

As we all know, we can't wish that. It may not happen next time. But remembering when we experience that begins to break us out of views and descriptions of experience that we don't even know we're clinging to. We don't even know we're holding them. That's where, to me, it gets so fascinating.

So to talk about what a view is, I need to start by talking about perception, which luckily we've talked about a lot, so I don't have to go into it too much. But it's fascinating—just fascinating.

As you know, perception is that arising with each moment of contact, and it's that precise in the way the Buddha talked: the description, not the labeling like noting, but the recognition quality. What's happening? As the Buddha says, what we perceive, we think about. Now that doesn't have to be a problem; it's really quite useful.

So there's a perception a little while ago—you heard a sound, and the perception for all of you was probably "bell." And the thought, which maybe doesn't quite bubble up to thinking, was meaning: oh, it's 7:25. That bell's time for the sitting, to go into the hall, to listen to the talk. All of these perceptions, one after the other—you come in and there's a perception of where you sit, and you're a yogi, and I sit up here. You shut up. I talk. It's like all these perceptions; we string them together and describe our world.

It's useful. If every time the bell rang you were all running around—"Oh, the bell! What does that mean? Where do I go?"—nothing could happen. And it works because we have, more or less, close enough, the same description of the perception of what it means, even though whether it was pleasant or unpleasant in that moment for you is different. So that's just how we describe our world—who we are, however we self-identify. All of that is normal and useful on a relative level, on a conventional level. It's not a problem.

Of course, the first place the problem begins, before we even get into views—and we've talked about this as well—is that our perception is quite frequently not accurate. And even more frequently, when it's not accurate, we have no clue that it's not accurate. We totally believe it. We think about it. We build up the description of the world based on that perception.

Sort of. OK, little examples. And what is our perception distorted by? Our friends: greed, hatred, and delusion.

My favorite example for delusion is very impersonal. When I'm home, if I don't have my glasses on, I really don't see that well, obviously. And I like things to be clean, you know, to a certain level of observable cleanliness. So if I'm walking around my house and it hasn't been cleaned for a while and I don't have my glasses on, I'm happy. It's clean. I don't notice anything. I'm quite content. I don't tend to wear my glasses—right now you're all a blur when I'm just walking around if I'm not needing them for something. But then I'll notice. I'll be working at my desk with my glasses on and leave them on when I go into the bathroom or something, and I'm sitting there going, *whoa*. What's

that ball of dust? What's that spider? What is that grunge over there? The perception is really changed. The fogginess of delusion is gone. That's just a very simple example, but we misperceive from delusion, and then we think about it.

Or consider when perception is colored by greed or colored by aversion. I remember one day—I don't remember where it was—but it was a really misty foggy day like yesterday, and it went on all day. I noticed for myself how when I walked outside, if my mind was in a little bit of a clinging, happy state, I'd walk out and think, "Oh, this fog is so beautiful and cozy, and the light..." You'd get all the thoughts about it. Then later in the day, as my body hurt and I was feeling grumpy, I'd walk out and think, "Ah, this is so oppressive. It's so heavy." Similar fog—not the same fog, a few hours later—but similar fog. Very different perception.

What we perceive, we think about. And what we think about, it turns into emotions, moods that go along with it. If we're aware that's happening, great—that's fascinating to bring mindfulness to. When we're not aware, then what we think hardens into a view. And without even recognizing we're attaching to it, we take that to be the true, accurate description of me or you or the fog or reality at this moment.

Dingo Khentse says, "When sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object—the fog, the dirt, the banana, whatever—influenced by all the accumulated habits and past experiences of your mind, the whole process is entirely subjective." Notice he's not saying it's kind of subjective, a little subjective. He's saying it's *entirely* subjective. "When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm." Have you noticed that? "When your mind is peaceful, free from clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure." It's really interesting to see.

Or there's this funny story—probably you've heard me tell this before—I heard it from Charles Genoud, about a Zen master and a samurai. Too good. So this wild, aggressive samurai comes to see a Zen master with his sword, angry, threatening to kill the Zen master, screaming and yelling and calling him, "You pig! You pig!" And the Zen master, as they do, just bowed and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

This even took the samurai aback a little. He said, "A Buddha? You see me as a Buddha? How am I a Buddha?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

It's really more that way than we might realize. Again, it's not to take it personally, but just watch how this works. It's so fascinating.

So perception, again—perception colored by any one of these kleshas—we just don't quite recognize it. It leads to a description that's inaccurate, which leads to a view, and then can lead to acting on it. Sometimes we can see through it to accurate perception, and then the whole thing falls away.

For example, someone told me at a retreat—not this retreat, but a smaller one—that they noticed a particular yogi hadn't come to any sittings for a day or two, and they got really concerned. Which can be good. It can be good. If someone's really missing for two days, it would be good to tell us. But this was somewhere else, a smaller venue.

They started noticing after some time, "Well, they really are missing." And all the thoughts and all the worry gets going. Where could they be? They're lost in the woods, or whatever. And as the yogi didn't show up, the thoughts start to come together with emotion. And it hardens. It moves from perception to thinking about it—citta—to view, diṭṭhi. Hardened into view. "Yes, something's really wrong, and I have to do something about it."

You can see the difference between when thoughts are just going through your mind and you can recognize, "Oh yeah, it's just thoughts," versus when suddenly the view is, "Yes, something's wrong. I've got to let someone know right away"—that energy, that sense that this is an accurate description of reality.

And then this person recognized—after I don't know how long, because they were telling me later—they recognized that, oh, actually... And this is also funny, because they were just looking in the wrong place. They had a wrong idea of which place in the hall that person sat. So for two days, they went through this whole thing. And then they saw the person and said, "Oh, okay."

Some misperceptions are easy to see through. The view, the reactions—we can just kind of laugh, hopefully. Okay, great. We learn how it works. But so many others, so subtly, we don't see through because they're happening so frequently.

When the Buddha talked about hallucinations of perception—inverted or distorted perception—what he meant is that we tend to perceive what is in constant flux as being permanent. There's not a big sign saying, "Yes, this is permanent." But perception is happening every moment, and we're perceiving and assuming permanence so much of the time. We don't recognize it.

Or, regarding anicca and dukkha, we don't perceive the unsatisfactory nature of things. We perceive something as offering security, satisfaction, happiness. Or, of course, as Guy has been talking about so much, we perceive a separate identity, a separate self where there isn't one.

These perceptions, these distortions, these hallucinations of perception—of course they lead to thinking, lead to descriptions of our world, lead to how we act and respond. But they're happening so quickly, these perceptions. They're so fleeting that we don't tend to even recognize those perceptions are occurring, never mind all the thoughts and reactions that describe our world, the views that arise from them. Just such a subtle process.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties come through mistaken perception. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience and true knowledge.

The emphasis here, the simplicity of moment-to-moment mindful awareness—not looking for something, because that's already too much. We're looking for some idea of what should be there. Gone, you know? But through moment-to-moment direct experience, each moment of pure mindfulness is just a moment. As I think I said last night, mindfulness in that moment is free from wanting, from greed, from aversion, from delusion—just for that moment. So there's the possibility of a more accurate perception. It's quick. It's quick. Not every accurate perception leads to insight. But the steadiness of mindfulness and simple perception is what allows for that shift, that wisdom, to arise.

So perception, when it's inaccurate, leads to the way we think about and describe ourselves, describe the world—and leads to when those descriptions are implicitly believed.

The Buddha described a view as "this alone is true, everything else is false"—if only our views telegraphed themselves quite so clearly.

I want to start by talking about how we get attached to our descriptions in a bigger realm than the subtlety of personality view, because it's the same process. Having an opinion or a view in the world isn't a problem. Of course we need it—opinions, preferences, views. It's election time. It's helpful, up to a point, to have a view. If you're going to vote or if you're not going to vote, either one's a choice, an opinion informed by whatever. Knowing that process—no problem. Just to know whether you want to take an orange or an apple at breakfast. There's nothing wrong with using opinions. It's not that in this way we give it all up and can't tell anything from anything. We're not talking about that. We're talking about grasping.

Because once we get attached, this energy of clinging, holding to a description, a view, an understanding of how we think we are, how we think the world is, what's right and what's wrong—the holding to it, to our description—we take it to be the reality. And it's as if, don't believe me, look in your own mind, in your own heart, it's as if our awareness snaps shut. It's as if we stop really looking, because now we know. This is

how it is. And we often don't notice, or even allow in, perceptions that run counter to the particular view or description of whatever it is we're holding to. I call it selective perception. And we don't even realize we're doing it sometimes. Sometimes we do.

But this freezes our mind. It freezes the intimacy with experience; we're not recognizing accurately. It freezes our idea of people, our idea of ourself. And in a very subtle way, we just notice what supports our view sometimes. Because when we're really holding to a view, even though if we really look, it's suffering, it's rigidity—we're disconnected from the fluidity, from the beauty, from the intimacy, the mystery of life and ourselves—it can give us this false sense of security. We know what's right, and we stay with the people who believe the same way we do. It's comfortable.

And it's scary when our views are challenged. A lot of times we feel threatened, or anger. I mean, look around the world—incredible violence and fear from different groups of people who have different views or beliefs about anything. It can be subtle, but it can also be obvious.

I can watch myself doing this. Since you guys are really lucky to be sitting and don't have to hear all the pre-election stuff—I tell you, every four years is just, for me, so much suffering. But I watch my mind. It's fascinating. Let's go to a different year, a different election; I won't talk about this one. But in any particular one in the last some years, it's like, I have my views, what I believe. I may not think each particular person is so great, but I know one is more aligned, the best I could do anyway, with the views I have. And I totally believe that's true. I believe my view. I know it matters—it's not like it doesn't matter. So I believe it, but I can really watch and see how my mind snaps shut.

I remember when Nixon—maybe some of you weren't even born then, I don't know—I didn't want to hear any good thing about Nixon. If he came on TV and did something kind of sympathetic, I didn't want to know it. I didn't want to let it in because it messed with my view of the demon, or whatever. And I can see how hard that is, how much suffering that is in my mind. And when they have the debates with the presidential candidates, I can see in my mind, it doesn't matter for me what anyone says.

There's nothing the candidate I'm not going to vote for could say that could change my mind. Nothing. And if I go in with that view, am I likely to hear anything? Is there even a possibility that I don't have it all scoped out? No, there's no possibility. And I have plenty of friends who all agree with me. Very few people do I know who don't. And then we can't even talk about it. That's half this country. And that's even without coming to blows, without coming to violence.

So this is a delicate line we walk. It's not simple to hold. I'm not saying I've found how to do it, but this is gross—I mean, this isn't hard to notice, right? That I really hold a view, an opinion. I need to act on that view and opinion. I'm not renouncing that. But can I do that without the attachment that makes me right and them wrong, that shuts down my perception and makes it impossible to receive any new information?

It's like Krishnamurti talked about—freedom from the known. When we're attached to view, we're the prisoner of what we think we know. And then we can unconsciously make choices to only let in the information that confirms what we know. Or we hear information that discounts it and think, "Well, he's just lying. It doesn't mean that, you can't even believe it." Whatever. You can see how much suffering comes from this in the world. And that's in the really obvious cases. What about all the ones we don't even recognize?

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "All things arise because of their interdependence. That is why nothing has a separate, independent identity. Because of our ignorance and hatred, we accuse, reprimand, or slander one another. Each of us is a product of our family, our environment, our friends, our education, our culture, our society. These conditions lead to a certain way of seeing things and a certain way of responding to things. When we see this, we can have compassion for everyone, including ourselves."

Just seeing how much incredible suffering there is in this world from people holding different views about—you pick it—our cultural identity, our gender identity, our religious identity, our country identity, our political identity, whatever it is. I don't have to go through it. You can pick this country, you can pick almost anywhere in the world. And it's interesting to see how it's often the neighbors who are closest that have the most virulent fear and hatred, the greatest sense of their views being assaulted.

Sometimes it can be a little bit amusing when we're moving away from war and hatred and bombs to something a little less intense—just seeing how we can act on our views and how we are so entrenched in our way of seeing that we just can't even get it, that another way is equally valid.

Years ago, many years ago here, we had a teen retreat with teenagers. Quite a few of the kids had come from the city, from a whole different environment than this place. So it was hard enough—they're having to eat tofu and beans and all of that. But the cooks at that particular time were in a "sugar is poison" phase. They wouldn't serve anything with sugar. God forbid there should be any sugar out anywhere.

So these kids—I mean, they're in this really austere environment, out of the city, so many difficult things. The food, the meditation. And then they're told they can't have any sugar. It was just really too much. A few of them were really suffering.

Finally, with the intercession of one of the teachers who had to do a major intervention with the cooks, some of the kids were allowed to have a secret stash of sugar. They could go hide it somewhere. Here they come in from the city, where people are probably dealing drugs on the street corner...

And they have to go hide their sugar from each other. Pretty whacked out.

So just this sense of being willing to let go of our perceptions. "Sugar is bad for you always and for everybody." How do we let go of that? And these are views we even know we've picked up. But what do we know for sure—so for sure that we don't even think about it? We don't even question it. We don't even know that there's another option. This gets into the territory, of course, of personality view, even more than worldview.

Just to give a simple example: a couple of years ago, I was teaching here with Steve Armstrong, and somebody said something—I can't remember the whole context, but I think Steve had somehow been talking about karma. Anyway, the subject of rebirth had come up, which luckily I don't have to clarify because we have Guy, and I'm sure he'll talk about it in much more specifics and brilliant detail than I ever could. So I can just throw things in like that and not have to describe them because Guy's here. That's what's really great about teaching with a team.

So I'm just mentioning rebirth. I'm not saying anything about true or not true—who knows? But it had come up, and somebody just said something in the question period: "Well, of course we know that's not true." Just completely dismissing it with an assumption that that's what we all know. Scientifically, no way that could be true. Then he went on and asked some question. And I really thought, what's Steve going to say?

What he said was great. He pulled this example. He said, "Oh, you're so sure that couldn't possibly be true?" He didn't try to convince them. He just said, "Here's another story." There's somebody we know—we all know him—a Sri Lankan man. When he was born, at about two years old, he spontaneously started chanting in Pali. Really, really long Pali chants, in a kind of... I mean, he was two years old. He'd never heard these in his two-year-old life. And of course, Sri Lanka has a lot of Buddhism. So apparently they took him to some scholars, and they said not only is it accurate—he's chanting like the whole Satipatthana Sutta, not just a few lines—not only is it accurate, it's in a kind of ancient Pali that isn't even what the scholars of this day were using.

What do you do with that? He started remembering spontaneously lifetimes back with Buddhaghosa, who wrote the Visuddhimagga. He was a secretary or something. We know this guy. This is a true story. What do you make of that?

If we can not have to make anything of it—if we can let that openness, that not knowing, inform our mind... You get a sense? Well, I don't know what your minds did with it. You all got kind of quiet. I didn't see anyone going, "Oh, that's a crock." You just were kind of listening. So if you didn't do that, if you just kind of held that space for a minute—huh, what could that be?—you get a sense of the lack of clinging, the openness to discover, the potential to just soften.

Surrender into the mystery of this moment without having to have an explanation before, during, or after. Without having to compare it to anything. Without having to know what it means about you. Without having to know how it compares to that other person or your last retreat or what you read or what Guy said or what Sally said or anything. Just this openness to explore, to be present, yathā bhūta, with things as they have arisen in this moment.

That's just that moment of freedom from the known, freedom from attachment to view, that allows just for this moment of openness and presence and freedom to discover—a kind of real tenderness, a kind of curiosity for life. And this is what we're trying to talk about in terms of the quality of mindfulness.

When we talk about that level of Dhamma vicaya, investigation is not "Now I will understand this, and I'll put it together with this, and I'll have this in it." You know Suzuki Roshi's famous line about beginner's mind: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few." Just to be here now, this quality of almost childlike innocence, connectedness and wonder without having to draw conclusions.

My favorite example of this, which I've often used, is the world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He's currently involved in so many cross-cultural musical adventures, you could say. You can see in him this kind of openness to discover all different kinds of music and kinds of instruments and forms, and he brings them together. He does this Silk Road ensemble now with people from all over the world, from all different kinds of music, different scales, different tonalities. I've listened to some of it, and I have to say, I really don't get some of it. It's out there for my kind of limited view of looking. But I love the sensibility.

One time years ago, before he was doing the Silk Road, I saw in Germany some kind of TV documentary about him. All I remember is he was flying in a helicopter into the middle of Africa to visit a very simple tribe. He got out of this helicopter with his mil-

lion dollar cello. They brought him to meet the head musician of this tribe—I think it was a tribe of bush people, they called them. This musician's instrument was literally a big empty oil drum, a metal oil drum onto which he had fashioned a series of strings on just a wooden pole. That was his instrument. So he was playing and singing on that, and then Yo-Yo Ma was playing on his cello. And then Yo-Yo Ma says, "Oh, let's switch!" So they switch instruments.

He had this really childlike openness. He's trying to play this guy's instrument and he goes, "Oh, I just can't play this nearly as good as you. You play it so well." And it wasn't put on at all. It was just this complete openness to discovery. I've always remembered it because I was so touched by that quality of mind that isn't building walls and separations through our views of "Well, I have this million dollar cello and this background of all this Western classical music, and I know so much—and look at this oil drum." None of that was there. Just this sense of appreciation within different cultural contexts instead of trying to reconcile all views.

The freedom from views isn't that we reconcile them all and figure it all out. And this includes views of practice, by the way—views of what's good practice, views of choiceless awareness versus concentration versus you name it. Without trying to reconcile them all into the one right view, it's the sense of not needing to hold to any view. We can use them as skillful means, but can you just imagine that possibility of not holding to any view whatsoever? It's scary a little bit. It's also really freeing.

Views of practice, as I mentioned. I love watching this in myself, because what happens is the mind has some little experience, makes up a few thoughts about it, and goes, "Oh, that's how it's supposed to be." I don't know if you notice this at all in your practice. And having the honor to sit while different people come and talk to us, we can see it happening one after the other. When you're just in your own experience, you don't quite see it.

So we can see people come in and go, "Well, good sati. I had good mindfulness because when I really paid attention to the pain, it went away." Or someone else comes in and says, "Well, my mindfulness isn't good because when I try and pay attention to this unpleasant thing, it just goes away and I can't hold on to it. I should be able to see its arising, its persistence, and its passing away, but I can't see that because as soon as I look, it goes away."

And someone else says, "You know, I'm not having emotions. And because I'm not having emotions, I'm not really getting to the meat of things. There's something wrong." And the next person comes in and goes, "But there's just so many emotions, nothing but

emotions. It's really just about getting concentrated and being with the breath. I can't do choiceless awareness because it's just breath, breath, breath, calm, calm, calm. Nothing's happening."

Choiceless awareness—yes, it's awareness with all that arises. But there are thoughts, and sounds, and endless things appearing. How can I possibly get calm when all this stuff is happening? And then it's the same person rotating through all of these positions, one day after the other.

None of it is suffering if we're not clinging to the view. But when you see this—call up the thought in the back of your mind. When you're suffering, when things are not okay, when there's conflict, call up the thought: What am I really believing right now? And the thought will come up: "I'm really believing there should be no thoughts."

Don't just bang it away and say, "Oh, I know that's stupid." Yes, we know it's stupid, but that doesn't mean we're not believing it. So call up the thought and see: right now there's a clinging to that view. And that's the suffering. Great. Explore it. Is it possible to even entertain the sense of: what if there's no perfect right view of what your practice should be?

Oh my god. You can't keep judging yourself, can you? You'll never get perfect either, because there is no perfect. Just that surrender into what's happening now.

This is both incredibly freeing—freeing from the clinging, the stricture, the measurement, the limitation of attachment to view—but also, at times, it can be very unsettling, because we are familiar with wanting this sense of security. Even if it makes us totally miserable, we're upheld by our view. It's like, "I know. I know what's true. I can't ever do it. I'll never be able to do it. I'm completely hopeless. But at least I know that. And I know what's true." Opening to "Well, what's appropriate? What's happening now?"—that can be a little bit scary.

So these views of right practice, and sakkāya-diṭṭhi—the sense of me—really arise in the same way. Guy has talked about this a lot: a moment of clinging to any sense experience or to any of the khandas. But you can see, again, how there's a perception.

For instance, you're walking and there's just a slight unpleasant sensation. It's very faint. There's some aversion. And there's a whole train of thought about it: "It's unpleasant, but I'm not seeing it clearly. And this pain has been there the whole time. I'm blocked. There's something wrong." Or in the sitting, that pain in your stomach comes back. "Oh, there's that block again." You ever think that? "There's that block again. What can I do to get rid of it? How can I move through it? My practice is stuck because I keep

having the same block." A whole sense of self arises, and then all the stories and memories about me and the things I haven't done and how I'm blocked, and the thoughts, right?

Then the next sitting you come and sit down, and when that starts, you just meet it with mindfulness, and it dissolves in sparkling light. "Ah, that block has dissolved because my practice is moving!" And it's pleasant. Then we start having memories that support our good practice, our onward-leadingness, and ideas about the future—like Joseph talked about, this body of light. All the memories that come up at that time support our view of ourself as being the practitioner of the ages, the next Dalai Lama in female form, whatever it is.

Selective perception. When you're feeling really horrible, you don't remember all those great moments. You might remember, but you throw them away: "Well, that was just a fluke. This is really me. This is the core." It's just taking a perception that's skewed by aversion or clinging.

A delusion is definitely there because we think it's me—a whole story of me—and we run with it.

Ajahn Sumedho talks about this self-view beautifully. He says, "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit—my views, my feelings, and my opinions. I can get caught into that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness." That's what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is: that view of me arising in consciousness. "But if I know that—that view of me—then my refuge is no longer in being the person. I'm not taking refuge in the personality or my views and opinions. So then the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends, because what we're taking refuge in is this awareness rather than in the view of me, of personality." I'm so good, I'm so bad, I'm this, I'm that. Our refuge then is this awareness rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness, because you can't do it. Resting in this conscious awareness is what he refers to as coming home, or our real home.

It's just that simple shift—from "There's no way I can do this, and I saw this and that, and here I am" to "Oh, awareness of... I can't do this, and this and that... awareness of." The refuge is the awareness, not the clinging to the view.

He said something I found very interesting. I've often mentioned this to groups—he shared it with a gathering of Western teachers a few years ago. He was talking about personality view, attachment to our views of our personality, our sense of self. And he

said he thinks the biggest hindrance for Westerners—this is just his opinion—is self-doubt in regard to trusting our insights into awareness, trusting our insights, that perception of the liberating sense of refuge in awareness.

It's similar to what Guy was talking about last night—minding the gap. That sense of just taking refuge in that gap, in that moment of non-concocting, of non-creating. Just the stillness, the silence of not creating a view or sense of self. Just this. The simplicity—so simple. That's what he's talking about: our insight into the liberating potential of a moment of awareness. Just this.

Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about generating a contentment with this. He calls it emptiness. He used many words for it. Generating a contentment with it. And seeing how quickly—this is what Sumedho is saying—our self-doubt arises. We don't tend to trust that. We don't generate contentment. We don't even believe it really happened, or if it did, we don't really think it's anything significant.

He says this happens in part because our belief in our personalities is so strong. We really have such faith in our personality views. It's so strong that that becomes our reference point. That's where we take refuge. That's what we really believe. And we wouldn't think of it as belief—we just think it's true. And so we get caught back into believing very implicitly the thoughts, the views, the story of our personality, our personal history.

All that's there—it's all cause and effect. But any of us, if we look steadily moment to moment, our moods are always changing. Our personalities have certain conditioned patterns, but they're changing all the time, aren't they? Yes. The same ones may come back very frequently—that's the conditioned patterns. But nothing's always there. What he's talking about is our believing so implicitly in our personalities.

Here's a simple example: a moment just—

Just the gap. Awareness is like this. And a moment before, it's, "Oh, there's no way I can possibly do this." And then it's so high. "What about stream entry? And what about all these things? And who am I? And what are they talking about anyway? This guy says it's like this, and then it's like that. And the Burmese and the Thais. And what about the Tibetans? And what about the Zen?" And it's hopeless. And how can we... we fall back into that. And in that moment of, "Oh, awareness," all of that drops away.

And then our habit of mind jumps back into, "Okay, it dropped away, but that's no way to live. How can you live like that? You have to have opinions. You have to know. You have to teach, right?" And that's what we believe. That becomes our reference point. It's a lot of suffering. It's a lot, a lot of suffering.

But it's radical trust in not knowing. Just the willingness to not know, to open into this moment is both freeing, but again, it is radically unsettling at times. It's not like every moment is just nice, nice, nice, leading to the most nicest, and it just goes like that.

As I said in the beginning, even with our gross views in the world, when our views, our perceptions, when our views are threatened—that we've been somehow holding to, whether it's in the world or in our view of ourself—it gives us a sense of stability. When that's threatened, that can be really scary.

Sometimes it happens in meditation. For a simple example, there's just a moment where suddenly the perception of the solidity of body goes away. Just sensations in space, you could say. And at times, that's really pleasant. But sometimes, the first time that happened, a lot of fear can come up because, where's the body? You open your eyes—okay, here it is. But it feels, you know, it's just because it's unfamiliar. And we're comfortable with the familiar.

And in terms of our whole subtle personality view, what Subhuti's talking about, we have such a strong belief in it. And the ongoingness of practice keeps... we keep coming up against the views we don't even know we're holding about ourselves, the beliefs, even when they're suffering ones. But every belief we have about ourselves, as we keep on with steady awareness, is going to be challenged, is going to be questioned. No, we can't hold with clinging to any view and really recognize the truth.

So while it's freeing, I know for me, I remember one time in retreat I recognized this. It felt like in some way, one way of describing my practice is that over the many years it's felt like a series of small little deaths of certain beliefs about who I was that I didn't even know I was holding to—like deaths of a certain sense of Carol-personality.

Now, someone from the outside would say, might say, if they were as aversive as me, "Maybe it died to you, but one would wish that it didn't really stop manifesting in the world." So don't be afraid. You don't really change into someone different. But this belief, this something holding, it dies away.

And there can be a kind of grieving. And it doesn't make any sense. Grieving for what? This stupid idea I had about myself that was causing me enormous suffering, and then there's grief when I'm seeing it's not true? Okay, grieving is like this.

Or we see a certain habit, and we think, "I don't want freedom if I have to get rid of this." Notice that kind of stuff.

There's one quotation from Stephen Batchelor that I like a lot. He says, "Emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, and seeming protection. And although it is freeing, it can also bring up great disconcertion." Disconcertion—if you're not a native English speaker, it means a kind of dis-ease. It's unfamiliar. It's confusing. Like being in no man's land.

So just so simple, we can't stand it.

But when we can just open, just radical surrender into this moment as it is, free from view, free from clinging to view—just that willingness to generate a contentment with emptiness, with non-concocting, with not needing to know and describe.

Then we're left with—I'll just end with this from Ajahn Sumedho, because it also speaks to what Guy said this morning, or last night, about the island:

"The only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, sense of self, is through awareness of them—through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion, through awareness of views. The island that you cannot go beyond is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of *becoming* awake and aware."

So let's just practice being awake and aware.

CHAPTER 106

Adhiṭṭhāna: Resolution and Determination

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a deep exploration of adhiṭṭhāna—resolution or determination—one of the ten pāramīs (perfections) in the Buddhist tradition. She begins with the mythological story of the ascetic Sumedha, who upon encountering Dīpaṅkara Buddha, made the vast resolve to become a Buddha himself rather than seeking personal liberation as an arahant. This illustrates how determination can span vast timescales, yet must be renewed moment by moment.

Wilson distinguishes adhiṭṭhāna from striving or willpower, explaining how wholesome determination feels like an alignment of mental energy accompanied by calmness and peace. Drawing from the Abhidhamma, she describes it as "the releasing of the mind onto the object"—a quality of decisiveness captured in the phrase "just do it." She offers practical guidance on recognizing when determination is wholesome: it arises with wisdom (paññā), truthfulness (sacca), relinquishment, and inner calm. When tinged with aversion or ego, these qualities are absent.

Through personal stories—including her humbling experience studying German at the Goethe Institute—and inspiring accounts of Master Sheng Yen's secret monkhood during military service and Tibetan nuns maintaining practice through the Cultural Revolution, Wilson demonstrates how determination supports us through obstacles. She encourages practitioners to establish clear aspirations for their practice while remaining flexible with circumstances, never giving up yet never clinging to expectations about how the path should unfold.

I decided to talk about adhiṭṭhāna—resolution and determination—tonight after it came to my mind this morning. Then, just talking with people in interviews today, perhaps because my mind was already inclined that way, it seemed like something I could see happening in people's minds. It's been a particular interest of mine. It's a mental factor, and it's been very interesting and useful for me in the last few years of my life as I've explored it. So I wanted to share that because I've been finding it very helpful.

Resolution or determination—adhiṭṭhāna in Pali—is one of the ten pāramīs, the ten wholesome qualities of mind and heart that, according to the mythology, the Bodhisatta developed over all the eons and lifetimes, bringing these ten beautiful qualities to perfection. Determination is one of them.

Determination is a very interesting quality, both in its vastness, as I mentioned this morning, and in specific moment-to-moment experience. The recognition of this wholesome quality in our mind, in our heart, as part of our meditation experience, is enormously helpful, as well as in our daily life, of course.

To talk about determination, resolution, or steadiness of purpose—these are a few different definitions. From Situgu Sayadaw, who's a prominent Sayadaw in Burma: adhiṭṭhāna can be regarded as a foundation for all of the pāramīs, for all of the perfections, because without a firm resolution, a firm determination, one cannot fulfill the other pāramīs. Of course, without some kind of resolution or determination, none of us would still be sitting here, would we? I mean this seriously.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu has talked quite a bit about it. He says it gives focus, motivation, and direction to our practice, if we're specifically thinking about our practice. And A.H. Almaas, who's not Buddhist, describes it as the quality of being unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. Some of these descriptions might sound similar to vīriya, to energy, and I'll talk about the differences and similarities in a minute.

So: unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement, giving focus, motivation, and directness to the practice or to our life, and a foundational force for all the pāramīs, for all of our practice.

Let me describe it in vast proportions over time—this broad determination, broad resolve, broad aspiration. As I mentioned this morning, there's the period of the so-called Buddha before the historical Gautama Buddha that we know actually existed. I'm quoting from a very esteemed and revered scholar of Buddhism, Mr. Guy Armstrong. To use his language, four incalculables and 100,000 eons before our present age—which is to say a very, very long time ago. It sort of sounds like a fairy tale, right? A very long time ago, in a distant age.

There was an ascetic named Sumedha who was practicing to become an arahat. That was his aspiration, his resolve. He heard that there was a Buddha, a self-awakened one named Dīpaṅkara Buddha, in another village. He went to hear him. And basically, just in beginning to see, to hear Dīpaṅkara Buddha, Sumedha was so inspired—as is the case in these stories—just with the Buddha's wisdom, his brightness, his dignity, that spontaneously, but very profoundly, there arose in him the realization that, sure, if he became an arahat, completely awakened, that would certainly be for his own benefit and the benefit of many others he would meet. But if he actually resolved to become a Buddha in some future time, that would benefit so many more people, so much more.

So out of a sense of great inspiration and great compassion, this spontaneous, deep resolve—adhiṭṭhāna determination—arose: to do whatever it would take to become a Buddha in a future life. That was this strong resolve spreading over four incalculables and 100,000 eons. That's a long time. That one vastness of determination, of course, has to be backed up by moment after moment after moment of determination arising in the mind and heart. I'll come back to how he had to do that in a minute as I talk about it with us.

As the story goes, Sumedha noticed the Buddha was about to walk through some mud, so he flung his body down so that the Buddha and all the Saṅgha could walk over him and not get muddy. This called him to Dīpaṅkara Buddha's attention—in a good way. And Dīpaṅkara Buddha recognized, could tell from looking into the ascetic's mind, that in fact he would become a Buddha in a future age. Had Sumedha not made that resolution, he would have become an arahat right there and then. So that's how these things end happily.

That's the story in vast proportions. But you can see in smaller vast proportions—whatever particular resolve or determination, whatever you could call adhiṭṭhāna aspiration for our own life, for our own practice. I'll come back to that at the end, just to hold that as a possibility.

We don't just have to mush around, hoping something nice happens. We can really have a sense of purpose and direction. And this is not antithetical to all the instructions we've been giving all the time, which is why this has been helpful to me.

So a lot of what I want to do is talk about recognizing the quality of resolve, of determination, in our mind now—much like we recognize the seven factors of awakening. We've talked about these other factors, how when we recognize a wholesome factor and understand with wisdom how it works, and we begin to incline our mind towards it, we can actually call on it in times when it's appropriate and really strengthen that quality. So how to recognize it in our own minds is really important, because it gives us the perseverance, the courage in life and in practice to keep going.

As we've talked a lot about viriya, energy, it's quite a strong quality, but it's not striving. You've gotten that, right? I mean, we've said that. We have said that, right, once or twice. So enormous energy can be put out. It isn't striving. It's not meant to be willpower. It's not expectation trying to make anything in particular happen—which is quite difficult for us, how to put out intense energy without any idea of result at all. It just doesn't really compute, but that's what we talk about.

And at the same time we talk about this energy, we also talk about relax, observe, allow—the mindfulness of whatever arises, what we talk about as choiceless awareness. Not even the attention, but choiceless awareness, the sense of—and I say it myself all the time—that awareness doesn't care what's happening. That is just really learning to radically trust awareness rather than trying to shape or manipulate our experience. We say all these things and mean them.

And I know at times it can turn into something else. When we're not striving, but we're so afraid of striving, or we can almost be so careful not to turn our energy into expectation or some view—which I know I went on about all last week, not to have any view of what should happen—it can kind of turn into almost a sense of, "Well, just whatever happens is happening. And anything I do is striving or wanting or goal-oriented or manipulating. So just lie down and let it roll over." And how to find that balance? How do you use skillful means? How do we cultivate the wholesome? How do we recognize the klesha, even like with our attention, as Guy was saying, even meeting it fully with our attention without hating it, without wanting something different, without identifying—but at the same time without just giving up?

You know, Larry Rosenberg, who is really very, very funny at times, he used to talk about how sometimes we just get so like, "Don't give anything any trouble. We should massage the kleshas. Just let them be comfortable. Don't get upset." And so we can go on this side of just fluffing around, not really knowing how to bring clarity and strength and power to the viriya without using wanting and anger.

Mostly when we think about how to do something with a lot of force, that's when we can come with ill will, with anger. I think Joseph said sometimes anger feels good—the sense of energy, the sense of our attention, our energy is all collected and focused. And by gum, we can do something. Unfortunately, what we're doing isn't just the thing we're doing. We're cultivating aversion and suffering. But that's a sidetrack.

So to learn that there can be enormous collectedness of energy, resolution to really do something clearly, in a wholesome way that's not kleshas. You all know this. It's not like some magic thing, but just to really bring our attention to it, so I want to talk about it.

A simple example, which we've often said: when the patterns of thought are coming again and again, seven thousand times you've seen them. We've talked about this a lot. I will not go to Cowboy Dharma. But just to say, "Not now." That sense of "not now"—you know what it is? When it's not aversion, it's not fear, and it's not kind of wimpy "not

now," but this real sense of, "No, I don't need to go there." You've had that experience, right? At least once, something starts in your mind: "No, I don't need to go there." And sometimes, some people were telling me today, it's amazing.

No, I'm not going there. And the whole thing just goes away. You're like, what? You really didn't need to go there. It's amazing.

That's a quality of determination. Or one way I explore it: you're really tired at night, and the metta sitting is over, and your mind is saying, "Oh, just go to bed." But there's this sense where you just make a simple resolve in the moment: I'm just going to do one more walking meditation for twenty minutes. You're not making some huge lifetime commitment, but just this sense of, "No, I'll just do it."

And that's really what it feels like. Just do it. It's not like, "Oh, I'll walk," and then you start walking, and every minute it's, "Should I or shouldn't I? I'm really tired. Maybe I should go to bed. No, I'll keep walking. No, should I or shouldn't I? Why am I doing it?" And you go, "By God, I'll just do it! I don't care!" And you stomp up and down. Neither of those are determination, right? They're not.

But that sense of just do it. And then whatever comes up in the twenty minutes comes up. You're tired. You're dizzy. You're aversive. You're yawning. You're incredibly filled with light and contentment. Whatever comes up, you just do it. There's not all that dithering. There's not all that wavering, this or that, all that energy that gets just blown away. It's all collected in the simplicity of just doing. You don't have to think about it anymore. And there's that simple willingness to be there. That's what I mean by the quality of determination, of adhiṭṭhāna.

One way of noticing how it feels—because this quality of determination, when we talk about it in terms of the Abhidhamma, in terms of different mental factors—it's one of those factors that's so-called ethically variable. We've talked about others, like concentration, for example. This means in itself it's not either wholesome or unwholesome, but it takes on the quality of the other factors that are in that moment of citta, that moment of psyche, that come together with it as determined by it.

So the quality that adhimokkha has as an energy, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome—this is the definition from the Abhidhamma—literally, I like it because I can feel this in my mind when I imagine it. Literally, this quality is the releasing of the mind onto the object. So it's like a quality of decision or resolution. It's not, "Should I go there or should I not go there?" It just releases. It just lands there. So it has the characteristic of conviction and it manifests as decisiveness. And I think really the best slogan

for it is just do it. It's Nike's "Just do it." Sayadaw U Tejaniya really likes that. In fact, he has a big picture of the Nike swoosh, and sometimes he'll just hold that up for people. Just do it.

You see how that could be wholesome or unwholesome. So here we want to bring it into the realm of the wholesome, the skillful. Just do it.

So how do we recognize it as a wholesome state, as a skillful state? One aspect of how it feels—this is my experience, and then I'll talk about some ways Sayadaw U Tejaniya describes it. One way it feels is you can sense how the energy, the mental energy, just kind of comes together. It aligns. It doesn't have to be super heavy or strong, but it just comes all together, and there's a sense of calmness.

A sense of peace accompanies it. You just give attention to that, you just do it.

Here's a very simple example: in bed in the morning. The bell goes off, or you wake up—even better—at four, and you're awake, sort of. And the mind is going, "Should I get up, or shouldn't I get up? I could get up, I'm pretty awake, but then I'll be tired later." You know what I'm saying. Back and forth, dithering. Should I or shouldn't I? Is it good for me or not good for me? However long we're there going back and forth trying to analyze—just what I call dithering—it leads to a loss of energy, a kind of doubt, a kind of vacillation, a kind of weakness in the mind.

I've noticed this almost every day of my life when I have to get up. It's not my favorite moment. That one moment in the day is not my favorite. I'm not one of these "Yes, another day!" people. I know some people like that. But I really learned this, and it's amazing. The lying there, the "should I" and "how do I feel" and "five more minutes"—all of that is not pleasant. When I just tune into the quality of determination, which is simply "get up," it's really like that. All the energy comes together. It's not a "should." It's not aversion. It's not judgment. It's just: get up. Instead of the energy going into all those other thoughts, it all comes together and I just get up. It's just like that. It really is just like that.

It's not like that's some wonderful thing. But watching that quality—it's just a simple moment, not a big deal—and learning to recognize it, and then learning that we can actually call on it. The mind is much more trainable than you might believe sitting here. We can learn to recognize the wholesome, incline the mind toward the wholesome. And wholesome brings other wholesome factors, and they strengthen. That's the whole gist of meditation practice, right? Of the bojjhangas, the factors of enlightenment. And with this as well. So learning simply to recognize it.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about the four qualities that come together when determination is wholesome, when it functions as a pāramī. It comes together with wisdom, with paññā, with some sense of clear seeing. It doesn't have to be the wisdom of an arahant, but the wisdom of clear seeing in that moment. Then with truth, truthfulness, sacca, honesty. With relinquishment, non-clinging. And with calm or peace in the mind. A clear, wise resolve comes together with these things.

Let me give you a very simple example so it doesn't sound so abstruse. Say you make a simple resolve here on retreat. Out of a sense of wisdom, you think, "I really would like to work with studying continuity a little bit." Now, it's wisdom rather than wanting, or comparing what someone else is doing, or thinking "my mindfulness stinks today so I've got to do something better." But in a balanced mind, you make a resolve: "Okay, the 8:15 sitting in the morning until lunch—I'm just going to be very steady. I'm going to sit. When I'm done with the sitting, I'm going to go walk. When I'm done with walking, I go sit. I'm going to really work with steadiness of attention in the so-called transition times and make that my resolve." It's not that you can resolve to be mindful every moment—that would not be wisdom, discerning wisdom. But "I'm going to resolve to really use this time like that for this week."

So that's, by the way, not a bad idea. That's a resolve that could be made with wisdom, depending on your particular circumstances—coming out of a sense of the value of mindfulness and where you're at in your practice.

And then in terms of working with the resolve, we meet ourselves with this sense of truthfulness, which is one of the other paramis. In other words, mindfulness has this quality of truthfulness anyway, just recognizing things as they are. So it's kind of like we don't kid ourselves. We don't say, "Well, I'm going to do that starting at 10, but first, just today, I really need a nap. But then tomorrow at 10 o'clock I'll start it." And then the next day we conveniently forgot we took a nap, and we really think we've been doing it. Little stuff like that. Just noticing, so that we have a sense of truthfulness to ourselves—not to anybody else—to really look and see what we're doing. And if somehow we can't do it, really can't do it, then keep bringing in the mindfulness, the truthfulness, and see why. Sometimes we do have to make adjustments.

The relinquishment is obvious. Relinquishment is just really non-clinging. When we have a particular sense of resolve or determination, of course we don't cling to the other activities that we give up in that time. We don't cling to all the other things that we wish we were doing. And if mental states come up of "Oh, just be nice to yourself and go have a tea," we don't cling to those either. We see it, we acknowledge it, and we just stay with our resolve.

What comes when it's a wise resolve, and we're meeting it with truthfulness and wisdom and non-clinging, is that it comes with a sense of calm, a sense of peace. If we're making a resolve and in really trying to do it we're getting more and more agitated, more and more upset, or more self-hatred, or more aversion, or more restlessness, there's something off about it. It's not as wise or as clear, or the motivation—maybe we're not quite seeing clearly.

For example, one obvious example: the smaller for Siddhartha Gotama Buddha in at least our historical era, before he became the Buddha. When he made that resolve, after all his years of very ascetic practice and all the things he'd been through, the night of his enlightenment, supposedly he sat under the Bodhi tree and made that resolve, right? "I will not get up until I've completely made an end of suffering"—or however he said it to himself.

I've always thought that is really interesting. That's a very powerful resolve. And then there's the story about all the armies of Mara and all the doubt and everything he went through. But what I think is interesting is that he had been through how many eons of lifetimes as a Bodhisatta, and how much very sincere, intensive practice in that lifetime before he sat under that tree and made that resolve. So there was a sense of discerning wisdom—he knew in some way that was a reasonable, a possible resolve. It was made at the right time, with a sense of the broader situation.

And that can cut both ways. I don't want to tell you don't make a strong resolve. If you feel it's time for you to sit under the Bodhi tree—we could sit under this one—and make that resolve and not get up until you're really free, and you have some sense that's possible, I don't want to squash that. On the other hand, for me, I know if I was to do that, it probably doesn't feel like it would quite be based in discerning wisdom. That's certainly not tonight, based on—you know what I mean? And it's not to put oneself down. It's just to see clearly what's possible.

Another way we can notice with smaller resolves: say you're feeling your mind, your body's incredibly restless. You're just that kind of restless all over, thoughts going everywhere. You come in and you sit down, and you make the resolve, "I'm just going to be with this. Mindfulness can be with it however it comes." I'm sure we've all made resolves like that.

Now, in terms of it really being a resolve, the resolve isn't "I'm going to sit here and the restlessness will go away." That's not from discerning wisdom because that's not in our control. But to sit and say, "Okay, I'm just gonna sit here, and as Jack Kornfield says, I'll be the first person to die of restlessness, but I'll just sit here and be with it"—that's the resolve that could be from wisdom.

And how you know that it's from wisdom, not from wanting or from ego? Because we could come in and sit down and say the same thing, but it's got that aversion behind it. Or it's got that "By God, I can do it—if that person there can do it, I can do it." And it feels like resolve, but it's tinged with kilesa. It's tinged with me-ing and my-ing, and "so that" and "in order to" and wanting and aversion. And the two experiences will be very different in that case.

So with the sense of resolve, "I'm just going to be with this," it gives the courage, the strength, that alignment of the mind to just be here.

And there's a calmness with it. The restlessness isn't calm, but the mind isn't caught in that spiral of "Oh my God, there's no way I can do this. This is impossible. Maybe I should get up." All that dithering—it's just not there. And when it comes up, that's simply included in the resolve, just part of the difficulty that we stay with for this sitting.

But when it seems like resolve yet it's really willpower or aversion, there won't be that kind of calm. There won't be that peace. It will be more and more and more of a struggle. This doesn't mean we weren't really sincere when we made a resolve and it's tinged with klesha. As we know, we just can't always tell. So this is how we learn. This isn't to say you're right or you're wrong, or that you can't make a good resolve because this is just another way that you're hopeless. It's to really explore and see, to learn when it's wholesome and when it's not, so we can call on this—not only in our retreat, but in our lives. Really, this is the discerning wisdom, the willingness to look.

And we can call on it. As I said, I've been exploring this a lot in practice too, but also in my life. Just to give you an example—it was really a strong example for me of working with resolution as a factor in my mind.

A couple of years ago, I had taken a few months off, some for retreat, but I also managed to carve out three weeks where I could—for some reason I've always wanted to study German. So I had arranged three weeks at the Goethe Institute in München. It was hard to organize all of that. My German was essentially non-existent. I was staying with a friend, and given all the variables, I was joining a month-long class but coming a week late, which they'd given me permission to do.

You take this little test, and I knew a little bit of German here and there from all my years traveling there and from my friends, but completely without structure, without grammar—just a little of this and that. So they gave me some tests and placed me not in the beginner's class, which was a big mistake, but in the second level. And then I came in a week late.

So I arrived thinking, "La la, this is going to be fun." And I walk in, and the age range in that class was sixteen to twenty-three—and me. These kids were all there gung-ho to study, already a week into it. And it's all conducted entirely in German.

I was sitting there with no clue. No clue what the teacher was talking about. I couldn't follow what we were doing in the workbooks. I was transported back into the horrors of school—only worse, because I was always okay in school. But this was like, "Oh my God, I don't know what they're talking about. I don't know what they're doing." And I have to ask these kids for help, kids who don't want to talk to granny. They just want to talk to each other about drinking beer in the English Garden on the weekend. That was really all they talked about. We didn't have much in common.

So the first day, I was just blown away. But then I'd go off and work and work and work. Then I'd come back the next day. And it was really fascinating to see the junk that came up in my mind. I thought, "Wow, I didn't know this stuff could still be triggered." Some days it was really awful. Some days I kind of enjoyed it. Then I'd try to say something in class, and I was the worst speaker because I really hadn't learned how to speak.

Anyway, I just kept going like that. And after two or three days, I'd get up in the morning and think, "Why am I doing this? It's totally for me. Nobody else in the world cares if I do this. If I never go down there again, none of them will care."

Why am I putting myself through this?

But I called on resolution and said, no. First of all, I just really wanted to do it. And whatever I do, I'm going to learn. Just go through with it. So if it's a little difficult, so what? So unpleasant mind states come up, so what? I gave myself a little talking to, and I got clear—yeah, I do really want to do it.

And so then every morning, I'd get up and I would just sit there and call in resolution. And all the "should I go or shouldn't I go" would just fall away. I made the resolution that not only would I go every day, I would never leave early, I would never miss class. And I did. I did every single thing. And I did learn a lot. No, I still can't speak German. But the main thing I learned—it was an amazing kind of retreat for me about the power of resolution in the mind. Not just to do something, but the calmness that comes with it, the clarity, just a sense of, "Yes, now this is what I'm doing." Some days it was fun, some days it wasn't, but whatever comes up is just the practice. We bring the mindfulness, we bring the resolution to it, and we go through it.

There's always going to be obstacles, obstructions, difficulties. Whatever comes up, as you know, is the path. And resolution's like, "Oh, okay." It was such a wonderful support and tool to call on. And it's really palpable—you can really experience it. So I just want to offer that. The more we get to use it, the more we can call on it here in our practice as well.

And as you'll have noticed, we really need it here sometimes, right? Pretty much everybody. Once in a while, someone has a retreat that's mostly calm, blissful, happy, and they don't feel like they need resolution. That's wonderful for that retreat. But it can set up a lot of suffering for later retreats. It really can.

I have a dear friend—I haven't seen him in years—but his first retreat was like that. And the next ten years were filled with so much suffering because he never had a retreat, or even a day of practice, that came anywhere close to that first one. Because you think that's how it's supposed to be, right? And everything else just seems hopeless. It's just supposed to be cruising. Well, mostly it's not.

As you'll have noticed, there are times for all of us in almost every retreat—and not just in retreat, but in our life—where it gets really difficult for a whole variety of reasons, with a whole variety of experiences. It can feel like we've just hit a wall. Maybe our expectations aren't being met. There are a lot of reasons.

But the commitment we're making to this radical mindful awareness, this sense of radical presence with whatever arises in our mind, in our body, in our heart, moment to moment—as maybe you've seen, it can take us to places we never would have expected. Some beautiful, some really confusing, some where you can't imagine there's any way this could be useful, wallowing around in this stuff.

And so, of course, we need mindfulness and viriya and faith and confidence. But here is where resolution is a quality we can really call on. When our sense of safety net—I like to call it that—starts to fray or starts to fall away. The safety net can be just the way you've gotten comfortable being in your life, even if it's not a happy way; we're comfortable with it. Or on retreat, there can be what I call a comfort zone.

There are all kinds of ways we keep falling into a comfort zone. Maybe it's how long you sit, or how much you sit and walk, or what time you have tea, or how much you sleep, or who you can sit next to at lunch and who you can't. Or where you do your walking. Or what mental states are acceptable and workable and which ones are not. Or just our little habits that we get into and don't even recognize. The views, of course, which I talked about last week—and how when our comfort zone starts to fray, how unsettling that can be, how difficult.

We're all going to come upon times—and hopefully more than once, hopefully even often, and I mean that hopefully—where we're hitting this wall, where our mind thinks, "I can't do this."

Or I don't want to do this. Have you ever come to a place where you say, "If freedom means having to give up *this*, I don't want any part of it"? Have you ever had that? Even if "this" is just the second muffin at breakfast. Sometimes it's that mundane. "If freedom means I have to always watch what I'm eating, to heck with it." That's a silly example, but have you noticed things like that in your mind? Or the mind projects further: "If freedom means I don't have any more attachment to my partner, and I can't be in relationship anymore, and we can't live together anymore—then forget it. I don't want anything to do with it." We go down some road. "If equanimity means you can't tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant, who wants to live like that? It's all some dull gray. I don't want that." And we subtly pull back.

Or sometimes it's just, "If I have to look at this self-loathing one more time, I'm just going to explode. It's impossible. I can't do it anymore." We all have mental states where we think, "I can't do it anymore." That's just a mental state.

Ajahn Sumedho said something I thought was very funny. He was talking about some really unpleasant experience when he was in Thailand. He said, "This is unbearable. I just can't bear this another moment." Have you ever reached that place?

I remember one practice period in Burma some years ago where this mental state kept arising: "This is completely overwhelming. It's totally overwhelming." Some image would come—I can't remember what—and the thought, "I cannot take another step. It's completely overwhelming." I would totally believe it. And then the tomato would say, "I can't bear this another moment." And then I'd see that I could. You have another moment? Oh yeah. Okay. Well, I could just be with this another moment.

After some point with that overwhelming state, I suddenly realized something. Because I'd ask, "What's overwhelming?" I didn't even know what was overwhelming. Something was overwhelming. Then I realized: oh, this is just a mental state. "Overwhelm" is a mental state.

So that's the wisdom coming in that can lead to resolution. "Oh, it's a mental state." As soon as I know it's a mental state, I know from my own experience that a mental state is a combination of thoughts and mental feelings and physical concomitants. Whatever the mental state is, it comes, it goes. And I can be with it. I know that. As soon as I saw that, there's the resolution coming: "Okay, overwhelming. This really feels overwhelming. It still feels overwhelming. But the resolution can just be with it."

So I often ask myself when that comes in—"Oh, this is unbearable"—I say, "Well, what actually is unbearable about this?"

That's a question that just directs the attention back in. Okay, you can just see it. A very simple form of resolve.

Or sometimes, as I said last time, the sense of hitting the wall comes when we are starting to experience the unfamiliar in our practice—that familiar sense of who we are, our personality patterns. And sometimes when what we would think is a freeing insight arises, you walk into a situation, say in the dining room, where normally you would be filled with self-consciousness and embarrassment, and you walk in and it's just not there at all. There's just seeing and hearing and smelling, and there's no sense of "me" at all. And the actual experience is just a relief. That burden, that exhaustion of self-creation over and over again isn't happening.

And then something clicks in and says, "Oh no, how could I live my life like that? What about me?" We want to put on that old coat again that's so familiar, so comfortable. It's almost like we want to go back to the garden, the so-called pleasure garden, even though it wasn't so pleasurable. What about—who will I be if that impatience goes away? How will I be if I don't have this suffering story to relate to anymore? As Poonjaji used to say, you don't have to carry your whole past around with you on your shoulder like a corpse. Just being alive and fresh in the moment—but then who am I?

Chögyam Trungpa had a wonderful phrase: "nostalgia for samsara." I want it back. It's so familiar. And we're all going to hit places like that. This is where resolve—just learning how to have the resolve to stay with it without knowing where it goes—is so important. Because freedom from clinging, the freedom the Buddha's talking about, radical moment-to-moment awareness, it really is uncompromising. And with all of our best intentions and all that we've read, and I'm including myself in this, and all that we know, our mind really can't imagine that from what we know now. It can't.

We want to know what we're going to experience and how it's going to be and what it means—to get a landscape ahead of time, which to some extent is helpful. But at the ultimate level, each moment has to be completely fresh, opening to the unknown. And in the moment when there's the resolve and the clarity and the wisdom to do it, it's so freeing. But in the moments when there's not quite that, when we want to know, it just freaks us out. I want to know what's going on. Don't tell me I can't. I want some sense of certainty.

And so that's when bringing in the sense of resolution—not about an expectation of what will happen, but just this sense of the broad aspiration—helps us recognize that these scary experiences, these difficult experiences, these uncomfortable experiences, these not-knowing experiences, whatever comes from the inside or the outside, this is what's happening now, and so it's part of our path. It's all part of our path.

We never know. In each of us, our own path shows up different from everybody else. That's why māna—comparing and conceit—is so subtle. We all experience it a lot. But it just makes no sense. What's happening in this particular mind-stream at this moment is different from what's happening in that one, or that one, or that one, or yours yesterday compared to today. But we compare because we want some kind of certainty. No, just this.

So we never know how our path will go. But the determination—both in the bigger sense of aspiration and then bringing that into the willingness to just show up with courage, not shrinking back from whatever happens, whether external circumstances or internal—is a wonderful support on our path. And we couldn't do without it.

I want to tell you a little story from someone whose determination really inspired me when I read his autobiography. He's a Chan master, Master Sheng Yen. He died about three years ago. He was Chinese, originally from mainland China, but fled to Taiwan in 1949 when the communists won the Civil War. I sat with him a bit in Switzerland and a bit at his place here in upstate New York. He's huge in Taiwan—sort of like the Dalai Lama of Taiwan. But we didn't realize that meeting him here, because he was so simple. Loving—he just had the most loving, relational heart. Very interested in each person, very kind, very thoughtful, very simple. Just this wonderful being. And then we find out later he's a huge scholar, has tens of thousands of followers in Taiwan. A wonderful being.

And so when I read his autobiography, he talks about his life very straightforwardly. He was born in great poverty in China, again in the twenties or thirties, I don't remember exactly—very, very poor, a lot of privation. He became a Buddhist monk quite young, partly because he had no way to eat, no place to live. But he was very committed, really very inspired by being a Buddhist monk.

From the twenties and thirties onward, there was civil war in China—great hardship, often nothing to eat, lots of privation. In 1949, when the Civil War ended and the Communists took over, he realized that no one was going to be allowed to remain a monk and the monasteries were being destroyed. The only way he could get out and get to Taiwan was if he joined the Taiwanese army, because then they would give him transportation to Taiwan.

So here he was, a deeply committed Buddhist monk, but he knew he couldn't remain one if he stayed in China. So he did what he needed to do—he joined the Taiwanese army and went to Taiwan.

But it wasn't so simple. He was very committed to nonviolence, and so he ended up with a job where he didn't have to perform violence. He was committed to that. But he couldn't get out of the army. It wasn't like he could get over there and say, "Okay, thanks you guys, now I'm checking out." He couldn't leave. And it was well over ten years.

But he said the whole time, he was very clear: in my mind, in my heart, I was always a monk. He couldn't wear the monk's robes, but in his mind, he lived as a monk to the best of his ability while performing his duties.

To him, being a monk meant being a vegetarian. So usually he would never eat meat, which meant that he was almost starving much of the time, and he had very poor health. He would also use discerning wisdom—he was flexible enough to see when he was actually starving and his health was so bad that he was going to die, and then he would eat a little meat. But he took that on as having performed something that was unwholesome, unskillful. Later, when he was finally able to get out of the army, for him doing prostrations was a great way of purifying heart and mind. So he did endless prostrations to purify what he thought were his unwholesome actions. That was his commitment, his way.

After ten years of having no teacher, no other support to be a monk—living as a secret monk in the army—he found a way out. And he said, looking back, "I realized that if I did not have a very strong determination to stay a monk and to return to monastic life, I probably would not have succeeded, because getting out of my particular branch of the military service was nearly impossible."

But he had such dedication. He would spend every little short vacation going to find a Buddhist master and studying at a monastery in Taiwan, even though it was very, very difficult. An amazing being. When he finally got out, he went into six years of retreat in a cave on his own, and then became this great scholar. Great determination—but the softest, kindest, most loving person. Very, very inspiring to me, this quality of aspiration and determination.

As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says—for me that story highlights this point from Thanissaro Bhikkhu—in terms of determination, the importance of establishing wise priorities or aspirations in our practice, in our life, and then staying true to them regardless of the

temptations to sacrifice them for lesser ends. This is personal for each of us. Skillful determination begins with discernment, with wisdom, and continues with it in making wise decisions.

I want to encourage all of us not to shrink from this, not to feel too caught in a sense of self and shrink back from really having a sense of what a deep and wise determination, resolution, aspiration might be for you in your life, in your practice.

As Thanissaro says, it really is important to establish a clear aspiration and then call on determination, which strengthens our energy, which strengthens our mindfulness, which leads to wisdom. And when we see, "Oh, I really can do this," our faith gets stronger again. That faith gives us confidence and willingness to act, which gives determination and mindfulness. It all circles around and supports each other. The wholesome factors bring each other along; each supports the next.

Having a sense of what is really your deep resolve, your determination—I think it's so important. You're working so hard here. And I imagine—I know for me—there are certainly times when you're putting in everything you've got, but you forget why you're doing it. It gets kind of dry and dull, or we're doing it to get more mindful. Why? Why exactly do I want to be more mindful?

And sometimes having that larger sense helps with the resolution—not to get there, but to come back, to be present with this moment now. It gives us the determination. Tejaniya likes to say, "Never give up." Never give up doesn't mean holding to an expectation. It means whatever arises, not to settle just for something good enough. "Okay, that's enough practice. That's good enough. I'm not suffering as much as I was. Let's go home." I used to do that a lot. Then you find out, guess what? It comes with you.

But never give up. Moment by moment, really bringing that quality of determination. As the Buddha said—a couple of things he said—two things I never lost sight of: not to shrink from the struggle, not to shrink from the path, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. These wholesome states of mind are great, but not to rest contented.

So for all of us, having a sense of what the greater aspiration is gives us this determination to keep aligning ourselves with it. And whatever comes up is our path, and it will be different. What my path is differs from anyone else's.

Another story I love about determination and path—probably some of you have seen this video made a few years ago with Tsoknyi Rinpoche and some Western women who went to visit nuns in Tibet, called the Nangchen nuns, that Tsoknyi Rinpoche had historically been taking care of.

During the Cultural Revolution—those twenty years—these nuns had a monastery way up high in Tibet. Of course, in the Cultural Revolution, the nunnery was destroyed, and the nuns had to disperse. Different things happened for different ones of them. Some of the nuns died. Some were put into work camps. Some went back to their nomadic families. Some managed to flee high up into caves.

All of them, though, in their different ways—because they came back together after those twenty years—in their different ways, they described how in their path, in their heart, similar to Master Sheng Yen, they kept their path of being a nun. The ones who went back and lived at home had to disrobe. They couldn't out loud do any of their chanting or any of their practices because the communists were so on the alert that they would be arrested, their families would be arrested. So they were being secret nuns, nuns in hiding, but secretly they were keeping their practice, their determination going. Same with the ones in the work camps. The ones who went way, way high up into the caves had incredible privation. Some starved to death. Many were incredibly ill. But in whatever way, whatever circumstances came, the sense of determination was just flexible with the circumstances, while really holding true to what is the key, what's the most important, what helps them wake up.

This video was about going back with Tsoknyi Rinpoche to visit the nuns, who were now allowed to return. They were rebuilding this nunnery way, way up high. They're hauling these giant stones by hand and wood up these incredible mountains. I couldn't even walk up the mountain, and they're hauling it up and building the nunnery back again. This is how they were describing their different ways of holding to their aspiration, holding to their determination.

And then each moment, it's moment to moment—how determination, *adhiṭṭhāna,* manifests in relationship to this particular moment, with wisdom, with truthfulness to ourselves, and with an element of calm or peace, because our heart is in alignment with what's really true, with what's really important. And if it's not and we get all confused—great. That's part of the path too. We bring in awareness with that.

My favorite part, of course, is they took at the very end—they allowed the women videoing to go up and see the oldest nun, who they said was the most enlightened of all of them. She was lying in a little bed, and I mean, who knows, she looked 120—maybe she was 40—but she looked really old. She'd had a really hard life, and she couldn't walk anymore, so she just lay in that bed spinning her prayer wheel. One of these beings, you know, that just incredible light beamed out of her eyes, even in the video. She

was smiling, and she said, "Well, I just lie here and spin my prayer wheel, and all day and all night, all I do is think: may all beings, wherever they are, may they be happy and liberated."

I thought, wow, what a life. Our lives can take so many different forms. It's not about what it looks like, but don't be afraid to come to whatever resolve is true for you, and then call on all the tools we have, moment by moment, just in this moment, to help us keep aligning. Resolution is an amazing tool.

One from the Dalai Lama. He was talking to some Western monks and nuns, and he looked out and said, "Oh, I see you're really dedicated." He said, "One day you too will become bodhisattvas in reality. And so whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

And that's true for us. Whatever obstacles, however long it takes, do not be discouraged. Just in this moment, we call on resolution.

And this famous passage from the Buddha describing aspects of the third noble truth, one who's awakened. This is not to compare ourselves, but to see that aspirations can go as high as is possible—not just to feel good:

One who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. This I call neither arising nor passing away, neither standing still nor being born nor dying. There is neither foothold nor development nor any basis. This is the end of suffering.

Therefore, the purpose of this holy life does not consist in acquiring alms or gain, or in honor or fame. It does not consist in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that is the object of the holy life. That is its essence. That is its goal.

So let's just sit for a moment.

From Dilgo Khyentse:

Do not forget the teacher. Pray to him or her at all times. Do not be carried away by thoughts. Watch the nature of mind. Do not forget death. Persist in Dharma. Do not forget sentient beings. With compassion, dedicate your merit to them.

CHAPTER 107

Unity of Emptiness and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound reflection from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson examines the essential unity of emptiness (suññatā) and compassion (karuṇā), drawing from both Theravāda and Tibetan traditions. She presents the threefold nature of mind as naturally empty, naturally aware, and ceaselessly responsive—meaning that wisdom spontaneously manifests as appropriate response through the brahmavihāras: compassion meeting suffering, muditā meeting joy, equanimity meeting complexity, and mettā meeting simple connection.*
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> *Wilson addresses common misunderstandings about emptiness that can lead to disconnection or nihilism, citing Nāgārjuna's warning about falling into the "abyss of emptiness." She equally explores how compassion without wisdom leads to overwhelm and despair. Through the Buddha's teaching on right intention (sammā saṅkappa), she shows how wisdom naturally purifies mental habits—greed transforming to renunciation and generosity, ill will to mettā, cruelty to compassion.*
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> *Drawing from diverse sources including the Dalai Lama, Śāntideva, Nisargadatta, John Lewis's nonviolent civil rights training, and the Thai forest master Ajahn Mahā Bua, Wilson illustrates how genuine realization of anattā makes harmful action impossible while simultaneously opening the heart to all beings. She offers practical guidance for meeting the overwhelming suffering we encounter daily, emphasizing that our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice—simply allowing experience to be met with non-judging awareness—is itself the cultivation of both wisdom and compassion.*

So tonight I'd like to just share some thoughts and reflections on the unity of the wisdom of emptiness and compassion, like two sides of the same coin, you could say.

Sometimes in our practice, not only here but all through our life, it can seem like what we're seeing or learning or hearing is more focused on the emptiness, the anatta, the wisdom side. Sometimes it can seem more focused, or we need to give more energy, to the compassion side. And sometimes, just being the way our minds work, we can set these two things up as somehow separate from one another—some kind of dichotomy, some way they're in conflict or don't go together, as if we could separate them, as if they were two separate things.

My reflection is that, of course, they're not.

The Tibetans have a wonderful way of describing the threefold aspect of the nature of mind. First, that it is naturally empty—empty of self, of any separate individual self-existence. Second, that the nature is naturally aware, naturally awake; the simplicity that knowing is the natural function of the mind, as we've been exploring. And the third aspect: that it is ceaselessly responsive.

This would mean, I interpret, that faced with any need to respond in the world, it isn't just hanging out in the emptiness of nothing matters. Rather, what spontaneously arises in the mind of wisdom is the appropriate response. In terms of quality of mind, you could say it's one of the four Brahmaviharas. Faced with difficulty, with suffering, it would come out as compassion. With joy, mudita. With a complex situation or something out of control, equanimity. With simple connecting with this moment, metta.

There's a saying Guy often quotes, which I just checked with him—he hasn't used it yet, and he said I could since it's the end. A Zen master, being asked what's the result of a lifetime of practice, answers: an appropriate response. Ceaselessly responsive.

So in some ways, to talk in very simple terms about our practice, compassion and pañña, wisdom, the deep insight into emptiness—just because we have to talk, we speak of them as two different understandings. But they support and interweave with one another, and each needs the other for freedom, for deep understanding.

In terms of compassion, it needs wisdom to be able to open, to be with the vastness of suffering, not to drown, to be able to bring in the vastness of equanimity. The Dalai Lama, speaking about compassion, said it must be derived from our insight into the emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Without the unity of compassion and emptiness, we can easily fall into despair. Because though our compassion may be strong, without this wisdom it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness, even despair. I certainly have experienced that. I imagine maybe you do sometimes. How can we possibly open to all of this? Or even just this knee pain, never mind all of this.

And on the other side, the wisdom of emptiness, of anatta, of nothing separate, inherently me, or anything inherently separate or self-existing—that can verge into disconnection. It's incomplete. It can go into this kind of view of nothing really matters, which doesn't have the quality of life, the tenderness for life that compassion has.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo, the Rinpoche that Guy spoke about last night, whom he met in Nepal. He's speaking about the danger of what we could call falling into emptiness:

"The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion and are obscured by concepts. Nagarjuna said, it is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practices, through the ways of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

That's how it feels.

Now, I love that Guy talked about Nyoshul Khenpo last night, because you get it—he's not just some namby-pamby. He knows what he's talking about in terms of the vastness of emptiness. You get that he's someone who's speaking from experience, not from view.

So just to talk a little about each: these are just my reflections, certainly not comprehensive. This is the vastness of our whole path, in my opinion—exploring both of these and how they come together.

I thought about this question of the incompleteness of emptiness, the incompleteness of the wisdom of anatta. These are words that people have said to me at different times on retreat, about either the idea of anatta—which is very different from the experiential knowing of emptiness—or sometimes about the experience itself. You have an experience of not-self, and it's a little freaky sometimes. People have said things like: it's fearful, it's unsettling, it's alien, it's inhuman. It's basically unattractive, all the same grayness. It's disconnected. Nothing matters.

If we say awareness doesn't care what happens, well, why bother with anything? Why not just go sit in a room and do nothing if nothing matters anyway? That kind of falling into emptiness is part of delusion. There's a sense of disconnect, of a kind of emptiness in a not-good way—not something that's really onward leading when we think about it. Because that lacks the ceaselessly responsive, connected quality.

So the question arises: if it is true that there's no inherent self-existence in anything, that every arising is really empty, just as empty as any thought when you look at it and watch it disappear—if everything has that quality of insubstantiality—what's the point? That's the question, the incompletion of emptiness as a totality of view.

But the experience, as we begin to and continue to experience it and understand it, is really—as I hope you already know—this isn't something where the vastness of it may be way beyond where we are. But moments of experiencing this, we all know.

That time when, just because the energy that's bound up in this obsessive, relentless self-referencing, this undying relating of everything back to me as the center of the universe—I don't know if you've noticed, but it's exhausting. It takes up so much energy. Have you noticed sometimes when you have some insight, not even a big one, there's often a lot of energy and enthusiasm? The energy that's all bound up in "me, me, me" gets released.

But we can't think our way out of that. It's really a misunderstanding. And so when we think, "Well, how would it be?"—it doesn't make sense. It has to actually happen over and over and over.

Without that understanding of emptiness, we can think, "Well, we act in a way that's for the good of beings and all." But when it's still coming from that ongoing self-referencing, even with our best intentions, we can't see clearly.

I've used this example before, but I love it. I heard on public radio a couple of years ago a discussion about various economic theories, of which I know nothing. But this one—it sounds ridiculous—the so-called generalized theory, not really scientific, that was sort of behind the way banks and things were working up until 2008 (although I don't think it's changed) before everything crashed, was called Acting in Rational Self-Interest. The theory being that if we each act in rational self-interest—what's good for me, but rational—that will be for the good of all. Yes, we can laugh, but do we even know?

The example I gave, and this is what I love, is that apparently in London they built this bridge called the Millennium Bridge for their big Millennium celebration. It was a large, fancy footbridge over the Thames River, a big architecturally designed thing. When it first opened, on the first day when hundreds of people were walking over this new bridge—several hundred people on it at once—it was too many people, and the whole bridge started shaking and wavering from side to side. Each person there saw how it was leaning to one side. So, acting in rational self-interest, each person stepped to the other side to balance it. All four hundred people stepped to the other side, and it just made the whole thing even worse. Because it's my rational self-interest rather than being able to see the big picture. Even with the best intention, without wisdom, our perception is shaken.

So much energy for life is released when this self-referencing loosens. The ability to recognize so much more clearly is released. It allows for clear seeing and appropriate response.

And then the question comes up: okay, so there's not me and I'm not acting in rational self-interest, but... This is from Padmasambhava. Someone once asked him, "But once we've realized emptiness, can it still harm us to commit negative acts?" And he answered, "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

Just think, in your own experience, of a very simple moment—which I trust in six weeks you've had at least, and you may be able to remember. One simple moment when nothing particular was going on, but there was just that sense of real presence. When the mind kind of clears, and suddenly the wanting or the aversion or the confusion that was clouding it just goes away. Someone was even mentioning today some experience, and they said, "Oh, that's aversion." And then everything just cleared, just from awareness noticing what was happening.

Maybe you're just outside taking a step, or seeing a leaf, or hearing the rain. Or you've been caught up in feeling judgment of somebody, and they walk past, your eyes meet, and all that falls away. You're just there with this clarity. Not comparing to past or future or congratulating yourself, but just the is-ness of that moment. Do you have a sense of what I mean? Just very simple.

In that moment, could the thought of harming someone even arise? In that moment, if someone fell or needed help, would you even have to stop and think, "What's the compassionate thing to do?"

Or what about me? The appropriate response is there, so simple. It's not a big view that we have to cultivate and adhere to and think about. It's just the natural response of the mind in that moment that's not all bound up with a sense of self-referencing. So simple, but as we know, not so easy. Not so easy.

So it's absurd to do anything negative. And what naturally arises—now we're switching into the way the Buddha speaks about it in the suttas—is that with the arising of wisdom, the link between paññā (this is in the Eightfold Path that Guy mentioned and Greg mentioned), the link between paññā, between wisdom and our actions in the world, is this second factor: right intention, wise thought.

And what naturally occurs with moments of clear seeing, with moments of this freedom—just this freedom from the contraction, from the clinging, from the self-referencing, just for a moment—what naturally occurs is that the habits of thought that lead to action, these habits naturally purify. And it's our old friends: the habit of greed, of clinging, naturally purifies. It begins to shift to renunciation and then to generosity.

Renunciation is not being a life of hardship where you have to push away everything pleasant. Renunciation is an inner attitude. This is all on the level of intention. It's the natural releasing of the clinging. Renunciation is an experience of the joy of simplicity. It's not getting out the hair shirt where you can't eat and whatever. Renunciation is the clinging dropping away, and there's just this appreciation of space and simplicity. It's a beautiful quality, which naturally then leads to generosity.

Ill will, the habit of ill will, naturally transforms into the habit of metta. And that of cruelty naturally transforms to compassion. And ignorance changing to wisdom isn't an act of intention, but that's from the insight, from the clear seeing.

So that's the link that the Buddha makes here in terms of how wisdom leads to action and how the action shows up as compassion, metta, non-clinging.

This is from Stephen Batchelor talking about Shantideva, who wrote *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which Stephen translated many years ago. He says, "When Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolved, he did not vanish into the abyss of nothingness." It's not that, "Oh, I realized emptiness and poof." But he realized that to be empty means—what I was just saying—to no longer be full of oneself.

And then Stephen says, "For Shantideva, insight into emptiness does not merely change the way he views the world, but it also transforms the way he feels about it. The heart is opened to the anguish of others, prompting a spontaneous longing to assuage their suffering." This is a more emotional way of talking about the movement into compassion. "And yet he can also acknowledge the irrational nature of the passion to save all beings," because as a limited human being, that's impossible.

So how to hold the two? Realizing even the Buddha couldn't fix the world. He couldn't even fix all his relatives—they went to war and killed each other. That isn't what we can do. And yet, that movement of feeling, being open to, letting the anguish of ourselves and the world touch us and turn it into compassion—this is the movement from the wisdom of emptiness.

If I was to distill it, I've been talking about the question of how the wisdom of emptiness opens into compassion. But how does compassion need the wisdom of emptiness? This has been an ongoing question in my life, these two balancing.

One way I put it is: How can we continue to open over and over—because there's never a one-time anything—to open to the beauty and the suffering in this complex and beautiful world? There's so much. Just sitting here, not talking to each other, in our own mind and body, there's so much beauty, there's so much confusion, there's so much suffering. How do we continue to find the courage to connect, to not turn away, to respond

in the face of sometimes overwhelming amounts of information, of suffering externally, in the face of external enmity? Or to find the courage internally not to just go to the automatic habit of response—hatred or aggression or fear?

That's the work, to some extent, that we've all been doing here together. It's amazing, ennobling work. And as you find, probably at times, it needs enormous courage. Enormous perseverance. And we must not think we're ever going to be perfect in it. But how do we find that faith, that internal wisdom?

As Martin Luther King described what the practice of nonviolence is, he said, "The practice of nonviolence means not only do you not shoot a person, you also refuse to hate a person."

This is really the depth of compassion, and that's not possible, as the Dalai Lama said, without the deep wisdom, without the deep wisdom of emptiness. Because as Stephen Batchelor says, talking about Shantideva, it changes the way we feel about the world.

There's a quote from Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

How can I possibly open to all of that? And that's the answer—I can't. As long as it's "I," of course it's limited. Of course. And much of the time that's going to be our experience, sure. That's why we keep on practicing.

So both the wisdom of those moments of not-self, of not-separation, of insubstantiality, of emptiness, allows some opening into the vastness of the beauty and the suffering. And also the natural purification that comes from our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice—the natural purification that results in the changing of the habits of our mind—so that even at times when there's a sense of "I," that natural response of aversion or aggression or hatred, sometimes we have the mindfulness, the clear wisdom, and the courage not to at least act from that. It wasn't a natural wisdom that sees through it all immediately, but there's enough wisdom that we can see what's happening and come down on the purification, the wholesome side. That's what we're doing a lot in our practice here. And that counts. It counts.

I hope this doesn't bum you out too much, but I thought, in terms of what we all are in this culture, in this day and age where there's so much information—the question of how do we continue to open, not to shut down, not to go into such overwhelm that we just can't take in any more information—I think this is a really crucial thing these days because we have so much information.

I just wrote down, from today, listening to the news and checking the BBC, just my normal day's routine—I didn't go out of my way. Liberia, just a mention of how this horrible civil war that ended in 2003, and now they're estimating that over one half of all adults in Liberia suffer from some severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder. There was a whole story about teenage girls being kidnapped for sex trafficking in the United States. A story about Holocaust survivors living in Israel, and when they died, their grandson found that they had remained really close friends with some Nazis in the SS in Germany—and the whole thing that the grandchildren were going through, trying to understand how this could be, how this friendship could cross these borders. Eight people killed in a huge car bomb in Beirut. Anything about the election campaign—and that one, believe me, is a lot. A young girl in Pakistan shot by the Taliban because she was advocating education for girls, now in a hospital in the UK recovering very well. Other journalists in Pakistan threatened by the Taliban. Gold miners' strike and violence in South Africa. More wildfires than ever this year in the States. Chaos and war in Syria. Violence in Yemen. The EU thinking they might come to some agreement on bank supervision legislation at some year in the future—and it's a great thing there is an EU working together; if you read European history of the Hundred Years' War, that wasn't so long ago, or World War II, even less long ago. Various murder investigations, various sexual abuse cases around the world, peace talks in Colombia between the government and the FARC rebels. The UN still exists.

And then we have our personal stories. A great friend of mine just took her first steps on her new prosthetic leg—sent me a picture. That's wonderful. And there's suffering in it.

That's really a minimal little thing. I didn't even go into my emails. I didn't look hard. This is the kind of stuff we're flooded with. And how can we find a balance? That's one question. I'm not even hardly going to go into that, because that's the whole question. But not to either just say, "Well, it's all too much, so I'm just not going to listen to the news"—though we all go through times like that.

I've gone through times where I'll hear it all and see how I'm hearing it, thinking, "Yeah, that's a shame." It's not superficial – well, it is a little superficial. It's not knocking it away, but you just can't let it all in. You can't die on the ground with each new news story. You wouldn't get through ten minutes like that.

But I've noticed how I'll be going through the news, going through, and I'm hearing it, and then one story will just really hit me. I don't mean in a bad way, but I see the difference – somehow the mind, the heart in that moment wasn't preoccupied with pouring the right amount of milk in my tea, because I'm listening to this while having breakfast, or thinking about what I'm going to say today, or doing something else. I was just sitting there, open, receptive, not so self-concerned. And the story goes in. You really get it in its beauty and its suffering and all of that.

You see, it's that sense, that willingness to connect with an open heart and mind, which is the way I like to describe metta. When that connection touches suffering, you get compassion. When it touches a being, however they are, it manifests as metta. And in that moment, even what sounds like a suffering story, you feel that tenderness of compassion and you can hear the beauty in it.

I'll tell you another story I heard a couple of days ago. I just happened to be open at the time of hearing it. It was a lovely story. They were talking about some hospital in Boston that was about to perform one of the world's first leg transplants. They were going to transplant one or two legs to this woman. They were interviewing her and she sounded so upbeat, despite her story. I just thought, ah, there's so much going on in this world.

She was in her early forties, I think, had three children. Happily married in Texas, but after her third child was born, she got some kind of horrible infection. They didn't go into details, but the only way they could save her life was to amputate both legs and both arms – this was about three years before the interview.

She was talking, and it wasn't goody two-shoes, but she had this spring in her voice, just talking about how supportive her husband had been. She had prosthetic devices, but her husband, knowing that she really wanted more of a living experience, to be able to hold her kids – he'd been so supportive in searching this out. She talked about how wonderful her children were. There was just something about listening to her that was filled with life and vibrancy, love and suffering – kind of all of humanity in a way. I actually thought, *whoa* – like I can see in some of your faces now.

When I think back on it, what went in, what I really heard, was the courage and the love and the life about it, in her particular case. And that's just a moment. I'm not always open like that. But in that moment, the quality of compassion is not depressive or self-referencing or overwhelming. Compassion, like metta, like equanimity, like mudita, is one of the illimitables – unlimited. It's a beautiful emotion, one of the brahma-viharas. It is, in a way, an expression of the vastness, of emptiness, where the vast meets the profound. It's not a suffering state.

Compassion arises through the wisdom of the open heart and mind that is in connection with life, that isn't for whatever reason in that moment needing to block, that isn't colored by fear, by aversion, by "how does this affect me."

This moves into the Dalai Lama now. Let's go to him rather than me – he says things better. He talks about how compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is. And how does that arise? By being present, by focusing on our own experience.

I know Susie talked a couple weeks ago about self-compassion and how profound that can be. It's about opening into our own experience. In that moment of self-compassion, that quality of mind isn't colored by aversion, by self-referencing, by greed. So the practice of self-compassion isn't just to make ourselves feel better and accept what's happening. It's actually the practice of wisdom that opens into the vastness, into the profound.

As the Dalai Lama says, compassion develops by deep insight into what suffering is, by being present, by opening to our own experience, and then this strengthens into a sense of empathy, a sense of connectedness with other beings. We start with what we're presented with in this mind-body, as the Buddha said, in this fathom-long body – okay, I'm paraphrasing, I don't remember his exact words – but something about how in this fathom-long body is the whole world. It's the beginning and the end of suffering. We can discover it all right here. And it does open into empathy.

Pema Chödrön quotes Stephen Levine, writing of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness.

At the point at which she felt she could not bear the resentment and the suffering any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others. A starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. And then she understood that it wasn't her pain —it was the pain of all beings. It wasn't just her life; it was life itself.

Then Pema Chodron says we awaken this bodhicitta—she's calling bodhicitta tenderness for life—when we no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In the words of the 16th Karmapa, you take it all in. You allow the pain of the world to touch your heart, and it turns into compassion.

Maybe not right away, but this is really the natural unfolding of this practice that we're doing. Because how do we let the pain of the world touch our heart? By simply allowing the sadness, the physical pain, the loneliness, the fear, the arrogance—whatever it is this mind-body is experiencing—by allowing it to be in the light of mindfulness, in the light of awareness, to let it touch our heart. And it's already turning into compassion.

That moment of how our awareness, our attention meets this moment—this is what the teacher was speaking about regarding kamma and result. The creation of kamma in this moment is the way the mind is meeting what's arising. So however terrible or scary or annoying or beautiful what's arising is, that's the effect of previous conditions. The way the mind is meeting it right now is the creation of present moment kamma.

And so all these moments of simple mindfulness, non-judging, non-clinging—it doesn't seem like such a big deal. But this is the cultivation both of non-clinging and also of compassion, of non-ill will, of mettā. And really, in a way, our own particular experience can open to the universal.

I remember hearing Ajahn Sumedho say once that you don't need any special experiences to get enlightened. You don't have to have special extreme suffering. The circumstances of our own life are all that we need as a vehicle for awakening and for the cultivation of compassion. When we're sitting here suffering, when we're caught in traffic, when we're having difficulty with the landlord.

And not to think the other way either—that our circumstances are so difficult there's no way we can experience happiness or wisdom. Really seeing it's not about the circumstances. We're not limited or defined by our circumstances in either a positive or a negative way.

I was watching a little documentary the other night called *Happy*, about all the research going on these days about the creation of happiness in our minds. It was from researchers like Richie Davidson and others, though I have to say it was short on science—showing a little chart and saying "studies have shown 50 percent this and 49 percent that" without going into the details. But what I loved about it were the little vignettes of different people in different circumstances, exploring what makes people happy.

The very first one is the only one I want to mention here, because it really shows that any idea we might have that our happiness or suffering is defined by our external circumstances just isn't true. It started with this man who, in whatever way they were measuring, came up as really, really happy. They were interviewing him, and he seemed genuinely happy. He lived in Kolkata, a very poor rickshaw puller. He walks pulling a rickshaw that people ride in. These guys are really poor and work incredibly hard in the slums of Calcutta. And he was so happy.

They showed him with his wife, with his kids. He was so happy to come home. Then they showed the little shack he lived in, which, coming from our culture, it's easy to look at and right away go into this kind of pity—not compassion, but "Oh my god, how can someone live like that?" And yet he was so happy to come home, his son there waiting, so happy when he sees him, there with his wife, showing all the neighbors and how they all support each other. It showed him pulling his rickshaw and describing conditions that I would hear as "Oh my god, how can you bear it?" And he'd say, "Oh yeah, that's just how it is." Really happy. He described himself as really happy.

It was so uplifting to see. But it also showed how easy it is to take a view about ourselves or about others regarding what's possible—both in terms of happiness, and also when we're feeling overwhelmed by suffering, how we can relate to something as suffering that may not be experienced that way at all by the person.

So opening this question of compassion—how do we continue to find the courage to meet, to open to our own suffering and others'—is supported by these moments of clear-seeing wisdom, but also by our steady practice, our willingness to explore: What intention, what motivation of mind am I landing on in this moment?

Years ago I read one line that stayed with me from a teacher. I forget who it was—it wasn't a Buddhist teacher—but he said: In every moment of activity, activity of mind, body, or speech, we are committing to something. The question is, to what?

So that's not a judgment, but just a looking and seeing. As Geshe Rapten, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said: How do we meet this moment? The cultivation of compassion with wisdom, wisdom with compassion, is looking and seeing. And seeing there are times when we can make a choice to act from non-ill will, from compassion rather than cruelty, rather than ill will, rather than clinging.

There was a very ongoing, difficult sangha political situation at his meditation center monastery. I don't want to go into it, but there was a lot of name-calling and power-grabbing, and he was really being ostracized. It was an extremely strange, unpleasant situation that went on for quite some months.

I was visiting there in the middle of it, and the whole atmosphere of the place was really unpleasant. There was another abbot who was basically trying to push Sayadaw U Tejaniya out, although Tejaniya was the teacher and not this other person. This other abbot was trying to get all the money and trying to work up the lay people who were in charge of running the place, saying all kinds of bad things about Sayadaw U Tejaniya. That's how it kind of works in Burma. Everything seems nice on the surface, but in the background, you tell bad stories until someone's shamed and has to leave. That's what they were trying to do.

Anyway, I was there visiting and talking to him, and he was just saying, "Well, I'm not going to leave because I'm here because of my teacher" — Shwe Oo Min, whom he reveres — "and he asked me to be here. This is his center, and I owe that to him, so I'm not going to leave."

And then about this other abbot, there was all kinds of bad stuff about him, and I said, "Well, why don't you at least tell the lay community this other stuff that's going on?" It's not gossip; it's just true.

He said, "No, this is a really interesting situation for me. This is like an examination for my mind, to see how my mind reacts in this really horrible situation. And what's really clear is I'm not going to add more akusala, more unskillfulness, to this situation." So even though it would have been helpful to give this other information, he didn't want to do it because to do it would come from an unskillful place. He said, "I'm just committed not to add more akusala to this situation."

And it was really great to see. It went on and on for months, and then, of course, it all kind of righted itself. That was a couple of years ago, and it's completely different and fine now. But to just see that quality of wisdom that meets the situation head on and then really sees what's going on here. It's not the external situation that's ever the problem, the source of our suffering or happiness. It's right here. We don't need to let ourselves become a victim of any circumstance or to think we need anything in order to cultivate happiness or compassion.

That lets me read this quotation from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche that I really like. I try to work it in every talk, so I don't know if it fits here, but you're going to hear it.

He's talking about ego clinging. He said: "The 'I' is just a thought. Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When the thought of anger arises in your mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is anger brandishing a weapon? Is it at the head of an army? Can it burn things like fire or crush them like rock or carry them away like a violent river? No. Anger, like any other

thought or feeling, has no true existence, not even a definite location in the body, speech, or mind. It is just like wind roaring in empty space. If instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, you can realize their essential emptiness, when you see through the hatred within, you will discover that there is not a single enemy left outside. Otherwise, even if you could overpower everyone in the whole world, your hatred would only grow stronger. Examine the nature of hatred. You will find that it is no more than a thought. When you see it as it is, it will dissolve like a cloud in the sky."

That's the wisdom of emptiness brought to bear on an experience of suffering, with an attitude of compassion. I'm not saying that's always possible, but when there is that wisdom of emptiness, we really don't have to be afraid of anything that we experience. And when we are afraid of it, that's okay too, because that's when we're cultivating, through the moment-to-moment mindfulness, the shifting of our habits. That's what's been happening here over this time. They both kind of work together.

So compassion needs, though,

the wisdom not only of emptiness, but you could say another way, the wisdom of equanimity—the wisdom of knowing the uncontrollability, the vastness of experience.

Now, Susie also talked about equanimity the other night. She mentioned the eight worldly winds, knowing that this is the nature of the world. Like I said, the Buddha knew—even with his vast wisdom and compassion, he couldn't make anyone else wise if they didn't want to open. He couldn't stop the violence even in people that he knew, never mind in the whole world.

And if we have a view of compassion, which I imagine most of us do, and we don't recognize it as a view, it either becomes a should—"this is how I should act in a compassionate way." I mean, that's better than not caring at all, right? But don't we often have that? "I should be more compassionate to myself, to others." And there's a sense of not quite knowing what that means, or how do I act, or what's right in this situation. Or doing what seems totally compassionate and wise, but then the result is completely other. And we're so thrown off, or we're upset, or we blame ourselves—because we didn't have the big picture.

But mostly, we're never going to have the big picture. Life is so complex. It's so ambiguous. We can never control outcomes. We can never control or even predict, most of the time, others' responses, or know what all the situations will be, and make all the potential decisions ahead of time. Have you tried doing that about some things here? Figuring out every single thing that might happen, to cover all the bases? Forget about it.

Even in the little things, like walking into the cafeteria for lunch—where will you sit? You can't even control that. You think you can, but someone else comes and sits in your seat, and it's all over.

But take something really more complicated. Have you ever been the medical proxy for somebody who's ill and dying? I have. And even if you go through all the possibilities and you think you know what they want, believe me, the situation that arises will somehow be different from all the things that you went over. And they're not able to tell you, and you have to make your best choice as you can—the choice of what they would want, acting for them. As someone told a friend of mine, "You're not making a decision for them; you're being their voice when they can't speak."

But to be able to do that with all the compassion to really be present for the suffering, and as much information as you can have about the whole situation—the medical ramifications, what will happen if this happens, what will happen if that is done. Will they get better or will they not? Will this increase the suffering? Will this help them recover? And no one really knows. And you have to make a decision, and the next, and the next. And then it doesn't go the way you'd hoped. You make a decision thinking things will be better in two weeks, and instead it just prolongs for two months in agony. And to still be open and present, and not be beating yourself up for that the whole time. I'm not saying I could do that in such a clear way, but that's the union of compassion and wisdom. We never know. And then not to back out. And then to turn around and look and see what decision we make the next time, from as much compassion and as much wisdom as we have.

A story I've often told: Sister Chan Khong—she used to be called Sister Phong—the nun who's the associate of Thich Nhat Hanh. They both were quite active social workers, peace activists in Vietnam during the war, before they got kicked out. Because they were peace activists, neither side trusted them. That's how it is, and they got kicked out.

But at one point, Sister Chan Khong—she was only sixteen at the time. I mean, she's a firebrand anyway, if you meet her, but totally committed to mindfulness first and then action. She was thrown into jail by the South Vietnamese for distributing peace leaflets or something; I don't remember exactly what. And so she's in jail in a cell with a bunch of other women. There were two young girls, eleven and twelve years old, who were in that cell as well, along with hardened criminals and prostitutes—and her. These girls had been swept up when the South Vietnamese army had done a sweep of the village, and anyone they thought was Viet Cong...

They threw into jail, and these two little girls were part of that sweep.

So Sister Chan Khong—because her parents were well-connected and knew the police—she was released soon. And so she was being released and having a talk with the chief of the prison. It seemed friendly. So she said, "Oh, I just want to tell you, these two young girls are in there. They're just innocent. They didn't do anything. And with all these hardened criminals, it's really not good for them."

Out of compassion and wisdom and action, just communicating this. And the response from the head of the jail was, "Oh, I see the prisoners are speaking with one another. That's not good, so we've got to really tighten up the conditions here. This won't do." And that was it. That was the effect.

So if we go into anger, if we go into resentment, if we go into hatred—that's not the way of wisdom and compassion. How vast is this path? How can we do it? If it's trying to do it all, we can't. But one moment—one moment to find the courage not to land in the resentment, in the aggression, just for that moment. Even against yourself. "Oh, how stupid was I?" That's the way we would go, right? "How stupid am I?" No. We had as much information as we had, but we didn't have it all. The movement comes from compassion, and now this next situation is complex. We can't control it. How do we keep finding that?

A few weeks ago, I read from John Lewis, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and one of the original Freedom Riders in 1959, 1960. I just want to read this because he's talking still again about the practice, the way of life of nonviolence. And Jim Lawson was the man who was training these young students. He was a bit older than they—an African-American minister from Ohio, I think, who had been a disciple of Gandhi for a long time and was a conscientious objector. He went to jail during the Korean War, so a long time ago. And then he was giving many workshops to these young students on nonviolence, *satyagraha*, as a way of life based in Christian love.

This is John Lewis again. One method of practicing this approach, when you're faced with an aggressive, even despicable person, is to visualize them as an infant, as a baby. If you can see them as the innocent child she or he once was, it is not hard to find compassion in your heart.

He says, "When you can truly understand and feel"—and to me this is the emptiness and the compassion together—"and feel, even as a person is cursing you to your face, even as he is spitting on you or beating you with a stick, if you can understand and feel, even in the midst of those critical and often physically painful moments, that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his anger and fury, then you are well on your way to the nonviolent life."

That's one of the best descriptions of the understanding of emptiness that I could offer. The emptiness is understanding just the causes and effects—*yatha bhuta*, things as they have come to be.

And it is a way of life. This is something Lawson stressed over and over again—that this is not simply a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when needed. It is not something you turn on or off like a faucet. This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day. It shapes your response to a curt cashier in the grocery store, or to a driver cutting you off in traffic, just as surely as it keeps you from striking back at a state trooper who might be kicking you in the ribs because you dared to march in protest of an oppressive government.

"If you want to create an open society, the means of doing so must be consistent with the society you want to create. Means and ends are absolutely inseparable."

From a whole different angle, but I think that's the unity of wisdom and compassion.

I want to end with something from a very different culture and training, but expressing the same thing. This is from Ajahn Maha Boowa, one of the most renowned Thai Forest meditation masters of the twentieth century. Really very revered, but also very tough. No one would have called him warm and cuddly.

I remember when I first went to Thailand, before I became a nun, I met several Western monks who had come into town and had been practicing with Maha Boowa. They were scared to death of him. They respected him, but they were convinced that he could read their minds—which actually, I think he probably could. In Thailand in general, he was one of those teachers really considered to be an arahant.

But he's not like a Dalai Lama. Everyone goes, "Oh, the Dalai Lama!" Mahabua is like... yeah, he's great. Just to give you a sense—there's a book, I think someone may have mentioned it, *Straight from the Heart*, which is really fantastic. He was tough, rigid, a fighter.

So this is from him. You needed that background to hear this.

He's talking about *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, which I've talked about—the knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be:

"The mind knows and sees things as they are, within and without, through and through, and then it stays put with purity. Whatever it thinks, it simply thinks. The khandhas are khandhas, pure and simple. The body is simply a body. Feelings, labels,

perceptions, thought formations, and knowing, cognizance, or consciousness are each simply passing conditions that we use until their time is up. When they no longer have the strength to keep going, we let them go in line with reality.

"But as for the utterly true nature of our purity, there is no problem at all. Those who have reached full release from conventional realities of every sort—they don't assume themselves to be more special or worse than anyone else. For this reason, they do not demean even the tiniest of creatures. They regard them all as friends in suffering, birth, aging, illness, and death, because the Dhamma is something tender and gentle. Any mind in which it is found is completely gentle and can sympathize with every grain of sand, with living beings of every sort.

"There's nothing rigid or unyielding about it. It's the defilements that are rigid and unyielding—proud, conceited, haughty and vain. When there's Dhamma, there are none of these things. There's only the unwavering gentleness and tenderness of mercy and benevolence for the world at all times."

So let's just sit silently for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 108

Right View: Making Friends With Awareness

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the Buddhist understanding of sammādiṭṭhi (right view) not as adopting correct beliefs, but as the capacity to perceive experience accurately—yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana, 'knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be.' She traces how perception (saññā) leads to thought (citta), which solidifies into view (diṭṭhi), often without our awareness. Through a memorable story about mysterious orbs in photographs—interpreted as devas by Burmese practitioners and as lens moisture by scientists—Wilson demonstrates how deeply our conditioning shapes what we 'know' to be true.

The teaching explores how saṃsāra operates through our habitual pursuit of pleasant experience and avoidance of the unpleasant, creating an endless cycle that keeps attention focused outward on objects rather than on the process of awareness itself. Drawing on Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teaching on renunciation as 'heartfelt weariness' with this cycle, Wilson reframes letting go not as aversion but as a wholesome, peaceful inner quality that arises naturally from clear seeing.

Practically, Wilson guides practitioners toward a fundamental shift: from involvement with objects to taking refuge in awareness itself. She emphasizes that insight can arise from the most mundane perception, since freedom depends not on the nature of experience but on the steadiness and freshness of non-interpretive awareness meeting each moment. Quoting Ajahn Sumedho, she describes how the 'world' we create in consciousness arises and ceases, while awareness itself transcends—offering our true refuge and 'real home.'

It's a kind of famous saying, a reflection on the Buddha's teachings, that to follow the Buddha's teachings is to go against the stream—to need to swim against the stream. And that means both of the common culture and society (and obviously all the different cultures, since his culture was very different from ours), but also against the stream of our mental habits, the stream of our views, and the stream of the flow of the habits and views of our culture. So that's a very famous saying.

When Steve talked about right view last night, one of the things he said was that Sāriputta said one of the two things essential for the arising of right view is to hear the voice of another—to hear right view. You're saying that kind of goes against our sense of "we can figure it out ourselves, we're smart." But I think it's speaking to this sense that we're so immersed in the habits, in the flow of the habits of our mind, that we don't even know it, don't even know how to look out of it.

This is one of the many brilliant delineations the Buddha came to. I mean, how he figured all this stuff out—really beyond genius.

In terms of how we think about things, there's perception. The six sense things are happening over and over; we've talked about that. And perception is just that recognition: seeing is happening, or "that's a plant." Simple recognition. It's automatic. It happens based on memory. What we perceive, we think about. So that leads to our thoughts, how we think about things. Those thoughts describe us, describe our world, describe how we think about things. And then the thought, the *citta*, strengthens into *diṭṭhi*, into view.

So right view, *sammādiṭṭhi*, and there's also wrong view, inaccurate view, *micchādiṭṭhi*. What we perceive, we think about. But how we think about things constructs our world. And then that becomes the view. It's not that we know we have a view—it's how we know the world is. It's not even something we're aware of. It's just how it is. And we'll talk more about this as we go on.

Our perceptions, as some of you are starting to recognize, are colored by our conditioning. Or as we're saying, even if you're just aversive or angry in a moment, it colors the perception, how you see someone. And if we're not aware of that, it colors—that goes on to inaccurate thinking, into inaccurate *diṭṭhi*, view of our world. So just to put out that as a possibility: things and the world may not be exactly how we think it is. And then on top of that, we don't even really know how we think it is, because it's often not something we look at.

So a little example, a story. I used to use this in a talk, and it came up in the staff dining room the other day—I was telling this story.

I spend a fair amount of time in Burma. The majority of the people in Burma are Buddhist. And where I've been spending time, and where I was when this happened, was in a monastery meditation center, hanging out with nuns and monks, mostly Burmese people, but also some Western friends, one of whom is a nun who's been a nun in Burma off and on for twenty years, speaks Burmese, and so is really in that culture. In that really committed Buddhist culture, with all the Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist worldview—which includes all the different realms of existence, different lifetimes—there's a lot of faith, and that's just part of the worldview.

We had taken a lot of photographs, and we were looking at the photographs from one specific event where there were several of us and a lot of Burmese people, and it was a *dāna* offering of some food that was going on. In my friend's camera, two or three

of the photos showed, on some of us and in between some of us, these round—perfectly round—balls of light, you could say. But perfectly round. And they're strange looking. And I was like, "Geez, I wonder what that is."

So my friend, the one who's been in Burma for 20 years, looks at it and says, "That's devas." Devas are celestial beings. She wasn't like, "It could be" or whatever. Now you laugh, because we think that's totally ridiculous. That's the way we think. But all the other Burmese people looked and said, "Yeah, that's devas."

So another friend, who's also spent a lot of time there but has a scientific background—she's actually a PhD scientist—looked at it and said, "That's not devas. There's moisture in the lens, and it does this, and it refracts the light," and this and that. We weren't having an argument, but that's just the worldview. It's what it is. So okay, maybe something in the camera. I went that way myself. And since then, the times I've shown people back here, it's really funny to see the different things people say.

Later I looked in my camera at the photos from the same time and place, and there were those same perfectly round things of light, which I've since seen in other photos in other places. The most recent one was when I was meeting with this very amazing Sayadaw up in Sagaing, who's 98. He's just a being of light and love and laughter—an amazing guy. There's a photo of me sitting next to him, and there was one of these big balls of light in between. I thought, "Okay, that could be a deva. That one could be a deva."

My point is, does our mind want to go to who's right and who's wrong and what is it really? My point is: who knows? Who knows? And this "who knows"—this willingness to be fresh and present with an openness of not having to know, to recognize in the perception that we don't know—that's bringing in a quality of fresh, awake awareness.

But mostly we're in "I know, this is what it is," and we don't even realize that it's our perceptions coloring how we think, coloring our worldview. Someone with a completely different—not even completely different, but somewhat different—culture and somewhat different conditioning could have a different world. We run into this all the time, but this is just a good example.

So awareness practice, as we're doing here, in those moments of awareness—just bare awareness of whatever's happening without interpretation—isn't comfortable for us, is it? It's a stepping outside of our comfortable, often unquestioned worldview and self-view. And even though we're giving a lot of information, bottom line, we don't want you to just swallow what we say, because that snaps awareness shut just in the same

way as our other views do. It's really this sense of looking fresh in each moment. That's the quality of awareness, moment-to-moment awareness, that we're hoping to practice, to cultivate, to get more familiar with here.

No explanation is final. And even though—and I'll talk about how being caught in our explanations is part of what keeps us in confusion and suffering—stepping outside of it, or just opening up to not knowing, is often rather uncomfortable. We like to know. Like someone said today, they don't like chaos. We want to know how things should be, even if it means we're doing it all wrong. At least we know we're doing it all wrong, and there's some comfort in that. Better than "I don't know, right or wrong. There's no right or wrong. Whatever I'm doing, that's not—that can't be. There's a right. There's a wrong. I want to know what it is."

So this sense of stepping outside of this way of being can be exhilarating. It opens us to this "who knows," this being willing to meet each moment as an unknown. But it's also one of the reasons retreats are sometimes rather uncomfortable. Because as we continue to open to awareness of each moment, we can't just keep falling back into our old habits. We will fall back into them, but we'll notice it. And sometimes they stop feeling quite so comfortable. They start feeling a little constricting, a little bit narrow.

Or we can't find them again. We want them. Someone was saying in a group today, they watched their mind when the pattern stopped—the mind going and searching for an old pattern of worry. At least that's familiar. Watch our minds do this stuff. This is great stuff to see.

So this sense of the opening, this willingness to just let awareness meet this moment with "who knows," not having to have every explanation. And if the mind does make an explanation, notice that's what it's doing without necessarily having to believe it.

This is why right view is something it's helpful for us to get another angle on—because we don't even know the views of the world, the descriptions of the world and of ourselves that we're believing, that we're buying, that are in the background of our mind, running our decisions sometimes.

In this shift into steady awareness, into not just holding to a view, mindfulness is really the heart of it all. It's still a question to me, even though I'm going to speak as if I know—but it's still a question—this simple moment-to-moment awareness. Not easy, right? We see it gets complex. But when you're actually just there, when there's just awareness of hearing, it's so simple we can't stand it, really. It's like, "That can't be anything. How can this do anything? How can it possibly be—" And we're gone. We don't even give it half a chance. We're gone, because that's the habit.

How is it so powerful? How is awareness not in itself transformative, but how does it set the conditions to open into transformative wisdom, into seeing differently? I can't answer it all now, but just offering some thoughts.

Do you know the way the Buddha talked about suffering and freedom from suffering—dukkha? He said, often, that's what he was teaching: suffering and freedom from suffering. The freedom he's talking about, and that our steadiness of awareness and the wisdom it opens into reveals, isn't a freedom of somehow rearranging all the external and internal aspects of experience so everything's nice. It just isn't. That doesn't really sound so great. And even though I might nod and say yes, notice how many times the mind gets caught up in real struggle because this thing happening shouldn't be happening, and if it weren't happening I would be happy, things would be okay, practice would be possible. Maybe there could be freedom, but not with this in the world—a little thing or a big thing.

What the Buddha is saying, and this is more radical and speaks to the right view Steve was talking about, is that the suffering from which he teaches freedom arises because of our misperception of the way things are, moment to moment. Not one big misperception—moment to moment, in subtle little things. That misperception leads to inaccuracy. We understand ourselves and the world wrongly some of the time. And based on that is how we respond, how we think about ourselves, how we try to make ourselves happy. So we respond in ways—basically with clinging, aversion, with delusion—that are trying to get rid of what we perceive as the cause of our suffering. Because our perception is inaccurate, it doesn't work.

Until we stop running like this and just sit and look—that's what we're doing, just stop and look at the mind and see how it works—with, from time to time, this fresh open awareness. Sometimes it's not fresh open awareness, but we notice that too, and then that's another moment of fresh open awareness.

One of the things I love about the translation of sammā in right view is that, in my mind, I hear it literally: right view as accurate recognition, accurate seeing. Seeing not just visual, but recognizing any moment of experience accurately, the way it is. That's what leads to freedom. I think it's so elegant, so beautiful. The Buddha's not saying get another world, fix everything, change everything, and you'll find freedom. It's: recognize how our mind and body works accurately. And the delusion that comes in the way we respond to life will fall away, even in a moment, because it doesn't make any sense. When we really see, in a moment, how craving for something that's over is causing suffering—when we see, not "Oh, I should" or "It's bad" or "They said this," but when we actually see: "Oh, wow, look at that."

It makes no sense. It's gone. It's gone. That's a moment of freedom.

I think it's so elegant that recognizing accurately—and mindfulness is what steadiness of awareness is—what makes this possible is what opens us to the wisdom that brings us to the end of confusion and suffering. Even just for a moment, moment to moment. Don't wait for it all to go away and dismiss everything else. Notice the little moments.

There's one phrase in Pali that I like a lot, that I talk about often. In some teachings, there are levels of different kinds of insights, and they're given names. You don't need to know them; it doesn't matter here at all. But one of them is called *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*, which is often translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are." *Yathā-bhūta*—often translated as "things as they are." But as I've been told by two good friends who are Pali scholars, the more accurate translation, the more accurate verbal tense, is "things as they have come to be."

Do you get the difference? Things as they have come to be. Don't think about it too much if it doesn't land immediately—just let it settle.

In this moment, it's a sense of the movement of things, that there is no ever-separate one thing. "Things as they are" is like: boom, this is a separate thing. But "things as they have come to be"—there is no separate thing. To me, it brings in the sense that this moment, as it's arising in each of our unique experiences, is coming to be as the effect of so many previous causes and conditions.

If each of you, in your mind, starts to enumerate—what are some of the causes and conditions that came together for me to be in this moment, sitting on this zabuton?—you'll never stop coming up with things. It goes back to your birth. It goes back to your parents' birth. It goes back to the Big Bang, the beginning of the universe. It goes to the farmers that grow the food. All the conditions coming together. How can you extract anything out and say, "This is how it is"?

So "things as they have come to be" gives the sense, to me, of the intricacy, the interconnectedness, the living aspect of life. And then this moment is already a new moment, coming to be with the last moment as one of the causes and conditions. It gives just this sense of—not like nowhere to rest, but there's no way you can pull it out and say, "This is me," or "This is that." It's the interconnectedness, the movement that we call life. Things as they have come to be.

What allows for that accurate recognition? Okay, you know now, right? Intelligent awareness, moment to moment, just meeting whatever's arising in this moment. Not trying to figure it out or recognize it accurately, but just that open totality of presence.

Whatever arises, received in awareness. Maybe we know, "Oh, that's a deva." Maybe we know, "I have no clue what that is." Maybe, "Oh, that's my opinion—it's not a deva. My opinion is like this." And then the next moment arises, whatever arises in that moment.

So it should be so simple, right? It's not, is it?

Why don't we recognize accurately? Steve is going to talk tomorrow, I think, about the *kleshas*, the torments of mind, the difficult mental qualities that basically distort our perception—as well as causing us suffering when we experience them. So I've just mentioned them, but that's one of the big things.

There's a quotation from the Buddha talking about nirvana. *Nibbāna* is the word in Pali. One of the synonyms is "the unconditioned," or "the unborn"—the moment of recognition. It's not a place or a thing, but freedom from conditioned experience, freedom from suffering. The Buddha often says, "This nibbāna, this dhamma—visible here and now."

Someone asked the Buddha, "To what extent is it visible here and now?" Not in another world, not in another body, not in another experience. And the Buddha says, "To the extent that greed, that hatred, that delusion, ignorance, confusion are not present in the citta." The citta is the mind, the heart, the consciousness. They're not present in a moment. To that extent, nirvana, freedom, is visible here and now.

Ajahn Pasano, a monk in the Ajahn Chah Thai Forest tradition for many years and now the abbot of a monastery in Northern California, says about that quotation: "Thus our own direct experience is where we can recognize whether or not we're creating suffering by following lust, hatred, and delusion. In our own direct experience, we can also experience the absence of suffering and the peace that comes when these qualities—this following of greed, hatred, and delusion—are abandoned." We're talking in a moment, not forever, in a moment. This is direct perception of the results that come from putting the teachings into practice. It's what has inspired the followers of the Buddha to continue to practice and train in accordance with his teachings.

I share this not so that we become followers of the Buddha, but because it's our own direct perception, our own direct experience that's brought about, that's made possible through the steadiness of non-interpretive open awareness. Our own direct experience of both how suffering is created and how it feels when it is released, when we're not following that. This is possible, and not some esoteric attainment forty-five years from now. It's possible in any moment. What's so amazing is that in the next moment we

completely forget about it and go running around after whatever it is. But then we can notice that again. So our own direct experience, yata bhuta, accurate recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment.

Back to our consideration of wrong view, the downstream way of the world, often called samsara—the sense of this ongoing search for pleasure and avoidance of unhappiness, thinking that somehow that's going to make us happy. I want to read from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a quite amazing Tibetan teacher. It's possibly challenging. I personally find it quite inspiring, but it may be challenging.

It's a long quote, and I won't read all of it, but he talks about three fundamental attitudes in the Buddhist teaching corresponding to three paths or three aspects of our practice, which can be practiced as an integrated whole. I'm just talking about the first one tonight, but I'll name all three. They're renunciation, compassion, and pure perception.

Renunciation—what he's talking about might be different from what you think, which is giving up everything nice and going into a monastery. What he's describing here is the strong wish to free oneself, not only from life's immediate sorrows, which of course we all have, but from the seemingly unending sufferings of samsara. Samsara being this cycle of conditioned existence, the cycle of the endless quest for gratification, approval, profit, and status. He's defining renunciation as a kind of heartfelt weariness and disillusionment that comes with seeing the endlessness of this cycle, this quest for pleasure, gratification, approval, profit. That's what he's calling renunciation. Not that we give up things, but we see. And this is yata bhuta. We're seeing in a clear way: what I thought, what we thought was actually the way to live, the way to happiness, is actually an endless cycle that keeps us spinning in suffering and wanting and confusion.

And then of course—and I'll talk about this another time—when we see that for ourselves, naturally compassion arises, both for ourselves, but also when we see others caught in that same confusion, there's a natural compassion of heart. And the pure perception is really seeing that every sentient being has the essence of Buddhahood, the essence of awakening, the pure perception, seeing primordial purity in that way.

So in talking tonight about going against the stream, we're starting to see, starting to open to the futility, the weariness of samsara. And that's not something that's really current in the culture; it's not the messages we get. And it's often not what we want to look at.

Now, do you feel all inspired and uplifted? I know I did, but you may not. You may think, "What do you mean?" And then we think, "I can't want anything, I can't have anything. What are you telling me, I have to go sit in a room?"

Our mind goes into all this kind of reactivity. Maybe yours didn't, but some people's does, sometimes.

But let me give you a funny, slightly embarrassing example of samsara. Because samsara, the way it seduces us, isn't that we're aware of suffering all the time. It seduces us with the promise of happiness. And we get caught in it because we think it actually is happiness, that it's increasing our happiness. It keeps us looking to the next thing for happiness. And in that looking to the next thing, the awareness of how things are arising right in this moment—we don't notice. We overlook. And that delusion keeps us spinning.

So I think I've told this before, but last summer I noticed this really big time in my own experience. I happen to be a big fan of professional tennis. I love to watch professional tennis, men's professional tennis. God knows why—I don't play it. But anyway, I love to watch it. And as with many people, if you have a sport, you'll have particular players that are your favorites. So of course I have one: Roger Federer, who last year, when I noticed this, was on a big upswing. It was coming up time to Wimbledon, which is one of the biggest tournaments of the year. So I was watching the whole thing. But for some reason, my awareness of the whole process kicked in a little more strongly than usual.

And I saw this whole process. No one's making me watch tennis. I do it because it's supposed to be really enjoyable, right? So when I'm watching and he's playing, I'm a nervous wreck—which is ridiculous. I don't know the guy. What do I care? Just watch it. It's just perception of seeing and some idea. But really, it is not an enjoyable experience. But I think it is. I'm doing this for pleasure. And my friends who have been around me when I'm watching can attest to that. I was telling this story with Joseph, and he said, "Oh, really? She's not fun to be around when he's playing, if he's losing."

So I was watching this. And of course, in a sport like that, the ultimate happiness is when your person wins, right? At Wimbledon, he happened to win it. And it made him number one in the world again—all these firsts, all these big things, like the best it could possibly be. He won the thing. He got back to number one. He'd won it more than anyone else. There was nothing that could have been better. So that should be the ultimate of happiness. I was watching that.

How long does it last? How long does it last? A day.

Because then the Olympics are coming up. And it all starts over again. It all starts over again. And whatever happens there, when that's over, it all starts over again. And then it changes. And now he's not even playing so much. And his back hurts. And he's not number one anymore. And he hasn't won anything since then. And I said, *ah*.

This is actually a good example of samsara. Because when you don't pay attention to what's actually going on moment to moment, you keep getting caught up in it. Wimbledon's over—oh, isn't that great?—and then two days later I'm on the computer checking out what's going to happen in the Olympics. And I was in Switzerland or somewhere. I'm always somewhere else during the Olympics, trying to get the computer to work. I was with my friend in a restaurant, and she had her little cell phone. She said, "Look, Carol, it's Switzerland, so it's good to like Roger here." Everybody's always pulling it out and showing me.

And I thought, you know, the whole process—there aren't many moments of real pleasure in it. There are some moments of real pleasure, and that's what keeps you going. But none of that has anything to do with freedom. Do you get a sense of how samsara works? It's a little bit funny, a little bit obvious, but underneath, because we don't really look, we take it for granted.

In many ways—in gross ways like that, in very subtle ways—we don't have this weariness with samsara, with this endless quest for gratification. One of the effects is that it keeps us moving: okay, now it's not good, but some new thing comes up. We may not even notice the wanting, or the sense that this isn't okay, this outside thing isn't okay. And that's a mistake, because stuff's supposed to be better. So how can we fix it? How can we make it work? It didn't work this time, but then there'll be the next time. It's this endless quest. And when it's satisfied, a new one comes up, because nothing lasts.

I think it was Chögyam Trungpa who had a wonderful phrase for samsara: the urge to correct. So just notice in your mind—even when things are as good as they can be, how long does it last? And then there's the urge to get it a little bit better, a little bit better. It keeps our attention focused outward on the object: it's a good object, it's a bad object, how can I make it better? Keeping focused outward.

What we want to do—what we're doing here—is turning the awareness, the attention around, and just noticing the process. When I started noticing the process, I mean, I could have told you about it, but actually *feeling* it—like when Steve was talking about awareness, you're feeling how it feels. Feel that urge to correct, to get it better, to get it

again. "Oh, this isn't good, but the next one will be." We won't really look at that. Just feel that onward leading, the endlessness of it. Not with judgment, but to look and see: oh, maybe there is another way.

This is what can open us to some sense of commitment, of trust, of faith—to just say, okay, let me bring this open awareness to things as they are, not assuming I know how things are. It's a shift of perception that allows us to look. It's steady awareness that allows us to see this process.

And what he's calling the weariness with it, a kind of renunciation—it isn't a kind of aversion, and it's not an act of will. True renunciation is an inner quality of mind and heart that's wholesome, that's peaceful, that's joyful. It's not like throwing something away out of fear and aversion, because that *is* fear and aversion. That's not renunciation. That's not wholesomeness.

So when I saw all that about tennis, I can't say I renounced tennis—that wouldn't be true. I was just watching it this afternoon. But it wasn't Roger, so it was just very interesting. And that's also interesting to see. I was watching the skill, watching what goes on. Okay, that's fun. And then they say, "Well, it's going to be a tiebreak, but we're running out of time on the TV because we have to put on the big basketball game." And they stopped it. That was it. Boom.

I was really okay with that. Okay, that's the sign—I was okay with it. That's what renunciation is. It's the not holding on. It doesn't mean you have to give up everything.

So this renunciation, it's not aversion. It's not depression. It's not "the whole world is disgusting and I'll give it all up." It's not that. But it's the sense of stepping outside of our normal way of looking at things, with an openness to explore, to recognize more accurately, without an expectation of what that means. And that's when we can begin to discover how suffering is created, how freedom arises—not when we think we know.

And as we've said ten million times, of course, the key, the place where we can put our commitment, is the willingness to wake up into awareness. Moment after moment after moment. We can't create wisdom. We can't say, "Now I'm going to see things as they are and become free from kilesa." It doesn't work. I'm sure you've tried—we've all tried. But we can wake up and notice, "Oh, now wanting is happening, and awareness of wanting is like this." And then the next moment, and then the next moment. That's what we can do.

Again, that makes it sound simple, doesn't it? That's our job, to make it sound simple. We know it's not.

So I just want to mention perhaps two ways that it gets so complicated. Not for you to hold on to—and I think you're going to recognize both of these; we've talked about them already. But just to plant a little seed of inquiry for when it starts to feel complicated or stressed or dissonant.

As Steve has said—maybe I said it, I don't know who said what—all we experience is six things, right? Over and over and over. So just think back for a moment to this day. How many times have the six sense experiences come? It's constant, endless. You couldn't count even just how many thoughts you've had, and that's only one of the six sense doors. So that's what's happening all day long, whether we like it or not.

Now, that's not a problem. But how does it get so complicated? Instead of just seeing, hearing, thinking, smelling, tasting, seeing, hearing, thinking—how does it get so tangled?

One way, of course, is through the habits of mind that we don't see, habits that feed into and emerge from this samsaric round, this assumption that getting the pleasant is going to make us happy. This is really the habit that our mind practices most of our life when we're not aware.

A sight, a sound, a smell, a taste comes. And without even recognizing it, there's pleasant, unpleasant, or neither one. We don't notice that. But in a subtle way or a gross way, we like it or we don't like it, or we don't pay any attention to it because it doesn't seem worth our attention.

And this can be big—"I really don't like that sound, it's driving me crazy"—or it can be some little sound we don't even notice. Or some little nice sound we're not aware of. We just feel a kind of "hmm," leaning toward it slightly. Or leaning away from it. Or ignoring it completely and looking for something more interesting to attend to. Over and over, all of these senses, all of these thoughts.

Even when they're neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we lean toward the pleasant. And what we perceive, we think about and use to describe our world. So it reinforces the sometimes unrecognized, unacknowledged view. It fuels this view that happiness, peace, rightness, goodness, ease in life—all of it has to do with pleasant, nice experience. And when something's unpleasant or difficult? What am I doing wrong? What are they doing wrong? How can I fix this?

And it doesn't mean we never do anything—I'm not saying that. But the underlying view that fuels samsara is: unpleasant means something's wrong. There's something I should be able to do to get things better. The urge to correct, the urge to correct.

Or we don't even notice it. In our daily life there's so much going on that we don't even notice what we don't notice, because there's just so much coming in. And I don't even have to mention how with all the media the attention span has gotten down to two and a half seconds or whatever it is. As soon as something's a little bit neutral, we're bored. And then boredom becomes a problem. But it's just another mental state. Here, we notice it. It doesn't have to be a problem.

What we're practicing—and all of us are really good at this—is in this subtle way re-acting to almost every sense experience that's coming through, even when it's very subtle. And the third way we get involved: we lean toward the pleasant, lean away from the unpleasant, and then construct a whole story about what it means about me, or to me. How can I fit into this? What is this doing to me? And we don't even notice that either. It's just another layer of thoughts. It becomes part of the fabric.

Remember Steve was talking about how we take all these various experiences and through thought weave the fabric of who we think we are? Not noticing that that's changing. The story of who we think we are is changing all the time. Again, we may not notice that.

So this is just a habit. Deeply ingrained to the point that we don't necessarily notice it until we start moment-to-moment awareness. And it seems so normal that we accept it. Like when I talked about pain this morning and I said, well, when pain comes up, of course we want it to go away. There's aversion. Of course there's aversion. That's normal—and it is normal. But don't we think in some way, "Of course I have aversion to pain. Who the heck wants pain? That's the way things are."

To even open to the possibility of freedom from suffering doesn't mean freedom from pain. It doesn't mean we're looking for pain either, don't get me wrong. But it's a whole different paradigm. And that's one of the ways it gets so complicated.

This keeps our attention, our sense of focus, involved in whatever the object is. This experience, this sound, this thought about myself, this emotion, this perception of how this person's looking at me and the way it makes me feel—all the objects. The energy, the meaning is all given to the object. We're involved in reacting to it or liking it or trying to fix it. The meaning of the world, the meaning of ourselves is largely, when unexamined, derived from relationship to object.

And so that keeps our attention turned out. We're trying to make the objects better. And of course, we bring that into meditation, because that's how the mind is working. So if the meditation—and it's whatever particular one you made up in your mind, which could change—if it's more spacious, it's better. If it's calmer, it's better. If it feels better, it's better. But it keeps us looking that way. That keeps us spinning in samsara.

Until we just stop. And what shifts is we're no longer perceiving experience as separate: this is bad, let's get a better one. Hopping from experience to experience without the steadiness of awareness that just allows for the whole series of events, cause and effect. We start to see how things come together to create this experience, how they fall apart, what causes create sleepiness, what causes create aversion. You just explore it.

But when we're focused on objects, relating to objects, it's like we're each living in our separate little bubble of me and my ideas and how each thing relates to me. And the little bubbles kind of bump up against each other sometimes, but we're all separate and our experiences are separate. And it's just not like that.

So the shift—

into yata-bhuta is when we start to notice the wider, deeper, more inclusive view of experience. Not just focusing on the object, but we shift to the process.

Andrew Olendzki, who used to be the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and is now the senior scholar there, a Pali scholar, wrote something once that I really like. He said, "As sati, as mindfulness grows, our mental attention, our mental capacity gradually shifts from the objects of attention to the process of being aware." That's exactly what we're talking about here.

This shift involves, requires, an attitude of letting go of the object, abandoning attachment to the object. It doesn't mean you push the object away—just abandoning that attachment, that involvement with the object. The mind is a dynamic process. When the mind is stuck on what has arisen, it is rigid and limited. But the mind that is letting go moment after moment keeps opening to the emerging flow, keeps opening to things as they have come to be in this moment.

Do you get a sense of that a little bit? And then watch how the mind turns it into, "Okay, this is now what I have to do." That's just what our mind does. You just notice that.

So that's really the shift—the shift from involvement and object and meaning to the process of awareness itself. To me, that's like the paradigm shift. This is my language, but it's true for me. I really feel like it's a shifting of refuge—refuge from samsara,

refuge from trying to correct, from trying to get it okay—to taking refuge in loving awareness. And you really do start to love awareness. Whatever's arising, you go, "Oh, that's wanting." It's like this, and there's the feeling of the awareness of the wanting. It doesn't matter what's happening in that moment. It really doesn't. This isn't an intellectual thing, but it's a moment of... it's not complete freedom, it's not liberation, but it's such a sense of difference. "Oh, okay, it's craving. It's like this." There's the awareness. And the interest is in that awareness and the process of awareness.

So that's why we're always harping on it—because we mostly don't even notice it or recognize it. It's just so normal and no big deal. Here we simply want to recognize it, like the foreground-background shift from object to the process of awareness. And the more we start to take refuge there, to trust that shift, the sense of the awareness gets steadier and steadier. And that's when accurate recognition, right view, can start to arise of itself.

So that's really the best way I can describe the power of intelligent awareness to truly transform our understanding of the world and the way we live in it, and actually lead to freedom.

One other way—not a little thing, but the same thing in terms of objects arising so often—another way it gets complicated is this: so much of what is happening, there's still the leaning into it, the leaning out, the ignoring it. So much of what's happening is just so ordinary. What the texts refer to as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. When you're walking from here to the dining room, seeing is occurring every moment. But other than a particular object that we might glom onto, we don't often notice seeing, seeing, seeing. It's just so ordinary. There are sensations in the body or whatever. It's just repetitive, happening over and over—hearing, hearing, seeing, seeing, feeling the breath, feeling sensations—just because there's so much happening in every moment, as you're all aware.

I'm not saying we should try to catch everything. I'm not saying that at all. Please don't. You'd make yourself crazy. But this sense of it being so ordinary, this sort of waiting for something special to happen, is another way that we lose awareness. "Well, this isn't worth paying attention to, so I'll wait until something really important comes." Just notice when that's happening.

And again, awareness doesn't care. Awareness isn't more—I won't say lovable, of course it isn't lovable—but it isn't more fulfilling if the object is incredible. It doesn't matter.

It's that sense of moving into appreciation, into fascination with the process rather than the object. It doesn't matter at all what the object is.

This is something Tejaniya says a lot: our tendency, our samsaric tendency, to think bigger is better, that intense is more meaningful, means that we wait for the intense experience and think insight's going to arise from that. And all this repetitive stuff, which makes up how much of our lives—ninety-nine percent?—we meet with, "Oh yeah, right, there's seeing, there's hearing." Not really that pristine openness, that opening into the unknown.

But insight can arise with anything. It can arise from the most mundane perception. Because it's not about what the object is. It's about the steadiness of awareness, that freshness of not knowing, that time when the mind lets go of the old views that are constricting and not allowing us to recognize accurately. And you never know when that's going to happen. You never know. So that's why every moment of awareness might be it. But if you're wanting, then be aware of that.

Dogen Zenji, the great Zen master, said, "If you cannot discover the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" So that's a form of delusion.

The last form of delusion I want to mention, something Tejaniya talks about a lot, but I'm sure you'll recognize it, is again how we take a perception of anything—the descriptions, the thoughts in the mind—and we make all these assumptions. Basically, we make up a story about what it means, and then we believe the story.

But sometimes we can see ourselves doing it. Here on retreat is a pretty good place to see that. When you're in silence, and if you don't know a lot of people here—has anyone noticed?—you see someone, you've seen them a few times, you see them come sit down, you see them walk into the dining room. You don't even know their name. And you have a whole story about them, right? What they're like, what their personality is like. I don't know how far it goes. It might just be a feeling sense. But do you know what I mean? Complete assumption.

The longer a retreat goes, the more you really start to believe it. On three-month retreats, people really can get out there about what they think other people are like. And then when silence breaks and they talk, people have told me—I'm not making this up—like in one minute of conversation, all their assumptions were just shattered. They were in love with the person. The person opens their mouth and it's like, "Oh my god. Nothing like what I thought this person was." But we believe it.

So that's an easy one to see. But we do it as making up a view, basically. We do it with practice a lot. We do it whenever we think we know. We don't recognize we think we know. You'll know you're up against an assumption, an expectation, when there starts to be friction, when there starts to be dissonance.

So let's take your practice here. "Well, I'm walking up and down. Like I said the other day, I'm just walking up and down thinking about stuff. This can't be right practice." Or someone said today, "I feel like it's really easy. It's fun. It can't be right." Notice the assumptions we're making, the stories we make up. And again, as Steve said, that's what we do about our stories of who we are.

So watch that. It's a lot of fun. It really is. If you're just watching it without judging, just with this unbiased awareness, this uninterpreting awareness, watch the stories. What particular experiences or memories or perceptions—"that person looked at me funny"—and it brings up all the bad things you ever did in your life. Notice that, and then all the bad memories that you have, and that story of me, and the feeling that goes with it. And it feels so true. It feels so real. It's real in the moment, and that feeling is real.

But the idea that story is *accurate*—that's not real. And then notice when it changes: the next day, the next minute. Just watching that reveals a really huge delusion.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, who is perhaps a forty-year monk in the Thai Forest tradition, a very great and respected teacher. He says: "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself—my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires—and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho." Can you relate to that? It takes off into orbit: my views, my feelings, my opinions. And I can get caught in that world—that view of me that arises in consciousness. And that's all it is: a view arising in consciousness in that moment. It's an object, like any other object.

But if I know that's what's happening—that it's just a view in consciousness—then my refuge is no longer in being that person. I'm not taking refuge in being a personality, or in my views and opinions. And so it goes away. I let it go. And the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends.

Now, he says ending doesn't mean that Ajahn Sumedho dies, or the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. None of those things. In Buddhadhamma, the world is the world we create in consciousness. That's why we can be living in different worlds. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same world that you create. But that world arises and ceases. And that which is aware of the world arising and ceasing is transcending that world.

So our refuge, then, is in this awareness—rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do it. Resting in this conscious awareness is what he refers to as coming home, or our real home. It's what I call taking refuge in awareness, loving awareness. And awareness includes anything.

So let's just sit.

CHAPTER 109

Five Spiritual Faculties

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this comprehensive talk, Carol Wilson examines the five spiritual faculties (indriya) that form the foundation of balanced meditation practice: saddhā (faith), viriya (energy), sati (mindfulness), samādhi (collectedness), and paññā (wisdom). Drawing from the suttas and Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teachings, she explains how these qualities work together as what Tejaniya calls "intelligent awareness" or "the meditating mind."*
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> *Wilson distinguishes between "bright faith" — the initial inspiration that comes from external sources — and "verified faith" that arises from our own direct experience. She addresses the particular challenge of self-doubt in Western practitioners, noting Ajahn Sumedho's observation that our strong identification with personality leads us to take both successes and failures too personally. The talk clarifies viriya as patient persistence rather than forceful effort, emphasizing the quality of "not shrinking back" from difficulty without pushing aggressively.*
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> *Particularly valuable is Wilson's discussion of vipassanā samādhi versus samatha concentration. She explains that the stability developed through awareness practice is flexible, open, and not dependent on any single object — quite different from the absorbed, one-pointed focus many practitioners expect. This balanced collectedness allows wisdom to arise naturally. The talk concludes with practical guidance on recognizing when faculties are out of balance and how they naturally support and correct each other through steady, wholesome awareness.*

Tonight I want to talk about what's called the five spiritual faculties, sort of the complement to the eight thousand defilements. It's very important that we recognize both.

Remember how Steve started his talk last night? I want to read the rest of that sutta. This translation is a little different—it's from Ajahn Sumedho and Pasanno, but it's the same sutta:

"This mind is radiant, but it doesn't show its radiance because passing defilements come and obscure it. The unwise ordinary person does not understand this as it is. And so for them, there is no development of the mind"—basically thinking that defilements come, that's it, they're permanent, there's nothing else to do. "This mind is radiant. It shows its radiance when it is unobscured by passing defilements. The wise noble disciple understands this as it is. Therefore, for them, there is development of mind."

I like this passage because it shows both sides, and that's what we're doing here—developing the mind in ways that we talk about with steady, intelligent awareness. As Steve spoke so clearly last night, this leads to the wisdom that sees, feels, recognizes, and understands the torments of mind, how they work, and allows the wisdom to come in that begins to disentangle us, free us, disidentify from it.

Not at the exact same time, but together with this process, wholesome qualities are happening quite a lot of the time too. It's just as important to recognize the wholesome, uplifting qualities of mind as it is to recognize the torments. We're saying recognize whatever's there, but I want to point out that sometimes there's wholesome. And it's important to recognize these with the same non-judging awareness with which one recognizes the torments.

I'm going to talk about these five faculties tonight. There are lots of ways to discuss them. I'll be somewhat experiential and conversational, and also talking about them in the way that U Tejaniya does, his particular slant. There are many slants, so this isn't definitive, but hopefully helpful and supportive for the way we're practicing here.

These five spiritual faculties, which are going to be very familiar to you, work together. When they come together in a balanced way, Tejaniya calls that intelligent awareness. Sometimes he calls it the meditating mind. For us, when we have that experience—even just briefly—where the awareness is getting its own momentum and there's interest, and whatever's happening isn't so important but you're just there, interested, it's going along... well, there's a pretty good chance, I would say for sure, that those five qualities at least, and there are others too, are coming together in a balanced way. That's when you can see the awareness and the wisdom are really rolling along. So it's very important to recognize these.

I'll read a bit from the book. When you experience wholesome mind states—I say wholesome rather than good, because we tend to think of good as feeling good, and it doesn't necessarily mean that—actively recognize them, actively remember them. Remembering is like mindfulness. Not to hold on, but to recognize them, remind yourself that you're experiencing a wholesome mind state. Let it be conscious, not swept under the rug.

Remember that wholesome mind states are possible—this is for when you're having a hard time—and that this is what the wholesome mind state feels like. In other words, just like with the kilesas, the defilements, recognize it. Because we're hopefully meeting it with steady awareness, we'll also see the causes and conditions that give rise to it and that strengthen it. If you know why it's wholesome or how it feels wholesome, try to see that for yourself. That will help you recognize it and remember, and it will strengthen

faith later when you can't recognize any wholesome mind state and you start to think there never has been one in your life. Then you can try to actively remember: oh yeah, I had that moment of faith three and a half weeks ago.

These five qualities of mind are saddha, faith; viriya, energy; sati, mindfulness, which we've talked about a lot already; samadhi, often translated as concentration but which I want to translate as collectedness or balance of mind; and paññā, wisdom. Each of these is a huge field for discussion. I can only give little snapshots tonight, but my hope is to trigger in you the interest and recognition so that you explore it in your own experience. If you take this in only as the first level of wisdom—secondhand wisdom—and just remember it, that might help you know these qualities exist. But really I want to get your mind curious, to bring it into awareness.

To start by talking about saddha, or faith: it came up in one of the groups today, and it is a key state of heart and mind for actually doing our practice. We usually think of faith as inspired by what's called bright faith—by seeing or hearing someone, or seeing something about someone else, or something we read. The beginning of faith, the first inspiration of it, generally comes from some outside source. A lot of people hear the Dalai Lama talk and get all inspired, for example.

The classical definition of faith in Buddhist countries would be faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. You have faith in that and it gives you energy. But that doesn't necessarily work for us if we haven't been born and brought up in a Buddhist culture; it doesn't mean anything particularly. Sometimes when we're not thinking of faith as a quality of heart and mind, we keep thinking faith means faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, or faith in something. That's a kind of intellectual understanding. But it's not how we can experience it here.

It's a mental factor, an experience of mind, of heart. So I want to describe some of the ways it's characterized and how I experience it.

This bright faith, this first inspiration—"inspiration" is actually a good translation in English. When you think of times you've felt inspired, there's an energy, isn't there? A kind of brightness in the mind, in the body, and an uplifted quality. The manifestation of it in our practice, as Sayadaw U Pandita used to describe it, is that saddha, faith, manifests as the willingness to do. It's what gives us, for a moment, for some time, the commitment, the energy to actually say, in terms of our practice, "Okay, another moment of awareness. Okay, I will not get in my car and leave." I know most of you have had that thought. Sometimes we think we should check car keys at the door. But that

willingness—sometimes it's just a moment of grim determination, heavy and forced—that's not faith. But you know what I mean by that sense of something that inspires us. It's simply the willingness to do.

And so it may be hearing or thinking about the Buddha and what he discovered. It may be seeing someone else, or talking to a friend, or reading in a book—anything that sparks in us, "Okay, there's something here, something I want to explore, something I want to discover." And of course, it's moment to moment. Sometimes it can really give us a lot of commitment, carrying us for a while. But in the beginning, this bright faith is still inspired from outside.

I feel a lot of empathy for people who are on their very first intensive meditation retreat, who haven't done a lot of practice, because the only faith you can have at that point is this bright faith. The other kind, verified faith, comes from our own experience. When we've gone through some experience and we really see, "Oh, it's really true. If there's just awareness of clinging and the clinging goes away, there's peace"—that's really true. You know it for yourself; it's verified. And that's a deeper, more personally accessible level of faith.

But even faith coming from the outside gives us confidence, gives us energy. I remember hearing on the radio when Obama was first elected president, right after, the day after. They were interviewing a young African-American woman in Brooklyn or somewhere. I still get chills. I can't remember exactly what she said, but she was so inspired to think that she could do something different, something more with her life than she had ever thought was possible for her. And you could hear in her voice that energy, that inspiration, that commitment.

We catch it from each other. That's exactly how inspiration works. That's one of the beauties of sangha. Even here, you're hitting a place where you're slumping through the day and you think, "I can't find one reason to be here. I can't remember why I came." And then somebody just walks by and something about the way they walk or the way they're practicing strikes you. And you go, "Okay, if they can do it, I can do it"—hopefully in a wholesome, faithful way. And then we take turns inspiring one another.

So just beginning to recognize that feeling when it arises in the mind is important, because it gives us the energy, the confidence, the willingness to do.

Now, this faith is not greed. Greed thinks about results. You could also have energy and commitment by thinking, "If I do this, I'm going to get that." That's not faith—that's greed. Faith may include the sense of, "Yes, it is possible to free the mind from kilesa, from defilement," as Steve was saying last night. But then the faith gives us the confid-

ence without feeding the greed of "When am I going to get it?" Instead, it gives us the confidence to open into the moment with awareness. It gives us the confidence to drop into the moment, into the unknown, to just do the practice. That's how you know it's faith—you can feel the upliftingness, the wholesomeness of it.

Where if it's greed, "Yes, by God, I want to rid my mind of kalesha, and by tomorrow!" – if you tune into that, you can feel it doesn't feel uplifting. It may feel like it's giving energy, but you can feel the difference in your mind. And if you don't know what I'm talking about, explore and see. That's what I'm trying to inspire – to look and see. Because when it's wholesome, it's not feeding kalesha, it's not feeding defilement, and it's not fueled by defilement.

So faith is essential. Without it, we just don't have the energy, the willingness to do. Otherwise it's just, "Well, that sounds like a nice idea. What's on TV?" Or, "That's the bell in the morning? Okay, yeah, I'm not letting those guys get up before me. I'm rolling over. It doesn't matter."

All of the five faculties work together in balance. And faith needs to come with a balance of wisdom – not just intellectual, but clear seeing. Because otherwise, faith can be kind of blind, where you're so inspired by someone. "Yes, if they can swim the English Channel, so can I!" And without any training, you jump in and start to swim. That's blind faith – unless you know you're a world-class swimmer and you can do it. But faith needs to be balanced with wisdom, the clear seeing of what's actually so.

Faith, this collecting of our energy, this uplifting quality, this willingness to do, is also for many of us in this culture so important because it can help to counteract, to help move through our patterns of self-doubt. Self-doubt, self-judgment – which I know one or two people here have experienced once or twice during the course of this retreat. And it's so strong. In this culture – I don't know if it's Western culture or the rational scientific worldview or what – but certainly we know from meeting with people in meditation retreats, and I see it here, all over this country, and in Europe, it just seems to be one of our stronger conditionings. Not everybody, but many people.

Our personalities, our belief that "I'm the one doing it, I'm the one making this happen," is so strong. So we take it all so personally. If it's pleasant, if it goes the way we want, that's a personal success. If it isn't going the way we want, if it's unpleasant, it's a personal failure. And none of that is inspiring faith. That gets us really caught up in success and failure and self-doubt.

Ajahn Sumedho, whom I quoted last night – he's an American man, but he spent many years as a monk with Ajahn Chah, who was a great Thai forest meditation master. He lived in Thailand, learned Thai, taught in Thailand, and then Ajahn Chah sent him to England to bring that monastic order to the West. Once some of us were meeting with Ajahn Sumedho and he was just talking about teaching. Someone asked him, "Do you notice any difference between meditation patterns when you're working with Thai people versus when you're working with Westerners?"

This is broad, but I found what he said quite interesting. He said his opinion at that time was that one of the biggest hindrances he'd seen for Westerners in our practice of meditation is self-doubt. Self-doubt in our own insights, self-doubt in our own experience of awareness, in our own little moments of freedom, of liberation – even if momentary freedom from patterns that we suffer from. And he said he thinks it's because we give so much belief to our personalities, so much weight to our personalities, that we get caught back into them immediately.

I would put that in terms of what I said before: we think we're doing everything. It's all up to us. Even when it's going really well – say here on retreat, when there's a momentum of mindfulness and it's going along and there's no sense of personal effort and you're having fun and it's flowing – it's really common to doubt it. Even a dear friend of mine who's been a meditation teacher for years said, "Well, this can't be right because it's just going along and I'm not doing it. Somehow, it's too easy. Something's wrong." Because we think it's all about me. We get caught back into the personality pattern. And when it isn't going well, of course, it's so clear that that's our fault because we're jerks and hopeless.

But he said he's really talking about those times of just touching awareness. Or if you start to recognize these wholesome qualities I'm talking about, you think, "Well, okay, it's here now, but that's a fluke. It just came in by chance, and it'll go because it's nothing to do with me." In a way, it's not about "me." It's just nature. Just as the defilements have their nature – the causes and effects and how they behave, doing their job – so too do the wholesome qualities.

So too does faith.

But it's very interesting, this way we don't trust ourselves because we think it's all about "me," and it's cheating. This stuff just happens by itself.

Just to give you an alternative possibility, one little example. Some years ago in Burma, I was teaching alongside Sayadaw U Lakkhana, who's a Mahasi-style Burmese teacher. In the way he was teaching, he had been saying in a talk about this noting prac-

tice—whatever arises, the mind notes it, you go to it and note it. He was saying, "Note it three times. If you note it three times, it'll go away." Which, you know, forget about it. That's not what happens.

So he was saying that. And then the way those retreats work, when he would leave, the other Western teacher and I would take questions—this was a retreat for Westerners. My friend U Lamang was translating for Sayadaw, who spoke in Burmese. So somebody said, "Hey, I'm noting it three times. I'm here, I'm mindful, and it's not going away. What am I doing wrong?" And they were so upset—it was like a whole crisis. Which we do, right? "What am I doing wrong?"

So we just talked about that. Later, I was speaking with the translator, and he said, "Oh, that was so interesting. Because it's the same for us. When we note it three times, it doesn't go away. And I always wondered." I said, "Oh, and then what do you do when it doesn't go away?" He said, "We go, 'Oh, well, never mind.'"

It's an alternative possibility. You just say, "Huh, what? Oh, well, never mind." You don't have to figure out how you're failing.

So this sense of faith, of not taking it so personally. Again, Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "The problem many yogis have is that you're so used to making things happen in your life. In daily life, they're used to setting themselves goals, applying a lot of effort, and achieving what they want. Then they do the same in meditation. They want to be good, very good, the best. When they—you, we—are not as good as they want to be, they quickly become disappointed. That's why they lose faith and why they lose interest in practice."

You see? That's a faith based on getting results. It isn't really the uplifting faith—it slides into wanting. And then we do get discouraged, falling into self-doubt.

So looking again and seeing that sometimes we can actively turn to outside resources when we don't find the inner resources that bring up the faith, or the memory, or verified faith. We re-tap into that inspiration, each of us finding what works for us. Nothing wrong with that. Really helpful.

But you see, tuning into that sense of uplifting, of commitment, of willingness to practice in our mind—that is saddhā. And learning to recognize and trust that. At the same time, not taking it personally, just as we don't take the defilements personally. Cause and effect.

There's one sutta called "The Inquirer," where the Buddha is telling someone what things to look for in a teacher to see if they're completely awakened, like the Buddha himself. At one point, the Buddha says, "Yes, purified states are found—purified states of mind are found—in the Tathagata," meaning himself. "There are purified states in my mind. They are my pathway, my domain, where I live."

But I do not identify with them. There is no craving for them—just their recognition. This is here, how it arises, what its effects are.

It seems obvious, and it's true in this order, that the arising of faith, the willingness to do, then strengthens the next factor, which is virya, or energy. In the way Ajahn Tejaniya is talking about it, it's a mental factor. So we're talking about mental energy—not necessarily the bodily energy to run a marathon or something. That comes from mental energy, of course, but here we're talking about mental energy specifically.

I'm using "energy" rather than "effort" deliberately. Sometimes virya is translated as "wise effort," but for many of us, effort comes together with a sense of need, of doing to achieve, and a kind of leaning forward for a result that's fed by striving. That would be unwise effort. But here, virya as energy, mental energy in the mind—just by itself, depending on the context, it's not necessarily wholesome or one of the five spiritual faculties. There can be enormous energy in the mind directing us to do amazing things that aren't necessarily coming together with right view, right understanding, and mindfulness.

Back to my tennis example: if you watch these players, it's amazing the amount of moment-to-moment clarity and virya they have to bring up with each point. I love watching just to see the level that these qualities can be cultivated to. But is the motivation, are the surrounding mental factors, necessarily all wholesome ones? I have my doubts. There's got to be a strong element of wanting, of craving, and self-identification. I'm not saying that's a horrible thing, but it isn't wholesome. It's not purity of mind. Certainly you can see as they get frustrated in a match—okay, there's a little bit of aversion being fed too. Enormous virya, and it's not a bad thing in the world to play tennis, but it isn't the wholesome state of virya as a spiritual faculty.

So that's how we're talking about it here. We call this "ethically variable" virya. It takes on wholesome or unwholesome qualities depending on what other mental factors are arising together with it. If we want to call it a spiritual faculty, then it comes together with wisdom, with right view, with mindfulness.

As an internal experience—explore it for yourself, because we're all different and we have different access to virya—but the way we're talking about it here as mental energy is that it's not pushing. Rather, it's a sense of persistence, of patience. Not resignation, not negativity, but that quality of "never give up." Sayadaw has that big sign on the door into his kuti: "Never give up." And all that means is when you come and say, "Oh, I was aware of this and this and that, but then there was just aversion," we say, "Oh, awareness of aversion. Next thing." That's just never give up. And now this, and now this. It doesn't have to be dramatic—"Never give up, my God!"—but just showing up, showing up, showing up.

So it's a balanced kind of effort. If it's all intensity, you can't keep going with it. You get exhausted. So it's this patience, this persistence, with a quality of interest, not pushing for a result. But it also has—you can feel this—it's described as not shrinking back from the difficult.

You can notice this when some difficult experience comes up in your mind. If there's awareness, you're not trying to do it right, but the awareness is just there. Something happened today—I can't remember what—but I was doing something and some negative state came up. I guess I was thinking about this because I've been contemplating these teachings. I could just see how the awareness, the energy in the mind, when that unpleasant state came, just wanted to go, "No, I don't want to go there." And virya is just like, no, not shrinking back. Just staying here, just meeting what's happening. It's a kind of courage. Moment after moment after moment with the difficult, with the unwholesome—just not shrinking back.

And with the wholesome, virya supports what is wholesome. So let's say you're recognizing, you're feeling saddha, faith, in your experience.

It's kind of uplifting. And then virya comes in to recognize it, to meet it, to be there with it too. It supports the wholesome.

But really here, in the way we're practicing, virya shows up simply as that patient willingness never to give up. Am I aware now? Am I aware now? Notice that quality of not shrinking back.

Sometimes virya is just not there. But as we get more familiar with these wholesome qualities, sometimes you can start to actually look and recognize that it could be there—you're just not noticing it. The kilesas make more noise. The defilements, they kick up a ruckus. And so they call our attention in a wholesome way or an unwholesome way. But sometimes we can notice that virya is there.

Virya is not something I have in overwhelming amounts. I have to work with noticing it. It's there. We all have it. We couldn't even stand up without it.

Take something simple, like getting out of bed in the morning. Not when there's a huge thing pressing, but just lying there thinking, I don't know... I'm aware, and I can be just as aware like this. And if I fall asleep, so what? Whatever happens doesn't matter. When I wake up, I'll be aware again. Which, on one level, is true. But then there's another part where you can just be aware of the whole thing. You can see the kind of unwholesome craving coming in. And the awareness notices that.

I do this myself a lot. Suddenly I'll just remember—like Tejaniya was saying—I'll just remember virya. And it's kind of, oh yeah, just that meeting what's happening. It meets that unwholesome, and you just get up. No big deal.

So we can actually, being familiar with these qualities, turn to the wholesome more often than we might think. This is development of mind. This is strengthening the wholesome. But it's done with wisdom, not with wanting, not with aversion.

For it to be wise virya, wise effort, it comes together. It's not fed by kilesa. You could do amazing things. You can look like you're practicing really well, sit through a sitting without moving, absolutely committed. But the motivation could be complete aversion. You know what I mean? You think you're doing good practice, but look and see—if the motivation is aversion, it's not wise effort. It's unwise effort, because what's being strengthened is aversion.

So you can check. When you feel that you're using a lot of energy, physically or mentally, sometimes we feel like there's virya, but it feels like we're pushing, really pushing, getting fatigued just from sitting. Then just check. Check in the background the quality in the mind. It's the same thing we've been saying all along.

Look and see if in this effort that we're putting out—where it feels like, well, I'm really working hard here, this is what I should be doing—it's back to the faith issue, the not trusting. Unless we're working so hard we're about to fall on our face from exhaustion, we feel like we're not really practicing.

So look and see when it starts to feel like that. Are you wanting, expecting, or trying to make a particular thing happen? Or do you have the expectation in the back of your mind that a certain thing has to happen for it to be okay?

Just looking and seeing. And for sure, that effort is being fed by greed, by wanting. Or is the effort in some subtle way trying to make something stop happening? Back to that thing about noting—if you note it three times, it goes away. So we say, okay, let me note it, note it, note it, go away.

Almost everyone I've talked to over time, at some point here, has this puzzling experience. They say, "I know I'm really aware of this thing. I'm describing it really clearly." And then they'll kind of stop and look puzzled, and you say, "But what? You mean?" We know—"But it's still here." Implicit in that is the belief that if we were aware rightly, it would go away. That's aversion.

So wise effort is just not shrinking back from the difficult, but not pounding it with a stick either. Just here we are. Or sometimes we're using a lot of effort, trying, and we don't even know what we're trying to get or what we're trying to stop, but there's just a feeling of dissatisfaction or confusion. We don't know what to do, so we're trying this and trying that. And that's delusion. That's *moha*.

So then just settle back and remember: the only task is just awareness. Am I aware right now? That's all. And you see, we're back to faith—needing some faith to trust enough to do that.

Another teaching from U Tejaniya about the motivation of wise effort: he says effort that comes with a defilement is, of course, wrong effort. Most yogis make an effort with some kind of desire. Effort comes together with defilement. So you just need to be very clear whether you're making an effort with *lobha*, with greed, or whether there's this other quality, *chanda*, which is sometimes translated as "wholesome desire." I find that confusing. It's more like a zeal, an interest, a willingness. It's not a greed for a result.

He says when you make an effort with greed, with *lobha*, you become tense and you'll suffer. When you're successful, you'll feel very happy. And when you're not, you may become upset or even depressed. That's one of the results we can see—it's a clue that it's unwise effort.

But when the effort comes with faith, with willingness to do, with *chanda*—wise desire, desire for spiritual growth—you don't suffer. The mind will become stronger, more powerful, more balanced. When you "succeed," you will not feel elated. And when you "don't succeed," you don't feel upset. This is the result of right effort.

You never give up, but again and again and again, just meeting the moment. We're not elated, we're not depressed, because it's just what's happening now. What's happening now? Just the effort to meet the moment—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. There's nothing to be elated or depressed about. So that's another sign that it's a more balanced effort. It's courage, not shrinking back.

Now, mindfulness—*sati*—I don't think I need to say a lot about since that's what we've been talking about since the beginning of the retreat. It's just that simple awareness, not forgetting. Tejaniya likes to talk about it this way: it's just not forgetting. Don't forget to watch yourself. Don't forget awareness—just in that very simple, light, relaxed way.

Now, mindfulness—and I think hopefully you're starting to get this—doesn't have to come together with a heavy directed focus. Are you starting to at all believe that? Yet?

I know for many people, including me, who have done other practices, for many years mindfulness was always coming together with a kind of very focused quality of mind. And because they often came together, it was easy to confuse them, to think that mindfulness meant that heavy focus, that it was part of mindfulness, that you have to have that.

What we're hoping you're starting to see here is: not. That's a different quality of mind.

So mindfulness is just this simple moment-to-moment awareness—just not forgetting. Am I aware? What's happening now? It's not that we have to put it in and hold on, but as soon as you remember, here it is again. That accessible. The virya keeps us doing it.

The steadiness of awareness, as we've said ten million times already in four days, leads to momentum. It starts to get its own momentum, which leads to continuity. We're committing to continuity, but all we can do is whenever we recognize we're not aware, we're back in awareness. Continuity doesn't mean we try to hold on to every moment and that we can somehow make it be steady. That's out of our control. That's wrong effort. But that persistence—that each moment of waking up in mindfulness, we're willing to do it. The faith gives us the willingness to do it. The virya gives us the ability not to shrink back.

The steadiness of mindfulness leads to the mindfulness getting its own momentum, which cultivates samadhi, the fourth factor. And I want to say a bit about this, especially in terms of how we're practicing vipassana here.

Samadhi is often translated into English as concentration. In my experience of working with a lot of people on retreat, it's one of the qualities of mind—and again, it's ethically neutral, just as virya is. You could really have a very collected mind in service of sneaking into a house and stealing something without getting caught.

We often think of samadhi as this one-pointed, really focused, intensive concentration leading to absorption, to jhana, which is one manifestation of samadhi. But often it comes to be that that's what people call concentration, and that's what they think the factor of concentration in our experience should feel like. And because when it is really heavy and deeply focused like that, you sometimes have experiences. We like experiences because then our self-doubt kind of goes away and we think, "I'm doing something and I'm getting somewhere." So it feels good, and we want more concentration, and we get really hooked. And when you can't get that kind of concentration, that kind of one-pointed absorption, you think, "I can't do it, and everyone else can." There's a huge amount of suffering. I've worked with a lot of people suffering so much—not from not being able to do it, but from the idea that that's the only thing that means really good practice, that that's what wisdom comes from, that that's what it's all about.

So I would like to say: no, it's not what it's all about. It's one of the factors.

Here, samadhi is more... Steve Smith likes to describe it as "perfectly put together." The mind is perfectly put together. Samadhi is really a mind that's balanced, a mind that's steady, that's stable. It doesn't have to be a unification of mind in the sense of all focused and absorbed on one object, object-oriented. It's unified in the sense that all the scattered mental energy all over the place is collected and right here.

The experience we can have of vipassana samadhi—this steadiness of mind—is peaceful, but it's also relaxed. It's light, it's cool, it's flexible. Yes, it's pleasant, but this kind of samadhi is not just about one-pointed, object-oriented focusing.

I'm going to call that other kind shamatha, samatha—tranquility practice—which is a very valid and useful practice. But here, the samadhi that develops through the steadiness of awareness on whatever is happening, this vipassana samadhi, has a different quality.

Sayadaw Tejaniya says vipassana samadhi does not depend on an object for its stability. In shamatha samadhi, whether it's the breath or a light or whatever, the mind just comes. You focus, focus, focus. And as the mind does get very unified and strong and collected, it's peaceful in a way. Because as Steve said last night when he was describing the three levels of kilesa, the second level of obsessive kilesa is kind of kept

away by the collected mind. When you're really focused on something, greed isn't coming up, aversion isn't coming up, doubt isn't coming up. And it is lovely—definitely lovely. But it doesn't have to just be one-pointed focus.

The way Sayadaw Tejaniya talks about it—and I'm going to talk about it that way since that's how we're practicing—he really doesn't stress focus.

In fact, he tries to help people break free from being really attached to focus. He says that kind of samadhi—very focused and one-pointed—is also kind of heavy. It's brittle, it's fragile. It really depends on having all the circumstances just right so you're not pulled out, so you can really concentrate. And as it gets heavy, wisdom isn't going to arise because you're not seeing anything else except just that one object; the mind is absorbed into it. Wisdom isn't arising there.

So Vipassana Samadhi does not depend on an object for its stability. The stability in the mind, the collectedness in the mind, comes from right understanding, from right view, which together with the continuity of awareness gives the mind stability.

How do we experience that? How can you recognize it in your practice? A lot of times we don't even think of it as samadhi because we have this other idea so strongly ingrained. As Tejaniya says, we're looking for some kind of state almost like a trance, and that's what we want from samadhi.

But this kind we're talking about is quite different—the mind is flexible, open, relaxed, awake and alert. There's a sense that whatever's arising is not a distraction. It's not like, "Oh my God, that sound is going to wreck my samadhi!" or "These people walking too fast are wrecking my samadhi," or "If I have to make that phone call, it's going to ruin my samadhi." This is a balance of mind that comes from right view—just awareness of this, without the mind constantly getting caught in liking and disliking objects. That's where we get all upset and distressed.

When awareness is simply meeting what's happening moment after moment without liking, without disliking, this freshness arises, this flexibility, this equanimity. The mind isn't fragile or brittle, so whatever's arising isn't a distraction. Learn how to recognize that, because it feels different from really heavy focus.

This kind of samadhi takes longer to develop, sometimes, on a retreat like this. And it's one of the things that people who've done a lot of practice in other styles find themselves distrusting when they try this approach—because it's like you've got no proof that anything's happening, until you start to notice the cause and effect with awareness.

I remember one time when I was sitting with Tejaniya in Burma, maybe one of the first times. As Steve has probably mentioned, there's talking there; it's not in complete silence. I was doing my walking meditation somewhere, and someone came up and started talking to me. My response was just, "Okay, the usual." I'd gotten used to it by then. In the beginning, people approaching felt like they were wrecking my practice—they don't even walk back and forth in lanes, they just walk across and through—and I'd wonder how anyone could develop any steadiness.

But by this time I was more balanced with it. I was just walking and aware, pretty present with whatever was happening. There was a sense—I wasn't calling it samadhi—but there was this sense of presence, flexibility, balance of mind, steadiness of mind. This person came up and talked. I stopped. That was just the next thing happening; I wasn't thinking about it. We had a little conversation, then I went back to walking.

And I noticed that the awareness was actually even stronger than it had been before the conversation, that the mind was steadier, even more collected. Awareness had been going through the talking, and not only was it not a distraction, it was as much a seed of strengthening awareness and samadhi as anything else.

That's a little moment of verified faith. You see, "Oh, it's a different kind of samadhi." Exploring moments like that becomes illuminating. And then, of course, as with most pleasant things, the habit of mind comes in: "Oh, how can I catch it?" That's where virya comes—just bringing awareness to that. "Oh, that's wanting." You can feel it. And then wanting becomes the next object of awareness. It doesn't have to be such a distraction if the steadiness of awareness keeps going, which is another way samadhi manifests.

The awareness, the steadiness, begins to have more and more of its own momentum. As someone said in a group today or yesterday, they started to be aware of all kinds of little stuff they didn't even know was there, things they weren't looking for. Awareness was just doing its own job. It starts to get stronger and subtler, noticing all kinds of things. "Oh, that's happening."

I didn't know that. And it's really this sense of *I'm not doing it* or looking for it. The awareness is just getting steadier and stronger, gaining its own momentum. That's also a way you can experience samadhi in the mind.

So the ingredients for samadhi are, of course, right attitude—not fueled by greed or aversion, not all about "me getting something." Mindfulness, the steadiness of mindfulness, and the continuity of mindfulness, just as I said. It's not a forcing kind of energy.

I would encourage you to feel free to experiment with this. Not like testing to see if something is really true or not, because that's a little bit of aversion in the mind. But don't be so afraid that you're going to wreck your samadhi that you're walking around on tenterhooks.

I think I mentioned before—I think it was this retreat—that I spent one retreat in a different style of practice with a strong kind of focused moment-to-moment samadhi. We were landing on one object and really being present with it, then landing attention on the next object, a kind of noting called momentary samadhi. But it had that element of very strong focusing. It was helpful; I'm not saying it wasn't helpful. But I didn't recognize until I was finished with that retreat that I had spent about a month in a very strongly steady, clear awareness, moment to moment, strong samadhi like that, focusing. Yet there had been this attitude in the mind...

It's like I was walking around like this, with my mind like this, trying to hold on to the samadhi. *I worked so hard for this. And this is a sign that practice is working. I don't want it to go away.* Identification with it, enjoying it, and wondering what it means about me. *Finally, I never thought I could have samadhi, but here it is.*

And when I looked back, I thought, how could I not see that? My God. It was so stressful and tight.

So here, we say it doesn't matter—just look and go, "Oh, wanting in the mind." Just playing with it and seeing. "Oh no, I better not look because that might mess up my—" Oh, look at that. Attachment feels like this. Just be free to play with it and see. It'll go away because, you know what? Everything does. And it'll come back again.

So we're not holding on, but we're really learning through wise attention what the causes are, what the conditions are that strengthen samadhi. And that's just wise attention, understanding, not taking it personally, knowing it's all just nature, seeing cause and effect, and continuity of awareness. Wishing it were so isn't one of them. Thinking, "If I want samadhi hard enough, maybe it'll come" isn't really one of the causes and conditions that brings it about.

And so we're just free to keep looking and seeing, looking and seeing, not trying to hold on to a state, not taking it personally. That's how the wisdom factor starts to manifest.

And so that's the fifth—wisdom.

Wisdom, as I think we've said a couple of times—I've certainly said in the groups—one way you can talk about wisdom is on three levels. The first level, and this is in the suttas, Tejaniya talks about it a lot but it's actually in the suttas, is what we've been discussing: secondhand wisdom. Or as Steve said with right view, the voice of another—some information. Even that level of wisdom is a form of paññā and is helpful in terms of the five spiritual faculties working together. A certain kind of practicality, a sense of the wisdom of knowing how to practice, knowing what to do. That's a kind of paññā, and that's useful.

It's not transformative wisdom, but as Tejaniya talks about how the five spiritual faculties working together are what really make intelligent awareness, he says, "I'm not talking about deep transformative wisdom. I'm really talking about this practical paññā, practical wisdom of just knowing how to practice." Knowing what it feels like when there's awareness and when there's not. Being able to look into the mind and get a feeling for how much effort is being put out or not. Just very practical stuff.

So that's the first level of wisdom—information. And the second level, combining the first and second, is this thinking about things, thinking it over, cogitating, looking in our experience and going, "Yeah, that really does make sense."

I can really see. And this has also been coming up in groups. That's often the level where we say, "I really know. For example, I really know impermanence. I know it's true. So how come I keep getting caught in clinging and disappointment?"

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says something about this a lot, not as a judgment. He goes, "Oh, well, there's a lot of awareness. You're seeing this whole process of something arising and the clinging to it, and then it goes away and the disappointment. And then you say, 'I know it, but how come this is all happening?' I say there's a lot of awareness, but there's not enough wisdom."

Because the really deep transformative wisdom is the third level of wisdom—insight wisdom—that is an effect. It's not something that we can input or wish to happen. It's not in our control, which I find hugely relieving.

So the steadiness of awareness, the balance of mind, the faith, the energy—all of that together that allows the steadiness of practice—in itself wisdom then does the work of freeing the mind and heart from kilesas. Not our wanting, not our pushing, not our trying. We can't make the wisdom; we can just have the faith and the energy for the steadiness of samādhi, the steadiness of mindfulness that leads to the balance, the collectedness of mind that allows wisdom to arise. And then wisdom does the work.

Just one last thing: all of these five qualities need to work together in balance. And they do balance themselves. You can feel when it's like that. But let me read Tejaniya's words again, since I wanted to do it more his way.

He says, "Yes, definitely, the five spiritual faculties work together. If any one of them becomes too strong, if it does too much of the work, it kind of blots out the other four. The others cannot be effective anymore. They can no longer do their work properly."

Then he qualifies this. If somebody has too much samādhi, the wisdom is not strong and cannot grow. If there's that just zooming-in focus, there's not space for the wisdom to arise and grow. The vīriya, the energy, cannot be strong because of the heavy concentration, and sati, mindfulness, is not sharp. And if those three are not working well, then saddhā will suffer. You start losing confidence in the practice.

If the wisdom faculty is too strong—and here later he clarifies, by the way, he doesn't mean insight wisdom; he said that can never be too strong—but the wisdom faculty of rational understanding, seeing clearly, being practical, investigating is an aspect of wisdom. Interest is an aspect of wisdom. If that gets too strong, if there's too much interest, intellect, questioning, investigation in that way, too much thinking, then there's no samādhi. The mind has no stability.

And this is where faith needs to balance that kind of wisdom. Sometimes this wisdom and thinking and analyzing and questioning manifests as wisdom, but we end up in big doubt. And that's where we need the inspiration of faith to just do, to just say, "Okay, awareness is like this. What's happening now?" So the mind has no stability, and again, this leads to the deterioration of the remaining faculties, and faith suffers, of course, again.

So the five faculties need to work together in balance. And they do. Sometimes you can recognize they're out of balance, like getting really focused in and you don't know what else is going on. And you don't berate yourself, but you can say, "Oh, let me just get a little interested. What else can the awareness notice right here?" You just bring in a little bit of interest. Or with too much questioning, see if you can get that inspiration, the trust, to just do again. A lot of effort and the mind's jumping all over the place—you might want to let the attention get a little more quiet, a little more settled for a minute.

So we can play with these qualities. But the most important is the recognition, really seeing through the steadiness of attention the wholesome qualities, how they manifest, how they support our practice, and how they lead to the development of wisdom, freeing our heart and mind.

CHAPTER 110

Compassion: Natural Expression of the Pure Mind

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson illuminates how compassion (karuṇā) and the other brahmavihāras—mettā (loving-kindness), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity)—arise spontaneously as natural expressions of the pure mind when awareness is steady and unclouded by greed, aversion, or self-referencing. Drawing from both Theravāda and Tibetan perspectives, she explains that these beautiful heart qualities are not separate from vipassanā practice but emerge naturally when the mind is free from the kleśas.*
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> *Wilson explores how our habitual response to dukkha is typically aversion—pushing away, denying, or trying to hold ourselves separate from difficult experience. She offers the profound question from Joko Beck: "Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?" This willingness to meet experience with kind, steady awareness rather than resistance is itself the cultivation of compassion.*
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> *Through personal stories, including her own journey with chronic illness, Wilson demonstrates how bringing compassionate awareness to difficult experience transforms our relationship with suffering. When we stop trying to hold ourselves separate from pain—our own or others'—wisdom naturally arises, allowing us to see clearly and respond appropriately. She reminds us that we learn to hate; it is not natural. Starting where we are, moment by moment, we discover that compassion is not something far away that we must achieve, but the natural response of awareness meeting life with openness.*

So tonight, what I want to talk about is just sharing some thoughts about compassion—compassion as it is an expression of steady awareness, compassion as a natural expression of the pure heart, the pure mind, as we can explore it and experience it here in our practice.

What made me want to talk about this is mostly listening to people in the groups. Certainly a lot of what we all experience is difficult experience. That's at least fifty percent of most of our lives and a lot of the things that happen in practice. A couple of days ago in one group, the subject of compassion and metta came up. For those of you who aren't familiar with that term, metta is another state of mind and heart, translated into English usually as loving-kindness. It's a kind of friendliness, an open-hearted connection.

In the group, the discussion came up because one or two people were experiencing kind of spontaneous, strong compassion or metta just from the steady awareness. As the discussion revolved with all different people, there was a kind of surprise or finding it a bit unexpected that compassion was coming up so strongly in this awareness practice. For those of you who are sort of new to this style, one of the other kinds of practices that we teach, that we learn from our Burmese teachers, is the specific deliberate cultivation of metta, the loving-kindness state of mind, or of compassion. Those are specific practices that we do that are focusing, one-pointed practices. They work together with insight practice, with Vipassana, but they're not Vipassana. You can't do both at the same time.

I just got the impression—which could be completely wrong, as we all know; what we think we hear and decide it means often has very little connection to what was actually said or what the person meant—but anyway, I just wanted to talk about the fact that it's not like they're two separate things. It's not as if, wow, it's so strange if metta or compassion or appreciative joy or equanimity come up in the awareness practice when we haven't been really just cultivating that.

What I want to talk about, specifically compassion—just because you can only pick one, and it's very useful in terms of our experience here—is the natural expression of the pure mind, the pure heart, in the appropriate situation.

There are four attitudes of mind, attitudes of heart you could say, towards living beings that are often called the four divine abidings. They're these beautiful states of heart and mind.

One is metta, loving-kindness, which is just this open-hearted friendliness, connectedness—natural. It's sort of like you'd feel if you go out and you're just in a nice space. You're not filled with aversion or greed. You walk out and say there's two little kids playing or two little puppies playing. It's just kind of like, oh, you just naturally feel a friendliness, right? Unless you're a real meanie. When you naturally feel that, that's just naturally metta. It's no big deal. It's normal and natural when the mind isn't clouded with greed, confusion, or all caught up in ourselves.

Compassion is that quality of connected mind, the response of the heart and mind—that same open heart and mind—when it meets the suffering aspect of a being. It's the empathy, the quivering of the heart, the openness and connectedness in the suffering.

If what we meet in a being with the same open, connected awareness is their happy aspect—they're having a lot of happiness and success—the natural response is mudita, appreciative joy. This is a great thing. You don't have to have great stuff happening yourself. Someone else can be really happy, and that can bring out the happiness in us. It's true. It's a great way to be happy.

And equanimity, which as an attitude Steve talked a lot about in terms of the subtlety of the mind, but also as a specific state of mind and heart in relationship to beings—it arises basically if there's something going on with a being, someone, that we really can't do anything about. Like knowing they have their own karma and we can't fix everything. So it's the mind that's really connected. It's not disconnected. Really connected but non-reactive in response to a being's situation.

As I say, they're all natural expressions of wisdom, natural responses of the heart and mind that is pure, even just pure in a moment.

The Tibetans have a way of talking about the nature of mind, dividing what doesn't really exist into three things that you can't really separate. But this is how it is that we talk, right? No wonder we're all confused. Anyway, the qualities of the nature of mind, you could say, depending on which angle you look from. When we're talking about whatever arises being known by awareness, and all objects being equal—awareness doesn't care, all objects are equal—that's looking at the emptiness aspect, meaning empty of a separate, self-existing, isolated self. It's all connected, the emptiness, all equal. But that doesn't lead to an indifferent disconnect, which is what our rational mind might think. Well, if everything's the same, and as we've been saying, awareness doesn't care...

Awareness doesn't care. What do you mean? I want to care. It's not a gray disconnected "who cares." It's that awareness doesn't get involved and reactive. So that side is looking at the emptiness.

Another quality is the naturally awake knowing aspect, sort of like that big mind we pointed to this morning where the sound arises and it's just naturally known. It's simply a natural quality of mind. It's not like you think, "Now I think a sound's going to come in a minute, so I better crank up the knowing so I can hear it." It just happens completely spontaneously. It's an amazing thing, but it's so common we don't even really look at it. So that's what we're examining.

And the third quality—the Tibetans say this third quality is called ceaselessly responsive. In other words, it's not just cooled out emptiness, whatever happens is known, never mind. But one of the four responses arises naturally in appropriate activ-

ity when met with the appropriate person. It's not like we have to go looking for it. And sure, most of the time our mind isn't quite in that pure state—we've talked about that a lot. But I just want to talk specifically about compassion as a kind of shorthand for all of these ceaselessly responsive beautiful states of mind.

Because it may seem sometimes like compassion is far away, like we're really having to work for it. And we're so overwhelmed when we experience a deeply loving or compassionate moment. It is kind of sad to me that it seems so far away and unfamiliar, and that we're much more friendly and at home with the big Ds, as we might call them—the defilements. We don't like them, but we're really at home with them.

And it just makes total sense, even in a rational way, that in any moment—not waiting until total awakening, but in any moment—when our mind is not clouded, when our awareness is not clouded by wanting, by aversion, or by "it's all about me," that relentless, obsessive self-referencing of almost every perception... Have you noticed that? And this isn't to judge. This is just to notice. You hear a sound and it goes, "Well, I hope people see I didn't do that." Everything. "Oh, the snow. Oh, it's going to affect me. It's going to be cold tonight." It's not a bad thing, but it's just the way our minds work.

And so this self-referencing often leads—not even in a big way, but in a little way—to a kind of calibrating, managing, figuring it out, making it comfortable for myself. It might come out of fear. It might come out of wanting. The first few days of a retreat—maybe you don't remember anymore, way back there with the dinosaurs, the first few days of this retreat—but you're kind of trying to manage it. Where are you going to sit in the dining room? Where's the best place? And who's going to sit near me? And who can I stand to sit near? And who do I not want to sit near? And what's the best time to eat? And what about my job? And where am I in the hall? Getting it all sorted out. It's little stuff, right? But how much air time does it take up? Everything is calibrated in terms of what does this mean about me and my comfort and getting through the retreat.

So when that drops away, even for a moment, it's such a huge relief. And there's all this energy that's bound up in that management that becomes available for connection with life.

for recognizing the bigger picture. You don't even have to think about it. It's just naturally the heart, the mind is more open, more connected, free from resistance and self—this kind of sense of self that separates us.

This isn't some big thing now: go out and get rid of sense of self. I'm not saying that. Just notice the moments, which I'm sure you have, when you hear a sound and the first thought isn't "what does that mean about me?" You just hear a sound. And we can see the big picture, respond from wisdom. That's what we mean by the steadiness of awareness. We see the big picture.

There's a story I heard on the radio. I guess it's true—it was on public radio. I mean, you never really know. It's like too good a story; I have trouble believing it's true. But I told it last year in Switzerland, and someone came up and gave me more detail, so at least someone else heard it too.

Apparently in London, when they were building the big Millennium thing, they built this Millennium Bridge, a new footbridge over the Thames River. When they first opened the bridge and several hundred people were walking over it, this story was talking about something called enlightened self-interest, which they thought had been like a financial policy. They believed if everyone acts from enlightened self-interest, everything would be okay. This was around 2009. Something about that didn't really work. What could it have been?

So they were using this example. Hundreds of people are walking over the bridge, and the bridge starts shaking. The bridge starts really wobbling over to one side—quite embarrassing, having just been built. Everyone on the bridge acted from enlightened self-interest, but with the focus on "me." So it's leaning this way, so everyone stepped over the other way. That didn't really fix things. It just made the whole thing worse.

You get a sense of that. Even when we're trying to act in a helpful way, when it's this obsessive self-referencing, we can't see the big picture.

So that's how it is for us a lot of the time. No blame, just starting to recognize that's how it is. And this is what our practice in all its forms is for—not to get rid of it, but just to see, "Oh, that's what's happening." And we start to see through it. Everyone's experienced moments of that.

I read from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche one night. He's talking about three fundamental attitudes of the path, just from his point of view. The first one is renunciation—seeing through, getting exhausted, giving up, having a weariness, a disillusionment with some sorrow with the endless quest for gratification. Just saying, "Oh, this doesn't really work." And we've talked about that a lot.

The second attitude he talks about is compassion, which he describes this way: it is born when one realizes that both the individual sense of self and all the appearances of the phenomenal world are actually empty of any intrinsic independent existence.

That's that *yathā bhūta*, all conditions coming together. When one sees the suffering that comes from one's own and from others' fundamental ignorance about this—which misunderstands the display of appearances as being composed of separate, permanently existing entities—that's not perceiving impermanence, as Steve talked about last night.

When one sees how much suffering comes from this misunderstanding, one who has even for a moment understood this absence of independent existence naturally acts from the boundless compassion that you feel for those who, under the spell of ignorance, are wandering and suffering in samsara.

You get that sense when you're having just an insight and you really see, "Oh, it's just like this. What's the problem?" And you see someone else who's so caught in that moment, so caught in the fear or the wanting or the anger that we were caught in yesterday, but now we're seeing through it. That can elicit not "the stupid jerk," but real compassion. Compassion, that empathy with: wow, this suffering is so extra.

And that's really the seed of compassion.

The third essential quality he calls pure perception. He's talking about this at the most ultimate, highest level, but I'm going to refer to it at a moment-to-moment level. Pure perception recognizes the Buddha nature in all sentient beings and sees the primordial purity in all phenomena. Every sentient being is endowed with the essence, the potential of Buddhahood, just as oil pervades every sesame seed. Ignorance is simply being unaware of this potential—in us, in others—like a poor person who does not know there is a pot of gold buried beneath his hut. The journey to enlightenment is thus a rediscovery of this forgotten nature, like seeing the ever-brilliant sun again as the clouds that have been hiding it are blown away. The same metaphor.

So it's not a one-time rediscovery. When I talk about a moment of pure mind, pure citta, where there's awareness—maybe the five faculties present, but not the kilesas—this potential for accurate recognition, for seeing the wider view, for the natural arising response of compassion or metta, appreciative joy or equanimity, it's just nature. It's just the natural response.

What we're hoping for in this retreat, in any retreat, is of course that the trust in the steadiness of awareness grows in each of us, and also that we begin to have more verified faith that this is the truer, the deeper response of our natural mind. Greed and hatred and confusion seem so much like our nature. They seem like the truest thing, but they're not. And we all see that in our experience.

Let me offer a composite example, not a particular one. When Steve talked last night about the first noble truth and all the difficulties of that, you get a sense perhaps of why—I get a sense anyway, the more I practice—the Buddha, when he had to distill all his teachings down and picked four truths as the hub, felt that pointing out this truth of dukkha was so essential. Steve talked all about it, so I don't need to repeat it.

But consider: what's our habitual response in the face of any of those aspects of dukkha that Steve talked about? When we're not paying attention, just in our normal mode, what's our natural response to the unpleasant, to uncertainty? The habit is anger, right? Or dislike, or aversion, or fear. That's just normal.

The anger can be outer blame or inner blame, some way of trying to push the experience away, keep it away. And if we can't keep it away, then another kind of natural response is a passive submission, a resigned attitude: "All right, I'll just accept it. This is what's happening, and I'll just stand it until it's finally gone." You can tell from how I'm describing it that this also has an element of aversion. This is not acceptance. This is not wisdom. But sometimes that's all we know—we can just endure until it's gone, holding ourselves separate from the experience.

Or there's outright total denial that it's even going on. And isn't denial an amazing faculty of mind? It's just incredible. Denial of suffering in ourselves, outside of ourselves.

I'll tell a little story. I was in the hospital a long, long time ago. I'd been there a few days, and there was a lot of pain going on, and they hadn't figured out what it was. So I wasn't in the most balanced, wonderful state—let's put it that way. They were trying to give me an IV, and my veins had sort of collapsed after a few days, and the nurse couldn't get it to work. That's not like horrible pain, but it's unpleasant, definitely painful. Then the nurse couldn't do it, so she ran out and grabbed a doctor in the hallway. And I thought—no offense to any doctors here—I thought, "Oh no." Because the nurses are the ones who do it all the time, not the doctors. Not a good sign. So the doctor came in and started working on it. I was just wasted. Little tears were rolling—I wasn't really complaining, but just a little tear rolled out.

He just looks at me and goes, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt." Just totally dismissive, you know. And I can understand why, because the motivation was to help. But when it's so uncomfortable for us to be with our own pain—or any pain—then we can't be there for someone else. The empathy that becomes compassion isn't there because we can't be with our own pain. So I could really understand that. Not that I was

analyzing it at the moment—I was just enduring. But I can really see that to be able to help, he had to cut off. So okay, fine. We all do that. Not on purpose, but our mind has that capacity. It's quite amazing.

What we start to see with the steadiness of awareness is that there's a whole other possibility, a whole other way of being, which is bringing this steady, non-judging awareness to whatever's happening. And sometimes when I'm talking about the compassionate aspect of awareness, when things are difficult, sometimes reminding ourselves that awareness doesn't care—but it can also be kind. It can kindly not care and just be with whatever's happening. And that can effect a complete change in our understanding of the situation.

Let me give an example. I'm making this up as a sort of composite. But if something's been going on, or someone here has been doing something that bugs you—whether they're making a noise, or you don't like the way they look, or they're breathing loud behind you, or you don't even know what. But you see this person, and there's aversion. You just don't want to be around them for whatever reason. Or you may know the reason, because they make this noise, whatever. And just being human, we can't help but make noises, right?

Our normal way would be either we just try and push the whole thing away and pretend we're equanimous and loving. That doesn't work, right? But what aversion does—the Buddha described it—what makes aversion grow is that aversion works by giving unwise attention to the repugnant aspect of something. Have you noticed that? Somebody or something's bugging you, really bringing up aversion. And it's their fault, of course. They're making you feel aversion. And the mind just can't stay away from that thing that's bugging you.

Thich Nhat Hanh gives the example: if you have one rough tooth, and all the rest of your teeth are fine, your tongue will go to that rough tooth like every five minutes. You're not running your tongue over the rest of your teeth. And you feel it, you get upset. You feel it, you get upset. You feel it, you get upset. It can go on for days. That's unwise attention to the repugnant aspect of something. And we just get focused in on that.

So with our steadiness of attention, we say just keep noticing, let awareness just notice the whole process. Many people have given examples of where you start to see more of the whole process. First there's that person making that sound. Then you keep watching. Oh, that's a sound. It's just a sound, being with a sound. The sound's just the

sound. Then you see the person. Well, the person's just a person. Oh, there's that thought—they remind me of my third grade teacher who was so mean to me. And you kind of see that.

And in the seeing of just the whole process—I'm making this up, this was nobody's story—in the seeing of the whole process, suddenly that aversion in that moment towards that person is gone, isn't it? And you see them with new eyes.

Perhaps there's just the connectedness of mettā, of friendliness. Or maybe there's compassion. You see whatever noise they're making, they can't help. And you feel compassion, quite naturally. It's not something you have to try and create.

It may seem like a small thing, but please do notice it. The effect of steady awareness meeting what's happening—not trying to push it away or figure it out—naturally opens out of the self-interest and aversion to seeing the whole picture more clearly. And the wholesome, pure state of heart and mind arises as a response. This can all happen in just a second. The next second it can be gone; we all know that. But that doesn't mean it isn't true and isn't real in the moments we're experiencing.

Compassion, generally one way of defining it, is the tenderness, the quivering of the heart in response to the suffering of another—this empathy with suffering. It's generally described as meeting suffering, and not just another's, but our own. And that's where I really am going to concentrate the rest of this talk: meeting what's arising, the difficult experience, with just this open, simple awareness presence, not pulling back, not shutting off.

In the big picture, compassion is generally spoken of as the motivation for action. Compassion is the movement, the action to alleviate the suffering of another, which is certainly in the world of action. In the biggest picture, in some of the Buddhist teachings, the strongest, most powerful expression of compassion would be bodhicitta—the motivation, the commitment, the intention to practice, to come to full awakening in order to awaken all other beings. This real sense of: my practice is all for the awakening of others. So that's the grandest expression of compassion.

But what I want to talk about here is recognizing that in the way the Buddha described all actions, especially of speech and of mind, the seed of all actions is in the mind. All actions originate in the mind. The intention that gives rise to any action is mental. Someone was talking about this in a group, just playing with drinking tea and kind of waiting till the mental intention would arise to lift the cup. And you can play

with that. You can just sit there, and sometimes when there's no time frame, you can sit there for two hours. You can play with this mental intention in the mind. It really is fun to play with this stuff.

The intention is just the little urge to speak, to move, even to think. And as with awareness, it comes together with whatever motivation, whatever qualities, whatever mental factors are in the mind. So compassion or hatred, saying something harsh or saying something loving, or just getting up and walking to the bathroom—everything comes with the intention that comes together with whatever particular mental states accompany it.

Compassionate action, the action to alleviate another's suffering, originates with this compassion, with this empathy, with this tenderness—for oneself, for beings—in the mind. And an action that might look like you're trying to alleviate suffering in others or even in yourself... you can't tell what someone else's intention is. Heck, half the time we can't tell what our own is, right?

So you could be trying to do something to help someone and really mean it, but the internal motivation could be a kind of fear. Have you ever experienced that, like being with someone who's suffering or seeing someone in a difficult situation? And you want to help, but actually what you feel is a kind of fear. In a small way, I sometimes feel this if I'm walking in a city and there's a homeless person, or someone who seems really mentally ill and wanting some money. I want to give, and I also feel a little bit afraid. And then I'm ashamed of feeling a little bit afraid. All this stuff is going on.

So I may go and offer something. In a way, that's a generous action. It's a somewhat compassionate action. But I can also see the difference between the times when it's just that movement of "Here, may this help?"—and it feels beautiful and connected—and other times when there's fear. Fear of being in the face of pain. That's a natural part of our humanness.

So here, on retreat, what we have the opportunity to explore is really the difference in our own mind, in our own heart, in the habits of our mind and heart, when the response to suffering—and here it's our own suffering—is aversion or fear versus when there's the potential for steady awareness to just meet what's happening with an openness that allows for the arising of empathy and wisdom and compassion. This is really what we can learn, what we can practice, what we can work with here on this retreat.

The Dalai Lama, as you know, is meant to be the incarnation of compassion. So how does he speak about how compassion develops in our mind stream?

How does it strengthen? The Dalai Lama says it's from deep insight into what suffering is—deep insight, which arises by opening to, by being present with our own experience. Where else can we start? And through this openness, which is precisely what we're practicing here, through this openness to our own experience, the compassion strengthens into a sense of empathy, connectedness with other beings.

Have you noticed, let's say if you're going through something difficult—whether you're ill or perhaps going through a relationship crisis or just some difficult emotional or physical experience—and you have different friends or people who come to try to comfort you or help? We can feel the difference. There's someone who wants to help genuinely, but actually in themselves there isn't the ease. In that moment, awareness can't simply be with the pain in themselves. So the helping often takes the form of "you could do this to fix it, you could do that to fix it, you could do this other thing." And it's well-meant, but it doesn't have the same sense. It just doesn't feel quite like the same kind of compassion as when someone else sits down and they can just be there with you. It's not saying "oh, I know" or anything in particular, but they can just be there. The heart, the mind, the awareness can simply flow into that pain, whatever it's engendering in our own mindstream at that moment. And it feels so different. That's the sense of empathy, the sense of connectedness with other beings in terms of compassionate action, compassionate presence with suffering.

And so here, and through our lives, this is really the field where we learn that. As the Dalai Lama said, we're exploring for ourselves our own experience without judgment. This is exactly what we've been saying—just let the awareness come into the whole process and watch what happens when we come face to face with a difficult situation.

That's why, on retreat anyway, the difficult times are so important. We always say that, and people think, "Yeah, right, you just say that to shut us up and keep us here." But they're really, truly important. We don't feel like we're being totally mindful because we think if we were totally mindful, it would all clear up, don't we? Even though we've said it a million times, don't you really think if you're doing it right, this difficult thing is going to clear up? And it doesn't. And you go through a whole sitting or a whole day and you're in and out—there's awareness and then you're lost in aversion or fear, awareness and lost in it. You think, "What's the point of this?"

But then the next day, or two hours later, or the week later, a similar kind of thing starts, and suddenly the mind is just there, touching it, open to it. The whole experience is still unpleasant, but the insight of what's really going on arises out of it. And it's a completely different, freeing experience. Out of that comes compassion or joy or love, a kind of understanding we can't get except through the steady experience of awareness.

So in some ways, we could think of it this way—this is a little too simplistic, but you can consider it like this: whatever's arising right now in your experience, beautiful or difficult (and we'll stick with the difficult ones since we don't complain about the beautiful ones, although we do get caught in wanting), whatever's arising right now, or yesterday, or in the next moment, it's the result of all the previous causes and conditions coming together. *Yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be right now. In this moment, it can't be any different. So thinking "it's my fault, it's wrong," and all of that—we do that, but it's useless. It can't be any different. That's like past karma.

But how in this moment awareness, our mind, is meeting this moment—that's the creation of present-moment karma, of present-moment action. So the most confusing or horrific or boring or difficult stuff could be going on over and over. Yet every moment that there's that willingness to just meet it with clear awareness—even if you can't quite do it, but there's the willingness, or just to remember, "Okay, awareness can be kind. What's going on? I know this pain, this aversion. I can't do it. This is one big mess"—one big mess feels like this. In that moment, that's a cultivation, a development of compassion. It's how we're meeting the moment that these wholesome qualities are developed—and also the unwholesome ones. If you're meeting the moment with a hammer, if you're meeting the moment totally believing judgment and blame, then that's what's being cultivated. But as soon as you see that with kindness, you're back in a moment of compassion.

So it's always available. And whether it's difficult or whether it's beautiful, this is how we're cultivating compassion. And it's really powerful. We don't see it moment to moment until suddenly something that we've just been struggling against or fighting with or that seems utterly unbearable—suddenly the perspective shifts. Because we're able to just touch it rather than trying to run away from it.

So we start where we are. But it's really scary sometimes, isn't it? This isn't what I wanted to spend my time with. Or where I am is too mundane—that's another way you can get on yourself. I don't have big enough suffering. Does anyone here think they don't have big enough suffering? But it doesn't matter what it is. It's just the habits in the mind. We start where we are.

And it's hard because of the habits. I don't know about you, but I really see, as I said before, that the general habit to difficulty is aversion. It's as if we trust aversion and fear and anger to protect us. It feels right. We should stay separate from difficult and scary things. Of course, it's easier to believe that if it's someone out there. But that same

habit of mine comes inside. So there's a pain or there's an unpleasant situation—better to stay separate from it. And all our strategies are like, how can I somehow hold myself separate?

But when there's anger, ill will in the mind, we can't see clearly. This is from the Buddha: "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, dislike, aversion, and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good or the good of others or the good of both."

So even when we're angry but trying to have good intentions, you can't see clearly your own good or the good of others. Yet somehow many of us have been, you know, raised and trained to believe that this is what's going to protect us from pain. We don't really trust the soft, kind awareness, the willingness to just be steadily with whatever's arising.

The Dalai Lama was asked one time about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society. He said, "Perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling it and reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger."

So this is a question from Joko Beck, a simple way to just ask yourself when we're all caught up, when we can feel we're caught in some difficult situation: Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?

I think it's a great question. Some of you are trying to analyze and see clearly and note it and get it all straight—but what's the motivation? Get the heck rid of it. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Can you just hear the ease, the kindness, that lets awareness come into that and see the whole thing in a different way?

The wisdom, the compassion, the clear seeing—that's really natural. All we need to do is set up the conditions for it to arise. The aversion and the hatred—it's nature, but it's not our natural being. It's not our natural mind.

Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa, Nobel Peace Prize winner and one of the architects of the whole reconciliation process after apartheid came to an end—I heard him on the radio once. He was in Boston, talking to a group of young men, probably

young adolescent men from some of the poorer sections of Boston. They were saying to him, "We live in the middle of a culture of violence. What can we do? How can we learn to love? We have to protect ourselves."

And Desmond Tutu said, "We learn to hate. It's not natural. We've learned how to hate."

The students said, "Well, what can we do?"

There's nothing we can do. We're in the middle of this culture of violence. And Bishop Tutu said—you could hear it on the radio, but you could hear that he was looking at each person very directly—and he said, "You. You. You. You can make a difference. One person can make a big difference. Start with you."

That's what we're each doing here—starting with us. Just beginning to explore, to see if it makes any sense that we learn to hate, that it's not necessary, that it doesn't have to be this way.

One of the other ways that aversion manifests—this trying to keep ourselves separate from experience—shows up particularly on retreat, though it's present in our lives too. So many of you have mentioned it already. It's this particular form of delusion, this confusion: aversion that manifests as self-judgment. A few of you have noticed the kind of self-judgment that comes up. Do you recognize that it's a kind of self-hatred, self-doubt, arising when we feel dissatisfied with what's happening?

Have you ever noticed how sometimes the thoughts of self-judgment masquerade as wisdom? "Well, this isn't right. This isn't going right. I should have more moments of clarity. This painful thing shouldn't be happening. It's happening because I'm not a good enough yogi. It's happening because I took that nap today. It's happening because I didn't take that nap today. It's happening because I ate too much food. I'm just investigating. I'm just seeing." But we're not really getting there because, bottom line, "I'm just no good. I'm hopeless."

It masquerades as wisdom. We don't see the aversion. But the whole function of it is trying to hold ourselves separate from some experience we're perceiving as unpleasant, as not good enough. Sometimes it might just be the self-hatred itself. But that's another aspect I wanted to point out.

See if you can start to notice this, continue to notice it. We can't do it only through will. But we can start to notice. We've all been practicing waking up and noticing we're not aware—okay. But also noticing, if you can, the times when we think we're aware,

we're sort of aware, we're pretty sure we're aware of what's happening—but there's still this feeling of disconnect. You feel like you're not quite landing with your awareness of what's happening. You're disconnected or confused.

I've noticed in myself, both on retreat and in daily life—sometimes in daily life it can go on longer—when I start to notice there's a feeling of alienation or disconnection, disconnected from myself, not connected with others, no empathy. I don't really know what's going on, but it's just somehow off. Do you know the sense I mean at all? Sometimes I don't know if I'm communicating at all.

When I finally notice this—after trying to figure it out and all the aversion masquerading as wisdom—I'll suddenly realize: oh, something's going on that the mind is resisting just opening into. We don't even know what it is sometimes. So I'll just stop and ask, "What's happening?" I let my attention, my awareness, just pour through my body like syrup and simply inquire, "What's happening?" Not trying to figure it out, but just landing here.

I may not get a verbal answer, but almost always I'll feel some tension, some tightness. I would say just about always, once I recognize that's happening and I simply ask, "What's happening now?"—there's something unpleasant or scary or just something I don't want to be with.

And in the being with it is the relief. Again, the empathy, the connectedness, the wholeness. Trying to hold ourselves separate from what's happening—which is impossible anyway—is the setup for separation and delusion.

Whatever it might be, even though you feel the pain, the sorrow, the grief, the fear, the sadness more fully, it's actually less suffering. There's more a sense of wholeness, of being alive. Again, a tenderness for life, a tenderness for being—including oneself, believe it or not. That isn't possible when we're trying to hold ourselves separate.

So we start where we are. Whatever we're experiencing here in our life—that's where we start. Just to touch this difficult experience: the aversion, the physical discomfort, the fear, the loneliness. We don't even know what it is sometimes.

Just to touch it with kind awareness. And then the next moment, and the next moment. Having the trust that the wisdom and compassion will naturally strengthen from this. Of course, you have to try it—you don't trust it until you see it. But do notice when it happens.

And once we touch a difficult situation, when there's wisdom present, the response we make can be much more appropriate. Because as the Buddha said, our eyes aren't clouded by ill will and aversion. We can recognize our own good, or the good of another, more accurately.

I'll tell a personal story. Quite some years ago, over twenty years ago, I developed a physical condition, an autoimmune condition. It's basically fine now—that's why I sit in a chair—but when it was developing, the symptoms were much stronger than they are now. It took a long time for any doctor to figure out what it was. There was a lot of pain and stiffness, much more intense than what I experience today.

And so, just the normal stuff that one goes through: the fear in the mind, the resistance to unpleasant sensations. One thing I really learned was when the mind would start going, "You're never going to be able to take a walk. You're never going to be able to do this or that." I was so grateful for awareness practice, because that mind would start up, and I'd see it and say, "I have no idea. I don't need to go there. That's just fear." I really could do that with thoughts about future stuff—that was just unknown.

But learning to just be with the physical experience was harder. It wasn't excruciating pain, which is a whole other thing, but a kind of heaviness, a stiffness, pain that came and went a lot of the time. And when it's frequent, that kind of dull background discomfort, it's almost easier to pretend, "No, I'm just balanced with this. It's there in the background, we're present, it's all okay."

After some time, people were saying—cold really affects me—"You have to leave here, you have to go live in Arizona, you have to stop doing any kind of work." I was thinking I was going to go to Arizona and live in a corner and never do anything.

And I gradually realized there was quite some fear and sadness, but actually aversion towards my body. The body was letting me down. It wasn't supposed to do this. And it doesn't seem to matter what age we're at. I'm sure I was still feeling, "No, it's not supposed to do this. Not yet. Not till I'm ninety-five." But that was subterranean, not quite in awareness.

Then at some point, something happened, and I recognized that sense of trying to hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience. I didn't have that quotation from Joko Beck yet, but it was the same idea, this kind of compassion. First, compassion for the body, almost as if it was a separate being. I thought, "If someone sitting next to me—if their body was doing this, would I hate them?" No, you'd feel, "Oh, that's really hard." So I came back and could feel some compassion for the body.

And then that sense from Joko Beck: well, can I just let myself rest in this unpleasant experience? And I started to meet the sensations just as they were, with kindness. Not every moment, but it was a major shift from trying to hold myself separate while pretending I wasn't—which meditators, we get really good at that.

So just really dying into it with awareness, with kindness, without any sense that this was going to make it go away, or what healing meant, or whatever. Just being with it, being with it.

And I really felt like that changed everything. I don't mean changing the disease or healing the body, but it changed everything in my mind. From a sense of fear and victimization—not being able to decide how to live my life—to being able to say, with quite some clarity, "I can do this. I can't do that."

The body can handle this. It can't handle that. But I don't need to go live in Arizona. I can wear gloves. I can turn up the heat. I don't have to just sit in a room and never do anything. I think I'll go with my friends to India and travel around—which I did. I was with friends who could take care of me. It's true, sometimes I couldn't get up into the rickshaws—they were too high—so they pushed me. It was okay.

Because of that clarity, that steady, kind awareness that let me simply be with the unpleasantness over time, wisdom comes in. You see the whole situation much more clearly, and you can make decisions based not on fear and not on resistance either, but on the clear information that awareness lets us see. I've always been really grateful for that.

So we start where we are. Whatever's arising—what are the demons that are arising for you here on this retreat? Someone phrased it that way today, but it's a common phrasing. That's where we start. Can I find it in myself to rest, just to simply rest in this difficult and unpleasant situation? And if you can't, then you just rest in that—in the "I can't." That's the next arising thing. Just one moment at a time.

I really like the story of St. Francis. Maybe you know his story. It was just one moment at a time. We never know how it's going to go for us. He wasn't born St. Francis of Assisi, right? He was born to a rich merchant. Apparently as a young man he was quite wild, ran with a wild crowd. He was kind of the leader of it—the rich young guys drinking and carousing. And at that time, there was a house where people with leprosy lived below the town. Of course, they kept people with leprosy away. People were afraid of that. If someone with leprosy—now it's called Hansen's disease—was out walking, they had to ring a bell so that everyone could hear and stay away, because there was so much fear.

Francis was very afraid. That was something he was deeply afraid of—being even close to a person with leprosy.

So at least in the biographies I've read, one of the key moments of his life, this young dissolute man, was when he was passing on his horse someone with leprosy. The tendency—he wanted to just throw down some money, because he had money. But either that time or another time, he got off his horse. He stopped. He gave the money hand to hand. He shook the man's hand, he hugged him. And it was like this direct coming into contact with his fear, with his repugnance, that changed his life. Slowly, from that one thing after another after another, he turned into St. Francis.

We start where we are. Who knows? Maybe someone here is the next St. Francis, in whatever tradition. We start where we are, whatever's going on. Can we find it in ourselves to bring this kind awareness and to see how wisdom and compassion are the natural response of the purified mind and heart? And when you forget it—never mind. There's again another moment.

Thank you for listening.

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness. That is metta.

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. That is compassion.

May all beings never be separate from the highest happiness, which is free from suffering. That is mudita.

May all beings be free from delusion, attachment, and hatred, and abide in equanimity and peace.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 111

Awareness of Intentions and Purifying Aspirations

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses the perennial question practitioners face: how do we maintain awareness when we leave retreat and return to the complexities of daily life? She offers a compelling answer through the lens of intention (cetanā) and the cultivation of wise aspiration.

Wilson draws on the Buddha's teaching that "kamma is intention," explaining how the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of our actions originates in the mind rather than in outcomes or circumstances. She illustrates this with the sutta story of a blind arahant inadvertently treading on ants, demonstrating that without harmful intention, there is no unwholesome action. The second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path—sammāsaṅkappa (right intention)—becomes central as she describes how steady awareness naturally transforms intentions of greed into renunciation and generosity, ill will into mettā, and cruelty into compassion.

Through vivid personal examples—from the pull to grab a book while dressing to restlessly changing radio stations—Wilson shows how watching small intentions without judgment reveals the nature of taṇhā (craving) and opens space for wisdom and choice. She emphasizes that connecting with our deepest aspiration provides the energy and commitment needed for this moment-to-moment practice. Drawing on teachings from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and the example of civil rights leader John Lewis's commitment to nonviolence, she demonstrates how clear aspiration aligned with awareness can transform not only individual consciousness but also our capacity to meet the world with compassion and wisdom.

The basic theme I want to talk about tonight is something I began a bit the other night about awareness of intentions and purifying aspiration. But really, it's a partial answer—one of many answers—to the question that comes up at this point in any retreat: How do we keep it up, even if we could ever be aware in the first place? How do we keep it up when we leave, when we're faced with all the complexities of life? There are so many pulls on our time and our interest, and we see how hard it is to really be aware with intelligent awareness just standing in the food line, never mind when we've got so much going on at work or at home.

There's no magic answer. You know that now already. But what I want to talk about in general is awareness of intention. As Steve was talking last night when he discussed the cultivation of the paramis, those wholesome qualities, it's another way of looking at the fact that awareness practice—bringing awareness into our life, purifying the heart and mind through the wisdom that arises from awareness—is about transforming our consciousness in all aspects of our life. Every activity can partake of this purification, of this cultivation of wisdom. There's nothing that needs to be outside.

As Steve said, the three pillars of Buddha Dharma are often talked about as dana (generosity), sila (ethical, non-harming conduct), and bhavana (mental cultivation). And that covers all of our life: our thought, our speech, our actions. There's nothing so mundane that it can't play a part in cultivating awareness, wisdom, and purifying our mind and heart. There's nothing so huge and gross and difficult or fantastic that we have to put it aside and say, "No, awareness can't handle this. This is too much, or this is too painful, or this has too much to do with me." There are times awareness isn't strong enough to meet it, sure, of course. But to say that anything's outside—okay, awareness, dukkha, impermanence, anatta—it applies to everything but not this? There's no "not this." But we might notice which are the things we put in that category, because that's where we're stuck.

So how do we keep it up? How do we keep going? How do we transform our lives? The most important thing is that the cultivation of awareness, the cultivation of mindfulness, the continuing willingness to explore this and let our minds and hearts be purified and cultivate wisdom—the most essential thing to make this possible is that we have to want to. Not just, "Oh, this is a good idea," which we all do. Steve was talking about the Dharma binging—it's a funny way of putting it. But we all leave retreat saying, "Yes, I'm going to sit." Of course we mean that on a certain level.

But really, it's about recognizing the difference in your own mind and heart between when awareness is present and when it's not—recognizing the quality of your responses to yourself and life when there's awareness versus when there's not. It has to be something that you recognize for yourself as making a difference. And it has to be not just a good idea, but something you really feel in your heart, in your mind, in whatever way you put it: this is what's most important in my life.

No one can do that for us. I'm not saying you should do it. I care just in that I want people to be awake and happy, but I'm not saying you should do it. I'm saying nothing else can do it for us. And then it's hard as hell, even once we have that. But without it, we kind of drift. We do it a little bit, we don't do it a little bit, we forget why we're doing it.

Haven't those of you who've been practicing a lot hit times where you've been going along really into practice—whether it's your formal sitting or paying attention—and then suddenly, I don't know, it kind of peters out? We got too busy. Or actually, things were going so well we didn't really need it anymore. Have you noticed that one? Luckily, something always happens sooner or later. Ruth Dennison, who's quite elderly now but is one of the first women teachers in Theravada in the West, one of Goenka's dharma sisters, has a very funny way of putting things. She said, "You know, in samsara, there's always a little leak in the canoe." It'll show up. That can wake us up again.

But what I want to talk about is this: even tuning into, whether you're on a retreat or when you leave a retreat, when our awareness has been more purified—we're more tuned into it and we can really feel, yes, whatever way you phrase it yourself, this is really most important. We mean it. And we leave. But like everything, it's not a one-time motivation. It's not a one-time thought. We can't just have the thought and then it runs in the background for the rest of our life. Have you noticed that? The mind is constantly changing. Constantly changing. And the seed of all of our action, as I said last night, the seed of all of our speech, arises in the mind. It's all in the mind.

So it's not a one-time decision. Yes, now I'm committing to making the cultivation of awareness the centerpiece of my life. I can mean that. I can say that a million times. But it will express itself—or not—in the moment-to-moment choices and decisions we make in the mind. How many do we make in a day, through our whole life?

So we start to get interested. None of this is from judging, but from interest. If you leave here and you say, "Yes, I really want to see how I can continue to wake up with awareness, to bring awareness in even to the most mundane," you begin to get interested in noticing your mind, watching your mind, observing the moment-to-moment choices. We make many of them—really small, mundane choices. I don't mean every single one; don't make yourself crazy. But the choices we make... and you might notice: when do we choose awareness? And when—and why—do we choose not-awareness, which we do sometimes.

Getting interested in this really starts to turn our attention even more inward toward the mind, to see that all of these little choices, and the big choices we make—for awareness, for speech, for action, the big choices in our life, the little ones like what to have for dinner, everything—all motivation comes from within. All choices and actions originate with the mind.

The two aspects of this I want to touch on tonight are: the big one, the overarching sense of aspiration and motivation when I talk about purifying aspiration; and the practice of looking for ourselves, more than once, but really deeply and really honestly, to

see what is really important in my life. What is the most important thing in my life? This is not just something superficial, but really a deep inner looking. And then how we use that deep personal understanding to support our moment-to-moment awareness practice—how we use that reference point of our conscious connection (which we have to remind ourselves of) to what's truly, deeply important in our life, and how that can support us in the moment-to-moment motivations, the moment-to-moment intentions that run the way we live.

So that's the macro sense of motivation and intention in the mind, and the micro moment-to-moment ones, as I want to talk about it.

Do you remember two nights ago when I talked about compassion as first manifesting as a motivation and intention in the mind? It all blends together, I know. But I want to expand a bit. It came up in talking to someone today and made me think I wanted to say more about this.

Wise thought, wise intention—intention being that moment in the mind when all the energy in the mind coheres, comes together in that impulse, you could say, that "about to," the mental impulse that leads to even thought (though that's pretty subtle to see), but that leads to speech and action. I remember I talked about just waiting for the impulse to lift the teacup and exploring that. That moment, that little mind-moment of intention—*cetanā*, the word in Pali—arises together in each moment with all the different mental factors in the mind, which makes it wholesome or unwholesome.

This wise thought, wise intention—*sammā-saṅkappa* in Pali—is the second step of the Eightfold Path. Right understanding, right view, leads to how we think about the world. Right thought leads to right action. And that leads to the next factors, which have to do with action: right speech, right action, right livelihood. It's very sensible. It's just how it works, very natural.

But it's not often the way we may tend, without looking, to think about or relate to how we assess the usefulness, the wholesomeness, or the unwholesomeness of our actions—that it all arises in the mind. The Buddha said, "I say *kamma*"—which just means action—"is intention."

But when we look at our actions in the world, there is the internal mental intention that gives rise to them. That's usually the thing we notice the least; it's the most subtle. Then there are the circumstances that may lead us to make a particular action, to make the choice. And then there's the outcome, if it's a particular action we choose. And don't we generally tend to judge or evaluate by the outcome? You know, how somebody receives it, how it works out. But as I said, that's the one that's the least in our control—

yet that's the one we take responsibility for. And the circumstances around it—sometimes we're aware of them, which could lead us to a more appropriate action when we know we're not colored by our own self-interest. Sometimes we don't see them clearly.

The intention, though, is actually the heart of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness. Let me give you a simple example from the suttas, from the Buddha. There was a monk, a *bhikkhu*, who was believed to be completely awakened, which would mean he would never act—he wouldn't even be capable of acting—from hatred or aversion or harming beings or greed. Wouldn't it be nice just to think about that? That it's not even going to happen that you say something from aversion or act from greed.

It's just not going to arise in the mind. Wouldn't that be lovely? Well, that's a possibility, even in moments.

Anyway, so this monk was walking back and forth in the woods, in the forest, doing his walking meditation. He was blind—I forget if I mentioned that. And some of the other monks saw him walking back and forth, and he was treading on ants, on a swarm of ants that he didn't see. He was walking back and forth and killing them.

So the bhikkhus go rushing to the Buddha, saying, "He's supposed to be an arahant! He's killing ants. He can't be." And if you read the suttas, there are many places where the rules the Buddha made for the monks and nuns come from people coming to him saying, "Oh, he's doing that, and she's doing this." You can kind of see—same kind of minds, you know. Not so different. Just because you put on robes doesn't mean you've arrived. It means you're cultivating, but it doesn't mean you're there yet.

So this is one of the places where the Buddha enunciated this teaching. He said there was no way the blind monk could have known the ants were there until he was told. There was absolutely no intention in his mind of ill will or harmfulness or even negligence, even delusion. Because sometimes we can harm beings from delusion, just not taking care to pay attention. Have you ever noticed that? I've noticed if I go in the shower without my glasses on and I see a little dark speck, I can't tell. I think it's just a bit of fluff. I have to actually go really close and look and see, "Oh, it's an ant." And if there's just that "oh, don't bother" attitude—that's delusion. Or just not even noticing that you're not bothering—that's delusion too. That's an intention of delusion.

So the blind monk didn't have that because he couldn't know. And the Buddha said there's no blame in that. There's no unwholesome action in that. Interesting, isn't it? Where we would say killing is bad, full stop. Now, once he knows there are ants there, if he were to say, "Well, I can't see them so it doesn't matter," that's a completely different intention in the mind. Can you feel the difference? And so that's really the seed.

Many of you have been noticing how much of delusion is assumption—how we're all assuming all this stuff about other people. A lot of people have mentioned it. And we do the same thing with intentions. We can never really know another person's intention, can we? So we judge by the action or we judge by how it makes us feel. But we don't know. I mean, half the time we don't know our own intentions, do we? And the same action can come from many different intentions, motivations in the mind.

The example I always give, because I see it easily in myself: there's somebody you know well and care for who has a particular behavior pattern. Maybe it bothers you, but you can also see it's causing them suffering or alienating people. And your intention, as you think about it away from the situation, is that you want to somehow share this with them. Your motivation as you're contemplating it is actually kindness, right? You're already laughing because you can see all the different ways that can manifest in actuality.

There is the possibility that one could really get in touch with the sense of kindness, the wanting to help. Get in touch with mettā for the person. Check the circumstances—you know, like you don't come in when they've just gotten back from work completely stressed out, their boss was really pounding them, and they feel horrible. And you sit down and say, "Let me give you some feedback, you know, to really help you in the world." Complete obliviousness to their state and the circumstances. So there's a kind of delusion there. It's not the pure mettā intention.

Or you want to say it, and you're waiting for the right moment. But then they do the behavior and it really ticks you off, and you decide now's the right moment. "I've been wanting to tell you this for a while." You get the drift. So the same physical words could come with so many different intentions.

And then, even if you do it with the clearest, most kind intention, how the other person receives it is completely out of our control. Have you ever noticed that?

And can we let that be without having to interpret it all?

So this is where awareness of intention is both a subtle practice and a fact of our own experience. We're not working on awareness of other people's intentions—let's just be aware of our own, seeing when we can be clear about it when we can. And sometimes it's very complex. I'm not saying otherwise. But to begin and continue to bring this into our daily life can be hugely transformative.

Don't make up a big expectation, but just as we start to notice intentions before we speak, before we act, you see that when we notice it, that awareness can really give us a moment of choice. Even in little things, simple little things—not like something horribly bad, but like getting in the car.

Sometimes when I get in the car and I'm driving forty-five minutes here—anywhere is forty-five minutes from here—I may be listening to a particular song, or I may be listening to something specific, a dharma talk or something, and that's fine. Other times I may find myself appreciating the silence, and then suddenly I see my hand going out to turn on the radio. And I pause, curious. Why? Not that I should or shouldn't, but kind of interested. I tune in, and I can see just this restlessness in my mind. I need to do that. I come back, and it's like, I appreciate this. Next moment, turn on the radio. Then I actually turn it on. Then I start noticing—because there's never anything I want to hear on the radio. So the restlessness moved out, turned on the radio. I last ten seconds. Ten seconds! I start flipping the channels. You put it on that one that scans, and then you can press it. I'm practically driving off the road out of restlessness. I'm exaggerating a little.

But watching this without any "you should" or "you shouldn't"—just watching the intention and where it leads—it really gives us so much information. This is exactly our practice here. But when we come in and say, "No, I shouldn't listen to the radio," and we get tight, we're making the action wrong, but we're not learning anything. Watching the intention, I learn a lot. And I get more and more tuned into the restlessness. So I do that much less. It lasts much less long because I'm noticing, "Oh, that restlessness. And this is increasing the restlessness. It's not so helpful. It's not actually pleasant. I don't need to do that."

And that's wisdom, making that choice. That's not me saying good or bad. Very different.

So the wisdom, tuning in—and this is where the second step of the Eightfold Path, wise intention, right intention, not just any old intention, but the ones that are onward-leading to awakening. And what's so cool about the way it works is what we've been saying all along: simply through steady awareness, noticing what's what, the unwise, the suffering intentions, through wisdom, naturally shift.

The Buddha talks about the unwise intentions of greed, of ill will, and of cruelty. Through awareness, the natural understanding that arises from awareness, the intentions of greed naturally start to transform to renunciation—the letting go of attachment

—and to generosity, as Steve talked about last night. Different from "I have to be a generous person." That's a kind of forcing. But naturally: "Oh, it feels better," as he was saying.

Ill will—thinking bad about people, thinking bad about oneself—naturally begins to transform to mettā, to friendliness, to goodwill. And cruelty, which can just be cruel thoughts—it doesn't mean we're out doing anything—transforms to compassion, the ability to just be with suffering, as I talked about the other night.

And this process is natural and normal. It's not like only if you're some super-fine being. This is the natural effect of awareness seeing what's what.

How the suffering intentions work in our mind, what their effect is, and what the effect is of wholesome ones.

A friend of ours, Guy Armstrong, who's also a teacher of this, likes to say that when he looks at how this works—when he sees what we've been saying all along, that with a steadiness of awareness watching yourself do unskillful things, the wisdom that comes naturally starts to transform our habits to wholesomeness—that the wholesomeness, the purity, is more our natural state. He says that's what really gives him heart in the beneficent nature of reality. That he can really trust that.

It may not seem like it. When we look out at the world, that may not be the first thing that hits when you read the news. But when we look inward at our mind, we can really start to see that. But again, it's not a one-time thing—okay, now I see it, the habit's changed.

There's a very famous quotation from the Buddha in this regard, in the sutta where he's talking about the cultivation of wise thought, wise intention. He said, just looking at his own mind before he became the awakened Buddha, he saw that whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind.

Scary, isn't it? If we're not bringing in awareness. But it's just nature, it's just obvious. The natural causes and conditions—whatever habits our mind habitually thinks about, habitually goes in, that's the inclination. That's how we'll respond habitually when there's not awareness. Awareness gives us a moment of choice. That's why it's so powerful, so ultimately transforming.

I want to read you something that speaks to this—this willingness to look and work at it over and over and over. This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and he's quoting a Buddha story. The Buddha, he says, knew a very miserly person who was unable to give anything away. So this man went to see the Buddha and said, "It is impossible for me to be generous. What should I do?"

And so the Buddha says, "Imagine that your right hand is yourself and your left hand is a poor, unhappy person. So give from your right hand to your left hand some old food which you don't like or need. Try hard to get used to this. Do this until you no longer feel miserly."

We just practice wholesome intention however we can. So the man began the practice, but he was so miserly that at first he could only give away a few leftovers or food he did not like from his right hand to his left hand. Gradually, however, he acquired the habit, and the day arrived when he did not feel quite so miserly. So then he went to the Buddha and said, "Now when I give food from my right to my left hand, I don't feel so miserly."

And the Buddha said, "Good. Now with your right hand, which you take to be yourself, give some gold, silk, or fine clothes to your left hand, which you imagine to be a beggar. Try to see if you can give open-handedly."

The man kept doing it, doing it, until of course he became a great benefactor to the poor, so generous, and became an arhat. So these stories always end that way. But look where we started. We start where we are. This noticing of the habits in our mind, in reference to what's really important—that's what can help us keep tuning in, what can help us keep practicing.

So this is when thoughts matter. And it's a training. It's a training.

This willingness to just look at the small moments of intention—you don't start with having to notice every single one. And it's not that now you have to make the totally right choice with all your actions. But just starting to look at what we do in small moments. A lot of insight can come, a lot of this shifting from unwise to wise intention.

So I'll give another very simple example. It almost sounds so silly to even mention it, but it happened to me the other morning. This is the kind of little nothing moment in our days where awareness can really show us how it can transform our lives—our thoughts, our intentions—by the choices we make.

This is so small, but I was getting dressed the other morning and I had a little book on my night table, some mystery novel. I was getting dressed, I had my time, and the mind just looked at the book and said, "Oh, I just want to have a look in that book." I could really feel the craving. I didn't even know what it was about. I didn't really want to look at it—there was nothing in the book I wanted to see—but the craving was really strong. I wanted to stop in the middle of what I was doing and pick up that stupid book and start reading it. I'm getting dressed in the morning!

I just let my awareness watch all of that. In the moment I could see it, the choice arose: let's just stay with the awareness. I made the choice—it's all really fast—stay with the awareness, don't act on the wanting. But not shut the whole thing down and say, "Oh, this is bad, just get dressed." I just watched the whole process.

I could see how that tanha, the wanting, can be so strong about something completely inane. I'm sitting there going, "No, I really want to look at that book." And I kept thinking, "I really want to look at that book." And I was just watching all of this. Maybe a minute, two minutes. Then at some point, the craving just completely died away—completely gone. I kept getting dressed. I noticed the craving was completely gone. And the sense of spaciousness, peace, and ease that's available in that moment of renunciation, in that moment when the mind lets go of the attachment to whatever—it doesn't matter to the whatever. Awareness is all that made that possible.

It seems like such a little moment. We wait for the big moments, for the big insights, but these little moments are available all the time. These are moments where the habit of craving is being naturally transformed. It will come up again in the next two minutes—don't get me wrong—but it's being naturally transformed. The habit is usually that craving arises and we just act on it without even noticing. That's the habit that runs our lives.

If we're stuck in "this is good, this is bad," that's not going to be enough to keep us looking. That just feeds our ill will, really. This is where it's so helpful to get a sense, for yourself, of your larger aspiration, your deeper sense of what's really important in your life. This is a place where you look at it honestly, but not with self-deprecation. Say it comes up: "I really want to cultivate bodhicitta, the intention to awaken to save all beings." And then your mind goes, "Who do you think you are?" Don't believe that second thought. It's not about who I am—it's about what's the intention, what's the deeper aspiration that guides my life? This is what's going to give us the strength to actually keep bringing in awareness.

I'll read you this little story from Lama Surya Das. He was talking about his teacher who died some years ago, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. I only met him very briefly, but from all accounts, he was quite an amazingly awakened Tibetan master. He was born in Tibet, lived in Tibet and India, engaged in deep intensive practice in caves, and wandered for years as an unknown beggar in India—a kind of modern-day Milarepa. The real deal, really filled with love. A very, very deep teacher.

Surya Das was talking about the first time Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was in France—there are quite a few Tibetan monasteries in France. He had grown up in the Himalayas and had never seen a beach. Some of his students took him to one of the beaches in France. He'd never seen a beach, if you can imagine. When he came back to the monastery, he began to give teachings about the first time he'd seen the beach and observed exactly what Westerners do there. He was giving regular teachings, and then all of a sudden he started talking about the beach, about how he and Atulku had gone to the very edge of the ocean. First he said, "It's so big"—in childlike awe. Can you imagine never seeing the ocean?

But then he started excitedly describing what he had seen. There were these people there, and instead of sitting or meditating or doing yoga, these people were just lying there, almost naked, doing nothing. And then when they were tired of lying there, instead of doing something, they just turned over. And then they lay there again for another few hours.

Kempo was truly, genuinely perplexed. He said, "Why were they doing that?" over and over. He couldn't understand it, but he had so much compassion for them. He said, "How could they waste their precious human existence?" He continued, "This lifetime is so short, so tenuous, so precious, so valuable, so necessary—a life not to be squandered but to be used impeccably, usefully, for the benefit and welfare of all. A life to be used for the future, for the next life—not just to lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard."

Kempo was sincerely impassioned now. "I just wanted to go wake them up," he said. "There was a big white chair about fifty meters away, obviously the lifeguard's post, but there were two young people sitting there, so I couldn't go up. But I wanted to badly, because I wanted to climb up there and announce to everybody that it was time to wake up."

You get the sense of the deep compassion. It's not a "stupid people" kind of judgment. It's more like, "Wow, this precious human life"—from somebody who has really dedicated his life in that way.

I share this story not to make us feel bad about ourselves, but to offer an example of that possibility of tuning in. For us, not with judgment, but tuning in with this deep sense of possibility—what is really important in my life? That's up to each one of us. I'm not saying what it should be. I have my opinions, but I'm not prescribing anything. The invitation is simply to really tune into it. It's a powerful force.

What I want to talk about, mostly in terms of our dharma practice, is this sense of consciously connecting within yourself with what your deepest aspiration is. Of course it may change over time—that's fine. That's what I mean when I say we keep purifying, we keep checking in, we keep seeing what's really important. And this aspiration serves as a guideline, a strengthening, a clarifying force in terms of the smaller moments of intention, of motivation, when we have to make decisions.

It's described in some of the Buddhist commentaries that when we have a sense of our overarching motivation or aspiration—not the moment-to-moment intention but the deeper aspiration—it serves the function of collecting our dispersed energy. It helps us focus and actually accomplish things in our life, supported by reference to this deepest motivation, that we didn't even think we could do.

Without that, we tend to just go through life responding to conditions by reaction or from habit—"Oh yeah, this will be good for now"—but we're not really looking at the big picture. We can drift through life. Not being bad—we can drift through life being good people—but without a sense of a greater aspiration that can truly guide us in our choices, helping us align rather than just drift.

This is something we all know in the ways we make choices. If you have children, if you have family members you need to be responsible for, to take care of, don't you make choices in your life? You give up some things, you choose not to do certain things, you choose to do other things that may be unpleasant or not what you'd most want to be doing if you were just responding to that particular situation. But when you're making the choice in reference to "this is going to serve my child," you do it. And you do it more or less happily. We can actually bring in the compassion, the love, the wholesomeness, the generosity, and do this action that without that higher aspiration we might do out of aversion or resistance. Instead, we're doing it out of mettā. You get a sense of that. It gives us so much more strength and power to accomplish things.

We can apply this in ways that aren't particularly wholesome too, but it can give us enormous focused, collected energy when we have a higher aspiration.

So back to tennis. I was reading the autobiography of Andre Agassi, the great American tennis player. Sports are really a good way to examine qualities of mind, both wholesome and unwholesome. Agassi seemed to be quite honest in his autobiography about all the struggles he went through. He described what it takes for someone to play tennis at the highest level—and I'm sure this applies to any other sport and to many other pursuits as well. From the time he was really young, whether it was forced by his father or later when he chose it himself, almost everything he did—what he ate, how much he slept—had to be evaluated in terms of how it would help or hinder his tennis. They learn to calibrate everything. Once he got married and had kids, he'd have to think, "Can I go to the beach with the kids for an hour?"

Not if it's in the middle of a tournament. Even an hour at the beach would so unbalance his energy, so affect how he had to get it together to go play a match. He couldn't do it. And so for thirty-four years, that was his life. Everything was in service to playing the best tennis he could. That's amazing to think of. I don't want to examine what the motivations were, but that's an amazing quality of commitment and focus. So imagine if we bring that quality to awakening, or to serving all beings. What's possible for us? Then when we have to make decisions, we can refer to what's really important.

There was an interview many, many years ago I read with Aung San Suu Kyi. You're all aware of her story now. It was when she was still under house arrest and had been for quite some years. I don't remember if it was before or after her husband died, but anyway, it was during all the difficult times. And she said—I'm paraphrasing, I just remembered this in my mind—she said, "People think I'm so amazing, but I'm really nothing unusual at all. I never planned to be the icon of the Burmese democracy movement. All I ever do, if something needs to be done in the name of love, then I'll do it. That's all." Just from that clarity of what was most important to her—in the name of wisdom, in the name of love, then I'll do it. Not some other big thing.

Where our deepest motivation and aspiration takes us, we may not know. It's much more about our motivation than about specific outcomes, in terms of dharma practice, in terms of awareness practice. Yes, our aspiration can be to purify our heart and mind, or to cultivate compassion, bodhicitta, to wake up. But the form it's going to take, we don't know. So it's different from having the aspiration to earn a million dollars and really focusing on that and doing it, or like a tennis player where it's more about the outcome. Here it's really looking deeply at what's the guideline in your life. What's really important? And then realizing that it's a lifetime of moment after moment after moment of just bringing kind awareness to what it is we're doing.

From Dilgo Khyentse again: "The whole thrust of the Buddha's teaching is to master the mind. If you master the mind, you will have mastery over body and speech, and your own and others' suffering can only come to an end. But if the mind is left full of negative emotions, then however perfect the actions of your body and the words you speak might seem, you are far from the path."

And guess how mastery of mind is achieved? Through constant awareness of your mind, of your thoughts, and of your actions. Just cultivating this simple, steady awareness—what we've been doing here the whole week. Maintaining this mindfulness in the practices of tranquility and insight eventually will sustain the recognition of wisdom, even in the midst of ordinary activities and distractions. Mindfulness is thus the very basis, the cure for all samsaric afflictions.

So just this willingness to look deeply, to see what's really important for you. And if it is on the level of cultivating awareness, of cultivating freedom or compassion or something along those lines, then really trusting that awareness, that mindfulness, is the tool, is the key. Let that deeper aspiration fuel our willingness to choose awareness when we notice we might have a moment of choice.

This is how we purify our awareness over and over again, purify our aspiration over and over again. It is work. That's okay. It's at least a lifetime practice. That's okay.

This is Dilgo Khyentse again: "This time, do what is important." This time meaning this lifetime. This is really looking from the vast perspective. So he says, "Throughout our many lifetimes in the past, we have taken many different forms. We've been rich. We've been poor. We've been beaten by our enemies. We've lost everything. We have had all the pleasures of the gods."

We've been the victims of political oppression. We have suffered from diseases. And all of those experiences of happiness and suffering have brought us nothing. But now, in this present life, we have entered into the path of the Buddha. We've entered into a path of awakening. We have met learned and accomplished teachers. This time we can make such circumstances meaningful and do what is important.

If a merchant visiting an isle of jewels were to return empty-handed without his cargo of gems, he would be ashamed to show his face in public. It's the same for us, who at this very moment have such favorable conditions for the practice.

The Dharma has two aspects: exposition and practice. Exposition is only the work of the mouth, and many there are who do not practice the teachings explained. As the saying goes, many have heard the doctrine, but those who implement it are few. Even those who have practiced a little can get sidetracked and lost. So as far as the Dharma is

concerned, practice is more important than teaching and talking about it. The Dharma is something that we really have to do. But we only really have to do it this moment, this moment, this moment.

Returning consciously to clarify your aspiration brings energy, brings faith, brings the willingness to do, brings the trust that this is really what's most important to me. It makes it possible for us to hang in when times get really difficult.

I want to offer two examples—one a reading, one a reflection—about the potential for acting out of habit and drifting, even when we think we're good people, and then the potential when we have deeply internalized our deepest commitment.

A couple of years ago I spent the summer in Munich. After being there many years, I decided I wanted to visit Dachau, the concentration camp they made into a museum. I went one afternoon on the weekend, and I was really glad I went by myself because I could just be quiet and move through it at my own pace.

It had an effect on me different from what I might have expected. What I might have expected was just the horror of it. And there was that, of course. But more than that, it re-inspired me. It re-energized me to rededicate to practice—entrusting practice, entrusting awareness.

The museum was set up thoughtfully, with different rooms and placards describing various aspects of the people who were interned there: all the different races, people who were gay, people who were Roma, people from different countries, Jewish people—all different kinds of people. You got a sense of the vastness of all who were there, local people, people from far away. And then there were placards describing some of the guards, some of the people who lived in the nearby village, all different aspects of the situation.

Often when they would talk about something specific that happened, they would show the range of human responses. People who were interned in the camp who were really heroic, filled with compassion, helping each other. People in the camp who were just the opposite, turning on each other out of fear. Same with the guards. Same with local people. They would always show all different kinds of responses. Each placard would have a picture of someone as an example, so it made it real, made it personal.

I was also watching all the different visitors—people from all over the world, German people and Polish people and people from Japan—going through the museum. You could see people settling, the mind just settling. They'd go from room to room becoming

more and more attentive, more and more present. It wasn't like people were just chit-chatting, but it wasn't like they were just going, "Oh, horrible!" and running out. They weren't getting angry. It just hits you on a level.

What inspired me about practice was getting a sense of the vastness. You can't just say a few really evil people did this. So many people were involved. And I don't want to say this is just about Germany in World War II. We can look at how many places in the world just in the last two decades where one ethnic group turns on another ethnic group, one race turning on another race, neighbors turning on neighbors. This can happen anywhere. I don't even have to list all those places, but it's not about one country in one time period. It's about seeing: How can this happen?

And what made it personal was that I really saw—

It's mostly normal people, good people. And it's not like ten million people set out to say, "No, I'm going to slaughter the other ethnic group." It's not like in Rwanda, where the Tutsis and the Hutus made some big plan. How did all the good people get involved in that and act in that way?

And so I could only come back to my own mind, my own experience, seeing how we never know where our next step is going to go. No one in 1932 knew how things were going to end up in 1944 and 1945. Nobody could know that. And so we each make the little decisions that we make in life. If we don't know how our own minds work—and we can only know that from the steadiness of awareness—if I don't know how to be with fear, even a little fear, then if some difficult situation arises and I'm afraid to say something, I might just say, "Well, it's just easier not to do it." The fear runs the show. And it doesn't seem like a big decision in 1932 or whenever, but then it grows. It grows, and we just don't know how we're going to end up acting.

What we frequently think and ponder, that becomes the inclination of our mind. So if my tendency is to think, "That's too difficult of a situation, and it's not my business anyway"... And this could be anything—walking by, seeing two young kids start to fight on the sidewalk in New York. They could be dangerous. I don't know what's happening. They could be on drugs. I should just stay away. That's the right thing to do. And I can see I'm acting from fear. Just go. It's not a big deal. And it's not such a big deal. But our habits strengthen. Our habits strengthen.

When we just end up reacting in life, not knowing how our minds work, not knowing how to bring awareness to the unwholesome intentions... okay, but maybe I should say something. Maybe I should do something. I have no idea how I would act if I were in a situation like that. I've never been in one. I don't know. But all we can do is have

this willingness to bring awareness to our intentions here and now. The littlest ones can end up having a huge effect. Because we're just all people. All our minds work the same.

So that's one way this really re-motivated me, re-inspired me. Not to say, "Oh, the world is horrible and people are horrible. Those are horrible people." It's more like, whoa—this is where our human mind can go without wisdom. Without the ability to see, without the ability to be with what's unpleasant in my own mind and to act out of compassion, to act out of wisdom, not out of fear, for some greater purpose that I can tune into for myself. We still never know what's going to happen. That's all we can ever do.

So now I want to read another thing, which is kind of the reverse—not Buddhist, but again a sense of when someone has and keeps reconnecting with the really deep aspiration in their life. And it's, in this case, supported by other people sharing it, just like we talk about sangha here—the power that can have in one's life, to guide one's life.

This is a reading from the autobiography of John Lewis, who is a congressman from Georgia and has been for many years, but he was one of the original Freedom Riders from Nashville, as a student back in 1959 and 1960. He was one of the original group of young students who founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, called SNCC, which when it was founded was really based in Gandhian and Christian principles of nonviolence. They were very deeply committed to that.

In this passage, he's talking about his days then, about the principles of Gandhian nonviolence, which all their actions—the freedom rides, the sit-ins at cafeterias—all of their work was based in this very deep principle of nonviolence. They were just young students, and they were being trained by an African-American minister named Jim Lawson, who had been in India. He'd been a conscientious objector in the Korean War and had studied Gandhian Satyagraha, but was also a Christian minister.

So that's the background. This is John Lewis talking:

"One of the most fundamental principles of the Gandhian notion of Satyagraha, nonviolent action, is that it is not merely a technique of achieving specific goals."

It is not simply a means to attaining political independence or racial desegregation. It is not just a tool to achieve unity and freedom in the world around us. True satyagraha, as Gandhi taught it, is about a fundamental shift inside our own souls. It is rooted in the achievement of inner unity, of inner freedom, of inner certainty—a place

we find within ourselves, a calm, sure place. And once found, that place is not swayed or disturbed or affected by the thousands of details of the world around us that bombard us every day.

Then he speaks about suffering from this place. He says, "Suffering is nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering. This is a difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence."

"We are talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us."

And I have to say, this sounds exactly like what Dingo Rinpoche was saying about pure perception. I just want to note that. This is in the Christian context.

"It recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy. This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence."

"And it is a practice. It is a way of life. This is something Lawson stressed over and over again—that this is not just a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when needed. It is not something you turn on or off like a faucet. This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day. It shapes your response to a curt cashier in the grocery store, or a driver cutting you off in traffic, just as surely as it keeps you from striking back at a state trooper who might be kicking you in the ribs because you dared to protest against an oppressive government."

"If you want to create an open society, your means of doing so must be consistent with the society you want to create. Means and ends are absolutely inseparable."

That, to me, is a great example of clear comprehension of deepest aspiration and the moment-to-moment working. And to me, it's a great example of the cultivation of awareness and wisdom, metta, and compassion.

So we just start where we are, and we never give up.

CHAPTER 112

Dhamma Lesson - Evening Story

Carol Wilson · 4 min

> *In this intimate evening reflection, Carol Wilson recounts a formative experience from her year as a Buddhist nun in Thailand. She describes arriving at a forest monastery in the north, where she encountered Mechi Rungduan, a head nun whose deep samādhi and committed practice immediately impressed her.*
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> *The teaching unfolds through a simple yet profound scenario: when unexpected visitors arrived and the small nunnery's accommodations became scarce, Carol witnessed something that challenged her Western assumptions about status and seniority. Rather than the senior practitioners claiming the best quarters—as she had grown accustomed to at IMS—the head nun was the first to give up her kuṭi, moving without complaint to a cave filled with bat guano. This act of spontaneous generosity and humility, repeated consistently, revealed to Carol what genuine practice looks like in action.*
>
> *This story illuminates how dāna (generosity) and the letting go of self-importance naturally arise from deep practice. Carol reflects on how true practitioners don't cling to status or comfort, and how this immediate, lived expression of the Dhamma—rather than abstract understanding—represents the real fruit of meditation. She closes by connecting this to the practice of sharing merit, noting how generosity emerges naturally from steadiness of awareness and brings joy to the heart.*

Many years ago, I was a nun in Thailand for a year, a Buddhist nun, a long time ago. This is a little story about some things I learned about generosity and humility from being with some of the other nuns.

At one point during my time as a nun, I went up to stay in a monastery in the north, in the forest. You have to understand, there aren't very many Western nuns, and many nuns in Thailand don't really practice that much. They're just living, cooking, taking care of themselves. But this was a place that had practiced nuns, which is why I went there.

When we arrived, there were monks and kutis on one side of the river, and nuns on the other—just a few, maybe six little huts on that side. When I arrived, there was a head nun who was pretty young, probably early thirties. Rungduan was her name, Mechi Rungduan. She came to meet us, and she was clearly in a state of deep samadhi. She

was a very committed practitioner, which I didn't know at the time. She takes me to my kuti. She was very steady, practiced, committed—doing a lot of concentration practice in a Mahasi-style approach.

The way it works in Thailand, in nunneries and monasteries, is that pretty much anyone can just show up. You don't call and make a reservation, at least not then. This was way out in the country, but really on any given day, all of a sudden five new monks could show up, ten new nuns could show up. It didn't happen often, but it could. So if ten new nuns show up and there are only five or six kutis, where are they going to go?

This is where I really learned about letting go and generosity. I had come from being on staff at IMS for a long time at that point, and it's sort of how we think of things here. The longer you were on staff, we had this thing called the room game—who got what room. The longer you're on staff, the more senior you got, so you got the better room. That's just how it seemed to work. And it seems like that in a lot of places, right? The head people, the higher people—they get the better room, the better office, the better everything.

So when ten nuns show up, I'm thinking, they better not put someone in with me. And they didn't, because I was the farang, the foreigner. They treated me very kindly, with great generosity and respect. Everyone else doubled up, tripled up. And the first person to move out of her kuti was Rungduan.

The first one. Not like, "Okay, I guess I have to after I've jammed nuns into everywhere else." She was the first one who would leave and go stay up in this cave filled with bat guano at the top of the hill. And not a murmur—just like, of course, that's what you do.

The act of generosity, the humility of the practitioner who is really practicing. It so touched me. Not enough to give up my kuti—but I was never asked to. I saw that over and over. It wasn't a one-time thing. And some of that really stuck with me as a way of understanding: oh, that's what practice is really about. That's really what the manifestation of practice is. This is immediate practice—sharing generosity, not holding on to status, not holding on to sense of self in that way.

So that was just one little moment, one little day, but it was inspiring to me—this sense of what a life of practice can be about.

Just a little act of generosity. Sharing the merit is an act of generosity. It's a great movement of wisdom, a movement that comes from our steadiness of awareness. Generosity naturally arises. And it's a happy, joyful state of mind and heart.

May you rest well.

CHAPTER 113

Awareness of Things as They Have Come to Be

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this encouraging talk, Carol Wilson examines how the seemingly simple practice of moment-to-moment awareness can be profoundly transformative. She explores the concept of sammādiṭṭhi (right view) and how our habitual misperceptions—seeing things as permanent, satisfactory, and having inherent self-existence—keep us trapped in cycles of suffering. Through personal stories and humor, she illustrates how we unknowingly operate from deeply held views that color our perception and thinking.

Wilson introduces the Pāli term yathābhūta, which she translates as "things as they have come to be," emphasizing how everything arises from countless causes and conditions in each moment. This understanding helps dissolve our tendency to take experiences personally and react habitually to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral sensations. Drawing from Ajahn Chah and Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she describes awareness as "an act of love"—a receptive, curious presence that doesn't judge or censor experience.

The talk addresses how our habitual refuge in pleasant experiences and escape from unpleasant ones perpetuates saṃsāra, the endless round of seeking gratification. Wilson explains that the Buddha's path offers another way: bringing awareness directly to suffering when it arises, rather than running toward sense pleasure. This steady, non-reactive awareness naturally purifies the heart, allowing wisdom and compassion to emerge while clinging and aversion lose their grip. The practice requires no striving—just simple perseverance and the willingness to receive each moment with openness.

So tonight I want to talk hopefully rather simply. Basically the bottom line is I just want to encourage you to keep going. That's it.

What I want to talk about is really different ways—certainly not exhaustively—that this simple moment-to-moment awareness can be so powerful and transformative.

Remember last night or at some point Steve was saying that what we're really starting from, the angle we're beginning from in the instructions and the way we're talking about this particular technique or form of practice, is from the wisdom side, from the understanding side. And if you remember when he talked about right view, he said that understanding is what frees our minds and hearts from suffering. Really the only tool, you could say, or technique that we're offering or talking about here is just this simple

recognition of moment-to-moment mindfulness, moment-to-moment awareness. And we're saying this purifies the heart and mind, this leads to the understanding that frees us from suffering.

Has that been your experience so far? There might have been moments. If there's even a moment, that's already great, because then we get a sense of how it works. But I just want to talk a bit about how this simple awareness, moment-to-moment awareness, the steadiness of awareness, can be so transformative. And what gets transformed anyway?

I think Steve said, but it always bears repeating, that all of our suffering arises not because of how things are, not because somehow we need to change things in the world. All of the suffering—not all of the pain, pain will come—but all of the suffering, this is how the Buddha saw it, arises because we misperceive. We recognize wrongly our experience of ourselves, of so-called others, of the six sense doors. We perceive incorrectly. What we perceive we think about, so we think about and describe our experience incorrectly. And then we respond, we react in a way that maybe not consciously but through habit we think is going to make us happy. And the responses coming out of misperception and confused thinking keep us confused and suffering.

When the Buddha talks about freedom from suffering, what we're talking about here isn't about some way to fix it all so that it's all okay. As I was saying in one of the groups, it's not that somehow finally we hit that moment where everything is like, "Ah, it's all over. Thank God we've got it." We're waiting for that. Secretly, look and see if you're waiting for that. It's not what it's about. And awareness or enlightenment isn't about somehow escaping from this world to a better place. The Buddha woke up in this world, lived in this world. We awaken into this world, in this mind and body, but recognizing with different eyes—using eyes as a metaphor—recognizing accurately.

We can't even imagine how something that sounds so simple could so completely change our understanding and the way we live our life. But it does.

And the basis, what allows us to even begin to recognize accurately—and you don't have to believe me—mostly we don't even know we're recognizing inaccurately. That's actually the delusion, the moha, the root of our problems. As I like to say, and friends and I have this little saying, we don't have a clue. Not a clue that we're recognizing inaccurately.

So I want to talk a little bit about that and how sati, mindfulness, which we've been calling awareness here, is just that moment of awareness that's free—what we're calling intelligent awareness—free from bias, free from assumption, free from opinion.

Just, it's like this. It seems so nothing, right? So mundane. That's the seed. That's the incredibly powerful seed, and the steadiness of that can just turn our understanding of ourselves and the world around. It completely transforms. It's not really that we're transformed—it's that our understanding is transformed. It comes in line with the way things are, the way things have come to be.

To start by talking about the sense of right view, or how we don't understand that we're perceiving inaccurately: I actually really like right view as a translation of the Pali sammādiṭṭhi. View as a metaphor is really how we see things. So we're using "see" as a metaphor for understand—it's not about actually seeing with the eyes. But right view is really the sense of how we understand ourselves in the world, the view we hold of how things are. I find this fascinating to explore because often, frequently, most of the time, we have all kinds of views about ourselves in the world that we just assume are true.

That's where we get confused and lost.

Right view is simply how we perceive. The Buddha had a great ordering of this: what we perceive is just that simple recognition—tree, person, bell. Oh, that's Carol. We're going to perceive what we perceive, and that's already complicated. That can be mis-perception.

What we perceive, we think about. We make a story: this is what it means. What we think about forms into a view of "yes, this is how it is." Mostly we're not actively thinking "yes, this is how it is"—we just know that's how it is. And when different views of the world meet each other, that's where so much of the conflict in the world comes from. It doesn't have to be conflict, but we all have views just from seeing through our different cultural backgrounds. We grow up holding different views of things, of how things are, without even knowing how it's different for somebody else.

One of the joys and complications of multiculturalism is trying to first see your own view, then understand others, and see where they connect. But we always want to think, "Well, mine's right though. I'll try and understand these other people. I'll make allowances. But this is really how it is."

So I'll tell you a little story. I was just telling this last week in Barry, but I liked it for this sense of view—how we perceive, how we think about things is shaped by the views we're believing, the views we're holding about the world, about how things are, about who we are.

This was a few years ago. I was in Burma with a few friends—two Western women who are nuns and the rest of us lay people. We were at a ceremony where dāna offerings were being given to a group of villagers who had lost a great deal in the cyclone. There were big offerings of food. It's a whole ceremony. These things are done very formally in Burma, and they're like a happy celebration time.

So that was the setting, and as always, ten million photographs are taken every time there's any kind of dāna, any offering of generosity. It's just a million photographs. So we got back and we were looking at one of our friend's cameras, photographs of different aspects of that day—us standing there handing out medicine and food, other people present.

On a few of the photographs, there were these very exact circles of light, very precise circles, not like smudges or little marks. They were just kind of on different ones of us in the photograph. So I looked at them and said, "That's funny, I wonder what that is."

Then my friend who speaks Burmese and has spent many years in Burma—you have to remember, Burma, the majority of the Burman ethnic group, which is where we were, are Buddhists growing up in a Buddhist culture. There's a complete faith in the Buddhist worldview, in different realms of existence. That's just how it is. To us that might seem quite strange, but to them, that's just how it is.

So my friend said, "Oh, well, that's devas. That's how devas show up in photographs." Devas are celestial beings. I said, "Really?"

Then our third friend, also a nun but with a PhD—she's a botanist, a trained scientist—she said, "That's not devas. Don't you know that's the way light reflects? There's probably a little drop of water in the lens..." And she went on for a whole five-minute scientific explanation.

Who knows? That's the question—who knows? Not "who's right," which is what we want to figure out. This is just how views work. The perception colors how we think about it, and the perception is already colored by the views we're living by that we don't even know we hold.

We thought it was funny. Who knew? All the Burmese people would say, "Yeah, sure, that's devas." Then we came back to the West and I was showing the photos to some friends at IMS and they said, "There's no way, are you kidding?" And they came up with another explanation: "See that light from that window? And see this? It's just her camera." But then we looked at other cameras from the same time, the same moment, and they had it too.

Since then, I've seen different photos of unusual situations that have the same thing. Like just last year, there's a photo of me and a friend with this incredible old sayadaw—sayadaw is a word for teacher, like ajahn or rinpoche—who's about ninety-eight years old.

He lives up in the Sagaing Hills, and he just oozes metta. He's one of the most amazing beings. He's been there his whole life. He remembers when there were tigers roaming around in Sagaing, and he would walk down on his alms round once a day, this huge walk. So anyway, he's an amazing guy. And there were a lot of those orbs in that picture. I started to think, you know, maybe it could be Davis. Who knows?

So my point is, the awareness—a moment of awareness is from that sense of "who knows?" But that's not so comfortable for us. It's more comfortable to land in the knowing, even if it leads to conflict. And never mind conflict with another person—conflict with our own experience.

So this sense of what we're cultivating, the quality of awareness, is this willingness, this freshness of presence—just in one moment, you don't have to try and hold it all day—of "who knows?" Whatever it is that's arising in your experience.

And so you may start to notice how many views come in when you're in conflict with your experience. "Well, this shouldn't be happening. Second day of a retreat, I shouldn't be this sleepy. It's because of..." you know, fill in the blanks. And then, "I shouldn't be thinking this. I'm getting lost in that. I shouldn't be." Why? Why shouldn't you? Because there's no "it shouldn't." This is what's happening. As Byron Katie says, when you fight with reality, you lose. "This shouldn't be happening." It should be happening because it is happening. In this moment, this is what's happening, and there's no way around it.

So the moment of mindful awareness is just, "Oh, it's like this." And if a view comes in—"it's because of this and this and the other"—fine. Recognizing that view is the next arising thought, rather than just automatically believing it.

This sense of recognizing incorrectly, responding out of the thoughts of that incorrect recognition, forms a view, and then that view colors our perception, and it keeps on circling. It keeps on circling. So that's just a little example of how this works.

In the big picture, the misperceptions the Buddha always speaks of—I'm just mentioning them, I'm not going to go into them tonight—are that we perceive constant change, but we don't actually perceive that. We perceive things as permanent. You might say, "Well, I know it's going to change later," but we don't perceive it in the moment. We don't perceive the unsatisfactory quality of experience. Somehow we think it's going to do it for us. We don't perceive the lack of substantial, separate, inherent

self-existence in things. We see not only ourselves, but especially ourselves, as separate, self-existing, unchanging. And that feels comfortable and safe, but actually these misperceptions are giving rise to our continuing misunderstanding and responding to simple experience in ways that really increase our confusion and suffering.

Don't believe me. I mean, you can believe me or not—it won't do any good. Because we can read this, we can hear this. And it's useful, as Steve said—it's beginning knowledge to help us look. And we can think about it. "Well, maybe it makes sense. It's worth having a look." But it's the steadiness of moment to moment—just that open recognition of awareness of what's happening without needing to make sense of it. Without needing to have this experience fit neatly into all my little patterns. Or if you need it, you just notice the needing.

That quality of: Is it Davis? Is it the moisture in the lens? Is it possible to just be really present and open without needing to know? It's just stepping into the unknown in each moment.

So this view—really, the deep view of misperception that the Buddha talked about, that I would not say guides all of us, but it's under there probably for most of us—is the belief, you could say, or the trust in what's called samsara. Samsara being the seemingly endless round of

looking, wanting, getting or not getting, leading to the next thing, leading to the next thing—the so-called endless round of rebirth. And you don't have to believe in different realms of existence, but birth after birth, moment after moment.

I'm going to read this from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I've been appreciating this a lot lately. He says, "The Buddhist teachings describe three fundamental attitudes, which can be practiced together as a whole." The renunciation he's talking about—renunciation, compassion, and pure perception, or wisdom. I'm going to talk about what he's calling renunciation tonight, the way he's talking about it, not what you might be thinking.

"Renunciation is the foundation, the root of all the subsequent stages of the path. It implies the strong wish to free oneself, not only from your immediate sorrow, but more so from the seemingly unending sufferings of samsara"—meaning the seemingly unending cycle of conditioned existence.

So how does that manifest, this wish to free oneself from that? "It manifests as a heartfelt weariness and disillusionment"—I think the word "disillusionment" is important—"with this endless quest for gratification, approval, profit, and status."

And that, I think, is a very succinct definition of samsara that I appreciate. It's the cycle we are so often caught in—this seemingly endless quest for gratification, self-gratification, for approval, for profit, for getting something, for status. Basically, wanting something. Seemingly endless.

The Buddha's not saying this is bad, you should hate wanting, you should hate yourself for wanting, and you should stop it right now. No. Why do we do this? Because in our twisted perception, that's the refuge. It's like a message whispering that this is what's going to make us happy. This seemingly endless quest—you don't get this thing, but the next one will do it. This particular sitting was unpleasant, but the walking will be better. This retreat so far is a washout, but maybe next time. That lunch—I don't really like chickpeas—but dinner could be better. Or you can go on the aversive side, but it's the same thing.

And without this moment-to-moment simple awareness of just watching that process, what's so fascinating is when I describe it, you laugh. It's not like you're all thinking, "I can't relate to that at all." Maybe you are—can't relate at all—okay, that could go either way. But still it keeps seducing us. Not even seducing us—it's like it's whispering, "This is the way."

Why? What helps us see through it? And that's where we come back to awareness. Not awareness with the idea "I need to stop this," but just to turn our attention. As long as we're caught in that flow of samsara, part of the effect is it keeps us looking outward, so to speak, toward the object, toward what's happening.

Another simple way the Buddha described how we get caught in this—just the habits of our mind, and you've all seen this—is the sense of how all day, as Steve said, just six things are happening. You remember what the six things are? Thinking and mental experiences are happening, over and over and over. And you see how fast stuff is happening.

Our habit all day—not only on retreat but our whole life—what we're practicing when we're not recognizing it, is that something comes, a sight. It's mildly pleasant or unpleasant. Mostly we don't notice that, of course. But the habit is, "Oh, that's so pretty." There's just this leaning into it. It's not like you abandon your life and go running after it. Just this subtle, "Oh, that's nice. I'll look at that a little more." And a sound comes that's unpleasant, and there can be this subtle reaction we don't even know about—"Oh, I don't like that." Not even the bigger version, just "Oh, I don't like that."

The neutral—where Steve was talking about how much of our experience in the day is so mundane—we just don't even notice it. And that's becoming even more prevalent in our culture, isn't it, with all the media and stimulation? God forbid there should be thirty seconds when something isn't coming in. And so we don't even notice that neutral experience.

This is like a habit of response that's just going on all the time. And I'm not saying it's bad or good—I'm just saying this is what happens.

And what this can lead to in terms of the way we think about experience and the views that get inculcated in the background, reinforcing this habit, is that first we're deriving meaning from the objects, from what's happening. It inculcates the sense that the pleasant is basically good or acceptable.

When you think about enlightenment, do you think about your back hurting? When we think about it going well—you know, you've had a sitting where you're just filled with anger and rage—are you describing that as, "Oh, that's great, that's a great sitting"? Yeah, thanks a lot. It's not what I thought of as a great sitting. It just inculcates the sense that that's what happiness is. That's what's right, the pleasant. It doesn't help, in a way, that wholesome mental states are actually more pleasant too, but that's another story. The fact that it has to be pleasant to be good—that gets in there.

And when difficult stuff, unpleasant stuff is happening, it's so easy for the mind to respond in some way with, "This is wrong." The world out there is wrong, or I'm wrong because this is happening, and to do this right, whatever it is, this needs to be fixed. I'm not saying we can't change things in the world. I'm saying, in this moment, this is happening. That's the way it is. But the mind says, "No, this shouldn't be happening." And it's only happening because I'm bad, I'm stupid, the world is wrong—we're just lost in aversion. And the neutral doesn't even exist. So we're really in a state of disconnect from what's actually going on.

Both in a very gross way and also more and more subtly, this view takes hold: that right is pleasant and unpleasant is bad. And that the way to happiness is this samsaric search for more and better things. Whether the pleasant is status or money or people liking you or getting things, it doesn't matter what it is. It's the search itself that's taking us away from the simple recognition: this is what's happening now. Things as they have come to be in this moment, recognized accurately moment to moment—this is the avenue to freedom.

When we're caught in this samsaric spin without recognizing it, thinking that we're trying our best to be happy, we're just feeding the confusion. How to get out of it? Then we bring the same mind: "Okay, it's bad, how can I get rid of it?" Instead, bring in that awareness. Watch the whole process. Not just once, I'm sorry to tell you, but ten million billion times. Each time fresh, each time new. This steadiness of knowing is where the wisdom comes. It's really quite amazing. Also humbling.

So I'll tell you another little story about that—just recognizing how samsara works from my own life. A little embarrassing, but never mind, since everyone who knows me knows this anyway.

In terms of thinking that what we're doing will bring us happiness or joy or comfort or whatever: I happen to be a big fan of watching professional tennis, professional men's tennis. I'm a complete non-athlete. I don't know why, but anyway, I'm a big fan of this. So this is something I do for enjoyment, right? I do it because it's going to make me happy. No one else cares, it doesn't do anybody else any good. There's this belief, unspoken, that this is a really enjoyable aspect of my life. And someone spends a fair amount of time doing it—not that much, okay, but still.

So last year, when I first realized this, I went through the whole process last summer with just more steady awareness. I don't think it's bad or wrong, so I didn't have any judgment about it. But it was during the time of Wimbledon, which is one of the big tennis matches, one of the most important ones. And of course, I have a favorite player, because otherwise you don't suffer as much. If you don't care who wins, you've got to care who wins to really get in there, you know.

Friends who know me say that when I'm watching tennis, if it's two players I know but it's not my favorite player—oh, I just watch and I'm appreciating the skill. It's fine.

My favorite player's playing? I'm a nervous wreck. Really. Sometimes I have to leave the TV and go take a walk if it's the fourth set of a five-set match. I can't bear it. I have to go take a walk and come back and calm down, and then I can watch it. Maybe.

So this was Wimbledon, and my favorite player, who's one of the main guys—anyway, Roger Federer—he actually won it that year. But anyway, he won it, and it was a huge thing because it made him have the most wins of anybody in the Grand Slams. It also meant he went back to number one. In the tennis world, these were huge things.

So all the stress of watching it, I was noticing just more clearly, without judgment: I don't actually enjoy watching the match. As I said, I have to leave. I'm stressed out of my mind. It's really unpleasant. But then I can't not know what's happening either. So I'm running back and looking, and maybe I'll just look on the computer. What's the score?

And I'll say, "Oh my God, he just lost. He got broken twice. I can't stand it." I'll go away. "Oh, he's up again now. Okay, that's good." And then I'll watch. I mean, it's so bad—the year before, somebody on the board of IMS called me up the day he lost in the quarters and said, "I'm so sorry, Carol." This is a guy I hardly even knew. I was really embarrassed.

Anyway, so that's the best it could be. He won Wimbledon. He was number one. In terms of samsara, that's the most you could have. You're happy. And I really saw: how long does that happiness last? Maybe two days. Because right away you've got to start worrying about the Olympics. And then after the Olympics, you've got to worry about the US Open. And it keeps going like that.

I thought, "Oh my God." I sort of knew that in the back of my mind, but the awareness—watching it without any judgment, just: look at that. And I thought this was making me happy. So that quality of awareness lets us see what's really going on.

But do you see the quality that has to come into the awareness? It's just interest, curiosity. If we start out with the assumption that this is wrong, this is bad, you're not going to see clearly. If we start out with the assumption that this is how it should be happening—and think about this in your practice—"Oh, this is how it should be." It's so subtle. You just give this little nudge, trying to nudge things in the direction of how they should be going. It shuts down clear seeing immediately.

So when I talk about awareness as being radical, that's what I mean. It's radically present with everything, with this open unknowing. How is it now?

And awareness doesn't really have a quality of kindness. I like to talk about kind awareness, but awareness itself isn't kind—it's just what it is. But for us as humans to talk about it, you could say that the quality of the awareness we're talking about is almost like a quality of listening. You know what I mean? Like we're just hearing.

Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about awareness receiving experience, rather than us going out and creating it somehow. So awareness is just receiving hearing, or receiving judging, or receiving sadness, or receiving frustration. Frustration is just like this.

There was a slogan on NPR a few years ago when they were doing a series of interviews about different people's lives. The slogan was: "Listening is an act of love." I like that for the quality of awareness. Simple awareness—only this moment, whatever's arising—is an act of love. An act of complete surrendering. Oh, it's like this now. Couldn't be any other way.

And it's not just to feel better in the moment, as I'm saying, but because the steadiness of awareness is what allows wisdom to arise. The wisdom that arises from recognizing accurately.

So back to the tennis example—recognizing accurately all that stuff that goes on doesn't mean it simply ends. I continue to watch tennis, but I'm more aware. As I'm watching it, it really isn't quite as fun as it used to be, I have to say. Of course, Roger's getting older and about to retire, so maybe it's that. But it really isn't quite as fun. I'm not negative about it, but I'm more aware, and so I can kind of go, maybe I don't need to watch it right now.

And that's a tiny example of what Dingo Kenzie was saying—a kind of disillusionment with the endless quest for gratification, approval, status. It's not saying, oh, it's bad and I'm bad. But it's also not saying, I will now stop craving. That doesn't work, have you noticed?

It's this sense of, oh, I want to... maybe not. The craving doesn't make sense in the moment of clear seeing. The aversion to things as they are makes no sense in the moment of clear seeing because it's just, oh, this is how it is.

The steadiness of awareness is what allows us to see the whole process, and seeing the process is what allows the wisdom—craving just drops away for that moment. It's really quite amazing, and then that strengthens our trust in the whole process, our trust in awareness.

There's a Pali phrase I like to use a lot: *yathā bhūta*, usually translated as "things as they are." In different lists of various kinds of insights in the commentaries, there's one called *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, usually translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are."

I just want to talk about *yathā bhūta*. Several friends whose understanding of Pali is a whole lot better than mine—which isn't hard—have told me that the more precise translation, according to the tense of the verb, is "things as they have come to be."

I really like that because there's only this moment. Awareness arising, meeting, receiving things as they have come to be in this moment—that gives me a certain sense.

"Things as they are," or when we're reacting—I like, I don't like, it's good, it's bad—what that feeds is the sense of separate, unique experiences. This is here, it's bad, it shouldn't be here. Oh, this is nice, let's keep this going. It keeps us looking outward to the experience, to the object. It keeps us involved in our relationship to the object and what it means about me. That's the big delusion, right? What does this mean about me?

Yathā bhūta—things as they have come to be. I love it because what it gives me is a more accurate sense that there's no separate thing. I mean, how did this bell come to be? It isn't some separate thing. If we start to reflect for just a moment on all the conditions that came together for this bell to be here in this moment—where can you stop?

There's whoever gave it, and it's been sitting here all this time, and Spirit Rock exists, and it's made of a certain kind of metal that was mined in a certain place, and all the men and maybe women who mined it, and then the people who had to turn it into this kind of metal, and then the people who transported it to the factory or wherever they make bells, and then back to however many hundreds of years ago when these kinds of bells were first designed. And what's the cause for this bell? What made the people who donated it decide to donate it? What made the people who accepted it decide to accept it? And because Spirit Rock is here, we're all here—and how did each of us come to be here?

You can't separate anything.

And in this moment, as I said, it can't be any different because this is how it is. Things as they have come to be. So if I'm just allowing this kind of radical surrender awareness, just receiving things as they have come to be in this moment—

it gives more space and less personal reactivity.

Because so many things have come to be, we can bring in curiosity—the kind of curiosity that we bring to the steadiness of our experience here. So you come in and you're sleepy in a sitting, and instead of "Oh, now I'm sleepy, bad," it's like: things as they have come to be. Everything's arising in this moment lawfully, due to all kinds of causes and conditions. The steadier our awareness is, the more we notice what those causes and conditions are. How we respond comes out of that seeing, and then we notice what effect our response has.

And so the whole thing that might have seemed haphazard, or "why me," or "I blew it again," starts to shift. We start to see that everything is arising due to causes and conditions, affecting the next thing. And with clear seeing, that recognition, that understanding unfolds naturally.

This is again what it's so hard for us to trust. Our job is just this receiving—letting awareness be an act of love, being willing to wake up in it again and again and again, and trusting that with the steadiness of awareness, the clear seeing, the right view arises naturally. You don't have to figure it out. And in fact, we can't. Because we try to figure it out from what we already know.

Do you remember Krishnamurti? Jack was telling me that someone who sounds knowledgeable was saying nobody remembers Krishnamurti anymore, that I have to stop quoting him. Anyway, his first book, when he first broke free, was *Freedom from the Known*. And I think that's a wonderful phrase in terms of awareness. It's freedom from the known. We sit down and our knee hurts. "I know why my knee hurts." No, no, no—just wait. What's happening now? Freedom from the known, open to discover. And then seeing. And the trust will build that accurate recognition will give us the information that we need. Accurate perception leads to wise understanding. If we try to figure it out, we're just going to go down the path we already know.

Thich Nhat Hanh said that understanding does not arise as a result of thinking—he's talking about Dhamma understanding. It does not arise as a result of thinking, but from the long process of conscious awareness. Thinking can express or contain some understanding, but it's too limited and rigid to actually hold much understanding. So I just say that we can't think our way into it. God knows we'll try, and that's okay. Awareness just notices thinking. That was a little aside there.

Even when there have been times—and we've all had them, I'm sure—where we have enough steady awareness to see through the seduction of this round of samsara. Haven't you all experienced a time where you really see, "Oh, wanting isn't doing it"? Getting those M&Ms really didn't make my day, whatever it is. Or someone said yesterday, "It's so obvious for a moment, and then we just forget again."

Isn't that the most amazing thing? To me, that's the most amazing thing about how our minds work when they're in their confused state. Just a moment of simple awareness, in that moment of clarity when you're not fighting against something or taking it personally or making a story—it's just like this. Doesn't it all seem so simple? Does anyone know what I'm talking about? Just checking. It's like, "Oh."

And in those moments, when we've let go of wanting, the sense of ease, the sense of presence and openness to the world and connection and freedom is so palpable. Why would I want to pick up that wanting again? It's so clearly suffering and constricting.

Two minutes later? You pick it up again. It seduced us again. We've heard the siren song: "No, come with me and you'll be happy."

How does this happen? Come! It really is amazing to me.

And I would say, if anything, all these years of practice, one of the things that's really strengthened is my deep respect for the power of habits in the mind. The habits of this wanting, of this aversion to the unpleasant, of evaluating our happiness based on that

and getting involved in every experience and thinking: What does that mean about me? How does this make me happy? How does this make me sad? How does that person walking across the floor so mindfully—what does that mean about me?

Do you notice that? It's amazing. Then you hate it. No need to hate it. It's not personal. Everyone's doing it. It's not personal. It's like, wow, look at how the mind works. I like this. I don't like that. This is good. This is bad. This isn't worth paying attention to. What does it mean about me? What does it mean about me that I don't like that? Wow, they really like this music. I don't like that music. What does that mean about me? What does it mean about them? It's exhausting.

Just—ah, it's like this, this music. So simple. Why do we jump out of it again? It's amazing.

So the force of habit just sucks us right back in. There's a kind of comfort in the familiar. Where do we really take refuge? We're talking about the difference between refuge and comfort. Where do we take refuge? And this is back to right view—not even conscious—when we're in stress, or when we're confused, or when something's difficult, what's the place our mind and heart, our habit of mind, goes to for refuge?

So often what we've been practicing, most of us, is that when something's really difficult, our refuge is to get the heck away from it. And when you think about it, well, of course that makes total sense, doesn't it? I don't think I should sit with pain. If I can get away from it, I should. That makes sense, right? So what's wrong with that? Refuge into the pleasant. Well, if I could have pleasant rather than unpleasant, I'd go for it. If I could have food I like versus food I don't like, I'd go for it. What's the problem with that?

We take refuge in that. We really believe it's comfortable. And then the other form of delusion is all the stories we tell about ourselves, the assumptions we make. I think I mentioned yesterday, talking about delusion—one of the aspects of delusion Tejani was discussing is assumptions we make about people. But notice the assumptions you're making about yourself a hundred million times a day. Because I'm no good, I don't understand, I'm too tired, this other practice is better, I don't know what the hell they're talking about, I had too much to eat. Or I can be aware and I am so good because of all the practice I've done, because I'm such a great person. Or who cares about that anyway, but the fact that I ate too much at dinner just shows what a kind of weak and—you know, and on and on and on.

You sit down and your breath is choppy. Oh, and suddenly your whole life story unfolds because your breath is choppy. All of it just based on assumptions.

The steadiness of awareness cuts through all of that.

Let's look at Ajahn Chah. He says, "We get so absorbed in objects and our reactions to the objects that we neglect to notice how the mind is working." This is our whole practice here—getting interested in how the mind is working. And yet, the mind is where suffering and peace are found.

I'll just read a little bit from him. "Escaping from suffering means knowing the way out of suffering. It doesn't mean running away from wherever suffering arises." By doing that, you just carry your suffering with you. But don't we think getting out of suffering means running away?

He talks about sense contact. Most of us are either afraid of contact, as if it's going to cause suffering, or we like to have contact but don't develop wisdom from it. Instead, we repeatedly indulge ourselves through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—delighting in the objects and getting lost in them. These sense bases can entice us into delight and indulgence, or they can lead to knowledge and wisdom.

So we take everything as practice, even the bad things. When we talk of practice, we don't mean taking those things that are good and pleasing to us. That's not how it is. In this world, some things are to our liking, some are not. Usually, whatever we like, we want. Usually whatever we don't like, we don't want to see or even know about. But the Buddha wanted us to experience all of these things. *Lokawidu*—look at this world and know it clearly. That's our practice. Look at this world and know it clearly.

If we don't know the truth of the world clearly—and we are the world, this mind and body—we don't go anywhere. Living in this world, we must understand the world. The noble ones of the past, including the Buddha, all lived with these things. They lived in this world among people and realized the truth right here, nowhere else.

That's really our practice—just to meet suffering in the heart, to meet happiness in the heart, right here. When suffering arises in the mind, awareness is right here receiving it with that quality of interest. What is this? How is it arising? Not by thinking about it, just the steadiness of awareness. We start to see how it arises. When happiness arises in the mind, awareness is right there. Happiness is like this. How does it arise? How does it end?

Seeing that suffering arises and it ceases right where it arises. This is Ajahn Chah again: "Happiness arises and it ceases right where it arises." Our job is just trusting this moment-to-moment receptive awareness to reveal *yathābhūta*—things as they have come to be. And amazingly enough, that is the seed that brings that clear seeing, that brings the freeing of heart and mind. It's really amazing how that can happen. And it

does happen, over and over. Really noticing that—it's like a shift of refuge. And we're practicing it here. That's really all we're doing here: practicing awareness. Just the simple recognition of the knowing.

We're just practicing it. I know you might be thinking something better is supposed to happen. You're doing this, you're humoring us, but you're waiting for the real thing to happen. This is it. We're practicing moment-to-moment awareness. And each moment of recognizing—well, so what?

Because we're focusing out on wanting something, we're in samsara. How do we step out of samsara? Through yata bhuta—things as they have come to be—with total presence and reception. Nowhere to go, nothing to change, nothing to do. Total wakefulness, this moment, and this moment.

We don't have to figure it out. I can't tell you what a relief that is. Because we haven't been doing such a good job if we had to figure it out.

Let me read this from Tejaniya, talking about this awareness, which is always available. That's how we're shifting our trust, our refuge—to recognize that it's always available as soon as we remember.

So this receptive awareness—we're not trying to create something. We're not rejecting what is happening. As things happen or stop happening, we don't forget awareness of them. We notice it stopped. We notice it starts.

And I think this is quite interesting: acceptance of an experience doesn't mean we stop being aware of it. We bring awareness along with it. Often people talk about a difficult experience and say, "Okay, I just have to accept it." And accepting becomes, "Okay, I can be with it"—as if, well, that's it, that's accepted. And a little bit the mind shuts down onto the next thing. "I did my task with this difficult one, I accepted it, what's next?"

No. What's happening now? Accepting means it's like this now. Does it change? Does it stay? Does something else happen? Who knows? Yata bhuta—this moment will lead to the next, and we never know what the next will be. So it's this constant opening into the unknown with full awareness.

In terms of how we get sucked back into samsara with these habits of wanting and aversion to the pleasant and the unpleasant and the stories of "me," there's one thing the Buddha said in the Suttas that I find both very important but incredibly poignant. It really evokes this kind of sadness every time I read or think about it, because it's so true, but it's so unnecessary.

He's talking about our habits of reacting to the unpleasant with aversion, of reacting to the pleasant with wanting, and of reacting to the neutral with just not knowing what's happening—how all of that comes to be habits in our mind.

"The unenlightened, ordinary worldling"—that's us. Or "thickster," as I've heard it more accurately translated. I love that. Thickster.

How does the thickster react? We get all upset at the unpleasant. We love the pleasant. But this is what touches me so much. He said, "A thickster, having been touched by a painful feeling, resists it and resents it." You can relate to that. Then, "In one who so resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance against painful feeling comes to be a habit in the mind." It just comes to be a habit.

And under the impact of that painful feeling and the resistance to it, he then proceeds to search for and enjoy sensual happiness. You're feeling bad and you go to the refrigerator and have some ice cream. That's basically it. Your back hurts and you go and take a hot bath, turn on a movie. Not that any of it's bad—see, our mind goes, "No, not bad"—but just to see the habit.

So under the impact of the painful feeling, he proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. And this is the part I find so poignant.

Why does he do so? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

And that's samsara, right? There's no other way out of our unhappiness, out of our suffering, except to go get something more pleasant. And in the moment of looking, when we're just focused out there, it does it—it distracts us from the unpleasant, it changes it, we get the pleasant. And so that's the promise. We'll keep on doing it, keep on doing it. It keeps us looking outward.

The shift of refuge is this willingness to be aware of the problem. Unpleasant—just what Ajahn Chah said—when suffering comes up, awareness comes in right there at that suffering. And the refuge is the awareness. The escape from suffering isn't the escape from all unpleasant. It's that step out of that endless quest for pleasant into awareness itself. *Ah, unpleasant feels like this.*

It doesn't mean we can't make an intelligent decision to change something. We can make a much more intelligent decision when it's not coming out of reaction. So it doesn't mean acceptance where you lie down and become a doormat. But it means we bring awareness in right here. That's the only way we're going to see clearly.

The steadiness of mindfulness, the steadiness of awareness with whatever's coming—whatever's coming—gives us a kind of real freedom because we can stop judging and censoring and saying, "This is okay to bring into my meditation and this isn't. I have to meditate so this can't be arising in my mind."

I was talking to Alexis today. He said something I thought was really great in terms of this. He said I could share it—I asked, so don't worry, I wouldn't quote any of you without asking. He was talking about when he'd been sitting for some time with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, with a sense of just bringing steady awareness to whatever arises. He said it felt so freeing because it gave him permission to be totally himself. To bring all aspects of mind here in the practice, in the awareness. To be totally yourself in your practice. Nothing left out. Nothing censored. But bringing awareness along with it. It's really an amazing kind of freedom.

And how does this purify our heart and mind? You might think, "If I'm just myself, well, all that stuff we don't want to see—that's what's going to come up." As if it's not coming up anyway, right? Instead of it coming up and it's like, "Oh no"—receiving. Receiving. It's an act of love. Listen to it. That's what's arising. See how it arises, what causes it, what are the effects, what are the thoughts, what happens next. It's all just part of a lawful process. It isn't personal. It brings so much freedom from this judging—the steadiness of awareness.

How does it purify the heart and mind? Just that example I gave before: when we recognize accurately, clinging and aversion as a response just don't make sense. They just don't make sense. We don't have to decide we're never going to be aversive again. It starts to drop. That thing you always judge yourself about arises again, and though suddenly you're aware—you're aware of the judging and all—suddenly there's a moment of, "Oh, look at that. It's just like this. I know why it came." Nothing else. You don't make that happen; it happens itself.

One of our friends and colleagues, Guy Armstrong, likes to say something I really appreciate. He said it's what makes him believe and trust that reality is really beneficent—that when we recognize accurately, it doesn't increase our hatred and our dislike and our fear and our greed. When we recognize accurately, it's these suffering states that drop away, that lose their power. And what gets more trustworthy, what gets more obvious, is compassion and metta and wisdom and equanimity. Naturally. We don't have to create it.

It's really quite amazing.

I was going to close with a quote from Ajahn Sumedho, but I think it's just time to stop.

The last thing I'll say is simply this: it's just this moment—simple opening into the present, no more than that. But every moment. Tejaniya has this big sign on his door: "Never give up." No striving, simple perseverance, no looking for result—but never give up.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

CHAPTER 114

Practice of Generosity: Transformer of Consciousness

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the practice of dāna (generosity) as one of the three pillars of the Buddha's teaching, alongside sīla (ethical conduct) and bhāvanā (mental cultivation). She emphasizes that purification of mind occurs not only through formal meditation but through all aspects of the Buddha's teaching, with generosity serving as a direct path to transformation.

Wilson draws on her extensive experiences in Burma to illustrate how generosity functions as a lived practice that brings joy to both giver and receiver. She shares moving stories of Burmese doctors donating their time at free clinics, nuns starting schools for poor children, and even money changers spontaneously offering donations after witnessing acts of giving. These examples demonstrate what she calls the "contagious" quality of wholesome states—how witnessing generosity naturally awakens the same spirit in ourselves.

The talk explores how the quality of mind during giving matters more than the gift itself, referencing the story of Anāthapindika and the Buddha's teaching that even throwing bowl rinsings into a pond with kind intention constitutes genuine generosity. Wilson explains the three times generosity brings happiness: in the initial motivation, during the act itself, and in later recollection. She concludes with a sutta passage where the Buddha recommends reflecting on one's own generous acts as a practice that frees the mind from greed, aversion, and delusion—emphasizing this as a valid contemplation practice available in any moment of daily life.

Do good, avoid evil, purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas. You find this teaching in all the different areas of Buddhist instruction: cultivate the wholesome, abandon suffering states. That's what purifying the mind means.

Of course, this is what we've been talking about with our whole awareness and mindfulness practice—how the steadiness of awareness naturally allows wisdom to arise. As Steve has said, it's the wisdom that ultimately purifies the mind. We've been talking about that a lot.

But I also want to talk tonight about the fact that purification of heart and mind comes not only from meditation. The way the Buddha spread out his sasana, his teaching, is that all aspects of our life, all aspects of his teaching, are really partaking of this

purification of mind and heart, of cultivating the wholesome and helping to change the habits of our mind and heart from our so comfortable ones—so comfortable and friendly with wanting and aversion and delusion—to change those to pure, wholesome ones, which actually are much more happiness-producing, even in the moment.

Even though my first training in Vipassana came in Asia, in the Goenka system, for some years it was mostly in the form of retreats, with no cultural container for it. In retreats like this, we learned the bhavana, the meditation, the cultivation of awareness, which really is the strongest, most powerful, most direct route to awakening, to purification, to happiness—no question. But it doesn't exist alone, as if separate from the rest of our life.

Even though we'd hear about the three pillars of the Buddha's teaching—dana, or generosity; the practice of sila, or non-harming behavior, which we took up with the precepts; and bhavana, mental cultivation in all the different ways we've discussed—I never really learned dana and sila as practices in themselves. I never learned the beauty, the joy, the depth of embracing the practice of generosity and the practice of sila as a way of life, not just to do them so that I could meditate better, which is sort of how we would take them on in those days. We understood that we have to follow the precepts because then you don't feel remorse, which is true—that's in the suttas. And we thought, "I want to not feel remorse so I can have better meditation states." All that is true, just a little bit askew in the motivation.

So all the aspects of the teaching matter. Today in the groups, it makes me want to talk about this specifically. I'm going to talk about the practice of generosity as a practice of liberation, of awakening.

I also realized something about the steadiness of mindfulness and really starting to explore the defilements, as Steve was talking about, with incredible interest. I was so proud to see that from everybody—so happy to see the defilements! "I can't wait for the next one, right?" Once in a while, you might really feel like that when you're bored. But here's what's important: while the steadiness of awareness will of course reveal the conditions that come together to create a kalesha, a defilement arising in the moment—how it comes together, how it falls apart—it's equally important to keep the steadiness of awareness to notice the moments when there's not defilement. Yes, there are such moments. We can get so afraid of seeing the pleasant, saying "the pleasant leads to clinging," so we pull back from it, and we're so interested in the defilements that we get a little skewed. It's important to recognize that the steadiness of awareness sees all of it. All of it. I just wanted to bring that out.

Purifying the mind is both seeing how the unwholesome creates suffering—not by hating it, but by being with it—and also recognizing how simple, attentive awareness with the wholesome actually strengthens it and helps it grow. This is natural. It's just a natural effect.

Here is a quote from the Dalai Lama: "When the mind is completely free of negative emotions and tendencies, it understands and knows all phenomena. It is only because there are obscuring veils between the mind and its object that we are unable to know all things. Once these veils have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing and being aware is the nature of the mind itself. As long as the mind exists, it has the ability to know. But this ability does not reveal itself until all obscurations have been removed. This is what it means to attain enlightenment."

What we can experience and what is important to recognize, as well as how the defilements work to obscure, is that we can experience moments when those obscurations aren't there—moments with the natural nature of the mind to see and know. And no new power is needed. It's just nature. It's what we've been saying all along.

So the three pillars of the Buddha's teaching—dana, sila, bhavana—are all about transforming our suffering habits of mind.

Purifying the mind, strengthening the wholesome habits—these are not secondary practices.

But again, it's important as I talk about generosity: I'll be talking about it from the point of view of the quality in the mind, in the heart, because that's really what matters. The mind is what leads to speech and action. It's not so much that we have to give this or that, but what's going on inside of us. And so we learn to trust in the steady awareness of the wholesome, of the beautiful—or just recognizing those moments. It doesn't have to be generosity. When it is, it's a little glimpse of nibbana, heading in the direction of pure mind. It's important to recognize that.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa. Someone reminded me of him today. He was a great Thai forest monk who died at the end of the last century. I spent some time with him when I was a nun. He was a bit of a radical within the Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition—and the Burmese tradition too—which are, you know, rather restricted. Within that context, he was very radical. You might not find what he says particularly radical, but within that tradition at that time, he was very radical.

This is from a short article of his where he's talking about nibbana for everyone. Already that was radical at that time. He says, "It may be summed up that nibbana is the coolness—coolness of mind resulting from the extinction of defilements. And when

we look into the fact that defilements are compounded things, conditioned experience, things that have birth and death—this shows that defilements occur when the causal conditions come together. And when those causal conditions are not present, defilements simply cease to exist."

So this is a moment-to-moment experience. Have you noticed a moment when a defilement simply ceases to exist? It's important to stay aware in that moment, not to assume. We often look away and think, "Well, that defilement just went underground." And when a similar looking one emerges later, we say, "Well, that's been hanging around all day. Here it is again. This is how I always am." We get really worn down by it, not giving equal attention or weight to those moments when the defilement wasn't there. Somehow we think, "Okay, that's a fluke, that's whatever, but here it is again."

As Poonjaji, a teacher I knew in India, said: it's like we take the past and put it on our shoulder and drag it around with us like a corpse. And that's what we're doing sometimes with our stories, with our sense of "this is what I'm suffering from so much." We might ask ourselves, "Well, is it happening now?" "No, it's not, but it was, and it will..." Notice those moments of coolness.

Here Buddhadasa goes on—he was kind of funny: "Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand it?" It's true, isn't it? "Under such conditions, living things must either die or become insane and die anyway." So you get a sense he's in there. He knows what he's talking about.

"So let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. As a matter of fact, we could say that these periods last longer than when the fires are burning."

That's a task: check it out.

He calls this periodical nibbana, or momentary nibbana. "We have periods of rest, physically and mentally, which refresh us. Why don't we know or feel thankful for this kind of nibbana?"

He's saying: pay attention to it, be appreciative. Not grasping, but feel how those moments affect us. I would call it the steadiness of awareness—though we can be aware and the awareness is clear and pure even while aware of defilements. It won't have quite that same pure feeling as when the mind, the citta, really doesn't have a defilement in it at that moment, and there's awareness.

We tend to think, "Oh, that's such a lovely moment. Everything is so beautiful." But notice just how the mind, the heart feels. Just this—I don't know how to say it—purity. Someone said to me once, and I really liked the way she put it: "It's like the mind and heart feel squeaky clean." Just for that moment. On retreat, you tend to have many such moments, and we often think it's because the perceptions are so vivid. They do get more vivid—the flowers are so beautiful, the deer walking by, whatever.

And that's true, but then turn around and just notice—just like we want to notice how the defilements are coloring perception and the resultant thought and action—notice how the purity in that moment of mind and heart feels. Just get familiar with it. Don't take it personally, but just get familiar with it so we recognize it more, so we can start to trust it more. And steady sati, steady mindfulness and awareness, is what naturally reveals this, just as it reveals how the defilements fool us all the time.

So from that perspective, I want to talk about the actual deliberate practice, or cultivation, or recognition of the quality of generosity as a transformer of our habits of consciousness.

The Buddha, as I said, knew the three pillars of his teaching: generosity, conscious conduct, and mental cultivation. But almost whenever he'd start teaching, he would tend to start by talking about generosity to people. So it wasn't just some kind of throwaway thing. And in fact, he set up his whole Sangha, the Sangha of monks and nuns, based on working together with the lay people through generosity. It is said that the sasana consists of four types of people: ordained women, ordained men, and lay women and lay men. And you need all four types to work together. He set them up to be connected with one another, and it still works today in countries where there are ordained men and women in the Buddhist tradition. It's working. Sometimes it's working better than others, but what binds them together is generosity.

He says, "Monks, the householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicine in times of sickness. And you, oh bhikkhus"—so this is nuns and monks—"are very helpful to the householders, as you teach and share with them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. Thus, monks, the spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

So he set it up. Lay men and women and ordained women and men mutually support one another for their mutual crossing of the flood and freedom from suffering. And it was set up, and it still is so in Buddhist countries, that monks—and at that time also nuns, bhikkhunis—in terms of food, would go out every day with an alms bowl to whatever community they were in. And the food is just offered. It's not specific to that

monk. You don't ask a specific person. They just walk with their eyes down. And they still do this today. Early in the morning, they go out in a line with their alms bowl, eyes down, barefoot—always barefoot. And the lay people, not everyone, but whoever wants to, they know when it's going to be. They come running out and they're standing there, often it's just with a little bowl of rice. That's all they can afford, at least in places I've been in Burma. Little bowls of rice, or sometimes a curry, or whatever. And as the monks come, they just put some into each bowl and then the monks walk on.

It's really—I don't know—I must have somehow been there years ago in another lifetime, because there's something about the early morning, watching the line of monks go out silently and the lay people lining up to offer, that is just really beautiful. It touches my heart.

But anyway, it's set up so they can only eat the food for the day. On eight precepts, nuns and monks don't eat after the noon meal and don't keep the food over. So back in the time of the Buddha, that meant that really the monks and nuns couldn't just go off and disappear and become complete hermits. They had to stay near a town, had to stay in connection with lay people. It's really, I think, quite interesting. There could be times when one would go off on a retreat and maybe other monks would support, but generally, for your whole life, the connection was there. It wasn't like making a community of ordained people who live completely separate, out of this world. They're in this world. And the basis of that is generosity.

And so when we look at the quality of generosity in our hearts—and this isn't just intellectual, though obviously we can think this—when we look at not what you give or why, but what is going on in the heart, in the mind, that makes an expression of generous offering possible, whatever it is... It can just be the generous offering of loving-kindness that you don't even say. There's this outward movement of giving. So what's going on in the mind and heart at that time? Why is it so powerful and transformative?

And of course, some of that's obvious. When you're offering something, it's the opposite of greed and possessiveness. It's the actual movement of letting go, of renunciation, of really letting something go.

It counters ill will, quite interestingly. If you're really doing it as real generosity, try to give something wholeheartedly and feel a lot of ill will towards the person at the same time. Maybe we could throw the thing at them and say, "There, take it!" But that's not really generosity in terms of the wholesomeness in the mind and heart.

And it counters our self-cherishing, covetousness tendency. Because in the movement of a generous action of mind, speech, or body, there's a way of abandoning our self-centered, self-cherishing nature. It's this reciprocal mutuality where connectedness and non-separation are actually what's emphasized, what's experienced, as we act from generosity over and over.

Shantideva, who wrote the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, has this one little quatrain I like so much about this: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

It is like having fed myself. That's the sense of the mutuality of real generosity. It's not about the thing or whatever is given. And the inner experience is one of actually a lot of happiness, contentment, even gratitude.

Ajahn Sumedho once said—and I liked this throwaway remark of his, at least it seemed like one when I heard it—"Oh, contentment and gratitude are very supportive states of mind for awakening." That's nice, isn't it? Try it, see for yourself. Contentment. Gratitude. These are states that generosity deepens and fosters because it opens us out of sense of self, greed, and ill will into contentment and presence in this moment. So generosity is actually part of the path of liberating our minds and hearts.

I spent that year in Thailand, and I've spent quite a fair amount of time in Burma in the last ten years or so—about a month a year or more. I think I mentioned the other night the nun Mei-Chi Rung and how her spontaneous generosity of offering her kuti as head nun as soon as any other nuns came kind of touched me. First, it just confused me, befuddled me. I thought, "What? Shouldn't she be looking for perks?" So it touched me, but I didn't quite get the depth of what was really going on.

The more time I've spent in Burma—and don't get me wrong, I am not idealizing this culture; there's a lot of stuff wrong, as in everywhere—but the majority of the Burmese people are coming from the Buddhist tradition. And deeply ingrained in the Buddhist tradition is this real commitment to generosity and to metta, but to generosity as a practice. Being in that culture, one is just surrounded by generosity.

What was the big surprise to me, what felt like a secret I had never really learned about in my life here, is this: we think generosity is good. We like it. We like to be generous. And we think if I have more, I should give to someone who has less. It kind of tends to go in that way. We can feel good about it, but if we feel too good, that's just being a little egotistical.

So what's the big surprise to me is how joyful—really joyful—this practice of generosity is, both for the giver and for the receiver, and how contagious this is. It's a joy that isn't just "Oh, I feel good," a kind of joy that you cling to. It's the happiness of the heart that's released its holding for that moment, of the mind that in that moment is really touching the wholesomeness of non-clinging, the wholesomeness of non-self-referencing.

And so what I have really come to love, one of the things that feeds my heart every time I go to Burma, is that whatever else goes on, there are these generous actions of giving and receiving spontaneously happening all the time—little ways, big ways—and the appreciation of it on both sides. People are looking for what they call "opportunities for generosity." That's what they say: "This is an opportunity for generosity." And they get really happy.

They have their eyes out for opportunities for generosity, not only with the nuns and monks, but also with regular people. It's just part of the culture, and so it starts to seep in. You start to feel and appreciate more and more the generosity, and actually the heart, the mind, gets happier and happier. And again, it's not the happiness of holding on. I mean, one can twist anything. A defilement can slip in anywhere and twist anything—you could get into competitive generosity. But mostly it's not that.

They say generosity gives us happiness in three times. When the motivation first arises—here's an opportunity for generosity, wow—that's the kind of happiness, the purity of mind and heart. We can feel that. Then in the actual offering, being really present, that's another moment or more of happiness in the doing. And later, in the recollection of it. At the end I'll read a sutta from the Buddha where he recommends this as a way to consciously turn the mind towards the wholesome. And that can be really useful to us at times when we're just drowning in the kilesas and the mindfulness isn't strong enough. You know, those times when we say we need to do skillful means. But there's enough wisdom to make the choice to say, okay, maybe I can just turn the mind to the wholesome. You can recollect your generous acts.

So just right now, remember some generous thing you did. See if you can do that without your mind clocking through and going, "That's not generous enough." Just any little generous thing. You opened the door for somebody with a generous heart—not like "hurry up," you know—with a generous heart. Any little generous thing you did. Just remember it. Take a moment and remember it, and let yourself feel it in a wholesome way. Let yourself appreciate it. And if you really can't think of anything, think of something someone did that was generous to you, and appreciate it in the same way. Just let it in for a minute.

This joyful, contagious quality—I feel I've learned so much about generosity as a practice, and I'll give you some little examples. There are a million. What I have to do when I prepare this talk is figure out which ones I want to use, which ones pop into my mind. Just to give you a sense of how—it may or may not work for you—but how sometimes just hearing about it awakens the same happiness and generous spirit in ourselves. That's what's so beautiful about the wholesome qualities. How can it awaken that in us? Because it's a natural effect of the pure heart and mind. It's not some weird different thing. They're contagious, and we can let that in.

Just tiny little things. I was up in Northern Burma one time years ago, and there was a Western monk who was living in the area. He was doing a kind of ascetic practice—he would always go barefoot. He wouldn't wear slippers, trying to be tough. He liked it. And I was riding in a little pony cart with the pony driver. This was years before they had motorcycles and such. There was another friend who spoke Burmese. And the pony cart driver—he knew this monk who came, and he said, "Oh, I feel so sorry for him. He doesn't have any slippers. I really want to go and give him some slippers." He didn't even know this guy. He just saw him walking around. And this kind of immediate wanting to help, to offer—it's just so lovely.

This year, in some monasteries or nunneries where they're able to, there's a place where I stay often where somebody donated money to build a building for a free clinic for the local poor villagers. It just works on the weekend. It doesn't have much in the way of supplies at all. People donate the supplies, send them from Malaysia or bring them when they visit. And the way it works is on Saturday, doctors come—Burmese doctors come on their one day off and donate their time. They work all day; a hundred or two hundred villagers come every day. And on Sunday, it's dentistry day. All these young dentists—and I swear they look about thirteen—all these young dentists come and donate their time. And it's intense, you know? In the free clinic, they really can't do very sophisticated dentistry. Let's leave it at that. But still, no one comes until it hurts so much, but they're there. And these young people, they're donating their one day off. This is not an uncommon phenomenon.

So just last month, over at the meditation center, a friend of mine who's a Western nun—the scientific one who doesn't believe in deva lights, only now she does—she lives there and her job is taking care of the Western yogis who come, setting them up in rooms, helping them get toilet paper. It's actually quite a job, I must say.

One Sunday afternoon, one of the yogis had a filling fall out, or her tooth blew up—one of those things where it really hurts. She had just come to Burma for the first time, and you can get really scared in a foreign country when you don't know where to go and you're just settling in. So her tooth hurt, but her mind hurt more, let's put it that way.

Vera said, "Well, it's lucky it's Sunday. I'll take you over to talk to the dentist." So she took her over, and the dentist in charge was a little bit older, a really lovely man, Vera was telling me. He said, "Well, of course I can't treat you here, but when I'm finished here"—at like three in the afternoon—"follow me into town," which is like an hour's drive, "to my office, and I'll open it up and do what I can." It wasn't a matter of, "Let me see, can I fit this into my calendar? When will I have time?" It was immediate.

So they went in, and it was a whole big afternoon thing. They got to his office, he did a really great job, he had all the equipment, and it was quite a procedure—not just a little filling. And then, of course, he wouldn't take a cent. He wouldn't take any money.

The woman yogi noticed that there was a little shrine—a little Buddha, photographs of this man's particular Buddhist teachers. She looked around and said, "Oh, this is what dāna is, isn't it?" Because it was this joyful spirit of "I'm so happy to spend the rest of my afternoon fixing your teeth and I won't take a cent for it." And then he turned to Vera and said, "Now you sit down, let me check out your mouth."

This complete, open generosity, this immediacy of spirit—our first tendency may be to feel shy or embarrassed, but that shuts down the mutuality. And there's so much joy in the giving that you really don't stay shy and embarrassed. You kind of open up and think, "Wow, how beautiful. Thank you so much." And there's this appreciation.

It's not like you think, "Well, now I have to go out and do something good." Maybe you do. But what happens is the wholesomeness lights up our heart and mind. So she was looking and realizing, "Oh, this is what dāna means."

I've seen that happen so often with friends who haven't quite been in that situation before, in so many different ways. After a meal with some nuns who are really poor—they're running a school for six hundred kids that they have to raise the money for every single month, living all together crammed into one little building because they tore down their other buildings to build this school for poor children. And then they invite us and our friends to lunch and lay out this huge spread that they would never eat themselves. And they're so happy doing it.

Our friends go, "Oh, this is dāna." And you can see as the meal goes on, their smiles get bigger and bigger and they get happier, and there's a sense of connection with the nuns, a happiness flowing both ways.

The next time, if you go back the next year to visit those nuns who did so much for you, they'll be so thrilled to see you. "Oh, you're the one I made mohinga for five years ago!" I mean, that just happened recently. "Yes, you're the one. I remember you. I made mohinga for you. I'm so happy to see you."

You can't not let it in. I mean, you'd have to really try hard. And as you start to let it in, you start to see: the happiness is the happiness. It feels like the mind and heart are being cleaned out, being purified. And there's a lot of other suffering, difficult stuff that goes on, but you feel like you can be more present with it, more open to it. It's really very powerful to see.

So I mentioned that nun who started the school. We're getting to know more and more of these amazing women—nuns who have probably been nuns since they were young girls, so their only education is from other nuns. They can read and write, they read the suttas, they read Pali, and they study the Buddhist texts.

And in some ways, the nunneries serve almost like a safety net for society, particularly for poor young girls who have nowhere else to go.

We've met at least eight such places now. There are many nunneries throughout the country, but among them you find these remarkable ones where the head nun or one of the women will suddenly have this vision that she needs to start a school to help these children.

Many of the nunneries take in very small little girls, either orphans or children whose parents come from the surrounding villages near Yangon and beg the nuns to take their daughters. They know the nuns can give them a better education, or at least make sure they have food. And so the nuns take them in.

One nunnery sits right next door to where we stay. It's packed, absolutely crowded. Four sisters run it. Two years ago they had about twenty little girls. The next year we visited, there were thirty. Where are you going to put them?

Every night they do their chanting for about half an hour—this is something all nuns and monks do. The sound carries over the wall from the same meditation center where I was staying. Some women yogis from Indonesia, I believe, were hearing these young voices chanting every night. One of them got so inspired that she went around to look, and she happened to be fairly wealthy. She saw these little girls and spoke with the

head nuns through a translator. They told her, "Yes, and we're about to go back to our home village in the Delta, which has been devastated by the cyclone. We know they're going to ask us to take ten or fifteen more little girls. There's nowhere else for them to go."

And this woman said, "Well, you need a new building, don't you?" And she gave them the money to build one. That's how it works. That's how dāna works.

There are many places like that, and it's not even a school yet—just a nunnery. But there are many where suddenly the head nun will just get it in her head: "I need to start a school." Amazing women doing all of this entirely on generosity.

Let me tell you about one: Daw Sumanacari from the Appamata School. She's actually the nun who made mohinga for me many years ago. She's been around where we stay for quite some time, living in a small nunnery with maybe fifteen women. Frankly, she always seemed a little depressed, to tell you the truth. We never really thought much about it, though I suppose I'd feel depressed too living like that.

Then maybe two or three years ago, she came over to speak with the two Western nuns I knew. Many friends had been sending money through these nuns, and we'd been offering it to other nuns in need. She knew about this—it had been going on for a few years. Usually people don't come asking for money. You simply go and offer. It's a beautiful thing.

But she came over toward the end of our time there, and she seemed very intense, very determined. She said, "I have to start a school. I really want to start a school. It's what I need to do. I've been meditating on it."

I honestly didn't think she could pull it together, but we offered what we could—enough to just get started, enough to build a little lean-to shack. You should see how it works. They build one structure, then add a small thatch roof, find a bunch of chairs, and the next thing you know there are a hundred children there. I'm not exaggerating. Somehow they find the money each month to hire regular teachers.

It's not a lot, God knows. So the next year we came back, and that's what she'd done. They'd torn down the building that all the nuns were living in, and they'd all moved into this one tiny other little building so that they could build this kind of thatched roof place. She had over a hundred young students. She decided to do it just for the little boys and girls both in the area who were too poor to go to the government school—the ones in grades one to four, because the others walked farther, like half an hour, to this other place I talked about. But in the rainy season, it's too hard for the little ones.

So she had started this, and then she'd found support from some other Burmese companies. There are some Burmese companies that actually have a specific wing that just goes around offering dāna to worthy causes—to start schools like this, to pay for teachers for three years in a row. Then in the fourth year, the nuns have to find funding themselves. They have to have community support. But it's like a whole company where half of what they do is that, and the rest is like being in a cosmetics import firm or something. It's really amazing.

So the next year, anyway, she came back and was talking to us again through Ayya Yani, who speaks Burmese, so we could really get the translation. She looked transformed, Daw Sumanichari. This was two years ago, I think. Her face was bright. She was beaming. And this is a translation of what she said. She said, "The idea to start the school last year was so urgent in my mind that I couldn't eat or sleep well. And now it's happening. And so I'm no longer worried, even though I now must work so hard"—you know, and they demolished their building—"and we have to work so hard to find support every month for the teacher's salaries, for the equipment, to get wells, to get toilets, and take care of all the kids." She said, "But all the energy is for these children and for the school. And so my mind is calm and happy." And she looked it—her mind was calm and happy. She was radiant.

It's really interesting, the contagious quality of these wholesome states and their onward-leadingness. This is Ajahn Pasanno, writing in *The Island*, commenting on this sutta: "A naturalness to the training, to the cultivation of these basic qualities, leads naturally to deeper qualities. When one is generous and delights in giving, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyful. This supports the development of virtue, as a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. Meditation progresses more smoothly, and the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are."

That's the difference in the quality of happiness, of upliftingness, of the wholesome mind—it's onward-leading. It makes it suitable. It sets the conditions for seeing things as they really are. Different from the happiness of getting what we want. It's just different. So much more contagious. And it is contagious, that happiness.

I guess last year, a group of people had brought in a bunch of money, like maybe twenty-five thousand dollars, and you had to go to money changers. Sometimes now you can change in banks, but then, no, there was no way. So you work it out. Friends we know would get the money changer in, and they would come with these stacks. I mean, because Burmese money is big, so at that point you'd have—I'm not kidding—giant

stacks of money like this that they would bring in. And it's all counting it. It's a whole process. It takes half the day. And it just feels sleazy, you know. It feels like you're doing a drug deal or something. We're giving our money and they're looking at it, because if there's one little dot on the bill, forget it, they won't take it. So they're looking at it through eyeglasses and these machines. And then they give us these crummy bills that completely fall apart if you touch them. One time I tried to joke with them and said, "No, we want good ones too."

Anyway, you're there all day, and we're just doing it, but it's just normal—that's what happens. These kind of youngish men with their phones, every two minutes getting a phone call, going on, doing all their business and going through the thing. So okay, we did that and left.

At the bed and breakfast, the woman who was kind of hosting it does a lot for us. She and her family are very big supporters of many of the monasteries. So later she called Ayya Yani a couple days later and said, "Okay, I have the rest of the money that hadn't quite come through, and someone donated three hundred and fifty dollars to bring it up to a thousand."

We thought, oh, it's a bed and breakfast where many yogis stay when going to practice. It must have been someone staying there, but we didn't know who. We went back and asked her—we kind of had to pull it out of her—and she said, "Oh, it was the money changers."

They had been listening to us talking. We were just chatting back and forth about how this money was going to be building toilets for these nuns—just like that, ordinary conversation. And so they donated three hundred and fifty dollars.

Stuff like that blows us away. And you let it in, because it's like—we call it a little rapture moment, where we get a little chill. "Oh, that's just so beautiful." Let it in, because it also brightens the mind and heart. These things are happening all the time. I'll stop—I have ten million more examples, but I'll stop.

The most important aspect of generosity, again, is the quality in our mind and heart. It's the motivation, not the action. It's not like the more you give, the better the generosity is. It's not about that at all. It's about the open-handedness, the open-heartedness in the mind and heart.

There's a great story illustrating this about Anathapindika from the time of the Buddha. Anathapindika was known as the Buddha's most devoted and generous supporter. He's mentioned often in the suttas. He's the one who, when he first met the Buddha, was so overcome with faith that he went and bought at a huge price this beau-

tiful park called the Jeta Grove. If you read the suttas, many, many of them take place in this Jeta Grove that he presented to the Buddha and his Sangha. Anathapindika is like the symbol of generosity for men—there's also an equivalent female figure.

This story about him illustrates how the importance of generosity lies in the motivation, not the outward appearance. One of the things Anathapindika did when monks were dwelling nearby was send rice gruel every morning, and then for lunch he would have "five hundred monks," they would say. Andy Olendzki, the scholar at BCBS, says five hundred means "a lot"—it just means a lot of monks and nuns. So every day he would invite all these monks to his home for the main meal, prepare this incredible offering, and serve it himself out of the generosity of his heart.

The king of that area, King Pasenadi, who was also a follower and disciple of the Buddha, heard of this and wanted to imitate him. If Anathapindika could do it, he could do it. So he also set up to offer alms every day to five hundred monks. But after a while, he learned from his servants that the monks would come and accept the offering, but then take the food into the city and give it to their supporters, who would then offer it back to them.

King Pasenadi wondered, "Why are they doing that? This food is very tasty—it's really better than his."

The Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, the courtiers and servants who distributed the food did it without any inner feeling. They were just following orders, as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court or just doing anything. The Buddha said they lacked faith and had no love for the monks. Many of them even thought the monks were just parasites living by the labor of the working population. When anything was given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it—even when the meal was made of the most delicious food.

In contrast, the faithful householders of the city, like Anathapindika and Visakha—the generous woman—welcomed the monks, regarded them as spiritual friends, truly appreciated them. A humble meal provided by a friend would be worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in the real spirit of generosity.

One last little quotation from the Buddha about this: "Even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or cup into a village pool or pond, thinking, 'May whatever animals live here feed on this,' that would be an act of generosity, a source of merit."

I love that, because it captures the sense that generosity is just that spirit which connects and offers freely in whatever we're doing. And at times, when there's enough steadiness of wisdom to see, we can incline our mind toward the wholesome in this way—in ways that really strengthen the wholesome and help purify the mind from *kilesa*, just in little ways.

It has to be sincere. But even something like holding the door for someone—and I don't want to make things crazy around here the next few days, so don't get all worked up trying to do generous things for each other, okay? Giving each other generous silence is itself a great act of generosity, okay?

So I'll give a small example, a really small one. Just when you hold the door for someone—not the thing where you stand there for forty-five minutes and then they have to hurry because you're holding the door. I don't mean that. But when you do it spontaneously, having the awareness in your mind of just appreciation: "Oh yes, may this be helpful for that person." Something like that, rather than being thoughtless about it.

Do you see what I mean? It's such a source of happiness for us. It's not like you're looking at them saying, "See what I'm doing?" No, that's not it. Just little things, you know? You're standing in the food line and there's only two oranges and there's seven people behind you. You really want an orange, but you know, I can let it go, let them have an orange. No one else even knows. But you could have such a sense of appreciating that act of generosity. It's really an uplifting, a purification in the mind in that moment. It's a letting go of clinging and self-cherishing. It's so little, you know? But it brings happiness just to do it. And the more that we practice it, the more the mind inclines in that direction. It's a very active way of purifying.

So as I said, there's the three times that the act of generosity brings the happiness of purity, the happiness of upliftment. And that's in the first thought of it, the first motivation. Let it in, feel it. In the act of doing it, doing whatever act of generosity it is with awareness. Really doing it consciously, not making a big show—as I said, no one else knows—but just really bringing the same awareness to the generosity as we might bring to the craving or the aversion.

Don't be afraid you're going to get into egotism about it. You might. So what? Awareness will notice that. We don't have to be afraid of it because we'll notice and it'll feel different immediately. And this is one of the ways we see how kilesas cloud. So you don't take the orange and you just kind of feel a moment of happiness in the recollec-

tion of the act of generosity. It's lovely. And then later, "I am so incredibly generous." It doesn't feel the same at all. You don't need to beat yourself up about it. Just pay attention. Wisdom will let you know the difference. You don't have to figure it out.

So this act of reflecting on past acts of your own generosity—and also your own conscious sila, non-harming conduct—is something the Buddha recommends. And I think maybe we don't do it that often. It's a real conscious use of wise thought, conscious contemplation.

In little ways, I think when I was in the last few years of my parents' lives, I spent a lot of time taking care of them. And it was easy to go into feelings of, you know, you can never do enough. Whatever you do, it's never going to be enough, because you can't make it better. So it could be easy to go into feelings of either exhaustion or just feeling bad I couldn't do enough, my mind settling on the times that I left instead of staying, and why couldn't I have moved to Atlanta and lived there—whatever. The mind can go there with our tendency to self-judge and self-blame.

But try the other. Try going to the sense of really acknowledging and appreciating all the actions of care and generosity. It's not the same thing as saying, "I'm so great." But it's just letting in, oh, those things that I did, those times—it brings in a sense of metta, a sense of upliftment. You can tell the difference, and it actually makes one happier and more willing to offer more, to do more. And it changes the whole dynamic. Just reflecting on it is really very powerful.

So this is the sutta—well, just this one aspect. The Buddha is talking about different reflections. But he says this about reflecting on your own past conscious virtuous actions. I'm going to read the one on generosity; it's the same. He's talking to lay people, talking to Mahanama, a layman. "There's the case where you recollect your own generosity."

"It is a gain, a great gain for me, that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms."

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, is not overcome with aversion, is not overcome with delusion.

I'll read it again because this is the immediate moment-to-moment practice: At any time when one is recollecting their own generosity, their mind at that moment is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her

mind, her heart heads straight based on generosity. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma.

"Mahanama, you should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children." Basically any time.

This can feel like cheating because it's such a happy practice. Sitting and thinking about how generous I've been—doesn't that kind of go the wrong way from what we think we should be doing? But try it and see what happens. In any moment, your mind then is not overcovered by greed, hatred, or delusion.

Amazing.

I think I'll end there. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 115

Perception, Papañca and Personality View

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines the process by which fleeting thoughts become the seemingly solid experience of self. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings about perception (saññā), feeling tone (vedanā), and mental proliferation (papañca), she traces how a simple sense contact can spiral into elaborate stories of 'me' and 'mine.' Through vivid examples—including a meditator mistaking her own breathing for someone walking downstairs—Wilson demonstrates how unexamined perception leads to suffering, while clear seeing brings immediate relief.

Wilson explores sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view or identity view), showing how this sense of self arises moment to moment through grasping rather than existing as something permanent. She draws on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche to illuminate how thoughts, even those accompanied by strong emotions, are ultimately 'like wind roaring in empty space.' The talk addresses why we cling to familiar personality patterns even when painful, and why moments of simplicity and non-fabrication (atammayatā) can feel unsettling.

The practical invitation is to observe how personality view constructs and deconstructs throughout each day, noticing how different 'selves' arise with different sense contacts. Rather than fighting thoughts or trying to eliminate the self, Wilson encourages turning attention to awareness itself—discovering that refuge lies not in personality but in the spacious awareness that can hold all experience without being caught by it.

So tonight what I want to talk about is this experience of thought—thought, perception, papañca, and personality view. It's all a train that follows. It's something that I find just so interesting, so fascinating, and we certainly all spend a lot of time in the realm of thought.

To begin with, it's important to remember—I know we've said it—but so often in meditation we come to feel like we're in some kind of a battle with thought. We feel that the better we're meditating, the less thought we have, and that the goal is to somehow get rid of thought. Which of course it's not. It's to simply understand what thought is, how it's useful, how it functions, and how it gets us so confused—through bringing awareness to thought rather than fighting it.

From Tejaniya: "When you feel disturbed by the thinking mind, remind yourself you're not practicing to prevent thinking, but rather to recognize and acknowledge thinking whenever it arises. If you are not aware, you cannot know that you are thinking. The fact that you recognize that you are thinking means you're aware." Isn't that good news? Remember, it doesn't matter how many times the mind thinks, wanders off, or gets annoyed about something, as long as you become aware of it. I know you don't believe that, but that's where we're starting from.

To begin just by talking about thought—what's so amazing to me, the longer I practice, is how powerfully we get caught in thinking, how powerfully we suffer from thoughts. Thought can be very useful, but how it runs our life! Do you have any sense what I'm talking about? It's amazing. And we get so immediately into the thought, the content. What we've been trying to point to, and you're getting it, but I just want to emphasize it, is to turn to the awareness and see what is actually a thought.

Of all the sense experiences, thought is the most ephemeral, isn't it? A thought is just a thought. That sounds like nothing, but that's actually an incredibly freeing insight.

So right now, deliberately think a thought: "There's a deer in the grass." Just think that thought. What was it? It came from nowhere, it's gone. Probably it's gone, unless I said that and it came back again. That thought is just nothing really, isn't it? It's just like smoke, like nothing. A thought energy—all thoughts are just like that in terms of the energy of thought. They come together with strong emotion or not, but when we're lost in the content we don't recognize a thought. All thoughts just come from wherever they exist and they dissolve like clouds back into space.

I can't remember when it was, but I remember the feeling of the first time that it really hit me on the insight level. I was all caught up in whatever the heck, and then: "Oh, it's just a thought." Just looking at it, it has no more anything than "the deer's in the meadow." It's just a thought. As Joseph Goldstein's teacher, Munindraji, always used to say: a thought of your mother is not your mother. Just a thought.

So we begin by exploring that, but it's so hard to believe. This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "This mind is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning"—have you ever noticed that?—"triggered off by circumstances, and unless seen through with wisdom, they quickly take root and proliferate, reinforcing the habitual predominance of hatred or attachment in the mind."

Can you relate to that so far?

"Yet, however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into the emptiness. Once you recognize the intrinsic nature of the mind, these thoughts that seem to appear and disappear all the time can no longer fool you. As clouds form, last a while, and then dissolve back in the empty sky, so deluded thoughts arise, remain a while, and then vanish in the emptiness of mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

Don't try to think about that too much, but just take it as a possibility. Just like that thought—"the deer's in the meadow"—it's gone. Nothing. Where did it go? Wrong question. There's no where. It's gone. Nothing at all has happened.

Somebody said at the end of the month-long retreat a year or two ago, thinking along those lines: "Oh, on this month, every day, so many thoughts, so much is going on in the mind, go through so many mind worlds." Don't you?

And then at the end of the month, I realized nothing really happened. In the whole month. Nothing really happened. It's like that. Just to open the possibility to look at a thought as a thought.

So then, again, it's amazing how thoughts get so solid that we can suffer so much from them. I mean, they're useful too. If we understand thought, we can use thought. We're not hating it. We want to understand it. But how do they get so solid? And how do thoughts get so solidly creating the story and the sense of me?

The word in Pali, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, is often translated as personality view or identity view. Steve has mentioned a few times the story of me being created. It's just thoughts. But it feels so solid.

So what I want to take us through—and of course it's much more subtle than I could talk about, but just to give a sense—is the way the Buddha described this process. We don't have to be on retreat to see it. We can see it going on in various ways all the time. But just to begin to tune in, to see how thoughts get so taken for solid and create what seems like a sense of me, and we believe the whole thing because it's unexplored, unexamined.

The place we begin in trying to describe all this is the moment of perception. Remember Steve talked about perception last night? Any time there's a sense door experience—the way the Buddha described it, say, seeing: dependent on the eye working, and forms being present, eye consciousness arises. When these three things come together—your eyes open and working, some form there, consciousness—that moment of eye consciousness is seeing. That meeting is called contact. We're not going to see all of that; we just become aware of seeing.

In that moment of seeing, perception automatically arises, as Steve was explaining. This is just happening every moment. The perception could be "room" or "person" or "bird" or "color"—whatever the perception is, it arises spontaneously. And also, at the same time, arises *vedanā*, that felt sense. It's very subtle: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. By the time we're naming it, that's already another perception. But these are just happening all the time. Seeing, the perception "a bird," pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. You don't see that clearly, but maybe it just feels a little nice, a little not—no big deal.

So starting with perception: what we perceive, we think about. That's just normal. And it's useful in that that's how we construct our world. It's not like it's a problem.

When I hit the bell at a certain time, we all agree, "Oh, thank God, it's the end of the sitting." We're thinking about it, but that's just the perception of that sound recognized as "bell." And it places us in this time of day, all together in a meditation retreat here at Spirit Rock. Our whole world can come out of that perception and the thoughts about it. It's useful. If we didn't have some kind of agreed perception, the bell would ring for the talk and—what's that sound? Bell? What does that mean? Where am I?

Have you ever woken up—if you travel a lot—I have a friend who says he actually likes these moments where he'll wake up and just have no clue in the world where he is, what year it is, sometimes even who he is. The perception isn't recognizing anything. But the delusion isn't making something up. You just go, "I don't know."

So, anyway, it's useful. That's what I'm going to say. Perception and the thoughts that come from it can be very useful.

And as we've been describing all along, when we ask what's the problem with the kilesas—besides the fact that they don't feel nice—the biggest problem is that when a kilesa is present in the moment, in the conscious moment of mind and consciousness at the moment of contact, we're not recognizing it. It actually distorts the perception. We perceive wrongly. We've talked about this. And we don't even recognize that we perceive wrongly.

Then the Buddha makes this little list: what we perceive, saññā, we think about, citta. All the thoughts about it, and the more we think about it, those thoughts kind of solidify into what he calls a view, diṭṭhi, of "yes, this is so, this is how it is." And then that leads to more thinking, thought, and action. So whether it's accurate perception or not, this is the process that happens.

Let me give you an example from a good friend of mine. At the last retreat I taught, someone who comes to a lot of retreats wrote me a note saying, "Please tell this story," but it didn't fit. So I said, "You have to come to another retreat." He's not here, so I'm telling it now. But anyway, it's a great story to delineate all of this.

A good friend of mine in Switzerland told me that many years ago she was sitting her first meditation retreat with Ajahn Sumedho. This was perhaps twenty, thirty years ago. At that time, there weren't Vipassana meditation centers in Switzerland, so they rented these big summer camp houses where they send school children for the summer. They're big old houses with lots of rooms, but only used in the summer—old, built of creaky wood, not insulated or very well built, very noisy.

At this particular retreat, the room they were using for the meditation hall was on what we would call the second floor, and the room immediately below, the same size on the ground floor, was the room they were using for walking meditation. She was sitting during a scheduled sitting—a formal schedule which you're supposed to follow. So she's in the scheduled sitting, following the breath, and feeling, kind of for the first time, "Finally, I can find the breath." It's just getting a little bit quiet.

And then, as I said, it was a really creaky house. You could hear everything. She starts to hear these creaks, and somebody walking downstairs in the walking room. You just can't do it quietly. Immediately she feels this aversion, which she didn't recognize of course, but it's: "They're ruining my samadhi. It's getting so quiet. What are they doing walking during the sitting time?" This is a very scheduled retreat—you're not supposed to walk during the sitting time. Creak, creak, creak. She's getting all worked up about it.

Being that it was this part of Switzerland where you follow the schedule—that's just what you do—I've been with another friend when the train was three minutes late. I am not exaggerating. "Well, this never used to happen." Three minutes late! We're glad if the train even comes.

So she's hearing the creaks. Every time the creak comes, it feeds the aversion, strengthening: "This is not the way to do it. You're not supposed to walk during the meditation time." But she was there. She wasn't going to leave because the teacher was there and you don't leave.

Finally, nothing else to do but try to give it up and go back to the breath. She managed to do that, to feel her breath. The mind calmed down a minute. And then, when she wasn't thinking about it, when she actually got a little more steady awareness going, she noticed that she was actually leaning against the wall. When she took a breath, her back hit the wall, and that was what was making the noise.

So you see the whole process right there: saññā, the perception, unpleasant vedanā—which might have been the sound but might have been the thought—the ruined samadhi, all the thoughts about it really hardening. And that takes like that amount of time. "This isn't right, this isn't the way things are supposed to be."

And then her whole background, you know, of being Swiss—it's all right there. The whole sense of "me" and "this is who I am" and "this is what's right."

And then steady awareness, without looking for something, and the perception cleared. The aversion dissolved and the shift of perception showed what was really going on. So once she saw clearly what that accurate perception was—"Oh, that's from me breathing"—well, do you think she kept on being angry at the imaginary person walking downstairs? You don't have to try and get rid of it. It's gone, right? Because it doesn't make any sense, because that's not what's happening.

That's exactly the process, both ways, that's going on for us all the time. When the Buddha talked about the hallucination of perception, the three characteristics—when we don't recognize the constantly changing nature of every moment of experience, when we don't recognize the unreliable nature, meaning we think we can land in this thing and it'll make us happy, when we don't recognize the impermanent and we don't recognize the non-self nature—it's not because we're stupid. It's not because we're just ignoring. It's because we really are perceiving so frequently, so inaccurately, without having a clue that that's what's going on. It's really called hallucination or perversion of perception.

So what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate. And that becomes, just like that, the story of "me."

This is the Dalai Lama's teaching: all of our difficulties come through mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience and true knowledge—just recognizing accurately. I talk about this all the time, but it's so amazing to me, the power of it.

So I think when we're really talking about what insight is, what right view is—remember I said the first night, right view, I really like it because it's seeing accurately—I feel that insight is really a shift of perception. So you could say that my friend had an

insight: "Oh, it's not that. It's this making that sound." And then if the steady awareness keeps going, you can see the whole process. "Oh, how the mind did all of that." The insight comes simply from the shift of perception that's enabled to occur through steady, non-judging awareness, as best as we can do. It allows us to recognize accurately.

So the way the Buddha described this whole process of getting lost in thought and view: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises." And this goes for all the other senses, including the mind. "The meeting of the three is sense contact. With contact as condition, feeling arises"—vedana. What one feels, that one perceives. We feel it, we perceive it—happens at the same time, really. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates, one mentally proliferates. I'm not making this up; this is from the suttas. One complicates, one mentally proliferates with associations, with memories, with the whole nine yards—okay, he didn't say that. "With these proliferations, with these complications as the source, the mind, the heart, is beset. It's assailed by complications, by trouble."

Can you get a sense of that? Can you think of one remote example of when that happened to you in the last half an hour? It's not personal. This is just what the mind does.

So what we perceive, we think about. When the perception is inaccurate and when it's colored by kilesa, the thinking is colored by the inaccurate assumption and the kilesa, and it just explodes into a whole story. And so the antidote, the understanding, is again the accurate perception that simply cuts through the confusion.

So in terms of this hallucination of perception, these complications of mind in terms of creating that identity view, that personality view through thought moment to moment—I want to take us into an exploration, investigating this sense of personality view. Not starting by thinking "there is no self."

So somehow I have to figure out how there is no self and think about it, because that's the whole approach—it's just thinking about it. We're trying to understand something, but those thoughts are still coming off of an inaccurate perception, a wrong perception.

All kinds of thoughts arise. When I recognize not-self or anattā, if my self vanishes, how do I find the car keys? How do I remember where I live? If there's no self, how do I function? It can seem silly, but we can really get caught up in this. Or we think if everything's annihilated, we won't care about anything. How will we function? As if

there's some solid self and we're going to have some big bang experience somewhere down the road, and the self is going to explode. And then there won't be a self and everything will be different.

Well, all that shifts is our perception and the resultant thoughts, views, actions, and understandings. Reality doesn't change. That's what's so far out. Impermanence is already the nature of things. It's not like we go from permanence and somehow everything falls apart—it's already all falling apart. We just don't recognize that.

When we perceive accurately, it may be scary at first, but we come into an ease and harmony. Just like my friend recognizing where the sound was coming from, all that fighting and hullabaloo—what will I do?—drops away. It's like, "Oh, this is what's happening." Just at ease. You can like it or not like it, but this is simply what's happening. So much simpler.

In beginning to explore and recognize this sakkāya-diṭṭhi, this sense of personality view, we can explore rather than try to get rid of it or pretend it's not there or hate it. Explore it. It's an experience that arises from moment to moment and passes away just like everything else.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, the Thai teacher I think we've mentioned, liked to say—and this is one of my favorite lines—"The sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping or clinging in the mind." All conditions arise due to causes. So the sense of self, personality view, the thoughts of "me," that felt sense of "me," simply arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. And when the grasping stops, it falls back away. This is going on all the time.

The Buddha, in one sutta, talked about the whole way consciousness works as being like a magic show. He says it's like having a magician at the crossroads back in rural India, performing all these magic tricks. When you're watching from outside, it's amazing—how do they do it? But once you get behind and see the tricks, it's just not amazing anymore, is it? "Oh, that's how they do it, okay." All the magic's gone, but you see how it is.

It's exactly the same with consciousness when sakkāya-diṭṭhi is operating, when personality view is present. We don't even recognize it as an assumption—it just seems like that's how it is. "I'm this personality. That's how I am, for better or worse." And it's an assumption. We may work really hard to change our personality and get it better, but we're still assuming that's what we are. We don't really stop to look, and it's so solid precisely because it's not examined or explored.

Ramana Maharshi said, "Ego, or the idea of self, or personality view"—you could put any of those words in there—"is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look closely and the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there." So also with this sense of separate self, personality view, ego—so long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it's found not to really exist.

And that's really the function and the result, the wisdom that results from the steadiness of awareness simply exploring what actually presents itself.

One of the ways our inaccurate perception strengthens into thoughts and then into views is that we stop recognizing what we believe. Instead, we start looking for what we think we already know. So instead of having an open, receptive mind that just notices whatever's presenting itself, whether small or big, the attention becomes unconsciously skewed to recognize what it's looking for, what's familiar—in big examples and small examples.

And I remember all the times I've been clumsy and I'm not a good athlete. And I literally went back to the fifth grade when they put me in the remedial gym class—for those who couldn't throw a softball more than thirty feet or something. I mean, really. But it was with friends, it didn't really traumatize me. I didn't care about gym, luckily. But my thoughts are back there. And right away, that's my whole life. It was forty years ago, and yet here's my whole personality—this clumsy person who's not an athlete—and here I am.

And then at some point I stepped off the tub, and I looked at the curtain, and it looked okay. I looked around and thought, "Oh, it's a nice day." And I went outside and started walking, and I saw the beautiful hills, and I started walking faster and enjoying the feeling of the body, and I thought, "I really love hiking."

And where's the clumsy guy? Gone.

So now we have the person who loves hiking and nature. But that's equally just arising. And we wouldn't normally experience it that way. You wouldn't say, "Boy, that sense of self really passed away. This is a different one." But it was.

And so we start to see this—just this simple thing of exploring in our own experience, just watching how these constructions form. And we're watching them in the relative sense, noticing how sense contact triggers thought, how thought triggers memory, how memory reinforces a sense of identity, how that identity colors everything that follows. We're seeing the mechanics of it.

But then, if at any point we bring that deeper quality of attention—the awareness that's looking for what's actually here—we start to notice: Where is this one who's clumsy? Where is this one who loves hiking? And in that looking, it's not that we find nothing. We find experience. We find sensation, thought, memory, preference. But the solid "me" at the center of it—the one who supposedly persists through all these different arisings—that's what we can't locate.

This is what the practice gradually reveals. Not through thinking about it, but through this patient, curious, sustained attention to our actual moment-to-moment experience.

I can't put up the damn shower curtain, and it's hopeless, and I need someone to do things for me, and it just goes on and on. It feels really real. It feels really solid. That's who I am.

And if we're not seeing clearly, we miss that it's just thoughts and emotions. What's happening right now? I'm not back in the rehab gym class. I'm just standing on the tub with my fingers a little stiff. All these thoughts and moods are coming up. That's all that's happening. It's not the whole story of my life. It's not even me. It's just what's happening.

But as long as we don't see thought as thought, we don't bring our attention into the present moment—just what's happening, like that. It might still be unpleasant, but it's fine. But when we get sucked into not seeing thought as thought, when we get caught in the story—if I hadn't even been watching that, you know how that could really take hold. You could go into whatever. It could really take hold—one that's even more intense than that. And then we can really drop into "this is who I am."

Sogyal Rinpoche said we get into so much confusion and pain by letting ourselves get lost in whatever happens. You project a thought, then the second thought believes the first thought. Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is by this time already a reality. By the time the tenth thought comes, it believes the fifth one has always been an actuality.

Can you notice that? It's all so solid. And if you turn around and just look—what is it? Thought. They're just smoke. They dissolve into nothing when we turn and look.

And so this is what we can really do. Over and over, turn and look and see. The personality view is arising and passing. It's not the same for a few moments together.

Notice tonight, tomorrow—just for fun, not with aversion (well, you can't help it if there's aversion)—but just for fun, see how many different stories of self come triggered by what sense contact. What thoughts come? See how some are more solid than others. Just see the construction of this magic show, and how when the awareness is a little bit steady and you see it coming and you see it fade away, you say, "Oh, nothing really happened." Then you think, "But that's true. You were in a rehab gym class in the fifth grade. That was true."

That's got nothing to do with it. That's gone. If it's true or not true, I don't even know. Am I making it up? I don't know. It's gone. What's happening right now is where we're going to be able to be with accurate perception.

Ajahn Sumedho says we create ourselves with our thoughts, then we attach to the thoughts and believe the thoughts, and we don't let in—this is where we get the selective perception. When we're attached to one personality belief view, we don't let in the perceptions that don't fit with that.

Notice how you do that. Notice if you ever happen to have self-judgment during this week. And even if you're aware of it, but only sort of aware of it, really the thoughts are being believed, right? Say you're judging yourself about whatever.

It could start from anything. I noticed one time on a retreat, when I could backtrack and see, I had gotten into the whole world of my entire life of self-judgment—back to all the things I'd done wrong and my bad personality traits and on and on. When I really traced it back, there had been a minimally painful sensation in my foot during walking meditation. Really minimally painful, and I wasn't really aware of it. So the aversion just kind of colored the perception, and then some thought or other came up about how I wasn't really doing it right. And then boom—gone into my whole life.

In that moment, when you're really believing that personality view, do you happen to remember all the things you did well in your life? No. And if it does come up, it's "yeah, but..." Like when I was talking about generosity practice—reflecting on generosity, reflecting on gratitude. If you're in a real self-judging personality view snit and you first start to do it, it's like, "Well, I did this really good thing." And then immediately: "Oh, you just did it because you wanted people to like you." Whatever you can come up with, it's going to be seen through that lens. Nothing else is believed.

But then the next day—like several people said today in groups—they have really good days and really bad days on retreat. You notice that? On the good days, whatever story it is about your life now, or about your spiritual life, or "I finally got this," or

"everything's so clear"—whatever it is—the next day it's all, as one yogi used to say to me, "gone to hell in a handbasket." I have no idea what that means, but it's very vivid. It's like: that yesterday, that was made up. This is how it is now.

But unexplored, we would still say it's all me. It's all the same me going through this. We don't notice that these are two completely different experiences. One completely went away—we don't notice that. The other arose due to other causes and conditions, but through the same kind of magic show of creating this sense of self.

So just to stop and look, to get interested in watching how the whole thing comes up—it really gets fascinating.

A friend of ours described this one time. She labels herself an aversive-type personality, and her friends tell her, yes, that's true, you are. So one time she was feeling particularly identified with that thought and that story, feeling bad about herself and all of that. She came to sit for the day somewhere, but she was aware of this train of thought going on: "Yes, I'm an aversive person. I'm an aversive person." So she was just watching her mind over a couple of sittings, watching what thoughts came and went, what moods came and went. She'd done quite some practice by this time.

And she said, yeah, it's true—quite some aversive thoughts came up. Maybe ten percent of the thoughts that came up. All other kinds of thoughts and moods and personality stories came: moments of generosity, of calm, of sleepiness—the whole show in an hour sitting. Each one, a different arising of personality view, of perception and thoughts, and the view "this is me," and all the attendant confusion and papañca. That's the word for proliferation—papañca. And then reacting to it and suffering from it, or liking it. But usually we don't quite notice how it comes together, goes away. Comes together, goes away.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho: "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit—my views, my feelings, and my opinions. I can get caught in that world, in that view of me that arises in consciousness. But if I recognize that happening, if I know that, then my refuge is no longer in being a person. I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or in my views and opinions. Then I can let go, or it just lets go naturally, and the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. It doesn't mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. In Buddhadhamma, the world is the world that we create in consciousness."

And this is like different worlds moment to moment. That's why we can be living in different worlds. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same as the world your mind creates.

But both of those worlds arise and cease. And that which is aware of the world arising and ceasing is bigger than it—it's transcending that world. So our refuge then is in this awareness rather than in trying to sustain our personality view or refined experiences in consciousness, because you can't do it. Our refuge becomes awareness rather than our personality.

Just notice if your mind is going, "I don't like that." It's not saying the personality goes away, but it stops being our refuge. And as we look more closely, we see it's not a solid thing anyway. It's really changing all the time.

As we look more closely into the magic show of the perceptions and the thoughts that come with them and the moods that come with them and all the thoughts, you might start to notice—see if this is true for you, it's certainly true in my experience—that when the train of thought and description comes together with a really strong emotion, the tendency is to think that it's more true, more real. Especially difficult emotions. I've noticed that part of the makeup of the emotion is the story: "It's always going to be this way." Have you noticed that? Even though you've seen it come and go twenty times already in the week, it comes again, and it's like, "Ah, it's always going to be this way, and it always has been that way." Even though I can remember times it wasn't there, it was really here submerged the whole time waiting to spring, right?

But it's not so. Just because a thought comes together with strong emotion definitely doesn't make it more true. If anything, it may make it less reliable. But we don't have to argue with it. Remember to turn our attention. Just turn our attention on and see.

Ajahn Sumedho again—he talks a lot about this, awareness of "it's like this." He talks a lot in this language and the personality view. So he says just notice you're really angry or really sad. Notice the difference between "I'm angry" or "my anger" versus "anger is like this." "My sadness is so unbearable. I'm so sad. I've been so sad all my life, or all week"—compare that to shifting the awareness to exploring how sadness is manifesting right now. Sadness is like this. An expression of, as Tejaniya would say, sadness is just nature. This is the nature of sadness. This is the nature of anger. This is the nature of clinging. When it's "my sadness," it's so much more difficult to be with.

So just trusting to turn the attention—and then we'll see, back to seeing this nature of thoughts. This is from Dilgo Khyentse again:

"Yet 'I' is just a thought. 'I'm so sad. I'm so angry. I'm so useless.' Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When a thought of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is that anger actually brandishing a weapon? Is it at the head of an army? Can it actually do things, crush them like a rock, carry things away like a violent river? No—anger, just like any other thought or feeling, has no definable true existence, not even a definite location in your body, speech, or mind."

You may feel tightness that is triggered by anger, but you can't actually locate the anger in your cheek anywhere. I love this last line: "It is just like a wind roaring in empty space."

When the feeling of strong, difficult emotion comes like anger, I can remember to turn my attention—oh, anger feels like this—and to say, let the wind roar in empty space. Awareness is bigger than the wind. It's bigger than the anger. Awareness can contain everything. I mean, it's not a thing, but it's like awareness can be with anything. So let the anger roar. The hand doesn't have to pick up a club and hit. And it roars, and we see it's really nothing.

"So instead of allowing these wild thoughts to enslave you, you can realize their essential emptiness, their essential ephemeral nature. If you see through the hatred within, you will discover there is not one single enemy left outside. Otherwise, even if you could overpower everyone in the whole world, your hatred would only grow stronger."

So examine the nature of hatred—or put any emotion in there. Examine the nature of anger.

Examine the nature of sadness, of greed, of happiness. You will find that it is no more than a thought. When you see it as it is, it will dissolve like a cloud in the sky.

Part of why the habit of our mind and perception resists this, if it does, is that sense of familiarity with personality, with belief, with the sense of me—the comfort of that. A lot of times we say, "Well, I don't want my personality, my sense of me to dissolve like a cloud in the sky."

Quite a few people have mentioned this, and many of us experience it. When you're practicing or you're in your daily life and the mind becomes peaceful, it becomes calm. There's no big story going on, no big sense of me. And often people come into this state thinking, "Nothing's happening." Kind of upset, kind of worried.

Or even more interesting is watching the mind do its thing—picking a perception and jumping on it, getting into this whole papañca of creating a suffering story. It brings a lot of energy and familiarity and a weird, twisted comfort. Because, well, thank God I'm back again. Even if I'm an angry me spinning this story, it's familiar, it's comfortable. We like this better than calm. "I thought I wanted peace, but I'm not so sure."

But we don't have to take it personally like that. Just watching the habit, the sense of self—when it goes away like that, it's very important to learn to feel comfortable. Ajahn Buddhadasa calls it, when just in the moment there's not a strong sense of self, he calls it voidness. That's the translation into English by Santikaro. It's kind of a weird translation. But let's just say those moments where you notice a personality of you just drops away.

And even if it's a difficult one—that whole self-judgment—and it just goes. People notice it just goes. It's not like you talk yourself out of it. The perception shifts. That's the insight. "Oh, it's just thought." It's gone. And in that moment, it's just kind of peace or contentment or quiet. There may be some seeing or hearing, whatever's going on. It's just peace.

Sometimes when it's really sudden and lasts a little bit, the mind can get scared. But more often it's just a sudden moment of peace, calmness, no personality view, nothing much going on. These moments, he says, generate a contentment with those moments. Really notice those little moments of experience. Not to grab onto them, for then we will, but just to notice personality of you coming together and going apart.

And when the sense of me as a failure is gone, notice it's really gone. It's not here now. Just notice it's just calm right now. Or there's a sense of happiness. I'm just feeling the breath or hearing the turkeys. That's just what's happening, nothing much.

And then notice our sense of dragging the past like a corpse: "But before I was feeling so worthless, and probably that's going to come again, and I don't want to get too comfortable with this because it's going to go away." Just notice that. That's another arising of personality view and going away.

It's really so important to let ourselves just touch this—you could call it emptiness, I like to call it the simplicity. The simplicity of the mind, the heart that's not concocting, that's not fabricating a whole sense of me or anything around whatever sense-door experience is happening. That's just landing here with what is without making any big story about it.

There's a Pali word that Ajahn Buddhadasa likes to point to: atammayatā. The best translation is "not fabricating," not concocting, really not constructing anything out of what's happening. So in that moment, it's like the mind, the heart, the awareness—it's at peace, it's independent. It's not affected by greed, hatred, or delusion.

Whatever's arising, it's met just as it is, and the mind just doesn't concoct anything around it. It's just the simplicity of being fully here in the present moment. You could call it the stillness of the non-reactive mind, but it's not the stillness of no experience. It's just the simplicity of things as they have come to be, and the deluded mind isn't making up a big story about it.

In some ways it's so simple we can't stand it, really. But that's it—just notice those moments of non-concocting, non-fabricating. Feel contentment with that.

Ajahn Sumedho also said once to a group of teachers—we were talking with him about how strongly we get sucked back into believing the personality view, all the different versions of it, and how we don't really trust these moments of simplicity, of non-concocting, of things as they are with no sense of self. We don't quite trust them. We think, "Okay, that came, but it's a fluke, it's a state, it's an experience—but really, this is who I am." Ajahn Sumedho, who worked a lot in Thailand and then extensively in the West, living in England and elsewhere, was saying that first, of course, one personality pattern that many of us really believe deeply is self-doubt, self-judgment. That's the one that gets under us, and we don't recognize it as a pattern arising—it's just the voice of how things are, telling us what we've done wrong.

He said—and this is his opinion only, but I think it's very interesting—that in his view, the biggest hindrance or obstacle for Westerners in their practice of awakening is that we have such a strong belief in our personalities. We really rely on them, take refuge in our personalities. We may hate them, but we take refuge in them. We may not even understand them clearly because we don't see their constantly changing nature. There are patterns, recognizable patterns to each of our personalities, just as our bodies are recognizable from each other. But it's all just patterns, shifting patterns.

So he says, we have such a strong belief in our personalities, we take refuge in them, and the magic show of the personality view becomes our reference point. That's where we land. And so when there's a moment of non-concocting or just simplicity, when you taste that purity, the flavor of the pure heart and mind, you think, "Well..." So easily we slip back into, "That can't be true for me." We don't believe it. We believe our personality view, and the personality view says we don't trust our moments of purity, of momentary freedom, of recognizing things as they are. "Okay, maybe, I don't know—but this self-hatred, that's really real."

Just take that in. If it makes sense to you, let it in. If it confuses you, let it go. But I think it's really very interesting.

So coming back to this simplicity of the non-concocting mind: in a moment when papañca is not being created, all this proliferation—one time the Buddha said the end of papañca is the end of suffering. Or there's that line from the Four Quartets by T.S. Eliot: "A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything."

Because in that moment, just the simplicity of non-concoction, there's no self-referencing. You're not referencing this sound back to me, this mood back to me—it's just what it is. Nothing more and nothing less. There's no comparing, there's no remembering or extending it into past or future, there's no referencing it back to me, there's no judging. It's just seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, mood—just what it is. A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.

The thinking mind, the personality of you, thinks, "I don't want to give up everything." But the reality of pure perception, accurate perception, is that nothing's being given up. In this moment, this is all there is. It's just recognizing it accurately. Nothing's being given up but our confusion.

I want to end with a quotation from the Buddha. My friend Fred shared it in Switzerland, but I couldn't use it there because the language is too complicated. I hope we can mostly understand it here. I like it. This is the Buddha talking about how his mind works, which isn't something you'd often hear. He refers to himself as the Tathagata.

He says: "The Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight." Do you get a sense of what that means? There's just seeing. He does not conceive of a separate visible thing. He does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight. He does not conceive of something unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer.

And then he goes through all the senses in the same way: "He does not conceive of a cognizable thing apart from cognition. He does not conceive of something not recognized. He does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing."

He does not conceive about one who cognizes.

"Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathāgata is such in regard to all phenomena seen, heard, sensed, and cognized."

Do you get a sense of what that means? It's just—there's seeing, and that's it. It's another way of expressing that famous Bāhiya Sutta we've been exploring: "In the seen, there is only the seen. In the heard, there is only the heard."

But here he's saying that when there's seeing, the Tathāgata's mind isn't conceiving about something else that isn't being seen. It's not referring back to "me, I'm seeing." It's not thinking, "Here's something seeing and there's something to be seen." It's just not making any distinctions.

The whole experience of seeing is everything and all. There's nothing else to think about in that moment. A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.

And in that moment, the mind, the heart is pure. The pure heart and mind in that moment is free from suffering.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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There is a poem by Rengetsu, a Japanese nun:

She saw that arising arose, abided, and fell away.
She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away.
Then she knew there was nothing more than this,
no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held,
nothing to lean upon at all,
and no one leaning.
And she opened the clenched fist in her mind
and let go
and fell into the midst of everything.

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Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 116

Three Jobs of a Yogi

Carol Wilson · 1h01

In this foundational talk, Carol Wilson offers a clear and accessible framework for understanding meditation practice through what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls "the three jobs of a yogi": starting with right view (sammā diṭṭhi), meeting each moment with awareness, and maintaining continuity throughout the day. She emphasizes that right view begins not as philosophical knowledge but as the attitude we bring to each moment of awareness—recognizing experience accurately without the distortions of wanting, aversion, or self-referential thinking.

Wilson illuminates the distinction between mere consciousness of experience and actual awareness, using the simple example of feeling one's hand to demonstrate how naturally available awareness is when we remember to notice. She explains how suffering arises not from experience itself but from our relationship to it—the habitual patterns of grasping at pleasant experiences and pushing away unpleasant ones that the Buddha called the "second dart." Through the story of the Buddha's 45 years of engaged teaching after awakening, she shows that freedom doesn't mean escaping life's difficulties but transforming our understanding of and response to them.

The talk includes practical guidance on noticing the quality of mind present in each moment of awareness, using personal stories like mindlessly eating cookies on retreat to illustrate how we can appear mindful while missing the crucial element of balanced awareness. Wilson closes with an inspiring letter from Mingyur Rinpoche describing his wandering retreat in the Himalayas, demonstrating how this simple practice of maintaining awareness leads to profound peace regardless of external circumstances.

So how are you doing? You dragged through the first day. That's great. Especially just for new people to know—everyone who's done lots of retreats before already knows—nothing's always, but the first day can be a bit difficult because you don't know what the heck you're doing, right? And you don't know why you came.

Well, I'm not really here to tell you why, but I'll try to talk a little bit, very simply I hope. I want to start by picking up on something Steve mentioned that Tejaniya sometimes talks about. It's just a way of trying to describe very simply why we practice, how we do it: the three jobs of a yogi. Yogi is shorthand for what we use for meditators, so we're all yogis here.

Do you remember what they are? Of course not. The first is knowing why we practice—right view. Then just meeting each moment with awareness. And the third job is the sense of steadiness, persistence, continuity. I just want to talk a little bit about each of those. It's actually relatively simple.

You might think right view—to start with right view, right understanding—it's both the beginning and you could say the ending of the path of awakening. If you've at all tuned into any kind of Buddhist teachings, to think right view, that's really, when we really understand the way things are, that understanding, that actual recognition of things as they have come to be on a deep level, is what frees our heart and mind from confusion, from greed, from aversion, from suffering. So how the heck can we start with that?

Right view has many, many levels of subtlety. But on the very first level, the way to talk about it here is a little sense of knowing the attitude, why we start this practice, why we're talking so much about the steadiness of awareness. What's the power of it? Why, really?

I like this definition of meditation as we're doing it: meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. That's really what we're doing—just experiencing mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. So on this level, the right understanding is the attitude we bring to each moment of awareness.

Right view, even in this way, right understanding, is not meant—I certainly don't mean it, and I'm sure the Buddha didn't—as a set of philosophical concepts or ideas that you should write down and remember. There is some learned knowledge, like what I'm talking about tonight if you haven't heard it, and that's a sense of secondhand information. Let's put it that way. The secondhand information just can incline us to be interested enough to explore. It's not that right view means you can list the Four Noble Truths and you can list anicca, dukkha, anattā—impermanence and suffering and not-self—and it's all like this, and you write a whole thesis of it, and it doesn't change your experience one iota because it's informational but it's not transformative, really, on a cellular level, an understanding level. That's like the depth of wise understanding. So it's not a philosophical thing.

But I actually really appreciate the translation into English as "right view," because for me I experience it as quite literal: recognizing what's occurring accurately. Not how we think it should be, not thinking about it in the right way, because pretty much once we start thinking about it, it's over as far as accuracy—unless we recognize it's thinking. But to recognize what's happening accurately.

This is the power of this simple awareness we've been talking about. When we say just feel the sensation, it's like this, you might think, What? So what? I've got to sit here all day and go, "Sensations like this, sight is like this, hearing is like this, walking is like this, anger is like this, frustration is like this." Give me a break. We focus on the object. But the awareness, the power of the steady, simple, unbiased awareness, is that through the steadiness of it, without our doing, the accurate recognition of what's occurring just begins to emerge more and more. And this recognizing accurately changes the whole way we understand and thus relate to experience in our life.

So that's a huge topic, obviously, because that's the beginning of right view. I like to think about the Buddha—when the Buddha awoke, the story of sitting under the tree, awakening to the freedom from all confusion, from greed, from hatred, from suffering—and yet he lived the next forty-five years in this world.

He didn't wake up into a different world. He woke up into a world and he lived 45 years—the peaceful one, the awakened one—in a body that does what bodies do, which is sometimes it feels good and sometimes it doesn't. He'd be sick and have backaches and headaches. He had a whole sangha of monks and nuns with whom he worked, whom he really taught and shared with. And there were times when that was wonderful, and times when—well, you know what it's like working with a group of people. Times when it was organizational dukkha, organizational suffering. All the monks and nuns' rules that are in place now came about because of some behavior that wasn't so great one way or the other, and then he'd make a rule. There were wars. He had kinship with families on different sides of wars, fighting over water rights. I mean, basically it was life, the same life.

So what was different?

And this is like—it wasn't rocket science, but it took me years to actually look and go, "Oh, duh, he wasn't floating around on a cloud out of body all the time." He was here, engaged, really engaged, really caring, spending 45 years of his life, the whole rest of his life, sharing with people to help them understand, out of compassion. He didn't need to do that. He could have just gone off and really been in peaceful mind. He spent 45 years really engaged. So it's not removal from life at all.

So what was different? I'm not here to tell you how the Buddha's mind was from the inside—don't even think that—but I know some of what's different. We have intimations, and we all do in moments, moments of freedom, that what changes isn't the external circumstances. You don't stop having unpleasant experience. The more you practice doesn't mean life just gets pleasanter and pleasanter. Look in your mind—do you somehow think that's what's going to happen? You think at the end of nine days here,

everything's going to be better, or else you wasted your money? And we laugh, I laugh. But when I really look in my mind, I keep getting caught in that one. "Oh, this backache. What's this doing back? I thought I conquered that one."

Anyway, what changes is the understanding and thus the relationship—the understanding of how we perceive, how we recognize experience. When we recognize it accurately, we stop looking to any experience to give us confirmation, to make us happy. We stop blaming experience for making us unhappy. So the Buddha could walk around India barefoot begging for his food for 45 years—how does that sound?—and be happy.

Once we recognize this, it's how we respond, both internally and in our actions externally. There's a quotation from Martin Luther King I like a lot where he says, "Nonviolence doesn't just mean that you don't shoot a person. It also means that you don't hate a person." And I would actually say, in terms of what we're practicing and learning here, it's from the inside out. When something is difficult, our natural response is to hate it or hate ourselves or fix it or whatever, and we're suffering.

So when we start to understand differently, we can still meet the situation and act and respond appropriately. It's not a withdrawing from life, but it's understanding what's going on in our own mind and heart—not in the other person's. That's their business. We don't even know what's going on in our own mind and heart, right? How much do we assume and project onto what other people are doing? I mean, that's just what our minds do. But come on, we don't even know why we're doing what we're doing half the time.

So this is what we're exploring here. We start to see that the suffering, the confusion, the lack of peace that's arising in our experience—that this steadiness of awareness with right view can help us see the way out of—isn't because of what's occurring. And this is a hard teaching, and we will resist it and fight it and find reasons why it's not true. But it's not because of what's occurring that we really deeply suffer. It's in the relationship. And the relationship isn't difficult because we're stupid jerks, stubborn, willfully trying to suffer.

Because we don't recognize accurately. Because we're not in practice.

It's not that some people are given the gift of awareness and some people are not. It's as natural as breathing. Have you noticed that at all today? Or are you looking for something too highfalutin?

So right now—do you feel your hand? How hard was that? Was that hard? Anybody who couldn't feel your hand? It didn't take a lot of effort, and it was immediate as soon as there was the thought of remembering, right? I doubt there's someone thinking, "I can't find awareness of how to feel my hand." It's right there. It's so there we don't even notice. We take it for granted. We're not interested.

So one way of talking about this—and I think Steve started talking about it today, and we'll probably say the same thing every night, I'm just warning you—one very simple way, and this is direct from the way Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it, very simple but helpful, is how we can recognize experience as we're practicing here. And this moment-to-moment thing directly affects what I was just talking about on the wider level of our relationship to experience and suffering.

So, mindfulness of our experience with right view. Steve talked today about how there's an object—an object arises in our experience. One way, and this is from the Buddha, we can notice what occurs as we go through the day, is that six different experiences tend to arise, keep on arising, right? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing—physical experience with the body. Those are the five physical senses. And then the whole mental realm: thoughts, emotions, moods. These are all coming and going. Has anybody not noticed that? As I said, you can't stop them from coming and going. This is what's happening. This is what we call our life. This is what we're experiencing.

So whatever's arising—say a particular sight arises, or, well, let's keep it simple, a sight, or say a twinge in your knee as you're sitting. So that arises. That is arising. It's simply the object arising. It's not personal. It's arising from whatever particular conditions have come together in that one moment to cause the arising of that particular sensation or that particular sound.

Does that make sense so far?

We don't stop and think, "What are all the things that made that sound come?" Those frogs croaking—it's just there. But once you start to go into it, it's endless, right? Any one thing you pick goes back to the Big Bang if you want to start figuring out what all the causes are, because everything's interconnected. So I'm not saying figure it out, but it arises due to lawful causes.

So say a sensation arises, right? That's the object. Any of the six senses—mood, a thought, aversion arises. The sense of that natural, not even awareness, but just the consciousness of it. The sight arises, and if your eyes are open and your eyes work and

you're awake, they're seeing, right? That happens. You don't have to plan, "In a minute when this light goes on, I'm going to see." Or, "In about thirty seconds, I think the knee's going to start to throb." We don't know, and it's out of our control.

Do you get that? And yet we take it so personally.

So this knowing just happens naturally. That's not the same as awareness, as Steve said.

That's what makes the experience of seeing or hearing. The sight, the eye works, the consciousness is there, seeing is occurring. As soon as we recognize that seeing is occurring, that's awareness. And as I think Steve took you through, you get a sense of the subtle difference. When I said "feel your hand," there was probably already a consciousness of it, but when I said "feel it," there was an awareness. You're still in the same experience, but there's this subtle shift. You get that feeling of that shift from—really, we're just identified. We could say later what's happening, but there's not really an awareness. We're just not thinking about it at all; we're just in it.

So there's the object arising, the recognition of the process—thinking, seeing, hearing—that's awareness. And awareness is just as natural as consciousness. It's not some big thing you had to manufacture, was it? You just had to remember. But you see how it's so nothing special that we don't tend to notice?

Then the third piece of the way he describes meditation practice—and where the third piece is where all our confusion and suffering lies or is released—is in that moment of awareness. Nothing other than the awareness. Feeling hand, feeling twinge, seeing, whatever, just seeing. In that moment that there's awareness of what the process is, what's the attitude, the quality that's in the mind, in the awareness at that moment?

Until we even recognize awareness, never mind recognizing the quality—but once we get in the habit, which is what we're trying to cultivate here, the habit of moment-to-moment awareness, that's all—you start to notice what's the quality in the mind that's aware.

I'm going to give examples, but I think I saw some nods. You already get a sense of the difference it can make. If in that moment of recognizing that seeing is happening, that recognition, that awareness is just "oh, seeing, it's like this"—do you get a sense of how that's freeing?

"Oh, look at that deer! It's so beautiful!" No, no, no. You're totally in the object. But "oh, seeing the deer"—and it's just calm seeing, no good, no bad, just what it is. There's a kind of being there with it, but there's space around, there's ease, there's just no problem one way or the other. You don't have to do anything about it.

We don't notice that. Into the deer—it's so beautiful, and oh, I love deer, and what are their lives like? Oh, they have so many ticks, and how does it feel to me? At least they don't hunt them here. I'm so lucky, or I'm so not lucky, or I should have been more of a nature lover. Whatever—you get a sense. Gone, gone, gone. But we don't notice that. We don't notice that often.

So in this way of practice—practically really in all ways of practice—we're noticing the object. As soon as we're conscious of it: oh, seeing is happening, thinking is happening, feeling the body is happening. And when there's not a lot of wanting or aversion or stories about me, it's just that simple awareness. One moment after the other, after the other.

And with the steadiness of that, we start to recognize more clearly the processes of our life. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, wanting. And much of the day, much of what goes on in retreat is nothing really special. Are you waiting for something special enough to notice? Probably. But it's like this—this is it. Yes, this is it. This is our life.

Come and tell us something else that happened other than seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mental activity. And did any of it last very long at all? And then another one came—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental activity.

And then you think, "Oh my God, let me get out of here," right? What is that? Oh, that's mental activity. And there's awareness.

When you recognize what is influencing, what is affecting that moment of awareness, when you feel that sense of struggle—"Oh my God, is this all there is? I can't bear another..."—oh, that's aversion. That's awareness again. Aversion has become the object. Knowing, recognizing the quality in the mind of aversion. And in that moment, the awareness is not affected by aversion. And that's a teensy sense of what a moment of freedom is.

Do you see this? And you still might be thinking, "Oh my God, I want something different." But when we're not so sucked into the object, but just noticing the process, it can just be what it is. And it's not a disconnect, not caring—like the life of the Buddha.

It's quite present. Because we're not afraid of stuff. We're not needing to hold on to something to make us okay. We're really here, really here, for this moment, which is whatever it is.

Another way Utejniya talks about this right view is recognizing, as I said, that whatever's arising is this moment's effect of all the previous causes. This moment could not be any different. How could it be? It's here. And it's not personal, it's just nature. It's a way, a language—just nature. The nature of seeing, the nature of hearing, the nature of feeling, the nature of thinking. We all experience these things. It's not so personal.

So how does it get so personal? It gets personal when we don't see this process. Our habit is really being sucked into what's occurring, into the object, liking it, disliking it. That's the habit. We get absorbed.

So there's an unpleasant smell—I'm not picking something too horrible, right? There's an unpleasant smell and you're really sensitive to smells. So there's smelling. It's unpleasant. We don't like it. If you're recognizing that smells one object, recognizing that sense smelling is happening in the mind—"Oh my God, I don't like it, I kind of shrink"—shrinking feels like this. Tightness in the mind feels like this.

That's a language that Ajahn Sumedho uses. He was an American man originally, who's been a monk in the Thai forest tradition for forty-some-odd years. And I love the way he talks about practice and awareness. It's the same thing as just awareness of something. "Oh, bad smell is like this. Aversion feels like this."

Do you get a sense? I feel like a qigong move, a tai chi move—from the aversion, the smell, and "How could they do it? Oh, I don't like it"—to: "It's like this." It's not trying to fix anything. It's not saying that this means X, Y, or Z about me or the other person. This is what's occurring now.

And we can see much more clearly in that moment when there's not the wanting, the aversion, the judging, the "me." Unpleasant smell, tightening in the body, aversion in the mind. "How can this happen?" You see that whole process without trying to fix it, without trying to figure out where's the suffering. It's obvious.

It's not the smell. It's all that stuff our mind is doing in reaction—that's what's holding on. It's like a snowball of confusion and suffering, going and going and going. And then you think, "Oh God, and now I'm doing it, I'm making the snowball of suffering, I might as well just hang it up." But that's just the same thing. Don't go into the content of the thought. Feel that—oh, that's aversion. Aversion feels like this. Just for that moment, it becomes the object.

And what's so remarkable, in terms of introducing us to the freeing potential of balanced awareness—that's what I'm going to call awareness when it's not affected by greed or hatred or confusion, balanced awareness—is that even a moment of recognizing this is like a moment of freedom. Just to get a sense. It doesn't mean that aversion will never arise again. But we stop being so afraid of this stuff, and we get interested in what's going on. How is the mind working?

Instead of somehow secretly believing we're going to figure it all out so that we can manipulate our internal experience and the whole world so we don't have to deal with anything that causes us harm or unpleasantness anymore. I'm not saying we're looking for harm, but I'm just saying it's not in our control. If our freedom, our happiness, our peace, and thus our ability to act in the world with compassion and caring hinges on getting it all copacetic, it's not going to happen in this world of change.

There's a word that I like in the Pali language: *yathā bhūta,* which translates as "things as they have come to be in this moment." And that's a description of one kind of high experience of insight, you could say. Everything's momentary. Things as they have come to be. So you're stomping up and down the hill, hot and sick of the noise and sick of whatever, and you go, "Oh, things as they have come to be right now. It's like this. Just like this." And we ever so subtly shift—as in that Tai Chi move—from being all involved in the content of the object to awareness.

So whatever the particular experience is, in terms of what opens up the way to recognizing and trusting more and more this potential for freeing our heart and mind—it doesn't matter. In this practice, it does not matter what the object is. All objects are equal in terms of being an opportunity to re-recognize the simplicity of awareness. Whether it's a subtle tingling experience, a subtle breath, or seeing something, or hearing something, or smelling a bad smell, or noticing you're filled with rage—but suddenly rage becomes the object. It's still rage. But the shift is from the absorption in the object into noticing the process with interest. We get really interested: How is this working?

And that's one of the reasons this style of practice can actually be so relaxing, so enjoyable. It really can be—I know you don't believe me yet—but it can be, because we're not trying to make a particular experience happen. And when you want that, that's wanting in the mind. And right away we're saying, "This one's no good, this one I need, this is okay but it isn't quite good enough." Has anyone experienced that today? "Am I doing it right?" That's immediately—doing what right? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, feeling, thinking. It's happening without our say-so. Are you doing it right? It's just happening. Awareness doesn't care.

And it doesn't matter if you notice the first little flip of anger. It's easier if you notice the first little flip—it's easier.

But if you've stomped up and down the hill for half an hour in a rage, thinking furiously, and suddenly you go, "Oh, this is rage. Rage is like this" — that moment of awareness is just as pure. It doesn't matter whether it was awareness of an incredibly blissful state or rage. The awareness is untouched, unstained. It's just arising here in this moment. Nothing can harm it. It's always available when we remember.

But it's not our habit to remember. It's our habit to base what's important on what's happening. So here, why we're going on about this, is to give us information to help us remember, to explore and see if what I'm saying is true in your experience.

I've been practicing for many years, and I want to say one thing that I have more and more respect for. This may not be encouraging, but it's true, and it actually helps me a lot. What I have more and more respect for is the power of habit in our minds. Good habit, bad habit. You all know external habits, but the power of habit in our mind is so strong and so familiar that without some information, without putting ourselves in a situation where we consciously try to observe and see what the habit is — notice I didn't say get rid of the habit, I said observe and see what the heck is going on, what the habit is — without that, we're just enthralled to it because we don't know there's another option. This is what you might call samsara.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was quite an amazing Tibetan teacher, talks about renunciation — which we think of as giving up everything externally nice. That's not what he's talking about. Renunciation is a quality of heart and mind of joy and simplicity. This is how he describes it: "Renunciation, the foundation of the path, the root of all the stages, implies the strong wish to free oneself, not only from life's immediate sorrows, but from the seemingly unending sufferings of samsara." Samsara being that seemingly endless cycle of conditioned existence.

What do we mean by that? That sense of something arising — we like it, we don't like it, it's pleasant, it's not pleasant — and right away there's that absorption into it. "I need more of this, and this is what's going to make me happy." Or the sense of it's unpleasant — we don't know that consciously, but just that pulling away, assessing it as wrong, bad, unhappy. "Get rid of it, and then I'll be happy." But the cycle is, as he's saying, this endless leaning to the next thing, leaning to the next thing. Just a little bit out there, it's going to be a little better. Do you have any sense what I'm talking about?

And so he says that with this sense of just starting to tune into that comes a heartfelt weariness, a disillusionment with the endless quest for gratification, for approval, for profit, for status. He's not saying you hate it, but a disillusionment, a weariness. And this isn't an aversion — this is the wise understanding, the right view of seeing things as they have come to be. That when we just zone in, zoom into the object — "Oh, if next time I sit the mind's a little quieter, then it'll be better" — it doesn't matter what it is. That leaning forward, that absorption into the object, keeps us off balance, no? Keeps us yearning. It keeps us fixed there and not seeing the whole picture — the sense of all the connectedness, the cause and effect.

That sense of "this pain in my knee goes back to the Big Bang and it's not in my control; it's nature occurring in this moment" — that is very different from "this pain in my knee, this burning, what can I do? How can I fix it? How can I possibly meditate if this is happening? If I just get up and don't sit anymore, get a chair, then it'll all be okay." It's not that we don't take care of pain. It's that "then it'll all be okay." We only see the object and it's going to make me okay in the future. We don't see the whole process of what's actually happening — that wanting, that aversion in the mind, that resistance to experience as it is that keeps us in this sense of a separated bubble of me.

It's all about getting it better, getting it fixed, getting rid of the unpleasant—me, me, me. And how come I feel so isolated? How come it's never okay for very long? Because our idea of okay isn't really working.

How do we notice it's not working? By starting to notice the awareness of the process, getting more interested in awareness steady moment to moment. That's a continuity, and that's essential. We start to notice the process, and that gets so much more interesting. You start to see through. You start to notice the vastness. You notice where freedom is, and it's not by getting everything okay.

Let me give you a little example of the shift from focus on object to seeing process. It's just a simple one, but this is how it is. Our lives are made up of simple experiences.

I was on a retreat a long time ago, one of my first three-month retreats I think, and I had a car. It was way two months into the retreat. Very strict schedule, silence and all. And basically, the idea—so that was thinking arose, which I didn't notice as thinking—that I wanted some chocolate chip cookies. I wanted chocolate chip cookies. You can imagine, two months into a retreat. Very strong wanting, which if you asked me later I would have said, "Sure, I thought about cookies and I wanted them." But that's like consciousness, that's not awareness really seeing the process.

Well, I had a car. I went out into town in Barre and bought a bag of chocolate chip cookies. And overall I'm not a binger, so it's not like that. So I had this bag. I went back to my room. And I thought I was being very mindful, you know? And this is when we think we're being aware and we don't notice the attitude in the awareness.

So I was sitting in my room and I thought I was being very mindful. I was focused on undoing the bag, feeling the sensations, opening the bag. I wasn't just thinking about something else and stuffing it down. I was very present, but completely missing the attitude in the mind that was aware—for quite some time. I ate a lot of those cookies, big bag. I remember because it was like one of those aha moments, you remember. I probably ate two-thirds of the bag just sitting there mindfully, thinking I was mindful, eating the cookie, chewing, feeling it, swallow, feeling it drop down, then seeing okay another cookie, reaching, chewing. This took quite a while. We're slow, we don't notice. And this is where we can think we're mindful and not see the attitude, that third piece—we miss the whole thing.

Suddenly—but I was being aware with awareness—I suddenly got a little bigger and I noticed: oh, chewing, chewing, chewing, the cookie feeling drops down. But there was this yearning feeling in my chest, like this longing, and the cookie was missing that. It would kind of drop past that feeling into my stomach, which was getting more and more full and not very pleasant.

So I said, oh, what's happening in the mind? It's longing, yearning. Oh, it's the loneliness. That's what's occurring. The cookies—they don't really do much for yearning and loneliness, but we think pleasant sensation is going to do it.

So as soon as I saw that—ah, loneliness is like this, that's what's happening, this is what's happening—awareness just relaxes into it. There's nothing to fix. It's just like this. The resistance goes away, but there's clear seeing.

It's okay. Loneliness is painful, and I can be with that. It's just like this. This is life.

And when we open into it—we all experience loneliness sometimes—it can almost open us into compassion for the world. When you can be with your own loneliness, and you're with someone else who's lonely, you don't try to say, "Oh, buck up! Why don't you go to the coffee shop?" You say, "Oh, yes, loneliness is painful. It's like this." You see, it's all connected.

The Tibetans have a saying I love. They say, "Samsara is the urge to correct." Just notice how much we're trying to correct experience. And when you notice that leaning forward, that leaning forward—you don't have to correct that. Oh, leaning forward is like this. Awareness takes care of itself.

Our job is simply what's happening right now. Getting more and more interested in the experience of awareness. It's just a little coming and going. Trusting it more. Don't look for such a big thing. Trusting it more. Not expecting some big thing to happen.

This week here isn't so much about having some wonderful experience by the end. Not at all. It's just waking up moment after moment, learning to shift the habit by getting interested, shifting our refuge from aversion and clinging and trying to correct—to awareness. How do we do that? Not by correcting trying to correct. That's just more wanting. But by simply noticing—oh, awareness of wanting. Wanting is like this.

The awareness is always available. We'll forget for a long time, then it's there. And the more and more we just recognize it, recognize it, recognize it, it starts by itself to get a bit more momentum. It does feel effortful at first. We have to keep remembering. That's one of the reasons we come to retreat.

As Steve said, this is just our life. We can bring awareness to whatever's happening. But because the habits of getting involved in what's happening—liking it, disliking it, and the third, really taking it as what does that mean about me, all the thoughts about me—we get so seduced by that. We forget about awareness.

So we have more simplified days here, to give us just a little more chance to notice awareness. Because it's the same mind and body. It's not different, not a different process. But as the days go on and you're hopefully not on your email and texting and not doing stuff, the mind will naturally get a little bit quieter. There's just a little less of this incredible amount of input that we meet every day in this world. I mean, it's unbelievable, right? So here, there's a little less. As life is a little simpler, it's a little easier to notice what the process is. That's all. That's all we're doing—practicing that here. Just shifting.

It's so poignant to me that the habits of our mind, what has really become our refuge, is this wanting, leaning in to getting some pleasant, happy experience—or trusting that the unpleasant is bad and that this is the source of my suffering, pushing it away, being in this struggle—and then interpreting all experience as meaning something about me. Do you notice that at all? And that's just thinking. You don't have to stop that.

When we notice, "Oh yeah, thinking it's about me," that's just thinking. But when we don't notice it, we're in struggle again.

It's poignant to me that this is our refuge. We say, "Of course I want to get away from unpleasant. Of course I do." I'm not saying we need to be with unpleasant, that we need to go looking for trouble. But it's going to find us sometimes, and if we can't be with it...

We say, "No, of course that makes sense. Of course wanting pleasant makes sense." We'd go to the mat for this—this is how I'm going to be happy in this life. And then even when we know it—I know it—but the habit sneaks up through the back door.

Just keep watching. And this isn't personal. It's not personal at all. It's just deeply ingrained. It's poignant.

There's one sutta where the Buddha describes this, our habit as unawakened ordinary worldlings. He uses the example of being hit by a dart, by an arrow. You experience one form of unpleasant experience, right? And when we're not understanding, not seeing with wise view, then immediately—he says we get upset, we beat our breast, we're anguished, we cry, we tear out our hair, we get all upset. "How could this dart have hit me? How am I going to—oh my god, my knee hurts, I'm going to be in the hospital..." Second dart. He calls that the second dart.

And he says then, in the face of unpleasant experience like that, the ordinary person—the only escape they know from unpleasant experience is to go find a pleasant experience. And so it comes to underlie our mind that we resist the unpleasant and lust after the pleasant. For the ordinary person, that's the only escape they know.

This is samsara. This is samsara.

I feel such compassion, really such sadness, to think of a life that feels like no way out. No way out because the search for pleasant is endless, and nothing lasts, and there's no way to avoid unpleasant.

So this awareness, the steadiness of awareness, is essential—which is why we talk about continuity for seeing the process. In just that moment, it's a step out of samsara.

There's the unpleasant pain as the first dart, and the mind starts: "Oh no, how can it be?" Fear is like this. It's still fear. I know I'm saying it lightly. It's still fear. It still hurts. But that involvement has switched to interest in the awareness, interest in the process. How is this working? What's the actual source of the suffering here? We get interested. Is it the actual sensation? Is it the thoughts in the mind? Can I kind of see how they go back and forth? What's going on here?

And that's the key attitude that really supports us through the continuity of the day—interest in what's happening.

So that's the step out of samsara. That's the other possibility when we're faced with unpleasant or pleasant: to be with it with a calm and peaceful heart and mind. Awareness is our way to discover how that is possible.

We can't do it by willpower. Believe me, I'm sure you've all tried. I've really tried. I know how it feels when I'm caught in fear, reaction, or wanting—like wanting those cookies, wanting, wanting. Wanting is unpleasant. Try just being with wanting without fulfilling it, but really being with it.

It's unpleasant. We get the thing we want, and we don't recognize that wanting itself was unpleasant. We feel happy because we got the thing, but we're happy because the wanting stopped.

Hang out with the wanting. It's just wanting, it's just a feeling, it's just a mood in the mind—so what? Oh, wanting's like this. That sense of recognition is just a little door into the potential of freedom. It's the escape instead of just having to go get something pleasant to avoid the unpleasant. And that's just the endless trying to fix of samsara.

So here we are. That's why the steadiness through the day, the continuity, is essential. Continuity—I kind of call it dread continuity because people hear it and then they think the "should," you know, I should be aware every single moment or I'm not doing it right. I think you've discovered today that it's impossible, it's not in our control. But the idea of continuity is this sense that every moment is equally important. The sitting, the walking, the simplicity, the qigong, the simple activities help us to keep recognizing moment to moment—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, feeling, moods. But standing in the food line is just as valid and important a moment of any of the six objects and potential of awareness, or when you're sitting on the toilet. It really doesn't matter. And the steadiness through the day is where awareness begins to get its own momentum.

And so this is only possible when you get this sense—and we'll keep talking about it—of not trying to make something happen. Not this strong effort of leaning forward. We get exhausted. Not in this practice, not focusing really intensely. Like when I described eating those cookies and I'm really feeling the sensation and I get really intense, I'm missing the big picture, and you get exhausted.

So this is why it takes a couple of days here to start to trust the awareness. You've been all spaced out, you're standing in the food line, and suddenly—oh, standing is like this. I can't... what is that? What is that? Oh, wanting. Curiosity feels like this. And the interest is what takes us through the day. Not heavy focusing, not trying to be aware, but just the remembering and the interest to see how the mind is working.

So in that way, we have the precepts so we're not hurting anybody, but in this way nothing's wrong. Anger comes up—oh, you get interested, how does that work? Happiness comes up, concentration comes up, fine. We don't hate concentration. Calmness comes up, fine. Calmness goes away, fine. Noticing all of it.

So this steadiness through the day with just interest to see how the mind is working is what allows us to keep remembering, keep remembering. If every time you remember, you beat yourself up, pretty soon you don't want to come back into awareness because you don't like beating yourself up. When you notice—oh, I was thinking for who knows how long—but awareness of that, awareness is like this, you start to really shift your refuge, just appreciating awareness. And as we trust it more, it starts to get its own momentum. So that's in these days, these early days, what we're really doing.

So it's not so exciting. Just moment after moment after moment. But relax. Be present with this. And, you know, the day really does get more enjoyable.

So I saw someone out walking, just being at the stream. Now, if you're on a retreat and you're thinking, I'm at the stream—hearing, seeing, happiness, aware of this—fine. But if you're thinking, I'm at the stream but I ought to be in the sitting, then I'd be being aware, and you're not noticing that, there's this sense of struggle. But if you're at the stream and you're like off in la-la land—what helps balance awareness? If you say, I'm going to just take a hike because it's all the same, but you hike all day—because we're so in the habit of wanting and aversion and meaning, we're not in the habit of awareness—you hike all day, you have a good time, but you weren't aware at all, or you were aware for two minutes in thirty hours.

You come back, and the question is: what helps balance your steady awareness? That's how we decide. You sit for a while, you walk for a while, you have a cup of tea if you're getting really tight. But if you think you're really present, if you think, "I'll just have a cup of tea because this is boring," no way. Boredom is like this—boredom is mind, boredom is an object of awareness.

But say you go have a cup of tea anyway, just because you want one. Okay, wanting is taking you down to the tea, but you can bring awareness along with it. You don't abandon awareness just because you're doing something you know is wanting-driven. We think, "I won't pay attention because I'm not really practicing"—no, no, no. There's nothing that isn't a worthwhile object. Everything brings us back into awareness. So you bring awareness along with you while you're wanting, while you're drinking the tea, and then you notice: did it support continued awareness or not? And that's how we go through the day.

You're not trying to make things turn out the way you want them in order to be happy. We're just trying to know what is happening as it is, moment to moment. Thinking that things should be this way or that way is a kind of expectation, and this creates wanting and leads to aversion. Just noticing things as they are opens us to awareness and peace.

I want to close with a little story—a true story—because this might seem very moment-to-moment simple, maybe a little too refined or separated from life. But really, this simple practice, the commitment to it, the dedication to just this moment, the willingness to just try it and see... You don't have to know how it turns out. Awareness does its job and wisdom comes by itself.

And this is a huge relief. We don't have to create wisdom. We can't. All we can do is think about stuff. How far does that get us in terms of wisdom? With seeing what's happening as it is, wisdom arises naturally. And what's the appropriate action becomes obvious. Life becomes so much simpler in moments. I'm not saying every minute—then we're all caught up. But we know the difference. Sometimes I'll be all caught up and go, "Wow, I'm all caught up now." I know the difference between when I'm all caught up and when things are just occurring. I'm aware—the same things could be occurring in my mind, more or less. I mean, no two moments are exactly the same. But I'm aware: "Oh yeah, the mind's really going on a ride now, isn't it? The Carol story is really whipping itself up." Just like that. The Carol story doesn't go away. But that's how it is. It's a little more spacious.

But this really leads to quite a depth of awakening. I want to say it's not just some esoteric thing that used to happen. Probably a lot of you have read this letter from Mingyur Rinpoche. You know who Mingyur Rinpoche is? He's a Tibetan lama, brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Quite well known, well practiced in this country and all over the world. He has a big organization, and about—I don't know, maybe it was two years ago now, something like that—he let everyone in his organization know he was going on a three-year retreat. So he went to Bodh Gaya, and everything seemed like a normal three-year retreat.

But what he did—he comes from a huge family of Tibetan really awakened lamas—he was in Bodh Gaya, and in the middle of the night, he just left. He took nothing. No one knew where he was going. His brother, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who's quite a well-known teacher and lama, put a little talk up on YouTube. They were amazed. They were so in awe. He didn't even take a toothbrush. He didn't take any money. He just left and went off, just like the practitioners of old—aimless wandering practice.

And so last fall, one of his Tibetan friends and disciples, Tashi, happened to run into him in Kathmandu. He was so skinny, with a beard and long hair, and Tashi didn't recognize him at first, as he says in this letter. But something about that person felt familiar, so he followed him. Then he realized—oh, it's Mingyur Rinpoche. He went to him and begged, "Can I at least come with you for some time?" He bought him a sleeping bag and clothes.

Mingyur Rinpoche had become really thin. He'd just been wandering around Nepal and Tibet, practicing in caves, unknown, begging for food. I want to read a little bit from the letter he wrote and gave to Tashi to bring back and put online for his friends and supporters, because it speaks to what I've been reflecting on. It's not about the externals.

He says: "I myself am wandering without any fixed location, staying in isolated mountain hermitages and other such places." We're talking about caves up in the Himalayas. And until he met Tashi, he didn't have a sleeping bag, didn't have a down coat or anything.

"I have experienced feelings of happiness and suffering, rising and falling like waves on the surface of the ocean. At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I have felt cold, hungry, and thirsty. Even when I have begged for alms, I have received nothing but insults and harsh words. At other times, I have received food and clothing effortlessly, without even asking for them, and in my mind it felt as though I were enjoying the pleasures of the gods.

"While I have experienced both happiness and suffering, the most important thing is that a deep and heartfelt sense of certainty has arisen in the depths of my being, such that no matter what happens, I know that the very true nature of these experiences, their very essence, is that of timeless awareness and vast compassion. This natural clarity of awareness is the very essence and true nature of our minds, with us from the beginning.

"Therefore, we maintain the flow of pure awareness to the best of one's ability—without meditating"—he means without focusing hard on an object—"yet not getting lost in distraction. Recognizing the importance of this, I have passed my days feeling joyful and content, wandering through the mountains and valleys and staying here and there. From my heart, I sincerely encourage all of you to practice diligently in this manner as well."

We may have lesser joys and sorrows than his, certainly lesser sufferings while we're here. But every moment offers that same chance to re-recognize simple awareness. That's enough. Just the determination, the sincerity from our heart to remember when we can, to keep showing up. And when accurate recognition occurs, wisdom comes by itself.

Thank you for being here. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 117

Perception, Thought and Views

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this illuminating talk on the third foundation of mindfulness, Carol Wilson examines the relationship between perception (saññā), thought, and the views that shape our experience. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that "what we perceive, we think about," she explores how misperception leads to mental proliferation (papañca) and suffering, while accurate perception can instantly dissolve confusion.

Wilson explains the natural process by which sense contact leads to feeling tone, perception, and then proliferating thoughts that "assail and overwhelm" us. She illustrates this with vivid examples—from mistaking one's own breathing for someone walking downstairs, to seeing a circus tent where there's only a lichen-covered rock. The teaching addresses how the three unwholesome roots—desire, aversion, and delusion—distort perception and generate unreliable thoughts we then treat as truth.

The talk also touches on the Buddha's teaching of the four "inverted perceptions" (vipallāsa): perceiving permanence where there is impermanence, happiness where there is unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and self where there is no fixed self. Wilson emphasizes that intellectual understanding alone cannot shift these deep perceptions—only steady, non-judgmental awareness of the arising and passing of experience moment to moment allows liberating insight to emerge naturally. The practical guidance encourages practitioners to become curious observers of their mental processes rather than victims of thought.

Since what we're talking about is mindfulness of mind—the third foundation of the four foundations of mindfulness—as Steve said, with the mind you're aware of everything, all four foundations. But I thought I'd talk tonight about an aspect of our mental experience that I'm pretty sure you've all been noticing pretty steadily, and that's thinking, thought. Because it takes up a lot of our air time sometimes, doesn't it?

Thinking is a really interesting phenomenon. It's just one of the six sense experiences—one of the mental sense experiences, along with emotions and other things. And it's so interesting because, well, for many reasons. But I know from talking to people here, and in all the retreats I've taught, and in my own experience, it can at times be the case that we get caught in feeling like our meditation practice is some kind of struggle with thought. Ever had that feeling? That thought's a problem somehow?

So why is that so? Some of it comes from certain forms of practice where we're really trying to get absorbed, where there's a feeling we're supposed to get rid of thoughts—that thoughts shouldn't be there. Now, you know we haven't said that on this retreat, right? I'm just checking. Because this is where perception comes in.

What's really important is when we talk about *yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment—the accurate recognition, as Steve was talking about with right view. The accurate recognition of experience moment to moment, the steadiness of it, is what creates the condition for wisdom to arise. And the wisdom that recognizes accurately is what liberates our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering.

Thinking and emotions are natural phenomena, part of our experience. So what's the big problem with thought? It comes down to this accurate recognition—recognizing the nature of thought, bringing attention, awareness, meeting it with awareness of the nature of thought itself. But often we're really kind of sucked into the story. We're lost in the story of thought. You get a sense of the difference, right? And that difference is huge in terms of our experience.

When we're seeing thought as a thought—right now, deliberately think a thought. "Elephants are gray." Think that thought. Where is it now? Is that thought gone? It dissolved, but I brought it up so it's back, right? You're hanging on to it. But does that thought have a lot of oomph to it? "Elephants are gray." It's nothing. It's not even as solid as smoke. A thought is just a little blip of mental energy, gone. Can you get a little sense of that? It just arises from who knows where, it's here, and it dissolves back into emptiness.

When the steadiness of mindfulness awareness is just noticing that whole process, how can a thought possibly harm us? So we say, "Well, okay, that thought—that was a stupid thought. Pick an important thought." But the thought energy isn't different.

So how do we get so lost in it? I'm going to describe some of the ways, some of the process—not to give you information that you now have to go and make a list, but hopefully to continue to pique our interest. So that when thinking or thought is the predominant arising experience, which it often is, instead of making it a problem or wishing something better was coming up or judging the thoughts, we recognize: what's arising? Thinking. It's like this. And then we get interested in exploring: why is it so clear that thought is just poof? What's going on? What's the actual process happening?

Because if we were trying to get rid of thought, it would be a little hard to function in the world. Thought is really useful. No one here is putting down thought. It's useful when we understand it and we can use it. When we can recognize what's appropriate

thought, we can pick it up. When thought has some hopeful bearing on reality—which I hate to say how rare that is—but when it has some bearing on what's really going on, when we want to put something together: incredible, creative, wonderful. But we've got to learn how to tell the difference.

And when we're not using thought, when thought's running us, aren't there times—maybe not for you—but you can feel like you're a victim of thought? Some people say, "Oh no, I don't want that thought to come back again because it's so horrible," and there's just that obsessive quality of thinking.

So here I want to just explore it, to see thought simply as another object of nature arising. But because we're so used to getting into the content, we just need practice. That's all. We just need practice in how to bring mindfulness to thoughts.

This is from Utajaniya: remember that a thought is just another object which helps us to develop awareness, perseverance, and balance of mind. As we've been saying, awareness doesn't care. A thought, a sound, a subtle sensation—it doesn't matter. But if you don't recognize thought as an object, then you will get carried away by the train of thoughts, by the content, and you lose yourself in the story. That's exactly what happens.

So can we even notice that process without any blame or judgment, but see how does that happen? What's the difference? How do we get lost in the story? What's going on? How does it feel so real? I mean, it's fascinating, really. These little blips of energy, and they're making us nuts. It's fascinating to explore. Hopefully you will pick up that it can be fascinating to explore. That's my hope.

So I want to talk about a few aspects of the process of thoughts arising in our mind, the way the Buddha described. It's all happening fast, but all the time, and some of this stuff we can see.

Back to the fact that there are six sense experiences arising and passing over and over. We've honed in on that the last two nights. The way the Buddha talks about our experience: there's a sense experience arising. Let's take seeing. Sight arises, there's an eye that works, that consciousness. Those coming together is called contact, that moment of seeing happening. Then if there's mindfulness awareness, that's almost the next moment—knowing that seeing is occurring. But leaving that out, I'm not talking about awareness right now. I'm just talking about the process of conscious knowing as we go through our lives.

So seeing occurs, hearing occurs. It could be a thought, but say seeing. The way the Buddha describes it, as soon as there's any of the six—seeing—the mind feels it as pleasant or unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And then, right then, there's a perception, saññā in Pali, and this is very specific, what the Buddha means by perception. A quality in our mind that occurs with every contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, whatever. The perception is like a function of recognition. If I hold this up and you see it, whether your mind says it or not, you'd probably recognize paper. A piece of paper. You might have more specifics—Carol holding the paper, well, that's a whole thing. But piece of paper, that would be perception. Pretty simple, right? This is going on all the time.

Now, as the Buddha said, what we perceive, we think about. We describe. Okay, not we—descriptions happen. And it doesn't have to be. There could just be seeing, paper, boom. The mind is kind of quiet. And we like those times. That's part of what it feels like when the mind is quiet, but you're not comatose. There's the perception—deer—and you don't go into the whole story of Bambi. There's just deer, and there's space around it, space where you don't have to make up a story. Then there are other times the perception turns into descriptions. We use the perceptions to describe and define our world, and that is very useful and essential.

So when you, most of you, heard the kind of gonging sound about ten minutes ago, you didn't say it, but you recognized "bell." And then there would be a further perception and even a description: "That's the bell just before the talk, that means I come in to go to the talk." And it sets you in your whole world. Here I am at Spirit Rock. Maybe you don't know what day it is, but you know it's nighttime and time to come to the talk.

Unless you were taking a nap and you heard that gong and you wake up and you have no clue—do you know how that is? The perception doesn't quite come in. You don't know if it's day or night. You don't know what time it is. Sometimes that's fun and sometimes it's disorienting.

So perception is just another aspect of nature occurring with every contact, every contact with the mind too. It's not a problem. It's something we don't often notice because it goes right into liking, disliking, thinking, our judgments about it. But description—that's useful. When we're all on the same page with the perception and the description, then it works. If we just rang the bell at 3 a.m. and didn't give you anything—what the heck? Your mind would make up some reason that bell was being rung because you wouldn't have that information. So perception is very helpful. It helps us describe our world. It's useful in that way, just as thinking is useful. What we perceive, we think about, we describe, the Buddha says.

Now, where it starts to get tricky—before we even get to the thinking—is that perception is quite frequently not accurate. And so much we don't even question. I'll get to where the inaccuracy comes about, often when the consciousness, the mind at that moment, is veiled with greed or confusion or wanting or aversion. But even prior to that, even our ignorance—we just don't know. Isn't there often a sense of "this is just how it is"?

A funny example: I used this last fall. I was at a friend's house, someone I know really well. We're in her living room, and over the couch there was a throw, a blanket over the back of the couch. I said something about, "Well, put it on that blue throw, that blue blanket." She goes, "What blue blanket?" I said, "What do you mean, what blue blanket? It's your house—the blue blanket." She said, "That's not blue, that's green."

Simple little thing. We were talking about it, but I could not see green. She could not see blue. Even trying. I said, "Well, isn't that interesting? I would go to my deathbed saying that thing was blue." And she, that it's green.

So right there's a little nugget: the perception isn't absolutely irrevocable, absolute truth. It's all subjective in that way. That simplicity—what we do with the perception—we think about it, we believe our perception, it becomes a view, really. We think about it and then "this is how it is, that's what blue looks like. How could she think green? What's the matter with her?" And you see how quick we go there. How quick.

So that's a simple thing, and we had fun with it because then it takes us into where our practice is most flourishing. The quality of open awareness is just the moment experience arises into the mind—of not knowing. Mindfulness awareness isn't about "I know what this is." That comes after, even if you're using labeling. The perception comes: "Oh, that's a bell, hearing." But first, it's just that open presence of awareness, the not knowing.

But with the perception and the thinking hardening into views, there's this sense of an unconscious "this is how it is." And when something upsets that, or someone else has a different "this is how it is," there can be big trouble. But first, let's just stay with ourselves.

Perception—we often don't recognize it. We implicitly believe it. Steve's example of what we perceive is the sun going around the earth, right? That's what we perceive. We can't perceive it any other way. And we read all this. I was thinking as he was talking and now he said, "Now we all know it does." I thought, well, I've read that. I believe

that, but I don't actually know that. I just know that everybody says it, and they know more than me, so I'll believe it. But I don't actually know that in terms of what our actual perception is.

This is what the Buddha described. What we perceive, we feel. What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate with associations, interpretations, memories, comparisons. And then—okay, I won't make it up, I'll quote it—these notions assail and overwhelm a person. And as Joseph Goldstein, a good friend of ours, a long-term Vipassana teacher, has said—he has a lot of very pithy sayings—one of them is: "We're making it all up." So a lot of the time, we are.

Let me give you an example of how this works in a kind of funny way. Sometimes perception we just don't know accurately—like blue-green, who knows what's the ultimate truth? You hear a sound and you don't know what it is. But that leads to the thoughts and the emotions and the views and the whole story. And we totally, implicitly believe that.

So a friend of mine, a good friend, was telling me about her first ten-day meditation retreat many years ago in Switzerland with Ajahn Sumedho, who is a really wonderful teacher—I mentioned him the other night. At that time there were no meditation centers, so the group rented an old house. They have these old houses in Switzerland that they use for summer camps for kids. They're really big with a lot of rooms, built without much insulation since they only use them in the summer. Wood, so they're really noisy. The kind of thing where anytime you're walking on the floor, it creaks, it bangs, you can hear the person breathing in the next room—but there's six people in a room anyway. That kind of place.

In this place, the big meditation room was upstairs, and the room used for walking, the same size, was immediately below it on the ground floor. And there was a schedule—you sit, you walk, according to schedule. And she would acknowledge herself as being very Swiss. You follow the schedule.

So it was a sitting time. She was sitting on her first retreat. Those of you on your first retreat, you know, it's tough. The third or fourth day, have you noticed your mind's getting a little cranky? It starts a little: this isn't what I signed up for. Third or fourth day, it's time for that. Don't take it personally. And it'll change, because everything does.

Anyway, she's sitting, and she said finally, just following the breath, the mind got a little peaceful. She's like, basically, thank God, you know, finally, for two minutes or three minutes, it's peaceful. And then she could hear this creak, creak, creak of somebody walking downstairs. Creak, creak. She says, "Oh my, they're completely ruining my

meditation, and it's the sitting time! How can they be walking downstairs?" And she just got into, you know, sitting, looking like an angel, but in an incredible rage. How can this person creak, creak, creak? Each time she'd hear the creak, anger would come shooting up. And another thought: How can they do it? Should I get up and go? No, they're wrecking my meditation.

You can relate, right?

So the stories are getting stronger. The emotion is coming with the stories. The negativity is getting stronger. And finally she realized, what can I do? Because I'm not allowed to leave the sitting anyway—she wasn't the manager. So out of desperation, which is what we usually do, she decided to go back and see if she could feel her breath. Finally, it's like, what else is there to do? Try and be with what's actually happening.

She didn't know how to watch her mind, so she went back and just felt the breath. She took another breath, took another breath, and then with the next breath, because she was just present, noticing, she recognized she was leaning against the wall. First retreat, can't sit up straight. She was leaning against the wall, and every time she took a breath, her back went into the wall, and it made this creak. That's what she was hearing. There was nobody walking downstairs.

So that's an example of when the accurate perception comes in, that whole story vanishes. The whole story of someone walking—you really can't sustain it when the accurate perception arrives. And the anger? Well, there's nothing to get angry at. It's all gone. It just vanishes.

That's an example of the difference between misperception—inaccurate perception leading to thinking and emotion and self-story, a huge amount of suffering, completely lost in it—and then accurate perception, where the whole thing vanishes. You get a sense of how fast that goes, how quickly, and the power of correct perception to free our mind from all that suffering.

Now, she went back to feel the breath, but it doesn't have to be the breath. And that's what we're going to practice here. One could also notice, say, wow, look at this aversion in the mind, and bring awareness to that as it is in the moment. Look at these thoughts—but different from jumping in and believing the thoughts. That's what the Buddha called papañca, proliferation. You just jump in with this one thought, and how are they walking? How can they be doing this? We get really caught.

Sogyal Rinpoche describes this very well. He says we get into so much pain and confusion by letting ourselves get lost in whatever happens. You project a thought, then the second thought believes the first one. Then a third, fourth, fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is by this time already an absolute reality. By the time the tenth one comes, it believes that the fifth one has always been an actuality.

Can you relate to that at all? We totally believe. And until we practice stepping back—oh wow, thinking is like this, this is a thought—we miss the moment of just sensing the nature of thought, which is just this poof. Instead, we're totally in the content and the associated moods and emotions and reactions and self-story, let's face it, that comes along with it.

And if I came and tapped you on the shoulder and said, "It's just a thought," you'd probably want to punch me. What do you mean it's just a thought? Don't you know what's going on? Yeah. Upset is going on. Upset feels like this. The thought is so solid.

It's interesting to see how when the perception is inaccurate—and when it's accurate too, we can have an accurate perception and also get wigged out about it—but when it's inaccurate and it really feeds into that, we get completely gone, out of touch with reality.

One of my definitions of insight is actually a shift of perception—accurate perception. The Dalai Lama says that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge.

And Thich Nhat Hanh says something I find very important: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking." Let me read that again. Understanding—Dhamma wisdom, he means—does not arise as the result of thinking. It is the result of a long process of conscious awareness.

It's the steadiness, the process of conscious awareness, that allows us to see—like that whole process with the noise in the Swiss house. It was the steadiness of awareness that let that be revealed. She couldn't think her way into that. She didn't have that information.

Thich Nhat Hanh continues: sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts. That's how thoughts are useful. But often thoughts are too limited to really carry all the understanding, to encompass all the understanding. That's one of the reasons we get into confusion when we're trying to talk about things—no matter what we say, it has a limitation. That's just the nature of things.

So I want to talk just for a moment again about what distorts perception, the qualities that can arise in our mind. We've discussed them before. I just want to give some examples, because then with steady awareness, we can start to notice. You can start to tune in. Sometimes the thoughts can be a clue that you're coming from a distorted perception. You can pause and think, "Wait, maybe I don't really know what's going on here." And that can be quite interesting.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was really a wonderful teacher, describes this beautifully. He says that when our sense organs meet an object, the only part the object itself plays—say this sight—is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. So the seeing: bell. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences—because that's what influences perception; if you never saw a bell like this, you might not know what it was—influenced by all of that, the whole process is entirely subjective. Blue-green, who knows?

He continues: when your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure, or lovely. You get a sense of that sometimes?

I want to give simple examples here because this is what goes on. Our awareness, our just natural being with experience, can notice at any point of it. But the steadiness sometimes lets us see the whole process. And once we start to see it's a natural process and don't take it so personally, it's kind of fun to watch.

What gets in the way, what distorts, what are the veils? Our old friends: desire, greed, aversion, ill will, fear, and delusion—which is sometimes also just not knowing. Delusion can make something up completely, but sometimes it's simply not knowing. We don't have all the information.

Here's another example, a little Zen story. In ancient times, a samurai warrior went to a Zen master. This samurai was very aggressive, wild—not really a practitioner. He runs into the Zen master with a sword and roughly starts yelling, "You're a pig! You're a pig!"

And the Zen master, of course, as they do, just bowed and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

That stopped the man for a minute. "A Buddha? How can you say I'm a Buddha?" Even he knew better.

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

It's a little bit like that. We take it all so personally, you know? So you can start to explore this in your own experience.

I'm just introducing this to begin exploring. One thing to notice: when there's wanting in the mind, when there's greed, just in the moment of the mind's arising, if we notice it, then it becomes simply the next object of awareness. We've talked about that. But when we don't notice it—and often we don't—later we might say, "Yes, there was wanting." But when it's distorting perception, we don't quite see it.

The Tibetans have a phrase I love: desire puts feathers on the object. It pretties it up. Have you noticed when you really want something—whatever it might be, a piece of chocolate cake, or going for a walk, or in your mind you're planning your next vacation—isn't it just so wonderful, so amazing? Check at the end of the retreat when it's over and you go home. Think back to all the amazing fantasies you had of what was going to happen. Just tell me if any one of them comes anywhere close to how amazingly wonderful and beautiful it seemed to the mind filled with wanting. That's just what wanting does.

When we recognize it—have you ever gone to the supermarket when you're hungry? We all know not to do that, right? Don't go to the supermarket when you're hungry. You end up buying all this junk and you get home thinking, what am I doing with this?

Here's a little example so you can get interested without taking it personally. The apartment I'm staying in, I had to buy some rugs because it's all tile floor. I have this one rug I bought on eBay, and I really liked it. It's cheerful. It cheers me up. I can feel there's a little wanting there—not a huge desire, but a bit of liking. I look at it and think, I like it.

So Franz came up just to check things out the other day, and he had a different perception. Not bad, just different. He didn't have what one of my friends calls "the love eyes." She was talking about when you first get in a relationship with someone, and she said they'd been married for fifteen years and were working through something—not bad, but you know, the love eyes aren't on anymore. The hate eyes weren't on either. You just see more accurately.

So Franz was looking at the rug saying, "Yeah, well, you know, it's like this, but..." He just saw other things about it, perceived it in a different way that I hadn't seen. It wasn't critical, just a different perception without that "Oh, isn't it so lovely?"

After he left, I was looking at the rug. I wasn't upset, but I noticed something. At first, we like wanting. So when the wanting is gone, we think, "Well, it's all flat. I don't want to live like that." That's aversion. But when the wanting is truly gone, you're just seeing

clearly. I could see what he meant. But no, I still like it. I still think it's kind of cheerful. That quality of "it's so wonderful" simply wasn't there anymore. Just little things like that.

Wanting also gives us tunnel vision. We see the thing we want and everything else is in the way, or we just don't notice. Pay attention to that.

My brother used to have a hound dog—they're bred for hunting. My brother didn't hunt, and it was a lovely dog, very sweet, but that dog's nose was so highly developed that the poor thing would come into the house and whatever new smell was there, he couldn't not go to it. Nose on the ground, straight to the smell. If there was any kind of dirty tin can, they had to hide everything. I always had to keep my suitcase zipped because any smell of dirty clothes and he'd be in the suitcase pulling things out. If you let him out in the backyard, he'd just run around the perimeter of the fence with his nose on the ground. He couldn't not do it. No way.

That's how wanting drives the bus when it has taken over our mind and we don't see it. We think, "Yeah, this smell on the ground is so great. This smell is so fantastic."

Let me smell this new one. This one's okay, but this new one over here—that'll be even better. And then we think about it and get into a whole story, and we believe it.

The wanting goes unnoticed. But what am I doing here? Andrea Levine—I just saw him speak, and he was so funny about this. When we recognize that perception, that the mind in the moment is affected—the perception may be distorted, you don't know, but maybe by wanting or ill will or delusion—know this, and really know this: you cannot rely on the thoughts that are being generated. You can't assess if they're accurate. You really can't trust them. You can't believe them.

Andrea gave a simple example with wanting. You're sitting there with this big piece of chocolate cake, and your mind says, "Have another. You'll like it. It's good for you." So you eat that other one. Then as soon as you're done, your mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you." Which one is me? And then we get into the whole thing. But it's just different mental factors coloring thoughts. So we start to see that.

And even more—maybe not even more, but more immediately obvious—is the suffering with aversion. With wanting, we kind of delude ourselves. We think it's good because we think we're going to get something nice. We skip over the fact that we're really miserable right now in the wanting, because we tell ourselves we're going to get something nice. With ill will, aversion, fear, you can't really skip over it because it's telling you not only is it bad now, it's only going to get worse.

When ill will, aversion, dislike is affecting the mind, it really leads to so much thought, so much assessment. Self-judging is a form of this. I know this one very well. And it's been so freeing that when I recognize self-judging, I know it has a feeling, a quality—it's an emotion by this point. By the time it's self-judging, it's really stronger than just a thought. It has a whole feeling for me, like a cloud coming over my mind and tightness in the body and a heavy mood.

You can recognize it. It arises due to natural causes and conditions. I could therapeutically trace back all the conditions in my life. Let me tell you, you only need to do that once. Then you know. The next time it comes up, you can just meet it as it is. You know there are causes and conditions. You don't have to go, "But that's right, my mother did do that, my father did do that..." Yeah, you know that. Good. Now it's arising now, and you can really be present with it. Knowing this helps because it makes it not so personal. There are causes and conditions.

And in certain situations, I know not only the past but the present conditions. For example, if I'm really tired and my mind is fatigued, or if I've had a series of difficult and unpleasant interactions—I'm balanced, balanced, balanced, balanced—and then all of a sudden, boom: "You really blew that one, kiddo." And I can feel it coming in.

So what's been so helpful is once I recognize, "Oh, self-judging is up, ill will is up, aversion's up"—the mind is throwing out, projecting all these thoughts—and I really know I cannot rely on them. Those thoughts are unreliable. They're based on inaccurate perception. I can't try to tease out which is right: that I'm really a worm on the earth because of what I said to that person, or because of what my mother did. Or maybe I'm not really a worm, I'm just kind of so-so. No, no—I'm really great, really incredible.

You know, forget it. Just forget it. The mind can keep on spewing that stuff, but you just see: oh, thought is just thought. It's just thought coming in. You feel the mood, the feeling of the self. That's what's arising now—causes and conditions. But you just know perception's off. The thoughts are based on inaccuracy. They're not to be relied on.

Do you get a sense of how when we start to tune into this in our life, it can be so helpful in making decisions, even split-second ones? When we start to notice—and this has been so helpful to me the last few years in my daily life—I'm doing something or saying something, and I think, "Oh, I really want to go do this." It doesn't matter what. It doesn't have to be a big deal. And then I just notice, because I'm used to just noticing my mind, what's going on in the mind. And I notice it's filled with wanting.

It doesn't mean the thing I want is bad or good. It means I can't tell. It means I have no clear way, no clear perception to assess. So if I can wait, I do.

Same with ill will. If I'm really negative—"Let me go tell that person how this last interaction affected me, with all the love in my heart, because they really need to know"—and then I can feel it: oh yeah, there's a lot of ill will. I don't have to judge it. It's not about judging. Just: this is what's up now. And with the practice of watching our mind, you can see how when there's ill will or aversion, it leads to these thoughts. And if I believe it and feed it, it gets stronger and stronger and stronger. Then I'll act from it.

Seeing that—not as a should, but just watching it—this is what Steve said: the wisdom comes by itself. The wisdom of "Oh yeah, I don't want to do that." It's not like I have to go back and study the *Visuddhimagga* to see that I don't want to go and yell at that person out of anger. When I'm just paying attention, it becomes clear. But if you start judging the anger, that's just more ill will reverberating on itself.

It's from the Buddha. Again: "When one is dwelling with a mind oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both." He's not saying that as a criticism. He just says: oh, that's how it is.

You know, if your mind's obsessed and oppressed by wanting, and you see that in the moment—sometimes just noticing wanting arises, sometimes you can see there's enough awareness that you know it's here, you know ill will's here, but we still can tell we're identified. You can tell that. That's awareness. So then you know: okay, I can't see my own good or the good of another or the good of both. So don't trust it right now.

With wanting. With ill will. And with delusion.

Delusion is sometimes just not having all the information. And we often don't know we don't have all the information. So then we have to act, but just—this is in the kind of mundane way I'm talking now—when we act from this quality of delusion, which is both not having enough information, just plain ignorance in that way, or the delusion of misperceiving and then building a whole life story on it. And there's a kind of delusion which is making assumptions. I've noticed in my own mind, on the level of perception, I don't really have enough information—that quality of just beginner's mind, just "Oh, I don't know what this is." But notice how the memory banks, the perception, will fill in something that's kind of close, and then we're sure that's what it is.

Like, one time I was teaching a retreat in Switzerland, a different place years ago, and walking in the woods—remember walking meditation? Walking in the forest with a friend, without my glasses, which is a really great way to play with that kind of delusion and misperception in the mind, because I really can't see very well. I see enough that I

can get around, and so then I think I know what's going on. I don't have a clue. And I don't know I don't have a clue, because I'm used to it. That's delusion. So I was walking in the forest—it's kind of a nice, tidy forest—with a friend.

And I looked over and saw this big gray and yellow, white-striped thing. I said, "Wow, what's a circus tent doing here?" That's what I saw—a circus tent. And I went, "Oh, a circus tent in the woods, wrecking the whole place like that." And my friend just looked at me. "Carol, go over there and look." So I go over, and it was a big rock covered with yellow lichen. But I literally saw a circus tent. That's delusion. And so much of the time we just don't know that, and we can actually build a lot more on such misperceptions than that quick moment allowed.

In terms of right view, as Steve was talking about, even in more profound ways—the liberating, accurate recognition, the *yathā-bhūta* that really frees the mind and heart, the accurate perception—the Buddha talks about four particular hallucinations of perception, or inverted perception, where we perceive something opposite from how it actually is. And then we believe it, and we build our thoughts and our views and our world on that. Seeing through those inversions over and over and over is really the source of liberating insight. How do we see through? Steady, steady, steady awareness of just what's occurring. Not looking for it—if you look for something, that's wanting.

Any of you who've read any Buddhism are very familiar with these. One is seeing permanence where there is not permanence. *Anicca*—the word for impermanence, for constant change. But the perception we often have is of permanence where there's not permanence.

Another is not seeing the first noble truth, *dukkha*—the unreliability, the unsatisfactoriness of experience. It doesn't mean every experience is unpleasant, but the unreliability to make us truly happy. We don't see that. We see potential for happiness. We see "this is going to make me happy." We see a sense of happiness where that isn't there, where it's *dukkha*, where it's unreliable, where it's intrinsically—I don't like to use "suffering" because we tend to go into aversion with that word, and it's not about aversion. It's about looking for reliability and stability where there is none.

And the third one is seeing a discrete, separate, permanent self in any moment of experience where that is not the case. It's like taking something personal where it's just conditions of nature coming together, as we've been talking about. But talking about it doesn't shift our perception. That's why, as Steve was saying, with right view we need to hear it or read it or get some sense. You think, "Okay, let's pick impermanence." You

think, "Well, I know things change." You ask somebody, and they'll say, "I know things change on a big level." But if you just start dropping in from time to time—don't go crazy looking for it—how often is the perception that things aren't changing?

We know "I change." Do I look the same as when I was three? No. But that's all on an intellectual level. You get up and think, "How come I'm sick today? It shouldn't be different." We think we're just kind of the same me, whatever that is. We think we're all sitting here, kind of the same. But when the mind is quiet, in moment-to-moment awareness, no two moments are the same. They're not.

When you're lost, like we were talking about in a group with some strong, difficult emotion—it was really strong, and the person was really with it. And then noticing: it's gone. There was just a moment of happiness, noticing it's really gone. But the tendency of the mind is to think, "Well, I'm not noticing it now, but it's really here lurking around because this is who I really am." It's permanent.

So these misperceptions—and don't believe me because believing doesn't help—there are so many moments, because perception is occurring every conscious moment, so many moments in our life where the perception, unrecognized, is of permanence, is of a sense of self, is of reliability. And then all our thoughts and views of ourselves and views of the world are built on that perception. And when things don't quite mesh, like a round peg in a square hole—do you know what I mean?

One of the definitions of dukkha—the actual etymological meaning, which points to unreliability, to things not quite working—comes from the old days. It refers to the axle, the wooden rod that goes through the hole in the big wooden wheel of an ox cart. They still have those in Burma, very rough constructions. Just this round thing going through a hole in one solid wooden wheel, and it doesn't fit that well. It's rough. It's just kind of bumpy, and if you've ever ridden in an ox cart, believe me, it really is like that. It just doesn't quite go smoothly.

So the Buddha calls these inverted perceptions. And he talks about what we perceive—saññā, perception—and how we then think about it, citta. So there comes to be the hallucination of perception, the inverted perception. And then without realizing it, we're thinking from that distorted base. How many people have your date books filled up for next month? I'm having to plan for 2015. I'm having to answer questions about 2016. And if I'm not quite aware, there's this underlying assumption that I'll still be alive in 2016. Or we make a plan. I remember once Franz and I made a plan—I was flying in from the States, he was God knows where, one never knows where he is—and we

were meeting in the Bangkok airport at midnight. And it really happened, which to me is even more amazing. But there are all these assumptions that everything is going to be steady.

And so we think from the point of view of this misperception, and that's the hallucination of thinking in citta. And then what we think about—as I was saying with my friend in the Swiss house—those thoughts kind of solidify, kind of coagulate into a view. A view meaning really a description of ourselves or the situation or the world. We may not enunciate it clearly, saying "this is what I believe"—it actually helps when we do because then we at least know what the view is. But it's more in the back of the mind. It's like, "this is what's true."

This is how the Buddha described view: "This is what's true and everything else is false." But we don't recognize that it's a view. If we don't recognize it, we hold to it, and then from those thoughts—just like when I'm in self-judgment and I believe the thoughts and then I start making assessments and actions from that—I just get more and more confused. It's more and more not working. That's what can go on for us until we start to understand how this is happening.

With views in particular—this sense of "this is how it is"—sometimes people talk about having some experience in meditation where everything's different from how it usually was. It's unfamiliar. Maybe a sense that the body falls away. Maybe suddenly everything's happening, but it doesn't feel like me. Nothing threatening, but it's just different. And often fear comes up because our solidity, our view—it's like the mind, the habit of mind, seems to like to be able to describe and know things. "This is how it is." Have you noticed that? We like to have it all figured out. "Okay, I know how it is." We like to have a clue.

And when we get locked into a view without realizing it, often we don't even let in consciously the perceptions that challenge that view. I call it selective perception. Think of politics—actually, don't think of politics—but I'm not going to mention anything specific. Many years ago, another president, many presidents of the United States back, one I was not fond of. And I just remember this one time, and of course that's all views and you see how it goes. But I noticed in my own mind how this selective perception worked.

Someone I could hardly stand to look at, could hardly hear the voice on television—like that, right away. They never did anything good in their life. So someone was telling me something about this president that was kind of sweet and loving and very kind, and my mind was going, "Don't tell me that. I don't want to know. There's nothing good about that person. Don't tell me. That can't be true."

Like, whoa, that's really interesting. I don't want my view upset. It feels easy—this is good and this is bad. This is right and this is wrong, right?

We've been talking about in one of the groups today, different styles of practice, and thinking, "Well, I'm doing this style of practice—does that mean this other style is wrong, or good or bad?" And that's what our mind likes to do. But it's not like that. It's not like that.

So when we get caught in a view, we sometimes literally don't perceive what's actually in front of our face.

This is another story Franz told me. I'm assuming it's true—the ghost driver. In Germany, if somebody enters a divided freeway driving on the wrong side, that can happen once in a while. You know what I mean? So all the traffic's going north and somehow you went in the wrong exit and you're driving south on a divided freeway—you can't get off. They call that a ghost driver. Don't ask me why. Because they're going to be ghosts pretty soon, I suppose.

So the story goes: the person's driving the wrong way, and sometimes they'll say on the radio, you know, they'll come on and say there's a traffic jam in this area or whatever. And so it came on the radio, and the woman was listening to it: "Ghost driver on the Autobahn between München and Augsburg." And the woman's going, "One ghost driver? There are many!" We just don't let in the perception because we're so fixed in our views. I know I'm telling funny stories on purpose, but you get a drift of how it goes.

So this sense of "me"—noticing how, and I'm touching on a lot of things that we could go into a lot of depth—but notice how one of the misperceptions I mentioned that the Buddha points to is this sense of "me," how we take things so personally. A mood comes up—it's my fault, it's me, it's like this. A sound comes—it's bothering me, it's got to be fixed. You come feeling lonely—what's the matter with me? All of that.

So this sense of "me"—have you noticed that it gives rise to a lot of thoughts? A lot of the thoughts are describing me and how I feel and what's going on. I'm not saying good or bad, but again, if the perception's inaccurate, the thoughts are not trustworthy.

So here, what we want to do is not get rid of them, not even argue with them, not try to change them, not try to fix them—but get interested in watching the whole process. Perception, what arises, the thoughts, the sensations—just keep on watching.

Two little examples for me on retreat. I was on a long retreat, just watching, watching, watching, watching, and I had watched a movie just before the retreat. Did any of you make that mistake? So it was a three-month retreat, and it was this movie *The Fu-*

gitive, from years ago. So I'm sitting and sitting and thoughts are coming, images are coming—Harrison Ford and this and that. And when I stopped resisting it and would just be noticing—thinking, liking, excitement—happening, happening, happening... then that would go away. And then the Carol story would start coming up. Carol's this and she's doing that.

And after a while, it was just thinking and seeing and feeling—the Carol story and *The Fugitive* story. There was no difference. In the moment, it was thoughts and emotions and internal images. That's all that was occurring. *The Fugitive* was more interesting. The Carol story I took more personally. But all that was happening was emotions and perceptions and thoughts and feelings and moods. It was really kind of funny to see.

And then to see how we land in some story, some thoughts, some mood during the day—like the example I gave the woman in the group where it really is a difficult thing—and then suddenly you notice it's completely gone.

But with selective perception, we just kind of ignore that it's completely gone. And then we're back to "I was so miserable all day."

Sometimes people say, "Oh, so... oh, really? Well, then in that first sitting, the whole sitting..." "Well, no, but there was about five minutes in the middle that was really..." "And then the whole day?" "Well, no, then I had this nice walk. I went up to the top of the hill, and lunch was really good." "But then in the afternoon I had this, you know, ten minutes and it was so..."

And we don't realize we're doing that—deciding "this is me" and all of that other stuff isn't me. But watch how it's just all cause and effect.

So another story. When I was on retreat, I was sitting in my room. I think it must have been just end of summer, early fall. Very present. And there's the sound of crickets. The perception was "crickets," and that was accurate. And then with that perception came a feeling—this feeling of nostalgia, that sadness of summer ending and fall beginning. A loneliness came. That is a habit my mind goes to when I hear crickets.

So that was happening. "Oh, sadness... and oh, it's ending... and I'm so lonely here, all alone in this room. Three-month retreat—I could die here, no one would know for three days until my next interview." So that's all going, and I was really mindfully watching, just watching the whole thing.

So I thought, let's just see. I'll do an experiment. I sat down and said, okay, bring the attention deliberately to hearing the sound of crickets. And then I deliberately thought a different thought. The perception was the same—crickets. I deliberately thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely here in nature? It's so silent. This lovely end of summer." That's all I did—deliberately thought that. And the whole story followed from that. I started feeling really happy. "Oh, this peace is beautiful. How fortunate to be on this retreat, the exquisite stillness, hearing the crickets."

And that was just as real as the one before. Or not. Thinking, emotions, perception—it all comes. Watch it come, watch it go. Birth and death of a particular sense of me. It's really fun to play with that through the days.

I will end with a short passage from Ajahn Sumedho:

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is about knowing these things fully, just as they are—that they are what they are in this moment. That is all."

That is all.

May our sincere intentions here, our efforts, the wholesome energy be shared with all beings everywhere as one of the causes for their awakening from suffering and confusion.

Thanks for listening. Thanks for your patience.

As you get up and go to walk, just notice what you're doing. Notice the mind, why it's doing it—without judgment.

CHAPTER 118

Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines one of Buddhism's most essential insights: the perception of impermanence (anicca). Drawing from the Buddha's teachings, she explains how developing and cultivating this perception eliminates sense desire, craving for becoming, and the deeply rooted confusion of 'I am.' While intellectual understanding of change comes easily, Wilson explores why we persistently perceive permanence in what is actually constantly changing—from our fear of loss and grief to our desperate clinging for security.*
>
> *Wilson shares a moving story from Burma about a young novice monk's death and how the village community naturally integrated this reality into daily life, contrasting it with Western culture's tendency to hide death and aging from view. She draws on teachings from Ajahn Chah on 'becoming,' the Buddha's tender exchange with his grieving attendant Ānanda, and insights from teachers like the Dalai Lama, Pema Chödrön, and Nisargadatta Maharaj. The talk illuminates how our habit of assuming permanence—in our bodies, moods, and sense of self—creates suffering, while steady awareness reveals the constant flux of experience.*
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> *Practically, Wilson encourages practitioners to notice not just change, but how we assume permanence: in sitting meditation when pain arises and we project it lasting forever, in eating when we overlay continuity onto discrete sensations, and in our rigid self-concepts that steady awareness naturally dissolves. She emphasizes that recognizing impermanence isn't depressing but liberating—opening us to wonder, contentment, and what she calls 'radical trust' in awareness itself. The talk concludes with Hafiz's luminous poem reminding us we are 'just a mid-air flight of golden wine between his pitcher and his cup.'*

Tonight I want to talk about one of the key insights that liberates the heart and mind—one that we've mentioned in passing, but that the Buddha spoke about quite frequently. This is the insight, the clear seeing into impermanence, or the word *anicca* in the Pali language.

This is from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus"—bhikkhus means monks or those meditating, so all of us—"Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sense desire, all lust, all craving. It eliminates all craving for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all the confusion, the wrong view of 'I am.'" Those four things are like shorthand for a completely freed heart and mind.

I really like that quote because of the specificity of it: the perception of impermanence *when developed and cultivated*. Do you remember that we've been talking about perception? I talked about perception a few nights ago, and how one of the base, repetitive sources of our confusion is the repeated misperception. I mentioned the three inverted perceptions, one being that in what is impermanent, we perceive permanence. And we develop and repeatedly practice that without having a clue that that's what we're doing. So I really like it when the Buddha says "when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated." That's just what I want to talk a bit about tonight—pointing to different ideas about why we have this habit of perceiving permanence, and also what helps us see through it. And guess what? That thing is steady awareness.

Let me say something about this quotation I read, about eliminating all craving and all craving for becoming. That may not be familiar language to some of you. Craving eliminates ignorance, okay. The confusion of "I am," okay. But becoming—this is a very simple definition from Ajahn Chah: anything that we attach to and put a meaning on is becoming. Whenever we see anything as self or other or belonging to ourselves, without the wise discernment, without the wisdom to know that such is only a convention, that is becoming.

That sense of self experience—we become the person who wants the banana, the person who feels too hot, the person with the hurt leg. We've talked about this, but just that attaching to anything is becoming. And that becoming gives birth to the sense of self experiencing happiness or unhappiness. That's a whole other talk, but I just wanted to define what becoming is. For the simplicity of talking about it now, it's simply when there's that leaning forward, that clinging, attaching to anything—a sense desire, a view, an opinion, my leg—without the discernment to realize, "Oh, this is a convention." That's all. That's what becoming means.

Anyway, the perception of impermanence cuts through all this confusion. It's really the doorway to liberation, one of the main entryway doors. Seeing *dukkha* is another one—dukkha, the unreliable, suffering aspect—and the perception of *anatta*, of not-self, is another doorway. Different ones light up for each of us, but all three work together.

So tonight I want to talk about impermanence. In one way, it's kind of interesting because of those three, the fact that things change is really the most intellectually obvious, isn't it? I mean, no one would probably argue with that. So how is it that we don't see impermanence? Why is it so hard to see? And why do we need to cultivate the perception?

I think I talked the other night about how liberating insight is really not that reality changes, but that our perception shifts. We shift our perception and then we see, we recognize things differently, we understand more accurately, and thus we respond and react in a way that's commensurate with what's really going on.

The thing is with impermanence—the fact that everything is in constant flux—even if we intellectually may know this from our own experience to some extent, from reading science and such, it's an intellectual knowledge. And the perceptual shift that needs to come happens over and over and over; one time doesn't really do it.

I think of it as a cellular knowing, a cellular living from knowing impermanence. Not having to stop and think about it, but rather the plans, the ways that we respond as if things are going to stay the same—that just doesn't happen anymore. So that cellular knowing operates on a much more subtle level. And that's the nature of insight. That's how our understanding of reality changes.

But what's interesting to see is that when people start thinking really in depth about impermanence, it's not like the most cheery thought, usually. We may think, from the place of not really getting it on a cellular level, that it sounds a little scary or depressing. The question arises: what will it be like to live if everything's changing? How can I function? As if it's not impermanent now, right? And when we have the insight, suddenly we recognize that everything's already changing. That's what I was trying to say. This is how it already is. It's not like we're going to lose something by recognizing accurately—it can only help. It can only help.

I just want to point at three different ways I've noticed in my own mind the not recognizing, the not perceiving of impermanence—things that veer my mind away from wanting to see it.

One is our fear of the unpleasant, our habit of not being with it. When we're really opening to the fact that every meeting ends in parting, for example, there's this instinctive fear of loss, of grief, of sadness. We don't want to feel it. And we have the habit that something unpleasant is bad, right? The whole thing about learning to bring this equanimity and awareness to whatever's arising—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—but our habit is, when confronted with the potential of loss and sorrow and grief, to think "no, bad." So we kind of shut it away a little bit, even though we can't avoid it. That can be a habit.

The second thing I want to point to is the misperception, the not recognizing impermanence right when it's in our face. And the third is the inattention, the lack of attention—all the spacing out, the lack of attention to just what's in front of us, to all the aspects of life.

In the culture I grew up in—and there are many cultures within this country—but in the culture I grew up in, old age is around, but even now it's kind of not so present. Not living in a multigenerational family or house. And death in particular is tidied up, kept minimal. You don't really have it. I didn't really have it in my face. So the society was also part of the conditions of just not really seeing all the aspects of life right in front of my face as life goes on.

I want to tell a little story about this. A few years ago, I was helping to teach a retreat in northern Burma, in the hills of Sagaing outside Mandalay. It was a retreat with a Burmese Sayadaw and a couple of Western teachers, but for foreigners—mostly Europeans, Americans, some Australians—along with Western teachers and managers. This is in the hills of Sagaing, right on the Irrawaddy River, a big river. Lots of nunneries and monasteries all around, in a small village.

So one afternoon, we—the staff of the retreat, the Westerners—were walking along the riverbank. We got down just a little bit, about maybe half a mile, not even. And right there by the river, there's the road, and then different nunneries and monasteries. We came even with a nunnery where we'd been visiting for a few years. We knew a lot of the nuns, a lot of the monks, and someone with us spoke Burmese.

As we got near there, along the wall which runs right along the river—and the river is very much part of people's lives there, the mode of transportation, people plant things along it—we saw the whole community. All the nuns from the nunnery we knew, all the monks, all the lay people, lined up along the wall, all looking over the river. This was very unusual, maybe eighty people or so.

We came up. What's going on?

They said three young novice monks, young boys of twelve or thirteen, had been out playing in the river, playing in a rowboat. And one of them had gone down and hadn't come back up again. He was a new monk from far away, not so used to the river, not from around there. Some men were down trying to find him, but it had been an hour already, so you knew he was going to be dead when they found him.

The whole community was there. Some little tiny girl nuns, four, five, six years old that we knew—everyone was there. And they found the young boy's body and brought it up.

What was so interesting to us was what proceeded from that. The whole community was there, and right by the road was a big *sālā*—a big platform with a roof but no walls, just sitting right there. They use it for all kinds of things. They brought his body in there. Someone went to inform his parents, a twenty-four-hour ride away, so it was going to be a while before they could come.

The whole community—the monks, the nuns—everyone gathered. The little boys who had been with him ran away, because of course they were scared. So some of the monks went to find them, to soothe them, to comfort them. There was this real sense of taking care of everybody. They took the young boy, wrapped him, ran up to the monastery, got clean robes, washed him, put him in his clean robes. The little girl nuns were there, and they knew him, and they were seeing the whole process. Everybody was part of it.

Then some of the nuns and monks sat down and were going to take turns chanting, staying with him until his parents came in another twenty-four, thirty hours. And it was just all right there. Everyone was sad, all the normal emotions, but it was all part of village life.

One of us, one of my friends who was managing the retreat at the time, said, "I'm forty-seven years old. I've never seen a dead body of a person." Just the difference from how we were brought up—and more, the naturalness of it all. Because really, when we talk about impermanence, death is the big one. I'm going to talk about it in smaller ways too, but just that sense of the naturalness. Because that's how it is.

When the way things are is hidden from us for various reasons, or we're just not in the habit of noticing, it feeds our inattention. It feeds our misapprehension, our misperception, without us even knowing it. And then we get uncomfortable, afraid, ill at ease—or think there's something wrong if we feel those things. Instead of seeing them as part of life. People were sad, people were crying, people were trying to soothe the kids, and that's all part of life. Nothing wrong with it. Nothing to avoid.

So let's call this kind of resistance or denial simply that: resistance. Two aspects I want to highlight are the resistance to the sadness of loss—trying to avoid that—and its corollary. That resistance is *dosa*, aversion. It always comes back, I hate to tell you, to the *kilesas*. They're just there when we're suffering. The resistance to the sadness, and the corollary is that our mind gets into clinging, holding on, all kinds of strategies to look for some security. It's not quite so obvious, but watch and see how we're doing it.

This is human. Death, loss, sorrow, grief—it's human. It's not that it shouldn't be happening. It's part of life. And so I feel, in terms of my experience in practice, we shouldn't have the idea that if I'm practicing correctly, I won't feel grief. Or if I'm practicing correctly, sadness won't come up. Rather, it's about not resisting or judging or blaming—just seeing these as natural functions of loss in this life. But met with awareness, they don't have to be any more than that. They come, you see them, they go.

We still see the impermanence even within that. But it's human.

There's a wonderful story from the time of the Buddha about his attendant, Ananda, who served him for the last twenty-five years of his life. If you read the suttas, the discourses of the Buddha that have come down to us, there are a lot of them, and Ananda appears in many because he was always with the Buddha. He was somewhat awakened, but not completely awakened. So he's kind of a humanizer, you could say, in terms of the suttas. His personality comes through as a really kind person, a loving person. He totally supports the Buddha and has deep faith, but his function, rather than trying to keep people away, is how to get people to hear the teachings. He's just very kind.

So in this sutta—the sutta of the Buddha's death, his last days—he's talking to his close monks about the fact that he's going to die soon, and they're discussing the procedures and cremation and such things. Suddenly he realizes that Ananda has disappeared. He says, "Where has Ananda gone?" Although, of course, he knew. But he said, "Where has Ananda gone? Go find him for me."

Ananda had gone into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning against the doorpost. He was weeping and saying, "Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me." This man has heard every talk the Buddha gave for twenty-five years. He really loves him, and he's weeping. It's just really touching. This is life.

The Buddha said, "Go find friend Ananda." And when Ananda came and sat down, the Buddha said, "Enough, Ananda, do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? How could it be, Ananda—since whatever is born, become, compounded is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away? There is no other way."

It's not that it's bad to weep and feel grief. We do. That's just what's happening. But at the same time, we recognize there is no other way.

Then he goes on to say, "Ananda, you have been showing loving-kindness in body, speech, and mind—beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly, unstintedly. You have achieved much merit, Ananda. Make effort, and in a short time your mind will be free, your heart will be free of corruptions."

That's his way of expressing compassion, saying, "This is really how it is." I love that. When we might hear him saying, "Don't you get it? Everything changes," he's not saying it like, "You stupid jerk." He's saying it knowing that hearing the truth can cut through our delusion. He's saying with all the compassion in his heart, "How could it be otherwise?"

So we see that for ourselves, but without flinching away or fearing or judging the sorrow and the grief. It's going to come. It's part of how our minds and bodies work, as long as we still think there's some chance for it to be other. It's poignant.

For me, if the grief is strong, I let the sadness, let the resistance be a wake-up call. The Buddha often used this fact of impermanence as a teaching tool, as a way to just wake up and say, "Oh, I'm really upset. What's really going on here?" Not "I shouldn't be," but "What's really going on here?" And then we see how much there's a sense of wanting somewhere to land, wanting some stable ground, not wanting to lose things. But we don't need to run from that. We don't need to run from shaky ground.

This sense of using change as a teaching tool is something that's accessible to us. That's why I started with this story about the young guy dying—because death is always available.

When he knew he was having, I think, a liver transplant, he was giving a speech to graduating students at Stanford. I didn't hear the whole speech, but they said about a third of it he was talking about death, because it was imminent for him. I just want to share one quotation. He said, "Remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I have ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life." He's saying when we're looking at things the way they really are, we're naked.

Those of you who remember the sixties may remember Carlos Castaneda. It's kind of gone into obscurity now, but Don Juan was always saying, "Make death your advisor." Not death as your advisor in a heavy way, but it's like, yeah, when you look at that, then what's really important? We look at that in our lives.

So seeing the habit, the fear of the fear, the judgment that something's wrong—if we feel grief, something's wrong, this shouldn't be happening. But no, this is how it is. And awareness sees this is how it is. What comes up is the next arising experience we meet with awareness. We start to see clearly the steadiness of awareness.

This is where seeing impermanence frees the heart and mind from clinging, even just in a moment. The reaction to the fact that we can't really rely on anything—this doesn't make sense, although this is what we do. The fact that everything's changing, all meetings end in parting, we will all die, we will all lose, whatever—so we react to that by clinging like crazy to whatever comes up that might give us some sense of stability or security. The mind that wants some... I don't know about you, but my mind really hates uncertainty. Not knowing what's going to happen, shaky ground. But all of life is shaky ground.

I heard on the radio, probably a couple of years ago on the news, on NPR, talking about the European debt crisis at the time, when it was really big in the news. This was completely serious. They talked about the European debt crisis, its effect on politics and government, and said—this is the quotation—"Politics is being driven by the stock markets, and the markets hate uncertainty." So they pressure this or that government, this or that political figure, and they gave examples: this person should stay, or this person should resign, or this person should do X, Y, or Z so that there can be certainty in the stock markets.

What world do these guys think they're living in? Is there certainty in the stock market? "The stock markets hate uncertainty"—there's nothing but uncertainty. This was said with such seriousness, as if that made sense. It's completely insane. But that's really it: What can I do to get certainty? Where can I find some place to rest?

The Buddha said the search for a resting place is burning. It burns our heart and mind. Not to need one is cool and peaceful. That's just the clinging—"I've got to find something I can rely on." That's samsara. It's burning. When, okay, this moment is like this—you've had moments like that here, right? Just the space around, oh, cool and peaceful. Stepping under that nirvana tree, out of the burning.

But the habit of clinging, the sense of "if I just get something steady, it'll make me feel at ease"—it's so deeply in there.

I'll read a little bit of a poem from Galway Kinnell. I really like it. It's long, but I just picked out a couple of stanzas that speak to this. It's called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight."

You scream, waking from a nightmare.

When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard as if clinging could save us. I think that you think I will never die. I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars even as my broken arms heal themselves around you. I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down. I have stood by as

you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die. Little Maud, yet perhaps this is the reason you cry, this the nightmare you wake screaming from, being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

I really like that. We are in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. But it doesn't have to be a nightmare. It doesn't have to be anything, because each moment can become so fresh and new when we're not holding on for dear life trying to keep things some way. I'll say more about that, but this holding on is what breeds the fear. Clinging breeds fear. Clinging breeds suffering.

I was just starting to notice this sense of how much we want to hold on. And this clinging is what keeps us from accurate perception—it's what gets in the way. Because we don't want to be in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. So first we don't think about the house that falls. It's somebody else's, or it was a mistake. We don't want to be in the pre-trembling. We don't want to be in the trembling. We actually just don't really want to know. Maybe this is going to be how it is—finally, I got to the safe place. I watched my mind do that so many times, just here, going through mental states, and finally you get to a nice one. Okay. Ah, I landed here. I finally got here. It's just such a habit of our minds.

So I started talking about noticing impermanence in the big things of death, but really the perception of impermanence is about moment to moment to moment. I once heard the Dalai Lama teaching about impermanence—I think he said this a lot. He was talking about how we think we see impermanence, but what we don't notice is how much we're assuming permanence, which is a kind of delusion. We don't notice the momentariness of change. We notice the big changes. Sometimes we don't even notice those. But we notice the big changes—when something begins, then it abides, and then it dissolves. That's sort of how we think about change. Maybe my life begins, it abides, and dissolves, even though we know we're different every moment. It feels like I'm here for these years—sixty-something, whatever—we're here, we're abiding, and then it'll go somewhere down the road. Or even the day starts, or even a sitting, or even a mood: here, it abides, it goes away.

But it's not like that. There's no abiding. There's nothing abiding for a period of time, staying the same. It's momentary. It's like nine billion plus nanoseconds in one second—I read that's some scientific measurement. And even the Buddha talked about so many mind moments in the blink of an eye, trillions. That's how fast things are changing. Changing so fast we can't literally perceive it. But then we get in the habit of our mind just stretching things out, because there is a lot of momentary change our senses can

perceive when we're really steady with the awareness. We think things arise due to conditions, stay a while, then go away. No. We're not the same in two seconds. It's not the same.

There's a kind of time-lapse photography—a yogi, a meditator, told me about this, the insight she had into impermanence.

I've loved that image ever since. She was watching a time-lapse video of a flower growing. We've all seen those—where the flower kind of bursts out of the ground, and the stem comes, and the leaves come, and the flower opens and then falls down. It's far out to see.

When you're watching that, we know it's all speeded up, but that's what's actually going on. And when we see it moving like that, there's not really a place where you could stop it and say, "That's the flower." It's all the dirt and the air and the sun and the water, and it's moving, and there's grass, and something starts to come, and it turns into the woody fiber of the thing. But when does it change from air and soil and water to woody fiber and leaves and flower and falling and rotting and back to the soil? Every second, it's different. And it's not just flower, right? You can't separate it from the environment, from the seeing of it. It's all constant. Every single minute is different. Continual opening, this constant flow.

That's impermanence. Things as they have come to be in this moment—but this moment is faster than that. Things as they have come to be isn't just that we're sitting here for nine days. How much has happened in your mind since you've been here? How many thoughts have arisen? You don't even want to know. How many moods? How many breaths? It's amazing. What's interesting is how we kind of shine on and don't really take that in, even though we're seeing it.

Somebody said once at the end of a month retreat here, "It's been twenty-eight days and absolutely nothing has happened. We've just been here for twenty-eight days." But on the other hand, every moment, so much is happening. She meant in the big picture, nothing has happened. You get up, you sit, you walk, you go back to bed. But really, nothing happened, right? You go home, people say, "What did you do?" "I got up, I sat, I walked." There's not that much you can really say to people who don't meditate about what it was like—so don't try. I'll tell you that tomorrow. But on the other hand, ten million things are happening in every hour.

Noticing that—a friend said on a retreat years ago, "I've been meditating for years and years," and she had. And she said, "I've known for years, I've seen impermanence, this fact that everything's changing, just like that flower. But this retreat, I'm suddenly

getting it. Oh, me too. I'm not just sitting here watching everything else change. That's what I am. No difference. No separation." What we're calling "me" is different every second. Every nanosecond.

So it's the clinging, the holding on that we don't see—not a big clinging, but just that idea, a sensation, a memory. Now we're remembering. I could come in and, like in groups, you start talking about what's going on. If you really look, it's probably not going on anymore, right? It was going on, even if you think it was going on five minutes before. I mean, that's what we have to do to talk, but it's not really happening anymore. Just changing like that.

So when we go to look for what's happening, the way we use thought usually is useful, but it distorts our perception. It can get in the way where we believe the thought rather than bringing our awareness back to the immediacy of perception—just this moment, this moment, this moment—seeing how fast everything is changing. You can't make really anything solid.

This is from Pema Chödrön.

She's talking about emptiness, but emptiness really meaning emptiness of intrinsic separate self-existence. So it doesn't mean nothing's there. You could say the flower is empty of separate flower-ness because it includes everything.

And so she says, you recognize this by not clinging, by not making a something of anything. That's what Ajahn Chah was saying. If I take the flower and make a flower of it, in that moment this is a subtle clinging. I've frozen everything. The flower has become separate from the dirt and the air and from me and from rotting. Now it's a flower. Later it'll rot, but now it's this unchanging thing.

So she says, we recognize this constant change by not resting in any experience, not making something, by keeping on going. She says everything is a verb. There's no thingness. Everything is a verb. Interesting, isn't it?

And then she told this funny story. With Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was a great Tibetan master, and Trungpa Rinpoche when he was alive—they were together in Bodh Gaya or somewhere, sitting under some tree. They were sitting together, she said, for two or three hours, just in silence, but really together, just happy and silent and beaming. And after about three hours, Chögyam Trungpa broke the silence. With a huge smile, he looked at Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and pointed to a tree. With a huge smile, he said, "They call that a tree." And they both cracked up. Just totally cracked up.

The sense of it is that we do call it a tree—that's useful. But then we call it a tree and we think it's this solid thing when it's a verb. In constant change, in constant motion.

Not that you can try to see that way. We know it's not in our control. You can't say, "Now I'm going to see impermanence every time I look around." Because the misperception, the perceiving of permanence, is such a habit we don't even know we're doing it. But bringing it into our mind and just starting to tune in, you'll notice it more and more.

And this is where the most important thing is—guess what? Steadiness of awareness. Steadiness of awareness.

Nisargadatta Maharaj—have you heard of him? He was an Indian teacher. They wrote a book of conversations with him that was translated into English really well, called *I Am That*. It's a great book if you ever feel like reading something non-Buddhist. Anyway, he says, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination."

Totally. So our job, if we start trying to think and look for something—"Let me see how everything's changing"—that's actually imagination, looking for something. We don't know how it should be. But lack of attention—that's what we're learning about. We're learning how to be interested in awareness, which is simply present one hundred percent with whatever's arising right now. That's all we've been practicing. It's profound.

That steadiness of awareness—just now, just now, just now—is how reality reveals itself. It's not like we have to figure out what we need to do to find impermanence. As I said in the beginning, that's how it is. We don't have to do anything to find it except keep showing up to what's happening right now with as much clarity and as little distortion as possible. The wisdom will reveal things for itself. We can notice when our habits of mind are falling into the habits of unwillingness to really show up. Those are habits.

They're going to come. Meet those with kindness—that's what we've been saying. Really see them. Notice them. And that's actually a clue. If I think I'm really present and I start to notice aversion in the mind, it's not like, "Oh, bad." It's more like, "Huh. That's interesting." What's the quality of not wanting to be with right now? You get interested: what's my mind not wanting to be with right now? Not a big psychological analysis, just what's happening right now? Interested to see.

So the steadiness of mindful awareness, moment after moment, is what's going to reveal impermanence over and over and over.

Just to give an example of how we draw things out and cling for stability, making steady something that we don't see change—going back to my friend who said, "Oh, everything's changing, and now I realize it's me too." We've mentioned this in terms of our idea of ourself. There's a word in Pali, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which means identity view or personality view. That word *diṭṭhi*, view, is like a description we've made that we don't even realize is a description—we think it's true.

Just to see how the steadiness of awareness breaks this down, it gets really interesting. One Burmese Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Lakana, who was the Sayadaw I was teaching with in Burma that year, describes the momentary construction of personality view. Because everything's momentarily constructed and falling apart—that's the thing with difficult stuff too. It's not arising, staying, staying, staying, and then going away. It's not just the pleasant stuff that's arising and going away quickly. The unpleasant stuff also isn't staying, staying, staying. It's constantly being created and falling, created and falling.

So this personality view—the way you can see it begin in a moment is this: back to the six sense objects, the six experiences. Sometimes when you feel like there's a momentum of awareness and you're not feeling too caught in everything, you notice how there's seeing, or you're hearing, and a mood comes, a thought comes. It's just kind of coming and going, faster or slower, and there's not really a problem. You have a sense of that? You're not saying, "Oh God, everything's changing. Oh God, I need something to land." And you're not even thinking "I" anything in particular. You're not going, "Oh great, that's me." Stuff is just happening in awareness. Thinking back, you can get a sense of the peace of that.

You notice that's going along, and suddenly some particular thing arises, and—whop! That's me. We usually don't say "that's me," but that's how it feels. Something's been kind of pulled out. "I don't like that sight. I don't like this mood. What is that person doing?" We don't even realize that's a perception and a thought that we're glomming onto, or a memory. But you get a sense of how it's kind of pulled out of the flow—or really, the mind just clings, wrapping around it. And that's "me" or "mine," right in that moment. Birth of personality view.

When the awareness kind of stops then, that's when it starts to feel permanent. Steve pointed to this—how actually what we're thinking of as me, the way we're describing ourself, is changing all the time. But when we don't have steady awareness, we don't notice that. Even though it's a completely different experience, we still think it's the same me. You know what I mean?

I'll give an example. A very simple one, of a friend who used to cook here on retreats.

A very dear friend and longtime practitioner, she used to cook here on retreats. She told me one time she came to sit for the day after she'd been working and talking with friends. She was a cook, and her friends were discussing—well, basically saying—she said, "I think I'm a really aversive type person. I have a lot of aversion." And all her colleagues and friends said, "Yeah, that's right, you really do."

So she was in a stew. This wasn't really new information for her, I have to say, but on this particular day she came to sit, she was in a real stew about it. Has anybody here gotten in a stew about anything you thought about yourself since you've been here? You know how it really feels like *this is what I am*. I'm an aversive person.

So she came to sit down, her and her aversive person. But because she'd done a lot of practice, the sitting reminded her to have steady awareness. The reason we haven't had a schedule here is because we want you to remember steady awareness everywhere, not just sitting. But anyway, the sitting reminded her.

So she starts watching the aversion and the thoughts in her mind, the images of how the aversion was manifesting. But then she just watched what came. And she said, "You know what? Yeah, there were some aversive thoughts—maybe ten percent. But there were also some really loving thoughts. There were times of no thoughts and just moods of compassion. There were times when there was nothing to do with me at all—just hearing and seeing and sensing in the body. And then there were times of generosity." All kinds of stuff was arising, and none of it was any more her than any of the rest of it.

She saw how the clinging to the aversive thoughts and the idea—the view, the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—"I am an aversive person"—that's a clinging. There were still no more or less aversive thoughts than before. When she was just watching with awareness, aversive thoughts came, the mood was there, and then they would go. Sure, they arise. There was conditioning that led to a fair amount of aversive thoughts. That doesn't make it her. It's conditioning that comes and goes.

So with steady awareness, if you really start to have steady awareness, there's no way you can stick to the idea of "I am this" or "I am that" or "I am this type of person." You just can't. We try hard. But you can't help but see the change. And this isn't a suffering thing to see—this is incredibly freeing. All these different aspects I'm talking about, it's incredibly freeing.

The question comes up a lot: Why would I want to see things this way? Why would I want to recognize consciously, moment to moment, the instability in the world, in my life, in my body?

It's because that's the way it is. That's the way it is.

Joseph Goldstein, one of his little remarks: "Anything can happen at any time." It's really true. And then there's that reaction of, "But oh my god..."—I think you can feel it. Why would I want to live like that? Live in fear? Anything can happen at any time?

But that's not awareness. That's fear. And the fear comes up because we're looking ahead and thinking, "What if this happens? What if that happens?" We have no clue what's going to happen. We have no clue what's going to happen in the next moment. But we think we do, right? You think I'm going to keep on talking, and you're wondering how much longer.

And you're going to be sitting here and then the bell's going to ring, and then we'll say something and you'll walk out or whatever. And it's actually kind of scary that more or less that happens, because that can lock us into assuming permanence.

So one thing I like to play with when I have the space on retreat is to just start to notice not only when there's change, but how am I assuming permanence? I don't mean thinking about this a lot, but just noticing it. Notice how the mind assumes permanence when you sit down—and I just pick sitting, it could be walking or anything. You sit down and your back's hurting, you're restless, and right away the mind goes, "Forty-five more minutes." Right then, we think it's going to go forever.

People have told me, various people here just on their retreat, having some really intense physical or emotional states going on for quite a while, and suddenly there's a shift in the relationship in the mind, a shift into awareness, and it's gone like that. Gone like that. How could that be? And it's almost like we can start wondering *how* could it be, instead of really noticing the gone-ness. So really notice when something is gone.

This is silly, but it was like a big insight. And sometimes you get big insights with little mundane stuff. I was eating on a retreat. Very careful mindfulness. Chewing, chewing, chewing—which we can do in a style of practice where we're really being focused. Chewing, chewing. You feel the food, you taste the taste. By the way, after two chews, the taste is gone. Did you ever notice that? Chewing, chewing, chewing, and it isn't so pleasant. So you chew in a hurry so you can take the next taste. Notice it sometime.

Chewing, chewing, feeling it, swallowing, you feel it going down. And I noticed I was feeling, "Oh, here, whatever it was I was eating is going down," feeling the sensation, the food's going down. But then I saw so clearly—it was a story in my mind: "The food is going down." That was the story. The experience was chewing, chewing, there was the

mashed-up food, and then I swallowed, and what I was calling "food"—that was gone. Completely gone. There was some feeling in my esophagus, but calling it the food I was chewing was just an idea.

I know, it seems silly. But these are the stuff that insights are made of. And I just kept seeing that each moment was completely different. And my mind calling it "food," doing all this stuff, was giving this solidity to things. Just—moment—what's it now? What's the experience now? What's the experience now? Noticing the gone-ness.

Noticing how you assume permanence in any way here, as I just mentioned—with mind states, with thinking we know what's going to happen, assuming we know. And noticing how when you sit down, you don't know how your body's going to feel in the next second. Do you have one clue what your next thought is going to be? What the next feeling's going to come up in the body? What sound's going to come? What sight's going to be there? Every moment is completely new and fresh.

And seeing that isn't scary. That's where the interest is, where the aliveness is. We really land in the middle of life. It's our thinking we know that keeps us in that—when someone says they're talking about the routine, you know, you go on and on and on—because we're not awake in it. And so somehow we can want that soothing of the same, the same, the same. But really, no two minutes are ever the same. You can't eat the same brownie—the second bite's a different bite.

It's usually not quite as good as the first bite. Every moment is different.

So noticing gone-ness, noticing you never know what's going to happen, but notice when we think we know what's going to happen. And just noticing how the conditions are changing so that nothing can ever stay exactly the same.

And cause and effect—how our mental states are affected by the weather. Have you noticed that? I remember one retreat years ago in England, in Wales, and I was talking to the teacher. I can't remember what my mental state was, but obviously, it was England and Wales. It had rained like twenty-seven days out of twenty-nine. It was a month-long retreat. And it was cold. Polish scout house. It was this house with freezing rooms and one bathtub for the thirty of us. And it was in our young days. You guys have no clue. And that's nothing compared to Burma.

Anyway, I was complaining, whining obviously, about my mental state, and taking it so seriously—what's the matter with me, why am I... it must have been a negative one, right? Why am I so depressed, or why don't I have energy, or why is my head heavy? He

just looks at me and goes, "It's the weather." You can't claim everything as being you, you know? It's all affected by each other, and none of it's personal. Just looking and seeing that.

So noticing this. Notice when we try to repeat a beautiful state, when we try to repeat an experience and then blame ourselves because we couldn't. Nothing's ever the same, ever the same.

As I said, why would we want to perceive this constant change? The perception of anicca, impermanence, cultivated, just noticed, and repeatedly noticed—it cuts through the habit of clinging and fear. It's what really moves our perceptions, what moves our heart beyond clinging and fear. It releases us from that.

The Buddha spoke of liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. It's the non-clinging heart and mind that recognizes reality accurately that frees us from fear and confusion. And recognizing, even just for a moment, how much stuff is changing—this flow, this conditioning, everything's a verb. There can be moments of fear. Let's just have it. Fear just comes and goes as conditions too. But I find it opens us to the mystery, to the wonder of life, to the sense of there's only this moment, and we just appreciate it so much more. It's not about adding to our suffering. It really releases us, even just in a moment, to so much more appreciation and contentment, really.

Contentment, because this is all there is. Ajahn Sumedho said once, "Contentment and gratitude are very supportive states for awakening." They're also reflective of the heart and mind that's really resting at ease—as the Tibetans say, resting at ease in whatever arises. So it's resting at ease, but only for the second. Just in this, in this, in this, in this.

And it really opens us into the possibility, even for a moment, of radical trust in awareness, in the Dhamma. Life is just as it is in this moment, can't be any different, doesn't need to be any different. And the freedom of heart and mind that manifests as compassion, as love, is available only in radical trust in this moment. However this moment is doesn't matter. And out of that, really the wonder, the opening to the mystery—it's not that we can't function.

Guy Armstrong has a quotation he likes to give of a Zen master who was asked, "What is the effect of a lifetime of practice?" And his answer was, "An appropriate response." When we're not distorting our perception, when we're really opening into the wonder, into the mystery, into just the sensitivity of this moment, whatever arises can

be met with appropriateness. Doing the obvious—whether it's a compassionate action, whether it's equanimity, whether it's just being present, whatever it may be, whether it's getting yourself out of the way of harm. An appropriate response.

So I will just end with a little poem from Hafiz, the Persian poet, called "Deepening the Wonder":

Death is a favor to us, but our scales have lost their balance. The impermanence of the body should give us great clarity.

Deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes of this mysterious existence we share and are surely just traveling through.

If I were in the tavern tonight, Hafiz would call for drinks, and as the master poured, I would be reminded that all I know of life and myself is that we are just a mid-air flight of golden wine between his pitcher and his cup.

If I were in the tavern tonight, I would buy freely for everyone in this world because our marriage with the cruel beauty of time and space cannot endure very long.

Death is a favor to us, but our minds have lost their balance. The miraculous existence and impermanence of form always makes the illumined ones laugh and sing.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

We are just a mid-air flight of golden wine between his pitcher and his cup.

CHAPTER 119

Simplicity and Honesty of Awareness

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the three essential jobs of a meditator as taught by Sayadaw U Tejaniya: right view, awareness, and perseverance. She emphasizes that our task isn't to figure everything out or to feel good, but simply to maintain present-moment awareness with friendly interest. Drawing on vivid examples—from watching Yo-Yo Ma encounter unfamiliar music with complete openness, to observing Tom Brady's emotional whiplash during the Super Bowl—Wilson shows how we typically oscillate between craving pleasant experiences and fleeing unpleasant ones, never resting in simple presence.*
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> *Wilson explores how deeply ingrained habits distort our perception, referencing the Buddha's teaching that the unawakened person knows no escape from unpleasant experience except chasing after sensory pleasure. This pattern becomes our default mode, operating below conscious awareness like the automatic actions of changing lanes while driving. She shares a touching story of a student who, through steady awareness of her own reactivity, transformed a difficult family visit simply by seeing her defensive patterns as they arose.*
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> *The talk concludes with wisdom from Dīpā Mā and Ajahn Buddhadāsa, pointing toward throwing experience "back to nature" rather than claiming it as personal. Wilson invites practitioners to trust awareness itself as refuge—recognizing that while the content of experience constantly changes, the capacity for mindful presence remains available, offering freedom from the endless cycle of fixing and correcting that characterizes saṃsāra.*

So what I'm thinking I'm going to be talking about tonight is the simplicity and honesty of mindfulness, of awareness. We'll see if that's what I actually talk about.

But first, I have to acknowledge these poor flowers. I keep looking at them, and I feel a real kind of identification. Sometimes we're feeling really upright, filled with the beauty and joy of practice, and sometimes we're just flopping around, but doing our best. They're trying—they're kind of trying to curve up again, not giving up. I kind of love them.

Last night, Steve mentioned in passing the first of the three jobs of the meditator, of the yogi, which is one of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's fun little lines—the first job being right view. The second and third jobs of a meditator are so simple: mindfulness, awareness is the second job—the simplicity of awareness. The third job is the perseverance, the continuity, the willingness to be steady. So simple.

Our job isn't to figure everything out. Our job isn't to explain everything. Our job isn't to have our experience move in a certain direction. Our job—you may not be happy to hear this—isn't to feel good. Or you might be happy to hear it because you probably don't feel so great, so you're doing fine. You're here with some awareness, with the intention to remember to be aware when you forget. That's our job. The rest takes care of itself.

I want to talk a minute about the simplicity of mindfulness itself. We've been saying how awareness, the sense of just recognizing what's occurring, doesn't take a lot of energy, doesn't take a lot of effort. When I gave that example the first morning about seeing—and then, oh, seeing is occurring—you can say, "Oh." It's not such a big deal. Very available. The only trick is remembering. Not stressful or exhausting. So in that way, mindfulness awareness is simple.

Another way I want to describe this quality I'm calling simplicity and honesty: in a moment of awareness, of mindful presence—I'm using different ways to describe the feeling, the sense, and these are not necessarily abhidhammically correct—but the simplicity of a moment of mindful presence is that mindfulness, or mindfulness with right view as Steve was talking about, is this quality of attention where the whole psyche in that moment is really present with just the experience that's happening, just as it is, without adding anything extra. Just simple. Without preconception, without assumption, without judging, without liking or disliking. Just kind of open for discovery. I think of it as friendly interest in whatever's arising. Sounds nice.

So your knee is killing you. Awareness would be friendly interest in the sensation. Is it burning? Is it tingling? How quickly does this simplicity of sensation move to, "Oh my God, and it's only day two"? Or how do you wake up and you're in the emergency room? I mean, you're not really in the emergency room—you're here—but you wake up from imagining you're in the emergency room.

What's actually occurring? The simplicity of mindfulness would be: oh, you notice those thoughts. The thoughts aren't the problem. When we recognize thinking is occurring, great—that's the simplicity of mindfulness again. Oh, this is thinking. But the complications from sensation, not really noticing how we get into that whole story—I'm in the emergency room, and in general, not only this moment but this whole retreat is unbearable, not only this retreat but my life, and anything I can see from this moment... You get a sense of what I'm meaning?

The simplicity, the honesty of mindfulness is just what's happening now. Just meeting each moment with this kind of freshness, aliveness—just what's happening now without preconception. It's so refreshing in the moments it happens. But we can't say,

"I'm now going to be free from preconception." It doesn't work. It's such a habit. But learning to recognize, to kind of feel, to taste what this simplicity feels like, how to bring this friendly interest, and how to notice when it's not like that, when the complications are coming in.

One way I noticed this in my own experience—I think yesterday afternoon—is how it doesn't have to be a big suffering experience or a big joyful experience. Something that seems to be staying the same, something that we assume we're familiar with—this quality of simple, honest freshness of attention often gets lost.

kind of blurred away. We think we know, so we don't really pay attention. We could say we're mindful, but it isn't really. It's a simple example of how with the familiar, we stop paying attention.

The cottage I live in down the road—when I moved into it, it had just been built, so it's over twenty years ago. I moved in, brand new, everything's brand new, the paint's brand new, the floors are really good, everything's perfect. One whole dharma talk, which isn't this one, is how quickly it stopped being perfect. The way I'm using the example here is the opposite: how I stopped noticing. I keep thinking of it—oh, this house is brand new and the paint is perfect and the floors are really good. And I'll come in and I'll see all these stains and stuff on the floor and I go, well, what's that doing there? It's so new, so fresh! Because I'm not looking. I'm not looking. I'm just assuming it's the way it's always been. And meanwhile, it's had twenty-plus years of deterioration.

Does that sound familiar to anything—like in our bodies, in our habits? You just don't look in the mirror. Hey, I'm the same as I was at twenty-five. How come this and that doesn't work?

So just bringing in this freshness, meeting something new each time. This habit of dulling out is one very common pattern of mine that distorts, that is in the way, that blocks this simplicity of mindfulness, this freshness—which is just meeting each moment as fresh, each moment as new. And that's the truth. Next moment anything can happen. Each breath is a new breath. You can never have the same breath twice. Each moment of that twinging pain in the knee is really different each time. Or the reaction in the mind is different. No two moments are ever exactly the same.

We don't have to think about the next moment. It's just this sense of complete commitment to presence with this moment's experience. That's one way I think of mindful awareness. Not "I'll be present if this moment's okay"—like sticking a toe in the water, checking whether this is an okay experience to be mindful of. No, it's just here.

Someone in a group today used an expression I loved. She was realizing she'd been kind of fighting with experience—it was unpleasant experience, that's what we usually fight with—and then recognizing, in my language, just to be there for it. Quit fighting. And in that moment of what I'm calling complete commitment to presence with this experience, the expression she used was really seeing, appreciating the richness of the moment. The richness of what's going on, which is only available to us when we're totally present. Just for one moment.

The simplicity of mindfulness, of awareness, the honesty of it—just being with things as they are, not as we think they ought to be, or should be, or were yesterday. Now, I'm not saying this is easy, and it's not that we can do it with an act of will, because the habits of our mind, our emotional habits, our personality, our psyche—Steve was mentioning it last night—they're pretty deeply ingrained. That's why they're habits, and they're comfortable. But we can learn to see those habits themselves with mindfulness.

Another example I remember when I'm thinking about this freshness, this quality of fresh interest without preconceptions: it's a documentary I saw on TV in Germany years and years ago about Yo-Yo Ma.

He's a really world-famous classical cellist, very interesting guy. So just to cut it short, he was really interested in music from all cultures all over the world.

In this documentary, he flew in a helicopter into a meeting with the head music man in a very small tribe somewhere in Africa—I didn't catch what country. He flew in a helicopter, so he was meeting this head musician of this particular tribe. The guy came out, a really old man, and he came out with his instrument, which was literally a big round oil can. He'd taken off the top and the bottom so it was a round cylinder, with a big wooden stick pole—kind of like if you were holding a cello, that would be the handle—and then with some frets and some wires coming out to make the strings. So that was his instrument, which he would play with his fingers and sing.

And Yo-Yo Ma gets out of his helicopter with his literally million-dollar cello. Maybe it's only a second-string cello, I don't know how much, but anyway, he gets out with it. He's listening to this head man play and sing, just totally present—not comparing it to how classical Bach should sound or anything, just really listening. Then he plays his cello for the guy, then the guy plays again, and then Yo-Yo Ma sings, wow! And then he tried the guy's instrument. He goes, "I can't do this nearly as well as you can do it. I just can't do it." Because he could right away get into appreciating the different background, the different culture, the different form of music, and the skill it took.

What freshness of mind and seeing does that take? Not to say, "Well, that's good as far as it goes, but listen to me play Mozart." And in fact, he said, "You take my cello, you try to play the cello. I want to try and learn how to do this better, your one." I just love it. That image has stayed with me for years and years. Whenever I'm noticing that I'm feeling really just dulled out or assuming something should be a certain way, I just think of Yo-Yo Ma. I think, "Oh yeah, that freshness, that childlike innocence, that interest free from preconception."

So what we're cultivating here, moment to moment to moment, is just remembering, recognizing, getting a feel for this, learning to trust it, seeing how it works. And in a way, this quality of interested attention—Sharon Salzberg has a line I like, which is, "To pay attention is to love." You could say that in a way. This commitment to simply be fully present in this moment, what we call richness of the moment—it's a way of loving, a way of opening completely to just what is.

Why is this so difficult, you may ask? Or maybe you already know, in which case I could stop now, but I'll remind us. The habits are so deeply ingrained. And you know how the Buddha described it, but first just to say about the habits of mind in general: it becomes, I think Steve was saying in different language, kind of a default mode. In times of stress, in times of hurry, when we're not really aware, the places that our mind, our personality, our reactions tend to go under stress—they feel more at ease, more comfortable, they don't seem to take as much mental energy.

Tara Brach, in her latest book, was writing about the default modes, the habits of our minds, of our reactions. And these response habits, she said, take less mental energy because they can operate a little bit under our conscious level. She gives the example, which I liked, of driving. Probably most of us here drive, maybe not everyone, but if you drive—when you're driving on the highway and changing lanes, that's really become so automatic that there's actually quite a lot going on, isn't there, that you're doing to change lanes at sixty miles an hour with a lot of cars around you on the freeway. But it's so habitual that for many of us we can do that almost below the level of consciousness.

All these many actions are taking place. Even deciding why, and what's the intention in the mind, and what particular sense experiences give rise to wanting to change lanes. Then checking the front and the rear and the turning and all of that. Moving the body, calibrating the speed, having your attention kind of global all around in all directions, and when to come back again. There's a heck of a lot going on in that. But we can do it. There's consciousness, but we're not necessarily aware. It can be below the sur-

face of awareness, quite natural. It's comfortable. It's a habit of mind. And so we don't necessarily clearly recognize—this is Tara again—or understand all that's going on or what's happening in that process.

So when it's a confused or suffering habit of mind, it's that same thing. We don't quite know what's going on, and we end up in this kind of fog of bewilderment, of confusion. How come everything's so off? How come I'm suffering? How come I can't quite seem to get in alignment with experience? Or how come I'm in this place of fear again?

But mindfulness, sati, awareness of the moment to moment—and this is why the continuity, the perseverance is so important—the moment-to-moment awareness of just what's occurring actually brings these workings of the mind into awareness. As Steve was saying, this becomes the next object of awareness, and we start to see what's going on.

So just like in changing lanes on the freeway, if you're more global, you'd be becoming aware of the process rather than talking to someone else or listening to music or trying to text or all the scary things people do when they're driving. And you're just noticing the movement of the arms, you're checking the mirror, the aversion to the slow person, the wanting to shift.

You can just gently, gently be aware of that whole process. This brings it into the light, and that really gives us the space to respond in a different way—from wisdom. Before, it's just on automatic.

If you want to get to perhaps the root level, the subtle level of where and how easily we get so quickly away from the simplicity of mindful awareness in any particular moment, the Buddha starts by describing our experience. Basically, he says, all we're experiencing is rapidly rotating moments of sixth sense experiences. There's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—physical experience—and then the whole mental world, which can be thinking, emotions, mental states, ideas, all of that.

These experiences arise in different ways. One physical sensation might be pleasant, one might be unpleasant. One mental experience might be thinking, another might be happiness, another might just be simple calm. But the processes are just these six things happening over and over and over. And we often say, if you find a seventh, let us know—we'd be very interested.

As the Buddha goes on to describe the experience—and I'm really not simplifying here, but just picking out the salient points for our discussion—each of those experiences, when it comes, we're very much in the habit of experiencing it as pleasant or unpleasant or neither one. But that's quick and subtle, and it's not something inherent in

the experience. Take the sound of a bell: in one moment you might experience it as pleasant, in another moment you're distracted and it's just neutral, in another moment you were quiet and it shocked you so you hear it as unpleasant. It's not intrinsic to that particular sound, but rather how it comes together in our awareness, in our consciousness at that moment. That's very quick and subtle, and it's just how things happen—no big deal.

But what we spend our life practicing is: something comes up and we think, "I don't like that." Or it comes and we think, "Yeah, that's nice, I like it." Or, "It's not really worth paying attention to, it's neutral." We don't go quite that far with everything, but on a really subtle level, we're practicing this quite a lot throughout the day, throughout our life.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says we spend our whole life—all these sense experiences happening—practicing liking and not liking. Pleasant leads to: "It's good, I like it, I want more." Unpleasant leads to: "I don't like it, it feels bad, it hurts, of course it's bad." Neutral? "What? I better send another text message."

This becomes a habit of mind. We practice it enough, it becomes ingrained. And that overlay—pleasant goes to good, I like it—then comes to mean something about me. Unpleasant becomes bad, this shouldn't be happening, how can I fix it, how can I get rid of it? It comes to describe and define ourselves and our life. It reinforces the sense that all unpleasant experience is bad, to be avoided, while pleasant is what we're here to get more of. We pretend we don't notice this is what's happening. It sneaks up.

I'm sure many of you are aware of this. I keep being surprised how it sneaks up in the back of my mind, even when I know it isn't true—that I'll be in the struggle and go, "Oh, it was pleasant and now it's not," and I'm wondering what's wrong, as if it's going to stay one way, when nothing stays the same for longer than a moment. But we keep not noticing. It reinforces this view, and it comes to mean something about me.

How much of what you've been through today, when you've been discontent with yourself, your experience, with us, with here, the food, whatever you're dissatisfied with—how much of that comes about as a response to something that isn't the way we want it to be? Instead of saying, "Oh yeah, this isn't the way I want it to be, this is unpleasant, I don't like it"—that's actually mindfulness. That's the simplicity of awareness: "This is unpleasant, and I'm feeling aversion."

I hate this zafu. It is so hard. How come I can't have one of those? Oh yeah, what's happening now? Physical unpleasant experience, aversion in the mind, thoughts arising—you're seeing the whole pattern. That's mindfulness.

We think, no, that's not mindfulness. Mindfulness means I'm sitting here and things are arising in the space of awareness, and there's no reactivity in the mind because I'm clear, I'm mindful. "Oh yes, that's unpleasant, but it doesn't bother me." That's what we think it should look like.

This is so deeply ingrained, and it often goes unexamined. It really comes to be the underlying way we're defining ourselves and describing life. So really look and see. I'm talking from how the Buddha talks and from my own experience. Hopefully it can trigger something—look and see. Use it as something to explore in your own experience. Not to say yes or no, right or wrong, or to believe it's true and then move on. Just to look and see. Because real wisdom comes from the steady awareness that lets us see how these things are working, not from believing whether something is so or not.

What gets ingrained in us—and this is really poignant—is this habit: some discomfort, something uncomfortable comes up. It doesn't have to be excruciating pain. Look and see. It can be the littlest uncomfortable thought, or a mood. It doesn't have to be the deepest trauma we've had—it might be—but it can be just a little bit of discomfort that we don't even really notice. The Buddha says our tendency is so fast.

He says the unawakened ordinary person, when confronted with an unpleasant experience—which could be just the littlest twinge—knows of no other escape from the unpleasant than to lust after, to chase after a sensed pleasant experience, sensory pleasure. He says this then becomes a habit that underlies the mind, the heart. It becomes a habit. It's so poignant.

I've seen this in myself ten million times. It's natural. It's normal. We've practiced it a lot. Something unpleasant comes—it may be noticed, it may not. If it's not noticed, we're off to something pleasant. And if you're sitting here, you can't just get up and walk out, so we're hoping you notice. You might walk out not because it's time, but because you had a bad thought, didn't like it, and better go have some tea. You can start to notice how that works. Or if you did notice the unpleasant, the whole story arises: this is bad, this is wrong, I better go get something pleasant. Of course, we don't say it like that, because the pleasant thing is "the good thing."

And so this becomes a habit that underlies our mind, the Buddha says. I find that really touching—that an ordinary person without the practice, without the understanding of this simplicity of mindfulness and the willingness, as Charlotte Joko Beck says, to just rest for a moment in this unpleasant, uncomfortable situation. Just so simple. Can I find in myself a willingness just to rest here? Not to fix it, not to make something better,

not to torment yourself either, but just to have the chance to see clearly, free from preconception, free from "this is bad, this is wrong, I can't, I'm bad." No—just what's occurring now.

This is where we learn how these habits work: by the willingness to be there and see them. This sense of thirst, this yearning for the pleasant, the better experience, to move away from the difficult, the unpleasant, the conflicted—this is really one of the ways that samsara is defined. This endless round of leaning forward to the next thing, to make it better, to make it better, to make it better. Even when it's good now.

As Steve said last night, you have the best meal of your life—but how long? How long can you keep eating? You've got to stop sometime. You eat the best meal of your life and keep going until you're really sick and never want to see that food again. It doesn't work like that. It never stays perfect. So this yearning for the next, for the next, for the next—this is really samsara. This is what keeps us in this cycle.

There's a Tibetan saying, a definition of samsara: the urge to correct.

It's pretty good now, but it could be a little bit better. Or it really stinks now, so it could definitely be better. But even when it's good, it could be a little bit better. Always leaning into the next thing. This is that unconscious, not quite aware quality—not finding the peace of total presence with this moment right now, whatever it is. That's the freedom, the peace the Buddha's talking about.

But when we think of freedom—freedom from suffering—really look and see: isn't this just freedom from unwanted experience? When you come on a retreat thinking, "I really want to purify my mind and body, I really want to cultivate compassion, I really want freedom"—all of this is true. But does your bad back figure into your image of freedom? Is sciatica still going to be there? Are you still going to have those annoying relatives acting in that way? But it won't bother you because you're floating on a cloud? Are you going to have a new personality? Good luck with that one.

It's really understanding in a different way. And the support, the key, what allows this understanding to grow is the steadiness of simplicity—mindfulness, awareness, the willingness to just rest at ease in this uncomfortable situation or in this beautiful situation, this incredibly wonderful experience. Can mindfulness just meet it as it is without that impulse of "yes, now it's going to be like this forever"?

When we're in that poignant place, the habit of mind is to jump away, to make it a little better, a little better, the next, the next, the next. What I notice this does is keep the habit of mind focused on the object itself. As Steve was exploring—object and awareness, object and awareness—when we're focused on the object, it's bad, it's wrong, I've

got to fix it. And then that becomes how we define ourselves, what it means about ourselves. "This is all messed up." Or "It's wonderful—wow, I'm finally getting it, I'm doing great." But we're all focused on the object, the object. Attention, the field of awareness, becomes really quite narrow. And then we're tossed around by circumstances, by our moods, by our reactions. We get entranced by our reactions to the particular experience. So that's the next thing we can be aware of—the reactions. That's the habit. But when we're not aware, then again our experience defines us. And really, it's exhausting. I don't know if you've noticed, but it's exhausting.

An example of this—how we're so tossed around from moment to moment—and this is how I'm reading the experience of someone else. At the end of the Super Bowl this year, and we're in New England so probably quite a few of you are aware of it, which I'm not a football fan—football is not my thing. But it doesn't matter where I am; someone's always watching the Super Bowl.

I heard the last minute was really amazing. I'm not even going to try to go through the whole thing, but the last twenty seconds—and if I get some of these details wrong, football fans forgive me, that's not my point, it isn't the football. So anyway, it's the last twenty seconds. New England's quarterback, you know, Tom Brady, is sitting on the sideline because Seattle had the ball on the goal line. There's like twenty seconds left. New England was ahead, but basically Seattle—it was a sure touchdown. They're right there. They're bound to get a touchdown and they're going to win because there's no more time. So my friend Guy had recorded it, and I went back and watched this last part to see.

So that's happening. And then the camera cuts away to Tom Brady sitting on the sidelines as the other guy is about to get a touchdown. It was—I mean, it cracked me up. It was total, total dejection. He was completely, 100 percent caved over, head in his hands, just to see this man totally lost.

And then, of course, the completely unexpected happens, as it often does. For whatever reason, the Seattle quarterback did a pass instead of running, and New England intercepted it, and so New England won. They cut away to Tom Brady on the sidelines. He's ecstatic. He's jumping up and down, throwing his arms in the air. It's like twenty seconds different. Not even twenty seconds—two seconds different.

This is samsara. This is how we live our lives. You can see I was a little detached. If it was Wimbledon, I might have had a different response. But I'm detached from football, so I can kind of watch the process. So that's another way of practicing mindfulness—I'm really there, but I'm not making it all about me.

That's samsara. That's what we do. "Oh my God, it's so horrible!" "This is incredible!" And then the whole boring rest of his year, right? Until he can be in another Super Bowl. What a life. Anyway, this is how we're tossed around when there's not awareness, when we're not recognizing the process but just caught in our reactions to experience.

So here, what we really want to cultivate is a moment of that sense of mindfulness. "Oh, I'm so dejected. What's happening?" Not "Oh my God, the guys are all..."—no. Dejection feels like this. Feeling dejected. Just noticing how that feels. You'll notice the thoughts, you'll notice the whole process. So there's the moment of that awareness, the willingness to rest in this uncomfortable situation, but then the perseverance, the steadiness, where we just hang with it and kind of watch whatever arises, all the different processes. And this is what allows the wisdom to arise. We don't create wisdom, but really seeing, understanding what's going on with these habits. And if they're just habits, it doesn't have to be automatic reaction.

A good friend of mine—actually she was just here, she's left now, but she's given me permission to use this story before—from doing this style of practice for many years, where we're not trying to have a particular experience but really getting that we just bring awareness to whatever's going on in the mind and body, with particular emphasis on watching the mind, the reactions of mind. Is the mind just being with what is? Or is it putting on this overlay of "it's bad, I'm in aversion, I can't see clearly" or "it's good, it's what I want more"? Just being with it.

So the example she gave, where she saw how all her years of practicing in this way had really dramatically shown up in her daily life. She was going home to visit her family in another state, and I've known her for many years, and it's always been quite difficult—a difficult family dynamic. Probably some of you can relate. And I don't know if you've ever gone to family or whatever, where you get on the plane and you have a very sincere intention and motivation, right? "I'm really going to..." Right? Whatever it is. "I'm not going to get angry when my sister acts like that. I'm going to walk in with loving-kindness to my mother even when she starts going on about 'you need a haircut' as soon as I cross the threshold," or whatever. And we really mean it.

We're not just blowing hot air. We really mean it. And you walk in the front door and boom—right? How long does it take?

So then you feel... and she said she'd go with this sincere intention, practicing compassion all the way on the plane, she gets in, and then she'd feel defeated, dejected. "I couldn't do it. All my practice is a waste of time. Here I am, back in the old patterns."

Again, we're reacting to that unpleasant situation from aversion and judging it as wrong. And again, the simplicity of mindfulness isn't there. We've kind of checked out—it's wrong, it's bad, I blew it again, I've got to wait until I can fix it. This fixing-it mentality is samsara.

So she said this time she was going home, and on the plane as she's going, she had those same thoughts—"I want to be..." But she also was just being aware of what was actually occurring, which was a lot of anxiety. She was feeling it. She was noticing, just being present. "Yes, I want to be filled with love and kindness, but at the moment I'm a little apprehensive." That's what's happening. And she just kept cultivating that steady awareness of her mind and her reactions and what was really honestly occurring.

She said she noticed, walking in the door, it wasn't just that her sister was reactive. She herself walked in already with barriers in front of her, ready to react to the expected insult. She was actually walking in with negativity before anything had even happened—which she had never noticed before. She was trying so hard to be good. Trying so hard to do the right thing. But by actually just being aware of what was really occurring, she said it was the best visit she ever had.

Because the honesty of mindfulness lets us see what's occurring. You see your own reactivity coming up to the expected insult. You notice the reactivity, and that becomes the next object of awareness. You don't have to automatically act out of it. And because we're meeting that reactivity in our own heart and mind with this simplicity, this friendly attention—not with judging, but "Oh, reactivity, of course, it's understandable how it would be there"—in that moment, that's like stepping out of samsara. It's a stretch, but just to give a sense of it.

Instead of just spinning in reactivity and judging, or pretending I'm not reactive and just blaming them, to see the reactivity, to meet it with interested awareness—in that moment we've moved from taking refuge in our normal habits and automatic reactions to taking refuge in the simplicity of awareness right then. Not trying to fix, not trying to change, not trying to evaluate. Just: "Oh, self-negativity, or reactivity, feels like this."

And in that space of awareness, that's changing the pattern right there. That's shifting the whole dynamic. Sure, it can come back again, and we notice it again. But this awareness is really shifting our refuge, shifting our habit. It's making a whole other way of responding possible, accessible. And it's not like you plan it out. When she's at ease with recognizing her own reactivity, then when the sister does say something, she already sees it and there's a kind of space—like someone said today, "Pain in the knee, but I saw the aversion in the mind." Recognizing the aversion, there's space. We're not

caught in the reactivity. The same thing happens in our life. Sister says something, and she goes, "Oh yeah, that's really unpleasant. I'm with the unpleasantness." Don't have to respond out of it.

So this is really quite profound. It may not seem like very much on a retreat when you're sitting or walking. We're so used to reacting to experience, so used to being entranced by our reactions, that our habitual way feels more easy and comfortable. That's one of the reasons we take away so many of our normal activities on retreats—so we can really watch what's happening. But it's so easy to say, "This knee pain, this sound, this fear—this defines me, this is what's going on," and fall into our normal habit.

But here, just remember the simplicity of awareness. Okay, knee pain feels like this. Anger feels like this. I have a moment of really, really wanting to go have a cup of tea—and wanting is uncomfortable. Wanting is unpleasant. And it feels totally normal and natural when we want something to go and get that thing. There's nothing wrong with having a cup of tea. You might think, "This is really sick. I want a cup of tea. I should sit here and feel wanting rather than go have a cup of tea? What kind of stuff is this?"

And I'm not saying you should. There's no should. But sometimes we might get interested. What does wanting feel like? It feels totally normal and natural to move away from wanting and get the thing we want. It feels totally normal and natural when something's uncomfortable to do something to get away from it, to fix it. We've practiced this our whole life.

And it's not that that's a bad thing, but if we bring in awareness and start to see the whole process, there are times when we'll say, you know what, let me just sit down and explore being with wanting. Can I find in myself, for this moment, a willingness to rest in this uncomfortable, painful situation? Wanting is uncomfortable. So we just rest there with that awareness, that interested friendliness, and see what happens.

And sometimes the wanting—I mean it will, if you're actually just hanging with it—it goes away. But here's the thing: steadiness, perseverance, continuity of awareness. Keep with it. The wanting has gone off and then we stop paying attention because now it's calm again. We pay attention when it's really bad, when we're really suffering, when it's really high, but then in these neutral times we think, okay, it's gone, did the job, now I'll go have tea. Notice when the wanting stops and it's just calm, just peaceful. Keep on being steady with the awareness.

When we do this, we can begin to recognize and actually cultivate an appreciation. This is actually an intimation of the quality of freedom of heart-mind the Buddha's talking about. Not whether the experience is good or bad, but just that ability to be present without so much fuss, without so much identification, without making it all about me.

Steve used the phrase last night about everything being natural, it's just nature. I mean, we are nature. I think it's funny how we talk about nature as if that's nature over there, as if we're not nature. But when we start to see—part of right view—that whatever's occurring, the wanting, the habits of mind... my friend going to visit her family, those habits that came up aren't a sign that she's some kind of bad, twisted person. They've arisen through natural causes. And we can see that. It's really helpful.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was a Thai forest monk and scholar, very famous in Thailand in the last century. He died in the late 1990s. A very interesting figure. In one of his books, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, he was talking about how recognizing that all arising experience is nature. All arising experience. By that he means it's not my personal doing. Everything is arising due to causes and conditions that have come before, really an endless stream, such that in this moment, this particular moment could not be otherwise. It could not be otherwise.

When Steve talked about these things as they have come to be in this moment—we can't track all the causes and conditions, but we can see some of them. And this gives us a sense that it's nature. It's not something to be in contention with. When we see the causes, it really lets us stop taking it so personally.

Buddhadasa said, "We have been thieves all of our lives by appropriating the things of nature as I and mine." He explains that the Pali texts—Pali being the language the Buddhist texts were first written down in—use a phrase that was translated into English as "throwing back." He says that in a moment when the mind, the heart is free, when we're not appropriating something as I or mine, we throw everything back to nature. We stop saying it belongs to me. And we can really see how these patterns of mind and reactivity and heart get created through a series of conditions.

Here's an example, from the body. The other day I went to a physical therapist. I was having some weird pains in my back and here and there. I mean, there's always something going on. But anyway, I went to see her, and it was unusual. First it was kind of like right view, like when Steve said the voice of another. She could just kind of look at me and goes, "Whoa, I've never seen you like this," and she started explaining what was happening in my body.

And she said, "Your rib is out and it's connected up to your collarbone, and the shoulder bone is out, and it goes all the way down to your left hip and your sacrum." She's naming all this stuff, you know—all the way down to your foot and your elbow. So, okay, I just knew it hurt. But she could see all these connections.

And then she said—nothing had happened. I hadn't fallen or done anything unusual. So we just got interested in seeing how it could happen. And I remembered that the previous week I had been in a place where I was walking about a mile back and forth from a parking lot several times a day, carrying a bag. Not particularly heavy, but carrying it and walking fast.

She noticed that. She said, "Your body already has this habit of being a bit curved in like that. So you're walking, carrying something like this. And when you're in a hurry, you kind of hunch and walk fast." Over time, that becomes an ingrained pattern in the body. And then she could link all of these things she saw to that way of moving and holding.

That's really interesting. When I could see the pattern like that and trace it, I said, okay, I can understand how that could happen. It doesn't make the pattern go away, but it kind of takes it out of the realm of "What am I doing? Am I so hopeless? Am I falling apart?" You can just go, "Oh yeah, look at that. Cause and effect. It's a natural effect." And then you can work with it.

Same with the habits in our mind. Buddhadasa says we realize, okay, here's this pattern of mind. It's not mine. It's arising due to natural causes and conditions—throw it back to nature. Quit taking it all so personally. And then that really lets us just look at it.

Like I could look at this pattern of stuff in my body she was pointing at and go, "Oh, that's interesting." And then today I was just taking a walk, and I wasn't holding anything, but I could see how the tendency was to start hunching because I was a little cold. And I just noticed it, having had it pointed out to me, without getting any "Oh my God, it's hopeless, I'm going to be like this the rest of my life." Just, "Oh yeah, look at that." And I naturally stood up a little bit straighter and could feel the difference.

Yes, it's just these simple little things. It's not "Ah, everything's changed and better." But this is what starts to feed our trust in the steadiness of awareness, the willingness to look, the trusting of being able to see with steady sati, steady mindfulness, steady awareness.

Gradually, gradually our refuge changes. It shifts from just falling into these unconscious habits of reactivity—of liking, of disliking, aversion and clinging and self-blame and owning everything as mine—to something else. And this might be a little far, but it feels like it to me: a real love of awareness. A real love of this willingness to be simply present with experience.

When I notice I'm in a pattern—spinning and confused and suffering—and I suddenly ask, "What's happening now?" I might say, as I said in a group once, "Oh, big ball of confusion. Feels like this." And I just feel a lot of... I couldn't name anything. The body feels like a bunch of gunk. The mind feels even more like a bunch of gunk. And I'm just present with that.

There's a sense almost of relief that I feel—of not being in contention in that moment with experience. And then I recognize, "Oh yeah, there's awareness of bunch of gunk." Bunch of gunk, and awareness of it. And with the awareness—that's really what we can trust. The bunch of gunk is going to go. Something incredibly beautiful is going to come. It's going to go. A lot of boring stuff is going to come. Bunch of gunk is going to come back. But awareness, awareness, awareness—this can start to be where we really take our refuge. And it really becomes powerful.

So the little examples we go through in our practice here—like the one I gave about sitting and watching wanting instead of having a cup of tea—you may think, "So what? Big whoop." But these examples matter. As I showed with my friend, when we don't recognize what's going on in our mind and heart, what the habits are, what the reactions are—when we're lost in the assumptions, in the preconceptions, in the distortions—we're not just present with what is. That state is so familiar and comfortable that we don't know when it can take over in the big things in our daily life. The unrecognized habits drive the bus.

And we don't know that that's what's happening. And in a moment of stress, in a moment of difficulty, when we're not quite aware, that's what pops up.

So these little examples here—if there's a million every day—don't think, "Well, this isn't important enough," or whatever. What we're cultivating is this willingness to keep coming back into the awareness, the awareness, the awareness, because we never know otherwise.

I heard on the radio a couple years ago—I came in the middle, so I don't know if I have names—but they were interviewing two men who had been working with young men in prisons, doing kind of anti-violence work with young men who were in prison for violent crimes. I didn't really get how they were working with them, but one of

them was describing a young man he'd been talking to. The young man was in prison—I don't know if it was life or how long—for some act of violence. And he said, "If only I could have back those three to five seconds when I acted in that violent way."

We never know. That's all it can take. We're just present, we're not aware, the habits drive the bus. And we all—well, maybe you don't, but everyone I know—have plenty of times that we've acted in ways we regret. It doesn't have to be that much violence, but how much stuff has come out of my mouth that I wish I hadn't said? I don't want to have to start counting. Just in the moments when there's not awareness, the habits drive the bus.

So when we start being aware, awareness doesn't end the habits. Awareness alone is not enough. You may wonder what I mean by that. Awareness doesn't mean the difficult habits, the reactions of mind, go away. But like my friend, you start to see them rather than believing them. We don't even know they're there in the beginning. We start to see them. Then there's more space and more space. And the wisdom comes in and starts to say something like, "I don't need to say that." It really shifts the whole show.

I want to end with one thing from Dipa Ma. Dipa Ma was an amazing little lady, an Indian Bengali lady. People often talk about her. She really had very profound practice and understanding—a lot of metta, loving-kindness in her heart, very deep wisdom. She was about four feet tall, the tiniest little lady, but very energetic and strong. Metta doesn't mean everything's nice and easy. She was really strong.

Joseph and I and some friends were visiting her in Bodh Gaya the year before she died. Joseph had a very long, deep connection with her. She's saying to him, "You should sit for a weekend." And he's like, "Yeah, okay, I'll sit for a week." And she says, "No, no, I mean sit down for a weekend. Sit and don't get up." That's what she meant. She was filled with metta, but a tough cookie. And Joseph being Joseph just starts laughing. She goes, "Don't be lazy." Just so simple: don't be lazy. She could do that. She could sit down for a weekend. So she was like that.

Anyway, this is from her: "There is so much sameness in our ordinary life. We experience everything through the same set of lenses—the lenses of greed, the lenses of aversion or hatred, the lenses of delusion, confusion, identification. But when greed, hatred, and delusion are not present, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before."

Now, every day, every moment is full of taste and zest. And she was just living a life in a really poor little apartment in Calcutta. Every moment is new.

That's really the simplicity and honesty of mindfulness.

Thank you for your kind attention. Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 120

Awareness Imbued With Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates how compassion (karuṇā) is not something we create through willpower, but rather the natural manifestation of wisdom when awareness meets suffering without adding anything extra. She explains how the kilesas (mental defilements) of greed, hatred, and delusion obscure our inherently radiant mind, and how each moment of pure mindfulness—that tender, quivering presence with unwanted experience—gradually purifies these habits of heart and mind.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from the Dalai Lama, Pema Chödrön, and the story of Milarepa meeting demons in his cave, Wilson explores how our habitual aversion to difficulty actually imprisons the soft heart we're trying to protect. She describes how bearing witness to our own suffering—without blame, without trying to fix or escape—develops into genuine empathy and connection with all beings. The talk references the Buddha's teaching that when the mind is "obsessed and oppressed by ill will," we cannot see clearly what is good for ourselves or others.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance for retreat practice: noticing when awareness is colored by aversion versus when it rests in simple presence, taking care of attitude before trying to fix situations, and recognizing that even small moments of meeting the unwanted with tenderness shift our deepest habits. She shares the inspiring example of Mahā Ghosānanda bearing witness to Cambodian refugees, and concludes with Mingyur Rinpoche's letter from his wandering retreat, encouraging diligent practice of awareness that reveals our inherent wisdom and vast compassion.*

So, we've been talking a lot about the kleshas, the difficult, distorting habits, mental factors, states of mind that arise all too frequently and are so familiar. A lot of our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice is in learning to recognize, to really meet, explore, not take personally. Really the whole practice is about purifying the habits of heart and mind, the habits of citta.

But as we've been saying all along, it's not our personal effort that does the work. All we do is put in the willingness to remember: Am I aware? Am I aware? Am I aware? And the steadiness of awareness is what allows wisdom to arise. Wisdom does the work of purifying the heart and mind, the habits.

So what I want to talk a bit about tonight is one of the wholesome habits. Just to know that in the moments of pure mindfulness awareness, when wisdom is present, in that moment, greed, hatred, confusion aren't. It seems like the mindfulness, the awareness is noticing greed—it's like two quick moments together. But in that moment of mindfulness, the greed, the aversion, delusion is not being fed, is not really present in that quick moment.

There are wholesome qualities that actually arise naturally, that you could say replace them. Or more, when Steve read that famous sutta about the mind being radiant, and the radiance being hidden, obscured by the kleshas—you could think of these wholesome, beautiful qualities as being the qualities that naturally arise in response to the appropriate circumstances when the heart-mind is pure, in a moment.

One of the things I love about the way the Buddha talks about it, and our experience of how the mind works, is that it's just moment to moment. Every moment arising and passing so quickly that—this is the impermanence part that can seem unsettling. But it's what allows for change, for cultivation, for development. Maybe you've seen it: you've had some really rotten moments, long series of rotten moments, but it does change. And when we talk about purifying or noticing the wholesome, we don't have to wait until it's absolutely steady state, never going to change, and then we maybe acknowledge something wholesome arising. Just a moment, just a moment.

So, when delusion is seen through, wisdom obviously is there. It's wisdom that sees through delusion, the quality of mind. When greed is recognized with wisdom, the beautiful quality that's present in the citta is non-greed, which can also manifest as relinquishment. Sometimes I've said renunciation, but that's simply the putting down of wanting, of needing, which can lead into the ability of the heart to be really generous, because it doesn't need to hold on.

And then dosa, the hatred-aversion quality—this is how the Buddha talks about the second aspect of the Eightfold Path: intention, wise intention, wise thought. The thoughts of greed, seen through with non-greed, replaced by relinquishment, generosity. Thoughts of the aversive are divided into two, sort of. Thoughts of ill-will—instead, the mental quality is metta, kindness, friendliness. And thoughts of cruelty, or when really the awareness is meeting a difficulty, suffering—cruelty, aversion is what comes up in the habits. But when there's clear seeing, purity of heart, mind, citta at that moment, mindfulness, awareness with wisdom, then what naturally emerges instead is compassion.

Sure, we can cultivate metta, we can cultivate compassion, absolutely. We cultivate the conditions for wisdom, which is the steadiness of awareness. We can't make wisdom occur. But what I want to talk about tonight—I want to specifically talk about compassion as the natural arising, the natural manifestation of wisdom and non-aversion in a moment of mindfulness, wisdom, when the particular object is a suffering one.

So not to think this is some far away experience, and not something we have to create. Not "I need to be a compassionate person," because we know just deciding what to do doesn't work. The angle I want to talk about tonight is really hoping to encourage us to keep on going. The practice we're doing of moment to moment remembering awareness—the awareness that, as we've said a lot, that simplicity of connectedness, just totally surrendering into the moment without adding extra, without pulling away, without aversion or judgment or clinging.

That quality of awareness, when it is aware of a suffering experience, takes on the flavoring of compassion. Karuna. It's not an act of will.

How the habits of our heart and mind are purified—this is the point I'm wanting to make—is exactly through this practice. And so you may realize, since I want to mainly talk about compassion, it means I'm also going to be talking about difficult, suffering experience. Anybody had any of those since they came? Right.

Because as I think we said this morning, really appreciate the amount of commitment and at times, I think for all of us, quite some courage to keep showing up here. To keep showing up—not even the external showing up, but with your own heart, your own mind, the habits of your mind, the things that arise here. For everyone, there are times that it's enormously difficult, painful, scary, whatever your particular flavor is.

And the habits of our mind, of the world, of our life are so much telling us this is wrong, get out of here. Go in the opposite direction, fix it, fix it, fix it. Really aversion. So much the habit.

And so every moment—just the quick moment—that there's that sense of simple awareness... You know, we're waiting for the huge momentum that sees through it all, but just that moment of awareness that's willing to meet fear. No big thing happens, but that quick moment where the aversion isn't the go-to response, where we call in the awareness instead—that's a little moment of purifying the habit, of shifting the habit.

So I just want to talk different ways about compassion in terms of our practice here. Ways to notice it. Why it isn't always our habitual response—it is natural, but not always habitual. Just in hopes of encouraging us all to consciously recognize this wholesome factor, because it's so amazing, really, how it works.

When wisdom recognizes the suffering aspects—greed, hatred, confusion—when it's just recognized by wisdom, that doesn't necessarily mean it goes away immediately. But wisdom just naturally doesn't feed the unwholesome. It's not an act of will. So when you really see something is causing you suffering—wisdom sees it, not just "I think I should stop," but wisdom sees it—let me just put that down. A few people have mentioned examples of that in their experience, just little things. That's the natural effect of wisdom: we recognize that greed and aversion don't work, basically, for what we think they're doing—to see reality as it is.

The other side is that when wisdom, when the purified mind-heart in a moment recognizes beautiful qualities—compassion, wisdom, metta, generosity—the attention of wise awareness actually feeds and strengthens the wholesome. Again, it's not an act of will. It's not like an act of greed: "Oh, this feels good, let's have more of it." That's not strengthening the wholesome. But just the awareness of generosity, the happiness it brings—it inclines the mind, the heart towards more generosity.

Being with a suffering, difficult experience with compassion, recognizing that compassion is a beautiful state of mind-heart, inclines the mind towards another arising of a moment of compassion. It's so cool. We don't have to do this as an act of will. We can't. But this is where, for me, so much trust comes in—really trusting the nature of how the mind and heart works. And it gives me the faith, the willingness to show up again when it's like not really where I think I want to be in that particular moment.

To define compassion: one of the definitions of karuna is the quivering of the heart when connected with pain or suffering. The tenderness. The tender quivering, the connectedness of heart and mind when we are connected with suffering. That's just the mental quality of it, the mental factor. When it strengthens into action, it manifests as the wish to alleviate the suffering of whatever beings we're in touch with.

And the vastest aspiration of compassionate practice would be the aspiration to practice our whole life, to awaken with the intention of using our practice in order to help alleviate the suffering of all beings. That's vast and beautiful and inspiring to me. But tonight I really want to talk in terms of our practice here, by and large.

The Dalai Lama, who's kind of the world expert on compassion—if we were going to look for one of the world experts anyway—when asked how compassion develops in our experience, he said it develops from deep insight into what suffering actually is. And guess how we get that deep insight into what suffering actually is? Yes, by being really present, by focusing, by opening to the suffering, the difficulty in our own experience. Where else are we going to start?

In our own experience. As Alexis spoke about the first noble truth last night, it's really the sense that unreliability is one part. Another part is that all living beings at times suffer. Not all the time, every moment, but it's something that unites us as living beings, rather than something to be a cause of shame or alienation or feeling like it's a mistake—which I know is often the way I feel. Something's gone really wrong, we want to go hide until it's better, we don't want people to know. But actually it can be a source of recognizing our unity, our commonality.

The Dalai Lama goes on to describe that by opening to, focusing on our own experience of suffering—and obviously he doesn't say it explicitly, but it's with mindful awareness, not with aversion; we could focus with aversion, but we're clearly talking about the mind that's pure in that moment, that just recognizes it—he says it deepens, it strengthens into a sense of empathy, connectedness with other beings.

So beginning with this simple moment of being fully present, without agenda, without aversion or clinging, with a moment of our own suffering, in whatever way—big, little, doesn't matter.

Moment after moment, by itself, it starts to strengthen into empathic connection with beings. It's sort of like my particular suffering in that moment becomes an expression of the suffering of all beings. We can think our way into it, but I'm talking just in terms of our awareness here. This really can happen. It often does happen.

I remember many years ago I was in a hospital. I was in a room with three other women, and I was there for some days. One day, when I wasn't particularly feeling sorry for myself, I found myself looking around and saying, "Oh wow, look what I'm going through. There are these three women going through their own suffering. How many people are in this hospital? How many hospitals are in this town?" It was Northampton, not such a big town, but there are four or five hospitals around. And then just keep spreading out, spreading out. How many human beings at this moment are suffering some kind of real pain, illness? It's vast. Our mind can't comprehend it. But that sense of strengthening from "oh, poor me" to just "wow, this is the human condition"—that's a quality of compassion, of unity. It takes us out of our isolation, out of our self-involvement.

This is really why the difficult times on retreat are so important. I always think later, looking back, "Yeah, I learned a lot. It was so important." But in the midst of it, are you going, "Yeah, I'm so glad this is happening. I really know this is the important part, this is really the nub of the retreat. I'm so glad that I'm really lost in this total frustration for

days"? But this is really where the rubber meets the road, you could say—of our practice, of awareness. I'm not saying we should feel glad, but this is where we can really start to explore.

Because what's purifying, what's arising in our present moment experience, is how things have come to be in this moment as this moment's particular culmination of all the different conditions that have come together. There's no way we can know what all the conditions are that brought this moment into being. I love when I start thinking about this—don't start thinking about it, because there's nowhere to stop. If you start, it's like Thich Nhat Hanh holding up the piece of paper and saying, "What's in this paper?" and you can't stop anywhere. You start with trees and the water and the sunlight and the people that grew it and the earthworms that till the soil, and it goes on forever. Anything is like that. If you start thinking of the conditions that brought you to this moment, there's nowhere to stop. We're back at the Big Bang. There's really no way to know what is part of this particular condition.

So that's just arising. You could say that's our past condition, that's our past karma. To sit here and go, "I'm so bad because this is happening. I'm a failure because this is happening. I can't meditate, I'll never understand the pure mind because this is happening"—that's the habit of aversion, turned inward, turned outward. That's our usual go-to mode.

But what's really purifying the heart and mind isn't that that stuff shouldn't be arising—that's out of our control. It's out of our control. But the way in that moment that awareness and wisdom is receiving that moment—that's where, in that moment, the heart-mind, the quality of the *citta*, is being purified or not. That's the place where the whole practice of purification of the habits of heart and mind is occurring.

So you may not think it's much. You're frustrated. "Okay, frustration is like this." And there's a moment of just being with it. You think, "But nothing happened. It's still frustrating." Okay, that moment wasn't a moment of purifying the heart. That was an aversive moment. But the one before—"Oh yeah, frustration is like this"—that is shifting the habit of aversion of heart-mind.

So that is just so important to start to recognize and continue to recognize. I find that—not that you're expecting some big bang—but just to understand how this works. How do you recognize it? Nowhere else to go. Mindfulness, awareness of the next moment. How we pay attention, how the mind meets each moment, is important. This is the process of purifying the heart and mind. All the different practices, not just this one, are all working on that level.

As I was saying, the habit is so deeply ingrained in most of us when confronted with difficult experience. I like how Pema Chödrön describes it. She says, rather than talking about suffering or difficult or painful, why not substitute the words "unwanted experience"? I like that because it really describes the experience. The experience is: I don't want this to be happening. Or really, I want it to be happening, but to someone else, not here. I'd like to read about it and feel compassion for that poor person, but I really don't want it happening here right now. I like that because it takes it right down to what's actually happening.

It's so reflexive when something painful, difficult, unwanted comes up—there's just the cringe back, the pull away. That's the aversion. That's just the habit. Let's get out of here. Let's protect ourselves from it. And the fear can come. She says many people, when she's talking about compassion for all beings, tell her, "I have so much suffering of my own, I can't even be with my own suffering. How can I open to the suffering of the world? It's too much to even think about."

So we're not saying that as a thought, what one should do. What we can do here on retreat with our awareness is really explore both the reflexive action of the aversion—the anger, the pulling away when that's occurring. When there's that klesha, that distortion in the awareness, we notice it. Just what we've been saying: notice the attitude in the mind when confronted with unwanted experience. Notice when that reaction is present, but notice when it's not present. That compassionate response of simply being able to be present with the unwanted without adding anything extra.

Pema Chödrön again—she talks about how really at core we have this tender heart, this real tenderness. That's the quivering of the heart when connected with the unwanted, with difficulty. But our training and our fear and the difficulty of it is such that we are going around as if we're trying to protect ourselves from feeling. It's scary. She uses the image of a sea anemone, an animal in the sea that has long tendrils and a very soft core, and if anything even gets near to touch it, it shuts down to protect the very soft heart. She says we're kind of like that. But we're using aversion to protect. And the very act of protection is what's increasing our confusion, our distortion, our separation.

She writes: "Kinship with the suffering of others—the inability to continue to regard it from afar—is the discovery of our soft spot." She calls it the discovery of bodhicitta. This bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, awakens when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. But when we protect ourselves so that we don't feel that pain, that protection becomes like armor that imprisons the softness of our heart. We do everything we can think of not to feel anything threatening. Does that sound familiar? We try to prolong feeling

good about ourselves. But then we end up, she says—I love this image—spending our life all tensed up as if we were sitting in a dentist's chair our whole life. I can really relate to that.

But this is the habit. And this is the belief: no, this should not be happening. That's the misunderstanding of the First Noble Truth. I think someone was saying in a group today—I never know where I heard it. Did Alexis say it last night? Did someone say it in a group? Did I say it yesterday? I don't know where stuff comes from anymore. But these habits are really reinforced because that's really what's in the society around us. I find from the media in particular, when they're interviewing on the radio somebody who's just experienced something terrible—first they go up and shove a mic in their face, which is already strange, but it could be a personal tragedy or a disease or an earthquake—a really common question, I hear it so much, is: "Well, who do you blame for this?" Who do you blame?

Who do you blame? As if of course there's someone to blame. This bad thing happened, and the first thing we better do is figure out who to blame. And a lot of the time when we're sitting here, there's no one to blame but ourselves, so we turn that inward. It's really easy to say, "This is happening and it shouldn't be happening. So what am I doing wrong in my practice?" Has that occurred to anybody, ever, when something was going on? Rather than simply, "Oh, this is difficult. It feels like this right now." Opening with a tenderness, a tender quality of mindfulness and awareness. But no, it's like, "Who do we blame? This is wrong, it shouldn't be happening." Immediately aversion comes in.

The Buddha, talking to some followers, says: "When one dwells, when one lives with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will"—and just so you know, he goes on to say the same thing about greed or lust and about delusion and confusion—but here we're talking about ill will. "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, one does not understand as it really is the escape from the arisen ill will. On that occasion, one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

So explore that. Next time you notice some unwanted experience is occurring—thoughts, emotions, a sound, someone else's behavior, your body doesn't feel good, whatever it is—if you see that awareness is recognizing that immediate knee-jerk reaction of "this shouldn't be happening, what can I do to fix it?"—just notice the quality when the mind is obsessed and oppressed by ill will. There's no way to see clearly.

Whatever we try to do to fix it, coming out of that ill will, just isn't coming from any kind of clarity. We can't see clearly what's good for ourselves, what's good for another, what's the good of both.

This is something that our steady awareness allows us to see. That's why continuity is so powerful. This tendency to think "this shouldn't be happening," to blame outward, blame inward—somehow we're going to be able to fix it. And "fix it" means, as in Joko Beck's words, somehow I can hold myself separate from this painful and difficult experience. Somehow I'm here and this is going to go over there. This is the way I think about it: it's one of the basic expressions of the delusion of understanding reality in ourselves that comes when the mind is obsessed with ill will, or with greed, or with confusion.

It creates this sense of separation. A beautiful experience we can't have, a difficult one we are with, confusion we don't know what to do with—this sense of the other, of me and the other. And if it's difficult, we think we can keep ourselves separate from the other. If it's wonderful and we don't have it, then it feeds this sense of insufficiency. Something else needing to be gotten. Something else is going to make me complete. Or this has to go away for completion, for ease.

This delusion of separation and inadequacy and insufficiency continues to be fed as long as the mind is obsessed with the *kilesas*, because it can't see accurately. That's why it's so important to take care of our awareness rather than getting involved right away and trying to fix things. Because we're trying to fix it through the lens of ill will, of blame, of not understanding, and that just keeps the whole thing going. It keeps us looking, as Krishnamurti said—to seek the truth is to deny it. Where else are we going to find it? As Dogen Zenji, the great Zen master from Japan, said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" It's only right where we are.

And at least thirty-three percent of the time, right where we are might be an unwanted experience. And if we're wanting it to go away in order to see the truth, right in that moment, delusion is being fed and increased. That's denying, not allowing, the simplicity of awareness and wisdom to simply recognize: this is what there is. This is reality. This moment is complete. There is no other moment.

So in a way, when I was talking the other night about the poignancy of thinking the only escape from arisen unpleasantness or ill will is to seek after pleasure—this is really the deep poignancy. It's what keeps our confusion spinning, our sense of incompleteness, inadequacy, loneliness, self-centeredness spinning.

The quality of awareness and wisdom that is simply present with openness, that tender heart in whatever unwanted experience—that's not only the arisen compassion, that's the wisdom, that's the freedom, just in that moment. But it's not necessarily the training of the habit of our mind, the way we naturally want to go.

So again, in our retreat here—a little microcosm of our life. The incidents that occur here may be rather small, although the reactions that come up in our mind may be rather large. Have you noticed that? It's just that they ran out of bananas! Why am I so distressed? Why are you having to forcibly hold your hand from snatching the banana off that other person's plate? It seems a little exaggerated. It is. That's okay. It helps us see it better.

Sayadaw Tejaniya has a line I really like. He says, "Concentration magnifies." When the mind's beginning to get a little more collected, it magnifies—we see things more clearly. But the kilesas exaggerate. So you might be really calm, really present, just walking to the meal, really present, and suddenly some desire comes up that we don't quite see. People have said suddenly they've turned around and they're halfway to whatever it is they're going to do without even noticing it. Desire gets huge because the kilesa exaggerates the importance of everything, and concentration magnifies that.

We call this, actually, in our parlance, "yogi mind." All of a sudden, something comes up that you need or that you hate or that has to be fixed, and it is life or death. We get these notes—you know, we're bursting into the office, but it's not office hours yet. You're standing there waiting till office hours so you can burst in and say, "Don't you know the kind of toothpaste you have in there is really not the best kind to have?" I'm not making up this stuff. This is the kind of thing that happens. You should see what goes on in a three-month retreat here. Just so you know, we're all in this together.

When you find you need to write a note to maintenance or the cooks or us—and it has this urgent quality of "my God, don't they know, for the benefit of all beings, let me write this note"—take a moment. Reflect a little bit. Just take care of the quality of awareness before you do that. That's for the good of all beings, especially us.

But anyway, that's just a little example—that was a sidetrack. In terms of our practice here, in terms of recognizing the difference between the kind of knee-jerk reaction of shutting down, protecting the soft heart through fear, aversion, and blame, and simply resting at ease in whatever arises—which manifests as compassion—the circumstances here are all we need. This is where we start. It's like a whole book: Pema Chödrön's *Start Where You Are*. We start where we are. Each little or big thing that arises that's unwanted is, in this moment, the place of practice. And it's all that we need. The circumstances of our life are all we need.

I want to read this little story from Milarepa. He was the great Tibetan yogi, the most famous Tibetan yogi, from centuries ago. It's said that he lived up in caves for years and years. He's really considered one of the most awakened beings to come out of Tibet, and he wrote many, many songs from his practice. I'm just reading little hints of this one, but it speaks to this in a kind of mythical way.

So he's been up in his cave for who knows how long—years. He was out, and his mind became blissful, and he was carrying some wood back up to his cave. This is when you're having a good day. His mind's blissful, you're carrying wood up to the cave, everything's copacetic, the practice is going well. When he arrived there, he found in the cave seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Okay, that's weird. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa to eat, some sat performing various magical tricks.

What I get out of that is they've moved in. They've made themselves at home, these demons doing all different things. As soon as Mila saw them, he became frightened.

And this is our normal response. So he meditated on his deity. He uttered a subjugating mantra—you guys go away. He performed a gaze to scare them off. He aroused his deity's presence. We're doing all the things we can do to make those demons go away, right? Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness. That's the list. But he was still unable to pacify them.

Because that's how he thought—well, these must be local deities. I've been here for a long time, months and years, but I have not praised them. So then he sang a song of praise to these beings. But you can tell it's kind of half-hearted—he did all the negative stuff first. So he ends it: "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. Drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone."

Does that sound familiar? We're trying. We start where we are. But we bring awareness to this whole process as we're doing it, so we see what we're doing. This is wrong, this is wrong, drink this compassion and get the heck out.

So three of the demons who were performing magic did go away. But Mila was unable to make the other four go away. Realizing that they were magical obstacles, he sang a song of confidence—really of faith in his practice. He's moved from subjugating gaze to faith in his practice, and the song ends: "It is wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse."

Three of them did vanish like a rainbow. The remaining one, though, performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, this one is very powerful. So he sang his song of the view, the pinnacle of his realization, which is long. I'll just share the ending: "A demon

like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. If you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk out our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit." Then he prayed to his deity: "Grant your blessings so that this lowly one may have complete compassion."

Thus Mila sang. And with friendliness and compassion and without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and so vanished like a rainbow from the Red Rock Agate Mansion.

You get a sense, don't you? With great compassion, we just open into the tender heart of *this is what's occurring now*. It doesn't necessarily mean that in that moment the demon vanishes like a rainbow, but the fear, the adversity, the sense of something wrong —that does vanish like a rainbow in that moment.

So we start where we are. Whatever's occurring—beautiful, great, difficult, unwanted—this is where the steadiness of awareness, allowing wisdom, purifies our heart and mind. And that's an idea, but it can be experienced. Because the difference between the blame and the unwanted and the adversity and the fear, and that tender heart just being present with what is—when we can't control, when we can't fix, before any of that—it's a beautiful, really nourishing state of heart and mind.

When we really are experiencing that openness to what is, there's no way we can confuse it with fear or disappointment or pity or blame. It's really obviously a beautiful state. Beautiful because there's no longer in that moment the sense of something else needing to be for us to be complete, to be true, to be at peace. Just what there is. Nothing in excess and nothing lacking.

So we start where we are. How do we meet our demons here on this retreat? It's not always possible to do something about them either.

He says metta—and I want to say compassion too—does not necessarily mean loving the difficult person or situation. Because sometimes when we have an idea in our mind, "I should feel metta, I should love this person," we wonder, "How can I love them? They're doing this horrible thing." And we're all caught up in thinking about it.

But he says—and see if you recognize what this sounds like—one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, thing, person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. That's what I consider to be metta. To me, that's like a perfect description of mindfulness, wisdom, or compassion. Witnessing, really present with the unpleasantness in a person, thing, situation, or oneself, without creating anything around it. Simplicity of total presence without pulling back.

This sense of bearing witness, starting with our own suffering, can then expand out to the world. But this is where we really start. And whatever is occurring in your experience is a perfect place to begin, to continue.

Sometimes sitting here, worries may arise about some experience at home. There's nothing you can do about it now. Just meeting that. Or times of being ill, having something going wrong with the body. If you've had experiences of chronic illness or serious illness, you know sometimes there are things you can do, but a lot of the time it's really a very rich field for exploring this quality of being present with the simplicity, just what is, without adding anything extra. And sometimes there's something to do, which we can see more clearly when the mind is not obsessed and oppressed by ill will, by fear. Sometimes bearing witness is all we can do. But that is a really powerful expression of compassion.

I've always liked to read about different people and different literature and periods of time in history. And a lot of poets and writers and artists who lived through really difficult, horrific times—part of what they do, I think, in their art, in their writing, is in a way bearing witness to something that's really incomprehensible or too awful to be with. But the power of just staying with, being present, bearing witness, telling it, is an enormous power for compassion in the world.

Maha Ghosananda—do most of you know who Maha Ghosananda was? He died a few years ago, not that long ago. He was a Cambodian monk who during the time of the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge happened to be out of Cambodia for many years, studying in Thailand, studying Buddhism. Millions were killed in the genocide in Cambodia. It was largely a Buddhist country, and basically Buddhism was wiped out. All of his family members were killed as well. And millions of Cambodians were living in refugee camps over the border in Thailand.

After it was so-called over—the war ended and a new government came in—he went to the refugee camps. And then he led what are called Dhamma Yatras, Dharma pilgrimages. He led lay people and monks and nuns back through Cambodia, which at this time was so-called at peace, but the landscape was littered with landmines from the war. There was still a lot of fighting.

He would go to the refugee camps, and instead of stirring up anger or saying, "This is so horrible," he would simply go to the people who had lost everything, who were in total trauma and shock, and start reading the Metta Sutta. He would go in and read from the Dhammapada: "Hatred is never ended by hatred. Hatred is only ended by

love." It takes such a knowing to go into such a situation and say that, to really teach it. But because it's the truth, it would inspire. And people were coming from a Buddhist background.

In terms of bearing witness, he led many of these Dhamma Yatras through the mined land of Cambodia. Even soldiers with guns would stop, put down their weapons, and come to offer flowers or bow. The poor people still living there, who hadn't seen a monk or any kind of peaceful witnessing to what had been going on in so many years—it was really, really powerful, that kind of witnessing. He couldn't change it, he couldn't fix it, he couldn't take away people's pain, but he could just show up and be a witness to that. A really powerful kind of compassion.

We start by bearing witness to our own unwanted experience.

Maha Ghosananda said—I think it was at a big demonstration in Washington, D.C. during that period when people were trying to end the use of landmines in the world—he said, and he knew from landmines: "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts." To understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to begin to remove them in the world.

Really, we can only start where we are.

I've noticed in my own experience that in times when I feel the most alienated, disconnected, caught up, confused—not just something unwanted happening, but not even knowing what's happening, just disconnected, separate, lonely—I've been noticing this for years now, but I still keep having to find my way back to that balanced awareness.

when I get present again, I see that that alienation, that confusion, that loneliness is—I want to say always, though it's tricky to say always—but I can't think of a time so far when it wasn't the case that there's something going on, something unwanted, painful, that I've gotten caught into the habit of wanting to deny, avoid, repress, not feel, not be with.

It could be some painful experience in my own body or mind—my own habits, or a physical problem that I hadn't looked at for a while and it's back. And you go, "No, this isn't back. No, this isn't what's happening." But it could also be the pain of a family member who's suffering a lot, and there's actually no way I can fix it. And seeing how the mind, the habit of holding oneself separate, then thinks, "Well, I can't fix it and it's too painful to keep showing up for, so let's check out." Even in a subtle way. You see this over and over.

So-called internal, so-called external—but in this moment, some kind of confusion, some kind of suffering, some kind of difficulty, sadness, that I can't do something about. That not quite recognizing, not quite landing in the middle with a tender heart and bearing witness when that's not possible or I haven't recognized—that sense of separation, confusion just grows and grows. It's so unsatisfying. And it's so self-perpetuating.

And then that opening to the tender heart happens. Oh yeah. Yeah, she's really having one of her hard times again. And I can't say or do anything that helps, and yet still I can be present and listen. It's so painful. Can I be with this right now? And in that landing in it, just for that moment, there's a sense of ease, of relief, of wholeness, you could say. The next moment the aversion might pop up again. But this is, you know, we start where we are. It's what we can do.

It can be extraordinarily difficult, for sure. Even just as we see, bearing witness to our own suffering—never mind when it starts to expand in the world. As I said before, in *Planting Seeds*, it asks: How? People say, my own suffering is too much. How do we keep our hearts open, or keep coming back to that tender heart, when confronted with so much suffering? I'm not here to answer it. I'm here to say we start where we are. But it's the same dynamic of heart and mind. Practice bearing witness with mindfulness, awareness, wisdom, with whatever unwanted situation is coming up here. Not just to make it better, but because this is really the path of purification, the path of freedom, the path of understanding the nature of heart and mind.

I did read somewhere—again, I don't know where, I don't have the reference—about the Dalai Lama, who, as you know, is so famous now that probably most, if not all, of you have seen him in various places. He's so joyful, so childlike. He jokes, he laughs, he's really so present with each person. And someone was asking him, "How can you do that?" Because he also, being the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, meets with every person who escapes from Tibet—whether it's a monk or a nun or a lay person—they make their way to Dharamsala to talk to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and they tell him their whole story. So how many millions of stories of loss and death and imprisonment and torture has he heard? And he's so present. He's so present with each person. If someone's reciting their story, he's really there with it, crying with them, feeling with them. One hundred percent present.

And then they ask, "How are you not continually overwhelmed?" But they watch him, and he's really there. That conversation ends, the person's gone, and he's really with the next person. And he could be laughing like a child with the next person. How can you do that?

And he's saying it's because when he's with that person, he's totally present, without the resistance, without the aversion, without adding anything around it. And so it's totally that moment, and when it's gone, it's totally the next moment. It kind of passes through. There's not the residue, not the clinging of fear, of me, of aversion. This is what it is. So fully present, without adding anything around it, the next moment could be a moment of total joy.

Okay, a lot of our experience isn't going to be quite like that.

Just watch it. Back to how Sayadaw U Tejaniya describes it—when we realize we're meeting an unwanted experience, we start to feel that rub. Maybe we don't quite recognize the aversion, but we start to feel that friction. We think, "I'm just bearing witness, I'm bearing witness, yes, I'm bearing witness." And we start to see that something is going on.

Or sometimes we know something's going on because it's so strong we're drowning in it. And that happens sometimes. The fear, the pain, the aggravation, the sorrow—whatever it is—just comes so strong that even though we're aware, even though we can name it, even though we know what's happening, the more awareness tries to meet it, we're just drowning. It's simply too much.

And so that's when, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, we need to really recognize that the aversion is taking over the mind state, and we really need to take care of the awareness. Shift the attention to a neutral object, or a beautiful object.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to talk about this during the time of the Vietnam War. Before he was exiled and couldn't return to Vietnam, he worked a lot with students—college-age students who were doing social service work during the war. They were seeing horrible, horrible things. And he said, "I tell them, there's so much suffering and pain and sorrow that they're witnessing, so much violence. But I tell them: just be sure to notice something beautiful, something pleasant, even if it's little." Notice the smell of the herbs in the field at night. Someone was saying today, "Oh, there's so many robins around." You don't have to get into a whole big story, but just take in that moment—the robin, just a moment of ease. Or feel your breath, or open to hearing.

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, it's very important to adjust your attitude first, to take care of your awareness and how you're looking at the situation, before you start trying to adjust the environment. Because otherwise we're trying to fix things, but just out of aversion. We can be practicing trying to fix, but with that cloak of aversion coloring everything.

Shabkar was another Tibetan practitioner, much like Milarepa, but he lived in the 1800s. He said, "Meditating without compassion is simply inflicting hardship on yourself." So when the unwanted comes up, just think about that a moment. We're not here to inflict hardship on ourselves. There's enough hardship in life. But we don't have to create compassion. We can just take refuge in that simplicity of awareness without creating anything extra to meet the unwanted.

But we do have to meet the unwanted. We can't skip this part and move directly to total wisdom and compassion for all beings in the world. We can't skip this part.

So really, if we can appreciate the power of it—once we can take care of our own awareness, once we can adjust our own attitude—that's when we really can move into compassionate action in the world. I've been talking about this in terms of practice and looking inward, not so much about acting. But I do want to make a point. When we've taken care of our awareness, when we're able to be present and bear witness with our own unwanted experience, then unwanted external experience, painful and difficult experience, becomes something we can meet. We experience it while remaining present. We're able to be there, we're able to see what can be useful and act not from aversion, but from a clearer seeing of our choices.

Martin Luther King, talking about nonviolence, said, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate them."

So we're starting in the reverse way. We're starting by not hating the suffering we're experiencing, the unwanted experience in our own lives. When we don't hate that, when we're cultivating nonviolent awareness, then when the hateful is external, we have the grounding to be with that experience and meet it from wisdom and compassion. At least we have the grounding from which to start.

There was so much else, but I'll stop here. I just want to end with this, from Mingyur Rinpoche. He's another wandering Tibetan practitioner—living in caves right now. Right now. He wandered off two years ago on a three-year retreat. He's Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche's younger brother. He went to Bodh Gaya. But then he just vanished in the night. He didn't take his passport. He didn't take any money. He didn't even take a toothbrush.

He went off. Just like Milarepa, you know. It's really quite remarkable.

So a couple of years into his wandering, he ran into one of his very devoted disciples who had been with him for a while and then left. I just want to read a little bit from the letter he sent out with this disciple. He has truly been wandering around in Nepal and Tibet with nothing. Just practicing.

He said:

I have experienced feelings of happiness and suffering, rising and falling like waves on the surface of the ocean. At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I have felt cold, hungry, and thirsty. Even when I have begged for alms, I receive nothing but insults and harsh words. At other times I have received food and clothing effortlessly, without even asking for them, and in my mind it felt as though I were enjoying the pleasures of the gods.

While I have experienced both happiness and suffering, the most important thing is that a deep and heartfelt sense of certainty has arisen in the depths of my being—such that no matter what happens, I know that the true nature of these experiences, their very essence, is that of timeless awareness and vast compassion.

While all beings have great wisdom and compassion, this is not always apparent. And this is simply because they have not recognized what they already have.

So from my heart, I sincerely encourage all of you to practice diligently as well. Practice awareness.

So thank you for your patient attention. Let us practice awareness diligently.

CHAPTER 121

Purifying Our Minds/Hearts in All Aspects of Practice

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson shares a crystallizing insight that has transformed her understanding of the path: all Buddhist practices, from generosity to ethical conduct to meditation, are different angles of the same essential work—purifying and transforming the habits of our mind. Drawing on the third noble truth's definition of the cessation of dukkha as the remainderless cessation of craving, she emphasizes that freedom isn't a distant goal but something discoverable moment to moment.

Wilson explores the teaching from the Aṅguttara Nikāya that the mind is naturally radiant, only temporarily obscured by visiting defilements (kilesas). She draws on Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching that 'Nibbāna means cool'—the natural state of mind when greed, hatred, and delusion aren't burning. Rather than waiting for complete enlightenment, practitioners can recognize these ordinary moments of 'coolness' throughout daily life, whether drinking tea or observing nature, understanding that purity lies in the quality of mind, not in special objects or circumstances.

The talk offers practical guidance on recognizing wholesome states rather than only focusing on eliminating unwholesome ones, and includes the Buddha's teaching to the layman Mahānāma on recollecting one's own generosity and virtue as active practices that purify the heart. Wilson encourages practitioners to maintain aspiration without harsh self-judgment, quoting the Buddha: 'If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so.'

I know what I'm about to say may be quite obvious to all of you, but somehow in the last few years it has become crystal clear to me. It gave me a whole picture of the path in a different way.

What we've been cultivating here is really bringing awareness to the habits of our mind and purifying and transforming those habits. It's become clear to me that all the different practices, all the different parts of the path that the Buddha taught—all of them are coming from different angles of purifying and transforming the habits of our mind.

Somehow that just makes it accessible. Simple—not easy, but simple. Straightforward. It becomes a thread that unites all of the different forms of practice, instead of having to set one against the other, or thinking this is the inferior practice and eventually you get to the superior one. They're all coming from different angles of purifying these habits of our mind. I want to talk in a broad way about that tonight.

The definition the Buddha gives of the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, is this: the cessation of dukkha is the remainderless cessation and relinquishment of craving—craving being the cause of suffering, of dukkha, in the second noble truth. For craving you can read the three kilesa: greed, hatred, delusion. The remainderless cessation. Fading away.

In that way, freedom from suffering is defined as the purified heart-mind, or as is often spoken of, the supreme state of sublime peace discovered by the Tathagata—namely, liberation of mind through non-clinging. This is what we can explore the whole way along in our practice. It's something really tangible, workable, discoverable on a moment-to-moment basis. That's what's so far out about the way things work.

I really find it quite helpful and energizing in practice when I recognize the fact that everything's changing on a moment-to-moment basis, especially in terms of looking at our mind, our heart. As Andrew Olendzki describes it—the Pali scholar and friend—he says that in Buddhism, the mind is not a subject that has objects as content. It's not a thing, but rather the activity or process of cognizing, a flow of events. When we talk about "the mind," we think of something there with things happening in it. But it's really just this process of cognition. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says the way you recognize the mind is simply by the activity, not by turning around and seeing something.

So it's changing every moment. We've recognized this, right? This is the only thing that makes cultivation and transforming the habits possible. But it's also what makes it so that we can be lost in a moment and really quite awake in another moment. It's not that we have to wait until we get to the total, ultimate, complete, remainderless, never-again-going-to-arise moment of greed, delusion, or aversion in the mind. You don't have to wait for that. That's good news.

To me, that's what makes practice not overwhelmingly discouraging. I'm serious. Because if we think in terms of having to uproot all the kilesa—every time they come we've got to get out that shovel and dig them up, and until they're all gone we're just going to be mucking around in this hopeless mess—you see how many kilesa come up in a day in your mind, right? You're not alone. None of us are alone. If we're thinking they've all got to go and we're waiting for that, it's a little demoralizing.

But if we can really get a sense of how all the different aspects of the path comprise our whole life—if that's our motivation, if that's our aspiration—then all aspects of our life become part of the path of purifying and transforming these habits of mind.

We can't control this, but the arising of greed, hatred, delusion, the arising of wisdom, the arising of wholesome states—it's out of our control, but it's not random. We've talked about that a lot. The classic line from the Buddha: what the mind frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the natural inclination of the mind, the habit.

So we come in with what we naturally think and ponder upon. You've seen all too clearly what the habits are. But all the time that you put in during this retreat—and for almost everybody here, in other retreats and in your life—all the moments that the mind is inclining to awareness, to non-greed, to non-ill will, to compassion, to interest, to samadhi—all those times are also feeding into the habits of what the mind naturally inclines towards. This is the only thing that makes it workable.

You remember when Steve read the sutta about how the mind is naturally radiant and pure. This purity, this radiance, is simply obscured by the visiting torments, the visiting kilesa. Partly they're obscured because we get so fascinated—either getting sucked into the kilesa or fighting against them, caught in the reaction and onto the object—that we forget to even notice the radiance. Sometimes it would be quite noticeable if we would remember. Same as our awareness: we don't even remember it's there, and when we do, it's just there. It's so normal.

So in a way, you could say the habits—the unwholesome habits—are learned.

Desmond Tutu, the Archbishop from South Africa, the Nobel Peace Prize winner who was one of the main architects of the whole peace and reconciliation process there. I heard just a brief snippet of him on the radio. He was in Boston meeting with a bunch of students—it sounded like they were late adolescents, maybe eighteen or nineteen-year-old young men and women from a very poor, difficult section of town. And he was saying to them, "We learn to hate. It's not our natural state. We learn to hate."

One of the students said to him, "But how can we—we live in the middle of a culture of violence. How can we possibly learn how to love?" And he just—you could hear him on the radio, couldn't see him, but you could hear him—he just turned to that young man and said, "You. You can make a difference. It starts with you, and you, and you, and you. One person can make a difference. And just know that hate isn't our natural state and it's not the only response. We don't have to just give in to that for ourselves."

I found that really inspiring from him.

There's a place in the suttas where the Buddha is talking about cultivating skillful, wholesome habits and abandoning unskillful, unwholesome habits. And he says, "If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so. But because it is possible, I say: abandon the unskillful, cultivate the skillful." He said, "If abandoning the unskillful led to your further suffering and unhappiness, I wouldn't tell you to do so. But it doesn't." I see I don't have the right words—I shouldn't put words in the Buddha's mouth. Although, I mean, he wasn't speaking English, was he? You get the drift. "If cultivating the wholesome led to greater suffering, to unhappiness, I wouldn't tell you to do so. But it doesn't. It leads to freedom from suffering and happiness and ease. Therefore, because it is possible, I tell you to do so."

I really take that in. Really take it in. If it were not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do so.

But it takes—I feel, certainly in my limited experience and everything I've seen—it takes, as you see, how hard just on a nine-day retreat where we've cleared the decks and that's all we're doing here, how hard it is even to be aware, never mind not getting all caught up in the unwholesome.

And also maybe you've noticed how often we don't recognize the wholesome. We get so focused on getting rid of the unwholesome, which of course isn't what awareness is doing, right? We all know awareness is not getting rid of the unwholesome. It's simply being present with things as they are and allowing the clear seeing.

And what's so cool—and we've said this before—is the wisdom that comes from steady awareness, simply from recognizing accurately. That's all. The wisdom that arises when we recognize accurately: in that moment, the unwholesome is abandoned because it doesn't make any sense.

But it takes a continual renewing, I think, for each of us in our own way, of our own internal commitment, our own internal aspiration to do so. I'm sure you know how easy it is, even on retreat, but when we leave retreat—and this isn't, that's why we love this style of practice, it's not just about retreat—but there's so many more things to go and do and see. Someone was saying, how hard is it to be aware? Not very. How often do we think, "Okay, I'll be aware later"—right now, as if you can't be aware whatever you're doing—"I'll be aware later." It's so easy.

There's another place—which I searched, I wrote it down years ago and could not find the reference, so don't ask me, I'm telling you right now—where the Buddha said at one point, speaking about his own practice, that the two things he never lost sight of

were not to be lax in his effort—in other words, not to just coast, which I find myself doing a lot until there's enough suffering that it kind of wakes me up again—and never to be satisfied simply with wholesome states of mind.

I find that really interesting. The way I read that is, when the kilesas are completely uprooted, that's okay, you can be satisfied then. But along the way, when it's kind of the same complacency—"it's good enough." The habits come and go, but we're not as bothered, they're not as strong. We really see a lot more wholesomeness, and this is true. A lot more generosity, a lot less aversion, a lot less getting caught in stuff. We think, "That's pretty good."

And never to be satisfied until we really, really see our hearts and minds are free. This is, to me, the aspiration that keeps renewing itself in my heart and mind in different ways.

And it's not a negative judgment. It's like an onward-leading aspiration.

I'll just give an example. Different things bring it up in me from time to time over my life of practice. I'll go for a while, and then something will inspire me into another gear, sort of like Steve said about his retreat—something really inspired him into another gear. Different times, different things.

But a few years ago—this is the one that sticks with me in this context of really purifying the mind stream, the heart stream. Not that long ago. When I was in Munich for a while, I went to visit Dachau. It's been made into a museum where the concentration camp was. All the years I've spent time in Germany, I somehow never got around to doing that.

That was the effect it had on me. It was very well set out as a museum, with lots of placards and photos of all the different aspects, all the different kinds of people involved, all the different strands. Coming through it, seeing the site—it was so big. When I went back to see my friends in Munich, they said, "Oh, but that's one of the small ones." I thought, my God, it's huge. So you get the sense of the vastness of this kind of unimaginable horror in my mind.

The placards showed all the different groups of people who were interned there—Jews and Roma and gay people and Catholics, on and on—with photos of different individuals. But also photos of guards, people who made the bread, people who brought in supplies. All the different people.

By the end of it, what hit me was: there were so many people involved. And this is just Dachau, and this is just World War II Germany. Pick your place in the world of all the horrors. There were so many people involved. There's no way my mind could make it separate and say, "Well, all of these people were some kind of inhuman monsters." It's just not possible. Mostly ordinary people—doctors, or people who lived in the village and brought in the food, or people who were interned in the camp and acted in all different kinds of ways: noble and base and normal. The whole range of humanity.

I think of any other memorial to unspeakable horrors. I read that they just opened, on the UN Plaza, the Permanent Memorial to Honor the Victims of Slavery in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It took so long to make that. I haven't been there; I just looked at it online. Again, how many people over hundreds of years were involved? They can't all be some kind of inhuman monsters. Or Srebrenica, or Rwanda, or the killing fields in Cambodia—on and on.

This might sound strange, but this actually really inspired me in my own practice. Because what I realized is: we don't really know, until we're in a really difficult situation, how we're going to behave. We don't really know. When we don't know how our minds work, we don't really know.

I've never been in a situation even close to what any of these people were in. And I couldn't just look and say, "Well, I know I would never do that." Do what? You don't know. You make a small decision. You don't know all the ramifications. You don't know what went into it. Maybe someone comes and says, "Do this, or some harm might come to your children," and you do it out of fear. How do I know what I would do?

Looking at my own life—when we say, "Okay, I'm going to make an aspiration. I'm going to sit every day"—you really think you mean it, don't you? With your whole heart, you mean it: I'm going to sit every day. How long does that last? Some people do sit every day. I'm always really amazed when I meet those people in their daily life. Or, "I'm not going to get angry at my mother anymore." All this stuff, and we mean it. But because we don't really know how our minds are working, because we're not really present with awareness, the habits surface when the conditions are present for them.

Like some people were saying in the little talking exercise today—I thought it was really interesting—quite a few people said that with the awareness in the talking, they noticed their habits: personality habits, habits of how they tend to engage in conversation coming up. The awareness really starts to see it.

And that doesn't mean you don't do it. It doesn't mean you naturally stop, and it doesn't mean you bring in more aversion to yourself, because that's just aversion. But you say, "I really want to see."

Many people have said at different times in our groups that they're starting to notice the big dramas that used to happen on retreat aren't happening so much. But they're noticing how much more subtle craving is showing up, or more subtle aversion is showing up. And I think that's great, because it's the subtle ones where we think, "No, that's a little aversion that doesn't really matter." And then the next thing you know, you're tapping out an email that's filled with all this stuff, and you think, "Oh, I just thought it was funny," and the person on the other end is like, "Oh, God."

So really turning around and watching what's going on in our mind—that's what we can do. We don't know what the effect is going to be of many of our choices and actions. We don't know the whole circumstance. That we can't always know. But the place we can bring awareness is to the quality in the mind that's motivating this speech, this action. And a lot of times it's complex, and a lot of times we can't tell, sure. But we keep having the interest, the willingness to look.

So it's better now. When I get an email and I can feel something—"No, that's just not right. Let me tell them"—and I'm supposed to answer and give my opinion, I'm actually supposed to do that. So I start to go, but now I can feel this kind of, "But I know I'm right." And then most of the time I manage to say, "Write it tomorrow, write it tomorrow," because I can feel the aversion in my mind, even though it's masquerading as my appropriate informed opinion.

The next day, I may have the same appropriate informed opinion. Because let's face it, the aversion's there because you know you're right. And of course, the flip side of the aversive type is discriminating wisdom. That's true. But the next day, even when I have the same opinion, that aversive tinge is gone and it feels so completely different. I can write it so completely differently.

And it's the same with craving. You write something because you really want this thing to happen. The next day, when it's not so much craving, you can see the whole picture. You can see the other person's point of view. You can write the email from a much more clear comprehension perspective, not just my perspective.

So it's in the little things like that—that we bring this awareness of our motivation, of the habits of mind, into our practice.

From that I want to move into talking a little bit about the Third Noble Truth. Remembering, we're talking not about the remainderless forever, but the moment-to-moment possibility of really recognizing a sense, the flavor, of the heart-mind that's pure in that moment, that's free from clinging—the quality of mind. It's not a distant state, or a state at all. In a moment of the process of mind, heart, consciousness arising with awareness, the five faculties and no clinging, aversion, or greed—that's a moment of purity.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa. I've talked about him before, the Thai forest monk who was quite a scholar, and also, for the Thai Theravada system, a little bit of a rebel in his scholarship and the way he talked about things. For example, in his center near Surat Thani on the southeast coast of Thailand, a forest monastery, he had a big statue of Avalokiteshvara. That may seem like, so what?

But in Thai Theravada Buddhist monasteries, you don't have statues of Avalokiteshvara. It's from a whole different tradition. They don't mix. So just for that gesture alone, you can see he had a much broader view.

I want to share a few things from a talk he gave, translated from Thai, speaking to lay people, not to monks and nuns. The talk is called "Nibbana for Everyone." It's quite long, but I just want to make a few points relevant to what we're exploring here.

He says, "Nibbana means cool. Cool." And "Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind." In Thai, as in Pali, mind-heart is the same word: citta. "It is the cool state of mind without any kilesa." So in any moment, he's saying, when there's no kilesa in the heart, in the mind, it's cooled out. It's cool.

He goes on to say, "It could be summed up that nibbana is the coolness resulting from the extinction of defilements, of torments. Now as we look further, we see that the kilesa—greed, hatred, delusion—are also sankharas, compounded things. All compounded things that arise will cease." So they're subject to birth and death. "This shows that the defilements occur when the causal conditions are present. And when those causal conditions are not present—and they will go away because every conditioned thing arises and ceases—when those causal conditions go away, the defilements simply become extinct in that moment."

I'm sure you've experienced this. When you're wanting, or you're in aversion, if you keep paying attention, suddenly it's just gone. Have you noticed that? That's the moment. It became extinct in that moment.

Buddhadasa continues, "Although the extinction is temporary—or in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily—the phenomenon has a real sense of Nibbana, even though it's not the lasting one."

I'm talking about this not from an Abhidhamma scholastic perspective, but really as a teaching tool to help us, to urge us all to keep recognizing these moments. We don't need to get lost in thinking, "But it's not really Nibbana, it's not really cessation." Just start to recognize these moments of coolness.

He says, "Temporary nibbana does exist for those who unavoidably have some impurities left." But then he says, "This temporary nibbana is that which nourishes sentient beings. Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them?" Right? We couldn't really. He says we'd go crazy. Or we'd die. Or both.

"So let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. As a matter of fact, we could say that these periods are more than when the fires are burning. This nourishing condition is thus normal to what may be called life or mind."

So he asks, why don't we appreciate it more? Why aren't we grateful for these moments of temporary nibbana?

If you think of it simply as moments of coolness, when the fires of defilement are not burning—these are just little moments that we can really bring into awareness. Of course, awareness is key to all of this. Awareness plays a part in every practice, in every technique, in everything we do in our life.

With this awareness, we've really been looking at the torments, the patterns that emerge, and also wholesome qualities like the five spiritual faculties. But I just want to highlight that this is a normal, natural moment of coolness, freedom from defilement. And awareness recognizing it—just recognizing, not making some big production out of it—is important. Remember, wisdom is this: when wisdom recognizes the wholesome, it strengthens the wholesome. That's just the nature of things. We don't have to hold on to that strength. That's what happens. It's so far out.

When wisdom recognizes the unskillful, the unwholesome, it doesn't feed it, because it doesn't make sense. That's just natural.

That's far out.

So this is just on the intellectual level I'm talking about, but we can start to notice it—that it's a natural, normal aspect of our mind.

The Dalai Lama, talking about the negative emotions and tendencies, says: "Once these veils, the negative emotions and tendencies, have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing and being aware is the nature of the mind itself. As long as the mind exists, it has the ability to know. But this ability does not reveal itself until all obscurations are removed. That is what it means to attain enlightenment."

So again, take it down to one moment. In one moment—there are many moments when the obscurations are not there. And no new power is needed then, just to recognize this purity of heart-mind.

Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche writes: "This is one's birthright, one's true nature. It's not something missing to be sought for and obtained, but is the very heart of our original existential being. It is actually inseparable from our uncontrived everyday awareness, beyond willful alteration, free from conceptualizing. Unfabricated ordinary awareness, unadulterated by effort and modification."

Does that sound familiar? Only slightly different Tibetan language. "Unfabricated ordinary awareness, naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural. What could be simpler than this? To rest at home and at ease in total naturalness."

So that's a different language, but it's just the same thing—starting to just rest at ease in natural awareness. And so, again, not looking for something but just having it in mind to notice little moments that are cool because the fire of torment isn't burning.

It could be in any moment. There's nothing special going on most of the time. You know how on retreat you'll have moments where maybe you're outside and everything—it's just the is-ness. Everything just is. You're not making up any stories. Maybe there could be thoughts or not, but you're not referencing it back to what does it mean about me, and what am I going to tell people about this, and how can I hold it. Just little kind of perfect moments.

And it could be seeing a lizard. Okay, that isn't here, right? That's in California. Here it could be seeing an icicle. That image I just said—that's an image from a retreat I did in 1975. I remember I was just sitting in a chair and this little blue lizard went by, and it was one of those perfect moments.

But so often we notice it, and we impute the purity, the perfectness, whatever it is, to the particular situation. "Oh, it's so beautiful out. The ice crystals are so incredible." Or that lizard and the quietness—"I'm on retreat." Or drinking this tea, and then you go and buy seven gallons of that tea because that was like the perfect thing. You try to go back to the same place. We impute it to that. Again, focusing on the object.

It's got nothing to do with the object. It could be any object. It's the quality of mind-heart in that moment, with awareness that the defilements aren't there burning.

So we have lots of little is-ness moments, some stronger than others. When it happens, don't stop—you can't stop and grab, because then it's gone. But just noticing more than the object, just kind of feeling what that simple quality of pure mind-heart feels like in that moment. However it is, don't put words to it or anything. It's not like you're trying to name it or call it out, but it's just kind of letting awareness come to it. It becomes recognizable. We see it is really normal and natural. It is part of our everyday experience.

But as with our tendency for intensity, we so much overlook it, just as we overlook the simplicity of awareness. We overlook it because it's so always available and so normal that we just don't even see it.

One friend of mine was describing her experience: it's like the mind and heart feel squeaky clean—like when you're cleaning a window and it's just so squeaky clean.

There's nothing there, nothing in the way. I don't know if that works for you, but I like it. You get the sense it's almost tangible.

So just start to let that in. It's really part of our life. The world doesn't change. It's not about the object. It's more this quality of mind, the cool mind, free from klesha. Readily available, it comes and goes. But if we don't even notice it—if we don't even notice it, or if we do notice it and it's like, "So what?"—okay, then maybe this isn't your path.

No, mostly we don't notice it. We overlook it because we're still looking for the big, you know, whatever it is. We're still in that somehow it's got to be really transformative, really pleasant—okay, let's face it, really *something*. But the world doesn't change. The Buddha woke up into this same world, you know. The way our heart and mind relates, responds—that changes because we understand differently. And we understand differently because the lens of awareness is clear. It's clean. All those moments of not being with burning defilement, what's also going on is clear and accurate recognition.

So this isn't to think about it. I just want to offer different ways of recognizing, just when it's there. Because just as you've been learning over this time—in the beginning maybe you didn't know what the heck we were talking about with awareness—it gets more and more a sense of what it is, although you can't touch it or see it or really describe it to your friends when you go home. But there's a way you know when there's awareness and when there's not. Right? Please say yes. At least sometimes. We know. It's more familiar.

And then we start to be able to really tell when there's torment coloring the awareness and when there's not. Just as we get more and more familiar with how greed and aversion and delusion feel and affect our perception, we get more familiar with the thoughts and the actions, we also get more and more familiar and at home when they're not there. So that's really key to let in. Not separate from our everyday awareness. It's not lying somewhere else.

This is from Ajahn Tate, who was a Thai forest master too, talking about this. He says: "Water in its natural state is a pure, transparent fluid. But if dye is added, it will change color accordingly. If red dye is added, it will be red. If blue, it will turn blue. But even though the water may change its color in accordance with the substances introduced into it, it does not forsake its innate purity and colorlessness. If a wise person is able to distill the colored water, it will resume its natural state. This is the same for the pure mind and the kaleshas that visit it."

So just in different traditions, different ways of pointing to the same really natural, actually very simple and accessible aspect, experience over and over of our mind and heart.

At the heart of all the practices, of course, is this moment-to-moment awareness, as we've been doing it here. As Ajahn Sumedho says, the practice of freedom is awareness. Well, it's a way of looking—I'm sure he'd go there. Anyway, awareness. But we've talked about that the whole time, so I'm not going to say more about that now.

What I want to mention—and I can only just touch on these, because each of these things is at least one whole dharma talk, don't worry, it's not going to be—is all the different practices, all the different aspects that the Buddha talks about on the path.

Of course, awareness is the overarching quality, and awareness is included with all of these practices, accompanying all of them. But they're all ways, again, of shifting, transforming the tormented habits of our mind and heart toward the wholesome. And that's not just so we feel better—that's actually what sets the conditions for the arising

of moments of freedom. So it's not merely, "Oh, this is a good thing and then later you'll be better." These are, in themselves, absolutely essential aspects of freeing our heart-mind.

You see, there are different meditation practices, and also, as Steve has said, the three pillars: generosity and moral conduct, and all the different forms of mental cultivation—all important. All aspects of our life.

I know Steve talked a lot about generosity today. We usually try to give a whole talk about it, more and more, because it's so key to cultivating the heart-mind of relinquishment, of counteracting clinging. But the only thing I want to say about generosity and sīla, restraint, is to recognize that they're not heavy-duty, difficult renunciation practices. The practices themselves—moments of generosity, moments of conscious moral conduct—bring so much joy and happiness, wholesome joy, wholesome happiness. It's not like we've got to practice and practice just to have a moment, please, when there's no collation and we can appreciate something. The practices themselves are cultivating a lightness of heart, a lightness of mind.

In moments of generosity, whether it's just giving a smile, some time, listening, a flower, whatever it is—it's not the thing itself. It's the motivation, the intention in our heart. And connecting to be generous also needs a generous receiver. That's the circle.

I've spent a lot of time in Burma over the last fourteen years, going there every year. Generosity is a large part of the Buddhist teaching, and since much of the culture is Buddhist, it's quite inculcated throughout. I do mostly hang out in monasteries and nunneries, but it's not only there—it's really all through the culture, this appreciation of generosity as a practice. Everywhere you go, it just comes at you from all directions. And there's this joy, a happiness, from people. You go to a little village, and they're poor fisher people, and they come and give you this big dried fish. "Please take this, and give part of it to our friend who's in Thailand." As if we could take a big dried fish to Thailand! Impossible, but this is such full-hearted generosity, and there's this happiness in it.

I see in myself how, before, sometimes I would want to be generous but I might feel a little ashamed—it's not a good enough thing to give, or what if they don't appreciate it? That's so self-centered, really. When you're truly giving, there's just this happiness: "Please, this is what I have, this dried fish, and I want to give it to you." And so you take it in the same spirit. The alternative—"No, no, don't give me your fish, you're too poor, I don't want to take your fish"—that's so ungenerous. That's how we feel at first. But there's this sense of letting in the joy, and then it becomes catching.

There's a phrase you hear: "opportunity for dāna." That's very common—"Oh, this is another opportunity for dāna." People always have that in their mind. And just to have that awareness—"This is a chance I can offer something, this is a chance I can be generous"—it's such a lovely thing.

So we take that fish and we go away, and obviously we can't take it to Thailand. So we find a nunnery and offer it to the nuns. And it keeps going like that. Generosity moves to the next place, to the next place.

Once I was staying at a meditation center where we often stay, right after the cyclone in 2008. The cyclone hit the southwest of Myanmar but also extended up into the area near Yangon—great destruction. Many people were killed, houses were down, people really didn't have food. Much of the rice production was destroyed. We'd brought some money from friends to try and help, and the sayadaw where we were staying said, "Well, the village just around this meditation center—the people really don't have enough food." He said if we would offer the money, he would organize what he called a rice dāna.

This meant for every house in the village—and it's all very carefully tracked there, they know which houses and how many people live in each one. So we paid for it, and a whole building was filled with rice. Then the monks, who of course can't offer or use money, went in and spent their time filling all the bags with rice, because that's what they could do, and they really wanted to help too. Then each villager from each house would come and we'd offer them a bag of rice. And you always do it face to face. It's not like you make a pile and they come and take it.

The Sayadaw insisted that we come and stand there to hand them the rice personally. These were big, heavy, fifty-pound bags of rice. Ryan and I together were heaving these bags up, and then a little lady would come, go "plop," put it on her head, take a kid in each hand, and walk off. I'm not exaggerating. So all along the way, it was very personal, face to face.

The next morning, the monks went out on alms round. They still do that in Buddhist countries. Every morning, the monks go out with their alms bowls following a set itinerary in the village. Each monastery has its own route, and the village people know when they're coming. Whoever wants to offer comes out and gives whatever they have.

A friend of ours from Mexico was a monk there at the time and went out on alms round every day. He came back that next day deeply moved. He said that they go the same route every day, and pretty much the same people come out to offer. Usually they just offer a little rice—that's all they can afford, which is fine. The rest of the food is

cooked for them at the monastery. In some places, still today in Thailand and Burma, the only food the monks get—and in some cases nuns—is what they receive on alms round. Up in Sagaing in the north, it's like that.

Raoul said that this day when they went out, after the rice dana, there were many, many more people out there giving rice. Some people had brought their little kids out, training them. The children would take a little spoonful of rice and put it in the bowl. Because the families had gotten rice, now they could offer some to the monks. Before, they weren't able to because they didn't have enough. And that's the first thing they did with it. That's just the flow, how it goes. And it's really happiness-producing.

So in the moment of generosity, with awareness, you can notice how the habit is being transformed in that very moment. It's not that if I give enough, I'll store up merit and then later on something good will happen. That's one way of looking at it. But in terms of our awareness in the immediacy of the moment—which is all there is—you can feel this. Let yourself appreciate it. Enjoy the happiness of generosity, and also be happy in receiving and happy for the generosity of the other person. In that moment, you can start to feel some transformation. You can see a shift from the old habits.

Similarly with sīla, with non-harming conduct—it's not just that we don't do these things. You might notice every time, even in a little way, that the motivation or the impulse comes up to transgress: to take something that's not yours, to squash a mosquito, whatever. And you don't do it.

I don't know about you, but a lot of our Western tendencies run toward self-criticism: "Oh God, I was so bad. What's the matter with me? I wanted to take that thing." Instead, you could actually notice that restraint—conscious restraint—is a wholesome movement of non-harming. In that moment, appreciate that shift of habit.

The more we pay attention to sīla and notice when the habits come up of wanting to harm or steal, when we say something harmful, we can notice how that feels. Notice the burning of the defilements. When we don't do it, notice how that's a wholesome quality of restraint. And it starts to arise more naturally, more easily. I'm sure you've noticed this.

It becomes natural and easy, and in fact the Buddha says it's not an act of will. It is normal and natural that freedom from remorse arises in one endowed with virtue. It is in the nature of things—freedom from remorse and really a kind of happiness.

I'll give you another little simple example. The simple little ones are what's important to notice. I was with a good friend of mine at Spirit Rock, a meditation center like this in California. If you haven't been, it has this giant bookstore that sells every

dharma tchotchke you could ever want, all kinds of stuff. They had all kinds of little statues, and I wanted a particular one that I had seen. I wanted to go back and get it. So my friend and I went there. It's a self-service bookstore, but I didn't see this particular statue out on display. My friend had sometimes helped out there.

She knew how to get into the storage closets, let's put it that way. So we went into the storage closet, and there was one that was just row after row after row of statues. The woman who supplies this is really good at buying things and getting a lot of them. So we were going through all these shelves looking for this particular statue, taking out the ones ahead and getting to it. It was a White Tara statue I wanted.

We were being very careful. They were kind of like—not glass, some kind of plastic or something. Anyway, we're pulling them out, and at almost the same moment, we each took out a different kind of statue, a head of Manjushri with a little sword up like this. And both had—we barely touched them and the swords just snapped off, for both of us, in each hand. We both went, "Oh no!" We each broke one.

Later we discussed this. It went through both of our minds—which we didn't say at the time—we could just put them back and no one would ever know. That thought went through both of our minds. And it was so clear: it just went through and there was no temptation whatsoever. It was so clear we wouldn't do that, even though the statues weren't cheap.

So we went and got the one I wanted, and then we took the broken statues. Actually, the woman who runs the bookstore is a good friend, so we went to her office with our two broken statues, like two little kids. She wasn't there, so we're writing out a note—okay, we broke the statues, what do we owe? She comes in: "Carol! What are you doing here?" "We broke the statues. What do we owe?" She goes, "Ah, that happens all the time. We just glue it back on and sell it half price." Oh, great!

So it worked out. But later we realized how really happy it made us both that there was not even for a fraction of a second a thought that either of us would really put that back and hide it. We would have totally gotten away with it. No one would have known. But that's not what it's about. That's the freedom from remorse.

Recognizing that in yourself, rather than "Oh, I'm so bad, I had that thought"—recognize the space that doesn't act on it, the natural honesty, the natural restraint from harmful behavior, and really appreciate that. This is also an act of changing the habits of our mind, and it requires awareness.

I want to read one sutta, and then I won't go so much into the meditation practices. They all, of course, are purifying the mind—samādhi, all the different forms of samādhi, and the different forms of vipassanā. But we've talked about that here, and time is running out.

This is something I've really found helpful in terms of conscious contemplation. It's not only that our habits are purified in the acts of generosity, in the acts of non-harming behavior, but that actually we can consciously reflect later on our wholesome actions as a source of shifting and transforming the habits, of purifying the heart and mind.

So I'm reading just part of a sutta in which the Buddha is giving a long talk to a layman who has come and asked, "Where should we lay people dwell in our minds for awakening?" He says, "This is a great question, Mahānāma. And the first place we dwell is the five spiritual faculties."

Remember them? Faith, perseverance, mindfulness, samadhi, and wisdom. So they're not just for people in deep retreat. That's the first thing.

And then he talks about some conscious reflections. I just want to read what he says about reflecting on your virtues—and then on your generosity, which is exactly the same.

Furthermore, Mahanama, there is the case where you recollect your own virtues. They are unbroken, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, conducive to concentration.

Now this is the important part, I think:

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting their own virtue, her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind heads straight based on virtue. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble one gains a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, piti arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

It's always one leads to the next, to the next—and it's just the nature of things.

So, Mahanama, you should develop this recollection of virtue while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children.

He's not just saying once in a while. This is an active act with awareness of purifying our heart and mind and bringing in joy, leading to the mind and heart free from defilements in any moment.

The same with recollecting your generosity:

It is great for me that among people overcome with a stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, open-handed, responsive to requests.

And the same thing—at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting her generosity, her mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. Her mind heads straight based on generosity.

I'll end with this:

You should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children.

So the big picture: take care of your awareness in all aspects of our life.

Thank you for listening to the Dhamma.

CHAPTER 122

Opening Night - 3 Month Retreat

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *Carol Wilson opens the three-month retreat at IMS by framing this intensive practice period as a radical choice to go against the stream of conventional life—echoing the Buddha's own description of the path 2,600 years ago. She reflects on the anniversary of 9/11 as a reminder of the suffering caused by fear, hatred, and greed, while also acknowledging the nobility and generosity that arise in response to tragedy. The talk emphasizes that transformation is not an act of will but comes through affectionate awareness and curiosity toward our own habits of mind and heart.*
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> *Wilson draws on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho about gratitude and contentment as supportive conditions for awakening, and references the Buddha's graduated teachings that begin by brightening the heart before addressing deeper insights. She encourages practitioners to consciously cultivate appreciation for the dāna (generosity) and mettā (loving-kindness) that support the retreat community, and to reconnect with their deepest aspirations.*
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> *Bhante Gunaratana then offers detailed teachings on taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, explaining their qualities of protection and accessibility. He illuminates the five precepts not merely as abstentions but as positive practices—protecting life, cultivating contentment, calming the senses, speaking truthfully, and maintaining diligent mindfulness. The evening concludes with the traditional Pāli chanting of the refuges and precepts, formally beginning the retreat.*

So tonight we begin this six-week or three-month journey together in earnest—no more messing around. We're really starting to investigate this, what they call the great matter. The great matter of life and death, the great matter of suffering and freedom, of self-hatred and compassion. The great matter that in some way is at the heart, to me anyway, of all of life. Exploring what gives, for me, all of life meaning, which is just being fully present and understanding our hearts and minds and the world as it is.

It's so amazing to me that the freedom that the Buddha spoke about—this really purifying the habits of our heart and mind, really shifting the default mode from confusion and self-dislike and fear and the illusion of separate, isolated existence that gives rise to greed and fear and cruelty—shifting that default mode to one of pure wakeful presence with this moment, that manifests in our hearts and minds as wisdom, as compassion, as all those beautiful qualities that were mentioned this morning.

One time I had a teacher who said, however you want to describe the experience, the manifestation of heart and mind of awakening, we'll all have different words for it, because there's no word that accurately describes it. So I kind of love that go-around this morning, everybody throwing in a different word. Somehow we all get the mandala, just like we're a whole mandala of people here together, exploring this together and in solitude—like Stephen Batchelor's book, *Alone with Others*. That's how we are here, alone with others, and both of those are essential.

I personally feel like this choice of how to spend your time for six weeks, for three months, is really radical. In this world, in whatever culture we each come from, the choice to start where we are and to really turn our attention wholeheartedly, twenty-four seven—for you non-American English speakers, that means twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—you get time off to sleep in the beginning. But then mindfulness gets stronger, and you won't want any time off. You won't, because it's so much more rich and alive just to be awake, even when we hate what we're being awake for. Just being awake, being present, instead of falling asleep into our old habits of reactivity—it's so much more worthwhile, in my opinion.

This is really radical. The Buddha, as I'm sure you know, often described his path and his teachings as going against the stream. To really follow this path of awakening is moving against the stream of his culture and his society back 2,600 years ago in India. And so in all of our different cultures and societies, we are in some way going against the stream.

And yet, I mean, I'm certainly not a student of all the philosophies and religions of the world, but in various different ones I've read about, there seems to be a core of solitude, of the mystic, of the call to turn our attention inward to our own mind and heart. To discover not only how we suffer and to free ourselves from that suffering, but as a way to share our being, our understanding, who we are with all of humanity, with all the people that we come in contact with. We can't help it. We are who we are, and whoever we come in contact with is going to be affected by that, just as we are affected by who we come in contact with.

So choosing this period of silence to really look inward, to choose to take refuge in awareness, in wisdom, in compassion, over the comfort of our habits of mind and heart, or over just the pull of reactivity—just the pull of wanting can be so strong. Have you noticed that? So strong, and not only wanting. Just choosing to give yourself, to give the world this time is, I feel, really radical. As the Buddha said, it's against the stream of what most people in all different cultures tend to do and the messages we get.

A big reminder of why: I probably don't need to mention to those of you who live in the States that today is 9/11, the anniversary of that huge terrorist act. One out of ten zillion examples on this planet, both in the history of this country and in the history of most other countries, in the past and in the present, of how much pain and sorrow and suffering can be created by even a few people filled and driven by fear, by hatred, by greed—never mind whole huge segments of any population. And it's also an example of all the history of violence and cruelty and oppression and war and bigotry for all different reasons, whether it's ethnicity or sexual identity or wanting someone else's property or some other cause.

Of course, these acts of cruelty and violence are not always responded to with cruelty and violence. There's as much nobility and courage and generosity in the world as well. So just to say with 9/11, to keep it with one example: of course we know in New York the courage of so many people and the generosity of those who responded immediately, who risked their lives and gave their lives. There was just such a general sense of people pulling together and caring for one another. What makes me a little sad in retrospect is how we remark on that as a special thing.

I heard on the radio, and I didn't know this, that a few people got together over some years and they got the US Congress to pass a resolution making the anniversary of 9/11 what they call a day of service, to kind of commemorate it in a wholesome, beautiful way. So I thought, okay, that's great that the Congress could do something like that. And they were giving examples of lots of people in New York all over the city who were going to different firehouses—because the firemen and women were some of the big heroes at that time—just painting the firehouses or cleaning up. It was kind of lovely because the fire people were like, "Wow, I can't believe someone's coming and painting our firehouse. How amazing." And the people that were doing it were like, "This is so wonderful to do something for someone else." Which is great. So there are wonderful responses too. I don't want to just harp on the negative.

But these horrible examples of fear, greed, cruelty, violence—whatever form they take—just keep on happening in this world.

So the radical thing, I feel, that we choose in coming to an experience like this is not an escape. Of course, that's what people who don't understand meditation usually think. "Oh, you're going to go get calm." That's what people say to me all the time. "What do you do?" "I teach meditation." "Oh, I could use that. I need to get calm." You have no idea what you really face—coming face to face with all the habits in our own heart and mind, all the default mechanisms that would lead me to respond to cruelty with anger, to hatred with hatred, to feel that I need to protect by lashing out, to greed with greed.

And I'm not saying we should then think we shouldn't do that. I'm thinking more that the courage we bring to our practice of awakening is this interest, this willingness not to judge, but to really look in our hearts and minds and see what's going on here. Can I respond in another way?

There's a well-known story of the Dalai Lama. Someone was asking him, "How can it be, when your country of Tibet has been so overrun by the government of China, and so many of the Tibetan people have been killed or put in jail, the monasteries and nunneries destroyed, so many of you have fled to India—and yet you refuse to go to anger, and you still have compassion and forgiveness? How can you do that when everything's been taken from your country?" And he said, "Well, the Chinese government may have taken the country. Should I also give them my heart and mind?"

That's our choice. Not such an easy choice. It's not an act of will.

One of my teachers, a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has little funny pithy comments. Someone asked him when he was here, "Okay, it's fine being on retreat, exploring when difficult habits of mind come up—greed, cruelty, hatred—and really being open to exploring them, not judging, not running, just seeing with affectionate curiosity, understanding, and trusting that that understanding grows naturally from awareness." Which is so cool. And that the understanding itself, wisdom itself, is the function that transforms our responses. So this person thinks, "Okay, that's all well and good on a retreat when people are in silence and enough comes up anyway. What about when we go back to life and people are basically mad? People are acting insane—not even in the big picture, but just who you run into in your life on the street. How do you deal with that?"

So Tejaniya said, "You realize that they're giving us a dhamma lesson. They're saying, 'Don't be like this.' I don't want to act like this or think like this or feel like this."

In my experience—I don't know if it's the same for you—that's not so simple, right? Easier said than done. If it were only an act of will... Have you ever thought, "I'm just not going to get angry at that person again"? Have you ever thought, in your relationship or with family members, "I'm never going to say that to them again. I'm never going to criticize that thing that drives me crazy. I'm never going to criticize it again"? And you know, how long? How long before it pops out of the mouth? Again, maybe I'm the only one. But how long? It's not an act of will.

So don't take that as a discouragement. Take that as an incredible relief. Because it's not an act of will. So when tomorrow you're standing in the breakfast line and somebody takes the last banana and your mind goes into killer mode—but you won't act on

it because Bhante is going to give us the refuges and precepts—you just see. Oh wow. You stand back and go, it's not an act of will to stop it. You bring affection and curiosity and go, "Wow, look at that. Isn't that amazing?" And that shift to affectionate interest, to awareness, to not taking it so personally, but really seeing how the mind works—that's the shift that can change our world.

Moment after moment after moment, that's our practice. It's not an act of will. So just put down trying, but show up twenty-four-seven for this moment. And the steadiness of awareness is really the condition that allows paññā, wisdom, to arise.

Just the recognizing accurately. It's so cool. Once we stop trying so hard to make what we think ought to happen happen—when we really have no clue what ought to happen, but we keep on trying—we just forget it right now. Just put it down and notice what's happening now in the body, in the mind, through all our activities of the day, with affection, with interest, without expectation. That's our job.

Another quote from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He says, "In the morning I practice to quiet and calm my mind." Apparently he gets up at like three or four every morning and practices for five hours. "And then the rest of the day, I use that quiet and calm to serve humanity."

So there's not really any way I feel that what we're doing is in any kind a running away. I mean, there's moments—God knows—we all run away. But ultimately, we're coming closer, like I think Andrea said, from A to A, but we really get to know and understand A, and then we stop fighting with reality. And that wisdom manifests as compassion, equanimity, all the beautiful things you guys said today.

So then I just want to offer, if it's helpful, a couple of reflections to start, to kind of set an attitude to begin. From Ajahn Sumedho—he's an American man who has been a monk in the Thai forest tradition, a student of Ajahn Chah for forty-something years, a really long time. I've found him quite inspiring in many ways as a teacher. And one time, I remember he said something that's really stayed with me. He said that in the heart, the mind, the attitude of gratitude and contentment are very supportive conditions for awakening.

And so I just want to mention that a minute. See that meditation isn't an isolated activity—something we do, do, do without paying any attention to what's the weather in our heart, in our mind, what's going on along with it. It's essential to include the whole package.

There are many places in the Buddhist suttas, the Buddhist discourses, where the Buddha, before he starts teaching someone, doesn't just go in and hit them with the highest teaching. Boom, you've got to understand anatta right now. Boom, there's no self. That's it. Get it. Some people could hear that, but we wish the Buddha were here because apparently he could read everyone's mind and know exactly what to say that they would be able to hear and understand. Wouldn't that be great? However, here we are.

Often he would, when beginning teachings, lead someone in what he called graduated teachings. He'd first talk about generosity and virtue, bring a lightness, a brightness, an openness to the mind and the heart, to actually move it away from being caught in wanting or fear or any of the hindrances. Because when we're really caught in aversion, caught in wanting, and don't recognize it, we can't hear and understand non-greed, because greed's saying, "No way."

So there are many suttas where the Buddha really starts by brightening the heart. It's not that we need to practice from a place of misery. You'll hit places of misery, but you can bring an interest to it. We don't have to start from there if we have a choice. And we often do have a choice. We'll talk about that in many ways.

But just these are three little reflections that came to me. You might find ones of your own that are more specifically helpful for you. But they help set a tone, help to relax, to bring the heart and mind into a receptive mode, an awake and energized and interested mode.

So gratitude and contentment. For me, often reflecting at the beginning of a retreat like this—wherever, but since this is where we are—consciously tuning your mind into various aspects that you can feel an appreciation for, a gratitude for. In a way, it's like tuning into what we call dana, or generosity, metta, or loving-kindness. It's a field that we can all be in here together, held really through generosity and loving-kindness.

I first started noticing this when I was doing retreats in Burma at a monastery, really so supported by the lay women—mostly women, but some men too—who work there, who serve the food, who do the cooking. An amazing, amazing amount of work that these women mostly do to serve all the yogis.

Yogis is the word we use in Burma for anyone who comes on retreat. All the yogis who come there from whatever country—Burmese mostly, but some foreigners. And these helpers do it with so much happiness, at least externally. I mean, I can't read in-

side, but there's a smile. They're going so out of their way to help you get the food you need, to help you in whatever way they can, to support your practice out of love of the Dhamma.

So this I really would feel when I was having a hard time—just kind of look around. It started to percolate unconsciously, and then I started to use it consciously. I would just notice the people around working so hard with so much joy to support me.

Now, we could go to the bad side with that and say, "I'm so worthless, and here they are working so hard to support me." That's not useful. But rather to say, "Wow, feel the metta. Feel the loving kindness, the friendliness, the generosity." And let that brighten your mind and heart, because it's a circle, a cycle. Generosity doesn't work if there's not a recipient. And so to actively receive and rejoice in that, to actually appreciate and have gratitude—this brightens our heart and mind, and it becomes a much richer, easier field to keep practicing in.

So here I look around at all the staff who are supporting us and all the beautiful touches, and the fact that all of us here together, just by our presence, are supporting one another. I think you may start to feel that as the days go on and you're dragging yourself through another walking period and someone else is going by. If they can do it, I can do it. You may not be grateful then, but later you will be. But just to consciously bring it in.

The work meditation that each of you are doing is a huge generosity to support all of us here together. As you're doing it, you can be grateful, appreciate your own generosity, and be grateful for the others. Or reflect on all the people in your life and all the circumstances in your life that are supporting you to be here. For everyone, it's a lot to be able to come here. There's people that are sacrificing and supporting and letting us be away. Really to feel gratitude for that—and that can brighten us. It's not like a chore; it's a real beautiful quality. All the generous donors that have supported IMS, that have made all these retreats possible—really appreciating that as another way of opening in our practice.

So consciously letting our heart and mind brighten through gratitude and appreciation. I often do a little gratitude practice at night just before I go to bed on retreat. Often when I start it, it's usually at the end of a day where you just—maybe you never had a day like this—where you just want to throw yourself in bed and go unconscious and think maybe tomorrow it'll all be different. Okay, gratitude. Yeah, I'm really grateful. I'm grateful the day's over. That's what I'm grateful for. And then I start saying a few other things. It's not very convincing. But you keep on going. And pretty soon, stuff just

starts coming. I'm grateful I'm here and there's peace and I had enough to eat today. I'm grateful bombs aren't dropping. I mean, it just starts to flow. And then there's this energy to keep on going, to keep on looking.

The second reflection is something Winnie mentioned this morning. She spoke of lineage, appreciation of teachers. She went back to the Buddha, which is inspiring to me. That may not be what's inspiring to all of you. But again, bringing in a sense of gratitude and inspiration—to consciously call in whatever teachers have been inspiring and helpful to you on your whole path of awakening, that have gotten you to this point in your life.

Sometimes, for me, I can reflect on the Buddha and the fact that these teachings have stayed alive for 2600 years. That really does inspire me. And there's a saying, said to be true, that if even for one moment no one was practicing Buddha Dharma, then the particular teachings—not the truth, but the teachings—would die out of the world. So I always think, well, we're doing our bit here. We're keeping it alive. We're sitting with all different people all over the world. But again, whatever teachers, whatever beings have inspired your particular path—take time sometimes to reflect on that, to bring them here, to let that inspiration renew our commitment and our energy.

And the third reflection that sometimes helps me, often, is that of my aspiration itself.

This morning we just briefly mentioned aspiration, one word. And if this is something that's useful for you, to just get in touch with what's really most important to you, what deeply brought you—not only to this retreat, but to this whole path in your life.

So aspiration, not just hoping for a nice experience or something like that. That's okay, we can have those hopes. They'll only make you suffer, but you can have them. But the deep movement of your heart, of your intuition that brings you here, that brings you on your path—to tune into that, to reflect on it, and to consciously make a commitment. Not a commitment that this is going to happen, but just a self-reminder in times of difficulty: oh yes, this is what's important. Kind of like a shift of refuge. Taking this moment to consciously, for ourselves, remind ourselves of our commitment and why we're here.

And so with that, I'd like to turn it over to Bhante to take us into the retreat with the refuges and precepts.

Thank you for the wonderful talk.

So I'd like to talk about the three refuges and the five precepts. Traditionally, that's how we start this retreat, and most people think that's only for starting and don't use them in the middle or at the end. But I encourage you actually to use them throughout your practice. It's not just an appetizer.

I'm going to explain them because sometimes we take things for granted. I remember when I was teaching in Uganda, somebody wanted to become a Buddhist, and she asked me how to become a Buddhist. I said, "Oh, you know, you can take the three refuges." Then I explained, and the whole time she was frowning. I asked what was wrong, and she said, "I have a question. What if I cannot feed the three refugees?" She thought that in order to become a Buddhist, you have to feed the three refugees—the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. She was very apprehensive because she said, "That's too much for me."

So I always explain to people what this means, because I don't know—some people may not know this, though I assume most people know what they are.

In order for something to be called a refuge, it has to have two qualities. One is protection, and another is accessibility. Keep those two things in mind: protection and accessibility.

Think of an umbrella. When it's raining, you need an umbrella to protect you from the rain. Whenever you use an umbrella, you always have to protect it. If you don't protect it, there will be many holes, and next time you take it out, you'll get wet because you didn't protect the umbrella—so it can't protect you.

The same thing applies here: we have to protect the Dhamma, we have to protect the Sangha and the Buddha, so they will protect us also. This protection is actually very important. You can even ask, protection from what? Protection from tormenting mind states.

You all know what happens when you meditate. Some difficult mind states arise. Some mind states are very good, but some others are difficult. So we need protection. I think most of the protection we need is even from doubt. At the very beginning of the retreat, we might have doubt. Why did I come here? I could have stayed home and gone for vacation in Rio de Janeiro.

Actually, that's what happened to me when I came here. I came from South America. I'd spent one year in Brazil and Chile and Bolivia. I'd seen so many beautiful things, and a friend of mine said, "Krishnamurti said the truth is a pathless path."

So what are we doing here? Actually, my friend cast some shadows of doubt about this whole thing. I thought, maybe I should have stayed there. So there's doubt at the beginning, actually. We need to sail through the doubt by getting into what we call faith and confidence. Once we take the three refuges, that helps us to cultivate faith and confidence and overcome doubt. But of course, other mental states also—we are protected from them when we take these three refuges.

Then another quality is accessibility. If you are using an umbrella, you don't want to put it in the kitchen. You have to put it at the entrance of your door so that you can access it easily. If you spend one hour looking for an umbrella, that's not a good idea. You should put it very close to where you can see it. The same thing with the three refuges—they should also be accessible. It's not something that exists only in a book. It's really something that you can practice and that can help you. So that's protection and accessibility. As we go along, try to find out how you can use them for protection and accessibility.

The first one is the Buddha. Buddha, of course, means "awakened one." That's what it means. We remember the historical Buddha who figured out this path. Out of gratitude, as Carol says, we take refuge in the Buddha. In the ultimate sense, that's what it means. But in this retreat environment, we want to be able to access the qualities of the Buddha. There are many—nine of them—but at least we can summarize them.

One is purity: purifying your mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. That one you can access. You may not be the Buddha yet, and I'm not one, of course, though my name has "Buddha" in it. But I'm not one, just in case. The name means "protected by the Buddha." So yes, you need to access the qualities of the Buddha. That's the beauty of the Buddha—he didn't have a monopoly over the quality of Buddhahood. He said, you can do it. You can purify your mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. So that's the first quality: purity. The second one is compassion. The third one is wisdom. You can be deeply compassionate and you can be profoundly wise. These things you can actually access as we go. You can cultivate compassion. You can cultivate wisdom. And then you can enjoy the qualities of the Buddha. That can take you towards the path of liberation.

The second refuge is called the Dhamma. Dhamma literally means "to uphold." It comes from a Pali word called *dara*. It means many things depending on context, but here we can say the ultimate Dhamma refers to the various levels of enlightenment or awakening. We can take refuge in that. Dhamma also means doctrine—what the Buddha taught. So many meanings. In the ultimate sense, of course, these different levels of enlightenment are what we take into account when we take refuge. But in terms of accessibility, it's the qualities of the Dhamma.

One quality of the Dhamma is that it's well expounded. In other words, you don't have to figure this out on your own. I think that's one thing I appreciate about the Dhamma. You don't have to scratch your head to find out where the Dhamma is. It's right there.

So "well expounded" means that the practice of sīla (morality or ethical conduct), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom) is clearly laid out. That's the beauty of this teaching.

For me, when I came to this teaching, I had navigated many teachings, and I really appreciated Buddhism and meditation in general. That's how I started—I didn't start with Buddhism. I started with meditation. After years of research and searching, I found that in this teaching, the Buddha gave us the address. And after giving us the address—let's say 1230 Pleasant Street, Barre, Massachusetts—he also gave us a map or GPS for how to get there.

I appreciate that because many times I've gotten lost with just an address. But when you have a GPS as well, that's enough. The map shows how to practice, and the GPS helps you navigate. But here's the problem: people ask the driver to do it for them. That's asking too much of the Buddha. The Buddha cannot meditate for you. The teachers cannot meditate for you. You have to do it yourself. This is the path. So you can take refuge in that—knowing that you are going to do this practice yourself, and it's accessible because you have the address, you have the GPS. You just have to do the work.

There are many other qualities of the Dhamma—six of them traditionally—but we can also understand that this Dhamma is calling one to come and see. It's directly visible. It's not hidden from us. From the time we start practicing, we can see the Dhamma. We can see our mind with all its compassion, mettā (loving-kindness), wisdom, aversion, fear, anxiety—it's all there. You don't have to go far away. It's just here. We find the Dhamma in the books and texts, but really, the Dhamma is right here in this body and mind. It's directly visible. That's another quality of the Dhamma.

There is also Sangha. Sangha means community—that's what the word means. Here, as a refuge, we take what we call the Sāvaka Sangha, the Ariya Sangha. Those who have practiced and attained enlightenment—whether they are monks, nuns, or laypeople—can be qualified as Ariya Sangha, Noble Sangha, provided they have practiced the Dhamma and achieved at minimum the stage of stream entry.

You can do it. Maybe on this retreat—it's available. You can go to the first level, second level, third level, and fourth level of awakening. The Buddha said you can do it. If you could not do it, he would not be teaching it. So it's possible. We can take refuge in

that—the possibility of achieving awakening. And those who have attained are role models for us. If we knew that nobody had ever attained these stages, we wouldn't be here. Why bother if it's not doable? But so many people have done it. So many people have done it in the past. The Buddha said that wherever there is the Noble Eightfold Path, there will always be people who attain awakening at different levels.

Right. That's on one level, actually the ultimate level. But in a retreat environment, how can we access the sangha? We are living here as a community. For me, having lived in a sangha, a conventional sangha, at Bhavana Society for eight years, I discovered some qualities that can be very helpful in this kind of environment.

One of them is support. Carol mentioned this as well. One of the qualities of the sangha is to support each other. When we live in a community, we need to support each other. Without that support, it's very difficult to practice. If you do one thing that is going to disrupt the community, then all the community will be affected. Let's say we all agree on noble silence, and then for some reason you get out your cell phone and hide, thinking, "Oh, nobody's going to see me," and you start calling or texting. That can disrupt us. Just one thing like that. And then we've all been talking to each other. So we need to support each other. In one way, the practice is individual, but on another level, all of us are involved together.

Another quality of the sangha is unity. We are here from different countries, different traditions, and all different shades of background, but what brings us together is unity. We are unified here under one umbrella. We are all aspiring to attain liberation. It's a wonderful aspiration, actually. Think of it. Take a moment to consider this: we all spent a lot of time preparing to come here. And when we come here, it's amazing that we are all unified under that theme. We are all aspiring to overcome suffering and cultivate happiness.

Another quality is to live in harmony. We need to live harmoniously here. At every level—when we are doing walking meditation, when we are getting our food—we have to maintain a sense of harmony.

So this is by way of protection and by way of accessibility. Whenever you take these three refuges, remember that. And it's not only at the beginning; it's also during the retreat. We use them as meditation themselves. Before you begin your meditation, you may want to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha—purity, purifying the mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. You don't have to remember all of them, but you can use perhaps a couple before you start your meditation. This is what we call Buddhānussati, Dham-

mānussati, Sanghānussati—reflection on the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Whichever resonates with you, you can use them as you go. It's not only at the beginning of the retreat.

Another thing we do along with these three refuges is to take the five precepts. The five precepts form a container that keeps us safe here. I'm sure you're all familiar with the five precepts. In English, the first one is abstaining from killing. I don't expect you are going to be killing insects and birds here. But actually, when we look at those five precepts, the way they are framed is in a way of abstaining. And I'm sure here you have heard so many don'ts. Don't do this. Don't do that. Now you have a list of do's.

Here, abstaining from killing means to preserve life, to protect life. It's actually active. It's not only abstaining, but also you have to protect the physical environment, the mental environment, the spiritual environment. For me, I always stretch things even further. I say, okay, don't kill even your time. You know, after coming here and meditating for one week and you're not going anywhere, you might think, "No, why did I come here?" And then you start killing time.

So, yeah, when is it going to end? And the rest of the time is just walking here, taking photographs. You're just killing time until part one is finished and you go home. So I extend that precept to actually stretch its meaning—not to kill time, not to waste time. Use your time productively here. Of course, don't kill any insects or animals, but I really remind you to preserve and protect all living beings.

Then the second one is not to take what's not given. Again, I don't expect that you'll take things from here—there's not a lot, actually. This is a meditation center. But one positive side of this wonderful precept is to be generous, to be contented. It's a wonderful quality of the heart and mind to be contented with whatever is available in this facility.

I know we don't have a television. Some people actually, when they came to Bhavana Society where I practiced in a monastery, they asked, "Do you have a television?" I said, "No, no, this is a monastery." So, I mean, you're going to miss your television, your commercials at home, maybe your ice cream and all those things. Be contented with whatever is available here. That will help you very much to progress on your path as it unfolds. If you lack contentment, then it will be very difficult for you. That means contentment with the food, your walking path, your cushion.

Actually, I tell you, when I practiced in '99, I wasn't contented with my meditation cushion. I kept looking for the best meditation cushion. And guess what? I didn't find one. Because it was pain. I went through a lot of pain, actually, because I'd spent one

year traveling in South America. I mean, I used to sit, but not for one week constantly. So I kept looking for the best cushion that would do the trick to overcome pain. I used to see people sitting without a cushion and wonder, how can they do that? I wished I could get a custom-made one, you know, with fluffies and all this, thinking then I could overcome pain. This can be a form of discontentment. Actually, I went back and forth between the chair and various cushions. I don't know whether the teachers noticed, but what I remember was the highest one. Really, my head stuck out because I was sitting on something like a throne.

So be contented with your cushion. Deal with your pain. Don't make yourself suffer throughout the whole retreat looking for the best cushion. Be contented.

Then the third one is abstaining from all sexual activities. Of course, in a positive way it means to control your mind and calm your senses—not to misuse your sexual energy. Yes, all the senses actually: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and thinking. We shouldn't agitate them. We should practice in a way that helps to make them calm and peaceful. That's how we can progress on this path of meditation.

The fourth one is abstaining from telling lies. Again, I don't expect that you tell lies since you are even maintaining noble silence. But something comes up, like when you have an interview with a teacher. I'm not saying you lie, but there's a little bit of an extension of what you see, a stretching. "Yes, I'm a sotāpanna, you know." Well, wait. There's a tendency to stretch our practice, to impress—I don't know—but there's that tendency, that excitement when you're talking about your practice with the teacher. Try to remember this precept: not to tell lies, not even fibs, not white lies.

So this is a very difficult practice because it comes up unconsciously. We just exaggerate our experience. "Oh, you know, I attained the fourth jhāna in this sitting." But you were sleeping the whole time! There's a difference between deep meditation, jhāna, and sleeping. So before you tell the teacher that you're in the fourth jhāna, you might want to check whether you heard the bell ringing or not.

These things come up. The good thing is that we've been there ourselves. We know how we have reported to teachers, and we know how we have stretched the boundaries. Don't take it as telling outright lies, really, but it's a little bit of stretching.

Then the fifth precept is abstaining from taking intoxicants and drugs that lead to heedlessness. So there's a condition there. Of course, I don't expect that you came with a martini here, or a beer, or some kind of joint just to catalyze the process of meditation. I

don't expect that. I don't think you even resort to mouthwash—I've heard that people resort to mouthwash! That's not what I expected here, but the positive side of this precept is to stay sober and be mindful all the time, to be diligent.

We are going to remind you of this. One thing we will remind you of is continuity of practice, so that you don't stay forgetful and heedless.

Of course, if you are taking prescription drugs and some medication, you should not discontinue. This precept is really talking about intoxicants that lead to heedlessness. For medical reasons, you can absolutely continue to take your prescription medicine.

So now we are going to take these precepts in the Pāli language. This is your Pāli 101! I'm sure we are all familiar with them already. Just to save time, let us do all the Namo Tassa together, and then I'll do call and response when it comes to the refuges—like Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi—I'll do the whole sentence and then you repeat, alright?

[The group chants the three refuges and five precepts in Pāli]

So now we have taken the three refuges and the five precepts. Now we have started.

I wish you the very best. Reflect on these things during your practice. You can always recall or reflect on your Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Or you can reflect on your sīla. You can say, "Okay, the last five days I haven't killed anything. I'm not stoned." You can reflect, and before you begin your meditation, if you do this for even the first two minutes, it's amazing how you can free your mind.

Reflect on your generosity—the precept of abstaining from taking what's not given. Just think about the positive side: "Oh, I'm very generous." You can practice generosity here on the cushion. Apart from giving some food in my alms bowl, there's also a lot of generosity that you're doing here.

You have generosity in letting go of your difficult mind states. That's another form of generosity—to be generous enough to let go of your greed, hatred, and delusion. That's it. You can reflect on that.

Thank you very much for your practice. I have a lot of mudita for you, appreciative joy, to see you really practice in the long term in this way. I'm looking forward to interacting with you in a silent mode.

Thank you very much for your practice.

CHAPTER 123

Meditation: Experiencing the Mind and Body Directly with Right Understanding

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this deeply practical talk, Carol Wilson examines sammā diṭṭhi (right view) not as philosophical doctrine but as the attitude we bring to moment-to-moment mindfulness practice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that right view is uniquely powerful in causing wholesome states to arise, she explores what it means to recognize experience accurately—seeing things as they have come to be rather than as solid, separate entities.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how our habitual responses to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience keep us trapped in saṃsāra—the endless cycle of grasping and pushing away. She references the Buddha's teaching on the two darts: while physical pain is unavoidable, the mental anguish we add through resistance is optional. Using personal examples, including her relationship with watching tennis, she demonstrates how we often mistake the yearning itself for pleasure, not recognizing the suffering embedded in our quest for gratification.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that liberation isn't about floating away to another realm but involves a fundamental shift in perception. When we meet experience with bare awareness—recognizing that "burning is like this" or "aversion is like this"—without adding stories of self-reference or judgment, a natural ease emerges. Wilson encourages practitioners to notice how awareness itself remains pure and undamaged regardless of what it touches, gradually building trust in awareness as a more reliable refuge than the pursuit of pleasant feeling. She concludes with Dīpa Mā's insight that when greed, hatred, and delusion are absent, every moment becomes fresh and full of zest.*

So tonight I want to talk about essentially right view, but in a very pragmatic way. It's actually at the beginning of every retreat, when I first start talking, I always end up talking about this. And I really tried to talk about something else tonight, but I just couldn't, because this just feels so important to me, to my heart, and just to understanding what we're doing.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya described meditation once as simply experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. That's the little caveat at the end—with the right understanding. Experiencing the mind and body directly moment to moment, as you know, also isn't that simple. So what I want to talk about is what do we mean by right understanding, right view.

When we translate it as "right view," it runs into our tendency to think right means wrong, I'm good, I'm bad. And then we can get our backs up about it right away. I'll actually move into that habit of our mind later on. But one thing the Buddha said about why right view is so important—and this connects to the talk last night about the four right endeavors—is this: "I do not see a single other thing so inclined to cause the arising of wholesome states not yet arisen, or if arisen, to cause wholesome states to further develop and increase, as right view. For one with right view, wholesome states not yet arisen do arise, and if arisen, wholesome states are inclined to further develop and increase." He goes through all the four right endeavors. I'm not going to go through that, but just consider the importance of right view.

The way I want to talk about this tonight is in a very pragmatic, simple way. What wise understanding, what right understanding, can we bring to our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice? What attitude do we bring?

If you look in the suttas, in the discourses, there's a lot of information about right view. It could seem as though you're talking about learning and coming to agree with a whole set of philosophical principles. It's not that. I'm not going to go into that at all tonight. But the way I love to talk about right view—the attitude we bring to our meditation moment to moment—is that it's not about philosophy or theory or believing anything. I actually really like translating right view into English quite literally as recognizing accurately what's occurring in the moment, in our mind, in our body.

So can I just explore a little bit what that means—recognizing accurately—and what's in the way? Why don't we recognize accurately, and why does that cause so much suffering? The right attitude is: it's like this. Without aversion, without clinging, then I can recognize accurately. Is there something I can do about it? Sometimes, apparently not.

What I really love about the Buddha Dhamma and what I read about the Buddha is that despite the fact that there can be millions of very abstruse and precise theories and philosophical concepts and things to learn and lists and all of that, at the core, the Buddha was really concerned with the salient points, the facts of our life. Why are we unhappy? Why do we suffer from dis-ease, and what will free us from that? He just wouldn't get sidetracked into discussions about many fascinating things that he said don't really lead to our own understanding.

What's also really clear is that everything he said—and what I'm saying tonight too—is not about believing this or that, because belief won't do it. Belief may incline us to lend an ear, to listen. But the very famous, common saying of the Buddha is *ehipassiko*—come and see, come and look, inquire for yourself, investigate for yourself. He's say-

ing turn our attention to what's going on in this moment, in our experience, in our mind, in our body, so-called internal, so-called external, and see what's really going on. This is really the place where we discover the source of dis-ease, the source of freedom from that dis-ease—the seeds of both rising in our own mind and heart stream, here and now.

Something interesting about the Buddha, the so-called peaceful one: after his complete awakening, he woke up into the same world that he was living in before. The world was still filled with war, injustice, inequality, violence, greed, hatred, prejudice. The world didn't change. And he kept on living in that world and engaging in that world. But from what I can understand from reading—I'm not at all claiming to know how the Buddha's mind and heart was—from what he said, from what we can see, what changes is the understanding of what's occurring in one's experience, the understanding of what we really are, what experience really is. And that shift of perspective, that shift of recognition, then of course changes how we understand, how we respond, how we relate to whatever's going on in the world.

And this is the suffering that the Buddha says we can free ourselves from. You can't change the whole external world. But Buddhism also isn't about pacifism—you don't try to change anything. It's about: where can we start? Where does suffering begin? Where does it end in our own experience? The seeds are in our own mind and heart. So what changes? How we recognize and how we respond, internally and externally.

An example is when Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Nonviolence means you not only refuse to shoot a person, you also refuse to hate a person." So where we start is in the recognition—not even refusing to hate a person, but the clear recognition that hatred and greed and desire don't make any sense when we're recognizing things accurately. It's not like we have to somehow get out the pick and the shovel and root out every wanting that's arising in the mind. Have you tried that? Somehow another one seems to find a little hole to come in, because it's the understanding, the recognition.

What I love about right view is that when we recognize accurately, the responses that lead to our habits of desire, our habits of clinging and aversion and confusion and "me, me, me, me, me"—have you noticed that one?—what leads to those habits just stops arising. It's like they're abandoned, but not abandoned by an act of will. The steadiness of clear seeing, the steadiness of clear recognition, mindfulness, naturally is a condition for the arising of wisdom, which is the accurate recognition. It's just so cool.

One phrase that's often used to describe clear seeing, clear recognition—Bhante used it the other night—*yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana*, translated in the old English translations as "knowledge and vision of things as they are." But several friends recently have told me—friends who know Pali a lot better than I—that a much more accurate translation is "knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be in this moment."

Do you get a sense of the different feeling? "Things as they are"—boom, things, solid, are, not changing. That's kind of how we normally look at things. But "things as they have come to be," to me, gives much more a sense of the causes and conditions all coming together, leading to, bringing us to this moment as it has come to be right now. And it's still in flux. You get a sense of the movement, of the interweaving of all the conditions giving rise to this moment, which is itself a cause and condition for giving rise to the next moment. Things as they have come to be. It keeps me from landing in solidity.

For example, very simply: think about all the causes and conditions that you even know of—and we don't know a lot of them—that have come together to allow you to be sitting here right now. How many? We can start with all the obvious ones, whichever ones are obvious to you. You're healthy. Somewhere back there in some other world, you decided to come here. And here you are. You made all those decisions. The people that support you. The money to come. You're healthy enough. Those are the obvious ones.

But then there's all the other ones that go back to just the fact that we're alive. That your parents got together, or you wouldn't even be here. That there's food to eat. And where does the food come from? The farmers who grow the food. And how do the farmers grow their food? What families support the farmers? How did the food get here? What about the people who drive the trucks and drive the trains? And then, of course, we're using gasoline. So whether we like those oil fields or not, up in Canada, they probably had something to do with the fact that we're sitting here. Because even if you walked, unless you grew the food and you didn't use any fertilizer whatsoever—anyway, we're all connected to everything. If you keep going, where can you stop?

To me, it goes back to the Big Bang. I was reading this book by Bill Bryson about science, and—long story short—he's talking about the static on TV, and some of that static is actually generated from the cosmic rays that came from the Big Bang. So if you're really bored and you watch the static on the TV, someplace you're seeing the universe as we know it coming into existence. That's kind of far out, this whole concept, but things as they have come to be—where do we stop?

It takes away the solidity. We start to experience just a little shake-up of the views that we don't even know are in the background, coloring our perception. This brings us to the distortions of perception. This is really the key to why we don't recognize accurately.

And we don't recognize the distortions. But when we see things as they've come to be, this sense that you can never just stop and say, "Now it's this, separate from anything else." It's like a time-lapse movie of a bulb growing into a plant—there's the stem and the leaves and the flower, and then the flower wilts and drops off and goes back to the earth and turns into earth. And if you kept watching that, where could you stop it at any time and say, "This stem is separate from the bulb"? It's separate from—now it's just stem, now it's just flower. It's like that. There's no kind of resting place, which we hate when we want one. But when it's just "this is how it is in this moment," a whole lot of our sense of confusion and distortion goes away.

So this is really at the heart of awakening—awakening from confusion, from disease. The heart of awakening isn't about moving into some other plane, floating off on a cloud somewhere. It's really, at the most profound level, a fundamental shift of perception. A fundamental shift of how we recognize the nature of reality in a moment—just in a moment. How we recognize affects how we think and describe, respond and react. It's at the heart of everything.

And we can see this even in a little moment when you have what we call an insight. An insight can be personal, psychological. It can be about something that's going on in the practice. But when we see the shift from being caught in the "meanness," the taking it so personally, to seeing just this cause-and-effect process—it's just nature. These particular causes lead to this condition in this moment.

And wishing this moment were different—has anyone ever wished this moment were different? How useful is that? How can this moment be different? It's impossible. Byron Katie, that teacher in California, said, "When you fight with reality, you lose." This moment is this moment. It can't be different. But when we shift to see causes and conditions, taking it so personally, our confused reactions just pop away.

A few of you have given examples like this. Sitting, for example, and there's a lot of pain, wherever in the body. And then sitting with the pain, however you're particularly reacting, responding to it. And then recognizing a lot of aversion in the mind, whichever form that aversion takes—whether it's outward hatred, inward judgment, just basic, pure, unadulterated aversion. Everything's getting worse and worse and

tighter and tighter, and there's either a sense of "What's wrong with me? If I could do it right, it would go away," or "If this idiot didn't give us forty-five-minute sittings, I wouldn't hurt." Whatever. We're all wrapped up in the reactions.

And then there's a moment where you see: oh, the pain arising is natural, just natural. If the body sits in a position for some amount of time without moving, pain's going to arise. And the amount of time changes all the time, depending on the conditions of our body at that particular moment. It's just nature. There's nothing personal in it. And then, just seeing that, the personal goes out. Often it's like, "Oh, the aversion is completely extra and actually unnecessary." I mean, this isn't something we're telling ourselves—"Oh, you're bad, this is unnecessary." It's like we just see: oh, this is how it is. Unpleasant physical experience. Aversion is not a necessary response to that. Boom—sometimes the whole bubble just bursts. And it's just what it is.

Now, this isn't always what we might think it's going to be like to have insight. Usually we imagine the bubble bursts, the pain goes away, the mind is really filled with light and bliss, and then we think, "Oh, I got it." And sometimes I feel so much compassion when someone comes in and says it's their second or third retreat, and their first retreat they had the great retreat—filled with light, filled with bliss, all this wonderful stuff happened. I think, oh, I'm so sad for you. Because now you're going to spend God knows how long trying to get that back, never believing that this other stuff going on is actually where we're going to learn the seeds of confusion and the seeds of peace.

None of you believed that, did you? But it's true.

So that's why it's so fascinating, but also important, to recognize what are the distortions—to even see if there are assumptions, ideas in the back of our mind about what's good, what's bad, what's right, what's wrong—or just how we interpret experience without even recognizing that we're interpreting, because it's so familiar. We don't even know it's a view. We just think, "Well, this is just how it is."

So the classic—well, I just want to read from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the classic descriptions of how we keep getting caught.

As the Buddha said when he first woke up and wasn't so inclined to teach—and as Bonnie mentioned—he said, "Oh, there are some beings with a little dust on their eyes, a little distortion, not so much." And he was really moved by compassion, it's said, because when he looked around, he said everyone wants to be happy. We all share that. And in our confusion, in our not really understanding what the potential is, what true

freedom from dis-ease is, in beings' efforts to be happy, they keep on doing just the thing that keeps them spinning in confusion, in suffering. And so that moved him to compassion, it is said.

The classic description of this is samsara—that seemingly endless cycle of leaning into, wanting, becoming, getting, losing, the next, the next, the next. Whether you just talk about it in this one life or over lifetimes, it's plenty enough to talk about it in this life to get the sense. Most of you have heard the phrase "ocean of sorrow," right?

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche describes it as a form of renunciation, which coming off of Bhante's talk the other night, I appreciate. He talked about renunciation as the foundation, the root of our path. It "implies not only the strong wish to free oneself from life's immediate sorrows, but more profoundly, the wish to free oneself from the seemingly unending cycle of samsara, which arises from a heartfelt weariness and disillusionment with the endless quest for gratification, approval, profit, and status."

Let me read that again. Does it resonate at all? The heartfelt weariness and disillusionment—that may or may not resonate—but the endless quest for gratification, approval, profit, and status. I'm projecting some, of course; I don't know how you all feel. But the quest for gratification, status, approval—I'm assuming most of us would say, yes, you can see how that certainly is a source of suffering and we'd like to abandon it.

But samsara shows up on an even much more subtle level. That's really what I want to talk about tonight: the habits that come in, how we're perceiving moment to moment here with our mindfulness practice.

This can be a challenging teaching, this idea of renouncing the quest for gratification. We might say, okay, approval and all that—we don't need that. But gratification? I didn't really sign up not to have any more gratification. But what are we talking about with that? He's not saying it's bad, but futile. How does it keep us? What keeps us on this path, even when intellectually we know about it?

Just some ways of describing it: that leaning forward, that sense that the next—when Guy talked about sense desire, but it's not just with sense desire—that this next thing will make me happy. That happiness and gratification and peace is going to come from just getting that thing we lack. You get a sense of how it keeps us off balance. It keeps us believing that yearning. As Guy said, we even almost misinterpret that yearning as a kind of pleasantness. It's comfortable anyway, because it's so familiar. Even though it keeps us off balance, this sense of insufficiency—of I'm not enough, this moment isn't enough. Even when things are pretty good, could it always just be a little bit better?

There's a Tibetan saying that describes samsara as the urge to correct. Look at that in your practice. What's happening now? That's the steadiness of mindfulness. It just could be a little bit clearer, a little bit steadier, whatever. That little movement is the movement out of peace into the whole world of wanting and becoming and losing and wanting and becoming and losing.

So it keeps our attention focused outward on the next gratification. It keeps us focused on the object, on the thing. And what we don't see is the vastness, the connectedness, the non-separation. We just see this thing: it's going to be good, it's going to be bad, it's all about me and gratification and getting everything copacetic. We can't recognize accurately what's really going on, because we're not even really looking at what's really going on. The perception is colored by this wanting, by this view that we don't even recognize, because without turning awareness onto our experience, we don't even know there's any other option. That's what's so sad. We don't know there's any other option.

Awareness practice is kind of like a shift to the bigger picture. And we can see, when we're wanting success—or when samsara is keeping us trying to get a new thing, a new thing—and we can see we're not getting it, that is a little more obvious that it's suffering. Although we forget and go for the next new thing.

But what's even more insidious to me—the most insidious aspect—is what Guy mentioned, where we confuse the yearning, this moving, this always trying to have some kind of pleasant feeling, we confuse that with pleasure, with happiness. And because we don't turn around and look at the experience, we just keep looking to the next thing and may not even recognize it.

I know this makes us sound like doofuses. So let me give you a personal example, which will make me sound like a doofus, but that's okay.

I noticed a couple of years ago—and this, for me, was a great description of *saṃsāra*—because if we knew it was suffering, if we knew it was making us unhappy, we'd be motivated to stop. But we think it's making us happy. That's where it's so insidious.

So for some reason, I'm a big fan of watching professional men's tennis, which is odd since I'm the most unathletic person you could ever meet. But I am. And so I watch it, I get really involved, and it's the only sport I watch. When I've talked about this before, people always come up to me about all their other sports—"Yeah, I really know what you mean, I could never understand sports until I started watching..."

Anyway, I don't do it to make myself miserable. I do it because I think it's enjoyable. I think it's enhancing the quality of my life. Obviously I have a lot of choice about what to do with my time and my life. So I hadn't really explored it until two summers ago.

Of course I have certain people that I most appreciate watching—I'm trying to put it in neutral language. Me and fifteen million other people enjoy watching the same person, so I'm hardly unique or creative about it. But anyway, two years ago this guy was about to win Wimbledon, which is the most prestigious of all the tournaments, and it would have been amazing if he did because at his age it would have put him back to number one—the best possible outcome it could be, right?

And so that happened. It was the best possible outcome. And you're so happy. For how long? A day, two days, not every moment of those days for sure. And then it's over because the Olympics are coming. It's all gone. You have to go through the whole thing all over again.

And then I started noticing what's actually going on when I'm watching a tennis match, when this guy's playing. Am I actually enjoying it? No, it's torment. You can ask my friends who've watched me watch. It's really torment. Sometimes if it's a tie in the fourth set, I have to leave and go take a walk. I just can't bear it. I don't even know the guy. I probably wouldn't like him. That's a whole other thing—what is this all about? It's a fascinating look at the human psyche.

But anyway, I'm doing it because I think it's enhancing the quality of my life. I'm doing it because I think I'm enjoying it. And I'm a nervous wreck, and I hate being nervous. I dislike suspense. I'm watching it all for the occasional amazing shot, which is like a tenth of a second—wow, that's amazing—then it's gone. At least they replay it, so you get it twice, then it's over.

So then I started to look: wow, what am I putting myself through?

So I haven't actually completely stopped, I have to say. But with steady awareness, you can't hide from yourself anymore. It's not quite as totally—I can't really pretend that it's completely pleasant. It's clear to me that it's samsara.

And to me, I love that as an example, because with the big suffering stuff, that's not a hard sell. But with this, it is. And it's not like someone telling me it's bad. It's just the steadiness of awareness of what's actually going on in my mind and body, in my perceptions, without any judgment. I wasn't trying to say I'm bad or good, just asking: what's really going on here? And whoa—it's really different from my idea of it.

This is where I think samsara continues to seduce us. Because until we know or trust really deeply in our heart from our own experience that there's another way of relating to experience, one that offers a different way of peace and happiness—until we know that for ourselves, we don't know any other option.

This may be a somewhat simple example, but I can get quite discouraged sometimes just looking at how this quest for pleasant experience, basically, where it gets us in the world.

I was listening to the BBC this morning. I always like to listen; there's always something interesting about how the world is. So today, they mentioned it was the fifth anniversary of Grand Theft Auto 5, the video game. I'm completely ignorant of video games, so they were describing it. This was all very serious on the BBC. They were interviewing the woman who was the announcer, interviewing all these men—not kids going, "Oh, awesome!"—but very serious, professorial video game expert types. I have no idea what makes somebody a video game expert.

They were talking about how it's one of the crowning achievements of creativity, with very artistic visual qualities and satirical humor. Going on and on about it. Apparently, it's one of the most popular video games of this generation.

So the newscaster asks, "But is it ultra-violent?" And they played some clips of some of the things that are incredibly violent, misanthropic. And these experts say, "Yeah, misanthropic." I looked up misanthropy—here's the definition: hatred, dislike, or distrust of humankind. So these experts are going, "Yeah, okay, it's misanthropic. So what? But it's creative."

And she said, "But isn't it dangerous?" "No, not dangerous. Sure, it's violent. But you don't have to do violence. There are other really cool things you can do in the game too. You have a choice." And the misanthropy, that's just a side note. They're going on about how amazingly creative and wonderful this is.

Okay, easy for me—I'm not sucked up into that. Someone else could say that about tennis, I grant you. But I don't think it's really quite the same. Just to see where we go... And actually, what was more shocking to me wasn't the game or how they described it, but these really serious professor types completely jumping over the violence and the hatred of humankind, saying, "Well, that doesn't matter. That doesn't make it dangerous"—never mind if 135 million people are buying this thing. What's getting put into the minds of all of us?

We can't do anything at that level about what other people choose to put in their minds and how they choose to look at what's coloring their perceptions. But we can do that for ourselves.

That's what we are doing here.

The classic way, of course, that the Buddha describes one of the habits of misperception that we get into—and you all know this, this is nothing you don't know, I just read it again from the sutta because it always deeply touches me—is how the Buddha describes all of our experience, the "all," as simply kind of rotating sixth sense experiences. Has someone said that here? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching with the body, and the mental world of thinking and emotions, formations. That's all that's happening, over and over and over. As Joseph says, seventeen billion times in a moment, fast. But that's it. And then we just construct all these explanations and worlds out of it.

So these are happening over and over and over. And what we're really good at practicing is: something comes—a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste—and it comes together with that, our minds feel it very subtly as being kind of pleasant, or kind of unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is something we often don't notice, and we'll talk about that more in the instructions in a few days.

But the net effect, just in a general going through our day, is we really practice: as things come up, if it's pleasant, we like it, or we think it's good, or we don't even know we like it, but there's the leaning. If it's unpleasant, it's assessed as off, bad, wrong, gotta be fixed—something. If it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant, it's either okay or we don't really notice. It doesn't mean much about me, so it's not very interesting, right?

We practice this; we've practiced this our whole life. It's not bad or good, but it's so comfortable, so familiar, so "how it is," that this becomes the lens through which, when we're not aware of it, we assess and evaluate experience. If it's on the pleasant end of things, it tends to be seen as acceptable, or good, or going in the right direction—even if we don't even get into clinging. The bliss states, for instance—very few people come and say, "You know, my practice really stinks. I sit down, the mind gets calm, and bliss arises. I'm really having a problem with this." Very few, until they understand.

The unpleasant, just subtly unpleasant—that becomes the lens through which we evaluate so much of experience. It's bad, it's wrong, I'm wrong, it shouldn't be happening, whatever. And so we're right back in that cycle of samsara: get rid of the unpleasant and get more of the pleasant. Not only just to feel good, but because the unexamined deep belief is that really, pleasant is the best we can do as human beings, that this is where freedom and happiness lie. But we don't say that to ourselves—that sounds rather simplistic.

And I'm sitting here blabbing this, telling it to you, I've said it a million times, and I look at it in myself and I still get amazed. Even when my mind's in a fairly present, subtle state and I start to feel I'm kind of glitching on, caught up on something, I sit and

look at it and go, "Oh, wow. Holding onto the pleasant again." Not just holding, but thinking the pleasant is right and unpleasant is wrong. Let's just call it that way. And then we get into struggle with it.

Here's the Buddha. Now this is the part that is always very poignant to me. The obvious: he talks about an "untaught worldling," which is a word in Pali. When he feels a painful bodily feeling, he or she worries and grieves, laments, beats her breast, weeps, and is distraught. So she thus experiences two kinds of unpleasant feeling: bodily and mental. Have you noticed that? It's as if you were pierced by a dart, and following the first being hit by a dart, you shoot yourself with a second dart. My knee hurts, I'm so bad, I'm so awful, it's so wrong. The two darts.

What does an awakened person do? They experience one sort of bodily, physical, unpleasant feeling. And that's all, this peace around it. But this is what unawakened people do when we don't look: having been touched by a painful feeling, we resist it and resent it. We pull away, we push away. And under the impact of that painful feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness.

Why? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

I find this so poignant. We don't know of any other escape from painful or unpleasant feelings except to go grab some pleasant feeling somewhere. Can you relate to that at all? It's not that there's anything bad about it—it's just that that's the only way we know.

If we don't know that there's a path, if we don't know that the real freedom of our mind and heart doesn't mean we have to get away from all unpleasant feelings—because that's impossible—but that there's a peace, an ease that allows our heart and mind to rest fully in this moment. Pleasant moment, unpleasant moment, neither pleasant nor unpleasant moment. Fully, without resistance, without clinging, without making up a whole story about what it means about me. It's just this.

You get a sense of how much ease that brings. A painful feeling in my knee—we're picking simple stuff, but it's also very true with our complex personality habits and our deep-seated tendencies toward self-hatred or blame or shame. All of these are brought about by understandable causes and conditions, arising in this moment. We can understand those causes and conditions, so they're valid. But the arising itself is extremely unpleasant, scary. Whether we then turn that unpleasantness back on ourselves with more blame, or whether we turn the aversion outward on the world, either way we're in the spinning of more wanting, more aversion—back in the futility of samsara.

And that moment of "Okay, pain is like this. Self-hatred feels like this"—one of my teachers uses that languaging a lot, and I've found it enormously helpful. I'm all caught up in some story, and I think I'm being mindful. I'm naming every thought, I'm looking at all this stuff. But I'm missing the big picture, the giant fire that's coloring my whole mind that's paying attention.

The Pali word for aversion is *dosa*. I like it. Short, sweet, clear—it colors a lot of territory, and I don't get so caught up in the story. Instead of going, "Aversion to myself, that's based on my past conditioning, and that's loneliness, that's alienation, oh I see the thought, I see that..."—just *dosa*. Dosa is like this. Oh.

In that moment, it's unpleasant. But awareness can just totally be there without needing to move away, without needing an explanation, without needing to do anything—just open, present, touching it with kindness. Or a really beautiful pleasant experience, same thing. Wow, bliss is like this. No big story about me, no big explanation, no going in, no pulling away. Instead of the struggle between "Oh my knee, and what's going to happen, and like Monty was talking about—the hospital, I'll never walk again, and what about the past, and what about the future, and me me me"—just: Oh, burning is like this. You actually feel the burning more clearly. But that's okay.

I really feel this—I've experienced it so many times. This is my daily life too. I'm not just talking about sitting on the cushion, particularly with complicated mental and psychological patterns. Like for me, self-hatred is a big pattern. And I know a lot of the past history—personal, familial, societal—the conditions that have given rise to this pattern in my particular individual psyche. And then I recognize that this particular individual pattern is also representative of something larger. I'm not the only person in the world who experiences this, I'm pretty sure.

When I'm fighting it or trying to understand it or trying to do something about it or trying to own it, I'm still subtly caught in the belief that it's unpleasant and it's bad, it's wrong. But when I can say, "Oh, self-hatred feels like this"—there's this feeling of complete relief that comes when I know my full awareness has just landed in what's really happening with no more contentiousness. Non-contention with reality. In this moment, it feels like this. There's an ease that comes.

That is what the Buddha is saying. For one who doesn't have a path, what is a cleaner, a more sure escape from unpleasant feeling? It's simply to open into what's happening now with simple, pure mindfulness—without assessment, without self-reference, without judging. Just: it's what it is.

But if we don't do that, he says, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feeling comes to be a habit in the mind. And then the tendency to resist unpleasant comes to be a habit in the mind.

And the tendency—this is my language—to have no clue about neutral feeling becomes a habit in the mind. Habit, because that's what we do over and over. That's all. It's just because it's what we do.

And so I feel so grateful just to know that there's another possibility. A lot of the time, my mind goes back into the habit. But even recognizing the habit is, again, a moment of awareness. "Oh, yeah, I'm really caught in wanting. It feels like this."

So the mindfulness—what it does, the steadiness of mindfulness that we're trying to cultivate here, this moment after moment after moment—first is that bare attention, as I just described. Just learning how to bring a mind that's in that moment, as Tejaniya says, with the right understanding. Meeting what's happening now, just as it is, without judging it. Pleasant—good. Unpleasant—bad. Neutral—who cares? No. Just as it is. Just as it is.

And the steadiness of that represents a shift. Generally, we're so engrossed in the object—and this is another thing samsara does: get this, get rid of that, me, this, that—that we don't see the big picture. So with our steadiness of mindfulness, of awareness, what's really happening is we're shifting from entrancement with objects to seeing the process. How is the mind working? How is confusion and suffering arising in this moment? How is it dissipating? How is it being abandoned? How does it not arise in this moment? How does wholesomeness arise? We're really getting more interested in that.

So when we speak of awareness—Ajahn Sumedho has this line: "Awareness is the point that includes," meaning it's just at this moment, but in this moment it includes everything, anything. Or the way I say it: awareness doesn't care, meaning awareness doesn't have preference. It's not that you can be aware of something so horrible it's going to damage awareness. That can't happen. We can forget about awareness, but once you remember again, does awareness seem kind of ragged? Does it seem like it got a little worn out? Does it seem like somehow it got all dirty? No. Awareness is just pure and vivid and clean, always. When we again remember a moment of mindfulness, here it is.

The way I think of it is that for me, the love of awareness or the trust in awareness gradually becomes—in the habits of my mind and heart—stronger or more reliable, more trustworthy than the love or trust in the search for pleasure. As long as my comfort, my love, my trust, my refuge, even unconsciously, is in pleasure—if that's where I find my comfort—then subtly, in the big stress moments, that's where the mind will go.

But more and more, we start to really experience just those little moments. Notice them, those little moments that are so freeing, when it's just the awareness of something pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, either one. Just that ease when the whole construction of "me" and "good" and "bad" and "this" and "that" and "what did they say" and "what do I mean" and "what's going to happen"—ah, burning—falls away. Just notice the peace, the freedom, the space that comes from that. Because noticing these wholesome moments also reinforces the trust, the confidence, your own confidence from your own experience. That's the only place it can ever really come from.

So in recognizing process rather than being caught in objects, let me give you a couple of examples. One very simple one that I like, again from Tejaniya. He said, very simply—and this isn't even meditation—someone knows a car is passing, right? You're aware that a car is passing. He asks, "Is this meditative awareness?" And he says no, anyone knows a car is passing. A dog knows a car is passing. What's the difference? What would make it meditative awareness, where we're aware of process?

His way of saying it is: How do you know you are aware that a car is passing? What are you aware of that's actually happening? So you would notice if there's the sense, the experience of hearing, the experience of seeing. And then you'd be aware of the mental process—the sense of hearing, maybe the perception of car, or the mental image of car. You get a sense of really recognizing the process that's happening, versus just "oh, a car is passing." We don't really look at it otherwise.

Do you get a sense of what that means? And to me, it's a lot more interesting.

What was really happening just then? Because there's only those six things: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, mental constructs.

Another way to understand how these habits the Buddha talked about—the dart of aversion to the unpleasant, clinging to the pleasant, not noticing the neutral—how they come to distort perception. Starting to explore that is, again, also moving into process.

So I think Guy said the other night, but it's just looking when there's real greed in the mind, that real *taṇhā*, that thirst, that leaning forward. As Guy said, focus on the thirst. But notice the effect in the mind—how it kind of narrows and limits our perception. And what we perceive, if we're perceiving the thing we want, the Tibetans have a say-

ing that wanting puts feathers on the object. You know, it makes it look so much more attractive. If you see it later and the wanting is gone, you think, "Huh?" Have you ever bought something, like something to wear, and you get it home and you go, "What was I thinking?"

Or an example I often give: I was walking in the desert in Yucca Valley a few years ago. And I love it there—the few animals, the Joshua trees, the space, the clarity. I just love walking in the desert. And one morning I was walking there, and the thought came through my mind, "Maybe I'll see a tortoise." They have these large land tortoises. They're few; you don't see them very often.

And I was quite happy until that thought came—which could have just come and gone. The thought itself is not a problem. But the clinging—ah, that thought was pleasant. And I glommed on: "Yeah, maybe I'll see a tortoise." And then I didn't recognize until I got home that the rest of the walk was, "Where's a tortoise? Where's a tortoise?" And all of a sudden everything became not tortoise, not tortoise, not tortoise. Everything I would look at, all I wanted was the tortoise. And nothing else counted.

That's what wanting does. It shuts us out. It really narrows and limits and imprisons the mind.

Aversion does the same thing—the pushing away of what we don't like. But have you noticed that when something's occurring that you don't like and you push it away, somehow it seems to expand and take over the world? Is there a sound in here you've heard that you really don't like? And can your mind just go, "Okay, one sound," and pay attention to something else? Oh no. It's married to that sound.

Thich Nhat Hanh gives a great example. If you have one little rough tooth, can you keep your tongue off of it? The rest of your teeth are fine. You're not running your tongue over your teeth all day. But that one rough tooth—forget about it. And then the aversion gets stronger. And you feel the tooth, which makes the aversion stronger. And then the aversion completely colors everything. And then if some poor soul walks in front of you while you're filled with this aversion over this rough tooth, you're like, "I can't believe they're doing—" whatever judgment comes out. And then you think, "What's the matter with me? Judging, I'm so horrible." And the aversion is just coloring everything.

Can you relate to that at all, or am I the only one?

And until we see it, we don't know. When we see it: "Oh, aversion is like this." I'm serious. It's not like every moment is like that.

But it can really be, oh, *aversion*. I'm so glad to see it. Really. Because once we see it, we can feel it. Aversion is unpleasant. So it's the same thing—we don't want to be with it because it's unpleasant. But you can feel it. You can relax into it. You don't have to, as Pema Chödrön says, spend your life walking around tensed up as if you're sitting in a dentist's chair waiting for the next unpleasant experience to hit. It's just like this. I haven't yet managed to do that in the actual dentist's chair, but I think about it.

The third delusion is neutral feeling, and it manifests in two ways. One is, of course, that it's all about me. This is really the third delusion, and it's so much fun to notice—really, it's fun to notice if you don't take it so personally. And it isn't personal. Every single person here, unless one of you is completely liberated—and I don't know, maybe you are—but otherwise, we're all sitting here, and so much of what happens, whatever it is—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, never mind thinking—how many degrees does it take to come back to me? They talk about six degrees of separation. I would say probably not even one degree of separation, right?

Somebody walks by—oh, they're walking better than me. Somebody has a pair of shoes—I'd like to have a pair of shoes like that. Somebody makes a noise, or you make a noise—what's everyone thinking about me? It's amazing. Oh, the fall is so lovely, and I'm so lucky to be here in it. Just to notice this. Not to judge it. Because the judgment becomes, "I shouldn't be thinking about me. I should be more enlightened than to think about me." Forget about it. It's going to happen. But it isn't personal. Just notice it. It's really fun. And then it's not personal.

The last thing I want to say is that the other way we get lost in delusion is—and this is one of the reasons it's so hard to maintain the steadiness of awareness—that so much of our experience is just simply mundane, repetitive experience. Why do we get bored with walking? We're waiting for something worth paying attention to to happen. Why do we kind of zone out brushing our teeth? It's not really compelling—okay, brush the teeth, big deal. But when's the insight going to come?

How much of our experience is just this moment again and again and again? How many times do we get out of bed and brush our teeth and go to pee and put on our socks every day? Every moment's different. And so this kind of glossing over, dulling out with the mundane, waiting for something worth paying attention to, waiting to get an insight from—this is, again, the same thing as being caught in samsara. So just wake it up in this moment with the simplicity of awareness.

I'll end with a quote from Dipa Ma, this little Indian lady who was an amazing, amazing yogi, just filled with metta and concentration. She was remarkable. She said: "There is so much sameness in ordinary life. We are always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. But when greed, hatred, and delusion are not present, you see everything fresh and new all the time."

Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now every day, every moment is full of taste and zest.

So let's just sit quietly with taste and zest.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 124

Faith (Saddhā) and Determination: Allies of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 1h03

In this talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the challenging waves of emotion, memory, and difficult mind states that often arise during intensive practice. She normalizes these experiences as essential purification processes, explaining that when mindfulness and concentration deepen, unconscious patterns naturally surface for release.

Wilson introduces two mental factors (cetasikas) as powerful allies of mindfulness: saddhā (faith) and adhiṭṭhāna (determination). She clarifies that saddhā is not about believing doctrines but is an experiential quality that brightens and purifies the mind, creating willingness and confidence to continue practice. Drawing from the Abhidhamma, she describes how faith clarifies the mind like clearing muddy water and manifests as non-fogginess and resolution. She distinguishes between wisdom followers and faith followers, encouraging practitioners to discover what personally inspires their practice—whether devotion to teachers, verified experience, or understanding the Dhamma.

Regarding adhiṭṭhāna (determination), Wilson describes it as a collected alignment of energy around wholesome motivation. She identifies four qualities that accompany genuine resolution: wisdom (paññā), honesty, relinquishment, and calm—noting that authentic determination feels steady rather than agitated. Through personal stories including her challenging experience learning German and the inspiring biography of Master Sheng Yen, she demonstrates how these qualities support perseverance through difficulty, transforming obstacles into practice opportunities.

So just as I was walking in here tonight, it's such a beautiful night with Venus, and it's so still and lovely. And then I walked in here, and it's really hard to imagine how wild it could be inside your little heads, what's going on. Sometimes it can seem so dissonant—one, the other, and all of it is samsara.

My sense at this point in the retreat... long retreats kind of go in a wave. Not everybody's in the same place, but there's a kind of a flow that we can sometimes feel. And so my personal sense, my limited sense from just some of the people I've been meeting with, is that you guys are cooking. It really may not be the recipe you thought you were ordering. It certainly may not be the one you want. But I just want to say that this is what the practice is.

It's easy to think, when we talk about the instructions and talk about the steadiness of awareness and all the subtleties of what we see, that it should be a certain way. And then you just get hit upside the head with really strong patterns of thought, memory, the emotions that go along with it, and in really intense waves. Has anybody experienced such a thing? And often that may come after you've started to feel a little calmer, started to feel there's a little more steadiness. "Okay, I got it licked." And then suddenly —whop.

As Pema Chödrön says, it can be helpful to think not so much that we're being with the unpleasant as with the unwanted. Because that helps us see what's really the suffering in the mind. I don't want this stuff. I want to look at intention. But instead, there's a wave of memories that we may have had conscious access to, but all of a sudden everything we ever did that we feel remorse for comes up. Or something triggers unworthiness and self-hatred and it just comes in like a cloud and starts distorting every thought that arises. Or rage. Or guilt. Or grief.

All of it's valid. And often it's not new information, but the thoughts will come, and then this flood of memories will come, together with the strong emotion that was generated at the time it happened. And it goes in waves, of course. And you can feel like... most people do feel like... A yogi years ago used to come in and say to me, "It's all gone to hell in a handbasket." And I'd think, what does that mean? I mean, you get a drift of what it means. What's a handbasket? I'd get sidetracked in that. But the sense is: this isn't what's supposed to be happening, and I'm certainly not growing in awareness and wisdom through this.

There's no question it's difficult. We can feel like we get filled with doubt, filled with self-recrimination. We get sidetracked into the story and the memories. We think "overwhelm"—like someone said today, about to be overwhelmed. It can even be a little bit overwhelmed.

But what we don't realize often—most of the time, everyone I've talked to—is that you think it's just overwhelmed and you're just lost. It gets so strong and you're feeling the grief or the anger or the rage or the remorse or whatever it is, to the point that you need to go and just sob for a couple of hours. And our tendency is to think, well, this has blown it, and maybe somehow I can patch my practice back together.

But this is what's happening at this moment. It's these cycles of... Someone reminded me of a way of speaking. There are cycles of purification of heart and mind, and then purity. The two go back and forth. The purification in a way is when all this stuff is coming up. You feel you're being overwhelmed, but there's really mindfulness still running through it. We often don't recognize it because the emotions and the thoughts are

a lot stronger than the mindfulness, but we're still meeting it. With awareness there's a shift in how we're being with it from our regular daily life. And in fact it's coming up so strong, deeper into retreat, as a result of mindfulness and concentration. As the mind gets purer, the conscious or unconscious habits of kind of keeping stuff down aren't being fed, and boom, boom.

I remember one retreat I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, who was a very tough taskmaster. You come in, you report—note, note, note—how it's supposed to be. And I had utmost confidence in him, and I really felt his deep compassion. So I wasn't really afraid of him somehow. In the interview—every other time, yeah, but not in the interview.

I was having one of these times that went on, off and on, nothing steady state for days, where a memory would come up, and a kind of grief and loss, and I would just be sobbing, sobbing. And I would be noting "sobbing." I'd go in and just describe what happened. I wouldn't give the story, I'd just describe what happened.

And he was so happy. Because he said, "This is dukkha. This is understanding dukkha."

Just what Bonnie talked about last night. We would like it if we got these little messages—*oh, dukkha, dukkha, now I get it, it's like that, la la la, that's a little bit of dukkha, I see, it's suffering*. It doesn't work like that. We don't really see what's feeding it until we're spinning in it. And then we pop out. The mind calms down, something else goes on, you're just eating lunch and tasting that little burst of flavor or whatever.

Then there can be a period that's more calm where you're just feeling the breath or watching the walking steps. And that's kind of like the purity of mind in that time—where the mind isn't distorted by the fear, by the kilesas, by the self-judgment. And they support one another.

So I just want to say this is happening for many people, and it's a very important part of the practice. Just seeing how changeable it is. From the purification to the purity, from contraction to expansion, from wild west to *oh yeah, la la la*, just feeling the lifting and feeling the pressure. It's like nature, right? Just changeable—how could it be otherwise?

What I want to speak about tonight is two qualities of mind that can help support us. Two wholesome qualities—there are many wholesome qualities that come along with mindfulness—but I want to call our attention to these two in particular. Because there are times when it's going wild like this, or you're bored out of your mind, that could be

it too. There's mindfulness, there's awareness, we're pulling it along, but it could use some support. It's getting some support, but I want us to recognize these two qualities tonight.

Because the way this works is huge, like firestorms, and then it passes, it's calmer, then the firestorm may come up again. Have you noticed? It's the same stuff, but maybe it's a little bit less intense. These patterns—don't expect them to completely go away. Please. Or if you do expect that, notice it, and don't give it a lot of energy.

But what does go away is the stickiness. It's like the Velcro. The *me, me, me*. You know how Velcro starts to get worn out and then it doesn't really stick and then the thing comes and it just doesn't stick at all? It's like that.

So I can feel a wave of self-hatred coming in. That's one of my favorite friends. If I don't recognize it, it's distorting everything, every thought I have. I can kind of now feel it coming in like a wave. I can see what triggered it, and without having to analyze my whole history—I know it, it's enough already—I can just feel it coming in. Sometimes the immediate cause is just that my mind is tired. I don't have to go looking for a big thing. You feel it come like a wave and go, *okay, self-hatred's here now, feels like this*. Don't trust anything your mind tells you as long as it's got the blinders on. That's how it is. Nothing personal. Passes out.

So, the two mental factors, qualities of mind I want to point us to tonight are *saddhā*, usually translated as faith, and *adhiṭṭhāna*, which Bhante spoke about, usually translated as resolution or determination. I'm going to speak about them tonight quite specifically in terms of recognizing them in our heart and mind, how they can support our practice here. Because they're both really huge topics and there's so much to say about each one, so I'm being quite specific in the way I want to speak about them tonight.

They're allies—allies of mindfulness. Not only in the difficult times, the unwanted times, but in those unwanted times when we can't quite find the strength of mindfulness, we can sometimes find these. Other times too.

So, mental factors—what do I mean, how does that work? First, I just want to mention: we keep talking about the mind. The mind does this, the mind sees that. And in listening, I hear—maybe you don't hear it this way—but I hear how it could easily sound as though the mind is some steady thing that's doing stuff and recognizing, some kind of blob, usually up here, but wherever it is, as if it's a thing. But to point out: the mind, what we're calling the mind, is actually a dynamic process that in itself is cognizing the flow of events. It's not a steady state thing, kind of cognizing the mind itself.

This is Silananda, who was a Burmese Sayadaw and scholar. He spent quite some time in California and has since passed on. He's describing the two component aspects of what we call mind in this form.

First, consciousness—remember, this is a test. Guy spoke about consciousness, one of the five aggregates, viññāna. You remember that? It's just that natural knowing faculty, very simple. Consciousness is arising in every moment of contact, and consciousness is that which is aware of an object—the basic awareness of an object.

The other component part of the mind are all the mental factors arising in that moment, in that consciousness. Silananda explains that mental factors are what influence a moment of consciousness. They arise together with the consciousness and modify it.

So really, what we're calling mind is this moment-to-moment arising of viññāna, consciousness, and various mental factors—whole bunches of them coming together. What we're calling an unwholesome mind state is when the mental factors are kind of led by greed or aversion or hatred or fear, confusion, not knowing what's going on. A wholesome mind state is when those are absent—it could be led by compassion, it could be led by mindfulness, it could be led by concentration. But they come with several of them together, not all by themselves.

I just want to clarify that in the way I'm talking, faith, saddhā, and adhiṭṭhāna—resolution, determination—are mental factors. They're qualities of mind that arise together with mindfulness and other wholesome states. They're not by themselves, but sometimes they're the stronger one, and we can recognize them.

For instance, one moment of citta—citta is a word that includes consciousness and the mental factors together—one moment of citta with sati, with mindfulness and wholesome qualities, makes it more likely that it will influence the next moment. Hence, continuity is really helpful. It starts to build up the momentum. Same way when the Buddha says what we habitually ponder and think about, that becomes the inclination of the mind. It's like the laws of physics, like inertia. A body in motion tends to stay in motion. We kick the wheel of mindfulness, it's easier to go. We jump on the wheel of aversion, it's easier to roll. It's nothing personal. That's what's so interesting to watch.

So that's the way I want to talk about these factors—in terms of recognizing the quality, what their effect is in our own mind, in our practice.

Faith, saddhā. The first thing I want to say is that many people in English have various relationships and reactions to that word. Some very positive, some not so comfortable. Faith, saddhā, as a mental factor, as we experience it in our mind, is not about believing something. Often we hear it talked about—if you're reading the suttas, saddhā is

faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. And it can easily come to seem like, "I have to believe these things—right view, the whole list of things, and what the Buddha and the Dhamma and the philosophy say—to become a card-carrying Buddhist, and that's what faith means." People can have different reactions to this.

On one retreat a couple of years ago, one of the teachers mentioned faith. It wasn't in terms of "you've got to believe this," just mentioned faith as a wholesome, supportive factor. And in the questions and answers the next day, a man said, "So you mentioned the F word"—which for you non-English speakers, I can't really elaborate, but it's not a good thing. It's a word you don't really want to say, not a nice word. That illustrated his relationship to the concept of faith from his past history.

That's not what we mean in terms of a mental factor. It's a practical, experiential factor that uplifts and brightens the heart and mind. It brings this quality of brightness, expansiveness, energy.

And it's essential in the way that the Buddha described the path. When he talks about the five spiritual faculties—five qualities of mind that, when there's momentum of mindfulness, when we talk about intelligent awareness, all those five faculties are there together to some degree, not always balanced. The first one is saddhā, faith, which leads to viriya, effort and energy, to sati, mindfulness, to samādhi, balance and collectedness of mind, to paññā, wisdom. And they cycle around and support one another. So it's not like faith is just a nice thing—it serves a very essential function in our onward leading on the path, in our practice.

The Abhidhamma can be interesting in this regard. There are descriptions of each of the mental factors—what they feel like, how they are in our experience. I'll just read a little about saddhā: "It has the characteristic of trusting. Its function is to clarify, as when a muddy lake becomes clear." So you can see the difference between doubt and faith. Doubt asks, "What's going on? What should I do?" In faith, there's "Oh, it's like this." There's a brightness, a clarity. "Or to set forth, as one might set forth to cross a flood." Sayadaw U Pandita would describe this quality, this aspect of saddhā, as a willingness to do. That's how he would describe its effect—it gives a willingness to do in the mind. To do what? To show up for the next moment. It's that brightness, that energy. "And it manifests as non-fogginess, as confidence, or as resolution." So you can see these are really supportive qualities: confidence, resolution, willingness to do—which is how it leads into viriya, into energy, into the willingness to just keep showing up.

This uplift, this brightening of the heart and mind, is actually what enables one to even begin—it purifies in that moment, just for a moment, the heart and mind so that we can actually hear the Dhamma, so we can hear how things are. When we're distor-

ted and clouded with confusion, with longing or aversion, we can hear the Dhamma, but it doesn't really quite get in. Has it ever happened that you've heard something you've heard a million times before, Dhamma-wise I mean, and you suddenly think, "Oh, that's what that means"? And it can keep happening on deeper and deeper levels as the mind is brighter, clearer. So this is a key aspect of our own practice, our own path.

There are many suttas where the Buddha, when he begins to give instructions to someone, looks through an assembly—you know, that amazing mind he has—thinking, "Okay, who here is ready to hear the Dhamma? Who here is ready to hear how it is? Whose mind is ready?" He'll look and see. There's one sutta where a poor beggar afflicted with leprosy comes to the edge of the sangha thinking, "Oh good, here's a big group of people. Maybe somebody's giving out food." He sits down and sees it's the Buddha. He thinks, "Oh, nobody's giving out food, but I might as well just sit and listen." And the Buddha looks out and recognizes that this man—Suppabuddha was his name—is ready to hear the Dhamma. So the Buddha looks, and it's not about anybody's state in life, or how rich or poor, or their background, or their gender, or anything. He just looks and knows: this person is ready to hear.

But then he doesn't start by blasting them with anattā. He always starts with gradual teachings to bring the mind along. He talks about generosity. He talks about sīla. He talks about different aspects of conditions and karma and renunciation in order to brighten the mind. The mind becomes bright, purified, pliable, free from hindrances—and then it's able to hear the Dhamma in that moment. So, in a little bit of a way like that, saddhā has that function in our mind in moments.

In terms of faith, it's said the immediate cause is something that inspires, that arouses that faith—something to place faith in. Classically in the suttas, it's the three refuges: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, which Bonnie talked about so beautifully the other night. But it doesn't have to be that. That's where we get sucked into the object again and think, "I have to have faith in that." Instead, it's about looking within. I want to drop this in for you: as you go through the day, tune into what it is that inspires you, that re-inspires, that deepens—what you can access as your own faith. Faith in terms of what brightens your mind in the difficult times. What helps you remember or strengthens a sense of trust and confidence? Depending on how your mind works, it may be confidence in the teachings, confidence in the Buddha, confidence in your own verified experience—which is called verified faith—or confidence in someone who has really inspired you, where thinking about them brings it up again. That's called bright faith. Look and see.

There isn't a right thing, but knowing what it is for you matters deeply.

This practice of awakening is not like, you know, being into Formula One and thinking about a certain kind of car brightens your mind. We're not talking about that. I just want to be sure that's all clear. But to look for yourself—this is really important.

Another aspect of faith that's true for some people, though it doesn't have to be, is that sometimes *saddha* is thought of as synonymous with devotion. You've probably noticed here in this particular place that the way we're teaching, devotion isn't a huge aspect of how we're presenting things—which is more reflective of us than anything else. But faith is often inspired and strengthened by this quality of devotion, which can be this real sense of placing one's heart upon, being inspired by a teacher, by the sangha, or by thinking about the Dhamma. But it doesn't have to be that, because we're all different personality types.

A while ago, some of us were having a group discussion with Ajahn Sucitto, who is an Englishman, a monk in the Amaravati tradition from the followers of Ajahn Chah. He's one of the followers of Ajahn Sumedho—a really lovely and, I found, quite inspiring and deep person. He's been a monk for thirty-five years, I think. We were just having a discussion, a bunch of Western Vipassana teachers and him. We'd been sitting a retreat with him, and in those monastic-style retreats, there's just a more natural emphasis on devotion, which manifests through chanting—chanting a lot of the homage to the Buddha, the qualities of the Buddha, chanting the qualities of the Dhamma, the qualities of the Sangha. Bringing that to heart, to mind, over and over. And people at those retreats love it.

He was saying to us, "Well, what do you all do to inspire faith? Because here these people love it so much, and you don't do it." And the people that come here love what we do. We said, "Yeah, they're the ones who come here." And in some of the retreats we do, there are people who really miss that devotional element, for sure. And there are other people like that man who talked about faith as an F-word. There isn't a right or a wrong.

So I'm just encouraging you to look and see for yourselves what lights you up. Devotion—it may be the qualities of the Buddha or the Dhamma or Sangha teachers. But I want to encourage you to tune into what's been meaningful for you. If you are devotional, what lights it up for you? Who have been your own teachers, your own inspirations? It doesn't have to be a Buddhist person. Whatever it is that really lights you up and brings that energy, that cohesive energy, that brightness in mind that kind of purifies the heart and keeps you on the path for the next moment. Sometimes it's surprising where it can come from.

I don't particularly think of myself as a devotional type, although I have to say it tends to come in more and more over the years. So now I find in my little house I have photos of some teachers who've just really been meaningful and inspired me. Ramana Maharshi, who you may know as an Indian saint in southern India who died in 1950—before I was even born—but lots of photos of him around the house. And when my mind's all caught up and the velcro is really working well, I just kind of look at a photo. It's hard to stay all worked up when I look at a photo of Ramana. He's just *right*.

But even more surprising to me—and I'm just giving this as an example—several times I've gone to Tiruvannamalai, his ashram in Tamil Nadu in southern India. He went there after his awakening, when he was sixteen or nineteen years old, because he was drawn to the mountain, Arunachala, as a holy mountain, an inspirational mountain to him. As you come up to it, it's just flat, flat, flat. And then there's just this big hill rising up in the middle of the flatness. He spent the whole rest of his life there, built his ashram around it, and really felt that it was all about Arunachala, all about the mountain.

So, okay, fine. I went to the ashram, which is a lovely ashram, really well organized, and I really like being there. And over time, it's like the mountain just starts coming in, coming in. You just look at the mountain. And there's a saying Ramana always used: "Arunachala, thou dost root out the ego of those who hold thee in their heart." Something like that. And I'd think, *yeah, right*. Because I'm from New York. I'm a cynic. The mountain's rooting out ego in my heart? Give me a break.

Mountain's just sitting there.

Well, I have a long photo of Arunachala on my altar, which I look at every day, and I cannot explain it. But luckily with saddha, you don't have to explain it. You just look at what's the effect. It brightens. I'm getting chills talking about it. I have no clue why. But when I tune in, it's the effect of saddha. It brightens my mind and heart in that moment. There's an energy, an uplift, an openness, a willingness to just look at what's going on. It's really quite amazing. So look and see what's true for you in that way.

The Buddha talked about various kinds of followers in different suttas. I'm just going to briefly mention a part of one sutta. In terms of what I'm speaking of here, he comes down to two types of followers who are not yet completely enlightened.

He says, what is an individual who is a Dhamma follower? This is the case where someone, not yet awakened, but with a certain degree of reflection through wisdom, has come to an understanding, an agreement with the teachings proclaimed by the

Tathagata. In other words, you've really looked at it, thought about it, and it makes sense. You've kind of taken the teachings into your own mind and heart. I would call it a wisdom follower in our investigation language.

And this person has these qualities—see if you recognize them: the faculty of conviction, or saddha; the faculty of persistence, or virya, energy; the faculty of mindfulness; of concentration; and of wisdom. So the five spiritual faculties beginning with conviction. But this is a wisdom follower.

And then he says there's another type of individual who is a faith follower, a saddha follower. This particular individual, not yet awakened, but having seen with discernment, has a measure of conviction, of faith in and love for the Buddha. And I would add the Dhamma, the Sangha, whatever your particular faith in and love for is. And this person also has these five qualities, the five spiritual faculties.

I just appreciated that—the Buddha noticing there are these different ways. Both of them arouse faith, saddha, this conviction which is onward leading to the other five spiritual faculties. So just seeing what our personality type is, what works for us.

In the Dhamma follower, which I always thought I was more of—but maybe not, and we all can have both—it tends to be that what really can bring that brightness, that lighting up in the mind, is just starting to see how things work, getting a sense of insight, just noticing.

And this is true for everybody: what we call verified faith. When you have an experience that confirms some of what we've been understanding and it just happens by itself, and then—oh, wow, that's really true. So many people have said that.

An example that quite a few people have told me about: some really familiar, unwholesome train of thought starts. You've been watching it, fighting with it, whatever. It starts up, awareness comes and notices it, and all of a sudden the mind, the wisdom says, no, let's not do that now. And it just vanishes. And you didn't do it. Wow. Notice that. That really can lead to verified faith. Oh yes, this Dhamma makes sense. I can see it's actually occurring the way that I've read about it. So it moves from just intellectual agreement—yeah, it makes sense—to actually noticing.

The Buddha talks about the importance of why it's really beneficial to know, to let others know and to know for yourself, that real awakening is possible. That it's not just some kind of cockamamie idea to keep us being mindful. That it really is, as he so often said, if it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so.

And so a moment when your heart-mind is pure, freed from the defilements, the kleshas—that's just like a little mini doorway in.

But to really know that this is possible is, as the Buddha says, really important. You don't talk about it or describe people who've awakened just for flattery or for any self-serving reason, but because there are faithful people who are inspired and gladdened by what is possible. If we never hear about it, we can never know.

There's a lovely book by Ajahns Pasanno and Amaro called *The Island*, which is a compilation of many suttas and other teachings about all aspects of the quality of sotāpanna, the first level of awakening in the Theravāda schema. It's really well organized, with lots of sutta references and their own commentary. But what I'm going to quote is the very last quotation in the book, from Yogi Berra. Do any of you remember who Yogi Berra was? You non-Americans will have no clue. He was a baseball player and manager of the Yankees, and he's kind of well-known for all these statements he would make that don't quite make sense—but if you think about them, they do. So this is their last quotation, from Yogi Berra: "If you don't know where you're going, you will wind up somewhere else."

So, the wisdom follower has a sense of the Dhamma. And the faith follower—again, seeing what we can actively bring in when we notice we're caught, when difficult situations are just too strong and we're caught in negativity and fear—what can we use to brighten the mind? If it's reflections on the qualities of the Buddha, the qualities of the Dhamma, the qualities of the Sangha, if that brightens you, bring it in.

There are suttas where the Buddha talks about directed and undirected meditation. He describes when you're meditating: "A monk is abiding, contemplating body as body, ardent, fully aware, mindful"—you've heard that before, right? And bodily distress arises, or mental sluggishness that scatters the mind. See, he knew this stuff happened. So when you're really lost—not just momentary sluggishness—this is skillful means, not running away. Then one should direct the mind to some inspiring object: the three refuges, but also your own generosity, your own sīla, your own non-harming conduct. These are important aspects of contemplation that bring up faith and brighten the mind.

And he says: when the mind is directed to some inspiring quality, happiness is born. From this happiness comes joy. With a joyful mind, the body relaxes. With a relaxed body one feels content, and the mind of one who is content becomes collected. Then one recollects, "The purpose for which I directed my mind has been accomplished. The mind has been brightened, purified." So one withdraws attention from that particular inspiring object and returns to undirected, choiceless awareness.

You see, this is actually a skillful use of thought, of contemplation. And what it's doing is inspiring faith. This inspiration of faith is onward-leading, supporting this willingness to do, this quality of vīriya, of effort.

And that leads to the next mental factor I want to talk about: determination, adhiṭṭhāna. It's not the same as vīriya, effort, but you can see how they come together. Resolution, variously described—Thanissaro Bhikkhu describes it as resolution in the mind that gives focus, motivation, and direction to the practice. But I want to say that even in a moment, we can recognize it. Ajahn Amaro describes it as being unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement.

This is one of the ten pāramīs, one of the ten perfections: resolution, determination. And it can be a very strong force to support vīriya and support our practice. Personally, I didn't really hear it talked about much in terms of moment-to-moment awareness—how it could support practice in that immediate way—until the last few years, when I've been exploring it more in my own experience.

It's often talked about in the big picture of vast lifetimes. The legend goes that in a previous era, the previous Buddha—the Dīpaṅkara Buddha, so long ago, in another world cycle, another lifetime—there was an ascetic called Sumedha who was so inspired by that Buddha that he made the resolution, the adhiṭṭhāna, that however long it would take, he too would become a Buddha. He would go through all the necessary wisdom practice, all the purification of heart and mind, so that he too could be of such immense benefit to beings. So this is the vast picture.

And then, if you read the whole collection of the Tipitaka, the Buddhist texts, there's a whole series called the Jataka Tales, which are supposedly all these stories of the different lifetimes of the historical Buddha we know—Gautama Buddha—and all the different lifetimes and the ways he was working to purify his heart and mind. That's the long view.

Tonight I'm talking about the moment-to-moment view, just to give you a sense. I'm just taking a little slice. But the point is to really start to recognize the wholesome, because when we recognize the wholesome, the mind can more easily incline towards it.

When we talk about the qualities of courage, of perseverance, the willingness and ability to be with the difficult—but not with striving, right? To really keep being there, but then we say, "but not striving, not expecting, not pushing." Or when we talk about choosing not to feed the unwholesome but inclining the mind towards the wholesome, where some series of difficult thoughts come up and we've been fighting them, but then

we go, "No, not now." This quality of strength that isn't coming from either aversion or clinging or me-ing—what is that? How do we access that? That can be a tricky place, no?

This is one of the places where we can start to feel this mental factor, this energy of resolution. It's really what we can call on for skillful means. The best I can describe it in myself is that I feel it in a moment as a kind of collectedness and alignment of energy around a particular motivation.

I'll take a really simple example: waking up and being in bed in the morning and having to get up. Well, that happens every day. But there's this state where, whether you're on retreat or not—let's say you're on retreat—you wake up, it's not the alarm, you're kind of lying there, "should I, shouldn't I," aversion, you're kind of fluffing around. That's what I call it—fluffing around. It's so cozy in the bed, I'm all snuggled in, should I get up, shouldn't I get up? Wanting and aversion, all of this.

And then, for me, the resolution is when the thought, the intention comes: "Just get up." Not "Just get up, you stupid, lazy person." Just: "Get up." And the resolution is that in that moment, the energy all aligns—just get up—and you just do it. You just do it.

Sayadaw Tejaniya often says that: "Just do it." In fact, sometimes he'll just hold up a big sheet of paper with a Nike swoosh. He'll just hold it up—just do it. Rather than this dithering.

It's different from forcing, it's different from doing it from aversion, but it really counteracts what I call flabbiness of mind. I know none of you would make this mistake, but there's this sense of feeling like we're just being with whatever is. So I'm lying in bed: "Okay, there's aversion, yeah, there's tiredness, yeah, it's snuggly, it's nice, okay, snuggly, nice, feels like this, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." Just do it. Get up.

You can feel the difference. And the first thing you might think is, "Oh, that's just being choicelessly aware." Yes, but there's a certain place for inclining to the wholesome. I'm picking a simple thing, but this is really where we can explore this quality.

Adhitana, resolution—as you can see, it's a factor that could be called ethically neutral, meaning that quality of collecting around a motivation, just doing it, doesn't have to be around a wholesome thing. I don't have to elaborate on that. That's how many things get done. But in terms of Dhamma practice, of course, it is wholesome because it comes together with mindfulness, it comes together with wholesome faculties.

I want to describe resolution as a parami. Don't get all crazy trying to remember, but just notice the four wholesome qualities that come together with resolution, with adhitana. I'll give a simple example of how we can see them supporting one another, and the difference from just a kind of forcing. Because it can be tricky. We can think it's simple resolution, but it's got that forcing quality. We all know how subtle that is.

The four qualities that come together with adhitana are wisdom—pañña, wise discernment—honesty, relinquishment or non-clinging, and calm or peace.

Let me give a simple example of how they go together. In terms of wisdom, wise discernment, even just beginning as a resolution comes up in the mind—is it even reasonable? I always thought it was very interesting, the story of the Buddha. He made this great determination to sit under the Bodhi tree: "I'm not getting up until I'm awakened." But he'd been doing intensive practice for six years before he did that. He didn't do that on day one. So there was some sense of clear, wise discernment.

So for us, we won't always know. But for example, say you decide, "I'm going to sit for seventeen hours straight without moving." Now for some people, at some times, that is quite possible and supportive. For a lot of us, a lot of the time, not so much. Knowing that, just knowing what's reasonable.

Take another example. We often recommend to people, just as a way of settling and strengthening the continuity, to take a period—if you're not already doing this, maybe you're all already doing this—take a period like the morning from the 8:15 sit until lunch, or from after lunch until tea, and just stay really steady. Sit, walk, sit, walk, don't do anything else. That's all. Just do that. Now one could make a resolution: "I'm just going to sit, walk, sit, walk." I would say generally, with discernment, does that seem reasonable? Does it seem useful? You don't have to write a thesis about it, just checking in and seeing. So that's the discernment part.

And the truthfulness, the honesty, is just being honest with seeing what we're really doing. So if we make that resolution, just very gently, and we're doing it, but then, "Okay, well I'm just going to go and have this little cup of tea and come back," and we somehow pretend we're not doing that—you know what I mean? We just kind of decide that didn't count. It's not quite the clear seeing, the honesty piece, that's all. Honesty is just part of mindfulness anyway: what's really happening.

The relinquishment is kind of obvious because when there's a resolution to do one thing, we're relinquishing other possibilities. Getting up in the morning is relinquishing more snuggling in bed. Sit, walk, sit, walk for four hours is relinquishing whatever else. Just very basic.

And the fourth, which is interesting, is calm. This I find one of the useful ways to check if what I'm doing is truly a resolution or kind of forcing or aversion.

For example, sitting and there's a difficult experience—let's just take pain in the body. And the idea comes in: "I'm just going to stay with it, see what happens." Well, you know all the different energies that could be feeding that motivation, right? And so if it's just the clear seeing, if it's the adhiṭṭhāna, there would be the discernment: "Okay, it's not that I have a bad knee and I'm going to hurt the knee." That's clear seeing, you know? And I know people that have hurt their knee from not using that discernment. That's different from fear and discernment. And the honesty: "Okay, just be with it and see what happens." And relinquishing moving.

But the calm is this: when it's from this resolution, all the energy just collects, it's just steady, just do it. There's not all this wavering, aversion, forcing—"Should I? Shouldn't I? I'm doing so great. I'm doing so bad. By God, I'm not going to move"—all that extra stuff that leads to agitation of mind, agitation of body. When it's a sense of resolution, it's like all the extra energy that's just floating all over the place just comes together in that resolution. "Oh yeah, just do it." Just for that moment. It's quite calm. And so that's something you could just kind of tune into: wisdom, truth, relinquishment, and calm.

I really want to encourage learning to and getting interested in exploring this in little ways in our practice, because the more we recognize these wholesome states, the more easily the next moment of citta, of mind, inclines toward it. And you know how we can remember a wholesome state and kind of call it up. We can use it. And the faith, our confidence, the willingness to do, gives us the trust also that the resolution is possible, that we can do this.

Let me give a couple of examples, kind of a close, personal one. It's just to show that this isn't only about being on retreat. This was an experience where I was really consciously working with this quality, and I learned so much about adhiṭṭhāna from it. This was about two or three years ago. I had a summer where I took some months off of teaching, and I arranged to study German for three to four weeks in Munich. I'd been wanting to do this for a long time. My German friends may wonder, talking about resolution after twenty years—resolution of learning German was noticeably lacking. But anyway, I decided I really wanted to do this. So I set it all up. I was in this class.

I came in a few days late. They didn't put me in the beginning class—they placed me in the next level up based on some little test I took. But the knowledge I had of German was very spotty, just from hanging out. No clear grammar or anything.

Anyway, I was in this class, coming in a few days late. I was all happy. I was staying with a friend in Munich, I loved being there, and everything was great. And I come in, and from the first moment, I hadn't a clue what was going on. The class was not big, maybe eighteen kids. That's the operative word—*kids*. Aged sixteen to twenty-three. And me.

It was a really interesting group from all over. A couple of young men from Turkey, from Spain, from Mexico, from Portugal, from Denmark, from Mozambique. All there really wanting to learn German, to come and study mostly, to enhance their careers. So it was a really interesting group of kids. Kids.

Right away, I felt... *really?* I looked around. And then we had to do a lot of work in pairs. Of course, the instructor was speaking in German, and for the first day, I went into total panic. I had no clue what he was saying. We were supposed to do these exercises, and I'm like, what are we supposed to do? So much got triggered in me—really just like what's going on for you here. All kinds of inadequacy and feeling old. I don't usually feel old. I felt old, I tell you. Being absolutely the worst in the class. I was back in school and I was like, what is this? I was just doing this for fun. And I was really, really in a panic.

Just as an aside, I find how valuable it is to put oneself in situations like that, outside of our comfort zone, because we really learn. First, I got so much more respect—in a way, for all these people, immigrants, people coming from other countries, immigrating for refuge or for economic reasons or whatever, and they can't speak the language, and the general population isn't that helpful, and just what it is to go through that. Growing up a white American in suburbia, everybody around me spoke English. I never had to give it a thought. And I spend a lot of time in Europe and I feel humiliated about two-thirds of the time when I'm hanging out with my Swiss friends. It's like, okay, what language do we want to speak? French, German, English? Schweizerdeutsch? Or maybe I could go into Italian? And I say, well, here I am. It's going to be English. Pretty clear, it's going to be English.

So this sense of real appreciation for people who have to navigate that—that was one thing.

And the other was what it's like not to be able to learn so easily, or to know what's going on, or to read so easily. That hadn't been my particular problem in school. It was here. So just appreciating that, getting outside of the comfort zone.

Anyway, it was amazing to me, the emotional stuff that was getting brought up. We'd be paired up, and I knew no one wanted to work with Granny because—I mean, they were respectful, but I didn't know what the heck I was doing, basically.

That's why they didn't want to work with me. Half the time I wouldn't even understand the exercise. Still, I'd learn things, and then I would spend all afternoon doing my homework. That's what I was there for, and that was all fine.

And then after the second day or so, I woke up and thought, "Why am I doing this? Nobody else cares. I'm doing this for me. And this is horrendous. I could just cut and run. I'm not going to learn enough German that my German friends will even know the difference if I did it or not."

But then I thought, "No, this is really for resolution." I'm just going to do it. And it became my practice. I said, "I'm going to do it. Everything that comes up around it is the practice."

So every morning I'd get up early and sit. Every day was different. Some days I was fine—I just went down and it was kind of interesting. Some days I woke up in a panic. Some days I woke up feeling like the stupidest person on earth. Some days, whatever. But I just made the commitment: I'm going to do it. I'm going to be with whatever comes up. I'm not going late. I'm not leaving early. I'm not missing a day. That's just it.

And I learned so much about the power of resolution. It brings us into the ability to be with all the other stuff that's going on. You really see the emptiness of all of it—all of it. You can do what's important to do while the mind's doing all its stuff, and you're embarrassed. Okay, embarrassment's like this—that's okay. You can make a choice for the greater good.

So that was really a huge learning for me about this quality of determination.

I'll close with one other story of determination, on a bit broader scale, from the biography of a teacher who really inspired me and many of my friends. He died just a few years ago—a Chinese Chan master, Master Sheng Yen. A really very profound teacher, but also in who he was: so kind, so relational. I just had the good fortune to sit maybe two retreats with him, one in Switzerland and one in upstate New York at his center.

He was so kind. The second time I went, even with so many students, he recognized me and called me by name right away. Then you find out that in Taiwan he has a huge monastery with tens of thousands of students and nuns and monks. He's like the Thich Nhat Hanh of Taiwan—a huge teacher. But so kind, with such deep teachings.

He wrote an autobiography. I'm really condensing it here. He grew up in mainland China, in the 1920s or so—a very hard life, a lot of suffering, not enough food, very harsh.

And as a young man, he became a monk in the Chan monasteries. It was tough, really tough—not even having enough food, working extremely hard. I won't go into the whole story, but he became a very devoted monk, deeply committed to his practice and to the monastic life.

In 1949, there was civil war in China, which made conditions even worse. When Mao Zedong and the communists won the civil war, he was living in a monastery in Shanghai. He realized his only chance to remain a monk was to get out of mainland China to Taiwan. He had no money, nothing. The only way he could escape to Taiwan was to join Chiang Kai-shek's army, who would bring him over. So that's what he did—a monk joining the army to get to Taiwan.

He had to disrobe. But he says, "In my mind, in my heart, I was always a monk." It wasn't as though he could simply arrive in Taiwan and say, "Thanks a lot, I'm leaving the army now." That was not an option at all. He said it was extremely difficult to get out of the military. For ten years he was in the army, yet in his heart, always being a monk.

One of his rules of training was to be vegetarian, but the army food wasn't vegetarian. As much as he could, he would eat around the meat, taking only the vegetables, until sometimes he was truly starving, really unhealthy. Only at that point would he eat a little meat. But then he would feel that was an unwholesome act. The way he worked with his unwholesome karma was through prostrations—he would do many prostrations, not from a sense of "I'm bad, I have to do this," but as a way of devotion, of bringing in wholesome energy in his mind.

He had no teacher. He had no support. After some years, he began to find teachers. And finally—without going into the whole story—somebody helped him find a way to get out of the army after ten years. It was really unusual; he said it was extremely rare that anyone managed to leave that branch of the military. But he got out, and immediately went on a six-year retreat.

A quotation from him: "Looking back, I realize that if I did not have a very strong determination to return to monastic life, I probably would not have succeeded. Getting out of that particular branch of the military was nearly impossible."

Determination—but just moment to moment. The determination to be a monk in his heart.

We never know where it's going to go. Maybe what seems impossible can become possible with a combination of faith, determination, and of course our mindfulness practice.

Thank you. Let's sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 125

Exploring Perception and Sense of Self

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a practical exploration of the Buddhist teaching of anattā (not-self), emphasizing that understanding comes through direct investigation rather than conceptual thinking. She draws on the Buddha's comparison of consciousness to a magic show and Ramana Maharshi's description of the ego as a ghost that vanishes when examined closely.

Wilson examines how perception (saññā), one of the five aggregates (khandhas), shapes our experience and creates the conditions for a sense of self to arise. Using vivid personal examples—from debating whether a blanket is blue or green, to the arising of attachment to a favorite mug—she illustrates how clinging to perception leads to identification and suffering. She traces this process through the middle links of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination): contact leading to feeling tone, craving, grasping, and the birth of a sense of 'I' and 'mine.'

Drawing extensively from Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teachings, Wilson encourages practitioners to notice both the birth and death of the sense of self throughout the day, and equally important, to recognize moments of śūnyatā—emptiness of self—when the mind is simply aware without fabrication. She references the Aṅguttara Nikāya to describe how an awakened mind perceives without conceiving of a seer separate from seeing. The talk concludes with teachings from Ajahn Jumnian, Nyoshul Khenpo, and Dōgen, pointing to the simplicity of unfabricated awareness that lies beneath all mental construction.

So tonight I'd like to pick up and explore a bit more one of the many really interesting themes that Winnie mentioned last night, particularly the one about exploring this sense of self, or as I like to think of it, demystifying the sense of self.

As we know, the teaching of anatta is quite central to the way the Buddha taught, and the understanding of it really can be quite freeing in the moment. But our tendency so much is to think that it's something we have to understand by thinking about it. And thinking about it—have you noticed what happens when you think about it? Does the sense of self seem to get a little bit stronger? The more we think about it, the worse it gets, because it's got nothing to do with thought. And then all the questions arise: well, if there's no self, who does this and who does that? But the thing is, there already isn't. Nothing changes except our perception.

As Winnie was saying, I think this idea that we have to get rid of something and then we'll be free—no. It's like this: I think I'm probably not the only one, but I do experience quite frequently a very palpable sense of self. Do you? So it's an experience like any other experience. We can explore it.

Remembering that everything the Buddha taught was quite pragmatic—to free our minds and hearts from confusion and suffering, not to add more conceptual philosophical overlay to our already crowded minds—I want to offer just a few ways of exploring this in practice. You'll find your own as well.

The Buddha said one time that consciousness is like a magic show. And I want to say the sense of self is like that. He describes a magician at some dusty crossroads in Bihar back 2,600 years ago. Kids and people would come and be so fascinated by the magic, but as soon as you see behind the curtain what the trick is, it loses all its interest, doesn't it? Oh, that's just what's going on. So the sense of self is just like that.

Ramana Maharshi said a similar thing. He said the ego—I'm substituting the idea of self—is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. When you look closely, the ghost vanishes. It was never really there. So also with a sense of separate self: as long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is not found to really exist.

Our ideas about having to get rid of this thing already posit a sense of existence based on just not really looking, not really noticing what's happening. So that's what I want to talk about tonight: how to investigate, how to look into it.

One clue comes from the Majjhima Nikaya, where somebody asked the Buddha—put succinctly—what is it that liberated ones know? And you've heard this; we all know it intellectually, so that's how we know there are different levels of knowledge, because this won't be news, but we're not liberated yet. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to. That's the phrase. What is it that liberated ones know? Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.

This is like the first clue to help us explore when this sense of self arises, rather than thinking we have to somehow get rid of it or blame ourselves. It's more like seeing what's really going on. Nothing changes except perception shifts, and how the perception shifts affects everything else—how we think, what we believe, how we act.

Where I want to start in this bit of deconstructing the magic show tonight is with perception, which again we've already spoken about. It's great on the three-month retreat because I can refer to things without having to explain everything from scratch.

So we've talked about what perception is: that quality, one of the five aggregates, arising in every moment of consciousness, of sense contact—discernment, recognition, memory. It's very useful, isn't it? Perception is really how we construct, describe, and define our world. Without perception, it would be extremely confusing walking in here. The bell would ring—what's that? What is that supposed to mean? What am I doing here?

What are we supposed to do here? Without perception, which is based on our memory and experience, things could be quite messy, couldn't they? And so when we have conventional agreement with our perceptions, things more or less function. We get along.

So perception is essential. It's not like we want to get rid of perception, which we couldn't anyway. We appreciate it. But as we've said, and I think Bhante talked about it, different ones of us have talked about it, perception is really a function of memory. And so perception, in each moment, is informed by all of our past experience. Our personal life experience, our familial history, our cultural history, the society, the education, the people around us. Not that we have time to clock through all of that and see. But even without it being distorted by greed, hatred, or confusion, perception is already informed by all these experiences.

And so what seems so—we believe, often—is really like an attachment to the implicit correctness of our perceptions. Have you ever noticed that? "Yeah, that's just how it is."

I'll give you a simple example. I'm going to try to give simple examples, not complicated ones, because it's the same process. I was at a friend's house—actually, it was Sally, Guy's wife—and I said something about the blue throw, the blue kind of cover that was lying on the back of the couch. She goes, "What blue cover?" I said, "You know, that one right there." She goes, "That's green." I said, "No, it's blue."

So I really tried to see green. I couldn't. She really tried to see blue. She couldn't. It's so interesting. We didn't come to blows about that. We were both willing to let it go. But to really see, even thinking that, and then you have the thought, secretly, "It's blue." There's nowhere to go. You could call in a third person. There's this sense that there's an ultimate truth, and blue is it, right? Knowing Sally, I'm sure she felt the same about green.

That's a simple thing, right? But you really can get a sense from that if a perception goes a little bit farther. Again, as when Bhante spoke about papañca, the classical phrase from the Buddha is: what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate—with associations, with memories, with ideas. And then if that thinking

and complication happens, just happens, to be fed by some kind of craving, or some kind of aversion, or some kind of identification—whoa, it really can get out of hand quickly.

So I'll give another example of that. I had a lot of examples, but I'm giving this particular example by request. You know you're getting old when people say, "I really want you to tell that story again." You feel like an old performer, like an old singer, and they want to do their new songs, but people go, "We don't want to hear your new songs. Sing that one from the sixties." But it is a good example. It shows how easy it is, and this is where clinging comes into our perception, and we complicate it.

So this friend told me this, a good friend, who was many years ago sitting one of her first retreats in Switzerland. She's Swiss. And at that time, it was a retreat with Ajahn Sumedho, who was her teacher. There were no retreat centers in Switzerland at that time.

It was probably at least twenty years ago. At that time, whoever organized the retreat would rent a place, and Switzerland has these big old houses scattered throughout the lower mountains where children go in the summer for camp. They have tons of room, but they're built really poorly—no insulation, old wood—so very noisy, very creaky. I'm sure some of you can relate to that creaking noise when you're trying to sit.

The way this particular place was laid out, the room they used for the meditation hall was on what we would call the second floor, and immediately below it, on the ground floor, was the walking room. So imagine this building, but without all the stuff in between, following a structured schedule just like here.

She was in a sitting period, struggling as one tends to do in the early days of a retreat, especially a first retreat. She was just starting to feel like she was getting concentrated on her breath. Finally, a moment of calm. It was a little quiet. And then she heard someone walking downstairs in the walking room, because it was so noisy that every step made a sound. *Creak, creak, creak, creak.*

We've really tried to soundproof here, but it's impossible to completely soundproof against other human beings just living. So anyway, this person is walking—*creak, creak*—and she thinks, "They're ruining my concentration. But this is a sitting period. No one's supposed to be walking during a sitting period." It just started feeding aversion: the thought about someone walking when they shouldn't be, and it's a sitting period, and we're all supposed to follow the schedule.

This fed into her own particular nature—maybe colored a little by being Swiss, but also her own sense that this is the right way to do things, that you do what you're supposed to do. She imposes this on herself. So she's getting really worked up. At some point, seeing there was nothing she could do—she wasn't going to get up and run downstairs and yell at them because she wasn't the manager; she might have had she been the manager, but she wasn't—she was getting into such a snit that she finally thought, "Okay, let me just come back and be with the breath."

She brought her attention back and was able to really land in the breath for a moment. As she truly felt the breath, in that moment the mindfulness—and this is really the power of a moment of pure, simple awareness—that whole story, that whole *papañca*, just wasn't arising. She was simply able to feel the breath.

Without the overlay on perception, she happened to notice that as she breathed out—she was leaning against the wall—her back went against the wall and made that creaking sound she had thought was somebody walking downstairs.

At that point: wow. You never would have discovered that by thinking about it. As soon as she saw it, she didn't have to try to let go. That whole construction, that whole concoction, just completely disappeared. It's not like you're releasing it—it simply goes away by itself because accurate perception doesn't support it. Do you see what I mean?

This is the power of mindfulness: to recognize something accurately. We don't know what we don't know. We can be holding on to perceptions we haven't even recognized, along with all the constructions that arise from them—getting into conflict with ourselves, with our belief systems, with others. I don't even have to take it any further to where this leads in the world.

This is why we're cultivating, why we're practicing, this moment-to-moment simple freshness of attention. It doesn't seem like it's so much. You come in and describe whatever's going on, and I say, "Oh yes, great, you're aware of it." That doesn't really make you feel good, does it? It's a horrible thing happening, and I'm saying, "Good, you were really aware of it."

But that is really the thing. The sense of freshness, almost of wonder, in a moment of awareness, in a moment of presence with whatever's there, allows just for that sense of, oh, maybe recognizing freshly without quite so much overlay on the perception.

And as I imagine you probably know, I know for me, it's not so easy. Even with wholehearted intention, even with all I know about this, even when I'm aware, I just want to bring fresh perception. Already that's an overlay. "I want fresh perception," you know. It's not so easy.

Someone who's been a real inspiration for me over the years—no one I know personally, but just as much as I can tell from reading and listening—is the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He's quite a world-famous cellist, based in Boston actually, trained in the Western classical music tradition. But how he inspires me is this: the times I've seen videos of him or read about him or heard him on the radio, or seen how he began this Silk Road Ensemble, he seems to really embody this kind of openness and freshness and interest and a kind of wonder when meeting musicians and instruments and other kinds of music from all different cultures.

Once I saw a video where he arrived somewhere in the middle of a small tribe in Africa and got out of the helicopter with his million-dollar Stradivarius cello and met this old tribal leader who was the chief musician of that tribe. His instrument was literally a round metal oil can on a stick with nails and a string coming out on the stick to make strings like the strings of a cello. And so Yo-Yo Ma, in this video, he plays, then that guy plays, and he goes, "Wow, that's so amazing, let's trade instruments, let me try and play yours." And the man is going, "Oh, I can't play yours, you play it so well." And it's like this sense of total interest.

For some years, he's been the guiding force behind this whole group of musicians, constantly changing, called the Silk Road Ensemble. The Silk Road—the whole area from the Middle East and Central Asia, Mongolia, China, Persia, Turkey, India. And so he's meeting with these musicians from all these areas with their different kinds of music and composing and instruments and different ideas of melody and timing, coming together and writing together, performing together—he with his cello, they with their instruments—really making this blend.

And so it's just really inspiring to me, his openness. And I love the idea, right? Loving the idea wholeheartedly, I listen to the music. I want to like it. I really want to like it. And my mind's like, "But..." You know, I can get it. That Mongolian singing is beautiful, but... And just, my perception from my cultural history can't relax into it. So I can intellectually appreciate. Then I listen more and listen more and I can start to get there. And I just see how difficult it is, even with good intention.

So I think, wow, he's so amazing. This is what he was writing in the forward to their first album. Remember, I think it was Winnie talking about Jared Diamond, when people met back in early days, you always had to suss out who was safe. So he's in a way referring to that. He said that when two people meet, within seconds an assessment is made on whether to trust one another. We all know how destructive it is when there's no trust. If there is some trust, an exchange might take place. As this trust devel-

ops over time, the exchange can lead to the best of all possibilities: creativity and learning. To me, this recording is an answer to that question—what happens when strangers meet?

I love it. That seems to be his attitude. He just does so many different things. So I take it as an inspiration, but I also take it as seeing how deeply and subtly ingrained all our past experience is that colors perception, that informs perception. And that's just normal. That's just how it is. So there's nothing wrong with this, and we're not always going to notice it. I'm just describing this and trying to use more simple examples just to see: this is how the process works.

And so then, in terms of perception, remember, I think it was Bonte who talked about the inversions or the distortions of perception—where we see what is in constant change as being permanent. We don't recognize impermanence. We don't recognize the unsatisfactory nature. We, in fact, perceive things as being going to give us lasting happiness. And we don't recognize the insubstantial, no-lasting-self nature of things. We perceive experience as being me or mine.

So it's on this level of perception that the whole magic show of that feeling sense of self starts. Again, not to say that's a problem, just to begin to recognize: oh yeah, sense of self starts with perception.

Perception leads to how we think about things, citta. How we think about things leads to our views, our opinions. So the view of self, the view of identity—sakkāya-diṭṭhi in Pali, identity view—is just being created moment to moment. It's not some lasting thing, but arising in a moment out of perception.

And when there's a moment of being attached, clinging to perception—we may not recognize it, but back to that blanket, the blue-green blanket, my insistence that it's blue, the way I couldn't see it otherwise—there's still a kind of clinging to that perception. Or maybe not to the perception so much as to that subtle sense of "but I'm right." So that's already into a view. It goes just like that: I'm right. But it starts by clinging to perception.

And just like that fast, when the thoughts have hardened or coagulated into a view, there can be a subtle clinging—just that little sense of "this is how it is, I'm right"—and our open awareness kind of snaps shut, is how it feels to me. I stop really noticing fresh. Like, say, listening to the music and I'm really trying, and then all of a sudden I get tired and go, "Well, that's really interesting, but I just can't appreciate it. I don't know how to appreciate it." And something just turns off. The freshness isn't there anymore. The open awareness isn't there anymore.

In terms of ourselves, what happens when we have a view—well, I'll get to that later—it's what I call selective perception. It snaps shut. So if there's a sense of "me, I'm so angry," and we've attached to that without really looking at how that whole thing got created, but just "oh, I'm so angry"—which is either "I'm so bad" or "I'm so good," but "I'm so angry"—then do you notice how, instead of just the open perception noticing whatever's arising, there's what I call selective perception? The awareness, the consciousness, starts picking up and noticing whatever particular sense, experience, or thought arises that reaffirms the view that the mind is attaching to at that moment.

"I'm such an angry person." And then all the memories will come of all the angry times, if you're identifying as bad. Or if "I'm so angry because they're acting so inappropriately," then all the different ways they're being inappropriate will come up. And all the other times—which are probably a lot more—when there's no anger, nothing special going on, or you're feeling loving, those don't seem to come into the mind at that time. Or if they do, they're dismissed.

It's actually a great moment—someone just shared this today—when you have the habit of getting lost and identified with any particular self-description like that. "I'm so angry, I'm so bored," whatever. And it starts, and you're in it, and "this is how I really am, this is my core." And suddenly, from practice, from all the times it hasn't been, something comes up: "But that's not true. It's not true I'm always like this. Just five minutes ago I wasn't like this." Wow! It starts to break apart.

So, starting with perception and then moving from that, I want to talk a little about when we can begin to get interested in this felt sense of self. Not the thinking about it, not the idea, but the actual experience of it—this felt "me" or "mine."

Once I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, and in that practice you note every moment. I was going along quite fine, and I just started noting whenever a sense of "me" would arise. I would just note it, because it's just another arising experience, just like anything. Sometimes it was an image, sometimes it was a felt sense, sometimes it was a thought. It's always something different, which is interesting to see.

So I tried—it was a mistake—I tried to describe to him, "Okay, and so I note whenever sense of 'me' arises." And they just, you know, he and the translator just cracked up. "Ha ha ha! She's noting atta! She's noting atta!"

Sense of self. Ha, ha, ha. There's no sense of self. Ha, ha, ha. It was what friends of mine would call a cross-cultural experience. We both just missed each other. But anyway, it was all right.

So the way I want to talk about recognizing this sense of self—I'm taking this way of speaking about it from Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai meditation master, scholar, and forest monk who died in the nineties. I spent some time in his forest monastery in the eighties when I was in Thailand for a year as a nun. He was a scholar and, within the Thai Theravada tradition, a bit of a radical, a free thinker. He wrote a book that was translated into English as *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, where he talks extensively about recognizing and exploring this sense of self.

This is what he said: "The sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind." I think that's such a great description. That's all it is—just a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. So what? It's no big deal. It comes, it goes when there's grasping and clinging. A friend of ours put it this way: I want, I need, therefore I am.

So this condition means it's a construction, a sankhara, a coming together due to conditions. And like any other condition, any other object, it can be recognized in awareness. Hearing, seeing, sense of self. We don't have to make it into this big deal: "Oh God, the sense of self is here. When am I ever going to get rid of it? It's here so much. I'm never going to get enlightened." And it just turns into this enormous thing. That actually takes the attention away from simply looking at: What am I calling sense of self? What's the experience right now?

This is almost prior to the whole construction, the whole story, the whole "I'm so this and that." It's just the original clinging. With awareness we can start to notice it. It can actually be fun to explore the arising and passing, the birth and death of sense of self.

Since the sense of self arises in a moment of clinging, it can arise with any sense contact, including the mind. It can be with anything. But I'm going to pick some simple examples where you can really see it clearly. Again, an example from my own experience, but it happens—arises and passes—hundreds of times in a day. When we get into reactivity about it, assuming it's here so much or it's always here, it becomes so familiar that we don't really notice that every time, it's different too.

A very simple example: someone was telling me on another retreat that there was a bowl of candy out in the back. They were walking very mindfully through the dining room, and suddenly there was seeing—bowl of candy. They saw very clearly how a sense of me wanting candy arose, just like that. Just wanting and sense of me. Then they kept walking. The image of the candy faded, sense of me died. Birth and death, just like that. Notice it over and over.

Another little story, similar but a bit more expanded. I was on retreat here once some years ago—a while ago, because we used to have not all this homogeneity of green mugs, every mug the same. We used to have all different mugs that people had brought and left here. It was kind of fun. So I was on retreat, and I would walk in, take a mug, whatever—they were all different, different sizes, different everything. Nothing.

But partway into the retreat, a couple of months in, I took a mug, I'm drinking my tea in the morning, and suddenly the thought arose: this is really the perfect mug. It's the right color, it just fits my hand, it feels good to drink out of. And I really became aware of "me and my mug" arising in that moment. I could see the clinging, but instead of thinking, "Oh no, I shouldn't cling," I could just see it. Before that, stuff was just happening. And I asked myself, should I keep it? And the answer came: no, just put it down. I put it down. That birth ended. So that's birth and death of the sense of self.

Starting there, that's a very simple example of dependent origination—the middle part that we can watch—which is a profound teaching. I can't begin to teach it fully right now, but most of you are familiar, I know. The Buddha describes twelve links of how suffering, beginning with ignorance, arises and ends in death—in a moment.

In one of the ways it's described in the suttas, it unfolds over two or three lifetimes. But another way it can be seen, and this is how Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it, is that especially the middle part, we can really, at times, see it happening in our experience.

Starting with ignorance and going to the middle part: there's consciousness and contact. There's a sense organ, object, consciousness, and contact. So in the case of that mug, there was touching. And contact leads to feeling tone—this isn't new information. Touching, pleasant. Feeling tone, without real awareness, gives rise to tanha, to craving, either wanting or wanting to get rid of. You feel that craving.

Now, Ajahn Buddhadasa describes how craving leads to grasping—that's just the stronger version. Someone said craving is leaning into, and grasping is when you grab hold. So Ajahn Buddhadasa describes that when we get to grasping, it becomes the feeling of "I and mine." We're leaning into, and then I grasp that mug. The birth: Carol, I and mine.

This leads to bhava, becoming, which Buddhadasa describes as the feeling of having and being—having my mug, being I, having my mug. Each stage is just a little bit stronger than the one before. And from bhava comes birth. And from birth: old age, sickness, disease, and then death.

So you see how really quickly, in that moment, it went from sense contact to the pleasant, to the leaning into, the grasping, to the birth of Carol and her mug. Put it down, walked away, the whole thing died. Gone. Birth and death in a moment, really gone.

Now, this happens quickly. We're not always going to see it. Don't make yourself crazy, but sometimes we can. Ajahn Chah has a lovely way of describing it: all twelve links of dependent origination go so fast. It's like you're in a tree, and you fall out of the tree, and you pass twelve branches on the way down—whop, whop, whop—you hit the ground and land in suffering. You passed all twelve branches, but you didn't really have time to stop and examine each one. You just land—whop—here you are, in the middle of not getting what you want and suffering, or what you want is going away and suffering.

But with our mindfulness, the mindfulness can pop in at any time and we can really see this. And if we're not hating it or fearing it, it's really fascinating to watch.

So back to the same silly example of the mug. The next day I came in, and I did kind of look for that mug. Already there's a little complication. Before, it had just been free and easy and natural. I walked, I picked, I took.

There was just space. Now, though... and the mug was there. Oh, okay. So I took it. Drinking out of it, saying, "Oh, this is right. This is perfect." The whole nine yards again.

And then this time, I thought, "I think I will actually save this mug. I'll take it to my room. I can take it to my room." Now, in this retreat, I was moving really slowly. So taking it to my room—because that was the only way I could really be sure no one else took it, right?—my room was way at the end of what used to be the Catskills. So I thought, okay, I'll take it to my room. And then I thought, but if you take it to your room, by the time you creep down there and get the mug and creep back in here to breakfast, breakfast is over. This isn't going to work.

And so my mind's going, and it's all getting so complicated. I really was in the suffering of that. I mean, this isn't huge suffering, but how many times a day does the mind do this? And at some point: "Oh, you know what? Put it down. Put it down." And the whole thing just dropped away in that moment. I really put it down.

But this is a great chance to explore: what does that sense of self feel like? It's really the contraction of grasping itself, you could say. What had just been free and easy became restricted, contracted, complicated. I'm planning. I'm scheming. My attention's

narrowed. There's tension. How do you get past all these people? Everything gets complicated and unpleasant because of—you know, it's not the mug—that sense of *I* contracting around that.

Watching the whole thing with mindfulness, honestly, no problem. Even watching all the complications of my mind, when the mindfulness comes in, the complication becomes: "Oh, look at that object, look how grasping creates sense of self, look how it creates complexity, isn't that interesting?" Put down the mug, watch it drop away, walk out, and notice the next time it arises. And you know, it's really fun to see. It arises, it fades and dies—over and over, hundreds of times a day.

So rather than judging it, or thinking if we do it right it's got to stop, we learn to start trusting more and more the power of the mindfulness, the awareness, to simply see: "Oh, this is just how the mind works in this situation." This is how what we call identification—it's really clinging to a perception or a thought or any of the sense experiences, any of the five aggregates Guy mentioned: consciousness, perception, any sankhāra, which is any emotional formation, vedanā. Often we're clinging to pleasant, or with tanha, pushing away, clinging to getting rid of the unpleasant feeling, not recognizing that and lost in the story.

But with each particular one, when the magic trick is seen through, it's like, "Oh, that's what's going on. This mug isn't going to make me happy for the rest of my life. It's just a magic trick." Put it down. It goes.

And on the other side of that—not the other side, but the alternative—just as, and this is back to Ajahn Buddhadasa, how he talks about it: just as it can get interesting to recognize birth and death of sense of self, how does it feel, what am I calling sense of self in this moment, hundreds of times in a day, so just as it's born, so it dies. He says it's really important that we recognize all the moments that are—now this is using Buddhadasa's language—what we call empty of sense of self, which is also true, maybe even more moments of a day.

So he's, in his way of talking, describing suññatā, which is usually translated as emptiness. He's describing that as meaning empty of sense of self. That's how he's describing emptiness.

And he says, moments where there is no particular sense of me or mine arising are not a state we have to create. These are just moments of simple—what you might call the mind—just being aware. This is truly normal and natural. It's a natural quality of our mind, just being aware when the attention isn't distracted in all this construction

and concocting and creating around a particular clinging. It's not like some amazing state we have to achieve, some big explosive blowout experience to finally recognize and have a moment of anattā.

As much as we get interested in noticing the birth and death of self, notice the death of self and just these moments where nothing much else is happening. It's just these moments he's calling suññatā—empty of sense of self. And we're not distracted.

There's a word used sometimes in the suttas, not frequently. Again, Ajahn Buddhadasa was picking it up: atammayatā, which is translated as a state of not being made of that. I know it's a little complicated, but you could understand it as the mind that is not constructing, not fabricating, not concocting. Or as Ajahn Amaro describes it, it refers primarily to the quality of experience prior to all the subject-object division, all the stories we tell. Just that moment of isness.

There are so, so many moments like that in every day, but we don't often notice them because our habit is to incline toward the concoctions. Inclining into whatever stories arise from attachment to a perception or a feeling or that little sense of self. The sense of self in itself is just another fabrication, another thing. It doesn't have to be a big story. But we tend to get more entranced by the stories, by the concoctions, and not quite notice just the simplicity of the silence of the non-concocting mind.

So again, as Buddhadasa is saying, do we notice? He says it's important to generate a contentment with what he calls voidness, this emptiness. We talk about noticing when experience is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, noticing when nothing's really happening—so what, you're aware. When there's no big whoop at all, pleasant or unpleasant, how often when there's nothing special do we kind of dull out, space out, find ourselves just waiting for the next me, the next birth of me to arise?

Are we uncomfortable in just that simple—even to say calm is too much—just the in-between, before anything special is happening? Notice: if a thought ends, a mood ends, a sensation ends, and it's just space, do you feel you've got to jump back to your breath? Jump back to something. Something's got to be going on. Fill up the space. Have something to note. Know what's happening. Can't just be space. It's like a little bit uncomfortable sometimes.

So he's saying start to notice the neutral, when so-called nothing is happening. Generate a contentment with that, or incline the awareness toward it. You might just notice the space between thoughts, or between actions. If you're eating, you probably jump up the second you finish your last bite—well, probably not here, you're all slowing down—

but boom, jump up. Just take a minute. Just be in the space a minute. There's nowhere to rush to. The space between breaths, the space between experiences. Just beginning to find an ease with that.

And assuming, "Well, this is the moment that there's no me. I'm looking for the moment of..."—forget that. You'll do that, and that's another sense of self arising. Then that's just the next arising experience.

Buddhadasa again: Normally we don't notice this emptiness, this voidness of sense of self because we're so involved with experience, so involved with concocting conceptual thoughts. I love that word, concocting. It's kind of like putting things together, but it has a quality of throwing things together in some kind of weird way, concocting. So it doesn't give us a chance to recognize just the empty nature of awareness, the natural nature of awareness.

I want to read a description from the Buddha. I like this because—

Here the Buddha is describing how it is in his mind, how his mind perceives things, speaking to the monks. This passage is a little dense, but I hope you can stay with it. I love it. It's from the Anguttara Nikaya.

He's saying, "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata" — meaning himself — "does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight." This is the corollary to the Bahiya Sutta, which you got a double dose of last week: "In the seen, there is only the seen." So he's describing how that is in his mind.

He does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight. He does not conceive of something unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer. Do you get a sense of that? The seeing is just the seeing. He's not thinking about what else is there to see. He's not thinking about what isn't being seen. He's not thinking about a seer seeing that. Seeing is just what's happening.

And similarly for hearing, similarly for things sensed, similarly for a cognizable thing — he does not conceive of a cognizable thing, which is any mood, any emotion, any thought, as apart from cognition. So what's happening? Thinking is happening. He doesn't conceive of a thinker who's thinking a thought, or of something that's worth cognizing, or of something that is uncognized. "What is it I don't know? What could I know?" No — just cognizing is happening.

Can you imagine that? Just the peace of it. It's so simple we can't stand it, but just the peace of it. It's just this. And even the sense of self is simply something cognized in that moment. "Oh, sense of self." And the peace of it.

I'm going to read a few more things describing it in different ways. This is from *The Island*, that book by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro, but it's actually from a disciple of Ajahn Mun, another Thai forest master named Luang Por Dun. He's reformulating the Four Noble Truths. That might be a little grandiose, but I love the way he expresses it in terms of what we're talking about here.

"The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering." You know what that means? It goes out — like when Ajahn Chah says the mind goes out and disturbs the sound. Hearing is just hearing, but the mind that goes out and complicates is the cause of suffering.

"The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering" — the First Noble Truth.

"The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering" — the Noble Eightfold Path.

"The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering" — the Third Noble Truth.

I just like that as a very pragmatic way of tuning in to the Four Noble Truths. I find it very useful.

So what we're doing, what we're practicing here, is the mind learning to see the mind clearly. Without bias, without judgment — just how is the mind working? Nothing to be afraid of in it. Nothing to be afraid of about recognizing this sense of self. Because awareness is stronger.

Awareness can be with anything. Just keep on bringing in the awareness, and we see more clearly how the mind is working. And as we recognize more fully how the mind is working, there's less and less suffering about it.

So, inclining the mind toward just some ease, some comfort, just some recognition with these—I call them little nothing-special moments. Instead of looking for the big light show, just the nothing-special moments. Or noticing when we're jumping out. Often, you know, any suffering sense of self and concoction feels better than just... peace. Just nothing. Because it's so familiar, the sense of me.

But again, back to Buddhadasa, Ajahn Buddhadasa. I think Guy mentioned those two Pali phrases: *ahankara* and *mamankara*. I-ing and my-ing. Notice they're verbs. I-ing and my-ing. Just constructions that the mind creates in a moment and then fall away when the conditions change. And they're changing all the time. So we're just here to explore that.

I want to read a couple of other ways of describing this, just to end. Just describing the simplicity of it.

This is from Ajahn Jumnian, another Thai forest master: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter—empty processes arising and passing away of their own. Perfect balance of mind with no reactions, and in this time there is no longer any doing."

Now, don't think about that as a goal to be reached and stayed in permanently. It's just a description of moments, the way the Buddha was talking when it's just this, and the mind doesn't go out and concoct a whole story about it. It's just this. Whatever arises is recognized and simply left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter arising and passing away.

From Nyoshul Khenpo, the wonderful Tibetan Dzogchen master, he said this kind of recognition, this simplicity of awareness, is not something missing to be sought for and obtained, but is at the very heart of our essential nature. He calls it unfabricated, ordinary awareness. So don't go looking for something so special in these moments. Just unfabricated, ordinary awareness, unadulterated by effort and modification. Naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural. What could be simpler than this?

That's the trouble, like I said before. It's so simple, we can't stand it. We want to go out and make a story. What could be simpler than this? So get out of the construction business.

In just little moments, just recognizing—the space, the silence, whatever way it comes for you, the calm, the nothing-special, the birth of self, the death of self, the creation, the complexification, the death of that—all of it is just mind and matter arising and passing. No need for interference.

And then this is from Dogen, the great Zen master, just to end: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to dissolve the barriers that seem to exist between oneself and others."

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

What could be simpler than this?

CHAPTER 126

Wisdom Needs Compassion; Compassion Needs Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the essential unity of wisdom and compassion in Buddhist practice. She explains how wisdom without compassion can devolve into a cold nihilism where nothing seems to matter, while compassion without wisdom can lead to despair, burnout, or actions driven by fear and anger rather than genuine care. Drawing on teachings from Padmasambhava, the Dalai Lama, Śāntideva, and Nāgārjuna, she illuminates how true understanding of emptiness (suññatā) naturally opens into compassionate response—when we are no longer 'full of ourselves,' the heart naturally moves toward the suffering of others.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that our meditation practice is itself the cultivation of compassion. By learning to meet our own suffering with tender, open presence rather than aversion, we develop the capacity to bear witness to the suffering of all beings. She offers the definition of compassion as 'the tender quivering of the heart in response to suffering' and shows how this quality strengthens through deep insight into dukkha gained through our own experience. The talk includes a teaching story from Milarepa about facing inner demons, illustrating how the final refuge is always placing oneself fully in the mouth of fear with compassion.*
>
> *The talk concludes with powerful examples of wisdom and compassion in action, particularly the nonviolent civil rights activism of James Lawson and John Lewis. Wilson shares how Lawson's ability to find human connection even in violent confrontation demonstrates the transformative power of a 'graceful heart'—one that recognizes the divine spark in all beings, even those who cause harm. This bearing witness, whether to our own pain or to societal injustice, is presented as authentic compassion that neither fixes nor flees, but remains present with an open, tender heart.*

Tonight I'd just like to share some thoughts on the topic of the unity of wisdom and compassion. You could say wisdom needs compassion and compassion needs wisdom for completeness. Luckily, they both naturally turn into each other, so it's not something to worry about.

The view, the understanding of emptiness, of non-separateness—that no thing exists with separate intrinsic existence—this can, just on its own as an idea or an incomplete understanding, converge into disconnect. It can start to seem like nothing matters, like nihilism.

And compassion without wisdom is when we just can't hold it, when we turn away in fear, drown in the grief, or try to act from compassion out of an idea of a "should" but without the deep understanding of wisdom. Even with our best intentions, the actions can start to come from our desperation, our fear, our anger. And so the two support each other.

I want to talk a bit about that, and then speak more about how our practice here is the most powerful way we are cultivating and developing compassion. We've talked about wisdom a lot.

When we say—a phrase I use often—that awareness or mindfulness doesn't care, it doesn't care what it's mindful of. I'll read a quotation that Winnie mentioned last night. You see how just hearing the sense of it is quite beautiful, but the mind that's just hearing it without really the gut-level understanding can think, "That doesn't sound so great to me." This is from Ajahn Chah:

"At some point the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing."

On one level that can be quite inspiring, on the wisdom level, as we're touching that potential of peace, of non-doing. But the old thinking mind can come in, or when it's an incomplete understanding—which it is, let's face it, for most of us most of the time—people often express, "Well, if nothing matters, what do we practice for? If nothing matters, when we awaken we're not going to care about anybody or anything. We're not going to be motivated to do anything."

That's a big question. If everything's all equal, we won't appreciate nature, we won't appreciate beauty. There won't be love, there won't be compassion—just some big, dull, empty blob of existence. "I'm not really so interested in that." Or people quite seriously say this sounds alien, inhuman. More than just a little uninteresting: a cold, empty void. Indifference.

So that's one side—the mind thinking about it that's separate from the experience. Because in the experience you don't think, "Oh, this is just dull and blobby." You think, "Wow, this is really free." But thinking about it, these doubts can come up.

The other side is again the incomplete understanding. Padmasambhava talks about the view and action—where we fall into the view. Not the idea, but the gut-level, real understanding of the emptiness of separate me-ness, of things, of this non-interference, this ability to just be with whatever arises, with peace and spaciousness. But it can fall into what's called "falling into emptiness."

Padmasambhava says the view—this real understanding, this wisdom that frees the heart and mind—is the most important thing. However, do not let your action slip in the direction of the view. If it does, you will fall into the evil views of demons prattling on about how goodness is empty, evil is empty. That sense of "It's all empty. Awareness doesn't care. I can do whatever I want and I'm free and it's empty and I'm creating no karma, so it just doesn't matter." Have you ever heard or read that kind of thing? It can seem like a logical outcome, but that's not what the Buddha is saying at all.

Stephen Batchelor quotes Nagarjuna: "Buddhas say emptiness is the relinquishing of opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable." When emptiness becomes a view that is held to—this is Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche describing it—"It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality." In other words, sad to see those of us stuck in samsara. "But far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the ways of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to re-emerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

Now don't get scared. I know that sounds like some of what we've been saying. But it's a one-sided, limited view—it's when emptiness is taken up as a view, not as one's real gut-level experiential understanding. That kind of falling into emptiness is not the wisdom of seeing things as they are, not the wisdom of the Buddha.

But in my limited experience, and in everyone I've seen and talked to as well, if we simply continue with our mindfulness practice as we're doing...

In moments where we're really experiencing, touching, recognizing various aspects of equanimity of mind, as I read from Ajahn Chah, or in a moment when all thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations are arising and passing and there's no need to fixate on anything or pull out any one as important—when we really are experiencing that,

not just thinking about it—in those moments, the natural response of the mind or heart, if a response is necessary, from the mind that's empty of the obsession with self, is the response of compassion, of metta, of appropriate response to circumstances.

Exactly because all of our energy is not bound up in the relentless, obsessive self-referencing that goes on. Again, I'm talking moment to moment. This isn't like we have to think about way down the road, one time, one big blowout. But moment to moment.

You can notice this for yourself over the days. In times when you're not *having* one of those moments, but one of those moments is occurring—and there's awareness, just presence with the is-ness of things, as we've talked about a lot—there's no big sense of "me." You're just sitting, drinking tea, taking a walk, looking at the leaves, whatever you're doing. Just present. Would a thought of harming arise? Does it make any sense? If someone comes by and you can tell that they're sad, and it's just this moment of pure is-ness, does any kind of resistance or aversion or blame come up? It just doesn't make any sense. It doesn't come up. It's not like we have to somehow manufacture compassion.

When in that moment the energy is freed from this need to protect, from this fear, from this relentless self-referencing—that's the natural response when faced with the suffering of a being or of ourselves. The real experience, the real understandings that come to us over and over in all different ways, of the emptiness of not-self, just deepen our experience and the mind's tendency to move into compassion rather than fear and anger.

A couple of quotations from Stephen Batchelor, from the introduction to his translation of verses from Nagarjuna's *Verses from the Center*. He's talking here about Shantideva, who was a teacher in India in the seventh century, the author of one of the most famous texts, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. Stephen also translated that text, and he says that when Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolves—and this can just be in a moment, we all know this—he did not vanish into an abyss of nothingness. In fact, Batchelor says, to be empty, to know emptiness, is to no longer be full of oneself.

And when one is no longer full of oneself, that insight into emptiness does not only change the way one views the world and oneself; it also transforms the way one feels about the world and beings and oneself. The heart is open to the anguish of others, prompting a spontaneous longing to assuage their sufferings. And at the same time, there's the wisdom that can acknowledge the somewhat irrational nature of the idea that one could save all others as a limited human being.

So there's the sense of the wisdom of the vastness, and the natural deepening response of the heart that touches the anguish of others because it can no longer be afraid to touch the anguish of ourselves.

And so the famous quotation from Shantideva: "When I've done something for the sake of another, I don't feel amazement or conceit. It is just like having fed myself. I look for nothing in return."

That's really more the sense. One is no longer so full of oneself. And what opens up from that is actually the ability to be more tender with oneself and others. But with the eye of wisdom, we can recognize more clearly what needs to be done, if there's anything that can be done.

There's a story I use often that I heard on the radio, but I've been told it's true. A few years ago, when the Millennium Bridge opened in London over the Thames River—it's a walking bridge—it was a big deal. The first day it opened, hundreds of people were walking across. It was a big celebration, quite a fancy thing. Anyway, so many people were walking across the bridge that it started shaking and wobbling, back and forth. They were telling this story as an example of what was called... well, it's gone. That's why I write things down. I think I know, and then it's gone.

But anyway, it's a kind of rational, enlightened self-interest—something like that. If you act out of enlightened self-interest, that will be for the good of all. And they were using this principle in relationship to economic policies that led to the 2008 "good-of-all" occurrences in the economy.

So anyway, all these people are walking across the bridge, and it starts to shake. Everyone acts from enlightened self-interest. It starts to lean to one side, so everyone steps to the other side. They all step to the other side, all four hundred people, which completely throws the whole thing off balance. Each single person meaning well, but from the limited view of my self-interest, you can only see so far. You all do the same thing, can't take in the big picture—which the wisdom of emptiness is more able to do. It's just a simple example, but that's kind of how it works.

And the other side of Padmasambhava's quote, where he says don't let your actions slip in the direction of the view—acting from the view that nothing matters. But on the other hand, if you let your views slip in the direction of actions—in other words, if you act without having the view, the understanding of emptiness—even when we're trying to act in the best possible way, like walking on the bridge, we can't see clearly. We can start acting from what we think is compassion, and it may be for a while, but the depth of the intention—we can't keep it up by willpower.

The Dalai Lama says—and he's Mr. Compassion, right?—compassion must be derived from our insight into the emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Without this unity, we can fall into despair. He says with wisdom, knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable—now to me that sounds depressing, but he's saying knowing that from the wisdom of emptiness, our empathy for our inability to pull ourselves out leads to a more powerful compassion. Once we really see that there's no me to protect, there's nothing to do but compassion for all beings. That's just what arises. But without that wisdom—this is the Dalai Lama—although our compassion may be strong, it is likely to have a quality of helplessness or even despair.

Have you ever experienced that? Just in the sense of when we're faced with what comes at us every day here, never mind the world. It's something that is probably one of the ongoing questions and examinations of my life, part of my practice, my exploration all these years. I'm nowhere close to really getting it, but I keep exploring and being inspired by it. Really, the question of compassion to wisdom: How can wisdom help compassion? How can we continue to open again and again in this complex world of so much beauty and so much suffering, of so much tenderness and so much horror? I mean, that's my experience of the world—sometimes more of one and sometimes more of the other.

But how do we—just listening to the news any given day. I'm going to spare you the litany tonight; I don't think there's any need for it. We all have our own. But just listening to the news: huge world global horrors, small individual cruelties and violence and bigotry and ignorance. Take your pick. Yes, there are beautiful things too—don't get me wrong, I don't want to just be one-sided. But talking about compassion means we're talking about suffering.

And so some days it's like, how can I find the courage and the spaciousness of heart and mind and the wisdom just to sit here and listen for ten minutes? Some days I have it. Some days there's a real sense of connectedness, the heart's really touched. Some days it's just—oh my god, it's so overpowering and everything in me wants to shut down. And some days I don't turn it on.

And I'm not saying there's a right or a wrong, but that's the question that lives at the heart of this work: How do we keep opening? How do we find the courage to keep reconnecting with the tender heart—the heart that's willing to just drop into our own suffering with tenderness, without going to hatred or despair or fear or indifference?

Sometimes the mind will go there. That's not always in our control. We all know that. But there are times we can notice a little choice: Do I let myself connect with this or not? And really starting to notice—how do we keep finding that wisdom, that courage, that tenderness over and over and over again? To me, that's kind of the whole koan of practice.

The wisdom and the compassion feed each other and cycle around together. As one gets deeper and more powerful, so does the other. But as Winnie said so eloquently last night, it's not linear. We can't assess. And everything else she said, which I hope you remember.

So how do we find the strength, the wisdom to be with the difficult, to be with the unwanted? I want to talk a little about what compassion actually is in terms of a mental factor, a mental quality—starting in terms of our practice here together, not theoretical, really quite specific to what we're doing. And I'm sure this is not news to any of you.

The definition of compassion is really the state of heart and mind that meets suffering with empathy—any kind of suffering: physical, mental, emotional. One actual translation is "the tender quivering of the heart in response to suffering." Meeting the suffering with an open presence—not shut off, not pulled back, not judging. Sounds like mindfulness, right?

Now, often compassion is spoken of as more than just sitting there feeling sympathetic—"Oh, poor suffering"—but as the actual motivation to act, the impulse, that deep urge that Stephen Batchelor was talking about to alleviate the suffering of others. This manifests in that deep intention of bodhicitta that we talked about the other day—a very strong motivation in some traditions to go through the whole path of awakening in order to come back and be present to alleviate the suffering of all beings. A vast motivation.

We don't have to start there. But even if you think of compassion as needing action to alleviate suffering, in our understanding of the way the Buddha taught, all action—the seed of action—is intention. We've talked about this: that movement of mind and heart that leads to action, that little impulse that comes informed by whatever qualities are present in the mind and heart at that moment, motivating action. Since the seed of all action is intention, the seed of compassion is in the intentions.

So here in practice is the perfect place where we begin to recognize—and this is really the key—not so much what's happening, but how the heart and mind in any particular moment is meeting and responding to what's arising. When we're talking about compassion, we mean that open heart and mind connected to suffering. When some as-

pect of suffering comes, we don't have to fix it. Where we're really deepening in compassion is in how the mind and heart in this moment is simply meeting this particular suffering.

You don't have to evaluate: Is it a big enough suffering? Is it a stupid suffering compared to everybody else's in the world, so it doesn't count? No—that's dosa, that's aversion. This is not just a laboratory. This is the cultivation of compassion, just as much as wisdom.

The Dalai Lama, talking about bodhicitta and deep compassion and how it develops, said that real compassion, true compassion, develops through deep insight into what suffering is. Yes, there is no way around that one. Deep insight into what suffering is. And how does he say this arises? It arises by focusing, by opening to, by being present with our own experience of suffering. Nowhere else.

As this deepens, as this becomes a more natural response—opening, closing, opening, closing—you may find times when compassion just naturally strengthens. And this is the Dalai Lama again: it strengthens into a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings. Through compassion—this is why compassion is a Brahma-vihara, a divine abiding, just like metta—all beings suffer at some point in their lives. All beings. And compassion is this quality of measureless heart and mind that, just by touching suffering with an open, tender presence, without judgment, without holding, our particular suffering opens into the universal.

This is why the difficult times of retreat—and life too, but we're talking about retreat, though it's the same in life, no different—why they're so important.

We cannot judge what's unfolding in the midst of difficulty. But it's not simply that we go through the hard times saying, "Okay, okay, I know I'm learning," just waiting for it to be over. You can't tell in the middle—we simply can't. But often, looking back later, you may see it clearly. I certainly can look back and recognize that the retreats where I learned the most, not in an intellectual way, but where the most change happened, the most opening, the most wisdom arose—these were always the most difficult times. Because that's where wisdom has to come together with compassion, meeting what's actually happening at that gut level where part of you is screaming, "I'm out of here!" But there's nowhere to go. So you can beat your head against the wall, or you can open. And we will beat our heads for a while, until we see it doesn't work.

I'm quite serious about this—I don't want to make light of it. These parts of retreat, just as in our lives, are invaluable. This is really what it's about. And there's no way around it. We don't get to bypass it. I think Winnie said it humorously last night, but we

don't get to simply declare, "Oh yes, I really get suffering. I'm open to suffering. I'm not resisting it. I really understand compassion"—just like that, the way I said it just now. It doesn't happen without this deep grokking of it. That doesn't mean we won't fight it. But that's exactly how compassion and attention develop, right where we are.

This takes tremendous courage and trust, and you're all doing it here. I want to keep supporting what you're doing and reflect that back to you. We start where we are. It's the only place compassion and wisdom can develop.

To me—and this is my own personal take, not from a Buddha—the essence of metta, and the essence of compassion too, where they truly begin, is with simple connection. The heart-mind openly, completely connecting, just sinking into what's happening without a "so that," without fear, aversion, or greed. This sounds very much like mindfulness—it's not so different. But that connection, when heart and mind meet suffering in that open way, is what blossoms into compassion.

Yet as we've all seen, for most of us most of the time, this is not our default mode. The Dalai Lama was once asked why there appears to be such a lack of compassion in human society. He said perhaps we simply pay less attention within ourselves to compassion and caring—we reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense we fully embrace hostility and anger as emotional states, fueling them, reinforcing them. If we were to give the same energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

So first I want to emphasize again: that's what we're doing here. Noticing anger is different from reinforcing it. But the initial shift involves recognizing our habitual patterns. When we're not aware, when we're operating from our automatic modes, facing really difficult suffering—whether physical pain, aging, grief, trauma, or external injustice—often it's as if, at least I see this in myself, unconsciously I trust aversion to protect me. Or anger to protect me. Or fear to protect me. That's where the mind goes.

What is aversion? The essence of aversion in any moment is that the mind pulls back from experience. It doesn't want to be there.

Whether it's fear and going away out of fear, or whether it's anger and aggression, it still pulls away from the experience and then blames someone else.

Whereas the essence of compassion starts with connection. As Joko Beck says, can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? That's all. I don't have to do anything else. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?

The answer might be, "No way." But you can be aware of that. That's already different—seeing the jumping away, the closing down, the shutting off, as if to protect.

Pema Chödrön has a lovely image. She talks a lot about compassion and how we really start where we are. Just this image of how we close to protect ourselves. We think we're protecting our vulnerable self from suffering. We shut down like a sea anemone—you know, those sea animals with tendrils that close up like that if you touch them. And she has this lovely image of us closing to protect our tender and vulnerable heart.

So we think, as best we know, that with the aversion and the fear, the shutting down, the tensing up, the resisting of suffering, we're protecting our tender and vulnerable heart. But we're not really. The more we protect, it takes an enormous amount of energy. It shuts out the potential of connection and tenderness. And again, Pema Chödrön says it's as if we spend our whole life walking around all tensed up like we're sitting in a dentist's chair. Something bad might happen, something bad might happen, something bad might happen. Compassion is not possible when it's like that.

How we meet this moment arising is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. What's arising in this moment is, as I hope you're getting, out of our control. And for whatever's arising, there are valid causes and conditions. How do we know they're valid? Because this is what's happening. We can't change that because it's already happening. How our mind is meeting it is the place, the movement from the habit of fear and aversion to the tenderness of compassion.

So when you think you're sitting with pain—a pain, a pain—and it's not going away and you're always in aversion, but you really look, there are lots of moments that are not in aversion. It's just with it. It's just calm. It's just peaceful. But then the aversion comes, or then all the "how can I fix it" comes. But then there are some moments that are calm, peaceful. Those are cultivating, developing, learning to trust more the power of compassion. It may not look like much at first.

Let me read you a story from Milarepa. Remember, Guy talked about Milarepa, the Tibetan yogi with the calluses on his bum? He was really one of the most famous, and a great poet. I'm going to edit this severely, but there's like a thousand and one songs, many songs of Milarepa. This is one story of what went on all those years he was sitting in the cave developing those calluses. I'll read part of it and make my little editorial comments as we go along.

Mila's mind became blissful and he carried some wood back up to the cave.

So this is like you in meditation. You've become blissful and you come back in to sit.

When he arrived there, he found in the cave seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa—barley flour—and some sat performing various magical tricks.

So you get it? You come home all blissful and here are the seven demons, and they've made themselves at home.

As soon as Mila saw them, he became frightened.

So just like us, he became frightened.

He meditated on his deity. He uttered a subjugating mantra—you know, a very fearful mantra—performed a gaze, aroused his deity's presence. He brought in all his protectors. Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness.

That's usually our order, isn't it?

Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness, but was still unable to pacify them. So he thought, well, these might be local deities of the place, and although I've been here for months and years, I have not praised them. In other words, we haven't even recognized they're here.

So he sang a song of praise—I'm cutting it short because it's very long—and it ends: "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. Drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone."

Does that sound familiar?

So three of them who were performing magic did go away, which unfortunately only gives us the sense we can keep on trying like that. But he was unable to make the other four go away.

So then he sang a song of confidence—really a song that called up his faith: "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse." And then three of the demons vanished like a rainbow.

He's slowly softening, but you can hear, right? Not quite.

The remaining demon performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So then he sang a song of view, the pinnacle of his understanding, really going to the depth of his practice. It ends with: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. So demon, if you were to stay here longer, that

would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We will talk out our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit." Then he prays to Lord Vajradhara: "Grant your blessings so that this lowly one may have complete compassion."

Thus he sang, and with friendliness and compassion and without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and so vanished like a rainbow.

The pinnacle of wisdom and compassion. But it's always the last resort of what we're used to. Here we're learning it right, over and over again.

The essence really of compassion is connection. Just this simple willingness to be present, tender awareness as much as we can. You could call it bearing witness—bearing witness to our own difficulty, our own suffering, which opens into others.

James Baldwin has a line that I like very much: "An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard." And I think that starts with our own suffering. When it's an enemy, it's someone, something whose story we have not heard. Same when it's projected outward to someone else.

So we start here with our own personal dukkha in whatever form—physical, mental, emotional—just being able over and over to touch it, to be with it, to bear witness to it. Not to make it go away, but just to be there. And it does open into a sense of connection with all beings.

Whether it's grief, chronic illness, the fear of some new and life-threatening illness, loneliness, the sadness of those we love suffering—whatever your particular flavor is—when we're able to be with it, to stop making it the enemy, to hear its story, it may not seem like there's much compassion. But this being able to bear witness translates naturally into bearing witness, being present for others going through that same suffering.

You can really feel the difference. Compassion doesn't always mean we fix things. But it means we're able to stay there with an open, tender heart. Because we can be with our own suffering, we can be with another's.

I've seen this with sickness, with illness, with grief. You know when someone comes really well-intentioned, cares, wants to help, but doesn't have that ability to just touch with their own self the suffering? There's a little bit of fear in it. Years ago I had a chronic illness, and so many dear, wonderful people came with so many ideas about how to help. But I could really feel the people who wanted to help yet had this level of fear, this level of basically "get better so we don't have to be around this." That's crass, but you can feel the discomfort.

And then other people come—same with grief—and just know. It's just how it is. I know how it is. I can be here with you. I don't have to fix it.

You can feel that, that bearing witness. It's a powerful form of compassion. It doesn't mean we each have to go out and be Gandhi, but it starts with being present to whatever measure of suffering is arising in our mind and body right now. From there, it can move to a much greater scale.

For the remaining part of this talk, I'd like to read a few examples from others, because they express this much better and much deeper than I can.

This sense of bearing witness can move from our own personal realm—being able to be present with friends, with people who are suffering—to something larger. And when we're present with a calm eye and heart, if there's something to do, we can see more clearly. Sometimes there's not.

I think this bearing witness is something that often shows up in the realm of artists—bearing witness to large societal areas of horror.

One example I've always admired is the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous poets in Russia of the twentieth century. She's mostly well-known because during the years of the Stalin terror, she could have emigrated. Many of the people she knew left Russia, but she chose not to. She chose to remain in her country, specifically to be a witness to the horrors of the Stalinist terror and the starvation, which she did experience. Her first husband was shot by the Stalinist army. Her second common-law husband and her son were both imprisoned in the Gulag for many years, and her second husband died there. So it's not like she was some disconnected witness.

I want to read a little snippet from one of her longer poems, *Requiem*, written between 1935 and 1940. It's a long poem about those years of Stalin's terror. Just this beginning, because it so touches me—the power of being able to be present with an open heart. It can really make such a difference. It doesn't fix things. But this is compassion as well.

She begins *Requiem*: "No foreign sky protected me. No stranger's wing shielded my face. I stand as witness to the common lot, survivor of that time, that place."

And then, instead of a preface, she writes: "In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, when the most people were being arrested and sent off to the Gulag or killed, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad."

What this means is that anyone whose family member had been taken—they would just be disappeared in the night, you never knew where they were—would stand outside the prison in Leningrad all day, every day, with packages, hoping they could just get to the front of the line and give a package of food or something that they hoped would reach their loved one, whom they didn't even know was alive.

So she's not exaggerating. She spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad with hundreds and hundreds of other people. "One day, somebody in the crowd called me by name." She was famous by this time, so someone called her by name. "And standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper"—everyone whispered there—"'Can you describe this?' And I said, 'I can.' Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face."

Just that power to be present and to communicate it, because she was so present to it all. And we can hear it because it's a natural aspect of our humanness to meet suffering with compassion. It's not some rarefied thing. When we're not lost in our own self-interest, that's what emerges.

Being fully present, bearing witness—that's one aspect.

Two other aspects I want to mention briefly. One is the complexity that arises when we do move into the realm of action. We must remember to start and keep coming back to the motivation of compassion, of wisdom, rather than assessing ourselves solely by our actions. Because that's how we can act with the most wisdom amid the complexity of life, knowing—as we're starting to know—that we have no control over the outcomes of any action we perform. There are so many complications. We don't even have control over the outcomes of actions just about ourselves, never mind in the wider world, never mind other people's responses.

So how do we act from the most wisdom and compassion and then not take it personally when it doesn't turn out how we want? How do we not fall into despair or anger or hopelessness? Believe me, I'm not saying I have this one licked. I'm just bringing these up as what is involved.

One complexity, not simple but common for many people—at least at my age—is what happens when you're designated as the medical proxy for someone, say for your elderly parents. That entails all kinds of decisions. You'll have no idea what they'll be,

and they had no idea what they would be when they asked you to take on this role. You can never figure out in advance what's going to come and what the decisions are going to be.

And you never know—you make the decisions as best you can. You don't know. Sometimes the best decision you could make leads to a lot more suffering for a longer period of time. Really. How do you stay with that? And stay open and present with the compassion, present with the suffering, and not fall into self-judgment or want to turn away because it's too painful to watch?

And I really see—I saw for myself, and I did this with both my parents—I saw for myself: when it's about me, there's no way to see clearly. If the decision is colored, tinged by "I'm going to be uncomfortable," or "That's what they think they want, but it's not what I think is best for them," or "I know more than..." or "I just can't stand to see that, so even though they wanted it, I can't do it"—all of that doesn't let you see clearly. It's not a simple example, but a common one that's very, very complex. And it's not like you say, "Okay, now I'll do it from compassion," and it stays like that. We have to keep reconnecting, keep seeing what's going on, and have compassion when we blow it. We will, because of course we won't have all the wisdom, and then we'll fall into fear, we'll fall into overwhelm, we'll fall back into the habits of aversion or blame or whatever our habit is. We stop suffering right there, and we start again. We start again. We start again. But life is complex, so just trying to do the right thing without wisdom—you see how we can get lost.

And this is just more from the news, but how attachment to view, combined with trying to do what's for the good of all—let's not even get into politics, but that's kind of where this goes—views for caring for life. This is a bit of a radical example, but where it can go: you have people who are anti-abortion and then end up wanting to kill doctors who perform abortions. How can you get there from compassion? Compassion to one side and murder on the other side, held by view. That's falling into views. Whereas compassion is coming back, coming back, coming back to see that the seed of action comes from our intention. And our practice here, being with our own suffering, is how we keep on purifying the intention, finding the courage over and over.

So I just want to read from two or three people who have examples of acting in the world over and over in very difficult and threatening situations. I'm not saying these people are perfect or anything, but they have the deep wisdom of the power of compassion and love to counter terror and violence and fear—and then the need to keep reconnecting, repurifying. It's never a one-time thing. None of these people do I know, of course, but they have really inspired me over some years of reading about them.

The first is a man named James Lawson. Probably a lot of you know who he is. He's a doctor of divinity, still teaching now at 85 years old. He is even now considered one of the leading theorists in this country on nonviolence and nonviolent activism. He was really one of the leaders in the whole civil rights movement starting in the 1950s, doing huge trainings for all the freedom riders and many of the civil rights activists on nonviolent civil rights activism. Really powerful.

He was a follower of Gandhi. Even during the Korean War, he was a conscientious objector. He could have gotten out of going—he could have been deferred because he was a minister—but he said that wouldn't be fair. So he went to jail as an anti-war activist. I turned on the radio one day, and they were just interviewing somebody. I didn't know who it was, but I just started listening, and halfway through I thought, "Wow, that must be James Lawson." And it was. I got so excited just hearing him. He was saying—this is a quote—"I discovered a strength and power in me when I was in jail to live out of my own conscience." He continues to teach nonviolent workshops, working for immigrant rights, rights of Palestinians, workers' rights to a living wage, civil rights. He's involved in all kinds of causes and in teaching nonviolence.

I want to read a little example of the simple but incredibly courageous and powerful way that he brings a sense of connection into a really violent situation. This is a description given to the writer by a person who was involved, Bernard Lafayette. This was in Nashville in 1960 during a demonstration for integration. As the demonstrators were walking along, some young white toughs came and started beating them up. They grabbed the guy at the back and started beating on him. Bernard Lafayette, who's telling the story, threw himself over the man to protect him. All of these guys had been trained by James Lawson, who was there. While this was going on, Jim Lawson walked over. He didn't rush over.

He said he walked over very calmly, as if to a longstanding appointment. When he arrived, that shifted the attention of the guys who were beating to Lawson. Bernard remembered that he just seemed so confident, so relaxed, as if this was just normal for him.

The leader of the toughs, when he saw Lawson, became really enraged—obviously at his coolness—and he spit on him. Lawson just looked at him and asked him for a handkerchief. The man, stunned, reached in his pocket and handed Lawson a handkerchief. Lawson wiped himself off.

Then he looked at the man, dressed in this leather motorcycle jacket gear, looked at the man's jacket, and started talking to him. Did he have a motorcycle or a hot rod car? A motorcycle was the answer. Jim asked a technical question or two, and the young

man started explaining what he had done to customize his bike. Amazingly, Bernard thought, these two men were now talking about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. A few seconds earlier, they had seemed to be sworn enemies. By this time, the guys on the ground were up and walking, and the line was moving again. Jim and the young man were still talking about the man's motorcycle. In that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject which they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them more human in the eyes of the other.

I just find that so powerful—the simplicity of that connection, finding the humanness in such a difficult situation.

The theory of this is explained further by one of his students at that time: John Lewis, who as you probably know is now a congressman from Georgia, has been so for many years, but he was one of the students, one of the original Freedom Riders. This is from his autobiography, where he describes the principles of Gandhian nonviolent action as he learned them from James Lawson:

"One of the most fundamental principles of the Gandhian notion of satyagraha, nonviolent action, is that it is not just a technique to achieve specific goals. It's not just a tool to achieve unity and freedom in the world around us. True satyagraha, as Gandhi taught it, is about a fundamental shift inside our own souls. It is rooted in the qualities of inner unity, of inner freedom, of inner certainty."

Inner unity is concentration, inner freedom is wisdom, inner certainty is faith. It's the same thing.

"And once found, that place is not disturbed or affected by the thousands of details of the world around us that bombard us every day."

Then, to bring in suffering, he says:

"Suffering puts us and those around us in touch with our consciences. It opens and touches our heart. It makes us feel compassion where we need to. But suffering can be nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering. This is a difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence.

We are talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even

in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy. This sense of love realizes that the emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into themselves, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence."

That is one of the most profound things I've read about compassion and wisdom.

I had one other story, a man from Burma, but it's a little long, and I think I'll just end here.

So, thank you. Let's just sit quietly with a graceful heart for a moment.

CHAPTER 127

Generosity: Transforming the Heart

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this talk, Carol Wilson examines generosity (dāna) as a foundational practice in the Buddha's teachings, not merely as a preliminary to meditation but as a powerful path for transforming consciousness. She explains how the Buddha typically began teaching with dāna, followed by sīla (morality) and bhāvanā (mental cultivation), establishing generosity as essential rather than secondary to the path.

Drawing from extensive practice in Burma and Thailand, Wilson shares moving stories that illustrate the profound mutuality of giving and receiving. She describes villagers who, upon receiving rice donations, immediately came out the next morning to offer rice back to monks—their first instinct being to share what they had received. Through these accounts, she reveals how generosity counters greed, fosters contentment, and dissolves the false sense of separation between giver and receiver.

Wilson presents practical guidance for cultivating dāna: attending to the volition behind giving, abandoning attachment to what is offered, giving face-to-face when appropriate, and maintaining presence throughout the act. She emphasizes that the Buddha taught recollection of one's own generosity as a meditation practice that literally inclines the mind away from greed, aversion, and delusion. Referencing teachings to the layman Mahānāma, she shows how contemplating our generous acts leads to joy, rapture, calm, ease, and concentration—the same qualities developed in formal meditation.

Sometimes in the middle of a meditation retreat, with all our talks and discussions, everything is naturally about meditation—that's what we're here for. But we can forget, we too sometimes can forget, that everything the Buddha taught, as far as we understand, was for the purpose of really transforming our consciousness. Purifying our heart and mind, inclining to the wholesome, abandoning the unwholesome mind states, the suffering mind states.

And it's not only meditation. Meditation is like the central tool, a wonderful tool, a really powerful tool. But in the Buddha's teachings, meditation is not a complete path. It doesn't exist in isolation.

As I think we've said earlier, often when the Buddha would start to teach somebody, he wouldn't just begin with, "Okay, this is dependent origination, get it"—unless he knew they could, and occasionally someone could. But he would usually start with

dana, or generosity, and talk about sila, morality, and talk about bhavana, mental cultivation. Tonight I want to talk about the first of these—generosity—as a training, a transformative quality of heart and mind, as part of the teaching and as a way of life.

I suppose the secret for me was this: we always think generosity is a good idea, right? Probably no one dismisses it outright. Sometimes you even hear, "I'll be generous because I can't meditate, but meditation is really where it's at." As if generosity were a lesser practice. But really, generosity as a practice is not about what it looks like, or what you give, or being appreciated. This quality of open-hearted sharing is, in the moment of generosity, a deep source of happiness, of joy, of transformation of heart and mind.

Obviously it counters greed—that's apparent. If you're being generous, unless it's something you really don't want (which doesn't actually count as generosity), you're working against that grasping tendency. But also, when one is truly generous in the moment, there's a sense of contentment, of sufficiency. It fosters and strengthens the sense of connectedness. When the heart is generous, it's not filled with ill will or separation. Generosity counters the false sense of separation and neediness. It's really very powerful.

What I mostly want to communicate tonight is something I didn't realize—almost like it was a secret—until I spent a lot of time practicing in Thailand and Burma. In those countries, where the teachings of Buddhism are woven into the culture and the majority of people are Buddhist to varying degrees of practice, generosity has a particular presence. It's in the culture in a profound way.

I don't mean to say we're not generous in this country. There's enormous generosity in the West—this real sense of volunteering, of offering our time and energy, not only during crises but at other times too. There's great philanthropy here. I certainly grew up with the sense that generosity is wonderful.

But for me—and I'm only speaking for myself—there was often a little bit of a "should" attached to generosity. One should be generous to those less fortunate. Just a little hint of differentiation: I can give because I have more. Which is fine, but what I didn't understand until I spent a lot of time on the receiving end in these countries is the incredible happiness and joy that arises in the mutuality of giving and receiving as a natural way of life.

I don't mean everybody in Thailand or Burma embodies this perfectly, but it's simply a way that exists there. I've learned so much and imbibed a great deal about it. Tonight I'll share some little stories as a way of communicating how contagious this is—the

sense of joy in generosity of time, of small things, of food—and then the sense of joy and dignity in receiving. Both go together. It's not that the generous person is generous because they have more while the poor person who receives is lesser. Not at all. The sense of dignity, joy, and mutuality is an essential aspect of generosity.

The Buddha actually set up his sangha of nuns and monks and laymen and laywomen with the idea of sharing, of generosity, as a central connecting principle. This is a quotation from the Buddha:

"Bhikkhus, Brahmins and householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness. And you, bhikkhus, are very helpful to Brahmins and householders as you share with them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, with the correct meaning and wording. And you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, bhikkhus, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

Mutual support. The way he set up the bhikkhu sangha—the community of nuns and monks—was such that they had to live near lay people, so that every single day they would go out to receive alms for food.

And you can't keep food overnight. Completely reliant on the generosity of the lay community for the requisites of food, lodging, medicine, and robes. You couldn't just live a completely separate life, collect everything you need, and go off and isolate yourself. There's this sense of mutual generosity. As lay people are generous to support the Sangha, the Sangha comes and shares with lay people—both their sila, their conduct, and the generosity of sharing the dhamma—so that laymen and women, ordained men and women, support one another, not living in isolation. He really set up his sangha in this way. And to some extent, it still works like that, a little bit, in the Buddhist countries—in Thailand and in Burma.

I've spent more time in Burma these last years. I just love seeing in the morning, if you're in a meditation center, monastery, or nunnery—the nuns only go out twice a week, but the monks go out every morning—early in the morning, in a line, barefoot, with the alms bowl and eyes downcast, walking around the local villages. There's a little novice boy who runs ahead ringing a bell, so the people in the village know the monks are coming. If they choose—no one has to do anything—if they choose, they come out and offer some rice, some food, whatever little food they can offer. And it's not in a personal way. The monks don't look up and say, "Oh, hi, thanks so much, nice to see you again." It isn't personal. It's offering to the Sangha for the continuation of the Dhamma and the Sangha.

There's just something about it—early in the morning at dawn, walking barefoot in silence, people coming out. I don't know, I must have been there in a previous life. I don't really know if there are previous lives. But there's something about it that is just so touching, walking across the fields.

The nuns go out in Burma twice a week, and you can see—because sometimes you can trail along after them, they let you do that—you can see there's a happiness in the people who are offering. They choose to get up early and come running out just to offer, take off their shoes, offer their rice, bow and go away, one handful in each bowl, and that's it. There's this real happiness that comes from that, a kind of mutuality.

Just to give a sense of how it works both ways: a few years ago I was staying in a monastery slash meditation center, where lay people could be there meditating. It was right after a big cyclone had hit part of the area southwest of Yangon. This was in Yangon. Thousands and thousands of people were killed, lost their lives and their land. It came into Yangon too, so this whole area was quite affected. Around this village, it's already very poor, but people were even worse off than usual. Crops couldn't grow, rice couldn't grow because the salt water had ruined the rice fields.

In this monastery where we were staying, some people donated money, and the Sayadaw, the head of the monastery, organized what's called a rice dana for every family in the village. He was offered the money, and he organized and brought huge truckloads of rice. There was a whole building filled with rice in the monastery. Then all the monks—because monks don't handle money, they can't go and purchase things, but they can work—all the monks who wanted to help would get bags and fill them with rice and sew them up. In Burma everyone has to be registered, so they actually know the name of every family in the village. Every family got a little chit, and then they would all come on this one particular day. A few of us who were there practicing were enlisted to kind of hand it over.

One beautiful thing is it's not done anonymously. It's not this sense of "We don't want you to know who's giving, and you should just take it and be ashamed that you need anything." It's all this sense of really valuing both the offering and the receiving as an aspect of happiness and purifying our heart and mind.

Everyone would line up from the village, come forward, and we would each take turns heaving these fifty-pound bags of rice to each person. These little ladies would come. It would take two of us—another friend and I—to lift this bag. We're handing it to her, and she goes plop, puts it on her head, and goes running off. I'm exaggerating. But

every time, she'd have a kid on each hand, or one kid, and plop the rice on and off she'd go. Everyone was different. Some people really looking at you. Some people you could see felt maybe a little funny.

But anyway, we at first felt awkward. We didn't want to think, "Oh, we're so wonderful, giving you rice." But then you start to just feel so happy at the mutuality.

So people went off with their rice. And the next morning, the monks went out on their alms round. There's always the same trajectory—each monastery has its regular route. Another monastery nearby would have a slightly different path, so the same houses don't have to choose which monastery to support.

The next morning the monks went out, and they know which houses usually offer. There was a friend of ours who was a monk at the time—not a Burmese guy, actually a Mexican guy. He came back that morning and he was really touched. He said, "We went out and now there were so many other people offering rice." Because they'd received rice yesterday, now they had rice, so they could offer some back. And that's the first thing they did with it. They came out in the morning, and they brought their little kids, having their children give the offering of rice back to the monks.

He was so touched. I was so touched when I heard it. Just that sense of how—and it's so often that way—when people in Burma get something, the first thing they think is, "How can I share this? Who can I offer some of this food to? Who can I help with my time?" It's just so deeply embedded. That kind of mutuality—I've run into it ten million times.

Sometimes being a foreigner coming, I go with some friends, and other people have offered us money to take to nunneries that are poor, that are just trying to get going, or that have forty young orphan girls they're supporting on their dāna. So we have some money from friends that we give. It's not a lot. And when we first started doing this, many of the nuns would insist—they'd come back to our meditation center in a few days and insist that we, about four or five of us, whoever was there, come and let them offer us lunch.

We'd think, "No, no, you hardly have enough." We felt abashed, ashamed. We didn't want to take the little they have. But that cuts the whole cycle of mutuality. This sense of shutting down to receiving is actually a lack of generosity of heart.

So we realized we should go. And we really would be offered these amazing meals. I have some photos of round tables just completely filled with twenty, twenty-five little bowls of different curries and sweets and fruits for four of us. It's embarrassing as heck. And then you see—this is what the thirty women and little girls in the monastery have,

more than they'd have to eat in a week. We know that. Whatever we don't eat, at one place we're pretty good friends with, they take it and parcel a little bit out to the little girls, who are all so happy. They're saving it. They're going to parcel it out for days, what we didn't eat.

But to go and not eat, or not go—that's so ungenerous. It's a whole different energy. Say, no, we go and try not to eat? You cannot. You cannot go and not eat. They sit there: "Eat. Eat. Have some of this. Have some of this." It gets to where it's almost a nightmare. "You have to eat this. You have to eat this." You learn how to eat really a lot, three times more than you want, and then actually stop while there's still some left—it's more than you can ever eat—but to really stop being abashed, stop feeling bad about it, and just feel the happiness of receiving the generosity, seeing how happy the nuns are to be able to offer.

It's really contagious. After a while, it's not a sense of "I should be generous." It kind of started like that for me: "Oh, everyone's so generous. I should really try to ramp it up a little bit." But after a while, it really is contagious.

And I'm saying this because it's a sense of the heart, the mind becoming happy, not feeling so separate, not feeling so isolated, not trying to find a parity—well, did I give as much as they gave, or is it equal, or whatever. It really doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all. It's this movement of open-hearted connection that's really incredibly powerful.

And I want to say it's not just a thing with ordained people. I mean, I hang out mostly in monasteries or meditation centers because that's where I go. I'm not saying everybody in Burma or Thailand is amazingly generous, just like not everyone here is. But it's amazing how often it pops up.

So this is another story from maybe two years ago. Again, I was with a couple of friends, and some people had offered money, and we were going to a money changer. It's a whole palaver that's changing now, but you couldn't change money at banks—that's unheard of. So you'd go and find a money changer through friends, and we're in this room and the money changers come. We were changing quite some money. And in Burma, the money they give you is big notes—a thousand note is equal to about a dollar, and they're big. So it's like this huge pile in the middle of the room, and you feel like you're doing a drug deal or something. It's really weird, except we're in an office in the middle of the monastery. It's still technically illegal, but this is what everyone does.

So anyway, these guys are really professional, these young guys, counting and calling up: what is it for Australian dollars? What is it for euros? What is it for dollars? And they have these little glasses. If there's the tiniest little dot, they won't take the dollar

bills. And then they give you these chat notes that are falling apart in your hand—they won't take a hundred dollar bill with a little dot, but anyway. So they're looking at it, there's this pile in the middle of the room, and we were talking to our Burmese friend who was organizing it for us. Because it takes a long time, an hour or two, we're just hanging out. She's someone who's a big supporter of many monasteries and nunneries, so we were just talking about that and what we were doing, and how mostly this money was probably going to go to build toilets in nunneries or to help support these nun schools.

Then a couple days later, the woman who had been there called us up and said, "Oh, a new donation came in—like four hundred dollars." We asked who, and she just said, "Anonymous." We didn't know. We thought—she runs a B&B—maybe some friend, some meditator had come through. But when we went to collect it, she said, "No, it was the money changers." They had heard what we were talking about. They heard what the money was being spent for—for nuns. And then they just gave four hundred dollars.

It's so cool. Because you think of these sleazy guys, you know—and that's my total projection. It was just so touching. It's a thing that kind of gets in there. And I'm just telling these stories because I find it contagious.

It's not just Burma, so I want to tell a couple other stories. This one from the States. I cut it out of a magazine, the New York Times, ages ago—it must be at least ten years ago; I don't have the date on it. From Detroit. Talking about a man named Matt Dawson, who at that point had worked for the Ford Motor Company for fifty-nine years. He's seventy-eight years old. He could have retired a long time ago, but he drives a forklift. He does as much overtime as possible—seventy-eight years old. He earns about a hundred thousand dollars a year so he can give most of it away. He said he's given more than a million dollars to schools and charities since 1994.

"I get joy, happiness out of this," he said at a news conference. "I can go home and sleep good."

Matt Dawson only went through the seventh grade in Shreveport, Louisiana, before he came to Detroit. And all he's done is work, work overtime. He's divorced, has a grown daughter. He says, "You know, I was raised like that—to help others. I have more than enough." For Dawson, more than enough doesn't include vacations.

He drives a 1985 Ford Escort and has a little one-bedroom apartment. "A big house, a big car, that doesn't excite me," he says.

The first recipient of his money was the United Negro College Fund, which got $50,000 in 1994 and has received $180,000 since then. He's given $200,000 to Louisiana State University, $112,000 to churches in Detroit and Louisiana, $20,000 to the NAACP, $10,000 to community colleges, and now he just gave $431,000 to Wayne State University for scholarships. Amazing. "Because it makes me happy. I can go home and sleep good."

So don't go thinking, "Oh, I should be better than I am." Let in just a kind of appreciation for how these wholesome states are contagious, because it touches that same inclination to the wholesome in us. When we can tune into this—when we talk about the pleasant, it's not that we're trying to avoid pleasant. Wholesome states often have a quality of pleasantness that's onward leading. As we can really appreciate it, whether it's our own generosity or receiving generosity, even just hearing about it can brighten the heart and mind. That's a kind of wholesomeness that is quite useful just to soak in, you could say. If you turn to grasping, that's completely different. But this is a kind of wholesomeness that really is onward leading and strengthening—strengthening our mind and heart and transforming the habits of our mind.

Another story, this one from a letter. I'll keep it anonymous—from an American woman. She's writing while donating some money to a particular cause, and she says, "I've been on the verge of quitting a job I no longer need, and I've been wondering if or how this job serves me. I've decided to keep the job for five or six more months and give all the earnings away to causes that I love. This is the first of many. So thank you. This gift brings me great joy." She's thanking the people she's giving money to! "This gift brings me great joy and opens a whole new chapter of work as dāna, work as generosity to the world."

It stops feeling like who's giving and who's receiving. It really stops having that sense of "I'm the giver, you're the receiver" or vice versa. It's just that mutual action of generosity, which takes two sides—that brightens and uplifts the heart and mind of all those involved, that lets go of clinging, that opens to connectedness.

One other story I just read off the BBC two days ago. It's called "A Strong Woman in Muzaffarnagar in India." I'll paraphrase it. Apparently in this town of Muzaffarnagar, there was fighting between Hindus and Muslims last month. Some dozens were killed. The BBC reporter Joanna Jolly went there with her local colleague and translator, Joydeep. There was a lot of anger, neighbor pitted against neighbor. But she'd heard of a Muslim woman who had adopted a little abandoned Hindu baby, and she just wanted to meet her. She's going as a news person.

She said they went there, and as they were walking toward this woman's home—this was a place where Hindus and Muslims had lived together peacefully for years, but now there was all this violence and fear—a crowd of maybe a hundred men formed around them. They pressed in close. It felt really threatening, but she wanted to go. Her colleague whispered that he was worried. "Let's hurry," he said.

What they found was, in the arms of this tiny woman, a tiny baby. The men said this little baby girl had been found ten days ago in a ditch, newborn, being mauled by dogs. This really poor Muslim woman had taken her in. They were convinced the child was Hindu, but it was only the generosity of this good Muslim woman that had kept her alive—even though she had eight children of her own.

The newswoman wanted to meet this woman. She said the woman was thirty-six but looked decades older. As they sat talking, the child was really tiny, didn't look very healthy, but the woman was just holding her in her arms and said, "I hope she'll grow up and go to school and get a government job. Then she can take care of me."

The newswoman said she wondered if this little girl could survive at all. She couldn't see any food in the courtyard, nor anything suggesting there was any money to look after her. "We have a rule as journalists not to give anything to the people we interview."

And it's a rule I've always followed. But the thought of the baby not having food was too much for me.

So she said to her translator, "I want to give some money." And she had to do it very secretively, of course, because there's this crowd of a hundred men crowding around, kind of threatening. So she hid it in her hand and went to shake hands with the woman, which is unusual—women don't shake hands in India. But the woman did it and could feel the money.

And so then they went to leave. She said the crowd of men came around, they were shouting in her face, they were demanding money, and she was really scared. They were trying to push their way back to the car. She said, "Just as I was beginning to wonder whether one of the men would hit me, I felt a warm touch around my stomach. It was the woman. She put her head on my shoulder, affectionately it seemed, and slowly but surely she guided me through the angry crowd. She would not let me go. Another man started shouting in my face. She held me even closer and didn't let me go until I was safely inside our car."

"The money I had given her was nothing. Certainly it wouldn't make much difference. I wasn't expecting anything in return, but I felt she had repaid me a hundred times over, with a kindness and strength that humbled me."

It's that feeling of how just a little gift from the heart can evoke so much more strength. That gift of the woman's willingness to see her safely to the car had a really profound effect on the journalist, which hopefully will, as they say, pay it forward and keep on going. There's this sense that we never really know the effect generosity is going to have. It really can transform us.

So, last story from Burma about how generosity truly transforms our consciousness.

This is a story about two men who became monks in their thirties. Often in Burma, when people become monks, they ordain quite young for various reasons—they just grow up in that way. But these two men had become monks in their middle thirties.

The reason I know about them is that at the meditation center where we were staying, one of the resident monks—one of the things he likes to do is go out in the community, see who needs help, and facilitate something if he can. So he had met these two monks. They just had this little dusty plot of land with a little old crummy kuti on it. They weren't doing much. They were just kind of hanging out there, seeming a little lost. They weren't part of a big meditation center. They weren't particularly meditating. They didn't have a big teacher. They weren't particularly studying. So they were monks—they wanted to be monks—but they kind of didn't know what to do with themselves.

So U Nyanaloka, the monk at the center, said, "You know, you guys should do something." He suggested that the way schools work in Burma, if you go to the government school—if kids can afford that—in order to actually pass the exams, almost always the kids have to go back at night and pay the teachers for what's called tuition after school. Without this extra tuition, they don't learn enough to pass. That's the system. And this neighborhood was really poor. He said, "There are a lot of kids here that maybe go to the government schools, but they can't afford tuition. You guys are educated. Why don't you just start offering after-school tuition?"

And so they took it up. Then U Nyanaloka took us to meet these two monks—very interesting men, U Tena Basa and U Wepola. They didn't look like your typical spiritual monks. One had been a captain in the military, and the other one had been a businessman. When we asked him through a translator what kind of business, he said he'd been selling beer and things like that. Even so, his parents didn't want him to be a monk, but

somehow they both wanted to quit their lives and become monks. They both chewed betel nut, which if you've ever seen it—your whole mouth turns red and disgusting and your teeth rot out.

It's not an uplifting look.

Men or women. And one of our friends has this real bias. If there's any monk or nun that's chewing betel nuts, he goes, "Betel nut chewing monk, betel nut chewing nun." And right away, it's really hard to see past it. So he says, "These are betel nut chewing monks."

But anyway, we went and they were having this after-school tuition. There were about a hundred kids coming and they were just teaching them to read and write, all ages up until about sixteen. We talked to the younger monk later, and this is more or less a direct quote from him. He said he felt like he'd wasted the first thirty-three years of his life just living a life, being a businessman. He said, "Now I'm giving my life and energy to helping others, to helping the children. I feel like I've been reborn." He was so uplifted when he was talking to us. He said, "I have a whole new life and I want to do some form of helping, some form of giving for the rest of my life. If it ends here, if there's no more way to help the children here, then I'll go somewhere else and do it for them there."

You could really see the transformation, the onward-leadingness. Whatever led him to become a monk, this everyday act of generosity, of offering what they can offer to these kids, was really changing his heart and mind. This is the Buddha's teaching. It's not just to be nice—it's really to purify. It's onward leading.

When one is generous and delights in giving, the heart tends to be satisfied and joyous. This supports the development of virtue, as a heart that is satisfied and contented easily inclines to restraint and composure. With this composure, together with the lack of remorse that generosity and virtue affords, the heart is easily settled and focused. So then meditation progresses more smoothly and the mind naturally brightens, making it suitable for seeing things as they truly are. This is from Ajahn Pasanno, but it's a paraphrase from things the Buddha says in many places.

At the heart of the practice of generosity—at the heart of all action—isn't how it looks or what someone else thinks or how much one gives or how much of one's time. It's all in the intention. All action, the seed of action, the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, is in the intention of mind and heart.

Let me read a little story from the time of the Buddha. One of his most famous lay supporters was called Anathapindika. He was considered the most generous male lay supporter of the Buddha. You hear about him a lot. When he donated to the Buddha and the Sangha the monastery, the dwelling at Savatthi, the Jeta Grove—you see that in many suttas. They'll say, "On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi in Jetavana, the monastery of Anathapindika." The Buddha spent nineteen of his forty-five rains retreats there.

So Anathapindika was filled with faith, filled with happiness from when he first met the Buddha. He got so inspired and was incredibly generous throughout his life. This story about him gives a sense of how generosity isn't about how much you give or about merit, storing up merit for future lifetimes. Sometimes you hear that—not in the suttas, but sometimes I would hear it in Thailand or Burma. "Well, I can't practice, but I'll be generous." Which is great if we're cultivating and opening our own heart. But sometimes there's a sense that we're storing up merit in the merit bank for our next life. Every open-hearted, generous act does create wholesome karma. But the Buddha's not saying, "Be generous so you'll have a happy life." For Anathapindika, it's really this sense of coming from love and the joy that it gives.

This one story gives a sense of the importance of intention—that it's not what's given, but the intention behind it.

Anathapindika supported the Sangha enormously. Besides giving the Jeta Grove, he would offer breakfast to all the hundreds of monks and nuns. He'd make sure they had their robes and their medicine. And every day, several hundred monks would come to his mansion and he would feed them a great meal.

So the king of the era, King Pasenadi—who you'll also often read about in the suttas—heard about Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him. It's kind of like the comparing mind we were talking about last night. "He's being generous, I can be generous too." So the king decided to supply alms every day for five hundred monks and had five hundred monks coming to his house and offering them food.

Andy Olendzki, the head scholar at the Center for Buddhist Studies, a Pali scholar, says that 500 usually means "a lot," basically. It's shorthand for a lot.

So the monks were coming, but after a while, the king heard from his servants that the monks would come, get the food he offered, but then take it away with them instead of eating. They would go into the city and give it to their supporters, and then their supporters would offer the food back to them, and then they would eat it. The king was puzzled, saying, "Why? I'm giving you really good, tasty food. What's this all about?"

So the Buddha explained to the king that in the palace, he just had his servants distributing the food, and they did it without any inner feeling, just following orders as if they were cleaning out a barn or doing any other chore. In fact, they lacked faith and actually thought the monks were parasites. They had completely the wrong attitude. And so the Buddha said that when anything was given in that spirit, no one could feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal was of the most delicious food.

In contrast, the faithful householders of the city, like Anathapindika and Visakha, who was the most generous woman, really welcomed the monks as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend would be worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give it in the right spirit.

So this is really where the purification of our habits, the purification of our heart is occurring. Not in the amount, but in just that willingness to share.

The Buddha again: even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup—like when you rinse out a bowl of food just to wash it out—just throws the rinsings of a bowl into a village pool or a pond while thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this," that would be an act of generosity. It's really this sense of how it is in our heart. So it's never a sense of "I can't be generous, I have nothing." It's not that at all.

In fact, one time we were in a small fishing village, a pretty poor fishing village, visiting, and a friend who had been there a couple of years before hadn't been able to get into Burma. But some of the people we met there remembered him. So this one pretty poor fisherman remembered him and said, "Oh, he's in Bangkok, he can't come?" And all he had was a big old dried fish. But he said, "Please, take this dried fish to your friend in Bangkok." So we were like, okay. But it's so touching, really. It's really so touching. It's so sincere. And that's all he has, the dried fish. Just this immediacy of giving.

So we took it. Of course, we weren't going to Bangkok for ages. So then we thought, okay, what do we do with the dried fish? And we took it to the next monastery we were at and offered it for a meal. And that's how it goes. It just keeps going on and on.

I say that like it's funny, but I could get into a kind of superior attitude, like, "Oh, dried fish is stupid." But it's so beautiful that one offers what one has. And that's just as much a deep generosity of heart as some billionaire giving a million dollars and writing a check without even thinking about it. Which one is the generosity the Buddha was pointing to? The generosity that's really transformative?

One time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching, the translator, a monk from Nepal, gave a talk on the practice of giving, the practice of generosity. He had just a few steps to consider, so I want to mention them, because I really wrote it down and I've remembered it all these years. Don't go crazy thinking this is how you have to do things, but it just makes a few points.

So, the practice of giving. The first is, of course, when you first have your first thought of giving, take a moment and really give attention to the volition, to the intention in our heart and mind. So it's not just some thoughtless act. Even when we have the thought "I want to give" but can't quite do it. You know how it is sometimes?

The Tibetans have a wonderful teaching I love. When you want to give and you just can't do it, just practice. Take a stone in one hand and practice giving it into your other hand. Just practice letting it go and receiving. You can kind of keep upping the ante from stones to some good food to some money or whatever. But just practice.

So that's the beginning: just giving attention to the volition. Not about being perfect, but seeing what's true.

Then, whatever it is that one is deciding to offer—whether it's time, whether it's service, willingness to lend an ear to a friend, food, whatever it is—again, it's like purifying your volition. Try to put aside, to abandon, whatever clinging there may be to it.

You know, there's this sense of "I really don't want this anymore, I'll give it." We can even barely do that. And then there's something else—a thought comes up, "Let me offer this." And it's a really pure volition in the beginning, and then we're about to offer and this voice says, "But maybe I might use this sometime in the next ten years. I really like this."

I'll see that sometimes. I want to give away clothes. Something is sitting there, hanging there—I haven't worn it for ten years. And I'll pick it up and go, "Yeah, but maybe..." And I think, "What is that about?" More than I could ever need. I don't mean beat yourself up, but just watching. This is like purifying the volition, abandoning attachment to it. So we're really giving.

And the third aspect—and this is interesting—when it's appropriate, which is not here on silent retreat, it's not appropriate. But when it's appropriate, there's something powerful about really giving and receiving very directly, face to face. I know we have this thing—I mean, we don't all, but somehow I get the sense in this country that to give anonymously is really a lovely thing because you're not getting all the credit for it. But there's also something very powerful about the simplicity of giving face to face, wholehearted giving and wholehearted receiving. Even with little things.

In Thailand and in Burma, where this is very much a part of the ordained culture, you go and offer flowers, you offer food, you offer support to the nuns or the monks. Whatever it is, a little thing or a big thing—if you go to a nunnery and offer even a big pile of money, it's like a little ceremony. You put it on a tray, and then you kneel, and you hold the tray, and the nuns that are receiving it hold the tray, and they'll do a whole chant of mettā, a blessing. They're blessing you for your generosity, wishing you mettā, wishing, "May you soon attain nibbāna."

People say that there. You offer something and they say, "May you attain nibbāna in the shortest possible time." Can you imagine?

A friend of mine was offering just the food dāna at a monastery—you know how we do here, that's where we got that. Every day people go and hand over money to buy the food for all the meditators that day. She had done this before, but she was blown away. She offered it to the woman who's the secretary at the monastery, just handed her the money, and the woman took it. Face to face, you look, you're both holding it, and she said, "May you attain nibbāna in this retreat." And my friend was like, "Wow."

Doesn't that really imbue it with a sense of respect and dignity? Not just, "Oh yeah, thanks, okay, here's the money, boom." But "May you attain nibbāna." It's an appreciation both ways.

And so that happens a lot. When Sayadaw U Pandita was here one time, and I was on retreat, I had heard about—I don't know—anyway, some book I wanted to offer him. And I was on retreat, so I had a friend buy the book and give it to him, and I was happy with that. I came out of retreat, and he said, "No, you have to hand it to me directly."

It was really interesting. I was embarrassed. I felt shy. I wasn't at all comfortable. I mean, I wanted to offer the book. I was glad he had it. Let's be done with it. But he made me sit there and very formally hand it to him. And he received it very formally, really one hundred percent present.

It was such a powerful teaching for me. I don't know why I should be embarrassed to just offer a gift. It's really a strange thing—some weird sense of self. But just this appreciating of the act.

It's not about me. It's not about whether the gift is good enough. There's no judgment. It's just strengthening that movement of generosity of heart—that really completes the circle.

And that leads to the fourth quality: when we're giving, give with the heart and mind really present. Really in touch with the giving, really focused on the intention. Do it with 100% presence. Which, of course, we're doing with everything we do—I know. But to really do that.

I was thinking about how often I'll write a check to Amnesty or whatever, and that's nice. But it can become just another item on the list: pay the electric bill, pay this bill, pay Amnesty, pay that. Wait a minute—really do it with a sense of presence, with a sense of appreciating the generosity. That's very important, even when you can't get a return.

Or there's a place where you can put food for the food bank—every month, people bring canned goods. And I notice how sometimes I can just be in the supermarket and buy a few things, run in, throw them down, and go. It's so different to go buy the things with full awareness of the generosity. Not like, "I'm so generous, aren't I great?" It's not that. It's the sense of happiness you feel just being able to offer, just being able to move out of your own little world. And then when I go put the food down, just be present while I do it. That's all. There's no one there to see. There's no one there to know. But it really is very different from just doing it as another errand.

And then, of course, after the giving, continue to be mindful of volition. Because as we know, everything changes. You give something away and then think, "I wish I'd given fifty dollars less. What if I'm short at the end of the month?" Just notice that. That's all. Just notice it. You don't have to let it take over.

And have a clear comprehension—a broader awareness of the larger context. We can't always know everything, but it's not that you have to give just because someone asks, no matter what. There's such a thing as giving that could be damaging to you. It could be that you're giving to someone who's an alcoholic and you know they're just going to buy more vodka. You don't really want to support that. There could be another way to be generous to them. It's about really looking and seeing. It's not that you should give anything, anytime.

There's a story about this in the suttas with Anāthapiṇḍika again. He had a nephew who would come to him—and Anāthapiṇḍika was really wealthy, like Bill Gates today. He could give and give and give. So the nephew would come and ask for a whole bunch of money. Anāthapiṇḍika would give it to him, and the nephew would go gamble it away, squander it, then come back and ask for more. Anāthapiṇḍika would give more. The nephew would gamble it away, get into really bad straits, and come back again.

After the third or fourth time, Anāthapiṇḍika said, "Okay, this is the last time. I'm not giving you any more money. You're just wasting it and ruining your life."

Same thing happened. The nephew came back again. This time Anāthapiṇḍika gave him some clothes, gave him some food, and said, "I'm not giving you anything else after this."

The nephew went away. Same pattern. He came back again. And this time Anāthapiṇḍika really gave him nothing.

Sometime later, the nephew was found outside the walls of the city—dissolute, starved to death in the gutter, or died from drink.

So you can imagine Anathapindika felt horrible and went to the Buddha, saying, "Oh my God, what did I do? I should have..." And the Buddha said, in essence, "No, no, no, you did right." He said there are some people you cannot help. There are some people who, in a particular situation... Remember, he has the vision of lifetimes, so this isn't just about one lifetime. This person was simply so caught in negative mind states that he couldn't break out of them. Your giving and giving and giving wouldn't have helped him. I just find that interesting, to have a sense of the broader context.

The first time I went to India, there was just so much poverty, and coming from the States, never having traveled much before—when I first went, I was nineteen—I was like, "Oh my gosh," the suffering was just overwhelming. In a sense, I could have given away every single thing I had and all the money I had with me in the first hour, easily. And it would have helped people a little bit, but you can't touch the depth of it. How do you deal with that? It doesn't mean you have to give away everything or else you're not generous. You consider the whole context.

The seventh element I would add is for us to receive in that same open, present, mindful way. Because as I was saying, receiving is an essential part of giving. For me, I've found that I've learned so much from receiving joyously and appreciatively.

The last thing I want to mention about the practice of generosity is not from that talk anymore, but concerns not only the giving and the receiving. This is something the Buddha speaks about in the suttas—the value and importance, the use of wise thought, wise contemplation, of reflecting on your own generosity, and also reflecting on your own sila, your own moral conduct.

So at times when your mind is really caught in negativity—remember a few weeks ago I talked about what cultivates brightness of mind, confidence, faith—when you can't be mindful, when you can't find anything good, sit and actually contemplate your

own generosity. Not your lack of generosity, but really incline the mind to tune into, to remember the wholeness. It's like previous kamma, previous intentions of generosity, ripening as appreciation and memory in the present moment.

A very simple example: if you've ever spent some years taking care of aging parents, you may know how, however much you do, it's very easy to feel that you haven't done enough because there's always so much more one could do. At least that's my experience. I can think of all the ways I should have given everything I had, I should have stopped my life, I should have moved to Atlanta, I should have done this, I should have done that. The mind can really turn negative or guilty.

But try really inclining the mind to the beautiful. Actively contemplate all the acts of love and generosity. Just bring them up. Not "I'm so great"—that's an ego thing—but just let them start to come. And sila too. This is a very powerful aspect.

I want to close with a quotation from a sutta where the Buddha is talking about this. What I'm reading is about recollecting your own generosity—he says exactly the same thing for recollecting your own sila, your own non-harming conduct. He's talking to a layman:

"This is the case where you recollect your own generosity, thinking: 'It is a great gain for me that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms.'"

So really thinking about that, thinking about the happiness of it.

"At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, at that time her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion."

It's literally inclining to the wholesome. It's literally transforming our consciousness, the habits of our mind.

"Her mind heads straight based on generosity. And when the mind, the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, has a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma."

And then the same thing I read before: "In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated."

"So, Mahanama, you could develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking..."

while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children. In other words, any time.

And that's a really wholesome use of thought.

So I just encourage you all to recollect your generosity, recollect your wholesome conduct, and notice how in that moment your mind is freed from greed, hatred, and confusion.

This is the path the Buddha is teaching us.

Thank you for your attention. Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 128

Retreat Opening

Carol Wilson · 49 min

> *This opening talk for the three-month retreat features Bhante Buddharakkhita and Carol Wilson explaining the traditional foundations of Buddhist practice: the Three Refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) and the Five Precepts (pañca-sīla). Bhante illuminates how taking refuge operates on both ultimate and practical levels—the Buddha representing awakened potential and qualities of purity, compassion, and wisdom; the Dhamma as natural law that upholds and supports practitioners; and the Saṅgha as both the noble community of awakened beings and the supportive qualities of unity, harmony, and mutual care.*
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> *Carol Wilson offers a rich exploration of the Five Precepts as profound practice in themselves, not merely preliminary requirements for concentration. Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, she presents the Buddha's teaching on the "five great gifts"—how abstaining from harm offers freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression to limitless beings while simultaneously receiving these gifts oneself. She emphasizes that working with ethical conduct cultivates the discerning awareness that sees the seeds of suffering and wisdom arising in the heart-mind.*
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> *The talk concludes with Bhante's practical acronym SPACE for retreat success: Slowing down, Silence, Patience, Perseverance, Attention, proper Attitude, Continuity, Concentration, Contentment, and being Expectation-free while Enjoying practice. The formal taking of refuges and precepts in Pāli is included, establishing the container for intensive meditation practice.*

Good evening everybody.

As you know, tonight will be the formal opening of the retreat where we'll talk about and take together the refuges and precepts.

But first, I would like to introduce the sixth member of our teaching team who arrived today, Alex Haley, sitting under the tree over there in the corner—kind of our pseudo Bodhi tree. Alex Haley is in the Spirit Rock IMS teacher training and he's here to assist us, offer sign-up interviews, and various other things. You'll be really happy to have him. He comes from Minnesota. Thank you for coming, Alex. He'll be here for the first three weeks, and then Aaron Treat will come for the next three weeks.

When we start retreat, we always take three refuges and five precepts at the minimum. So I'll explain what are the three refuges, and Carol will explain about five precepts. And then we will take all of this in Pali language. I think all of you have a paper. If you don't have a paper, raise your hand—there are some papers on the table outside that you can get.

Before we take them, let me explain what are the three refuges. The refuges are the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. In countries like Burma, I heard that monks and nuns and lay people take almost one year practicing this. It's a meditation in itself, though here we use it just to start the retreat officially. But it's really meditation itself—you can spend a year just reflecting on these three refuges. Here it's just going to be used as a start, and you can use them in your practice.

So we start with the Buddha. Buddha is a Pali word which literally means "awakened one." That's what it means. And the Buddha, as you all know, is a historical figure who lived in India and attained enlightenment. Somebody asked him whether he's a god, and he said, "No, I'm just awake."

The good thing about the Buddha is he never monopolized his qualities of enlightenment. He said in one discourse, in the Majjhima Nikaya, that you can also become a Buddha. You can overcome greed, hatred, and delusion. In other words, you can enjoy the qualities of the Buddha. It's possible. You can become a Buddha yourself, and you also have the potential to become a Buddha.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, there are two levels. One is the ultimate level. At this level, we actually recognize the historical Buddha and also we recognize the potential that we can also be awake. Another level is to really think of the retreat environment here and how you can apply this. The qualities of the Buddha are many, but we can perhaps summarize them as purity, compassion, and wisdom. In a retreat setting, we can actually cultivate and practice these qualities of the Buddha. We can purify our mind. We can be deeply compassionate. We can be profoundly wise. We can actually cultivate these qualities of the Buddha.

Then the Dhamma. Dhamma is another Pali word which is very common even in Hinduism. It means natural laws. Literally it means "to support." It comes from *dara* or *dham*—the Pali word meaning "to uphold." So Dhamma is what upholds us. It upholds us here in the practice. In other words, it really supports us so that we don't enter into tormenting mind states like difficult emotions. If we practice the Dhamma, we are not affected so much by these emotions, and if they come, we can deal with them using the Dhamma. When we go to refuge in the Dhamma in the ultimate sense, it means the four stages of enlightenment. And then, in final enlightenment, of course, Nibbana.

That's what we aspire for.

In a retreat setting, we can talk about the practice of Dharma itself: the practice of morality, ethical conduct, the practice of concentration, the practice of wisdom. The entire practice that we are going to undertake here is Dharma itself. So it's accessible. In a retreat setting, all the teachings you're going to receive are accessible to you.

Traditionally, six qualities are given to describe the Dharma. It is calling one to come and see directly. It is visible, timeless, immediate. All these qualities of the Dharma are valuable. When you practice Dharma, you can see for yourself, right here. Directly visible—that's one quality of the Dharma. Leading onwards—it leads to awakening, it leads to peace, it leads to happiness. That's where it's inclined. So we can take refuge in that.

Sangha, the third refuge, literally means community. In our monastic tradition, we live in a sangha in a monastery—the ordained sangha. But in this situation of taking refuge, it means the Arya Sangha, the noble sangha, those who have attained enlightenment. They may be ordained or not ordained, but we uphold them. They serve as role models for us. They have done the work, and now it's us doing this work. We want also to be part of them.

In a retreat setting here, on another level, we can take the qualities of Sangha. In our monastery, these qualities are unity, harmony, and support. We support each other. We come from different countries in our monastery, and here also we come from different countries, so we need to support each other. We are united under one umbrella, and what is that umbrella? We are all aspiring to attain awakening. That's what brings us all together here, irrespective of culture or country. We have the same aspiration: to be free from suffering and to cultivate happiness. We are in one club, in other words.

In order to maintain that unity, we need to support each other and be harmonious in terms of what we have to do here—perhaps keeping silence. If you don't observe silence, you are going to disrupt others. Then we are not supporting each other because of our behavior. So it's very important to remember these qualities: unity, support, and harmony. These qualities are accessible during the retreat here.

And on the ultimate level, of course, remember that when you go to the refuge today, Sangha is actually upholding the noble Sangha, the Sāvakasangha—those who have heard the Dhamma. Another name is Arya Sangha, meaning the noble Sangha. Those are our role models.

Then you're going to ask: where are they? Are they in Paris or New York? They are there. The only thing is they don't make it to the newspaper. That's the unfortunate part, but they are there. Even the Buddha said that wherever there is the Noble Eightfold Path, there will always be people who are awakened, people who have actually realized the path.

This question comes up: "Bhante, have you ever seen an enlightened being?" Well, they are there, but they don't advertise themselves. We can rest assured that when this path is existing, there are people who are practicing, and they have realized it.

So these are the three refuges that we are going to take in Pali language.

One of the many things that I love about the Buddha's path, about this path that we're all on together, is that in my personal limited understanding, all the different aspects of the path that he taught—each of them singly, and then all of them together—are for the purpose of purifying our heart, our mind. They are for seeing through and transcending the habits, as Bhante mentioned, of greed, of hatred, and of confusion.

And so when we begin by taking the refuges, the appreciation and contemplation of each refuge is a practice in itself, which in itself brings a kind of purity, a concentration, a focusing of the heart and mind. I've seen nuns in Burma whose main practice is the contemplation of the qualities of the Buddha. While it's not a practice that particularly speaks to me personally, seeing the effects of it in the brightness of their minds and hearts, the focus of their minds and hearts, is really beautiful. You can see it's a practice that is onward leading, that's purifying the heart and mind from greed, from confusion, from self-centeredness.

Working with the precepts, with ethics, with conscious conduct in a similar way is one aspect of the path. When I first started practicing, of course every meditation retreat was founded on taking the five non-harming precepts as an integral part. It was respected, but it was always kind of like, "If you do the precepts, then your practice can proceed better, more calmly"—which is true. But I feel it didn't give enough respect or power of understanding that just working with these five guidelines, these training guidelines of non-harming behavior, is in itself a very deep practice of purifying the heart and mind, of cultivating wisdom, of seeing through the suffering that arises here in our heart and mind when we're driven by, consumed by greed, by hatred, by confusion.

To see that the suffering which manifests through our actions begins from the seed of confusion in our heart—this is profound. And when we are really taking on as a practice giving awareness to our actions, using as a guideline these five training pre-

cepts for restraining ourselves from actual behavior of body and speech that is harming, it's not just an external guideline that we mindlessly adhere to. It's a reminder to bring awareness, this kind awareness, this quality of discerning interest, into seeing what's going on in our mind and heart when we have the impulse to act or speak in a harming way.

So when we restrain, that's great—that's a movement of wholesomeness, a movement of non-harming. And noticing why, how it feels when we act out of harm, how it feels when we act out of non-harm, what the effect is both ways—this is a discernment of steady awareness that, in working with these precepts, is really cultivating quite deeply. It's leading us into a deeper purity of heart, a purity of mind.

I ran across a lovely sutta from the Buddha about the eight streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nutriments of happiness. The first three are going for refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, in the Sangha—that they bring happiness to our hearts, to our minds. And then the other five streams of merit are what he calls the five great gifts. And that happens to be abstaining via the five precepts.

This is what the Buddha says about the five great gifts: "Here, a noble disciple, having abandoned the destruction of life"—so we recognize this is the first training guideline, to refrain from harming living beings—"abstains or refrains from the destruction of life. By so refraining, she or he gives freedom from fear, freedom from hostility, and freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. And she or he, in return, enjoys immeasurable freedom from fear, from hostility, and from oppression or affliction. This is the first great gift, the fourth stream of merit that leads to one's welfare and happiness."

I just think that's so beautiful. By refraining from harming living beings, one is giving this great gift to measureless beings, and is also in the same way receiving this gift of freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression.

And similarly with the other four training guidelines, the other four precepts. He uses the exact same language: a noble disciple abstains or refrains from taking what is not given—the second precept; refrains from harming oneself or others with one's sexual energies—the third; refrains, abstains from harsh, false, and abusive speech—the fourth; abstains, refrains from liquor and intoxicants, which are the basis for heedlessness.

I know you are all familiar with these five training guidelines, but to really think of taking them on in this context—that each of them is a very powerful and quite profound area of exploration in our lives. They're not simple, as I'm sure you know. Just take the first one, refraining from harming living beings. Easier said than done, even with our full, wholehearted intention.

So taking these on, we explore with awareness what's going on in our mind and heart if we harm—what was happening, what's the effect for others, for ourselves. When we don't, when we refrain, can we even tune into the possibility of offering this gift to limitless beings of freedom from fear, from hostility, from oppression? That may not be immediately accessible to our minds.

I know many of us tend to focus more on all the times we've thought about doing something, breaking the precepts, rather than actually noticing all the moments of restraint. Or just even tuning in to ask: How can my not stepping on this ant be a gift to limitless beings?

But we don't know. We don't know.

What's the effect on the world of a being—a very famous being like the Dalai Lama? Someone who we quote all the time because he's famous, but he's so amazing in terms of his refusing to take on hostility, to act in ways that are harming, even when he himself and so many of his people are themselves suffering under great cruelty and oppression.

There is one quotation I read from him. As usual, people were saying, "How can you continue to not give in to anger when the government of China has so oppressed your people, your country, killed and imprisoned so many, destroyed nunneries and monasteries?" And this is one of—you know, pick one of ten million examples of what the Dalai Lama says. This one: "Maybe they have taken my country, but need I let them have my heart, my mind as well?"

The effect someone like that has on the world—just reading things he says—we don't know the effect that our commitment to acting from harmlessness, to the best of our ability, might have. And our commitment to keep bringing in awareness to our motivations when we act from harmlessness and when we act from harm. Don't stop paying attention. Keep exploring, see what's going on, learning to understand with this eye of wisdom, this heart of compassion. Understand when the seeds of suffering arise in our hearts and we act from delusion. Don't turn away. Pay attention and see.

This is part—half—of our journey here. To really meet with wisdom and compassion the seeds of suffering in our mind and heart and see how they form, how they act, to see how with the eye of wisdom they lose their power. That's why it's hard. We're going to hit all kinds of stuff here.

But the other half of our journey is seeing the seeds of compassion and the seeds of wisdom that also arise here in our mind, in our heart. And seeing how they flower—how it's really almost like magic. How clear seeing in wisdom, when it sees a suffering aspect, it doesn't feed it. So that which doesn't make sense, leads to non-clinging. When wisdom and discernment sees the wholesome, it naturally feeds it. It grows. It's like magic, but it's actually lawful. We don't have to do it with an act of will.

So following, taking on these five precepts as training guidelines—as the Buddha says—then it follows naturally that we are free from remorse. It's not from an act of will. It's the law of nature. Freedom from remorse leads to calmness, leads to happiness, leads to concentration, all the way up to awakening, as Bhante said. So this isn't just something we do so we can have better concentration. It's actually a very profound aspect of our path.

So just to remind you what these five training guidelines are. Again, the first is—and this is what we'll be chanting together in Pali, and I know it's on the sheets in English—the first one is to refrain from harming living beings. Again, this is all intention.

The second one: we take the training guideline to refrain from taking what is not given. Obviously stealing, but you can see how what's cultivated in each of these is a wholesome, beautiful quality of mind. In this case, contentment. Inner contentment. What we have is enough. Not needing to feed greed.

Ajahn Sumedho, who's a wonderful teacher, a monk in the Thai forest tradition, said one time—I heard him say—that contentment and gratitude are very supportive conditions for enlightenment. So get contented. Don't take what's not given, and don't even want it, and then you'll be happy.

Anyway, not taking what is not freely offered. And exploring: what does that mean? Hmm, that shampoo in the shower—I know that's not the one that they offer here. It looks nice, let me just check it out. Now probably no one cares if you use that shampoo in the shower. But it's not that. It's checking out what's going on in your own mind and heart. Are you using it and hoping nobody comes, putting it back and drying it off so no one can tell? What's going on in your mind when you're doing that? What are you cultivating?

A lot more suffering than the lousy shampoo is worth. Don't even wash your hair, forget it. But notice what's going on in the mind. So taking the precept not to take what's not freely offered.

There's a great story of Guy's from when he was on staff here. We were on staff together many years ago, but it was his story. It concerns both taking what's not given and the fourth precept, which is not using false speech.

One evening during probably the three-month retreat, he went back into the kitchen, into the big walk-in refrigerator, and opened it up. This was a long time ago—probably most of you here weren't even alive, so it's definitely not any of you. He opened the fridge, and there's a yogi in there with his hands in the date box. Being the gentleman that he is, Guy said, "Can I help you?" And the yogi said, "I'm looking for the maintenance office." So that's two precepts in one. We'll try to go the other way, right? But anyway, not taking what's not freely offered.

The third precept in our lay life is not harming ourselves or others with our sexual energy, which is quite complex, as we all know. On retreat here, we take the fifth precept, which really, if you were taking eight precepts, becomes the third precept—which is celibacy for the period of the retreat. In lay life, the lay five precepts, it's not celibacy. But for the period of the retreat here together, we take the precept to be celibate, just not to act on any sexual energy. Which isn't saying there's anything wrong with it. I actually see it as part of noble silence in a way—really keeping our energy with ourselves and for our practice.

And the fourth training guideline: not to use false speech, not to lie, not to use harsh, abusive speech. I know you talked a lot today about noble silence, which makes that all easier. Working with wise speech is a tough one in our lives. It's just so easy—in the mind, out the mouth. Or in my case, out the mouth before it actually came into the mind in any conscious way. But it's a big one to work with. Here, mostly noble silence helps. Or you might watch some of the things you say to yourself and see if they're harsh or abusive. Just a hint.

But there will be a few times you'll need to talk—sometimes in the work meditation, if you need to check with the cooks or the housekeepers, if you have some questions, if you need to talk to the manager about something, in the interviews. Not to go nuts about it, but just tuning in and seeing why we're saying what we're saying.

There's a guideline of the Buddha, a very simple one about wholesome speech: A statement with five factors is well spoken, blameless, and unfaulted by the wise. Which five? It is spoken at the proper time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken gently—in other words, not harshly. What is said is beneficial to the best of one's knowledge. And it is spoken with a mind of goodwill.

So this, of course, is the best of all scenarios. But it's just something to bear in mind. Not that you're going to have time to stop and check everything before you talk, but later, sometimes, if you say something to the cooks or the managers or in an interview and you walk away feeling just kind of a little funny—that's how I feel when I know I've shot off my big mouth. I go away and I just feel kind of... off. And it's different from putting oneself down, but it's the sense that comes of having acted in a way that isn't quite wholesome. You just feel a little off.

And it's then really interesting to just explore and see: ah, that was said, and it really was completely unnecessary. It wasn't bad, but it was completely useless. In terms of beneficial, not so much. That could be all it was.

You don't judge yourself when we transgress or go against one of the precepts. It's not like then we hate ourselves. Oh, okay, bring in the awareness, see what happens. We can tell what's the effect of going against one of the guidelines, what's the effect of refraining. This is where the discerning mind of wisdom comes in, and we naturally begin to incline more to the wholesome. It's not that you get out the whip.

It becomes a movement of love and faith. It's just so much more happy to refrain from harm than it is to act in a harming way. This understanding becomes more and more integrated into who we are.

The fifth precept addresses refraining from alcohol, from intoxicants that are the cause for heedlessness. This one is quite clear. The one thing we want to say to everybody is that if you're on any kind of steady medication for any reason, please stay with it. The Buddha is talking here about recreational intoxicants and drugs that cloud the mind. But anything you need—if you're on pain medication or any kind of medication—please continue taking it. The precept does not refer to that at all.

So these are the five precepts: a great source of investigation, of happiness, and of wisdom.

[The group then recited the traditional taking of the precepts together, chanting the preliminary homage, the three refuges, and the five precepts in Pali.]

Strive on with diligence. Now, since we have some time remaining, I would like to give you some tips for meditation retreat. I want to share something with you because I've attended many retreats and I've had many people saying different things. I want to remind you how to be successful in a retreat.

You have to remember one word: space. Not spacing out—spacing out is another thing entirely. You don't want to space out during the retreat. You want to remember the word "space." Give yourself enough space.

This is an acronym I've come up with that really helps to put things together. The "S" stands for slowing down. If you want to be successful on a retreat, slow down. When we come to meditate, you need to slow down. In other parts of life—in the business world, in daily life—you can go faster. The faster, the better there. Here, the slower, the better.

I remember when I came here in 1999. Carl was a teacher and Guy was a teacher. I was really racing, but there were some yogis who were walking so slowly. I thought, "How am I going to walk like these yogis?" It was amazing. They were role models, just really walking slowly. I learned from them, and I experienced it in my own practice—whenever I slowed down, I could see things clearly.

You see that fan? It has slowed down. You can count the blades. You can see the cobweb. But if it's running very fast, you can't see.

So if you cannot really slow down your body, how are you going to slow down your mind? It's impossible, because the mind runs faster than the body. If you cannot control your body, how are you going to have a handle on your mind?

So this is a good reminder. These are just tips, actually. Slow down—that's the first one. S stands for slowing down. You observe yourself. I cannot emphasize this enough: the more I slow down, the more I see things in the body-mind process. Of course, you have to be careful—when you're going to the bathroom, you need to find out what speed helps you to be more mindful. There are certain areas where you have to adjust the speed.

Now another thing: S also stands for silence. People have talked about this already, so you know what silence means. Most teachers have mentioned it, and it supports your practice.

P stands for patience—Joseph talked about that—and perseverance. Perseverance means applying wise effort. Patience with the unfolding of your practice, with the way your practice unfolds. Try to be patient, even when you have done so many retreats.

Every retreat is different. Maybe the last one was an easy one and this one is difficult. Or perhaps it's the other way around. But if you want to set yourself up for frustration, equate retreats. "Oh, I did a ten-day retreat with Goenka and now I'm here—it should be easy." No, it's different. Every time is different. So be patient with the unfolding of your practice.

A in SPACE stands for attention—another fancy word for mindfulness. Pay attention to everything. Don't leave out anything, whether you are eating, in the bathroom, or dressing. This is our practice as monastics. When we are dressing, putting on these robes, we have to reflect on them as we are turning them, as we are tying them. So it becomes part of meditation. When you are dressing, when you wake up, when you are drinking—attention to everything.

I remember when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Janaka. I used to go there thinking that I was going to report about my walking and sitting. As soon as I entered the interview room: "How's your daily practice? How about brushing your teeth?" I said, "Oh, what's this actually?" This is Sayadaw. I think Rebecca has also practiced with Sayadaw U Janaka—he is amazing. Daily practice is very important. Attention to everything, excluding nothing. That will accelerate your practice.

A also stands for attitude—proper attitude towards the practice. Not pushing things, not indulging in them, not ignoring them. Somebody will talk more about developing proper attitude.

C—here C involves a lot of things. I learned this C when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita here many years ago, in 2003 I think, at the Forest Refuge. The teacher said to me, "Oh, Bhante Buddharakkhita, you are protector of the Buddha—now you should protect the C's." Then he told me about the C's.

C stands for continuity.

Continuity of your practice means one mindful moment after the other. Not one hour mindful, and then one hour where you just lose it and you're in another space somewhere. You become a space cadet. You don't want to become a space cadet. You want really to link one mindful moment after the other so that they become stronger.

Actually, that's why even these clothes are stronger—because it's one thread after the other. You can do like this, you cannot make a hole. But if it's just one thread, let's say if there's a hole here and you start with one thread and it's not supported by the other threads, then it's so weak, then it can break through. Remember, how you gain concentration easily is through constant mindfulness. It's continuity of your practice that's going to help you a lot.

C also stands for concentration—stay focused. It's also contentment. We've talked about contentment. Be contented with your practice, because you'll see people who are really going into their practice very fast, very wonderful yogis. In the first two days they're just concentrated, and you are really struggling a lot. Be contented with your practice. Don't compare it with others. Just be contented with what's arising in your experience, with what we have to offer here, the retreats and all that we have to offer. Concentration, contentment. Concurrence is so philosophical—we'll talk about that during dharma talks. So we stay with those three C's: continuity, concentration, contentment.

E stands for expectation-free. Yes, I mean it. When I did my retreat here, whenever I went for an interview with Joseph, I would come down and there was already a signpost on this path: "There's nothing to expect." For me, that was an amazing reminder. Because I really, I mean, I came from far away. I expected something here, you know. From the airplane, I came from South America, and before that I was in Africa. I was expecting something. And then after one week, something was not coming. What's wrong with me, actually?

Expectation is actually very good before you come for the retreat. You have to get somebody who's going to water your plants, look after your dog and all that. It's no problem. Before coming here, no problem. But when you come here on a cushion, it gets in the way. "Okay, I'm going to sit here. Oh, yeah, last time I was in Burma, I got into jhanas and all that. Yeah, now I'm here." Then you expect in one sit to get jhanas. First one, second, third, fourth, enlightenment—expecting all these things. It might get in the way, actually. There's a saying that if you want to have a bad sit, have a good one the first morning. I'm not saying that you shouldn't have a good one in the morning. But if you have a good one in the morning, and then the next subsequent sits, I'm telling you, it's really difficult, especially if you're somebody who's an expectation freak. You're in trouble. So, expectation-free.

Another E: actually enjoy your practice. E stands for enjoy. Yes, not attachment to your practice, but really enjoy it. In fact, the Buddha said that those people who are enlightened, they continue to meditate. And somebody asked, "Why?" It's for abiding in peace and happiness. It's a vacation, in a kind of way. You came here, you're on a retreat, you retreat from difficult situations. And then settle back in your practice. And that's what the Buddha talked about—joy, actually. Joy is part of the practice. In Buddhist teaching, joy is one of the conditions, one of the factors of enlightenment. When joy arises, you feel happy. And in fact, it's the precursor to concentration.

When I teach myself in Uganda and other venues where I teach alone, I tell people: breathe in happiness, breathe out happiness. Breathe in peace, breathe out peace. I tell people when they're breathing to connect with something that they aspire to—happiness, joy.

So I think that's a culmination of our practice—to have happiness, peace, enlightenment, awakening, joy. I would say joy, but in order to fulfill it, we must learn to enjoy. Not through attachments, but actually through cultivating joy so that you can proceed on your practice. Because sometimes when we have difficult mind states, sometimes we can't settle our mind and body.

But if you really relax and just send metta, loving-kindness—"may I be well, may I be happy"—and all that, then you can actually cultivate these states of mind.

So remember SPACE:

S — Slow down, silence.

P — Patience, perseverance.

A — Attention, proper attitude.

C — Continuity, concentration. You can also add contentment.

E — Expectation-free. Or simply: enjoy your practice.

I hope that helps. At least that's what I use as a template when I go for retreat.

CHAPTER 129

Faith: Giving Confidence for Our Path

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this comprehensive talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson illuminates the often misunderstood quality of saddhā (faith) as described in the Pāli suttas. Rather than belief in doctrines, saddhā is presented as a mental quality that uplifts, brightens, and clarifies the mind—described in the Abhidhamma as functioning like a muddy lake becoming clear. Wilson explains how faith operates as part of the five spiritual faculties (indriya): saddhā, paññā (wisdom), vīriya (energy), sati (mindfulness), and samādhi (concentration), which work together in balance during meditation.

The talk distinguishes between "bright faith," initially sparked by external inspiration, and "verified faith" that develops through direct experience of the Dhamma. Wilson explores the Buddha's teaching on Dhamma followers and faith followers, noting that both types possess all five faculties but may have different entry points. She shares how devotion can manifest differently for practitioners—whether through traditional practices like Buddhānupassanā (contemplation of the Buddha's qualities) or through what she calls "devotion to awareness itself."

Practically, Wilson addresses how to work with faith when difficult mental states arise and the mind shrinks back from experience. Drawing on a sutta where the Buddha instructs monastics to direct attention to inspiring images when scattered, she encourages practitioners to consciously contemplate what genuinely inspires them—teachers, the sangha's support, or simple acts of generosity around them—as a skillful means to restore the uplifted quality of heart that gives confidence to continue meeting each moment with full presence.

So tonight, what I am going to talk about is the quality of mind, of heart, of faith, which is given quite an importance in the teachings, in the suttas.

Last night, Winnie mentioned how all the aspects of the path work together, kind of come together and support one another. And as maybe you're seeing, and probably you all already knew anyway, this path, this retreat, requires a huge commitment, doesn't it? Over and over. Not just a one-time commitment—you got here, you thought that was the big commitment, and it wasn't even starting yet.

This perseverance, this commitment, and with wise attitude, the commitment is simply to meet each arising moment fully, wholeheartedly, with open, interested attention, without wanting, without aversion. How do you do that? How do any of us really cultivate that quality of energy, of effort, that we can continue to meet the moment? It takes a huge effort, but it's not the effort of wanting, of pushing, of aversion. Where does this come from? What is it that gives us this energy that leads to mindfulness, to wisdom?

The Buddha spoke often about five faculties—five spiritual faculties they're called—five specific qualities of mind and heart that we can experience, that we do experience, that we can recognize, that circle around and support each other. Sometimes they're talked about in a linear way, because that's how our minds work, that's how we can talk. The first one is faith, which is balanced with discerning wisdom, and this balance is what gives us the energy to do. So there's faith, wisdom, energy, mindfulness, and collectedness of mind, or concentration. These five qualities are in balance whenever the meditating mind is balanced—these five qualities are there.

One of the ways the Buddha talks about faith, saddha in Pali, is as the first, the initiating, of these qualities. It's the quality of mind and heart that you could say kick-starts the energy. It's the quality that opens us and gives us this confidence, this energy, this willingness to do, but from another motivation than wanting, than aversion, than our usual "me, me, me, what can I get?" So that's why I want to talk about saddha. It's a beautiful quality of heart and mind.

The translation into English of "faith," as with all English words, has a lot of different baggage and connotations for different people. Some people might find it a beautiful word, but one time we were teaching a retreat, I think it was at Spirit Rock, and one of us teachers talked about faith, and someone said humorously, "Oh, you mean the F word?" They weren't really thrilled to hear about faith.

So just to say from the beginning, this quality of saddha is not at all about believing in or signing up to a certain set of beliefs. The faith the Buddha's talking about here is a quality of mind. It doesn't mean that to be a card-carrying Buddhist Vipassana practitioner, you have to sign up to a certain set of beliefs. To me, that would be more deadening than enlivening.

We all have different relationships to faith in our personal history. Sometimes it's a very supportive idea. Sometimes it's been the description of a certain set of beliefs that we felt has been put on us, that we had to follow, and that we have somehow come into reaction to. But here, as far as I can tell, pretty much everything the Buddha taught is speaking from a practical, experiential point of view. What qualities help us wake up?

The quality of faith, saddha, is a mental state, a mental quality that we experience in our heart and mind that we can recognize. It's not about concepts or views or ideas, but it's a quality the effect of which is that it uplifts and brightens the heart, brightens the mind. It brings in a sense of inspiration. So it's a quality that we can feel.

The Abhidhamma, which is complex but has kind of nice descriptions of all the different mental qualities, describes the function of saddha as to clarify, as a muddy lake becomes clear. I'll say in a minute, I didn't used to quite understand that, but lately it's been making more sense. Another function is to set forth. The manifestation, the way it shows up, is again non-fogginess of mind. So those of you who are just falling asleep, all the fogginess—a little inspiration of faith can sometimes bring a jolt of waking-up energy. Non-fogginess as removal of the heart's, the mind's impurities, those qualities that are causing us suffering in the moment. And as confidence, as resolution, or as Sayadaw U Pandita describes it, faith, saddha in the mind, gives us the willingness to do. And that's the next quality of the five faculties: viriya, energy.

So, to talk a bit about this sense of faith as a quality that uplifts, that brightens the heart, the mind, that energizes in a wholesome way, that clears it—it's a really great thing to begin to tune into. In a minute I'll talk about seeing each for ourselves what does inspire this quality of faith, of inspiration. But how does it clear? How does it function as giving confidence?

So in clearing, you could say in clarifying the muddy lake, in clearing impurities of mind, it's as if it opens our heart, our mind, our views to another possibility.

For most of us—I want to say all, but one should never say all—for most of us, the way that we live is caught in confusion, in delusion, in not recognizing the way things are accurately. Like when Joseph talked about impermanence the other night. It's not that that's something that's going to become true if we wake up, right? It's already true, but we don't recognize it accurately. And there are many ways that we live in a world of concept, as Andrea was talking about, and views that describe ourselves and describe the world that we don't even know. We just think this is how it is.

And so we tend to consciously notice what fits our view and not notice what doesn't. It's just a limitation on how we can experience the world, and that's what we think is possible for us—it's a vision for us.

The sense of uplift, of inspiration that can come with faith is a kind of opening of the mind, of the heart, past the limitations of the comfortable, to be open to the unknown, to be open to a vision, to a possibility we hadn't even thought of.

This doesn't have to just be in spiritual experience. In 2008, right after President Obama was elected for the first time—that seems like an age ago—I remember the next morning after the election, reporters were interviewing people, because there was, in many quarters, a real excitement, a euphoria almost. This reporter had gone into communities interviewing young African-American women and men, late teens and such. I remember this one young woman they talked to who had clearly had a very difficult life up to that time and hadn't really felt that there was much possibility for her to go to school or to do anything that she wanted to in life—really clearly, as is so often the case, living in a situation where opportunities weren't freely offered.

But she was saying, "Oh, you know, it just gives me so much faith, so much inspiration that if he can be elected president, I can go to school and learn how to be a hairdresser."

It was really so touching. This is really the sense of confidence that comes with faith—the sense of opening past the views we held, for good reason, but thinking there's nothing much possible for me. It's like, oh, there's another vision. And that faith, that opening, that uplifting energy of the mind or heart gives the confidence, the willingness to do.

In terms of talking about faith as one of the spiritual faculties, in terms of our practice here and in our whole life, the Buddha would often begin offering teachings to someone by considering who could hear the Dhamma. But he would realize their mind isn't quite in the uplifted, open place for it. So he would give what he would call the step-by-step talk, graduated teachings.

There's one sutta I like where the Buddha's surrounded by his sangha—nuns, monks, lay people—he's teaching the Dhamma. And there's a poor sick person, actually a leper, a poor wretch of a person as it's described in the suttas. He sees this crowd and thinks, "Oh, maybe there's some food over there. Maybe if I go over there I can get some food." So he goes over, certainly not intending to hear the good Dhamma. But he's just sitting there and thinks, "Oh, there's no food, it's just the Buddha talking, but okay, I'll sit here. Might as well listen."

The Buddha, who could of course tell what was in everyone's mind, looked out in the crowd thinking, "Who here could hear the Dhamma, where it could really go in?" And he sees this guy, Suppabuddha—that was the sick man's name, the poor leper's name—he could hear it. But he sees the mind is kind of closed, not in the uplifted receptive place.

And so he starts with a step-by-step talk, which he always starts by talking about generosity, the qualities of generosity, the qualities of non-harming conduct. He goes through a whole list—renunciation, the dangers of sense pleasures—and then, this is the language: "When he perceived that his mind was ready, uplifted, clear, then he gave the teachings particular to the Buddhas, of the Four Noble Truths."

This language, to me, describes the quality of saddhā in our heart and mind. Just this sense the mind is uplifted, it's clear, it's flexible, it's open and ready to hear the Dhamma. This quality of faith is really essential to let us open in here, to just be with what's going on.

It's described initially as bright faith—something usually external, first and maybe again and again, triggers this quality of uplift in our mind, in our heart. For each of us, there's been something, and there continue to be things. We can actually use this as a contemplation, consciously contemplate, come back to what is it that can elicit this quality of saddhā in our mind, in our heart.

Like this young woman thinking about President Obama being elected—but then the bright faith isn't about putting the truth onto that person, thinking I need that person to do it for me. What that bright faith offers, whether it's a person who inspires you, or hearing the Dhamma, or reading the Dhamma, whatever it might be for you—it's not about putting the energy onto them, that quality of devotion, although devotion can be an aspect of faith. But it's not giving over the power to anything outside. Rather, it's that external stimulus that elicits that quality of brightness and uplift and openness in our own mind and heart.

This is called bright faith. And as that gives us the energy to do—like maybe it gave that young woman, maybe she really did go to school and learn how to be a hairdresser.

That would be the *viriya*. And then the mindfulness, the determination to do it.

So as we open with bright faith in terms of our Dhamma practice, as we continue to practice, it becomes more and more what's called verified faith. It's not so dependent on that particular external stimulus because we come to know for ourselves, in deeper and deeper ways, the truth of the Dhamma. But even when we start with bright faith, it's not about putting it onto someone else. It's about eliciting this willingness to do.

What the heck is it we're doing? How is it different from wanting? And this is where it gets really interesting to me. Because the faith, the confidence of this wholesome quality of *saddhā*, isn't about getting something we want, or feeling good, or getting the

result we want. The confidence is really in the willingness to basically give ourselves wholeheartedly, with awareness, into this moment just as it is. Without holding back. Without having a "so that."

So it's not a willingness to do such that if I do X, Y, Z, in three days I'm going to be a stream-enterer. I mean, our minds might think that. But then we start practicing and that is not the energy of faith—that's the energy of wanting. It feels really different. We'll flip back and forth, but you can really tell: wanting is not inspiring. It gives us energy to do, God knows. How many things have we done in our life that come from wanting? A few, you know. It gives us energy to do, but it's not opening. It's not uplifting. It's narrowing and self-referencing and exhausting. The energy of faith is quite different.

So the willingness to do, to meet this moment with our fullness of presence, with awareness, no matter what this moment is presenting. But there are a couple of different ways that faith might manifest for us, because we're different personalities. Here I want to talk about the sense of devotion, because for some people that really is the manifestation of faith for them.

The Buddha talks about two kinds of followers in the suttas. He talks about Dhamma followers and faith followers, which I think is really interesting. The faith followers—he uses the word *saddhā*, faith—but I want to say, in the way he's talking about it, I would substitute in English "devotion followers," because both types have faith.

The Dhamma followers are disciples in whom the faculty of wisdom, of the five faculties, the discerning faculty, is predominant. They develop the noble path with wisdom in the lead. Faith followers are disciples in whom the faculty of faith is predominant, and they develop the noble path with faith in the lead.

But—and I'm paraphrasing here—a wisdom follower is one who is not an awakened person yet, but someone on the path who has sufficiently gained a reflective acceptance and understanding of the teachings proclaimed by the Tathagata. I think I'm more that type. In my early years, a lot of what I learned and what really inspired me came from reading suttas, from reading a lot of the Buddhist teachings that I would get from Sri Lanka, from the Pali Text Society. Actually, I didn't know anybody else where I was living who knew anything about this, so it was that or nothing. But that saved my life. I would say that was really inspiring to me. It wasn't that I was some awakened being, but reading and hearing the Dhamma in that way, it just made sense and went deeper and deeper. And it inspires faith, that sense of uplift.

A faith follower, the way the Buddha describes it, is one who has sufficient faith in and love for the Tathagata, which is how he described himself. Both of these followers actually have all five faculties, so don't think it's one or the other. All of them have these five faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration or collectedness, and wisdom. And they all balance. So it's not one or the other, but we can see in ourselves maybe a predilection to move in one direction or the other. Not to think there's a right or a wrong—really see that for yourself.

This sense of devotion, I think, can be really appreciated if that's the type, if that's what lights up the energy for you. Look and see for yourself. Remember, maybe it was on the opening night with Bhante, we talked about this meditation, *Buddhānussati*, where you contemplate the qualities of the Buddha. I was saying that in Burma, many of the nuns I know, that's their main practice.

And that practice in itself doesn't—you know, I don't hate it or anything—but it doesn't wake up this quality of energy in me. But being with the nuns who practice it, I can see that for them it does. When they're practicing this, they become quite radiant, filled with joy and incredible energy and commitment and confidence to live their lives as very simple renunciates. And the ones I know, they're living pretty tough lives—living very simply, taking care of a lot of little orphan girls, or starting schools that they run for poor children, all on dana every month. I mean, really amazing commitment. And I can see the inspiration, the faith that comes, and how that feeds all these five faculties.

And they then become a source of inspiration for me, because what's wonderful is we can catch it from each other. So that particular practice doesn't inspire a lot of faith in me directly. But being with someone whose faith is up—that inspires faith in me. There's a way we can use that with each other.

But we're all different. Last year, I was teaching a retreat in Germany, and a young man came—a young German guy who lived in Shanghai. And he had, just the previous year in Shanghai, had his first introduction to Buddhist practice. I don't think there's so much Buddhist practice really available in China, but he had gone to a five-day retreat with the Pure Land Buddhist school. He said it was in a really ancient monastery with Pure Land Chinese monks, and to him it was so inspiring. He said just the ancient quality—they spent a lot of time together chanting and circumambulating, walking around the statues of the Buddha, chanting. The whole sense, he said, was just so spiritual. It really brought up faith in him.

And that gave him the energy, the confidence, so then he came back home to Germany and did an eight-day Vipassana retreat with us last year—his first real retreat like that. He said that devotional quality really inspired faith in him. But he also said he didn't have any tools at all from that in terms of how to watch his mind or how to practice. So then he found it opened him up to hear the Dhamma, and he really was embracing mindfulness practice and the Four Noble Truths and all of that. That's really kind of how it works.

But there are other people for whom that's not going to be so inspiring. As I said, when I first read the suttas, or when I first heard the First Noble Truth talked about—which, you know, when Bhante mentioned it last night—I found that incredibly inspiring. It's like, "Oh yes, this is how things are." Instead of people saying, "Oh yeah, it's going to be okay, things will be okay, it just gets better and better." But it isn't just getting better and better. "What's the matter? I should be happy. I've got nothing to complain about." And then I heard the First Noble Truth. "Oh yes, that makes total sense." Great faith would come up, and that gives a confidence to practice.

So it can be interesting and helpful for each of us to just look in your own experience and see what inspires you. And I've found for myself, even as I say I'm not the devotional type—maybe that turns out not to be true. Maybe what I'm seeing for myself is that the two qualities of faith follower, devotion follower, and Dhamma follower, wisdom follower—it all ends up coming together one way or another.

So for me, the devotion turns out to be not to a being, not particularly to a sense of the memory of the Buddha, although I'm quite inspired by many of my teachers. The devotion turns out to be a love of awareness itself—a complete confidence, complete love of the awareness of this moment. Which can lead into, when the awareness is more or less pure, an embracing of this moment. Or not. Then you embrace that you're not embracing this moment. But a real sense of confidence in awareness. Confidence in the Dhamma, that it reveals the truth.

So I'll tell a little story that for me personifies this—I don't know if it works for anyone else. It was maybe, actually it's a long time ago now, fifteen or twenty years, when I first visited the Ramana Ashram in Tiruvannamalai in southern India, in Tamil Nadu. Ramana Maharshi, if you don't know, died in 1951. But he was really considered one of the great awakened beings, one of the saints of India in the last century. He spent all of his life from the time he was sixteen until he died at the base of this small mountain, Arunachala, in this little village of Tiruvannamalai. An ashram grew up around him, and he really, from what one can tell, seemed quite awakened—very inspiring.

So this ashram is still there, and it's very well maintained, very well managed. There's what they call a samadhi—it's a different use of the word than how we use it—which is kind of like the marble tomb where he is buried, with a big building around it. The ashram is there at the base of the mountain, and the mountain is one of the things Ramana would speak of often. He would say, "O Arunachala, you root out the ego of one who meditates on you in your heart."

So it's a sense of really freedom from confusion, from greed, hatred, and delusion.

The ashram honors Ramana, but it's not about mere devotion to him. It's really there to support all the people who come—which is millions of people over the years from all over the world—to wake up themselves. So it's not like a dead place, like a museum. It's really alive, oriented toward awakening.

And I say millions of people come there from all over, so every evening there's a big hall, bigger than this, where all the guests can sit along the side, and the men and women who run the ashram come and do an hour's chanting. You sit and listen—it's one of the things to do. You listen to the chanting, and right behind is the open room with the samadhi, with Ramana's tomb there. Then after the chanting you go to dinner.

The chanting is led on the men's side by the man who's the president of the ashram, who runs the place. And as the chanting is going on, and all through the day, people are walking around circumambulating the tomb. It's something one does when one's there. And watching people do it—all kinds of people, and myself included—you can see, as much as you can tell from looking at someone, all the different ways that people do that.

Some are really showy, prostrating around, and you can tell there's a wanting so much to feel the truth, to wake up. You can just feel this energy. Some people are just walking around chit-chatting, just la la la, and then they go away. Some people are just so grim, trying so hard. So much different stuff.

And I could see that in myself. There were times I'd just be walking around, but there were times I'm like, "I have to really be present so I can wake up." Does that sound like anybody's walking meditation? Right? Just—ugh! And it looks like you're really doing it, but the motivation isn't this upliftingness of faith. It's wanting. And they feel so different when you notice it, but we so easily slide into "Ugh, I gotta wake up." "No, oh no, I spaced out in that moment." "Oh, Ramana, Ramana." What can he do? He's gone. Just like the Buddha, they're gone. What's here now?

So, all of that. I was watching. And on this particular night, the chanting ended. Every night the president of the ashram would go in, and all the people—two hundred people—you go in, you sit on the floor in rows, and the president and the other people who run the ashram come and ladle out the food. They serve everyone their meal, every night and every lunch.

So he finished the chanting, got up—this very simple man—just got up, very simply walked around the tomb, and went and served the dinner. No huff, no fluff, no big show, no prostrating. Just get up, walk around the samadhi, go serve dinner. Day after day after day, year after year after year.

And to me—of course, I don't know how much is projection, I'm aware of that—but what it really said to me, this is the quality of devotion. Just the simplicity of awareness in this moment. Just the simplicity of: you get up, you walk around the samadhi, and you go serve dinner. To me, that's really the devotion to the everyday simplicity and honesty of awareness.

And that's really what we're cultivating here. Not looking for a better experience, but you get up, you brush your teeth. You feel grumpy, like Winnie said yesterday, or you feel great. It doesn't matter. Just get up, and you notice how things are, and you brush your teeth, and you come and sit. You go wash the pots, you take a walk. You just feel whatever it is. It's the awareness that the faith, the saddhā, gives us the trust, the confidence to really open into. It doesn't matter what's happening, but the saddhā, the faith, gives us the confidence to give ourselves completely to this moment—whatever it might happen to be—with nothing held back.

Here is a quotation from Ayya Khema, the great German nun and Buddhist teacher. She's talking about faith. She says that the willingness to give ourselves to our path wholeheartedly is not a one-time decision. It keeps on deepening. This is like the verified faith. As long as we're still looking for a loophole—a loophole means some way out, looking for some lasting happiness in this world—

Then our commitment to our spiritual path is not complete. This isn't about judging—it's just about looking and seeing. "Okay, I'll open to this moment so that it gets better." You know, all the "I'm being mindful, but it didn't work." How often do we say that? "It didn't work. What am I doing wrong? Because it's supposed to get better." Only when we've realized that there is not another way out will we be ready to really give ourselves to the path.

I don't say that so that you take it as a way to put yourself down—not at all. But more in the sense of seeing. It deepens. It deepens. We don't have the confidence or the trust to just really give ourselves to awareness of whatever's happening when whatever's happening is difficult. Or it so doesn't match the unrecognized view we have of how things are supposed to be. Winnie last night was wonderful when she was describing what the perfect day would be like. And we laugh—ha ha ha, we don't really think that. Yeah, right. We wouldn't admit it, maybe. But when you get up grumpy and everything goes the other way, it's like, "I'm not giving myself completely to this. No way."

But the confidence, the trust, the faith in awareness—what starts to happen is a shift of motivation from wanting, from somehow looking for experience to affirm ourselves, to confirm ourselves, to give ourselves some sense of importance, of getting somewhere. Don't you want to know you're getting somewhere? This open awareness where you're just floating around, noticing whatever arises, and you're not having any experiences, not getting more clear—doesn't that drive you crazy? Don't you want some proof you're getting somewhere?

But the real surrender: Where do you think you're going to get? Where is there besides this moment? There's nothing else besides this moment. Dōgen Zenji, the great Zen master, said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?"

So whatever's occurring in this moment—beautiful, difficult, a moment of faith, a moment of aversion, a moment of hearing, a moment of pain—this moment is the Dhamma speaking to us. It's nowhere else. And faith, this uplifted quality of heart and mind, gives us the confidence again to say, "Okay, it's like this right now." Just a kind of surrendering or giving ourselves into this moment, nothing held back—not in order for something better to happen, but because of us right here.

What's really started to shift for me, getting stronger and stronger, is that this devotion or this quality of Dhamma follower starts to be that the trust, the confidence in awareness, in mindfulness, becomes more trustworthy and more interesting than our habit of liking and disliking whatever is occurring. Our habit of getting entranced by aversion and greed and self-stories—those things will still come. But we get more interested in the awareness. It just feels so much more reliable and true and freeing, and always accessible when we remember. Awareness isn't just accessible when pleasant things are happening or when unpleasant things are happening. It's whenever we remember.

So this is the shift from expecting or thinking we know, to simply loving awareness itself—that's my language. Then we don't keep evaluating by the quality of what's happening. And then we can start to see that all of our six sense experiences—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensations, and then the whole mental realm of thoughts, emotions, moods—those are the six sense experiences. They're just occurring, over and over, across those six doors. All of them, any of them, serves to re-trigger our recognition of awareness. There's nothing outside of it. We don't have to wait for a better experience.

And this gets to be really so wonderful, because you can sit down and be having just the most awful, useless sitting. I know we always tell you no sitting's useless, but don't you feel like some of them are useless? You say, "I'm just sitting here and it's restless and it's foggy and I'm sleepy and what's the point? I might as well just be in bed—it'd be more pleasant, that's for sure. Useless."

And then you come tell us, and we say, "Oh, but there's awareness of fogginess." And you go, "Thanks a lot. I needed you to tell me that." Right. But we mean it. We mean it. And just so you know, if you're on my interview list, I'm going to keep on saying that the whole time. You don't even have to come because that's what I'm going to tell you.

You tell me something, and I say, "Oh yeah, and there's awareness of that." That's so far out! Because over and over again there will be that shift where you're sitting there foggy, and then—oh, awareness of fogginess. Awareness of fogginess. And this love of awareness will come, just for that moment. You see, awareness doesn't care if it's aware of fogginess or aware of bliss. Awareness isn't better when it's aware of something pleasant. We can be aware of anything.

So just starting with something simple—I had this example written down. I was at home washing a teacup. I'm a little bit attached to my two perfect teacups, I have to say. I don't want to break them. When people stay in my house, I put them up high. I say, "Use anything you want, but not those two teacups." And they say, "We wouldn't dare, we wouldn't touch them."

So I was washing my teacup this one day, very carefully, and then I became aware—I'd been really mindful, mindful of the movements of the teacup, but I wasn't noticing the attitude in the mind. The mindfulness wasn't complete. It was mindfulness with the attitude of wanting. I was being very careful with my movements because I didn't want to break the teacup. Do you get a sense of how we can be mindful *in order to*? That's a sort of mindfulness, but it's not the mindfulness of faith. It's not the vīrya that just dies into what's happening. It was the wanting.

So, okay, there's klesha. There's the torment in the mind of greed that I didn't see. But all of a sudden I became aware of the greed. Our tendency could be, "Oh, I'm not being mindful well enough because there's greed." Okay, that's aversion. But what happens with true mindfulness? "Oh, that's greed. Oh yeah, look at that. That's greed." And then the awareness of greed—the awareness becomes more interesting. It starts to grow and gain its own momentum.

It wasn't like I said, "Oh, I have to really love awareness here." It was more like, "Here's awareness. Oh yeah, that's—oh, that's greed. Oh yeah, greed is like this. That's how greed feels in the body. That's awareness of greed." And then I noticed the next thing, and the mindfulness just starts to get its own momentum again. Anything, everything that occurs can be the trigger back into awareness.

That's why we talk so much about continuity. It's not to gain something. You think you've wasted half the day—like when you were saying if you're not walking, you're wasting half the day. But then you suddenly wake up. You're drinking tea, your seventeenth cup of tea of the day, and it's only ten in the morning. But suddenly you become aware. You feel a sensation. You're drinking the tea. You notice the absolute disgust—"I can't stand another sip of tea. It's disgusting. I'm going to float away." Oh, aversion's like that.

And then you touch it—you palpably feel the awareness. It's like, "Great, here we are again." And that awareness leads to the steadiness of mindfulness. It starts to get its own momentum. That's the concentration. And then the wisdom, the clear seeing, the recognition of what's wholesome, what's onward-leading, what's not—that's not an act of will. That comes by itself.

So this example I'm making up—the seventeenth cup of tea, the disgusting something, and then, "Oh, I really don't need any more tea right now." And you get up and you go, "I think I'll just do walking meditation." Really with that tone of voice, not with judgment, not with blame. Oh yeah, wisdom sees this is really more supportive of my awakening right now—get up and walk. And you'll see that happening more and more as the retreat goes on. We say it gets a little bit easier to remember to be mindful. In the beginning, at the end of every walking pass, you try to think, "Do I need to go to the bathroom yet? No, not yet, I have to do another one." And after a couple of weeks, you don't even think about it anymore. It's happening naturally.

But notice this. Notice how the faith, the confidence, brings the energy, the willingness to do, and then we start to love the awareness. The mindfulness gets its own momentum. The mind steadies and the wisdom comes, you see more clearly, and that again cycles around and feeds the faith, feeds the uplifting quality. And so it keeps

spiraling deeper and deeper. We need that. We need that recommitment, because it does get difficult. It's difficult in the beginning, and it gets difficult in different ways as we go on.

One of the descriptions of viriya, energy, is the quality of mind, of heart, that does not shrink back. To shrink means to pull back from the difficult. So when something difficult happens, there's that uplifting of faith that gives us the courage: "Okay, I can surrender into this moment too, with awareness." Not pulling back, but surrendering into this.

Because it does get difficult in different ways. We have to keep finding that faith again, that recommitment. Stephen Batchelor, once talking about emptiness—emptiness of sense of self, the sense of awakening—said, "Emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, of self-centeredness, and seeming protection. And although it is freeing, at times it also brings up great disconcertion." It feels very uncomfortable, confusing—like being in no man's land, where we're not in the realm of the familiar. We can't quite figure it out the way we're used to doing. And so then, again, we may call on faith to give us the uplift, to give us the energy. This too—not to shrink back.

So I just want to say one last thing: when you're finding yourself at a difficult time, noticing it's hard, when your mind is shrinking back, you can actually consciously use deliberate reflections on what brings up faith and inspiration in your heart and mind. Even though this is a deliberate contemplation, it can be very useful when we feel the energy is really getting lost, when we feel like, "What am I doing this for? I'm picking up and putting down my foot—why? To feel the sensations? Why? Who cares?" You ever have a moment like that? I do, often. Then I'll just do it again because the faith is really natural, and then it goes away. But sometimes we need to call it up.

So look and see for yourself. Think about it: What has inspired you, uplifted you, brought you to this path? There can be different things. For me, often I'll think about the teachers I've had, the people in my life in different ways—they don't have to be Buddhist teachers—but those who have exhibited some quality of compassion, of wakefulness, that when I think of them, that upliftedness, that energy, that openness, that willingness to do, comes into my heart, into my mind. A sense of gratitude, a sense of inspiration.

Or sometimes we can't find it even in ourselves. What I've found—and this unexpectedly started to occur for me one time when I was on retreat in Burma, during a really difficult retreat, getting quite caught in some heavy mental states—was that just trying to think of my own teachers or what inspired me, it just didn't cut it. I couldn't get there

because the heaviness of the mental state was too strong. But then, in a situation like this, because we catch it from each other, we can actually use the external surroundings, use the sense of sangha. There's no way we're doing this in isolation. You may wish you were in more isolation, but we're not in isolation. And we really support one another.

That is one of the meanings of Sangha.

So I noticed on this retreat in Burma how well the people who were running the retreat center were taking care of us all—so many yogis from Burma and all different countries. The great generosity and metta with which the people who were working in the kitchen would do everything they could to satisfy people's little needs, the amount of care and kindness and metta that was just all around supporting me. And that actually uplifted my mind and heart, brought back faith, brought back openness.

So I would say sometimes if you're here and feeling that way, and you notice another fellow meditator—sometimes you can just feel that they're in the flow. Of course, we never really know. But as Joseph or someone was saying, you can tell when someone's just spacing out, and you can tell when someone's really there in that moment. And you think, "Oh, right. There really is a point to this." It can brighten our mind and heart.

Or I look around and notice the great generosity and metta from the staff. The care that goes into—just look at the flower arrangements. When one is dying, they put up some new beautiful arrangements. Somebody put great metta and generosity into that. Just look around and let it in. It doesn't take much. Because it then elicits that quality in our own mind and heart. And then again, there's the energy to take the next step, to notice the next thing, to bring awareness to this sense of shame or fear or aversion.

And I'm not just making this up as something I thought was a good idea. The Buddha also talks about it. There's one sutta actually given to nuns. Ananda is talking to nuns and then he and the Buddha are talking together. I'm going to paraphrase it a bit.

The Buddha is saying, "Here a nun, a monk abides"—you may recognize this phrase—"contemplating the body in the body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful." Do you remember Andrea talking about that phrase? He's saying they're just in the four foundations, leading away from the unhappiness that comes from wanting the things of the world. And as one is abiding, contemplating the four foundations of mindfulness, it could happen that a bodily sensation arises, a distress, or a mental sluggishness, or a mental distress. So the Buddha is saying this could arise—something that scatters the mind, that gets us confused. He recognizes this happens.

And so he says: you're practicing, a bodily distress, a mental sluggishness, a mental distress arises, and your mind gets completely scattered and lost. At that time, the nun, the monk, can direct her mind to some inspiring image. The word is *image*. And he gives the example of using the image of the Buddha. But I'm going to substitute here for whatever elicits faith in you. You can actually consciously—you're completely scattered, you're lost—it's one way that we can use metta, as Winnie was talking about. Metta for many people, just the quality of metta, inspires and opens the mind and heart. Or it can be contemplating or just bringing up some inspiring person, inspiring teacher, some of the examples I gave—but really to contemplate what brings up faith in you.

So do this for some time, and as this happens, you start to see that the sluggishness recedes, the distress recedes. He says happiness is born. From this happiness, from this joyful mind, the body relaxes. A relaxed body feels content. Just in case you thought we were making up this relaxation stuff—this is the Buddha. Joyful mind relaxes the body. A relaxed body feels content. The mind of one content becomes collected.

She then can reflect: "The purpose for which I directed my attention to an inspiring recollection has been served, so I can withdraw my attention from that." And that's called directed meditation. And then I just withdraw my attention from that and don't direct the mind to anything in particular. Just notice whatever's arising. Back to our mindfulness practice.

So this is from the Buddha. Using the sense of faith, and then it leads through all the five faculties to wisdom and keeps on spiraling deeper into faith.

I think that's enough. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 130

Understanding Dukkha: The First Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson offers a fresh perspective on the First Noble Truth, explaining why this teaching about dukkha actually inspires happiness rather than despair. Drawing on Bhikkhu Anālayo's etymology of dukkha as the ill-fitting axle hole of an ox cart—that constant friction and unreliability running through all experience—she distinguishes this understanding from the limited translation of "suffering."

Wilson explores the three aspects of dukkha articulated by Sāriputta: dukkha-dukkha (the suffering of painful experience), viparināma-dukkha (the suffering due to change), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (the inherent unsatisfactoriness of all conditioned phenomena). She examines how our resistance to reality—through denial, inattention, and misperception—creates the second arrow of suffering. The Buddha's teaching in the Two Darts Sutta reveals how untaught worldlings know no escape from pain except seeking sensual pleasure, creating deep habits of aversion and craving.

Through personal stories, including her experience of grief after her sister's death, Wilson demonstrates how opening to difficult experience without resistance transforms suffering into simple presence with what is. She cautions against the "dukkha lens"—a subtle aversion to life disguised as wisdom—while showing how genuine understanding of the First Noble Truth naturally ripens into compassion. When we stop holding ourselves separate from our own suffering, we become able to truly be present with others in their pain, recognizing dukkha as the shared human condition that connects rather than isolates us.

What I want to talk about tonight is the First Noble Truth, because it actually makes me really happy. I get quite inspired thinking about the First Noble Truth. It's both obvious and also quite profound, and we misunderstand it—which is really why we suffer.

The First Noble Truth is the Truth of Dukkha, and dukkha is often translated into English as "suffering." I think that's a limited and not so helpful translation. When we hear the word suffering in English—the First Noble Truth, suffering—it easily slides into the glib "life is suffering," which of course is not what the Buddha was teaching. When we hear suffering, it's pretty easy for the mind to slide into some aversion along with that. It just kind of comes together. And I'm pretty sure the Buddha didn't enunciate and teach the First Noble Truth to elicit aversion in our minds at all, but exactly the opposite.

In each of the Four Truths there's an action to be performed. The First Noble Truth of dukkha is to be understood. Why? Because the understanding—not just intellectual, but really on a cellular level, which is our whole life of practice as we keep going deeper and deeper with it—that understanding frees us. It frees us from confusion, from suffering, from reactions to life that are based on inaccurate recognition of reality.

Just to start with the word dukkha, I really like the way Bhikkhu Analayo, who's quite a scholar, describes or discusses the translation of that word. One way he breaks down the word in Pali is two parts: *duh* meaning difficulty and *ka* meaning actually the hole, the axle hole in the wheel of an ox cart. You might wonder where we're going with this, but these old-fashioned wooden ox carts have big wooden wheels with a hole in the middle where the axle—that pole that runs between the wheels—fits. And it doesn't really fit in a very smooth, frictionless way. It rubs. There's disharmony. There's friction. It's just that little rub. It's never really smooth and comfortable. If you've ever ridden in an ox cart without padding, trust me, this is a very accurate description of dukkha. It just rubs. It just doesn't quite fit.

Another way he describes it is a kind of discomfort, uneasiness, not standing in an easy way. Or as Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it, the basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives. This isn't just the suffering of unpleasant experience—of course that's included. It's much broader and actually more liberating to understand than that. It's this sense of unreliability, that friction, even when everything's all together.

As Ruth Denison, this wonderful German-American teacher, used to say, it's just the little leak in the canoe. There's always just some little something. And even if there's not something, our minds make something when we don't see. This is how sick the mind is: I walked in here, I looked at these lovely flowers—they're lovely—and I thought, but the last ones, I liked them better. I miss those last flowers. They had that purple. How do we get through life? But this is what the mind does when we're not watching. And then we take it up and we make it really a problem.

Let me read you two definitions from the Buddha. Sariputta, who was the Buddha's chief disciple, was answering a question to someone who asked about dukkha, and he said there are three types of dukkha. First is the stress, the discontent due to pain, due to difficult experience, called—obviously enough—*dukkha dukkha*. The next is the dukkha due to change, that what is beautiful and pleasant changes, the constant fluctuation—*viparinama dukkha*.

And the other is sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of all conditioned formations, of all compound fabrications—that they're never really going to be satisfying.

Let me talk a little bit about the first two particularly.

The first, the obvious one, dukkha dukkha, is what we usually think of when we think of the first noble truth. It's the way the Buddha described it, the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering.

All of that—and I'm using the word "suffering" here—I would call all of that suffering. We're aware that we don't like any of those things. But what's the Buddha talking about when, after everything he understood, he decided, "This is how I want to package what I understood to teach, to free your heart and mind"? And he starts by saying, you know, all these painful things are suffering. It's like, "Duh!" How is that going to free us?

But what's so fascinating, even just on this level of the very first aspect of dukkha, the dukkha dukkha, is that we don't really understand or believe that this is just how life is. He's simply describing reality the way it is. So we go, "Yeah, right, we all suffer." But when it happens—when it actually happens—how does our heart and mind react?

And this is where it comes to be so freeing. Yes, this stuff happens; that's dukkha dukkha. But the first noble truth that's not understood, that contributes to the suffering the Buddhist teachings can free us from, is the reactions in our hearts and minds. The fire of longing, the fire of aversion that comes from misunderstanding life as it is, from misperceiving life as it is.

And so we keep on, moment after moment—again we'll see and then we'll forget—we resist reality as it's arising in the moment. So much of our experience when we're consciously suffering is that we're in contention with what's happening now. Again and again, we're either pushing away or somewhere looking for that stable state that's going to be reliable. And the Buddha is saying, in terms of all the aspects of dukkha, that there is nothing that's reliable.

Dukkha as one of the characteristics of existence, along with impermanence, anicca, and no separate self, anatta—the Buddha describes these over and over as an aspect of all conditioned phenomena. All, not just some. All conditioned phenomena. So all aspects of experience are included in the first noble truth of dukkha—not just the obvious difficult ones.

And so there's the fire of aversion and the fire of longing. We keep thinking something here is going to be reliable, secure. We don't recognize accurately. And because we don't tend to really deeply, cellularly get it—this is how life is—when something dif-

ficult comes, even the obvious difficult: aging, illness, failing at something, losing one's job, something difficult happens, so often there's this sense of, "I did something wrong. How come this is happening to me?" As if blame, surprise, or shame are warranted, as if this is a mistake. And if we could get it right, this kind of mistake would stop happening. Did you come here to stop those kinds of mistakes?

There's a spiritual teacher in California, not Buddhist, but probably many of you have heard of her—Byron Katie. And she has a great line: "When you fight with reality, you lose."

And so this aspect of not recognizing the simple way that things are—all the birth, aging, death, sickness, gain and loss that happens to everybody at some point, over and over—not recognizing it, the way we respond out of not recognizing, is really moha, delusion.

The suffering from these tormented reactions is really from the base root of delusion, which shows up in a couple of ways. It shows up through denial—just denying what's actually occurring in front of our face. Through inattention—we just don't notice. And then misperception—actively perceiving something in a way that's inaccurate. These forms of delusion at different times are supporting, are not understanding, are not living in harmony with this truth of how things are, the noble truth of dukkha.

Let me tell a story, a very simple, simple story. Not some big suffering thing, but this sense of how even when things seem to be going fine, that little leak in the canoe is running through and we don't tend to notice.

When I was growing up, when in my early twenties, I started to realize I had really bought the story that things just get better and better.

You grow up and get your life together, and all of that. But I really was buying it. And I didn't have any obvious horrible thing going on, but I wasn't happy. And I thought, what's the matter with me? I have nothing to complain about.

And even when we do have stuff to complain about, many people here come and say, "Well, this is going on and it's really difficult, but other people in the world have it so much worse, so I shouldn't even complain." It's like we shunt it aside, we don't want to look.

So when I first heard this teaching, I was like—oh, huge breath out. I'm not insane. It's not like I'm some kind of weird, negative person who can't be happy. It's just that I wasn't seeing the whole picture, which steady mindfulness lets us see.

So I'll tell you this story, a simple one like that. Some years ago, I was on staff here in the winter. It had been very cold, gray, snowy. And so another friend who was on staff, a guy, we decided we wanted to go to the sauna—which is nowhere near here. Don't even get your hopes up. Not that you need one today, but it's like a half hour drive away. So in the cold winter and ice, we said, "Great, we're going to go to the sauna."

Now, I'm going to describe it as it really happened, but not as we saw it. Because what we said was, we went to the sauna, we came out and said, "Wow, that was great." And then we talked about other things. But I'm going to describe what actually happened.

So we decide to go to the sauna. We have to bundle up, we get in the car, and it's really cold for like the first ten minutes till the heat comes on. So we're cold and bundled and driving in this crummy weather and ice. We get to this place where the sauna is. It's not the nicest spa in the world. And then we have to separate. So I don't know what his was like, but the women's locker room was kind of grody—kind of grungy and cold. I always like to be barefoot in there, so it was cold and damp. Take a shower. It's unpleasant. Get in the sauna.

Great. It's fantastic.

Like, how long can you sit in a sauna that is really nice? Yeah, five minutes maybe. Then you start to sweat and get a headache and it's too hot. You think, "No, but I came all this way." So you stay a little longer. Then finally you have to get out and take a cold shower. I hate cold showers. Take a cold shower. Oh God. Then you can go back in again. But it's never quite as good as it was the first time. You can't stay quite the same amount of time, but a little bit. You do that for a while and finally, okay, that's over. Come out to the grody locker room. You're all cold again. By the time you get dressed, you go out. I met my friend who said, "Wow, that was great."

And that's what life is like. It is. It's a constant fluctuation—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

So now you might be saying, why would I want to look that carefully? I want to pretend everything's great. Well, good luck to you. If it worked, none of you would be here, believe me.

It doesn't work, because that's not how it is. It's just not how it is.

My mother was a really lovely woman, very resolutely positive, you could say. One time she visited here when I was on staff. You know, it says "metta" over the top of the building. Now, I don't know where she picked this up, because she respected what we

all do here, but she didn't really know anything about it, wasn't that interested. She said, "Oh, metta—that's kind of the opposite of dukkha, isn't it?" I said, "Wow, where'd you learn that?" And then I described dukkha, and she said, "Oh, but I don't have any dukkha. I don't suffer."

It's not that it's true, but you're seeing here part of what makes retreats so difficult. You're seeing it, all of you—the opening into the unpleasant. Even little, nudgy unpleasant can be really hard, can't it? Never mind the big stuff. And depending on our particular habits, some of us have spent a lot of time perfecting how my mother was: "No, I don't suffer. Going to the sauna. It's all great." We don't want to look at it, because if we see the unpleasant, we feel we'll be thrown over. But that's denial. It's inattention, but also denial—just not seeing what's happening.

I read a book about Russia in the 1990s. The man who wrote this book was interviewing people who had been in the gulag under Stalin, who had survived it. After the Soviet Union broke up, he could find people who would actually talk about it—they wouldn't have really talked about it before. So he was just interviewing different people during that time.

The book was really about that, but to me, it seemed to be about the power of denial. He quoted George Orwell in talking about the courage of perception, the power of facing unpleasant facts. And this writer noticed that during the thirties and forties under Stalin, when so many people were just arbitrarily arrested—we're talking twenty million people, not one or two here or there—those who tried to avoid arrest by lying low, by hiding, moving from place to place, had a very good chance of success. However, people rarely tried to do that. Despite mass arrests, almost everybody believed, "It can't happen to me." It's like how we feel about death. Can't happen to me. So people would deny the bad news because it implies worse news. If I'm about to be arrested, it would mean the whole system has gone mad—which was true. But that's too much to let in. It can't be true. So you just deny the whole thing and don't take appropriate action.

The power of denial is very strong. And even though in some way we feel like this is our protection from the difficult, from the painful, it's actually what keeps us in a sense of alienation, of isolation, of disconnect. There's a sense of believing I can somehow hold myself separate from this unwanted experience, from this painful, unpleasant experience. Do you ever notice that in your mind? Probably not so clearly like that. Something's happening, and we do everything we can to fix it because it shouldn't be here. And somehow I can hold myself separate from this.

When there's still in us this habit—and it's so deep—of holding ourselves separate from the unpleasant... We've talked about this, this aspect of mind called vedana, the sense of recognizing the unpleasant and how easily that moves into pushing away. Recognizing, or not recognizing, when the mind feels something is pleasant, and how easily that moves into wanting. Neutral, and how easily we miss that altogether. It's not a given that this has to happen, but it's such a deeply practiced habit of our mind. It's like in this mind that doesn't really exist, that has no base, there's a deep rut. I don't know where the rut is, but there is a deep rut that the mind just falls into.

Unpleasant... wrong, bad. It's not just, "Oh, I don't like the unpleasant, let me hold myself separate." It's like, "This shouldn't be happening." And you see that even in little things on retreat. The breath is a little tight, and all the stuff that can get going in your mind—what's wrong, how to fix it, the teachings—all because it's tight, it's a little unpleasant. That's all that's happening. But somehow it feels like it shouldn't be this way. It's so deep. And also in life, when something difficult happens.

Often I've seen when someone is ill or develops—maybe not like a flu or something, but some kind of chronic disease, some really difficult thing—that people often feel a sense, and I've experienced this myself, a kind of alienation, of isolation. It can almost be like shame. What did I do wrong that this is happening to me? Or when something difficult happens in life, or we're separated from what we love, it's either that you don't want people to know, you feel ashamed, or the mind throws the aversion out and looks for people or situations to blame. Both of which are aversion, which doesn't see clearly, rather than recognizing: this is what's happening, and we're all together, at different times experiencing really difficult, painful stuff. This is life. It's not some weird mistake.

I remember years ago I developed a kind of chronic autoimmune condition. I was doing everything you do to work with it, but at some point I noticed—and I've talked to a lot of other people who've been spiritual practitioners—there can be this idea, not quite reaching consciousness, that if I was really a good practitioner and my mind really wasn't all knotted up with delusion, I wouldn't be sick. That if you could really practice correctly, your body wouldn't somaticize stuff and you wouldn't get sick. I know that sounds crazy, but I know I'm not the only one who feels that.

At one point it occurred to me: Ramana Maharshi died of cancer. And I just started going through all these examples—everybody dies of something. They get sick, they die. It's got nothing to do with the idea that if you really have it together, you're not going to get sick, your body's not going to get old. Follow it to its logical conclusion—it's nuts. We laugh, but look at what the mind is doing and how in this world of absolutes, we get

these perfectionist ideals. It's just supposed to be better and better and good, and if something goes wrong, it's because you somehow blew it or someone else did. And right away, we're in contention with reality. This is denial.

Freedom. Freedom from fear. Liberation of mind is not about getting rid of unpleasant experience. It has nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing to do with it. Yet our habit is so strong.

There's something the Buddha said in a sutta where he talks about the two darts that always moves me, actually, quite a lot—about how these habits get developed. Many of you know the sutta with the two darts, where he talks about the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened one. An unawakened person is as if hit by an arrow of physical pain—they get upset, they lament, they beat their breasts, they scream and yell. It's like they shoot a second arrow at themselves. That's the two arrows. And an awakened person gets shot by an arrow and... nothing. They don't shoot the second arrow.

But following that, he says something I always find moving. He's describing how in a normal person experiencing a painful feeling, they resist it and resent it. So the underlying tendency of resistance against painful feeling comes to be in the mind, comes to underlie as a habit of mind. Do you get that? We resist the unpleasant, the painful, and so the tendency to resistance of painful comes to be a habit that underlies the mind.

And under the impact of that painful feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because—and this is the line that really gets me—an untaught worldling, a normal unawakened person, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness. So then a tendency to lust for pleasant feelings underlies the mind, along with the tendency to resist unpleasant feelings and a tendency to not know what the heck's going on with neutral—a little different from how he said it.

He says one does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, or the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. That really—I don't know—it's so poignant to me that people in the world, without a path, experiencing something unpleasant, the only escape they know is to go lust after something pleasant. That's samsara in a nutshell. If that's how we grew up, if that's what we've learned, if that's what we've unconsciously taken in—and the Buddha's talking about a deep habit.

No wonder we struggle so much, even when we have the information. We think, "Okay, open to the unpleasant—that's the path to freedom." And we go, "Okay, yeah, okay, maybe." But when the difficult actually comes, it's not like we can just do that. Not so often. Because the habit is so strong: go for the pleasant, that's the only escape. For those who don't know.

But as the Buddha is saying, awakened people do know of the escape, other than just lusting after the pleasant. And the escape begins with understanding this First Noble Truth. Because when we understand that it's not about getting more pleasant or getting rid of unpleasant—when we understand that it's not about thinking that the presence of difficulty in our life is the cause of our real deep suffering, our unhappiness—when we understand that there's no way to be free and happy with these difficult conditions just isn't true. But we can't just take that on board. We can't just say, "Oh yeah, that's a good idea, and now I'm going to do it." We have to keep looking, keep looking, see for ourselves if that's really true.

So this is what retreats are for, in a way. That's why, in a perverted way, sometimes we teachers—when you come in and you're suffering, not when you're suffering big time, but with little sufferings, even if it's big time to you but it's a little thing, not really a life-changing thing—we're like... we're not masochistically happy you're suffering. That's like when Winnie says, "We'll bring you back to look at what's going on here," because this is the path to freedom. If we just said, "Okay, let's fix all the conditions so God forbid you don't have to be together with this unpleasant experience in your mind," that's not doing you any favors.

When I first started teaching—because first we have our own neurosis, yes, hard to believe, I know—but a big one is wanting to be liked. And it took me a while to really learn that when people come in and they're talking, my job isn't to take away your suffering, which I couldn't do anyway. I mean, if I could wave a wand and it was really gone, that would be one thing. But my job is to support, as Winnie said, the opening into the investigation of what really is the suffering here, to support that with wisdom, because that is the way into freedom from suffering, not by avoiding it all.

So when you start noticing thoughts like: Why is this happening to me? Why now? What did I do wrong? How can I get that other one back? I've blown it. It's all over. I'm out of here—that one comes along—I'm going home right now. This is hopeless. How could this happen? Whose fault is it? I don't want anyone to know, I'm really ashamed of this. All this stuff—it's all the ways that we're taking it as personal.

And you know how alienating, how isolating, how this sense of separation from others and from life arises when we meet the difficult with this way of relating. But what's so touching about dukkha, the First Noble Truth, is that all conditioned phenomena are shared. This is the way it is for all of us. We're all going to get sick. We're all going to fail sometimes. We're all going to have choppy breath once in a while, pain and whatever, our own particular story.

And so as I go on, I'll say that really the opening into dukkha is more and more the opening into compassion. It's the movement from alienation and separation and shame into the opening into all of life as it is. And this opening out of aversion and fear and greed is the opening that purifies the heart and mind. It actually allows the recognition of things as they are, the recognition of liberation, of nibbāna.

So when we are—even in the little thing or big thing, it doesn't matter—able in a moment just to surrender into the difficult, just as it is, to open our mind and heart, to stop resisting, I think you'll find that the sense of it being unwelcome, unbearable, really changes. It really changes. When you're not in contention with this moment of reality, we really can experience the ease and peace of mind and heart.

That is, some say, the natural ease and peace. And even very intense suffering states, it works in the same way.

Just a little example. A few years ago, my sister died suddenly. It was a very intense time—all of it was very intense—and I was her main person, handling everything. So I experienced quite some grief, which is normal, right?

It was very interesting. At the time it happened, I had come off a period of intensive retreat for a couple of months earlier that year, and I just felt like I'd been quite awake in my mind—really present, not resisting things so much. It was an interesting time. And then this happened out of the blue.

I noticed that with that kind of grief, there was no way my mind could say, "This shouldn't have happened." I mean, it happened. You can't say it didn't happen. This is what happened. It's so clear. There was no way I could get into any kind of self-judgment or blame for feeling grief. You know, for those of us who have self-judging as a tendency, we're pretty good at finding all kinds of squirrely ways to bring it up when it doesn't make any sense. But I couldn't then. It was just—of course there's grief. Of course. Even though it was so strong, it surprised me.

What was so interesting is that over some months, the grief would come and go—nothing stays all the time. It would be very intense. And there was just no resistance in my mind about it. I would really be with it, really intense. And it would really go. It

wouldn't last too long. It would just come at all odd moments of the day and night. I had a very full schedule the rest of the year, and I had to keep doing what I was doing. Sometimes it was harder, and I couldn't always do extra things that I would have liked. But again, it's like, okay, this is just how it is. There was so little resistance that it was amazing to me.

At those times when the grief would be coming really strong—and grief is grief, it's not like grief suddenly feels like something else; it's heavy, you cry, all of that—but without the resistance, I couldn't, even at the time, call it suffering. It's just what it is. Not good, not bad, just what it is. I learned so much from that.

I noticed over time, after months, that some kind of resistance, some impatience, started to come into my mind. It would come up with just a little thought—"Okay, you know, let's move on here," or "It's time," or "You shouldn't be feeling this anymore"—whatever stupid story the mind made up. But there would be a little bit of resistance, and it was a completely different experience. Then it became more alienating, more separating, more dragging me down, more isolating. Very interesting.

But at the time when it was just what it was, no resistance, no contention—when I was opening to what was happening—one is also open to all aspects of life. I remember during the peak of that time, some friends in Germany, really dear friends, took me to this incredible garden show. They have one every two years that moves around to different places. It was in Koblenz that year. Acres and acres of all these flowers—it's amazing.

So I was in this grief, we go, okay. But it was so beautiful that it brought such happiness to my mind. I remember thinking, "Wow, flowers are nice and all, but I never totally got it—that flowers are amazing, that they bring so much happiness to the world just looking at them." There was something about it. It's like you just open to all of life when it's like that.

So explore that, explore that other aspect of the First Noble Truth—that of change.

And this is where I really want to ask you to look, because this is where we see that dukkha, the First Noble Truth of dukkha, is not just about unpleasant experience. The Buddha said all feeling, all feeling, *vedana*, is included within dukkha. And so even now, if we're thinking of dukkha as unpleasant, difficult, then it doesn't make sense, does it? But all feeling is included within dukkha.

This was Sariputta's lion's roar of awakening. It's something he saw. Wow—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It's all included within dukkha because it's unreliable. It's liable to change. There's nothing to hold on to. Like the Buddha said, separation from what is

loved. It doesn't mean that we don't appreciate pleasant or that pleasant stops being pleasant. It just can't offer us anything more than that fleeting moment of pleasant experience.

So not just buying this, but look, explore. The Buddha said that dukkha either ripens as confusion, ripens as bewilderment, or it ripens as search. So when you're in resistance, in contention with experience—whether it's unpleasant or something beautiful has changed, and you feel that, you're fighting with reality—let the dukkha ripen as search.

Ajahn Chah put it a different way, saying that there's two kinds of suffering: the suffering that leads to more suffering, and the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. So take your pick, moment to moment. And the ripening as search just means get interested. Look.

It doesn't mean we start being afraid of pleasant or the beautiful. The Buddha said what is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it. A lot of times people get into the reverse of chasing after pleasant. This is a major dharma practitioner propensity—to almost hate the pleasant, right? God forbid I should feel something pleasant because I might crave. And craving's bad, we know craving's suffering, so we're pushing it away. But that doesn't work either. It's seeing what's really so, not trying to manage the world. That's the same way of trying to manage the world. It doesn't work. And then we think pleasant's bad—it's not.

Or people start thinking, well, everything just becomes kind of all the same. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—it's all dukkha, so what's the point? And that's a way that we can get a little bit lost. In fact, some years ago, I actually think it's a way that we misunderstand the First Noble Truth, and we can actually fall into a kind of aversion to life. Aversion to the pleasant, aversion to life—it's all dukkha, so what's the point?

And there are periods—and this will really cheer you up—there are phases in practice, in deep practice, where sometimes it's like having the dukkha lens on. Where maybe we haven't really been, like my sauna experience, where you start seeing the steady awareness, not just noticing the unpleasant, not just noticing the pleasant, but the steady continuity of awareness. You start to see the constant changing—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—there's nothing to hold. There's nothing to rely on for happiness. The unpleasant too is changing, but you can't hold to anything. So what's the point?

With the dukkha lens, I remember well one retreat I had. I'd walk into my room, and I had a plant hanging. I'd walk in and I'd go, "What's the point? It's just going to die." And really, it wasn't funny at the time. You're just seeing that's true, but it's not complete, right? I mean, it would be nice to water it and let it live for a while in the meantime.

Or I remember seeing a couple on staff who had just gotten together—this was a long time ago—and they're walking down the driveway holding hands, and I'm thinking, "Yeah, well, good luck." I gave them six months. Recently I found out they're still together, just so you know. But who knows if they're happy?

But this kind of dukkha lens that gets on is not... I thought I was really kind of clever, seeing in this way, kind of busting myself out of attachment. But it really isn't.

It leads to something unbalanced, a kind of nihilism, and it feeds aversion. It's not what the Buddha was talking about.

I love that he speaks in terms of the pleasant, that pleasant feelings are included within dukkha. But he's saying there *is* pleasant feeling. We just need to understand the gratification in it, the danger in it, and the escape. Even though he talks so much about the dangers of sense pleasures, he never said they're not pleasant, never said we can't appreciate them.

There's one sutta where he's talking about his practice before he was the awakened Buddha. He was really exploring what the gratification in the world is. And he said, whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, that's the gratification. If there were no gratification in the world, beings would not become enamored, in love with the world. But we do. There is gratification—he's not saying there isn't. But mostly, like worldlings who only know to seek pleasant feeling when it's unpleasant, we stop there. We don't keep searching.

So that's the gratification—pleasant feeling. But he keeps looking. What's the danger? The danger is that the gratification is impermanent, subject to change, unable to give us any satisfying, reliable happiness. This is the danger. And the escape is the abandoning of desire and lust for the world. He's not saying we hate the world and it all becomes one dull gray thing, but that we abandon the lust for the world.

Without craving, we often think something's missing. Something *is* missing, but the thing that's missing isn't actually what was bringing us to feel alive. It's poignant to me that so often the craving, the wanting, the attachment is what we're so used to, what we so connect with the pleasant, with happiness. When that's gone, at first we don't recog-

nize that the peace and ease of non-contention, of really opening fully into this moment, is such a greater happiness than this more raucous happiness of attachment, of craving.

So I think this putting an aversion lens on is just something to bear in mind, to be aware of if that's happening for you. Because as I say, I thought it was so clever, but it's just aversion. As the Buddha said, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, by aversion, and does not understand as it really is the escape from the arisen ill will, on that occasion—and it's only moment to moment—one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both.

When you notice you're sliding into this ill-will aversion lens, it doesn't mean avoid the unpleasant, but turn your awareness to that. And if it seems like you're getting blinded by aversion—maybe a really difficult emotional state or a complex emotional pattern keeps coming up, for example, here—you can explore it, be with it, be open to it, like the grief I was describing. But then it keeps coming, or it's at night and your energy's low, and you can feel yourself getting sucked into a vortex of it. Do you ever feel like that? You can kind of know what's happening, but it just pulls you in. Ill will, aversion, fear becomes beyond overwhelming, and the more you try to be mindful, the stronger the ill will gets.

When you notice that, that's when we talk about skillful means. Refresh your awareness. It's not the same as running from the unpleasant, but that's when you really see it's not helpful to just keep feeding the aversion. You can't see accurately. So at that point, deliberately shift your attention to something more neutral. It's not running away—it's refreshing the awareness. Whether it's opening to hearing, feeling the breath, going outside and doing some walking, being with the sound of the wind, whatever it is. You're not abandoning awareness, but you're moving away from just spinning in the ill will.

Even with our best intentions, the habits of our mind to react to the unpleasant with aversion are so strong. The denial, the resistance, being in contention with reality—it's such a strong pattern. But keep noticing, because the steadiness of awareness, this continuity, is what sets the conditions for liberating wisdom to arise. All you have to do is be steady with awareness and you'll see this constant fluctuation of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It just keeps changing.

At times, the fact that there's nothing lasting in our experience to rely on for happiness can engender fear. But keep looking—fear is just another mental state too. This leads to real freedom when we're not looking for happiness to what can never give it. Happiness is available. It's such a sense of not being in contention with reality, opening into how things are in this moment.

The last thing I want to say is that in some ways, I think the real jewel at the heart of our experience lies in understanding the First Noble Truth, in fully opening into just this moment of reality—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—without unrealistic expectations, without pushing away.

The jewel at the heart of this understanding is, of course, wisdom, but it's also compassion—deep compassion. The Dalai Lama often says that compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering truly is. And this insight begins and strengthens from being with our own experience of suffering.

I've seen over and over in my own life how a particular experience of suffering—going back to that grief, that particular experience of grief or pain or illness, and we've all had our own stories—feels particular to us: my story, my past, my situation. When we stay in that resistance—"Why me? Why this? Why now?"—not understanding that this is simply the way life is, the effect of that resistance is to feed the sense of alienation, discontent, loneliness, separation, failure. Take your pick. That's the suffering—the suffering of isolation, of being the separate, isolated, lost little self.

But when, even in some moments, there's this opening into our own particular experience of grief or suffering or pain, you find that it's like magic. Not just in the first moment, but it opens out of being *my* particular grief to *this* particular expression of grief, which is an aspect of life shared by all humans. This is a particular expression. This moment of happiness is a particular expression of happiness that at one point or another is something all humans experience.

When we're not afraid to be with our own illness, our own aging, our own grief, then we're really able to be fully present with an open mind and heart for the grief, the illness, the pain of someone else. Because we know it. This is life.

Instead of trying to navigate our separate lives, putting on a good face and getting the most we can out of it, there's this sense of release. Pema Chödrön talks about how when we're trying to avoid suffering, we walk around tensed up our whole life as if we're sitting in a dentist's chair. We put that down. We're just open to whatever this experience of life in this moment presents—if it's my grief, if it's your grief, the grief of the world, the pain of the world.

There's a whole other talk on compassion, so much more to say about it, but you can really feel this for yourself, can't you? If you've had a particular difficult experience, say a chronic illness—I've had that—many people come, really very sincere, caring, wanting to express their sympathy. But I could really tell the difference. Some people cared and wanted to help me, wanted to do something, but the feeling underneath it was, "This is so uncomfortable to be with, let's fix you." With all the caring in the world, but that not understanding: yes, this is how it is. This is the First Noble Truth. Sickness is going to happen. I can be here. But no, it's too uncomfortable because we can't be with our own.

And then when someone else would come and you'd feel, "Yeah, it's tough, isn't it?" Sometimes there's nothing else to say or nothing else to do, but we're able to be really present, heart-to-heart, bearing witness. Because we know this is how it is—in ourselves and in others.

Openness to dukkha ripens as freedom.

I want to end with a little letter from someone that really inspires me, conveying this sense of how when we understand that life is both the beauty and the suffering, and that opening to all of it brings us deeply into wisdom and compassion, this luminous nature of heart and mind.

This is from Mingyur Rinpoche. Do you know who Mingyur Rinpoche is? He's a Tibetan Lama, the brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche, quite a practitioner, and a well-known teacher around the world. Almost three years ago now, he set up his whole teaching organization globally, but then he let everyone who runs his organization know he was going to go off for a three-year retreat.

He went off. He was in Bodh Gaya in India, about to start his retreat. Everyone thought he was just going to go to a monastery and do the retreat there. But what he did was, in the middle of the night, he just left. He told no one where he was going. He just left and went off to be a wandering yogi on retreat where no one knew where he was.

Online, his brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who's a great teacher, said, "He just left. He didn't take his toothbrush. He didn't take any money. He didn't take his passport. He didn't tell anyone where he was." It's easy for me to say, but I can't imagine doing that. Yet there are people still doing that in this world.

He went off and no one heard anything from him. Tsoknyi Rinpoche was saying, "Our mother—I'm worried about our mother. She's so worried about him." After about a year and a half, one of Mingyur Rinpoche's really close Tibetan disciples happened to see him in Nepal, in Kathmandu.

And he said he looked so skinny, he just saw him from a distance, he had a beard and he looked so skinny, he didn't recognize him right away. But something about the way he walked was familiar. So Tashi followed him along and then he realized—oh my gosh, it's Mingyur Rinpoche.

And so he begged Mingyur to let him come along with him. He gave him food. He gave him warm clothes to wear. And he stayed with him a while. And then Mingyur asked him to leave and gave him this letter to bring back and post for his friends.

So I just want to read this little bit from his letter. And now he's off. He's still off doing that now. No one knows where he is.

So he says: "I myself am wandering without any fixed location, staying in isolated mountain hermitages and other such places. I have experienced feelings of happiness and suffering, rising and falling like waves on the surface of the ocean. At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I have felt cold, hungry, and thirsty. Even when I have begged for alms, I receive nothing but insults and harsh words. At other times, I have received food and clothing effortlessly without even asking for them. And in my mind, it felt as though I were enjoying the pleasures of the gods.

"While I have experienced both happiness and suffering, the most important thing is that a deep and heartfelt sense of certainty has arisen in the depths of my being, such that no matter what happens, I know that the true nature of these experiences, their very essence, is that of timeless awareness and vast compassion.

"Suffering ripens as search. Search ripens as freedom."

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 131

Concocting Sense of Self: An Exploration of Anattā

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson offers a practical and accessible exploration of anattā (not-self), one of the Buddha's most liberating yet often misunderstood teachings. Rather than approaching anattā as a philosophical concept to think about, she invites practitioners to bring mindful investigation to the actual experience of how a sense of self arises and dissolves moment by moment.

Drawing on the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadāsa and his book "Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree," Wilson explains how the sense of self is a "concoction" — assembled quickly from sense contact, vedanā (feeling tone), perception, grasping, and proliferating thought. She illustrates this process through relatable examples: attachment to a favorite mug, reactions to cold wind, and how a simple sound like crickets can trigger an entire worldview of nostalgia and mood. The Buddha compared consciousness to a magic show — once we go behind the curtain and see how the illusion is constructed, it loses its hold on us.

Wilson emphasizes that we don't need to get rid of the sense of self — there isn't a permanent one to eliminate. Instead, practice involves noticing both when self-concoction arises and the many moments when it's absent. These "moments empty of self" are normal and natural, not extraordinary states to achieve. By bringing satipaññā (mindfulness and wisdom) directly to these experiences, we see the impermanent, constructed nature of self-view, which naturally loosens our identification. The talk concludes with Mary Oliver's instruction: "Love yourself, then forget it, then love the world."

Last night, in part of her talk, Winnie described the quality of investigation—how it's not thinking about things, but this quality in the mind of really interested attention.

So tonight I'd like to, taking off on that, talk a bit about using this interest, this investigation, to explore in our own moment-to-moment experience one of the core teachings of the Buddha, one of the freeing teachings: that of anattā, so-called not-self. Everybody's favorite subject. But it's so freeing. And it makes people a little bit nuts when we don't really just look at our experience, but when we think about it.

The Buddha wasn't teaching philosophical concepts. He wasn't saying, "Let me give you some new things to think about." The understanding of anattā, of not-self—we don't come to that recognition by thinking about it. But that's what we try to do, think our way out of it, and it just spins and spins and spins until we feel a little nutsy about it. It is definitely a loaded concept.

As soon as we bring up not-self, a lot of people's practice becomes like they're trying to get rid of the self. "I know there's not a self, but I still have one. So how do I get rid of it?" The sense of self came up, and so it's as if there's something here that, once we really break through some barrier and have some blowout experience, just completely gets rid of the sense of self—and then you're home free. Are you waiting for that? Or else there's the question: when the self goes, who knows where the car keys are? Stuff like that, all those endless questions. I think I made my point.

But what I really hope this talk can do is serve as an invitation to drop all the ideas and the concepts and the worry, and just actually bring an interested, mindful attention to exploration of sense of self. Just discovering, exploring it, seeing what's actually going on there. Because—and this might not be news—it's not that you have to get rid of yourself. There's not one. It's already like that.

It's just like impermanence. It's not like everything's permanent and once you see it, then everything starts changing all of a sudden. It's the same with not-self. Really, at the heart of our not quite understanding, our mistaken relating to experience as if there's some lasting, self-existing self, is that we don't perceive accurately. All that changes—reality doesn't change, but our perception shifts. We perceive wrongly, and then we think and act and carry on and react from that. Without actually just taking a look at what's really going on, we're lost in a world of assumptions and misperceptions without even recognizing it.

So that's the way I want to invite us to explore tonight. This is an invitation to investigate, just with mindfulness, not with thinking about it. First: what is the experience in any moment that you notice, that I'm labeling or calling "me" or "mine"? Not pretending we're not having that experience. Doesn't it arise frequently? The sense of me, the sense of mine. And also, just bring interest, awareness to moments of experience—to a moment when there isn't a sense of me or mine.

To use Ajahn Buddhadasa's language—he was a great Thai forest monk and meditation teacher—he talks about moments that are empty of a sense of self. Empty in that way. He's not saying we have to stop having or experiencing a sense of self, because we do. It comes up all the time. But I don't know how it is for you—for me, and I know I'm not the only one, the sense of me or mine is so familiar that often we either don't notice

it, or it's so familiar we assume it's always here, not noticing when it's not. And we don't really look at what we're calling me or mine. It's simply another arising saṅkhāra, another arising experience. But when we take something for granted, when it's so familiar, we stop looking. "Oh, here I am again." What are you even calling me? If someone grabbed you and said, "What are you calling me?" you may not even know, because it's just assumed. Here it is. I didn't get rid of it yet.

So our job is to get interested—not hating, not with pre-assumptions or preconceptions—but just to see what actually, in this moment only, not a whole philosophical treatise, in this moment, this sense of me... what's the actual experience, just right now? Bring mindfulness and wisdom, sati-paññā, right to that point.

Ramana Maharshi expressed it this way: "The idea of self is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look closely and the ghost vanishes. It was never there. So also with the sense of separate self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is found not to exist."

This is really a great description of our practice—to look closely. But not even assuming it doesn't exist. Just look closely at what we're calling me, I, mine in any particular moment.

The rest of the talk I want to offer comes from a couple of different angles, and you may find your own way in.

What's interesting about the sense of me is that, starting from misperception, it's a concoction. I like that word. It's just made up of a bunch of different experiences strung together really quickly, concocted out of a moment of sense contact with grasping. There are hundreds of these concoctions of me or mine throughout any day. But when we really look closely, we can see the arising and the strands that come together, and how they come apart again when conditions change.

There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about consciousness as being like a magic show. The sense of self is the same way—like a magic show. He describes being at a crossroads back in his time, where there's somebody putting on a magic show. You sit and watch, amazed, wondering how they do that. It seems so real. But if you could go behind the curtain and see how it's all put together, the whole sense of reality is gone. The sense of wonder vanishes. You see they're doing this, they're doing that—that's how they create this illusion. It's exactly like that with our sense of self.

The way I want to start exploring this tonight is really from the point of perception, which we've talked about a bit—where this concoction begins for us. I just happen to love that word *concoction*. In English, it has a sense of a bunch of stuff thrown together,

perhaps without much pre-planning, not exactly a recipe which is all planned out, but grabbing a little of this and a little of that and throwing it all together. And here you have a sense of me—a little haphazard.

Starting with perception: we've discussed it as one of the five aggregates, a mental quality arising in every moment of sense contact. It's that quality of recognition based on memory, discernment, which usually leads to thinking.

Now, perception is definitely useful. In a way, it's how we define our immediate world, how we place ourselves in experience. When you heard the bell ten minutes ago, you not only recognized "bell," you knew it was the bell at a certain time of day. The whole context came with it—you're supposed to come in here and listen to a Dhamma talk. You know who you are and where you are and why. There's a whole lot that comes into that perception of bell.

It's useful, right? If you had to figure it out every time you heard a bell—"Right, okay, I know it's a bell, but what does it mean? And who am I?"—or if you walked in here thinking, "I'm in here, but there's no me, so which zafu do I sit on?"

At this relative level, perception is extremely useful. No one's saying we want to get rid of it. And the thoughts that come with it, that give us context—again, extremely useful. We couldn't get along without it. Sometimes we start to think, "Oh, got to get rid of that." Not at all. But we want to understand it.

The tricky thing with perception is that, first of all, it's personal. It's informed by our life experiences, by our past. There's a lot of cultural conditioning in perception. So there's not one accurate perception that's true—which we want, this one accurate truth that's the same for everybody. We can trust our perception so completely, not knowing that it may not be the same for other people. It's actually kind of amazing to me how much we manage to do things together, given how different our perceptions can be.

I was at a friend's house, a good friend, and she had a blanket thrown over the back of her couch. I said, "Oh, could you hand me that blue blanket?" She looked at me puzzled. "What blue blanket?" "On the back of the couch." "No," she said, "that's green."

We really went back and forth about it. I could not switch my perception and see it as green. It was a blue blanket, no two ways about it. But she couldn't switch and see it as blue either. So is there some accurate truth somewhere in between? It's aquamarine and we're both partially right? Who knows?

That's a simple example, very simple. And our perception in that moment wasn't even colored by greed or aversion. But throw a moment of greed or aversion into the mix and that can completely distort everything. The kilesas—never mind delusion—completely distort perception.

Do you have a sense of this? When you're really angry at somebody, really angry, and you look at them, the way they look becomes ugly. They didn't used to be ugly, but now they're ugly. You just see it that way. Or when you're really infatuated with someone and you look at them—oh, just everything about them is so endearing! The way they shuffle their feet, the way they slop their food around, it's all so endearing. I don't know where that came from.

But when the wanting isn't in the mind anymore, you hope you didn't make too many strong commitments while it was there. A friend of mine made a really good comment about this. She's been married for a while, good friends of mine, and they're very committed—it's a good marriage. But she said, "You know, the dynamics change. A few years in, for both of us, the love eyes are gone. The love glasses are off." Which didn't mean they don't love each other, but those love glasses where you see everything as just so lovely—that perception shifts.

This is where wars and views start: from perception that we believe is simply how things are. It's so easy to attach to perception. Grasping can come into perception. "No, that's a blue blanket." That's grasping. Right then, with the arising of that grasping of perception, there's a sense of *me* taking a stand on the blue blanket.

I could give a whole talk on views, which I would love to do, but this isn't it. You can really draw this out and see how quickly we're at war—attachment to views, often based simply on perception, and right away that sense of me arises.

As the Buddha goes on to say, what we perceive, we think about. We do. What we think about, we complicate—with associations and memories of perceptions. This is what becomes papañca, the whole proliferating story. It's the concoction arising from perception and clinging, not recognizing whether it's accurate or not, spinning into a whole sense of me. And it doesn't have to be particularly negative or troublesome. Just see how it happens. Get interested.

Let me give you a simple example. I was in Burma at a meditation center, walking up a little path toward a Bodhi tree that had been planted with a concrete circular wall around it where people walk in circumambulation. I was just walking up, not even as

far as to the back wall, and there was a Burmese nun walking around, circumambulating the tree with her hands in añjali. I see that—that's my perception. The nun walking around the Bodhi tree like this.

And there was a sense of happiness, of faith. "Isn't that so lovely, that sense of faith?" I had a whole series of thoughts as I was walking. "That sense of faith, it's just so touching that she's walking around like this."

And then, for whatever reason, another thought arose: "It's just a tree. She's walking around worshipping a tree. What kind of faith is that?" This all happened in the space of about two seconds.

That thought came up, I grabbed hold of it, and there was a little bit of unpleasant vedanā with that thought. I grasped that, and the whole sense of self shifted. As I was walking up, those were two distinct concoctions of self that were created.

They weren't the same one. One was a sense of me really filled with faith and happiness, and then it turned into something a little bit aversive—my opinions and views about trees and faith and blind faith and all of that. That wasn't the same concoction. Those were two separate concoctions.

I got up there and then I had an accurate perception, which is she was walking around texting on her cell phone. The world has changed. And so I just laughed. And with that, the whole concoction dissolved. It just dissolved. When there's accurate perception like that, all the worldview that was built on the inaccurate perception just dissolves away. You don't have to get rid of anything. It's like, "Oh, that." And just in that moment, the whole sense of self dropped away too. I didn't do anything with it. It was just gone. It's great, you know, and then there was just a moment of no particular concoction.

So when the perception is accurate in that moment, the whole magic show, the whole concoction of sense of me, just falls apart. Because there's nothing to hold it together. It's not like you have to get rid of anything, but you see that this whole construct of perception and liking and disliking and thoughts—you know, it could go on a lot longer than two seconds—when you see what's accurate, the whole thing just goes away. When the clinging goes away, the whole thing goes away. You don't have to do anything, you don't have to get rid of sense of self, you don't have to worry about it coming. We just get interested in watching how that happens.

So this is the essence really of insight—a shift of perception. It's not about breaking through to some new world where there's not a self and everything's impermanent. It's a shift of perception over and over and over. It's like those pictures where they draw a

thing, and if you look one way you see a vase, and if you look another way you see two profiles of faces. You can usually see one or the other, but you usually can't see both at the same time. But once you've recognized each, both modes of perceiving can be recognized in that experience. Or like those magic eye pictures where 3D hockey players pop out if you look at it correctly. Until you can do that, all you see is just little abstract forms. And if you can't do it—like my mother, for example, could never do it, and it drove her crazy—you never know that's there. You only perceive in one way. But when you perceive the other way, even if you can't always, it shifts something in our mind stream, in our understanding. We may still have many more moments of perception the other way, kind of like the relative way of looking—me, me, me, I, I, I, mine, mine, mine. There's a lot of that. But there's that sense of knowing it's a construction. It's coming and going and we can see that. It takes the oomph out of it. You don't have to be so afraid or aversive or try to get rid of sense of self. It's just another arising mental formation. Sankhāra—the sankhāra aggregate—like anything else. We make such a big deal about it by not looking at it, by assuming permanence, by really grasping at it and identifying.

So we want to explore that. That's what I want to talk about here.

Ajahn Buddhadasa—by the way, he wrote a wonderful book about much of this, translated into English and called *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*. Not now, but later, if you're really fascinated, you might want to have a look. I use a lot of the way he talks about things when I talk about it. So he says: the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. Explore and look for yourself when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. It's simply a condition, a process, like anything else that we experience—a mental, physical process that we can explore by simply bringing mindfulness, truth-discerning awareness, to when you have a moment where you feel "me." Instead of going off into a whole reaction to it, just turn around and recognize in that moment—not thinking about it, but bringing awareness to what's "me" in this moment. Sometimes it just feels like a little physical contraction of grasping.

Sometimes there's a mental image. Sometimes the thing that's clung to—which is often a thought or a description of oneself or a mood—is the thing one sees: "Well, that's me." But just notice, because then you'll start to recognize that each time it's something different. It's not the same thing that you're always coming back to, and that's really interesting to see.

So the sense of self, mere mind, can be born when there's contact—consciousness making contact with any of the six sense objects—and there's craving. It doesn't have to be born, but it can occur with anything, gross or subtle, and it really doesn't matter what. The sense of self is born hundreds of times a day with contact with any sense impression, and it dies equally as many times as it's born. There's not the one that didn't die hanging around in the background. Equally, it dies. And it can get really fun to just keep noticing it.

This is just an aside. I tried once when I was on a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, where you note every moment, giving a very soft label to whatever's arising—a very, very strict Burmese Abhidhamma way of understanding things. So I was doing this, what I'm describing. I had no sense of me, and I'd notice, "Oh, self," and it would be like a sensation or an image or a thought. And it was really helpful because it was just blasting apart any sense of permanence. But I should have known better. Anyway, I tried to describe to him what I was doing. I said, "Oh yes, I'm noting sense of self whenever I see it." He and the translator got a big kick out of that. "Ha ha ha, you think there's self! Ha ha ha, she thinks there's self!" I never could get that across. But I hope I can get it across to you, because it was really interesting. It was. It is—to see how it's born and dies over and over.

I'll give this simple example that I use a lot because it's just so mundane, but that's where we can really explore here on retreat, watching this. This was on retreat here quite some time ago. You know how it is—you go in, you get a mug. But this was a long time ago. We didn't have all this uniformity of crockery that we have now. At that time, there was the same shelf with mugs, but just whatever people had left here over the years. So every one was different. You'd go and get a mug.

I'd been on retreat a long time—it was a three-month, I guess. Take a mug, get my tea, do my thing, sit down. It was just all very simple and smooth, and I wasn't really paying any attention. It didn't matter. But one day, as I was drinking my tea, the sense of pleasant feeling about that particular mug came up, and I sort of half noticed it, half not—like Joseph calls "more or less mindfulness." It isn't really. I didn't notice the craving. Immediately: "This feels really good on my hand. This is the perfect mug, and the color's nice too." And I could feel in that moment this whole movement—it goes just from pleasant feeling to liking it, to grasping it, to trying to think about how I can save it, how can I have it tomorrow, what can I do. All like that. That's the birth of self. And I started thinking, "How can I keep it? Maybe I can go put it in my..." Too much trouble. Put it down. I put it down, took it to the dish room, left—death of self, right there.

And that's the whole dependent origination, right there. We haven't gone into it a lot, but just the middle part of it—where the Buddha described how we can watch the chain of suffering arising from a moment of craving, of leaning in. This middle part, which we can watch over and over here in our practice, is where there's sense contact and there's a pleasant or unpleasant or neutral feeling. Without awareness, with pleasant we lean in—there's wanting. With unpleasant we lean away. Either is craving. It attaches us to the object either way. And then that craving strengthens to grasping, to really holding on, grasping right there. And that grasping—

is what Buddhadasa calls having and being. And that moves into becoming, into birth—birth of a sense of self—into suffering and death of self.

So if you don't think about this as a whole lifetime thing, but moment to moment to moment, just sitting there—ah, pleasant feeling, this is really nice, I like this mug—"me and my mug" is born in that moment. And then the grasping, the having and being, the person who has this mug, who wants to keep it. And then you put it down and walk away—death of self. So death of self isn't necessarily a suffering experience.

Notice when there's that sense of craving, clinging, grasping that comes in. And this is mild, right? This is where we can explore it. We're not talking about your most difficult personality pattern or the most important thing in your life, but it's the same process. To watch it here, to see what's the effect, to explore when you notice that—what does the grasping, the craving, feel like experientially? What's the effect in the mind, in the consciousness? We can really start to notice this.

For me, when it comes as "oh, my mug," we don't notice it initially because in that moment I was focusing on the pleasant feeling and all the concoctions of how can I get more and what can I do. We get enthralled by that whole view and the stories, the papañca, not noticing the actual effect. What had been simple and easy—walking in, quite present, relaxed, fairly equanimous, noticing what was happening—suddenly everything kind of zooms in and narrows. Mentally, physically, you can almost feel it. I can feel wanting, grasping in the mind. It's like a physical contraction. It feels like, almost half the time, that's what sense of self is for me—this physical contraction. What had been wide open and noticing whatever becomes really zoomed in, restricted. Consciousness is restricted when there's wanting and aversion in the mind. The Buddha described it this way. We can experience it. Not with judging, just to see. What had been open and wide becomes really centered on this little green mug. It becomes the most important thing in the universe just for that second. Put it down, walked away.

But the next day, I didn't totally put it down. I walked away and pretended I wasn't looking for it, but I just kind of—you know, you pretend you're not. This is denial, but it doesn't really quite work. Saw it easily, took it up, went through the whole thing again. And this time I really started thinking about how I could save it. So what had been simple got really quite complicated.

Well, you can't leave stuff on the windowsills even then, so I'd have to take it to my room, which I could certainly do. But I was doing a very slow style of practice. And it would take me—I'm not exaggerating—to walk from the dining room to my room, twenty, thirty minutes easily. I thought, okay, I'm going to take it to my room. And then before every meal, I have to walk back there. So it's like an hour to go back, get the mug, come back. I thought about it for a while, for a few minutes. Then I said, you know what? Forget it. Put it down, and then it really went.

And there's that sense of ease, of space, of peace, when there's not the concoction of self going on, when we put it down. That's equally important to notice. Because just as there are many, many moments in a day where there's birth and death of the sense of self, there are also many—and this is coming back to Buddhadasa again—many, many moments which he talks about that are empty of sense of self.

He says, in translation, that this is truly normal and natural. It's not some special esoteric state of mind or heart we have to create. We think, "I have to have a moment where there's no sense of self, where there's no self"—we don't even say "sense of self," we say "self." "I want a moment where there's no self, because it's always here." But that's because we don't look and see. As Buddhadasa says, it's really normal and natural. It's the natural state of mind and heart when we're not distracted by our reactions to sense contact, by our likings and our dislikings and what we think about it, our perceptions and all of that concoction.

When we're not distracted by that, there's no sense of me or mine coming up. And you can't make a big project of it, because then it becomes a "me" trying to look for something. But just let it go there, kind of in the back of your mind, to see how often, how many times a day, those moments arise when maybe nothing special is going on. It may be a pleasant experience or an unpleasant experience—it doesn't matter what's happening. But often there's a kind of pleasantness to it, the pleasantness of non-clinging, the pleasantness of that non-narrow, non-gripping quality of consciousness, when everything isn't zoomed in and focused on something.

We each describe it in different ways, although sometimes we don't quite recognize what's happening. It's simply a moment of non-concoction of self.

We tend to think—whether in sitting meditation or any other time, drinking tea, going to the bathroom, walking, whatever—we tend to think, "Oh, it just wasn't so easy," and there's that kind of struggle. You're trying to notice, you're trying to be with things, you're trying to get it right. We all know that one. Then you have a sitting or a walking or a dance, and it's just flowing. It's all just coming and going. "Finally, I'm getting it right." We have to add that. We just can't leave well enough alone.

But that sense of how it's going, how it's going right—our habit is really to make something of it about me. So it may be just free and easy for a moment, but we may not quite notice what's free and easy: things are happening without adding a me or my story on top of it, not needing to react to whatever's occurring.

But then pretty soon, our tendency, for many of us, is to get kind of seduced, distracted back into the sense contact or the content about it. And then it's like, "Okay, so I have to describe this in my interview. What's actually going on is like this, and how's the mindfulness, and how's that, and how can I make it happen again?" And all of that starts again.

But just noticing in those simple moments that there's no me or mine arising in that moment. Sure, it comes after—that's okay. But many, many moments throughout the day there's just the sense of, I don't know, isness. Things are as they are. It may be calm, it may be something difficult happening, but the concoction of me isn't occurring around it.

You might notice when the grasping of me dissipates. It's not something we do, but it dissipates. Notice the difference.

Here's an example: my system is kind of sensitive to cold, and I tend to get a little aversive around it. I can watch that happen, that pattern. So if I'm out walking and there's cold wind—the other day I was out walking and it was cold wind—I'm aware of the cold wind, but I could see my body tensing and the aversion. And the little voice says, "Ah, it's hard for me being in the cold wind." So that's the whole construction of a sense of me from the unpleasant vedanā. And then my memories, my perception of my body and my past history, and I don't like it. It's very fast, you know. And so there was a little bit of struggle watching it, but that's the sense of me.

And then at some moment, really what I did was just get a little more mindful. Instead of going more into those thoughts, feeding those thoughts—and hating the thoughts is also feeding them. You know that, right? "I shouldn't be having all these thoughts about me." Same difference. It doesn't matter. Instead of giving them attention,

I just let the awareness come back to the sensations of cold, just the bare sensations. Sati-paññā right at the sense contact, not in order for something, just to be here with what was happening.

And in that moment, just being with the sensations of vibrating and cool or whatever, the grasping, the aversion just dissipated because it wasn't being fed. And then there's just this sense of coolness and sensations and walking and no real sense of self in that.

This isn't some amazing liberating moment. But it's moments that we experience so frequently. So just let it in a little bit, because again this is also recognizing aniccā, impermanence. And what really starts to cut through our misperception—our misperception of self as a solid thing, and our misperception that it's steady, constant—is when we see that something's coming and going all the time. That just starts to get in cellularly, and we just can't take it so seriously anymore.

It's really amazing how seriously, as soon as I'm in here—that whole issue, whatever it is, a mug or the pain in your back or the mood you're having or it's fall and everything's dying, whatever it is—becomes so serious. And when the clinging goes, when buying into that whole concoction dissipates, it's just what it is. Even if all the same sense contact is still there. The misperception goes away, and that changes everything.

So, just letting it be in the back of your mind: when we're not distracted, when we're not seduced and obsessed by sense contact and our reactions to it, it's just normal and natural that there's no particular sense of self coming, because it's a created experience. It's a concoction that's fed by greed, by aversion, and by delusion.

We're all getting really familiar with these as our good friends. They accompany us a lot of the time—greed, hatred, and delusion—but not all the time. And so that's why we try to emphasize how important it is to see these torments when they're in the mind, because they distort perception, they lead to all this papañca and assumptions and suffering. But it's equally important to notice when they're not present, when there's wholesomeness in the mind—whether it's equanimity or concentration or mindfulness or calm or mettā, whatever. Just to notice both the presence and the absence of the confusing and of the wholesome.

Buddhadasa also talks about noticing this to generate a contentment with these moments of emptiness. Because they're not like some big event usually. A lot of times you may notice, "Okay, nothing much," and we're kind of waiting for the next big arising of self. Even if it's suffering—nothing's really going on, and we're waiting for something to happen. There's nothing. Have you noticed?

I'm probably not the only one whose mind does this. In a somewhat calm period, you're present, there's that little bit of sense that not much is going on, and you don't quite notice it. Then the mind comes up with some cockamamie story—a suffering one even—something that didn't even happen that you could get really angry about if it was going to happen. And you sit there and the mind's spinning it out and you think, "What is going on?" It's like, "I'd rather have a suffering sense of self than no sense of self," because it's just so familiar. But once you notice it, you can't take it too seriously anymore.

There's a sutta from the Buddha that I really like because he's describing how his mind works, in the sense of the magic show not being created. He says, "The Tathagata"—that's how he refers to himself—"does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight." Do you get that? There's seeing, the experience of seeing. He does not conceive—the commentary says he does not imagine—a thing out there to be seen in its own right. He does not conceive of that. So there's just seeing. He does not conceive of a seer. In other words, he does not conceive of being an agent behind the seeing. So that just doesn't arise in his mind.

There's seeing. He's not thinking, "Here I am doing the seeing, seeing that." Our habit is to do that—"Here I am seeing that." But I'm not saying this so you can get in a fight with that habit. We can simply see that it's just another arising thought.

This is what's so cool about awareness. It's not like awareness has to stop and say, "Oh no, here I am conceiving about being the agent of seeing—it's all over, I'm caught in sense of self, hang it up." Right there, bring in the interest and see, "Oh, okay, what's that sense of self right there? Oh, you just feel some grasping." You don't have to deconstruct the whole sense of the seer and the seeing and what does it mean and the Buddha doesn't think it and is there something out there or not and if a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it really make a sound. You don't have to do any of that.

You can just notice. The seer and the seen, and "Oh my god," a sense of me feels like this. Satipaññā, right there. Right there. You never have to go anywhere else. All it takes is the willingness to keep turning around and looking, to keep turning around and looking. What are we calling that sense of me?

So, as I said, one way is exploring that sense of grasping when it arises in the body. Notice, if it's true for you, how it can tend to narrow the mind, the consciousness, make a sense of limit, of separation.

Just explore that. See how it is when there's suddenly an arising of a sense of me that wasn't there before. Instead of going "oh no," just see what that's like. See what it's made of. See if it really comes and goes. Don't believe me. Look and see. See if you can find the same sense of self all the time. Come back and tell us. You know, maybe this is all wrong and there's really something. Look and see for yourself.

Because it doesn't change anything for any of us just to hear it—we all know that really well. But to just get interested and explore, to see what some of the things are that we tend to grasp at. That's why the five aggregates, when they're called the five aggregates of grasping, it's exactly that. The five ways the Buddha broke up our experience to talk about it. And at any moment, when one of them is the site around which grasping comes, that's where the sense of self arises.

But we can explore very simply. Body is obvious—we've talked about that a lot. You can see when there's an unpleasant sensation and go, "Ah, my knee hurts," just feeling that contraction around it. Or as Andre was talking about, often we have an image of the body that's not the body at all. We'll have an image of "I don't like the way my hair looks today." That's actually not the body—that's a mental experience. But unpleasant vedana, we grasp at it.

Just notice. I have a dear friend who lost her leg to cancer a couple of years ago, a long-term practitioner. And she's used it as such a fascinating exploration, seeing how her mind works. It's going, "How could she say that's me?" But it feels like some part of me is gone, yet it certainly can't be me. And then, of course, there's the whole weirdness of phantom pain, which is a totally bizarre thing. She has that quite strongly. Walking—she loves to walk. She walks and hikes all over the mountains, I want you to know, on her prosthetic leg. She's planning a trip to Ladakh where she'll hike for five days. She's doing great. But there are times she can hardly walk because the leg that isn't there hurts so much when she takes a step. What the heck's going on? How can we call that me? It's just experience, kind of an empty space.

Vedana, the pleasant-unpleasant-neutral, is a big place where this sudden grasping can come in and we don't notice it because it's so quick. Most of the examples I've given have been that. It's so fast. Have you noticed, as we've talked about it, how really quick and ephemeral this pleasant feeling is, this unpleasant feeling? It's so quick, just like that, arising and passing in every moment, different feelings.

But as Ajahn Buddhadasa says again, notice the wave-like nature of pleasant feeling. It comes and goes so quickly. And then he says, just at times, contemplate your life. How many of the decisions you've made have been to get more pleasant feeling? And it's so nothing. It's really amazing to have a look at it like that.

But as you start to see the pleasant feeling and how the grasping comes around it so quickly, it leads into the whole world of emotions and thoughts and the stories about ourselves and personality view, just like that. Chökyi Nyima, who is a wonderful Tibetan teacher—Rinpoche, he's Chökyi Rinpoche's brother—he says, "Watch the fickleness, the unfaithfulness of the mind, how easily it is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight, sound, thought, into an immediate mood." Can you notice that?

Just so quickly we can go from a little bit of unpleasant feeling to the whole mood of our life. Have you noticed that here? Any sense contact can do it.

Once I was on retreat—I don't remember what time of year it was—but I was sitting in pretty quiet surroundings, and I heard crickets. Just the sound of crickets. I was aware of the hearing, aware of the perception of crickets, and it had, for some reason, a kind of poignant quality. I'm not even sure if it was pleasant or unpleasant, but there was a vedana that I grasped at, and immediately, from crickets, I went into this whole story of autumn and the ending of things and the poignancy of life and how you can't count on anything. You know that kind of mood? Nostalgia and sadness. I was kind of wallowing around in it. Me, me, me. Just like that—from a sense contact and an unpleasant feeling.

And then I noticed it.

So I went back, because the sound was still happening, and I said, "Crickets." And then I deliberately thought, "Isn't it wonderful to be able to hear nature in a place like this? Isn't it lovely that the trees are turning red?" I deliberately brought up pleasant thoughts, and just from the pleasant feeling of those thoughts, immediately all the moods followed. Just like that, just as real as the other one. "I'm so lucky to be here in this beautiful place in nature in the fall." It was just as real as the other—maybe thirty seconds apart. How can we take this stuff so seriously? But it's really fun to see how it happens, just from a quick little vedana that we don't notice.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho. He's talking about just such an example. He says, "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit. My views, my feelings, and my opinions. I can get caught into that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness."

Do you get a sense of what he's saying? He's not saying there's some solid me out there. It's a view, a series of thoughts that say "this is how it is" that we hold to as being true. And it's just a sense experience, a sankhara arising in consciousness. That's all it is. Turn around and look at it.

He says, "But when I recognize that, then I'm no longer taking refuge in being a personality, in my views, in my opinions. And then as that dissipates, the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends." That doesn't mean Ajahn Sumedho dies, or the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. In Buddhadhamma, "the world" means the world that our mind is creating in consciousness—which is why we can seem to be living in different worlds.

So our refuge then is no longer in being Ajahn Sumedho. Our refuge is in this awareness, rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do it.

And I want to say this: we're talking about one moment of refuge in this moment of awareness. Don't extend it into the future with thoughts like "I can't do it." Just in one moment.

When I saw that whole world of nostalgia and crickets, when I just saw that as a concoction arising in consciousness, that mindfulness right there—that steady mindfulness—became the condition for wisdom to come by itself. The clear recognition, the accurate perception, comes by itself. You don't have to try and create it. It's like, "Oh, concoction." And it dissipates. In that moment there's refuge in awareness. There's nothing else in that moment one needs to do.

Just continue to keep exploring how these worlds, these worldviews arise and change. I've given you a couple of examples; there are millions. And even the most difficult emotional and personality patterns can be seen this way.

Right now in the retreat this last week, it seems like really a lot of you—and it's kind of normal at this time in retreat—are finding that deep and difficult emotional patterns, personality patterns, are coming up into awareness. When Andrea talked about yogi mind, sometimes that can trigger really deep suffering, because some little event can activate a pattern we've experienced our whole life with a great deal of belief. And it's hard.

This is part of practice—to see it. Even that, even when you feel like you're spinning and lost in it and it feels just unworkable, if you can keep on bringing mindfulness right to the sense door, you'll see that none of these are lasting that long. They may be coming up frequently, but in between your horrible self-hatred, there'll be a moment when you're just sitting there thinking, "What's for lunch?" We tend not to notice that. We

think, "Oh, it's been all day. When can I go to bed?" And then you start thinking for a while about your vacation last year, and then you come back to "Oh my god, this is..." But just notice that. Just notice—it doesn't mean it isn't painful. But just because it's painful doesn't mean it's any more me than the other.

So just trusting the steadiness of awareness, the accurate perception will come in. It can't help it. That's why the continuity is so important. Accurate perception isn't changing what's happening—it's seeing what's happening more clearly for how it is. And this is where we begin to be able to trust the awareness, to take refuge more and more. It's hard when something is so difficult or so familiar, when we're so sucked in and just spinning in it, to take refuge in awareness, because sometimes you feel the difficulty more clearly. But that's, as we start to see, impermanent as well. It's painful sensation, it's painful vedanā, but it's changing too.

The awareness and the clear seeing is so freeing from the confusion that comes from this holding to a sense of self that the trust, the faith, just gets stronger and stronger. Ajahn Sumedho says we're taking refuge in the awareness.

So just to end with another invitation: as much as you notice, it can be fun—play with it. Noticing birth and death of self, explore what's the concoction, what's the grasping to at the moment, and really give yourself the space to notice other moments when there is no concoction going on. There's plenty of those moments. They may be calm, they may seem a little spaced out, but there's awareness there. Not the moments when you're really zoned, but when there's awareness—just no big concoction.

Notice if you're kind of leaning into the next experience. Give yourself a moment of space. You finish one bite of food—give it a second before you put in the next one, if that's possible. When you finish eating, if you notice your mind going, "Okay, now go wash the dishes," just take a moment. Notice the space between activities. I don't mean create three hours between activities, but just notice. You're feeling your breath, you're aware of thinking, a thought's like this—it ends. Just be aware for a moment of the space, without having to jump onto the next arising experience because God forbid another thought might come.

Just be content with voidness, as Buddhadasa says. Be content with these moments where there's no particular sense of self. The moment between birth and death, the moments between thoughts—just appreciating that.

I'll end with this little line I like. It doesn't really fit, but I like it, so that's how it goes. From Mary Oliver: "Love yourself, then forget it, then love the world." That's how it works. When we're not all wrapped up in these births and deaths of ourself and we're not fighting them, then there's the space to love the world.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 132

Purifying Mind and Heart

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson unpacks what it truly means to purify the heart and mind (citta), drawing on both practical experience and Abhidhamma psychology. She begins with the Buddha's description of Nibbāna as directly visible whenever the mind is temporarily free from the kilesas (defilements)—greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). Rather than viewing purification as scrubbing away impurities from a static self, Wilson presents the mind as a constantly arising process where each moment of consciousness co-arises with various mental factors (cetasikas), some wholesome and some unwholesome.*
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> *Wilson explores how the kilesas function as "makers of measurement," narrowing and distorting our perception, creating a sense of separation and self-centeredness. Through vivid examples—from searching for desert tortoises to the universal meditation experience of becoming hyperaware of swallowing—she demonstrates how wanting and aversion constrict consciousness. She then presents the Buddha's three-fold path as addressing three levels of defilement: sīla (ethical conduct) works with transgressive kilesas expressed through action and speech; samādhi (concentration) calms obsessive mental proliferation; and paññā (wisdom) sees through the latent tendencies that can arise unexpectedly.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that purification isn't about eliminating personality patterns through willpower, but about meeting whatever arises with kind, curious awareness. Wilson shares a moving example of a friend who transformed difficult family visits simply by watching her reactive patterns with mindfulness rather than trying to override them. This shift from doing to wise seeing allows the natural extinction of defilements when their causes aren't fed, revealing the "periodical Nibbāna" that, as Ajahn Buddhadāsa notes, nourishes us throughout each day.*

We have been speaking frequently about how an aspect of this practice is about purifying the heart and mind, or we talk about cycles of purification and purity. Winnie was mentioning that at the end of her talk last night. So tonight I just want to talk a little bit about what we mean when we say purifying the heart and mind. What do I mean by it?

This has been something that's been really interesting and illuminating for me in my practice and my understanding of the whole path in the last few years. It's my current understanding because we know it's always moving and shifting. But really it seems to me that all aspects of the path that the Buddha taught—not just meditation, but all the different aspects—are different ways that he's offering to us to purify the habits of our

heart-mind. The whole path is about shifting these habits from the suffering ones that are rooted in greed and hatred and confusion and delusion, toward taking more refuge until the habits of wholesomeness become more our refuge, more natural. And this is not just a good idea—it's the whole teaching.

In fact, this is the way the Buddha describes Nibbana. Someone asked the Buddha, "What do you mean Nibbana is directly visible, inviting one to come and see, immediate, to be personally experienced by the wise?"

The Buddha answers: "When, Brahman, a person is impassioned with lust"—that's the word for greed, lobha—"depraved through hatred"—that's all the different forms of ill will, hatred, fear—"bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion, then she plans for her own harm, for the harm of others, for the harm of both, and she experiences in her mind suffering and grief. But when lust, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, one neither plans for one's own harm or the harm of another, and so forth, and does not experience in her mind suffering and grief. In this way, Brahman, is Nibbana directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise."

So he's basically equating the immediate experience of Nibbana, the real freedom of heart and mind, with the mind and heart that is free—temporarily or forever, but even temporarily—of greed, hatred, confusion. That's what we're talking about in terms of purifying the heart and mind. It's not just about feeling good. And it's not a should, or about being good or being bad. It's really just seeing what's causing suffering and what's not, and this is what he points to.

To me, it's really fascinating to explore all the different ways that we are doing this here and in our life. One way this has been helpful and illuminating to me is in terms of the many different meditation practices. Just within Vipassana, there are so many different mindfulness practices, and then there are the samatha concentration practices, and then other kinds of practices.

I don't know about you, but it can be in my mind at times to think, well, which one's the best? Or which one's better? Which one should I be doing? Which one will I get more out of? Or which is the real one? For those people who can't do the real one, that's probably the one I'm doing—and which is the real one that's going to take me to the breakthrough? That's what we're here for, the breakthrough. This purifying the mind stuff, okay, that's what they tell us when we're lost in self-hatred, when our fear is coming up again for the ten millionth time, and they say, "That's okay, that's great, that's purification." We go, "Yeah, right," and walk out thinking, "What's the real one?"

But this is what's so cool: it's all the real one. And it takes it all, believe me. It takes all the different practices at all the different times of our life. Because the habits—I don't know if you've noticed—the habits of wanting arising, or ill will arising, or fear, or anger, or delusion, they come up a lot. Have you noticed that? That's good. That's the beginning of purification, to notice it. Seriously.

But do you notice how much they come up? And have you noticed how as your practice goes on—you've been here four weeks now—and whatever you may think is completely irrelevant, but all of you, your practice is deepening. Your practice is getting more profound. You're coming to see more subtle layers of stuff, which is both beautiful—the wholesome qualities of heart and mind you're seeing too, very important, equally to recognize with the so-called torments, or so-called defilements, or kilesas. I might use the word kilesa rather than defilements, which I really don't like as a word, and I don't want to keep saying greed, hatred, delusion, greed, hatred, delusion, so I may just say kilesas.

As your mindfulness gets steadier, and your mind gets a bit more collected, you actually, at times, notice these difficult qualities more than before. Has anybody noticed that? And then you think, "Oh God, it's going backwards. It's worse." But no, we see it on more and more subtle levels, which I'll talk about. And this is essential.

This understanding is essential. But only when we're meeting these difficulties with right understanding. Otherwise, it becomes unbearable. And even with right understanding, once in a while it's unbearable.

So to begin exploring what makes purification possible, what allows the habits of mind to shift—just a brief two-minute foray into Abhidhamma, which is really a twenty-five year study. So, two minutes.

When Winnie was talking about us being an open system, this relates directly to how we understand purifying the heart-mind. We use two different words in English—heart and mind—but in Pali, citta means both. There's no sense of split; it encompasses the whole mental activity, the psyche.

It's an open system. When we talk about mind, we're not talking about some static entity, some self-existing thing that does things and decides things—as if purifying it means we get out the scrubber and start cleaning with steel wool, scrubbing and scrubbing until finally we have this pure lump of mind.

It's not like that at all.

As Andy Alinsky puts it very succinctly, the mind is not a subject, a thing that has objects as content. Rather, it is the activity or process of cognizing the flow of events. Just as the body is, so is the mind an activity, a process arising moment to moment and passing moment to moment, like everything else.

Here's a quick Abhidhamma foray—I don't want to get sidetracked, but the way it's described, a moment of mind or psyche involves consciousness, which we've discussed as one of the aggregates: viññāna, that simple quality of knowing. This arises in every moment, the pure knowing of an object. In itself, it's neither wholesome nor unwholesome. A sound comes and there's that knowing. Labeling it as "hearing" is then a mental factor.

So any moment of consciousness arises together with various mental factors—these are the sankhāra aggregate. Various mental factors co-arise with consciousness in a moment, forming what you might call a moment of mind, citta.

In the way Abhidhamma breaks this down, it identifies fifty-two different specific mental factors. In any moment of consciousness, many of these arise together—it's not just one at a time. Don't go nuts trying to see them all. We're simply using this framework to help us observe the obvious things.

For example, there are seven mental factors called universals that arise in every moment of consciousness: contact, where consciousness meets the object; vedanā, feeling tone; saññā, perception; cetanā, volition; ekaggatā, one-pointedness. Yes, you who thought one-pointedness meant being deep in the fourth jhāna—it's actually a universal factor, just the quality that allows the mind to know for an instant that something is happening. There's also attention, and something called life faculty, which sustains the vitality of consciousness and the mental factors just long enough for that moment to exist.

Just to give you a sense of how intricate this becomes—and I'm really not going to go further—many mental factors arise together in one moment of consciousness, and they come and go. Consciousness is a living, changing experience, always changing.

Along with the seven universals that are always present, other factors come and go. Some are wholesome—leading toward happy states, toward clarity—and some are unwholesome. Altogether, they identify fourteen unwholesome factors and twenty-five beautiful ones. Just so you know, there are far more beautiful ones than unwholesome ones. We simply tend to notice the unwholesome ones more because they really make a mess of things. But the wholesome ones are numerous, and many arise together.

Of the unwholesome factors, the three roots are delusion, greed, and hatred. Delusion is present in any unwholesome moment of consciousness—always. Greed or aversion may not always be present; there are states with just delusion alone. But if greed is present, delusion is there too. The same with hatred—delusion accompanies it. However, greed and hatred never exist simultaneously. These factors come and go, just as all the beautiful states do.

Among the beautiful states, nineteen beautiful qualities are always present together. Just as an example: faith, mindfulness, non-greed, non-hatred, neutrality of mind—which is equanimity, called tatramajjhattatā in Pali, for your information.

I love that. Tatra majjhattatā. Standing in the middle of everything, kind of—equanimity. And tranquility of body and mind, lightness of body and mind, quite a few. And then others that come and go with specific consciousnesses.

So it's complicated. All that we don't need to know. But the thing that we see that makes it interesting is that because every moment consciousness is arising new, it has the potential to be different. It is different in every moment. It's not steady state. But it's not that it's just random and haphazard—oh, this moment the mind is completely filled with hatred, the next moment maybe it'll be completely filled with bliss, who knows, let's hope.

It's not an act of will, right? We've all tried that. "May my mind be peaceful. May metta arise." I know that sounds like the practice, but I mean just like an act of—okay, may metta arise, may this ill will stop now. It doesn't work. It's lawful. It's not random. But as we've seen, it's not in our personal control.

Because the changes are lawful, in the most simple way: whatever is present in one mind moment makes it that much easier for it to arise in the next. I mean, that's not rocket science, right? You've probably noticed—if you're really angry about something and you really stew on it for a moment, what's likely to be in the next mind moment of consciousness arising? Probably not, "Oh, isn't life beautiful?" It's like, "I can't believe it, I can't believe it." It kind of topples over. As the Buddha says, what the mind frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the natural inclination of the mind.

So whatever mental qualities are arising frequently, frequently, frequently—it becomes a habit. That becomes the natural inclination of mind. But this is equally true for the beautiful qualities as it is for the difficult qualities.

And so this is where it can get really interesting to explore how the mind works. What is the experience, the effect in the mind, in the heart, in our thoughts, speech, and actions when the qualities in the citta in that moment, when the habit of greed or ill will or fear or delusion is running the show? And what's it like when the beautiful qualities are present? To really explore the nature of both.

The only way that is really possible, I think, is what we've been doing here—cultivating mindfulness, this quality of just interested, kind attention. What really helps is to bring this attitude of curiosity to it rather than the attitude of, "Oh my God, this is so ugly to look at. I can't believe my mind."

I don't have to tell you, right? We take it so personally. That's why I love it when Winnie last night gave us the big picture back 25,000 years in time, when we can't really know the cause of anything, but the cause contains everything. And the night before, multi-universes from Joseph. Go all the way out there back to the Big Bang—and maybe that's only one universe out of multiple ones—or go back 25,000 years or even longer to the first Homo sapien. It's hard to take it quite so personally when you see the aversion coming up in the mind or the wanting coming up.

If you can remember: oh, this is like a scientific, heartfelt investigation, both of the nature of suffering, but also just how does the human mind work? Here's an example of it. They all kind of work the same. It's amazing to think. We all have our different personal stories and personal history and all.

But if we get really interested in looking and seeing, we can begin to perceive the nature of greed. How does it work? How does it do its job, to use U Tejaniya's language? How does aversion work? How does it do its job? How do faith, mindfulness, and wisdom work? How do they do their jobs? And it's mindfulness, of course, that allows us to see all of this.

Coming back to the Buddha's teaching, his pointing to nibbāna as directly visible when the heart-mind is free from kilesa—and the reverse of that being that all of our internal suffering comes from these three roots of greed, hatred, and confusion in our minds. For me, when I look around the world, all the human-imposed suffering out there—not natural catastrophes, but the human-imposed suffering—and we can list it all: war and religious intolerance and racism and poverty and economic injustice and crime and abuse and fear, all of it going on and on and on. You can see it. You can really see it as kilesas acting out through the body, speech, and mind of beings.

When looking on that level, when one has the "noticing the kilesa" lens on, it could be overwhelming. There's so much of it. You can really see it though. But then, when we look in our own minds and see how much suffering arises when the mind is filled with ill will or aversion and it leads to speech or action, how much suffering there is when we're aware of it—then when we notice other people acting that way, that's where the connection comes, the natural compassion.

That doesn't mean what people are doing is okay. Just like it doesn't mean that if I'm acting from ill will and that's really suffering, I should go ahead and break the window because I want some fresh air—it doesn't matter. It doesn't mean we do whatever. It doesn't mean the horrible actions are okay, not at all. But it shifts us from responding from knee-jerk ill will to being able to respond from compassion. That's wisdom. That's the wisdom that changes the whole show.

And that wisdom comes from the steady mindfulness that's exploring these suffering habits in our mind, and all the practices that help us in various ways to shift that. Because just as it's true that all the suffering comes from these difficult states, it's equally true that we—all of us—experience beautiful states as well, perhaps even more so. Moments when we're not driven by greed, by hatred, by confusion.

This is true in the world as well. Look around the world, and if you put on the wholesome lenses—you don't get it so much from the news. Every now and then the news will tell you something really good somebody did. You have to kind of listen for it. But just looking around the world, there's beautiful stuff: acts of great love and courage and compassion and generosity. Everywhere you look—famous people, people you don't know, little things on the street—when you're looking for that. And we see that in ourselves too.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, from an article he wrote called "Nibbana for Everyone," which should be encouraging. He was quite a scholar, but in this long article he's talking about nibbāna. He writes that nibbāna may be summed up as the coolness of mind and heart that results from the extinction of kilesa, from the extinction of defilements in the mind. Whenever they're not present, there is what may be called nibbāna, whose meaning is "cool."

He's making a pun on the Thai here, because apparently—I don't speak Thai, although I spent quite some time there—a lot of Pali words have made their way into the language. They talk about cooling rice; they say the rice has "nibbana-ed." So he's making a pun. He had quite a sense of humor.

But he goes on to say that because the kilesas, the defilements, are conditioned experiences—aspects that come into the mind and go, as I was describing—they have birth and death like anything else. And when the causal conditions are not present, the defilements simply become extinct. It's not like an act of will, getting out the hammer to get rid of the kilesas. When the causes that are feeding them stop feeding them, they simply don't arise.

It's so much easier than thinking we have to do that. We just explore and see what's feeding it. What starves kilesa? What feeds the wholesome? And by observing this through steady mindfulness—cause and effect—what's so wonderful is that what feeds the wholesome is actually steady mindfulness leading to wisdom. When wisdom recognizes wholesome qualities, they get stronger. We don't have to make that happen. In fact, we can't, because when we try to do it, we only know how to do things from wanting and aversion. But when we notice faith, it brightens the heart and mind.

When we're truly noticing mindfulness and awareness, appreciating them, it becomes so much easier for mindfulness to arise in the next moment. And what starves the kaleshas is the same thing: wise attention, wisdom. When wisdom recognizes what's going on with the kaleshas, it's not an act of "Oh, this is bad, stop." It's more like seeing. So many people have described these little moments of seeing wanting for something—perhaps wanting a particular mental state, as someone was describing—and seeing how the states are just changing, changing, changing, sometimes so quickly. Wanting comes up, and you see the state go away before you even recognize the wanting. It doesn't make sense anymore. You don't have to say, "I'm going to stop wanting that state that already passed." The wanting just dissolves. It becomes extinct simply through the steadiness of clear seeing and wisdom. This is what starves the kaleshas.

So he's talking about this—back to Buddhadasa—that when the conditions aren't present, the defilements simply become extinct. And although this extinction is temporary for all of us, in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily, it still is a phenomenon that has the real sense of nibbana, even though it's not the lasting one.

Anyone can see, he says, this temporary nibbana which nourishes we sentient beings, though we still will see the difficulties arise from time to time. Anyone can see that if the defilements were with us all day and all night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them? Cast your mind back. Do you really, really think that the defilements have been with you all day and all night, every second without ceasing? We couldn't bear it. Under such conditions, we'd go mad.

So let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of kalesha are not burning. And in fact, we could say that these periods last longer than when the fires are burning. Periodical nibbana keeps us all alive and well without any exceptions. We survive because of this kind of nourishment. This is truly normal and natural.

Just like last week when I was saying to notice not only when the sense of self arises and passes, but also to notice the moments when it's not there—it's equally the same. We bring this interest, this exploration, to how the kaleshas arise and work, what feeds them, what starves them, how they function, how they create suffering, and what helps to purify and shift the habits. We also bring equal interest and non-identification, non-selfing, to all the moments of coolness, of non-defilement, because noticing that equally is equally important. This is really essential to our path of awakening.

As the Buddha said, if it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. It's not easy. And as we go on and explore, as I mentioned at the beginning, what we start to see in terms of exploring how the kaleshas show up and what helps to purify the habits is that they're tricky little devils. They can be incredibly gross and obvious, or they can be really quite subtle. This is what we want to explore with interest, not taking it personally.

To begin with recognizing how these roots work on a simple level: when you recognize greed or wanting in the mind, when you recognize ill will or aversion, when you recognize delusion or confusion, or you have some vague sense that there must be some confusion because you have no clue what's happening—you can guess there's some delusion going on. That's one level.

But knowing that even in our complex and deeply habituated personality patterns, our deep traumas and sufferings—which are much more complex and which arise for most of us over and over on retreat—it's not that you're always going to see the clarity of greed, hatred, or confusion in the middle of those experiences. But even our complex, difficult emotional states are triggered by one or two of those roots. You may not see it at the root, but exploring how these roots of suffering work on a simpler level is one of the great things we can do on retreat. And then sometimes you can start to see how they function on a more complex level.

We begin to explore how these qualities, when arising in a moment of mind, a moment of consciousness, distort perception and lead onward to suffering. The Buddha once said that lust, greed, hatred, and delusion are makers of measurement. Makers of

measurement. What that means is that they impose limitations upon the range and depth of the mind—creating a sense of here, a sense of there, a sense of somewhere to get to.

I'll give you some simple examples.

I talked some about that last week, but I'll say it again. Noticing when you become aware of wanting in the mind—and this is easier with little things—but we want to get into, "Oh, okay, here's desire," rather than getting focused on what we desire, or why we shouldn't desire that, or talking ourselves out of desiring it, or pretending we don't desire it and going and getting it, or whatever it is that we're doing. What's much more interesting is to take your attention and turn it onto the desire itself, onto the quality in the mind. And notice, just noticing, like it's a scientific experiment. What does it do?

I'll give this example I often use, but it was a good one. I was in the desert in California, teaching in Yucca Valley years ago. I love walking out in that desert. They're very peaceful in the early morning with Joshua trees and a few little animals, but you don't see much. Occasionally there are these large land tortoises, and it's really special to see one. You don't see them often.

So I was out walking and just feeling peaceful and open and present. And the thought came, "Maybe I'll see a tortoise." Which could just come and go. But it didn't just come and go. It landed with wanting, with greed. And this is what keeps thoughts going—it's not the thought. We don't see the greed underneath it, or we don't see the aversion underneath it, even though we may see the thought.

I noticed how this affected things. What had been just really present and open became present *wanting to see a tortoise*. So I'm walking, completely focused, looking, looking, looking, and the mind is like, "That's not a tortoise, that's not a tortoise, that's not a tortoise," looking, looking, looking. Completely different experience. Absolutely the mind is narrowed and limited and measured. Where's the tortoise? Here am I. Where's the tortoise? And before there had been no sense of that at all.

Really interesting. This is what happened. Oh, forget the tortoise. Settle back. Just what is. Notice the difference. The second one is a moment of purity. The greed dissipated. The greed will dissipate eventually because everything changes. Feeding it would be, "Yeah, I need to see a tortoise, I need to see a tortoise." At some point, noticing the tightness, bringing the awareness to the tightness, okay, just let it be. The craving dissolves by itself from wisdom. Playing with that, seeing how that works.

Same thing with aversion. Have you noticed? With aversion, it's more like the mind shrinks back, but it tightens and narrows. Have you noticed how when something brings up a lot of aversion in your mind, you're married to that object just the same way as if you were really grasping at it? If there's a loud, disruptive sound and there's aversion to it, have you noticed how that kind of takes over?

Or have you ever had a time—maybe I shouldn't say this because it'll trigger it for people—it happens to almost everybody on retreat, where all of a sudden you notice you're swallowing a lot. And it drives you crazy, as if you weren't swallowing before. And then all you can notice is how much you swallow. And the aversion builds, and then you think everyone in the room is waiting for you to swallow. No one else is—I don't know what it is, but it's a well-known meditation phenomenon. Sooner or later, if you haven't had it yet. And then you'll find, a week later or a day later, you never even notice it again.

You wonder, "What was that all about? Am I still swallowing?" What was that all about? It was all about aversion, that's what it was all about. Just boom—it takes over the world. Notice that. The maker of measurement, it shrinks and narrows our consciousness.

And then, of course, as I talked about last week, it's all about me. But one way to understand this sense of measurement—I like the way Sogyal Rinpoche talks about it. He says that in Tibet, when they're measuring to build a house, to measure the foundation and make what we call the footprint of the house, you stand there holding a string. From you, you measure the string out as far as it goes, and then from you, all the way around—that's how you make the measurement of the house. He said that's like the sense of self. Everything's measured from here. Everything's measured from me. Every sense experience becomes: What does it say about me? What does it have to do with me? Just noticing that again really narrows and constricts the world.

And even anything that happens comes to feel like a message from the universe. Have you noticed that? So I was thinking, if that day I had seen a tortoise, the mind goes, "Oh, the universe is really all coming together to show me a tortoise." The whole universe is conspiring to let me have my desire. Or the universe is all conspiring to make these unpleasant sounds happen to me. Why me? It's this sense of narrowing, restricting.

So notice how it works. It works like that for everybody. Notice when it comes, when it passes.

And then as we start to get a feeling for it, there will be times—in our more difficult, really deep strong patterns—sometimes they're just so strong that all we can do is be really present with them with kindness. That's already the purification process. Because the habits, the knee-jerk habits, are that we meet stuff with greed, hatred, and delusion and keep on feeding it. That's kind of what we learn in the world. To meet a difficult state of heart or mind with kindness, with friendly interest, with even just simple awareness—that moment is the purification of consciousness.

We tend to think that purification means this bad stuff is going to stop coming up. When am I going to purify my whole personality? I think I said this last time, but it can't hurt saying it again. I've been waiting. I've been waiting a long time for my personality to purify. And so have my friends. Just in our meeting this afternoon, my closest friend asked, "What's a remedy for her personality?" This is what we live with. No one here—I've pretty much given up. I'm much more at ease with it. That's the purification.

The purification is meeting what's arising in the mind and heart right now. It's not about changing the object. So there will be times when our patterns are so strong, all we can do is meet them kindly. That's shifting. That's purifying.

But then there are other times when we can start to see—for instance, self-judging, which is a pattern that many of us have. Now I can recognize when it comes into my mind. I can feel the energy like a cloud. And I know it's dosa—aversion, hatred mind. I know that. I know that's the root. I can feel...

Dosa, which is the Pali word for hatred—I actually prefer this term because it encompasses a wider range, all the many gradations of aversion. I can feel it, and I can see how each moment of aversion that I'm identifying with—"Yeah, that is really bad, you are really horrible, you are really hopeless, this shouldn't be happening, you should be better by now"—just distorts the perception and makes the next moment more distorted, more affected by ill will, by hatred. It turns into a downward spiral. Does that sound familiar to anybody?

So that's going to happen. It's going to happen. But what we do is we start to get interested in exploring *how*. In these simpler moments of kalesha, we're getting a sense of how they feel and how they function. Then there will be times when the mindfulness is steady and strong enough that you can really explore within the complicated pattern. I can really see the aversion in the self-judging, and I know how it works well enough. I know I can't trust any assessment or any thought that comes out of this mind when self-judging is distorting perception. So when you recognize self-judging and then you're

trying to assess how good your practice is, forget about it. Just recognize, "Oh, that's aversion in the mind. Feels like this." That's the shift from being caught to changing the habit. This is what we're talking about with purification.

When I talk about all the different ways the Buddha offered us different aspects of the path, how they're all working and helping us in different ways, shifting these habits —each of these is a whole talk, so I can only mention them briefly. But he talks about three levels, just as a way of describing how these kalesha, these torments of mind, show up in our experience.

The first, strongest level—the English translations are always so Victorian and odd—but the translation is something like "the kalesha of transgression." Let's just say it means you act it out. The greed, the hatred, the confusion is so strong that we speak or act from it. And what is the purification practice for this? It's sila. It's taking on as practice a relationship to the five lay precepts, or the eight precepts, or the 227 precepts, in whichever way we do it.

When the energy of the kalesha is so strong—and we all know this—it comes out our mouth. Or look in the world: people act from it. We can rationalize forever, but you can really see when we're paying attention how strong it is when we act, when we say the thing, when we do the thing, when we steal, whatever it might be. The practice of sila, the practice of restraint, is a very powerful practice of purifying the habits of the mind and heart on this really strong level. And I sometimes think I never quite appreciated it enough.

Restraint—consciously refraining from wrong speech—that's actually one of the wholesome mental factors in the Abhidhamma. Restraint, wise speech. Or restraining from wrong action: stealing, lying, killing, all of that. Wise action is one of the beautiful mental factors. And wise livelihood is one of the beautiful mental factors.

Of course, you'll still notice we may consciously not act from greed, but you'll still notice the greed in the mind. But there's that beautiful quality of refraining, of restraint, and that's really important to notice. So whatever you have been doing in your life before here, I don't know, but probably there was a lot of refraining from unwholesome speech and action. And here, all of us together being on at least the five precepts —consciously take it in. Notice all the times that you haven't acted out of greed or out of anger. Out of delusion is harder to notice, but those two are easier.

We tend to judge ourselves because we're still seeing the greed: "I'm so greedy and I'm not going to go get seconds on dessert, but I'm so filled with greed." It's easy to sit and judge that rather than noticing the beautiful quality of restraint. And because it's

lawful—what we practice, toward that the mind naturally inclines—you start to notice. I hope you start to notice. I'm putting it in your mind to look and see if you notice that restraint starts to come more naturally and easily.

I'm just picking food because for some people it's complicated, for some people it's just an obvious example. But I remember my first long retreat here. I'd be first in the food line, or soon anyway, soon after the food came out. And there was one guy—I didn't know anybody—he would come ambling in twenty-five minutes after the meal was served. And they didn't keep refreshing the food like they do now. He'd come ambling in and there'd be some things left and some things not. And I thought, "God, he must be enlightened."

He just comes in and eats and leaves, and I'll never be like that. But now I notice when I'm on retreat, I don't think about it. It's nothing, it's not an act of will, but just somehow, from many years of practicing refraining in different ways—as soon as you want something, you go get it—no, we don't. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter what. That refraining from acting out of greed is strengthening this wholesome quality of non-greed.

So just recognize that in all your time here, all the moments of the day. It's not every moment—there are moments when greed isn't there. You're not strengthening non-greed; it's already not there. But notice when there's conscious refraining from action, or just when it doesn't arise, when it gets more natural and easy. That's a quality of the habits of mind and heart purifying. Sīla is a powerful practice—conscious conduct in our lives.

Generosity, the practice of generosity—not so much about what one should give, that's a whole other talk—but the quality in the mind of the joy of sharing, the joy of connectedness. It's really a beautiful, joyful quality. You can't share much with things here, and please don't start with each other. But we're giving each other the generosity of heart, the space to be quiet with yourself. That can be a generous act. Refraining from going and talking to someone can be an act of generosity. Appreciate that. That's a letting go of craving.

This is a whole other teaching of the Buddha, a practice that's really a powerful way of purifying the habits of greed in particular, but also ill will, and also of separation. When you're really offering something to someone, the sense of separation goes away. And if you really are, from your heart, offering something—even a smile—there's not ill will present in that moment. There's open-hearted generosity. It's one of the beautiful states. The beautiful and the unbeautiful don't coexist in any moment.

So there's generosity. The second level is called obsessive kilesa. And this is, I'm sure you know, when the thoughts are just spinning—thoughts of greed, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of delusion—on and on and on, obsessive, obsessive, obsessive. This is one we get to make really good friends with here on retreat. It happens a lot in life too.

And what practice really helps us cool that out, balance that out, is samādhi. So you're going to see this is sīla, samādhi, paññā—the three parts of the Eightfold Path. Samādhi, collectedness of mind, is what starts to purify, temporarily, the obsessive kilesa—the spinning, spinning of ill will, wanting, delusion.

We've talked about how in samādhi, this collectedness of mind, when there's some concentration, the hindrances are kept away. And it's really quite interesting to see, as the mind gets more and more collected—and I don't mean it has to be one-pointed, but collectedness of mind, samādhi, all the samatha practices, all the brahmavihāra practices, or ānāpāna, being with the breath—but it's also what we call momentary samādhi, khaṇika samādhi, which is the steadiness of awareness, of attention, on changing objects, which is very much our vipassanā meditation. With that, as the attention gets steady, steady, steady—have you noticed we've mentioned continuity once in a while?—steady, steady, steady, that's what leads to the collectedness of samādhi.

And as the mind gets collected, the hindrances don't really, they can't really—the strong ones, greed, hate, ill will, doubt—they don't really get in. And as the mind gets more and more collected, more calm, even greed and lust, anger, agitation, don't really arise.

This is one of the reasons people like the collected mind, the concentrated mind, so much. Partly we like it because we think, "Oh good, I'm finally getting somewhere." Okay, that's not so wholesome. But partly, when there's that sense of collectedness—it can be with mettā, or it can be when people come and say, "Oh, the awareness, the mindfulness is just kind of flowing by itself and things are coming and going and there's no real problem. Whatever's coming, it's interesting"—there's a sense of there being no agitation, no anger, no wanting. It's just whatever's coming is seen. That's the kind of purification of mind. The torments aren't arising.

And as one practices, really very one-pointed into jhāna practice, the power of the collected mind gets really strong and you can really taste the sense of purity. But it doesn't have to be that strong. We can taste it, notice what the pure mind feels like—the mind that isn't driven by wanting, by agitation. Sometimes, before we've started practice, we may have never even really noticed that that's possible.

And when you feel it, even just a little, it's like, ah, just this coolness, this peace. It's the mind that isn't distorted by the kleshas. One person described it to me as feeling like the awareness is squeaky clean—you know, like when you're cleaning a window and it's so clean it squeaks. There's just nothing in the way.

So we notice that. Of course, later greed can arise for it, because this is a temporary purification. But it is really shifting the habits of mind. First we're even getting a sense that this is possible. I remember many times in practice where the peacefulness and happiness of the mind that isn't riddled by kleshas is so much more peaceful and happy than any sense pleasure I could think of. Any. Every sense pleasure starts to seem really gross compared to that. Which is why we can get so attached to certain kinds of concentration. That attachment part comes later, and that isn't helpful. But in terms of the obsessive defilements, it's the collectedness of mind that really helps to shift the habit.

But it's conditional, of course. And so when the conditions that lead to the collectedness change or go away, the habits of klesha can come back in again. Not can—they will. Sometimes, slowly, slowly, the purity can last a while and we can rediscover it. We learn to appreciate it. We learn how to feed it. But once in a while you'll have a period here where you feel really focused, and then somehow it shifts and you feel like you're just hit over the head by some really strong, difficult emotional state. And you go, "How did that happen?" Because it's kind of like the steadiness lifts up and the old habits come roaring back.

So this is the third level, called the latent kleshas—the underlying tendency for one of the kleshas to arise given the appropriate conditions. It's like if the seed is there, you give it water, it's going to sprout. Don't let this one make you feel hopeless and discouraged. But it's why things are going fine, fine, fine, you're really focused, and all of a sudden you let up—oh, let me just enjoy the trees—and whop. Where did that come from?

And it can be little things. Someone told me a few years ago, on retreat here, on a three-month retreat, they were very mindful, noting everything. They were walking past the breakfast table after breakfast was over, just noticing: walking, looking. And then all of a sudden it was like a different part of them—their hand just went out and grabbed an orange and took it and kept on going. And they're like, "What? Where did that come from?" They didn't notice the wanting come up, and the acting felt like, whoa. Not that it was bad to take an orange, but it's just like, where did that come from? It can be like that, very small, or it can be really big.

And so here, what the practice is, is wisdom—clear seeing. The Buddha said these underlying tendencies for the kleshas to come about are not seen through by an act of will or by doing, but by wise seeing. This is where our steady mindfulness comes in—to just be with it, not to fix it or hate it, but to just be willing to stay present. Because we never know when a sudden old habit will emerge. We just never know. I don't mean this like a scary thing. I mean, this is why we want to take refuge in awareness.

So, okay, two examples to end. One is on the scary side, but just shows how we never really know. When a latent defilement comes up so strong that we act it out, it could be just a few seconds, and it could change our life. I was listening to an interview on public radio last year with two men who were working with young prisoners—young men who were in for life, or for many, many years. And they were talking to one young man who was in for life. They didn't say what he'd done, but some violent things. I'm assuming murder, but I don't know. And he said—this young guy, the men who worked with him were reporting it—he said, "You know, I just wish I had back those three to five seconds of my life where I did this violent act, for which I'm now in jail for life." Three to five seconds.

We never know. Now, the more we have been practicing all these other aspects—of sila, of generosity, of samadhi, of mindfulness—the chances are our habits are really getting so purified that it probably wouldn't come to that for any of us.

But still, we never want to abandon wise seeing. And it's not an act of will that the purifying happens, but simply through watching to see.

I'll end with this last example from a good friend who has told me I can use it. It's mundane, but this is our life—why seeing is what allows the wisdom, the paññā, to arise, which by itself dissipates the habits, changes, purifies the heart-mind.

This friend's family lives quite distant from where she lives. I've known her for about thirty years. It's been quite difficult when she goes home to visit—just her mother and sister now—and it's always challenging. Every time she goes, with all her years of practice, she makes that affirmation: "I'm going to go home and really work with mettā and not get sucked into the dynamics and not get sucked into being negative." Have any of you ever done that? We know how that works.

So she always does this. She goes home and tries it, and it's a really difficult situation with her sibling. After a retreat here a couple of years ago where the emphasis was really on what I'm talking about—just bringing kind awareness to watch the habits in mind and see how they work, trusting the mindfulness to bring the wisdom, and that that purifies by itself instead of trying, because by trying we don't even let ourselves see

what's happening—she said she got on the plane and started her usual routine: "Okay, when I walk in the door, I'm going to be really kind, I'm going to be really..." And then she said, "Wait a minute, let's just watch the mind."

So she started watching, and she saw that as soon as she got on the plane, her mind went into reactive mode. She got resentful and resistant. She was saying things like, "Oh, I'm going to just be nice, filled with love and kindness," but underneath she was thinking, "Oh, with Mom and my sister, this is going to happen." She saw her mind, her heart, building up this whole story. And she just watched it—how the aversion was coming as a habit.

When she was watching with awareness, really present with it, that was already purifying, because she wasn't feeding it. And delusion feeds it. We pretend it's not there, and it keeps on working under the radar. So she was watching the whole thing. She walked in the door and she saw how as soon as she walked in, she was ready for battle. She just saw that in herself. Instead of feeding it, it relaxed. And she saw when her sister came, she was ready to have a difficult interaction before her sister opened her mouth—didn't even give her a chance.

She just watched like this. She said it was the best visit she ever had. Because she was able to be with her own process. And just by trusting the steady mindfulness, she was able—not by an act of will, but by wisdom—to see that the processes, the habits, were being purified.

This is what's available to all of us. All of these different aspects support us. So when you're having a really bad day and you don't have one moment of mindfulness, contemplate your sīla. All the acts of restraint. That's wholesome. That's changing the habit of mind from self-negativity, from dosa, to something beautiful. Just for one example.

Okay, that's enough. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 133

Wisdom and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential unity of wisdom and compassion in Buddhist practice. She begins by examining how an incomplete understanding of emptiness (suññatā) and not-self (anattā) can feel unsettling, even alienating, when divorced from the warmth of compassionate connection. Drawing on teachings from Nyoshul Khenpo and Nāgārjuna, she warns against falling into the 'abyss of emptiness' where nothing seems to matter—a conceptual trap rather than liberating insight.*
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> *Wilson presents the Tibetan understanding of mind's threefold nature: empty of separate self-existence, naturally clear and knowing, and ceaselessly responsive with compassion. She uses the image of Green Tārā—serene in meditation yet poised to act—as an embodiment of this union. The Dalai Lama's teaching that real compassion must arise from insight into emptiness prevents us from falling into hopelessness when facing the world's suffering.*
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> *The talk offers deeply practical guidance for cultivating bodhicitta, the awakened heart. Wilson emphasizes that compassion develops through intimate presence with our own suffering, however ordinary it may seem. She shares the Dalai Lama's capacity to be fully present with each person's pain without carrying residue—demonstrating how emptiness enables rather than blocks empathy. Through examples ranging from walking meditation in Burma to the Freedom Riders' nonviolent resistance, she shows how wisdom and compassion together enable courageous, effective action. The teaching reminds us that each moment of meeting our experience with kind awareness is sufficient—we need no special circumstances to cultivate liberation.*

Tonight I want to talk about the unity of compassion and wisdom. You could say wisdom needs compassion and compassion needs wisdom—which luckily happens naturally like that.

To talk about how wisdom needs compassion: when we talk about, and sometimes even experience, the wisdom of emptiness—emptiness meaning empty of separate, intrinsic self—it doesn't mean nothing's there, but there's no reliable separate anything to hold on to. We've talked about that quite a bit. The sense of not-self, the sense of everything coming and going. We say whatever thought occurs, awareness doesn't care. Whatever experience happens, just be aware of it. One isn't better than the other.

There can be at times a beginning sense of understanding this or experiencing it, but not fully. And so while a deep understanding of this, or even moments of it, is freeing, there's also oftentimes—I'm sure many of you have experienced this, I certainly have—when the idea of emptiness, of not-self, of awareness doesn't care, is actually felt or experienced as rather unsettling. To say the least, unattractive. I didn't really come here to find out everything's all the same and awareness doesn't care and whatever I think doesn't matter and whatever I do doesn't matter. It's not just to move everything into some dull grayness. People have used words to me like uncaring, alien, unattractive, inhuman. You get the drift. Sometimes even when we experience this it's kind of scary, because there's no reference point.

This is a kind of incomplete aspect of wisdom. It's true, all that, without the judgments about uncaring and alien and inhuman. The sense that there's nothing to hold on to, that in a way, in the purity of mind, it doesn't really matter what's arising—that's true. But if that's the only way we experience it, it can lead to a sense of disconnection, a kind of disillusionment. It verges into the incomplete aspect without the connectedness of compassion. It can sound as though emptiness and not-self is a very uncaring, disconnected state or experience.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a great Dzogchen master: "The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, or emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute—like everything's empty, nothing matters—in a nihilistic fashion, and we are obscured by concepts."

Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness." Nagarjuna went on to say, "The Buddhists say that emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable."

So you get a sense of the difference. The experience is one thing. The belief, the concept that it's all empty, it doesn't matter—that's something else entirely. Back to Nyoshul Khenpo: "Those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do." Which we've been saying, right? There's nothing to do. But knowing that from a deep understanding is very different from a little bit of knowing combined with the concept that it all doesn't matter, there's nothing to do. You know, the kind of crazy wisdom where two people are fighting over a cat—just cut it in half, it doesn't matter. That kind of thing. Nothing matters.

So that's wisdom, but not complete wisdom, because it doesn't have the compassion, it doesn't have the connection.

The Tibetans have a lovely way of describing the natural nature of mind, of heart, as threefold aspects—although all three come together, we split it up just because we have to talk about it. All mind, all experience has the quality of being empty, empty of any separate self-existence, what I was just saying. And at the same time, in those moments of spontaneous knowing, natural awareness, the natural clear knowing quality of mind-heart is always available, always present.

We've said that—the simple way we've been saying it—awareness is always accessible when you just remember.

And the third aspect of that, in the moment when there's the clear awareness which is always accessible, knowing with the understanding of the empty nature, the third aspect is that the natural expression of mind of heart is that it is—the Tibetans use the phrase—ceaselessly responsive. Meaning that in any particular moment of experience, if a response is appropriate, that natural response will be that of compassion or metta, whichever is appropriate, equanimity—of the brahmaviharas—but call it compassion for simplicity. This is the natural and ceaselessly responsive nature, the active nature, when the heart-mind of emptiness is called upon to respond.

And when you put that all together, that's where we really get a sense of the depth of the freedom the Buddha is talking about—this unity of wisdom and compassion.

Now, at the same time, compassion needs wisdom or we so easily fall into the vortex of despair. We get overwhelmed, we take it all personally, we just can't be there. You know all of that—or falling into righteous anger. So without the depth of wisdom of emptiness, we can certainly cultivate compassion. Of course, we don't have to be perfect in any of this, but the real depth of compassion needs both.

This is from the Dalai Lama, who says: without the unity of compassion and emptiness, we can fall into despair. Real compassion must be derived, must arise from our insight into the emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Otherwise, though our compassion may be strong, it is likely to fall into the quality of hopelessness or even despair.

Have you felt that sometimes? It feels like it's really compassion, but it so easily tips into the quality of hopelessness, of despair.

And so our practice, where we're cultivating wisdom through the steadiness of mindfulness, we're also naturally developing compassion. Sometimes one seems more up, sometimes another seems more up, and sometimes they come together in a lovely way. But they keep on developing—one and then the other, and then they come together.

One expression of this that I really like is the statues of Green Tara. I don't know if you've ever seen that—she's a Tibetan goddess of compassion. I have a little one at home that I really like because to me it depicts this blending of wisdom and compassion. So the statue—she's sitting there really in meditation, really at ease, totally relaxed, clearly in meditation, but the eyes are a little bit open. Not this sense of complete pullback from the world. And I'm sure if you've ever seen the Green Tara icon, you know that one of the feet is resting up on a lotus petal, ready to get up if action is called for. At that moment, action isn't called for. So there's the deep serenity of wisdom, of meditation, but always—not like, "Oh my God, I've got to do something!" No, that's hard, that's not it. Total serenity, but as soon as the appropriate action is called for, it naturally arises. Doing the obvious, as I heard one teacher say—not holding oneself in readiness. It's the natural response of wisdom.

Nyoshul Khen again: someone who realizes that all phenomena are empty and who realizes or recognizes the non-existence of self will naturally have spontaneous compassion for sentient beings who do not realize this and so continue to suffer through delusion and clinging.

And you don't have to think, "Oh, that's somewhere way down the road, impossible for me." Again, remember, everything is only moments—only this moment. To me, that's one of the most freeing teachings in my practice, because when I find my mind thinking, "Well, how can I ever be that compassionate? I was just having these horrible thoughts about this other person yesterday..."

Right now. Right now is all we have to work with. That's a huge relief, and it makes everything possible.

So, remember—last week I was talking about working to purify the habits of heart and mind. And I think I suggested noticing moments in your own experience when the heart-mind is pure, when it's not being distorted by greed, hatred, delusion. And I know another time I said: when there's no sense of self. Notice those moments.

Think back, if you can think of one. As I said, they're just simple moments. When you're really present and awake, just with this moment, just as it is—as someone was describing in an interview, just being totally present with what is—there's no problem in that moment, is there? We can't imagine why there would ever be a problem again. We don't have to wait long, but in that moment of the pure heart and mind, whatever it is—whether it's just walking, seeing the leaves, drinking tea, just standing—there's just that purity, that simple total presence, not thinking of me or other.

In that moment, could you imagine, if there was some being in front of you having trouble, that you would act from aversion or cruelty? The natural response of compassion would just naturally spring up, wouldn't it? Can you imagine doing anything harmful or cruel from that space? It just doesn't occur in that moment.

And so in terms of some little chipmunk that needed help, you may not know, you may not have the information of what would be the most supportive, helpful thing to do. So we don't always have omniscient wisdom. But in that sense of the wisdom of emptiness, the wisdom of not about me and other, the movement to compassionate action would just naturally arise. You wouldn't have to think about it.

Later you could think about and analyze and beat yourself up when you weren't in such a pure space anymore. But at that time, it's just the natural way that the mind of wisdom and compassion functions.

And so wisdom needs compassion, but compassion also needs wisdom. Because we don't have the big picture. Even when we're not really taken over by greed or confusion, but just a little bit caught in the sense of "I" — even if we're meaning well, wanting to do good — our vision, what we can see, is going to be narrowed and limited in that "me and other" space, if you know what I mean. "I want to do something good for the environment," but somehow it's always coming from me. We just can't see. Instead of "me and other," the wisdom shifts it to "we." And out of that "we," a more appropriate, compassionate action can come.

I'll give you a very simple example — not even compassion, but just that shift out of "me" to "we" that lets one see the situation in a more holistic way. This is such a simple example. Some years ago when I was on retreat at Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center in Burma, there were a lot of people there, and I was doing some walking meditation. It's not so orderly, you could say, as here. There are no special walking rooms, just places outside to walk — a narrow walkway here, verandas outside of the meditation hall, anywhere outside you can walk.

So I was walking, and here, you know, if we start walking one way we assume everyone else will walk in the same direction, and we're all very tidy about it. God forbid someone should go crosswise. But there it's just kind of whatever. I had my little space, walking back and forth, and people are ambling this way and that, coming right towards me, and I'm... well, you can imagine. Maybe not, but... No one walked into me, but I was in a decent open space, thinking, "Okay, well, let's all try to walk for the well-being of all." I wasn't really aversive, but there was that sense of me trying to coordinate it, you know — psychically. I mean, I wasn't really talking to anybody, but psychically. "We're just walking here, we're just all walking together, one big mishmash."

But then something let go — which, as we know, can't be an act of will. Something let go and I quit seeing it from this perspective of how all these people were in my way. Actually, it's working. Nobody's actually walking into anybody here. It's working. I just walk back and forth, and someone seems to be walking — well, they are walking directly towards me, that's true. But when we get to the point, before the point of contact, one of us turns. Okay, what's the big problem? One of us turns. Maybe it's me, maybe it's them. But someone turns. Keep on walking. Actually, there was no problem. And I was there for weeks, and it was always thus. As soon as it wasn't that sense of me having to take care of it for all of us — but especially for me — and I was just seeing the big picture, oh, it works. Maybe they move, maybe I move. One of us moves in the big "we," and it all works out.

It's simple, but it makes a huge difference. That's, in a little way, how compassionate response and clear seeing can arise when so much of our energy isn't caught up in this relentless, obsessive self-referencing.

Without wisdom, we can have wonderful ideas of compassion and act in great compassionate ways, but it doesn't have the real depth, the staying power, because it's not coming from the deep wisdom of not "me and other" but "us" — and that "us" includes everything. But when that obsessive self-referencing is just a little bit released, so much energy is available for life, for awareness, for appropriate response, for compassion. And that's how it naturally shows up, which is a nice thing.

So then, in a way, the question of compassion with wisdom — the one that comes up for me — I sometimes feel like this has been one of the great koans in practice. You've probably noticed how a lot of spiritual practice is really paradoxical: one thing's true and then the exact opposite is true, and they're both true, and you can't figure it out, but you somehow have to understand it. It's like that with this. For me, this balance, this dance of emptiness and compassionate action — cultivating wisdom to be able to really act in wise and compassionate ways from a depth, not just from an idea, and not then just getting into the wisdom that's so serene and removed — I feel like a lot of my life is kind of back and forth, back and forth. Trying to figure it out, which is of course hopeless, but dancing back and forth between those two, making teensy, teensy little understandings, and then I didn't understand anything, starting over. It goes like that.

But how, with the depth of wisdom and compassion, do we continue to open our hearts, our minds, in this complex world of beauty and suffering?

And these days, it's hard enough, I find, to find the courage—not just the willpower courage, but the courage of the tenderness of wisdom, of compassion—to keep opening in the face of even our own overwhelming suffering. Each of us, at times, experiences

suffering that is overwhelming. Just to open to our own. And then the way the information world is these days, there are all the people we know, all the people we care for, our family and friends, and then just to be able to be present in the face of all of their suffering. And then there's the media. Just one day of listening to the news can—well, some days one can be somewhat present. Some days it's more than the heart can take in and it shuts down. At least that's my experience. It's an overwhelming amount of information.

So how do we continue to find the wisdom and the courage to open, and the courage to be present? And if we respond, how do we not go to the response of fear, of aggression, of hatred, of self-righteous anger—if we even have enough wisdom to have the choice? How do we not fall into and wallow in the internal space of despair, or feeling, as the Dalai Lama said, that it's hopeless, there's no way I can open to this, so forget it? It's like all or nothing.

Somehow, I notice in talking to different people, and I have the same tendency myself—we either have to do it all, and we have to do it all right now, and if we're not doing it completely perfectly, we're hopeless failures. I don't know if that relates to anybody, but I've certainly picked up that little tinge once in a while in interviews. And so it's like this: I should be able to open to all the suffering in the world right now, and when my heart shuts down, it shows what a selfish, deluded person I am. Right? Those are our two alternate choices. Not really so helpful.

But to see that we really need both—the inner reflects the outer. We need both. And that's why we have this practice.

There's something I read from Martin Luther King one time, just a short line, where he said, "Nonviolence means we not only refuse to shoot a person, but we refuse to hate them." I love that, because to me it gives the sense—it's not superficial. It's already quite profound that we refuse to shoot a person, we refuse to hurt a person with our actions. That's already wonderful. I mean, if that could just go in the world, that would be fantastic. But on the depth of all of our actions, our heart and mind really transforming, purifying, so that we're like the Green Tara—the spontaneous response in a moment is wisdom and compassion.

For this, the purification, the practice, the looking at suffering has to really keep coming in on a deeper and deeper level, deeper into our own experience, so that the transformation is real. Not only do we refuse to shoot, we refuse to hate. And we have enough awareness, enough self-knowledge, enough mindfulness to actually notice a moment when we have a choice. No, I'm not going to go to hatred now. And we all

know there are plenty of times we don't have that choice. But that's why we're practicing—to even see that choice is possible, to see that there's another way, and to learn to trust that.

So how does this happen? I wanted to read something from the Dalai Lama in terms of opening to so much suffering without falling into despair. I read one time—I don't have the exact quotation, I just remember it because it went in, so this is a complete paraphrase, not his words. But the person interviewing him was describing how, as I'm sure you know, he is the person who receives the histories, so many suffering histories of so many people. Any Tibetan refugee who manages, especially in the past, to escape from Tibet could get to the Dalai Lama and would tell their story. It's endless histories of loss and murder and losing one's family, nunneries and monasteries destroyed, imprisonment and torture. Endless. If I read just one or two, it's like, oh my God, how can you live after that? How can you take it in?

And he'll be there, totally present for each person who comes. No matter who it is, whoever he's talking to, he's so present. All of him is there, like you're the most important, only person in the world at that point. Total presence, which is really an act of love, isn't it? An act of compassion.

So he'll be there, hearing this history, really in it, often weeping, really completely empathetic, as long as it's there. Then, when that person leaves and the next thing happens, he's totally there in the next thing. He could be with another person and they're laughing and joking, or he's going to another teaching in a completely other space.

It's this sense of—not because he didn't care that such presence was possible, but precisely because he's so fully present, just in this moment, empathetic, crying, with no resistance. And so the next moment is just as total, and there's no residue.

So it's not "how can I open to all of it?" I can't. That's exactly it—"I" can't. The "I" is somehow the resistance, the limit. We do the best we can, but when there's no "I," experience is just passing through. So he's really there, really empathetic, completely compassionate—and with the next person equally so, even if that might be a joking, happy moment. Empty of separate self and yet totally connected and empathetic in the experience. This is the union of emptiness and compassion as it shows up in a person's activity.

Compassion is sometimes defined as the quivering of the heart. I like that because it actually feels like that, kind of—the quivering of the heart in connection with pain or suffering, our own or another's. The tender heart. When the Dalai Lama or Tibetans talk about it, they speak of bodhicitta, which is the most noble aspect of compassion—

the noble or awakened heart. It's described as the great motivation to cultivate compassion and awakening this noble heart in our own heart and mind in order to bring all beings to awakening. That's a vast aspiration of compassion. But even just to talk about bodhicitta as the noble heart, the tender heart, this quivering of our heart in response to suffering, this kinship with beings.

So the Dalai Lama, saying that of course cultivation of this is possible, asks: how does it develop? He says—you can guess. Maybe you can guess. From deep insight into what suffering is. And how do we develop that insight? By focusing, being really present, he says, with our own experience of suffering. We don't have to have some giant, amazing experience. We all experience plenty of suffering—and happiness, as Winnie was reminding us last night. We got there in a circuitous way. But the suffering that we experience is exactly where we start to learn in a cellular way what compassion is, as we learn how to open into, to meet our own suffering, whatever form it takes, with this tenderness of heart.

This is the Dalai Lama. He says that compassion then begins to strengthen and becomes a sense of empathy, connectedness with other beings. And this is not like an intellectual thing where we should try to make this happen, because then it just becomes pushing some idea. So don't worry about it or push for it, but notice—because it really does happen that way.

Sometimes people think, "Well, my suffering isn't so much compared to..." and they'll name how much other people are suffering. There are always people going through far more horrendous things than we are, even though there are plenty of people here going through horrendous things. But that's a way of saying, "Well, mine is really nothing. I don't have the right to even worry about this, or even meet it as suffering, because it's so nothing." That's a pushing away. That's a denial. That's making it personal and sidestepping the whole issue. It doesn't matter what it is. Any kind of suffering that we open to with this tender heart, with this quality of mindful awareness—non-judging, totally present—can really move into this empathy, into this sense of connectedness. The expression of my particular suffering becomes the suffering of all beings.

Pema Chödrön quotes Stephen Levine, writing of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness. At the point at which she felt she could not bear the suffering and resentment any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others—a starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose in a dirty flat, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. She said she understood that it was not her pain; it was the pain of all beings. It wasn't just her life; it was life itself.

And Pema Chödrön says, "We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence." In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

Again, this happens by itself. We don't have to be expert at it. But this is why—and I think Winnie said this last night—the difficult times in retreat are so important. They're so important. I've talked about this in terms of purification, but really, how we meet presently arising experience is the point of purification. What's arising in this moment? Someone said, "This shouldn't be happening." We always think this shouldn't be happening. But that doesn't make any sense, because it *is* happening. And if it is happening, it should be happening, because all the conditions have come together such that this moment is like this. It can't be any different.

But how the mind-heart of awareness meets this moment—that's the place where compassion and wisdom are cultivated. How we meet this presently arising moment, when we meet it with clear mindful awareness, is the arising of the compassionate intention, the wise intention, as Winnie talked about. Just to meet what's happening with kind awareness. It's certainly not our—in the world it may not be the main go-to modality. The Dalai Lama says someone asked him about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society.

And he said, well, maybe we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling it or reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger. And so, that's what we're practicing.

But have you noticed that sometimes when you're really in a difficult spot, all of a sudden metta or compassion arises, and it's like, whoa, where did that come from? Who was that? And that's lovely to notice. But do you notice how other times, when we're tired or it's happening again, the go-to thing is more a sense of aversion or judgment?

Here's a little story that exemplifies this. I was staying with a friend in an ashram in southern India, near Tiruvannamalai, but it wasn't Ramana Ashram. It was a smaller one. And in the middle of the night, like one or two in the morning, we started hearing these incredible whacks. I can't even do it—so loud. Whack, whack! Just like some really loud, hard thing hitting the floor. And this went on for the rest of the night.

We got up in the morning and were walking out, and we could see into another room, the main center room in the ashram. There was a little bed, one of those charpoy beds, and an old Swami was sitting on the bed. Really old, with a long beard, in his orange outfit. He was sitting on the edge of the bed with this long, thick rope that looked like he'd made himself out of tying all kinds of rags together. It must have taken him years to get that many rags. So this thick rope about this long, and he was just sitting there on his bed with all his strength, just flapping it on the floor. He'd been doing this for hours by this point. Whack! Whack! Whack!

So we asked, what is he doing? We couldn't ask him directly—he was too engrossed. "What is he doing?" They said, "Oh, he's keeping the demons away. He's keeping the hindrances away. He's getting rid of them."

Isn't that what we do? Whack! Whack! Whack! Get rid of this ill will! Get rid of this sleepiness! Get rid of this doubt! Whack! Whack! That's not really the most useful approach. It doesn't really work, and it's exhausting. It takes huge energy to be fighting with all our experience.

Pema Chödrön gives another lovely image. I like it a lot. She compares our heart, our tender heart and mind, to a sea anemone. Do you know what that is? It's a little creature that lives in the sea, and because it has a very soft center, it closes around itself to protect itself. She says, you know, we think, "I have enough suffering of my own, I can't let in other people's suffering," or "I can't even let in my own suffering," so we close around to protect ourselves.

And she says, we think we're protecting ourselves, but really when we close off to anything, we're also closing off to ourselves. Notice that—when we can't be with some aspect of our own suffering, do you notice we don't get to be with the beauty either? We're just disconnected until we figure out what's going on.

I love that image. Instead of judgment, it's like, "Oh, it's a sea anemone closing down around the soft center." But then we see that's actually what shuts us off. And we start to learn—and this is what we're learning through practice—that the place of strength and wisdom and courage, that which actually gives the understanding and the natural response of compassion, is the softness. It's the wisdom that actually lets us just be with that tender heart, whatever it is that's occurring.

We don't have to take on the whole world. Just starting with our own experience here. Whatever it is that's going on in your practice.

So that's why these periods are so important. The difficult times—not just to get through and think, "Okay, they're important and I'm through it, thank God, we're on to the next thing." You'll look back, I'm pretty sure—I can't say for everyone, but I know for me—times that I've had retreats that were really difficult, where you think, "Oh my God," and you come staggering out of it. None of you here will come staggering out. You'll all come out floating on clouds of bliss. But once in a while, I've come out kind of reeling, thinking, "Oh my God, that was so hard. What was that about?" But you find out later it was about so much. Those are the retreats where so much was learned, in my experience. The kind of learning that really makes the mind and heart stronger, more courageous. It lets go of a lot of confusion through being with the suffering, seeing how it's created, how the mindfulness and compassion being with it allows it to dissipate.

And then it comes up again. And we're like, "Oh no, I saw it once. That was enough." No, it wasn't. Ten million times will be enough. And again, and again, and again. And we think, "Oh my God." But instead of that, notice each moment. It's a deepening of the potential for this anemone to open. And for that moment of meeting it with just simple mindfulness, just simple acceptance—not in order for anything, not to make it go away, not to have a big "aha" moment, but just because this is the moment that life is presenting right now. There is no other moment of life than this one right now. And our choice is to shut down to it or to, as best we can, meet it with kind awareness and compassion. We don't always have that choice. But that's okay. Then we notice we're shut down. That's a new moment that we have an opportunity to meet again. But there's ever only this moment.

And so it's so important—we can't skip this part. It's like we want to cultivate compassion by really understanding it, but let's jump over this horrible part here in the middle where we have to keep on swimming back in this stuff. And it's not even like... sometimes it's really intense. Sometimes it's like, "This is such a stupid thing." Like when I talked about swallowing the other day. It seems like a stupid thing, but the amount of suffering could be huge. Don't denigrate it. Don't push it away. Really meet it.

Shabkar, who was a really amazing Tibetan yogi from the early 1800s—he wrote *An Autobiography of Shabkar*, it's a huge book, mostly in poetry—but he was a really amazing yogi. This is just one line of his. He says, "Meditating without compassion is simply to inflict hardship on yourself." I think that's worth remembering. I'll say it again: Meditating without compassion is simply to inflict hardship on yourself. And there's enough of that.

So we can't skip this part, because this is really where the depth of wisdom of emptiness meets the depth of compassion, and compassion moves from an intellectual idea—which is useful, that can guide us to do wholesome actions—but it moves from intellectual to really that cellular depth of wisdom, like the Green Tara. Because without that, I know there are times I want to do a compassionate thing, but if it's not really from myself, if I'm still caught up in me or in fear or protection or whatever, then if it comes to the crunch, when things get hard, sometimes compassion's not what comes out. We're back with the old swami hitting ourselves with a rope—or someone else, in the crunch. So it has to really be like a cellular understanding. Not just an idea.

And then compassion and wisdom of emptiness is not about not acting. Incredible response, incredible courageous response and proactive actions are possible when it's really moving from this depth of transformation of heart and mind—that even faced with violence and possible death, the coming from compassion and wisdom is still accessible.

Just an example, back to Martin Luther King: you not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate a person. A few months ago, I saw on TV a special on PBS—it was a commemoration from a period of the civil rights movement in the 60s. This was a period from the Freedom Rides in 1961.

For those of you who are American, and also probably a lot younger than I am, at that period in 1960 and 1961, a group of young college students—African-American college students from a divinity school in Nashville—had formed a group they called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They were really very active in the civil rights movement. They thought up and began, or maybe didn't begin it, but they're the ones who carried out what was called the Freedom Rides.

At that time, buses that went interstate were supposed to not be allowed to be segregated, but in certain states in the South, they enforced segregation anyway. They had separate waiting rooms at the bus stops and all. This was against the law, but the country wasn't enforcing the law. So these students came up with the idea of having these Freedom Rides—just having groups of their students, African-American students but also white people from all over, riding together on the normal buses, Greyhound and Trailways, getting off at the stops and just going into the waiting rooms together. That was it. That's all they were doing. And unbelievable violence came, especially in Alabama and Mississippi.

That's a whole long story, but the point I want to make is this: I saw an hour-long program going through it, and I'd read a lot about it, but it had some videos of some of the people and then interviews with some of the people involved. The video must have been made just a few years ago, because one of the people I know is dead now.

At one point, the video was interviewing a man named John Siegenthaler, who was a special assistant to Robert Kennedy, the attorney general. JFK was the president, and Robert Kennedy was the attorney general—the head legal person in the country. So it was really his responsibility to be enforcing the law, but also to be protecting these Freedom Riders because they were being subjected to horrific violence.

Kennedy sent John Siegenthaler down to Montgomery to talk to the governor of Alabama to get him to protect the people. The governor wouldn't even talk to him for a while. In one particular incident, Siegenthaler managed to bring it to an end. Those Freedom Riders were finished.

John Siegenthaler was talking now, remembering: "Good," he thought. "I really did something. I managed to get this particular incident done. I got the governor to agree to do something." He was feeling kind of proud of himself.

But then he hears from the young students in Nashville that they're sending more people. He's like, "What? What's the matter with them? I just managed to cool it out, and they're sending more people? This is crazy."

So he got on the phone, and who he was talking to was this amazing young woman named Diane Nash, who was part of this group. They were using her as the organizer. She wasn't doing the ride herself. She would stay in Nashville and talk to everybody on the phone. She's talking to Robert Kennedy, and she's organizing the whole thing. If you read anything about her, she just seems to be the most amazing person.

First I need to read from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's statement of purpose, because this is the depth they're coming from. This was written by James Lawson, who was training them in nonviolence. He was a Christian minister, still alive, one of the main proponents of nonviolence.

He says: "The philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence is the foundation of our purpose and the manner of our action. Nonviolence, as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions, seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear. Love transforms hate. Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man."

This is very Christian language. "Such love goes to the extreme. It remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities."

So these kids—they're kids, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old—have been training in this depth of nonviolence based in love and forgiveness, in the face of violence. They've been training deeply in this, and it also meshes with their Christian faith. So it's not just an idea. They're going into incredibly violent scenarios.

They're sending more people on the bus. John Siegenthaler gets on the phone to Diane Nash, and he's thinking, "Well, here's this young girl. I just have to get her to understand reality."

He says, "I was trying to get her to call them off, and I was getting more and more frustrated." He said, "I said, 'Don't you get it?'"

Don't you understand? Somebody might even be killed."

And she said—she said, "You must understand. At night before leaving, we each made out our last will and testament. Yes, we know someone will be killed. But we cannot let the power of nonviolent protest be stopped by violence. So we must continue."

And he was—this is like fifty years later—he was in awe even then. He said, "I really, really learned from this young woman." And the last thing he said was that he had been talking to Robert Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy said to him, "I was just on the phone with Diane Nash. Who *is* Diane Nash?" She's like this amazing person.

So that's a huge depth, right? It's possible. I mean, that's one of the more inspiring examples I know in this country. But that's like on the cellular level—that's how we're working here, on that level. It doesn't mean that we always have to act. I just want to show you that compassionate action and wisdom is not about passivity at all. But compassion doesn't mean that action is necessary, because often action isn't possible.

In a way, I'd say for me the essence of compassion, where it begins, is with connection. That's really the wisdom of a mindfulness that just connects with our own experience. The simple power of bearing witness—bearing witness to our own experience—allows us to be courageous and able to bear witness with another.

James Baldwin wrote once, "An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard." And I often think that about ourselves. When we're feeling like we're our own enemies, fighting against our own experience, it's just a story we haven't heard. Can we just listen into our own experience? Listening is an act of love, an act of presence, of bearing witness.

Here's another simple example of how just the willingness to turn our attention openly to something can be the wellspring of compassion in a very simple way—and how disconnect is what doesn't allow compassion.

It's very simple, but I was listening to the radio once a couple of years ago. There's all these stories, and you kind of half-listen. There was a story about a man—they were interviewing a man who was a BBC war correspondent, so he was used to talking on the radio—who was talking about a disease called Huntington's disease, which is a deterioration of the nerves that is genetic. It goes from father to son, and it hits in middle age. His father had died of it, and his elder brother had died of it. It hits in middle age, and you only live a few years. All the nerves deteriorate, and you die. There's nothing they can really do.

So he was talking about this. His father and brother had both died of it. He so far hadn't come down with it, but he was just at the age when his brother got it. It's the kind of story where you could be listening and think, "Oh yeah, that's a shame." You mean it, but sort of—that's a shame, on to the next, oh that's too bad. I was doing that, but then somehow I just put down my breakfast and listened. No big deal, but I just turned my full attention to it and listened.

He was just talking about how—very matter-of-fact—and you just think, what must that be like? He said, "Every day when I'm walking to the store to get the newspaper"—he lived in London—"I'm thinking, is this going to be the day when my leg just starts to tremble a little bit? Is this going to be the day when I notice the first symptom?" Knowing pretty well what the trajectory would be, having seen it in his father and his brother.

All it took was just listening. It went in so deeply, in a way of just—oh. The compassion, the empathy of what must that be like. And then the big picture, of course—that's true for all of us. He just had a more specific thing he was wondering about. But in a way, that does apply to all of us. It's not some big deal, some big world-changing thing, but just that willingness to connect—that's how compassion arises.

And without the connection, that disconnect is where atrocities are possible. I just read this yesterday—it's a horrible quotation from Stalin, who said, "The death of one person is a tragedy. The death of a million people is a statistic." This is the man who had twenty million people sent to the gulags and killed. But I thought, you know, it's true. That's why sometimes it's so important to tell stories—to get a sense of one image, like that man with Huntington's disease—and then I can understand, oh, that's what it must be like for those people.

You might get really involved with people who have that particular disease. We kind of need an immediate connection to get a sense of it.

So, we're not going to be perfect. We're not perfect in wisdom. We're not perfect in compassion. But the willingness to keep noticing, the willingness to just keep on reconnecting, to keep on cultivating, to keep on purifying—it's never going to be perfect.

This world, in my experience, life is so complex. Things are really ambiguous. Even with the best of our intentions and compassion, situations are complex. We often don't know what's the most useful, helpful thing to do. Can we be with that, not be frozen, and still act? And if we do the thing that doesn't lead to the result we thought would happen, can we meet that with compassion and equanimity?

A not-so-simple example: if you've ever had to be a medical proxy for someone—which I've been for both my parents and my sister—it's extremely complex. You can sit down with a person and go through every possible idea you could think of, what could happen and what they want. Guaranteed, what really happens won't be on that list, because it'll be some different combination of things. And so one makes the best decision one can from compassion and from wisdom. You really don't know. Making a decision to do a procedure that could really heal for some years, and it turns out that it just prolongs agony for two weeks and they die. Or you make a decision not to do a procedure and the person dies, and you never know what would have happened otherwise.

That's how life is. We don't know what would happen the other way. Can we just meet that ambiguity with the most wisdom, the most compassion we have? We're not in control. We keep saying that, and we're really not in control. Recognizing that makes it more possible to keep working.

Sister Chan Khong, the nun who is sort of like the closest companion of Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote an autobiography some years ago. She talks about being very committed to social action, very committed to mindfulness and compassion. At one point, she and Thich Nhat Hanh had been denied reentry to Vietnam during the war because they wouldn't take sides, and so both sides didn't trust them and kicked them out. After the

war, the Vietnamese government was arresting a lot of monks and nuns and artists. Sister Chan Khong was quite involved in a letter-writing campaign. Whenever she'd hear one was arrested, she'd write letters to the government.

But this is from her: "Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew I had to do walking meditation." Is that what you do when you feel angry? "I have to tell them what's wrong," no? She said, "I needed walking meditation. Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to listen, easier to cooperate."

I just love that. And this is from a woman who'd been a Buddhist nun and practicing really hard since she was sixteen. Just like, what's the reality of it? I'm angry. I choose not to act from anger, but I choose to act. So my job is to meet my own suffering here, this anger, with wisdom and compassion. And when the wise intention is available, then I can act with wisdom.

So we just dedicate our lives. It's the work of our whole lives. It's not about ever getting perfect. Something Ajahn Sumedho wrote years ago: the ordinary suffering of our lives—we don't need special suffering. The ordinary circumstances of our lives are enough to get enlightened with. The ordinary circumstances of life are all we need to teach us wisdom and compassion. It's everywhere we look. We don't have to go looking for anything special.

And I know for me, when sometimes my own particular story seems to be taking over my mind, I just keep on practicing with it. Even something as simple as being hungry—there's a way at some point you can be with it, and it can turn into empathy.

Wow, this is so nothing—and there are people who go to bed every night without food. You can turn that against yourself, or you can turn it into compassion and let it help you connect with what's going on in the world.

At other times, when I feel too overwhelmed in some particular story of my own, when the mindfulness isn't strong enough to be present with it, I turn the attention outward—to seeing, to hearing.

But also, the messages of wisdom and compassion are coming at us from everywhere. The Four Noble Truths are speaking to us constantly—in the animals, in nature, in the woods, in snakes dying on the roads, in little chipmunks storing their nuts.

When you hear a siren going by—whenever I hear a siren, I try to think: usually it's a fire or an ambulance, and somebody's life is really changing right now. I don't know how. I don't always remember to do it, but I just try to let that in. We are the world and the world is us.

We don't have to look for anything special. All we have is this moment, this moment—and it's enough. It's enough. It doesn't matter what's happening. How we meet it is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion.

I want to end with this line from Pema Chödrön, speaking about bodhicitta: "At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness or open space."

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 134

Poems from the First Buddhist Nuns

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson brings alive the voices of the first Buddhist nuns through their enlightenment poems preserved in the Therīgāthā. She begins with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's stepmother whose courage and determination (adhiṭṭhāna) led to the establishment of the bhikkhunī saṅgha, demonstrating that awakening is equally available regardless of gender, caste, or social status.

Wilson shares the profound stories of nuns from vastly different backgrounds: Paṭācārā, who went mad with grief after losing her entire family and became one of the most compassionate teachers; Candā, a destitute beggar who found freedom through the Dhamma; elderly women like Bahuputtikā, praised by the Buddha for her diligence despite physical weakness; and Puṇikā, a servant woman whose confident understanding of kamma allowed her to teach a Brahmin about true purification.

Through these poems, we encounter practitioners who struggled for years before awakening—like Sāmā, who practiced for 25 years without peace, and Mittākālī, who was controlled by anger and self-centeredness. Their voices remind us that the path was never easy for everyone, even in the Buddha's time. Wilson emphasizes that these are real people whose internal struggles mirror our own, making their eventual liberation both relatable and inspiring. The talk concludes with an invitation to become 'true daughters and sons of the Buddha, always finding joy in peace.'

So tonight, it's going to be a little bit story time. It's always kind of hard to find a balance for what to talk about on this night when half of you have one foot out the door and the other half of you are really deep in silent retreat.

What I want to talk about is something that makes me very happy to talk about. You know, we're always referring to the Buddha as the source of our teachings and practice, and as we always say, he's a real person. But sometimes, to me, you can almost start to get the feeling of myth. He's so perfect.

So what I want to talk about tonight is some of the nuns, some of the women who were nuns during the time of the Buddha. We know about various of the monks and nuns if you read the suttas. If you really go through them, you get a sense of them just being real, normal people—except the ones you hear about are all enlightened. You don't hear about the others. But the different personalities, different reasons in their

life that they came to the Buddha's teaching and the practice, different courses of practice, some easy, some difficult—it gives me a sense of these as real people. And even though it was a long time ago and the external conditions are different, internally we haven't changed very much.

There's a lot, but I just want to talk about a few of the stories of some of the different nuns and read their poems, because there are some poems from nuns and some poems from monks that are in the suttas—their enlightenment poems. To me it gives a real life, a voice to these distant people. It's not just some people who gathered around the Buddha 2600 years ago, and we give lip service to it but really know for us it's hopeless because they were so much better and different. I just love sharing about them.

There were, of course, many women who joined the order of nuns, and they had all different ways of manifesting, just as we all do. Some were very strong women who became great leaders, became great teachers, either in the way they spoke the Dhamma or in sharing compassionately with other women who joined. Some were just very quiet, simple practitioners—you don't hear much about them except for their poems. Some were young, some were old, some were rich, some were poor—the whole gamut of different kinds of people. So I just want to share a little bit, some of the poems that I particularly like, and give a sense of the women.

To start, of course, one has to start with the woman who was responsible for convincing the Buddha to begin an order of nuns, because he didn't do so right away. I don't want to spend too much time with Mahapajapati Gotami, because her story is the most well known. But she was the stepmother—really the aunt—of the Buddha. His mother died when he was a week old, and her sister, Mahapajapati Gotami, was also married to the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana. I guess kings at that time, or leaders, whatever they were, had various wives and various courtesans, and they had a whole show going on. So anyway, she was the stepmother; she raised the Buddha, married to the king.

At some point in this period in India, the strata of society was extremely rigidly held in terms of caste system, and women's roles were really defined in relationship. Their social status was decided by their male relatives. They didn't really have much autonomy and freedom at all. It would be, you know, your father, then your husband, then your son.

Of course, Mahapajapati Gotami was quite devoted when the Buddha left the family and came back as the Buddha and was teaching. He was teaching to his family, and his son became a monk and got enlightened, and his father got enlightened, and Mahapajapati Gotami began to get enlightened. They were all quite devoted.

So at some point, her husband died—the king—and her son, well, the Buddha was her stepson, was already the Buddha, and his son became a monk, and then her son and her nephew also became monks. So she didn't really have any man. In one way she didn't have a social status; in another way she's like, "Wow, free! Free at last! I can try and do what I want." And there were a lot of other women in similar situations. She was really a leader.

There was a period when her side of the family and the Buddha's father's side of the family, the two clans, got into a dispute—really a war—over the water rights in a particular river. So even, you know, that's how it was then, that's how it is now. Quite some men got killed, but the Buddha came and gave a very inspiring discourse to the men who were fighting, which we don't have recorded, to stop the fighting, to stop the war—which he did. And they all got really inspired. As the texts say, they all went off and became monks.

So that left a whole other bunch of wives and mothers and daughters, like, "Okay, well now what?" So they were all quite inspired too. But at this point, there wasn't a bhikkhuni sangha, a nun's sangha. So Mahapajapati Gotami got really inspired and went to the Buddha and requested that it would really be good, lord, to ordain a women's sangha. And again, I don't want to go into the whole thing because it's a whole discussion, but for whatever reason, he was very reluctant to do so. He said no, he really didn't think so. And I think it was societal.

So at that point, he wouldn't do it. But she—and this is where her courage shows, but also her faith, because she was filled with faith. She wasn't being arrogant and demanding. But it's the dedication, really—the parami of adhitthana, of resolution—which is a very powerful sense of knowing wholesomely what one must do and then having the courage and the energy to do it. That can be as simple in your practice as when you're getting lost in a particular train of thought for the seven million and thirty-fifth time, and you see it, and the mind goes, "No, I don't need to go there."

It's not aversion. It's a collecting of energy, really clearly, around what is wholesome—just "no, I don't need to do this," or "yes, I need to do this." It's a really powerful quality in the mind.

So she possessed this quality, this resolution, but it was really based in her devotion, in her faith—not only in the Buddha, but in the teachings, in awakening. She basically, as we say, wouldn't take no for an answer.

The Buddha went off, as he did, two hundred miles away. He was always traveling. So she gathered a group of women who followed her, because she was a great leader, and they shaved their heads, put on orange robes, and walked barefoot the two hundred miles to where the Buddha was. She arrived outside where he was teaching and just stood there quietly, but crying.

And this is where you get a sense of the people around the Buddha. Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life—also a cousin—took total care of the Buddha with great love. He was also the person through whom many people would have to go to get access to the Buddha. One thing I love reading about Ananda, comparing it to different guru scenes I've been around where there's a big teacher—as they get more well-known, there's always a little inner circle of people protecting them. Their job is to control access: who gets in, who doesn't get in.

Ananda saw his job as getting people in to hear the Dhamma. You never hear him saying, "Oh no, you can't come, he's too busy now." It's always, "Get them in, come hear the Dhamma." He was a very beloved person. And being the Buddha's cousin, he would also be related to Mahapajapati Gotami.

So he saw her out there crying, and this is where he really interceded. He came and said, "Blessed One, are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of stream entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship?" You know all those from Bhante's talk the other night, right? The test.

And the Buddha said, "Yes, Ananda, of course."

Then Ananda said, "Well then, since women are able to realize perfection, and since Pajapati was of great service to you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your foster mother; she even suckled you at her own breast—it would be good if women could be allowed to enter into homelessness."

And so, basically... okay, you put it that way. Very good. I'm rephrasing it, but I imagine it was more or less like that.

But the thing is, once he agreed—that's the point. He was absolutely clear, and this was a radical aspect of the Buddha altogether: in terms of wisdom and compassion and potential for understanding and awakening, there is no difference in terms of sex or gender. There is no difference in terms of what caste or level of society one belonged to. There was no difference if you were rich or poor, if you were the Brahmin caste who controlled spirituality at that time, or you were the lowest—not even a caste—the so-called outcastes, called Dalits now, that people wouldn't want anything to do with. He said: no difference.

And so once he established the Sangha of nuns, it was in the same way open to anyone—any woman who was sincere, coming from any background, sincere in wanting to practice, sincere in faith. And once he embraced it, the Sangha of nuns grew quite rapidly.

Mahapajapati was a great leader because she was the one who had the courage and energy to begin it, and many women came with her. So I'll just read a little bit of her poem:

Homage to you, Buddha, best of all beings, who set me and many others free from pain. All pain is understood. The cause, the craving, is dried up. The Noble Eightfold Way unfolds. I have reached the state where everything stops. I have been mother, son, father, brother, grandmother—knowing nothing of the truth, I journeyed on. But I have seen the Blessed One. This is my last body, and I will not go from birth to birth again. Look at the disciples all together, their energy, their sincere effort. This is true homage to the Buddhas.

I like that last line, because that's you. All the disciples together, your energy, your sincere effort—this is the best homage we can give to all the Buddhas.

So Gotami really manifested enormous energy, courage, dedication, and resolution. Because of her, many, many women had the opportunity to join the Sangha. And they were from all classes and all life situations. There were some who were like queens or consorts to kings.

She was from a well-to-do banker's family in Savatthi, and as was always the case, her parents arranged a marriage for her with someone from a similar background, a similar caste. But she had fallen in love with a servant, which there was no way that would ever have been sanctioned, and so they ran away together. They had to run far away so that her family couldn't come find her. And her husband had even more reason to want to run far away because they probably would have killed him if they'd found them.

So they ran away and were living in another city, another little town. When she got pregnant, she wanted to go back to her family, and the husband understandably procrastinated. So they didn't make it with the first child. When she got pregnant the second time, she really begged, and even though he procrastinated, they finally started off. She was quite pregnant when they finally started off to go back to her family, but they had waited too long.

On the way, on the trip, she started going into labor. And of course, this is like one of these stories—of course, then at the same time, she's out in some field somewhere going into labor and a horrendous, horrific kind of cyclone storm starts. So her husband goes

off to some distance where there are reeds and things to try and cut some reeds to make her some kind of shelter. He's out of sight of her, and she's with the other little two-year-old and having a baby. He gets bitten by a poison snake and dies.

She of course doesn't know what happened. She's just lying out in the field in this storm. She has the baby, and then the next day—what to do? He didn't come back. So she starts with both children, comes across his body, is devastated, but keeps going.

She gets to a little river near her parents' village where normally you could just walk across it, but the storm had been so humongous that it was a huge torrent. There was no way she could walk across with her little toddler and her baby. So the best she could do was to leave the toddler—toddler means like a two-year-old little child—and with the newborn baby, walk across the river, put it down, go back. Yeah, you see trouble coming, right? Go back and get the other one.

So while the baby's on the one side and she's in the middle of the river with the other child, a giant bird of prey comes and takes the baby. She gets all upset, and the other child gets swept away.

She manages to get out. She's completely—not completely, but close to crazy. She gets to her village, asks the first person she sees, "Where are my parents?" And the man says, "Ask me anything, but don't ask me that." She says, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, that huge storm, it stove in their house, they were killed. That smoke you see is from their funeral pyre."

So this was in the space of 24 hours. She just went completely mad, completely out of her mind. And so for some years she was just wandering around, utterly out of her mind, wearing ragged clothing, and whenever she'd get near town, people would throw things to make her go away. The better side of human nature.

And at one point, after some years, as she was mad and wandering around, she came to the Jeta Grove where the Buddha was teaching. And again, people on the outskirts tried to drive her off—"Get out of here, you're crazy, go away." But of course the Buddha saw her and beckoned her to come over and just looked at her and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she did. That's why he was the Buddha. He could do things like that.

So she did, and someone gave her a cloak, and then she sat down and said, "Help me," and told him her story. And he said—and this I love because it's like the power of really speaking the truth, the compassionate truth, but the straight truth. You know, I can see in myself how the tendency might be to think compassion means saying, "Wow, that is unbelievably tough. No wonder you're crazy. I would be too." And that's compas-

sionate. But the Buddha offered real compassion. He said, "Don't think that you have come to someone who can help you with that. In your many lives you have shed more tears for the dead than the water in the four oceans." He's saying this with compassion, but this is how it is. "I can't change this for you." And he kept on going. He said, "Yet when we ourselves die, no one can help us. No kin, no teacher. When we die, no one can be there for us or help us. Even in this world, our family cannot end our suffering."

You can get that. He's not saying it in a harsh way. He's saying, this is the truth of things. And she could hear it. It brought her back to her senses and it really went in. And then he told her about the Eightfold Path and the path of his teachings. And at that point, she asked for the going forth, which is to take the three refuges. And he took her to the community of nuns and she became a nun.

I love that because of the power of compassionately speaking the truth. But you can also get a sense—at least I do—that one can't speak like that unless one really knows it. If it's intellectual and I'm saying, "Yeah, well, no one can help," it just doesn't have the depth unless you're speaking from absolute depth, from knowing that. And from that, there's really this depth of compassion. He's saying it because it's the most helpful thing he could say.

So she became a nun and practiced for quite some time before she awoke. And her poem is one that I like very much because it describes the moment, the moment of her awakening. And you'll notice that it is something you hear sometimes—we're always trying to kind of give a sense of it—she's moving from a period of really concentrated, focused practice, and then she just kind of relaxes, and she's in an everyday activity, and in that moment, her mind wakes up. So that's in the poem. Let me just read it:

I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher.
I am not lazy or proud.
Why have not I found peace?

Can you relate? See, that's what I mean. It's not different.

Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope.
I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse.
Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed and sat down on it.
I took a needle and pushed the wick of the lamp down.
When the lamp went out, my mind was freed.

Just that moment. You get a sense of it?

From really strong concentration and focus to just relax, but with care and presence. As my lamp went out, my mind was freed.

So you can understand how she would be a source of great wisdom and compassionate support to other women who came into the Bhikkhuni Sangha. And so she is the one whose name is mentioned the most.

I'll just read you one other poem, from a woman named Chanda. Again, another horrible suffering. This woman Chanda—her husband, her parents, and her children all died in a plague. You know, this was a tough time. There were wars, and plagues, much like now. And when a woman had lost all her family, there wasn't social security or really any kind of safety net. So she basically became a beggar, just had to go from house to house begging for food because there was no family at all to support her.

This is her poem, Chanda:

I was in a bad way, a widow, no children, no friends, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered house to house in the heat and cold for seven years. But I met a nun who had food and drink, and I went up to her and said, take me into the homeless life. She was Patachara. Out of compassion, she guided me in leaving home, encouraged me, and urged me to the highest goal. I took her advice. It wasn't wasted. There are no obsessions in my mind.

I love that the first thing Patachara did was give this starving woman food and drink. You know, that sense of compassion. And then, when she said that she wanted to enter the homeless life, took her in and taught her the Dhamma. But the first thing she did was give her what she needed—food and drink.

"There are no obsessions in my mind." Isn't that nice? Wouldn't that be nice? It would be nice. We all have moments of it. Remember that, keep noticing that.

There are so many directions I could go from here. I think I'll talk about older women first. Quite a few nuns joined when they were older. Some of them had husbands who wouldn't want them to become nuns, but after their husbands died, they were able to join the order.

Sometimes people say in interviews—women and men, of course—they say, "You know, I started practicing, and I'm so old," however old you started, "and look at these people who are starting young. It's so inspiring. And I'm starting old—is it too late for me? I don't have enough time. I'll never make it."

So just to see that this was true then as well—I'll talk about a couple of these women.

One, her name was Bahupitika. She became a widow. She was fairly well off and had —there are two different versions—in one she had ten children, and in the other she had fourteen children. And her husband died before she did, so she had to be strong.

When her husband died, and she had quite some money, she said, "Why don't I just divide the money rather than holding on to it? I'll divide it between all my children"—let's stick with ten children—"and their spouses, and then they'll take turns taking care of me," which was the appropriate thing in the culture, that the children did take care of their elders.

So she did that, and she would spend a little time in one son's house and then go to the next daughter and husband's house, and like that. But after a while, she noticed they were starting to resent her. She'd be there and they'd start muttering, "Well, you'd think she didn't have any other houses to go to. Why does she have to stay with us for so long?"

After a while she thought, "Who needs this? I'm going to go ordain." So she went and ordained with the Sangha. But she was quite old by this time, elderly and rather weak.

What's interesting about her—just to let you know the end now—the nuns were often described as the nun or the monk who was most known for teaching, most known for wisdom, or whatever quality. Bahupitika was the one most recognized by the Buddha for her diligence, for her perseverance.

She was quite weak, and as a really junior nun, even though she was elderly, she would wait on and take care of the other nuns. But all she could really do was bring them water. And she thought, "I entered the order in my old age, so I want to be really diligent." So she would practice all night, stay up all night practicing and doing walking meditation.

But because she was quite old and weak, she was a little shaky and also tired, so she would do walking meditation all night with one hand going along the wall or holding onto the trees, simply because she felt too weak to walk unaided. But she would just keep on practicing all night.

At one point the Buddha heard about this, and he appeared to her and simply beamed her with radiance and appreciation. She became—I don't know if it was at that exact moment—but she became an arhat. And the Buddha declared, "This is the bhikkhuni, the nun, most known for her diligence, for her energy."

So you never know. It's never too late.

A little side story, and this might be apocryphal: they said that before she was awakened, her job was bringing water to the nuns. And if you read all the suttas, you'll see that with the groups of nuns and the groups of monks, it's like groups of people anywhere—all different personalities, more or less nice, more or less able to get along with each other. Really, there's lots of friction. You read how many of the Vinaya rules came about because of stuff like that: "So-and-so's doing such and such," and "Oh really, is he? Okay, we need a rule."

So in this case, apparently, as she was waiting on the nuns, some of them weren't treating her very nicely. I don't know exactly what they were doing—making fun of her, little put-down remarks, "you're too old" or something. But technically, in terms of unskillful speech and behavior, it's really not good karma to say or do unwholesome things to anybody, but particularly to an arhat. You don't want to insult an arhat with aversion. It's not good.

And so when she awoke—you wouldn't know, and you also don't go around talking about your own attainments, particularly as monks and nuns. You just don't do that. It's not appropriate. So she's not going to show up and announce, "I'm an arhat, you better be nice to me now." But at the same time, out of compassion, she didn't want the nuns to say something that would cause their own suffering later. So she's trying to figure out, what can I do?

Apparently—and again, this is why I say it's apocryphal—she had developed some psychic powers. So when she was bringing them the water, she used her energy to heat it up psychically. When they saw that she could do that and was bringing them hot water, that was her way of telling them, you know, out of kindness. And then they really realized.

It's kind of interesting, all these back roads.

So she was the one most appreciated by the Buddha for her perseverance, for her energy. Her poem I don't like so much, but there's another older woman, similar to her, named Dhamma. I'm going to use her poem instead. I don't like all the poems—you're getting this through me. You can read the book and read the other poems if you want. There's lots of them. I have to choose.

My teaching point is with Dhamma, who's another similar older woman. Again, she waited until her husband's death and then ordained. Her poem describes her moment of waking up, which occurred because she was out walking with a cane and was so weak that she fell over.

This is her poem:

I wandered for alms.
I leaned on a stick.
My whole body was weak and trembled.
Suddenly I fell down and could see clearly
the misery of this body.
My heart was freed.

I love that.

So whether it's seeing the misery of the body getting old, the misery of our body being sick—you don't have to wait until you get old. You get sick. Just seeing, instead of resisting... We get sick. It's a chance for awakening. Is that how you felt when you got a cold last week? I'm saying it lightly, but I mean it.

This is a chance to awaken. How do we choose to look at what's happening? This is the misery of the body. Seeing this, my heart was freed. That willingness to meet what's happening—of course, just with non-judging attention—and then it moves into the wider space. Oh, this is how it is. Every body gets sick. Every body—I mean body as body—dies. Every body gets old. Seeing that, we can go the way of self-pity, and sometimes we do, that's okay, until we really learn: oh, this is how it is. The heart can be freed. Same for them, same for us.

Okay, I'll tell one that isn't so much about suffering. There are some that aren't so much about suffering.

This is a woman named Punika, and I like her because she's very confident and gutsy. Her role in society was as a lower-class servant—almost like an indentured servant, I would say, nearly a slave, where she didn't have the freedom to come or go. It's not like she was working for wages. She was working for a rich family, a family that was very dedicated to the Buddha.

What's interesting, as you read about Punika and some others too, is that these servant women, or almost slave women, actually had more freedom to come and go than the really high-caste, well-to-do women. The wealthy women were kind of sequestered; they couldn't just go out and hear the Buddha speak, whereas the servant women could. So there are different stories where the servant women would go out, hear the Buddha talk, and come back and report it to the women for whom they worked. They were sharing the teachings in that way.

Punika's job was to go and get water in the morning from the river, which was very cold, hard work. She had been going out and hearing the Buddha teach quite a bit, and she was a stream-enterer at this point—the first stage of awakening—from listening to

the Buddha teach. As Bhante was talking about, one of the fetters that dissipates at stream-entry is doubt. So at this point, her faith, her confidence in the truth of the Dhamma and in the power of the Dhamma to free the heart and mind, was very clear and strong. To me, she's an example of the courage and confidence of speaking the truth of Dhamma to power.

The story and her poem unfold like this: She was down at the river in the early morning to get water for her mistress. At that time, it was one of the beliefs of the Brahmins that in certain rivers you could wash yourself and they would function as holy rivers—this wasn't the Ganges, but similar. You wash yourself and it washes away all the evil deeds you've done, all the bad karmic results.

She was down there and a Brahmin comes down to do this. And you'll hear how spunky she was. She says:

I'm a water carrier. Even in the cold, I have always gone down to the water, frightened of punishment or the angry words of high-class women. But what are you afraid of, Brahman, that makes you go down to the water? Your limbs are shaking with the bitter cold.

The Brahmin, whose name was Udaka Suddhika, replies: *But you know why, Punika. I am doing good to prevent evil. Anyone, young or old, who has done something bad is freed by washing in water.*

Punika says: *Whoever told you you are freed from evil by washing? The blind leading the blind! In that case, all frogs and turtles would go to heaven, and water snakes and crocodiles. Thieves, executioners, and other wrongdoers would be freed from their bad karma by washing in water. If these streams carried away all your old evil, they would carry away your virtue too. You would be separated from both. Rather, don't do that thing, the fear of which leads you down to the water. Stop now, Brahman, and save your skin from the cold.*

She's pretty spunky, right? And he listens to her, because she has so much faith and confidence—she knows what she's speaking of. He says: *Lady, you've brought me back. I will give you the robe I bathed in.*

She says: *Keep your robe. I don't want it.*

I love Punika. She continues: *If you are afraid of pain, if you don't like it, then do nothing evil, either openly or in secret. For if you do, even if you get up and run away, you won't escape its pain. If you are afraid of pain, if you don't like it, take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.*

Train in the precepts. That is good.

So of course he listened and took refuge. But I just love that exchange. She went and spoke with the Buddha, who then spoke to her master, who freed her so that she could become a nun—which is why we have her poem.

You can hear her personality in those verses. Someone else could have that same confidence, that same faith, and not be quite so spunky about it. But it's really coming from speaking truth to power, from *knowing* the truth. That confidence. You see, when we have some knowing of the truth, however our personalities are, we're going to express it in a way that somehow is shared in the world. We share our wisdom, we share our light when we have confidence in it, when we have faith.

That's why we're always encouraging you to trust your insights, to trust your practice. It's not just for you—it's for everyone that you come in contact with.

I'll tell you one more story that isn't about suffering. The woman who was known by the Buddha as the foremost in preaching, the foremost in expounding the Dhamma, was named Dhammadina. She was the wife of an important man named Visakha in the town of Rajagaha, and had a very happy marriage. Very settled, upper class, well-to-do. And he went out—again, the women stayed home while the men could go out, the servants could go out. So he went out one day and heard the Buddha teach. He became quite inspired.

When he came home, usually they would be friendly—he would eat and invite her to eat with him, he'd greet her. But this time he came home and just walked right past her without speaking. She thought, "I wonder what's wrong? Well, when we eat, he'll invite me to eat with him. We'll talk about it." But he didn't. He just ate and ignored her.

So she thought—and I love this, it's so like what we do—"What did I do? What's wrong? Why is he angry at me? What could it be?" Taking it all personally, trying to figure it out.

But of course he wasn't angry. He called her and said, "You know, after hearing the Buddha, I'm so inspired. I've been thinking about it, and I want to renounce the world and become a bhikkhu. So if I do that, I'll give you all my wealth, all my money. I want to take care of you. What do you want to do? You could keep my money and stay here in Rajagaha, or you could go back and live with your parents. I'll support whatever you want."

She thought about it and said, "You know, I want to renounce also. I also want to become a bhikkhuni."

He said, "Great!" and sent her off in grand style, on a golden palanquin carried by attendants. She went to meet the Buddha, became a nun, traveled to a distant village, practiced, and became awakened.

After some time—we don't know how long—she happened in her travels to return to Rajagaha. And lo and behold, her husband Visakha had not managed to go off and become ordained. He was still living there. But he was still very inspired by the Buddha. So he approached her—not as his former wife, but as an awakened being, as an awakened nun—and very sincerely asked her a whole series of subtle and profound questions.

I won't go through it all because it's quite long. It's an entire sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, and it's the only sutta, really, that is a series of questions where a woman, a nun, gives all the answers.

At the end of this whole series of questions, these subtle, profound ones, she finally said, "Okay, that's enough. Go to the Buddha and really get the full teaching from him if you have more questions."

So her ex-husband went and told the Buddha the whole exchange. And the Buddha said, "Just as she answered—that's exactly what I would have said. Just as she said, so you should remember it."

And so her words became what they call *Buddha-vachana*—the word of the Buddha. It became, in the Majjhima Nikaya, an entire sutta that is Dhammadina's answers to her husband. She had an easier route to awakening. And her poem is actually in the Dhammapada. As the foremost in expounding the Dhamma, she was truly recognized in awakening and in teaching as equal with men.

And in those days, for a man to go to a woman to learn Dhamma was extremely unusual. And to have the Buddha say, "Same, same—I would have said the same," extremely unusual.

Here is a little poem from Dhammadina:

Eager for the end of suffering, full of awareness—that's the way. When one's heart is not attached to pleasure, we say that woman has entered the stream.

Just simple. Eager for the end of suffering, full of awareness—that's the way. So Dhammadina, of course, became one of the great teachers among the nuns.

Now, a couple of poems that I particularly love. These are from women who, after they became nuns, really had a tough time—the opposite of those stories where the Buddha gave a talk and five hundred people became arahants. These are women who really had to struggle. And I find it inspiring to know this. We think, "Well, in these days where the Dhamma is kind of going downhill and we don't have the Buddha to teach us and we struggle—but back then it wasn't like that." But for plenty of people, it was a long life's journey, even with deep commitment, even after having joined the order.

The first is a woman named Sama. She joined when her best friend, who was a queen, was killed. Both were deep followers of the Buddha. So Sama became a nun, but she was suffering for a very long time. This is her poem:

It was twenty-five years since I turned away from home, and I hadn't had a moment's peace. I had no peace because I did not know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Buddha. Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died.

"I had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert."

I don't know how it is for you, but I really feel a real person there. Twenty-five years without a moment's peace—and you thought six weeks was a long time! But you hear the commitment, the dedication it takes. And of course, if she came to me, I'd say the same thing I'd say to you: I don't believe for a minute that for twenty-five years you didn't have a moment's peace. For sure there were some moments. But it feels like that. It feels like that. And you hear—it's tough. It takes deep, deep commitment and perseverance for everyone.

Another similar poem, from a different woman. Her name was Mita Kali. Before she became a nun, she heard the Buddha preaching the Maha Satipatthana Sutta—that's the long discourse on the four foundations of awakening, of enlightenment. Just to say—can you imagine getting to hear the Buddha teach the four foundations of mindfulness? Wouldn't that be something? I mean, amazing.

So she heard it, and she became a nun. And the reputation was that she was actually a very difficult person—very angry, very self-centered. This is how it's reported. And she changed gradually. Not overnight. She was quite angry and self-centered and struggled a lot.

This is her poem:

Although I left home for no home and wandered full of faith, I was still greedy for possessions and praise. I lost my way. My passions used me, and I forgot the real point of my wandering life. Then as I sat in my little cell, there was only terror. I thought, this is the wrong way. A fever of longing controls me. Life is short. Age and sickness gnaw away. I have no time for carelessness before this body breaks. And as I watched the elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are.

I stood up. My mind was completely free. The Buddha's teaching has been done."

You see, we lose our way. Our passions use us. We forget the point of our wandering life. But the remembrance is just as close as the forgetting, however long it's been. Same for her, same for us.

I'll give you two more short poems. One I find humorous, and one I simply like.

The humorous one is from a woman known only as Sumanagala's mother. Not much is known about her story, except that she was clearly a wife and mother, and from her poem, she was evidently extremely happy to no longer be living the domestic life. We don't know what happened to her husband or son, but this is her poem:

"Free, I am free. How glad I am to be free from my pestle"—the pestle being the thing that grinds grain. "My cooking pot seems worthless to me, and I can't even bear to look at his sun umbrella. My husband disgusts me. So I destroy greed and hate with a sizzle, and I am the same woman who goes to the foot of a tree and says to herself, 'Ah, happiness,' and meditates with happiness."

Nothing personal. It's simply that the renunciate life has an element of deep happiness also. It's not all struggle and suffering. Just the peace of happiness.

This last poem is from a woman named Uttama. Again, not much is known about her, but she came from a Brahmin family. She is simply describing her moment of awakening:

"The Buddha taught seven factors of enlightenment. They are ways to find peace, and I have developed them all. I have found what is vast and empty, the unborn. It is what I've longed for. I am a true daughter of the Buddha, always finding joy in peace. I have ended the hunger of gods and humans, and I will not wander from birth to birth. I have no thought of becoming."

So let us all be true daughters and sons of the Buddha.

Thank you for listening to the Dhamma.

CHAPTER 135

Right View at the Beginning: Why am I Practicing?

Carol Wilson · 49 min

In this foundational talk from a month-long retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the essential question that shapes our entire meditation practice: why are we doing this? Drawing on Sayadaw U Tejaniya's definition of meditation as "experiencing mind and body directly with right understanding," she examines how our motivation and view determine whether practice becomes transformative or simply another activity in saṃsāra.

Wilson explores the Buddha's teaching on three levels of paññā (wisdom): heard wisdom, intellectual understanding, and the direct intuitive insight (bhāvanā-mayā paññā) that actually transforms how we live. She explains why understanding impermanence intellectually doesn't stop us from clinging, and how the phrase "yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana" (knowledge and vision of things as they are) points to what meditation actually cultivates. The talk includes a poignant critique of how wrong view can lead sincere practitioners to years of dissatisfied effort.

The practical heart of the teaching lies in shifting attention from the content of experience to the process of awareness itself. Using examples from daily life and her own practice—including a memorable story about chocolate chip cookies—Wilson demonstrates how recognizing "wanting feels like this" or "aversion feels like this" creates a refuge in awareness rather than reactivity. She draws inspiration from Mingyur Rinpoche's recent letter about wandering practice to illustrate how this understanding brings peace not by changing circumstances, but by freeing the heart from habitual patterns of grasping and aversion.

One of the most expansive yet simple definitions of meditation that I've heard recently comes from Sayadaw Tejaniya. He describes meditation as experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. Very simple. All-inclusive. And the key point I really want to talk about tonight is this: experiencing the mind and body directly with the right understanding.

In a very important way, you could say that the beginning, the most important aspect—not just as we begin our retreat but as we continue whatever phase we're in, in our life of awakening, our life of awareness—is that we bring to our meditation, to the whole day, the understanding that we begin with right view, with right understanding. This is the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path.

You might say, "Right, if I had right view and right understanding, I wouldn't need to be following the Noble Eightfold Path and sitting here meditating." But as with everything, there are degrees.

In a simple but comprehensive and profound way, to talk about right understanding in terms of beginning a retreat, in terms of where we are in our practice, is to have some understanding of why you're doing this. Really deeply, why mindfulness? Why an intensive meditation retreat? But even that's too narrow. Why do we need to experience the mind and body directly, with or without right understanding? What's the point?

This is a question that doesn't have one philosophic answer, something we can read and study and say, "Okay, I know this is why," because that doesn't cut it.

The simple answer is that the right view, the reason for our practice and meditation, is the cultivation of wisdom. Wisdom—a buzzword that could mean many things. As I mean it here, the wisdom that the Buddha is pointing us towards, the wisdom that develops through our wholehearted commitment to moment-to-moment awareness, to whatever's happening right now. The commitment is to the awareness, not to what's happening. And that's the biggest shift.

The wisdom isn't about coming to a particular insight. "Oh, now I've got an anattā insight. I can chalk it up, write it in my books, and when I leave, I'll be a better person." That might all happen, and that would be cool—nothing wrong with that. But the way we know to do things is to do something for a result. A very wholesome result. Yet with that in mind, it can often be the case that we become so focused on trying to be mindful correctly, being more mindful, being mindful of every moment, that it becomes an activity I am doing to achieve a specific result. If you get a sense of this, you'll see it's just another activity in saṃsāra. "Now I'm doing mindfulness. And if I do it right, I'll get whatever my particular story is." But we'll get something, because we wouldn't do anything if we weren't going to get something for it, right?

This isn't the wisdom of the Buddha. But this is all we know. If we said nothing good is going to happen, everything is going to keep on going just like it is, the world is going to keep on spinning, you'll be happy, you'll be sad, you'll suffer, you won't, everything will change, you're really not going to get any better than you are right now—and you've got to really put out effort to be present for every moment—would you come? Probably not. At least not in the beginning.

The wisdom that arises through this willingness to relax into mindful presence with whatever's happening, without resistance to this particular moment, without fixation or holding on—"Now I've got it, let's hold on to it"—without getting lost in the story of what this particular experience means about me, whatever it is. It's just this.

The wisdom that arises from that is different from what we might expect. It's simply the potential, the possibility of recognizing reality just as it is.

You might think, "Big whoop. That's what I signed up for?" Well, you know what? That is a big whoop. Because in terms of how the Buddha describes what's going on in our mind, how we suffer, why we suffer—and we'll talk about that the whole month—it's not because what's happening is bad.

It's not because we're messed up. It's more like, *why* are we messed up? Because we don't recognize what's really going on. And so we keep bringing these misconceptions to our meditation practice and turn it into another endeavor to try to make ourselves different and better. And when that doesn't really meet our expectations, we're lost. What do we do now?

But the wisdom of the Buddha is so radical because it completely undercuts this view. This is what you call wrong view. And the right view—simply the right view of just starting our practice—is the willingness and the trust that through moment-to-moment mindful awareness, we can recognize when the heart and mind is fully present without being distorted by greed, wanting something to be different, aversion, hatred, or fear.

These states can be there, they can be recognized, and they're simply another arising experience. But when we don't recognize greed, fear, and "me, me, me," then it completely distorts our perception. We recognize inaccurately. We respond to the situation to the best of our ability, but since we're recognizing it wrongly, our response—which is usually trying to make ourselves happy—just doesn't work. And we don't know why.

You've all practiced a lot. You know what I'm talking about, I hope. You have some sense of what I'm speaking of.

What the Buddha's pointing us to is so radical. He's not saying you have to change everything. It's: stop trying to change everything and really, really, a hundred percent land here in this moment and just let it be as it is with full commitment and presence. And the moment-to-moment clarity, purity of heart and mind that's present is the condition—and we call that mindfulness—it's the condition that allows for accurate recognition. That clear recognition of things as they are cuts through our confusion, our distorted responses, and the way we act in life that keeps our suffering going.

There's a phrase in the Pali, *yathā bhūta ñāna dassana*, which means "knowledge and vision of things as they are." It's one of the highest understandings.

So why we practice with a wise view to begin with is just to have the sense that it's not ultimately about somehow changing myself or being a better person. I mean, that's all great, that stuff happens. But it's not about that. It's not to get something. It's to have this willingness, this trust—just this trust to be so present and awake with things as they are—that the clear seeing changes our whole understanding of ourselves, of one another, of life, of what we really are.

It's radical. It completely cuts through. And we can hear it.

The Buddha talks about three levels of *paññā*, of wisdom. I find this very helpful because they're all aspects of wisdom, but only the third level is truly transformative of how we live in the world.

The first level of wisdom is what you would call heard or borrowed wisdom. It's when we hear things. I'm sitting here talking to you, and if this is something you've never heard, you're hearing it. Whether it's wisdom or not, that's another story. But it's when we hear things or read things, learn about things, and we go, "Hmm, okay," and it's going in. That's often the kind of wisdom I learned in school. I could memorize it, I could say it back, I could say I know it. But it doesn't change us. It doesn't change how we live in this world or understand the world.

The second, intermediate level is our intellectual understanding. We contemplate this heard wisdom—what we've read, what we've learned. We take it to heart, we think about it. Yeah, that makes sense.

So talking about impermanence, for example, as we often do, as you're all very familiar—it's one of the deep insights where we can all say, "Yeah, I've heard about impermanence. It totally makes sense. I don't argue about impermanence." Probably no one here is going to really argue that impermanence doesn't seem to be true, right? It's not rocket science.

And yet—*and yet*—does anybody here ever find their mind and heart still clinging to something you know is going to change? Do you ever find yourself clinging to something that's been gone? It's already gone. Maybe it's gone a second, maybe it's gone ten years. Maybe it never even existed in the first place, except as a thought.

So that intermediate level of real cogitation—that makes total sense, but it doesn't quite transform our understanding.

And then the third level is really *bhāvanā*. It's called *bhāvanā-mayā-paññā*, which is insight, intuitive wisdom. It's when you have one of those "aha" moments—and I'm sure you've all had them. You can have it in daily life: if you're doing Sudoku and suddenly you go, "Oh, that's the number that goes there!" It just pops up from somewhere. Aha, and you just know it.

So it is with our Dhamma wisdom. With impermanence, there will be a moment where—wow, yeah, it's all really changing. A moment. It doesn't last forever either, but you get a sense of the different levels. And so the *paññā* that is cultivated through our trust and steady awareness, the one that really changes how we live, is this third level.

Mindfulness, even in the form of sitting and walking practice, is not an end in itself. It's not about getting the technique, because you'll hear there are all different techniques, and that can be really confusing. If you think it's about getting the technique right and becoming more and more perfect, you keep hearing, "Well, you could be with the breath, or you could be with hearing, or if it's better for you, be with the body." And you want to say, "Just tell me what to do so I can do it right! This is just driving me crazy." We just want to know how to get it right.

But it's not an end in itself. It's a supportive condition to relax into full presence and awareness of this moment's experience—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience, thinking, emotions, whatever. And this is the radical thing: it doesn't matter what mindfulness is aware of. Because it's not about the what. It's about learning to recognize and trust, over and over, the mindful awareness itself. Whether you're sitting, whether you're walking, whether you're eating, whether you're trying to space out, whether you're just waking up from three hours of spacing out—it doesn't matter what. You'll find it's even possible to be aware while you're spacing out. But then it's not really spacing out anymore, is it?

It's about that, not about getting it right.

This is quite broad, as you can see. It's not about a meditation retreat or a forum, or sitting and walking enough hours so then the rest of the time you're free. It's not about this incredible effort to get somewhere. It's about our whole life. Meditation, real meditation—that practice of awakening, the process of awakening—isn't limited to some form.

This form obviously we think is tremendously helpful and supportive, because we get so lost in what's happening in our daily lives. There's so much happening that we get easily distracted. We forget to notice that there can be awareness of what's happening.

Have you noticed that today? Do you know the difference between knowing what's happening and recognizing that you're aware of what's happening?

Right now, are you seeing me? Yes? Okay. Were you aware that seeing was occurring before I asked you that? Did you get a sense of the difference now when I ask, "Are you aware that seeing is happening?" Seeing, if your eyes were open—some of you had your eyes closed—but if your eyes were open, you were seeing. Notice how, until I mentioned it, we don't tend to be aware of the process.

Now, did it take a lot of energy and effort to be aware that you were seeing? No, it doesn't. It just takes remembering. That's what our practice is—remembering. And it gets more and more interesting.

The awareness of the process of seeing is actually what we're cultivating. Seeing—how many sights do we see in a day? Some are beautiful, some are ugly, most of them are neutral. We're not even aware what's going on. We wait until there's something really good to see, like the Super Bowl.

Then we're really into seeing. Big whoop, then that's over. Then there's something else to see, like a tennis match—now that's really good to see. But then it's over. Then there's a sunset, and then there's something beautiful, and then there's something ugly, and most of the time there's nothing. And we think it's all about seeing something better. Get a better object. Same with how we feel inside, same with our moods, same with our emotions. This is the wheel of samsara. We forget. We're so sucked into what's happening that we forget that the process of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking—that the awareness of the process is our practice.

I read this from Bhikkhu Anālayo in his book from a few years ago about the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Foundations of Mindfulness. This is actually from a footnote where he's quoting Jack Engler, who's a well-known psychologist and meditator, a friend of ours. He's theorizing that one of the reasons Western meditators may progress more slowly is the tendency to become absorbed in the content of awareness rather than continuing to attend to the process of awareness.

So that's really what we're cultivating with our moment-to-moment mindfulness. Sitting, walking, eating, whatever—to keep remembering to notice the process of awareness. It's not stressful or difficult. It doesn't require huge energy. It doesn't have to be exhausting. But remembering it... we just get so sucked into what's happening and our habits of "what does it mean about me." The habits of our mind are so strong. That's nothing to criticize. This is just yathā-bhūta, seeing things as they are. It's not personal.

But without having a little sense of right view of why we're practicing, then we can, with our greatest commitment and sincerity and effort, really do meditation practice for years and end up feeling dissatisfied, a failure, or feeling it's useless—because we're doing it from the wrong understanding.

I want to read a little bit from an article someone pointed out to me in the New York Times yesterday. Someone was writing an op-ed piece—I won't say his name—but he's talking about mindfulness and meditation. He said he's a 25-year mindfulness meditator. He didn't say Vipassana, but that's clearly what he's been doing. And clearly very dissatisfied, let down.

Let me read a couple of things, because this is like the trap we can so easily fall into. It's kind of heartbreaking to me.

He's saying people talk these days about the promise of mindfulness—that mindfulness meditation will reduce your blood pressure, reduce your social anxiety and depression, improve your relationships, including your relationship with yourself. Meditation in the right doses, he's saying, is also valuable as a means to relax the body, to quiet the emotions, to refresh one's energy. There's growing evidence that meditation has health benefits.

Now you've all heard all of this, I imagine. And not to say it's not true, and not to say what's good or bad, but if that's why one is meditating—and it might be—then either you get that and good, okay, done, it's over, or you don't get it and you really have to find another way. Maybe yoga, nothing wrong with yoga, or take a pill or whatever. It's limited.

He goes on to say, "What I haven't seen is much evidence that meditating leads people to behave better, improves their relationships, or makes them happier. In the modern world, meditation is far more effective as a technique for self-management than as a means of personal transformation, much less enlightenment."

This is someone who's been doing mindfulness meditation for 25 years, very sincerely. And that may be some of your experience. I'm not here to say what anyone's experience should be. But I can speak for myself, and I know not only for myself, that what makes me so sad about that is clearly he's bringing such a wrong view to the whole reason for doing it. When that goal comes from misunderstanding, then the way we go about it is coming from our inherent misunderstanding, and it's just another thing we're doing. It's so sad.

As he goes on, he's clearly seeing meditation as a very specific, limited activity, distinct from mindfulness in life. So that point I would really like to get across. Hopefully you all know that. The specific form of meditation that we're doing here—whatever you're doing internally, the sitting, the walking, the being in silence—this structure isn't with the rest of your daily life. But what we're cultivating, this recognizing the process of awareness, is not in any way limited to a meditation retreat or to depths of deep samādhi concentration. It's about recognizing awareness, whatever's happening—subtle, gross, busy, thinking, no thought, lots of energy, no energy, you're sick as a dog, you're feeling great. It does not matter. As long as we're conscious...

awareness is available and accessible. The structure of the retreat is simply to give us really supportive conditions to help us keep remembering and recognizing, because the habits to do otherwise are just so strong.

Why? I don't know. We won't even go there. One of the things that will make you crazy, according to the Buddha: the workings of karma and the beginnings of things. So don't go there. How are things now? *Yathābhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment.

What really drew me to the Buddha's teachings—I mean, I was practicing before I understood it was the Buddha's teachings, but when I started reading extensively about them—is that the teachings are so pragmatic, so practical. What really got him, at least according to the mythology and the texts, what really got him doing his own inquiry and got him to awaken and then to try to share what he saw with others, was grappling with the basic dilemma of life and death. Why do we suffer? And why is it that in only wanting to be happy, we continue to make choices that keep us spinning and suffering?

He saw that after he awoke—that's what motivated him out of compassion to teach. But what got him to look for himself was simply this: we all want to be happy. We don't want to die. We don't want to be sick. Everyone gets sick. Everyone dies. Everything we love goes away. We have to be with things we don't want. And that is how it is. So far, there doesn't seem to be another way. And if you'd found one, I bet you wouldn't be here.

So he's really grappling. And when he woke up—this is also what I love—when he woke up, the Buddha, the awakened one, the peaceful one, he wasn't living on a cloud in some other realm, in some other world. He's still living in a body, with kinspeople who got into fights over water and killed each other, people coming in and being totally obnoxious to him all the time, the monks getting into arguments, the nuns getting into arguments, the laypeople always trying to prove things. Can you imagine if all the

people wandering around practicing were coming up to you and wanting to engage you in debate every day and prove you were wrong? What a nightmare. And he didn't live in another world. Yet his heart was free.

So it always got me looking: what's the difference? What's the freedom of the Buddha? And looking then, because it sneaks up in the background, the wrong view in my mind—why am I on this path? If I'm really honest, I'll look and see: well, maybe then I won't have a bad back anymore. Maybe my personality will get a little bit more friendly, finally. You see those things back there. It's great to see them. When we don't see those ideas, that's what's running us. When we see it, we go, "Oh yeah, there it is again. Wanting, wanting. If I do it, I'll get better."

But awareness trumps wanting. Awareness of wanting. Wanting is like this—and you're back in awareness. There's no experience we can have that blocks awareness when we remember it. You don't have to stop thinking to recognize awareness. You don't have to only have a particular sensation or feel your breath or only have subtle emotions. You can be really angry, a little bit out of control—hopefully not here—but you can even be aware of that. So don't put some particular way awareness should look onto it. Just keep re-recognizing and keep trusting it.

And so this, I mean, another thing I found very inspiring, an example of this waking up and still in the same world. Many of you have probably read this. You know Mingyur Rinpoche? He's a Tibetan Lama, the younger brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Very well known, very renowned.

About two years ago, he had his teachings organized and he said, "I'm going off on a three-year retreat." But he didn't just go to the forest refuge where it's really nice and cozy for a three-year retreat. He has many people who love him and are very connected to him, and he knew people would want to support him. So he kind of snuck out of his hotel in the middle of the night. As his brother said on the website, he didn't even take a toothbrush. He didn't even take any money. He just snuck out and went off like you read about in the old days, off to just roam and practice. No one knew where he was for two years.

Now just recently he sent a letter out. He'd run into one of his supporters who had begged him after two years, "Would you let me be with you?" And so they were together and then he sent out this letter. I found it so inspiring because this is present day. This is why I teach—because of this possibility of undercutting our understanding of what really brings happiness.

He said: "I myself am wandering without any fixed location, staying in isolated mountain hermitages and other such places. I have experienced feelings of happiness and suffering, rising and falling like waves on the surface of the ocean. At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I have felt cold, hungry, and thirsty. Even when I have begged for alms, I received nothing but insults and harsh words. At other times, I have received food and clothing effortlessly without even asking for them, and in my mind, it felt as though I were enjoying the pleasures of the gods. While I have experienced both happiness and suffering, the most important thing is that a deep and heartfelt sense of certainty has arisen in the depths of my being, such that no matter what happens, I know that the true nature of these experiences, their very essence, is that of timeless awareness and vast compassion."

He says, "This natural clarity of awareness has been with us from the very beginning. It is the very essence and true nature of our minds." And then he offers the koan we're all faced with: "One must maintain the flow of pure awareness to the best of one's ability without meditating, yet not getting lost in distraction."

That encapsulates the whole thing. I found it so inspiring because this is somebody writing just a couple of months ago.

And "not meditating," I would say in terms of what we're doing here, means not thinking of meditation as that guy writing in the New York Times described it—as a separate, specific activity done by me to get somewhere, somehow separate from the rest of my life. It's all meditation.

"Without getting lost in distraction" means, as Jack Engler said, not getting so lost in what every experience means about me and how it can fulfill me and make me feel better or worse, that we lose sight of the simplicity of awareness. Knowing that you're seeing right now. Knowing that you're feeling. If you're feeling sleepy, knowing you're sleepy. Awareness of sleepiness. Any object, any experience points us back to awareness.

That's what non-distractedness means. It doesn't mean clamping down, shutting out all thoughts, only focusing on one thing. That can be useful for cultivating shamatha, cultivating a real steadiness of mind, but that's not what he means here by non-distractedness. And it's not what I mean by awareness that we can recognize connected with any object. Non-distractedness means simply recognizing awareness.

When we are just in moments—when you experience that flow of awareness, that non-distractedness—there's nothing that can happen that's a distraction. That loud noise, that person running up and down the steps above your room last night—that's

hearing. That's awareness of hearing. That aversion arising in your mind, that blame, all the pictures of that person, the notes you're going to write, "How can they be here?"—that's aversion. It feels like this. Awareness of aversion.

"Big whoop. I don't want to be aware of aversion. I want to be aware of bliss. That's why I came."

Okay. Wanting. Wanting. Feels like this.

I know it sounds a little silly. Try it. Keep trying it. You'll come into an interview and say, "So and so is happening." Oh, really? Great. It's like this.

It comes to be such a refuge, such a relief, such a source of happiness—even though the practice isn't about making us happy. Happiness arises when the mind lets go of clinging to wanting it otherwise. When it lets go of aversion and pushing away. "Oh right, I'm furious with that jerk running up and down the stairs." Anger feels like this. I do this a lot. I notice, "Oh yeah, awareness of anger." After a while you don't even have to say that. But it's like a Tai Chi move—from being lost and absorbed in the experience of anger and what it means about me, justifying or blaming or blaming yourself and the whole nine yards, to simply: "Oh, anger and blame feels like this." You don't have to do anything about it but recognize the awareness. Over and over, this comes to be such a refuge.

And that space of recognizing just what's happening is what allows for yathābhūta ñāṇa dassana—clear recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment.

So what changed in the Buddha's awakening, living in this world? What changed for Mingyur Rinpoche? As he described it, the deep certainty in his heart, in his mind—this third level of paññā—the deep certainty that no matter what happens, "I know the true nature of experience is timeless awareness and vast compassion." That deep certainty. We have moments of it, and we lose it. But notice in those moments, just the simplicity of being with awareness, how our heart and mind then responds to experience from that place is very different.

What changes, what frees our heart and mind, isn't that all the situations around us get better—that's out of our control. It's not that we get a better personality. It's that we're no longer caught, even just for a moment, in reacting and responding to life from these habits of aversion pushing away, of greed holding on, and of telling the story of me—of having every experience need to fulfill in some way "me," or else it makes me suffer and we must get rid of it. That's what you call saṃsāra.

Dingö Khyentse Rinpoche has something I've really liked a lot lately. He's talking about the three fundamental attitudes which arise and which are the foundations of our practice of awakening. The first one is renunciation—and that's what I want to talk about for a moment now. The second is compassion; the third he calls pure perception, or that accurate recognition, yathābhūta in Pali.

But renunciation, as he's describing it—he's not talking about the renunciation of not eating at night or not wearing jewelry or sleeping on the floor, that kind of thing. He says the foundation of renunciation, the root of all stages of the path, implies the strong wish to free oneself from the seemingly unending sufferings of saṃsāra. Saṃsāra being the seemingly endless cycle of conditioned existence. This wanting and getting, or wanting and not getting, and either way, leaning into the next moment, leaning into the next thing, pushing away from that. Wanting, getting, wanting, getting.

With this renunciation comes a heartfelt weariness and disillusionment with the endless quest for gratification, approval, profit, and status.

Let me read it again. And this isn't a should or an idea, because that doesn't work—it just makes us feel worse about ourselves. But this sense, just for a moment—we'll have it for moments and then we get hooked in again—but a moment of heartfelt weariness or disillusionment with the endless quest for gratification, approval, profit, and status. That's saṃsāra.

And when we don't have that right view of trusting awareness, when we don't simply look at and watch how this cycle is playing out, then we just get sucked back into it again. So with this right view of the process of awareness, moving from content to process, you don't have to stop that cycle, but we see it. Without awareness, we don't really quite notice that's what's happening. Awareness can change the whole thing.

We think, "Okay, this time it didn't do it, but next time it will." This time I didn't get it, but next time... or, "This time I did get it, but now it could be just a little bit better. Just a little bit better." You bring that to formal meditation too, right?

No matter how good a retreat you've ever had, don't you hope this one's a little bit better? There's a Tibetan definition of samsara as the urge to correct. So just notice—you're doing walking meditation, and you think, "But I could feel it just a little bit clearer if I tried a little bit harder." That's the cycle of samsara.

How does sati, how does mindfulness shift that? It's not like you come in with a hammer and declare, "This is bad, I'm going to stop it right now." I mean, I've tried that. Have you tried that? "I am now going to give up clinging. I'm going to stop wanting things." It doesn't work, right? That doesn't work. We try it and then we get aversive

because we couldn't stop wanting. "I understand very clearly—I talk about it all day long. I know that wanting doesn't work. So what's the matter with me?" And then you're in aversion. Both of these responses are all about me, me, me. Awareness is different. Awareness is like, "Oh, wanting is like this." It's a movement from the object to the process.

I'll tell you a simple little story of where that happened years ago, many years ago, on my first three-month retreat. This was bad, so don't do it. I had a car, and it was like two months in, an oblique November in Massachusetts. I just got this—what I thought was a yen for chocolate chip cookies. I can say it's only the first day of this retreat, so you can't be too far along in these things yet. And it got bad. I mean, it got really bad. I had to have chocolate chip cookies. Just so much wanting.

So I got in my car and drove into Barry, and luckily there's not much else you can do in Barry. I bought a bag of cookies and brought them back to my room and sat there. I thought I was being mindful. Chewing, chewing, swallowing, swallowing, chewing, chewing, swallowing. I went through two-thirds of that bag—and it was a big bag too. That's not something I normally do, just to say. Two cookies is usually enough. A whole bag? Something else was going on.

But I didn't quite recognize it for a while. Chewing, chewing, swallowing, swallowing. And suddenly, awareness clicked in and I saw what was really happening, which was wanting. Oh, the cookies—there's this pain, this yearning. It was kind of like here, but the cookies were dropping past it into my stomach. They weren't really touching the yearning at all. It's like, "Oh, that's wanting. That's what wanting's like."

To me that's just a little example. If we don't stop and look, we just keep eating the cookies. We get to the end and go, "Well, I guess it wasn't chocolate chip. I guess it was oatmeal I needed." We just don't get it. That's samsara—what the heck's going on? But suddenly we go, "Oh, awareness. Wanting feels like this." And that's the difference.

In samsara, wanting, yearning, loneliness, aversion—it doesn't feel too good, does it? And our whole ethos is: if something doesn't feel good, something's wrong, make it better. You want something? Go get it, and then you'll feel better because the wanting goes away. We say, "Just hang out with wanting feels like this." And people go, "Huh? Huh?" Go to someone on the street and say, "Just hang out with wanting feels like this instead of going and trying to get a better job. Just hang out with it." They'll say, "I don't think so."

But try it. That's the shift to awareness. We don't have to respond. In fact, with wisdom, with clear seeing, there's not the urge to respond. "Oh, that's just wanting." Not to do anything about it. Doing things about it just keeps it going. "Oh, that's just wanting." And awareness of wanting is just that. You've taken refuge in the awareness again, and it really can stop being a problem—in that moment.

I mean, I've done this a million times. It'll come up again. So what? We're not saying it should stop. We're just saying, let's see what's really going on. "Oh, wanting feels like this." The habit of mind is to move away from it. Just stay with it. You're back in awareness. And there's peace. There really is peace. Even with wanting, it's just some sensations. It's just some energy in the mind. It's also just awareness and compassion when you bring full attention to it. You don't have to fix it.

So with steady sati, with steady mindfulness, the interest becomes the process—not the what, not how to fix it. It changes everything. Steady, steady, steady. The reason we have this structure is because we have to just keep remembering. The habits of getting lost and distracted together are so strong. That's just how it is. But the more we practice, the more steady we are with it, the habit of awareness—of recognizing awareness, of trusting awareness, of really loving it—gets stronger and stronger.

I call it a shift of refuge. Our refuge, what we grew up with, what I grew up with—refuge is to go after pleasant, get rid of what's unpleasant, do whatever we can to bolster our good sense of self. That can be helping other people, that can be doing anything. But at the core of it is the me, me, me.

The shift of refuge to just appreciating awareness rather than evaluating it by what's happening—it's so much easier. It's so inclusive because there's nothing in our mind, in our heart, in our experience, in other people, in life that needs to be shut out. There's no barrier, no differentiation that needs to be made. There's no judgment—"My awareness is better than your awareness." I mean, who owns awareness? Nobody. "My awareness is better because I'm aware of really subtle tingling sensations in my finger and you're only aware of aversion, so my awareness is so much better." I think that's awareness of me-ing. But awareness is untouched. It doesn't care. Or as someone else said, it's not that it doesn't care—it cares, but equally for everything. Take your pick.

And so our practice here is really about just cultivating this shift of refuge, just in one moment, and then in this moment, and then in this moment.

I think that's all I want to say. Thank you for your attention.

So please come if you'd like.

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And so our practice here is really about just cultivating this shift of refuge—in one moment, and then in this moment, and then in this moment.

I think that's all I want to say. Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 136

Seclusion (Viveka)

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this talk from the 2014 February Month Long Retreat, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of viveka (seclusion) across its multiple dimensions. She begins with kāya viveka (bodily seclusion)—physical withdrawal from people and the overwhelming flood of sense experience—drawing on wisdom from Thomas Merton, Thích Nhất Hạnh, and Ajahn Chah to illuminate why such withdrawal supports clear seeing.*
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> *Wilson then examines restraint at the sense doors (indriya-saṃvara), carefully distinguishing wise renunciation from aversion. Using practical examples—from being distracted by beautiful views on retreat to habitual phone use—she shows how bringing sati-paññā (mindfulness-wisdom) to sense contact differs from suppressive tightness. The Buddha's teaching that sense experience itself isn't problematic, but our imprisonment by habitual reactions to it, becomes central.*
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> *The talk progresses to citta viveka (seclusion of mind)—the stillness of the non-reactive mind that doesn't concoct stories around experience. Drawing on Ajahn Buddhadasa's emphasis on atammayatā (non-concocting) and Luang Pu Dun's reformulation of the Four Noble Truths, Wilson points practitioners toward recognizing moments when awareness meets experience without proliferation. She acknowledges that seclusion also creates space for 'demons' to arise—difficult mind states previously avoided through distraction—referencing the Desert Father Saint Anthony's twenty years of solitary struggle. The teaching concludes with the Buddha's instruction from the Bhaddekaratta Sutta on the 'better way to live alone': dwelling at ease in the present moment, free from desire.*

Beautiful night, huh? Did you notice? There's something about how the beauty of nature, the moon and the clouds, can bring the mind into a kind of space and quietness sometimes. It's just lovely.

So tonight I want to talk about seclusion. The word in Pali is *viveka*.

When we first think about seclusion, we tend to think about it in terms of seclusion from other people—periods of solitude, periods of being alone. And this is a really important, respected, even vital part of so many spiritual traditions, isn't it? Times of renunciation, of solitude, of aloneness.

I want to share some reflections on that: the value of it, why we would do it, why it's so helpful. But also, in the way the Buddha talks about it in the teachings, seclusion isn't only about being secluded from other people. There's one quotation from a sutta where someone's asking the Buddha, "Do you know, sir, emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" And Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, notes that those are three designations for Nibbana: emancipation, release, seclusion for beings—that word *viveka*. So in that way it's being used as seclusion from dukkha, seclusion from the kilesas, from greed, hatred, and delusion. This idea of seclusion actually has a lot of different depths to it.

On the first level, which is really quite profound, there is this sense of spending some periods of time—and some people choose their whole life—secluded from other people, a life of being a recluse or a hermit. And in a small way, that's what we're all doing here. This form of intensive silent practice is really coming from a life of seclusion. And even though you may feel like you're more with people here than you ever are in your life—eighty of you all jammed together all the time, thinking "Please, seclusion, what do you mean?"—at least, hope to God, you're silent. And that's a little bit moving in that direction.

But it's a huge part of spiritual traditions. Jesus in the wilderness. The early Christian mystics. A few years ago, I was with a Swiss friend, and we were traveling in southern France. We went to visit in the Dordogne, in southwest France, two or three Tibetan monasteries that he knew—he was friends with some of the people who ran them. Two of them were under the auspices of the Karmapa, and one was a Dzogchen monastery.

What was interesting is that, not being in the Tibetan tradition, I wasn't really aware of these places. We got to one of them, and although it was Tibetan, all the people there were not Tibetan. Some were monks and nuns, some were lay people, but all different cultures—mostly Westerners, Europeans. They had just begun three-year, three-month, and three-day retreats. You've heard of that in the Tibetan tradition, right? It makes our three-month retreat seem like nothing.

They had just begun one. In a separate little enclave—there were four enclaves—over a hundred people had just started. In one of the enclaves, it was their first three-year retreat. In another, it was their second. In the others, it was their third. In still others, it was their fourth. So this is just quietly going on in France. All these hundred people on these three-year, three-month, and three-day retreats—their fourth one in a row. Can you imagine? They come out, earn a little money, and go back in again. Just to say: this is a tradition that's still alive in the world today, not only back in ancient times.

So how does this serve our aspiration for awakening in this practice? Whether we choose to be even more of a secluded person, or if our practice is really to awaken in daily life, here we are practicing a form of some kind of renunciation and seclusion. How can that be helpful?

I want to read from Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk who was always drawn to being a hermit and mystic, but was always being called back by his superiors and not allowed to go be a real hermit. This is an encapsulation of something he said about the desert fathers—the early Christian desert fathers who went off into the desert completely alone in Egypt for practice: "The search for solitude is a journey to discover the inner self."

The monks fled to the desert to become ordinary. If they had gone there to be extraordinary, this would have meant taking the world with them as a standard for comparison.

I like that. Not that I'm a special person, but just more and more ordinary. But then still, why do we need, at times, to flee the world, to get away from the world, to discover how truly ordinary we are? You think, "I already know I'm really ordinary." But you don't really want to be ordinary. You want to be extraordinary. How can we be happy to be just ordinary?

Anyway, why do we need to get away? Thich Nhat Hanh speaks to this—why we would take time away from all the activity. Because it's not just this first form of seclusion called kāya viveka, or seclusion of body. We first think of it as being separate from people, because we get so caught up. But it's also about being removed from so much sense door activity, which we've touched on before.

So Thich Nhat Hanh is talking about both of these. He says, "We have lost our taste for silence. We do not know how to be with ourselves without something else to accompany us." He says a book, a telephone—you can tell how old this is. I would say with an iPhone, with our tablets, with our computers. Think about it. You don't have to think very long, do you? Go to a restaurant. How many people can sit there, never mind if they're alone, even when they're together, sitting there on their phones? Have you ever noticed that? Or we were somewhere recently, a restaurant with young people who looked like they were on a date, sitting there in pairs—but all on their phones. Really, to be alone without something to accompany us.

Thich Nhat Hanh continues: "The first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our best, to reorganize our lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us." I actually love that line. He uses it in a few places. We don't even recognize how society and the norms around us are colonizing us until we take some time away from other people, from the flood.

And this brings me to the third part I want to read, from Ajahn Chah. He talks about the flood of sensuality—just the flood of sense experience that we encounter throughout our days in daily life. We've talked about this, but I just like the way he says it. He says: "Sunk. We are sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations." Just sunk in it. Sunk because we look at externals and we don't look inwardly.

He says it's like being a prisoner. Somebody else has control over you. When they tell you to sit, you have to sit. To walk, you have to walk. So being imprisoned by the senses is the same as that. No matter how hard you try, you can't shake it off.

Do you get a sense of that, or does it bring up a kind of resistance? "No, no, no—I'm not sunk in senses." Here, that's part of what we're doing. We're actually setting up conditions to allow us to pull out of this flood, this flood of sensuality. Not because it's bad, but because there's so much going on. As all these teachers say, we don't have a chance to just stop and look inwardly and even see what's true. What's going on for us?

And so the sense of kāya viveka isn't only about pulling away, creating some space from other people, but about stepping back from all the expectations and all the sense experience that we're just rolling in, day in and day out.

I don't know if you've ever noticed—I notice myself more and more in the last few years—whatever I've read or watched on TV or read on the computer, it can be something just stupid and passing the time, or something really useful. It doesn't really matter what it is. But when I get quiet, when I sit, or if I'm just going to bed, or just sitting quietly, whatever that was, it's just rolling around in my mind. In my heart, in my mind. If there were emotions involved—I really don't like watching big emotional movies anymore, because who needs fake emotions? There's enough going on in life. It's bad enough. I need to go suffer over somebody who never existed, and they lost this other person, and blah, blah, blah? Give me a break.

But I go to bed and that's what's rolling around in my mind. I think, why am I doing this? So we just need to get a little bit quiet to see this. We might resist: "I don't want to be quiet and see that, thank you very much." But this is what's just going on when we're sunk in this flood of sensuality—to the next thing, to the next thing, to the next thing. We don't have a chance to even see what the effect is.

So this kaya viveka is pulling out of being around people a lot, but also out of this overwhelming flood of sense experience. But I hope you know, when I say this and from what we've talked about all along, I'm not—the Buddha wasn't—saying that sense experience is a bad thing. It's life. It's what's happening. But he just said, let's set up some conditions so we can actually know what's happening instead of just being swept up with the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. When he says we're imprisoned by our sense experience, I think what he really means is we're imprisoned by our habitual reactions, which marry us to the sense experience—reactions we don't recognize.

Now, this we've talked about, so I don't need to go into it too much. You've seen in the early days of retreat how maybe the first couple of days are nice and then it starts to get a little more awkward—or maybe it goes the other way. But there's a sense of having to fit into the schedule, the things that you miss, the things that you want, that noise. You're walking and there's a sound and it's unpleasant and you don't want to walk anymore. Your body hurts. We just react—the body hurts so you stop. It feels good, so you eat more. You're having a nice sitting, so you keep sitting. It starts to hurt, you get up. We are simply run by the reactions of mind to sense experience. Liking it, not liking it, making up a story about what it means about me, how can I fix it.

You may even remember the first few days when you spent time—maybe you don't, maybe you're past all this—getting your little nest arranged and figuring out your schedule. When am I going to eat? When am I going to shower? What works for me? What are these other people doing? I don't know if I want to sit here. I don't like those people. Let me find the right place. It takes up a lot of mental energy. Again, maybe you're past it, but it takes up a lot of mental energy. Even now, when I first come to sit myself in a new place, I've got to suss it out, got to figure it. After a couple days, you settle down, you get your drift going. But those first two days are kind of great to pay attention to because that's the mind imprisoned by reactions to sense experience, wanting to get it all copacetic so we don't have to deal with that anymore.

But it's not that sense experience is bad. It's just when we're sunk in the flood, we don't have the chance to even see what's happening. There's just too much.

So this kaya viveka, as you've seen—there's still plenty of sense experience going on, right? We're not unconscious. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking—let us not forget—is still happening every moment. You might think, "What? We're still in the flood of sensuality, aren't we?" Maybe. But even so, hasn't there been—and be real about this, don't just automatically say no in your mind—haven't you noticed some more space and some quieting down in the mind, in the thoughts, even just a little at various moments? All the movies and stuff you've seen—hopefully you're not having to

rerun them now. Your mind is running on what's for lunch, what's for dinner, what the person upstairs is doing, but it's not the same. There's more space. It starts to quiet down and we're starting to see the patterns, aren't we? Sometimes. Yes. Say yes. Sometimes.

But there's still a huge amount going on. So the other aspect of kaya viveka—what I want to talk about a little—is restraint at the sense doors. I want to talk about this especially because one of the instructions, one of the attitudes we've often been pointing to, is this sense that awareness can meet whatever's arising. Not needing to choose, not thinking that one thing is better than another thing, right? You've picked up that we've been saying that. This doesn't sound completely unfamiliar—just checking, you never know. And so from that point of view, now here I am coming in saying restraint at the sense doors can be really supportive for clear seeing. And you might think: what the heck?

You just said whatever's going on. So this is where we can look and see what is skillful practice, how we can use particular techniques to support our deepening in awareness and wisdom. And it all comes down, of course, to what's the motivation. Was that this morning when James did intention as instructions? It was like a year ago, wasn't it? The sense of checking what's the motivation.

So restraint at the sense doors. What we mean by this in terms of practice is a kind of renunciation. But renunciation as we often think about it—in our culture here we have so much—can come together with a certain negativity. Maybe that's too strong, maybe not. But as the Buddha said before he was awakened, he would hear about renunciation and how good it was, and he would say, "But my heart did not leap up at the thought of renunciation. It felt like a sheer drop-off." That's a quotation from one of the suttas. Because he didn't understand the benefits of it.

So when we think of renunciation as an aversive cutting off, that's not renunciation. That's—guess what?—that's aversion. Restraint at the sense doors really means seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. We're not saying it's bad to see and hear and smell and taste and touch, but we just restrain, become a little more inward.

For example, seeing is a good illustration. The sense of restraint at the sense doors would be just kind of renouncing that impulse to be looking around all the time. You know how you're walking and you're looking and you're thinking—and you can pretty much tell now when someone's a little spaced out, because when we're spaced out, looking is a way the energy just goes out through the eyes. You say, so what? You can be aware of it. You can. Sometimes. But restraint at the sense doors, in terms of support for the mind at peace, support for our heart that's more present, is to check it out. Restraint

doesn't mean refusing to look. It means bringing—as Ajahn Buddhadasa, who I think one of us mentioned, this great Thai forest monk meditation teacher—he talked about restraint at the sense door simply meaning bringing together sati, mindfulness, and paññā, wisdom. He would talk about bringing sati-paññā to the point of sense contact.

So say restraint at the eye door. The first would be just to have a sense of renunciation: I'm just gonna maybe not look around so much. Not out of aversion, but to see: does this help me be more present? And then sati-paññā at the eye door would simply be being present and noticing what happens with eye contact.

Some people have mentioned to me after years of practice, you know, we think, "Well, I shouldn't look around," and that's just kind of a "should" and you get reactive and we get all tight and then we don't look around. I have a friend who thought of restraint at the eye door and walked around blindfolded for a couple of days on retreat. That's not really it. You can walk around blindfolded and be just filled with aversion and greed and not see it.

But noticing—if we aren't looking around all the time, then it's easier to be present when seeing really calls the attention. And noticing what happens when we go off into looking around.

A friend told me some years ago she was doing retreats, she'd been practicing a lot, and she was doing a long retreat on Maui. It's beautiful, you know, it's up high so you can look out, there's a beautiful view of the ocean. She said when she first went, whenever she was doing walking meditation, always outside, she was always looking at the view, almost like, "I have to look." You should look, here I am on Maui, you have to enjoy the view. And then she just started noticing all that lack of restraint at the eye door was just feeding craving. She was getting more and more unsettled, agitated.

So then, out of wisdom—renunciation comes from wisdom, and it's a renouncing of experience that brings us into more agitation and suffering—she said she just started walking along the side of a building and not looking up. Not out of tightness, but out of understanding. And it brought ease. It brought happiness.

It brought open space to her heart.

Later, people would say to her, "What's the matter with you? You're in Maui and you're not even looking up." And she said, "Because it was so much easier. So much peace."

So that's the wisdom of renunciation and restraint at the sense doors. But you could do the same thing, and it could be from aversion.

Another example, another story of friends. Quite a long time ago, they opened a retreat center—I won't say where it is, you'll know who it is—but anyway, opened a retreat center in Switzerland. And again, an even more beautiful spot with lakes and mountains right outside the front. You can't not look—you can't.

The year that they first opened it (I teach there every year), it was really funny because one of the people who was sort of running things said, "Everyone's just sitting outside, just staring at the lake and the mountains, staring at the lake and the mountains." And again, it's like, "I want to put up a big wall so they can't look at the lake and the mountains." It was really funny—I was cracking up. There was this sense of, "No, it's bad. Don't look. Don't look." That's not restraint. That's aversion. It's not necessarily a helpful attitude that the beauty is bad.

So restraint at the sense doors is really about bringing mindfulness and wisdom to the point of contact—whether it's hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, thinking—when we can, and noticing the effect.

You can see this with unpleasant experience. When the Buddha talks about what causes ill will as a hindrance to keep growing, he says: unwise attention to the repugnance of an object, to whatever it is that's creating and bringing up ill will in your mind—you keep on focusing on that thing.

Have you ever noticed? Ayya Khema always gives the example: if you're really annoyed at someone and you keep on looking at them, what happens to the annoyance? It feeds it, doesn't it? You look at it—okay, that's lack of restraint at the eye door, and no *sati-paññā* at the eye door. And that keeps on feeding the ill will.

So the restraint—"let me not look"—might feel a little hard, might really feel like a renunciation at first, because you just want to look. Because you want to suffer more. "Let me look and get really worked up. Let me look"—and it just turns into a cycle. So wisdom may come in and just say, "Okay, just don't look. Just try not to look." You want to look, but you don't. That's restraint.

And noticing how, over time, with the not looking, the heart and mind come back to peace. They come back to ease. And in this case, restraint and renunciation are not a giving up of something wonderful. They're a choice for our happiness and well-being, for greater understanding.

So that's what I mean by restraint at the sense doors—it's really fed by the motivation and the effect. And I'm not saying that sense experience is bad at all.

Even from the Buddha, a very short little couplet: "A bhikkhu keeps her eyes from wandering restlessly with desire. And her ears are deaf to chatter and gossip. She has no longing for new sweets to taste, nor has any desire to possess things in the world as her own."

Okay, that's pretty high, what he's saying—a strong statement. But the next line is: "Where she is in contact with sense impressions, she does not become sorrowful or sad. She should not begin to wish for some other kind of life, or tremble when confronted with fearful things."

So in other words, how I read that is: don't let your eyes and mind run restlessly with desire, but on the other hand, when you meet experience, don't tremble or wish it were different or be sad.

It's just what it is. Both of these perspectives are supportive of practice. And so our subtlety of practice, our flexibility of mind, our skillful means, involves seeing how seclusion—kāya viveka, seclusion from the flood of sensuality and from people—is supporting a clearer seeing of just what's going on. How is it supportive of inward looking, of more peace, more ease, less reactivity in mind and heart over time? We make choices based on that understanding.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks to this beautifully. He talks about how we like to have our windows open, but if we leave our windows open all the time—and he's really talking about our sense doors—everything is coming in and just disturbing us. It's simply too much. So he says, "Sometimes a beginning meditator may want to leave the city and go off to the countryside to help close those windows that would trouble his spirit if left open. There he or she can become one with the quiet forest, rediscover and restore herself. The fresh and silent woods help you remain in awareness. Yet when awareness is well-rooted, when it can be maintained without faltering, then you may wish to return to the city and be there less troubled. But before you reach this point, you must be very careful, nourishing your awareness moment by moment, choosing the surroundings and sustenance that assist you the most."

This is really just as the Buddha is—very pragmatic. For many of us, I would say for most of us, unless you're extremely unusual, seclusion of body and seclusion from a lot of interaction and seclusion from this flood of sensuality is extremely helpful and important to support clearer seeing, understanding, and greater peace.

And you may start to notice—hopefully you have—as the flood of sensuality and reactivity in the mind begins to slow down, doesn't it? Sometimes it's just a trickle. There are moments when there's not much at all. There are moments when there's sati-paññā

at your sense door contact and there's really just nothing created around it. Silence. Space. That's really what I was alluding to, what I was feeling when I walked up and said, "Ah, the moon." That was sense contact. It was seeing. It was pleasant. But then the mind didn't have to do anything else about it. Ah, a sense of peace. We can notice that more.

And so this space, this silence, this more balanced awareness does grow as we give ourselves the opportunity to explore, to renounce, to have some restraint.

But—there's always a but—you may have noticed it's not like one-way traffic. As the flood of our habitual thinking and reaction and sense experiences begins to quiet down and there is more space and less reactivity in the mind, sometimes that actually leaves space, not just for the hindrances, but really for even more unexpected wild stuff to come up and be seen. Have any of you noticed that at all?

I want to read a story from the Desert Fathers, those early Christians in the centuries after Jesus. Saint Antony of Egypt was the most famous of the Desert Fathers. His life inspired thousands to leave their homes and follow him. He was from a really rich family. He heard the words of Jesus that you should sell all you have and give to the poor, and he actually believed it, did it, and went off way out into the desert. Finally he moved to a deserted fort, fifty miles south of Memphis in Egypt on the east bank of the Nile. He lived alone without seeing a human face for over twenty years, being brought supplies of bread and water every six months.

Sometimes the friends who brought these supplies would hear terrifying shrieks and groans from behind the locked doors. Eventually they could stand this no longer and broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. However, Antony emerged healthy, sane, balanced, and full of advice on how to lead an ascetic life. He went to Alexandria to support the Christians who were being persecuted there and spent the rest of his life alternating between retreats into solitude and emerging to help and advise others. Really, the more I read, the sense of the retreat into solitude is balanced by the emergence to support and help others.

But the point I was making is this: being visited by what you could call demons is, unfortunately I'm afraid, a pretty inescapable part of our retreat from daily life into what comes up in our mind and heart as it becomes more quiet. So it's not that something is going wrong. It sure feels like something is going wrong because we hate this stuff. But that may be the reason we didn't really want to go into solitude in the first place. Seriously, you know?

So the demons are going to come up—the shrieks and groans of Saint Antony. Here it could be huge self-hatred, giant fear, patterns of mind like self-judgment, guilt, or greed. You know what your ones are by now. And deep down, you probably know them all. That's one thing. All these years of practice, they come up in different formations together. But mostly, we get the same old ones, the ones that come up and we think, "Oh yeah, I thought I worked through that one. Fifteen years ago." Hello! Let them in. They come up in a slightly different way.

Rage, guilt, pride, worthlessness—the shrieks and groans of St. Anthony. That's part of it all. And often we can miss it because the content may be all about how we're relating to the practice. It isn't good enough, it isn't deep enough, or it's too filled with this, or not enough of that—whatever the particular flavor. Because we're focusing on that content, we miss the fact that here's that demon of total worthlessness. Here's that demon of fear. Here's that demon of pride, whatever it is.

Just knowing that the seclusion may give space for these things to arise—but it's also allowing the mind and heart to grow in wisdom and depth and steadiness of awareness, sati-pañña—so that becomes the very tool and refuge we bring to meet the demons. Instead of thinking we're going to get rid of it by jumping to another sense pleasure, which is what we can do in our daily lives, never quite feeling it fully. Here it's like, "Oh no, I really need to get on the computer right now." Ever notice that? Suddenly it's so important. Or, "I've got to talk to someone right now." No. Just sit with it and see what's happening.

This is why it takes so much courage to come into a period of seclusion like this. Seclusion from our life, seclusion from our friends, seclusion from so much sense pleasure. It takes, I think, enormous courage. Some days more than others. Some days it's like, "Oh, this is great. I could do this forever." But the next day is another story. Just respect that in yourselves, in each other.

And one of the reasons we want to keep a sense of supporting each other's seclusion, of really not interacting with each other, is because you never know what's going on with another person. We don't even know what's going on with ourselves half the time, right? So whatever we think is going on with the other person is pretty much going to be projection. Just leave them alone. It's this great gift we give one another—to meet our demons in our own way, on our own terms, with the support of our own mindfulness and wisdom.

So that's kāya viveka. The next is citta viveka, which is seclusion of mind. A friend of mine says that kāya viveka means no body bothers you, and citta viveka means your mind doesn't bother you. It's just a shorthand, but I like that.

Citta viveka, seclusion of mind, really means the mind is secluded from the hindrances. Sometimes it's taken as meaning deep states of absorption, which is one form of citta viveka, but I want to talk about it not only as deep states of absorption but as when the mind is not being caught in kilesa—greed, hatred, delusion arising as a reaction to sense pleasures, as a reaction to experience.

In states of what you would call deep absorption, where the mind is really collected in one experience, states of jhāna—one of the main reasons it feels so onward-leading, why the mind feels so pure, is because when the mind is so absorbed, there's like no space for the kilesas to get in. They just don't even come in. It's not like you're fighting them off. They just don't come up, or something starts to arise and the mind goes, "No, I don't think so," and goes back.

Well, who wouldn't like that? It's nice, the sense of touching what the purity of mind and heart can feel like in a moment. It's not a steady state, it's not enlightenment, it doesn't last, it's conditional. But just to feel that is an expression of citta viveka.

But another way I want to talk about citta viveka is the silence of the non-reactive mind. Not the silence of nothing happening. As our mind quiets, and as the mindfulness awareness is getting a bit more steady—and it is getting more steady, right? In spurts. But there are times when it's more steady, when it's moving with its own momentum. It's not so much effort. And it can really be with different sense experiences, the six sense experiences coming and going. Have you had moments like that? Steady times like that?

In the times when awareness is getting more and more steady and the chatter is quieting down—though there can still be thoughts and such—this silence of the non-reactive mind begins to reveal itself. We start to experience, again like when I was looking at the moon, sense experience or thought or whatever, and the mind is simply quiet, with space around it, not needing to create anything around that experience. It's also a real experience of peace, of purity, that perhaps we don't often notice.

There's a word in Pali: *atammayatā*. Ajahn Buddhadasa, again in some of his writings toward the end of his life, said this is the ultimate Buddhist concept—*atammayatā*—which means something like "not being made up of this or that." You could say it's the state of heart and mind of non-concocting. We simply experience what's arising without concocting anything around it. I love the word "concocting" because it has that sense of just making something up out of nothing, on and on and on. Do you have any sense of what I mean?

The highest peace of mind and heart would be complete seclusion from the reactions of greed, hatred, and delusion—where they don't arise at all. But in this *citta viveka* of non-concocting, we can start to explore sense experience, both when the mind is not concocting and when it does concoct, seeing how each unfolds and what it leads to. This is where we can begin to experience *citta viveka*.

I read this from a Thai Ajahn—I think it was in *The Island*, though I encountered it somewhere else as well—from Luang Por Dun, a disciple of Ajahn Mun. This is his re-wording of the Four Noble Truths. For me, this speaks directly to the mind, to *citta viveka*, the mind that's free from concocting:

The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering—the Second Noble Truth. Something happens, a sight, a sound, and the mind goes out. There's a whole story. That's the cause of suffering.

The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering—the First Noble Truth.

The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. This is that *sati-paññā* at the mind door—just watching this concocting, how it comes up, how it leads to trouble, how it drops away.

The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering.

Do you get that? This sense of... And this isn't rocket science to notice, is it? We're not talking about incredible subtlety here—the mind going out and making trouble. Just very simple, the difference.

Here's an example I wrote down. Just walking. There's a cold wind blowing. There's a sense of coldness and the perception of wind. It's unpleasant. The mind goes, "Ugh." The mind going out to satisfy: "I don't like this. It's cold. I feel disgruntled. Why is it cold like this? There aren't enough good walking places here at Spirit Rock inside, and I can't walk inside with my shoes on because I need to walk in my shoes," and on and on. That's the mind going out, fueled by—it's not rocket science—aversion or greed, creating a whole story.

The mind of non-concocting, *citta viveka*: Walking. Cold wind. Coolness. Unpleasant. That's it. The mind just doesn't do anything with it. That's *citta viveka*.

Now, what is truly normal and natural? This isn't some incredible esoteric state that we create. But by bringing *sati-paññā,* mindfulness and wisdom, just to watching—the same thing, *sati-paññā* at the mind door—watching the mind that concocts and the mind that doesn't, and just seeing the effect of each, simply keep noticing, keep watching with awareness. The wisdom comes in by itself.

But what I'd like to point to, and this is also from Buddhadasa: recognize those moments. The translation Santikaro uses of *suññatā* is "voidness," but recognize those moments, I would say, of just the peace, the space of non-concoction. Because often we'll go, "Oh, that's nice"—like looking at the moon—"Ah, the moon, that's nice, it's so pretty, I feel so... ah, it's nice." But we don't really recognize the quality in the mind that's awake, present, alert, where there's just the space of not creating anything around it.

So it can be really helpful to recognize—as Buddhadasa says—to generate a contentment with this kind of emptiness. At that moment there's no sense of anything particular, no sense of self. Just generate a contentment with that. Recognizing first when it's happening, instead of getting sunk again in the sense experience.

I use the moon as an example, but nature is one of the reasons, I think, that having retreats in lovely natural settings is so valuable. Partly we're just privileged to be able to be here—most of the retreats I teach are in some lovely settings, though some aren't. Some places in Burma, not so pretty, but some are. Nature can be really supportive in this way for us, if we can recognize how it works to incline our hearts and minds toward being really present but without any concocting of wanting or aversion or making up a story.

I mean, we can also make up a story—don't get me wrong. We can make up a story about anything, and we do. But nature can be so helpful.

I'll give a couple of examples. I know from your own experience people often mention this, but the point is how we can consciously use nature to recognize citta viveka—the stillness of the non-reactive mind-heart.

Yesterday I went out to the Point Reyes seashore just by myself, simply to take a walk to the ocean, be there quietly, and walk back. And yes, there's much less sense bombardment than doing errands or being at home on the computer. So there's a sense of peace and spaciousness in the environment. Yes, it was mostly pleasant sense experience. It's a lot easier to talk about the non-reactive mind when it's pleasant and you're not being bombarded. I acknowledge all of that. But you can still get lost.

Still, I was noticing, sitting at the seashore—you get that sense of space from looking at the sky and the sea. But then you can notice that it's kind of like a metaphor for the internal space in the mind and heart when the mind isn't fixating on something and reacting. Just tuning into that citta viveka—the mind wasn't going off into wanting. It could do that with pleasant experience: "Oh, this is so nice, how can I have a vacation by the beach, how can I do this more, how can I live..." You could go off that way. But when it's just, "Ah, this"—notice, not just "this is nice," whatever. Notice that quality of vibrant, wakeful stillness, if you can put it that way, of the non-reactive mind and heart.

That's citta viveka. That isn't dependent on taking away sense experience. And it's easier to tune into—and lovely—when we're not too caught in craving, but it's certainly available as we begin to recognize it no matter what's happening.

So here's an alternative experience, also from my own life—being in Burma, where I was again this year for several weeks. I've been going there every year for quite some years. Those of you who've practiced in Burma, India, Asia, or have heard the endless stories about it, know it's noisy. Extremely noisy. Often at night there's just noise everywhere. There's not a sense that it should be quiet. Even in meditation centers, people will come by walking and talking at the top of their voices as they come and go. And we're like, "What? This is a meditation center. It should be quiet." That's something we made up, really.

But the noise I'm talking about here is the loudspeakers in villages all around—at any wedding or any event. They come on. It can be all day and all night. Sometimes I've been where it's day and night for three days and nights without stop. Loud, really loud. If you walk right by it on the road, it literally hurts your ears. This is just part of life there. Everyone has that.

One time we were staying in this village way out in the country—there was hardly any electricity. We had offered some solar panels, which was the only electricity. People have generators. So we're staying there, and at 3:30 in the morning this huge loudspeaker comes on with some Dhamma talk in Burmese. Apparently they do this every night. 3:30. And then at 4:00, across the river, another one started. We asked someone, "Why? Doesn't it bother people? Not everyone's getting up at 3:30." They said, "Oh no, it's nice to lie in bed and listen to the Dhamma." We said, "Really? Okay."

So that's not my example of citta viveka. That's the opposite of citta viveka. But that kind of noise... I've noticed the last couple of years—I'm there, going to bed, and it starts. It's not every night, so you can't get regular, you never know. It starts, and it's like, "Whoa, this is really loud tonight." And the worst is when they start with karaoke—I can't tell you.

It starts really loud, and my mind will have a little reaction, and then I've really noticed the last couple of years, it's like, okay. And the mind just doesn't do anything with it. I didn't believe it at first. But now I don't even notice. It's like someone will say, "God, it was so loud last night." And I'm like, "Oh, was it?" And there's just the same quality of mind.

Now, it could be delusion. That's not citta viveka—that's delusion. You don't notice what's going on. That's not citta viveka. You may feel at peace, but there's not quite the aliveness, you know. But this is more that I can really see it. The mind does nothing with it. And every now and then, something particularly loud reaches out and grabs attention. And the mind goes, "Oh my God, if that goes on all night, I..." Let it go. Just let it go.

And then to really see—citta viveka grows as our wisdom grows, as our practice with seeing this grows. The mind inclines towards the peace of non-concocting because we're so much happier. This is really moving in the direction of the deepest seclusion, which is the ultimate seclusion from the kilesas, where they don't arise at all. Okay, that's down the road. But citta viveka is really something that we can experience—little, big, moment to moment—with pleasant, with unpleasant, with neutral, with big experiences, with little ones.

And in a way, I would just point us to recognizing the quality of it. "Oh, great, thank God, everything's okay." Why is everything okay? Notice what the mind and heart feel like at that point. Notice that wakefulness. At first there might be the thought, "I don't want to look too closely because I might get caught up in aversion and wanting again." At first it's like that—notice. But then you'll start to trust it. You'll trust it more and more because this is really taking refuge in awareness, taking refuge in the peaceful mind, in citta viveka, really coming to see that more and more.

Ajahn Chah's student Ajahn Jumnien, another Thai forest master, said: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter—an empty process arising and passing away on its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. Then there is no longer any personal doing."

That's an expression of the seclusion of mind and heart that's really emancipated, that's freed from the arising of kilesas. But we can experience this in moments. One ceases to focus on particular content, and all is recognized as mind and matter, arising and passing of its own. As Greg said earlier tonight, it's just nature. We just give it back to nature. And we're nature too.

I think our koan in terms of how we relate to seclusion—the choices we make around solitude, around seclusion from the sense doors, around restraint at the sense doors, around recognizing when the mind is balanced enough that we can really explore citta viveka without needing to shut down the sense doors, or when we need to support ourselves that way—is to recognize and trust more and more what the silence of the non-reactive mind feels like. And to tune into the motivations when we try to restrain or shut something out. Is the motivation from aversion or fear? "Oh no, this is so peaceful. If people start talking, if there's sound, that's going to wreck my peace." That's not citta viveka. That is holding on to a state.

Ramana Maharshi said: "Solitude is in the mind. A person might be in the midst of the world and yet maintain serenity. Such a one is in solitude. Another may stay in a remote forest and still be unable to control the mind. Such a one cannot be said to be in solitude."

Those attached to desire are unable to experience solitude wherever they are, whereas those who are not attached to desire are always in solitude, even when they are engaged in work and connection with people. That's the Buddha.

In the same way, there's a sutta that many of you are probably familiar with called the Elder Sutta—or in Thich Nhat Hanh's translation, "The Better Way to Live Alone." In this sutta, a bhikkhu comes to the Buddha and says there's an elder who only wants to be alone, and he says how wonderful it is to be alone. The Buddha goes and talks to this elder Thera about it. The Buddha asks the monk Thera, "Then how do you live alone?" And he replied, "I live alone. No one else lives with me. I praise the practice of being alone. I go for alms alone and I come back from the village alone. I sit in meditation alone. That is all. I am alone."

And so the Buddha said—this is Thich Nhat Hanh's translation, which tends to be a little softer—"It's obvious that you like the practice of living alone." He's not saying that that's bad, but he goes on to describe a better way, a more wonderful way to be alone: the way of deep observation, to see that the past no longer exists and the future has not yet come, and to dwell at ease in the present moment, free from desire. This is the same as what Ramana Maharshi was saying. When a person lives in this way, free from desire, just sunk in the present moment, there's no hesitation in his heart. He abandons anxieties and regrets, abandons binding desires, and cuts the fetters which prevent him from being free. This is called the better way to live alone. There is no more wonderful way of being alone than this.

So the kāya viveka, the bodily seclusion, and the citta viveka, the mental seclusion, are in support of our experiencing that purity of heart and mind—a better way of being alone, really secluded from craving, from the wanting, from the creating of the sense of self, the concocting, this endless concocting of a sense of self out of every sense experience.

And so our koan of what's supportive is really in service of moving in this direction of citta viveka that then leads to this deepening sense of abandoning clinging and the concocted sense of self, rather than an idea of what it should look like.

Seclusion isn't just about being isolated. If that isolation is leading to fear of people, resistance to noise, over-reactivity to experience, then what's being fed? What's being fed is aversion and fear and wanting. If you're in the middle of the world and your mind is getting more calm, less reactive, less given to concoction, what's being fed is wisdom and liberation.

So that's what we look at. What's being fed? What's being starved when we make our choices?

I want to say two things to close. The Buddha said, "Two things I never lost sight of while I was still an unenlightened bodhisattva. One is never to be lax in my effort"—in other words, not push, push, push, but never give up. Never give up. And the second: "Never to settle merely for wholesome states of mind." I love that one because it's so easy to do. We think, "Wow, this is so lovely. This is good enough. What more could I want? A little clinging—okay, so what? It's not really a problem." So just watch that—never settle for wholesome states of mind.

I'll end with one story, going back to that sense of how going off to live a life of real seclusion isn't to deny humanity or cut oneself off. Rather, the wisdom that comes out of that so often—as with Saint Anthony—expresses itself naturally, because the natural expression of wisdom is compassion.

This is from a review of a book about hermits. I don't even know the name of the book because I just cut out the review a few years ago. But this part describes a visit to an Anglican convent where the author meets a nun whose need for solitude had taken her to an abandoned cabin on a cliff way off somewhere in some remote place. Having repaired it, she lived there for eighteen years—but not quite alone, because people brought their troubles to her. However, rather than resisting that or feeling like they were intruding, she believed that the responsibility of the solitary one was "to stand at the intersection between the love of God and suffering humanity."

To me, that's a beautiful expression of the wisdom of the really secluded heart and mind—that it manifests as compassion. We stand at the intersection of the wisdom of God and suffering humanity. But along the way, we do what helps support us, even if it means meeting our demons.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 137

Investigating Sense of Self

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Carol Wilson offers a demystifying and practical exploration of anattā (not-self), one of Buddhism's most challenging concepts. Rather than approaching it philosophically, she invites practitioners to investigate directly how the sense of self is concocted moment-to-moment through perception, feeling tone (vedanā), and grasping. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that consciousness is like a magic show, she demonstrates how turning toward and examining the sense of self reveals its constructed nature—and how it vanishes when seen clearly.*
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> *Wilson weaves together teachings from multiple traditions, including Ajahn Buddhadāsa's insight that 'the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind,' Ramana Maharshi's ghost analogy, and Suzuki Roshi's image of getting soaked in fog. She illustrates these points with accessible personal stories—from discovering her handwriting in a book to the drama of a favorite mug—showing how I-ing and my-ing (ahaṅkāra and mamaṅkāra) continuously create birth and death of self throughout each day.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that insight comes not through thinking but through sustained conscious awareness and unbiased moment-to-moment mindfulness. Wilson encourages practitioners to notice the contraction of grasping, explore how the magic show is constructed, and recognize the natural spaciousness between births of self. She concludes by pointing out that realizing emptiness of self isn't disconnection but rather the doorway through which mettā, compassion, and wisdom naturally arise.*

As Jaya said last night, this is the requisite talk on anatta. But as it happens, I really enjoy exploring and talking about this—let's say concept, though it's not really a concept. It's just a pointing to our direct experience, the whole sense of not identifying with experience as a lasting sense of self.

The idea of anatta is often one that people's minds can get kind of stuck around. Just as Jaya said last night, the perception of impermanence leads to freedom. So too is the perception of anatta, of not-self. But our minds can get so caught—maybe yours not—in this whole idea of: if there's no self, who's driving my car? If there's no self, how will I know where I live? If there's no self, will everything fall apart? All of that kind of stuff.

Or you're struggling. Every time you notice a sense of self, it's "Ah, another failure." Again the sense of self—will it ever go away? You're waiting for the big explosion of emptiness and then it's all over. You never have to deal with this self again, right? You see what a burden it is, you're ready for it to go. And somehow that didn't happen yet, did it?

We get caught in philosophical thinking about it. And this one, if you start believing it, I want to say—endless. Endless.

This is why I love talking about and exploring sense of self. I like to talk about demystifying the sense of self, investigating the sense of self. Because everything the Buddha taught, as far as we can tell, isn't to introduce us to new philosophical concepts to discuss. That really wasn't his point in choosing what to share. Rather, it was to point us to accurate perception of our direct experience, to see what frees our hearts and minds from confusion and suffering. He's not pointing to anatta to drive us crazy—"See if you can get subtle enough to really see it." No. He's pointing to an obvious truth of how things are that, when we begin to recognize it, frees us from confusion.

The way I look at it, which is fun, and that's the angle of this talk, is hopefully from a very practical exploration of the moment-to-moment experience of sense of self arising, sense of self passing away. Not about thinking about it right so that we'll get the big bang. Also, I'd like to point out it's not always like that—one big explosion and you're completely free. It's often the way Suzuki Roshi talked about. You know how he talks about getting wet in a fog? He talks about how if you go walking out in a huge thunderstorm, you get really soaked and you know it—there's no secret.

So we're waiting for that, the big boom. But if you go walking out in a fog—and we get that here a lot, fog—and if you go really walking in it for a couple of hours, you don't quite notice when, but you get soaked. Soaked to the skin, soaked to the bone. But it's a gradual process.

And I know in my experience, for myself and for many, many people, that's how insight, that's how our understanding develops. Little blips moment by moment, accurate perception moment by moment, and we don't even recognize a lot of the time that that's what's happening. Because we're looking for the big thing, and also a lot of these moment-to-moment insights are not so pleasant. And so, you know, that's kind of, "Oh God, what a drag, this is coming up again." Anyway, so that's really how it works.

So I want to talk about really demystifying anatta, exploring the sense of self. Just some ideas that come to my mind, some tips—not in any way covering everything. But first, to talk about what's really the nature of insight. What is understanding, really?

There's a famous quotation from Thich Nhat Hanh I use a lot: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking." Did you hear that? Did you believe it? "It is the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding." From Thich Nhat Hanh.

I know you all experience that. Sometimes you'll come into an interview and you'll really have, you know, a very real experience you want to talk about, and the words just don't really do it. They're too rigid and limited. So we can't think our way into insight.

But one way I like to describe it—the way I experience insight—is like a shift of perception. It's not that reality suddenly changed. But the perception, the way we see and understand it, suddenly shifts. You know what I mean? And this is not just dhamma insight, but just in our life. I think I talked at the very beginning—right view is really literal. Suddenly we recognize—we're using seeing as a kind of metaphor for all the senses—more accurately. We suddenly see a situation differently, or a problem. Suddenly you see what you could do about that problem, or your personality, from a whole new angle.

So, in a way, the recognition of a sense of self not being a real entity is very similar. It's like the optical illusion—when you see a picture, you know that very famous one that looks like a line drawing of a vase. And you see a vase, but if you look at it another way, it's two faces in profile. That's a very famous one. Or those magic eye things that are just geometric colors, and if you look for a long time in the right way, suddenly a 3D image springs out. They have whole books of those where people just sit and stare at them.

So you see, once you see the other way—both ways—it's not like the first way of perceiving went away, but we also perceive there's another way of recognizing the same set of circumstances. See what I mean? And both then, both ways of perceiving might be accessible. It didn't change reality, but it expanded. It really changed how we can perceive and understand in more than one way. And also we might see more accurately.

So when in those magic eye pictures, when suddenly you see like two hockey players—now this is a trick question. Are there really two hockey players in that flat sheet? Is there really a three-dimensional picture in that flat sheet? No. It's a shift in perception. But you've seen the picture. If someone else came to you who never saw it and said,

"Well, you're just a fool. There's no other thing in there. It's just these blue and yellow geometric patterns"—you don't have to get into a fist fight about it. You don't have to prove anything. But you know for yourself. That's really what we call verified faith.

You've seen it for yourself. You may not always be able to see in that way again, but you've known that there's another possibility. Just that simple shift in perception is like an example of what insight is like. Once we recognize that perception shifts, the perception leads to how we think about the world, how we view, how we respond, how we act. And I'll say more about that, though we've talked some about it already. So that's the basic of how insight works—this shift.

To come to the sense of self: there's one sutta, which I didn't write down where it is—I read it years ago—where the Buddha describes our mind and consciousness as being like a magic show. He gives the example, as I recall, of a magician who comes and sets up his stall on the crossroads. The magician has a stage and he's doing all the magic tricks. And you know how it is when you first see it—it's like, wow, that's amazing. Now, of course, we're all so cynical and sophisticated. We know there's no real magic and we assume it's a trick. I'm thinking back then the Buddha was imagining people would go, "Wow, that's amazing! How does he do it? Oh, it's magic."

But then he says, once you go behind and you see how the trick is done, all the sense of magic falls apart, doesn't it? We see, oh, that's how it's done. Very logical cause and effect. There's no mystery about it. So he says the same thing for how consciousness, how perception and thinking can construct our view of the world.

I'm going to use that image of the magic show in terms of how the mind constructs a view of ourselves as being a separate, steady, lasting entity. And even if we say in our mind, "Well, I know it's not," the way we respond, the way we react, is often from the sense or the assumption that there is. Or am I wrong about that? Does anyone have a sense that you sometimes react to things in the world as if it was all about you and you're the center of everything? Yeah, that's how we look.

This is from Ramana Maharshi. It's my favorite quotation from Ramana: "The idea of self is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. If you look closely, the ghost vanishes. Because the ghost was never there, so also with a sense of separate self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, there's nothing to be found. It's found not to exist."

What I think is really interesting—and I love doing this in my own life, not just in formal practice, but in ordinary life—is really noticing, bringing awareness to when the sense of self arises. Because certainly, I would say we experience a sense of self, experi-

entially. I mean, it seems to be there pretty much all the time. That's our assumption. But the felt sense—physical or mental, emotional—that felt sense of "me," of self... is there anyone who never experiences that? You know what I mean? Just that very basic sense of me. This is something that we experience.

And I think sometimes the confusion comes when people are thinking, "Well, I shouldn't be experiencing this," or "I'm not experiencing this."

Or something that has to stop being experienced. You know, we get all crazy about it, instead of just noticing whenever a sense of self arises, and turning ours into another arising experience we can notice. We don't have to make it some big special thing. It's really a lot of fun to explore this because it does come up a lot.

When Ramana was saying to turn and look at it—I think what happens a lot in terms of perception is that when something is so familiar, like the sense of me, when it comes up it's almost not even recognized as something arising. It's just kind of like an assumed backdrop for everything that's going on. And we don't think to look at it. It's almost like our perception, our awareness just snaps shut and we assume it and keep on going and act from it, instead of stopping to see, whoa, what is this?

So how is it a magic show? A sense of self arising in a moment is really—back to my talk of last week—it's really concocted out of moment to moment aspects of our experience. And it's a concoction, a cocktail that's arising over and over and over all through the day with kind of different elements. But not looked at closely, it feels like it's always the same.

The way I want to talk about it tonight is that often—I don't want to say always, but often—the concocting begins with a moment of perception. We've talked about perception quite a bit. You know what we mean by perception in a moment? That sense of when there's a sense object, a sight, a sense door that works, an eye, and the two come together—sight, eye—and there's consciousness. That's called contact. This is happening every moment of our being alive, fast, so fast.

When contact comes together, one of the five aggregates, as someone mentioned—I think Andrea or Brian—one of the five aggregates is perception. This quality, it's a mental quality that recognizes the experience. So seeing, and perception is based on memory. It might be a person, or if it's someone you know, it might be the name, or it might be red, recognizing it as a color, recognizing it as a bowl. This is going on all the time.

Obviously—although it's not so obvious—it's pretty subjective, because the particular perception, the recognition, is of course influenced coming out of our particular life experience, isn't it? But first to say: perception arising every moment is certainly very useful. It's how our whole world is constructed and explained. Of course, half the time it's constructed and explained inaccurately, so that's the problem. But we need some perception, and when we're all in more or less agreement, it helps things to run.

Like you heard the bell gong out there fifteen minutes ago. You know bell, you know, oh, it's time to come into the hall. You know the perception is you're yogis and I'm the speaker—you're quiet and I talk. It's helpful. If we all didn't have any perception of who's doing what, it'd be chaos, and we hate chaos. So perception is really very useful.

But it's also interesting to see how quickly the whole world, our whole description of a world, forms around perception. Just to see how it works is also a very fun thing to play with here on retreat. Some people have been talking about it.

A simple example happened to me a couple weeks ago, but it just struck me because it was so clear. I was looking for a book for something about my talk a couple weeks ago, some quotation, and I don't have my books here. Andrea found the book for me down in the staff yurt. So I was looking through the book—it was a thick book—and I opened it to the page I wanted, and someone had already marked it there, a little note. I looked at the note and there was this immediate—it was my handwriting. Oh great, some things don't change. It's been two years since I was here. But there was this immediate sense of me. It's just a piece of paper with pencil scrawls on it, and me—this felt sense of me. It was really funny. Wow, here I am. And then my whole life—when was I last here? I guess I was using this, I do like this quotation, I guess I do use it a lot. But what was really funny was how just some pencil scrawls could evoke my whole sense of self, past and future. Very interesting. Not bad or good, just really kind of fun to watch that.

So, as I think Andrea was talking about, perceptions are of course influenced by whatever qualities are arising in the mind, as well as memory. When perceptions are influenced by delusion, as she's talking about, we recognize inaccurately—or by greed, or by hatred. Sometimes we just see with another person and we recognize differently from each other, and there's not necessarily a sense of right or wrong. But just to see how implicitly we assume our perceptions are accurate—yet just from different personal histories and different cultures and different ethnicities and different countries and different languages, we're going to recognize differently.

Even when there seems to be a lot that's similar. There's a simple example with a good friend. Actually, Sally, Guy's wife—I was at their house once, and there was a throw over the couch. I said something about, "Oh yeah, it's on that blue throw over there." And she said, "What are you talking about, the blue throw?" I said, "What do you mean? The blue throw on your couch. Big, big blue blanket on the couch." She said, "That's not blue, that's green."

And we really talked about it. I could not see green. She could not see blue. It's really interesting. Then you could get into a whole thing—who's right? Who's wrong? Like there's an absolute blue, and I'm right. You can get nuts about it. Okay, we didn't come to blows over the stupid blue-green afghan, but that quality of perceptions that don't match can lead to war. It leads to a lot of arguments.

Think of a close relative that you have a disagreement with about a particular situation. How much of that's based in differing perceptions of what went on? It's really powerful. And so when the perception is inaccurate, the whole world we create isn't reliable.

The Buddha said—this is his definition of *papañca*, of complication, of concocting—"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is sense contact. With sense contact as condition, there is feeling tone, *vedanā*." So that's another aggregate, as well as perception. "What one feels, one perceives"—so you feel it right away, then perception. Beautiful blue throw. Green, not so pretty. Blue, nice. "What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates"—one complicates with associations, memories, and so forth. "And with these proliferations as the source, the mind, the heart, is beset. It is assailed with mental perceptions and notions." Like the story someone told about the monk painting the tiger on the wall and then getting afraid.

So there's a perception, we make up all this stuff, we concoct all this stuff, and whether it's about me or something else, there's a sense of me at the heart of it, and then we really believe it—until we can have a more accurate perception.

A simple example, just to see how this happens. A few years ago when I was in Burma, I was at a meditation center. There was a little flagstone path leading to a Bodhi tree that's surrounded by a concrete wall, just a little thing, and people walk in a circle around it. I was walking up, and there was a Burmese nun walking around it with her hands in *añjali*. Right away I recognized—okay, that was my perception—walking around, hands in *añjali*. I thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely? There's such faith here."

I know a lot of the Burmese nuns have very deep faith, and a lot of their practice is *buddhānussati*, really recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, which is both a samādhi collecting practice and also really lights up the energy, the faith. So that was my historical information that led to that perception. "Oh, isn't that nice? Oh, so much faith." So that was the assailing. Then other memories come up, and the mind makes memories and associations. But it's just a tree, for God's sake. It's just a tree. It's not the Buddha. It's not even the same tree.

She's walking around, you know, so faithful to a tree. What the heck is that all about anyway? And I guess I'm not a devotional type. Blah, blah, blah. All of this in the space of about ten seconds as I'm walking up. When I get close enough to actually see her, she was walking around texting on her cell phone. Oh, okay—so much for all of that.

As soon as you see it, as soon as the perception is accurate, all that story is gone. Just gone. It vanishes into thin mist because it has no relationship to anything. I'm sure my mind went off into some other story after that, but I don't remember what it was. I just thought it was quite amusing.

But that's perception leading to our whole world—what we perceive, we think about. When the perception is inaccurate, we get way far away. When we recognize accurately, the whole magic show falls apart for that moment. You don't have to tear it apart. It's gone because it doesn't make any sense.

Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "The world appears so real to you because you think about it all the time. When you stop thinking, it will vanish into thin mist." And you think, "I don't want it to vanish into thin mist. As much trouble as it gives me, I'd rather have it than not." And as long as that's the case, you'll have it.

Talking more specifically about the perceptions that lead to this concocting of sense of self, I want to quote Ajahn Buddhadasa, who had such a pithy way of putting things. There's a book of his writings that Santikaro Bhikkhu translated, very much exploring sense of self, called *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*. It's really very accessible, fun to read, not abstruse and scholarly at all, although he was a great scholar.

So he says—just for your reflection, not to believe, but to bring us into exploring—when you notice sense of self: "The sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind." That's it. All this huge trouble-making thing that we're at such pains to get rid of, that we suffer so much from—just a condition arising when the conditions come together, when there's grasping and clinging in the mind.

A friend of ours says, "I want, I need, therefore I am." And it's true, but look and see for yourself. This isn't about some kind of judging of wanting; it's about exploring and seeing. We can see it on really strong levels, like Andrea was talking about—how we can get really attached to a view of ourselves, or when she was describing being angry about something and really attached to that. It operates on strong levels, but it's also arising in relation to quite little experiences, hundreds of times every day. That's why we don't really notice it so much. That's why it feels so ongoing.

Merely a condition which arises when conditions are there for it and passes when they dissolve. Just with accurate perception, the whole thing is gone. You don't have to do anything about it. Wisdom does it. Clear seeing, wisdom—when the perception isn't distorted by *kilesa*, by greed, hatred, confusion.

So it's a condition. He really says it's a sense of self, not a thing but a verb, an activity. There are words in Pali—*ahaṃkāra* and *mamaṃkāra*—that are translated as something like "I-ing" and "my-ing." That's what's going on in relation to something. There's grasping and clinging in relation to some little perception or feeling tone or feeling in the body or thought. I-ing, my-ing—boom, birth of self.

Rather than thinking about this, it's really—I swear—it's fun to explore when you're somewhere like this on retreat, where you have the time and space and you're not too involved in complicated interactions. You can kind of see it coming in little ways. This isn't about getting demoralized—"Oh my God, every time I turn around, a sense of self! That's too much." No, it's great that it's too much, because that's how we get to see it. If it just came up once a day, you'd have to be so alert to catch it. But luckily, you'll have many opportunities every day. How fortunate we are to explore this in this way.

So I'll give this little story. I always use this same one because I like it—why make up a new one when I have this? It hasn't happened since then, ten years ago. It's the last time sense of self arose. Why are you laughing? Luckily I'm not a monk, because laying claim to false attainments is a *pārājika* offense—but I am not ordained.

Anyway, very simple. Just to give a sense of how we can explore this.

I was on a long retreat like this at IMS in Barre quite some years ago. And I know it was quite some years ago because the setup is similar to here—you go into the dining room and eat, all hundred people crammed in there, the same kind of deal. It was a long time ago because at that time we didn't have so much uniformity of dishes and mugs. Now everything's the same, but then it was all the mugs that had collected over twenty years of IMS that people had left there. So you'd walk in to eat or have tea and there were just shelves of mugs, all completely different.

I was deep in the retreat, and for weeks I would just go and take whichever mug, have my tea, and it was simple and easy. Whatever was going on was just going on.

But one day, I went and took a mug as usual, and as I was sitting there drinking my tea, what I realized now is that it just felt very pleasant. The color was pleasant. The way it felt—you know how some mugs just feel good in your hand—was pleasant. And the thought arose: "This is really... this might be the perfect mug. It's just so nice. I like it. I wonder if I should take it back to my room and keep it."

In that moment, that was birth of self. I-ing and my-ing. Me and my mug. Right in that moment—boom—*jati*, birth of self, right then. The grasping to the pleasantness, the grasping to the idea of the mug. In terms of the dependent origination, which I think Guy will talk about a bit tomorrow, another way the Buddha describes the concocting—the middle part really being, you know, there's contact, there's feeling tone, the pleasant arises. When there's not clear seeing with pleasant, the mind naturally moves into leaning into it and then grasping. Or if it's unpleasant, leaning away and grasping at something different. So that's the grasping and the clinging—ah, me and my mug. And the next is becoming, turning into birth, birth of self.

It's all really fast. But from that first sense of the mind grasping, sense of "me" is a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. So instead of just the mug—that very quick movement of grasping—it's seeing the perception, the pleasant feeling, and then all the birth of self, and then all the attendant thoughts that come with it, all the concocting.

I saw that. And you can feel—this is where you can really notice when that grasping comes in—it's almost like a physical or mental contraction, however it is for you. The world contracts around. I can just feel it. It's like, "Ah, me and my mug." As long as we're focused on the thing we want, we don't notice that. But really, when the Buddha talks about grasping as a maker of measurement, instead of just the awareness, the field of awareness where things are coming and going, it all narrows down to me and my mug.

So in that moment, I saw it. Put it down. Never mind, I'm not going to save it. And that was the death of that self. That's where the dependent origination goes—from birth to suffering and death. In that moment, that was the death of that self. It was over.

As Ajahn Chah describes the dependent origination with its twelve links, as I just described the middle ones, he says it happens so fast. It's not like you have moments to explore. "Wait, there's the clinging. There's the grasping. Wait a minute, I know birth is about to come. I can feel 'me' coming." He said it's like if you fall from a tree—it's really

fast and you hit twelve branches on the way down, but boom, you just land in dukkha. You don't really have time to stop and reflect on each branch. There it is. Birth of self, death of self.

He's so funny.

Okay, so that was it for then. But the next day, I came into the dining room, and I looked for that mug.

I pretended to myself I wasn't looking, but you know—I'm not really looking, but let's just look instead of taking the first available mug. Oh, there it is.

So right then, noticing the constriction of wanting, the taking it, the sitting down—this really is a good mug. And so I started thinking maybe I should take it to my room. I started plotting the complications.

I thought, well, my room is all the way at the other end of the building. I'm walking really slow. That means every meal I have to schlep for half an hour walking down to get it, schlep for half an hour back, so I have to start an hour early to get my mug to drink my tea. Okay, maybe not. Put it down. Put it down.

And then it really died. It didn't get born again. But to really see—that's the complications that come from the birth of self, from grasping at something so simple.

So you see, it's fun to watch, right? You don't get all upset about it. Don't take it personally. Every single person on this earth—except maybe our Hans—the mind is concocting like this all the time. And then we beat ourselves up because our mind is doing it. If we had a choice, would you do this? No. It's just what the habits of mind are doing. So we bring in our moment-to-moment mindfulness and explore it.

And seeing the difference between what's effortless—you know, the times of awareness when you're just noticing what's happening. There's interest. It may be clear. It may be vague. That doesn't matter. It may be subtle. It may be gross. That doesn't matter. But there's just a sense of effortless being with what's happening, however it is, until some grasping at some experience comes up and there's a sense of self which just kind of freezes everything. Several people have said that it's so exhausting—the thoughts, the emotions, the moods, what to do.

Here you may not notice immediately what's grasped, whether it's a perception or a feeling or a physical sensation or a mood. But we can at least start to notice when there's that glitch, when there's that sense of narrowing, constricting, when

everything's gotten complicated. Not so much thinking your way in, but just—ah—re-connect with the where. Ah, okay. All tight and complicated feels like this. And you bring in awareness and start exploring it again. See what's really going on.

This is where we can really start to notice the power of simple moment-to-moment unbiased awareness, which we've been talking about the whole time. If we're looking for something, that looking for is already narrowing the field of possibilities, putting on blinders. But when we're just moment to moment, whatever's arising, this willingness to just meet with unbiased awareness—that's what allows for a shift in perception, for recognizing something in a way that we didn't before, for maybe seeing how sense of self is constructed, noticing how it vanishes, how the whole magic show can fall apart.

Okay, just quickly. Someone who's inspiring for me in the sense of giving me the felt sense of this kind of freshness of moment-to-moment unbiased awareness—just the newness, the willingness to be present without an overlay of concept or idea. You know, like I think James showed a picture of a baby, right? Just that newness, that freshness, that willingness or interest to learn.

And it's so tricky because of our perceptions feeling so true and being so subtle, like the blue-green thing. I mean, who knew until you meet it? And how willing are we to just not hold on to the perception and go, oh, maybe it is green—and even trying, you can't see it.

Anyway, someone who inspires me in that way, who just gives me that feeling, is the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. I haven't ever seen him or heard him play in person, but I've seen various videos and movies about him over the years. And I know in the last few years he's been quite involved in a project called the Silk Road, which brings together musicians from all over the world, mostly from along the Silk Road in the Middle East and Asia into China. They get together and compose and play with all the different instruments and all the different kinds of music.

And it's vastly different, you know—he's a trained classical cellist in the Western classical music tradition, and he might be playing with musicians from China or Kazakhstan, from Iran, with different scales and different ways of using tone and music. And they get together and compose together and play together. It's really far out—this whole sense of incredible openness and curiosity. Not just "I play mine and you play yours and we try to appreciate each other," but actually doing it together.

I have to say, when I listen with my untrained ears—ears whose perception is really based on what I've grown up familiar with and liking—I can't get there. I try. I have a couple of the albums and I'll really listen because I love the idea, and my mind is like...

it's far out, but I can't really relax into it. Let me put on my Chopin nocturnes again. And I can see, okay, that's not good or bad—that's just my perception. But his openness is so far out, and I take that as a quality of the freshness of moment-to-moment mindfulness awareness that's possible.

The other video I saw of him was actually in Germany years ago on TV, where he was flying in by helicopter to a small tribe in Africa. They showed him getting out of the helicopter—it was in German, and I really couldn't understand much of what was said, but I didn't really need it. He gets out of the helicopter, and it was prearranged—he was meeting the really old man who was the chief musician of this tribe of bush people. They're getting together, and he has his second-best cello, like a million-dollar cello, that he pulls out of the helicopter. And this man has his instrument, which is literally like a round metal oil can with the top and bottom gone, a long wooden pole, and two strings on it. So he was playing that and singing, and then Yo-Yo Ma would play his cello—they're playing for each other. And then Yo-Yo Ma says, "Oh, let's trade." So they trade instruments, and he's trying to play this thing, going, "I can't play it nearly as well as you." Just such a freshness. It's so far out to have that openness to discover.

And so that's really what we're cultivating here with our moment-to-moment mindfulness. Just notice those moments of, "Wow, look at that—completely identified with this thought. Isn't that amazing?" That's the quality of awareness. "Oh, I thought this is what's happening. It's not what's happening at all." I was sure that person who's driving me bonkers is the one walking across in front of me, over my walking path, and all those thoughts. Finally you look up, even though you're trying not to—it's not that person at all. Cool. Isn't that amazing how that works? And the whole magic show falls apart.

So that's why there's this freshness—this mind of mindfulness allows wisdom to come in when it's not distorted by *kilesa*. And moment by moment by moment, our willingness to just remember mindfulness is what's strengthening the condition for the next moment.

In terms of other aspects of experience that we grasp and create the whole concoction of self from—obviously this is a huge topic; I'm just going to name a few so you can notice in yourself. Perception, as I mentioned, is so easy to grasp and have a sense of self about—like seeing my handwriting, "Oh, my handwriting," the whole world in a second. Fun to watch that.

The sense of body—now this is a huge one. I'm talking about not so much the idea of body; that's an idea. Notice the difference between idea and what's the actuality of the moment's experience. This is what gets really interesting in terms of mindfulness and

perception. We all have ideas about our body, a sense of identification, of grasping to body as self. But explore here: when you feel that, when this is me comes up about the body, don't just end there.

Let your awareness tune into what's the experience in this moment that's being perceived as body and being held to. Because when you start to see that, the magic show breaks down at a moment-to-moment level.

I'll just give a couple of examples. You look for yourself—don't agree with me, and she's full of it, okay? Just look and see what's true for you.

So if I'm sitting with my eyes closed in meditation and my knee's killing me—we all know the difference, I'm sure, between the concept "my knee is killing me" and the sensations of burning. We've talked about that. It's not easy, but it's not rocket science. But often seeing how that sense of identification works with the eyes closed, my knee—what's the actual experience that's being perceived as "my knee" in that moment? And then whether it's pleasant or unpleasant.

So often there really is just sensations of vibrating, for example. I'm calling it my knee. When I think "my knee," there's a mental image that comes in my mind—and it's totally different for any of you. There's a sense of my body, or a mental image of my knee that I don't notice as seeing. And the sense of that mental image, which is just a visual thought, and the particular sensation of vibrating, and a concept of space—like locating the sensation down here, and the mental image is here—and it's all, "that's my knee." And not even questioned, you know? That's my body, that's my knee, and it's causing a ruckus, and then we go off into the concoction of "me."

Just explore. Not to make it go away.

I remember many years ago I was doing a vipassanā practice, Goenkaji style, where you sweep your attention through your body. At one point—I wasn't sitting with Goenkaji then, I was with a different teacher you could actually talk to about stuff—this was a long time ago. I was sweeping through my body, but there would be this overlay of image, an overlay of the image which wasn't the sensations, and it was driving me crazy. Because there's the thought: that's an image, it's in the way of the sensation, I can't feel the knee because there's the image of the knee. You know how that is—you get this idea that this is wrong and it drives you crazy? Did that ever happen to any of you here in your practice?

And I went to the teacher, and thank God, he goes, "Yeah, okay, the image is the image, the sensation is the sensation—what's the problem? You just notice what's happening." Sound familiar? It's like, oh, right, image, sensation, fine. We don't have to put it together into some big show. Just look and see.

You look in the mirror and there's this whole idea of me, my body—it's horrible, it's beautiful. It's just a seeing. It's just an image, that image in the mirror. It's just a sight, you know? Is it me? And then we start thinking about it and construct it all. But just with moment-to-moment awareness—not to get all woo-woo and falling apart, but just being in the moment—what's the perception? What's being held to in the moment? How is the mind concocting a whole story, a sense of me?

And notice: you turn away from the mirror, and say you've had all these horrible thoughts about how you've aged ten years in the last three weeks and you're never going to do another retreat, you look like hell. And you turn away from the mirror—that whole concoction falls away. You think, oh, it's time for lunch—it's all gone. Notice that. Just notice that. It's really interesting.

Another big one—big one—vedanā, this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feeling tone. It's a mental experience of how the mind feels an experience. And often it's the vedanā, the pleasant feeling of something, the unpleasant feeling of something that the mind is clinging to, and often that's not quite noticed. An example: say you've been having a series of good sittings.

Really pleasant, really calm, really peaceful or light, whatever it is. And you know it's pleasant and you like it, but after a while you're really being mindful, you're aware of liking it. "I know it's going to go away," you're telling yourself, and you really believe it. "I know this is conditioned, I know it's going to go away. I'm not clinging." Right? "I'm not clinging." We really think we're not clinging. We know it's going to go. It goes away, and by gum, somehow we're really bummed out.

So there was clinging, but you really don't think you were clinging to the experience. Often it's that pleasant feeling quality arising moment to moment with perception that the clinging is to, and we don't quite recognize that.

Or clinging to the unpleasant. Yes, why would we cling to the unpleasant? Because we're nuts. But we keep, like I said the other day, we keep focusing on the repugnant aspect of something, and that marries us to the thing just as much as holding on to the pleasant.

So all we're saying is just bring that fresh awareness and notice it—not get rid of it, just notice. What's the magic show? How's it concocting us? I mentioned the other night, Buddhadasa often talks about how much pleasant feeling we base our life on. He's saying more just notice the wave-like nature: pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, arising and passing every moment. When we start to just notice that, well, I guess it's crazy to base our life around wanting pleasant. But we know it's crazy. It happens anyway. There's no point in saying that. But just noticing this.

The third level—and this, again, yes, I'm going through the Satipaṭṭhāna, the four foundations of mindfulness—is mindfulness of mind: emotions, moods, states of mind. And of course this is a huge area where we perceive and there's a sense of grasping to a particular mood, a particular description, a series of thoughts about ourself. This is really a big area.

And what's interesting, the Buddha says in terms of experiencing the sensations of body and bringing awareness to the movements of mind, the mind is changing so much more rapidly than the body. It's so much more obviously impermanent that if you're going to—he didn't exactly say it this way—if you're going to identify with something, it makes more sense to identify with the body.

But really, maybe—this is me, not the Buddha—because the mind's changing so rapidly, to me that's really a much stronger place where I don't notice that subtle grasping to a particular perception, a particular mood. And we really—that's me, right? This happens so much more quickly.

I mean, I'm sure you've noticed how when a mood comes, even though you can say to yourself, "This wasn't here yesterday, probably won't be here tomorrow"—but it's a difficult mood—isn't part of it telling you, "But this is really how it is. And this is really who I am, deep in the depths. Even though I didn't know it before, I wasn't aware of it yesterday, but it was there, waiting to come out. It was really there. I just was ignoring it in my delusion."

But really just noticing how and what is being clung to, and how that concocts a sense of self.

From Ajahn Sumedho: "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit. My views, my feelings, and my opinions."

Right? And you see how that can happen from any sense experience? This is also a really fun thing to explore, sort of in the way of the stories that Andrea was talking about the other night. From anything. The most innocuous sense experience. You see a

deer. "Oh, yes, see. Ah, the cute deer." And Bambi, and the fifth grade, and Old Yeller, and it's endless. Pretty soon I go to Old Yeller and I'm in trauma. Really, I mean, that really did a job on me when I was five years old. And if you're too young to have seen the movie, it's just as well. It's about a dog.

Or something beautiful comes and you're, "Oh, beauty in my life," and then something difficult comes, "Oh, the horrible things in my life," and it's just flipping back and forth every two minutes. But without noticing that each is a new concoction, birth and death of self. We don't really get that. We think it's a steady state.

Ajahn Sumedho then: "But if I recognize that I'm taking off—it's my taking off into orbit—if I recognize that, then my refuge is no longer in being that person."

I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or my views and opinions. So then the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. Just noticing that.

This whole huge world of Carol can come up around seeing a deer, and then you turn around, the whole thing drops away and it's gone. Notice that. Notice the gone-ness. Notice the seething power of these emotions and stories and thoughts, but the absolute emptiness of them when we don't keep buying into the grasping, when we just notice how the magic show's working.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse, and I'll read it: "I, the sense of I, is just a thought. Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When a thought of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is that anger in the mind actually holding a weapon? Is it at the head of an army? Can it really burn things or carry them away like a violent river? No, that actual anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no lasting self-existence. It's just like wind roaring in empty space."

I love that. With any strong emotion—beautiful ones too—we don't have to damp it down. It's just like wind roaring in empty space. We don't need to grasp it, we don't need to fear it, we don't need to do anything about it. Just let the wind roar in the empty space and it blows itself out. No problem. When there's not that grasping sense of self—when there is, just let it roar and notice when it falls away again.

So we're just tuning in when there's this contraction of grasping. And of course, I can't go into even more subtle experience like motivation, volition. We always talk about that—who's the one deciding to move? Just a mental factor arising. Or the sense of knowing, of consciousness itself. Because it's arising every moment and it's so subtle, again, it can feel like me. There can just be this subtle grasping, tightening, contracting around it.

So just noticing whenever you feel that little or gross—incredibly gross or subtle—sense of the contraction of grasping and experience that sense of self. Notice the birth of self. Get interested in how the magic show's concocted. Notice when it falls away. As Ajahn Buddhadasa says, birth and death of self happens hundreds of times in a day. So just as we notice the birth, notice the death, and notice the times in between.

He says—this is Buddhadasa again—it's truly normal and natural that the nature of the mind is just to be aware. The times when there's no birth of self after death of self is just awake, calm. Spacious is a metaphor that's often used—spacious as opposed to the narrowness of fixation, of clinging. But space can be an idea that we also cling to.

He says, in any moment when the heart is not clinging or grasping at something and creating a sense of self—in any moment when that's not present—this is Buddhadasa's language—we truly realize emptiness. Because just the emptiness of sense of self, it's truly normal and natural. It's not like some huge endpoint that we've got to get to. It's just the way things are.

Understanding or recognizing anattā isn't like something that's here driving the bus goes away. We just recognize differently. It's not like everything falls apart because now we're not holding it all together. I mean, we're not doing such a great job trying to hold it together, let's face it. It's that, in fact, the burden of trying to hold it together falls away. And it's just truly normal and natural to notice the time between births.

That's why, as we were seeing, periods of calm can be interesting. But you see how uncomfortable calm is. The mind is what Buddhadasa calls "volunteering for suffering." It's calm, nothing's going on. All of a sudden—oh, let's get something going on. Let me think about this horrible thing that might happen in ten years. I'd rather be a suffering self than just this calmness in between taking birth and death of self.

Just notice it.

And the last thing I want to point out is that while reality does not change—the sense of emptiness of self, this natural state of things—this is not the emptiness of disconnection or the calmness of just not caring, of nothing matters. That's not clear perception. That's not the liberating truth the Buddha is pointing us to. It's not passive, unfeeling, or uncaring.

It's really the doorway that opens when our mind and heart isn't all caught up in this obsessive self-referencing. That's when metta and compassion and wisdom naturally become our responses.

The Tibetans said, once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative. It just doesn't make sense. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously. Just in a moment, in a moment.

Two other quick quotations. From Dogen Zenji: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers"—I would say the seeming barriers—"between oneself and others."

And the last, from Mary Oliver: "Love yourself, then forget it, then love the world."

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 138

Wise Intention

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses a question central to Buddhist practice: how does the quiet, inward work of meditation relate to our actions in the world? Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "a wise person is characterized by her actions," she explores the critical relationship between awareness, intention (cetanā), and ethical conduct.*
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> *Wilson distinguishes between macro-level aspiration—our overarching sense of purpose that guides our lives—and micro-level intention, the moment-to-moment impulses that actually lead to speech and action. She emphasizes that good intentions alone are insufficient; what matters is the quality of mind present in each moment of action. The same words spoken from compassion versus frustration carry entirely different karmic weight. Through the example of a young man in prison who wished he could take back "three to five seconds" of reactive violence, she illustrates how unexamined mental habits can manifest in devastating ways.*
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> *The talk draws on the Buddha's teaching that "intention is karma" and explores clear comprehension (sampajañña) as a framework for understanding our motivations. Wilson shares how visiting Dachau deepened her commitment to examining even subtle mental habits of aversion, fear, and greed—recognizing that ordinary people, not uniquely evil individuals, participate in collective violence when seeds of unwholesome intention remain unexamined. She concludes with the transformative power of steady awareness: how ill will naturally transforms to mettā, cruelty to compassion, and greed to generosity when met with wisdom. Quoting Martin Luther King Jr., she affirms that true nonviolence means refusing not only external violence but the internal violence of hatred.*

Tonight I want to talk a bit about—well, this sounds grandiose—how do we manifest embodied awakening? Or more specifically, something that I've heard in a couple of questions: what's the relationship between the meditation practice we're doing, this very inward, quiet, subtle practice, and actions in the world? Does it relate at all? Is it some kind of esoteric, isolated, disconnected activity? Obviously the answer is no, but I want to talk a bit about that.

The Buddha was very clear that the way our awakened mind and heart manifests is in our actions. This is a quotation: "A wise person is characterized by her actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's discernment shines." He also says a fool is characterized by her actions as well. In other words, how we act in the world is reflect-

ive of the understanding, the wisdom that's been cultivated, that's grown in our heart, in our mind. So it's obvious, but just to say that what we're doing here is not somehow isolated in any way.

Not that it's an immediate cause and effect—as soon as you see something, you're perfect in the world. But in the big picture, if there's someone you know, or you hear of teachers or whoever, claiming all this wisdom, and you see that they're really acting in unskillful, inappropriate, harmful ways, that's something to really look at, something to really pay attention to.

So I want to talk about this sense that our wisdom manifests in our actions. It's not so straightforward though, is it? The wisdom that manifests isn't just the ideas that non-harming is a good thing—I mean, we could probably sign up for that. That greed causes suffering—maybe you're ready to sign up for that. But the wisdom isn't just the idea that it would be a good thing not to do certain things and to do other things. I think we know that, right? "I'm not going to get angry anymore." Good luck. We can sincerely mean that. We can sincerely mean it. But it's not enough wisdom—moment to moment wisdom—to truly transform how we respond, how we act in the world.

When we don't deeply, truly understand how our minds are working, the habits of our mind—and we've been going on about this the whole time, really emphasizing that the steadiness of awareness allows us to see all the habits that occur, the habits of the kleshas of greed, hatred, and confusion, how they manifest, how they arise, how they act, how they bring us suffering—not as some kind of esoteric exercise just for the hell of it, but because when we don't really know, when we don't really watch and we don't understand how these habits work, and also the beautiful habits, how they transform in the light of awareness—when we don't understand, then even with the so-called best intentions, we find ourselves doing something completely opposite.

I heard this on the radio sometime last year. It really haunted me, on public radio. It was an interview with two men—I came in in the middle of it, so I can't tell you who they were or the whole of what they were talking about. I can only give you this little snippet that haunted me. They were talking about some project they have, working with people in prison for violent crimes, some project of working with interrupting violence. That was the name of it. I missed everything else, except for this little quotation they mentioned from some young man who was in prison for an act of violence. The quote from him was: "I wish I could take back that three to five seconds" of his life when he reacted in a situation with violence that has completely changed and informed the whole rest of his life. Three to five seconds—when we just don't know, we just don't see what our mind and heart, how it's reacting in that moment. It's amazing.

We can see that in ourselves. It may not be a violent crime; it may be that I've had enough cake and you find yourself up there with your hand in the cake again. How did that happen? How could that have happened? That's little, that's not a horrible thing, but it's that same sense of not really being aware of what the mind is doing in that moment.

So that's what I want to talk about: this sense of bringing awareness to the intentions in the heart, in the mind. The Buddha said very clearly, over and over, that the seed of action, the seed of karma, is intention—that motivation in the heart and mind that leads to speech and action.

So in this level of intention, it's that *cetanā*, the word in Pali, that about-to movement—not the macro, which I'll talk about as well, but the micro, the moment-to-moment impulse in the mind and heart that leads to speech and action.

In our practice here, we say over and over that mindfulness, unbiased awareness, doesn't care what's arising. Our job of awareness is simply to see. Whatever's coming up in the mind, whatever mood or emotion or train of thought, we simply need to be present for it. With pure awareness, watch it. Don't try to suppress it. If greed comes, watch it. If fear comes, be with it. If ill will is arising, be present with it. Ill will is like this. We're not saying act it out, but we're not saying suppress it. It's all equal opportunity for awareness.

So then the question comes: when does it matter? Does it ever matter? Does it ever make a difference? And this is where, when we're not completely aware, it does matter. Whatever qualities are in the psyche, the consciousness in a particular moment—whether it's greed or ill will or compassion or equanimity or *mettā*—they cohere in that moment to form an intention, that about-to movement that leads to speech and action. It matters.

The Buddha was so clear that the seed of action isn't the result, which is how we tend to evaluate it, but it's in the quality of the intention itself, in that internal moment, which makes it wholesome or unwholesome, karmically. So learning through the steadiness of mindfulness practice, really cultivating an interest, a commitment—not just as an interesting practice, but truly seeing how we understand the workings of our mind, how wisdom comes in and understands what leads to suffering and what leads to freedom in our own mind and heart—is going to impact the way we respond and act in the world.

This is why it takes such a commitment, a willingness on our part to keep showing up for the whole show. It's not in our control. We know that. We space out, we come back. But the willingness to keep looking—I find for myself that over the years the commitment keeps changing, keeps deepening, keeps changing form.

Recently, what re-inspired my commitment was something I've mentioned before, but it had quite an effect. A few years ago, when I was in Germany, I decided I really wanted to visit Dachau, which is set up as a museum—one of the concentration camps. I went there, and I was grateful I went by myself, because I had time to simply walk through and reflect.

It's set up quite skillfully as a museum. They had some of the original buildings, and others were no longer standing—just the foundations. One sense I got was how huge it was. German friends later told me, "But that was one of the small ones."

The museum was arranged with large plaques and posters describing different aspects of the whole situation—the internment camps, the concentration camps, the people who worked there, the things that went on, the different people who were interned. There might be a poster showing all the different nationalities of people in the concentration camp, or people of different sexual orientations, or the Roma, or others—not only Jewish people, but all kinds of people. People who worked there, things doctors did, people who brought in the bread, people in the community who did this and that. They described all these different aspects. So it's huge—so many people involved.

Then often there would be a specific person whose story they would tell. This made it quite immediate for me—it takes it out of the vastness to the personal. We can relate a little better when it's this one person who was the baker, or this one person who went through this particular difficult experience.

In a strange way, what it really did was deepen, really deepen my faith in the Dharma, in our practice, in the depth and power of awareness and steady wisdom to truly transform our hearts and minds. It re-deepened my commitment to keep looking, because the vastness of it took me to the place of recognizing: this is just people. You can't say this is a few really evil people. It's normal people, like me.

And then you look around the world. How many horrific scenarios are happening right now—I don't need to take you through them all; I'm not here to do that—but one could. Horrific scenarios, now, in the past twenty years, throughout all of history, involving thousands and hundreds of thousands of people. They can't all be evil people different from me.

I do not know. I do not know how I would react or respond if I were in a particular situation of genocide, in a concentration camp, or if someone in my family was being threatened unless I did something I felt was wrong. I do not know.

And so the sense that it took me to is a deepening of my willingness, my commitment—and I keep revisiting it—to really look and see: what are the habits of my mind? How will I act in a situation I haven't been in before, one that's scary or difficult or pressured? Just thinking, "Well, I'm a good person, I wouldn't do that"—no. Forget it. Like this young guy in jail, three to five seconds. When the conditions are there, if there are still tendencies to greed or ill will or fear or aversion—yes, there are still tendencies to all of that. And so far, everyone I know has these tendencies.

If we don't want to see it, or if we take it as not personal—this is just the habits that have been cultivated through how we've grown up and what we've learned, what we've been talking about the whole time—if we're afraid to see it or we're not in the habit of looking, if we don't really have that faith in the steadiness of awareness and trust that wisdom really does transform the habits, then we're either going to drown and not look, or we're going to delude ourselves. We just really don't know. We just really don't know.

And so this is where we bring our practice in. This is a laboratory here on retreat, but your mind here—do you think it's a different mind from the one you have in your daily life? No. Maybe you're having some nicer states than you get in daily life. Maybe you're having some really whacked-out states that make you think, "I don't have those in my daily life." Yeah, right. It might be about an orange. It's not about something really important. But the state is similar. This is what we're here to discover.

This commitment to really look, to really look in our mind and heart and see—it's why all the aspects of the path that the Buddha taught, as far as I can understand, of metta, the brahmaviharas, the generosity that Greg talked about, sila, non-harming behavior, meditation—it's not like you do one so you can do the next. All of them are different angles to come in and purify the habits of our heart and mind.

When we talk about the pure mind, moments when it's not acting out of greed, hatred, or confusion, it's not just because it feels good. It's not just, "Oh great, something to get to." It's because the more and more these habits change, the more we can learn to really recognize and rest in the pure heart and mind instead of taking refuge in ill will or fear or greed. I mean, we don't consciously say that's what we're taking refuge in, but where do we go in times of stress? That's what starts to change when the heart and mind begins to be purified. That's what we're doing here.

All those moments where nothing is happening, it's just calm—these are really important moments. Those moments when it's calm and you watch your mind, as I said last time, volunteering for suffering. It's calm, and you'd rather make up something to get upset about. At least then you can explore it. That's the habit of mind, of "me" and aversion popping up.

All these moments of moment-to-moment mindfulness of the mundane. Okay, it's not calm, but you just feel sensation in your foot. You're watching yourself want a third piece of cake. You eat it or you don't eat it, but you pay attention to why you're doing it. Why is sitting, the breath, hearing—so what? It's not "so what." Every moment that's a moment of pure awareness, not filled with greed, hatred, or confusion, is really important. This is the beginning of purification, which just means switching habits. The habits begin to change. And this is what's going to change our whole life and the way we relate and the way we are with other people—so that we don't have our own three to five seconds of unaware, really violent, really harmful, really selfish behavior. Or not too often.

I want to talk a bit about mindfulness of intention, both in the macro and the micro, because sometimes we get confused in that way. In some of the commentaries, they talk about clear comprehension—sati sampajañña. Sati is mindfulness. Sampajañña is the word often translated as clear comprehension. One way to talk about it is recognizing that our mindfulness practice isn't just a narrow focus but includes a broader range of appropriateness.

And really, what's our purpose? Why are we doing what we're doing?

In the broad, macro sense of intention—and in English we use "motivation" and "intention" somewhat interchangeably, which can be confusing when we apply these terms to both macro and micro levels—I want to offer some clarification, as this has come up here.

When we talk about aspiration, like at the beginning of the retreat when you had your small groups discuss your aspiration for practice, or like the Tibetan practice I mentioned the other day of clarifying your aspiration at the start of a practice period—that's more macro. It's a sense of what's really important here, not just in this moment.

Aspiration, in terms of wholesome aspiration, in terms of what's onward leading, what really brings us energy, brightness, faith, and confidence—what got you here? What keeps you here other than social pressure? That's micro-intention: "I'm here out of fear." But the aspiration... in some moments that's true. We just notice that. That's

okay. Social pressure can be useful at times. But the bigger aspiration, whatever that is for you—and that might change from time to time—is really this sense of: What's truly important in my life? It's important to take time to tune into that and see.

I think this story is funny. Lama Surya Das was writing about an incident with one of his teachers who has since died, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was really one of the most profound Dzogchen masters around. Rinpoche had gone to the ocean in France, and Surya writes: "It must have been the first time that Khenpo had seen the beach"—he comes from Tibet, right?—"and observed exactly what Westerners do there."

When he came back to the monastery, he was giving a Dharma talk and suddenly veered off and started talking about the beach. He said, "It was so big!" Then he excitedly described what he had seen: "There were these people there, and instead of sitting and meditating or doing yoga, they were just lying there, almost naked, doing nothing. And then when they were tired of lying there, instead of doing something, they just turned over. And then they lay there again for another few hours."

Khenpo was truly, genuinely perplexed. Why were they doing that? He couldn't understand it, but he had so much compassion for them. And this reflects his sense of: How could they waste their precious human existence? This life is so short, so precious, so valuable—not to be squandered, but to be used impeccably, usefully, for the benefit and welfare of all.

You get a sense of what was important to him. Don't take that as a judgment, but to me it's inspiring. "Not just lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard!" He got really impassioned. He said, "I just wanted to go wake them up." And he saw this big white chair—obviously the lifeguard's chair—and he said, "But there were two people sitting there, so I couldn't go up. But I wanted really badly to climb up there and announce to everybody that it was time to wake up."

It's funny, but take it as a reminder. And again, this isn't from judgment; this is from really touching in deeply in your heart and mind, honestly—not what you think you should or ought to feel, because that's just disconnection, but what's really important to you. Then, whether every day or once in a while, really take the time to tune in and see what's truly important. Use it as a guideline. This is called clear comprehension of purpose or aspiration. This is the macro level.

But as I've said, while it's really important, it's not enough. Because what really leads to behavior is the moment-to-moment micro intentions that I've been mentioning. As the Buddha said, "Intention, I tell you, is karma"—the movement, the quality in the mind or heart that leads to speech and action.

I know you've all heard this, and it may not be how we normally tend to think. We tend to think—compassion is a good example—that we do something to help.

That's a compassionate action. It may be. It may be. But it really depends on what the motivation is in the mind. We tend to judge by the result, or how it looks. But that's out of our control. Or we judge by the situation around it, but we often don't know the situation. The only thing that's in our control—and if there's mindfulness we do have a moment of choice—is to learn how to get in touch and notice why we're doing what we're doing.

The same action could arise from so many different intentions. I always use the same example because it's just a really easy one. Say you have the idea that there's someone you care about who has a particular kind of behavior that's bringing them suffering, and you really want to help them with that. That impulse could arise in the mind really from a place of caring and compassion. But they're not around then, so you're not saying it then. Our tendency is to just have that thought—oh, that's a good idea—and then we don't pay attention. When the time comes, we just say it. But we're not noticing that just because the idea was coming from compassion three days ago doesn't mean it still is. We assume it's steady state until we do it, and we stop paying attention. That's not the case at all.

So when the time comes to say this compassionate thing, the same phrase could be said from frustration, impatience, hostility, or just complete ignorance. The poor person comes schlepping in at the end of the day, totally exhausted, the kids are screaming, they're trying to make dinner, and you say, "I really have something important to tell you. You've been doing this bad thing for fifteen years and people hate you for it. It would be good to change. Out of all the love in my heart, I'm sharing this"—completely oblivious to what's going on. The same words. Or one day you could say it and really take the time to stop and connect, and it really does come from compassion. It's the kind of thing we see in the compassion practice—you're saying those phrases and noticing all the different feelings that come with it. That's what we're practicing to see: to really see why we're doing what we're doing.

It's these little moment-to-moment movements that, if we're not aware, the habits of mind will tend to surface. As the Buddha said over and over, what we frequently think and ponder upon, that becomes the inclination of our mind. Which, you know, is a little scary sometimes to think about, but it's really important to see. And that importance can bring in this willingness to really look.

Now, the beauty of the willingness to keep noticing, what we've been saying all along, is that the natural effect of clear seeing, of wisdom, when the mindfulness has momentum—say, going back to wanting to say that compassionate thing, but you keep paying attention, you see how the idea was compassionate, but now you're just ticked off at the person. You can see that, so you don't say it. You don't say it. The wisdom allows us to see the ill will, not flinch away from it, not take it personally, and it gives us this moment of choice.

From the space of wisdom, the habits of greed, of holding on, of ill will, hostility, cruelty—those habits naturally transform in the light of wisdom. That's what's so far out about this, what really lends, in my mind, the sense of trust and confidence, the willingness to look, the willingness to see. Because when we do—and I know you've all been seeing this here at times, and then it rebounds and we get lost again—but there are times when you're really just watching craving, watching craving, even watching the mind act on it, but you still watch it without a lot of judgment. And at some point the wisdom, the paññā, just comes in: I really don't need that. You've had that moment where the mind just puts it down and you think, "Oh, I let go," but you didn't let go. Wisdom saw, and craving stopped arising because it didn't make sense. It's so much easier than thinking you have to figure it out and let go. All we have to do is be willing to trust the awareness enough to keep being steady, to keep looking. This stuff naturally transforms. It's really amazing.

Guy likes to say—maybe he said it in some of his talks here, I don't know—he talks about thinking that it's really a beneficent universe. When he first said it, I thought, with my aversive mind, "Beneficent universe? Are you reading the papers? Are you paying attention to history? How can you say that?" But what he means is this: when there's clear seeing, the natural effect of wisdom is yathābhūta, seeing clearly things as they have come to be in this moment. In the heart-mind of purity, in that moment, a thought of harm does not arise. The thought of "it's all about me, more for me and less for you" doesn't arise. You don't have to let go of it. It is dissipated by itself.

That's the trust. That's the sense of beneficent universe that's so far out. It really gives me the faith and the willingness to keep on looking at all the relatively unpleasant moments when the other habits are popping up. We really need to see them.

So this sense of the macro—having clarity within yourself about what is truly important to you. What is your sense of purpose or aspiration? And that can change, you know, as we go through life and as we go through our practice. That's wonderful if it changes. Just keep checking in.

The way it's described is that it gives us a kind of collectedness—it gathers our dispersed energy. It serves as a guideline, as a reminder. If we don't have an overarching sense of what's really important in life, then even when we're paying attention, we just respond haphazardly. We make this choice, we make that choice, not necessarily in a harmful way, but there's no direction, no focus. Whereas if we have a sense of what's important, it can inform our choices. It collects the dispersed energy.

For example, think of having a family. There are probably many sacrifices and many choices you make where you don't do something you want to do, where you give up all kinds of activities in order to support your kids, to be there for them, to be with the family. And it doesn't even—well, it may sometimes—but generally it's not a resentful thing. It's a choice out of compassion, out of metta, out of generosity. You're just doing the obvious, as one teacher said.

You get a sense of how the family gives collectedness, gathers the dispersed energy. It doesn't mean every moment is filled with total compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity. But when there's a choice to make, the sense of what's really important is something we can reference that truly supports us.

In terms of our practice—which is our whole life, not just sitting here—in terms of continuing to cultivate wisdom and awareness, tuning in to your aspiration can give us great determination, resolution, which is one of the paramis. It's the sense of willingness to keep going even in the face of difficulty.

One example of this was the Chinese Chan master, Master Sheng Yen. I don't know if any of you knew who he was. He died just a few years ago. I had a couple of retreats with him in Taiwan. He was a very inspiring, wonderful being—quite realized, very kind, very relational, a great teacher. In Taiwan, he was kind of like the Dalai Lama of Taiwan, with this huge following, tens of thousands of people. But when he would come and teach here, he was just very simple and relational. It's like being around the Dalai Lama—people around just feel good because he's so kind. He manifests compassion and simplicity and kindness. And it's contagious. Wholesomeness is contagious because it's true for us too.

Anyway, Sheng Yen was wonderful that way. He wrote in his autobiography, describing his life, and this quality of aspiration leading to resolution and clarity in his decisions was very inspiring to me.

He was born in mainland China, way before the revolution, before World War II, into a very poor farming family. He became a monk, a Buddhist monk, when he was quite young out in the country. It was very difficult—not much food, very harsh conditions all over. He basically struggled most of his growing up and his young period of being a monk. It was always a period of deprivation.

After World War II, during the time when the Civil War started going again very strongly, he was in Shanghai, I believe, in a monastery. Just when the communists, when Mao, seemed to be winning in 1949, and the nationalists went to Taiwan, he said he knew his commitment was to be a Buddhist monk. That was his life. That's what he was. And he realized that if he stayed in mainland China, he wouldn't be able to do that. They were destroying the monasteries, and he'd either be killed or forced to disrobe. So he wanted to get to Taiwan in order to continue being a monk.

Well, he had nothing. He was poor. The only way he could get there was by signing up with the nationalist army, Chiang Kai-shek's army, and then they would take him over. So he did that. He signed up and was enlisted, and he got over to Taiwan. But it wasn't like he could arrive and say, "Okay, thanks a lot. I'm now withdrawing from the army." Fat chance. So he was there at least ten years, serving in the army.

And he said, you know, the whole time he lived as a vegetarian. Often he didn't have enough food. He said only would he ever eat meat if he was actually really starving, but then he would if he had to. He said the whole time, "In my heart, I was a Buddhist monk." But he was in the army and he had to live and do what you're told in the army, right? But somehow, luckily, he got some kind of a job where—well, they weren't really fighting too much—but he didn't have to do any kind of fighting or any kind of violence. But still, he said it was extremely difficult. Extremely difficult.

And then it was through a whole series of really unexpected events that things began to shift. He says it was extremely difficult, almost impossible for anyone to get out of the army ever—not just like in a few years. But somehow, after time, he managed to meet some other Chan masters on the island. And just through a series of events born from his deep commitment, he would take whatever time off he had and go off and do very strenuous practice in caves with these masters. Just really tough.

And at some point, finally—I don't even remember how—through meeting a couple of masters and someone knowing someone in the government and someone writing a letter, he finally got out of the army after ten years. But the thing is, he said he never in all that time ever abandoned his deep aspiration and intention: *I am a Buddhist monk and this is what I'm doing.* And when he got out of the army, the first thing he did was go on a six-year retreat. A six-year retreat. And he was just this lovely, lovely guy.

So the sense of the power of aspiration, of touching into it—we don't know what will unfold. And then it has to inform our moment-to-moment actions and decisions. You couldn't just say, "I'm a Buddhist monk," and then sit back and let it happen. You have to do all these actions, and you don't ever know. We never know how any action's going to turn out. So we have to be as clear as we can in the moment. And then in this moment. And then in this moment. We never can be in charge of what's going to happen.

So that's where, for me, this sense of recommitment from being at Dachau—it keeps coming up these last few years, and it's been quite alive. Sometimes it's a little demoralizing when I'm really looking, but other times it's really inspiring because it makes me want to look and see, okay, what habits are still showing up? And it's in the little things.

I noticed last year, I think, I was on a kind of self-retreat—just relaxed, simple, quiet, very peaceful. And I remember at some point I was doing a little walking and some little aversive thing came up. No big deal at all, just a little bit of aversion, and then it was gone. And I could see how my mind would go, "That's no big deal, no problem." I mean, it wasn't a problem. It wasn't bothering me or anybody. But I thought, no, wait, come back a minute. That's the habit of aversion showing up in a really mild way. But you know what? That's not acceptable. In the big picture. I mean, in the moment, yeah, it's just what it is. But in the big picture—remember, I think I quoted, or one of us did, the Buddha saying, "Do not settle merely for wholesome states of mind."

Not like, okay, there's a little bit of aversion, a little bit of greed, it comes, it goes, there's a lot of awareness, it's manageable, it's good enough. It's good enough, but no, it wasn't good enough. It re-inspires me to keep looking, to keep seeing, okay, what are the little habits? Let's see them instead of going, "Well, it's good enough," and then stopping paying attention.

So with little things—when you suddenly slam down the phone or get a little annoyed with that person on the other end calling from Social Security, or not answering, or not even a person, that voicemail, the three and a half hours of voicemail. Still, aversion comes up in the mind. Noticing that. Not with judgment, but with interest, with care, with a willingness to see. Because these are the habits that are going to manifest.

I notice for me sometimes when I go to make a compassionate offering to a homeless person, I just feel a little bit of fear—whether I offer or not. Notice that little bit of fear. Just begin to see where the habits are arising, because this seeing with wisdom, with caring, is what allows for their natural transformation. Otherwise, if we don't see these seeds, they can sprout, given the appropriate circumstances.

And probably many of you are aware that I go to Burma. I've been going every year for the last thirteen years or something. And in the last two or three years, I'm sure you're aware because it's in the news, that there started being more violence—Buddhist and Muslim violence—which is really heartbreaking to read about and see. And again, it's like little pockets here and there, and one can have all kinds of ideas about how it's being fomented and how seeds are being planted and directed from external forces, and all of that. And that

could all be true—I think it is true—but still, it's like lots of people, decent people. Not people I know personally, but I know a lot of Burmese people, just people like us. And all of a sudden there's some kind of mob violence that sweeps through. What's that about? And that can't happen if there's not a seed to be triggered.

The seed might be fear. The seed might be fear that's been fed by propaganda, fed by fear of losing your family, fed by all kinds of circumstances. But if we're not aware of how fear comes up in our own mind and heart, how it gets triggered, and we're not able to hang out with it—which fear is a hard one to hang out with—but we haven't had practice hanging out with it, then that's the seed for acting out of it. Get rid of those guys, because if they're gone then I don't have to be afraid.

So this isn't about judging other people, but looking and seeing in my own heart, in my own mind: what are the seeds that still show up? And they're little. It's not a judgment. That's the whole point I really want to make—this commitment to be interested, to see for ourselves. And then we see how naturally, and this is really what's so amazing, how the unwholesome habits, as I mentioned before, really do transform.

I want you to also notice not just the unwholesome habits, but how the wholesome ones are coming up. Not just the purity, but for instance, Greg talked about generosity the other night. The habit—and this is what the Buddha talks about—wise intention. The unwise intention of greed, of holding on, naturally transforms in the light of steady awareness, first to renunciation. Not the renunciation of "oh, good things, pleasant things are bad, put it down." That's called aversion. But a simplicity: okay, I don't need this. And then that transforms to generosity.

The renunciation and the generosity, the wholesome intentions—one way you can tell they're wholesome is because the state of mind and heart is expansive, even joyful. When I touch real renunciation, when the mind just puts down something, there's a sense of simplicity, of ease, of openness. It's not a sense of deprivation at all. And I'm sure Greg talked about generosity, and I know he told stories about the happiness that comes from giving. Really, if you're giving something and thinking, "Oh God, I've got to

give this away, but I really wish I could keep it," it's not really generosity. But the sense of, wow, just the happiness that the open-handedness gives us—that's the purified intention, that's the wise intention. Notice it.

It's not feeding the ego to notice the wholesome. I know James has gone on about this a lot, so I don't have to go into it. But it's not feeding the ego to feel the happiness of generosity or the simplicity and ease and openness of renunciation. And in the same way, ill will transforms to friendliness, to mettā, and cruelty or harshness transforms to the wise intention of compassion.

I want to say just a little bit, because there's not much time, about those two, kind of mixing them together, how that happens.

Ill will or cruelty, the unwise intentions, obviously arise when we're in contact with something painful or difficult. The difficulty with compassion—someone mentioned it this morning—is when some really difficult, painful situation with someone else comes up and we feel pain, connected to that. Or difficulty in our own hearts and minds, and we beat ourselves up about it, thinking it shouldn't be there. That's cruelty.

Ill will, which transforms to mettā—ill will comes from really focusing on the unlovable over and over. Whereas mettā comes from the connection of really letting our attention fully connect with the being, starting by seeing the good, but then widening out to connect with them just as they are. Unwise attention to the repugnant aspect of a person or a thing breeds ill will. It's just cause and effect.

So our habit of mind that feeds ill will, the lack of mettā and compassion, is this "get me away from this." I was sharing with somebody in an interview—Larry Rosenberg, who's really funny. He's a teacher in Cambridge, grew up in Brooklyn. He's like eighty now, hard to believe. Anyway, he used to watch a lot of old movies, and I remember him years ago saying—I have no idea if it's true, but he said it—that he'd read somewhere that they'd done some kind of study about what's the most frequent line in all movies. I mean, who has time to do studies like this? But anyway, one of the most frequent lines was: "Let's get out of here." And so, that's what ill will and cruelty, non-mettā, non-compassion is saying: let's get out of here.

Wisdom and mindfulness are saying, "Let's just be here for a moment."

As Joko Beck says, "Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?" That's just mindfulness. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? That's not the same as "How can I fix it? How can I make it go away? How can I feel better about it?" It's just: can I find the willingness to rest?

That's just the start. That's the start of mindfulness. It hasn't quite transformed yet, but actually it is transformed in that moment when there's the willingness to rest with full presence in the difficult situation. Ill will or cruelty are not arising. The sense of connection—which is really how I think of metta and compassion—is arising. That's a moment of friendliness, of acceptance. That's a moment of wisdom transforming the habit of mind.

If one can stay with that situation in this way of just resting there with awareness, and there is something that can be done to alleviate it, that will be seen more clearly when it's not distorted by fear, by ill will, by needing to fix it so I don't feel pain, or by just not being able to bear another's pain. Then we might jump in and try to help, and maybe we'll see clearly and help—and maybe not. Sometimes compassion is just the ability to be there when there's nothing we can do.

One of my favorite examples of this comes from the beginning of a long poem by Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous Russian poets of the 20th century. She lived in the Soviet Union through the whole period from before World War I, through the Communist Revolution, and all the terrors of the Stalinist regime where twenty million people were arrested and put into the gulag camps. She knew many people—her first husband, her son—who were arrested and imprisoned. She had originally been from a kind of aristocratic class, and many of her friends, when they saw what was coming, emigrated to live in France or Paris. But she made the decision not to leave, in order to bear witness to what was happening in her country.

This is the beginning of a long poem called *Requiem*, about the years from 1935 to 1940, the height of the Stalinist terror, when so many people were being arrested. She writes:

Not under the protection of foreign skies
or saving myself on wings of alien birth,
I was then there with my whole nation,
there where my nation, alas, was.

And then, instead of a preface, she writes: "In the awful days of the Yezhov Terror"—Yezhov was one of the heads of government under Stalin, and there was a period of a few years when they were indiscriminately arresting all kinds of people—"I passed seventeen months in the outer waiting line of the prison in Leningrad."

This was the line where anyone whose relatives had been arrested would wait. Their loved ones would simply be disappeared in the night, and they would go and wait in this line outside the prison, hoping to reach the authorities, to offer a care package, or even to find out where their relatives were. You'd go every day, every day, every day. She did this for seventeen months because her son had been arrested.

She continues: "Once"—she was already quite famous at this time; poetry was very celebrated then—"somebody identified me there, called me by name. Then a woman who was standing behind me in the line, who of course had never heard me called by name and so hadn't known who I was, awoke from her torpor—the torpor typical of all of us there—and asked me, whispering into my ear. We all spoke only in a whisper there. 'And can you describe this?' she asked me. And I answered, 'Yes, I can.' And then the weak shadow of a smile glided over that which had once been her face."

That just gives me chills—the power of compassion. Incredible courage. Incredible willingness to bear witness when you can't change it, when you can't fix it. If there is something to do, hopefully it will be clear, but if there's not, we still don't run away. This is the power of wisdom: not wishing things were different, but the willingness to rest in the dis-ease.

The Dalai Lama was once asked about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society. He said, "Perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state." In other words, we kind of trust it. "If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and trust to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger."

So it just starts by resting where we are. Resting where we are and really seeing how that begins to transform our intentions and our actions.

I'll end with this quotation from Martin Luther King, speaking to this clarity of intention. He says, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person—you refuse to hate him."

He was talking about the periods of the Freedom Rides and the bombings of the churches in Birmingham—horrible, violent stuff. And it's amazing that he could say this: "I have come to see even more that as we move on toward the goal of justice, hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter."

That's really the force of wisdom. It's possible. In just a moment, we can refuse to become bitter—if we have the willingness to keep showing up and watch, and the trust that if we just stay steady, the wisdom will transform this by itself. We don't have to figure it all out. We just have the willingness to hang out with it as it's going on.

Thank you for your attention. Let's sit quietly for a moment.

This is from the Buddha:

I do not see a single other thing so inclined to cause the arising of wholesome states not yet arisen, or if arisen, to cause wholesome states to further develop and increase, as right view. For one with right view, wholesome states not yet arisen do arise, and if arisen, wholesome states are inclined to further develop and increase.

CHAPTER 139

Brahmavihāra Practice Day 2

Carol Wilson · 47 min

> *In this second day of brahmavihāra practice during a month-long retreat, Carol Wilson provides detailed instruction on mettā (loving-kindness) meditation in the Burmese tradition. She addresses common obstacles practitioners face, particularly the tendency toward self-criticism and the misguided impulse to rush toward difficult categories before establishing a genuine foundation of self-acceptance. Wilson emphasizes that mettā is not about achieving grand emotional states but rather a simple, repeated inclining of the heart toward friendliness and non-separation.*
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> *The talk explores the dual nature of mettā practice as both a samatha (concentration) practice when done intensively and a cultivation of wholesome heart qualities. Wilson explains how mettā serves as an antidote to ill-will, referencing the Buddha's teaching to his son Rāhula about how loving-kindness frees the mind from aversion. She offers practical guidance on working with the classical four phrases—safety, happiness, health, and ease—while maintaining a relaxed, non-striving attitude.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is Wilson's discussion of the benefactor category, explaining how to choose a being toward whom well-wishing comes naturally, whether a teacher, grandparent, or even a pet. She guides practitioners through connecting with their own goodness and that of the benefactor, emphasizing that the practice is about shifting deep unconscious habits of separation and judgment rather than forcing feelings or achieving results.*

As has been mentioned, each day we will give sequential instructions at this particular sitting in the particular style of practicing brahmavihāras that we've learned from our teachers in Burma. There are, of course, many different styles of practicing, of cultivating loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. I'm not in any way saying this is the only way or the right way, but it's a particular style of practice, of cultivation, that we've found really helpful and that one can learn and practice on one's own. That's why we're sharing it in this way.

I'm just wondering how many of you are familiar with or have practiced this mettā practice. Almost everybody—good. That makes our work easier. So I'll just introduce it lightly and we can start.

As you know, in this form of really simply cultivating the quality of mind, of heart—and you know in the Pāli language the word for mind and heart is the same, so if we say mind, if we say heart, we're not actually making a distinction, it's both—cultivating this particular quality, this beautiful quality of mind, of heart, of loving-kindness, friendliness, acceptance. In this form, it starts with ourselves and moves sequentially through different beings standing for different categories. Classically, each category is meant to be a little more difficult to quite easily feel the sense of friendliness and acceptance. But of course each of us is different and it doesn't work the same for everybody. What may be a difficult category for some may be easy for you. No problems, no worries, doesn't matter. Just exploring and seeing.

I want to say a couple of things. Even though we're teaching this as a fairly structured form of meditation, of practice, I want to again remind us, emphasize—this is not like another way of practice that you've got to get right. Another thing to conquer. And when you can't, when loving-kindness isn't what comes up, another way to feel like a total failure on the face of the earth. That's really not why we're sharing this, and that's not what it's about. It's not about getting it right and getting quickly to the difficult person—which for some weird reason seems to be, not for all of us, but for many people that I know and have talked to, kind of deeply embedded. The faster we can do it, the better we're doing.

And so, "Never mind myself—that's completely selfish, a total waste of time." Never mind the fact that self is sometimes the hardest person to actually feel simple, kind acceptance for. We're not saying you have to swoon with love. Simple friendliness, acceptance, just not hating the fact that you're sitting here existing. Never mind that you can't do that—we want to start with Hitler. And if we can't do that, it's another sign of the fact that we really don't deserve to exist. And we're back to where we should have started in the first place with moi.

So that's not the practice.

What it really is about is a simple cultivation, a simple practice of this wholesome, beautiful quality of mind—simple acceptance, non-separation, inclusion, really. It's the counter to the separating, exclusionary, suffering quality of mind of ill will. Of not liking, all the way to hatred, but just simple ill will.

The Buddha originally, it says in the suttas, taught mettā as an antidote to fear, which is a form of ill will. But he also said, in talking to his son Rāhula, "Cultivate loving-kindness. It frees the heart, the mind, from ill will."

So, not to have grand expectations, but simply recognize that every moment we simply incline the heart, the mind towards "May I be safe and protected, may I be happy"—just using the phrase...

to incline the intention—never mind trying to feel, as that turns into wanting—but just inclining the mind in that direction is the shifting of the habit.

When we come and say, "Well, I'm not worth it," boom, that's the old habit of ill will directed towards oneself. "They're not worth it"—directed towards them. Simply shifting the habit by the simple repetition of the phrase with the intention to mean it. You can't make yourself feel it. You just have the intention to want to mean it. That's good enough. That's shifting the habit.

And so an aspect of metta is patience, as with all of our practice. Patience is essential. So it's not helpful or useful or even relevant to be looking for results. How good am I feeling about this person that I'm sending loving kindness to? And have they felt it yet? Let me go call them up and see how they're doing. Never mind that.

Just the willingness to not simply follow our usual habit of sinking into, "Oh God, I'm hopeless," or "Oh, they just bug me, to heck with them." Just not landing in that. That comes up and you go, "You know what? May I be safe and protected." That's all. That's all.

That doesn't seem like much. But our willingness to keep connecting to that again and again and again—and yes, ten million times—is what's actually the practice. That shifting of the deep, unconscious habits of our heart and mind: of greed and ill will, of wanting and judging and separation, of "these people are okay and these people aren't," and "this part of me is okay and this part isn't."

As it is, right now, I love and accept myself. Can you even stand to say that to yourself? Just as I am, I love and accept myself in this moment. And then don't think about it, don't analyze: "Well, I would love and accept myself if I wasn't da-da-da-da-da." It's just the quality of open, connected friendliness. That's really what metta is.

Sometimes the quality of heart-mind of metta—the mental state, to use the terminology that the Buddha used—has a wide range. It doesn't necessarily have to be what we would call emotional, like a big emotional feeling. And so sometimes it can be on that range. It's nice when it's this big sense of oneness and inclusivity and love for all beings. Yeah, I mean great, we'll take it. But don't land in "that's what we're aiming for" or "that's what metta is." Metta is also just that simple movement from separation to, "Oh, just like this, may you be happy and peaceful."

The willingness to connect—whether it's a sense of ourselves, or a sense of the other person, what we'll call today's so-called benefactor—just to connect to a sense of that person just as they are, without saying, "You'd be worthy of my friendliness if you would just clean up your act a little bit." Just as you are. Just warts and all. May you be safe and protected. May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.

And those, as you know, we begin this practice by bringing up in your mind, in your heart, a sense of the particular subject we're including. So we'll start with ourselves and then the so-called benefactor.

And here, the way we're doing it this week—which is an hour a day or more if you feel it—we're not doing this practice in the form of cultivating deep samadhi, deep shamatha. The way this practice is structured is different from vipassana, in that we are continuing to come back to the same thing: to the phrase and the sense of the person. So the structure of the practice is one that, if we were doing it only this, all day every day, it becomes a shamatha practice that can lead to absorption. And so that's one aspect, and that's part of why the structure is so specific.

So it's a sense of the person, and repeating—in the case of metta—there are four classical phrases you repeat, and I'll say how to do that. If we were doing it all day, every day, to cultivate samatha, the staying with the form without changing it a lot would be a little more helpful, supportive.

Because changing it around a lot can increase restlessness. But the way we're offering it here, once a day in the afternoon, is to more highlight the other aspect.

It's kind of a double-edged practice, this. There's the shamatha piece if you do it all the time, but the other edge is just what I've been talking about—actually cultivating this kindness, this inclusivity, this accepting, friendly quality of heart and mind, this opposite of ill will.

And so while the form of the practice is not vipassana—it's shamatha because we don't explore what else comes up much; we come back to the phrase, to the sense of the person in a very gentle way—here, what we're cultivating, what we're leaning into, is this friendly, accepting quality.

Because we, most of us teachers, have found—and nothing's for everybody; it may drive you nuts, you may want to run out of here screaming, okay? Just notice it. Try not to actually run out of here screaming. But you may hate metta. I hated it for years. A little bit of ill will there! I hated it for years until I did it intensively.

But the reason we offer it is because for many people, they find it a real support for the attitude of relaxed acceptance that really is the essence of mindfulness.

So if you find you've been approaching practice like, "Let me notice the breath, feel the breath—in, out, in, out. I notice that pain in my back—burning, burning, burning." Right? "I'm being mindful—burning, burning, burning." That's mindfulness, right? You might notice a little sense, just a subtle sense of aversion going on there. We laugh, but I've spent days like that. And all of a sudden it's like, "Oh god, that's aversion." Duh.

So sometimes just the practice of metta—you start to feel when that harshness comes in. "Oh, well that's interesting. It's actually different." Okay. Burning is like this, with that softness. So it's just to explore for yourself. That's why we're offering it like this.

But still, I'm going to say how the practice is structured while giving you a little bit of leeway here to see what's supportive for you. So it's not about getting somewhere or getting it right. And certainly, practice this, cultivate it, in as relaxed a way as possible. It's that balance of always, yes, we stay with the form, but relaxed moment to moment. It's a dance we're always kind of finding our way in.

So today we'll start with self and then the being called benefactor. As most of you have done this retreat, you know what that means, but I'll just remind us. This is from the old classical teachings, where benefactor was meant to be—first of all, they thought back in the old days of the Buddha that metta to self was the absolute easiest, which I guess just shows a cultural difference, a historical difference. Because at least I know from my own mind, and all these years of sharing practice with people in all different countries, I'd say—this is a conservative estimate—ninety-five percent of people have a really strong self-critical, self-worth, self-hatred mindset. A habit of mind.

And so that's just a different thing that makes it a little difficult for us to cultivate metta, which is why when we offer it the first day, we offer self and benefactor. Because for some people, if you find you're just getting all knotted up trying to say, "May I be safe and protected"—"I don't deserve to be safe"—"May I be happy"—"Happy? How can I be happy when there's so much suffering in the world?" You know, all of that. That can happen a little in the beginning. But if you're lost in that, go to benefactor, where it can be easier.

So benefactor is meant to be—classically they say your parents. Okay, here again we run into another difference for some of us. Not all, but some. But a person—a teacher, a grandparent, a mentor—someone that can be someone you know. It's easier. But some of us don't come up with someone, so we think of someone who inspires us.

Someone who's helped us, or who inspires us, or for whom we easily feel a sense of natural well-wishing, a natural connection. It could be a teacher or a mentor. We often say now that people may think of a niece or a nephew. Or if you're old enough, a grandchild—skip a generation where it's a little bit easier.

"Easy" doesn't mean that this person you should love more than your parents or your child or something. There's just less complications. And notice your mind right now if it goes to, "Yeah, but I ought to be able to go right to my parents," or whatever. That's our trip. Just look at how it is. Someone less complicated.

I heard there's a Tibetan saying which I love: the teacher that's easiest to send metta to is one who lives two valleys over—because you don't know so much about him. This isn't to support delusion. It's simply to support the ease of connecting and well-wishing.

That's why when we move to a good friend, it's someone you would naturally wish well for, but there's just been a little more rubbing, a little more stuff going on. So while you're sending metta, suddenly you think, "But what about that time they borrowed that thing and never gave it back, and I said I didn't care. Why do I care? I do care." And then all of that arises. So just coming back to the simplicity.

For the benefactor, see who comes up for you. Maybe you already have one, and that's fine. You can keep using the same person. It's not that you have to go through everybody who's ever been kind to you. Pick one. Keep it simple. Because it's not about sending metta to everyone. It's about cultivating this quality—the ease, the recognition of this quality in our heart and mind. So it becomes more familiar. So it becomes more of the default mode instead of criticism, instead of separation, instead of self-judgment.

It really can happen. I'm here as living proof. It comes and goes—I'm living proof of that too. Nothing's steady state. But we can learn to trust it a bit more.

So start where it's easiest. Whenever it starts to get complicated, go back to where it's easiest. And that's not just for today. That's not just for these next two weeks. That's for the rest of our lives. Because what we're doing is cultivating this quality of mind and heart, and whatever helps us do it is the most helpful.

I could keep going, but I actually want us to have a little time to practice. Back to the benefactor though—even if you can't find someone, a pet is fine. A pet is a living being. Unless you have a pet rock; I don't know about that. But a living being, anyone that you can tune into, just as they are.

The aspects of the formal practice: take a moment to get a sense of the person. We'll start with ourselves and then the benefactor. If you're visual, a visual sense memory can be helpful. For yourself, some people like to just get an image of themselves in a mirror. That might be a little tough. So often people use a memory of themselves when they were younger—more innocent, before you turned bad. When you can actually have some sense of meeting yourself. You know I'm talking tongue-in-cheek, right? You haven't turned bad. Well, I don't know. I mean, I don't know you. Whatever helps.

Now, if you're more kinesthetic, which I am, I find loving-kindness to myself is actually easier because I feel a felt sense of my body sitting here now, just as it is. If your body is a painful body, that can be a little harder, because it's important to feel as comfortable as you can. If touching your body with your awareness brings up pain and aversion right away, that's going to be too hard to cultivate metta to begin with. You really can't push through pain. So sit in a way that's comfortable. If the body part doesn't work for you, then do try to go to a memory of a happy time, or whatever helps you connect with yourself.

When we get to benefactor, again, think of the person, the animal. And if it's someone you don't know, some people use a being in the world who's really inspired them, even if they don't know the person, but they can get a real sense of them. Maybe they've seen them someplace or heard them, where you get some living sense of their goodness, or some aspect that inspires you.

With yourself, when you tune in, actively take a moment to feel into your own goodness. The sincerity of your intentions, for example. Just being here for this month manifests huge qualities of integrity, of purity, of wisdom and compassion. Because someone who's really lost in a harsh way of life, really suffering, really violent, really not having a sense of living in an ethical way—trying to sit here for a month would be so much suffering. So just appreciating your goodness. And we all have other stuff too.

Metta begins by tuning into the goodness, the wholesomeness. You might find your integrity, or times you've been kind, or your sincere intention. But metta is not blind. It starts by acknowledging, "Just as I am, may I be safe and protected." It connects and then spreads out to include our whole being, just as we are. So as you're doing loving-kindness to yourself, if anger comes up, fine. "Okay, just as I am. This anger too, it's painful. May I be happy. May I be safe and protected." It's not a rejection of anything. But it's triggered by tuning into the wholesomeness, the goodness. We do that with ourselves and then with benefactors.

So let me guide us briefly now. Sitting in as comfortable a way as you can. There's no perfect comfort, but relatively comfortable. Awake, of course.

Just take a breath and let your mind and body relax. Not make it relax—let it just relax. Stop fighting whatever's going on. If it's tense, and you notice it's tense and it stays tense, you relax. Let the mind relax around that. Just as the body is right now, it's fine. Just as your heart and mind is right now, it's fine.

Right now maybe you're not feeling friendliness. Maybe you're tired, maybe you're bored, maybe you're pissed off—whatever's going on, it's like this now. Notice how that accepting movement is actually the movement of metta. Just as I am in this moment.

Let your attention connect with your body-mind. If an image is more helpful, experiment with that. Just relax, let it come. Nothing to push, nothing to achieve.

Take a moment to reflect on or tune into whatever aspect of wholesomeness arises—sincere intention, kindness, honesty, generosity, whatever comes up for you. Don't push it away saying that's not good enough, whatever it is. Just let yourself say, "Yes, that's an aspect."

Just as I am in this moment, may I love and accept myself. Not to make it so, but to feel that softness, that connecting quality of heart and mind to ourselves in this moment. You don't have to change one bit to be worthy of friendliness, to be worthy of loving-kindness in this moment. We all are, by virtue of simply being.

When you tune in, don't try to make yourself feel anything. Just tune in. And I'll offer the classical phrase, which you gently repeat in your heart.

Don't try to make it so. The phrase is like a carrier for our intention. We say it, we offer it to ourselves, we let it go into the universe. Don't look for results. And if these phrases don't work, you'll find your own—but don't spend the whole time trying to get it right. That's one of our sidetracks.

So classically: May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. Or in short form, may I be safe and protected. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy, or may I live with physical ease. And the fourth one: may I live with ease of well-being, which means may my life not be such a struggle. May I live with ease.

And so then we just keep gently repeating in your own time, your own rhythm. Connect with the sense of yourself, your goodness, and simply offer this next phrase as a kind of movement from the heart area. Let it go. Connect again. Offer the phrase. Sure, it will become rote sometimes—that's okay. Sure, you'll get lost in thought—that's okay. When you recognize that, we simply go, all right, come back to yourself. Offer the next phrase. That's the practice. Just simple, relaxed, accepting, just as I am, right now. May I be safe. May I be peaceful. May I live with physical happiness. May I live with ease.

So now, if you'd like to experiment with bringing in a sense of a benefactor—whatever being you've decided to use or who comes to heart, to mind—just let yourself be and take a moment to get a sense of this being. Whether it's a memory, or a memory of a photo, or a time together, whatever helps you connect. Just for the moment—you don't have to hold on, just for the moment. And again, consciously tuning into some beautiful, wholesome aspect of their heart, their mind, their actions. Something easily accessible to you, to think of, to connect to. It doesn't have to be anything big.

And starting from that moment of connection, that appreciation, just simply offering the same phrases we offer ourselves. Not to change them, not even to make them happy—you know, we can't actually do that. But it's an expression of this quality in our heart that holds this friendliness. May you be safe and protected, feeling what meaning that might carry. May you be safe and protected from inner and outer harm.

And no rush. Have a sense, connect again, because you'll probably lose the sense of the person—the mind wanders. Lose the sense, connect again. May you be happy and peaceful. May you live with physical happiness, or may you be healthy. May you live with ease in this world.

And whatever else comes up in your mind—different things, different emotions—no problem, don't struggle with them. But if it's possible for now, we don't investigate much either. Just let them be and reconnect with the benefactor and offer the next phrase, just as it is. Just staying very simple and relaxed. Just relax. Offer the phrase without looking for result.

May all beings everywhere live in happiness and freedom from suffering and confusion.

So we're, as I said, just offering this for you through the days, if you find it useful.

CHAPTER 140

Extraordinary Seeing: Simplicity, Honesty, and Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 53 min

In this foundational dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essence of vipassanā practice by reframing what 'extraordinary seeing' truly means. Rather than pointing toward otherworldly experiences, she reveals that extraordinary seeing is simply the accurate recognition of our moment-to-moment mental and physical experience—something we rarely achieve in ordinary life. Drawing on Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teaching that meditation is 'experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with right understanding,' Wilson presents the three essential jobs of a yogi: mindfulness of whatever is arising, right understanding (not distorted by greed, hatred, or delusion), and continuity of practice.

Wilson explores how suffering arises from our habitual tendency to appropriate natural phenomena as 'I' and 'mine,' referencing Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching about 'throwing everything back to nature.' She demonstrates the simplicity of sati through direct inquiry—asking practitioners to notice the shift between merely seeing and being aware that seeing is occurring. This subtle recognition, she emphasizes, is mindfulness itself: effortless yet easily forgotten.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with the deeply ingrained habits of liking and disliking that keep us trapped in saṃsāra—the endless cycle of leaning toward pleasure and away from pain. Wilson encourages practitioners to trust in the power of simple awareness rather than getting lost in analyzing or fixing experience, recognizing that nothing in our mental-physical process needs to be excluded from mindful attention.

One definition of Vipassana, a very often used definition, is that of extraordinary seeing —seeing in an extraordinary way. And the main agent or the main tool that we have for this so-called extraordinary seeing is, of course, the mental factor, the experience of mindfulness, of awareness.

Now, what's actually quite amazing to me about this so-called extraordinary seeing is that when we first hear that definition, my mind tends to think that to look for something extraordinary would be something incredibly amazing, otherworldly, something really elsewhere, blow your mind. That's where my mind goes with extraordinary seeing.

But meditation—this is Sayadaw U Tejaniya's definition of mindfulness meditation—is simply experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. That is what extraordinary seeing is. And what's amazing to me is that it could be called, and it is, extraordinary seeing to actually recognize our moment-to-moment experience accurately. That's extraordinary. Because so much of the time, we're not recognizing our experience accurately at all. In fact, to put it in a silly way, we don't have a clue half the time what's really happening. And we don't have a clue that we don't have a clue. We think we really know what's going on.

And so the experience, the practice of this simple moment-to-moment mindfulness, experiencing our mind and body directly, just as it is, is amazingly enough the process that conditions the wisdom that frees our heart and mind from suffering, from confusion.

The Buddha shared, in my understanding, that his motivation for sharing what he had understood and experienced was not so that we could have a new complex philosophy to embrace. It's turned out that there is a very complex philosophy with a lot of lists we could embrace and memorize, and maybe that's helpful, but that's not the point. The point is to help us, to show us a path, to give us tools, really, to recognize for ourselves—only I can recognize for myself, no one can give me that, same for each of you—to recognize for ourselves the seeds of suffering, the potential of freedom from that suffering, how these seeds of suffering are created and arise in our own mind and heart in a moment-to-moment way. Not some big monolithic something out there, but just by this extraordinary seeing of simple moment-to-moment presence with our mind-body experience with the right view—and that's key—we start to actually recognize for ourselves how the seeds of suffering and confusion may sprout in a moment and lead to more suffering in our mind and heart, but how also in a moment that can be released. That cannot happen. With clear seeing, with accurate understanding in a moment of what's going on, the confused responses that bring us into further suffering just don't need to arise.

That's how the clear seeing leads to wisdom. When we understand accurately, we respond appropriately. And that, to me, is like the miracle, really. Thich Nhat Hanh has this phrase, "the miracle of mindfulness." The miracle of the way things are, the miracle of freedom, is that it's not about becoming somehow different from who or what we are—good luck with that. But actually coming fully into presence in this moment, one hundred percent present, without the distortion of greed, hatred, delusion, and recognizing what's actually going on. The accurate recognition of reality is what frees us from suffering and confusion.

It's not that reality needs to change. It's changing every moment. But it's not that extraordinary seeing is going to take us to some other plane where we can get out of this mess. I mean, we'd like to. I'd like to. But it doesn't work like that. It's landing in the middle. We see how much of this mess is completely unnecessarily created by the response of our heart and mind based on just not seeing clearly.

So that's really how the process of mindfulness works—this is our Vipassana practice. And I know we've referenced once or twice in the beginning of the retreat, in terms of instructions, that there are various techniques of Vipassana. I'm talking about Vipassana mindfulness insight practice here, not specifically absorption samatha practice. I'm talking about Vipassana insight practice.

And so, as we've said, this moment-to-moment simple presence—there are various techniques and instructions, some of which we've talked about. I'm not going to go into them all, but like having a single focus and coming back quite rigorously for some time to one single focus, or having a more broad noticing of whatever's occurring, using mental noting, being really precise and connecting very precisely to the particular sense object that's arising, or being more receptive, more relaxed, more open, sweeping the attention through the body—all kinds. I'm not even going to name them all. All useful.

But what I want to reference tonight is that each of these, all the different techniques, are skillful means in service of and coming out of this kind of broader field, broader understanding, which is what I just said: mindfulness of whatever's arising in our mind-body moment to moment, with the right understanding. And the third aspect is continuity—the steadiness, the perseverance of that from moment to moment to moment.

Those three aspects, one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, calls the three jobs of a yogi. Mindfulness, moment to moment—you've probably figured out that's one of the jobs. With right understanding, which I'll talk some about, and we do our best to see that. And the third job is the continuity, the moment-to-moment.

Not that you're going to be perfectly mindful moment-to-moment—it's not that you're doing it wrong unless you're absolutely mindful from the first moment your eyes open in the morning to the last moment you go to sleep. That's not what we mean by continuity. It's simply the intention, the willingness, whatever you're doing, whatever posture you're in, to recognize: this is a moment for awareness. Whether it's been two seconds since your last moment of awareness or three days, it doesn't matter. I mean, it

matters in some way, but the fact that you have the intention in that moment of awareness again—it's fresh, it's new. It's not a lesser moment of awareness because it's been longer since the last one.

So continuity is not about another way to be perfect. It's about really getting it that whatever is happening in this moment, whatever you're doing, whatever activity you're engaged in, this is the only and the perfect moment for sati, for mindfulness. There is no other moment. There's no better moment to wait for to be mindful. And the wisdom that comes, comes from the steadiness of mindfulness. That's what allows for a clearer seeing of cause and effect and what's going on.

So these are our three jobs, and this is what's at the heart of awakening. We all have subtexts, our reasons for coming, our reasons for practice—of course we do. Don't think that there's something wrong with that. But it's helpful to recognize that really the essence is these three things: the moment-to-moment awareness, the familiarity, the cultivation. So as I said the other day about metta, but it's the same for awareness—that moment-to-moment awareness becomes our default. It becomes our refuge. It becomes our home. It becomes more interesting, more fulfilling than all the endless hoo-ha that our mind goes through about every sense experience that arises.

So it's not about having a particular experience, getting a particular experience, and then you've made it. It's not about fixing yourself, although of course we all have aspects we'd like to fix. It's not about having a better sitting. It's not even about getting concentrated. It's about this cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness. And that can only ever be done in one moment, in this moment. You can't do it in the last moment. You can't be mindful now for the next moment. All there is, is this moment. And whatever particular sense experience is presenting itself, that's the perfect object for awareness. It's the only one, because that's all that's happening. There's nothing better to wait for.

Mindfulness doesn't care. It's not like mindfulness is only really good when it can be mindful of something really sublime, something really subtle—the heart of boundless metta—and then, okay, we can call up mindfulness. But this nagging, irritable, grumpy mind that makes some really negative judgment about everybody that walks past? "Look how they walk. Look how they eat. Look how they dress. What are these people doing here?" We don't want to be mindful of that, right? But that's what's happening. And awareness doesn't care. It's the same pure mindfulness as it is with a sublime experience—when we have right view, right attitude, when we're recognizing that simplicity of awareness for what it is, not getting lost in evaluating the content of experience.

Which is mostly how we spend our lives. Well, I notice that's how I spend my life. Maybe not you, and if that's the case, I bow to you. But mostly, that's the habit of what our mind does.

So in terms of this mindfulness with right understanding, with right view—in a simple way, at the heart of awakening, as best I can understand it, which is of course limited—the most profound level of right view, right understanding where the Buddha was talking, is a really fundamental shift in the way that we recognize and understand reality. The way that we recognize and understand our moment-to-moment mental and physical activity, because that's the particular representative of reality that we have the most access to. But it's a fundamental shift. And how we understand ourself, how we understand a moment of experience—that's what's going to lead to how we think about it, how we describe it, how we respond, how we react.

It just makes sense. If you think somebody did something—say you're in the dining room, and you think somebody picked something up, and you believe they're taking something that belongs to someone else. Whatever you do or don't do, that's the thought you have. You think that's describing reality. And whether you say something or remain silent, the way that you think and feel about that person is going to be informed by that perception and that description of what's going on.

Then if you see the same thing, but someone informs you, or somehow you realize that actually that is not what was occurring—the person was working in the kitchen, doing their job, which was to come out and pick up this plate and clean it—suddenly you have a whole different explanation of what looks like the same action. Your thoughts, your feelings, your possible response to that person are going to be different. This is just normal. This is just normal cause and effect.

So when we don't recognize or understand accurately, our responses are a little bit askew, and our responses and reactions to our responses are a little bit more askew, and it just keeps cycling. We're all kind of banging against each other's ideas of what's going on. We don't even know what's really going on for us. Then we project what's going on for the other person. They don't know what's going on for them either, and they're projecting what's going on for us. We're trying to have a conversation here, and we wonder, how come we don't understand each other? That's just how it goes.

So the Buddha is really saying that at the heart of freedom is accurate recognition. That's where our practice of simple moment-to-moment mindfulness, which seems like nothing much in any moment, is so transformative, so extraordinary—this kind of accurate recognition, accurate seeing.

There's a phrase I like to use a lot. It describes in some of the texts a so-called advanced insight, though it's not as if it's linear. We see something, then we bounce to another, and we don't see, and then we see again. But the phrase is translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be."

I like that because what it really helps us see is recognizing accurately in this moment just how the mental and physical experience has come to be in this moment. In this moment, it could not be otherwise. All the conditions that have come together—which we can't even trace, can't even try to trace—create this moment that cannot be changed. Just how this moment is, mentally and physically, recognizing that accurately: knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be.

And then all the different conditions arising in this moment, some of which would be the quality in our mind and heart of how the mind in this moment responds—this then becomes again a cause and condition for the arising of the next moment. So this sense of accurate recognition through the steadiness of continuity is what allows us to really begin to recognize differently.

And it's not that then the wisdom arises—the wisdom of clear understanding, the wisdom that allows the heart and mind to just put down greed. Not to give rise to clinging to something that's already changing before the mind has even started to cling to it. It just doesn't make sense.

It's not like we have to sit and say, "I think I won't cling to this sunset because I know it's going to change, and the moon's really beautiful, so the moon will be pretty, so let the sun go, and I can do that because I know I have a new thing to cling to..." We don't have to do that. The sun's going down. It goes down. It's lovely. We appreciate it or not. It's gone. You don't have to drill yourself not to cling, do you? It's just obvious.

It's like that with everything. We really can put down trying to figure it all out, trying to control, trying to create wisdom. It's such a relief. It's so amazing. To me, it's amazing.

It keeps on being amazing. Through the steadiness of mindfulness with right understanding—which is mindfulness not distorted by confusion—through that steadiness, wisdom naturally arises. And the wisdom then responds appropriately, and the potential for peace in this moment can naturally arise. In this moment. The next moment it can all go to hell again, but in this moment it can arise. Knowing it's all moments is also incredibly freeing to me.

So let me start by talking a little bit about the simplicity of sati, of mindfulness. As someone said, I think it was Sally, mindfulness is just knowing that you know what's happening. But let's keep it really simple.

Right now, most of you have your eyes open. Are you aware right now that seeing is occurring? Are you? Were you before I said that? Probably not. Maybe you were, but probably not. Now, do you get a sense of the subtle different way it feels? Before, you were seeing. You were seeing. But then when I say you're aware that you're seeing, aware of the seeing process, it's a subtle shift of how it feels. Do you get a sense of that?

That's mindfulness. How difficult is that? How much energy does that take? How special does the experience you're mindful of have to be? Not at all. How easy is it to completely forget about? Easy, right?

So that, in a way, is the simplicity of mindfulness. Oh, awareness of seeing. How long—like now, are you still aware of seeing? That seeing is occurring? Other things may come to the forefront, becoming more predominant, because that's how it is. But are you aware of it? Suddenly hearing became more prominent, or how long does seeing last before thoughts arise? Perception, which would be recognition—maybe you're recognizing Carol, or you're recognizing the statues, or you're kind of glomming onto what the object is.

And then, as Greg talked about last night, pleasant and unpleasant. We may notice that, but we may not notice it, yet it's happening. And then suddenly, "Ah, no, it's not so nice. Look at this. It's kind of messy up here. Can't they get their act together? I like the Zen style when it's all black and everything's the same. Look at this—there's schmutz all over the place." Or the other way, either way. How soon before that's occurring and we don't recognize that that's occurring, and that becomes what we think is happening? "I'm sitting here not liking blah, blah, blah." Really quickly.

Now, it's not that the thoughts or the pleasantness or unpleasantness, the liking or the disliking, the judgment—it's not that any of that needs to be a problem or that it's wrong or that it's in the way of mindfulness. It's simply that with steady mindfulness, we would recognize the next arising experience is this thought. Or this feeling of, "Uh, it's just kind of messy up there." You'd recognize that, oh, that feeling's occurring. You'd recognize a thought, you'd recognize a judgment. You might then come back and recognize seeing again. Do you see what I mean?

That the steadiness of mindfulness with right view is simply recognizing just barely what's occurring, without confusing all the assessments—the liking, the disliking, the greed, the aversion, the "what does it mean about me?"—without confusing that for the simplicity of the process. "What does it mean about me?" as a thought or a feeling can be the next arising object of mindfulness, and that's fine.

But I'm hoping you already get the sense of how fast the mind moves and how much we don't recognize that that's what's occurring. And that's how we get a bit askew from reality. If I'm sitting and recognizing seeing, then I feel sensations in the body, then I notice a sense of subtle discomfort arise, I notice a kind of aversion come into the mind, then I'm aware of seeing, then I notice the naming of what I'm seeing, and the associations in my mind, and that I don't like it—all that stuff's still going on. But awareness just moment to moment noticing it, that's the practice. That's the practice. And that awareness noticing grumpiness and judgment is just as beautiful and pure awareness as noticing anything else.

So our job in cultivating the steadiness of mindfulness is to keep on recognizing what's really happening now. Seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, tasting, assessing—whatever the particular habits of mind. This is the simplicity and the honesty, really, of mindfulness. Not, "Oh, that's really kind of nasty. I don't really want to notice that in my mind. Let's go do some metta." Rather, "Okay, nastiness feels like this. That's okay." Awareness isn't stained. Awareness doesn't have a problem with anything.

Seeing how these habits of our mind work, getting interested in them, is how the understanding of how suffering and freedom arise grows. These are habits of mind. That whole example I gave of the grumpiness—that's just a habit of mind. We all have different habits. There's only so many different permutations. So that's the grumpiness habit: seeing something that's a little bit unpleasant, or feeling something in the body, and then you get a little grumpy about it, and then you make up a story about it, and then off to the races—somehow thinking getting that all organized is going to make me happy.

We're really happy sitting here criticizing everybody and everything up the wazoo. That really makes us happy, doesn't it? But has it stopped? Has it stopped any of us?

Or thinking of all the things we don't have that we want, and how happy we'll be when we get those things—has that made us happy? It's actually more insidious, the wanting one, because somehow it gets in there and we think it's making us happy. You sit there wanting whatever—a new relationship, a chocolate chip cookie, or just for this talk to end so you can go to bed. That could be a big one. You're just sitting here wanting it. And we get lost in the wanting, even mistaking the wanting for happiness. Have you ever noticed that?

How nice it's going to be when I get in the bed. I just spent seven or eight weeks in Burma. You get up at 3:34 in the morning. You guys think you have a tough life—you have no clue. Even when I wasn't on retreat, you get up at 4 in the morning when you

live in the monastery, breakfast is at 5:30, lunch is at 10:30, and that's it. That's it for the day. And the bed's not comfortable. Talk about not lying in luxurious beds—a mattress like that. But actually, I'm usually quite happy there.

Still, there would be times in the middle of the day, a really busy day, and the mind's just so tired, you start thinking, "Oh, how nice to be in the bed. I can't wait till it's time to go to bed." And it's so—all I can say is stupid—because it's having the illusion that that's making me happy. All it's doing is cultivating wanting, cultivating dissatisfaction, disconnection with what's really going on. This is called samsara, really.

The sense of this leaning into the next thing that's going to really do it for us. Or if you're on the aversion side, it's the leaning away from this thing here that's not doing it for us. And that can be anything—a sensation in the body, a sound that we're hearing, the habits in our mind, anything.

The simplicity and honesty of sati, of mindfulness, is just simply: oh, what's happening now? Wanting feels like this. I hate how it feels. Unpleasant. Wanting feels like this.

And, you know, that's hard, difficult, as someone—several of you have said already just in two days—but it's not news to any of you, I don't think, that the simplicity of sati in that moment of recognizing, seeing, is really easy. It's not effortful. But to actually continue to do it moment to moment is incredibly difficult—to keep remembering, or to actually come into the simplicity of what's happening. Because all our layers of association and wanting and aversion and comparison and distortion are happening so fast, and we're so entranced by our reactions to things, that sometimes we just really don't even know what it is that triggered all these reactions.

So in terms of mindfulness with right understanding, mindfulness with right view—I mean, right view is a huge topic, all the way to really understanding all the ways that we don't recognize accurately, to freedom. But just keeping it simple for our practice here, thinking of mindfulness with right view as just the simplicity of a moment of clear presence without the distortions of putting onto it aversion, greed, or really the bottom line one: it's all about me. Me, mine. What does this say? What does this mean for me? How does this affect me?

And I think Greg talked some about this last night. It's just such a deep habit for all of us. And it's how we've been taught. So deeply ingrained that what is pleasant, what feels good, is right, is good. It's how it is. And when it's pleasant, we're right. What's unpleasant is wrong. Need to get rid of it. And at the bottom of both of those is that it's all about me. And my happiness depends on getting more of the pleasant and less of the unpleasant.

And it's kind of like—it just seems as though somehow it's so ingrained in us that we don't even recognize it, even when you know it. And many of us here, we've experienced this quite deeply, you know, in practice, in life. Because it's not a different mind in practice than in life—it's just that we kind of clear the decks a little bit when we come on retreat so we can see a little bit more the subtlety of how the mind's working. But it's working the same way in more complex situations in life.

So we may have really experienced the truth of that many times. I know I have. But then there are other times when I'm tired or the mind isn't very clear, or I do get entranced into the object and what I think about it and how it's going to affect me and what it means—and it just slips back in again. I go, oh, right. I'm totally caught up in it. I've got to get rid of this unpleasant experience and get to this pleasant experience, and then it'll be okay.

For me in particular, with emotions, that happens a lot. Having sadness, or discomfort, or a headache, or whatever. And it doesn't mean we can't act in an appropriate way. If you're ill, you act in an appropriate way, but it doesn't have to be from aversion and fear, if you see what I mean. But what slips in is the sense of: I don't want to feel this unpleasant emotion. It's too unpleasant, so let me do something to get away from it. And not even recognizing that's what's going on.

So in retreat, there's not so much you can do to get away from it. That's what's helpful. What can you do here? We kind of take stuff away. But you know, that's the thing with cell phones. My God, you know—I'm a little bit bored. Let me go look online at something. How often has that made me happier? Really, like one in ten thousand times. But we still do it. Or you go wash your socks, or you go have a cup of tea—not that those things are bad. But it's more about bringing awareness to seeing: why am I doing this? Because this feeling I'm having isn't pleasant, and it would be better to be somewhere else.

When we don't have, in a moment, the trust or the habit of this mindfulness that's just willing to die into this moment, then the old habits take over and drive the bus, basically. We run from the unpleasant, we go towards the pleasant, we evaluate all life in that way, and we get more and more confused.

The Buddha described experience—I don't know if Greg talked about it last night—that really all we experience in our mental and physical process is six things. There's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and physical sensations, and then the whole mental world: thinking, emotions, visual images—the entire mental realm. Each of these arises moment to moment and passes moment to moment. Check it out. There's

no solid thing here. Arising and passing, arising and passing. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Well, not quite that obvious.

And then it's pleasant or it's unpleasant. We don't notice that. We're right into liking and disliking and analyzing and thinking and discussing and describing—just like that example I gave with the seeing. That's just what our minds do. I'm not saying this is a problem. This is what our minds do. Mindfulness with right understanding, with wise view, is simply having the willingness to be with this too, so we start to recognize what the mind does.

In a way, a lot of what our practice is about is, as someone said, an investigation. We're really looking: How does the mind and heart work? Moment to moment. How is suffering being created? How is it being released? Moment to moment.

So now when I see how fast it can go from hearing a sound—just hearing a sound—to a whole world of my entire past and future, all based on what's just a bell ringing, instead of going, "Oh no, I lost mindfulness," I bring mindfulness in and go, "Wow, that's amazing. Look at that." You're back in mindfulness. But these habits are so, so strong, and it moves so, so fast that we get entranced by the particular object, by our descriptions and reactions to it. Because again, it's all about me.

What are we really entranced by? Bottom line: me, me, me. How I feel, how I think, what's happening to me, what's going to happen to me, what other people think about me, what do I think about other people, how does everything relate to me? How does that deer standing out there in the field—is it looking at me? Does it see me? Is it scared of me? It's really like, duh. But it's just to see that, you know? That's really kind of the bottom line. This is what keeps us entranced by objects and our reactions to them. This is what we call samsara.

And we lose—we just don't recognize in that "what does the deer think about me"—the simplicity of awareness, which is always available. Oh, seeing. Oh, thinking about me. See, it's not that awareness has to get rid of this stupid thing our mind is doing in order to be aware. We bring it in, no matter what's happening. There's nothing, nothing that needs to be outside the field of awareness. There's nothing that occurs in our mind and body that shouldn't be known with awareness. Not "we've got to get rid of this so we can cultivate mindfulness." Nothing. We may not want to see it—right, that's another thing. But there's nothing that's outside.

So we're standing there feeling like a fool, thinking all about the deer. Look at me. Ah, feeling like a fool is like this. That's Ajahn Sumedho's terminology—I love it. Instead of analyzing everything, what am I doing? Oh, feeling like a fool is like this. Awareness just lands in it. You don't have to make a big analysis. You just kind of feel the mental and physical gestalt in that moment, and that's it. You landed here.

You're back with awareness. That's our job. Not to figure out the whole story. Just land in the awareness again. Over and over and over.

So another way of talking about how not to take experience so personally—Greg mentioned it last night. It's funny, because I had the same quotation, and I'm going to use it again. It's from Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was quite an interesting Thai forest monk and scholar. I spent some time at his monastery ages ago, when I was a nun for about a year in Thailand. And he was quite... for a monk in Thailand within the system, which has a lot of limits on it, he was a little bit radical. A little bit. But he was quite a scholar.

He's talking about this in his book, *Mindfulness of Breathing*. And Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses the same language. When we take everything that's occurring so personally—particularly the patterns and habits of our mind—but it's all nature. The physical experience coming and going is nature. The mental experience coming and going is nature. Whatever arises in this moment—physical pain, mental states, even if it's a strong mental pattern of yours, say, of shame or of grief or of greed or of self-love, whatever it is—it's arising due to all the previous causes in a lawful way. This moment couldn't be otherwise. It's also nature. This moment couldn't be different.

Ajahn Buddhadasa says that the Pali texts use the phrase "throwing back." He says when the mind is free—and I'm going to say when the mind is free, not meaning you have to wait until absolute freedom, but in any particular moment—he says, "We have been thieves all of our life by appropriating the things of nature as I and mine. We have been ignorant and we suffer for it." It's not that we're bad or good. It's just that we suffer for it. "But now, in a moment of freedom, we become wise. And at this last step of practice, we realize, oh, it isn't mine. It isn't me. It belongs to nature. So we throw everything back to nature and never steal anything again."

That's just it. Whatever's occurring is just an aspect of nature. *Yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be, couldn't be otherwise. And my getting in there—it's not even a "my"—but the idea, "Oh, this shouldn't be, and I've got to fix it," is just an appropriating to some sense of me, stuff that's just natural and couldn't be otherwise.

Even our really painful, difficult personal patterns, which we all have—they're not something separate, just belonging to us. We can trace, for all of us, our patterns, our responses to life, our personalities. We come in with something, but they also are informed by the environment we grew up in and our family and the experiences that we have and the people we know and the stuff that we go through. There's no way to separate all of that. It's all part of nature. It's all in a way lawful—not like good or bad—but we can kind of see when certain particular patterns of mind come up that are difficult, that are suffering, and I don't like them. "I don't like them" is really kind of the bottom line.

Having understood to some extent some of the environmental and familial conditions that gave rise to them—and I'm not even talking about anything really intense or traumatic, but just stuff, you know?—understanding that, I don't have to, every time the particular pattern comes up, sit and go, "Okay, let me go back, and my mother was like this, and my father was like this, and because of them I'm like this..." Thank God, I don't mean that. It's like looking at it and saying, "Yeah, that's why. It was completely lawful. I understand. Great." Now it's like this. It actually releases any sense of ownership or needing to fix it. This is how it is in this moment. Just relax into nature.

It's like going out and wishing the moon wasn't full. What's the point? This is how it is at the moment.

So this sense of learning to trust the simplicity of awareness, rather than getting distracted and completely absorbed in the reactions and habits of our mind—liking, disliking, looking for something a little bit better. It's going to happen. We learn to recognize those as the next arising mental experience.

But this is a huge shift, because so much of the time we've just learned to believe all these reactions and responses. The habit is to really get absorbed into what's happening—the object, the physical or mental experience, our thoughts, our emotions, whatever—really absorbed into it and our responses to it.

There's a subtle Tibetan definition of samsara: the urge to correct. Just somehow we could get it a little bit better, couldn't we? Of course this doesn't mean we give up and never do anything to improve life. I'm not saying that. I'm talking about our moment-to-moment experience, that sense of "this is how it is." Rather than landing in it with open-hearted, kind, interested, friendly attention—that's mindfulness, "Oh, it's like this"—we think, "But only if it could be like that, it would be better." Right? That movement forward, that movement toward something—that's what keeps us on the wheel of confusion. "It would be better, I will be happy with this next thing." That's really what you could call samsara.

In my experience, it keeps me locked in that sense of separation, of isolation. It's about what can I do, keeps me in the sense of "me," leaning forward either away from what I don't like or toward getting what I do like, or the next big thing. And so that sense of "I" or "mine," that kind of stealing from nature, is an isolating tendency. You don't see the big picture. You don't see the process of what's happening. We get lost in each specific experience, and it's never enough. There's always going to be something better.

And I don't know if you've noticed, but for me, it's like we're jerked around by liking and disliking and liking and disliking, and the next thing, and this emotion and that emotion. One thing you may notice here—you have a lot of thoughts, right? Thoughts come up frequently, telling you what to do, what you like, how you're going to do this, how you're going to do that. Have you had times when you have completely opposite thoughts and feelings about something within five minutes? And you believe in both? It's crazy, isn't it? Think if we acted on all these thoughts—it would be insane. But what's scary is how much in our life we do act on moods and thoughts.

So just to give an example. James pointed this out to me from the Super Bowl the other night. I won't say much in case there's somebody who's taping it and waiting until they go home in a month to watch it. I won't say anything about which team or whatever. But anyway, it was very close to the end, like a couple of minutes, and one team had the ball. It looked inevitable that they would score. The team that was about to score was behind, but if they got a touchdown, they would win. Two minutes to the end. That's what was occurring.

But anyway, that's not the point. The point is, it was close to the end. So this was going on, and they had the camera on the quarterback—not the quarterback of the team with the ball, but the other quarterback, who had been doing a really good job. He'd gotten his team in a winning position, and now he has to sit there and watch the defensive team blow it.

So anyway, they had the camera on the quarterback, and he's just sitting there looking like the picture of total dejection. Just completely, totally collapsed. And then—I won't give you details in case you're saving it—but they messed up the play in an unbelievable way. And it was clear that they weren't going to win and the other team was going to win. They cut back to the quarterback. He's leaping up and down, throwing his arms around.

It cracked me up—within two seconds from total, total dejection to leaping around like a maniac. Oh my God, this is saṃsāra. This is saṃsāra. It's a game. It's a game. And then it's over. Those minutes are over. And now he's got to get all revved up for the next

season and the next game. And it's endless until he retires. And he'll probably never remember anything because he's probably had so many concussions from all these years of being a quarterback. And then you have to suffer from that. This is so saṃsāra.

But anyway, that was to me the perfect example of life. This is what we do. And we believe it all. We believe it, and we wonder why we're exhausted. We wonder why the world is nuts. We wonder why retreats are so hard. We say, sit down and look at your mind—this is what we're looking at.

The only refuge that makes sense is awareness. If you take refuge in activity, this is what you get. But awareness can watch the whole show with interest, not with judgment—to see how suffering is created, how freedom is created, in this moment, in this heart, in this mind and body.

And so that's like the three jobs, the overarching jobs, within which all the techniques are supportive of this simplicity and honesty of mindfulness, moment to moment, with the right understanding—not taking it personally, not liking, not disliking, just what's happening now. Simply six sense experiences, and the continuity, the steadiness—just remembering: am I aware now? Okay, great. Whatever you're doing, nothing is more or less important in terms of what you can be aware of.

So I'll just end with two things. One, in terms of the continuity: Joseph, our friend Joseph Goldstein, had a great little way to help get a sense of whether there's a way we're prioritizing sitting, which many of us do. He said, just imagine throughout the day—we say it's all equal: sitting, walking, daily activities. But in our mind, we really think first there's sitting, then there's walking maybe, daily activities okay. We give it lip service, we try. He said, so imagine reversing those priorities. The most important place to bring your mindful awareness is your daily activities—taking a shower, work meditation, going to the toilet, walking out of this room. The second is walking, the third is the sitting meditation. Just explore that, see what your mind does with it.

And so, in a way back to saying what I find has been most vivid for me over these years: what becomes more and more real, not tangible but accessible, is this sense of trust in the power of simple awareness. However difficult something is for me, when something is going on and I'm struggling and working and trying to figure it out—and this is in life too, not just on retreat—at some point when I realize I'm all caught up and confused: What's happening now? Oh, confusion. And the awareness of just what's happening—it's like everything just relaxes into this moment. Awareness doesn't need to push this moment away. You don't have to figure it all out. The next moment will take care of itself.

More and more, I trust that. That's our practice here. Whatever technique you use is in support of that.

So thank you for listening to the Dharma.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 141

Brahmavihāras Day #7

Carol Wilson · 44 min

> *In this seventh day of brahmavihāra practice, Carol Wilson introduces working with the neutral person in mettā meditation while emphasizing that loving-kindness practice is not about achieving or conquering, but simply inclining the heart toward friendliness moment by moment. She explains how all Buddhist practices—vipassanā, samatha, and the brahmavihāras—work from different angles toward the same purification of our habitual responses of greed, hatred, and delusion.*
>
> *Carol addresses common experiences that arise during mettā practice, including encountering difficult states like self-loathing or aversion, and offers practical guidance for working with these challenges through gentle recognition and returning to connection. She clarifies that the 'neutral' person isn't neutral in themselves, but rather someone we don't have strong feelings about—perhaps someone behind a counter or a fellow retreatant we haven't formed stories about.*
>
> *The teaching emphasizes flexibility over hierarchy in practice: when connection is difficult with one category, practitioners should return to where mettā flows easily, whether that's the benefactor, friend, or self. Carol notes that any moment of pure mettā—regardless of the recipient—cultivates the wholesome quality we seek. The guided meditation moves through self, benefactor or friend, neutral person, and finally expands to include all beings, demonstrating how this gradual progression opens the heart beyond personal preference.*

So today in the offerings in the formal progression of this loving-kindness practice, we'll bring up the so-called neutral person. I'll talk about that a little bit.

But first, a reminder which probably has been said every day: just remember that we're cultivating this loving-kindness practice not to achieve anything or prove anything or get somewhere or do it right. And it's not about moving quickly through all the categories to get to the difficult person or all beings or anything. Simply, moment to moment, as Kate was saying yesterday, we are inclining the mind, the heart, towards this state of mind and heart, this quality of friendliness, acceptance, patience, inclusion, kindness. All of those are words that express some angle, some part of loving-kindness.

My belief is that in terms of all these different practices offered by the Buddha, they all, from different angles, are cultivating and working towards the same end, which is this purification of the suffering, confused habits of our heart and mind. The habits

where we respond to whatever situation by either greed or hatred, fear or delusion. Deep, deep habits that we think make sense. It's basically what we talk about every night in one way or another.

All the techniques of vipassana are working in that way to purify a moment of the mind stream, the heart stream, and then we can recognize accurately. Concentration, shamatha meditation, is doing the same thing. And all the brahma-vihāras are, from another angle, offering us a different direction to come in to simply shift the habits of the inclination of our heart and mind. So that's what the loving-kindness practice is doing. And technically, it's kind of like the opposite of ill-will, the opposite of anger.

You'll also see often, in terms of the so-called purification that comes up when you're practicing mettā here or on your own, you may have noticed once in a while other states than mettā arise in your mind and heart. States such as aversion, or self-aversion, or ill-will, or fear. Besides just the regular boredom and wanting and daydreaming. Sometimes you think, "I'm practicing mettā and I'm just filled with self-loathing. That doesn't really seem like what we're trying to do here."

But that's kind of how the old habits get highlighted. And our practice of this mettā, again, isn't to stop self-loathing and immediately feel boundless love. We would if we could, but we can't, so we don't, and it's better not to try. But recognize: this is self-loathing, it's not mettā. That's already good. And then gently come back and see if you can just incline the mind, the heart, to connection, to friendliness, to well-wishing. As Kate was saying, it doesn't matter if you don't feel it. But just that inclination—each time, in a moment, we incline towards this friendliness, this acceptance of ourselves, of friend, of benefactor, of neutral, of all beings. It really doesn't matter which category, which being. That moment of inclining the mind, the heart, is a moment of shifting the habit.

That's why often we think we're practicing and practicing and nothing's happening. And then at some point, now or having lunch or three years from now, suddenly in a situation where you would normally get really averse or annoyed or react in some way, suddenly friendliness and mettā arises instead. And you think, "What's going on? This can't be me. I didn't do this on purpose. It's just happening."

And that's really what happens. We think anger is just happening, but it's just happening because we've practiced it for a really long time. So the more we practice this loving-kindness, the more that comes to be the inclination, the habit of mind.

I'm saying this in terms of why we're going through the different categories—because they highlight maybe different aspects of where it's easy, where it's difficult, or different specific habits may come up in our heart and mind. Perhaps for some people the being you're using as a benefactor is more easy to naturally feel friendly, connected, accepting than oneself or friend or whatever. But that's why we also say we offer the different categories for you to see, for you to practice, to explore—not to conquer.

And when in any category you're really getting lost in the reactivity, or there's no connection at all and you're just lost in thought, or the energy has just dropped out, then go to where it's easy. If you spend the whole retreat just with benefactor or self, if that's easy, that is cultivating the loving-kindness.

As I think I said the first day I was talking about it: any moment that there's just a pure moment of mettā—it doesn't have to be the big feelings, but just that purity, that wholesomeness of mind, heart, mind stream, rather than the fear or aversion—in that moment, whoever might happen to walk in front of you, the heart-mind would accept them with mettā. So you're not wasting your time if you can only send mettā to benefactor or yourself. That's great. For yourself, some people—we've talked about that. You think it's selfish and all of that.

So wherever you can feel the connection, that's cultivating it. That's great. Don't think of it as hierarchy, please. Or should.

Sometimes, as we say, self is the most difficult. We have the idea that we need it, that we should do it for ourselves, but in doing it to ourselves, we're just running into a brick wall over and over. Go back again to wherever it's more connected. Stay there a while. And then you can slip yourself in through the corner and see what happens. Just not to think of it as a hierarchy, and really have this flexibility to see right now what's helping to reconnect the heart, the mind, to incline the intention in that direction of friendliness, inclusion, well-wishing.

So-called neutral—and most of you have done this, I know from the first day, so you know, but I have to say it anyway. It's not that the person we pick is a neutral person in themselves. It's someone we don't really know. You know them enough to be able to remember them or somehow bring up a hazy image, but it's someone you don't have much to do with, most likely, because it's someone you don't have very strong feelings about one way or the other.

Some people find there's no one who's absolutely neutral. Fine, don't go crazy. Some people come and say, "Well, I picked someone, but I'm starting to feel a little bit of liking towards them, a little bit of metta, so do I need to stop now and find another neutral

person?" No, no—that's how it's supposed to work. It's good. Stick with them. But you might find a person where there's a little bit more on the pleasant side, a little bit more on the unpleasant. Pick the one a little bit on the pleasant.

Some people find it's hard to think of someone who's neutral because right away our mind has formed opinions. So just be as mellow as you can with it. Occasionally someone will say they were shocked to find how many people were neutral—almost like people we didn't really pay much attention to. Don't go on a trip about that either. Just pick someone you don't have a big story going on about or a lot of experience with.

If it's still possible after a week here that there's someone in this retreat who's relatively neutral, someone you haven't got a whole story playing about, that's helpful because then you can catch a visual as you're walking around. That may be too late for that. You could pick the person behind the counter at the supermarket where you always go, something like that. Just see who pops up.

It's meant to be a bit more difficult simply because we don't know much, if anything, about this person. If there's someone here, we can impute to them being a human being. We can see: just as I want to be happy, just as I deeply want peace, so too do you. And just wishing that for this person as a representative of humanity. Just as I feel, so may you be happy.

You may know what their work is. You don't know anything about them, but you can see it's the guy working in the dry cleaner and he's friendly when you come in. Or it's somebody in the gas station and they're always there doing their job, the best they can. Don't go into too much story-making. Just find a way to connect. If anything, you can just get a hazy visual and a sense of just being with them, remembering them as a human being. Offer them the phrases one at a time: just as I want for myself, so too may you be safe and protected.

We'll start with self and then go to whichever has been easiest for you—benefactor or friend—just to kind of get the mind and heart a bit collected to start. Because to start right off with neutral, one of the ways you may experience it if it's difficult for you, it may not be so much the opposite coming up, but just the energy falling out. No real connection there, and the mind just goes off into wandering.

That's why I said don't deliberately make up stories. That's one of the ways the distracted mind fools us in metta practice. It goes off on endless stories about the person we're supposedly sending metta to. Have you noticed that? You kind of half feel you're

doing the metta—oh yeah, the guy in the dry cleaner, and he goes home and he has a nice dog and he must be happy and I wonder if he's got kids. Oh, sending metta. You're not sending metta. You're just thinking about stuff.

So notice that. Notice that with all the metta in your heart. It's not bad. It's just not metta. We just want to know what's what. That's one way neutral gets difficult. We kind of lose the thread.

So then again, pick it up if you can. But if you just keep getting lost, again, return to where you can connect a little more steadily, a little more easily. Spend some time there—self, benefactor, friend. And then again, experiment with this so-called neutral person. Just see how it is. In a way, it's not exactly all beings, but I find it kind of a beginning entryway, because we don't have the personal connection to hook onto—just that they're a being, worthy of love and acceptance, just as we are, just as we all are. No better, no worse, no different.

So let's practice together for a little bit, purifying, cultivating the wholesome in our hearts, in our minds, sharing that with ourselves, with our friend, benefactor, neutral, and ultimately all beings.

Finding your comfortable posture, much as you can. And you know what we always say, what I hope you often do, is just take a moment to relax into how it is right now with this body, with this heart-mind. We're just including all aspects of your present moment experience, not starting metta in some kind of struggle with what's going on. It's like this right now. Just relaxing into the sitting position. Receiving the sensations of the physical sitting posture. Just into this field of acceptance, of non-judgment. It's like this now. May this body be happy and healthy.

Feeling whatever's occurring in the heart, the mind, whatever weather system's going on. It's like this now. Sleepy, restless, bored, happy, frightened, lonely. It's like this now. And however it is, it's one momentary aspect of states of mind-heart that we all share, we all participate in. How my mind is expressing in this moment is this particular representation of all beings, of life, of nature.

Just as the heart-mind is in this moment: May I be happy, safe, healthy, living with ease.

And so if spending time with yourself has been accessible or useful, then please let your awareness just completely come into a sense of yourself, whether it's physical—feeling yourself sitting here—mental image, sense in your heart, your memory. If self is really, really difficult, don't fight with it right now, but go to benefactor or friend where it's easy. We can't really be doing this fighting with experience. It's like this now.

So if you're doing self, just tuning in: just as I am in this moment, may I love and accept myself just as I am. Consciously tune into any aspect of your sincerity, your goodness, total worthiness as a human being—which is true for all of us, for everyone. The sincerity of your intention, of your practice, whatever comes up for you. Nothing is too insignificant an aspect of your goodness to appreciate.

And just gently keep on connecting the sense of acceptance, friendliness, and using whichever phrases have been useful for you. The phrases are not to change anything, but as an expression of this warmth, this tender inclusion of all aspects of heart, of ourselves.

May I be safe and protected. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy and may I live with physical ease. May I live with ease, may I be able to care for myself happily in this world.

Sometimes we're the offerer, sometimes the receiver of this simple, friendly, kind energy. And don't worry or get upset if you get lost, if the phrases become rote, if some other feelings are going on. Just simply recognizing that's happening now—that's already a shift from reactivity to friendly acceptance. It's like this now.

And then see if you can just gently connect again with yourself, however you're feeling, feeling the body, connecting with your goodness, and start again, simply offering the next phrase. Just very simple, like a gift. We offer the phrase—may I be happy and peaceful—without looking for any result, just an offering of the heart, and it goes off into the universe. Connect again with the sense of myself. Offer the next phrase in the same way.

And then if sending to yourself, receiving for yourself seems to be flowing, if it's easy and you want to stay there right now, great—please do so. If you'd like to instead bring in either friend or benefactor, this could be a time to do that. Just whichever one naturally seems easy. The sense of getting a sense of the being is simple. You can connect to their wholesome, lovable aspect and just relatively simply feel inclusive, friendly, accepting, and just offering each phrase.

So whichever being comes up for you, friend or benefactor—the easy one: May you be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May you be happy.

May you be healthy. May you live with ease in this world.

And now I suggest, if you're interested in exploring, offering friendly, kind acceptance and well-wishing to a neutral person, you could bring that sense of that person in now—a memory, a visual sense, whatever works for you.

Just give it some time. No need to push or try. Be a bit patient with this if it doesn't connect. Some people find that neutral is actually the easiest. We never know. We're all different.

Stay steady for a little bit. As best you can, get a sense or image or a felt sense of the person, or remember them in some place where you've seen them or heard them. Connect, just knowing that as a human they also want to be happy and living in peace.

And just offer: May you be safe and protected.

After that, if you've lost the sense, take a moment to connect again and then offer again. Connect to the image or felt sense or hearing, and then offer. If you lose the thread, simply start again—very patient. See how it goes. This too is an aspect of metta: patience.

But if you find you're really getting lost, as I said, simply switch back again to where you can connect with a bit more steadiness. And then you may try neutral again. We're just exploring here.

For the last few moments of the sitting, only if you want to, sometimes I imagine the metta as a simple warm glow in the heart area, the chest. And I just imagine spreading this out to include all of us in this room—moving from neutral to a sense of just including all of us without preference or exception. All our fellow travelers on the path.

May we all be safe and protected. May we be happy and peaceful. May we be healthy. May we live with ease.

May the fruits of our practice be shared with all beings in all walks of life. May all beings everywhere be happy, be freed from suffering and confusion.

CHAPTER 142

Understanding the First Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this dharma talk from a February Insight Meditation Retreat, Carol Wilson offers a nuanced exploration of the First Noble Truth (dukkha), emphasizing that it is to be understood rather than merely endured. Drawing from the Dalai Lama's teachings on right view and the importance of examining reality directly, she clarifies that dukkha—often mistranslated as "suffering"—more accurately points to the unreliability, unsatisfactoriness, and incompleteness that characterize conditioned experience.*
>
> *Wilson unpacks the three traditional aspects of dukkha: dukkha-dukkha (the obvious pain of illness, loss, and death), viparināma-dukkha (the unsatisfactoriness inherent in change, even of pleasant experiences), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (the subtle stress of conditioned formations constantly arising and passing). She addresses common misunderstandings, particularly the notion that accepting dukkha means passive resignation. Using the Buddha's own engaged life after awakening as an example—including his active mediation in conflicts among his kinsmen—she demonstrates that understanding dukkha actually enables clearer seeing and more compassionate, skillful action.*
>
> *The talk explores how delusion manifests through denial and inattention, keeping us caught in reactive patterns of aversion to the unpleasant and craving for the pleasant. Wilson emphasizes that steady mindfulness allows us to meet each moment's experience without contention, revealing the interdependence of all phenomena. She concludes by connecting this understanding to compassion and nonviolent action, reading from James Lawson's principles that guided the civil rights movement, showing how deep insight into suffering naturally gives rise to courageous, loving engagement with the world.*

Talking last night about the quality of freedom of heart-mind—call it Nibbana, nature of mind, whatever—and how it's only visible here and now in the immediacy of this present moment. Although I would imagine for many of us that our practice is really to come to understand this with sincere intention and enormous effort—certainly not just this retreat but, if we're on the path, it becomes our whole life.

But still, there's a kind of catch-22. As hard, as sincere as we may be, if we keep looking through the same set of deluded, confused lenses on our perception, everything we do to try to understand things as they are, to try to free our heart and mind, just keeps us going in the same round, and we can't really get it. We can't see what we're

doing because we're only seeing in the same way. And then, when those moments come—and it can just be moments—when suddenly, "Oh, yeah, that's how it really is," it's so immediate.

I remember reading years ago about some famous Tibetan teacher who was saying to his own teacher, "Oh, why didn't you tell me it was like this? Closer than my own eyelid!" Does that help us? No. Closer than my own eyelid—got it? No, because we keep on looking in the wrong way.

This is from the Dalai Lama: "All things, including nirvana, arise from causes and conditions. To find happiness, it is indispensable to have a correct view of the nature of mind and the world. What is meant by right view is not faith or believing in a particular dogma, but a clear understanding that is reached through thoroughly examining reality. This kind of examination will refute the belief in the independent existence of things, which is the root of our distorted vision of the world and vision of ourselves, and replace it with the right view—the right view which implies a recognition that the nature of Buddhahood"—this is Tibetan language—"the nature of liberation is the essence of our own mind, our fundamental cognitive ability, luminous and pure without confusion."

When we say "our," that's just a way of speaking, but this natural purity of cognition is luminous and pure. Right view also involves identifying the factors that keep us from perceiving this nature, so that it becomes possible for us to abandon them, or at least to stop feeding them. A lot of our practice of mindfulness is about seeing and identifying these factors. And the seeing itself is what's liberating.

Tonight I want to talk about the first of the Four Noble Truths. I'm hoping to have one talk on each of the four, but you never know how it goes. Things get sidetracked, other things happen, but we're starting with the first tonight.

From my limited understanding as not being a scholar, all different schools of Buddhism share the Four Noble Truths as the essence of the Buddha's teaching; they are central to all of them. It's sort of like when he had to distill it all down: What is it? Perhaps it's a little longer than just "nothing whatsoever is to be clung to," but that's at the heart of the Four Noble Truths. These are the four facts of life.

The Four Noble Truths are: the first, the truth of dukkha, which is what I'm going to talk about tonight, and I'll unpack that word; the second, the cause of dukkha; the third, the ending of or freedom from dukkha, the cessation of dukkha; and the fourth, the Eightfold Noble Path—the path of walking, of life, of practice.

I want to talk about this first one, the truth of dukkha. Each of the truths has an action associated with it. The truth of dukkha is to be understood. That's all. The Buddha said: What do we need to know to free our hearts and minds from these habits of misperceiving that keep us from being so immediate, closer than our eyelid, that keep us looking elsewhere? The first thing is simply to know and understand this truth of dukkha.

Certainly I can't offer a comprehensive understanding tonight, and it's something that we keep understanding and learning with more and more subtlety, more and more depth. In my experience, my whole life, it just keeps on going. There keeps on being more to see in my own mind and heart.

Again, as the Dalai Lama said, this isn't about understanding conceptually a dogma, believing that if we can understand and remember it, that's what's going to do it. Understanding dukkha is an invitation to this investigation into the nature of reality that His Holiness was talking about. And as Greg said, the nature of reality that's accessible to us is this mind-body process that each of us experiences moment to moment—our own, so to speak, mind-body process.

How amazing that all the confusion, but also all the truth of the way things work, can be experienced and revealed by exploring with open-hearted interest this mind-body process. What we come up against when we start, and as we keep going, is this truth of dukkha. So let me offer some reflections, certainly not comprehensive, but some reflections on the first noble truth.

I just want to share that dukkha is often translated as "the truth of suffering," but I don't want to translate it that way. Because when we hear the word "suffering" in English, how closely related is aversion? When you hear that word... yeah, it's pretty hard. "Oh yes, the truth of suffering. That's what people say about Buddhists—they're really downheads. Everything is suffering. Life is suffering." Have you heard that as one description of the first noble truth? Life is suffering. Well yes, let's embrace that. And how does understanding that free our heart and mind? It's like, please, I think I need to go somewhere else.

Suffering as a translation is often used, but perhaps it's not so helpful, not so useful in terms of understanding the real subtlety of what the Buddha is trying to introduce us to. And remember, understanding this—if we really understand it, even just in a moment—in that moment it is freeing us from unnecessary suffering, the suffering of reactive mind and reactive heart, because we're not recognizing accurately.

So I love talking about this first noble truth because the more I understand it, the more ease and peace and contentment I feel with life as it is. This doesn't mean life as it is has suddenly taken on a rosy hue. Anyone who really knows me knows I am not the world's biggest optimist. And it's not like, "Yes, I just see everything moving along and it's all going to be perfect in a perfect world." You're never going to hear me say that. But the understanding, the sense of understanding what dukkha means—really getting it—means not being in contention with reality. And this is incredibly powerful. We'll talk about it in many different ways.

So one way of describing the word dukkha comes from the Venerable Anālayo, who is another really preeminent translator. He's a German monk in the Theravada tradition, but he's done a lot of translating into English. He talks about the word itself—dukkha—and one way of breaking it apart is that the "du" part is like difficulty. Difficulty, not standing well, just difficulty. And one definition of the "kha" part—remember this is from 2600 years ago in rural India—involves an ox cart with two big wooden wheels, just solid wood with a hole in the middle where the axle goes through. So the difficulty of standing badly, the way this cart wheel rolls with this hole and the pole going through it—not smooth, not relaxed. And still today, I've ridden on an ox cart. I'm here to tell you that's a really good definition. It's just not comfortable. It's just not easy. A kind of disharmony, a little bit of friction.

As Ruth Denison, a great teacher who is quite old now, once said, "That little leak in the canoe..." There's always a little something that shows up.

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it as the basic sense, arising from time to time—not every moment—of unsatisfactoriness or incompletion that runs through our lives. It's not that every moment is horrible suffering. It's not that. So this is one way of thinking about dukkha: this unreliability, as Greg uses a word we often use, this kind of incompleteness, this unsatisfactoriness.

And then the Buddha, as he was wont to do, being quite precise, talks about it in three different aspects. And this is where it becomes a challenging, very challenging teaching—both to talk about, to hear, and then to keep looking at in our lives in all these three aspects.

This is Sariputta, the Buddha's chief disciple, describing: "There are, friend, these three kinds of dukkha. The stress, the discontent that arises just due to pain, due to difficult things that happen. The second is the discontent that arises due to change—viparinṇāma dukkha. And this is really when beautiful, pleasant things are occurring, and they do. They're also included within dukkha, not because they're not beautiful and

pleasant, but because they're unreliable. They go away. And the dukkha due to formations, which is saṅkhāra dukkha—saṅkhāra being any fabrication, coming together, going apart, this sense of endless coming together, going apart."

I'll talk about each of the three.

In a way, it's the most obvious, and in another way, in terms of really opening to understanding, it's immensely challenging. I find this in our practice here, in our daily lives, and just in our minds—even being able to wrap around it enough to be willing to look. Not that we can totally understand, but even to meet it.

So this is how the Buddha describes this dukkha dukkha: Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, illness is dukkha, death is dukkha. We wouldn't argue with this, right? It's unsatisfactory. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair all occur. Separation from what is pleasing is dukkha. Union with what is displeasing is dukkha. Not to get what one wants is dukkha.

Probably, I'm guessing, up to now we could all be on the same page. No one's saying, "Yeah, I don't think that's dukkha. That's great. I love not getting what I want." But what the Buddha is saying is that this is simply a fact of life. This is what occurs at times to everybody. Everybody. No one here gets out alive.

And so this is where people go, "Okay, well that's really inspiring." But mostly what I'm here to talk about—my way of approaching this—is not to try and convince you, or me, that this stuff really happens. Rather, it's to look at why we need to understand, why the Buddha thought, "I need to tell you this so that you can understand it," because that's how our mind relates to it.

In terms of this first dukkha, the dukkha of pain, the dukkha of loss and despair and lamentation, what the Buddha's talking about—where we can explore, where we can investigate—is in our personal, moment-to-moment experience in our mind and heart of dukkha dukkha. I'm going to use "suffering" for dukkha dukkha: unpleasant, painful, difficult things occurring in our own mind or occurring to us from the so-called outside. Maybe it could be grief. It could be sadness. It could be illness. It could be job loss. It could be someone externally really treating us badly. It could be systemic. It could be cultural. The teaching is not saying that bad stuff doesn't happen—and I'm using "bad" in our normal way.

But when the Buddha talks about understanding, about not being in contention with reality, I want to say that in terms of the bigger world—the sense of the incredible amount of violence, hatred, injustice, homophobia, racism, poverty, economic inequal-

ity, you name it—the freedom really comes from our being able to truly be with this dukkha without fighting with it. Remember, he's talking about the immediacy of what's occurring in this moment. What's happening in this moment.

Two of the ways we get really lost in reactivity: One is the obvious one of aversion, anger, fear—moving into some realm in our reaction either to what's happening or to ourselves, blaming ourselves or hating others, or just all-out denial, so that our heart and mind is overwhelmed by anger, fear, aversion. That's perhaps the more obvious way.

Another way we sometimes hear more intellectually until we really get it on a cellular level—and then we understand differently. But often when we talk about how freedom comes from not being in contention with this moment of reality, we hear it as a kind of passivity. That the Buddha is saying we can't respond or try to change anything in this world or in our life. Have you sometimes felt that that's what the teaching is? When we use the word "acceptance," it's often heard in that way. "I just have to accept." And this can lead into either a kind of self-blame—whatever bad happens is my fault—or else it's hopeless, a kind of victimhood, or else a reactivity to that: "What do you mean we can't change? That's crazy."

That's not what the teaching is saying at all. Understanding in a moment, not being in contention with this moment's experience, is what allows for clear seeing, the clear recognition of what's occurring. And that can allow, in the next moment, if a response is appropriate or possible, for that response to occur. How the mind-heart is awake and present in this moment becomes a cause, a condition for what arises in the mind-heart in the next moment. So if we're filled with aversion, feeding aversion, feeding anger and confusion, that's much more likely to lead into the next moment. But when just in a moment we can drop into "this is what's happening now"—and yes, it's horrible, we're not saying it makes it nice, this is horrible—the immediacy of presence, not the concept, then that moment of non-aversion, of clear-seeing wisdom, allows for clearer recognition and a more appropriate response.

So I'm saying at the beginning—hopefully I'll have time to talk a little at the end—but I just want to really make it clear as I move into talking more about the freedom that only comes from total presence with this moment: that acceptance, that non-contention, is not passivity into the future. It's not stupidity, or rolling over like a doormat and not responding at all. It allows for really clear seeing and a strong response.

One way that this not being in contention—this not-passivity—works is by recognizing that we all, at different times, will experience to different degrees all that stuff the Buddha mentioned. And we each, to differing degrees, have our personal experience, our cultural experience, our familial experience, our community experience—whatever it may be. Different for each of us.

The Buddha is talking in terms of these Four Noble Truths, of this First Noble Truth, and all of that is true. And it's not at all a justification or an apology for the injustice and the violence in the world. It's not that. But the place we can start to free our hearts and minds is right here. And that takes a willingness to drop in right now, when I feel—you know—"I can't bear to be with this." Okay, what is it I can't bear to be with? Just exploring it with kindness. Not in contention.

A place I find really instructive to look at in terms of this balance is the Buddha's life itself—little parts of his life after he was enlightened. What did he do with the forty-five years of his life after he woke up and became the peaceful one, free from suffering, free from confusion?

He made choices. He did not live forty-five years of passivity, hanging out in some realm of heavenly beauty. The suttas tell us maybe he could have done that—that was a choice he could have made. I mean, who knows? I don't know. But that's in the suttas: that was a choice he could have made.

But the choice he made was to tune in to the beings, the humans in the world. And this is part of the vastness of a Buddha's mind—it can empathetically feel what's going on. And seeing the suffering, he didn't say, "Well, yeah, that's just how it is. Just be with the suffering. That's how it is. Not in contention with reality." No. His clear seeing, the heart—the jewel in the heart of freedom, in the heart of understanding dukkha—is compassion. It is this ability to bear witness to the difficulty, the unhappiness, the dissatisfaction in our own mind and heart, and to be present with that in others.

When our mind, our heart, our response is not clouded or distorted by aversion, by ill will, by clinging, then we can make choices. We don't make them—intention makes them. Let's not even go there any further than that. But choices are made. Choices arise due to causes and conditions arising in the mind, and they coalesce into an intention in a moment. And then the Buddha had the intention to share what he knew, out of compassion for the world. That intention would keep arising for forty-five years.

So certainly not passivity, but quite ongoing engaged activity for the good of beings.

If an understanding of dukkha meant "it's all hopeless, nothing can change," he wouldn't have bothered, right? I figure he wouldn't have bothered. If the understanding of reality meant "it's like this in this moment, and it'll always be like this—change isn't possible, so heck with it"—he wouldn't have gone teaching, walking up and down India barefoot, begging for his meals every day.

Think about it. Does that sound really very comfortable? When you think about waking up, do you think about how you're still going to have your backache? He did. There are suttas where he had to lie down and he goes, "Ananda, you give the talk. I have to go lie down. My back hurts." Or he'd have a headache. Stuff happened. You know, his kinsfolk on both sides—his mother's and father's families—went to war over water rights. His awakening couldn't stop the stupidity and the violence and the greed in the world.

He couldn't change the world. I mean, here we all are, 2,600 years later, really sincere, really wanting to cultivate wisdom and kindness and compassion. And that's beautiful—what a great thing that this is a path that's still alive. There are many paths, but this one is still here. Yet he couldn't fix the whole world. He couldn't even fix his own kinspeople.

But he didn't just sit there and think, "Well, they're killing each other. What to do?" He did what he could do. He went and talked to them. He really mediated. He did help them come to some conclusion. He did stop that particular moment of violence based on greed and water rights and fear.

So he was active. It wasn't a life of passivity. It was action based on compassion, based on clear seeing, from an ability to be with all these painful things happening and then to respond in a way that's sensible, that's appropriate—that isn't put off by the suffering but isn't lost in it either.

When we perceive correctly, the heart-mind is free, it's open. There's that moment of purity, the potential, just for a moment, to be here so fully that whatever's occurring is simply recognized as it is. It doesn't become a source of suffering for us. We don't then act out of it in ways that cause suffering for others.

I'll stay with dukkha dukkha—talking about why this is so difficult for us. Because again, it's obvious that all this happens. And yet still, so often, moha, delusion, shows up in our minds in various ways. One way is this kind of denial: this isn't happening, or it's not going to happen. Or we know it intellectually, but we don't really let it in.

That we're each going to die is the classic example, right? I know it. The older I get, it's a little closer than it used to be, I have to notice it—but not really. Not yet. There's like twenty more years, whatever. There's a way it's just not quite in there.

How often when something goes wrong in our immediate life—a loss, an illness, we hurt ourselves, or something really appalling happens to us from outside while we were just minding our own business—the sense of denial, the feeling that this is not supposed to happen, is often so strong. Even just with illness, which I have a lot of personal experience of, it's quite easy for the mind to slip into thinking, "Yeah, I know, but if I was really pure enough... if I was practicing correctly, if I had enough understanding, this illness, this bad thing wouldn't have happened. Somehow I did something wrong."

There's often, when someone is ill or suffering grief or loss, a sense of shame. The dukkha dukkha, the suffering, can take us into a sense of alienation. In a way, we each suffer alone. If I'm really having a migraine, there can be empathy, but no one else can really have it with me. Not that I would wish someone to have it with me, but no one really can. So in that way, it's true—you're experiencing what you're experiencing in this moment.

But the next moment, someone else is experiencing their suffering. We all experience all these aspects: loss of what we love, being together with what we don't like, old age, birth, sickness, death, the stuff that goes on in the world, the violence, the injustice. We're all impacted in different ways.

What's so fascinating is how, at times, there can be this sense of "no"—when bad stuff happens, it's a mistake, it's wrong. And often our tendency is to turn it against ourselves. It becomes this kind of self-judging: what did I do wrong to be experiencing this?

That's aversion, right? You're aware that's aversion. That's the habit of mind: unpleasant leads to aversion. Push it away.

Blame inside, blame outside. Because this isn't supposed to be happening.

This is one of the places where this becomes challenging when we think of the injustice in the world. Because if we say in the moment, whether it's supposed to be happening or not is a moot point—it *is* happening. In this moment, it is happening. This particular moment can't be any different because it's already here, happening. That's what not being in contention with reality means. It doesn't mean saying it's right, it's appropriate, let's support it to continue. It's saying: this is what's happening. And when the heart, the mind, is meeting it with aversion, fear, blame—any sort of aversion—it

pushes away the experience such that we can't recognize accurately. It keeps us in that cycle of more delusion, not recognizing accurately or being able to respond appropriately.

And it's amazing, though, the power of denial. Sometimes I think I should give a whole talk on it. It's an amazing power in the world. Have you ever noticed—if you've been in a relationship that lasted some time and then broke up, probably no one here has had that experience—and at the end of it... In the beginning, everything's so lovely. That's why you get in the relationship, right? You don't get in it going, "Oh, this is going to be horrible." You really think it's going to be great, and the person's so wonderful.

Then at the end, when it ends, whichever way it ends—good, bad—you can see, I mean, I've seen for myself, the things that really came together to make it break apart, that wasn't new information. That was something I knew the day I met the person. Me and the person, we knew, but oh no, no, no, that's not even happening. It's like, I don't even know that. That's not really true. I'm not even going to look at that. It's almost like my mind can almost see itself doing that: I'm just not going to go there. And that'll just make it not be true. If we ignore it enough, it won't be true. It doesn't work that way. But denial is amazing.

I read years ago a little article in the *New York Times* about some small town in Spain. The mayor said the cemetery was getting too full—there was no more space to bury people who die. So the mayor proclaimed a temporary moratorium on death until they could find more land for a new cemetery. I mean, this was serious. This was not funny news. This was a serious article in the newspaper.

So we can go to this place of feeling isolated, when in fact the opening into these aspects of dukkha-dukkha, as Ajahn Sumedho likes to point out, actually can be something that unifies us as human beings. He used to start his talks with, "Welcome, sisters and brothers in old age, disease, and death." Like, we're all going to go through it. We are. Why be ashamed when we're sick, or something is falling apart, or we've lost our job, or one of our really unpleasant mental habits has suddenly come out our mouth and now everybody knows what a mess we really are? You think they didn't know. We're the only ones pretending we don't know.

But this is life. We're all sharing in it. Really, it doesn't have to be a way to be ashamed or alienated, but a way of connectedness, of unity, of inclusion. Not non-inclusion—inclusion. This is really the heart of empathy that arises from a deep understanding of suffering in our own experience. And this heart of empathy is the heart of compassion. The Dalai Lama talks about this a lot.

So this quality of denial—just, this isn't happening, it's not supposed to be happening, only good things are supposed to happen, and if something bad happens, it's wrong—however way our mind works with it, that's one basic element of delusion, of moha, that serves the purpose of keeping us from recognizing accurately. It comes from the belief, as I think Joko Beck said, the belief that I can somehow hold myself separate from this unpleasant and difficult experience. Have you noticed that? Just in practice here.

This is what I love about being on retreat—you can have simple examples. Someone will come in and say, "Well, I'm all upset, but the thing I'm upset about is so stupid." And we go off into how stupid the thing is. Never mind that it's stupid. Turn around and see. This is how the mind works. This is a great place to observe it.

We think we can hold ourselves separate from this unpleasant experience, which might just be a recurrent sound that we hate. We experience it as unpleasant, and the last thing we want to do is simply open with awareness into the experience of hearing. "I don't want to hear that sound. I don't want to hear that sound." We do all the things we do precisely so we don't have to just open into hearing what's unpleasant.

When there's a moment that we can do this—and you can't do it by an act of will; you try, but you're still caught in the unpleasantness—but the moment when something lets go and you just drop into, "Okay, unpleasant sound is like this"... you get a sense, "Oh, that's just what's happening." Unpleasant doesn't have to morph into pleasant for everything to be okay. That's just how it is. Unpleasant is like this. But we can't hold ourselves separate. We think we can rearrange the world to stop it.

Because I know we've talked about this, but secretly, way in the back—and I find it comes up in my mind all the time too, despite everything I know, even cellularly—secretly it'll come up: it's all about heading for pleasant. It's all about moving in the direction of more and more pleasant experience.

No one comes in and complains when they've had a really pleasant sitting. Do you? You don't come in and say, "My practice has gone to hell. I was just sitting there and it was bliss and there was no pain. It's really horrible." It's a rare being who comes in and complains about that, right? But you can spend days lost in that, cultivating wanting.

So this is a really deep habit of our mind, this aversion to the unpleasant.

One of the suttas I was mentioning in a meeting with someone the other day that I love, where the Buddha talks about this habit, is the one about the two darts. What he says is so poignant to me: a normal worldling, an unenlightened person, the only es-

cape they know from unpleasant feeling is to go lusting after a pleasant sense experience. Does that sound familiar? That's like, in the world, without opening to understanding our mind and heart, he's saying that's the only escape people know.

So something's unpleasant—it could be vastly unpleasant, or just a little bit unpleasant. Just a little bit unpleasant at home, and you jump up and go to the fridge, or get on the phone, or turn on the TV—just to not feel it. Or here on retreat, you go into a fantasy. Have you noticed that? A pleasant fantasy. You come back and ask, "What's going on?" Well, my little finger's a little tight, you know. It's unpleasant. I mean, I've had that experience, really. It's just the habit of mind.

So the only escape a worldling knows is to lust after pleasant experience. This becomes a habit that underlies the mind, the Buddha says. The avoidance, the resistance to unpleasant, and the lusting after pleasant, and not understanding what's going on. This is so deep.

But the willingness to just, with our steady mindful awareness, meet each experience equally—that's what breaks this habit. And it's what lets us start to see how that habit is working. It's like, "Wow, look at that."

We can do it the other way too, not always going for the pleasant. But this is one of the ways we sometimes get into, kind of dharmically, in our practice, a misunderstanding of dukkha. We think, "Well, okay, it's not about chasing after the pleasant."

And this is another aspect of the truth of dukkha—the fact of change, viparinama dukkha. Sariputta, who was the Buddha's chief disciple, in one sutta gives what's called his lion's roar of awakening, where he declares, "Yes, I know this to be true." And one of the things he says is that all feeling tone—all feeling, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in our mind—all feeling is included within dukkha.

Now, if you think of dukkha just as suffering, that's, again, we're into, "Oh my God, he's saying there's nothing pleasant, there's nothing beautiful. It's all just suffering, it's all just horrible."

This is the misunderstanding. But the second aspect of dukkha—unreliable, nothing to hold to—is that it changes. There is beauty in this world. There is happiness in sense pleasures, in beautiful experiences. The Buddha is not denying that at all. It's only when we ask from them something they can't give—a reliability, a lasting happiness, a sense of self-gratification—when it goes, as the Buddha said, separation from what is loved, that will happen. It absolutely will happen to every single thing, any moment that we

love. The same will happen with the moments we don't love, because no moment lasts. Nothing lasts. We don't like that too much when it's pleasant. It's that unreliability, that nowhere to take a stand.

So the Buddha is saying, or Sariputta is saying, all feeling, all vedana, is included within dukkha in that it's unreliable. He's not saying there's nothing beautiful. In another place, a poetic translation of another sutta, he says, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it." Do you get the difference?

So we're bringing in the steadiness of awareness. Mindfulness meets the unpleasant, meets the pleasant, meets the neutral. Just being with what's presenting itself. This is not being in contention with the reality that's presenting itself in this moment—any of the changing sixth sense experiences.

This is why we emphasize steadiness, continuity. The more and more mindfulness starts to get its own momentum through all the activities of the day, there's no way you cannot notice: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—just changing all the time. They're all happening. And if we are avoiding the unpleasant, glomming onto the pleasant, we're never going to see accurately. We keep spinning in this cycle of unsatisfactoriness.

So this sense of just landing in this moment, as it is. And then this moment, as it is. Not trying to explain it all—just here, here, here. That steadiness of awareness reveals the way things are. And then that sense of "I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience" starts to drop away.

But we're so deeply conditioned, with really a lot of fear of the unpleasant and of pain. I certainly am. And I'm not saying we should now be able to say, "Okay, now I'm just going to open to all the suffering in my life, all the suffering in the world in this moment." We can't do that by an act of will. And there are definitely many times when the degree of emotional pain or physical pain or mental pain arising in my heart-mind, in my body at this moment, is occurring more strongly than the strength of awareness to meet it in that moment.

But that's a momentary thing. We tend to go, "Well, that's just too much. I can't be with it. It's over." But I'll go back to migraines, because I get them. I remember years ago when it was just so unbearable. I would just roll around. It was unbearable. I just wanted to not be conscious at all, or just out of it.

I'm still not saying I like them, but I can see a real shift at times. Everything's just moment to moment, nothing steady state. But there are times when there's that pain and instead of the mind going, "Oh my God, this is unbearable, I can never be with

these moments"—it's just what it is. I'm not analyzing or trying to do anything, or trying to get compassionate. The habit of heart, of mind, of total aversion and fear toward the unpleasant is much less strong than it used to be, at moments.

And then there are times when you can say, "Okay, it's like this." I'll be going around doing what I'm doing, sometimes having fun and talking, and then there'll be a lapse where it's like, "Oh my God, shoot myself"—and that'll come in. And then there'll be times when the mind can be with it again.

The bigger picture knowing—this seeing how the mind works—is also part of awareness. Not having some idealistic view, which we can also get lost in through practice. "Okay, now I know I should be with everything that's occurring, and if I get into aversion, that's bad. I'm wrong. I didn't do it right." We're back to the same old, same old—taking it personally.

Aversion is unpleasant. "I did it wrong. I should be able to always be perfect." It's so slippery, isn't it? It's so slippery how these things come in.

One way I've noticed this kind of misunderstanding manifest in a dharmic context is when we start to hear that all feeling is included within dukkha. We taste for ourselves the pain that comes with attachment to pleasure. We start to see—perhaps for the first time—how the habit of mind goes chasing after one pleasant experience after another. There are times when we simply recognize: this is going nowhere.

But rather than just noticing that, the mind flips into aversion. And I wouldn't be surprised if everyone here has had this experience—we have it a million times. We start to see craving and go, "Wow." Then we start to see it ten billion times a day. Anyone have that experience? And then we think, "This is horrible. This is hopeless. This is endless. Oh my God, I have so much craving. I'm a horrible person."

That's where we go. Self-judgment is just aversion—denial of the first noble truth. Stuff's not supposed to happen.

Some people then almost start to shy away from connection with the beautiful, with the pleasant when it's happening. Almost deliberately noticing more the unpleasant in practice and thinking somehow that's a kind of wisdom. "Well, it's all going to end anyway, so there's no point even bothering with the pleasant, with the beautiful."

I've been through stages like that in practice. We used to call them dukkha stages. I thought it was a sign of cleverness, but it wasn't. It was a mark of ignorance.

For example, there's one stage in practice where you're really seeing a lot of endings. You see the beauty, the pleasant—you see it go. You see the unpleasant come—you see it go. There's just nowhere to stand. I remember walking into my room where I was practicing on a long self-retreat. I had a nice plant hanging up, and my mind goes, "It's just going to die." No appreciation whatsoever—just, "Oh, that's going to die." I remember a couple had just gotten together on staff at IMS. They were walking down the driveway holding hands. My mind said, "Give them six months." That's just how the mind kept operating, thinking it was a sign of cleverness. "I'm not getting attached because I know it's all going to change."

It's a phase. If you can skip it, may you.

So it comes back to steadiness—appreciating the beautiful, but the wise one does not strive after it. Recognizing the unpleasant, but the wise one doesn't have to run from it. Recognizing the neutral, not making anything of it. Steady, steady, steady. And we learn to recognize—this is where we really start to see the nature of our mind and heart, the nature of reality.

The Dalai Lama again: "Buddhism essentially consists of two things. The view, which means a definitive understanding of the interdependence of all things. And action, which can be loosely defined as nonviolence. But if one were to summarize the Buddha's teaching in one word, we would have to say that it is universal interdependence, of which nonviolence is a natural consequence."

We start to see things as they really are when we're not so caught in the unconscious habits of preference and fear and denial. Unfortunately, the only way to that is through the practice of really opening wholeheartedly into this moment as best we can.

And this moment and this moment—whatever, however subtle, however gross, it doesn't matter what's happening. That moment where we just meet experience, not to fix it, not to have a great insight, just to be here. That's a shift in that moment from the habit of aversion and clinging and delusion to that open-hearted, clear mindfulness.

The Buddha said, "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will. On that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

One's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both. That's another poignancy in our habitual response to the difficult—and I mean the really difficult, and even the little nudgy difficult. That sense of keeping separate: bad, wrong, get away, not seeing. Whether it's all the way to fear, hatred, revenge, or just the subtle "ah, no, let's pretend

this isn't happening"—these are all forms of dosa, forms of ill will, that keep us from being able to recognize as it really is the interdependence of all things. We can't see even our own good, or the good of another, or the good of both.

That's why there's so much emphasis on direct knowledge, direct seeing, and then response out of a mind and heart freed, just in a moment. We can't always tell whether it's filled with ill will or wanting or not. But that's what we're learning here, in all these simple little moments. That's why, if we just fixed things every time we were uncomfortable—well, we try that. That's our basic way of going through life. And that's part of the structure of retreat: you sit, you walk, so that we have to look at this stuff. Not as a forcing, but to really understand.

So don't believe anything you read or anything I say. I'm just trying to encourage us all to keep looking, to keep seeing, so that we're not blinded. The truth reveals itself moment after moment after moment.

This noble truth, when it's understood—this noble truth of dukkha, of this unsatisfactoriness running through—recognizing it just in a moment, that moment has the potential to really release our heart and mind from this cycling confusion of suffering and hatred and isolation and alienation. It doesn't have the power to make everything okay in the world. It doesn't have the power to make everything okay in this mind and body. By okay, I mean pleasant, nothing going wrong. But it has the power to shift our whole understanding of what peace is, what freedom is, what suffering really is.

Let me say just a little bit about the third type of dukkha and another aspect of delusion, which is inattention. Again, this is why we emphasize the steadiness of awareness. Inattention—where we just don't notice things.

The third aspect of dukkha is sankhara dukkha, which you could describe in different ways. This is kind of subtle, so don't go wacko thinking about it, but one way to put it is the perpetual incompletion—things come together and go apart. Another way of describing it is the relentless nature of life. You have to get up, and you have to brush your teeth, and then you eat, and then you have to brush your teeth. You get up and you have to pee, and then you have to drink something, and then you have to pee. And then you have to drink something, and then you have to take a shower. It just keeps going like that. That's what life is like, every day. And there's a lot of inattention to that.

Now, when people hear this, there's often a misunderstanding: "Okay, so I should notice every moment? Oh, it's unpleasant, I have to pee, and you have to go." It's not that. But it's about stopping the habit of making things up and then wondering why we're not satisfied with life.

Have you ever gone on a vacation to a lovely spot, and some of the moments are beautiful, and some are nice, and some moments you don't feel good, and some moments you go out to dinner and you really weren't in the mood, and the conversation isn't great, and you didn't like the food—but you're in Italy, for God's sake! And so you feel like you've got to really appreciate it. You're in a beautiful spot. It doesn't matter if you're really unhappy that day. You just gloss it over. You don't know. You come back and say, "That was a great vacation. It was a great vacation."

So what you can do here is just explore eating. Eating's a great place to investigate, unless you have huge issues around it—then don't use that, use something else. Explore sleeping or whatever. But choose something that in our mind we think, "Oh, that's great, that's really where I find happiness."

So chew. Next time they serve a chocolate brownie or something, notice how long, when you're chewing on it, does it really taste good? Chew, chew. There are two chews, and then it's just mechanical movement. Do we keep paying attention then? No. We start thinking about the next bite, don't we? And we think about the next bite until this massive glob is gone, and then we go for the next bite. We say, "That brownie was great." And we wonder why we're not quite in alignment with reality.

Then you might think, "I don't want to look that closely." No, we may not. But believe me, that's really more freeing. Then you can eat as much brownie as you want without needing it to give you more than it can give you. It can give you what it can give you. And then you can put it down when you've had enough. That's sankhara dukkha. And the delusion part is that we just don't pay attention. There's this inattention.

This is what keeps us believing we can have pleasant, pleasant, pleasant—because we're just not really noticing the alternation, the ceaseless alternation. But it doesn't have to be a problem. It frees us. It really does.

When I first started my first three-month retreat, I remembered—I don't have a big thing about eating, but still, I was always on time for lunch, put it that way. There was one guy who would come strolling in twenty minutes after lunch started, and some things would be running out, and I thought, "God, he must be enlightened." I was so amazed. I never really knew who he was. I didn't talk to him ever after. But I just had this sense of, "Wow, how amazing. He must be enlightened."

Then, twenty years later, I just noticed that without even thinking about it, I would come into the meal whenever I came into the meal. And if it was late and the beans were gone—hey, no big deal, the beans were gone. It just really didn't matter. I could like it or not like it, it really didn't matter. It was pleasant or unpleasant, but I wasn't

looking to it to give me more than it could give me. There's such freedom around that. We still appreciate, but you're not looking for it to provide something beyond what it can.

That's a simple little example of how the steadiness of attention frees us. It doesn't erode our enjoyment of life. It allows enjoyment to be more true, more natural, more connected.

So I have two minutes to mention again that opening to dukkha is not about passive resignation or non-action in response to our own particular circumstances or in response to the world. The seed, the beautiful jewel in the heart of understanding dukkha, is compassion.

The Dalai Lama says compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is, and this comes from being with our own experience. Where else can we learn? And this naturally widens and strengthens with a sense of empathy that gradually spreads to all beings.

When we're able to just be present—just for a moment, don't make it your whole life—in that moment, without the need to correct samsara, that experience, just in that moment of the purity of heart-mind, allows for clear recognition and seeing. It allows us to recognize that if the appropriate response is perhaps there's nothing compassionately one can do, then we can bear witness. This is a deep expression of compassion. Just to be with yourself in your suffering. To bear witness to it, to be present with it. That's something many of you are talking about—rather than hating and blaming ourselves or trying to run away.

Yeah, this really... sadness is sad. This is painful. This is an expression of the sadness that we all at times experience. Can I just be with it, with kindness? That's an expression of compassion.

And when we can bear witness with ourselves, sometimes that's all we can do with another. But there's a difference between being able to be with someone as they're going through or expressing their suffering, and the need to fix it because we're uncomfortable. These are two different things.

And then, if there is appropriate action—when we're not caught in reactivity, the response can be one of enormous activity, courage, wisdom, strength. Compassion is not at all passive. The understanding of dukkha without needing to be in a reactive stance actually allows for whatever way our personality wants to express itself as an expression in the world.

I'll end by reading something written by James Lawson, who guided the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Nashville in 1959 and 1960. These were kids in college—African-American young men and women who organized and carried out the Freedom Rides through the South in the years after. Incredible actions of courage and bravery based deeply and profoundly on love, compassion, and nonviolence. As the Dalai Lama said, when we understand our interdependence, nonviolence as a way of action is the natural response.

James Lawson wrote:

"We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the manner of our action. Nonviolence, as it grows from Judaic Christian traditions, seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear. Love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice. Peace dominates war. Faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality. Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Such love goes to the extreme. It remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility."

Knowing that this deep understanding and commitment to love, nonviolence, and interdependence—which needs to be renewed moment after moment after moment—led to incredible actions of courage and bravery, and in essence, to change injustice. Based not in anger, not in hatred, but out of this understanding, this love and compassion that comes from understanding.

And the way the Buddha teaches, it begins with simply being willing to have the intention to try to land in this moment. That's all. You don't have to do it. You don't have to be perfect. Just the intention, in this moment, to be nonviolent towards your own experience.

CHAPTER 143

Brahmavihārā Day #12

Carol Wilson · 44 min

> *In this final guided mettā session before transitioning to compassion (karuṇā), Carol Wilson invites practitioners to explore loving-kindness in whatever way feels most natural and connected for them. Rather than providing structured instructions, she creates space for a "free mettā period" where participants can discover their own authentic relationship with this brahmavihāra practice.*
>
> *Carol shares several approaches to extending mettā to all beings, including the directional radiation method (north, south, east, west, above, below) and a beautiful visualization taught by Venerable Anālayo. This technique involves imagining a warm, gentle energy like a lantern in the heart center, then simply lifting imaginary screens to allow the loving-kindness to flow outward in each direction—a practice of allowing rather than forcing. She also describes her own approach learned from Goenka, radiating mettā simultaneously in all directions like an expanding circle.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes flexibility and personal discovery in meditation practice. Carol acknowledges that while phrases can be helpful, sometimes they create too much mental activity, and practitioners should find what genuinely connects them to the quality of friendliness and warmth. She encourages returning to simplicity when the vastness of "all beings" causes the energy to dissipate, then opening up again. The session closes with a beautiful dedication of merit, extending loving-kindness to all fellow retreatants and support staff before radiating outward to all beings everywhere.*

This afternoon is the last afternoon that we'll be guiding the metta. We move to compassion tomorrow, just so you know.

I thought today we would, of course, formally continue with all beings. But I had the feeling not to give any new or different specific instructions about that. Rather, since it's the last day we'll all be doing this together at this time, I wanted to let you find your own way. You can start with all beings if you like, but more than that, just let yourself play in the realm of metta in the way that calls you—the way that feels the most energized, connected, and easiest for you.

Even as gently as it may be, you may try to bring your experience along as we're saying in the instructions, even though we keep saying, "Find your own way." Just the fact that someone's up here saying "Now, radiating metta to all beings" is, in a sense, asking

you to try that—which is great. That's why we say it. We want you to try it. But I thought today I would mention all beings and then give you the space where you don't have to even have a little sense of trying to match any instruction. Just use this as a free metta period. Hopefully you can do that at other times too.

All I'll say about all beings is that there are many ways of doing it, both formally and informally. One of the most accessible to many of us is the way Brian offered it, which is really just sending or radiating or allowing the metta to move in the different directions —north, south, east, west, above, below. I like that myself.

There are other ways, depending on how your mind works, where you just keep saying, "May all beings be happy. May all living beings, may all creatures..." and you go through a whole list. I'm going to spare you because it gets very wordy, but in a longer period, sometimes it's useful.

For many people—and I know it's come up—sometimes saying the phrases and the words is useful, but sometimes it's actually just too much action. I remember hearing about Venerable Anālayo, the German Theravāda monk, describing his way of doing metta. He said he disliked the word-heavy way of doing metta. He described something which I thought sounded lovely as a way to play with it: just beginning a metta period by imagining in your heart, in the center of your chest, a kind of warmth—a gentle, friendly, warm energy. This works for people who don't get all tight around trying to visualize. Just a warm energy, almost like a gentle, warm lantern in your chest.

Then just allowing it to come out, as if you want to send it, letting it go out in one direction. He had the image of a lantern or lamp, the old-fashioned kind that has screens you can put down. When you want to allow the loving-kindness to move out to the front of you, you just lift the screen, the little wall, up from that side, and it just goes out. This is different from you having to make it happen. You're just lifting up the wall and letting it go out. And then the same for each different direction.

Just playing. Playing with the sense of sending out this energy of friendliness and warmth.

For me, when I'm thinking of all beings, sometimes I just say, "May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful," and imagine it going in all directions simultaneously, just radiating out in a circle. I learned that from Goenka in my first retreats. Sometimes I do the specific directions, like north—I forgot to check before I came in here. I am really directionally challenged. Brian probably helped you, right? If you know, that's all that matters. I don't have to know. In front, behind, right, left.

Then I'll imagine to the north different beings that pop up in my mind, like polar bears, or humans I know who live to the north, or ones that I've read about. Ones that are happy, ones that are sad, things that are going on—don't get too far down that road—but animals, whatever. Overhead, of course, people going over in planes, or hot air balloons.

I actually love teaching this where I teach in Switzerland because it's about 4,000 feet up, and it's a place where hang gliders are just going off all the time. There are literally people drifting over your head most of the day. So it's a very literal "those above me, safe and protected"—literally, may they be safe and protected. It's kind of fun.

I'm just throwing out ideas because I don't want to guide the whole thing. I want to let you see and be with your own way of accessing loving-kindness.

So, go.

Finding for yourself—I'm sure you already know, but doing it consciously. What helps you relax into this moment? What helps you come out of contention with this moment?

If all beings is easy for you, as for some people it's the easiest, go ahead and start there. If it's difficult or too abstract, then of course starting where it is easiest—self, benefactor, neutral, whatever's easiest.

When you're ready, just start letting it go out to all beings, finding your own way in this, however it connects and is meaningful for you. If you find you're losing the thread or jumping around too much, then come back to simplicity. Always supportive. Just get clear to whom you're offering this well-wishing in this moment. Sometimes with all beings we kind of lose the energy—it's so vast. So get simple and then open up again, if that's helpful.

In the last few moments of this sitting, if you would like—you certainly don't have to—but I just invite anyone who'd like to, instead of all beings, to extend this warmth, this friendly, accepting kindness first to all of us here in this room. And just imagine it expanding out to include all of your fellow retreatants and all of the retreat support staff here—the managers, the cooks, the whole Spirit Rock, office workers, the caretakers, maintenance, housekeeping, teachers—just everybody. All of us together, coming together to make this particular time be what it is.

May we all be well, happy, and peaceful. May we all love and accept ourselves just as we are. May we all be safe from inner and outer harm. May we all be able to care for ourselves and one another happily in this world.

And may the merits of our wholesome intentions, our sincere practice together, be shared with all beings everywhere, in all phases of life.

May all beings be safe and protected. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy and well. May all beings know ease of well-being.

CHAPTER 144

Exploring The Second Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a detailed exploration of the Second Noble Truth—samudaya, the origin of suffering. She carefully examines taṇhā (craving/thirst) as the Buddha identified it: craving for sense pleasures, craving for being (bhava taṇhā), and craving for non-existence. Wilson emphasizes that taṇhā cannot be abandoned through willpower alone; only wisdom arising from steady mindfulness can naturally release its grip.*
>
> *Wilson distinguishes between taṇhā and chanda (ethically neutral desire or zeal), clarifying a common confusion in English where both are often translated as "desire." She explains that the problem isn't the object of craving but the quality of craving itself—that leaning, thirsting quality that narrows our perception and creates a sense of insufficiency. Using the Buddha's framework of gratification, danger, and escape, she illuminates how craving seduces us with promise of satisfaction while actually perpetuating the cycle of suffering (saṃsāra).*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for investigating craving in meditation: noticing its physical and mental qualities, watching how it arises around any experience to create a sense of self, and observing its dissolution. Wilson shares accessible examples—from wanting cookies to searching for desert tortoises—to illustrate how taṇhā distorts perception, causes us to miss what is present, and imagine what isn't. She encourages practitioners to explore these subtle movements with curiosity rather than judgment, recognizing that each moment of seeing craving arise and pass offers a glimpse into the peace of non-clinging.*

So tonight I want to talk about the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of our suffering, Samudaya. You remember last time I spoke about the first noble truth, that of dukkha, the unreliability, the unsatisfactory nature. And so then when the Buddha decided, you know, the four things he wanted to tell us, the facts of life, that if we understand will free us from unnecessary suffering—out of everything, what he picked as the cause was, as I'm sure you know, this isn't like a surprise, but I'll read it to you.

This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is this craving—craving is an English translation that's usually used for the Pali word tanha, and I'll go more into wording in a minute. It is this craving which produces renewal of being, which is bound up with delight and lust and seeks pleasure now here and now there.

I love this definition because it kind of gets to the seductive quality of it. Bound up with delight, seeks pleasure now here and now there. Namely, craving for sense pleasures, craving for being, craving for existence, craving for bhava tanha, which is like states of being, and craving for what is usually translated as non-existence, but which is often described as kind of not wanting a particular experience to be happening, which could move into aversion.

So I want to talk about this tonight, this second noble truth, this quality in our experience, in our minds, our hearts of tanha, and hopefully invite us to explore in our own experience to see if it's true for yourself that actually this experience is a cause of suffering. And then I will hope to point to some ways I see that, but to invite you to explore.

Now, as with the first noble truth, the Buddha says it is to be understood. The second one is to be abandoned. And when we talk about tanha, craving, a way you can look at it is, again, not just what we call the wanting of greed, but also that craving for non-existence, kind of the pushing away of what we don't like. So both of these aspects, with delusion underneath, of course. It never comes without delusion.

I can't answer this, but just to put out: why did the Buddha pick tanha rather than delusion as the cause of our suffering, as the thing to explore? I'm not claiming I can answer that, I'm just putting that out.

And it's to be abandoned. Now, the reason I really like exploring and talking about this craving, which leads to clinging, which leads to grasping so fast it's almost not synonymous but close—because in some ways it's rather obvious on the grosser level. I mean, craving for sense pleasures, when we're really caught in wanting, craving, desiring a sense pleasure, we can notice, right? And sometimes we don't notice, which is amazing. But it's not that subtle. And if you really look, intellectually you could kind of understand how that could be a cause of suffering.

But even that we can get really lost in. And I would say, in my experience, that's the most gross level of the way that tanha leading to clinging just seduces us into confusion and suffering. So I love exploring it in my practice, in my life, because it goes to such subtle aspects of our experience where it has the effect of leading us into confusion and suffering. I just want to point to some of those as we go along.

So it's to be abandoned. But even if intellectually we could agree, yeah, okay, I intellectually think that could be a good thing to get rid of craving—many people have come and said, okay, I'm ready now, I'm putting down craving, right? Or even just pick one thing you decided to stop craving. Did it work? You could maybe really force yourself

not to go—even a sense pleasure—not to go get that thing. But just sitting down and saying, okay, I've thought about it, I heard it, it's to be abandoned, I take a vow and abandon craving—we can't do it as an act of will. So don't think if you haven't done it as an act of will, it's because you're weak.

It's because only wisdom works. Only wisdom sees and understands. Craving arises through ignorance, through not understanding, through not recognizing accurately. And it's only wisdom—this is what I keep going on about, seeing accurately. I didn't realize I say that so much until I hear Brian keep referring to what Carol says. So now I think, I guess I say that a lot. But it's okay. I mean it.

The steadiness of mindfulness leads to wisdom. When wisdom recognizes a situation accurately, craving doesn't make sense. It's not abandoned in a particular moment from an act of will, but it's the natural response of wisdom. Which is good news. But our job is to set up the conditions for wisdom to arise.

What I want to do tonight in this talk—because there are so many ways to talk about this second noble truth—one approach, which Sally will do tomorrow night, is the whole train of dependent origination, the twelve links. How in a moment you can experience the middle part of it, which is the most salient for our meditation experience. To see how from the point of contact, the feeling tone arises, and from the feeling tone—this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how the habit of mind can move. Just that moving of craving into pleasant and pulling away from unpleasant, and then into the whole train of becoming, birth, and death, just like that. That's a really interesting and very useful way to talk about it, and then to explore in our own experience. But since Sally's talking about that tomorrow, I don't have to.

So what I want to do tonight—it's just the way my mind works—is to offer an invitation and some pointers from my experience to turn our attention inward and explore, investigate: What is this mental, physical experience—really mostly mental with physical concomitants sometimes—that is called craving? How do we learn to recognize it as it comes, as it goes? How does it arise? How does it behave in the mindstream? What is its nature? And when we're in the grip of craving, how does it behave? And then how do we behave when we're not aware, or we can't shake loose of its grip? How does it pass away again?

There's no way wisdom is going to abandon craving if we can't even recognize when it's happening. And when we do recognize it, a tendency—again, often—is first we decide it's a good idea to abandon. Then we see that doesn't work. Then we say, okay, I'll pay attention. And then we start to see how frequently craving, wanting, desiring, clinging arises in our experience.

Has anyone noticed? Have you noticed that the more you're paying attention, the more frequently it seems to come? Because you're practicing wrongly? No—because we're seeing what we mostly don't see.

So my invitation here is not to think of craving as something horrible, not to approach it as, "I've got to go see all the craving, and it's going to be awful, because it's bad, and the more I see is more proof of how bad I am, and it's hopeless." We don't want to see it that way.

I remember, it popped in my mind tonight, years ago I was talking to a good friend who's a meditator. It was an interview, but we're also friends, and we were just talking. She was seeing a lot of craving, a lot of wanting, and I was just kind of—I get excited by that. I don't think, "Oh, that's horrible." I get excited, because that's what we have to see. Sati, mindfulness, has to see what's happening. That's how wisdom comes. See how it behaves.

So we were talking, and I was pointing things out, and I was all excited. And then she says—with all the love in her heart, she says to me, "Well, it's like you're saying to me so lovingly, 'Dear, you're just covered with green slime.'"

That's not what I mean at all when I invite us to explore this. Freedom comes from recognizing accurately. So seeing what's going on is the beginning.

There's a place in the suttas where the Buddha talks about three levels of wisdom, three kinds. All three of these play together and intertwine, but only the third level is truly transformative—yet we need them all.

The first level is called in Pali *sutamaya paññā*, which means wisdom from that which is heard. So it's basically acquired wisdom, and this is the beginning of right view, the Buddha says. When we talk about impermanence, or I'm talking about craving, or anything we hear—we come in, and that hearing is the first access to wisdom. We may or may not know anything about it from our own experience, but we hear it.

That can be the catalyst for us moving into the second level of wisdom, which is *cintāmaya paññā*. You could call it our own natural intelligence, where maybe we're pondering—say, what I'm talking about tonight, craving.

We might be pondering, remembering times in our experience where we could see how wanting this particular thing and not getting it caused a lot of suffering, and when the wanting went away—we're just thinking, "I could see how that makes sense." We're pondering and coming deeper in, and it motivates us to keep exploring, but it's not truly transformative.

This is the level that we're all at much of the time. And it's really important and useful, because so many of us have grown up with such a deeply conditioned habit of giving power to thought—to thought as the way to understand everything, to think our way through, to figure it out. You know what I mean? And then we keep on thinking, keep on thinking. So often we can feel like we're a little bit stuck there. We've thought it through. We see it. We really understand. You come and say, "I really understand impermanence. I do really understand." We could all give a discourse on impermanence. And then we turn around and get all upset when our good sitting changes.

Because we understand it on that intellectual level. It really makes sense. But it hasn't reached the third level, *bhāvanā mayā paññā*, which is insight wisdom—where we get it in ourselves, as I like to think of it. In terms of anything, we have what we'd call an insight. It doesn't change us forever necessarily. But you've all experienced this in different ways. You've had an insight into something. *Oh. Oh, I see.* This craving went away, and I really get it. It's peaceful, and I didn't get the thing I wanted, and I didn't need to. Here's the peace. It's right here.

The difference between hearing me say that—the first level—nodding to yourself, "Yeah, that makes sense"—the second level—and actually experiencing that below the level of thought... it's like, *wow*. An aha moment. A shift of perception, really, is what insight is. We recognize in a different way.

So these three levels are bouncing around, working together. It's only steady awareness that allows this third level, this shift of perception, to arise. And we keep on paying attention, and then we understand more what that shift of perception was bringing to us.

Now I want to talk about this word *taṇhā*. The literal, the closest translation I've heard of this word—and I'm not a Pali scholar—is actually "thirst." So when I talk about *taṇhā*, I'm referring to a quality, a mental factor really, a quality in the mind-heart that arises and passes like everything else.

This quality of thirst is, I find, really helpful to understand as a leaning into or leaning away—this *need*, this thirst for something. And when it strengthens, when we kind of grab hold of something, it intensifies from craving, from the leaning in, the thirst, to clinging, to grasping. It's the same thing, just a little more gripping.

Now, in English, the word "craving" is often used interchangeably with the word "desire." And this can get very confusing. This is only in English. I've been mulling about languages, because when Brian was talking in his talk a couple of times ago about views—and how we don't even know what our particular perceptual influences have

been from our whole upbringing, influences that inform the perceptions we have that lead to views—I think the language we grow up speaking and thinking in is really an interesting part of how that happens.

For English, there are certain constructions and ways of talking about things. "Desire" is one word that is very confusing, where Pali has a very specific word—*taṇhā*—for this thirst, and a different word, *chanda*, for a different kind of thing. Both of those, in English, we call "desire." But being a native English speaker, I have no clue how these words fall and what the habits of mind and thinking are for the many other native languages represented here. I can never know what it's like to be a native Spanish speaker or Hindi speaker, or French or Swedish or Finnish or Persian, or various forms of Chinese. There are so many different languages represented here. And for each of them, there's a whole different way you think in that language. It's really interesting. No wonder our perceptions are all different, and that's going to inform the view and how we understand.

That's a little aside. But just to say, when I'm talking about words, of course I'm coming from English.

And it may or may not quite correlate with the language that's natural for you. There's no way I can do it other than in English, but I just want to acknowledge that.

So, we use the word "desire," which is too broad for this state of taṇhā. And then, many times, people get into confusion. They come and say, "Well, what's wrong with desire to take care of your family? How can you say that's the cause of suffering?" And then we get all kind of reactive, really confused. "What's wrong with desire? I'm hungry and I have a desire to go eat. That's just normal life. How can you say that's the source of suffering?"

So there's two things going on. One is the word taṇhā, thirst, which is this yearning, this needing that takes us out of being able to recognize accurately in the present moment. The second is that when we talk about taṇhā as the source of suffering, it's about the quality of that state itself in that moment in the mind—it's not about the object that the taṇhā is leaning into.

This is a pet peeve of mine. Other teachers may say something different—just honesty in advertising. Sometimes I hear people talk about wholesome desire and unwholesome desire, and I find that so incredibly confusing. Because what that's doing is focusing our attention onto the object. So you could say desire for nibbāna is a wholesome

desire, and we're focusing the attention on the object, nibbāna. But taṇhā is a state of heart or mind arising in the moment that then focuses the attention onto whatever the object is in a way that's moving out of balanced, open, present in this moment.

You can feel it, that subtle pulling forward or pulling back if it's aversion. "Ah! Only if I got to nibbāna, everything would be okay." So nibbāna, which is certainly a wholesome object—whatever we know about it, it's a wholesome object—it could be an aspiration that's motivating us to land here in this moment, or it could be the source of incredible suffering because we're lost in taṇhā about it.

Have you ever experienced that? What's wrong with nibbāna? But you're ready to just tie yourself up in knots. "I came here for nibbāna, and I'm just sitting here feeling knee pain." That's taṇhā, expectation, frustration. It's suffering. Not too hard to spot, but we get lost in it.

So it's not about the object. It's about the quality in the mind of this thirst, this leaning in.

There's another word in the Pali language: chanda, which is also variously translated, but it is ethically neutral. It's translated as a kind of excitement, a desire to do, the energy to do something. And it is ethically neutral, meaning that whether it's wholesome or unwholesome depends on what other mind states come with it.

So for instance, the sense of, "I really have the energy, I need to go get a better job because I'm about to have a child and I want to really be able to take care of my family." Now, that's a complicated thing, so a lot of different emotions could come in at different times. But the sense of, "Yes, I want to care for my family" could be compassion and chanda, this desire to do. That's different from craving. It's different from the source of suffering. Do you get a sense of that?

But chanda can also—the actual word for the hindrance of sense desire, not all desire, but that's often translated "sense desire"—the word in Pali is actually kāmachanda. It's like excitement about the pleasures of the senses. And so in that way, it's not such a wholesome feeling because it's leading us into suffering. Not good-bad, but leading us into suffering.

So the word we translate as "desire" in English could often be used as chanda in Pali. It's also one of the four bases of success in terms of meditation qualities, sometimes translated as "zeal"—this energy that gives us real energy to practice. Chanda, willingness to do, a really wholesome thing.

So do you get a sense of what I'm meaning about when we want to explore taṇhā? Don't let yourself get all lost in what is the object. Because that's one of the ways that taṇhā, this craving, actually leads our mind into delusion, confusion that keeps us from recognizing what's happening accurately. This zoning into the object desired and not noticing what's going on here in the mind and heart.

What I'm really doing tonight is trying to bring us into an interest in exploring how this actually works.

I want to use as a framework something the Buddha talked about. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the translator, describes it as the three movements in the unfolding process of insight. This is something the Buddha discussed: noticing the gratification, the danger, and the escape in particular areas of experience. I'd like to use this as a framework for exploring craving.

The Buddha spoke about how, before he was enlightened, he was pondering: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? And what is the escape? It occurred to him that whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world—this is the gratification.

And I love that. He's not saying, as I mentioned in my last talk, that everything is horrible, hate it all, and then you'll be happy. He's saying there is gratification, pleasure, and joy in the world. The danger is that it's impermanent, mixed up with unreliability and subject to change—this is the danger. And the escape is the abandoning of desire and lust for the world.

The Buddha said: If there were no gratification in the world, beings would not become enamored, would not become enthralled, really stuck to things in the world. But because there is gratification, we become enamored. If there were no danger in the world, beings would not become disillusioned; beings would not suffer. If there were no escape from this, then beings could not escape from this disillusionment. But there is.

I want to use those three as a light reference point.

In talking about desire or craving that leads to clinging, the Buddha talked about four areas of grasping. I'm not going to go through them all, but the first one is sense pleasures, which is, as I said, everywhere, very seductive, but in some ways the most obvious. Then there's grasping at views, which Brian talked about quite clearly. There's grasping at rites and rituals, misunderstanding them as a way of purifying people—for instance, at his time in India, there was a belief among the Brahmins that if you went to

certain rivers and washed yourself, it would wash away all your previous bad actions and all your bad karma. Which would be great. But he's saying, yeah, not so much. And the fourth is grasping at sense of self. So you can see they get increasingly more subtle.

I'll start using sense pleasures as an example and talk a little bit about sense of self.

In terms of the gratification, I think it's important to be able to recognize the gratification—the joy, the delight in sense pleasures—because that's true. Sometimes people think, well, because craving leads to suffering and sense pleasures lead to craving, I should actually not even notice the pleasant or move towards the pleasant. There are certainly plenty of suttas where the Buddha talked about the dangers of sense pleasures in very graphic terms. I'm not going to go there tonight because I really want to talk more about how the craving itself distorts our perception and leads us into confusion.

But start by seeing that sense pleasures are pleasure. Great. Pleasant sights, smells, tastes, touches, and all of that. So that's not so hard to see.

The danger is the obvious one the Buddha talked about: that whatever the sense pleasure is, it's going to change, and you're left falling flat. But another way to understand the danger—and this is something we can experience over and over if we keep remembering to notice the craving—is the addictive quality of going to sense pleasures for gratification. Because we have access often to so many, when one falls flat, we don't notice that we move into the next one, right? And the next one.

And that's exactly samsara. This round of birth and death of self and suffering. Okay, that one didn't work out—what about this next? That good sitting went away, but now I can go walk. Have you ever seen that? You're sitting and it's difficult. Okay, forget that sitting. I'm going to walk. It's going to be so good. You go walking and it's just as difficult.

Okay, forget this walking. I'm gonna go sit. It's gonna be so nice. That's it. I'm gonna go eat. Then I'm gonna feel good. Well, no, but now I'll go have a nap. That'll do it.

And we don't quite notice the process. We're just going from one thing to the next to the next. There's a seductive quality to it—a seductive quality to the craving itself. The definition I read, you know: "accompanied by delight, seeking pleasure now here, now there." And so there's almost a way at times that the very wanting itself becomes associated in our minds with gratification.

If you really turn around and look at the experience of wanting, well, in my experience, it really isn't so pleasant. It isn't gratifying. But we don't turn around and look at it. We just keep leaning into the next thing. And so in our minds, the wanting becomes associated with getting the thing we want. It's like the only way an untaught worldling,

as the Buddha says, knows to get away from the unpleasant. Remember, I used that sutta the other night: the only escape an untaught person knows from unpleasant experience is to lust after sense pleasure. This becomes what we think is the escape, but it's really the danger. This way we just keep getting pulled by the nose from one thing to the next to the next, and we don't even notice. And then when we do notice, we go, "Oh, but that's okay. I'm in charge of it all. And it's not that unpleasant."

This is my favorite little story that to me exemplifies samsara—when we don't really want to look at the suffering of it. And we can do this a lot. A good friend of mine, a dear friend, very wise person, has the habit of really liking particular cookies. Just in a very restrained way: two cookies after lunch, two cookies before bed, certain cookies, very restrained. So we were hanging out one day, and we were talking about craving, dependent origination, and such. I was saying, "But this is exactly it, you know? Craving. There's the craving, this discontent, this leaning in, having the cookie."

The person said, "No, there's no suffering in this."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Well, wait—when you don't get the cookie, then what?"

He goes, "I always get the cookie."

And that's really what we think. A lot of times in our life, we just substitute something. I didn't get that cookie, but I get something else. And so we never stop and look at the process. We keep looking in the wrong direction. It keeps us looking to the gratification instead of turning around. We're always looking for the cookie instead of turning around. You say, "But as long as I can get a cookie, what's the problem?"

This is what keeps us bound to samsara: the unwillingness to turn around and look at this craving for sense pleasure. Sometimes people are almost like—I mean, I've had people say, no one here I don't think, but say almost like they don't want to look that carefully. Just feeling how that craving feels, that leaning into the cookie, because there's almost a fear: "But then I won't really enjoy the cookie anymore."

Have you had that sense? If I really look... You know, if I'm out in nature and it's so beautiful—the nature and the buds and the magnolia tree—and oh, I'm so wonderful and I feel so great. I don't want to look at the craving. I want to feel like I'm incredibly

one with nature. It's so happy. And I don't want to just go: seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing. Pleasant, pleasant. So we don't want to look because we're actually—first of all, that's not how it goes—but we're attached to

It's really so poignant to me that we're conflating, mixing up this craving with the gratification. The thing that we're looking to for our happiness and ease is the very thing that keeps us spinning in wanting, in a sense of insufficiency and not being enough. Because what is wanting? It's looking to something else to fill us up. And as long as we're buying into that, we're always going to be experiencing in that moment a sense of being incomplete. The cookie's going to do it, but not for long. So then we have to crank up another one, crank up another one. Go out and look at that bud again. Well, the bud doesn't do it today, so maybe I can find a lizard and maybe the lizard will do it. I wish the frogs would start croaking again, but it's not as nice as last night.

Not being lost in the wanting doesn't mean there's no appreciation. We still appreciate the beauty of nature. We can still appreciate a meal, but we're not looking to that meal to do more than be what that meal can be, which is pretty limited, no matter how good it is.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh: "We need to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures"—what he's calling indulging, I'm calling just being lost in the tanha, the craving, not seeing it—"and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. This attachment to sense pleasures, or just one sense pleasure, the cookie, brings about suffering and entanglement." Look to that. It brings about complication, entanglement, both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and others. "But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind brings neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others."

So that's something you might explore if you're outside and you're thinking, "Well, this beautiful sunset—oh, but what if that's tanha? I can't tell if it's craving or not. Should I look at it?" How does tanha feel? "I don't know. How can I tell?" Okay, right then, that's doubt. Just notice that.

But when Sally talked about papañca, papañca in the mind, I like to talk about papañca of action. And craving will really lead you—this is where you see the complication. You're just appreciating the sunset. It's lovely. It's gone. No craving. Fine. If you find you're planning your whole day to get out there for the sunset the next day, there's a little bit of craving going on. Everything starts to get complicated because we somehow have to set it up to get that thing again. Not bad, just noticing the complication that comes in. So this is part of the danger, the danger of craving.

Another danger—and I'll stay with sense pleasures and then move into some of the others. The Buddha described greed, hatred, and delusion as makers of measurement in our mind, in our heart. In other words, when there's this craving in our mind, in our heart, not recognized, when we're being led by the nose by it, it puts limitations on the range and depth of the mind, of the heart. Basically, it narrows our experience. Have you ever noticed that? When you really are into wanting something, have you noticed how everything else becomes irrelevant? The breath, the feel, the limitless nature of mind and heart suddenly becomes all about the cookie, or whatever it is. And everything else is either in the way or irrelevant. That then affects how we actually perceive experience and how we respond to experience.

Sayadaw U Pandita was a quite profound meditation teacher, a Burmese teacher now in his nineties. Very tough teacher. He talked about—and I really like this—he said, under the influence of tanha, when it's happening in our mind and heart and we're not recognizing it, turning around and recognizing it, the way the delusion manifests is, one, we don't accurately recognize what is here, and two, we actually perceive what is not here. So we're doubly disconnected at times under the influence of tanha. And this can be rather subtle.

I'll just give a simple example, but you can explore it for yourself and see how it works. I've used this example quite a lot because it's simple yet accessible.

When I was teaching in Yucca Valley years ago, there was this lovely desert that you could walk out into, and every morning I loved to walk out into that desert. You just walk out and it's desert—some trees, yucca trees, various animals, not too many. Some birds, a little jackrabbit sometimes, once in a while a snake, and once in a great, great while, a large land tortoise.

So I was walking one day, just very present, the way you'll be here, simply with the isness of things. When there's not *taññhā*, when there's not wanting in the mind, it's just present. Kind of like big mind—whatever's occurring is occurring. There's no to-ing and fro-ing, no problem.

And suddenly the thought came in—which in itself wasn't a problem—"Maybe I'll see a tortoise today." The thought came and didn't go. This is how the whole sense of self and everything gets created. Some experience comes and *taññhā* leans into it, then grasping just grabs it and makes it a solid thing. So that thought became, "Maybe I'll see a tortoise," and the wanting came up, just like the wanting for the cookie. Not noticing the wanting, what had been just vast and present and simple and easy became really narrowed down, and I was just looking for that particular experience, looking for tortoise.

Walking through the desert—boom. Then I noticed I was going, "Not tortoise, not tortoise, not tortoise," looking, looking, looking. That was really my experience. And it actually wasn't a very pleasant walk anymore. It was just, "No, no, I want this. That isn't it, that isn't it, that isn't it." I never saw one.

Luckily, at some point I noticed it, which is good, because then I could use it for a dharma talk. But truly, I noticed it. And this is what I want to invite us to do: notice what's occurring then. Not jump onto, "Oh, I'm so bad, I shouldn't be wanting." Just notice what's occurring.

You can really feel for yourself—mentally, because craving is a mental thing—how it comes up in your body and in your mind, how you experience it. We want to learn to recognize it, to know it's present. This is great—this is mindfulness coming in. For me now, I'm so familiar with it. Sometimes you don't recognize it, but I can just feel it. It's a kind of physical contraction, almost like mentally leaning forward. Sometimes you're just pulled. So I could notice that.

Notice the limitation, the narrowing of attention and the narrowing of the mind and heart, focused just on wanting this thing. And notice the sense of rejection or disinterest in anything else. Just to see that.

And then when we notice wanting—not hating it, not judging ourselves—but just exploring it. If it's some little thing where you don't actually need to do much, here on retreat is a great time to do it. Just stick with the wanting, the *taṅhā*, the craving. Notice how it feels. Notice what kind of thoughts come up. Notice what behaviors arise.

If it's so strong you can't not act on it, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, okay, wanting's just doing its job, but you bring awareness along with it and let awareness do its job. So you notice how the wanting is working, how it's driving us. It's really fascinating.

And at some point—I promise, I don't know at what point—it's going to drop away, because everything that comes together from construction dissolves again. Absolutely everything. If you can hang with it and actually watch as it dissolves, and then keep on being present, you may notice the quality of ease, the quality of peace that we usually associate with getting what we want. But it's actually because the wanting itself has dissolved. We don't have to be driven by getting that thing.

When we really learn to understand this, wanting is simply another experience—mental, physical experience that comes a lot, and goes. As often as it comes, it goes. It's not like it's going to come one more time than it goes and never leave again. Every time

it comes, it's going to go. And we can really get to explore it so it doesn't become something to be afraid of or hate, but we can really understand how it works—the seduction of it for us, the gratification, and the dangers of it for us.

And this is just with sense desire, which is the most obvious one, but you see how really quite subtle it can get. The way it causes you not to see what's around—like I'm in the desert looking for tortoise and just oblivious to everything else.

We do that. You want to get to the meal on time, and you're ready to walk over people—even your best friend. "Get out of here! There's only one more corn muffin." And then you sit down and think, "May all beings be happy, may all beings be happy."

So our job is just to notice these things, these subtle movements that come up in the mind with wanting and not getting what we want. But craving can also distort perception. In a simple way, say I'm looking for a tortoise and I see a rock in the distance. The mind goes, "Oh, tortoise!" And I go running over—oh, it's a rock. There's a Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object, makes it look really much more attractive. I give all kinds of examples of that. But just noticing it—really interesting.

So we can't really see what's here. Both of these ways of not seeing accurately—this narrowing of the mind and heart, not recognizing what is here, seeing what isn't here—this is also the way the dangers manifest in craving's attachment to views. We're all going to have views; Brian talked about that, so I don't have to go into it. But the attachment to views, that "this alone is true"—the craving for it. And the sense of self, which in some ways is the most subtle and most pervasive view, comes and goes, comes and goes. Brian talked a lot about it. I only want to mention the way we can use exploring our internal experience of this thirst, this craving, this grasping, to explore how the sense of self arises and passes in a moment.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, whom we've mentioned quite a few times—a great Thai meditation and forest monk master—has a wonderful line. He said the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. Not some big solid thing we've got to chip away at and try to understand. For me, this is helpful because I'm kind of kinesthetic, practical. Not through ideas trying to understand and through that idea then let go of that idea—that's the way some people process and learn. We're all different in the way we take in information and learn. For me, it's very practical, moment-to-moment. And so Buddhadasa's way of describing it really works: the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. Or what's called sakkāya-diṭṭhi, identity view.

What we can simply notice, as we get more and more familiar with how craving, taṇhā, feels when it comes up in our mind-body—sometimes I couldn't say exactly what, but I can kind of tell it's hanging around. As you get more familiar with it, then you'll see the way it's described in terms of sense of self. Anything that arises in our experience, any of the six sense doors—a sight, a smell, a sound, a taste, body sensation, a thought or emotion, the five aggregates that Brian talked about, another way of talking about the same thing—you'll see how there are times you're sitting or walking and sounds are coming and going, or someone was describing today how thoughts were just coming and going like wisps, no problem.

But suddenly a thought comes and it's like, yes, everything in the mind and heart comes together, collects around that, and grabs a hold of it. This is how it is. Whether it's "my back hurts," or "I want a cookie," or "that sound is not acceptable"—whatever it is, something in the constantly changing experience, this movement of leaning in, taṇhā, grasping, has grabbed a hold of that experience and made it me or mine. The sense of me arises very strongly with that. Me and my back pain. Me and my cookie. Me and the sunset. You get a sense of what I'm saying?

And then it's often a thought. When we don't notice it, of course it leads to a whole series of thoughts. Usually we wake up in the midst of that series of thoughts, and it's become that particular me. The me—and I know Brian gave a lot of different examples, the different stories of me. The me who's very clumsy. The me who's an incredible yogi. The me who went through all those things in third grade. The me who really feels out of it today. All of those different ones.

But because we don't stop and explore, we don't stop and look at it—as Brian said in his talk, you know, the me in third grade is the same me that's sitting here, right? Doesn't it feel like that?

Because we don't really just stop and notice that sense of self arising. It's just another experience that comes and goes. It's the same as being able to explore *taṇhā*. The sense of self really is just a lot of thoughts that begin from a moment of *taṇhā*, a moment of craving connected with any particular thing. It can be anything, any stupid thing. The particular chair you want to sit in in the dining room—craving for that can be the source of a huge story of self.

Someone else is in your chair. *Your* chair. What are they doing there? I've been sitting there every meal this whole retreat, and now they're there. Don't think I'm making this up—no one on this retreat has told me this, but I've been on a lot of retreats at IMS. Believe me, this is not something I'm completely inventing.

And people will tell you, mostly after it's over and they've really seen it, because in the midst of it, we don't recognize this as craving and sense of self. We think that person is out to get me, sitting in my chair. The whole sense of offense, of being wronged.

But what we can do is start to feel that craving. So you walk into the dining room, you see that—it's a sight. The perception is just seeing. Then the whole story of me comes up around that. The suffering one, the craving. And then whatever goes on—you turn, you walk out—that whole thing falls away. That me, that's birth and death of sense of self around craving. Another sense of self will arise, no doubt, quickly. But that's okay. We can just, with our awareness, with our interest, explore how this happens.

And this is one of the really subtle ways that this movement of *taṇhā*, this movement of craving, is the cause of so much confusion and suffering. It's at the heart, the seed, of the moment-after-moment-after-moment creation of story of self. Unseen, it is the source of suffering.

I'm not saying, actually, that the stories creating sense of self need to be a problem. I'm not saying that. They're thoughts driven by craving, and when awareness recognizes that's what's happening and sees through it, we don't have to get rid of it. It's just another arising mental and emotional construction that comes and goes like every other mental construction. It doesn't need to be a problem. But we can really get interested in seeing how the craving comes up in relation to anything—a sense experience, a view, a memory—and then off to the races, as someone said. Or not.

And instead of judging it, just explore and see. Bring the steady awareness to see. Whatever arises, dissolves. The craving arises and dissolves. The sense of self arises and dissolves.

So the escape—I'm talking about gratification, danger, and escape—I want to talk about again in our moment-to-moment experience here, in a simple way that we can practice. So I'm not at the moment talking about the big escape forever, but just in a moment of seeing.

The escape is this ability, this steadiness of awareness. Awareness itself does not uproot clinging, does not uproot craving. But awareness—the steady awareness that allows us to see this whole chain of cause and effect, like I've just been describing with sense of self or with wanting a cookie or whatever—to see it all, to see the craving come and go, the steady awareness is what sets the conditions for the wisdom to come in.

So after seventy-five times of walking into the dining room and that whole sense of self around the person sitting in my seat, finally wisdom comes in and says, "Why don't I sit over there?" So easy. The craving was abandoned by wisdom. With an act of will you could say, "I'm just not going to do it. I'm going to sit over there. I'm sitting over here. I'm not craving." It's not the same. "Why don't I just sit over there?" And the craving is abandoned. That's from wisdom.

But what we can do is set up the conditions by really taking our refuge in the steady awareness, by getting interested in this process rather than judging or fearing it.

So I'm going to give a really, such an insignificant example that you're going to wonder why I'm picking it—but that's exactly why I'm picking this example, because this is what we can do so often on retreat to really see. Because it's the same, it works in the same way with the big things. So one day, I wasn't on retreat but I was teaching.

I got up in the morning and had a mystery novel sitting next to the bed. I get up in the morning, I'm getting dressed, whatever, and just this strong craving came up. "Oh, let me just pick that up and read a little bit." Which—so what? I mean, this is hardly a horrible thing to pick up and read.

So I was watching, just watching, except doing it. And I said, "No, I'm not going to do it. I'm just going to watch the craving." And as I say, this is so trivial because people would say, "So what if you pick it up and read? Who cares?" Nobody cares. There's nothing wrong. Again, it's not about focusing on the object. The interest is in looking at what's going on. It's easier to look at the craving when the object isn't very important to you. It's easier—so pick the little things. Start with the little things.

So I said, "Okay, I'm not going to pick it up. But I'm going to sit here and really be aware of the wanting and the thoughts that come up in my mind about it." So I sat there for a few minutes. I didn't just say, "Oh, forget it," and go brush my teeth. I sat there and just watched the whole process, noticing the wanting and the thoughts and what I should do—"Oh, it's okay"—all of that. No big deal.

And then the craving just went away. Completely went away. And I could just sit there and see it completely go away. And then don't just get up and run. Feel what I was saying—the absence of craving. How that limitation, that narrowing of the depth, the breadth of mind and heart, is gone and it's just... peace. Just like that. It's such a little thing. We can do this hundreds of times a day. And it gets really interesting.

In that little moment, that wasn't a big "Aha! Now I'm liberated, the mind is forever free from clinging." But it was a moment where the heart-mind was free from clinging. And that moment comes and goes, but in that moment we get the intimation—a little

beginning glimpse into what was the Buddha talking about when he says, "What does one know?" I think Greg said this, that one enlightened knows that nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to, worth holding to. It's not a put-down of things. It's saying that this relationship of grasping onto something to make the whole complete for gratification is the source of our suffering.

By not seeing it, by continuing to give all the energy and focus to the object—ours to the object—that process continues to strengthen the sense of self and other, of separation. We don't see the emptiness of self-existence in any object.

This is just the last thing I want to point to—the way, an even more subtle way I think, that craving really distorts perception and keeps our suffering going. In a moment of craving, it keeps us zoning in, moving into whatever the object is, whether it's a cookie or a particular chair or a mood or a memory or a way I want to think about myself. As soon as there's that craving, it's like the mind—and this can be very subtle, we're not talking huge—this is very subtle, where the attention fixates on the object.

Now, you can be really focused, focus attention really on one object. That doesn't mean it's craving—don't get me wrong. We can be very relaxed, sinking into just the breath. The mind is not craving. Learn to recognize that contraction of craving. We can be really concentrated on one thing; that doesn't mean it's craving. But the craving is just a kind of zoning into the object: "Oh yeah, there's that, there's that."

So we can also be with the breath, be with the breath, be with the breath—and what's really getting strong in that, which we don't notice, is the sense of *me* wanting *object*. You see what I mean?

And so the sense of me gets strong, the sense of object gets strong. This is another thing with language—with English anyway. We say, "I see the bowl." Just the way the English language works, there's always me separate from the object. So that just tends to be the habit of our mind. And craving, even so subtle, perpetuates that.

That's really all I wanted to say about this. Don't go all crazy about it, but just notice how craving tends to isolate things out and keep us in that sense of separateness, of isolation.

The escape? Simply the willingness to be steady with the awareness. Not trying to make the experience be what we think, but just that willingness to be steady with awareness.

I'll end with a couple of quotations. This is from Ajahn Chah:

Worldly accomplishments on whatever level still leave you in this realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be comes about in dependence on external things. It's not the happiness of freedom, the happiness that does not depend on anything external. What is it we depend on?

And by depending, he means craving.

We depend on possessions, on pleasure, on reputation, on praise, on wealth. We lean on all these things like leaning on a rotting old tree trunk. After we lean on it for too long, it breaks and falls and we fall with it. Such is worldly happiness.

This is from Adyashanti:

Those who are free don't want anything. They don't want anything from their mind. They don't want anything from their emotions. They don't want anything from anyone. And they don't want anything from life. They don't want anything. If you don't want, what's left is an incredible sense of being free.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 145

Brahmavihāra Day 19: Muditā (Appreciative Joy)

Carol Wilson · 46 min

In this nineteenth day of brahmavihāra practice, Carol Wilson offers guidance on muditā—appreciative joy or sympathetic joy in the happiness and success of others. She begins by addressing a non-traditional but valuable approach from Ajahn Sumedho: cultivating appreciative joy through recognizing beauty in nature and our surroundings as a gateway to understanding the non-personal, non-clinging quality of true muditā.

Wilson introduces gratitude practice as a foundation for muditā, suggesting practitioners consciously acknowledge simple blessings—health, food, access to the Dhamma, safety, clean water, friendship. She notes how Ajahn Sumedho teaches that gratitude and contentment are supportive states for awakening, opening and softening the mind. This gratitude practice helps recalibrate our habitual perception away from noticing only what's wrong.

The guided meditation progresses through the traditional sequence: beginning with an easy person whose happiness we can appreciate without triggering envy, then moving to the benefactor, a friend, and finally the neutral person. Wilson emphasizes that we need not focus on grand achievements—appreciating someone's simple joy in gardening or walking their dog is sufficient. When difficult mind states like envy or comparison arise, she recommends bringing kind attention to these feelings before gently returning to muditā. The practice reveals how appreciative joy, as one of the four boundless states, can be accessed throughout daily life, transforming even difficult days through small moments of genuine appreciation.

Today we continue with Muditā, Appreciative Joy.

I know Greg yesterday introduced it well, beginning with the so-called easy person—someone whose happiness or success you can easily connect with without it tweaking your deepest inner jealousy. That's meant to be the easiest person.

Since we only have four days for this and for equanimity, I've got to move things along. And as Greg probably said, and I'll say again, technically in the way it's taught, we don't include ourselves in the formal muditā practice. Since it's happiness in the happiness of others, that's why, I think. Or maybe they just assumed that we would naturally be happy with our own happiness without it being a grasping thing. But all of us in teaching this have found that's not always so true for us in these cultures. Some-

times, sure, we're happy for the things we have, but with a lot of grasping and fear that it's going to go away. Or sometimes—I don't know how it is for you—but sometimes I know I overlook little things that I could really appreciate or be grateful for.

Ajahn Sumedho, in different writings of his, has a way of talking about just beginning to tune the heart, the mind, into this sense of appreciative joy in a way that is completely not traditional in terms of how it's taught. He talks about thinking of muditā as appreciating the loveliness and beauty in our own experience, in things around us. So he includes appreciating nature, appreciating the beauty of nature. And I've actually found, since we're in a place where it's quite lovely at different times, that this is a really nice way into this sense of non-personal, non-clinging, non-jealous appreciation.

For me, I don't get too envious of nature. It's beautiful. I don't think I wish I could be as cute as the deer. You just kind of appreciate it. I'm not thinking, "I wish people looked at me like they look at that flower." If that's happening, you pretty much know, okay, there's definitely a kilesa distorting the perception at this moment. It's not too hard to find.

So I'm just dropping that in. I'm not going to guide us in that, but I want to mention it. When you're walking around here, especially after my talk on craving, and you have a sense of "this is beautiful," and then you start thinking, "Oh, but if I really like it, is it craving?"—all of that—if we start to feel what this non-clinging appreciative joy is, both in the formal practice and in walking around, it's something we can really tap into all over the place.

I've found this to be one of the beautiful qualities, one of the boundless states when our mind is really open. It's a wonderful thing to tap into in just little ways going through the day, going through a difficult day, or walking through a city. It could just be a beautiful church that you walk by. Take a moment to appreciate the architecture. You don't have to go into some big story. Or small things that happen in our own lives that we can consciously be grateful for.

I mentioned the part about nature so you can get a sense of the non-personal quality to that appreciation, that appreciative joy. And now what I'm going to suggest is this: let's start by taking some moments to tune into your own self and life and consciously go through a few things you could be grateful for.

Gratitude, as I think I mentioned—and again this is from Ajahn Sumedho—gratitude and contentment are very supportive states of mind for awakening. And that's really sweet, because we're open, we're present, we're receptive. And you can't force it.

I do quite a bit of gratitude practice, especially when I'm in grumpy mind at the end of the day. I don't know if that ever happens to any of you here. You hit the bed and you're like, "Thank God that day is over and tomorrow will be new. I have not had one useful, mindful moment this day." Should you ever have a thought like that—maybe it's only me—whether you're in bed or you just take a moment, I've really done this a lot: just tune in. What is there I could be grateful for? And grumpy mind finds this very phony at first.

It's like this with muditā as well. It can just be little things. When we're choosing someone to tune into their happiness, it doesn't have to be that they just won the Nobel Prize. It could be that they love to garden and they're able to work in the garden. Something as simple as that, that you can appreciate their happiness, their joy.

So let's just take a few moments. Just let yourself come back into presence.

Let my words fall in gently, but be more with yourself than with my words.

Take a breath and, the usual—relax into presence, mind and body. Before we begin with the easy person, just tune into yourself. Very simply, don't try to make yourself feel "I should be grateful." It's not that.

I'll narrate what my mind does with this practice. In the beginning, as I said, it feels a little forced. And soon it starts to come in. It just starts with something: I'm grateful I had enough to eat today. I'm grateful that I'm healthy enough to be here practicing. I'm grateful that in this lifetime I met the Dharma and I was interested enough to hear it. I'm grateful that I have some friends. I'm grateful at this moment I'm not living in a combat zone under threat of imminent violence and attack. I'm grateful I have clean water to drink whenever I want it. I'm grateful for the beauty of the world, that I can be here on this sunny day.

Just see whatever comes up in your own particular stories—not to hold on to, but just to open to the small and the large joys, happiness, success that come. It's a kind of recalibrating the habit of perception so we don't just notice what's wrong. Take some time with that if it seems connecting for you.

When you're ready, or if gratitude doesn't connect, bring up where you started with mudita yesterday—a friend that you can easily see and appreciate something successful or happiness-producing for them, and tune into that. May your happiness and good fortune continue. May your happiness never end. I'm happy for your happiness, for your success.

So for some minutes now, be with yourself and then with this easy-to-see happy friend.

When you feel ready, you might include the benefactor—the same one you've been using is fine. We're not trying to force any feeling at all. Just get a sense of the being you've been using and tune in to some aspect that's fortunate for them, successful or happiness-producing. As I said, it doesn't have to be a big thing. That's our avenue into connecting. Just as with karuna the suffering is the avenue into connecting, but in that moment of connection, the awareness spreads out and includes the whole sense of the person.

So explore this benefactor. If you'd like to stay with the easy friend or yourself, of course that's fine. Use the same phrases as an expression, a carrier for the connecting, the appreciating of their happiness: I'm happy in your happiness. I rejoice in your success. May your happiness and good fortune continue.

As with all our meditation, other states of mind and heart will arise. Greg talked about the near and far enemies, so particularly envy, longing, comparison can come. Of course they will. When they come, notice it without judgment. See if you can reconnect with the sense of the benefactor, some happy aspect, successful aspect. If the envy is too strong, then take a vipassana moment and bring kind attention to it—envy is like this. Then as it lessens a bit, return gently to the mudita.

If you'd like, bring in a different friend—not the easy first one. Perhaps the one you've been using for karuna, for metta, or another friend who comes to mind. Just to begin to get some flexibility. Again, tune into some successful, happy aspect of their life at this time. And if you get lost, go back to where it's more connected for you.

Be with this friend for a few minutes: I rejoice in your happiness, in your success and good fortune. May your good fortune continue. I am happy with you and your good fortune.

Now, if you'd like, explore connecting with the neutral person you've been using. Because we don't know so much about this person, we don't know what happiness or success they're enjoying. So perhaps just imagine them being happy.

Or some small thing you've seen about them. Maybe you've seen them walking their dog, and you can be happy for them that they have a dog.

This is where the Buddha said that just as we all share times of suffering, we all share times of happiness and joy in our lives. Not in equal measure, of course. But just some small happiness. See if you can experiment, explore, connecting with the sense of the neutral person for you in this way.

And as always, giving it patience and time. If energy just drops away, if you get lost in thought, put it down. Return to connect with the friend where it's easy to see their happiness, or the benefactor, and reestablish a sense of appreciative joy. Take your time. And if you want to explore neutral again, do so. But there's no urgency. Just simply a way to explore for ourselves this beautiful quality, this natural quality of our heart and mind when we're not lost in confusion and fear.

May your happiness and good fortune continue.

May all beings know happiness and the causes of happiness.

May our practice be a cause for the happiness of beings.

CHAPTER 146

Brahmavihāra Day 22: Cultivating Equanimity (Upekkhā)

Carol Wilson · 49 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Carol Wilson introduces the practice of cultivating upekkhā (equanimity) as the fourth brahmavihāra. She explains that equanimity corresponds to the Pāli mental factor tatramajjhattatā—literally meaning 'standing in the middle of all things'—a quality present in any wholesome state of mind. Unlike the previous three brahmavihārās where we actively wish something for beings, equanimity practice involves cultivating a connected, non-reactive presence while recognizing that beings' happiness and suffering arise from their own actions (kamma), not from our wishes for them.*
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> *Wilson carefully distinguishes genuine equanimity from its near enemy, indifference. True equanimity is rooted in wisdom and maintains full connection and caring, while indifference involves subtle disconnection—a distinction she illustrates through honest reflections on her own practice. She references the eight worldly winds (gain/loss, pleasure/pain, praise/blame, fame/disrepute) as conditions that equanimity allows us to meet without reactivity, and shares the Buddha's teaching to his son Rāhula that upekkhā practice abandons the habit of aversion.*
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> *The session includes practical guidance on working with traditional and contemporary phrases, beginning with the neutral person before moving to oneself. Wilson emphasizes that this practice develops an 'unshakable balance of mind' that serves as the culminating quality bringing vastness and unconditional openness to all four brahmavihārās, allowing practitioners to remain present with joy and sorrow alike without drowning in reactivity.*

We'll use this period to cultivate the quality of equanimity in our own hearts and minds. I want to talk a little bit about equanimity and how it works as this kind of practice.

First, by equanimity, what we mean is a specific mental factor in Buddhism—a quality of mind, just as compassion is a specific mental factor and muditā is a specific mental factor. Mettā comes under non-hatred, under a broader realm, but equanimity is a specific mental factor. The word in Pali—one I really like—is *tatramajjhattatā*, which basically means keeping in the middle of all things. I have this image of the human standing in the middle of heaven and earth, all things in equipoise. This mental factor, which goes into upekkhā equanimity, is considered present in any wholesome state of

heart and mind. There are quite a few mental factors that are always present in such states, and equanimity, *tatramajjhattatā*, is one of them—this perfect balance of mind. It's associated with pure consciousness. It affects the balance of the mind that's really present but not pulled into reactivity by whatever circumstances are arising.

In terms of cultivating this as a brahmavihāra, what we're doing is calling up that quality, inclining our mind in that direction, and then strengthening it with the same focus we've been doing with the other three. As we keep bringing attention to that inclining, to that quality, it gets stronger and stronger until it can begin to, as they say, radiate in all directions. It becomes boundless in that way. As it strengthens into brahmavihāra, it becomes what is called an unshakable balance of mind.

So equanimity, *tatramajjhattatā*, being something that arises whenever there's a pure heart-mind, is something we all experience. But this strengthening into the unshakable quality—where it comes to the forefront and we really experience it—is something we focus on in the equanimity brahmavihāra. Of course, in vipassanā practice or other one-pointed practices, it would also be arising and strengthening. You'll hear tonight when Bonnie talks about the seven factors of awakening—equanimity is one of those as well. So it shows up in different ways in how we talk about our experience.

Here, as brahmavihāra, it's a little bit different in the way my mind conceptualized doing it from the other three. We go through the same beings in slightly different order, but it's not so much that I'm wishing you equanimity. When I was first doing it and trying that approach, it didn't make any sense. What we're doing is cultivating that quality of really loving connection that is standing in the middle of all things, that's non-reactive—towards ourselves, towards any being. To be honest, it sometimes is a little bit challenging.

Let me read something from Nyanaponika Thera. He says equanimity is the perfect, unshakable balance of mind. It's rooted in insight, rooted in wisdom. It's not disconnected, heartless, "who cares?" That's not equanimity—that's the so-called near enemy: indifference. When you really feel equanimity and then go into indifference, you can tell the difference, just like with all the near enemies and the beautiful states. It's really obviously different. But until we recognize it, it's so easy to slide into indifference and still be thinking it's equanimity.

I've noticed this actually in my life, even more than as a brahmavihāra practice. There will be a period, however long, where equanimity is rooted in wisdom. The heart is open. The mind is connected to oneself, to whatever's occurring, or if it's about a being, to that being. There's definitely that sense of connection and a tendency to feel what's happening—it's not like, "Oh yeah, that's kind of tough that happened. Well,

we're all the owners of our karma." That's the phrase, and it's easy to slip into that. But there's this radiant calm, really connected. The subtle disconnect can come in at first without noticing.

I've had periods in life where I'm feeling really connected, and all the joys and sorrows of my life and the people I'm connected with come, and you feel it but don't really get thrown off balance—really equanimity. As time goes, it changes. That's always going to happen. And maybe the wisdom factor goes down, the energy goes down. I start to think, "Yeah, well, the mind's equanimous. It's all cool."

I'm just flowing with it. And that little extra awareness, the living awareness that always accompanies wisdom, starts to fade. It's like you're coasting—coasting on the wisdom of the day before. Can you relate to that at all? Yesterday, it was all happening without any effort. So that's how it is now. But it isn't like that now.

As it starts to slide into indifference, I often wouldn't notice it. Then suddenly I'd realize—not so suddenly. Maybe after an hour. After three months, really. I'm not exaggerating. Sometimes everything is mellow and I think, "Oh wait, it's really disconnected." It's moved into a state where I'm not really touched by things anymore. That's not equanimity. That's indifference.

So it's subtle. We explore this in the Brahmavihara practice and in our broader practice, because equanimity is really the culmination of wisdom. It's rooted in wisdom. The far enemy of equanimity is reactivity. And one of the effects of this practice—what can sometimes make Brahmavihara practice challenging—is that the far enemy often gets highlighted. You may have noticed that in the other practices as well.

Sometimes I'll offer certain phrases and you'll see how reactivity could get triggered. And sometimes it does. "What do you mean, you're the heir to your actions and my wishes can't make you happy? What do you mean by that? What's the point?" And the mind goes off into reactivity.

This is where it becomes really important to recognize: this is the practice of cultivating equanimity in relationship to ourselves or another being in a particular circumstance. But it's really about seeing that quality in our own mind and heart—not so much "I wish it for you," but rather seeing how I am with you in this experience, recognizing that I can't control your happiness and suffering.

I have found that coming to touch this in intensive practice, at times it's fantastic, it's so beautiful. And at other times, it really brought up in me a kind of reactivity, or almost a fear, which is a kind of reactivity. It seems so bald, perhaps. So this is how it is. The classic phrase is: "I, you, all beings are the heirs, the owners of your actions, of your

karma. Your happiness and unhappiness arises from your actions, not from my wishes for you." It's a long, drawn-out phrase, although I came to really appreciate it. I'll offer you a few others, and on the notice board there's a list of different equanimity phrases, so you might find one that connects for you.

Nyanaponika describes equanimity as the perfect, unshakable balance of mind rooted in insight—but it is not dull, heartless, or cold. The perfection is not due to emotional emptiness, emotional disconnect, or not caring, but to the fullness of understanding, to its being complete in itself.

In a way, as James alluded to this morning, when we talk about the four Brahmaviharas, one way of thinking about it is that equanimity is the factor that brings the vastness and the unconditional all-beings nature to the other three Brahmaviharas.

With metta, for instance, people often say, "How can we wish 'may all beings be happy'? That's impossible." You've all thought that as soon as you start thinking about it. Equanimity doesn't make it possible that all beings can be happy. Rather, it's seeing the vastness. We can't understand the vastness, but at some point, any being has happiness. At another point, any being has sorrow. At another point, we wish well for all beings. Equanimity brings in this vastness, knowing we can't control it. It's not going to ever all be the same for everyone. But there's this vastness of seeing.

From the Buddha's point of view, he's seeing aeons and world cycles coming and going in incredible vastness. We don't have to go there. I suppose if one could really see on that level, it gives a kind of vastness to our momentary sufferings and happinesses. But it's not that. It's just knowing that we're all going to experience all of it at different times—not the same for all of us and not in equal measure, God knows. But that equanimity brings the vastness.

The knowing rooted in wisdom allows us, at times when there's so much suffering that we're opening to, not to drown in sorrow or reactivity. Equanimity gives us that vastness of "this is how it is now," which allows the heart and mind to be present.

With appreciative joy, again, it's equanimity that allows us not to just get totally lost in "woo-hoo, isn't this fantastic?" and then plummet the other way. Instead we can hold the awareness that this person's happy, but that person's not—just that vastness. I'm saying many different things here. I don't want you to think about it too much. I'm just trying to paint a different picture of equanimity, of its vastness.

The wisdom that's often described, or the experience that's often talked about with equanimity, is in very simple terms the recognition that we all go through, at different times, what the suttas describe as the eight worldly winds. Probably many of you have

heard of this. The eight opposing conditions: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, praise and blame, fame and disrepute—being really well thought of, or being completely dismissed with everyone saying "oh yes, they're so bad."

You can see how these can flip back and forth for any one of us, and sometimes really quickly. And again, it's back to the first noble truth. When we're having praise and it flips to blame, it's so shocking. How could that happen? But it happens all the time. We don't even have to go to Twitter and online platforms to see this. I feel so sorry now for famous people, because as soon as they're famous, it's almost like they're set up to be shot down. Who can find something bad to say? And then it's all over the internet.

But it's useful—fun may not be the right word—but when you tune into watching this in your own life without taking it so personally, it really starts to bring in the equanimity. In terms of being in this seat, with our job being to teach and share things, there are times... I remember years ago doing an interview group in another country, and for some reason the people in the group were feeling quite free to share their opinions. One started, "I really didn't like your talk. I really didn't like the humor." They went on and on, and I'm going, "Okay." And then the next person said, "I really loved the humor"—the very thing the other person was hating. You can't land on any of it. This is equanimity. You don't land, you don't make praise and blame, pleasure and pain into something solid. It can flip just like that.

So equanimity is the vastness of wisdom, the vastness of heart that can recognize it all and can be with the joy and be with the sadness and be with the flatness and be with the beauty without falling into reactivity. That's just what we're cultivating.

There's one more piece. There's a sutta where the Buddha is giving advice to his son Rahula, who became a monk at a young age. He's giving him advice about these four brahmaviharas. He said to Rahula: the practice of mettā abandons the habit of ill will in the mind; that of karunā, compassion, abandons the habit of cruelty; that of muditā, appreciative joy, abandons the habit of discontent; and upekkhā, equanimity, abandons the habit of aversion. I don't actually think it's that limited, but it's interesting to see these subtle differences.

So that's all I want to say in introducing it. The way we practice equanimity as a brahmavihara follows the same form. We start with the neutral person, then we go to ourselves, and then we go through the same groupings—self, benefactor, friend, difficult person, and all beings.

When I first was doing it, I'd been practicing intensive mettā and then the other three brahmaviharas, and then equanimity. So I was trying to radiate to that person "all beings are the heirs of their actions"—trying to radiate that wisdom out to them. It didn't fit, because that's not what it's about. It's really connecting to the person, to the sense of the person, just like we've been doing. And then, rather than thinking about it conceptually, it may be easier to hold the whole person with the awareness: "Your happiness and your unhappiness arise from your actions, not from my wishes for you."

It depends on my wishes for you. And so when I was doing it, at first that was a really long phrase. I'll say it again: All beings are the owners or the heirs of their own actions or karma—karma just means action, intentional action. Your happiness or unhappiness springs from your actions, not from my wishes for you. That's the classical phrase.

So that's one that often triggers reactivity. We offer other phrases because if you go right into reactivity, it isn't helpful. Of course, reactivity may come up later, and we play with that, we explore that. But anyway, when I first started with that phrase, I found it long. But then—and this may not connect for you at all—I came to love it because I found that one phrase included all four Brahma Viharas in it.

So when I'd start with "you"—that's the neutral portion—"you're the owner of your actions," that was the connectedness of metta, just connect. Yes, you're the owner of your actions. But I'm not saying it as a punishment; I'm actually feeling in my own heart, you're the owner of your actions, your happiness—and then I would feel mudita. Or your unhappiness—I would feel compassion. It comes from your actions, not from my wishes. "Not from my wishes" is like the letting go that somehow I can control or fix, but it's not the letting go of disconnect. Do you get a sense of what I mean? Just play with it. I know I'm saying a lot. Don't overthink it.

So it may be that you connect and feel a sense of the whole person. That's fine. Another way could be, whether it's neutral—where you may not know so much specific—or when we come to ourself and then benefactor, if we get that far today, you connect to yourself, connect to that person, and there may be a specific aspect going on in their life that pops into your mind. It may be a suffering aspect, a happy aspect, or something you wish they would kind of clean up their act. You know, whatever it is—you've been through all of that with a person in all the other ways. So let that come up, and then we're holding the sense of really connecting to them, including this aspect. But the equanimity is like really knowing: your happiness and unhappiness, I can't control by my wishes; it arises from your own actions. Still, I'm here with you.

I wrote down a couple other phrases. "I care for you, but cannot control or keep you from suffering." But equanimity also includes happiness—it's not just about suffering. "I wish you happiness, but cannot make your choices for you." These are more modern ones. Some people find this works: "Things are as they are right now." Just this simplicity of being fully present with the sense of the person, whatever's going on, staying really connected. Things are as they are right now. "However I might wish otherwise, I cannot control your suffering. I cannot change this for you."

This is not about what we do or don't do. This is cultivating this quality of radiant, connected presence that isn't pushing and pulling, but that's really there in connection with someone. "I care for you, but I cannot control your happiness or unhappiness." "May I accept things as they are right now." "May I be—or may we be—undisturbed by the comings and goings of life." "I care for you, but cannot keep you from suffering." "I care for you, but cannot make you be happy." You get the idea. Those are the main ones, and there are some others out there. Find what works for you.

So it may be that you have a sense of the whole person or your whole self. Or when you come to self, maybe it's a particular thing going on. And notice, it doesn't have to be a suffering thing—it could be a happy thing that we're getting all attached to. And that's also reactivity.

So, you know, just okay—may I be with things as they are. I care for myself, but... And it's a little trickier when it's with ourselves. It's more like, may I accept things as they are. Even for ourselves, our happiness and unhappiness arises from our actions, not from our wishes—which is what we've hopefully been seeing really clearly here.

Now, that's going to make you confused. When we're saying with metta, "may I be happy," it feels like a wish, right? But it's an action of mind. It's actually inclining the intention of mind away from "this is hopeless" to "may I be happy." That's an action of mind. A wish would be sitting down and saying, "I wish I would just quit liking chocolate. I just wish I would." And then we go and eat as much chocolate as we want. "Oh, I wish I would quit liking chocolate." We don't do anything about it. That would be about my wishes. It's not about my wishes—it's about my actions. But anyway, don't overthink it.

All right, so let's just start simply. We start with the neutral person, and then we'll come to ourselves. Just have patience with it, because it's not such an immediate big emotional feeling. We're looking for this radiant calm. Find the way that you have been just landing here in this moment.

Of course, starting with simply however the body feels, however the heart and mind feels. It's like this right now. It's just like this. That cool connectedness of non-reactivity is what takes us into the deepest peace of awakening. It's what allows for that. So just simply connecting.

We do start by bringing to mind whoever you've been using as the so-called neutral person. Whatever helps you connect—just connecting with them as a whole being in metta, or focusing on some aspect of their happiness, or their suffering, and the other two. See what comes up for you now in terms of bringing into heart, to mind, this person, this so-called neutral.

What we're cultivating is this even-mindedness—really connected and even, able to be with all aspects. I care for you, but I cannot control your happiness and unhappiness. You are the owner of your actions, the owner of your kamma. Your happiness and unhappiness springs from your actions, not from my wishes for you. May I be with things as they are.

So now, just taking some time exploring what it's like to do this for a little bit. Remembering, though, the first step is that connecting. It's not a disconnected "ah, whatever." Really connecting. You're the owner of your actions. May I be really present with you, knowing your happiness and unhappiness does not depend on my wishes for you.

If you feel like exploring, move to yourself. Maybe go back and forth if you get too involved, but just see how it is. With ourselves, it may be something particular—maybe there's a particular incident going on in our mind or in our life. Don't go looking, but something that pops up, or maybe just the way you're feeling right now, whatever.

Connecting with yourself, whether it's the classic phrase—"I am heir to my actions, my happiness and unhappiness springs from my actions, not from my wishes"—or "May I meet this with balance, may I be with things as they are," or just simply, "Things are as they are."

Exploring meeting this sense of ourselves with this connected balance of mind. Just playing with it, exploring. If you get lost, if it doesn't feel energized enough, if you're just lost in thought, take a moment to stop, reconnect. You could go to the neutral person again if you get lost in stories about yourself. Come back, just exploring this possibility of being really present with this steady, accepting wisdom quality of heart, of mind.

May I accept things just as they are right now.

May all beings know peace and the causes of peace.

CHAPTER 147

Expressions of Freedom: The 3rd Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this profound exploration of the Third Noble Truth, Carol Wilson reframes our understanding of Nibbāna from a distant goal to an immediately accessible experience. Drawing from the Buddha's own words in the Aṅguttara Nikāya and teachings from masters including Ajahn Buddhadāsa, Ajahn Chah, and contemporary teachers like Mingyur Rinpoche, she illuminates how freedom from dukkha is not a far-off attainment but present in countless moments throughout our day.

Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching that the mind is naturally luminous and brightly shining, only temporarily obscured by the kilesas (defilements) of greed, hatred, and delusion. She emphasizes that these torments are conditioned phenomena—what comes together can come apart—and that the mind's intrinsic purity remains undisturbed even when obscured. Through the lens of Ajahn Buddhadāsa's concept of 'temporary Nibbāna,' she points to the cooling moments between afflictive states that we typically overlook.

The practical heart of this teaching lies in shifting attention from the content of awareness to the process of awareness itself. Rather than being absorbed in objects of experience, Wilson invites practitioners to notice the 'squeaky clean' quality of pure awareness—moments of simple presence free from craving, aversion, and delusion. These ordinary moments of uncontrived awareness, she suggests, are the doorway to liberation. The talk concludes with Mingyur Rinpoche's letter from his wandering retreat, affirming that recognizing our true nature of timeless awareness and vast compassion is the essence of practice—available here and now, closer than our own eyelids.

So tonight, as I promised, I will talk about the third noble truth. I'll be using words from different masters and teachers, just to give different flavors. But this is from the Buddha:

"What now is the noble truth of the extinction of dukkha? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving. It's forsaking and abandonment, liberation and detachment from it. The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana. And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there's nothing to be added to what has been done, nothing more remains to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms nor sounds nor odors nor tastes nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. One is steadfast in heart, and one who

has considered all the contrasts of this earth, and is no more disturbed by anything in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay."

What I love personally about that definition is that it's very experiential, accessible by the wise, moment to moment—and that includes us. He's describing a state of heart and mind freed from craving. That's what he's calling freedom from confusion, from suffering: the cessation of craving. I really like that because that's the angle from which I want to speak about it tonight, rather than trying to describe some state that we can really start looking for. It's basically saying what we've said all along: turn around, look at your heart, look at your mind. See what's going on. See if this is true.

Because when we hear about freedom from craving, from hatred, from delusion, minds tend to think ahead along the end of a path. We think, "Well, that's down the road, some other lifetime, never going to happen to me," and we just throw it into some idea. But what's so cool about the nature of what we call mind and heart in our moment-to-moment experience is that he's not talking about a distant state at all—a state other than this moment of the heart, mind, consciousness, awareness being free from these torments. I'm going to use "torments" or "kilesas" rather than saying greed, hatred, and delusion every time. That's what I mean by torments.

So it's not like some distant steady state. What we're calling mind is, as Ajahn Analayo describes it, not a steady state. The mind is not a self-existing steady subject that takes objects as content. When we say "the mind," in English it sounds like one steady thing, doesn't it? Just like when we say "the body," we think of a solid, unchanging thing, and the mind too. But the mind is not a subject—it's an activity. It's the process, the moment-to-moment arising and passing process of cognizing the flow of events. Just as the events and objects at the six sense doors are arising in every moment, the cognizing function, which is the function we call mind, is also arising and passing in every mind moment, of which there are ten million in the blink of an eye.

So when we talk about a moment of mind, of heart, free from greed, hatred, and delusion, this is what makes it accessible to us. Because the so-called mind isn't some solid thing we've got to somehow transform and make other than it is now. We can actually use our practice to look into the quality of the heart-mind in this moment. Does that sound familiar? It's what we've been talking about the whole time. Because it's changing all the time, this means that—not the final never-arising of the torments again, we're not saying that—but in any moment, a kind of taste of this freedom is available to

us, accessible to us. There are many moments in the day, believe it or not, when there's not greed, hatred, or delusion, not craving in the mind, in the awareness. We often don't notice it.

So Nibbana is directly visible. This is from the Buddha: Once a Brahmin approached the Blessed One and asked him, "You say Nibbana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see." He's not saying down the road, ten lifetimes from now. Immediate, inviting one to come and see. "What does this mean?"

The Buddha said, "When a person is impassioned with lust, depraved through hatred, bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion, then she plans for her own harm, the harm of others, the harm of both, and experiences in her mind suffering and grief. But when lust, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, he neither plans for his own harm nor the harm of others nor the harm of both. She does not experience in her mind suffering and grief. In this way, Brahmin, Nibbana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise."

I would really invite us to listen to what the Buddha is saying, not get caught up in concepts, but just take it in. Directly visible. Immediate. Immediate means only right now—immediately here, nowhere else.

Not something that we have to get. It's not something at all. But if we really are interested, if we look and begin to see what is worthy of application, exploring what is the quality of heart and mind in a moment when there's wakefulness and it's free from craving—just start to explore and see. What does this mean? What is this experience? Is that something you even know?

And I want to say it is, but we overlook it so often.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, the Thai forest monk and meditation master we've spoken of often. He was quite a scholar. He died in the 1990s. This is from a long talk he gave to Thai people called "Nibbana for Everyone." He was specifically—he was a bit of a radical, I think, as we've said, radical within a very constrained context of Thai Theravada Buddhism. But still, in that place he was a radical. And he's speaking to Thai people who had come to think Nibbana just means when a completely enlightened person dies—that's Nibbana. That Nibbana has no relevance to any of us, or to lay people, or to anybody these days. That's something they talked about in the old days. So that's why he's talking about Nibbana for everyone.

I'm not going to read the whole thing—lucky you—just a few things I picked out.

He says, "Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any kilesa, without any torment. Nibbana is cool." Now he's punning here, because from what I understand, in Thai they use the word Nibbana to mean actually to cool something off—like the rice is Nibbana-ed, for example. So he's punning, but he's also making a good point.

Nibbana is a natural condition, the cool state of mind, of heart, when it's free from kilesa. Buddha termed this the cessation of suffering, which means the extinction of the heat from the kilesa, from the defilements. And just as you hear this, don't think about it so much—take it in. When you're impassioned with lust, bewildered by confusion, doesn't it feel like burning, burning in the mind? Anger—that one's even more obvious.

He goes on (I'm skipping): "When you look further, we will see that the defilements also—greed, hatred, delusion—are also conditioned things, compounded things, coming together from conditions, going apart when those conditions cease. Things that have birth and death." And so this shows that the kilesas occur, and when the conditions that cause them are not present, they simply become extinct. They just become extinct. And although the extinction is temporary—in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily—the phenomenon has the real sense of Nibbana even though it's not the lasting one.

Can you relate? Does this make sense?

"Hence, temporary Nibbana does exist"—this is the Thai master—"for those who unavoidably have some impurities that still arise in their minds."

But he goes on to say, "Anyone can see that if these torments were with us all day and all night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them?" You take that in, and now you may be thinking—if you have a cynical mind—"They *are* with me all day and all night, every second without ceasing." But I think his point is a good one. It's not the case.

He says, "Under such conditions, living beings must either die or really go crazy. So let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of kilesa, of defilement, are not burning. And as a matter of fact, we can say that these periods last longer than when the fires are burning. We survive because of the nourishment from this kind of Nibbana. This nourishing condition is thus normal to what may be called life, mind, heart."

"So why don't we know or recognize or feel thankful for this type of Nibbana?"

That's the million-dollar question. Why don't we even recognize?

So that's one reason I like to talk about this third truth from this angle—because I know in my own life, my practice, whatever, in all the reading and talking about the sense of freedom and the nature of mind and Nibbana, the habit of my mind is craving. Looking for the missing thing that's going to bring me to completion. Not noticing, not turning around and noticing that what's occurring in my mind at that moment *is* craving—even though the object is some idea of Nibbana or freedom. And then suffering so much from trying to understand what that could mean.

Does anybody relate to that?

So no, no, you have no idea what I'm talking about. Lucky you. There's a lot of suffering going on there. But then you turn your head and go, "Oh, this is crazy." And then there's the voice of Mara: "It may be craving, but you've got to really crave to figure out nibbana. You can't just go, 'This is craving,' and walk away. You can't do that."

So I want to come from this angle, and I'm reading from a lot of teachers. It's not just me throwing in the towel of defeat and saying the best we can do is notice craving in our mind. This is really about starting to see that when craving is not present, that absence is the intimation of freedom. So can we even let it in? Can we notice what Ajahn Buddhadasa called "temporary nibbana"? Why don't we?

And again, the most simple ways—just the simple moments of what I would call now, in my current language, purity of consciousness. When the awareness is there, not distorted by greed, hatred, delusion. We've talked about this a lot, right? Mindfulness. But we still tend to kind of focus on the object of the mindfulness. So it's like starting to shift the field of attention so that we can actually begin to notice what is occurring that we tend to overlook.

I'm sure many of you have heard this really well-known, famous sutta of the Buddha's from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Luminous is this mind, or heart, brightly shining, but it is distorted, it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This unlearned people do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind, the heart. Luminous is this mind, this heart, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way does really understand, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

What was for me kind of an aha moment in my own practice was realizing these two descriptions—luminous is the mind, but the brightness, the natural luminosity of mind is covered by attachments, and then the mind is brightly shining when it's free of attachments—the aha moment was when I got it: that's not necessarily sequential. Even

when the luminous quality, the brightness, the radiance of heart and mind is not recognized because of the attachments, the kilesas, that radiance is completely undisturbed. Both can be going on simultaneously.

And the simple way I think about it in my own experience is this: our habit, you know, the kilesas, it's like they make a lot of noise when they're present, right? Greed, hatred, confusion is going on, and all the papañca kicks up, and all the stories, and all the "me." We really notice that stuff. Maybe we're aware of it, maybe we're not, but our attention really gets sucked in. Meanwhile, there's the shining quality of mind noticing that. But the kilesas just make so much noise that we're in the habit of getting completely entranced and involved and reactive to whatever particular object it is that's occurring at any of the six sense doors. That's kind of where our attention tends to bend, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What do I think about this? What am I seeing? What am I hearing? It's kind of how we talk about our lives.

Even when you come into an interview and I'll say, "What's happening?"—really, that's the wrong question. Big picture, it doesn't matter what's happening. You saw this, you heard that, you felt this, you thought that, another thought, another sight, another sound. That's all that's going on, all day long. This one or that one, what difference does it make? But that's how we talk, and we miss the luminous quality of the heart-mind when it's not distorted by the attachments. We forget to even look in that direction.

I'm not saying we should see some incredible, brilliant nuclear sun. I'm just talking about a very simple quality of the mind, the heart, in those moments when we're not obsessed, distracted, blinded, caught up, seduced—whatever word you want to use—by whatever particular sense object, including mental ones, is occurring.

So it's sort of like we learn to shift the direction of interest, or expand the direction of interest, so we're not just staying, relating and reacting to every single object that comes.

I remember one time I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, very tough teacher, very demanding, very great master. And it's the practice where you're noting every moment whatever's arising. I can't remember what I was reporting in the interview, but clearly I had some kind of complaining tone in my voice. I mean, one wouldn't dare really complain, but clearly I was dissatisfied with what was occurring. And he just says to me, "So what do you want, different objects to note?"

I was like—that was so right on. That's exactly it. Yeah, I want better ones. That's how we're spending our life, wanting better ones to note. And we just keep on spinning, spinning, spinning, and we miss this luminous quality of the heart, the mind, when it's free from attachments, because we don't even think to notice that.

So very simple, when you're here these next days. Now, I don't mean turn around and be looking for some experience—not that. But what we're cultivating here is the quality of awareness, consciousness knowing what's happening, and then the awareness knowing what we're knowing. And as we've said like ten million times, wise attitude: mindfulness, just that complete presence without adding anything extra, without wanting, without aversion, without the overlay of concept or "me."

And this is what Ajahn Buddhadasa is talking about—moments of coolness. Just start to notice them. It's often little moments when anything could be happening. It's not a fantastic sitting, necessarily, at all. It can be a time when you're just walking up to the dorm and there's just no sense of any problem. You're just quite present.

Even then we tend to attribute it to conditions. We often attribute it to the particular object: "Oh, but just then, the bud on that bush was so lovely, and I just felt this moment of peace appreciating the bud and the softness of the breeze and the sun." And so again, we're throwing all the peace outward to the conditions and not noticing that what was going on is just a moment of pure simplicity of presence.

Kind of like in Zen they just call it the is-ness. Just this. "Just this" could be like the moment I described. It could be taking a step and your toe hurts. It could be coughing. It could be drinking tea. It could be having what you call a great sitting or having what you call a horrible sitting, or just before you fall asleep at night. Many, many of these moments of just the simplicity of presence. Notice that.

Yes, craving will come in, or aversion will come in, or something else will happen, or some yogi walks by and ruins the moment for you. But if you keep the awareness going, you can just notice the change. And if you can notice what made the change—did that yogi walking by really make the change? What's the difference in the mind?

So we notice the difference when the heat from the defilement is again arising. And if you can manage not to take it personally, but just be exploring this difference, this is beginning to recognize. This is the coolness, this intimation of freedom from suffering—immediate, inviting one to come see for oneself.

We look too hard for the big blast, blow it all off, and we never have to deal with this stuff again. Sorry. But more and more and more moments—it becomes more trustworthy. And when we get sucked back into the reactivity, that's much more noticeable.

"Oh, wow, this is a defilement, this is the suffering nature again." But we start to know more and more that this coolness—mini-Nibbāna, whatever you want to call it—this coolness, this heading in the direction of the peace of mind and heart that's not disturbed by conditions, we start to get a sense of it, an intimation of it, beginning to trust that it's immediately accessible here and now.

You don't need to be different. I mean, there's nothing different—every moment you're different—but it's not something to gain. Starting to really explore this, that sense of—I don't know, we use the word purity. One friend described it once, these moments of just the simplicity of kind of pure awareness, pure meaning not distorted by kilesa. She described it as feeling squeaky clean, you know, like when you're cleaning a window and you can't see anything and it just squeaks with cleanliness. I somehow like that—just squeaky clean, nothing in the way.

So we can start to explore this, recognize this, see why it is that we don't. Sogyal Rinpoche said—again, this is why we don't—"At the present moment, our mind faces away from itself. Our attention bends towards whatever we experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, or texture. The mind leans towards it."

Do you get a sense of that sometimes? I was talking about craving just at the end of my talk last week—just that subtle movement of mind to kind of fixate on an object can be craving. The attention, Sogyal again: "The attention is also caught up by thoughts about the past, about the future, about the present, when in fact everything takes place in the present."

This is from Huang Po, Chinese Chan master.

This pure mind, this pure heart, shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. But most people are not aware of it. We think the mind is just the faculty that sees, hears, feels, and knows—just a kind of functioning. We notice the functioning, not the purity of the aware mind itself. Blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling, thinking, they don't perceive the radiance of the source.

Not to make this into some big "source thing" to look for, but just to notice from time to time, with interest, when whatever's arising, that way the attention tends to bend towards it. We don't notice the awareness that's noticing. That's what we've talked about so much—just noticing the knowing, that's all. We're talking about radiance, purity. It's not some huge nuclear sun. It's just this purity of the capacity for knowing, arising out of nothing, going to nothing, nothing you can hold to, no thing—but this radiant source.

And this is the poignancy, really, of craving, of aversion, of reacting to experience: it keeps us so busy and engaged with experience that we don't notice where it's arising from.

Even our mindfulness practice—I mean, whatever we do, however we practice—you've noticed this: the habits of our mind show up in how we practice. The way we act in big situations in life, after a while you realize that's coming up exactly in how you're relating to feeling the breath. It's really amazing. Something so simple as just noticing what's occurring, and all the major traumatic habits of our life show up.

So, even in the choiceless awareness form of mindfulness practice, where we're just noticing whatever's arising by itself—we talk about this because you really begin to get a sense, a little less sense of "me doing" and more just receiving. Stuff's occurring, stuff's occurring. There are times when the awareness is what's obvious, not so much the object.

But even this approach can become meeting, meeting, meeting, meeting—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, noting, noting, noting, noting. That's mindfulness, and it can be quite balanced mindfulness, sammasati. But it can—and I'm speaking totally from personal experience—have just this subtle sense of "me doing," which is craving. Any sense of "me" is a craving. "Me doing." So it seems incredibly mindful. Every moment is mindful, but the sense of "me doing" is just so strong by the end of the day, by the end of the retreat. You go, "What? I don't quite get what's going on here."

So then I'm going to try and not do. I'm going to just receive—things are coming, things are coming—but it's not very clear. "I should be better." And all the while, we're focusing on technique and focusing on object. That's all skillful means. I'm not saying we can throw that stuff out. But let's not forget to keep noticing the awareness that's doing that, the mind that's turning towards—that it's not a thing, but just that activity—not quite so caught up in the objects.

Bhikkhu Anālayo, that very brilliant German Theravada monk and translator, has a theory. He says one of the reasons Western meditators may progress more slowly than their Eastern counterparts—now, I don't know if that's true, but he did a lot of his practice in Sri Lanka, so this is his opinion; I'm not necessarily endorsing it—but this is the point: our tendency to become absorbed in the content of awareness rather than continuing to attend to the process of awareness.

That's exactly the point I'm making. When you come to an interview and I say, "What's happening?"—I'm making that same mistake. I'm going into the content of awareness. But really what we want to attend to is the process of awareness, over and over and over. And that gets more and more interesting, more and more obvious.

You have to think about it; it just becomes more obvious. And then you'll notice when the process of awareness is really distorted by kalesha.

A lot of people have been describing now, in our meetings, how all of a sudden they realize there must be aversion in the mind because they were having these really negative thoughts about everything they saw and people who walked by. And it's great, because maybe a year ago we wouldn't have even noticed that it was the process of awareness getting distorted. We would have just really thought there's something wrong with everybody and everything—the sun and the bushes—or something really wrong with me. Instead of saying, "This is a momentary arising of aversion that's distorting perception in awareness." And what comes together can go apart.

If we get interested in the process of awareness rather than doing battle with the aversion, we're back in a moment where awareness is like this, aversion is like this. There can be that squeaky clean process of awareness even with aversion or wanting as the object, when it's not all mixed up with the awareness, when we can see it.

This is from another Thai forest master, Ajahn Tate. He speaks of "the mind"—and again, even though it's just this changing process that awareness comes from, just saying "the mind," my mind goes back to solidity because of how we're used to thinking. So just to remind you: the mind is the process of knowing.

He's saying the mind and the defilements, the kalesha, are not identical. This could be good news. If they were, purification of mind would be impossible. The mind makes up imaginings. It imagines things that harness the defilements to itself—meaning it imagines things that hold the defilements to itself—and then becomes unsure as to exactly what is the mind and what is defilement. Do you get a sense of that? Like you can't tell the difference.

So this is his metaphor: Water in its natural state is a pure, transparent fluid. But if dye is added to it, it will change color accordingly. If red dye is added, it will turn red. If blue dye is added, it will turn blue. But even though the water may change color in accordance with the substances introduced into it, it actually never forsakes its innate purity and colorlessness. So if a wise person is able to distill the colored water, the water resumes its natural state. The dye stuff can only cause variation in outer appearance, not in intrinsic nature.

When we say awareness doesn't care what it's aware of—or someone said to me, "What about if awareness cares equally about what it's aware of?" I said, okay, that works too. Awareness cannot be stained or damaged or harmed in any way because the object of awareness is some really disgusting thought or mood. And it's not made better by being aware of really subtle movements of piti. Its natural moment of pure awareness is just what it is.

This is the beginning of that sense of luminosity, of radiance—not always huge, because there's so much subtle confusion covering it—but just begin to get interested. Intimations of this. You begin to really see it's not some far away possibility. If you're looking for the big bang, yes. But if you're willing to just touch into the simplicity of isness—of just standing here hearing the wind, before it goes to "I'm standing here hearing the wind"—just hearing, just seeing, just being with. Taste the quality not only of the object but of the awareness itself.

Ajahn Sumedho says something I love. It isn't exactly, I would say, kosher Theravada teaching, but he says the practice of freedom is awareness. Consciousness is the doorway to liberation. Now, I'm not equating consciousness and awareness—he might have been. I would say consciousness is just that quality of knowing, the natural quality of knowing. Hearing just happens by itself. Awareness is recognizing that knowing is happening. But he's saying awareness is the practice of freedom. And consciousness is the doorway to liberation, meaning when anything arises in consciousness and is known, it ceases. And then there's freedom again.

This is what's occurring moment after moment after moment, all day long. The Tibetans often have a phrase: all difficult thoughts, emotions, everything that arises, self-liberates in the nature of mind. To me that's exactly the same thing Ajahn Sumedho was saying. Something arises in consciousness, is known by awareness, and is left just as it is.

The conditions change, it vanishes, it dissipates. And again there's peace. It's what you could call self-liberating. We didn't have to get in there with hammer and tongs and fix it. But resting at ease in whatever arises, with this purity of awareness, trusting the awareness, seeing what occurs—it self-liberates.

Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche speaks about this same understanding. Again, this is Tibetan language, but it's the same teaching. He says this is one's birthright, one's nature. It is not something missing to be sought for and obtained elsewhere, but is the very heart of our original existential being. And this, I think, is important: it is actually inseparable from our uncontrived everyday awareness.

So Dzogchen says sometimes in the heart of our everyday moment-to-moment awareness is this potential to be just pure, free. In that moment, there's no problem. Beyond willful alteration, free from conceptuality. Unfabricated, ordinary awareness. That's just what we're practicing here. Unadulterated by effort and modification. Naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural awareness. Totally natural. Stop trying so hard, because awareness is just natural. We've given so many examples of that. What could be simpler than this—to rest at home and at ease in total naturalness? They ask, what could be simpler than this? Then he says, get out of the construction business. Just rest at ease in whatever arises and stop constructing all this stuff.

The point I'm making here is that our natural, ordinary, everyday awareness is the doorway in. And it's these simple moments when nothing special is going on that we can actually recognize and access it. I don't know if it's just the way things are speeding up, so intense in our culture—I guess not, because this goes back to the Buddha—but we're looking too much for something really shocking, something really incredible, something to really notice. And so in these little moments, it's not enough of an anything. We don't trust that recognizing that purity of awareness, just our natural awareness—not supermundane, super concentrated—our natural awareness is a doorway in. This is really a place we begin to explore the third noble truth, over and over and over.

This is from the Dalai Lama, saying the same thing in his own way: that when the mind is free of negative emotions and tendencies, it understands and knows all phenomena. It is only because there are obscuring veils between the mind and its object that we are unable to know all things. This is the point. Once these veils have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing and being aware is the nature of the mind itself.

It is amazing that it ought to be so simple. Just seeing and being aware—that's going on all day, and we get so caught up and complicated. When I said in some talk ago to Ben, "Why didn't you tell me it was this close—closer than my eyelid?"—I'm always looking way out for something much more. And this is so ordinary, so completely accessible, arising in our experience every moment, that we just overlook it completely.

Our ordinary everyday awareness is not separate. Not removed from life. The practice of freedom is awareness. What I want to say is the more we appreciate just this coolness—just think of it as this coolness, just simple awareness—the heart and mind maybe not plunging quite so much into objects, we start to actually recognize ourselves and the world in another way.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, when the mind isn't obscured, when awareness isn't obscured, we see and know things clearly. That's the nature of the mind itself. When I've been talking about recognizing accurately, the real, the deep freedom that comes—more than just the little moments—doesn't come from going somewhere else, but from recognizing more and more deeply and accurately just the way things have always been. And are now.

It's not something else we have to achieve.

Remember when Greg, quite a few talks ago, read that line from the Buddha? When someone asked the Buddha to distill everything he knew into one sentence, he said, "Nothing is worth clinging to." Remember that? It's a test: nothing is worth clinging to.

This teaching is furthered in that same discourse. Having directly known everything, she fully understands everything. And having fully understood everything, she sees all signs differently. She sees the eye differently, forms differently, and so with all the sense bases. Whatever feeling arises connected with seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, with mind contact as condition—that too she sees differently. When a bhikkhu knows and sees thus, ignorance is abandoned and true knowledge arises.

Seeing signs differently means seeing without the distortions. Seeing, you could say, the impermanent quality, the not-self quality, the unreliable and unsatisfactory quality. Not something we have to click through and see, but rather it becomes so clear that all arising experience has this ephemeral nature—whatever is conditioned comes apart. Ephemeral, not lasting, but also not self-existing.

This is sometimes called emptiness, but as Ajahn Amaro points out in his book *The Island*, the Buddha didn't talk about emptiness as a thing or a state. Rather, he spoke of all experience as being empty of inherent self-existence. This seeing signs differently, this opening into the empty quality of nothing being inherently solid and self-existing, is actually one of the deeper aspects of freedom. It releases even more fully the tendency to get sucked into and reactive to objects.

Ajahn Jumnian, another Thai forest master who is still alive, describes it this way when speaking about meditation: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is recognized as simply mind and matter—an empty process arising and passing away of its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. And there's no longer any personal doing." This is a moment of balanced mind.

But people often think that this sense of emptiness, empty of self, moves into "who cares"—the indifference aspect of equanimity. What Ajahn Chah describes is true equanimity. It's not a divorcing or separation from our life, from activity, from anything. Emptiness is right in the heart of it all.

Pema Chödrön speaks about this empty quality of the sense of self, of permanence—how any experience is recognized simply when the mind is not clinging. That's all. When the mind is not clinging, not making something of anything, not resting or holding to any experience, she says, "Keep on going. Everything is a verb."

Then she tells this story. Some people have heard it, but I share it because it's funny. Chögyam Trungpa and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, two great masters, were sitting under a tree somewhere in Bodh Gaya together, just so happy to be in each other's company. They sat there beaming, silent, grinning for hours without saying anything. After about three hours, Chögyam Trungpa broke the silence. With a huge smile, he pointed and said, "They call that a tree." And they both just cracked up laughing.

It's a subtle thing, but you see—they know we call it a tree. Yet they see all signs differently. We can recognize tree, we can use tree, and we know it has no inherent self-existence.

Another Tibetan teacher puts it this way: "The experience of emptiness is not found outside of the world of ordinary appearance, as many people mistakenly assume. In truth, we experience emptiness when the mind is free of grasping at appearance." And yet we fully know all appearance. We fully relate. And the natural response of this heart-mind of non-grasping is compassion.

I want to end by reading two passages from beings who experienced this directly. The first is from a Tibetan wandering monk called Shabkar, who lived from 1781 to 1851. He was very, very famous.

He was sort of like Milarepa in that he wandered all through Tibet, simply practicing his whole life—practicing and creating these beautiful songs of compassion and awakening. What's interesting about Shabkar is that they say he was very poor and uneducated. All of his practice came not from intellectual study or understanding, but purely from his own direct experience. He was also deeply compassionate. He didn't eat meat, which is very rare in Tibet because there's not much else to eat. And he would often try to buy animals that were going to be slaughtered in order to save them—that kind of really profound compassion.

So this is a little bit long, and I'm sorry, but I just love this. It's called "The Fruit." This is one of his songs about his experience of emptiness and compassion:

When one looks at one's own mind, the root of all phenomena, there is nothing but vivid emptiness. Nothing concrete there to be taken as real. It is present as transparent, utter openness, without outside, without inside—an all-pervasiveness without boundary and without direction. The wide open expanse of the view, the true condition of mind, is like sky-like space, without center, without edge, without aim. By leaving whatever I experience relaxed in ease, just as it is, I have arrived at the vast plane that is the absolute expanse. Dissolving into the expanse of emptiness that has no limits and no boundary, all vision, all sound, my own mind, and the sky all merge. Not once did the notion arise of these being separate and distinct.

Now this is interesting:

In the absolute expanse of awareness, all things are blended into that single taste, but relatively each and every phenomenon is distinctly, clearly seen.

This is the paradox that keeps going back and forth. Wondrous.

Toward all the beings under the skies who have failed to realize this, all-pervading compassion spontaneously dawned. The urge to sing this song arose of itself—without entering the narrow rock gorge which is mind watching for stillness and movement, without being caught in the snare of view and meditation created by the intellect, without flying into the dark clouds of dull states of mind, without plunging into the storm of agitated thinking. The great Garuda, my own mind, flew freely into the wide open sky of the absolute expanse.

In this expanse of sky-like evenness, all phenomena, all appearances and sounds of samsara and nirvana are apparent yet empty. They are empty and yet they appear. Although they appear, phenomena are empty, free of the limiting concept "truly existent." Although they are empty by nature, phenomena do appear, free of the limiting concept "non-existent." In the vast space of the view that is itself spontaneously free from the two limiting concepts—belief in permanence or belief in nothingness—this joyous song burst forth by itself.

Even more vast than the sky is the view of emptiness. There the sun of love and the moon of compassion arose. And again and again I made boundless prayers to benefit the teachings and beings. May all disease and epidemics, all famine and all wars be ended, and may all have happiness and joy.

And this last piece is from a letter from Mingyur Rinpoche, written about a year and a half ago. He's the younger brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Many of you probably know that he went off for three years to do retreat, and he just vanished—simply walked out

from Bodh Gaya, didn't tell anyone where he went, didn't take anything with him. He said he didn't even take a toothbrush. He just went off. So really, he's doing today pretty much the same wandering practice that Shabkar or Milarepa was doing.

After about a year and a half, one of his most devoted disciples, Ramatashi, happened to run into him in Nepal and begged to be allowed to come with him. So he went with him for a while. Then Mingyur gave him this letter and sent him away again. I'll just read a few passages, not the whole thing:

"I myself am wandering without any fixed location, staying in isolated mountain hermitages and other such places. I have experienced feelings of happiness and suffering, rising and falling like waves on the surface of the ocean. At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I felt cold, hungry, and thirsty."

And you know, he doesn't mean a little bit cold, a little bit hungry. He's wandering around in Tibet without a coat.

"At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I have felt cold, hungry, and thirsty. Even when I have begged for alms, I receive nothing but insults and harsh words. At other times, I have received food and clothing effortlessly, without even asking for them, and in my mind it felt as though I were enjoying the pleasures of the gods.

While I have experienced both happiness and suffering, the most important thing is that a deep and heartfelt sense of certainty has arisen in the depths of my being, such that no matter what happens, I know that the true nature of these experiences, their very essence, is that of timeless awareness and vast compassion."

This natural clarity of awareness has been with us from the very beginning. It is the essence and nature of our minds. Therefore, one must maintain this flow of pure awareness to the best of one's ability—exactly what we are doing.

While all beings have great wisdom and compassion, this is not always apparent. This is simply because they have not recognized what they already have. Thus, aside from merely recognizing our own true nature, there isn't the slightest thing to meditate on.

"Recognizing the importance of this, I have passed my days feeling joyful and content, wandering through the mountains and valleys and staying here and there. From my heart, I sincerely encourage all of you to practice diligently in this manner as well."

I just love it. It's like today—that's happening today.

This is the last paragraph from the Buddha's description of the third noble truth:

"Hence, the purpose of the holy life does not consist in acquiring alms, honor, or fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the object of the holy life. That is its essence."

Unshakable deliverance of the heart. Rather like what Mingyur Rinpoche was speaking about.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 148

Introduction to Awareness Practice: 3 Jobs of a Yogi

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this opening retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a practical introduction to vipassanā meditation through the lens of what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls "the three jobs of a yogi." Drawing from a definition of vipassanā as "experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding," she unpacks these three essential elements: beginning with right view, cultivating continuous awareness, and maintaining steady perseverance throughout the day.

Wilson emphasizes that the fundamental misperception we bring to practice is taking all experience personally—appropriating the things of nature as "I" and "mine." Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Buddhadāsa and Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she explains that whatever arises in mind and body is simply nature, arising due to causes and conditions, not because we are bad or failing. This understanding transforms our relationship to difficult mind states like greed and aversion, allowing us to observe them with curiosity rather than judgment.

The talk highlights that awareness is not something we create but something we recognize. Wilson shares practical guidance on working with the "very, very now"—the immediacy of direct experience before interpretation takes over. She encourages practitioners to explore what supports balanced awareness in each moment, whether sitting, walking, or engaging in daily activities, rather than following rigid schedules. The continuity of this simple, honest awareness is what allows wisdom to naturally arise and recognize how suffering and freedom unfold in our own hearts and minds.

Looking out at you all on the first night, I feel a lot of empathy, having done many retreats myself. I can see how peppy you're all feeling. One time, many years ago, I was teaching a retreat with James Baraz. It was the first night, there were about eighty people, and the room was arranged in a semicircle. We hadn't said, "Please don't lie down when we're talking"—we forgot to say that. Literally, I'm not exaggerating, halfway through his talk, I was sitting with my eyes closed while he was speaking, and when I looked up, two-thirds of the room had completely downed out, lying down. Luckily, James has energy and could keep going, but it was an uphill battle. So you may be lying down in your minds—that's okay.

Tonight, I'm going to try to keep things simple, which is not my strong point, and talk about an introduction to this way of practice. I'm basing this on something Sayadaw U Tejaniya likes to say, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, describing what we're doing here in practical terms as "the three jobs of a yogi."

These three jobs are contained in this description of Vipassana meditation: *Vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding.*

So those are the three jobs. The first is to begin practicing with right understanding. The second is cultivating awareness—experiencing the mind and body directly, which is what mindfulness is. And the moment-to-moment part represents continuity: not just a couple of moments and then kicking back, but moment to moment to moment through the day.

Right understanding is the attitude, the understanding we bring from the beginning—some sense of knowing why we're doing this. Then we cultivate and remember awareness with right understanding, which means awareness not distorted by wanting and cockamamie ideas. The third job is steadiness, perseverance, continuity.

What's amazing—Thich Nhat Hanh often talks about the miracle of mindfulness, the miracle of awareness—and it is beyond amazing to me, over and over, that by experiencing through mindful awareness what's happening in our mind, in our body, in this moment, directly, not through the filter of all our interpretations, we begin to understand deeply. The more we practice, the more continuous we are, the more we understand why the Buddha taught this: to understand how suffering and happiness and freedom arise in our own heart and mind, nowhere else. Mindfulness, awareness, continuity—this is the condition that allows wisdom to arise, that allows us to recognize accurately. It's really amazing.

What I loved about the Buddha's teachings when I first heard them, and all along, is that he was eminently practical. Even though there's a great deal of philosophy and very specific, fascinating stuff to study, the core is simply seeing why we tend to feel as though we're living in contention with life so much of the time. And I know I'm using the royal "we," but probably if you felt everything was really great, you wouldn't be here.

The Buddha says, let's really look and see. It's not about looking out there and asking what's wrong with life. It's looking and seeing why we are living in contention with life. How can we come to live with ease, with peace, with wholesome qualities of loving-kindness and compassion? What can bring this about?

This moment-to-moment direct experiencing of our mind and body is the key. We begin to experience things as they are, not as we think they are or think they should be. And then we see, over and over, how confusion, suffering, contention, aversion, wanting—whatever arises in this moment in the mind stream, in the heart—arises due to causes and conditions, not because we're bad people or stupid, but due to habits, conditions, misunderstanding. We see how it arises, and by continuing to pay attention instead of running away when it gets unpleasant, by continuing to notice how it is with this awareness, even that becomes a support for awareness. By noticing how the confusion acts, we start to see how suffering is created.

This recognizing accurately is the wisdom that allows for change. That's what's coolest to me. It's not that we have to personally figure it all out and then consciously make some kind of change, because we don't really have a clue. But when the clear heart and mind of wisdom recognizes how things are, we naturally respond in an appropriate way. This is how wisdom works. This is an incredible key.

Let me give a very simple example. I have a little nephew who's just over two, the only child in my family right now. I'm having fun watching him grow. It's wonderful to watch—I'm sure if you have kids, you know—how they just naturally learn as they go through stages.

So I just thought of this simple example. You know how kids get these blocks with a thing that has a triangle and a square and a circle, and they're supposed to put the right shape block in the right hole? At first, when they're too young or just starting out, it's impossible. One goes in right, so then they think they should all go in, and they're trying to force them. So he's trying to force the triangle into the circle or the circle into the square. It doesn't work. He doesn't know why and just keeps pushing and pushing, getting frustrated, getting angry. And then that anger—not only with kids, right?—can escalate and turn into not liking what's for dinner or getting mad at me. It can turn into a whole thing.

Keep on trying. Keep on trying. Come back later when the anger isn't completely distorting attention. Because once anger is distorting attention, we can't see accurately. I don't imagine a kid would be thinking this way, but this is how we would: "What's wrong with the people who made this stupid thing? It doesn't work." Or, "What's wrong with me? How come I can't do it? They're doing it fine. What's my problem?" On and on and on. The more we don't recognize the anger, the more it's distorting our perception, and we just start to either send it outward to the world or inward to ourselves. We're in contention.

But say he comes back, or he's a little older, and he's able to have enough steady attention that's not all angry—just picking up the blocks and really noticing, just seeing what's going on and actually seeing how it works with the shapes. He really gets it. Once you get it, you get it. The anger's gone. All those stories are gone. You quit trying to put the triangle into the circle. You really get it.

What made that possible is just steady, calm awareness. And when it sees how things work—just kind of like the laws of nature—*oh, that's how it works*—the whole problem falls away.

That's a pretty simple example, but that's the process. That's the process we are entering into: exploring our whole life, the whole process of our mind and body, how it works. Because without recognizing accurately, it's like we're fighting gravity. *Something's wrong, I can't fly. Something's wrong, I feel heavy.* We're fighting aging. *There's something wrong—I get older every year.* We do feel like there's something wrong when you start this. Really, who made this up?

But at the heart of awakening, at the heart of what really frees our heart and mind from this contention—what I would say is the essence of right view—is this deep fundamental shift in how we perceive and thus recognize and understand and respond to our mind and body experience, to how the mind interprets experience, and to life.

Not a one-time thing, okay? Just forget that. Just totally put it down—the idea that you're going to have one moment of a fundamental shift and it's all just going to be clear and you're going to float out from this retreat filled with compassion and love for all beings and wisdom. You'll have moments. I can't tell you—and it's very embarrassing actually—how many retreats I have done thinking, "I've got it now."

But it would sneak up in the background. I'd be going along, going along, and halfway through the retreat I'd realize I was suddenly feeling frustrated, which meant I had an expectation I hadn't seen. Somewhere in the background: "All right, I thought this one was going to do it. And then we wouldn't really have to be aware all the time anymore. We wouldn't have to do this stuff anymore."

Just forget that, and you'll find it a lot easier. Because what we're really learning to do is shift our refuge—shift the refuge from the habits of mind, of self-centeredness, of wanting, of aversion. That's not like a should. I'm not making a list.

I'm going to stop being self-interested now. Okay, from now on, greed is out. No more greed. Hopeless, you know? Don't even think about it.

But what we're doing is bringing awareness to understand how greed is when it arises and how it works. Don't believe anything we say, or anything the Buddha says, that greed causes suffering. Instead, recognize when it's present and keep being aware moment to moment. See what occurs. See what kind of thoughts come up. See what kind of behavior comes up. See how you feel. See how you relate to the world. That's where the wisdom comes—from the awareness and the steadiness, the continuity.

We really do start to see. And it's amazing that the seeds of suffering and the seeds of freedom and compassion arise in a moment and pass in a moment. There's no solid state, which is sometimes unsettling and scary, but actually that's what allows for change. That's what allows for wisdom. That's what allows for shifting refuge from these old habits, from this confusion.

At the heart of awakening is right view, and Steve is going to talk much more about the specifics of right view because it's the first of the Eightfold Path—the first step. And it kind of goes in a circle, so it's also the last. How can I possibly start my practice, or even continue in the middle, with right view when it's so complex? But we can start very simply, and that's what I want to talk about tonight.

In terms of right view, bringing this to our moment-to-moment simple awareness, the misperception or confusion—the thing we don't understand—is a little deeper and a little more complex than not getting that a triangle is a different shape than a square. It's a little closer to home and a little more complicated.

But I would say the way both Ajahn Buddhadasa and Sayadaw U Tejaniya use similar language here is helpful. Ajahn Buddhadasa was a very famous Thai forest teacher and scholar in Thailand in the last century—he died in the 1990s. I was lucky enough when I was a nun there to spend some time in his forest monastery. So did Fran—you were there some too.

So the basic misperception I want to point to, just to simply begin our practice—we're not going to understand it in depth, but this is taking in information—it's the first level of wisdom: heard wisdom. Things that we've heard, things that we've read. We don't know it in our cells, but we're listening, we're learning, we start to learn. This is important because without hearing something or reading something or having a point of view we never encountered, it's a lot harder to discover it on our own.

And for many of us here, you're already in the second level of wisdom the Buddha talks about, which is really using our intelligence, our understanding, where you think about it, you explore it, you're really getting it on a deeper level. Yeah, this does make sense. I can see it. But it's still a bit prompted. You know it, but when the chips are down, no, that's not what you know.

And the third level, bhāvanā-mayā-paññā, is really the insight level where—you know, like when my nephew suddenly goes, "Oh, yeah, right, that's how it works"—you don't have to think about it anymore. You know that's how it is.

So we're bouncing around between those levels in a lot of different ways all the time. It's not linear. Nothing's really linear.

Anyway, the way Tejaniya describes it is just to say that in this first wise attitude, whatever's occurring in our mind, in our body—our thoughts, our moods, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, physical sensations, the whole range of moods—it's just nature. It isn't personal.

We take it all so personally. It's my fault or it's your fault. You're making me feel bad. But we take it all so personally. Instead, we can say: no, it's just nature.

So when I said a minute ago, "Notice when greed comes up and just really notice how greed arises, how wanting feels and how it..." if you're taking it personally, that's not possible.

Right? It comes up and it's either, "This feels like crap, let me go get whatever I want so I don't have to feel this anymore." Did you ever notice that's really what greed is doing? Or it's like, "Oh no, here I am, I'm so committed to practice, I'm really working, and here's greed, greed, greed. And the more I think about it, the more I see it—greed, greed, greed. Greed to look, greed to hear, greed to eat, greed to sit. I'm sitting and I want to walk. I'm walking and I want to sit. I'm sitting and I want to lie down. I'm lying down and I want to get up. Greed, greed, greed—it's hopeless."

That's taking it personally. It's not so helpful. Does that sound familiar, though? Can anyone relate to that?

It's just the way nature works. Greed arises—it's a habit, but it arises due to causes and conditions. We'll talk a lot more about this as we go on. Mostly, something pleasant comes up in the mind, or there's something pleasant, and the mind just leans in. It wants more. It's a habit. We don't notice, and it turns into greed. Aversion is the reverse. And then it goes into a whole story. It's just nature.

When you're not taking it personally, awareness can come in and go, "Oh yeah, look at that—greed. It feels like this. It feels like this in the body. These are the kind of thoughts that are coming up. What action does the mind want to do?" Watching it with awareness, you don't have to act on it.

It's really—I'm serious—fun to explore this stuff. Because in that moment, just that moment of simple direct awareness, "Oh, greed is like this"—greed is just as valid a support for awareness as a sensation of breath or walking or hearing. "Oh, greed is like this." Awareness of greed. In that moment, just for that moment, there's a sense of freedom. We're not so locked into the story, and it's just, "Oh, this is what's happening."

Mingyur Rinpoche says—and I hadn't thought of it this way, although it's kind of obvious—that whatever's going on, whether greed can be fiery or wanting, or we're in some story, or we have a pain, it can be very fiery and wild. But awareness itself in the moment is inherently calm. And so that's why when there's this kind of—call it like a Tai Chi move—a shift of refuge from "Oh no, my back hurts, what am I going to do?" to "Sensation is like this, the pain is like this," and there's a recognition of the awareness of the pain... the pain is still pain. We think, "Oh no, it all goes away, la la la." No, the pain is still pain. But when the refuge is in that awareness, just for that moment, that's inherently calm, and it really feels like, "Oh, right."

Then we try to hold on to it, and there's wanting—until we recognize, "Oh yeah, wanting is like this." And there are times when the steadiness of awareness is really beginning to get momentum, and whatever comes, the awareness just starts to have its own momentum, and there's that recognition. When it's like that, it's so easy. It's so simple.

I can say that. I feel that sometimes. And then the next hour, or the next five minutes, you have the first level of wisdom about that. You remember, "I just have to be aware of this sensation and recognize it's unpleasant and awareness is calm—everything's going to be great." Fat chance, right? Because that's not what conditions are present right then. It's not because you're failing. That's taking it personally again. It's because the conditions for clear seeing aren't quite present. Either the wanting or the aversion or the delusion, the meaning-making—it's still there in the mind that's aware, kind of distorting the awareness, but we don't quite recognize it.

That's why we talk about this when you're practicing sitting, walking, eating, whatever. I said today: when you feel some tension, some struggle, just gently check—what's the attitude in the mind? Not like an analysis checklist, but sometimes you can just kind of feel, "Oh, what does it feel like?"

Nothing. It's really calm. Or it's like, oh, I really want this to go away. And you just feel that. You just feel that.

And then there are other times when—I was just doing a self-retreat and I could feel the tension in my body. I knew intellectually that there was some wanting, some resistance that was influencing the awareness, the being present. I knew it intellectually, but I couldn't quite feel it. Awareness couldn't quite touch it. It was just kind of subtle. Like when you're pretty present, but your glasses are just a little bit wavy—they're not quite the right prescription. You're looking at it, you just can't see clearly. And you can't see it till you see it.

But we continue moment after moment with the simplicity of awareness, because then you know: Oh, I know something, there's some tension, and I don't see what it is. That's what's happening now. Tension feels like this. There's nothing outside of awareness. Nothing that we need to get rid of or push through in order to make the awareness correct. But remembering that is so hard. That's just dropping the me-ing, the doing, the ideas, and just—ah, it's like this now. That's Ajahn Sumedho's language, and I use it so much. It really helps me.

In sitting, I find my mind tends to get a little more convoluted if something's going on like that. I find that when I'm doing walking meditation, it just kind of eases out a bit. I don't know. But we're all different. There's not a right way. It could be lying down for you, or eating, or whatever.

But anyway, what I can tell is when it's convoluted, and there's this subtle trying to figure it out, just—oh, it's like this now. It's a dropping, a surrendering into the simplicity and honesty of awareness of just how it is now. You don't need to know how. It's like this. And then there's awareness again. That doesn't mean it fixes anything—it's awareness. You can learn to recognize how that feels.

A friend shared with me something one of her teachers said—a Tibetan teacher. He was describing just the immediacy of awareness, how it feels, to a group he was teaching who weren't particularly practitioners and didn't have the language they use in that Tibetan scene. I loved it. He called it "just being with the very, very now."

And I love that because I can think, oh, I'm feeling my emotions, I'm feeling my step, you know. But this—you can tell there's just something like, oh, the very, very now. Just totally here without a pulling back or a "so that," or a needing to understand, or a subtle fear. If I feel this, it's really going to feel lousy, and then what's going to happen? Where's my mind going to go? From just—ah, the very, very now. To me, that's taking

refuge in the Dhamma, in the way things are. And that is the simplicity of awareness. That's why it's such a miracle. The steadiness of that is what actually starts to allow wisdom and accurate recognition to arise.

So Buddhadasa—I mentioned him a while ago and got off onto Utajaniya—but he talked in his book *Mindfulness with Breathing*. The book itself was just about working with ānāpānasati, but he had a very broad way of teaching and understanding. He wasn't just talking about samatha, one-pointed practice. He was talking about wisdom, awakening practice.

He said, again, it's all nature. All arising experience is nature. And he was really big on nature. He had a forest meditation center way down in the eastern mid-Thailand, and he didn't give a lot of instructions. The monks would just go and live, for weeks, for months, for years, in tiny little huts in the middle of the forest. He was really about that—just being silent and aware in nature. After a while, you start to see it's not like "I'm in nature." This, it's nature. It's all nature.

And then he went on to say: when it's nature, whatever's arising in this moment is the result of an inconceivable train of causes. This is the effect. We can never understand all the causes in one moment. And essentially, this particular moment right now can't be different.

How can this moment be different? It's here. There's no way it can be different. As Jack always says, give up all hope for a better past. This moment can't be different. But with accurate recognition, with wise attention that isn't putting an overlay of blame or confusion or interpretation—it's just here, the very, very now—with that wisdom that can arise, the response that arises within this moment, well, that's what really can be very different.

When there's just the habit, you keep trying to throw that square block into the triangle and you never succeed. But when there's this very clear seeing—oh look, that's how it goes—quite naturally, it's also nature. The understanding shifts. The response shifts from aversion, from clinging, to one of wisdom, to one of metta if that's appropriate, to compassion if that's the appropriate thing. It's not an act of personal will. That's what's so cool. It's nature. It happens naturally.

The steady learning to have some trust in awareness, practicing—that's what we're doing. We're just practicing recognizing this simple awareness over and over and over. The retreat gives us support to do that because when there's so much coming in, our habits are so strong, even when we want to do it, it's just harder. It's possible, but it's harder. So we need to give ourselves some energy, some practice in shifting the habit.

Back to Buddhadasa—he could be kind of funny. He says we're always appropriating the things of nature as "I" and "mine." And this is the basic misunderstanding that wise view starts to see through. He says we've been thieves all of our life by appropriating all the things of nature—whatever's occurring—as I or mine. He says we've been ignorant and we suffer for it. But when we become wise—and he's talking about this last step of practice—we realize, oh, it isn't mine. It belongs to nature. And so we just throw everything back to nature and don't steal anything anymore.

We don't have to wait until it's always like that. We can have moments of that, just in very simple experiences. Explore that here.

I noticed again, just this last month—I was doing a self-retreat at home—this wasn't new information, it was just a different way my mind looked at it. We always see different angles that spark the interest, and interest is really such a key motivation to help us keep exploring in this way.

I noticed how with all the different experiences, all the perceptions that come in—what's happening? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, sensing with the body, and the whole mental world, which includes all the constructs, the thoughts, moods, the mental states. All these things are happening and being perceived by the mind. I started to notice how certain experiences or certain perceptions were privileged in a way as being me or belonging to me. There were tons of other sensations and perceptions, pleasant or unpleasant, mostly probably kind of neutral. Maybe I noticed them, maybe I didn't. They just kind of go by. It's whatever. Oh yeah, that deer—there's seeing. You don't even notice seeing. There's hearing. There's warmth. It's neutral.

Then all of a sudden the warmth gets really hot, and there's a little aversion, a little unpleasantness, and the mind goes into aversion. What's the matter with my body? Why is it so warm? Why don't they turn on the air conditioning? What kind of—on and on. That particular perception has suddenly been privileged as me, as mine, without wisdom, leading to all kinds of responses, all kinds of contention, one way or the other.

Or it's really pleasant and we think, this is great! Finally, something's happening. I had a few moments where I really felt aware. I got it. I'm finally—how can I keep it? How can I get it back? So it's pleasant, but we're privileging that as mine.

And once we do that, that steady awareness that can look at what's happening—what are the causes, what are the conditions that bring this about, and how does it change—we can learn if we can watch like that. But when we start to clamp down around anything as me or mine, the awareness gets distorted. It may not completely snap shut, but it's not recognizing accurately anymore.

So we spend a lot of our life like this. But again, this isn't something you have to figure out intellectually. This is what's so cool to me. The steady simplicity of awareness is what we're learning. We recognize how things are. It's how things are. It's not like if you really get clear, then you'll stop being yourself. We're just like we always were—which is maybe not good news. Ajahn Sumedho says, "It's not your personality that gets enlightened." I kept waiting to get a new personality. Forget about it.

But we get more friendly, because it's nature. You can see the causes and conditions. And the parts that come from really reacting out of confusion do start to lessen and ease away.

Again, my friend passed on another thing her lama said. I liked his way of putting it. He's talking about how all experience is nature—whether it's hearing, whether it's thoughts, whether it's moods, whatever it is. It's just all aspects of nature, cause and effect, natural law. And he says, when we hold on to and solidify any particular experience as me, we suddenly get locked back down into what he called "the narrow bandwidth of a sense of personal identity." I love that. And we lose the connection with the vastness, we lose the connection with the whole, with the whole range.

One easy way to play a little bit with this—not if you're in a big struggling mode or in a lot of pain or aversion, but when you're calm yet awake—I find playing with hearing meditation helpful. Now, it doesn't work for everybody. For some people hearing has too much story or sense of personal stuff with it. But for me, just sitting and being present with hearing—not listening, not reaching out, but just sitting. Okay, feel sensations. I'm not blocking anything else out. But allowing hearing to be at the forefront of what's received. Not listening, just hearing.

And over some time, just hearing sounds come and go. There's a natural recognition—the mind recognizes. It might recognize a bird or a frog or whatever. That's fine. But that's not hearing. That's a perception. That's thinking. That's not a problem. But just know it's not hearing. That's going on, but you're not getting caught up in it. Just hearing, hearing, hearing, hearing.

And after some time, when the mind is calm, the hearing could be a lovely bird. The hearing could be the turkeys. The hearing could be someone stomping into the hall in the middle of your sitting and slamming the door. The hearing could be someone breathing really loudly near you. And it's just hearing. It's just nature. The hearing could be your stomach growling, and you normally would get all embarrassed because it's me—but it's just hearing.

So there's a sense of not privileging something as me. There's not that narrow bandwidth of me and everybody else, me and the other. It's just what's occurring. Just playing with that from time to time might be interesting.

Often it's thought that we shouldn't be talking about this sense of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—this personality view, this tendency to privilege, to go through life from the center of "it's all about me or mine"—in the beginning of a retreat or early in practice. Because intellectually it's very hard; we can't really totally understand it intellectually. And it's a subtle and ongoing experience. Plus it makes some people frustrated to try and figure it out. You can't figure it out, so just forget trying to figure it out. No, no, that's got to wait till later in the retreat or whatever.

But this is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, and Buddhadasa too, and Ajahn Sumedho as well. No, this is where we start. Because we want to begin and continue our practice with the right understanding, with the right attitude.

Ajahn Sumedho would say, you know, some people he knew practiced for twenty years very, very sincerely—but without even looking at this. Not that we can totally understand that we're not a particular separate self, but they practiced without even examining it. Or as Sayadaw Tejaniya would say, we're practicing from a sense of me. It's all about me trying to get something. There's the striving, there's the effort. You could try, put in so much effort, so much trying, so much sincerity, push to really deep states, and it could still be coming from this delusion of it being all about me getting something to be better. He said, so why wait twenty years until you finally can get some insight? I'm not talking about just words—let's start with at least having that intellectual understanding and looking at it.

Because it's natural. You'll notice the times when everything kind of coheres and it's all about me. You notice it because it starts to feel kind of yucky. Except when it feels good. Because sometimes it feels good—that's why we keep going. It's just comfy, like an old blanket. Yeah, me.

I would notice sometimes all these feelings of real sadness, nostalgia, thinking about my dead parents. It would come in, and I could see a habit of mine, almost wanting to really sink into it. And I'd think, why? There was nowhere to go with it. It wasn't like there was something I needed to think through or figure out. Oh yeah, we're so sad, it's all gone by. What's that phrase? *Alles vorbei*—they say it in Germany all the time. It's all over, it's all bye-bye. And I could see my mind wanting to go there. Why? That's so crazy. But it does, because it's just comfy.

So the simplicity and honesty of awareness is really what we're here to learn and practice. This is our amazing ally, the amazing tool that really begins to allow us to see all of this. Again, from Ajahn Sumedho—and I think this line is extremely important to remember: we don't create awareness. We recognize it.

How much of the day have you, subtly or grossly, been trying to create awareness? Giving the attention or trying to find it. It's really because that's what we know. I have to try and make something happen. That's the me-ing and the my-ing. That's what we know, what we've learned. It's incredible. I find it very hard to trust that just, oh yeah, trying feels like this—and to see that that's awareness. You might say, "I came here to sit and 'trying feels like this'? I came here to walk up and down sweating in the heat, and 'sweating and feeling aversive feels like this'? And they tell me this is good practice? I don't think so. Complaining in the mind feels like this?"

But when I say "it feels like this," that implies awareness is actually there with it. The very, very now. Just for that moment. And day after day, what we're doing here is moment after moment, simply practicing.

This simplicity of awareness, this honesty of awareness. We don't try to create it. We start to see that as soon as we remember—oh yeah, am I aware?—it's right there. Am I aware? How can I get it? Am I aware? As soon as you ask yourself that, you're aware. And it doesn't matter of what. It doesn't matter if it's gross. It doesn't matter if it's some incredibly subtle thing. It doesn't matter if you don't even know what—there's just some feeling. Am I aware? We get more and more trusting. As soon as we think, awareness is available. It's so simple that we keep thinking we have to do something. We'll keep falling into that.

The simplicity of awareness—what I mean by that is this landing in the bare experience without confusing that for all the interpretations. You know what I mean by interpretations? And it's not that the interpretations are bad. We can recognize that's a thought, that's a memory, that's a mood. That's fine. That's, again, bare experience. But then—oh, look at that little deer with its velvet horns. I wonder if that's the little Bambi that was born in our driveway last year. It looks so cute. I wonder if it's lonely. Oh, isn't it great being in nature, and so happy, and yada, yada, yada.

What's happening there? Seeing. Thinking. There's a particular mood in the mind. Liking. It's pleasant, or whatever. That's what's occurring. That's the simplicity of awareness. We can be aware of anything. We tend to get lost in the overlay of interpretation.

And that was a simple one. When your knee hurts, the interpretation is quite different. When the person sitting behind you is making a lot of noise and they're ruining your samādhi, the interpretation is quite different. When you were doing really well and suddenly you lost it and you think you're going to scream and go home because you can't bear to be here another minute, the interpretation is quite different. And so the simplicity of awareness is just learning how to recognize the bare experience.

Seeing. Utejāniya talks about seeing a lot, and I've been playing with it more and more. I find when I can be aware of seeing as a process, it somehow just—nothing's always, okay—just clicks my mind into awareness and out of believing interpretation right away.

We see a lot. We use seeing to function. That's fine. But everything we're seeing is a concept. It's useful. We can tell each other apart. We can tell what's going on. We can tell the dining room from the toilet. All that's helpful. We can see. But the actual seeing is when you are aware that you're seeing. Do you get a sense of how that's different from just being in the looking? And then how we forget. So now I bet you're kind of aware that you're seeing, right? Doesn't it feel different? Just a subtle shift, but doesn't it feel different?

There's something different? That's awareness. That's all. That easy. Just practicing over and over.

So I like playing with seeing. It really has been very helpful. It gives you a kind of clue. Oh yeah, that's all it is. That's all it is. Not to change anything. Not to fix anything.

And this is the honesty of mindfulness, of awareness that I talk about. It's just the simplicity of being with it as it is, just as it is. The honesty is: okay, it's like this. And to see how the mind might subtly try to make it a little bit better so it reflects well on me. Even though nobody knows what's going on in your mind, it's like, "Well, this isn't really... I'm not really feeling this selfish and vengeful. There are good reasons for it. It's not really vengeful." But no—this is how it feels right now. That's what's happening. Just honest. Because even vengeful, ugly thoughts are a support for awareness right now. It's just thoughts.

So the simplicity and honesty of awareness is what we're practicing over and over and over. And because the habits of interpretation and reactivity and self-blame are so strong, because our habits of focusing on the object of attention, the object of awareness, are so strong—have you noticed how we just get sucked in? Whether it's seeing or hearing, or definitely with mental experience, with thinking. We start by being aware

of sadness, and the next thing we know we're back in the whole story. And then again: oh right, all right, this is sadness. Not to get rid of it, but just to recognize what's happening.

Because those patterns are so strong. We've practiced them our whole lives. And this is the natural law, cause and effect. How many mind moments? Have you noticed how fast the mind moves? How fast things change in your mind? Have you noticed that today? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, thinking, thinking, pleasant, unpleasant—so fast. And we can't stop it because that's what life is. That's how it's occurring.

So imagine how many mind moments in our life we've practiced me-ing and wanting and blaming and aversion. That's just what we know, what we learned. We keep trying to put that triangle block in the round hole because that's just what we learned. We kind of don't quite get why it doesn't work.

So that's why the third job of the yogi is this persistence, this continuity, this moment-to-moment quality—that whatever we're doing, whatever activity we're doing, becomes the ground of awareness practice. That's why this schedule: awareness with everything.

And this is only possible—I mean, it's not possible in the beginning anyway—but it's only possible if we're bringing this relaxed, settled-back quality, trusting that we just have to recognize awareness, not trying to create it. If you're trying to create it, you're going to burn out really fast, right? It's just pushing, pushing, wanting. Instead it's like: oh, what's happening now? Awareness. It's been two hours and you haven't been aware. Oh no, I haven't been aware! Well, now I'm aware. Here we are. There's awareness.

When that's the attitude, it's natural. We're just starting to understand how it works moment after moment. Then with this relaxed quality—just whatever's occurring is okay, we're not trying to veer it in another direction—that's when the perseverance, the wise effort, the continuity, the momentum of awareness begins to start coming in of itself. It takes a little time. It really takes some trust, and it takes some patience.

Sayadaw Tejaniya says patience is technically an aspect of metta, of loving-kindness, a wholesome state. It arises from wisdom. But greed, as he points out, is looking for a result. You can be working really hard, trying to be aware, and greed is driving the bus. That's when you're going to flame out. You're really sincere, really trying to be aware so that you feel better or whatever—but it doesn't work. And patience won't really be very

accessible, because patience is an aspect of wisdom. Wisdom, that sense of settling back, trusting awareness, and investigating: What are the conditions that support my recognizing awareness? What are the conditions that seem to starve it?

The Buddha used that metaphor a lot—feeding and starving. What feeds wholesome mind states? What feeds the hindrances? What starves the hindrances? What starves wholesome mind states?

So here, really seeing this, we're not here for nine days in a short-term push for some big experience that's going to do it. We're really here to spend nine days and nights practicing recognizing awareness. I know, it's not very exciting. You're not going to be able to show a lot for it. But it really, really deeply shifts and strengthens and changes our habits. It's not that it stays, but we remember. Every time you can remember and trust, that remembrance and trusting becomes available in daily life—because it's not dependent on a certain position or a deep level of concentration, or on having everybody quiet, or on feeling good. It's not dependent on any particular experience.

You may find that the thing that most supports you in remembering awareness tomorrow is taking a walk in the woods—or not the woods, this is Massachusetts, in the fields. Then the next day you say, "Oh, that was really good. That's what supported my awareness, so I'm going to go for a three-hour hike"—which I'm not recommending. You go for a three-hour hike, but you're not really looking at what's supporting awareness. You're back in memory, and you completely blow yourself out.

One of the reasons we have the open schedule is because, as Tejaniya says, it actually allows us and requires of us that we tune into what's going on in our mind and body with wisdom, and see what's feeding recognizing awareness now. So it's not that sitting an hour is somehow better, for example. You may think that sitting an hour is good, but really after half an hour you're filled with pain. The aversion to the pain is so strong that awareness can't really recognize it. You're just spinning, spinning, spinning. So you're sitting there for half an hour feeding aversion. Much more useful to stand up, make yourself comfortable, or go out and do some walking and rediscover balanced awareness. What's supporting your balanced awareness?

Or it may be the reverse. You sit for five minutes and you think, "Oh no, I've got to go walk. That'd be better. Nothing's happening." And you're walking, thinking, "Well no, this isn't really juicy. Let me go sit." And then you start to see, "Oh, this is just wanting, wanting, wanting." So let me just stay in one posture for a while and explore wanting. And that brings in the balanced awareness. You see what I mean?

This is like really making the practice our own, from our own understanding, our own wisdom—and this is what we take into our life with us. Understanding how it works. Understanding and trusting that awareness is to recognize, not to create. That all aspects of the day can be supports for awareness. Not all day every day. It really takes a lot of patience.

So just relax. Relax. Observe. And no matter how long it's been since you remembered awareness, as soon as you remember—

And we're only ever here right now.

So that's the three jobs of the yogi. Right view—it's all nature. Just play with that. Don't force it. Just play with it. It's all nature. Then simplicity and honesty of awareness—mindful attention to whatever's occurring, just as it is. And finally, this persistence, this willingness to keep showing up, to keep remembering.

One last thing I want to say. What really supports this willingness, this persistence—not that we can always access it—is to reset our intention, our motivation. We have to keep remembering, keep retuning into: why the heck am I doing this? Sometimes it's just intellectual, but sometimes we really can reset it.

As I mentioned when taking the refuges, for me that often will do it. I'll remind myself—for me, trusting the Dhamma. Oh yes, this potential, the Buddha, the potential for awakening. Maybe I can't understand the direct link between being aware of knee pain and awakening, but let me trust it. This is why I'm doing this. Or whatever's true for you—I'm not trying to say what your motivation should be.

And then trusting even simply—this is again from Mingyur Rinpoche. He says, in terms of patience and strengthening the intention: we're using our attention to any object of meditation to support recognition of awareness, which is what I've been saying. Since our intention is not to get completely absorbed into any object—so absorbed that we lose touch with everything else—the intention is that whatever's occurring helps us recognize awareness. We'll forget that, we'll get absorbed, and then we'll remember.

This is what I really like, the way he said it. As we set this intention to recognize awareness—why we've been talking about it day and night—every time there's just that moment of setting the intention to recognize awareness, that's all, every time we do this, the mind will start to incline in that direction. It's just natural. And so the steady practice will itself begin to bring about the natural recognition of awareness. That's when the recognition of awareness starts to have momentum.

In the beginning, we have to keep consciously remembering, consciously setting the right intentions to recognize awareness. My intention is to recognize awareness. We forget. We set the intention. But that's inclining the mind. That's changing the kind of rut that it moves in. And it really does start to do itself after a while.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 149

Sallatha Sutta: The Dart

Carol Wilson · 54 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson offers a detailed exploration of the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6), the Buddha's discourse on the two arrows of suffering. The teaching reveals a profound distinction: while both awakened beings and ordinary people experience pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings (vedanā), the untaught person compounds their suffering by shooting themselves with a second arrow of resistance, grief, and lamentation. Wilson explains how this reactive pattern operates so quickly that we rarely notice the initial feeling tone before we're caught in a tornado of reactivity.

The talk illuminates how our unexamined habits of craving pleasant experiences and resisting unpleasant ones create an underlying worldview that keeps us perpetually dissatisfied—always leaning toward the next moment, never fully at ease with things as they are (yathā bhūta). Wilson shares practical examples, including her own discovery of how a small pain in her toe triggered an entire storm of negativity, and a friend's transformation in relating to difficult family dynamics through sustained awareness practice.

Central to the teaching is the understanding that freedom comes not through an act of personal will, but through wisdom that arises naturally from clear seeing. When we cultivate steady awareness and become interested in the process rather than entranced by each experience, we discover what the Buddha called 'an escape from painful feelings other than enjoying sense happiness.' This escape isn't withdrawal from life, but rather the capacity to experience pleasure and pain without being fettered by them—responding with appropriate compassion and wisdom rather than habitual reactivity.

This morning I was enjoying the discussion and the questions answered with Steve, talking about how the qualities in the citta—I'm going to use citta, meaning mind or heart—the wholesome and the unwholesome, and really how the practice involves the different ways that these habits of greed, confusion, and *dosa* (the word in Pali that covers the whole range of resistance) are seen through, not acted on, and eventually uprooted or abandoned. These are the three roots, you could say. And this abandoning happens not by an act of personal will, but through wisdom. Wisdom does the work, the ultimate abandoning.

This made me want to talk tonight about a sutta, one of the discourses of the Buddha. It's one I often refer to—I've gone back to it over and over in my own personal practice, and I bring it up frequently in talks. But tonight I wanted to actually use the discourse

itself as the main theme. It's called "The Dart," where the Buddha talks about his subtle but accessible discovery, his understanding of how in a moment these habits of mind arise.

The citta, the mind-heart, is changing every moment. There's nothing just sitting there like a lump. Even when we say "the latent tendency" for greed to arise, that it's a seed—that's a way of talking. Because the citta, the mind, heart, mental energy is changing every moment. It's more that there's a propensity, given certain conditions, for something to arise. There's no steady state in that way.

In the sutta, the Buddha is describing how these tendencies arise in the moment, how he's seen it, how then it develops so quickly into habit. This is the second foundation of mindfulness: mindfulness of vedana, of feelings. This is something arising for us every moment, but it's so quick we tend to overlook it. We end up in the tornado of reactivity without quite seeing how we got there. Awareness provides the conditions we cultivate that allow wisdom, clear seeing, to arise.

So the Buddha is really answering the question: What is the distinction, what is the difference that exists between a well-taught noble disciple—that's the translation for an awakened person—and an untaught worldling? I always have trouble with that word "worldling." The word in Pali is *puthujjana*, which I actually like. Sayadaw U Pandita, who was a great teacher, gave us a series of about fifteen talks in a row on *puthujjana*. He'd come in and say, "Tonight we will talk about *puthujjana*"—meaning we were going to be talking about the defilements.

So what's the difference between them? That's an interesting question, something we can look at.

The Buddha says: An untaught worldling, *puthujjana*, experiences pleasant feelings, experiences painful feelings, and experiences neutral feelings.

Now, just a clarification about why "feelings" is the translation of a specific Pali word. In English, "feelings" is very general—it could mean moods and all kinds of things. But here it's a translation of the Pali word *vedana*, which means specifically this feeling tone. We tend to say "feeling tone" to distinguish it from moods. It's the quality of pleasant, painful, or neutral that's felt mentally, associated with each moment of sense experience, including mental sense experience.

So when the Buddha says "experience a painful feeling," if there's a sharp stabbing in my leg, there's the stabbing, and the vedana, the mental experience, is the feeling tone. That's what he's talking about. It's subtle—we tend not to see it, as you'll see. But he's saying it's arising with every sense experience; the mind can notice that.

So: an untaught worldling experiences pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings. A well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings.

Already this is uniting something. Somewhere deep down, don't we think the painful feelings are supposed to stop? That's really the essence. He's saying no, they don't.

So what's the difference that exists between an awakened one and an ordinary worldling?

When a *puthujjana* is touched by a painful bodily feeling, she worries and grieves, laments, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of painful feelings: a bodily and a mental painful feeling. It is as if a person were pierced by a dart, by an arrow, and following the first piercing—the painful physical feeling—is pierced by a second arrow.

How could this happen? It's similar with the *puthujjana*. When touched by a painful bodily feeling, she worries and grieves, laments, beats her breast, weeps, and is distraught.

So she experiences two kinds of feelings, a bodily and a mental one. And I want to say also that a mental and emotional unpleasant experience can itself be experienced as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The second dart—the grieving and lamenting and beating our breasts—could also arise in response to the first dart being a mental experience, say of sadness or whatever.

Do you get a sense of how quickly that happens? There's something, and it doesn't even have to be very unpleasant—just a little tightness in the body—and the mental feeling of unpleasantness arises really quickly. I've always been in awe of how the Buddha noticed that, and noticed how it's happening all day long, because it's so quick.

Often when we discuss this, people ask, "What's the difference between unpleasant and aversion?" Because of course it's unpleasant, and it moves right into aversion. In case you didn't pick it up: grieving, lamenting, beating the breast—all of that *is* aversion. And I like that he exaggerates it, because it doesn't just go, "Oh, unpleasant, a little bit resistant." We're off in the tornado! Within no time, without mindfulness, without awareness, we're just off. And many times one thing leads to the next, to the next, and we're way down the road. You couldn't even notice what started this particular storm, what unpleasant feeling triggered it.

Sometimes when I could trace it back, when I'd be on retreat, it would be something so innocuous. I remember one time doing walking meditation, feeling fairly present—I wasn't just spaced out—but suddenly I found myself in a storm of negativity and self-hatred, with all the selective memories of bad things I'd done and people who'd been mean to me. Where did this come from?

I applied what is always the way to wisdom: *It feels like this right now. It just feels like this.* Just landing in the present with the storm, but with the body. Then I kept walking. And what I saw—this is really true—I had a little pain in my big toe. That was it. A little pain in my big toe that I would feel when I walked. When I was aware of it, you couldn't even call it pain, just a little unpleasant feeling would come and boom—tornado. One thing leads to the next to the next.

That's our problem.

Then the sutta goes on, and this is the part I find very poignant, very subtle and interesting. Having been touched by that painful feeling—the second one—he or she resists and resents it. It's not just that moment of aversion; we resist and resent it. And then, in one who resists and resents painful feeling, an underlying tendency or habit of resistance comes to underlie the citta. The habit of mind and heart tends toward resistance.

Under the impact of that painful feeling, the sutta continues, one then proceeds to look for and enjoy sense happiness. And why? An untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense happiness.

I love this. It's so profound, but so obvious.

Then, in one who enjoys sense happiness—going to it for relief—an underlying tendency, the habit of craving, of lust as the translator says, for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the citta. A lust for pleasant feelings. And so one does not know, according to facts, according to the Dhamma, the laws of nature—one does not know the arising and ending of these feelings. Does not understand the gratification of pleasant feelings, the danger and the escape connected with them. In one who lacks that knowledge, the underlying tendency to ignorance gets going.

This is just so amazing to me, and it's something we can really start to explore. When one with these underlying habits—which have so quickly begun to develop—when one experiences a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, or a neutral feeling, one feels it as if fettered by it, or bound by it. Another translation says we feel as if joined to it. I would say *stuck* to it by Velcro. Whether it's pleasant, painful, or neutral—it's like, "This is me," basically.

And such a one is fettered by suffering, the Buddha declares.

So that's our dilemma, as he describes it. I want to talk about it because this—as I'm saying—is giving you information. Many of you, if not all of you, have already experienced this, because it's happening all the time. But when we discuss it, this is the aspect of wisdom: heard wisdom.

I'm describing it, and the Buddha described it, for us not to take it on board as a piece of philosophy—because that doesn't help us—but to take it and look in our own experience. Don't look too hard for something, because that's wanting and it blocks. But when we're just landing in our experience with this open awareness, like I said about that time when I was walking with my foot—"What's happening now?"—I didn't try to analyze and go back. I just, with awareness, surrendered into "right now it's like this." What's going on? And just by seeing it, it can come up, because you have that information. And then the more we see, it moves into the third level of real insight wisdom, where we really do start to understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the form of these feelings.

I'll talk about that before I go to the difference with an awakened being, who experiences the same. Well, the difference, of course, is they don't lament and beat their breasts, and they don't shoot themselves with the second arrow, because they understand the nature. I'll get into that more, but I want to talk just a little about this first.

The way the Buddha is describing our moment-to-moment experience here—we've mentioned it before—he's really, in a way, pointing to the six sense experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and the whole realm of mental experience. Pleasant and unpleasant moods, emotions, thoughts, the conceptual realm, loving-kindness, anger—the entire realm of mental experience. Those things are just happening over and over. That's what we experience all day, right? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking—over and over. Have you noticed it doesn't stop? Have you noticed how fast stuff occurs? That's just how it's going on.

So each time there's anything, it's experienced as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. How often do we actually notice that? Even when we're mindful, everything's so fast. It's often not the predominant or observable thing, so don't make yourself crazy always trying to see it. It's often not observable. Because until we even have a sense that this is going on, the way we misunderstand our experience forms in the background our view of ourselves, our view of the world. When we talk about right view and wrong view, this is really how one aspect of wrong view gets formed—pretty much, I would say, with most of us.

So all these things happening, the six senses spinning through all day, every day—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—so often not being noticed. But the inculcated habit! Because we're all of an age where we have spent all of our life, how many times in a day, practicing liking the pleasant, not liking the unpleasant, not noticing the neutral. When you're bored, check out neutrality. Something else needs to happen, and quick! Many times people come in kind of chagrined in an interview and say, "I just noticed that I'm happier to have my mind create suffering than to be calm." It's a little more "me" going on here, even if it's a suffering one.

So we've practiced a lot—to the point that of course we like pleasant. If you had a choice, pleasant or unpleasant, of course you'd choose pleasant. And I don't think the Buddha was saying you can't tell the difference. We can tell the difference. We can keep on telling the difference. But because it seems so joined, the worldview that can get established in the background—and again, don't believe me, I'm just putting this out, but explore and see for yourself—good, right, "the way it's supposed to be," the direction we're all moving: doesn't it head in the pleasant direction? When your practice is working, isn't it pleasant? When something is unpleasant in practice, in life, we tend to think it's wrong or not supposed to happen.

Or when you start getting into—if anyone here ever gets into a little bout of self-judging, which I know very well you do—see if it arose from something pleasant. Yeah? Probably not. Same with doubt. But you may have experienced something like a pleasant physical sensation, and there was a quick thought: "This isn't what's supposed to be happening. I'm not doing it right because I should be experiencing something other." And that thought was unpleasant. And we didn't catch that. It's often the thoughts and the emotions that are really quick that we don't notice, because they're so much more subtle than physical.

So, often unrecognized, but the worldview—that happiness, peace, and ease is associated with pleasant—persists. Moving all the way into liberation, when we talk about freedom of heart and mind and peace, it's hard for me to even think about that without associating it with more pleasant feeling and less unpleasant feeling. No? And so when we experience in our life discontent or unpleasantness or suffering—again, we're not saying we go looking for suffering or that we should hurt ourselves. But we always have to explain even a little bit, because the question arises: "I hurt. Why should I sit with hurting even for a second if I can move and get rid of it?"

It's like asking, "You people are crazy. If I'm restless and I can get up and move, why the heck should I sit with restlessness? What's the point?"

Then we all offer the answer, "Well, when we die, we're going to have to be with it, so we learn now." That's true. It's a way to at least get the person back there practicing. But it's so much more immediate than that. Although, who knows how immediate that other reality is also.

It's so much more immediate because if we don't have the capacity or the interest to sit and be present and see what's really going on, then our responses—out of all the care in our heart to make ourselves happy or to bring happiness to others—are based on misperception or based on wrong view. This is really the sense of it: there's unpleasantness, we move towards pleasant, and that's the only outlet we know.

So it can be as little as feeling restless and going to get a cup of tea. And mind you, we're looking at the process here. I'm not judging or saying there's anything wrong with a cup of tea. The Buddha's not saying pleasant is bad. He's just saying we need to understand how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral keep changing and cycling around.

But deep down, isn't there that sense that you could just get it a little bit better? A little bit better. And whatever it is, even if we get what we want—we do sometimes, right?—there's not unpleasant, it's pleasant, there's that ease. Do we really stay present and notice how long it lasts? How quickly the pleasant feeling changes?

The tendency is that when one pleasant experience is gone, we don't notice that what happened is a new experience came and that pleasant one went. We think, "Oh, it's gone. I need to get another." So there's that subtle leaning into the next thing. That's really samsara—the sense of just, it could be a little bit better. Even when it's all copacetic, it could be a little bit better. And when it's really unpleasant, we think the problem is in this situation. If I can get rid of this situation, then I'm on the path to happiness.

And conversely, when something isn't working out and you can't change it, there's often a tendency either to get angry or to blame and judge oneself, or to really feel ashamed, or to put the blame outward and spin in more anger. And neutral? We just ignore it.

When we talk about samsara, it's this living in a world of constant change where sometimes it's beautiful, sometimes it's not, where sometimes it's fair, sometimes it's not fair. Sometimes we have what we need. Sometimes everything seems to be going wrong. And we somehow think it should always keep moving in the hopeful, positive direction. And somehow we can control it. So when there's a lot of things going wrong, we tend to judge because we think, "I ought to be able to make this not happen."

This is samsara, and we're stuck to each experience like Velcro. It's pleasant: "Ah, finally, so happy." It's unpleasant: "Oh my God, I'm suffering." It's neutral: "When is life going to actually wake up? When is something good going to happen?"

The Tibetans have a saying I love—that the definition of samsara is the urge to correct.

And it's really like that. It's not always huge. It's just that little urge leaning forward, and not noticing that that's endless when we don't notice. So unexamined.

Some of the effects of this is that it actually feeds the sense of insufficiency, of discontent. There's always that kind of suddenly looking outward, or to the next thing, or away from this thing. Never just totally present, at ease with things as they are.

Things—as someone reminded me, I use this phrase a lot—*yathā bhūta*, which is a phrase from the Pali that means "things as they have come to be in this moment." You get the moving nature of it. Just in this moment, things as they have come to be couldn't be any different in this moment. And when there's the wisdom, the awareness, it's just like this—without thinking it needs to be corrected or anything. It's just like this. That's what allows the clear seeing, and an appropriate response can come up.

But when there's this sense of glomming to the pleasant, and I'm it, we never can just relax and see clearly. Same with the unpleasant. Always on that little, "what next, what next?" It keeps us always looking—I want to say outward, but it keeps us looking into the object, whether it's so-called inside our own heart and mind or outside. Looking to the experience, looking to the object for peace, for fulfillment, for meaning. And the objects, as we've been saying, are always changing. You put faith in any object for real peace and happiness, and it's gone. But we don't see that.

And so we kind of stay in the thrall. Even when we're sort of present, but we don't see this process—in the thrall when something wonderful happens: "Oh, it's great!" Or something horrible happens: "Oh my God!" And that's when, as I said the other day, life can be exhausting when it's like that. We're trying our best to respond appropriately, but because we don't really see what's going on, we can't. Someone's unhappy here—have some chocolate. I mean, there's nothing wrong with offering somebody chocolate, but it's not really going to take away the grief. So how to be with it in a way that's understanding.

Just to give an example that really works for me—it doesn't work for everybody, but I'll offer it anyway—of seeing how the ups and downs of life, pleasant and unpleasant, immediately follow each other. We take it so completely personal, which we do, and

then we so inhabit it. And it can completely change the next minute. We so inhabit that and don't even see what's going on. We don't have the continuity of seeing. We're just in each experience. It's like this. We don't...

So this was a couple of years ago. Probably most of you know—I'm not a football fan—but when the New England Patriots were playing in the Super Bowl. Because I live in New England, I'm more aware. I wasn't watching the Super Bowl, but people said, "Go back and watch the last two minutes." My friends recorded it. So I went back to watch the last two minutes.

Tom Brady is the star quarterback. He's sort of to New England what Steph Curry is here—but not approaching the mania that I am experiencing here around this. It's really wild around the basketball world. So Tom Brady's the star quarterback. In the last two minutes, he and his team had done a really good job, had completed a lot of passes. But now the other team had the ball, and they were ahead, and within two minutes it was clear that they were going to win. There seemed like no way they could lose.

And then the camera cut over to Tom Brady sitting on the sidelines. Never saw a better picture of dejection. I mean, really, he was sitting there, his head was down, just sitting there, so dejected. And then I think the other team was actually on the goal line, and somehow they lost the ball. They turned it over, and the Patriots got the ball and managed to make a touchdown, and they won. This is all in two minutes—a completely wild and unexpected kind of thing. Then they cut to Tom Brady, and he's leaping around like a maniac, waving his arms and grinning.

Someone might say, well, of course he's happy. I'm not saying he shouldn't be happy, or that he shouldn't be sad. It's the totality of each that strikes me—and not seeing that this is the human condition. To me, that's samsara. Then you have to live with all that time in between, the back and the forth. I could just go to the last two minutes, but they had to live with however long that whole game lasted.

So we don't see it. We don't recognize it. We're always caught in looking to the object, the experience, for happiness, for peace.

The next part Joseph discusses is how these habits become underlying tendencies, because we go for the pleasant experience without understanding its coming and going. We don't understand the nature, the gratification, the danger, and the escape.

And this is again from the Buddha: "Before my enlightenment, oh monks, while I was still a bodhisattva"—while he was still practicing to awaken—"it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger? What is the escape from the world? Then it occurred to me: whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification."

The pleasure, the joy, the happiness, the pleasant sense feelings—that's the gratification. And I want to emphasize that he's not saying this doesn't exist or that it's bad. Yes, this is the gratification.

What's the danger? That the world is impermanent, that all experience is impermanent. It's all bound up with unreliability, with dissatisfaction, and subject to change. And as someone said the other night, the change is really so momentary. We all see the big changes, but the pleasant feeling is changing so quickly, coming and going, and we don't see that. This holding to the pleasant, the habit, comes because it's going the next and next and next, and we're not really seeing it as it is—how fast it's changing, how totally unreliable any feeling, any experience is.

It's pleasant and there's gratification in the moment, yes. But right away comes that clinging to the pleasant, thinking that's the source of happiness, not seeing the danger.

And the escape is the abandoning of this lust, this desire for the gratification, for the pleasant. This is the escape from the world.

I want to point out: escape from the world—he didn't say that. He said the abandoning of this habit of craving, of lust, is the escape from the suffering in the world. He didn't say the escape from the world is to go in a cave and never have anything to do with anybody. He didn't say that. He didn't say that there's no more gratification in the world. He said the abandoning of the lust. Agreed.

So that's really what Steve was talking about this morning. That is really where freedom comes. And it's not an act of personal will, because it doesn't work. We can try. I think I said the other day, you try all the time: "I'm not going to crave anymore. I really get it. I've heard it. I've read it. I've seen how fast pleasant things change. So I'm giving up believing that that's really the way to happiness." It's something to incline the mind towards.

If it works for you, wonderful—I'd really love to hear it. But the habits are so insidious, and as you see, it happens so quickly.

Abandoning lust for the world does not mean abandoning interest in the world. It doesn't mean abandoning care or compassion or engaged activity. It doesn't mean any of that. Actually, even in a moment—it doesn't have to be the heart-mind completely free forever of greed and aversion—but when there are moments of steady awareness and we can see clearly and wisdom comes, in those moments of wholesome heart-mind, there isn't greed, hatred, or delusion. The response to the moment is going to arise out of beautiful, wholesome states. That's what there's room for when they're not shoved out by wanting, by leaning into the next thing, by avoiding something because it's unpleasant.

So actually, the abandoning—even in a moment—of lust for the pleasant and resistance to the unpleasant is what allows for a more appropriate response. Whether it's compassion or wisdom or equanimity, or just a sense of doing what needs to be done in this moment without any big whoop about it, without resistance, without wanting, without putting it all back to what does it mean about me. Just what needs to happen.

But it's not an act of personal will. Wisdom does the work. Wisdom does the work. It's wisdom, which is a quality in the citta, that arises just like greed—comes and goes, just like greed. So what we can do, and what we are doing, is cultivate the conditions that allow for wisdom to arise more frequently, to grow stronger, so that we can actually begin to cultivate a different habit of mind.

There are many ways to do that. The main one, and the one we're talking about here—you know what I'm going to say, right? It's the long habit of continual awareness. And it really is an amazing thing.

Someone today asked something like, "What wisdom is coming from noticing my foot's asleep?" Fair question. In the moment, it's not like we get this great insight. But every moment of awareness that isn't distorted by these habits is a moment that's allowing for clear seeing. The continuity is necessary because we need to see the process—what I've been describing about pleasant or unpleasant, and to notice that, to notice the reaction, to notice how the reaction spins out of control and leads to more thoughts and feelings, and then how we go for the pleasant. We need a steadiness of awareness to really notice the process.

And the switch that happens, the way wisdom starts to work in our experience, is that we start to get more interested in the process than in our reactions to each individual experience or object. Because our habit is, with each object or experience, we assess it: like it or don't like it, what does it mean about me, what's the effect going to

be, what can I do. There's a sense of separateness, of one-one-one. We don't see the big picture. We stay in this separate little reactivity. We stay in "what does it mean about me."

But when we start to see with a steady awareness that begins to build a little momentum, we start to see a process. This is where it's like, "Oh, I see it working. I really see it working"—like that silly example of me and my big toe hurting. I really saw it, and I wasn't expecting anything. Just with awareness, looking: "Oh, look at that." It wasn't about "I have to stop aversion" or "I should fix my big toe" or "How stupid am I that this happened." It was like, "Wow. This is like a natural law. This is how it's working when these habits have been developed—aversion and wanting, greed—without recognizing them." And seeing it function, it's like, "Wow, how cool."

Not expecting that with an act of will we can come in and say, "Okay, now I see it once, it's over." Think how many mind moments we've practiced these other habits in our life. Just think about it in one day.

So in a way, it's kind of encouraging. I'll say it's encouraging. I don't think we need as many moments of awareness and wisdom to cut through, for insight to arise, as we've had moments of delusion and greed and aversion. I really don't think we need that many. That's the power. Wisdom and the wholesome qualities are actually a lot stronger because they reflect the truth of how things are. This other way of functioning is based in confusion and not seeing. So when you see, "Oh wow, look at that, isn't that interesting?"—then I know. I know that that process was true.

You don't have to think about it anymore. That's what we mean when we talk about insight, the quality of insight. We might reflect on it later, but there's this sense of *oh*. The perception is shifting. You see it in a different way. And seeing—it doesn't have to be visual, I'm just using that word for all perceiving—there's this recognition: *Oh, that's what's going on.* You just know it.

It's like when a puzzle suddenly shifts—one of those trick-of-the-eye images where you can only see it one way, and then suddenly you see it the other way. *Oh.* You couldn't see it until you could. And once you can, you can't unsee it. You can fall back into seeing it the other way, but you know it's there. And if someone comes and tells you, "No, you didn't see that," you don't have to get into an argument. But you know. You know.

This is really what the quality of insight is. You can see why we can't create it from an act of will, because that would just be thinking about it. And we don't even know what we're looking for because we haven't recognized it yet. The way it actually reveals itself is so different from what we expect.

So we become more interested in the process rather than entranced by what's going on. This is the shift. This is where awareness, steady awareness, becomes what Ajahn Sumedho calls "an escape hatch"—the way out of samsara.

And now I have to say it again. When I said "the way out of samsara," did somewhere in the back of your mind, not quite articulated, a thought arise: *We're not going to have to keep going through all this stuff?* The samsara, the difficulty—but the stuff keeps happening.

So this is from Sumedho. He gives a kind of grin and says, "But it's not what we might think it is, the way out of samsara." It doesn't mean this stuff stops. He says that when we really determine in our hearts and minds—when we truly commit ourselves to cultivating awareness in our lives—then something changes. On a retreat like this, if this practice is new to you, it might give you enough of a taste that you want to make that determination. It doesn't mean we make it once and it's over, but there's a sense of reordering our priorities. He talks about this a lot.

When you really determine in yourself to cultivate awareness, then you start using everything that happens in your life—everything that happens, no matter what's occurring—as a way to cultivate awareness. On retreat and off retreat. That's why we structure the practice this way.

Someone today—I won't say who, because I didn't ask permission—said something I really loved, so beautiful. They spoke about having this determination and working with it in life, deciding to take some classes in a kind of craft they're not particularly good at. And just watching the whole process of trying to do, and doing or not being able to do, all the reactions that arise in the mind. The whole thing is held in the light of awareness—just watching what the mind is doing, being present with that entire process.

But the difference between being with a process and being with a process *with awareness* is that the Velcro isn't there. You might be jumping up and down with excitement or feeling really dejected, but there's this knowing: *Oh yeah, I think this is going to make me happy.* How long was Tom Brady happy from his Super Bowl win? Then there was this whole football deflating situation, and he's being sued—I mean, something always happens. That's how life is.

And Ajahn Sumedho is saying it's not that we create some ideal state through the continuity of awareness. He says that awakening out of delusion, we find ourselves in reality as it is—*yathā bhūta*, reality as it's come to be in this moment.

And again, the real isn't what you're expecting. Life is fair and unfair. There's pleasure and pain. There's success and failure. There are horrible things and beautiful things. That doesn't stop happening. It doesn't go away.

What changes? Back to the sutta. What changes is our understanding, and the understanding changes our response.

So the well-taught noble disciple does not beat his breast and weep when touched by a painful feeling. She experiences one kind of feeling—a bodily one—but not a mental feeling, as if pierced by a dart but not hit by a second dart. So having been touched by that painful feeling, she does not resist and resent it.

Can you imagine that? That's why we practice just being with little pains, being with restlessness, being with something that's unpleasant but not killing you. To see that it's really possible to be totally present without resisting and resenting it. Without needing to move away to go to something pleasant. And then when you're really clear about that, you can eat the shrimp. But it helps to be clear about that first. If you eat the shrimp before you're clear about it, we don't learn. That's where the awareness comes in.

So under the impact of that painful feeling, she does not proceed, does not need to go looking for sense happiness. Why not? Because a well-taught disciple knows of an escape from painful feelings other than by enjoying sense happiness.

To me, that's the most profound statement here. We know, even just for a moment, we know there's an escape from painful feelings other than just needing to enjoy sense happiness. This not knowing that there's any other way out of unpleasant than to go for sense happiness is so poignant to me. I mean, look at the world. I don't have to say much else. Look at the world and this sense that we have to get more to be happy. And those people who are born into a situation where they can't get more, where there's really a lot more of unpleasant than pleasant—we think, well, a lot of compassion if we can be present, but kind of like it's hopeless for them. But it's not hopeless for us when things really go wrong. To see that there's another way out of that suffering.

She knows. So there's no underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings. That doesn't get developed. Because she knows, she understands according to facts the arising and ending of those pleasant feelings. It comes and goes. You know that. And the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these pleasant feelings. And so

when she experiences a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, or a neutral feeling, she feels it as one who is not bound by it, as one who is not joined to it, as one who is not fettered by it. Such a one, oh monks, is called a well-taught noble disciple who is not fettered to suffering. This I declare.

That's really one way of looking at what we're practicing. So what does that mean—to experience it without being bound to it, but we still experience it and we're not fettered by suffering? It's really this long continuous awareness that allows that to happen. The situation may stay just the same. But the unfetteredness, the freedom, is in the completely different response that arises from wisdom, not because we think we should.

So I'll give you an example from a good friend of mine who's given me permission to use this. She's been practicing in the Dharma for many, many years. We're close friends. Both her parents are dead now, but her parents lived in Texas. She had always had a difficult relationship with the family, but she was close. She'd go home every year and visit her parents and her siblings. And it was always a bit fraught. Not horrible, but normal fraught. Difficult.

But she said every time she'd go home—just as Steve or someone was saying here, if you think you're enlightened, go home and see what responses, what reactions come up. She said every time she'd go there, on the plane on the way, she'd think: I'm going to act from mettā. I'm going to be really kind. I'm not going to be triggered.

Does it sound familiar? Have you ever done that?

As soon as she walked in the door—boom. She was the most reactive she'd ever been. And she'd wonder, why? She's making all these efforts, but it's not an act of will.

So we're talking over years. She started practicing really looking at the steady awareness and observing what's arising in the citta in any moment. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—vedana—what's the response? We notice when there's anger, we notice when there's greed, we notice when there's love. It starts to become a habit. And this is the awareness getting momentum. It's not some great state. It's not based on a kind of structured concentration that goes away at the end of a retreat. That's why it doesn't feel so special right now. But it starts to creep in, and we know it is from talking to you all. You're still wanting some juicy steak you're not going to get, so you don't quite trust this yet.

So anyway, she'd done a retreat like this, and she's going home on the plane. She said, okay, I'll just keep practicing, just watching my mind. That's all—just the awareness watching my mind. Rather than make this commitment that she was going to be the perfect daughter when she walked in the door.

So she's on the plane watching her mind, just being mellow about it. She had a wait in the airport, so she went over in a corner and did a little walking meditation, just watching her mind. But then she noticed, on the plane watching her mind, that this kind of reactivity—not just resistance, but a little aggressiveness—was there in her own mind. Her mind was thinking, well, when I walk in, my sister is going to do this and this and that, and I'm not going to put up with that. And she goes, oh wow. So actually, I'm walking in the door with negativity, ready for a fight. And I had no clue because I was saying I'll be peaceful, I'll be loving, I'll be happy—but not with awareness, not seeing what was really there.

So she kept on being aware. She said, oh wow, look at that. Not "oh, you're so bad"—just "oh, look at that." And so she just kept watching. She walked in. She was aware of that. Her sister did whatever.

She said it was the best visit she ever had, because she was just interested in the process. And what happens with the clear seeing is the wisdom kicks in. She actually responded with much more openness, much more acceptance, because she wasn't blocking what was going on in her own resistance—she was aware of it. When her sister did do the things she always did, my friend was already aware of her own resistance, and wisdom said, yeah, you don't need to act from it. It doesn't have to drive the bus. And she was actually able to be—not even able, it just happened by itself.

That's what we mean when we say wisdom does the work. Our work is really getting interested in the process. And that's what Ajahn Sumedho means by stepping out of samsara. The same stuff's going on. The Velcro isn't there. The wisdom, just from seeing how things are, is all we need to do.

That's what I love about Right View. Once there's a real recognizing accurately, the way that craving is abandoned—it's not like, oh my God, I have to give it up. It stops making sense. When you see, oh, I really want this pleasant feeling to last, and you can watch it evaporate and you're aware, it doesn't make any sense because craving is uncomfortable. We don't like to be with it. It's like, oh yeah, craving doesn't make sense—poof, it goes away.

When she walks in and her sister's starting in her reactive mode, but she knows her sister really had a lot of suffering. And when she was aware of her own reactivity and not reacting to it, getting angry at her sister didn't make any sense. Because when you can see the suffering in someone, what naturally comes is compassion—when we're not caught. You don't have to think about it. I mean, we can cultivate it in other ways, but in this way, the wisdom does the work.

So when we think about, oh my God, I have to give up craving and attachment to all the beautiful things—that's what we hear, isn't it? Giving up attachment, giving up lust for the beautiful things in the world. We think that means giving the things up. But it's all still happening. Giving up the craving is like the hugest freedom, relief.

And we can't do it because an act of will is usually coming from me wanting something different. Duh. Wisdom's like, "Oh, it's like this. Craving doesn't make any sense." Boom. It's gone.

Play with it in little ways, not in big ways. Then it'll come in the big ways.

And then we see, as I said before, when the craving, the aversion, these habits are abandoned, it doesn't mean that one necessarily just becomes quiescent, just lives a quiet life. One is as active as one's personality ever wanted to be—with more being in sync with what's really going on, responding in a much more appropriate way.

The Buddha says this really beautifully. I want to end with this. Someone asks, "In what way is one a wise person of great wisdom?" And he says it's many different ways. This one just suits my talk.

"In what way is one a wise person of great wisdom?" He says, "Such a person does not intend"—so that's the citta in movement, the intention, the wanting—"does not intend for his own affliction or for the affliction of others or of both." So we don't have any arising of wanting to do something to harm ourselves or others. "Rather, when a wise person thinks, she thinks only of her own welfare"—and notice, your own welfare is included; we're all equal—"thinks only of her own welfare, of the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world. It is in this way that one is a wise person of great wisdom."

So just by getting interested in the process, see what kind of... if it comes up, you're making a commitment to awareness, and just gently watching, this wisdom arises quite naturally. And from seeing such a little thing as pleasant feeling come and go. Like someone said—I think Alexis said—with one thread, the whole dharma is attached.

So play with it. Play with it over the days. Don't make a big deal about it, but it's really one of the keys in to recognizing reality and freedom.

Thank you for listening to the dharma.

CHAPTER 150

Wisdom Shines Through Our Actions: The Buddha

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path—sammā saṅkappa (right intention or wise motivation)—and how wisdom manifests through our actions. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that "a wise person is characterized by his or her actions," she explores how the quality present in the heart-mind at the moment of action determines whether that action leads to suffering or liberation.*
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> *Wilson references the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19), where the Buddha describes his pre-awakening practice of observing how thoughts imbued with sense desire, ill-will, and harmfulness naturally subsided through steady awareness, while thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will (mettā), and compassion arose without causing affliction. She emphasizes that this transformation happens naturally through wisdom rather than through acts of personal will—"superficial wisdom" cannot overcome "real and deep kilesa."*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing wholesome states with the same attentiveness we bring to unwholesome ones. Wilson reframes renunciation not as grim self-denial but as the spacious joy that arises when clinging falls away. She describes mettā as simply "the ability to witness the unpleasant without creating anything around it." Through personal stories and teachings from the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King Jr., and contemporary teachers, she illustrates how shifts in internal motivation—even without external action—can transform our relationship to situations and others, connecting individual practice to broader questions of human rights and compassionate action in the world.*

The first moment of launching out into the silence always feels really strange to me, and then it gets going.

What I want to talk about tonight—the general theme—is that we've been talking so much about the steadiness of awareness and the importance of continuing steady awareness with wisdom to recognize all the conditioning, all the habits of mind that cause suffering. Of course, I'll have to include that; don't think you're getting away without it. But what I want to emphasize more tonight is how that wisdom feeds and strengthens wholesome states. I want to mention a few ways this actually occurs—there are many ways—and really as a way of encouraging and emphasizing the recognition of wholesome states with awareness as well.

Theoretically, this shouldn't be necessary, since you're all committed from morning to night to steady awareness, noticing everything that arises and passes. So you equally notice the wholesome with the unwholesome, correct? No. Once a day there's a wholesome state, and the rest of the day—that's about how it is. I noticed.

So here's the focus. A couple of reasons I want to mention this. One is what I just said: because we talk so much and really start to explore the suffering habits that arise in the citta, in the heart, which is essential, sometimes it actually happens that even though we've been resisting them forever, our habit of mind in retreat gets a little too focused in one direction. We get into another habit of mind that just doesn't quite recognize the wholesome or bring full awareness into it and inhabit it with the same confidence with which we inhabit greed and hatred. We may not have the same trust or the same personal feeling that it's mine, but we need to recognize it.

Another thing is that sometimes on retreat, at different times, people feel that we're getting so involved in all the minutia, all the little stuff, that it seems to feed just this obsession with me, me, me—my stories, my this and my that. It just seems like I'm more self-involved than ever. And another kind of doubt that can come up at times is: this is great, I'm really learning a lot, but it seems so subtle and esoteric, so supported by the silence and separateness of retreat—what does it have to do with daily life? Noticing the little subtle movements of greed when I look at the person walking next to me, what does that have to do with daily life?

The answer, of course, is everything.

So those are perhaps some reasons I'm planting in the mind. What I talk about may or may not have anything to do with you, but I'm thinking it does.

What I really want to talk about is right view. Wise understanding is the first step in the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha's fourth of the Four Noble Truths describes the way of living, the way of practice to cultivate and deepen awareness, wisdom, right view. We've talked about that, right? You've noticed we talked about that.

The second step of the Eightfold Path is sammā saṅkappa, which is variously translated as right thought, right intention, right motivation. We've been talking about noticing the motivation, that impulse in the heart and mind before moving. That's really what I want to talk about tonight: sammā saṅkappa, right intention, right motivation.

This is from the Dalai Lama. A few people have also been expressing something along the lines of—nobody actually said this exactly, but this is my point—wondering whether this approach is really enough, or whether it's just something Sayadaw U Tejaniya made up. So just to say, it's not like this is completely separate or doesn't align

with what other great Buddhist teachers say. The Dalai Lama puts it this way: Buddhism essentially consists of two things—the view, which means a definitive understanding of the interdependence of all things, and action, which can be loosely defined as non-violence. The view and action.

The second step of the Eightfold Path—wise thought, wise motivation—is the key, the impulse, the link to action: right speech, right action, right livelihood, which are the next steps in the path. So this intention is crucial. It's key.

The Buddha was very clear. I think I read a similar quotation in one of my other talks. The awakened mind, the awakened heart shows up and manifests in our actions. This is from the Buddha: "A fool is characterized by his or her actions. A wise person is characterized by his or her actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's wisdom, one's discernment, shines." He says this over and over. Our actions are the inevitable effect, the result, the manifestation of whatever quality, whatever attitude is in the mind in the moment that impulse to speak or act arises. This is extremely clear.

And so it is a profound aspiration, I feel, to even begin to hold the aspiration to really purify, to transform the habits of our heart and mind, the habits of consciousness—those habits that, unrecognized and unthinking, keep leading us into wanting and aversion and more confusion and suffering. It's a profound and, to me, really beautiful aspiration.

But we can't do it as an act of personal will. We've said that many times, because what do we know? How do we know to act from? We don't quite tune into the awareness. We try to get rid of greed by aversion. We try to get rid of aversion by greed—"Let me feel loving kindness." We're thinking, we're trying to think our way in, and we may mean well. But we don't know what's going on. We don't have the tools. It's not something we can just personally wish into being.

This is where the key lies—this second step, this understanding of how to recognize motivation and what attitude in the mind colors our actions. That's what we've been training in. But what's really quite wonderful is that in the light of wisdom, in the light of steady awareness, as wisdom develops, the natural effect of that wisdom is that these unwholesome habits begin to naturally transform. I'll speak to the specifics that the Buddha addresses in Samma Sankappa, but it's remarkable. It really is.

You've all seen now how when we don't recognize what particular quality in the mind—the kilesas, the unwholesome habits, or as Steve was saying the other night, the dangerous habits—when we don't recognize their presence, they drive the bus. Sometimes even when we do recognize them, they still drive. But at least awareness is going along, and that's a significant difference, which I'll get to in a moment.

Even with good intentions, even when we have a really clear sense—"I want to be more kind," or "I'm not going to eat this harmful food"—we really mean it. We're totally sincere, and we absolutely can't do it. We don't know why.

I remember in one group with U Tejaniya some years ago, there was a perfect description. A woman, a long-term meditator, had a certain food she was really allergic to. It wasn't just that she didn't want it—she liked it. She was coming into the dining room at the meditation center in Barre, which has a big blackboard announcing what the meal will be. She came in, saw that food listed, and noticed the wanting arise. Her mind said, "No, I'm not going to eat this, out of compassion for myself." So that's wisdom, she thought. But then, she said, she went and sat down and took it and ate it.

So she asked U Tejaniya, "How come? There was this wisdom, but I didn't act on it."

And he said in his way, "Well, superficial wisdom, real and deep kilesa."

It's like that, right? That moment of wisdom—"I'm not going to do it because it's harmful to me"—that is a moment of wisdom. A moment. That's the key here. Mind moments are arising and passing really quickly. Without recognizing this, we think, "Oh, I'm not going to do it," and we stop looking. Hence the emphasis on steadiness of awareness. We don't notice all the moments of greed that are running the show. I guess you can relate. People don't laugh if they can't relate.

That's why it takes a real kind of seeing that is helpful—seeing all the different things in ourselves and in life. For me at least, if you don't go drown in self-judgment, which is of course just flipping to aversion, you can really say, "Oh wow, look how strong this habit is. Let me recommit to awareness." Of course, that requires some sense of verified faith, some sense of confidence that this work actually leads somewhere.

The key is in recognizing what's the motivation for action. As the Buddha said in the Dhammapada, that famous verse at the very beginning: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Speak or act with an impure mind and suffering follows you like the wheel follows the hoof of the ox that draws the cart. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves you."

The key here is that mind is the forerunner of all things. And so when the Buddha speaks about this impulse of intention, *cetanā*, it's really like an impulse that leads to speech and action, and we can notice it arising. Often we just feel the impulse and notice the thought—like this friend thinking, "I want to not eat this"—without noticing, because it can be subtle, all the impulses and the wanting, the greed that was coming with those impulses.

As the Buddha describes what makes action wholesome or unwholesome, our tendency is to evaluate it by the result. Or by how it looks, or whether it got what it wanted. But this is absolutely not the case in terms of the way the Buddha understands the world and what's really supportive for us to see. Both the qualities of the pure heart and mind and how they manifest, and how the impure manifests—the intention is really the heart, the seed of action. It's the quality that's together with that impulse in the heart and mind in a particular moment that motivates the action.

The exact same action, looking from the outside, could be motivated by a whole slew of different things. Because when you look at it, we don't actually control the results of action, do we? We could do something that really, if you tune in, is felt from kindness. We're really trying to help someone, but we don't have the big picture. So maybe there's been delusion. We projected some whole story onto how unhappy that person is that wasn't true at all to begin with. That's big delusion. But maybe we even saw something accurately and tried to help, yet what they really needed was just to be left alone. That kind of thing is simple enough.

I use speaking as an example often, because say you have something a little difficult to communicate to someone, but you're not doing it in anger. When you're clear, you get in touch with this sense of caring, of kindness, because you know this little thing they do is really bringing a lot of negativity their way from other people, and you want to help them. Well, you can already surmise the various kinds of motivations and intentions that could give rise to the exact same words.

So if you're really clear with yourself, you could do it quite from loving-kindness. But you didn't check out what was going on with them, and they just staggered home from the end of a most stressful day. They're at the end of their rope, and you decide to give them this really loving feedback, and they're just not able to hear it. That's a kind of not getting the big picture. Or perhaps we've practiced being loving, but in the moment, that's not really what's happening. "Let me tell you this for your own good and for the good of all beings"—and various other things. The words are the same. But how it's re-

ceived, even when you do it with loving-kindness and it seems like an appropriate time, is completely out of our control or even knowledge. We don't know how that person is going to hear it, how they're going to receive it.

So as the Buddha said, the key, the heart of action, of intention, of motivation, is the quality in the heart-mind that the action is springing from. And this is the place that is so cool, what I was talking about—because in the light of steady awareness that allows wisdom to recognize accurately what's going on, which is what we've been doing, the motivations begin to naturally transform. This is what the Buddha called *sammā-saṅkappa*.

In particular, he mentions that the motivation or thought of sense desire, of greed, transforms to the motivation of renunciation, and from that to generosity. That of ill-will transforms to *mettā*, to friendliness. And cruelty, another aspect of hatred, transforms to compassion.

You'll notice he doesn't say thoughts of delusion transform to wisdom, because as we've said before, that's not a matter of personal intention or thought. That's a matter of long, clear seeing that allows for wisdom to arise. But these are plenty to work with in terms of wholesomeness and really experiencing consciously the happiness of it.

So of course we start with the steady awareness that notices how, and how frequently, the unwholesome, the difficult habits of mind are kind of the fallback mode. And how, sometimes really obviously but sometimes quite subtly or suddenly, they can become the motivation for action.

Sometimes what really inspires me to keep having the willingness to open to this, to look at it with interest—not with "Oh my god, more aversion," but with genuine curiosity, really wanting to see it—I may have mentioned this in one group. I was on a retreat a while ago doing some walking meditation in a pretty calm, clear state. I wasn't feeling a lot of aversion. The mind was calm, there was quite some wisdom, some happiness, all of that.

And just then some thought came into my mind, thinking about some email I was going to answer and what I would say—a little funny answer—and it went on. But then I thought, wait a minute. And I saw in that little funny answer that had come up, which I could just dismiss as nothing, no suffering, gone on to the next thing, calm—but in that little funny answer there was just the teensiest bit of aversion. Because humor definitely can carry that, and I'm from New York so it's even more so. But it wasn't really harmful or anything. It was just a little tweak of aversion, and then gone.

I could see my mind go, "Well, that's okay. That's no big deal. It's not hurting anyone." And I thought, wait a minute. It's not a big deal, but the more we practice, the more the steadiness of awareness comes, the more the wisdom comes, the less it's okay. And this wasn't an aversive judgment. This was actually inspirational to me. Oh, okay—that's the aversion I really want to see. When aversion arises in the mind, when greed arises in the mind—because for me, it's my aspiration—it's not okay, really.

It's okay, it's a little bit aversive, and maybe they even missed it, they won't even know, they'll think it's funny too. But I can feel—you can feel. You know, we're learning how to feel how aversion feels: that separation, that contraction. Same with greed. Same with delusion. You start to feel it.

Really, the danger of it is that it blocks freedom. The danger isn't just that it doesn't feel good. The danger is that even subtle aversion—one can't see, as the Buddha said, with aversion one's own good or the good of another or the good of both. One doesn't recognize the pure nature of heart-mind with even the littlest bit.

But to look in that way needs to come with balanced awareness, not when you're already spinning in self-hatred, right? I think you get a sense of what I mean, and it was inspiring to me. It's like: right, keep going, kid, keep going. It's not just settling for good enough.

So that's one way I get inspired. Another way is just from noticing other little ways it comes up. If I'm walking in the city and I see a homeless person begging and I go in the other direction because I feel awkward, I let myself feel that. Let myself feel it. And then, just like here, you go or you don't go, you do whatever you do, but you bring awareness along with you. You bring it along with you.

Or paying attention to things in the world, to people in the world. I've used this in talks before, but on the radio three or four years ago, I came in the middle of some interview on public radio. I didn't even know who they were talking to. But it was somebody who was doing some kind of social research in prisons and had been talking to young men—young men in long-term incarceration for violent crimes. I didn't know any more details than that. But the person interviewed was describing one interview he'd had with a young man who was in for some very serious violent crime, very young, and in for life basically. And he said—the guy in prison said—"I just wish I had back that five to ten seconds where..." basically the greed or the—he didn't say it quite in our language—"I wish I had back that five to ten seconds where I did that violent act."

And that just struck me, because we all know how, even when we have quite some tuning in to what are the habits in our mind, given the conditions—and we haven't been paying attention, or something strong enough triggers us—boom, they just can come shooting up. And without enough self-knowledge, without enough care in the mind in terms of our behavior and action, without recognizing motivations, five or ten seconds is enough to ruin yours and somebody else's life. So stuff like that will really re-motivate me. And you can see it anywhere. You can see it anywhere.

This is where we start to see for ourselves: what do we really trust? Again, we've said this a lot—what is your refuge? For that young man, whatever was going on, anger, violence seemed like the only safe response, the only refuge, because of what had been practiced.

So here, starting to recognize—we've been talking about awareness as a refuge—but now I want to talk about the three wise intentions, motivations. Because as we learn to feel and recognize them, see how they arise, know how they feel, inhabit them just as fully as we inhabit the unwholesome qualities, this will also strengthen the wisdom, which will strengthen the confidence, the faith, which gives us the energy and the willingness to keep on being mindful and stabilize the mind—and it strengthens wisdom. Those are the five spiritual faculties that Steve's going to talk about, so I'm not going to say much more about them.

These three naturally transform in the light of steady wisdom and awareness. Let me read from the Buddha. Here he's talking about before his self-awakening, when he was still an unawakened bodhisattva. I love that there are not that many suttas where he's talking about what his mind was like before he was awakened. It's still pretty far along, okay? But anyway, this is a very famous sutta, the Two Sorts of Thinking. I'll just read a few lines of it.

He says: "As I was practicing, as I remained heedful, a way of mindfulness aware, ardent, energized, and resolute, thinking filled with sense desire arose in me. I discerned that this had arisen in me." Just mindfulness, right? You don't go, "Oh my God, thinking with sense desire, what am I going to do?" No—"I discerned that thinking with sense desire had arisen in me. I saw that it leads to my own affliction. As I noticed it leads to my own affliction, it subsided. As I noticed that it leads to the affliction of others, it subsided. As I noticed that it leads to the affliction of both, it subsided. As I noticed it obstructs discernment"—which is the word he's using here for wisdom—"it promotes vexation and it does not lead to liberation—it subsided. It subsided."

He's just doing what we're doing. Watching it. Seeing how it functions. It promotes vexation.

It leads to my own affliction and the affliction of others. He's seeing that in himself, and through the steady awareness, it subsides.

The same with thinking imbued with ill will arose in me—exactly the same thing. Thinking imbued with harmfulness arose in me—exactly the same thing.

And then he said, as he kept on, whatever a person keeps pursuing with their thinking and pondering, that becomes the inclination of their awareness. So we've seen that. That's the habit. Think about it all the time. It's like a rut—a rut in emptiness. I don't know where the rut is, but somehow it keeps feeding. That's what arises. It gets easy.

So if one keeps pursuing thinking—and by thinking here it's also motivation leading to action—imbued with sense desire, that's how it's going to go. With ill will, with harmfulness, that's going to be the easy response that leads to speech and action.

Then he goes, "As I remained thus heedful, ardent, and resolute, thinking imbued with renunciation arose in me. I discerned that this had arisen in me and that it leads neither to my own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor to the affliction of both. It fosters wisdom, discernment, clear seeing. It promotes lack of vexation and it leads to liberation. If I were to think and ponder in line with that renunciation, even for a night, even for a day, even for a day and a night, I do not envision any danger that would come from it, except that thinking and pondering a long time would tire the body." He's like, just totally, this is just what happens. "When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed. And a disturbed mind is far from collectedness, far from steadiness. So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, and concentrated it." Why is that? "So my mind would not be disturbed."

So he's really looking in the same way at thoughts of non-ill will, or metta, and thoughts of harmlessness, or compassion. Really just exploring them equally with steady awareness and seeing they don't lead to harm for me or another or both. They don't cause vexation. They don't block wisdom. Not a theory, but watching it in his own mind and heart.

And in the seeing of that—this is what's called the wisdom of seeing—oh, this is how the harmful ones act, leading to vexation. As I kept on noticing, as I kept on looking, they subsided. And you've all seen that sometimes. Then we assume it should always subside immediately. That's extra. But seeing how, through the steady awareness, the unwholesome is not being fed.

It may have a momentum and keep going. There are times when it's kind of half equal because the mind moves so fast, like when we act from the greed but bring awareness along. The motivation is kind of flipping back and forth between greed and

awareness, greed and awareness, but because the mind moves so quickly. But as the awareness gets stronger and the wisdom stronger, the kilesa actually subsides in that moment.

And the reverse is also true. As awareness is really aware of non-clinging—let's say that for renunciation, or generosity, or metta, or friendliness, or non-ill will—the awareness of it, the wisdom that seeing that it causes no harm, actually feeds the wholesome. We don't have to think, "Oh, here this is, let me hold on to it, let me whip it up, let me get it stronger." We can really trust that through the steadiness of recognition of awareness.

It's like Guy Armstrong likes to say, the way he thinks of it, it's a beneficent universe. When I first heard him say it, I thought, "What, a beneficent universe? You look around?" But he said, no, because this is the laws of how it works. When you notice the wholesome with awareness, with wisdom, that naturally feeds it. When there's wisdom in the heart and mind, these unskillful motivations naturally begin to transform. It's not an act of will.

So this is really a wonderful thing. That's why I want to talk a bit about where that came from. One way it happens, as I just described from the Buddha, is just by steady awareness. We see this causes suffering, and the transformation is the wise mind goes, "Yeah," and just puts it down. This doesn't make sense.

When we really see that clinging is causing suffering in a particular situation, like holding a hot potato, you don't have to think about it. Should I put it down?

I mean, the trick is not to throw it with aversion. The trick is, "Oh yeah, let me just put that down." It's like that.

But another thing I want to explore—this is how I look at it too—is what allows for the clear seeing to come, for these kleshas to kind of drop away. It's that the wholesome, the beautiful qualities of renunciation, loving-kindness, compassion—these are qualities that can really arise from a broad, inclusive awareness. I'll talk about renunciation in a moment, because you may not think of that right away as a beautiful quality, as a happy quality. But that's because we don't understand what it really is.

When we're still caught in what Lama called the narrow bandwidth of "it's all about me," we may have the thought, "I want to do compassionate action," but we really can't see much beyond our nose. We want to do it and we think we want to do it, but that's when we can't. We can't really see what's clear. We can't really get a broad, more accurate perception. But just widening the perception to take in the whole show—it changes everything.

This again from the Dalai Lama, part of that same quotation. He's talking about universal interdependence, which is a way of saying not separate "me-self," just all arising experience: "Since we are all dependent on each other, and all other beings want to be happy and not suffer just as I do, my personal happiness and suffering are inextricably linked with those of others."

In other words, there's no way we can act out of greed and hatred without affecting others as well as ourselves—just as the Buddha said, the affliction of ourselves, the affliction of others. And seeing that, this narrow bandwidth opens up. Even if you're not acting, but the motivation shifts, it can shift the whole picture.

Let me tell you a little story—really a non-doing story, but just a shift of inner motivation. A long, long time ago, too long ago, I was traveling by myself on an overnight train in India. I had a sleeping berth, but not a private one—second or third class. So I had a berth, which is just like a shelf, with three other berths in that same little compartment. But I hadn't thought to get the ladies' car. So it was me and three guys on this berth.

I didn't feel totally comfortable. I mean, there were a million other people on the train—you're definitely not isolated. And in the daytime, there were people everywhere. But then they all leave, and it's just me and these three guys. They were just lying there. They weren't bothering me at all. But every culture has different ways that are appropriate. Lying there staring at me isn't really rude there, whereas here, if they're all lying staring at me—well, you know.

So I was extremely self-conscious and a bit aversive. I just turned to the wall, but I really felt impinged upon. Not scared—I knew nothing was going to happen—but I was aversive and felt impinged upon. "Me, and they should leave me alone, and my space, and blah, they're in my space."

I was like that for a bit of the night. And then at some point, somewhere, something in my mind shifted and I said, "Okay, this is *our* space. We're all just here." That was all. But it was a real shift—that thought was coming out of a shift in motivation rather than saying it and trying to rationalize and pretend that I really felt different. You can try that. Sometimes you can talk yourself into it, but usually not.

Anyway, I thought, "Okay, it's our space." That's all I did. I just kept on lying there. We got up in the morning, and of course their whole families came in, and suddenly there were twenty-five of us there in the car. But I hadn't said a word. I hadn't been like, "So it's our space, we're all one, let's shake hands." I hadn't spoken to anybody at all. But the whole motivation in my heart and mind had changed.

So they brought in their families, they got really friendly—where they hadn't spoken to me before either. And they were buying me little sweets when we stopped at the stations and giving me chai. The whole thing was a completely different experience. It was really such an interesting lesson.

So it's a natural occurrence. Not like I was doing something to be good friends with these people or making any effort. They just felt the difference. We're all connected, you know. You lie there emanating aversion—it's not a secret.

So really we start to see from this the interconnectedness. And this again strengthens these wise motivations, *sammā saṅkappa*.

I want to say a little bit about each, because each one could be a huge talk, but I want to touch on each briefly. Hopefully you can recognize when they're arising in your experience, because they are. They're not some incredibly esoteric thing. But do notice them just as much as you notice the others.

Renunciation might be the one that is most not recognized, or not quite recognized, as the really happy state of heart-mind it is as a motivation. Remember, the motivation is about what's occurring in the *citta*, not about the outward appearance.

We often tend to think of renunciation as a grim giving up of something we want. So we still have the greed and we're giving it up in order to better ourselves—which could be one way, but there's suffering in it because we're losing something we love. You kind of think of it as harsh and grim.

But the intention of renunciation, when it arises in a moment in the *citta*, is the abandoning in that moment of the clinging, which is actually an experience of spacious joy and ease and peace. And it's not about how much stuff we do or don't have.

Someone said to U Tejaniya once in a group, kind of idealizing, "When you left your lay life to become a monk, it must have been such a renunciation. Now there's so little craving. You have so few things." He won't put up with stuff like that for a minute. He said, "Yeah, all the craving for all the ten thousand things—the same amount of craving gets narrowed down into two objects: food and robes."

He's really saying it's not the amount of objects, it's the amount of craving in the heart-mind. So really look at that and see. But notice here, in the times when the craving is put down, notice the space that opens up. Notice the joy that leaves. And as one does live a simple life, if that's what one does—that's not what it has to be—but real re-

nunciation is a kind of simplicity that comes from genuine joy and happiness and ease. If you're renouncing and wearing a hair shirt, filled with aversion and grimness, that's not *sammā saṅkappa*. That's aversion and grimness. So it's really looking to see.

Explore this. Quite a few people have mentioned the dining room as apparently a wonderful place for insight. I've had similar experiences, like the example I just gave. People in different ways have really enjoyed playing with noticing how craving comes up around any particular kind of food—whether they thought they shouldn't have it, like the woman in my example, or they thought they should only have one helping instead of five, or whatever it is. Watching how the craving came up and all the different responses.

First there's that joy. This isn't renunciation yet. This is the joy, a kind of wisdom in the steady awareness of just watching how it's working. And having the permission to go get the food or not go get the food takes the pressure off and lets you really explore.

But then there are times when you hold yourself back, you don't go get it, but there's that tightness. It's a working towards renunciation, but you can still see there's the wanting, the tightness. You're like, "What are you talking about? This is a real joyful thing? I don't think so."

And then there can be a moment when naturally the craving just falls away. You think, "Well, I just don't want that." Notice that. A lot of the time when the craving falls away, we move on to the next thing. But inhabit with awareness that moment of renunciation. Notice the ease, the spaciousness, the coolness that comes in the heart and mind when the *kilesa* dissipates. The *kilesas* are like hot. The mind is burning. It dissipates.

It's okay now. No. Stop and notice that. Stay really present with it. It's like this. Just like this in this moment. Nothing in excess. Nothing is lacking. That's a moment of renunciation, of ease.

From that can come a natural generosity that's also a joy of the heart. It's kind of the next step, not a should. But do you see how it can be easy to skip over it, wait for the next kalesha to come? Really notice it, because bringing that same steady awareness to the wholesome that we're bringing to the unwholesome feeds the wholesome. It strengthens it—not in a holding-on way, but really recognizing: oh yes, comfort, ease. Non-clinging feels like this.

And it becomes more familiar, more trustworthy. It's not something we hold on to, but every time we recognize it, we're strengthening that habit, if you want to look at it that way. So really take some time. When you start to feel an ease—some kalesha, it

could be ill will or aversion, is easing out—don't just think, "Okay, thank God, that's over." Stop. Notice the heart-mind that's free of kalesha at that point. This is totally important. Over and over and over, because this is really what's changing the habit and bringing in the confidence. This same sense of simply not being so engrossed in "me"—which is how it feels when there's wholesomeness. It just opens up.

So in terms of renunciation, that's really where the opening happens—to not just seeing what I need and what I want, but what's the situation in the bigger picture. It could be in the dining room where you really want another biscuit, and you can see there's only three left and there's still five people to come. And not as a should—oh, there's five people, oh, okay—but the wanting just falls away. There's a natural ease of seeing this is really what's needed in this situation. That's wisdom. That isn't self-referential. You get a feeling for that.

And that can go all the way up to the whole environment, the shortage of everything that people need in the world, and noticing when we're overusing. Without having ideas about how one should behave, but really noticing in oneself when we're using too much—what we feel is more heat than I need, or more water than I need, or more whatever than I need—and not a should, but that sense of no clinging, it's not all about me in the mind. It's just naturally: oh, I don't need this much. There can be more. I don't need to use this much electricity. You might think, "Well, no one else is going to get it. I might as well use it." That's kind of the rational kalesha mind. But "oh, I don't need so much electricity, just turn it off"—that's the renunciation. Wise motivation of renunciation. And it's a sense of, again, as the Dalai Lama says, being in the wider picture, the sense of connectedness. You say, "Oh, I'm connected with all beings," but it's just not that inner reference so strongly.

So to say a little about non-ill will, which is how metta is described. Again, I'm just trying to give a flavor of each of these so you recognize them. Ill will we know. We're learning to recognize ill will. Metta—sometimes again, not mistaken, but a limited idea of metta may be making it a little too amazing. "I radiate"—when the Buddha talks about radiating metta in all directions, we could easily think it should be this amazing force of love moving out to all beings. And so I love the way Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about metta.

He says, what I call metta is the ability to witness the unpleasant in a person or a thing or any situation or an aspect of oneself—to witness the unpleasant, to be really present, without creating anything around it.

You get a sense of that? In other words, it's like this. Just being purely present, non-ill will, is actually metta, friendliness. Much more available than you maybe would have thought, right? Non-ill will.

Or as James Baldwin said, an enemy is someone whose story we have not heard. When there's ill will, we're not hearing anything. And that could even be the story of some difficult emotion or physical experience we're feeling. Metta is just this quality of presence without pushing away, without adding a story, just fully with it. So meeting your own experience, hearing it, hearing the story—that's a kind of metta. That's a kind of non-ill will.

And so, hopefully you can see how that arises here on retreat, of course in daily life. But I mean here, many people say, I've seen it myself, how easy it is that somebody—and it's nothing personal to anyone—but usually somebody does something that bugs us, maybe just once, and the mind makes the thing, right? But the ill will is just that feeling of negativity that comes up, and then if you're exploring it with awareness as the Buddha taught, did you see the thoughts that come from it? Hopefully, here, mostly not actions. That's why silence is so wonderful. Really, it lets us explore this stuff without being afraid we're going to really say something that we'll regret just because the ill will was taking over at that moment.

But seeing how, if we just keep feeding the story, the ill will—and every time that we see that person, that's what we think—we can see how the seeing triggers the ill will. And then we think about it. And then say it's a sound that's being made. Then we hear a similar sound, and without even looking, we assume it's that person, even though it's a sound everybody makes, right? But that sound that comes from everybody is all about that. And you see how it builds up.

But then when we witness the unpleasant in a person or thing, you start by just witnessing the unpleasantness of the ill will in our own heart-mind when it's arising, instead of jumping away from it to blaming the other person, or jumping away from it to blaming ourselves for having ill will. Both of those are not just witnessing the ill will with awareness. Oh, it's like this. Ill will feels like this.

When you can be with that, then when the person heaves into view, you're able to just witness seeing. And when we're not creating anything around it, when awareness is just simple awareness we've been talking about, all of a sudden the perception spreads out, right? It happens to me all the time. And what I was perceiving as arrogant or whatever my mind was making up—because we don't know what's going on with anyone else, and we don't even know what's going on with ourselves, and we think we

know what's going on with other people—when that spreads out, and we're just witnessing the unpleasant behavior without creating anything around it, there's a kind of connection. That's metta too. It's connection.

I'm not trying to talk myself out of the ill will. I mean, that's better than just being with the ill will, but I'm not trying to. The perception shifts, you know? You see something you didn't see, and what I was perceiving as arrogance—I said, oh. Wow, to behave like that, you just get this sense: that's a lot of suffering. That's a lot of suffering.

So that's actually compassion. Compassion comes up in response to suffering. Metta is connection with whatever's going on. They're both very close together. It just arises naturally, right? You don't have to make it. Notice that. We tend to go, okay, well, that's good, I had a moment of compassion. And then we sometimes think to really bring full awareness and inhabit that is a kind of an ego thing, you know?

I don't want to give it a lot of attention. I think I'm such a compassionate person, but I really need to notice how much ill will there was. And don't forget about that. But if the ill will is gone, really notice that it's gone. Notice the gone-ness. Don't keep holding onto it in memory.

And notice what this simple friendliness of metta or compassion—which is more like the connection with suffering, the quivering of the heart, but without aversion—let that be there in your awareness. Really notice, again, the coolness. Compassion is a beautiful emotion, even though it arises in the face of suffering. Notice the coolness of non-kilesa. Notice the spacious, all-inclusive quality, that it's not all about me and what you're doing and how it affects me. It's simply: oh, it's like this now. Me and you and the whole situation—it's like this now.

And then it can be that something somebody's doing seems to impact your activities and get in your way, and suddenly you realize, oh, that's a lot of suffering. And without even thinking about it, you just get out of the way. I don't need this. They can have it. But it's not an aversive thing. It's really letting go. And there's this sense of love and happiness in the whole situation—they need it more than I do. You don't turn that into a big ego thing. You could, but then it won't feel like happiness. It won't feel like coolness. Just notice that.

Do you see how these little moments arise so much on retreat? I see some nods, so thank goodness you're seeing some of it. And this isn't just a little nothing—this is really important. Really important to notice, because this is the path.

The steady awareness that we've been cultivating, this steady awareness free from kilesa, how that awareness is meeting each moment of experience—that is the path of non-harming, of metta, of renunciation. The reason those habits start to grow and transform is because in any moment, how the citta, the mind, the awareness is meeting the moment, is the path. There's only this moment.

So when we're meeting difficulty or greed with this clear awareness that isn't filled with difficulty or greed, in that moment you could say it might manifest as metta or compassion or renunciation, but it is actually the wholesome that's feeding that. In that moment, we're cultivating—or rather, the wholesome is being cultivated—in that quality of steady awareness.

So when we say that awareness has the qualities of metta, of compassion, of non-clinging, it does. Not that you can necessarily see them, but right there, just in how we meet the moment. One teacher said—not a Buddhist teacher, but he said—in every moment of activity, the heart-mind is committing to something. The question is: what? That's really what we look at in this moment. What's the attitude in the heart-mind? What is it committing to? And how we see internally is how we act externally.

Two reflections—from Martin Luther King and Eleanor Roosevelt. I was recently in Atlanta, where I have family, and we visited the new Museum of Civil and Human Rights, which is profoundly touching and illuminating.

From Martin Luther King: "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate them."

So that's what we're doing, only in reverse. We see that you refuse to hate them, and that's what leads to refusing to shoot them.

And this was from Eleanor Roosevelt, in the human rights section of the museum, which documented both historical and present-day violations of human rights, both in this country and around the world. She says: "Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home. So close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world." I'd say, you know, right here. "Yet they are the world of the individual person. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in terms of human rights in the larger world."

That's what we're doing, you know. That's how it connects.

So notice again, when there's a shift of attitude—the little ones I've mentioned, but sometimes in the bigger picture too—when there's a shift of motivation, of attitude, how that can completely change the sense and effect of the action.

I'll give you a couple of examples, one from Mingyur Rinpoche and one from Bhikkhu Anālayo—two very different monks.

Bhikkhu Anālayo said—very classical Theravada study monk—he's talking about practice in a retreat setting and how it can seem very self-involved and separate and selfish. But he says, practice in a retreat setting turns into compassionate activity through the transforming power of one's aspiration to awaken for the benefit of others as well as one's own benefit.

Check it out. When you notice, when you tune into that aspiration, then going through the same outer actions can feel so different. And it can even motivate you to action that you wouldn't otherwise take.

Even in little ways. This seems like a silly little example, but from my own practice, it really stuck with me. I was sitting in Burma this past winter, and I was just doing some walking on a little path in a kind of wooded area. There weren't many people staying at this place; it wasn't crowded. And there was some rubble—I don't even remember what, something sharp—right in the middle of the path. I was just very calm and peaceful. I would come to it, see it, walk around it. I didn't have aversion, I wasn't thinking about it at all, quite equanimous, but just in my own world, doing my own thing.

And suddenly the thought just popped up: "Well, this isn't bothering you, but what if somebody else comes along later and really hurts themselves on this?" I hadn't had that thought. And immediately I picked it up and moved it. It was just a nothing doing—you're doing the obvious. Picked it up, moved it, and kept walking. I said, "Oh, that's so interesting." Because that time when it was just about me, it didn't bother me. It never occurred to me to move the thing. As soon as the connectedness, the friendliness, the mettā thought came up, there was immediate action—just doing the obvious.

So when we think it's aversion and clinging and self-interest that leads to action, just notice: mettā, compassion, wisdom actually are extremely strong motivators for action.

From Mingyur Rinpoche. He's Tibetan, and there's a great emphasis on bodhicitta, which means cultivating the awakened heart-mind—practicing in order to wake up so that you can help wake up all beings. That's bodhicitta.

So he says intention—what our intention is—can transform neutral activities into wholesome, positive ones. He says, "Sleeping, for example." Did you think that could be a really wholesome positive? When we go to bed at night with the mind of bodhicitta, with a mind that aspires, we aspire: "May our sleep be the cause of increased capacity to help all beings attain enlightenment."

Try it. It changes everything. Really.

When you go to eat, really tuning into gratitude when you're eating. And now I've just started saying to myself, "May all beings have food. May all beings have drink. May this food give my mind and body strength to be able to serve myself and all beings." And sometimes you really say it and it transforms everything. We can do that with anything, with everything as we go through the day.

So that's it—you say the thing and then you drop it. Don't be labored about it. But just notice: sometimes it does nothing, and sometimes it actually brings up that shift of motivation. Then just play with seeing how that feels.

We need to get as comfortable and trusting with these qualities as we are with greed and aversion, with fear and self-interest.

I think that's enough. Just to say that the noticing, as I was saying, really builds confidence in the understanding, which strengthens all the five faculties toward wisdom. The wisdom, again, strengthens the confidence, and it keeps on going. Because as we practice and get to more and more subtleties, we're also noticing more and more, becoming more sensitive to the suffering in our own heart and mind. So it takes a continuing deepening commitment to ourselves to keep being willing and interested to show up for the difficult. It's like a cycle.

As we understand more, the confidence and the willingness to keep showing up deepens, and they keep serving each other in this beautiful, self-reinforcing cycle.

May we all practice for the benefit of ourselves and all living beings.

Thank you so much. I deeply appreciate what you're doing with your lives here in these nine days. It's truly amazing, given everything happening on this planet.

Let's sit quietly for a moment, opening to awareness in whatever way or posture feels right.

CHAPTER 151

Mindfulness and Right View (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the profound relationship between mindfulness and sammādiṭṭhi (right view), the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. She emphasizes that the Buddha's teaching is fundamentally pragmatic—not about adopting a philosophy, but about directly seeing how dukkha arises and ceases in our own experience moment by moment. The practice of ehipassiko (come and see for yourself) invites us to investigate reality directly rather than through belief.*
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> *Wilson explores sakkāyadiṭṭhi (personality view or identity view) as the central misperception underlying our suffering—the deeply conditioned habit of taking any particular experience as 'me' or 'mine.' She illustrates how a simple sensation like warmth can remain neutral, flowing naturally, until the moment we 'privilege' it with ownership, triggering chains of reactivity rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. Drawing from teachers including Ajahn Sumedho, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and Mingyur Rinpoche, she describes vipassanā as experiencing mind and body directly with right understanding.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with this recognition: rather than fighting reality or waiting for dramatic breakthroughs, we can trust the simple knowing of 'it's like this now.' Wilson describes mindfulness as 'the point that includes'—a non-judgmental, nonviolent awareness that doesn't require anything to be different. Through persistent, moment-to-moment awareness of ordinary experience, wisdom naturally arises, revealing things as they are and allowing unnecessary suffering to fall away.*

I want to talk tonight about giving a bigger context for the purpose of cultivating this steady, non-judgmental awareness that we're exploring—that this whole retreat is set up to help develop, recognize, trust, and cultivate. It's not just for the heck of it. And it's not just to be a better mindful person. It really serves the deepest purpose, in my understanding, of the Buddha's teachings.

The thing that really drew me to the Buddha's practice in the first place, and really the way the Buddha taught when I started to be able to read and hear and understand it a little, is that it's never been about adopting a new philosophy. There's an endless amount of information and philosophical discourse and ways of understanding and de-

scribing the mind and heart and the world in the Buddhist teaching, don't get me wrong. One could take the Buddhist teaching and spend your life in philosophical debate and discourse about it. And many do. That's not my bent.

But the heart of the Buddha's teaching is really so pragmatic, so practical from what we can tell. He started teaching and everything he offered was from the point of view of helping us see for ourselves how suffering is created on a moment-to-moment basis in our own mind and heart—how the seeds of suffering can grow and create suffering in a moment when the conditions are ripe, and also how the seeds of peace and release from suffering arise in our own mind and heart when the conditions are supportive of that.

As someone said last night, maybe it was Fran, these teachings aren't about "if you believe this then this will happen for you," because belief just doesn't cut it. It's all about *ehipassiko*—you too come and see for yourself. Come and look.

So everything we say, everything the Buddha taught, this whole retreat—we're really trying to set it up to support everybody to get interested enough, or just stay interested enough, to keep bringing this interested, mindful attention to our life, to our mind and body process. Not just for the heck of it, but because when we really recognize accurately what's going on, that's the condition in a moment that gives rise to release from the confusion, the suffering, the angst that gets created in our response, our reaction to experience when we don't understand it accurately.

To me, that's the most amazing thing about the way the Buddha spoke about what frees our heart and mind. I think most of us, when things aren't right, when we're suffering, we try to fix everything externally. Nothing wrong with that when we can do it. But a heck of a lot of the time, we can't do it.

The Buddha is saying that the suffering comes not because the external conditions are as they are. Yes, a lot of the time, external conditions and internal conditions are really difficult, really messed up. We're not saying everything's hunky-dory. But when we don't recognize our experience accurately, then the response that arises in the way we think, in the way we feel, in the way we act in relationship to experience—that response is what creates and continues to keep us spinning in suffering and confusion.

And so what's so cool is that the freedom, the wise understanding, the right view the Buddha speaks about—*sammā diṭṭhi*, the first step of the Eightfold Noble Path—is wise understanding, right view, recognizing accurately. When we recognize accurately

what's going on, then the response of heart and mind is in alignment with things as they are. It sounds simple and maybe not that exciting, but it changes everything. Everything. It's really so amazing.

From Mingyur Rinpoche: "If we want to be happy, we must figure out which causes and conditions lead to our well-being." Which makes sense. "Similarly, if we do not have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how could we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?"

This meditation, the whole Buddhist path, is about recognizing accurately the conditions that create suffering in our heart and mind. And once it's accurately recognized, it's actually a natural effect of the accurate recognition that we respond appropriately in a way that doesn't create more suffering for ourselves, just on a moment-to-moment basis. It's not a one-time thing and then it's over. You probably know that by now, right? It's never going to be a one-time and it's over. This is our life, this whole life.

But what's amazing is that the power of accurate recognition is what frees us, and the steady, non-judging mindfulness of the simple experiences—just the simple things we've been talking about today—that is the powerful tool. The steadiness of that sets up the condition for wisdom, for accurate recognition to arise.

One of the definitions, I think it's from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, of Vipassanā meditation: Vipassanā meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. Sometimes he calls that the three jobs of a yogi. The moment-to-moment mindfulness—you're probably getting it that that's what we're really leaning on—experiencing the mind and body directly, just as it is, with the right understanding.

Often this right understanding, wise view, can be information that's handed to you, that we need to hear in order to inspire us to look more carefully. But what I personally really appreciate about the translation of *sammā diṭṭhi* in the Pali to "wise view" or "right view" is that in my mind, which is pretty literal, I translate that literally: that the view of experience is accurate. The shift of perception, the shift of recognition—"Oh, that's how it is." All the reactions of dislike or self-interest or greed or confusion fall away because they no longer apply.

But anyway, I have a nephew, a three-year-old nephew, and he's the first in my family—the first and probably the last, given the age of my brother—little one. So it's been fun watching how he learns.

This is just an example of how little kids learn. You know those toys where you put blocks in with different shapes—a triangle, a circle, a square—and you have to put the triangle block in the triangle hole? It's not rocket science for us, but for a little kid, you just see an adult do it, and then you can't do it yourself because you don't have the sense that the triangle doesn't fit in the circle. So the kid's trying to put it in the wrong one, and you can watch the frustration build and the confusion.

If it were an adult thinking more clear thoughts, you might think, "What's wrong with me? This is messed up. They made it wrong, or I'm stupid, or how come my mother can do it?" Because it was so easy for them and I can't do it. So given your propensity, you either blame inside or you blame outside or you throw the whole thing out the window. I have a good friend—she's a nun—and she'll be working on her computer and says, "I just want to throw this whole thing out the window." This is in the monastery over in Burma, but I can really relate. So it's not just little kids.

But then, suddenly, watching a little kid—and you can say it's developmental—suddenly it clicks in and he gets it. Maybe he doesn't know the word, but he can see: triangle, triangle, it matches, it goes in, the whole thing starts to work. And all that reactivity? It's just gone. Because it doesn't make any sense anymore. Because he's seeing things more accurately. This is the nature of things. And when there's accurate recognition, all the hullabaloo goes away.

That's simple, but that's really what I'm talking about. The nature of insight is this shift of perception—from not recognizing accurately and getting reactive, to just, "Oh, it's like this now. That's how it is." This is what our mindfulness is helping us practice.

So we stop fighting. It's not personal. It's like we stop fighting the law of gravity—probably we all stopped fighting that a long time ago. We stop fighting the fact that bodies get older. Well, no, actually, people don't stop fighting that. But you'd think we would, because it happens. It's the law of nature. And that whole extra suffering is just a sense of denying or not recognizing things as they are, or wishing they were different.

Have you spent any time at all today wishing things were different? Did you have any moments of experience arising where somehow you're thinking, "This isn't right. It's not supposed to be like this right now. I'm doing it wrong. It's too hot. The instructions are stupid. I shouldn't have come. I'm too sleepy." Whatever—something's wrong because it's supposed to be different. That's exactly the place of being in contention with reality.

And what this steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness is hopefully giving us the practice to see is: "Oh, it's like this now." Ajahn Sumedho says that all the time. "No, no, I'm sleepy." "Oh, it's like this now." And attention, a total sense of presence, just drops into feeling how it is—good, bad, indifferent. It's not that everything becomes lovely. You're still sleepy and your body's heavy and you're sweating. And—oh, it's like this now. But the contention is gone.

As the teacher Byron Katie says, when you fight with reality, you lose.

So we're here to embrace this quality of moment-to-moment awareness—to see what reality actually is.

And we can't think our way into it. We have to keep practicing. That's what this is about.

Let me give you another kind of example. In my mind, it's the same kind of example—a shift in how we think about something, or the way we use language, can actually affect how we experience. We don't recognize accurately.

I was reading a book about nonviolence as a powerful tool, both internal and external, for social change—how it really needs to come from within. The author was talking about Gandhi and Martin Luther King and the real power of nonviolence as both a strategy and a way of life. But he was also saying that it's often perceived from the outside as weak or passive—as if nonviolence is just the best you can do when you really should be fighting.

The point that intrigued me in this particular article was looking at how language reflects assumptions. We may be aware of some of them, but often we're unaware—yet they're affecting how we think about things, shaping how we even recognize what's happening.

He was saying the very term "nonviolence" actually makes violence the norm. "Non" positions it as the exception, and then we think that way. What about if the only word for war were "non-peace"? Doesn't it create just a little shift? Such a small thing. I'm not going to go into a whole linguistic exploration, but language, which reflects so much of how we think—and it's different from culture to culture—can shape the way we're thinking and looking at ourselves and life.

So why is it that we get so habituated to not recognizing accurately? Why should it be so difficult? I don't think I can answer that either, but that question leads into what I want to talk about next. This is really part of the exploration of moment-to-moment mindfulness.

We were saying that awareness can be with anything: the movements of mind, thoughts, sensations in the body, sound, sight. Sure, it takes some steadiness and practice to notice the more subtle movements of mind. Absolutely—that doesn't come right away. But we can actually notice how the mistaken assumptions and habits of mind and heart and reaction arise. It's not like we have to hear about them and say, "Okay, now I'm going to stop doing that," because we can't. We don't even know it's happening in our mind. But hearing it, we can start to get interested in exploring.

One essential wrong view, one misinterpretation of moment-to-moment experience that is, according to how the Buddha talked—and certainly in my experience—at the heart of our confusion: a central misunderstanding, misperception, wrong view, and one that is arising very, very frequently in our moment-to-moment experience. It's arising and passing because nothing is steady-state. It's not like there's this wrong idea sitting in the back of our mind that's always there. Nothing is always there. The mind isn't always there either. Everything's changing every moment. But this one arises frequently.

It's called in Pali *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, or personality view, identity view. It really means the habit—incredibly deep—of taking any particular moment of experience as being me, or mine, or who I am.

I'm going to try to keep this from getting too abstract, but this is really at the core of our suffering and confusion. This is where all the distortions and reactions to experience arise—out of this habit of taking ownership. As I always say, we take everything personally, and it's not personal.

"What do you mean? Of course it's personal. I'm sleepy. Who's sleepy? I am. Who's suffering from it? Me."

Yes, it feels like that. We're not saying it doesn't feel like that. We're not saying try to think your way out of it, because who's trying to think their way out of it? The more you think about it, the stronger you feel the "I." So I'm not saying abandon that. Just start to watch what happens when a particular experience is somehow separated out as me or mine or I.

Very simply, going through the day-to-day, noticing when you were aware—I'm sure there's plenty of times you weren't aware, so only the times that awareness was remembered—noticing whatever's occurring. There's seeing happening, hearing happening, sounds come and go, sensations in the body coming and going, moods, emotions,

thoughts coming and going. All of that. Maybe tastes when you're eating, smells. All of these things are happening over and over and over, sometimes very rapidly. You agree with that?

So when Steve was talking about moment-to-moment awareness and how we're practicing with really the very mundane experience much of the time, it's exactly so we can start to notice. You need the steadiness to start to notice this.

So notice how you might be walking or outside. There's sensations—it's warm, it's cold—there's hearing, there's a perception of bird, there's a thought that goes by, there's a sight that's happening. Not that you're naming each thing, but there's awareness that is going on.

But suddenly, a particular experience is somehow privileged. Being me or mine—and we don't say "neon lights me or mine." You're just walking along, and suddenly—Steve kept talking about being in the sun, right? So suddenly you're walking in the sun. There's been warm sensations, there's been hearing, and all of a sudden it's a hot sensation, and something happens: "Ah, I'm so hot."

That particular physical sensation of warmth—before it was just coming and going, it was warmth, it was relatively neutral, there was hearing, there was seeing—but suddenly it's like, "Ugh, I'm so hot." Do you get a sense of the difference? The feeling of heat or warmth has been kind of privileged, it's been pulled out of the whole flow which keeps on going and going, of me or mine. And this sense of heat or unpleasant has somehow come up and it's *me*. And the whole flow can kind of stop at that point.

Or it could be something really pleasant. "Oh, the cool breeze. It's so nice." And then the next thing you're thinking about how you're going to make it cool back in your room. And then you're thinking about the nice cool vacation you're going to take after this, and then on and on and on.

But before that, it's just a sensation arising, a sound arising, a thought arising. When the sense of me comes in, then it leads to reaction—and we want more, or we don't want it at all. We think about things. If it's something unpleasant that keeps on occurring, we start thinking this shouldn't be happening. How can I get rid of it? Why don't they fix it? Why is this going on? It can lead to a whole lot of resistance, anger, suffering, blame. And something that we like can lead to a whole story of how to get more, or what does it mean about me?

And what we don't notice is how what had just been a very steady flow of awareness—different things happening—has suddenly shrunk and gotten frozen in a way.

Lama Tsultrim Allione, the Tibetan lama, talks about how really thoughts and all our experience is just nature. We're nature. Yet we take everything that occurs personally, as if somehow we're in charge of it, as if we can control it. So if you're really sleepy, there's a sense it shouldn't be happening, or it's my fault, or if I do X, Y, and Z, sleepiness will go away. Other than going to bed, you probably can't control that.

Do you control what thoughts come? We wish, right? Can you control the sensations that arise in your body? No. Everything that occurs—there are conditions that are coming together, some internal, some external. We're really affected by the environment, by other people. But the tendency, when a particular experience has been privileged as I or mine, is that it becomes separate—me—and everything else is other.

So Lama Tsultrim was saying to recognize when that happens, instead of realizing that thoughts, sensations—it's all just part of nature. At the moment when a certain experience is held to as me, we kind of solidify. And he says we become locked then in the narrow bandwidth of personal human experience. We become a human experiencing this narrow bandwidth, and we lose the sense of—not even the connection, because that implies me connecting with something else—but we lose the sense of the inclusive nature of experience, of nature. What we're calling me is just conditions arising as part of nature, as a natural result of whatever the causes are in this moment. It becomes me and that's other. And how can I change the other so that the me is more comfortable or happy or whatever? It goes in that direction.

So when we get locked in this narrow bandwidth, it is what distorts our accurate recognition, and it leads to what the Buddha really spoke of as the deepest emotional habits of mind and heart—what are really the wellspring of confusion and suffering in our mind.

And those are—I'm just going to mention—the habits of greed, wanting what we want; aversion or hatred, really just trying to push away what we don't want. And this can go very subtle and get really far really fast. And then the basic delusion, just not recognizing accurately. Like my nephew, before he could tell the triangle and the circle apart, before he got frustrated and all, there wasn't greed or aversion. He just wasn't able to recognize accurately. That's a kind of delusion.

Our habit of solidifying around a particular experience as "me" and "mine" is so frequent and common. This is also nature. It's a habit that I'm going to guess we all have. I'm just going to hazard a guess—I haven't met a person who doesn't have that habit. But it's so familiar and it seems so right, it happens so much, that mostly we don't even

look at it or notice it or question it. We just get involved in the reaction of liking, disliking, and confusion. This is what mindfulness helps us begin to see through in another way.

I'm back to the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. So the Dalai Lama is saying that the paradox is that although we have a drive for self-focus, the drive behind self-focus is to seek greater happiness for yourself. And this is just what the Buddha said. The compassionate thing that motivated him to teach when he first woke up—because he was thinking, "I don't really need to teach, I could just kind of hang out in peace for the rest of my life." But he looked around and he really saw that everybody wants to be happy. That's really at the heart of all of us. But by not recognizing accurately what brings happiness and what brings suffering, we keep doing—in trying to be happy—just the things that keep us suffering more.

That's what the Dalai Lama is saying here: "The drive behind self-focus is to seek greater happiness for yourself, but it ends up doing exactly the opposite. When you focus too much on yourself, you become disconnected and alienated from others. And in the end, you also become alienated from yourself. With too much self-focus, your vision becomes narrow. And with this, even a small problem appears out of proportion and unbearable."

Have you had any moments like that today? Retreats are great for that. I mean, really, even in your mind you say, "This little thing that's going on that I really feel murderous rage about..." You can have a thought that your reaction doesn't seem quite in line with the mundanity of this situation. But you can really see—oh my goodness, little things cause so much suffering. And in our daily life, it's the same thing.

Now here's Desmond Tutu. He's talking his own language, but saying the same thing, so it's not just the Buddha. He's saying, "You know, in a real sense we have a very profound complementarity." In other words, we're all part of each other, the whole world. You don't have to be a believer in anything. He said, "I learned to be a human being from other human beings—learning to walk, learning to speak from other human beings. We belong in this delicate network. It is actually quite profound."

That's what Lama Dreamed was saying. We lose the sense, the recognition of this delicate network when it becomes "my sound, my hearing, my reaction."

Back to Desmond Tutu: "Unfortunately, in our world, we tend not to recognize our connection until times of great disaster." He's talking externally, how in times of great disaster, then we come forward and try to help. But I want to say also, internally, what

we can explore on retreat here and in our life is when it's a time of personal disaster. And on retreat, the personal disaster may just be that you didn't get oatmeal for breakfast or something. It can feel like a personal disaster.

So what we can explore is—that's what we're practicing for. We don't have to wait for a huge disaster to knock us out of our habit of viewing everything as "me" and "mine." Because that's what happens with a big disaster, personally or worldwide. It shakes us up. It makes us look fresh somehow. We can see in a different way. It kind of knocks us upside the head or the heart.

We don't have to wait for that. This is why we want to practice this simple moment-to-moment mindfulness—because it sets up the conditions that reveal things as they are. It doesn't have to only be accessible when everything's falling apart. It's just this simple. The simplicity of mindfulness, which can include everything.

What I mean by that... Can you hear the bell? I'll say it again. Just the simplicity of hearing. Just what it is. Mindfulness. No big whoop.

Then, did you notice if there were any thoughts that came after that? Which is fine. Mindfulness can notice the thought. "Why is she ringing the bell?" "It's a nice sound." "It's not a nice sound." "I wish that was the bell for the end of the talk because I'm sleepy and I want to go to bed now." "How much longer is it going to be?" "Is it hot in here?" All of that is just natural. Mindfulness can notice all of that.

The simplicity of mindfulness, though, is it's just not adding anything extra. So the simplicity of hearing the sound—hearing. If we think "bell," that's a perception. Mindfulness can recognize that. There's nothing that occurs in our mind, in our body, in hearing and seeing and feeling and thinking that needs to be outside of the simple moment of mindful recognizing. It's like this now. Nothing excluded.

So that whole train of thought I just described—when we're not aware of it, we hear the bell and the next thing we know we're really kind of disgruntled and feeling restless and tired and wanting to go, and aversive. And everything I'm saying, you know, "Shut up, shut up already, I want to go." And you don't quite know how you got there. Then suddenly you wake up feeling really aversive right now. "I shouldn't be feeling aversive. I should be really in mindfulness and really loving—that's what the retreat's about."

But as soon as you notice—oh, aversion—that's mindfulness. That's the simplicity of mindfulness. It's like this now. There's nothing that's outside of this simple moment of awareness.

Ajahn Sumedho often uses the phrase, "Mindfulness is the point that includes." I love that. It's a point, meaning it's just this moment. It's not about what happened three seconds ago, because there's only this moment. But whatever's occurring in this moment, the simplicity and honesty of mindfulness can just relax into it. It's like this now. You don't even have to have words for it. Just—it's like this now.

I do that all the time, on and off retreat, when I'm really trying very dedicatedly to be mindful as we've been giving instructions. You try to hear the sound, notice the thought, feel the sensation, right? Have you been trying to practice like that today? Sometimes? Ever? Does it get tiring? Yeah. Does it feel kind of stressful sometimes? Because it's like we're trying too hard. Because it feels like something I have to do as an act of personal will.

No, that's only how we know how to do stuff. So in the beginning, the act of personal will is simply that remembering—what's happening now. That's it.

What's happening now. You don't even have to name it.

So when I'm starting to feel that trying to be mindful, trying to be present, and I start to notice the stress and the tightness and it's feeling so effortful—the point that includes is simply: oh, it's like this now. I'm saying words because I'm talking, but I may not need to articulate "ah, effortful feels like this." The whole thing—you don't have to name it all, this is a sight, this is a sound—just the whole thing. There's a sense of total relaxation, of total presence and wakefulness into this moment. The point that includes.

And for me, there's always a sense of ease. Ease because the sense of fighting with or trying to fix what's happening is released in that moment. Oh, it's like this now. And if I had to put words to it, it's like: I feel totally stressed and tired and hot and aversive. Feels like this now. And there's—it's so weird, I know, it doesn't make sense just to talk about it—but there's a sense for me of the relief of no longer being in contention with reality. And a wakefulness: oh, it's like this now.

This is the shift from our entrancement with the particular experience, the object. Say striving, say tension. Our idea of it being about me—my tension, I'm doing something wrong, or why is there tension? And the idea of relief would be: I relax into tension, I name it, and it gets better. Right? Those of you who've done a lot of mindfulness practice—don't we often get caught up in thinking that if you were being mindful properly, the unpleasant thing would change? I've been with it, I've been with it, I've been with it. We go, right, uh-huh, and? Yeah, well, and it's still here. Okay, that's right. No one said mindfulness makes everything you don't like go away. It's nothing to do with that.

But the peace that comes—oh yes, it's like this—this is the shift to taking refuge in that moment of awareness, that moment of mindfulness, rather than getting our confirmation, our sense of self, our sense of good and bad and liking from the particular object. Because the object is changing every moment. And awareness, mindfulness, is not stained or gotten dirty or ragged if it's a difficult experience. It doesn't get more beautiful and pristine if it's a lovely experience. In some ways, awareness doesn't care what it's aware of. It's not like our wanting mind of me—we only want to be with the good stuff. Good means pleasant, basically, or some idea that I'm doing good. Awareness doesn't care. Oh yeah, it's like this now, completely stressed out. And the ease is: the stressed out is here, but the sense of it's all about me in that moment is gone. Just for that moment. Because the awareness—trusting the awareness, recognizing—it's just so simple.

And that's why we want to do moment to moment to moment these very mundane experiences. Because we want to have more and more chances to just recognize. It's so simple. It's like nothing.

This awareness, you know, like we've talked about this morning and will keep talking about—you're just feeling your hands touching. You're just noticing, you're seeing. You think, hey, awareness of stress. You're like, huh? I came here so I could say, okay, I know I'm stressed. That's it? That's what you got to offer? I don't think so. We're looking for something a lot more spectacular often in awareness than just this simple knowing. Oh, yeah. Hearing and knowing of it. Sensation and knowing of it.

It's so ordinary. It's available in every single moment of consciousness. It's so available and so kind of neutral, you could say, that mostly our habit is to completely overlook it because we get entranced by whatever it is that's occurring, whatever the object is—especially when it says something about me.

But even that sense of me—this is about me—can also simply be noticed by awareness. That's the point that includes there's nothing outside of it.

So noticing the difference, for example, in how complicated and reactive our experience can get when that little privileged perception comes and owns something. Say you're walking outside. Of course it's not cold now, it's hot, but go out tonight and it's cool. My body doesn't like cold very much. So it could be walking outside and there's just a sense of coolness on the body, coldness on the body, and it can just be noticed like that, just like the hearing of the bell. That's normal. Then the perception can recognize it as cold. Hearing—that's just normal. Awareness notices that.

Then the habit of mind is that what we perceive, what we feel, we think about. So then there's the thought of cold, and this is where the sense of me can come in so strongly. "It's cold. How could it be so cold when it was so warm? And I was so warm, so now I don't have the proper clothes. And I know it's not good for me to be cold, and my proper clothes are all the way down at the bottom of the hill, and I have to walk all the way down there to get them, and now I'm going to get a cough, and now I'm going to get sick, and I have to teach the rest of this retreat, and I'm not going to feel well—I'll be up here coughing my guts out in front of all these people..." That's just how my mind might work. I'm sure yours are much more spacious and non-reactive than that.

And then it goes from the thoughts to what's called a view. The view would be: this is me, I'm cold, it's not good for me, something needs to be done. Like that. Me is really solid. Do you see how complicated it gets? What did it start with? Without the sense of owning it as me, we're out.

And there are plenty of times it's not like that. Walking, and there's coolness, and there's coolness. And nothing. It's amazing. We just recognize coolness and don't create anything around it. Life is so simple. It's so simple we can't stand it. So there's coolness, and then there's hearing, and then there's a thought: "Oh, my body doesn't like to be cold." But that thought can come and go and be recognized too.

So with the awareness practice, it's not that we're going to be able to stop all this complication. And there's no point in hating it—that's just more complication. But what we can do is get really interested in exploring it, include it in the mindfulness. See how, as the Buddha said, when we suffer, the extra suffering is that the heart and mind creates agitation through clinging. Clinging to wanting it to be warm. Clinging to wanting to have more oatmeal. Clinging to whatever. Instead of: okay, coolness is like this. Hunger feels like this. It's really just to explore the difference between the complexification and the simple moment-to-moment sati. Mindfulness.

Often we don't talk about this at the beginning of a retreat, but the way that this particular style of practice—and we really learned a lot from Sayadaw Tejaniya—remember, Vipassana meditation is experiencing mind and body directly, moment to moment, with the right understanding. This is what makes all the difference. We want to start by talking about the right understanding. Not that we have it all the time, but this is just an idea we can put in. When you notice you're really all caught up and everything's complicated, just stop a minute and ask: what's going on now? You can often feel the contraction, the tightness in the mind and body, and you might notice that sense of "it's all about me right now." You don't have to get rid of it. Just bring awareness: oh, it's all about me. It feels like this.

Ajahn Sumedho, who talks about this a lot, says we have a tendency to think that we must wait and practice a long time before beginning to understand this personality view, or the idea of personality. It's often that way. People say you shouldn't talk about it until late, late in a retreat.

We can't understand by thinking about it. But Ajahn Sumedho asked himself: why should I practice for twenty years from within the delusion of "I am practicing to achieve something for me"? Complete delusion. Why practice from wrong view when we can start by simply having it in our mind to bring in the mindfulness and begin to see? Is this true or not? Don't believe me—just look and see for yourself. Get interested. Explore.

When you're feeling suffering and confusion, just check what's going on in the mind that's paying attention. And when there are times of ease—not some blissful, amazing experience, but ordinary moments—notice those too. Maybe not today, maybe you were too tired today, but there will be moments. You're just walking, or sitting, or eating, or sitting outside looking at a bird, and nothing special is going on. But there's some moment-to-moment awareness, and really there's a sense of non-struggle, of ease, of peace. Isn't that simply being moment-to-moment present with things? Notice that.

The next moment, of course, the mind will go, "I'm doing so well. I'm at peace. La la la la la." That's okay. Just notice that. And if that recognition clamps everything down, great—awareness notices that too. "Oh, I'm making it so special. It's like this now."

I always think of this awareness—the point that includes, that can be with anything—as like a Tai Chi move. It's just, "Oh, it's like this now." You don't have to move away from anything. We simply move from involvement, from really being seduced and entranced by the object, to noticing what's occurring. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental activity.

So we don't have to wait. We don't have to practice for twenty years and then say, "Oh, I was doing it all from wanting to try and get something." When actually, it's like this now. Just moment to moment, simple awareness. And all these mundane moments of nothing special are just what we need. Because when nothing special is happening, we won't be so entranced by the object, and we have a better chance to notice the simple knowing, the simple awareness, and start to trust it.

The attitude that we bring to awareness, what makes it possible not to be in contention, brings us back to that nonviolence from Martin Luther King, where he's saying nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate them. It only comes from the attitude in the mind, heart, and the moment.

This quality of non-violence is the attitude that infuses wise mindfulness, wise awareness—the non-violence of refusing to hate or cling to whatever experience arises. The attitude we often bring is, "This is good, this is bad, I don't like this." But what's happening now? It's like this. This quality of non-violence, non-contention, really of interest—really seeing this is what's happening, this is life in this moment. Let's just see how it's working.

What allows us to see how these habits grow—the habits of suffering, the habits of freedom—is the steady moment-to-moment awareness, the perseverance, the persistence. When we're just aware for a moment, then we space out for an hour, then we're aware for a moment—sure, in the beginning that's out of our control. But what happens is we'll wake up again only when something is intense enough. Either we're really identified, really reacting, really liking something, and then we don't notice all those moments of simple awareness where there's a sense of ease, of peace, and just the knowing can be known. We don't notice that. Then we wake up again in the middle of some big reaction, and we think, "It's always me, I'm always reacting, this is how it is."

People come in for interviews and say—though no one here, since we haven't talked yet—"I've just been sleepy the whole day." Really? So when you had lunch, you were sleepy?

We do this same thing with our mental states. Someone comes in and says, "I've been sleepy the whole day." Really? So when you had lunch, were you sleepy? Well, no. At three o'clock, were you sleepy? No. So when exactly were you sleepy? "Well, there was about ten minutes in the 8:15 sitting where I was really sleepy. And then again at 4:30, I noticed I was really sleepy."

We do this. We take these moments and make them the whole thing, without the steadiness of moment-to-moment attention. This persistence is what creates the conditions for wisdom to arise—wisdom that recognizes accurately things as they are.

And this is what's so beautiful: it's nature. We don't have to create wisdom. We can't. But with steady moment-to-moment mindfulness, why we keep going through the whole day, that becomes the condition for wisdom, for clear recognition of things as they are, to arise naturally.

So this third aspect of the yogi—perseverance, continuity—as Steve said last night, every moment is a dhamma. Awareness doesn't care whether you're aware of your breath, a really subtle sensation, what the food tastes like when you're eating, or you're having a little hissy fit in the toilet. It doesn't matter. You bring awareness right then, at any moment.

As we go through the day, we really want to see this—not to privilege sitting over walking, over eating. That's part of why we take away the steady schedule, so you can find your own rhythm in sitting, in walking. What helps you keep coming back into awareness? What helps you refresh your attention, refresh your mind?

And then really to see that whether you're walking down to have tea, looking at the horses, sitting in here, or doing walking meditation, it's all equal. Nothing is more or less important in terms of awareness.

We're not trying to achieve something here in a short period of time. It's just nine days of many, many moments, each an equal opportunity to begin to recognize and trust simple mindfulness, simple awareness—to see how it begins to get its own momentum. And that momentum is the natural condition for wisdom to arise. We don't have to make it happen. It's not an act of personal will.

Sayadaw U Pandita said, "When mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of body and mind, and then unnecessary suffering falls away."

And Mingyur Rinpoche says, "Once we start our path of Dharma, every practice is an awareness practice. Every moment is an awareness practice. Every activity is an awareness practice."

So that's really what we're doing here. In any moment, however long you forget, it doesn't matter. The next moment we're awake, we start right here. It may seem mundane and not much, but it has the power to completely change how we live our lives.

CHAPTER 152

Vedanā, Saññā, and the Power of Awareness (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson illuminates two fundamental aspects of experience that the Buddha identified as arising in every moment of consciousness: vedanā (feeling tone) and saññā (perception). Drawing from the Sutta on the Two Arrows, she explains how unrecognized pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling tones trigger habitual patterns of craving and aversion. When we experience something unpleasant, we not only suffer from that experience but shoot ourselves with a second arrow of resistance—and then seek escape through pleasant experiences, not knowing any other way.*
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> *Wilson explores how perception, equally subtle and quick, shapes our entire world through recognition based on memory and conditioning. She shares vivid examples of how perception becomes distorted by the kilesas (defilements), leading to elaborate stories, moods, and suffering—all from a simple misinterpretation. The practice of steady, relaxed awareness allows us to see these processes clearly, breaking the chain of reactivity before it proliferates into full-blown emotional storms.*
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> *Quoting Ajahn Chah's teaching that the mind is intrinsically pure and peaceful, Wilson points toward the second aspect of practice: discovering the uncontrived awareness that has always been present. Rather than constantly chasing pleasant experiences or fleeing unpleasant ones, we can rest in simple knowing—fresh, clean, and unbound. She encourages practitioners to notice moments of natural peace and to trust awareness itself rather than remaining caught in the endless cycle of reactivity to objects of experience.*

Deep in the middle of a retreat like this, it's always kind of amazing to me. I rediscover it each retreat, whether I'm taking the retreat or helping to support it—how much stuff goes on for everybody, how much comes up for people. You think you're just going to come and sit and walk, and it seems simple enough. Just be aware of whatever happens, or you could even just watch your breath.

And really, so many people have talked about the roller coaster. So much mental anguish and grief. People are describing deep suffering, habits of mind and heart that are coming up. At other times, real experiences of joy or peace or some kind of insight—and then two seconds later it's different again. It's amazing, really, just sitting there and walking, and all this is going on.

And so, does it ever come up? We say, whatever happens, okay, great. Are you aware of it? Good. That's basically all we say. Did you notice it? Great, that's the practice. You start to wonder: why, really? What's the point?

It reminded me—a teacher of mine said years ago, not a Buddhist teacher, but he said, kind of joking: in the light of steady awareness, all of the snakes come out of their holes. And you notice real snakes are coming out too. Apparently there have been rattlesnakes sighted all over the place here. I don't know if it's our steady awareness or if it was the sun's steady awareness, but anyway—beautiful snakes, weird looking snakes, snakes you'd really rather not see. Come on up, join the party, come into the light of awareness.

So what's the point? Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche said: the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind-heart, as well as how the deluded mind-heart works. Meditation practices work to uncover our innate wisdom and purity by recognizing the obscurations—which we've been talking about—for the changing, insubstantial appearances they are, thus revealing what has always been present.

These two processes I want to give some ideas about, certainly not exhaustive. One is how the confused, the deluded mind works. A lot of what is going on in this retreat—and it's all meditation, not formal versus informal, even if our mind makes that distinction—a lot of what's happening, when we're noticing all the things I mentioned earlier with steady awareness, we're starting to see, or continuing to see, if you've been practicing for forty years, how the confused mind and heart works. And the other half is starting to get a taste, a glimpse of what the non-confused heart-mind is like. This innate wisdom that is always available, but unnoticed so much of the time.

Last year sometime, I did a month of self-retreat just in my apartment. I have one note I wrote down that I actually reread. Usually I write notes in a retreat and never reread them—just in case you're writing up tons of notes, see how much you really reread them. But what I wrote was that I noticed, and I realized, when I first started practice years ago, my motivation—which seems very reasonable—was to get away from, to somehow change, all the difficult, unwanted aspects of my life, my mind, my heart, my personality patterns, and to really change that, get rid of it, get away from it. As well as somehow—and how this was going to happen was never too clear—get away from all the unpleasant things in the rest of my life as well.

And we laugh, but really, bottom line, why else would we do this? Because that's what we know. That's what we know from the deluded mind: go from the unpleasant to the pleasant and everything's going to be great. So that's where I started. But I never

would have been able to know—it wouldn't have made any sense, I couldn't have imagined from there—that the intimation of freedom, the touching of it, just not complete peace but moments where you recognize, you get a glimpse of what's available, arises in a completely different way. Nothing to do with getting away from the things we don't like. Nothing to do with somehow rearranging all the things so the world works better. Although we keep trying, and we can still act appropriately, but nothing to do with that.

I never would have known that the way to the release in the moment of the heart is actually this, what we've been talking about—just this complete being with whatever it is, even through the difficult, not in spite of but because of. This is what's happening. The way to peace and freedom is opening into it with just this fullness of presence without deluded interpretations.

And not just once, I'm sorry to tell you, but again and again and again. But it gets easier because the trust is there. We really know: the running away from this is actually the source of the suffering and confusion.

Opening into this moment with fullness of presence is what allows an intimation of what peace of mind and heart is truly like. But hearing that isn't going to make any difference to any of us. That's really what this steady awareness practice can, again and again, lead us into noticing, knowing, beginning to trust for ourselves.

This is from Ajahn Chah, a very well-known quotation. I kept thinking about it and couldn't find it, but it sums up what I want to talk about tonight. I'm sure many of you who've been in this scene have heard it a million times, but that doesn't make it less true:

About this mind, in truth there is nothing really wrong with it. It is intrinsically pure. Within itself, this mind, this heart—same word—it's already peaceful. That the heart is not peaceful these days is because it follows moods. The real heart-mind is simply an aspect of nature. It becomes peaceful or agitated because moods deceive it. The untrained mind-heart is stupid. Sense impressions come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness, and sorrow. But the mind, the heart's true nature is none of these things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind, but only a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things. It forgets itself.

So I want to talk about two of the very core ways—there are many—but deep, deep habits, subtle habits of the mind, of how we get tricked and lost into moods and emotions and reactions. There are two mental qualities that the Buddha spoke about very clearly. He picked these out of all the different mental experiences to highlight as something to notice, as arising in every single mind moment—which is like every milli-

second. A millisecond is a mind moment. The mind is just arising and passing. It's not a steady-state thing. Mind is an activity. Arising and passing, every millisecond, with different qualities arising in it. That's the only way change is possible.

These two qualities are *vedanā*, which is translated as feeling tone, and *saññā*, which is translated as perception. I want to give a little description of each and some examples of how these subtle but always arising, every-moment experiences, when not recognized, so easily take the mind and heart into getting confused and misinterpreting—into moods and everything, the whole nine yards.

Talking about *vedanā*, which I'm sure most of you are familiar with, though some perhaps not. The Buddha described that our whole experience is these six sense experiences, just arising and passing. We've talked about that. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, and all the mental experience. Each arising sense experience, including the mental experience—take this sound, our trusty bell. In that moment, in each of our mind streams, that hearing is experienced in the mind. It's a mental experience of having a subtle pleasant quality, or unpleasant quality, or neutral quality. It's really quick and fast.

To me, this is one of the many reasons that when I've been studying what the Buddha taught, I think he was an incredible genius. Because this is so fast. He's saying it's happening, occurring in every mind moment, but it's so fast we mostly don't even notice it. I'm pretty sure I never in my whole life would have ever picked that up if I hadn't heard and read about it and been taught about it.

And that sound—say you heard that as pleasant—that's not inherent in that sound. It's a quality of how the mind is receiving it in that moment. It might have been pleasant in my mind and unpleasant in Francis's. Tomorrow, different conditions applying in my mind, I might hear what was not the same sound—you can't step in the same river twice—but hit the bell again tomorrow and the experience might be unpleasant in my mind. So it's not a steady-state thing. He's saying this is happening with every sense experience. So how many times is that a day? A trillion, right? How many sense experiences are happening all the time?

And this is the rub. This is where we get into trouble. Because it's so quick and we don't really notice it, the tendency is, when it's pleasant, just to kind of lean into it. We want more.

When something's unpleasant, we lean back from it. We want less. And when it's neutral? Any neutral today? No, we just space right out.

The Buddha talked about this in really interesting terms—I could discuss this all day, but I won't. He talked about how this tendency, when unrecognized, is what seeds the really deep habits of craving for the pleasant, aversion to the unpleasant, and delusion. These are the habits we've been talking about that so underlie and distort our perception and interpretation of things, because it just seems right.

In one sutta, he starts out by asking: what do you think is the difference between a completely awakened person and someone who's not? That gets the attention. And he said the difference is this: an awakened person experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral vedana, feeling tones. An unawakened person also does. So just in case you thought when you get enlightened there's no more unpleasant vedana—forget about it. The same is experienced by all people.

So what's the difference? This is really interesting to me, because it describes how these habits come to be in our heart and mind.

When an untaught worldling—that's an unawakened person—is touched by a painful bodily feeling, let's start with physical because it's easier, the tendency is to worry, to grieve, to lament, to beat your breast, to weep and be distraught. Can you relate to that? He's not saying you get a little bit upset. He's really laying it on, because that's what we do.

He says it's as if you were hit with an arrow—one arrow, the physical arrow—and then we shoot ourselves with a second arrow. "Oh my God, what happened? How can this be? My knee's going to break!" And on and on and on. This is the first thing: we shoot ourselves with a second arrow when we experience an unpleasant experience.

Then we don't stop there. That person experiences two arrows. Then having been touched by that unpleasant or painful feeling, the mind resists and resents it. In one who resists and resents that painful feeling, the underlying tendency, the underlying habit of resistance against unpleasant feeling comes to underlie the heart, the mind.

He's describing the process. It doesn't happen once in a while—it comes to be an unconscious habit. A painful, unpleasant experience comes, there's this lamenting, beating the breast, the resistance. And so the resistance comes to be a habit we don't even notice. It just feels right, doesn't it? When something's unpleasant, you think, "Well, of course I move away from it. What, are we here to hurt ourselves?" It just seems absolutely true and right.

Then he goes on, and this is even more interesting to me. Under the impact of that unpleasant, painful feeling, a person then proceeds to search out sensual happiness. Why? Because an unawakened person does not know of any other escape from painful,

unpleasant feeling except the enjoyment of sense happiness. So then in such a person, the underlying tendency, the underlying habit to crave, to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind, the heart.

Do you get a sense of that? Can you relate in yourself how when there's something unpleasant, it seems like the natural thing to do is to go and have a pleasant experience? Just have that in mind as you go through the next days and see how that works.

He says the person does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, the pleasant and the unpleasant. We don't understand the arising and ending of the feelings. And we don't understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. And so delusion comes to be a habit underlying the mind.

I'll just finish with the sutta, then talk about it.

In the case of a well-taught noble disciple, an awakened person, when they're touched by a painful feeling, they simply don't do anything else. They don't worry. They don't grieve. They don't lament. They don't need to go looking for sense happiness to avoid feeling the unpleasant feeling. It is one kind of feeling they experience—a bodily one—but not a second one.

Those of us in this habit of resisting the unpleasant and craving for the pleasant, the Buddha said, experience these feelings as if chained to them, as if joined to them. We really suffer from them. Someone who is awakened feels the feeling, and it's just that. Nothing else is created in the mind or heart around it. Pleasant, unpleasant—it's just this. And so they experience that feeling as one who is not chained to it, who is not bound to it, who is not joined to it. It's just this.

And that's the gratification, the danger, the escape. The gratification is yes, pleasant is pleasant. We enjoy it. He's not saying pleasant is wrong. A lot of times people think the Buddhist teaching is that we shouldn't appreciate or enjoy the pleasant because then we start craving. That's not what he's saying. Yes, we may start craving, but we can bring in awareness and be aware of that. It's okay. We don't have to live in mortal fear of craving because, for one thing, it's going to come. For the second thing, fear isn't any better than craving. You trade craving for fear—you didn't really get anywhere with that one. But what we can do is bring in awareness.

So there is gratification in the pleasant. The danger, of course, is that these feelings last only that amount of time. It's so quick, the pleasant and the unpleasant. They may keep coming back, but they last that amount of time. There's no steady state to put our trust in for any kind of ongoing gratification. That's the danger. If you could have an

unpleasant feeling, search for the pleasant, get a hold of it, and then be happy with everything okay from then on, there would be no problem. It doesn't work that way—but we tend not to notice until we're really looking.

The escape, he says, is realizing and abandoning the craving for the pleasant and the resistance to the unpleasant. And that's not an act of will. When awareness sees what's really going on in that moment, just for one moment, the craving dissipates because it doesn't make sense.

The habits that come from this go really far, really fast. There's a moment of pleasant, and—correct me if you don't relate to this—the sense of pleasant as good, as right, as the way things are supposed to go, and unpleasant as wrong, as bad, as a mistake, just seems so normal, so obvious.

When many of us, or at many times, are evaluating an experience or evaluating something in life, how much of the rightness of it is really around because it's pleasant? How much of the wrongness of it, how much of the stuff that even during this day you find your mind has been raging against in myriad ways—all the complex good stories that we can really buy into—how much, if you really look underneath, did it start from an unpleasant feeling, an unpleasant experience? And it's so obvious to us that that's wrong. Because this has been such a habit through our whole life, and it's certainly inculcated from all the different avenues in society. So it's just accepted.

When I say I came to practice with the sense that I wanted to get away from all this unpleasant stuff in my personality, and that clearly it was all a mistake, and that it ought to be possible to do that—I know I'm not the only one with that delusion. What I didn't know is that the freedom would be from seeing through that delusion. It's not that achieving constant pleasant is actually impossible—though it is impossible in this world, in these bodies, with this mind and heart to always have pleasant. It's just impossible. You won't believe me, and that's okay. Keep looking. This is the power of mindful awareness: to look and see what's going on.

But this is what keeps us caught—because the fact is, the feeling tone is so quick. It just moves like that.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was a wonderful Thai forest monk who died in the late 1990s. He had a forest monastery in southern Thailand called Wat Suan Mok, where practitioners would mostly just stay out in nature. He didn't do a lot of formal meditation teaching but let the silence and stillness of nature teach, which I think is pretty far out. I spent some time there when I was a nun. I know Fran spent some time there too.

Anyway, he was very learned as well, and he says to just explore in your steady awareness practice. You start to tune into vedana. Explore the fleetingness of it, how quickly it comes and goes—pleasant feeling, how quick. And then sometimes just reflect on your life a little bit. Think of some of the big choices you've made, the big things you've chosen in your life. How much of it came down to thinking this way is going to bring more pleasant feeling? I mean, we don't think it quite that clearly, but how much of it comes down to that? It's really interesting just to look. This is not to look at it with judgment, just to look and see what's going on.

But because the mind opens and changes so quickly, and our habit is not to bring simple, steady awareness to the process—our habit is so deep to move away from the unpleasant, just like that. It's so obvious that as soon as there's an unpleasant thing, the craving comes up for something pleasant. And if there's any way possible, as soon as that craving, that leaning in, that tanha, that thirst comes up, we act on it if we can. Whatever little thing it might be, we act on it. And that acting keeps us from recognizing the process.

The danger, of course, is that even if you get what you want—like people were talking about, this yearning for a cup of tea and noticing the wanting to go down and have the tea—you have the tea. Maybe it was as pleasant as you thought it was going to be. But no matter how pleasant that tea is, at some point it's over. Then you're left with your mind and heart again. The tea's gone.

And if you're really paying attention, how long does food stay pleasant when you're eating it? Really pay attention. How many chews does it stay pleasant? It just turns into mush, and you've got to swallow fast to get to the next pleasant moment. But that's the thing—there's always the possibility of leaning into the next pleasant moment, the next pleasant moment, the next pleasant moment. And so this hides what's really going on.

We don't really stop and look at it until we either do something like come on a meditation retreat where we're forced to sit and take away our usual escapes, or something big happens in life and we can't get to a pleasant moment that hides the unpleasant. But then we're thrown for a loop because we don't know how to be with the unpleasant without being bound by it. We don't know how to be with the pleasant without being bound by it—bound by craving, bound by aversion.

So here, part of what's going on when some of these snakes are coming out of the hole—and pick the littler ones—is that we're learning how to find in the heart and the mind the willingness to rest with this unpleasant for a minute. When we talk about just

a simple moment of awareness that isn't distorted by aversion or greed, it's just for that moment touching the unpleasant. That's huge. That's a real shift, just for that moment—starting to be an intimation that there's another way.

There's another way of being in this world, in this mind and body, that doesn't entail having to get so reactive every time something's unpleasant. It doesn't entail being afraid of it. And when the mind isn't so distorted, if something is unpleasant, difficult, and harmful, and we can move to change it, well, that's quite obvious and we do so. So it's not stupid awareness where you have to stay and never move. We can move out of intelligence, not out of craving that just hides the whole process. Do you get a sense of what I mean?

So this is a whole different way of being. To me, when I first read that discourse—that line that the unawakened person doesn't know of any other escape from unpleasant feeling tone except to lust after pleasant—I find that so sad, so poignant, because it just describes so many of us in this world. If you look at the world, this is really what the whole concept of samsara points to: just the cycles of existence, of unhappiness and wanting and getting, and then it's gone away and wanting again and getting and it's gone away, and it just keeps going.

We're so used to that cycle that it's really common for people to say, when we're talking in retreats, in different kinds of ways, "Well, if there's no craving, if there's no aversion, then what?" I remember someone saying years ago in a three-month retreat, "Well, if there's no craving and aversion, what—I just sit in my room and never act for the rest of my life?"

That's what breaks my heart—as if craving and aversion are the only mental states, the only motivation for action. That's how ubiquitous they can be in our experience when we're not really looking.

We think... how much of this is part of the reason we keep emphasizing relaxed awareness? Have you noticed that we say that once in a while? I'm glad you noticed. We're going to keep on saying it too. We're not going to stop saying it.

Because mostly—I mean, we're not all the same—but many of us bring our same habits of mind to meditation as we do to anything. And how do we know how to do something with full intention? You buy in, you just strive, do, strive, push. We're really putting in a hundred percent effort, very sincerely, and not noticing the craving, the trying to make something happen. You wonder why you get headaches, why we feel like our body's snapping in two, why you think "I never want to meditate again" once the bell rings. "Let me out of here." But then luckily the mind changes and you find yourself

coming back to the next sitting. Here today, you got a lot of time in between, but you're coming back to the next retreat, right? Now, about the fourth day—now is the time to think, "Oh, now why did I come again? Now I remember what the beginning of the retreat was like, why I never wanted to come to another retreat. I'm remembering that now." But then it'll change.

So thinking desire is the only way we can do something... What about compassion? What about simple wisdom? What about a neutral willingness to act? The body's hungry and we go to eat. It doesn't have to be a frenzy of craving every time we go to eat. Sometimes it's just time to go eat and we eat and we can enjoy it. It doesn't mean it's always craving when you appreciate the pleasant. But we can learn to recognize the difference, because when the craving is there, it really feels like this going forward, and it really narrows the vision. It's all about the craving, as Steve said the other night—it only sees the pleasant aspect. The aversion only sees the unpleasant aspect. And it doesn't just lead to craving; it leads into moods and emotions and reactions. It completely distorts our perception—which is where I'm going to go now, into saññā.

But the process of steady awareness, what we're really trying to give ourselves the time and space to explore here over and over... because you can see how quick and subtle this process of vedanā and the aversion and clinging can be, how much you just need to practice the awareness as an alternate way. But what starts to happen—it really does start to happen, and I've heard it in a lot of you already, even if you don't recognize it—is that where the attention goes, where the trust starts to move... it shifts from craving and aversion. Because really, in a lot of ways, you could say that's our refuge. That's where our trust is. When the chips are down, you crave, you avert, whatever. That's what we know how to do.

But it starts to switch to a trust in awareness. And for me, it's really like a love of awareness. I can be with the wanting and see the wanting for something, or the aversion, the fear of something. Okay, awareness of it. And there's a sense of appreciating the awareness more than I'm believing in the aversion and the craving. It really lets the awareness become stronger. It starts to get its own momentum, and we start to see more clearly, start to recognize these things happening. The steady awareness allows wisdom to see what's happening.

And in those moments where you really see it—for example, dying to go get a cup of tea—pick the simple things. It's good to start with the simple things. Don't start with the most complicated thing in your life. Just the little simple things here. Or someone gave a great example in the group today of just seeing anger come up about such a simple little

thing. And really, the thing that the anger came up about was so simple they couldn't take it seriously. So you see how the process is working in the mind. And that's really where insight begins—where we see, "Oh, this is a habit."

This is the process. It's not really about this little thing that happened.

So like the cup of tea. How many times would I be walking and think, "I really have to go have a cup of tea." It's so strong. And just stop and be with the wanting. That doesn't occur to us in daily life that we could do that, but you can. Just be with the wanting and see how it is for you.

Sometimes people think wanting or experience wanting as being actually pleasant. So maybe it is for you. Look and see. For me, the actual wanting itself—not the idea of the thing wanted, the actual wanting—is extremely unpleasant. You're off balance and want to go get the thing. Why? So the wanting will stop. When the wanting stops, it's peaceful. It's nice. We think, "Well, that tea was so great. I'm so peaceful." It's because the wanting stopped.

So if you just keep walking and noticing wanting, wanting, wanting, sooner or later—I promise—the wanting will dissipate. Because everything dissipates. I'm not saying it won't come back in a tenth of a second. I'm not saying how long it'll be till it dissipates, but it will dissipate. Keep awareness going and notice the difference. And notice, wanting doesn't kill us. It's just an unpleasant experience. We're so in the habit of "unpleasant—jump away" that we don't stop and look at it. So, okay, wanting's like this. It's not so bad.

I play with it sometimes. Go into a supermarket when you're really hungry, but don't buy anything. Just go in and play with the wanting and then walk out. It's not going to kill you. Just play with it, little things like that.

Okay, so then moving to saññā, perception. And this is equally interesting to me. Perception—we've talked about that, right? Again, it's another mental quality arising in every moment of consciousness with every sense door experience. And the Buddhist understanding of perception is just that moment of recognition. It's based on memory and our past experiences. So I'd recognize this as a bell. You can see that perception is conditioned because someone could come in here from somewhere else and have no clue this was a bell. Our perception—we think our perception is accurate, but it's not necessarily accurate at all. It can be distorted by confusion, by delusion, by not having enough information.

So for instance, someone coming in here and not knowing what this is—what I notice is the mind likes to know, so it makes something up. It kind of fills in the gap. "That's a really big begging bowl. I don't know how the monk could walk around with that"—because it's kind of shaped like the begging bowls they carry around in Thailand. You just make it up.

I've seen my mind do that. Somebody's walking by over there. If I don't have my glasses on, I can tell it's a person—about. But that's it. But there'll be some little flick of some sign or something, and the mind goes, "Oh, that's so-and-so." Now, the chances it's so-and-so are slim, but you think it's so-and-so, and then the mind goes on from there—all the reactions and the thoughts and everything. That's a perception distorted by delusion.

Perception can also be distorted by wanting, by craving, by seeing only the pleasant, as Steve was saying the other night. I'm reminded of a friend who was talking about the second or third year of her marriage. I was a good friend with both of them, and I said, "Well, how's it going?"

She said, "Well, it's going, but you know, the work's starting now because the love glasses are off."

You know how that is. You think, "What? How come I didn't see all this other stuff that was going on before? It's so obvious now." You just hope that the hate glasses don't go on, right? That's when it's divorce time, and all of a sudden you only see the negative stuff. But this is perception that's distorted by the kilesas.

So the habit of wanting the pleasant, of craving—it can really distort perception. But perception doesn't just stop with that recognition. As the Buddha said, what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate with associations and memories and projections. And then these complications and these thoughts become out of control and assail a person, attack a person. Have you ever had that experience? You're just sitting here and your thoughts are attacking you. Go back to the beginning of perception. And it can go into moods and a whole world.

Perception describes and defines our world. It's a useful tool. We need it. It's good that I know I'm Carol and my job is to get up here and talk. It's good you don't all think you're Carol and we're all trying to get up here and talk. That doesn't work. We take turns. It's good you come in, you know the zafu, you know where you sit. That's all very useful, especially when our perceptions agree with each other. When they don't agree with each other and they harden into views, that's when there's big trouble.

So I'll tell you this little story—I often tell it because it's a great example of how perception goes right away into a description of the world, into mood and emotion and suffering. A friend told me this. She was sitting on a retreat, her first retreat, many years ago in Switzerland. There weren't any centers then, so they rented old summer camp houses up in the mountains. These were old wooden houses, not well built, with no insulation, because they weren't used in the winter.

It was a very structured sitting and walking retreat. The sitting room they were in was on the second floor, and right below it was the walking room. Because it was an old wooden house, it was really creaky. Every time anyone moved around, it made really loud creaking, popping sounds.

So she was sitting—everyone was sitting—and she was really finally, finally getting into her breath, having a good sitting. Then there started to be all these creaking, popping sounds. And she thought, "Oh, somebody's walking downstairs." Right away it was unpleasant. She wasn't tracking all of that, just thinking, "They're ruining my meditation. They're walking downstairs, and this is the sitting time. Everyone's supposed to be sitting. How dare they be walking downstairs during the sitting time." Crack, crack, pop, pop—really getting angry and upset and self-righteous, the whole nine yards.

This takes like a tenth of a second, right, from the perception of someone walking. But there was nothing to do, because she also wouldn't dare get up during the sitting and go down and yell at the person. Social pressure is sometimes a good thing. So she sat there. There was nothing else to do. She thought, "Okay." Somehow awareness came back in.

And just notice the whole thing. Okay, okay, just let it go. Just come back and be with the breath, just as it is. So awareness, this beginner's mind, awareness is just fresh and new, not carrying anything, but just meeting this breath completely new and fresh.

So she was doing that, just feeling the breath, really present with it. And as the breath came in and her chest expanded, she noticed she was leaning against the wall. And every time she breathed in, the wall started cracking and popping, and that was the noise she was hearing that she thought was someone walking.

So miraculously, the anger all went away. That's actually how insight works. With accurate perception, all the stories and the aversion and the mood—it all just vanishes because it doesn't make any sense.

This is what's going on in our minds and hearts an incredible amount of the time. And don't believe me, if you think I'm projecting—okay, just keep looking and seeing. When we're suffering from wanting, from aversion, from spinning, from what that person is doing, from what I'm doing and why can't I be different—we mostly don't, without awareness, even have the ability to see the whole chain.

Perception is really quick. Vedanā is really quick. Sometimes we're already way down the road. But even being able to—she was way down the road, all upset and angry—but awareness could come back. Don't try to retract, but just land with awareness right here, right now, just as it is. With that freshness, reality reveals itself.

As Dōgen Zenji said, if you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it? This is the power of awareness, this simple awareness when it's not distorted by wanting, by aversion, by delusion. We can't always tell when it is distorted, but we can keep remembering, keep re-accessing.

And this is the second part of the practice, where the meditation is revealing these habits. I'm just touching on them, but really explore these. These are fun, especially perception and watching the whole story. That's really fun to explore if you don't take it personally. See how fast, how far the mind gets, and how upset you get. And then sometimes you can even play with it.

I've done this on retreat. I remember one retreat years ago, I was sitting in my room, and there was this sound of crickets. It was in the autumn. There's something about crickets that's a real autumnal sound to me, and something about that, plus I was long into a retreat, that led to a real nostalgia. That sense of autumn and the summer going—and mind you, this is New England, so winter's really coming in—and things are dying, and then I'm dying, and you know the whole deal. Crickets, crickets, hearing, hearing, and all the mood and the sadness and the whole nine yards.

So then I thought, let's just change that. The crickets. And then I had a thought: isn't that lovely? I'm out here in nature and there's the crickets and the peace. And then all these happy feelings came in about nature. We're just making it all up, you know? So you can really just play with this and see. It's kind of fun. See if it's really true. Perception—that's the beginning of how it goes.

But because it's so fast and so quick, and the habit of our mind is that we kind of like to know—like I said, I'll see somebody in my mind and I'll go, "It's so-and-so." Why can't the mind just go, "Don't know"? Why does someone come in and have to say, "This is a bell" or "This is a begging bowl"? Why can't we come in and go, "Don't know"?

We can, but there's this sense of liking to settle, of not being so comfortable hanging out in the not knowing. Maybe that's not true for you. But the Korean Zen teacher used to say, "Only don't know. Only don't know." But we like to know better.

What we perceive, we think about. And what we think about then hardens into views—this is how it is. This is a bell and nothing else. This is that person and nothing else. This is how my mind is. I'm an aversive type of person. I'm an impatient type of person. This is how it is. It just gets solidified, and we don't even recognize that.

And then that gets carried over. This is what's really interesting: when something hardens into a view that we don't recognize as a view, we believe it. Often, then, the awareness isn't quite open to recognize perceptions that run counter to the view. I call it selective perception.

So notice, for example, if you happen to be caught in the pattern of self-judging. A lot of people have mentioned that. Notice when that's the thought—that negativity, that aversion—that's distorting the perception. And the perception is that whatever's coming up in your mind and heart is proof of what's wrong with you, in whatever way your mind does that.

Notice at that time: do memories start to come up of all the wonderful things you've done? If you're walking down the path and someone smiles at you, do you say, "Oh, that's so nice"? Or do you think, "Oh boy, that deluded person is smiling at me. If they knew what was really going on in here, they'd never look at me again." Whatever perception doesn't fit, sometimes we don't even let it in.

Once I was teaching a retreat years ago, and as you see, I sit in a chair. I've done that for years. This was six days into the retreat or something. A woman was talking to us, the other teacher and me, and she was just dying of pain on the cushion—forty-five minute sit, forty-five minutes of dying of pain, sitting cross-legged. Not just a little pain and exploring it, but really beyond the beyond.

So I said to her, "Well, why don't you sit in a chair?"

She said, "Sit in a chair? You can't sit in a chair. You're supposed to sit on a cushion. Everyone's sitting on a cushion."

And the other teacher said, "Carol's sitting in a chair."

And it was like she had never noticed that. This was five days in, not two minutes into it. You could see her whole face shift—"Oh. Oh, she's sitting in a chair." This was before the days when half the room was sitting in a chair. But still, how can we so not see what's right in front of us? And we trust our perception so implicitly.

So let's plant that there. The hallucinations of perception that we don't see, that really keep us spinning—and each of these is a talk in itself—are these: we don't perceive the changing nature of things. We perceive permanence. We may intellectually say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know everything changes." But on the perception level, we don't actually see it.

The three characteristics—we don't perceive impermanence. We don't perceive the unsatisfactory quality of conditioned things, the dukkha. That's why craving keeps leading us by the nose. We keep thinking it's going to satisfy us. We don't perceive the impersonal nature of things, the lack of control. We keep thinking somehow we're going to get this mind and body doing what we want. We just don't perceive that.

That's why thinking about it isn't enough.

That can get us looking, that can get us to trust the awareness, but it's not enough to change the perception. Because perception is below the level of thought. It can trigger thought, but it's actually below the level of thought.

These are two of the ways—subtle but really quite profound—that as we cultivate steady awareness, we're starting to see how the deluded mind works.

The second part then is starting to recognize, to uncover, the innate wisdom, the innate purity. This is the piece I want to end by pointing to: the steadiness of awareness, why this simple everyday awareness is actually so profound and transformative.

It's so kind of ordinary. You're starting to really notice it. You're getting a sense of how ordinary it is, how easy it is to overlook. But this is the shift that will start to really allow the intrinsic purity to come more and more into knowing, into perception, into our heart and mind—the real intrinsic purity that allows wisdom to arise.

So instead of being overly involved in all the objects of experience—the pleasant and unpleasant—and enamored of our reactions to them, which is also an experience, our perceptions, what I think about this, what I think about that, what I think about me, what I think about you, just so engaged with our reactions, over-involved with experience in a way... we're switching the real trust to the awareness. The awareness and the

object coming together. It's not exactly a foreground-background shift, but it's kind of like a trust shift. We still know what the objects are, we know what's happening, but it's like: awareness of, awareness of, awareness of.

And this simple awareness—without looking, don't go looking for something, that's just wanting—but the more we're letting it in, there's awareness and object, awareness and object, not just object, object, object. The more it starts to spread out and make itself known: a moment of awareness. It's not a thing, it's really an activity. But we can feel into it. It has different kinds of senses, but it's a knowing—awake, alert. When it's not distorted by greed or craving, it's just this... someone described it as squeaky clean. The lenses of our heart and mind are squeaky clean. Whatever's arising arises, does its thing, and goes away. We're just really right there with it. It's not off at a distance. It knows what's happening. It's feeling it fully. It arises, does its thing, goes away. And we're not fettered by it. We're not chained to it in either direction.

So starting to get more interested in this, more trusting of this. One way I find helpful is to plant a seed in the back of your mind and heart to recognize in those moments—not just the big things I've been talking about, the difficulties, seeing the deluded habits—but I'm sure you must have had at least one moment, not that you had it, but there was a moment somewhere where nothing special was happening, and it was just feeling either peaceful or calm.

Nature's very helpful for that. You could put different words on it. Sometimes the word is just cool—the coolness of no kilesa acting out, the coolness of not reaching out to experience and getting all involved. Or peace. It could be joyful. It could be calm. It could be cooled out. Equanimous. Different words. The words are already too much. But noticing that.

Nature helps a lot because we tend not to... you can get involved in wanting and disliking, but it's a little easier just to feel that. I noticed on my first few retreats there would be lots of moments like that. But then I would go with the old habit of attributing that.

And it's kind of pleasant, but it's not exactly pleasant. It's really more like the peace of not getting caught up in things.

But I would attribute it. I'd go, "This is really pleasant," and I would attribute it to the beauty of nature, the fact that I'm silent, something to do with a particular experience. So I'd always attribute it back to the object, or back to the particular mood I was in, which is also an object—not really noticing, because awareness is just so available, so

nothing special. Not noticing that what was actually going on was the peace of simple awareness not getting all involved in whatever was occurring, but knowing what was occurring.

I would have loved it if someone had mentioned that to me fifteen years ago, but it probably wouldn't have made any difference. You just notice it when you notice it.

So here—don't grab a hold of something, but also not just bringing in awareness when we're suffering, not just bringing in awareness when you're sitting and trying to do something or trying to see these patterns, which is interesting, that's far out. But the times when nothing special is going on—Steve's been saying over and over, just the mundane things. Fine. The things are mundane. Awareness is never mundane. Awareness is fresh and new in every moment.

It's something that Dipa Ma said. Dipa Ma—she was this amazing little Bengali lady, a grandma when we knew her, maybe four feet tall, literally. And very, very profound practice and understanding. She said her mind was filled with love and concentration and peace. That was it. But she's living a life—she's a widow with a daughter and grandson to support in a tiny little apartment in Calcutta. And she was a bundle of energy, I tell you.

Once we went to visit her in Bodh Gaya, just the year before she died, a bunch of us. We were with Joseph Goldstein, who was a long-term student of hers. And she says to him, "Joseph, you should sit for the weekend." And he's going, "Oh, well, you know, I'm busy. Maybe next weekend I'll sit." She goes, "No, sit down for the weekend and get up at the end of the weekend." Joseph just laughed. And she just looked at him and goes, "Don't be lazy." She was totally serious. To her, that was nothing.

So anyway, she said, "Nothing is mundane. Awareness is always fresh and clean. It includes everything without being distorted by anything." Like Ajahn Sumedho says, awareness is the point that includes. So far from being dull because we're not all involved—who cares, you don't know what's happening—it's just the opposite of that. Like she says: alive, fresh, clean. It's not like not caring. It's more like Byron Katie says—it's like loving what is. What is, is. What is not, is not. Don't add anything extra. I got that from Guy Armstrong's new book. I'll just put in a plug for that—it's a very nice book on emptiness.

So I just want to end with this from Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche:

Unfabricated ordinary awareness, unadulterated by effort and modification—naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural. What could be simpler than this? To rest at home and at ease in total naturalness. What could be simpler? Apparently a lot of things, but this is

one's birthright, one's true nature. It's not something missing to be sought for and obtained, but it's at the very heart of our being. It is actually inseparable from our uncontrived everyday awareness.

What could be simpler than this? To rest at home and at ease in total naturalness.

So let's just sit for a moment. Whatever posture you're in for the next half hour, just hang out in total, uncontrived naturalness. And if you're awake—

CHAPTER 153

Wise Intention Arises Naturally from Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common question among practitioners: how does the cultivation of steady, non-interfering awareness relate to action in the world? Drawing on the opening verses of the Dhammapada, she illuminates how all experience is preceded by mind, and how the quality of our intentions—whether rooted in the kilesas (greed, aversion, delusion) or in wisdom—shapes the karmic fruit of our actions.*
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> *Wilson introduces the Pāli term cetanā, referring to the moment-to-moment intention that arises before every action and speech. She emphasizes that without steady mindfulness, we remain unconscious of these subtle motivations, operating from deeply conditioned habits. Through the powerful example of Mahā Ghosānanda, the Cambodian monk who taught mettā in refugee camps during the Khmer Rouge era, she illustrates how removing the 'landmines in our hearts' is the path to removing them in the world.*
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> *The talk explores the three aspects of sammā saṅkappa (wise intention): nekkhamma (renunciation), mettā (loving-kindness), and karuṇā (compassion). Wilson explains how these wholesome qualities naturally strengthen when recognized by wisdom, while unwholesome states dissolve when clearly seen. She offers practical guidance for daily life—transforming neutral activities like washing hands or sleeping into opportunities for cultivating bodhicitta. The teaching reveals that our moment-to-moment awareness practice is not separate from compassionate action but is its very foundation.*

Here we are.

It's great. It's been so much appreciating speaking with everybody and whatever you're going through—the depth of commitment that it takes just to still be here. Someone was saying, "I feel like all I'm doing is just going after pleasant. That's all I see, that's all I do." And I thought, you know, if all anyone was doing here was going after pleasant, no one would last a day here. Really, you'd be out of here. So just widen out the scope, give your mind and aspirations some credit.

I want to talk a little bit tonight about wise intention. Something that comes up frequently here, different people expressing what seems like a paradox: we keep stressing in the instructions and working with awareness that what we're cultivating is this steady momentum of awareness that's non-interfering, non-aggressive, not trying to fix.

Just watching what's occurring to see, to learn how the mind and heart works. That is what we're stressing. And then people often say, "But what about action in the world? How do we...?" You've heard those questions.

So I want to talk about it because it's not really a paradox. It's just an incomplete kind of understanding.

The first thing to say: when we talk about steady awareness, taking it with you, just notice—you've been acting. You've been acting with body, mind, and speech consistently through all your time here. And awareness has been coming along. Awareness can be aware of action. It's not either awareness or action. We're bringing awareness into our activities.

But what I really want to talk about is the steady awareness that's not interfering, that gets right into, surrenders into whatever's occurring in this moment, resting at ease, knowing it fully, feeling it completely. That turns out, in the way of the Buddha's teaching, as wisdom grows, to be the farthest thing from passivity. It's really just the opposite. It's movement into the ability of heart and mind to respond appropriately in situations rather than from these knee-jerk reactions we're not even quite aware of.

The Buddha was very clear that action is how we can tell our understanding. He said, "A fool is characterized by their actions. A wise person is characterized by their actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's discernment, one's wisdom shines." He's so clearly saying that the clarity that comes from our understanding leads to wise action.

One of my favorite quotations is from Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodian Buddhist monk who has passed away. He was a peace activist, a teacher of wisdom and also mettā, loving-kindness, in the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand during the time of the Khmer Rouge. He happened to be out of Cambodia when all the devastation and killing was happening, when the Khmer Rouge were killing so many millions of Cambodians and basically most of the monks and nuns. Most of his family was killed, so he was touched directly. It's not that because he was out of the country he didn't feel it.

He went to the refugee camps where all the displaced Cambodian people and families that were left were living. Because it was a largely Buddhist country, many of the people were Buddhist, and they really would respect him. He would go and make a little temple in the middle of the refugee camp. When he'd come and the people would gather, he would start just quoting the Buddha, the really profound teachings: "Hatred never ceases by hatred. Only by love alone does hatred cease." Just to have that depth—

you'd have to really know that, not just say, "This is a good idea, I think I'll tell it to these people whose lives have been devastated." But to go in and really actualize that. Later he led peace marches throughout Cambodia. He was quite an activist.

He once said this at a demonstration against landmines: "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts. So to understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to remove them in the world."

This is, I think, very directly the link between the wisdom that arises through the steady, non-choosing awareness—not choosing to just pay attention to what we think is good and ignoring what we don't, but the steady awareness that reveals what's really going on—and where this wisdom and the ability, the natural response of heart and mind, really shifts. We can bring it along, but it shifts naturally from being caught in greed, in ill will, in hatred or cruelty, to renunciation, which is just renouncing the greed, to generosity, to mettā, loving-kindness, compassion.

Sure, there are many things we can do, ways in our life that we can actively cultivate these, and that's a whole other talk. That's certainly true. But first, to really start to see that with the wisdom that comes from accurately recognizing what's going on in these crazy minds of ours—as we start to watch, the natural effect of wisdom is that our motivations start to change.

That's what I want to talk about—this quality in our heart, in the mind, of intention or motivation.

I mentioned the first two verses of the Dhammapada in one of the groups today. The Dhammapada is one of the most well-known sections of verses from the Buddhist Tipitaka. These are the first two pairs, very well known:

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind, and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

Corrupted mind. Guess what makes a corrupted mind? It's subtle. We haven't talked about it too much—our three friends, right? You know what our three friends are?

Speak or act with a corrupted mind, and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

The second couplet: All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind—the word for mind being the same as the word for heart—so mental activity, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind, peaceful heart, and happiness follows like a never-departing shadow.

The point being that the seed of all action, according to the way the Buddha saw it—and we can explore this in our experience with our steady awareness—the seed of action isn't the act itself, but the intention, the quality in the heart-mind that gives rise to the action.

The way the Buddha talks about intention, it's a very specific mental factor or quality of mind. In English, intention can have a couple of different precise meanings. One is the really broad intention, aspiration—like what Steve and Alexis both spoke about: What is my intention in life? What's most important to me? Or even, my intention when I go back is to do X, Y, Z. It's still kind of broad, even if it's for a whole day or a whole year or a whole life. It's a wide-ranging thing. But we often use the same word, intention.

That's not the specific intention we're talking about here. It's a Pali word, *cetanā,* and it refers to something in any mind moment. The energy kind of coalesces—there's a little feeling of a little "uh," a little impulse that leads to speech, that leads to action. They say even thoughts, but let's stick with noticing it before action and speech. Before every movement, every speech, it's not personal. It's just, again, the whole series of cause and effect. But this energy kind of coalesces and gives a little—about to do—just, and then there's the movement, then there's the speech, then there's the voice. So it's a moment-to-moment thing, very precise and immediate.

And it arises, of course, due to whatever conditions are going on. When the Buddha spoke about wholesome or skillful, unwholesome or unskillful speech and actions—wholesome karma, unwholesome karma—he was very clear: it's the intention that marks something as wholesome or unwholesome. In other words, what brings suffering for ourselves or others.

So often we tend to think about how something looks. We could be trying to do a good thing for somebody, and it looks like the right thing, but we could be filled with fear or filled with aversion—let me do this thing so they can just stop suffering and get out of my face. You know what I mean? Even though you're doing something that's ostensibly kind, it still isn't a bad thing to do. But internally, what's being fed, what's being strengthened in one's own mind-heartstream at that moment would be the aversion, or would be the fear.

Do you get a sense of what I mean? The same action from the outside could be arising from very different qualities that are motivating in the heart and the mind. That's the whole source of skillful means. When we keep talking about being in pain during a sitting—when should you move?—we kind of want a list: go for this amount of time, and then when it's like this, move. And we always say no, it totally depends on the

situation and the state of your mind, because it's really about what quality motivates that movement. It could be aversion. It could be compassion. It could just be clear seeing, a kind of neutral recognition: Oh yes, this is causing pain, the reaction is getting too strong, so I'll move. All of those look the same from the outside. Are you getting a sense?

So that's the seed of action. It's so subtle a thing, happening every mind moment, that we need this steady, steady awareness we've been cultivating to begin to really notice that this is even occurring much of the time. We might notice the grosser ones. We might notice, you know, I really feel a sense of love and I want to do something to help you.

But moment to moment, because the mind and heart is arising and passing in every moment, it can be changing so quickly. So without the awareness, for most of us a lot of the time—not always, but the reason the Buddha talks so much about really bringing in the awareness to see the difficult aspects... We also want to see and appreciate and really feel the wholesome, the beautiful qualities. But the reason we want to keep noticing when greed is arising, when aversion is arising, is because it's so familiar. We so often don't recognize it. It is, as we were saying, the default mode. So often things are happening underneath the level of consciousness. It's just habit, just habit driving the bus—the difficult habits of mind.

Tara Brach in one of her books gave a good example of just how habits, the default mode, can operate. Mental habits take less energy, and they can just operate underneath conscious awareness a lot of the time. I love the example she gives: if you're driving, listening to music or whatever, and changing lanes on a busy freeway—now, a lot is really going on, isn't it, in the mind? Seeing and hearing and thinking and checking the perceptions, the movement of the hands, the movement of the eyes, the movement of the leg. There's a whole lot going on. But if you've been driving for a long time, that's just almost second nature, isn't it? You can change lanes and be drinking coffee. And if you drive on the freeway in LA, you know, people are doing everything while they're driving. It scares me to death, but they're putting on their makeup, they're shaving, they're talking on the phone, they're drinking their coffee—because they're in the car for two hours on the way to work. But anyway, you get a sense. It's just operating below the level of consciousness a lot of the time.

And that's what's happening frequently with these habits of our mind. We don't quite see what's going on, and it's the steady mindfulness that lets us start to see it.

Someone mentioned something very common in a group: being aware, say, of a pain in a particular part of the body. You're watching it, watching the mind. Awareness is there. You see the aversion come. You see it go. You see the sensation—it's not moving.

Then all of a sudden, you move without having recognized or consciously said, "Now I'm going to move." Can anyone relate to that? You watch it ten times, and all of a sudden you moved. That's the moment.

In that moment, you've had all these intentions. For whatever reason you're not going to move—"I'm not going to move, I'm exploring it." But as soon as awareness goes away, it's just, "Oh yeah, right, move." It's unpleasant, we move, I'm out of here. It's just what we do from habit. It's not inevitable. But you see why awareness is so key, because that's a little thing. Big picture, so you move—so what? It's not the end of the world. And you're wondering, why do we make such a big thing out of not noticing you moved? It's not that you failed, but this is really a little example of what's going on.

So start exploring: have you ever noticed where you have some really good intentions in your life? Really sincere, but you can't quite follow through for some reason. Like, "I'm going to sit every day." Or, "When I go back home, I'm not going to get drawn into that difficult interaction with my family member. I'm just going to radiate love and compassion." Have you ever tried that one? But we mean it, right? How come we can't do it?

A good example from a retreat with Sayadaw U Tejaniya a few years ago at IMS—because it was shared in the group, I think I can say. Someone went into the dining room, and the menu was up on the blackboard. She saw something on that menu that wouldn't make her really ill, but something she really couldn't digest well, that wasn't good for her to eat. So she saw it, and wisdom came up, just with compassion: "Oh, I'm not going to eat that, because I care about my body." And then she found herself heaping it on her plate, eating it all, and going away feeling rotten.

So she said to Sayadaw, "How could that happen? I had the intention to care for my body and not eat that, but that's not what happened." He made one of his jokes, you know—he said, "Well, it was like weak wisdom and strong kilesa." Which is partly true. What I would say is that moment of wisdom, of really seeing with compassion—that was a true moment of intention, of wisdom and compassion. But then, a lot of the time, we have that, and there's not the steady momentum of awareness, because every moment is a new arising mind moment. So that moment was a moment of wisdom and compassion.

Then the awareness was kind of abandoned, or whatever. And then the old habits arose—well, that looks good, I think I'll eat it, it really tastes good. And just the greed habits come up, or the delusion habits. I don't know what was in her mind.

So you see, you can get a sense of where steady awareness matters—not to make yourself do the right thing, but to watch and even learn why you're doing the other thing. "I really don't want to eat it and I'm eating it, a big pile of that stuff." Well, let the awareness come along, and we start to see what's going on. Because until there's the awareness and the wisdom of seeing how these patterns work, I don't know about you, but I don't really believe it. We just kind of check out. But seeing how it's working—to me, that really brings in the saṃvega, the urgency, the willingness to keep on practicing, to keep on cultivating awareness.

I don't mean this in a discouraging manner, but the more I've been watching and practicing, the less you take it personally, the easier it is to just see: oh, this is how these patterns work. If greed's in the mind and we're not aware of it, it's easy for it to arise in the next moment. The more I've practiced, the more I've seen how really deeply conditioned these patterns are.

Quite a few of you have been saying, "Oh my God, I'm just seeing craving, craving, craving everywhere. What's the matter with me?" I'm going to say: nothing. There's a reason the Buddha picked it as the cause of suffering. It wasn't just like, "Let me pick something." What's the cause of all the suffering in our minds? Craving. It must come up once in a while! Of course we're going to see it a lot. That's a good thing if we can keep on with awareness.

But with lack of steady awareness, the sense of urgency comes to me because without the awareness, without really understanding these patterns and allowing the wisdom to appreciate and grow the wholesome motivations, the wholesome intentions—in moments of stress, in moments of crisis, when awareness falls away, what's the default mechanism that's going to come up?

I read this one little statement frequently because it so touched me. I heard on the radio a discussion with a young man who was in prison, I think for life. He was young. I didn't hear anything else about him or what he did. He was in prison for life, and they were having an interview with him. He was saying with so much sincerity that he wished he could take back the three to five seconds of his life where this violent act just came up. Three to five seconds. But can you relate? Because it's not an act of will—"I'm not going to act from aversion anymore." With all the wider intentions in our heart, if we don't know how our mind and heart works, if we're not trusting, if we're not continuing to cultivate awareness whenever we can, to just keep watching—and to be willing to bring in the awareness when the unwholesome motivations come, and meet that with kindness, with compassion, not with judgment.

That's the whole point of this non-judging awareness: to see how it's working. If we are bringing in the awareness with judgment or trying to fix it, there's no way to see what's really going on. As soon as there's ill will, as soon as there's some kind of not wanting to see it clearly, we can't recognize accurately what's the appropriate thing to do.

The Buddha said—one of my favorite quotations: "When one is dwelling with a heart or a mind that's obsessed or oppressed by ill will"—and he says the same thing for greed and the same thing for delusion—"and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion"—he's not saying this is who you are forever, he's saying on that occasion—"when the mind is obsessed with ill will, one cannot know or see as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

So he's not saying bad or wrong. He's just saying when the mind's obsessed by ill will, when it's obsessed with greed, you can't see what's good for you, what's good for others, or what's good for both. Even when we want to do the right thing, if we're not in the habit of bringing in awareness and just watching what's going on in the mind, we can get so tricked. We just don't know.

I often feel this sense of actually respect for the power of the habits, the unwholesome habits of mind. But that same respect will start to come in for the wholesome habits, because they develop naturally in the light of awareness.

Some years ago, not that long ago, maybe three years ago, I was in a relatively new museum in Atlanta called the Museum of Civil Rights and Human Rights. It's all about the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties—a very moving museum. But just the point I want to make now is on the top floor, it's talking about human rights and various historical moments. It's mostly writings and photographs, pointing to various times and histories of human rights crimes. One point just said: "While systematic human rights crimes often start with a small, powerful group, they can only be carried out if others are persuaded or coerced to join in or deliberately look the other way." Basically, for ordinary people—

What would I have done if I was in the Holocaust? I don't know. I haven't been in that situation. For ordinary people, the pressure to take part in abuse or to look away is real. They risk punishment, they risk death, they risk danger to their families—all kinds of things, huge fear. So this exhibit was just making a point of that, bringing it home, inviting you to look in your own heart and mind. It was a whole great process in that museum.

What it makes me think of, when I was visiting Dachau, or reflecting on any of the horrible things going on in this country—the violence and the racism and all kinds of suffering—is that if we're not really tuning in to our own heart and mind in a moment of stress, who knows what's going to come up? Who knows what we would do? Like that young man in prison, we might want to take back that three to five seconds.

We can't control all of that. And this isn't to make us feel scared. This is to hopefully inspire us to really have urgency, out of love and compassion for ourselves, for our families, for all beings. The place where this starts, the best way we can manifest that in the world, is by beginning with what we're doing here—understanding how this inner work and life in the world come together.

So all this "being with, being with, being with" isn't some esoteric mental game that has nothing to do with life in the world. It's exactly the reverse. Really coming to know how we would act in such a situation—we don't know until we're there. We know what we want to do. So here, every moment that there's the ability, the willingness to allow awareness to feel, to notice what's going on—that's a moment of strengthening this power of seeing. And that's what gives rise to natural wisdom.

What's so beautiful, really, is that in the light of wisdom, the habits driven by kilesa, acting from kilesa—it just doesn't make sense in that moment. I don't really like to talk about "letting go" of a particular action or intention, because to me that phrase can have a little tinge of aversion—"get rid of this, I'm letting go of this." But when we just are with it without adding the extra judgment, it stops making sense.

As the Buddha said of his own practice before he became fully awakened, he was watching his mind. He said, "I have two types of thoughts. I can put them on two sides." So he's not the Buddha yet, but he was pretty good, right? He was pretty far along. And still, he said, when he was walking or sitting, being very committed and paying attention, thoughts of greed would come up in his mind. Thoughts of ill will would come up. Thoughts of cruelty would come up in his heart.

So maybe we could cut ourselves some slack. If this guy, who was so close to being a Buddha, had these thoughts come up—it's just habit. And he said he would just notice: "Oh, a thought of cruelty has come up. If I really explore it, I see that it leads to my own suffering and the suffering of others. So I don't pursue that thought." But he's not saying, "Oh my God, I can't believe this came up, this is terrible, what am I going to do?" He's just looking at it: "Oh, a thought of cruelty has arisen in my mind." Really, it's awareness.

Then he saw the same for thoughts of ill will and greed. And on the other side, a thought of generosity would come up, a thought of renunciation, a thought of friendliness, of mettā, a thought of compassion. And he'd say, "Oh, I see this has arisen. And as I look at it, I see no harm to myself or another that can come from being with this thought, from contemplating this thought. Even if I stayed with this thought for a day and a night, I see no harm that could come from it." Except—he's so practical—"I could tire myself out. I could tire my body and my mind from just staying and thinking for so long." So then he stopped thinking about it. He's just so practical.

This is what he calls wise intention, the second step of the Eightfold Path. The first step is right view, wise understanding. We begin there, and it keeps cycling deeper the more we practice. Wise understanding—how we understand the world—gets deeper and more comprehensive. But even in the beginning, in a moment of wise understanding, in a moment of paññā, a moment of wisdom, the natural expression is going to be that the intention of greed, the intention of ill will or hatred, isn't what arises. Rather, it would be one of renunciation or generosity, of friendliness, of compassion.

So just noticing in your own mind, tomorrow or tonight—those moments when you're aware, when the heart and mind is perhaps calm, or whatever's going on—you can see that the heart and mind isn't kilesa-ridden at that time. You know what I mean?

It's not riddled with greed. It's not riddled with ill will. Maybe it's just neutral. But maybe it's also wholesome. Just notice that. In that moment, there's like a space.

You know, when there's self-involvement—remember, I read from Desmond Tutu the other night—when we're so self-involved, our whole world shrinks. We create a sense of self and other, and difficulty, and fear. When it's not *kilesa*-ridden, just notice this: there's a kind of space. And in that space, the kind of wisdom—you don't have to think this—but the whole situation is recognized just more accurately. And if there's something to do, to say or to do, the response can just come up much more naturally, appropriately, from connectedness, from recognizing the whole situation—either letting go of clinging, generosity, friendliness. It's just the natural response, doing what's obvious.

Sure, we can cultivate these qualities in our lives, but to notice that they're the natural effect, the natural response of wisdom—I just want us to keep exploring that, because that's what really, for me, feeds and strengthens faith. The confidence. Because it's not about "you're so great" or "I'm so great" or "I can do it." That's just a self-involved way of looking. The confidence is in the laws of nature, the laws of dhamma. It's like having confidence in gravity. You don't have to think about, "Do I have confidence in gravity?" I hope you're not going around thinking about that.

And so the more we start to see both that the unwholesome, unrecognized, just makes it easier to come up in the next moment—but to see that with clear seeing, with wisdom—then what more naturally arises is the renunciation, is the friendliness, is the non-cruelty or the compassion. Learning to trust that. It's not like you have to do it with an act of will. Just like hopefully we're learning at times to trust that awareness arises again by itself. Have you noticed that from time to time? We keep pointing it out. Sometimes it feels like a lot of effort, right? But other times you're lost in thought. You don't think, "In five seconds I'm going to arouse awareness." It just comes. All of a sudden it's here. That wasn't your act of personal will. Just like that. Noticing this, the faith can deepen.

So then I want to talk a little bit about these three wise intentions. Mostly just because we've talked so much about the *kilesas*, it's really important with steady awareness and wisdom to also recognize the wholesome. When we've talked about the five spiritual faculties, a lot of the reason is to recognize when wholesome qualities are present in the heart and mind. Because when wisdom recognizes the wholesome—this is the Buddhist language—it feeds the wholesome. This is another thing we can trust, have confidence in.

When wisdom is recognizing the *kilesas*, it's just, "Oh, look at that greed. Greed is like this." You know, when we're caught in it, we're caught. But when wisdom's watching it, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, we're seeing how greed does its job. And you see what it does, but it's not being strengthened by the awareness. But the wholesome, when it's recognized by awareness—actually, it grows. Awareness feeds it. I mean, wisdom feeds it. Awareness doesn't feed it; wisdom feeds it. And that's a really cool aspect of the way the universe works—that wholesomeness strengthens wholesomeness, that wisdom strengthens wholesomeness. It's not all, "I've got to sit here and get all these good qualities, get rid of all these bad qualities, and do it now." Good luck.

So each of these could be a talk in itself, but I just want to talk a little bit about them because they're all wonderful. Renunciation, which is actually a very happy quality of heart and mind. It's not the biggest one going in this culture, I would say.

I think it's often misunderstood. The Buddha too, you know—there's a sutta where he said when he first heard about renunciation, his heart did not leap up at the thought of it. So we're in good company.

But I really think, and this is from my experience, that we don't understand what renunciation actually means. Remember, we're talking about intention—a quality in the mind and the heart. It's not external so much as in the intention.

Renunciation wisdom is recognizing how greed works, which we've talked about a lot. And renunciation is what happens when greed is seen through in a moment—it's the quality of mind that simply renounces the greed itself. We think of renunciation as getting rid of objects, but this is the same misperception that we tend to have with greed as well. We miss feeling and noticing the greed because we're looking to the object. Greed is a real quality of mind, this thirst, this tanha. And we'll say, "Well, but it's okay if there's greed because this is a good thing I'm greedy for." Or we think, "Oh, I'm so greedy because that's a bad thing I'm greedy for." And we're skipping over the quality in the heart and mind.

But exploring—and here we're back to awareness, we're never going to get away from awareness, never—it's good because, as Alexis was saying, it becomes our friend. A friend that never leaves us, because we need it.

So renunciation is about recognizing the suffering aspect of greed. And in a moment when that's recognized, just for that moment, it dissolves. It doesn't mean there's no appreciation for beauty or for whatever the thing is. It doesn't mean we can never have the thing. But it means the greed is abandoned in that moment.

I think I referred to this example in another talk during the last retreat. A woman came in and said she was completely blown away by exploring this quality of greed. She was in a sitting and had this incredible desire—and desire in English covers many different mental states, so I'm deliberately not using that word. I really mean this quality of greed—to scratch an itch. You can imagine how strong it was in a sitting, how it felt. And she wasn't scratching, not because scratching was bad or good, but just to explore that quality of greed. Awareness was really exploring how the greed felt. And she said it was so strong, it was amazing.

Then suddenly it flashed in her mind—this is what I think I mentioned—when she was a teenager and had this unbearable crush on somebody in her high school, just filled with greed. And she said, "Oh my God. This is exactly the same quality, the same intensity of greed to scratch this itch as it was when I was in high school thinking I was going to die from greed for this person."

That was a huge insight. Do you get a sense of it? We think it's about the object. No, it's about that quality in the mind. And seeing that in that moment, there was a real moment of wisdom, of insight. It was like, "Whoa, this is crazy." And it just for that moment dropped away. Just for that moment. This is what we explore. It's the craving that creates the dis-ease, not getting the object.

So renunciation does actually breed a real quality of simplicity in the heart and mind, a kind of contentment. Because with less craving, you can still do whatever you do, but you just have less need to go out and fill it up. And it's not like you're left barren and empty. It's actually the sense of simplicity of just being able to be present with contentment and appreciate what's here.

On the other hand, one could live very simply out of a forced idea of renunciation that has nothing to do with what's actually going on in the heart-mind. Someone said to Sayadaw U Tejaniya once, kind of projecting, "Oh, you're a monk, you became a monk after you were grown—amazing renunciation—you must feel so pure." He won't put up with stuff like that for very long, and he said something like, "Don't make up a whole story. Just because someone's a monk, they can have the same amount of desire as you did in your life, only it's just channeled into two objects." Because there's not much you can have—you can have food, you can have robes.

That's what they get. And believe me, I've hung out more with nuns. They can get into very incredibly fine details about the robes. I've had friends that are nuns go on about the length and how this hem is and how this folds and this one and that one. The same amount of greed can come in.

So watching the renunciation is really this quality of just not needing to go with the greed, starting to feel the suffering of it. And it moves into generosity. Because when we're not holding, there's just this impulse to offer whatever is needed. And the thing about generosity—maybe Steve will talk more about it tomorrow—it's such a state of happiness. Generosity, just that act of offering and the act of receiving when you don't shut it down, the whole circle of that, it's a really happy state of mind and heart. It's really wholesome.

But I think we all know, we've had it implanted in us, that giving is good, helping is good, and it is. But to actually tune into the moment-to-moment intention, that motivation, that movement, that quality in the mind and heart—first there's the renunciation, the greed just isn't making sense, and then just the offering—it's a very happy state because it's actualizing the interconnectedness, the non-separation in a way. So I'm just dropping these seeds in. Explore that. Recognize it.

The Buddha even says to contemplate at times: if you're feeling lost in negativity, sit and contemplate past acts of generosity of your body, speech, and mind. Not to say "I'm so great," but because in contemplating, in remembering it, it can bring up a happiness, a wholesome happiness that can actually bring a brightness to the heart and mind. It's really like countering the kilesas. The same with our sīla, by the way, the same with our non-harming conduct.

So moving into the next one, I'll put them together: friendliness and compassion, non-harming, non-ill will. Obviously, what arises when the habit in a moment of reacting to unpleasant or suffering with resistance or fear or aversion—that's our habit. And often I can see in myself that I want to do something to help someone, and still it's better to do it than not, but at times the motivation really isn't compassion. Because compassion is a real connecting with suffering. It's this quality that we bring in with our awareness. Being fully present, without resistance, without clinging, without blame—really surrendering into it, feeling with. That's the quality of compassion, or the quality of friendliness if it's not as much suffering.

Every moment that awareness is meeting experience, just like it is, with that freshness, with that kindness, being fully present—that's actually, in my opinion and experience, a moment that's feeding and strengthening the habit of heart-mind, of compassion, of mettā. So all these seemingly nothing special moments of awareness, how our mind is meeting this moment, is the practice of wholesomeness, of mettā, of compassion, of non-greed. I think that's just really important not to think about but to recognize, to feel it. Because when we recognize the wholesome, again, it strengthens it and it strengthens our trust and faith.

So compassion, mettā, arises not from resistance to the difficult, but from connection, from simple being with, without the aversion that keeps us from seeing clearly. And then again, the point is, it's natural. It's a natural expression of a moment of paññā, a moment of wisdom, a moment of presence.

James Baldwin had a wonderful line: "An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard." I really feel that. Once we hear the story—and that could be the story of your knee pain, right? You really hear the story—that connection's there. That's compassion. It's natural when we're not lost in the aversion and the self-centeredness. Not making someone the other.

But it's not so supported. It's not really what I've learned in society, even though I verbally learned it. What kind of works in the culture, what's supported in the culture, is another thing.

The Dalai Lama, when asked about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society, said, "Well, perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling or reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger."

How I relate to that is just that I've grown up with a sense that really in the face of the difficult or scary or whatever, anger is not only the best defense but the only defense, the only protection. And you can't just change that intellectually. But the more we see the strength that can come when the heart-mind is open and not lost in ill will, when it can see and recognize more accurately, the strength of appropriate action that can come from compassion, that can come from mettā, is really amazing. And we have more sense of what can be appropriate to do.

It's the last opposite of being a doormat. It's not like, "Oh, metta, compassion—okay, just walk all over me." Metta and compassion include us, right? It's not metta for everyone else while this one here doesn't count. It encompasses the whole situation. But the power of coming from a different angle than what's usual in society—it's really powerful when it happens.

There's another story I heard on NPR, on a podcast called Invisibilia. I don't know if you've ever heard it—they look at different ways the mind works, things that affect society. This particular story is a great illustration of what they call "non-complementary behavior." I really think it's about not just going along with the flow we're taught in society.

Two families—I don't know where this was, it sounded suburban somewhere—were out in their backyard on a summer evening, having a picnic dinner together at a table, drinking some wine, surrounded by trees and bushes. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, a man appeared with a gun. He just slid the gun in between two people. They didn't see him coming or where he came from. He threatened them, said, "Give me your money."

Of course they were startled, scared to death. They said, "But we don't have any money." He was holding the gun right up against someone's head. First they tried saying things like, "What would your mother think if she saw you doing this?" He said, "I don't have a mother."

And then, all of a sudden, one of them said, "Would you like a glass of wine?"

He was completely taken aback. "Oh... okay." So he had a glass of wine, sat down at the picnic table with them. He's drinking wine, they all start talking and chatting, having this whole conversation. The people were still scared, but this is non-complementary behavior. They're having wine, they're talking, and after a while he says, "You know, I can see I came to the wrong place. I'm going to go."

He gets up, and then he says, "First, I want a hug from everyone." So they all hug him. They give him a glass of wine to take with him. He leaves.

They, of course, run into the house and lock the door because they don't know what's going to happen. Nothing. Afterwards, they went and opened the door, and he had drunk his wine and taken the glass and left it very neatly right in front of the door for them to take back. That's it.

Cool, isn't it?

It's not like it's always going to work that way, but notice the power of clarity it takes to just, in a moment, come from the beautiful, the wholesome. It doesn't always work, I know, but sometimes it does. And it's not an easy thing to do.

Metta and compassion don't necessarily mean loving something. I used to think that metta meant I have to love people who are acting horribly. And of course, the mind would immediately go into resistance about that idea. But I really appreciate the way Ajahn Sumedho describes metta in regard to difficult people or situations. He says it does not necessarily mean loving it in the way we usually think about love, but rather witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, a thing, a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. That's what he considers metta to be.

Does that sound like anything we've been talking about all week? Just witnessing the unpleasantness—or the pleasantness, or the neutrality—in a person, a situation, oneself. Really present with it, without creating anything around it. And out of that, wisdom arises and the wholesome qualities get stronger, really more naturally.

This is our path. And it arises only ever in this moment—how awareness is meeting this moment, what qualities are present in this moment. This is our path.

This is our practice. We can't do anything about the past. The future is just an idea now. All the moments we've had here, you know, non-aggressive mindfulness and the momentum it builds—it's, in some ways, I think it's the most powerful thing in the world for really bringing compassion and loving-kindness and some kind of greater humanity to ourselves and to the world.

Remember what I read that Martin Luther King said: nonviolence means you not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate a person. But this isn't coming from the "I refuse" up here. It's coming from that deep inner wholesomeness that only comes from this ongoing practice, from the practice of the heart and mind meeting the difficult without creating anything around it. Meeting the beautiful without creating the craving around it.

And so, as you go through these days, as you go back home, experiment with this steady awareness. This first part you've seen a lot, more and more clearly and deeply—some people were saying that today for yourselves—the actual suffering, the unsatisfactory quality of the unwholesome mind states.

Someone was describing that about really deep anger today. Being with it, being with it. Caught, caught, caught. But at some point, it was so clear how much suffering that was. If you just keep noticing that without judgment, the same with craving. Caught, caught, caught. Or wanting, wanting, wanting. Or not caught—like, "I love it, yeah, I'm going with it." But at some point: oh yeah, this is really suffering too. This isn't a judgment. And it doesn't mean that craving won't come up the next moment or anger won't come up the next moment. But the more that awareness is recognizing it, this is the wisdom. This is what will allow the spontaneous dissolving of the wanting, of the ill will in a moment.

What allowed whatever person it was at that dinner party to say, "Have a glass of wine"—you know, that's not something you could plan ahead. There had to be a moment of spontaneous dissolving of fear that one could do that. Just even for a moment.

And then the other thing is to recognize and appreciate and really feel the wholesome moments of quality in our mind. When there isn't clinging. When you walk outside or you go to eat and you're enjoying the food but you're not lost in rabid greed about it—I'm sure there are moments like that. Or when you're not in aversion, and that person who's just been bugging the hell out of you walks by and there's just nothing. You don't have to love them, but there's nothing. There's no aversion. Appreciate. Appreciate the wholesome moments because it really starts to go in and feel it, just like we're feeling the difficulty, the *kilesas*.

And then just a little thing to leave you with. Noticing there are many ways we can work. When we understand right attitude in our mind, we can really see when the mind and heart in a moment isn't colored by ill will or craving. Then we can use this steady awareness with any meditation technique. Because then we can do it without getting caught in the striving, without getting caught in the ill will of trying to fix. And there are many ways of cultivating these wholesome qualities, different kinds of meditation and inner life. All the different retreats could talk about different ways.

The only thing I want to say now, just to play with here, is: sometimes when you're not all lost in aversion but just going through the day, to consciously bring in a shift of attitude, to bring in a sense of compassion or a sense of sharing, just in your mind—not even doing anything. This is something that Mingyur Rinpoche talks about a lot. It can really change the whole tone of things.

Just simple things. Say you're washing your hands and just thinking, "May I wash and clean my hands to be of service to all beings." Something like that. Something that makes sense to you. That's all. You just start doing that. It feels so different from just washing your hands and running out. Or every time before I eat, I think, "May I eat this food to strengthen my body to be of service to all beings." Whatever makes sense for you when you remember it. And not just saying it—like when I was a kid and my parents always made us say grace before the meal. Each of my siblings, we had one, and we would say it so fast that you couldn't even understand the words.

Thank you. Okay, now we'd eat. Not like that—actually knowing what you're saying.

But play with that. So this is my favorite. I often use this. I'll share it with you. Even when you go to bed, when you're lying down to go to sleep—Mingyur Rinpoche offers this teaching about how intention can transform neutral activities into wholesome ones.

So sleeping. When you go to bed at night with the mind of bodhicitta, with the mind of cultivating awakening to be of benefit for all, we aspire that our sleep be the cause of increased capacity to help all beings.

That's nice, isn't it?

So you can even go to sleep with a good conscience. I'm going to sleep. May my sleep strengthen my capacity to help all beings. Doesn't that feel different?

And it's so easy. Just to incline the mind, the heart, toward the wholesome.

So that's the heart of what we're doing—with some small examples of how it moves into action in our lives.

Thank you all for your kind attention.

Let's sit for a moment.

Sitting or standing or walking or sleeping, for the benefit of all beings, in this next half hour.

CHAPTER 154

Sammā Sati - Mindfulness and Right View

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential distinction between ordinary awareness and sammā sati—right mindfulness as a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. She presents a working definition of vipassanā meditation as "experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with right understanding," emphasizing that technique alone is insufficient without the proper quality of understanding informing our attention.

Wilson explores how cultural conditioning and identity view (sakkāya-diṭṭhi) distort our perception, using vivid examples from her time in Burma to illustrate how worldviews shape what we think we "know." She draws on the Buddha's teaching about the cowherd from the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19), showing how mindfulness can be either precise and careful or broad and relaxed depending on conditions—both are valid expressions of sammā sati. The Tibetan master Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche's description of shepherding provides a parallel illustration.

The talk addresses the exhausting cycle of taking experience personally—creating concepts, exerting effort toward goals, and setting up targets in the mind. Wilson offers the liberating alternative: recognizing that nothing is personal, that awareness doesn't care what's occurring, and that every moment of clear recognition naturally allows wisdom to arise. She encourages practitioners to appreciate mindfulness itself rather than seeking confirmation through particular experiences, finding fulfillment in what she calls "the fresh instant of the present moment."

So tonight I mainly want to speak about mindfulness. Seems appropriate. And just mostly talking about recognizing it and pointing to how it can be such a powerful tool in service of clear seeing, in service of awakening.

One definition of Vipassana meditation that I often use and like very much is that meditation—Vipassana meditation, insight meditation—is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. Those are three aspects that I think go together. The mindfulness part is experiencing the mind and body directly. The right understanding speaks for itself. And "from moment to moment" is the continuity, the steadiness, the perseverance, which is also essential in terms of practice.

But I want to start by talking about experiencing the mind and body directly with the right understanding. That's really key. Our tendency often is to talk about or think about meditation as beginning from learning a technique and doing it right—and if we get it right, the understanding will come. It's true, of course, that the more we practice and the more steady our mindfulness gets, that's actually a condition that allows for wisdom to arise. Right understanding deepens kind of endlessly as we go through our practice and our life. But to think that we just do the technique and it doesn't matter what quality of understanding is in the mind that's paying attention—that is a piece of ignorance, a mistake.

What makes it sammā sati—*sati* being the word for mindfulness, and I'll be using mindfulness and awareness to mean the same thing in this talk—is the quality of understanding present. *Sammā sati* is right mindfulness, the path factor of the Eightfold Path. The Buddha also talks in a few suttas about *micchā sati*, or wrong mindfulness. So it's not that if you experience the mind and body directly any old way, it's mindfulness.

What does wrong mindfulness mean, very simply? It's when you could be experiencing the mind and body directly, but the motivation could be quite unwholesome. For example, a thief is extremely careful, aware of the body and the mind, to sneak into a house and do all those things to steal something. You could say that's *sati* in terms of experiencing the mind and body directly, but it's not *sammā sati*. It's not path mindfulness. It's not understanding. So that's a very simple way of describing it.

The right understanding, basically—and I'll talk quite a bit about this—is when the moment of experiencing the mind and body directly is not distorted or unrecognized by greed, by hatred or aversion, or by delusion. In the moment of *sammā sati*, right mindfulness, we're just experiencing sensation or sound or sight or thought, just as it is.

We all know that. We've all been practicing a long time. We know what mindfulness is. But I just want to point out a bit about practicing and really bringing in, from the beginning, a sense of the right understanding—just the beginning right understanding. You don't have to wait until the end of the path.

Right understanding is a translation often called right view, which is also a path factor—the first of the Eightfold Path. I like the translation "right view" because for me I find it to be quite literal. The way the mind is viewing experience is what gives rise to how we think about things, to how we respond, to how we understand.

When the Buddha was talking about what frees our hearts and minds, what the liberating wisdom is, it's not something that doesn't exist now. It's not that somehow we move to another plane of existence where everything's all love and light and wonder-

ful. You know that, right? We're not going there, because it's not there. Rather, it's like suddenly the scales, the distortions drop—even if just for a moment—and the mind recognizes things accurately.

To me it's so far out. Liberation from clinging, from confusion, arises naturally from accurate recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment. Not from making things in this moment different. And this accurate recognition isn't something we can create with an act of will. But we can start to get interested in also seeing how the inaccurate recognition comes to be.

Mingyur Rinpoche, the Tibetan teacher, says: if we want to be happy, we must figure out which causes and conditions lead to well-being. Similarly, if we do not have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how could we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?

Our steady mindfulness practice means we're going to be spending all this time recognizing both. To really see, as the Buddha said—everything he taught us, as far as I can understand, is not about taking on board a new intellectual philosophy, even though there are twenty volumes of teachings. In all of those twenty volumes, it's not about memorizing them, although one can.

There are in Burma still, they call them Tipitaka Sayadaw. Sayadaw means teachers. There are a few still alive in Burma who have memorized the complete Tipitaka, all twenty volumes, which is as it was in the days of the Buddha. They're quite revered in Burma. So one could do that, and you would gain a lot of wisdom that way. But that's not why the Buddha was teaching.

It's so that we really recognize that suffering arises in a moment as conditions come together in our own mind and heart stream. Freedom from suffering arises in this moment when those conditions are seen through with right understanding, with wisdom. Mindfulness, samma sati, right mindfulness—not distorted by greed, hatred, confusion—is the tool that allows for clear seeing.

So just a few examples, two different examples that I like, to give a sense of how natural it is when we see clearly and the confusions drop away.

One very simple one. If you watch young children learning—I have a new nephew, he's about two and a half, so it's been fun visiting. He doesn't live around here, but each time I go, you see a new stage of learning.

Very simple: when he was around two, when they're playing with wooden blocks, you have a big wooden thing with different shapes—a triangle and a circle and a square—and the child has blocks in those shapes and tries to put the block in the matching hole. To us it's obvious, but to someone who doesn't know, you keep trying to put the triangle into the circle. It doesn't work. You put the square into the triangle. It doesn't work. You throw the blocks all over the place, you scream, you yell, you get upset, right? Because that's what happens when you don't understand. The not understanding leads to frustration, impatience. You blame the blocks, or if you're older, you blame yourself. Why am I so stupid? Why can't I do it? I see my mother do it. She just goes boom, boom, boom. It works for her. Why not for me? Of course, a two-year-old isn't thinking like that. They're just throwing blocks around. But that's an expression of the frustration.

Then they keep doing it, and it's just a natural function of the mind-body process getting older. Suddenly, you know, we say the penny drops in English, and he goes, "Oh right, triangle goes in triangle. That's how it works. Going in a circle doesn't work." He just suddenly sees how they go together. In that moment, that's like a moment of insight, recognizing the way it works. That's all. All the frustration, the self-blame, the other-blame, the throwing of blocks—it just drops away. Because it doesn't make sense anymore. You don't have to decide to abandon the frustration because, oh yeah, the triangle goes in the triangle, the circle goes in the circle. So simple.

It's like that. It's a law of nature.

So you get a sense. It's like how we stop fighting gravity. If you want to really suffer, go out and keep trying to fly. Fight gravity, get upset. But we don't do that. I hope. I hope you're not doing that. These are laws of nature. So you get a sense of what I mean.

In terms of right understanding—which we simply begin our practice with, not the endpoint of course—we can just begin to look and see: what is it that hides or blocks for us accurate recognition? Because it's accurate recognition that allows us to come into harmony with things as they are, the mind and body as it is, the world as it is, the way things work. And from that we can respond in an appropriate manner. We don't have to throw the block through the window. We can respond appropriately. But first we have to see clearly.

So what blocks for us? Obviously the habits of our mind. But even behind that, where do the habits come from? I'm going to give another example of how the views, the way that we view the world—based to a great extent for all of us on our culture, our upbringing, the environment we grew up in, the environment we live in, all kinds of things.

Because that's the cultural background of most people, the sense of the way the Buddha talked about the world—like for example, the Buddhist cosmology of different realms of existence—that's just taken as how it is.

So you might notice in the metta chant that we've been doing, there's a place where it says, "all devas," those are celestial beings, "all human beings, all those in lower realms." In Burma, that's just a fact of how the world is.

So I was there one year, and we were taking many photos of different things. At one point we were with a group of people offering food dana, food donation of rice and beans to some villagers after a strong hurricane—what they call a cyclone there—where the rice paddies and their food had really been destroyed. We were just offering and doing this beautiful thing. Offering in Burma is quite special, because there's a whole ritual around the offering and the receiving that's really dignified and beautiful on both sides.

Anyway, later, looking at a friend's camera—one of the friends who had taken many photos—in some of the photos, all over them, there were these perfectly round, bright light kind of things. As we were looking at it, two friends, one who is Burmese and one who is Western but had spent twenty years there as a Burmese nun, they said, "Oh, that means that's devas. Those bright lights in the photos, that's devas. Devas were there."

And then another friend, also a nun, who is a scientist with a PhD in biology, said, "It's just the way the light's working in the camera and the water and the refraction," and she gave all these explanations. I showed the photos to some friends here and they also offered all the scientific Western explanations.

And it's like—who knows, right?

If it was just the camera, I went back and looked in my camera. I'd taken a few photos, and those round things were also there. Who knows if it's devas? Who knows if it's just a quirk of the light in that particular camera? But to see how the Burmese people, the people really steeped in that culture—there was no question. They know that's devas. And the others had no question either. They know it's some refraction of light in that particular case. They *know* it.

At least we didn't come to blows about it. We were just like, okay, whatever.

Can we just be with not knowing? That's the mindfulness place. What do we actually know? Seeing. The perception is round, bright light. That's it. You don't have to create anything around it. That's the quality of mindfulness—really present. Maybe it's this, maybe it's that. Who knows?

Although I will say, my scientist friend later—this is a bit of a sidetrack, but later she went to Tiruvannamalai, Ramana Maharshi's ashram, where there's this really sacred mountain. And there is something there.

I spent a lot of time there. I was totally surprised. I'm not into sacred mountains or anything like that, but there's something there, I'll tell you.

Anyway, on the full moon – this is in India – many Indian pilgrims come to walk around the mountain. It's a thing you do, a *pradakshana*, walking around the mountain. It's quite some miles. And in India, when many people come, we're talking a million. I'm not exaggerating. We're talking a lot of people when many people come in India. So it's just solid people walking around this twelve-mile route at night.

My friend sent me this photo, but I don't have it on this computer so I can't show you. But it was just these round things all over the place, everywhere. She wrote me, "Okay, okay, maybe it's dust." Who knows?

But you get the sense that this is what affects how we perceive. And rather than getting into right or wrong, what mindfulness is doing – the steadiness of mindful awareness – is bringing us into stepping outside of having to know, being caught up in our worldview altogether. Not having to justify or say it's right or wrong. The worldview is going to come up, we recognize it, but the moment of mindfulness is just stepping outside of either "Oh yeah, it's like this" or "It's not like this." Just seeing. Who knows? It's like this now. It's like this now. It's like this now.

And when we're not adding the extra liking, disliking, aversion, whatever – it's just what it is – that steadiness, the perseverance, is what allows for wisdom, which is accurate recognition of the mind-body process of things as they have come to be in this moment. That's what allows it to arise.

I use that language on purpose. The steadiness of this clear mindfulness, with right understanding, without all the overlay of opinions of liking and disliking, allows wisdom to arise. It's not an act of personal will. It's not that if you do it right, you've got to figure out what you need to see and try hard enough and see it. In fact, that's just the opposite of what's going to help you see how things are.

I found that a huge relief. Oh, my job isn't to figure out everything and see it and create wisdom. My job is just: what's happening now? Learning to almost love the simplicity of mindfulness, rather than getting so involved in what I think about each experience – what does it mean, is it good enough or bad enough, what am I doing wrong, what am I doing right, is this on the right path or the wrong path?

Just what's happening now. Ball of light. Seeing. Finish. What's happening next? I wonder what it is. Wondering. Just this moment. Just this moment.

Coming to really... well, for me, it's almost like loving mindful awareness. I was feeling that on the way up here, thinking about this and that. And then just awareness of what's happening right now. It gets almost tangible in some kind of way, mentally tangible. It's just like this now. And that's so complete in the moment. It's a moment of being purely present, without needing to push away or include something that's not here, or push away what is here. Just whatever is here. Maybe it's precise, maybe it's broad – doesn't matter. But the quality of experiencing the mind and body directly, with right understanding, is just, in a way, the sense of total presence.

There was a quotation – I put it later, but I want to say it now – from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He talks about "the fresh instant of the present moment." I like that. Just feeling the fresh instant of the present moment. That's all. The *what* of the present moment is whatever it is, changing every moment.

That's not as important as just recognizing, coming into trusting that fresh instant, that quality of direct experiencing with right understanding.

One of the habits, the views that keeps re-arising for pretty much all of us—and Winnie mentioned it last night—is one of the largest habits that obstructs accurate recognition: this sense of identity view, the sense of taking any experience in a moment as me or mine. Of course, that's not going to just go away, but we can begin to recognize how it's arising and functioning in a way that distorts our recognition of experience.

Just in a very light way, you can notice how it comes up throughout the day. There's just the six sense experiences arising and passing pretty much endlessly, right? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensations in the body, physical sensations, and the whole mental realm—thoughts, emotions, moods, mental images. That's just what's happening over and over and over again, every waking moment. Have you noticed that? Are you waiting for it to stop? But this is what's occurring.

Now, mindfulness is just noticing what's occurring in this moment without adding extra. But in terms of this identity view, you might just—very lightly, don't make a big deal about it—you might notice how, say you're sitting, you're out walking, there are many sense experiences. A thought comes, it just comes and goes: "Oh, it's Tuesday today," or there's a sight, there's a sound, you're feeling the sensations of the feet. Many, many experiences are just coming and going. They may be neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, but no big deal. They just come and go.

But suddenly there's one that somehow the mind privileges as "this is me," or "this is happening to me," or "this is mine." And suddenly the whole experience takes on a different quality. Do you know what I mean? And to see then what effect that has. We react.

A couple of days ago when it was so hot and muggy, for example. Walking, there's a sense of heat, there's a sense of hearing, all the different things, and suddenly one becomes, "God, I'm so hot." Even that could just be a thought coming—"I'm so hot"—and it goes. But this thought, "I'm so hot," becomes privileged as my thought. And then the experience of the heat, of the mugginess: "Ah, that's so unpleasant. That shouldn't be. What can I do about it?"

So it moves from a sensation and a thought to my thought, my sensation. And then there's the reaction—it's unpleasant, the aversion comes, all kinds of thoughts come about what can I do about it, or what's the matter with me, if I was really a good yogi it wouldn't bother me, or whatever way your thought goes. It doesn't really matter which direction. But when there's that privileging, when it's all about me or mine, that just keeps going. And instead of just "oh, heat feels like this," it becomes my heat, or that heat, or "how can it be like this? How am I going to last for six weeks in this kind of heat? And the rooms aren't air conditioned..." And then there's flies, and there's mosquitoes. And pretty much you're like, "If I wanted it like this, I could have gone to India. I could have gone to Burma. You don't need to come to Massachusetts for this kind of weather."

It just gets out of control pretty quickly, right? And there's suffering, there's confusion, there's just agitation through clinging, which is what the Buddha called it. Agitation through clinging.

A friend of mine was telling me one of her Tibetan teachers described it in a way that I liked very much. He says, you know, everything's just arising and passing—our thoughts, all the different sense experiences coming. There's a sense of our body, but it's all nature. There's nothing personal. It's just all nature. But then suddenly something becomes personal, mere mind. And what had been wide open, all-inclusive, just nature occurring, suddenly gets all solidified into what he called "the narrow bandwidth of being a human being"—somehow separate from everything else.

I like to just get this sense of it: suddenly solidified, me against the humidity, or me against that other person who's walking slower and making me feel like I'm a lousy meditator, or whatever it is. Solid. Everything has gotten solidified, and it distorts our perception.

It distorts our perception, it leads to more thoughts, it leads to more wanting. We get really seduced and entranced by the mind's reactions to these things. And there's no way when that's going on unrecognized that we see accurately.

So when the mugginess is a problem, or "I'm too weak," or "I can't be with it," or "I have a medical condition, there's no way I can continue" with whatever it is—there's no way to recognize accurately: "Oh, heat feels like this, sweating feels like this, aversive feelings in the mind feel like this." It's not that the aversion has to go away, but the flip from the narrow bandwidth, the solidity—"this is really how it is, I'm like this, I'm separate, and this is causing me trouble"—to "oh, it's just like this now," without adding anything extra: that's when clear seeing, when insight can begin to arise.

This sense of taking it personally—anything—is one of the most pervasive patterns in our experience. For pretty much everybody, whatever our background, whatever culture, whether we believe in the devas or don't believe in the devas, this is what the Buddha was talking about. This sense of taking it personally is one of the biggest wrong understandings. When we don't recognize it's arising, it prevents accurate recognition. It keeps us spinning, spinning, trying to be happy but not understanding why we're not happy—because we keep looking in the wrong direction, which leads to clinging, leads to aversion.

Ajahn Sumedho says, "We create ourselves through our thoughts and we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self." So take that as a challenge, because you're probably not going to stop creating yourself with your thoughts. We're not here to stop it, but we're here to bring awareness to it, to bring mindfulness to it. It's not that the reaction stops. It's not that I still don't have the worldview of devas or not devas. But mindfulness can see: "Oh, this is muggy feeling, this is unpleasant heat, this is aversion—feels like this." That's the difference.

Mindfulness, as Ajahn Sumedho calls it, is the point that includes. It includes anything. That freshness of the present moment, whatever is here—it's like a totality of presence, just for a flash. Don't try to extend it in time. All we can do is be fully here for this moment. That makes it more possible in the next moment. But that moment is all-inclusive. This moment is all-inclusive. That's the power of simple sati.

We take a lot of things personally, don't we? I'm staying with simple examples, but I hope you understand that the simple example of the heat and the reactivity, the reaction of aversion, taking it personally—both the heat, the unpleasantness, and the aversion—we're taking it all personally when we're caught up in it. The only way to bring mindfulness, to explore the quality of heart and mind, to see what's creating the suffering, the only way to be able to do that in a balanced way is in a moment when

we're not taking it personally. And that includes the aversion, that even includes the habit of sense of me. It's just a thought. Nothing is personal. Nothing. It's all just, as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, nature. We are nature. It's all aspects of nature.

The aversion arising from the unpleasant feeling of the heat that arose from a thought about it—that's just conditioned from habit. The more we react, the more that aversion reacts to unpleasant; it becomes an ingrained habit and shows up when we're not aware of it. That doesn't mean you are a bad, aversive person. It means that's just aversion doing its job, as Sayadaw Tejaniya says. We want to get interested and see: What is aversion's job? How does it work? What is fear's job? How does it work? How does wanting show up, and what's the effect when wanting is happening in the mind?

The quality of mindfulness with right understanding isn't to stop things from happening, but to get interested in whatever's happening, because none of it is personal. And that's what really allows for this quality of—I call it affectionate curiosity—that mindfulness can bring to whatever's arising. Without that, the effect of taking it personally is we really get caught in striving and reactivity, completely entranced by the habitual reactions of the mind and heart to whatever's occurring.

We start or continue in our habit of looking to experience, or whatever object of awareness is happening, for self-confirmation, for meaning, don't we? When you think about coming in to talk to a teacher, it's so habitual—you think, "What should I tell them?" And you want to say the good things, whatever the heck that means to you that day. But the "good things" really is either it feels good, usually, or somehow we think it means we're getting somewhere.

Where are we getting? Where are we going to go? There's nowhere but this moment. Yet we think we're getting somewhere. It's as if we're looking to a particular experience to give us meaning.

You come in and say, "I'm so sleepy, so tired, my thoughts are all over the place." And we take that experience to mean, "I'm a completely useless human being on the face of the earth. I shouldn't even be here." And why? Because I was sleepy in the ten o'clock sitting.

If you really question people—"I'm sleepy all day, the whole day"—and you ask, "Really, the whole day? How about lunch?" "No, I was sleepy then." "How about when you were walking?" "Oh no, I wasn't sleepy then." "So when were you sleepy?" "Well, the sitting after breakfast." Oh my goodness. Okay, you're sleepy, all right.

Sleepiness is like this. The difference between taking it personally and not is the difference between throwing your blocks through the window and simply putting the triangle in the triangle. Oh yes, sleepiness is like this. No big deal. It's a completely different experience. And that's strengthening the habit of mindfulness.

We think mindfulness is only strengthened when something incredibly good is happening, or when the mind is really steady. No. In fact, I can tell you from personal experience of forty years—actually it's more than that, which is really embarrassing—but it took me a long time to trust this. Sleepiness, that kind of low energy, is one of my hindrances of choice, let's say, one of my good friends, especially on retreat. And it took me ages to see that getting all resistant to it—"I'm not going to fall asleep, I'm not going to fall asleep"—and somehow thinking that's mindfulness? I'll tell you, that's not mindfulness. That's aversion. Aversion is aversion. Mindfulness of aversion is mindfulness, but aversion masquerading as mindfulness is aversion.

So if I'm sitting here and I don't fall asleep through sheer force of will, what have I really been feeding? What have I been cultivating in that sitting? Aversion and tension.

When I finally understood this—okay, sleepiness is like this—I realized something important. Sleepiness is dull. You think, "Well, I'm not mindful. It's not clear." Of course it's not clear, because the job of sleepiness is dullness. You're not going to have incredibly clear awareness when you're sleepy. It's going to be dull. But there's still awareness if you're there with it.

What I started to really come to trust—you can't see it happening in the moment—but when you go through a period where you're really sleepy, and you didn't just check out in your pajamas for the whole day, you did actually keep on trying to sit and walk to some extent, then suddenly you're awake again. It will happen. I promise you it will happen. You will be awake again—probably at three in the morning—but you will be awake again. And there's awareness. There's mindfulness.

Well, that didn't just drop from the sky with no causes and conditions. Everything is lawful. During that period of dullness, you were practicing: dullness is like this.

Sleepiness is like this. But that's mindfulness—albeit weak and dull, it's still being cultivated. It's very different from just giving in. You're feeding the wholesome rather than feeding the unwholesome by saying, "My God, I won't fall asleep." So really looking and seeing: what's feeding the wholesome, what's feeding the unwholesome? Feeding the wholesome is what supports our waking up.

Nyoshul Khenpo again—he was a wonderful Tibetan Dzogchen master. I'm taking his teaching in context to fit this discussion. When we're really practicing without a little bit of right understanding, when we're taking it all personally and we don't recognize that, we can practice extremely sincerely, putting in a huge effort. But with this wrong understanding, it's all about me trying to create something.

As Ajahn Sumedho said—I know I'm jumping around, I'll get back to Khenpo—people used to say, "Don't talk about identity view or this sense of creating self in the beginning because it's too complex." But he said, "Why not? Why spend twenty years practicing through the delusion of me trying to get somewhere? Why do that? Let's start seeing accurately in the beginning."

In this way, when we don't see, when we're coming from the sense of me, when taking it personally, as Nyoshul Khenpo says, we exhaust ourselves in three ways. Probably more, but I like these three. The first is we create fabrications, we create mental concepts. The second is then we exert a lot of effort. And then we create many targets in our minds.

Can you get a sense of this? When we're taking it personally, when it's about me, first we create many concepts, we construct all this stuff—like the example I gave about it being humid and hot. That's all that's happening. Yet from that, in thirty seconds or two seconds, we can be into a whole thing about our health and our past and our future and our retreat and what we're going to do. We're creating all these concepts from that sense of identification.

Then we create a lot of effort. The effort may be in the so-called environmental world. How can I get cool? You're running all around. You're going to L.L. Bean to order one of these fans with a battery that you see at tennis matches. And how can I hide it so nobody knows what I'm doing? I can't have it in the hall, so maybe I won't sit in the hall. You can spend days like that about whatever. This is a lot of useless effort based on a lot of concepts and a lot of goal orientation, creating many goals. Your goal is to get cool. Well, next week it'll be freezing, and then your goal will be to replace the fan with a little heater. You've got to get those gloves with a battery. This is our life if we're not seeing what's going on.

No wonder we're exhausted. No wonder we're not happy—because everything's always changing. If you just notice, "Oh yeah, muggy and hot, feels like this," it's so much easier. So much less exhausting.

And not just environmentally, but internally the same thing happens. Whether with mindfulness—"I think my mindfulness should be more precise. I think I should be feeling my breath more really precisely"—we set up a sense of how it should be, a concept. Then we put in a huge amount of effort, but it's effort based on wanting, on greed, personal effort. You're going to know it eventually because it brings conflict, it brings tension, it brings frustration.

In fact, if you feel frustrated, pretty much for sure there's some idea in the back of your mind that you think should be happening and it's not—or something is happening that you think shouldn't be. And you think the frustration is about this thing that isn't or is happening, but the frustration is actually just the wanting based on a concept in the back of the mind that sets up a goal, sets up a target, that we're putting in a huge amount of effort to try and make happen. Completely exhausting.

Yes, we do put in a lot of effort, huge energy here, but the effort is that of the steadiness of just remembering mindfulness in this moment, and now in this moment. As soon as we start aiming it to try and make something happen, we're moving into those three ways of exhausting ourselves that Khenpo is talking about. So let's not put in a huge sincerity of effort all towards trying to make something happen, when really the effort could be into just relaxing back into what's happening right now.

In terms of what I just mentioned, someone might have the idea that mindfulness should be very precise and really try for that. I think Joseph mentioned this morning that mindfulness isn't about a particular technique. Sometimes we can get ideas like that—mindfulness means it's very precise, or mindfulness means it's more broad and all-inclusive and settled back. This is right mindfulness, or that's right mindfulness. But as I think Joseph mentioned, both of those are fine. It's not about whether it's broad or narrow. Mindfulness is that quality in the citta, in the consciousness, in the mind-heart, of clear recognition in that moment—sammā-sati—free from distortion of greed, hatred, confusion. And that can be very precise, or it can be broader, more all-inclusive.

In fact, the Buddha even mentioned both ways in a couple of suttas. So I just want to read that so you know it's not just us saying it's whatever. Someone said to me once, "Whatever I come in and say to you, you're just going to say, 'Just notice it, it's all fine.'" There was some truth in that. But the noticing part is what's important.

In one sutta, the Buddha is talking about two types of thought—it's an important sutta, I'm not going to talk about the rest of it—but he's describing his exploration of his own mind before he was the Buddha, before he was awakened. He said he noticed two types of thought. One type is thoughts of harmfulness, thoughts of greed, thoughts of ill will—the unwholesome, the akusala kinds of thought. And when he really looked at it,

he saw that the more he thought about them, the more they led to his own suffering and the suffering of others and tired him out. Then he saw on the other side what you could call wholesome thoughts—thoughts of non-greed, thoughts of non-ill will, mettā, thoughts of non-harming, compassion. And he saw that as much as he thought those thoughts, there was no harm that could come from them to him or another—unless, he's so practical, he thought too much all night and could tire himself out with thinking too much. Totally practical.

That's just the context. So he says, "Whatever a person keeps pursuing, whatever is the habit of your mind, that becomes your inclination." So if we keep thinking about aversion and not recognizing it—not recognizing it being the salient thing—it becomes a habit.

And then, talking about when he's noticing the habits of harmfulness, of ill will, of greed, he said, "It is just as in the last month of the rains retreat in India at that time, in the autumn season, when the crops are ripening, a cowherd would closely watch his cows. He would tap and poke, he would curb them, he would make sure that they don't go into the crops that are ripening. Why? Because he sees that there would be a fine or public censure or difficulties arising if he let his cows wander into the crops and cause them damage." Very simple. "In the same way, I saw for myself in the unwholesome states, unskillful qualities of mind—I saw drawbacks and defilements and suffering. And I saw that in the wholesome states of mind, there are the blessings of renunciation and the aspect of cleansing."

And then when he saw the wholesome states, he said, "It is just as in the last month of the hot season, when all the crops have been gathered into the village, a cowherd would look after his cows. While resting under the shade of a tree or out in the open, he simply keeps himself mindful. He simply needs only to be mindful that there are these cows." Very much as Joseph was saying from the sutta: "Oh, there is a body." Just has to know there are these cows. And then the Buddha says, "In the same way, I simply needed to be mindful that these wholesome states are here."

Both of those, he says, are ways of practice. So when it's wholesome, when the mindfulness is getting its own momentum, there's the sense of the more broad quality—settle back under a tree with the simple steadiness of mindfulness: these states are here, these states are arising, whatever they are. Yet at other times—and he linked the other times to when there are difficult states of mind—we're still aware of them, but the quality that we bring into the mindfulness, it's still relaxed, don't get me wrong.

They're both relaxed because we're not trying to change anything. But when there are unskillful qualities zooming in, we need to have a little more sense of care. A little more sense of not just settling back and going, "Okay, whatever," because aversion is zooming in in the background. Instead, it's recognizing: "Right, aversion is like this." It's still mindfulness. It's still relaxed. You're not going, "Oh my God, aversion! I've got to be really careful and keep it from coming." It's not that. But it's just being a bit more careful.

Both of these qualities are needed. When you're more open and settled back, you're aware there's a state—there's hearing, there's seeing, there's thinking, there's wanting, there's bliss—that things are coming and going. And people think, "Oh, that's really nice. It's all just coming and going. I've got it now. This is balanced mindfulness." And then all of a sudden a memory comes up, or someone starts making a heck of a racket, or you remember whatever. Something comes and all of a sudden—zoom—something has been identified with, something's coming up strong. The whole thing is rocky and you think, "But it's right that I need to be open and relaxed." And you try to maintain what you think is right mindfulness, and what happens? You just keep getting carried away, carried away, carried away.

So you go, "Okay, let me be a little more careful. Maybe I specifically come and feel sensations in the body." Not to block that stuff, but to reconnect with balanced mindfulness. Mindfulness that's not distorted by the kleshas. And then you can recognize the aversion. You need to just be careful enough to keep the mindfulness sharp and steady so that we see it when it comes. Because these habits are so familiar. We don't tend to notice them. "Of course I'm aversive to humid, muggy weather. Who wouldn't be? That's normal." And we're off. But with mindfulness: "Oh, aversion's like this. Aversion's like this." Sometimes precise, sometimes relaxed. Both are mindfulness.

I want to share another example from a contemplative master. I've known this teaching for a long time, but I was reading it when I was on a little self-retreat this fall, and I just have to share it because it's so perfect.

Nyoshul Khenpo was a truly great Tibetan Dzogchen master who died at the end of the last century. He's talking about what was really a hard life when he was a young monk at age ten in one of the monasteries in Tibet. He said, "At the age of ten, my job was to take care of the sheep that belonged to the monastery, sometimes shepherding the animals out in the wilds. When it was sunny and nice, I would stay outside, very relaxed, feeling happy, just watching the sheep munching the grass." Just like the cowherd—simply aware, like that.

"But sometimes it was raining and freezing cold with hail and wind, and I was without shelter, and I could not see the sheep who were lost in the mist in the ravines. So I had to chase them everywhere in order to collect them and bring them back at night. I knew exactly how many there were. I recognized each of their faces and called them each by name."

I love that, because in a sense, that's the quality of careful mindfulness. Sometimes with different techniques, we shouldn't confuse the technique with the idea that mindfulness only exists in a particular form. So for example, in the way the so-called Mahasi technique or Sayadaw U Pandita would teach, mindfulness is described as really coming face to face with experience, naming the object, seeing it clearly. It seems to be more object-related—very much in the way that Nyoshul Khenpo was really looking out for each sheep, recognizing them, able to give each one its name, seeing them face to face. Sometimes that approach is really helpful and skillful.

Then there are other times when it's just settling back under a tree, all the things coming and going, the sheep munching, and you're not focusing in on each one. That's also mindfulness.

So seeing for ourselves, it's not about how mindfulness shows up. Both of these approaches are very useful. What matters is that quality of just experiencing the mind and body directly, from moment to moment, with right understanding.

Whether it's precise or whether it's more broad, both of these can be right understanding—the fresh instant of the present moment. This is the meditation. This is the work of the mind that is knowing. This is really what we're practicing here.

And that's where we come to the continuity or perseverance. When we talk about right effort, this is where the effort comes in. Not for a goal, but to really completely open into this moment with right understanding. Because every moment is Dhamma—Dhamma in the sense of the truth of things, the way things are. As the great Zen master Dogen said, if you cannot discover the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it? It's only accessible here because that's all there is.

So this retreat—we're not trying to achieve something in six weeks or three months or at any time. It's really practicing recognizing mindful awareness, recognizing right understanding, just meeting the mind and body experience as it is, noticing when we're suffering, how that's arising in the moment, getting really interested in that. Noticing when there's suddenly that aha moment of, "Oh, I'm holding on to wanting it to be different," and it all just falls away. How that arises in a moment.

Noticing that mindful awareness can be the thread through all of these, that there's nothing, no experience we have that needs to be outside of mindfulness, outside of awareness. When you notice you're putting something to the side and saying, "This has to change so I can practice," that's the place to really get interested. Because awareness doesn't care what's occurring. Everything that arises—as Joseph said—in our day, in our mind, in our body, is a key opportunity to come back into mindfulness if we've gotten out of it, to recognize awareness again. There's nothing that needs to be steadied, that needs to be kept away.

So Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says, as mindfulness is remembered, that's our perseverance, that's our effort—to just remember mindfulness every moment that we can remember it. And in the beginning, it is a personal effort. It's not just happening by itself. We're up here talking, we're having sittings, we're meeting with you, all to help you remember mindfulness. But it starts to develop its own momentum. I'm sure most of you, if not all of you, know that—where it starts to get easier, where you're not having to remember it every moment, it starts to come in by itself.

And we come to appreciate the mindfulness itself, the quality in the mind-heart that's present and aware. We come to appreciate that more. That becomes much more fulfilling than trying to have a particular experience or confirming or describing ourselves by experience. Like I was saying when I was coming up here tonight, I suddenly remembered, "Oh yeah, right. Just the freshness of the present moment, just that." In that moment, it doesn't occur to want something else. It doesn't occur to judge or evaluate. It's just this, but totally present and awake. It's like, "Oh, what's the problem?" And the mind goes, "I'll tell you what the problem is. There's plenty of problems." "Oh, problems feels like this." It's always available to come back again.

This steadiness of mindfulness, when it starts to get its momentum, is the condition for insight wisdom to arise. From Sayadaw U Pandita: "When mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of mind and body." It's not like if you want it or if you're good enough. It's just a law of nature. It's how it is. The more moments of clear, accurate recognition—we recognize accurately—we're going to see how it is. We see how it is, wisdom arises. Try and stop it.

We do try. We try really hard. We really try to get in the way and not see how things are. But that's why we set up this structure. So by hook or by crook, you're going to get mindful and see how things are. "Oh yeah, what was the problem? There's no problem." I've had so many moments like that—"Oh, what's the problem? There's no problem."

Five minutes later, big problem, big problem. A minute ago, there was no problem. Why can't I get back to no problem? It's like, no, there's a problem now. Okay, problem feels like this. We kind of just land in where it is. Not an act of personal will.

But as Mingyur Rinpoche says, and I'll close with this: once we start our path of Dharma, every practice is an awareness practice. Every activity is an awareness practice, an opportunity to practice awareness. Every activity here—broad, narrow, whatever it looks like, wholesome, unwholesome—as soon as we're aware, that experience brings us back into clear seeing.

Nothing is excluded.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 155

The Dart: The Buddhist Explanation of the Difference Between Awakened and Unawakened People

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers an in-depth exploration of vedanā (feeling tone) as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and illuminated through the Salla Sutta (SN 36.6), known as "The Dart." She examines the Buddha's essential question: what distinguishes an awakened being from an ordinary person, given that both experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings?*
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> *The teaching reveals how unrecognized feeling tones trigger automatic reactions—resistance to the unpleasant and craving for the pleasant—creating what the Buddha calls being "pierced by a second dart." Wilson draws on the wisdom of Mahā Ghosānanda's insight that "all the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts," showing how these subtle mental movements shape our speech, actions, and ultimately our suffering.*
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> *Through vivid examples ranging from meditation hall seating choices to watching tennis matches to the Dalai Lama's remarkable presence with suffering, Wilson demonstrates how steady mindful awareness offers an escape from the endless cycle of seeking pleasant experience to avoid the unpleasant. She emphasizes that freedom doesn't mean abandoning appreciation for beauty or becoming indifferent to life, but rather finding refuge in awareness itself—a peace not dependent on the presence or absence of any particular feeling tone.*

So tonight I want to speak about the second foundation of mindfulness that the Buddha spoke of in the Satipatthana Sutta, this quality of mind-heart called vedana in the Pali—what we're calling feeling tone in English, which we mentioned a couple of days ago in the instructions. We use "feeling tone" rather than "feeling" because feeling is a more global expression in English. We use it to talk about moods, emotions, sensations in the body. So I'm going to use feeling tone for vedana to be quite specific about what I'm speaking about.

To start with, let's think about why the Buddha gave such emphasis to this fleeting, subtle, and quick mental experience. Why did he emphasize it so much that out of the whole realm of our human experience to be mindful of, when he divided our entire ex-

perience into four things, he picked one of those four things as vedana? He's really emphasizing the importance for us to notice it, to bring mindfulness to this experience, to this quality.

Remember that everything, as far as I can tell, that the Buddha chose to share came from the motivation that if you can explore this, if you can see and understand how this works in your own experience, this is a key to really releasing the suffering that arises moment to moment in mind and heart through ignorance, through not understanding. This is really at the heart of the phrase *Ehi Passiko*, where the Buddha says, "You too, come and see." It was never like, "This is what you need to know, memorize it, write it down." Well, they did memorize it, but that's because they couldn't write it down. But the point was never to memorize it, pass a test, have debates. It's "Look, you too—come and see, explore."

So I want to invite us tonight to explore vedana in our experience, using as my text one of the discourses, the suttas of the Buddha.

From what I can see, in choosing this subtle quality—this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality—the Buddha did so because it's right at the heart of the moment-to-moment arising of suffering and confusion in our minds when we're not aware of it. Sometimes it can seem, even to me, who is totally devoted to this practice, that there are times on retreat when we're really looking inward, getting so fascinated by these subtle movements of our heart and mind, talking about these subtle little things. Sometimes it's fascinating, and sometimes it's like, "What's this got to do with anything? The world's going up in flames and we're sitting here looking at these little movements of unpleasant and pleasant."

But the thing is, what we have to study is this body and mind. It's these subtle movements that lead to how we speak and act in the world. We're like the laboratory for everybody else. We're the laboratory of how human beings work.

I think of Mahagosannanda, who was a wonderful Cambodian monk and a very great peace advocate after the Khmer Rouge took over. He went to all the refugee camps with Cambodian refugees. His whole family was killed during the Khmer Rouge time. He would go and really bring Buddhism back to the camps, getting everyone together in chanting the metta chant, bringing metta in the midst of such suffering. Very powerful. And then once the Khmer Rouge were gone, he would lead peace marches back through Cambodia when it was still quite dangerous. He was a great peace activist and monk.

One thing he said in a speech once: "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts."

To understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to remove them in the world. And I would say the bottom line is that the landmines in our hearts—in my heart—arise from the unseen habit of greed, of hatred or aversion or fear, of delusion in the mind. When that's unseen and it leads to intention, it leads to action, as Winnie was talking about this morning. That's why intention is so key.

Learning to explore vedana, to recognize it, to just get interested in seeing how it arises and how it works, is a wonderful way—really a key way—to start to both understand how these so-called landmines arise out of habit in our heart, and how, with steady mindful awareness that gives rise to wisdom, they can be removed as the tendency for them to arise starts to be abandoned through wisdom. That's really how I see the importance of this.

So this sutta, this discourse of the Buddha, is called "The Dart." A dart is like an arrow. I'll read pieces of it and then give my impressions.

"An untaught worldling, O bhikkhus, experiences pleasant feeling, feeling tone, vedana. He or she experiences unpleasant vedana and experiences neutral vedana. A well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings."

And then comes the question that is really the key to the sutta, what makes it interesting: "So what is the distinction, what's the difference that exists between a well-taught noble disciple and an untaught worldling?"

Essentially he's saying everyone experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. So what's the difference between an awakened being and a regular person going through the world like us?

I think that's a pretty compelling question. It gets me interested. I'm interested to see what he has to say is the difference.

First, just describing vedana, which I did a little bit, I'll remind us: vedana being, as he says, a sudden, subtle feeling tone in every moment of conscious sense door experience. As I think has been said, perhaps by several of us, all that is ever occurring that we can be aware of is any of the six sense experiences. All day long: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching physical sensations, and the mental realm—thinking, images, moods, emotions, mental states. That's all that's happening.

It's on and on and on—and happening really quickly. We're not always aware of each thing, of course, but it's happening. And what the Buddha is saying is that each moment, and a moment is really, really quick—seventeen trillion mind moments in the

blink of an eye quick—no way we're going to see them all. Each sense contact like that, the mind receives it in some way with this taste, this flavor: pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This has been happening all day, all night, all our life. And as I think I said the other morning, it's amazing to me—how did he figure this out? How do you notice this? Because it happens so quickly. I would never have picked it up if it hadn't been pointed out. This is a place where right view can arise from the voice of another. If I hadn't read or heard this, I wouldn't have just been looking there, noticing my thought, and gone, "Oh, I see the pleasantness leads me to wanting. Ah, how interesting—that's the key to suffering and freedom from suffering." I don't think I would really have noticed that without it being pointed out like ten million times.

But this is going on all day long. And because we mostly don't notice it—it's so fast—the feeling tone itself is a very subtle mental experience. The tendency, and this is no surprise to you, I'm sure, is that we kind of lean into the pleasant, don't want to be with the unpleasant, and don't notice the neutral. This just feels so obvious and normal. It's not something we even notice or question, but it comes to be so culturally acclimated that of course we think, "Of course I like the pleasant. Of course I dislike the unpleasant. Neutral? It's okay, I guess." We never really pay much attention to that.

And it becomes so conditioned that really the sense of liking gets mixed in. As soon as you say pleasant, you think it's liking. Unpleasant—already in many of our minds, aversion is in there. But it comes to be, at least I've noticed it over and over in a subtle or sometimes not so subtle way, the way that our minds tend to value or evaluate our experience. Good, right, how things are supposed to be—usually in the pleasant realm. And when it's unpleasant or going into difficulty, it's gone there so quickly we don't notice the unpleasant. We think, "Well, this is wrong, this isn't how things should be." The whole view of the world, and what we're trying to do, and what makes things right or good, is based on pursuing pleasant and avoiding unpleasant. And as I said, *ehi passiko*—don't believe me. Keep exploring in your experience as we go through this time.

So that's just to begin with. That's all I want to say before going back to the sutta. But this pattern is so rooted in habit. Because remember, how often has the mind practiced this? How many sense door contacts have there been today? How old are you? How many days have you lived through with sense door contacts every mind moment? And how many times have we not noticed this? So it's really in there that the way it's supposed to go is towards the pleasant.

So back to the sutta: "When an untaught worldling is touched by an unpleasant bodily feeling"—but I would say it could be any of the senses—"unpleasant feeling, he or she worries and grieves. He laments, he beats his breast, he weeps, and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of unpleasant feeling: a bodily and a mental one. It is as if a person were pierced by an arrow, and following the first piercing, he is hit by a second arrow."

Utanija calls this double dukkha.

"So that person will experience feelings, unpleasant feelings caused by two arrows. It is similar with an untaught worldling. When touched by a painful, unpleasant feeling, he worries and grieves, laments, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught. So he experiences two kinds of unpleasant feeling: bodily and mental."

Can you relate to that, or does it seem really abstract? You see, this is the place where it goes so quickly—unpleasant and unrecognized unpleasant. As the Buddha describes it, the feeling explodes into story. It explodes into reaction and reactivity.

Notice what the Buddha is describing here. He didn't say the person goes, "Oh, I kind of don't really like that unpleasant feeling." No—he's weeping, he's distraught, he's beating his breast. He's really having quite a reaction going on. That's what the Buddha is pointing to. Can you relate? I mean, that's what we do. And we don't even notice the subtlety of unpleasant moving into aversion. The unmindful mind can get so entranced by the reactions that this becomes the description of what's really going on without mindfulness.

Take an obvious, simple example you all know: an unpleasant, painful feeling in the body when you're sitting. Not even a really killer one, just a little one. But as we always say, as soon as you notice—oh no, unpleasant—it explodes into reactivity. "How am I going to stand the rest of this retreat? How am I going to stand the rest of this sitting? How many more days are there?" You want to start going through your calendar. "I wish I hadn't given up my phone because I could go back and really count exactly how many days are left, and how many more sittings, and how impossible it's going to be to get through this." And wherever it goes from there.

At some point, we might realize, "Okay, this might be papañca." Sally talked about that the other night. But then we often go, "Well, I shouldn't be doing this. This is bad." And it's more unpleasant feeling. We're not even asking: what actually happened here? What actually happened? Unpleasant—immediately moving away. Immediately. It's un-

bearable. Beating our breasts, tearing out our hair, weeping and distraught, hitting ourselves with a second arrow. And we think this is kind of normal. I mean, it is kind of normal, unfortunately. That's the problem. It's normal.

So it explodes into reactivity, and we get really sucked into the story, sucked into what's going on. And it reinforces a view we may not even realize we hold—that better and better means more and more pleasant. When you think about being an enlightened noble disciple, do you imagine still having that backache when you sit? Do you think about still having to deal with your grumpy family? Do you consider that your stomach might not digest food well, and people won't act appropriately, and you'll still get sick, and you'll still have unpleasant mental states? We don't really think it through. We think, "Oh yeah, it gets nicer and nicer, nicer and nicer, until we're all floating on a cloud." But we all have pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. This teaching really invites us to look and see.

Let me go back and then talk more about this. The Buddha continues: you have the unpleasant bodily and mental feeling. Having been touched by that unpleasant feeling—both of them—the person resists and resents the unpleasant feeling. Then, in one who so resists and resents the unpleasant feeling, the underlying tendency—in other words, the habit of resistance against unpleasant feeling—comes to underlie the mind.

This is where these habits, these kilesas, are being created moment by moment by moment. That habit of resistance: as soon as there's unpleasant, we resist it. And the resistance is just that—"No, this shouldn't be happening." It doesn't have to be all the way to beating our breasts. Just: "This shouldn't be happening." And that comes to be the habit.

I'll read a bit more and then go back and talk about it. Under the impact of that habit of resisting the painful feeling, he then proceeds to enjoy sense happiness. And why does he do this? "An untaught worldling, O Bhikkhus, does not know of any other escape from unpleasant painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

I really think that's one of the keys to this whole teaching.

Then, in one who enjoys sensual happiness in this way, an underlying tendency to lust, to craving for pleasant feelings, comes to underlie the mind.

In other words, that becomes a habit. He does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings.

I think this is really the key part of the sutta, something to get interested in exploring. Because the Buddha is laying out so clearly how these habits of aversion or hatred and greed for sense pleasure come to underlie our mind, come to be habitual. And we can really, with mindfulness, explore that happening—not just hate it, but explore it happening and really see.

This pattern reinforces a worldview of not recognizing the first noble truth. So just check and notice how you evaluate yourself, how we subtly evaluate others, how you're evaluating your practice—which we try not to do, but do on an endless basis. How much of that evaluation is by pleasantness or unpleasantness? It's so ingrained. I keep finding it sneaking up through the back door. I think I'm just really present with things as they are. It's all fine. I can feel the ease of that. And then suddenly it's like, "Oh no, it should go a little bit in that direction because that's the way it's supposed to go." And ninety-nine million times out of a hundred million, that way it's supposed to go is going to be pleasant. Because that's just what we're geared to look at.

This underlying habit of resistance to the unpleasant, leading to leaning into, lusting for, craving any kind of pleasant experience—because that's the only way out we know. That's so sad to me. But see, that's really what I would describe as the workings of samsara: the sense of this endless leaning forward into the next thing, the endless search for gratification.

We can see it in the big picture; it's not hard to notice. When we're out in the world and things are a little unpleasant, we go to the refrigerator, call up a friend, get in the car, buy a new something, or do whatever to feel something pleasant, just to move away from the unpleasant. I'm not saying that any of these things are bad. It's not about that. It's really about noticing the process.

But this habit keeps us always leaning a little bit toward gratification, a little bit out of a sense of insufficiency. Whatever is here right now just isn't quite enough—this next one will do it. This next one will do it. And it's not quite so clear in our minds; we just get into the habit of moving toward the next pleasant thing, the next pleasant thing. We don't see the danger, which I'll talk about in a minute.

One thing this pattern does is keep us focused on each object, each experience as good or bad, the thing to get away from or the thing that's going to do it. When that experience inevitably dissolves or changes—when the gratification, even if it did gratify us, just doesn't last more than a fraction—when it inevitably changes, then the focus is on the next object, the next object, never seeing the process. This is the endlessness of

dissatisfaction, the leaning forward of samsara. Sally gave that Tibetan definition of samsara: the urge to correct. It could always be just a little bit better. Never quite good enough.

In focusing on the object, the experience—this one or the next one—there's always a sense of me and object, and the world is narrowed down to that. We don't notice the vastness, the sense of nature, the non-separateness of it all. It's me needing to get that. Each experience—and this is to me why life can seem so exhausting—each experience is like, "So this is the one that's going to do it," or "This is the one that's making me miserable." We're just completely taken by each experience, up and down and all around, and it's just—oh my God, how do we get through the day?

The example I use that's been in my mind the last two or three years is an image that really works for me, plus it makes me laugh. Clearly it's not about me, because it's easy to laugh when it's not too close. It's about how we're up and down so quickly, and each moment seems so real. We don't notice what's happening because we're in that constant leaning forward of resistance and going after pleasure.

It's a sports example from a few years ago, from the Super Bowl—American football, for those of you who aren't American. It was when the Patriots, the New England team, played the Seahawks from Seattle. I didn't watch it; I'm not actually interested in football. But my friends told me the last two minutes were really amazing, and they recorded it so I should watch it.

I'm not going to get all the details right, so football fans, don't hold me to being accurate with how these things work. I'm just making a point about samsara, okay? I'm not trying to get football right.

Anyway, it was the last two minutes, and the New England quarterback, the big star Tom Brady, had done his job. They were ahead, two minutes left. He was sitting on the sidelines with the defense team on the field. And then whatever happened, the Patriots were about to lose. Two minutes left, the other team had the ball almost right on the goal line. There was no way they wouldn't score, and the Patriots would lose.

Brady was sitting over there on the sideline, nothing he could do, and the camera panned to him. He was a picture of total dejection—his head in his hands, total despair. Then it went back to the field, and a totally bizarre thing happened. The pass was intercepted, and somehow they ended up winning.

A totally weird fluke. Then the camera pans to Brady again. He's leaping all over the place, so happy. They won.

Someone said to me, "Why shouldn't he be upset? Why shouldn't he be happy? Sure, he's upset, he's happy—that's life."

But it's the thing—it's like it's so *everything*. That upset was total, that was going to make him miserable forever. Then he was so happy, he won the Super Bowl, he's going to be happy forever. But how long was he happy? There was some whole big thing about deflating the balls. Actually, now he's not even allowed to play for four games. You know, it doesn't last. Nothing lasts.

This is life. Up and down, up and down. It keeps changing all the time. And when we're looking to the object, to the experience, we wonder why. Why is it so exhausting? Why are we never really fulfilled for more than a second? Because nothing can do it. That's the danger.

But it's nice to watch. We can watch it on retreat in little ways. I came up here and all these people are out looking at the sunset. It's really pretty. You're probably not looking for your life's fulfillment in the sunset. Probably. I hope not. I don't know—yogi mind can get out there. But you're just looking at it. "Isn't this nice?" It's nice. That's it.

Are you noticing the pleasant? Or do you notice where it goes into, "Wow, the sunset! But last night's was even better." Someone just said that to me—we were saying, "Yeah, last night was really better." Then we hope maybe tomorrow night will be even better. That's it, right there. That's the movement into samsara. Being on retreat is great. We can watch it in the little things. It's the same way it works in the big things.

So why would we want to look this closely? When we really bring our attention to look, what we find... you know, we kind of like the juice. We like the juice of being all excited and leaping around because we won the Super Bowl. We don't really like the juice of being totally demoralized and depressed. But there's a way we get hooked in, and the steady awareness that lets us see what's really going on is sometimes, to the unenlightened worldling's mind, not so attractive.

Ajahn Sumedho—it's funny, it was a talk I was listening to from a while ago, and sometimes he just says, "This is how it is." He's talking about opening to the real in any moment. He says, "The real is not what you're expecting, I tell you. It's not all happy, safe, and secure. Life is fair and unfair. There's pleasure and pain." He says, "The conditions arise and cease, arising and ceasing like the breath going in and out."

There's pleasant, there's unpleasant. This doesn't go away. There's nothing that has any intrinsic substance to it.

And so when we really look, we can practice without realizing this and turn our whole practice into still subtly searching for the pleasant thing that's going to do it for us. It turns into an idea of some meditative state or an idea of what nirvana would be—I mean an idea, not the reality—that always will have a tinge of "it's going to do it for me now."

Instead of seeing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, just really bring in the steady mindfulness and see how this is. When we really see steadily, some of the entrancement with the object, with this experience, with the leaning and thinking it's going to do it, goes away—which I experience as really ease and peace. The idea of it to the mind that hasn't experienced that is like, "Oh God, who wants that?"

Again, I'll take another sports example. Sports are good because so many people get involved. Anyway, I happen to like to watch tennis, professional tennis. God knows why. I'm the most unathletic person you could imagine, but I love to watch it.

The thing with watching sports—I see it with other people watching other sports too—there's this idea that you're doing it from choice to enjoy yourself, right? That's the idea. So if I'm watching tennis and I care at all who wins, if I pay attention to what's going on in my experience, it's not that enjoyable that often. Every point that doesn't go the way of the person I want to win—oh, you know, it's unpleasant. And then it's like fear, and then it's worry, and then, oh my God. I'm all tense and suspense and everything. And then even if they do win, it's really just more relief that the damn thing is over. And then I feel pleasure. But then, as with any sport, as soon as it's over, there's a day and then the next tournament starts or whatever. There's no resting.

But then, if I really watch, I started saying, "Okay, I'm doing this to enjoy myself. Really, Carol?" There's something a little off. So I started just really paying attention to what's going on internally, externally, seeing. And as I said, I was telling this in Switzerland—it's actually when I said it that I realized exactly that's what was happening. I hadn't realized it before.

Watching tennis, it's moments of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. There's pleasant—there's one really skillful shot. It's like pleasant, it's so great. But then it keeps going. There's another shot. It's going back and forth, back and forth. Neutral, neutral, neutral, neutral. Then there's another bad shot. Ah, unpleasant. And then it's just neutral, neutral, neutral. And then, ah, unpleasant. Then pleasant. Then neutral, neutral, neutral. And that goes on for hours. I was just fast-forwarding through a match. It was a five-hour match. These guys are fighting. And that's going on all that time. If you're really paying attention, it's like, "What am I doing this for?"

But that's just like a little microcosm of life, extraordinarily. It's really, really kind of interesting.

So, okay, back to the sutta. I'm talking about—this is all talking about the sutta.

Remember he said, in one who enjoys sensual happiness, the tendency to lust for pleasant, the tendency to resist unpleasant, doesn't know according to facts the arising and ending of these feelings, or the gratification, danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. In one who lacks that knowledge, then the underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings also comes to be a habit.

And so when such a person experiences a pleasant feeling, an unpleasant feeling, or a neutral feeling, he feels it as one fettered by it, as one chained by it. Another translation says "as one who is joined to that feeling" — unable to escape from it. It's like a chain, a trap.

"Such a one, O monks, is called an untaught worldling, who is fettered by birth, by old age, by death, by sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. She is fettered, she is chained to suffering by this, I declare."

It's a strong statement. I'm giving examples that make us laugh, but the Buddha is saying: really look at this. This habit chains us to suffering.

As I said when I read that statement — that an untaught worldling doesn't know of any other escape from unpleasant feeling except to crave for pleasantness — I feel that's so poignant. It makes me feel so sad, really, for all of us to be in that position. But then I feel enormous gratitude, a sense of being blessed that I, that all of us here, have had access, been exposed to a path that actually does offer another way. There is an escape other than just looking for endless pleasant feeling. And the escape, as Semedo says, is just not what you might think it is. But there is really an escape.

So I want to talk about that — gratification, danger, and escape. This is another sutta from the Buddha:

"Before my enlightenment, O bhikkhus, while I was still a bodhisatta" — someone who's committed to complete awakening of a Buddha but not there yet — "it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? Then it occurred to me: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification. That the world is impermanent, bound up with dissatisfactoriness, and subject to change, unreliable — this is the danger in the world. The removal, the abandoning of desire and lust for the world — this is the escape from the world."

First, I think it's important to point out that the Buddha says there *is* gratification. Often when people hear about the danger of everything being unreliable, and the escape being the abandoning of desire for the world, it's heard in a way that suggests pleasant experience is to be shunned, or pleasant experience is a problem — basically saying abandon the world altogether. People hear the Buddha say sense desire is bad, and we hear that as pleasant experience being bad. He's not saying that. He's so practical, really looking around and saying: there is gratification. There is beauty in the world. And we enjoy it, we appreciate it. That is the gratification in the world. If there were no gratification, we wouldn't have desire for it. So not to deny that, but more to explore what that really is.

The danger being, as he said, that whatever we put our reliance on vanishes in a moment. He's talking here in terms of vedanā, the feeling tone, saying that people don't understand the gratification, danger, and escape in the feeling tone itself. The gratification is just that little blip of pleasantness — like that. And what we don't see, the danger, is how fleeting and insubstantial feeling tone is — pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It's just a blink of an eye. We think, "I'm building all the decisions of my life around having this pleasant feeling," which just vanishes in a moment. Look at it and see.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a renowned Thai forest monk, meditation master, and scholar who died at the end of the last century — actually, several of us have spent time at his monastery in the forest in Thailand — he said once: really explore the fleeting nature of pleasant feeling. And then look at all the decisions you've made in your life and really see how many of them were guided by wanting to have more pleasant feeling. How many decisions did you make for pleasant feeling? His guess was you'd find about ninety-five percent of the decisions we make, just kind of off the cuff. We don't really see the fleeting quality of these. We go right into the reactivity to the reaction, and then we build our whole life around it.

So the escape — the escape is the steady mindful awareness that just starts to explore...

The abandoning of desire and lust for pleasantness, for the things of the world, is not something that we do with aversion or fear. It's not, "Okay, I'm not going to go to anything pleasant anymore because I'll just get into wanting. I'm just going to go in a room and shut the door and live the rest of my life there." Which doesn't work anyway, as you see. The mind then will just make up pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant. You can't get away from it—you can't, in a body and mind.

But when we start to see how it really works, the wisdom sees that the craving stops making sense, because you see it's only bringing more suffering, not less.

But first I just want to say that the Buddha himself says it's not that we no longer appreciate the beautiful or the lovely. There's one place where he says, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it." Very different things. It's not like then everything's just all kind of gray, the same, ugly. "I don't care, I'm going to put a vase of flowers, I don't care—pick ragweed, pick dandelions, pick up an old piece of grass or this beautiful rose, I can't tell the difference." We can tell the difference. We can still know, "I like the yellow rose better than I like that other thing." But in the end, it doesn't matter. I'm not predicating my happiness on pleasant or unpleasant. There'll still be that sense of looking at this and pleasant might arise in the mind, and looking at that and unpleasant might come up. But I don't have to build my life around it.

From Thich Nhat Hanh: "When we are obsessed by desire for sense pleasures, we lose our freedom." This was taught by the Buddha. But it's very important to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. Attachment to sense pleasures, that kind of looking for happiness, brings about suffering and entanglement, both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and others. The joy and happiness of a peaceful mind brings neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others.

That's actually a very good guideline. If you can't tell—am I just appreciating, or is there a little bit of clinging going on?—and then we try to rationalize to ourselves... Rationalizing, you can't ever trust that. But we can tell when we're just with mindfulness watching the experience: if it starts to feel entangled, if it starts to get complicated, as Marie Joy was saying—complexification starts happening, we're concocting all kinds of stuff—good chance, really good chance, there's some craving for pleasant or avoiding of the unpleasant going on.

So this is something we can really explore on retreat here. Something I love about retreat is the simplification of life. And you've all been here now, what, like nine or ten days? You probably know to the minute. The things of your daily life are a little bit farther away, and the stuff that goes on here starts to seem bigger and bigger, doesn't it? Some small thing that in your daily life you'd go, "That's no big deal," and here the mind is like, "Oh, I don't like that, I do like that"—it's really huge. You can really notice it more. The magnification of concentration. And as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, the exaggeration of the kilesas. You put those two things together and what have you got? Yogi mind. "It can't be like this. I've got to have a different toothpaste or I'll die." Yogi mind.

So anyway, we can really explore here, really get interested in looking: Is it true? The little decisions that the mind makes as you go through the day here—don't take it personally. Remember, this is just nature. This is the Buddha describing how these habits get set up, how when we're not aware, there's the resistance and the wanting. Don't take it personally. This is going on in all of us here in this human race. You're in the laboratory to explore it.

And this is what's so beautiful to me about it—it's just nature. With a steady seeing of mindfulness, you don't have to figure it out. Just be willing to bring the simplicity, the honesty of mindfulness to the whole process. And you have ten million chances a day to do that. Then the wisdom comes by itself. It starts to see by itself: "Oh, wanting this just complicates. Wanting doesn't make sense." It drops away. It's a huge relief.

So explore that here. How fast that movement comes. There's something unpleasant in experience—that flash of movement towards the pleasant.

So this little example—I think Winnie or someone was talking about this morning—in terms of intention, it's the intention that comes up: where to go sit when you're in the dining room. Just notice. Notice you walk in, and there's a little sense of unpleasantness, so you want to move. Somebody's too close. The light's too bright. It's too noisy. You don't like this. Just—why do you go sit where you sit? Why do you choose which cup? Although now they're all the same, but still, you choose one. Why do you choose how much food to take? How do you choose where to sit in the hall? Whether to walk? What kind of tea to have? Little decisions.

I don't mean analyze it and get into some crazy kind of doubt—"Oh no, should I have peppermint, should I have chamomile, oh no." I don't mean that, okay? Just be natural, be normal, but watch what comes up and how often the movement toward wanting something comes when there's just a little bit unpleasant. Just a little bit.

When you're walking and suddenly there's that sense, "Oh, it's time to stop walking now." Check it out. What's going on? A lot of the time, just unpleasant or boring. And a thought came up: "I could go do something a little more juicy, a little more interesting."

And just the sense of craving itself—it's a habit, right? But sometimes just the craving itself is experienced as pleasant, as more active. Someone said today, and I really loved it because it showed how we don't understand the neutral, how ignorance to the neutral starts to underlie the mind—this movement, this resistance to unpleasant and going to pleasant.

Sometimes as the mind's getting quieter here, people experience where it's been really intense—pleasant, unpleasant, or nice—but then it kind of calms down a little. Maybe it's a little dull, maybe not, but things just aren't so vivid. Things are present, you're there, but it's heading into neutral zone, which we've talked about before as being maybe calm and we don't notice.

So this friend said today, noticing that, and noticing how suddenly the mind wanted to want—just to look, just wanted to look at something. And the wanting itself brought a sense of vividness, of a little bit more intensity that was experienced kind of as better. You could see the wanting itself was enough to give this sense of vivid. Basically it's a sense of vivid me. That's often what's missing in the neutral. It's just this—"Oh, I want to look." And it's experienced as being almost more alive, more pleasant or something.

This is when, really, we can see how we get caught in saṃsāra. So notice that. The sense of how the wanting and the aversion is so normal and natural that that's what feels at ease.

So here, again, when you notice the wanting, the clinging—even just little things like "I want to go sit in that seat there, but somebody's in it," or "I want to go sit in that seat, it's empty"—just stand a minute and feel the wanting. This is so not our comfort zone. We're so habituated. Wanting comes up, you act on it. You get the thing you want and everything's copacetic. What's the problem? Why should I sit there and feel wanting when I can hurry and go sit there and get the seat I want and be happy? Right? That's how we live our lives.

So stand there. Just feel the wanting. Just feel it. Notice how it's just sensation, coming and going, thoughts in the mind. And eventually it will go away. I promise. Because everything goes away. Keep paying attention after it goes away, and just notice.

So then, having been touched by that painful feeling, he does not resist and resent it, and no underlying habit of resistance to the unpleasant comes to be. Because there's no habit of resistance to the unpleasant, there's not the need, the urge to go looking for sense pleasure to avoid it. There's no need to do that, so it doesn't come into the mind. And so there's no habit of craving and lusting after sense pleasure in the mind. It's just this now.

He knows, according to facts, the arising and ending of those feelings—just that fleetingness, the coming and going. He knows the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with those feelings. So in one who knows thus, no underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feeling comes to lie in the mind either. He feels as one who is not fettered by feelings.

Still feeling all the feeling tones—that doesn't change. Such a one, O bhikkhus, is called a well-taught noble disciple who is not fettered by birth, by old age, by death, by sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. She is not fettered to this suffering. This I declare.

This doesn't mean she or he is not living a life. As Ajahn Sumedho says, life still goes on. But as Mingyur Rinpoche puts it, we start to recognize a sense of peace that arises from the stability of an awareness which is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

The stability of awareness doesn't care—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And we bring this sense of steady awareness to our normal everyday experience. But this difference of steady awareness, rather than getting lost in reaction to each experience, changes the whole thing.

I'll give just one example from a good friend of mine. She's given me permission to use this story—her family, hi, if you're listening. She always listens to the podcast. Her family lived quite some distance away. I've known her for many years, and she'd fly to visit them a couple of times a year. As is often the case, going back home to visit family was often difficult—difficult relations with the parents and with a sister. And every time she'd go, she'd make a vow: "I'm really going to meet them with loving-kindness this time. I'm really not going to get reactive this time." Have you ever tried that? "I'm going to go home and just be the bodhisattva of compassion." And you step in the door and it's all over.

So she said she'd always do that and then get home and get involved with the sister, with the mother, whatever. But this was just a couple of years ago, after a retreat where we'd been particularly looking at the attitude in the mind and really strengthening the steadiness of awareness of whatever was coming without trying to change—just really seeing. Taking refuge in the mindfulness, in the awareness, rather than reacting to what's happening.

She was doing the same at the airport, getting ready to get on the plane, starting to say, "Okay, I'm just going to cultivate mindfulness." And then she thought, wait a minute, let me just bring awareness to what's actually happening. So she's bringing awareness, doing some walking meditation in the airport, sitting on the plane, and she noticed—I don't remember the exact specifics—that as she was going home, she was actually feeling rather resentful, getting a little ready to engage in battle. She was trying to pretend she had loving-kindness, but there was this subterranean difficulty going on. So she just brought awareness to all of that, instead of trying to make it be different, trying to move to the pleasant.

She said it turned out to be the best visit she'd had. Because through that steady awareness brought to all those experiences, there wasn't the sense of her being that, or being stuck to it. The way I say it: the Velcro is off. She was watching the sense of resistance or fear or judgment coming up, but seeing it coming and going without landing in it. She didn't act from it or speak from it, and the visit was completely different from how other ones had been.

Same world, same life, same pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feelings—but taking refuge in the steady awareness, the wisdom comes that we don't need to react from them, because that's not the path of happiness. But it doesn't mean we shut the world out.

I want to end with a little story about the Dalai Lama. Because this isn't about not caring or somehow not feeling or not being open to the suffering and the joy in the world. It actually allows for much more sensitivity and open-heartedness and connectedness when we're not taking it personally, when we're not needing to go to the pleasant to make everything okay.

Someone was asking the Dalai Lama—you know, everybody who comes, all the Tibetans who come out of Tibet always go to meet him. How many stories, how many people has he been face to face with, telling him horrific stories of loss and death and imprisonment and torture and destruction? I mean, really face to face. Even reading about it, I can hardly bear it. But can you imagine being face to face with hundreds of thousands of people? And this person asked, how does he do it? Because if you look at him, how is he not continually overwhelmed?

He said that when the Dalai Lama is with someone and they're talking, he's totally with them. And if you've ever seen him, you can see that. He's completely present with somebody, like you're the most important person in the world in that moment. Very responsive. And if you've ever seen him anywhere, you also know he has a sense of lightness, a sense of joy, a sense of real love of the Dharma, compassion. Well, he's Mr. Compassion, the sixteenth incarnation—he's had practice.

So he's totally present. When somebody's telling him a story of great suffering, he can be crying, really feeling with it. Then they leave and he's done. He turns to the next person, and maybe they're laughing, and the next minute he's laughing like a small child. People ask, how can you do it? Because he's so present. But there's no kind of him resisting the unpleasant or needing something pleasant. Nothing created around it. It just moves through. He turns to the next one, totally there. And if that's joy and happiness and childlike wonder, he's totally there. Not holding to that either—it moves through. Turn to the next. If that's suffering, totally there.

This is life. When we're not under the thrall of these habits, when we see just this—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—this little thing, it seems like so nothing. But if we explore it, it has immense potential to free us from these habits that keep us confused and struggling when we don't recognize them. The power of accurate recognition is immense to free us from suffering.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Let's just sit quietly a moment.

CHAPTER 156

Cultivating the Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this deeply personal dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines why intellectual understanding of impermanence (anicca) differs from the liberating perception the Buddha described. She explores the three levels of wisdom (paññā): heard understanding (suta-mayā paññā), reflective understanding (cintā-mayā paññā), and direct insight (bhāvanā-mayā paññā)—explaining how only the third level truly frees us from clinging.

Drawing from her own month-long self-retreat and the death of her younger sister, Wilson identifies three ways delusion (moha) blocks accurate perception of impermanence: denial and avoidance of change, misperceiving momentary change as stable existence, and simple inattention or lack of continuity in mindfulness. She shares the touching story of Ānanda weeping at the Buddha's impending death from the Parinibbāna Sutta, illustrating how grief is a natural human response we need not resist.

Wilson offers practical guidance for retreat practice: noticing how moods arise and pass, observing the changing nature of seeing and sensing, and using Ajahn Chah's simple reflection "this is uncertain" throughout daily activities. She emphasizes that steady mindfulness reveals how we create permanence through selective perception and imagination, while direct presence opens us to the tender beauty of each fleeting moment. The talk concludes with Hafiz's poem "Deepening the Wonder," celebrating how awareness of impermanence can deepen rather than diminish our appreciation of life.

The subject I want to speak about tonight is cultivating the perception of impermanence. *Anicca*.

As you know, the Buddha spoke frequently about the centrality of really understanding the fact of impermanence—one of the three Dhamma doors. Guy spoke the other night about the five aggregates in terms of seeing *anattā*, the insubstantiality of sense of self. That's one Dhamma door. Really getting an understanding of the truth of *dukkha*, like the first noble truth, is another Dhamma door. And then sometimes the perception keys into the truth of impermanence, *anicca*—the three characteristics. Of course, as we proceed with our spiritual journey, we're going to see and understand all three of these because they're just three different aspects of how things are. It's not like it's some insight that changes anything except how we relate to life. But it's said that sometimes a person might just more naturally tend to recognize, to have an accurate perception of, one or the other of these three.

So tonight we'll talk about *anicca*, the power of the perception of it.

This fall I did about a month of self-retreat. I did a few self-retreats last year—I took a sabbatical from teaching. So I did about a month of self-retreat in a really beautiful spot, and for some reason this sense of impermanence arose strongly. Sometimes it's kind of terrifying in the implacability of it. This is how it is, and nothing can change that. But also, when the mind isn't caught in clinging and resistance, when it's really just recognizing this is how it is, it opens us into this tenderness of the immediacy of this moment of life, because it's all there is. It's so poignant and so beautiful at the same time, in my experience.

One very famous haiku kept running through my mind and heart that whole month. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. Issa, a Japanese priest from the 18th century, wrote: "This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet..."

I just love that. It is a dewdrop world. It vanishes as soon as the sun comes out, and yet it's so beautiful. It's so poignant. It's so tender. It's said that he wrote that after the death of his young daughter.

So this opening to the perception of impermanence is really what frees our hearts and minds from the stasis of clinging. And it's not a dread, horrible thing—it opens us to the wonder and the mystery at the same time.

But here's what's interesting. Of the three characteristics, intellectually, when we speak about them, impermanence seems to me the most intellectually obvious, easy to understand. Probably no one here is going to argue about it, right? But there's some way that knowing it intellectually isn't freeing us from clinging. Or am I wrong about that?

So what is it that changes? And this is where the Buddha talks about the perception. He said: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, this perception eliminates all sensual desire. It eliminates all lust for existence, for becoming, for turning into some new form in mind or body. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'"

Those four things mean complete awakening.

The perception of impermanence, when it's developed and cultivated—I'm taking that as the key for what I want to talk about tonight: how we can begin to develop, or continue to develop, this perception.

Because it's not that things are permanent and then, if we have some kind of insight, things start to change. This is how it already is. So how come we don't see it? Why is it so hard to perceive this?

On some level, this is the nature of all insight. It's not creating a new reality, but shifting our inaccurate, confused, basically wrong perception of what's occurring, of what we're experiencing. Because how we perceive is how we think about things, and how we think about things becomes the views, the construction our mind puts onto life through thought, and that then determines how we're going to respond to experience.

So even if intellectually we know everything's changing, when we have a really hard, difficult mood—everything's changing, but not *this*. This is going to be here forever, right? That's just kind of how it feels. And then we start reacting as if it's going to be here forever, because that's the perception in that moment. The nature of insight is not that actuality changes, but that perception shifts.

The Buddha spoke about three different levels of wisdom, of paññā. They're all wisdom, and we're taking in and working on all three levels at various times. It's not simply linear.

The first level is *suta maya paññā*—in English it would be "heard understanding." Understanding that someone says, or that we read, or that we intellectually take in. So when you read "yes, everything's impermanent," that's heard understanding. Or I say that tonight. And that's not nothing—it's useful. We can sometimes use those thoughts just to help us remember. When you're in the middle of that really difficult, horrible mood and your mind goes, "Oh yeah, right, I think I heard somewhere that everything's impermanent"—it doesn't really shift our understanding, but it might just give us the strength or the courage to hang with it a little bit more. So that's the first level of wisdom, and it's important. Without that, there's no right view, no wise understanding.

The second level is *cintā maya paññā*, which is really using our thinking, wise reflection, our intellectual understanding. We kind of think about it: everything really is impermanent. And we might intellectually go through the day—it's not really the gut-level perception, but we're kind of saying to ourselves, "Oh yes, the leaves on the trees are turning yellow, everything's impermanent, things change." Now that's true, and that's a reflection that can help us come back into our own experience. But even that, unless it's on the third level... Oh yes, the autumn, the leaves are falling, the leaves die—we can say the whole thing, and it's like, okay, maybe it mellows us out a little bit. But it isn't really the depth of insight into anicca, into impermanence, that really shifts our understanding in a moment. You know what I mean? It's important, and we really use this. It kind of softens us up to start perceiving things in a more accurate way.

And the third level—this is really the level of insight, not thinking but just an aha moment—is when the conditions are ripe such that the perception actually shifts. We have little or big insights frequently about all kinds of things. In terms of impermanence, it can be anything going on. It's not that you have to be in some kind of deep state of practice. It can be with anything. But suddenly, you're washing your hands, and as you're washing your hands you just see the soap disappearing, and it's like—oh my gosh, everything just disappears. Everything just... And it could sound really silly when you're saying it, but when it goes in, it's on a cellular, visceral level. Do you know what I mean? You've had insights like that. *Oh. Wow.* And then the mind will think about it and we'll talk.

And that's fine, knowing the mind's thinking. Usually two thoughts is enough. You know, we got it. Okay, you don't have to write a novel about it. But the energy of the insight usually goes into thinking. Yet you can feel, wow, yeah, everything's changing. And if someone came to you and said, "That's not true," you don't have to get in an argument. You see, the perception has aligned in that moment. That's really how it is.

Of course, as with everything, perception lasts a fraction of a second. So again, we may have that insight, it goes in, it makes a difference. It has an effect on our understanding going forward, on our mind stream. But it doesn't mean that once we have an insight on impermanence or anything, then from that moment on, every single moment is going to be accurate perception. Right? Because what blocks it? We know—our old friends, especially delusion. Delusion leading to greed leading to aversion, resistance.

So this is what I want to talk about: just how we can explore this in this situation we have here, which is a great situation for exploring this. The perception of anicca is so liberating, as the Buddha said, because in that moment, just in that moment of that accurate perception, the heart, the mind is liberated. In that moment, it's freed from clinging. Because clinging doesn't make any sense. It just doesn't arise in a moment of really recognizing that there's no solidity, no stability anywhere. It just doesn't make sense. And then with that wisdom, the heart, the mind, you really get that sense of freedom, of liberation from the constriction, the limitation that comes with the trying to hold on, with the trying to push away, with the trying to keep everything in its nice little box so we can feel safe and secure.

So I wanted to talk about three different ways that came into my mind that moha, delusion, manifests—ways that we can explore here. This is to be interested in how delusion manifests as a kind of block, not allowing the accurate perception of impermanence. And sometimes we can see these manifestations coming up too.

And again, as I talk about forms of delusion or clinging, remembering, just to plop it in there, that we're exploring these with interest, with wise attitude. These are not three more ways of delusion that show what a really hopeless, stupid person you are and you might as well give it up. This is like, "Wow, let's see how this works. It's really fascinating." And if you think you're going to see anicca once and then the delusion is going to stop—hello, wake up. What are we all doing here? Why are we spending our life? This is a lifetime process.

And if we're interested in it—I've talked to a lot of people in the meetings, not everyone and no one all the time, but quite a few people are just starting to get this sense of interest in seeing what's going on. Like someone said, "Aversion comes up in my mind and it's like, okay, it's aversion. It's the next thing arising." You can kind of watch it. So just to put that in there.

The three ways I want to talk about are: a kind of denial, avoidance of change or what comes with change; the misperception, recognizing wrongly even when we're present; and the third—you see they all link together—is simple inattention, lack of continuity. The inattention means we just don't notice what on some level we're not keyed up to notice. And that actually hides the perception of impermanence.

So, just to start by talking about denial. This is a bit coming off what I was talking about last week. It's not a quiz, I don't really expect you to remember, but I was talking about the two darts, the two arrows. The Buddha is saying that the habit of our mind when unpleasant experience arises is resistance. That comes to be the underlying habit of the mind, resistance. So that's denial—a refusal to look at change. And then under the influence of the habit of resistance, the other habit that comes up is clinging, looking for pleasure. So that's the second way, the misperception, looking for something to make us happy where it can't happen.

So this is one of the ways, on a very subtle and profound level, that this habit of resistance to unpleasant and clinging to the pleasant actually operates. It's not only just about it feeling uncomfortable in the moment.

This is one of the habits that actually obscures the recognition of reality. In that obscuration of things as they are lies what keeps us wandering in confusion and suffering. So on this level, the habit of resistance and clinging—it's not that it's bad, and it's not just about big things. On these subtle levels, it's really deep. This is such a great opportunity to explore it while we're here in the silence together.

I want to say a little bit from my own experience about the sense of resistance. One of the resistances that comes up—and this can be on the macro level of change as well as the smaller one—is simply seeing things that we are attached to, things that we love, particularly people that we love, or situations that are important to us. When we see them vanish, go away, it opens us into a great deal of sadness for most of us—a sense of loss, grief. And then what can come in so quickly, in the sense of denial, is not really deeply understanding the First Noble Truth.

So the loss comes, the grief comes, and there's that sense in the back: "Well, something's wrong. It's not supposed to be this way. I shouldn't be feeling this." Or basically, "I don't want to feel it"—that's what it really is. I'm feeling grief, and I don't want to feel the grief. Therefore, there's something wrong with the way the universe is working. They shouldn't have gotten sick. I shouldn't have lost my job. This person shouldn't have died.

The denial, I think, is really a turning away from simply opening with tenderness to the pain, to the sadness, to the sense of grief or loss or change or confusion or instability—and really seeing that this is part of our human life. When we talk about opening to the truth of impermanence and really freeing our hearts and minds from this confusion, from always reacting and responding in a way that's inaccurate... Sure, I have no idea what an arahant experiences. Maybe they don't really experience grief, but they do notice absence.

There's some sutta—I'm paraphrasing because I couldn't find it—after the Buddha was really old, and his two closest disciples who'd been with him all the time, Sariputta and Moggallana, had both passed away. He's looking out at the assembly and saying, "This assembly is empty. It is empty of Sariputta and Moggallana." He noticed the difference. He wasn't weeping and wailing, but he noticed the difference.

But another sutta that I actually love, because it really touches me, is from Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant and cousin for his last twenty-five years. He is a really lovable figure throughout all the suttas, all the discourses. He's in very many of them because every discourse that starts "Thus have I heard" is meant to have been recited by Ananda, who was with the Buddha for twenty-five years, had an incredible memory, and remembered every discourse that he heard. So he pops up a lot.

But he's very human. He's kind of like the human touchstone. Sometimes he would make mistakes, and the Buddha would chide him: "Haven't I told you, Ananda?" He was very kind, very inclusive. In terms of being the Buddha's attendant, it wasn't like you see with some masters, where the attendants are trying to keep the crowd away. Ananda was there because he loved the Dhamma. His job was to help everyone who

wanted to hear the Dhamma come and hear the Buddha. He was a great supporter of the nuns. He spent a lot of time teaching the nuns, sharing with the nuns—anyway, I'm getting off on a whole other talk. But he's a kind of way in for us.

There's one lovely sutta, the Parinibbana Sutta, which is very long. At this point, the Buddha has told his disciples that he's going to die in a certain amount of time, and then they're talking about other things. And then it says, all of a sudden, Ananda left. "The venerable Ananda went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost: 'Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me.'"

Andy Olendzki, who's a Pali scholar and was the director of the Study Center for many years, told me something I didn't know—that this is a very well-known image in Buddhist art and iconography: the sense of Ananda leaning against the doorframe and weeping at the coming loss. And the Buddha was still around at this point, mind you—at the coming loss. I love that this is in the suttas, because it shows that this is part of being human. If we shy away from feeling that, we'll never see things as they are.

The story goes on. The Buddha inquired where Ananda was, and they told him, so he told a monk to bring Ananda to him. When Ananda came, he said, "Enough, Ananda, do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So how could it be, Ananda—since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away?"

But he's not saying this harshly. He's saying this out of love and wisdom and compassion. This is how it is. This is how it is. Let it in. Let it in.

And then he went on to really praise Ananda and bring up his confidence in Ananda's understanding and practice, saying, "Continue to practice, and you will come to full understanding." He's really saying: This is how it is. You have the confidence, you have the understanding, you have the ability. Keep practicing.

And so I just love that, because I feel like that's saying: yes, this is how it is for us. Don't run away from it. Don't hide from it. This is part of life.

Personally, I found that even opening to the grief of a loved one's death without resistance kind of deepened the sense of love and connectedness. About five or six years ago, my younger sister died quite suddenly and relatively unexpectedly. I was her closest person, so it hit me harder than I expected—my parents had died in the years before that, but this was just different.

It was so interesting to me. I couldn't have talked about it like this in the couple of years after, but now it's become part of my psyche. It was like: this had happened. There's no way to argue with that. You can't say, "Oh, no," or "Maybe," or "We could change it." There's nothing to do. This is how it is. And so somehow my heart was just able to say yes, this is how it is, and was just able to be—for quite some months—totally present.

At times this really strong sense of grief or sorrow would just well up in the middle of whatever I was doing—you know how it is—and the heart and mind would simply respond: "Yes, this is how it is now." I would just really let it be there. It would move through, last a little while, be gone, then come again a few times a day. But the sense of clarity remained: No, this is just how it is. And also that it's fine to feel the grief. Actually, I felt that it came connected with the deep love I felt for her. Trying to shut it out was like trying to shut out the whole world, in a way.

I feel like I learned a lot about the human nature of change, of death, of coming together and going apart. How could it be otherwise? The only way it could be otherwise is if I went first. There's no other way it's going to happen. And yet this sense of subtle denial and fear of just feeling is something that can keep us locked.

The Buddha often used an opening to the reality of death as a powerful teaching tool. There are many stories like that. Just one brief one—I'm sure you know it, it's the most famous one—of the woman who came to him after her young child had died. She was completely distraught and begging the Buddha to somehow bring the child back to life. He said, "Okay, if you go and collect a cup of sesame seeds from houses that have not experienced death." Of course, she went, and every single house had experienced death. After however long, the mind gets it. She comes back and says, "Okay, I get it." And then the heart-mind is open to really hearing the truth, and the Buddha could teach, the Buddha could share.

So I'll tell one more story about this, because it's just life. Some years ago—I don't know, maybe ten years ago—I was teaching a retreat in the Sagaing Hills in Burma with friends, including Sayadaw U Lakkhana. It was all Western yogis, about thirty of them, but with a Burmese teacher and us, another teacher and me, along with Western translators. We were friends with people there. There are three nunneries in a row next door, and we're friends with those nuns. The retreat center is right on the Irrawaddy River, kind of up high, but you walk down to the road and you're walking along the river.

So one day, we were just out walking along the river—me and the other teachers and the translator friends—and about two nunneries down, there was a huge gathering: the whole group of the nunnery, some monks, and many of the people who live there, all standing by the river. I said, "What's going on?" They told us that three young novices—little boy monks, ten, eleven, twelve years old—had gone out in the river to play. Somehow one of them had drowned. The other two had lived there for a long time, but this one who had drowned had just come last week from far away. He wasn't used to being in the river, and I guess he didn't know how to swim. Everyone was standing there, and they had just recovered his body.

And then—the learning is what happened next.

They had to send for his family, who lived far away. There weren't cell phones there yet, so it was a long journey to reach them, and then they had to take buses to come. It was going to take twenty-four to forty-eight hours for his family to arrive. So the nuns and the monks from his monastery came down, just up the hill, and they took his little body up to a big sala right on the side of the road. A sala is like a big open room without walls—a large roof, big teak pillars, open space. They set up a really lovely little bed and put him in clean robes and brought down nice blankets. Then all the nuns and monks gathered. And many of the nuns are really young—there's this one little nun...

At that point, she was probably around six or seven. We know her now—she's sixteen, seventeen. It's wonderful to see. She came running up to us, holding our hand, and Jake was with us. He could talk to her; he speaks Burmese. So she was part of it too. They didn't say, "Oh, you're too little. Go hide in the back."

They put him on the bed, and then everyone from the community—the laypeople, the monks, the nuns—all set up what we would call a wake. They were staying with him for the twenty-four to forty-eight hours, chanting suttas and metta, taking turns. The whole community just staying there with him, including the little nunlets and the little novices. And the two little boys who had been with him—they took care of them too. The monks came down and made sure they were okay, not too lost or caught in blame. It was just this sense of the whole community coming around and saying, "Yes, this is what happens. And here we are, dealing with it."

One of my Western friends said, "I'm forty-seven years old. I've never seen a dead body before." And I thought, yes, that's kind of how it is here in this culture.

I thought it was beautiful—I mean, sad. It was really sad. Even when I saw Yeti just last year, we were walking right by the river and we both kind of pointed, reminding each other of that time. It has a resonance. But there was this sense of: this is how life is. Let's see it. Let's not hide from it. Feel the sadness—that's part of how life is. We don't stop caring, but we can respond in a much more appropriate way.

So that's the denial piece. And then, as I was talking last week, out of the denial—or out of "I shouldn't feel sad" or "this is too much"—we tend to cling, as we know.

One time I asked myself: Why? Why do we cling? What are we clinging to? This sense of instability—something about it, I don't know about your mind, but my mind, which of course doesn't exist, but the mind seems to hate it. It hates instability. Unless you don't like what's happening, then it wants instability. And it doesn't seem to notice the contradiction between those two different ways.

Just this sense of shaky ground, the sense of not knowing what's happening. Have you noticed that in your practice? We want to get it all figured out. "Tell me how to do it right so it'll always be nice, balanced, open, choiceless awareness and no striving. How do I get it so it stays like that?" Right? Isn't that what we think we're trying to do?

But it's so poignant. Our strategy for happiness: cling to an experience, cling to ideas, cling to views—views of ourselves, clinging to views of our personality. Even when we think we have a disgusting personality, still it's *my* personality and we hold on to it. Views about anything.

This sense of clinging—like how to find stability in an unstable world—and not quite noticing that it's the clinging that's creating the dissonance, the ill-at-easiness, the suffering.

I heard this on public radio a few years ago. It was a financial program, or maybe the news, and they were talking about the European debt crisis. Very seriously talking about it, discussing the stock market and what effect the European debt crisis would have on politics and governments. And they said, "Politics is being driven by the stock market, and the markets hate uncertainty." So they pressure this or that government, this or that political figure to stay or resign or do this or that—so there won't be uncertainty in the stock market.

This was said with all utmost seriousness.

Stock market uncertainty. That goes together, right? Uncertainty and the stock market go together. "Stock market uncertainty" is like an oxymoron. It doesn't happen. They said this with all seriousness. If this figure resigns, if this government does that, then

the market will be happy because there will be no uncertainty. And I thought, this is how we live in this world. We don't even notice when we're doing that for ourselves—this response to the unreliability of life.

Hold on, let me share this. It's a fragment of a long poem by Galway Kinnell, an American poet, called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You scream, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard
as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down."
I have stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die."
Little Maude, perhaps this is the reason you cry.
This the nightmare you wake screaming from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

And so, that's how it is. And sadness is okay. Actually, when we're not trying to stop from falling, when we're not resisting the trembling, there's so much beauty and love and tenderness for the moment. When our minds and hearts become more flexible, more flowing—not caught in that "oh no, it's going to go, it's going to go"—we can recognize: it hasn't gone right now. It's just this. There's so much tenderness and freedom in that.

From the Buddha: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful. One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere."

This comes back to realizing there's not one to abide. It's the clinging that makes us look for somewhere to abide.

One way we can open to this—just to remind ourselves, it's a practice Ajahn Chah mentions often—is simply going through the day, and when something comes up, you remind yourself: this is uncertain. Not some heavy "oh my god, this is uncertain." But just when you notice your mind saying, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that," then simply: oh yeah, this is uncertain. That's all. And then we go on. I think what's more amazing is how much things seem to keep going the way we think they're going to. This is uncertain—just not putting that clinging in. As we saw, anything can occur in the next moment.

The other *moha* I want to talk about is the misperceiving of impermanence. We think of it like this: something's here, here, here, then suddenly something can happen in the next moment. Someone's here, here, here—suddenly they die. But that's the misperception. We're not perceiving the momentariness of change. As the Dalai Lama said, the sense of impermanence is not that something arises, exists, exists, exists, and then goes away. That is not perceiving accurately. That's misperception. That's perceiving a sense of permanence—that it's hanging out for a while and then goes away. Not really seeing the constant nature, the momentariness of change.

Someone mentioned today, in terms of our practice, in terms of seeing, for example—when we're not quite mindful of seeing, it's one of the things that gives us a sense of permanence. The room and the people seem the same as last time, and seeing is always occurring. But there can be a moment when you tune in and every second the actual seeing is different. As you're walking, it's different images, different images, different images, changing every second. But mostly we don't perceive that. It's not that we're going to go through life perceiving little layers—you can't function that way. But there are moments when the perception shifts and we see: oh yeah, it is like that.

It isn't like it's just all the same, the same, and all of a sudden it crumbles. It's not like that.

A friend was telling me about watching a time-lapse video—you know time-lapse, right? It was a time-lapse video of a flower bulb that was planted and then growing. You've probably seen things like that. When you see that, starting from the bulb and then the little shoot comes up through the earth and it grows into the leaves and the flower and then the flower decays and falls, you just see it's moving the whole time when the time is speeded up.

Where can you stop it and say, "Now that's just a flower existing"? Now that's just a bulb existing, separate from anything else, self-existent. It's not. Every single instant it's changing. The conditions are changing and the so-called self-existent thing is changing, and there's no way to just stop and say it's static. There's nowhere to land and say, "Now it's going to be like this," even for a second.

And then, as we start to turn around—someone years ago said on a retreat, "Oh, I finally got it. I've been seeing for years that everything around me is changing, but suddenly I see, oh, that includes me." So it's not only like some static me is watching the bulb growing and everything changing, but the so-called me, as Guy was talking about, is also constantly changing. The five aggregates are rising and shifting and changing and coming together in different ways. That's all that's going on.

So part of our misperception is that we don't recognize that aspect. And it's true—on some level we need some sense of steadiness to get through the day, absolutely. But one of the great things about being on a retreat like this, at times when you don't have very many responsibilities, is that you can even just sit in your room if it gets all kind of too weird for a little while. You can just sit in your room for a while and watch molecules dance. It won't stay that way very long, believe me. You don't have to worry. You don't have to hold it all together so much.

So one way we don't perceive accurately then is inattention. Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." I love that. It's going on all the time. We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination.

This is why we put so much emphasis on gently cultivating a sense of continuity, just whenever you remember, bringing the mindful awareness to whatever's going on. Because lack of continuity is something that really masks anicca, that really hides impermanence. We don't really see the constant shifting and change. We might notice something's here, and then later we might notice it's gone, or we might just be more caught up in another thing. But we don't quite see the whole process—we absolutely don't see the whole process without some continuity of mindfulness, even in chunks.

A great place to explore that here on retreat is with your mood, with your sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, with your sense of your personality. The moods that come through the day. How many moods, how many emotions have you had today? You probably didn't count them. More than one?

If Joseph was here, we'd have a joke, but he's not here, so I'll tell you. One time we were teaching a retreat together, and after we left the sitting, he said, "Carol, how many emotions did you have in that sitting?" I thought, I don't know. I must say mental states, not just strong emotions, but mental states. I don't know, fifteen, twenty, something like that. I said, "How about you?" He goes, "I don't think I had any. Maybe one." This is like a real joke between us now all the time. I go, "How many mental states did you have?" So we're all different. There's not a right way.

But notice how the lack of continuity masks impermanence. We've all known being in a really strong emotion and thinking, "Now it's going to be like this forever." You know that. We think that. Then somehow it goes away. Or I think I mentioned in another talk, someone comes in and says, "Oh my God, I was so upset." Really, the whole day?

No, well, not this time, not that time, not when I was sleeping, not when I was bathing—but it comes down to like one sitting or a sitting and a walking. But then the mind is thinking, and this is three days later, "I was so upset." And it assumes a permanence. We assume permanence so much of the time.

A story from a friend of mine. I was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock and she was cooking there. It was a long time ago. And she was telling me—she's a longtime meditator—that she saw herself, and other people saw her, as an aversive type personality. So she'd been having this conversation with the other cooks and they were saying, "Yeah, you're really aversive." And she thought, "Yeah, I am really aversive."

But then she had a day to just be silent on retreat. So she was sitting and walking, and she said, "I'm just going to be really steady and mindful and watch the mental state, watch the mind, just be really continuous." And she said it was amazing, because the idea she had been clinging to was "I'm aversive." And when we're not steady with our mindfulness—which is just noticing what's happening—when we're not being steady, we tend to fall into what I call selective perception. We have a view, "I'm aversive," and then the selective perception tends to notice everything that substantiates that view. Have you noticed that? When you're in a bad mood, everything seems to prove, "Yes, I am in a bad mood, and this is why I ought to be." We don't notice the other stuff.

So she was just being steady, and she noticed—oh, when I look carefully—there were many moments where her mind was kind, generous. She really had a lot of faith, loving the Dharma. She was having joy, a heart of generosity in cooking for all the yogis. There were many neutral moments. There were some loving moments. There were all kinds of things. She said about ten percent of the thoughts and moods were aversion. Ten percent. But without the steady, mindful awareness, we don't notice that. We fall into these assumptions that it always is like this.

So notice, as you're going through the days, not only with moods—though moods and thoughts are a good way to do it. People often say, "I have this particular habit. This is my personality. I always tend to have this loneliness." And I ask, "So you're feeling that?" "No, no. I had this joy. I looked out and there was this joy. But then the loneliness, I know, was just gone in the background because I wasn't paying attention to it. But when the joy went away and I thought about it, then of course I could feel the loneliness again."

And no one has said that specific thing to me. But do you hear that sense of "this unpleasant thing, whatever I'm identifying with, is always here—it's underground"? When you don't notice it, you're still assuming permanence, that it's always here. And we do that.

So what we're saying with steady mindfulness is: just letting go of the clinging to ideas and surrendering into what's occurring now, just like this. When the loneliness is here, it's like this. Not the stories, but how does it feel? And stay with it, stay with it, stay with it—and then it changes. It goes away. Something else arises. Stay steady and notice that.

So often we don't quite notice the actual gone-ness of something. We lean into the next thing. "Okay, the loneliness is gone. That's over. I don't have to worry about that anymore. Now what's next?" And then we're all caught up in the next thing. Really notice when it's gone.

Really notice when you're having an experience of bliss and it goes away. Really notice that it's gone. I don't mean just notice calmly that it's gone—notice what comes next, how something else begins. When we really stay steady, we can't hide from the ephemeral, changing nature of things.

Notice how conditions change and affect the experience we're having. Notice how you feel emotionally might affect how the breath comes and goes. Notice, as many people point out, how the weather might have an effect on your mood. But we don't tend to just see it as changing conditions, like the bulb growing with the sun and the water. We think, "What's the matter with me? I was in such a good mood yesterday and it rained a little bit and now I feel like crap. What's the matter with me? Why can't I stay steady? Why can't I stay in this open, loving space? Isn't that what I'm here for—to always be open and loving?"

Good luck. It would be nice. But the weather changed and the barometer dropped and you got a headache and now you're in an aversive mood. That's how it is now. Notice it coming together. Notice the conditions coming together. Notice how they change, and notice when the aversion is gone. It's gone. Don't assume it's hiding underground. It's gone. Really notice what's here now and stay really steady with it. We can't hide from it.

This is silly, but this is where I really saw this: one time I was eating on a retreat. Eating is really interesting. I think if you're really mindful of all that goes on in eating—for one thing, how many chews is it while the food still tastes good? Not many. One chew, two chews, and then blah. That's why we're going for the next forkload before we even finish, because it stopped tasting good. But that's another thing—a whole other talk.

So I was being really quite aware, feeling the sensations and watching it go down the throat, and then feeling the sensations, when it suddenly hit me: the food in the mouth was "the food," but these sensations were just sensations. It was a thought in my mind calling these sensations "the food" that was giving the sense of permanence, of something unchanging. It was a completely different experience. Sensations in this area was very different from chewing and feeling "the thing." But the mind says, "Oh no, this is the food, and now it's that," and then I visualize the esophagus or whatever. We create the unreal by excess of imagination. What's really happening? Sensations. That food was so gone. You go back to your mouth and see there's no food there. It's gone.

It seems silly, but we're so into the next thing that we don't give ourselves time to notice. So maybe there are ways you can play with this on retreat—just give yourself time to notice. In activities, see if as soon as you eat one bite, you're shoveling in the next. Give it a little bit of space. Or as soon as you finish eating, you jump up to go do the next thing. Give it a little bit of space. Just let something end. Or notice how the mind jumps into the next thing, but notice that's what's happening. Notice when you're assuming permanence—whenever we think, "This is what's going to happen," or we assume we know what's going to happen next. The bell rings and we all come in here. It's amazing that most of the time that works.

It is amazing.

So just bring in that Ajahn Chah teaching: "Okay, this is uncertain. This is uncertain."

For me it feels like really great renunciation when I'm on retreat—off-retreat too, but on retreat you can notice it more clearly—the difference between when I'm simply really present with whatever's happening in this moment, or when I'm walking around or sitting, really living in the constructed world of thought, of whatever's going on. Not that thought should stop, but when we're really living in that world.

And the great renunciation is to just simply let those thoughts hang there in space. Just come out of living in that constructed world and drop with total surrender and presence into the reality of this moment. It's like this now. Just feeling the sensations of the lifting, or the coolness of the rice when you're chewing, whatever it is. That complete coming into the present moment. The renunciation of all the stories and the thoughts just for that moment. Ah, peace.

Not needing somewhere to rest, but the resting at ease in whatever's arising. There is resting at ease—it's just in this moment. We can't hold it, we can't keep it, we can't keep it going. But when we're not trying to make something to rest in, whatever is occurring right now, this is the place where total ease, the totality of presence, is possible.

So just play with this as you go through the days, noticing when you're assuming permanence. Notice when you're not. Notice when something's gone and you think, "Oh, but it's gonna—" Wait. How is it right now? Just drop into that.

And yes, some of the time we do open to that fragility—that being in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. And because we're not completely awakened, sometimes we're going to fall into some fear or some resistance or whatever. That's fine. That's just the habits of the mind and heart. We can be with that too.

When we really start to have some—or continue to deepen—our confidence in our perception of change, of impermanence, we get much less afraid of life, of change, because we know this is how it is. This is all there is. It doesn't take us into a kind of "well, who cares" disconnect—"it's all changing, to hell with it all." At least in my experience, it doesn't do that. It actually opens into the potential to really appreciate the wonder and the mystery. It's just this. It's so amazing. And then now it's this. We don't need to make it anything in particular. Somehow this moment is everything.

I just want to end with a poem I really like from Hafiz, the Persian Sufi poet.

Deepening the Wonder

Death is a favor to us, but our scales have lost their balance. The impermanence of the body should give us great clarity, deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes of this mysterious existence we share and are surely just traveling through.

If I were in the tavern tonight, Hafiz would call for drinks, and as the master poured, I would be reminded that all I know of life and myself is that we are just a mid-air flight of golden wine between his pitcher and his cup.

If I were in the tavern tonight, I would buy freely for everyone in this world, because our marriage with the cruel beauty of time and space cannot endure very long.

Death is a favor to us, but our minds have lost their balance. The miraculous existence and impermanence of form always makes the illumined ones laugh and sing.

So, thank you. Let's just sit quietly a moment.

CHAPTER 157

Aspiration and Courage

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this heartfelt talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the inevitable challenges practitioners face when cycling through difficult mind states. She emphasizes that the path of awakening is vast and all-encompassing, held within the framework of the Four Noble Truths—dukkha, its cause in taṇhā (craving), the possibility of cessation, and the Eightfold Path of practice.*
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> *Wilson draws on Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching that Nibbāna is accessible to everyone, describing it as the coolness of heart-mind freed from the torments of greed, hatred, and delusion. She distinguishes wholesome aspiration from goal-oriented wanting: aspiration uplifts and energizes, while craving contracts and frustrates. She shares inspiring examples, including Master Sheng Yen's unwavering determination to return to monastic life despite years of hardship, and Burmese nuns whose devotion and generosity transformed their communities.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with common obstacles—returning patterns, overwhelming emotions, and what Sayadaw U Paṇḍita called "stopping within." Wilson references a discourse where the Buddha reassures the dying monk Asaji that concentration is not the essence of the teaching, but rather insight and awakening. She encourages practitioners to use wise reflection on inspiring beings, to hold personal suffering as an expression of the universal human condition, and to meet difficult moments with non-aggression—the very expression of compassion that transforms experience into the path itself.*

I want to offer some reflections on aspiration and courage.

At this point in the retreat, I'm really struck by how much everybody goes through. How difficult it is sometimes. And despite all the instructions and all the lists and everything we talk about and the upliftingness—there are times for everyone where there's lots of insight and it's really going well—then it seems to cycle around again. You're just kind of spinning in your neuroses, it feels like. You think, "Here we are again, and it's into the fourth week. What did I do wrong?"

And that's just the lighter side. But seriously, what everyone goes through at different times in your own way, it's quite challenging sometimes, isn't it? Difficult, tiring. And it takes, I think, enormous courage to keep showing up again and again—not just today, not just in this retreat, but for our whole path of awakening, for our whole life.

What I want to talk about tonight, in terms of something that can support our keep showing up, having this moment-to-moment courage, is something that helps me a lot: to keep refreshing, renewing my deepest sense of aspiration for why I'm doing what I'm doing, in terms of this whole path of awakening.

When we are in the difficult time, even if yesterday it was all flowing and it was so clear that there's no self, or everything's coming and going, or there's no point in putting in effort—it's just all happening by itself—when it feels like that, it feels like, "Well, now I know. This is how it is, and it's going to be like this for the rest of the retreat and probably the rest of my life." And it probably isn't the first time you've had that experience and that thought. And if you're lucky, it's the next day before that falls apart. Could be five minutes later. And it's like, "Oh my God, again, this."

Sometimes we can see in whatever particular personal experience of suffering is coming up, we can see the three characteristics. But then it starts to spin and we start to get sucked down into the vortex. And this is for everyone at different times—it's as if we're back in the story and the "me" and the suffering and "what did I do wrong." Can you relate at all?

So, some things about aspiration. The first thing, to remind us when we're really in this struggle and it seems to come down to me doing it wrong and what can I do to fix it: remember that this path, this whole path, is vast. Hold it in the framework of the Four Noble Truths.

When I'm spinning and thinking, "Oh my God, I'm back in self-hatred again, and if I really knew better..."—just to open up a minute, even if it's an intellectual reminder, to remember that whatever arises is held within the Four Noble Truths. There's not some experience you have that's somehow outside the Four Noble Truths, and if you get rid of that, then maybe you can begin to discover what the Buddha was talking about. Everything can be held within that framework.

Just widen out and see: it isn't just about me fixing this pattern of my mind and being less neurotic. We're really here to understand the Four Noble Truths—that this is dukkha, the cause of dukkha is tanha, craving, that there is an ending of craving, the sure heart's release, the ending of suffering. Whether it's a momentary release from craving, which even Sayadaw U Pandita talks about as a moment of mindfulness, as a moment of freedom, or it's the complete ending of greed, hatred, and confusion, which is the arahat—both of those are on the path. And then the Eightfold Path of our practice, of how we live our life.

Just to remind ourselves: even if it seems we're struggling in a bubble of me and mine and what's wrong with me, that's just the particular expression of some aspect of the Four Noble Truths. Remember the vastness of what we're doing.

The path is vast, all-encompassing, and as the Buddha said, we are all invited. Ehipassiko—you too, come and see for yourself. It's not only for monastics. It's not only for people who have some kind of really special circumstances in their life.

The truth is true for everyone. Everyone here has some kind of incredible deep aspiration, or you wouldn't still be here. Whatever got you here, you wouldn't still be here into the fourth week. It's for everyone.

So to remind ourselves that the potential for awakening is available to each of us in any particular moment of our experience. And that's not just some kind of a nice idea. That's really the essential heart of, I hope, why we practice. Don't shy away from that. Or let yourself fall into some sakkaya ditthi, personality view, of "okay, yeah, for somebody else—for me, if I could just get through the six weeks without committing some horrible thing, that'll be good." Really let it in. This is what this path, this practice is about. And as the Buddha said, if it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. He didn't just say it's possible for this person over there. Ehi pasiko—you too come and see.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who we've spoken about, gave one talk that was translated into English. I just want to mention it very briefly because I love the title: "Nibbana for Everyone." This was a talk he gave to Thai laypeople quite some years ago, where he was saying that in Thailand at that time, Nibbana had come to be thought of as something only accessible in previous generations, or only to monastics. But he was saying Nibbana means cool, basically. So he said that in any moment the mind stream, the heart stream, is freed from the torments of greed, hatred, and confusion, it's cooled. That's the coolness, he says. He talks about momentary Nibbana the same way that Sayadaw U Pandita talked about a moment of mindfulness being a moment of freedom.

His whole talk, which I'm not going to go into more now, is really saying Nibbana is for everyone. We all experience many moments every day of this coolness—the heart and mind that's cooled, not burning with the fires of the torments. We need to notice this. He said if you didn't have moments like that, you couldn't bear it. We couldn't survive. This is what keeps beings alive, he says.

So this is, to me, both very inspiring—it can feed aspiration—but it's also, in a way, daunting. Or it's a... I don't know, challenge isn't the right word. But if I really let it in that this is true and accessible and open to everyone, it can inspire in me a really deep aspiration. And it doesn't allow me to fall back into personality views that are almost

afraid, or somehow thinking I'm not worthy to really honor, to really have such a deep or profound aspiration. If we don't really think we want it, then it's okay if we don't get it, kind of thing. I'm not good enough, so why should I try? So let's not really look—if you know what I mean.

So I want to talk about really taking the time... Bonnie and Sally have both mentioned aspiration. I just want to talk about it a bit more to bring it home, because I've been finding in some of these last years in my practice that consciously tuning into this quality of aspiration—in my own particular mind, heart, stream—consciously tuning into it, feeling it not just on an intellectual level but really tuning into it, allowing it to inform our moment-to-moment decisions, allowing it to give us the courage, the energy to keep going, to keep showing up on the path... I've found this to be enormously supportive, and something I didn't think about or do so much in the early years of my practice.

This sense of aspiration, as Sally talked about a while ago, is kind of like the overview, the large-scale intention—not just moment-to-moment cetana, but a wider sense of what's really, truly, deeply most important to you in your life. Really take the time. You may know, you may not know, but tune into that for yourself. And it's not just a thought. The thought might... you may know when there's a thought, or maybe a thought of what you think ought to be your intention. But when you really tune into the aspiration, for me it's a kind of felt sense, kind of like a gut level—oh yeah, that's really what's most important to me in this life. It doesn't mean other things aren't also important, but this is kind of the bottom level, you could say.

And this sense of overarching aspiration really helps set us on a path. It's what we return to again and again, what keeps us on a path. But it's not something that's just a one-time thing—okay, that's my aspiration, I'm here to awaken, that's it—and then we forget about it. We have to keep connecting with it, moment by moment. It becomes, hopefully, a support, a sense of strength, something to remind us in our moment-to-moment choices and decisions. Because every moment is changing.

So first let's say, now, tonight, tomorrow, through this time, let yourself—when it comes up in your mind, in your heart, or you just have some sense, yes, whatever it is—I'm not here to say what it should be for anybody. But say an intention is: I really want to awaken for the benefit of all beings. Okay, that's the bodhicitta, the bodhisattva motivation.

But say that intention comes up in your heart, in your mind. For many people—not everybody, but so many of us—there is this tendency of self-doubt, of putting oneself down, thinking "I'm not worthy" or "I'm not able" or "someone else, but not me." You

know what I mean? An intention that profound could arise, and the mind goes, "You're right—who do you think you are to be having such an aspiration? First, you can't do it," or "You're just being..." whatever way your mind goes to dismiss yourself.

Don't listen to that. That's just aversive habit of mind. That's just falling into some view of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, of personality view. Don't listen to that. Really honor what comes up in your deep sense of what's most important to you in your life. And that can change, of course, as our life goes on, as our understanding and wisdom deepens, as our compassion grows—whatever. That can change, change form. But just for here on retreat, when you let yourself touch it, whatever stuff the mind has around it, don't pay attention to that. Really honor that intention.

And that's all. You don't have to make a big deal of it. It's not an ego thing. It's different from "I'm so great, I have this intention." It's just an aspiration that comes.

One way—the way I, for myself, can tell the difference between when aspiration turns to wanting: aspiration could be a sense of what is possible. So say the aspiration is really to free the heart and mind from the torments of greed, hatred, and confusion. That's a vast aspiration. It's also a sense that that's not how it is right now. It can be a sense of what's potential, right? So that could certainly turn into a goal. And then I'm sure you remember us saying again and again that the practice is about totally being here now, not goal-oriented. How does that work together?

When it's an aspiration, it's not like one eye on the goal—"I'm here, and how can I get there?" It's a sense of, "Wow, it's a possibility." And it's a wholesome, beautiful quality. You can feel it. It brings a kind of brightness in the mind, an uplift, a sense of energy, a willingness to do. You could say *saddhā*, faith, bringing *viriya*, the willingness to do. And what do we do? We don't have one eye on the goal, saying, "What can I do to get there?" What we do is completely open and surrender into this moment. Just this moment now is the path.

So aspiration—you can feel it's supportive, it's energizing, it brightens and uplifts. When the habit of mind switches to wanting or greed, which it will because that's just its habit, it kind of switches. Then it's like one eye on the prize, so to speak. "How am I doing? How am I doing?" And instead of feeling this uplift, you can feel—as with greed, as with wanting—the tendency of the mind-heart starts to get more narrow, more contracted. That can come as some sense of frustration, or a sense of expectation, or a sense of disappointment—all that stuff.

So that's useful to notice. Not something wrong, but it can be really helpful. "Wow, I'm really feeling frustrated. It's just not happening. Here's greed, and I'm really here to get rid of greed. What's going on?" Oh yeah—greed. That's what's going on.

And then the aspiration can come back to give us the courage. "Oh, okay. Greed is like this." Honestly. And in that moment, the frustration shifts. It's like a sense of, "Yes, I'm willing to show up for this."

So aspiration is a powerful force to keep coming back to, to keep finding ways to refresh, revitalize, and remind yourself. Because when we can really use this aspiration—this sense of what's most important to us, maybe our deepest, strongest purpose in life—that's a reminder. It can serve to allow us to collect and focus our energy through the vicissitudes of our life, through the different choices we have to make.

We're able to do or be with things that we never would have thought possible just from our little sense of self and personality. The sense of aspiration gives a great courage and quality of resolution, determination. Adhiṭṭhāna, which I think Sally also spoke about, is a real strength of intention where the energy of the mind-heart comes together. Just do it. Determination is really like the Nike thing—just do it. In fact, U Tejaniya used to hold up the Nike swoosh when somebody was having trouble. He'd just hold it up and say, "Just do it. Just get up. Just feel what's happening. Just get simple. Just do it."

To give an example, one thing that helps me keep refreshing or encouraging my aspiration is sometimes wise reflection—tuning into beings that I know or that I've read about or that I see who are somehow inspiring. The way they are living their life or manifesting certain beautiful qualities can touch that same wholesome, beautiful quality in my own mind and heart, rekindling my being in touch with aspiration, with what's important.

So I wanted to give an example of determination, of how the clarity of aspiration can lead to a real sense of determination that can take one through very difficult aspects of life. This is from an autobiography I read of a great Chinese Chan master who died just a few years ago. I know some of you knew him very well—Master Sheng Yen. I had the good fortune to sit with him for only two short retreats, but I was enormously inspired by his being, by his wisdom, and also by his kindness, his relational quality, his simplicity of being. He was a great Chan master in Taiwan with tens of thousands of followers, which you didn't realize because I met him in the West and he just seemed so simple and accessible. And then you find out he's huge, just huge in Taiwan. He wrote an autobiography called *Footprints in the Snow*.

He became a monk early in life. He had a very difficult life of great privation and poverty, and he became a monk in mainland China during the twenties or thirties. It was a very difficult life, but he was quite dedicated to being a monk through the World War and then through the Civil War. Then in 1949, when it was clear that Mao was winning the Civil War and that all the monasteries were going to be destroyed, the only way he could get out of mainland China—he had no money, he had nothing, and he was still a monk—was to join Chiang Kai-shek's army, and then they would take him to Taiwan. So he did that. He did that to get out of mainland China.

But once he got to Taiwan, you couldn't just say, "Okay, thanks. I think I'll withdraw from the army now. It's been nice." He said he was really basically stuck there in the army. He was disrobed. He said, "But in my heart, in my mind, I'm always a monk." He had to spend really years and years, over ten years, in a very difficult situation in the army there. He said he managed not to have to do any killing, but he had a very deep commitment to vegetarianism, for instance. But the food wasn't vegetarian.

This is his sense of determination, but also how to be flexible. In his heart, he was always a monk. One of the monk's rules for him was to be vegetarian. So mostly he'd eat vegetarian to the point of almost starving, because that wasn't the food. But when it would come to the point where he was really going to starve, he ate meat. He really had this flexibility of discerning wisdom, asking what's the appropriate action here, but still relating to that truth: in my heart, I'm always a monk. And when he felt that he had done actions that he felt remorse for, actions that weren't the sīla he really wanted to support, he would, in his own way, make amends. He did lots of prostration practice as a way of purifying his karma.

He said finally, after a long time, he did manage to find a way out. And he said, "Looking back, I realized that if I did not have a very strong determination to actually return to monastic life, I probably would not have succeeded. Getting out of my particular branch of the military was nearly impossible."

This is the kind of thing that you can't see from the beginning—his aspiration to be a monk and to live that way. But we don't know what events are going to happen in our life or what's going to turn out, really. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. So aspiration isn't about planning out how everything's going to look. We don't know.

But it's really the beacon, the deep-seated root of what will be our guide. And then we have to find the flexibility and the discerning wisdom to move within the circumstances of our life, but always returning as best we can to our aspiration.

He said that after he got out of the military, one of the first things he did was seven years of solitary retreat. I thought, wow, finally.

He was elderly when I met him and really one of the more inspiring people I've encountered. When I think about him, it brings a sense of brightness to my mind, to my heart. We don't always have to generate all the brightness, all the wisdom ourselves. Sometimes we're spinning in our stuff and we can't find it within. But it's okay to bring to heart, to mind, somebody or something that can reignite us, that can get us back in touch with some quality of wholesomeness, some quality of uplift that really feeds our aspiration.

When I think of Master Sheng Yen, my mind doesn't list all these qualities—it just feels this brightness, this inspiration, and a kind of real metta that I felt from him, a real commitment to what is possible in a life. Just leave it there. You don't have to go on to the next thought: what is possible for him but not for me because of this or that. No—just leave it there with the inspiration.

It's so helpful to keep doing this, because as I said, we need to keep finding ways to support what I'm calling the courage, the willingness to say, okay, this too, again, for the ten-thousandth time. Just now? How can I have the courage, the willingness to show up for this and recognize that whatever's coming up now is part of the path? Just because it doesn't look like I think the path ought to look. Just because I feel like I'm spinning in my story and I'm not getting neon lights—that's okay, honey. You're understanding anicca while you're going through this. It doesn't usually telegraph itself like that. You just feel like, aye, aye, aye, again.

And then you come in to one of us teachers and we say, yes, but you weren't feeling that yesterday. And you think, oh, shut up. I'm feeling it now. I'm going to feel it forever. Don't give me this "you didn't feel it yesterday." It's really happening now. And you go out of the room.

So this is where we really need to find our inspiration to keep going. At this point in a retreat, where you're really working so sincerely—everybody—there's, I think for all of us at different times, periods where I call it hitting the wall. We hit the wall in different ways. I'm not going to even try to list them all. I'll just give a few examples. But for whatever reason, we think this is it. It's kind of like, give me my walking papers. I'm gone, for whatever particular thing is going on.

Sometimes—and this is a big one—as I said, we've been seeing clearly, and then our so-called painful, neurotic, bad habits come up again. The self-hatred, or the spinning in fear, or that memory again of what that person did in the third grade. I thought we went through this already fifty-five times. And again, I have to feel it. I felt it. I know it. It's over—but it isn't over. Here it is.

So then the only conclusion our little minds can come to is: I'm no good. I can't do it. It's not working. And it's all about me, because we're caught in the cage of self-judgment at that point. We're taking it all personally. It's all about me working my way through it.

Sometimes we know what it's like not to have that particular pattern happening. We've felt the freedom, those moments of the coolness of no kilesa. So when it comes back—I don't know if it's like this for you, but for me it can be like a double whammy. Not only do I have to feel it all again, there's also the thought: I'm more aware of how deluded I am feeling all of this. I'm actually feeling quite clearly how caught I am, and how unable I am to get out of this.

And so on top of all of that, we add the hopelessness of: oh my God, the more I practice, the more neurotic I get. And if it's like this now, just wait till I go home—because I'm not even getting triggered much here.

Wait till I have to go see my family. You know, that can just spiral and spiral.

Okay, that's one way of hitting the wall.

Sometimes, for all of us, something opens up—an emotional pain, a trauma memory, physical pain—that we haven't really quite felt before to that extent, or opened to before. It can be both scary and frightening, or just painful. Just that sense that this is unbearable, there's no way I can be with this, the mind says. I can't bear this. Sometimes it's just afraid of how bad it's going to be. Sometimes it's like shock: "No, if freedom means opening to this, never mind. Let me just shut it down." But that's just a thought coming through. It comes through a lot, but it's just a thought coming through.

This sense of "I can't bear it another moment"—I think of something I heard Ajahn Sumedho say one time, which comes into my mind a lot. It really helps me. He was talking about practicing in Thailand during the hot season—and it's hot in the hot season. There's the kuti with a tin roof, which I've experienced. You bake. Go in a little hut with a tin roof when it's 120 degrees outside and see how you feel. Hot, that's how you feel. And in all his robes.

He said, "I'm sitting here sweating through my robes in the hot season of Thailand with the mosquitoes, and my mind is doing whatever it's doing. And I think, I cannot bear this one more second." Have you ever hit that place? "And then I'd find that I could."

I love that.

So I'll be sitting, thinking, "This is unbearable. I cannot be with this one more instant." Oh, yes I can. It's just an instant. Then I'll say to myself, "What's actually so unbearable about this moment right now?" And this is a serious question; it's not putting myself down. When I ask that question, it piques the interest again. The mindfulness returns: What is actually happening right now? It's not saying I should be able to bear it or not. It's just a shift of attitude in that moment.

But what makes this shift possible? Remembering. Just remembering our bigger aspiration from time to time.

Another way we get really caught in what I call the cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi is when our view of who we are or what should be happening on retreat becomes rigid. Winnie talked a lot about the kind of background agendas we come into retreat with, and we're going to keep hitting them over and over. You know you're hitting one because you're frustrated that something isn't happening. That's always a great sign. "Oh, I'm hitting up against some agenda, some expectation. Great, let's see what it is." Bring it up into the light of day so it's not working in the background.

But when change is occurring and we're taking it personally—and we all do this—there's a great sutta I like from the Buddha about a monk named Asaji, who had been a very good monk. He was practicing a lot and he came to the Buddha, very sick, afflicted, gravely ill. I think actually he was dying. He was telling the Buddha that he was filled with remorse, and the Buddha said to him, "But if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to virtue, Asaji, why are you troubled by remorse and regret?"

And Asaji says, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I was able to tranquilize the bodily formations." In other words, he could really cultivate concentration and get calm. "But now I do not obtain concentration. And so it occurs to me, let me not fall away." He's not being able to concentrate his mind and he's freaking out. "Let me not fall away"—he's basically saying, "Don't let me fall away from the path. I can't get concentrated."

Sound familiar?

And the Buddha said—it's a whole long discourse, and I'm going to spare you the full version. First he talked about impermanence, about the impermanence of the body. Bodily formations change, and so the conditions change, the results change.

He talks about impermanence of vedana—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—when the conditions for the pleasant change, it changes.

And then he said also, "Remember in fact that in my teaching, concentration is not the essence. People who think concentration is the essence of the teaching, when the concentration can't arise, they think they've fallen away from the path. But concentration is not the essence of my teaching. The essence is insight, the path, awakening."

And so he's saying to Asaji, "Yeah, the conditions are changing. You're really sick. You can't cultivate concentration now. That's how it is. But that's not a falling away from the path."

So this is the sutta. Everything's the path. Seeing concentration can arise. Seeing the causes and conditions have changed. Seeing the impermanence, seeing the impersonality of that. That's the Four Noble Truths right there. And the freedom in the moment—oh, it's like this. Of course I can't concentrate. I'm dying, for God's sake. I can't concentrate.

That's a moment of freedom, that the bubble burst, the clinging, the sense of self trying to do something burst. And of course, Asaji became one of the arhats.

So just to know, it's not just us spinning around in this. The same at the time of the Buddha, the same with nuns and monks who'd been his disciples and followers for many years. We can get caught in this little bubble of "it's all about me and me doing and falling away" instead of seeing the big picture. Whatever's occurring, we see it through the lens of the Four Noble Truths. There's the potential in that moment for a moment of awakening, a moment of freedom, a moment of coolness, whatever it is that's happening. And it doesn't mean in the next moment the conditions change and we're back spinning again. Not to take it personally.

Two other quick ways we sometimes get caught. One is something Sayadaw U Pandita used to call "stopping within," which is basically this: it's going really nice, things are flowing. Either you're really focused, it's smooth, everything's happening, it's effortless, it's just going. We don't have to put in effort and you don't need to put in effort. And something in the back of the mind goes, "That's good enough. I could live with this." I'm exaggerating a little. It's kind of subtle, but there's some way we go, "Yeah, okay, that's good. It's better than I ever thought it could be. I'll take it." Something puts down, "Okay, that's enough now."

He calls that stopping within. The energy over time can start to decay, or the interest isn't quite so strong. Of course it'll change—we know that. But just to be aware, we've said, "Great, good enough. I'm on cruise control for a while."

Another way that I see a lot is this: actually, a lot of insight could be happening, really getting a deeper sense of anattā, of the out-of-control nature of things. Quite a lot of people are experiencing things where you're really feeling the out-of-control nature of things. But often that's accompanied not with "Great! Not-self is occurring, out of control. I'm so free! I'm so happy!" Instead, all the defense systems, the self-personality stuff kicks in, trying desperately to control. There's this real sense of struggle. Or some idea of impermanence comes in and the mind goes, "If that's what freedom's about, I don't want anything to do with it."

The mind thinks, "What about if there's no self—what about loving my family? If there's no clinging, how do I care for my children?" All the stuff that the mind makes up about the future. It's not actual experience, but a fear of what it might be.

And it's almost like we want to go back to the pleasure garden. When we were talking about the Buddha's life, you know, maybe there were times when he was out there in those six years eating one grain of rice every two weeks, where maybe he thought, "It could be nice back there with those lotus ponds. What am I doing here? This is what it's about? Let me go back. I'm not ready to give this up yet."

Chögyam Trungpa called that "nostalgia for samsara." I love that phrase. We know we're suffering, and yet we just want it back. It doesn't quite make sense, but over my years of practice, several times in long retreats—I can't even say exactly what it was—but it felt like a series of small deaths. Not aspects of my personality I wished away, but more like views that I was believing about who I was, about my personality. And they would just start to melt away or be seen through.

Even though it was liberating, there could be this sense of nostalgia for something going away that was familiar. That's comfortable, you know, like in that Peanuts comic from when I was a kid, with Linus and his old blanket. Your old cozy, smelly, holey blanket, but it makes you feel good, so you slip into it. A kind of nostalgia for whatever it is—a certain sense of self—even though in the going away, in the seeing through it really, seeing it was never real to begin with, there's quite a freedom. I find that interesting, that nostalgia for samsara.

These are just some examples, but I'm offering them not because there's something wrong when any of these are happening. Rather, I want to remind us that the path is lifelong and all-inclusive. And a lot of the time, we don't realize the understandings that are coming. It's not all in thought.

On retreat, there are times when emotions are coming and going and changing rapidly, and they're all really intense, and you kind of believe them all, and it's exhausting. And we'll say, "Oh, so things are changing." But it doesn't feel like you're getting that insight. It just feels like you're getting thrown all over the place. But on another level, on a deeper level, perception is shifting. Perception is starting to get clearer, to see things more the way they are. It doesn't always make it up into the thought world the way we want it to. So these are extremely valuable and important aspects of our path—in retreat, out of retreat.

Remember, nibbāna is for everyone. And as far as I can tell, except for incredibly rare exceptions, it's very challenging. It's demanding for everyone. In some ways, I would say, freedom from clinging—the heart-mind that's free from clinging—is absolutely uncompromising. It's not free from clinging except for certain things. Freedom from clinging is just really freedom from *all* clinging.

And with our most sincere intention, and everything we read, and us yakking up here all the time, and ten million instructions, the mind of thinking—of what we know—can't imagine what that uncompromising, radical freedom of heart-mind is like. Whatever we can imagine is limited by what we know, and by what the imagining is. It's impossible. But we want to know ahead of time. We want to aim in the direction of what we think it should feel like. And then when this other stuff comes up that sure isn't what we think it should feel like, we get caught again in our expectations. Or we get caught trying very sincerely to take all of the instructions and figure out which is the best one to apply right now to get to freedom from clinging, or to feeling better, or whatever it is.

But we're all caught up in really what's required of us. The full commitment, the courage, isn't to fix it or figure it out. In those moments when we see we can't possibly know, it's the commitment, the courage to just—in this moment—open. Surrender. It's like this now. Totally open into this moment as it is. Not for anything. But because this is all there is. This moment.

As Dōgen said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" Right here. This moment.

And so, to do this again and again—that's what we're all doing here, again and again. We get lost in our stories, in trying and figuring out and applying things. And then, for me, I need to call on my aspiration at this point. When I can see I'm confused, when I'm trying to figure things out, I really connect with opening to truth. For the benefit of all beings, just drop into the moment. And the next moment arises as it does.

It's a really radical trust in the path of awakening. It takes its own path and wends its own way for each of us. Each of us has a different path. It shows up differently. That's why comparing makes absolutely no sense. Of course, that's not going to stop us, as you know. Bonnie was talking about *māna*—we'll keep it up until the last possible moment. By God, I'm going to compare until I die! But it makes no sense because everybody's path, everybody's conditioning is slightly different. And we all have to go through what we have to go through.

So it's about finding the courage to open into this vulnerability, into this kind of love and trust of the mystery of now. For me, more and more over the years, it's become a sense of reconnecting with my aspiration—that brightness of heart, mind, energy that just gives me the courage to show up again. And so I want to encourage you to find ways for yourself. We're all different. What helps you reconnect with that for yourself?

For me, one way is remembering—as I said, just remembering inspiring beings. Another way is when I see that I'm in my story, to widen it out and see that this particular moment of suffering is not just my moment; it's an expression of the human condition. Whatever particular suffering any of us are experiencing, we're brothers and sisters in that with so many people in this particular moment of life. Opening it beyond the personal—the personal as an expression of all of us, humanity, not separate. That gives me strength to be with it more.

Also, I find when I'm just being with myself on retreat, sitting, walking, going through something, and I'm not really thinking of my aspiration or that real sense of practicing to awaken but also to be of benefit to beings—I'm just doing my thing, practicing, something's hard, and I'm with it for a while, and I think, "Okay, that's enough. I can get up now and go do whatever." And then it comes to mind: "You know what? Just be with this. It's not just for you, but maybe if you're really with it, it might be able to benefit somebody." There's a whole other kind of strength, a courage—like, "Okay, right, let me sit down and be with this again." And it's not like a should at all. It's this really uplifting energy of "Right, let's really understand it." It's a kind of compassion, a kind of love, a *mettā*.

And again, seeing that the attitude with which our mind-heart meets any particular experience is also really helpful. Sogyal Rinpoche says, "If you cultivate the correct motivation within your own experience, it turns into *bodhicitta* all by itself." So the way I think of that is: How does the mind-heart meet this present moment of your experience? Non-aggression in the mind-heart's relationship to a moment of our own personal suffering is the expression of the intention of compassion.

So just playing with that—as difficult as this moment is, just surrender into it for an instant with non-aggression. You don't have to love it. We don't love the things that are difficult. You don't have to like it. But as Ajahn Sumedho says—he calls *mettā* just being with what's difficult without creating anything around it. That seems more possible to me. I'm not going to love my knee pain. But I can just be with it without creating anything around it. Non-aggression, just meeting this painful experience, this sense of self-hatred, this self-blame, this fear—just like this now. It's just like this now. That's manifesting the intention of compassion, and it strengthens the more we do it.

So as I said earlier, one of the things I do to help me reconnect with aspiration when I'm not finding it in myself is to use wise reflection. This is a way we can use in different ways. One is to consciously think of beings I've known who inspire me, like Master Sheng Yen.

It doesn't have to be some amazing master either. It can be just someone you know who manifests great generosity at times, or courage, or compassion. Thinking of that person really lights up that energy in my own heart and mind.

Or if you're a devotional type, as Bonnie was describing the other night, then sometimes thinking of a sense of the lineage—whoever your teachers have been, their practices, going all the way back—just holding that in mind can sometimes really brighten the heart-mind.

I've spent a lot of time in Burma, a lot of time with different nuns at various nunneries, many of them quite poor. These are mostly village women, you could say living a simple life, a poor life, and they're dedicated to living a virtuous life while also being very generous. Many of the nuns take care of young children. They all have a very—well, not all. I mean, there are good nuns and bad nuns, good monks and bad monks, just like everything. But the sincere nuns, and there are many of them, have a very devotional nature. For many of them, Buddhanussati, reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha, is a very profound practice.

Now for me, I'm not that type. That particular practice doesn't inspire me. A guy talked about it the first night—it really inspires him. We're all different. But I can be with those nuns and see how inspired they get from that reflection. And that inspiration, that love and devotion, lights up something in my own heart. I can appreciate that energy, and it touches a kind of devotion to the truth, which is the way it manifests for me. So it doesn't have to be exactly your way, but letting in the different beautiful, uplifting qualities that we see in people is a profound way, I find, to touch into aspiration, to remind yourself.

I'll tell a little story of another nun who inspired me—Sumanachari. We knew her for several years. There's a group of us that goes every year, and friends donate some money that we offer to these nuns. She was the head nun in a smallish nunnery of about twenty-five nuns—again, poor. When we first met her, like so many of the nunneries, they had no electricity, no decent clean water, just a tiny little building. The building had gotten bigger over the years, and she'd been there quite a while. She came by one day because she knew that we sometimes—I mean, we would offer money anyway, every year—but she came at the end of our time, very earnest and sincere.

We'd always thought of her as a little depressive, a little pulled in, just going along. But our friend Aria speaks fluent Burmese, so we could communicate well. She was saying that she hadn't been able to be at ease in her heart and mind all year because she saw that many of the poor children in that area—and there are many, both young nuns and little kids—had to walk far away to another school started by another nun, about a forty-five minute walk. But in the rainy season, that was too hard for the really little children. So she had this deep wish to start a school for these very small kids. She had nothing, but she asked if we could donate some money just to start it.

We didn't really think she could do it, but we thought, well, we could give three thousand dollars. So we did. We came back the next year, and it was amazing. I've seen this so many times now. It's amazing. With that money, all of the nuns had moved into one little house. They'd given up all their space. She'd used that money to build lean-tos—just roofs, open air—and lots of desks. She had one hundred and fifty little students by then. That means she has to hire teachers, regular teachers at regular salary, all from donated money. These are nuns who live on total donation. She's not the only one who's done that—there are lots of nun schools that do the same. But she had pulled this together in a year.

She came back and she was bright. Her face was radiant. She was exhausted—and she's been more exhausted every year since. But she said, "I'm so happy. My citta, my heart and mind, is at peace. I'm able to just give all that I can to take care of these young kids. It just makes me so happy."

When I think of her, Sumanachari, she's really an ordinary person who manifested this great love and devotion and generosity, year by year by year. I know many like her. So just thinking of people you know who embody these qualities—see how it lights up your heart and mind. And then you can say, okay, let me come back.

Let me be with this moment of back pain for the benefit of all beings. And mean it. Let me just surrender right now.

So just coming back to your aspiration—sometimes you'll feel it deeply, sometimes it seems superficial, but keep it up. It sinks in. It gets deeper. It starts to spread out. And you'll see how it gives us the courage and the determination and the resolution to keep showing up, even when we don't understand, even when we don't see the path before us. We really have to trust that what's occurring now is what it is.

I want to end with two things from the Buddha. Two things he said he never lost sight of: not to shrink from the struggle, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. He says it is this unshakable deliverance of heart, of mind, that is the goal of this holy life—its essence, its heartwood, and its end.

Don't settle. Don't settle for anything less.

Thank you for your kind attention. May our sincere practice together today—and these six weeks or three months—be a cause, a condition for our own awakening from confusion. And may the merit be shared with all beings everywhere, that all beings may be freed from suffering.

CHAPTER 158

Wisdom and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *Carol Wilson offers profound reflections on the essential unity of wisdom and compassion, building on the teaching that the manifestation of emptiness is compassion. She explores how these two qualities, while sometimes developing at different rates, ultimately need each other for complete understanding and skillful action in the world.*
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> *Drawing from teachers including Nāgārjuna, the Dalai Lama, Padmasambhava, and Thich Nhat Hanh, Wilson examines how insight into anattā (not-self) and suññatā (emptiness) can feel cold or alienating without compassion, while compassion without wisdom can lead to despair and overwhelm. She explains how simple moment-to-moment mindfulness practice naturally cultivates both qualities—wisdom arising through clear seeing of the Four Noble Truths, and compassion emerging spontaneously when the contracted sense of self releases.*
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> *Wilson shares personal examples of how resistance to difficult experience creates disconnection, and how cultivating compassionate intention can open the door to wisdom. She discusses the crucial role of upekkhā (equanimity) in sustaining compassionate action when we cannot control outcomes, offering inspiring examples from Martin Luther King Jr. and the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. The talk illuminates how bearing witness with presence, even when we cannot fix suffering, has profound power—and how the Eightfold Path itself bridges wisdom and compassionate action through right view and right intention.*

If you may remember, Guy ended his talk the other night on emptiness by saying that the manifestation of emptiness is compassion. I want to offer some reflections on wisdom and compassion—the unity of the wisdom of emptiness and the manifestation of compassion.

I really enjoyed when Guy was talking about how the common way we think of the world here in the West is materialism. That's obvious, but I just hadn't thought of it that way. And it's been a conundrum, I would say, in my whole life of practice, phrased in different ways: how to find really the balance of wisdom and compassion.

When you're having some sense, some understanding of the fact that everything is really a dream, that everything's really empty of substance—how do we live in the material world when there's that understanding that it's all just a dream, just a phantasmagoria? How do we continue to function and care?

And then on the other side, when that isn't so apparent, how do we continue to open our heart and mind to the infinite beauty and the infinite suffering without either drowning in despair or grief or getting so identified?

I've often found that my practice, which is my life, kind of flips between trying to understand from those two points of view, both of which are limited. The sense of how do those come together?

Sometimes, for me and for people I've talked with, when the understanding of the emptiness of phenomena and the emptiness of self becomes clear—as Guy was saying, knowing it's not just like a dream, it is a dream—sometimes that quality is really how perception is shot through. It can happen deep in retreat from time to time, it can happen in life. And for me, when there's that sense, it's not complete, not finished. It's like living in this surreal space—someone used that wonderful word in one of our group meetings. It's so clear in one way that it's just this phantasm. And at the same time, we've got to walk and talk and function and eat, and we do, quite easily with no problem. So the material world is really here.

It can seem like one way of perceiving and being negates the other. How do we hold and understand both? That's a question that can let the thinking mind go wild. How can I reconcile? Have you spent a few moments of the thinking mind trying to reconcile how everything's just a dream, a lump of foam, but somehow my knee hurts and I hate it? It's a lump of foam, but I'm hungry. I really want something to eat. This lump of foam needs some food.

How do we hold both of those? It really does seem surreal sometimes. But the problem of the surrealness and the trying to reconcile is actually the thinking about it.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking. It is the result of the long process of conscious awareness." I've loved that quotation for years because in my experience it's so true. Thoughts are the reflection of the material world and describe it really well. The fact that everything's a dream—thoughts can talk about that, but they can't touch the experience. Trying to reconcile with thoughts is never going to work. If we could just give that up, in that moment there's no problem.

But looking at it another way: the wisdom of not-self, of emptiness, is that sense of wisdom that really sets the mind free from clinging, the heart free from craving. And then living in the material world is the world of action and response. So what's the link between those two?

This is the Buddha's genius, right? Wisdom, action, right thought, intention. Sound familiar?

The Eightfold Path. Right there—right view, the wisdom of emptiness; the second step, wise intention, which compassion really is. You could think of that as wise intention, right thought, which is what leads to action and speech in the world. Somehow you can find everything in the Buddha Dharma.

So to talk about wisdom and compassion really in terms of our deepening understanding of the whole path and our life—they really have to come together. They have to support each other. Of course, this happens naturally. It's just the way things are.

So now we're in the material world, talking, using thoughts. That's what I'll be doing the rest of the talk—some exploration of wisdom and compassion, how they support each other, how we could get lost in one without the support of the other.

The empty nature, the sense of emptiness of things—that can be a really profound insight. But just by itself, it's incomplete. We have it many times, the insight, but incomplete. Often people talk about having seen anattā at a gut level, not just thinking about it but feeling it, or the dreamlike nature as I was describing, and really an intimation of the truth that, oh yeah, it really is like that. That's not just a metaphor. It can hit you in many different ways. It can be shocking. It can be freeing. It can give you a lot of energy. It can be scary as heck.

Some of the different things yogis have said to me over the years in describing their reactions to insights into not-self, emptiness—sometimes it's very fearful. I think some people even mentioned that to Guy after his talk, that it kind of brings up fear, this sense of the emptiness of things. Or—I've written these down, these are words people have said to me over time—"If there's not any self, if it's all empty," it has this sense of being uncaring, cold. Alien, someone said. Inhuman. Indifference, not caring, annihilation. You get the drift.

And that can really be what I think in Tibetan they call falling into emptiness—the sense of emptiness, of not-self, that isn't supported by the compassionate manifestation, which naturally comes. But it doesn't always... Just as with the seven factors of awakening, they don't all grow up exactly together. We're kind of flipping. Sometimes you might be understanding emptiness, not-self more. Sometimes you might be seeing more compassion. Sometimes you might think you've never seen either one of them, and you'd give a lot for either one. But anyway, they're not always growing up together. It can tilt one way or the other.

In this sense of not quite seeing the compassionate aspect but just tuning into the emptiness, it can become embraced as a view. We get a hit of it, really a hit of not-self, but then it becomes a view—this is how it is.

There are various quotations I really like. One from Nāgārjuna, who as Guy mentioned is one of the best writers and teachers on emptiness. He said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material, concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Buddhists say emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable."

We can get caught in that. And so this is where compassion brings in the warmth, the connectedness to life, to beings, a sense that it matters what we do even when everything is empty.

But compassion also needs the support of wisdom. This is from the Dalai Lama. Because without the understanding of emptiness, compassion veers off into despair and overwhelm. From the Dalai Lama: "Compassion must be derived from our insight into emptiness of inherent self."

This is where the vast meets the profound. Without that unity, we can fall into despair. Because knowing from emptiness that people's suffering is avoidable can lead us to a more powerful compassion. But without the wisdom of emptiness also for ourselves, our compassion may be strong, but it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness, even despair.

You get a sense of that for yourself sometimes as we open up to become much more sensitive to our own suffering, the suffering of the world. There are times when the compassion is quite beautiful, but it's so easy for it to tip over—at least in my experience—into overwhelm, into a kind of despair, into a feeling of how can I possibly hold all this or be with all this? And that is when it needs to be balanced with the deeper understanding of not-self, of emptiness. These two always balancing, always coming together.

From Padmasambhava, the great founder of the lineage of Tibetan Buddhism: "The view"—which is really the understanding of emptiness, of not-self—"the view is the most important thing. However, do not let your action slip in the direction of the view. If it does, you will fall into the evil views of demons, prattling on about how goodness is empty, evil is empty." Doesn't matter what you do, it's all empty. "But do not let your view slip in the direction of action either, or you will be caught in materialism and ideology. That is why my view is higher than the sky, but my attention to my actions and their effects is finer than grains of flour." That sense of how both aspects are true at the same time.

Another Tibetan teacher, Padampa Sangye, was once asked, "Once we have realized emptiness, does it still harm us to commit negative acts?" Again, that's like the action slipping in the direction of the view. And he said, "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

To me, ongoing in my practice, in my life, and in talking with so many people, we see for ourselves in our little ways—okay, we're not up there with Padmasambhava or even close—but in little ways, how as wisdom comes, more compassion comes with it simultaneously.

I want to talk a bit about our practice. Vipassana here is a wisdom practice, but compassion is being cultivated at the same time. When we realize emptiness, even for a moment, compassion comes with it naturally. And how can it be otherwise? In a moment of insight into not-self—let's keep this simple, insight into not-self—in that moment the heart-mind is free from clinging. That's really what a moment of not-self is. There's no clinging at that moment. Clinging is almost synonymous with an arising of sense of self. So much energy is released when it's not bound up—the energy for life, the tenderness for life, the ability to see clearly when the energy is not caught in this obsessive self-referencing.

The Buddha talked about the kleshas, greed and hatred, but really a sense of self, which arises from that, is a maker of measurement. As soon as there's clinging, a sense of self, there's a measurement: me and other. And with the obsessive self-referencing, even when we mean well, there's no way to recognize the vastness of the situation. There's no way to really see clearly the good of oneself or the good of others or the good of both. I'm quoting from the Buddha: when there is greed, when the mind is obsessed with greed, with hatred, with confusion, we cannot see clearly.

In a moment when that vanishes—just a simple moment, and you have many moments like that when the sense of self isn't arising—then all that contracted energy of mind and consciousness and heart is available for just pure presence in this moment in life, for just the tenderness, the vividness, the totality of "it's like this now." And we can see clearly. It's just a natural occurrence.

Without that, even when we intend to do well and we have a compassionate intention, we still can act. It's not like we have to wait until we're completely liberated before we ever do anything, because our compassion would be tinged otherwise. But we really can't see as clearly.

I've used this example often because I love it. I heard it on the radio some years ago. There's a bridge that was built in London over the Thames, the Millennium Bridge. This is a bridge that people could walk over. When it was first opened—I think when it was being inaugurated—hundreds of people were walking over the bridge. There were so many people that the bridge started to shake. It was leaning a little to one side.

So each person thought—or rather, didn't think, but simply responded—what can I do to help? And everyone moved to the other side. And that, of course, just made the whole thing worse. You get a sense of each person trying to do their right thing, but completely in their own little bubble, because you can't really see the vastness when we're caught in the self-referencing. So the wisdom of emptiness allows for a more appropriate, a more wise response.

And also, this question of how can I hold it all—all the suffering, even just one day of listening to the news. Sometimes I can't bear it. Yeah, I can't. That's exactly the point. *I* can't. And as long as it's *I* resisting or drowning or wanting to do, but somehow hitting a sense of me, that subtle resistance—we can't. And that's realistic. We can't.

But in the moment when there's not that sense of *I,* and it's just passing through, like that story I told about the Dalai Lama a few weeks ago, where he can just be with people in their most immense suffering and really be crying and there with them. Then they leave and he turns to the next person and they're laughing and he's jovial and kidding around. And he's totally present, but there's not an *I* that's landing on and holding on to it. It moves through.

Not that we should hold that out as "this is how I have to be all the time." But play with noticing it once in a while when it happens here. With little things that happen here. That's what's so great about being on retreat—it's the little things. That's what we can do.

So our practice here, our simple moment-to-moment mindfulness practice here, is actually what is also developing the capacity for greater and greater compassion. As the Dalai Lama says—and since he's Mr. Compassion, we always use him when we're talking about compassion—how compassion is developed is through deep insight into what the nature of suffering is. And how do we get that deep insight? By focusing on, by being present with our own experience of suffering. How else? Where else?

And so then he says, as we're more present, without resistance, without judgment, with our own suffering, that insight into compassion begins to strengthen. It turns into not only compassion or being able to be with our own suffering, but it broadens into a sense of empathy with more and more beings until it really turns into the vastness of bodhicitta.

And this is really going on in the simplicity of our mindfulness practice. So we start where we are, wherever we are. And that's why the difficult—the really difficult moments and hours and days of our retreat—are so important. It's not just that we're developing wisdom, but also they're the ground, the seed for really developing compassion. Sometimes the wisdom shows up more, sometimes the compassion.

Whatever is arising in this present moment—mind, body, whatever is occurring, inner, outer—yathā bhūta, things as they have come to be in this moment. This moment is the result of all the previous conditions and can't be changed. But how the heart-mind, how the attention is meeting this moment, the quality in the mind and the awareness that's meeting this moment—this is the place that we are cultivating and developing. This is the place where wisdom and compassion can grow, where the old habits are being changed.

How we meet what's currently arising doesn't mean it should go away. But any moment that you're simply present with fullness of attention, without greed and aversion—that's a moment that actually has the seed of wisdom and compassion in that moment of awareness. We kind of, in the material world, get lost in looking for results. It's not that way.

Pema Chödrön writes: "If we begin to get in touch with whatever we feel with some kind of kindness, some kind of tender attention, our protective shells will begin to melt. And we will find that more areas of our life are workable. As we learn to have compassion for ourselves, the circle of compassion for others—what and whom we can work with, and how—becomes wider."

Just what the Dalai Lama says. Can we begin to just have the idea, when we're in these difficult, really difficult times, and you can't—when you can't really be mindful of it, and it's not going away, it's not getting better—can we just have the idea to meet it with simple kindness, just to touch it as it is? This is so not our habit.

The Dalai Lama, when he was asked about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society, offers us something important to consider. For the moment here on retreat, each of us is a representation of human society. So if at times you feel a lack of compassion in yourself, even towards yourself, you could listen to this.

He says, perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling or reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

Just think about it—and maybe this isn't true for you—but how often in our own internal experience on retreat, when something really difficult is going on, does it seem just natural that we have some form of self-aversive reaction? Some kind of self-blame: if I was doing it right, this wouldn't happen. Or: this is so bad, or I hate it. Or it's somebody else's fault—also a kind of aversive reaction. But just really beating ourselves up, going negative: all the instructions they give, and I can't do one of them, and it's because I'm useless and I'm hopeless. Does any of this sound familiar? Does it ever? And really, not just saying it, but totally buying into it.

And even more, have you ever noticed how the really self-judgmental negative comments about yourself and your practice masquerade as wisdom? "Yeah, you are really an egotistical, hopeless yogi. Look at how much the sense of self is arising. You are the most egotistical person here." Oh, that's egotistical. "I can't even criticize myself without being egotistical." It keeps on going and going. And that's masquerading as wisdom. Then a different voice, a different thought comes in and goes, "Well, that's really interesting. You're really seeing clearly." Oh look at that—that's really egotistical again. So the wholesome, compassionate voice? No, that's just weakness. The negative, self-blaming voice? That's wisdom. That's what the Dalai Lama is talking about. We don't really embrace compassion, we don't really see it.

So could we have the possibility? You can't force compassion. "Okay, goddammit, I'm gonna be compassionate now with this back pain. Compassion, compassion. Oh, I really love you." That doesn't work.

Just bringing mindfulness, coming face to face with the experience—this is one way Sayadaw U Pandita would describe mindfulness. Coming face to face, just as it is. Beginning there and just seeing it as it is can also bring along a compassionate attitude. And it may be that you need to begin by coming face to face with the dosa, with the anger, with the judgment. That's the thing that's happening. Coming face to face, we see it for what it is.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When a thought of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is the anger in your mind actually holding a weapon? Can it actually burn things like fire or

crush them or carry them away like a violent river, that thought? No, anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no true self-existence, not even a definite location. It is just like wind roaring in empty space.

I love that. So let that thought of anger roar, and it just roars and roars itself out. Instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, with mindfulness you realize their essential emptiness. Examine the nature of anger, the nature of hatred. You will find that it is no more than a thought. And when you see it as it is, it will dissolve like a cloud in the sky.

The essential emptiness, even of anger, roaring in empty space. In that moment, that's the moment of emptiness bringing in—as soon as you see it roaring in empty space, any sense of judgment or anger goes away. It's just, "Oh, that's just what it is." That simple touching can allow for compassion to arise. Coming face to face then with the actual thing that the aversion was about, seeing it as it is, can completely change the experience and allow compassion to come.

An example, a daily life example. The public radio station over the last two or three weeks has been having a series of reports on various aspects of the refugee crisis in Europe.

And so this particular one I thought was very interesting. They were talking about in Calais, in France, where there's a really huge refugee camp called the Jungle. It has thousands of people, and it's been the center of a lot of agitation and anger. The refugees are really trying to get out of it and get over to England, but it's getting a lot of press.

A reporter went there, and some of the French residents of Calais were having big demonstrations, wanting the jungle to be gotten rid of, demonstrating against the refugees. The reporter was talking to some of the French people who were demonstrating, saying they hated them, they should go away—the usual.

He talked to a sixty-eight-year-old woman who was protesting, really angry, saying they should go, that she hated them. He said, "Well, have you ever been there?" And she said, "No, I never did go there." So she agreed to go with him to visit the jungle, just to see what it was like. Obviously she already had some openness that she would even do that, but she was afraid to go by herself.

So they went. And he was just describing—because there were so many people—she was first amazed by how many people were there, how many children, how tough the conditions were, and the incredible ingenuity she saw of how people were surviving and taking care of themselves and their families, washing themselves, how many children there were without their parents.

Then she talked to a young man who had been a law student in Afghanistan. His whole village had been destroyed, completely destroyed, and he had managed to get out and made it to Calais, to the jungle. They're all kind of stuck there. He was describing how, because some of the refugees were trying to get out and jump on trucks to get over to England, he felt—just going out for a walk—like they were targets of the truckers, and sometimes targets of the police, really feeling completely vulnerable and unsafe.

She was completely appalled. She left and said, "This is a free country—or I thought it was. I didn't know that people were being treated like this." And she went to the offices and said, "What can I do to volunteer and help?" That was the outcome of her one-day visit there.

I love that story, because it shows how the fear, the anger, the hatred comes simply from not coming face to face with seeing the situation as it is. That simple coming face to face, breaking through the preconception—*oh, it's like this now.* She didn't go hoping to be compassionate. It just naturally arose, a sense of, "Wow, this is really suffering. What can I do?"

That's really, I think, how our practice works, how simple mindfulness works.

The great author James Baldwin had a line that I really love. He said, "An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard."

Take that back to yourself. When our experience is feeling like it's an enemy to us, what's the story we haven't heard? We're like that French lady going into the jungle. Can I just put down my preconceptions and turn my gentle attention back onto this experience here, this experience I'm finding so unbearable or off or bad or whatever it is?

This is where we can also see that wisdom gives rise to compassion. I also want to mention Thich Nhat Hanh, who in one of his recent books, *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*, analyzes some of the different suttas of the Buddha. He points out that in one sutta the Buddha mentions that penetrative wisdom, really penetrating wisdom, comes from insight into the Four Noble Truths. And vast wisdom finds its expression through compassion, through intending to benefit oneself and others.

I would like to point out that everywhere I've read, when the Buddha talks about compassion, he doesn't just say for others. It's always oneself *and* others. Sometimes I think when we're considering what compassion should be, it's like it's out there, and we forget we're also a human being in need of compassion. That's another way you get into compassion burnout—forgetting that this nama-rupa needs the same care as that nama-rupa, if you want to look at it that way.

So Thich Nhat Hanh is pointing out that when we meet an experience that seems like such suffering, when we're so caught up, and with steady mindfulness we suddenly see it through the lens of the Four Noble Truths, compassion might automatically arise.

Let me give a simple composite example. This is no particular person, but a composite of a lot of people saying a lot of things here. Simple things, when something is really causing you distress—like the sight of a person that for whatever reason triggers your judgment. You're comparing, you're unhappy, and you keep seeing them and it keeps triggering, and you're all balled up in that suffering. Or there's a sound that keeps happening and it's really triggering anger, despair, blame of oneself, blame of another, and we're really caught in it.

Can you relate to how that can happen? We can be caught in it and think we shouldn't be caught and try to talk ourselves out of it, but it's just still a big ball.

Then we bring our attention right in.

Say, well, what's actually happening here? So say it's a sound. Bringing the attention just really with the hearing. Noticing the unpleasant. Seeing the arising of all the aversion and the self-blame and the other-blame and the story and "it shouldn't be" and this and that. And then keeping us, oh, that's really the first noble truth: suffering. You may not say it, but that's what's happening. Seeing the second noble truth: the cause of suffering is the reactivity and the delusion in the mind. It's not the sound, it's not the sight, but it's all that reactivity and identification. And the continuing mindfulness, seeing this whole process start to break apart—and really it's the Eightfold Path saying, oh, just being present with what is. Hearing is like this. Aversion is like this. Sound is like this. Oh, and the whole thing drops away. And in that moment there's a sense of really cessation of that suffering. You get a sense, just like that—there's the whole Eightfold Path. That's the Four Noble Truths, right there. You don't think of it.

So many people have mentioned to me and to other teachers, through some experience like that—really quite simple, although it could have been a huge storm of suffering—when it comes to that wisdom piece through the Four Noble Truths, seeing it clearly, spontaneous and sometimes really profound compassion and metta has arisen.

Sometimes it's manifested as metta and compassion for one's own self for having been caught in that. Sometimes, and many people say this, the sight, the person who triggered the response, or the sound, or whatever—there's just spontaneous waves of compassion and caring and non-separation that comes. Not self-generated.

It's different from when we're really angry at someone and we're trying to crank up the metta: "May you be happy, may you be peaceful"—you know, really trying to get over it. Maybe we get a little squeegee bit of metta going. But this is—well, thank God at least—but this is just spontaneous, because that sense of obsession with "me" is gone. And there's just the compassion that comes about from seeing the suffering in the world that arises from confusion. People are quite surprised by that sometimes, but this is the natural result of wisdom: the manifestation of compassion.

So just notice when that happens. And see how the simple mindfulness, the steadiness of mindfulness that leads to clear seeing, is the cause for compassion to arise. And when it's there, just explore it, feel it. You don't have to own it, but just see how that goes. And when it goes away, because it will, then we just meet the next experience face to face. No need to hang on.

And then another way: sometimes in our practice and in our life, the way into wisdom—this is how compassion came through wisdom—but sometimes the way into wisdom is through cultivating compassionate intention when we can't really come face to face with something.

I feel in my own life, I notice this all the time: when I'm feeling, I start to notice over some period—sitting, walking, on retreat, it doesn't matter—but I start to realize I'm feeling quite disconnected somehow. You think you're really present, you're trying to be present, mindfulness seems like it's there, but you have that feeling of disconnect. You don't quite know what's happening, but whatever's happening doesn't feel good. There's something going on; you don't know what it is.

And I find, almost always, it turns out that there's some difficult or unpleasant experience—it could be a little tiny thing, or it could be a strong emotional state, whatever it is—that there's a resistance, a denial, and trying to avoid, to not have to touch into. Maybe unconsciously. You know: "Oh yeah, I'm looking at that. Oh yeah, that's over there. Yeah, I see it." And you can't quite get there. That's always, I find, leading to this sense of disconnection, being out of touch. It keeps us locked in our little bubble of me and other and distance and separation. When we have that dosa lens on, back to the Buddha, we can't see our own good, or the good of another, or the good of both. And we can't make clear decisions; there isn't wisdom.

So just a personal example then of an experience where the resistance to the unpleasant was there, not quite recognized, but the mindfulness wasn't really connecting, and wisdom wasn't coming—but the actual cultivation of compassion allowed for the attention to settle into what was happening, and wisdom came.

This was quite a long time ago, years and years ago, and I've talked about this on other retreats. I started to develop an autoimmune disorder, a physical disorder. At that time it ended up being mild, but it had rather strong symptoms that were affecting me. I couldn't walk very well, and there was some kind of pain, and they didn't really know what it was—one of those situations where they don't know what, and even when they give it a name, they still don't know what, and they can't do anything anyway. But here's a name for it.

At that time, which went on for some months before I really knew what it was, it was worsening steadily. It had the potential—I've been really fortunate—but it had the potential to go in a direction that would have killed me. That was unknown at the time, but even just living with this, I was—I think I was here during part of that time, teaching a three-month retreat—just dealing with the physical body and the idea in the mind of what it could be.

So I was pretty aware. I wasn't in a big state of fear or a huge state of aversion or anything. It really felt like I was pretty present, just dealing, being mindful. But I really can tell you now, because I didn't see it at the time: there was this subtle background sense of, "You know, if you were really spiritual, you wouldn't have this." Have you ever had that thought?

If you really could think the right thing, then this particular thing would go away. Or this disease is caused by my lack of, you know, my holding on, my aversion, whatever. I just want to say—I'm here to say—these thoughts are really not helpful. True or not, I have not found them to be very helpful.

So that was kind of in the background. Well, if I was really spiritual, I wouldn't be having this, with all my practice, you know. Sayadaw U Pandita was here and talking about how when you're really giving, he gives all these examples of yogis developing the seven factors of enlightenment to this great degree of balance and curing themselves of all these amazing diseases. And we would sit around and go, how come we never get cured of anything? It kind of leads to doubt. Not helpful.

But anyway, that was going on. And at some point later, it dawned on me: you know what? Even the greatest masters, even the Buddha—he died. He died. Ramana Maharshi got cancer, you know? You think he could have thought his way out of that? Like, duh. But that wasn't the wisdom piece. That came later.

So there's this subtle thing, but I was trying to be mindful, trying to see this and that. And everybody I knew had advice. You should go live in Arizona because the cold really affects it. You should only eat non-wheat, non-dairy, non-caffeine. I did that for a while. That really cheered me up. All kinds of stuff. The doctors didn't know what to do, so you have to make a decision. But when you can't see clearly, the decision comes either out of fear or out of denial.

So anyway, at some point during that fall, a Tibetan lama, a really beautiful old man, just happened to come by here for the afternoon. That just happens here sometimes. And he gave me a little blessing on the head and said, okay, say this mantra—which I didn't even understand, it was Tibetan. I had no idea what it meant. I looked it up later and it was a compassion mantra. So I said, sure, what the heck, it can't hurt.

So I'd sit up here and once a day I'd just be doing that mantra. I wasn't trying to cultivate compassion or anything. I was just doing that mantra. Really, it changes the habit of the mind. And so, just without consciously making it happen, the whole inner weather system switched to this sense of compassion for the body. And I really felt the body not as caroling me, but just as—wow. I didn't realize I was holding this negativity, this kind of blame, this resistance toward a body going through suffering, you know. There's a body over there. Would you hate it? Would you blame it? You'd just do what you could.

It changed everything. There was just this sense of tenderness, and the resistance and the self-blame and all that just vanished. That was just aversion. With the compassion, the aversion was gone. And with the compassion, the awareness, the attention, the presence could just touch what was going on moment to moment in the body, in the mind.

And it was really—I had to make decisions about what to do. I could make much clearer decisions, not based on fear and not based on denial. Should I give up teaching and do everything differently and go live in a corner in Arizona in case it got worse? Or should I just pretend nothing was happening and carry on?

Anyway, just after that, some good friends—Joseph was one of them—were going to India for a short visit to Dipa Ma, which I'm so glad I went because that's the last time I saw her before she died. So I thought, they said, come on with us, it's only for a couple

of weeks and you'll be with us. We can take care of you—which was important because I just had trouble walking, getting into rickshaws and stuff like that. So I thought, yeah, great. So I went to India, which other people thought was nuts.

You can't go to India. What if this gets worse? But it wasn't getting worse. I could see how it was. It was fine. And in India, I could drink chai and eat chapatis. I got so happy. It was really nice. And it was fine.

And then you just do what you have to do. You can see clearly. You can make choices. You can see your own good or the good of another. And that compassion intention then leads us into coming face to face with the development of wisdom. So both these aspects are going on in our practice here, in different ways, taking turns.

There are of course other ways we can cultivate compassion, like doing the compassion brahmavihara, just as with metta. I'm not going to talk about that tonight, but I want to point out that there's the wisdom of moment-to-moment mindfulness, and the compassion intention can sometimes bring us into that wisdom.

Another way, though, that compassion needs wisdom is wisdom in the form of equanimity. Because even when we have relatively clear seeing—I mean we're not arahants, but relatively clear seeing—and touch compassionate action with as much wisdom as we can, say when I was making my decision to go to India or whatever, you have to make choices, take action for yourself or for the good of another.

The wisdom of equanimity is knowing that no matter how caring we are, how wise we may be, without any action we can't ensure or control the results. We can act as best we can from compassion. The compassionate action may not be received at all. It may be thrown back in our face, and that's the least of it. But that's possible. Can we then cultivate equanimity—not either keep forcing it where it's not helpful, or take it personally and fall back into negativity?

This needing to balance equanimity and compassion is again present in some suttas from the Buddha's time that Anālayo pulls out and mentions in his book. Just a couple of quick examples.

One where the Buddha was called because the bhikkhus in a place called Kosambi were having a huge quarrel about some minor point of etiquette, but it had completely split the Sangha. They were brawling with verbal daggers, as it's described in the sutta. And the lay people were losing their faith—who are these guys, you know, just fighting over this stupid thing?

So the Buddha was called and asked out of compassion to come and talk to these bhikkhus and straighten them out, basically. So he came and he's essentially saying, "What are you doing, fighting? Come on, let's get together." And basically—you can tell I'm paraphrasing—they said to the Buddha, "Don't bother yourself with this. We'll deal with it. You just go off and abide in peaceful abiding."

And so the usual requisite three times he says, "Come on, get it together. What are you doing, you foolish men?" And they respond, "Don't bother yourself. We're dealing with it. We'll take care of this. You go off." And so after the third time, he did. He took his robe and his bowl and he wandered off.

So basically, with equanimity, you really see clearly: I can't do anything. These monks are hopeless. He basically went off—"You foolish men"—and found three bhikkhus who were living together in perfect harmony and metta, combining like milk and water, which is another whole beautiful sutta. But he really just accepted the situation.

Then there's another sutta, though, where the Buddha is pointing out that there are times when equanimity isn't appropriate and we need to have the wisdom to see when action is called for. This is also really hard to discern and we're not always going to be able to.

So again, very briefly, there was a point where Sariputta—I think it was Sariputta, one of the Buddha's main disciples—was giving a talk on a very profound and abstruse point of understanding. I read it and I thought, yeah, well, I really don't understand that. So I'm not even going to try and replicate it for you all. But anyway, he was giving this talk. And some of the other really senior bhikkhus were saying, "No, that's not true. You're wrong." They kept basically abusing him in that way. Then they went to the Buddha, and Sariputta explained what he had said again.

And the bhikkhus again said, "No, you're wrong." During this time, Ananda had been there—Ananda, who was very close to Sariputta—and had heard all this and had just kept silent.

So then the Buddha says—first he says, "Sorry, Buddha's right." Then he turns to Ananda and says, "Ananda, what are you doing when your senior bhikkhu, your well-loved bhikkhu, is being abused by his fellow bhikkhus, and you just stay here silent?" Basically, he was saying this is not the time for equanimity. You should stand up and support your fellow bhikkhu out of compassion.

This is very interesting. And so I find in my life, and in all of our lives—it's really complex, isn't it? The situations we find ourselves in are complex. Life is ambiguous. There are so many times when we're not always going to have enough wisdom or enough compassion. We have to do the best we can. But equanimity is so essential, in both ways.

Little things. One time, years ago, I went outside at a friend's house and their cat was just in the process of pouncing on a little baby bird. So without even thinking about it, I grabbed the cat and grabbed the bird. It seems like that was the spontaneous act of compassion that it was. But what was the result? The bird was going to die anyway, and I managed to prolong its death by about thirty-six hours. Not good or bad, but I really needed equanimity to see that. We don't know what the effects are going to be.

And if you've ever had both the privilege and the responsibility of being a medical proxy for someone who's really sick—maybe even on the edge of life support—even when you know what they say they want, the situation is pretty much always going to be other than whatever you thought about. I know this from personal experience. You have to make decisions based on as much wisdom as you can about what they would want. But what they want depends on what the effect of that decision would be. And whatever the doctors say, they don't really know. You don't really know. You have to make the best decision you can out of compassion and wisdom. And then have the equanimity—for yourself, for your loved one, for the doctors—to stay present with that decision and with the effects, however it went.

So wisdom, compassion. Compassion needs the wisdom of equanimity to stay present in this world, to stay present.

And what about really the vastness of suffering—throughout history, but now—of war, of violence, of prejudice, of inequality, of poverty, of injustice, you name it. How do we respond? Sometimes we can do something, but whatever we do doesn't solve the whole problem. The Buddha couldn't fix the world. How can we do what we can and still stay present when we can't? How do we tell the difference? This vastness of compassion and the wisdom of equanimity—but still staying present. This bearing witness has such power.

So I want to read from two people who really inspired me, in very different ways, with the ability to stay present and bear witness, and maybe act, maybe not.

One, of course, is Martin Luther King. Just one thing he wrote in 1963, at the time of some of the most violent bombings—those church bombings where little girls were killed—and the violent, violent response of the police against the demonstrators, and the jailings. He said at one point: "I have come to see even more that as we move on towards the goal of justice, hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter."

How can we do that? To stay present. Really seeing with wisdom the suffering—enough wisdom and compassion to keep moving forward, and that vastness that allows us not to become bitter. It's mind-boggling to think of. But moments, moments.

And then this is very different, but there's also this sense of bearing witness when there's nothing one could really do—but just the bearing witness, and the being able to communicate it, had a huge effect on a whole people.

This is the very well-known Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who lived through the whole period from before World War I through the entire era of Stalin's terror and the gulags. She was very, very well known for her poetry in Russia. People wouldn't know her to look at her, but her poetry—she would write about this, and it had a huge sense of support for the people living through that terror.

So I want to read a few short lines from a really long poem of hers, which she wrote from 1935 to 1940. *Requiem* is the name of it. This was at the height of the Stalinist terror, when people were just being arrested and thrown into the gulags or killed—anybody, anywhere, for no rhyme or reason.

She could have emigrated. She could have emigrated to France. And she chose not to. She chose to remain in the country to be a witness to the horrors and to record it in her poetry.

During that time, her first husband was killed by Stalin's police. Her second husband and her son were arrested and thrown into the gulag for years, where her second husband died. So she was not observing this at a distance. This was her life.

There are just two little lines I want to share:

No foreign sky protected me. No stranger's wing shielded my face. I stand as witness to the common lot, survivor of that time, that place.

And then at the beginning of the whole poem: "In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror"—Yezhov was the head of the secret police, so this was the worst period of time, of arrests and death—"In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad."

That was when her son was in prison. Everyone who could even find out they had a relative in prison would go wait in line all day, every day, hoping to get a food parcel in. So she spent seventeen months waiting in line.

"One day, somebody in the crowd recognized me"—because they wouldn't have known her face—"Standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper"—everyone whispered there—"'Can you describe this?' And I said, 'I can.' Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face."

Nisargadatta said, "Listening is an act of love."

So however our compassion, our wisdom—however it shows up—the two need each other. They cannot exist without each other.

I'll just end with Pema Chödrön: At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness, or open space.

Thank you for listening to the Dharma.

CHAPTER 159

Purifying Habits of Heart/Mind

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates a profound realization that has deepened her practice: all of the Buddha's teachings converge toward a single purpose—purifying the heart-mind from the habitual patterns of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). Rather than viewing nibbāna as a distant state to achieve, she invites practitioners to recognize the moments of coolness and freedom from kilesa (torments) that are available right here, right now.*
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> *Wilson presents the traditional framework of the three rounds of kilesa: transgression (purified through sīla), obsessive torments (protected by samādhi), and latent defilements (uprooted by paññā). She emphasizes that these levels work together, each strengthening the others. Drawing from her visit to Dachau concentration camp, she reflects on the profound importance of truly knowing our own minds—recognizing that without this intimate understanding, we cannot predict how we might act in extreme circumstances.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with difficult patterns, encouraging practitioners to notice not just when kilesa arises, but also moments of its absence. Wilson suggests various tools including sense restraint, the brahmavihāras, dāna practice, and consciously shifting intention during daily activities. She reminds us that purification isn't about hating the torments but about curious, compassionate exploration—understanding how craving and aversion do their job, and recognizing the gradual weakening of these habits through sustained practice.*

Tonight what I want to reflect a bit about is something that's been becoming more alive for me in the last few years, more like a realization about the way that everything the Buddha taught—as far as I can tell, all the different aspects that make up all the different teachings—all come from the same place, heading toward the same place of purifying the heart and mind from the habits of greed, of confusion, of delusion.

I want to talk about some different ways of that tonight, ways that you all know, that we all know. But sometimes, I know for me and in talking to people here on retreat, one can get so pulled into whatever technique you're trying to do, or whatever idea we have about nibbana or bust and how to get there. And if you can't do what you think is supposed to be happening, you go to some lesser practice, but it doesn't count because you're just marking time, not really heading for the big end.

What has really inspired me these last few years is that I feel once we start to understand the depth of how subtle and strong these habits of the torments are, but how in any particular moment they can be gone, and all the different ways of purifying—it stops being about retreat and it becomes so clear that everything we do in our life is part of this practice. Not that I pretend to be able in one talk to address everything we do in our life, but just to point in that direction.

So, what is this noble truth of the ending of suffering? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving. It's abandonment, liberation and detachment from it. The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion. This indeed is called nibbana.

I bring that up because I want to use it as a kind of reference, a pointer tonight. There are different ways one can think about nibbana, all of which are essentially wrong and useless. But we have to talk—well, I have to talk, you have to listen. This way of looking at it I've found really helpful, rather than some state we're trying to construct the conditions to get to and then it's all okay for the rest of our life. It's the sense of a moment, or increasing moments, where greed, hatred, confusion is not present in that moment of consciousness, in that moment of citta. So it's not a state at all that we're trying to get to, but immediately, here and now—that's all there ever is. What's the quality in this moment of the mind, the heart?

As Buddhadasa says, nibbana is a natural condition. It's the cool state of mind without kilesa, without torments, defilements, whatever word you want to use. The fewer the defilements, the more coolness there is. So one way of talking about nibbana is like the complete extinction. But another way, which is accessible to us here and now, moment to moment, is to trust more, to recognize more the moments when the heart and mind is cool, when in that moment it is free from kilesa. Start to get a taste of that. Start to recognize it.

As Andy Olendzki puts it very succinctly, the mind is not a steady state; it's not a subject that has objects as contents. The mind is activity, the process of cognizing, a flow of events. The events are changing from moment to moment, the action of cognizing everything is changing from moment to moment. That's what makes freedom possible—the mind is changing from moment to moment.

So we can really recognize and explore both the moments when there is this coolness, when the heart-mind is free from the torments, and also the moments when it's not. Our whole life, our whole practice can become really not about hating the torments

and trying to get somewhere else, but really getting interested in exploring: How do the torments arise? What is it like when they're not there? What feeds them? How do they starve? How do they work?

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, how do they do their job? We just want to explore. How does craving do its job? How does aversion do its job? How does metta do its job? None of it's personal.

So in any particular moment, cessation of clinging is available.

The next moment it may not be available anymore.

The Dalai Lama offers this profound insight: "When the mind is free of negative emotions and tendencies"—in other words, the three roots of confusion—"it understands and knows all phenomena. It is only because there are obscuring veils between the mind and its object that we are unable to know all things. Once these veils have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing and being aware is the nature of the mind itself. As long as the mind exists, it has the ability to know, but this ability does not reveal itself until obscurations have been removed. This is what it means to attain enlightenment."

As far as I can tell, all the different things the Buddha talked about, all the ways of meditation practice—dana, sila, bhavana, all the aspects—are different methods, different conditions for recognizing when the heart-mind is obscured and cultivating a shift in those habits. Because they're just habits, right? Since the mind is changing every moment, the habits of greed, aversion, and delusion are really deeply rooted.

If you remember a few weeks ago when we talked about the sutta of the two darts, the habit of resistance to the unpleasant is so strong. Many of you have seen this—how immediately the mind craves the pleasant and ignores the neutral. Many of you have been noticing and talking about that. Often, then, there comes a sense of dismay: "Oh my gosh, there's so much aversion." It's usually framed as "I have so much aversion. I am so deluded. There's so much craving in my mind."

And we remind you: if the Buddha chose craving as the second noble truth, the cause of suffering, you're probably not the only one experiencing frequent moments of craving arising in the mind, right?

But what we're here to do is actually get really interested in exploring. There is a moment of craving—it doesn't mean it's a steady state. Mindfulness is, of course, always the first line of support for purifying. Just the interest to notice craving, for example, is already a shift from identifying, from being lost in it. We've talked about that a lot.

All of these teachings, all the ways we live our life, give us different tools to help us recognize what habits are arising right now. And if they're torments leading to unwholesome thoughts, speech, and action, then there are all these different tools to help us strengthen the wholesome and starve these unwholesome habits. But the only way that can happen is not from aversion or clinging, but from this wise attitude, from interest, from really wanting to understand.

What I really want to encourage—really, this whole retreat I wanted to encourage—is to have that sense of not taking it personally when you notice how these torments are arising and how they might lead to thought, speech, and action. Because as soon as you take it personally, we're stuck, we're caught, we're feeding it. But when you start to just look at it and see—that's that step, that Tai Chi move, the way Ajahn Sumedho talks about—"Oh, it's like this." That can be the difference between night and day in beginning to explore, understand, and shift the way the habits of mind work.

For me, what it has taken is more and more understanding of this—less thinking I have to have a really good meditation and get to some special place, otherwise it's impossible, but starting to appreciate that from whatever space I'm in, whatever the quality of mind, if there are kleshas present, whether really concentrated or scattered all over the place, quiet and subtle as in retreat or in a really busy experience in life, there are tools available to really continue working to purify, to shift these habits.

It takes trust and interest, a sense of really understanding that this is about our whole life. There's not some piece of our life it's not about. And there's not some piece of our life where it's impossible to notice what's going on in our mind. Maybe not in the incredibly subtle way some of you are experiencing when you get quiet and can notice, for example, the seven factors of awakening and feel how they are, when they're balancing. Sometimes. And then that changes. Why does it change? Because every moment of mind is changing. It's always going to be that way. But that's a subtle kind of awareness.

Just walking through life, walking down a busy city street with all kinds of things happening and you're thinking about going to work and you're late—that doesn't matter. Just noticing the quality of mind right then, it doesn't take huge concentration, it doesn't take effort. It just takes remembering. Walking down the street, noticing rushing. Okay. How hard is that? Noticing rushing—you don't have to then get out your list and go, "Is that one of the kleshas? What do I do about it?" Right there, you're present with it. You can feel the imbalance of the rush. You just notice it.

That kind of noticing can follow us through our life more and more, and then we can begin to more consciously bring in any of the tools that arise for us. So first it's just getting really present, having some trust, having some interest, not taking it so personally.

For me, the more I practice, the more I respect the subtlety and the power of the habits of the torments. But as Joseph always says, I'd rather see one arising in my mind-heart than not see it. Because not seeing it is when you really don't know how your mind works. Some of you have mentioned this—there was a question the other day about being really mindful and really careful, and all of a sudden you do something that's not careful. Or all of a sudden you've been really mindful. Someone told me—not this retreat—they were really mindful, not craving, really watching their eating, walking, they were in eight precepts, and walking past the table, really, really mindful, and all of a sudden their hands shot out and grabbed some orange and kept on going. Who did that? That wasn't me, you know. We don't know what's sitting down in there sometimes.

I've told this before, but this experience had a really deep effect on me in my life, in terms of once again deepening my respect for the power of the torments when we don't see them. But also, somehow, this really strengthened my faith, my confidence, my willingness to keep exploring no matter what. I don't know why that's how it worked, but I was in Munich one summer and went to visit Dachau, one of the concentration camps—I guess one of the smaller ones—just outside of Munich. I went by myself one afternoon.

It was set up in a really interesting way, like a museum. This is what I remember. It's been a while now, so I don't totally trust memory. If you go and find that's not how I said it was, that's just because memory is unreliable. But this is what I remember and the effect it had.

You go in the different rooms or the different barracks, and there were lots of big posters, notice boards describing different aspects of the people who were incarcerated there, of things that went on, of people outside—maybe the guards or the people in the village who brought in the bread, some of the doctors who worked in the place and did experiments, some of the people in the place who did wonderful things, some of the people who were incarcerated who did terrible things. And they would talk about it and then give examples, a photo of a real person, their little story. So it made it real.

And of course the vastness of it, knowing that's just one place, and the sense of—normal people. That's the thing. The people who were in the concentration camp, the people who were running it, all the villagers around, everyone who's involved in one

way or another. It took away any kind of sense I could have of—we like to make up stories that it's all these bad, evil people who do the bad, evil stuff and everyone else, we're just good people. I would never act like that.

Walking through it, I thought, so many people. And that's just one country at one time. We don't have to go through the history of even the twentieth century—the amount of horrific things that human beings do to each other. Genocides and racism and wars and cultural cleansing, on and on. So many people, each individual person involved. All the people doing that can't be some kind of evil monsters. It's impossible. It's people.

Walking through it, what I really got for myself was this sense—and this is why it's strange that this was inspiring to me, but it was—this sense that I don't know, if I were in a position where my family were threatened, or if I were threatened with torture, what I would do. I've never been in that situation. And so it helped me see that if I don't really know the quality in my own mind and heart, what's coming up in this moment—not how I think I'm going to be, or how I think I should be, or what my idea is of what's right—but if I don't know how to really be present with the suffering that comes in my mind, to really see, even in the little times, when the torments come up, when they don't, how to work with them, how to not feed them, how to move in another direction... If I don't really take that in as the work of my whole life, of every moment, who knows what I would do in a situation I could never imagine being in. Just those sudden moments.

So that somehow inspired me a lot. It keeps reminding me when I think, this is good enough. There's not so much craving right now, this feels good enough. Keep looking, Carol. Keep looking. It's maybe good enough in this moment, but good enough isn't completely liberated. But that's not trying to go somewhere else.

That's just looking right here. You never know.

I was listening to the public radio a couple of years ago. I came in in the middle of an interview, so I actually don't know who was speaking. But there were two men and they were discussing work that they were doing with young men in prisons in the States. Their work was called Interrupting Violence. All I heard was them quoting one of the young men in prison for life that they were working with. And he said, this young man, "I wish that I could take back that three to five seconds of my life when I reacted in this violent way" — a situation that completely ruined someone else's life and ruined his life.

To me, I still get chills at that: three to five seconds when we just lose it. And so if we don't really know our mind, if we don't know how to be with our mind, if we don't really take this seriously — and this is out of love for ourselves and the world, not out of fear, not out of aversion, but really out of recognizing that this is how we can bring freedom and compassion to our own heart and mind and to everyone we come in contact with in the world — we start right here, right now.

This is why there's so much emphasis on recognizing the presence of the torments. I don't really like the word "defilement." But I might keep using *kaleshas* — I like that. Greed, hatred, delusion. Recognizing their presence, recognizing how they act, recognizing their absence. Like I said at the beginning, it's equally, if even more important, to recognize just the simple moments when the heart and mind, as Buddhadasa said, is cool. Cool from the absence of *kalesha*.

Again, I'm paraphrasing Buddhadasa when he says that like everything, *kaleshas* are conditioned. They come together due to conditions, and anything that comes together goes apart when the conditions change. So a lot of what we're learning is what conditions give rise to the *kaleshas* in our experience, what conditions starve them. Certainly that's what we're doing in the meditation. And that's a major piece, but it's not the only piece.

So seeing how they do their job — this is really a profound aspiration. I just want to remind us, we need wise attitude to watch these. When we start falling into this sense of despair that there's so much, that these habits are so deep, that despair is simply another way that aversion is doing its job, making you feel like crap. That's its job. So then we just have to notice again. Notice again. You kind of pull up your socks and notice again. Don't let yourself fall into it. It's just the *kaleshas* obscuring, obscuring the radiant mind, the radiant heart. But that radiance is not gone, it's just obscured.

The more you notice even just little moments of coolness — moments when, whatever, you're sitting here and you're struggling with something or you're just bored or you're feeling your breath but nothing special, and suddenly there's no big deal. There's suddenly no big deal. I'm not talking about suddenly the lights go on and everything explodes and you're floating in *nibbāna*. I'm talking about there's just a moment of coolness, free from *kalesha*. No neon lights. You probably didn't have time to think "it's neutral and I'm bored." That's the next moment when it's gone. But the moment — oh yeah, it's just like this. Notice that. Not cling to it, that'll come next and then it's gone too. But notice, just notice it.

Because this is where the real *saddhā*, the confidence, the faith comes — that oh yes, this isn't some fairy story. The purity of heart and mind, that ease, that peace, that's actually, as Buddhadasa says, accessible in the moment. Just a moment of non-clinging, that's all it is. So noticing those, and that gives the faith to again notice when the clinging comes in.

I want to talk about three ways, called the three rounds of *kalesha*. Three aspects of our practice — by practice now I'm meaning our whole life — that we can work with. This is in the commentaries. These are three different levels of strength, of intensity, that these *kaleshas* show up in our mind, in our heart.

The first round is called the *kaleshas* of transgression. You can guess what that means. That greed or hatred or confusion is so strong that we speak and act from it. Actions of speech and body motivated by greed, hatred, confusion. And the protection from that, what helps to purify that, is *sīla*.

is our commitment to non-harming conduct, to restraint.

And I think, you know, we talk about the power of sila, the power of virtue, of non-harming conduct, and I think sometimes I hadn't always appreciated the purifying power of wholesome restraint. So when a kilesa comes up in your mind as thought and you don't speak from it, and you don't act from it, notice the wholesomeness of that rather than berating yourself for having had the kilesa arise. You say, "Oh no, I'm being so angry." But you didn't go yell at the person, did you? You kept your mouth shut. That's wholesome restraint. We hope you did. That's wholesome restraint. You didn't act on it. That's wholesome restraint.

This is really a huge protection. Not only protecting us, but the rest of the world, of course. But it's also—and this is the part I wanted to point out—it's also weakening at that time the power, the strength, the intensity of the kilesa. The more we practice wholesome restraint of speech and action, the easier it gets, doesn't it? Have you noticed that? Because the power of that habit, that kilesa habit, is weakening. It's not as strong.

And sometimes, especially on retreat, we just notice that it keeps coming. We think it should—you know, I restrained already, it shouldn't come back anymore. And we don't really notice that it's weakening. So here is something kind of subtle, but it's great to explore.

And this isn't news, but just to say: of course when we act from unwholesome speech or action, we feel bad, the other person feels bad, and it feeds, it strengthens the habit of that kilesa in the mind to keep on going.

I was looking at some notes from a talk I gave a long time ago about something like this. And it was an example that I guess had just happened that week. It must have been a long time ago because it was about calling my parents, and they've been dead for quite a while. But anyway, I noticed I had felt aversion—some kind of anxiety, not like aversion to them, but worry, anxiety, negativity. And not with awareness. You know, when there's awareness of the kilesa, that's already our first protection. But this was without awareness.

So I called them up. The aversion, the anxiety was in my voice, was in the way I talked to them. So then they got all reactive and anxious and worried about their condition—it was a time when they weren't so healthy. So then in our dialogue, in our communication, since I was anxious and negative and then they got more anxious and negative, then I got more anxious and negative about them. Then we hung up. We were all more anxious and negative. And then I talked to my sister and I brought that into it. And the whole thing just kept spiraling, spiraling.

So this isn't like aggressive, horrible. This is still dosa. This is still aversion. And when we're not aware, it's just what happens when we act it out. It's contagious.

But you know what? Wholesome qualities of heart and mind, as we see, are also contagious, aren't they?

So just that sense of sometimes—you know, when teachers are all together, you probably hear what a racket it is in there in the staff dining room sometimes. I mean, there's so much noise and everyone's talking all at once and with a lot of energy. And I can get quite inspired when one of us starts to say something and then just stops. And you can see that was a wise speech moment. Oh, wise speech moment! And there's the tendency, "Oh, come on, say what you were going to say," you know. But it wasn't anything wholesome. And the sense of just stopping is inspiring. Seeing the restraint, just such a simple thing like that, is inspiring—never mind when we manifest non-harming, when we manifest even generosity or compassion.

So here, when you don't act out, that's really purifying the intensity.

Another way that I think I consider part of sila is non-acting, is restraint at the sense doors. So, for example, many people talk about this.

When you're walking around and you see that you're comparing, right, the mana, and there's the seeing, and unpleasant feeling, and then the whole judgment comes up, and the negativity, and then you're negative back at yourself, and you've really been getting caught in it. But then you decide to bring restraint to the sense door. By re-

straint, I don't mean walking around blindfolded. Somebody did that here once, a friend years ago. He spent three days walking around here blindfolded when he was on retreat. That doesn't really solve anything, though it could have been interesting.

Restraint can be first that we just choose not to look around. Very simply, not out of fear, not out of negativity, but similar to wise speech, we just don't feed the seeing because the mindfulness isn't strong enough right now to just see it and not react. Or right at the seeing you bring sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, right to the point of seeing. Seeing, just seeing is like this. But you have to have some mindfulness to do that. Sometimes if there's not enough, and the defilements of transgression are strong, you just have a feeling that if you see that person again you're going to go trip them. Then you just restrain at the sense doors. You don't look. That actually can be wholesome.

Not everything needs to be: "I'm so hopeless. I should be in Nibbana and instead I'm just trying not to push somebody." But you're making the choice. You're making the choice not to do that. Notice that. This is serious stuff.

Again, noticing the wholesomeness that comes from non-harming behavior, from restraining action. This is from the Buddha: "For a person endowed with virtue, with non-harming behavior, with sila, there is no need for an act of will: 'May freedom from remorse arise in me.' It is in the nature of things that freedom from remorse arises in a person endowed with virtue."

In other words, when we don't act on the kilesas, when there's a sense of restraint, you can actually feel and appreciate the wholesomeness of freedom from remorse. And it's important, just like with noticing the mind of non-clinging, to notice those moments of wholesomeness. It brings a real kind of freedom from remorse, a real kind of happiness, and a deeper confidence and trust in your own ability to continue to explore, to not have to be afraid when you notice the kilesas coming, but that you can really start to meet them with more strength, with more wisdom.

A friend and I once—I've used this story before too, but it was a funny thing—we were visiting Spirit Rock, or maybe I was teaching there, I don't know. But we went down to the bookstore, which if you've ever been there, has like seven million things in it: books and statues and jewelry and God knows what. You'd spend hours going through it. But I knew I wanted one particular little statue I had seen, and the friend I was with had sometimes done volunteer work in the bookstore. So she knew, because it wasn't on display—it's a help-yourself place, there's not someone serving you there—she knew where in the back room, in the big closets, which closet had statues and where I could find it.

So the two of us were opening the closet. And it's like, you know, floor to ceiling, row after row, hundreds of little statues. So we were piling through the thing, taking the ones out, because the one I wanted was in the back, small like this. As we were doing it, we each picked up a different statue, and they're made of some kind—I don't know what they're made out of—but I picked one up and it had a little sword and I barely touched it and the sword broke. I thought, uh-oh. And then my friend, like a second later, the same thing happened to her. She picked up another one, the sword broke, and we both looked at each other.

We went over this later. We just looked at each other. But we both had the thought go through each of our minds: we could put it back and no one would know. But it just went through, and neither of us had the slightest impulse to actually act on that thought at all. So, you know, we have to go take it to Marianne, we're going to have to pay for it. So we did, and we went to Marianne—she's our friend, but she runs the bookstore—and we were like two little bad schoolgirls: we broke the statues. And she just said, oh yeah, that happens all the time. We just glue it back together, sell it at half price, no problem.

We talked about it later, and we both felt so happy at that sense of confidence—the confidence that there was no way either of us would have the slightest inclination to actually act on that idea, that aversive or greedy thought or whatever it was.

So there's that sense of freedom from remorse, but also an appreciation of the confidence that comes from recognizing that the quality of greed—or whatever kilesa it might be—is getting less strong, a little more transparent, not so much running the show. It gives you confidence to keep on exploring in other aspects of your life. It's not personal, but it's really quite happiness-producing. So notice that. Notice not only the kilesas themselves, but their absence and the effect that has.

The second level is called obsessive torments. You can figure out what that one is, right? You've all been having a lot of fun with obsessive torments here. You're not acting out on greed or hatred or confusion, but the mind—you know what the mind is doing. "I am so useless. This is so horrible. That person is driving me crazy." I don't mean just thoughts that come and go, but you know when you're really spinning in a deep habit. And the suffering is obvious. I don't have to tell you. Whether it's self-judging or what I call vipassana vendetta—when you're just lost in thoughts of revenge and aversion, wondering what you can do, caught in self-hatred or greed. Greed can be incredibly painful. Have you noticed that? It can be so strong. These are called the obsessive torments, this spinning.

We're protected from that when there's unification, a collectedness in the mind—the samādhi. When the mind is sufficiently collected, the hindrances don't really get in. It truly feels like a protected space. Sally gave a whole talk about samādhi and shamatha, where you're really cultivating collectedness of mind. That's part of what is so beautiful and uplifting when the mind is really focused on one object—because it's so collected that greed, hatred, and confusion aren't really arising at that point. That's one of the ways we get drawn in and want to really have that. We think it's a great state, but notice the coolness, or just appreciate a moment of what the pure mind feels like.

But it doesn't only have to be with samatha, with one-pointed concentration. There's the whole khanika samādhi that we talk about, the moment-to-moment-to-moment practice. I don't want to repeat everything we've discussed, but the mindfulness is steady, and the collectedness, the steadiness of the mind, can become very stable. That's what Sayadaw U Pandita was referring to when he used to talk about vipassana jhānas. He was really talking about a level of stability in the observing mind that had the same quality of protection from the kilesas arising. You can be really, really steady with whatever's occurring—steady whether you're using noting or just moment-to-moment mindfulness. Whatever's occurring—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—it doesn't matter. Even if what you're noticing is an unpleasant thought and aversion starts to arise, the mind is so steady that it notices it and then the aversion just goes. There's no space for the kilesas to really get in at that time. It feels like real protection—temporary, conditioned—but genuine.

Again, though, we mustn't hold onto it. If our mind makes this a space we're supposed to get to because this is the place of safety, then we're missing the point. That's just a constructed space. It's useful, first to steady the mind, because when the mind is free from kilesas we can appreciate that coolness, come to understand how it feels, and trust it more. But we shouldn't hold on to a constructed state that is somehow going to protect us if we just stay there. That's not really how wisdom arises—that's how craving arises.

But the protectedness of samādhi, whichever way it manifests—in one-pointed concentration or in khanika samādhi—again, let yourself feel it. When there's steady noting and things are flowing steadily, we tend to get so focused on the object. But notice the quality in the mind that's observing. If you're noticing the seven factors of awakening, or any one of them, also notice that there's an absence of kilesas at that time. Familiarize yourself with this. Really trust it—that sense of purity or ease or however it feels. There are many different ways to experience it. It strengthens confidence. It helps us truly appreciate what's happening.

And then when craving comes in and we start to make this the thing we've got to aim for, the craving becomes all the more obvious.

And so then, if we're really having this commitment—great, I want to explore the absence of craving, the coolness—and now here's the craving, great, this is the thing to explore now. Honestly, I really mean that. I'm not just saying it. Okay, craving is like this. See how it behaves. See how it destroys the ability to recognize the radiant nature of mind.

Then the third aspect is called the latent. The latent torments, the kind of underlying tendency, is described as a seed that, if it's given the proper conditions to sprout, it will sprout. Like the example I gave of that person walking by being so mindful and then suddenly the hand reached out and grabbed. There was just that moment. Mindfulness went away, craving came up, boom, acted on it.

Quite a few people have described similar experiences. You're walking, you're really mindful, you're walking out of the hall, you're really present, you're really steady, you're noticing what's going on, you're starting towards your walking place, and then all of a sudden you find yourself rushing and almost pushing somebody aside to get to your walking place. You go, wow. How did that happen? I was so mindful. Apparently not in that moment.

What are the conditions? You get interested rather than berating yourself. Mindfulness went away. There was a sight—somebody getting close to my walking place. Sudden craving came up and, unnoticed, in one second you're shoving somebody away and running down. Then you get there. Probably nobody noticed that for a moment, right? But this is what's called the latent. And that's there for all of us. But they only arise when the conditions come together to allow for the arising.

I just want to say, it doesn't mean that sitting down there in the middle of your chest there's all this gunk that's just sitting there and it's always there but you just don't see it, but it's really you down there. Not. Okay? Just given certain conditions, lack of mindfulness, pleasant—craving will come. Lack of mindfulness, unpleasant—aversion will come. But the more we're practicing with this, the less strong these habits get. Every moment of mindfulness is weakening the habit.

Latent greed, hatred, and delusion, the Buddha said, are abandoned not by acts, but by wisely seeing. Wisdom, paññā, is what really uproots the latent defilements. That is really the subtle level that we have the opportunity to explore here in a long retreat, one that is more accessible to us than perhaps in daily life—although it is accessible in daily life when we get familiar with it.

An example of how paññā uproots in the moment is really the same thing with, say, the seeing and the comparing and the unpleasant sight and the self-judgment, the aversion. When there's steady mindfulness, say, of concentration—you can be walking and you're really steadily noting, so there's the protection of the concentration. There could be walking, you're aware of seeing, you recognize unpleasant thought, you recognize comparing come, and the mindfulness keeps going on while the obsessive thoughts about it just don't start. Because there's so much steady mindfulness and concentration, it doesn't have room. But you have the sense that if you let up on the concentration and mindfulness, those thoughts would blossom real easy. You're not holding it out of fear. This is steady, but it's not uprooted.

Then there can be another moment—and this is paññā, the uprooting of the latent tendencies—and people have described this. The same scenario: you're walking, there's the seeing, the comparing starts, but there's enough... suddenly there's just wisdom in the mind. It doesn't go to aversion. And people have described this. Comparing. Everything's changing. What on earth? Who's comparing what to whom? It doesn't make any sense. And it's not an intellectual thing. It's a sudden seeing. It's like, wow, that doesn't make any sense. So the aversion makes no sense, the comparing makes no sense, and the whole thing just dissolves. Have you ever had that experience?

Yes, yes, you have. I know some of you have. But you may not recognize it. You're saying, "Oh, thank God," and then you think, "Well, that's okay. Done with that one." Now we're over māna, we're over conceit. No more comparing is going to happen.

That was a moment. But it's important in that moment to recognize it, because it really is gone in that moment.

Or when you're craving for something, going down to the walking place and you start to put... and suddenly it just doesn't matter where you walk. The craving doesn't make any sense at all. It's just creating suffering, and it simply vanishes in a moment.

That's how paññā, in the clear seeing—that's how wisdom sees how things really are in a moment when there's no kilesa in the mind. And then craving, aversion, comparing—it just doesn't make any sense. That's the abandonment that comes from wisdom. It's not some kind of rigid "I can't, I've got to shut everything out." The wisdom does the work. It's not an act of will, it's nothing personal.

But recognize and appreciate when there are moments like that. Because this is what will strengthen the confidence, the faith, that gives us the energy to come back and be mindful, be present in the next moment, even if it's a difficult moment. To show up again rather than thinking, "Oh no, I thought I had it and now it's over," and then wanting to give up.

Instead: "Right, I really saw how that moment of pure heart-mind worked. In that moment, kilesa doesn't make sense. Okay, let me see now. I'm wanting it back. Let's see how wanting is working in this moment." This really strengthens the wisdom factor.

These three work together. Sometimes the level of sīla is the place where we need to work—restrain at the sense doors because the kilesas are so strong. Great. And then that can lead to steady mindfulness, which can lead to wisdom, and then wisdom can strengthen the faith. And again, we might be back at the place where we're needing the sīla, but they circle around and support and strengthen each other.

I was talking with a friend about this the other day. When you start to feel, here four or five weeks into the retreat, and one particularly painful personal pattern is coming up that you've seen ten million times—you really know it—and you've gone through all these different phases I was describing, even including moments when you saw it clearly with wisdom and it went away, and now it's arising again, it can be easy to think, "All of this work and it's still here. How am I ever going to get rid of it?"

We notice this presence rather than noticing how the habit has been getting weaker, more purified through all these different aspects. Notice when you're now using sensory restraint instead of just feeding the seeing and getting lost in the reactivity—that you do that so much of the time that the whole pattern arises much less than it ever used to. Or when the anguish, the pain of it comes, instead of just getting lost in it, there's enough steadiness of mindfulness and concentration that your attention can really rest compassionately with the pain and be with that. And the practice keeps going on really steadily. And then there are times when it just starts in the mind—"Oh yeah, there's that obsessive thought"—and it just drops away.

It's important to notice that all of these are happening, that the pattern is, as one Tibetan teacher once said, like having a piece of cloth that you keep washing and washing, and slowly it gets more transparent. First you can't see through it at all—it's just so solid, the pattern. But then you can start to see a little bit of shadow and light through it. You wash it, you wash it, you wash it. And then it's even more threadbare and you can start to see some forms. You wash it, you wash it, you wash it. And it starts to get

some little holes and it gets more and more clear. And eventually—not soon, okay, not soon—but at some point it's just kind of holding together with little threads, and it's more and more clear.

So our job is to notice that purification process—not just keep focusing on "look at that thread, it's still there, it's still there, this is hopeless," without noticing how much it's actually been weakening.

When wisdom is not available—and there are times wisdom isn't available—all the other ways the Buddha taught are also ways to help us continue to shift the habits. This is from Ajahn Pasanno: "It is helpful to recognize the tendency that good qualities foster further good qualities, so that we can nurture the appropriate causes for the results we are seeking. Otherwise, we may want to experience the fruits of the practice before the ripening has fully taken place." Does that ring a bell? We don't know when the ripening has taken place, but we can look and see what's going on here and now in this mind, and then use the appropriate support for shifting the habit.

When we realize we're really blinded by ill will, when the aversion is too strong and we're drowning in it, that's when all these tools we've been talking about become supportive—not to run away, but to change the habit. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about when we're blinded by ill will or greed or confusion, before you start trying to fix the environment, recognize the quality of really strong kilesa in the mind, and then refresh the awareness. Change the channel. Bring your awareness to something neutral. It isn't helpful to drown in the difficult state—we've said this again and again.

You might bring attention to a neutral object. When you have pain in your knee and we say "go to hearing," it's because you're just getting lost in aversion. Refreshing the awareness isn't running away. But this applies in life too, not just on retreat. When you're too caught in aversion and notice the mind keeps going to the negative, use some of the tools—for example, what Jaya talked about the other night, where we consciously tune into the lovely. Not as running away, but refreshing the awareness so that we can shift the habit, purify in that moment the habit of aversion. When the mind becomes balanced, you can let go of looking to the lovely. You don't want to look at the lovely so much that it turns into total greed, running around only seeking pleasant. But it can be really useful.

This is one of the ways we practice the brahmavihāras—not as running away, thinking "there's aversion toward that person, let me send mettā." But when aversion or greed is just taking over, and you recognize that's happening, and you see that mindful-

ness isn't strong enough right now—it's not about sīla, you're not acting on it, but it's becoming obsessive—then you can change the channel to bring in one of the brahmavihāras, if that's possible.

Or in daily life, when we feel like we can hardly even touch meditation, what about practicing dāna, which Ajahn Jaya talked about last night? This is a beautiful practice of purifying the heart, because it's about intention—not what you give, but the intention of joyfully opening the heart and mind from clinging, whether it's clinging to time, or an idea, or money. This intention of open-hearted sharing is an internal act of shifting, purifying the habit of greed into the openness of renunciation and generosity. It's a beautiful practice. I see it a lot in Burma—it's really embedded in much of the Buddhist culture there. And it brings a kind of happiness that's important to feel, to let yourself feel what that purification, that happy quality of mind, is like.

Working with patience, working with all of the pāramīs. There are times when you might call upon viriya, the pārami of energy. When you notice you're just slumping around with no energy and you couldn't care less, you think, "You know what, I could find a way to just bring up a little bit of energy." Not in a negative, pushing way, but in a way that shifts the habits toward the wholesome. We can really use all these tools in our life. Dāna—big. Sīla—big. Bhāvanā, especially using the brahmavihāras in our life when the concentration, the steadiness, and the wisdom aren't available.

One last thing I use a lot from the Tibetan tradition: sometimes just consciously shifting the attitude with which we're doing activities can really change the sense of the action. The way Mingyur Rinpoche talks about it, a conscious intention of wholesomeness can transform a neutral activity—or even an activity where we're feeling a little negative or like we have to do it—into wholesomeness, into generosity, into compassion.

When you're doing anything, washing yourself here, or doing your work meditation, if you catch yourself thinking "I've got to do this"—not even in a hurry, but just kind of blah, "I'm sick of doing this"—or you're at home brushing your teeth, thinking "brush my teeth again, sankhāra-dukkha, every day brush your teeth, wash your hands," and you can feel that subtle kilesa, shift the awareness, shift the intention. Mingyur would say, when you're washing your hands, think: "May this help to cleanse the hands and minds of all beings." When you're making food: "May this food serve to strengthen my body so that I may act for the benefit of all beings." Not as a should, but really changing from neutral or slightly negative or slightly greedy to wholesome. If you keep thinking of it and doing it, it really has quite a profound effect on shifting the habits, on purifying the habits.

The one example Mingyur gave that I like most is for sleeping.

So this is wonderful. You go to bed at night with the mind of bodhicitta, thinking: "May I aspire that my sleep may be the cause of increased capacity to help all beings attain enlightenment." Isn't that beautiful? You go to sleep and while you're sleeping—or just before you go to sleep—you're purifying your habits of mind simply by shifting the intention. It's a wonderful way to go through life. Not that I go through life like that all the time, but whenever I remember it, it makes one feel so happy. And that happiness is a sign of the wholesome. It really is how we affect all beings.

This working on purifying our habits in all aspects—whatever we're doing in our life, from the most subtle wisdom practice to something quite broad, like simply holding an intention while you do the dishes: "May this be for the benefit of all beings"—it does somehow affect everyone we come in contact with. All the beauty and the suffering in the world, it starts in our own hearts, doesn't it?

I want to end with a quotation from Eleanor Roosevelt that I encountered in Atlanta. There's a relatively new museum, the Museum of Civil and Human Rights, which I was visiting last year with my family. It's quite a moving museum, because Atlanta was the heart of where Martin Luther King lived. The first two floors present a complete history of the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties, that entire period. It's really well done, very moving. And then on the top floor was the human rights section—a smaller part, but focused on different genocides and human rights abuses that have taken place and that are even taking place now.

I found this quotation from Eleanor Roosevelt there, and to me it applies so directly to this practice. It inspires me to continue to have that willingness to see what's going on in my mind and heart, to meet it with compassion when I can, with interest always, and with the confidence and trust that whatever tool is available to help purify, that's where we need to be. There's not some that's lesser and some that's better.

So from Eleanor Roosevelt: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person. And without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."

The world of the individual person. That's us, where it all starts.

Thank you for your patient attention.

CHAPTER 160

Right View: From the Beginning and All Through the Path

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of sammādiṭṭhi (right view), the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. She emphasizes that right view is not about adopting new beliefs but about perceiving reality accurately—what the Pāli phrase yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana describes as "knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be." This understanding recognizes the impermanent, conditioned, and impersonal nature of all experience.

Wilson examines how sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view or identity view) creates the fundamental misperception that underlies our suffering. She illustrates how the sense of "me" becomes the measuring point for all experience, leading to the complexity of reactive patterns rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. Through practical examples—from reactions to cold weather to the subtle ways fear can permeate even simple actions—she demonstrates how mindfulness (sati) differs from sammā-sati (right mindfulness), which recognizes not just objects but the qualities present in awareness itself.

The talk offers profound guidance on transforming practice from striving and self-improvement to simple recognition of what is occurring. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Chah, and Mingyur Rinpoche, Wilson points to the radical simplicity of awareness practice: any object—whether pleasant or unpleasant, sublime or difficult—can serve as a doorway to recognizing the naturally radiant quality of mind that remains accessible even when temporarily obscured by passing defilements.

I would like to share some thoughts about Right View, which is really the beginning and the ending of the path of awakening.

I'm sure you're quite aware that in the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path begins with Right View. And of course, it's not a linear path. It's not that at the beginning of the path we should be completely awakened—that doesn't make sense. You'd think it should come at the end. But there's a certain degree of Right View that begins the path and then permeates all aspects of our practice. It keeps cycling through. It's certainly not a linear path; it's circular, spiraling deeper and deeper.

So even to begin our practice, we need and we have some essential aspect of Right View. This is something we can think about intellectually, but we keep coming back to this attitude of how we relate to our moment-to-moment practice—whether it's from Right View, right understanding, or from confusion. It really affects how we practice. The attitude in our mind and our awareness in a moment of paying attention matters deeply. It's a bit like what James was talking about last night when he spoke of bringing to mindfulness the qualities of interest, relaxation, and being kind. That's the quality in a moment of awareness, and that's really what Right View points to. It's the heart of the Buddhist teachings.

We've been giving lots of instructions, and you all know many more techniques. I'm sure you know this, but just a reminder: the practice isn't about getting the technique right. All the meditation techniques, all the methods, all the instructions—they're not about perfecting those so that you become a good meditator. The Buddha wasn't there to teach, "This is how to be the perfect follower of the breath, and if you can do it perfectly, you're enlightened." No, the techniques are in service of cultivating steady mindfulness, cultivating at least a moment of mindfulness that grows more and more steady. All of the Vipassana techniques are in service of that. That's the beginning of Right View. Right View then imbues everything.

But even steady mindfulness—why do we want to cultivate that? That's not an end in itself either. The Buddha's whole teaching has many wonderful, fantastic side effects and results. But the heart of the teaching is to really awaken our hearts and minds from delusion, from the confusion that creates suffering arising in our hearts and minds on a moment-to-moment basis—suffering that comes from the way the heart and mind respond to situations inaccurately, incorrectly, because we don't recognize what's really going on.

So his whole teaching is to really have the motivation, the understanding, the trust—the faith, the saddhā—in this potential: that freeing the heart and mind from confusion and suffering is really possible. As he said at times in different suttas, don't settle for anything less. Even for wholesome states of mind—that's wonderful, but don't settle for that. This is really the deepest aspect of Right View, which we cycle into and out of over and over. We keep coming to understand it a little bit more, then we lose it completely. That's on the deepest level.

But even to begin our practice, we need to know that the Right View which can lead us to even start is the sense that somehow we're not really getting it right. I mean, if we really had it all together and things made sense, who would spend a month sitting here like this? It's not really a vacation. We come here knowing, having practiced before,

that it's not going to be a joyride. There will be moments that could be a joyride, and there will be plenty of moments that it's not. Because that's life. You think life gets different because you're sitting on a cushion? No. You just see it more clearly.

So sati, mindfulness—it's not an end in itself, but it's the amazing tool. The steadiness of mindfulness is the amazing tool. What does it do? How does it open this really deep potential of awakening?

It's not that mindfulness is creating a new reality. It allows us to recognize this reality, this moment of mind-body experience, accurately. We may think we're recognizing accurately, but if we were, we wouldn't be so embroiled in confusion.

One of the ways Sayadaw U Tejaniya defines Vipassana meditation is as experiencing the mind and body directly, from moment to moment, with the right understanding. So that's what I want to talk about tonight—the beginning right understanding that we can remind ourselves of, that we have to remind ourselves of, because it's not completely in ourselves all the time.

Right view, which is often the translation of samma ditthi, the first step of the Eightfold Path—it's not about learning another set of beliefs, or believing anything, or taking another set of concepts and saying this is true, everything else is false. Not even the Buddha's teaching. Right view isn't about believing anything.

Sometimes it's translated as right or wise understanding, which is also good. But personally, in the way I'm talking tonight, I really like the translation of right view because I think it's very literal.

Right view is far more simple, and I would say elegant, than believing another set of concepts or views or explanations. It's simple, elegant, and totally radical in terms of our experience.

Right view is literal, and it means the view, the way we recognize ourselves, the world, in a moment of experience. There's only this moment of experience. It's right in terms of being accurate—in a moment, recognizing what's actually happening. Not through some veil, some mist of assumption, distortion, self-identification, liking, disliking, whatever. In the beginning of practice, we don't even know that's there.

You think, "What are you talking about? I'm just seeing how it is. It's cold and I don't feel good, and that's how it is. Let's fix it." That's our idea of what's going on. We come in here, it's cold in the morning, and we think, "They should get this heat together." That's just the reality. This is wrong. But there's a little extra in that, you see? There's a little extra.

So right view. Just this moment. How is it?

There's a phrase listed in Pali, one of the higher knowledges, realizations. The phrase, which I love, is *yatha bhuta ñana dassana*, which means knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be. I'm indebted to Gil Fronsdal for giving it that precision of translation, because it's often rendered as "things as they are," but that gives a solidness. "Things as they are" makes us feel it's like this now—solid, non-changing.

But "things as they have come to be" gives me the sense of fluidity. They've come to be in this moment as a result of so many causes and conditions that there's no way we can even name them all. And this moment could not possibly be different. It's impossible, because this is how it's come to be right now. The next moment will come to be in a different way.

So "things as they have come to be" recognizes the impermanence, the changing nature, the conditionality, the impersonality. And when this is recognized accurately, appropriate response is much more possible.

This is the sense of right view—things as they have come to be.

When you look at the Buddha, or read about the Buddha after his awakening... for years I never thought of right view and right understanding as "we recognize experience differently and thus respond more appropriately." In the back of my mind, there was always this feeling that somehow it all should get better, shouldn't it? Things should shape up somehow. We should shape up the world, for God's sake. People should get better. Something should change.

But when you look at the Buddha's life, he woke up—the Peaceful One, the Fully Awakened One—into the same world that he was asleep in. He woke up in the same world. Things didn't change. There were still wars and poverty and prejudice and bias.

He lived with physical ailments. People still acted in totally irrational, stupid ways, both toward him and otherwise. His awakening didn't end violence in the world. It didn't end hatred. It didn't end prejudice. But how he lived in and understood and related to the world was completely different. He lived in a world of relationships and action.

So when I look at that, I think, "Oh, right, so what is awakening about? What is right view?" It doesn't mean people start acting nice, necessarily. It doesn't mean they walk up and say, "Oh, you look so bright and clear." Don't you kind of secretly think when you

leave retreat that everybody's going to say, "Wow, you're really amazing. You're just filled with metta and compassion"? Yeah. Once in a while that happens. But it doesn't last, because nothing does. And that's not really what it's about.

So what changed? What changes? How we recognize and how we respond. We move from misperceiving—we perceive wrongly, we interpret wrongly—so we respond in ways that increase our own confusion and suffering. And much of the time we don't even know that's what we're doing. That's what the Buddha's talking about with wrong view. For me, it's fascinating when I can start to tune into it. It's also painful at times when we begin to see all the ways we're misinterpreting and complicating things for ourselves.

I'm trying to talk on a very basic level of right view here. But why? Why do we so misperceive? Why do we misrespond, embroiling ourselves in so much suffering? I'm not going back to origins—forget that. The Buddha said one of the things that will drive you crazy is trying to think about the beginnings of the universe. So he didn't know about the Big Bang, I guess.

How we perceive, how we think about things—this is the heart of what the Buddha's teaching is. He talked about how his teaching is against the stream: against the stream of common society, of common culture, of all the different common cultures. That's not so different now than it was then. But it's not only the external culture he's talking about. It's also the internal ways that we perceive and understand the world—ways we may not even recognize. We take them for granted.

As it's often said, when we're growing up in a particular family, in a particular culture, and if we're only surrounded by that particular culture, we don't even realize that there are other possibilities, that there are so many other cultures and ways people live—until we travel a little bit or step outside, if we happen to be able to live in a bubble like that. But then we start to see: this is true for all of us. How we're brought up, the cultures we live in, the things we meet in our lives—these have an effect on how we interpret, how we look at things. Some things we recognize, but much we don't.

And so Buddhist teaching—awareness practice, moment-to-moment awareness practice—is actually a stepping outside of the unrecognized, unspoken, unquestioned worldview and self-view that we may have been operating from in the background, whatever it is. This can be very uncomfortable at times, even if the self-worldview isn't a particularly happy or pleasant one. But it's familiar, like an old cozy bathrobe. You just get all cozy in it, even though you put it on in the morning and get really depressed and never want to go outside and just slump around the house. But you don't want to take it off because it's so cozy. Sort of like that.

Here's an example—not a personal one—of the ways ideas we don't even recognize shape how we interpret and perceive things. I hope this works. It worked for me. I was reading a book some years ago. I didn't take very good notes—I think the book was called *Nonviolence*. Anyway, I was reading the foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

And he's talking about nonviolence as the word, noting how in Gandhi's philosophy and teaching—in the Hindi, it's ahimsa—both of those are negations. Violence, or ahimsa is the negation of violence, just like nonviolence is the negation of violence. And so without recognizing it, he says, it's as if saying violence is the norm.

And nonviolence, rather than being a really active, proactive response to life, rather than being a whole view of life, it's simply, in that way—ahimsa, nonviolence—it's like it's the negation of violence. Violence being the thing that's expected. He said, what if you turn it around? What if the only word for war were non-peace?

You get his sense? Just a little thing like that. You don't say, wow, I don't even recognize the subtle effect words can have like that.

So it is sort of to turn in and kind of see—you have to stretch the mind a little bit. What would that mean?

Just along this same theme, I heard an interview soon after I was reading this, part of an interview with James Lawson. Do you know who he is? He's one of the foremost—he's pretty elderly now, I think he's still alive, two years ago he was—pretty elderly now, but he's one of the foremost theorists in this country on the philosophy and the actions of nonviolence. He studied Gandhian principles in India. He was a conscientious objector during the Korean War. But during the Civil Rights Movement, starting in the late fifties and early sixties, he was really one of the main people who was training all the civil rights workers, especially those young people in Nashville who started the Freedom Rides and the sit-ins. He was really the major trainer of how to do really important action from nonviolent principles.

And so in this interview—this is just one line from the thing—but the interviewer was asking him, "Well, how do you then deal with violence if you're talking about nonviolence?" And he said, "You're asking the question from the wrong angle." Nonviolence creates, it stems from a completely different configuration of power than the one you're imagining, or the one that would ask, "Well, how do you deal with violence?" He didn't really go into it or outline it in that interview, but it's that same sense of: if non-peace is

the only word for war, everything changes. And he's saying it's a completely different configuration of power. You're asking basically from the other way of perceiving, which is really what we're doing all the time in our daily life.

One last thing that gives a hint of it too, from Martin Luther King: "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate them."

So just to me, that gives a little sense of looking from a whole different angle, from a whole different place, a configuration of power that has nothing to do with the external kind of power we think of. He's always talking about soul force, power of the heart. You can't even think all the depth of that.

Well, that's just the example I was giving—to take up that our essential wrong view, the essential misinterpretation that the Buddha's teachings speak to, that we carry around with us because it just seems so normal. You know what I'm going to say, I'm sure: it's sakkāya-diṭṭhi. Diṭṭhi means view. Sakkāya means personality or identity view.

So what that means really, in the nitty-gritty moment-to-moment experience, is there's the whole field of sense experiences happening. I think Sally mentioned the sense experience. So there's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensations, thoughts, moods, images—all arising from moment to moment, right? We agree on that? And it's just like this, seems like a flow, a stream, one after the other after the other. This is one of the ways the Buddha described our life.

So this is just going on. Whenever one of those is—particularly when the energy of grasping comes—it's identified, it's felt as, taken as being me or mine, any particular one of the sense experiences, that's a moment of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, a moment of personality view.

Now mostly when we're meditating, we might notice—when we're being quiet, one of the advantages of a retreat environment—we're actually first even noticing there's this constant flow of sense experiences. And we might notice that some are just coming and going, and then suddenly there's this energy of, kind of like a mental energy to grasp it and go, "Yes, this is happening to me." And it feels different from all the other ones.

In our daily life it's still like this, but it's happening so fast. Generally, I think a lot of us, we don't notice a particular thing like that—it just feels as though it's me.

This stuff is either happening in me or to me. This is me in my life, right? Or am I the only one? Creating a sense of self and other.

The way Sogyal Rinpoche describes it, he called it this fascination with me, with the sense of me. And that's a real feeling, the sense of me, isn't it? Sometimes when we talk about sakaya-ditti being a view, not being an accurate interpretation of reality, we think, well, there should be no sense of me. But there is a sense of me. Do you have a sense of being me or I sometimes in the day? Do you notice it? It can be noticed because it's not always there.

I actually love exploring that in practice, but it's so frequent and it's so taken for granted. It's like what I was saying before about nonviolence—you don't even think about it. The sense of me isn't thought about. So Sogyal says this is like a fascination with me. This sense of me, which is a real kind of sense—it feels like me. It doesn't mean it is; it feels like me. And so that becomes the measuring point for all experience. Everything relates back to the sense of me.

Joseph gives a great example. He was standing once on retreat in the food line for lunch, second in line. There were big pots, and the person in front of him lifted the top off a pot and dropped it, making a heck of a racket. You can imagine, in the silence, deep in retreat—a heck of a racket, everybody looks. And he said his first thought was, "It wasn't me."

We do that. It's all about me, right? The measuring point for everything. It's cold out—is that good for me? Bad for me? Something happens, and we think, what's this going to mean to me? Incredible things happening in the world, good or bad—well, what's this going to mean for me? That's the first thing, and then we can widen out.

Now, this isn't to be looked at with judgment or self-judgment. What's that? That's all about me too, right? "I'm just the most self-oriented person in the world. I'm the most self-judging person here." Just watch it all. Watch it all. But don't take it personally.

So Sogyal says everything is measured from the sense of me. It's natural, but that doesn't make it true. It's really fascinating. And that's where we get seduced into it. That's where we really don't quite notice.

This is where our wrong view feeds the confusion that keeps us from recognizing in any moment accurately what's occurring. An incredible complexity comes into our reactions to a moment of experience as soon as it's being recognized through the veil of distortion of sakaya-ditti, of me.

Even this, though, can be recognized with mindfulness. There's nothing that awareness can't recognize. So it's not hopeless—otherwise, there would be no point in bringing it up. We can explore it. But the complexity of our life, of our response to all these

different sense impressions, is triggered by, distorted by, the not recognizing sakaya-ditti when it's operative in a particular moment of mindfulness, a particular moment of awareness.

Let me give you a simple example. The other morning when it was really cold—

Start with just perception, just the recognition of experience. Say you're walking outside. My body is very sensitive to cold, so I'm using that as an example. Walking outside, the cold is coming, and the cold sensation is occurring. Maybe there's a sound of wind, and there's an experience of that as being unpleasant. That would just be perception—coldness feels like this, wind, unpleasant.

But the sense of sakaya-ditti would be, "I'm so cold. I'm so cold." Do you get a sense of the difference? Cold is like this, versus I'm so cold. It starts right there, and it's unpleasant.

So then from what we perceive, as the Buddha says, we think about. Like the example I was giving before: I'm so cold, and I come in here to sit and it's fifty-eight degrees. Can't these people get themselves together? Don't they know? Okay, maybe we want to save propane—turns out there wasn't any propane—but maybe we want to save it. Don't they know it's flu season? The last thing we want is for everyone to get sick here, right?

So it depends how far that goes. One thought might be all, or maybe it went on for twenty-five minutes. Who was suffering? Only one person was suffering from that particular train of thought. The other person was suffering from their particular train of thought. But that's the incredible complexity coming from the sense of me.

Those thoughts—and it could be on the pleasant side; I'm just using the unpleasant because it's more obviously suffering—all of that is going on. And then it comes down into a view: Yes, this is true. It's too cold. They're not on top of it. I'm going to get sick. This is not okay. This isn't good for my body. And it's all so solid. Do you get a sense of that?

In the sense of yata-bhuta, things as they are—so that's sati. You might be noticing all of that, but if you don't recognize the view of self and the aversion that's distorting perception, it's sati, but it's not what Sally mentioned the other night: samasati, the path factor, right mindfulness. Because right mindfulness recognizes the qualities in the citta. Mindfulness can be aware of sakaya-ditti, can be aware of aversion. That's fine—you know it's there. It still feels like aversion, it's still unpleasant, but mindfulness is recognizing it. That's samasati. That's path factor mindfulness.

Unrecognized, we just spin and spin and spin. As the Buddha said, agitation through clinging—clinging to the sense of self, clinging to the belief, clinging to the dislike, clinging to the unpleasant. And then if you think, "Oh, I'm clinging again," it's just another thought of me that's clinging.

But what's wonderful, what's amazing, what's so freeing about awareness, about mindfulness, is that at any moment it can flip—from being completely lost in the sakaya-ditti to, oh—

Sense of self is like this.

Or, "I'm so cold. This is impossible. I can't bear it." Oh, coldness feels like this. It still feels cold—it doesn't become all mellow and wonderful. It still feels cold, but it's just the sensations, and nothing created around it. That's the simplicity of clear seeing versus the complexity of the attachment of sense of self and all the reactions that come from that.

Ajahn Sumedho—the American who's been a monk in the Thai forest tradition for forty-some-odd years—he says we create ourselves through our thoughts. And we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self. Check it out. You've got a lot of time to see that.

But if you just look at the difference between this complication and the simple being—"Oh, sensation cold is like this. It's really unpleasant. Unpleasant feels like this." And a thought comes up: "I wonder why it's so cold. What's the matter?" And you go, "Okay, wondering feels like this." It's not that you have to push anything away. It's just shifting from the unconscious, unrecognizing that we're believing this interpretation, to what's the actual sense experience now?

Physical coldness. Mental unpleasant. Mental thought. Physical contraction around the coldness. Mental unpleasant. More mental unpleasant thought because the contraction is more unpleasant than the coldness, which is actually just cold. And spiral, spiral, spiral. And then you say, "Oh yeah, sakayaditthi is like this." I'm not just saying—I do that all the time. It lands you in the middle of the experience. It's not a suppression or a pushing away at all. It's like, "Oh, it's like this now."

Which is a phrase Ajahn Sumedho uses. It really helps me, because sometimes my mind is trying to analyze, trying to name it like I just did—cold sensation, unpleasant sensation—and really get into that. But behind it all, that can come from a trying to control and get it all copacetic, right? If I can name it all and be mindful. Instead, just "Oh, it's like this now." Not even naming it, just "like this now." The resistance goes, and you're just being fully present in that moment.

And then the next thing arises. And if you're really cold and a thought comes, "Well, why don't I just put a blanket around me?"—there's nothing wrong with that. Just put on a blanket, for the love of God, and stop whining, Carol. It's so much more simple. It doesn't mean we can't respond in an intelligent way, but we're able to see what's actually going on rather than running all over the place.

As I did once at IMS many years ago. Yogi mind, when everything's exaggerated and you're really not seeing clearly. The heating pipe started playing the Rolling Stones. Not really, okay. But it was so loud. How can it be so loud? These heating pipes—something's got to be wrong. I was on staff at the time, so I knew the building, and I ended up running around down in the boiler room, way down in the basement, to see if the furnaces were working right. As if I would know, right? As a cook, what do I know from furnaces? Nothing. "It's got to be something wrong. It can't be making so much noise." Instead of just, "Oh, sounds like this now." It's probably not the Rolling Stones—but that could be, you know, a perception. But okay, it's loud. Just like this now. So much more simple, so much more simple and appropriate.

So just that simplicity of recognizing what's happening—sensation—that's samasati. In that particular moment, it's not like it's an incredibly powerful insight. But what we're cultivating through all the techniques is the moment-to-moment-to-moment recognition, recognition of this simple awareness. And that's what starts to give awareness its own momentum. You start to be able then to see more accurately, more clearly.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya likes to describe, instead of thinking of whatever's occurring as ourself, is to just think of its nature. Like, we tend to get upset about the weather, but probably—at least in this culture—we don't think we can control it. And so I may be upset about it, but I'm not really going to go out there and start blaming myself because it's raining or snowing, right? So that little bit of assuming we have control is taken away.

So when we're exploring in our practice moment-to-moment experience, especially when we start to see the painful, the distorting mental states that come when we're looking through wrong view, we recognize that these also are simply arising. Yathabhuta—they've come to be as they are in this moment due to just previous habits of mind. It isn't personal.

The deeply conditioned habits. As I'm sure you know, the Buddha spoke of the roots of our confusion, our deep suffering, as arising in this mind-body system through certain mental states or mental factors—the mental qualities of confusion, delusion, not recognizing clearly what I've been talking about. These lead to responses of either great greed, fixation, holding on, wanting, leaning forward, craving—or hatred, aversion,

fear, pushing away. These three are the root mental qualities that lead to all the other suffering states we experience. And they really arise out of the misperception of relating to any experience as me or mine.

When they're present and not recognized, they're going to be present a lot. As we cultivate mindful awareness, we start to recognize them more and more and more. This is a very important part of practice. This is where I was going with seeing it as nature. If we start to recognize, for instance, how often wanting something to be different arises—even some little thing—and if in that moment it's taken as me, taken as mine: "I'm such a greedy person. I can't believe wanting is coming up again. I'm hopeless." Then right away we're back in the extra suffering, and we don't want to see it because we're taking it personally. And it's really, really hard.

But if instead we say, "Wow, wanting coming up again," or "Fear coming up"—I remember one period in practice where I thought I didn't have that much fear. I was waiting for some big, total panic that was going to send me fleeing. But then I started to notice little blips of fear coming up about everything. This was one phase of practice. I wasn't even on retreat. I was home, and I was taking the tea kettle off the stove, and I had this fear that I was doing it wrong. How can you take the tea kettle off the stove wrong? And the fear—I thought, oh my god, this is amazing.

Now if I took that personally, that would go down the path of "You're completely hopeless. All these years of practice and you're afraid of how you're taking off the tea kettle. Why don't you just hang it up? It's hopeless." Or I could get really overwhelmed. But when you're seeing, "Wow, this is a habit of mind, that's fascinating"—it's not something about Carol, because there's not a solid Carol here anyway. It's just seeing how this has been conditioned in this mind-body system. And the awareness noticing it is, as James said, really interested.

It won't be every moment, but just to hold that sense that whatever's coming up in this moment is arising due to its simply having been practiced a lot. As there is conditioning, here we're shifting—the yatā bhūta, recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment, allows the clear seeing that we can respond differently in this next moment. Like I said, instead of getting all upset about the cold, you just see how cold feels like this, you put on a blanket, no big deal.

So it makes clear seeing possible, which allows us to respond appropriately. It's not that these things aren't going to arise—greed, hatred, confusion. They will. They are. And the more we practice mindfulness and trust it, we'll see them more. Sometimes people come in and they'll say, "Oh my god, I'm a million times worse than when I started practice. I'm a hopeless neurotic mess." But we're just seeing what we didn't see

before because the faith is getting stronger, the mindfulness is getting more continuous, gaining its momentum. There's more sammā sati than there was, and so it gives us the heart and the strength to really look at it, to not take it so personally. And it's important to see because without that clear seeing, these difficult states are what lead to the distortions where we recognize inaccurately.

There's a sutta, a very brief one, where the Buddha talked about the four ways of going off course, the four ways of wrong action. And they're basically this: prejudice based on what we like, what we desire; prejudice based on what we dislike, based on anger; prejudice based on delusion, not recognizing accurately; and prejudice based on fear. We can see this in the world clearly. I imagine for you, certainly for me, we can see how that in other people impacts us, how it impacts other people. We can get really filled with despair and pain around that.

What we're doing here though, and what is really amazing about this month-long period or two-week period of silent intensive practice—where we're not so much relating to each other or to the outside world—as I said with the Buddha, it's not that our awakening fixes the outside world. But what we are looking at is seeing: okay, it's not only everyone else who has prejudices based on likes and dislikes, on anger, on fear, on delusion. It's also arising from time to time in this mind and heart, completely clouding accurate recognition, completely clouding appropriate response. And as the Buddha said, leading to more agitation through clinging, affecting how we can relate to others in the world.

So this is some of the reason why we need faith, as James was talking about. These five wholesome spiritual faculties arise through our willingness to keep cultivating steady mindfulness, and they're essential. There are times we really need to call on confidence, on our faith or trust, because the stuff that comes up—we're stepping outside the comfort zone to recognize these things.

Or sometimes we can bring in the intellectual understanding of right view, really why I'm talking about it tonight. Sometimes when I'm totally caught, I'll really say, "Right, this is nature. This is cause and effect. It's like this now." And it gives me the faith just to relax into it. It's like this now. This feels horrible. It's like this now. For this instant it feels horrible, okay. But it doesn't have to have all the stories about me and past and future and everything. It's just like this now.

And then there's a possibility for the next moment to arise with a response of more clarity, more wholesomeness, more compassion, more wisdom.

When we don't recognize the effect of sakkāya-diṭṭhi that is present, we bring the same sense of misperception into how we approach our practice—just our simple mindfulness practice. This is what so frequently leads to striving, trying to make your experience be a certain way. Probably none of you have ever fallen into that.

Even trying to make the breath be a certain way, as if it matters. The breath is going to come and go, and if it stops coming and going, you won't be there to care about it. But it's going to come and go, and it's the object that helps us re-recognize awareness. It's not about getting a better breath. We think, "Well, I shouldn't be thinking about things." Thinking is occurring. That's what's happening. That's then the object to bring us back into awareness. Any object can bring awareness. But when we don't recognize that the sense of "me doing" is behind the technique, then we can practice endlessly without understanding.

Ajahn Sumedho says our tendency is to think you can't understand or even think about sakkāya-diṭṭhi in the beginning of practice—it's too obscure, too complex. You have to practice a long time. But he says, no, he's come to really believe—and I agree with him—that's crazy. Why practice for twenty years from the delusion that I'm practicing to get somewhere and make something happen? Why spend twenty years doing that? You can start to just begin to explore, to bring in and recognize when the sense of self, sakkāya-diṭṭhi, is occurring. It's not going to stop occurring, but we can just recognize it, as I've been talking about, and see the difference between the complexity and the simplicity—when it's there and when it's not—without even taking that personally. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi also isn't personal. It's just a habit of misinterpretation of our minds.

When we don't recognize it—and I mean, probably many of us have practiced with great diligence, great sincerity, great effort—behind that, without recognizing, so much of it is coming from that forceful striving. Trying to get, trying to do, trying to be better, or trying to get rid of, trying to change your personality. Does this resonate with anybody? No, I'm serious.

And then we say, "Okay, well, I've got to stop doing that, right? I'm just going to recognize sakkāya-diṭṭhi and stop doing that. No more striving." No. This is the radical nature of moment-to-moment mindfulness practice. Sati, mindfulness of just what is occurring, no matter what is occurring. So striving—striving feels like this. It's just another movement of mind, another mental state. Trying to get rid of striving feels like this.

You just keep noticing. A good place you can see it in minuscule is the sense of trying to control your breath. You ever get into that? You just try to notice the breath and then as soon as you notice, you're trying to control it. And you think, "God, I'm not supposed to control the breath. I'm going to not control the breath." Then you try to just look at it

from the side because you're not trying to control it. "I'm not really controlling—oh, controlling, controlling. Never mind, I'm going here. Am I controlling it?" And you're all wrapped up in a knot.

What about: "Oh, controlling feels like this." Okay. That's just what's occurring. Controlling feels like this. I don't like it. Okay. Not liking feels like this. Really. Really. I'm not kidding. This is really the quality of sammā sati—recognizing what's occurring. Steady, steady awareness starts to get its own momentum.

Mingyur Rinpoche, describing this, says we give attention to the object of meditation to support the recognition of awareness, of mindfulness. We use the object as a tool to access the mind of mindfulness. Now this is me, not him: for that purpose, any object is equally useful.

So it can be breath, or it can be controlling. It can be a pristine sense of coolness and little subtle vibrations, or it could be a massive whole body-mind feeling of hatred. It's like this. It's the awareness that we're recognizing, developing the steadiness of—not trying to make better objects.

And you'll know when you're trying to make better objects, because right away the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* leads us into either greed, wanting to achieve something, or aversion, trying to get rid of something, trying to stop something, or delusion—you don't know what the heck's going on—or more, it's all about me. It's all about me. But then mindfulness can just notice that.

I'm not saying it's easy, but the more we start to do it and trust it, the more natural it gets. It starts to be that this old suit of clothes, the old fuzzy bathrobe of "me, me, me," isn't the only way of recognizing a moment of reality. So here we have all these moments to practice—simply recognizing mindful awareness. Mindful awareness.

A lot of times it feels like nothing much is going on. We want some flashy things going on. And if you can't have wonderful flashy things, we'll take some big trauma. Better that than boring, right? Nothing's happening. But awareness doesn't ever get bored.

We start to notice—this is back to Mingyur Rinpoche again—as we're using every object to recognize awareness, then we start to recognize the quality of the mind, the quality of the mind that's aware in any moment of awareness. Not just the object, not just the phenomenon perceived by the mind.

This is what James was pointing to last night when he talked about those qualities of interest in the mind, and relaxation, and kindness. Those are the wholesome qualities that we start to recognize. Interest is really a quality of bright mind, of wisdom, of non-

delusion. Relaxation, I'm thinking, is really like a quality of non-greed. The fixation of clinging, of holding onto something, is relaxed. It's just as it is right now—non-greed. And kindness, of course, obviously non-hatred. Not the kindness of "oh, it's so nice"—it's just like this, without creating any negativity, any aversion, any "me" around it. It's just like this. Kind attention can just be with what is. And that's all.

In fact, one of Ajahn Sumedho's definitions of *mettā*, which I really love—*mettā* in terms of being with something or someone that's difficult—is just to experience the difficult or unpleasant in a person or a situation, just as it is, without creating anything around it. I love that. It's like this. And space. Nothing else you need to do.

So this is really *sammā-sati*. As Ajahn Chah says, we become the knower of objects, not the owner of objects. And so slowly, slowly, as the awareness gains momentum, the right view, the understanding—it starts to be more our default mode. Not completely, but it does start to be at times. Sometimes we actively remember it, but then there are times when, like I gave the example, all of a sudden: "Oh, it's just like this now." That arises spontaneously, and it's so obvious. And we really start to shift to the more accurate way of seeing.

I'll just end with this very well-known sutta from the Buddha. I know you know this—two alternate ways of perceiving. And we go back and forth between them.

This mind-heart is radiant, but it doesn't show its radiance because passing torments, *kilesas*, defilements, come and obscure it, hide it. The unwise, ordinary person does not understand this as it really is. So for them there is no development, no cultivation of mind. You just think, "Oh, this is just how it is. Greed is here and I'm the victim of it and there's nothing to do." This is the truth.

This mind is radiant, and it shows its radiance when it is unobscured by passing *kilesas*, torments. The wise, noble disciple understands this as it is, and so for them there is cultivation, development of mind.

So that's what we're doing. We recognize that when the *kilesas* are covering the radiance, we don't think that's all there is. We can recognize the torments, but we know it's a passing show. And when the radiance is there—just the simplicity of the heart-mind at ease, at peace—just starting with that.

Don't go looking for Nibbana—just start with moments of purity. When there's not greed, not hatred, not delusion, recognize those moments as well. Just the simple radiance, really view that.

And when a new cloud comes, we don't despair. We know it's a cloud. Conditions brought it together. Awareness that radiance is still accessible.

So that's what I wanted to share about right view.

CHAPTER 161

The Two Darts: Mindfulness of Vedanā can Purify the Heart

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates one of the Buddha's most penetrating insights: the role of vedanā (feeling tone) in the arising of suffering and the path to liberation. Drawing primarily from the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6), known as "The Dart Sutta," she explores how an ordinary person experiences two kinds of suffering when touched by unpleasant feeling—the initial bodily pain plus the mental anguish of resistance—while an awakened being experiences only the first dart.

Carol explains how vedanā—the quality of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality that arises with every moment of sense contact—is so subtle and fleeting that we rarely notice it directly. Yet this unrecognized feeling tone drives our habitual reactions: grasping toward the pleasant, pushing away the unpleasant, and ignoring the neutral. She weaves in teachings from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), the Dhammapada, and insights from teachers including Ajahn Buddhadāsa, Mahā Ghosānanda, and Mingyur Rinpoche to show how these unconscious patterns perpetuate saṃsāra—the endless cycle of craving and becoming.

Through vivid examples—from watching basketball fans ride waves of elation and despair, to her own midnight cookie episode on retreat—Carol demonstrates how simple, sustained mindfulness of feeling tone can reveal the mechanism of suffering and naturally release our bondage to it. The Buddha's promise is clear: by contemplating the impermanence of vedanā without clinging, "one personally realizes nibbāna."

To explore together, expanding and discussing a bit more on this aspect of our experience of vedanā that Bonnie introduced in the instructions the other morning. Because one, it's fascinating, and two, it's really one of the key experiences that just happens to arise every single mind moment that we're alive. Understanding and meeting it with mindfulness rather than overlooking it is really one of the keys to clear seeing and liberation. It's an amazing thing. To me, one of the signs of the genius of the Buddha is that he even noticed it and figured it out. This can be really interesting to explore, and I'm just offering these reflections in that spirit.

Mingyur Rinpoche writes, talking about recognizing cause and effect conditions: "We can recognize that the same interplay between cause and effect conditions our own mind and shapes our experience." Hopefully we're all seeing that as we explore here. If

we want to be happy, we must figure out what causes and conditions lead to well-being. Similarly, if we do not have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how could we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?

To me, those are kind of the two aspects of our ongoing spiritual practice—the two sides of a retreat, and the two sides of the things we talk about. Sometimes we're talking about the causes and conditions that lead to happiness, that lead to well-being, and sometimes we're talking about the causes and conditions that create a moment of suffering in our hearts and minds. Sometimes you're experiencing a rare moment of the causes and conditions that lead to well-being, and other times you're experiencing many moments of the causes and conditions that lead to suffering.

This is really what we're exploring in our practice, what we're seeing. I remember Sayadaw U Tejaniya once said something that was so obvious I thought it was brilliant precisely because it's so obvious. He was talking about someone really wanting to get concentrated and wanting to be free. He said, "You know, concentration doesn't happen just because you want it to. That's not really the cause and condition that gives rise to concentration." Just take that in. "I want to be free. I want to not have this experience anymore." And we get so frustrated when it doesn't happen. So here it's like, stop. We just look, moment to moment to moment, with steady mindfulness without assuming we know. And then the causes and conditions for both happiness and suffering reveal themselves. That's really why we have to go through both sides in our practice.

Vedanā, this quality, this moment-to-moment experience of feeling tone, is so important that the Buddha picked it out in his sutta on the four foundations of mindfulness. When he decided to divide up experience into four areas, he picked vedanā for a whole section, the second one. Until I really heard and read about it from the Buddhist teachings and started to explore it in my experience, I never would have even noticed it. I didn't even have a clue that it existed. How did he figure that out?

Really understanding and exploring how we suffer, really looking at these qualities in the mind—remember, meditation is the work of the mind. It's not just about some kind of subtle, esoteric looking at these things separate from life. What goes on in the heart-mind is what conditions how we speak and how we act in the world. It's not separate.

I think very frequently about a quotation I love from Maha Ghosananda, who was a Cambodian monk and peace activist during and after the time of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge killed millions of people in Cambodia, and basically all the monks and nuns had to flee if they were going to survive, as did many other people. Maha Ghosananda, who has since passed away, was giving part of a speech in Washington, D.C. some

years ago. He said, "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts." So to understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to remove them in the world. To me, that just really points to the inseparability of understanding the landmines in our own mind and hearts from how we speak and act in the world.

So what are the landmines in our hearts? In the big picture, the Buddha said: the qualities of greed, the qualities of aversion or hatred, the qualities of delusion. When they're present in the heart-mind in a moment and unrecognized, that's what leads to unwholesome speech and action. And it's not just something that makes you feel a little bad—it's actually running the show.

This brings to mind the first two verses of the Dhammapada, which are also very famous: "All things are preceded by the mind, the heart, are ruled by mind, are made of mind. If you speak or act with an impure mind"—basically greed, hatred, confusion in the heart-mind—"then suffering follows you as the wheel of the cart follows the ox that pulls it. All things are preceded by the mind, the heart, ruled by mind, made of mind."

And if you speak or act with a pure mind, a calm, bright heart, then happiness follows you like a shadow that never leaves. This very famous couplet from the Dhammapada says to me exactly what Maha Gosananda says and exactly what Mingyur Rinpoche says: understanding what leads to suffering in our experience, and thus in the world, and understanding what leads to happiness.

Each of us, as human beings, is just one representative of humanity. We have our own particular stories and our particular patterns, but underneath that, we're all the same. It's the same things that lead to suffering, the same things that lead to happiness. So as we come to understand how confusion and complexity gets created moment to moment, how we can see through it, and how recognizing accurately releases the confusion—even if just for a moment—we're not just doing it for ourselves. We're understanding how this works in everybody.

This doesn't mean it fixes everybody. The Buddha couldn't fix everybody. But we can certainly move into our relationships with ourselves and others in the world from a very different place of understanding—when the corruptions aren't present. I'm going to use *klesha,* the word for greed, hatred, and delusion, because I really don't much like the translation "defilement." "Torments" is another option, but I'll just use *klesha*—that's what I mean by it. The torments of heart-mind: greed, hatred, confusion, the habits.

When the Buddha came to talk about this, when he picked out *vedana*, this quality of feeling tone to explore, it was really because—while there are different angles to enter—this is one that's very accessible to us when we start to notice, to really come to understand.

I want to start talking about it from a sutta the Buddha gave, called "The Darts." I'll go through the sutta bit by bit and then offer my ideas, my comments about it.

He starts out by saying, "Now what is the distinction, what is the difference that exists between a well-taught noble disciple"—basically an awakened person—"and an untaught worldling, an ordinary person?" That's an interesting question, right? What's the difference? That gets my attention.

And he says: "An untaught worldling, monks, experiences pleasant feelings. She experiences unpleasant or painful feelings and experiences neutral feelings. A well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings."

So what's the difference?

I would suggest—if you're anything like me, maybe you're not—just take a moment to look at what might be the background, perhaps not quite conscious assumption when you think about what it would be to be enlightened. And don't pretend you've never thought about it either. When it slips in, do you think, "Yes, I'll experience the same unpleasant feeling tones that I'm feeling now"? No, you don't. Don't you think it's just going to get better and better, nicer and nicer—in other words, more and more pleasant *vedana*? Doesn't that somehow slip in the back door?

He's saying no, it's not like that. An awakened person, like an unawakened person, experiences pleasant *vedana*, unpleasant *vedana*, and neutral *vedana*.

So first of all, if we can even let that one go, that's huge. Okay, it doesn't go that easily. May it be so for you, and I won't have to give this talk. But I'm giving it to myself, not just to you.

So what is the difference? That's the rest of the sutta.

"When an untaught person, an ordinary person, is touched by a painful, unpleasant bodily *vedana*, feeling tone, they worry and grieve and lament. They beat their breast. They weep and are distraught."

Can you relate to that? It's not just, "Ah yeah, that knee, it's a little bit unpleasant." No—you beat your breast, you're distraught, you weep, you pull out your hair. It's like, "Oh my God, it's the end of the world!"

"They thus experience two kinds of unpleasant feelings: a bodily and a mental one. It is as if a person were pierced by a dart, an arrow, and following the first piercing is hit by a second arrow. So that person will experience feelings caused by two darts. It is similar with an untaught, ordinary person: when touched by an unpleasant bodily feeling tone, they worry and grieve, lament, beat their breast, weep, and are distraught. So they experience two kinds of feelings."

That's the first part he presents. He's saying this is what an ordinary person does. Can you relate to that at all?

Let me describe *vedana* for a moment, and then say what happens with this. *Vedana*, feeling tone itself, as Bonnie described the other morning, is a very subtle and fleeting, quick experience.

arising in every moment of consciousness.

So how does the Buddha describe our experience, really? Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, mental experience and thinking or emotion—he calls these the six sense experiences. And they're just happening, over and over and over, all day long. Have you noticed that? Just happening.

So what is a sense experience in that moment? All these things are happening very quickly. Say seeing, for example. There's the physical eye door that works, if it works. There's a form, a visual object to be seen. And there's the consciousness in that moment. When they come together, there's seeing. But what we experience, what we really recognize, is just that seeing is happening. Recognizing the seeing—that's mindfulness.

So the seeing occurs, and right away with it is perception. That saññā, that recognition: it's a bell, or it's a light, or this is a room. You may not even say the word, but that just comes up. It's just normal nature. Nothing wrong with that. The perception can be accurate or inaccurate—that's a whole other talk—but that perception arises is just natural.

And it's perceived, it's recognized in the mind with this feeling tone that is also felt in the mind: this kind of pleasant feeling tone, unpleasant feeling tone, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is just arising as nature, cause and effect, just as with perception, just at that moment of contact. It's just nature. It's not good. It's not bad. It's not personal. And it's so subtle, arising in every moment.

It's easy to think that the feeling tone, the quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality, is somehow embedded in the object—like this bell is pleasant to look at. But it's not. It's how it's felt in the mental sphere in each of us. The same sight—well, it's

never the same, right? How I see this bell in this moment, someone else may see it differently. It may come in as neutral to me. It may come in as unpleasant or pleasant to you. And five minutes later, to the same person, it could come in with a different feeling tone. It's not a steady state thing. It's just what arises due to conditioning.

But it's so quick. It's so quick that, as I said, until I read about it, I didn't really notice. I don't look at the bell and think, "Hmm, neutral feeling tone. Nice gold color. Pleasant feeling tone. Ah, it's pleasant." We don't really notice. It's so fleeting, so quick.

And in the not noticing, of course, is where the habits come in. You know this. We talk about this all the time. But it's so deeply habituated in the mind stream: when there's pleasant feeling tone, there's that little leaning forward. When there's unpleasant, that little pushing back. When it's neutral, look for something else.

In the not noticing, that's where it moves from unpleasant bodily feeling tone to lamenting, beating your breast, pulling your hair, and thinking it's all over. It's like that. It's so fast. Because we don't really notice the feeling tone so often, the whole experience—all the reaction—we're immediately into complexity and story. What does it mean? What to do? Without mindfulness, it's really easy for us to think that the reactions and the story is really what's happening, the accurate description of reality. Do you get a sense of what I mean?

Take unpleasant sensation, just a little unpleasant sensation in the knee or the elbow or the hand. We may actually be mindful of the sensation but not recognizing the unpleasant, and then immediately the thought arises: "This really isn't good. I don't think I can continue to sit with this like this. In fact, I remember someone I knew who kept sitting when it was like this in their back, and they really hurt themselves."

And that's really not wise attention. That's really not mindfulness. That's really not compassion. It's just "I've got to do something and I've got to do it now. This is bad. This is wrong." And all of that could happen in like a tenth of a second. Or am I the only one?

We may recognize, as it's getting really ramped up, that this seems a little exaggerated. "Fear is like this, fear is like this." But really, in there, not noticing the unpleasant, the reaction, the response is just—of course. Of course it's wrong. Of course it's bad. Of course I shouldn't hurt. You know? Hello?

And someone said, you know, we have a body, and cause and condition. We have a body and we're sitting still for half an hour. At some point we're going to hurt. So then your mind goes, "Okay, so why sit still for half an hour?" Right? Because we should be able to organize it so we don't hurt, because hurting is bad.

Same with pleasant. There's a pleasant feeling just at lunch. Something tastes good. We know it tastes good, but we miss the pleasant feeling. And it's just, "Oh, this is really great. I've got to get the recipe. I've got to have some more, but I don't want to be greedy. How much are other people eating? It's okay, they had four—I can have another one. It doesn't really... this is really good for me and it soothes me. It's compassionate. It's really the way we're supposed to be, and there's still enough. And the cooks will appreciate it—I'm really doing it so the cooks will feel good, so they'll know that I like the food." Right?

There's nothing wrong with pleasant food. And there's nothing wrong with moving so you're not harming your body. But when we don't recognize the vedanā, the complexity—we're entranced by the reactions. We're really lost in that. And we think that's really... we're taking that as a description of reality. And we respond in that way, and through that to the next thing that happens. That's how we get so confused. Confused and lost.

So basically, without mindfulness—because the six sense experiences, that's all that's happening all day. And notice how fast they're changing sometimes when you see it. Nothing stays really for more than a moment. So all those vedanās arising through the day in our daily life too, and the not recognizing the tendency to move toward the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, ignore the neutral—we use that really as the overlay of what's meaningful, what's valuable, what's worthwhile in our life.

Think how many mind moments we've practiced that. No wonder it's such a deep habit. No wonder it feels right, really, and normal in a way. Do you know what I mean? It's like, of course pleasant is better. Of course, if it's been a pleasant sitting, if it's been really clear and then suddenly it's all muddy and the body's really hurting—even though you're aware of it, but it's really turned unpleasant—it of course feels like something's wrong. It's just such a deep habit.

But it's a habit. Because it's a habit doesn't mean it's the truth. But it's, as you know, very difficult to change habits. So a lot of our practice is this exploring to see how this process is working, really being interested, not taking it personally, because we're all kind of running in these habits.

So really starting to explore, back to reading the sutta, which I put down somewhere. Here it is. The Buddha goes on to describe how we ordinary people react.

You're beating your breast, you're resisting. "Having been touched by that painful feeling, one resists it, one resents it. Then in one who so resists and resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance, a habit of resistance against painful feeling comes to underlie the mind."

Do you get a sense of that? It just becomes the habit to resist and resent unpleasant feeling. And because it's a habit, it feels normal. It feels appropriate.

Then he goes on: "Under the impact of that painful feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. And why does one do so? An ordinary person, O Bhikkhus, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

This kind of breaks my heart, actually.

"So in one who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind. He does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. And in one who lacks this knowledge, an underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings comes to underlie his mind."

Let me talk about this a little. To me, this is the classic description of samsara—what keeps us spinning in this wheel of wanting and becoming. This deep tendency of immediately resisting the unpleasant, and the only way out, we think it's the way out, the only one we know, is to go look for something pleasant.

That's just the sense of samsara: always leaning a little bit forward, if not a lot, but a little bit forward to something a little bit better. The next good thing, the next good thing. Even so simple as: this thing I'm eating is good, so let me have the next one.

Just as Guy was saying, the Tibetan saying that samsara is the urge to correct—just get it a little bit better, a little bit better. That sense of always leaning into the next thing and confusing it, not really seeing the effect of that, which keeps us really quite narrow, looking forward, with a sense of incompleteness, a sense of insufficiency, a sense of needing something to make it okay. And the second it's here and okay, it doesn't last—we're needing the next thing, needing the next thing.

So we're always kind of leaning into that object, not seeing the whole process, not recognizing the sense of connectedness and vastness, but really under the influence of unrecognized greed and aversion and me, me, me. The mind becomes really narrow

and focused, like tunnel vision. And we experience it in different ways—as alienation or neediness or a sense of what's wrong, always needing something more. And we often confuse this with happiness, with pleasure.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes just the wanting of something, we almost think it's pleasant? We confuse it. Oh, just the pleasant fantasy. Well, that thought's pleasant in the moment—just imagining how great it's going to be when you get whatever the heck it is. The orange at breakfast or the amazing new relationship or whatever it is.

Is it ever as good as you imagined? If it is, how long for? Really, pretty quick. So then the next thing, the next thing, the next thing.

And we start to see how in each moment—it can be emotions, it can be physical objects, it can be pleasant meditative experiences—there's always that sense when we get it of thinking, this is supposed to do it. Not understanding, of course, the impermanence or the fleetingness of vedana itself. We're looking at the object, thinking it's going to make me happy, when really the craving just goes away and there's a sense of ease, a sense of peace. And really what we're craving is pleasant vedana, pleasant feeling tone.

How quick is it? When we start to explore, just noticing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, feeling tone is so fleeting and insubstantial—and we're running our life by it.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a really wonderful Thai forest monk, teacher, and scholar, quite interesting—he said once, just explore pleasant feeling tone. Start to notice how it feels, and I'll talk a bit later about unpleasant too. Just notice how quick it is.

So try it in eating. Say you're eating an orange or something that you like, something that's pleasant. When you take a bite, we tend to notice the juiciness and all of that, but just notice, if you can, just the burst of pleasantness. How long does it last? You have to take another bite to get another burst, or eat another orange, or think a happy thought, or remember how the previous bite tasted so that thought is pleasant.

See how quick it is.

So Ajahn Buddhadasa says, as you start to notice how fleeting pleasant feeling tone is, you start to see—and he says this: think about all the decisions and choices you've made in your life. He says, I bet you'll see ninety-five percent of them were based on wanting more pleasant feeling tone.

So maybe that's exaggerated for us, you know, more awake beings. But look and see, not with judgment, with interest. With interest, see how this works.

We don't see the vastness, the non-separation. It keeps us looking, looking, looking. And another thing it does is we keep landing in each experience, whether it's emotional or something to eat, pleasant, unpleasant. And it's so—this is it. We take each one as so—I mean, it's real in that moment, but it's like we really die into it. *This is going to make me happy.* We're really there with it. And then when it goes away, we're distraught. We're so—*oh no, this is really gone.* And that's so complete. And then the next good thing—*oh, finally, now it's good again, and now I can relax.* And then another difficult one comes.

Some of you have mentioned in interviews how you're starting to see emotions just coming really quick and fast—beautiful ones, difficult ones, confusing ones, complicated ones—coming through, coming through. And you see, wow, when you really identify with each of them, how exhausting it is. And we're doing that in our life a lot of the time.

A place I like to watch—it amuses me—I kind of think of it as a metaphor for watching how samsara works, is if you watch friends who are really involved in watching a particular sport, a particular team. It's good to watch friends if you're not particularly involved, right? Easier to watch them.

So, for example, last year when the basketball team here, the Golden State team—those of you who are here know—it was like a big deal when I came out here in the spring during the playoffs. I've never in my life been anywhere out here where everyone, everyone I spoke with without exception, was completely caught up in the Golden State Warriors and where they get through and have the most wins or whatever, and then in the playoffs. And I mean, even people, friends of mine on staff here who to my knowledge had never looked at any kind of a sports game at all. They're like, "Gotta go, Carol, I gotta go watch the Warriors play." I almost fell off my chair. Really? You're gonna go watch the Warriors?

So one night I was out to dinner with a friend from Germany. We were driving home into San Rafael around 7:30 on a weekend evening. I was driving, and I said, "Jeez, it's like there's no cars on the road. It's weird. It's spooky. What's going on?" And Franz goes, "I bet there's a Golden State game on." And sure enough, when I went home and walked past the window of my friend, I could see in the TV—Golden State, two heads.

And if you watch people—something like basketball is fun because it's fast moving. So you're watching and you want a particular team, so that team scores a basket. Yay, yay, pleasant feeling, pleasant feeling, so excited! And then they're running around, and then the other team scores—oh no, unpleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, oh, it's so bad. And it's changing every second, every two seconds. It's exhausting, but each one's really real. It's so true, you know? And it's like, halftime, "Oh my god, they're twenty points behind!" I said, "But it changes so fast. How can you worry now? There's another—you don't know what's going to happen in forty-five minutes. It's so fast."

It's fun to watch when you're not the one who cares. It's different when you're the one who cares. But to me, it's a great little metaphor for samsara.

And then, you know, finally, thank God, the game ends. And it's good if they won, but even if they lost, thank God it's over because it's exhausting. But how long do you get? If they won, great, you can be happy. For how long?

If you lost, you're sad. For how long? Because the next day, there's another game. You've got to get all revved up again. You've got to go watch it again. You've got to see where they are. So to me, this is like a little metaphor. It's exhausting, but we think we're having a really good time. We're choosing to do this.

But in our life, here we are. We can notice what we're choosing and what's really bringing us happiness. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with watching a basketball game—don't get me wrong. I'm just saying, watching what we really think is bringing happiness and ease, and seeing how it works. It's fun to see how it works in something that's not the most important thing in your life, because then we can really explore.

That's kind of what's great about this time we have on retreat. Now we're really in the heart of the retreat, well into the second week. And sure, stuff from your daily life is still coming up—it doesn't go away. But all of you, no matter what you think, you're quieter than you were when you came. You might notice, actually, as awareness strengthens and gets its momentum, that one might actually notice more thinking. You might notice more wanting arising, more aversion arising. You think, "I'm more of a mess than when I came." But it's really that awareness is noticing more and more subtle things.

People come in and say, "Oh my God, everywhere I look there's craving." And we go, "Great." And you probably think we're really twisted, but it's like, wonderful! You're really seeing what's going on—and not only you. That's a wonderful thing to explore in retreat. Here in the smaller things, start to see how it works. When there's pleasant or unpleasant, or when you notice you're all caught up in wanting or aversion.

And the question might come up: so what's wrong with wanting and aversion? Okay, we can see, if you really don't see it, you can do bad stuff. But if you're just sitting here minding your own business and feeling some wanting and aversion, and so what, you go have a cup of tea instead of doing your walking meditation—big whoop. We're not saying there's something wrong with what you did. That's again looking at the object. But we want to explore: what happens with vedanā? And when we don't see it going into wanting, aversion, delusion, why does the Buddha pick those out as being so not just problematic, but the roots of suffering, the roots of confusion?

This is just a quick aside: when they're not recognized in the mind, coloring and distorting perception, it's exactly this that gets in the way of recognizing accurately. And as I've said before, waking up, freedom from suffering, isn't about coming into another reality. It's about recognizing accurately—just what Mingyur Rinpoche was saying—what brings happiness and what brings suffering. Not our habitual ideas that more pleasant equals happiness. That's not real reliable happiness. But what really does.

And so when there's desire present in the mind—maybe you didn't notice the pleasant, but you're noticing desire—get interested in watching the effects of it. Notice what it does in the mind. It has a kind of narrowing, a tunnel vision. You can see how it really, from being kind of just present, calm with whatever's arising, suddenly the awareness snaps shut on the thing that's wanted.

My brother used to have a hound dog, the kind they breed for hunting, although this one was just living with him in his house in Atlanta. But because it's bred for hunting, it's a really sweet dog, yet the nose is so highly sensitized that he'd come into the house or go out in the backyard and all he could do was follow scents. His nose would just take him to any human, any animal scent. He had no control over it. He'd come in the house and go into my suitcase and pull out any dirty clothes because they had a human smell on them. He'd leave the clean clothes alone. You had to hide all the garbage. He'd just be pulled by the nose, by scent.

And I think of craving as like that. It just kind of pulls us by the nose. It's like, "I just want..." and we're off after it.

The story I often tell, but I think it's a good one, is when I was years ago at Yucca Valley in the high desert there in Southern California. I like it there very much, that high desert. We'd go walking out in it every morning. And I find there's just something very clear and bright in that dry desert air—the different Joshua trees and the birds and the little bunnies and the chipmunks—just being present with all of that and just walking, just being there.

So again, one morning doing that, and there are a few really large land tortoises there, but you don't see them very frequently. Normally I was walking in the desert and just present with that, just that exquisite awareness we have sometimes but we don't recognize. It's because there's no wanting going on, there's no aversion going on, there's just—you're just awake. But the thought comes up: "Maybe I'll see a tortoise." And that thought was grasped at: "Oh yeah, maybe a tortoise! I know where the beds are..." And immediately, what had been awake walking, inclusive, became: head for the tortoise, head for the tortoise. And everything else that came—not tortoise, not tortoise, not tortoise—just head for the tortoise, head for the tortoise, whether you see one or not. The experience, totally different.

And we think, "Oh, that's going to make me happy, seeing the tortoise." I was happy before I got into wanting to see it. And now I don't even remember if I saw it or not, because at some point I noticed what was happening to me. "Oh, look at that." And then the peace that comes back is when the wanting is just put down. It goes away. Ah.

So whether I saw the tortoise or not, I don't remember. But if you see it, it's like, "Ah, great. Saw the tortoise." The wanting's gone. There can be a wide sense of just presence with all that is in that moment, whatever arises.

That's why it's often said—I think Guy said this, a Buddhist said—wanting and aversion are makers of measurement. It kind of measures me and the thing that's wanted. "Me" immediately springs up when there's wanting or aversion.

Aversion works the same way. The mind shrinks back, really like a sudden reaction to the unpleasant. And in that shrinking back, almost we get just as caught up in the thing. Have you noticed?

Thich Nhat Hanh always gives the example of what it's like if you have one rough tooth. One tooth that just has a little chip in it. All your other teeth are fine. How much time does your tongue spend going to that little chip in the tooth? It's not like feeling all your other teeth and going, "Oh, these are fine, these are neutral." It's: rough tooth, unpleasant, rough tooth, unpleasant, rough tooth, unpleasant. Right?

Or if there's some sound going on that you find annoying, that you find unpleasant. We're not just noticing unpleasantness, that sound. And it's intermittent and not regular, right? So it happens. And then it's quiet. Then it happens again. And it happens, but it's not regular. Do you notice the time in between when the sound is not happening? The mind can be completely caught up with unpleasant expectation, waiting for that sound. We're like married to the unpleasant experience with aversion, the same as with pleasant.

And then delusion—well, for unpleasant, Ajahn Chah has a great line. He says it's as if we spend our life walking around tensed up like we're in the dentist's chair. Just trying to hold away anything unpleasant.

And delusion—first it's just not noticing what's going on, that's one aspect. But really the deeper delusion is that this all becomes about me. When there's craving, there's definitely me, it's about me. When there's aversion, it's about me. It all becomes the center focus of everything.

As someone was saying today, they noticed the sense of "me" came up in something, and they said, "Wow, I was just paying attention to it and I noticed—this is really unpleasant." Just kind of contraction and limiting and really, really unpleasant. That's interesting.

It wasn't aversion—just noticing.

So this is the most simple way to start exploring. Not to say, "Oh, wanting is bad, I'm going to stop wanting." Forget that. But get interested in exploring it. Get truly curious about it. Because as the Buddha said, until we start exploring it, we know of no other escape from unpleasant feeling except to lust after the pleasant.

Until we get interested enough to see what's really going on—with the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, with the lusting after the pleasant—until we see what's actually happening, we don't get it that this isn't making us happy. We just keep thinking, "The next one, the next one, the next one, the next basket, the next basket."

So our practice here is simply to bring attention to see, to explore craving and aversion, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Remember, the Buddha said that the ordinary person doesn't understand as it really is the arising and ending of these feelings. As I was saying, they're so quick when we start to see them, these feeling tones. And the ordinary person doesn't understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape.

The Buddha talks about this frequently, and I think this is another piece of brilliance—the gratification, danger, and escape in feeling tone, in the world in general.

He says that before he was awakened, he was exploring: What's the gratification in the world? What's the danger? What's the escape? He said there is gratification. Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world—pleasant feeling tone, in a way—is gratification. We enjoy it. We get pleasure from it. And that's how it is. He's not saying bad or good. He's just saying, yes, this is a fact.

So when people say the Buddha's teaching is that everything is suffering, everything is unpleasant—he's not saying that. He's saying, for sure, there's gratification, there's pleasure and joy in the world. This is pleasant feeling tone.

What's the danger? The danger is that the world is impermanent. In terms of feeling tone, they're so quick, so fleeting. There's no way they give any kind of lasting gratification at all. Bound up with dissatisfaction and subject to change—this is the danger. If we're not seeing the feeling tone, if we're letting it drive our decisions, how we respond to life, it doesn't work. Because we're looking for something it can't give.

The escape is the abandoning of desire and lust for the world. This is the escape.

I want to say a few things about that. I've talked about the fleeting quality of vedanā, the confusion of thinking that going for the pleasant is making us happy. But when we really look at it, we can see that's not necessarily so. However, this "abandoning the lust for the world" is often confused—when we hear it but we don't experience it in a moment—it's often confused with thinking we should abandon the world. And that's not what the Buddha's saying.

When we abandon, just in a moment—like when I was describing the simple craving for a tortilla—when that drops away, there's peace. Not the peace of incredible gratification from getting what you want and the big jazz of that, but the peace of contentment. Just contentment. It's like this now. This is really a much deeper peace.

It's the escape from the lust in the world, but it's not escaping from the world. It doesn't mean there's no appreciation of beauty, of joy. These things are still happening. It's not like we want to abandon pleasant feeling tone. But what drops away in a moment is this lusting for it and this fear of the unpleasant—which has been driving the bus, running the show.

One of my favorite quotations from the Buddha is: "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer craves after it."

Explore for yourself, just in little things here, a sense of that difference. A sense of the difference between appreciating and craving, this contentment.

It's not from an act of personal will. That's just more wanting. "Now I'm going to stop craving and really feel contentment with just this breath, no matter how it comes."

Contentment. Ease. These are out of our control—how we're going to feel. We don't know what feeling tone is going to come up. It's not an act of will. But notice in those moments, it's wisdom that recognizes, "Oh, this wanting, this seventeenth orange—maybe it's not going to do it." And you put it down.

So I'll tell a story like that. And let's just see it: simple moment-to-moment mindfulness.

From the Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta, where he's talking about vedana, how to be mindful: "When feeling a pleasant feeling tone, one knows, 'I feel a pleasant feeling tone.'" That's it. You don't need anything more. "When feeling an unpleasant feeling tone, one knows, 'I feel an unpleasant feeling tone.'" Not "Oh my God, what can I do about it?" Simply: "I feel an unpleasant feeling tone. It's like this." "When feeling a neutral feeling tone, one knows, 'I feel a neutral feeling tone.'"

I know—we're like, "Okay, yeah, right, then what?" Try doing it. Just try doing it. And with steady attention, see what happens. The whole world opens up. And we can start to see how these patterns work.

I'll give this example. I think it was the first time I sat a three-month retreat at IMS, a long time ago. And this is a story of bad behavior on retreat that I am not recommending, okay? But I happened to have a car, and it was deep in November in Massachusetts, and I got this intense craving for cookies. I got in my car, went into the little town there, and bought a bag of chocolate chip cookies. It's not my usual thing. I took them back—I had a room by myself, which is sometimes unfortunate.

The going and the getting and coming back—I knew what I was doing, but that wasn't mindfulness. I was just being pulled by the nose of craving, with no understanding of what was happening. I went back to my room and sat down. But then I started eating the cookies. And I was being very mindful of eating them—picking one up, chewing, swallowing. Very mindful. Feeling how it goes down. Very mindful.

And I kept eating them. I don't usually tend to binge, but I ate a lot of those cookies. A lot. And I kept on being mindful. At some point I thought, "This is a lot of cookies, Carol." And I kept on being mindful.

Because I was mindful—and mindfulness doesn't have a hierarchy—I started to notice something. It was as if, following the cookie down, it would drop into my stomach, which was starting to feel less and less pleasant, I have to say. But I noticed in my heart area there was this real painful feeling that the cookies were dropping past. They weren't fixing that painful feeling, which I hadn't noticed before.

And then I realized: this is a really deeply unpleasant feeling of loneliness and sadness. Oh. And feeling it was like, "Oh, that's what's happening." This unpleasant feeling so often gives rise to not wanting to feel it, not even noticing it, gives rise to seeking pleasant feeling tone. And I hadn't even recognized that.

As soon as I saw it—"Oh, loneliness feels like this"—I didn't eat another cookie. I didn't eat another cookie.

I just put it down. Oh, loneliness feels like this. That was fine. That was completely fine.

So we can explore these processes and we can really trust the steadiness of awareness. You don't have to figure it all out by yourself. Simply have the willingness—if you notice wanting, let your attention feel how wanting feels. Generally, I find wanting unpleasant. We're used to doing something to get away from it because it's unpleasant, hence we get what we want. It doesn't feel natural to just hang out with wanting without acting on it. But explore that in little things. I promise you won't die from wanting. And I promise at some point it will go away. I don't know how long, I don't know how soon it might come back, but at some point it will go away.

So sometimes work with this in little things. You're walking and it comes up: "I've got to go have a cup of tea right now." Just explore the wanting. But if it gets stronger than the mindfulness and you go have the cup of tea, then still bring the mindfulness along and watch. Watch the whole process. It gets really interesting.

Another approach—if you've missed the feeling tone but you're already in action, which can be interesting, like me with those cookies—is to have an eye of mindfulness watching the little decisions you make throughout the day. It's fascinating to see what's motivating them. Often, not always, but often, a little decision like walking into the dining room and choosing where to sit can involve a quick sense of "oh no, unpleasant, I don't want to sit next to that person," so you go sit somewhere else. It happens so fast we don't even notice it.

Or you decide, "I want to have a cup of tea." You're in walking meditation and you notice the wanting. Stop a minute and feel what's going on. Maybe it's just wanting pleasure. But maybe there was a moment of boredom, neutral or unpleasant. Or maybe

your foot hurts. Or maybe it was just "enough of this." Or maybe the rain—my God, I can't stand it—was just an unpleasant thought. Let me go inside and have some cozy tea.

Whether you drink the tea or not, that's not the point. Watching how this process works is fascinating. To see how frequently this habit pattern operates—immediately jumping back from some subtle unpleasant feeling, not even a big deal, and going toward pleasant—reveals how deeply ingrained this is. It's just habits of mind. And you don't have to try to forcibly stop it. Just bring the mindfulness along, bring the mindfulness along.

At some point, when wisdom sees clearly—like when wisdom saw, "Oh, that's loneliness"—I didn't have to tell myself to stop eating cookies. The whole thing just fell away. It wasn't necessary anymore. The craving stops making sense in the light of wisdom in that moment. It's not something you give up as an act of will. The aversion to unpleasant feeling stops making sense too. All that aversion does is bring us into more suffering. We start to see: pleasant feeling is like this, unpleasant feeling is like that, and we can really be with it.

This is how the Buddha describes the awakened one: "When a well-taught noble disciple is touched by a painful feeling, he does not worry or grieve or lament, beat his breast or weep, nor will they be distraught. They experience one kind of feeling, a bodily one, but not a second mental one." You're pierced by a dart, but you don't shoot yourself with the second one. "Having been touched by that unpleasant, painful feeling, they do not resist and resent it." So the underlying tendency of resistance against the unpleasant does not come to underlie the mind of someone who understands this.

"Under the impact of that painful feeling, she does not proceed to enjoy sensual happiness. And why not? Because a well-taught disciple knows of an escape, discerns an escape from painful feeling tone other than by enjoying sensual happiness." So the underlying tendency to lust for the pleasant does not arise. "She knows, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings." We just know it. Unpleasant feeling comes, it comes, it goes.

You don't need to do anything about it. Pleasant feeling comes, it goes. We don't need to do anything about it. Neutral feeling comes. We actually notice it's happening. We don't need to do anything about it. It comes and goes.

So when an experience carries a pleasant feeling tone, a painful feeling tone, or a neutral one, they feel it as someone who is not bound to it, who is not joined to it. "Such a one, O bhikkhus, is called a well-taught noble disciple who is not chained by birth, by old age, by death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Such a one is not chained to suffering. This I declare."

So the same things are happening, but we experience them as not chained to them.

I want to end with the conclusion of the Buddha's instructions on being mindful of feeling tone. First, simply recognizing pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling tone. You might pick particular moments to explore this—don't go crazy looking for it every moment. Sometimes it's not the obvious thing; notice what's obvious. But sometimes when your mind is fairly calm and you explore, you can choose experiences where feeling tone is very apparent.

For example, if it's cold out and wet, and that carries an unpleasant feeling tone for you, you might simply experience it. You don't have to go stand in a downpour—I don't mean that. But just for a little while, feel the cold. And instead of lamenting and beating your breast, simply feel... unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant—just exploring the feeling tone. Then go inside where it's warm and dry and simply feel pleasant, pleasant—just exploring that. When nothing else big is going on.

So this is the Buddha: "Whatever feeling tone one feels, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, one abides contemplating impermanence in those vedanā. Contemplating, recognizing the fading away. Contemplating, recognizing the relinquishment, the not holding on, the simply letting it go." You don't put it away—it just goes. "Contemplating this, one does not cling to anything in this world. When one does not cling, one is not agitated. When one is not agitated, one personally realizes nibbāna."

Just from noticing such a simple thing, over and over.

CHAPTER 162

Courage of our Aspirations (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses a challenge familiar to all serious practitioners: how to sustain energy and commitment when practice becomes difficult. Drawing from the Saṃyutta Nikāya's description of the Third Noble Truth—"that unshakable deliverance of the heart"—she explores how aspiration (Pāli: chanda) differs fundamentally from craving. While craving focuses on results and creates suffering, true aspiration opens us to possibility without attachment to outcome, providing energy for each moment's practice.*
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> *Wilson shares the inspiring story of Jangchup Palmo, a Tibetan refugee who at age fifteen witnessed her family's death and spent years in caves around Mount Kailash practicing to develop genuine love and compassion—even toward the Chinese soldiers who had caused her such suffering. This real-life example illustrates that profound transformation is possible, though it requires sustained commitment over time. Wilson also references Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teaching that Nibbāna—the coolness of heart free from kilesa (defilements)—is available to everyone, not just monastics or ancient practitioners.*
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> *The talk addresses common experiences of "hitting the wall" in intensive practice: when concentration fluctuates, when we see our patterns with painful clarity, or when glimpses of non-clinging reveal how radical true liberation actually is. Wilson encourages practitioners to find personal sources of inspiration—teachers, practitioners, or anyone whose qualities of goodness brighten our own hearts—as resources for renewing commitment when practice feels impossible.*

What I wanted to talk about tonight is having the courage of our aspiration and how aspiration can really support us when things get difficult, should that happen.

Just noticing this point in the retreat—well into the middle—is a really interesting time. It's all interesting, but it's really like you're all cooking in different ways now. And we on the teaching side are really privileged. Some days it feels like a privilege to hear everything that's going on and see the wide variations.

The sense I get, always around this time of the retreat, is how much it varies for each person. There's a time when you might be feeling there's a lot of insight. You're really starting to see and understand things. Maybe there's a period where the sense of self

isn't so strong, or the craving is really letting go, or you're getting a sense of what simple, quiet awareness is, or whatever it is. You think you're getting some understanding. It's going.

And then the next sitting or the next day, you're back in despair. The patterns of heart and mind seem to have come back. Not only did they come back, but stronger than ever and more gripping than ever. And you're more upset about it because secretly we thought it was over. Even if we didn't think it was over, at least we thought we were getting the retreat together. And now it's gone down the toilet again. And we say, okay, just be mindful. Keep going, keep going. And you walk out thinking, yeah, thanks a lot. Don't you guys have anything helpful to offer? You just keep going and the next time it's like, wow, so amazing, so beautiful. It can change from one step to the next, right?

So how do we keep ourselves renewing, refreshing, re-energizing, recommitting over and over again in the times where it feels like it's all gone awry or it's just like, oh no, one more time. I cannot open to this self-hatred one more time.

That's what I want to talk about—really the power, the courage of aspiration. In the last couple of years in my life, there have been many ways to support our keeping going, but tuning into and consciously contemplating my own particular aspiration has been something that has been really helpful and supportive to me, so I'm sharing that aspect.

Starting with a sense of what the Buddha was teaching and offering, really tuning into the vastness of the path and the fact that he's saying it's freely offered to everyone. You know the famous phrase, *Ehi Passiko*—you too come and see. That's something he said to everyone. Not "this is how it is, you have to believe it," but "this is what I've learned. *Ehi Passiko*, you too, come and see." All are invited. Not just monastics, even though the particular way we've been offering the teachings has come from—has been kept going 2,500 years through—the monastic tradition of nuns and monks in the Southeast Asian Buddhist countries. It's not just for monastics; it's for everyone.

And what he's saying really—I just want to read this because it inspires me—is that we not sell ourselves short with what's possible. This is the Buddha talking in the Saṃyutta Nikāya about the Third Noble Truth. I'm not reading the whole thing, but just part of this particular way of describing the Third Noble Truth:

And one who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything whatever in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. This I call neither arising, nor passing away, nor standing still, nor being born, nor dying. There is neither foothold, nor development,

nor any basis. This is the end of suffering. Hence, the purpose of the holy life does not consist in acquiring alms or honor or fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the object of the holy life. That is its essence. That is its goal.

I just love that. As aspiration, not as "this is where I am now," but aspiration as really—and that's just one way of expressing it, that's what the Buddha offers. I'm not saying that's what one's aspiration should be. It's unique to each of us. But the sense of his holding that out as possibility—to me, when I feel like I'm just spinning in my stuff, or I'm on retreat too, and there are times on retreat where you're putting one foot in front of the other and going, why? What has this got to do with anything?

And just reminding myself of that potential, of aspiration.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa said—we've mentioned him before—there's a talk well-known in English-speaking countries, a translation called "Nibbana for Everyone." This was in the 1980s or early 1990s, before he died. He was speaking to Thai laypeople and saying, you know, it's come to be believed that Nibbana, freedom, is either just for very rare monks and nuns, or something that only happened back in the old days. That it has nothing to do with people now—it was a nice idea but, you know, forget about it for us. And he's saying no, Nibbana is for everyone.

The short synopsis: Nibbana means "cool." He's saying it's that state of heart, of mind that's cool from the freedom, from the coolness of no kilesa at that moment. Just a moment—and sometimes even Sayadaw U Pandita would talk about momentary freedom. A moment where we just touch the sense of what's possible when there's that real, steady mindfulness and awareness without any clinging or aversion or me-me-me-ing. And we have moments of that, just moments where we get a glimpse. Buddhadasa called it a momentary sense of the coolness of heart and mind, free from kilesa, but with mindfulness and wisdom. He says we all have many moments of that because we couldn't survive without it.

The fire of the kilesas, the burning of clinging and wanting and aversion and the endless—seemingly endless, but it's not—me-me-me-ing. Have you noticed how exhausting that is? How sometimes it really does feel like a fire? And just the sense of ease, of peace, of coolness, really, when that's gone. The word comes from really hot countries where coolness is more a sense of peace. I know in Barre right now, in Massachusetts, you talk about coolness, it might not be the best simile. But the sense of ease—just noticing that, touching it, and thinking this is the potential for everyone.

So just to bring it into the realm of reminding us why the Buddha taught, why we all are continually inspired and motivated to spend our lives both practicing and sharing this—because it's such an incredible possibility for each one of our minds and hearts, and for the world.

This sense of aspiration—talking to someone today in German, *Absicht*, that's aspiration—not a one-time decision but a really incredibly supportive, onward-leading aspect of our path, of our whole spiritual practice, which is really the path of our whole life, not just about a meditation retreat.

So I'll say a bit about aspiration and the difference between aspiration and craving, desire. We can often get confused between those two, of course. Aspiration as a wholesome sense of our deepest motivation, our deepest, really deepest purpose—I'm talking now in terms of our life, in terms of our awakening heart and mind. From this aspect, it could be many things. But it's a wholesome factor. And one can feel when it's wholesome aspiration: it has a quality of uplifting our energy, supporting our energy. It brightens our heart, our mind. It gives a sense of *ah*.

So for me, when I read what I just read from the Buddha, if it tunes into aspiration, it's a sense of *ah*—inspiration. An in-breath, filling the body, filling the mind, the heart with life, with possibility. You can feel the wholesomeness. And it gives the faith, the confidence, the energy to do. Really, the energy to drop into the next moment with total commitment.

But how it can shift, of course, to greed, to wanting—and at times it will—it feels really completely different. Because the attention starts to get focused on the result. So maybe the aspiration is for complete awakening, and that can be really inspiring, uplifting, energizing, brightening. And then another time I could read this, but the mind, the heart is a little bit—or a lot—colored by greed or self-hatred, and not quite seeing it. It's like, well, that's just hopeless. That's impossible. How far am I from that? Really far. And then the comparing comes in, and the sense of looking—one eye on the goal, or both eyes away from here. And it feels different, way different. It can be frustrating. It can be demoralizing. Or you start making the checklist: How much more do I have to do? How far have I gotten? But it's not an inspiring, onward-leading state. It's a suffering, confused state.

You can flip back and forth. Gil Fronsdal has written a little about this, and I like the way he described it.

One way aspiration becomes craving is through expectation. "I've been meditating—how far along am I? Have I gotten there yet? Am I first stage yet?" We measure ourselves through expectation. But at its best, aspiration has an openness to possibility without a need for anything to happen. To me, this is the most succinct, beautiful explanation: an openness to possibility, to the vastness of possibility, without a need for anything to happen. This is the practice in a nutshell.

This does not mean that we do not act on our aspirations, but that we do not cling to the success, to the results. There is something wonderful in a healthy aspiration that is not dependent on outcome. This isn't something we can just own, but I'm saying it to drop into our hearts and minds. You get the sense of the difference—when the aspiration is alive and yet not dependent on outcome, it gives the energy, the determination to simply take the next step.

A sense of what's really true for each of us, our deepest aspiration, our motivation—I've found for myself, and talking and reading with many other people too, it's not so much something that comes through thinking about what it should be. As soon as there's a "should" in there, it's not really quite the thing. Whatever is a deep aspiration for you tends to arise in an intuitive kind of way. I feel it could come up in the heart, in the mind, often in the silence, in the stillness of heart, in a contented mind. That can happen on retreat, though it doesn't have to be on retreat. But not when we're in the midst of trying and wanting and comparing and doing—just when there's a stillness to get more in touch with ourselves. I'm sure many, if not all of you, are familiar with that.

And what it is for you could be whatever it is—to cultivate compassion, to completely awaken, to be a better person. There's no right or wrong about this. But taking the time from time to time, or just having it in the back of your mind, notice if and when something like that arises. And don't let your little personality trap you into thinking, "Oh no, that's not possible for me. Who do you think you are? This is an ego trip." When the vast, powerful depth of a deep aspiration arises, don't dismiss it.

Say, take what the Buddha says—this unshakable heart, this unshakable mind. Say that arises as an aspiration. I know in my mind the next thought could quite possibly be, "Yeah, right, fat chance." Or, "You think so? Who do you think you are? Maybe the Buddha." That's just the old habits talking. Blah, blah, blah—thank you very much. It's just thoughts arising. But the sense of the power, the depth, the beauty of whatever aspiration comes for you—I feel it's so uplifting, so onward-leading, and so important to honor that, really. To let it in. It's really beyond the personal, you know. It's the personal

that thinks, "Oh no, it couldn't be possible." But that quality, whatever it is that comes up for you—just let it in. Let it sit there. And as best you can, simply honor it without putting it down, without going into personal stories.

Sometimes the aspiration can be inspired. For me, it sometimes came from reading the Buddha. But sometimes it comes from talking to someone else who's experiencing inspiration, or hearing about someone else. So I want to share a story of a woman, because this is actually what made me want to talk about this tonight.

Some days ago I was talking to a friend, a long-term meditator and practitioner. She has been involved for many years in what's called the Tibet Oral History Project, which interviews elderly Tibetan refugees, gathering whole stories of their lives. Some of them are available on the web. She had told me about this some years previously and had shared a particular story—she'd actually sent me the whole interview.

When we were talking the other day, she just kind of burst out again, remembering this woman she had interviewed: Jang Chup Palmo. The depth of her wisdom, the simplicity of her kindness and love and caring for everyone around her, the incredible suffering she'd been through and the practice in her life—it was so inspiring to my friend. And remember, my friend had met this person in person just a few years ago. This is a real, living person, which sometimes is so much more immediate. You might think, "Well, the Buddha, okay, but that was 2,600 years ago—maybe things have changed." But the profoundness, the depth of her wisdom, what she'd gone through, and here she is sitting there, this really loving, simple person caring for everyone.

She said, "That really inspired me. Why settle for less? Why settle for less?" You know, it's really possible.

So I'm going to share this story, because my friend inspired me—she who was inspired by this woman. It's a long story, so I'll just give you a brief synopsis.

Jangchup Palmo was born in Tibet in 1943 to a nomadic family, fairly well-to-do at that time. When she was about fifteen, after the Chinese had been in the country for a few years but when they started to really destroy the monasteries, she and her family and village were all trying to flee to India, as so many did. They got involved in a firefight with some of the Chinese army. Most of the relatives she was with—her parents and siblings—were killed. And she was shot; she had several bullet wounds in her legs and arms. She was fifteen at this time.

She was captured and taken—not really to a jail camp, but to a sort of house arrest. They took care of her and treated her wounds. But she was so determined; she wanted to escape so that she could practice the Dharma. Her family had been quite religious,

quite involved with Buddhist practice, knowing many lamas, and she herself had been quite spiritual from a young age. She very much couldn't practice where she was, and she wanted to say prayers for her dead relatives and simply practice the Dharma.

After a couple of different attempts, finally when she was sixteen and had more or less healed from her leg wounds, she managed to escape with one other person. This is in Tibet, in the winter. They managed to escape and flee. It's a whole long story—I'm cutting this short. Through the winter, falling in icy ponds, not having any food, going over passes, encountering others who would support them. One woman took them to her house and completely gave them food for the journey and ways to carry it. Finally she and this other woman managed to escape. They traveled for one year—one year walking around Tibet with nothing, escaping from the Chinese.

They got to Mount Kailash. And when they arrived, she began really wanting to do practice. After a while, her friend said, "It's too much. I'm too cold, there's not enough food, I really can't stay." She said, "Of course, fine, go on your way." But she really wanted to stay at Mount Kailash and practice. Now she's sixteen, seventeen at this point.

So she starts doing full-length prostrations around Mount Kailash, going on and on, taking weeks and months—just storing a little tsampa and then doing prostrations, going back and getting the food. She's doing this, living in caves for some time, really trying to purify her heart and mind so she can say prayers for her dead relatives.

At this point, she met a couple of lamas who came—realized beings. They were talking to her, asking, "What are you doing?" She described her practice, how she was trying to practice to be enlightened and also to say prayers for her parents. She said, "I felt agonized by the thought that the Chinese had caused us suffering and killed without reason, yet I continued to practice."

The lama asked her, "How do you perceive the Chinese?"

She said, "Well, to be honest, I perceive the Chinese as enemies. They caused me so much harm, and I believe that they're enemies."

He said, "You are doing a great deal of practice, but you know it's necessary to have love and compassion. If you continue to perceive the Chinese as enemies, this does not conform with the Buddha Dharma. You really will never achieve complete enlightenment as long as that's how you are perceiving the Chinese." The lama told her, "If you practice this—love and compassion—the enemy will not be the enemy but like your relatives. If you can love the enemy without any degree of difference, if you can learn to feel no difference, this is what you need for practice."

She, of course, had great faith—she'd been brought up in great faith. So she really took it in and vowed to this Rinpoche, "Yes, I really will practice. I want to do this."

So she's staying now around Mount Kailash for years and years, practicing, just living in caves. There's nowhere else to live.

And she said, I put in tremendous effort to learn. I practiced again and again, really hard. I exercised the practice again and again, even while eating, and finally with the Lama's blessing, and doing pilgrimage and prostrations around the mountain, meditating, and putting in every effort I could, really focusing single-mindedly on this—this coming to love and compassion. I couldn't do it for almost two years.

So I'm thinking, only two years? She couldn't do it? It improved a bit. Then a little bit more. But the thought kept returning—the thought of the Chinese as enemies. So she kept practicing while at Mount Kailash.

And we think, you know—I think, I don't know what you think—but I think, okay, I've been doing metta for a couple of weeks, and I still don't quite love myself. She spent at least seven years there, practicing, practicing, practicing, with this sincere devotion, but also the honesty of seeing. So how do you find the energy? How do you find the determination? How do you find the inspiration to keep going? This is what inspires me.

She said, I lived at Mount Kailash for many years, practicing Dharma. There was no place to sleep except in caves. And so the interviewer is asking her—she'd been living in the States for many years at the point of this interview—and the interviewer says, after spending seven years, can you help us understand what did you come to understand from that? And she says, if one practices diligently, it certainly is possible to realize enlightenment and help sentient beings. And those two are like conjoined.

But this is what she's saying now, how she is now. The essence of practice: I treat everyone with love. When people appreciate it, there is joy all around. That's the result of practicing the Dharma. However, you may not be able to practice love and compassion as the Dharma teaches all at once. Just know a moment of peace, the possibility.

She says, I do my Dharma practice. I continue to do my Dharma practice that has brought me so much positive results. However, since I live in constant touch with human beings, these days I strive to bring happiness and peace to the people, try to alleviate their suffering and multiply their joy and do whatever I can to help people. That is my work.

That's what I teach people in ordinary words—to love your parents and your family and then spread out to your community and spread out to the country. And then she's really working on developing love and peace between countries. To speak in terms of the Dharma teachings, you must really practice for years and years, which is difficult.

This is a real person. I think she's passed away now, but I got the transmission from talking to my friend, and this kind of thing is like, oh, okay. This is possible. It's possible, and if the mind isn't covered with klesha at the moment, that sense of possibility, of potential—if that's what speaks to you—can really bring an energy of willingness. Not the grasping to be like her, but as she says, okay, years of practice. Can I just open into this moment as it is?

That's really how the aspiration can support us. Not in looking forward, but in really moment to moment mindful awareness—what's happening now—to meet it with fullness of attention, the kindness that comes with a compassionate awareness, and no expectation. Each moment is like an opening into the unknown. We have no idea what way each of our paths is going to take.

And even though I doubt most of us have the degree of physical suffering that she went through, we all have our own particular difficulties and sufferings and joys in our life. It's another kind of personality thing to say, well, my suffering isn't that much, so it's nothing, and push it away. Whatever suffering is occurring, that's the place where compassion and wisdom can land and grow.

So it's like opening into the unknown. I need the aspiration to give me the faith and the courage to keep doing that, moment after moment after moment. And as I said in the beginning of the talk, certainly for me, I think for most people on retreat—and I'm mostly talking about being on retreat here just because that's where we are—we keep on coming to places where it's difficult, no?

I call it, sometimes it feels like hitting the wall. You're going and going and going, and suddenly it's like, oh no. We hit the wall in so many different kinds of ways, and some walls are harder than others. Sometimes the wall is just a little bit of foam, and you just kind of bounce and can keep on going. Sometimes the wall is really solid brick, and you run into it at full speed, and it's like, whack. "I can't keep going, I'm out of here."

And it almost doesn't matter what the particular content is, although there are different contents. It's just that sense of being thrown back. How do I find the trust and the energy to just open again, land again in this moment?

Ajahn Sumedho gives this teaching—I think people have mentioned it—where he's talking about being in Thailand when he was practicing as a monk in the hot season, and it's really hot, and these little kutis, these little huts with a tin roof. Have you ever been under a tin roof when it's like a hundred and ten degrees out? Man, you cook. This is from personal experience. You cook. And he says he's sitting in there just sweating through his robes, just sweating through his robes. "I cannot bear this one more moment." Have you ever had that feeling—about whatever? He said, "And then I would find that I could."

I love that. I use that so often. "This is just unbearable." And then my mind would go, "Yeah, what's actually unbearable?" And that's not like a snide comment—it's a real inquiry: what's actually unbearable about this? And usually I find it's just that there was a moment of aversion, just saying I don't feel like being here anymore, basically. Then I found that I could.

So there are different ways we hit the wall. I just want to mention a couple of them. There are many more. Just maybe so you know you're not alone, although maybe nobody here will have experienced any of these, in which case I'm just revealing myself. But I tend to doubt that.

One way is simply how impermanence manifests in relation to either the technique of our practice or what's arising in the sitting and the walking—how impermanence manifests, and we don't see it as impermanence, as causes and conditioning changing. We take it personally. If you've ever noticed, when things are smooth, you're with the breath and it's quiet and subtle, it's pretty effortless, there's not much clinging, you think, "Yeah, this is now how it is. This is really how it is." And you go out to walk or you come to another sitting and the mind is just all over the place and there's nothing but thinking. And we think, "What did I do wrong?" Right? Isn't that what we think? "What did I do wrong?"

There's a sutta from the time of the Buddha I like a lot in this regard, with a monk called Asaji who had been really ill and probably on the verge of dying. But he had been practicing a long time and had strong practice, and so the Buddha came and was talking to him. Asaji was sick, afflicted, gravely ill. But he was very troubled. He's saying to the Buddha, "I'm very troubled by regret, by remorse." And the Buddha says, "Why? Have you done unskillful things? Have you done unwholesome things? Have you had bad virtue?" And he said, "No, not at all." So the Buddha said, "So what's bothering you, basically?"

And Asaji says, "Well, formerly, Venerable, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations. I could calm the body with concentration, with samādhi. But now I cannot achieve concentration. I cannot calm the bodily formations with concentration. Now I think, oh no, let me not fall away." Oh no, I can't get concentrated anymore, I'm losing it. Does that sound familiar to anybody?

And the Buddha basically said, "Asaji, haven't I said over and over that the conditions coming together give rise to the results, and when the conditions change, the result will change?" Formally, you could attain concentration. He's basically saying—okay, this is my synopsis—"Asaji, you're gravely ill. You're dying. The conditions for concentration arising do not exist."

But in my teaching, concentration is not the essence. The essence is insight, the path and the fruit. He's actually saying, don't glom onto that and get all upset because the conditions have changed.

But I like this story because that's just what we do, you know? "Oh no, it's gone. It was all about this."

So that's one way. Just noticing that when things change, instead of taking it personally, notice how the conditions have changed. Oh, it's like this now. We need some inspiration, some trust, some faith sometimes to do that—not to get sucked into our personal story of "I blew it, I'm not good enough, what am I doing wrong?"

Another way this shows up is not just when things change, but when we're really seeing things clearly and it seems like so much that we feel, "I can't see this anymore." Often around this point in retreat, people start saying, "I'm seeing so much clinging—it feels like every single moment, what I see is clinging." Or another person will say that about aversion. Or someone will say it about conceit, or just the sense of self: "It's here all the time, every single moment."

And we'll say, "Oh yeah, great, that's great, you're seeing it." But it feels unbearable, right? "I can't bear to keep seeing this anymore." It doesn't even feel like insight anymore. It just wears us down.

Even though I always say it's true, it's not complete. We haven't quite seen it so clearly before, so when we start to see it clearly, it stands out—that's all we see. Sense of self arising about every single little thing. "Oh my God, I never saw it before." So it really stands out. It's true, but it isn't complete. It's a little bit magnified—or a lot magnified—because of what Sayadaw U Tejaniya said that I love: concentration magnifies experience. And the kilesas exaggerate.

Put those two together, and that's when we go wild with yogi mind, right? When something that's just a small thing becomes huge.

So something that's really an insight—seeing sense of self arising, or how much clinging there is, or how every little thing can seem like clinging—that's really useful insight, seeing how subtle and how frequently it arises. It's magnified through the stillness of some concentration. Even those of you who think you have no concentration—that's because you have some idea what it should look like. But there's some stillness, some steadiness in the mind. Otherwise you couldn't even sit here for forty-five minutes without going nuts.

So we're seeing it with concentration. But if there's a little bit of aversion or a little bit of selfing, that's the kilesa that magnifies it further. And that's when it's like, "Oh my God, I've hit the wall. I can't look at this one more time."

For me, that's when I can call up the aspiration. Okay, I don't know where it's going, but there's the trust to just drop in. Okay, I can't bear it. And then I found that I could. Just this moment—not the whole future, not the whole past—just this moment.

Or when we see our bad habits, our unpleasant habits of mind, and the patterns that have been difficult, and we're seeing them really clearly but with insight. We say, "Oh, I always get reactive in this situation, and I see how that's driven," and we really understand it. And we have this sense: maybe it's not going to happen so much anymore. Do we really have that hope? First it's a belief, then it's a hope. And then we see it not only happening—with awareness it's happening, so it's more painful. And then we act on it again, still, with awareness.

And we're thinking... do you know what I mean? You can watch yourself doing the unskillful thing, which is actually better than doing it without awareness. Even the Buddha said that. But it's more painful. That's why it's better.

Because... no. I know. That sounds sadistic. It's not. Really.

It's wisdom that abandons the unskillful patterns. It's not an act of personal will. But when we're acting in unskillful ways and the awareness is coming along, we go, "Oh wow. Eating that seventeenth orange, like I mentioned the other time—that actually isn't really bringing happiness. Maybe I don't need to do that." And that puts it down. Wisdom puts it down. But the wisdom has to kind of come along to see how the suffering is being created through the wanting and the aversion.

When we don't see that, that's again like hitting a wall. Not only are my patterns still here, they're worse. I'm more neurotic than when I started. And it's like, what's the point? That's another place where we hit the wall.

Just one other thing I want to mention. Sometimes when we're really opening into new insights, perceptions maybe we haven't had before, or not in the same depth—maybe really an intimation of what non-clinging, what the heart-mind of non-clinging could really be like in a moment. Or an intimation of really the sense of self, the sense of thing, just kind of not arising. You know how sometimes fear will come when there's that little sense of "oh, it could be possible." And that's okay. Fear just comes. That's nothing personal. It's just a habit. That's not what I'm calling hitting the wall.

But sometimes, at different times, you can get a sense of intimation. "Oh, non-clinging is really... the liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging is really radical." It's uncompromising. It's not, "I let go of clinging to anything except this one particular thing I still get to hang onto." It's not like we can abandon all the unpleasant experiences but still feel personally gratified by the pleasant ones.

I remember one retreat, I was suddenly realizing awareness really wasn't picking up the unpleasant—aversion wasn't coming—but the pleasant ones would come in and it was kind of like, "Oh, let's land in that one." That's still... you don't get to have it both ways, you know?

So sometimes there can be, at least for me, I've noticed an intimation: "Oh, so liberation means even that. I don't even get to hold on personally even to that, whatever it might be." And there can just be this little sense of "I don't know if I want to go there." And that's because it's some idea we have. We don't really know, but it's like, "Oh."

So I've noticed for myself, it's like a sense of wanting to go back to the pleasure garden. You know, the Buddha was brought up in all these pleasure gardens and everything, and he left and went on his quest. But sometimes we're out there and we think, "Oh, I just would like to go back, just for a little bit, to the pleasure garden." It's not like we're abandoning all pleasant experience, but the pleasure garden is that sense of feeling fulfilled by it.

Talking to someone today—and I feel that myself—sometimes I wish I could just go back to thinking, "Oh, if I could just go see that movie, it's really going to do it for me." And I'm going to still go see the movie, but we know it doesn't really do it for us.

So this kind of... Chögyam Trungpa called it "a nostalgia for samsara." Yeah, that's a great line, isn't it?

I've felt this sometimes in my practice, at different times, where there's a particular personality pattern or some way I've perceived myself that I wasn't even aware of. And it just becomes clear. It just comes up and it's so obvious, and something about it is just dissipating, going away. And there's a sense of a small death of some idea of myself that isn't even particularly pleasant, but it's comfortable. There's almost a sense of grief or mourning for the passing of some sense of myself—which is just an idea, because that sense of yourself doesn't really go very far. But you start to see through it. And so sometimes that's like, "Ah."

No more. But, you know, we never just stay in one place. You can notice when that's a funny kind of hitting the wall—*okay, I think I'll stop for a while. I don't want to give that up.* But that's just a momentary thought, an idea. As Buddhadasa says, Nibbana is for everyone. And it's demanding for all of us. It's challenging for all of us. We're all going to face, to meet many, many really difficult, confusing moments on our path of awakening.

And these are, in some ways, really important and valuable moments on our path. Because this is where we're really up against the belief systems we maybe don't know we have, or the areas we've gotten comfortable in but that are really keeping us in our little cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, our little cage of what we believe is possible for this personality, maybe without even realizing it. And it's not like we have to break the cage—we just have to see, *oh, that's an idea.* Bring in whatever inspires you. That's an idea of what's actually just happening now. The idea can hang around there, but just drop into what's happening now.

It's impossible not to come up against this. And our path is lifelong and all-inclusive. It includes not just being on retreat—everything in our life, all aspects of our life. Freedom from clinging is uncompromising. Really, there's no part left out.

And I believe that with our most sincere intentions and aspirations, and everything we read and talk about and hear from other people, our minds, our thinking minds, can't really imagine what that would be like. We can only imagine a kind of takeoff from what we already know. I know in my mind I want to know something ahead of time—peaceful, nice, we use all these pleasant words—but we don't really know. We don't know what to aim for. We want a sense of what awakening is going to be like, something I can compare to now that keeps me going, but the only thing I can say about awakening in words is really freedom of heart and mind, freedom of mind from non-clinging. Real awakening is not going to be some state that confirms us and makes us

feel all comfortable and secure. It's not going to make us feel good, because it's the sense of *us* that gets seen through. But from the sense of me trying to understand, that's the only way we can think about it.

So along the way, at different times, we're really inspired, really energized. Beautiful things happen, really amazing insights. The heart develops, we're open, we feel love, we feel compassion, we see the change. And then at other times, we're really challenged. All of our views and assumptions—and the ones we don't even know we have—are going to get challenged. It can get to where I love it, usually, when all of a sudden I think I'm really ill at ease and then go, *oh, that's how I thought things were.* That's the view in the background that is running the show right now. Oh, great. Great to see that. It's not how it is.

So to me, this is really why we need to keep finding, in each of our own ways, the energy, the commitment, the determination, the aspiration to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. One moment, one moment, opening to what is without needing to know what it's going to be like, where it's going to go, how our life is going to unfold.

In terms of aspiration, I want to offer this: find for yourself not only what aspiration comes up for you, but explore—and probably you already know for yourself—what helps you in the times of difficulty, or when it's just dry, or when you've lost touch with that inspiration. Find ways to reconnect with what keeps you going.

For me, one of the reasons I read the story about the Tibetan woman is because it really gets me back in touch with inspiration, with aspiration. And for me, calling to heart, to mind, various people, beings that I know—they don't have to be completely awakened, but they may manifest different aspects of beautiful qualities that brighten the heart and mind. And the way it works is that aspect of that person wakes up that same aspect in our own heart and mind. Finding that connection, different people—like I thought today of this monk I know in Burma. I've known him for about fifteen years. He's just a very simple, peaceful guy, U Jayanta, very mettā-filled. And he's just looked the same for fifteen years.

I don't know, he doesn't look a day older. We go to visit him every year when we're there, and he's just simple and friendly. You feel metta and peace in his very simple monastery up in the Sagaing Hills. I have a picture of him. He doesn't say much—it's not like you get this deep wisdom—but you get metta and peace and love. It's just who he is. I get chills when I think about him. And that's because if I couldn't access that in my own heart-mind stream, it wouldn't inspire me. So when you think of other people that bring whatever aspect alive in you, realize that it's coming alive in you.

I know lots of different nuns in Burma because I go there every year. There are many, many women in Burma who are nuns. And it's not that they're all really super awakened. Being a nun has been one of the not-so-many avenues, especially in the past though it's changing a little now, for women who weren't married or didn't have kids to live a safe and healthy life. And many of the nuns also take in poor orphan girls, or girls whose parents or the monk in their home village have asked the nuns to take because they're very poor, or they only have one parent, or they can't really get an education where they live and the nuns can help them go to school. So a lot of the nunneries function as a kind of safety net for poor young girls.

These nuns—I can think of a lot of them, but I'll just tell you about one. Many of them don't all do what we think of as intensive meditation practice, although some have that deep aspiration. But what many of the nuns do as their practice is Buddhānussati, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha. They do this with chanting and contemplation, every day, every day. And you can feel it brings them really deep faith, a deep kind of inspiration that shines out of them and gives them the energy to do what is often quite a hard life, quite a demanding life.

One nun became a nun when she was sick in her twenties and almost dying. Her parents were about to sell their last things, give their last money to support her and get doctors. And she said, "Forget it, I'm going to become a nun instead, so you don't have to give up your whole farm." She became a nun and she had so much faith that it healed her. This was about not quite twenty years ago. It healed her, and then her sister also became a nun. They came to Rangoon, really excited to become deep meditation nuns. They went to a meditation center, and this is really what they wanted to do.

Then there was a big cyclone in their home village down in the Delta, and the Sayadaw, the head monk of the village, sent them maybe ten or fifteen young girls to take care of. This is very common. So they had to do a complete 180-degree turn. This is Daw Uttara, that's her name. A 180-degree turn—they left the meditation monastery, found some little piece of land that they had to raise money to buy, built a little shacky bamboo hut, and started taking care of these little girls. The girls become nuns, and they all live on donations, alms food, money for their clothes. They're completely dedicated to taking care of these little girls.

So this is a twenty-year project. Their lives just turned around completely. They're totally doing it with complete love and tenderness. I've visited them every year for about the last nine years, and you can see the little girls growing. New ones come, of

course—it never really ends. But the tenderness, the care, the love, the friendliness—it's not like, "Oh, we've got to do this and then we're going to go meditate." This is now their practice. And the faith and love just shines out.

They still say, "When the girls are grown, if they don't want to stay nuns, great. But we've given them a grounding in morality, in how to live a good life." They help them go to school, and the schools, by the way, are run by other nuns who have devoted their whole lives to starting these schools, because a lot of poor kids can't afford the government school fees. And so they're helping these kids with all the love in their heart, and this is their dharma practice. They still say, "And then when the girls are gone, we'll go back and do our meditation."

So I think of Daw Uttara. She really inspires me too, with this sense of deep faith, and that you turn around and what life presents you becomes the practice of compassion and awakening.

So that's one way. Find in your own life, maybe a picture, someone you know. I was just talking to James, and he says he gets all teary about Audrey Hepburn. She really inspires him. It could be anybody who has particular qualities of goodness that come out for you. This is just who I happen to know that brings it out for me. It doesn't have to be Buddhist, it doesn't have to be holy—it's just whatever brings out these qualities and you can feel it touches your energy, your aspiration.

So find your own inspiration.

Thank you very much. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the essence of the holy life.

CHAPTER 163

Investigating Dosa with Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this retreat talk from Spirit Rock, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of dosa—the Pāli term for aversion, hatred, and ill will—as one of the three unwholesome roots (akusala-mūla) that cause suffering. Drawing from decades of personal practice and teaching, she examines the wide spectrum of mental states that share dosa's essential quality of pulling away from experience: from obvious states like anger and rage to subtler manifestations such as boredom, disappointment, self-judgment, and fear.*
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> *Wilson explains how dosa functions through the process of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination): when unpleasant feeling (vedanā) arises at a sense door and goes unrecognized, the mind reflexively pulls back, creating a gap where proliferation (papañca) floods in with stories, memories, and reactive patterns. She emphasizes that this pulling away distorts perception—we literally cannot see clearly when ill will is present, as the Buddha taught. The talk offers practical approaches for working with dosa through satipaññā (mindfulness-wisdom), including meeting experience directly at the sense door, recognizing when awareness needs refreshing rather than forcing attention on overwhelming states, and understanding that each moment of tender awareness without reactivity is itself the cultivation of compassion.*
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> *Particularly valuable is Wilson's discussion of self-judgment as a form of dosa, often arising from unexamined views of perfectionism, and her teaching that compassion naturally emerges from being willing to meet our own suffering honestly. She concludes with a moving story illustrating how facing our fears transforms into genuine connection with others' pain.*

So what Sally was so subtly alluding to is what I'm going to talk about tonight: exploring the three unwholesome roots that the Buddha speaks of all the time—really the cause of our suffering in our minds and hearts on a moment-to-moment basis. Tonight I want to offer some thoughts about exploring one of them: dosa. You know, that moment when you want to throw something against the wall—that's the moment of dosa.

I really want to talk about it in terms of inviting us to explore how this root arises and functions in our moment-to-moment experience. I'm going to be speaking mostly from a being-in-retreat point of view, because retreat gives us, as we know, the stillness and opportunity to explore sometimes on a less complex level how this root—how

everything—functions in our mind. This talk is by no means comprehensive because there's so much to say, but I wanted to share different aspects from a lifelong exploration of this particular root in this particular mind-body system.

Dosa is often translated as hatred, and we often talk about it as aversion, but it has a whole wide range of different moods or mental states that partake of its particular function. I made a list of some of them, just so you can start to feel the common flavor: hatred, aversion, ill will, irritation, boredom, frustration, disappointment, impatience, denial, resistance, self-judgment, grief, despair, sorrow, depression, guilt, shame, anger, rage, aggression, regret, hostility, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror.

Feeling better now?

You see, some are really very intense emotional states that, when we're not aware of them or when they're stronger than our mindfulness, can lead into unwholesome speech and action that bring harm to ourselves and others. Obviously, this is suffering. Some are perhaps more subtle but pervasive—like background states of heart and mind that we may not quite recognize are present, but they're still having the effect of coloring and distorting our perception. The suffering aspect of dosa is rooted in the fact that when it's present, we don't perceive ourselves, others, or reality accurately. I talked about this in the very beginning with Right View. Once perception is inaccurate, it gets fed by more dosa-thoughts, and we get farther and farther from what's really true. Our actions and speech can cause ourselves and others more harm, more suffering.

I want to talk about dosa tonight not to say that aversion and all these things are bad and we should get over them now—that we have to purify our mind and these states are bad, so stop it. That's just meeting dosa with more dosa. It doesn't work. This is really an invitation, with a wise attitude of interest, to not take it personally but to truly explore how these particular mental states act in the mind. How do they create more suffering in our own experience and for others?

This interest becomes possible in the moments when we recognize that dosa is a conditioned habit, a human experience—not just me being a bad person. The other side of being a bad person is really reveling in the anger or self-righteousness, thinking, "Yes, this is the right thing." I'll talk a little bit about that too. But really seeing this as just part of the human condition is essential.

In most cases, dosa and aversion are more obviously suffering states to us than greed or delusion. We tend to notice them more quickly. And when we're acting from them, we tend to get more feedback from other people—they don't like us so much. That feedback can further feed the dosa if it's going into self-judgment. Even though

dosa may be more obviously a suffering state than greed or delusion until we explore them, that doesn't make it easier to understand. So just to have this interest to explore and not take it personally—that's so huge.

I remember for myself, quite some years ago now, having an aversive tendency doesn't mean you go around being angry all the time. As I mentioned when discussing the brahma viharas, there can be a habit of mind that just tends to notice the unpleasant first. That's simply the habit. Another habit might notice pleasant first, and another doesn't really notice much of anything—greed, hatred, delusion, as tendencies.

I had been branded while on staff at IMS as "clearly the aversive type," to which my first response was, "I don't like that." Then we'd just joke about it: "Yeah, Carol's the aversive type, Joseph's the greed type, Sharon's the deluded type." Because it's true—people tend to respond differently to these. No one goes around to Joseph saying, "Oh, you're so greedy." I just have to look cross-eyed and people say, "Oh yeah, you're such an aversive type."

But I didn't realize that when little aversion would come up in my mind, there was a kind of subtle sense of not quite wanting to see it—taking it more personally than other experiences that arise. I remember one time I was with a particular teacher, not even a Buddhist teacher, and everything was just arising in the space of awareness, to use the language we're using here. Whatever was coming, no problem. Then a really aversive thought came up. And I saw in that moment that it just came and went like everything else—because it was just another thought.

Wow.

Aversion is just another arising mental state, just like anything else. And I had been really identifying with it, making it more of a thing, which actually prevents clear seeing. So that was a really freeing moment. I'm just offering that in terms of the space we can bring to explore this, or anything else that's difficult in our experience.

So the first thing I want to say, talking about the moment-to-moment level that we can at times explore here—and it may seem very subtle and precise, but it's still the same way our heart and mind functions in more complex situations in our daily life—is what's going on in a moment of dosa.

The whole dependent origination: there's contact, feeling, unpleasant feeling arises, and as we've talked about, the habit of mind really is the dosa of unpleasant. The habit is to go into dosa if we don't see it clearly—aversion or fear, just to say it that way, with all the ramifications.

How that functions is: in a moment there's unpleasant, whatever the sense contact is, and the dosa just pulls back, just doesn't want to connect in a way. I'm personifying it, but it's like, "This is unpleasant," and there's just a pulling back, like a knee-jerk reaction. So there's a disconnect in that moment. The attention, the awareness, just isn't really landing wholly in whatever the experience is. It could just be an unpleasant sound—it doesn't have to be anything dramatic. It just pulls back.

And in that response of pulling back, first, whatever is occurring that's unpleasant—that pulling back of dosa is occurring in response to a sense contact that's happening right now. Right now. So even if there's a thought, a really painful memory of ten years ago, and it shoots into all the memories and it's really painful—it's shame or it's fear or whatever—because of the pulling back and the not recognizing accurately, the awareness may not actually recognize that it's something occurring now that's unpleasant, that's giving rise to that dosa reaction.

We go off, because there's that gap. This is the gap between dosa and becoming. But it's not the gap that's freeing—it's the gap of delusion, the gap of disconnect. And in that comes flooding, because the mind is so fast: thoughts and memories and emotions and reactions and a whole story, so quick that we may not even be able to find our way back to what's the sense contact that triggered it.

But even if, say, shame—just pick shame, that's a huge one, really difficult to land in and feel—even with all the stories, the memory is a thought that's occurring now. The shame that's being felt is a physical, mental experience that's occurring now. The content may be about the past and about our whole life, or it may be about the future. Fear projects into the future: "It's going to feel like this forever, I'm going to keep acting like this forever." And you see how we're in the story in no time.

We may be aware that it's shame, that it's fear, but because the tendency is to jump away from the contact, it may be that without steady sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, we may not recognize: "Oh, this memory is a thought arising now." And mindfulness can just meet that thought arising now. This shame is a feeling arising now. Sometimes if mindfulness is balanced enough, we can meet that thought arising now.

I don't know if this seems simplistic or unworkable, but to me this has been incredibly freeing and useful. Because when I get all involved in my daily life in some really suffering dynamic, and I'm trying to figure it out and think it through, I go, "What's happening now?" I just relax into the present moment, not looking for an intellectual answer. What's happening now? And I may just feel something in the pit of my stomach.

Couldn't even name what it is. You don't need to. It's difficult, unpleasant, whatever. Mindfulness just can be with that for that moment. And then it moves into whatever happens next.

So this is where we cut through all the papañca to see: whatever it is, it's being triggered by something occurring now, because that's all there is. Past and future are thoughts. But it really is amazing when we can watch how quickly everything can flow into that little quick gap of pulling away.

A simple example—I'm making this up. There's some unpleasant sound. You're sitting in the hall and there's some sound from a person, and it's unpleasant. You don't quite notice "hearing, unpleasant." The mind immediately does that pulling away when we don't quite notice it.

And that reminds me of my father. Maybe that's not even clear—there's just a feeling of my father. He used to do that. I remember all the times he used to do that. And it was unpleasant, and we'd get in these arguments, and he didn't respect me, and nobody respects me. And in two seconds, it's down the road—not recognizing sati right at that sense door. Maybe I'm aware of the story, but maybe I'm not quite in touch with the resentment or the aversion that's fueling each new thought and each new memory. I'm not quite present with each thought and memory. And pretty soon it's amazing how fast the mind moves. We're in a whole storm of resentment and all the times that I wasn't respected, back through my life.

Sometimes we can bring mindfulness to that and actually it unwraps a whole—it allows to arise a whole personal insight into habits that have developed in our life, and we really see it in a purifying kind of way. You all know what I mean. But that feels different, because at some point your attention lands in the middle of that process and you're no longer fighting it. You just go, "Oh, wow, no wonder I feel disrespected. That's how it all worked. That's how it is." We don't spin on it anymore. We're just seeing how it is.

But when we don't recognize, we can get into a whole cycle of judgment or fear. Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it like we're a cow chewing the cud. We get all upset about something—that sound, my father, the past—and then it passes. And then we think, "Yeah, that sound, that really bugged me. And that's because..." It's like we regurgitate the cud and chew it some more. Let's just chew over that unpleasant thought one more time. Some of you have mentioned noticing how the mind does this when things get calm. Nothing's happening now, so let's just call up that unpleasant experience that happened and really think about it some more. That's when you know—the Buddha

said puthujjanas, the unenlightened worldlings, are mad. We're crazy. As Buddhadasa says, who wants to volunteer for suffering? "Me! Things are calm. Let's get all activated."

We don't always do it a lot. It's just that we pull away.

One of the significant things about when dosa is coloring and distorting the citta is that we don't recognize accurately what is occurring. This is really one of the biggest suffering aspects of it. The Buddha says a similar thing about greed and about delusion too. I'm just reading the one about dosa: "Again, Brahman, when one dwells with a mind—which is citta, mind-heart—obsessed and oppressed by ill will, by dosa, one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, arisen dosa. On that occasion, one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

I have taken this so much to heart—to really just notice. Whether there's greed or dosa or confusion, as soon as you can even notice it's tinging the perception—maybe it's huge, you know you're in total rage. That's not rocket science. You can tell rage is going on. You may not be mindful, but you can tell rage is going on. Or it may be more subtle disappointment. But as soon as you keep recognizing that this quality is present in the citta, in the heart-mind right now, and you can tell you're not really quite able to be mindful of it, that it's distorting things, then you know: you can't really trust whatever assessment or evaluation thoughts are making then.

You just can't trust it. Is it right? Is it wrong? You can't trust it because the perception is distorted by risen ill will, by risen greed. As the Buddha says, you just can't see your own good or the good of another or of both.

And even more, you can see sometimes how dosa in the mind really distorts the actual perception. It's not uncommon when you're really in a negative mood, or really particularly angry at a person, and you look at that person—they look more ugly. You know what I mean? Or you look at yourself and you look more ugly. When there's that pulling away, the dosa coming in, every time the sound comes it's louder and louder, more and more obnoxious.

I'd forgotten this, but once I was on a long retreat at IMS and the radiators there in the winter would make these pinging sounds. They'd been doing that forever. I'd lived there for years. This was not new information or a new experience. But one day—one of those days when you kind of know there's dosa in the mind but not quite, when suddenly your body hurts, everything hurts, nothing works, the pillow's too hard although

it's been fine for three weeks, the people next to you are disgusting even though you loved them yesterday, the food is repulsive—and it takes a while to notice that maybe there's a lens going on here. It really takes a while.

So this was a day like that. And then the radiator sounds literally started to sound like little explosions. A little explosion and I'd jump, and there'd be so much negative, unpleasant feeling radiating out of that. And then the next radiator sound would be even more of an explosion. It just builds and builds when we're not aware. You might have a sort of mindfulness—you kind of know it's there—but there's still this pulling away, which can manifest as blame, aggression, or it can manifest as fear, which is like retreating dosa, retreating aversion. But it can literally distort perception, and then that will distort our judgment.

The only escape we know is to escape from unpleasant feeling by getting the hell out of there. If the best you can do is have a pleasant fantasy, you'll do that. But if there's something else available, you'll get out of there—or do whatever you can to avoid the unpleasant feeling that's giving rise to dosa. And because we're not seeing the dosa, we can't see clearly.

A friend of mine told me a story from her daily life a few years ago. She was in Massachusetts and was just beginning to teach Dharma some weekends. A very close friend she didn't see often invited her to come teach a weekend quite a few states away. The fact was that my friend was really busy, and to drive down to this state and teach this weekend would have been very difficult and exhausting. She really didn't want to do it. But the thought of saying no to her friend and imagining her friend being hurt or angry—that thought was so unpleasant that she didn't even want to go there. So the thought would come, she'd move away from it, and she was making all these plans to do this crazy weekend because she didn't want to feel the unpleasant feeling that came when she had the thought: what if my friend's upset?

She went through quite a long time of not being able to actually call her friend and say, "You know what, I can't do this." And then she saw: this is crazy. Look at everything I'm trying to do to avoid feeling this unpleasant feeling of hurting my friend. And I don't even know if that's even the truth—it's just a thought occurring now that I don't want to feel. Can you relate to that? So she finally called her friend, who was of course totally fine. It was no problem. If we just tell the truth in the first place.

So that kind of thing—maybe you've noticed this. I see it all the time in my life and talking to many of you, sometimes on retreat. Things have been going fine, whatever that means to you, or good, or calm—in quotes, whatever that is for you. And then, as

one yogi used to come and say to me all the time, "It's all gone to hell in a handbasket." And I used to say, "What does that mean?" I get the drift, but anyway. You come in and say, "It's all over, it's gone."

What's happening is that all of a sudden there are lots of thoughts going on, or you're in a lot of self-judgment, or there are dosa-laden thoughts happening. All different patterns, and you really feel caught and spinning. It's what I call in my own experience "the crazy place." There's a certain intensity to all the different things that are coming up, but it feels disconnected. There's this sense of why is all this happening, and what really is going on?

And then, after some time, I recognize that certain kind of crazed intensity—all these unpleasant, really difficult patterns coming up, whether avoidance or thinking about past things or anger at someone. But it doesn't quite hold together in some sensible way. And then I'll say, okay, what's happening now? Just feel my body. And I'll say, oh.

loneliness feels like that, or I really feel hurt, or whatever it happens to be. And it's a particular pattern, emotion, feeling—one of the ones that in the conditioning of my life I've either been afraid to feel, or conditioned myself not to feel, or it's just too unpleasant, or whatever. I have the habit of being afraid to feel it.

This is all unconscious. I'm not saying, "Oh, here's shame. I'm afraid to feel it. Let me go make up a bunch of stupid stories." You just don't know what's happening. You land in it. Just touch it with mindful awareness—oh, it's like this. And I always know that awareness has touched what's happening because all the hoo-ha, all the *papañca*, just for that moment dies away. And there's a sense of relief. It's like, "Oh, yeah. Really unpleasant. It feels like this."

And so I see it's that same habit of the mind doing all this stuff not to feel a particular really painful feeling that I've been in the habit of not being able or wanting to touch. As I say, this isn't something you can force. There can be many good reasons in our lives—past trauma and such—where you don't force your way in. I'll talk a little bit about that. But I'm just talking about the process now.

So even just recognizing this process is going on, or that there's something happening and you don't know what it is—maybe you can touch it, you don't have to stay there—but just to see: when *dosa* is in operation and we don't see it, and we're pulled away from experience, it just keeps feeding on itself and complicating and complexifying, and we're the one who's suffering.

The Buddha said, in talking about how aversion, how ill will arises in the mind—this is in terms of the hindrances—that it arises from unwise attention to the unpleasant aspect, the repugnant aspect of an unpleasant situation.

The example that Thich Nhat Hanh always gives, which I find easy to relate to: if you have one tooth with a little chip in it, it doesn't actually hurt. All the rest of your teeth are fine, but you have one tooth with a little chip. Do you notice how often your tongue goes to that little chip? You're sitting there—you're not usually running your tongue over your teeth while sitting—but in this case? And a little bit of aversion, a little bit of aversion. "Yeah, that's really bad. I've got to go to the dentist. Why did my tooth chip? My body's crapping out. I'm getting old. It's all over." Just unwise attention to the repugnance of an unpleasant thing. So simple. And it can go so far, so fast. So just noticing that.

I want to mention the particular *dosa* experience of self-judgment, which one or two of you might have experienced during this retreat. It very much grows and builds in the same way. The reason it's a condition in your particular mind-body system—we can all look in our past and see the reasons why the particular habits are there. I find they may come up on retreat, but are in therapy to explore. It can be useful. For me, once I've seen why a pattern's there, it really helps my mind not take it personally anymore. I don't have to go back to my mother and my father and my upbringing. "Yeah, right, I understand why that's there." These conditions come, it's unpleasant. Without awareness, this habit comes. It's impersonal.

So for whatever reason in each of your minds that there may be this habit of self-judgment, recognize it's basically an expression of *dosa*—a pulling away from, a rejecting of, either not wanting to see the particular experience that's arising, the particular sense contact. One of those six, as I think Sally said—that's all that's happening. And really, on a very radical level, even when it's extremely intense, and sometimes we can't see what's really happening—we can't, that's not in our control sometimes—but on the radical level, all this going on, total self-hatred, and I look and what's happening? Well, it started with a pain in my toe.

This is a real story. It started with a pain in my toe that went unrecognized as I was walking. Each step brought a little pain—not even a big pain—but unrecognized. The mind didn't want to see it. It went into more negativity, more dosa. And that took the form of self-judgment: "Well, you're not doing it right now. You're in aversion."

Self-judgment is almost always arising from a dissatisfaction with whatever the particular experience is that's happening now. It's similar to doubt. When things are going well, are you racked with self-judgment? Unless craving comes up and then you can find a way to rack yourself: "Well, but now there's craving, I blew it," right? But usually self-judgment comes as a reaction of dosa to some particular thing that's occurring.

It's often in response to a view—that's a whole other talk, but we've mentioned views. The view is "it's supposed to be like this and not like that." The view, in talking about dosa, is that we're here to really purify our heart-mind. Dosa arising is a suffering aspect, causes suffering to me and others, therefore it's bad, I'm wrong. I've been practicing all this time and dosa is still arising—I'm hopeless. It shouldn't be. And all the views, right? Have you noticed that happening at all?

When the view comes and our experience doesn't match it, there's an unpleasant feeling, a pulling away, and then it can totally feed into self-judgment. And because each self-judging thought is unpleasant in itself, the experience of self-hatred is very unpleasant. Again, because dosa is functioning, the mindfulness isn't landing on the experience and it just keeps spinning out, spinning out, spinning out.

There's one last thing about self-judgment. Notice what can often feed believing in self-judgment: an unseen view of perfectionism, basically. That somehow things are supposed to be perfect. We think, "Well, no, I know things aren't supposed to be perfect." But look and see in your mind. We think, "Well, no craving should arise. I've understood now that craving brings suffering and I'm going to let it go." We expect—you know—that's how it should be. When we talk about open awareness and noticing things come and go, people think it should all be neat and tidy.

But it's chaotic. It's chaotic. "What am I doing wrong? It's supposed to just be come and go, come and go, nice, nice, nice. But it's not. Things are all coming and going. I don't see the beginning and the middle and the end. It's not like—how can I see the beginning and the middle and the end? It doesn't stay there. Something else comes. What am I doing wrong?" And then we go off into self-judgment. So just check it out. That's just a little side hint.

So our practice of mindfulness-wisdom, sati-pañña. Just a few little hints—this is by no means comprehensive—of how we can use sati-pañña to begin noticing how to be with the various forms of dosa, and also how to work with wisdom and compassion when the intensity of the dosa is stronger than the energy and the mindfulness, and we actually need to balance the attention by doing something else. That's not the same as running away, the knee-jerk avoidance of dosa.

The Buddha, as always, taught the middle path. And I think—again, this is very simple sketching—the two most common responses to really strong, unpleasant dosa states, whether anger or hatred or fear or whatever we notice, are these: One is that it comes up and there's the self-judging. It's obvious suffering, we don't like it, others don't like it, it shouldn't be here. And so the tendency is to disconnect, to avoid it, to repress it, to not even quite let it up into consciousness.

And sometimes we sort of—you know how denial works—you kind of know you're doing it, but then you don't. But sometimes we really don't even know. It's way below the level of consciousness. This is when sometimes on retreat a really strong pattern—I'll pick shame again—comes up that we really hadn't consciously felt, because the system in our mind of keeping it out of sight, out of mind, has really been very stringently cultivated over our life.

So that's one—we think it's a mistake when it comes up. And then the other side, the flip side—the Buddha says neither of these—is to really completely, fully embrace anger, rage, aggression, fear, whatever it is that comes up. And as you know, anger particularly is very energizing. So the energy comes, and we think, "Well, I can't just push this energy down. I've got to really, really embrace it. This is the way to go." Especially sometimes if we're just discovering that we've been repressing it our whole life, and we really don't know any other way than letting it up. So I'm not saying we don't let it up, but I'm saying it's the total embracing of it that's a little different.

This is what the Dalai Lama says. He's talking about compassion, of course. When someone asks him why there is a lack of compassion in human society, he says, "Perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling or reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger." And I say that's also what we're doing with mindfulness, with awareness—giving the same energy to mindfulness and awareness.

So not fully embracing and identifying and going with it and acting from dosa, and not pressing it down—the middle way of the Buddha, of satipanya, mindfulness wisdom at the sense door. Ideally. This is ideally, and then with all different ramifications of how it is in the moment. So please, if the ideal isn't working for you in a moment, here are the other things I say too.

Ideally, it's like the awareness wisdom can just fully meet that. So say it's anger—let's pick that. Anger arising in a moment can be a really strong energy. Mindfulness can meet that energy. It's not trying to deny it or push it away. It can really let the energy

roar, but with mindfulness we see it—this is mental state, this is physical energy—we can see what it is, and it's not necessary to act on it, it's not necessary to be afraid of it. It can come, it can go. We're not denying the energy, but we're not getting into the content so much. Do you see what I mean? Simple awareness is really powerful that way.

I think for some of us—we're all different, but for some of us, like for me who's been in the habit of not really wanting to let that up—there can almost be a kind of fear of experiencing the powerful fear or anger or hostility energy, even just sitting here. Afraid of: if I really feel it, I'm going to act from it. So really learning that with mindfulness, we can trust it.

Sayadaw U Pandita said to me one time in an interview—I actually don't remember what was going on with me, but it really stuck with me. He said, "You know, with mindfulness, you don't have to be afraid of anything." He was talking on retreat, basically, but I don't have to be afraid of anything that arose in my mind, in my body. Mindfulness could be there with it. And that was really impactful for me. I hadn't even realized I was afraid of something, but he was so astute. He could tell what was going on.

Something Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says really helps me with a strong energy of anger, for example, or any of the dosa states. You know, Dilgo Khyentse was a very great awakened Tibetan master. He's saying thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color, right? So when a thought of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive—is that thought of anger actually brandishing a weapon? Can that thought really burn things like fire, crush them like a rock, or carry them away like a violent river? No. Anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no real self-existence, not even a definite location.

And this is what he says: it's just like wind roaring in empty space. I love that. I love that. Let the energy come up. Just sitting here, it's roaring in empty space. Thoughts of aggression can come up. We don't have to be afraid of them.

If there's awareness, we're not going to get up and hit the person next to us upside the head. Hopefully. So far, so good.

These thoughts come up in—I want to say to all of us, maybe not in some of you really cooled out folks—but stuff comes up. Let it come. Let it go. Really see. It's like wind roaring in empty space. Awareness doesn't have to be afraid of it. Yes, it's unpleasant. Okay. It's unpleasant. Half of life is unpleasant. Let it roar.

The last line: "Instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, you can realize their essential emptiness."

So this is really one way the Buddha was talking—sati at the sense door, as best we can. Either just that simple sense of the sound that's triggering it, or the wind roaring in empty space, when that's possible.

Sharon has a line I really like: "The opening to truth is what frees our heart from fear and selfishness." And Dogen Zenji said, "If you cannot find truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"

So when anger is rising, and we can really let it roar like empty space, bring awareness and mindfulness to it—that's the truth of this moment. And the opening to that truth is what frees our heart from fear and selfishness. Not the avoiding it or trying to pretend it's not happening. And knowing we're not going to be perfect. Of course it's not always going to be like that. But that as a possibility.

So these are some nuts and bolts, a few little hints on working with different ways of aversion or dosa coming up in our mindfulness practice.

The first one is simply bringing your attention. None of these are always possible, just different approaches. When something keeps eliciting anger, aggression, aversion, fear—whatever—it keeps happening and we're maybe even mindful of the state, but not quite able to notice the sense contact. Maybe you can bring your attention there. That really helps.

Here's an example. There's always a practicing-in-Asia example. One time I was sitting at a retreat center in Burma, and for whatever reason—well, this is normal—they were doing construction. It's extremely rare to sit at a retreat center in Burma where they're not doing construction. But they're doing construction, and just across the little road outside my kuti, not even as far as the wall back there, they started with electric sanders. Two different ones on two different frequencies. From 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., all day. And it would stop, and it would start, and it would stop. So you can imagine all the different things you go through.

Finally, out of total desperation—which is, of course, the last thing we ever do is surrender, right?—out of total desperation, I just brought the attention right to the ear door. Just hearing. Just quit resisting the hearing and be there. So that's what just hearing really meant. And because there's just being with it, without the gap and without all the stories—what are they, insane?—and all that stuff, it's just what it was. Really, it's just what it was.

So that's one way. Definitely not always available, but sometimes we don't even want to try it. It's amazing sometimes.

Another approach: when there's a bigger thing going on and we can see, "No, I don't want to, I can't go there." A friend years ago who sat a lot of three-month retreats told me how she related to this. She said she was a middle-aged woman, not a real athlete or anything, and sometimes she would go to the beach with her grown sons. She'd be at the beach, and they'd be in the water near the shore, and whenever a big wave would come, she'd see it and turn around and run to try and get away from it. She said the wave would always come and clobber her, turn her over and over. And her kids would say, "Mom, don't turn and run. Face the wave and just dive into it, and then it won't bother you."

She said she was only able to do that once or twice because the habit of "Oh no, here it comes, turn and run" was just so strong. But she was relating this to her practice on retreat, when some unpleasant, difficult thing would come and she could see the reaction: get the heck out of here.

Larry Rosenberg, a great teacher in Cambridge, used to love to watch old movies. He said—I don't know if this is true—that he read somewhere about a compilation of the most commonly said line in movies, and it was, "Let's get out of here."

So anyway, she would say that would come up for her. "Let's get out of here." Turn and run. But it doesn't work.

Then sometimes—and Bonnie always reminds me of this because she says she heard me say it in a talk years ago—sometimes when the anger's there, it's wind roaring in empty space, but it's not quite that empty. You want to be with it. You really don't want to act on it. You don't want to speak from it, but it's so strong. And kind of, "Oh yeah, let me just be mindful of the contact, seeing, seeing..."

It's like, forget about it. But mindfulness isn't always neat and tidy. So this is what I call stomping meditation. There's this energy, it's really strong. You can't just sit here and go "mindful, anger, anger, anger," because you feel like you're going to explode. But that doesn't mean we can't be mindful. Mindfulness can be precise, it can be wide.

So go outside, hopefully where no one can see you—and not in the hall up there where you're two inches away from somebody else. Go away from people and just stomp. Anger, anger, you're feeling it. Let that energy move, but you're aware it's anger. You don't have to try and be precise, thinking "Let me see, where's the sensation here?" It's just stomping. But I found that extremely helpful. The thoughts roar and the energy's moving, but you're aware. You're aware. That counts. It's awareness. It'll cool out eventually.

And the other approach, the last to mention, is what I was saying first: sometimes you can tell something's going on, but you can't tell what. So remember to tune into the subtle background state. Really noticing the attitude in the mind, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya is always talking about. Take care of the awareness first.

Notice when you start to see there's a lens of ill will over everything. Just tune in and see. You might feel tightness in the heart and the mind. You might notice there's aversion. And that's the place to bring the attention—not trying to fix it, not trying to deal with each specific object that's occurring. It doesn't even matter. But take care of the awareness, as he says. Just notice that's what's going on.

Sometimes you might see something really simple that's giving rise to all of it. A friend told me about a three-month retreat years ago. He noticed—it took him most of the day to notice—that he'd had a real ill-will aversion lens on his perception about everybody and everything. And finally he noticed it. So that was good. That's awareness. Then he was kind of wondering, well, what's happening now? So he just tuned in and he saw—and he was laughing as he told me—he noticed that a sweatshirt he'd been wearing all day was too tight. That was it. When he'd move his arms, it was a little unpleasant. He didn't notice. And it led into a whole day of ill will. Mindfulness is our friend. We don't need to be afraid to check this stuff out.

Not recognizing—to me, this is the most profound suffering of *dosa*, of all the three roots: when we don't recognize it, it blocks the radiance of the pure mind, the pure heart of simple awareness. Once we make friends with—I can't say make friends, but we can just be with. My friend could be with that *dosa* covering his experience. He could say, "Okay, my sweatshirt's too tight. This unpleasant feeling's like this." And that radiance, just the sense of peace and ease, is available again. This pulling back, all this confusion that comes in through the knee-jerk response of *dosa*—it prevents, blocks the recognition of that. To me, that's the deepest suffering.

Bankei, the Japanese Zen master, said: "When you do not set yourself in contention, in conflict, with things, then your primary nature reveals itself in its true form." That's really the heart of the suffering of *dosa*—and the freedom when we're not fighting with it.

Pema Chödrön makes a beautiful simile about our habit of shutting down in the face of even just fearing the unpleasant—not even the unpleasant itself—comparing it to a sea anemone. You know what a sea anemone is? A soft sea creature with tentacles, and if you just touch it, it closes around itself. She likens our habit of closing off to avoid

unpleasant experience to that protective reflex, which is really a movement to protect, in a way, our tender heart. But the effect is to shut ourselves off from ourselves and from everyone else.

That's the drawback of the way things are. We can't shut down selectively. We don't get to just get rid of the unpleasant aversion and hang on to the pleasant.

I've noticed in myself—often in retreat, but even more in daily life—that the times I feel most alienated or disconnected or just out of sync, my mind can be telling myself any story about why. But I've noticed again and again that when that's true, when I finally stop and look, I find that it's because I'm somehow trying to avoid or deny or repress some unpleasant or difficult experience. Just trying not to be there for it.

It could be so-called internal or so-called external. It could be some unpleasant thing going on with me in relationship to a friend, or it could be that something really difficult or painful or sorrowful is happening with a family member or a dear friend, and it's really painful. It's like, okay, I want to know, but you don't really want to completely let it in and feel it. And as soon as I recognize, oh yes, right, that's really sorrowful—she's really suffering right now and there's nothing I can actually do about it, and it feels like this—then the whole sense of opening into feeling alive again. Feeling connected again. Feeling open to the sorrow but also open to the beauty, open to love, open to connectedness, to how it is. It all comes together in that way.

This is, to me, the jewel in the heart of our practice, the jewel in the heart of mindfulness and wisdom: being willing and able to be with all the aspects of dosa, which are suffering in themselves, and the unpleasant that gives rise to it. The jewel is that by landing in this, even just for a moment with mindfulness and wisdom, that's the arising of compassion. That's how compassion comes.

As the Dalai Lama has said over and over, compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is, and this insight comes from being with our own experience. What else? Being with our own experience, and it naturally widens and strengthens into a sense of empathy with all beings.

So when something really difficult is happening and all the forms of dosa are present—the dosa itself could be the difficulty or the instigating sense contact—that's arising due to past karmic conditions. That it's happening in this moment is out of your control. You can't change this moment; it's already gone. How the mind and awareness are meeting this moment of our experience—that's what can affect the shift of habit.

Meeting aversion, fear, resentment, or whatever—the attitude of how we meet this arising moment—that is the path of purification, of change, of opening the tender heart. This is really how compassion is being cultivated on a moment-to-moment basis here. Not just in the Brahma Vihāra practices, but every time there's something painful or difficult. It's okay, it's like this. Just for a second, that moment of tender awareness without dosa, without greed—just like this, now. That is the cultivation of compassion and wisdom. That is the shifting, the purification of habit. Just a mind moment, but it's all mind moments. And this is not something to overlook. It's really being present with it.

I don't have time for all the practices, but I need to mention that Shabkar, the great Tibetan yogi, said: meditating without compassion is simply to inflict hardship on yourself.

So sometimes just the meeting itself is compassion. But there are times, as I referred to earlier, when the intensity of the difficulty coming up—the painful emotion—is just so intense. Either it comes up so strong and fast, or it's such a deep traumatic habit pattern, and in the moment the mindfulness awareness can touch it but bounces off. It's just too strong to stay with. Compassion is recognizing this is how it is right now. It's not good or bad. Don't go to the judging, "I'm not perfect" place. Recognize this is how it is right now.

And then, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, when we realize that the ill will, the fear, the terror, the rage is stronger than the mindfulness right now, stronger than the awareness—and the more we're trying to be mindful, the more the dosa is being fed, we can see it's spinning out of control—well, that's just wisdom to recognize this is what's happening right now. So Tejaniya says it's not necessarily skillful mindfulness to drown in the difficult situation. Check what's going on in the mind, whether it's a mental state or physical pain. Don't keep paying attention to that. We need to refresh the awareness—to move the attention away from the triggering physical or emotional pain and refresh the awareness.

It may be that we bring the awareness – we don't abandon awareness, that doesn't have to be our first line – but we bring the awareness to something neutral or to something beautiful.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to talk about cultivating seeds of joy. In the midst of the Vietnam War, when he was working with social workers who were in really difficult situations, he'd say, "Just go out in the fields and smell the herbs at night." You may think, in the midst of horror, smelling the herbs at night – what's that going to do? It refreshes

the awareness. It brings balance back to the heart and mind. It moves attention away from getting lost in dosa. And it can bring, just for a moment, balance. This is really important. This is an act of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh says it's very important to adjust your attitude first. Take care of your awareness, the way the mind and awareness are looking at the situation, before you do anything about adjusting the environment. As I said before, we can't recognize accurately with ill will, with dosa.

There are many ways to shift the attention to refresh the awareness: something neutral, something pleasant, going with seeing, going with hearing, the Brahma Viharas, or contemplating something the Buddha offers. Contemplate your own wholesome moral conduct. Contemplate, bring into heart and mind, all your acts of generosity of thought, speech, and action. This isn't an ego thing – it actually brightens the heart, the mind. Contemplate whatever brings you faith, whatever your aspiration is.

The Buddha often used this. He'd look over a group of people and see someone who he thought could hear the Dharma, but their mind wasn't ready. So he'd talk about sila, he'd talk about dana, he'd talk about faith, until the mind and heart were brightened, the awareness was balanced, and then they could hear the Dharma. We can do that ourselves. Find ways to refresh the awareness.

It's not like we've got to get to the bottom and get rid of all the dosa and all the unpleasant right now. Forget about that. Each moment that we're cultivating, either you start with sati-pañña, or when that's not possible, refresh the awareness. You're still practicing sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom. You're cultivating the wholeness and the balance that can then again meet the difficult situation.

I want to end with a story that speaks to what the Dalai Lama was saying – that by being able to meet our own difficulty, our own suffering in whatever form it's taking, whatever dosa, not letting dosa run the show but recognizing it, this widens that compassion for ourselves into empathy and compassion for all beings. And really, for me, so-called internal and external are not separate. Why is someone else's pain hard for us? Because we don't want to feel it here.

I heard this story on the radio last fall. It was about the migrant crisis in Europe, which I'm sure you're aware of – so many people in so many wretched and horrible situations. A reporter was talking about interviewing people in Calais, France, on the coast. I don't know if you remember – in Calais there's a huge refugee internment camp that they call "The Jungle." At that point, a lot of refugees were caught there, basically

trying to get to the UK and not able to make it. They were kept there in really horrible conditions, of course, not wanting to be there. At this time they were trying to close the camp, so it was in the news a lot.

This reporter had gone there, reporting about the conditions and how hard it was. Then he went into Calais and was talking to just ordinary French people. He was speaking with one particular woman, a middle-aged French woman, and she was saying how this camp is so horrible, and the people in it shouldn't be here, they should go back where they came from, and they're really bad, and it's bringing trouble to Calais. All the usual kind of things you can read. She was clearly coming from anger but also fear – you could hear that.

As he spoke to her, he got her to agree to come to the camp with him. This is already huge for someone feeling that way. She was already willing to just meet her fear. So she went to the camp with him, and they walked in. She's looking around, seeing how people were living out in the elements, in crummy tents, packed in, with nothing to do. She's just going, "Wow, these conditions are horrible. Nobody should have to live like this" – just seeing it. But that meant she was willing to touch that pain in herself.

Then the reporter mentioned he was talking to one young man who was describing how hard it was being there without his family. All he wanted to do was work, but there was no work, nothing to do. If they went outside the camp, he felt preyed upon by various truck drivers and the police. He just felt completely vulnerable and attacked.

And she got so moved. She saw, oh, this is a really lovely young man, an educated young man. He just wants to work. He just wants to live in safety.

So then she ended up by going to the office of the camp and saying, "What can I do to volunteer here to help people?"

It's amazing—just the willingness to face our own suffering and fear naturally morphs into connectedness and compassion.

As James Baldwin says, an enemy is someone whose story we have not heard.

So just hearing what story is coming up in this mind moment, in your citta.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 164

Mingling Our Minds with the Dhamma

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson invites us to consider how we can mingle our minds with the Dhamma so thoroughly that the teachings become inseparable from who we are. Drawing on the insight that citta (mind-heart) is not a static entity but a moment-to-moment flow of cognizing, she emphasizes that transformation is always possible—one moment at a time.*
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> *Wilson explores the Buddha's three pillars of practice: dāna (generosity), sīla (ethical conduct), and bhāvanā (mental cultivation), showing how each addresses different levels of the kilesas (mental torments). She explains how transgressive defilements are purified through restraint, obsessive mental patterns are calmed through samādhi, and latent tendencies are ultimately uprooted through paññā (wisdom). Rather than viewing these as a hierarchy where meditation is superior, she encourages practitioners to honor whichever practice is accessible in any given moment.*
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> *Through personal anecdotes and inspiring stories—from a football player who taught himself to read to Sister Chân Không's patient activism—Wilson illustrates how conscious intention can transform ordinary actions into profound practice. She shares the Buddha's teaching to Mahānāma about recollecting one's own generosity and virtue as a practice available while walking, sitting, or even at home crowded with children. The talk concludes with Eleanor Roosevelt's reminder that human rights begin in small places close to home, suggesting that purifying our own hearts is where meaningful change in the world must start.*

Dingo Kenzi has a phrase that has always stuck in my mind, one that I like very much. He talks about mingling our minds with the Dharma, which I just love. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

The rest of how I remember it—I'm not sure if this is accurate or if I made it up—is mingling our minds with the Dharma until it's so mingled that we die with no thought of Dharma in our minds. You get it? It's so mingled that you don't think about the Dharma as some separate belief system or anything. It's just how our minds are—purified. I can only assume that would be the mind of an arahat. Who knows?

But mingling our minds with the Dharma really means using all the aspects of our life and realizing that all the aspects of the Buddha's teaching—not just meditation—are about purifying these troublesome habits of mind we've been talking about the whole time: these torments of greed, hatred, and delusion. As we know, the cessation of dukkha, the third noble truth, is the remainderless cessation, the relinquishment of craving, of the torments.

This purification of the habits of our mind, what I'm calling mingling our mind with the Dharma—this is the work of our whole lifetime. Our whole lifetime, at least. We don't have to know what happens before or after, but it's at least this whole lifetime. Not one retreat, not ten years. I don't say this to be depressive; actually, it's been more and more inspiring to me when we realize the actuality. In the last some years, I've come to appreciate more and more how everything the Buddha taught comes from some different angle of helping us purify and transform these suffering habits of mind. All of it is to be used, not so much in a hierarchy.

It's been helpful to me in my own practice, and also in speaking with people, when—you know how on retreat we can get caught up in questions like: Should I do concentration practice or vipassanā practice? Which is better? Which do I need? Which is going to get me enlightened faster? If I miss one, do I not get it? And if I'm doing vipassanā, which form? More precise? Do I do noting? Do I do open awareness? Choiceless awareness? Just resting back? If I don't do the right one, I'm going to miss it. And then: which things do I have to know? Okay, dāna and sīla are pretty good—you do that if you can't do anything else, but that's not the real thing, right?

Trying to figure all that out can be—I'm making it a little funny—but it can really cut close to the heart. I've talked to plenty of people, and myself included, who are really in a state of suffering frenzy about it: "Oh my god, why didn't I know about this practice before? I've been wasting all my time and I didn't know about this one. This is the real one!"

Starting to actually realize—and this is me thinking—the Buddha taught all these ways, offered all these different approaches, because at different times, different approaches are what's accessible to us. We need them all, in all times of our life. When, say, concentration isn't available but the practice of sīla is, we shouldn't think, "Well, okay, I'll do sīla, what the heck, until I can get concentrated again—that's the real thing." That attitude is klesha-driven. We need to actually come to respect and honor all of these practices.

I just want to touch lightly on several of these. None of this is new information, but I'm trying to bring it together under this way of looking at it.

We know that transformation of these habits, as deep and long-lasting as they may seem, is absolutely possible. It's possible because citta, what we call the mind, is not a static entity. It's not an entity at all. Andy Olenski had a description of citta I liked: this moment of mind-heart. In Buddhism, the mind is not a subject that has objects as content. We talk about it that way—"the mind"—and right away we think of a thing, just from the use of language. But the mind is not a subject that has objects as content; it is rather the activity or process of cognizing a flow of events.

This is, to me, one of the most freeing things I've realized: the so-called mind is simply a moment-to-moment arising activity of cognizing. Moment to moment to moment to moment. When we try to look at a whole lifetime or even a whole hour, we can't do it. But moment to moment? That's workable.

That's possible. And that's what we're cultivating. We're cultivating sati—mindfulness is moment to moment, one moment giving rise to the next.

When anger is being cultivated, it's also moment to moment. A moment of anger, unrecognized, being fed by attention, gives rise to the next, to the next. But because it's a flow of events—really much how Guy was describing kamma, you know, the past is over, but it's moment to moment, how intention works, moment to moment—this is where all of the different tools the Buddha offers us come to bear, where we can work and where we can really see change.

And also recognizing—and this again, not to be demoralizing, but it just seems to me so true and it's helped—recognizing how subtle and deeply ingrained the habits of the torments are. All of you have seen that. And instead of getting frustrated when you think you're clear of it and suddenly it pops up—has that happened to anybody? Suddenly it pops up. You say, "Oh, right. The conditions arise. Without mindfulness, they pop up."

So this little example from my life occurred to me today when I was thinking about this. Just so little, nothing. But I was on a self-retreat, I think it was last year—it all blends—in Switzerland, in a place I like very much. I'd been on retreat, quiet, for about two weeks, and I was just walking on the country roads there and the hills and mountains. People walk by, not many people.

So I was on retreat, which makes this all the more striking—I really had to notice this was happening, because I should have been more mindful. I was just walking and present, and a woman came walking up to me, passing me on the road, and came over

to me with some kind of piece of paper in her hand, like a brochure. She said something to me in Swiss German. I couldn't understand it right away, but I could have understood a little bit had I paid attention.

Instead, what immediately came up—and I could track it later, what the conditions were—was a kind of pulling back, a turning away. It was like, "No thank you," and turning away and walking away. An aversion, a "no thank you, don't." I realized later, and I felt bad of course, that she was probably just asking me for directions or something. I mean, I didn't even really stop to see.

But I realized it was all the years of walking somewhere in the street and someone comes up to you with something they're trying to sell or something they're trying to get you to take, or the Watchtower, and just, "No, please leave me alone." That's what was coming up, just like that—boom, like that. I kept on walking and she walked, and then within two seconds the sense of moral shame came up. Aversion, just like that, so quick. The conditions come when I'm not paying attention, when I'm not mindful.

Now, to see that without judgment is really important. This is mindfulness coming back into play again, and we understand. I picked such a simple little example because that's what helps me see: "Oh right, all my life really needs to be dedicated to using whatever tools are accessible in the current conditions to help purify the habits of mind." Because they just pop up so easily. They're so comfortable otherwise.

But change is possible when we really are committed—which all of you are, or you wouldn't still be here. We can use all the different ways, but change is possible.

I just want to tell you this story that Sally was very kind to point out to us. It was a little interview with someone on the news a few weeks ago, with a young man who is a rookie in his first year as a wide receiver—which is an American football term—on the New England Patriots, which is a fairly successful team. That's a primal spot for some young guy in football.

But the interview with him was very touching because he was talking about how when he was in college in Georgia—he went there on a football scholarship—he realized that he could only read on a junior high level. Junior high is about ages twelve to fifteen. So he was reading on a low level for someone in college.

He decided he really wanted to get better at that. He really wanted to learn how to read, and he really committed to it. He would start trying to read and it wasn't easy—not easy for him. In his spare time, when he was getting massages, they showed in the interview a picture of him getting worked on after a football game, reading away in some book.

But the interesting thing was this: he was in a Barnes and Noble looking at books, and he struck up a conversation with some middle-aged lady.

He's a young African-American guy, and this is a middle-aged white lady, and she says, "Well, why don't you come join our book club?" And he goes, "Okay." He joined this book club, went to it every month for two years. They show a photo, and it's all these middle-aged white ladies and him. They're all twice his age, and they're all sitting there talking about books and what's going on, and he's so happy being there. He did this for two years.

Now he's on the New England Patriots, and he's just written a children's book about the magic of learning how to read. He's also started a kids' literacy foundation. He's talking to the interviewer, and he says, "You know, sometimes people have called me a nerd." The interviewer said, "Well, how does that make you feel? Usually that's kind of an insult." And he goes, "Wow, you know, actually I'm proud of it. It's like a badge of honor for me." He said, "The football, that came naturally. That was a gift. I didn't have to try. But this reading, I really had to try. I really had to commit. So coming from where I came from, to be called a nerd—that's a badge of honor."

His vibe was so sweet and loving, sharing with all these kids with his book, teaching them how to read. And then he goes out and plays football and knocks people over. He was in the Super Bowl—you couldn't do better than that in your first year.

Just seeing this reminds us that when there's commitment and dedication and the willingness to keep going, change is possible for all of us in all the different realms. Not to underrate the power of conditioning, but we can embrace what the Buddha called the three pillars of the path: *dana*, or cultivating the intention of generosity; *sila*, non-harming behavior; and *bhavana*, mental cultivation—along with various other tools I want to mention. They all work together, whichever one is accessible at a particular time.

As Sally was saying last night, we really are often, in cultivating the happiness of a wholesome heart and letting ourselves feel it and trust it and move in that direction—we are so frequently moving in the opposite direction of the stream of culture, the stream of society.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, a long time ago, something I know he stood by: "Society makes it difficult to be awake. We know that 40,000 children in the third world die every day of hunger, but we keep forgetting. The kind of society we live in helps us forget. So that's why we need exercises for awareness, for mindfulness. We've lost our taste for silence. Every time we have a few minutes, we pick up a book to read or make

a telephone call." This was before the days of cell phones—and it was bad enough then. Now it's overwhelming, right? We know that. "We do not know how to be ourselves without something else to accompany us. The first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our best."

That's what the Buddha is offering us, asking us to do, giving us so many ways to practice.

I want to mention a little bit about generosity and moral conduct, just in terms of how it works to purify our heart-mind. I don't have to go into it extensively because we've talked about it all. In the early days when I first began to practice Vipassana in the West—I first learned it in India, but in the West, at the Insight Meditation Society, when it wasn't with Goenka anymore—I think it's not everybody, but it's kind of a Western thing. In the beginning, we were all really enamored and fascinated by the meditation aspect, whether concentration or vipassana. That's really where it's at, you know? And it is very powerful, don't get me wrong—it's the main thing we're doing. But it's almost as if a glance would be made to *sila*. You take the five precepts at the beginning of the retreat. *Dana*—we'd say, "Oh yeah, generosity is good." Not that much said about it, kind of assumed. And if anything much was said, it was because it helps the mind not have remorse, so you can practice better. I'm glossing it a bit, but it was sort of like that.

Joseph always tells us how Munindra, his teacher, at one point came to him after listening to the Western students and said, "What are you doing? It's like you're sitting in a rowboat and you're rowing as hard as you can, but you forgot to untie it from the dock."

You really need Dana and Sila. It's all part of the purification process, and sometimes that's what's available to us. Sometimes that's really where we can touch. We've talked about this through the retreat—those moments when kilesa is not distorting our perception, not distorting our heart, where you just feel that sense of purity. And you may not think of it as much, just this kind of cleanliness. Someone described it to me as their awareness feeling squeaky clean, like right after you've cleaned a window—just squeaky clean, nothing there.

Sometimes we look for that in a meditative state, but this sense of the happiness of a wholesome heart and mind can be recognized in acts of generosity, in moments of virtuous conduct, or simply refraining from harmful states. That's often where it's available. You don't have to wait for a deep meditation state.

So thinking about the practice of generosity in this way—as a transformer of consciousness, as a transformer of the habits of clinging, obviously, but also the habit of me and other, the habit of self-reference, the habit of fear too. Think of generosity that way.

And to me, the secret teaching that I didn't really get here, that I didn't get until I'd spent a lot of time in Thailand and Burma, was the really powerful happiness, the joy that comes about through moments of generous intention. Whatever it is one is being generous about is almost secondary. But that moment of generous intention—it comes in three phases. First, the idea of a generous thing. And there's really this thing in Burma of "Oh, an opportunity for Dana!" That's the phrase that's used. "This is an opportunity for Dana."

In my growing-up Western way of hearing it, generosity is good, and if you have more you should give to those who have less. It's well-meaning, and sure, that's good to do. But there was a kind of "should" there, and a little bit of hierarchy, a little bit of separation. What I got in Burma is just this sense—just the idea of an opportunity for Dana—people would get happy. They'd perk up: "Oh good, this is a place I can be generous," whatever it was.

We know people there who amazingly give so much. They have good businesses and they give so much money. And then there are people who have nothing, but they'll just —a little boy came up once whom I never saw before or after and just gave me this tiny little flower in the street. This little seven-year-old boy, probably fifteen but looking seven, gave it to me and bowed and walked away. I thought, what little kid here is going to do that when I'm walking down the street? Can you imagine? But he was so happy to offer and go away. That happiness.

And then in the receiving, there's that equal happiness. You let it in. This quality in that moment—the moment of thinking about it, the moment of actually offering the generosity, a smile, whatever—and then the moment of reflecting on it later if you've been the one who's been generous. It also brings up joy. Not the joy of "I'm such a great generous person," but the joy, the happiness of a wholesome heart in that moment. That's really what's being cultivated and developed with this practice of generosity. It's something we can really look at in little ways all through our life.

Again, it's not that I should be generous. Still, that's better than doing nothing, I guess, but that's not the transforming of the habit, the purity of the habit that I'm talking about. It's really letting yourself feel just that happiness, because the sense of barrier goes away.

I had to learn to receive as well with that same openness. Because when someone comes and offers and you go, "Oh no, I have so much more than you, don't offer that to me"—you feel what that does? It just shuts the whole thing down.

And the joy is really in the mutuality, in the sense that separation is gone in that moment, the sense of clinging and the sense of ownership. It's a beautiful, just a beautiful thing to include in our lives as practice. And it's something that is available, you know, in times when we think other things aren't.

I'd always heard, and I didn't understand it for a few years, that if you're really annoyed with someone, you should give them a gift. I'd heard this as a Buddhist teaching, and I kind of thought, I didn't really get what that was. And then I started getting suspicious if anyone gave me a gift.

But I can see now, if you're talking from the point of really the intention of heart of generosity, that transforming intention. So if you're giving the gift, it means truly giving it. It doesn't mean, "Here, take this gift and be gone." To really be generous, you open your heart and hand the flower. And in that moment, there's not ill will. When there's really that intention of generosity, there's not clinging and there's not ill will. So it's not to give them a gift for them. It's to purify your own heart and mind.

Things like this are available to us when you can't find your breath, when you can't find a moment of concentration, when you think bhavana, never mind mental cultivation. You can just do a little something. Smile at a lady in the store who looks really grumpy. Be kind to the person behind you in line who has a whole lot of bags and you don't have much, and just really with kindness let them go and not look for something back, but just do it. And let yourself feel the happiness of that.

That's not an ego trip. That's really one of the wonderful things about how mindfulness wisdom works, and we've said this before, but you can really trust it: when you put mindful attention on the wholesome, to use the Buddha's language, it feeds the wholesome. So when you're feeling the happiness of generosity with awareness, it lets that grow. That's not the same as "I'm so great." It's really feeding the wholesome.

And mindfulness on the unwholesome—being mindful of "I don't want to give that, this is mine," and just being mindful of how that feels—starves it. It doesn't mean it naturally goes away, but you're feeling that this feels really crummy. Mindful awareness notices that. So it's trustworthy to explore the difficult habits. We don't have to be afraid to look at them with mindfulness. It's not that if I see it, it's going to get worse. It's just the reverse, just the opposite.

So that about dāna. And sīla—this moves into actually the Eightfold Path, where the Buddha talks about sīla, samādhi, paññā. Virtuous behavior, samādhi is the whole bhavana meditation aspect, and paññā is wisdom.

To start with sīla, the teachings talk about three called the three rounds of kilesa, the three different levels you could say that kilesa acts out. And I think Sally talked some about this last night in talking about motivation. But the first round is called the transgressive. It means you actually act or speak from unwholesome, from greed, hatred, or confusion. And what purifies the transgressive level of defilements, of kilesa, is sīla—restraint, not acting out, consciously restraining, non-harming behavior.

And this isn't just, "Oh, that's the best we can do." This is the Buddha saying a fool is characterized by their actions, a wise person is characterized by their actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's discernment, one's wisdom shines. So it may be at the beginning of the rounds of the transgressive, but it actually shines through our whole life.

So the transgressive: actions of speech and body motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion. And we're protected from that simply by restraint, by wise restraint. We may still feel, be quite aware of, a thought coming up of wanting to say something aversive or do something unpleasant or harmful. But the actual conscious refraining from doing that is a wholesome act.

You've seen it all here, how when we do act or speak from unwholesomeness—and bring mindfulness along with you—it has an effect of keeping on feeding. It affects other people and the whole thing grows. You're feeling a little bit impatient, and you go into a store and you say something in a really impatient way to someone in the line in front of you, or to the lady who's checking out your groceries. You can see right away it affects that person and you can feel it come back. Maybe they're a little more grumpy to the next person coming after them, and then that affects that person, and it's a whole chain reaction.

Or the person is just nasty back to you, and so you leave the store in a worse mood than you came in with, and you slam the door in somebody's face, and someone says, "Can you give me some money?" and you go, "No way." It just keeps feeding itself. We can see that.

So the simple restraint—the lady checking you out is making a mess of it, and you manage to keep your mouth shut and not say something—consciously recognize that restraint.

That's a wholesome action. And we really tend—maybe you don't, but I tend to—go to the fact that I'm still thinking the unpleasant thing, and so I'm still bad and wrong. But to notice the restraint really feeds it.

If it's possible, you could even feel—you know, there's still the unpleasant, there's still the unwholesome thing in your mind, so it's not quite so clear that it's a happiness as with generosity. But you can get a little bit of a sense of the purity of not speaking in that way. You really can feel that. Restraint.

On retreat, you can practice restraint at the sense doors. Off retreat it's a little harder, but here it's like when you can see grumpiness in your mind or greed really strong, just going out through the eye door. You can just bring mindfulness in right at the eye door, feel the greed, and kind of keep the attention here. Not feed it by going looking for something to want.

Do you find yourself sitting on—well, I don't know if they have it here—at IMS, when you're sitting on the toilet and they have the cleanser on the back of the seat, and you just sit there and read that thing avidly for ten minutes? What is hydroxychloroquine? What could that be? Let me compare it to this one over here and see which one is... A little bit of restraint at the sense doors can actually be helpful not to feed the greed, and you can appreciate that.

And the more we practice, there can be a happiness. The Buddha says it's not an act of will that freedom from remorse arises in one who is endowed with virtue. It is in the nature of things. It's just natural. If you are acting with virtue, refraining from unwholesome speech and actions, it is natural that you would experience freedom from remorse.

The more we practice with this, it really is purifying the habits, so that—I imagine you all can taste this, I'm sure you all can—you start to recognize and appreciate how natural aspects of *sīla* become for you. How in a place where maybe earlier there would have been an urge to act on something, nobody's looking, and it just isn't there anymore. You don't. Appreciate that. Feel the purity of that. It's something that can really bring us happiness.

So I'll give a simple example. Oh, I forgot I had some examples I wanted to give of the happiness of generosity too—I might go back and read that. But anyway, a simple example. I've said it before. It happened here with a friend of mine.

We were in the old Spirit Rock bookstore before it moved. We went down, and I wanted to buy a little statue that I had seen there. You know how it's self-service, and no one was there at all. But my friend had often helped Marianne on days, so she knew how to get the little magnet thing that opened the big cupboards out in the other room—the ones that don't have handles, but you get this magnet and open them.

So she opened it, and this one huge closet was just full of tens and dozens of statues. We were piling through all of them trying to find the one that I wanted. I took out one and she took out one. Almost simultaneously—they were very delicate—and this one was Manjushri. It had this little sword. We just barely touched it and the sword broke. It happened to both of us, and we were like, "Oh, it broke! It broke!" These things are like sixty dollars. We didn't say anything. We just looked and said, "Okay," and we took it over to the office and confessed to Marianne.

She was like, "Ah, it doesn't matter. It happens all the time. We glue it together and sell it again, half price." But we were ready to pay for it.

Later we discussed it. And the thing that made us both so happy is there was a fleeting thought in the mind: we can put it back.

No one will know. No one was there. And that thought came up in each of our minds and got absolutely no traction whatsoever. It arose and then it wasn't even a possibility.

Later, my friend sent me an email and she said—I liked how she put it—"To see one's mind have that thought, and then one has the choice right away to see what karma is one creating in this moment." And in that moment, there's no choice. It's so clear.

This is the effect, the *vipāka*, of previous purification, and it's something you can really appreciate. There was no possibility that either of us would have done that. And instead of going to bad that the thought arose, it's like—wow, feel how lovely it is to be able to trust the purification that is going on in your mind and heart. To trust that *sīla* is really available. And the more you let yourself feel that happy wholesomeness, the more likely it is to arise again in the future. So just very simple things, but really letting it in.

What I wanted to read—two things about generosity—because the other thing about generosity is that hearing about others' wholesome actions can bring joy to us too. It's contagious. Just in the same way that acting in an unwholesome way can start a chain reaction going, so too can generosity.

So I just want to read you these two little stories. Maybe it won't make you feel good, but just see. How do you feel? Because if it touches something in us, that's touching it because that happiness of the generous impulse is available in our heart and mind.

This I cut out a long time ago, many years ago, about a seventy-eight-year-old man, Matt Dawson, who had worked for fifty-nine years for the Ford Motor Company in Michigan, and he was still working. He could have retired. But he didn't, because he gives most of his money away. And when this was written, he had just given two hundred thousand dollars to Wayne State University. But over the course of his life, he gave away more than a million dollars—this guy working at the Ford Motor Company. His first gift was to the United Negro College Fund, fifty thousand dollars, and since then he gave them almost two hundred thousand more. And he gave two hundred thousand to Louisiana State University, money to churches in Detroit and Louisiana, thousands of dollars to the NAACP and to community colleges.

And when people asked, "Why do you do it?" he said, "Well, I get joy. I get happiness out of this. I can go home and sleep good." He said, "No matter how much you make or how little you make, you've got to save a little of that to share. I was raised like that, to help others. I have more than enough for myself."

See, it's hard to not feel good, right? You can try, maybe, if you're in a really bad mood—I understand.

This is another thing, from a woman at a retreat a few years ago, and she wrote this to me. She had heard some of us talking about offering support to some poor nunneries in Burma, and she had offered some *dāna*. And then this came, just out of the blue. She said, "I've been on the verge of quitting a job I no longer 'need'"—in quotations—"and wondering if or how this job serves me. I've decided to keep the job for five or six more months and give all the earnings away to causes that I love. And this one is the first of many." So she was saying, "Thank you, because this gift brings me great joy and opens a whole new chapter of work as *dāna* to the world."

It's really available to us, you know. You don't have to be in deep retreat, or retreat at all, for this to be available. And we can call on it when we can't find *bhāvanā*.

Okay, so back to the three levels of *kilesa*. The transgressive level—we're protected by *sīla*, restraint. The next level is called the obsessive torments. You can already figure out what that one is, right? And for that, we're protected by *samādhi*, by collectedness of mind.

The obsessive level—you can guess—it's not just wandering mind. It's really the spinning, the spinning, whether it's a self-hatred story or a greed story or a lot—it doesn't matter what it is. But that spinning, spinning, where we just feel assaulted by it. Not just a once shooting up, like when I was walking past that lady in Switzerland, but really constant, relentless.

And so *samādhi*, in all the different ways that it shows up—not just one-pointed focus, although that's one way—but *samādhi* really meaning the collectedness of mind, heart, *citta*, the unification, the steadiness. So you've all experienced it in different ways. It doesn't have to be a deep state.

It can be that many things are still happening, but there's this sense that the citta just feels collected. A lot can be going on, but it's not as if your attention is all distracted, flying all over the place. There's a sense of stability.

Samadhi can be samatha, one-pointed concentration. All the Brahmaviharas, in the way we've been sharing them here, are samatha practices. They kind of do double duty, because it's samatha—the collectedness of mind—but it's also cultivating the wholesomeness of the Brahmaviharas, which is obviously another way of purifying the habits of mind through bhavana, through meditation.

But the steadiness, what that does is this: when the mind is steady like that—and really it can be one-pointed or wider—it's a protection from the hindrances arising, from the obsessive kilesas coming up. It's almost like when the collectedness is strong, the hindrances can't get in. I don't know if you've noticed sometimes that something which usually would bring up self-hatred, and it would spin and drive you crazy, but you're pretty present, the attention's steady, the mind is focused. And the self-hatred thought tries to come up and it just bounces off. It can't get in. Or it comes up and you just look at it and it's gone. It's a little different from wisdom—it just can't arise in that moment. The mind is so clear and steady. That's samadhi. And that can go, of course, as the Buddha said, to depths we can't imagine.

This is really useful. Whatever state you're in doesn't have to be one-pointed. It can be what we've talked about as khanika samadhi, what Mahasi Sayadaw called momentary samadhi—the same steadiness, but the object can be changing from moment to moment. The level of steadiness and collectedness and unification can still be quite strong. I think when Sayadaw U Pandita talked about Vipassana Jhanas, he was alluding to this kind of equal level of collectedness, of steadiness, but we're with changing objects, not moving into one-pointed practice.

So when it's like this—not to engender clinging—but one of the reasons it's so pleasant is because the hindrances aren't there, distorting the citta, the mind and heart. And this purity is a kind of happiness, a kind of peace. You can experience it in different ways and to different degrees. But one of the reasons why doing samatha one-pointed practices can be very supportive is because it can give us a much more obvious taste of what a pure mind-heart moment feels like. So that we can actually say, "Oh yes, there is something better than having another M&M. There is something actually more beautiful than fulfilling the next desire." And it doesn't matter if what's going on is pleasant or unpleasant—it can bring a kind of confidence in the power of the mind.

And then it can lead to attachment, because that's just how the hindrances work. But in the moment of the steadiness, the unification of mind, let yourself taste that. And I want to again make the point: it's not dependent on one-pointedness. It can be when a lot of things are going on, but there's still that steadiness that isn't distorted by kilesa.

So this I really appreciate. But it's not a state that we can cling to, and it doesn't bring us to the end of the habits of mind. Often people will see, especially in a very focused samadhi state, that it may seem really strong—and it is really strong—and the hindrances can be very far away. And then that state either ends or it decays. It's going to decay sooner or later. And sometimes it happens that within not too long a time, people are really surprised that the hindrances or the difficult patterns come back. Sometimes they come back slowly and not too strongly, but sometimes it's like they hit you upside the head. You go, "What's going on? I was so in there. I really had it. And now this lust is coming up like crazy. What's going on?"

And it's because that protection from the obsessive defilements is temporary. It's conditional. It's useful because we really can appreciate that quality of protection and that purity of heart and mind, and it strengthens our faith and trust. But it's not all. It's not the end of it.

And so the third level we talk about is the so-called latent kilesas, or the underlying ones. These are the ones that drive us crazy. These are the ones when you think you're so clear, and people tell me this story—they're walking so mindfully down to tea, and they say, "I'm not going to have anything to eat this tea." They're walking extremely mindfully past the table, and suddenly their arm reaches out and grabs something, and they go, "Who did that?"

"That wasn't me," right? It wasn't you. It was greed. It just sprang up. When the conditions are there, they say the seed is there, latent. And if the conditions are right—which are simply the conditions for greed plus a lack of awareness, a moment without mindfulness—poof, they can spring up.

Has anybody noticed that? And you think, "I was done with this pattern. I've seen through this pattern. It was over. What's the matter with me?" Don't take it personally. This is why we need all the different ways of practice. But they can really spring up.

And that's a little one. That's a funny one. But I heard this interview on NPR a couple of years ago. Two men were discussing work they were doing in prisons, in men's prisons with young men. They were calling their work "interrupting violence." I missed the details of how they were actually doing this, but they were quoting one young man in the prison. He said, "I wish I could take back that three to five seconds of my life when I did the violent act"—the act that put him in prison and completely changed his whole life.

That haunts me, actually. That three to five seconds. Latent defilements come up, and we're all so affected by the conditions and the society and where we live. We can't think we're separate from that. We can't be separate from that.

I'm not saying we never know what our latent defilements are—you've been looking at your minds for a long time; we know what's there, we know what they are. And so it's about really having trust in the potential of purification moment to moment, and the willingness to use all the tools at our disposal.

It's wisdom—paññā—that uproots latent defilements. The Buddha says they are abandoned not by acts, but by wisely seeing. This is what Thich Nhat Hanh says, what we've been saying all along: wisdom is the result of the long process of continuous awareness. You've seen that here, right?

And the difference between an obsessive defilement that's kept at bay through samādhi and one that's seen through with wisdom—you can kind of feel the difference. It feels more truly gone.

Someone gave an example, and you've all seen this. Say the old habit arises: you're seeing something, and the comparing comes, and the judgment comes, and then the self-judgment comes, and the aversion is coming, and that whole self-hatred—you know how that can happen, just like that. I know a lot of you know that. We can see it sometimes; we can be mindful while we're really in it. Or we can be really concentrated and it just doesn't quite come up.

But with wisdom, it would be different. An example—and I'm making this up—the seeing comes up. You see the seeing. The comparing comes up: "They're better, they're worse, they're doing this better." And then suddenly it's like, wow. The wisdom comes

that everything's in constant flux, in constant change. Their conditions are completely different from my conditions. What is there to compare? Comparing makes absolutely no sense.

And this isn't like a thought train. This is a sudden perception, and in that moment, the craving, the comparing, the conceit—in that moment, they just completely drop away. Completely gone. And I know, at moments like that, that's the moment of wisdom seeing through a latent kalesha.

Do you get a sense of how this works? It might come back—when it's completely uprooted it won't—but it'll come back a lot, a lot, a lot. So we keep on purifying. We keep on cultivating the steadiness of awareness, because that's what allows the wisdom to arise. Steady awareness in a moment of heart and mind that's free from kalesha.

So when we get discouraged—on retreat, off retreat—when we see that we're trying to put all our eggs in the basket of meditation, or of one particular form of meditation, and that's not available at this moment, or it's available but it's not doing what we think it ought to do, just remember there are all these other ways. Sīla, dāna, the brahmavihāras are also practices of intention. It doesn't mean you have to be overwhelmed with muditā, but every time that phrase is said, that's a movement of intention in the heart. It's different from "Oh, who cares?" It's "Oh, I really am happy for your happiness."

That's shifting the channel. That's transforming the habits in a little way.

Two other things I just want to mention. One is wise contemplation. We've mentioned it a little, and I've alluded to it, but there's a sutta from the Buddha I like where he's talking to a layman, basically asking, "You know, we're busy in our lives—what can we do to purify our minds?" And he gives six contemplations, of which I'm going to refer really to two. The other four are contemplating the three refuges. So if contemplating the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha—the beauties of those—is something that really speaks to your heart, then really do that. As I mentioned, a lot of the Burmese nuns use contemplations of the qualities of the Buddha that really inspire their faith. The other one is contemplating the devas, so if that is something that meets you, use that.

But the ones I want to highlight are recollecting your own virtues and recollecting your own generosity. I just want to read what he says. He says the same thing about both, so I'll do it with generosity. He says, "Furthermore, there is the case where you recollect your own generosity or where you recollect your own virtues." So just think-

ing about how generous you've been: "I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous." And then for virtue: "They are unbroken, unspotted, liberating, conducive to concentration."

"At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity or recollecting virtue—your own generosity, your own virtue—their mind is not overcome with greed, is not overcome with aversion, is not overcome with delusion." So he's saying in that moment you're cultivating purity of heart-mind. Their mind, their heart, heads straight, based on generosity, based on virtue. And when the heart is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones gains a sense of the meaning of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma.

"So Mahanama"—that's who he's talking to—"you should develop this recollection of generosity, this recollection of virtue, while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children." In other words, anytime—anytime that we can remember to do it.

And to me, that's something I never did. You know, just feeling lost and thinking, "Let me recollect my generosity." Does that occur to you all very much? "Let me recollect all the times I didn't act in a harmful way." This is something that's so available. It really brightens the heart. It leads us straight.

The last thing I want to mention—I know I'm going through these quickly—is coming off of Sally's talk last night on motivation: at times we can consciously work to tune into our motivation. It's always helpful, but sometimes we can consciously work to transform it in very simple ways—before, during, or after an action. That was the Buddha's advice to his son Rahula: whenever you can, notice the intention. If you notice it before an action, great. If you notice it only in the middle, good. If you notice it only after, good. But if it's wholesome, keep doing it. If it wasn't wholesome, stop doing it, even if you're in the middle.

It's also recognizing that we can sometimes consciously take the time to transform our intentions before an action, if we have time to do that. This is from Sister Chan Khong, who's the nun who's been with Thich Nhat Hanh forever. This is from her autobiography years ago. They were peace activists during the Vietnam War, but she's writing this much later. They'd been living in France, and the Vietnam War was long over. But this was a period when the Vietnamese government was arresting a lot of artists and monks and activists.

She said, "Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew that I had to do walking meditation." Is that the first thing you think when you become angry? It's not a bad idea. "Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign." Because she's quite an activist. "Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

She was involved in all kinds of activities and letter writing. And this is someone who'd been doing this since she was sixteen years old and was still doing it. We never just stop.

We say, okay, there's anger. I do want to act. Let me really cultivate non-anger before I do it. I love that. It really inspires me.

And on a more simple level, Mingyur Rinpoche suggested in one of his books something I know from Tibetan practice, which they do a lot: just as you're going through the day, here on retreat or in your life, consciously setting an intention can transform a neutral everyday activity into a really wholesome activity—a beautiful quality of heart and mind.

For example, when you're washing your hands, you might say, "May my hands become clean so that I may be of benefit to all beings." Or when we're eating, "May all beings have delicious food." The example he gives that I love is about sleeping. When you're going to bed at night, when you're going to sleep, he says when we get into bed with the mind of bodhicitta, we aspire that our sleep be the cause of increased capacity to help all beings. Isn't that great? If you do it with sleeping, you can do it with anything.

And it may seem, okay, la la la—but keep saying it, keep saying it, just like with the metta phrases. Sooner or later, you start to actually feel it a little bit. It's a wonderful practice, and it's really fun.

I want to end with some words from Eleanor Roosevelt. Last year, I was visiting a relatively new museum in Atlanta, the Museum of Civil and Human Rights. It had just opened a couple of years ago, and I found it very powerfully organized. The first two floors are all about the civil rights movements in the fifties and sixties—the Freedom Riders, and Martin Luther King, of course, because he came from Atlanta. It's very powerful and interactive. Then the top floor addresses different human rights and some of the human rights abuses going on in the world today. It was very immediate.

There was one quotation from Eleanor Roosevelt that I want to end with, because I think it really works in the sense of working to transform our motivation, even in little actions—using all the tools at our disposal, all of them, whatever is available at any moment of our life. It's all working to purify. It's all working to free our hearts and minds.

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home. So close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we will look in vain for progress in the larger world."

I think mingling our minds, our hearts with the Dharma—that's the closest to home we can get to start to activate human rights in the world.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 165

Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson illuminates how the perception of impermanence (anicca) can become a profound vehicle for liberation when it moves beyond intellectual understanding to direct insight. Drawing from the suttas, she shares the Buddha's teaching that when the perception of impermanence is fully developed and cultivated, it eliminates sensual lust, craving for becoming, ignorance, and the conceit of 'I am.'*
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> *Wilson explains the three levels of wisdom (paññā): heard wisdom (suta-mayā paññā), reflective wisdom (cintā-mayā paññā), and insight wisdom (bhāvanā-mayā paññā). She illustrates how we often remain at the intellectual level, believing we understand impermanence while our perceptions continue to assume permanence. Using vivid examples—from Magic Eye images to a friend's colored blanket—she demonstrates how perception shapes our entire experience and how steady, non-judgmental awareness allows accurate perception to arise naturally.*
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> *The talk examines three obstacles to perceiving impermanence: denial (resistance to change, particularly unpleasant feelings), misperception (seeing things as stable between their arising and passing), and inattention (the lack of continuous mindfulness). Wilson draws on the Buddha's teaching about vedanā (feeling tone) to show how our habitual reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experiences keep us trapped. She offers practical guidance for noticing assumptions of permanence in daily life and concludes with Hafiz's poem celebrating how recognizing impermanence deepens wonder rather than diminishing care.*

In the particular style of practice we've been offering here, we've been speaking about how the steadiness of mindfulness, of awareness, is the condition for wisdom to arise in the heart, in the mind. And when wisdom arises, it's wisdom that does the work of freeing habits of our mind, of freeing us from confusion, from suffering.

So I want to try and explain how that works a little bit, using steady awareness of impermanence—how wisdom into really understanding this aspect of all existence arises.

All of the path, all of the different techniques that may be offered, not only here but in all aspects of the Buddha's practice that I'm familiar with—they may come from different angles, accentuate different aspects of our experience, but they're all in service of releasing the habits of our heart and mind from the obsessive relationship to objects

and experience, from the suffering of wanting and aversion and confusion that arises from this obsessive reaction. It's like the chicken and the egg kind of thing. It just keeps going.

So all the aspects of practice are to help us see through wisdom. When wisdom recognizes the fallacy, when it senses that this clinging, this aversion, this confusion is based on inaccurate understanding, then wisdom allows it to basically drop away, evaporate.

As Steve said at the end of his talk last night, he was talking about seeing with steady awareness these strong torments of heart and mind. But that same process of steady, non-judging, non-engaged, non-involved awareness is what brings our heart-mind the wisdom to see, to understand the aspects of impermanence, of anattā or not-self, and of unreliability—the three aspects of all conditioned phenomena. Recognizing that accurately isn't depressing. It frees us from reacting and responding and trying to make ourselves happy in a way that completely doesn't work because we're misperceiving the world.

I want to use anicca, or impermanence, as a jumping off place to talk about this. The Buddha said: "Bhikkhus"—bhikkhus is the Pali word for monks, but really it means anyone who's engaged in practice, so it's us—"Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for becoming, for getting, for becoming another existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'"

Those things—that's a description of a completely awakened person who's no longer caught in the grips of self-involvement, of greed, of aversion. To me that's an incredibly powerful statement: when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

If you turn it around, it's saying that when we don't perceive impermanence, that leads to this habit of lusting for sense pleasures, of trying to become something different, something better, the sense of self that feeds the sense of "I am."

So how can just this perception of impermanence have such a powerful effect? This perception of impermanence is pointing to the nature of insight. When we talk about insight understanding, it's really about a shift of perception. It's not that when there's insight, somehow we understand intellectually. There could be insight into all kinds of things, into personal experiences in your life. You're sitting and some problem in your life is going on and suddenly you see it in a different way. Another way to deal with it you hadn't thought about. That's the shift of perception.

What the Buddha is saying with this is not that when there's deep insight understanding, the world has changed. When the Buddha awoke under the Bodhi tree, free from suffering in his mind, in his heart, he didn't wake up into a different world. It's the same old world, with the same old problems, same old people running around doing the same old stupid things. And also nice things, also compassionate things, but the same world.

When we talk about the awakening, the insight that comes through our steady practice, it's not that we become different. It's that the perception becomes accurate. It aligns with how things actually are. This is really the shift that is insight.

A simple example: you know those visual things, they used to have books called the Magic Eye, where you'd have all these blocks of color that didn't look like anything, and if you looked at it with a steady, steady gaze, but soft gaze, not trying to see, at some point all of a sudden an image would jump out like 3D soccer players. And it's still just the same blocks. Then you'd go to the next page and you think, well, let me see the 3D soccer players, and you're looking for it hard, and you don't see it. You have to just relax, but be steady. If you look and relax and then look away and then come back, it doesn't work either. But once you've seen the 3D soccer players in there, even though the next time you look you don't see it right away, you know it was there.

Because you saw it, you know it was there. So there are these two ways of perceiving, and in a way they both have their accuracy. But if you never saw the 3D soccer player—like for instance, my mother. We were in a mall one time and they had big posters of this, and she just couldn't see it. It was driving her crazy. She's like, "Come on, come on." And the tighter she got, of course, the harder it was to see it, because she's bugging her eyes out trying to see. "Relax, Ma, relax." She never did see it.

That's how it is with us and impermanence a lot of the time. This is the really powerful level of insight—the level of perception.

We've talked about perception, right? It's that simple recognition of a sense experience happening in every mind moment. Useful! It's just neutral, but it's extremely useful. If we didn't have perception, you'd walk in—well first of all, why would you walk in? You'd hear the bell ring and go, "What's that sound? What does it mean? What am I supposed to do now? Where am I? What the heck is going on?" So perception is extremely helpful.

And the second there's perception, the whole world arises around it. What we perceive, this is from the Buddha, we think about. And what we think about, we often complicate with associations and memories. This is when we get off track. But it all starts with perception, and that's extremely useful.

However, as Dilgo Khyentse said, when the sense organs encounter an object—a sound, for example, in the ear—the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. So when your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. Have you ever noticed that? When your mind is peaceful, when your heart is peaceful, free from clinging or fixation or reactivity, then you experience everything as primordially pure.

The thing is, pretty much until we start really exploring this, the tendency is we believe our perceptions. We think this is really how it is.

I'll give a simple example. I was with a friend at her house, and there was just a blanket thrown over the back of the couch. I said, "Oh, could you hand me that blue blanket?" She says, "What blue blanket?" "That blue blanket on the back of your couch." She says, "That's not blue, that's green." And we're both—I could not see it as green. She could not see it as blue. Luckily, that's pretty benign, right? We didn't come to blows or have an argument or whatever. But it's really interesting to see how quickly the whole world can come up based on perception.

There was a great example Alexis gave the other day when he was meditating in Burma and he heard that sound. Really, the accurate perception was that he didn't know what it was. But with one perception—the sound outside—came all the responses and reactions of mind, the compassion for the poor worker suffering. All of that is what we perceive, we think about, we complicate based on our experience, right? And if we don't question it, we believe this is really what's happening. Then it's so fun to be able to shift to, "No, it's the guy snoring"—and a whole different series of thoughts arise. The thoughts lead to reactions, to moods, to how we respond to the world. If they'd been talking, Alexis might have turned around and said, "Wake up, you're wasting your life, wake up!" But luckily we're in silence. And that's why we're in silence here, folks.

Perception is really powerful, and the whole world comes out just like that.

I picked up a Dharma book that I was looking for something in it. And I found a little note in this book. It had been lying around for years. I picked it up and looked at it. "Wow, that's my handwriting. This is right in the place I was looking for." So I thought, "Oh yeah, right, okay, some things don't change."

But the sense of just looking at it and seeing my handwriting in a flash—this whole sense of me and my life and my past and teaching—it just came up like that. Sense of self, my whole history, like a whole blanket of self arose. Just from the perception of seeing pencil on paper.

So it's just so interesting. With steady awareness we watch how this process works. Nothing right or wrong, we just really watch how it works. Without the steady awareness, we can so easily get caught in just totally believing our perceptions.

So, back to perception of impermanence and to the aspect of insight. The Buddha spoke about three levels of wisdom, three levels of understanding. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it frequently. They're all useful, and we kind of bounce back and forth between them, but it explains why we think we know something, but it doesn't really change how we live our life.

The first level is called *sutamayā paññā*, and it's really heard wisdom. When Steve was talking about Right View the first night and saying from the suttas that the Buddha said the first thing you need is to hear—hear it somehow—that's heard wisdom. So, say we're talking about impermanence. We've read about impermanence, we all can go, "Yeah, we hear that, everything's changing." That's heard wisdom. We may or may not believe it, but even when we do, it's still on that level.

But it's something. When Steve was talking about injecting right view, sometimes even on that level it can help. If I'm in the middle of a strong emotion, really caught in it, and I can remind myself, "Right, this is an emotion"—in that moment, I'm still really caught in it. But I'm injecting the first level of wisdom, heard wisdom, which reminds me still: it's an emotion, this isn't the whole world.

The second level grows from that first level. We really think about it. We use our intelligence, we explore it, we start noticing in our life. So in terms of impermanence—the first level, that things are changing—probably you wouldn't argue with that. Would anyone here argue with that? You wouldn't dare, would you?

This is why I wanted to pick impermanence to talk about, because on the level of the first level of wisdom, it's the most obvious one. We think, "Yeah, we know everything's changing." So why am I talking about it as this big insight that can free our heart and mind if we perceive it? We think, "I know it." But it's just that first level, and it doesn't change anything.

The second level is really thinking about it, analyzing it. You mull it over, you start to notice things. You can go outside—the sun's setting, it's impermanent. You're consciously trying to notice. And it's going a little deeper. This is important. Bringing it up might make us inquire, might give us the energy to keep cultivating awareness. But you think, "Well, okay, I'm really getting it. I'm noticing every day the sun goes down, every morning it comes back again. I notice people are wearing different clothes today, some days your hair's different—a good hair day, a bad hair day." You notice these things, unless you have no hair—then you're saved from that. But you have to shave every day, so that's a drag too.

But somehow it doesn't really change stuff.

The third level, *bhāvanāmayā paññā,* is really insight-level wisdom. That's the level where our perception—not just our thinking about it, but the moment-to-moment spontaneous perception—actually shifts, comes into alignment. You could say in a way we cellularly know, even just for a moment, that nothing is static for one fraction of a second.

And I can say that, and I've experienced that in the past, but I'm not experiencing that right now. So when I say it, that's the second level. But once there's a shift of perception where impermanence is really perceived on that immediate level—not thinking your way into it, you can't think your way into it—the perception shifts.

Of course, then it shifts back, like those magic eye things. But knowing it, having experienced it cellularly in lots of different ways, it changes something. You know somehow that the perception we don't even realize we're perceiving—that things don't change—has shifted.

We don't even recognize that—and that's what I want to talk about. But on some level, a shift occurs, and we know something in a cellular way that we didn't know before.

That's the third level of insight. Insight isn't like intellectual knowledge; it's an understanding, you could say. It's not like knowing information—those are the first two levels—but it's an understanding that simply happens. And then, in that perception that has arisen from being accurately aligned with how things are, what we perceive becomes what we think about. What we think about becomes complicated; it hardens into view.

Instead of the perception being off—actually a misperception leading to thoughts and views that are not in alignment with how things really are, taking us far away—the perception is accurate. And this is really when the perception matches experience. Then how we think about things, the response to the experience, to the situation, is appropriate.

So what happens is that wisdom abandons the strategy of clinging in the face of the perception of impermanence—not because clinging is bad, but because it doesn't make any sense. I mean, when you see the sun going down, do you break out in tears? Because it's beautiful, that's a different kind of tears, okay. But if you see the sun going down, you're not like, "Oh no! Oh no! Oh my god, it's gone!" Maybe if you're in a certain mood, but mostly probably not, right? Because it doesn't make any sense. The thought doesn't even really arise. It just doesn't make sense.

Well, that's how it works. It's not like, "Wow, everything's impermanent!" No, no, no. It's like—oh, the clinging just doesn't arise. And we're just really present, so aligned with how things are. It's not that we don't care about things. We're actually able to care. Care and attachment aren't the same thing.

When we're not attached—when it's not "I need the sun"—it's just, okay, it's beautiful. It's gone. Now it's like this. That's got its own beauty. We can just be so present when the clinging isn't there. But it's not something we can talk ourselves into.

So what allows for this shift of perception? What sets the conditions for it? Guess what it could possibly be? The steady awareness that we've been talking about. Not looking for impermanence. Not looking for anything. But this—well, we've talked about it non-stop, I don't have to say it again, but I will. The sense of settling into, relaxing into: it's like this now. It's like this now. But steady, steady, steady. Without a supposition, without an assumption of what it should be, then the truth of things reveals itself over and over and over.

So why is it so complicated? Does it seem complicated? Why is it? It's so clear—everything's changing all the time. It's so clear. Obviously, it isn't so clear, or we'd all be free.

Why is it not so clear? I want to talk a little bit about these habits of mind—the same ones Steve was talking about in all their full-blooming mess—but in a more subtle way that they show up.

What blocks the accurate perception, put it that way. So it is, of course, our old friends—visitors, but they're there a lot. The three, the big three: greed, hatred, and delusion. Delusion, confusion, greed or the tendency to cling, and resistance, fear, aversion—those three.

This is how I want to talk about it in terms of impermanence and perception. The three ways these habits show up—the habits in the heart-mind of relating to experience, particularly in terms of things changing and going away.

The first is that of denial, avoiding, leading into clinging. That's basically resistance and clinging to change, a kind of block to the clear perception of "this is gone now."

Another one is misperception—recognizing wrongly, the inaccurate perception.

And the third is inattention. Lack of steady attention feeds the perception of permanence.

So let me talk a little bit about each of these.

The first one, the kind of denial. Denial that things change. Do you ever have any experience of that at all? When something changes and you feel, "Well, this shouldn't be happening"?

There's a sutta about Assaji, who was a very well-practiced monk at the time of the Buddha. He'd had good practice, good concentration, and he's basically dying—he's sick and dying. The Buddha hears that Assaji is really upset, feeling that he's falling away, filled with remorse and fear.

The Buddha comes to him and says, "What's the problem? Are you feeling remorse and fear? Have you been harming yourself or others? Have you been breaking the precepts?"

"No, not at all."

"Well then, what's the matter?"

Assaji explains, "Formerly, when I would be meditating, when I'd be paying attention, I could really achieve stability of mind, concentration of mind, steadiness of mind. But now I can't. When I try to do it, I can't, and I'm afraid I'm just going to fall away."

And the Buddha says, basically: Hello. You're dying. Your energy, your physical experience is completely different from how it was before. The conditions that were present when you could easily get concentrated are not present now. It's not that you're falling away. And besides, concentration, focusing, isn't the liberating aspect of the path anyway. So it's not about that.

But even someone with as much understanding as Assaji—and he had the Buddha around to help him, while we're floundering around on our own—even he didn't notice. Completely different conditions are here. Of course the effect is different than before.

Have you ever noticed here, you have one day where you go for a walk in the woods and you're so clear and present and mindful? So the next day what do you do? You go walk in the woods at the same time, with the same idea that it's going to be clear and present and mindful. And it's not. You trip over roots, everything's a mess, the black flies are out, you're filled with aversion, it's raining, and you think: What happened? I had it, I knew, and it's gone. I blew it.

I'm not really exaggerating that much, am I? Yes, it's a shame, but that's how it is. And we don't really notice. It's a completely different set of experiences. You're not the same person even, and everything else is different.

These are simple examples, but denial. I read an article, a little snippet in a newspaper years ago, from some little town in Spain where the mayor said the cemeteries were completely full. There was no room to bury anyone else. So he sent out a memo to the people in the town that nobody should die until they could find more cemetery space.

That was major denial.

But the denial comes in many ways. One of the ways it comes, in my experience, is through the habit that is so deeply ingrained in all of us—this habit of resistance to unpleasant experience and leaning into the pleasant, which leads to not even noticing the neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This is something I could give a whole talk about, but I've got to condense it to two minutes. I think this is the genius, one of the genius things of the Buddha, where he says—and this is really clear in his teachings—that all these sense door experiences we're having, seeing, smelling, tasting, thinking, whatever the six are, you know them, you're experiencing them all day, constantly changing. When each one arises, just like saññā, perception, arises quite naturally in the mind, what also arises is that each experience, say a sound, is experienced by the mind as having a quality of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

It's quite quick and quite subtle. It's not inherent in the sound—it's again conditioned, how it's perceived in our particular mind stream. So this sound, one time it could be pleasant in your mind, another time it could be neutral or unpleasant. It might be pleasant for you in that moment and unpleasant for me. It's not inherent, but it's just another mental experience. And this is happening with every sense door experience of all six senses.

To me, this is genius because I never would have noticed that if I hadn't read about it, if I hadn't practiced and gotten in the habit of looking at it. And what's so brilliant is that in the not noticing, the habit comes.

He says, what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person? Both types of people experience painful feelings, pleasurable feelings, and neutral feelings. It's the same. It's not that when you get awakened all the unpleasant stuff stops. I would just like to say that again—it doesn't stop. The same amount of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral keeps happening.

So what's the difference? He's saying, and I'm shortening it, the tendency in the mind when we're not recognizing—and he starts with the unpleasant—when we don't recognize unpleasant experience, say a physical unpleasant experience, then the tendency of the unawakened person is as if they were shot by an arrow that sticks you in the leg. And on top of that, he says, you yell and scream and beat your breast and pull your hair and lament. That's the language. So basically we get all upset because it hurts. Can you relate to that so far? Yeah, a little bit, right.

So it's as if we shoot ourselves with a second arrow. And that goes on, and it just seems normal. I mean, it is normal. It's, unfortunately, our habit. Then it becomes a tendency, a habit that underlies the mind—resistance to unpleasant experience. That just feels normal.

And then, in the presence of unpleasant experience, the only escape a worldling knows, someone who doesn't really see clearly, the only escape we know from unpleasant feeling is to go try and get a pleasant feeling. So we lust after pleasure. We move away from the unpleasant and go look for something pleasant. Again, can you relate to this at all, even a little? I'm not saying good or bad—I'm saying this becomes the habit.

And so underlying the mind becomes this habit of craving for pleasant. We don't realize as it really is the nature of what's going on, or the nature of the feelings themselves. They come, they go. They just last for a second. But in a way we're putting all our eggs in the basket of getting more pleasant feeling, thinking that's going to make us happy.

This is where the whole dynamic of craving for pleasant and pushing away unpleasant arises. And it's so deeply in us.

I mean, it's just so deeply in us. I'm not saying this is good or bad. If you had a choice, you could tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant. Neutral—maybe you would notice neutral once in a while. The Buddha's not saying who cares, you can tell the difference. If you had a choice, you wouldn't go for the unpleasant.

But so often this is arising in every moment, and when we don't know it, we're just on this ping-pong—oh, get me away from that, go to this. And the whole way that we tend to perceive what's good and what's bad tends to be based on what's pleasant and what's unpleasant.

Check it out. If you're having a good sitting, it's rare—unless you've really been playing with this for a long time—it's rare that there was a lot of unpleasant stuff going on. Right? Usually, it was pleasant. As you go on and on, though, and as mindfulness and awareness get stronger, awareness doesn't need to be touched. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—equal. Awareness can meet it equally. When we can start to take refuge in that steady awareness, rather than taking refuge in running away from unpleasant and needing to get more pleasant—that's been our refuge so much, you know. Even just to the point of, I don't know, you're a little bored, you go to the refrigerator. Pick up the phone. None of these things are bad. The things aren't bad necessarily. But just watch. I'll talk more about this tomorrow morning, but watch as you go through the day. How much of what we pick is to have more pleasant feeling?

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a great Thai meditation master, a forest monk who died in the late 1990s—he said, just first, just notice pleasant feeling, how ephemeral. A feeling tone just lasts like that, you know? And then just kind of contemplate all the decisions you've made in your life. How many of them have been based on moving towards more pleasant feeling? He says his guess was ninety-five percent. Now it's not saying bad; it's just that we're giving pleasant feeling a power it doesn't have to make us happy. And in terms of our understanding of what's right or wrong, good and bad, it's so based on pleasant and unpleasant.

So back to the denial of change. So often, when something beautiful or someone we love dies or goes away, or something that's important to us changes, or our body changes, or we get sick, or your car gets wrecked—or even down to, you know, you didn't get the second piece of pizza. I mean, it can range from really life-changing to little. But let's go big. It brings up a lot of sadness, you know, a lot of grief often. Especially when someone we love dies, it brings up grief. And grief and sadness are pretty unpleasant.

And if we're not aware, if we don't have steady mindfulness, the habit is to try and move away from that, to not be at ease with just resting at ease in the sadness. And even deep underneath it, almost an unconscious interpretation sometimes: something's wrong because I feel sad. Right? This shouldn't be happening in some way. Even though we all know everything ends and everyone gets sick and everyone dies. We all know that. But as if when we feel grief about it, there's something wrong, and there's a subtle moving away—let's not look at it, let's not look at it.

So for me, I feel like grief, sadness—if we can open to that as part of life... You know, it's not that "Oh yes, she will not be seen by me again." I mean, the Buddha could say that maybe. But for me, when someone I love is gone, there's a deep sadness. But we don't have to be in denial, thinking either there's something wrong with us or something wrong with that situation. It's like this now. And being able to just, with gentle awareness—sadness is like this. Grief is like this; it's part of being human. You know, it's a sign of love, the love really, in some ways.

So then we don't have to go into denial, try and resist—that's the resistance to the unpleasant—and then the craving for the pleasant, you know: okay, let me go party so I don't have to feel unhappy.

This is kind of weird, but I just read this headline yesterday about the English royal family. Not like I follow them so much, but I just read this headline about Prince Harry, whose mother, Princess Diana, died almost twenty years ago. He was just saying how when she died—I guess he was twelve or something—he just basically pretended like nothing had happened.

He just couldn't deal. So now he's speaking out for mental health. He's in his late twenties or something, but he said for years and years, up until just a few years ago, he basically said, "Well, okay, that happened." Boom, now everything's fine, and I'm going to play and be a boy and fly planes and do all this stuff, and everything's great. And that's the other way—completely going after pleasure and just pretending this never happened. Until now, you know, the stuff he's starting to get in touch with, the grief and the sadness, and he has to learn how to be with it. That it's quite okay. It's part of life.

There's a lovely story in the suttas when the Buddha was dying. He announced he was going to die in three months or something, and his attendant Ananda, who had been his attendant for twenty-five years, his cousin, very close—and if you haven't read any of the Buddha's suttas and you do, Ananda is like this really lovable human character. He humanizes things. He's not perfect. He makes mistakes. He's very friendly. He's

always trying to help people get access to the Buddha. You can't help but like Ananda. A lot of the other monks and some of the nuns too, they're kind of remote, but Ananda feels really human.

So the Buddha's announced this, and then he's giving a Dhamma talk to a bunch of monks, and he looks around and goes, "Where's Ananda?" And it turned out, they went and found him—Ananda had gone to his hut. And Andy Olinsky, who was the director of the study center for many years, a Pali scholar, tells me this is a famous artistic rendering of Ananda: he was standing in his doorway, just leaning against the doorpost and weeping and weeping and saying, "Oh, what's going to become of me? My teacher, who's been so compassionate to me, he's going away. What will I do without him?"

So this image of Ananda's grief is very famous. And of course the Buddha calls him back. "Ananda, haven't I told you? Everything that comes together goes apart. All conditions change." But with so much compassion—not "you stupid jerk"—but with total, total love and compassion. I love that because it's like, this is human. It's our conditioning.

And if we can really understand there's pleasant, there's unpleasant, neutral, we don't need to run from the unpleasant. When we just—it's like this now. It's unpleasant, but we're present, we're alive, we're whole, we're really completely in tune with this is how it is in this moment. And it again will change. It's not like, "Oh, I know, I'm sad now, and then it'll change." That's a resistance. Just like this now. And it will change.

So when we notice that resistance, let it be a wake-up call. And then it's not that we stop caring—we're really much more present, more free to respond in an appropriate, kind, compassionate way.

That's one way, I think, that perception of impermanence isn't seen—because we're lost in that reactivity, the fear of the unpleasant, going for the pleasant, and thinking that's just the natural response. It's steady awareness that lets us see through that. And that simple willingness to just, as the Tibetans say, rest at ease in whatever arises. So what we're saying is just relax. It's just like this now. You don't have to think about the past, the future—just this moment. It's like this now. And the way things really are shows itself.

The Buddha said at one point, "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." I love that. Cool and peaceful—kind of neutral.

We're still in that wanting the pleasant, away from the unpleasant. Cool and peaceful sometimes isn't so attractive. So see where you are with that.

That's one way to start noticing how the perception of impermanence gets blocked. The second level where we misperceive—where we actually are perceiving something, where even intellectually on the first level we might think we're seeing it as impermanent—is this: we see something, we see its beginning, and then we see it end. So we say everything's impermanent. This retreat had a beginning, and soon it's going to have an end. Maybe not soon enough for some of you in a particular mood. In another mood you might say, "Oh, I could do this forever." And five minutes later it's, "Please God, get me out of here." We tend not to notice how that changes.

But we see that something has a beginning and an end, and we think, "Oh, I see change." But what we don't notice—the misperception—is that we're not noticing the momentariness of change. I remember hearing a talk by the Dalai Lama once where he really accented this. He said, "We see something arise, then it exists for a while, and then it passes away." I thought, wait a minute—come back. This "exists for a while"? No. There's no existing for a while. Everything is changing momentarily.

This perception of "it's like this, and then it's going to change"—this has been my life, I've been like this for sixty-six years, and at some point I'm going to die, so I know there's change. But my perception might be, you know, even though I look pretty different from how I looked when I was five years old, every day is different—but we don't notice that so much. So we have the intellectual sense that we're perceiving impermanence, but we're not. We're seeing this steadiness, and then we're really surprised when suddenly it ends. That's a misperception. Endings take us by surprise.

The Buddha said once, picking up a little bit of dirt underneath his fingernail, "There's not even this much of form, of mind, that is permanent, that is stable, that is not subject to change, that will remain the same. Not even this much." He said, "If there was even this much form, mind, perception—anything that was this permanent—this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be seen. But there isn't even that much that's stable, that's permanent."

We don't like that too much. The mind that's looking for ease—this habit of looking for ease in the pleasant, in the comfortable, in knowing how it is—we tend to like that. I tend to like that. I want to settle down and not be shaken up all the time. I want to rest at ease. Not in whatever arises—I want it to stop arising. I want it to just be kind of mellow, and I'll rest at ease. So there's that clinging that comes in, even to just a particular moment. We don't notice how it arises, how the conditions are always changing.

Someone was describing to me what I think is a great example. A time-lapse video of a plant growing—you see the plant growing, it turns, the buds come and the flower comes and the leaves come and the fruit comes, and it all just keeps going. There's no

one moment that it's stable. There's not a moment saying, "Now this is the plant, now this is the flower, now this is the bud." It's always one thing morphing and transmuting into the next, into the next, into the next. There's no way you can extract something out and say it's discrete, that it's just that. And even so, how can you separate the plant from the soil or the air or the sun or the water, even if you're not seeing all of that?

It's all coming together all the time. Same with us. I mean, that is exactly the same with us.

On the actual visual level, walking through our daily life, we don't really see that so much. But sometimes in the quietness of meditation, when you're just sitting and feeling sensations, sometimes you can notice. It's ch-ch-ch-ch—lots of sensations. Some of you have mentioned not just sensations, but the whole six sense doors. You know, there's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, thinking, thinking, sensation—and stuff's just coming, coming, coming. Someone said in a group, "Is it going to stop?" No, it's not going to stop. This is it.

We start to see sakkāya—just the constant morphing, arising and passing, arising and passing, every instant. This is what's going on in our life. When we're fighting it, you know, the search for a resting place—"Please, God, let it stop"—there are times it feels like that. That's burning. But when we can meet it with "It's just like this now," and then "The next is like this now"—when the clinging goes away, the trying to stop it, trying to slow it down, trying to just make it be what it is for a certain amount of time—when that goes away, the sense of dissonance, the sense of being at odds and in contention with life, with experience, that also is gone. And we can really respond in an appropriate manner with sensitivity, with tenderness, with seeing things the way they are rather than the way we wish they could be.

The third level of delusion, of moha, which supports not recognizing impermanence, the perception, is inattention. So this is really where the steady awareness comes in. The steadiness, the continuity of awareness, the continuity of mindfulness, is actually the tool—it's the tool that reveals life as it is. Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." I love that.

So we're paying attention, we're really cultivating. It's not in our power to be aware every moment, but the amount of clear aspiration and intention each of us is putting in, the fact that you're still here—that's how we know there's a deep commitment. Because, you know, if you're not really trying to cultivate awareness, it's pretty unbearable hanging out here. You're just eating and you can't talk to anybody and there's nothing to do. It's not really what you would choose. So we know—plus we talk to you all every day too, and it's really quite inspiring.

The steadiness of awareness starts to reveal ways that we've been assuming permanence without realizing it. One big way in our experience through the day is the sense of our personality—sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. Steve was talking a little bit about this. People say, "Oh, I'm such an angry person," for example. And you think about all the times you've been angry. There's an assumption of permanence about that. Remembering the past, imagining the future, but not really a sensitive moment-to-moment-to-moment awareness. Because if we cultivate that, we see there's no statement like that we can make that's really true, except for in this particular moment.

A good friend was describing an experiment she did. She'd been practicing for a long time and she was working somewhere with other people. She was a cook, and they were telling her, "You know, you're such an aversive person. You're a real aversive personality and you're just aversive all the time." And she was like, "Yeah, I am an aversive person. I know I'm an angry person." But she said, "Let me check." So she took one day to just sit and not work. She said, "I'm just going to watch the mind. Just watch what's coming up in the mind."

And of course, this is how it's going to be when you're just steady with it. She said, yeah, angry thoughts came up—a lot of them. But she said, maybe it was ten percent of the day. There were plenty of moments of appreciation, moments of just being neutral, being hungry. There were lots of generous moments in the heart and mind. There were lots of moments of love and compassion. How could she say she's an angry person, you know?

But think back on the day-to-day. Or if you go to bed at night, do you ever go to bed at the end of the day and go, "Oh, this has been such a hard day"? Or "I've been sleepy all day." A lot of times people come in and say they've been sleepy all day in an individual interview.

I say, "Really? What about at lunch?" "Well, no, I wasn't sleepy then." "Were you sleepy every single sitting? Were you sleeping?" "No." "When?" "Well, the sitting before breakfast I was sleepy. And at four o'clock I was a little bit sleepy." "And?" "Well, that was it."

But without the steady awareness, we make these assumptions. We think, "I'm angry," like my friend. So even if it's not manifesting, we think it's lurking under there. We believe it's our true nature—it just isn't showing up right now. Maybe I'm feeling compassionate, but that's a scam. What's really under there is this angry, worthless person. And I know it's going to show up again.

This is assuming permanence. This is misperception. What's happening right now? This is where we can start to trust the simplicity of awareness rather than the assumptions we make about everything.

I want to offer some ways of noticing when you're assuming permanence. If you're relating to any experience that comes up in the day with the thought, "Oh no, how is it going to be like this for the rest of the retreat?"—have you ever had that thought? Whether it's a beautiful experience or a difficult one. Often it doesn't even last five minutes. "How am I going to get through the day feeling like this?" Or a little twinge comes in your knee and it's, "Oh my God, this is it for the rest of the retreat. I might as well hang it up." And it doesn't even turn into anything. Notice how you relate to experiences like that.

With steady awareness, you can start to see the habit of assuming permanence—fear, anxiety, self-doubt projected into the future, brought up from the past. It's just a particular moment that we notice and highlight. Notice when you do that. Notice when you try to repeat a beautiful experience, like I talked about going into the woods, where we think we just have to do that and that's how it's going to be—not seeing that conditions are constantly changing.

You can't step in the same river twice. The same person can't step in the same river twice, because you're not the same person from one second to the next.

During the last three-month course, the five teachers would have dinner together every night in the dining room. We know each other for years—thirty years. We know each other so well. But every night it's different. We're each in a different mood. We've had different experiences. We come together as a team and might think it's all the same, but every year it's different because we're never the same person. All five of us are five different people with five different experiences. You can't have the same thing twice. Really noticing that all causes and conditions are constantly changing—physical, mental, environmental.

Also notice when you're experiencing something difficult and waiting for it to go away. Or something beautiful—the beautiful ones you notice when they go, because you suffer. The difficult ones, say you're anxious, and then suddenly it's lunchtime. You're having a nice lunch, thinking about this and that, taking a walk. Then later you realize, "Oh, I was so anxious before. What happened to it?" You didn't notice it was gone.

But when you do notice it's gone, take a moment to really register the gone-ness with awareness.

To me, that's really important. Not just, "Oh yeah, it's gone, that's fine, la la la." Register that it really isn't here. Not that idea that it's under there somewhere, but you don't want to look for it because surely you'll see it—you know it's there. Register: it really isn't here now. It's like this now. It's really different and constantly changing. Let it in. Conditions are always changing.

Ajahn Chah had a great practice. He would just say to anything going through the day: "And this is uncertain." So, this is uncertain. How we assume—you know, you assume I'm going to stop at 8:30? You don't know. It's uncertain. I don't know either. They're hoping, but... I've got to talk fast. But it's more amazing that the schedule actually goes on as we think, because this is uncertain. We never know. And we all know a million stories about sudden amazing things—horrible or beautiful things that happen. I'm not going to tell any. But just: this is uncertain. I wonder, it says on the menu what lunch is going to be tomorrow, but this is uncertain. Maybe it'll be tempeh again. It's uncertain.

Anyway. All right, I am going to stop at 8:30—you're lucky.

But the thing I want to say is that these are just some ways that the perception of anicca, of impermanence, is blocked by the habits of mind—of misperception, delusion, not recognizing accurately—fed by the habits of greed, of clinging, and avoidance of unpleasantness. From that deep, deep habits of not recognizing unpleasant, pleasant, and neutral. All of that seen through with the simple steadiness of moment-to-moment awareness. Not trying to see through, just the willingness to drop into this moment just as it is, free from expectation, free from judgment. That's what we're practicing.

And that's what's so beautiful to me—not just about the Dharma, but about the way things are. When we recognize accurately what arises, it isn't like, "Oh well, who cares, everything's changing, the hell with it." And that's what people are often afraid of. If I really realize things are changing and I'm not attached, I won't care about anything. But it's just the reverse. Like I was saying with the sunset—the sense of when we're not afraid something's going to go, when we know it's going to go. So the clinging doesn't come, and we're free to just be fully present with tenderness, appreciating. The beauty, the poignancy—even in the sadness there's a sense of being fully present and alive in it. Kind of like really opening to the wonder and the mystery, rather than just trying to keep it all copacetic and as comfortable as we can, and when a big change comes maybe I'll be ready for it.

Just this. Just this.

I want to end with this poem that expresses that to me, from Hafiz:

Deepening the Wonder

Death is a favor to us, but our scales have lost their balance. The impermanence of the body should give us great clarity, deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes of this mysterious existence we share and are surely just traveling through.

If I were in the tavern tonight, Hafiz would call for drinks, and as the master poured, I would be reminded that all I know of life and myself is that we are just a mid-air flight of golden wine between his pitcher and his cup.

If I were in the tavern tonight, I would buy freely for everyone in this world, because our marriage with the cruel beauty of time and space cannot endure very long.

Death is a favor to us, but our minds have lost their balance. The miraculous existence and impermanence of form always makes the illumined ones laugh and sing.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 166

A Wise Person Is Known By Their Actions

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a question that often arises in practice: if the heart-mind is free from greed, hatred, and delusion, what remains? Drawing from the Buddha's teachings, she demonstrates that wisdom naturally gives rise to beautiful wholesome qualities—renunciation (nekkhamma), loving-kindness (mettā), and compassion (karuṇā)—which form the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Intention (sammāsaṅkappa).*
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> *Wilson shares the Buddha's own account from the suttas of how he observed his thoughts, dividing them into two classes: thoughts of sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty on one side, and thoughts of renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty on the other. Through diligent awareness, he noticed that unwholesome thoughts naturally subsided when clearly seen, while wholesome thoughts could be sustained without harm. As the Buddha taught, whatever we frequently think and ponder becomes the inclination of the mind.*
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> *Through powerful contemporary stories—from Maha Ghosananda's teaching of mettā in Cambodian refugee camps to a dinner party transformed by non-complementary behavior—Wilson illustrates how this ancient wisdom applies to modern life. She emphasizes that true renunciation is not external giving up but inner contentment, and that mettā, as Ajahn Sumedho describes it, is simply witnessing the unpleasant without creating anything around it. This steady awareness, meeting each moment with openness rather than reactivity, is the very essence of the path.*

So tonight, I want to talk about something that came up last night. A couple of people said things, wondering, you know, if in the heart-mind there's no greed, hatred, and delusion, is it just like a big, vast wasteland? And that question actually comes up a lot. I find it quite poignant. People have said to me, not here, but elsewhere, "If there's no greed and aversion, what do I do? Just sit in my room for the rest of my life?" It touches me—we're so immersed in those habits that become the intention for action that we say, "Well, what else could there be?"

So I'll say there is something else. And I want to talk about that tonight.

The Buddha was very clear. One of his statements is: "A wise person is characterized by their actions. A fool is characterized by their actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's discernment shines."

So this isn't just an esoteric practice that we can engage in because we have the time and can really watch all these subtle movements of mind and clinging and aversion. It's not just a mind game. Buddhism isn't just a mind game—it's really about the bottom line: how we act in the world, with ourselves, with others in relationship, is how the understanding, the wisdom of heart and mind, shows.

And that's because, as the Buddha often said, intention is the seed of all action, the heart of all action, and it comes from the mind. I'm sure you've heard this, the most famous opening of the Dhammapada: "All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted, impure mind—basically a mind of *kilesa*—and suffering follows, as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox. All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never-departing shadow."

So knowing, being aware of what's arising in the mind-heart—same word, you know, in the Pali, *citta*, mind-heart—knowing what's arising, knowing the habits, what gives rise to the mental intention that gives rise to action: this is the seed of freedom from suffering in our own mind and heart, and also in how we relate with the world.

One of my favorite quotes comes from Maha Ghosananda. He's died now, but he was a Cambodian monk, a peace activist, sort of like the Cambodian Thich Nhat Hanh. After the Khmer Rouge had basically killed millions of people in Cambodia and destroyed most of the nunneries and monasteries, people were all living in refugee camps in Thailand. He was a Cambodian monk, but he had been out of the country during the years this was happening. Most of his family members were killed, so it's not that he wasn't touched by this.

He would go into the refugee camps, and as Cambodia had been essentially, largely a Buddhist country, people had a familiarity and respect for the Buddha's teaching and for monks. He would just go and start talking about *metta*—the core teaching of the Buddha: hatred is never ended by hatred, only by love alone. Can you imagine going into a refugee camp where everyone's there because their family's been killed and saying that? Coming not from his head, but from what he really knew.

He led peace marches through Cambodia after that. And once, in a speech at a demonstration against landmines, he said: "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts. So to understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to remove them in the world."

Really, this is where we start. And it may seem daunting, but I want to connect it now to just what we've been doing here—this whole practice of steady awareness, watching all the subtle and not-so-subtle habits of our mind. We've been emphasizing noticing the *kilesa* habits, but there are also many beautiful, wholesome habits of mind, which I'll talk about in a minute.

But we can have—have you noticed how we can have a really good intention? Like understanding the landmines in our hearts. We can have a really good intention: "I'm not going to get angry anymore." How does that work for you?

But we mean it, don't we? We say it because we don't really know—not just intellectually, but on that *bhavanamaya-paññā* level—how these habits of mind work. We don't really know deeply the habits of our mind.

And without wisdom, the wisdom that arises from steady mindfulness, steady awareness... really, the wisdom sees the false lure of greed, the false lure of aversion and hatred as a response to difficult situations. It sees through that. And that seeing through is what allows for the natural emergence of the beautiful, of the wholesome, that the Buddha talked about. I'll get there in a minute.

But until we really are recognizing moment to moment our habits, I like to say, they drive the bus. We don't think so, but just that sense of, "I'm not going to get angry anymore." You leave here: "I'm going to sit every day at 7:30 in the morning." We know how hard that is, right? Even when we really mean it.

Or a great example from a retreat here, when U Tejaniya was here one time. A woman said in a group—so since it was twenty people, I feel okay to share it. She was saying, "I'm really watching the habit of my mind, and I went into the dining room at lunch here, and the menu's up on the blackboard. The menu was something that I know is really not good for me, that I'm allergic to, that makes me feel unwell." So wisdom was there. She said, "Well, I'm not going to eat that." That was wisdom in the mind. But then somehow she filled her plate with that stuff and ate it. She was asking, "How come? There was wisdom. How could I do that?"

And Tejaniya, being as he was, said, "Well, superficial wisdom, real kilesa."

And so this is where the sense of bringing the awareness along with us, while the unwholesome habits are running, is where the wisdom starts to come. But what I'm assuming she did—I don't know, but it sounds like—you go in, you have the wise thought, and then you think, "Well, that was good enough, basically. I had the wise thought." I

mean, you don't really think that, but that's what happens. And awareness goes on a holiday. And you're sitting there eating whatever it is that made her ill. And then you go, "How could that happen?"

So part of the job of awareness is—it's not going to automatically stop that. We can't stop the habits with an act of will. We know. We try, and we'll keep trying. You're not going to stop trying. I guess it's better to at least recognize it's unwholesome and try to stop it than not know. But generally we say, "Okay, that's wisdom, I've done it, done, dusted," and we stop paying attention. So that's how it happens: "I really wasn't going to get angry the next time my partner did that totally stupid thing. But somehow I did, even though I was going to cultivate compassion."

So, you know, they're good ideas, but we really need the steadiness of awareness that isn't judging. That's why when someone comes in and says they've been watching how aversion was coming up in the retreat here, and they describe seeing it all, and they think they were failing—I say, "That's great." I mean, awareness is watching all of that. And I can see people kind of go, "Geez, whatever I say, she's just going to say awareness is watching it. That's a big help." But I only say it if I mean it. And it is great that awareness is watching.

Of course, then we think, "Okay, I saw it once, right? That should be enough." Don't we say, "I saw it already. It's not going to come back"? But some people start to notice, as the mind gets quieter, the heart gets quieter on retreat, and as the awareness is getting more momentum, spreading out—

being in a hurry, the mind thinks then everything should get better. And what people often comment—because it's true—they say, "My God, I'm just seeing craving everywhere I turn around." Anybody notice that? Yeah, right. How could it possibly be so much? And then, if we're taking it personally, we go into some story, trying to push it away or beat ourselves up or think there's something wrong with us.

But the Buddha, out of the whole field of experience for the second noble truth, the cause of suffering—he picked *tanha*, craving. It must come up once in a while. It must have a big effect in our life. So when we start to see how often it's coming, I'm serious, that's when the wisdom mind is starting to kick in. It's like, "Look at that." The awareness can keep on watching it. It starts to—maybe not as fast as we want—but it starts to lose its glitter, its false promise, even a little bit.

This is what we're doing here, and it's not just esoteric playing with the mind. This is to really see and know what our habits are. Our particular ones. I mean, they all come down to greed, hatred, and delusion—and that's not particular. This is how human

minds work. But as Steve said, they're habits. They're not the only possibility. Here they shine up more because we're looking at them, but that's great, because in our daily life—like that woman eating all that food—they're in the background. And that's often what gives rise to intentions, to action, if we don't know, if we're not aware.

So even when we can, on some level, control—like using the precepts—that's great. We can make a commitment not to act in certain harmful ways, and hopefully for all of us that hasn't been super hard: not to kill, not to steal. Well, if you had a tick on you, you know, at least you'd look at what was going on in the mind—and that's the point, right? So we do make some commitments: "I'm not going to do this, I'm going to refrain from that." And we can do that in life on a gross level.

But on a more subtle level, when we're not aware of how these habits work, when we don't really see them, when we've just continued our habit of looking away when they come up—then if the seeds are there in a situation that's unexpected, they can sprout.

There's a quotation I say a lot from a book I read, because it really touched me. It was by a man named Hassan Bayev, a Chechen surgeon. If you remember in the 90s, there was a big civil war between Chechnya—which is part of Russia, an Islamic part—and Russia. It was very violent, very horrible.

So he was a Chechen surgeon who had been living in Russia doing surgery, but when the war started, he came back to Chechnya, to Grozny, the main city, just to work in the hospital and offer his skills. The whole book was called *The Oath*, and it was just about his experience, which was more horrible than we can even imagine. The conditions sounded about like the mid-1800s here in terms of medical facilities. And he was the only surgeon after a while in this hospital.

He would treat whoever came, from either side—the Chechen patriots, the Russian foot soldiers, the Russian officers, anybody who came. And because he wasn't taking sides, he said, "I'm a Chechen patriot, but I'm not taking sides in terms of healing people." So he was actually under danger from both sides. He ended up being kidnapped, had a very severe concussion, his life was threatened, and he had to escape to Boston. It was actually the Chechen side that kidnapped him and hurt him.

But the point I'm getting to—just to give you the picture—he said: in a situation you've never been in before, where he'd never held a gun, never been in such danger, he said, "You don't know how you'll behave." And he said, "I was fortunate because I

have my surgeon's oath not to harm." He felt so clear in his heart, in that wisdom. He knew it wasn't just an idea but that in his heart-mind he was committed to non-harming. He said, "I felt very fortunate I had that."

I think it's a wise thing to say. When we're in a really difficult situation we've never been in, the habits of fear and anger that come up in response to difficulty, in response to the unpleasant—they zoom up. Or the habits of greed that come up when there's just something we want so much to get away from. They just come up. The seeds are there.

So it's the deep aspect of our steady awareness practice. Seeing all this is what's going to free us from that.

I was listening to NPR a couple of years ago, an interview with two men discussing work they were doing with young men in prison. They were doing a project called Interrupting Violence. They were talking about some of the young men who were in prison for really intensive crimes—murder, assault—in prison for a long time.

And just a quotation from one young man, very young but in prison for maybe life, if not many years. He said, "I wish I could take back that three to five seconds when I acted in that violent way."

It gives me the chills, you know?

I might think I wouldn't do something violent, but you don't really know until you really know. It can't be theoretical; it can't be what we wish. It has to be that we've trusted awareness—the steadiness of it, the willingness to stay with what's going on in our mind.

And this is where the beautiful part comes in. Through wisdom, through that steady awareness, as we've said, it allows for, gives the condition for, wisdom—clear seeing, just recognizing what's going on, the truth of things. It lets wisdom arise.

The natural effect of wisdom, when there's wisdom-awareness-mind turned toward aversion or clinging—if there's really enough wisdom in that moment, it's not feeding the kilesa. You can be aware of the kilesa, but it doesn't get stronger and stronger. Wisdom can watch how it behaves, and it can fade out. The kilesa, not the wisdom. Sometimes the kilesa goes and the wisdom fades too. But this is really how wisdom works. We see it clearly.

When the kilesa fades in terms of an intention as a motivation to action, what the Buddha describes is how the three unwholesome thoughts or intentions that lead to action can transform with wisdom. We can try to transform them by wanting to, by mak-

ing a resolution in our mind that we're going to do it. But when there's really strong wisdom that sees through the greed, the ill will, the thoughts of cruelty, it does in a moment naturally transform.

The Buddha talked about three—there's a whole sutta where he talks about wise thought. Thoughts of greed and thoughts of lust transform in the light of wisdom-awareness to thoughts or intentions of renunciation, of generosity. Thoughts of ill will naturally shift when they're seen through. It's not like you're just left with this big empty void. The response, the quality that comes in the aware, awake, responsive heart-mind at that point, would be one of metta, of friendliness—or if it's been more a cruel kind of thought, of compassion.

The Buddha was exploring this in his own mind. I want to share his attitude. This is one of the suttas where he's talking about his practice before he became a Buddha. He starts it out by saying, "When I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva..." So his unenlightened bodhisattva was pretty good, you know, but he's describing his practice.

I want to read a little, because listen to the tone he's saying it in. He said, "Suppose I divide my thought into two classes. On one side are thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty. On the other side, thoughts of renunciation"—which is really like the clinging evaporates—"non-ill will," which is metta, "non-cruelty," which is compassion.

So you see, noticing these two kinds of thoughts—and even in saying it I can see in my own mind how just even a little subtly comes up: "Well, these are the bad ones, and these are the good ones," with a little hint of aversion. Maybe not you, but...

So he's just noticing these two different kinds, and then he's just practicing. He says, "As I abided, diligent, ardent, and resolute"—this is the language that's in the Satipatthana Sutta. He's not saying, "As I was lolling around under a tree having a nice tea and spacing out." He's saying, "As I abided, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of sensual desire arose in me, and I understood thus: this thought has arisen."

Is that what we say? "You're filled with greed!" No—"I understand a thought of greed has arisen." We could follow the Buddha's example.

And so the awareness keeps looking. "This leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom. It causes me difficulties. It leads away from Nibbana." But he's not shaking a stick at himself. He's looking at the qualities that come up in his mind with this thought of greed. "And as I considered thus, it subsided in me, in my mind, in my heart." He's just noticing.

Same with thoughts of ill will, same with thoughts of cruelty. As he's abiding, ardent and diligent, thoughts of ill will come up, thoughts of cruelty come up. And he just notices them, just like that, and says, "Oh yes, when this thought of cruelty is here, it's for my own affliction. It gets in the way of Nibbana." He understood that.

Not intellect—I understood that. And in understanding it, it starts to fade. It fades out.

Then on the reverse, he noticed the thought of renunciation arose. And as he abided thus, he thought: "This thought of renunciation has arisen. It does not lead to my own affliction or others' affliction. It aids wisdom, does not cause difficulty, leads to Nibbana. If I think and ponder upon this thought, even for a night, even for a day, even for a night and a day, I see nothing to fear from it."

So this is a thought. He's not saying, "Bad thought, go away." He said if he was pondering this thought for twenty-four hours, he sees nothing to fear from it. But—he's so practical—but with excessive thinking and pondering, I might tire my body. And when the body is tired, the mind becomes disturbed. So I quieted my mind. So practical! Yet there's no judgment going on. He's just seeing how it works. That's what wisdom does.

And then this is the famous line: "Whatever a bhikkhu, a practitioner, frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind. If one frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of cruelty or ill-will, one abandons the thought of non-cruelty to cultivate the thought of cruelty, and the mind inclines to thoughts of cruelty." And just the reverse. If one thinks and ponders about thoughts of compassion, then in that moment the mind has abandoned thoughts of cruelty and it will incline to thoughts of compassion.

It makes sense, right? It's not rocket science really. But it's this willingness to just keep looking. And that's what's so beautiful—what I appreciate is that wisdom sees: "Wow, this thought of greed is really an intention of greed. It brings you to act on it. It causes suffering for myself and others." Just noticing that, not with a big stare. And noticing too that the thought of renunciation actually brings happiness to myself and others.

So I want to talk just a little bit about each of those three, to support bringing the same steady awareness to noticing the wholesome, to noticing the beautiful qualities when they're present in the citta, in the heart-mind. And realizing that just as awareness-wisdom starves the unwholesome—to use the Buddha's language—wise attention to the wholesome feeds it, strengthens and supports it.

This is the reason Guy Armstrong once said, in a talk he was giving, that he thinks it's a beneficent universe. And I was sitting there in my "the world is dukkha" mode, thinking, "Beneficent universe?" But I saw what he was saying. It's like it's the natural order of things that when there's steady awareness and wisdom and clear seeing, the heart-mind inclines to the wholesome. It's natural. We can help it along, but it will happen naturally. So don't believe me—but look. Keep looking. And we'll see how it happens even here on retreat.

I want to say a few things first about the intention of renunciation. These intentions—renunciation, generosity, metta, friendliness, non-greed, non-ill will, non-cruelty, compassion—are actually the second step of the Eightfold Path. The first stage being Right View, which we've talked about quite a bit, leading to sammā-saṅkappa, which is variously translated as Right Thought or Right Intention. And these three are specifically named as the Right Intention that arises from Right View, from Right Understanding.

So renunciation—it doesn't mean what some people might think. We tend to think of renunciation as external, as a giving up of things. Going into the monastery with a narrow wooden bed and nothing else—that's renunciation. And we think, well, that doesn't really appeal. As the Buddha said, his heart did not leap up at the thought of renunciation when he first heard about it. He didn't really understand. But as he came to understand it, that really changed.

What I want to say about renunciation is that it's wise intention. An intention is what's inside the mind and heart; how it manifests in the world can have many different forms. So it's not about the external giving up of things so much as the inner contentment of being with what is—that allows for this feeding of greed to just dissolve. Because the greed starts to be seen as a cause of dissonance, of suffering. And the allowing of that to simply evaporate brings a real sense of joy and peace in whatever kind of simplicity.

So exploring that internally. Someone, again, was saying to Tejaniya, who's a monk—and he became a monk later in life. He's not one of the Burmese monks who started when he was seven years old; he'd had a whole life. Which is part of why he really pushes this practice of noticing, this gentle awareness of everything, because he did this in his daily life, not as a monk.

So they were saying anyway, all this projection—"Oh, as a monk and renunciation, it must make you so pure"—they were doing all this, and he would never really take that kind of projection anyway. He said, "You know, you can be a monk, and all that desire, all that craving—it still can be there. It's just narrowed down into only two objects. But you can still have just as much craving as ever." That's not renunciation.

And conversely, you could live what looks like a normal life in the world, but you're not bound to things by that craving.

So, playing with this sense of inner contentment, the simplicity that can come when the craving really isn't being fed. And we tend to think also, when we think of craving, we skip over it—tanha, this wanting—and look at the objects. People will always say, "Well, what's wrong? I'm craving peace. I'm craving enlightenment. I'm craving a happy family. What's wrong with a happy family?" It's like, no one's saying that. We're missing the whole boat, which is what we do. We go to the object. It's not about the object. It's the craving itself that's the deluded source of suffering. And renunciation arises when the craving evaporates. There's this sense of real presence and peace and contentment leading to generosity.

What happens on a retreat, or off-retreat—when we start to, with a steady awareness, as I said before, see how much craving is popping up—if you can hang with just watching it, you start to see how craving works. And some of the magic of it starts to go out. Because isn't craving like this siren call? "If you do what I'm telling you that you need, you'll be happy." We're leaning into whatever the thing is. And then we get defensive: "But that's a good thing to want." Or we blame ourselves: "That's a bad thing to want. I shouldn't be wanting that." It's not the object.

So I just want to share what someone said in a group. I thought it was so insightful, really, because it's true. They were seeing there was a huge craving to scratch an itch. And have you noticed there can be a huge craving when you're walking just to look at who's walking by? Have you noticed? And you feel like you're going to die if you don't look at who's walking by. How strong that craving can be.

And this person noticed it was that kind of craving for something—scratching an itch, whatever. They noticed, "Oh my gosh," it just popped into their mind: "This is the same level and intensity of craving I remember back from high school when I had a huge desire crush on somebody." It's the same level of craving for something so innocuous as scratching. That's right. That's it.

So seeing craving on retreat, when you think, "How can I have craving for looking? It doesn't make sense"—and then we dismiss it because the object seems insignificant. No, don't dismiss it. This is how we really see. It is the same quality of craving. So whether it's craving for enlightenment or craving to look at the person next to you—and what happens when you look, if you keep paying attention? You look, and pretty much you judge, right? "They're better, I'm better." It really did you a lot of good.

So you feel worse. You feel worse from looking. That was great. And then, you know, if you're aware that happened, then you get aversive towards yourself. Or then you say, "Well, I can't handle this anymore. I'm going to go have tea. Let's blow the whole thing off." It really did a world of good.

But if you keep noticing, you see—wow, this promise of craving doesn't really pan out. Unfortunately, we have to see that about a hundred million times. But watch it, watch it, and you'll see. Don't you notice? It's the craving itself that's creating the disease. Not the itch, not the looking or the not looking, whatever it might be.

So say it's for something like enlightenment. We can have a sincere aspiration and intention to do what is necessary in our practice. It doesn't have to be from craving.

Renunciation is this: in a moment when craving is seen through and it drops away naturally, there's just this sense of peace and real contentment and ease with what is. The more the wisdom awareness notices that, there can be times when craving starts to come up, and there's the wisdom that allows us to be with it. So there's also the wisdom that lets us, with awareness, rest with the unpleasant.

Which is also the next one. All of this is rooted in not wanting to be with the unpleasant. *Taṇhā*—it has the story that it's pleasant. Have you had times when you go into a daydream? We even make the confusion of thinking the craving itself is somehow happy, is somehow pleasant. We're lost in this pleasant story, not noticing it. But if you really look and hang with it, without feeding, without getting rid of it—it's mostly unpleasant. It's dissonant. It takes us out. It takes us away. It brings dissatisfaction in the moment.

Seeing that, the more we know that on the *bhāvanā-mayā-paññā* level, then craving can come up and you notice it quicker. Awareness can be with it, and it just drops, really. Play with that in little ways. The food time here, lunch, is a great place to play with that. So many people mention experiences they have around the eating and the wanting and going for seconds or not going for seconds and watching the whole thing. A lot of people bring that up, right?

And if you can really just get interested in exploring—I remember the first three-month retreat I sat. It wasn't full like this, maybe fifty people. But the food... I mean, it was a poorer time for IMS, shall we say. At tea you would get an apple, and every second day, two spoons of peanuts. I'm not kidding, that's what we had. Some days there would be enough food, but not the sense of plenty. And I would, you know, the bell would ring, I'd be there, go eat.

There was this one guy. I didn't know anybody. He would come wandering in late, twenty minutes late, twenty-five minutes late. And again, it wasn't as many people as here, and some of the food would be gone. There wasn't just tons of it. And he would come in very carefully, eat whatever, and I'd think, "God, he must be enlightened." You know? It's amazing. He must be so enlightened. And I'm not even a huge foodie, but just, you know, that's the hit of the day.

Well, sometime later, years later, it wasn't like a big thing, but I started to notice on retreat that I was walking in really late and I wasn't thinking about it. I could be sitting before noon and some craving would come up. "Oh, I smell baked potatoes" or whatever. And it would come up and I'd see it—oh yeah, okay, craving's like that—and it would just go. Didn't get all into it, didn't feed it, and there's this sense of peace. You do what you do, you get up, you walk in and eat. There's baked potatoes, there's not—there was always something. I didn't starve.

And that's the sense of renunciation, not a willful thing. But the willingness, the steady awareness that can be with craving, sees how it works—it loses its allure.

You just hang out with it, and then you can make a choice from awareness-wisdom. Maybe you're really hungry, so you get up and go eat—that's fine. We still take care of ourselves. You can still appreciate the food. But this renunciation just starts to occur quite naturally, and we appreciate it. And from there, it can move into generosity.

A friend was telling me some years ago that she was studying with Sogyal Rinpoche, and he had many projects, one of which was to support poor nuns in Tibet. You would kind of adopt a nun and give a certain amount every month to help her eat and clothe herself and be able to keep practicing. My friend was really inspired by this. First, there was the generosity—she wanted to do it, and that made her really happy. But in order to have that money, she had to consciously take it out of her clothes budget, so she didn't buy new clothes. She would give that money to the nun instead.

So there's the renunciation of the new clothes, and there's the generosity of giving, and both of them made her equally happy. It wasn't this wrenching sense of not having what she wanted. She said, "No, I'm not buying this. This money goes to the nun." And that thought of letting go—the craving would simply dissolve, and generosity would arise to replace it very naturally.

Then you bring awareness. Let the awareness notice it. Feel that sense of contentment in not wanting. Feel the happiness that arises in the heart-mind with generosity. You keep paying attention. And that's awareness-wisdom strengthening the wholesome. That's really wise attention. So just playing with that.

Now, ill will and thoughts of cruelty—I'll put them together. It's more obvious. Ill will transforms into mettā, or non-hatred, which is really simple friendliness. Cruelty transforms into non-harming, or compassion.

Both of the unwholesome ones—ill will, cruelty, all the forms of aversion—arise as our conditioned response to difficult, unpleasant, painful experiences. Whether it's physical pain, some action in the world, some interaction, or some thought in your mind, when something is unpleasant and difficult, the habit tends to be some form of pushing away: fear, aversion, aggression, ill will. Get away from me.

Now, mettā. Let me read you what Ajahn Sumedho says, because when I've mentioned mettā or non-ill will, something goes through the mind: "What, so I'm supposed to love this stuff? Somebody's really acting in a very aggressive way and I'm supposed to feel all this love in my heart for them? How do I do that?"

Ajahn Sumedho on mettā, in regards to difficult people or situations, internal or external:

"Mettā does not necessarily mean loving it. One is simply witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, in a person, or in oneself, without creating anything around it. That's what I consider to be mettā."

I'll say it again: witnessing, really present with, the unpleasant in a situation, in a person, in oneself—in space, without creating anything around it. In other words, the heart-mind is not reactive. It's not making a story about me, about them. It's not getting into aversion. It's just: Oh, this is happening. It's like this.

Does that sound like anything we've been talking about all week, only calling it awareness? Sometimes mettā and awareness can have the exact same qualities. That's what we're talking about here. Not loving, but simply the ability to start from witness-

ing the unpleasant in ourselves, in the situation, in a person. This is awareness. And the steadiness of it is what allows wisdom to arise—the wisdom being, hopefully, starting to see the possibility of a different response.

It's so ingrained in most of us that the natural response to aggression, or the safe response to anger, or the safe response to difficulty, is to get the heck out of here, or get rid of them, or meet anger with anger. It just seems like that's what we do, and anything else would be weak or letting ourselves be walked on.

The Dalai Lama, when asked about why there seems to be a lack of compassion in human society, said: "Perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring."

We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense we fully embrace hostility and anger as emotional states, reinforcing them. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

To me, this reinforcing of compassion and caring, the ability to be present with the difficult without responding, without the mind only knowing how to go to the unwholesome—this is what awareness and wisdom offer us. And it starts with that willingness to be with the unpleasant. As Joko Beck says, "Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?" I ask myself that a lot.

And that's what we can start with—what's happening here, silently, in your own experience. It's not just a lucky first-world problem, being able to look at your anger, at your grief, or how somebody walking loudly really got you ticked off and you're in a murderous rage and then you try to talk yourself out of it because, well, look at the stuff in the world, I have no right to be in a murderous rage. No—look at it! Just like with craving, let awareness be with it and see: how does the anger work? What happens with it?

You'll see. We do see. We know, as the Buddha said, it causes us suffering, it causes others suffering. Keep looking, because then we think, "But what's the alternative? What else can I do? It's the only way to protect myself." We have to see that's not true.

James Baldwin, the great American writer, says an enemy is someone whose story we have not heard. I love that. So when there's that anger—now, not being angry doesn't mean, "Okay, do whatever you want." But it means there might be another wholesome quality, compassion, mettā, that actually provides a great, really strong intention for action. And we can see more clearly than we can when the mind is filled with anger.

The Buddha says: "When one dwells with a mind, a heart, obsessed and oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

So when we're lost in fear, in ill will, in anger—even when we're trying to do the right thing—you know, it's why it's such a tricky place when there's so much injustice and so much suffering in the world and we really want to engage with it. Whether we want to engage with climate change, whether we want to engage with the refugee crisis, whether we want to engage with homophobia, with racism, with just somebody mistreating someone we see on the street. And if what we've been giving unconsciously the power to is anger, hostility as the source of strength, then that's what's going to come out.

The Buddha's saying even when we're trying to do the right thing, if the intention's coming from ill will, from anger, we can't see clearly the good of others or the good of ourselves or the good of either. So how can we learn to really trust? And again, it can't be done just by an act of mind, an act of wishing. But when we start by connecting with awareness, as we're doing here, without creating anything around whatever the suffering aspect is—and we practice on the little ones here, sure, to give us some trust, some faith.

But you see, do you see at times in your practice when you just connect? You're filled with aversion from something, you know, something essentially stupid—some sound or whatever. You know it's essentially stupid. That doesn't help, because then the aversion goes on you. But you're filled with it. Or say a pain, which a lot of people have experienced. And seeing the aversion, seeing the fear, eventually by being able to rest with the aversion without creating anything around it, rest with the pain without creating anything around it—at times you'll see the whole sense of suffering drop. Maybe the pain's still there. Sometimes people can't even call it pain anymore.

And then there's clear seeing. So sometimes with a knee, you know, there may be something you really need to do to take care of it. When you're in that whole world of reaction and aversion, who can see what you need to do? You can't tell. You think you're either going to have to have surgery tomorrow, or it's absolutely nothing—it's a dharma pain. And you can't tell. We're just all wrapped up in the kleshas.

When we can see clearly, when the aversion drops, when there's connection with things as they are, wisdom lets us see what to do—in little picture, in big picture. But it goes against the stream of what we know, and against the stream of society. And it is hard to try—even when we start to know for ourselves—reacting from aggression, re-

acting from self-aversion brings more suffering. I know, if I could meet it with mettā, there's more peace and more ability to act appropriately. But everything around you is saying, "Are you crazy? You got to protect yourself. Are you crazy? Tell those people what they're doing wrong."

Get out there and, you know, whatever it is.

So to this point, I think Steve said—or the Buddha said—if you can't be with wise people, be alone. But sometimes *we're* the wise people, you know? And we're so affected by other people; none of us can live in isolation. So when we go out, we'll be getting all kinds of signals: "Want! Want! Be angry! Get upset! That's how you are in the world."

We need sangha to help us remember what we already know for ourselves. But sometimes we're the ones who—when you have that deep sense, you know that you don't want to come from anger, that there's another choice—then your being able, or my being able, to act that way can really affect other people.

I heard this great story on a public radio program. It's called *Invisibilia*, and it's talking about all qualities of mind that aren't seen that affect our life. It's really interesting. So this is called non-complementary behavior, which I would say really is responding to aggression with metta, or kindness, or non-aggression anyway.

So this group of people—two families, I think—were together outside in the evening in their backyards. It sounds like a suburb somewhere. They were having a lovely dinner together on this lovely evening, outside eating, drinking wine. And all of a sudden, a guy came out of nowhere—they didn't see him coming—and he had a gun. He just showed up, stuck it to one of the people's head, and said, "Give me your money."

They're freaked out, of course, don't know what to do. And they said, "We don't have any money. We're just having—" "Give me your money."

So the first response was someone saying, "What would your mother think? What would your mother think if she saw you doing this?" And he says, "I don't have a mother. Give me your money." And really, the gun was to somebody's head.

And at this point, one of the people said, "Would you like a glass of wine?"

He said, "Huh?"

So, okay, well... and he sat down, had a glass of wine, they started talking, kept on going. And they were scared—it's not like they're like, "Oh la la"—they were scared. But they really had wine, they were having a conversation with him, and after a while he goes, "You know, I really see... I came to the wrong place."

So he said okay, he'd go, and he got up and he wanted hugs from everybody. And then he took a glass of wine and went off.

Well, they ran into the house like crazy, locked all the doors, right? But he went off, he didn't come back. And then later when they went and opened the door, he'd taken that glass that he'd drunk the wine from—he'd left it very carefully on the curb and went away.

Cool, huh? Yeah.

So to come from that place, it takes a real trust, doesn't it? And knowing that's what can come from steady mindfulness and awareness.

I love stories like that.

And then I think what also can bring it in is when our habit of not wanting to bring full attention to difficult, unpleasant situations—how that feeds the thoughts of separation. Like James Baldwin said, "An enemy is someone whose story you haven't heard." So we don't want to hear their story. We don't want to connect. It's a lot of what goes on in the world.

So another story I heard on the radio, about the refugee crisis in Europe—this was last fall, I think. You remember, there's one of the big refugee camps in Calais, just in France. I think they've actually destroyed it. So it was last fall, and there were a couple thousand people there living in really not very good conditions, and they were all trying to get out and go to England. There was kind of a lot of upheaval, but they weren't being violent or anything.

And so the BBC reporter was going around just talking to normal citizens in Calais. He ended up talking to this one middle-aged French lady, and she was just saying how she hates these refugees and they should go back and they're just causing trouble—typical of what we'd hear, right? Aversion.

And he said, "Well, have you ever actually been there in the jungle?"

And she said, "No."

And somehow he talked her into going there with him.

And so she went in with him. And this is it—this is like awareness, just connection with what is, different from our ideas about it.

So she went in there with him, and he was talking to some young men, and she was talking to one of the young men from—I don't know if he was from Iraq or Syria—and he was just describing how hard it was. He's in his early twenties, he just wants to work, and there's no work there, and there's nothing to do. If he goes for a walk in the street, he feels really unsafe, targeted by the truckers, targeted by police. All he wants to do is work.

And so she's going, "Wow, these conditions are awful. These people are good, they don't have enough food, they don't have anything to do."

So she went to the main office of the camp and volunteered. She became involved in wanting to volunteer and help. Just like that. It's a natural effect of clear seeing—non-hatred arises when we see things as they are. We can also know that and turn our attention to that, and wise attention will strengthen that possibility.

But this is what the guide means when he says it's a beneficent universe. This is how it works. When we see clearly how hatred brings separation, how fear brings separation, how aversion even to a pain brings separation and more suffering—just the willingness to recognize, "It's like this." Not wanting something, just "it's like this now," can change everything.

So, you still have some time here. Notice. Just notice the little times. Because it's the same mind, it's the same process, it's the same habits as in the big pictures. And you can learn to trust it from the little—that's the beauty of practice. But it doesn't mean we can't see the same thing in our daily life. So that's our path.

The attitude that the mind, the awareness, is meeting the experience right now—how we meet, not "we," but how awareness, mindfulness meets this experience, whether it's with simple interest, curiosity, kindness, or whether it's through buying into delusion. But when we meet it with just this open kindness, this sense of not making an enemy, that's our path. That's the whole practice. And it doesn't matter what's occurring—something subtle on retreat or our daily life practice. The path is how the heart and mind is meeting this moment. That's where the awareness is.

As Steve was pointing out this morning, it's always available. Always. You just have to remember it. And when there's more steadiness of awareness, the truth of how things are reveals itself. That's just like the law of nature, like gravity.

So we can take in information—I mean, I'm blabbing, you're taking in information or not—but we can know, okay, maybe non-greed is more wholesome and more happiness-producing than greed. So that's a piece of information. It can incline us to look and see: Is this so? Look and see how we meet when we're dealing with the neighbor in the

upstairs apartment who's stomping around every night at four in the morning. How we meet all the aspects of that—that's our path of awareness and wakefulness and wisdom. Changing the diapers, driving in traffic—great one, you know. So it might not be as refined awareness, but awareness is always available. This is what we do here, this is what we take with us no matter what aspect of our life.

How do we meet this moment?

A few years ago—I won't even get into it, but the politics in Burmese monasteries is baroque and pretty out there. Anyways, a whole bunch of bad stuff was going on with Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He was kind of the target of gossip. That's how they do it in Burma. They go, "Oh, everything's fine," and there's all this background gossip. And people were saying bad stuff about him and trying to isolate him, saying lies and things.

I was just having a conversation with him, and I said, "Well, this other monk is saying all these lies about you, trying to turn people against you." And he was just being quiet, he wasn't doing anything. I said, "Well, why don't you just at least say what's true? You don't have to say something bad about him, but just say what's true."

He says, "You know, I just don't—" *kusala* means wholesome, *akusala* means unwholesome. He goes, "You know, I just don't want to add any more *akusala* to the situation."

I love that. Just kind of see this, all this unwholesome stuff going on, and he's just not adding unwholesomeness to it.

It's out of our control. All we can know if there's awareness is our motivation—and even often that, not clearly. We never know how our actions are going to land. We can't know the effect of any action.

The awareness and the motivation, the quality of our mind—that's all we can really know. So he's saying, okay, taking a stand there, not creating more akusala. That's really our practice of mindfulness, awareness, wisdom.

I'll just end with one line from Desmond Tutu. He was giving a talk to a bunch of young college students in Boston. One of them was saying, "We live in the midst of a culture of violence. There's violence all around us. How are we supposed to love? We grow up with hate."

And Desmond Tutu said, "No, we *learn* to hate. That's not our truest nature. That's not the truest nature of mind and heart."

And he was looking at each person, going, "You make a difference. You can make a difference. You, you, you. One person can make a big difference. So start with yourself."

That's what I wanted to talk about tonight. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 167

Mindfulness and Right View (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this retreat talk from Spirit Rock's one-month Insight Meditation retreat, Carol Wilson offers a profound exploration of how mindfulness (sati) and right view (sammā diṭṭhi) work together as the foundation of liberation. Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, she emphasizes that the Buddha's teaching isn't merely about mastering technique, but about experiencing mind and body directly with wise understanding.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how suffering arises not from external circumstances but from our reactive relationship to experience—particularly through the filter of personality view (sakkāya-diṭṭhi), the habitual tendency to take experience personally. Using accessible examples—from a child learning to match shapes to circles of light in photographs interpreted differently across cultures—she demonstrates how our conditioned perceptions create struggle, while accurate recognition naturally dissolves it. She shares the inspiring example of a 90-year-old practitioner who finds walking across her room to be "the most interesting time of my life," illustrating the freedom available through simple, moment-to-moment presence.*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom for retreat practice and daily life: rather than trying to eliminate the sense of self through willpower, we can meet each arising experience—including self-referential thoughts—with non-judgmental awareness. When we stop fighting with things as they are, the purity of heart-mind (citta) naturally reveals itself. Wilson concludes with the Dalai Lama as an example of complete presence, wholly available for each moment and encounter.*

I'm sure you remember everything James said, and remember him saying that in the Sutta, the Buddha describes the direct way for the ending of suffering, sorrow, lamentation, and despair as cultivating and developing the foundations of mindfulness.

I want to elaborate a bit on that—which, of course, everything we say is an elaboration of that. Saying that it's the direct way to freeing our hearts and minds from suffering, I want to start with that, to really make the punctuation that the heart of the Buddha's teachings, and why we all practice and share and live our life as best we can from within the heart of the Buddhist teaching, is that the point is really this possibility,

this potential to truly free our hearts and minds from confusion, from delusion, from greed, hatred, and confusion. When we act from those things, we bring them about in the world as well. That's really the heart of the Buddha's teachings.

And he says, in different places, don't settle for anything less. Don't settle just for wholesome states of mind, of heart. That's a vast statement. Because really, when we're suffering and a happy, wholesome state comes, that's wonderful. That's onward leading. But how much of the time is it like, "Well, okay, that's really good. Good enough. I'm ready to go home." And it gets more and more solid. These are wonderful, and don't settle merely, he says, for wholesome states of heart and mind.

I want to put that out again—that even, especially at the beginning of a retreat, at the beginning of our path, not waiting until fifteen or twenty years into our practice to say, "Oh yeah, maybe this could happen." He's laying it down: this is why we can take up a path. This is what's possible.

To echo what James said last night when he was talking about faith, about confidence—just opening, I find for myself anyway, just opening my mind, my heart, to read those words, to hear them, to talk to people, to admit it as a real possibility, real potential for this mind, this heart, in this world, in this life. Never so much looking to a future goal, but really saying: how we practice now, how we explore, how I explore what's occurring in this moment in this heart and mind—in this moment, it's possible to get a sense of what this liberation could taste like. It's not something we wait for twenty years.

So having that as we begin a retreat and as we continue on our path shores us up, supports us. As James said, with the faith it gives us—it gives me anyway—the confidence, the willingness to do. That's one way that Sayadaw U Pandita translated saddhā. It gives us the willingness to do, as James was saying, the strength, the courage to just show up, be present with, bring this quality of non-judging, relaxed, accepting mindfulness to whatever is arising in this moment, in this body, in this mind, in this heart.

That's a huge challenge, an incredibly beautiful possibility, and in a way it holds everything. It's like the container for everything we go through in our practice here, in our practice in our life.

From that, I want to then talk about how the simplicity of mindfulness can be so powerful—to be, really, one of the central tools, central supports for this at least one-lifetime journey of purifying the habits of our heart and mind, of really opening to the potential of freedom. How is it that mindfulness is so central? What does it do? What is it? I want to talk about that a little bit in my own way.

But rather than start from the doing—you know, so frequently I find, having grown up in a middle American, middle-class culture, there's just this sense of doing and achieving, and we're kind of assessed by what we've done. Isn't that such a common way of greeting when we first meet somebody? "How are you? What do you do?" That's not every culture; that isn't the first thing you say.

So here I want to talk about mindfulness, but not to begin by talking about the technique. Even though meditation is a skill and an art, and we're going to be giving all instructions that we very carefully discuss and think about—you may not be able to recognize that, but we do—I'm not here sharing this to help you master a technique. The technique is secondary. It's rooted in wisdom, in right view, in wise understanding.

So often we start by saying, "Let me do it, let me get it right, and then I'll get to understanding." But the Buddha, when he gave the Eightfold Noble Path—the path of the Fourth of the Four Noble Truths, the path of life, of practice—it begins with right view, right understanding. Everything else springs out of that. It's really more like a circle than a path.

Of course we don't begin our practice with completely understanding everything. Then we wouldn't need to practice. But there's a definition of meditation that I'm liking a lot these days. I think it's from Sayadaw Tejaniya. I've been using it for so long I kind of forget where I got it, but it sounds like him: Vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. I love that description of Vipassana meditation—experiencing the mind and body directly. That's essentially mindfulness, what I'll be talking about.

What does that mean, directly? From moment to moment—that's the continuity that James was talking about, where you don't just keep taking the kettle off the flame. From moment to moment, with the right understanding. With some sense of wisdom about why we're doing what we're doing.

There are many ways to talk about this, but that's what I want to speak about for the rest of this talk. What does it mean, "with the right understanding"?

The Dalai Lama said—and you can read this from many different sources—so much of our unhappiness originates within our own minds and hearts, in how we react to events in our life, so-called internal, so-called external. And that's what the Buddha was talking about when he spoke about freeing our hearts and minds from suffering. He wasn't talking about rearranging the world so that nothing bothers us anymore.

I mean, we've all been trying to do this. Maybe you're not, but many people I know, including me, spend an inordinate amount of time trying to rearrange the world and other people so that we're not bothered. And then even more time—if you're a thinking person like me—rationalizing it so we don't really acknowledge to ourselves what we're doing. Rationalizing what's really wrong with that person's behavior, or this situation, and how we can fix it and everything will be okay.

The Buddha is saying just what the Dalai Lama said: seeing that what frees our heart and mind isn't going to come from fixing everything. And we kind of know that on some level, right? But not really. Don't we somehow think everything's got to get better? I wish everything would get better. But the Buddha wasn't saying, wait until everything gets better.

What truly frees us from reacting to experience in ways that increase our unhappiness and suffering is literally right view—recognizing what's occurring in this moment in our mind and body accurately. This, to me, is incredibly radical. He's saying that freedom isn't about everything getting reorganized. In some ways, even we don't get reorganized—certainly not as an act of will. But when there's this moment of experiencing the mind and body directly, fully, with complete attention, with the right understanding—in other words, recognizing accurately, without dragging in all our views and concepts and filters, which we mostly don't know we're doing—without that, we see how things are. And boom, the suffering reactions don't arise because they don't make any sense.

It's so inspiring to me. And then, of course, really frustrating. Because why the heck can't we just do that? The Buddha said, come and see for yourself.

So that's the miracle of mindfulness, as Thich Nhat Hanh often phrases it. Because in a moment—just one moment, and all that we can ever experience is just this one moment—in a moment of really clear recognition of what's occurring, that's the moment we get a little taste of the freedom of heart-mind that's not lost in fear or greed or reactivity, responding in an inappropriate way. This is the miracle of mindfulness. This is what we're practicing here.

In some ways, when I do a retreat for myself—I just had a month-long self-retreat in November, it was so lovely—I thought, should I do this practice? Should I do that practice? Should I do this technique or that technique? And in the end, it doesn't matter. Well, it matters—I mean, you've got to do what we tell you. But what I thought was, it doesn't matter. It's a month just to practice awareness moment to moment. It's not to make a particular experience happen. It's to practice being with this moment's experience just as it is.

How many moments do you have? Don't count it up. How many moments do you have to practice that for this month, or two weeks, or two months? That's amazing. It's an amazing gift to yourself and the world. And we'll forget ten million times, because that's the habit.

So that's what I'll talk about now—habits. But then mindfulness will reassert itself. It'll do itself. Suddenly there will be awareness again. Also ten million times. It's amazing.

We come to trust that more and more.

The Effect of Accurate Recognition

Let me give a simple example I've been using lately, because I have a new nephew. I never had a niece or nephew until the last four years, and it's fun for me watching how kids learn and grow. This example, to me, is just the perfect illustration of how right view frees us from internal suffering.

You know those games for really young children, maybe two years old, with wooden blocks of different shapes—triangle, circle, square—and a big board with holes of the same shape? They learn to put the right shape in the right hole. They still do things like that with their hands, even though two-year-olds can work my cell phone better than I can. My nephew picked it up—I have four screens of apps, and he flips through them, goes to one that does some kind of spin art. I didn't even know it was there. He opens it, starts drawing colors. The kid was two and a half years old. It's shocking. But that's another story.

Back to the simplicity of squares, triangles, and circles. To us, the matching is just obvious. But to a child who doesn't know, who doesn't yet see shapes as distinct categories, they watch the adult do it, they try to do it, and it doesn't work—because they don't have the concept of the right shape fitting in the right matching hole. You watch them trying to put it in, and it doesn't work. The adult does it, and it does work. The frustration. The anger. They want to throw the blocks, get mad at the parent, throw the whole thing away. And if it were an adult person having that kind of experience, the thought trains might be things like, "I'm so stupid," or "They're holding a secret from me. They're not telling me how it really works. I hate them." All of that.

And then at some point, the penny drops. He gets the triangle in the triangle hole, the circle in the circle hole. Maybe first it's an accident, but then two, three times—he gets it. And as soon as he gets it, all that other stuff just vanishes. There's no more anger.

There's no more sense of "you're hiding a secret from me." There's no more frustration. It's gone. Because it simply doesn't apply anymore when there's accurate recognition of the experience.

It's so simple, really. That's a simple example, but that sense of *ah, that's how it works*—there's no more struggle. The mind-heart is at peace in that moment. *This is how it is now.* That's really right view. *This is how it is now.*

I think of that as an insight moment, whether it's a personal insight or a dharma insight. It's like, "Oh, it's like that now." It's not something we can plan or create with an act of will, because we don't even know what we don't know. But this is what mindfulness does, this careful attention, just seeing what's going on. Suddenly—oh, it's like this. That's right view. And the struggle stops.

When we see things as they really are, what's the effect? It's like we don't fight with gravity, right? Gravity is one of the laws of nature. Somebody said that *dhamma* means the laws of nature.

So for instance, gravity—when we really understand it, we aren't going to waste our time getting upset because if we jump off the roof of a building, we're going to fall. We know that. That's just how it is.

Right view, which is a result of steady, simple mindfulness, has that same effect. We stop fighting with things as they are.

Last fall, I had lunch with a woman I've known for many years—a dear friend, very wise, a deep practitioner, and a mentor and benefactor. She's now in her early nineties. She has had a really rich and full life, with many wonderful things she's done.

Now she lives in a retirement facility. Externally it looks like her body's quite frail. She can walk, but gingerly, and she doesn't go out and do things so much. So externally it would appear that her life has gotten quite constricted, quite narrow.

But she began her introduction to Buddhadharma and meditation practice, I'm guessing, in her mid-fifties. She wasn't at all in Dharma before that. And she just devoted herself to it—even in the midst of her full life, devoted herself to it. Many, many years of long intensive retreats and practice, really one of the more profound meditators we know.

What she said was so inspiring. We were just hanging out, very simple, had a little lunch. She liked my socks. Just very simple and normal. And then she said, "You know, this is the most interesting time of my life. This is just so interesting."

I said, "Really? How so?"

She said, "Well, for instance, when I walk across the floor to the little kitchen, I'm just so mindfully present—just walking across the floor. That's everything. That's what there is. And then when I'm making the water for the tea, it's just what there is. It's everything. It's so interesting. Noticing what's going on in the body, in the mind, whatever I'm doing. The most interesting time of my life."

This to me isn't just some simple thing somebody's saying. I do know her a long time. It's really the effect of a heart and mind that's quite awake in the moment. And in that wakefulness, that ability to be just fully present with walking across the floor, the mind, the heart at that moment isn't distracted by thinking, "I used to be able to walk better." It's not distracted by looking for something more interesting to land in. It's not wishing for something else—not looking anywhere else for fulfillment, not caught in wanting, not caught in judgment. All that energy is just present without looking for anything. It's like this now, with total presence and wakefulness.

This is really the purity of citta—heart-mind energy. There's a purity of presence that comes when we're not so caught up in recognizing inaccurately, when we're not looking for happiness and ease and peace in ways that can't offer it, that can't bring it. Instead, we see that happiness, that freedom, isn't about any activity or any object. It's just as available walking across the floor as being in some really deep state of meditation—which this person had experienced many, many times. It's just as available in pouring the tea, because it's got nothing to do with the activity or the object or being fulfilled by some experience. It's that collected purity, that presence of heart-mind that is recognizing accurately: it's like this.

Given my choice, if it was an act of will, I'd live like that. Maybe you would too. Maybe you're thinking, "I don't want to walk across the floor and be happy. I'm looking for something a little more oomphy than that." But here you are—you're going to walk back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Why not try it?

See if it's possible, instead of wishing you were walking into Bhutan or something. Just walk back and forth and explore the quality of heart and mind that's just being fully present with this, without bringing in all our filters.

That's why the Buddha talks about right view—the filters over our perception that get in the way of accurate recognition. It's just our human condition. Mindfulness can help us recognize this, but without mindfulness, we don't know.

Simple examples of what I'm saying: perception is just this recognizing what's happening. Feeling a sensation in my foot, or seeing light, or hearing a sound and knowing. If I ring the bell, you just hear that sound. But without mindfulness—or even with mindfulness if we don't recognize it—when we hear that bell, the perception of "bell," whatever our past experience might have been around bells, is somehow there. It may be mild, that's a pretty mild thing. But maybe when you were in school the bells drove you crazy, and you hear a bell now and you still tense up. Maybe you hear this and you think, "That's the most beautiful sound I ever heard," and then you're off thinking about all kinds of things. Where did they get that bell? Or you think of the person who rang it—rang it too loud, rang it too soft, they were this or that. All this garbage. And this is just a little nothing thing.

But that's normal. We're all the product of our whole life, the conditions of our life, our family, our culture, our schooling, what we've grown up to believe, the way we've been viewing the world. That's inescapable. It's part of being human. And where we get caught is when we don't recognize that it's a filter. We don't even know that there's a filter on how we're perceiving and recognizing and responding. We just think... we don't even think "that's how it is." We *know* that's how it is.

And then we have also the pain of different people and different cultures from different backgrounds not understanding one another, feeling threatened, feeling angry—and just not really having... how can we have that sense of recognizing that you relate to the world in a very different way than I relate to the world? Of course I like the way I relate to the world. It's comfortable. It feels true. Can I know, though, that that's a cultural conditioning? Yours is different. Neither one's right.

Mindfulness is like a stepping outside of the views of all of our cultures. It's really radical in that way. It's the stepping outside of the comfortable, often unrecognized, familiar view of self and the world. And even though there are a lot of teachings from the Buddha, it's not positing another view. The Buddha gave many teachings, many descriptions of how the mind and heart work and how the world works, but at the end he's saying, as Greg and James have said, *Ehi Passiko*—come and see for yourself what's true. What brings freedom and ease of heart and mind? What strengthens compassion, love, and connectedness? What strengthens greed, hatred, and confusion? Look and see. Believing what he said, believing what I say, isn't going to free you. It may just give you a way to look. So he's not positing another view. I love that. Just staying or being in the "okay, this is what I think, and I don't know—what's the bare experience right now?"

That's so freeing. But it's also often not so comfortable. Mindfulness is just practicing this, moment to moment.

So a simple example is a story I often tell, because I love the sense of our different worldviews. I've spent many years in the winter going to Burma with friends. We go to different nunneries. There are many, many women who are nuns, and young girls who are nuns—very poor, many of them, rather simple in terms of a different kind of education from what I had here in the West. And the worldview of the nuns that I know is very classical Buddhist—different realms and devas and hell realms and all of that. That's just the worldview.

So we were there once after a huge cyclone, like a hurricane, had destroyed the crops in many areas of the country. We were just going to a couple of small villages and offering donations of rice and food—a one-time donation. So we were doing that in a big room with many people offering and receiving, very good energy. And I was taking tons of pictures.

We looked at the photos when we got back to the monastery where we were staying. And in some of them, through many of the photos, were these perfectly round circles of light—just bright light, circles of light all through the photos. So we're looking at them, and a couple of friends, Burmese women, and also another friend who'd been living as a nun there for many, many years, they all said, "Oh yeah, well, those are devas"—devas being celestial beings. "That's how devas look in photos."

"Oh, really?"

And then another friend, who has equally been there many years, but she's a scientist—she's from a medical background, a PhD scientist—she looks at it and goes, "Well, that's some refraction of the light, some water in the lens," and all this stuff.

And we're like, oh, yeah, it could be. Who knows? But she was positive.

So we were caught between these two views. And I could see how my mind worked—I didn't have a big investment in it, but my mind immediately went to "yeah, right, refraction of the lens, water in the lens, of course." I didn't go right to "it's devas."

So we left it at that. Then later I looked on my computer and I had some photos from a different camera—same thing, circles of light all over. Different camera, but the same phenomenon. That's interesting. Maybe there were devas after all.

The thing is, who knows? Who knows? But each person, coming from their particular background, was really sure that's what it was.

So we played with it. We'd show the pictures to people back at home in the monastery, and the scientifically-minded ones would say, "Oh yes, that's refraction, light particles, whatever." Other people, really more faith-based, would say, "Oh no, that's devas. That makes sense to me."

Some years later—two or three years later—the scientist friend went to Ramana Maharshi's ashram in Tiruvannamalai in southern India. There's a sacred mountain there, Mount Arunachala. I find it a very powerful place. On every full moon, people come from all over India to circumambulate the mountain. It's quite some miles to complete the whole thing. And when we talk about people coming from all over India, we're talking hundreds of thousands of people. On this particular full moon night, it was some especially auspicious one. She said they were estimating a million people—a million people coming from all over with great faith, circumambulating this mountain at night, because they do it at night.

So she sent me a photo, which I haven't been able to find again. There were just perfect balls of light all over that photo. She said, "I give up. I give up. Maybe it's devas."

Who knows? Who knows?

Sometimes Greg does his deva chant, and I love it. We don't have to determine what's true or what isn't. But seeing the filters, recognizing them—that's valuable. It's fine. We're human. We're all going to have those filters. It's not a problem when we recognize them.

So then, to say what being mindful would look like: if I was looking at the photo, it would really be not needing to make an assessment or a story at all. I'd be aware of seeing. I'd be aware of the mind thinking. I'd be aware of liking or disliking or whatever. That's what's occurring in this moment. Then if I had a memory of devas or whatever, I'd be aware of that thought and that memory. Very different from looking and declaring, "It's this" or "It's that," and "You're right and I'm wrong."

This is really the quality of mindfulness. That's kind of how it works. The power of mindfulness is just this willingness to completely land for just a moment. It's like this, now. You don't even have to know, you don't even have to be able to recognize what's happening—but you're just walking and there's a feeling. It's like this, now.

You're sitting and there's a noise that's bugging you. It's like this now. That doesn't mean you suddenly like it. "It's like this now" means I feel really annoyed. It's like this now. Annoyance feels like this. It's just relaxing into, with fullness of presence, just what's occurring in this moment—again and again and again. We like it, we don't like it,

but not needing to make the story. The sense of just opening with wonder. The sense of discovery. Each moment is new and fresh. It doesn't mean we love each moment, but it means we're not in struggle. We're not fighting.

And then there's the possibility to recognize accurately. Because what gets in the way of recognizing accurately is the habits of mind of aversion. Right away we don't like, we push away. There's no way to even be fully present. We're already holding the situation at a distance. Or wanting, which is again looking out there, looking out there. Or trying to keep it like this instead of just acknowledging it's like this. Let it go. I don't even like to use "let it." It's not in our control. It's coming. It's here. It goes. That's what's happening. Whether you let it or not, it's going to do that. So it's just this sense of relaxing fully into what's occurring now. This is our practice.

And it's not easy. What really fuels the habits of pushing away, of aversion, of not liking, of wanting it to be a certain way, of just getting completely confused and lost in thoughts and stories—really the bottom line is this: the moment-to-moment relating to any particular experience as being me or mine.

I just read something from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche the other day, and I thought he gave a very pithy explanation of this. He writes: "The very root of delusion is the thought of 'I,' the habit of clinging to the notion of self. This notion is simply due to a failure to investigate. There's no such thing as a truly existing autonomous self. Our minds fabricate this concept in the same way that it makes up all of our thoughts. Then, after constructing this self over and over again, we get so used to our invention that it seems to really exist as a distinct entity. And then, when the thought has deeply taken root, we demand that the self should be happy and comfortable, enjoying wealth and pleasures. If it could be the center of the universe, that would be the best. This attitude is the very basis for our wandering around and around in samsara."

This attitude is the very basis for not recognizing what's happening accurately—relating to it in terms of whether it's going to make me happy or unhappy, and then taking that response out into the world and suffering.

But I bring this up not to suggest that we should hate or fear or judge or think we're here to somehow dig up and uproot the self. As Rinpoche says, and Ramana Maharshi says the same thing, the self exists just because it's not investigated. Investigated. So you don't even have to go investigating self. The steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness—what's happening now? What's happening now?—reveals things the way they are. It's not like you have to actively will yourself to go out and stop creating a sense of self. I'll tell you right now, you're not going to do that. But the sense of self is simply another

thought, another experience that can be met with mindfulness, as with anything. So it's nothing to fear, or to hate, or to think, "I'm so bad, I have such a strong sense of self." You hear people say that. I hear people say that.

And then you listen to it. It's like an unfinished loop. "Oh, sense of self is like this right now." Simply another arising experience.

So I'm trying to take the mystery out of it. Don't make it a big bugaboo. But we must start to see that when we don't recognize this, it becomes the strongest filter blocking accurate recognition, right view. It's kind of like the core habit of life—just a habit of mind, just a habit of thought that, unrecognized or recognized but taken personally and reacted to, leads us into all realms of confusion and suffering.

This brings us back to that definition of vipassanā: experiencing the mind and body directly, moment to moment, with the right understanding. This doesn't mean that you can come in, or any of us can come in, saying, "I'm giving up sense of self. I will no longer have that thought arise, and when it does arise, I won't believe it." We can't do that. But the right understanding is simply starting to recognize that we don't have to take experience so personally. Even the sense of self is just a habit.

So whatever's arising, when we're taking it personally—you know how that feels, right, to take it personally—but what's actually going on? One of the ways the Buddha describes experience, and we'll explore this as we go through the days: What are we experiencing? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, physical sensation, and the whole mental world—thoughts, emotions, perceptions. Those are like six things that just keep happening over and over and over. The mental world is of course much more complex, and it constructs whole stories about whatever is occurring.

But notice: say you're walking. There are many sights and sounds and touches on the body and thoughts that come. They're just coming and going. No big deal, right? And suddenly there's a sight or a sound or a thought, and the next moment of mental energy grabs that thought. It really identifies—it's me, or it's mine. That particular thought has become personal.

It was simple. I was walking outside and I felt chilly. So the moment-to-moment experience was a sensation of walking, coolness, chilliness, a kind of contraction in my body. I felt that—that's the experience. Then there could be just that. It could be unpleasant. There could be a thought, "It's chilly," noticing all of that. No big deal. Then there's, "It's chilly. It shouldn't be like this. I should have worn another sweater. What if I get sick?" And on and on and on. The whole thing has become contracted and all about

me. And then it takes off into the infinite universe. Have you noticed that? It doesn't usually stop with one thought—"I'm cold and it's not good for me. Okay, la la la." It usually keeps going. That's taking it personally.

It doesn't mean you can't go put on a sweater. I'm not saying that. But so much of the time, experience moves immediately into aversion, into wanting, into stories of me, into taking it personally. And often when difficult stuff is happening, we get really lost in self-blame, in self-judgment, taking it personally.

So when we're saying "recognizing what's occurring with the right understanding," when you're experiencing something difficult—say aversion is coming up, or fear is coming up—taking it personally would be somehow thinking, "It's my fault," or "It's me, I have to fix it." Especially when we're seeing unpleasant stuff. As James said, the whole world of difficult stuff will come, the whole world of beautiful stuff will come.

When we take it personally, awareness in that moment kind of ends there. It stops, and it becomes all about how can I hold on to this, how can I get rid of this, how can I fix everything. We remain caught, and we don't recognize accurately.

Recognizing with right understanding means understanding that whatever's arising, there are conditions. Everything arises due to the conditions that came before. We can't see all the conditions—just sitting here, there are conditions going back to the Big Bang that led us all to be here. You can't ever really stop somewhere. But we can't say that it's all about me.

When we start to see that aversion is arising, instead of thinking, "Another sign of what an aversive person I am. It's hopeless. I'd better do metta from now until the end of time"—instead of that, there's the possibility of simply recognizing, "Ah, aversion's like this now." Awareness just notices it without making it personal. We notice it arising and then simply being there without all the extra. We might experience coldness, notice the shivering, notice that it's unpleasant, notice the mind doesn't like it. And when there's no awareness of that, the not-liking-it leads into aversion, leads into a whole story of aversion. "Oh, that's how it works."

Mindfulness lets us see how all this works. And when we see how it works, when we can drop the triangle block into the triangle hole, we don't have to throw the blocks. We don't have to hate the parents. We don't have to get all whacked out because there's aversion or wanting going on. We can see what's happening. We can take our refuge in the awareness, in the mindfulness—not in having the perfect experience to make it okay.

Ajahn Sumedho—I find him a wonderful, inspiring teacher. He's an American man who's been a monk in the Ajahn Chah Thai tradition for many, many years. I heard him say once that he'd thought you shouldn't talk about in teaching or in practice the concept of no permanent self, the concept of sakkāya-diṭṭhi—personality view, grabbing hold of any experience and making a "me" or a "mine" out of it. That's what I was just describing: personality view. He thought it shouldn't be talked about until you've been practicing for a long time because it's too subtle.

But then he reconsidered and thought, "You realize that's crazy. Why spend twenty years practicing from wrong understanding?" All that time thinking it's me doing this to get that particular state and be happy, when there's no particular thing to get that's ever going to last. The happiness isn't about my personality being happy or getting a thing, but about—as I described with my friend—just the purity, the simplicity of total presence, recognizing things as they are and not adding extra. We start to recognize what perhaps wasn't able to be recognized when we're caught behind that idea of self, looking through it at the world and all of our experience.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu—you know who he is? The South African archbishop who was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, one of the chairpeople after apartheid ended in South Africa of the Committee for Truth and Reconciliation, a very powerful person. He described an African concept: "A concept that we have at home, the concept of Ubuntu. It says a person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu says, when I have a small piece of bread, it is for my benefit that I share it with you, because after all, none of us came into the world on our own. You realize that in a very real sense, we are part of a profound complementarity. It is the nature of things. You don't have to be a believer in anything. I mean, I could not speak as I am speaking without having learned it from other human beings. I learned to be a human being from other human beings. We belong in this delicate network. It is actually quite profound. Unfortunately, in our world we tend not to recognize this until times of great disaster."

I'm offering this as a possibility of perceiving in a whole different way that isn't me at the center and everyone else out there. But that's not something we do with an act of will. This is really where the trust in this steady, simple, moment-to-moment mindful awareness of just whatever's arising becomes so powerful. When we start looking for what we think we should see, we're already in some kind of wanting, some kind of moving away.

To experience Ubuntu, complementarity, as he describes—I can't think my way into that. It may have been something my thinking mind would never have come up with. But when the filters of me and other and wanting aren't arising in a moment, then things as they are become accessible, perceivable. The filters may come back again in the next moment.

And a good clue that the filters have returned is that we're going to start feeling stress again. We're going to start feeling some tension, some wanting, some discontent. Don't take that personally. Simply notice: all right, so what's going on? Discontent feels like this. Whatever's occurring in this moment—that's the only moment there is—that's the doorway to present moment awareness. And the steadiness of present moment awareness is the condition that allows clear seeing wisdom to arise.

To me, that's a huge relief. It's not that I or you have to generate wisdom. In fact, you can't. But it's a law of nature that when there's steady, non-judging awareness, suddenly the clarity arises naturally—oh yes, that's the triangle, it fits in the triangle. It just emerges on its own. We can trust that.

This is where the tool of steady mindfulness and awareness becomes so powerful, because it's something we can recognize and practice again and again and again. If we can trust enough to let that land in whatever is happening, rather than continuing to get sucked into trying to organize what's happening to match some idea we don't even know we have. There's just a moment of recognition. Ah, we're not dragging in the past and the future. It's just this. Just the sensation of warmth on my foot. It's enough.

I want to end with a description of what full presence looks like. When the Dalai Lama greets you, he takes your hand and then rubs it tenderly, as a grandparent might. He looks into your eyes, feels deeply what you are feeling, and touches his forehead to yours. Whatever feeling—elation or anguish—is in your heart and reflected on your face, it is mirrored in his. But then, when he meets the next person, those emotions are gone, and he is wholly available for the next encounter and the next moment.

Perhaps that is what it means to be fully present: available for each moment and each person we encounter, untethered by the memories of the past and not lured by anticipatory worry about the future.

This is our practice. This is our practice—moment to moment, simple mindfulness.

CHAPTER 168

Investigating Craving and its Ending in our Experience

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a deep investigation into taṇhā—the Pāli term for craving or thirst—which the Buddha identified as the origin of dukkha in the Second Noble Truth. Drawing from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta and other canonical sources, she explains the three types of craving: craving for sense pleasures, craving for being or states, and craving for non-existence (wanting things to go away).

Wilson clarifies an important linguistic distinction often missed in English: taṇhā refers specifically to a quality of heart-mind, not to the object of desire. This differs from chanda, a neutral energy that can manifest as wholesome aspiration (dhammachanda) or as sensual excitement (kāmachanda). She explores why we remain bound to saṃsāra through the seductive nature of craving—how it creates tunnel vision, leads us endlessly from one object to another, and most poignantly, obscures our recognition of the citta's natural purity and peace.

The practical invitation is to turn mindfulness toward taṇhā itself whenever it arises—noticing its physical sensations, its mental textures, how it distorts perception, and what happens when it naturally dissolves. Drawing on Ajahn Chah's teachings about the mind's inherent stillness and passages from the Sutta Nipāta, Wilson emphasizes that craving doesn't end through willpower but through nibbidā (disenchantment)—the wisdom that sees through craving's false promise. When we truly see what contact does, craving simply stops making sense, revealing the natural peace that was always present.

In a way, what I want to talk about tonight could be seen as a follow-up on the question about purification—purification of heart-mind.

As Dara said, it's not exactly something we do, but essentially it's transforming the habits of the habitual mental states that arise in the citta, the mind-heart. I think I explained before that the word citta in Pali means both mind and heart. It doesn't have the split we give it in our language. We're transforming the habits that obscure the clear and accurate recognition of reality—yata-bhuta, things as they have come to be in this moment—the habits that obscure it: greed, hatred, confusion, and that lead us into all kinds of unnecessary suffering, both internally and in our speech and actions.

Essentially, this is at the heart of the Four Noble Truths, the essential primary teaching, said to be the teaching of all the Buddhas—certainly this Buddha that we have some teachings from. What I essentially want to talk about tonight is the second Noble Truth, the cause of the unsatisfactory as the Buddha explains it, which is the Pali word tanha.

Now, I know we haven't gone through the Four Noble Truths. We will. I'm just going to mention them briefly. The first, of course, is to be understood that there is dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability in life—both the aspect of pain, obvious suffering, sickness, death, and all of that. The fact that these happen, and waking up doesn't stop them from happening. There's the unreliability of constant change. There's nothing to hold on to, and there's no inherent self-existence. That's dukkha, the first noble truth. Unsatisfactoriness is the word I like.

The Buddha then says that the cause, the origin, is this tanha. That's what I want to talk about tonight. The third noble truth is that there is a cessation, an ending of dukkha with the ending of tanha, of clinging, of craving. And the fourth is the Noble Eightfold Path—the path of life, of practice, for understanding, waking up, exploring this, what we're all doing now.

Regarding the second truth, I want to read from the Sutta. I use dukkha because suffering, I think, is too narrow a translation. It leads us to think that all unpleasantness is going to go away when we understand tanha, and it isn't. So I'll use dukkha as unreliable.

"This is the noble truth of the origin of dukkha. It is this craving, this tanha, which produces repeated renewal of being, which is bound up with delight and lust, and which seeks pleasure now here and now there. Namely, craving for sense pleasures, craving for being, craving for states, craving for existence—that's the second one—and craving for non-existence." Vibhava-tanha is also like craving, the wanting stuff to go away that we don't like.

I want to talk about exploring this, but tanha isn't only greed. It really encompasses all of it—the craving, the thirst. The best translation, the closest translation for tanha is thirst. This thirst for pleasure, this thirst for being, this thirst for something to not be. It encompasses all the kilesas, all the confusion.

Tanha does not vanish; we do not abandon it through an act of will—which we probably know, but we keep trying. "Okay, I get it. You talk about it tonight, you read about it, I get it. She finally convinced me, it's no good, so I'm giving it up. It's not the path of

happiness." If only, right? It's not abandoned by an act of will. Conversely, it doesn't mean you're a sad specimen of a human being because you haven't yet given up tanha, and you would if you had any strength at all. That's not really how it works.

But wisdom, paññā, recognizing accurately, and the stability through steady mindfulness and samadhi, stability of mind—this is the condition for clear seeing. And the clear seeing, the wisdom, is what allows paññā, what allows tanha to, in a moment, evaporate. Not because wisdom hates it—hating is really an aspect of tanha. It's because when we recognize accurately, in that moment—and there's only moments—craving doesn't make any sense. So it's abandoned.

There's a word, one talked about in the whole train up to liberation, called nibbida, which is often translated as disenchantment.

That's really what it is. The wisdom sees through the craving. There's a disenchantment with what's craved, and it drops away.

The example that's often given for disenchantment is this: if you have a hungry dog, a wild dog that comes running up and finds this big bone, he grabs a hold of it. But that bone has been out in the desert being bleached for a hundred years. There is not one speck of anything that could give that dog anything—no marrow, no nothing. Just a dried up old bone. So the dog starts on it, but immediately it's apparent there's nothing there. As much as the dog wants some pleasure, there's nothing there; that bone can't give it. You see, "Oh, that's just how it is." You don't keep wanting the bone. Wanting makes no sense. You put it down and walk away.

That's nibbida. That's disenchantment. That's, in a moment, the freedom from tanha, the freedom from the dukkha, the unreliability.

A lot of people aren't really very interested in disenchantment. And therein lies the problem. That wasn't casually said—it's actually quite deep in us.

My intention with this talk, of course, is to give a lot of information, but really my intention is an invitation to all of us to actually turn to mindfulness wisdom, to actually explore this aspect of experience that we call tanha—as it arises, how it acts, how it passes. Because it's simply a mental state that arises and passes in a particular moment of citta, many, many moments of citta. When we're meeting it with right attitude, with just the attitude of this interested mindfulness, it's as worthy an object of mindfulness wisdom as anything else. So really that's my invitation here, and everything I'm talking about is to just let us turn the mindfulness onto the tanha, to explore it, see what it actually is so that it loses its mystique, quits driving the bus. We can actually see what's

going on. What is its nature? How does it arise? How does it behave? And then how do we behave when we're not recognizing that tanha is in the forefront of the mind at the moment?

What we call mind—moments of consciousness with mental qualities arising and passing—is not a steady state at all. It's an activity. Every moment is a new arising quality of mind and heart. And that's what allows our practice, that's what allows investigation. That's what allows us to notice, in this case, tanha arising, notice in the moments it's present how it acts, notice when it goes away. And then notice that you expect, "Now I've conquered tanha, and it's gone." And how come I have to keep going through this over and over and over? We think, "Okay, once done, that's it." We're so disappointed. But who knows? Ten million mind moments in a day—actually, they say seventeen trillion in the blink of an eye, but let's stay with ten million in a day. It's already a lot. And our job is just to keep coming back and look and explore.

So everything I say tonight is from that—trying just to pique our interest, our exploration, and our trust in the Dhamma, our trust that when the obscuration isn't there and there's accurate recognition, you don't have to figure out how to abandon that craving. It stops making sense in that moment. And it's like—wow.

First, let me start talking about maybe some ideas we have about tanha, craving, often translated as wanting, desire, greed, all the different words. But as you know, this is not only greed; it's also pushing away.

One of the confusions that comes up a lot when we're thinking about it—not exactly just being there feeling that thirst, but thinking about it—is this: What's wrong with wanting things? We only would do something if we want things. What's wrong with wanting a better world? What's wrong with wanting a good relationship? What's wrong with wanting peanut butter at dinner? Whatever—what's wrong with wanting awakening? What's wrong with wanting to practice? And then we get all confused.

Something—and this is my particular thing—is recognizing that *tanha* is referring to, is a label for, a state of heart, a state of mind. *Tanha* is about the quality in the mind and heart, not about the object. All of those questions—what's wrong with wanting this or that?—all the attention gets focused on the object. And then we start getting confused.

But *tanha*, thirst, this leaning of "I need to have, I want to have"—and then it strengthens into grasping, *upadana*, holding on, clinging—it's the state in the heart, in the mind. And so there comes to be a linguistic confusion, because in English the word "desire" or the word "want" can actually be referring to very different qualities or states of heart and mind, very different mental states.

It's kind of symptomatic of the whole way our delusion works on so many different levels: all our attention is focused on the object, and we don't actually notice what's going on in the mind-heart. So it's a linguistic thing.

In Pali, *tanha*, this word that I've described as thirst, is very specific. There's another word, *chanda*, that is essentially neutral. *Chanda* is translated as a kind of excitement, a desire to do, an energy, an interest. Sometimes it's translated as zeal, a desire to act. So depending on what it's paired with—there's a word *dhammachanda*—then there's this interest, this zeal, this willingness to act that is a wholesome quality, one that gives us the energy, the aspiration to practice the Dhamma.

So when we say, "What's wrong with wanting awakening? You have to want in order to be able to practice"—we're talking about this *chanda* energy. We're not talking about *tanha*. They're very different states of mind and heart. If we're only looking at the object, we never even notice the difference. And then we get really confused. "So there's good desires, there's bad desires"—and we go, "Well, what the heck?"

Chanda is also found in another pairing: *kamachanda*. *Kama*—not karma, but *kama*—*kamachanda* is the excitement of sense pleasures, leading into what is really the first hindrance. Not wholesome. That same zeal energy, but focused on the excitement of sense desires, which takes us into *tanha*. So that's *chanda*. There can be *dhammachanda*, zeal to do totally wholesome things.

The same object, though—even take wanting enlightenment. My guess is maybe many of you have experienced this: the thought is, "I really am dedicated to wanting enlightenment," but the internal experience is one of huge suffering and frustration. Have you ever experienced that? Am I making that up?

So we look and we say, "Well, but what's wrong with wanting enlightenment? It's the aspiration. What's the difference?" We get all worked up. Turn the attention around. That's *tanha*—this thirst, this craving, this quality that when it's present in the *citta* and unrecognized, we suffer. We don't see accurately. So here we want to really start exploring it.

The same thing with peanut butter for tea. You're just hungry. You need to go eat. Nothing wrong with that. We say, "I want to eat." Maybe you're hungry, maybe you're not. But "I've got to have peanut butter" or "I do not want another peanut butter! If they have peanut butter again, I'm going to scream! I'm going to write a note and put it on the bulletin board—for the well-being of all the yogis. It's not my personal preference; it's for everyone's well-being."

And I just want to say here and now: when that thought occurs to you about anything, we beg you—we beg you—do not put the note on the bulletin board. Take a twenty-four-hour period. See if it's still life and death, for the benefit of all beings, that this note goes up.

It may have changed in a 24-hour period. The qualities in your mind state may have changed. So we call that "yogi mind." It's wonderful terminology because it captures exactly what happens. It's like the kilesas—greed in this case, or aversion—exaggerate. They do, don't they? It's like peanut butter becomes the bane of the planet when you're feeling that way. It exaggerates. And concentration magnifies. When those two come together, it's not a good combination.

We call it yogi mind. It happens. It happens to all of us. Because there is strong concentration. And again, you might be quite much more focused than you were ten days ago, even though you don't think it. You might be with the breath or something neutral or something wholesome. But then an unwholesome kilesa comes roaring up. We don't quite see it. And all that focus, that magnification goes in and—boom—it takes over.

We all have that. It's like, "Oh, I'm just the worst person who ever existed," for whatever reason. And when you say the reason the next day you go, "Huh?" You can't even imagine it. But anyway, that's a sidetrack.

To begin, I want to invite us to explore so we learn to recognize and see. Don't believe me or the Buddha, but as he said, he offers his teaching for us to come and see, explore, and learn to recognize with mindfulness and wisdom—sati-paññā—when tanha, this craving, this thirst, is present. How do you recognize it? And what's the effect of it? Why is it a problem? Why did the Buddha pick this out of everything as the cause of dukkha? So we turn around and take a look at that state.

I'm going to say some things about it. You may see your own things. Most of these we know, but if we really knew, right? We know, but we forget. Because it's so seductive. We've spent our life really in the thrall of craving—it's the only way we really know to be happy, to be at peace, to have some pleasant experience. That thirst, that leaning into it is just what we've learned. And because we keep getting focused out on the object, we don't recognize what's actually going on. We're giving all the potential for peace, for ease, for happiness to that particular object of mind—physical or mental—at that time. And it's just so seductive, it just pulls us along.

My brother used to have a hound dog, a red bone hound, a sweet dog. A hunting dog bred for hunting, which of course it didn't get to do in downtown Atlanta, but he did have a backyard. Sweet dog, but the nose was so highly bred for scents. That dog was

led by his nose. He would come in the house and just follow his nose to every new smell, every new thing. When I would come to visit, if I left my suitcase open, he'd be immediately in the suitcase sniffing any dirty clothes or anything that had a scent of person on it. He was immediately in there, pulling it out of the suitcase and chewing on it. When he'd go outside in the yard, he couldn't just go play like a dog. He just had his nose on the ground and had to go around following every scent.

That, to me, is craving. That's how it works. We're just led by it, led by it, led by it, and we have no clue that there's another way, that there's something else going on here.

So it gives us this kind of tunnel vision too. When the craving is strong and we're on the thing, that's all we want. Everything else is in the way. Have you noticed that, even with little things?

Or like when you're in line. I can see I'm really sidetracking here. A friend told me about this—when you're in line to get on a bus or something, and there aren't assigned seats, so you don't know if there will be enough seats, and there's a big crowd. I'm from New York, so my New Yorkness really comes out. I could blame it on New York, but I have to blame it on craving. It's like, shh, go for it, and everyone else is in your way. In the way. You get the seat, you sit down, and then—ah, may you be happy, may you be peaceful, everybody else. I hope you all get a seat once I have mine. But until I have it? Tunnel vision, craving, get away.

My friend told me that many years ago he was somewhere in China, way out in the middle of nowhere—Dunhuang, I think. And like one bus a day came to get out of there. So he'd been there, done his thing, and then he's waiting at six in the morning for the bus. The bus comes, and it's like a mob of people. While fighting, they all get on the bus, it fills up, and it goes. And he's just standing there. He didn't want to fight. He's trying to be the nice tourist. So they all get in, and it goes away. He's like, oh, twenty-four hours till the next bus comes. So he made sure he got on the next one.

Abandoning craving doesn't mean we can't see what's going on.

So it's like that—it leads us by the nose, creates tunnel vision. But the seduction is that real promise of happiness. As you know, we really think this next thing is going to do it. And of course we've talked about it and will more—the whole sense of not being sufficient, how craving accentuates our lack of wholeness, all of that. But I'm going to stay really with exploring it in our present moment experience as a quality of heart that's often experienced concomitantly. There are physical expressions that may come with it, so that we can really explore and see what's going on in the mind and body when taṇhā is present.

It has that seductive quality too—the next one's going to do it if this one didn't. The next one's going to do it if this one didn't. Watching professional sports is a lot like that, isn't it? I happen to be, for God knows why, a big fan of professional tennis. And it's been really interesting the last couple of years to watch what goes on in my mind around that. Really interesting.

The mind wants to pick one person that it's kind of wanting to win. And once that happens, all this energy—every back and forth, every point, there's a sense of wanting it to go a certain way. Wanting, oh, okay, that one was good. There's happiness. Well, no, that one wasn't good. Unhappy—but now there's another one. This one will be good. Oh, that was good, but now there has to be another one. This has to be good. This has to be good. And no, no, no, this has to be good. And then finally they win the match. But that's one match, then there's seven matches, and finally the tournament. The tournament's over, and if that one person out of a hundred and twenty-eight won the tournament—phew. What happiness. But it never ends. You get a day and then there's the next tournament, and the whole thing starts over again.

And I notice in myself—if I'm watching and it's two people I really don't care about, it's actually much more pleasant. I'm really watching and it's like, wow, this is really nice. I'm not wanting, no, wanting, no. It's more like, oh, look at that, that's very interesting, very skillful. I can turn it off when I've had enough. I don't have to keep watching.

Or going online shopping, like looking for a rug.

Just pick one website, go to eBay. Put in the size rug you want—10,200 choices, right? I'm not exaggerating. You think, well, there's no way I'm going to look at 10,200 choices. But it comes up and you know, well, just one more page. Just one more page. Five hours later.

And we think this is making us happy. That's the seduction. We're clueless. As the Buddha said in the definition—seeking delight, now here, now there. And what's so interesting is that if we don't turn around and look at the craving, we can easily mistake the craving itself for the delight. We mix it up.

So seeking delight. You get off after five hours. I do turn it off before that, the eBay. But you feel horrible. You have a headache. Your eyes are bugging out. Half the day is over. You didn't find a rug anyway. And even if you did, it doesn't look like what it looked like online. So it's a waste of time completely. And then we turn around and say, oh, what could I do now? Maybe I'll have some ice cream. What's the next thing? What's the next thing?

I have a very wise friend who knew this perfectly well. We were having a conversation. This is a person who's very careful, always likes to have a couple of cookies after lunch. Not pigging out, not a lot, just two cookies every day after lunch—but has to have two cookies every day after lunch, certain kinds of cookies. So we were laughing and talking about craving, and I said, this is really the essence of samsara. Thinking those cookies will make you happy. "But they do make me happy," he said. I said, right, okay. But what about when you can't get a cookie? He says, "Oh, I'll always get a cookie."

This keeps us bound to samsara. Samsara, the endless round—the red bone hound, the next, the next, the next. Wanting sense pleasure, wanting to become, wanting a state, wanting—and all the while thinking this is what's going to bring peace and happiness. Not really recognizing it. It's really poignant, really touching that we do this.

The Buddha speaks about what Bhikkhu Bodhi describes as three movements in the unfolding process of insight. You see it around tanha, you see it around many things. The three movements are recognizing the gratification in a particular experience, recognizing the danger in a particular experience, and then recognizing the escape.

This is from the Buddha himself: "Before my enlightenment, O bhikkhus"—bhikkhus technically means monks, but it also means anyone who's practicing, so bhikkhus, like he's speaking to us—"while I was still a Bodhisatta, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? Then it occurred to me: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification. That the world is impermanent, bound up with dissatisfaction, with unreliability, and subject to change—this is the danger in the world. The abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world."

Notice he's saying the abandoning of desire and lust. He's not saying abandon the world. There's a huge difference. When we talk about renunciation, renunciation is the abandoning of the craving that keeps us bound to samsara. It doesn't mean we're necessarily abandoning the world.

So, that there is gratification—there is. Even though the Buddha talks so much about the danger of sense pleasures—the danger being because they're so seductive, because we get so lost, because we don't bring in mindfulness wisdom, satipañña, and investigate what's really happening—we just keep getting sucked in, like the examples I gave.

But it's true that there's gratification. Sometimes people say—and we hear this frequently—"Well, if there's no clinging, if I'm not supposed to cling or have thirst for pleasant experience, what if everything's just all the same? Who cares? You don't like

anything. You go out in nature—so what? It's green, it's gray, who cares? It's a turkey, it's a worm, who cares?" And I think, again, people aren't interested in nibbida because of this misunderstanding. But that's not what it is at all.

It is important to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. Attachment to sense pleasures brings about suffering and entanglement, both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and others. The Buddha often talks about agitation through clinging—that's what Thich Nhat Hanh is pointing to, the attachment to sense pleasures. But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind bring neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others.

So we can really explore the difference here. Not putting a "should" on it, but genuinely explore the difference. Let's take nature as an example. You go out and see the beautiful moon. There can be a real appreciation, there can be a sense of joy, or there could be a real sense of craving and thirst. These will feel quite different in the heart-mind. Explore that.

To explore it means we have to have the willingness to trust, to understand that when craving arises, it's arising due to causes and conditions. It's a habit of mind. So we're not talking about craving to say, "I'm not going to let it come. I'm not going to see it." We don't have to be afraid of it. If we meet it with wisdom—well, we can't control the wisdom, but we keep meeting it with mindfulness, and the wisdom comes. We don't need to be afraid of craving. It's another mind state.

So it comes. There's joy, you're appreciating the moon, and the craving comes in. Notice that narrowing. Notice that kind of leaning forward. The craving actually brings a sense of dissatisfaction with it. Rather than trying to fix things, it tries to fix them, but it actually is what brought up the dissatisfaction in the first place. Don't believe me—look and see.

So, not to be afraid, but really watch. See the difference. There is appreciation. We don't hate sense pleasures. But we really want to see the difference between just being with "it's like this now"—exquisitely silent, just like this, the happiness of the mind at rest, of seeing clearly—versus "I wish I'd gotten up at five to see that moon the other night and I didn't do it, and it won't happen for another 150 years. Oh, that's nice, but it's only a quarter moon now and it was so beautiful..." You know, now we're in a whole other world. Be there with that too.

So the gratification is real. But the danger—we really start to notice what the Buddha points to—the danger is the fact that craving can't satisfy us because of impermanence, which intellectually we know. But I want to emphasize even more the danger being that seductive quality that we don't really recognize. Something changed, but we don't really see it. Like with tennis, we just go, "Okay, the next one, the next one, the next one." Or the cookies, or the next page on eBay. Instead of seeing that everything's changed, that there's nothing to cling to, the clinging just keeps propelling us to the next thing.

This seductive quality, this onward-going quality that just keeps us locked in—to me, just me personally, that's one of the biggest dangers if we don't see it. If we overlook the heart-mind space of clinging and keep focusing on the object, we miss this danger. Because even though the object changes, we always find another object. And even if we don't get it, we have reasons why we didn't get it. And the object isn't necessarily a sense pleasure—it's a state of mind. Often we can get really locked into craving for states of mind here.

Probably that hasn't happened to anybody. But you know, it does happen sometimes to a rare meditator that they're craving a particular experience. And if you get it, then you lose it and it's suffering. If you don't get it, you're miserable. So either way, look at the craving rather than being satisfied with the object.

So that's one danger—the narrowing. All the craving mind sees is what it craves, and everything else is in the way. Like I was saying about getting on a bus or getting on a plane. I do that a lot, get on planes, and I get to watch this all the time. You're waiting. Am I going to have an empty seat next to me? Will there be an empty seat? And everyone getting on is the enemy until they're past me. Until the doors close, you know, just watching that. That's the suffering—the constriction, the separation, a sense of me versus others. And that's the unwholesomeness that we can't see accurately.

To me, the biggest danger, the most poignant one, is what I mentioned in the beginning: that when there's taṇhā in the mind, in terms of greed, in terms of aversion, in terms of delusion, it distorts accurate recognition. That is the veil that blocks recognizing our true nature. That is the veil that keeps us locked into saṃsāra, that keeps us from recognizing the radiance of the pure citta, as the Buddha talked about. And we get locked into wanting more, wanting more, wanting more. We don't see that it's the very wanting that's the thing that's blocking—as Ajahn Amaro likes to talk about—the natural peace and ease of mind and body. It's our natural peace and ease. The taṇhā is what blocks it.

I think someone, maybe Dara, said this quotation about how wisdom, paññā, when citta is recognizing accurately, when there's wisdom in the mind—it recognizes the natural characteristics of whatever the object is: sense pleasure, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience. So wisdom recognizes, maybe a sound, it might recognize it as a bell, but it also recognizes that it's impermanent, that it's changing, that it's got no intrinsic inherent stability, that it's unreliable. I don't mean that with every sound, if there's wisdom, you go, "Oh yes, hearing, impermanent, unreliable." It just knows that. It recognizes it accurately. Craving doesn't arise. Aversion doesn't arise.

Delusion, when these qualities are present in the citta, distorts perception and we don't recognize these qualities accurately. But the object is recognized. So there's still hearing. There's still a bell. But the impermanent qualities, the unreliable non-self qualities, aren't recognized. And that's when we just get into a whole lot of trouble. Because the way we respond and relate is what keeps the taṇhā going. It distorts our perception. So to me, in a way, that is the most poignant aspect of the danger of taṇhā, of craving, of aversion, of confusion.

Escape. Well, first, to begin with, rather than jumping to complete absence, complete abandonment of taṇhā—when you notice it arising, our tendency, in itself, and you don't know this unless you explore, but in my experience, the experience of thirst, of craving, of leaning forward mentally and physically, is unpleasant. And our deeply conditioned way to escape from unpleasant is... what? What do we do when something's unpleasant? What do we do to get happy?

The Buddha said it's the only escape an unenlightened worldling knows. That's most of us, I would assume. I love that word, puthujjana, unenlightened worldling. The only escape we know, we know no other escape from unpleasant than the seeking out of and experiencing pleasure. So the minute an unpleasant experience arises—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, just this simple vedanā that James introduced the other morning, and I think Aaron will talk about more fully in a couple of nights. It's such a key experience. It's so subtle. We don't notice it. Unpleasant vedanā in a sight, a sound, an internal feeling, a mood comes up, and boom, the mind goes towards something pleasant. That's just what we've learned.

And as the Buddha said, we know of no other escape, the worldling, from unpleasant than the seeking of pleasure, and then that becomes the habit that underlies the mind. We seek pleasure, we have the habit of resisting the unpleasant, and neutral—what? Is there neutral? We've got no clue in life what's going on with neutral.

That is really, to me, so poignant. It's one of the most poignant things.

Knowing that this is the case, perhaps it wouldn't be our first response to keep the sati, the mindfulness, going when tanha arises—when you notice that closing in, or that leaning forward, or the tightness, however you notice it. Rather than jumping to get something else, or going to aversion and blaming yourself, just recognize that this is the next arising experience. It's a mental experience. Let the mindfulness meet it. How does it feel? What does it feel like? Is there a reflection in the physical body? I generally find it unpleasant, but look and see. Turn the attention back whenever you notice tanha.

This is something we're going to have many chances to explore, and that's wonderful. Instead of it being a problem—and it is a problem when we're not aware of it—but instead of being a problem, people often come and say, "Oh no, it's hopeless. I'm seeing cravings so much," and they get disheartened. Understandably so. Why? Because we don't want it there, it's unpleasant, and we want to be happy.

But if we could say, "Okay, every time you notice craving, that's an opportunity to meet it with mindfulness and wisdom"—not to make it go away. That's not mindfulness. We know that, right? We know that if you're mindful properly, it doesn't mean the difficult thing disappears. Do we all understand this? That's not the point of mindfulness. The point of mindfulness is to meet what's happening just as it is. And the steadiness of mindfulness allows for wisdom to see how it acts.

So when you notice tanha, explore it. Some useful inquiries might be: How do you even know it's there? Is it a thought? Is it a physical experience? I get a kind of tightness in my chest—it's almost like physically leaning forward. Sometimes I notice what feels like a measurable tightness in my mind. Sometimes it's just a thought. You notice you've been planning for the last five minutes: "And then when I get to lunch, I'm going to do this... Five more minutes and I can go to bed... How am I going to manage to get the shower at this time?" And after a while you notice—hmm. This could be tanha. It's possible.

So then, instead of going, "Oh no, how can I stop it?"—land in it. Bring in the attention. How does it feel, mentally, physically? What thoughts does it bring up, if any? How does it affect perceptions when it's present in the mind? How does it feed our intentions and our choices? How do we act when there's tanha in the mind? Really hang out with it and explore it.

And sometimes, you know, it's so strong that you just cannot help doing the thing. I'm speaking of simple things here, within the bounds of the precepts, but simple things—you just can't resist.

Well, something that happens for me in walking meditation—somebody walks by, and I just want to look. Why? It's not like it's a horrible thing to look, but the craving to look can be so strong. So I'll notice the craving, and sometimes it's so strong I can't not look. Basically, the craving is stronger than the mindfulness. That's all that's happening. So I look.

You do it. Bring the mindfulness along with you. You're acting from the craving, but you can still bring the mindfulness along with you and see what happens.

So an example for me: I was walking, quite present with mindfulness, and then craving arises—I've got to look, I've got to look. I look, and right away there's seeing, right away there's a judgment. They're better than me, they're worse than me, oh that person, or what are they... So there's the judgment, and that's unpleasant. Then there's self-judgment for judging. And it was like, "That was really a good move, right? That was really a good thing to do, to look there." Then you come back and you're walking again, and it was fine before.

Bring the awareness along with you. That's where the wisdom comes in. Sooner or later, the mind goes, "Oh, that craving doesn't really make sense. It really doesn't."

So first we're able to just hang with it. Okay, it's unpleasant. You're not going to die from it—I really promise. You're not going to die from it. And if you keep hanging with that particular craving, walking back and forth, make yourself a pact once in a while if you get interested: you're just going to keep walking until that particular craving dies away. It will, and probably a lot quicker than you think.

Keep watching. "Oh, it died away, good, I'm out of here." No—keep watching. Keep the mindfulness going. Notice what it's like. For me, when the craving goes, if you stay mindful, it's like... ah, peace. And that's the natural peace and ease of mind that we were looking for in the first place. Why in the world the mind thought looking at the person passing was going to give me that peace and ease, I don't know. But notice when the craving goes.

Over and over we do this, and we really learn. We can see: okay, it's an unpleasant experience, and it's telling me a story that is really hard not to believe. Don't set yourself up—if you set yourself "I can't" or "I shouldn't do this," then you're just bringing in more tightness. Rather, just say, "Okay, you're really going to let mindfulness be there, whatever you're doing," and the wisdom comes.

Because this is yathā bhūta—things as they've come to be, as they really are. You really see that the craving is not serving the purpose we think it is, that it's actually the cause of the dissatisfaction. Literally, in the moment, as well as in the future, as well as in our understanding—in the exact moment, it's the cause of the dissatisfaction.

So hanging with cravings. Okay, it's just mental and physical sensations. It's really not such a big deal. A lot of the time. Sometimes it is—don't beat yourself up about that. But there are a ton of little times when you can really explore it here. Ah, peace. Just the peace of mind and heart being with things as they are.

I want to read a couple of quotations because I like them. From Ajahn Chah, on why we don't recognize the craving—he talks about the flood. He's talking about sense pleasures, but I want you to know this is also about mental experience. Views and opinions is something the Buddha talked about very much as a source of grasping. And I think I'll talk about it in a whole other talk, because it's really huge. We hold on to a thought, a view—"It's like this. This is true, everything else is false." Of course, we don't say that. Then we're attached to it. The attachment is the problem.

It brings us into conflict with ourselves and others. So it's not just sense pleasures, but it's that same craving, that narrowing, that inability—in the grip of the craving—to see that there's any other possibility, to appreciate anything else. It's just this.

So we're sunk, as Ajahn Chah says. Sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations. You might think that sounds like our mindfulness practice—we're aware of all of these—but we're sunk because we only look at externals. We don't look inwardly, meaning looking at what's going on in the mind at that moment.

This is still Ajahn Chah, and I'm sure you've probably heard this, but it's so beautiful. He says how the mind within itself is already peaceful. That the mind is not peaceful these days is because it follows moods. The real mind is simply an aspect of nature. It becomes peaceful or agitated because moods deceive it. Sense impressions, including mental ones, come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness, and sorrow. But the mind's true nature is none of those things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind, but a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things. It forgets itself. But really the mind is unmoving and peaceful, just like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up, the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind. The fluttering is due to the sense impressions. The mind follows them. If it doesn't follow them, it doesn't flutter. So if we know fully the true nature of sense impressions, we will be unmoved.

That's the key. This is the power of mindfulness and stability of mind—to allow us to know fully the sense impressions, to allow us to know fully, for wisdom to know, not personally, the qualities of the taṇhā in the mind and the qualities of the peace and stillness when it vanishes.

James reminded me of this—one of my favorite quotations from the Buddha, from the Sutta Nipāta. Bhikkhu Bodhi just put out a new translation of the Sutta Nipāta, which is wonderful. The Sutta Nipāta is generally accepted as one of the earliest of the books of the Suttas, so some people think it's maybe the closest to what the Buddha actually taught. And some of it's quite radical, particularly when talking about non-attachment to views.

This is from the Sutta Nipāta: "For some people contact—the point where sense plus object meet—is enthralling. And so they are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But others come to understand their sense activity. And because they understand it, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does. And so their craving ends. They realize the total calm."

I just love that. We're not trying to get rid of anything. We see just what contact does, and so their craving ends. It's not an act of will. It's the natural effect of a moment of wisdom in the heart, in the mind. And the steady mindfulness with just what is occurring—taṇhā is a perfect example—is what gives us that possibility.

I'll end with two other quotations. This is from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, who is a brother of Mingyur Rinpoche and Tsoknyi Rinpoche. He's also a wonderful teacher. He says—this is in a more Tibetan framework—that the mind, the pure mind, is the Buddha. When the mind is free of reference points and grasping at characteristics of sense impressions, then it is unobscured, unveiled. And when in that state, it is the Buddha. Because in that state, all obscurations, all phenomena, naturally dissolve. Just the arising and the passing.

They're naturally dissolving anyway. But in that state, that's what's recognized.

I'll end with a suggestion from the Buddha, a reflective contemplation. I was doing a self-retreat in November, reading various teachings from the Buddha. And this is so different from the habit of how my mind works.

This is a specific instruction regarding disenchantment or dispassion. Often what we're encouraged to do is notice the drawbacks of being involved—much of what I've been talking about tonight: the danger, the drawbacks of taṇhā, and why it doesn't work. But another way to approach this is to actually incline the mind towards the deathless, to incline the mind towards that natural purity.

This is the Buddha offering a reflection: "A bhikkhu reflects thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, nibbāna."

Instead of being all caught up in "What should I do? How can I do it? What can I get? How can I stop it?"—just this:

This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, nibbāna.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 169

Liberation through Non-Clinging: Undaunted Courage (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the Third Noble Truth—the cessation of dukkha—not as a distant goal but as something we can taste in every moment when the heart-mind is free from clinging. Drawing on the Buddha's original teaching and insights from Ajahn Buddhadāsa, she explains that liberation through non-clinging doesn't depend on what we're experiencing, but on the quality of awareness meeting that experience. These moments of coolness, free from the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion, are available to everyone and nourish our lives.*
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> *Wilson addresses the common challenges practitioners face as understanding deepens: the discouragement when insights seem to fade, the pain of seeing habitual patterns continue even with awareness, and the fear that arises when our views and sense of self are challenged. She draws on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, who described how awakening can feel like annihilation as our strategies of self-interest fall apart. Shantideva's three aspects of transcendent patience—patience when wronged, patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma, and patience to face profound truth without fear—offer a framework for meeting these difficulties.*
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> *Practical guidance includes recognizing moments of freedom throughout the day, connecting with aspiration rather than expectation, and cultivating adhiṭṭhāna (determination) as a wholesome quality that brings energy together in service of awakening. Wilson emphasizes that everything arising in our experience—whether boring, scary, or repetitive—is the path itself, not something to get through before real practice begins. The talk concludes with an invitation to trust awareness rather than personality and moods, finding the courage to surrender into each moment.*

I used to think I would talk about the third noble truth, but somehow this teaching is headed in another direction. We'll start with it, though.

Since we have talked about the first truth of dukkha, the second truth—the cause of dukkha, this tanha, this craving that I spoke about a couple of weeks ago—the third truth being that there is an ending, a cessation of dukkha, and the fourth truth being the path, the Eightfold Path, which I believe Greg spoke about at some point. Everything we talk about is the Eightfold Path.

I just want to read to you the Buddha's definition of the third noble truth when he first taught these four truths: "This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of dukkha—the remainderless fading and cessation, the renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving, of that very tanha that is the cause of suffering."

One way that I find quite accessible in our moment-to-moment experience of our mind and heart—one way of describing, really meeting, understanding, experiencing moment-to-moment the third noble truth—is in the moments when the heart, the mind, is completely free from clinging. Liberation of heart-mind through non-clinging.

Because of the fact that the mind-heart, the citta (that word for both), is a phenomenon arising and passing, changing in every moment, you don't have to wait for total, complete, absolute cessation of clinging to touch, to taste, to experience a flavor of this quality of liberation through non-clinging, moment to moment to moment.

As Joseph Goldstein really likes to say: liberation through non-clinging, and it doesn't matter to what the mind does not cling. Just like I say awareness doesn't care what it's aware of—it doesn't matter to what the heart-mind doesn't cling. Because it's not about the what. It's about that quality of non-clinging in this moment of heart-mind, in this moment of consciousness, this moment of citta.

So now we start to veer.

All of you really, even if you don't believe it, have moments where you know for yourself that it's the clinging, the craving in the heart, in the mind, in a particular moment—you really see when it ends, when it dissolves, that it was simply that clinging, that craving, that was blocking. As someone said today, it was so clear that it was clinging that was blocking the perception of emptiness. When the clinging is gone, that perception is available.

Even more, many people see that when the clinging lets go in a moment—whether the clinging is to any of the five aggregates, to whatever experience—in the moment when the clinging dissolves, so does that particular sense of self.

One of my favorite quotations about this comes from Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai forest monk and scholar from the last century. He says the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's it. We make this big brouhaha about the sense of self—it's got to go, it's always here—and then when we stop and look at it, it's simply a condition that arises. Okay, it arises a lot. But every time it arises, it passes. Every time.

You say, "Well, not this time. It's here now." You just didn't see it arise. It's kind of fast. And because we don't look, we assume it's always this same sense of self. But it's every moment of sense of self arising, clinging to some different particular experience. That's a whole other talk—I have like seventeen talks in this talk.

But there are times when we really see it, when we really experience: the clinging goes, and there's no particular sense of self. And it's not a huge experience. It's just so normal and natural. And there's that sense—well, this is really where I'm going—"Well, this is obvious, isn't it? How could I possibly get caught up in it again? It's so clear. Yes, emptiness, everything is insubstantial. How could I possibly get upset about that noise of the beeping smoke alarm? How can that possibly bother me when I know all phenomena are empty?"

And then you find yourself up in the middle of the night throwing pillows at it and writing notes about it as you're mumbling, "Empty phenomena rolling on." Doesn't feel too empty.

But when we really see it, when we really get it, it's not an imagined thing. We're not making it up. We really do know in that moment that when the focus of attention, of awareness, is on the object—whatever of the five khandhas the object is: smelling, tasting, thinking—when the focus is on that, we're looking to the object for fulfillment, for meaning, for sense of self. That's where the clinging comes in. That's where the whole suffering, the whole phenomena ball gets rolling.

And we know as soon as there's that kind of Tai Chi move, that stepping into the awareness of the same object, the same experience—just the stepping into refuge in awareness instead of sinking into looking into the object for self-reference—oh, the same experience is occurring without the Velcro. It's just happening, just as it is. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That extra suffering isn't there.

I really want us all to trust in those moments that this is a real perception, that this is a true understanding. And just as it arose, it passes away.

This is what I really want to talk about tonight. We really get it, but—so how can we, this is kind of a pep talk—what can we do? How can we keep on finding the courage, the trust, the determination to continue to open into, with totality of presence, this whole path, this one particular moment? That's what I want to talk about.

People are really in different places, and you all keep changing places, right? Because that's how it goes. Everybody's path is unique. But there are times when each of you has been really experiencing deep insights into Dhamma, into freedom, into the three characteristics, into emptiness, maybe into aspects of your personality, habit pat-

terns that you hadn't seen, really understanding, seeing through them. And then you turn around and you're doing the same thing again and you're really caught again, and it can really take us into discouragement. Or am I the only one? Yeah, I don't think so.

Or you know it's going well. And I think if you come into any of this and say, "Oh, it's going well, it's really good," we never let it sit there, because what does that mean, you know? But it's going well, there's insights, it's flowing, and then all of a sudden some really deep, difficult, painful thing comes up. Or even worse—a lot of just niggly, stupid thoughts, and you can't focus on anything. At least if some big thing comes up, you can feel like you're working with something, right? But when it's just, "Oh, I'm thinking this, I'm thinking that, it's not even about anything, but I just can't focus"—that's when you're really ready to hang up the towel.

Doubt, impatience, frustration, despair, really—can it be? I'm in despair because I was in walking meditation and thoughts kept coming up. I'm in total despair. We hear this stuff all day. The thing is, you are in total despair. And so this is where we want to bring our awareness to understand what's going on here and not to let ourselves get caught in these emotional reactions to what's happening.

Ajahn Buddhadasa had a translation of a talk he gave, and I'm sure many of you have heard quotations from this, where he was talking to Thai lay people. "Nibbana for Everyone" is the title of this talk. I'm just reading very briefly from it. He's talking about how Nibbana is a natural condition—a natural condition, not some amazing huge thing only for special people. That's what he's telling Thai lay people. Don't just think it's for nuns and monks who are going to be arahants and you just have to wait for another lifetime. Nibbana is for everyone.

And so he's calling it a natural condition, the cool state of mind, of heart, without any kilesa, without any torment. It's just what we've been saying all along. And just a little piece—he goes on to say that if we really look at this, we see that the kilesas, greed, hatred, confusion, are also sankhara-dhamma, compounded, conditioned phenomena. They come together when the conditions are ripe, and when those conditions change and cease, then those causal conditions are not present, and the kilesas, the torments, simply become extinct.

So this is in any moment when there's suddenly clear seeing—kilesas in that moment have become extinct. And he says, although the extinction is temporary—don't dismiss it. In other words, the coolness takes place temporarily. The phenomenon has the real taste of Nibbana, even though it's not the lasting one.

And he says we all experience many, many moments of this coolness of heart and mind, of the moments free from kilesas, because without it, the fire of the kilesas, he said, we'd die. This is what nourishes our life. This freedom, these moments of freedom from kilesa—to really notice that through the days here. These aren't about any amazing thing happening. This isn't about big insight: "Oh, non-self!"

It's just the little moments where the heart-mind is cool. It's not burning with the fire of greed, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion. So just notice this—in the walking, in the sitting, when you're eating, sitting in the bathroom, anytime. I often experience it as just a little exquisite moment. Or one of those moments of what the Zen people call the is-ness of things.

Often when we're in a place like this where the nature is really beautiful, there are these moments of pure presence when you're outside. What can easily happen is that we overlook that it's the quality of the coolness, the absence of kilesa, that's creating the sense of purity of presence. We tend to attribute it, or can attribute it, to the circumstances or the object. You walk out and there's the beautiful crescent moon and the sky is just... so beautiful. And we forget to notice that really what that coolness is—in that moment, consciousness is free from kilesa. It's a moment, a little taste of liberation of heart-mind through non-clinging.

But our habit is... so just notice these moments. Many, many, many through the day, they come and go, no big deal. Let it start to be no big deal. Then we'll stop striving so much to achieve some idea of nibbana. Whatever idea you have can't possibly be correct, because it's not about an idea or words. So put the ideas down. Let go of the views and just notice a little nothing-special moment of putting down your foot. There's just the sensation of pressure and tingling. The mind isn't saying, "Okay, a couple more steps and I go to lunch." Just the sensation of pressure and tingling and wakefulness. And it comes to, well, nothing's happening. I'm just walking, feeling pressure. Notice that—just that moment of purity of heart and mind. Many, many moments, so that we can really trust it more.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa says, nibbana is for everyone.

So that's on the one side. And on the other side, our tendency, as I said, is so much to attribute experience to the object, to the circumstance, that we forget to notice the purity of heart-mind. And then we're kind of sucked back into the story, sucked back into this place of confusion and doubt. "It was so beautiful. I was just at ease. And now I go in my room and I'm lost in all these weird emotions. How can that possibly be?" And then we start spinning.

Nibbana is for everyone, but the true liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging is also really challenging for everyone. These moments, yes, they're absolutely natural. They're free from effort because effort gets in the way. They're absolutely available to all of us much of the time. But they come and they go, and the habits are so strong.

I want to talk a little bit about some of the ways that, as we deepen in practice, as we're really touching and experiencing freedom—maybe as I described it just now, or seeing through your patterns, or some of the things I said before—and then seeing that go away. Even though we may tell ourselves, "Oh yeah, well that's okay, it's really okay, it's all one, I don't mind"—maybe there's a moment when it's okay, but it starts to spiral down and we start to believe it more.

Freedom from clinging is absolutely uncompromising. There's no aspect whatsoever of our experience that's exempt from that. So at times, as our practice is deepening and understanding is growing but going back and forth between understanding and getting caught—the language I use is that we hit a wall in different ways. We're really practicing very sincerely, and actually understanding is deepening, but at times we hit different places that are really challenging in our practice, in our life. I want to mention a few tonight so you won't think there's something wrong with you, but also so you can see it's all part of the path.

As I was saying, freedom from clinging means nothing is exempt—freedom from greed, hatred, delusion. When we think about what freedom from clinging would be like, what nibbana would be like—which we do, because that's what we do—of course we're going to have some idea about that. We want to know ahead of time: What am I doing this for? What's it going to be like? How's it going to be? How can I steer my experience in that direction? Isn't that what all the techniques and all the instructions are about?

We lose the fact, we lose noticing, that the steering has become wanting, and the wanting is in service of some idea we've made up. We forget that we can't know, that what's required moment to moment to moment is just this—just in one moment.

Remember, it's only ever one moment, which to me is the only thing that makes it workable. So what I'm saying is about this one moment. What's required is full commitment in this moment to open with fullness of presence into the unknown of what's occurring right now. Without having it all sussed out, without being able to put it in a trajectory of where it's going, without knowing—if I really open into this scary thing, what's going to happen? What will I get out of it? What will I know? You don't even

know. Just to completely open into the unknown in this moment, with mindful awareness, with kind attention. It's what we've been saying all along. But there are no guarantees. Ever. Just into this moment.

And at times this is really freeing when it happens. It's like, "Oh yeah, how could I forget?" But there are times it's really challenging. Really scary.

Awakening is not a self-improvement project. As Ajahn Sumedho said—I remember hearing him say once—it's not our personality that gets enlightened. Awakening doesn't confirm us, make us feel all good about ourselves, give us a sense of self-fulfillment: "I'm such a better person now that I'm enlightened." It's actually the standpoint of "me" that gets seen through. As I was saying, really noticing the arising and passing of the sense of me, the sense of I. When we recognize that in those moments, we can't take it so seriously, and that's freeing. When we don't recognize it, again, it's really serious and not so freeing.

So along the way, what happens is that all of our views, our beliefs about ourselves, about what the world is like, about practice, about anything—at some point all of our views, our beliefs, our attachments, our strategies of self-interest are going to be challenged. Not to say they're all bad or wrong. But at some point as we practice, any view that we're holding to is going to be challenged. Because the Buddha talked a lot about not attaching to views—views of enlightenment, views even of the teachings, views of who you are, views of anything. Even the teachings are not to be held on to. No view to be held to.

And so many times when we're in places—happening to some today and some not—where what I call "hitting the wall" occurs, we're going along and actually we can tell the practice is going great. It's just that what's coming up is unpleasant or disconcerting or not what we'd expect, or we don't quite know how to be with it. And so we think our view of what practice is, is what's being challenged. But actually our path of awakening is going along just fine.

A lot of what our job is—I don't know if you've noticed—we kind of pat you back into shape. "Okay, that's okay. Shake yourself up. Keep going. It's going along fine." Have you noticed how often we do that? Because it's all about just keeping on meeting the moment with open awareness. It's not about making the moment different or better, or making us feel better about ourselves. But God knows we'll keep trying.

So just a few of the ways—there are a million ways, but just a few that came to my mind that are very common in my experience, and I know I'm not the only one—of how we hit a wall or don't recognize we're running into a view we're holding, a personality view, particularly sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

One is simply when things are going along and you think it's going well, and then it changes. There's that deep sense of "I had it, I was doing it, I understood it—and what did I do wrong?" Have you ever had that experience? "I blew it, how can I get it back?" And so it's not only a sense of discouragement because basically now it's unpleasant and before it was pleasant—let's face it. But also really feeding into self-judgment, the whole personality of "I can't do it, I did it wrong, somehow I'm controlling this whole scenario and I blew it."

But really it's just seeing—we call this anicca. I think we've mentioned that once in a while. Things change, conditions change, and it's not just us. This is a sutta from the time of the Buddha, one I often use.

He's talking to a monk, a bhikkhu, named Asaji. And it says, on one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove. And he heard that Venerable Asaji, a long-term dedicated bhikkhu, was very sick. He was afflicted. He was gravely ill. And the Buddha went to see him, and Asaji was not only ill, but he was upset. He was basically saying that he was troubled by remorse and regret.

So the Buddha questions him and is saying, well, do you have something in terms of your virtue, your sila, to reproach yourself with? Something you've done wrong that's bringing up this remorse and regret? And Venerable Asaji said, no, no, no, Venerable Sir. So the Buddha said, so what, basically, is your problem? And he probably didn't say it like that, but who knows?

So Asaji says, well, formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was ill, I was able to keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations, but now I cannot obtain concentration. And so it occurs to me, let me not fall away. In other words, he's lost his concentration, he can't tranquilize it, and he's thinking, oh no, I've lost it. Don't let me fall away, I'm sick.

And the Buddha basically says, Asaji, haven't I told you, whatever phenomena are subject to arising are subject to ceasing when the conditions change? He's basically saying, you're sick. You're sick as a dog. You can't cultivate concentration because the conditions of mind and body aren't present. And that's freedom—recognizing that. The freedom isn't getting the concentration. The freedom is recognizing that's what's happening. That's the essence of the path.

So the lack of freedom is really making a whole personality view around the belief that it should be different. In fact, I think often when we're in conflict with experience and we don't quite know why, it helps to check what's the view in the background, in the back of your mind. I find for me, it can almost always be boiled down to either it should be better or it should be different. And that's of course an endless one, right? It should be better, and no matter what's happening, it could be better. And so to really see that's what's going on can be a moment of freedom.

So that's one—not recognizing causes and conditions and taking it personally.

Another one, and this is like a whole phase in practice that's really important: when on the personality level, we're really starting or continuing to see with wisdom some of our particular habits of mind, of heart, that bring us suffering or unhappiness, that bring others suffering. They don't have to be huge ones, just little habits, like a habit of impatience, for example. And we start to see it and really understand it. As we become aware of it, we feel the pain of it more. We think, well, I really see how that's not helpful.

And then we turn around, wait in the food line, and there's impatience springing up and we're acting on it. But we're acting on it with awareness, which the Buddha says is more useful—but it happens to be a lot more painful. Because as you're cutting to the head of the line and taking all this extra food and you're so embarrassed because everyone's looking at you, you're so aware: oh, this craving is still running me even though I know it's painful. Have you ever experienced that? Just to see.

And even more when we go out into our lives and see the habits still running, and we're really aware, we can get so discouraged. What's the point? I'm more neurotic now than when I started the practice. I'm doing these neurotic things more. Not really—we're just much more aware of it. And if we don't really bring in mindfulness and wisdom here, we can really talk ourselves out of practice, because it's discouraging.

What this is requiring of us is that willingness, that courage to keep dropping into this unpleasant, painful experience with awareness. When we're saying, I don't want to see this anymore, and maybe the practice isn't helping—no, bring it in. Bring the awareness in. Meet it. But that's what's really hard. Really hard.

Another obstacle, and this is again obvious on one level but on another level can be quite profound: sometimes there's just too much pain—physical pain, emotional pain.

And for sure, for all of us, there are moments when an emotional thing coming up is simply overwhelming. The physical pain is too strong. You need to shift your attention. That's just part of practice.

But I mean something larger, where it's more like the fear of: "Oh no, if awakening means I have to incorporate the awareness of *this* in my experience, no thank you. I'd rather not." Or just some unpleasant sensation—not even a killer pain, not pain that's going to damage you. We're not talking about that. But sometimes, take an itch. I'm not going to die of the itch. But sometimes it's so hard, so hard just to be with it. I'm using a simple example, but imagine something stronger than that, where you think, "I cannot bear this another moment. I cannot bear to see this pattern again in my life." And if we're not aware of that, the habit of avoiding the unpleasant reasserts itself and we abandon mindfulness. We abandon awareness.

But again—moment to moment.

Another line I love from Ajahn Sumedho. He was describing his early years practicing in Thailand in the hot season in his kuti. Believe me, I've done it—hot. In a kuti with a tin roof, it's like 105 degrees and the sun's beating down and you're inside with long-sleeved robes on. You're cooking. So he's sitting in that kuti. There's no AC. You can't go get an iced Coke or something. You're just sitting there, and there's no food—it's afternoon, that's it for the day. So he's just sitting there, sweating through his robes, thinking, "What am I doing here? I can't bear this another second." And then he'd find that he could.

I love that. I'll be sitting, thinking, "I can't be with this for one more second." And then—it's like this, now. That's all. The one moment. The releasing of the clinging to the idea "I can't bear it," and just that relaxing, surrendering into the moment. Not with a sense of, "If I do it this moment, I have to do it the next moment, I have to do it forever." Just this moment. That complete surrendering with awareness. Coming out of the cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

We don't know where it's going to go. It really requires us to keep connecting with, to keep finding our aspiration, our motivation, our trust and confidence. Which is why I started this talk with really acknowledging for yourself, recognizing the moments of wisdom, the moments of freedom. Not to try and hold on to them, but to trust them. To have confidence that those are true and will happen again. And that gives us the courage to say, "Okay, there's nothing but this moment. Truth is only available in this moment."

As Dōgen Zenji said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?"

Something in this gives us the courage to just surrender for one moment. Not for anything—just to be here.

Now, a different way that we can hit a wall is one that Sayadaw U Pandita called "stopping within." One way this happens—and here I'm extrapolating, I don't know if this is exactly how he meant it—is when our practice or our life is going along well. There's maybe been a lot of insight, or particular levels of suffering that brought us into practice, that brought us on the path, have really been ameliorated. We're not suffering as much. And there really is a difference. It's like, "Wow, this is great!" And then it's kind of like... "And it's good enough." It's good enough, you know? We might find—and sometimes people say this, and I've seen it in myself too—

It's just part of our journey. As we go along our path, we discover this is good enough. And we might think, "Oh, maybe I wasn't really in this for full awakening. I was in this to make life a little bit better." Which, of course—I mean, why does any of us start? There's nothing wrong with that.

But the stopping within is when we say, "Okay, that's good enough"—and maybe we're not quite conscious of it. And then if you're on retreat, for example, you might find something else comes up that's a little difficult, but you have a way of thinking, "I don't need to go with that. This is good enough. Let me go and open to the stars. Beautiful."

Now, there are times that's totally appropriate, right? Like when James was talking about really accessing the uplifting qualities, the joy—there are times that's totally appropriate. I'm not saying no. But that's to bring us back into balanced awareness, to keep on being fully present for whatever presents itself.

What I was just describing now could sound like it's the same, but it's really more like, "I've had enough. Okay, the stars are so beautiful. Where did Greg say that Andromeda was? Maybe I could go write him a note. Oh, if I could get my phone from the managers, I could look on that app someone was telling me about..." And Rachel was saying you point it at the sky and it shows you everything—and then we're gone, right?

So just look and see, and this is not about judging. We really want to see deep in our own hearts and minds. We keep finding what our motivation is. And for me, I found that it keeps deepening and changing over the years. We come to more understanding. "Oh yeah, this is pretty good. But real freedom might be possible." But that means to keep on going, to keep on looking. And it means we'll come again at some point. We'll keep coming back into facing some aspect of our views or ideas about ourself, or ideas of what freedom is, that are going to get challenged. There's no way around that.

Or sometimes we're starting to get the intimation of that—wow, some aspects of my personality, I'm really going to have to let go of. And then we get these ideas that aren't necessarily true, but like, "Wow, if non-clinging is really uncompromising, that means I'm going to have to let go of the beauty of nature." Whatever our mind comes up with—all kinds of stuff. "That means I'm going to have to let go of loving my family. That means I'm going to have to let go of caring about the environment, or of doing social justice work in the world." Whatever we come up with. "Well, if liberation means that, I don't want it."

Or sometimes—and this is weird, but I've experienced it, maybe I'm the only one, I don't know—there's a sense of certain aspects of my personality, even kind of suffering ones, but they're so familiar. They're so comfortable. It's like putting on an old comfortable bathrobe that you don't want to take away. Who would I be without this impatience? Who would I be without whatever it is?

It doesn't make sense, but I've often felt it's like a small death of some idea about my personality. I want to go back to the pleasure garden that the Buddha had before he was the Buddha, when it was all nice—but it was nice because we were in complete delusion of what was going on. I want to go back. I don't want to see that there's dukkha in these aspects. Let me just get all comfy in my delusion.

You know it's too late for that, right? It's too late for that. But we want it. Chögyam Trungpa called that nostalgia for samsara. We want to go back, we want to go back. We've done all this work, but let's pretend it never happened.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, again from his preface to that book, *The Island*, that Adrian mentioned.

As one begins to realize or recognize non-grasping as the way, emotionally one can feel quite frightened by it. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart, and it can be frightening. But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find that our stability is not in achievement or attaining, but in being—in being awake, in being aware.

That really is where the stability is, where the freedom is. Taking refuge in the awareness that's receiving whatever particular phenomenon is arising, existing, passing away. Awareness receiving, awareness receiving. We take our refuge in that, moment to moment.

And that awareness receiving is also really feeling whatever is occurring. It's not holding experience at a distance. To me, this is really where the courage comes—to find for ourselves that courage, that patience, to take a breath and just surrender into this moment.

Stephen Batchelor has another way of saying the same thing. He says emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It's a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection. And although it's freeing, at times it can bring about a great sense of disconcertion, of dis-ease. It's like being in no man's land, no person's land. You don't know where you are. You don't have the familiar reference points.

Shantideva talks about three aspects of transcendent patience that we bring to our practice. The first is patience when wronged—that's the way we normally think of it. The second is patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma, and that's a lot of what I was talking about, all the different difficulties. Patience to bear the hardships for the Dhamma, for awakening. And the third is the patience to face the profound truth without fear. Not that fear doesn't come, but we don't let it run us.

So when Stephen Batchelor or Ajahn Sumedho is saying that it's a falling apart of all of our strategies, all of our ideas about things—the patience to face that, the patience to meet that with awareness, whatever arises—that's really taking refuge in awareness. That sense of courage, determination, really finding how we connect with it, how we keep connecting with it. We all have our own ways.

I'm mostly talking about this tonight just to remind us that this is the path for all of us. Everything that's occurring—these most scary, difficult experiences, these boring ones, these hard ones, these repetitive experiences that you think you've seen seven million times and it's happening again—these are the path. They're not what we get through to get on the path. This is it.

In the moment when awareness, when citta, meets the arising experience—that's the place of freedom and purification. The freedom isn't getting rid of the experience. It's in that moment when, like Sayadaw was saying, "I can't be with it" and it's aversion, it's me, it's all the stories—and then it's like this now. Just that simple moment of heart-mind free of kilesa, free of clinging. It seems like nothing. You're sitting here sweating through your robes, the same as you were a second earlier. But in this moment, the heart-mind is free. It's the same sweaty robes.

Everything is our path. Trusting that, connecting to it, remembering the moments of freedom, of wisdom, of understanding—this really helps so much to reconnect with whatever your deep aspiration is. Aspiration, not expectation, right? But we need to remember what it is, because it takes a lot of courage to keep going in this way.

To discover the wisdom, the courage, the humility to keep just surrendering again, no matter what. We think we had the biggest insight, and the next hour we feel like we never meditated before, and you have to go in and tell the teacher that you're completely hopeless. Can we find the humility? This is just another arising experience. How is the awareness meeting it? That's the place of freedom or the place of suffering.

One thing that helps is connecting with the aspiration. Another thing that really helps me sometimes, when it's real dukkha, real suffering, and I can see I'm caught in the personalness of it, a lot of sakkāya-diṭṭhi around it—it's a little bit of a reflection, but often it moves into a real perception experience. When I'm all caught in my own story, whatever it is, I just start to recognize that this is a particular expression of an aspect of dukkha that is shared by all humans.

You could try really hard, but I bet no one can come up with something that, when you get to the nub of what it's about, you're the only human being that ever experienced. You say, well, the particular story—okay, but that's not it. Whatever it is, I start to recognize: oh, this experience of unbearable loss...

This experience of fear, losing the sense of who I am. This experience of just hating having this cough. To start to expand it and see it as a representative expression of the human condition.

And when I do that, it starts as a contemplation sometimes, but it almost always—not always, but almost always—really moves into empathy and compassion. That sense of compassion that we're all in this together, that this is just a unique expression of the human condition. May I meet it for the benefit of all beings. It really helps to die again into this particular moment.

Another mental quality we don't talk about too much but that really helps is one of the pāramīs, one of the ten perfections, the ten wholesome qualities that are developed. In Pali it's *adhiṭṭhāna*. It's translated as resolution or determination.

When it's wholesome, it's a very wholesome quality. It's a pulling together of the energy. It's that resolution of "just do it"—not "I'm going to do it, by gum!" Just do it, like the Nike thing. Just do it.

I use a simple example. In the morning, your alarm goes off and you're lying there thinking, "Ah, I don't want to get up." You can wander around in the thoughts for a while, you can think about your dream, you can get into the aversion. Or you just get up. Just do it. Without any big production, you just get up. That was so much easier. So much easier.

Starting to recognize this quality of determination, it's like a bringing together of the energy in a moment—the energy and the aspiration in the moment. Okay, just do it. I don't want to go to the sitting hall, but the bell rings and you just go.

Have you noticed how that starts to happen? The bell rings for the sitting, and instead of deliberating—should I walk? Should I have tea?—you just go and walk. It's so much easier than all that hoopla. You just walk and then you sit and then you walk and then you sit. It's so easy. And determination is just, "Oh yeah, just do it."

We can do it on small levels. Sometimes it's with wisdom. When there are obsessive thoughts going on, sometimes you can really just see: not now. Not with the hammer, not with aversion, but those times you just see—what Joseph calls the sword of wisdom. Not now. That's determination. Energy coming together.

In a larger picture, this is how *adhiṭṭhāna*, this resolution, works when we have a sense of our aspiration. For example, if I feel that my aspiration is the path of practice—which is really all of life, not just being on retreat—is really to free the heart and mind from clinging, of course I'm not thinking that every moment. But then when something gets really difficult, or not even difficult but too pleasant—"I'll practice later, right now I'm going back to the pleasure garden for a while"—the sense of tuning into the larger aspiration can give strength to our present moment motivation.

Not with a "should" or anything, but with wisdom I might say, "Should I go do that?" No, it's okay. I think I'll just go sit right now. Or in daily life, when you're getting all confused—"I've got so much to do in the morning, make my toast, make my coffee, do this, I don't have time to sit"—and you're spinning around like this. You know what? Just sit. Just sit. Just a moment of determination, resolution, in service of your larger aspiration.

The larger aspiration becomes a guideline to bring our moment-to-moment motivation into alignment with what's really important to us. Determination can really help in this way.

Again from Ajahn Sumedho: I think it was in a retreat where I heard him say this. He was talking about a point when he was the abbot of Amaravati, during one of what I'm sure were many very difficult phases interpersonally in the monastery. A lot of difficult stuff was going on over a long period of time.

And he said that he felt very blamed, he was feeling very blamed, and he said, "My personality hated it and feared it." He was getting caught up in hating and fearing the blame. And then he said, "And then I really got in touch with my aspiration, and I determined to put my trust in awareness, not to put my trust in my personality and moods."

This was his whole practice—trusting in awareness. But we have to remind ourselves. We all get caught up in it, right? We make the determination to trust awareness, to really take refuge in awareness, not in the moods, not in the personality. Not denying the personality, but not relying on it for freedom, for ease. Because we never know what's going to come up.

When I talk about surrendering into the moment, surrendering into what's happening, I don't mean by that abdicating choice or decisions or actions. In some ways, I think it means really sometimes taking much more courageous choices, much more courageous action—really, because there's no other choice if we truly want to wake up.

There's an example I often use from a documentary I saw some time ago, about two friends who were mountain climbing in the Andes. It's called *Touching the Void*. Some of you may have seen it. It's really quite intense.

The short version: They're climbing very high mountains in the Andes, roped together, just the two of them. One of them slides and falls over the edge of a deep crevasse. So they're roped together, suspended like this for hours. The one still up on the mountain can't pull the other up—there's no purchase, he can't do it. He tries for hours, but he can't pull him up, and if he goes any closer, he's just going to get pulled over himself. So he has to make his decision. He cuts the rope.

The other guy falls into the crevasse. The one above can't see down there, can't go down. So he makes his way back to their base camp, waits there for a few days to see if his friend might come. But he figures he's probably dead.

Meanwhile, the one who fell dropped into that narrow crevasse but hit a ledge and didn't go too far down. He broke his leg from the impact, but he's caught on this ledge, and the crevasse is completely dark, just going down and down into blackness. He said the deepest fear he had was of that abyss. To go into that abyss was his absolute deepest fear.

So he's just hanging on that ledge with his broken leg overnight. And then he realizes: nothing's going to happen. Nobody's going to come. The other guy couldn't get there, and there were no other people. Finally he said, "I had to do something. I could not just abdicate. I had to do something." And all he could do was try to lower himself back down into that abyss—the very thing that was his deepest fear.

So he did it. And it turned out that it wasn't so deep. He hit ground, and it went a little bit upward, and he saw light at the end and could scramble his way up. Mind you, he has a broken leg. So he scrambled his way up. The rest of the documentary—this was a recreation about twenty years later, but it really happened—shows how he's scrambling over amazing terrain with that broken leg. It took a couple of days, over rocks and all, making his way back.

By the time he was almost there, without food, without water, in all that pain, his friend was just in the act of packing up camp, thinking he couldn't have survived this long. The guy crawling out was so out of it, totally delirious. And the only thing that brought him back to consciousness as he got close to camp was the smell of the acid from their latrine. That smell was so acrid to someone who hadn't eaten or drunk anything for days that it shot him back into awareness, and he made his way back.

It's intense, isn't it? But that moment of deepest fear—the way out, the only way out, was in. It won't always be that intense for us, but it feels like it sometimes, doesn't it?

It feels like it sometimes, though, doesn't it? It feels like it.

So, never abdicate. But it's just this moment of awareness. What's happening now?

The Buddha said, "Two things I never lost sight of: not to shrink from the struggle, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind."

The Dalai Lama said, "One day you will become bodhisattvas in reality. So whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

There's only this moment we can meet with mindfulness. Notice those moments of purity—when you're looking at the stars, or whatever it may be. Just this moment of awareness.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 170

Simple Awareness: Conditions For Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 49 min

In this opening evening talk from a retreat on natural awareness, Carol Wilson addresses a fundamental question: if we're practicing to free ourselves from suffering, isn't that just more aversion? She responds by exploring the Buddha's motivation for teaching—his recognition that beings sincerely wanting happiness continuously create more dukkha through misunderstanding themselves and reality.

Wilson introduces the Pāli phrase yathābhūta ñāṇadassana (knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be) as the essence of liberating wisdom. She explains that awakening isn't about rearranging circumstances but about seeing clearly without the overlay of views, particularly sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view or identity view). Using the simple metaphor of a child learning to match shapes to holes, she illustrates how confusion and its accompanying suffering naturally dissolve when reality is accurately recognized.

The talk emphasizes that awareness itself is pure and impartial—it "doesn't care" or "cares equally" about whatever arises. Wilson shares an inspiring story of a 90-year-old practitioner who finds walking across a room to be "the most interesting time of my life," demonstrating how complete presence transforms ordinary moments. She encourages practitioners to explore their experience with curiosity rather than judgment, watching how the mind privileges certain experiences as "me" or "mine," and trusting that wisdom arises naturally through persistent, accurate recognition of each moment.

So, end of the first day of a retreat—not quite the end. You've got to stay awake another couple of hours. First day of retreat, which can go all kinds of ways.

Tonight, I just want to talk a little bit about this practice we're sharing with you and why—just some simple ways of understanding why mindfulness, why simple awareness is so powerful in freeing our hearts and minds from confusion. Not all the reasons, but pointing to the background of this practice.

Someone asked today, "If we're practicing to free ourselves from suffering, isn't that just more aversion?" In a way, that question can take us into the heart of how the Buddha taught, why he taught, why he decided to teach—which I'm sure many of you know—but it speaks to the heart of our dilemma.

You probably know this story well. When the Buddha first awakened, he wasn't very inclined to share or to teach, because he said people wouldn't get it, and it would be burdensome to schlep around for the rest of his life trying to explain it to people who wouldn't understand. But he was moved, cutting the story short, he was really moved to compassion because he said that with his omniscient eye he could look through the world and read people's minds. And he could see that really each of us, each human being at least, just wants to be happy. We all want to be happy. And in our sincere trying to be happy, we basically keep doing the things that keep us spinning in suffering and confusion—because we just don't understand what suffering is and what can bring happiness. We don't understand ourselves and reality accurately. That's what motivated him to teach.

So it's true. He said, "I teach suffering, or *dukkha*." I don't like "suffering" as the translation because it's too limiting, too always unpleasant, and *dukkha* is not always unpleasant. But anyway—teaching *dukkha* and the end of *dukkha*, certainly leading to happiness. The highest happiness is peace. He's not saying we're doing this just for the heck of it and you're not going to feel any better.

But the heart of it is that we suffer, and the confusion that we wake up from—it's not that the world changes. It's that we misunderstand ourselves, the world, reality. And in misunderstanding, we do the things we think will make things better for us, but those very actions just keep us spinning in confusion. That's the loop that's called *samsara*: wanting and getting and wanting and getting, just spinning and spinning because we don't know how to step out of it.

When you look at the Buddha's life, when he woke up, he kept on living in a body, in the world, and the same stuff happened. The world didn't get better. People didn't all start acting filled with love. The same stuff was going on. So his freedom of heart and mind had to be something different from being able to organize things the way we want them to be.

But don't we keep trying to do that somehow? We can't even organize our own mind, right? That's what we see here. My God, that's the first insight. If you haven't done an insight retreat before, the first insight is: your mind is not yours. It's not in your control. Causes and conditions come together, a thought comes, and you are not in charge of it—though we keep thinking we are.

So at the heart of awakening, it's not about rearranging everything. It's about seeing, recognizing—using "seeing" for cognizing; I don't necessarily mean visually seeing, I'm using it as a shorthand for knowing—a moment of reality just as it is.

There's a phrase, one of the highest insights. It's called *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*. I love this phrase. It translates as "knowledge and vision of seeing things as they have come to be in this moment." Recognizing things as they have come to be. That is liberating wisdom—not somehow achieving a certain state that gets us out of this hell of being in a human body and mind. No. It's seeing what's really so.

And that has an amazing power, because the Buddha is saying that when we misunderstand, when we misinterpret, when we misperceive, we put a whole story on top of what's happening, and then that's how we react. That's how we respond.

And it just takes us more and more into confusion.

So the miracle of mindfulness, to borrow a phrase from Thich Nhat Hanh, is that it gives us the way to begin to recognize, just to rest with full attention, full awareness, full presence in this one moment. And when it's mindfulness that's not clouded by confusion, then there's an accurate recognition. And moment after moment of that changes everything.

This is the definition of vipassana meditation that I like from Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He says, "Vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding." You can hear that's what we've been saying all day. Mindfulness is experiencing the mind and body directly—not through the veil of all our ideas about what it means. And that's what I'm going to talk about for the rest of this talk, because we don't even know that veil is there. We think we know what's going on.

Experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment—so that's the continuity through the day. Not just, "Oh, here's a moment of feeling tingling," and then we're off for three days. It's the steadiness, with the right understanding, which I think Alexis talked about: right view, wise view.

"Right" is a tricky word because we immediately go into right and wrong, good and bad. But take that away. Right view means seeing or being with experience fresh, just recognizing whatever is occurring in this moment, how it has come to be as a result of so many different conditions that we can't see. But it's just like this, free of any overlay of our idea about what it means.

And that's the tricky part—free of any overlay about what it means. This is what we're practicing.

I think it's really interesting, this definition, and this is the way we're trying to share this particular style of vipassana: the emphasis on right view. The Eightfold Path begins and ends with wise understanding, wise view. And you might think, "Well, I can't start the path by having the end of the path already—wise view." No. But we can start with some understanding, a little bit intellectual, a little bit practice, of right understanding of just this: that whatever's occurring is not me. It's arising due to conditions, many of which we don't control.

But when we don't see that, we take everything personally. If it's a pleasant experience, we congratulate ourselves—we did it right!—and the whole story gets going. Then it goes away, and we're having an unpleasant experience, and we blame ourselves, we blame that noisy person next to us, we blame somebody because something went wrong. And all the different moods and thoughts and stories and reactions follow on that. We're so far from just the actual moment of experience, so fast. This is how we don't even know that there's been this overlay put on experience.

This is why we're practicing the simplicity of mindful awareness. It's radical. Because in this wise view, right view in terms of mindfulness, we're not trying to make something happen. Even—I know, it doesn't really compute, right? You come here, you're sitting, you're walking, you're not talking, there's all these things you're doing differently, and we're saying every moment that you're awake, remember awareness. And then we say you're not trying to make something happen!

We're not. We are trying to keep recognizing awareness. We're trying to shift our refuge. But it's not our MO to do that without wanting some kind of better result. And that's such a habit. We talked about it already today—it just slips in. It's so hard. "Okay, I've remembered awareness a lot today. Where's the goodies? When's something going to happen?"

I said patience. It's only been one day. We're talking our whole life—I've got news—at least just this life. Just stay with this life. But we're like, "Okay, something should happen, and it should be better than it was when I came. It shouldn't be worse, right?" It just slips in there. And it seems so normal. We don't even recognize it.

So it's not our MO just to try to be with what is without any "so that," without any reference really to what's it going to do in the future and what did it do yesterday. It's just like this now.

In the moments of that kind of presence—which I'm sure many of you have experienced today—if you recognize that moment, it's really quite peaceful. Because the mind's not making a big hullabaloo about whatever's happening, good, bad, or indiffer-

ent. You're just hearing. Bird. Not "oh, the bird" and then all the commentary. Not "oh, the black flies" and everything that follows. Just hearing. Hearing. And nothing around it.

That's peace. That's not the idea we're thinking about when the Buddha looked around and said we want to be happy. We're not thinking, "I want to just hear, and nothing should be created around it. That's my idea of real happiness." Maybe. Maybe not. Probably not at the beginning of practice.

So it's radical, this learning how to just be with what's happening. And then we start to recognize the views that overlay, the ideas that we overlay—and this is where it gets really interesting. Because we're not here to say stop those views. We don't even know what they are. But as we start to recognize just moment-to-moment awareness, and as we've said, just one moment is simple, is not exhausting—that's all, just one moment, you don't have to project it into the future—the more steady it becomes, the more that awareness mind, which is not personal, allows us to recognize the views that are overlaying. Because ultimately they don't really match. And it's really interesting to see.

When I was on retreat this last month, one thing I started noticing—I like to do walking meditation a lot—I'd be walking and just watching what's going on in the mind, seeing, hearing, noticing the thoughts and the moods, and I would see how it would always keep slipping in some sense of "just get a little bit better" or "what does this mean?" And then I would start analyzing, you know, some Buddhist philosophy thing, looking at vedanā and looking at clinging and all of that, but forcing it out of some wanting to understand. And then this line kept coming to me: just let reality reveal itself. Quit looking so hard. Just moment to moment, let reality reveal itself and tell its own story. Quit making up a story and putting it on top of it.

So this is where we start to see how the belief we have, the view we're holding in the back of our mind about experience that we don't recognize—how that affects how we react, respond, and the moods and the beliefs. It can take us way down the road.

Here's an example I've been using the last couple of years, a very simple one. I have a young nephew, and I've been watching how kids learn things. When he was two or three—this is very simple—you know those games where you have a box and wooden blocks of different shapes: triangle, circle, square? Children learn how to put the right block in the right shape. Before he knows how it works, an adult will show him, and to him it looks like magic—you put it in and it just goes in. He tries it, and it doesn't work. Because he's putting the circle in the square and the square in the triangle, and it doesn't work.

And you can see, I could see, how he doesn't just go, "Oh, it doesn't work." It's like, "They could do it and I can't. What's the matter?" Frustration and anger arise. In the little mind, if it were an adult, there might be either self-blame or blaming the adults—they're keeping a secret and not telling you how to really do it—or deciding this is a broken game, or "this stinks anyway, throw the whole thing out the window, let's go outside." All of that gets going. And it can build up. Even with a little kid, it can build up into a whole tantrum.

They keep trying, and then suddenly, maybe by mistake, the right block goes into the right opening. And when he suddenly sees the shape, it's like the ignorance, the cloud of confusion in the mind, went away at that point. Then they see: oh, every time, that's just how it is. All that other stuff—the anger, the blame, the wanting—you don't have to talk yourself out of it.

It goes away because it doesn't make any sense. As soon as the realities recognize the way it is—oh, okay, you put the blocks in here. And if I want the square to go in the triangle, it's not going to work. That's just how it is. There's no blame. There's no suffering. That's just it.

That's the difference between *yathābhūta* and *yathādasana*—recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment, versus when we put the overlay: "If I could really do this right, I would get this block in here no matter what. There's something wrong." That's simple. But I like that example because it's really a metaphor for the whole thing. The overlays, the views that might be in the back of our mind, could be a lot more complicated. And so we can get caught in many aversive or wanting reactions and stories about ourselves and others and what this means—without actually, without mindfulness not being colored by the aversion, the clinging, we can't recognize accurately. We can't recognize accurately when that's going on in the mind.

There are many different ways, many different views, of course, that can be held in the back of the mind as we go through practice. But the most pervasive one—and Alexis touched on it, I'm just going to touch on it, but just play with noticing it, not try to think your way out of it—the most pervasive view, kind of at the heart of the Buddha's teaching, is this overlay, this interpretation on so much of our experience, of taking it personally. It's me, or it's mine. That just feels true, doesn't it? And that's the thing with a view. It's not like we're thinking, "Oh look, now I am putting on the overlay of self to this sitting that was so terrible, and I just couldn't even focus, and thoughts were coming all the time, and I remember my last retreat—it was better, and now it's not, and what am I

doing wrong?" At times you can see, "Oh, that's an overlay of self, taking it personally." But more often we're really caught up in, "Well, what is wrong? If I could do it right, I wouldn't be thinking. If I could do it right, I wouldn't lose awareness."

As long as there's that taking it personally, that clinging to a particular idea or experience, the clinging and aversion distort the awareness, the mindfulness, the consciousness that's meeting the experience, and we can't recognize it accurately.

The Buddha even said, in one place, "This *nibbāna*, this freedom, is visible here and now." And someone asked, "To what extent is it visible here and now?" He said, "To the extent that greed, hatred or fear, negativity, and confusion are not present in the consciousness, in the mind." When they're not present, they're not distorting, they're not caught. And this is a moment-to-moment thing. So in a moment when you may feel quite aware, but it's filled with resistance to what's happening and not recognizing that resistance, there's not going to be accurate recognition of what's happening.

For example, it's like, "That noise is the source of my suffering." And that just seems clear. We're caught up in that. That unpleasant noise, and that person shouldn't be making it, or they shouldn't be running the lawnmower during a sitting, or whatever—clearly the source of my suffering. Or there's a really pleasant experience. You're feeling really light and happy and good, and you think, "That's clearly the source of my happiness." So this happy, pleasant experience should definitely be strung out, made to happen again, made to last long—and we get into a clinging, a wanting, a holding on to something that cannot last. Because we all know intellectually, but it doesn't really get down in the gut: nothing, nothing, nothing lasts. No state of mind, no thought, no mood, no sensation in the body, no experience in the world—nothing lasts. Some things seem to last longer than others. But the sense of thinking, "This unpleasant experience is my suffering, this pleasant one is my happiness"—that's where we get caught. That's where greed and resistance, confusion, are coming into the mind, into the awareness, and we're not recognizing accurately.

The sound, I find, is more easy to work with. When we really can just, in a moment, experience this awareness of hearing—and you can just notice, "Oh, no, no, no, that sound"—it's just feeling the hearing. And then notice the thoughts arising, the aversion with the thoughts, the sense of self-blame or other-blame, and the whole story that's going on. We see, "Oh, that's the suffering." The sound is just a sound. As Ajahn Chah, the great Thai forest monk and meditation teacher, said, "The sound isn't bothering you."

You're going out and bothering the sound.

It's kind of like that—just a little shorthand—but this is what we keep exploring. These are the qualities that block accurate recognition, that block right view in a particular moment.

For me, one of the most freeing realities about how our mind and body works, the one that truly supports me, inspires me, and gives me the trust and energy to keep looking at all this, is the fact that our mind is arising and changing moment to moment to moment. And by mind, I mean mind and heart. *Chitta* is the word in Pali, which means all our mental activity. I'm not trying to create the kind of split we can get into here between thinking mind and emotions. I mean all mental activity.

It arises. Conditions come together—physical, mental, inner, outer—and there may be sadness arising. Fine, that's what's happening. It's going to last a while, and it's going to change. So there'll be a moment when maybe there's resistance to the sadness, not recognizing it, and there's a real sense of struggle. But then there's a moment: "Oh, resistance is like this." The awareness is recognizing resistance. So it stops fighting resistance, and resistance is just the next arising experience. The whole sense of struggle and "me" drops away. There may even still be the sadness, but the shift is from owning it, believing it, holding on to it, resisting it—to something more like a qigong or tai chi shift. From "this is me, this is me, I like it, I don't like it" to "oh, it's like this now." A shift into the awareness. Taking refuge, just for a moment, resting in the awareness.

And that's the thing: everything's only a moment. So we're all caught up and not having awareness, really identified with greed, and then suddenly there's a seeing through it. There's a moment of purity of heart and mind where there is right view, wise view. It's not like it's all distorted, all greed, hatred, and delusion, and then finally one day—boom—it's all gone. Every moment is a new moment. Every moment, awareness can be accessible. And it doesn't matter what the awareness is noticing. I say a lot that awareness doesn't care what's arising. It's equal with anything. It's not like if what's arising is resistance, the awareness is thinking, "Oh, I don't want to be with that. It's going to get me all dirty. I only want to be aware of the nice things." Our identification says that. Awareness doesn't care.

Or as someone else said to me, "No, you should say it cares equally." So whichever fits your personality pattern—you can go with "it doesn't care" or "it cares equally." Either way, awareness is just pure. It's just clear. Whatever's arising is the perfect gateway to re-recognize awareness, because that's what's happening now. And there's always a new moment. It's not like we're stuck. We don't have to be afraid.

Sayadaw U Pandita, he was a very tough teacher, very demanding, but I found him incredibly compassionate actually. He said to me once—I don't remember what was happening in my practice—but he just said so kindly, "You know, you don't need to be afraid of anything that comes up." And when we start to, and begin to, and continue to trust the sense of awareness, even the most difficult stuff, when we can touch it with awareness rather than identification, it really, really shifts things. I'm speaking from personal experience here. It's completely different. From being all caught up to "Oh, look at that, the body's doing that, and these are the conditions of the body"—and then it moves from resistance to compassion automatically.

That's one of the beautiful things, actually, about moments when the awareness, when the mindfulness is not distorted by the habits of greed or aversion or just confusion. The wholesome, beautiful qualities of response arise naturally. So when there's not greed or aversion, if you just happen to notice the body's hurting and awareness simply sees it—instead of "Oh no, stupid body"—it becomes "Oh, poor body. What can I do to help it?"

So if you're sitting here, for example, and there starts to be some pain in the knee, and the first reaction involves that sense of taking it personally—back up a minute. The way that sense of taking it personally can work, it's really fun to explore as you go through the practice here. And please, don't take taking it personally personally. This is just what our minds do. If you're going to get disgusted or overwhelmed by it, that's not helpful. The whole attitude we're bringing in with this awareness practice is, "Wow, that's interesting. Look how the mind works."

So one way, I think Alexis mentioned, that the Buddha described our moment-to-moment experience—and which I also find very helpful in terms of exploring and running a retreat like this—is through the six sense experiences. He mentioned that.

If you go through the day, you're seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—the whole mental world. And that one, yes, that seems to take an inordinate amount of space, but that's just arising too. Thoughts, moods, emotions—these things are just occurring over and over and over. Seeing, smelling, hearing. A lot of the time we don't quite notice what's happening, but there are many, many moments of sense contact all day. That's what's going on.

There are many short little ones that happen that maybe you don't notice at all. Or maybe we do notice, but they're no big deal. You're walking, maybe feeling the sensation of the foot on the floor, but not making anything of it. You hear a sound or

whatever. But then there are other perceptions—a thought, a sound you like or don't like, a smell of the food at lunchtime and you're hungry, a memory that comes up and you're off into a whole world of your past life that goes along with that memory.

So certain of the six sense experiences come and the attention really gloms onto them. It's me, or it's mine. The mind, the consciousness, privileges certain sense experiences, certain perceptions as me and mine, and immediately goes into them and hangs on tight. Until awareness starts to get momentum, we don't quite notice that's what's happening. We're just walking along and suddenly we're like, "Oh no! I remember when I was doing that thing in third grade, and it just shows that horrible aspect of my personality, and it's coming up now in the way I'm looking at people when they walk by in the hall." And it all seems so real and so true and so unpleasant—although it could be completely different in five minutes. You have a whole different memory about how great you are and what you're going to do and how you're going to change and what wonderful things you're going to do when you leave here.

We don't notice that a thought came up that was pleasant—oh, that's me. Or a sound came up that was unpleasant, and there's immediate aversion—oh, that's me. And the sense that we can control, as I said, we take credit or we take blame. We congratulate ourselves or we react. Like my nephew—we react with "How can we fix it? How can we keep it? How can we hide this so people don't see how horrible we are?" Whatever it is, we get into a whole story, and the wanting and the resistance and the sense of me, me, me just keep growing and growing. And then it's gone. You're just walking. But we don't maybe notice that it's gone.

This is a really interesting practice, just to see that this is the habit of our mind. When we see it, great. We can see how it works. We can see how it puts on this overlay, how everything gets so much more complicated and full of suffering. We can see how when it goes away, there's just hearing, there's just seeing, and things are simply as they are. Exploring this is a huge part of our practice.

We start to see that what's occurring is arising due to all the conditions that came together in this moment—not because I decided, "Now I'm going to get really concentrated." Sayadaw U Tejaniya said once, and it's like, oh yeah, right, why didn't I think of that before? He said, you know, getting concentrated in meditation is a result of certain conditions. You can learn what the conditions are. Wanting to be concentrated is not one of them. And when we're wanting—I'm picking that because it's very present when people are on retreat—wanting to be concentrated completely blocks seeing what the conditions are. We can't just look and see.

A Tibetan lama friend of mine, Lama Drimed, said that when all these different experiences are coming or going, we're just part of nature. It's just nature. There are sounds and smells and tastes and physical sensations. We're here. We think of ourselves as this body in nature, but there's really no separation. We're all just part of nature. But when we solidify around a particular experience—and we do that all the time—when it feels like me, he says we're like locked into what he called the narrow bandwidth of being a separate human being, separate from all of nature. And that's what we do a lot.

We can't think our way out of this, which is our usual approach. Don't even try. But this is an invitation to trust present moment mindfulness.

That's what's so amazing about something that seems so simple. This is called sakāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, identity view. The Buddha talked about it a lot. It's really one of the core confusions that keeps us spinning, not recognizing accurately.

We used to think you don't talk about that at the beginning of a retreat because it's too subtle and people think about it too much and get confused. But it's at the core of our misperception and our suffering.

Ajahn Sumedho—you know who Ajahn Sumedho is? He's an American man who's been a monk in the Thai forest tradition for forty, fifty years. I've found him quite inspiring, the way he talks about practice. He said he used to think, and people would think, that you have to practice for a long time before you can even start to talk about or explore sakāya-diṭṭhi. But then he thought, why practice for twenty years with the wrong understanding? Why practice for twenty years out of the delusion that I'm practicing to achieve something, to get somewhere?

So start looking now. We're practicing to be fully present with things as they are in this moment. And that's what frees our heart and mind from greed, hatred, and confusion. It's amazing. All this practice we're doing isn't to get somewhere else. It's just to retrain the habits of our mind to land here. It's like this now. It's like this now. That tai chi move is so powerful. You can see how immediately the personality view springs up and we're the center of everything.

Just a funny story Joseph Goldstein tells on himself. He was on retreat, I guess here, and in the food line for lunch—long, long line, everyone's there. He was the second one in line. The first person took the lid off the big pot and dropped it, and it made a heck of a racket. You can imagine, everyone's there, it spills all over, huge racket, everyone's looking. And Joe said his first thought—and he had to restrain himself not to actually say it—was, "It wasn't me."

That's what we do, right? Immediately, whatever happens, it's all about me. Right there.

So with awareness we see that, we laugh at it. Wow, look what the mind's doing. Even that isn't personal when we can see it. There's nothing our mind can do that need be outside of awareness. We start to learn to trust it. Laughing helps. Wow, look at that. And in that minute, it wasn't me—it was awareness noticing. It really shifts.

In the moment of simple mindfulness, the whole concoction falls apart. For that moment. The Buddha talked about consciousness as a magic show. It puts everything together. It seems so real. But if you look behind the scenes of a magic show and see how the tricks are done, it loses its interest. This is like the concoction of self.

So don't even try to see through that. I'm saying all of this just to support our willingness, our interest, that whatever's happening, see if we can simply re-recognize awareness. It's like this now. I feel completely confused. It's like this now.

And the more we trust it, the awareness becomes more—it could be joyful, it could be peaceful, it's interesting. It becomes a refuge, more than needing to have every experience confirm us or tell a story about us or explain what it means about us. The awareness really becomes the refuge.

Recently, a few months ago, I was visiting a friend, a person who's in their early nineties now, a very inspiring person. This is someone who has lived a very rich, full, and varied life, and is a longtime, very deep practitioner of this practice—a very wise person. Being ninety, their body is frail, they're living in a retirement place, pleasant but a small apartment, can't get out much, can't do much.

And this person was saying—and this is a very sincere person—that this is the most interesting time of my life.

And I said, really? Why?

I said, well, if I'm just walking across the room here to the teapot, that's totally my life. That's everything. That's what I'm doing. I'm just walking across the room. It's everything in that moment. If I'm pouring the water for the tea, that's everything. That's my whole life.

This person wasn't referring to something in the past, wasn't looking to the future. Total presence. It's so alive, so present. Everything is so interesting. And it was so inspiring to me. This sense that this person is really living in the understanding that it's not about the object, it's not about the activity. It's really the living itself, the wakefulness,

the purity of the heart and mind in that moment. Purity meaning just really being present with what is, without needing anything extra. That's the most interesting time of their life.

When our life is in that moment, it's complete. That's what we're practicing. From that, response is possible. It's not like we become some kind of zombie. From that moment of pure presence, if there's some action that needs to happen, wisdom sees. Wisdom knows what to do. It's obvious. One teacher called it "doing the obvious." It's just a knowing. It's not even me. It's wisdom that knows because there's clear seeing.

So that's really what we're doing here. And that's why we talk about the third aspect: the simplicity and honesty of mindfulness with right view. We notice when it's not right view because there's struggle, there's tension. Then we notice, what's going on? Wanting, aversion—oh, look at that.

And the continuity, the simple perseverance. Whenever we forget, the next moment we remember, here we are again. That's why every moment is Dhamma. Every moment is a moment when the truth of reality can reveal itself. Reality isn't more real when it's a pleasant moment. Reality isn't more real when what we want to happen happens. Or when what we don't want to happen happens. It doesn't matter what's happening now.

The willingness to meet any moment of the day, to treat all moments as equally valid—that doesn't mean you're not going to forget a million times. It's not a holding on. It's this perseverance, this willingness to wake up no matter what the activity, all day. This is what we're practicing here.

So these eight days, it really isn't about pushing in a short time to get to some particular state. I was thinking the same thing during this last month I was sitting. It's a time to have the conditions where we can really just practice recognizing awareness, whatever's happening. Whether we're in our daily activities, whether we're doing formal walking meditation, whether we're in the movement session, whether we're doing our work meditation, whether we're lying down, whether we're in the sitting—there's really not a hierarchy. It's not like sitting is better and you go to your room and check out. It's not like sitting is worse. It's whatever's going on.

That's one of the reasons, actually, that starting this afternoon and tomorrow, we don't have such a rigid timetable for the sitting and the walking. Because that means we're noticing what's going on in the mind. Instead of just sitting until the bell rings, which can be fine, maybe you're sitting and after thirty minutes, as I talked about today, you're just lost in aversion. You're just sitting thinking, oh my God, I have to sit till the bell rings, and you're just feeding aversion because you're not recognizing it. When, if

you could recognize in your mind, let me stand up, refresh the awareness, go do some walking—then the awareness comes back in a more balanced way. You actually can find you're more continuous. I found this myself. When you're in your own rhythm, you're paying attention to what's going on in the mind.

You don't just walk because the bell rings. You don't just stop walking because the bell rings. You don't say, "Well, now there's no bell, so I'm going to my room to space out." Whatever's going on, you watch what you're doing and why you're doing it. And that's what's interesting.

It's not about setting up rigid rules—"I can never go to my room." You can. As Alexis was saying, if you're tired, rest. But watch why you're doing it. Don't set up some framework of "I should do this, I shouldn't do that"—within the bounds of the precepts and not harming ourselves or others, of course.

I'll use taking a nap as an example, because in some forms of practice you're really pushed not to take naps and not to sleep much. And I'm a person who has a lot of tiredness; I don't have huge energy. But you can watch.

Say you go to take a nap on a retreat. The first time, the mind is really dull and tired. The body is tired. You can see you're trying to sit and you're just falling asleep. And it's not aversion—you really need to sleep. This will help refresh. So you go and take a nap. You wake up, and you can see the energy is a bit refreshed. It was helpful. You start walking and think, "Oh, that was helpful."

The next day, it's a little unclear. You're not quite sure. "Maybe it'll be good, though. Let me try it." And you're watching the mind that's trying to repeat what happened the day before. You can't really tell—do I need the rest or not? So you just watch that. You rest or you don't rest, whichever you do, and you keep noticing. Say you rest. You wake up. It was okay. You feel all right.

The next day, you're not really tired—you're just sick of sitting and walking. So you think, "Maybe I'll go take a nap." But here, see, we're not trying to fool ourselves. You're not saying you can't take a nap, but you're watching what's going on in the mind. So you watch. You go take a nap, but you're really seeing: it's wanting, it's aversion to what's going on. It's just "I want to be unconscious for a while. I'm sick of being aware." And you take the nap, and you wake up, and you're more logy, more out of it, more dull. And you go, "Okay. That's an interesting piece of information."

That's what we're doing—exploring it all. As soon as you set up "I can't do this" and we don't look anymore, we don't learn.

Or we do the thing we think we shouldn't do. "I'm not having seconds. I've had enough to eat. I'm not going back for seconds." And the next thing you know, you're going back for seconds.

So don't turn off the awareness. We do that a lot. "I'm doing the bad thing, so I'm not going to be aware of it because that makes me feel worse." No. Bring your awareness along with you. Pile that plate with food and notice the greed. Shovel that food down and notice how it feels. Notice the self-disgust. Notice the whole thing. Because none of it's personal.

This is really where we're learning, and it gets interesting. That shoveling the food down was as valid a moment as a moment in sitting where the breath is really refined and subtle and there's light and bliss. It's the awareness—that's what we're cultivating.

To end with two quotations, one from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "As mindfulness is remembered more and more frequently, it gradually develops its own momentum. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we get lost in our entrancements with the reactions of mind to whatever's arising."

That's really it. We appreciate awareness more than we're entranced with our reactions. But this is a natural occurrence.

And Sayadaw U Pandita: "When mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, wisdom arises. This is the natural effect of the momentum of mindfulness."

We don't create wisdom. It naturally arises through steady, accurate recognition. It's amazing. It's not an act of will. It happens naturally.

This is back to Sayadaw U Pandita: "There will be insight into the true nature of body and mind." This is really the natural law. This is the Dharma.

So just this moment, remember awareness. That's our practice.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 171

Investigating How The Deluded Mind Works

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this mid-retreat talk, Carol Wilson draws on teachings from Ajahn Chah, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, and the Buddha to illuminate how the deluded mind operates. She explains that understanding delusion is essential for recognizing the non-deluded mind—our intrinsic awareness that remains peaceful regardless of circumstances.

Wilson examines two of the five aggregates (khandhas) that arise in every moment of sense contact: saññā (perception) and vedanā (feeling tone). She shows how perception is conditioned by our experiences and can be distorted by the kilesas (greed, aversion, and delusion) when we're unaware of their presence. Drawing from a sutta where the Buddha distinguishes awakened from unawakened beings, she explains how the untaught person, struck by unpleasant feeling, shoots themselves with a second arrow through resistance—and then seeks escape only through sensual pleasure, reinforcing habits of craving and aversion.

Through vivid examples—from mistaking a texting nun for a devotee circumambulating a Bodhi tree, to a meditator blaming others for creaking sounds caused by her own breathing—Wilson demonstrates how unexamined perception combined with vedanā generates papañca (mental proliferation) and unnecessary suffering. The teaching points toward recognizing that awareness itself is inherently calm, offering peace and stability independent of pleasant or unpleasant conditions. She concludes with the Buddha's reflection: 'This is peaceful, this is sublime—the stilling of all mental activities, the ending of craving, release.'

At this point in a retreat—in the middle of a retreat—I'd say almost every retreat, and it's true for this one, I start to feel, after talking with people, really touched by how much everybody's going through. It's just life. It's just a microcosm of life. All the moods and emotions and fears and beautiful stuff. A lot of it is just coming and going with awareness, and that's fine.

But how often do we get, as Mark was talking about last night, to that tipping point where we get really caught up in the struggle? It becomes a huge thing, and then it calms down so much. We sit here and tell you: just be aware of it all. Just be with it. Everything that's coming—you're caught up, it's like this. You're not caught up, great, just be with it all. That's the whole point of mindfulness.

There are times when that seems so real and true and there's no question. And there are other times when you're thinking, what the heck are they talking about? What good is any of this doing? Am I the only one? So what's the point?

I want to talk a little bit about some aspects of this. Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Dzogchen master and died some years ago, said the main purpose of these dharma teachings, of dharma practice, is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, the non-deluded heart, as well as how the deluded mind works.

We're spending a lot of time on both. But how the deluded mind works is an essential aspect. Learning about that is really one of the main things that frees us to recognize the non-deluded mind.

Nyoshul Khen goes on: meditation practices work to uncover our innate wisdom and purity by recognizing the obscurations for the changing, insubstantial appearances that they are, thus revealing what has always been available.

Now, no one said that the time spent on each of those is equal. There's probably a lot more time spent exploring and coming to recognize the way the deluded mind works. But that's okay. It doesn't take as many equal moments of recognizing natural awareness and purity.

Did you notice that? You're all caught up for however long—it feels like forever, maybe it was five minutes—but suddenly awareness comes in. You go, "Oh, it's like that." And the whole thing passes. You don't have to have that fantastic feeling for the equal five minutes. That one second just clears it all, because awareness is pure no matter what was going on.

You're saying, "Yeah, right, that's not my experience." Look for it. You'll see.

I want to talk about one way the confused mind works that is really interesting, that the Buddha spoke about, just to help us see: when we get all caught up, it's not random. You feel like you're minding your own business, being mindful, and suddenly—whomp—out of nowhere. Not just that a mood comes, that's fine, but we're really caught in it. Yesterday the same mood came and you weren't caught. We can feel like a victim, but it's not just happening randomly.

Once we get more interested in watching the process with awareness, it really gets interesting. We can see the lawful nature of how these things work. That's where the wisdom comes in, and we don't always go down the same path.

I noticed—I wrote this the last time I gave this talk—I had just had this recognition in my own practice, noticing how when I first started practice, very reasonably, I think quite many people would, what I really wanted was to get away from the confused and unpleasant and difficult aspects of my personality. We've been waiting for those to change into the bodhisattva of the ages. Really thinking that would all change. You'll become the most loving, compassionate person on the planet—waiting for that. And all the difficult stuff of my life would disappear. That's why I started practicing, probably. Not quite saying it that bluntly.

But I couldn't have imagined from that place—most people couldn't—that the peace, the freedom, the moments (not all the time, okay), that the peace and freedom that's available, that arises, comes in a totally different way. It's not from getting rid of all that stuff.

But it's actually from this purity of awareness—of being with what's arising totally, without being lost in resistance and wanting. Being with what's happening, surrendering into it. The wisdom comes from the total presence, not from getting rid of the stuff we don't like.

You can't imagine that. You can't imagine that. That's why we keep saying, "Oh great, you're feeling sadness? Feel it with awareness." We kind of just push you into it because the Dharma reveals itself. You don't have to figure it out ahead of time. It will show you.

If we just keep learning how to bring full awareness, full tenderness, full presence to whatever it is that's arising, we start to see it clearly. We can't not. Ajahn Sumedho often says the practice of freedom is awareness. Or I put it differently: awareness is the practice of freedom. We don't always notice it because it's just little easeful moments, not a big thing.

One of the wonderful aspects of steady sati, steady mindfulness, steady awareness, is that we do begin to see, to recognize some of how this process of getting all caught up and identified occurs in a moment. What Mark was mentioning last night about a tipping point—where maybe some difficult memory or mood or experience comes up, and there's awareness, so you see it's difficult, that's okay, difficult's like this. There's some thoughts, awareness is noticing the thoughts, it's a little uncomfortable, but it's awareness, it's not really suffering. But at some point there's that tipping point where suddenly it's like, wow, now we're really in it and this is really not okay. What can I do to get out of it? And we're back into all the old patterns.

What we forget is the intrinsic purity of awareness.

Ajahn Chah—you've probably heard this, it's very well known—about this mind: "Within itself, it's already peaceful. The mind, the heart—remember it's the same word—the mind-heart is not peaceful these days because it follows moods. The real mind is simply an aspect of nature. It becomes happy or agitated because moods deceive it. Sense impressions come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness and sorrow, but the mind's true nature is none of those things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind but only a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things. It forgets itself. And then we think it is we who are upset or at ease or whatever. But really this mind of ours is already unmoving and peaceful, really peaceful. Like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up, the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind." The fluttering is due to those sense impressions. The mind follows them. If it doesn't follow them, it doesn't flutter. "If we know fully the true nature of sense impressions, we will be unmoved."

That's really what I want to talk about tonight. "Our practice is simply to see the original mind. So we train the mind to know those sense impressions and not get lost in them. Just this is the aim of all this difficult practice we put ourselves through." From Ajahn Chah.

So one way of describing our moment-to-moment experience, or what can happen, how we get lost in sense impressions—to use Ajahn Chah's language—I want to talk about two aspects of experience in the mind that the Buddha spoke of, that are arising in every moment of sense contact. They're subtle. They're rising every moment. So sometimes we see them, sometimes we don't. But really seeing how they can, unrecognized, lead us into all this morass of whatever's going on—just by not recognizing what's happening.

These two aspects are two of the five aggregates, things that are rising according to the Buddha's way of looking at our experience in every moment. One of them is perception in English, saññā in Pali. The other is vedanā in Pali, which is feeling tone.

So I'll just describe them and then talk a bit—more than a bit, probably—about each of them.

Saññā, perception, is that simple quality of recognition. This just happens naturally. You hear a sound and immediately the mind, first it knows it's a sound. And then if it knows what it is—oh, bird call. Or if it doesn't know what it is, it makes something up. That's what I'll get into in a minute. But perception, this recognition, is just natural. It's happening all the time. We're not trying to stop that. It's not thinking about it. It's just "oh, that's a robin" or "this is a chair."

And then vedana, this feeling tone, which we've mentioned, is also arising in every moment of sense contact. It's this subtle feeling in the mind of experiencing each sense contact as having a pleasant or an unpleasant or a neither pleasant nor unpleasant neutral flavor. This is a subtle thing. I've always been really amazed that the Buddha could pick this out, because as you see when I talk about it, it goes so quickly into wanting and aversion that we don't even notice this subtle, quick vedana. But it's arising with every sense contact.

Now, they're both coming together. Sometimes you'll notice one more than the other. You can't necessarily tease them apart. But when we're not aware, the habits of mind with these two things can get us into big trouble—when we're not watching. When we watch, we can just see the lawfulness of how it works.

This is one way it's described by the Buddha: What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. This is assuming deluded mind. What one thinks about, one complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas, with comparisons, and these notions then assail and overwhelm a person. Like the monk who painted a tiger on the wall of the cave and then turned around and it scared him. This is concocting—the concoction of sense of self, of everything that gets us confused.

I'm going to describe a lot more about that. But to start by just talking about perception: it's happening in every moment, and a lot of the time we don't necessarily notice it. It's a useful thing because one perception can kind of describe—in a way, it puts us in place of the whole world of what we're doing. You hear the bell a little while ago and you know it's the bell, you know what it means for the time of day and the time for the talk, and you know to come in here. And when you come in here there's the perception of zabuton, and which one is yours and which are others', and it's all very helpful because we're having more or less joint perceptions—which is not always the case in this world.

Because perception, as the Buddha talked about, is informed by our life experience. It's really based on our experience and our memory. If I know it's a bird call, it's because I've heard birds before, or someone's told me it's a bird, and I know it.

This is why, depending on how we've grown up in different cultures, in different families, in different ways of looking at the world, the same experience can be perceived very differently by different people. And perception is something that seems so—I mean, it's easy to just take it for granted that my perception is accurate, don't we? We do. Even very simple things.

An interesting little example: I was at a friend's house, and I said something about the blue shawl that was over the sofa. She said, "What blue shawl?" I said, "That blue shawl." She said, "That's not blue, that's green." And then we got into discussion. I really tried—I could not see green. And she could not see blue. And you wonder, is there some objective reality out there? Is it azure? And there's not.

It's all perception. And that's something simple—we weren't going to come to blows about whether it's blue or green. But take that to any other level. Look at different cultural experiences. What's the whole thing with culture shock?

Whenever I've practiced in Asia, the relationship to personal space is very different from the relationship to personal space I grew up with. I want space. I want my room alone. But my Burmese friends—they don't want to sleep in a room alone. The more people, the better. It's scary to be in a room alone. And then they have to have the light on at night. We Westerners are going, "Turn off the light! We can't sleep with the light on." And they're saying, "No, we can't sleep with the light off." Little things like that, but the perception is just "this is how it is." It's safe with the light on. No, can't sleep with the light on.

Once when I was a nun, I was staying at a monastery, and they were very kind to me. They kept moving me around, but at one point they put me in this huge second-story room—it was like a barn or something. I just had my little mosquito net in the corner. I was the only one in it. Then one day they came and told me I had to leave because some people were coming. Some people. A whole busload of women moved into this room—fifty women moved into this room that I'd had all to myself. They were perfectly happy to be all together.

So perceptions are very different. You see how we can really not recognize that our perception is conditioned—and come to blows about it. That's just one thing. But beyond that, our perceptions, as different as they all are, often aren't really accurate. And this is where we start to get into even more trouble. This is where we're moving into the area of insight.

When I was talking about the experience with my nephew, suddenly the perception got accurate, and then my experience matched his reality and there was no more dissonance. There are a million examples, but here's another simple one.

I was in Burma at a meditation center, walking up this little pathway. At the end of it is a Bodhi tree planted with a round concrete form around it, creating a circular little path. I was walking up, and I saw up by the tree—not that far, maybe halfway to the hall—a nun walking around it with her hands in añjali like this, circumambulating the

Bodhi tree. And I thought, "Oh, isn't that sweet? There's so much faith here. It's really inspiring." I was having all these pleasant feelings and thoughts and the perception of faith.

Then I got closer, and she was texting on her cell phone. That burst my bubble. That first perception was delusion, *moha*. I didn't have all the information. And a lot of the time we don't have all the information. Someone has asked, "How do we know when we have all the information?" And a lot of times we don't. So let's always take things with the grain of salt.

I got closer and then realized, oh, she's texting on her cell phone. It didn't have to be a problem, but you just see the delusion and how with perception, the mind—I've noticed this many times—when it doesn't have all the data, it fills in something that's close. It uses some memory: "Oh, that's what it is."

Once I was walking in the woods in Switzerland and I said, "Oh, what's that yellow and white striped circus tent doing here?" I was walking with a friend, and he said, "What, are you out of your mind? Circus tent?" It was just a big rock with yellow lichen on it, with kind of stripes. I want to say I didn't have my glasses on. Let's hope so, but you never know. The mind will just make stuff up.

So just be willing to see that we may not have all the information. That's not really suffering—that's just seeing how perception works. With steady awareness, we start to see clearly instead of just saying, "Okay, that's what it is. She's doing that." You keep on going. You keep on looking. And oh yeah, there's more information. It's different. Steady awareness reveals more accurately. That's what we can trust.

Now, other ways that perception is distorted is when there's kilesa in the consciousness and we're not aware of it. Kilesa is the Pali word that Sayadaw U Tejaniya translates as "defilements" in his book. I prefer kilesa or "torments," which refers to the qualities of greed, of taṇhā, of grasping, aversion, rejection, fear, and moha, delusion.

When greed or wanting, desiring, or aversion, rejecting, resisting is affecting the perception—when it's in the mind, in the consciousness, at the same moment as that perception, and not recognized—then it really can distort the perception. And we don't know. Like, if you're really hungry, what happens if you go to the supermarket when you're really hungry? Have you ever noticed? Not the time to do it. I get home with all this stuff that I'm never going to eat, that I don't even like. "Wow, that looks good," and you just buy it. When the craving's gone, from the perception you look at the thing and go, "What?"

Or when you have a crush on somebody. You look at them, you think about everything about them. It's so wonderful. It's so lovely. You love all their little peccadilloes. And then when the—as one of my friends says—when the desire eyes have fallen off, you go, "I loved that little peccadillo? That's driving me crazy now."

Or later when you're angry at somebody, they look ugly when you look at them. They're not more ugly than they were the day before. It's the distortion of our perception through the anger mind or the desire mind.

Now, that's just, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya has said, desire and aversion doing their job. That's how they act. When they're present in the mind, that's what they do. Steady awareness helps us start to recognize that's what's happening. That's why we're always on about this: Notice when there's a sense of dissonance, a sense of dis-ease in your awareness. You know you're aware, but there's a sense of dis-ease in relationship to what's happening. Check it out. Just check out and see. What's the tone? What's the attitude? What's the flavor in the mind that's aware?

For me, often I'll look and I'll be looking—I know something's there, so there must be craving—and no, there's no craving. It's just open and natural. And I just hang there for a minute, and suddenly it's like, "Oh my God, it's filled with craving. It's so filled with craving I didn't even notice it."

It was just comfortable and easy.

So this is just a short introduction, but I want to emphasize how perception is completely subjective, completely conditional, and how easy it is for us to not even notice this and to absolutely think "this is the truth"—and how perception gets distorted when we're not recognizing the presence of suffering mental states in our mind.

When we do recognize them, as I described with my nephew, when there are difficult mental states and we suddenly recognize accurately, all that extra stuff drops away because it doesn't make any sense anymore. We simply say, "It's like this now." The actuality doesn't change—that's the power of correct perception. The actuality doesn't change, but our understanding of what's happening comes into alignment. And then there's not the dissonance, there's not the struggle, there's not the trying to change it. We're not relating to something that isn't happening, which is what we're doing much of the time.

This is a whole other talk and I don't have time to go into it fully, but the Buddha speaks extensively about inversions of perception, or what might be called hallucinations of perception. In the really deep Dhamma understanding, the perceptions that are inaccurate—that are continually reinforced by the habits of our mind—include seeing

permanence where nothing is permanent. We simply don't recognize the changing nature of things, so often. Intellectually we know it, but the perception is "no, it's steady." And when it goes, we think, "Where did that go?"

In terms of dukkha, we don't recognize the unsatisfactory nature of experience. Something can even be pleasant, but we think it's going to hang around—not seeing the impermanence—and really make us happy, not recognizing that nothing can truly do that.

And the third, of course, is the frequent perception of a self, a solid self, where there isn't one. Because perception arises in every moment of experience, and we're not recognizing this, the sense of self feels like, "Yes, sure, that's just how it is." So there are countless moments of that reinforcement. When we're not exploring, when we're not bringing in steady awareness, that pattern just keeps getting strengthened. It feels—I was going to say comfortable. It may not feel pleasant. The sense of self is often the biggest pain in the neck there is. But it's like an old comfortable bathrobe. You just want to cuddle up in it, even though it's disgusting. I don't know where that image came from.

Anyway, my point is that inaccurate perception isn't just a superficial thing. It's happening every moment.

Now I want to move into vedana—feeling tone. Putting perception and vedana together is how things really get rolling.

I'm sure most of you, though perhaps not all, are familiar with the way the Buddha described vedana: that sense of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral that arises in every moment of sense experience, often without our really noticing.

So we're going through our day, and every sight, sound, thought, mood, taste, smell, sensation in the body—how many sense experiences happen through the day, if you count every thought as one? I don't know, millions perhaps. You know how many, because it's every waking moment, very quickly. Each one of those moments involves a perception, and there's the vedana, quick as lightning: pleasant, unpleasant, or neither one.

And here's what the Buddha saw with real genius: when this goes unnoticed, the tendency of mind is that of course we like pleasant, we don't like unpleasant, basically. Neutral—maybe we notice it, maybe we don't. In our kind of hopped-up culture with so much information coming in, neutral almost veers into unpleasant for some people. We don't know what to do with it. We've got to fix it.

Going through our day, going through our life, our mind is practicing the habit of liking whenever it's pleasant, not liking whenever it's unpleasant. You're probably sitting there thinking, "Well, of course. Who likes unpleasant?" And so that just seems normal and natural. It is—it's nature. But because this seems to be just how it is, the sense of pleasantness and unpleasantness comes to be the way we really describe and define ourselves and the world—what we do and what we don't do, what we want, what's beneficial and what's not. At times this is really gross and obvious, but at other times it's extremely subtle.

The habit—and I'm putting out information here, so don't believe me, just keep looking and see for yourself because it gets fascinating—see if this is true for you. We've really cultivated this habit. So the sense of unpleasant experience that happens, often an unpleasant mood arises, and we turn it against ourselves: "There's something wrong with me."

An unpleasant mood came up. The sense that pleasant is better and that—let's come back to practice, really at the bottom line—look in the back of your mind. I keep finding this; it keeps slipping in there. I think I'm practicing to see the truth, but it veers into what's more pleasant. If it's going right, shouldn't it be more pleasant? Isn't that a sign that things are going the way they're supposed to? And when a sudden unpleasant thing comes up, it's a problem.

And this again is because of the moving into the pleasant. Then we end up just with the habit of desire—getting more pleasant, getting more pleasant, getting more pleasant. And with unpleasant, it's like push it away. Don't be with it. I don't want to be with it. I don't know how to be with it. And I shouldn't have to be with it because it should not be happening. It should only be pleasant.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was quite a great Thai forest meditation master and also a scholar—and a character; I spent some time there, and he was a character—he said once that ninety-five percent of everything we do is for pleasant feeling. So that's where we get even more to it: we think we're wanting the thing, but really what we want is this pleasant feeling. And it's so ephemeral. It's like this. Same with unpleasant feeling—it's so ephemeral. And we're not used to noticing it, and we get lost into the greed, into the aversion, and that just feels like, of course, the normal response.

This is what the Buddha was talking about when he saw that we really want to be happy, and we keep doing the thing that keeps us suffering. Because in following this—going for the pleasant, going for the pleasant, feeding the craving, feeding the habit of craving, feeding the habit of aversion—that's never going to work. But we don't see it because it didn't work this time, or this one went away, so then there's the next one,

then there's the next one, then there's the next one. Endless, right? That's samsara. Just the leaning into the next thing, the leaning out of this thing. This one doesn't work, go for the next one. "Ah, I finally was with this unpleasant—ah, thank God it went away, I finally learned how to do mindfulness right"—and then there's the next, and then there's the next, when we're really in it.

The Buddha has one sutta where he talks about this that I love, because he's just really describing how these habits get inculcated in our heart and mind. And I find it poignant—that's the word I use—because it really touches me about our human condition. He's saying, what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person? So that gets our attention. What's the difference?

And he says both—awakened and unawakened people—both experience pleasant vedana, unpleasant vedana, and neither. Both. He's not saying that if you get enlightened, unpleasant vedana stops. Both experience all three. So what's the difference?

And he says when a regular person is touched by a painful, by an unpleasant—and he uses bodily sensation to start with—he worries, he grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Can you relate to that? When your knee starts hurting? It's as if you were shot with an arrow and you shoot yourself with another arrow. So we can notice how we do that. Something unpleasant happens, and immediately we go to aversion and we start railing about it. We've ramped it up.

But this is what really touches me. Having been touched by the unpleasant feeling, she resists it and resents it. And so then in one who resists unpleasant feeling, the underlying tendency of resistance, of aversion, of negativity, comes to underlie the mind. It just becomes a habit to resist the unpleasant.

And this is the pain. Under the impact of that painful, unpleasant feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful, unpleasant feeling except the enjoyment of sensual happiness. And so then that becomes the tendency to crave, to lust for sense pleasure, just for pleasant feeling. And that craving comes to underlie the mind, becomes a habit.

I just find that so, so sad really. That in the normal world, and certainly how I grew up, the only way—even if it's unconscious—the only way when something painful or unpleasant is happening, the only way out, he's saying, that ordinary people know, is to go do something pleasant. You know, open the fridge and eat some ice cream when you're feeling bad. It's not like it's a bad thing. It's not like it's wrong to go enjoy something pleasant. Sometimes it can be helpful when we're all lost. But when that's

the only out we know, then the habit of aversion and resistance to the unpleasant, the habit of lusting and going toward the pleasant—that becomes the habit that underlies the mind.

And then he goes into neutral feeling, and he says there's a tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings. You don't even know them. This becomes the habit of mind.

And then he says you experience these vedanas, these feeling tones—I say feeling tones because we use "feelings" to mean moods and more complex mental experience—one experiences these feeling tones as if fettered by them, as if chained by them. Like, oh, this is unpleasant. We don't even notice the unpleasant itself; we're lost in all this world of suffering around it.

And the difference in the case of an awakened person? When they're touched by the painful feeling, they don't worry or grieve or lament or beat their breast or tear their hair. So they experience one kind of unpleasant feeling, not two kinds of unpleasant feeling. And because they understand, they understand according to facts how these feeling tones work—the arising and the ending of these feelings—they don't need to run away from it.

So they understand. Touched by the painful feeling, they do not resist it. So there's no underlying tendency of resistance. They don't need to go searching for sensual pleasure, so there's no underlying tendency or habit of greed. Just able to be fully present with whatever feeling comes, experiencing the feeling tone as one who is not fettered by it. It's just what it is. There's no need to run away, there's no need to do anything. It comes, it goes.

Really, it's the knowing of impermanence, but also of the fact that pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—is rotating through life. And that's not the way to happiness, to get rid of one. It's not the only way to evaluate what's useful.

So you put these two together: inaccurate perception and the tendency to get lost in wanting or aversion. And it really can take us very far, very quickly. To start to watch it is really quite interesting.

I just want to say something about the escape, because this is part of why practice is so hard. Even if you haven't recognized how the concoction came to be, you know you're in, say, an unpleasant experience. And there's aversion there. And you can see that—there's enough awareness, you know the aversion. But we can see aversion, and it's really hard to be with, isn't it? It's like all our training says: get the heck out of here. And so it just feels so wrong to hang out with aversion. Aversion has really been driving us.

Or the reverse: when there's strong desire in the mind and the heart, we really focus on the thing desired. But one interesting thing about retreat is that the same strength of desire and aversion can come up about little things. Have you noticed that? And it can make it easier to be willing to hang out, just hang out with a desire without acting on it.

Because sometimes it's harder to convince yourself absolutely that that thing is the most important thing in your life. You can see that whether you get a banana at breakfast or not—you can't really totally convince yourself that it's absolutely essential.

So going against our habits, sometimes when the desire isn't so strong, this is where we let the awareness stay steady. We take our refuge in awareness and hang out with the wanting. If you're walking and wanting comes, keep on walking and just let the awareness be with the wanting. See what it does, see how it feels. It's unpleasant. We're trained to do anything not to feel it. But it'll go away. And then there's the peace that was there before the wanting. You didn't have to get the banana for peace. Peace is available. We can move into the awareness. Learning that.

Same with aversion. Something Tejaniya says, in terms of really bringing awareness when there's kilesa in the heart, in the mind, distorting perception—he talks about how the degree to which the suffering mental state comes into the mind could be like from one to ten, how strong it is. And we tend, like say with aversion or fear or even grief, when it's little we think, "I don't have to pay attention to it yet. I'm just being mindful. There's a little aversion, it's okay." We don't want to pay attention. We wait till it gets really up to number eight or number nine, and then it's—forget it. It's stronger than the awareness. We're lost.

So he always says, take care of your awareness. Notice it as soon as it's there, when it's little, when it's like a one or a two—notice it then. And it's really true. I find now in my life, I'm often, not always, but kind of happy when I see a little aversion come up. Not a big one, but just some little thing. I'm driving, someone cuts me off, a little aversion. Wow, great to see. Great to see. Because in the seeing, then the awareness is really where the trust is. "Oh yeah, that's aversion. See it come, see it go." I'm not landing in it. It's not making the decisions. But when we're not really recognizing it, it's making the decisions a lot of the time.

So when we decide to do something, that intention—that's a mental movement that is informed by whatever particular mood or mental state is in the mind. And it's conditioned like everything else. If you make a decision, it seems like you're making it, but you walk into the dining room and you're deciding where to sit at lunch. Just a little thing. Just be aware of what's going on in the mind. Notice the perceptions. You walk in and people are there already. "Ah, I don't want to sit next to that person." Unpleasant.

These are little. You maybe don't even say it, you don't even feel that unpleasant. "Oh, I'm going over there. Oh, that's in the sun. I'm going over there. That'll be nice." First bummer, negativity. "Where else can I go?"

Just watch how much subtle aversion to unpleasant, how much subtle going towards something we envision is going to be pleasant, is driving the bus. It's really fun to watch because we want to know these things.

We don't want our only escape from unpleasant feeling to be getting something pleasant, because then when the pleasant doesn't come, we're lost. We don't know what to do. We think peace isn't available until we get the pleasant again, and that's way too conditioned.

So how can these two come together to create a big story? I use this example often, but just to see how perception and vedana—pleasant, unpleasant, aversion, and greed—can create a whole storm. This is papañca. We think about it, we complicate it, it creates all kinds of moods and responses that assail us and torment us.

A friend of mine was doing a retreat many years ago in a rented facility in Switzerland. They have these old camp houses, like two or three-story wooden houses that they use for children's camps in the summer. But they're not winterized, not insulated, so they can't use them in the winter. Just at the end of summer, they would rent them for retreats. This was her first retreat, so she didn't have a lot of experience, no experience, no dalai lama wisdom.

In this house, on what we would call the second floor, was the big room that was the meditation hall, and then an equal room below it was the walking room—sort of like here, but no insulation at all, just thin wooden floors. So anywhere you moved in that house, she said, creak, creak, creak. You could hear it everywhere.

They were in a scheduled sitting. This was scheduled sitting and walking all day. And this was Switzerland—you follow schedules in Switzerland. That's part of the cultural conditioning. You follow the schedules.

So they were in the sitting, and she was doing ānāpānasati, following her breath. Remember, she's new to this, so she's just trying to get really present with the breath. And then she heard creaking—somebody walking downstairs, back and forth. Creaking, creaking, creaking. It was completely distracting her from the breath. You can probably relate.

The immediate aversion arose: "This is ruining my meditation! I was finally getting to feel the breath and this person starts walking." So there's the perception of the person walking, the unpleasant feeling of that, and then the thought, "They're disturbing my meditation." There's a perception, a view of how the meditation was and how it should be, leading into more views. And every time a creak came, the attention just got glommed into the unpleasant.

Have you ever noticed that? There's something unpleasant and your attention just gets glommed into it. So every creak, she glommed in. "It's ruining my meditation, I can't feel my breath, and you shouldn't be doing it, and it's the schedule..." She got all worked up. And there was nothing to do, because she would never get up and go downstairs in the middle of the sitting and yell at the person.

So finally—whether it was out of wisdom or just out of dumb luck—she just dropped back into the present moment experience and started feeling the breath again, just however it was. It's sort of like we tell you: when the mind's all caught up in something, just shift the attention to something more neutral. So she did that. She went back to the breath and started feeling the physical experience.

And then she noticed she was leaning against the wall. Whenever she breathed in, her back went into the wall, and that's what was making the noise. It wasn't somebody walking downstairs.

Well, you can imagine all that anger about that person. The perception was wrong—delusion, fed by aversion, the whole story fed by aversion. She was really suffering a lot. Seeing that, that whole mass of suffering went away. Now, she probably—knowing her, and it being her first retreat—replaced it with self-blame and aversion, because she didn't really see the whole process. But I love that example because we can see in it exactly how perception and vedana, unaware, when we're not aware of the process, can take us anywhere. And we really can suffer.

So you get a sense. We can play with this here on retreat. That's a simple one I told, but this is where we go all the time anyway. There might be a difficult mood coming up. That's okay. There's going to be sadness. There's going to be grief. It's not that the stuff shouldn't come up. It's the difference between meeting what's happening—"It's like this now"—with awareness.

"Oh, I'm angry because of it. I don't know why I'm angry." But anger's arising. And sometimes it will come and you don't know the reason. You can just be with it, with a kind of purity. Feel how it feels in the body. Notice the thoughts coming and going, but

not going into story, not going into changing it, not going into aversion. Just perceiving it as it is without needing to have all the information. And it goes—it really goes—in the light of awareness.

These are subtle things. You're not always going to see this process clearly. But what happens as we take more and more refuge in awareness is that we start to get more and more interested in the process itself, rather than jumping into each particular experience—"this is good because it's pleasant, this is bad because it's unpleasant"—and getting entranced by our reactions and all the perceptions. As we get more and more interested in the process, awareness gets stronger. And as it becomes a bit more continuous, you really start to see the whole conditionality, the cause and effect relationship. You really start to know.

There are times when you see clearly: "I could really... that's unpleasant. I want... I could really pick that up, but I need to just be with unpleasant right now." Wisdom comes in and starts to make those decisions in little ways.

This is nothing major, but it's just popping into my mind as an example—the dining room thing again. On retreats, I like space. I don't like to be cramped up next to people. So I'd always try to look for the right spot when I was on retreat here. And the same with food. I'd want to go and be sure I got there before it ran out. It's not going to run out, don't worry. We used to run out when we didn't have enough money. It doesn't run out now.

Then I noticed one retreat, I just wasn't even thinking about it. I'd go in and maybe I'd look and think, "That's not such a good spot," and I'd just sit down wherever there was space. And I'd just go and whatever food was there, I'd eat it. It was so peaceful. It was so peaceful. And all that agitation—"I've got to get the right thing"—it takes so much energy. This is what we start to discover with the steadiness of awareness.

This is from Mingyur Rinpoche: "Discovering our own awareness allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of the mind, which exists independent of conditions and circumstances, independent of our emotions and moods. Awareness does not increase or decrease whether we are happy or sad."

So if we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness—and that's what we're doing, just in a simple way—if we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness, we comprehend that awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind is. That's really interesting. Don't think about it too much, but let that idea drop in. This allows us to discover a sense of peace and stability that is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feelings.

I can say I know this is really true. There are little moments we can experience it—not a whole steady state all the time—but play with this. Just that sense of being all caught up in suffering, and then that tai chi move into awareness: "It's like this." You're touching, just for that moment, that inherent calmness, that sense of ease, that sense of peace. It's not a huge peace, just "ah." Let yourself notice those moments. Don't make a big deal of it—go home and write a whole book about it and it's gone.

These moments often involve neutral feeling, and this is where I think neutral can be kind of interesting. They say neutral is where the kilesa that comes out is moha—we just space out, we just don't notice. But many things like calm and peace and stability also have the quality sometimes of neutrality, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And it's really interesting to see that the habit of moha around neutral means that sometimes when you're actually experiencing peace or freedom from kilesa, you kind of don't quite notice it. We don't quite notice it. We're looking for the big lights to go off—enlightenment! We don't just notice, "Ah, there's this ease. This unpleasant experience is like this, and in the awareness there's an ease, and the unpleasant thing's still going on." Awareness doesn't care. Notice these little moments. Then you start looking for them, and you notice the craving, and okay—you notice that, and there it is again.

So neutral is really an interesting thing. I think I mentioned this, perhaps in a group: often on long retreats—three-month retreats or month-long retreats—people will come in and say, "Well, nothing's happening." Deep into the retreat, I ask, "Nothing? You're sitting there, absolutely nothing?" "Well, no," they say, and they describe all this stuff they're seeing and hearing. But nothing, you know, nothing really interesting. I ask, "Could that be calm?" "Oh, calm. Oh, yeah, calm." And then they notice their mind creating all kinds of imaginary difficult scenarios, because that's better. The mind will create trouble because it amps up the sense of me. Calm—there's not so much "me" hanging around. It's just calm.

So start to notice that, generating a contentment with just the simplicity of awareness, a contentment with the mind that doesn't have to go get pleasant or run away from unpleasant. In just little moments, the mind not going out to experience and getting over-involved, just letting experience come and go and really feeling it, but not with this looking for some big meaning out of it, looking for fulfillment. The awareness itself, the sense of steady awareness, the sense of this natural peace and ease, comes to be more and more trustworthy. And we lose it—we know we lose it a lot. But it's not like it has to be created over time. It's, "Oh yeah, right. Awareness of unpleasant is like this." That's what we're practicing here.

Upasika Kee, who was a Thai laywoman and a great teacher, wrote this book called *Pure and Simple*, which is a lovely book if you want to look it up. She was very much "this is how it is"—tough. I mean, you read about these old Thai forest people and how they were practicing, they were tough cookies, I tell you. Anyway, she says, "What is, is. What is not, is not. There's no need to add anything extra." That's like the whole teaching in a nutshell, right?

Does that sound unbearably bleak? It's not, you know. We think, "Oh well, it's nothing. It's calm. It's just this big, empty, dull space." And it's not at all. When we're not needing something from experience, when we're not having to push it away, we're able to be fully present in this moment. It's what it is—I'm not going to say it's always delicious and beautiful. Sometimes it's unpleasant. But it's like a totality of presence with just this. That's really, to me, much more alive than chasing after pleasant whatever-it-is, or having to run away from unpleasant.

And sure, the more unpleasant something is, the harder it is to see through our habits. But when there's just a little fraction of a moment of this peacefulness of awareness, even in the midst of some difficult thing—just a little moment shot through and then the difficulty, you're in it again—to me, that's extremely powerful. It really strengthens the faith, the sense of "Yes, I know this is true." The habit right now of getting lost and identified with aversion is in this moment stronger. But suddenly there's a moment of, "Oh yeah, it's like this now. What is, is. No need to fight it." And there's that peace, that contentment, that stability of mind. This is really possible for all of us.

I'll just end with this from the Buddha. There's a sutta in this book, *The Island*—I don't know if you know this book—that Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno from Abhayagiri Monastery put together. "The island" is a reference to Nibbana, and they're pulling out various suttas. They're great scholars.

One's Canadian and one's English. And this is in California. But they're both scholars. They've been monks in the Thai forest tradition under Ajahn Sumedho for many years. And so they've pulled out—it's quite a thick book—all different suttas talking about various aspects of Nibbana and enlightenment, along with their own understanding. It's a great resource.

From this book, they point to a sutta where the Buddha speaks about how a great deal of our practice leads to disenchantment—getting out of this entrancement with our reactions, with wanting, with aversion, with "me, me, me." So much of our practice is

just what I was talking about: seeing how the deluded mind works. And the more awareness sees it, the magic show falls apart. We don't get so caught up, and there's more ease.

But also at times, they say, the Buddha talked about simply inclining the mind toward the peacefulness of Nibbana—almost as a contemplation. Not always so caught up.

And this is the reflection. He says: "A bhikkhu reflects thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime—that is, the stilling of all mental activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, disenchantment, release."

Now, that's not a craving, but just—how often do we incline our mind simply to this? This is sublime. A sense of peace. A sense of not craving. Not a whole lot of action going on, but just beginning to incline toward appreciating that. It's a beautiful thing. Something to drop into your mind from time to time. It's not always a struggle.

So that's part of what we're doing here with our steady awareness practice.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 172

Awareness Naturally Strengthens A Beautiful Mind/Heart

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common misunderstanding about awareness practice: the concern that non-reactive observation might lead to passivity or disengagement from life. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "intention (cetanā) is action (kamma)," she explains how the quality of our motivations—not just external results—determines the wholesomeness of our actions. She references the Dhammapada's opening verses on how mind precedes all experience, and explores a sutta where the Buddha describes his own practice of observing thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill-will, and harmfulness, noting how they naturally subsided through clear discernment.

Wilson emphasizes that steady awareness creates the conditions for wisdom to arise, which naturally weakens unwholesome states while strengthening wholesome ones—not through willpower but through the lawful unfolding of cause and effect. She describes how greed transforms into renunciation and generosity, ill-will into mettā (loving-kindness), and harmfulness into karuṇā (compassion). Using Ajahn Sumedho's definition of mettā as "witnessing unpleasantness without creating anything around it," she presents these qualities not as lofty emotional states but as simple, non-resistant presence.

The talk includes practical examples from retreat life and daily situations, teachings from the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu on interdependence (Ubuntu), and encouragement to trust that moment-to-moment mindful awareness—even seemingly unremarkable moments of "it's like this"—is actively cultivating wholesome mental habits. Wilson concludes by suggesting we orient our practice around sincere aspiration while trusting in the honesty of our motivations, moment by moment.

So I guess the overarching topic I want to talk about tonight could be called just action.

A lot of times there can be confusion or misunderstanding, or at least sometimes we can feel as though, as we've been practicing like this, cultivating awareness, we just keep saying whatever occurs, just being with it, being with it—really total radical non-interference, right? Which is amazing for truly understanding what's going on. But in the beginning, it can be confusing when people think about, well, when I'm in my life, what does that mean? Does this mean complete, radical—I mean, you don't do anything, right? It doesn't make sense, but it's something that sometimes people get confused about. They wonder, are we somehow abdicating engagement, choice, decision in life?

Does living with awareness mean awareness doesn't care, and so I don't care about whatever's going on in life? And of course, that's not true. But I want to talk about how it works.

Another thing that sometimes comes up, quite frequently, is underneath that a sense of, well, doesn't it seem like anything we do—and quite a few people have said this, some here and on other retreats—that we're supposed to see that wanting is suffering and confusing, but it seems that anything I do is from wanting. And then we think, I want to be enlightened. If I didn't want to be enlightened, I wouldn't practice. If I didn't want to support my family, I wouldn't work. And some of that confusion comes from using the word "want" in a very global way. But I remember someone on a three-month retreat years ago said, "Without wanting and aversion, what would I do? Just sit in my room for the rest of my life?" I feel kind of sad at that, but that's the bottom line of what we're used to.

This Buddhist teaching is certainly not about becoming passive and quiescent in life. Even the Buddha, as a monastic renunciate, was an incredibly active, engaged human being, engaging with people all the time. So that's not what this is about. In fact, there's one sutta, just one line, where the Buddha says, "A wise person is known by their actions." Their actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's wisdom, one's discernment shines. So that's really getting right to the point. The heart of how our wisdom manifests, he's saying, is in our actions—that's how we can tell.

So what does that mean? What does it mean when he's talking about actions in that way? That's more what I'm going to talk about.

You can see that awareness practice is not to abandon acts in the world—I mean, we couldn't—but to allow wisdom, when there's a moment of understanding before we act, that gives our mind, our awareness, a moment of choice. Without awareness, it's like that person said: our knee-jerk reaction to so many situations is to respond with wanting or aversion. Or at least it's all about me, me, me. It comes from what's going to make me feel the best. That just seems normal. But as wisdom grows, and as there's more steady awareness, there's just some knowing of what's going on. When a situation presents, there's the potential to respond in a much more wise and appropriate way. So it's not about not responding, but about not responding out of this reactivity.

But what does the Buddha mean by action? When he says the actions of a wise person show who's wise, does it mean that every action we do has to be somehow amazing? Does it mean that every action is somehow only serving being? You can't just go to the store and buy some pretzels—everything has to have a huge meaning? And that's of course not it.

Action is very specific, the way the Buddha talks about it. He says, "Intention"—the word cetanā, volition—"I tell you, is action, kamma." The word kamma or karma literally translates as action. "Intention, I tell you, is action, is kamma. Intending, one does action by way of body, speech, and mind." So what he's saying is the heart of every action isn't in the movement, how it looks, or even the results, which is out of our control anyway, but it's the movement of mind, this cetanā, this volition, that's at the heart of every action. That's what determines—"determined" is kind of too strong a word—the wisdom, the wholesomeness, the unwholesomeness.

So intention, many of you know, but if you're new: it's just a little mental impulse, in the way the Buddha talks about it, that leads to action of even thought, speech, and body.

It's like a little movement in the mind. The energy gathers together and then leads to action. Without that intention, there wouldn't be movement, there wouldn't be speech, there wouldn't be action. And it's meant to be happening in every moment. So most of the time we don't notice it. And often when we do notice it, it's something that's very easily identified with as "me." But it's just another piece in a train of cause and effect.

A very simple example: we're sitting, an itching sensation arises in the body. There's a little unpleasant feeling, not quite noticed, a little bit of aversion, and there's the intention—oh, move and scratch it. It's just a whole chain of cause and effect going on. So that intention, then, is said to be—the quality of that intention, what makes it wholesome or unwholesome—is the qualities of the state of mind that's coming along with it, that's conditioning it. So that was pretty mild, barely any aversion, just a little scratching. But without intention, we wouldn't scratch. You can be sitting and there's an itch and the mind is very calm and there's awareness of the itch. And for whatever reason, aversion, reactivity doesn't come up. And there's no movement. There's no need to scratch. We're not saying you shouldn't scratch. I'm just saying that's how the cause and effect works.

We tend to focus on the actual action and the effect or result of it. And the Buddha is saying the whole heart of suffering and wholesomeness in actions is in this intention together with the qualities of mind.

You've probably heard these very well-known two stanzas from the very beginning of the Dhammapada, which is one of the texts in the canon, the suttas:

All experience is preceded by mind, is led by mind, is made by mind. Speak or act with an impure mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox that pulls it.

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow.

That's a very well-known couplet in the Buddhist teaching. And I think it's really quite profound—it comes to the heart of why we see the power of really devoting ourselves to cultivating and trusting this moment-to-moment receptive awareness that's willing to see whatever's going on in the mind. Because the mind, moment by moment, is really the seed of all the things—all the speech and action and even thought, though that's harder to see—that we do in the world.

So it's not that looking at our mind is some kind of esoteric, removed activity that has nothing to do with, that's somehow divorced from, living a full, rich life, from becoming a more useful person in the world. It's the absolute heart of that. It's the best—if there's any other way to actually come to understand why we're doing what we're doing and actually have the chance to change that, it's because we're really seeing it at the source. You know, we have the idea, "I'm going to stop doing this." Forget it—you just decide "I'm going to stop," whatever it is, but we're not seeing the motivations that get it going. We're just kind of lost.

Or as Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said, "Actions are the servants of the mind." When you think of it that way, when the Buddha is saying someone's wisdom shines through their activities in the world, this is what he's talking about—the motivation, the intention, the quality of heart and mind that's giving rise to our actions.

Without mindfulness, of course, it's really easy to miss the motivation a lot of the time, isn't it? Even when we're looking for it, half the time we can't notice it because it all moves so fast. But just to begin to tune in and see—because you could say in actions, sometimes you could talk about three parts of it. There's the motivation, there's the result of the action, and there's the external circumstances, the situation. That's one way of talking about the elements of an action. And usually, as I said before, what we tend to really notice is the action, and we judge whether it's good or bad usually by the result—if we get the result we want. But that's not so much in our control.

I always use this example because I think we can all relate to it really easily. The same action could come from very different motivations. And it may or may not have a similar result in terms of what the Buddha is saying. Say you have someone you're close to and you have something you really, out of all the love in your heart, want to give them some feedback about. But it could be feedback that you actually know—

It's not just because you don't like it, but it's something they do and you really do care for them, and you can see that it's alienating other people. It's not simply that you don't like them personally. So you really, out of love, do want to tell them.

There are many different ways that could play out, aren't there? Part of the situation is that you wait. You're really aware of your motivation and you don't say it until you're genuinely feeling clear, feeling metta, not feeling aversion, truly caring for them. So that's one piece—the motivation. That's the best we can do.

And there's always a good chance we sort of think we are ready. "I'm going to wait till I really feel like that." But then something happens and they do the thing, and you're a little bit off balance. You get thrown over and suddenly blurt out, "You know, I've really been meaning to tell you this thing." It comes out completely different, and it impacts them completely differently.

Or consider the ambience. They come home from work and you're there, but you actually don't wait to see—maybe they've had a day from hell. You don't know because they're just looking fine. You think, "Okay, here we are together, have a little drink and let's just talk about stuff." But meanwhile, they're a mess inside. So you share this thing with all the love in your heart and it just crushes them, because you didn't have that information.

So on one hand, you're doing it out of real metta. But even if you do it out of real metta, and it's the right time and everything, it's still not in your control. The other person goes, "Oh, thank you so much. I've been waiting all my life for you to tell me this." That would be rare—but it's a possibility. That's the result we want, right? And you feel like, "Oh, this was a good action." Or they throw something at us and we think, "Well, you stupid jerk."

But anyway, you get a sense. The Buddha is saying that a great deal of the time, the result is out of our control. And this is because we don't know what's going on with the other person. Often we don't know the situational information. Sometimes we could find out and sometimes we can't. So that's a kind of ignorance—not that we're foolish, but simply that we don't have all the data. We don't have all the information. Everything's like that, you know? It's just not in our control.

So to learn to think about what's wise action and what's unwise action, and what we can actually be aware of—it comes home again to this: What's happening in this mind and heart? That's what awareness can see. And that really is the seed to our ongoing suffering or happiness. It keeps going; it's lawful. This whole practice is lawful.

So here's the good news, which somebody reminded me of today. They said I mentioned this a couple of years ago, and I thought at the time, "That's just a crock. That isn't true." So I don't care if you believe it or not—just keep looking. But it actually is true in my experience, and someday it may be in yours. Probably it already is, but I'll keep talking about it.

With steady awareness—the kind we're cultivating, which isn't "I should do this, I shouldn't do that," but just interest, seeing what's going on—we start to notice the motivations, the thoughts, and what they lead to. That steady awareness is the condition for wisdom to arise. And when wisdom recognizes what's happening, it naturally feeds wholesome states of mind and heart.

It's really amazing. When I started to trust that—which is the way Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks, though he didn't make it up, he just emphasizes it—I started to realize: that's really true. I don't have to figure out the wisdom. I just put in the trust and the steady awareness.

The more wisdom recognizes craving and keeps on watching it and sees the suffering, the wisdom isn't feeding it. It's going, "Look at that, look at that," and at some point—not forever, but just for a moment—the craving is put down.

When wisdom sees the peace of no craving, or wisdom sees generosity, it strengthens it in a way. It's like leaning in. Just as when delusion is feeding anger the anger gets stronger, when wisdom is meeting the wholesome, it strengthens the wholesome. We feel how that feels, and the inclination of our mind and heart is to move towards that—because it's really more happiness-producing.

This is something the Buddha

This is something the Buddha really examined closely for himself. There's a well-known sutta where the Buddha is talking about the time before he was the Buddha, when he was still doing his practice. He was probably a little farther along than some of us at this point, but it's a sutta where he's talking about two kinds of thoughts.

He says, "As I remained heedful, ardent, and resolute, thinking filled with sensuality, filled with greed, arose in me."

So have some faith. He's about to be the Buddha. He's ardent, he's resolute, he's heedful, and thinking filled with sensual desire arose in him. Cut yourself a break.

But then, this is how he meets it, which is our lesson. He says, "I discerned, I saw thinking imbued with sensuality has arisen in me. And that it leads to my own affliction or the affliction of others or the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom. It promotes vexation. It does not lead to unbinding, to release."

This isn't a judgment he's making. He's looking at it with discernment, with wisdom, and saying, "Oh, here's thinking with sensuality." He's watching what it does. He says it promotes vexation. It leads to his own affliction. It leads to the affliction of others. This is what happens. He's simply watching, and this is what he sees.

"As I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, it subsided."

Isn't that what we've been saying? As he noticed, it subsided. As he noticed that it leads to the affliction of others, to the affliction of both, as he noticed that it obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, and does not lead to release, it subsided. Whenever thinking filled with sensuality had arisen, thus it was simply abandoned.

Do you really hear that what he's saying is just what we've been doing? And then he did it again the same way, the exact same thing. Thinking filled with ill will arose in him. And then thinking filled with harmfulness arose in him. The exact same process—it led to affliction and vexation, and on recognizing that and paying attention, it subsided.

So whatever a person keeps pursuing with their thinking and pondering, whatever we think about frequently, that becomes the inclination of our awareness, of our consciousness. If a person keeps pursuing thinking filled with greed, then the mind is bent by that thinking imbued with greed. In other words, just as we say, it becomes a habit. If we keep in the habit of following thinking with ill will, then the mind gets in the habit of going in that direction of harmfulness. But this is good—he's simply seeing, watching how his own mind works.

And then, again, the other direction. "As I thus remained heedful, ardent, and resolute, thinking filled with renunciation arose in me."

Renunciation really means the releasing of clinging. That's what he means. He doesn't mean renunciation in terms of thinking about objects or activities that he should give up. He's talking about this as a quality of heart, a quality of mind—renunciation as the letting go.

So thinking filled with renunciation arose in him, and he discerned that thinking filled with renunciation had arisen. And that leads neither to his own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor to the affliction of both. It fosters discernment, it fosters wisdom, it strengthens wisdom. It promotes lack of vexation, and it leads to freedom.

"If I were to think and ponder in line with that renunciation, even for a night, even for a day, even for a day and a night, I do not envision any danger that would come from it."

So if you want to get lost in thought for a day and a night, get lost in thought of renunciation! He didn't see any danger that would come from it, except—and he's so practical—except that thinking and pondering a long time would tire the body. It's just totally practical. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed.

And a disturbed mind is far from collectedness. So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, and concentrated it. Why is that? So it would not be disturbed.

He says the same thing about thinking filled with non-ill will, which we could call metta or friendliness, and the same thing for thinking filled with harmlessness, which moves us into compassion. He says exactly the same things about all of these. And the same principle: whatever one thinks and ponders upon frequently, that becomes the inclination of the mind.

So there's good news here—it isn't just that we're stuck with the kilesas. Even in steady awareness, really steady awareness, the wisdom that comes from that naturally works. In the first case, when you see the thinking filled with greed, for example, and wisdom mind is just watching, watching, watching, it naturally releases in a moment. This really happens. And then it starts to become more natural for the thinking, the motivation of non-greed, of renunciation moving into generosity, to arise.

This is really what we mean when we talk about the lawfulness of the Dhamma—this is lawful. It's not necessarily an act of will. It's what happens when wisdom is steady, recognizing the suffering and delusory aspect of that craving. *Whoa, I don't need that.* And we put it down.

People have given little examples of this. It happens on retreat where you can notice it in small ways. Different people describe different experiences. We go somewhere we expect greed to come up, and just for some reason one day there's no greed. It wasn't an act of will, and it's like a surprise. *Where's the greed? It's not here now.* And that absence of greed is like a renunciation, and the person describing this felt it as a kind of calm, a kind of peace. Recognize that. That's a natural unfolding. That's the natural result of wisdom.

It's a little moment, but recognizing these actually helps. It's what gives us more verified confidence that this is actually happening. Don't just say, "Oh, this is some weird thing—there's no greed right now but it's coming back." Really notice: the wholesome motivation has arisen. And when we feel it, when we get familiar with it, it's actually more pleasant than greed.

So even though we do tend towards the pleasant, the Buddha uses that tendency. But we tend towards wholesome pleasant, and it's more pleasant than the unwholesome pleasant. It kind of is that way—until we get to where either one doesn't matter.

The same with aversion. People describe going into situations here where just being around people can trigger aversion or judgment or whatever, and then sometime you're waiting for it and it doesn't come. Just a sense of friendliness. Just a sense of, *Oh, okay, you too.* When that first would happen with me, I'd go, "Whose mind is this? This ain't my mind!" It's like, no, it isn't my mind. The other one wasn't my mind either. But just to notice. Don't think, "Oh, I must have been spaced out because I just missed the aversion. For sure it was there and I just missed it." No. Really feel where there's just a tender connectedness. And that's non-ill will.

In terms of non-harmfulness, one of the ways it really comes up for almost everybody on retreat is towards our own really difficult experience. Have you even had a moment where you've been struggling with some painful experience of body, emotion, mind, internally, and you're trying to be mindful, but basically there's that blame, there's that negativity, there's that whatever it is towards it? And at some moment, that shifts. What was it that Mark said? "Honey, it's okay"? Is that what he said? *Honey, it's okay.* But really, it's like, "Oh, oh yeah, it's like this now." That's the shift.

The harmfulness—because that digging at ourselves, that blaming ourselves, that judgment—that's really a kind of abusive mind towards ourselves. It's almost cruelty, you could say. And when that drops, and it's like, "Oh, it's like this now"—what's changed is that motivation in the heart-mind. It's shifted from harmfulness to compassion. Compassion is the quality of awareness of heart-mind, of citta, that just totally meets the suffering without any negativity. Out of that is where compassion arises.

These aren't acts of personal will. This is where the trust really has to come. I can't decide, "Okay, from now on, no more greed in this situation."

You know how we try that. "Oh, I got it! Now, every time this really horrible emotion comes up, I'll just go, 'It's okay, honey.'" That works once, right? Then the next time: "It's okay, honey. It's okay... How come it isn't working?" Because we're back in the outer action and not noticing again the motivation.

And what do we have to do to fix it? Yes, yes. That's all. After we go through trying everything—"How do I get back the good motivation?"—oh, right. I discern that thinking imbued with harmfulness is arising right now. And that's already shifting things.

So in the course of our ongoing practice here, cultivating awareness, it really is the lawful way it works that these suffering habits of speech and action and thought do start to shift. Because we're spending many more moments not pondering them.

The two different ways of thinking that the Buddha talked about—greed and lust tend to switch to renunciation, generosity. Ill-will tends to switch to non-ill-will, or mettā. Harmfulness to harmlessness, or compassion, karuṇā.

I just want to talk a little bit about those three. They're not esoteric; we all know all of them. But just to mention them a little bit, to recognize how they arise in small ways through the practice.

As I say, awareness and wisdom in awareness function in both directions. They help the unwholesome to dissipate, and they strengthen the wholesome. It's actually an amazing arrangement. And we can trust it because it's not something we create.

I keep saying it's not an act of will because that's so hard for so many of us to either trust or believe. If it feels like I did it, that's the identification with the cetanā. And when something comes up and shifts in one go—wow, it just changed—it feels like magic. It feels like magic because in that moment there wasn't a sense of noticing or identifying with that sense of volition. It came just... instead of a volition to have an unwholesome thought, the volition to have a wholesome one came. Just out of the causes and conditions coming together. This is what makes it wholesome.

It's really helpful to understand that as the conditions are being set in motion, if we continue with steady awareness, wisdom is going to grow. It's not that we're just going to magically not have any more greed, hatred, and delusion. No, that's a long way down the road. But these little moments, like the ones I just mentioned—they're going to happen. You may not notice them, but you'll start to. It's inevitable. It's just the way nature works. The same as nature growing.

I was walking yesterday outside and it was still nice, and I was just thinking how in this last week you've all seen how spring is just like... it's amazing, right? It's just sprung up. Every day the plants are a little bit higher and the buds are opening. It's amazing to see. And it's just lawful. It comes in its own time. We thought it should have come back in April, but it didn't. There's a whole long winter, like two months longer than you want it to be. And you can want and try and water and do whatever you want—those buds aren't going to come up. Those plants aren't going to come up.

There's nothing you can do about it. And at the right time, with all the conditions, they come up. You couldn't stop them if you wanted to. I suppose you could rip them all up, but you can't really stop them from growing. You can't make them grow faster. You can't make them grow slower. This is just what happens.

I loved that reflection yesterday. But then today came, and I thought, "Oh, that's perfect too." Because that's how it is with our minds. It isn't just better, better, better, better—everything's good. It's more like, "Wow, I'm really seeing something!" and then, big time, lost in the well of delusion. Whether it's from one moment to the next or one day to the next, that's just how it goes. Up and down, up and down, up and down.

So we have to really, again, like the Buddha said, discern: "Thinking imbued with ill will has arisen in my mind." Not "Oh no, forget it," beating your breast. Simply noticing. And then as I notice, it fades. And there's a moment of compassion towards myself. Having a long-range view, the patience to trust that this really does occur naturally.

As we get more familiar—or a lot more familiar—and trusting of these qualities of heart-mind, of renunciation, the opening up, the release of clinging, of mettā, friendliness, of compassion, then we can also consciously incline the heart, the mind, in the direction of renunciation, of generosity, of mettā, of compassion. As we learn to recognize the wholesome, it becomes an act of wisdom. There are times when you can actually choose in a more conscious way to move into the wholesome.

Let me give a simple example. Take renunciation. Food is a good place to play with this on retreats. Say you're walking into the dining room. Maybe that's a place where greed doesn't arise naturally, and you notice, "Okay, great, no greed." But another time you walk in—I'm just making this up—say you're heading towards the back table and you came in late, back where they put the desserts. There's one piece of cake left. You see it, you're not all crazed, but you see it and you'd like to have that piece of cake. Then you notice there are still more people behind you, and you think, "You know what? Yeah, I'd like to have it, but I can leave it. I don't need it. Let someone else have it."

A simple sense of renunciation, moving into generosity. And then you keep watching, and you really feel the happiness of watching someone else take that cake and eat it. It's actually a nicer happiness than shoveling that thing down your throat. It's gone in two minutes and then what? Did it make you that happy? Maybe. You had a hard day, maybe you needed it. But other days you can really say, "No, let someone else have it."

That's more like conscious intention, where we incline the mind and keep paying attention. In regular vernacular, we notice how it feels. You notice the quality of ease, of peace—that's how it would be for me; it might be different for you—or a kind of happi-

ness at being able to let go. Then we may cling to it, whatever. But actually appreciating the happiness of wholesomeness isn't necessarily leading to clinging at all. So don't be afraid to let that kind of pleasantness, that kind of happiness, into awareness.

Don't think, "Oh no, that's just ego feeling happy. I'm so great, I'll let him have the cake." Don't do that to yourself—unless it actually is that. But if you really feel into it, I mean, it might be. But then it wouldn't actually feel happy. It wouldn't actually feel so good. There's a quality of genuineness we can recognize: "Wow, look at that. It makes me happy."

This is something we can actually contemplate. As I mentioned earlier, the Buddha said to contemplate your generosity because it actually brightens the heart and mind. It leads onward to more wholesomeness. It inclines the mind and heart in that direction, which is a lovely direction—one that doesn't lead to the affliction of oneself and doesn't lead to the affliction of others. Do you get a sense of what I mean? These are just small examples, but we can do this in big ways in our life or in small ways.

Sometimes the renunciation doesn't always move into generosity, but there's simply the simplicity of not needing to let yourself be run by the craving. Whatever it is becomes more simple. And again, recognizing renunciation, we're talking about a quality in the mind, in the heart, more than how it looks externally. One could live very simply and be filled with greed, not renouncing anything inwardly. It's probably harder to be really wealthy with many possessions and be truly simple—I wouldn't know—but I would say it's probably possible. Because it really is the quality in the heart and mind of non-clinging. Play with it. See how it feels.

Another thing we recognize from all of these—from non-clinging, generosity, friendliness, compassion, non-harming—is a certain feeling of connection. With generosity, for instance, you feel the other person receiving the cake, or whatever you offer. Feeling their sense of receiving and your sense of happiness creates this sense of not being separate. You don't have to get all mystical about it, but the generosity of one person is the happiness of another. The happiness of another is the happiness of the person who is generous. How do you separate it?

This brings to mind Archbishop Desmond Tutu from that wonderful book where he and the Dalai Lama have these long conversations about joy. He speaks about the concept we have at home in Africa, the concept of Ubuntu. Bhante Buddharakkhita, whom we teach with and who is from Uganda—I mentioned this in the fall—said, "Oh, I loved that you mentioned that, because that's absolutely what we have at home, this concept of Ubuntu."

Ubuntu says a person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu says when I have a small piece of bread, it is for my benefit that I share it with you, because after all, none of us came into the world on our own. And you realize that in a very real sense, we're meant for a profound complementarity. It is the nature of things. You don't have to be a believer in anything. I could not speak as I am speaking without having learned it from other human beings. I learned to be a human being from other human beings. We belong in this delicate network. It is actually quite profound. Unfortunately, in our world, we tend not to recognize this connection until times of great disaster—you know how we respond then, we really want to help other people, we recognize it.

That's really what he's pointing to, this profound connection. What he's saying is just what the Buddha said. It's not some kind of woo-woo idea, but when we're not acting and seeing and viewing ourselves in the world through the lens of greed or hatred or self-interest, that's how the experience actually is. You can still tell I'm me and you're you—it's not that distinction disappears—but it's that sense of what I do affects you, what you do affects me. And this is onward leading, actually, to more wholesome states.

The Dalai Lama expresses something similar. He says that Buddhism essentially consists of two things: the view, which means an understanding of the interdependence of all things, and action, which can be loosely defined as nonviolence. But if one were to summarize the Buddha's teaching in one word, we would have to say that it is universal interdependence, of which nonviolence is a natural consequence.

Since we are all dependent on each other, and all other beings want to be happy and not suffer, just as I do, my personal happiness and suffering are inextricably linked with those of others. This nonviolence does not mean weakness or passivity. It is the deliberate choice of altruism in our thoughts and actions, so that it becomes inconceivable to knowingly harm others.

From that teaching, I want to emphasize the deliberate choice. The point I'm really trying to make through our practice here is that without awareness wisdom, we could make that choice, but we really couldn't follow up on it. Because when something comes hard and we're afraid and we don't even recognize it in the mind, we're going to act out of fear, we're going to act out of anger, we're going to act out of greed. The habits are just too strong.

But this is his way of saying it, or Bishop Tutu's way of saying it—this is the truth of how things are. When the kilesas aren't distorting our perception, the movement of non-clinging, of generosity, of friendliness, of compassion, are just going to be the natural response, in little ways. I'm not saying we should have the idea now that we have to go out and act out of compassion in every moment, because we're not going to be

able to do it. But this is what's going to give us, hopefully, the trust to keep at least having the motivation to re-recognize awareness over and over and over. Trusting that the natural wisdom, seeing things as they are, goes in the direction of compassion, of metta, of non-clinging, of other wholesome states. Because that's the way it is. But we keep recommitting again and again to ourselves just to look and see.

To say a little about friendliness and compassion—we know what they are. Metta, non-ill will, non-hatred, friendliness. I think of metta or non-ill will as simple connection. Even when we use the word metta or loving-kindness, often people get the idea it's some real big emotion. It has to be this love, this all-encompassing love where all beings are connected. You get the drift. But listen to Ajahn Sumedho's definition, talking about metta or non-ill will in regard to difficult people or situations: "It doesn't necessarily mean loving it. One is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, a thing, a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. That's what I consider to be metta."

I actually love that. Something difficult, a pain in the knee, and one is witnessing that with awareness without creating anything around it. It's just like this. It's like that short quotation I read from Upasika Kee: what is, is. What is not, is not. You don't need to add anything extra. That's what Sumedho is saying about metta. Simple, complete connection. It's like this. Out of that arises acceptance, clear seeing, friendliness. Not making any aspect of ourselves or another person or experience the other, so to speak. Because really, in the light of the connectedness of attention, of awareness, there isn't the other—it's just what it is.

As the writer James Baldwin says, an enemy is someone whose story we have not heard. So a lot of our practice with awareness is just to hear the story of this knee pain. I don't mean making up a story—I mean just to hear the knee pain, the sadness, somebody else's pain, whatever it is that's going on. What is it? Without adding anything extra, but without needing to pull away.

And this is really what compassion is. The Dalai Lama—he's of course Mr. Compassion, so we always use his definitions—compassion is really when the heart-mind is meeting suffering fully, without resistance, without adding anything else. Compassion is that tenderness of heart that's meeting the suffering, in oneself, in another, no different.

What the Dalai Lama says is: how does compassion arise? By being with our own suffering. By being present, without adding anything extra, with our own suffering. From that, not needing to shrink back, not needing to resist or turn away from our own suffering, he says that naturally opens up and spreads out to empathy with other beings. We can really see this. We can really feel the natural interdependence that comes from opening, just being willing to be present with suffering. And so that's why it's so

important on retreats, the difficult things that happen and all the stuff we go through, because that's where we're starting to see. What's the difference between all the fighting and "it's okay, honey"? Just the being with it.

How different is the experience when there's compassion and when there's aversion? Huge. And from someone else, you know, even when you try to do something to help someone who's suffering, but really the seed is our discomfort to be with. Because if someone's suffering, we're uncomfortable with it because we're uncomfortable with our own suffering.

So have you ever had someone really trying to help you, and they're trying to help you, but you can feel that the seed is their discomfort with your suffering? If you can feel that. I mean, if you've been sick, you maybe feel that. I've had, in the past—I'm fine now—a chronic disease, and everyone wanted to come and tell me, "Try this, try that, drink this, do that." You know, all the good intentions, and ten million things to do, and now there's even more. There wasn't so much internet then. But you could really feel—and this wasn't a judgment—but I could really notice when someone, with really full intention, but there's a little pressure, a little pushing, and you could feel their dis-ease about it: "Do this, come on, fix this, we don't want to see you like this." Or someone else who'd been through similar things kind of goes, "Yeah, it's really hard, isn't it?" You feel the difference.

And that's not to put any of us down, but that's where the motivation really is what informs the connectedness. When there's compassion, we're able to be there. And a whole different way of relating opens up, our views drop away. Compassion and mettā both arise from just the simplicity of total contact, surrender into it. It's like this, without resistance. It can change everything.

So I'll tell this story—some of you have heard it—that I heard on the radio a couple years ago. Remember during the big refugee crisis in Europe? I mean, not that it's over, but when it was up in the news. And there was in Calais, in France, this really big refugee camp that was called The Jungle, that sounded really, really packed, really awful. Refugees from Afghanistan and Syria and all over North Africa, Southern Africa were packed into this place, basically trying to get to England, which didn't want them. So they're trying to sneak out and sneak on trucks and go under the channel and get to England. So they're in this camp and contained in the camp. Really, it's like a prison. They're not allowed out.

So I heard this reporter on the BBC went, visited the camp and talked to different people, and then he was just walking around in the city of Calais, and some of the people were having a big demonstration against having the jungle there, against all the

people. So he's interviewing them, and they're all, you know, just the general "they shouldn't be here, whatever, get rid of them." But he found one woman, just kind of an average middle-aged, middle-class woman, very negative: "These people are horrible, they shouldn't be here," in the protests. And he said, "Well, have you actually gone there?" She said no.

So she was open enough that she was willing to go with him into the jungle and meet people. They did, and they went around and talked to people. She talked to some young men who had come and had to leave their family, and they're saying, "All I want is a job and an education. When I walk outside the camp just to try to go buy something, some of the truckers kind of beat me up, the police kind of beat me up, they throw me back in here, they won't let me leave." And she saw there were horrible conditions, and she thought, "Wow, I thought this was a free country. But maybe it's not." And she was, just from talking to people—that connection broke through her view, really strongly held view. And like all our views, we never have all the information. It broke through her views, the connection just with individual people. And she decided to go back and volunteer. She went back and became a volunteer there.

Sweet story. There are millions of sweet stories like that. Just one person doing one thing, not to be a great bodhisattva of the ages, but just because it's doing the obvious, as I heard one teacher say, when the connection is there, when the wholesome motivation is driving our actions.

So, we can't figure all out how our life should be and what we're going to do and how we're always going to come from the right motivation. But one thing I want to say first is to recognize—part of what's changing, not part, it's a big part—the habits in the mind. When we say what we frequently think and ponder on, that becomes the habit. And you maybe think, "Well, I'm not thinking and pondering on compassion all that much. It comes up sometimes, but not all that much. I'm not pondering on non-greed a lot sometimes." But every moment of mindful awareness that's just not distorted by kilesa, where you just—it's like this.

Every one of those moments is a moment of cultivating wholesome intention. A moment of "it's like this." It's non-greed, it's non-hatred, it's non-delusion. And so it's actually shifting the habits of where our mind tends to dwell. We don't notice it because there's nothing special going on. You know, my toe hurts—it's like this. But if it's not aversion, that's actually strengthening the habit of wholesome attention, of non-ill will in the mind.

It's happening kind of like getting wet in the fog, where you don't really notice it, as Suzuki Roshi says. You go out in a rainstorm, you know you're soaking wet. But this is like you go out in a fog and you don't really notice it, but you get drenched to the bone through your clothes and you couldn't point to any moment it happened. This is the power of moment-to-moment awareness. This is what we're doing.

So just one last thing. I'll simply drop it in. I was saying, how do we keep it up? We do tend to want to go home. I used to go home and plan how I'm going to always act only from compassion and kindness from now on. How long would that last? I'd be beating myself up—at least, if not anyone else—within two hours for not being compassionate. You're not compassionate enough, I'd judge myself. Because that's coming from a "should" up here.

But using the understanding of moment-to-moment motivation as really being the heart of action—how do we keep it up? In the bigger picture, it's like when we want to be enlightened. "I want to be enlightened"—it may not be this thirst, but it's an aspiration, a direction to which we incline our activities. It's been so helpful for me, and someone brought it up in a group, but it really can be so helpful to take some time with yourself again and again. Get really quiet. Go into what is really important, most important to you in your life.

We go through life making all kinds of choices—every day, a million choices. And I don't mean you have to, every time you're going to the supermarket, have a meditation and say, "What's really important and what things should I get?" Not that. But one or two things.

So say, just to make it easy, say liberation from clinging—say that was what's really important to you. Not to set that as wanting, but to see, okay, that's really important. And then when I'm making smaller decisions in the moment, I can tune in: what are the conditions that will support that result? The conditions being bringing in awareness and not acting from greed, just seeing what's going on. We kind of use whatever our larger aspiration is as a beacon, a goalpost to tune into in bigger decisions. But it's not like we're always looking there. It brings us back here to help us orient when we're deciding things.

Because there's no way we can know what's going to happen, how things are going to turn out. We could plot our whole life for the next ten years, and all kinds of stuff is going to happen we never even thought about—good, bad, and indifferent. But what we do have, moment to moment, is the sincerity of our own motivations.

This is something the Dalai Lama says a lot. People ask him how, with the Chinese government, he can keep advocating nonviolence. How can he keep having compassion? And besides saying that maybe the Chinese government took his country but he's not going to let them take his heart and mind—that's one thing. But what he says again and again is, "I can only trust in the sincerity of my motivation. I can't know how my choices and actions are going to play out in the future." We can't know that. But all we can do is keep coming back and looking at and trusting the sincerity of our own motivation, just with honesty. And when we blow it in our mind, then we meet that again with the sincerity of awareness, with the sincerity of non-ill will. This is really our action in the world. Whatever way in the bigger picture we choose to show up, whatever it is we're doing, it's going to be informed by our motivation in the moment.

So that's just what I wanted to share tonight.

Oh, I just want to read one little haiku, which doesn't really fit in—but it does in a way. Because sometimes when we say awareness doesn't care, or even talking about the wholesome, there can still be that feeling in the back that somehow either life gets better and better, or we don't feel the poignancy, we don't feel sadness. But we do.

Everything still happens. People we love die, and things get hard. That isn't going to change. And the tenderness—it doesn't mean we don't feel it. We feel it more, but perhaps without aversion.

So just this haiku I love, from Issa, a Zen master a couple of centuries ago. He wrote it on the death of his young daughter. It simply goes:

This dewdrop world
is a dewdrop world,
and yet, and yet.

That's our koan. A dewdrop world that's always changing—and yet, and yet.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 173

Relaxation and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 42 min

In this talk from the Forest Refuge, Carol Wilson illuminates how the instruction to relax in meditation is far more profound than a superficial beginner's technique. She reveals that genuine relaxation with presence is actually the entryway to wisdom—the recognition of an awake mind and heart free from clinging and resistance.

Wilson examines how our habitual approach to meditation often involves subtle forms of greed (wanting to see clearly), aversion (resistance to what's arising), and delusion (trying to match background views of how practice should be). She points out how easily we confuse awareness with focusing, directing attention, or trying to see objects more clearly—all of which create unrecognized stress and strain. Drawing on the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejanīya, she emphasizes that we're not trying to make things turn out the way we want, but simply to know what is happening as it is in this moment.

The talk offers practical guidance for cultivating receptive awareness—meeting experience with the simple recognition "it's like this now," using Ajahn Sumedho's phrase. Wilson explains how replacing effort with genuine interest transforms practice from a chore into engaged curiosity about how the mind-body presents itself. She also discusses skillful means for when difficult experiences threaten to overwhelm awareness, suggesting we temporarily shift attention to something neutral to refresh the quality of mind. This relaxed, interested presence becomes the doorway to recognizing moments when greed, hatred, and delusion simply don't arise—not through personal will, but through seeing reality as it actually is.

I wanted to say a few things about the relaxing aspect of how we do this form of practice.

We've said it a few times, but I want to give a sense that this instruction about relaxing is much more than a superficial introductory thing to do, just so we're not striving in the beginning. It actually goes through many levels of how we're noticing how the mind and heart is working. In my experience, exploring what it truly means to relax with presence in the moment is really the entryway to wisdom—to cultivating and recognizing the quality of awake mind and heart that is free from clinging and free from resistance. So we're not just saying relax in a superficial way, go take naps. That's the beginning of it, but really it goes through many levels.

In the way we start with relaxing, what we've said is just, as you're sitting here, without really aiming the attention, just notice how the posture feels. Sensations in the hands. Hearings arising. There may or may not be meaning, but hearings arising. If there's meaning in thinking, that's just happening. Maybe you feel the way your knees feel, the butt on the cushion. Just whatever's naturally arising in this moment—physical, mental experience. The relaxing is this quality of simply being with just as it is, without resistance or clinging, without needing to explain what it means. Just this now. This is the relaxation of not being in contention with this moment's experience.

Of course, for many of us, as we know, we're meditating, we're sitting here meditating, so we are more aware of what's going on in the mind and body. It can be so easy or habitual for many of us to confuse awareness, presence, mindfulness, with really thinking we need to focus on the object, direct the attention, really see or feel the object clearly—that that's what meditation means. Just noticing when there's this extra effort, which is extra at this point, and it can so easily be overlooked. We're really focusing, trying to see more clearly, know what's happening, give it a name, see the beginning, see the end—all these things, these ideas we have in the back of the mind. And we might overlook the sense of stress, of strain, of exertion that can be arising moment to moment in the mind that's aware.

Rather than this focusing, this directing, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, when that's going on we don't recognize it in a subtle or not so subtle way. That focusing, that looking, that trying is very often driven by wanting—a form of greed. Wanting to see clearly. That little push is a form of greed. Or resistance. Too much thinking is happening. Too many thoughts. Really feel that sensation. Get in there. Resistance. Or trying to match a subtle view in the back of the mind: it should be clearer, I should be able to notice one object at a time. There's lots of thinking and it's all messed up, but there is actually awareness of thinking. But I should be able to pick out each thought. I should be able to stop them as soon as I'm aware. Noticing that view in the background—unnoticed, it is delusion, trying to make it be a certain way.

So the relaxing isn't about trying to even make that tension stop. Relaxing is: oh, it's like this now. Tension is like this. "Oh good, I saw it, now it should stop"—wanting is like this. The relaxing is just the sense of meeting, just letting reality reveal itself in this moment just as it is.

If our habit is to go into the object, just explore receiving. Awareness receiving hearing, thinking, greed, wanting, confusion, spaced out, whatever. This quality of relaxing is really a moment of being fully present without contention with reality. It's a moment of beginning to recognize that quality in heart-mind when there's awareness not

flavored with greed, hatred, or confusion. Not making a big deal of it, but that sense of relaxing—feel how it's different from the striving. We just keep exploring, letting it be. The striving, the wanting things to be different, is going to come up like ten million times, but it's simply another experience that awareness notices. Or not. And in the not noticing, at some point we start to feel some sense of dissonance, some struggle.

It's so easy in that sense of struggle to fall into our habit of thinking something's wrong, I've got to fix it. What am I doing wrong? It shouldn't be like this. Receptive awareness of the struggle: it feels like this. Using Ajahn Sumedho's way—I use it all the time.

Oh, it's like this now. Just opening into this moment.

As our sense of awareness and attention begins to trust this relaxing attitude, this receptive quality of awareness, you might find—you will find over time—that the meditation, and I don't mean just sitting, I mean everything through the day, can really start to be less of a chore. It becomes more interesting, because we're not trying to massage or direct our experience in some kind of way. We replace this trying to make something happen with the quality of interest. What's happening now? How's the mind working right now? Oh, look at that, it really wants things to be different. Oh, that's interesting.

And really, in going through the day, you start to find that this quality of coming back to awareness, remembering awareness, gets easier because the so-called meditation becomes less of a struggle. It's more a kind of interest, just seeing what's going on. How is the reality of the mind-body presenting itself? We're just interested and willing to show up, not trying to make it be different.

When we really start to trust this through the day, it's a huge relief. It's watching what's occurring rather than judging and assessing everything. For me, that quality of interest—I mean it's not always there, nothing's always there—but the quality of interest really comes from not being too identified with experience. So let's just really see what's going on. What qualities in the mind are bringing up suffering? What is the heart and mind like when things are at ease and calm and interested? Just noticing.

So we let interest do the work rather than our ideas, our wanting, our resistance. Some of you know, and some are learning, it can take a while to begin to trust this. So we're just exploring, playing with this now. This relaxation is a quality of really interested presence. As Byron Katie says, if you fight with reality, you will lose. Just interested in how it is right now.

As Tejaniya says, we're not trying to make things turn out the way we want them to happen, to be happy. We're trying to know what is happening as it is in this moment. That's all. When we want this or that to happen, when we think things should be this way or that way, that is expectation, which gets us caught up in aversion, greed, confusion. So we just notice: it's like this now. Even expectation is like this now.

When we really start to trust this, it's so much easier. And this is the doorway to wisdom, to freedom. When we recognize moment to moment the way reality really is, these delusions of self and needing to fix and greed and aversion don't arise in those moments because they don't make sense. It's not an act of personal will. And that is a huge relief when we start to trust it. You don't have to figure it all out. In fact, we can't. You don't have to make the right thing happen. There's not a right thing. And whatever we think it is, it just gets us all messed up anyway.

That's it right now. What's being received in awareness? What's the quality in the mind that's meeting it? Just now. That's all.

One skillful means we do employ from time to time is really about taking care, refreshing the awareness, not letting the awareness get overwhelmed with greed or resistance. This is for when something's occurring and there's awareness of it, but it's just so difficult, so painful—physical or emotional—or some really pleasant fantasy so strong that even as you're being with it, the resistance, the aversion, or the greed is so much stronger than the awareness. You're just in a fight.

More useful then to make the choice to consciously switch the attention to something more neutral, simple and neutral. That could be hearing, or a neutral sensation, or opening the eyes and just seeing. And it's not so much about the object, but about noticing that we can begin to again recognize the receptive, non-reactive quality of awareness. And then if the difficult experience again calls, fine. Awareness is a bit fresher meeting it again.

So we do employ skillful means, but it's not to get rid of the experience or make it be a certain way. It's always about the quality of refreshing the mind that's aware, bringing it back into presence.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 174

Wisdom and Awareness

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this Forest Refuge talk, Carol Wilson examines the profound relationship between awareness and wisdom as the foundation of Buddhist practice. She begins by emphasizing the Buddha's central motivation—freeing hearts and minds from suffering—and encourages practitioners not to settle for anything less than complete liberation, not even wholesome states of mind.

Wilson explains that the freedom the Buddha offers isn't about changing external circumstances or eliminating unpleasant experiences, but about recognizing ourselves and the world accurately. Drawing on teachings about sammā diṭṭhi (right view) as the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, she illustrates how suffering arises from inaccurate perception and inappropriate reactions. Using the simple analogy of a child learning to match shapes with holes, she shows how accurate recognition naturally dissolves frustration and confusion without requiring effort to "uproot" unwholesome states.

The talk addresses how greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) distort perception when unrecognized, yet can be met with simple, interested awareness rather than aversion. Wilson emphasizes that steady mindfulness—what Ajahn Sumedho calls "taking refuge in awareness"—allows reality to reveal itself naturally. She draws on teachings from Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and Mingyur Rinpoche to show that moments free from the kilesas are accessible throughout each day, and that the sense of self is merely a construction that arises and passes moment to moment. The practice becomes one of radical trust in awareness itself, which is inherently calm regardless of mental turbulence.

Tonight I want to talk about wisdom and awareness. That's pretty much it for the month. But really, I want to start by talking more about wisdom.

As you are aware, wise understanding or right view—however you want to translate it—is the first step of the Eightfold Path. You could think of wisdom, or freedom of heart and mind, as the beginning, the thread that goes through all of our life of spiritual development. And it keeps strengthening wisdom throughout.

To begin our practice, to begin each day, we really need to remind ourselves again and again of the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Again and again he said why he was even teaching was to free our hearts and minds from suffering, from confusion. That was the really deep—and maybe not only, but the main—motivation of everything that he taught.

When we come to our spiritual life, our spiritual practice, it is essential to begin from this, to really hold it in our heart and mind. As the Buddha said, do not settle for anything less than real freedom of heart and mind from suffering. Not even wholesome states of mind. How often have we said, "Okay, that's good enough. It's pretty good right now." We don't actually say "I'd settle for it," but there's a sense of "it's enough already." Not even settling for wholesome states of mind.

This is what can really bring us a depth of commitment, of faith, and the willingness to hang in there—not only on retreat, but in our whole life. The willingness to hang in there when everything gets tough, to really embrace this potential, this aspiration, in whatever language is true for you or touches your own sense of aspiration. This isn't to create craving. That's why I like chanting the Refuges and Precepts—it's really a way of honoring the depth and power of what we're doing and reminding ourselves why. It gives a whole strength to our practice, even when we're just schlumping along one foot in front of the other, thinking, "What am I doing here?" We don't think of this every moment, but it has an effect in the mind stream. It strengthens our faith.

I was listening to a talk by Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche. He's the older brother of Tsoknyi and Mingyur Rinpoche. He seems like a very sweet man. I don't know him, but he said liberation practice means that we practice the Dharma with deep motivation, not only for some ease and happiness in this life. When we start our practice with this understanding, with this potential of really freeing our heart and mind from suffering, it will bring faith and confidence and real strength to our practice.

I'm saying this here for people who are on a month-long retreat. I might not say that to a group that had a lot of beginners in it, because saying "not only practicing for some ease and happiness in this life"—I mean, mostly why do any of us begin practice? We'd like some ease and happiness in this life. That's not a bad thing. We're not throwing that out the window. But by the time we've done as much practice, as much commitment in our life as people here, I know I'm not saying anything new. I just want to highlight the power of reconnecting with the depth of wisdom that the Buddha is offering and reminding ourselves that's why we're doing this. This isn't an aspiration of "I'm no good, I'll never get there." It's like, "Yeah, right." It's not just to feel good. Doesn't that help in the fifty percent of the time that you don't feel good here? That's what we're here for.

Whatever type of technique of meditation we're doing—we're doing one particular one here—whatever aspect of bhavana, of mental cultivation we undertake coming from any aspect of the Buddhist teaching, it's all with this potential for real freedom from suffering. All the different techniques are coming out of that and offering us a way to wisdom, to understanding.

What is the wisdom, the freedom from suffering, that the Buddha's talking about? How am I going to talk about it? Let's put it that way. I am in no way saying that I am encompassing all the wisdom the Buddha talked about, please.

The freedom he's talking about—of our hearts and minds not being caught in suffering—is not that we get a different world or a different body, or that people start acting more appropriately in this world, doing what we want, or that injustice and bias and hatred and war and racism and everything stops. No. But it's really that we understand ourselves and the world differently. This is what I love about the freedom, the wisdom of heart and mind that the Buddha is talking about.

It's like right here—the way things already are doesn't have to change. The confusion and suffering arise simply because we don't recognize ourselves or experience the world accurately. And when we recognize inaccurately, we respond inappropriately, and we suffer.

The Dalai Lama has said that so much of our unhappiness originates within our own minds and hearts. It originates in how we react to events in our life—so-called internal, so-called external. The freedom that the Buddha is offering us is not freedom from the events or the experience. It's not freedom from the unpleasant.

We all know that on one level, right? But how many times do you find yourself—I certainly do—getting caught back up in that subtle or not so subtle assessment that this experience is *wrong* because it's unpleasant. We don't say that exactly. It is unpleasant, and so the assessment is it's wrong, or I'm wrong. And we carry this sense that our freedom is heading us toward a beautiful land of pleasant, pleasant, pleasant—just getting better and better, going up and up in a nice steady way. More and more pleasant until finally it's just a big blast of pleasantness, and we never have to experience ourselves or anything we don't like again.

Yes, we laugh, but look in there. What are you really thinking sometimes? It's a riot when you really look at it.

So the Buddha really shared what he recognized when he woke up. The world wasn't different, but with the eyes of wisdom, the heart-mind of wisdom, we see things the way they are. We simply recognize nature, Dhamma, the way it actually is. And our re-

actions and responses that are based in confusion just stop for a moment. We see that the seeds of suffering and the seeds of freedom are rising moment to moment, here and now, in this mind, in this heart. This is what we can really come to understand. This is what I think our practice is about—recognizing accurately.

Mingyur Rinpoche, the younger brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche—quite the family those guys, you know. Their father, Tulku Urgyen, was one of the greatest Dzogchen masters of the last century. Anyway, Mingyur says, "If we want to be happy, we must figure out what causes and conditions lead to well-being. Similarly, if we don't have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how can we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?"

You can see how this is leading into our steady awareness practice. Right view, right understanding—we can think of that on so many levels. One level of right understanding or right view is really quite literal: recognizing experience accurately. Just recognizing accurately in a moment—that's a moment of insight. That moment frees our heart and mind. Little moments, but they count. Notice them. It frees us from the suffering of inappropriate reactions.

This is really amazing. The wisdom, the freedom the Buddha's talking about isn't that we have to have some amazing experience somewhere. It's the natural order of things. When our perception, when our awareness is really present and not confused, we see how things are. Then the suffering aspects—basically greed, hatred, and confusion—they don't arise in that moment because they don't make sense.

A lot of the translations use words like *abandon* and *uproot*, and that can be useful in a way at times when we say, "Okay, not now." But I know for me, those words slide into a subtle sense of bad, aversion, get rid of. And the way my mind works—and I doubt I'm the only one whose mind works this way—as soon as I think, "These are the causes of suffering, I must uproot them," what's going on right away? Bad, get rid of, aversion. And that's exactly back in the same cycle.

That's why the steadiness of simple awareness without judging, without picking and choosing—the willingness to be with what's happening and see how it works—is so profoundly liberating. It really doesn't seem like much of anything. You're just being aware of clinging for the ten millionth time, right? What the heck? This doesn't seem like it has anything to do with freedom, because we want it now, and we want it the way we want it.

But this is really changing the whole show. The more we come to really trust, to take refuge—or as Ajahn Sumedho says when he's really caught up in something or having a hard time or his personality's being challenged—"I would just determine to take refuge in awareness." Sometimes we have to just say to ourselves, "Yes, I'm going to cultivate awareness, even though this is a complete mess. I'm totally caught in it. There's no way. It's hopeless. It's like this."

Sometimes we just determine. So this is really the power of awareness to reveal reality. Reality reveals itself. And that is the wisdom that leads to freedom of heart and mind.

A simple example I often use of the effect of accurate recognition—of how it just frees the heart and mind from suffering—involves a small child. I got this from watching my young nephew growing up. He's four now, but when he was two, he was learning those simple games where you have blocks of different shapes—square, triangle, circle—and you have a board where you put the right shape in the right hole.

For a little kid who doesn't know how to do that yet, they see the parents do it. You go plop, plop, plop, and it looks simple. And then he would take the block, but he'd have the triangle and try to jam it in the circle, and it didn't work. And he didn't know why it didn't work, because all he saw is if you put it in, it works. So he's trying, it's not working, and frustration and anger arise—whatever's going on.

Expand it as if it were an adult. It's either like, "There's something they're not telling me. There's a secret of how to do it, and they're not telling me." Or they are somehow setting me up, or I'm really stupid, or this is a stupid game anyway—you know, all the things, until the blocks go flying across the room.

And at some point with a little kid, as they keep doing it, maybe there's a mistake the first time and the circle goes in the circle. Ah! But he doesn't really see why. It was just by chance. But little by little, the attention gets a little older, there's a little bit more steadiness of attention. And at some point, the perception matches what's happening. He really sees the difference of the shapes and how they match the holes. And then it goes in. And every time it's simple.

And all that other stuff just goes away, doesn't it? It doesn't make any sense anymore. He doesn't have to say, "Now I need to uproot this frustration," because it's gone, right? "Oh, they were telling me the secret." It just doesn't make sense anymore.

So that's just natural. That's nature. That's what happens when we recognize, or the mind-heart recognizes, accurately. But we can't exactly think our way into this. Lord knows we've tried, but we can't really think our way into it, because we don't know what we don't know. You know what I mean?

The nephew doesn't know why it's not working. And then when it's working, you can go back and see why. But we don't know what steady awareness is going to reveal. And if we think we're looking for something, that gets in the way. The insight is just that sense of, "Oh, it's like this now." It's just so clear. There may be thinking about it, some understanding, something mental, but then you don't really need to hold onto it. It's an understanding that's there for that moment, for that particular experience.

So this is really like a very simple corollary to the wisdom that the Buddha's talking about. It's nothing personal. It's just that when the awareness is not steady, or when it's distorted by wanting or confusion or thinking about something else or looking for something—just not really present—when it's like that, we just don't recognize how things are. But when it's cleared up, it's just like the laws of nature. A triangle fits in the triangle hole. That's not really going to change. It's the laws of nature.

So we stop fighting when we see how things are. The classic things that are talked about, of course, are recognizing impermanence, recognizing not-self, recognizing the unsatisfactory nature.

I'm not going to go into those tonight. But I'm sure all of you have had moments when one or the other, or all of those ways that experience truly is, becomes really palpable. Am I right? In some sense we forget it later, but when it's there, it's like, "Oh, there's no point in arguing about the fact that everything's changing, because it's just how it is." All the arguing does is create the suffering. All the resisting does is create the suffering. And that's so obvious. It's just nature. It's just how it is. It's like fighting gravity. Or fighting the body that's aging—which we do, which really helps a lot. I'll just tell you, it really, really helps. It just adds.

Everybody's body is aging. I'm just noticing it more lately, I don't know why. And I can really—it's fun to play with, actually. It is. Because I can see certain moments when it's, "This is not okay. It can't be like this. It wasn't like this two years ago, and it is not okay that it is like this now." And then at some point it's like, "Get a grip. This is how it is." And when the mind, the attention, arrives at, "Oh, this is how it is right now"—there's not a past, there's not a future, there's no fighting—it's just like this now. It's fine. It's just fine. Because the problem isn't in what's happening; it's in the mind making up

a whole story and wanting and confusion and holding around it. It's like this now. There's nothing to fight about that. Remember I said the other morning, Byron Katie's line: when you fight with reality, you lose.

So this is really the wisdom that the Buddha's talking about—just the laws of nature. It's how it is. It's kind of sad and shocking, in a way, that so much of our energy, so much of the stories we tell ourselves, the ways that we perhaps unconsciously describe or think of ourselves in the world, are not in sync with how things are. And I'm not about to go and ask, "Why did it start like that?" The Buddha lists four things—and I'm only going to mention one of them—four things that will make you crazy, basically, to think about. And one of them is the beginning of things. So we won't go there. But we can look at how it is now.

So how do we recognize accurately? What does block or obstruct the arising of wisdom? As I say, this arising of wisdom, accurate recognition, is a lawful process. It's not like what I thought when I first started practicing. I thought I did whatever they told me, and I tried, tried, tried, and push, push, push. But in the back of my mind was the feeling that at some point, some kind of magical occurrence would happen. Something would descend from the clouds, or something would blast apart in my mind. And somehow—I didn't know how—boom, wisdom and freedom would come. But it's extremely lawful. Everything has cause and effect; nothing arrives just magically from the sky. And mindful awareness, the steadiness, the perseverance of mindful non-judging awareness, is absolutely the key. It's such an amazing tool for its simplicity, for its availability.

I'm sure you've heard the Buddha talking about Nibbana, saying this Nibbana is visible here and now. To what extent? For Nibbana you can substitute freedom from suffering. To what extent is it visible here and now? To the extent that greed, that hatred, that confusion are not present in the citta, in the mind stream, in the heart stream, in a particular moment.

Because these distort. This is what obstructs, what prevents accurate recognition.

Now, right here this starts to get a little bit tricky in the ways a lot of our minds work. Because I'm saying that these three qualities—and we talk about them all the time—are the qualities that when they're present and not recognized, perception is distorted, understanding is distorted. They lead to suffering and confusion.

Can we hear that without the mind jumping into the habit of "this is good and this is bad," "I like this, I don't like that"? Right away, we're into "these are bad, they must be uprooted, they shouldn't be happening." Does that come up at all? I mean, that's just how the mind has been trained to think, really.

And so this is where the steady awareness is a complete game changer in the ways that we meet moment-to-moment experience. Yes, when these qualities are present in a moment of mind, a moment of citta, and not recognized, they do lead us astray. We recognize inaccurately, we draw the wrong conclusions from experience, and then we act on them, even very simply.

Say there's a really loud sound, and the aversion—unrecognized—that that sound shouldn't be happening. "I'm suffering because of that sound." We may or may not then act on it, do something about it. We may even stop the sound. And then we think, "Now I'm not suffering anymore. I fixed the sound"—which is adding delusion on top of the aversion, because that just keeps feeding the ideas we have: if I can control experience, then I'll be happy. That's what happiness is, right? That's the definition, really, of samsara. The Tibetans say samsara is the urge to correct. Fix it, fix it, fix it.

And so whether it's that or whether it's a really nice experience—a beautiful sight, a lovely smell, the sight of lunch, or whatever—and we don't quite recognize that sense of greed coming in, the going after, the sense of maybe excitement or uplifting or getting something and tasting something good. There's nothing wrong with any of that. But not recognizing the greed when it's there really focuses us on the object and makes that particular object or experience the source of our ease, the source of our happiness. And again, we just keep on in samsara, in suffering, not seeing clearly.

With all of these three, but particularly with greed and aversion—two sides of the same coin. You know, tanha, when the Buddha talked about the cause of suffering, the second noble truth, the cause of our confusion. He chose tanha as the cause, which could translate as craving, as thirst really. Thirst. We use "desire" in English to cover a lot of different states. So tanha is thirst, and that can be the craving for or the craving to push away. Either way. So we get aversion and clinging both in there.

And the thing about it—we're so seduced. Our hearts and minds are so seduced by the habits of craving and the habits of aversion. This is really, in a way, what we've been taught through the culture, through growing up: that the unpleasant is what makes us suffer, the pleasant is what makes us happy.

The craving, even in the definition in the second noble truth—the Buddha says something like, "tanha, accompanied by delight, now here and now there, looking for happiness now here and now there." But that phrase "the craving accompanied by delight"—I think that's a really interesting way of phrasing it, because we do so often mistake the craving for a kind of happiness.

Which, as you know, those of you who've been watching craving arising ten million times and just can't bear it another moment, you go, "How could I ever mistake this for happiness?" And that's part of the mystery. But basically, it's so habitual—okay, I'm speaking for myself—it's so habitual to arise. It's become such a deep habit that as soon as craving comes up, we go with it. It feels right. It's so comfortable. We don't tend to question it in normal life.

If we're not even looking at our experience—just going with it—we don't even think craving is a problem. We don't even notice craving, frankly. We just go after the thing. Or with that unpleasant sound, we may notice aversion, but still it's all about the sound. And of course I don't like to be with the unpleasant—what masochistic person does? Only a masochist would want to be with the unpleasant, so that's really sick. Of course that's normal.

We're so seduced by these patterns. It just feels like the right thing to do. To even shift the attention from just going with it to instead saying, "Oh, let's just look at this. Let's just keep steady awareness being with this whole process rather than getting sucked into following the craving, following the aversion"—before we start really exploring steady awareness, that might never have occurred to us, because it's just so obvious that's how things are.

That's what our invitation is when we're talking about simple, relaxed awareness of whatever's occurring. That "whatever's occurring" includes, a lot of the time, these qualities that arise moment to moment in heart-mind that obstruct clear seeing. They're also simply mental states that awareness can notice. They're not outside of awareness. When we abandon awareness, we get lost in them, just out of habit, just out of familiarity.

But when we take our refuge in awareness—or as Ajahn Sumedho said—we go, "Oh, yeah, right, I'm really caught up right now. It feels like this." That's all. You don't have to analyze. You don't have to figure it out. You just kind of take a breath and go, "Right, it feels like this now."

Sometimes I was looking for craving and I don't see any craving. It's just—everything's fine. It feels like this. And I just surrender into the moment. And suddenly—this has happened so much—I would have sworn there was no craving. The mind was clear. I was just mindful of what was happening. But everything's all caught up. I can tell something's going on. So, okay, it's like this now. I'm just looking, looking, and all of a sudden, it's like a huge mountain of craving comes shooting up into my mind. I'm like, "Oh my gosh!" It's so much, occurring so frequently, it's so familiar, I didn't even notice. And I was even looking for it, and I didn't even notice.

Have you ever had that experience? It's like, wow.

But then the trick is this: you simply allow awareness to notice the next moment. We don't take that personally. We don't go off into a whole story about how bad we are because we didn't recognize the craving, and it's hopeless, and I'm hopeless. That's just the same thing—aversion.

So this is the invitation with the steadiness of simple mindfulness. You don't have to think about what to look for, but it's bringing interest in. As Mingyur Rinpoche said, if we want to understand suffering, we have to get interested and see: How does suffering arise? How does it dissipate? In just a moment. You don't have to look at your whole life. Just a moment. It's all happening right here in this heart, in this mind, in this moment. That's all we have, this moment. That's all there is.

So instead of going with the habit of thinking greed is bad, aversion is bad—

I'm bad. It's hopeless. It shouldn't be here. Instead, it's more like, "Oh, here it is." How do you know it should be here? Because it's here.

This moment has arisen through all the different causes and conditions that have come together, stretching back to the Big Bang, really. There's no way we can ever isolate which causes and conditions brought us to this point. They've all come together to create this particular moment, which in this moment couldn't possibly be any different. Because it's here, it's what it is.

So when there's greed here, okay, awareness gets interested. How does it feel? Explore it as it comes and it goes, watching it come together, watching how it behaves. What is its nature? Or as Tejaniya likes to say, how does greed do its job? What is its job? It has a lawful job: go get that thing, it'll make you happy. And if that one doesn't do it, the next one will. Keep on wanting. Keep leaning forward. Keep going for it. That's greed's job, and it does it very well.

So we always want to bring awareness to see how it works. How does it arise? What conditions? Not thinking about it so much—I mean, I have to say it to talk about it, but you're not thinking about it. You're just watching. Seeing what conditions bring it up. Seeing how it behaves when it's here. What kind of thoughts come up? How does the body feel? How do we behave under the influence of strong greed?

The more we see it—and that's actually the positive side of seeing greed arise ten million times. When there's willingness, the moment of awareness that's just interested in greed isn't distorted by greed at that moment. This is tricky, but you can get the feeling. Sometimes you know there's greed, but you really feel caught in it, or aversion. Other times you feel it, you still feel it, but there's this little bit of interest. "Look how it works." I'm walking to get the food and I'm not even hungry, but then I smell a particular smell and I notice this upwelling of, "Oh my God, this is going to be so good." And the next thing I know I'm sitting at the table shoveling it down. Whoa, I missed a little bit there. That's how greed just kind of took over.

We see that a lot in different ways, and we start to see, without having to think about it, the lawful way it acts. And without hating it, without trying to just shut down—the awareness watching it—this is the condition that allows natural wisdom to surface. The steady awareness that's just recognizing the causes and conditions, how experience acts, how greed does its job. Keep on watching.

The fact that the presence of unrecognized greed ends up causing us suffering—it doesn't have to be something you believe. It's not a philosophy you should take on. We can take it as a piece of interesting information and then follow the Buddha's invitation: *Ehi Passiko*, come and see for yourself.

So the willingness to just keep with steady awareness as the greed, as the aversion are coming up and doing their job—stay with the awareness rather than saying, "Well, awareness isn't strong enough, forget it. I'll pay attention again when it's doing better." Do you notice how that happens? And that happens in our life too. "Well, I can tell I'm going to eat this whole quart of ice cream, so I'm just going to tune out right now. I'll wake up when it's over and say, 'Why did I do that?' But during it, I'm not going to pay attention."

But we bring attention along during these things. And at some point, now or down the road, it's just a law of nature that it starts to become obvious that the greed isn't really the way to happiness. We don't have to believe it. It's just actually how things are.

That, to me, is what's so wonderful about the wisdom the Buddha talks about. It's not that we have to memorize all the philosophy and then try to bring our experience into alignment with it, and when it doesn't match, we get really dissatisfied. I don't know if that ever happens to any of you. But rather, you take it in and go, okay, maybe I can get interested. When greed is arising, it's like this. When it's gone, keep paying attention. When the aversion is gone, we keep just being steady with the awareness. And notice what the heart and mind feels like when it has this quality of purity—purity meaning it isn't distorted by the kilesas.

Maybe nothing special is going on, but notice that there are many, many moments throughout every day when the heart-mind is not in the thrall of greed, hatred, or confusion. It's just simply present and peaceful. It's often neutral, and we often don't notice neutral, but just begin to tune into that. Because we notice how the kilesas cause confusion and suffering, but it's equally important to keep the steady awareness going. And we notice, oh, there's a kind of peace that's not dependent on having things the way I want.

I'm sure everyone here, we all know this. We've all had moments. You couldn't get through even a week retreat or two days of retreat—you certainly couldn't get through a month. None of us could get through all the amount of practice we've been doing without many moments of that.

You know Ajahn Buddhadasa's talk we often quote from, where he talks about Nibbāna for everyone. It's a whole long talk, but he was a funny, funny guy. In that talk, he's discussing the kilesas. I don't like to use the word "defilement" just because it feeds into my connotation of negativity and aversion right away. It isn't helpful for me. So I use kilesa, that's why, or "torments."

But he says, really seeing that they arise due to causes and conditions—you can see, when greed is arising and we don't see it and we're going with it, it's like that is being practiced. That's being fed. When we sit in the sitting this morning, like I was talking about, with a lot of pain and we're not moving, but what's really being fed and strengthened is moment after moment of aversion. That's really what's being practiced. That's lawful. So when you get up, there's a lot more aversion, because one moment of aversion in the mind stream makes the next moment a little easier, then the next moment, then the next moment.

Luckily, the same is true for the wholesome. So that's what Buddhadasa was saying. The kilesas arise due to causes and conditions. And when the conditions dissipate, the kilesa vanishes. Everything arises due to conditions and everything vanishes when the conditions change—and they always change.

So he said—what I was trying to get to—he says, you know, if there are many moments a day that the heart and mind is pure, free from kilesa, he calls it the coolness. He's using a pun because the word Nibbāna in Thai, they use the word "nibon" to mean cool, like to cool the rice. So he's playing on that—the coolness of no torment in the heart and mind. We can feel that. He said, without that, if we didn't have many moments a day of that, we would die. Or we'd go crazy, and then we'd die. It's just unbearable. But we tend not to notice because the kilesas make a lot more noise. The reactions in the mind are more familiar, and we just get entranced by our reactions. We just believe it. "Well, I'm really not going to get through this."

So this quality of steady awareness, not picking and choosing what should be happening, not judging or evaluating what should be happening or how good the awareness is, but the willingness to, whenever we can remember, just come back into this steady being present—this is the key that allows wisdom to arise.

We're also using wisdom, or right attitude, kind of on an intellectual level when we keep reminding ourselves that the quality of wise attitude in the awareness isn't about wanting to make something happen, but just simply recognizing—as both Sayadaw U Tejaniya and Buddhadasa use this same way—recognizing that everything that arises is simply nature arising due to causes and conditions. They've come about, that's how it is. And they'll change when the conditions change. It isn't personal. Nothing's personal. And so when we keep reminding ourselves, if there's a lot of wanting coming up—

Not to think there's something wrong with me, but rather that interest can come in when we realize, yes, wanting is arising due to conditions. Let's just get interested and see how that's manifesting. It isn't about me having a lot of greed. It's not about ownership at all. It really changes the dynamic, again, to just seeing things as they are.

One insight that's often described as a high level of insight is called recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment. That's like a really high level of freedom, just *yathā bhūta ñāna dassana*. I like the *yathā bhūta*—recognizing things as they have come to be. It doesn't sound very glitzy. It doesn't sound like some amazing insight, but this is really moment to moment, this willingness to just recognize that whatever's happening is happening due to all the previous causes and conditions. It's not mine or me. It doesn't mean I'm good or bad. It doesn't mean anything about me. It's just nature.

As Buddhadasa says, the Pali texts use the phrase "throwing back." When the mind is free, he says, we throw everything back to nature. He says we've been thieves all of our life by appropriating the things of nature as I and mine. But we've been ignorant and

suffered for it. When we become wise, we can realize, oh, this isn't mine. It's just an aspect of nature. So we throw everything back to nature. And we never have to steal anything again. It's all just natural things happening.

This is perhaps one of the most deeply rooted aspects of clinging and aversion—this habit, this view of clinging to, holding to any particular experience as I or mine. We all know this, but it's really just another habit of clinging. We can also recognize that with awareness. We don't have to uproot it, get rid of it, extirpate it. Just notice how it comes together. Notice how it goes apart.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "The Buddha talked to us about being free from attachment to the five aggregates, but we can't give them up because we don't really know them for what they are. We believe happiness to be ourselves. We see ourselves to be happy. We believe suffering to be ourselves, and we see ourselves as unhappy. We can't pull the mind out of this view, which means we are not seeing nature. There isn't any self involved, but we are always thinking in terms of self."

So it seems that happiness happens to us, suffering happens to us, elation happens to us, depression happens to us. The chain of self is constructed just through thought and attachment to any particular experience. And with this solid feeling that there is a self, everything seems to be happening to us. But when we are free of this constructed belief that there is a self, then the condition of selflessness is naturally revealed.

The main thing here is to really keep remembering that everything in the mind is moment to moment. So when we talk about being free of this construction that there is a self, it's not helpful to posit that as some kind of future great insight that's going to come and we're done with the sense of self and we never suffer anymore. It's all moment to moment.

As Andy Olendzki says, the mind, *citta*, in Buddhism is not a subject that has objects as content. It's not a thing. It's the process of knowing. And it's informed by whatever particular mental qualities are arising in that moment. And it's changing. So there's no there. We just know the mind by its activity. And it's arising in each moment due to conditions, including the previous moment. So each moment is new and fresh.

To me, this aspect of impermanence—and this is really the moment-to-moment quality of impermanence—this is what is so uplifting, so inspiring. It's what makes freedom possible. It's what makes it accessible to my mind to be willing to really explore greed and aversion, to really be willing to hang in there when it gets tough.

Because it's not that I have to be aware, aware, aware for ten years of suffering, suffering, suffering, and at the end of it, finally it all blasts through. That would be impossible. But there are moments—again, as I mentioned before—just simple moments when there's not greed, hatred, or aversion. There may be nothing special about them. Notice those moments.

The sense of self is constructed. You can see it happening. It's constructed moment after moment. And then that construction falls apart moment after moment. So there are equally many moments when, as Ajahn Chah says, there is no construction of sense of self, and there isn't the suffering around it. Again, there's nobody there to appreciate it, so we tend not to notice it so much. It's just, "Oh, isn't that nice?" And then the self is back. We don't notice it.

We can watch with steady awareness because this is just how it is. I mean, I'm saying that—don't believe me, don't believe the Buddha—but get interested to explore. We can really see.

All day long, the six sense experiences are just cycling, cycling, cycling. Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, thinking, thinking, thinking, emotion, emotion, emotion, seeing, wanting, whatever's going on. Endlessly. How many mind moments have there been in the day? I don't know. It feels like millions. Who knows how many? Not every single one of them has been a moment of sense of self.

Notice—and this is where it gets interesting—how they're all happening, different things coming and going. And out of the field, it may happen quite frequently, but it's not everything: a particular experience, a sight or a sound, an emotion, a smell, a feeling in the body, suddenly there's some clinging, some sense of "that's me" or "that's mine," a little contraction. It just feels like a little contraction around it. It comes up, and that particular experience out of the whole field is like it's been pulled out, privileged in some way. This one is me or mine or says something about me. It's unbearable, or it's really great, or we have to do something about it, or we have to keep it going. The thoughts that come around it and the story of me keep coming.

If we don't notice that this is just construction—different building blocks being piled on top of each other—there's the unpleasant sound, there's the attachment to the aversion to the unpleasant, there's the thought about what I can do, there's the sense of self-judgment, there's the memory of all the unpleasant sounds, there's the thought telling yourself, "Well, if you were deaf, you would love to hear this sound, so what's the matter with you?" And then you think about... and this can go on and on and on. Out of nothing, nothing. And then we come up and go, "Ah, the sense of self is horrible. I'll never get rid of the sense of self."

Just keep watching. Just keep watching. As strong as it is, at some point that dissipates. You hear the bell for lunch and that's all gone. That's all gone. We're just walking, happy as a clam. I don't know what that means—are clams happy? Why do we say happy as a clam? And you're just walking to lunch. No sense of self. And then you see the food. Oh wow, this is a new one.

Just keep watching. What I love is that if we're willing to just keep taking a step back into awareness—that Tai Chi move—the way things are reveals itself.

Reality reveals itself. We don't need to be—in fact it doesn't help—to put our concepts on top of it.

So this sense of self, when it's there and unrecognized, is really one of the stronger habits. Talk about familiar! Talk about really feeling like the old bathrobe we never want to take off, even though it's totally disgusting. That's like the sense of self—no, don't take it away from me! Just sitting here with peace? No, I want something.

Have you ever seen your mind make up a whole, really suffering scenario that isn't true, simply because things were calm? It's quite amazing to see that. "What's going on? Well, I'm at least here suffering. That's better than peace." And that's really the habit. It's so strong.

So we don't have to figure that out. Steady observing—I don't like the word observing—just being present with what is. It's really a surrendering into this moment. It's not that we get a piece of knowledge, a piece of wisdom, but the natural processes reveal themselves through steady awareness.

It's not an act of personal will. I feel this is a huge relief. We don't have to figure it out. We don't have to create wisdom. In fact, we can't, because we're trying to do it out of some idea. But the natural laws, just as how greed does its job—steady awareness that isn't too distorted, steady, steady, steady—reality reveals itself. And that's wisdom. Wisdom does its job. "Oh, it's like this now." And then if there's a response needed, wisdom makes the appropriate response.

There can be many different responses. That loud noise that's bothering you—wisdom sees, "Oh yeah, that's unpleasant. Oh yeah, this is aversion. Aversion feels like this, just like this." And that's what's happening. No need to create anything around it. And there's peace for that moment. It's all just moment to moment, but this is really the power—the power of simple awareness.

So rather than accumulating knowledge, it's more like, I find, a deepening of radical trust, radical faith that the truth is accessible, only ever accessible in the totality of this moment's experience. There is nothing else. Dogen Zenji said, "If you can't see the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?"

So it's like this radical trust that when I remember awareness, there's more and more trust to just drop into: it's like this now. We never know what will happen next. There's no "so that," there's no fallback plan. But there's the trust that with clear seeing, with steady awareness, wisdom naturally arises. And wisdom recognizes that the responses that bring suffering to our heart and mind don't make any sense.

You've all had that experience. You're caught in something and suddenly it shifts and you see it clearly, and the wanting goes away, or the aversion, or the self-judgment goes away. It feels like a miracle because it wasn't through self-will. Have you noticed that? When an insight comes, it's not like you did it through an act of will. Wisdom is doing the work.

Are there times when there's a steadiness of awareness? Some people have mentioned that. And you can't make it happen through wanting. That's right. But you see, it's the effect of natural causes. We learn to trust that more and then just keep falling back into the awareness.

I just want to end with another line from Mingyur. As we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness,

We begin to comprehend that awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind. This allows us to discover a sense of peace and stability that is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feelings.

I love that. Just take a moment with this: awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind. Learning to trust that.

So we have a month here—not to have some big experience, but there are so many moments just to remind ourselves, learning how to recognize and trust awareness. So simple. And the truth and freedom reveals itself in its own time.

Thank you all for your kind attention. I appreciate it.

CHAPTER 175

Three Levels of Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 41 min

In this talk, Carol Wilson offers a clear and accessible exploration of the Buddha's teaching on the three levels of wisdom (paññā). She begins by establishing the foundation of relaxed, light-touch awareness—receiving experience without hierarchy or struggle, allowing mindfulness to naturally become more continuous through its own lawful momentum.

Wilson explains how wise view (sammā diṭṭhi) becomes increasingly familiar through practice, enabling us to recognize when mistaken understanding creates dissonance or struggle. Rather than diving into content or story, awareness learns to notice the quality and attitude of the mind itself. She then unpacks the three progressive levels of wisdom: suta-mayā paññā (heard wisdom), which can serve as a helpful reminder that experience is 'all nature, not personal'; cintā-mayā paññā (intellectual understanding), where steady awareness 'gathers data' and starts recognizing patterns of conditions arising and passing; and bhāvanā-mayā paññā (insight wisdom), the spontaneous, transformative 'aha moment' when understanding arises directly through experience.

Practically, Wilson emphasizes that these levels work together—even after profound insight, we may find ourselves reactive again, and can skillfully return to heard wisdom as a starting point. She reminds us that awareness itself is unstained by any experience, equally available in moments of difficulty or ease, inviting practitioners to rest simply in this moment without comparison or anticipation.

No need to try to understand or recognize more clearly, to make things different somehow, to do it correctly. Just getting more and more comfortable and at ease with this sense of light touch awareness, just receiving whatever's occurring. Gross, subtle, precise, vague, broad, seemingly many things occurring at one time—totally fine. Or naturally more precise. There's not a hierarchy.

And you'll see, as awareness naturally gets a bit more continuous, because each moment of remembering mindfulness in that moment of citta makes it more likely it arises in the next moment. It's lawful. So as we go along naturally, as Tejaniya says, as we keep practicing, right view gets more familiar and we clearly recognize when there's wrong view distorting or flavoring the awareness. We recognize—not that we're thinking about whether this is right or wrong, but with so-called wrong view, mistaken understanding (put it that way, rather than right or wrong), there'll be some sense of struggle, dissonance. It just feels like something isn't right.

And our tendency without awareness is to go into the object or into the story. We think that's what's not right. But now we start to recognize—our awareness actually recognizes, as impersonal—oh yeah, the attitude in the mind is actually out of sync with reality. Oh yeah, it's like that. Just noticing that, that's already wise view again.

As Tejaniya says, the object of awareness becomes more and more the mind, the quality of the mind, not the story. We're aware of the story, of course, but the interest is in the process, what's occurring in the mind. So as we go on, we begin to cultivate naturally a keen interest in the state of our mind, in the process. And just through the steadiness of willingness to remember awareness—we can't control how steady it is, but through the perseverance, the willingness to, with a light touch, recognize, oh yeah, here it is again—the recognition of process, of causes and effects rolling on without me being in charge, just naturally begins to be more obvious.

Natural wisdom, paññā, arises not from our personal doing. So this is the wise view that arises on the deepest level, just recognizing accurately: it's like this now. Of course that level of paññā, wisdom, also arises when the conditions are present, not because we wish it were so, which can be a relief. We can quit trying so hard and just be here for this moment.

The Buddha spoke of three levels of wisdom, and we can access the first two as skillful means.

The first level is simply heard wisdom. For instance, when we hear, "Oh, wise view—it's all nature, it isn't personal." That's something we've heard. And maybe it makes sense. It doesn't transform us in the moment, but at times it can be a wise use of thought. When there's a recognition—awareness recognizes, whoa, really caught up in something now, a difficult emotion, a lot of aversion or craving, reacting to it, or just taking the whole thing really personally—awareness recognizes that. You can just drop in this heard wisdom, sutta maya paññā. All right, it's all just nature. Causes and conditions creating, coming together as it is right now. It's just a thought one can drop in, and then continue with awareness. Sometimes that can just help as a reminder. But if it leads to thinking, analyzing, not so helpful at that time—drop it.

And then the second level, cintā maya paññā, is a kind of intellectual understanding. Tejaniya likes to talk about it as the steady awareness gathering data. Not with a tally sheet, not taking notes, but just the steady awareness starts to recognize: maybe it is all nature. It starts to see some instances of conditions coming together and, oh, that's how the sadness comes up. Oh, that's how the conditions fall apart and sadness ends. Just gathering data, it starts to make more sense. It brings a little more confidence. Again, it's natural. It's not thinking about stuff. It's steady awareness gathering data.

This kind of understanding is not transformative in itself, but it really supports the confidence to keep showing up.

And the third level, of course—*bhāvanā-mayā-paññā*, insight-level wisdom—is what spontaneously occurs when suddenly the conditions come together and awareness is recognized. It really is all a natural process. I'm not doing anything here. That "aha" moment—that's the mental factor of *paññā*, real wisdom arising in that moment. Also arising when the conditions are appropriate, not through an act of personal effort. And in that moment, it is transformative. For that moment there's a real seeing and understanding. And that moment changes. Awareness notices, and the next moment arises.

Perhaps later—the next day, or two minutes later—the mind feels all reactive and caught up in something again. Our old habitual tendency might be to immediately chastise ourselves: "Ah, you understood it, now you've lost it." But now, rather, we can pop back up to that first level of wisdom, heard wisdom. "Oh my god, I lost it—oh yeah, it's all causes and conditions. It's a natural process." Let awareness just explore through being present how it's happening. And we're back in the second level, steady awareness gathering data.

So the moments of difficulty, the moments of seemingly lost insight, are equally valid moments for the arising of wisdom as a subtle, really interesting experience of impermanence, for example. Awareness doesn't care what the object is. It's not stained or damaged by difficult experience. It's not made better by a lovely experience. As soon as there's the remembering of awareness, it's available—whatever is occurring in this moment.

So just resting with awareness, attention into this moment's experience, not looking into the next moment, not needing to compare to the past moment. Just this.

CHAPTER 176

To Study the Self

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson takes up the investigation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view) as the deepest of the three distortions of perception. Drawing on Dōgen Zenji's famous teaching—"To study the Buddhist way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self"—she guides practitioners through the moment-to-moment arising and passing of the sense of self.

Wilson weaves together teachings from multiple traditions, including Ajahn Sumedho, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Ramana Maharshi, and Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, to illuminate how the ego is simply a conditioned phenomenon—"like a ghost caused by the play of shadows." She explores how steady awareness naturally reveals the constructed nature of self, showing that the sense of "me" arises hundreds of times daily around the simplest sense contacts, yet dissolves the moment it is clearly recognized.

The talk offers practical guidance on distinguishing genuine insight into emptiness from spiritual bypassing, emphasizing what George Orwell called "the power of facing unpleasant facts." Wilson explores the delicate balance between recognizing the non-personal, conditional nature of emotions while fully feeling them—like "wind roaring in empty space." She concludes with the teaching that true liberation doesn't mean losing our humanity, but rather caring more deeply while not being caught, captured beautifully in Issa's haiku on impermanence: "This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet."

When Andrea spoke last time, she talked about delusion in a very helpful way, and the three distortions of perception—the third one being the distortion of perceiving a sense of intrinsic self-existence where there is none. So I thought I'd go off and talk a little bit more about that.

Really, I've been thinking about this. When I was on retreat a couple months ago, a very well-known line from Dogen Zenji kept running through my head. One simple translation goes:

To study the Buddhist way is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened by the 10,000 things.

It's nice, isn't it? What the hell does that mean? But it's nice. That's the framework of what I'm talking about. Whether that translates to you, I have no clue.

I want to begin with something I love talking about: just exploring what we see through steady awareness—not going looking for it, but recognizing again and again how this distortion of perception arises and gets us all confused, this particular one about sense of self. And of course, it's resting on what Andrea spoke about. When there's any delusion, there's going to be greed or hatred or delusion. With greed or hatred, there's always delusion. There can be delusion without those two. But when any of these are present in the mind stream, in the consciousness, in the awareness, and not recognized, it's impossible for the perception, for the awareness to recognize accurately what's occurring, what's happening. The Buddha says that over and over.

This really is, in some ways, the most poignant aspect of tanha. The Buddha talked about tanha, or thirst—whether it's wanting or pushing away, fed by delusion—as the second noble truth, the cause of our suffering. There's the obvious suffering of just the wanting and not getting, but really the deeper point is that it's obstructing the clear recognition. As I spoke about the other night, that clear recognition is simply what allows wisdom to arise and the mind and heart to just put down the burden of wanting and aversion and getting so lost in this me, me, me. It's really poignant. But without recognizing that that's what's occurring, as Andrea said, the perception is distorted. There's a quotation from Anaïs Nin, the French writer, that we see the world not as it is, but as we are. It's really like that. We just don't recognize what's going on.

In terms of how that works with the sense of self, the personality view—to me, this personality view, sakkaya-ditthi, is of the three vipalasas the one that's the most deeply entrenched, the one that really is kind of beneath all the other sufferings. And it's just so frequent, so familiar. It feels like home, doesn't it? We don't always like our home, but it feels like home. So we keep going back there, keep recreating and believing it moment after moment.

But it's not that there's something real, this sense of self. You all know this, but I have to say it anyway. It's not that the sense of self, the ego, is some real existing thing that when you finally hit accurate recognition and uproot every strand of clinging in your mind, then you'll finally get rid of this nasty sense of self. It's just another conditioned phenomenon, arising experience like anything else. As many people say, it's a concoction that arises due to conditions, due to perception, due to contact, due to feeling, due to the thoughts that come from it. There's distorted perception, then distorted thinking, and then view—sakkaya-ditthi, the personality view.

The Buddha gave it such importance that of the three fetters that are seen through in the early Buddhist way of talking about the four stages of awakening, one of them is sakkaya-ditthi—seen through, understood not to have self-existing intrinsic existence. It doesn't mean the sense of self stops arising. It just means sooner or later the awareness understands it again, then it arises again, then it understands it again.

I want to bring in some other voices, not just mine. Ramana Maharshi says, "The ego is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. If you look closely, the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So also with ego, with sense of separate self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one searches for it, it's found not to exist."

That's how it is. How do we investigate the nature of mind and the root of samsaric delusion? The very root of delusion is the thought of "I," the habit of clinging to the notion of self. And this notion is simply due to a failure to investigate. There's no such thing as a truly existing autonomous self. We fabricate this concept in the same way we make up all of our other thoughts. Then after constructing this self over and over again, we get so used to our invention that it seems to really exist as a distinct entity. And once this thought has deeply taken root, we demand that the self should be happy and comfortable, enjoying wealth and pleasures.

If it could be the center of the universe, that would be the best. This attitude is the very basis for our wandering around and around in samsara.

But it's not just because we're stupid and stubborn. The habits, the way that the kilesas do their job, the frequency of how fast the mind works—all of this feeds into this arising over and over again. This is really the biggest suffering: this concocting of the sense of me, the sense of I. But that's really what's happening. It's just arising in any particular moment due to particular conditions. It arises, it exists, it passes away.

If you remember reading—probably years ago—*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, it's one of those early books that we all read. It has so many wonderful one-liners in it. The one that hit me, I think I was on retreat when I was a nun in Thailand, and just happened to have one book. This is the book I happened to have. I don't know how I had it; it was a long time ago. Different lines from that book are burned into my memory in a really uplifting way.

This one line, Suzuki Roshi says: "Every existence is a flashing into the vast phenomenal world."

I love that. It's like each moment of existing is just a flashing into the world. It flashes and dissipates, flashes and dissipates. That was just so real for me at that moment. And when you have an insight like that, it just stays real. That's what the sense of self is, just like any other moment of existence—it's just a flashing. Conditions come together, it flashes into the universe, and it dissipates when the conditions change.

And it seems so real and solid only because it's not investigated. In the terms of how we're practicing here, with really steady awareness, there's no way not to recognize this is happening—not every moment, but frequently. That's the power of the subcontinuity of awareness. We see the conditions coming together, doing their little job, and falling apart.

Ajahn Sumedho says we create the world through our perceptions, our views, through the mental formations that come, and then it falls apart when we recognize with awareness:

"So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho."

Can you relate to that? Although it wouldn't be your world that arose around you, right? It takes off into orbit.

"My views, my feelings, my opinions—I can get caught in that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness."

You recognize right there the shift of attitude: from "this is me" to simply a view arising in consciousness, simply another thought arising in awareness.

"If I know that, if I recognize that, then the refuge is no longer in being a person. I'm not taking refuge in my personality or my views and opinions. Then it lets go, and the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends in that moment."

I think that's another important habit to notice: we tend to take refuge in our views and opinions—as Andrea talked about—not even recognizing they're views. Even more, we take refuge in being a personality. We may really dislike our personality, wish we had a different one, but that's still taking refuge in the personality.

So as Ajahn Sumedho says, the world of Ajahn Sumedho arises simply—it can arise around any sense contact, all day long. Just the slightest sense contact and the whole world of me can arise, just as he describes it.

Like the rain this morning. Wake up hearing gentle rain, and immediately: "It's really pleasant lying in bed listening to the rain"—which could just be a perception. But then the mind goes: "So pleasant, and it's really nice to be able to lie in bed, and it's lucky it's not a big rain. It's just a little rain, not like the hurricanes they have in the South. It reminds me of times as a child when I went camping with the Girl Scouts and the rain on the tent—not the time it washed us out, but the time it was a nice rain on the tent. But oh no, now I have to get up. And do I walk up there?"

Do I take my car up there? Is it going to rain later? And just like that, right? That's a matter of two seconds—less time than it took me to say it.

That's not a particularly dramatic example. I mean, we wouldn't necessarily notice that without steady awareness, would we? Because it's not a big flashing of obvious suffering or intense joy. It's just a simple little moment. How many little moments like that are in our day, around any sense—including mental ones, including a thought or a memory—the whole sense of "me" arising? With steady mindfulness, with steady awareness, this presents itself, this reveals itself.

We can't really hide the fact that these arisings of self come and go—if we're steady enough, if awareness is steady enough. And if you're really looking, it's a different self, isn't it? Each time different feelings, different emotions, different thoughts. Unexplored, unexamined—or when we pay a little bit of attention to it, then we don't pay attention when it goes away. Then there's awareness when it comes back, but there's not awareness when it goes away. That's how the wisdom mind doesn't arise, doesn't see the impermanence, doesn't see, as Ajahn Sumedho says, how the sense of "Ajahn Sumedho" fades away.

So I've told you that little story about the rain. I don't remember noticing when that particular little sense of Carol went away. Because without awareness, you're sort of half aware, right? I was doing things, so it shifts—then you're taking the shower, you're doing this, you're doing that. And without the steady awareness, it doesn't have to be really intense focus, but without it, the habit of just assuming "this is a steady me" is running in the background. So it felt like the steady Carol doing all the different things she did. And how many different ones today? Innumerable.

This doesn't have to only be noticed on retreat, but it's certainly a lot more supportive—more opportunity to see this—just because there's more space and less doing. I certainly notice when I'm doing and having to do the next thing, and that habit of the mind reaching forward, that it's just a little easier to overlook this subtlety. But we don't have to overlook it. It's really, really obvious when we do look.

So we notice the arising, but we also notice the dissolution. As Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about, the birth and death of self happens hundreds and hundreds of times in a day. And we can notice that. And then there are many other moments in the day when the mind, heart, consciousness is empty of grasping. These are his words—empty or void of grasping, of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, of the sense of self. There are many such moments, just as we talked about in another context—moments that are just cool or plain or neutral, nothing special. Steady, steady awareness also notices those.

Buddhadasa's language is not exactly what we're doing here, but he talks about the importance of noticing the birth and death of self. And equally important—of course it's all equal, right? We notice everything—equally important to notice the moments of just simplicity, of coolness. He calls it voidness, and that's how it's translated in his book: to generate a contentment with these moments of voidness, of emptiness of self.

That's really interesting—really being equally present and interested with the neutral. It's come up in a couple of the groups; I think I mentioned it in a talk, but a few people have mentioned it from their own experience. Seeing how, maybe they had to track it back—I'm just going to say it in the order it would have happened—seeing how when the experience of the mind is present, but it's a little bit neutral or calm or nothing special, seeing how the mind kind of whips something up. It brings up not even just a pleasant fantasy but an unpleasant fantasy, because it's a little juicier. It's like, because it's me, really, that sense of me. And somehow we really, I think I said in a group, get addicted to that little sense of oomph about me. We don't want it to go away.

That's just a habit. I'm not saying we don't want it, but it's familiar. It gives us a sense of me. Where would I be without the sense of me? This is from Ajahn Sumedho.

So when there's not those moments of voidness generating contentment, when there's not a sense of self arising, you could call that recognizing non-grasping. Because essentially, the sense of self arises when there's a moment of clinging or grasping to that particular sense experience, or the pleasant feeling, or the thought. You can feel that—I can feel that contraction, that sense of limitation, that sense of clinging come in right around any experience. So the rain: a very simple, pleasant thing. It didn't have to go anywhere.

As soon as the thought arises—"Oh, I like this"—and suddenly I'm thinking about Girl Scouts, it's not a huge contraction, but it's limiting. It's smaller.

The Buddha said in one of his suttas—he's talking about the measureless quality, the measureless mind and heart—and he says the *kilesas*, greed, hatred, and delusion, are makers of measurement, makers of limitation. You can feel that. You can feel it as soon as there's that contraction, like a contraction of self. But somehow it's just so familiar, it's a habit.

Ajahn Sumedho writes: "As one begins to realize or recognize non-grasping as the way, then emotionally one can at times feel quite frightened by it." I want to say it's not necessary to feel frightened by it. It's not like that has to happen. It can be a huge relief. It doesn't have to be frightening. But it can happen. "It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart. But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find stability—not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Being awake, being aware."

I love that. It's really the sense of finding our stability in the inherent calmness of awareness, not in any particular experience.

So, this "maker of measurement"—there's one way that Sogyal Rinpoche talked about it that really conveys how the clinging sense of self, this distorted perception-thought-view, is a kind of measurement. He talked about how in Tibet, when they're measuring to make the footprint of the foundation of a house they're going to build, they start in what would be the middle, and they have a piece of rope that's the diameter. Then they measure from there all the way around to determine how wide it's going to be. He says that's what we do with the sense of self, with the sense of "me here." Every momentary perception is measured back to the sense of me. Me perceiving this. Me wanting. Me not wanting. Just the simple sense of me that immediately makes the measurement of "other."

Seeing how that's the habit—we kind of laughed about it in some of the groups, how immediately the simplest little thing, like where do I sit when we sit down, can come back to "what does it say about me?" And it's all about me. It's really quite fun to watch if you're not taking it personally. And it isn't personal. We're really seeing how the habits of mind work.

So there are many, many moments in the day with arising and passing where we can really recognize the not-self, but also recognize that when there is a sense of self, that's also equally empty of self. It's not like that's a real thing, as I said in the beginning, that we have to see through. It's simply another conditioned phenomenon arising due to a sense of clinging at a particular experience and then the interpretation of that as being

"me" or being "mine." And then that interpretation, that thought, becomes a view, a belief. As Andrea said, we don't recognize it. We don't get a neon sign: "View is arising! I think I'm a self!" It just feels true. That's how it is. We don't question it. But we can really see it arising due to lawful conditions and causes. It dissolves when those causes change, and it's also just nature.

In a way, I kind of love watching when the sense of self comes and when it goes. Seeing it takes the sting out of it, but also reveals just how much it comes, how strong it can be when unseen. And seeing it, it's just—again, it's just perception and *vedanā*, feeling tone and thoughts concocting this whole story. Ten million stories in a day. When you look at it, it's no wonder we're so tired so much of the time. Because we have this story, and then we react to it. And then we think, "How are other people thinking about me?"

And everybody that walks by, what are they thinking about me? And everyone else is thinking that. My god, the energy that's going around in here.

You wonder sometimes—one time at the retreat center, because there's so many more people, there's more energy bopping around. I remember one three-month retreat, about November, so it was two months in. You do your own thing when you're yogis. You may not have a sense of how it is on the staff and teacher side. There's a lot of energy roaming around. And as you know, sometimes it's a little bit identified with kilesas. That does happen sometimes.

I remember one time years ago, I was out somewhere, and I wasn't really paying much attention. I came bopping in the front door, opened it, and the energy was so strong—I opened it and went, "Whoa!" I felt like it almost knocked me down the steps. I thought, "Oh, I better bring my awareness in here, walk it into here." So something goes on.

I wanted to read this: The fact that even the sense of self is an equally valid object of awareness. All objects of awareness met with awareness are equally valid objects for wisdom. They all exhibit the Dharma. They all show the same aspects of impermanence, of not-self, of unreliability, of nothing to rely on. They all show the same kind of emptiness of intrinsic existence and the same opening into the purity of awareness.

This is Dilgo Khyentse again: "This troublesome ego, which is so concerned about itself, has in reality never begun to exist. It does not exist anywhere now, and so it cannot cease to exist. Not the slightest trace of it can be found. When one recognizes this empty nature, therefore, any notion of there being an ego to dissolve vanishes. And at the same time, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns, uncontrived and effortless. Here you will see the unity of emptiness and compassion."

I just love this kind of absolute way of describing things. But that's how it is. When the awareness, the wisdom mind—sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom mind—really sees that there never was and there isn't now, all that clinging in that moment dissolves. And it doesn't just leave us like a blah nothing.

Really, when we see in how we're practicing here, when the awareness is steady and wisdom arises and the kilesas aren't being fed, many of you see how—not as an act of will—the kilesa, the wanting, the aversion, the confusion vanishes. When there's just this momentum of awareness and wisdom recognizing, it may slowly dissolve the kilesa, or it may just vanish. And it's really not a sense that you did it.

But that doesn't just leave an empty nothing. What's really important in the big picture—and by big picture I mean of our whole lives—is the steady cultivation, the steadiness of awareness and wisdom. What naturally occurs is also lawful, the Dharma: the wholesome arises when the kilesas aren't making so much noise. The wholesome arises, and wisdom-mindfulness feeds the wholesome. This is lawful.

So that's really what Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was saying. In that moment of wisdom really recognizing the absolute emptiness—that there never was, there isn't an ego now—in that moment, the energy that's released from the clinging, from the holding, from the concocting and holding to it, naturally goes into compassion, mettā, equanimity. I don't mean that as a hook to make it worth exploring, but it does happen.

So I was thinking again—it kept coming up in my mind when I was on retreat, which is really why I was thinking about this: "To study the Dharma is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, to forget the self is to be enlightened by ten thousand things."

I was noticing in my own practice, but also from talking to so many people, that in a period of intensive practice—say a retreat like a month like this—it's different for everybody, but there can be a general trajectory, although nothing's linear, of course. In the early days of a retreat, the content—I mean, we're still cultivating steady awareness, and it doesn't matter what the content is—but the content tends to be more on the personality level of things. When you come into a retreat, the stuff you've been doing at home, the thoughts, are a little more engaged with our everyday life. But also, in really seeing—and this is a necessary and important aspect of practice—there's a great deal of practice where, with the steady awareness, what's naturally being revealed is aspects of our personality patterns.

A lot of you have been saying that. And it's very insightful and very liberating. We're seeing our personal conditioning. Maybe we haven't recognized from some of our past experience how that's affected habit patterns and emotional patterns that arise with frequency here and in our lives. And we start to see that. Or we already thought we knew it completely, but information comes up and we recognize it on a deeper level.

It's really interesting. But with awareness, it's not like this isn't equally important practice, because awareness is able to recognize, wisdom is able to recognize this. It's fascinating—we can see it on the level of how the conditions come together to create this particular mood, this particular habit. And even though it seems like it's all about *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, all about me and my personality, if you really look when there's mindfulness and wisdom, that's the content, but we're really seeing the process—the process of conditioning, the process of how that works.

And then when there's wisdom that notices, there's often a moment where the knee-jerk reaction doesn't have to happen. Do you know what I mean? I noticed for myself that it was really kind of fun to watch, just watching the conditions roll out automatically when there's a particular trigger.

Just a silly little thing I wrote down when I was on retreat, when I was aware. I was pretty aware. And my phone vibrated. And I was in quiet, didn't want to talk to anyone. So immediately—and this is all like ten times faster than I can say it; I wrote it down because I wouldn't remember it all—the phone vibrates, and immediately: "Oh, who's calling me? I get all these phishing phone calls. I should call the do-not-call list, but I did put it on the do-not-call. Why are these all happening? I don't want to answer it." And there's this immediate aversion, very solid, very solid me—just like that, maybe a second.

And then awareness came in and just said, "Wow, look at that. Just a vibrating phone and this whole habit pattern of craving and aversion in a particular state came up like that." You just punch the button and the whole thing rolls out. But as soon as there was awareness, the whole thing dissipated. And it was really interesting to see.

As Sayadaw says, awareness breaks the chain of events. So instead of going on or saying, "Oh, what's the matter with you? You should feel compassion," or whatever—look at that. Press the button. Boom. It comes out. Awareness is here. It dissipates. Really fascinating.

And that is really not about taking it as a personal thought, but really seeing the causes and conditions that give rise to a sense of self. And then the conditions change. Awareness comes in. They dissipate. It's nothing to get upset about, but it's really interesting to understand. There's a lot more wisdom, and there's the chance for those conditions not to so absolutely take over every time.

Once we see it, once awareness-wisdom sees it, the next time it happens, if there's a modicum of awareness—I mean, it'll happen and there isn't, but then the awareness will come and you'll see it—there's a chance not to react with the aversion, not to react in that way.

This is really equally important as objects of awareness leading to wisdom, not just personal wisdom. I mean, when it's happening in our practice, it's really interesting, for sure. But sometimes people can think, "Well, that's okay, but we're still on the personal level, and we want to get down to the nitty-gritty. I just want to see perception and vedanā arising. I just want to see how the thought comes up. I just want to see dependent origination. I don't want to be bothered by all these personality patterns."

But as Dīpama Kenzei was saying, it's equally empty. It's just a different content.

With mindfulness and wisdom, with right attitude, we're really seeing the emptiness. This is from Tejaniya. He says that emotions, although being experienced in the moment, are there because of past causes and conditions that are having an impact in the present moment. That's really what we see.

I don't know about you, but I find that my mind takes emotions so personally, especially unpleasant ones—even when I absolutely know. I guess that's not absolutely. I think I absolutely know. I sort of absolutely know, but not absolutely yet. Emotions are just as he's saying. They're causes and conditions. They come together. I know they're going to pass.

When you're in the middle of that despair, or just that aversion again, or that hot flash, and you think, "I know this is going to pass. I know it's going to pass." But part of the emotion itself is the belief that it's going to be like this forever. That's the emotion doing its job: "I'm going to be here forever, so just get used to it."

So we see that emotions are arising in the moment because of past causes and conditions having an impact on the present moment. But we need to remind ourselves that it is a process. It's natural. And so we just recognize that it's natural and allow ourselves to observe it. We need to appreciate that we are actually aware—even when it seems

we're in the midst of a difficult emotion—appreciate that we're actually aware, and to initiate awareness rather than complain about the experience. This is practicing Right View.

Talking to many people these past couple of days, hearing about difficult emotions or some turmoil or just another conditioned habit like mine with the phone—there's this sense of, "Yeah, I know there's some mindfulness, but it keeps going." You can feel a discouragement, a not really recognizing that mindfulness and awareness are quite activated. But that doesn't necessarily mean the pattern stops. It just means consciousness has the ability to observe it, to recognize how it's working a little better. It doesn't mean it stops working, but really recognizing that you can activate awareness.

It can be flipping back and forth, especially with strong patterns. But just keep remembering awareness. Take refuge in awareness. Not because "I hate this thing, and if I take refuge in awareness, it'll go away." That's not refuge in awareness—that's aversion. But just recognize, "Oh, it's like this now." Just recognizing that.

So calling this "studying the self" is also part of our process of purification and part of deepening understanding. Then at other times in our practice—whether in retreat or daily life—the same habits or similar emotions can arise. Of course they're not exactly the same; it's a different time. But it's a pattern we really recognize, one that previously felt like it was being met with right attitude. There was a brightness in the mind, the interest.

But later, the same things can come up, and this is where we move into "to study the self is to forget the self." Something arises and it's just kind of like, "I really don't need to go there." Not out of aversion, but out of really seeing that at this point, it's an old habit—like a shadow of an old habit arising. We could jump into it and go down the whole path, but it's actually completely unnecessary. In that moment, there's enough awareness listening. "I don't need to feed that." Change the channel. And this happens naturally.

I'm not saying you should do that. But here's an example: some years ago, I wasn't on retreat, but I was sitting and—I don't know what was going on—but the habit of self-judgment and self-hatred, that familiar "you're not good enough" arose. Sometimes it's just thoughts, but sometimes it comes in like this really heavy cloud. I can feel it coming before I even recognize it's already there. I feel it, and I sense this negative tinge over everything, and it's really heavy.

So seeing this coming in, seeing why, just watching it. And then there's this habit, a belief really, that since it's here, to be wise and mindful I have to really be with it—note it, feel it, not avoid it, name it, feel the heaviness, really be there.

But then some piece of wisdom came in and asked: Do I? I actually completely know all the antecedents. I know why it's coming. There's no personality reason I need to explore this. So I thought, what if I don't go "oh, it's so heavy, heavy, hatred feels like this"? What if I just say one line of mettā?

And it was like that—like a wise presence. It was that sense of relaxed awareness, not aversion. Just say one line of mettā. Not "I've got to do mettā." Just say one line.

Okay. I said, "May I be happy and peaceful."

And the whole thing just dropped away. Not the mettā—the other thing. Just dropped away. Oh yeah, may I be happy. It wasn't like I went into the bliss of oneness or something, but it just shifted to a wholesome mind state. I realized that when there's wisdom in the mind, it's not that we have to follow the personality seven million trillion times ad nauseam. It is empty. In that moment, the emptiness is apparent. Let's cultivate the wholesome, and it's right there. And you know it's possible like that because it *is* right there. You're not fighting about it.

But there are other times, of course, when the whole personality story just isn't what's arising. This isn't like it's better. It's not like you should make that happen, or that it's linear. But sometimes it's just like that—it's enough already. That stuff loses its interest, completely loses its interest. Sometimes the Carol story is the most interesting thing going. And other times—really?

One time I was doing a three-month retreat, and I had seen a movie just prior to that retreat. I don't know if any of you have had that unpleasant experience. You should really pay attention to what movies you put in your mind before you come on retreat, I tell you.

So this was some thriller—Harrison Ford in *The Fugitive*, I remember. I was sitting there, and the Carol story would be going, and then Harrison Ford would start with all of that, and then my story would start, then Harrison Ford would start. After a while, I realized they were equal. It was just images and thoughts and emotions coming up. One wasn't more or less me than the other. Actually, the Carol one was less interesting.

But I really saw: it's just conditions coming together. And it's a view that makes whatever was going on with the Carol story—I can't even remember what it was—seem more real.

So we can really start to explore that. And that kind of forgetting the self is partly when it just isn't arising.

That happens naturally. But also when we can just see we don't have to feed that interest in me. Sometimes there's a belief we have to explore it too much.

Ajahn Sumedho made an interesting comment in one talk I was listening to. He was, of course, talking about awareness, and he says, you know, awareness has been available to us since our childhood. But we just don't recognize it because we've been so absorbed with attention into ourselves. We're absorbed into attention into our bodies, our emotions, our personality. He says we're obsessed with ourselves.

And I can see that, right? It's so interesting that there's any other object, but ourselves is usually the most compelling one, that we just don't notice the possibility of awareness. And so this sense of forgetting the self—it's interesting that he kept on talking about that.

I use his phrase a lot where he says, "It's just like this now," as a way of just relaxing, surrendering into just what is. And as I said, I use that frequently myself. And I notice when I use that, when it's helpful as a wisdom prompt, is when I'm feeling all caught up and circling around something. If it's just unpleasant and I know it, that's okay. But when somehow it's all confused, all coagulated, usually caught up, identified in some way—he says, "It's like this."

But then he goes on to say, and I totally related to this—he said, "When I say 'it's like this,' I used to try and see why it's like this. But now I just go, 'It's like this.'" Because the trying to see why would take me into analyzing. It would take me back into the whole world of Ajahn Sumedho.

And I really have found this so frequently with myself. This can be more—not so much when I'm in the Carol's story—but at times when the Carol's story can come up in the background, but I think I'm just looking at subtlety in practice. And I'm looking at saññā. And I'm looking at vedanā. And I'm looking at how things come together. And I'm just seeing the emptiness and seeing awareness. But somehow, it seems like I see the clinging come, I see it go, and I think I'm mindful of it all, but it's feeling like it's getting more and more tight in some kind of ball or something, right? And it feels like I'm mindful. It's not spacing out. I can't see why, so I'm trying to see. "It's like this now." Like what? Well, there's clinging. I can really see—she completely takes me into whatever's going on. "It's like this now," without trying to analyze, without trying to see what.

Because with that awareness—this is Sumedho again—awareness does not get involved in the sankhara. You know, sankhara, the mental formations, everything that's going on. Awareness isn't trying to figure them out at all. It's radical. You relate to that quality, but we're like, "Okay, it's like this now. How?" It doesn't matter. You don't need to know. Is it clinging or is it aversion? Who needs to know? Who wants to know? "It's like this now." No, I have to know that, right? I have to know how it works. If I'm caught in clinging and I don't know it, I'm going to get caught more and I better see it. "It's like this now." Tightness, boss.

And that awareness isn't getting involved in sankhara. No need to fix the self.

No need to improve the sankhāras. No need—this is Ajahn Sumedho again—no need to do anything. "It's like this now" is again taking refuge in awareness. Sumedho calls awareness the escape hatch from saṃsāra, from birth and death. So in that moment, he's calling that moment—"it's like this now"—an escape hatch from saṃsāra. Saṃsāra, the wanting, the spinning, the trying to figure it out. Just, "Ah, it's like this." In that moment, nothing's born and nothing dies. That's what he's talking about.

I find it, at times, really hard to trust that radical surrender. And so we have talked here about when awareness is available but we're not so completely absorbed, when it doesn't have so much momentum—the times when the trust is easy. But it isn't always that clear. And the trust isn't always so easy. We think, "Ah, it's like this... but I've got to figure this out. This awareness is so feeble. What awareness?" And then we're off on it.

So to really determine, as Ajahn Sumedho says, to trust awareness in those moments—this is really what, in a way, is strengthening the habit of freedom rather than the habit of identification, forgetting the self.

I just want to acknowledge that it's a really delicate balance between recognizing the emptiness, the non-personal, conditional, contingent nature of all of our emotions, all of our conditions, all of our personality patterns—not just some of them, all of it—and what's sometimes called spiritual bypassing, or delusion. "Oh yeah, right, I know what that is." Subtle pushing away. This is something I want to mention so we can have an awareness of it and explore it in our practice. I'm not saying I have the last word. I just want to make a couple of comments about that.

In terms of recognizing the emptiness, the conditional nature of any strong emotional experience, that doesn't mean not feeling it. But it means it's not an identification, it's not resistant, we're not caught up in the "all about me."

One of my favorite quotations is from Dilgo Khyentse about this:

"Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. So when a thought, a feeling of anger, arises in the mind, in the heart, with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive—is anger brandishing a weapon? Can it burn things like fire, crush them like a rock, or carry them away like a violent river?"

He's not talking about the body acting. He says, "No, anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no intrinsic self-existence, not even a definite location in body, speech, or mind. It is just like wind roaring in empty space. So instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, realize their essential emptiness."

We feel it, but we just let the wind roar in empty space. That's really kind of how it is. "When you can see through the hatred within, you discover there's not a single enemy outside." I just like that line—the wind roaring in empty space. Really seeing that.

Recognizing the non-personality, the emptiness—it doesn't change what's occurring. Emptiness is a mode of perception, a way of looking at experience. It adds nothing to and takes nothing away from the raw data of physical and mental events. So it's really present with what's going on. We may get information from it. We may not. But you can tell it's not bypassing, it's not delusion, because you can see there's that quality of wise attitude. There's a kind of brightness, an interest in the mind. It's not contracted. It's not closed off. We can start to recognize that.

The bypassing can be obvious, just illusion. "No, I don't want to feel that. That's not happening."

Denial is an amazing force. Have you ever noticed what an amazing force it is? For example, say you get into a relationship, and then some years later it ends. When it ends, you think, "Wow, look at all those qualities in that person." And if you think about the things that led to the ending, if you really think about it, you knew that. You knew that from the first week—those things were obvious. It's really amazing. It's totally amazing to me, the power of denial.

So it's tricky. We're not always going to see through it. The bypassing can look very similar to genuine mindfulness, but there's this quality—it can be gross or much more subtle—of just a little bit of pushing away. The difficult thing or the habit pattern comes up and we're sort of mindful of it. You could name it all. Like when I was describing the self-hatred, I could name it all. But if it had been bypassing, it would have been, "Okay, I know all that. I don't need to go there. Let's do something else." The quality in the heart-mind, the quality in the awareness wouldn't have that brightness. And it wouldn't just automatically vanish—it would just kind of push it away and go somewhere else. It can be a very, very subtle habit of aversion, of not seeing.

This is where I think we're starting to see through this—if we are, because we flip back and forth in this kind of bypassing or subtle denying—where our steady mindfulness and all our years of practice in all the different traditions we do, where we're not picking and choosing, only paying attention to what we like or what feels valuable. The steadiness of awareness gives us the power of what the British writer George Orwell called "the power of facing unpleasant facts." I think that's a huge liberating aspect of our awareness practice. It just gives us the power of being present with unpleasant facts. And this is where spiritual bypassing or just pushing away a certain pattern—we don't quite see it because we aren't quite resting in that unpleasant fact.

A simple example: I was on retreat, a self-retreat in Switzerland, staying in a friend's apartment near the meditation center where we teach. It's kind of up in the mountains—lower mountains in Switzerland, about four thousand feet, not really mountains, more like hills, but pretty. I was walking on the road, just a regular road with farms around, and I was aware, nothing special going on. A lady came approaching me, and she had some kind of pamphlet or something in her hand. She came up to me and said something in German, which I can understand some of, but my mind goes into a kind of panic when someone addresses me that way. I didn't get what she said—I could only construct it later—and she's showing this thing to me.

Immediately I saw a lady with a pamphlet and I went into this whole thing: "This is like Jehovah's Witness, and they're trying to pull me into something." And I responded, "I don't understand, I don't speak German." And I went away with this aversion, just like that. It happened in no time, just the habit coming. The sense of it being unpleasant, her coming at me with the thing. I associated it with Jehovah's Witness, I didn't want to deal with her, it was unpleasant. So I pushed the whole thing away—get out of here, lady—and I walked off.

Then one second later, I reconstructed what I thought she had said, and I think she was asking for directions. Definitely wasn't Jehovah's Witness. And I felt really bad. But I saw—I really appreciated it—because I could see, even though this awareness came in after, I could see again how that whole pattern comes, and how I respond out of that.

And the response, if I hadn't been aware, the response is really, "I don't want to feel that discomfort of this person asking me for something."

I can feel that when you're driving and there's so many more people these days standing on the highways, on the intersections with signs that they're homeless, they're vets, they don't have jobs, they need money. And I mean, it's just heartbreaking. And I can see that same habit come up in my mind. I don't want to have to interact. I don't want someone pushing something in my face.

And so the bypassing, in a way, going with that habit is just bypassing being able to be with the unpleasantness of just feeling that awkwardness, feeling that discomfort. But awareness lets it be okay. You don't need to bypass. You can really have the power of being with the unpleasant fact. This person's putting this thing in your face. You think it's unpleasant. You don't even know. Can you hang out with that? Can you just hang out with that? And then we're not bypassing anymore.

But you see, it can be so subtle. "No, I don't need to do that. I don't need to do that. Go away." And we don't recognize that it's just a habit of avoiding.

Okay, that's all I have time for, so I'll just end by saying those are just some things I wanted to drop in about looking at the different ways of studying the self and forgetting the self and opening to be enlightened by the ten thousand things—meaning what I said Doug had said earlier: the truth is right where you are. Where else can you expect to find it?

And it doesn't mean we don't feel or don't care or lose our personality. I'm sorry to tell you. You just get like more who you are in some way when you know it's empty.

And so just with two quotations, let's finish. The line from T.S. Eliot: "Teach me to care and not to care. Teach me to sit still." In a different way, from a different angle. And sometimes it's even more deeply touching when it's not personal. It's not that we don't feel things anymore.

So I'll just end with my favorite haiku from Issa. He wrote this on the death of his young daughter. He said:

This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet.

That's how it is.

Thanks for your attention.

CHAPTER 177

Recognizing the Non-Deluded Mind

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this Forest Refuge talk, Carol Wilson draws on teachings from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and Ajahn Sumedho to illuminate the dual purpose of Dhamma practice: discovering the nature of the non-deluded mind while understanding how delusion operates. She emphasizes that nibbāna is not merely a distant goal but a natural condition—moments of coolness and freedom from kilesa (mental torments) that arise many times daily, often unnoticed.

Wilson explores the Saṃyutta Nikāya passages on the third noble truth and the famous teaching that the citta is luminous, only temporarily colored by visiting attachments. She examines the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19), where the Buddha describes two types of thinking and offers practical similes: when kilesa are strong, we must be careful like a cowherd protecting crops; when the mind is wholesome, we can rest like that same cowherd under a shade tree, simply mindful.

The talk addresses how latent tendencies (anusaya) operate below conscious awareness, driving habitual reactions before we notice them. Wilson shares personal examples of how subtle craving hijacks attention, and offers skillful means for both situations—careful attention when caught in difficulty, and conscious inclination toward the peaceful and sublime when the mind is settled. She concludes with the Saṃyutta Nikāya teaching on directed and undirected meditation, inviting practitioners to recognize that contentment arises naturally through steady, non-interfering awareness.

There's a statement from Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche that I often use to preface what I'm talking about tonight. He says that there are two purposes to this dharma practice that we do: one is to discover the nature of the non-deluded mind, the non-deluded heart, as well as learning how the deluded mind works. Both of these are what's going on in our practice here.

Awareness recognizes the wisdom mind and goes back and forth between these two modes. Sometimes—maybe a lot of the time—we're recognizing how the deluded mind works. But equally, we're recognizing the nature of the non-deluded mind. Steady awareness with wise attitude and right view are equal support, the tool, the avenue for clear seeing and wisdom in both cases.

Sometimes the skillful means could be a little bit different depending on which modality is going on. That could be one of the reasons why people sometimes say it seems a little confusing—they know it's really not, but sometimes you say this, sometimes you say the other, and it seems like you're doing two things at once. Or neither one.

The nature of the non-deluded mind: this is from the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha talking about the third noble truth, the ending of dukkha. I just love this translation:

It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving. Its forsaking and abandonment, liberation and detachment from it. The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion. This indeed is called nibbana. And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, nothing more remains to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, neither the desired nor the undesired can cause such a one to waver. One is steadfast in mind, in heart. One who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything whatever in the world. The peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the object of the holy life. That is its essence.

I think it's so wonderful, and we should repeat that to ourselves every day. Not as a wanting or a goal orientation, but as a reminder. And not as some distant state, because I know that's said in a lot of superlatives—the complete extinction of all these things.

But how I want to talk about it tonight, and how we explore and recognize in our practice day to day, on or off retreat, is recognizing that the citta, the mind, the heart, is not a steady state. It's not a thing, a subject, that has objects as content. It's an activity, the process of cognizing, a flow of events. And as such, as everything, it is changing. Even "it" is not the right word to use because that makes it a thing. But this flow of activities is changing from moment to moment. This is how it is. And this is the only thing that makes practice, that makes liberation possible.

Thinking of it this way, it's not that the ending of craving is only some distant state, but there are many, many moments of heart and mind, recognized with awareness, when there isn't greed, hatred, or delusion arising in that moment of citta. As Sayadaw U Pandita says, a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom.

If we hear or think about or contemplate what I just read—this potential of freedom of heart—and are afraid that's going to put us into some goal-oriented clinging mind so better not to think about it, we're really doing ourselves a disservice. That's delusion. Really recognizing, as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, that nibbana, or freedom of mind, is a natural condition. The cool state of heart and mind without any kilesa, without any tor-

ments—this is a natural condition arising in all of us many times a day, often unnoticed, because it's just kind of cooled out. There's no big greed or fancy object to get entranced by or try to get rid of.

It's a natural condition that arises. As he says, without moments of this coolness, of these moments when there are no torments or kilesa identified with in the mind, we would die. We just couldn't live like that.

And so that means in any moment, as awareness is steady—and this is one of the wonderful things about steady awareness—these moments of purity of heart and mind, coolness, the mind of non-clinging: this is the deathless, namely the liberation of mind through non-clinging.

As Buddhadasa says, nirvana for everyone. It's a natural condition. Through steady awareness, we start to see more and more moments of this. But do we even let it in? Can we let it in? Do we even notice it?

A great deal of the awareness in our practice is more involved in recognizing the suffering aspect of the torments, of the kilesas—hopefully recognizing the suffering aspect. That's when there's wisdom in the mind. When there's not wisdom in the awareness, we're just in them, thinking, "This is really going to do it for me." But to start to see the power of the kilesas...

Once the Brahmin Jāṇussoṇi approached the Blessed One and said to him, "It is said, Master Gotama, that nibbāna is directly visible. In what way, Master Gotama, is nibbāna directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise?"

And he answers: "When, Brahmin, a person is impassioned with greed, with lust..."—and by "person" it just means that moment of mind. It's not like, "I'm a person who's impassioned with lust and that's who I am from now on." Just don't go there. A moment. "When the mind of a person is depraved through hatred, bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion"—he gives that one a little extra emphasis—"then they plan for their own harm, for the harm of others, the harm of both." Basically, he says that when there's lust, hatred, and delusion, one cannot recognize one's own good or the good of another or the good of both. You just can't recognize what's true and what's helpful and what's good when the mind is clouded with these things. "But when lust, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, then, Brahmin, one does not experience in their mind suffering and grief, nor plan for the harm of oneself or others. In this way, nibbāna is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see."

So for us here, the invitation is to really continue exploring—because this isn't new information for any of you—to continue trusting in the steadiness of mindfulness, awareness with right attitude. But recognizing that sometimes it's really about seeing, recognizing, feeling, getting familiar with, trusting this coolness, this purity. Other times we're much more involved in reacting to—or hopefully, if there's wisdom, seeing how—the torments obscure the truth, the way things really are.

Both modalities have to be here. They support each other. And in fact, without some knowing, even if we don't know we know it, some experience or some intuition of this pure, cool quality of heart-mind that's unobscured, we wouldn't practice at all. It's like we know it.

There's that very famous quotation from the Buddha that speaks to this: "Luminous is this mind, luminous is this citta, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This unlearned people do not really understand, and so do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands. So for them, there is cultivation of the mind, cultivation of the heart."

That's what we're all doing here. There wouldn't be cultivation—you wouldn't be sitting here all these months and years—if there wasn't the knowing somewhere in there, the touching somehow. Many of you really know it, but sometimes we lose the trust that we know it. But it's there, this nirvana for everyone, the coolness of the heart, the mind that is free from greed, hatred, delusion. That touching—whether you call it radiance or just purity or just coolness—that freedom from suffering, that steadfast heart-mind that just for a moment isn't bothered by whatever's occurring.

And so our practice can have these two aspects: recognizing the moments of clinging, or hours of clinging, of the aversion, of the confusion—at times really caught, but then suddenly there's the wisdom, the recognition—and then noticing the absence, the dissolution, the cessation of that moment or hour of clinging. Really, with steady awareness, being present with that cessation, with those moments of coolness, really observing. And then with that steady state, you're bound to notice, awareness is bound to pick up, when the obscuring kilesas arise again—usually all too soon. Whenever it is, it's too soon.

This is really how it works. But for many of us, as we go on and on and can taste at times those moments of freedom, the times when you're just tuned into it—it's no big deal, but it's just so obvious that that's the way things are—in those moments of wisdom, the clinging really doesn't make sense. It's so obvious that it's based on delusion

and suffering. And then it comes back again. Many people have described how you can feel the sense of the mind about to start clinging. You can tell. It's just changing a little bit in there. And everyone goes, "No, no..."

Get away. Get back. And it's already over by then. But still, we can see the mind doing that. This is how it works.

And in some ways—this is my opinion, not only my opinion, but it is my opinion—you could look at all aspects of the Buddha's teachings and all the aspects of our practice as really being about simply purifying, shifting these habits that arise in the heart-mind. It's just this nature, it's just habits. That greed arises so much, that aversion arises so much, isn't because it's an act of will. It's just the habit of how the mind has been working, how it's been responding. And in moments of not really much attention, that's what comes up.

But everything in practice is shifting those habits. You could say purifying, but really just shifting it from taking refuge in the greed, the hatred, the confusion, to this real trust of the coolness, the purity.

And I just want to say: every moment of this awareness with wise attitude, just meeting what's occurring without getting involved in pushing away or identifying, just meeting it—that is actually a moment of shifting the habit. Even awareness of greed, and the greed is really there, but there's moments of awareness back and forth. The awareness isn't greedy. Awareness isn't aversive. And that's a very different moment of response than the usual.

And because awareness is getting more and more steady, but it's nothing special—it's just really, as many people are saying and noticing, more ordinary—it's easy not to recognize that this is actually this quality, this kind of purity, this simplicity, this non-involvement in kilesa that's going on.

So, the skillful means—whether the awareness is really caught up in a lot of kilesa, or whether it's more steady awareness and there's more moments of coolness—sometimes the Buddha gives a little bit different instruction, and we do as well.

I just want to read a little bit from one sutta. This is in the Majjhima Nikāya. It's translated usually as "Two Types of Thinking." This is a long sutta with lots of little nuggets in it that we quote all the time, but I'm only going to focus on a particular one this time. It's the sutta where the Buddha is talking about before he became a Buddha, when he was doing his practice and he noticed two types of thinking—one unwhole-

some type and the other wholesome. The unwholesome would be thinking with, guess what? Greed and cruelty and hatred. Not delusion—delusion's part of all of it. And then the wholesome is, of course, the opposite of those.

So he was just noticing in his mind that the difficult states would come up, and what it would be like if he kept thinking about those—that it led to suffering and tiring. The wholesome states would come up, and if he kept thinking about those, he couldn't see any problem that would come from it. Except if he thought about it for a day and a night, no problem would come except his body might get tired. He's very practical.

So there are two different ways. He says that when he noticed that the unwholesome led to his own affliction—so when awareness noticed that, wisdom notices, "Oh, this is causing suffering"—because of the wisdom, that type of thinking subsided. But he was watching carefully. And he noticed that it leads to the affliction of others, the affliction of both, that it obstructs clear seeing and wisdom, that it promotes vexation. It subsided. So the steady awareness allows the wisdom to arrive that lets it subside.

But this is the skillful means he mentions. "Just as in the last month of the rains, in the autumn season when the crops are ripening"—he always gives all these agricultural metaphors—"a cowherd would look after his cows..."

He would be looking very carefully. He would tap and poke them, make them move this way, make them move that way. He's looking at them very carefully. Why? Because he's trying to keep them from wandering into the crops. He knows if they wander into the crops, they'll cause destruction. And not only that, he'd get in trouble—fine or public censure.

So the Buddha says, "I foresaw in unskillful qualities drawbacks, degradation." And so he was being very careful. Here he's saying we're careful with the awareness. He's not saying kill the cow so it doesn't get into the crops, but watching carefully.

This is really what we've talked about when we say just be with steady awareness, notice whatever occurs, don't get involved, there's no doing. But then we'll also say, when you recognize that the mind is really caught up in the kilesas, and the more awareness that's given to it, the stronger the kilesas are getting because they're really stronger than the awareness—then we give all kinds of suggestions: avert the attention to something neutral, brighten the mind, do something else. It's like being really careful. It's not running away from it, but it's not "okay, whatever happens." We're not saying whatever happens, just follow it. With wisdom and awareness, when there's wis-

dom in the mind, there's no need. But when the kilesas are stronger, that just kind of gives us a little clue: oh, that's going on. You don't hate it, but let's just have a little care in the attention.

But then he talks about when the wholesome states are in his mind. He said, "I noticed when thinking imbued with harmlessness, for example, has arisen, it leads neither to my own affliction nor the affliction of others nor the affliction of both. It promotes wisdom, lack of vexation. It leads to freedom. If I were to think and ponder in line with that for a night and a day, I do not envision any danger that would come from it except, as I said, it would tire the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed. And a disturbed mind is far from collectedness." So he steadied his mind.

This is all just very practical. The simile he gives for this is about when there's wisdom, when there's wholesomeness, and the steady awareness sees that there's wholesomeness—then there really isn't anything you need to do. He said, "Then it is in the last month of the hot season when all the crops have been gathered into the village. A cowherd would look after his cows in this way while resting under the shade of a tree or out in the open. He simply keeps himself mindful of those cows. In the same way, I simply kept myself mindful of those mental qualities."

Do you get a sense of that? That's really a lot of what we mean when we say just be aware, noticing what's arising. Imagine yourself lying under the shade of a tree, watching the cows go by, watching the mental states, the thoughts come and go. You can see they're wholesome and there's no need to get in there and do anything. When it's like that, we'll notice when all of a sudden something comes flying up. And that's not a problem.

So we start to see how the kilesas obstruct, how they do their job to get in the way of just recognizing this simplicity, this coolness of heart-mind.

Ajahn Sumedho, in speaking about the third noble truth, the cessation of clinging, says a normal person doesn't notice the cessation of clinging or the cessation of most objects. Our attention tends to be too flighty, too jumpy. We're not really able to take boredom. We can't really take just a moment of nothing. We all know this, right? The mind jumps into the next thing. And especially these last years with social media and phones and this immediate gratification—it's really quite something. Just noticing.

You see it with kids—it's a million times worse. But I just notice it in my own mind. I'll be sitting, having a cup of tea, which I enjoy. It's like the nice point of the morning. And I can see, within a minute, my mind going... Let me just check—the phone's right there. Let me check this. Let me check the weather. What's the weather going to be to-

morrow? I already checked it last night, but I forgot, you know. Or just something. And I can feel that flightiness, that restlessness, that subtle wanting of—what? It's nothing really, because the actual checking and looking at whatever it is, just keeping awareness going, I notice the mind gets a little bit tighter. Everything gets a little bit more constricted. Remember the maker of measurement—where it was really just kind of peaceful and open the minute before. But as a normal person's mind, it's a little bit flighty. It doesn't really recognize.

But as we cultivate steady attention, we do start to recognize—this is still samādhi—that what arises, ceases. We start to see, as Andrea was speaking about the other night, that everything is conditions. All the qualities that come and go in the mind are constructed phenomena. And with steadiness, we can see them arise—this is still samādhi—arise and cease in consciousness. With steady awareness, seeing this again and again and again: arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing. And we start to get—or wisdom starts to get—a little bit disenchanted with all this endless arising and ceasing.

Disenchantment doesn't mean—it's often translated with words like disgust or revulsion, something that has an edge of aversion. That's neither accurate nor helpful, I think. Disenchantment is a better word because the habit of the kilesas is to be enchanted with the object, with the reaction of wanting, or just the restlessness, or "give me something not to feel this subtle, unpleasant restlessness." We're enchanted with that. And with steady awareness, we start to really see how this works—the sense of purifying the habits of the kilesas, seeing how, as that quotation I read about the luminous mind, they obscure the purity, just the simplicity of ease.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "What then is meant by pure perception? The way we usually experience the outer world, our bodies, and our feelings is impure in the sense that we perceive them as ordinary, substantially existing entities. From this erroneous perception come the negative emotions which perpetuate suffering. However, take a closer look at all these appearances"—I don't mean peer; the steady awareness takes a closer look—"and you'll find that they have no true self-existence. From a relative point of view, they appear as a result of various causes and conditions"—that's what we were just saying, the conditionality—"like a mirage or a dream. But in reality, nothing that arises from causes and conditions has any true self-existence whatsoever. In fact, there is not even anything to appear."

I love getting into this real radical teaching. As it is said, one who realizes this emptiness of the self-existence of anything is the true sage.

Remember, moment to moment. It doesn't have to be all or nothing—that's when it can get discouraging. But recognizing in moments: this is the way things are. And for all of us, to really get interested. We don't create awareness—we recognize it. The steady awareness with wise attitude is shifting the habits, as I said.

So in terms of carefulness: when it's the middle of the rainy season and you don't want the cows to get into the crops, when there are kilesas going on and they're all too familiar and comfortable—

And there's enough wisdom and enough awareness-wisdom to recognize that that's going on. And we all know that. You'll be caught in it and then out of it, caught in it and then out of it.

But what we start to really see—and I don't know, to me this helps me, I don't know if it's discouraging to you, but it helps me—we start to recognize and continue to recognize, to respect the power of the habits of conditioning, of craving. And craving can be like the wanting or the aversion, this sense of identity, of identification with things.

Many of you have been mentioning in the groups and interviews, as the awareness is getting more steady, and experience is getting a little bit more subtle—you've been here a while now—people are seeing different habits, really more subtle habits of mind. Self-judgment, wanting, fear, whatever it might be. And then they say, "Oh, I recognize this from my life, but this is much more subtle." Seeing all these little things—this is really great, because this is starting to see when the subtle is operating.

In the beginning of practice, the big fears and aversions and greeds take us over, and they're really hard to be with. They seem so strong. But as practice goes on and we notice those more, you start to see—and this is what I really have so much respect for, it makes me interested—it's these subtle habits that are almost below the level of consciousness that are running the show when we're not aware of them.

Tara Brach gave the example of how the habits under the level of consciousness operate. When you're driving and changing lanes on the freeway, there's so many little things that go on in consciousness and perception and thinking and value and judgment. You're not naming each one. You're probably not even thinking about it. But there's so much happening, kind of under the level of consciousness. Sixty miles an hour, five lanes, and you're doing all this stuff. It's kind of amazing. If you tried to think about all of it while you're doing it, you'd probably have a wreck. It's too much.

So it's like that—the habits are under there. A simple example: you're sitting, and there's a pain in your knee. You think, "Well, I'm just going to be with it." And the next thing you know, you've moved. Not that it's right or wrong to move, but it's more the sense that conscious mind is saying, "Oh no, I'm not going to move from aversion, I'm just going to be here"—and the next thing you know.

I remember one time I was sitting on a long retreat in my room over at the retreat center, just doing my own thing, not the schedule. I was sitting in a chair, really in there. I wasn't just thinking about something—I was really in there, noting, noting, noting. And all of a sudden, I was at the door with my hand on the knob, thinking about cake. It woke me up so much. How did that happen? It's just under the level.

So it's great when we're seeing it here. Respect that. Because this is what happens in our daily life, doesn't it? When you go home, or to your partner, there's some issue that's really hard. I used to go home to visit my parents, and you think, "Well, I'm really not going to get sucked into the dynamic this time." Have you ever tried that one? "No, I'm going to go and just be filled with metta." And you mean it. It's a sincere, conscious intention in that moment. Unfortunately, you can't string it over. And the unconscious is so subtle and so quick. So you walk in, the mother or father says one thing, and it's off to the races. And you say, "Oh..."

But this is just how it is. So we still keep on trusting the steady awareness in these situations at home, and I'll talk more about that next week. Here's the same thing—really seeing how it works. Understanding this is called the latent tendencies for lobha and dosa, greed and hatred, to arise. Not the really gross ones, but given a particular set of conditions—one of which would be just not quite having awareness at that level of subtlety—that habit will arise. It's kind of latent.

That doesn't mean no matter what happens it's going to arise, because then there would be no point in practice. But it's understanding why. Why, when I thought I was really aware, suddenly there's greed and I'm at the door thinking about cake, and that's like a tenth of a second. Not to get into a whole, "Oh no, I'm bad, I wasn't mindful." It's like, wow, isn't that interesting? Look at that.

But in the moment of awareness, with my hand on the door—oh, look at that—awareness and wisdom noticing it, that awareness-wisdom didn't feed the greed. And it wasn't aversion. Aversion also feeds the same kilesas. It was just, "Oh, look at that." So right away, with the steady awareness, the wisdom is there. It's not that we need to fear it. In the seeing of it, even a moment of greed coming out of latent tendencies and mind-lessness becomes the catalyst for wisdom, for clear seeing, for a moment of coolness, of non-clinging.

To experience the peace, the coolness of the heart and mind that's free from kilesa—it doesn't mean the externals have to be beautiful and nice, with only nice things coming up in your mind and body. It doesn't at all. We see the drawbacks of the kilesas, but that doesn't mean the conditions have to be perfect.

In fact, I personally find, and people have mentioned this too, that often it's in the more difficult times that—especially now that we've been practicing a lot, everybody here—in the difficult times it can kind of wake us up to say, "Oh, okay, this is the place to really take refuge in awareness." As Ajahn Sumedho says, really determine to bring awareness, to trust awareness.

I know times when there's something physically very difficult going on and the mind wants to either go unconscious or find some way to distract, or there's a subtle aversion. And the last thing the habituated mind wants to do is say, just really drop into this with total awareness. It's like this now. Although from a hundred thousand times in my life, the thinking mind knows that the way in is the way of freedom. It knows that. Not freedom from that unpleasant experience—freedom from the kilesas that are obscuring that quality of ease, of coolness, that isn't bothered just for a moment by whatever is occurring. As I was saying this morning, my body may be afflicted, but the mind doesn't need to be afflicted.

So as much as we know that and recognize it through the steady, non-interfering mindfulness, we still have to sometimes take a breath and remind ourselves: yes, refuge in awareness. Just because the subtle tendencies of kilesa are so strong—not because we're somehow hopeless, useless meditators. That's the habit of kilesa speaking. We just have to remember to shift the habit. And every moment of steady mindfulness is shifting it.

As we see more of the drawbacks of the kilesas, we're less seduced by that unrecognized belief that craving is taking us in the way of happiness, that aversion and pushing away is taking us in the way of ease—as if we could be separate from this difficult and unpleasant experience. The more we recognize that, the more steady the awareness gets when we're just lying under the tree, being present with what is. That sense of becoming disenchanted with the ceaseless coming and going of objects, of kilesa.

So that's the way the aspect of practice that is understanding how the deluded mind works leads to the abandoning of craving, the abandoning of identification.

But also inspiring to me is that it doesn't have to only be that we endlessly focus on the kilesas to get rid of them. There are also times when the kilesas aren't strong. When there is that peace, we can consciously incline the attention, incline the mind in that direction.

There's a quotation I was reading in *The Island*. I could read that again and again—that compilation by Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno of quotations from the suttas dealing with awakening. All different kinds of quotations, and you get great sutta references. This particular one speaks about just this: nibbida, disenchantment, losing one's taste for. You just lose your taste for it. You know that example of a dog that comes upon an old bone, and he's all excited, chewing on it.

But the bone is so old, there's not one drop of anything in it—no marrow, no nothing, just an old, dried-up thing. So the dog chews it, and then, "Ah, there's nothing here," and just goes away. It's not hatred or disgust. It's just losing one's taste for it.

So that's from seeing how the kilesas work, seeing the constant coming and going of conditioned experience—we lose the taste for it. But as well, and this is something the Buddha said, at other times when we're not so engrossed in kilesa, a bhikkhu—and bhikkhu can mean anyone who's practicing—can reflect thus. It's like inclining the heart, the mind, to the deathless. Not thinking about it, but just recognizing, "Ah, this is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, disenchantment, nibbana."

Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that this is a reflective contemplation. But I found it to be something subtle—just not always being so engrossed in the kilesas, in the impurities, in the coming and going. Just that sense of peace, coolness. This is sublime. As Buddhadasa says, generating a contentment with emptiness.

At first, we don't so much have that contentment. At first it's a sense of, okay, it's like putting down the bone, but then what? We're still a little bit used to wanting things.

There's a very famous quotation from Ajahn Sumedho about this—very famous in our little Vipassana Buddhist circles. He says: "Try to think about knowing the unconditioned, knowing the deathless. Would that be interesting? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be incredibly fascinating.' So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. The space in this room—is it interesting to look at? Not to me. The space in this room is like the space in the other room. The things in this room might be interesting or uninteresting, good or bad, beau-

tiful or ugly. But the space—what is it? There's nothing you can really say about it. It has no quality except being spacious. So one recognizes space only by not clinging to the objects in the room."

When the clinging stops, when you let go of the absorptions, judgments, criticisms, and evaluations of the beings and the things in the room—when that isn't arising—you begin to experience the space of it. But mostly we're so involved in the absorptions and the judgments about everything: the beings, the space, the room, the mind. When there's no grasping, and there's just the space within which things are arising, that's that place. Someone was saying we often don't recognize it—the mind gets restless, too flighty. But here we do start to notice it, and we don't just have to stay bored with the space.

This really did inspire me—recognizing just that moment of peace, nothing special going on. And you might just, as a little skillful means, incline toward it: "Ah, this is sublime. This is peaceful." Not "Oh God, I've got something." But just letting it in—that sense of the peace, the coolness that isn't reacting off of anything or creating any sense of me in relation to anything. You don't think all that stuff. But you're kind of noticing what that feels like. We get more tuned into that quality in the heart, in the mind, in the awareness.

I'm using words that are all too gross, but it's kind of like purity. A friend of mine described it as feeling squeaky clean. Just squeaky clean. There's nothing there—just that awareness with nothing extra.

A lot of times when we have little moments like that on retreat, and off retreat too of course, but it's easier to notice on retreat—in the past, I would think about certain moments that were so vivid, but I would attribute it to the circumstances. It was beautiful weather, I had finally finished worrying about whether I was going to get a new job, this little lizard went by and it was so lovely, the people were so nice. You remember it in the context. But I would tend to give too much credit to the context, to the conditions, not recognizing that the sense of happiness or peace or freedom—whatever way your particular mind stream would name it—that is just the quality of that purity of heart-mind, and it's nothing to do with what the conditions are.

So that can be experienced—not so easy, but say in the midst of a bad headache, just for a moment. Yeah, it's easy.

OK, it's easier. It's easier when it's a beautiful day and you're outside and the peonies smell good and you're not sneezing from pollen. But maybe not. Maybe that's actually what sucks the mind into "isn't this wonderful."

But anyway, the skillful means, as the Buddha was teaching, is just that we can recognize and incline the mind to appreciating this—to the wholesome, to the heart-mind that isn't colored or distorted by kilesa.

I want to mention one other sutta from the Buddha where he's again giving two ways of giving attention. And this is, again, when the mind is pretty steady, as we're talking about now—not lost in gross kilesa. He's teaching that it can be skillful to brighten the heart-mind.

I like this sutta because it starts with Venerable Ananda taking his robe and bowl and going to a settlement of nuns. He's going and meeting with a group of nuns. Ananda, by the way, in the suttas is the friendly monk that we can more easily identify with. He makes mistakes. He's really friendly. He's very supportive of the nuns all through the suttas.

So he's approaching the nuns, and they say to him, "There are a number of nuns here who abide with our minds well established in the four foundations of mindfulness. Their understanding, their wisdom, their freedom is becoming ever greater and more excellent."

And he says, "So it is, sister, so it is."

Then he goes and tells the Buddha about this. He's basically talking to the Buddha about these nuns, these women, who are really well established in the four foundations of mindfulness. It's very steady. Their wisdom is growing. Their compassion is growing.

And the Buddha says, "Yes, very good." And as a monk or a nun abides contemplating—and he gives the four foundations—the body as body, feelings as feelings. Just in the simplicity of like under the tree, just a body. Just aware of the body, just to the extent necessary to know there is a body. Aware of feelings to the extent necessary to know there are feelings. This is this subtle, steady quality of mindfulness.

Still, in that time, it can happen that a bodily object or bodily distress arises, or as one translation says, a fever of kilesa might arise in the body, or sluggishness might arise in the mind, and either of those might arise and scatter the mind outward.

So he's saying, even when the practice is getting much more steady and refined, yeah, hello, this can happen.

And he says, so then the bhikkhu could direct their mind to some inspiring sign, some inspiring image. Basically, this is to direct the attention to something wholesome. This is where this sutta is called "Directed and Undirected Attention."

The mind gets scattered outward by some fever of kilesa in the body, some sluggishness in the mind. And so he said—this is what we've been saying as a skillful means—refresh the awareness. It may just be moving to something neutral, but here, when it's much more refined, we can really consciously tune into the wholesome.

So for example, "This is sublime." That's been really working for me lately, like a reminder. That's so peaceful, just the mind of non-clinging.

But it may be aspiration, as I mentioned the other day. It may be an image or a memory of someone who really inspires you, or an insight that you had.

I know when I'm in Burma, many of the nuns that we visit—sometimes for many of them, their main meditation practice is Buddhānussati, which is reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha over and over and over. Now for me, that particular practice doesn't particularly inspire me. But being with them when they're doing it, the faith and the brightness that practice brings up in their minds—that faith and brightness then does inspire me.

So I can call up some nuns I know and just get a sense of their faith and brightness. And then that's like a sense of the wholesome. And the mind gets collected again.

And he's saying, from this happiness, joy is born. With a joyful mind, the body relaxes. A relaxed body is more content.

The mind of one content becomes more collected. So the bhikkhu then reflects, "The purpose for which I directed my mind has been accomplished." In other words, the mind is balanced again. I withdraw attention from that particular wholesome object. I no longer think about it, no longer pay attention to it. And inwardly mindful, I am content.

That's directed meditation—skillful means, even when our experience is quite subtle.

And what is undirected meditation? Not directing one's mind outward or to any specific thing, one knows, one understands: "My mind, my attention is not directed outward, not focused on before or after, free, undirected." And one understands, "I abide being aware of body as body, ardent, fully aware, mindful. I am content."

I just love that. This is really what we're practicing when we say "just the steady awareness, just to the extent of knowing what's occurring." And knowing that that's what's happening—I am content. Nothing to want, nothing to get rid of.

So we have these two ways. With the steady awareness practice, sometimes we need a little more care. You see the kilesas coming, they're too strong, so you think, "Okay, a little more attention." Not knocking them away, but a little more taking refuge in awareness. And maybe you need to shift attention to something else. But when it's more steady, you don't need to do that anymore. The mind is aware. Just whatever's occurring—no before, no after—I am content.

This is really our practice. And as Ajahn Sumedho says, the practice of freedom is awareness. Just one moment, one moment, one moment.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 178

Big Sky Meditation

Carol Wilson · 43 min

> *In this guided meditation, Carol Wilson offers a practice rooted in the recognition of awareness itself as vast, boundless, and sky-like. Drawing on imagery that resonates with both classical Buddhist teachings on the nature of mind and contemporary contemplative approaches, she invites practitioners to simply rest in open awareness while observing how all phenomena—sounds, sensations, thoughts, and emotions—arise and pass like stars and clouds moving through an infinite sky.*
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> *The meditation systematically deconstructs the sense of a solid, bounded self by releasing identification with the body's usual coordinates: no arms, no legs, no head, no inside or outside. Instead, sensations appear as "points of light" flashing into awareness, thoughts move like shooting stars, and emotions gather and disperse like clouds. Throughout, Wilson emphasizes that the mind naturally knows and contains all experience without being made up of it or affected by it—pointing toward the Buddhist understanding of awareness as luminous and empty (suññatā).*
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> *This practice cultivates the quality of spacious awareness that supports insight into impermanence (anicca) and non-self (anattā). It offers a restful yet profound approach particularly suited for retreat settings or times when a practitioner needs to release effortful striving. The meditation concludes with a traditional sharing of merit (puñña), dedicating the beneficial energies of practice to the awakening and peace of all beings everywhere.*

Let yourself sit in a way that is comfortable. Just relax into being present, same as always. It is helpful if your eyes are gently closed.

In a very easy way, imagine the mind—or awareness, consciousness, whatever word you want to use—as vast as the night sky. Just sitting here, really wide and open. Notice any sounds, any hearing that arises and passes. There is no need to go towards it or make anything of it. Just sounds arising and passing in the wide open space of the mind.

Sound, silence—it is pretty quiet here. But just relax. Wide open space. Hearing just comes and goes, like stars in the sky. No trying to hear. Just imagining the vast night sky of mind. Sounds appear and disappear in the vast sky of mind.

The mind is vast, wide open, no boundaries. Sounds arise and vanish by themselves in this wide open space. There is no inside, no outside. Just sounds, hearing arising and vanishing.

Physical sensations arise and pass by themselves, like points of light shooting into the vast night sky of mind. Points of light arising, passing. Sounds come and go. The mind is vast, limitless. No borders or boundaries. Sounds come and go. Sensations like points of light. They arise and pass, but the mind contains them without being made up of them.

There are no arms, no legs, no front or back, no head. Simply sensations, points of sensation, points of light, arising by themselves, passing in the wide open sky-like nature of mind.

Sounds come and go. Sensations flash into the sky like points of light. The nature of mind has no boundaries, no center. Sensations and sounds flashing into existence and passing away again in the wide open space of mind.

Thoughts flash through like shooting stars. The wide open mind contains these things, recognizes them, but is not affected by them. It contains all experience but is not made up of that experience.

The mind is vast, wide open. It is, but it has no self-existence, no limits, no boundaries. In this wide open space, sounds come and go. Sensations like points of feeling arise and pass with no particular location, just flashing into awareness and dissipating again. Thoughts come and go like stars moving across the sky. Experience is known by the mind quite spontaneously.

Moods, emotions, feelings come together like clouds drifting across the sky and come apart again, all arising in this vastness of mind, recognized. The mind knows all things but is untouched by them.

This wide open sky-like mind. Sensations come and go like points of light. Sounds spontaneously arise, vanish. Thoughts like shooting stars through the wide open emptiness of the mind. Moods and emotions move like clouds. There is no center, no boundary. No head, no body. No near or far. Just sensations, sounds, moods, thoughts arising spontaneously, known spontaneously, vanishing spontaneously.

There is nothing to do, nothing to change or fix, and no one to do anything anyway. Simple things arising and passing in the wide open space of mind.

May the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms. May it be a cause, a condition for their awakening from suffering and confusion. May all beings live in peace and with compassion.

CHAPTER 179

Awareness and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · 50 min

> *In this opening retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses a question that arises for many practitioners: how can the simple practice of moment-to-moment awareness possibly counter the forces of hatred, fear, and confusion in the world? Drawing on the teaching of Mahā Ghosānanda that 'all the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts,' she illuminates how understanding—not willpower or aversion—dissolves the roots of suffering.*
>
> *Wilson explains that the Buddha's path begins and ends with sammā diṭṭhi (right view)—the accurate recognition of experience as it actually is, rather than through the distorting lenses of craving and aversion. Using the simple analogy of a child learning to match shapes, she demonstrates how confusion and frustration naturally fall away when we finally see clearly. This same principle applies to our deepest patterns of reactivity: when recognized accurately, they simply don't make sense anymore.*
>
> *The talk explores how unrecognized greed, hatred, and delusion—particularly the habit of taking everything personally—shrink our world and perpetuate suffering. Wilson emphasizes that this practice isn't about trying harder or fixing experience, but about relaxing into receptive awareness and letting life reveal itself. She shares the inspiring example of a man who lost his wife in the Christchurch mosque shooting yet responded with profound wisdom: 'We are one people.' This transformation of heart and mind, available in each moment of clear awareness, is the liberation the Buddha offers—not escape from the world, but a complete change in how we understand and respond to it.*

Sometimes I go through periods when the things happening in the world, the news, just seem to hit me harder than usual, overwhelming me for whatever conditions are present. There's always something happening, but the cycle of fear and hatred and violence, fear and hatred and violence—the big picture we see and the small individual picture—sometimes I can feel quite overwhelmed by it. I imagine I'm not the only one.

The last few weeks were a time like that for me. Occasionally, when I'll be coming on retreat during one of those times, my mind will engage in samsara questioning: How can this commitment, this practice of steady awareness leading to wisdom, possibly match and counter the force of delusion, hatred, fear, and anger in the world? How can it possibly be met? Not whether it's useful, but how can it possibly be stronger?

Actually, in a way, I kind of like it when these questions come up for me because then I take a deeper look. I really reaffirm in my own experience, in my own mind and heart, the power of the awakening heart and mind, the power of the wisdom, the clear seeing that arises from this practice of steady awareness.

What I appreciate about re-recognizing—not rediscovering, it didn't go away—is that this force of truly understanding things as they are, not just intellectually but kinesthetically in our gut, is the power that really transforms our own hearts and minds. I like that I keep reconnecting with that rather than just assuming. Assuming is never the way of awakening. What's happening right now? Look and see. Look and see for myself. Look and see for ourselves. Is this a path? Is this a practice that's actually leading to less pain and suffering and hatred and fear and anger in your own heart and mind? Because that's the place where this practice works.

One of my favorite quotations is from Maha Ghosananda, a wonderful Cambodian monk and peace activist. He was speaking at a conference in D.C. about landmines—you know, there are landmines sprinkled all over the world, many in his home country of Cambodia from the time of the Khmer Rouge. He said that all of the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts. To understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to remove them in the world.

To me, that's one way of saying the essence of the Buddha's teaching, certainly what we can undo, explore, and come to see. This isn't about believing it intellectually—you can think all kinds of things. It's really looking and seeing: What are the landmines in my heart? How are they created on a moment-to-moment basis? How are they dissolved on a moment-to-moment basis?

As Maha Ghosananda said, through understanding, landmines in our hearts are dissolved. Through understanding—not through willpower, not through hating and digging them out, not through saying, "Okay, that's it, I'm never going to be angry again." Have you ever tried that? Does it work? It would be good if it did, but it doesn't.

This is what I want to talk about tonight: how amazing the power of this simple, receptive, moment-to-moment awareness is—awareness that seems like so nothing. The way Alexis was talking about it this morning: just notice you're seeing. Notice I'm seeing? Go around all day noticing I'm seeing and this is going to liberate my heart and mind from suffering? I don't know about that.

But luckily, here you are with nothing else to do. We make it that way on purpose, really, because if you had anything else to do, if you don't have a trust built from your own experience in this, you'd go do the other thing. I'm sure you've tried many things today, most of which probably weren't that interesting—for a while. When you're reading the ingredients on the toilet cleaner, you know you're sinking.

Just notice reading. That's all you have to do. Just notice reading. Wanting. Incredible boredom. That's awareness. That's awareness.

You can't get away from it.

But the Buddha, in his awakening, was speaking about the wisdom, the understanding that frees our hearts and minds. It may seem that this practice is a turning away from all the conflicts, all the difficulties, all the pain in the world. Certainly, as we come to a secluded, supported, relatively safe place like this, we are very privileged to be able to be here. That's not a put-down—it's something we can genuinely appreciate.

But as you see, as we were saying last night and perhaps this morning as well, all the ups and downs of life are going to happen here. Each of us, even though our personal, familial, and cultural histories may be different, each of us is a microcosm of the human condition. And so what we see in the world—this seeming cycle of confusion and fear and violence and hatred—there's also a lot of goodness. It doesn't get as much airplay, but you can find it if you look. We're a microcosm of that.

What we are setting up in a retreat, in our whole life of awareness practice—the Buddha is saying that what he's offering us isn't an escape from the facts of the world, or from connection with people, or from relationships. He's saying that what frees our hearts and minds from suffering is understanding things as they actually are.

The Buddhist path begins and ends with wise understanding, or right view. The first step of the Eightfold Noble Path is right view, but then it's really more like a circle. You move through *sīla*, appropriate non-harming behavior, through meditation, cultivating energy and mindfulness and collectedness of mind, and then it comes back around again to right understanding and right intention. It keeps deepening and spiraling.

What I love about the translation "right view" is that in a way I find it very literal. Viewing, recognizing our experience accurately—as opposed to our ideas and assumptions about what's happening—is actually what frees the heart and mind. The wisdom that arises from accurate recognition is what frees us from the suffering and confusion brought about by the habits of reaction. We're reacting to something we're not even recognizing accurately, so we respond in ways that are inappropriate.

The Buddha, in his awakening, when he came to understand and free the heart and mind, awoke and lived in the same world. So if we're waiting for the bolt of lightning—there was a lot last night. Did it do it? No, here we all still are. If we're waiting for the bolt of lightning to take us into an alternate universe of happiness and freedom, give it up. There's not an alternate. Maybe there is, I don't know. I have a friend who's going on about black holes, showing me pictures and trying to explain them. Maybe there is an alternate universe if you go through a black hole. I have no clue. But that's not what the Buddha is offering us. We don't have to do that. He woke up in the same world. But recognizing it accurately—that's what changed.

So when we understand the landmines in our own heart, that understanding, that accurate recognition, is the wisdom that allows for the habits of mind to release from responding with anger, with hatred, with greed, with self-judgment. This is the liberation of heart-mind that the Buddha's teachings offer us.

Remember, I read from the Dalai Lama the other night: so much of our unhappiness originates within our own minds and hearts, in how we react to the events in our life. That's very much to the point. The suffering the Buddha is talking about, that we can explore here on retreat—even if it seems small, or you might even say insignificant if you want to put yourself down—but it's not helpful to call your suffering insignificant compared to that in the world. The mechanism is the same.

This is what we can truly understand: that the suffering which arises from this moment in our own mind and heart, from how we're perceiving and responding to experience—the suffering arises in this moment. And the freedom from it, the dissolution of the suffering, the compassion and the wisdom, also arises in this moment, in this mind and heart.

The suffering is not because circumstances are as they are. And awakening from suffering doesn't change all the circumstances externally. It's not going to. But it does affect a complete change in how we understand and how we respond, both internally and externally.

We can't simply decide that from now on we're not going to act out of anger. To some extent we can, and that's where the precepts are helpful. We come up against certain strong impulses toward harmful action. Even then, sometimes the energy of anger or greed can be too strong. But often the precepts will bring us up against a wall, and we see what's going on in the heart and mind. "Oh, I don't want to do that." That's great. It's as if the precept is letting wisdom come in and say, "Oh, that's a harmful thing—don't do it."

But the anger might still be arising, right? Yet it's not just about external action—it's also this wisdom of accurate recognition. And that's all it is. Accurate recognition really changes the heart and mind.

As Martin Luther King said, in talking about nonviolence, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. We not only refuse to shoot a person, we refuse to hate them." That's really the internal place that all of our practice is bringing us into, again and again, moment after moment.

Because just thinking about it, without the experience of really recognizing things as they are—in my mind, it can be easy to think that when these horrible things happen, of course the normal response is anger, fear. Well, that is the normal response. That's the habitual response. But is that the right and appropriate response? What else could be possible?

And then there's someone like Dr. King. Or actually, I was quite inspired a couple of weeks ago. I was listening to the BBC, and they were interviewing people a day or two after all those people in New Zealand were killed in the mosque. I don't know how they do it—they go and interview people who survived it, like the next day. I don't know how you can do that. But anyway, it was very inspiring because they were talking to a man. It seemed like he was an elderly man who had been in the mosque with his wife. And his wife died in the attack and he didn't. They described him in a wheelchair—she had been his caretaker. And they were talking to him maybe two days after his wife had died.

You could hear him talking. He just sounded amazing. He said, "We are one people." And he didn't mean just the people who were worshiping in the mosque. He meant everyone. It may have been just New Zealand or it may have been the world, I don't know. But he wasn't just talking about the people in the mosque. He said, "We're one people." And he said, "Perhaps someone who acts like this, like the killer, is hoping that there will be retaliatory violence from Muslims." But he said, as far as he's concerned, that's not going to happen. "We are one people. We need to change within ourselves to be able to live together."

How can someone have that depth of clarity and connectedness to be able to respond in that way? It's possible. This is really very inspiring to me. It's possible. And this is, you know, one person, one person, one person. It doesn't end all the hatred, but this is where we're starting. This is really what the Buddha is offering us: the same world, recognized differently.

Starting from our own experience, really with interest—look and see what's going on. It's so elegant. When we recognize accurately—

all of the responses of confusion or wanting or whatever—they don't make sense anymore. So they just drop away.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. It's very simple, one I've been using a lot recently, because it's simple but it really illustrates how this works. It's about my young nephew when he was really young, when he was two or three. Now he's old—he's five. Just watching how kids learn, you know.

This is a simple example with those old toys where they have a box with wooden blocks in the shape of circle, square, triangle. And then you have a big wooden box with holes cut in those shapes. The kids just learn to put the blocks in. We say it's not rocket science. But first a kid, you know, you show them and it looks so easy. So they think they can just pick up the block and put it in. But he's not differentiating circle from square from triangle. So he's trying to put the circle in the triangle and it doesn't go. He tries again to put the triangle in the square—it doesn't go.

Different kids based on personality respond differently. But I could see the sense of confusion leading to frustration, leading to a kind of antsiness. If it was an adult trying to do it, the thoughts could be things like, "What's wrong with me?" Turning the frustration inward. "It looks so easy for them. What's the matter with me that I can't do it?" Or more like, "There's a secret the adults aren't telling me. What is it?" And you can just see the frustration building. It doesn't work, it doesn't work, until you just want to throw the thing against the wall and go do something else.

But keep trying and all of a sudden something clicks. The triangle goes in the triangle. And it's like, "Ah, that just seemed like an accident." But all of a sudden something clicks and they see the shapes and they see how it works and it's just normal. It's just a law of nature. It's not like they suddenly had this brilliant change. It's just seeing, "Oh, that's how it works."

And all the frustration goes away, because it doesn't make any sense. It doesn't relate to the actual experience at all. The sense of "I'm stupid" or "they're not letting me know what's going on"—all of that's gone. Okay, yeah, you put the triangle in the triangle. That's just the law of nature, like gravity. And so you stop trying to put the triangle in the circle because that doesn't make any sense. And then, of course, you get bored and move on to something else—but that's extra.

You get a sense of what I mean. That's what we're talking about with right view. That's insight. Oh, it's like that. All my excitement and upsetness and thinking I've got to get angry—that's just because it doesn't relate. This is how it is.

This is the right view that the Buddha is offering us. When we recognize ourselves as we are, moment to moment. Not a big concept, but what's happening right now in this moment? What's actually happening? Not what I think is happening or how I think it ought to be or how my breath ought to be or how it ought to feel if I'm aware every moment—just what's happening now. Oh, sitting, reading the toilet cleaner, boredom. That's what's happening just right here, right now. And you know what? In that moment of awareness, just resting in it, it's totally okay.

You're thinking, "Yeah, right." But no, it's totally okay. In that moment: "Oh, this is what it is now." And all the wanting and the comparing and the looking for something else just drops away. We see that what was making the problem isn't that the experience isn't giving us enough—it's that the heart, the mind, the consciousness in that moment is so covered over, distorted by wanting it to be different, by trying to make something happen, by comparing to some feeling we had in the past. And we're not even recognizing that this is going on as a kind of overlay upon simply just being here in this moment, fully present with things as they are.

So this beginning to explore what's really going on is the power of this simple, steady, moment-to-moment awareness—mindfulness.

Mingyur Rinpoche said once that if we want to be happy, we need to recognize what causes and conditions lead to well-being. And similarly, if we do not have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how can we possibly expect to be free from it, to free ourselves from it?

The understanding he's talking about here, again, is not thinking, "Oh, what do I need to make me happy? Let's see—if my body didn't hurt and if I had a new car and I had a better job and there was peace in the world, then I would be happy. Or if at least I could go to bed early, I would be happy." Those are just ideas. Just ideas. The understanding he's talking about is the simple, clear, and accurate perception, recognition of what's happening now—not being in contention with reality. That's mindfulness.

One definition of vipassana meditation, I think this is from U Tejaniya: vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. Does that sound familiar, like what we were exploring today? Experiencing the mind and body directly means just this simple awareness, relaxing into experience, just being here with it. Directly—not through the veil of how we think

it ought to be, or how it was yesterday, or whatever I like or I don't like. Oh, it's just like this now. It's just like this now. Just feeling the sensations, just noticing seeing is happening.

It seems so simple, so nothing. But the steadiness of this—and it's the steadiness that's the key—starts to reveal just how life is working, the cause and effect of how things are happening. We start to recognize for ourselves.

If all it takes to really feel some liberation from the landmines in our hearts, to be present in a moment of life fully, without feeling in contention, without feeling self-judgment, without it being such a struggle, without needing it to be other—if it's so simple that all we have to do is just recognize what's occurring, why is it so hard?

Because it's simple. And it's really difficult, isn't it? Difficult not in the sense of you have to try harder. Because trying harder... trying harder generally means a sense of wanting to have a certain thing happen or wanting to have a certain thing stop happening. So we try harder. Wanting, wanting, wanting. Get away, get away—I'm trying harder. Aversion, aversion. This is exactly what blocks and obstructs our resting at ease with clear awareness. It's what obstructs accurate recognition. It's what obstructs really awakening.

Not that wanting can't arise, not that aversion can't. It can arise, it can be recognized. But unrecognized—that's really where we get into all these reactions. Like the young child throwing blocks across the room. Really, the frustration and the aversion is unrecognized, and that's what's cultivating the response. That's what keeps us confused, what keeps us from recognizing what's happening.

From the Buddha: "This liberation, this nibbana, is visible here and now." To what extent is it visible here and now? To the extent that greed, that hatred or fear, that confusion are not present in the heart-mind, are not clouding, are not obstructing our clear presence. When we don't recognize these states, they run the show.

And you can be trying really sincerely, with full effort. And you're mindful of what's happening. You're walking. Let's take walking. As I think Mark said this morning, you can be walking and feeling every single sensation—sixty sensations in the lifting of your foot. That can be done with wisdom, or it can be done with incredible wanting and striving and pushing. You feel mindful because you're present, but what's being missed—the elephant in the room—is how much wanting and forcing is going into that. At the end of a period of walking, you feel like your whole body is just going to break in two. Sometimes I'll notice my tongue is glued to the roof of my mouth.

I feel the sensations, I'm present. What's the problem? But oh, there's a little wanting going on here, not quite noticed—the attitude in the mind.

As the Buddha said, when the heart-mind, the citta, is filled with or obsessed with wanting, greed, or aversion, or ill will, and we don't recognize it, we can't see our own good or the good of another or the good of both. We can't recognize accurately.

And so it's not—we think, "Okay, I'm going to really get rid of greed," and we start hating greed. That's not really the point. It's more like looking and seeing: how does it work? Greed is just another aspect of nature. It's a habit that's been cultivated in the heart-mind. It makes sense. This is pleasant, let me get more of it, because that's the avenue to happiness—that's what we've learned. It's just cause and effect. This is unpleasant, let me get away from it, because it's miserable to be with the unpleasant. Who wants to be with pain? If you can get away, of course you should. But that aversion part is extra. We don't recognize that, and so it distorts. We don't quite know what's going on.

There's a funny, simple example of how that works. I think it was from Andrea Levine. She spoke about how you can't trust your mind—you can't trust your perceptions when they're distorted by greed or aversion. If you can recognize it, that helps. So she gave a simple example: You're eating a big piece of chocolate cake, and there's another big piece, and your mind goes, "Come on, have another piece. It'll be really pleasant. You'll really like it. It's good for you. Have another piece. You deserve it." So you eat the other piece, at which point you're not feeling so well, and your mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you." We think it's the same mind, but that's what craving does—it tells us it's going to make us so happy. So you just can't trust it.

We need to start recognizing that these mental qualities are just habits, forces of nature. We're just nature like everything else. When they're present and unrecognized, they keep us spinning in confusion. It can really start from just a little "I don't like that sound," all the way up to being caught in rage or fear or terror. It can go really quickly.

And the greed and the aversion—this not wanting to be with what's happening, wanting it to be better—the strongest or most familiar cloud of delusion, the way they show up, is that sense of it all being about me. I don't know if you can relate to this at all, but just the sense of taking whatever's occurring personally.

And that can be just noticing this. Don't take it personally that you take it personally. It's like, "Oh no, I'm doing it again." That's another habit of mind. The thing with steady awareness—remember, awareness isn't picking and choosing. "This is okay to pay atten-

tion to. Oh, this is ugly, I don't want to see how much I'm identifying with stuff. So let's pretend it's not happening. All beings, may all beings be happy." No, no, no. Just see what's really happening. Awareness is just interested.

And watching how it all works—that's where the wisdom and the freedom come in. So watching how this sense of taking it personally arises and what the effect of it is, just in small things.

What do I mean by that? Just the sense of, as we're going through the day, there are all these things happening. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, all the different physical sensations. And how many thoughts and moods and emotions and images have come in this day? Millions. Every moment something's arising. I'm really pretty sure—I'd say I'm one hundred percent sure—your mind didn't take every single one of those personally, because it would really be unbearable. Unbearable.

Because when we take it personally, it either is me, or it's mine, or it's happening to me, it's doing it to me. The whole world comes to be about me, and it really just shrinks everything.

So, for example, there's a sound that's unpleasant and it's occurring over and over. That's just what's happening. But when there's that sense of "that sound is affecting my practice, that sound is upsetting me"—then immediately the mind either goes into "I should be able to just be equanimous with it" and gets negative toward oneself, or it goes into "This is a meditation center. They should be a little more in control. Their heat shouldn't make noise. The lightning shouldn't come. The rain—they should have fixed the gutters ages ago so that we wouldn't have to sit in the meditation hall and listen to all this noise. What's the matter with them?"

And it can go on and on. If you're here on a three-month retreat, sometimes we used to have these wars over the windows. How much are they open? How much are they closed? It's just endless. But that's all about me. I shouldn't be hot. I shouldn't be cold. They should make it better. It just complicates everything.

And we really believe that story. It shouldn't be. How can they fix it? It's their fault. It's my fault. How can I get more? And we don't even recognize it. We get completely entranced by the reactions of mind. At some point, we're not even noticing it's an unpleasant sound anymore. We're way down the road—I mean, it might be literally way down the road—but you're way down the road of "how can it be fixed, what's the matter with them, I should have gone to this other place," whatever it is. And seeing how it shrinks our world.

This is from the Dalai Lama. Because we're paying attention, the steady awareness is really being with our own experience all day, we really are giving a huge amount of attention to seemingly me. So of course we're going to be noticing how much the sense of me taking it personally comes up. But keep watching. Keep watching. Don't stop watching.

The Dalai Lama: "The paradox is that although the drive behind excessive self-focus is to seek greater happiness for yourself, it can end up doing exactly the opposite. When you focus too much on yourself, you become disconnected and alienated from others. In the end, you also become alienated from yourself. With too much self-focus, your vision can become narrow. And with this, even a small problem appears out of proportion and unbalanced."

Maybe you haven't been here long enough to experience this, but there is a phenomenon that occurs on retreat—and occurs off retreat too, but I'm talking about on retreat—that we call "yogi mind." Around day two, day three, it starts to happen.

It's normal, this sense of taking things personally. Something pleasant or unpleasant, a small thing, gets really exaggerated. It becomes so important that you find yourself needing to write a note to the cooks with this incredible vehemence.

I got a note once when I was a cook here long ago. It said, "If I never see another wheat berry for the rest of my life, that would be for the good of all beings." And it was signed "Mettā." These notes are always signed "Mettā." And I believe the people who write them really think, "I am writing this for the good of all beings. If you ever serve this again, I won't be responsible for the other yogis' mind states." Actually, a teacher said that to us once: "If this is served again, I won't be responsible for the mind states of the yogis out there."

Or you burst into the office demanding, "Don't you have this particular kind of cold care in the yogi needs closet?" with this incredible vehemence. We call that yogi mind. The world is shrinking, and it becomes all about me. Whatever's occurring is all about me.

Joseph Goldstein tells a great story—simple but great—about how this works. He was on a retreat, in line for the meal, maybe second in line. Big pots of soup with the covers still on. The person ahead of him took the cover off and dropped it. You can imagine the racket it made, everyone looking. And he says his first thought was, "It wasn't me." You want to stand aside and announce, "What's with me?" That's what our minds do when

the world shrinks like this. That's what happens with this sense of taking things personally. And that, again, serves to strengthen the habits of fear and aversion and greed, because we think that's what makes us happy.

We'll talk more about how these patterns work in the coming days. But here's the thing: you don't have to try to get rid of any of this. This is the beauty, the simplicity, of simple moment-to-moment receptive awareness. Because if you heard Alexis this morning, we're not trying to make anything happen. We're not trying to get rid of anything that's happening. We're just trying to see, to be with this moment's experience as it is. Let life reveal itself. Let life tell its own story in the light of this simple, steady, moment-to-moment presence.

It's so much less we have to do than trying to fix. How can we fix? We don't even know what's happening in the first place, and then we're trying to fix it to match some cockamamie idea we come up with.

Basically, bottom line—maybe I'm wrong, and you'll look and see for yourself—but generally, if you're trying to fix it, you want it to be more pleasant. Just look and see. Don't believe me, but look and see. When you think of being free from suffering, does that include any more unpleasant experience? No, right?

We were just talking today about suttas where the Buddha starts to give a talk, then turns to Ānanda or Sāriputta and says, "My back is hurting. You finish the talk—I'm going to go lie down." Did you ever think of the Buddha having a backache? He had a body, right? The body keeps doing its thing. It doesn't stop. That's not the suffering the Buddha can free us from. The body is still going to grow and decay and get sick. Things are still going to happen in the world.

So if we're trying to get in here and fix our experience, if we're using awareness practice to try to make our experience better—well, in my experience, that agenda keeps slipping in more and more subtly. Don't blame yourself when you notice it. Just check: "I'm being with what is." Is there tension? Is there struggle? Check it. "I'm being with what is... but it would be a little better if it was like that."

Once I was practicing in Burma, having been there quite a long time, doing walking meditation. I was just being present, aware, and it was fine. Awareness was pretty natural, easy, nothing spectacular. But I noticed this little niggling sense, a subtle feeling of struggle or something.

Sometimes it's helpful to take a moment and actually see what's the thought, what's the expectation lurking in the back of the mind. Sometimes it's helpful to bring it up into the light of day, because when you see it, you go, "Oh." This one was: "It could be

better." That was the thought. Just a little bit of striving, pushing—it could be better. What could be better? I don't know. I didn't know. It. Something could be better. Walking up and down could be better. Really?

But without recognizing that, there's wanting. It's wanting, it's like this now. Because what we're developing, what we're cultivating, what we're coming to trust—this refuge—is the simplicity and totality of receptive awareness. It's like this, whatever's occurring. The seeing, hearing, smelling, thoughts, thinking, whatever's happening—that's the catalyst to re-recognize awareness. Any moment, whatever's occurring, knowing it's happening: here's the awareness again.

This starts to become more interesting, more enlivening than deriving our sense of happiness, unhappiness, and personal meaning from whatever particular experience is arising. Notice how much we might think, "Oh, it's going well now because my body's not hurting and I'm really enjoying this food," or whatever it is. Or, "It's really going badly now—there's this sound and there's aversion and there's a tingling and people are moving." But there's actually really steady awareness. That's fine.

The steady awareness, this mindful awareness, the simplicity and honesty of that—just relaxing into whatever's presenting itself due to causes and conditions. We never know what's going to arise in experience in the next moment, do we? You can plan it all out, but we sit down and you never know what's going to arise in the next moment of a sitting. Do you? I love it when I've been on retreat long enough that I sit down and it's like, "Okay, what happens next?"

Our whole life is like that. It's not just a sitting. Whenever you stand up thinking, "I'm going to go walk," and the next thing you know you're sitting in the dining room drinking tea. How did this happen? I thought I was going to walk. Awareness kind of took a holiday and didn't notice all the different motivations coming and going.

All we want to do is just relax into this moment with the simplicity and honesty of awareness, and let life tell its own story. It's so much easier than what we can imagine. But the awareness, the sense of awareness—it's nothing fancy going on. It's almost ephemeral. But like when Alexis asked, "Are you aware of seeing or not?" and you could know you were aware of seeing after he said it—that difference between seeing and not being aware of it and being aware of it is palpable, but really subtle. It's like almost nothing, but it's something.

How do we trust that enough that it can actually be the condition that leads to the wisdom that transforms our understanding of ourselves and of life? That really transforms the habits of our heart and mind from confusion and self-interest and fear and

greed to wisdom and compassion. That allows us—like that man in the wheelchair in New Zealand, whatever his natural response—to actually be able, in a moment, to have a sense of more of the connectedness of all of us and not just our own particular story.

The effect of living in this fullness of awareness, just being with what's happening in the heart-mind in this moment, is really the condition that leads to liberating wisdom.

I want to share an experience with a friend I was visiting a couple of years ago. She's an elderly woman in her nineties, a very long-term and deeply serious practitioner with a great deal of wisdom. Her life had been extremely rich and varied and full, all kinds of experiences. But now the body was frail. The mind was still clear, but the body was frail, and she was living in assisted living. Her life had become extremely confined—maybe she could go out of the facility once in a while if her daughter took her, but mostly she stayed in the apartment.

And she said—we were just visiting, she'd been a really deep Dharma practitioner for years—she said, "You know, this is the most interesting time of my life."

I said, "Really? How so?"

She said, "Well, it's just like when I'm walking across the room to go put the tea kettle on. That's everything." She didn't say it this way, but she's so present. Walking across the room, that's all of life right here. There's nothing else. It's so alive. "And when I'm pouring water into the tea kettle, it's just so interesting. It's just all of life right here."

And this wasn't an intellectual thing. This was a deep message from her heart. I could see it's really all of life in that moment, so present in that moment. It's not about the activity that's making her feel interested and alive. It's the quality of the pure heart and mind that isn't lost in stories of me—that in that moment isn't distorted by wanting things different or thinking it could be better. It's just total wakefulness. There's a quality of purity, you could say, in the heart-mind, just not clouded by these confusions.

And it doesn't take some incredible thing in life to be alive and interesting. It's the quality of present moment awareness. Steady, steady, steady. This is really what our practice is.

And just let the knowing, let the wisdom arise by itself. It will. It's a fact of nature, cause and effect. Just like if you plant a seed and water it and there's sunshine—the right conditions—it grows. Nothing we do. Steady awareness without picking and choosing—that's what's so important. Letting all these difficult and beautiful things come and go and being really present, watching it with interest. Reality reveals itself.

And the natural effect of wisdom is that wisdom cultivates, inclines towards the beautiful, the wholesome qualities of heart and mind. The suffering qualities don't make any sense. They become irrelevant. And so they're abandoned in that moment.

I want to end with a couple of quotations from two very different Burmese teachers. One is from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "As mindfulness, awareness, is remembered more and more frequently, gradually it develops its own momentum. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we appreciate our entrancements and reactions with whatever the mind is noticing." So we appreciate the awareness more than the reactions.

This is from Sayadaw U Pandita: "When mindfulness, when awareness, is persistently and repeatedly activated"—which is just simply remembering, that's it, repeatedly activated—"wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of body and mind." This is not an act of personal will. You don't have to make it happen. It's just a natural law.

So relax, settle back. What's happening now? That's our job. This moment, and then the next moment. Then we forget for five and a half hours. Then—oh, what's happening now, right now? That's all. Just not being in contention with this moment.

Thank you for your kind attention. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 180

Perception of Impermanence Stabilizes Understanding - Aniccā

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates how accurate perception of impermanence (aniccā) serves as a gateway to liberation. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual craving, craving for becoming, ignorance, and the conceit of 'I am,' she explores why this single recognition holds such transformative power.

Wilson examines the three characteristics of conditioned experience—aniccā (impermanence), dukkha (unreliability), and anattā (not-self)—showing how they interweave. She discusses saññā (perception) and its distortions, explaining how our habitual perception of permanence keeps us in contention with reality. Using vivid examples, including the story of Ānanda weeping at the Buddha's approaching death, she illustrates our natural human tendency to recoil from change and seek refuge in pleasant, familiar experiences.

The teaching emphasizes that insight arises not through intellectual understanding alone, but through the three levels of wisdom (paññā): hearing (suta-mayā paññā), reflection (cintā-mayā paññā), and direct development (bhāvanā-mayā paññā). Wilson points to steady, non-preferential awareness as the key that allows accurate perception to arise naturally, revealing the momentariness of all experience. She concludes with Ajahn Sumedho's insight that true stability is found not in achievement but in being awake, and reads poetry by Issa and Hafiz that beautifully captures the tenderness of fully embracing impermanence.

So we've spoken quite a few times about right view. Alexis described it some more now—the sense of just understanding in the beginning of our practice that we're simply perceiving nature without taking it personally, without adding an assumption on top of it. But in another way, right view simply means recognizing things as they are already, living in alignment, understanding in alignment with life as it actually is.

Right view, as it continues to cycle and grow with wisdom—wisdom is simply recognizing accurately what's occurring, as we've said. Steady awareness is what leads to, is the condition that allows for this clarity of wisdom to arise.

What I want to talk about a bit tonight is what the insight is, what it is that right view recognizes. This is not new information to anyone who's been practicing, on the intellectual level. But of course, right view, the real cellular understanding of things as they are, is not just on the intellectual level. So we keep on bringing awareness to whatever's occurring.

What is it that wisdom recognizes? There are different ways it could be talked about. Tonight I want to talk about it in terms of how the Buddha described all conditioned experience as having certain characteristics. All conditioned experience, without exception, has the characteristic of being impermanent—*anicca*—constant change and flow. Of being *dukkha*, the word in Pali, meaning unreliable, unsatisfactory, nothing one can place one's trust in as a way to happiness or peace. It will always disappoint. And *anatta*—that no conditioned experience has an intrinsic sense of self. There is no steady self. It's about all things, but of course, what we care about is me. So there's this quality of not-self.

These three qualities are just how things are. It's not that as wisdom develops, suddenly the world shifts and everything starts to change, whereas before it was steady state. It's not that the nature of insight is, "Oh, now that I've moved through that black hole into the alternate universe, everything's unreliable and shifting and not-self. Before, it was really solid and didn't change. It just somehow—I wasn't happy about that."

The nature of insight comes back again to the literal meaning of right view: accurate recognition. The nature of insight actually begins with perception, with the shift of perception.

Perception, *saññā* in Pali, refers to a very specific state of mind—that quality of whenever there's a sense contact, like hearing, the mind has a recognition of it. Hands clapping. It just happens. It's not right or wrong. It just happens. We're not trying to stop it, but we can recognize it happens. It's based on memory. If you've never heard that sound before, the mind might not know it's hands clapping. But the habit of perception, what the mind tends to do more often than not, is make something up. Rather than, "Oh, I don't know what that sound is," the mind goes, "Oh, that's such and so." It may be right, it may be wrong. So even a very simple perception like that can be inaccurate, and we don't know unless we come back and look carefully.

Some inaccurate perceptions are very simple to recognize. But the perception of impermanence, the perception of the unreliability and unsatisfactoriness of particular experience, the perception of not-self—these are not so easy to recognize.

The Buddha talks about it as inverted perception, the distortions, the hallucinations of perception. So much of the time, the perception of impermanence isn't there. We may even think, "Sure, I know everything's impermanent," but our perception is actually pretty solid. I look at that zabuton. I'm not thinking about it, but I'm not seeing change going on there. My mind, without thinking, assumes that's the same as it was yesterday, the same as it's going to be tomorrow. There's this whole assumption of permanence without even recognizing that's going on or questioning it.

Reality doesn't change, but insight starts with perception. The shift of perception into alignment with how things are is really the movement of insight. Perception is so important because it doesn't just stop there. The Buddha talks about the distortions of perception, or accurate perception, and how perception gives rise to *citta*—how we think about things.

And then that gives rise to *diṭṭhi*, or view—wise view or inaccurate view. So perception gives rise to thought, which gives rise to view. "This is how it is." We think this is how it is. And all the accompanying thoughts and moods and actions arise from that, just in the blink of an eye.

A simple example. I was reminded of this by Alexis's experience two nights ago with the chirping, which hopefully didn't happen again. So it's a story Joseph told—I'm allowed to tell it, but it's his story. Very possessive, dharma teachers are of their stories. Although it didn't happen to him. I mentioned it at the table and he goes, "That's my story." I said, "Well, I heard you give a talk where it wasn't only my story, it actually happened to me, and you were using it and you didn't ask me." So, payback time. This is what goes on. It's really highbrow stuff.

Anyway, this couple—and we can't remember who it was, so I hope there's no one in this room because we can't remember who it actually happened to; it was a long time ago—a couple of our friends moved into a new house, and they were settling in, and then they started hearing this little chirping from the basement. It sounded like a little nest of birdlings. Isn't that sweet? And they'd hear the chirping. "That's so sweet." This went on for a couple of days, and the thoughts—so nice—and all the happy emotions, all this stuff going on.

After a couple of days, they thought, "You know, it's a little too regular. I don't really..." So they actually went down and looked, which can help. And of course it was—Alexis is chirping—it was the fire alarm thing. Chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp. So then that was accurate recognition. And all the thoughts changed, and all the moods changed,

and all the story around it changed. Deflated, unhappy. It wasn't like the end of their life, but everything around it changed, just from the perception becoming accurate. You get a sense of that.

So: perception to thinking to view. And then once there's a view—"Oh, it's like this"—we have views all the time. Once there's attachment to it, and most of the time we don't even recognize it's a view, never mind that we're attached to it. We won't say, "Oh, it's a view that that chirping sound is birds, and I really love it." It's like, no, that's what it is. That's basically how views are.

So when we're talking about perception—accurate perception or inaccurate perception—inaccurate perception takes us into the realm of looking for ease and happiness in experience that's changing, that's unreliable, that has no steady, stable self-core, and then not understanding why it isn't working. Why doesn't *saṃsāra* work? Because we're looking in the wrong way at the wrong thing.

So just to go into this a little tonight, I want to pick *anicca*, because I could talk all night about each of them, and to try and do all three at once... let's just stick with *anicca*. They all come together anyway.

The reason experiences are unsatisfactory and unreliable is essentially because they're constantly changing. And the reason that there's not a steady, stable self is because there's no steady, stable *nothing* to be a steady, stable self. So it's really kind of just roped around together—three angles of the same reality.

So I'm just going to talk about impermanence. This is from the Buddha:

Bhikkhus—which really means practitioners—*bhikkhus*, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual craving. It eliminates all craving for becoming—for becoming any particular state, any particular experience.

It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all of the conceit, all of the view of "I am."

This is shorthand for complete awakening—those four things. The perception of impermanence, when basically really deeply known, uproots, eliminates, dissolves the craving and the confusion that comes from the view, the conceit, "I am."

Well, that's a pretty powerful statement, in my opinion. Really powerful. And it's not saying you've got to go out and get rid of it. It's just coming back to the power of accurate perception.

And probably I could just say this next point, and that could be the rest of the talk. What do you think gives us accurate perception? Have a guess. Based on what we've been talking about ad infinitum this whole retreat—steady awareness. Steady awareness reveals what's already so.

Okay, that's enough. Go do it.

Basically, it is. Everything else I'm saying is just intellectual information to kind of encourage you to be willing to keep coming back into steady awareness and exploring why we don't. And it's not because we're recalcitrant and stupid—just because of the habits of mind. That's a powerful statement, the power of perception.

I pick impermanence also because on an intellectual level, of those three characteristics, I think for most people the concept of impermanence isn't really rocket science. I mean, the fact that everything comes to an end at some point—is anyone going to dispute that? Yeah, I get it. We get it. We think we get it.

But remember—do you remember?—that Alexis mentioned three types of wisdom, three levels of paññā, you could say. And they're all important. They work on different levels.

So one, what he talked about as heard—information, data that's coming in. On that level, I'm talking about perception of impermanence. That's information coming into your mind. And it's useful. We know we can't really learn without hearing correct information. It's useful to us.

And it circles around in our own experience, our own mind. It kind of deepens to the next level of *cintā mayā paññā*—thinking about it, not just analyzing, but kind of owning it, feeling it, noticing change, for example. It's not just disconnected information. We're really understanding it, thinking it through. But it isn't yet really transformative.

And the third level, *bhāvanā mayā paññā*—bhāvanā means mental development—I would say that's the insight level. That's the level I'm talking about of insight, of like a shift. It's like, "Oh!" You know, that aha moment when something really changes, something really shifts. Like I talked about the little kid with the blocks. Remember that night? "Oh, that's how it works!" It's a shift of perception that immediately leads to a change in how we think and the view. And that's the level of insight. That's what's transformative.

And it's not like you just have one insight and it's all over, okay? It keeps on going, keeps on going, keeps on going. Because as much as there's that—say the perception of impermanence is suddenly really deep in that moment, wow—there are moments where you just, not even thinking, it's so clear there's nothing stable and solid. And half an hour later, you know, that's all gone and it's really solid again.

That's not like you did something wrong.

But how fast the mind moves! A new mind moment arising every moment, and we're back to the perception of permanence—permanence, permanence—it keeps being fed. Without what? Right, without steady awareness. We fall back into the habits.

So yes, I've been pointing to this lack of steady awareness, or awareness kind of checking out. And that's assuming we're interested in awareness in the first place. Without it, in normal life, we're not even really looking at things. We're just assuming our perceptions are accurate, and we get all ruffled and confused.

But here, where we're starting to bring steady awareness, what are some of the aspects—and there are many—but just some that I want to highlight? These are natural habits we all have that may condition awareness to check out, for us to look in the other direction.

One is the fact that it's so much a habit to place our sense of what's going to make us happy or peaceful on some kind of stability, on some particular experience—either getting it or having it. It can be something really beautiful and important: a relationship, family, the job we have. Just that you can walk outside and the earth isn't going to rumble and move. We can walk out thinking it's more or less peaceful here, that at the moment we're not in a war zone. Whatever it might be. Or just the fact that my back isn't hurting and it hasn't hurt—may it never hurt again! Holding on to that for dear life, but not quite recognizing that we're doing so.

The habit of moving toward or feeling comfortable in the pleasant, trusting in what's familiar, finding the place where we feel we can let down and relax and feel at ease—does that make sense? Can you relate to that? It's rare that we go, "Wow, this really feels awful. Let me relax and feel it." We've been saying that, right? But it's not our natural tendency. The natural tendency is to recoil in the face of unpleasant or difficult experience. Just that habit of resistance and aversion to the unpleasant, which we've talked about.

Remember, Alexis mentioned in his talk that sutta about the dart. Everybody, whether awakened or not, experiences pleasant and unpleasant and neutral experience. That's just happening to all of us. The difference between one who's at peace and one

who's not is that the one who's not gets reactive around the unpleasant. And the Buddha said the only escape a normal person knows—one not on a path of waking up—the only escape such a one knows from unpleasant experience is to crave after something pleasant.

So it becomes a habit of mind, he says: resistance and unhappiness underlie the experience of unpleasant. And that craving, going toward something pleasant as a way to escape the unpleasant—that becomes habitual. You can see this being acted out in our mind and experience so much of the time. I want to say all the time, but nothing's all the time. Except impermanence is all the time. But all the time, it just is, of course.

This is unpleasant—let's go to the pleasant. We're not saying you should run from the pleasant to the unpleasant. But the Buddha is pointing out: knowing no other escape. That's so poignant to me. That's so sad. Because that escape isn't an escape. That's what keeps us bound in the cycle of fearing the unpleasant and wanting the pleasant. And because both of those are impermanent, unreliable, and without intrinsic self-existence, that pleasant one can't do it. So then we go to the next pleasant, the next pleasant, the next pleasant—and that's the whole cycle.

The real reason we're saying on retreat, "Okay, it hurts a little bit, don't run away right away," is because there is an escape, but it's not just going to the pleasant. The escape is the shift into wisdom that comes from accurate perception. The effect of accurate perception is that the mind-heart releases the clinging. It really knows, "This isn't going to do it," and just releases the clinging. It's not an intellectual thing. And that's the escape. The escape is the release of the clinging, the release of the aversion. It's not getting into happy pleasant-land.

It doesn't happen.

So anyway, I think one of the common experiences that happens when we don't quite recognize or accept the naturalness of impermanence, of change, is this sense of recoiling from the unpleasant. Even with the big movements of impermanence—even though of course we know everything at some point goes away, every car is going to fall apart, every meeting ends in parting, as the Tibetans say—we really know we're all going to get sick and die, as is everyone we know and love. Just on the first knowledge level, right? But still, when something ends, it's sad. It's painful. The sense of loss, the sense of pain, the sense of "this shouldn't be happening."

And so this natural habit of recoiling, of resisting the unpleasant—it could manifest as denial, it could manifest as rage, but for sure we're going to feel sadness at loss. But sadness is often experienced as an unpleasant experience, right? So there can even be a recoil from the sadness.

What I've found in myself, and in talking to people, is that this sense of not recognizing or just being at ease with things going away—even though obviously they've gone, you can't really deny it when something's gone—but there's a pulling back from the sense of loss, the sadness, the grief, as if that's a problem. And this is where, again, the escape isn't to get rid of the sadness. It's just that sadness is okay. That's part of our being human. That might be part of what's going to arise on the emotional level in a time of something we care about falling apart, going away.

We don't have to—if we have enough steady awareness, this kind, non-preferential awareness—okay, sadness is like this. It's okay. It's just part of being human. All the emotions are part of being human. The awareness can keep on being here, and you'll see the sadness itself changes. When we pull back, it kind of freezes things, and we're back in this sense of contention with things as they are.

And just to say, this is part of humanity. There are different stories in the suttas, but the one I really love the most, quite famous, shows that this was the same back in the time of the Buddha. It's the story of Ananda, who, as most of you know, was the Buddha's cousin and loving attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life.

Ananda was a very personable person. In the suttas he's kind of like someone you can relate to—he's not a completely awakened being, so sometimes he makes mistakes. He says something that isn't exactly accurate, and the Buddha will go, "Not so, Ananda." And you think, "Oh great, I can be like Ananda!" But he's extremely kind. He has incredible memory—he could remember every single discourse he ever heard the Buddha give. And he made a deal with the Buddha when the Buddha asked him to be his attendant. One of the things he asked for was that if he wasn't present for a discourse, the Buddha would give it to him again later so he could remember it. So if you're ever reading the suttas, the suttas that start "Thus have I heard"—that's Ananda's voice. Thus have I heard, and then he goes on with the sutta. Just to give you a sense of a real person.

So anyway, in this one story, the Buddha had announced to his Sangha that he was going to pass away in three months. And then he's sitting talking to the monks and nuns, and he looks around and says, "Where's Ananda?" They all said, "Well, Ananda's gone back to his hut."

There's an image that Andy Olendzki, who was the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and a Pali scholar, told me about later. They weren't visual images at the time of the Buddha, but much later it became a known image in Buddhist imagery: Ananda leaning against the frame of his door, weeping, weeping, and saying, "Oh, how shall I go on? The teacher who's been so kind to me, the teacher who's so wonderful, who I've been with all these years, is going to leave, and I'm still a learner with much to do." Just weeping from sadness. It's just so human, right? I love it.

So the Buddha, of course—"Okay, get Ananda, come on Ananda, come back." And he says—and you can't tell the tone from reading it—but he says, "Ananda, haven't I told you? Everything that comes together, when the conditions change, must go apart. How can it be otherwise? It cannot be otherwise."

But then he goes on to actually cultivate wholesome qualities in Ananda's mind state at that moment. He says, "You've been so many years so faithful, so generous, so kind. You have all these really wonderful, generous qualities. Really recognize them, and don't worry."

You're on the path, and you'll wake up.

So he's not like, "You stupid jerk, Ananda." He's like, "Ah, you know, it's so sad. But really, look at all the wholesome qualities. Look at all the wisdom. Incline the mind to that, and awakening will surely occur."

I just love that, because this is our path. This is what it's like to be human. We don't need to recoil from sadness or grief or whatever, or take it as a sign that change shouldn't be happening or that we did something wrong. It's just part of the whole bigger picture.

But again, this tendency to pull back is a place where the steady awareness drops out, isn't it? Because we don't want to feel it. And it's a habit—that deep habit. We're not even purposely thinking, "I don't want to feel it." We're just gone, looking for pleasure. That's the big picture. So that's just one way of recognizing that.

In this way, clinging to anything is such a poignant strategy for happiness, right? Because it so doesn't work. It actually keeps us spinning in the dissatisfaction, in the sense of dis-ease.

Why do we cling? One reason is what I said the Buddha taught—to escape from the unpleasant. But I also think one of the things that perhaps many of us experience, though not everyone, is that what we're wanting is that sense of ease, which we can equate with a sense of stability or familiarity or control. I don't know—many of you

may notice in the meditation this sense of trying to control something, just because God forbid what might happen if I don't have it all tightly together. Something great might happen, but I don't know—I'd rather know and just have it in this nice little packet so nothing bad could surprise me.

This sense of stability, this reaction to the unreliability—the fact of dukkha, the fact of constant change—is the mind somehow looking for something steady to hold on to. Whether it's a sense experience, whether it's a relationship, an idea, a view about things, a particular comfort with the level of people you're with, whether it's our ideas or views about ourself, a view about our personality. And it may not even be a nice view, but it's familiar. I know that's what I'm like. Don't try to tell me otherwise. It's familiar.

And that just increases the dis-ease, the disjunct, the being in contention with things as they are. The peace that comes from wise view is that we're no longer fighting with reality. It's just doing its thing. It's like this, and it's not a problem.

You know the teacher Byron Katie? She says, "When you fight with reality, you lose." I love that. When I feel like I'm struggling, I'm fighting with reality, and I'm losing.

There's a line from one of the suttas: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." Not needing a place to rest. Can you imagine that?

One Tibetan saying—it's like a meditation instruction: "Resting at ease in whatever arises." Just, it's this now. That's all. That's all. No sense of past, future, changing, not changing. Just resting at ease in whatever arises.

Again, "One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." Abiding—having that sense of landing and trying to stay and hold and settle.

Now, I don't know how this is landing for you all, but I know my intellectual thinking mind doesn't like that very much. It's like, "What do you mean?"

Nothing, no abiding. One rests in peace who doesn't rest anywhere.

I want to rest. I like to be comfortable. And comfortable means I rest. I don't have to every single moment be changing and not abiding. This and this and this—it's exhausting!

But what's exhausting is the mind going on about that with aversion. That's what's exhausting. You don't even have to think about it at all. It's just how it already is.

So that's one way I just wanted to point out how the steady awareness can fall away and the perception of impermanence isn't perceived—because of the deep habit of recoiling, pulling back, denying, resisting, going to the pleasant in the face of discomfort, unfamiliarity, dis-ease.

Another way, again, is that we may not recognize—often we don't—the momentariness of change.

For example, once I was hearing a talk from the Dalai Lama. He was talking about this and said, "Well, everything changes, like my body. It came into existence, it's here for a while, and then it goes away." So it's changing, but it's kind of a steady state—the zabuton, steady state, whatever.

Then he said, "We're seeing change," but he clarified, "No, that's not really it, because that still is assuming a kind of permanence." What's not being recognized is the momentariness, the incredible rapidity of change.

It's said somewhere in the suttas that the Buddha talked about how many mind moments arise—a moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Whatever measurement they used then translates to something enormous, like seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye. We're talking fast.

And so when perceptions are happening this quickly, it's so fast that it can look permanent. The example often given is if you have a torch, a fiery torch, and you spin it really fast in the dark—if you spin it fast enough, it looks like a solid circle of flame. Have you ever seen that? That's the rapidity, and then it looks solid.

In a way, that's what's going on with us. And of course, you can't sit down and say, "I'm going to notice seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye." That's just an idea. But it's meant to point in a direction.

What does it bring us back to? The steadiness of awareness—here, here, here, here, here. And various aspects of this change reveal themselves. How can they not? That's what's happening.

Sometimes I play with awareness of seeing. We talked about seeing—it's not that you don't have the concepts. It's more that seeing is like the awareness of the process that seeing has happened. And looking is more like being out in the content of what's being seen. Sort of like the difference between being lost in thought and being aware of thought. When you can be aware of a thought, you still might know the content, but you're not in there mucking around with it. Same with looking and seeing.

As we're walking around, first notice how often seeing is occurring, which we don't notice a lot. But if you start just playing with it, not worrying about the content—for every single instant, the seeing is different. It's never exactly the same. Even if I just sit still like this, this shows up, that shows up, different things are coming to the forefront. It's always different. And that's just one of the sense doors—never mind how fast the mind door is moving.

So just start to notice the momentariness of change. Don't make a big deal about it. Just let that go in. But as the awareness is getting more and more naturally steady, this starts to reveal itself. You see then how much the perception is really of permanence. And that's not a problem, but just noticing that—how many moments the perception is actually of permanence—it's interesting. It doesn't take an equal number of moments of perception of impermanence for insight to really come. Because how much of our life—

has the perception been of permanence, and it keeps on being.

So for example, in your time here today, in your practice today, whatever you were doing—sitting, walking, having an emotion—was there ever, did it ever happen at all today that something occurred and there's a thought: "Oh no, now I'm going to be with this the whole sitting." "Oh no, here comes this again. I'm going to have to deal with this mental thing again all day. I was with it all day yesterday, and here it is again today." Did that ever happen to anybody?

And then it's often that we don't—not always—but there's a kind of selective attention. Again, this is why we talk about non-preferential awareness. We don't even realize it, but the selective attention often skips over the neutral. So even this thing—"Oh no, it's going to be here all day, and it's really a pain, and we don't like it"—but it's got some juice to it, so we notice. Awareness notices when that comes up. It somehow doesn't notice all those moments that there was boredom, that you were hearing the tree frogs, that you were wondering what was for lunch, that you were just a little bit sleepy, that you were thinking about last week, and then: "Oh God, here's this thing. It's been here all day. It's going to be here all day. I can't bear it."

Just notice that. Nothing is here all day. There may be—maybe there's only a fraction of a second that that pain wasn't there. But there was a moment. "No, it was there. I just didn't notice it, but it was there." That's what we do. Just check it out. Don't believe me. Check it out.

Really, sometimes we start to see there is no stasis anywhere. That's what His Holiness the Dalai Lama was pointing to. Sometimes I talk about the example of a time-lapse film of a flower growing. And we just found out yesterday that the camera set up

in the front—I don't know if you've noticed it—they're actually doing time-lapse filming of the tulips growing. Don't ask me what they're going to do with it. That's going to go up on the website. This is what you can see if you come to a retreat—five weeks of watching the tulip grow. That'll pack the house.

But anyway, it's fortuitous, so I can use it in this talk. You can imagine, right, a time-lapse—you see it on nature shows—and the plant coming up through the dirt, so it's speeded up. But if you see that, it's continually changing. It's just speeded up. There's no moment that you can stop it and say, "That's the bulb," and it stopped. The next moment, it's changing a little bit, changing a little bit. You can't say, "Now this is the stem, now that's the flower," and it stopped. It never completely stops, becomes a thing isolated in itself. The conditions are coming together and changing and making it every instant. That's nature.

Guess what? Right view, right? Guess what we are? Nature. That's what's going on. Conditions coming together in every moment. They're slightly different in the body, in the mind, in all the different sense doors that are arising. Always different.

So the steady awareness isn't like—we don't have to think about this stuff. But the more we really pay attention, it starts to be highlighted. A friend many years ago was saying on retreat—she'd been sitting for like twenty years, years and years—

"You know, I really have gotten it," she said. "I've known for years, really known in my gut, cellularly—like insight—that everything around is constantly changing. But suddenly now I'm getting it: oh, me too. I'm part of that. Before it was like I'm here, solid, watching everything constantly change." Doesn't it feel like that? But she said, "Oh no, it's not like that at all. I'm completely part of it. There's no separation."

This is from the Buddha: "When one perceives impermanence, the perception of not-self is stabilized. And when the perception of not-self is stabilized, that perception eradicates the conceit 'I am,' the view 'I am'"—the same thing he said before—"which is Nibbana in this very life." Nibbana means liberation of heart-mind through non-clinging.

So you see, they work together. That perception of impermanence really stabilizes the perception of not-self. Because with that sense of constant change held within steady awareness, you don't have to think about it. That's just what presents itself.

Sometimes in sitting meditation—and I think both Alexis and Mark talked about how sometimes it's wild—people say sometimes it's nice and calm and we can stay with the breath, which is fine. But one of the things that can be a trap, if it becomes a trap—it doesn't have to be, it can be very useful—is when we feel like we need to go back there. Why? Because it's calm. Because it gives the illusion of stability. And when we open up,

we think, "No, there's just stuff going on all over the place. This, this, this, and that. That's not good meditation. I'm not stabilized. I'm not concentrated. I've got to go back to the breath." Right? It happens a lot.

What are we opening up to? The thought arises: "Something's wrong. Everything's changing, and it's not in my control. Something's wrong. How can I fix it?" That's not meditation. If you're trying to fix that, well, keep trying until you notice how much suffering is increasing. Then just let go into it. You can't force letting go, but just notice it's like this and don't believe that it's wrong. Steady awareness is just noticing it's like this now.

When there's a wrong view—an unrecognized view—that's what happens when you think, "This is wrong. It shouldn't be so changing. There's something out of control. I'm doing something wrong." That's the result of the wrong view that things aren't supposed to change, that we should be able to be stable, that everything should be copacetic somehow. But steady awareness that isn't adhering to any view—not even right view—just noticing what is... you simply observe, "Oh, that's wild. It's like this now." And awareness is steady, and it's like this now.

Awareness isn't stained or damaged by difficult, unpleasant experience. Awareness isn't better or purer or clearer if the experience is pleasant or one we like or really subtle. Awareness is just receiving whatever arises. The meaning that this is good and this is bad is all put on by our thinking.

Nisargadatta Maharaj once said that we miss the real by lack of attention and we create the unreal by excess of imagination. I love that. So that's what we're doing.

This sense of the perception of impermanence stabilizing the perception, the recognition of not-self—we can see that. It doesn't have to be super subtle. We can just begin to notice it as we go through the days here in retreat. That's what's nice about a retreat: we have the space to notice what's going on anyway, but with a little more subtlety because we're not quite so distracted.

But just as I was mentioning before, in terms of physical sensations and mental states—a friend of mine said he noticed on retreat that he was really frustrated, but then he recognized it's impossible to be frustrated all day, even if you try. It's just impossible to be frustrated all day. So we notice the presence and the absence of mind states.

We can also notice the views, the personality view we have of ourselves. And it can be helpful to first recognize: "I'm a depressive person," or "I'm someone who can't meditate," or "I'm angry a lot"—whatever it is. We have a good friend who is a self-con-

fessed aversive type. Not only self-confessed—all her friends are on her case: "You're aversive, you're aversive." She got kind of fed up, and she was sitting one day and she said, "I'm just going to really pay attention, just be really steady in awareness of all the mental activity, all the mental states that go on through the day, just out of interest."

And so she saw—of course, one can't help but see—that they're constantly changing. She said, "Yeah, there are a lot of aversive mental states. And there's a lot of generosity arising. And there was a lot of mettā arising. And there was a lot of just concentration or just equanimity or just being normal, doing whatever." So to come back and say, "I'm an aversive person," is again picking and choosing and just ignoring everything else that's occurring. Maybe something comes up frequently, but we don't have to land on it. Just staying with steady awareness, you'll see everything's changing. We can't land anywhere—good, bad, or in between. It's always in flux. So we simply need to notice what's actually going on.

In a way, it's taking refuge in the awareness rather than taking refuge in pleasant, unpleasant, our ideas about ourselves, good ideas, bad ideas. Just that willingness: "Okay, it's like this now." Let the steadiness of awareness, the willingness to just relax back into awareness, be the refuge, and let life reveal itself.

This actually has the effect of really opening and freeing the heart-mind. It really does release the clinging, the grasping. Because when we're grasping, trying to hold something, we recognize there's nothing to be held—it's all moving and there's nothing solid there anyway. The lack of struggle and the real presence opens us to the beauty and mystery and real presence in life, rather than this constant push-pull.

But it's true that there can be times along the way when maybe we first open in a deep way, one time or another, to the unreliability of experience, or to the fact that there really isn't some steady-state "me" that we thought there was. Just a moment when it's not there. Recognizing that at a deep level is peace.

But this is from Ajahn Sumedho, and I think this can be quite helpful: As one begins to realize or recognize non-grasping as the way—non-grasping at anything including self and ideas—then sometimes, not always, but sometimes, emotionally one can feel quite frightened by this. You know that everything's changing and there's no me, there's nowhere to rest. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart, and it can be frightening. It doesn't have to be, but it can be.

But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions—what Alexis talked about last night, the faith, just the willingness to be here with kind awareness with these emotional reactions—and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being awake, in being aware. The stability of just this moment of being aware. That's it. Not thinking about it.

So this refuge in awareness releases the struggle, even just for that one moment. It really opens us into a fullness of presence. But it's not a disconnected fullness of presence at all. Sometimes people say, "Why would I want to perceive this constant change? Why would I want to open to this? It sounds dreadful, this instability, and it sounds like maybe knowing everything's changing, you wouldn't care."

But it's just the opposite. Because it's a caring that doesn't come from a need to reify or justify or make myself okay.

It's a caring that's like… this is just how it is. The beautiful, the difficult, the poignant. The sense of presence and being alive becomes even more vivid. We don't stop caring.

Two examples. One is from the Dalai Lama. I read about him once—you know, he meets so many people, right? Every day. All the Tibetan refugees. You hear so many really heartbreaking, unbearable stories of people suffering. And then he meets people who are happy, and all kinds of people. Many people have said—and I've read this—that when he's meeting someone, when he's shaking their hand and talking to them, they always say they feel like he's just so totally with you. Like this is the high point of his day, meeting you. Whoever it is, he's 100 percent there.

And they can watch him. He's with someone telling a horrible refugee story, and he's crying with them. He's totally feeling with them. And then that's gone. The next person comes. He turns to that person. It's a whole different world. He's not weeping anymore. He's totally there with that person. Maybe they're laughing. Maybe he's just talking about some business.

Some say, "Well, how do you do that? How can you just drop it?"

He goes, "Well, it's totally present. That's what's happening—the sadness. But there's no holding on. It doesn't reverberate. It's this. Then it's gone. And the next thing occurs."

That can really be like that. It doesn't mean we don't care. We're able to be fully there because we're not held back by this fear of, "Oh my God, it's going to overwhelm me." Just to explore that possibility.

And to notice, in terms of impermanence—notice when your mental states, when a difficult one is gone. Sometimes we don't quite have the steadiness to notice it's gone. We jump into the next thing. Notice the absence of difficult mental states. Notice the presence of wholesome states. And notice the absence of wholesome. Because that really helps us.

You know, you've been so frustrated all day, and then you're not. Notice the absence. Not assuming, "Well, it's under there. I'm just not clear enough to see it." That's just some idea. You look around. It's really gone. It's gone. Sure, it'll come back. The conditions will change. But notice that.

And then the other thing—the other way of just saying this—the sensitivity, the tenderness to be with life as it is, I think is stronger, is deeper. It can really open to the mystery and the wonder.

I just wanted to read two poems to end. One is this very short haiku by Issa, which to me is just knowing the ephemeral nature of the world, and still, we're humans. It's written on the year anniversary of the death of his young child. And it's just very simple:

This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet.

And that's how it is for us.

And this is Hafiz. "Deepening the Wonder":

Death is a favor to us

The impermanence of the body should give us great clarity, deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes of this mysterious existence we share and are surely just traveling through.

If I were in the tavern tonight, Hafiz would call for drinks. And as the master poured, I would be reminded that all I know of life and myself is that we are just a mid-air flight of golden wine between his pitcher and his cup.

If I were in the tavern tonight, I would buy freely for everyone in this world, because our marriage with the cruel beauty of time and space cannot endure very long.

The miraculous existence and impermanence of form always makes the illumined ones laugh and sing.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 181

Dāna/Sīla Transforms The Habits Of The Mind

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common misconception about meditation practice—that steady awareness and non-interference might lead to disengagement from life. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that a wise person intends for the welfare of self, others, and the whole world, she clarifies that wisdom naturally manifests in how we engage with life, not in withdrawal from it.*
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> *Wilson explores the Buddha's definition of action (kamma) as rooted in intention (cetanā), emphasizing that the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of any act lies in the motivation behind it. She references the opening verses of the Dhammapada: "All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows." This understanding reveals why cultivating awareness of mental qualities is so central to practice—these qualities shape our motivations and thus our actions.*
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> *The talk illuminates how dāna (generosity), sīla (ethical conduct), and bhāvanā (mental cultivation) work together as the three pillars of Buddhist practice, all serving to transform habitual patterns of greed, hatred, and delusion. Wilson shares moving stories from her time in Burma illustrating the joy and mutuality of genuine generosity, and explores how the precepts call forth empathy, restraint, and discernment. She encourages practitioners to notice and appreciate moments when wholesome qualities naturally arise—when ill will doesn't take hold, when restraint occurs, when generosity flows freely—recognizing these as evidence that the Dhamma truly transforms the heart and mind.*

So I mentioned this afternoon that I wanted to talk a little bit more about dāna tonight, but it's kind of embedded in the whole talk. It's not just about that.

Sometimes it can sound, from the instructions we're giving—the steady awareness, the complete non-interference, really being totally present without changing anything to see how the mind and body work—it can give one the impression that really the culmination of this practice would be somehow abdicating involvement with life, abdicating engagement with life. You know that's not true, right? But that's what I'm going to talk about tonight.

Often people really think, well, if you never get involved, if you never change what's happening, how do we do anything in the world? And of course, that's not the point, but it works in a different way from what we think.

Another thing that people say to me frequently—and I think I mentioned this in one or two of the groups—but people have often said this as we're talking more and they're discovering how much greed and aversion are arising in the heart and mind, and how much they kind of lead us to action. And we keep hammering about the unwholesome aspect of that. People have said quite seriously, literally, "Well, if I don't act from greed and aversion, what do I do—just sit in my room for the rest of my life?" Very seriously. Which is to me really saddening, because that's the implication that these are the motivators of the world, these are the drivers of action—greed and aversion.

We were exploring it in one of the groups about strong aversion. Greed too can feel very enlivening, can't it? It gives us a sense of purpose; it kind of wakes us up from calm. Let's have some aversion going on, some greed—we feel really much more alive, and much more "me" too, which is really to the point. But it kind of overlooks the fact that there are many other impulses to speech and action than greed and aversion, which is of course all the wholesome qualities that we've been talking about.

But just to say from the Buddha, just so you know, that the point of awareness, the point of wisdom isn't to let us just be so cooled out that we don't engage in the world at all. This is one of the statements from the Buddha:

In what way is one a wise person of great wisdom? A wise person of great wisdom does not intend for their own affliction or for the affliction of others or of both. Rather, when they think, they think only of their own welfare, the welfare of others and of both, and the welfare of the whole world. It is in this way that one is a wise person of great wisdom.

So a wise person is known by the intentions of caring for the welfare. And you notice he also says the welfare of oneself—all equal. Sometimes we think, if I'm really wise and compassionate, thinking about my own welfare is somehow greedy. But the Buddha is saying we're all in this together. My own welfare is as important as the welfare of another and the welfare of both.

And in another place, he says a wise person is known by their actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's wisdom, one's discernment shines. So he's definitely saying the understanding, the opening of heart and mind, the real wisdom, is going to manifest in how we are in the world, how we are with ourselves, how we are with each other.

So wisdom and this awareness practice—it's not about abandoning acts in the world, but it's to allow the wisdom to grow that gives us the choice, the space to allow wisdom to choose, to act from wisdom, from compassion, from appropriateness in the face of

any situation, instead of being so automatically seduced by the call of craving or the vitality of aversion. The steady awareness, the wisdom that arises, just gives that space to see more clearly, and the appropriate response can naturally arise.

But I want to go a little more into what the Buddha means by action, which many of you are aware of. He's very specific. And this is where looking at these habits of mind, the wholesome and the unwholesome, is so key. Because for most of us, when we think of action, we think of the actual act as being good or bad or wholesome, or the actual words we say. But the Buddha was very clear.

The word kamma just means action. So he says, "Intention or volition, I tell you, is action. Intending, one does action, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and mind."

And so what he's putting out—and this is what's so interesting and so helpful and accessible in seeing why cultivating and transforming the habits of mind is so key to waking up and to how we are in the world with one another—is that the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of any action, as the Buddha talks about it, is in the intention. That movement of mind, that cetanā is the word in Pali, that little movement of mind that gives rise to action. There would be no action without that movement of mind. We're not going to always notice it arising in every moment.

So that movement of mind arises together with whatever particular qualities are in the mind. Does that sound familiar? We've been hammering on it all week, right? Notice what are the qualities arising in the mind as you're being present, as you're eating, whatever. This is because these qualities in a moment leading to speech or action are going to be the motivation.

Again, this will be very familiar to some of you from the Dhammapada. This is Gil Fronsdal's translation:

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow.

So obviously, corrupted mind means with greed, hatred, confusion. And a peaceful mind means with any of the wholesome qualities, with calmness. Or as Dingo Kensey Rinpoche said, actions are the servants of the mind.

This is really very essential. It's clear—this verse is like the second verse in the whole Dhammapada. It's that important.

So the time that we've spent here seemingly just watching what's going on in the mind and the body, not engaging, just letting it all be—this is so essential to really coming to understand how the mind works, how it feeds motivations, and how motivations lead to action. It's essential even just to get in the habit of tuning into what's going on in our mind.

What leads to speech and action? Of course we're not going to notice that a lot of the time, but that's why there's so much emphasis on this steady awareness, recognizing what qualities are arising in consciousness right now. Because that's what leads to action, rather than focusing on the results.

You can see how the same seeming action—we can't really evaluate if it's helpful. We can't evaluate from the outside, if it's not us, what's the quality of the action, since it lies in the intention.

Speech is a really good place to explore that. You can say something that you think will be for the good of another, but you can say it with total irritation. "I'm telling you this"—but your motivation is so they'll fix themselves and stop bugging you. I mean, totally. We can kid ourselves, but if we're really paying attention, we know. And frankly, they always know too. You really can't hide it.

Or you can say the same thing with a lot of care and loving-kindness. Or you can say it kind of negligently—you meant to say it before and you knew it would be helpful, but right now you're just tired and you want to say it, so you just blurt it out without paying any attention to what's going on with the person, whether they're tired or they just got some bad news. Just completely oblivious—a kind of delusion. Or it can be done with real care. Same words, same words.

This is just a very simple example, but we can start to explore and recognize for ourselves that the intention matters. When the Buddha talks about suffering or happiness coming from speaking or acting with a corrupted mind or a peaceful mind, of course he's talking about the suffering or the peace in our own mind and heart. It's not that, as we all know, if we do an act that's really kind and good, then everything good always comes back. Not immediately, sometimes.

So if we're always looking at the external as the evaluator, as the assessment, we're going to get really confused and disappointed sometimes. But when we're tuning into ourselves—if you've done something from the clearest, kindest motivation you could, and it just doesn't land with the other person, and you're willing to hear that if it doesn't land and you want to know why, you keep on going with it. Or it could be something

where they're just not interested. They're off somewhere else and they just brush you aside. But still, you have that clarity and kindness of your own motivation. And that's really where the peace is, where the ease is. It doesn't mean we can fix the world.

So that's why the quality arising in the heart and mind in this moment—which can lead to thought, speech, action—is the key. It's the key to really understanding suffering and happiness.

When we talk about purifying the habits of mind—have we used that term much here? Sometimes we do. Let's say *transforming*, in case purity is not a happy word for you. We're transforming the habits of our mind. Really, you could say in a way, we're not uprooting, but wisdom dissolves the habits of greed, hatred, delusion.

In some ways, I've been feeling and sensing more and more, the more I practice, that actually everything the Buddha taught—all aspects of what he taught, not just sitting, not just meditation—is about transforming these habits of mind. That's it. All of it.

And so when we think, "I'm just watching greed, greed, greed, greed, greed, greed—can't I do something more interesting?" This is it. This is it. Until wisdom comes in and you have a moment of non-greed. Then you can watch non-greed, non-greed, non-greed. This is the key. The Buddha said over and over that he discovered the liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. Other times he said that Nibbāna is directly visible.

When? When the heart-mind is not obsessed with greed, or obsessed with ill will and hatred, or obsessed with delusion. So really, it's not just a sidebar—everything he taught, I truly believe, was in service of transforming these habits of mind and heart.

Meditation, the steady awareness we've been cultivating, and other forms too—this is the Dāna-Sīla-Bhāvanā. These are the three pillars the Buddha taught. Dāna: generosity. Sīla: non-harming behavior. Bhāvanā: mental cultivation, cultivation of heart and mind. We've had sīla and dāna embedded in this retreat, but the focus, of course, has been more on bhāvanā. Yet all of it—all of it—is working together. It's not just about bhāvanā.

So this may be the most direct way to insight: the steady, steady awareness that sees clearly until suddenly, ah, it lets go. But these other qualities of working with dāna and sīla, really embracing them as part of the path, are also very key, very supportive in transforming these habits.

There's a statement I read from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche that I really like. This is how it feels to me when the habits are transforming through what we're doing in all aspects of our life. He says, "We're mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole being." That's what I feel we're doing. If it's just meditation, we're mingling our mind with the Dharma only in meditation—then we go out and we can't continue to find awareness, so we have to wait until the next retreat. But it's everything, everything in our life: mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole being. That just makes me so happy, just thinking that.

And it's not like it's an act of will doing it, but it's the willingness to incline the heart and mind toward the wholesome. That's what I want to keep talking about tonight: transforming these habits of heart and mind.

In terms of the meditation practice here, we've talked a lot the last couple of nights about recognizing the wholesome qualities, because that's equally important. But I know it's been coming up in the groups—one or two people have noticed that greed arises more frequently than they might have realized. And once or twice, people have noticed, "Gee, judgment and ill will and aversion seem to come up once in a while. They seem to be driving things, and I didn't even know they were here."

Sometimes when we start to see this—not only start, but actually when we've been continuing to see it over years—we realize: let go. It takes years. It's not a couple of retreats, as people who have been sitting a long time know. These habits have been reinforced through so many mind moments. We've practiced them so much. But they are habits.

People can get a little despondent. It can at times feel overwhelming. Has it ever felt overwhelming? Just like, "Oh my God, look how much greed there is. There's no way." Because if you think you've got to get out the pickaxe and uproot each moment of greed, that's endless, right? You uproot one and then another one comes up. You uproot one and think, "Have I done it yet?" Oh, that was greed—I've got to uproot another one. That can seem a little overwhelming, and that's not how it works, thank goodness.

The wisdom does transform, and you may have noticed how sometimes it seems to happen quite naturally. Mark mentioned—or maybe both Mark and Alexis—what the Buddha called the three wise intentions: how greed transforms into non-greed, or generosity. You can see in the first one how ill will transforms into non-ill will, into friendliness; and how harmfulness transforms into compassion, into caring.

Many people have named or mentioned little moments here. They may seem insignificant, but it's important to recognize where just the steady awareness—and the wisdom that arises from that—naturally chooses the wholesome. These unwholesome motivations, in that moment, either dissolve away without seeming like an act of will, just by themselves, or they don't arise at all.

Simple things. People say, going to the meal and noticing greed, and then just not acting on it, and it drops away. Wow. Or going in at some time in the evening, expecting to have greed, and there isn't any. It just doesn't come up. It's just a little moment, but it's really significant to notice these things. This strengthens the confidence—not in your own ability, but in the fact that steady awareness leads to wisdom, and wisdom really does let go of these qualities, doesn't feed them.

With ill will too. Maybe you've been noticing how much your mind tends to judge.

This is a really common thing. You sit there in the dining room on retreat and everybody that walks by – everybody – gets some negative judgment. "I can't believe they're wearing socks like that. I can't believe that – they must have had that on yesterday. I can't believe they're making that much noise when they're walking. I can't believe they're going so slow." And on and on.

And finally you notice: maybe it's not them. It's possible. It's a possibility that there's aversion distorting the perception. And then, okay, this is what my mind does. I'm so aversive. You get used to it. You're making peace with it.

And then one day you're sitting there, and the person walks by, and nothing comes up. Just friendliness. "Oh, yeah, look at them. They're doing the best they can. Isn't that lovely?" You go, "Who was that? That's not familiar."

Let it in. Let it in. You notice it's not fake – you're not faking it. It's not pretending: "May you be happy, you schlump." No, you're really feeling it. The judgment doesn't come up. It's really different.

It's familiar, isn't it – the faking? We try. We're trying with the best of intentions, but that's delusion. We don't know what we're doing. But when it really doesn't come up, feel that spacious heart and mind that's empty of ill will. It really is, as Mark says, non-ill will. It may not be boundless metta, but it's non-ill will. Feel that.

Or consider cruelty. Here on retreat, hopefully we're not really being cruel to each other, but what kind of stuff does your mind say to yourself when things are going on that are difficult? Or when aspects of your personality come up that you're familiar

with and you really don't like and you think should be really over by now – how friendly, how kind is your mind with that sometimes? There's this real harshness, why meditation is so hard often, because we're just so cruel to ourselves.

But then, have you noticed a moment when the same thing comes up, the mind maybe starts to get tight, and then: "Oh, yeah, that's really hard. It's okay. It's like this now." And that happens naturally. Again, let it just be perceived with awareness – the emptiness of cruelty, the space of compassion, just that simplicity of being with what is. It's not an act of personal will or forcing. It's natural.

And so the power of awareness-wisdom is really, in some ways you could say, maybe the most direct way of transforming the habits of mind. We know it's one moment at a time, but each moment like that, when the awareness is steady and you really notice the dissolving or the non-arising of the torment, it's a powerful moment. It's really transforming the habits. And they are habits, these difficult qualities. It's not inevitable. It can seem like it's inevitable sometimes.

I heard just a snippet of a talk by Bishop Desmond Tutu to some young men and women in their early twenties, living in a really difficult part of town, an area where there's a lot of violence. And he was telling them that no, it's really up to you. He turned to them and said very forcefully, "We learn to hate. Hate isn't natural. You don't have to hate. We learn to hate."

And as much as there's so much violence and hatred in the world, and how much the news often seems to feed that, giving us more examples of it, we can also always find examples of the opposite – where people in circumstances I can't imagine being in respond in a different way. Respond with compassion.

Respond with kindness. It just is a great thing to take in. Because I feel like when I look inside my own heart and mind, I'm seeing all the aspects of suffering and the potential for beauty, for wholesomeness, for love, for compassion. And I'm this microcosm of human beings. We all are. So we look in ourselves, we see the difficulty, but also the beauty, also the potential—and the same out in the world. So when I hear something like that, somebody saying something that's just inspiring, I just take it in and really appreciate it because it brings up faith in me. It brightens the heart and mind.

The latest one I heard was a couple of weeks ago on the BBC. It was the day after the attacks on the mosques in New Zealand. The BBC reporters were down there interviewing survivors—I don't know how they can do that. They were talking to one man who had been in the mosque with his wife, and she had been killed. He was an elderly man living in a wheelchair, and she had been his main caretaker. So they're interviewing

him, asking the kinds of questions like, "Who do you blame?" But he was just saying—I wrote it down because I really liked it—he was saying, "Perhaps someone who acts like this person did is hoping that there will be retaliating violence from other Muslims, but that's not going to happen here." He said, "We are one people." He was talking about all the people in New Zealand, not only the people in the mosque. "We are one people. We don't want vengeance. We need to change within ourselves to be able to live together."

I just thought that was so beautiful—his wife had just been killed, and he says we have to change within ourselves to live together. And that's true. It's out there in the world. There are many, many people cultivating and committed to waking up in whatever way, to transforming their hearts and minds, to developing the wholesome. Sometimes we can see it in ourselves, and that can strengthen faith. But when we see it in others, that can also strengthen faith, because in a way, we are one humanity—different stories, but the same way that the heart and mind and body work.

So I want to speak a little about dāna and sīla as the Buddha taught them—as aspects, as ways to embrace transforming the habits of our heart and mind. As most of you know, whenever the Buddha would begin a teaching, always to lay people especially, he would talk about generosity first.

I have to say, just to be honest, in the beginning of my practice—it started in India, but then here—the emphasis and the interest was very much on bhāvanā, on meditation, for all the different reasons. And of course, generosity is always, "Yeah, generosity is good, you know." And sīla is also, "You need sīla so you can practice better"—as foundational. But I never really got it, and I'm not blaming my teachers. After my first retreat, I didn't even know it was Buddhism. I'm sure the teacher might have mentioned it. So I'm not really blaming the teachers. It changed my life. I didn't know why. I didn't know what was going on. It just shows we don't have to know that much—we just do it.

Growing up here too, generosity was always presented as a good thing. And I think my family was generous. People in this country are generous. But the sense tends to be focused on what was given and how much. People would say about someone, "Oh, they're so incredibly generous," and it's usually about someone who has a lot to give. It doesn't have to be, but it often is. But generosity, just as with everything else, is actually about the motivation in the heart, in the mind.

That opening of heart and mind that doesn't hold on to whatever it is—whether it's time or a smile or just a willingness to connect, or a flower, or money, whatever it is. At the heart of generosity, it's not about a "should," that you have to give because that's the right thing to do. It's because the act of generosity, the motivational act of it, is a source of real happiness. It's a source of real connectedness and happiness.

And I really didn't understand this until I spent a lot of time in Thailand and Burma, practicing in the Buddhist parts of those countries. There, it's a very deeply ingrained understanding. And it can get warped, because we can warp everything. But the sense of it—in Burma, they'll say, "Oh, this is an opportunity for dāna." And they get excited. "Oh, look at this, an opportunity for dāna!" They'll get really happy and go find whatever way they can offer food or whatever it is.

So in the moment of a generous act, whatever it is, tuning into the motivation—you can feel how in that moment of sharing, it counters ill will. There's not ill will in that moment. In fact, it was said somewhere that the Buddha suggested if you're feeling ill will towards someone, you should give them a gift. Before I understood the motivational aspect, I didn't understand what that was about. You'd get paranoid if someone gives you a gift. But it's not that. If you're really moving from generosity, in that moment there's not ill will. In that moment it's really an open-hearted connectedness, and it brings a happiness to the mind. It isn't ill will. So it's actually countering the ill will. And of course it counters greed and possessiveness, whether it's your time or a thing, whatever. And also self-cherishing. It strengthens the sense of connectedness, the recognition of non-separation.

You don't have to get all intellectual about it. I'm talking about it, but this is all happening in one moment when you're actually giving anything—to really do it with fullness of presence and a sense of appreciation and dignity. Sometimes I would feel a little abashed to be offering something. What if they don't like it? I'd feel a little self-conscious. And that really cuts the mutuality. The thing that really feeds and strengthens the happiness of generosity is the mutuality—the giving with dignity and mindful attention, and the receiving in the same way. Really conscious.

So when you give, really tune into the motivation to offer. And when you're actually doing it, stay present with that, really present. And then afterwards, later, you can actually reflect on the act of generosity. The Buddha suggests this. And that brightens the mind and heart. So there are three moments of brightness, of happiness, from an act of generosity: the motivation, the actual doing, and the reflection afterwards. And it's not happiness like, "Oh, it feels good, la la la," like eating chocolate. It's a way that it brightens the heart and mind. It's countering ill will.

One time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here and I was practicing with him for a couple of months, I'd heard he wanted a specific book. So I wrote a friend of mine who was on staff while I was sitting, asking if he would get this for me and give it to Sayadaw, which he did. He said it was from Carol and so on. When the retreat ended and I was just paying my respects to Sayadaw, he told someone to go get this book. He brings it out and hands it to me and says, "Okay, now give it to me directly."

It was really interesting. And I was nervous, you know. He could be intimidating. So I was handing it to him, and he's fully present. "Give it to him directly." And he said—I'm not sure he said this exactly, but it's what Burmese people say a lot. He said something similar.

And they mean it. Even just a little gift to a laywoman in a monastery—you give it and they receive it with full presence and say something to the effect of, "May this be a cause for you to reach Nibbāna in the shortest possible time." Isn't that nice? You give somebody five dollars and they're saying, "May this be a cause for you to reach Nibbāna in the shortest possible time." It's a whole different feeling around the act of generosity and the act of receiving.

Something I really learned about this, the sense of mutuality, is that in giving, it's equally important to receive. Spending time in Burma—where I've spent more time, near where Shwe Oo Min is—there's another place I've spent some time. And there are many, many small nunneries around there. Tons of them, and some of them really poor. Nunneries tend to get less support than monks, and these nuns live completely on dāna. They're not out there earning a living. Everything comes from generosity—building the buildings, getting their food, having toilets, digging a well, all of it.

A few friends have been giving us donations when we go over in the winter, and then we offer it to certain nunneries. They need a well. They need a toilet. So we offer, and we say, "This is from hundreds of friends. We're just carrying it and offering it." And then the beauty with which it's received—not like, "Oh, thank you, we're so poor, this is embarrassing." No, it's received with real appreciation, and then they get together and do a whole mettā chant, a whole blessing chant. It's a very formal ceremony.

And then—this is what I had to really learn—the nuns would want to invite us back and give us lunch. They would give us a lunch that was like twenty-five different curries for three people, and then another whole table of desserts. They don't eat like that. They're not eating any of that. And what we could leave over, which was most of it, they'd probably live on for a week. They wouldn't eat with us. But if we said, "No, no, no, we're well taken care of. You keep this. Eat it yourselves"—that completely cuts the mutuality, the sharing, the back and forth. They were so happy to watch us eat. It's

really hard because they urge you to eat and eat and eat until you can't stand another minute. Finally, after a couple of years, we said, "Okay, we're just saying no to everybody because it's really too much."

But the sense of mutuality and not saying, "Oh, I have more than you, so you shouldn't give me anything"—saying that shuts off the oneness. It shuts it all off. The dignity and beauty in receiving actually brings joy and happiness to the heart. So it's really transforming a kind of holding separate into wholesomeness, into generosity, into mettā. Not compassion at that point—it's more mettā and generosity. And then the whole cycle of generosity becomes contagious. It just keeps on going.

I'll tell you one little story because I thought of it today—a friend who's practicing here started it years ago. Again, it was at Shwe Oo Min. I don't know, was it ten years ago or something? She had been sitting there and had gone over, and I hadn't been there before. I didn't know any of the nuns or anything around. She had wandered around and met a nun in a small nunnery that didn't have much, kind of made friends with her, and then offered her money to get electricity. She didn't have electricity, and you needed a few hundred dollars or something—it was complicated then. So she offered that, and she was really, really happy to be able to offer. And then she became friends with this nun—Daw Sumanacari is her name. And the nun would invite her for mohinga, which is this fish soup that's like one of the special dishes of Yangon. To make mohinga is a real gift. And then this friend invited me to come along. So I met her and had that great mohinga.

Anyway, so over the years, going every year, we'd meet this nun. This is just one example—I could give a hundred. We'd meet this nun, and she had a little nunnery that was slowly growing, maybe twenty nuns there. Frankly, she always seemed a little bit depressive. But one year, maybe... Well, just normal people, you know, just seemed a little pulled in.

One year she came, maybe four years ago, knowing that we had a little money to offer, but she said, "You know, I've just been not able to sleep. I'm so feeling that there's so many poor kids in this area that couldn't afford to go to the government schools." I mean, a lot. And she said, "I just want to start a school for these poor kids." Quite a few nuns do that, which is amazing considering what it entails. So she said, "I just want to do this, you know?"

And we thought, well, we can offer something and see what happens.

We came back the next year and she'd taken down one... She had two small buildings, and the twenty-five nuns lived in one and ate in the other. So she'd taken down one of the buildings, and they'd all moved and crammed into the other one. This is common. And she had a school—like a hundred kids were coming. She had a kind of lean-to. Now there's actually companies that come from Japan and build school buildings. But at that time she just had a lean-to, and these kids coming.

To do this means she's getting all of this on dāna, hiring teachers—regular lay teachers that you have to pay their salary every month—all of that on dāna.

And then she came to talk about it to us at the end of that visit. She was shining. Her face was shining. She was saying—wait, I wrote it down. I mean, I can't speak Burmese, but our friend Aria can. She said, "Even though now I must work so hard"—because really it's the head nun who ends up having to hold it all together, and that's her—"I have to work so hard to find support every month for the teacher's salaries, for the equipment. We still have to have food. We need more toilets. We need desks." And all of this is true. "Even though I have to work so hard to do this, all the energy is for the children and the school, and so my mind is so calm and happy."

And she really looked like that. She said, "I'm so happy if I can do this for the rest of my life."

And she's still doing it. It keeps getting bigger. And it's no exaggeration—she's working like crazy. She looks really tired, I have to say. But she's really happy at being able to help all these kids. And so it kind of keeps going around, going around. The generosity to her, and then her generosity to the kids.

And then one year—was it two years ago?—garbage pickup wasn't really a concept anymore. It's like you dump it on the ground or you burn it over there. It's just starting to happen, but at this time, not. One day we went out for a walk, and there was Dōsuman Ācāri with a whole group of the older kids. It was like the last day of school or something. And she had organized down the street, down Shwayumen Road—she had organized that these kids were going down with trash bags and picking up all the trash.

That might not seem like a big deal to you, but that's like an unheard of thing. We were so amazed. We were so impressed to see that. She looked around and said, "Okay, let's clean up the trash here." Of course, there's nowhere to take it. There's nowhere to take it. But it was wonderful. She's training the kids, you know—that you don't just throw your trash on the ground.

She's cleaning up this road that involves hundreds of people who live on it. And I don't know, the generosity just keeps cycling, cycling. This is how it transforms the habits in our mind, and it's contagious. Wholesomeness is contagious. It inspires us internally and externally.

So that's what I want to say about generosity. I could go on and on. I love talking about it because it makes me happy. Just contemplating your own generosity or your own sīla, as the Buddha talked about, really can brighten the mind.

In fact, there are various suttas where the Buddha arrives and sits down to talk to just a motley group of people. He doesn't know them—they're not his nuns and monks. And it was said that he could look around and simply tell what was in anybody's mind. So he would look around and see who in this gathering could hear the Dhamma, could really hear it, could let it in. Then he would zero in on whoever he thought it was.

It's often said he would begin with what he called a graduated teaching. He didn't just jump in and start talking about impermanence. In a graduated teaching, you talk about dāna, you talk about sīla, you talk about refuge, you talk about kamma—action and result—the joy of renunciation. And then, when he saw that the mind of the person was ready, pliable, uplifted, serene, bright, then he would talk about the deep Dhamma.

So it's all going together, transforming the habits. There's a great sutta where there's a man with leprosy named Suppabuddha, a beggar, and he sees this whole group around the Buddha and thinks, "Oh, maybe they have some food over there." So he goes over to get some food, and there's no food. He thinks, "Well, I might as well just sit and listen." And the Buddha looks out, and Suppabuddha is the one the Buddha sees who could hear the Dhamma. You never know. So the Buddha did this graduated teaching. And when the mind, the heart, was bright, pliable, uplifted, then he taught the Dhamma, and Suppabuddha got it.

This is what we can do for ourselves. When we're feeling down or lost—thinking, "I haven't been aware for three weeks, I haven't sat, I can't possibly do it, I'm no good"—just go give somebody a bunch of flowers. Just call a friend who you know is down. Send a check to your favorite charity, but do it really with clarity, knowing what you're doing. Or simply contemplate, through recollection, previous acts of generosity. And it really, as the Buddha said, sets the mind and the heart straight. When one is contemplating one's acts of generosity or non-harming, at that time there is not greed, hatred, or delusion in the mind. The heart-mind is set straight on the Dhamma.

So explore that. Don't say, "That's not really generous. All I did was give somebody a piece of fudge." It doesn't matter what it was. That might have been the best thing they had that whole week. Don't buy into this kind of negativity we get into, thinking, "Oh, that's just being egotistical." If it's egotistical, it won't brighten the mind and heart. You'll feel the difference. But I think I never really learned to sit and just think about, or call up, or let come up, times when there was generosity, times when there was mettā, times when there was non-harming. It really does make you happy. Just thinking about it makes you happy.

Okay, a little bit about sīla. Again, it works in the same way. At the most basic level, of course, the Buddha talked about non-harming behavior as the five precepts—the ones we took on the opening night, except the third one isn't celibacy but rather not harming oneself or others through one's sexual energy. So that's the basic sīla.

But again, even if we just set it as a rule—you don't do this—and you come up against it without much self-reflection and simply say, "Okay, don't steal," and you don't steal, that's already great, because that's transforming some motivation. Even if you want to steal, want to take something that isn't yours, but you come up against the rule and you don't do it, that refraining is actually a wholesome act.

We tend to just say, "Well, I wanted to do it. I just didn't because of the rule, but I'm such a bad person." But you didn't do it. That's the wholesome act. In that moment, that transformed the motivation from taking to restraint. And restraint is actually wholesome.

But as we look more deeply, really examining what's going on in the heart and mind around our actions in reference to non-harming behavior, we see it's actually quite profound. We begin exploring the movements, the motivations in our heart and mind that come up even in the thought of wanting to do or not wanting to do what keeping the precepts requires.

We read from Ajahn Sucitto talking about the five precepts. The transcendent point is not what they look like—not just "don't do this, don't do that"—but what they call forth in our heart and mind, what it takes to keep them, the efforts involved, and the effects that keeping the precepts have on your life. Really exploring what happens when we pay attention.

He says sila, like dana, is based in a sense of empathy. It's not a one-time thing —"Okay, I didn't lie today." It's making non-harming a way of life. The precepts are to be protected with a sense of truly valuing one's own mind, one's own body, and the con-

text of the people one lives with. With these precepts, we extend that sense of respect and regard from our own mind and body towards all creatures, so that we impart value to this realm that we share with others.

Tuning into the motivations that help us keep the precepts is really profound. If we just kept attending to this, it would completely transform the habits of our mind. Because as we pay attention to see what effect just moving towards harsh speech has—just the effect of thinking of doing it—we notice the reverberations in our own heart and mind when we're tuning in. And then if we actually act on it, as Tejaniya says, even when we act on the unwholesome, bring awareness along with you. So we see, we learn the effects. That's how we learn.

I know now when I've said something thoughtless or harsh, it really reverberates with me. I can see it reverberate with the other person, but it really reverberates with me. There's a sense that respect for one's own being and respect for other beings are totally interrelated.

So I do want to say again: really appreciating restraint as a wholesome act. Because some of you think that if you have these unwholesome ideas come up—you know, this mosquito is driving you crazy and you just really want to slap it. You kind of slap at it on the side, trying to miss it, but this is in the middle of the night during a bad mosquito season. The worst little habits come out in the middle of the night when you hear that sound in your mosquito net. This is one of the worst things. And you can see the aversion and this urge to kill. It's a horrible feeling if you really tune into it.

So we need to bring awareness along to see that—not just turn off the awareness. The precepts aren't meant as a vow where if you break it, you're going to hell. They're really meant to bring us to pay attention, to see what's going on, and to appreciate that even feeling that hatred and then restraining the hand and not killing the mosquito—that's an act of non-harming. Appreciate it, and that will feed the wholesome. If you just focus on "I was going to do it and I'm so bad," that's just more ill will. Instead, focus: "Oh yeah, okay, I managed not to do it. Non-ill will came up." Let's appreciate that. That strengthens the wholesome.

This is Ajahn Sucitto again: "Morality carries with it the strength of restraint, the empathy of concern for how one's actions affect oneself and others, and the clarity of discerning the difference between short-term happy feelings and long-term well-being."

I love that—discerning the difference between short-term happy feelings and long-term well-being. Getting rid of the mosquito: short-term happy feeling. I don't have to hear that buzzing anymore. But not long-term well-being for the mosquito or for me. As the Buddha said, the wisdom to be able to be momentarily with the unpleasant but for a wholesome outcome—that's one aspect of wisdom.

There's something very interesting about the precepts. Being around people who really have strong sila is to me enormously inspiring. You can feel the purity. I was telling the group the other day—we were talking about sila—I remember the time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching with a couple of other monks. He was a very strong teacher, but he was also a very strong holder of sila. All the monks' rules, but all the aspects of sila.

He was very strong in it. I remember one day—they were just eating, you know, they would eat in their own room and be fed. I don't know what I was doing. I must have been on staff at the time because I just kind of walked into the room. I wasn't a yogi. I came in to give something or take something. I wasn't really thinking about anything in particular, I just walked in. And I felt—I still remember this—the sense of purity in that room was palpable. It kind of knocked me back because I wasn't thinking about it or expecting it at all. It's an amazing thing, the kind of power that comes from non-harming, from really committing to that. It transforms your heart and mind, and you're going to see more clearly. This is the freedom of non-clinging.

So notice for yourself—it's a lovely feeling when you start to have more confidence in the wholesomeness in your heart and mind, in the wholesomeness of your sila. We're going to blow it, but there's more confidence that you can trust that, more confidence in the wholesome instead of thinking we're always going to fall into the negative.

A simple story I tell: I was with a friend at Spirit Rock, not on retreat, and I wanted to go buy a little White Tara statue from their bookstore. If you've been to Spirit Rock, you know the Jikundo bookstore with ten million things in it—my goodness. So I wanted this statue, and it's self-service, so we went in and looked all around but couldn't find it. My friend had sometimes volunteered working there, and she said, "I know where the closet is where they keep them all."

So we went, and she knew where the special magnet opener was, and we opened the closet. It's this huge closet with all these shelves just packed with statues—hundreds of statues, all different ones. No one's around. We're taking out different statues to look for the one I wanted. They were all organized, the same ones together. So we both took out

at the same time a Manjushri statue. Manjushri has this little sword of wisdom. And at the same time, we just barely touched them and that sword broke for both of us. We're each holding one and both go, "Oh no!"

Later we dissected this. We both momentarily—in each of us—the thought came up, "I could put it back and no one will know." The thought came, and there was no way it landed in either of us. We'd never even thought about it. We both looked at each other and said, "I guess we have to go tell Marianne," who runs the bookstore and is a friend of ours. Like kids going to the principal, you know—we broke the statue.

But it was interesting because we both felt so good about that, really—that we could have put it back and no one would have known, and the thought never even landed. The thought came and just went nowhere because it was so obvious we weren't going to steal. It's just a little thing. It doesn't mean you're perfect with sila, but let stuff like that in. It really strengthens one's faith and confidence in the Dhamma, in the fact that it really works, that the habits of mind are being transformed. We don't have to just live in the inevitability of these difficult habits.

Just a couple of last suggestions to end. There are times when, as we're tuning into our motivation before acting, we can see that it's unwholesome. Take a moment, reflect on it. The Buddha gave this very famous talk to his son, Rahula, that before you do any action, reflect on the motivation. Is it for your own good, the good of another? Then do it. If it's not, don't do it. Or if you don't remember, in the middle of the action, reflect on the motivation. Is it for your own good, the good of another? Do it. If not, stop doing it. Or when it's over, reflect on what the motivation was.

We can do that ourselves. I'm learning to do it when answering emails, which is really a great place—especially if you think there's a little bit of aversion in there. "I've just got to tell them how to do this right."

And I really see it. The answer comes up really quick and I have all this energy and I'm typing the email. I'm learning to recognize that energy isn't discriminating wisdom. That energy is aversion. Don't hit the send button. Close the computer. Send it another day. And you read it the next day and you go, "Whoa, good thing I didn't send that."

We can reflect, find ways to reflect on what you're doing. Sister Chân Không, who is the nun who has been with Thich Nhat Hanh for years and years, she's really very committed to this. In her autobiography, which was written quite a few years ago, she's talking about when they were living in France. They'd been not allowed to come back to Vi-

etnam during the Vietnam War because they were peace activists and weren't taking sides with either side, North or South Vietnam. So neither side trusted them and exiled them.

At this time, living in France, she's still a peace activist. I'll just read this from her:

"Many people were being arrested—nuns, monks, artists. Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew that I had to do walking meditation." Is that what you do when you become angry? "I'm angry. I better do some walking meditation." "Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to rediscover my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to let my heartbeat relax, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted in arresting such a wonderful monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

She spent her life being a real peace activist and a deep practitioner of mindfulness meditation. And you can see that willingness to tune into the motivation first, always first, with all these tools to help transform the habits.

To me, this is the work of our lifetime, and all of our life is part of it. There's nothing outside of it. Every time we speak, every time we act—we're going to blow it ten million times, but it's always an opportunity to see what's going on.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 182

Awareness with Thinking

Carol Wilson · 42 min

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of the most challenging aspects of meditation practice: working skillfully with thinking. She observes how practitioners often believe that successful meditation means having no thoughts, when in fact the path to freedom lies in recognizing thought as simply another sense door experience—the sixth sense door in Buddhist psychology—equal to seeing, hearing, and other sensory experiences.*
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> *Wilson shares insights from her own retreat practice, noting how the mind habitually prioritizes thinking over other sense experiences, treating thoughts as more real and more connected to a sense of self. She explains that the shift from being lost in thought to recognizing "a thought is a thought" is genuinely world-changing. Drawing on teachings from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Ajahn Sumedho, she illuminates the ephemeral nature of thought energy itself—how thoughts arise from nothing and dissolve into nothing, like a puff of air. The classic Tibetan analogy of the dog versus the lion illustrates the difference between chasing after thoughts and resting in awareness at their source.*
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> *Practical guidance is offered for developing this skill: appreciating moments when awareness returns after being lost in thought, using neutral easily-observable experiences to refresh awareness when thinking becomes overwhelming, and approaching the exploration with curiosity rather than aversion. Wilson emphasizes that thoughts themselves aren't the problem—it's the unconscious believing in their content that creates dukkha. Through patient practice, we can learn to use thinking as a tool rather than being driven by it, fundamentally changing our relationship to experience.*

So I wanted to just say a few things this afternoon about awareness with thinking.

We've talked about it a bit. Alexis brought it up this morning. Of course, the thought process is certainly one of the more significant experiences that we could possibly be aware of, right? Takes up a lot of airtime, doesn't it, in your practice? You wish it didn't.

How much of the suffering that we're experiencing in our practice here, on a moment-to-moment basis—the discontent or dis-ease—is connected with thought, with thinking? It can be so frequent, especially if you're new to this style or new to practice at all. The idea is so common that if we're doing well, we're getting to a point where we're not thinking, or hardly thinking at all. And that peace is really about not having thoughts.

Which, I mean, in one way that's true, right? When there aren't a lot of thoughts and we're aware, it is peaceful. But that's not like the peace to end all peace. That's a condition.

I remember many years ago, I read a short statement from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, you know, when we really look at the nature of a thought, what is it? It's like poof. It's so nothing. And so therefore there's no logical reason why thoughts should bother us so much and we get so caught up in them. That part wasn't so helpful, right?

But it's actually quite fascinating once we begin to—as we continue to for our whole life and practice—include thinking as the sixth sense door and bring in awareness with the quality of curiosity, that receptive curiosity that Alexis was talking about today, really just exploring what it is. It can be fascinating. And also, it's incredibly revealing, almost amazing, when the shift happens in one's experience—from being really in the thought, where the thought describes the world, describes us, and we don't think of it as describing reality but as actually being reality, even though the reality of one moment is completely different from five minutes later, we're caught, we're totally caught—the shift from that to recognizing, "Oh, a thought is a thought." It's world changing.

The same story can be going on in my mind, and I think, "Oh yeah, that's thinking." It's completely different from the believing.

So just to begin to explore, to continue to explore—it's quite fascinating. When I was doing a self-retreat for a few weeks earlier this winter, I was somewhere not home and practicing in this style, meaning being with awareness and not having a really rigid structure at all, just being aware with whatever was going on, all the sixth sense doors as we've described. And for some reason, just the interest was piqued in exploring thought more.

What piqued it was I was noticing, as I'm walking around, or I'm doing the dishes, or sitting, or whatever, all the sixth sense experiences are occurring, correct? You're seeing, you're hearing, there are physical sensations, maybe not as much taste and smell, but some, and thinking. And I started to notice, in terms of receptive awareness rather than planning, how much more priority or importance my mind or my attention was giving to thinking than it was to hearing or seeing. Thinking—that's the real thing, which was causing immense suffering. But that's the real thing. And I could see, oh, that's the habit.

So you're doing the dishes. And even if we think we're being mindful, we're thinking about doing the dishes. And sometimes, when we see this with awareness, it's fun to see. But then when you think about how much it's happening, sometimes the thinking about doing the dishes—it's almost like we take that for the reality. More in touch with the thinking about doing the dishes than just the simplicity of the sensations.

That is a simple example. But I've been exploring thought for years, and this was just a piece I hadn't seen: a sense of prioritizing the thought door as more important than any other sense door. In other words, that was more me. Let's face it, when it's important, why is it important?

Because somehow it's about me. It's creating a sense of me. Or I don't like it, or I do like it—that's creating the sense of me.

There is hearing, the beautiful birds, peace. Okay, that's nice. But what about me? Let's think about something. That's what the mind does. It's more interesting. We'd rather think ourselves into a suffering story about me than just rest at ease with seeing and hearing and thinking and sensing.

But I'm not getting anywhere with this. What can I do to make it a little more interesting? What can I do to get somewhere? What can I compare it to? What does this mean about me?

Nothing. And we hate that.

So first, noticing how—and it may not be true for you; we're all different, I'm not saying we all prioritize thought—but it was just interesting for me to see how somehow I gave thought more reality. And what's so interesting is it actually has less reality, the content.

When we're not recognizing thought energy as a thought, that's when we get so carried away. The thought arises: I like this. What can I do? How can I have more? What does it mean about me? All the different memories. And then there's a whole sense of me that gets created just like that.

Or the thought could be: I'm here to meditate and thoughts are bad. That's a thought, based on an idea. So when a thought comes, the other thought—that thoughts are bad—comes up, and that brings aversion. Then we have this resistance to thought, and thought becomes a real problem. But it's not thought that's the problem. It's the not recognizing: thinking is thinking, seeing is seeing, hearing is hearing.

Without recognizing that a thought is just a thought, it takes us so far, so fast. Thought is a useful tool—it's not that thinking is bad. It's not. We want to understand how it works so that it becomes an amazing tool in the world. But when we don't understand how it works, it's running us.

Have you felt that at all since you've been here? Whipped around by your thoughts? And doesn't it feel so real, what they're telling you?

When people describe their experience in the group, they'll talk about a period where it was so difficult. And something difficult is happening—something unpleasant that is difficult to be with. That's not necessarily thinking; that can be happening, for sure. And our training, our habit, isn't to be able to rest at ease with the unpleasant.

So something's going on that's difficult, and that unpleasant feeling gives rise to aversion out of habit. And that aversion usually gives rise to some kind of description, explanation, what's wrong, how can I make it better—an assessment of practice, an assessment of yourself, an assessment of your whole life. Really, all of that in just moments. And there's this strong sense that this is reality, isn't there?

We're assuming this is an unpleasant assessment at this moment because something difficult was happening. But it feels true. It's me.

And then people talk about later—the next hour or the next morning—and it's all completely changed. Because experience—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—is arising and passing in every mind moment.

There's no stability of objects. That's how our world is. And so, of course, it's changed. By the next morning, it's changed ten million times already. But we're just noticing it in slower motion—how our stories change. The next morning, something completely different arises: something lovely, or just the evaporation of that suffering, that dukkha, and a different story emerges. "Oh, pleasant."

Maybe there's just balance with it, no clinging, and then there wouldn't be much thought about it. Maybe there's a little clinging—normal—and we think, "What did I do? How did I get there?" Or, "This is so great," and whatever story follows. And that also feels equally true and real.

When we're not recognizing the actuality of thought as a thought, it's amazing how we keep getting sucked in. It really is. Just think a very simple thought: "The sky is blue." You've probably thought five others since that. "The sky is blue." It comes up, and where does it go? What is it? It's nothing, right? "The sky is blue." Look at the thought energy of that. It's really ephemeral. It's really nothing. Do you get a sense of that?

All thoughts are like that. A thought is a thought. The content of a thought can be anything—beautiful, neutral. It can be helpful, it can be unhelpful, it can be really awful. That thought energy itself is just a puff. And what makes it more solid isn't the thought itself, but that we're not recognizing it as such, believing the content instead. So then the scary thought arises, and then the whole nine yards, the whole thing starts. Emotions come with it. They keep the thoughts going.

Some thoughts are heavy. Some thoughts are poof, just like that—neutral. Notice those little neutral ones, because that's a way to keep exploring, reminding ourselves, "Oh, that's thought energy. It's empty." And notice when it's gone. Ajahn Sumedho talks a lot about noticing this. With little thoughts—the big ones you may not notice ending right away—when little ones are gone, there's often a little space before the next one. Honestly, sometimes there is a little space before the next one. Often we don't notice the space.

Where does the thought come from? Where does it go? It's nothing. The thought itself is nothing. Just let in the possibility that if there's a little space—don't grab it, then it's gone—but just noticing that. It's the ground that thoughts come out of. It gets really fascinating.

And this is, of course, something you can't play with when the thought has a lot of juice in it, when we're caught in the content or when it comes together with strong emotion. But there are so many thoughts that are just like—la, la, la, la—stupid, a hundred million times stupid. And you have them so many times. You sit down and you just can't relax until you think of the name of that actor who was in that movie in 2002, and you can't remember the name of the movie either, but it reminds you of something. And you just can't relax until you think of it.

A good use of our time. How many thoughts are just blah, blah, blah, blah, blah? So those ones—not to be aversive—that's really where you can play with recognizing the nature of thought. Honestly, the more we get familiar with it, it is so freeing.

I remember—not exactly when—but the first time that I actually recognized with something that was a little difficult: "Oh, that's thinking. Thinking." It was just like, "Oh, that's thinking. It's not the whole world describing itself. It's just a series of thoughts that are unpleasant. And there's fear, which is an arising experience we can be aware of as well." That's what's happening now. That's always available.

The Tibetan tradition gives this example—I've read it many times—of how a normal person not practicing relates with thoughts versus how a yogi would relate with thoughts. Maybe you've heard this; it's quite well known. It's like the difference

between throwing a rock at a dog and throwing the rock at a lion. I don't know who of us would have had the experience of throwing a rock at either one, particularly a lion, but the example gives a good metaphor.

You throw the rock at the dog, and the dog looks and goes chasing all over, following the rock. It just gets into a whole flurry, and it doesn't ever see where the rock came from. It's just following the rock. You throw the rock at the lion, and it just sits there and looks right at the source of the rock—which is you. It doesn't go anywhere, just right at the source.

So they're saying that for an unpracticed person, or in our normal habit, the thought comes and we just go running off in it. Whatever it is, we just take off into that thought and the whole world it creates—pleasant or unpleasant, liking it or not, we're just off in it. But when we're with awareness, learning to just have awareness that thinking is happening, awareness simply notices the thought as it is. That's all. Whatever the content is, it's thought energy with some content. "Yeah, that's thought." And the nature of thought itself takes us right back into relaxed awareness, into the simplicity of non-identification.

So how many thoughts do we have in a day? A lot. So that's a lot of opportunity. Be happy with the next thought! It's a lot of opportunity to really explore this, to see without judgment. Thoughts are going to happen. The ear hears, the mind thinks. It's normal. And it's useful—we use thoughts.

So when we're feeling it's a problem, widen the awareness first and check. There will be some resistance, some disliking, some idea that this shouldn't be happening, once you've recognized it's thinking. But when you're all caught up in a story, see if you can just go, "Oh, thinking." Not push it away, but turn around and—like the lion—just notice. That energy of thinking. That's what we can play with.

It's not easy, so just a couple of little tips. We often mention these simple ways in our awareness practice: first, just recognizing that we can include thought, thinking, as simply another arising object, same as any other object. Really let that in, especially if lurking in the back of your subconscious is the idea that no thought is better than thought—and maybe that you like no thought better than thought. Just be aware of that. Because if we're not, then as soon as thought comes in, there's this subtle sense that it would be better if this weren't happening. We already know the suffering that comes from that. Then you notice that. But anyway, just having in mind that thought is equally valid—not better, not worse—an object of awareness like anything else.

But of course, it's trickier. Think of how slippery and quick and subtle thoughts are, and also what I mentioned before—the power we give them by believing so implicitly in their content or the energy underneath. So it's slipperier. This is where it becomes a practice, and we can really use skillful means.

We've all said several times: when you're lost in thought and suddenly awareness returns—not an act of personal will, just suddenly, "Oh, I'm thinking"—appreciate that moment of awareness. This appreciation helps us become familiar with how it feels when there's awareness while thinking is happening. Often the thinking will stop, and that's fine. Don't set up expectations like, "I should be able to keep thinking and be aware." There are many different ways this unfolds. Just start to appreciate when awareness comes with thinking. That's one thing.

And there are times when awareness arises and the thinking keeps going. You can be aware and watch what it does. You see how wanting comes up and makes this story, and then you're off in it. Normal. Don't get down on yourself—that's normal.

When we're starting to explore what U Tejaniya suggests, and of course we would all suggest it, you titrate, just as when something is difficult. You get interested in watching thinking, but then you're getting lost a lot. Come back. Pick again a neutral, really easily observable experience to refresh the awareness, to help steady and balance the awareness again. You probably won't have to wait long for more thoughts to come up.

There are times when the mind is more balanced—you're more calm, the interest is high, there's not a lot of suffering or resistance. That might be a time when you think, "I could really explore thinking a little now," because you're not in such a reactive space. And an hour later, you're doing something else, and you think, "I'll explore thinking," but you just get swept away. That's going to happen. At those times, come back to something easier to be with, to refresh the awareness.

So it's a skill, really a skill that we all can learn if you're not used to it. And it's so freeing. It can change our whole relationship to our experience, to explore thinking in this way and not be afraid of thinking—to be able to use thought rather than being driven by it.

Okay, that's enough. As I said, I could go on and on. So again, really patience with the thinking process. We're remembering none of it is personal—it's just nature. And the thoughts that grip us, there are causes that bring them about. What keeps it going? Widen the attention, and you'll see there's strong emotion underneath, or wanting

that's feeding it, or some idea that keeps surfacing. Get curious: What's going on with this? It's a fine object of awareness—a fine object of awareness. And awareness is being strengthened in doing that.

So thanks for your attention. Just let yourself settle. Maybe take a moment to let your attention sink into feeling the body, just being present. It's been a lot of words. Just let awareness rest with a simple experience.

And just noticing how the body feels, how the mind feels, what the mood is. We're not trying to glom on to some experience, but just settling, opening, relaxing any wanting or resistance to just being fully here in this moment. No expectations, no needs. It's just like this now. And awareness just notices whatever arises now.

May the wholesome energies generated by our practice be shared with all beings for their happiness and well-being. May all beings live with wisdom and compassion.

So thank you all. And just let awareness accompany you, seeing what choice the mind makes to stand up, to go to awareness in movement, or something else. It's interesting to see what's making the choice for our own well-being.

CHAPTER 183

Unentangled Knowing

Carol Wilson · 44 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson weaves together teachings from multiple Buddhist traditions to illuminate the nature of 'unentangled knowing'—the simple, complete awareness of what's happening without adding anything extra. Drawing from the opening verse of the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification), she explores the question posed to the Buddha: 'Who can untangle this tangle?'

Wilson shares Thanissaro Bhikkhu's insight that saṃsāra is not a place but a process—'the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them.' She pairs this with Ajahn Sumedho's teaching that both saṃsāra and nibbāna are 'modes of perception,' with saṃsāra being perception through the lens of 'me, me, me.' The talk explores how misperception—seeing changing experiences as a solid, separate self—lies at the root of our confusion, echoing teachings from the Dalai Lama and Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Practically, Wilson emphasizes having 'confidence in awareness' rather than confidence in our reactive patterns. She shares Ajahn Sumedho's example of making a determination (adhiṭṭhāna) to trust awareness during difficult times. Through personal examples and the teaching of Thai laywoman Upāsikā Kee Nanayon, she illustrates how accurate recognition naturally dissolves confused responses without effort. The talk includes Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings on interdependence and emptiness, showing how unentangled knowing reveals our fundamental connectedness and naturally gives rise to compassion.

Are you aware? Are you aware of being aware? And it doesn't matter what's past, because now—are you aware now? That's our whole practice, that's it.

I wanted to riff some more on the inner tangle and the outer tangle. It's the verse that introduces the Visuddhimagga, which is a really long commentary. It's not the original Pali discourses of the Buddha—it was written in about 500 A.D. in Sri Lanka. Some people really like it and some don't, so I'm not saying anything about the quality, but it's really huge.

The poem is, as Mark said, "The inner tangle and the outer tangle. This generation is entangled in a tangle. And so I ask of Gotama this question: who can untangle this tangle?" And then there's this whole giant book, which goes through all the different practices. The Path of Purification is what it's called.

Here's another description I've been loving lately, the last couple of years, that I think describes the tangle. This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He's talking about samsara:

"Samsara literally means 'wandering on.' Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live and the place we leave when we go to Nibbana. But in early Buddhist texts, samsara is not the answer to 'where are we?'—it's the answer to 'what are we doing?' It's not a place, it's a process. The tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, your mind creates another, and you go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds, too."

Does that make sense? And you wonder why none of us know what's going on, creating all these worlds around. But you can see that on a moment-to-moment level. So untangling the tangle is finding a way to move out of this samsara-ing—not going somewhere else to nibbana, but being here in a clearer way.

Ajahn Sumedho, on the same theme, also talks about samsara. He says, "Samsara and nibbana are not places to go, but modes of perception." I love this because to me it cuts to the heart of it. Modes of perception. Samsara is perception from or through personality belief, personality view. Or to just cut to the chase, it's from or through the view of me, me, me—the center of everything. I don't know if you can relate to ever having experienced a moment like that.

So that's samsara-ing, the mode of perception. I did mention a few nights ago that this is how His Holiness the Dalai Lama and also Thich Nhat Hanh describe the source of our confusion and suffering—as being misperception. And this is really the heart of the misperception: perceiving any particular experience of the six sense experiences that come and go as me or mine, or having any kind of perception, in a moment—this is just moment to moment—of me as a separate ongoing entity.

This isn't something to think about. I mean, God knows we can think about it. But perception isn't something we think through. It's just suddenly you see in a different way. That's what insight is. You can't think your way into insight, but suddenly, boom, you see in a different way. That's the power of continuous receptive awareness.

So back to who can untangle this tangle. There's the whole of the Visuddhimagga, but there's a shortcut. And guess what that shortcut is? Continuous, steady awareness, pure and simple. There's a book called *Pure and Simple* that contains the teachings of a Thai laywoman from the last century, Upasika Kee. It's thick, but very, very powerful, very clear understanding.

unentangled knowing. And so it fits perfectly. Unentangled knowing is simply, in a moment, the simple, complete awareness of what's happening just as it is without adding anything extra.

So this isn't any new information. But the power of this steady, steady awareness as it begins to get momentum—that's the condition for wisdom. And you could describe wisdom as accurate recognition. When something is recognized accurately, all the confusing responses—the greed, the hatred, the confusion, the stories of me—tend to drop away. It's not like you have to think your way out of them.

Mark's story the other night about when he was in the bathroom is a great example. The music started playing. That's a great story. And it's good to see these stories in our own experience, even little ones, because it's exactly the same process as being in a big, really suffering, tormented story in our minds.

Seeing how samsara-ing works, how the mind creates a world and we enter into it—he didn't create that beautiful marble urinal, that was already there. But he entered into it fully, like, "Wow, this is so amazing." So just seeing how you go in and the mind is already in some kind of "Wow, this is an amazing place." And then the whole thing that went on—the music and all the thoughts about it. What he told us later, he was thinking things like, "I wonder how much it costs for them to put in this sound system. It's so good." So that's not an obviously suffering experience, but it's a world he entered into.

And in the moment when he picked up his phone again and saw, "Oh, this is coming from my phone"—if you don't add any extra, all the other stuff just falls away. The amazing sound system, well, you don't think anymore about it because clearly there isn't an amazing sound system. All the wondering, all the amazement—it drops because it has nothing to do with reality. And that's a moment of wisdom. That's how wisdom functions. The confusion, when the misperception shifts and is recognized accurately, all the confused ideas and responses just fall away. So we don't have to somehow dig them all up and put them aside. For that moment—that's the thing. They don't fall away forever.

But this unentangled knowing, what we're doing here—I'm saying all this to try and give us more and more faith, more and more sense of trust and confidence in this steadiness of awareness, because it so often doesn't seem like that much is happening. But with the continuity of awareness, which as many of you are saying, you can feel that growing—not having some idea you never space out, of course we do—but the more that there's confidence in awareness... This is a way that Ajahn Sumedho often talks. He talks about having and reminding himself to have confidence in awareness.

What we mostly have confidence in is all our reactions of mind. So when something comes up that's difficult, the natural response, the habit of mind—it's not that we plan it—is aversion. Unpleasant, aversion. We've talked about that. And then how fast that leads to a whole world. This isn't new information. But awareness isn't aversive. It isn't me. It's just watching the whole process. It's not trying to stop it.

But having confidence in the awareness—it's that foreground-background shift. The whole thing goes on, but it's a completely different experience. There's no me in it when there's confidence in it. There's me in the story. But awareness isn't me. And it just is unfolding. And actually, one feels more in it.

It's not unfolding over there somewhere while I remain detached, not really feeling it because I'm aware. Actually, there's no resistance anymore. Resistance is one of the effects of me resisting experience. When there's confidence in awareness, things are seen with continuity.

A moment of awareness, as we've said, isn't feeding the greed or the aversion. It's not feeding the story, and the story is always fed by greed or aversion or the sense of me. And the sense of me—that's really the misperception that feeds greed and aversion anyway. It's rare to find otherwise. I want to say it couldn't be any other way, but I wouldn't dare say that. But it's pretty rare. I'd like you to tell me if you find an example where there's a lot of greed or aversion coming up in your mind but no sense of me involved in it. I don't think so. Even when we're angry about how someone else is being treated, when we're really angry in the aversion—not a sense of kindness, but just really *I'm angry*—there's a way it's about me.

So interesting.

When Ajahn Sumedho talks about having confidence in awareness, that's inspired me a lot because he's about 85 now, I think. He's been practicing as a monk for fifty or sixty years. And what he talks about now all the time—I often listen to him online—is receptive awareness, intuitive awareness, he calls it. That's absolutely just every moment, the steadiness of intuitive awareness, unentangled knowing, to use Ajahn Chah's language. So it's not like that's new to him.

But not so long ago, I was in a small group at some retreat he was teaching. He was talking about how he would have to, at times, take a firm stand, like a resolution in his mind, to have confidence in awareness. He was describing a time at his monastery where there was really a lot of difficulty going on, very difficult stuff. He being the head of it, and some of his decisions were creating some of the difficulty. But anyway, being the head of it, all the stuff that was directed at him—the blame and the anger and

everything directed at him. And he said, "My personality doesn't like that. I was really suffering with all this stuff coming at me. I really didn't like it and was starting to get involved in reaction."

And then he said, that's when he knew he had to really take a resolution. Determine—that's the word he used. "I made a determination to have confidence in awareness." That was very inspiring to me.

Resolution, determination—it's a specific quality of mind. It's a mental factor that we can actually experience. And it's neutral, because you could have a determination to do something unwholesome. So it's ethically neutral, depending on what the determination is. But it's a quality of mind that's like—you could say it's the Nike thing: just do it. But without aversion or judgment. Instead of flopping around—maybe I should, maybe I shouldn't, oh, it'd be nice to trust in awareness, but stuff's kind of hard right now, whatever it is—just do it. There's a sense of, in a moment—not forever, just a moment—of stability.

Adhiṭṭhāna is the word in Pali; it means resolution. So when he said "I made a determination," he was tuning into that mental quality in his mind, which we all can, but we often don't think to notice it. And it's not greed or aversion—just take refuge in awareness.

And that's really what we're practicing here. When something difficult or beautiful is going on and we feel all involved in it, taking refuge in awareness is like almost opening to the experience more, but just let the awareness in. We don't create it; just let it in. I find just remembering that again and again, the whole experience becomes all-inclusive, because awareness isn't me. In a moment of just receptive awareness, there's not Carol identifying with anything. When there's identification, then it's *my* awareness—that's different. You can feel the difference. But when it's just receptive awareness, everything's just happening. Not trying to name what's happening, the feelings are there, but it's a completely different way of being, as I'm sure you all know.

And it's nothing we can create with an act of will. I'm sure we've all spent plenty of time trying, and we still will. What we can do is set up the willingness to receive awareness and then just keep setting up that willingness. It seems to come, and then it goes. But the more we are willing to have that confidence, the more we are willing to see, to trust how steady awareness actually begins to release the particular tangle when it's seen accurately.

The tangle just releases. It's nothing we do personally. That's wisdom. Wisdom does the work. The more we recognize when that happens—and it's happening all the time.

Someone said today, you know, just entering into the world, seeing your mind create the world, entering into it, it falls apart and we enter into another world. Like someone said today—I hope you don't mind, you said it in the question period, but it was so perfect: "I'm the best yogi," and it's the whole world. And then the next day, "I'm the worst yogi," and it's the whole world. You're not the only one, right? And we totally believe each world.

And then there's the world of our memories and this and that. And then we're bumping into other people. And thank God we're not talking—that's one of the reasons we don't have talking on retreat, you know. Other people are in their world. But if they met you in the world where you thought you were God's gift to humankind, and you're talking to them, that's who they think you are. Then the next day, they're going to relate to you because that's who you think you are. But that day, you're no longer God's gift to humankind—you're a worm who doesn't deserve to live on the face of the earth. But they don't know that. And they're going through their different worlds too. And we're trying to have a society here... And we wonder why things are confused.

Sidetracking here. Okay.

I personally actually really enjoy—I love, actually—when there's enough awareness to receive, to see how in a particular experience the sense of me is arising and functioning, and how it is when that goes away. Because it comes and goes; it's just another world. There's not one "me" that we have to see through. It's just another world.

All aspects of the teaching, all aspects of the Buddhist teaching, are working to purify our hearts and minds, transform the habits. But the deepest transformation is through this element of wisdom.

And so, remember—I'm sure many of you know this quote from Shantideva, one of the Dalai Lama's favorite quotes, apparently. It's this: All the happiness I experience comes from wanting other people to be happy. All the suffering I experience comes from wanting only myself to be happy.

And it's easy to hear that as a should, you know, how we should be. But I want to say, I've just been noticing sometimes in little moments how that's actually a literal description. How when there's not that sense of referring it all back to me, the quality of heart and mind that comes out in a situation is actually a sense of happiness, whatever wholesome quality.

A simple little example I noticed last year. I was just sitting at home, and I guess I heard or read something—I must have been listening to news or the radio, I don't even know what. But somebody had done some nice, good thing. And it landed in a moment

when my mind and heart was caught in a world of "you're not so good," in a world of very familiar self-judgment, right? So I kind of knew it was there, but not with confidence and awareness—just the kind of, okay, I know it's there, but it was coloring everything.

So the good thing, whatever the person did, was heard, and the immediate reaction was: Why didn't I think to do that? Right away, it's all about me. This good thing happens, and it's all about me—and it's suffering. It's not a happy "all about me."

Then later, I wasn't thinking. I was just watching.

Awareness was just watching that. Then I heard another thing—it was different. I wasn't thinking or trying to redo that experience. But I heard another good thing, something similar. And at that time, there was just an awareness that the other stuff wasn't there. The immediate response was simply, "Isn't that wonderful?" I felt so happy for the person, just so happy in general for that good thing to happen.

That's mudita, appreciative joy. It just naturally came—not thinking I should have it, nothing to do with me. When there's not the reference point present in the mind, the beautiful qualities come out. So just noticing when that happened, not clinging. I mean, it's gone. Of course we cling—that's the next thing.

But in terms of our steady awareness here, of course we notice when the difficulties are there. It's sort of like Alexis was saying today—you kind of feel some difficulty, and often that's like a little sign. It helps us bring awareness back in. Actually, Anam Thubten talks about that as a smoke signal for awareness, a smoke alarm for awareness. When you start to feel just a little discomfort in your body or mind, it's like, "Ah, bring in awareness again."

But equally important—notice when the difficulty goes. We often go, "Okay, nice," and then maybe space out. Notice the calm or the happiness or the mudita or the compassion. It's really important to let the awareness stay steady, to notice the whole thing. And so that little example with mudita—I've been noticing things like that more and more. That was a small one.

Sometimes, and this is only personal, it's different for everybody, but sometimes not listening to the news... I mean, there's plenty of suffering in the news. And you really have to titrate, pay attention to how much the heart and mind can take in before you're just going into a sinkhole. That's not out of avoidance, but it's always refreshing the awareness so we can open to what's happening. That's in our daily life, not different from retreat.

But I notice when I'm hearing something difficult and I'm in a me-space, it's either "I can't stand it" or "I think I shouldn't have this privilege because so many people are suffering"—which I can feel often. But there are other times when there's not the me, and the same tuning into something really painful or difficult occurs. We get plenty of chances to practice with this, but I'm not practicing. It just happens. There's not the me, and the pain lands. You really feel.

This is when awareness can open to the suffering, the dukkha, without any me-story about it. And it's just natural that some sense of connectedness comes up. I mean, I'm saying this, but it's just, "Oh. Wow, that's so hard. So many people like that." That's just a natural response of compassion. That's what's available when the me-ing isn't there.

Please don't take the sense of seeing that there's a lot of "me" personally, or that you're doing something wrong. I love watching it because it's just a deeply rooted habit based in the misperception that somehow we're a separate being, separate from other things and ongoing—that there's no changing nature. That's the perception, again and again and again.

With steady awareness, you'll see that even though it feels like a steady me, it's changing all the time. Like Tanissaro said, all these different worlds. It's a different me—a happy me, a sad me, this thought, that thought. What you're calling "me" might be a sensation. So just get interested, exploring it.

I wanted to go in a slightly different direction in terms of describing the misperception of a sense of separate self. You probably know how Thich Nhat Hanh always talked about it. He did die a couple of months ago, and I used to read and study with him a lot. I hadn't for quite some time.

And then I went back, watching little short videos of him, and was reminded of how sometimes the way he described things sounded almost too simplistic, or too nice. But there's actually a real depth of reality in it. So I just wanted to share a couple of things I'd written down.

He always talked about emptiness—empty of a separate self—as being really full of everything. If you've heard him at all, he would say a flower is nothing separate; it's full of the whole cosmos. You can't have a flower without the sun, without the oxygen, without the earth, without the earthworms. How did the earth get here? It's geological time—rocks ground down over millions of years. And where did they come from? The universe. It just goes on and on. You can't separate anything out.

He was describing a human being this way: as a human, you're full of your ancestors, the parents, the cells of your parents, back and back and back. Also all animals, minerals, plants. Take away any of these, and humans can't exist. So there's no way anything can really be separate from everything else. It's intellectual when we talk about it, but really, at times, that's what we're pointing to. Not that you have to think that way, but it's a misperception that somehow we're absolutely separate.

I found this note—I don't know who sent it to me, a couple of years ago. Maybe someone here. It's unsigned. But I just saw it today, and I thought, oh, that's kind of sweet: "I still only think about myself, but now I am the world." Delightful.

So how do we continue to discover this emptiness, this fullness? How do we perceive in this way? This is Thich Nhat Hanh again, talking about the kingdom of God, but he just means recognizing reality, freedom: "It's available twenty-four hours a day. The problem is whether we are available to know this. Or are we lost in the past, in the future, in wanting, in aversion?"

With mindfulness, he says, we're fully present in the here and now, fully alive in the here and now. Just one in-breath—no hard labor. Really, that simple. Just one in-breath, and we're fully alive in the here and now.

So you might notice, with awareness, that we all have moments—many moments a day—where there's this simplicity of unentangled knowing, this awareness he's talking about, present in the here and now. Just a moment. Maybe you could be doing anything: drinking tea, looking at the sunset, having pain in your leg. It could be anything. But where it's just completely this, and you may know other things going on, and there's no self-reflection about it. No "what does it mean about me?" No "I'm experiencing this"—although that might arise in the next moment. And it's not like big lights going off. It's just this, this, this.

Let that start to come in. Start to notice the alternate perception. The more the awareness gets steady, the more accurate perceptions can arise. The tangle—like the little story about the music—as soon as you see it, it drops away. More complicated ones do too. Many people here could describe some big storm that was going on, and then you see it somehow different, and it drops away completely. That's what's going on all the time.

So we're really just willing to have confidence in awareness. And that allows us to open into what's happening. The more we do that, the more we develop real trust—being with the beautiful is really important, recognizing the wholesome. But then we also

become less afraid to be with the difficult, because we really start to understand that opening to difficulty also opens us into the sense of us all being in this together. Compassion naturally comes.

I think that's all I want to say. I thought there was some more, but I just want to close with this from the Dalai Lama.

He says, "Every morning I reflect on the truth of interdependence, that nothing exists as it appears. Nothing is separate, but all arising from connected conditions. And this understanding naturally gives rise to compassion for all beings suffering from being in this confusion."

So the steady awareness has the power to really change our understanding in amazing ways. Let's have confidence in awareness, quietly for a while.

May all the wholesome energies arising from our practice together—all of us here in this room, from our sincere intentions throughout the day—may all this wholesome energy be not for ourselves alone, but may we share it with all beings everywhere. May our practice truly be a cause for beings to be safe and protected. May all beings be free from fear. May all beings live with wisdom and compassion.

Thank you all for your sincere Dhamma energy, for being here together.

Continuing awareness now in whatever posture, whatever mode feels most supportive for you to refresh the awareness—whether it's walking or having tea or going outside. Come back to the next sitting if that seems appropriate, or do whatever supports awareness. Just trusting.

CHAPTER 184

Awareness and Wise Attitude (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this dharma talk from an online retreat in the style of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Carol Wilson explores a profound teaching from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche: the main purpose of dharma practice is to recognize the nature of the non-deluded mind and discover how the deluded mind works. She emphasizes that we don't need to create special conditions for the non-deluded mind—we simply need to recognize it again and again, while bringing genuine interest and investigation to understanding how the kilesas (greed, hatred, and delusion) function.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance on tuning into the quality or attitude present in the mind that is aware. She distinguishes between moments of non-deluded awareness—marked by stability, calm, interest, or equanimity—and moments when kilesas color our perception and lead to suffering. Crucially, she explains that awareness alone doesn't liberate; it's wisdom (paññā) that arises through steady awareness which actually releases attachment. The five spiritual faculties (saddhā, viriya, sati, samādhi, paññā) naturally strengthen through this practice.*
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> *Particularly valuable is her teaching on skillful means when difficult mind states become overwhelming. Rather than abandoning awareness or forcing ourselves to stay with an object that's too intense, we can consciously shift attention to something more neutral to refresh and re-establish balanced awareness. This isn't running away—it's honoring our commitment to recognizing wise awareness regardless of conditions. Wilson reminds us that dharma practice encompasses our whole life, including dāna, sīla, and bhāvanā, and that we practice not for ourselves alone but for the benefit of all beings.*

What are you aware of as I begin to speak? Just noticing how it is—aware of body, mind, hearing, mood, emotion. There's a sense of what often happens to me: "Oh, now they're going to speak," and something relaxes. I'm sort of semi-aware but waiting for the entertainment. And I think, well, that isn't entertaining. I better go back to my own awareness.

But we never leave our own awareness. That's the thing.

So I'm going to speak a bit, as you no doubt expected. But please don't let that be some kind of break in awareness. Let awareness notice whatever is naturally occurring. If you missed some of my words, it probably won't make any difference in your life. If you hear them all, it might not make any difference either. So just being with whatever occurs—loving awareness more than needing something special to happen or stop happening.

What I wanted to speak about occurred in my mind last night: one of my favorite things that Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche wrote many years ago. I've always loved it. He says, "The main purpose of these Dharma teachings is to recognize the nature of the non-deluded mind, as well as to discover how the deluded mind works."

I love that. Recognize the nature of the non-deluded. Not create it, not create some amazing condition so finally we can get to a place where the non-deluded mind is sitting waiting for us. But just to recognize, again and again—as well as to discover how the deluded mind works.

Discover. To me, that brings in that quality we've been talking about in wise attitude: interest. Investigation. Allowing the mindful awareness to collect the data when the deluded mind is functioning—on the rare occasions that it shows up—rather than running and hiding and assuming we've failed.

In terms of Rinpoche saying the main purpose of these Dharma teachings, of our Dharma practice: I'm sure you know this, but just to highlight, we're not talking about only this meditation practice. We're not even talking about this way of being within recognizing awareness. Dharma practice for recognizing the non-deluded mind, trusting it, having faith in it, having confidence—that means our Dharma practice is our whole life. And what we're doing here, cultivating to recognize awareness that's available in our whole life, is really important. But the Buddha taught dāna, sīla, bhāvanā—generosity, morality, and mental cultivation. Our whole life. I just want to highlight that.

But now I'm talking about the slice of life of our practice here. The sense of recognizing and trusting the availability of awareness as soon as we think about it. And after a while, we don't have to think about it. It's arising, recognized naturally as it gets momentum.

And this aspect of getting more and more familiar with tuning into what we call wise attitude—the quality in the mind that's aware. Remember, we've been talking about wise attitude the whole time. But the more that becomes intrinsic, so much a part of recognizing awareness, the attitude in the mind, in the consciousness, becomes more and more obvious.

This is the place I want to speak to this morning: where we're really recognizing more and more moments of non-deluded mind, awareness of the non-deluded mind, and moments when there's awareness and the deluded aspect—the kilesas—is present.

The deluded mind is basically mind that in that moment is influenced by greed, hatred, or delusion, with delusion often manifesting as a sense of "me." When that's arising, not recognized in awareness, it influences perception, feeling tone, thought, action, and views—which is all too often how we're functioning in the world. From perception based on this awareness, but awareness influenced by greed, by aversion, by views. That's how we think about the world. That's how we act.

This awareness, though, and recognizing the awareness, recognizing the quality in the mind when it's deluded—that's an avenue into freedom from that.

So first, recognizing the non-deluded mind. Something that Andrea gave some examples of yesterday afternoon. Just in a little way. I'm not talking about going looking for the big explosion of nibbāna. That's nice. We're talking about moment-to-moment awareness of what's arising in the mind. And there are moments of presence of mind that are not kilesa-ridden.

I'm using kilesa because I don't really like the word "defilement." Kilesa meaning greed, hatred, confusion, sense of self—unrecognized. There are moments when, tuning in to the attitude in the mind that's aware, you might notice you're not really noticing greed or hatred.

There's maybe stability, maybe calm, maybe interest, maybe compassion, maybe just, "Ah, it's like this now." Equanimity. You don't have to make a big deal of it, but noticing—awareness noticing—"Oh yes, that's a moment of non-deluded mind."

And just as we're hopefully all getting more and more at ease with the naturalness, the non-excited flashiness of awareness, getting a sense of that—it's not some special thing—so normally we overlook it in our life. We get sucked into reacting to whatever's happening and just overlook awareness. Hence our practice together.

Often moments of non-deluded mind can be similar. We're looking for oneness, looking for the sense of love, and it just might be "just like this now." Just peace and space. Just lack of reactivity. Noticing those moments, you don't go clinging to them. Clinging might come, and then that moment's gone and clinging's here. Fine, next moment. But I just want to point that out. Stay with that.

And then there's discovering how the deluded mind works. Now, I would say—I'm not a mathematician or a statistician—I would say at least fifty percent of our practice, really I want to say ninety-two percent, but I'll stick with fifty percent of our practice, is discovering how the deluded mind works. Have you noticed anything about that during these few days? Have you noticed a moment of deluded mind arising? Yes? Thank you.

This is what's so wonderful about what we've been saying about awareness—that we're just recognizing what's the quality, what's the attitude in the mind that's aware. Because as we've said, though we need to keep learning to trust this: when there's greed arising, some kind of aversion, hatred, fear, delusion—and there's delusion under greed and aversion also—but the delusion, say, of a view: "It's supposed to be like this," and it's not, and we're really suffering and we don't catch that view, that attachment to that view. Or anytime there's a sense of me, sense of self, me or mine.

When that's arising in the awareness and we don't recognize it, awareness doesn't recognize it, that's when it colors the perception. Then we speak and act and wonder, "Why is everything so out of sync?" Have you ever noticed you're doing something, you think it should go like this, and it goes like that? Because what we're perceiving and what we're thinking is completely out of sync with reality. This is how the kilesas completely distort our perception, our views, our thoughts. This, folks, is what we're living with.

So just kind of hoping if we practice enough it'll go away—well, it hasn't worked yet for me. If it's worked for any of you, I'd like to know. "I just hope if I do this enough, it'll go away."

But what Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about a lot—not only he, but I've learned so much from the way he speaks about it—is this encouragement: as we keep tuning into the attitude in the mind again and again, it becomes second nature as soon as there's awareness. And not just on retreat, but in our life. So you can't help but notice when there's wanting, when there's some kind of resistance or aversion. And it doesn't have to be so big it's rage—we tend not to miss that. But just the kind of, "I don't want to do this now. This isn't supposed to be happening." Or, "Oh, the greed is so strong." Or, "Oh me, I failed"—here's the sense of self again, believing it.

So our habit—maybe some of our habits, maybe you've transcended this habit, may it be so—the habit is we see this, and sometimes as awareness is strong and you're noticing the greed, the aversion, the sense of self, awareness just keeps on noticing it. So as we've said, that kilesa simply becomes the next arising object—a perfectly fine object to help us re-recognize awareness. No problem.

And sometimes just the awareness of noticing the greed, the aversion, the sense of me—awareness itself, when it's not distorted by that, is not feeding the kilesa. It's just letting it live its life in the light of awareness. So often, if the kilesa is not so strong and awareness isn't identified, then the kilesa may go away.

Awareness doesn't make the kilesa go away. Sometimes we think—and this is, you know—"I'm being mindful, but the greed is still here. What am I doing wrong?"

Have you ever had that thought? "I'm being mindful of this pain in my knee, and I recognize the awareness, but I still hate it. I'm not being mindful in the right way." This happens because we're imputing to awareness something it doesn't have. The title of one of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's books is *Awareness Alone is Not Enough*. Because it's not awareness that liberates. It's not awareness that releases the attachment. It's wisdom.

Wisdom is a quality that arises in the heart and mind. But the steadiness of awareness, bringing in the data of how the greed is working, how the aversion is working—this steady awareness is the condition that allows wisdom to come in and arise.

Have you ever had a time... let's pick greed. For me, greed is easier to watch somehow. It's not that I don't get caught in it, but I can observe it more easily. With sense of self, you watch it for a while and then boom, you're really caught. But you can really watch greed—"I really want this"—and there are times it just goes. Other times, the greed is really strong, and awareness is watching. But have you ever seen that somehow the greed gets stronger? You can tell. It's taken over. You're about to go with it.

So the habit can be to shut the awareness down. "Well, the awareness wasn't strong enough. It didn't get rid of the greed. I'm going to follow it." So we stop being aware. The greed doesn't want awareness there. It's like what Alexis was talking about when he got in an argument with his partner—you can see the aversion and the delusion, or the wanting to win, takes over. "I don't want to be aware. I want to go with the kilesa." Right? Kilesas have a life of their own. A moment of greed feeds the next moment of greed. A moment of aversion feeds the next moment of aversion. Delusion, of course, the same.

And the same is true with awareness, with sati. A moment of sati feeds the next, and the next, and the next. So it's really important when we become aware that the kilesa has gotten stronger not to check out of the awareness, thinking, "Well, it didn't stop it, so no good." There's awareness, but the wisdom's not there yet. The wisdom isn't strong.

When the wisdom gets really strong, that's the moment where the mind will go—and it's not you, it's not an act of will. It's different from saying, "Okay, I'm not going to go get this. I'm not going to go get this," and the greed's still there, but you're holding

yourself back. Fine, that's restraint. And you can be watching the greed, but the greed's still arising. But there's a moment where the mind goes, "I don't need this." And the greed dissipates. Have you ever had a moment like that? Yes.

Aversion too—you're getting angry at somebody and you go, "Wait a minute, maybe I'm not seeing this right." The aversion dissipates. That's wisdom doing its job. It's not personal will.

And awareness, the steady awareness, brings along wholesome qualities: the interest, the energy to stay with it, the stability of mind to stay with it, the confidence, the faith to stay with it. And then the wisdom arises. *Ah!* This greed isn't really making me happy. It stops.

It doesn't feel like a willful, forceful action because you're not doing it. It's a letting go of doing. But what sets this up is the willingness. When the sense of self is really strong, don't think, "Oh, I failed—sense of self is taking over again." Instead—and this is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that has helped me so much—bring awareness along with you while the mind and body is acting out of kilesa. Bring the awareness along.

We don't like to. Why? Because it feels lousy. We don't like how it feels. So we pretend it's not happening and turn off the awareness. This is called delusion. It does not work in any terms of purifying the heart-mind.

Bring along the awareness. As Tejaniya is always saying, watch how greed does its job. I love that. Let's learn how sense of self does its job. Learn how aversion, how resistance does its job. Because that's just nature. The nature of the kilesas—that's a dhamma too. Kilesas are a dhamma too. Any arising phenomenon is a dhamma. It's part of nature. So we can't just turn away from it and hope that bad part of nature will go away. We can see the effects of that in the world in so many ways.

Bring awareness along. And this is where the confidence in awareness, the trust in the Dhamma, is really what feeds our heart and mind. Because sometimes it's a little thing—clinging, wanting to go eat something I shouldn't eat. I can be with that. Sometimes it's a big thing, where it's really painful to watch my stupid personality really identify with itself and go down that road again. Can I bring awareness along?

Awareness is okay to feel the unpleasant. We know this intellectually, but I keep finding it slipping in the back of my mind: "Oh, I want to go to the pleasant. Oh, this can't be right because it's unpleasant. Something's wrong—this experience moment is unpleasant." Hello, vedana! Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—constantly changing every instant. You think if you keep getting more aware, the unpleasant and the neutral go away and you only get pleasant? Somehow that idea is back in there. It's not going to happen.

But awareness—that's okay. The pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. This is what we're learning to recognize and trust. That's the refuge in awareness rather than the refuge in object.

So the wholesome qualities that steady awareness and our trusting it brings along—the first of these is saddhā, faith, confidence in awareness itself, in our practice, in this. Sayadaw U Pandita said to me, "Awareness—you can be with anything." Just confidence. And that gives us the energy, just the willingness to hang with it for this next instant. Who knows how long it's going to last? And it's possible for experience to get stronger than awareness, and it can't be there—it's too hard. I'll say a little about that at the end, if I remember.

And then there's the mindfulness, of course. And all of this together brings the stability, the samādhi. And these together allow the wisdom to arise. The five spiritual faculties, all coming naturally with our steady awareness. And so this grows and grows.

We start to see and learn how the kilesas do their job. We discover how the deluded mind works. It's really helpful to see.

So when I start to notice aversion arising—hopefully I start to notice when it's arising, not half an hour into it—I'm not afraid of it, not thinking, "Oh God, I failed again." Here's aversion. That's the nature. Given this set of conditions, aversion arises. That's just the nature. But as soon as there's a thought of awareness, awareness also is present. We can watch that without engaging in it. We're feeling it fully. It's not at a distance, but awareness isn't averse. Watch how much wisdom comes in. It doesn't last nearly as long. And more and more, awareness is just understanding the nature of this life of mind and body—recognizing how the non-deluded mind is, discovering how the deluded mind works.

Awareness is equally available, always accessible. The refuge in awareness, the love of awareness rather than the attachment to what's occurring—this is really, as Ajahn Sumedho often talks about, awareness as a doorway to freedom. So we don't make it some big whoo-hoo, just right now. Awareness. And more and more, getting a feeling for the attitude in the mind. Not wanting it to be a certain way. It's like this now. It's like this now. Not leaning into wanting it different. Not expecting how it should be. Just this total, "Ah, it's like this now."

So let's just sit quietly together for some time, as it's like this now.

May this wholesome, beneficial energy that is created through our sincere practice together and alone, through each of our personal dedication to wisdom and compassion, to recognizing and living from goodness, our natural goodness—may these beneficial, wholesome energies spread out and be shared with all beings in all realms in this universe, as well as this world.

May the wholesome energies of our practice be not for ourselves alone, although may it support our awakening from confusion. May it also support the awakening from confusion of all beings.

Really knowing we're not practicing for ourselves alone can be a source of strengthening faith and confidence, willingness to meet whatever arises with awareness and interest and friendliness.

May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings know happiness and the causes of happiness. May all beings live with wisdom and compassion.

For me personally, it's nice to sit together with all of you after days of just sitting alone at home. It's nice. Thank you all for your presence.

One comment I wanted to make—I did remember, which in itself is amazing. We've talked about this before, but I just wanted to remind us that it's a skillful means thing. There are times when you're rested, you're aware, the attitude in the mind is interest, but the object is really one of the kilesas—strong rage or shame or greed or total personality view, identification, whatever it is. And you recognize there's awareness and the willingness to be with. It feels like you're really being aware in a very clear way. But the difficulty of the object is just getting stronger and stronger. That's out of our control.

So in a way, you could say that the energy of the object—the wanting, the fear, whatever—is stronger at that moment than the energy of the awareness, even with your sincere intention. And you can recognize it just because you can feel like it's getting out of control. Of course it was never in control, but you feel like the more you pay attention, the worse it gets—not just unpleasant, but the awareness is just getting too shaky.

So at that point, this is really very important. Remember that our intention here is not to fix the object, not to get to the end of that object, not to see it off. It's not to "note it off," as is sometimes said in the Mahasi system.

Our commitment is to keep on remembering to recognize balanced awareness, to keep refreshing the awareness.

So when the object is too much, this skillful means is to really consciously shift your awareness to some obvious and more neutral experience that's happening right now. It could be anything. It could be some sensation in the body, or your fingers touching, or hearing, or seeing. You're not abandoning awareness—you're shifting to an object that's more neutral, and then you can refresh, re-recognize what awareness with wise attitude feels like. "Oh yeah, right."

It may take a few moments, because the other moments are still having an influence. Let's say you're feeling your finger, but you're still lost in fear—just keep on bringing the awareness, awareness, awareness to something neutral. And then you'll start to re-cognize balanced awareness again. Refresh the awareness, and do this a lot. It's sort of what Sayadaw would do when he would stick that inhaler thing in his nose—sometimes it takes something strong. But it's just to refresh the awareness. It's not running away.

Running away is when we shut down awareness altogether, which sometimes is what we've got to do. And then awareness will come back, whether we want it to or not. Here it is again. We can't really run away. And that's a wonderful thing.

So I just wanted to put that out as a skillful means. And please don't feel like it's a failure if you use it. It's a success, because you're really seeing that your commitment is to refreshing and re-recognizing balanced awareness, no matter what's happening.

CHAPTER 185

Three Jobs of a Yogi

Carol Wilson · 49 min

> *In this foundational talk, Carol Wilson presents Sayadaw U Tejaniya's elegant framework for vipassanā practice: the three jobs of a yogi. These are experiencing mind and body directly, maintaining moment-to-moment awareness, and cultivating right understanding. Wilson emphasizes the Buddha's practical approach—not creating elaborate philosophy, but offering tools to understand why we suffer and how we can be free.*
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> *The talk explores how we habitually add layers of reactivity and assumption to simple sense experiences, using vivid examples from retreats in Asia where construction noise became a powerful teaching on the nature of aversion. Wilson explains how steady awareness with wise understanding—seeing experiences as nature arising through causes and conditions—transforms our relationship to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. She references the insight knowledge of yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana (knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be) as the fruit of this practice.*
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> *Practical guidance includes recognizing the shift from being identified with experience to resting in awareness itself, what Wilson calls "a shift of refuge." She draws on teachings from Mingyur Rinpoche and Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of "the miracle of mindfulness," illustrating how this simple recognition opens access to natural compassion and wisdom. The talk concludes with encouragement for continuous practice throughout all daily activities, reversing typical retreat priorities to emphasize awareness during ordinary moments as most essential.*

So tonight I'm hoping to just give a general overview, a sense of what's the purpose, how this works in a very general way. The idea is that it'll give you enough impetus to keep going for another day.

What I've always been inspired by, what got me interested in Buddhism in the first place and why I trusted the teachings of the Buddha from the beginning, is because it seems so practical. Everything he was teaching, everything he was sharing—and he said this many times—was to help us normal people understand why we suffer and why we don't need to. What we're doing based on our confused interpretations of life that causes us more suffering. So he's being very practical and direct, not trying to give us a whole philosophy—then you look at how many Buddhist texts there are, amazing, right? But if you just cut to the chase, cut to the practice, what he's really teaching, it can really be quite simple and basic. And amazingly, it's amazing really, how this sim-

pleness of mindful awareness, steadily recognized throughout all our activities with a mind that's not caught up in reactivity and projection, how that can be so liberating. We call it the liberating simplicity of mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh called it the miracle of mindfulness. It's really quite amazing.

It's not that the mindfulness takes us to creating something different or into a different world. It took me years to suddenly recognize that when the Buddha woke up, he woke up into the same world that he was living in before. He didn't float on a cloud somewhere, and he was called the peaceful one. But he still had to deal with all the regular aspects of life that we all have to deal with, for forty-five years. So the difference wasn't that somehow everything got pleasant and all the unpleasant things went away. Not at all. But the difference was in the understanding, how he recognized and thus understood reality.

And so that's really what our practice is offering us—the opportunity to explore moment after moment after moment in a very simple way. And it's a shift in understanding that's not about thinking about it. We talk and talk about all the different techniques, but it's all about our own moment-to-moment experience. That's what shifts the confusion that we don't even know we're living in. That's the whole point. We don't even know. We wouldn't do this stuff on purpose, right? We wouldn't say, "Let me choose how to relate to reality in a way that's going to make me really much more tense than if I just let it be as it is."

We do what we do because we think it's the thing, whatever it is in the moment, that's going to bring us happiness or ease or bring peace to other people or be helpful in some way. And then when—not all the time, sometimes it is helpful—but then when it isn't and it blows up in our face, we go, "Well, somebody did something wrong. Probably not me, but somewhere in the world something's wrong. It shouldn't be happening like this." This is taking us in a whole different direction.

So what the Buddha saw is really that, and what he's speaking to, the seeds of suffering that arise in our own mind and heart. It's not that the Buddha's awakening could fix the world. And our practice and our sincere cultivation of wisdom and compassion, it does bring more understanding and peace and compassion to ourselves. We do respond in the world differently. That does affect people, but it's not going to fix the world. He couldn't end war between his own clans of his mother and father. But the suffering that he was pointing to is the confusion and the pain and the stress that's arising moment to moment—not every moment, but a lot of moments, more than we want—in our own mind and heart. And also to discover the peace, the ease, the compassion, the beautiful qualities that also arise right here, right at home, in our own mind and heart.

So he's offering us in this simple practice—the way we're offering here from Santa Eutasia Nia—giving us a tool that's very available to start to and to continue to explore, so that we start to understand: how are these seeds of suffering arising? How are they ceasing? They arise in a moment, they cease in a moment. How do the wholesome, beautiful qualities of compassion, of wisdom, of interest, of mindfulness, of collectedness of mind, of faith—how do those arise? What's the effect when there's wholesome in the mind? What's the effect when there's the suffering?

So it's not that we're trying to parse it out and write it on a piece of paper. It's handing us the tool to really explore and learn for ourselves. And when we see things accurately, as they really are—this is the miracle of mindfulness, as Thich Nhat Hanh called it. Because the accurate recognition, recognizing things as they truly are, is actually what allows for the wisdom that changes our response. It's really quite amazing. We don't have to figure it all out. Thank God, we're not doing such a good job. But we can trust—the more we're willing to trust, able to trust—the steady continuity of awareness that sets up the condition for this clear seeing.

In one of the lists of different kinds of insights, there's one that's quite a developed insight called yathābhūta ñāṇadassana, which means knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be.

That's a very deep, profound insight knowledge—as they have come to be in this moment.

So that's always available, right? As they've come to be in this moment. It's not an insight knowledge of going somewhere else. It's like, wow, this is how it really is right now. It doesn't seem like much, does it? But that is really what this practice is about.

One definition of Vipassana meditation—I think this is Sayadaw Tejaniya's definition of how we're offering the particular practice here, and I like it a lot: Vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly, from moment to moment, with the right understanding. At other times he calls these the three jobs of a yogi. You're all yogis. These are the only jobs you have here on the retreat: experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment—that's the perseverance, that's the continuity—with the right understanding. That's it. Of course, it's not so easy to do, but that's really a great definition of what we're doing, what we're learning here.

To talk about experiencing the mind and body directly, that's mindfulness. With the right understanding—I want to speak about both of those, just introducing them in a way. What does that mean?

As many of you have been doing different kinds of insight meditation for a long time, I'm sure most, if not all of you, are familiar with the basic idea of mindfulness: simply feeling, knowing what's happening in this moment. Sensation in the body, or as Alexis described, hearing a sound. We're talking about knowing with awareness that that's happening. But the simplicity of mindfulness without it being distorted by any kind of reactivity or assumption about what's happening—just letting this experience be totally present without adding anything extra—that's what's so tricky. Because so much of the time we don't know we're adding anything extra. We think that's just how it is. That sound is bad. It's driving me crazy. I'm going to lose it if that sound continues. And it's wrong—we're in a meditation center, it shouldn't be happening.

I go to sound a lot for examples because it's so clear it's happening outside of us, but it's exactly the same for a mood or a pain in the body or anything else. And also because when we're practicing in Asia, sound is the most incredible teaching tool you can imagine—it's inescapable, really loud. I think most of the meditation centers have some kind of clause written in that there should be construction going on no matter when. I don't think I've ever been in one when there wasn't some construction happening. And it should be as close to the meditation hall as possible. And it's always loud.

The first place I ever went, they had rebar—bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. And then they had an electric sander machine with this one high-pitched sound, and it would go on all day from seven in the morning until four in the afternoon. It was closer to where I was sitting than the back of the hall. After a couple of weeks, I finally thought I'd made peace with this high-pitched sound. And then, my God, they brought in a second one that had a different pitch. You just think you're going to lose it. And sometimes we do lose it—in the privacy of one's own hut. Anyway, that was a digression. That's why I use sound a lot.

So we often don't know that we're adding to our experience. This is what the steadiness of awareness brings in: the right understanding. As Alexis said yesterday, this operates at all levels, but one simple way to begin bringing in the idea of right understanding, wise understanding, is thinking of whatever's arising as simply nature, arising as the effect of causes—which is true for everything that's arising, internally and externally. As Mingyur Rinpoche talks about, recognizing the same interplay between cause and effect that conditions other things in the world is also shaping our own mind and experience. So think in terms of looking steadily at cause and effect and not taking it personally. Gardening—you plant a seed.

If you know what kind of seed it is, it's naturally going to grow into that particular plant. It won't grow into a different kind of plant. But it will also need the particular causes and conditions—the right soil, the right water, perhaps fertilizer, the right weather. And if any of those are too much or too little, it may not grow, or it may not grow well.

But if we get upset because we planted a daffodil bulb when we really wanted peonies, it doesn't make a lot of sense. We tend not to do that. If the plant doesn't get enough water, we may not like it—we wanted the thing to grow—but we don't take it personally. It didn't rain. There's really nothing one could do about that. So we look at that series of cause and effect, and everything works like that. Everything.

As Mingyur Rinpoche says, we can look at how cause and effect conditions our own mind, and how that shapes our experience. We're not different from a plant in that way. He writes, "If we want to be happy, we must recognize what causes and conditions lead to well-being in our mind and heart, in our experience. Similarly, if we don't have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how can we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?"

This to me is just a very direct and simple explanation of what we're doing with our steady mindfulness practice. The quality of mindfulness with wise understanding is this quality of simple interest, not taking it personally, seeing what's arising and then seeing what happens next, and then what happens next. Not only when it's nice stuff—understanding what leads to more wholesome, beautiful qualities—but also when it's difficult. When sounds are coming and aversion is arising in my heart and mind, the invitation is not to stop paying attention, not to close down awareness at that time and think, "Well, I can't practice. This is too unpleasant and I can't really focus on my breath, so forget it until they stop."

That's what we tend to do—decide it's not working now. But as Mingyur Rinpoche says, if we don't understand the conditions that lead to suffering, how can we possibly expect to free ourselves from it? Without steady awareness paired with wise understanding, the assumption we make is that the sound is the cause of my suffering, or that my inability to concentrate because of that sound is the cause of my suffering. And we just go with that.

When we're seeing through the veil of assumption, of wanting, of aversion, we draw inaccurate conclusions. We don't know they're inaccurate. And we build our choices on that foundation, getting more and more confused or locked into a particular explana-

tion. "It's impossible to really be present with that sound. It's impossible for me to be at peace while that sound is happening"—or this pain in the knee, or feeling sad, or whatever it is.

A simple way to describe nature: What's happening? All that's ever happening in our experience is the arising and passing of these six sense experiences. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing sensations in the body, and the whole mental realm. I know it's a lot—the mental realm is complicated. But just one after the other, happening all day long.

Did you have a moment today where none of those things were happening? Well, maybe there were moments you didn't notice they were happening. But that's all there is. And it's not in our control. I use sounds as an example because they're so obviously happening outside of our control—and yet we think we should be able to control them. Can you control what sensations arose in your body today? Or, God forbid, what thoughts arose? Could you control whether it stayed pleasant? Could you control whether mindfulness remained? Could you control whether you felt bored or sleepy or whatever?

But without steady awareness, without seeing cause and effect clearly, we often think we can control these things. Our habit is to get really glommed into the experience, into the object that's happening.

We don't quite recognize awareness itself. We just get into the experience, and then we like it or we don't like it. This is really the huge habit of our mind.

We think whatever's occurring—one of these six sense objects, which is one of the brilliant things the Buddha articulated—a sight comes, a sound comes. Even being aware of seeing or hearing, it's experienced just as a little tinge in our heart-mind: kind of pleasant, kind of unpleasant, kind of neither one, not making much of an impact. That's just part of how things are. Not bad, not good.

But we often don't notice that. As something gets more pleasant, or we like it, we say, "Of course we like it." And that becomes our position. Or it's unpleasant, and we don't like it, and it shouldn't be happening. We like it, say in meditation, and that means we're doing it right and it's going to get more and more like this. We don't like it, it's a little bit unpleasant, and that means something's wrong. And neutral, neither one—that means nothing's happening and something better ought to start happening, like soon.

Sometimes people find their minds even create a whole suffering story just to escape neutrality. Why? Because at least then I'm suffering. And ultimately, it's all about me.

This is so familiar we take it for granted. Without steady awareness, we really don't tend to notice that the sense of pleasantness or unpleasantness—how we define and describe the world—is really what gives meaning to the experience. And we just assume that's true.

So as I say, if it's unpleasant, we assume there's some problem with the experience. And often: what does that mean about me? Or what effect is it having on me? Or if it's something happening internally, we think *I'm* doing it. If it's mental, then we think that *is* me, and there's something wrong with me. This assessment is so intertwined with the experience that we often don't even notice it. We just think, "Yeah, sure—it hurts and it's bad and something's got to give here." Or, "Yeah, sure, this is pleasant, and this is how it's supposed to be. Finally I got it right, and it's going to stay this way and get more and more this way because now I'm doing it right."

We don't even notice that. It coheres into a story just like that. We think that's an accurate representation of what's happening, and then the whole thing builds up. And it's so familiar. We're so used to defining and explaining, giving meaning to each experience based partly on pleasantness and unpleasantness, and then based on what it means to *me*, that it just seems real. We don't even notice it. It's like gravity, right? We don't think about gravity very much through the day. You don't really think, "Good thing there's gravity—we're staying on our cushion." But it's part of what we can notice when our attention opens up. Such a familiar habit.

So to say something's unpleasant—I'll go back to that sound, just to keep it simple. Bringing in awareness, first recognizing awareness, not just hearing and "I don't like it" and this whole story. The difference would be recognizing the hearing. A hearing. I can still hear it—it's like thirty years ago, burned in my brain. But that's just an experience; it doesn't have to mean anything else.

So there's the hearing, recognizing that hearing is arising. All the conditions for it are present; you don't have to think about it, it's happening. It's unpleasant. I can feel the quality of not liking it. That's another arising experience. That's a mental quality arising in my heart-mind—not liking it, aversion. That's a fine next object of awareness. It's the next object of awareness: an unpleasant vibration. Then there's irritation in the body. There's a kind of cringing back, a tightening. That's the next arising experience: unpleasant physical sensation.

Tension. "It shouldn't be like this." That's the next arising experience. Judging, not liking.

Do you see what I mean? Being present doesn't mean just being present with the lovely stuff. It means being present moment after moment, but without buying into the assumptions—watching how they're being created. Actually, that steady awareness with the wise understanding, "Oh, it's just this now, causes and conditions," that's what transforms everything. Of course aversion arises. I've spent my whole life cultivating aversion when unpleasant things happen that I don't want to have to be with. And I don't think I'm the only one.

As we said about awareness, every moment that awareness arises in the heart-mind, it's that much easier for it to arise in the next moment. But that doesn't just work with the wholesome, right? It works with whatever. The more you practice something, the more it arises, the more naturally it arises. So spend a long time with unpleasant physical experience, the cringing back, and aversion arises. Aversion is unpleasant in itself. The attention doesn't want to be there. And it just turns into a whole story, which is a way of trying to avoid. "Why are they doing this? I shouldn't have to deal with this. I need to move. I don't know..."

There's nothing wrong with thought. We're not trying to stop thought. We just want to bring awareness into that story, into that whole process. The steady perseverance of awareness feels that whole process and asks: Where is the suffering here? That's the question. Where is the suffering here? And when we're with that whole story, it becomes clear the suffering isn't the sound. The suffering isn't even the thought. The suffering is the identifying—taking that aversion as me and fighting with present moment experience.

When awareness recognizes, "Oh, aversion feels like this," there's a stepping into awareness rather than letting me be the aversion. It changes everything. This is really the miracle of mindfulness. It's not changing what's happening. But the shift from being the aversion, or hating the aversion, or being lost in that story—and that story could go on for hours—that shift is everything.

When we wake up from the story, pay attention. What was the effect? Is everything hunky-dory now? Do we feel free? Do we feel better? Usually we notice: it didn't do the job. The story just helped us not notice what was happening for a while, although it whipped everything up more.

The freedom is: "Oh, aversion feels like this." And the interest, the energy, is in the awareness. Awareness can include whatever's happening, but as I say, it's not stained by it. It's not about me. There's not that sense of personal suffering or personal needing something pleasant. That's the moment of intimation of freedom, of ease.

In that moment, all that *mishigas* is happening—the sound, and even the thoughts—"Oh, that's like a particular button: you push this button, these thoughts come out." Awareness notices it. And in that, just for that moment, resting in the awareness, there's ease, there's peace. And really, unbidden, often, rather than all this aversion, a moment of compassion comes up for those poor guys out there in that heat, working eight hours a day.

What's it like for them, holding on to that sander and having to run it eight hours a day? When I'm all caught up in identifying with the unpleasant, not recognizing it, it really is all about me. But in that moment of awareness—I'm not saying I *should* be compassionate—it opens up the world. It opens up the field. It's like, wow, those poor guys out there, it must be tough for them. And the next moment, the sound comes, it's still unpleasant. The sense of aversion might come, but awareness sees it. It just drops away that much sooner. It really is a kind of magic, just a simplicity of awareness.

And that's really the key. Where's the suffering now? What's happening now? When we say "with awareness, what's happening now?" you don't have to try and delineate it all, say it's a big, whole story. Like, what's happening now? "Oh, I really hate this feeling." Okay, start right there. Awareness notices hating this feeling. How does that feel? And with this quality of interest, awareness is just interested in what's happening now. It's not bringing in a judgment. Awareness isn't liking or disliking. It's like, "Ah, it feels like this." And that can be with anything.

This is where we really start learning to trust—to really trust being with the awareness rather than glommed into the object. Because that's our other habit: the habit of not noticing liking, disliking, pleasant, unpleasant, and using that to define everything. The other habit—and this can be a meditation habit too—is that there's an awareness of whatever object is arising: the breath, hearing, anger, boredom, just a sensation. We're quite aware of the object but not recognizing the mindfulness, not recognizing the awareness. So we get completely glommed into the object. You can get quite focused that way, and that's not a bad thing, but that's just one particular way of being in meditation, in awareness.

What we want to cultivate here is not just that, but a kind of widening out, a tuning in more and more to the awareness of any object. It's kind of like a little bit of foreground-background shift. It opens up the field. So this simple awareness, free from concept, free from trying to hold on to a particular object—we allow whatever's happening naturally to happen, and awareness can receive it. It's a whole different way of being, a kind of openness to the unknown in each moment. It brings a freshness, an interest.

Let me give an example that I like a lot, from somebody who really inspires me: Yo-Yo Ma, the very well-known cellist. Years ago, I saw a documentary about him on German television. Since I don't speak much German, I didn't understand a lot of it. But this part I did understand, and he just so inspires me. To me, he embodies this sense of freshness and wonder that comes from steady attention without preconception. It opens up the world.

In this part of the documentary, he was in a helicopter, going with his million-dollar cello to Africa, to some small tribe somewhere in what looked like the Kalahari Desert—a small tribe in Africa—to compare music with them. He's really interested in music from all different kinds of traditions. So he gets out of the helicopter with this million-dollar cello, and he meets the man who is the storyteller, the one who holds the stories of the tribe and serves as its musician, who sings. And this man brought his instrument. His instrument was a long pole, and the body—the round thing that would make the sound—was really like a big old oil can. Then it had strings, like frets coming up, and a couple of strings rising from that. So it kind of looked like a big bass fiddle or something, but it was just this oil can and a couple of strings coming up from it.

And so he's playing on that, and he has Yo-Yo Ma playing some beautiful classical piece on his cello. And then Yo-Yo Ma is so fascinated by this man, by this instrument, by how he can play it, by what he can do with it, by the kind of music he's making. Totally different kind of music. And he's just so entranced with it. He says, "I could never play that." And he's asking him questions. And he said, "Let's trade instruments and try to learn how to play each other's instrument." So he's using the man's instrument, trying to play. He says, "I could never do it like you could." And he's so entranced. Present. Enthusiastic. This wasn't put on in some kind of way. So free from ideas or assumptions, just looking fresh in the moment without bringing in the whole backlog. Not abandoning who he is, but bringing in this openness.

I love that. I think of it so often because to me it's the perfect example of the freshness of present moment mindfulness with wise understanding. Not bringing in preconceptions, not bringing in "I'm going to like it, I'm not going to like it." Just listening freshly and seeing what arises and then being totally present for it.

That's what steadiness of awareness can bring to our life. It's really a shift, but it necessitates a willingness to be with the beautiful, a willingness to be with the difficult, a willingness to be with the neither beautiful nor difficult. In other words, what's happening now? It's like this in this moment, just like this, without bringing in anything extra. And naturally we begin to notice a wider, deeper aspect of life and connecting circumstances.

So another little example of how remembering awareness shifts the picture, in whatever we're doing, not just meditating. It was a couple of days ago, here, for me. I got up in the morning, and I was a couple of days out of jet lag, because I flew here from California. I forget what I had to do, but I had to get up and go somewhere, do something. And I was just feeling really tired. My body was feeling really tired, and my mind was dull. I wasn't in aversion, which is already something, but I was noticing: "Oh, I'm so tired. I have to do this. I'm so tired." I was just being aware of tiredness, tiredness.

And suddenly it occurred: Ah, awareness is like this. Tiredness is like this.

I don't know if you get the shift. I knew I was tired, but my attention was really in feeling tired. "I'm so tired." So even without adding aversion, that was like the whole world in a way—Carol's world then. The body's tired, the mind's tired, have to go to this, dragging along, that's how it is.

And then: Oh. The shift into "it's like this now." That's the shift into awareness of what's happening. Still tired, still all of it, but the energy, the interest. It's almost like identification, but it's not really. It's just that you stop identifying so much with the tiredness. Just, oh. Tiredness is like this. But the awareness—you just recognize it again. Basically, that's all it is: recognizing awareness.

It took that narrowness out. Suddenly, awareness recognizing tiredness also recognized: Ah, it's a lovely day. I looked out the windows—the sun and the snow. It was really quite lovely. It felt really fresh. What a nice day. And then the thought came up: Oh, I get to come and help teach a meditation retreat. It's really such an amazing thing in this world. That's why I'm here, to spend this time sharing the Dhamma. What could be better in the world? That really feels like something useful.

I wasn't just telling myself that. Those were other aspects of experience in that moment. The release from being just in the object of tiredness, tiredness, tiredness—just allowing awareness of tiredness, just recognizing awareness—it allows whatever else is occurring to also be known.

You'll see as we go through this retreat that we tend in our instructions not to emphasize focusing on one object. In moments we are, but we're not going to say come back to that object, or it's better if you're focusing on one thing. Sometimes it's on one object, but sometimes not. There's often a much more broad sense of awareness, where whatever's arising—the experience, the object—is touched lightly with awareness, and then another, and we might have a bigger picture. It's quite interesting.

So that's part of what we're doing. But then the habit of mind—that was an example, my little example, where the habit of my mind is, thank goodness, once in a while shifting into really recognizing awareness and resting there, rather than always jumping into "Carol's tired, Carol's tired, Carol's tired." Yes, Carol's tired, the body's tired, and this is happening, and this is happening, and awareness is knowing it all.

It's what I call a shift of refuge. We don't even know what refuge is when we're caught in "me, me, me" and what this means about me and our unrecognized assumptions. We don't even know it's refuge—looking for the pleasant, trying to make it better. Basically that is what we're all doing, but it just isn't working.

So we're learning to recognize and trust the simple, whereas it really doesn't seem like much of anything. That's why we have this time together. This refuge of getting interested in the process of continuous awareness rather than trying to have a particular thing happen.

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, steady awareness with right understanding is not to create something. We're not trying to create any kind of particular state or experience. It's not to reject what's happening. And as things happen or stop happening, we don't forget to notice them either. "Oh, I saw that one already, so never mind"—no. That's what's arising now. We notice it. Whatever's occurring, we don't let go of being aware. We're not creating something, we're not rejecting something, but whatever's occurring, awareness recognizes it.

As this becomes more of a refuge, you'll see it pop up. You'll see it become accessible. We can remind ourselves in difficult times in life too.

This was something Anam Thubten, who's a lovely Tibetan teacher in the Bay Area, said. He was giving a talk, I think on Zoom, somewhere in the first year of the pandemic. He was talking about how now, just in the environment, in the world, we're easily overwhelmed. And it's only gotten worse now, if anything. We're easily pulled into the whirlpool of fear, of worry, of anger that is swirling in the world. Not always, but at times it can be easy to be pulled into it. It's a habit.

He said that in those times when we're pulled into that whirlpool, it just feels so natural—we lose touch with awareness. When we lose touch, we just forget about awareness and we lose touch with our innate dignity, with the access to love, with the access to compassion. We're pulled into that whirlpool of fear.

So we practice to re-recognize awareness. Our practice isn't going to end that whirlpool of fear and anger swirling in the world. But we practice to re-recognize awareness. And when we do, in a moment of recognizing awareness, we recognize that whirlpool,

but then the access opens—it opens us up to natural compassion, to natural connectedness with beings in our heart, to love, to wisdom. And then that's what we can offer to the world.

So we practice to just re-recognize in any moment of the day, whatever is happening, just to re-recognize this simplicity of awareness.

It's come to be for me when I do a retreat, I think, "Oh, I have all this time now." It slips in that I want something to happen. But really, it's all this time, all these moments of the day to practice recognizing and trusting awareness, whatever's going on. I really think that's what we're doing here.

This is the third job of the yogi, Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say. Call it perseverance, or being present with what's happening in the mind and body from moment to moment. In some ways when we talk about right effort, in one way it's that quality we described this morning of just that simplicity—just feel your hands. That much effort. It's not striving, it's not tiring. And then again in the next moment.

And then again in the next moment. But it's still only one moment.

So when we talk about this simplicity of relaxed perseverance, or when we use the word "continuity"—one three-month retreat, we started calling it "the dreaded continuity." Because it's only just in a moment, but when our mind hears me say, "And now this moment, and now this moment, and now this moment," there's something in the mind that goes, "Oh my God, there's no way. Okay, this moment, all right, but oh, give me a break."

So what is happening in that moment? Projection or fear. There's only this moment. There's only this moment.

And so the third job of the yogi is that whatever is occurring through the day, however long it's been that we forgot to recognize awareness, as soon as we think about it, here it is again. Whatever we're doing.

The continuity is an essential piece. And that's why you'll see starting tomorrow—this is really thought out, the way Tejaniya teaches, but it's really helpful—you've probably noticed that tomorrow the schedule is more open, that we're not having so much sitting, walking, sitting, walking. This is not just because we felt like it, but it's not to make it less continuous. It actually gives you the opportunity to strengthen your experience, your understanding of what it means to recognize awareness—not limiting it to the sitting posture, not limiting it to the walking time.

Because consciously or unconsciously, when it's so structured in the day, doesn't it feel like we think, "Oh, thank God, okay, no structure. I can just go kick back"? So the downside of it is: no, you can kick back, but you have to be aware that you're kicking back. And that's not tiring, no matter what we're doing. Taking away the complete rigor of the schedule actually allows us to explore.

Sayadaw would say in terms of sitting—and it'll be talked about more tomorrow—but it's not like how long you sit means you're more aware. Sit and see with steady awareness, with this interest. What's supporting awareness? Maybe you're really tired and you've been sitting for fifteen minutes, but you can bring awareness to the tiredness, so you keep on sitting. Maybe you're really tired and you're falling on your face and you're trying to be aware of tiredness, but you're just feeding aversion, aversion, aversion. That's not so helpful. We want to cultivate awareness, not aversion.

So you might say it might be more useful to walk. Walking, you can be more aware. What brings in more awareness? What conditions support remembering awareness? That's what our job is.

So whether we're sitting or walking, notice why you sit. Notice when you get up. Why? Notice why you start walking. Notice when you stop walking. Why? Mindfulness, steady awareness, requires this real honesty with ourselves—because we're not judging. We just want to know why.

So we're walking and we're having a moment, really present, hearing and seeing. And then suddenly we're turning away and walking into the dining room. Now without awareness we might say, "I had enough and I'm tired and I need to have tea." With awareness we can see, "Oh, the image of tea arose. There was this feeling of wanting. There was this feeling of, 'Oh, how nice that'll be.' Pleasure, pleasure, pleasure, pleasure." And the next thing we knew, we're walking in to have tea. That doesn't make tea bad, but we want to know what's happening.

So this gives us the chance to do it. Whatever's going on in the day, that moment of noticing wanting as you have tea is just totally equal to a moment sitting on the cushion where you're really present, or walking.

Our friend and colleague Joseph Goldstein likes to talk about, in terms of retreat, the three aspects: the sitting meditation, the walking meditation, then all the rest—daily activities. Which, by the way, that's not just Tejaniya talking about that. When we would sit with Sayadaw U Pandita, it was very strict, a very strict schedule. But when you'd go into the interviews, he wanted to know what happened in the sitting.

He wanted to know what happened in the walking. And he wanted to know how your mindfulness was in daily activities.

So Joseph says he likes to present it as: reverse the priorities. The most important part of your practice is the daily activities—bringing in awareness when you're taking a shower, when you're eating, remembering awareness no matter how long it's been gone. Then the walking, then the sitting.

This is really it: we can take awareness with us anywhere we go. Appreciate it. Why? Because this is not a short-term thing where somehow we sit and sit and sit, we practice and practice for eight days, and then we have some kind of steady-state awareness that we're going to take with us.

Those of you who've done lots of retreats know very well—secretly—you keep thinking it's going to happen at some retreat. Secretly. Pretend you don't. I pretend I don't, but secretly, it was years before I'd end a retreat and realize, "Oh, it didn't happen." I was kidding myself. What "it" is, who knows—but something great that wasn't going to go away.

So that's not what we're doing. We're not pushing. But gradually, in the beginning, we have to remember, consciously remember, more and more frequently: "Oh yeah, am I aware? Am I aware?" But as we've said, that momentum starts to grow. It starts to get much more natural. We relax, we allow, and that becomes more and more our way of being.

In the beginning, it takes trust. It takes a willingness to remember—but only this moment. Perseverance, but in this moment; it doesn't have to be hard. Just the willingness to do that again and not expect a special moment. Any moment, because awareness doesn't care. Awareness of a boring moment is just as clean and freeing and present as awareness of a beautiful state of bliss.

I'll end with this from Sayadaw Tejaniya: "As mindfulness is remembered more and more frequently, gradually it develops its own momentum. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we appreciate our entrancements with the reactions of mind or whatever is arising."

That's really the momentum that builds—we appreciate the moments of awareness more than we get involved in the entrancements.

Thank you for your kind attention.

May the beneficial energy of our practice together, of our committing to the Dhamma, may that beneficial energy be shared with all beings everywhere as a support for their awakening from confusion and suffering.

CHAPTER 186

Unentangled Awareness

Carol Wilson · 53 min

Drawing from the opening verse of the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification), Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's answer to the question: "Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?" She explores how our difficulties arise from mistaken perception—the 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion (kilesa). Rather than annihilating these mental defilements, the practice works through steady, receptive awareness that creates conditions for wisdom to arise naturally.

Wilson draws on teachings from the Dalai Lama, Ajahn Sumedho, Thānissaro Bhikkhu, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya to illuminate how saṃsāra is not a place but a process—the tendency to keep creating worlds and moving into them. She explains how unrecognized kilesas, even subtle ones, distort our perceptions and color our interpretations of ourselves and others. Through vivid examples, she demonstrates how the sense of self (sakkāyadiṭṭhi) at the center of experience creates narrow, prison-like worlds of measurement and comparison.

The talk offers practical guidance for watching how mental worlds come together and fall apart throughout the day—during walking meditation, eating, or simple activities. Wilson emphasizes that wisdom is not a personal achievement but a natural quality of mind that arises when awareness is steady and balanced. When kilesas are recognized rather than fed, the heart-mind naturally manifests its true qualities: compassion, generosity, equanimity, and loving-kindness. This "coming home" to present-moment awareness reveals our fundamental interconnectedness—what Bishop Desmond Tutu calls Ubuntu: "a person is a person through other persons."

We'll talk tonight about steady awareness and hopefully some of the ways that it helps wisdom, how it supports wisdom arising—hopefully helpful little hints.

Alexis and I both were thinking today of a particular poem that's at the beginning of a long Pali commentary in the Theravada tradition called the *Visuddhimagga*, the Path of Purification. The beginning stanza is:

The inner tangle and the outer tangle—this generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama Buddha this question: Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?

The *Visuddhimagga* is a long book. I'm not going to go on that long, but I love that. We're entangled in a tangle, the inner tangle and the outer tangle.

The Dalai Lama offers a couple of descriptions of our tangle. As you've probably heard him say, if you listen to him at all, he says with great confidence that our true human values—what I call our good qualities: wisdom, compassion, generosity, equanimity, loving-kindness—these he considers our truer nature. And he says this with real conviction. These qualities are what naturally manifests in our heart-mind in response to life in a moment when our heart-minds are not clouded by confusion, by the three gang members: greed, hatred, and delusion. And that's really what we can discover and explore—that when the heart-mind is not clouded, when those qualities aren't distorting, these beautiful qualities, these wholesome qualities, are what naturally arise in response to situations.

Again, His Holiness says this all the time: all of our difficulties come from mistaken perception. He doesn't just say it—Ajahn Sumedho says that all the time. Thich Nhat Hanh said that all the time. I say that often enough myself. But really, I see how that's true. All of our difficulties come from mistaken perception. This ignorance, this mistaken perception, is at the root of the 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations.

Feels like that, doesn't it? We start with greed, hatred, and delusion, but somehow they blossom into 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations. I like that phrase, "cognitive obscurations," because when delusion is present, you may not notice it as a destructive emotion. You may be feeling quite fine—everything's fine—but it's a cognitive obscuration. It's confusing perception.

So this is at the root of the tangle. And our path of awakening, as we're presenting and offering it here, as we're learning from the Buddha—this path of wakefulness, of practice and wisdom—it works, and hopefully you're getting that, not by somehow annihilating the destructive emotions or wishing them away or somehow destroying them or somehow moving into another plane. It's the simplicity of steady, receptive awareness that sets the condition for clear seeing, for wisdom to arise, for a moment of conscious awareness with interest present without cognitive obscuration. And the accurate recognition there in a moment is what starts to see through, to see accurately. And the accurate understanding—that's the wisdom that untangles the tangle.

Of course, that's only in one moment, because it keeps recreating, recreating. Have you noticed that? You think there's just one big tangle we'll figure out, but it's all a moment-to-moment arising and creation.

Samsara. Vance mentioned samsara last night, often described as the rounds of wanting and loss, birth and death. I like the way—I've really liked this a lot the last few years—a definition I read from Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He's an American man ordained in

the Thai forest tradition, and he's very prominent in translating Pali into English. In the Theravada, he's one of the three most prominent translators, along with Bhikkhu Analayo and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu: "Samsara literally means 'wandering on.' Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live, the place we leave when we go to Nibbana. But in early Buddhist texts, samsara is the answer not to 'where are we?' but to 'what are we doing?'"

I really love this. It's the immediacy. The action is no place. It's the answer to what are we doing. It's not a place. It's a process: the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them.

As soon as one world falls apart, you create another and go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds too. Do you get a sense of that? You don't even know we're in our different worlds, and we bump into someone else. No wonder things are a tangle.

So the Buddha looked for and found a way to stop samsara-ing—like giving up an addiction that was really based on misperception. Ajahn Sumedho says in a similar way that samsara and nibbana are not places to go, but modes of perception. That's really it.

He's saying that samsara is when the perception—this is the deluded, confused perception—is from or through the self, which is personality view. In any moment, the perception—and here saññā refers to a very specific activity of mind—occurs in any of the six sense contacts. Say there's a sound. Perception occurs naturally. It's based on memory and conditioning, but it's like recognition. So it would register "bell." That would be the perception in that moment. You see how that perception then gives rise to how we think about things, how we feel about them, and then the whole world gets started from that moment of perception, from all the different sense contacts. And perception isn't always accurate.

So Ajahn Sumedho is saying that when that perception is through or from the sense of self, the sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, that is the core misperception—the core mistaken perception. Whenever perception starts through the sense of self without being recognized, it's already off, and that's the beginning of that particular world.

If anything came up in your mind just now—she's coughing, what about me?—that's what we do. That's exactly the beginning of a world. This is the core misperception we're so familiar with: that any perception comes from the sense of "me." And this is where these whirls that bring the tangle start.

With steady awareness, we can bring interest—awareness is interest—to see how it's working, not to annihilate, not to stop. Because we don't even know what to stop. That's just another cockamamie idea we make up. "We should stop this." We don't even know what. We make up some idea of what nibbana would be like, what it would be like to be free, and then we try to make that happen. Tangle, big tangle.

So with our practice, as we've been encouraging here, we can watch the complex worlds arising and dissolving in our experience all day long. Do you get a sense of that? Often we don't notice, so that's what we get to do here. This is in daily life too—this isn't something just happening on retreat. One of the reasons for not interacting too much on retreat is so we can watch this stuff. Otherwise, as he says, we're all creating our world, bumping into other people, and the worlds don't match. But here we can watch it come and go, hopefully with steady awareness and interest. It gets interesting. It's really quite fascinating to watch concoction—I love that word—a concoction, just things thrown together. To watch a concoction of mind, a world come together and fall apart, and watch how it happens again and again.

Let me give you a simple example. When the starting point is misperception, there's always delusion or kilesa—one of the kilesas: greed, hatred, delusion. But this can arise with any sense experience. Sometimes there's a sound. The sound arises. It's known as hearing. You recognize a sense of pleasant or not.

It's the bell. And nothing else happens, and the next thing happens. There's no concoction going on there. That's a sense of peace. This is just what it is. That could be with any sense experience as well.

So this example from a friend just popped into my mind. She said she was at work, sitting there, and one of her colleagues—I guess it was a big office—came in and frowned at her. My friend thought, "She's mad at me. She's angry at me. Why?" So that was her perception: this colleague is angry at me. But the colleague didn't speak. She went on by and was just on the phone doing her thing.

So all day at work, my friend was watching. Every time she'd look at the colleague, she could see that she looked angry and fuming and doing stuff, but she wasn't talking to her. And my friend was getting, you know, alternately self-conscious, angry, irritated—what's going on? There's this whole bubble world. And because there was a lot of aversion—dosa, the Pali word for all the kinds of aversion: greed, aversion, fear, irritation, the whole 84,000 varieties—because that was present in her awareness without being recognized, of course it distorted a lot of other perceptions. And as you can see, it

was all about me. All about me. So the aversion in her mind affected her whole day, the decisions she made. And every time she looked at that person, the colleague looked more angry. My friend got more angry.

Of course, at the end of the day, she checked it out. None of that was accurate. The colleague wasn't angry at her. She wasn't even thinking about her. She had just come in looking somber because something had happened at home, and she was just going through her day. There was no connection with my friend at all. A complete made-up story.

This doesn't sound outside the realm of possibility, does it? At least she could check it out, but she spent the whole day in this crazy fuming. So the original misperception was: she's angry. That was the first misperception. But then the sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the sense of self—she's angry *at me*. That's really the sense of personality view that riles up the concoction, because we put our self, the sense of self—which isn't accurate anyway—at the center of the universe, and it all just takes off.

So with steady awareness and an interest—the quality of interest that we bring to awareness when it's balanced—that is so helpful. There's one of the wholesome enlightenment factors of mind: dhamma vicaya, usually translated as investigation of dhamma, or interest. It's not investigation as thinking about things, as we tend to understand investigation. It's a mental quality, a mental factor, and it's really that quality of interest. It kind of lights up the field in the mind. So you're being with a sense—say there's a sense of pressure in the chest—and it's either pressure and bored, or pressure with aversion, or pressure and "I don't want to be with it," or it's "What's that like?" You're not saying it, but just really that quality of listening, almost of receiving, of just being really tenderly but fully present. Let reality reveal itself—that quality of interest. But that can only be present when kilesa is not, right? That's the thing with these three.

I'm going to keep using the word kilesa just because I find it... I don't really like "defilement." I don't want to keep saying "torments." Anyway, that's my preference. I'm going to keep saying kilesa. So you know what I mean, right? Greed, hatred, confusion.

Now, why I said that, I don't know. But investigation—we're used to thinking about stuff, but it's not that. It's just this quality of steady, awake attention.

This is one of my favorites. For twenty years now, this has been one of my favorite quotations from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking." I think I'll say that again.

Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It's the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding.

This speaks to the nature of experience, and why thinking our way into something unknown can't work—because thoughts can only think what they already know. So this long process of conscious awareness, that's what we're doing. That's exactly what we're doing here. And it takes the awareness, the alertness, the interest, and the patience to keep trusting and to keep coming back into the awareness. Not expecting some big understanding light bulb to go off every ten minutes and then everything's copacetic.

Watching, watching, watching—and then suddenly you see: *Ah, she wasn't angry at me at all. Look at all the stuff the mind was creating about that.* That's a kind of insight, a later seeing of how it all works. You may not notice it the next time, but you might.

There are a couple of points I wanted to make from this example of creating a world. I think you can sense that the mind is doing this all day long with all kinds of different sense experience. Do you get a sense of that? Some experiences are more gripping than others. Some are lighter—they don't have to take hold. Like I said, it can just be steady awareness: a sound comes and there's awareness; a thought comes and it can be of your mother and it can be a difficult thought and you feel it. Awareness knows it, feels the difficulty. And it goes. That's not creating a world. That's just seeing what's happening with awareness. The world is created when we take off, fed by the sense of me, by greed and aversion.

One point I particularly wanted to make concerns the power of unrecognized torment—*kilesa*—in the mind. Some people ask, "Why do we have to keep noticing? What's the point of continuing to notice these defilements when they come all the time?" Because without recognizing them—as in that little example I gave with my friend—the power of that unrecognized irritation, or anger at the person, or fear about what she's angry at me for, that unrecognized quality keeps distorting further perceptions. It flavors our assumptions. It flavors the stories we make. It can flavor our actions and our reactions. It's incredibly powerful.

And it doesn't have to be a huge, overwhelming anger. That we'll probably notice. We may not be able to be really balanced and aware of it, but at least we'll notice it. But the subtle or small aversions and greeds that arise—they can just be kind of niggling in the back of the mind. "Oh, she's mad at me, okay. I'm not really averse, it's okay. Not enough to have to pay attention to." So we don't.

Sayadaw—I went from Ajaan to Sayadaw; I was in Thailand, now I have to come back to Burma—Sayadaw Tejaniya sometimes likes to talk about recognizing the *kilesas* and how they do their job. One year when he came to a retreat, he had something he would keep repeating in every interview group. And it was really helpful. He talked about getting interested in recognizing *kilesa* in the mind and realizing that, of course, like anything, sometimes it's very subtle, sometimes it's gross. We can see that they arise in a range of zero to ten.

He would say it's like when you go to the doctor and they have those little smiley faces moving into frowny faces, and you're supposed to say to what degree you're in pain today—zero to ten. I never know what to say. Compared to what? But anyway, he says it's like that. So say with my friend, if there's a little bit of aversion—"It doesn't matter, I'm not really bothered"—

Don't have to pay attention to it. It's like a 1 or 2 level. And he said, that's what we tend to do. We think, "Oh, it's no big deal. I don't need to pay attention to it." We wait until it's up to eight or nine before bringing in awareness. And then, you know, the horse is out of the stable. It's at eight or nine, and awareness—we're gone, off into it. Then it's struggle.

When we bring awareness, when there's a sense of balanced awareness, stable awareness, and we become aware—"Ah, it's really, really wanting, wanting"—okay, be aware of wanting. When the awareness is truly balanced, it's not feeding the wanting. When we're not aware of the wanting or the aversion in the background, every new little experience makes it a little easier for the ill will, for the wanting to color the next experience. It can be subtly growing in the background. When we become aware—"Oh yeah, wanting, aversion, it feels like this"—then we're seeing it clearly.

As I think we said, Joseph Goldstein has said he'd much rather see a *kilesa* than not. He's happy when he sees it. I feel like that too, up to a point. Because when you see it, then it's not going to be behind the scenes, making choices, coloring our interpretation of ourselves and others and what's going on. So, "Oh yeah, here's aversion. It feels like this. It's like this now." Really taking refuge in the awareness, but seeing it.

The Buddha says, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will—and he says the same thing for craving, the same thing for delusion—obsessed and oppressed by ill will, craving, or delusion, and one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both. He says this in quite a few different places, and I think it really cuts to the nub.

When our mind-heart is obsessed by ill will—and all we mean by obsessed is that in that moment it's unrecognized, coloring the perception—in that moment we can't perceive accurately. We can't really trust what assessment we make of how to act for our own good, for the good of others, or the good of both. Because perception is distorted. Perception is unreliable. When we don't know these qualities may be in the mind affecting our perception, that's when we really might be trying to do something good and maybe by luck we hit it, but we can't tell.

Notice he starts with, you can't tell your own good—what's good for you. So really, just starting to tune into that out of compassion for ourselves and the world.

"One neither knows, when one does not understand as it really is, the escape from arisen ill will." So guess what the escape from arisen ill will might be in this context? It's not a secret. It's not something we haven't been talking about. But really, this is the power: we take refuge, as I just said, aware of the ill will. It's still here. Awareness doesn't make it go away.

Sometimes people think that with mindfulness, if they're being mindful correctly, the difficult thing goes away. How many people have ever thought that? That you're not being mindful correctly because the unpleasant thing is still here. And then we know that's not true, but secretly in the back—right? I mean, we all do it. "I'm being mindful, I'm being mindful," and then, what's the problem? Well, I'm being mindful, and then—oh yeah, it's still here. "I'll be mindful. If I do it right, it'll go away." It gets more and more subtle.

Anyway, the awareness is the condition—the steady awareness: "Oh, ill will, it's feeling like this." Noticing the thoughts that it's sending up, noticing how it feels. The awareness is just watching how it's acting, or the greed. But it's not feeding it. And that steadiness of awareness not feeding it is the condition for wisdom to arise. It's wisdom in the mind. It's not a personal act of will: "I will now end this ill will."

I mean, we've all tried, right? "I will now end this greed." We can, with an act of will, choose not to act on it—and that's a good thing. That's why we have precepts. But the ending of the defilement itself is not an act of will. It's wisdom, a quality in the mind that sees clearly, and suddenly—*ah*.

Have you had a moment when ill will or greed just stops? And you didn't feel like you did something—it's simply gone? Keep noticing that gone-ness; that's really important too.

An example of how this works: Vance's story about the lungi. He wasn't bragging about his awareness. He was talking about the real destructive quality of greed—what it does in our heart and mind, and then how we perceive and act when it takes over. But he was noticing all of that because there was awareness present. Clearly, the greed was strong. The suffering was strong. It made sense—it wasn't a harmful greed or anything.

But the awareness of watching all of that—watching the craving, watching what came up—meant there was enough awareness present when that sense of the anglerfish arose. When that anglerfish with its teeth came up and he saw his friend as the enemy, that was awareness seeing it. And wisdom popped in: *Wow, look what it's doing.* That was a moment of wisdom. And he said, "I couldn't possibly take it then. What am I cultivating here?" That recognition isn't personal either, just as the aversion isn't personal. That's a moment of how wisdom functions. It's like, "Wow, I'm not going to do this." It puts down the craving. That's wisdom acting.

It's the steady awareness with interest in just being present for however the experience is manifesting that sets up the condition for this wisdom to arise. In that moment, craving is abandoned. These are really faith-inducing moments if we stay with the awareness and notice. We don't take it personally either. We don't take the *kilesas* personally, and we don't take the wisdom personally—but we recognize it.

This is something Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about frequently, this understanding of wisdom. It wasn't new to me, but somehow he brought it home in a way that's been quite helpful—thinking of it more in these terms. It's a further taking out of the sense of self trying to do it right. "I think if I practice enough, if I do all the things, if I'm steady with awareness, then I'll have some wisdom. And I can act from wisdom. And I'll put down the clinging." But there's still all that *me, me, me*—which is a misperception.

Wisdom is another quality of nature arising when there's steady awareness recognizing things as they are. The wisdom—the natural quality of heart-mind when it's not distorted by *kilesas*—as His Holiness said, is to move towards the wholesome, to manifest the wholesome. So wisdom, when it's present, isn't interested in the *kilesas*. It abandons them and moves into the wholesome—in that case, renunciation, putting down the greed.

This is a natural occurrence. It's natural cause and effect. So it's not something that requires you to be some kind of incredibly wise person for it to happen. It's not about intelligence. It's not about personality. It's cause and effect.

If we practice anger, anger, anger, what's likely to be the first reaction that arises in an unguarded moment? Anger. We've simply practiced it. But when we practice awareness and clear seeing, bringing interest and non-reactivity—real presence, non-identification, because awareness isn't "me," it isn't identified—the wisdom comes. And in that moment of wisdom, that starts to arise more frequently. It's cause and effect, but it's not personal.

To me, that actually strengthened faith a great deal. Just cultivate steady awareness, and nature takes care of itself. All we do is get in and muck it up. Like if we're trying to grow a daffodil bulb and we get in and mess around and do all kinds of stuff, we end up killing the thing—overwatering it or pulling it up or whatever. Leave it alone and just watch what's happening.

With the steadiness of conscious awareness, as we're doing, you'll see as you go through the day—I already said this, but I want to highlight it again—really watch. As worlds come together and fall apart, really get interested in exploring, seeing how that's happening again and again. When you're walking or eating, whatever you're doing, just being a little more tuned in.

Thoughts come and go, but when it's a world, there's a real me in it, buying into the whole thing. I use this example frequently because it might change every five minutes. Say, walking meditation. Aware of walking, and somehow it's really pleasant, and the thought comes up, "I'm really an ace yogi here. I'm really getting it." That thought can come and go. It doesn't have to be a world. But it could be a world.

So it comes up. It's pleasant. There's a sense of me—you can feel that. "I'm doing well." There's a sense of gratification. This can be subtle, just a gratification. We feel good. There's nothing wrong with feeling good. Remember, I'm talking about just being aware of how this world is being created. Feeling good, and I've seen this in myself, and then all kinds of thoughts about me and memories of all the good times and all my great practice, and then plans for the future—all the retreats I'll go to, or I'm going to meet the Dalai Lama, or whatever it is. We go on and on. We might be aware of the thoughts, but it's not complete awareness because we're not noticing the clinging. We're not noticing the sense of me driving it.

So that goes on. That's a world. We're in that world. That's a happy world.

And then, I don't know, you trip over something, almost fall on your face. And just immediately: "Who saw me? What an idiot, what an idiot. And that person I was really respecting—they saw me trip. So they'll know. I think I'm so mindful and I can't even see the crack in the sidewalk."

A completely different world, right? Five minutes later. We don't notice they're different worlds. We think that's the same me. They're completely different worlds.

So that one goes on. And watch the thoughts that come. There's the identification. It could be you just trip, you say, "Oh yeah, how funny," and then the next thing happens. It doesn't have to be a world. But when it is, notice that gripping of me. In the sense that rather than gratification, there's a sense of the unpleasantness or the shame or whatever. And then all the memories that come.

I call this selective perception. We have so many memories of our life, but in that world, the only memories that come up are of all the times when you blew it, when you were a stupid jerk or you fell or you couldn't do it right. "I knew I couldn't do it. I'm so conceited. I was thinking that, and here I am. I can't even walk in a row without falling on my face." And that goes on for a while.

Then without awareness—or sort of awareness—we kind of forget. We don't really notice it go away. But the next thing we notice, we're just kind of bored. I think that's enough.

Maybe I should go have some tea. It's another world. This could all happen in the space of fifteen minutes. And none of them, thank goodness, require you to intersect with anyone else—you're just being quiet.

So do we notice that what arises ceases? This is really where the steadiness of awareness is so key. The worlds are no problem when awareness notices them. This is what the mind does. This is how identification works. Awareness isn't identified. We're not trying to annihilate identification. We're not trying to say there's no self, so don't feel this. Yes, the sense of self is felt very clearly. It happens to be a misinterpretation, but it's felt very clearly. Be with what's actually felt, as it is, with steadiness.

So watch as the story concoction comes together. It feels like maybe you're caught a bit in the middle, and then it drops away, and then it's gone. Notice the gone-ness. Notice with steady awareness—or do we just jump right into the next world?

Ajahn Sumedho says most people don't notice cessation of the concoctions, or cessation of any experience, because our attention is too flighty, too jumping around. Of course, that's the condition. And I think probably now it's more flighty than it was at the time of the Buddha because of the whole thing about attention spans. Just the fact of —my mind goes to Elon Musk's thing, Twitter. You can't have more than a certain amount of syllables. Nobody's mind can comprehend more than that. You've got to move to the next thing. Talk about flighty.

So our attention is too flighty. But that's just a habit. We're cultivating a habit of steady presence, steady awareness. And that's growing over days because we're welcoming it. With this steadiness, notice the world dissipate. Notice the world fall apart. Notice cessation. Notice that's not there and things are just coming and going and there's awareness. And then notice another world starts to come together. You don't notice it right at the beginning, but you notice in the middle, wherever you notice. And then you notice, oh no, another one. Oh yeah, sense of aversion. Just that comes and goes. So it can be really interesting just seeing how it works.

In a similar vein, sometimes on retreat here, as we're getting more and more tuned in to watching our mind—what's arising in the mind, which is what gives rise to these worlds—I like to play with this when I'm moving around on retreat, and then it comes into daily life. Just watching what quality in the mind—it could be *kilesa*, but it could not be, it could just be whatever it is—is giving rise to the intention, the motivation to make a choice, to act.

Like when you walk into the dining room to sit down, watch your mind choosing where to sit. How does it choose? Sometimes one just goes and sits down. Sometimes one can feel the greed. I like that place. It's over by the window. I can see that. How can I get over there? Or sometimes you feel the greed, but awareness chooses not to act on it. Or you've noticed it's "I want to sit there"—oh no, that person.

I can't be near that person. I have to go over there. I don't want anyone near me. Just watching all of that stuff. Or noticing how you eat.

I've started seeing this at home with all kinds of little things. It's almost funny, but I notice when I'm making tea, I really notice. I tend to always hold the spoon in my right hand and the honey in my left hand. And then sometimes I'll switch it, and I'll be noticing. It doesn't matter, right? But just noticing the different things we do. "I always go for this first. I always have to make my bed before I do that." Any kind of little thing—when you choose to go have tea or you choose to go do some walking. Not making it wrong, but just tuning in to these little things.

This is really training the awareness to notice what's arising in the mind. And then when it kind of gloms on and a more strong world starts to be created, you might notice it. So that's just something I wanted to offer as a way to play with practice—really seeing the effect of kilesa, but then also seeing how worlds come and go, and with steady awareness we can really watch that.

In the midst of a world, or when there's not steady awareness, I want to say another word about taking refuge in awareness, reminding ourselves what that means in the middle of something. Ajahn Sumedho describes awareness as a natural activity of awakened attentiveness. I like that phrase—awakened attentiveness. The mind is alert. Not created, but recognized. Very natural and often overlooked.

Alexis said this morning, referring to completely resting in awareness in a moment, one moment, as being home, coming home. It's funny because I was thinking that same thing before he said it. I was listening to a talk by Thich Nhat Hanh where he talks about this. You know, he talks about the miracle of mindfulness—that was his first book. But in this one talk, he was saying that this mindfulness, this awareness, this sense of really resting in total awareness in the moment, is our home. It's our true home.

He talks about coming home, and it's not a place. It's not an activity. It's just this sense of fullness of presence in the present moment. The totality of the present moment just as it is. To use Ajahn Sumedho's phrase: it's like this now. It's like this now. A kind of relaxing of any resistance that might be there—we don't even know—but completely coming into this moment.

Ajahn Chah talks about it in a similar way. He talks about the sense of this is home. Citta doesn't really reside anywhere, but you feel here, a sense of home, awakened awareness. And he calls it Grand Central Station. He says, just stay home in Grand Central Station. The thoughts are like the trains—they all come and go. They all start at Grand Central Station, and they all just end at Grand Central Station, the home of awareness, the home of present moment awareness. So we don't have to get on the trains and go out. Just stay home. Let the trains go. Let them come back. But just stay home with present moment awareness. No need to figure it all out. Relax and drop into.

We can do this in just little things and get a feeling for what that totality of present moment awareness feels like. Alexis, you mentioned the question someone was asking about what U Tejaniya meant by superficial awareness in his book. I'm going to talk about something similar. Joseph has a phrase—he's so good at coming up with phrases—of "more or less mindfulness." You know, we're kind of mindful. We're going through. We're walking.

We know we're walking. We know what we're doing, sort of. And it's not spaced out, but it's not really quite here. We do that a lot. It's not bad, but there's a difference between that and when the attention is wholeheartedly, fully present.

Like this morning, I was just doing the dishes, no big deal. And I was like that—more or less mindful. Thoughts were coming and going, but thoughts can be here with total presence too. I wasn't lost in thought. I knew I was washing the dishes. But it's subtle—there's a bit of disconnection. I know I'm doing it, and there's a thought, la la la. You're kind of here, but there's a disconnect. It's not whole. It's not really fulfilling. More or less mindfulness. And it feels disconnected and unsatisfactory if you tune into it. You're not quite here.

So somehow I just noticed that—oh, it's like this now. That wasn't a right or a wrong. It's just that suddenly I recognized it was kind of half disconnected. It's a delusion. Not really quite here. And then awareness just opened and dropped in.

For me, that phrase of Ajahn Sumedho's—"it's like this now"—that's one of my helpful phrases. You can all find your own, as some have asked. But when I say that, it's not like saying what it is that's like this. It's that whatever resistance or interpretation or looking was present just goes away. All my awareness drops into the body and however the mind feels. Oh, it's like this now. It's just a moment of total moving into what is. And whatever it is, it's fine. It might be unpleasant, it might be pleasant, but the sense of struggle, the sense of disconnect is gone because it actually brings me right in touch with this totality of awareness. Just relaxed, not thinking about.

It feels like home. A home of awareness is fulfilling, and from that the next thing arises, and one knows what it is. That's an always-available home.

Really, I think—and Alexis talked about this with the First Noble Truth—at least half the time when we drop into what's here now, it's unpleasant. And we're so conditioned, again by the sense of me, that we just naturally recoil, both our mind and even our body, from the unpleasant. Then we interpret that as being a problem—it's bad, it's wrong, we've got to fix it.

But when there's that sense of just dropping in—so when I dropped in this morning, I didn't even remember what was happening. But it could be that I drop in and maybe there was some unhappiness about some thought, or maybe my back was hurting, or maybe I was feeling in a hurry and doing the dishes in a hurry, which is unpleasant. But I can drop in and just say, "Oh, hurrying feels like this."

So that complete dropping in is letting go, but it's not a conscious act. Awareness just is here. It doesn't buy into the resistance.

Joko Beck said, and I find this helpful: Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in this confusing and uncomfortable situation? That's the invitation. Sometimes you can ask yourself that consciously. You just kind of acknowledge, I know what's going on, but

what's happening? Oh, can I just rest with awareness in this confusing and unpleasant situation? And sometimes the mind goes, "No way!" But sometimes it goes, "Oh yeah, okay." And there's a kind of tuning into the possibility of peace and ease that is available when there's not resistance.

So as I was saying, the core misperception is that sense of self, or self-clinging. Any experience that arises—it's an aspect of craving, clinging—is clung to: this is me, this is mine, this is myself.

So just something to look at. I'm not going to go into detail, but as the Dalai Lama often says, just tune in to notice yourself. When there's that sense of self-clinging, don't fight it. Notice—just like with any kilesa—how does it act?

And we can start to notice the narrowness that's present in our interpretation of the world, in our field of experience, when it's all about me. It's a self-centered world. It's really so narrow. It can feel like a prison, and it gives rise to greed and aversion.

The Buddha spoke about the kilesas as being—this is a phrase—"makers of measurement." When there's greed, when there's ill will in the mind, when there's a sense of self, he says it's a maker of measurement. You can just see very much the sense of self: me and other, that's a measurement. Me and that, that's a measurement. They're better than me, they're worse—that's a measurement. And this sense of self creates that.

Just a simple example of the difference between a self-centered world that's created and one that's not. Very simple. A couple of years ago, I was just home, kind of present, but there was some aversion in the mind—not a big deal, but just an aversive, grumpy mood, annoyed at myself about something. Not a big thing, just a normal day going on. And I heard—maybe someone told me on the phone, I don't remember—but something a colleague, a friend, had done that was really a very generous, beautiful thing.

And the first response that came up in the grumpy, self-centered mind was: They're better than me. I should have thought to do that. I should be willing to do that. Look how generous they are. A completely self-centered world leading to more ill will and clinging. I recognized that. That's how we go through the world so much of the time, with that center of me.

Then the next day, a similar thing happened. It wasn't that I thought myself into feeling better about that person. But a similar kind of thing occurred where I heard in some way about someone I knew who'd done something really thoughtful or effective. But this time the mind was really clear and balanced. There wasn't any big sense of self

—it was just awareness. And immediately, spontaneously, without any thought, the quality of appreciative joy, mudita, arose. Like, wow! That's such a great thing. How generous. That's so wonderful.

And that's the joy. That's what the Dalai Lama was saying. When the heart-mind isn't distorted by these kilesas, that's what arises. So the world is so much more open and broad when it's not in that little circle of self.

Just to explore this, to see it, to see the self doing this again and again—and the wisdom will arise that at times just doesn't get so sucked into it.

Two quotations about that, one from His Holiness and one from Desmond Tutu. His Holiness says: "The paradox is that although the drive behind excessive self-focus is to seek greater happiness for yourself, it ends up doing exactly the opposite. You become disconnected and alienated from others when you focus so much on yourself. With too much self-focus, all about me and mine, your vision becomes narrow. And with this, even a small problem appears out of proportion and unbearable."

Have you noticed that? Even a small problem—our fears and our distrust are strengthened. But really the main thing is our vision becomes narrow. We become more alienated, even though we think focusing on ourselves is taking care of ourselves, making us happy.

But with compassion, with seeing clearly, with mudita, that's not abandoning oneself. It's all included. Our idea of taking care of you while not taking care of me—that's a self-centered view, that sense of separation. So noticing it, then thinking I shouldn't be like that—that's just more delusion. It's just another world that gets created from sense of self. Watch it arise, watch it fall away. Let awareness just see what feeds that world.

How does it feel when it drops away? How is it when it's not there, when things are arising and no world is being created? Just give attention to that. And then when there's not that narrowness of self, we can recognize how things are more accurately.

This is Bishop Tutu—one way he describes how things are in terms of us as human beings. The Archbishop of South Africa, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He says:

"We are wired to be caring for the other and generous to one another. We're wired that way. We shrivel when we're not able to interact. That's part of the reason why solitary confinement is such a horrendous punishment. The concept we have at home in Africa is the concept of Ubuntu. It says a person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu says that when I have a small piece of bread, it is for my benefit that I share it with you."

It's the same thing Shantideva says—not because I should, but because we're all connected. Because, after all, none of us come into this world on our own. So you realize that in a very real sense, we are meant for a very profound complementarity. It's the nature of things. You don't have to be a believer in anything. It's the nature of things. I learned to be a human being from other human beings. We are all part of this delicate network. It's actually quite profound.

So that's just another way of expressing how the tangle untangles—just in a moment, when the kilesas aren't coloring perception, when the world isn't being viewed through the lens of me and other. It's just very simple and natural. It's nothing we create with a sense of self. But with the steady awareness that allows wisdom, in a moment of wisdom, that connectedness, that complementarity, that lack of me and other—that's just how it is. We don't have to think about it. You don't even have to recognize it as such. It's just that sense of how it is. And what naturally arises are the beautiful qualities in response to anything: equanimity, concentration, wisdom. This is really the natural result of wisdom.

And this steady, steady awareness—even though it's so hard and we have to meet so much difficulty at times—it really is amazing, the power it has. The miracle of mindfulness, as Thich Nhat Hanh says.

So thank you for your kind attention. As I had this insight: awareness will never abandon you. Sometimes we abandon awareness, but it's always available when we remember again.

May the beneficial energies created by our sincere practice here together, our sincere commitment to awakening, be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms of existence. May our practice truly be a condition for the awakening from suffering and confusion of all beings, including ourselves.

CHAPTER 187

The Two Darts

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson explores the profound teaching from the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6), also known as the Dart or Arrow Sutta, which illuminates the difference between awakened and unawakened beings. The Buddha teaches that both experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling tones (vedanā), but the untrained person adds a 'second dart' of mental reactivity—worry, grief, resistance, and craving—on top of the initial experience. This habitual pattern of resenting the unpleasant and grasping for pleasant sense experiences keeps us trapped in dukkha.*
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> *Wilson examines how vedanā, the second of the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna), serves as a crucial gateway to understanding our conditioning. She references Ajahn Buddhadasa's observation that 95% of our actions are motivated by seeking pleasant feeling, and draws on the Buddha's framework of understanding gratification, danger, and escape. The gratification lies in momentary pleasure; the danger is in impermanence and the torment of constant craving; the escape is not abandoning the world but abandoning our attachment to particular experiences.*
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> *The practical invitation is to cultivate steady, non-judgmental awareness that can observe these rapid movements of mind without being swept away. When we can simply be with experience as it is—'it's like this now,' as Ajahn Sumedho teaches—we discover the peace that doesn't depend on conditions. This sublime stillness, the relinquishment of craving, is available in any moment we're not caught in identification or reactivity.*

I want to pick up tonight on what Greg was talking about last night, this idea of how our spiritual life is sort of against the stream of everyday conditioned experience—what we learn and how we're conditioned in the world. But we also see how it's, as the Buddha said, like swimming upstream against our own internal conditioning, our own ways of seeing the world. It's not all about the external. In fact, the whole path is really about purifying the confused ideas and confused perceptions and suffering in our own heart and mind.

This swimming upstream—what we really start to run into here on retreat, and people already are, is that it starts to get a little bit of a rub, or a lot of a rub. It's really starting to see, and this is helpful, this is good, that the habits of mind we're so familiar

with, so comfortable with, so miserable with—but we're comfortable with them. That's who we are, right? Don't tell me to give it up, even though it's completely making me miserable.

The steadiness of non-biased awareness allows us—and the steadiness is key—to start to see what's actually going on on a more moment-to-moment level. We start to see how we're swimming upstream against assumptions we had, or unconscious ways of being, habits of our heart and mind. Big habits. Already today, people have written notes or mentioned in groups, and it's normal, it's part of it. You're feeling the rub, but the awareness mind, the wisdom mind, is also seeing: "Oh, this habit of mine."

Let's take judgment, which a minimum of fifty percent of people experience. We're seeing the habit of judgment or the habit of something else. You kind of knew it was there, but it's coming up all over the place. People have been saying they're seeing these habits of mind, seeing how the mind is throwing out judgment about all kinds of things that really don't need to be judged—and they're suffering from that.

There can be a spark, and people have expressed this, a spark of appreciating seeing it. You recognize: look at how there's aversion, how you start judging and judging everything, and then you're judging yourself in an infinite regression. You see, "Oh, this is so unnecessary. This is so much suffering." There can be a feeling of—well, maybe happiness is going too far right at the beginning of seeing it—but a sense of, "This is good to see. I'm glad to see this." Can anybody relate to that?

That's an aspect of insight, a kind of intellectual insight. But we really mean it: "I'm glad to see this, and I see this is useful, so I'll stop doing it." This is the next part. We mean that. We want to do that. We have no more use for this.

And what happens generally? It can be amazing. It keeps going and gets stronger. It starts showing up everywhere. It feels like we've walked into a giant waterfall of judgment and there's no way out. It's bigger than it ever was before. Am I exaggerating? At moments it's like that—coming up more clearly, but it can be such a mystery at the beginning, before we have the steady awareness to see what's happening, to understand why. Why does this continue? We've seen it clearly, we really understand this isn't serving a purpose, we don't want to do it—and it keeps happening more and more. We're just sucked right back down.

And not just on retreat, but in life. It doesn't end there. This isn't the end point. This is a beginning point. This is where I think it's like, wow, what's really going on? What's happening here?

So I want to start from that place and talk a bit about picking up again on what Greg said about field work.

This is what our steady, mindful awareness reveals—being with experience as it's occurring, not as we're trying to control and fix it, which is what we usually do. "I don't want to do this anymore, so I'll push it away, and then we'll pretend it's not happening." And then, as the Buddha said, it's like holding a snake by the tail—it flips around and bites us again. Because we don't really understand why it's happening. We don't really understand. We just see that this is a stupid thing to keep doing. It's like knocking ourselves on the head repeatedly without knowing why.

So the steady awareness—that's why the steadiness throughout the day, which we're cultivating, is so key. The non-judging awareness and the steadiness allow us to see this fieldwork of what's really going on.

Tonight I want to talk about just one aspect. We've mentioned briefly the vedana, the feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. I want to re-remind most of us, and perhaps introduce it for the first time to some of you, as a way of thinking about and then hopefully bringing attention to our experience to see what's happening.

This is one way, again picking up on what Greg offered, of how the Buddha described life, or our moment-to-moment experience. Greg said it several times: the six different sense experiences happen in contact. Contact is described specifically as a moment. And actually, I love this about the way the Buddha describes things, and the way I see in my experience—it's always only moment to moment. We extend it in our mind forever, but it's just what's happening in this moment. That's always workable. It's bearable. This moment projected ad infinitum into the future is unbearable—that thought. But in this moment? Okay, what's happening?

Contact is a moment where, for example with seeing, there's a visual object, the eye door is working, and there's consciousness. Those three things come together, and there's a moment of seeing. That's just what's going on all day, as Greg said: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, thinking, thinking, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, thinking, thinking. A lot faster than that, going on all day. That's it.

Sometimes when you're really quiet and things are happening, stuff can be seen occurring so quickly that people go, "Oh my God, it's so exhausting!" But it's exhausting when we try to control or stop or have an opinion about each thing. That is exhausting. And that's the next piece we really want to get to, because that's what our habit of mind mostly is.

So I said it's happening fast, so many contacts occurring. The next thing the Buddha talked about is vedana—that with every sense contact, each one, there's a mental experience. We experience each contact in our mind. There's a seeing, and it has a slightly pleasant tinge, or unpleasant tinge, or neutral. That's not inherent to the object. That's something occurring in our own mind at that moment. For someone else at that same moment, the sight of a similar object is a different experience. You might have a sense of unpleasant, they might have a sense of pleasant—perception and all of that. Or neutral, where we don't even notice.

This is just a very quick mental experience that the Buddha said happens with each sense contact. Ever since I first learned about this, it's one of the first things that helped me think, "God, this guy was some kind of amazing genius. How did he come up with this?" Because it's so quick! All of those contacts, how fast I described them—each of them with a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. And a lot of it just goes by. We don't have to make anything of it.

But how much of the time does our mind make something of it? We like it, we don't like it, as Greg said. The pleasant, unpleasant, or neutrality goes unnoticed because it's so quick and subtle. Right away, most of the time, what happens is the mind goes into preference. We like it if it's pleasant, we don't like it if it's unpleasant. That's pretty universal.

And because we don't notice that it's just a reaction of mind, a habit—it's pleasant so we like it, we like it so we want it, we try to get more, we try to hold on, unpleasant the reverse—something deeper happens. Even more than that, this reaction comes to shape the very sense of whether something is pleasant or not. Look in your own life.

Don't believe anything I say or we say—this is just an invitation to look. So much of the way we consciously or unconsciously assess experience or life or anything is whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. And if it's unpleasant, there's something wrong. Basically, if you follow it through, the idea is that somehow unpleasant stuff or unwanted stuff—as I think Pema Chödrön likes to say—shouldn't be happening. It's a mistake. The pleasant, of course, is what we want.

And not only do we like it, but we assess ourselves by pleasant things or skillful things. When something's unpleasant or we have a really negative thought, and we don't notice the unpleasantness, we jump right on: "That's bad. I'm bad." It goes into a whole downward spiral.

So it's not just that in the moment we get into clinging or aversion—it is that. But without recognizing this kind of pattern happening, it comes to be the way we evaluate ourselves, the way we evaluate the world, the way we give meaning to ourselves. And it also really is strengthening the sense of me. It's all about how is it affecting me? How do I evaluate me? And then how do I evaluate others?

Any discontent, any suffering—this always arises from unpleasant. And a lot of the time, the sense contact is a thought, an idea that's unpleasant. A lot of our confusion and going down the rabbit hole of negativity and self-judgment is from thoughts that are unpleasant. And then we judge them as bad and wrong. And because it's all about me, I'm bad and wrong and hopeless and useless, and I should only have pleasant, good thoughts.

Of course, even talking Buddha Dharma encourages this split, right? We talk about wholesome and unwholesome. And as it happens, wholesome states of mind tend to be more pleasant than unwholesome states of mind—that is true. But we don't have to add on top of it, you know, the judgments. But we do. So we're starting to see how we do that.

Ajahn Buddhadasa—I think maybe Greg mentioned him—was a Thai forest monk and teacher from the last century, very scholarly. I spent some time at his monastery a long time ago. And he said once, looking, if you start to notice this going for the pleasant, going for the pleasant, going for the pleasant, start paying attention. He said ninety-five percent of everything you do is for the sake of pleasant feeling. That may not be the right amount, but look and see. When we make a decision, when we decide what to do, when you decide where to sit in the dining room, when you decide what kind of tea to have, when you decide what to eat or not eat at lunch.

You don't have to add a "bad" to this. You don't have to add a judgment to this, because then we can't see clearly. It's like just seeing cause and effect. How does this work? It's fascinating. Of course we prefer pleasant if we could have it—that's not the problem. It's the attachment.

Some of the main effects of this, unexamined: it keeps our attention, our sense of what's real, of what's going on, always kind of looking outward. Even when it's about our own inner experience, we're looking outward to what's making me feel bad or what's making me feel good. We're always kind of leaning into, as Gregory describes, that leaning into the next pleasant experience, leaning into the next experience to make this one okay. It keeps it going, keeps it going, but it keeps the focus narrow. Me and other, me and good, me and bad—how can I control experience to get it the way I want it to be? And we can get really involved in that.

It doesn't mean we can't make choices, but when we're really thinking that if we get it all copacetic, all pleasant—even though we know everything's changing—don't we keep doing that anyway? We think, "Well, this is good now. Oh, it changed, but this next one will be a little better." There's a lovely Tibetan Buddhist phrase: the definition of samsara is the urge to correct. We just always could make it a little bit better. And since nothing's steady state, that never comes to an end.

Also, because of this narrowness of focus, it really...

It strengthens the sense of me and other, right? Because we're always leaning forward or leaning away. It strengthens that sense of me and other. And again, it's this narrowness of perception, narrowness of the world.

And when that's just for a moment dropped—and that happens in or out of retreat, moments when there's just a minute of awareness, mindfulness, of whatever, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, it doesn't matter—but just being. Let's say you're sitting, drinking your tea, and you're just there, tasting the tea, not making any story, not "me." And there's a sense of... you don't sit there thinking "there's a sense of vastness," but there's not the sense of narrowness. There's just the sense of—anything I say is too restrictive. Me and the world, it's like, this is just... it's all this. This is what's happening now. Everything is like this now. Not "I'm like this and mommy this and this has to go and this has to..." This is it for now. And it's just this sense of ease and peace.

On retreat—I know my first retreats that I would do, I didn't really understand what was happening at all, but I could remember moments. I'd leave the retreat and I'd remember a moment. I remember one retreat in particular, I thought, that was like the most... I was sitting somewhere, and that's what happened. It was just so clear, and everything was beautiful. I remember that blue lizard. It was the most beautiful blue lizard, and there's something about that place in California and that lizard that was so perfect.

But it's nothing to do with that. It's to do with a moment of just pure, awake presence where the heart, mind, energy is all collected and present without wanting or aversion or separation. It's like, ah. It's just perfect in this moment because there's nothing in excess and nothing lacking—because you're not thinking in those terms.

But even so, our habit of attributing everything to the environment or to others or to experience—we often miss that that's happening in this moment of conscious awareness. We think it's the externals, right? So that's something that we lose by being so focused in.

And then we just... we can be so like, it's like we're trapped. We're just tossed between pleasure and pain, pleasure and pain, our whole life, like ping-ponging back and forth. Does that make sense?

I have this one memory that to me personifies this being tossed back and forth between pleasure and pain. It makes me laugh. I was watching the Super Bowl one time. So I ask in advance the forgiveness of anyone here who's a football fan, because I'm not going to get any of the details correct at all. I don't remember what year. It was the Super Bowl. I was with friends who were totally into it. But I remember just this at the end.

So I know the Patriots were playing, and Tom Brady was the quarterback. I can't remember who the other team was. And this was right at the end. So again, I ask your forgiveness—I'm totally not a football fan. But it was like the last two or three minutes, something like that. And the Patriots, something happened. They didn't have the ball. The other team had the ball because my memory is Tom Brady sitting on the bench. And the other team did something where they suddenly got a touchdown or whatever, so they were ahead and there's like hardly any time left. And the camera panned to Tom Brady, and he was like the picture of total dejection. Total. I mean, physical, mental. It was funny because, you know, I don't know him. It was just funny to see how total —total dejection, like his whole life in that moment of losing.

But then because they'd made a goal, the Patriots got the ball again. I can't, again, I totally don't remember what they did. But whatever they did, it was some amazing thing, and in two minutes they made some points and they won. So it was totally, you know, amazing if that could happen. So then they panned to Tom Brady again. And he's like—he wasn't just kind of, "Oh, isn't this nice?" He was ecstatic. He's leaping around.

He's grinning. Between those two minutes, his whole life encapsulated in each of those moments. I always keep remembering that because it seems to me that's what we do. That's what we do. And it doesn't end with the Super Bowl. It's everything—it's lunch, it's sleeping, it's everything. And as long as we're trapped in that, that's what we are. We're trapped.

So our process here, bringing in steady awareness, what it's doing is fieldwork to see what's actually feeding this habit. One of the meanings of the word Dharma, or Dhamma, is the law—the law of how things are. And so dependent origination, one of the key teachings of the Buddha, shows that all things happen lawfully. In other words, if you plant a seed, it's lawful. If it's an apple seed, you're going to get an apple tree,

however much you might pray for mangoes. That's what it is. The cause leads to a lawful effect. And the same thing's going on in our bodies, in our minds, in the habits of our mind.

So we can start to look with the steadiness of awareness and see what the seeds of dukkha, the seeds of suffering and confusion, are in our moment-to-moment experience. What conditions lead us to getting more caught? What conditions lead us to seeing more clearly? Because wisdom—recognizing accurately the quality of wisdom that arises in the mind—really does see in a moment: "Oh, this holding on isn't really serving me." And instead of willpower, wisdom just puts it down for a moment. You'll only experience just a moment: "Oh, I don't need to do that." And it's different from hating it or pushing it away. "Oh, I don't need to do that." That's a moment of wisdom, clear seeing. And more and more of those moments are what really start to give us access to peace and ease.

This is where we talk about the key role of vedana, the feeling tone. This is why the Buddha made it the second of the four establishments of mindfulness. He's breaking out all of our experience: established mindfulness of body, established mindfulness with vedana when it's arising, established mindfulness with citta—all the qualities of mental states—and then with the dhamma, with how different things in the mind function. He broke it out, in my opinion, because he highlighted it so much. Understanding vedana through clear seeing is such a key to helping us release these mindless habits we have, where we don't realize how we got there because we didn't recognize the vedana.

I want to talk about this from one of the teachings of the Buddha, one of his suttas, one of his discourses, where he describes this. I have always really liked it. Many of you know it—it's called the Dart, or the Arrow. I like it for two reasons. One, it starts out by saying: what's the difference between an awakened or enlightened person and a regular person? So he gets our attention. He's going to tell us what the difference is. That's useful.

The second thing is, in this sutta he's really explaining how the habit gets reinforced. The seed of suffering is always greed, hatred, and confusion—these qualities in the mind called the three roots of confusion, of suffering, that the Buddha always points to. And we can feel when they're present. We get confused and we suffer. And they're habits. It's not that we're willfully wanting to do this—they're habits. We get sucked in, partly from what I've been describing.

So he's describing here how these habits get reinforced. I just find it so practical. I want to share it a bit and talk about what the sutta says. That's how he starts it: what's the difference between an awakened person and a regular person? He calls this regular person an "untaught worldling," but I always have trouble saying that.

I'm just going to say we normal folks experience pleasant feeling tone, we experience unpleasant feeling tone, and we experience neutral ones. The well-taught noble disciple, the awakened person, likewise experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling tones.

So just in case, lurking in the back of the mind, hidden, is the unseen belief that we really think we're going to get rid of all the unpleasant experience in life if we get awakened—forget it. Hang it up. That belief is keeping us spinning. That's just another form of samsara, keeping us spinning toward the pleasant. And then every time there's something unpleasant and we're lost, we think, "Oh God, I'll never be enlightened because this unpleasant thing is happening." No. Awakened and unawakened alike experience all three.

So what's the difference? A regular person, when they are touched by painful or unpleasant bodily feelings—say you're having an unpleasant pain in your body—that person worries and grieves. He laments, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught. You get the drift. Your knee hurts. "Oh my god, my knee! The ambulance! And this, and what are they doing, and we're sitting so long..." And if you're lucky, it stops there.

So he thus experiences two kinds of feelings, two feeling tones: the bodily unpleasant and the mental unpleasant. The Buddha says it's as if you were hit with a dart, and then on the heels of that first strike, you're hit by a second dart. Really, it's more that we hit ourselves with the second dart. The second arrow—hence the name of the sutta.

So that person will experience two types of unpleasant feeling. You get a sense of this, right? It really makes sense. And it may not just be a bodily unpleasant feeling. Often, I'd say even more when we're on retreat, it's a mental unpleasant feeling—like judgment, for example. And then we hit ourselves with another dart, an endless regression on how bad that is, how bad we are, why that person shouldn't be doing whatever they're doing, in or out.

So this is where it gets interesting. Being touched by that painful, unpleasant feeling, the regular person resists it and resents it. Okay, makes sense so far, right? We resist it, we resent it. So then in one who so resists and resents the unpleasant feeling, the underlying tendency of resistance against painful feeling comes to underlie the mind. In

other words, it becomes a habit, a tendency. When there's unpleasant, the habit, the tendency is that right away resistance and resentment come up. Can you relate to that? Normally, yes, that's what happens. It becomes a habit.

And then under the impact of that painful feeling and the resentment, the person proceeds to enjoy or to look for some kind of sense pleasure, some kind of sense happiness. And why? Because a regular worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense happiness.

I find that so real and so poignant. He's not saying sense pleasure is bad. He's just describing the habit of resistance to unpleasant feelings. We just think, "Of course there's resistance." We don't even notice that because we didn't notice the unpleasant to begin with. And the next thing the mind does is go look for some sense happiness—whether it's looking for a pleasant fantasy if you're stuck sitting on the cushion and there's nowhere else to go, or going to have a cup of tea, or going to the fridge for ice cream. Out in our life we can get ourselves into a whole lot more complicated trouble going for some sense happiness because we're not seeing clearly.

And so then the underlying tendency, the underlying habit to lust, to crave for pleasant feelings, comes to underlie the mind. You get a sense of this, right? It's really happening like this, again and again and again. It seems so real. The person who does not understand, who does not know according to facts—just according to the way things actually are—the arising and ending of these feelings, or who doesn't really understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings, in one who doesn't understand that, the underlying tendency to ignorance and confusion in relation to neutral feelings comes up, and that becomes the third habit.

So I just want to say a bit about these things, but it's really, really interesting.

Seeing how quickly it becomes a habit with unpleasant to lust for pleasant, how both of those—resistance and craving pleasant—are such deep habits that underlie the mind and how frequently they're reinforced. This is the thing: the lawfulness is that a habit is something you keep practicing.

Seeing it once, in that moment of really seeing—"Oh, look, I'm craving for thirds at lunch because I'm just not feeling very good. Oh, I don't need to do that. I can just be with not feeling fine"—and there's a peace that comes with that. And that's a moment of freedom. But that's a moment. And that moment doesn't go on for the whole rest of our life. How many more moments, not only here but in our life, are we practicing from these habits?

This isn't to be demoralizing. This is to be realistic, so you don't get too discouraged when we really see clearly something isn't helpful and five minutes later the mind is doing it again—because it's been practicing it for however old you are. It's been practicing it. And so just to be realistic: actually the power of clear seeing is stronger. The power of wisdom is stronger. But one clear seeing isn't enough to wipe out a whole lifetime of habit. That's why we practice. We're just practicing awareness.

So Chokyi Nyima, who's a Tibetan Lama—he's actually the brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Mingyur Rinpoche—he's talking about renunciation or weariness with samsara. But what he means by weariness is just getting weary of this endless, endless, back and forth, back and forth—pleasant, unpleasant. And he said: watch your mind, watch the fickleness of the mind, how easily it is influenced just by a simple pleasant or unpleasant sight or sound or smell or thought into an immediate mood. And that immediate mood goes into a whole world of story.

Can you notice that? Notice that in the sitting or in the walking. I think when I was giving the walking instructions the other day, I was alluding to that. You can be walking, and there's just a beautiful sight. "Ah, the spring. It's so beautiful." It's pleasant. And it goes into a whole world. Three minutes later, someone cuts across your path really close—and not even too close, you didn't have to put on the brakes—but they intruded on the beauty of the nature and the oneness of experience that was completely ridiculous, and boom, unpleasant, boom, you're off into a whole other world. And then you know where that goes five minutes later: "I am hopeless. I am useless. How can I think I can practice with my mind?" Endless, endless, endless.

And when we start to notice vedanā, it's a trip. As Chokyi Nyima says, how fickle the mind is. Pleasant—boom, into a whole world. Unpleasant—boom, into a whole world. Neutral—we're completely spaced out. Let's go look for something to happen. It's neutral, right?

And watch your mind. When I first saw this, it was like, "Oh, my God." The mind will cook up an unpleasant fantasy rather than be neutral. Something that never happened, but it might happen. It might happen next year, and this person might say—I mean, you're really pissed off. And why?

What was the point of that? I'll tell you the point of that. I got to feel really pissed off. I got really strengthened.

When it's neutral and it's just like this, when you're really aware in that moment, there's that sense of it's all here, the vastness, there's no problem. But when it's neutral and we're not really quite aware, not aware of the neutrality, it's kind of, well, what's happening? I didn't come here for nothing to happen. Let's get some juice going. Let's have something happening. Let's go. This is the underlying habit of neutral.

It just touches me so, what he says—that we normal people don't know of any other escape from unpleasant feeling, from unpleasant experience, except to lust after pleasant sense pleasure. As long as we're in that cycle without looking, we don't even know there's another option. As Greg was talking about last night, substituting a higher pleasure until you really don't need to substitute at all.

But this is where, back to the sutta, when the Buddha says the normal person doesn't understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. That's a phrase he uses frequently—gratification, danger, and escape with something. Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is one of the, I would say, three main translators and interpreters of the Pali texts into English living at this time, describes it beautifully. He says these are three movements in the unfolding process of insight: understanding the gratification, understanding the danger, understanding the escape. Not saying one's bad or wrong, but just understanding them.

So in terms of the gratification of going for sense pleasure, the Buddha talks about understanding the gratification. I looked up gratification in the dictionary. To gratify is to satisfy or please, to give pleasure by satisfying desires or humoring inclinations. I thought that was good. The Buddha says, if there were no gratification in this world, there wouldn't be clinging. But when he talks about the habit of clinging, of craving for the pleasant, when he discusses the Four Noble Truths, which we'll explore later, he picks a specific word for the second truth, the cause of our confusion, our suffering. He picks the word *taṇhā*, which translates basically as thirst. It's really this quality of thirst. I need this. I lean into it. That's what we're talking about here.

And the gratification is, first of course, obvious—something is pleasant, and we like that. That's a gratification. But unwise attention to the gratification gets us lost. So gratification is, he goes on talking about in the Second Noble Truth, this *taṇhā*, this thirst, accompanied by delight, relishing experience, now here and now there. I love that phrase. I watch in my own practice when there's craving for something. Pick little things here. And you're not judging it. You're just bringing steady awareness to it. Judging it, then you can't see clearly. So when there's craving, when there's wanting, great. Awareness of craving feels like this. See what the gratification is. See it clearly.

I've also seen sometimes we confuse the actual feeling of wanting itself. I've noticed how that can be confused with actually being a kind of gratification. You almost think the wanting is pleasurable. Look and see if that's true for you.

And then I've noticed, as I was saying, in terms of neutrality—I would see how, like when I was doing self-retreat at home, just a mellow, quiet retreat, just practicing awareness. My phone's there because I would stay in touch with people I needed to through texting, just because I was alone for a month. And I could see, doing walking meditation, the phone's over there, and if there's a little bit of dullness—not a lot, just a little bit of boredom, a little bit of neutrality—I think, well, what can I do now? There's this sense of, oh, I could check the weather. Any damn thing, you know, it doesn't matter. It could be something like, oh, I could go outside and pick flowers.

I mean, it doesn't have to be that the thing we want is anything wrong with it. But noticing that wanting and how it gives a sense of enlivening—we confuse that with what being alive feels like. Wanting, you know. Boredom, neutrality—no, no, wanting. So we want, and we confuse that enlivening, or think that that enlivening... what's getting enlivened again is the sense of me wanting. So explore that. I've seen this a lot, and I think it's really interesting—it kind of wakes us up. This can be a kind of gratification. So explore and see for yourself: what's the gratification? And always the sense of me gets a little bit stronger in that.

So he's not saying there's no gratification, but explore and see what it is, what it is for you.

And then what's the danger? What's the danger? And of course, the first danger the Buddha mentions is that everything is impermanent. And not just that at some point it goes away—nothing is steady state.

So that sense of gratification... we all know how it is online, right? You go online or on your phone to check one thing. Maybe not when you need to know it, but for, like I said, some kind of gratification. How common is it that you stop at that one? You check the weather—okay, that was enough, right? Five hours later, or whatever, how many things have you done? How good are you feeling? Not very.

But it's like that moment, that little moment of gratification, pleasure—it doesn't last very long. It never does. But because we keep leaning into the next, we don't see it. So that's the first danger. That's the real danger. Everything's impermanent. And if that's what our mind is leaning on for real peace, for real ease, it's completely unreliable.

So with steady awareness, we start to see that. We start to see the endings of each gratification instead of not noticing that and moving into the next. We start to see how unreliable it is, how it feeds sense desire, how it keeps us caught. The more we're in this habit of resistance to unpleasant and craving for pleasant, as we start with our steady awareness to notice what's happening in our consciousness, in our mind and heart, you'll start to notice—look and see, you don't believe me, but you will—the mind isn't happy. It's in a tumult. It's just always back and forth, back and forth. Even when it's not huge suffering, it's not at ease. It's not at peace. It keeps us looking in the wrong direction. It's a kind of torment.

One of the translations of the word for greed, hatred, and delusion—*kilesa*—I think someone mentioned this, often translated as "defilement." That's not a great translation. "The torments of mind," I think, is a good translation. If you're aware, if you notice, when there's real greed in the mind or real aversion or fear or delusion, we're not happy campers. The mind really isn't at ease, the heart isn't at ease, and our actions or decisions aren't clear because we can't recognize accurately.

So these are all some of the dangers. Explore for yourself. It keeps us from seeing accurately, and we can't make great choices either because we're not recognizing what's really going on. You know, that second quart of ice cream trying to be happy—wasn't a great choice, maybe. It wasn't a great choice. With clear seeing, we could have done something different. Just resting at ease with the unpleasant actually can bring peace.

So those are the dangers. And the escape—normally we think escape is getting the heck away from unpleasant. That's the escape. But that's not the escape. The escape, as the Buddha describes it, is the abandoning of desire and lust for the world, for the pleasant. The abandoning. This is the escape. The abandoning of the cravings for the world.

Not abandoning the world. That's not what he's saying. And when he says "the world," he's talking about this round of six sense contacts. That's what he means. So abandoning the lust, the craving, the desire for particular experience—the world. He's not saying abandoning the world. That's very different.

But tuning into this possibility of escape is something we can only start to trust when we recognize these little moments of that possibility. Because thinking about it, even if we think it sounds nice, without even a moment of experience of the peace of non-clinging, without that, it's just an idea. It doesn't quite go in. Because, you know, the pleasant feeling, that enlivening of wanting, that sense of me feeling happy—we don't

really want to give that up. We'd like the unpleasant to go away and for there to always be pleasant. That's why I said in the beginning, that's not going to happen. The freedom is different from that.

But part of the danger is we don't want to give that up. And we can only imagine that as the only pleasure. That's what he's saying—without steady practice to see that there's another possibility. The quality in the mind-heart in a moment when it really does put down that clinging, put down that aversion, can just rest at ease with whatever's arising.

I think it's Joko Beck—I always quote this—but I think Joko Beck said it: Can I find in myself, in my heart, in this moment, only for a moment, the willingness to rest in this confusing and unwanted experience? Just for a moment. Just be with this like it is.

Steady awareness, unbiased awareness. It's not made better by pleasant. It's not damaged by unpleasant. And as we start to recognize and trust the mindfulness, the awareness more, instead of being so glommed into getting meaning from the experience, positive or negative, we can be more with the awareness. Oh yeah, that's really unpleasant. Awareness is noticing that. It's a whole different experience.

Like I described with the lizard, when I recognized what was happening, then there was the peace in the mind that wasn't clinging. It's like, ah, I don't need a particular external experience for that. I can start to really trust from experience—oh, this clinging. Watch. Just be aware when the clinging is there. Keep walking with the clinging and keep just noticing it with awareness. And at some point, it will stop. I promise, because everything stops at some point. And then keep on being aware. And you might really see that the peace and ease that comes is actually the ease we wanted from getting the thing we were clinging to. The peace that comes from clinging—you get the thing, the clinging stops. That's what creates the sense of ease. But it doesn't last because we're putting it on the object.

So it's not about giving up the world.

Back to the sutta, though. He's saying, what's the difference with an awakened person? So you can guess: with an awakened person, when they experience unpleasant, painful feeling, they experience a single feeling, a bodily one. They do not worry, grieve, and lament, beat their breasts and weep. They're not distraught. So when they experience one unpleasant feeling, they experience one unpleasant feeling. That's it. Having been touched by it, they don't resist it, don't resent it. And because we're not in reactivity, there's not the underlying habit to go clinging for something. It's just like this now.

Ajahn Sumedho is always talking about this receptive conscious awareness. And he uses the phrase, what he calls, "Oh, it's like this now." I use that a lot in my practice. I can feel the mind kind of trying to figure something out or in reaction, and I go, what's going on? And instead of trying to figure it out—oh, it's like this now. And the total awareness just drops into: it's like this.

Maybe it's unpleasant, maybe there's hardness in the heart, maybe the mind is agitated, but that's like this now. And there's no more resistance or clinging in that moment. Seeing it clearly, just as it is, without struggle—that's the way into peace and ease.

That doesn't satisfy our intellectual mind, but this is nothing to do with the intellect. It's that sense of the happiness that isn't based on pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling.

Here's what the Buddha says: When an unawakened person experiences one of these feelings, we experience it as though we're chained to it, as though we're joined to it. It's like this unpleasant feeling where we're just totally chained to that and all the reactivity. But an awakened person does not experience it as one chained or joined to it. There's an unpleasant feeling, a neutral feeling, a pleasant feeling tone. It comes. It's like this. It goes.

"Such a one, O bhikkhus, is called a well-taught noble disciple who is not chained, who is not fettered by birth, by old age, by sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair." He's not chained to this suffering. What a powerful statement. And the Buddha is basing it on just exploring this very subtle but happening-every-moment experience of vedanā.

There's something important I wanted to share about opening into the absence of torments. Really, the absence of clinging doesn't mean we abandon the world. It doesn't mean we don't act. It doesn't mean we don't have responsibility. But in the absence of torments, the mind, the heart manifests rather than through greed—it doesn't respond through greed or aversion. It responds through the brahmavihāras. It responds through friendliness, or through compassion, or through appreciative joy if someone's happy, through equanimity. These arise more naturally in the consciousness, in the mind-heart that isn't distorted by wanting, by aversion.

It's not personal. Neither is the wanting or the aversion personal. These are like lawful habits that arise. And so through the steady awareness, we're actually setting up conditions that lead to clear seeing, that lead to the wisdom that changes the habits.

And that's why being with the difficult stuff, as difficult as it is, doesn't mean your practice is going wrong. I mean, we're not always with difficult stuff, but we have to be sometimes.

That's why Greg was saying, you know, maybe you have wonderful, wonderful experiences. I said to someone today, if on your first retreat you have these amazing, brilliant experiences, what I say is, I'm sorry. Because I have a friend who, for ten years, said that happened on his first retreat. And for ten years he thought that's what's supposed to happen. Every retreat he was just in miserable agony trying to make that happen again. But the real wisdom comes from seeing how these things are created.

So back to the escape—when we're not caught, even for a moment, in these torments, there's the space in the consciousness, in the heart-mind, to discover this real peace or joy or ease or happiness, whichever way your particular consciousness describes it. That's available to us with the steady awareness that isn't caught in identification or reactivity. It's only available when we're not caught in the clinging or the aversion.

As the Buddha says of Ananda: "This is peaceful. This is sublime." The stilling of formations—just all the hoo-ha stops for a minute. It's so peaceful. It's sublime, the stilling of activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, just the putting down, as Greg described last night, the ending of craving, disenchantment from all the stories, nibbāna.

But just touching a moment of that, just when there's nothing going on, instead of going, "Let's cause some dukkha here, let's whip it up," notice—is it possible to even incline towards the peacefulness, towards the non-complication? Our habitual intellectual mind isn't too jazzed by that. But start to notice when it's like that. It's peaceful. And that grows and grows. The appreciation of that, the inclination to peace, to happiness, that grows more and more. And the habits of clinging and aversion—we notice them more. They get more obvious.

They get more gross. But in the noticing of them, with conscious awareness, we're not feeding them. They're not being fed. They may get big, but if you can keep aligning with awareness, you watch how they rise, you watch how they fall, and then notice—yes, this is peaceful. This is sublime. Just let it in. Just let it in.

And then in the next instant, some big craving comes up. You can only laugh. You might as well laugh. This is it. But then this is another chance—just awareness of craving. It's like this. It's peaceful. You don't have to do anything about it.

To end, I'll share a quotation from Pema Chödrön: "When we wake up, we can live fully without seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, without recreating ourselves when we fall apart. We can let ourselves feel our emotions as hot or cold, vibrating or smooth, instead of using our emotions to keep ourselves confused. We can just feel them. We can give up on being perfect and instead experience each moment to its fullest."

Just that last line—if we give up on being perfect and just bring in awareness and experience each moment to its fullest, life takes care of itself.

Thank you for your kind attention. I hope something was useful.

May the wholesome energy of our sincere intentions, our sincere practice together, be shared and benefit all beings everywhere. Truly, we practice to purify our own hearts and minds and to share that with all beings.

CHAPTER 188

Power of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 50 min

> *In this opening retreat talk, Carol Wilson illuminates what she calls "the liberating simplicity of mindfulness" (sati). Drawing on the Buddha's pragmatic approach to ending suffering, she explains how our moment-to-moment experience through the six sense doors becomes distorted by deeply conditioned views (diṭṭhi) that we don't even recognize we hold. The most fundamental of these is our unconscious assumption that pleasant experiences are "right" and unpleasant ones are "wrong"—a view that generates endless reactivity and suffering.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that right view (sammā-diṭṭhi) is not about adopting correct beliefs, but about learning to recognize experience as it actually is, free from the overlay of our assumptions and conditioning. She shares a teaching story from Sayadaw U Tejaniya about simply resting in hearing rather than fighting with sounds, demonstrating how clear seeing naturally dissolves disturbing reactions. The steadiness of mindfulness, she explains, creates the conditions for wisdom (paññā) to arise spontaneously.*
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> *The talk concludes with a moving account of an elderly practitioner who found their final years to be "the most interesting time of my life"—not because of external circumstances, but because of the profound aliveness discovered in each moment of pure presence. Wilson encourages practitioners to trust this simple practice: being fully present for just this next moment, without pulling away or creating stories about experience.*

Goenkaji, a long time ago, used to start each evening Dhamma talk by saying, "The first day is over. Eight more days to go." And believe me, I was dying in those retreats. This is Kush.

But the first day can be pretty long, no? Sometimes not, but yeah. I imagine some of you feel a little bit tired? A little bit blasted? That's normal. It won't stay that way, but it's such a shift from our ordinary life, whatever that is. This is somewhat different, one way or the other. And so sometimes we're tired, or just because we're not doing so much, the mind just wants to shut off.

But also, realistically, many of us come into this from whatever our lives have been —more busy or stressful. Sometimes just getting ready to come is stressful. And we get here and, quite legitimately, the mind and body are tired. So not to make any problem about it. You can take a little nap after lunch, whatever—take a nap in your sitting.

When you wake up, you wake up. There was a lovely Sri Lankan monk years ago, long gone now, and he would say that on any retreat, you'll get as much sleep as you need, on or off the cushion.

I just want to normalize it. You don't need to be judging yourself, and you don't need to be—what my mother used to call—"awfulizing," projecting into the future: "Oh my God, eight more days like this." It won't be. The next moment won't be like this.

So I just wanted to talk a bit tonight about mindfulness, sati. Sometimes I like to talk about what I think of as the liberating simplicity of mindfulness, of awareness. I mentioned to my colleagues the other day that Thich Nhat Hanh used to talk a lot about this. I think his first book was called *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Actually, when I first heard it, I thought, "Oh, la la." But it is a miracle. It is a miracle—the power of mindfulness to start transforming our suffering habits, our suffering relationships to life.

Something that I've always so appreciated, that has always drawn me to the teachings of the Buddha—as far as I know them from reading in the Pali suttas—is how extremely pragmatic he seemed to be, even though there are books and books and reams of material. He always said that of all the things he knew, he knew so much. He said, "How much I know is like all the leaves in the forest." But he picked up a handful of leaves and said, "This is what I'm teaching, because it's all you need to know to free yourself from suffering." And that's what he was concerned with, even though there is all this philosophy and stuff we can study. It's fascinating. It can really relate to our lives, to our practice. But it isn't necessary.

The Buddha was really concerned with the salient point of our lives: the suffering, the discontent, the dis-ease that we all experience in one way or another. And he asked really practically: Why? Does it have to be this way? Why are we discontented and suffering? Is it necessary? If not, what's a way to understand it better? What's a way to live differently? How does this suffering arise? How does it cease?

So that, in a way, is what's taking us into this practice. And at the core of it is this quality of awareness, of mindfulness. The pragmatic part of the Buddha is that he's saying, "Let's look and see what's bringing about suffering, unhappiness, dis-ease in my mind and heart." Not the whole world—in my mind and heart. What's bringing it about? What conditions bring it up? What conditions allow for it to release?

As Mingyur Rinpoche says, very practically too, if we want to be happy, we must recognize the causes and conditions that lead to well-being. Similarly, if we don't have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how can we possibly expect

to free ourselves from it? Or as Joseph always talks about, his teacher Munindra used to say, if you want to understand how your mind works, sit down and look at it. Let's really look and see what's going on.

And this is like the whole core of the Buddhist teachings—that nothing just falls from the sky without causes and conditions. Everything is very lawful in the sense that if something is arising, there have been all kinds of conditions that led to it. It didn't just drop from nowhere. So we can start to look and understand it. And this is where mindfulness is really the key.

Why can't we just see how things are? Why do we get so confused? When the Buddha talked about his Eightfold Path, the path of practice, it begins—and really the path begins and ends—with right view, right understanding. Of course, in the beginning of the path we don't have complete understanding, but we have some sense of right view. And that's the core of it. So I want to speak a bit about what I mean by that, this being the beginning and the ending of the path.

I'm talking about this word view—*ditthi*—not as a belief, not as a philosophy. The Buddha's not saying you have to have right view meaning you need to master a million Buddhist teachings. When we talk about understanding them, understanding the fact that everything is impermanent, you could say that's right view. But he's not talking about—and here I'm not talking about—right view as learning and adopting a set of beliefs. Going around saying "everything's impermanent, this is right view" does not, as an intellectual belief, transform our understanding and our heart. It does not transform our suffering. Try it.

When we go around holding something as a belief, thinking "this is true"—that's one of the ways *ditthi*, or view, is defined in the suttas: the belief that this is true and everything else is false. We don't say that in neon lights, of course, but that's what's happening. The Buddha actually says that people with views, attached to views, go around in the world annoying one another.

So when we're talking about right view, it's not about saying, "Yes, everything's impermanent, and you're suffering because you don't know that everything's impermanent. But I do, and I'm right, and you're wrong." That's the same thing. That's the same samsara we're suffering from. He's not talking about that.

What he means is much more simple. The word that always comes to my mind is elegant. View, using the English word, I like because it points to appropriate view—the way we see, the way we recognize our moment-to-moment experience. Right view, or accurate view you could say, or wise understanding, is recognizing this moment of ex-

perience, our self and the world as it is, rather than through the veil of all our assumptions and views and beliefs that we don't actually even recognize we have, because they range from gross to very subtle.

When we're in the grip of a view, or we're looking at the world through a view, and we don't quite recognize it accurately, then the way we think about the experience doesn't match reality, the way we respond doesn't match. This is where we get into what are called the disturbing emotions: greed, hatred, anger, fear, self-centeredness, separation. All of this comes from recognizing inaccurately, responding in a way that our inaccurate recognition tells us is going to make us happy, then being completely confused because that doesn't work. And we don't know why it doesn't work, because the way we're understanding the world isn't in alignment with the way it really is.

So I'll give you an example of how view works. Really, in some ways, the whole purpose of mindfulness and all the techniques around it is to keep introducing us to how to bring our totality of presence and awareness into this moment, free from all the assumptions—and even to understand that that's possible, to get a feeling that that's possible—and then recognize. I say "see," but it's not really visual seeing. It's more recognizing, just being with what's happening as it is.

Ajahn Chah, I think I mentioned the other night, was saying: in a nutshell, the point of the teaching of the Buddha is to transform one's view. It is possible to change it. It only requires looking at things, and then it happens. And that is the essence of the steadiness of mindfulness. Looking at things—not trying to figure out which things to look at so we can put it all together. That's just coming from our misunderstanding. Looking at what's naturally arising in this moment. And there's never any other moment. In this moment, what's naturally arising—not what we think it should be or how we think it ought to be. How is it now? The steadiness of mindfulness is what allows for clear recognition to arise.

It's based on our conditioning—our society, our cultural background, our experiences. We don't have to get rid of that, but we can recognize when a particular view is operating. When we don't recognize this, that's when we clash.

It can be kind of fun to see the differences, actually—if you're looking from outside and you're not so attached. If we leave politics and certain other things out of it.

An example: I was in Burma a few years ago with some friends. At that time, staying in monasteries in the central part of Burma meant being immersed in a very Buddhist culture, with deep faith in the Buddha's teaching and the different realms of existence. This faith in various levels of existence was something everyone had grown up with.

Several friends and I, along with a bunch of Burmese people—monks and sadhus—were going to a small village to offer a donation of rice to the villagers. This is a very joyful occasion, very much part of the culture. When there's a donation of rice, all the donors are there, all the village people come, and it becomes a big event done with tremendous joy—and ten million photographs of everything.

So we were taking photos, different friends taking photos. Later, when we looked at the pictures on the camera, in several of them there was this perfectly round, bright light appearing in the images.

We're all looking at it, and the Burmese people say, "Oh, that's devas." Devas—celestial beings. "That's devas." And all the Burmese people agreed: "Oh yes, that's devas."

Then one of our friends—who is actually a nun in that tradition but happens to have a PhD in biology and botany, coming from a very scientific, medical background—she says, "No, there's no way. That's a watermark. A little moisture got into the lens. There's no way that's devas."

So who knows? Our tendency is to ask, "Well, which one's right? We've got to figure out which one's right." But that's not the point. Who knows what's right? It might not be either one.

What's interesting is that a year later, this same friend was in southern India at the ashram of Ramana Maharshi. Every full moon, people walk around the whole mountain, Arunachala—about a ten-mile walk. People come from all over India for this. It's a huge pilgrimage. Millions of people bus in. I'm not exaggerating—a million people walking around this mountain at night.

My friend was also doing it, and she took a lot of pictures. When she looked at her photos, there were these round deva things all over the place. And she said, "Ooh... maybe it is devas."

Who knows? It's not that there's a right answer. But we have different information, and the information we have and believe—that's how we describe our world. That's how we create our world. That's what it means to us, and that's how we might respond.

Our sense that we need to know—"If I know, then..."—when that takes over, the quality of freshness of attention, the wonder, the curiosity that comes with mindfulness that's open to discover, all of that shuts down. "Well, now I know what it is. It's a watermark. It's moisture. It's devas. That's it." And the curiosity goes out.

But no—it's just fresh. It's like this. We're not meant to settle on it. That's a little example of not being about getting it right.

But when we're believing that, if either side had really believed it, you could easily get into struggle or conflict around it. And in other kinds of views, we get into struggle or conflict with our moment-to-moment experience once in a while. Anybody notice today any moments when you weren't totally at ease and at peace with your mental or physical experience? Any moments of that? No, everything's totally copacetic, right?

So there are lots of different ways one could talk about this, but I just want to start with the really obvious tonight—in terms of the views that are affecting the way we relate to our experience that we don't quite recognize, because it seems so obvious and normal. But it's what's leading to, what's giving rise to, our sense of dissonance, our sense of being not at ease with things as they are.

Because a lot of times people think the freedom the Buddha's talking about means that finally all this crazy stuff in the world and everybody is going to stop. When you think about—or don't really consciously think, but in the back of your mind—what freedom from suffering might look like, what liberation might look like, are you still going to have backaches? Are your relatives still going to be as obnoxious as they are now? Is this stuff still going to go on? Are people in the world still going to be so crazy, getting involved in wars and such? If we don't really look at it, somehow on the surface level it's easy to say, "Oh, no, of course that goes on." But on the background level, somehow everything gets kind of nicer in there. And that's not the kind of thing he's talking about.

It took me a while to realize, but when I looked at the Buddha's life, when he woke up, he didn't spend the next forty-five years floating around on a cloud. He was walking barefoot around northern India, begging for his food. And the monks and nuns that he was training—they were wonderful people, but if you read the rules for the monks and nuns, every rule came about because of some stupid thing that the monks or the nuns were doing. He said, "Okay, I guess I have to make a rule about this. Don't do this. Don't do that." His relatives would get into wars about water rights. All kinds of endless sadhus would come and want to argue with him. To me, that's like the worst—every day some sadhu would come and just want to argue with him. The world didn't change, is my point. But he was known as the Peaceful One.

And that peace that he's offering us the chance to explore—with the tool of awareness to bring us in to see—is the peace that comes from a mind and heart that's at ease with things as they are. And that's only possible when we actually are present with things as they are, not as we wish they were or think they should be.

So this one habitual assumption is one of the root views we are caught in, and we don't see it. I'm sure those of you who've done practice a lot before are well aware of it. But that doesn't mean it doesn't keep sneaking in the back door or the front door.

One way the Buddha described experience—very basic experience—is through six sense doors. There's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensation, and then the whole mental realm: thoughts, emotions, all the mental experience. And those things are happening over and over through the day, right? In one way, he said, there's nothing else going on but that. A lot of it's mental, and it gets all complicated, but if we're really looking, it's thinking, it's mental experience, emotion, physical sensation, sound, seeing. All these things are coming and going. Don't believe me, but just look and see and let us know if you notice something else. No, seriously. But check it out first before you write me ten million notes.

So these things are coming and going, and we're so in the habit of thinking... Some feel pleasant. Some feel unpleasant. Some are kind of neither one nor the other—we don't notice that so much. But it's so immediate. We like some things. We don't like some things. And that can be quick and subtle. Or we kind of don't have much feeling, or we kind of ignore some things that are happening. And because things are happening quickly, we don't tend to notice that. But we've spent most of our lives practicing this. And so, basically, if something's kind of pleasant—say there's a sound, say at the end of the sitting you hear this bell, and we didn't make it a nice, quiet sound.

It might not be pleasant for everybody, and it might not be pleasant for you every time, but this one time it's pleasant. We don't notice hearing pleasant without steady mindfulness—it's just, "Ah, that's nice." Nothing wrong with that. But when we don't notice it, that's nice—that's the reality, that's a nice thing. Not even sound and then pleasant and liking it, just "that's nice." And that's how it should be.

Then something unpleasant happens. You're sitting in the meditation, and you just feel this heaviness come over your face, your body, and your mind goes, "Oh no, sleepiness. Oh my God, and there's thirty more minutes to go. What am I going to do?" So you're not seeing this as a lot of different experiences. It's one big unpleasant experience. And that's wrong. It shouldn't be happening. It's wrong. Either I'm doing something wrong, or this whole stupid retreat and meditation is stupid, or why is sleepiness happening? There's some way it's not okay. And that's just a little thing, sleepiness. It's a pretty normal thing.

Of all the people I've talked to over a lot of years of retreats—and I've talked to a lot of people, and in my own mind as well—there are many things people enjoy, many things they suffer. The amount of suffering, mental suffering, that people have ex-

pressed to me about the experience of sleepiness is unbelievable. Unbelievable. And you look at it, and what is it? For the love of God, you're sleepy. What's the worst that could happen? You fall asleep. Oh my God, you fell asleep, the end of the world. But I'm not exaggerating the amount of suffering that people put themselves through.

This is the suffering the Buddha's talking about—not the fact that there's sleepiness, but the reactivity to it. And the reactivity comes basically on this aspect I'm talking about. Because it's unpleasant, and the deeply held assumption that we go through our lives with is that unpleasant is bad or wrong. Either the experience itself is wrong and shouldn't be happening, or there's something wrong with me and I shouldn't be experiencing this. And then we do something else to try and make it more pleasant.

Rather than with steady mindfulness seeing just what's happening—a simple experience like sleepiness—or say there's a pleasant experience and we get, "Oh, this is wonderful, this is good, this is how it's supposed to be"—it coheres into a lot of thoughts and emotions and reactions around it, a whole story. To the point where—I'll go back to sleepiness because it's a simple experience—the story that coheres around it is so complex and so fast that we don't even, without mindfulness, without this just simple, steady attention to the experience—there's no way to unpack it. When people come in suffering so much from sleepiness, it's the whole package that's really wrong and bad. And the only way to fix it is to somehow get rid of that experience. Is this making sense?

With the pleasant, it can be the same thing. Maybe you haven't had enough time yet. But say you have a sitting, or say there's ten minutes of the sitting, and it's just peaceful. Why is it peaceful? Because there's not any wanting, and there's not any aversion going on. You're not fighting with experience. That's why it's peaceful. But we don't necessarily notice that. It's peaceful because the body feels good, because finally I'm doing it right. And this is how it's supposed to be. And after six or seven days, it's going to always be like this, because this is what we're aiming for. This is what freedom feels like. It's peaceful.

And we just get sucked into that so quickly. It's all around pleasant or unpleasant, liking or disliking. And we take our meaning from that—the meaning about ourselves, the meaning about experience, what it means in the world. This is what keeps us in the cycle of samsara, of always wanting something better, something new, wanting to get away from the unpleasant, and defining ourselves and the world by that.

We know something isn't working, but we don't exactly know why. It's because this sets up a view that we don't quite see. It's such a deep assumption, such a familiar habit that we don't even notice it. We take it for granted, sort of like gravity. Pleasant is right. Unpleasant is wrong. We don't even notice pleasant or unpleasant—we just feel that this is right and this is wrong.

The view is the attachment to that. Of course we can tell the difference. Of course if we had a choice, we would tend to go to the pleasant. I'm not saying otherwise. But that doesn't have to come with the view wrapped around it that absolutely this is the only right way, and this is what it means about me, and this is what unpleasant means about me—that I'm hopeless and useless.

So we're practicing this all day long, this one particular confused view. And when we're experiencing through the veil of that, we can't even recognize accurately. This is where mindfulness comes in, where we want to learn to trust the simplicity of awareness, what's actually happening. What's actually happening?

When sleepiness comes, what's the actual mindfulness? It's just meeting the experience. Today, Winnie offered feeling sensations in the body, or hearing, or sensations of breath. Take hearing, for example. Our tendency would be: that's the bell. And it may feel pleasant or not, we like it or we don't, we may notice that or we don't, but that's the bell.

But what's the actual experience? It's just pure hearing. And if a thought comes —"that's the bell"—that's fine, but that's a thought, that's not the hearing. Of course it comes, but that's not the same thing. And if it's "oh, I like it" or "I don't like it," that's fine, but that's another thought. That's not the hearing.

What we're training is how to really trust the simplicity of mindfulness. It takes a willingness to just rest into the experience. As much as we're holding back, that's a little bit of the aversion, the fear. You can't rest right into it. Mindfulness is right in there, just as it is—without assumption, without any story, without holding back, without our comparing. It's just like this.

That's not our habit. But when there is a moment where we just drop in, then there's clear seeing and the response can be more appropriate.

Just a little story from one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He tells about himself when he was in training in his monastery in Burma. His teacher was giving a dhamma talk, with many monks and lay people sitting in the hall. Outside the window, some work was going on—there's always some work going on in any monastery in Burma you ever sit in. So it was really noisy. That's normal, not an aberration.

He was sitting there trying to hear his teacher, and this was really noisy outside. He found himself getting really angry and agitated at that noise. "I want to hear my teacher, and they're making so much noise." Then he'd be hearing his teacher for a while —"Oh, that's what I need to hear"—and then the noise would intrude again, and he'd start getting angry and agitated. You can imagine, right?

And finally, at some point, he noticed what he was doing. Wait, what's actually happening? Let me just look at that.

So the sound started outside, and he just allowed his attention to rest in the hearing. Oh, it's just hearing. All the agitation—that was extra, mind reactivity. But when he was just resting in the hearing, at that moment, it didn't come up.

And then his teacher would start talking, and he's just resting in the hearing of that as well, not getting caught in the wanting. And then he said, "Oh, it's just hearing, hearing." All the wanting and the aversion wasn't arising anymore in those moments—just the simplicity of hearing.

And then he thought he could see clearly. Oh, I could just move closer and hear my teacher better. Because you can see more clearly when all this fretfulness isn't going on —"it shouldn't be like this, it shouldn't," and "I like it, I don't like it." It's just hearing. He could really see that's all it was—hearing—and everything else was reactivity, made up. And then you can see clearly.

That's what we're practicing. It seems simple, but that is what we're practicing. We start very simply with feeling the sensations in the body, the breath, or hearing, just because the mental realm, as you can see, is so fast-moving and complex that it's difficult to be purely mindful of the mental activity, especially in the beginning. It's just too active.

But that's what we're doing. We're cultivating the simplicity of mindfulness—just meeting what's happening. Body sensations, hearing, and it'll move to thoughts and whatever, just as it is, whatever the experience is. Not just for that, but really what we're doing is cultivating again and again this clarity of totality of presence, free from all our assumptions and ideas and comparisons and all of that.

So then you might notice if there's a time in the sitting, a walking, an eating, where you're feeling present and it's fairly easeful. Not completely, but just fairly easeful. Notice—don't make any big deal—but just notice the quality in your heart-mind at that time that is easeful.

Because I know for myself, in the early years of practice, when it was easeful or nice, I would attribute it to the situation. "Oh, this is such a nice cup of tea." Or, "It's so peaceful, it's a lovely day today, and it's so nice out here in the country," and la-di-la-di-la. We're attributing the peace to external circumstances. We forget to turn around and look. It's peaceful because the heart-mind is fully present, collected, and it's not caught in reactivity and liking and disliking. It's not fighting with what's happening now, but present with what's happening now.

We tend to think something's not good and we pull back, but actually the surrender into this moment, the totality of presence, is the way into the ending of suffering, just in a moment. It's useful to notice.

But then you try to recreate it. You go back and sit in the same place and look at that same tree and have that same kind of tea. It never works exactly the same, does it? Because it isn't. No moment's exactly the same. Our mind and body have changed. Somebody else is sitting next to us that we didn't want to see. Someone sits across and gets in the way of our view. The water's not hot enough. The tea feels old. But it's got nothing to do with any of that. It's the quality of presence of mind-heart that isn't fighting with what's happening.

John Samedo, talking about awareness and mindfulness, says, "It's not about making value judgments about our thoughts, our emotions, or our sensations, or whatever happens. We're not making value judgments. Awareness is about knowing, being with these things fully, that they are what they are at this moment." That's it. They are what they are at this moment.

He goes on to say—and this is me paraphrasing—as we expand our experience of mindfulness to all our experiences, which we will in a few days, then this becomes a kind of total freedom to receive life as you experience it in this moment. No more trying to say, "This is okay to happen. This is not okay to happen."

So even though we're giving instructions—let the attention come to the breath—we're not saying, as Woody said, we're not saying the breath or the body is somehow better than other experience. We're just using a skillful means, a more simple, easily accessible arising experience—sensations, hearing, breath—

to help us keep cultivating, keep recognizing this simple, steady mindfulness.

But mindfulness doesn't reside at the breath or the body or in any particular place. So when Woody said today that when you recognize you're lost in thought, and there's that moment of mindfulness again—he said that's a good thing. It is. That's a moment of mindfulness. You don't have to go back to the breath to get back to mindfulness. It's

right there. In that moment—oh, thinking was happening—we appreciate that's a moment of mindfulness, mindfulness that thinking was present. And it's right here. The thinking was also right here, because there's nowhere else we can go but this moment. We just weren't aware of that. But as soon as we were—oh, thinking—that's a moment of mindfulness. We appreciate how that feels, what he described as the difference between mindfulness of thinking and being lost in it.

And then for now, we're saying allow the sensation of breath or body or hearing to arise into the forefront of mindfulness as a way to simplify, as a way to help us continue recognizing the mindfulness. But it's not that breath or any other experience is somehow better, or that mindfulness only exists there. These are just techniques to help us recognize it more and more, because we're so inured to our habit of deciding this is okay, this isn't okay, choosing this, rejecting that, judging ourselves or whatever is happening. Just get simple. Learn to trust the simplicity of mindfulness, free from the overlay of our views and conditioning. It's so simple in one moment, right? But as you see going through this, it's hard. It's difficult. One of the reasons is that it's not our habit.

But also because our conditioning—our subtle assumptions and views and preferences—that's going to stay. We're still going to have preferences, of course. But we're so used to this conditioning, and it can be so subtle, so embedded in us, that just deciding "Now I'm going to drop these views, I'm not going to be caught anymore in wanting and aversion toward pleasant and unpleasant, I'm just going to be present with clear mindfulness and let things be as they are"—we can't just do that. It would be nice if we could. This is why we start to appreciate the conditioning, the power of our habitual patterns. With mindfulness, we see that too, and then it's okay. We know this conditioning is affecting how I like or don't like this experience. That's fine. That's different from declaring this is good and this is bad. We can see, oh yeah, look how that is. Mindfulness is just noticing that rather than taking it personally.

Am I making sense? Does that land?

Another example came to mind today of how we can get caught, rather than resting in that fresh, open quality of mindfulness—that sense of openness into the unknown. Each moment is the unknown. Not dragging in all our opinions, all our previous experience—that is so difficult.

So this came up: someone I've had great respect for, a kind of hero of mine over many years, is Yo-Yo Ma, the classical cellist. He seems like a wonderful person. He does really good work in the world. And I've seen various videos where he has this quality of really open, interested wonder about all kinds of things, but particularly about music.

I don't know if you know, but in the year 2000 he started this project called the Silk Road Project, which has been going on now and has grown quite large. What he did was bring together, with this open, fresh attention free from assumption, musicians from all over the world. It's a huge thing now. The first one was called the Silk Road Project because he was bringing together musicians from all the different countries along the old Silk Road—Mongolia, China, Persia, Iran, Central Asia, North Africa, Turkey, India, Western countries, and later Finland. Okay, Finland wasn't part of the Silk Road, but it expanded over time.

He'd bring together musicians and the instruments from their countries. And it wasn't that he would have the Chinese musicians play with certain Chinese instruments—though they would do some of that, really beautiful—or Mongolian throat singers, really beautiful, or classical Western music. But the thing he did that's so amazing is this: he would bring together, say, someone from Iran, and someone from Mongolia, and someone from India, and someone from the West. They'd get together and write music, bringing together all of those traditions into one piece.

So it might be some of the Iranian music, some of the Indian instruments, some special Chinese kind of flute, and the classical cello or violin, and different kinds of tonalities. I mean, it's really wild. And he'd bring it together.

So you can see I get really enthusiastic. I think it's so wonderful, this openness, this bringing together. And in my mind, I think how incredible that you can do that—bringing together musicians who are then writing music where they're mixing all the different ways and the different instruments from all over the world.

I still think that. But that's in my mind.

When I actually listened to it on the first album—and there have been many more since—I kept listening. And my ear couldn't like it. I wanted to love it; I love the idea of it. And if I hear each separately, you know, if I hear the Chinese instruments, it's beautiful. Same with the Iranian. But when they put it together with the Mongolian throat singers and the classical instruments, my ear just can't hear it in a relaxed way. Much as I want to, much as I think it's wonderful.

That kind of amuses me in a way. And I keep trying. But I see it's not right or wrong. I can see that thinking about embracing a view isn't transformative. And it doesn't mean that I have to like it. But can I just listen totally free of assumptions and conditioning? Yes, so far not. There might be moments one can. But just looking to see—this is what the Buddha is saying—looking and seeing how the mind works.

Now, there's not suffering in what I'm describing, unless I get upset because I can't really go, "Wow, I just love this. Let me listen to this in the car all the time." I start and then I go, no. If I got upset about that, then that would be suffering. But I can see, oh, that's how it is now. I love the idea, but the ear is just used to what it's used to, and I'd rather hear Chopin piano nocturnes. That's just how it is. It's not good or bad. And someone else would be completely different based on their conditioning, and that's not good or bad either.

But just to see—I like looking at these different levels—to see how it is, not to think we can think our way through these things. We're so used to, many of us, thinking that we can understand through thinking. That's what mindfulness is helping us drop underneath. The thoughts can be useful, can turn our mind to the Dhamma. We had thoughts that brought us to this retreat. Thoughts are useful. But then we turn our attention into just the simplicity of presence, just as we are.

As mindfulness is remembered more and more frequently, gradually it develops its own momentum. In other words, it gets easier and easier; it starts to happen more. You know, like our old habits happen by themselves. We don't think, "Now let me cultivate a little bit of greed and aversion." No, it happens all by itself and knows how to do it very well, thank you.

So we're learning to cultivate mindfulness. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we appreciate our entrancements with our reactions of mind to whatever is arising. Let me say that again. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we appreciate the entrancements with reactions of the mind to whatever is arising.

For example, about recognizing thinking. *Thinking*. We appreciate that moment—ah, awareness is here again, thinking—we appreciate that, rather than getting entranced by our reactivity and our judgment and our ideas about what should be happening. We're entranced by that. But instead we say, oh yeah, here's awareness again. Oh, and judging is like this. And we're more appreciating the awareness.

That starts to become a bit more natural. And as Sayadaw U Pandita says, when mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, this is where the steadiness comes in. You can't stay steady through the whole day, but the willingness to try and remember—the sitting, the walking, the eating—that's why this matters. Practicing once and then forgetting doesn't work. It's the steadiness, and that just takes time and patience.

When mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of mind and body. That's really the whole game. The steadiness of clear seeing, the steadiness of mindfulness of just what's happening by itself, is a condition for wisdom—paññā. Not thinking wisdom, but the wisdom of really recognizing, insight into the true nature of mind and body.

And one of the beautiful things about when there's really that wisdom that's recognizing—it's not an act of will, of personal will—but when wisdom recognizes how things are, the confusing reactions naturally drop away. Like Sayadaw U Tejaniya's story about the sound. When the wisdom was just present—oh, that's just sound—all the suffering reactions dropped away. That's a natural effect of wisdom. I love that because it's not like you have to figure it all out and then somehow put it down. We can trust that the steadiness of mindful awareness is setting up the condition for this to happen.

So I just want to end with a little inspiring story of a friend of mine who's passed away. This person was a long-time meditator, probably one of the more accomplished yogi meditators among just regular people that we knew—someone who'd done a lot, a lot of retreats. A person that started in their middle age, not when they were young. A person who lived a very rich and full life outside of here, who had done many things in their life, really quite accomplished. So they had a very rich life and done a lot of practice. And so, really, very wise. The sort of person the Tibetans often call a "secret yogi"—someone just living a normal life, where regular people wouldn't know anything special about them, but they had really quite profound wisdom.

I was visiting them when they were in their nineties, the last couple of years of their life, living in a nice assisted living place—they had some money. Just in a little apartment. The body was frail and couldn't really go out and do much. I was just having a visit and they were saying, "You know, this is the most interesting time of my life."

Yeah. Sincerely. This was a very sincere person.

And I said, "Really? But you've done so many interesting things and practiced..." They couldn't practice formally that much anymore. The life seemed so constricted, you know?

They said, "No. No, it's like... it's all right here in this moment. When I walk across the room to the little kitchenette, that's everything. All of life is present here in this moment, walking across the room. When I'm putting the tea kettle on to heat, that's everything. The totality of presence in that moment. And life is so alive. Every moment is so interesting."

Dipa Ma said a similar thing: every moment is so interesting.

And this was so completely honest from this person. And you realize the interest is not in the activity. The interest isn't in the object. The interest is in the quality of wakefulness in the heart and mind, that quality of presence—and what I would call the purity of the citta, of consciousness. Purity meaning just not in any kind of dissonance. Not trying to hold back from the experience because it's maybe unpleasant or not good enough. Not half present and half thinking about something else, but just here with it. Just walking across the room is all of life. It's really quite amazing.

And I heard later, when this person was in hospice, they said the same thing: "This is the most interesting time of my life."

So that's really the direction, this quality of simple mindfulness. It seems like nothing special, or like work, in the moment. But it's really taking us in this direction. The freedom is this quality of real presence, freedom of heart and mind in this moment without pulling away, without making it a story.

So just having the trust, the faith, to be present for this next moment.

That's it.

That's it. That's all we can do.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

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May the beneficial energies of our sincere practice together be a cause of our own awakening from suffering and confusion. May it also be a cause and condition for all beings to awaken from suffering and confusion.

CHAPTER 189

Power of Steady Awareness to Change Our Relationship to Life

Carol Wilson · 48 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the transformative power of recognizing our innate awareness—something so close and available yet consistently overlooked. Drawing on teachings from Sayadaw U Tejaniya and insights from Anam Thubten, she describes how we habitually get pulled into whirlpools of worry, fear, and blame, losing touch with our natural dignity and capacity for compassion.*
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> *Wilson explains the three aspects of vipassanā practice: experiencing mind and body directly (simple sati), maintaining continuity moment to moment, and holding right understanding (sammā diṭṭhi). She emphasizes how the subtle arising of 'me' and 'mine' in relation to vedanā (feeling tone) creates the conditions for afflictive emotions to multiply. Through careful attention to this process, we can discover that awareness itself is never disturbed by what it knows—the awareness of embarrassment isn't embarrassed, the awareness of pain isn't suffering.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for retreat practice: trusting awareness rather than seeking meaning from objects, recognizing that even mundane experiences are doorways to awakening, and understanding that we don't attain awareness but rather learn to recognize it. Wilson quotes Ajahn Chah on how one who knows the Dhamma has a mind at peace that naturally resolves difficulties, neither lost in delight at gain nor excessively upset at loss—truly knowing the world clearly as a lokavidu.*

I guess I'm going to talk about awareness tonight. It's all I ever talk about—it seems like it's all I ever talk about because it's what I always want to talk about. It's so amazing, the power of recognizing our innate natural awareness as it becomes steadier and steadier. It's so liberating. And awareness is so available, yet it's so overlooked by us in our life.

You know, it's like the Tibetan saying: it's closer than your eyelids, yet you can't see it. And then when we do notice awareness of something, the something that we're aware of pulls us in more. Even if we dislike it—"I dislike it"—there's a lot more juice in that than "oh, awareness of dislike." So we get in there. But awareness itself is such an amazing, liberating, beautiful, freeing, completely natural, no-quality non-thing.

I'll talk a little more, just a bit of elaboration really, about our practice here—the practical way we cultivate steady, stable recognition. Simple awareness. Simple recognizing of what's happening, whatever is happening. And how this really works to open our heart and mind from the dream of constriction and reactivity and loneliness and fear, to the potential to just be here with oneself, with others, in a different way. Still here, though.

We're all familiar with the Buddhist story—I won't go into that. But the point, really, is that when the Buddha awoke and declared himself the peaceful one, truly free from the torments and suffering of the afflictive emotions, living a life of ease and peace, the point to recognize is that the world didn't change. He was living in a human body, with a human mind, with other human beings, and the nature of the world didn't change. The freedom, the peace he discovered was not about somehow making everything better. It didn't mean the body doesn't get sick. It didn't mean any of that.

So what is this peace, this freedom? What's the direction he opened up and pointed to—found in so many other spiritual ways too? And what is the direction we can begin to glimpse in little moments? Start to get just an intuition, an apprehension of how this is really a possibility, in moments here and now. How can conscious awareness—the steady, mindful awareness of just what's happening—affect our understanding of the world in such a way? Because that's what changes: the understanding. How we understand ourselves and understand the world. And the responses and reactions and qualities that arise in our heart and mind based on that understanding.

Here's an example. A while ago I was listening to a talk by Anam Thubten, a Tibetan lama who lives in the Bay Area in California. I like him very much. He's funny, but he's very—I don't know, I just like him. He's tuned in. This really stuck with me. It was last year, but it could be now. It's just more and more true. He was talking about the really challenging times that we're all living in, how really distressing things are.

And he said: any of us can so easily be overwhelmed by the challenges—personal, in the world, whatever particular one is hitting us at a certain time. We're so easily overwhelmed, as if pulled into a whirlpool of worry, of fear, of anger, self-blame, other-blame. We're spinning in this whirlpool of really suffering emotions and thoughts. Can anybody relate to that at all?

Sometimes it's such a habit we don't even know. The particular thing that distresses us comes up, or we hear something, or we read one line of the news—that's enough often—and into the whirlpool we go. Sometimes we're just spinning helplessly in it. Other times, even when we've been cultivating awareness and wisdom, we can still be sucked in.

And he says—this is him—we're swirling in this whirlpool, in this world, and it's kind of the way of the world. It's often, in my opinion, exacerbated by how things are set up. For example, I don't know if you've noticed, but often when you see on TV that there's been some kind of disaster—something like a cyclone, not even something deliberately caused by other humans—some news person runs up to someone whose house has been destroyed, sticks the microphone in their face, and says, "Who do you blame for this?" Have you noticed that? So often asking, "Who do you blame?" As if this should be the first response, the first thing someone should say, immediately. If anything bad happens, there's definitely got to be someone to blame. And often we blame ourselves.

Sometimes, when I've seen this—I mean, I could be projecting, I don't know what's in the person's mind—but they look kind of taken aback. And then they seem to clock in, figuring out who they should say they could blame.

We feel compelled to blame someone. But this cycle can become so consuming that, as Adam Tesfon says, when this happens we lose touch with the natural dignity of love, compassion, and wisdom. When we're spinning in this swirl of fear, anxiety, and blame—whether directed at self or other—we've lost touch with what the Dalai Lama spoke of, our true human values. We've lost touch with present moment awareness. This brings us back to Anantapta.

He says we practice in order to re-recognize awareness, again and again. How can that be so powerful? Because when we're not just sucked into the swirl but suddenly *aware* of the swirl, something shifts. It's not that all of that magically disappears and we find ourselves living on some cloud of peace. But the shift from being sucked into that swirl of pain to the awareness of it restores that confidence, that taking refuge, that trust. In that moment, we're with awareness rather than giving all our energy and belief to the emotions and the story as being who we are.

We practice to re-recognize awareness, and with it comes access to kindness and compassion. These we can offer to the world. That's what Anantapta is saying, and it's an amazing power that recognizing awareness can have.

You don't have to believe what he's saying or what I'm saying. I'm offering it as an example, as a pointing—something to have a look at in our practice, in our time here. It doesn't have to be the huge swirl of the most suffering experience. It can be stubbing your toe walking up the stairs and thinking, "They should have a sign on these stairs!" Or someone saw you stumble and now you're thinking, "Oh my god, I'm so embarrassed." That's a little mini swirl, but we can get caught in it.

Practice just the awareness of embarrassment. It feels like this. It doesn't mean the embarrassment goes away, but that velcro that sucks us in, that *being* the embarrassment, wondering what they think—it changes completely. Awareness of embarrassment. The awareness itself isn't embarrassed.

Little things. Check it out. Explore it. The steadiness of awareness is incredibly powerful. So that's our practice.

One definition of Vipassana meditation that I like—this comes from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, but it's not unique to him, and Alexis alluded to it this morning without saying it directly—is that Vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly, from moment to moment, with the right understanding. Sometimes Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls that the three jobs of a yogi: experiencing the mind and body (that's simple mindfulness, simply recognizing what's happening), from moment to moment (that's the perseverance, the steadiness, the continuity through the day), and with the right understanding (that's what makes it *right* mindfulness—not "I know what's happening" while being lost in thought).

I'll say a little bit about each of these.

So knowing, experiencing the mind and body directly. Simple sati, samma sati, right mindfulness as it's described in the Noble Eightfold Path. None of this is anything you don't already know. You've all been practicing, you all know mindfulness—the awareness, the attention, simply being with what's arising. So simple, just as it is, without adding anything extra.

A sensation arises and you know it. You can just feel it. Maybe perception—that recognition, just a factor of mind—comes in and notes "tight" or "hurts" or something. It's just that. Sati recognizes it as that and leaves it as that. It's free from elaboration, from preference, from judgment, from wondering what it means about me, from comparing to how it was yesterday, from how we wish it was at another time, from thinking it means we have to go to the hospital. It's simply sensation.

Can you get a sense of how totally easeful our lives could be if we could really live like that? And immediately the mind goes, "No, you can't just have sensation, because you have to function."

You can't just be hearing sensation, sensation. You have to know that the sound of the bell means you get up and walk out.

Once I was on a retreat myself, a three-month retreat, and I'd been sitting quite a while. It was deep into it. I was practicing not exactly in this style—a little more directed attention—but still the same mindfulness. Basically, I would just be noticing what happened. So I started coughing. Cough, cough. I'd feel tickle, tickle. Cough, cough. Notice hearing, seeing. There wasn't a lot of elaboration at this point. It was pretty mindful.

And then at one point: cough, cough—oh my gosh, I've got bronchitis. That was a thought. But at that time, I used to get bronchitis quite a lot and I'd get really sick from it. So that thought had a little bit of oomph to it, unnoticed. "Oh my God, I've got bronchitis." Then: cough, cough, tickle, tickle. I didn't have to do anything. And the whole thing calmed down. I could just be noticing.

But it doesn't mean you don't know what's happening. If the coughing had kept getting worse, without being reactive, the thought "this is bronchitis" could arise. There'd be the sense: do I need to go to the doctor? Do I not? Thinking arises. Thinking is known. Mindfulness can be aware of all of the six senses—all the physical and the mental sense. We can know what's happening. That's not the same as all the reactivity and elaboration that comes when it isn't quite mindfulness, when we're getting confused with the reactions. And that's where everything goes wonky, right?

When it's not just hearing or seeing—say you're sitting here feeling tired. Okay, feeling tired is like this. Awareness notices tiredness. And really, it's not a problem. It's tired. It doesn't mean it feels good. It doesn't feel good. It feels like this.

What makes the difference here? The right understanding that the Buddha talked about, that Uteshanu is talking about—when we are mindful with the right understanding, what allows it to be simple without adding all this elaboration is when there's not that adding to the experience of me or mine.

A sensation arises. And you can see this in your own practice. It doesn't need some great esoteric deep concentration to see it. It could be something simple like a little niggle in the back. You just feel it. You're just aware and noticing things. And then—like my bronchitis—suddenly the thought comes: "Oh my God, this could really be a bad thing in my back."

Now, if that thought isn't noticed, already it's become *my* sensation, *my* back. That thought comes up and there's a little bit of fear, a little bit of aversion. The afflictive emotion has started to kind of feed off of the mindfulness, and it starts to distort the mindfulness. So what was just a little sensation now is *my* back, *my* pain. How long can I sit with this? The aversion starts getting stronger, there are more thoughts about it, we

start having memories of our past life—I mean this life, past times in this life. We'll just stay in this life; it's enough to deal with. We start worrying about the future, start looking at everyone else, start thinking: who's to blame? Those teachers for making us sit so long.

This was the stupidest thing I ever did in my life—and on and on the mind goes. We're way, way down the line from simple sensation or simple unpleasant feeling. This is where the afflictive emotions, the torments of mind, come up and multiply. And it all starts from that subtle sense of me, that subtle sense of mine, which is arising. It arises and passes. It arises so much of the time. But there are times when it doesn't.

When these kilesas, these torments, are not recognized—when something arises and we don't quite see them—that's when it's not the simplicity of mindfulness. That's when we've got the beginning of a little mini whirlwind, or a really big one.

One other thing that can happen in the way we're practicing here, with just awareness noticing whatever's occurring: maybe nothing particularly difficult comes. Just seeing, hearing, sensation. And then suddenly it's like—boring. There's nothing, so what? Seeing, hearing, smelling—so what? I mean, we want to bring an awareness that leads to some insight. It's called insight meditation, right? So shouldn't there be something a little more interesting than hearing, hearing, oh that person's coughing, okay coughing, I don't like it, okay not liking?

It's boring. Again, we don't quite recognize this as one of the afflictive states, but that's delusion covering over. It's a subtle disconnect. When we're saying boring, too mundane, not really interesting enough—there's a subtle pulling away, a subtle aversion. And I see for myself that this could be present a lot in life. When we're actually feeling rather at ease, not caught in a lot of wanting or a lot of aversion, it can be like a pseudo heading towards equanimity. Oh yeah, it's peace. Uh-huh, yeah, it's fine. It's nice. Okay, it's like this. Whatever. You want to go out? Whatever. It's all equanimous. No—it's all disconnect.

But when there's that genuine relaxing, that opening, that really committing and trusting to just open with fullness of presence into this moment, whatever it is—as Dipa Ma said, who was a wonderful Bengali woman with really profound, deep practice, who died in the late eighties or early nineties—she said: when you're really awake, nothing is mundane. Nothing is mundane.

When awareness is recognizing experience—that being confident, having confidence, resting in the awareness rather than looking to the experience to affirm us or give us meaning or feel good or feel bad—just awareness is so... it's not necessarily joyful, but it's just alive.

And so that's why I keep wanting to talk about it and keep inviting us all to keep recognizing more and more. Because it's such a little shift—from being aware of an unpleasant sensation to being in the unpleasant sensation. The sensation doesn't go away, but that shift to the awareness of it, somewhat like what I was reading from Ajahn Tuffon though that was a stronger experience—it's amazing because the thing is still occurring, yet the suffering about it is gone. Even if it's just a quick moment. And when you recognize that, it's not me recognizing; it's just like that, just obvious.

As we go through the practice—and our practice here is just moment after moment remembering, that's all, nothing special—

All these so-called mundane experiences—everything, everything that arises—we can be aware of. Each moment becomes a doorway to simply recognize: oh yes, awareness again. Oh yes, here's awareness. Oh yes, awareness of hearing. Awareness of boredom. There's nothing awareness can't notice.

And as we go through the days, awareness gets a bit more natural. What really becomes natural is that we trust it a little more. We have a little more confidence, a little more willingness to recognize it. It's not that we don't recognize it because we're recalcitrant or obtuse or stupid—it's that the habits of our mind, the habits of how we've learned to relate to life, are just so strong. These are the habits that bring us into identification with experience and into the reactions of the afflictive emotions.

One of the main ways these habits form is moment to moment to moment. But because they form moment to moment, they're also ceasing moment to moment. Remember, nothing's more than a moment.

Something Ajahn Sumedho said—I liked how he described it. He was describing how we live in these bodies, how we are these bodies and minds. He says, and I like his phrasing, that we live as sensitive forms. In other words, the five sense doors and also the mind are experiencing constant input, aren't they? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, emotions. If you close your eyes, as Alexis said, there's still kind of visual images. You can stop your ears, but there's still some sound going on. We're not trying to shut anything out—and you couldn't even if you tried. You couldn't go through the day, you couldn't go through five minutes, without constant sense input. That's what our life is: the five senses and the mental one.

And as the Buddha described—and you all know this—every sense contact you experience comes with vedanā, with a quick feeling tone in the mind of it being either slightly pleasant, slightly unpleasant, or kind of neutral. The Buddha thought that little experience of subtle pleasant or subtle unpleasant or neutral with each contact was so important to bring mindfulness to that when he taught the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse Alexis talked about on the four foundations of mindfulness, he broke experience into four different areas. The first is the body. The second is vedanā. He broke that out as being absolutely key to explore.

Why? Because with the steady awareness of seeing how it works, the truth reveals itself, and we can stop getting so caught in the habit.

So let me just describe it a bit. This constant sense contact, from the moment we're born, arises together with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is going on, arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing. You get the drift? It's kind of understandable, in a way, how frequently we tend to space out when we're not really aware, and how we tend to get caught in our reactions to pleasant or unpleasant. We seek sense experience, but—maybe this isn't true for any of you—I've certainly noticed there are times when I'd really like a break from the constant arising and passing, arising and passing: pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant, seeing, hearing. You don't even realize, you know. But if there's a little bit of reactivity in you—not at all of them, but at many of them—that's one of the reasons things are so tiring. We don't even notice that.

So the right information is this: there's a sound, slightly pleasant. That can be noticed, and that's all. The right information is that's just what's happening. Awareness notices. There doesn't have to be anything extra. As soon as the sense of "me" or "mine" comes in—that sound is unpleasant, my unpleasantness is bothering me—there's the constriction. Even though it's little, even though it's very subtle at first, that's the beginning in that moment of the afflictive emotion.

"It's so hot. Heat, heat. I'm hot. I'm really hot." Just that little bit of difference. We're not saying right or wrong, good or bad. We're saying we can bring awareness to notice this too. This is where the steadiness of mindfulness through the day allows us to... We don't even have to look for it. Just stay steady with awareness. Keep coming back when you realize it's gone.

You can't help but notice the difference. Notice how as soon as the sense arises that "this sound is bothering me." And if you stay with awareness, you can notice a little bit of tightness, a little bit of thought—what can I do? What's the matter? That person is making that sound and they are making me feel aversion. That shouldn't be happening.

Susan and I were just laughing because in a way I said, no one else can make us feel aversion. Aversion arises in our heart and mind when there's unpleasant, and there's a sense of holding on to that unpleasant and really falling into the spiral. Awareness can recognize, "This really feels unpleasant." And that's it. Nothing extra.

But you see, as I'm saying this, that doesn't sound like amazing, wonderful freedom, does it? You didn't come here and say, "Oh, I can sit and feel my back hurting and say, 'Oh, that's just unpleasant sensation, nothing extra.' And they're telling me that's freedom." I don't think so.

But we start where we are. And you will have like the subtle, "Oh, my back's hurting, okay, pain, it's just pain, it's just pain." And the clinging to the aversion can be so subtle that we don't quite recognize it. We're trying, really trying to be mindful, and in the back of the mind—way back there—if I'm mindful correctly with this unpleasant sensation, that means it goes away, right? Because I said that that's freedom. Freedom means this unpleasant thing's going to go away.

That is such... it just keeps getting in there again and again and again. I can't tell you how often I'll find being with something—I'm really quite aware, I know there's awareness, I noticed the thoughts of aversion, so I'm really aware—but it's still... you can still feel you're caught. You can still feel that little swirl is going on, and you start trying to look and see what's the swirl, but the looking is colored by aversion. I'm looking to see why am I swirling and why is this stupid thing still here when I'm being mindful?

It keeps slipping in, slipping in. And then, because we keep practicing, you recognize, "Okay, I don't like it, I don't like it, I think I'm mindful, I don't like it." And suddenly, suddenly—because when we're with awareness, awareness can be with aversion, awareness can be with greed, simply another thing happening. The aversion and the greed might be strong enough that they keep arising and you really bring awareness to them. But at some point, the attention is feeding the awareness, not the greed. At some point, that clinging, that velcro drops away, and it's just, "Oh."

And it really is just sitting there with a sensation, and there's no problem. It might not last long, but notice when that happens. That's what I mean by the sense of a subtle apprehension, starting to see how these things can work. It's really quite... it turns into a real voyage of discovery. A real voyage—how is the mind working? How do these afflictive emotions arise in this heart-mind in this moment? And how do they cease in this same heart-mind in another moment?

All we need to do is just step back into this moment of noticing what's happening. We don't have to figure it out intellectually. We don't have to try and change what's happening. Life is doing itself. Simple awareness is just to notice that. Notice that without adding the story of me to it. And when that story comes up, awareness notices that too.

So what we're really starting to do is trust—trust more and more and more the simplicity of awareness. Our habit is to look to the objects, right? A really beautiful experience or some wonderful experience happens in the meditation, or something wonderful happens in your life, or something difficult happens, or just a sound you don't like. But the habit is, with the pleasant, the unpleasant, we're so used to taking pleasant as good, right, the way it's supposed to be. Unpleasant is bad, wrong. There's something wrong with me or something wrong with the world.

We go to blame if that happens. Neutral experience we don't notice at all.

And without being aware of this pattern, that's where we get into the wanting—always leaning into something nicer, something better, or holding on to what we have. The pushing away, trying to get rid of the stuff we've decided isn't good. It's always about what does this mean about me? How is it fulfilling me or affirming me, or making me feel that there's something wrong with me because this is arising?

Do you get a sense of how complicated that makes everything? And it's completely our habit. So walking out of here, you start noticing, "Oh look, I'm doing all this me-ing." Of course you are. We all are. It's also not personal. It's just a habit, and awareness notices that. You just get interested in seeing how this works. Seeing how—oh, just be with what is. Just be with what is. But I don't like what is. Okay, be with not liking.

We don't trust that at first because we're so used to getting our sense of meaning from objects, wanting the good ones and wanting to get rid of the bad ones. We're just caught in that. It's like gravity. It seems so true we don't even recognize it.

That's how this moment-to-moment steady awareness is so radical. Because it's like—just really drop into what's happening now and know that you're noticing it.

Why it's so difficult—and that's a whole other talk—is because all of our habit is to get the heck away if it's unpleasant. And if we're trying to get away, there's no way of recognizing what's actually happening. So that's why it's practice. That's why we talk about the huge swirl that Anam Thubten talked about, or all the pain in the world, or something difficult in your life. What's useful about being on a retreat is you can work with... it's the same way the mind works with stubbing your toe. It works in the same

way. Use these little experiences. That's why we talk about the steadiness through the day. Whatever you're doing is mindfulness practice, because that's where we're really going to go on this voyage of discovery and see how the mind works.

So don't try to think, "I shouldn't have aversion." That doesn't work. When aversion comes up, how is it? How do you recognize it? How does awareness notice aversion?

As Ajahn Sumedho always says—instead of going, "Aversion's like this." That doesn't help everybody, but it helps me a lot. When something's going on and I'm trying to name it, I'm trying to see it, but it feels too busy—I can tell there's efforting, I can tell there's doing. I'm not spaced out, but... "It's like this now." I don't even try to name it. It's like this now. Attention completely opens, drops into the body-mind. It's like this now. You just open and feel it, just for that moment.

It's a world of difference—the shift from identifying with something to awareness of it. It's so nothing and it's so everything.

So that's why being on retreat, seven days and seven nights, with all the little stuff that goes on—each moment is equally valuable for recognizing awareness, for letting the steady awareness show us how the mind works, how suffering is created, how when the afflictive emotion isn't being fed, the compassion comes, or the mettā for oneself, or the generosity—how that naturally comes. So many chances to see that, and it doesn't have to be any kind of wonderful experience. Some of the biggest insights, where you suddenly think, "Oh, I really see it"—

It can come just from—I don't know—touching the silverware and feeling the coldness. One time I remember I was very aware of eating and chewing and swallowing, and then I swallowed, and it was so clear. I mean, this sounds silly, but that's how insights are sometimes. It was so clear that the food was gone. It's gone. It's really gone. I mean, this is huge—wow, it really was here, and now it's really gone. It's turned to something else. Little things, you know. That's how it is.

Don't be waiting for some big lights-going-off moment, thinking that you're sitting here with tinnitus in your ears, sick of listening to me talk, wishing you could go to bed. That's the moment, because this is the only moment we have to really be here.

So this starting to, and continuing to, really bring our confidence, our trust into awareness—it's a beginning to abandon our entrancement with experience, with samsara, this endless round of sensations and wanting and losing, wanting and losing, just wanting more and more sensation.

I heard this advertisement on the radio last week. It was for Disney World, going on about this and that, screaming and yelling. And right at the end, the announcer says, "Disney World. Every amazing feeling ever, and all at once." Oh my God, it sounds like a nightmare. But that was their ultimate advertisement to get you to come. This is the world we live in. Then I thought later—what if that was true? What would the poor six-year-old kid do, having had every amazing feeling you could ever have all at once? What are they going to do for the rest of their life?

Anyway, when you put it like that, it's kind of nice to put down that entrancement. It's beyond kind of nice to be able to just be present in this moment without all the reactivity, without needing it to be other, without needing something to fulfill me. And we can only begin to know and trust this from our own experience.

I'm just up here trying to share, hopefully just to entice you to keep looking, because this sense of steady awareness is always available. The movement from identification and wanting and aversion to "oh, it's like this"—it's always available. When the afflictive emotions are so strong, yes, sometimes we can't quite notice awareness. And as we go through the days, that's one of the ways we can offer little tips about meditating: how to take care of our awareness, to move it away from the all-compelling difficulty to something more neutral. You'll hear us say it's not about getting a better object—it's about what supports recognizing awareness, taking care of awareness.

So we start; every moment the Dhamma is revealing itself. That's why, as we go through these days, the perseverance—the third job of the yogi—is this: of course you can't be mindful every moment, of course not. Don't even think that. Or you can think it, but just notice you're thinking it. When we've forgotten, the next moment can remind: "Oh yeah, right—touching. All right, stepping. All right, thinking." And it doesn't matter what was going on before. We're here again. We're here again.

As we said, this becomes more natural. Right now it's not natural because we're entranced by what's occurring, entranced by objects. As we get more established, you can kind of fall in love with awareness in a way that isn't personal. We still know what's happening—maybe more clearly, because we're not so gripped by it. We can respond more appropriately, from wholesome states, from wisdom, from non-clinging, from non-blame, from non-greed. We can perhaps have a clearer sense of appropriate action.

So in our week here together, as we said, we're really not trying to achieve something in a short time or a long time. I know—this is what our minds know how to do. You don't come here for seven days without thinking you should have something to show for it at the end. If you do, it won't last anyway; nothing does. But we're here to have all these moments to practice recognizing awareness.

That's an incredible gift in the world. As Anam Thubten said, in any moment when we can relax back into awareness, that sense of dignity arises that allows for the beautiful qualities of heart and mind to emerge. And that's then what we share with the world. When we're lost in our afflictive emotions, that's what we share with the world.

So we're not trying to achieve something. We're simply using this time, whatever we're doing, to practice recognizing awareness. Starting from mindfulness—what's happening now? And then recognizing that we're aware of what's happening now. That's all. So simple.

And once we start to trust that a little, when we can relax into it a bit, we stop thinking subconsciously that we have to have some kind of worthwhile experience to be mindful of, something to talk about—not just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting. When that starts to relax, when we start to trust the recognition of awareness, everything begins to shift. That's really what we're doing here.

As Ajahn Sumedho says, awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts, our emotions, our sensations. It's not about making value judgments. Awareness is about knowing these things fully. They are what they are at this moment. It's a kind of total freedom to receive life just as it's arising in this moment, just as you experience it. You don't have to fix it. You don't have to make some meaning. You don't have to say, "What does it mean about me?" Just receive it as it arises in this moment. That's why continuity is so key.

Here's another little practice hint from Sayadaw U Tejaniya. As we go through the day, whatever's arising, awareness of it—very simple. But remember, we're not trying to create something. We're not rejecting what is happening. And as things begin to happen, or they stop happening—say something difficult stops happening—we don't forget awareness either. A lot of times when we're really working with something and it goes away, we think, "Oh, thank God!" Like when the bell rings: "Oh, thank God!" We just forget awareness. But we don't forget. Acceptance of an experience does not mean we forget about being aware. Acceptance means we're really more present because we're not struggling with it anymore.

I want to end with a couple of short quotations. From Mingyur Rinpoche: "Discovering our own awareness allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of the mind, which exists independent of conditions and circumstances, and independent of our emotions and moods." This is a big one to start to trust. Awareness is aware of our emotions and moods, but it allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of

mind independent of our emotions and moods. Awareness does not increase or decrease whether we are happy or sad. We don't attain awareness. Rather, we learn to recognize it.

And the effect this can have on our life—I want to read one thing from Ajahn Chah. He was a great Thai forest monk, a meditation master from the last century. He was the teacher of Ajahn Sumedho and kind of the founder of that whole school of monks and nuns from Amaravati. He was very down to earth. I just picked this book up somewhere: *Everything is Teaching Us*. Just the name is good—everything is teaching us.

So: "Whenever a person's mind enters the Dhamma, then the person has well-being. The person has a mind at peace. The mind then has a way to resolve difficulties. When pain and illness afflict the body, the mind resolves it naturally, understanding this is natural and not falling into depression or fear over it. Gaining something, we don't get lost in delight. Losing it, we don't get excessively upset. But rather, we understand that the nature of all things is that having appeared, they then decline and disappear."

With such an attitude, we can make our way in the world. We are *loka vidū*, knowing the world clearly. The Buddha was said to be the *loka vidū*, knowing the world clearly. But when we're seeing just as it is in this moment, knowing the world clearly, then *samudaya*, the cause of suffering, is not created. Greed is not born. There is wisdom, knowledge of things as they really are, and it illumines the world.

This is a lot to take in, but it really does arise from our willingness to just keep cultivating the simplicity of steady awareness.

I'd like to sit quietly for a moment after this sharing.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 190

Exploring Awareness of Thought

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this comprehensive exploration of the mind's relationship to thought, Carol Wilson investigates why we habitually privilege thinking over direct experience, despite thoughts being the most ephemeral of all sense experiences. Drawing from her own retreat insights and the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadāsa, Ajahn Sumedho, and Ajahn Chah, she illuminates the concept of atammayatā—the quality of non-fabricating or "not concocting"—as a doorway to understanding how we continuously construct our reality.

The talk traces the mechanics of papañca (mental proliferation) through the chain of vedanā (feeling tone), saññā (perception), and thinking, showing how these quickly coalesce into views (diṭṭhi) and a solid sense of self (sakkāya-diṭṭhi). Wilson offers Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's insight that saṃsāra is not a place but a process—"the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them"—and demonstrates through relatable examples how our perceptions, shaped by memory and conditioning, generate elaborate mental constructions that we mistake for reality.

Practically, Wilson encourages recognizing moments of peace and non-fabrication, noting that calm and the absence of kilesa (defilements) are themselves valuable—we need not always seek dramatic positive states. She invites practitioners to look directly at thoughts, investigating their empty nature rather than following their content, using Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teaching about the lion who looks at who threw the stone rather than chasing the stone itself. The talk concludes with the liberating possibility of resting in awareness without alteration, where thoughts arise and disappear like ripples in water.

Tonight, I just wanted to share some reflections on the phenomenon of thought, of thinking, and the different ways it shows up—how we get caught, and so forth. None of this is going to be new to you. I'm just touching on a few different points that are interesting to me and have been helpful, hopefully to you as well.

A few years ago, I was doing a self-retreat, and for some reason at that time, the quality of thought became really interesting. Not the thought itself, but the way that the conditioning of my mind would give thought so much more importance and meaning than many other experiences—even though when I'd look directly at a thought with awareness, clearly it's just empty. So that's known on one level, but then to keep seeing

how the attention, and maybe the belief, would keep privileging thought and the content of thought. Not always, but so frequently. And it just got really interesting to me, exploring it when I wasn't aggravated with it.

I was noticing how we take the thought description as a more real, accurate description of reality than what it was actually describing. There's a quotation from Audubon, the bird naturalist, who said that if there's a choice between the drawing of the bird and the bird, trust the bird. With thoughts, it's like trusting the thoughts describing the knee pain rather than feeling the sensation. That's a simple example—it gets more convoluted. But it's just kind of like, why? It's so empty. Why does this keep happening? And then it doesn't, as we know, just stop with the one thought.

I wanted to start with mentioning a word that's not often in the suttas, but Ajahn Buddhadasa spoke of it in the last years of his life. He was a great Thai forest bhikkhu, meditation teacher, and scholar. The word is *atammayatā*. It basically means "not made up of that." What it really points to is the quality, the state of heart and mind of non-fabricating, of not concocting—which I actually love, "not concocting." Not constructing. Based on non-identification prior to the quality of thought making distinctions between self and other, just not fashioning anything.

This is really, in a way, the highest peace—the heart and mind independent of responding or reacting to experience. It's not exactly nirvana, but it's up there. I just love this non-concocting idea because we can use it to explore ourselves, all the different kinds of ways that the habits of our mind do concoct out of experience. That's what Andrea was speaking about when she discussed the concoctions of sense of self the other night. It's a concoction, a fabrication.

Ajahn Sumedho talks about this too—how we create our world and ourselves. It's a concocted state of being, moment to moment. A concoction of the five khandhas, the five aggregates: a concoction of physical form, of vedanā (feeling tone), of mental states and concepts, of perception and consciousness. These things are happening often with thinking. It's not only with thinking, but thinking often holds the concoction together—this sense of "me," even though it's arising separately in each moment.

So in terms of thought, there are different ways thought creates, fabricates a reality, a concoction that just seems so real when we don't think to look at it. And sometimes when we do meet it with awareness, it still seems so real because we're so used to it. Ajahn Sumedho frequently talks about how we create a sense of self with our thoughts. Is that familiar to you? And you can't create a peaceful self. So try it out. Not that you haven't, but it's really interesting. You can't—because the concoctions, the fabrication, aren't actually in alignment with what's really going on.

In the broad way, we create a sense of self from thoughts and stories.

We're telling ourselves stories all the time. This is one of my current favorite quotations from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who is one of the three living foremost translators of the Pali suttas into English.

He's talking about samsara. Samsara literally means "wandering on." Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live—you know, we're living in samsara, the place we leave when we go to nibbana. But in early Buddhist texts, samsara is the answer not to "where are we?" but to "what are we doing?" We're samsara-ing.

I love this. He says: "Samsara is not a place, it's a process—the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, the mind creates another and you go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds too."

Does it make sense? We never know what's going on with ourselves. We think we know what's going on with someone else, but they're in a completely different world. Things don't match.

This is on a really obvious level of our thoughts. We can just see how—and a lot of you have brought it up in the groups—even in one sitting, all these different worlds come. We're up, we're down, we're equanimous. We're seeing all our childhood failures. We're feeling so inspired. We're remembering some weird thing that happened. We're really upset about that person who looked at us cross-eyed, and then it turns out they weren't even there. There are all kinds of worlds we're creating. And without awareness, it's like we jump from world to world and still feel like it's the same me. Can you relate to this at all?

This is samsara. This is what we call the rounds of rebirth—never mind different lifetimes, but moment after moment being reborn into this particular world. This particular world of feeling hungry and wishing you had a good hamburger. This particular world of loving to look at all the beautiful young animals and feeling so fortunate. This particular world of feeling so tired you just want to fall on your face and never have to come into the meditation hall again. On and on and on. Some are obviously more difficult and more compelling than others.

But when we just start to tune in this way, to see how thought is concocting all these worlds, it's amazing. What's amazing is how much we don't recognize it. When we start to practice, when we're sitting, when awareness is just noticing thoughts—and then of course we get into what feeds them—we start to see those worlds. We start to see how it's changing.

It often comes together when people describe it in groups. They say, "Wow, it's amazing seeing all of this, the ups and downs and the coming and going." And just the sense—this is my language, not anyone else's—of awareness noticing this, and somehow there starts to be a sense of release from having to be the inhabitant of all those worlds.

Even in just one sitting, when you're not buying into each new world, isn't it a relief? It doesn't matter so much what's coming up. Isn't that a relief? We don't have to take our stand on every thought and mood and emotion that comes through. No wonder we're exhausted in life—we feel like we have to own each of those. Just having awareness receiving, letting it come and go, not concocting around it, is an incredible ease and peace.

So noticing, always noticing the concoctions—but just notice those moments of ease when it's not happening. You don't have to concoct anything around it. There's nothing to say about it. But I'm always encouraging people to notice these moments. You could call them a moment of alert awareness in which the heart-mind is free from kilesa. It's just a moment of presence, of is-ness, of just not creating anything. And often it's not necessarily ecstatic or anything.

It can be quite neutral, quite peaceful.

And so a lot of our cultivating awareness isn't just noticing the unwholesome, the suffering qualities in awareness, but also noticing the peace, noticing the wholesomeness, noticing the absence of kilesa.

We were saying in one of the groups today, talking about when there's not aversion, not ill will—and appreciating in the Theravada language, *dosa* is the overarching word for the kilesa of hatred and all its many subsets, down to the tiniest irritation or aversion. In the Pali, the way it's talked about, it doesn't jump right to metta. Instead there's *a-dosa*—the "a" is a negation. So, no dosa in the mind. That's lovely.

Metta is like a stronger mental state that we feel, and it's beautiful. It's not dosa either; it's metta. But it doesn't have to be metta to not be dosa. You don't have to feel love for all the world to recognize: there's no ill will, there's no aversion. It's just this.

Peace. You don't have to get attached to it. It's not what maybe you're looking for in the beginning of practice—we're often looking for something more positive. But this is just the peace of no-dosa.

Now, another way of understanding how the mind, the thoughts, and the mental states go out and concoct and create—maybe you've heard this. It's quoted in Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno's book, *The Island*, which if you haven't seen, is really wonderful. It's a great compilation of many suttas and references, and also teachings from Ajahn Chah, since he was their teacher. It's all about awakening, sotapanna, enlightenment—just really good, with lots of quotations.

This is something from Ajahn Chah that I'd seen before. He's describing one way suffering and concoction happen when we're caught in thoughts. It's a kind of redescribing of the Four Noble Truths.

He says: "The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering."

Do you get a sense of that? Does that ever happen? The mind going out to satisfy its moods—this is, of course, without awareness.

"The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering." That's the first noble truth. He turns it on its head.

Then he says: "Seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering." That's kind of what we're doing—awareness of the mind. Seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

"And the result of seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering."

I like this, because turning it around makes you actually think rather than just running through the truths one, two, three, four. It also feels very much in alignment with this cultivation of steady awareness—the mind seeing the mind clearly.

Even in a moment, many of you have experienced this: when the mind is going out, caught up, there's suffering—maybe you wouldn't put it that way—and suddenly awareness recognizes clearly what's happening, and the suffering in that moment ceases. That's exactly this, just in a moment.

So that's another way to explore. Because it's thoughts, usually—the mind going out to satisfy its moods. But how does that usually manifest? This brings us to the next aspect, which you're all familiar with: how much of the mind going out to satisfy its moods is triggered by the reaction to vedana?

A lot, right? Maybe all. We don't want to say everything, but a lot.

You all know vedana—I'm assuming you know what we're talking about. The response to vedana. It's so pervasive. This isn't new information: when there's pleasant feeling, the habit of the mind is to cling.

We're all like, "Yeah, we know that." We do. So why? Why does it keep happening? Unpleasant—push away. Neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—like the mind of delusion, you just don't notice it.

Actually, a few people have mentioned boredom coming up, and then bringing interest to boredom and seeing how it changes right away to something else. I love that. Boredom is one manifestation of awareness just not being quite connected to experience. Boredom is kind of like the deluded response to neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

I find looking at so-called neutral vedana really interesting, if vedana happens to be an aspect of experience that is naturally presenting itself to you in these days. I'm not saying you need to go out and explore vedana now—I'm not trying to direct practice in that way. But at different times, different aspects of our experience, as we're getting interested with the awareness, as the awareness is getting more steady, we start to see the cause and the effect, how the concoctions come and how they fall apart. At times like that, vedana might just start to be noticeable, just popping up. So explore it then. It's really interesting.

What I was going to say is that neutral vedana—I find it really fascinating in my own experience, but also talking to people over the years who come in for interviews and bring it up. Neutral is the way in to the experience of calm, the experience of peace. It's not the high of bliss. It's not the intensity of some incredible suffering that we know we're learning from.

Over all the years that I've taught on three-month retreats, people often come in and they're in practice—they're not just checked out, they're in practice—and they say, "Nothing's really happening. Stuff comes and goes," and they can describe it, but they feel like there's nothing. No mental states happening. "What's the point?" Really, over the years, I'll ask, "What about calm?" And they go, "Oh. Oh, calm. Yeah, yeah." It doesn't occur to them to notice calm. This isn't one or two times—it's common. And in our culture now, God forbid there should be thirty seconds we're not looking at the phone or on the internet or somehow feeding ourselves.

So it's fascinating. Again, non-aversion—it's peace, it's calm. It's not some big hullabaloo. And noticing it: this is peaceful. This is sublime, as the Buddha says—the non-creation of formations. So that's my little piece on appreciating when boredom comes. Wow, what's going on here? Then boredom's gone anyway, but just exploring it.

In terms of how vedana keeps catching us, Ajahn Sumedho said something in a talk that stuck with me. He said we are very sensitive forms. This mind-body experience that we're living—we are very sensitive forms. And we experience our life as constant vedana. Vedana is arising at every moment of sense experience, at any of the six sense doors. Every mind moment, as experience is arising, vedana is arising along with it. We're rising and ceasing, and it doesn't stop. It doesn't take a break.

So we're very sensitive. This is how we're experiencing life in these forms—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It doesn't have to be a problem, but that's how it is.

Don't believe me, and don't believe Ajahn Sumedho, but just notice from time to time. When things are coming and going very quickly and awareness is truly present—feeling pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—sometimes when there's that little or stronger coagulation of self around the experience, it can really feel oppressive. Of course, that's a little bit of aversion in the mind, but it's like so much is happening every moment. Please stop.

But when there's not that coagulation or aversion or clinging, just coming and going, coming and going, coming and going—it's fine. There's no leaning into the next moment, no wishing it would stop. It's just this. And it's gone already. As soon as you notice, it's gone. There's no comparing it to the past because there's only now. That's just how it is.

So we're sensitive forms, as Ajahn Sumedho says. But again, we all know this. The habits, though—Roy's been talking about the strength of the habits of mind: greed, hatred, confusion. These habits arise in a moment from this visceral, seemingly instinctive reaction to pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. We can notice it with awareness. It doesn't have to be a problem. Even the reaction doesn't have to be a problem. We're going to see that many times.

I could give three whole talks on this alone, so I'm really condensing because it's fascinating. But we can truly see it. It's not a problem that this happens. It's not a problem that we have aversion to it happening. Of course, nothing's a problem when awareness is there. But this is just to see how the concoctions keep happening so quickly and so frequently. One of the major beginning points of this construction is vedanā arising in the mind—pleasant, unpleasant—so quick.

It's so fast: from the pleasant thing not quite noticed to a whole world created of thought. So quick. And it can just be a simple world. A smell, a nice smell, not really noticing the pleasant quality. And within thirty seconds, you've gone from "What's for lunch?" to what you like, to your favorite bakery, to what you're going to do when you go home, to the dinner parties you're going to plan. My first three-month retreat, I planned all these dinner parties. Endless planning of dinners. I never gave one of them, but endless planning of dinner parties.

It's just—that's not a bad concoction, it's just a simple thing. But it can happen just like that, from the pleasant or from the unpleasant. And it can go to much stronger ones. I don't have to go into that.

We're so seduced so quickly into believing the thoughts. Pretty soon we don't even recognize that that's what's happening. The thought-constructed world becomes the description of the world. Never mind that back there with the dinosaurs, there was a moment of pleasant feeling that we didn't notice. We're way off in our world.

And this, of course, as we all know, is the phenomenon that's called papañca. It's also called conceiving. The Buddha talks about the tides of conceiving washing over one. Papañca is another word for this proliferation.

So feeling, vedanā, arises in every moment. And as the Buddha says, what one feels, one perceives. It's often said that feeling and perception seem to arise right together. One feels a pleasant feeling—it's a smell—and the perception arises: that smells like bread baking. It just comes right together.

It's like a little concoction, but that's not a problem. That's just what's happening.

When it turns into another world—this is the whole rest of the formula of papancha. What one feels, one perceives. And this is, of course, without balanced awareness. What one perceives, one thinks about. Oh, bread baking, some thoughts about it. What one thinks about, one complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas. And these notions then assail and overwhelm a person.

Something as simple as "that smells good, bread baking"—and we end up... I don't even know where my mind just ended up, I don't even want to say. But you could end up in horror. You could end up in some wonderful world of what you're going to... all over the place, just like that. Just like that. So fast.

These are the tides of conceiving that overwhelm and assail a person. You know that story about the monk who painted a picture of a tiger on the wall in a cave, and it was so realistic that when he turned around and looked at it, it scared him? That's what we're doing—concocting with thoughts, with this papancha.

I just want to say, in terms of awareness of thoughts, wherever we're noticing them: simply because a thought arises in our experience together with a strong emotion or a strong force or mental state does not make it more true or accurate. Sure, it calls our attention—awareness, noticing. What are the hooks? What's the mental set? What's going on with it? But so often when a thought is insistent or really coming with a lot of grief or a lot of wanting, we're overlooking the concoction and again giving the power to the content of thought.

And that's what's so amazing, because of all the experiences, all the six experiences, thought is by far the most ephemeral, the most empty. When you really look at a thought, what is it? Just this energy. Whatever the content is, that's just content, but all thought is just... And when strong emotion comes with it, we can sometimes miss that and give all this meaning to the thought. But in my experience, just because there's a lot of emotion doesn't make a thought more accurate. In my experience, it makes it a lot less accurate. It doesn't mean not notice it, but not so much believing it.

So: what one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates with associations, memories, and ideas. And these notions then assail and overwhelm a person. These are what you could call the tides of conceiving that wash over a person.

From vedana to saññā, perception—this place here is really where all the construction takes off into the ozone, if we're not quite aware at that point.

Thich Nhat Hanh—I read this so many years ago, before I even understood it, but it stayed with me because it seems true. Thich Nhat Hanh said all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. He's saying all. The Dalai Lama says something very similar. That is why there's so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge. That's really what our awareness is: just receiving direct experience. A perception is a direct experience, recognizing the perception, but not necessarily assuming the perception is accurate.

Of course, we know this. Perception is based on memory. So I don't know why I'm into bread baking. I don't know why that popped up, because I haven't smelled it and I haven't thought about bread all day. But that's the one we're sticking with. The smell

comes up, perception of bread baking. Now, if you come from another culture and you've never smelled bread baking, that wouldn't be the perception that arose. The perception might be linked to something else that was familiar, or it might be not knowing.

Perception is so much based on memory and our own particular experience—our particular personal experience, our cultural experience, the experience of our family group, our cultural group, our ethnic group. Everything we've been through is affecting the perceptions that we have. Again, this is sort of back to what Thanissaro Bhikkhu was saying: because from the perception we create these worlds, and we're in our own world, and we think everyone else's is the same, but their perceptions are different. And so that's why there's so much colliding.

It's fun on retreat. Some people have mentioned this. When you notice that there's been a perception which you didn't quite recognize and your mind has been reacting to it—this frequently happens—and then something happens that bursts the bubble and you see that your perception was completely wrong? I love when that happens.

Like when I'm in the dining room on retreat and someone walks in the back that for whatever reason I have a reaction to. And who knows why? When it's a small group, you know each other a bit more. But you know how it is on big retreats when you haven't met anybody and you don't know anyone. Yet by this time, you would have some kind of opinion—maybe subliminal—about everyone. So the perception of the person is affected by that.

Someone walking by, there might be a sense of ease or there might be a little sense of pulling back. Maybe it reminds me of that person back when I was in school who was really a jerk and I didn't like being around him. But we don't question these things. Someone walks by, or they're sitting at the table near me eating, and I just kind of feel uncomfortable—like that kid in school I always had to eat lunch across from, and for some reason I just felt yucky. The poor person! He didn't do anything.

So you feel like that, and then the mind can go on and on and on, and then I turn and look, and it's not that person at all. That's happened to me more times than I can say. And then if you're really aware, the whole thing can just pop. The world pops. But if you're not quite aware, then you go, "Oh no, how stupid am I? And what was I thinking?" And then we're in another world—a different one, not a nice one either, but the same process. That's seeing how the perception can form a whole thing.

One woman told me once, years ago, she was working in an office—let's call her Helga—and she came in and went to work, and then someone she worked with, a friend, was really frowning and just giving her what they'd call a stink eye. Then the

friend went off without talking. So the whole day Helga was thinking, "What did I do to her? I thought we were friends. Why is she so angry?" And every time Helga happened to see this woman, it was already colored by "Why is she angry at me?" She just saw the anger and went through this whole thing. You can imagine the whole day.

Then by the end of the day, somehow she had a conversation, and it was a completely made-up thing. Completely. The woman was having something sad happening at home. She hadn't even looked at Helga. She hadn't even noticed Helga. She was in her own world over there. But Helga had spent the whole day creating this world of suffering and self-blame and other-blame out of a perception that went unquestioned.

So it's easy to do. This is one of the great things about silence on retreat. Because once we start talking to each other out of our confused perceptions, sometimes it clears things up, but sometimes it just explodes. Here we can do the inner work. The other person really doesn't know what's coming up in your mind, so don't worry about that. We can just watch what the mind is doing. We're all doing it. Let's face it.

Joseph used to say—way back in my early days when I was sitting a three-month retreat, probably Jack actually, this sounds more like something Jack would say—imagine if there was a big screen and all of our thoughts were projected up on the screen. How horrible would that be? Horrible! So luckily we just have to explore our own ridiculous thoughts. And if we can laugh at them, just look at this. How do we believe them when we're looking at them? They're so ridiculous, most of them. Well, mine are. Maybe yours are all really deep.

Just looking at them and saying, how can we believe that?

So perception is a real driver for this. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, the second thought believes the first. By the fifth thought, you're thinking, "Oh yeah, that's really true." By the tenth thought, you don't even know where it started, but this concoction has always been so, and this is the truth of the world. And how long does it take for ten thoughts to come? Boom.

So *saññā* – perception – drives *vitakka* – thinking. The perversions of perception: do we see inaccurately? Then we think inaccurately, like Helga making up all those stories about the other person working in her office. We think inaccurately. But then that's thinking. The tenth thought, as Sayadaw says, strengthens into *diṭṭhi* – into view. And this is like a stronger concoction of thought.

The bottom line view, of course, is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* – view of self – as Andrea talked about. And that's kind of like the driver for all our confusion and suffering, really, arising moment to moment. But any view – it's basically a description that's really held

to. As I read in one sutta, the Buddha says believing a view is like thinking, "This alone is true. Everything else is false." Well, that sounds so harsh. But when we look at this, Ajahn Sumedho says that without awareness, we can be totally committed to our views. Totally.

And views aren't just views of sense of self, views of the world, views of politics – God help us – views of ourselves. It can be Dhamma views. I don't know how many discussions I've been in or sat on the edge of where Dhamma views are so held to. And it's not about right or wrong, but these are concoctions of mind. Attachment to view is really one of the strongest ways, unrecognized, that we're caught in the concoction of thought. And as we see in the world – we could talk about this for hours – when attachment to views clashes, that's what's going on everywhere, right? So much suffering, so much confusion, so much pain. This is really the heart of the tides of conceiving.

And *papañca* – the congealing around the view of self – is really the perception, the thinking about, the view, the idea. You could say a view is an idea: "It should be like this" or "This is how it is." That often isn't put into words at first, at least in practice here.

I think Andrea has spoken to it, but several people have mentioned this feeling: awareness is flowing, awareness is there, noticing stuff, and then feeling you're in a place where it's kind of stuck. You don't know what. You don't know what's happening. Awareness can be with stuckness, or maybe aversion or something, but there's this feeling of something going on that's difficult and can't quite just relax – let it come up in relaxed awareness.

And then often – I've seen this many times – okay, relax into it. It just feels like it's not good enough. I was doing walking meditation one time at Shwe Oo Min, and it was fine. There was awareness, noticing what was happening, there was no problem. And then I just started to feel some tension. And the mind started saying, "What's the problem? What's the problem? It's just things coming and going. What's the problem?" And sometimes when I would just kind of let the awareness get quiet, just see what's going on that's not being seen – then the view popped up: "Oh, this isn't good enough."

Well, what does that mean? Whatever's happening isn't good enough. That's an endless view, right? Because it can always get better.

Not recognizing that view, it was kind of behind everything that was happening. Not good enough, not good enough, not good enough. Views about what's supposed to be happening in practice, views about how awareness should feel—any view about practice happens so frequently and slips in so insidiously.

In all my years of practice, at different times, something happens while you're practicing, you're caught up in some way, and suddenly there's an insight. It opens up and you say, "Oh, that's what's happening. I'm thinking it should be like this, but I can just relax and let it be." And it's a real insight. Insight isn't a thought—it's like, "Aha." But then often there's a thought or two expressing the insight, a way of knowing, and that's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. And there's that sense of ease, of freedom. "Oh yeah, that's how it is."

I remember watching this during one three-month retreat. Within—I don't know—two and a half seconds, it would start to formulate in the subconscious: "Oh, now this is how it's supposed to be." And right away, I was free from that, but now *this* is how it's supposed to be. The mind just wants somewhere to land. "It's supposed to be like this." So we have some way to make ourselves miserable by always trying to make it be like this and beating ourselves up when it isn't. Why do we do that? I don't know, but we want somewhere to land.

So noticing views—the perception leads to thinking, leads to a view: "Ah, this is how it is." And this is where the view of self, the tides of conceiving, the tides of papañca as the Buddha describes it, wash over a person.

In one sutta where he talks about the tides of conceiving, he's saying one should not neglect wisdom, paññā—just seeing clearly. Not creative, but just not neglected if it's there. One preserves truth, cultivates relinquishment, and trains in awareness. Train for peace. That's a nice little group—that's another whole talk. But one should preserve truth. And in a way, in our practice, in our awareness, it's just what's happening now. That's all. Just what's happening now. Cultivate relinquishment. Train for peace. Preserve, not neglect wisdom.

The tides of conceiving, of papañca, do not sweep over one who rests upon these foundations. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over one, one is called a sage at peace.

So what's conceiving? The Buddha goes on to say: "I am" is a conceiving. "I am this" is a conceiving. "I shall be, I shall not be, I shall be possessed of form, I shall not be possessed of form"—past, future. All the "I am," just as Andrea was saying the other night, whatever form it takes—just notice. That's a papañca, that's a conceiving, that's a construction in this moment. You don't have to think all that stuff, but just kind of notice it.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi further elaborated, the tides of conceiving are thoughts and notions originating from the three papañcas. Papañca is described as having three roots, three different qualities in mind that are drivers of papañca.

One is craving. Wanting. Something comes up and craving really drives that concoction of thought, like we talked about.

The second driver of papañca, the second root of conceiving, is conceit—māna. And you know how māna is defined in the Theravada texts? It's defined as the sense of the mind comparing: that one is better than another, one is equal to another, one is less than another. So we look at the comparing, but really the heart of that comparing is the conceit of me and other. That's why even "equal" is māna, because there's that subtle—and this can be very subtle—conceit of self, conceit of other. And this, even very subtle, is one of the three big drivers of papañca, of thinking on and on and on.

And the third: diṭṭhi, views.

So these are the three roots of conceiving, the three roots of papañca, the three qualities in the mind unrecognized that just get us so far so fast: craving, sense of self and other—that little sense of me—and views. Views and craving are the most obvious, of course.

And whenever—I think when I'm answering email, this is actually a good time for me to really practice. I don't always, but to practice feeling when there's a view. Answering some business email, or we have different emails about things going on here—policy and various matters. Too often, too frequently. Threads with several people. And we do have to give our opinions. That's what the email is, right? You have to give your opinion. You can't just say, "No, I don't feel like responding. I don't want to get into views." But I mean, we all feel like that. We'd rather just not engage. So this is how we have to function in the world.

When the email comes in, if I have a modicum of awareness—and sometimes I do, sometimes I don't—it comes in and it hits. Some things you can just feel. There's calm. I don't feel a tide of conceiving. I'm not thinking "there's tides of conceiving washing over me," but I just feel calm. I look, I think, and I can write an answer.

But there are other times when I read it and right away—it doesn't have to be a huge thing; if it's huge, I notice, okay?—but it can be just a little *uh*, a little tightness, and this sense of *yeah, but this is really clear how it should be*.

The three personality types, you know—the greed type that transforms into the faith type, the aversive type that transforms into discriminating wisdom, and the deluded type that transforms into equanimity. The aversive type just means the mind tends to notice the unpleasant before it notices the pleasant. It doesn't mean you're running around angry all the time. That's what greedy types think. I just want to tell you it's not so.

But there is this sense of discriminating wisdom—sometimes you think it's discriminating wisdom, but it's aversion. That can definitely happen. And so the email will come in, and if I'm not aware, it's just so clear what the appropriate response is and what should happen. I send it off, and half an hour later it's like, *oh*. There was a little tinge. It may still be mostly that I was right. But there could have been a little tinge of aversion, which definitely makes it harder for the person to hear.

But it's view—that's what I'm talking about. The sense of view is *I'm right. It's obvious how it should be*. And in that, even in a little thing, attachment to view, there's not the space to let in that someone else is looking at it in another way that never occurred to this mind. It never occurred because the view completely limits us. So whether it's sense of self, or politics, or what we think happened—it's endless. Exploring views is really, really important.

There's one place where the Buddha said—I think it's in the Sutta Nipāta—and the colloquial translation, he's talking about the suffering, the pain of attachment to views. He says, "People who are attached to views just wander around in the world annoying one another." So we can see that.

There's another place where he says, "The end of papañca is the end of conflict." The end of papañca is the end of conflict because we're not creating a sense of self or other. Or as Bankei, the Zen master in Japan, said, "Don't set yourself in confrontation with anything." It's just this—not adding anything extra, not conceiving a me, not conceiving an other.

This is from the Buddha. I like this. It's a little bit long, but I like it.

If the mind is left to its natural flow without any alteration, the present thought will not stay very long. When the present thought occurs, if we think it should not occur and try to stop it, that blocks the expressive power of awareness. But when the present thought first arises and we recognize it, we can just rest in the natural flow of that recognition without any alteration. It's like ripples in water—as soon as they arise, they

disappear without a trace, which is the characteristic of thoughts. There is absolutely nothing solid, true, or imperishable about a thought. Just exploring thoughts in that way, even when the content seems really intense.

I'll end with this little poem about continuing the natural flow of thoughts without trying to change: "Whether eating or sleeping, going or staying, whatever one does, there is nothing more than this—even in the teachings of the Buddhas of the three times."

That's the freedom from papañca, from conflict, from atammayatā. There's nothing more than this.

Thank you for your patient attention.

Let us just be quiet for a minute, and then we can chant the sharing of blessings together.

This is an example of how thoughts are also useful. When we understand that they are intrinsically empty, we can use them—like words to share the merit, to cultivate the wholesome. We don't hate thoughts. We simply recognize their nature.

Let us chant together.

Now let us chant the verses of sharing and aspiration, through the goodness that arises from our practice...

CHAPTER 191

Wise Attention

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a detailed exploration of the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), one of the most practical teachings in the Majjhima Nikāya. The sutta addresses how the āsavas—the most subtle level of mental defilements including craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, and ignorance—can be abandoned through wise attention (yoniso manasikāra).

Wilson begins by explaining the three levels of kilesa (mental torments): the level of transgression, which is balanced by sīla; the obsessive level, balanced by samādhi; and the latent level, which requires paññā (wisdom) to uproot. She then guides listeners through the Buddha's seven methods for abandoning the āsavas: through seeing (wisdom and the Four Noble Truths), through restraint at the sense doors, through wise use of requisites, through patient endurance of difficulties, through avoiding what feeds unwholesome states, through removing arisen unwholesome thoughts, and through developing the factors of awakening.

The teaching emphasizes that wise attention isn't about controlling experience but about noticing the quality of awareness itself. Wilson shares personal examples illustrating how everyday activities—from eating to shopping to relating to discomfort—become opportunities for practice. She highlights the importance of recognizing what feeds versus what starves the kilesas, encouraging practitioners to explore these dynamics without judgment throughout all aspects of life.

I want to share about a particular sutta of the Buddha's that I've always liked a lot. It so exactly talks about this way that we're practicing. It's also considered a very important sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, the Middle Length Discourses—it's number two. It's called the Sabbasava Sutta, or "All the Asavas."

Let me try to explain asava. I'm going to keep it simple because there's a lot of information. Don't try to remember it all. It might get a little wonky. This is practice too—being aware as you're sitting, listening, noticing whatever comes up in your mind. As Ajahn Sumedho always says when he begins to talk, this is just a period for reflection, for taking in and noticing whatever is happening in your body and mind. In one way, there are a lot of different things the Buddha's saying. In another way, it's just one thing. The whole sutta is saying the same thing over and over.

Asava is a word that doesn't have a good translation. It's sometimes translated as "taints" or "cankers"—these are weird old words. It refers to a category of the kilesa, the defilements. I don't like that word either, so I'm going to use kilesas. In a way, these represent the most subtle level of defilement, the deepest level, almost the latent tendencies, you could say, that "defile, bring renewal of being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to further birth, aging, and death." They are specifically referred to in the sutta as craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being or becoming, and ignorance—like the ignorance at the beginning of dependent origination.

But what I love about this sutta is that the Buddha isn't hammering on about what they are. The main point of the sutta is wise attention. He's giving different ways that by how and what we pay attention, and the quality in the mind that's aware, these deep-rooted tendencies can be abandoned. It's often said that when they talk about someone who's completely awakened, an arahant, it's one who's no longer experiencing the asavas. But what I love about this sutta is that it gives seven different ways of how we pay attention—things we can give attention to, how we give attention—that will abandon the asavas. It covers all different aspects of our life. It's very broad. I've always loved this sutta for years because he's talking about how we give attention, what's wise attention, what's unwise attention, to the different things we're doing in our life. It's not just about really refined sitting on the meditation cushion.

First I want to talk about something that's in the suttas, but I heard Sayadaw U Pandita first speak about it. You could call it describing how the kilesas manifest in our experience and what helps to abandon them. It's the three levels of kilesa, three levels of habits of mind and what helps them to transform, to be abandoned.

The first level is called the level of transgression. This means the kilesa is so strong that it serves as an intention—we speak or act from the kilesa. Transgression. What protects us is sila. When we're cultivating sila, when we're tuned in to sila, it's just enough of a reminder that we won't act on greed and take something that isn't ours. It's not the level where you never act on greed, you never take a second bite of a cookie or something. We're really talking about the level where we're doing something egregious, harmful—hitting someone, saying something really appalling. The level of transgression is pretty obvious. We all know when we've acted from that level: strong greed, strong aversion, strong sense of me. And the cultivation of sila, the tuning into sila, protects us from that.

I really love that—how all the different aspects of practice aren't just something to do so you can get to the really subtle stuff. They're all, in their own way, supporting freedom of heart and mind. So we expand our idea of practice to include everything. I know it already does, but just in case something isn't included in your idea of practice, we keep expanding it.

The second level is called the obsessive kilesas, obsessive torments. "Torments" is a good translation for kilesa—they feel like that. I'm pretty sure we all have experienced this. This is when the torments are just creating spinning thoughts, thoughts of greed. Anyone experience that?

Thoughts of me, just obsessive – that's exactly the word. It's like, "Please shut up." Just, "Oh no, not this again. Why?" We all know that. I don't have to spend any more time describing it.

And what balances this, what protects us from this, is the collectedness of heart-mind, the steadiness – samādhi. It doesn't have to be one-pointed samādhi, but also the way we're cultivating it here: the steadiness, the balance of mind. When the mind is collected in that way – and we all experience it – that it's temporary, but the stronger kilesas, the obsessive quality, doesn't get in, basically. It doesn't arise so much.

Of course, with really focused concentration, that's more obvious. We can even think thoughts don't arise. And it's also more obvious how temporary that is when the conditions for the really focused concentration go away. But also in what we're cultivating here – the collectedness, the unification of mind, all the qualities brought together – stuff happens. But I know you've all experienced at different times, not always, but at different times when some sense experience or some object comes up, or a thought that would have driven you nuts or led into obsession at another time, and it doesn't.

Does anyone experience this? You just see something, and nothing happens. It's just the next arising thing. That's an experience. It's really, really helpful noticing this. It may just be calm. It may just be a kind of spaciousness. "I thought there'd be big trouble from that thought, but there's just space." Noticing that strengthens our faith, as we're always talking about. It strengthens the sense of confidence, the sense of appreciation that there are moments of heart and mind, moments awareness picks up, when the kilesas aren't running riot – when maybe they're not even manifesting in that moment.

So this is where the collectedness of mind, the steadiness of mind with right view, wise view, is the protection against the obsessive qualities of defilement. But as we know, that doesn't uproot them completely. It tones it down, and we can really appreciate it more. But sometimes, especially if you've been in really focused concentration – it

doesn't have to be, but it can happen – when that goes away, it seems like the kilesas were just lurking around the edges, and then it's like they can party. It's just like, "Whoa!" It doesn't have to be like that, but sometimes it is a bit flippy. This way that we're practicing doesn't tend to be so hot and cold like that, but it can still happen. The kilesas come back – they're not abandoned. But it's very, very helpful to see this and to understand how it works.

And then the third level, which in a way we're talking about with āsavas, with this sutta, is more the level called the latent torments. And this is like, you know, give me a break. It's the potential. They're not arisen yet, but it's the potential for the torments to arise given the appropriate conditions. They're not manifesting at this point, at this latent level. But as they say, it's like a seed – it might just sit dormant, but given the appropriate conditions, the seed will sprout.

So when he's talking about abandoning the āsavas or the latent tendencies, it's really on a very subtle level that he's talking about, which I want you to remember as we go through the different ways he describes wise attention.

You can see it just in little ways, maybe here. Someone was telling me once on a three-month retreat – I think they were at the back table after the meal, and they were planning not to eat. They were walking past the tea table, and there was just a big bowl of oranges. They were present, clear, not spaced out – because then you'd expect something to come up. Present, clear. But just for some reason, all of a sudden the hand went out and grabbed an orange. And they said, "Who did that? It wasn't me!"

But you can see that. You're just minding your own business, you're pretty present, and all of a sudden – boom – this thing of aversion just comes: "How can that person do that?" It's like, "Whoa, where did that come from?" Don't take it personally, but this is just seeing, "Okay, okay." So we keep cultivating wise view, wise attention. This is why we deepen our aspiration, why we keep going.

And what abandons the latent tendencies, he says, is paññā – wisdom, wise seeing, really understanding. And that's where he goes on with this sutta. So this sutta is really, really pragmatic. He gives seven different ways, but this sutta is, he said, "a discourse on the exhaustion of the āsavas in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see." So he's talking about wise attention.

And this is what he says: "When one attends unwisely, both unarisen taints arise and arisen ones increase. When one attends wisely, both unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are abandoned."

Now, does this sound familiar? I really hope. I really pray it sounds familiar. Because it's exactly what we've been saying all along. And what's the quality in the awareness?

So the quality of unwise attention—when we're attending to experience and there's greed, aversion, or selfing in the mind that goes unrecognized—the unarisen taints arise, and more arise. When the awareness is with right attitude, then it's the reverse. This is really very basic, and I love that this is the central point, the driving force of everything he's saying.

But then he gives seven different aspects, seven different ways this plays out in our lives. I just want to mention each of these. They won't be new, I think, but I've often found it helpful to have different lenses through which to examine what I'm doing.

He starts, of course, with taints that can be abandoned by wisdom, by seeing. It's quite long, so I won't read the whole thing, but he's saying that when one doesn't understand, when one pays attention to dhammas—and dhammas here simply means experiences—that are unfit for attention, or when one attends in a way that is not wise, the taints arise.

What dhammas are unfit for attention? They are dhammas such that when one attends to them, the unarisen taints of sensual desire, being, and ignorance arise, or the arisen taints increase. So it's not really about declaring this is bad and this is good. It's about paying attention to a particular thing and *how* one pays attention. We're watching and seeing what feeds the kilesas, what starves them.

How does one attend unwisely? It's lengthy, but you can see it's through the lens of "me." He gives examples: Was I in past time, or was I not? How was I in the past? Having been what? What will I be in the future? How shall I be? What shall I be? Having been what, what shall I become?

You get a sense of this? We do this, right? Maybe not quite so elaborately. And we think it's so important, so very important, not noticing that craving and confusion and doubt are strengthening, strengthening, strengthening. We think the content is so important. But the content is unfit for attention precisely because it's unwise attention. And the more we pay attention to that content, the stronger the unwise attention gets. It's just a cycle. That's all he's saying.

He goes on to explain that when we attend unwisely, one of six kinds of views arises—all different views of self. You're attending: What was I? What's going to be? Whether it's what happens when I die, or what's going to happen when I leave here, or what's going to happen tomorrow at lunch—it doesn't matter what.

One of these six views arises: "Self exists for me," or "No self exists for me"—which can be a view, you know, not an insight, just a view. "I perceive self with self," or "I perceive not-self with self." You see, back in that time, the various ascetics who would come to talk to the Buddha would get into these really nitpicky discussions that make you crazy to read them. So I'm not going to make you listen to all of that.

You get the idea. As we're attending to a particular experience, and the attention starts feeding these views of "me"—what am I going to be, what was I, I'm perceiving myself, whatever—a view is forming. The kilesas are getting stronger.

So our job is to notice that with wise attention. And the Buddha says the well-taught disciple of the noble ones recognizes when dhammas are unfit for attention. When this is happening, they recognize it.

And how does one attend wisely? First, by not attending to dhammas unfit for attention, and by attending to those fit for attention. Unarisen taints don't arise and arisen ones are abandoned. So one attends wisely basically through the lens of wisdom, of the Four Noble Truths, as the Buddha describes it here: This is suffering, the origin, the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

That doesn't mean every time there's awareness of an experience, you've got to run through the Four Noble Truths in your mind. You know that, right? But it means there's that sense of clear seeing, of wisdom. So all those thoughts—of me and what was I—arise, and there's a sense of recognizing that holding to those thoughts is leading to suffering. The cause of suffering is the clinging. The way leading to the ending is to see that clearly, and the clinging drops away. You don't have to run through all of that. But that's what's going on when there's wise attitude in the mind, when there's wise attention, when we see that. Experiencing that over and over and over really strengthens our visceral understanding of it. You're really seeing that.

The fitness is not inherent in the object—like, that object's bad to pay attention to, and this one is good. Because we can make these little rights and wrongs in our mind. So many people have mentioned it; we just tend to do that. The fitness really, in this context, is always coming back to: what's the quality in the mind that's aware? If in really paying attention to something—and I'll describe ways later how it becomes so clear that greed is arising—okay, maybe in that moment, in that situation, this object is not fit for attention. It's really not inherent in the object. It's just seeing: paying attention with this quality of mind is feeding kilesa. And wisdom sees that and can put it down.

So the Buddha is saying, one who could do this—when one attends wisely in this way, fetters are abandoned in them: embodiment view, doubt, and holding to rites and rituals. So that's basically describing stream entry. Just looking at things in this way. These are called the taints that can be abandoned by seeing.

And now he goes through, I think, five different ways of how we relate to experiences in our life. And this is why I love this sutta, because it's really saying how we pay attention—with wise attitude in the mind, right view, wise attention—in different aspects of our life, can actually be a cause, a conditioning for the abandoning of taints. He's not saying, just do this because you've got no other choice, and then when you can come and meditate, you can see. It's like what I was describing from Ajahn Chah this morning: it doesn't have to always be subtle experiences to see this stuff.

The next category is asavas that are abandoned by restraining. This is like restraint at the sense door. One reflecting wisely—so it's always with wise attitude in the awareness—one abides with the eye faculty restrained, and then it goes through all the other senses. "While fever of defilement might arise in one who abode with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no torments or fever of defilement in one when he abides with the eye faculty restrained."

So what does that mean, restrained? Of course, it does mean some kind of restraint. It doesn't mean going around blindfolded, restraining, don't let anything come into the sense experience. It doesn't mean it has to be hugely ascetic. It's really, as I think Ajahn Buddhadasa called it, sati-pañña—mindfulness and wisdom at the moment of sense contact, at the sense door—so that there's reflecting wisely, meeting the sense experience with awareness, with mindfulness and wisdom, just seeing what's happening here. The awareness is right there. It can just be there at the sense door. It doesn't have to go and proliferate so far, so fast on one sense contact.

That there can be just a little sense contact, a pleasant or an unpleasant, and boom—the papañca we talked about—just off so quickly, so quickly, and believing it. But restraint doesn't mean holding tight and not letting that happen and being afraid to look. It's not that, because that's unwise. That's cultivating aversion. But this satipañña is really more and more about what people are describing: just this presence with wise attitude at the moment of sense perception. Seeing what happens. And how often different people have mentioned it as just seeing—and no big story comes. Or experiencing a pleasant taste and it's just that. Not a whole other thing has to happen. This is really wise attention at this point. It's not just avoiding.

Once, some years ago, a friend who was on staff at the retreat center was working with restraint. So he decided he really didn't want to get lost in sight and lost in all this greed. So he walked around for three days blindfolded. And they say, that's not it. We can shut stuff out, and maybe one would notice there was less wanting. And then when you take it off, maybe you notice more. I mean, that could be a wise way to go about it. But sense restraint doesn't mean that. It just means paying attention, seeing what's going on, and also seeing how far it can go when we're not meeting it with wise attention.

As Ajahn Chah says, "When the nose smells an odor, just leave it at the nose." I've always liked that. Just leave it alone. It's happening. We leave it alone. That's sense restraint. So it requires just this interest to see what's happening.

A hint from the Buddha, in terms of seeing—another way he's describing satipañña at the sense door: "On seeing a form with the eye, one does not grasp at the signs and the features." And this is interesting, because you're not going and saying, you see someone that you think is really attractive and grasping at this, like, "Oh, look, the hair's really nice, and I really like how they dress." Or you smell, and it smells like a nice lunch—"What's that smell? Is that potatoes? Or what could it be?" It's not quite papañca, but you're really like, "Oh, that smell, that smell." You're going into grasping at the obvious things that are pleasant. Or aversive.

If you notice aversion to something—I guess I'm the aversive type—the greed type, probably much more what I just said. But the aversive type is like that, where something's unpleasant, and then the mind focuses in, "That's just so awful. Look at that. It's just so uneven." Focusing in on the little things. It might not be huge suffering, but this is lack of restraint at the sense door. And the aversion is just slowly increasing. It's being fed in that moment.

So when we notice, "Oh yeah, aversion's like this," you just leave that thing as it is. You don't have to fix it. This is a really interesting thing to explore. It doesn't mean having some kind of idea of how you have to restrain the senses, that you have to be somehow ascetic, that you have to keep it simple. But it can help. You explore and see what helps to support less craving, what kind of feeds it.

This is just from memory, not his words exactly. But the essence was this: you're feeling overwhelmed. So much stuff is coming in, pleasant and unpleasant. You like it, you don't. It's all coming in. He said, well, you don't have to sit there and open all your windows and open all the doors and try to listen to everything the neighbor is saying and turn on the TV. You don't have to invite everything in and then feel lost in craving and aversion. You can be a little more simple.

So that's also a kind of restraint at the sense doors. But not "I should be simple." Not like I have to be incredibly ascetic, or I shouldn't eat much. You could look externally like you're being really restrained, but internally you could be feeding aversion and clinging just as much.

I know U Tejaniya used to say—people would say, "Oh, you stopped your lay life to live as a bhikkhu, and that's so much giving up." And he'd say, "There can be just as much tanhā, just as much craving, in the life of an ordained person. It's just that there's less things you can direct it to. But that doesn't mean there's less craving. There's just less things."

It's really about looking internally. And looking at signs and nuances—something that's really interesting. We're not doing this with aversion, but noticing, say, what's the quality in the awareness when we're giving attention to something beautiful? Like nature. Sometimes people get into, "Oh, it's so beautiful. It's bringing happiness, it's eliciting joy," and that's fine. But really noticing the quality in the mind that's aware, because the same thing could be wise attention, or it could be increasing this sense of "I need more, I need more, I need more." And it can be subtle.

Sometimes—and this isn't helpful—practitioners notice that and think, "Well, true freedom from craving means I have to somehow avoid beautiful or pleasant experience because I'll crave." We might crave. We're here to learn about it—that's okay. But it's not about avoiding out of some kind of aversion. It's really about learning. Really notice: "Oh, it's beautiful. This is peaceful. Oh..." And then suddenly you don't quite notice the wanting coming in, but you're planning a hike for the next afternoon, or you need to go somewhere. It kind of creeps in. "Oh, okay. That's interesting."

That's interesting. You can explore. What was the quality of the attention? How did it move from just being present? It's beautiful. Leave it at the eye door. How did it change? This is a wonderful exploration through our whole life. Not to do the right thing, but to learn. This is really how the subtle aspects of clinging and aversion come up and kind of drive things. We don't notice when they're coming up subtle—until they're not at the subtle level anymore. Now they're at the obsessive level. How did that happen? I was just so peaceful.

So there's no judging in this. It's just exploring. This is one place to really notice how we pay attention to things.

Shankara, who was an Advaita master, said, "Cease dwelling upon sense objects and peace will arise in your heart." It doesn't mean don't notice, but the dwelling on—"Wow, this is so nice. Oh, this is so horrible"—the dwelling on, the meaning.

So these are just different ways to explore this restraint.

This one is called Āsavas Abandoned by Using. The Buddha is saying that reflecting wisely, one pays attention, one notices: What is the quality in the mind? How does one use things? What is the attitude with which we use things?

This is what he says: "Reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu uses a robe for protection from the cold, for protection from heat, for protection from insects, flies, wind, burning, and for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience. So reflecting, one uses alms food not for amusement or intoxication or vanity or for embellishment, but for the endurance and care of the body, the continuance of the body, for ending discomfort, for assisting in the holy life. And considering thus: 'I shall terminate old feelings'—like being hungry and eating food—'without arousing new feelings of greed, and blameless shall I live in comfort and health.'"

Then, since it's for bhikkhus, he continues with how they use their resting place, how they use medicine—because those are the four requisites that one can have. But for us, I think it's really interesting noticing the quality in the awareness when we use things. How do we relate to food? Moment to moment, not in the big picture, but noticing what gets fed.

I remember when I was first thinking about this on retreat at the retreat center. Sometimes there's an extra apple or banana, maybe the bananas have run out. And I'd think, "Well, I'll just save this for later." There's nothing wrong with that—there's plenty of food, it's not taken from anybody. But noticing, I would notice after a while how much extra work that was. You have to get the thing, wrap it up, put your name on it, put it in the fridge, save it. Then you think, "Do I want it now or later?" "Can I take it to my room? No, there are ants." All this extra hoo-ha! And what was going on? It's different from saving something because you really need to have, say, a boiled egg in the evening for your health—that's a completely different quality in the mind that's aware.

So we're noticing this. Is the way we're using something feeding the wanting? Or feeding the aversion? Or feeding the "me, me, me" in comparison, whether you think you're embarrassed or whatever it does? Noticing how that's working, how burdensome it could be—I started to notice. When it's just simple, you just take what you need and don't take extra if you don't need it. A little bit hungry later? That's okay.

Now, I'm not saying this is what one should do. I'm not saying to set up an ideal. But noticing—I started noticing for myself. I used to arrive at meals early, in time in case some aspect of the food ran out and there wouldn't be enough. Then sometime after a while, I stopped doing that. I just didn't think about it. And it was so free and easy. You

get there, something's run out, but there's something else and it doesn't really matter. And where do I sit? I just sit wherever—so free and easy. The difference is simply not the "me," not the kilesas being created.

So just play with this in all aspects of our life. Do we take more than we need in terms of the environment, in terms of how much energy we use? Again, this isn't a view that we're trying to meet. If it is, then with wise attention you notice: What's the quality in the mind as you're trying to meet the view? "It's good, it's bad, I'm good, I'm bad"—that's more subtle kilesas coming up. So this isn't about meeting an idea, but just noticing. Go into a store when you're shopping for clothes—just noticing. Not that there's anything bad about buying clothes, but we're always paying attention to what's feeding and what's starving the kilesas. Sometimes notice how craving is just looking for something to land on.

I mean, in the old days when you had catalogs and you'd shop through them – you didn't want anything, didn't need anything. But you'd sit down with a little restlessness and start looking at the catalog, and you'd keep going until you found something you could want. Now it's a million times worse with the internet, my God. "I'm bored, let me go to Amazon." This is great practice.

We watch the relationship in the mind without judgment. What's feeding kilesa? And of course, this comes from the sense behind it – that we really, in some way, feel and honor the suffering that comes when kilesa is running the show. And that we feel and honor those moments that are kilesa-free. Oh, it's just peace now. You're looking at Amazon. No, I don't want anything. You put it down. Ah, peace. How long does it last? That's another question. But noticing those moments of freedom from kilesa, freedom from torment – that's very, very strong.

I remember one time I was listening to a Dhamma talk Ajahn Sumedho was giving at Spirit Rock. At Amaravati, when they have a retreat, like a ninety-person retreat, they ask everyone to take eight precepts. There might be medical reasons for exceptions, but basically everyone's on eight precepts. So he was talking away, giving the talk, and he was laughing. Usually people laugh along with him – he's pretty funny. But on this occasion, he said, "I happened to go in the dining room and look in the refrigerator – it's called the yogi refrigerator, where people can save food and have their name on it and stuff – and it was so full of things." And then he said, "Well, how would it be if we just donated everything in that refrigerator to the homeless?" Dead silence. I cracked up. You could tell – I mean, I could just project because I wasn't seeing everyone's faces – but anyway, exploring this, the attitude with which we use things. I love it that he brings this in.

Okay, the next one. How does he phrase it? Āsavas that are abandoned by – this translation says "enduring." I would say tolerating, or really more patience. So the quality of being with things that are difficult, with the quality really of patience, which is non-judging acceptance, not pushing away, not creating aversion or wanting.

And he gives the examples of how āsavas can be abandoned by patience, by tolerating. "Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, and contact with gadflies" – which we can all relate to – "flies, wind, burning and creeping things." Just that. We all have plenty of time to explore this. Is it even possible when that tick starts crawling up your leg? Not that you should have a moment of patience necessarily. But anyway, it's more the ones you can't avoid. Like when I walk home down the hill – just the last couple of days, I ran into Vlad yesterday. We stopped to say hello for one minute, and like fifty-five thousand flies just swarmed around both of our faces. It's like, okay. You don't have to answer, but the taints that can be abandoned by patience, by enduring.

And then he goes on: "ill-spoken, unwelcome words, arisen bodily feelings that are painful, wracking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life." He's not messing around.

These are things that, in a way, we can't really do something about. Because in the next section, he does go to avoiding. He's not saying you just subject yourself to everything, but for the things we can't avoid – how can we meet them with patience so that we're not cultivating more greed, hatred, and confusion?

I remember, again, a talk by Ajahn Sumedho where he was talking about the first years in Thailand. The monks had these heavy robes. Have you ever been to Southeast Asia in the hot season? It's hot. It's really hot. When I was a nun, it was like that. You wear these long sleeves, and you're inside this kuti with a tin roof, and the sun is just baking it. It's hot. So he was talking about sweating through his robes in his kuti, and after hours thinking, "I can't endure this another minute." Have you had that feeling here sometimes?

I can't endure this another minute. And then I'd find that I could. And that's so often how it goes—oh, I can't endure this another minute, and then I'd find that I could. The next minute is like a completely different moment. It's really quite wonderful.

I love practicing in Asia for this reason. It's incredibly supportive for an aversive mind to really learn the patience of equanimity. In a situation that seems so unbearable or unpleasant, with no way to be at ease with it, later I could be really happy and at

ease in just the same situation. It's not exactly the same, because the conditions in the awareness, the conditions in the mind are different, but really seeing how this is so—this comes from just this attitude of being with, just as it is, and exploring it.

When I was a nun in Thailand, there was this place in the jungle with only a few nuns and only one Western nun—me. I'd be in my kuti, and it had a door and a screen, which was really nice. But people would come up and stare in to see the Mechi Phalang sitting. "Oh, look, she's sitting!" I hated that. And whenever you'd go out, "Oh, Mechi Phalang's walking!" with all the noise and commotion. You go through that feeling of, "I can't bear this another moment." And then you find that you could. And then you discover that particular situation isn't actually the cause of suffering. It really wasn't. To discover this for ourselves—it may not stay, but to discover it—is very energizing and freeing. You really learn so much. I've developed so much more ease and equanimity in difficult situations. Not always. Every time I go back to Asia, I have to get over it again, but it doesn't take so long.

I actually value it hugely, because one of the ways that I get lost is through comfort. Too much suffering, too much difficulty, may be more than one can stay balanced with. But too much comfort, for me—I can have a modest, pretty comfortable life, I'm not opposed to comfort—but when it's all comfort with nothing difficult, I just zone out. So I notice that, and I pay attention.

This is the Buddha's advice to Rahula, his son: "Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth. For when you develop a mind like the earth, arising agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Because just as people throw clean things and dirty things on the earth—excrement, urine, spittle, blood, everything—and the earth is not horrified, the earth is not humiliated or disgusted because of that, so just so, develop a mind that's like the earth. And then arising agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain."

Then he goes through all the different elements—water, air, fire, and space. Whatever's coming, it won't invade your mind. It comes, it is like it is, it goes—when there's this mind of patience, of non-reaction.

But it's not just that you have to be patient and stay with anything. He's so practical. I really like this. The next category is pains that can be abandoned by avoiding. This is what we've been saying: when what you're paying attention to or what you're being with is just so strong and it's feeding the kilesas so intensely, it's unwise attention and unwise attitude in the mind to stay with that thing. He's calling it "avoid," but what we mean is turning your attention.

He says the bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, avoids a savage elephant, a savage horse, a snake, a stump, a bramble, a cliff, a cesspool, a sewer. Reflecting wisely, he avoids unsuitable areas and frequenting unwholesome friends. Really paying attention.

I like this because he's not saying you should be completely balanced and at ease no matter what's happening. He's not setting that up. He's saying: look and see what's supporting and feeding the kilesas, and what's supporting their abandoning. Sometimes being with something that's just too difficult—the savage elephant or the inner danger, when something's coming up too strong—that's when we turn away.

You know, we talk a lot about when there's past trauma coming up and it's just so strong. There's awareness of it, but at some point, often, it gets so strong that we'll say, it's time to turn the attention away and balance the mind. And no one ever wants to do that, because they want to end it. But it's really looking at not the result but what's starving kilesa, what's feeding wholesome mind, and what is it time to avoid, to turn the attention away from.

I really like that the practice isn't idealistic. We're not saying, "If we really understood the Dhamma, we would be able to be with anything with somehow a mind of peace." But that's just not how it is. Look how it is: you're trying to be with something and it's just feeding, feeding kilesa. That's unwise attention.

Something U Tejaniya says: if what you're doing, and you're really aware with right attitude, what you're doing is just causing the kilesas to get stronger and stronger—stop doing that thing. Stop paying attention to that thing. It's not rocket science. We get so caught up in views.

But of course, there are things that are supportive. We don't have, you know, like in the airport, CNN blaring in the background. We do say it's really helpful not to be on your devices. We do have silence. There's all kinds of things that are supportive of not feeding kilesa and also being able to see more clearly. It's not being extreme, it's just being reasonable. But he's really saying this is in order to see what's feeding wholesome mind states. This is what helps the abandoning of the kilesas. And remember, when he talks about abandoning of the āsavas, he's talking about the deepest level of freedom, not just some little thing.

So just put this out: next time you think of kilesas getting too strong, and you realize you need to shift and not be with this thing, not pay attention—don't need to go, "Because I'm a failure, because I couldn't have good enough mindfulness to be with this

thing, I have to change my attention." That's not helpful. It's more like really appreciating your motivation to abandon the āsavas and how you're being present in this moment with this thing. So really looking and seeing.

Sometimes the avoidance may be a little bit difficult. It may be avoiding something that we like. Like when I was saying about comfort, there's a certain way I get too comfortable. Okay, just avoid lying around in bed for twenty-four hours, whatever it is—eating too much, whatever it might be for you. That feeds kilesa. But it's not about feeling deprived, because over time, the more we notice...

Like people coming here—just the other day I was at the doctor's, and the nurse was asking, "What do you do?" I never used to say what I did, because people thought it was weird. But now they're like, "Oh, that's so cool." They have no clue, but they go, "Oh, that's so cool." And then they say, "Oh, does that mean no talking?" Well, yeah. This particular show? Well, this one's a month. Just a month. "I couldn't even do a day." So you don't start with a month. You start with a day. But people say, "I could never do that. I could never do that."

So we all have these things—"I could never do that." But over time, what we're avoiding here, we're avoiding talking in order to be able to be more present. Over time, we start to see that that avoidance, that simplicity, is easy. The same also with renouncing things. It starts to lessen the kilesas. You start to notice it. It may take time. Over time you notice it, you don't notice it right away. But gradually, noticing the beautiful qualities—they're more available. They're increasing more. You may not be able to point it exactly to the fact that you're not quite as comfortable, or you may not be able to point it to the fact that you haven't been on your computer for a while—I mean, that one's more obvious.

But just looking over time, life's getting more simple. You don't push yourself into things that increase the kilesas and confusion. Just start to notice. And I'm sure for all of you over the years of practice, the beautiful qualities of heart and mind show up much more than they used to. They're more familiar. And then, oh, okay, they're familiar—maybe we don't appreciate it as much. But anyway, knowing that you can really avoid what's feeding kilesa.

And then this sixth one, and this takes wise attitude too, is removing. And so this is—remember hearing it through wise view—"here a bhikkhu reflecting wisely does not endure an arisen thought affected by desire, ill will, cruelty." So this is right thought. He abandons it. And I'm going to read this language just because the language comes out so harsh, but we don't have to hear it in that way, just as I read the Four Right Efforts the other day. "He abandons it. He does away with it and annihilates it." A little harsh, but

that's the language. "He does not endure arisen evil, unprofitable dhammas. He abandons them. And what taints and fever of defilement might arise in one who did not abandon these thoughts—there are no taint or fever of defilement in one who removes them."

But I would say, if you don't buy into the harsh kind of annihilation language, take on the possibility—and it's really maybe more than we recognize. This is speaking to adhiṭṭhāna, to resolution, and to wise discernment.

So we'll start with thoughts. More often than we think, reflecting wisely, one does not endure an arisen thought affected by sense desire, ill will. One was like a clear insight moment in my practice. It wasn't sitting practice—I was at home. And some years into my practice, cause and effect, and an old, old pattern of really self-denigration and self-hatred came up. And I was quite aware of it, noting it, noticing it, feeling it, each thought, noting each thought down the road. Not thinking about why, but being really present with it—but in it, in it, in it. And it wasn't like being free.

Suddenly, just a thought came: I know this. I've seen this ten million times. I don't actually need to explore. Why don't I just turn, change the channel to mettā? And it was like that. It wasn't from aversion. I said, okay, I'll just say a few mettā phrases, it works or it doesn't. So I say the four phrases. The second time I said the four phrases—totally mettā. And that whole self-hatred thing had just vanished. And that was really interesting to see.

When we say we can really—when the mind can get in habits, right? Of going with the negative, of going with the greed. And more often than we might think, when there's awareness, when there's some right view in the mind, you can notice it and you can say, you know, don't really need to go there. So it's abandoning it, it's removing it, but it's really just turning the attention to the wholesome. And if it's from aversion or it's from greed, it won't work. You'll still feel all caught up. But often we do have the feeling that I have to be with this no matter what.

So you ask, why? That was my question: why do I have to be with this? Just turn to mettā. And it's like, cultivate the wholesome. And there's a kind of resolution, adhiṭṭhāna, just a willingness to do that.

Another time when I was doing walking meditation, not so long ago, some years ago, I was walking and some little thought came up of some little email I could have sent. It was just a tiny little bit of aversion, but funny, you know. I was always like, oh, that's amusing—it's just a little aversion, doesn't matter. And I thought, wait a minute, it's aversion. It matters.

Don't overlook it. Not to beat myself up, but no—this is really this subtle level. This is the resolution. If we want to really understand freedom, to free the heart and mind, then we notice when it arises. We don't think, "Well, this was just so little, it doesn't matter."

That was a really impactful insight for me. It really deepened my resolution, really deepened the determination to be willing to see whatever's arising. It's not personal.

And then you start to see that really, more often than we realize, you can change the channel. You know—"I would just love to have this thing, I would love to have this dress"—and we're just thinking, not with judgment, "I don't really need to do this." You just come back and feel your hands or feel your feet or take a breath. It's not out of aversion. It's just out of knowing, "I don't need to do that."

Joseph calls it the sword of wisdom. But that's when it's a little stronger. And sometimes, again, the sword of wisdom can't be wielded with aversion. So you have to have a mind of awareness to see that there's not aversion. But there are times when it's a little stronger: "Oh no, why can't I do this? No."

And adhiṭṭhāna—when it's with wholesomeness, when it's a willingness not to get caught in aversion, when it's with clear seeing—adhiṭṭhāna is a quality in the mind of resolution. It's one of the ten pāramīs. It collects all the dispersed energy: "No, I'm not going there." And we can call on that. It's a strength of heart and mind.

We don't just have to flounder around and think, "Oh, the aversion, the greed, I'm caught, what can I do?" It's enough. Bring in some awareness. And if it turns to aversion, you'll feel it right away. And you'll go, "Okay, this isn't the time for that. What is happening? Aversion." Maybe this is the time to shift, to do something else, one of the other approaches.

But I think this is really important to recognize: none of it's me, none of it's us. We don't have to hold on to the beautiful thoughts in our mind. We don't have to hold on to the difficult ones either. And the more we see the emptiness, the more we see that it's all causes and conditions—the aggregates coming together and going apart—the more you can see it's actually much more workable. We don't have to think so much like prisoners of our minds and our thoughts and what's going on. "That's enough with that one now. I can really change the attention. I can change what I'm doing. I can stop doing that thing that's feeding the wanting and go do something else"—whether it's getting up from sitting and going for a walk.

And so doing these things from the sense of wise attention and wise view, rather than that contracted feeling of "Oh, I couldn't do that, so I've got to do this." You see how we go to that? But really appreciating that everything we do, everything we pay attention to, how we do it—paying attention with wise attitude in the awareness—can be a supporting, contributing condition for the abandoning of the most subtle kilesas. So it's our whole life.

The seventh approach I'm not going to go into now—I've just mentioned it in passing. It was about developing the seven factors of awakening. So also developing wholesome qualities. That's a whole other talk, but there's that too.

But I really wanted to talk about these middle approaches, about how we live our life. And the quality of wise attention is always available to us. The quality of awareness, and what's arising in the mind that's aware, is always available to us.

So that's really how everything comes together—it's just saying one thing. How you pay attention and what you pay attention to. Is it increasing unwholesome qualities that have arisen, causing new ones to come? Or is it like abandoning them? Are wholesome qualities arising that haven't yet arisen? Are wholesome qualities being increased and developed?

And this is just an exploration for our whole life.

Okay, so that's enough. Thank you for your kind attention. Like I said, you don't have to remember any of it except that one last thing, which is what we've been saying the whole time anyway.

So let's end with the acts of generosity, of sharing merit with all beings and with ourselves.

CHAPTER 192

Aspiration and Resolution

Carol Wilson · 54 min

In this reflective talk, Carol Wilson examines two of the five strengths from the Tibetan tradition—resolution (adhiṭṭhāna) and aspiration—exploring how these qualities sustain our practice both on retreat and in daily life. She distinguishes resolution as a pāramī from mere willpower or striving, describing it as a calm, collected quality of mind that gathers dispersed energy without aversion. Unlike a New Year's resolution, true adhiṭṭhāna brings relief from the exhausting cycle of dithering and second-guessing.

Carol emphasizes the importance of consciously connecting with our deepest aspirations, noting how aspiration differs from expectation or wanting. When we touch genuine aspiration, it uplifts and brightens the heart, strengthening faith and our willingness to show up moment after moment. She warns against the subtle shift from aspiration into yearning or measuring progress, which creates suffering rather than liberation.

Drawing on inspiring stories of Burmese nuns whose lives embody resolution and generosity, Carol encourages practitioners to find their own sources of inspiration—teachers, lineage holders, or ordinary people on the path. She briefly touches on the remaining three strengths: familiarization with awareness, cultivating wholesome seeds through sīla and generosity, and nibbidā (disenchantment)—that peaceful dispassion that naturally arises when wisdom sees through the emptiness of self-centered pursuits. The talk offers practical guidance for maintaining practice amid changing conditions.

I just thought I'd offer a few reflections inspired by a list I read from Dilgo Khyentse called "An Explanation of the Practice as a Way of Life." It's called The Five Strengths—five qualities that really support practice, waking up in our life. The five strengths are the power of resolution, the power of familiarization, the power of wholesome seeds, the power of disenchantment (nibbida), and the power of aspiration. I took the list, but what I'm talking about has nothing to do with anything he said. I just like the list, and then my own thoughts emerged from it. Mostly I'm going to put together resolution and aspiration and focus on that.

My idea is this: since the conditions we're in will be changing more radically than they usually do day to day in a couple of days, we're all faced with continuing to cultivate and trust and develop our moment-to-moment awareness as the conditions get more demanding or louder—more things coming. As the demands come, how can we

continue to support ourselves? Really, our resolution and aspiration is the main thing. There are ten million different ways to help us remember, but what's really at the core is the commitment, the resolution, and our aspiration to awaken.

There's a line from Thich Nhat Hanh I read way back in the beginning of my practice, but I often think of it in terms of continuing to commit myself to a life of Dharma, of awakening. He said: "Do not let yourself be colonized by society." I think of that so much. Not to be negative—it's just so easy for us to fall into the habits and patterns that we grew up with, that we're used to, and that are coming at us from every direction. Not to be fearful, but just to be realistic.

The more we continue to commit to the habit of awakening, to the path of awakening, the more we're really bringing it into our life, the more we're aware in our life. In my experience, the more wisdom, the more awareness there is, the more is called forth from us. In some ways, life is more harmonious, but in other ways, we're really opening much more deeply to the way things are—which is all beauty, but also our own suffering and confusion. We become more empathic, more connected. We can't just close off to the confusion of the world, but we meet it with a wisdom eye, not just overwhelmed—usually—but sometimes.

I've found that the more we practice, the more faith there is, the more aspiration, the more commitment. But that's because more is called for. I don't know anyone who's really practicing who says practice just gets easier. We trust it more. It becomes more who we are. It becomes more our way of being. In that way, it's absolutely easier. It's not like you go for a week and then think, "Oh yeah, right, awareness. Oh yeah, right, the Dharma. Oh, the precepts—I remember that." It just becomes part of our being. In that way, it's easier. It doesn't even feel like practice. It's more who we are.

There's another line, I think from Dilgo Khyentse, that stays in my mind: mingling our mind, mingling our hearts with the Dharma so that we die without any thought of Dharma in our mind. What that means to me is we don't have to think about Dharma, because that's what we are.

So I've found that the more practice becomes part of who we are, the more we're motivated to keep finding ways to recommit, to call up our resolution, to call up our aspiration—rather than just thinking, "Oh no, now the retreat's faded, and I have to wait for the next retreat." In fact, it stops being about retreat or not retreat. It's about recognizing we don't have to do this alone, and we can't do it alone. Don't be afraid to find ways.

And that's what I want to talk about: ways to truly re-inspire ourselves, get in touch with our aspiration again, find that energy of resolution just to keep going. So that's where I want to begin—resolution, and then resolution in terms of aspiration, those two together. I'll say a few things about the other three if there's time at the end.

I could give a whole talk on resolution. It's a fascinating quality of mind, a translation of the Pali word *adhiṭṭhāna*. It's a mental quality—not like an idea, not your New Year's resolution where you make some concept: "I'm going to go to the gym every day." We know how that works. That's just an idea in the mind, a thing, a concept.

Resolution in this talk is one of the *pāramīs* when combined with wisdom. It's a quality of heart-mind. Just like greed, just like *samādhi*, just like *mettā*, we can recognize and become familiar with the presence or absence of this quality of resolution in the mind. I find it so interesting because it's not something I ever thought about or recognized in my regular life, or even in the first years of my practice. But actually tuning into it has been very helpful when I remember. It can be very helpful.

The way it's described is as a steadiness of purpose. It's a mind that is unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement—it just keeps going steady. They give the image of something steadfast, like an upright stone pillar. But I think that's not exactly the best image because it sounds inflexible, like "That's my New Year's resolution, I'm going to do it by gum no matter what." And that could be aversion. It could be a little disconnected. It might not have wisdom.

So it sounds inflexible, but it's not. It's a quality of mind that collects our dispersed energy, collects our scattered commitments and brings them together with a focus and a sense of just moving onward, doing what needs to be done.

We know how to do things. We know how to do things that are difficult, that require energy, that require commitment. But often, before we tune into resolution—just in our normal life, and we see this at the beginning of practice—the way we know how to do things is really by pushing or striving. Or there could be a little tinge of aversion. Maybe, I don't know, you've got to get up every day and make breakfast for the kids. That could be different on different days. For one thing, you have to do it—pretty much you've got to get up and feed the kids. But that could be done with *mettā*, done just with love. It could be done with aversion. It could be done with lots of different things.

Or coming on retreat. Getting up every morning on retreat. As you know, you could have lots of different mental states. So what's the quality of mind that keeps one getting up, going through the routine, doing the sittings, doing the walkings? That could come from striving. It could come from trying to look good. It could come from a real commitment, but with this energy of aversion pushing behind it. You know what I mean, right?

But the sense that comes with resolution doesn't have that overtone of striving or being disconnected or aversion. It's actually very calm, collected. I call it, in my experience, the opposite of dithering. "Should I do this or should I do that? Should I get up?" You know how exhausting that is?

I've used this in other talks, but the example where I really saw it in my life these last few years: in the morning before breakfast, especially when I'm coming up to teach and I'm on a schedule, I do about fifteen minutes of qigong. I enjoy qigong—fifteen minutes just helps me connect. Here too, but sometimes at home when I don't have a schedule, it's actually even harder.

But I would just sit on the couch and think, should I have the tea first? Maybe I'll just have some tea. Should I do the qigong? Well, why not? I could do it later. After breakfast, I could do it. And it's just dithering. Should I or shouldn't I? But no, I'll just sit another few minutes.

And then when I recognize resolution, it's just kind of the energy—just do it. In fact, that's really what it feels like. Just do it. You just get up and do it. It's not forcing. It's really a relief. Because instead of the energy going back and forth—that's really exhausting, sitting on the couch and dithering. Should I have tea? Should I do this? Should I get up? Should I lie in bed five more minutes? I mean, that's horrible, isn't it? And on and on and on. And by the time you get up, you feel lousy.

So sometimes U Tejaniya used to just hold up the Nike swish. Just do it. He would just hold it up. Just do it—without any kind of aversion or judgment.

It collects the dispersed energy. It's really a very interesting quality. It's a relief, and we can feel it. You can actually feel it. Just do it. It collects it. You do it. The mind is calm. It's not going in all these directions. You're not thinking about should I or shouldn't I. Not anything. It's just the energy's there, and you do it.

This is a very accessible quality of heart and mind that we can consciously tune into. We all know it, but we can consciously tune into it. It's one of the ten pāramīs in the Theravada tradition when it's supported by wisdom.

On its own, resolution is like an ethically neutral quality of mind, meaning that in the moment of kāja, in the moment of citta, it could be paired with unwholesome states. Like you could really have a lot of resolution to go and do something unwholesome—to do something really greedy, to rob a bank, to do whatever. You could have a lot of resolution. But that's not the pāramī.

When it's combined with wholesome aspiration, that's different. Or it can be neutral, like me doing qigong. It's not super wholesome. It's not unwholesome. It's just kind of neutral, calm. There's equanimity. So that would be wholesome. That would be a pāramī. It doesn't mean the resolution has to be to go save the world. It's just combined with a wholesome mental factor.

But in terms of our life of practice, in terms of working together as supported by paññā, wisdom—or if you translate wisdom as discernment, I find that really helpful. Because the discernment can go along with perhaps a wholesome intention of compassion or a wholesome intention of strengthening the body. But the discernment is also about seeing if the appropriate conditions are there for the resolve.

Like I'm sitting here—I could make a resolve to go into fourth jhāna right now. That would not happen because the conditions aren't here. And we often, without the discernment of wisdom—and in practice we can really do this—we collect the energy: "Yes, now I'm going to do this." But the conditions totally aren't there.

I like the example of jhāna as a specific state because, as Sayadaw Tejaniya says, there are very specific conditions we can see in the mind and body that support the arising of one-pointed concentration. Wanting it to happen is not one of them. If we could just remember that and really believe it, it would save so much suffering.

When I first started thinking about the wisdom and discernment that goes with resolution, I considered the story of the Buddha's life and the story of Buddhism—the big resolution he made when he sat down under the Bodhi tree and said, "I'm not getting up until I'm completely awakened," in whatever language he was using. And it happened that night. So somehow he had the discernment to know. He didn't do it six years prior. The first thing he did when he went out as a renunciate wasn't to sit under the Bodhi tree and declare, "I'm not getting up until I'm fully awakened." No, he went through six years of incredible practice and seeking—concentration practice, starving himself, really finding the way. And when he did have the discernment to sit under the tree, that was really coming from wisdom about the conditions, and from faith and trust in what he knew. I think that's always been really interesting for me to consider.

I'm thinking of this because of the last time I was in Bodh Gaya. We were visiting Dipa Ma—it was the year before she died. She was a very deeply practiced Bengali woman, about this tall, really tiny, a little grandmother. And she was so—not fierce, but just really committed. She said to Joseph, "Joseph, you should sit for a weekend." And he said, "Oh, yeah." She said, "No, sit for a weekend. Sit down for the weekend and don't get up." He just started laughing. She said, "Don't be lazy." She meant that from her ability, from her practice. For her, that was not a crazy thing to say. For him, maybe a different thing—I can't speak for him. I don't know if he did it or not.

So that's the sense of resolution—when it's supported by or when it's supporting our aspiration, not just in practice but in our life, the aspiration that we bring to our dharma life. When I say practice, I don't mean formal sitting and walking. And I don't really mean being on retreat. I really mean, at this point, the way we've been here and the way I'm talking now—I really mean our life of commitment to Dharma. And I want to say commitment to awakening, but that might not be your aspiration. I'm not here to tell you what your aspiration should be.

But I want to talk about how supportive it is to keep tuning into what one's aspiration is. Because it has been—you all know it—and it will again get hard or flat, become just a memory where you're not feeling connected to the wakeful energy. And instead of going, "Oh no, I can't do it," really taking the time to reflect, to tune in to what is truly, truly important to you in your life and in your life of Dharma—which hopefully stops being a separate life—and really allowing ourselves to feel it deeply.

Because aspiration is different from expectation. Aspiration is really this heart-mind sense of, as I said, what's truly important, what's possible, why we're practicing—whatever words you want to use. And when it's aspiration, the quality it brings to our heart and mind uplifts. It uplifts our energy.

It uplifts our heart. It brightens the heart and mind. It strengthens faith. And that faith strengthens our willingness to show up again.

We might think, "Okay, this might be a really hard thing that's going on in my mind, a really hard response to something in the world. Can I have another moment of confidence in awareness? Can I have confidence in cultivating the wholesome instead of just going down the old rabbit hole of habit?"

So aspiration, when we touch it, really brightens this for us. It helps us in whatever way is appropriate to how we practice. It's different from wanting or expectation. But I know it's easy, the way we think about things, to get confused.

Because aspiration could be, say for example, to completely awaken from suffering. That could be one's aspiration. And the way our minds work, we can think, "Well, that's a goal, right?" It is looking at a possibility. If there was no possibility—if it was like, "Just practice and nothing's ever going to change, your mind's going to stay the same as it is, we're just going to fluff around, it's hopeless, but keep on practicing"—we need a little sense of what's possible.

But that's like a sense of, "Oh yeah, that's possible." And the aspiration feeds the willingness to be here now, to completely surrender into this moment with awareness and wisdom.

But when that same aspiration—to fully awaken in this lifetime, whatever it is—when the quality of mind relating to it turns, as it will at times, into a subtle yearning or expecting or judging or measuring how far to go, anything like that... you get a sense that instead of completely surrendering into wakefulness here, it has started leaning forward. And that's the little movement that gets all of samsara going again.

But you can tell it's different from the quality of aspiration because it isn't uplifting. It's like, "Oh no, it's hopeless. Why am I doing this? This is useless." I don't have to go down that road. You can tell the difference. It really isn't that subtle when it gets going.

Because that can be a habit of our mind, don't use that habit as a reason not to really land in your aspiration. I think it's so important not to be afraid, to really open to—in your own heart and mind, you don't have to tell anybody else, you don't have to write it on the bulletin board—but in your own heart and mind, really touch into: What's most important to me?

We know the habits get triggered quickly. We know that we can lose the sense of faith. But truly tuning back into the aspiration can change that. Give yourself time to do that again and again, especially when we feel lost. That's what can get the faith going.

When we're in touch with our aspiration—say the aspiration is to awaken in this life—whatever way you are practicing, working with awareness or cultivating concentration, this aspiration is supported by the quality of resolution. Because it's not that you make an aspiration and that's it, right? It's every moment.

There's a saying I read years ago from some teacher, one Buddhist teacher, saying: in every moment the mind is committing to something. The question is, to what?

If we look at that with interest—and you have to look at it with interest, not with judgment—when we see "to what?" we'll find it's things like: I want to take a rest. I'm a little bit hungry. This is too much trouble. What's it connecting to? We look and see.

It's moment after moment after moment.

So the idea, the connection in your heart-mind with your aspiration—even if it's just a feeling, it might not even be words—but that can support the resolution to the little choices we make, the bigger choices. Not every single moment. Don't make yourself nuts. But just really seeing in the little choices, "Oh, what's my aspiration?" I mean, that already feels like too much.

But a lot of people here have described just an exploring in ways that were interesting. Seeing something in a little moment that wasn't important in life, but in that little moment seeing craving come up where they didn't expect it. "Oh, look at that. That's craving for that." The craving was seen with awareness and could just go. That kind of thing.

The resolution, the willingness to meet it with awareness, to be interested. Remembering that again and again and again. The resolution to when we have bigger problems, choices that we have to make. And we never know what's going to happen whichever choice we make. Quite a few people have brought up needing to make some kind of choice and just seeing all the stuff that goes on with that, all the thinking.

And somehow there can be this secret belief: if you make the right choice, everything works out. And if you make the wrong choice, it's just all dukkha. It's like we keep thinking that there's some fairyland where everything is going to work out. Forget about it.

But when we're tuning into aspiration, what I find is that it helps us more easily align with checking what's the motivation as we make the choice, rather than looking for the result of what we want. Checking in with awareness, tuning into the present moment, letting the decision—even just a little one—come out of awareness and out of wholesomeness when we see it. So the resolution just gives us the strength of mind to do it. Or to get up and do the Qigong. Or in a day—I'm not saying you need to sit every day—but it's really helpful just to remember awareness.

I was talking about Thich Nhat Hanh one night, maybe it was the first night, where he was talking about just coming home to ourselves. And I found that just in daily life, if I just sit down—and that just happens to be the posture, sometimes I'll do walking—it could be for thirty seconds. But that commitment of taking the posture, in a way it's like taking the quality in the mind. It's really reminding my mind, "Oh yeah, awareness is the main thing here." It's more important than getting my toast right away. It's more important than whatever. It's not saying it, but just doing it. Just doing it. This is where the

resolution really supports us. It's just simple. It makes it easier. But I'm saying it so we can call it up to our minds sometimes. We need to call it up to our minds, and we can do that.

So tuning in for yourself again and again. What's the aspiration? What lights up your heart and mind? What keeps you going? What's kept you going this month? What will keep us going on this path as we continue?

Ajahn Sucitto was saying once, he was going on about faith, and he said, "It's such a beautiful aspiration to transform one's consciousness." He said, "So few people in this world seem to have that aspiration." And it really takes faith—trust and confidence in the truth of the teachings, the truth of the path, or confidence in awareness, or however you want to say it. Confidence in your own commitment, in your own practice. It really takes connecting again with the aspiration and confidence because it's so easy to fall into skeptical doubt.

It's just the information that's coming in from so many other avenues. If we're just kind of—not that you have to be on your guard—but if we're just kind of really not quite aware, which often we're not, it gets in and starts feeding the old habits. And then you find yourself all caught up and go, "Wait a minute." Just—I say sit. It doesn't matter if you sit. It's just take a moment. What's happening now?

Right. Awareness. Being really present with things as they are—so much more helpful on the path than giving in to skeptical doubt. We might say, "Oh no, I'm lost again. It's all over." No. Recommit. Reconnect with the aspiration.

So what works for you to discover, to rediscover? It takes a lot of humility, right, and courage. You just keep beginning again, rediscovering. You say, "Okay, I got really lost in this reactivity for this day, for this week, for whatever it was." But now's now. Meeting this with humility, rediscovering—that's beautiful. That's not a failure. Trusting that, seeing what helps.

In my life, in the last few years, I've been realizing how much support I get for reconnecting with aspiration and with the reality of the potential for awakening by consciously tuning in to other people, dead or alive, that are inspirational. Really, this sense that we don't have to do it alone. And in fact, it's too hard to do it alone. We always talk about sangha, living sangha, and of course that's wonderful when we have it. But even more than that, I've been consciously reminding myself—and I'll give some examples, because I like to talk about it for one thing, and I get to, but it's also really supportive.

One is just sometimes consciously reflecting on your particular lineage. As far back, all the beings who've been real teachers for you—it could be in this form, it could be in another form. Just right now, my old piano teacher when I was in elementary school popped into mind. She was a Christian Scientist. She was like a pseudo-grandmother. But there was a way that she really inspired me toward goodness and love. I hadn't thought about her in ages. That just arose now. But we all have lineages like that. And it can also be the lineage back to the Buddha, whatever it is. But consciously calling on it, instead of our kind of Western notion that we're independent, we do it all by ourselves—as if that's intelligent.

Really, thinking about whatever your particular lineage is, it can be devotional or not. I'm not a particularly devotional type, so I wasn't doing this for a long time. But when I think about different teachers of mine, especially when I'm on retreat and the mind is quieter and you can kind of feel them in your heart, I feel so much gratitude and appreciation. And then just using that gratitude as this wholesome energy to re-strengthen, to recommit to our aspiration, to turn our energy back into cultivating what we value.

I've also thought often of different beings alive in my life on the path—people I share the path with or that I've met. And it's not that they have to be extraordinarily realized. When Menandria spoke about Ujjayanta the other night, that really hit me as very inspiring. It took me back to this place in Sagaing where I've been every year for twenty years. And it really touched me, but it also reminded me of other beings that truly inspire me.

I'll share a couple of stories to make a point: it doesn't have to be someone who seems incredibly enlightened. There are so many people one might come in touch with who have various aspects that are incredibly inspiring. And inspiring in the way that it touches that potential in our own heart and mind. It wakes that up. That's, I think, why it's inspiring.

So one of the nuns I know from Burma—a few of us would go every year and offer support. I visited her, so I happened to know her story. When she was about nineteen or twenty, she was really, really ill. Her family was a farming family in the country. She wanted to become a nun, but they wouldn't let her. Actually, a lot of the nuns had parents who didn't want them to go be nuns. Her parents wouldn't allow it. She became so ill she was almost dying. The parents were having to call doctors.

There are many stories of families that use all their money on medical care for one member of the family. This just happens all the time. So they were doing that, and then they were about to have to sell their house and their farm. She convinced them to let

her go be a nun if her sister would come too. This was because her faith was so strong. She's someone who has really strong faith, and as I said, her practice is powerful – mostly at this time, Buddhānussati, which is really reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha. This would brighten her mind and heart and bring forth this faith, which would bring steadfast resolution. She was committed because she felt so much faith in wanting to be a nun that it would heal her.

So her sister and she both got ordained when they were about nineteen or twenty. She showed us in her little nunnery – at this point started with a small bamboo nunnery near Shwe Oo Min, near Yangon – they had a little Buddha rupa. There's always a Buddha rupa in any nunnery or monastery. And she said, "This is the first one we bought." She said, "When I cut my hair, which was really long and beautiful, I could sell it. And we used that to buy this Buddha rupa." They were so proud of it. It was just so touching.

She did get well. She amazingly did get well, because this happened maybe twenty years ago. Then she and her sister came to Yangon and went into a nunnery or a meditation center, usually run by monks, by a Sayadaw. They really wanted to meditate, to really reach Nibbana. So they were there meditating for some months.

And then from her home village down in the country, the head Sayadaw of the village – each village would have that Sayadaw, the monk teacher – said to her, "There are a bunch of poor young girls, either orphans or only have one parent, and their parents want them to get schooling but can't support them." This happens so much there with nuns. And he said, "I'm sending them up to you to take care of." They didn't ask for this. But this is just what happens.

So she made a complete 180-degree turn. She left the meditation place, went and got a tiny little piece of land, probably got the money from their parents. This was near Shwe Oo Min. They started by building a tiny little bamboo hut, and the young girls came – like ten of them, fifteen of them. And then the two sisters were completely devoting their lives to taking care of these girls. They become little nunlets, so cute, taking care of them and supporting them so they can go to school. All of the support is on dāna – the rice they receive and a little bit of money on dāna to take care of these girls.

This is not an unusual story. You can go to hundreds of places like this. But we happened to know Daw Tara and speak with her. The sense was that it was a real 180-degree turn. They wanted to meditate, but now this is the path. She was so committed to these girls. "We want to give them the chance to have a wholesome life. They don't

have to stay nuns after they grow up, but we want to give them the chance" – basically, not to have to go on the street. She didn't talk like that, but essentially, not to starve completely.

You can see the affection. You can see the care. You can see the love. And it wasn't like, "We're doing this until they're gone and then we're out of here." Because it's never going to happen – they keep sending new young ones.

But the tenderness, the generosity, and the absolute commitment to this path—to me this is really inspiring as an example of how your life is your path. It's all about awakening.

At the same time, Dodra, who is kind of the smarter one, is studying to be a Dhammacharya, which is the path available for the simple nuns—someone who doesn't have a lot of education and not a big place or a lot of support. It's a Pali Dhamma training that takes years and years of study for these nuns, kind of like five years of successive tests. I know many nuns who may be studying this for ten or fifteen years before they manage to pass it, but it's a huge big deal when they do. So she's been studying this, and she did finally pass it.

But this sense of just the complete giving over, out of generosity and love—but it's the Dharma practice. It's the awakening practice. It's not something else. So that was very inspiring to me.

Another friend, who I don't want to name, I've known for maybe thirty years—not a Burmese person—of practice and really committed to practice, and like a normal person, like all of us, with hard times, hard mind, hard life. This person ordained as a Burmese nun I think it must be seventeen or eighteen years ago now. I know her really well. We work together with a couple other friends, and we offer support to nuns in Burma. So she's spent a lot of time in Burma, but not all the time there.

Watching her really closely over these years of being a really committed nun—in the Burmese tradition, they don't get much support. She can't stay there all the time. She's a homeless nun. She has to leave, but now she can't even get back in. They wouldn't even give her a visa this year.

Watching her over these years, I can't even know how hard it's been, how demanding. And it's not that it was a natural fit with her personality. So there are a couple times when it's so hard, and I say, "Why are you still doing this?" She says, "Because I really want to purify my heart and mind. And this is how I'm seeing, this is how I'm doing it." And she is doing it. It's really so inspiring.

When I think about it—I'm just used to being around her and I don't always think about it—but when I think about what she's gone through in all these years, and it gets easier and it doesn't, the situations keep changing, it's really inspiring to see what someone can do. Talk about resolution. This woman has incredible resolution and incredible aspiration. And it's really been work. It's not like, "Oh yes, I'm just a nun and everything's fine." It's been work. Very, very inspiring to me.

So think, see who comes to your mind, who inspires you, who really can wake up this energy. It really touches me just to see these people. And then it wakes that up in us. And they're regular people. Don't make them into something like, "Oh, I could never do that." They're regular people. Everywhere you look.

One other nun—Dasumanachari. The first time I ever went to Shwayumen, I don't know, 2006 or something, there was another nun with a little nunnery right around the corner. There's a lot in that little area. A poor nunnery. A little nunnery. A friend took me there first because the friend was offering money so that she could put electricity into her place at this time.

We knew her over the years. Fine, she's a little bit depressive, but there's a nunnery with about twenty nuns and just doing their thing. And then one year—I'm not sure how long ago, maybe ten or fifteen years—she came by when we were all there, usually there in the winter. Friends give us money and we're offering money to different nunneries.

She knew that, and we offered her money. She came to us before we left and said, "I really have this vision." She's speaking in Burmese, but one of our friends translates. "I really want to open a school for poor kids."

Some of the nuns do this because—and this was even before the civil war—a lot of poor kids couldn't afford to go to the government schools, even though they're supposedly free. So some nuns and some monks start Sangha schools that are free for the children. To have the school means that nunnery or monastery is running the whole operation on the dana that they're offered. They hire teachers at a regular rate. They have to have donations to build the building or the lean-to or whatever they need to keep it going. They raise money even for the uniforms for the kids—all on dana.

So she came and said she had this vision to start this school. Like I said, she's... you wouldn't have seen that as a possibility in her. And what we offered was not nearly enough to do it, but it was kind of a seed starter.

We came back the next year, and it's still running now. She came and she had done it. She'd started this school—I think at that time she had 150 little kids, up through what we'd say fourth or fifth grade, that would come every day. She was having to hire teachers. They don't get a huge amount of money, but she's hiring the teachers. She had given up most of the living space for the nuns. They'd moved into the one little building and built a big, open-air lean-to and gotten money for desks and gotten some support from organizations in Burma that offer assistance. Some big companies used to have a little wing that would be like a donation generosity wing, and they'd offer money to nuns and monks and schools and such.

So she came and she had this thing going, and it's gotten only much, much bigger. And she—this is the point—she was like transformed. She was just glowing. She had so much more work, so much more responsibility, because it's all on her. But she was filled with light.

What she said was, "It's so much responsibility. I have to raise all this money and the buildings. I'm exhausted." But she was radiant. She said, "Now my citta is calm. My mind is calm. My mind is peaceful." And it was really true. You could see it. And it wasn't a one-off thing. Every year it's bigger, and she has more going on, more teachers, more students. It's really amazing to see the aspiration married to the resolution, and really that coming from the faith, and the generosity coming from the faith. I think she's one who practices Buddhānussati, just looking at the qualities of the Buddha—that really brings up her faith.

So just seeing what's possible. Really tuning in. That helps me. That helps me to reconnect with aspiration, to bring up this energy.

I know I have to mention the other three really quickly. But I just want to say other ways, some that we've mentioned. Like when I mentioned the Buddha saying to contemplate your sīla, to contemplate your acts of generosity—really take time and tune into that. Previous acts in your life of wholesomeness. Or even just tuning into, as some people have mentioned, thinking, "Where am I going with this practice?" And then reflect on the last ten years of your life, or how things were before you started practicing. Really let that come in so that our faith in the Dhamma, in the Buddha Dhamma, the faith in the truth of how things are, and that that transforms how we are with life and how we live—you can't overvalue that. I think it never hurts us to do it again and again and again. Whether it's reading, whether it's being in nature, whether it's listening to the ten million things available online or videos you can see—that can be inspiring.

I would say show some care when you're choosing what to engage with. Not just anything. There's a lot of garbage out there too. But really pay attention to what's inspiring for you. Notice what the effect is. If it's just making you feel envious or critical, that's not helpful. For now, put it down. See what's feeding the wholesome. That's really what matters. Strengthen that.

Find ways to give attention to your intention as you're doing things. Mingyur Rinpoche mentions this, but many teachers do. Just noticing, say, the intention of generosity. Contemplate that in your heart. Feel how lovely it feels, the intention of generosity. And then when you're doing little activities, you could consciously bring in the motivation of generosity. If you have a service job, consciously infuse it with that motivation. "I'm cleaning the floor. May all the yogis and the staff appreciate the clean floor."

My first three-month retreat I sat, my job for a month was cleaning the toilets. And I really got into it. It just made me happy to make clean toilets for everyone to use. That's not an ego thing. That's having wholesome motivation as we do things. It transforms activities.

The Buddha himself, when talking about generosity in different suttas—there's one where he says to the monks and nuns, when you rinse your bowl after eating and throw the dirty water into a little pond, even then you can think, "May whatever beings live in this pond be able to eat from the rinsings of this bowl." That's an act of generosity. How much does that take? Just remembering. I think of that teaching all the time.

Consider how different our life becomes. Instead of "Oh God, I have to clean the floor again," we think, "May beings really appreciate this floor." It's no more work. It's actually less work. And it's really feeding the wholesome. So that's just another idea I'm offering.

One last thing I want to say: please don't be shy or afraid to really connect with your aspiration. Let it be what's true for you. Not "Oh, I couldn't have the aspiration to awaken. I'm just a little nobody." That's not serving you or anybody else. It's just an ego thing.

When you feel that sense of inspiration, dhamma inspiration, just let it come up. That's all you have to do. Just tune in. Don't be afraid. The Buddha said two things he never lost sight of: not to shrink back from the difficult, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. I like that. It's not a "should," but it's recognizing when we hit that place of "okay, this is good enough" and come out of retreat think-

ing "this is good enough." That's the trouble though—how long does it stay good enough? Something always happens. Not to rest content with merely wholesome states of mind.

But as I think Andrea said the other day, he also said, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." So see what's true, but don't sell yourself short. Let the aspiration be as vast as the Dhamma is vast, because we are the Dhamma.

So I just mentioned the power of familiarization, which is basically being familiar with our practice—in this case, familiarity with awareness—so that we really have confidence in it, we recognize it.

We've been spending the month of your practice recognizing it. Familiarization with how the mind feels when it's lost in aversion and greed, how it feels when it's free from kilesa—those moments of coolness that Andrea mentioned, that Ajahn Buddhadasa speaks of, those moments when the heart-mind is free from kilesa. Familiarization with those moments. They happen a lot. They happen in life. We can recognize those. We can know we've experienced this, we know awareness is able to be with anything. We're familiar with that. We can call on that to remind us, to strengthen our faith, to keep us going.

Wholesome seeds—well, we've talked about that. Just cultivating the wholesome, cultivating sila, cultivating generosity, really strengthening those qualities in heart and mind, as I read the other night. Even that has the effect of really uprooting the asavas, the kilesas. It's not like we practice generosity so that we'll have a good rebirth or something. The moment of generosity is the moment of non-clinging—the moment of non-clinging to sense of self or things. Just tune in. In a moment of generosity, the heart is happy. It's open. There's a sense—not even connection, but self and other, that delineation is much more gone. Real generosity, you know. Whatever it is, even if it's just a smile. It's a powerful practice of freeing the heart and mind from greed. Sila, the same in its way. We've talked about that before, but not to think that's just an ancillary practice to get ready for the real thing. It is awakening practice.

And the fourth, nibbida, which is often translated as dispassion. Let's translate it that way—not translated as disgust, as it's sometimes rendered. All these negative translations, you know, from back in the 1900s or whenever it was.

I wrote a little piece about nibbida. Disenchantment is actually a very peaceful, a very calm and peaceful and spacious quality of heart-mind. It's described as losing one's taste for, or not delighting in the flavor—really losing one's taste for the fascination with all our experience and the fascination with sense pleasures. We're often ex-

periencing this: losing the fascination, losing our taste for the narrowness that comes with our self-centered perception and self-centered way of living. And after a while, it's not every moment, but there are moments where it's just, "Yeah, what about me?" It feels so unpleasant, so separating, and kind of the nibbida just puts it down. It's not disgust, but the mind just loses the taste for it. There's no nourishment there.

The example that's often given is of a dog that's really hungry, and it finds this bone that's been bleached in the sun for ten years. And it's gnawing on the bone, but there's absolutely no nourishment there—no marrow, no nothing. And so it just puts it down and goes away. That's nibbida. It's actually a cool, settled, and clear moment of heart and mind. It really comes from a lot of wisdom. And sometimes it arises just naturally from wisdom.

Contemplation and reflection, at times, can support it. Reflecting on—say, I'm getting all involved in something, and suddenly: this is all about clinging. It's all about me. Not a judgment, but just feeling that. The contemplation of the complications that come from following on this wanting, from this doing. It's just a reflection. And the mind goes, "I don't need to do that. The peace is so much more." The mind just inclines to peace. It's a lovely experience.

Or the other way that's mentioned is consciously inclining the mind towards the peace, the peace of Nibbana. There's this saying of the Buddha's that I like a lot. He says, "Here, Ananda, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or an empty hut, a practitioner reflects thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime."

That is the stilling of formations, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, cessation, Nibbana.

Even momentary. Just incline the mind in a moment. What can I do now instead of that? Ah. This is peaceful. Just in this moment, the relinquishing of acquisitions. No formations arising. The ending of craving is peaceful.

That's something we can familiarize ourselves with—just noticing that more. It's not going to be fed too much in the regular daily culture. But this is what we can support in our lives.

So those are just some reflections, hopefully in some way helpful in your ongoing practice.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Let's share the blessings that we are so fortunate to receive with all beings.

CHAPTER 193

Liberating Simplicity of Awareness

Carol Wilson · 46 min

In this evening talk from a U Tejaniya-style retreat, Carol Wilson illuminates the profound yet overlooked nature of awareness itself. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Chah, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she explores how the simple act of recognizing awareness—without adding judgments, preferences, or personal narratives—creates conditions for liberating wisdom. The talk addresses how we habitually overlay experience with unexamined views, taking things personally and creating elaborate stories from neutral moments.

Wilson examines the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa) through practical examples: how we miss the constant changing nature of experience (anicca), grasp at things expecting lasting satisfaction (dukkha), and assume a solid self at the center of every interaction (anattā). She shares a compelling story about a colleague's misinterpreted frown to illustrate how quickly we construct suffering through unexamined assumptions. The teaching emphasizes that right view (sammā-diṭṭhi) isn't about adopting correct beliefs, but about meeting experience without the veils of our preferences.

The practical guidance centers on Ajahn Sumedho's counsel to have confidence in receptive awareness, especially during difficult emotions. Rather than rejecting any experience, practitioners learn to recognize that self-judgment, grief, or anger simply feel "like this"—another arising to be witnessed with the pure awareness that Ānanda Thubten calls "true nonviolence." Wilson concludes with Upāsikā Kee's teaching: "What is, is. What is not, is not. No need to add anything extra."

At the almost end of a day that sometimes can seem rather long, sometimes not—but anyway, it's almost over. And then there'll be another one and another one and another one. So there's no point thinking about it. There's only this moment. And that is so freeing. When there's only this moment, what's the problem? You don't like this moment, okay, but not liking is like this. What's the problem?

What I want to talk about tonight is just basic, kind of 101 introduction to awareness, which many of you who've done these retreats a lot have heard before. But I could remind myself about the quality, the power of awareness every single day and it wouldn't be too much. That's what we're doing here.

I like to call it the liberating simplicity of awareness, of mindfulness. If you think about it, which I often do, this aspect of our experience that we've been talking about—just this simple awareness of whatever's occurring—it's not a thing. It's kind of an activity, but it's a completely normal aspect of all of our experience, completely natural and normal. We so overlook it because it seems like nothing special.

What's amazing to me to contemplate is the incredible power of the steadiness of this awareness when we take refuge in it, rather than taking refuge in and trusting all our thoughts. The steadiness of awareness sets up the conditions for liberating wisdom—completely liberating from whatever's occurring.

Liberation not from the things we don't like in the world. When most of us first start practicing, somehow we think that nibbāna or freedom means all this junk stops happening. Please, God. Things get better. People get nicer. We don't get angry ourselves. Everything just is somehow better.

But the liberation that comes from the steadiness of awareness, from really taking refuge again and again and again, is not from this world. It doesn't remove us from experience of the world. In fact, we just surrender more fully into this moment, like I said in the beginning. The liberation is from the confusion, the suffering, our mistaken and confused understanding of experience, which takes us into worlds of wanting, aversion, confusion, me and other, and all kinds of descriptions of what we think is happening—which isn't happening at all.

The liberating power is incredible. I just want to talk about that tonight, pointing to things we all know but to help us remember, because we forget. We forget to trust awareness, we forget to notice it, and we forget to have confidence in it.

One of the definitions Neal really likes, of mindfulness awareness: Vipassanā meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly—not thinking about it, experiencing it directly—from moment to moment, with the right understanding.

Those are, in a way, three components. They're not separate, but three angles. Experiencing the mind and body directly, from moment to moment—not just once in a while—with the right understanding.

You might think, as I used to think: okay, I forget sometimes, but generally I'm aware, right? I know what's going on. I know I'm sitting here and I'm not in the dining room. I knew when I was eating, I was eating. I'm not completely unaware. How can it be so liberating? What's the difference? How is this mindfulness, this awareness different?

Part of it is that it comes with right view, and part of it is just the quality of the awareness itself.

Ajahn Sumedho—the American monk in the Thai tradition, he's ninety now but still at Amaravati, retired but giving lots of talks that are streamed online—one of his descriptions of awareness, and this is really his thing, his confidence in awareness: Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or our emotions, our sensations, or whatever's happening. Awareness is simply about knowing these things fully as they are, what they are in this moment.

And knowing means not the knowing of thinking about—"Oh, this is a tingling sensation." It's just that fullness of being with it, knowing it with awareness. Sometimes knowing is used in that way of "Oh, I'm aware of it." Knowing is like this. Not making any value judgments.

Can you just, for a moment, imagine how simple that makes life? Just notice going through the day—you see somebody do something, and the habit of mind makes some little judgment. They mean this, or they have that kind of personality. It doesn't even have to be negative. Just some little summation, putting them in some little box. Why? It's just a habit.

But just think: somebody does or says something, and there's no need to make any judgment about it whatsoever. There's no need to sum it up. There's no need to say that's what the personality is like. There's no need to add anything to it. Thinking about it is one thing, but just notice as you go through the days—in the moment that happens—how it's like, ah, it's so simple. Life can be so much more simple than our mind makes it.

You still know what's happening. You're not stupid. You're not disconnected. You're more connected. When we're caught up in all our judgments—it means this, that's the kind of personality they have, and I wonder what that says about me because I think that about them—that's not simple. That's complicated. And the more that goes on, the less actually connected we are, the less we actually know what's happening. We're living in this world of complication. How long does it take the mind to do that, from seeing to complication? We can get so far so fast.

And in terms of talking about right view, right understanding—when that's what's taking over, all these complications—we believe that. We believe it. And that's not the right understanding that we're talking about with this sense of pure mindfulness.

Another quotation, I think this is also from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "This awareness is a kind of total freedom to receive life just as you experience it in this moment." A total freedom. Don't think of it—explore it through the day. Something comes up in your mind, you think it shouldn't be there because of whatever. This awareness with wise understanding is total freedom. You don't have to have any opinion. Oh, this came up. It's like this now, in space.

When we're talking about the steadiness of mindful awareness through the days here—the sitting, the walking, the eating, the mindful movement, whatever—more and more you'll be noticing this: what's happening in the body, what's happening in the mind. The reaction in the mind to what's happening is just another mental experience. And as we start to and continue to recognize a simple moment of awareness—oh, not liking is like this—and we're not needing to add anything to it or to push it away, just this total freedom to receive life as it is.

I love these quotations. I read them to myself all the time.

This one is from Sayadaw U Vivekananda. A moment of awareness, pure and simple. Just in a moment. Not trying to create anything. Life is coming and going, doing its thing. We don't have to create anything. Not rejecting what is happening. As things happen or stop happening—a sound, a thought, a sensation, my talking, whatever it is—as things happen or stop happening, don't forget awareness.

And acceptance of an experience—say there's a difficult sound, the experience is difficult, there's aversion, and you're struggling with it—you say, "Oh yeah, aversion's like this." Acceptance of the experience: there's a sense of ease that comes from that. Acceptance of an experience does not mean that we let go of being aware.

I don't know if you can quite follow this. Sometimes when we know we're struggling—I must be in reaction, I must be making a judgment about—oh, judgment is like this, ah, just receiving. And that sense of release, that sense of ease. Then sometime, in the back of the mind, because these habits of wrong view are really very subtle, more and more subtle the more we look—

the back of the mind thinks, "Ah, I got it. I got to the place of ease and not struggling. So that was the job. And now I can quit being aware."

We don't exactly say that. But it's like, "Oh, okay, I got to the relaxed place. That's good enough. Now I can take a break." It's as if we're doing a job, getting to some place. But we're not doing a job. We're not doing anything—except remembering, once in a while, that we can remember awareness. And then it starts to get its own momentum.

All the sixth sense experiences are happening by themselves, right? Sitting, walking, seeing, hearing, sensations in the body. Do you have to look very far to notice something happening? Did you have any moments today when you couldn't find something happening to be aware of? You might have. Completely blacked out, nothing happening. But that's a thought already happening. Sometimes we're looking for something we think is *worth* being aware of—and that's a different story. But there's always something. Try to stop things happening. That's like a nightmare.

So life is doing itself, with this receptive quality of connected awareness: "Oh, it's like this now. It's like this now. It's like this now." And with that continuity, we start to allow wisdom to recognize more accurately what's happening, rather than our mistaken assumptions.

I want to talk about this sense of right understanding—or as Alexis mentioned, so-called right view. It's tricky using the word "right," because if you say right, then there's wrong. And if we have right and wrong, the habit—at least in English—right away you have a dichotomy. One's good and one's bad. Then we go for the good and we don't want the bad, and we're into this conflict. It doesn't mean that.

But in terms of accurate view, what's meant by "view" here? Really, in the mind, it's how we recognize and understand ourselves, the world, a particular moment of experience. So a view, in the most obvious way, is a belief—a belief system. We all have them. That's fine when we're aware of it. If I have a belief that I'm a Buddhist and I have ideas about what that means, fine. That's a belief, a view. But when I don't recognize that it's operating, when I'm looking at the world through that view, putting it as a template on experience and evaluating what experience means through that lens—and we don't even know we're doing it—that's how we get out of touch with what's happening.

I'll give an example I often use, which is kind of obvious. But first I want to read this from Ajahn Chah. He said, in a nutshell: "The teaching of the Buddha is to transform one's view."

It is possible for the view to change—view of ourselves, view of experience, view of the world. It only requires looking at things, and then it happens. That's really, in essence, what starts to happen and deepens through the steadiness, the continuity of just one moment of this simplicity of awareness. As Ajahn Sumedho says, just surrender—and it's like this now. Without anything extra. And not looking for anything. It's just like this. It's like this.

It's like this.

And gradually, as the awareness gains its momentum, actually the views that we don't even know we're holding start to show up. They start to be noticed with awareness as another thought, as another assumption, as another belief—which is fine to see. But not seeing is like gravity. We don't think every moment about gravity, we don't walk around thinking, "I'm being held down by gravity." That's just how things are.

I'll give you this example. It's a broad example, but it works down to very subtle levels. I've often used this because it was such a fun experience. Some years ago, I was in Burma with friends, and we were with a group of people giving a dāna offering of bags of rice in a poor village. It's all done very formally there, and it's really lovely. It's not like you just buy some rice and make a pile and people take it. You offer it face to face. It's received. There's blessings. It's just a lovely experience.

So we were in this small village offering in this room. And later—you always take pictures, ten million photographs of every dāna offering there ever was, and then you look at them all—so later we were looking at the photographs from a couple of different cameras. And in some of the photographs, there were these perfectly round light circles. Perfectly round.

We're looking at those, and a couple of our Burmese friends said, "Oh, that means devas were there." Devas are celestial beings, they're bringing luck. Devas are said to be drawn to the wholesome, drawn to generosity, drawn to what is good. So there were devas there, liking it.

Then one of us, who was actually a nun but also a scientist, said, "That's not devas. That means there's a little drop of water, a little drop of moisture in the camera." She was positive. They were positive. And our kind of way of thinking was, "Well, which is the right one?" That would be right view—which is the right one? And if I get the right thing to understand, then I know it. That's how we tend to approach it. And that's what freezes us up.

Just to end this story: our scientist friend, a couple of years later, was in Tiruvannamalai in southern India, where Ramana Maharshi has an ashram. On the full moon night, literally millions of people come to do pradakshina, to walk around the mountain. So she was there on a full moon night, with people walking around—it really could be a million people. And she took a lot of photos; she's a photographer. Then she sent me pictures. They had all these perfect light circles. And she said, "Oh. I know there's no moisture in my camera. Maybe it is devas." Who knows?

So views can change. And the point of right view is not putting our belief system onto our assessment of what's happening. It allows for another possibility to emerge. When we know what it is, it slams the possibility shut. And then we can't see—not in this case, there wasn't suffering—but in our own experience, we can't recognize with awareness how confusion and suffering may be arising in our heart due to a kind of mismatch between our opinion of what's happening, our idea of what's happening, and what's actually happening.

We don't see that because our view—so-called wrong view—is so strong we don't even know it's there.

So awareness, with right view, is simply meeting experience, not through the veils of our preferences and beliefs. Just receiving what is, however it is. And we can't just do that by thinking about it, because we don't know what we don't know.

In the Buddhist teaching, of course, the very strong views that arise from misperception—that we don't recognize accurately because our perception is distorted, overlaid by view—what the Buddha always talked about is that we don't recognize the impermanence, the continual changing nature of all experience. Always. Intellectually we may know it, but intellectually knowing is not the same as meeting experience with wise awareness free from any overlay of our opinion. We don't even know it's an opinion. We might say, "Oh yeah, I know everything's impermanent," but in the moment of seeing, there's an assumption of permanence we don't quite catch. Sometimes. Not always, but sometimes.

These are the examples the Buddha gave, perhaps the most subtle. In experiences of suffering, for example, because everything is changing and we don't realize that, in any moment we place a particular clinging onto some experience: "This is going to do it for me." How often do we do that? We may not say those words, but in our mind it's like, "Ah, now everything's going to be copacetic. I got it." How long does that last?

Finally, we don't see the inherent suffering, the discontent, the dis-ease. We don't recognize it, and we think this beautiful whatever it is—from a brownie to a new relationship, to a new job—this is going to be the thing that makes everything okay. We still don't see that. We see it as beautiful, so we get lost.

And of course the third misperception, which is usually talked about as seeing anything as being a self-existing entity—either me as separate, self-existent Carol, like this, or even this bell as a self-existent bell that's always been like that. One way I heard a

Tibetan Rinpoche talk about this recently—I liked it. He didn't even go to self or not-self. He just said the third misperception is that we think we see things how they are, but we don't see things how they are. And we don't recognize that.

I'm sure many of you have heard of Thich Nhat Hanh. He's passed away now, but he was very famous, and one of the ways he would talk about this particular perception—with the bell, with anything—he said the bell is only made up of non-bell elements. Have you heard him talk like that? Whatever you pick is made up of all other elements, and it ends up connecting with everything in the universe. Where do you stop? So there's the bell, there's the metal, there's the fire that shaped it, there's the people that dug the metal out of the earth. How did the metal get formed? How did the earth get formed? How were the people fed? And the sun and the food and their ancestors and the earth? You go back to the Big Bang. You take anything. And is the Big Bang even the beginning of things? Or in Buddhist cosmology, that's just one out of endless eons. So, who knows? And if you're thinking, "Well, I don't believe that," that's fine. Who cares if we believe it or not?

But the sense is that without recognizing it, our habit is to perceive things as separate, ongoing, self-entities. And from that perspective, that's really one of the misperceptions, one of the inaccurate views, that leads so quickly into confusion and suffering from just any simple experience. Do you know what I mean? All of them do this.

Some people, though, find that the way to see this more clearly is in the changing nature of things, and that starts to become obvious. With steady awareness, you can't not notice change. If awareness is at all steady, there's no way not to notice change. Because how long does one thought last? How long does a sensation stay exactly the same?

I mean, if you're really steadily aware, you'll see that nothing lasts for more than a second. You might think it does, but that's because we quit paying attention and we're thinking about it. "This pain in my knee has been here all day." But if you really just surrender into it, it's changing all the time.

Some people find clarity through the sense of the unsatisfactory nature. You think this soup is going to really set you up for the day. The first bite is so perfect—it's cold and warm and tasty. The second bite, it's nice. The third bite, it's kind of so-so. The fourth bite, you're already thinking about something else. And by the fifth bite, "Yeah, I'm done with this. What's next?" We don't notice that without steady awareness.

And the third one is just that whatever's happening tends to be taken personally. This one is the one that goes so far, so fast. With awareness it's just another thought, another view that's noticed, no problem. It's not that we have to get rid of anything. Remember, awareness with right attitude is not to reject any experience. It's not to make anything happen. It's not to stop paying attention when we feel at ease. It's just to keep noticing.

But notice how with these views that we don't recognize, this is where the confusion and suffering comes so quickly.

Here's an example from a friend of mine. I'm sure you can relate. She went into work, and as she went in, there were a lot of different people in the room. One of her colleagues, as the colleague came in, looked at her with a frown and with a really angry look. But they didn't speak. The colleague went off and was doing their work.

So my friend was like, "Well, what was that about? What's she so angry about?" You see right away—not even a view, just the assumption: she was angry and it was at me. "What did I do?" And the whole day, every time she'd see the colleague from a distance, they didn't have interaction, and the colleague wouldn't be smiling. "Well, what's the big deal?" She's going through, "What did I do? What's her problem? The least she could do is come and talk to me about it." The whole day. Can you imagine? This isn't so far-fetched, right?

This is what we're doing. This is what is occurring. And we think we're present.

In that situation, she might have thought, as she did, that she was aware. She was aware of the look of the person. She was aware of her thoughts. She was aware of being angry. She was aware of feeling hurt. But she wasn't aware of the sense of taking it personally and the assumptions that led to. And that that led to all these different thoughts.

At the end of the day, when she connected with the person, not only was the person not angry, the person hadn't even been looking at her. The person was completely involved in something going on in their life at home and had nothing whatsoever to do with my friend—who had spent the whole day making up incredible stories. And so sure of it.

You see how we do this, right? Can anybody relate to that? This is what we do.

So with awareness, we're not simply going to decide, "I'm not going to get caught in any of these assumptions." No. But we keep bringing the awareness and say, okay, I feel angry now. As we become steady with awareness, we start to notice more—oh, an unpleasant look. And that's our habit. Something's unpleasant, we don't like it, we pull

away, or we get angry, and we take it personally. If she had been smiling, it would have been nice—oh, pleasant. Everything's great. That's pleasant. We feel good, and we take that personally too, though we don't notice it.

This is why the steadiness of awareness is so important. We start to notice: oh, unpleasant look; oh yeah, I feel angry. And then we start to recognize what anger feels like. Remember, we're not rejecting any experience. Any experience that's arising is a doorway, a gateway to awareness. There's no experience that's better to be aware of than another.

The freedom that comes from not getting lost in fear and aversion doesn't come from saying, "Aversion is bad, push it away. I'm going to pretend I'm not angry and make up a different story." I mean, we try that. It works for a little while, but it's not true freedom. Freedom comes from recognizing: oh, aversion feels like this. It's not personal. Through steady awareness, you see how it came about through causes and conditions. It feels unpleasant, it's like this, and it doesn't have to go anywhere. It doesn't have to spend the whole day making up stories.

And then imagine there's no aversion—I'm making this up now—no aversion, you're doing your work, then you happen to catch sight of her again and she still looks really sullen. So you have awareness. Oh look, she looks sullen. Oh no, is she mad at me? Oh, look at that again—taking it personally. And you just see that. You don't even try to stop it, but you see it. It changes everything.

This is where it becomes—it's really sometimes fun, actually—to just be taking refuge in the awareness and watching what comes up, feeling how easeful it is not to make a "me" out of all of it. Not to have to believe it, but to see how it comes to be.

I think Alexis mentioned this, but I'll give you the same example from myself. You know the certain views we have of our personality? I think he mentioned self-judgment, being down on yourself. It's such a habit. And I think as we're looking, we can see how particular habits of our personality have been formed.

For me, self-judging, lack of self-worth—that's a strong one. Going through my life, I can see how it was created through experience. I know how it was created. I know how it's been fed. And I'm really familiar now with how it feels when it comes up. I can recognize it with awareness because it's so habitual. It's a habit based on conditions. The particular conditions present themselves, you push the button, and self-judgment might come up.

It doesn't mean every time it does. Sometimes the condition might be that I'm tired and somebody looks grumpy. Or I could go home and be tired and think, oh, I don't like how I said that. And that could be the end of it. Or that could continue, depending on whether I'm tired and awareness isn't very strong and there's aversion, or a lot of other things happened, or I got a nasty email. All these things come together.

But recognizing how it feels—and it's so clear as you get familiar with your habits and maintain that steady awareness—we can say, oh, I don't like how I said that. Oh, I don't like how I said that. Ah, self-judging feels like this. It's simply the next arising experience. It's arising due to causes and conditions. When it's recognized as simply another condition, it doesn't have to go away. It stops being a problem.

It doesn't start being pleasant. But we're not here to get rid of unpleasant. And secretly, in the back of your mind, keep looking—because it slips in there: *This shouldn't be happening. It's unpleasant.*

Well, every experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in our mind. And they are not all going to start being pleasant. Ever. So get over it.

Unpleasant doesn't have to be a problem. *Oh yeah, unpleasant is like this.* And I recognize that's what's happening. Actually, I don't recognize—awareness recognizes. It's like, *ah.*

We start to... it's not really "we" doing this. I don't know how else to use language. We start to and continue to take refuge in the awareness rather than in the experience of what's happening, what it means about me, or my ideas about what's happening. And sometimes when we really do this—*oh yes, the awareness of self-judgment is like this*—it can feel like the trust, the attention, is really landing in the awareness, because there's a sense of ease even though the thing is still happening.

But for most of us, this isn't our habit. And as I said, awareness is so difficult precisely because it's so—you don't notice it, right? It's always available. It's so close, so much a part of our experience, that we really don't even notice it most of the time. We don't pay attention to it. It doesn't have all the juice. Self-judging? That has some juice. If we want that kind of juice, we can keep feeding it. Awareness is like this—quiet, unassuming. It's hard for us to trust, but that's what these retreats are about.

This isn't about having some great experience by the end. When I go on retreat now, for however long, even if in the back of my mind there's something like—not that *this* will be the one that does it, okay, finally I got over that—but maybe something good will

happen, right? Something. I'll feel a little... whatever at the end. But really, it's like this: six days or three weeks or a month or however long of many, many moments to practice recognizing awareness. What a gift.

It doesn't matter what's happening. You're having some really lovely, blissful, quiet experience? Great—awareness. You're walking up and down in a fury? Great—awareness. Whatever is happening all day, in all our activities, each moment is a new moment to practice recognizing awareness.

And each moment, there's no big thing that happens. We don't get lights going off. So we tend to—often it's neutral. And we like pleasant, we don't like unpleasant. But neutral? Boring. Something needs to happen. And often nothing's happening externally, so we make up something internally.

Watch. When I first saw this, I couldn't believe it. I watched my mind on retreat make up a completely unpleasant, suffering scenario of what might happen when I went home—if I saw this person and they said that. Anger. Hurt. On and on.

But at least there was a sense of me getting upset. It was better than calm. Aware and calm. It's like this. Just to notice that.

So we start to really learn how to have confidence in awareness, and it takes our willingness to keep practicing. Again, with Ajahn Sumedho, I learned so much from him about this particular area because it's what he talks about all the time. Some years ago I was at a retreat with him somewhere, and he was in a group—it was a bunch of teachers, so maybe he was letting his hair down, though someone can't really let his hair down because he doesn't have any.

But anyway, he was talking about how even then, after all these years of really knowing the freedom of this resting with awareness, seeing the impermanent nature of all experience, being fully with it but not taking it personally, knowing that deeply—even so, he was going through a period of really a lot of difficulty at Amaravati, opinions and decisions. And he said, "You know, I'm the abbot and I'm making the decisions, and a lot of people really hate me, don't like me." He said, "My personality doesn't like that. It's really hard, really feeling all the things I feel." And he said he was going through that, and then at some point he made a really firm commitment to himself, a conscious vow in a way, to have confidence in receptive awareness.

He knew that, of course, but there's a way we get lost in our stuff when it's really strong, when external experiences are really difficult, eliciting really difficult internal experience. Caught in our stuff—caught in grief, anger, really resisting or blaming, and really suffering from it. So he made this really strong commitment to remember to have confidence in awareness.

That really means when you're feeling grief or anger or self-righteousness—self-righteousness is a very difficult one—to have confidence in awareness means you're aware of it. "Oh, self-righteous, grief, I see you." But that's not it. Awareness is just right here in it. Self-righteous grief feels like this. Really drop in, but it's awareness receiving rather than being in it. I can't really say it better than that, but explore it. It really feels different. There stops being a fear in that moment of feeling the thing, because it's just what it is, and awareness receives whatever it is.

Once we can see that in the little things, the trust, the confidence in the liberating power of this steady awareness grows in our heart and mind because it becomes our experience, this conscious awareness.

Anam Thubten, a Tibetan Rinpoche, talks about this just dropping into awareness. He says, "Dropping into being the pure witness to whatever is being experienced without holding on to or rejecting any aspect. Dropping into being the pure witness." He was saying that this is true nonviolence, true ahimsa. When we're really dropping into our experience fully like that, the effect is nonviolence, compassion, openness, non-separation. That's what allows compassion to arise, not the fear of what we're experiencing.

But we don't have to go to that level. We simply practice remembering awareness of just this moment. How's the body feeling? Hearing is happening. There's some thought. You don't go looking for anything—just remembering awareness.

Thich Nhat Hanh calls it coming home. I was listening to a talk of his. Since he died a few years ago, YouTube has so much material—it's amazing. Sometimes I want a little twenty-minute dharma hit, and there's a lot of Thich Nhat Hanh teachings available. Some I like more than others. In this one, he was talking about loneliness and the illusion of connection. He was discussing devices—this was about ten years ago—and how we think we're so connected. We're texting this person and emailing that person.

I'll think, "Oh, in a single day I was connected with people in Singapore, someone in Burma, someone in Indonesia, a couple of friends in Switzerland, then my friends here." And this is an idea—so I'm really connected. But he's saying that's the illusion of connection.

Meanwhile, we're walking and we don't even know we're walking. Maybe you're making your dinner, but thinking about how you're connected with someone in Singapore. You're not actually connected with either one. It's an illusion.

So he talks about the act of just sitting down and being here fully in your body—that's connecting. Feeling your breath, feeling aversion, really present with it—that is connecting. That's really the miracle of mindfulness as he talks about it.

You come home. And you find, as we go through the days here with awareness, in a moment of really connecting—say, with breathing—we're not trying to hold on to it, we're just feeling it. Or you're walking, and ah, just landing, feeling the feet. Awareness doesn't have to be tightly focused.

As we start and continue to just trust this relaxing into awareness, something shifts. "Oh yeah, I'm just walking, coming home." Suddenly we start noticing more. You might notice other feelings in your body. You start to notice thoughts that are coming. You suddenly notice hearing, or feel the coolness of the air, or smell the rain. You're not looking for any of that. But as we take more refuge in awareness, the experience of the world starts to open up—internally, externally—because we're not choosing. He really calls this coming home. And that, I often think, is what awareness is about: not trying to achieve, just being here.

I want to end with one short quotation from Upasika Kee, who was a Thai laywoman from the last century. There's a book of her teachings called *Pure and Simple*. She was a very powerful yogi—and tough. These Thai forest women and men are serious practitioners, as we are.

She said: "What is, is. What is not, is not. No need to add anything extra."

If we could live that simply, just in one moment. What is, is. What is not, is not. No need to add anything extra.

And just in this moment, remember awareness. That's it.

If you're falling on your face and you need to go to sleep, you go to sleep. It's not about what it looks like to anybody else, or even to you. What's happening now?

Okay. Good night.

CHAPTER 194

Steady Recognition of Awareness Untangles Confusion

Carol Wilson · 51 min

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk from a U Tejaniya-style retreat, Carol Wilson reflects on the tenderness of human existence and our universal longing for happiness. Drawing from the Buddha's compassionate motivation to teach, she examines how moment-to-moment mistaken perception—rooted in moha (delusion)—gives rise to the afflictive emotions and cognitive obscurations that keep us spinning in confusion.*
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> *Wilson explores the practice of cultivating steady, receptive awareness as taught in Sayadaw U Tejaniya's approach, emphasizing that we don't create awareness but simply learn to recognize it. She illuminates how vedanā (feeling tone) triggers rapid chains of reactivity: from a simple sensation like cold, the mind quickly constructs entire worlds of wanting, aversion, and self-centered thinking. Quoting Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, she reframes saṃsāra not as a place but as a process—the tendency to keep creating worlds and moving into them.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for retreat practice: observing how selective perception operates when the mind is "obsessed and oppressed" by ill-will or craving, noticing the arising and cessation of mental worlds, and recognizing how awareness itself remains untouched by what it observes. Wilson draws on teachings from the Dalai Lama, Mingyur Rinpoche, Ajahn Sumedho, and Anam Thubten to show how steady awareness naturally gives access to love, compassion, and our innate dignity—qualities that emerge when we stop being servants to greed and aversion.*

Just sharing in the groups over the last couple of days, but today particularly, I was feeling something I often feel—the tenderness, really, of being human, of living this life as a human being on this earth.

It's not easy. Being human, there's a lot of tenderness to it, but there's a lot of beauty and love and kindness. There's also sorrow, difficulty, loss, pain, fear—all of that. It's part of being human. There's no way around it. It's part of what we signed up for without knowing it when we took birth in this form.

Sometimes you just feel it more tenderly than others. And the sense of all of us here—I mean, all humans—we want to be happy. We want to live with ease. As Mingyur Rinpoche says, everything we do, every move we make is in the pursuit of trying to be happy. And that's, of course, really normal, natural.

I was feeling the tenderness of that and also really appreciating all of us here in this situation, sharing in the groups and in your practice. Just sitting here in this last sitting and looking out at all the people sitting so quietly, all kinds of stuff going on inside. I don't know all your intentions, so I'm projecting, but assuming there has to be some level of really sincere intention, motivation for understanding, for freedom, for ease. You couldn't even still be here after four days of doing this without that really honest, sincere intention. People can't stand it otherwise. And it's really touching.

I remember a friend's mother said to me once, "What do you do? You mean there's no TVs?" It's like a whole other level of reality.

So it's natural that we want to be happy. And I'm sure all of you know this—I'm not saying anything you don't already know—but how the Buddha was really moved out of compassion to teach when at first he was thinking it's too much trouble to try and really share what he had seen in his awakening because it's subtle and hard to see. People won't get it. And he was really moved, this is the story, moved to compassion. With his all-seeing mind he could see how much everyone wants to be happy, and in trying to do so, is doing so from confusion, from misunderstanding, and doing the very things that keep us spinning in the confusion, in the suffering, and not really knowing why we're doing that.

Do you get a feeling for that sometimes here? We're really sincere, and we might have a little moment of really being free—you see the potential—and then we're spinning in the stupid story again. Really in it. Not just "oh, I'm sort of in it," but really in it. Or am I the only one?

It's kind of a mystery. So there's a tenderness to that, for me, with our sincere motivation and the effort and the willingness to be here and all the wholesomeness, all the beauty. And it just calls forth so much patience and willingness to look and willingness to really walk this path. It's not easy. This is compassion.

This is the first noble truth, of course, of the Buddha—that this unsatisfactoriness in life, this being human, includes the beauty and it includes the difficult. And the beauty also doesn't last. The difficult also doesn't last. Nothing lasts. Nothing's steady state.

But the suffering that awakening frees us from—and I know we're all knowing this now—isn't what we would originally think in the beginning of our practice, or when we're doing, as Mingyur says, just trying to be happy. The idea of happiness, the idea of freedom of heart and mind, as we've said before, is basically this: difficult stuff should stop happening. I shouldn't feel grief or loss or whatever.

And so the freedom that really the Buddha's teaching and awareness is taking us into is different from that. It's not a freedom that gets rid of the stuff we don't like, but it gets rid of the sense of me not liking. That's a whole different angle. We can't think our way into it.

But you'll recognize it when I say it, because I think I've already said it fifteen times.

All of our difficulties—this is the Dalai Lama now—all of our difficulties come from our moment-to-moment mistaken perception. *Perception* is a very specific term in the Pali. It really means how we recognize experience in a moment. We recognize a person, we recognize a clock, we recognize this as a retreat—that's perception. Moment-to-moment mistaken perception. Because we don't recognize accurately.

And so this is one aspect of the *moha*, the delusion that Alexis mentioned. We recognize inaccurately. And this ignorance, this inaccurate recognition—this is still the Dalai Lama—is really what feeds the 84,000 destructive, obstructive emotions, the afflictive emotions, and the cognitive obscurations.

I like that phrase: the afflictive emotions. And I like how they put in 84,000. But we can stay with greed, hatred, and confusion—that's enough. The 84,000 are just subsets of that. And cognitive obscurations. I like that because it's not always afflictive emotions that are confusing us. It's not always that we're feeling aversion, or we're in greed. We can feel quite balanced. But the *moha*, the confusion, the not recognizing accurately, can still be clouding the consciousness, the *citta*, and producing inaccurate perceptions.

And why is that such a problem? That's what we'll go into—how these inaccurate perceptions feed our confusion and reactivity, and we get so lost so fast from what's actually true.

In any particular moment where the mind, the heart, consciousness is present and clear—and everything's moment to moment, right?—there are moments when the consciousness isn't obscured, when we're not caught in greed or aversion or resistance, when it's just clear and no confusion is emanating from that. In those moments, there are still different qualities of mental states in the consciousness, but those are when the beautiful, wholesome qualities shine out. It could be equanimity. It could be calm. It could be loving-kindness. It could be compassion. It isn't always like some big, over-

whelming emotion. It could be very subtle and peaceful. Or just peace. Just the heart-mind that isn't fabricating some whole story of problems. Just that moment of peace. And then it's over and we jump into the next thing, which I'll talk about. But this is what naturally shines out—the beautiful qualities.

So the path of our practice here, we're talking about really recognizing and cultivating the recognition of this receptive, natural, conscious awareness, just the simplicity of steady awareness. Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a great Tibetan Dzogchen master, said our dharma practice works in two ways. One is to recognize the nature of the non-deluded mind, the non-deluded heart. And the other aspect is discovering how the deluded mind works. Both of these are going on.

A lot of the time here, what we're doing is learning, discovering how the deluded mind works. But we maybe don't really recognize that we're learning that. We're just hating that it's here and wanting to get rid of it. But the simplicity of how it works—it's not that wisdom is allowed to arise because of the steadiness of receptive awareness and we get to sidestep the difficult stuff. The way that the wisdom really arises as to how the deluded mind works is by clear recognition, by—I hate to tell you, but you already know this—hanging out with the difficult stuff.

And it's so often on retreat, or in life—but we'll stick with retreat because it's a little microcosm. It's the same mind, right? Whatever's coming up here, the way the mind works on retreat, it works the same way in our daily life. We just have a little more space to explore it here.

But so often, you know, we really feel like the practice isn't going well, or we're hopeless, or we're caught in aversion, or we can't recognize awareness. Or it was going great, but now we're bored out of our mind—and what are we going to do? Whatever, 84,000 choices.

And going back to what the Buddha saw in the beginning, our go-to habit is: *this is wrong*. And once I understand this, it's going to stop happening, and I've got to do something to get rid of it, right? That's just where we go. But it's not like that. It's really by being with. It's like you had a choice—you don't have a choice. You're being with it because it's here.

And when we say again, really accept the moment—because this moment could not possibly be different. Everything's come together. All the conditions that have come together to make this moment, it's like this. How can we wish this moment was different?

How the mind, the heart, the awareness meets this moment is setting up conditions for the next moment. But this moment is as it is. How do you know it should happen? Because it is. Because all the conditions have come together.

And so it's really by—when these difficulties or unwanted experiences arise... I think it's Joko Beck, maybe it's Pema Chödrön. Instead of thinking of it as dislike, just think of it as unwanted. And that's true, right? This is an unwanted experience that's happening right now.

But the steady awareness—that hopefully you've noticed, because we say this no matter what you tell us, right? We just say, okay, be aware of it. How can you bring awareness into this? Receive it with awareness. That quality of awareness that isn't judging is what allows for the wisdom to start to come in, to begin to understand how the deluded mind works. If we just think we're waiting for it to go away and then it gets the way we want it and we can just be happy in that, we've learned nothing. We've learned nothing.

And for me—and it's not only for me—I've had long retreats. There are periods on retreats that are sometimes really difficult. Sometimes there are moments that are difficult, moments that aren't. But sometimes, on some retreats, we call them dukkha retreats. If you look back, if you've had a lot of years of practice, I'm sure you can look back and think of particular retreats where you're like, "What is going on? Dukkha, dukkha, dukkha." And they're not all like that.

And in the middle of it, even though you're really bringing awareness, you're practicing, it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. But our subtle background idea is still: if I'm aware right, it's going to go away, right? How many times do you say, "I was really, really mindful, but it's still here"? It slips in.

And you can't really tell, mostly, in the midst of really learning to bring awareness into the difficulty. You don't really see until kind of later the effects of that. I mean, sometimes for me, after a period that was really difficult—and maybe it could be in life too, it doesn't have to be on retreat. Bringing the same awareness in life, it's the same. And you may think—you can't even tell sometimes. Are you just spinning in it? Are you just kicking your heels and caught and spinning? Or are you really learning how to bring awareness, how to meet it differently? And sometimes you can tell—a moment of seeing it differently—but a lot of times you can't until later.

Sometimes a similar thing comes up, or you find yourself in another situation, and you see that there's a level of freedom from identification with that experience. The experience doesn't necessarily stop arising, but there's a different relationship to it—a kind of freedom from being so identified with it. It's not that you can clock how you're learning and how much freedom is coming, but you'll notice it later.

Learning to trust this more and more can give us a sense of faith, confidence. When the garden isn't growing as fast as you want—and it never will, as Nisha was saying last night—we can have confidence that the steady, non-judging awareness, just remembering that, is the only personal effort we can put in with this style. But something is happening. Something is happening. It's not in the way that we think, because the way we think is based on misperceptions.

So let me say a bit more about awareness. This is from Ajahn Tejaniya, trying to describe how this receptive awareness—I mean, it's just part of us—is like being the pure witness to whatever is being experienced. With difficulty, sometimes that's hard, but also with the beautiful, still being the pure witness without holding onto or rejecting experience.

It's really a different sense of being fully present, really being the witness to the suffering in ourselves or in the world, really feeling it. It's not like a removed, "Oh yes, that's suffering. Oh yes, this is happiness. I'm the pure witness." It's feeling it. And the more that receptive awareness is really receiving, we actually feel it more completely, but without rejecting and without holding onto experience. This is the doorway. This is what allows for compassion for ourselves, compassion for others.

I was listening to a talk online from a Tibetan Lama, and someone asked him at the end, "Can you say in one word what the Buddhist teachings are?" Which, you know, that's kind of a silly question. But I thought he came up with a great answer. He thought about it a minute, and he said, "Empathy."

Empathy is really—and then he talked about it—but really that comes from just being able to be with the suffering, to be with the beauty. When there's that empathy of feeling it in ourselves, we're naturally able to be with it with others. Actually, the sense of self and other isn't so much there when there's empathy. I thought that was a lovely answer.

As we cultivate trust in the simplicity of awareness—we don't create the awareness, we just learn to recognize it—this is what makes a vast understanding and response to life become possible. We start to see through our misperception of being separate, of being an independent me. We're not so much constructing the world through that mis-

perception, that self-centered lens. That's really the ultimate misperception that gives rise to all the others—this self-centered sense of me, separate from others, where everything refers back to me.

Sogyal Rinpoche once gave an example of this sense of everything referring back to me. He described how in Tibet, when we're going to build a house and we're making the footprint for the house, we start with the center stake. Then we have a long measuring rope, and from that stake we measure all the way around to get the dimensions of the house. He said that's like the sense of me—the center point of everything, and everything is measured from that sense of me. That's really the ultimate misperception.

This practice addresses the habit that leads to the habits that blind us: the habits of wanting, the habits of resistance, of aversion, the habit of reflecting that everything's about me. This is really where we get lost, from that misperception. And we can't just talk our way out of it because it's unconscious. Like I said, it's like gravity. I don't think "me"—something just happens and me noticing that happens.

Joseph tells a story that illustrates this perfectly. It's small, but it shows what happens. He was sitting a retreat here himself, and you know, he's tall, so he stands out. Plus people know who he is, so everyone's looking at him. He was standing second in the lunch line, just like here, and the first person went to help themselves to the soup or whatever, and the big pot still had the lid on it. So the person picked up the lid, and it dropped on the floor and made a heck of a racket. You can imagine, when you're all standing in silence—a heck of a racket. And everyone's looking, because everyone's lined up. He says his first thought was that he wanted to turn around and go, "It wasn't me."

That's what we do. Whatever's going on, how does it affect me? That's the point.

In a moment, in any moment, when there's that receptive awareness—really present with what's happening, that sense of empathy—then you may think, well, you're not doing anything. You're just receiving. But when the perception isn't clouded by confusion, as Anam Thubten says, the heart will know what to do. We don't have to think, "Oh no, if I'm just being receptive, I can't function, I can't do anything." No, no. The heart will know what to do. It becomes clear. It's just obvious. So learning to trust that.

There are lots of ways of talking about how we get so far away so quickly from just the simplicity of experience. Tonight I'm focusing mostly on thoughts, because that's a good way we get lost. But let's start with Vedana—you know Vedana, feeling tone, right? Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Any sense experience—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, or emotions—the mind, the citta, experiences it as having a quality

of pleasantness or unpleasantness or something kind of neutral. This is subtle and quick, this feeling tone, Vedana, something the Buddha talked about. And I think it's so brilliant that he could notice that. Because as you know already, and I'll say again, it leads so quickly into so much confusion when we don't notice it.

Ajahn Sumedho puts it this way: we live as sensitive forms. This is back to the tenderness of being human in my mind. We live as sensitive forms. In other words, there's constant Vedana, feeling tone, arising in our mind—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—with every sense experience. And that's constantly, twenty-four seven. It doesn't take a break. So we're really sensitive forms. The hearing is neutral, or it's a little bit pleasant, or it's a little bit unpleasant. We don't notice it most of the time, but this is going on. This is our experience. The sense doors—it comes with a sense of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It just makes a little impact in the mind.

We often don't notice, and often it's just subtle enough that nothing comes from it. But because it's so frequent—it's so frequent—there are plenty of times when it makes a bit more of an impact. Say it's really cold. You go out and it's really cold and windy, and it really makes an impact. You notice. Maybe you don't recognize the unpleasantness, but you notice it. Or maybe you love it when it's cold, so it's pleasant. It's not like the coldness is inherently pleasant or unpleasant. It's how it's impacting this particular being at this particular moment.

With the right information, or right view as Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say, there'd be a sense of: coldness. It's unpleasant. Cold is like this. The body's feeling shivering. Shivering is like this. It's just what's happening. But with misperception, which just comes in right away, it becomes "I'm so cold." Do you get the difference? It's adding a whole "I'm." Cold feels like this, but "I'm cold"—which goes almost immediately to "I don't like it. I didn't bring the right clothes. What's the matter with the weather in Massachusetts? What is going on?"

In two seconds, you're into disaster. It takes no time. Me, me, me—and then you see someone else walk by with a really good down coat, and you don't have one, and then you're into all this wanting. Then you're saying, "Okay, okay, I'm really trying to boycott Amazon, but I'd really like to go back to my room and order a down coat, because I could get it here by tomorrow."

If you've been here on the three-month retreat—I've been teaching it often, not recently, but for thirty, thirty-five years—the last some years, it's been a really different experience. You come in and there are piles of packages in the foyer halfway through. Where are these coming from? And then you realize the retreatants are back in their

rooms ordering stuff online, and it's getting delivered. This is really true. It used to be that occasionally somebody's partner would send them some cookies, but now it's unbelievable.

That's a digression. But that's where we go. That's where we go. You could be there, you've walked out, you've felt cold, and thirty seconds later we're down that rabbit hole. That's how fast it happens—when we're not recognizing accurately the misperception that "this cold is happening to me." That "me" has a sense of clinging, a sense of tension. Not to judge it, but just to notice the difference, how it feels. "Oh, cold is like this" versus "I'm so cold." Playing with that, noticing how it works.

And of course, as I said, it doesn't stop there. As soon as there's "me," there's pleasant or unpleasant. Pleasant is the same: "That would be so nice. Let me go get more." There's a judging of experience. Pleasant experience is good—it's supposed to happen, it's normal. Unpleasant—there's something wrong with it, or with me. Something to do. And it just spirals, spirals, spirals.

That's the afflictive emotions getting going, right? And as soon as they're getting going, you can't actually recognize what's really happening. This is where we're talking about just what's really happening. "It's so cold and I don't know what to do and I have leftover bronchial stuff from when I had bronchitis in December..." And if you ask, "What's happening?"—"Well, I have bronchial problems and I might get sick." But what's actually happening? Oh, there's tickling. An aversion. That's what's happening.

It's really hard—how hard it is—to simply rest in "Ah, it feels like this." Because it feels so real. This is where we really get lost, if we can't just appreciate the simplicity of awareness. The thoughts take us. And so quickly, so quickly, we create a world in our thoughts, right? And we believe it. We believe the description. Maybe I'm not the only one—the mind comes up with a description of thought, of liking, of disliking, of what's wrong with this, of how it should be, what's really going on. And then, without even recognizing it—because it was ten seconds from feeling the cold or hearing an unpleasant sound to "How can that possibly be happening?"—we're gone. And we really don't even know that that's just a created world of thought. We really think that the mental thoughts are the actual description of what's happening.

Have you heard this? A long time ago I mentioned that Audubon, who was famous for recognizing and drawing birds, said: if there's a drawing of a bird and there's the actual bird, and the drawing is different from the bird, believe the bird.

And so we're learning, with awareness, what's happening in just the simple sense experiences. Come home, as Thich Nhat Hanh says. It's an act of real wisdom to just not have to sit. You can walk. You can be doing the dishes, whatever you're doing. Come home to just this moment—which includes thinking, but recognizing thinking rather than being lost in the content.

What's happening now?

But we get so lost. You probably also know this story about long ago, a monk who was living in a cave, and he painted a picture of a tiger on the wall. It was so realistic that when he turned around and then turned back, it scared him. That's what we do. That's what happens.

As Ajahn Sumedho says, we concoct these worlds based on the reaction to pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. That actually colors our perception. A whole story comes up, and we're inhabiting that world without even knowing it. We think that's the world.

This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, an American monk in the Thai tradition. Perhaps you know who he is—he's one of maybe three living translators from the Pali into English of the Theravada Buddhist texts. He has a monastery in Southern California.

He's talking about samsara. You know the word samsara? It's usually translated as "wandering on," which is considered this life. He says samsara literally means wandering on. Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live. We often say, "Oh, samsara—there's a lot of suffering in samsara." Samsara is about birth and death, suffering. It's just a place, the place we leave when we go to nibbana.

But in the early Buddhist texts, samsara is the answer not to "where are we?" but to "what are we doing?" I love that. What are we doing? Samsara is not a place—it's a process, the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart—the world of being really cold and needing a better down coat—then you come inside and that world is gone. We create another one and go there.

At the same time, you're bumping into all the other people who are creating their own worlds. They're living in their world; you're living in your world. We're bumping into each other. And lost in these worlds, we don't even know what's really happening. This is the essential misperception. This is how we get so far so fast.

Ajahn Sumedho says this is like a concoction. We concoct the whole world of being cold, or coming back in and being in a nice warm retreat center and feeling safe. Or you come in and it's a nice warm retreat center, but then somebody walks past and you think they're looking at you with a stink eye, as they say in Hawaii. And you think,

"What did I do?" You don't feel safe. What's going on? You can't talk. Then you've got a whole other world in two seconds, and they don't even know you were there—they're in their own world. Who knows what their world is?

But we don't even think that. We just think we're in our own world. We're concocting these worlds again and again and again, concocted based on the perception, based on the feeling tone, the mental states that come up, the thoughts that come up about it, the concepts. We're living in our own world without even knowing it. So complicated, so quickly.

As the Buddha said when he talked about this: what we feel—vedana—what we feel, that we perceive. You walk out, unpleasant cold, you perceive it as cold, or however you perceive it. A hell realm of freezing, the cold hells, whatever you perceive. It's amazing, it's invigorating—whatever your perception is. Just like that.

The Buddha taught that what we perceive, we think about. And what we think about without awareness, we complicate. This is still from the Buddha. We complicate with associations—all our associations of coldness—with memories, all our memories of coldness, and everything we've ever read.

All our concepts, all our ideas—all of this happens from thinking in the blink of an eye, doesn't it? And then the thoughts keep going, going, going. And then the Buddha said these thoughts turn around and assail a person. They turn around and attack us, basically. Just like painting the tiger on the wall. It's exactly that.

This is what we do again and again and again without recognizing it. We wonder—we might think we're mindful, but if there's not the steady awareness that we've been talking about, we might jump in and see aversion to the cold and then not notice all those worlds. And a little bit later, we're eating in the dining room and we're in another whole world of greed or shame or judgment or embarrassment—whatever the particular world we're in—without quite recognizing it again.

Ajahn Sumedho says we don't often recognize how flighty our minds are. I'd say our attention is so flighty. Without the steadiness of awareness, we don't notice the cessation of one world and the beginning of another. That's why we're talking about this: when we have steady awareness, you really can see. You can see this whole process, like I was just describing. When I described the cold, you could see how that happens.

So with steady awareness, not abandoning awareness no matter what happens, we start to see these worlds come together and fall apart, come together and fall apart. The more we see that, the less able we are to keep identifying with each one. I mean, it's exhausting, isn't it?

Look tonight. Look tomorrow. Just notice the pleasantness or unpleasantness. Notice as the thoughts start creating a world. Notice the world that comes up, and keep noticing when it dissipates. Or maybe you don't actually see it end, but later you notice it's gone. Notice that. And how many in a day?

If we're identifying with each one: this one's happy, this one's not happy, this is pleasant, this is not happy, I'm so ashamed, I feel incredible, I'm so bored, I'm feeling peaceful, this is the stupidest thing I've ever done, this is so amazing, how could anyone not... It's exhausting. And that could be in ten minutes. It's exhausting when we're identified with each of those. But it's fascinating when we're really exploring it and not taking it personally.

Time goes fast when you're the one talking. Not so much for you. It's two different experiences.

One point I wanted to make about this: why sometimes it seems like we spend—those of us up here—a lot more time pointing to the kilesas, the difficult qualities of mind: greed, hatred, confusion. We talk about the beautiful qualities too, but we really give an emphasis to awareness recognizing when the heart, when the mind, when consciousness is clouded by kilesa.

Recognizing that wanting is present is very different from not recognizing it. Or aversion. Because we can be mindful—I can say I'm mindful, and I'm going to keep using the cold because it's easier than making up a new example every time. I can be aware of cold and think I'm quite mindful, quite aware. There's awareness, but not noticing the reactivity, not noticing the aversion. We all know this, right? It's like there's layers. Cold, cold, cold—and then the mind gets going. Then you realize you're caught in something, the whole story. What's happening?

Oh, it's really unpleasant. Aversion's like this.

But without recognizing—when awareness doesn't recognize that we're seeing through the lens of aversion or the lens of greed—that's where we get so caught. The whole story keeps going and we can't see what to do. We can't act appropriately. We can't recognize accurately.

And this is from the Buddha. I think without knowing, we don't recognize that wanting or clinging, aversion, resistance, or the sense of me—everything filtered through *me*—is present. That masks what's actually occurring. And this is really the basic misperception we're running around with in our life. We're just not quite seeing what's really happening.

The Buddha said, "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill-will..." And that's how it feels. Our heart-mind is oppressed when there's ill-will, when there's aversion in it—oppressed by craving, oppressed by delusion. The sense of me, me, me at the center of everything—it's an oppression if you really feel it. When that's happening, one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill-will. What's the escape from arisen craving? What's the escape from arisen delusion? We don't understand that. And on that occasion, one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both.

He's really saying that when we don't see that those are present, we can't recognize accurately, and we can't see what's for our own good or what's for the good of others. Why? Even if we think we're well-meaning, even if we want to do something to help someone else in the world, but it's coming from greed or anger or self-righteousness—we just can't see clearly.

So explore here. That's what retreats are good for. They give us little examples to explore. Notice. It could be fun, really, going through the day.

If you start to notice, say there's some greed. Pick food—pick something easy, right? Say there's a smell coming, and you think, "Oh, there's going to be mashed potatoes." I don't know where that came from. Mashed potatoes, and you really like mashed potatoes, and it's ten in the morning. You feel the greed coming up. And you notice the greed coming up, sort of, but then you're caught in it. Notice how when there's greed coloring the perception, it affects what we see.

With greed, it's sort of like—you know, there's this saying: a pickpocket only sees a saint's pockets, doesn't see that the person's a saint. You see what the greed wants and you don't see anything else. You have that sense—there's only two bananas left and there's four people in front of you, and you want to just elbow them aside. You try to think of a way: "How can I just go by and take..." It's like you don't care about anything else. The greed blinds what you see. Or the aversion works in the same way. Selective perception, I call it.

Notice if there's something here—a sound, or God forbid, someone, or something—and the mind has just got an aversion going. Notice how that thing seems to be ubiquitous. It's everywhere. If it's a particular sound, that's all you hear.

Sometimes we get locked onto someone we don't even know. We get what we call Vipassana romance or Vipassana vendetta. And it's nothing about the person, because you don't even know them. But there's something about them that gets wanting going,

or aversion going. Either way, you see that person all the time. You know, you think, "They're deliberately putting themselves in my way." And people really—I mean, seriously—we don't even notice other stuff.

And this happens within yourself, when you're feeling self-judgment. There's a wear of self-judgment, but you're really believing it. So that's aversion.

Aversion in the mind. And then what aspects of thoughts come up, what memories arise that you believe? If you think, "Well, but I did that good thing," it's like, "Oh, that's a crock. No. What's really true are all the bad things you could list about yourself." And you say, "Well, let me say some good things," and you go, "No, that's not true." The perception is just glomming onto the negative. And that's all we can see.

That's how, when the mind is obsessed or oppressed with aversion, it can't see clearly. There's some beautiful, there's some unpleasant, there's this, there's that—it's changing every moment. We don't see that. How often do you come in and say, "This has been going on all day"? Coming here, you've been feeling this boredom, or whatever it is, all day. And in that moment, we think that.

When you notice yourself thinking it, check in and see. How long, in steady state, did that actually last before a moment came in thinking, "I wonder what's for lunch?" "Oh, but I'm really such a horrible person. I'm really done today." "Well, you know, it's kind of nice out. Maybe I'll go for a walk." "Oh, god, I'm really so..."

Notice selective perception and see how it works. This is awareness helping us see how the deluded mind operates. It works the same in the world, in big things. And I won't go into any content, but I can see there are people I don't want to see anything good about. I really don't want to let in anything good. I can see my mind doing that. They're all bad. They're all good. And that's just not true for anything. Selective perception blinds us. And mostly, it's about ourselves. We don't notice the cessation.

So watch yourself through the day here. Play with it. Notice with simple choices as you go through the day—we get used to bringing awareness into the quality of our mind. I often say, as an example, when you go into the dining room, you have to pick where you're going to sit. Notice how the mind chooses that. There's no right or wrong. But you might notice: Is it wanting that leads the show? "Oh, that's a good seat over there where I can see out the window and no one's sitting across from me." Or is it aversion? "I don't want to sit next to that person, and here I don't like to sit because it's too close to the line, and that's too close to the tea station." Or is it that you just don't even know where you're sitting—you just plop down? Explore it. It's not right or wrong.

Explore going through the line. Explore thinking, "Should I take an extra apple and save it for nine o'clock tonight when I'm really tired?" And how many apples do you pile up because you save them? And then they're rotting back there. Notice what you go through. It's really interesting.

If you don't make it right or wrong, the awareness starts to get more subtle, more tuned in, really seeing. You can see wanting arise, the impulse to save the apple. Whether you save it or not doesn't matter. But we don't have to be servants of the greed, of the wanting. We can see it.

We can feel wantings like this. If we don't see them, they do their job, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says. Wanting has one job, and it does it well. Aversion has its own job, and does it well. But when we bring in awareness, we can see how these forces act. They do their jobs, but they come and they cease. We don't have to be driven by them. We don't have to be afraid of them.

This is why the steadiness of awareness really starts to help us see through these stories, these different worlds that are being created. We can see them being created—that's okay. But we can see them coming, and we can see them falling away. We don't have to be caught in them.

I'll end with something Anam Thubten says about the practice of awareness. When we can be with awareness, even though the habits are there, the awareness itself is untouched. Awareness of aversion is not averse. Awareness of being caught up in a story—the awareness isn't caught up in the story. It's watching. It's with it.

He says, "We are easily pulled these days into the vortex of fear and worry and anger. It seems to be swirling in the world." So easy to get pulled into that, and then we lose touch. He says we lose touch with awareness. We lose touch with our innate dignity. We lose touch with love and compassion, which are natural states, because we're lost in the vortex of aversion and fear.

So we practice to re-recognize awareness—awareness of fear, awareness of anger. But re-recognizing awareness, he says, when we're recognizing awareness, there's natural access to love and compassion, to dignity. Awareness offers us access to that again. And that's what we offer to the world.

It's a lot to think that just this simplicity of awareness can make that possible. But it does. It's not us. It's not something we create.

He talks about conscious awareness, his language for it, as "awakened attentiveness." It's not something that's created. We can't create it. We can't make it happen. It's not like a refined meditative state. It's simply recognized because it's completely natural, normal, always available. It's so simple that we overlook it.

I'll read this, because I love it, from one of the schools of Mahamudra Tibetan teaching—the four faults of natural awareness:

It's so close, you can't see it.
It's so deep, you can't fathom it.
It's so simple, you can't believe it.
It's so good, you can't accept it.

It's so amazing, and it's so nothing.

Thank you for your attention, whatever worlds were being created as we all sat here.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 195

Receptive Awareness All the Time

Carol Wilson · 12 min

In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson explores the essential quality of maintaining awareness throughout the entire day, not just during formal sitting and walking meditation. She emphasizes that the awareness cultivated in this practice tradition is fundamentally different from directed, focused mindfulness—it is a gentle, wide, receptive quality that doesn't grasp or strain to know experience clearly.

Carol offers practical guidance on how this awareness manifests in daily activities: walking to put on shoes, standing in the food line, or moving through any moment. Rather than trying to focus intently on sensations or label experiences, practitioners are encouraged to simply know what they're doing with a soft, background awareness that grows naturally over time. She shares her own journey transitioning from Mahasi-style directed attention practice to this more receptive approach, acknowledging the challenges of releasing habitual efforting.

The talk addresses working skillfully with difficult experiences like physical pain and aversion during sitting meditation. Carol teaches that awareness isn't about enduring until discomfort passes, but about honestly recognizing when aversion is being strengthened rather than observed. This "meditation for adults" means knowing why we do what we do, trusting ourselves to find our own rhythm, and allowing awareness to become a natural companion and refuge—a 24/7 practice that is relaxed rather than exhausting.

The power of the revelatory aspect of this practice grows through our willingness to remember awareness no matter what we're doing throughout the whole rest of the day.

That's one of the reasons we like this format here. Even if we were teaching a retreat in a more structured retreat center, we wouldn't have regular sitting, walking, sitting, walking. We'd have times that we meet and talk, but then the rest of the day the schedule is open for you to find whatever most supports your remembering awareness.

The walking meditation is similar to the sitting in terms of instructions. It's not, as in some forms of meditation, mindful walking where there's a real structure—that you should go particularly slowly, or that you need to bring the focus just to the sensations of the foot and leg. It's the same as what we're doing in sitting. And then moving through the day, whatever activities arise.

The one aspect I want to emphasize is that the quality of the awareness, the quality of this remembering mindfulness, is a very gentle, wider, receptive quality. It's not about—say you're in the food line—it's not about the mindfulness where there's a sense of "I need to be mindful of feeling my feet on the floor so I don't get lost," or "I need to notice the thoughts in my mind, notice the judgment." There can be this little bit of trying to hold on to mindfulness, or trying to know clearly the way the sensations of the foot feel, or know clearly what's happening as I'm standing in line. That wanting to know clearly, that kind of focus—that's way extra. That's not practicing to trust.

In the beginning it doesn't feel like much, this general receptive, wider field of awareness. When you're walking out of the hall, you're not trying to focus, but you know you're walking. You may feel the whole sense of the body, the sense of space. It may be that hearing comes up. It may be that you notice seeing. It may be that you realize you're thinking about what was said and how can I do it—and then all of a sudden you realize you didn't know you were walking, but you knew you were thinking. So it's just not trying to make the experience be a certain way, but remembering to know what we're doing.

This gentle, background awareness starts to feel more natural. It starts to get more steady, more running in the background. When I say the sense of knowing what you're doing as you're walking to put on your shoes—it's like knowing what you're doing, maybe feeling the body, knowing you're hearing, noticing you're seeing your shoes—but it's not thinking about it. You're not labeling what you're doing. There's not that gripping. It's just this gentle quality: you're feeling your body or your mind, you know you're putting on your shoes.

You let the awareness grow by itself. You're not trying to do it. We do have effort. The effort is just as Andrea said: Am I aware? As soon as you drop that in, you're aware. After a while, you don't even have to say it. You're just tying your shoes and suddenly—oh yeah, aware. It pops back in. And then there's nothing you have to do with it. As soon as there's awareness, it's knowing what is, broad and precise, and that's that moment of awareness. We're never trying to change it or make it better. It's more and more just this awareness that comes with us, that starts to accompany us, that becomes more and more natural and familiar.

Through the day, what gives this practice the wisdom factor is the willingness to remember that. Of course we forget ten million times, but the willingness to remember, whatever you are doing—this is a twenty-four-seven practice. Not having a steady schedule isn't a way of saying kick back, you're not working so hard. It's a way of saying there is no moment that isn't available for awareness, no matter what's happening.

The first times I was starting this practice, I found the walking and the moving through the day actually fed my understanding of it much more than the sitting. Because in the sitting, I would get more caught up in the habits of meditation. If this is new to you, you'll see that.

I did Mahasi practice for years, which I love. It's just different—much more directed focus. It took me quite a while not to be in some kind of struggle. "No, don't direct the focus. Relax. No, don't. No, relax." It was like a nightmare for a while. But in the walking and the moving through the day, somehow the habit wasn't as strong, although I love slow walking.

In fact, the first time a few of us were at Shwe Oo Min with U Tejaniya a long time ago, we were doing walking back and forth. I was with Narayan and Myoshin, two other teachers. We thought we were walking at a normal pace. He would say, "Walk at a normal pace." We thought we were. No way. He'd come up, stop you—he moves around like that. "Why are you going so slowly?" Just like that. "This isn't slow. You want to see slow? No, just walk normal." It was impossible in the beginning. But that's all fun. You're just watching that. It really doesn't matter what speed. Walk slow if you want, but be aware—not because you should.

So it's really whatever you're doing. And in terms of sitting and formal walking, yes, extremely helpful, because the more simple our activities are, the easier it is for us to remember awareness. Sure, you can do it with everything. Sure, go on your computer. Go back to your room and—please don't—go on your computer and say, "See if I can be aware while I'm looking at the news." For goodness sake, let's get real. Keep it simple.

So sitting and walking are really helpful. The amount that you sit and walk isn't some "should" or some ideal. It comes from you being really present. Say in the sitting, you realize—not just "I'm sick of it, time to go," or "It's forty minutes, time to get up"—but you're actually relaxed, aware. What's the motivation to get up? Awareness notices. "Ah, I'm bored." It notices boredom. You get up or you don't, but there's awareness of boredom and responding to it. Or there's awareness of boredom, it passes, and then you're sitting, and it's calm again.

Same with the walking. But if you see in the sitting, for example, that you're sitting with quite some pain, you're aware of pain—so there's awareness. I mean, there's also the sitting where you're not aware of the pain; you're filled with aversion and you pop up and go. Okay, that happens. You can be aware of that too. Be aware of that. Know that's why you stopped sitting. Just knowing why you're doing what you're doing.

We call it meditation for adults. You know why you're doing what you're doing. And ultimately it's about what supports your continued awareness.

So when I started to say you're in a lot of pain, you're aware of the pain, the aversion is growing, you're aware of the aversion—and you all know how to do this. It's not like a goal in this style that you should be aware long enough until the aversion goes away, or you're aware long enough and the pain goes away. Forget that. We all get caught in that, but forget it.

Sometimes the mindfulness isn't as strong as the aversion or the clinging. We all know this happens. Awareness can notice that too. So you notice that in this particular sitting, the pain is strong. You're aware of the pain. The aversion is getting really strong. You're aware of the aversion. But what's actually occurring is that the aversion is growing and growing and growing. You're saying, "I'm not getting up until it's been an hour." You're gritting your teeth. You're clenching your hands. You're cultivating aversion. That's not really what we need—we know how to do that well enough already.

So just see with wisdom: "Okay, this is strengthening aversion." We all have different thresholds for this. Sometimes you can see it, and awareness comes up enough to be with the aversion. Sometimes not. And it's not like you're going to get it right or you're going to blow it. If you get up too soon, you've ruined your retreat? Come on. You're just watching.

But if you feel like you're feeding aversion, it's perfectly wise, perfectly skillful means, to end the sitting with awareness.

The same applies in walking. You're walking and it feels great, back and forth, back and forth, and you realize it's been a while, it's really comfortable, and you haven't actually been aware for the last fifteen minutes. You're just drifting along pleasantly. It might be time to shift the posture. Awareness in any posture is simply what brings us back into the moment.

So that's all I wanted to say today. But it's so gentle. It's not stressful. It's not tiring. You might feel tired these days—physical tiredness, sure. But if the way we're remembering awareness is bringing up tiredness, that's a sure sign we're putting in too much personal effort. And that's a useful feedback system. "I don't want to be aware." Okay, relax. You're aware right then of relaxing. That's all it takes.

Something is always happening—that's samsara. Something is happening every mind moment. Awareness is available just to notice that. It's happening anyway. Awareness can simply notice it. It becomes our friend. It becomes our refuge.

So just explore this as we move through the day. Twenty-four seven, just relax. Just relax. I think that's okay.

Find your own rhythm.

Trust yourself.

Finish here.

CHAPTER 196

Explaining with Interest and Awareness How Kilesas Function - To Trick Us into Confusion

Carol Wilson · 1h00

In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a penetrating exploration of how the kilesas (defilements) operate at subtle levels to keep us confused and suffering. Drawing on teachings from Thich Nhat Hanh, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, she explains that nibbāna is fundamentally a cooling—relief from the burning fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. As Buddhadāsa taught, we all experience temporary nibbāna in moments when the mind is free from these afflictions; if we didn't, we couldn't bear existence.

The talk focuses particularly on how saññā (perception) becomes the gateway for kilesas to reassert themselves. Wilson explains the classical progression of papañca: unrecognized perception leads to thinking, which hardens into views (diṭṭhi), which then 'assail' us. Using vivid examples—from mistaking a lichen-covered rock for a circus tent to the different perceptions of a bathroom depending on one's mental state—she demonstrates how perception is always conditioned and how the fundamental misperception of a solid, separate self (sakkāya-diṭṭhi) underlies all our difficulties.

Practically, Wilson emphasizes trusting steady awareness rather than trying to catch every moment of arising. She shares Sayādaw U Tejaniya's teaching about 'collecting data' and having 'right information'—recognizing that 'heat feels like this' rather than creating elaborate stories of suffering. The talk concludes with passages from Sāriputta showing how even the subtlest traces of lust, hatred, and delusion obstruct the measureless liberation of mind, inviting practitioners to explore these processes with curiosity rather than judgment.

So tonight, I just want to talk a little more about this inexhaustible subject, the kilesas. We never have enough of them.

Thich Nhat Hanh says at one point, "Nirvana is cooling." You know, the word nirvana actually means cool, like the rice is cool. Nirvana is cooling—cooling from the fever of anger, of fear, of greed. Cool from the fever of kilesa, which are due to wrong perception.

And Ajahn Buddhadasa says the same. Probably many of you are familiar with the article that's been published in English for many years from one of his talks called "Nibbana for Everyone." It's an interesting article where he's talking to Thai lay people who, at the time he gave the talk, many had the belief that nibbana was something in the

past or only for radiant, enlightened people or something. So he was just saying nibbana is for everyone because he said the same thing that Thich Nhat Hanh says: nibbana is cool. The fires of kilesa are burning, burning. And we all experience temporary nibbana.

Buddhadasa was a Thai forest monk, quite a scholar. He died in the 1990s. And within the Thai monastic tradition, he was a little bit outside the framework in how he interpreted things. For instance, in his monastery Suan Mokkh, he had an Avalokiteshvara statue up, which is quite unusual there. I spent some time there a long time ago.

So anyway, he says we all experience temporary nibbana, moments when the mind, the heart, the citta is free from the kilesas. It's cool, free from the burning of the kilesas. He says this because if the kilesas were burning all the time, if we never had a moment free from them, we couldn't bear it. We couldn't stand it. We'd either go crazy, or we'd die, or we'd go crazy and then we'd die. We're going to die anyway. But he's saying the fire of the kilesas is unbearable if we didn't have these moments of temporary nibbana.

One of the mysteries to me—there are many mysteries to our intellectual mind—is why don't we see this? First, why don't we notice the temporary nibbana? We do sometimes as we're practicing; you'll see those. But just recognizing why is it so pleasant? Because the kilesas aren't burning in the heart, in the mind.

And why do we not see on the deepest level how much burning and suffering is coming from our addiction to these kilesas? On one level, it's obvious. Like I was saying this morning, I think I read from Sayadaw U Tejaniya where the gross levels—we really need to know them so we don't act in harmful ways. And it's not a mystery. We know that those levels are suffering. But the subtle ones—how do the really subtle levels of kilesa work in our heart and mind? How do they keep us so fooled and so lost?

There are many ways this happens, and this is just going over things you already know. But it's really fascinating to me how this works.

If you read it, he seemed—from that book, only that book—very kind. It was a great book, but he didn't come down with a sword too often. But there was one point where he said to his students, in some way, why do we keep suffering? Because you're not, in some way, really committed enough to freedom from suffering. And he said, if I told you what it was really like, all I would hear is the sound of cars driving down the driveway.

I think that's first noble truth stuff. If I told you what it was really about, you'd be out of here. You're all past that because we kind of know. We kind of know, right? But then all of a sudden it hits us upside the head again. I thought I... maybe not you, but me.

We need to thoroughly understand how much the three unskillful root qualities of mind are torturing and tormenting us. And again, this takes right view in the awareness. Otherwise, we just spiral down into more negativity. But we haven't quite learned this lesson fully yet. We don't learn our lesson the first time, the second time, the third time. The Buddha stopped it three times, but like someone said in a group today, it was more like a million times, right?

We only turn for help from the wholesome qualities when we realize that the unskillful qualities are running our lives and we can no longer stand them. If you can read that without adding aversion on top of it—sometimes his language is very, well, it's in translation—but if you just allow those moments when really you can no longer stand this, without piling aversion on top, it brings up a kind of determination. Like an adhiṭṭhāna. Not "I'm going to make this go away"—we know that doesn't work—but the sense of, okay, I'm not going to drive my car down the driveway. Here we are. What is our support here?

Just—guess what—the simple receptive awareness. That is a completely reliable support for whatever's going on. We make our determination: okay, let's meet this again. I feel like I can't bear to see this stupid, painful habit of mind one more time. I completely understand it. Obviously not.

The kilesas are really sneaky. Have you noticed that? They're really sneaky—not the gross ones, but the subtle ones. They keep tricking us back into identification, craving, and suffering. The way I want to talk about how they sneak in tonight is on the level of perception, saññā, which Andrea talked about. This quality, one of the five aggregates arising in every moment, is a mental quality that simply recognizes what the sense experience is. "Hearing" could be a perception, or "that's the bell" could be a perception.

I'm sure if you've ever listened to me, you've heard it, because I talk about it all the time. But His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Ajahn Sumedho, other teachers—on and on—they keep saying, in the Dalai Lama's language, that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. And that's what I find so fascinating.

Just even on the basic level, perception is conditioned. The way we recognize something is based on our memory, our experience in life, our family, our background, our culture, the way we've been brought up, the experiences we've had. So somebody might recognize something one way and someone else would call it something else. Often it's not like there's an absolute right, and often our perceptions are incorrect anyway.

Here's a simple example of how perceptions can be different—and you can't necessarily bring them together. I was at a friend's house, and I said, "Would you hand me that throw, that blanket, that blue blanket on the back of the couch?" She said, "What blue blanket?" I said, "That one, the blue blanket on the back." She said, "That's not blue, that's green." She couldn't see blue, and I couldn't see green. It was interesting. We didn't get in a fight about it. It was just okay.

But just to see—to both of us, that was the absolute perception. It was blue. And even trying, I couldn't see green. So no big deal. But this is going on all the time. And if we're not aware of perception, we so often identify with it, don't even know. We just take it to be the accurate experience of life.

And this is where, of course, His Holiness and Thich Nhat Hanh are talking about the basic misperception. The basic misperception, of course, is not seeing impermanence, not seeing dukkha, the unsatisfactory. But really the basic one is the perception of any experience as being solidly me or mine, separate from all other things. That's the basic one.

And as His Holiness says—another quote I love—basic ignorance of this, of the nature of reality, gives rise to the 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations. I just love that. The 84,000. You can knock it down to three, right? The big three. And cognitive obscurations. So in a way, that's how sometimes there can be delusion in the heart-mind without greed or aversion. And then it's like cognitive obscuration. You just don't see clearly.

If you don't recognize that delusion is present, which we often don't, it's sort of like walking in fog. We see something or perceive something at a sense door, we don't really quite know what it is, but we don't recognize that, and the mind makes something up.

I remember years ago I was teaching in a place in Switzerland where there was some forest, and I was walking through it. It's not like a huge forest, you know, a little patch of forest. And I was walking and I saw out of the side of my eye—I said, "Well, what's a yellow striped circus tent doing here in the middle of the woods?" That's kind of weird. There was no questioning. I saw a yellow striped circus tent. I didn't even look, didn't even question. That's what we do with perception.

Well, one way or another—I don't actually remember if I was with someone and said it, or I told them later and they said I was crazy and we went back and looked—of course, it was a big gray rock with yellow lichen on it, kind of in stripes. Of course there wasn't a circus tent. But I love it when the misperception can be perceived so quickly. Because even something simple like that, you can reflect on it. I really, there was no question, that's what I saw. Well, we're doing that all the time. Not "we," but perception is making perceptions all the time.

As many people have said already in the last few days, they notice the perception of self coming up. That's fine. Noticing it is fine. The problem comes when perception is arising in every moment and it's not always the thing that awareness notices. And then what we feel, we perceive—this is the Buddha, of course. What we perceive, when we're not recognizing the self, we think about. And as we think about it, we complicate it with associations, with memories, with concepts and ideas. And then this hardens into a view.

You know, this is the classical definition of papañca, right? Starting from vedanā and perception—they both come so close together you can't really tease out which is first. But unrecognized, still around, these perceptions, these concepts, these ideas, these views—unrecognized, they're clung to. The clinging is like the sense that we know this is true. You don't even think of "me clinging." It's just, "This is an accurate description of reality." Unrecognized, then these concepts turn around and assail a person.

Do you ever feel like that? Like a lot, right?

And so this is how we get so far, so fast from any particular perception, and get lost. As André was saying, we wake up and wonder what planet we're on. Just from—oh yeah, circus tent. I could have gone into a whole story.

This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, talking about samsara. This is how it works. Samsara literally means "wandering on."

Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live—we're living in samsara, the place we leave when we go to nibbana. But in early Buddhist texts, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu is quite the early Buddhist scholar, samsara is the answer not to "where are we?" but to "what are we doing?" We're samsara-ing. It's not a place; it's a process—the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, the mind creates another one and goes there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds. We wonder why we don't all get along, why there are so many different views. That's really samsara.

And this creation of worlds is just like what I described—from perception that's unrecognized and basically clung to, just assumed. That's accurate.

Ajahn Sumedho also talks about samsara similarly: samsara and nibbana are not places to go but modes of perception. I like this a lot—modes of perception. Samsara is when we're interpreting experience through the perception of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, separate self. When that's the perception, and then that leads to thinking, whatever interpretation of experience through that lens—that's the cognitive obscuration. That's the beginning of a world. So fast, through the lens of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. That's how complex worlds come into being so quickly.

Without steady awareness, we don't even notice. We wake up in this world, we wake up in that world. But with steady awareness, we can really notice. We can really start to see and get interested in how perception is affected, colored by whatever quality is in the mind in the moment of perception. It isn't really a steady-state thing. I couldn't have gone back and seen that rock as a tent anymore because I had the information—the ignorance wasn't there.

Someone said in a group, and I hope you don't mind I'm using this because it's so perfect, about how what's in the mind really affects perception. The person said they were going into the bathroom feeling like, "Now I have to spritz everything and clean it all off," and it just feels like drudgery. Just noticing that—fine, fine practice. But then another time, going into the bathroom and thinking, "Oh, everything's so sparkly! All the metal is so sparkly and shining and light." Same experience, right? A different day, different experience. The quality in the mind is different.

With just kilesa—even just a subtle not-liking, or a subtle sense of "me, I have to do this"—it makes the whole experience what it is. Walking in without the kilesa, just a sense of openness or pleasantness—"Oh, look at that!" The attention, the awareness is fresh. It's not already distorted by tiredness or clinging or dislike. And so some other aspect, some lovely aspect of brightness shows up.

This is going on all the time. It's really fun to watch, to see. It certainly starts to take the solidity out of our perceptions and the trust—I mean, it doesn't make it so you never trust perception, but it does take our absolute certainty: "This is how it is. This is how it is." And that's important. That's so important.

It goes back to the description of papañca. You know this: saññā, perception, leads to citta, to thinking about—which is just what he's saying. What's felt, what's perceived, leads to thinking about. If the perception is distorted, then the thoughts coming out of that perception don't really have much bearing on reality, because they're coming out of that perception.

And then the citta, how we think, hardens into ditti, into view. The view is a description of the world, or a description of myself, or a description of anything. And when it hardens into view—not recognized, being identified with or held to—the Buddha describes view as thinking, "This alone is true. Everything else is false." But we don't have that little warning sign which would tell us, "This is a view." We just know. You know that this is true and everything else is false in that moment.

And as the Buddha said, when we're attached to a view, those who are attached to views just go around in the world annoying each other. It's more than annoying, right? Andre and I were talking today, and we were both saying that views are kind of—I don't know if it's the bottom line—but really, what's giving rise to violence and terror, all the stuff that's going on in the world, is coming out of views. Attachment to views. We can have preferences. We can certainly prefer one thing to another. We vote, we do whatever, of course. But it's that attachment: "This is right and everything else is wrong." So much suffering.

And this is on the unrecognized level when they talk about sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. This is what's going on. We don't even know it's a view. We don't even recognize it's a perception, because we think this solid thing is having the perception. And so it can get really interesting to keep exploring.

I'm just bringing these up as points to look at. We see it. And in the steady awareness, there are times when this really shows up. Just be steady. Don't look for anything. Just be steady. You can see it happening. And all this solidity—it doesn't even fall apart—it just stops being so solid. And it's really kind of cool. There's a sense of freedom. And then, you know, the next minute maybe another whirl starts.

Ajahn Sumedho—I like the way he says this. I hope it's not too depressing to you. That all depends on how the mind takes it. He says we live in these bodies as sensitive forms. So there's constant vedanā, feeling tone. Constant. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Arising and ceasing at the six sense doors. Constantly. It never ceases. And we all experience life like this.

Do you get a sense of that? Sometimes, especially on a quiet retreat, when there's holding to it, we really can feel what seems like this constant barrage of contact, contact, contact—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—at the sixth sense door going on all the time. Other times, if there's not a holding, that awareness can be there of contact, contact, but there's not a sense of resistance. That's when it's just like this. No past, no future. Just like this. No resistance, no holding. You wouldn't even say flow, because that's like flowing from this to that. It's just this.

We can experience it different ways. But when Ajahn Sumedho said that—I've heard him say it a couple of times—I thought, "Yeah, that's right." Constantly. It never ceases. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

And it's so fast. The habits of the mind—with pleasant, the wanting; with the unpleasant, it's bad and wrong; with the neutral, to space out—and all of that comes from a sense of me. It's so fast. Of course, these habits forming from these kilesas will pop up from time to time. It's just so fast.

So there can be a lot of awareness and receiving, and it's not really forming. And then we kind of lose touch with the awareness, get lost in the thought or here and there, and then it's all solidified again. Not to take that personally or get discouraged, but rather to have an appreciation for just how much this is going on all the time. Not thinking, "I've seen how sensation comes and it's pleasant and then there's craving, so it shouldn't bother me anymore because I've seen it." This is happening in what—seventeen million moments of consciousness in the blink of an eye? Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration, but it's a lot. It's a lot that's happening. Of course it's never going to be that the awareness is about catching each one and deconstructing each one, and then there's freedom.

But the more we're seeing how it works, then those moments—those temporary moments of Nibbana, as Ajahn Buddhadasa said—when you really can notice the vedanā coming in, or maybe you notice the perception giving rise to thoughts and just not cling to it, and you really experience in that moment the coolness of not coagulating around it as "me," or the kilesas are just not there. You really experience that. And then when the fires come back again, we can trust, have confidence in the awareness to notice those too. That's just the next thing arising.

We can really trust that the more steady the awareness is, wisdom is what comes in and really starts to see how it's working. We don't have to catch it every minute. Just trust the awareness. And people have said they've noticed times when suddenly some

clinging that was going on just stopped. No big deal, nothing they did. It's like that. Notice that. Not make a big story—because then it's clinging again. But just noticing. Nothing personal. I didn't do something. It was just nature.

Steady awareness, free from kilesa. Noticing how kilesa is arising, conditioned, how it functions, how it passes. Awareness isn't the kilesa. Awareness noticing is what gives rise to wisdom. And the wisdom really doesn't feed that. It puts it down. You can trust that. And feeling that, there is that little moment. It can be just a moment, but let the awareness consciously be aware of the taste of that. It's just a little passing moment, not some big lights going off—"Oh my God, I'm having a rapture moment!" It's just a little coolness.

Which is one of the reasons I find awareness with neutral to be a really interesting place to explore. Because with neutral, at times we tend to get bored, or we space out, we look for something. But the boredom is kind of the kilesa response to neutral. Neutral is really also on the wisdom end of things—it moves into peace, calm, equanimity. They're more like cooled out.

So just a little moment—if you want to call it temporary Nibbana, which is where the fires of kilesa stopped or didn't come up in that moment. It's not like, "Wow!" It's just—don't ignore it though. Don't hold on to it. If you hold on, it's gone anyway. It'll go anyway. But just notice it. Notice it. Don't be looking for some big thing. Like Ajahn Buddhadasa said, we all have lots of moments like that. And then we go, "Oh, cool."

Now, you know, and then that moment's gone and new moments come. But it's really worth exploring.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about this sense of vedana and perception coming, coming, coming. He talks a lot about having right information. Right view comes from right information. As I mentioned in one of the groups, one of the times he was here—not the zero-ten-zero time, a different time—he was always talking about thinking of steady awareness as collecting data. The mind is collecting all this data, and you're just being aware of all these little things as you go through the day. No big anything. Kilesas come and kilesas go, but it's like you're collecting data. And you start to have the right information. When we have the right information, which is right view, then the experience, the vedana, the perception, doesn't have to go into a story.

This is just basic mindfulness 101. Right view means when you're really hot—like in Burma, often it's really hot—right information is: oh, heat feels like this. Not: oh my God, I'm so hot, I'm going to die. Just: heat is like this. That's right information. Or "sound is bothering me"—wrong information. Right information is: sound is arising, it's

like this. Unpleasantness is arising, it's like this. The thought "I don't like it" is arising, it's like this. But as soon as there's a "me" that puts it all into a story, then we're coming from wrong information. And that's where judgment arises, and afflictive emotions, and views, and we come into conflict with others. It can turn into a whole spiral pretty quickly.

To use a simple example, again back to Myanmar. Any time I've ever practiced there, in any monastery or nunnery or meditation center, there are always little villages around. The idea we have here of this holy silence—forget about it. I remember when we were starting the Forest Refuge, I was on a committee. At one point we were having a conversation—this will make me look a little hard-ass—but we were having a conversation, it had been here a year or two, and people were saying, "Sometimes when there's a sitting in here and someone goes out that door right there, people in the hall can hear it open and close. We should make it so it's quiet." And I was in one of my moods. For the love of God, you know—this life!

Anyway, so back to Sayadaw U Tejaniya. When you first go to practice in Asia, if you've been practicing over here, you've got to get over it really quick or you suffer big time. Anywhere—up in Chazwa, up in the Sagaing Hills—in the villages whenever there's a wedding or a birthday, they rent these giant speakers, as high as up there. If you're walking through the village and you see one, you go, "Oh, God," because the ceremony could last up to three days, twenty-four-seven. Loud, as loud as it can possibly be.

In fact, I remember one time we were up in Chazwa, which is way up the hill with a little village down there. It was a three-day one. And I remember thinking, I wonder if I went down and paid the person a hundred dollars, would they turn it off? I was kind of serious. A hundred dollars at that point would have been huge. But then I thought about it. No. Then everyone else would go rent things so they could get a hundred dollars to turn them off.

Somebody told Sayadaw U Tejaniya that story. Because the story I started to tell—he loves this kind of stuff. We were sitting one time, and the same thing was going on.

But one day—I'm not exaggerating, maybe embellishing just a little—there were four different celebrations going on at once. Four different ones, equally loud from all directions. You can't even imagine. And it goes on... okay, maybe they stopped at two in the morning, these ones. You can't ignore it.

And he would—he loved it. He goes, "This is so good for practice." And he means that. You don't complain about any condition. He's like, "Look at your mind. Where's the suffering? That sound can't make you angry. That sound can't interrupt your practice."

And it's really true—you can't get away from it. So you can either make yourself miserable or work with it. It's really interesting. You watch the mind go in and out, in and out, but it's so clear. There are times when it's so averse you can't stand it. Other times you get sidetracked into something else and don't even notice it. Other times the sound is coming and it's just what it is, and the mind isn't creating anything around it.

It's really interesting. Right information is just: this is what it is. And when the aversion comes: this is what it is. Wrong information is: me, they shouldn't do it, I'll pay for it, what's going on, what's the matter with these people, why don't they make these places quiet? Or: this person is snoring in the hall, they shouldn't be doing that, they're bothering me. And it just spirals and spirals and spirals.

This is where views come in. This is where our suffering comes in.

So with steady awareness, we just keep exploring that. We can be aware. We can really appreciate the awareness rather than believing all the stuff our mind makes up. It doesn't stop the experience from being unpleasant, but it makes a huge difference.

I'm a lot better with sound at night than I ever used to be. I'll tell you that.

Because of all that, I want to read this from Ajahn Chah. Because these complex worlds—that's a world I'm telling you about, it's a story—but that was a huge world going on with those sounds and my mind and everything.

Ajahn Chah says: "The things of this world are merely conventions of our own making. Having established them, we get lost in them and refuse to let go, giving rise to clinging to personal views and opinions. This clinging never ends. It is samsara, flowing endlessly on. It has no completion. Now, if we know conventional reality, then we'll know liberation. If we clearly know liberation, then we'll know convention. This is to know the Dhamma. Here there is completion."

So that's it—the worlds the mind is creating and we're moving into. Just what he's saying: clinging to it, from aversion, and we don't know that. We just keep doing it, doing it, doing it. But with awareness, we can know conventional reality. That's what's occurring.

And those times when we really see how this is all created—it doesn't stop it, and we still feel it. Conventional reality is right here. We're in it, so to speak, but not of it. And seeing that just changes the whole thing.

When we really know conventional reality, that's why I would say awareness is the doorway. Any object is a doorway to awareness.

Any object. And the steadiness of awareness is what gives rise to wisdom, which is the doorway to seeing through the distortions of perception and feeling and story and view, to things as they are. It's fun to see.

So watch the complex worlds arising and dissolving all day long. This is fun. They're all about me—all the worlds are about me. Watch how long one world lasts before another one comes. How many different worlds have you been in today? And they're all about me, me and other, me and other. We can just watch the concoction and all the effects of it. Some last longer, some are more real than others. And we're all having different ones.

It reminds me of a moment—I don't know, last year sometime—I was on a long-haul flight, walking down the aisle of the plane, one of these twelve-hour flights. You could see the TV screens on the back of the seats, big enough that you could see what each person was watching. And it was really kind of fun as I was walking down. I thought, everyone is engrossed. I could see all the different worlds they were engrossed in, all the different stories. Everyone here is sitting completely absorbed in some completely other world. Over here was some kind of martial arts thing, over here was a love story, over here were some monsters, here was a vampire movie, here was some mafia thing. Everyone completely absorbed. And that's what we're doing, only without the movie screen. We're making it up ourselves, and we're all in different ones.

So we watch. The steadiness of awareness reveals it. If we're just willing to keep coming back into awareness, we don't have to hold all this stuff I'm saying, because reality reveals itself.

Ajahn Sumedho asks, do we notice that what arises ceases? Sometimes we just notice we're in this world, and later we notice we're in that world. But he says, do we notice what ceases, or do we jump right into the next story, the next view, the next perception? Most people don't notice the cessation of concoction, he says, because our attention is too flighty. We don't notice things ending, but we might notice we're in a new one, and that's already good. Because our attention is so jumpy, we don't always notice the ending of things.

Craving is like that. When we have steady awareness, we really can see it end. But when we don't, we can see craving, then we don't get what we want, or we get what we want and it goes away—but we don't quite notice that. We don't quite notice when the craving ends or the aversion ends. We notice that it's gone, later. So seeing the ending—you can't make that happen, but it comes as our attention is less flighty. That's what we're cultivating here. Reality is going to reveal itself.

Again, Ajahn Sumedho says we create ourselves through our thoughts. And our thoughts cannot create an ultimately peaceful self. We keep trying though. But really, see if your thoughts—don't try to think new thoughts, you've got enough—but see if they create an ultimately peaceful self.

And watch what I was talking about this morning, about how when the kilesa is present in the mind, it colors perception. How perception can be different—like that bathroom example—when there's different qualities in the mind. Again, this takes the personal out of it. It clearly just becomes a process.

And you can also see the willingness to notice when the kilesa is just a little bit present—just a little, maybe it's a one. When awareness is steady enough and there's not the reaction to the wanting, and you can see it really, really subtle like that, that's when it's really interesting. You don't have to slam it with a hammer. You can be aware and kind of see: how does it go? What does it do? How does it color things?

You know the Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object? When you want something, it just makes it look so nice, whatever it is. Have you ever had that experience where you want something and you don't get it, and the next day or the next year you think, what was that about? Unfortunately, sometimes that's with people, a relationship, and you're in it, and the next year you go, what are we doing in this relationship?

Or with aversion—when aversion is distorting perception, the thing looks so unattractive, doesn't it? Or the person looks unattractive. But then later that's gone and there's metta, and it's a completely different experience. Noticing that with interest, not taking it personally at all, but really seeing.

And we start to see how more and more we feel how the kilesas really are tormenting us—because we buy into them. With awareness watching them, it's not so tormenting, and they don't last so long.

Again, we've said over and over, the Buddha talks about feeding and starving in terms of wise attention. When balanced awareness is the quality in the mind and attention is given to wholesome mental states—any of the wholesome mental states—that feeds it. Not that it makes it last longer, but it nurtures it, it nourishes it. So really, when you notice wholesome states, love or peace, just let your awareness feel it. Let awareness settle into it, not jump over to the next thing. That feeds it.

And if this kind of balanced awareness is giving attention to one of the kilesas—to craving, for example—awareness can really watch craving come and do its thing, but it's not feeding it. It's not keeping it going. It's watching. It's starving it of nutriment. It's

not awareness's job to stop it. That's not how we think of awareness. Awareness just notices. The steadiness gives rise to wisdom. It's wisdom that puts down the kilesa. But this is starving it, not giving it its nutriment.

But when the awareness and the attention is focused on kilesa through the veil of wanting, aversion, me, me, me—without recognizing it—that's feeding. That keeps it going. Like when you get really lost in aversion to a sound, thinking they shouldn't do it, I shouldn't have to deal with this, and you're really lost in that. As we all know, that keeps it going, feeds it. But attention that's balanced and doesn't have kilesa in it starves the kilesa. So just watching how that works.

The Buddha said, "When one dwells or lives with a mind that's obsessed and oppressed by ill will"—or by craving or by delusion, he says the same thing three times—"when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, craving, or delusion and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

I find that powerful. I think of it often. When the mind-heart is obsessed—and obsessed just means the greed, hatred, or delusion is there and we're identified with it—even when we think we know the right thing to do, we just can't see clearly.

I've seen so often, say with aversion—it can be just a little aversion. You get an email and you have to answer. It's so clear what the right thing to say and do is. Or you're in some meeting and something happens. It's so clear. And then later, the aversion's gone, and hopefully I didn't answer the email. I look and I can see a whole other aspect that was not available to the mind, to the awareness that was colored by aversion. It's just not available.

But aversion in particular has this flip side of really thinking it's right. Well, so does greed—it's obvious that's the good thing to do. You just wait until it's gone, keep paying attention, and then you see, oh, I couldn't see clearly then.

So just knowing that serves me so much, not only in my life and keeping me from actions, but in practice too—just watching my mind in sitting or in daily life when something is going on and I think I see what I should do or what I have to figure out. I just tune into the mind and I can tell there's doubt or there's wanting or whatever. I just know, okay, this is present. So it's fine that it's present, be aware of it. But this is not the time to think I can trust whatever answer my mind's coming up with.

The thoughts are unreliable when they're coming through the veil of kilesa. That is something my mind knows now from experience. So if I don't recognize the veil of kilesa, the same thing happens—you get lost in it. But if I think I know what to do, and then I notice, "Oh no, I'm really feeling aversive," I understand: okay, this isn't the time to make the decision. It might be the next moment, or it might be in a year—it depends how long it takes. But this understanding has saved me so many times. It's been so freeing and so helpful to see that.

The last thing I want to share starts from Ajahn Sumedho and then moves to something from a sutta, where he's talking about conscious awareness. It's kind of back to views and the division and conflict that comes when we're attached to our view, internally or externally. He says, "Our unity with ourselves or with each other lies in conscious awareness, not in trying to create peace out of ideals. We can't find permanent peace trying to create a peaceful world of separate individuals." We are all different and we can't help it. We want different things and we react to different things—that's just how it is. Different things bring up greed, different perceptions, and that's just how it is. Conditioned phenomena are unstable. I find that so interesting, this sense of attachment to views and not seeing them at the root of so much confusion within ourselves. Never mind the world—within ourselves it's the same. We're representatives of the world, the way our heart and mind works.

Just a bit from the suttas, which speaks in the most subtle way to how the kilesas obscure liberation of heart-mind. I'm condensing this—there are two different suttas that say the same thing. In one, Sariputta, one of the Buddha's two chief disciples, is talking. In another sutta in the Majjhima, a layman named Chitta is saying the same thing. They're asking about the different kinds of deliverance of mind, liberation of mind: the measureless deliverance of mind, deliverance by nothingness, deliverance by emptiness, deliverance by signlessness. That's the technical part we don't need to worry about at this point—it's very, very subtle. How are they the same? How are they different?

But this is the point I want to get to. With all of them, they lead to vast, measureless deliverance of mind-heart. But Sariputta says—and this is the key, what connects them all—"Lust is a maker of measurement" in terms of the measureless liberation of mind. Lust is a maker of measurement. Hatred is a maker of measurement. Delusion is a maker of measurement. With any of those present, measureless deliverance of mind is not available. Then the same lust, hatred, and delusion—it is a "something" as compared to nothingness. Lust, hatred, and delusion are makers of signs, makers of con-

cepts, determining things into existence, as Ajahn Chah says. When lust, hatred, and delusion are there, this is what prohibits the measureless, signless liberation of heart and mind. We're talking about really subtle levels here.

And to me, this is—I guess sad is the way I feel about it. It's so subtle. The kilesas just get stronger and stronger, but on this subtle level, these are the obscurations the Dalai Lama is talking about, what obscures our basic goodness, the true nature of mind. And it's sad that we keep getting tricked back into that. We keep getting tricked back in.

This is where Suzuki Roshi says, just have the willingness. And the rest of the sutta ends with unshakable liberation of mind, unshakable deliverance of mind, when the heart-mind is empty of greed, hatred, or confusion. So there's from the subtle to the really gross and unmissable.

And watch it. Trust in the awareness. Whatever level is showing up, it doesn't matter—don't go looking for another. It's the same process from the gross to the subtle. That's how Goenka used to teach, moving from the gross to the subtle. He would say that all the time. He was my first teacher a long time ago, and I really practiced with him in person, not through the videos. That was a long time ago. I didn't know what he was talking about. It was my first retreat.

So this is really worth exploring with a steady attention. Welcome it. Craving feels like this—let's see how it works. Aversion feels like this—let's see how it works. Oh, just kind of quiet. Coolness feels like this. Just see how it is. And the next moment arises.

So those are the little points I wanted to make about this tonight. Thank you for your kind attention.

Let's end by sharing the blessings. First, really appreciate the wholesomeness, the goodness that has arisen in our hearts and minds. It's important to appreciate this at any point, but at the end of the day is a good time to really let in the goodness, to feel it, to honor it—not just saying, "Oh, all these days I had all this affliction," but noticing all the wholesomeness. So first we take that in: may it be a cause for my awakening. And then out of generosity, we share it with all beings. It's a nice way to end any day, especially days of practice.

CHAPTER 197

Transforming Habits of Greed, Aversion, and Delusion

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines how the Buddha's teachings on wise attention (yoniso manasikāra) can transform our habitual patterns of greed, hatred, and delusion across every dimension of life—not just on the meditation cushion. Drawing extensively from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she presents the Buddha's framework of seven methods for abandoning the āsavas (taints): through seeing, restraint, using, enduring, avoiding, removing, and developing.*
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> *Wilson introduces Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's teaching on the three levels of kilesa: transgressive (countered by sīla), obsessive (countered by samādhi), and latent (countered by paññā). She offers practical guidance on how wise attention differs from unwise attention—it's not about avoiding certain objects, but about how we pay attention. When attention dwells on gratification or grievance, the kilesas grow; when attention rests in simple, receptive awareness, they naturally diminish.*
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> *The talk emphasizes sīla as a profound contemplative practice rather than mere rule-following, highlighting the beautiful qualities of hiri and ottappa (conscience and wise fear of wrongdoing) as the 'bright guardians of the world.' Wilson shares personal examples of choosing wholesome mental states, demonstrating that we often have more choice than we realize in which thoughts we follow. This teaching invites practitioners to see every moment of daily life as an opportunity to explore what feeds suffering and what starves it.*

A couple of quotations from the Buddha.

The Brahmin Janusoni approached the Blessed One and said to him, "It is said, Master Gautama, Nibbana is directly visible. In what way, Master Gautama, is Nibbana directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise?"

Gautama says, "When, Brahmin, a person is impassioned with lust, depraved through hatred, bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion, then they plan for their own harm, for the harm of others, for the harm of both, and they experience in their mind suffering and grief. But when lust, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, they neither plan for their own harm, nor for the harm of

others, nor for the harm of both. And they do not experience in their mind suffering and grief. In this way, Brahmin, Nibbana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise."

You see, you can't get away from the kilesas.

One other very familiar quotation—I'll use Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno's translation: "This mind is radiant, but it doesn't show its radiance because passing defilements come and obscure it. The unwise, ordinary person does not understand this as it is, and therefore there is no mind development in the unwise, ordinary person. Bhikkhus, this mind is radiant, and it shows its radiance when it is unobscured by passing defilements, passing kilesas. The wise, noble disciple understands this as it is. Therefore, there is development of the mind in the wise, noble disciple."

So development of the mind—cultivating and exploring the abandonment of the habits of greed, hatred, and delusion—this is what we've been talking about all along. And as the Buddha says, it's when these qualities are absent in the heart-mind that Nibbana is directly visible.

I want to talk a bit tonight about the fact that in the teachings of the Buddha, mind development is not just something we do on retreat. As much as we say that steady awareness, receptive awareness, is the condition for paññā, wisdom, to arise—and this is perhaps the most profound and powerful and always accessible way of really understanding how these qualities obscure peace and allowing the kilesas to be abandoned—our whole life, all aspects of our life, the Buddha viewed as opportunities for this work. We can meet all aspects of our life with this interest, this willingness to use everything to explore, to discover how to transform these habitual responses of wanting, of aversion, of "me, me, me," of confusion, of looking at the world in an upside-down perspective.

It's not that the development of the mind has to wait for retreat. And the way the Buddha talked, it's not even all about meditation. He said everything.

There's far too much for me to go into tonight. I'm going to cover a number of things but not be able to explore them in as much depth as I'd want. But I want to give you a sense of the ways the Buddha talked about looking at aspects of our life, looking at how with our attention and awareness we're meeting experience. We can learn, with attention, to meet this moment of experience, seeing when we meet it in ways that create more suffering, that feed the kilesas, that keep the habit going. And we can learn to meet this moment of experience in ways that truly abandon, even just for a moment, the creation of kilesa.

As I said, there's a lot, but I'll use one conceptual tool: the three levels of the habits of mind. I first heard this from Sayadaw U Pandita, who called them the three rounds of kilesa—three different levels of intensity at which they show up and wreak havoc in our lives and minds.

The first level, the strongest level, he called the kilesa of transgression. It's so strong that it manifests as the motivation for speech and action. This is when the kilesa is really going to town. What counters it, the habit that strengthens and protects us from being lost in it, is sila—non-harming behavior. I'll talk a bit about that.

The second level is called the obsessive level, which I think everyone here can relate to very well. This is being caught up in obsessive thoughts, the torments, just feeding and feeding. Familiar? Wanting, whatever—just caught up in it. What protects in the moment, what can shift the habit, is actually samadhi, the collectedness of mind. It doesn't have to be one-pointedness, though that's one way. But as you've all seen, as the mind and attention get more stable and balanced, we're not tossed around. There's right view in it, so things that arise don't elicit so much reactivity. There's less aversion, less greed, less selfing. I know everybody has been saying they're seeing selfing so much, but that's actually a sign of wisdom seeing. Before that, we don't even know. So don't be discouraged about that—that's actually the mind starting to balance out. The aspect of our life that we can pay attention to, so as not to feed kilesa in this obsessive form, is samadhi, the balance of mind.

The third level is called the latent or underlying level—the level that isn't manifesting now but is just lurking there, waiting to cause trouble, although there's no "there" for it to lurk. This latent level is what the Buddha called the asavas.

The asavas are a category of—sometimes it's translated as "taints." It's a strange translation, not a great one. Asavas is a very specific category referring to the very, very subtle level of kalesa that really isn't manifesting, but the tendency, the habitual tendency, if met with the right conditions—as Thich Nhat Hanh says, if those conditions are watered—it's like a seed that will sprout.

The asavas are described by the Buddha very specifically as three: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being or becoming, and ignorance. And ignorance covers everything. So those are the three asavas. And the quality that helps abandon this level of kalesa rising, as he says, is not abandoned by acts but by wisely seeing, by wise attention.

So I want to talk a little bit about those three in light of one particular sutta of the Buddha. There's no way I can cover it all, but I'll introduce it and then you can look at it in your own life. I love this sutta. It's called "All the Asavas." It's basically talking about different ways that our mind can employ wise attention in connection with any particular experience—how we pay attention and what we give attention to. All of this is possible because of awareness, and it can either feed the asavas or starve them.

This might sound subtle, but as I go along you'll see it's not just about sitting on the cushion. The Buddha is talking about all different aspects of our life. That's why I love this teaching, because he's addressing the most subtle level of kalesa. In other places he says the person who's completely free from all asava arising is basically an arahat. So he's talking about very subtle levels. But he's not just saying you have to go into fourth jhana and this and that. He's talking about different activities in our life and looking with wise attention, with interest, with steady awareness, and seeing: How are we paying attention? What are we paying attention to? Is it increasing kalesa? Is it increasing wholesomeness?

Does that sound familiar at all from anything we've said? It's exactly, in some ways, what we would often quote from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: what you're paying attention to, see what's happening in the mind.

So in this sutta, the Buddha says there is an exhaustion of asavas in one who knows and sees, and not in one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. Yoniso manasikara is wise attention in Pali.

He says: when one attends unwisely, both unarisen asavas arise and arisen asavas increase. When one attends wisely, both unarisen kalesa do not arise and arisen kalesa are abandoned.

He goes through seven different ways of attending wisely. I'll describe each one as we go through it. You don't have to remember them all, but just see what lands in you as a way you can bring this into your life. This is about our life. This is about every single aspect of our life. There's nothing in our life that's outside of this. That's the main reason I want to talk about this.

As soon as you're thinking, "I can't be aware with this," or "I'll practice tomorrow," you're blowing it off. But everything in our life is included. All of us here—you wouldn't be here this month, you wouldn't have all been practicing as many years as you've been practicing, if you didn't really deeply believe or know in some way that your heart and mind can be much more free than it is, and that you care about that. So we have to re-

mind ourselves that we care about it, again and again, because the other voices are so loud and so familiar. This is just another way of trying to plant that seed to help you remember.

I'm going to break this down because the Buddha talks at length about the first way of seeing wise attention. This is really, I think, the important thing. What dhammas—and in this usage, dhammas just means things that are arising—what dhammas are unfit for attention that one attends to? They are dhammas, or things that arise, such that when one attends to them, the unarisen taints of sense desire, being, and ignorance arise, or the arisen ones get stronger.

These are the dhammas that are unfit for attention. But the interesting point here, and this is really what we've been saying all along, it's not that those dhammas in themselves are the problem. It's the way we're paying attention to those things.

Something in itself may be neutral, beautiful, or difficult. It's not that the thing itself is unwise attention, but as we're focusing on it, as we're giving it attention, we can see whether the kilesas zoom up or not.

The example I think we've used here, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya would always use it: When somebody does something, says something, and it elicits anger in your mind or some other difficult emotion, you're aware of it. But if you keep looking at that person—you're sitting there being with anger and then you look at them again—what happens? The anger kind of squirts up. And so we keep looking, getting more and more anger. This is unwise attention. It's not that that person is an unwise object. It's the way we're paying attention.

Or say there's a sound that's unpleasant and it's really eliciting a lot of thought: "How can they do that? How can they make that sound? How can they mow the lawn when I'm trying to meditate?" Pick your own version. We can be sort of aware of the aversion, but the focus keeps being, "How can they do that? How can that sound be like this?" And the more attention is given to that object, the greater the aversion grows—even though we think we're with balanced awareness.

If the attention is just, "Okay, sound is like this," you all know what happens. With something strong going on in you—a story and all the stuff the mind does to try and avoid it—it's feeding it, feeding it, feeding it. But when you suddenly allow attention to just land on it and feel, "It feels like this," it may still be difficult, but you can see that with wise attention, the kilesas aren't growing, growing, growing. A sense of wisdom can come in. It's just like this.

This is something we can pay attention to all the time in our life—this kind of wise attention.

So I'm going to take that and then go back to get a sense of his very beginning description of what wise attention is and how we can use it in all three of these levels. The aim is to see, to realize when it seems like we're getting more lost in the kilesas—and not just the "what" but also: What can I do? "Oh no, I'm overwhelmed. Can I trust awareness?" We know we're with awareness, but still, it's going on.

You can just have a look and ask: What is the attention singling out here? What aspect of the experience is it singling out? As the kilesas are growing, growing, growing, try shifting to another aspect—from the thought to the feeling, from the thought to the sound, from whatever it is. Just try shifting the attention to something else and see. Stay and watch to see if it really starts to go down. We can use that.

We can use that with sīla too. I think it's a wonderful thing to mention sīla not just as "we should" or just as non-harming behavior with these five precepts that we're supposed to follow. That's not it. It's really seeing, looking deeply with wise attention at what the actions, the thoughts, the moods that lead to action—what's feeding kilesa, what's not.

What prompts non-harming behavior, or restraint from harming behavior? Consciously refraining from doing something unskillful is itself a wholesome motivation and a wholesome act. So instead of thinking, "Oh, I wanted to do this bad thing. I didn't do it, but I'm so bad because I wanted to do it"—which is just feeding more kilesa—instead notice: "Oh yes, I saw the potential to do it. I consciously refrained from doing it."

That's a wholesome motivation. And so with wise attention, you can bring the attention to that wholesomeness rather than spinning into the negativity, and see that the kilesa isn't being fed.

With sila, with a real commitment to noticing how we are in our life, how we act—it's a very profound aspect of our practice and of purifying our heart and mind, and it's always available to us.

I'd like to read a few things from teachers I appreciate, just to offer a sense of the depth and power of giving wise attention to our motivations, our speech and action, and the effect it has on ourselves and on the world.

From Mingyur Rinpoche: "Our behavior, how we relate to the world around us, even in very difficult situations, becomes the most reliable means of protecting our mind from anxiety and frustration." The most reliable means. Difficult situations, inner or outer.

And from Ajahn Sucitto, which I quite like, speaking about the five precepts: "It's not a superficial practice. The transcendent point is not what it looks like not to do these things—not following the precepts for appearances—but what they call forth, what it takes in our heart and mind to keep them, to follow them, and the effects that they have on your life."

So it's an ongoing, moment to moment, really deep attention and exploration. What does it call forth in our heart and mind not to tell a falsehood? Not to harm someone with our sexuality, or ourselves? Not to take some little thing that is not offered? It's not like, "Okay, I didn't do it" or "I did." It's really, really attending with wise attention, resting in what's arising, resting in awareness, truly exploring what comes up, how it feels to act in these wholesome ways, the effect it has on your mind, the effect it has on the world around you.

Again from Ajahn Sucitto: "Morality carries with it the strength of restraint, the empathy of concern for how one's actions affect oneself and others, and the clarity of discerning the difference between short-term happy feelings and long-term well-being."

I like that one a lot. Short-term happy feelings—"I'll just take this, no one will know"—versus long-term well-being. But you can break it down simply to what's feeding kilesa.

We always use this example: you're in a place like this retreat center and someone left their shampoo, and you think, "I could use their shampoo." Of course you could—no one's going to care, right? But just to notice it wasn't offered, and you put it down. What's the effect on the heart and mind? That wanting comes up, or that feeling bad, or that "I hope no one sees me" kind of thing. You put it down, you don't do it, and you're protected. The heart and mind is protected from the kilesa, and the wholesome is fed. It's such a little thing, but it's so uplifting. So purifying.

Notice in your mind when this becomes more and more normal and natural, when you hardly have to think about it. You can trust your heart and mind that you're not going to do these things. Some temptation might arise—you kind of look at it—but you have this freedom from fear that you're going to act in inappropriate ways. It's a wonderful feeling, because it's really strengthening the wholesome, really helping to abandon the greed and the aversion.

From the Buddha: "Wisdom is purified by sila, and sila is purified by wisdom. The combination is the highest thing in the world." That's from the Buddha, so you can't argue with that. And he says a wise person is known by their actions.

I think sila is such a beautiful practice—so rich, so subtle—and something we're faced with in so many moments of every day. We can't say there's no place to practice awareness, no place to remember awareness, no place to bring wise attention. Just seeing that.

Do you know what also protects and strengthens our commitment to non-harming behavior and awareness? Two wholesome qualities of mind, perhaps you've heard of them: hiri and ottappa. They're called the bright guardians of the world. According to the Abhidhamma, these two beautiful qualities are present in every wholesome state of mind. There are many beautiful qualities present, which perhaps I'll read tomorrow morning. But hiri and ottappa are present in every wholesome quality of mind. And ahirika and anottappa—the reverse—are present in the unwholesome qualities.

They had these not very onward-leading, rather Victorian translations: "moral shame" and "moral dread."

But that makes them sound really negative when they're actually beautiful qualities, guardians of the world.

You can think of hiri as conscience. It's more inward-looking, and it's like—well, maybe it's like disgust or fear, but really it's that it's painful to think of doing something harmful. It pains us. Conscience is probably a close connection. You think of doing something that causes harm, and you can almost feel pain in your heart, in your body. And when you do something harmful, the pain of that—because we keep paying attention. As the Buddha says, if you do something unskillful, do it with awareness. Don't turn off the awareness. Do it with awareness. And then the pain, the discomfort of that in oneself and others serves as a wake-up call. So hiri really protects us from our own potential for painful actions, helping to decondition the greed and the aversion.

Otapa is more outward-turning—like awareness, like fear, tuned into not wanting to elicit the painful results that would happen when you do something unskillful. You do something unskillful and people will not like you, or in a kinder way, you realize that you've hurt somebody, caused some pain. It's tuned outward, protecting us from causing pain to others with our actions, and to ourselves as well. And these are called the bright protectors of the world.

Ajahn Amaro was saying in one talk that when Ajahn Sumedho bought Amaravati and was building the new hall there, he had two statues put on each side from some statues he'd seen in Thailand. These aren't that common—I don't think I've actually ever seen one. But they're like deities, Hiri and Otapa, the two deities, the bright guardians of the world, one on each side going into the Dhamma hall. I love that.

Thinking about it, "moral shame, moral dread"—that doesn't do it, right? It just makes you feel bad. But thinking of these as beautiful qualities, or as Sayadaw U Pandita said, that living with sīla actualizes our sense of oneness with others—it really does. In actualizing a sense of oneness with others, it's also not feeding the sense of me, me, me. It's tuning into a sense that our actions affect one another. You can't do something in isolation.

So this is what I wanted to say about sīla, but really I'm encouraging us that this is a great and always available aspect of life to meet with awareness and wise attention. We can see what's feeding unwholesome states and what's starving them, what really brings up the sense of ease, of non-harming, of appreciating that, of a calm mind. Or as Andre read from that one sutta: for one who follows precepts, for one who follows sīla, there's no need for an act of will for freedom from remorse. It's just cause and effect.

So that's the first of the three—working with sīla for transgressive kilesas. The second one, obsessive kilesas—I don't think I need to talk about that since we've spent a month looking at how awareness and steady mindfulness with right attitude works with obsessive defilements. I don't have time to go into that.

So back to the latent ones, because I want to give you a glimpse of some of the other aspects of our life, how the Buddha talks about using wise attention with awareness—wisely considering, wisely reflecting—to serve to abandon the kilesas, abandon the āsavas.

The latent tendencies—I mean, you must have a sense of this. You feel like you're going along some days, quite aware, the mind is calm, you're not feeling wanting or aversion. And some little thing just happens, and out of nowhere, craving or aversion just springs up. Has that ever happened to anybody? It's like the "out of nowhere" bit, though—you're walking along, and someone told me once they were on retreat at their retreat center, and they were walking past the tea table. They were like, "These apples, I don't want them. I'm fine." They really thought they didn't want them. And as they walked past, their arm went out and took an apple and walked behind. Who did that? Greed did that. Greed was driving the bus at that moment.

So that's a little thing. But these tendencies can just spring up in unexpected moments. And that's a funny example. There are some not-so-funny examples.

There's a lot of not-so-funny examples. She must have had one recently. I, of course, haven't. I can only use other people's experiences because I can't think of one.

But there's one I always use because it's actually extremely poignant to me. I heard on the radio a few years ago—came in in the middle of some interview on public radio. I didn't know who the interviewer was or who they were interviewing, but it was clearly an interview with young men who were in prison for serious crimes, in prison for years. I want to guess murder, but I don't know—serious crimes. And the young man was saying, "You know, sitting here, I wish so much that I had back those three to five seconds"—when the urge to do whatever he did just came up and he acted on it. Three to five seconds.

I can relate to that, right? You're just going along and something happens and this aversion springs up. Luckily, I think we must have enough awareness that it wouldn't move to physical harm. But plenty of times you're just minding your own business and some little thing happens and—how can they do that? Just read the news. Just so strong. And it can die away really quickly too with awareness. It doesn't have to go on and on and on and take over.

But just to get a sense of what he means by these latent torments, and not to be discouraged, but just to know it's possible to meet them with awareness—and to then also pay attention, give more awareness to how we're paying attention to experience.

So I'll just go through these other five ones that the Buddha mentions, because they might not be what you'd expect.

The first one is how asavas can be abandoned by restraining. Restraint at the sense doors. And all of these he says, "Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely..." He says that for each of them. "Reflecting wisely, abides with the eye faculty restrained. While asavas and fever of defilement might arise in one who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no asavas or fever of defilement in him when he abides with the eye faculty restrained"—or all of the faculties restrained.

This doesn't mean tight, never looking around. One time years ago—I guess it was a three-month retreat—someone who was on staff was sitting for three days. He said he wanted to really restrain at the eye door. So he walked around blindfolded for three days. That's not what we're talking about.

And again, this is reflecting wisely. So we're noticing, whether it's the eye or the ear or thinking, when it's unrestrained, when it's just flowing out. We go outside and we're walking, and you can see the difference. It's not like, "God forbid I should look around"—it's not that. But we're walking and, "Oh, the chipmunks! Oh, the birds! What kind of bird? Where can I go see that?" And you're going here and you're going there. Then you think, "Someone told me they saw a bobcat the other day..." All of this coming from a seeing or a hearing and thinking, and not noticing it, not with wise attention. The attention is on how interesting that would be. It's on the gratification from the pleasant, rather than on noticing that through that seeing without wise attention, greed is growing, growing, growing, growing.

So restraint at the sense doors is just seeing, being right here with it. That old quotation from Ajahn Chah: when we hear a sound, the sound doesn't bother us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound. And that's it.

Clearly, restraint—it's not like there's some rule of how restrained you should be. But reflecting wisely, with wise attention, we notice what's feeding the kilesas. Aversion does the same thing. You get caught up in, "How could that person do that? When I get home, I'm going to say this..." And we're in the thought.

And sometimes it's out of our control. Even with wise attention, of course, the *papañca* has taken over. And when we recognize it, then with awareness, we can land again in something concrete here.

But other times, it's not that it's taken over, but the sense door is just a bit unrestrained. So there's that thought that came up, that memory that could just be met with wise attention. It's unpleasant. But no, it's unrestrained. So the attention to the unpleasant aspect gets stronger, stronger, stronger. The unwise attention is paying attention to what's wrong, what that person did wrong, what I don't like. And it balloons. Or the same—you pay attention to that lunch the other day. It tasted so good. Unwise attention to the gratification of the pleasant is an interesting place. *This is so nice. How can I get it again?* It's not like it's evil. But if you notice that, yes, just a little bit of craving grows and grows and grows.

So this is a good place for awareness to let us explore wise attention in terms of gratification, in terms of the reverse of gratification. We really grasp at something. So, clear awareness. And the restraint—it can go into our life too. Just paying attention, as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, we don't have to leave all our doors and windows open all the time in our life and just let everything come in, everything come in.

And we can look at this with our receptive awareness and right attitude. So this isn't about saying you're bad or wrong or something. *I should never watch television because it's bad and adharmic or something like that.* It's not that at all. It's bringing wise attention to what we do. So if you're watching TV or reading a book with attention, just noticing what's being fed in the mind. You could watch something on TV that's quite inspiring and it's uplifting. You can watch plenty of stuff that isn't quite inspiring. It might just be flat and bored and you're tired and it's helping you relax, but it's not really increasing *kilesa*. You could notice that.

Or you can notice—I've noticed more now when I turn something on, like eight out of ten times, I don't make it past five minutes. And it used to be, I thought, *Oh, this is bad, but it's just five minutes.* After five minutes, the mind is just not happy. It's like a little bit, *These people, they're so nasty. What do I want to watch that for?* And I just turn it off. But it's different from a judgment. I can watch something that's really stupid that I'd be embarrassed to tell people I watched. But it's not feeding a lot of greed or it's not feeding a lot of aversion in the mind. So we pay attention to that. But we don't just let everything come in, no matter what. So we each will find our own way in our life, in the way that we live. Restraint at the sense doors.

Once at the end of a three-month retreat in integration and asking questions, I was with Joseph and someone was saying, you know, they found after a retreat they go home and they'd go to a dinner party. They remember this, and they just felt they didn't really enjoy it—the conversations were kind of meaningless. What could they do? How could they not feel like that? And then we both said something. And then I thought, and I finally just said it, though I didn't know if it was really what I should say: "Well, one thing is you could quit going to dinner parties." And Joseph said, "Yeah, actually, really." Not that they're bad, but you're paying attention and you're seeing the sense doors are unrestrained and it's just feeding negativity. It's feeding *kilesa*.

So it's not a judgment on the thing. Again, as with wise and unwise attention, it's our commitment to our own heart and mind—to see what's feeding kilesa and what's starving it. Because we care about ourselves, we care about awakening, and we care about the world. So it's not a beating yourself up thing. It's out of love. It's out of compassion.

Okay, the next one is āsavas abandoned by using. "Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely uses their robe only for protection from cold, for protection from heat, for protection from contact with gadflies, flies, wind, burning, creeping things, and for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience."

You get the drift. I like this—it's reflecting wisely. It's the attitude with which we use things. I love it that he puts that in there. Are we using something like food? Great, we need to eat. It's fine to appreciate it. But are we using food for emotional comfort? Again, this isn't intellectual. It's paying attention in yourself. Am I using food, you know, when something's really good and you taste it, you eat it, it feels fine? And then we're using it more to feed wanting, to feed wanting. If you're aware of how you're feeling, your stomach's really saying, "I've had enough now." But we keep on going, keep on going, using it just to feed pleasant feeling.

We're saving stuff for later. I remember on retreats, over at the retreat center, sometimes I'd want to save a little bit of food for if I was hungry at two in the morning—which never happened. But if I was hungry at two in the morning, I would have this little bit of food. There used to be all these shelves and all these rotting little things of food. And how much extra trouble it is, like with that mug I talked about. Save the food and put it there. Do I want it or do I not want it, or should I eat it? And then there's more food. There's always more food here. You're not going to starve. And then it's all piling up, and then it's embarrassing, and you don't want to clean it out because yogis are watching you. And it goes on and on.

The attitude with which we use things—take what you need. Again, this isn't like an ideal in the mind. It's just really noticing. It's so peaceful. It's so liberating. Life is just so much less burdensome. You take what you want and you put it down. You're done. With food, with clothes, with whatever. Not being too much of a strain on the planet. Just using how much water we need. Just, you know, whatever we can do—again, actualizing our oneness with others. But this is with wise attention. Paying attention to how we're using things. Is it feeding greed? Is it feeding shame? Is it feeding kilesa? Or is it that sense of ease where you can put it down?

I remember the very first three-month retreat I sat. I was new to the whole thing, and you project all kinds of stuff. There was enough food, but in those days there wasn't a lot of extra. I think we had cheese like three times in three months or something. People paid six dollars a day to sit there at that time, so the budget was a little less. Anyway, there was enough food, but I remember I would always be there in time in case something ran out.

There was this one guy who I totally projected onto. I don't even know who he was. He would come in twenty minutes late, twenty-five minutes late to lunch, cruising in, carrying his offal food. And I would think, he must be enlightened. He must be so enlightened that he can come in late, and the food's gone, and he's just mellow about it. I had no idea what was going on in his mind. I didn't even know who he was.

And a long time later, years and years later, in the middle of a three-month course, I just noticed I had stopped caring. I was coming in really late, and I would just take whatever was there, and if something was gone, it was gone, and I really didn't care. It wasn't any big deal. It's so relieving. It's so simple and easy. You take what you need. You don't have to feed the wanting. Just noticing this, the attitude with which we use things—I like that a lot.

The next one is what I would call actually patience, although it's translated here as enduring or tolerating. "What āsavas can be abandoned by patience?" Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with gadflies, flies, wind, burning and creeping things. Remember, they're out in the woods—there really are burning and creeping things. He endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words, and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life.

We're talking some serious patience here. But the Buddha's not saying patience like, "whatever." It's the attitude in the mind, the wise attention that can help not feed the kilesas. That's what it's about—really seeing that it's possible, not always, but to meet this experience. Many people have said there's this receptive awareness that's just receiving an unpleasant. Mostly we don't have to be patient with pleasant, but when there's receiving an unpleasant, as of the awareness, you get that sense of equanimity, of non-reactivity. That's the quality that's feeding the wholesome and starving the kilesas.

We can't force patience, but we can incline the attention in that direction. Like what I said from Ajahn Sumedho about sweating through his robes and thinking, "I can't bear it, I can't bear it." Have you ever had a moment when you felt like that? And if I keep the awareness on "I can't bear it, I can't bear it," what keeps getting stronger? "I can't bear it. I really can't. This is unbearable."

But when I just drop the attention—seeing with wise attention, reflecting wisely, that's just feeding it, feeding the aversion—drop the attention back into sweating, hot. It's like this. It's like this. That's the patience. That just shifts into wise attention. In that moment, it allows—not always, but often—the kilesas to just dissipate, to be abandoned.

But it's possible then. But with all kinds of things, with words—when people say something to you that's rude, how hard is that to really be patient with? It's really interesting to explore all the different places in our life.

When I was a nun in Thailand—and that's a long time ago—I stayed in a kuti in a forest monastery. I really just liked to be private and quiet, but you're the *falang* nun, you know, the foreign nun. And in a lot of the meditation centers in the woods, they're like parks. People come, lay people come. This was up north. Lay people come to spend the day, have a picnic. It's in beautiful spots in the woods.

And so I'd be walking and they'd come up in your face and take a picture. I mean, you can't overtly be rude, at least, right? But they'd come up in your face and take a picture. I'd be in my kuti—like a screen door—and they'd come up and be staring in the screen door. "Oh look, the *farang* nun is meditating," you know, stuff like that. Definitely aversion would arise. Definitely.

I could put up a cloth so they couldn't see into the window. But it's like, okay—patience. Patience. If I focus on "how can I stop that," it just grows. If I focus on "I don't like it," it just grows. It's like, okay. It's like this now. Unpleasant. It's over in a second. They take a picture and it's gone. I stew on it for half an hour. I mean, who's causing the problem here?

So patience. The Buddha said in the Greater Discourse to Rāhula, his son: "Rāhula, develop meditation that is like the earth. For when you develop a mind like the earth, arising agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as people throw clean things and dirty things—excrement, urine, spittle, and blood—on the earth, and the earth is not horrified, humiliated, or disgusted because of that, so develop a mind, a heart like the earth."

Then he goes through all the different elements. But that's just a way to think. It's just, okay, this horrible thing was said to me. It's like this now. Tuning into the quality in the mind with wise attention, reflecting wisely.

The next one—and you might be surprised—is avoiding things. The Buddha is not saying every horrible thing, you have to go right to it. Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely avoids a savage elephant, a savage horse, a savage bull, a savage dog. Okay, we don't have that here. A snake, a stump, a bramble, a chasm, a cliff, a cesspit, a sewer—we can avoid all of that. Reflecting wisely, they avoid wandering to unsuitable places. Reflecting wisely, avoid frequenting bad friends, unwholesome friends. Reflecting wisely—so that wise companions. "So while taints and fever of defilement might arise in one who did not avoid these things, there are no taints and fever of defilement in one who avoids them."

I think this is a really important one too, because sometimes we have that sense that to be really mindful means you can just be with everything, and you should just be able to be with everything. And he's saying, no, you don't have to be with everything. And again, it's with wise attention.

wise friends, not avoiding good friendships. It's not like you're judging them. You're noticing what happens, what's fed in your mind and heart. It's always about what's going on in the mind and heart. They may be lovely people, and the more you hang out with them, the more you get into greed, the less you want to pay attention to your mind, the more you just get into some *papañca*, useless chatter. And you're paying attention and you're feeling not so wholesome, not so good. And it's not about putting them down—it could be a lot worse. Of course, it could be a lot worse. But just to say it's not about judging them. Like the dinner party example: lovely people, but it's just not supporting what's important to my heart and mind. So we see that.

Sometimes avoiding may have a little tremor of loss. It's a choice we're making from wise attention not to feed *kilesa*. But also, it's practical. It's not idealistic. We don't come here to have a retreat to try and understand wise attention with TVs up here like they do in the airport, saying you should be able to be really present no matter what's going on. We have it in silence. When you're having a bad hindrance day—you're just lost in hindrances—and someone else comes up and talks to you, it's not a good scene, is it? One time many years ago, I was on a retreat with my partner, who was also on the retreat, a long retreat, and we happened to run into each other and started talking. We were both in a really ratty hindrance state of mind, and it was such a bad idea that we talked to each other. The hindrances—forget it, you know?

So we avoid. We don't have to let go to the most difficult thing. We're not trying to do this in Times Square. If you're in Times Square and you can't get away, then we use wise attention: what feeds and what starves, how can we cultivate patience, how can we have restraint at the sense doors—there's all these different things. But it's not expecting that if I really could practice, I could be with anything. No. Avoid what's dangerous. Avoid what's completely unnecessary. Avoid what feeds in you getting more and more into greed and aversion and me, me, me.

Okay, we're getting there. The next one is removing. Avoiding would be more like when I put the cloth up so the Thai people couldn't see in—I was avoiding that. Removing is a little bit more tricky because it's talking about not feeding certain mental states. "Reflecting wisely, one does not endure, does not feed an arisen thought affected by sense desire, by ill will, by cruelty. One abandons it. Does not endure arisen unwholesome, unskillful states."

Now, we can only hear that with the wisdom from receptive awareness that it's not a judgment—that there are times we all know when we don't have the choice. We totally know that. And he's not talking about that. But he's talking about something that's really interesting to explore with our wise attention: there are times, more than we might realize, when we can actually choose what thoughts to follow and what thoughts not to follow. More than we might realize. And this isn't a choice out of aversion—"I don't like this, I don't like this"—but really seeing with *sati-paññā*, with wisdom and receptive awareness: I don't have to go down that road. I can go here.

There are times we don't have that choice, and the steady awareness helps us learn how these *kilesas* work. We all know that. But this is from that *sutta* where the Buddha was walking and he's really seeing when he had thoughts of greed, thoughts of aversion, thoughts of cruelty. It was for his own suffering, for the suffering of others, and there was nothing useful about it. And then he resolved not to follow those thoughts, to abandon those thoughts. But when thoughts came up of compassion, of kindness, of non-ill will, of generosity, he looked and he said, "I can see no harm that can come from those thoughts. Even if I thought them for a day and a night, there could be no harm, except perhaps the mind and body would be tired out, so that I would rest." It's so practical.

So this is something to think about: not getting into judging when we're caught in this stuff, but recognizing the potential with wise attention that more often than we might think, you can make the choice.

Now there's one more thing. I'll give you an example—I think I've used this in some groups. A few years ago, I was sitting, not on retreat, just at home. And something triggered a pattern of self-judgment, which I have been looking at for fifty years. I know all about it. It's coming up.

So I'm being mindful. There's this thought. There's this feeling. I wasn't reacting. Just noticing, noticing, noticing.

And the thought came up: I don't need to explore this. I've been down this rabbit hole ten million times. Let me change the channel to metta.

It was just like that—just a kind of exploring. So I simply substituted metta thoughts. "May I be free from danger. May I be happy and peaceful." I just said the four phrases, just like that, without trying to feel metta, and without aversion or running away. Just changing the channel.

By the second repetition, the mind and heart actually shifted—that quality, that mental state of metta, arose, and the other was gone.

I thought that was really a huge learning for me, because it wasn't aversion. I could have been just as mindful of the self-judgment, but why? We can actually consciously cultivate the wholesome with wise attention.

And this, I think, is a really huge thing for us to learn—very different from "I've got to be with it to the bitter end for the one hundred fifty-eight million billionth time." No. Be happy. May all beings be happy. Maybe just come back to mindfulness of something else.

I'm using that tone of voice because it's really like that. It isn't a reaction.

So start to look and see with wise attention. With wise attention, we can consciously cultivate the wholesome, consciously starve the unwholesome.

Okay, that's enough. You get the drift. But do it. Do it. This is what our life's about. And it doesn't lead to more suffering. And it doesn't lead to being shut off from people. I gave the example about unwise friends, but it doesn't mean we're cutting off friendships. It just means we're meeting the world with more wholesomeness and less reactivity—because we're meeting ourselves that way too.

And every moment's a chance to explore.

So thank you.

CHAPTER 198

Mundane and Supermundane Right View

Carol Wilson · 49 min

In this talk from Forest Refuge, Carol Wilson offers a nuanced exploration of sammādiṭṭhi (right view), distinguishing between its mundane and supermundane aspects as described in the suttas. She begins by establishing the foundation of receptive awareness practice—that steady, flowing quality of attention where whatever arises becomes simply an object that reintroduces awareness, whether pleasant or unpleasant, mundane or profound.

Wilson explains how supermundane right view emerges naturally through sustained awareness practice: the direct, experiential recognition that all phenomena are arising and passing, empty of lasting self-existence, equally doorways to awareness. She describes those moments when the heart-mind is free from clinging and aversion—not through force, but through the simple non-creation of confusion in that moment of clear seeing. Drawing on Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations, she contrasts this with mundane right view: the understanding of kamma, that actions have causes and results, and the recognition of how wholesome actions of body, speech, and mind bring happiness while unwholesome ones bring suffering.

Practically, Wilson addresses a common confusion in practice: when to simply rest with what's arising versus when to skillfully redirect attention. The key, she emphasizes, is taking care of awareness itself—not making things the way we want them. She reminds practitioners that mundane right view, far from being secondary, is essential groundwork that allows wisdom to arise. When the heart-mind is not clouded by wanting and aversion, the shift of perception that recognizes freedom becomes possible.

When we first begin with this style of practice, when one first begins and we're all trying to get the felt sense, the trusted sense of steady, receptive awareness—which includes not holding on, as we've said ten million times—it takes a while to start to feel the flow of it, to trust it, and to really get a sense of what is meant by awareness with right view.

Right view is a huge topic, but by now I know that everyone we're speaking to has, at times, really experienced—not intellectually, but intuitively, experientially—that sense of the mode of receptive awareness. When you can say it's flowing, it's steady, and whatever's arising, as Mingyur Rinpoche said, is simply an object that reintroduces awareness. Whether it's something beautiful or something difficult, whether it's

mundane, whether it's clinging or aversion or love—whatever's arising, there's this sense of "it's all here." That flowing awareness with right view, you really can at times get a sense of how that could move toward a taste of freedom, really.

People have said that when something difficult comes up, a pattern, they can feel it's coming. It still feels difficult, but there's that little shift you can't really describe to someone else—into the awareness *with* it, not *of* it, but *with* it, rather than *in* it, fighting it or trying to figure it out. Like, "Oh, it's still happening, but it isn't suffering in the same way. It's still unpleasant, but isn't suffering."

Different people have said this in different ways. And when it's like that—which it isn't always—you don't have to think about it, but that is really almost supermundane right view. The right view that it's all coming and going, whatever it is. Whatever it is introduces us to the nature of Dhamma, the nature of life. There's nothing to be preferred. There's nothing to be shut out. And everything comes and vanishes.

It really starts to highlight or give us more of a felt sense of the emptiness side of things—empty of its own lasting self-existence. When the awareness is steady, everything's arising due to causes and conditions. Some of them we don't see because they can stretch way back, but we can see that coming together, we can see whatever's happening coming together, doing its number, falling apart, the next thing going, going, going. The more we are trusting and resting with this receptive, steady awareness, the more this just soaks in. Not thinking about it, but it soaks in. It gets a little harder to take everything so solidly and everything so personally.

And then, at some point, it isn't so hard because everything's changing, and we're resting in receptive awareness. As we all know, sometimes whatever's occurring—not that it's pleasant or unpleasant—overwhelms the awareness. In the beginning, with instructions, I know it's confusing when we try to give the sense of receptive awareness with whatever's happening, but also teach that if it's too much, you can use skillful means to redirect the attention, to take care of the awareness.

Often in the beginning—because that's what we know, though not only in the beginning—the mind takes it that when aversion or clinging comes, it's bad and we need to redirect the awareness. Or when something unpleasant comes, we think, "Oh, it's overwhelming the awareness, I need to move it." But it isn't overwhelming the awareness—it's just that we don't like it. Or we have the idea that the kilesas should not be occurring. That's a view we have. It takes long conscious awareness before we really understand experientially that aversion can come up and be known and felt, and it passes, and it doesn't matter.

Awareness doesn't care if it's aversion or bliss. *I* care. I want bliss. I don't want aversion. And everything's locked into place. Awareness doesn't care. And that's the turning in the direction of freedom. It doesn't care, but it's present.

So in the beginning, it's confusing for all of us. We don't know: when should I redirect the attention? What should I do? This is coming up. I can't be with it. But mostly we can be with it. Not very frequently do we truly need to redirect.

I remember a long time ago, I heard a talk by Ajahn Sumedho about practicing in Thailand, in a kuti. Those kutis have tin roofs. If you've ever been in one in the hot season with the sun beating down—I have—you want to die. They are so hot. And he said he'd have three robes on, these really heavy robes. And he said, "I'd be sitting, sweating through my robes, thinking, 'I can't bear this another minute.' And then I'd find that I could."

That's what it's like.

That's just another minute. "I'll bear this another minute." Okay, it's like this.

So it's definitely confusing. But as we come to trust receptive awareness with right view, and more and more see that whatever our skillful means might be, the motivation is taking care of the awareness—not making things the way we want, but taking care of the awareness.

When something difficult arises, or it could be something wonderful, but it comes up and it's so strong that it has overwhelmed the awareness, basically you've lost connection with awareness. It's not like, "This is just strong and hard to be with." It's overwhelmed. And you all know what I mean by now. At that time, that's when the right view is really to take care of the awareness. That's when we consciously have the intention to redirect the attention to something just neutral and easy to be with. Because what we're doing is refreshing, rediscovering, refueling into that quality of awareness. And that's what we're taking care of.

When we talk about right view, there are these two modes. One is: anything coming and going is all equally empty, equally just what it is in the moment, equally a doorway to awareness. On the other hand, really through the steady awareness, we come to understand what brings confusion and suffering on our regular mundane level. The steady awareness helps to see that.

That gets less confusing as we go along. As we understand experientially how the awareness is, then we understand that we can, with it, really see: How does greed get so strong that it completely takes me over? What experiences—not asking yourself, but watching—what experiences increase greed to the point that it's taking over? Or aversion, or fear, or whatever? Not that it's bad that it's there, but to the point of taking over.

I wanted to say a little about right view in the way it's talked about in the suttas. This is a vast topic, and I'm condensing it to five minutes. Using Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, the Buddha talks about mundane and supramundane right view. I feel like we're working in those two sides of the coin—you can say two realms, but really two sides of understanding—back and forth all the time.

When it's flowing, when everything is just coming and going, it's approaching that quality of right view, that sense of a shift of perception that recognizes things in a different way and frees the heart and mind from confusion, sense of separation, and clinging in that moment. Supramundane.

And then when we're either caught in stuff or really watching and seeing that if I keep doing this it leads to more greed, and can consciously shift—we feel like that's a doing. That's different from just whatever's happening, whatever's happening doesn't matter. But then seeing where it does matter and making a conscious shift, a conscious choice—this is what you could call mundane right view.

I want to share what the Buddha says about them, but first I'll read this from His Holiness, talking about nirvana and regular life:

"To find happiness, it is indispensable to have a correct view of the nature of mind and the world. Someone who has the wrong view about nature cannot follow the path of transforming a habit to realize liberation. What is meant by right view is not faith or believing in any particular dogma, but a clear understanding that is reached through thoroughly examining reality."

That's what steady awareness makes possible—thoroughly examining reality moment to moment.

"This kind of examination will refute the belief in the independent existence of things, which is the root of our distorted vision of the world, and replace it with right view."

This also implies, in Tibetan language, a recognition that the nature of freedom is the essence of our own mind—pure, without confusion. But it also involves identifying the factors that keep us from perceiving that nature, so that it becomes possible for them to be abandoned, for us not to feed them.

That's a way of talking about mundane and supramundane right view. It's huge, but when the Buddha talked about mundane right view, he was talking about knowing the Four Noble Truths—not just intellectually, but in our hearts. It's not completely transformative, but that way of looking at the world is very important. He said if it really came down to one thing, you could say it's the understanding of kamma: not all the complications of it, but the understanding that actions have causes and results. And not understanding that, he says, is what keeps us really bound in actions that cause suffering.

This calls on us to see what Joseph describes as the big picture of mundane right view. It's learning to see what qualities in the mind, what qualities in the heart bring us suffering, and how our wholesome actions of body, speech, and mind—even though they're still rooted in the realm of desire, even though they're not coming from freedom—really have the effect of bringing us happiness in this world.

The Buddha says this is a very important aspect. He's not saying, "Oh, that's second class." He says it matters how we live in the world in a way that brings ourselves and other beings happiness, ease, love, compassion. How to live in the world without actions of speech, body, and mind that cause more confusion and suffering for ourselves and others. This is mundane right view, but it's very, very important. And it's actually what makes it possible for the awareness, the wisdom, to arise to actually see—

more clearly. Supermundane right view—the shift of perception that allows for the understanding of freedom—is only possible when the heart-mind is not clouded by wanting, aversion, or the contraction of self.

So working with this mundane right view, the real sense that actions have effects, have results, that it affects me, it affects others, that nothing is outside of that—this is really, really key.

And in fact, when the Buddha went on to list very mundanely, you could say, the ten right actions—this is under right view, under his description of *sammā diṭṭhi*—he's talking about the level of action, which I think you know. I'll just read them quickly to see how obvious but important it is. These aren't rules where if you don't follow them you're bad. These are things to pay attention to, because paying attention with awareness to the causes and conditions that lead to wholesome actions and their effects, and

the causes and conditions that lead us to unwholesome actions and their effects—this is the information, as the Dalai Lama said, that allows for the habits to transform. So it's not a secondary thing.

You know the unwholesome actions; the wholesome ones are just the reverse. The first are bodily actions, basically the precepts: destroying life, taking what is not given, wrong conduct in regard to sense pleasures—essentially greed and sexuality, but wrong conduct. It's not saying *brahmacharya*, it's not saying celibacy, it's saying not hurting people or yourself.

Three bodily actions, and then four verbal actions that cause suffering if we don't see the greed or the aversion that's giving rise to them: lying, false speech. And it's interesting because he says somewhere in the suttas that a person who will deliberately tell a lie is capable of doing anything. He really has very strong things about truthfulness. Then slander, harsh speech, and idle chatter. So speech is a big one. And maybe if some of you practiced a little with speaking yesterday, maybe you saw—you already knew how powerful it is, how quickly it gets into the mind, how quickly we may lose awareness of the subtle level of this intentionality.

And then three mental actions: covetousness—he's not just saying greed, he's saying covetousness, when you want something that belongs to somebody else. Check it out, how unpleasant that is. Then ill will and wrong views. So wrong views is basically major suffering. But then you flip those to not doing those, and that's right view.

I say this not so you have to remember it all, but to see how he's saying wholesome action is at the heart of right view. Mundane right view, really given attention and care—which our steady awareness allows us to see—understanding comes naturally through steady awareness. We know that. And this is part of the path to awakening. It's not something lesser.

In terms of supermundane right view, to use Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation: I know I always think of it this way. What's really supported me so much in my years of practice is the understanding, the trust, that mind is arising and passing moment to moment. To think of something that arises and has to stay like that—then there's no way we can... we think, how can I have a mind that never has any *kilesa* coming up? It's impossible! And we think way down in the future.

But as we've both talked about, and in groups, just in that moment when being with something, when that shift to awareness with wisdom comes in, the clinging, the aversion, the me-ing about something is gone. It's gone. Really gone. And awareness is still there. And there's just that sense of coolness, of freedom, of ease, of however it is for you.

That shift of perception takes the solidity, the perception of solidity, the perception of me, the perception of problem, the perception of lasting—and it just evaporates in that moment. Nothing goes away. It just stops being created. And in that moment, just that potential for a moment, we all can experience that. Can't hold on to it. Can't hold on to anything. But just recognizing gives a sense of the peace, or the coolness, or whatever word works for you, of the heart and mind free from that sense of self-clinging, aversion, me and other. You're not saying all that stuff. It just isn't being created in that moment.

The perception of the shift, the fundamental shift of how we recognize and respond to moment-to-moment experience. I think Andrea said in her talk last night this one particular phrase: things as they have come to be in this moment. It's just, back to Sayadaw: it's just like this. But with this, that's what is really allowing for the non-creation in this moment of the torments, of the confusions.

Not that we have to chop them away with an axe, but in the moment of seeing clearly, receiving as it is, they're not created. They're not born. Always that potential is available.

And so in a way, that's kind of how I feel about awareness practice as we're doing it here, which is just a form of practice. There are times when that sense of the heart-mind can be free—not even thinking of heart-mind. It's just that the experience is so clear and crisp and bright, whatever it is. And we don't have to do anything. It's so clear we don't have to do anything. Anything we do just mucks it up.

But then at another time, it's all confusing. There is a sense of personal effort—a little bit—not to change anything, but to look at what's happening there. There's awareness here. What will help refresh the awareness? How can I take care of the awareness? So there's a little bit of seeing and doing, with some intellectual wisdom that comes from past experience. That's useful—the first level of wisdom, what we've heard. The middle level is what we think about it, what we've learned.

So sometimes when we're feeling all confused, we can call on that. What's going on? Awareness—I can't feel it. What would help refresh the awareness? Not "how do I get rid of this?" No, no. What would help refresh the awareness? That's right. You remember: oh, just feeling my hands, being with hearing. "Oh, it doesn't feel good." It doesn't matter. I'm aware, aware, aware. And we start to trust that more and more and more.

So there's really nothing to do, but occasionally there's a little something to do. And finding these two, I think, kind of correlates with the two aspects of right view in a very simplistic way.

That's just what I wanted to share today.

May the beneficial energies generated from our sincere practice together be shared with all beings as a support for their freedom from confusion.

Just now. Keep going. Nothing else to do but be aware.

I just remember this story Joseph told us last night. Years and years ago at a Yucca Valley retreat, there was a lovely monk from Sri Lanka who collapsed during a talk—he had a little heart attack. He was okay afterward, so they had the emergency people come, and they were asking him questions to see if he was alright. They said, "Do you know what day it is?" And Joseph said, "No one here knows what day it is."

So we're in good company.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 199

Some Benefits of Continuity of Awareness

Carol Wilson · 50 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines why continuity of mindfulness is the essential condition for liberating wisdom (paññā) to arise. She begins by clarifying that the Pāli term citta encompasses all mental experience—both thoughts and emotions—before exploring the Buddha's teaching that Nibbāna is directly visible when the mind is free from greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). When these kilesas color our perception, we cannot see our own good, the good of others, or the good of both.

Wilson draws on Thanissaro Bhikkhu's insight that saṃsāra is not a place but a process—the tendency to keep creating worlds and moving into them. She explains how perception (saññā), which arises with every sense contact, becomes distorted by the kilesas and leads to papañca (mental proliferation). Using vivid examples, including a memorable story about a meditator who blamed creaking floors on another person only to discover she was causing the sound herself, Wilson demonstrates how accurate perception instantly dissolves suffering that was never truly grounded in reality.

The talk addresses the three perversions of perception (vipallāsas)—seeing permanence in the impermanent, satisfaction in the unsatisfactory, and self in what is not-self. Wilson emphasizes that insight doesn't change reality but reveals what has always been so. Quoting Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she encourages practitioners to notice kilesas when they're at a 'two' rather than waiting until they reach an 'eight,' and reminds us that with steady mindfulness, we need not fear anything that arises in the mind.

So tonight I wanted to offer just a few thoughts on why the steadiness of mindfulness, why the continuity, is actually the key piece—the condition that allows for liberating wisdom, paññā, to arise in the citta.

By the way, someone asked today in a group, what's the difference between heart and mind? I think I'll just clarify so I don't have to keep saying heart-mind. In Pali, the word *citta* is translated as all mental experience—thoughts, emotions, all of that. Sometimes here in the West we've had to make that distinction. We kind of think about the mind as thinking and the heart as emotions. And so a lot of times we have gotten in the habit of saying heart-mind to convey that it's all connected. So I feel like just saying *citta* instead of heart-mind. That's what I mean by it. It's all the mental activities.

So I wanted to talk about why the steadiness of mindfulness is really the key condition that allows for liberating wisdom, for paññā, to arise. There are so many different ways I could talk about this.

To begin with, starting from the top, there's this quotation from the Buddha. At one point someone came to him and asked, "In what way is Nibbana directly visible here and now?" He gave a long answer about how it is directly visible, inviting one to come and see for oneself, to be personally experienced by the wise. He says when lust, when greed is abandoned in the mind, when hatred is abandoned—there's a paragraph for each of them—when delusion is not arising in the mind, in each of those cases, Nibbana is directly visible.

When the mind is obsessed or overwhelmed by—or really in our case, when it is just colored by—greed and we don't recognize it, or by aversion, or by delusion, which those three come together in what's called the three defilements or kilesas or poisons of the mind, when they're present in the citta, in the mind stream, and we're not aware of it, Nibbana is not available. That's really the deepest suffering that comes from these qualities.

He says when any of those are present, you can't see clearly, you can't see your own good, you can't see the good of another, and you can't see the good of both. A lot of times people say, what's wrong with clinging when you're just having a pleasant feeling about something? You're not hurting anything, and it's in the moment, and it feels pleasant, and it is onward leading to have more pleasure, and that becomes the habit. But when clinging is in the mind and not known, we can't see our own good, we can't see the good of another, we can't see the good of both.

These are habits of mind—greed, hatred, confusion. The absence of them, cultivating moment-to-moment mindfulness, can also become a habit of mind. But these so-called poisons or kilesas, they're not inevitable. They come and go like everything else. And so the quality of clear seeing moment by moment by moment, the steadiness of that attention, is what allows for the wisdom to arise to actually see how this is working, how we get lost, how we can come out of getting lost. It's not theoretical, it's not like something I said or you heard me say.

The steady awareness—why it's so important—is that the awareness is receiving whatever happens, not picking and choosing. "This is bad, so let's pretend it's not happening. This feels good, so let's go there." We know how to do that. We've practiced that twenty-four-seven since we were born. But we really want to learn how the steadiness of awareness without selecting what's worth being aware of is how we can actually learn in this way how these states affect our mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh said, along with everyone else, all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge. That's exactly what we're doing here—direct experience. But until we start getting familiar with what awareness is, what mindfulness is, we don't even know what direct experience is. We feel like we're some steady-state being, but it's really some concoction coming together and falling apart, coming together and falling apart, and we call it "me," and it's changing all the time. And we don't even know it.

This is one of my favorite quotations from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, about how we get so confused, how we're living in the world so confused. *Samsara*—you know the word samsara—it literally means wandering on. Many people think of samsara as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live. We're in samsara, we're suffering in samsara. The place we leave when we go to Nibbana. That's what a lot of people think. But in the early Buddhist texts, which he's a scholar of, samsara is the answer not to "where are we?" but to "what are we doing?" It's not a place, it's a process—the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, your mind creates another one and you go there.

Can you relate at all? At the same time, you bump into other people, all of whom are creating their own worlds too. And we wonder why we can't communicate so well. This isn't like an exaggeration or something. He's really describing what we think our life is without direct experience. We're just kind of lost in these worlds, lost in these worlds. And it is just going on from one to the next to the next to the next. We keep trying to make it a little bit better, right? We get this world a little bit better, not really seeing that it's still going to come apart too when we don't see clearly.

Ajahn Sumedho—he's an American man, most of you probably know who he is—anyway, he's ninety-something now, still giving dharma talks. It's amazing. He says a similar thing: "Samsara and nibbana are not places to go, but modes of perception."

So we're coming to perception. Samsara is when the perception of experience is seen through the lens of delusion—of me, of what he calls *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which is a word in Pali meaning personality view or identity view. It's a form of *moha*, of delusion, of the third poison, you could say—that's taking any experience to be me or mine and then perceiving whatever's arising through that lens. And that's what he's saying is samsara: sense of self. That's the core wrong perception, the misperception that keeps the whole thing spinning—one world coming into another, another, another one. And until we have the direct perception, the direct experience again and again, that allows for the sudden accurate perception to see, "Oh, it's not like that"—until that can happen, we can think about it all we want, but that just solidifies the whole thing.

So nibbana, he's saying, is the mode of perception free from this confusion, free from sense of self. In other words, just recognizing more accurately. I've always loved that about the Buddha's teaching and the way he describes it. In some ways, the way he describes freedom—it's not that we're going somewhere else, just as Thanissaro Bhikkhu says. We're simply perceiving things as they are, accurately. It's like we don't need to create some new thing. We just need to keep having the willingness to land here, to land here, to land here, in this moment, as well as we can—free from expectation, free from thinking "I know what's going to happen"—just surrendering into this moment. But with this quality of heart that's interested, aware: "Oh, it's like this now. It's like this now. It's like this now."

I could do that, you know, twenty-four-seven. And because we want something a little more obvious, something showing that something's happening, we tend to lose our patience with that. That's why we're up here talking, talking, talking—trying to get you all to just keep remembering, to just keep remembering. And it's like, as someone said in a group, we can go days or an entire retreat and there can just be one moment where somehow the *kilesas*, the great hatred, clears away. And there's the awakeness and the awareness and interest. It just clears away, and the perception is accurate. And there's that sense of, "Oh, all the confusion, the sense of struggle—it's just not even that you put it down, it's just not there." And there's the sense of just ease. It's not like fireworks going off and everybody's bowing to you. It's just, ah. It's just ease. There's not all this hoopla going on.

But so, I want to then go talk about the hoopla a little bit—that's how we get so lost, so far, so fast in these worlds. So I mentioned perception, and I'll start talking about that.

Many of you know, but just to clarify: perception, in terms of how the Buddha speaks of experience, is the translation of the word *saññā* in Pali. And it's one of the mental experiences that's said to be arising in every mind moment, every moment of *citta*. So the way he describes it—I think Greg's talked about some of the sixth sense experiences, right?—that's all that's ever happening. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, some physical sense experience or some mental experience—that's all that's ever happening. And we make up all this stuff, my God, but that's all that's ever happening.

So a sense experience happens, and our sense organs—so say a sound, something happens to make a sound, the sense door is working, your ear is working, and there's consciousness. When those three come together, there's the experience of hearing. That's called contact, the experience of hearing. Very simple. And it's just all conditioned. It's nothing personal. Happening all the time, isn't it?

Every moment that we're awake, this contact is happening.

In that moment of contact, a couple of things occur. Perception arises, which is this quality of recognition—how our mind recognizes that experience. And at the same time, the vedana, the mental experience of it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, they're coming quite right together.

Perception is essential for functioning. You hear a sound and the mind just knows, "That's the bell," or "That's the lunch bell"—so it's even more specific. And then the bell at six in the morning is, "Oh, that's the wake-up bell." Now, it may be a completely different felt experience internally, right? The same kind of sound. So the perception can be different depending on the state in our heart and mind.

But even more than that, perception in itself is conditioned. And we tend not to particularly notice—we just think, "Oh, that's what it is. That's the robin. That's the bell. This is a zabuton." We just take our perceptions for granted. But perceptions are conditioned by our culture, by how we grew up, by our past experiences. Some sound that may be quite neutral or lovely to one person may trigger someone else's past trauma and be a scary sound. It's not that there's one right perception, but our tendency is to just completely believe, "Well, that's what it is."

This is a fun thing to explore, actually. When I first realized this, I was visiting a friend, and I just said to her, "Would you pass me that blue throw on the back of the couch?" She goes, "What blue throw?" I said, "That one." She goes, "That's not blue. That's green." We both tried, we both practiced. I could not see it as green. And she could not see it as blue. We didn't come to blows about it.

But that quality—that goes to the world, right? Look at the world. And I'll go into how that solidifies. It goes from the perception to what we think about it, and on and on. "This is true. This is a view. I'm right and you're wrong." And we don't even notice it. Boom, like that.

So perceptions are often inaccurate. And we don't know. Is there a really right one there, blue or green? Is there really an external perfect reality and we just have to figure it out? Don't waste your time. It's all conditioned.

Once we see how perception is conditioned by our memories and experience, we can also start to explore how each moment of perception can be distorted—is distorted—when there's the kilesas, when there's wanting or aversion or delusion, a sense of "me" in the mind stream, not really recognized. It's like we're looking through those glasses. Like I said with the bell, you could really see the difference. Seen through craving: "Oh,

that's great, lunch!" Seen through aversion: "I don't want to get up—oh, bad bell." But more than that, the kilesas can so distort perception that we aren't anywhere close to what's really happening.

It's interesting to watch. There's a nice Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object—it makes it look really much more attractive.

And so, I mean, pick a relationship when you're first getting into one, and the other person is just—everything's so wonderful about them, right? It just is. You just don't see anything wrong, which, if that didn't happen, you wouldn't get into a relationship. So, you know, it gets you there. You're lucky if some of it stays. And later, if—God forbid—it happens that the relationship ends, and you're thinking about all the stuff that you're seeing now that led it to end, you could say, well, that was all there in the beginning. I could actually see it then, but the mind was like, oh no, no, that doesn't matter. There's only this beautiful stuff, there's only this beautiful... And at the end, it was like, only this bad stuff, you know?

When you're angry, someone you look at looks ugly. When you're in love with them, they look beautiful. They're just being them.

So we can't—like the Buddha said, when there's greed or aversion in your mind, you can't see your own good or the good of another. You can't really assess the situation accurately when it comes to act. But if we don't recognize that, we don't know it's there.

How do we recognize it? Yes, of course—the steady awareness, the steady awareness that's willing to hang out when we start to recognize there's some greed or there's some aversion. It isn't like, oh, aversion, let's not go there. It's like, oh, get interested in it. How does it feel? How does it act? What's going on with it? When we see clearly the power of correct perception, all the negative or afflictive thoughts, craving thoughts, vanish.

Last year—I think it was last year—I was teaching a retreat at the Forest Refuge, and one of the meditators came to me. We'd been there about a month, so this was about three weeks in. It was just a great little example of noticing how the quality in the mind completely changes perception. This person's job was cleaning the bathroom. And they said they'd been going in, not like massively averse, but just, I've got to clean the bathroom. In their cleaning, it was just a little kind of dull and heavy.

Then one day she went in, and her mind was just feeling really bright and happy. She went in and said, oh, all these fixtures, they're so bright and shiny! They're just kind of glowing. It's so lovely in here. And she could even say, okay, you know, I don't think the fixtures are a lot different than they were yesterday. Probably not. That's what the mind does.

So that's a simple one. It's fun to see. Or sometimes on retreat—maybe there's too many of you and it hasn't been long enough—but after a while, in some way of never looking at anyone, you get everyone pegged anyway. And there's the ones you like, the ones you don't like, you know. Or just the socks—you know who it is. Then your mind goes through the reactions that you've made up to this person.

So you're sitting in the dining room, and this person who you have a little reaction to—not even knowing their name—and you see them walking by towards your table, and you're like, I'm not going to look though. I'm not going to look. You're sitting there not looking. Then they sit down, and finally you can't help it. You look. It's not that person at all, right? And you say, oh! All that, all that hoopla. Oh, it's this whole other person. And it completely vanishes. It completely vanishes because it doesn't make any sense.

That's insight. That's how insight works on a much more profound and subtle level. I try to make it funny because then we can really explore it. But this is going on all the time. Don't take it personally.

So I have to organize my mind here. Which direction do I want to go?

There's a sixth sense experience happening all the time. And with each sense experience, there's perception and a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling that comes with it. As you know, one of the deeply, deeply ingrained habits of the unaware mind is that when it's pleasant, some wanting arises. When it's unpleasant, there's aversion, a pushing away.

Just like when some person walks by—the perception is "someone I don't like"—and all this unpleasant thought comes up. Just noticing how that happens is really different. It's not feeding it.

But how often is this happening? Every moment of the day, these sixth sense experiences are occurring. Some perception of the other is arising, some subtle pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tone. And it doesn't always engender craving or aversion. Sometimes stuff just goes by—it's neutral, there's no reaction to it. This happens more often than we realize, because we tend to get hung up on the ones where there is a reaction.

But just to realize how quickly everything's happening—this is a piece of starting to have some respect for how and why our minds get so caught up so quickly in these stories. There's just so much happening so quickly.

With steady awareness, it's not like everything goes into slow motion and you see each sense experience and the perception and the vedanā. But sometimes, with a steady awareness, you do kind of notice how these building blocks, how this concoction comes together. And that can be really interesting to see—the perception and the vedanā, and then that goes into thinking about it, into papañca.

As the Buddha said—let me read this: "What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas. And then these associations and these complications turn around and assail us."

Can you relate to that at all? This is what's going on. I don't want to say twenty-four-seven, but it's going on a lot. You're just minding your business, somebody walks by, there's just a glimpse. Actually, what was really seen was a glimpse of color. That was the accurate perception—a glimpse of color. What was added was the idea that it's this or that person. That thought experienced is unpleasant. And then it's thought about, it's complicated, and these notions turn around and assail one.

This is without awareness, without mindfulness. It's not that this happens with every single sense contact, but this is what happens when we're getting lost. And then it turns into a whole world, like Thanissaro Bhikkhu was talking about.

"The tides of conceiving sweep over one who is not aware and mindful." That's from the Buddha. The tides of conceiving. And sometimes it feels like that—just sitting here and this tide of this story comes over. And it goes away. And then the tide of that story comes over, the tide of another story.

And then we don't want to know that anymore. So we just dull out or go and say, "I'll pick this story and get lost in it for a while." That's when we go off into thinking about stuff. Even if it's a suffering story—at least I don't have to notice all these other ones. It's just too exhausting. Saṃsāra is exhausting.

Of course we're tired. My gosh, this is what's going on in our lives. We're constantly reacting. We like this. We don't like that. We like us. We don't like that. We don't like this. What does everyone think about me? What do I think about them?

And this is, as Ajahn Sumedho says, we're sensitive beings. This body is sensitive. There's perception and vedanā going on all the time. And when there's not steady awareness, the reactions to this, the papañca, just goes on with it, and then it strengthens from thinking about it. It hardens into a view—this is true, everything else is false. This is what's really happening. We don't even know anything about perception

and vedanā, and yet we're certain this is what's happening, and all our reactions are, of course, right. Anything else is wrong. Until it changes five minutes later, but we don't notice that. We're in a new world.

So I just want to give you an example. Many people have heard this, and someone here could tell it better than me, but I know you like to hear it, so I'm telling it for my friend sitting back there. He knows what I'm about to tell.

This one story I really like because it's so perfect for this—it explains the whole thing. A good, good friend of mine was sitting for her first meditation retreat many, many years ago. I won't say where, because it would help identify her. But she was sitting, and it was in a rented facility. This was before there were all these centers. It was an old house that had been used for a summer camp, so it didn't have a lot of insulation—a really creaky wooden house. And it was her first retreat. You know how first retreats are. They're not always so wonderful.

So she's sitting in the meditation hall that's upstairs, and the walking room was down underneath it. Creaky old house. She's sitting there, and it was a sitting period, and she said whenever people were walking, it was so creaky—you'd hear everybody walking. It used to be like that in the walking room back there. When people would come in, all the floors here would creak. One of the years I was the manager, I think '84 or '85, the other manager, Rand, got on this mission. He really got on this mission to try and fix the floors so they wouldn't creak coming in, because people would be sitting and they'd hear someone walking out there. Which is actually good for practice. People can walk. It can creak. So what?

But anyway, so this was the sitting time. There's noise, and she heard someone walking in the hall downstairs. She was, of course, on her first retreat, trying to be with the breath. She's supposed to be with the breath. She's clearly not having a good time, in some aversion. And she hears the creaking, and—ugh—how can somebody do that? That's not right. That's not right.

I have to say, this person is from a culture where things should be done properly. That's not right. This is the sitting time, not the walking time. And that person shouldn't be making all that noise. It's wrecking my meditation. How can I be with the breath? So this went on for a while.

And then for whatever reason, she said, "Well, I'll just go back to the breath."

So she went back, tried to feel the breath. And then she did feel the breath. And then she realized she took a deep breath. She was leaning against the wall, and when she took a deep breath, her back went into the wall. And that was making the creaking sound that she was hearing.

Luckily, no one else heard. It was clear, right? In that moment, all the anger at that mythical person went away. It's just gone. That's what insight is. That's what insight is.

I want to break this down because that's how it works. Being with the breath, the hearing arises, and there's perception. The perception was, "Is somebody walking?" So that's already an inaccurate perception. It hadn't come to the aversion yet, but inaccurate perceptions can also be based on ignorance. We don't have all the information. Notice how the mind tends to make something up that approximates what it is. And if we don't know that we don't know—we really thought that was reality—that was based on ignorance.

And it was unpleasant. So the perception and then the story about it and then the unpleasant moved into aversion. And then the aversion, the thinking about it, turned into all the memories and associations. And it hardened into the view: one person should not be walking during the sitting time. They are wrong. And because they're wrong, it's messing up my practice. That was not an opinion. That was the explanation of reality, right? And that's what we do. It's solid, solid.

And if she hadn't, for whatever reason, brought the attention back to the breath... We didn't have a lot of wisdom then, but that was sort of adverting the attention. When we say, "Okay, you're getting lost in something, shift the attention to something more neutral to take care of the awareness"—without knowing it, she was doing that. She sank back into the breath, and at that moment, the story wasn't happening anymore. She just felt the breath. And because there was steady awareness that wasn't at that moment colored by the aversion anymore, it was just with the experience—oh, it perceived in a completely other way, more accurately, because it wasn't colored. And in that accurate moment, just a fraction of a moment of accurate perception, the whole story is gone because it was never true to begin with.

So that's actually a very powerful statement of the power of accurate perception. You can see the power that greed, aversion, confusion, delusion—it's all about me—have over our mind. And we can experience it on the grosser level like this. At first we don't recognize it's aversion, and we just think it's righteous indignation at this person who's being really thoughtless. But then later we can say, "Oh yeah, that's..." All it does is create suffering in the moment and the suffering of confusion.

And if it had been a retreat where you could talk—thank God for silence—how often would we have said something? On the three-month retreat, there's often someone who has a little cough, and there'll be a cough drop on their pillow. We beg people not to do it. A cough drop on the pillow. "Here, maybe this will help your cough." Mettā. It's always fine mettā. I mean, how deluded can you get? The person doesn't feel mettā when they're reading it, I'll tell you that. You have to process it for half an hour because they took it in another way.

So thank God for the silence on retreat. But it goes into more and more subtle ways, what the Buddhists call the vipallāsas, or you could call them distortions of perception. Joseph likes to call them hallucinations of perception. And this is taking us into what has been mentioned quite a few times: the three characteristics. The distortions are, although things are always changing, the perception is one that doesn't see change.

The perception is of permanence. The distortion regarding dukkha, as Devon was talking about last night, is not recognizing the unsatisfactory nature of things. The perception is that this is going to give me happiness, satisfaction. And with anatta, the perception of no solid self here, the distortion is the perception of a solid self—me.

These perceptions arise moment to moment to moment. They're not solid state. But because we don't even recognize that, because they're so familiar, arising so frequently, this is the level the Buddha is talking about. When the heart and mind, even on this subtle level, is obsessed or colored by wanting, by aversion, by the confusion of me, we can't see accurately. We simply can't see accurately.

These distortions are really moment to moment. They might be seen through, and then they come back because they're so familiar. The sense of self just feels so familiar that many people assume it's something that's always here and that we need to get rid of it. But that's an assumption based on an idea.

The more we can just practice, just cultivate a bit of trust and keep falling back into this moment of simple awareness—whatever's going on. Remember, we've said a few times that mindfulness can be with anything. So we think you have to be mindful and get rid of this sense of self. But as Ramana Maharshi said—I have this quotation in my mind—the sense of self is only real because it's not examined. It's only real because it's not investigated. When you really look at it, I'm paraphrasing but this is more or less the quotation, when you really look at it, you see that it was never there. It vanishes into thin mist. Just in one moment.

Notice if hearing that your mind kind of jumped: "Oh, I got it! And then it'll vanish and be gone forever." That's not seeing impermanence. Notice.

The more we can cultivate steady awareness, you can start to notice the distorted perceptions. Notice when you're perceiving permanence in a way. This isn't like a judgment, like "I've got to see." Just notice. When we assume that I'm just going to keep talking until a certain time and we're all going to keep sitting here—that's an assumption. That we're going to wake up in the morning, that the cooks are going to be here to make you breakfast. Once in a while it hasn't happened. There have been a couple of times they didn't get here in time and breakfast wasn't ready. You never know.

But you can just notice when you're sitting and you go, "Oh no, this knee pain, and it's thirty more minutes—I can't bear it." That's an assumption of permanence. Just little things. So just go, "Oh, look at that. Look at that."

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about the perception of impermanence. And he's talking about perception. The perception of impermanence is what allows for—basically, it leads to liberation. The perception of impermanence. So we think perception might not be much, but that's the place of being lost in confusion or freedom. Just this moment of perception, of seeing something in a different way.

When the mind isn't clouded with these thoughts—"Oh yeah, this pain's going to be here"—and then you notice the next moment you were lost in a thought. You don't know if the pain was there or not; you have no clue, because something completely other was happening. And then in the next moment there's the pain, and the mind goes, "See, it's always here." We didn't notice the gap because of the lack of steady mindfulness.

This is really where the steadiness of receptive awareness is so powerful. And we have to practice it because our habits are so much to check out when we don't like something or we get a little bit bored. So that's just why we keep reminding: come back, come back.

That's why I've said it in a few groups. It's so common. We say, "Well, this is always going on." I'm going to say never. I probably shouldn't ever say never either. But I won't let someone get by with "This is always happening." Nothing is always happening.

When you find your mind saying "always" or "never," that's a great clue. Check it out.

Some of you might think, "Well, I wasn't aware of that pain, but it's still here and it was there before, so it must have been there in the meantime." That's a thought. That's inverted perception. That's a hallucination of perception.

But we don't have to figure it out. Can we have just the simplicity of trust? Just: what's happening now? We get all confused, and then—okay, just what's happening now? Just what's happening now? And the steadiness starts to reveal what's always been so.

That's what's so powerful about the quality of insight: it isn't changing reality. It's not like we have to get somewhere where everything becomes impermanent. We don't have to get rid of some solid self and then live in some ego-free bliss. There's no solid self now. There's no solid self. There's no me there. And we're not living in ego-free bliss either. You can keep bringing in awareness and see it comes and goes. It comes and goes. Nothing's steady state, including insight.

So the insight can be really deep—you can have a profound insight into the truth of change, that nothing's reliable. Really deep. It's transformative, but not steady-state transformative. Are we waiting for that one insight where we don't have to be mindful anymore? Forget it. Just forget it.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who's one of my teachers—I was saying this to my colleagues this morning—he talks about the three kilesas as like a street gang. He said they get out on the street, trying to cause trouble. And greed and aversion are the ones you really see; they're out in the front. But delusion is like the mafia boss in the background who's really running the show.

So you can have a really deep insight. You really are, for a while, free of inverted perception. You're not creating a sense of self. You truly see that different things are arising. And then—it doesn't have to happen, but everything's conditioned, including moments of mindfulness.

You know, maybe you've done retreats and you're really quite aware afterward, really interested, paying attention. And then more stuff comes in. It takes reminding ourselves, and then there's a little bit of thinking, "I can kind of coast on this, right? I've been aware. It's here. It's much more available than before. So now I can coast." And we coast, and it's there. You remember, but a little bit less, a little bit less, a little bit less.

And what happens when there's not that receptive, wakeful mindfulness seeing what's happening? Then the street gang gets busy. It's like the kilesas just want to come out and party. That's what they do. They fill a void. If there's a void, something comes into it. Something's always arising in the citta.

Ajahn Sumedho says we create ourselves through our thoughts, and we cannot create an ultimately peaceful sense of self. I want to drop that in because I find it really interesting—we keep trying, but we can't create an ultimately peaceful sense of self. This is how we can practice with it: just moment to moment, in little things, noticing the difference.

We can notice sometimes when we're caught up in the inverted perceptions, and sometimes you can notice it and explore bringing in receptive awareness in little things.

I'll give an example. Say today it was really hot—I'm making this up—and you're walking outside, aware, and then feeling really hot. There's a kind of knowing it, but not really receptive awareness. What Joseph calls "more or less mindfulness awareness." You know you're walking, you know it's hot, you vaguely know there's aversion, but not really. If someone came up to you and said, "Is there aversion?" you'd go, "Oh yeah, sure, I know it." But you weren't really aware, receiving it, being with it.

So there's the heat, and the mind is saying, "This is too hot, I shouldn't be walking," or "You shouldn't even have retreats in this kind of weather, why don't we have it somewhere else, this is bad for my health." And the citta—all the memories, the thoughts come up—what I need to do, and about my heart, and ice packs. I was watching the French Open, and they have these heat waves, and these tennis players have ice packs—why can't I have an ice pack? It would be better for us, why don't they give us that? On and on.

And you don't realize it's suffering. We just think this is justified behavior in our mind. This is a world we've entered into. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, complicates the whole thing. And then this becomes, as the Buddha says, agitation through clinging. Clinging to the idea, clinging to the aversion, clinging to "this shouldn't be happening to me"—whatever it is, there's clinging to it.

If it's a condition that keeps going and you kind of wake up and feel how you're in this, it can be interesting to just stop a minute. Okay, just simple awareness. What's the actual perception right now? Just walking. Walking. There's heat. Heat feels like this. Just—heat feels like this. And maybe it feels unpleasant. The mind goes, "Oh, I don't really like it." Okay. Unpleasant thought. Aversive thought. There could be an aversive thought. It doesn't mean those don't happen. It's just awareness of it rather than completely identifying with it.

So there's the heat. There's dislike. There's aversive thought. It's unpleasant. And that's it. There's nothing else around it. It's just what's happening. It doesn't mean we have to only have pleasant, clear experiences for awakening, for insight. Oh, that's what's going on. Agitation through clinging. Release of agitation through non-clinging. Just—it's this, it's this. Actually more present with the heat. It's just heat.

There's another story Sayadaw U Tejaniya likes to tell about a yogi, a meditator who was practicing in Burma, where it can get really hot. Really, we're talking hot. Once I was a nun in Thailand, and in the hot season, you're in this little kuṭi with a tin roof, and the sun baking down, and you have to wear long sleeves and everything. That's hot. It's good to explore aversion and just how it can be hot and peace at the same time.

Anyway, so he's describing this yogi. It was so hot. The yogi was telling him, "I was in so much resistance."

I mean, this is crazy. I can't do this. Human beings can't live like this. And on and on the mind went.

But then suddenly something shifted. He had been bringing awareness to it, yet was really lost in it at the same time. But sometimes when you keep surrendering into mindfulness—you feel lost, but you can keep bringing in the mindfulness—and suddenly it shifts.

You realize: My body's really hot, but the mind isn't hot. The mind is cool.

And that's the shift to wise view, to wise understanding. It doesn't make the unpleasant situation go away. If you could only all really believe that and not forget it. Wisdom insight doesn't make the unpleasant situation go away, but the agitation through clinging does go away. And that sense of peace, it's just the relief of: Oh, it's like this now. That's how it is, however it is. It's so obvious, even though it's just a second. The difference is so obvious.

And so the more we can practice, the more we can really learn to trust that, to really see that the more steady our awareness becomes, the more there's continuity. We watch as the worlds are concocted and the worlds fall apart. Another one comes up and it falls apart. We're not trying to stop that from happening. We're just sitting back, receiving life as it's arising in this moment with this interest: How is it working? How do the kilesas in the mind create confusion? How does the absence of them lead into peace and a sense of freedom?

We're just watching to see. And don't believe anything I say or you read. Watch and see if that's really so.

Ajahn Sumedho says most people's minds are so flighty, so jumping around, that we don't notice the cessation of things. We don't notice the ending of things. So that's something to attend to in this bigger picture of the worlds that are being created—not even the subtle worlds of misperception, but the big worlds. We jump from one to the other because we often don't notice that one world ended and another one started. But the more we notice that sense of impermanence, that's what also allows for the perception of no separate self.

Just a couple of last things. Again from Ajahn Tejaniya: the benefit of continuity, of steady mindfulness, is it allows one to observe the aversion from the unpleasantness, or the greed from the pleasantness, in its infancy—when it's just starting up, when it's manageable, before it is full-on in your face and you can't look at it, you can't be mindful of it.

He would get into different moods on different retreats, but he would talk about this. Whenever there's kilesa in the mind—wanting, aversion, or delusion—if you can see it, think of it as being on a scale of how intense it is, from zero to ten. You know, like when you go to the doctor and there are those little smiley faces that go into a frowny face and you're supposed to say how much pain you're in. I never know—compared to what?

So he was talking like that, and he's saying: Most people notice aversion or greed in the mind, and it's like at a two, and you think, "Oh well, it's not very strong. It doesn't matter. I don't have to pay attention to it." There's some aversion, like when you're walking and it's hot, and you think, "Yeah, yeah, there's some aversion. It doesn't matter. It's not really bothering me."

This is really where we should bring attention. As soon as you notice it, let the awareness fully feel: Oh, aversion is like this. But we wait until it's an eight. And then it's so strong, it's hitting us in the face, and the mindfulness isn't equal to meeting it. We think, "Well, I'm in overwhelm. I've got to change something." And then we are in overwhelm and we need to shift the attention.

But starting right at the beginning—don't be afraid to let mindfulness be with whatever's happening. Whatever's happening.

Sayadaw U Pandita said to me once in an interview—and again, he wasn't soft and fuzzy. But something difficult must have been going on; I don't remember what. He said, "You know, when you have steady mindfulness, you don't need to be afraid of anything that comes up in your mind."

And that was so helpful to me. Fear might be what's coming up, but you don't have to be afraid of it. Mindfulness can really be with anything. So don't go, "Oh no, I shouldn't see it. If I see it, it's going to get worse." No, it's going to get worse if we don't see it. So just really seeing how it is.

I think I'll just end with Upasika Kee, who was a Thai laywoman, a very profound practitioner from the last century. There's a book of her teachings called *Pure and Simple*. She was pretty heavy duty, I'll say. But anyway, I'd just like to end with this one quotation from her:

What is, is. What is not, is not. No need to add anything extra.

That's our practice.

CHAPTER 200

Working With The Judging Mind

Carol Wilson · 47 min

> *In this warm and practical talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of the most persistent challenges in meditation practice: the comparing and judging mind. Drawing from Suzuki Roshi's teaching about the four kinds of horses, she illuminates how our tendency to evaluate ourselves as better or worse than others—what the Buddha called māna (the conceit of 'I am')—creates unnecessary suffering. Wilson notes that according to the Theravādan model of awakening, this comparing mind doesn't fully dissolve until the final stage of enlightenment, offering practitioners compassionate perspective on this universal human tendency.*
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> *Wilson shares candid stories from her own practice, including her early competitive impulses during late-night sittings and the challenges of teaching alongside renowned teachers like Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield. She explores how this judging mind manifests everywhere—in the meditation hall, dining room, walking practice, and in our broader cultural conditioning around competition and worthiness. The talk examines how perception (saññā), the third of the five khandhas, naturally categorizes experience and how easily this leads to comparative judgment.*
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> *The practical heart of the talk offers multiple approaches for working with the judging mind: the self-compassion break developed by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer, using humor to shift from 'my mind' to 'the mind,' and cultivating what Wilson calls 'relaxed, interested, kind awareness.' She emphasizes that sincere effort—rather than any external appearance of 'good practice'—is the true measure of our meditation. The talk concludes with Jennifer Wellwood's poem 'Unconditional,' pointing to how meeting our difficult experiences with willingness reveals the inherent completeness already within us.*

Good evening.

I'd like to start off the talk tonight with a favorite passage of mine from *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, a wonderful classic dharma book by Suzuki Roshi. He says:

"In our scriptures, it is said that there are four kinds of horses: excellent ones, good ones, poor ones, and bad ones. The best horse will run slow and fast, right and left, at the driver's will, before it sees the shadow of the whip. The second best will run as well as the first one does, just before the whip reaches its skin. The third one will run when it feels pain on its body. The fourth will run after the pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones. You can imagine how difficult it is for the fourth one to learn how to run.

When we hear this story, almost all of us want to be the best horse. If it's impossible to be the best one, we want to be the second best. That is, I think, the usual understanding of this story and of practice. You may think that when you sit in meditation, you'll find out whether you're one of the best horses or one of the worst ones. Here, however, there is a misunderstanding of practice. If you think the aim of meditation practice is to train you to become one of the best horses, you will have a big problem. This is not right understanding. If you practice meditation in the right way, it doesn't matter whether you are the best horse or the worst one.

When you consider the compassion of the Buddha, how do you think the Buddha would feel about the four kinds of horses? He would probably have more compassion for the worst one than for the best one. When you are determined to practice meditation with the great mind of a Buddha, you'll find the worst horse is often the most valuable one. In your very imperfections, you'll find the basis for your firm, way-seeking mind. Those who can sit perfectly physically usually take more time to obtain the true way of meditation, the actual feeling of practice, the marrow of practice. But those who find great difficulties in practicing will often find more meaning in it. So I think that sometimes the best horse may be the worst horse and the worst horse can be the best one."

Comforting, isn't it? Unless you happen to be one of those yogis that sits in full lotus and is just cruising along—in which case there's hope for you yet.

It's so easy, and such a strong inclination, to see ourselves in relation to others, to see how we're doing. How do we compare with others? Am I a good yogi? Am I one of the worst yogis here? Have you seen that in your own practice?

Bhante talked about this yesterday: the Buddha's teaching on *mana,* a Pali word often translated as "the conceit of I am." By conceit, he doesn't necessarily mean "better than"—that's often how we use the word in English. Rather, it refers to any kind of separating ourselves out and getting caught in selfing.

In the stages of enlightenment, as many of you know, in the Theravadan model there are four stages: stream entry, once-returner, non-returner, and arhat, the fully enlightened being. At various stages, different fetters or obstacles fall away. You might be comforted to know that the conceit of I am doesn't fall away until you are fully enlightened. So if you find yourself comparing and selfing, one way you can think of it is: well, you're no higher than the third stage of enlightenment.

This is what the Buddha had to say about this tendency of mind: "One who thinks oneself equal to others, or superior, or inferior—for that very reason disputes. But one who is unmoved under those three conditions, for that person notions of equal or superior do not exist. An accomplished person does not by philosophical view or by thinking become arrogant, for he is not of that sort. For those who are free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions—such as these, they wander about the world annoying people."

And you can guess who is most annoyed by the mind that gets into this. Especially on a silent retreat, nobody knows what's going on in your mind but you—which is both the good news and the bad news.

So I want to talk tonight about this tendency to compare ourselves and to judge ourselves, others, and life: the judging mind, the comparing mind.

When does it happen for you? Have you noticed when it tends to arise? Particularly on retreat, in the more social situations—like sitting down at the table in the dining room and there are people near you. Notice what the mind does.

There's somebody eating very mindfully. "Oh, look at Miss Mindfulness over there. So impeccable." Or, "Oh my goodness, how much they put on their plate. Wow." Or, "I dropped a fork. Everybody knows."

Walking practice is another very common area rife with the judging mind, the comparing mind. I think Pante was talking about it the other day. You see somebody who's walking so slowly—"Wow, look at them." Or, "Who are they trying to impress and prove?" The same exact stimulus can have a very different response just a couple of hours later. You see somebody walking fast and it's, "Gosh, they're just themselves. They're not trying to prove anything. I wish I could be that unpretentious." Or, "Don't they get it? Why don't they slow down? Think you're in New York or something?" The mind will just go everywhere.

And particularly—not only what they're looking like outside, but what am I looking like in here.

On one retreat here many years ago, in my early days of practice, I really got into slow walking. I tend not to do it in that extreme way, but I mean, I really went for it. So it would take me about forty-five minutes to go from the hall to the bathroom, or to my room. But I loved it. I was just really—as you might find out—when you get into that groove, it just feels so good and you're not trying at all. So I don't want to discourage those who are into that. It's beautiful when you're practicing that way.

But I could see myself—when I was all by myself, I was just really delighting in it. Lifting, moving, placing. When somebody else would come by, I'd have a whole different reason for practicing that I started to notice and name. I used mental noting to a great extent. And after a while, I'd be noting: "Lifting, moving, looking good. Lifting, moving, looking good, looking good." Because that was what was going on in my mind.

And we come from such a competitive culture, those who are, for better or worse, living here in the U.S. "We're number one, we're number one." And probably most countries have that feeling of pride. Even if you go to football games, they sell the foam fingers with the index finger sticking up—number one, number one. There's a tremendous pressure that gets put on a culture that values being the best so much.

And we do it whether it's our country—which is different than having pride in whatever particular characteristics your country has and feeling really appreciative of your heritage and your past. But when it gets into comparing, "We are better"—the mind just tends to do that. Whether it's our religion, or our meditation. "I'm a Vipassana meditator. Yes. I'm of the Theravadan school, the real teachings of the Buddha. Oh, those Zennies and Tibetans, they just kind of took the Buddha's teachings and ran with it."

Or Buddhism and Christianity and all the great world religions—just think how many wars, how much hatred, over each body of teachings trying to understand the incomprehensible, all pointing to the mystery in their own way.

Or whatever class or ethnic identity. And again, so much pain in seeing ourselves as better, or internalizing "not as good" from all the messages in the culture. Or not even realizing that it is so internalized, whether it's privilege or internalized oppression. The great wounds in our culture, our society, in humanity—it doesn't matter what culture you come from, there is othering that happens, the comparing mind.

And it also is true within our own being, intrapersonally. My body—taller, shorter, curlier hair, straighter hair—priding ourselves on it or not. Or our mind. "I have a clear mind. I have a creative mind." And whatever you've been gifted with, it's something to really honor and appreciate—your uniqueness. But if it gets into comparing, "I am more creative than maybe everybody here"—the mind will go any place.

Even to the point where our neurosis can become a badge of honor. I remember going to college and reading a lot of existential literature—Camus and Sartre—and just feeling like the more screwed up one is, the deeper you are. I'm pretty deep because I

am messed up inside. And those happy people are just shallow. Now I'm teaching about awakening joy, but that was what it was back then. "Oh God, how shallow. Don't they see what's going on?"

So when for you—I'll invite you to take a moment and go inside to make this relevant to your own experience—when does it come up? Here on retreat or in your life, that comparing mind, either "not enough, not good enough" or "better than." Without any judgment, hopefully, just seeing the humanness in it. Remember, no higher than third stage. But just see how it gets activated and how painful it is.

I'm remembering now—I hadn't planned on telling this story, but it comes to mind around competitive practice. In the first years of practice, I was really wholehearted, gung-ho, and I still am in my own way, though it looks a little different on the outside now.

Late night sittings was one place where I could see this happening. "I'm going to be the last one here." And then at some point, I caught on to myself and I said, "I think I'm going to be the next to last one here. That's really cool. And I can let go of being the last, even though I know I could be the last." Yes.

I remember going to Joseph in an interview and saying I was seeing my mind do this thing, and it was really humbling. And he told me a story—I don't know if he shares it these days—but in his early days of practice, he said, "I had exactly the same trip going on with my sitting." He said when he was in the Burmese vihara in Bodh Gaya, there was this guy from Denmark in the next room. The wall didn't go all the way up to the top, so you could see if the person's light was on. And Joseph was determined to sit longer than the guy next to him. Every night that Danish light stayed on. He went through months of practice, and finally when they spoke, he said, "How did you do it? You never went to sleep." The guy said, "Oh no, I just slept with the light on."

It's amazing. And it can happen even in the dharma seat. It's not that once you get to the dharma seat, this doesn't happen. In my earlier days of teaching—this is in the 80s, about 35 years ago—when I started teaching bigger retreats in the major leagues, we'd go down to Yucca Valley, a big retreat center in Southern California. Joseph would give a talk one night and just blow people's minds with clarity and depth of wisdom.

Then Jack Kornfield would give a talk the next night and just hypnotize everybody with his magical spell. Sharon Salzberg would give a talk and tears would come down, the whole audience weeping with loving kindness. And then I'd have to go on. And I knew if I was in the audience, I'd be saying, "Get that guy off and get Goldstein back on." It was really painful.

So here's the punchline to the story. This went on for some time, the first couple of years. And it just got so painful that I went to Ram Dass, who was one of my two main teachers and mentors, along with Joseph. I said to Ram Dass, who was really impactful in my life—how many people here have read *Be Here Now*? Yeah, for those younger than that generation, that was a book that changed everything, just changed my life.

So I went to Ram Dass and said, "You know, this is crazy. It's so humbling to give a talk and just know that I wish somebody else were up there." And Ram Dass said, "You know, Joseph Goldstein's already taken. Why don't you just be the best Jamie Barr you can be?" I went by Jamie in those days. And it took me a while to really get that—oh, maybe I have something to say in my own way. But it was a while to get there.

We all are unique expressions of life that have never manifested in the unique way they're doing through you. But it's really painful, that prevalent comparing mind, when we believe it. And it's ultimately rooted in the sense of not being good enough, not being enough. That somehow, if I were only a bit more, then I'd be okay. We measure ourselves against impossibly high standards, or against what our last retreat was like.

You notice that? You remember the very last few days of your last retreat, where finally everything just falls into place, and you say, "I want to do this again." The hook comes back at you. Then you sign up, and you find yourself thinking, "Gosh, there's so much sleepiness and restlessness. It's not like it was." But you forget how it was at the beginning of that other retreat.

Somehow it's all rooted in the fear of not being good enough—this sense of unworthiness or self-judgment or self-hatred. Sally mentioned the other night when the Dalai Lama was here. I was at that retreat. It was in 1979, just a few months after the Dalai Lama came to the States for the first time. It was in this very room, and he had a Q&A, and somebody asked about self-hatred. Like she said, it took a while for him to get the concept. Until finally he said—this is after two and a half months of people practicing—he looked at this person and said, "You're wrong. You're absolutely wrong."

Can you imagine? After two and a half months of sitting, the Dalai Lama saying, "You're wrong." But he said it with tremendous compassion. Something like, "What makes you think that everything else is part of the fabric of life, and somehow you're a mistake? You're not good enough? This is real misunderstanding."

But we do it. There's a teaching from *A Course in Miracles*, a Christian body of wisdom, a beautiful set of teachings. And there's this one line I love that says, "Believing in your littleness is arrogant, because it's preferring your own opinion to God's." What makes you think that somehow you're a mistake or you're not good enough?

The Third Zen Patriarch, in probably my favorite piece of Dharma wisdom, has this line that I love. It says, "To live in this realization—to live in the highest realization—is to be without anxiety about non-perfection." To live in the highest realization is to be without anxiety about non-perfection.

That's when you know you've really made it—when it's okay to be perfect. It's okay to be perfectly you, just the way you are, instead of trying to be perfect, which is never possible. That's not what humanness is about.

So first, how does this happen? How do we get into this complication? We were talking about the five skandhas, or five khandhas, the other day. The third khandha—there's form, there's feeling tone (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), and then there's perception. Perception, as we said in that question and answer period, is the recognition of what is here. "Oh, this is a bell." Your brain or your mind files it, compares it, and places it in your previous experience with a name and the familiarity or non-familiarity of something you've encountered before. "Oh, this is a bell."

And then it's just a hop, skip, and a jump—just one little connection—to the mental formations about that perception. "Oh, this is a pretty big bell. Not as big as some bells that I've seen. Oh, this bell has a sound a little bit higher than the one that I know at home." The mind starts to compare. And in that comparison, there is better or worse that often slips in—particularly around us.

To see who you really are is to see who you are without, as the Buddha says, those notions of superior or inferior—but simply this particular expression as being unique. Each individual expression of life has its own beautiful quality. Ajahn Sumedho talks about it in one of his books as the shining through of the divine. There it is, shining through us through a special manifestation. But what it is that shines through, we can't even take credit for. And so when you feel you're not good enough, you're creating a separation that really doesn't have to exist.

One Tibetan master, Trungpa Rinpoche, I remember him saying once: "Timidity is just another ego trip."

Here's Marianne Williamson—perhaps you're familiar with this. She says: "Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

There's another quote I appreciate from Nyoshul Khenpo, a great Tibetan master. He says: "Buddha nature, the essence of awakened enlightenment itself, is present in everyone. Its essence is forever pure and flawless. Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore it or overlook it are deluded. There's no way to enlightenment other than by recognizing Buddha nature and authentically identifying it within one's own stream of being."

So that's one way you can think of what we're doing here. When we, at the beginning, took refuge in the Buddha—what does that mean? On one hand, there is that amazingly inspiring being who lived twenty-five or twenty-six hundred years ago, who showed that awakening is possible. But he showed it's possible for all of us. When you take refuge in the Buddha in a more fundamental way, you're taking refuge in your own capacity to awaken. It's a very profound thing to take refuge in the Buddha right inside. It means you can't—if you really get it—you can't pretend that you're not enough.

You might know this intellectually. It's a whole other thing to embody it.

And this is what we're doing more and more. I'm sure you've been touched and inspired by the Buddhist teachings that have made sense to you. And little by little, it's a matter of moving from the conceptual to the embodied. That's why we're practicing here.

There's a beautiful way of thinking of the teachings. First, you hear the Dharma. Probably when you first heard the Dharma—like when I read *Be Here Now*, or maybe when you listened to a teacher—something touched you deeply. *Wow.*

Then there's understanding the Dharma, where it's really starting to make sense to you, more than just a kind of inspiration as a possibility. "Oh yeah, I understand. I'm starting to understand."

Then there's realizing the Dharma, where you have a true, verifiably faith-inducing understanding. "Oh yes, I get it. This is more than just an idea. I really see it. I really get a glimpse of it. I'm realizing what it's all about."

So hearing the Dharma, understanding the Dharma, realizing the Dharma—and more and more, after you realize it, then there's being the Dharma, where this is your home, this is where you are living from, and it's not just an accident or a glimpse. You might forget, and until you're fully cooked you undoubtedly will forget, but this becomes more your home base, your perception of reality.

This is a process that we're in that takes a lot of patience, a lot of persistence, a lot of kindness. And I want to talk a little bit about both working with the comparing and judging mind and some attitudes that will help you in this process.

There's one issue that's so central where the comparison comes in: evaluating how your practice is going. "Oh, I was pretty clear that time. This must be going pretty well. I think it's happening." Or, "Oh my God, there's just so many emotions. I'm just this mess of emotions and going through a lot of tissues here."

Or it can go the other way, where you see people really having emotional catharsis and then you say, "Wow." One of my first retreats I went to, I was sitting and everybody around seemed to be crying and going through lots of tissues, and I was just sitting there—in, out—with my breath. And I went to Joseph and said, "I don't know if I'm doing it right." I thought, "I don't know if I'm getting my money's worth." But it was more that everybody seemed like they were going through such deep transformations, and I was just sitting there feeling my breath coming in and going out. What gives?

And he said, "Don't go looking for trouble. It'll find you soon enough."

And it did.

But we have all kinds of ideas about what good practice looks like. Hindrance-free yogi, deep slow-walking yogi, whatever it is, and we measure up against that. It's really impossible to tell where your practice is by what it looks like from the outside.

Sometimes you can be in very deep dukkha land and think, "Oh, what was the point of coming here?" not realizing this is going to be the richest retreat. This is where the gems will be discovered. This is where I'll face my fear and see it's possible to not only survive, but see I have capacities for courage and strength that I didn't know were here. I can even see through fear. But while you're going through it, it just seems like nothing is going right.

Or just the reverse—"Hey, I've been feeling really good these last week and a half or so. I'm really going now." And it might be really going well, but it might be just that you're coasting and not playing your edge. You don't know.

But here's one thing you can use if you want to get a sense of your quality of effort: rather than looking at the external, keep checking in with your sincerity. That's the key ingredient. Just your willingness to show up as best you can, and willingness to come back when you see you've gone. Your sincerity will sometimes lead you to do very different things, if you see that you're doing whatever you're doing in support of your practice.

And so you might notice, "Oh, what I really need to do now is just really follow the schedule and not take breaks and just give myself wholeheartedly to it." But it might mean, "I need to have a cup of tea and just chill out. I'm trying a bit too hard now. I need a walk in the woods. I need to sit here and be willing to touch my pain."

It doesn't look any one way on the external. It's about getting in touch and seeing: Why am I doing what I'm doing? And if there's a sense that you're doing it to support your practice—"I'm doing this so that I can really show up fully"—good practice.

So it's more about your sincerity of effort, your sincerity of intention, than what it looks like. And only you know. That means you have to give up looking any particular way for others. "What are they going to think of me?" You don't have to worry about it, because they're worried about what people will think about them. We're all absorbed in "What are they going to think of me?" without realizing that everybody is having that same internal thought. Don't worry about it. Just stay connected to something in you that loves the Dharma enough to come here on a retreat of six weeks or three months, something that says, "I want to wake up"—or whatever it is that's touched you.

A few things to keep in mind about working with this judging mind, this comparing mind. One is kindness and compassion with your process. And forgiveness for all the ways that you don't quite measure up. We need a basis, a grounding of kindness, in order to create enough safety and refuge and heartfulness to see clearly. If we're struggling and trying to fit ourselves into some imagined idea of good practice, that very struggle is contracting in the mind, and you'll be working against yourself.

So I'd say, for myself, the essence of my instructions—I think I'll be giving instructions tomorrow, so I'm going to remind you again—the essence comes down to being interested in what's happening, being kind with what you see and kind with whatever your experience is, and having a sense of ease and relaxation where you're not contracted. That's it: a relaxed, interested, kind awareness.

Interest is really the key. I have a birthday card at home that I've never given away because I love it so much. On the front is this baby—almost an infant—and he's holding in his hand a booger right out of his nose. And there he is, mesmerized, fascinated. You open the card and it says, "You always were easy to entertain. Happy birthday."

I aspire to booger-hood! Just letting your natural interest bring you in, just for the sense of wonder. It's amazing.

As the meditation deepens, as the mindfulness gets stronger, you want to pay attention. Here's a little insight into the process. At the beginning, it takes some effort to be here. It's true, because we're so used to going to past, future, fantasy, whatever, and it

takes effort to bring yourself back. But as you put in that effort to be mindful, the mindfulness starts to get stronger. And when it gets stronger, you see more. And when you see more, it's more interesting. And when it's more interesting, you want to pay attention. And so it keeps pulling you in. "Yes! Oh, the present moment—it's so cool!" Have you ever had glimpses of that?

The alternative is if you say, "Well, if I'm mindful, I'm mindful. If I'm not, I'm not. That's okay, I'm just going to be... I'm going to lighten it up this time."

It won't really happen if you don't put in a wholehearted, sincere effort. And if you're not consistent in your mindfulness—and continuity is the key, continuity of awareness no matter what you're doing—then your mindfulness isn't so strong. When it's not so strong, things aren't quite as interesting as your fantasies. When they're not so interesting, it's boring. And when it's boring, you don't want to pay attention. Heaven forbid anything but boredom, which is a whole other talk—a very profound thing to explore, but for another time.

When it's not so interesting and you don't want to pay attention, when the mindfulness is weak, it continues to be uninteresting and you're on a track toward just intermittent mindfulness. So interest is the key. Letting that sense of wonder pull you in. At the beginning, you might need to trick yourself or pretend that it's interesting. But after a while, as it gets stronger—oh yeah, this is really interesting. Really amazing to see life so vividly. And everybody here has done retreats, so you know what I'm talking about.

Interested, but relaxed. Not pouncing on experience, just relaxing enough so that the mind is at ease. And I like to make it like a game. That's what makes it a bit more fun for me, because it's easier to pay attention when it's fun. So I'm just playing the awareness game. It doesn't matter how long I've been gone—oh, there I am. Come on back. It's just the game of awareness. Or walking—let's see about walking. How interesting. There I am like a baby taking my first steps. Just what is going on here with walking?

So interested, relaxed, and kind. Which means whenever you see yourself wandering, or see whatever is arising and it's difficult, there's the kindness that's right here.

I want to teach you, since I have this chance now, one way to bring this kindness to your experience. Some of you are familiar with this, but since this is one opportunity I have to share it with everyone, I want to offer you the self-compassion practice that is so helpful and effective as a way to hold difficulties.

This was developed by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer, who've done a lot of retreats here and at Spirit Rock—who've kind of packaged in a simple formula what we do here. So this is the self-compassion break.

When you're really having a hard time with the judging mind, or with your meditation not going as well as you'd like, or you're confused—very simple, a few different steps.

First step, the way I like to do this—this is my own variation and it's a little bit different than what Kristin and Chris said, but they said, "Yeah, that sounds good. You can do it your way." So what I do is start off by putting your hand on your heart, because this physiologically releases oxytocin and soothes the system. Just try this. Put your hand on your heart and notice what it feels like as you do that. There's tenderness. If you don't do anything else but just do that, that's good enough.

And then they offer a few different reflections, three different reflections. You can use your own words, your own variations. Maybe I'll put them up on the board so you don't have to worry about remembering.

First one: "This is a moment of suffering," or "This is hard." Just acknowledging—oh, this is hard right now. This is a moment of suffering.

Second reflection: "Suffering is a part of life." And you might think of all the people in the world who are going through what you're going through right now, and just include yourself in there. Suffering is a part of life.

And third: "May I hold my suffering with kindness and compassion."

This is suffering, and suffering is a part of life.

And may I hold my suffering with kindness.

As you're doing this, you can be both the one receiving that comfort and the one giving it. There's a wise one that can hold that hurt one, that confused one inside. It's a kind of coming into wholeness.

So that's one way to hold it. Actually, I'll share with you my own version of this that I used with the judging mind for quite some time in my early years of practice. I was just looking at the judging mind, because I saw I really had a judging mind—maybe even better than yours. And I really wanted to work with it.

So this is what I would do. At some point I said, I need to change my relationship to the judging. You might close your eyes again as you do this so you don't feel too self-conscious. Just imagine that you had a really harsh judging thought. And you can try this out. Put your hand on your cheek and feel the tenderness in the cheek as you silently say to yourself, "Oh, judging, judging"—like it's okay, just judging. Feel the tenderness in the noticing.

I did that. That was my main practice for about two years, both in retreat and at home in daily life. It wasn't like I did this each time, although I did it a lot at the beginning. You know, you can kind of surreptitiously just touch yourself. But what happened after a while was the tone in my mind started becoming softer and softer to the point that that was the response: "Oh, it's okay, dear." And then whenever I'd have a judging thought, it became another opportunity to practice compassion—letting the Quan Yin right inside of you do the noticing. Because she or he is right in there.

So, self-compassion, forgiveness, just for all the times those habits have been created. They're just habits of mind that need to be held with kindness.

Another way to work with the judging mind is having a sense of humor. If you can move from "Oh gosh, look at my mind" to "Look at the mind do its thing"—if you go from "my mind" to "the mind"—that's a huge shift, because then you're not taking it personally.

To laugh at this mind—on one retreat here, it's interesting, being here I get in touch with all of those moments. On one retreat, again working with the judging mind, there is this line from the Third Zen Patriarch, the same one that I quoted before: "The burdensome practice of judging brings annoyance and weariness." That made a lot of sense to me, so I played this game. Every time I'd notice a judging thought, I'd tack on "the burdensome practice of judging." Particularly in the dining room: "Oh my goodness, look how much food. The burdensome practice of judging." I would go through a meal saying that about fifty, seventy-five times. After a while, the only thing I could do was laugh. Look at the mind. "Oh God, doesn't she eat any food? Is she a bird? The burdensome practice of judging." And laughing makes a huge difference.

Another thing is seeing the emptiness of the thoughts, how empty they are. They've come from nowhere and return to nowhere. Joseph has a very good instruction about this, by the way, that I highly recommend you trying. He says if you're sitting in the hall and you're bothered by your thoughts, just imagine they're coming from the person behind you. Very effective, you know. You just kind of picked up radio waves. For all intents and purposes they did, because you don't say, "Oh, I think I'm going to have some neurotic thought of doubt right now." It just comes on its own. To not take it personally—there's tremendous freedom in that.

When you start seeing through that taking responsibility for your thoughts, and you see how empty they are, there's tremendous freedom. You see all those thoughts of judgment and comparing as just habits, mental fabrications to be seen through.

So: kindness, compassion, forgiveness, a sense of humor, seeing the emptiness of the thoughts, and really learning to give yourself the same benefit of the doubt that you give to everybody else.

Just your own sincerity. That's good enough.

So I'll close with a poem that I love. Actually, I can't pull up the one I'd planned, but I'll close with a different one—there were two possible endings.

This is about the courage to take a look inside and be with everything, which is really how we learn to see all the beautiful qualities within. This takes courage. And I want to share this beautiful poem about the willingness to go to those difficult places and discover that you have everything you need. There's no comparing yourself with others. There's no comparison when you see it, when you see that everything is right here.

This is called "Unconditional" by Jennifer Wellwood:

Willing to experience loneliness,
I discover connection everywhere.
Turning to face my fear,
I meet the warrior who lives within.
Opening to my loss,
I gain the embrace of the universe.
Surrendering into emptiness,
I find fullness without end.

Each condition I flee from pursues me.
Each condition I welcome transforms me
and becomes itself transformed
into its radiant jewel-like essence.

I bow to the one who has made it so,
who has crafted this master game.
To play it is pure delight.
To honor its form, true devotion.

So let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you very much for your attention. See the Buddha right inside. That's where she is. That's where he is.

CHAPTER 201

Disturbance is the Path

Carol Wilson · 44 min

In this profound talk from the Forest Refuge, Carol Wilson contemplates the relationship between mind and the activity of mind, drawing on the wisdom of Thai Forest masters including Ajahn Ṭate and Ajahn Chah. She explores how samatha (calming, samādhi) and vipassanā (insight, dhammavicaya) work together as complementary tools for liberation—like two ends of the same log, or a knife that needs both blade and backing to cut through suffering.

Wilson shares a personal story from her time as a young nun at Chithurst Forest Monastery, when deep meditation brought up primal fear rather than peace. Ajahn Sumedho's guidance taught her that when deep patterns arise from the deconstruction of self, patience—not forceful confrontation—is the skillful response. This leads to her central teaching: disturbance is not an obstacle to practice but becomes the path itself. The five hindrances (nīvaraṇa)—sensory desire, aversion, dullness, restlessness, and doubt—are territories we work with daily until they're uprooted.

The practical instruction centers on containing these hindrances through body awareness, breathing with constriction and difficulty rather than trying to fix from a sense of self. Wilson emphasizes trusting awareness itself, which is connected with wisdom, healing, and transformation. She reminds practitioners that moments of knowing these states as they are—seeing them as dhamma, as nature rather than self—nourish the seed of liberation. The Buddha's similes illuminate the fruit of this work: feeling freed from debt, sickness, prison, and servitude, arriving at an oasis after wandering through desolate territory.

One of the meditation masters of the Forest School of Thailand, Ajahn Tate, who was a contemporary of Ajahn Chah, said that we practice so that we can know the difference between mind and the activity of mind.

Tonight I'd like to contemplate and reflect on how we practice to bring about that insight using two frames and two approaches that complement and inform each other: samatha, samadhi—the calming, steadying, jhanic path—and vipassana, dhammavijaya—the inquiry and insight. These two are necessary for the cultivation of this insight and for the path itself.

Practicing here at the Forest Refuge in this space and in the quiet stillness, we have a great opportunity to see how the mind is, how it moves, where it goes, where it dwells, and its activity. More often than not, that activity is mostly what absorbs our attention. Particularly if we're not intersecting the flow of the mind with some path activity, our normal awareness is really concerned with the activity of mind—how it flows incessantly, how it's connected with the sense of me and my narratives, and within that, the sense of time: what's memory, what's gone before, where we're going. It can be quite difficult to come out of that stream of the narrative thinking mind and to turn attention beneath or beyond or behind it. Because, you know, who are we if we're not thinking? What are we about if suddenly the sense of what we've been and where we're going starts to unravel? It can be very disconcerting to feel underneath that. You can feel a bit lost, a bit footless, a bit goalless. It can bring up some perhaps ambivalent feeling tones—anxiety, fear even.

So it's a very profound area to contemplate.

I remember when I was practicing in the monastery under Ajahn Sumedho at Chithurst Forest Monastery in the UK. We would do long retreats, anything from a month to three months every year. Sometimes they would be three-month winter retreats, and sometimes in the summer, six weeks of personal retreat. I was on one of these personal retreats, which I often used to feel like a bit of a failure at. I would notice that I practiced a lot better when there were a lot of people, a sense of sangha and holding. Left on my own, it was quite challenging, especially as a young nun with my mind bouncing all over the place. But I worked at it.

During one of these retreats, I had this moment when I was sitting late one night and the mind just stopped. What arose wasn't actually peace—it was just this enormous sense of terror and fear. It was very primal. What then arose in my mind was that I created a strategy: I had to actually face this down, this very primary fear. The structure of the self is often wound in with this energy of fear and desire, moving toward something and moving away from something. When you feel that in a very raw sense, at a very energetic level, it's quite overpowering.

In my mind, and in the approach of the training in that style of practice in those days, there was this sort of warrior style. You just take everything on, head on. I had this idea that I should actually increase the fear so I could really practice with it—that I would take myself out into the forest and practice at night and scare myself to death and see where that went.

I had the wherewithal somehow to approach my teacher and just check if this was a good strategy. I thought he would probably be quite pleased. But actually he said he didn't think that was a good idea. He said that when these deep patterns come up, these deep reactions from the disintegration or deconstruction of what has been constructed and what we've relied upon, what you actually need is a lot of patience. Not to just push through and send your system into shock and overwhelm, but to be very patient and keep working with the core of the practice through samatha vipassana—calming and insight—and to let these states dissolve and fade away in their own time. You can't just crush what arises and what is difficult to be with.

That was a relief. I was let off the hook. It felt very true and very right and very good guidance for working at a deeper level, as we are doing now when we sometimes face not very easy states that start to arise in the space we have here.

The mind and the activity of mind—the mind in and of itself, the citta, the unobstructed citta, heart-mind—as Ajahn Chah said, is already free. It has a quality of awareness. In that awareness, conscious awareness, there is this quality of knowing, knowingness. Not so much knowing about things and cataloguing things through our filing cabinets of information. It's a knowing that exists before we know things as an object and have names, before we pull out of the interwoven nature of reality some discrete entity and have a name for it, catalogue it, and have a story around it. This is me, this is you, this is a tree, this is a bird, this is good, this is bad, and so on. Before we do all of that, the actual fundamental nature is just a pure knowing.

This word pañña, or prajna in Sanskrit, has within it the etymological meaning of a sense of before we know something. Wisdom is before we go out and objectify something. This pure state of knowing has an almost unknowing in it, a sort of unpackaging, stripping away of how we've designated ourselves in the world.

To turn and to rest and to recognize just the fundamental state of mind is in some ways the easiest thing, because it's our natural state. But in other ways it's the most tricky thing, because we are caught up in the activity of being shaped by what moves through the fundamental space of the awareness of the heart.

In samatha and vipassana, samatha is just beginning to calm some of that activity through what we've been doing: bringing attention to the body breath, the foundations. This is a very profound teaching. It's also very simple. We might wonder, what's the higher path? What's the real teaching? But actually this is pretty core and essential and profound. It's the teaching and practice that the Buddha used on the night of his awakening.

It's the practice he taught extensively. It's the practice we come back to again and again—just this simple returning to how it is within breath and body.

As we do that, going a little bit beneath the cognitive frames, we have some ground from which the activity, particularly the vacī-saṅkhāra, the mental activity, can begin to settle to some degree. And this unification, as we've been practicing and talking about—the samādhi, beginning to taste some of the pleasure and the peace of feeling the body, mind, and heart unifying within awareness, suffused with awareness, with this fundamental nature of mind, and that sense of coming together, not being disparate, not being pulled all over the place.

So this samatha is one of the bedrocks of the practice. And it's based upon training attention to what is an object of awareness, which in this case is body and breath. It can be sound, it can be color, it can be sky, it can be candle flame, it can be mantra. But for our primary purpose, we are using the first foundation of breath and body, so that attention isn't just being dragged here and there but has a steadying point of contact.

As this samatha and calming is developed in this very patient practice—as we talked about, Ajahn Lee, the Thai Forest master, would say this is like that bridge that spans the fast-running river. You have a pillar at one side of the river and a pillar at the other side, and that middle pillar going down through the deep currents of the river. It's a bit like the middle pillar of samādhi among the three factors of the path, going right down through the deep currents of the mind.

It's not easy. It takes a lot of patience. It's a lifetime practice, because those currents are very strong, currents of the mind. And when we have some steadiness, that current actually gets more highlighted because we're not just following the momentum of it. But still, it's a very important aspect of the training—to train the mind breath by breath, moment by moment. And then we get caught up, and then how is it now? We come back and we start again.

In some ways, you don't really achieve it, achieve some great—I mean, there are the deepenings of peace. As Ajahn Chah said, "Peace, more peace, more peace"—the jhānas and so on, the deepening of steadiness and unshakability and absorption. But generally speaking, it's pretty fragile for most of us, as it gets interrupted and life crashes in, or the patterns from within emerge. But it's still very important.

Sometimes we don't even recognize how much samādhi is there. It's not always perceptible, because we're sitting in a field of it. So it's not just us—we're contributing to that field, all of us together. When we come here, we're supporting that quality of samādhi. But you notice it if you sit for a few weeks and then you go outside, you get on

the freeway or something. You'll notice that the state you're in is different than everyone rushing along, moving very fast. It's just hard to see here; you haven't got that mirror so much, and it's hard to recognize it. But there is a gathering that just happens from being present and being in this context, in this container.

In many ways, the deepening of samatha, samādhi, jhāna—this steadiness, stillness, absorption—is quite dependent upon the container: non-distraction, non-interruption, a certain ability to sit with the content of what's emerging without getting overwhelmed, a certain level sometimes of body health so you have some energy, some strength.

Some of the fruits from that: you can feel some more peace, perhaps pleasant abiding, some clarity, perceptivity. There's also the healing aspect of the path—very healing for the body, for the psycho-emotional dynamic of our feeling tone. It can be very soothing. There are many benefits from the samatha.

However, it's also dependent on these circumstances, and if you take away the container, you can feel the diffusion of that gatheredness. Often when people leave a retreat and they say, "I'm losing it," what they really mean is they're losing that sense of the container and that feeling of gatheredness. When the samādhi deepens, it's a very different quality, a different sense of time, a different sense of space—something slower, grounded, rooted. You don't feel so pulled around. And that can disperse with the impingement of contact and the world around, and also with the impingement of what emerges from our own patterning and the flow of the mind itself.

This is why samatha is always balanced with, and provides the ground for, the wise discernment—the dhamma-vicaya, the contemplation of dhammas, the investigation of dhammas, or what's sometimes called vipassanā—to inquire and to see into the nature of the mind and its activity.

Ajahn Chah would sometimes say that samatha is a bit like a stone you put on grass. You put that stone on the grass and the grass doesn't grow, and you think, "That's great, all the problems have gone." But he said if the stone gets knocked off and the right conditions arise, the hindrances, the dukkha, arises.

Another way that he talked about this: when he came to the West for the first time and saw Westerners engaged in meditation, he was quite interested because these retreat forms weren't really how they practiced in Thailand—they came more from the Burmese lineage. They didn't really practice these kinds of retreat forms so much. So he was quite interested in these ten-day, one-week retreat forms that people were doing.

But then he came up with an interesting observation. He said, "You Westerners, you're a bit like people that have a good lawyer. You get into trouble and then you ring up your lawyer to spring you out of jail." He said, "You're out there in the world and you get into trouble and you go off on a retreat. But you don't yet understand what gets you into trouble." You need to understand what mechanisms generate that sense of dukkha and struggle. If you haven't yet resolved or transformed or overturned the hindrances, you go back and the conditions help you sort of get yourself together, but if you just rely on that peace from samatha, then you haven't got the complete picture.

Ajahn Chah would also say that there are two kinds of peace: the peace of calm, from samatha, and the peace of wisdom, which arises from insight. And the peace of wisdom is an unshakable peace. It is the unshakable deliverance of the heart, which is the ultimate fruit of this practice—the heart, the citta, the mind in touch with the world.

It feels, it can wobble and it can feel, but it's not completely flooded and shaken and overwhelmed with what is impinging upon our experience.

So we've already, I'm sure, been exploring and practicing these two complementary tools of what brings about freedom, stability, healing, and clarity. And they're not really that separate. Another image Ajahn Chah used is like a log. If you want to pick up a log, you pick it up by both ends. One end isn't really better than the other. And it's like samatha and vipassana—the two ends of the same log.

Or he said it's like a knife. If you want to cut through something, if you just have a blade with no strength, no back to the knife, then you haven't got the power to cut through, to see through the hindrances, the dukkha, whatever is catching us.

Or he said it's like a candle—this is another image he used often. Sometimes samatha is a bit like building a candle. We can build a really, really huge candle, but if we don't light it, it doesn't illuminate anything. We get peaceful and peaceful and peaceful, but that wisdom quality is perhaps not being nurtured. On the other hand, if we're just trying to light a candle and see what's going on but we've got no wax, then the flame just blows out and we get caught up in the patterning, caught up in our conditioning, caught up in our reactivity.

One thing that is difficult for many of us—certainly for me and many fellow practitioners I've known for years—is equating the sense of being more peaceful with things going well, with being good, and then feeling that disturbance means something's gone wrong, that we're a bad meditator. But actually, it's often the disturbance that activates

the need for insight in meditation. In some ways, you could say the path becomes a path of allowing ourselves to be disturbed. Disturbance is the path. It's not in the way; it becomes part of the path.

When we can't control the state, when we haven't got the conditions, when we get sick or aging or we lose our faculties a bit, when we're not in a peaceful situation, we get triggered. And if we're just relying on the peace, then we don't really have any ability to deal with what is probably ninety percent of our life.

So the seeing into requires the breath steadying, but also opening the mind, opening the awareness. This can be a choice—we can sometimes just move in and out of that. Sometimes we're just developing samatha and really want to explore that, and that's a very good practice to keep working at. We might just say, "Not now, I don't really want to look at that state," and turn the attention back. Sometimes we do that and it keeps rising. And so then it's an opportunity to explore what's arising, what's happening here. We change our attitude—rather than "this is disturbing me" or "distracting me," we explore this as an opportunity to contemplate this dhamma.

And the dhammas that disturb us, that we will be contemplating, will be within the teaching form of what's traditionally called the hindrances—nivarana. Just to mention these: I know we've heard about them a lot. But they still trick us, don't they? We still forget. We still get carried away. We still struggle with them. So it's really important to name these territories and realize that each of them is what we'll be working with every day until they're uprooted, until they're transformed, until they no longer trick us or overwhelm us.

The first one is very powerful. It's kama tanha, kama chanda—the energy of wanting, wanting something else. Have you experienced that today? There are different forms, and we'll look at some of the different forms of that tanha, that thirsting energy. The translation "sensual desire" is often used, but in this particular formulation, it's looking at the desire to absorb into a sensory experience. I think when we're in this kind of space with very little sensory stimulation, we really get to see that energy wanting something. This isn't about being a bad person or something being wrong—it's a dhamma, it's nature. When we identify with it and it becomes "me," then it becomes a sense of self and a struggle. But when it arises and we recognize, "This is the mind in a state of wanting, it's a dhamma, it's nature," then we can contemplate it.

This is sati sampajañña—mindfully bringing clear comprehension, mindful attention, contemplation, and awareness. How is this? How does it move? What are its narratives? What are the thought forms? And where does it take us? Then, not to follow it, not to follow that movement, and to feel the agitation in that.

So much of the practice is about containing these hindrances as they arise. That's where you need the strength—like the back of that knife or the wax of the candle. You need some steadiness to contain, especially if desire is strong, or its opposite: aversion, irritation. It can range from a subtle sense of just feeling a bit off to even rage. Something comes up—a memory, someone who upset us, something that happened—and we think, "I don't really want to deal with this. I'm here on my peaceful retreat." And it crashes in. And then, there it is.

And it's very painful. But to remember, as Ajahn Chah would say, desire, hindrances—this is the path. It's not outside of the path. It's actually building our path of awakening. The strength and the enlightenment qualities needed to support our awakening don't arise in a vacuum. They arise from working with the dukkha, from working with the hindrances. So it becomes, "Oh, okay. How then am I going to be with this?"

This middle way of not absorbing into experience and continuing to inflame it, and not repressing or turning away, but to tolerate, to contain. A really good way of working with these two quite strong energies—these first two hindrances—is to go beneath, to see the cognitive thought forms, how they perpetuate. Those are connected with the sense of me. If you notice, within all those narratives there's a star character, which is me and my opinion about it all.

But we can also explore going beneath the cognitive. This is where the practice of body awareness is so important—into the body and the felt sense. How does this feel underneath? Not to do that to try and fix, but to just bring pure awareness there. Breath, attention. Breathing with the constriction, breathing with the fire, breathing with the discontent, breathing with the longing and the wanting, breathing with the lust, with the hate, with the rage, with the upset. Just feeling where it is in the body, and trusting—because you're not trying to fix it from the sense of self. We're trusting awareness, the fundamental nature of mind, which is connected with wisdom and intelligence and healing and transformation. So our job is very simple. It's not to sort it all out, but just to bring awareness to the point of contact where the hindrance is felt. Breathing there.

The same applies to dullness, though it's more difficult because we go dull, shut down, don't want to do it, don't want to be here. It's connected with aversion, and it can be psychologically profound—this sense of "I just don't want to be." It's an aspect of desire, the desire not to be. It's quite painful to feel, so we go dull. These are habits of shutting down, of not being fully embodied. The mind also has subtler ways of dullness—just sort of sliding into sleep when we're not necessarily tired. It's just the hindrance.

Being able to bring some inquiry to that, the energy of inquiry—"What is this?"—can help. Open the eyes, shift the posture, bring a little bit of energy to explore that state. It's quite hard to explore, actually. It's easier in some ways to explore something with a lot of energy, like desire and aversion. With dullness, it's more like, "Oh, where's the bed? I just shut down." But what we can do is not have a big ambitious project about it. We simply say, "Can I stretch my awareness a little bit around this state? Bring a little more attention, stay with that. Where is it in the body? How does it feel?" Before we just slide along with it.

Similarly with restlessness, which we can really feel. Restlessness and doubt—those two are very connected, the last two hindrances. Anxiety, insecurity, lack of confidence, not being sure. These kinds of worrying. This is often a default place we go to, just worry, anxious. It's connected with that doubt and the restlessness of mind. When the Buddhist lists talk about the ten fetters and the overcoming of each on the path of awakening, the maturing of full awakening, one of the last to go is restlessness of mind. So we're going to have to be patient with these energies, from subtle to quite coarse, to quite profound sense of doubt that projects onto the sense of self. "I don't know what I'm doing, why am I here, where I'm going. I haven't got a clue, I'm useless." Or "I don't know about all of this, I don't know what to do."

To be able to tolerate this is profound—to be able to tolerate doubt, to know that that which knows doubt isn't doubtful. It can be confident. It's important to see this is just doubt, mind in doubt, because it happens a lot. And it has this seduction—this feeling that I've got to come up with a plan, some clarity, be firm and sure. But it's okay not to know. Just tolerate that state. I don't know. But I know that I'm aware and I'm present. I'm just here, and that's enough. Simply here, watching and being with the activity of mind as it's rising and passing, manifesting and shaping the sense of self within the fundamental awareness and presence of conscious attention.

Ajahn Chah spoke about this. When we have the experience of hindrances, when we find ourselves triggered and different states arise, feeding the activity of mind—particularly that which is difficult to be with—he said to know and watch your heart, and to know that it's pure. Its fundamental nature is pure, but these states come in and colour it.

the awareness, the heart, the citta. So he said, be like a tightly woven net—catch what arises and examine what's present before you react.

That's very good advice, by the way. How often do we react on strong emotion or feeling, and then we have to live with the karma of it and clean up the mess? So to practice with these states in this container, we have the space to really get to know very

thoroughly how they operate within us. So that when we get triggered and they arise, we don't just get shaped and reactive and pulled along, but we can know: "That's desire, that's wanting. I can let it go, let it be. I don't have to be born into that." Or: "That's aversion, I'm really averse. Just be patient, just soften." Whether it's dullness or restlessness or doubt, agitation, worry, fear, anxiety, and so on—just to recognize that a moment of knowing these states just as they are is a moment of nourishing the seed of liberation. It's not a wasted moment. Sometimes these states can get more fierce before they begin to lose their intensity, before they lose their power over us.

This work that we're involved with here, it's not a magic wand, really. One sort of wishes it was. Take this pill—blue one or red one—and out of the matrix, boing! Even that wasn't an easy path. It's why it's called practice. So we just pace ourselves. We're in a long stream of practice and awakening. And as mentioned on the first night, from the text, the path activity in and of itself breaks up that which obstructs. And then the fruit of that path activity arises according to the Dhamma. We don't have to manufacture the fruit. We're tending the ground so that fruit can arise.

But it is important to recognize moments of the fruit, actually, because they're always here. We might not be in the ultimate jhana, but there's a little bit more peace. There's some more interest and inquiry into what's really happening here. What is this state? I'm really interested in this. How does it feel? I can be with this. I can breathe with it. And then perhaps a moment of really seeing through its density, its seduction, the sense of me-ness about it, and realizing: "Oh, it's Dhamma. It's just nature. It's not self. It's not defining ultimately who I am. It's anicca—arising and passing and pulsing and lacking any substance."

The Buddha said that once you're working with and seeing these hindrances, the fruit of that, as you become less entrapped by them—he said you're going to feel like someone who's free from debt. The heaviness, the sense that you owe something, that you're burdened by something, starts to lift. Or it's like being free from a sickness. You don't even know that you're suffering from this kind of sickness until it starts to lift and you think, "Oh, I feel pretty good. There's some space, there's some joy, there's some energy, there's some authentic sense of well-being, some clarity."

It's like being freed from prison. When we're caught up in the hindrances, it's like the mind has become imprisoned, has lost its true nature. Or it's like being free from servitude—you're not just being pulled around by this state and that state. You have choice, agency. "I don't really think I want to go down that route." That's what mindfulness will do. It will deliver us and give us more mindfulness, more choice. "I don't need to be pulled down there." And that's very liberating.

Or he said, it's like leaving a desolate territory. You've been a long time in a barren, desolate place, and you come to an oasis where there's a pool and coconut juice.

I'm elaborating now—I don't think that was in the suttas—but anyway, you have that feeling of enjoyment, pleasure, the pleasure of being alive. You're reclaiming your human nature: kindness, compassion, well-being, empathy, clarity. The spiritual faculties start to naturally emerge. We can divert them, certainly, but they are inherently present within this true nature of mind. They begin to become visible for us.

So little by little, whatever has been happening for us today, or if we've had any difficulties—never give up on yourself or this practice. Remember, that's part of the practice. Sometimes I can feel completely done in, lost and overwhelmed. But remembering that it's always possible, whatever is happening, to return again and again to this moment, this breath—we find our way back to the path, one breath at a time.

CHAPTER 202

Attending To The Immovable

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this profound retreat talk, Ajahn Kittisaro explores the essential shift from grasping at changing conditions to resting in the unchanging ground of awareness. Drawing from the encounter between Venerable Anuruddha and Venerable Sāriputta, he illuminates how even accomplished practitioners can remain bound by conceit, restlessness, and anxiety when focused solely on spiritual attainments rather than turning toward the deathless (amata).*
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> *The talk weaves together teachings on yoniso manasikāra (wise reflection) and avijjā (ignorance), using the beautiful similes of guest and host, and dust dancing in sunlight from Mahāyāna sources. Just as guests come and go while the host remains, and dust moves while space stays motionless, all experiences arise and pass within an unmoving awareness. Kittisaro connects this to the Buddha's declaration that the heart is inherently luminous (pabhassara citta), though we lose touch with this original brightness when confused by what moves through it.*
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> *With characteristic warmth and humor, Kittisaro shares his own journey through serious illness and how Ajahn Sumedho's permission to simply 'let go' became a gateway to peace. He encourages practitioners to notice the silence underlying all sound, the space containing all form, and to trust that peace is always here and now (sandiṭṭhiko, akāliko). The teaching offers a gentle yet radical invitation: rather than endlessly polishing conditions, we can rest into what Ajahn Chah called 'doing everything with a mind that lets go.'*

I take this opportunity to offer some reflections on the Dharma.

As we enter the heart of our retreat, this very precious opportunity we have to be in a place conducive for wise reflection—the Buddha used the phrase *yoniso manasikara*, which we translate as wise reflection. Tonight I'll talk a little bit about that, about some of what it encourages us to ponder.

When there's a lack of wise reflection, when we're making assumptions in a compulsive, conditioned way about what is true, what is false, what is mine, what is yours, what should be, what shouldn't be—that lack of wise reflection the Buddha called *avijja*. *Vijja* means seeing clearly. The prefix *a* means not—not seeing clearly. It's translated as ignorance, a kind of ignoring of the actuality. We're imagining that our views and opinions are the truth, but there's an unconscious ignoring. We're not really using this instrument we have, this precious instrument within us, inherent in our nature—con-

sciousness that can discern, that can wisely reflect, that can align with and know things the way they actually are. When there's the *avijja*, when there's the ignorance that the Buddha talked about, it is the condition that gives rise to all suffering.

So we've all made the effort, the commendable effort and not easy effort, to let go for a time. It's like a gesture of what the Buddha called *viveka*—leaving the life, the habits, the daily routines, the responsibilities. Yes, they come with us, but we're leaving that circumstance for the sake of retreating, for the sake of cultivating this wise reflection that can illumine the nature of things and liberate us from that which gives rise to and perpetuates suffering, distress, conflict, confusion—what the Buddha called the whole mass of suffering.

I'd like to start with just the outlines of an encounter, a story recorded in the scriptures, the Buddhist teachings, of a meeting between the Venerable Anuruddha and Venerable Sariputra. Sariputra, you remember, is one of the Buddha's chief disciples, foremost in wisdom. This encounter took place before Anuruddha was enlightened. Already he was formidable, a bit intimidating. But he approached Venerable Sariputra because they were colleagues. I don't know if he said "friend" or "venerable sir," but he was respectful, I'm sure.

He said something like—I don't have the exact words recorded—but something like, "My divine eye can see clearly the multifold, thousand-world system." Already at that time he was known for his samadhi; he was good at mindfully staying present. And he was already known for being foremost at this inner vision, being able to see the subtle realms in all the different directions. "With my divine eye I see the thousand-fold world system," he said. "My energy is aroused and unsluggish." He went on to say, "The mindfulness is unshaken. The body is calm. The heart, the *citta*, the mind is concentrated, singular. But I still suffer. This heart is still not liberated."

When Sariputra answered, he said, "Friend, when you have that thought—'my divine eye, foremost in the Sangha, that can see the thousand-world system'—that is connected to your conceit, this idea about yourself." He said those thoughts of your energy being aroused and unsluggish, the mindfulness unshaken, the body calm, the heart concentrated—that's connected to your restlessness, always having something else to do, somewhere to get to, something to accomplish. And he said, "That thought, when you have the thought 'but I still suffer, the mind is not liberated' from what's called the floods that sweep us and carry us away—when you have that thought, it's connected to your anxiety."

This next phrase is interesting. Sariputra said, "It would be well when those thoughts arise to let them be, to just abandon them and turn your mind to the deathless. Turn your mind to that which never dies."

I'd like to talk this evening about this slight adjustment, slight but profound, of our attention that is so important. It wasn't long after Anuruddha took up that instruction that he was freed.

Remember, when we chant every morning the qualities of the Dharma, the Buddha is talking about this timeless, peaceful nature. He says it's always here and now. It's not somewhere else. We chant it every day: *sanditiko*—that means this peace, unshakeable peace, is not somewhere else. *Akaliko*—it's not bound in time.

It's not only available when I've done it all right and feel I deserve it, or when I've experienced enough pain. It's timeless. It's not just for a Tuesday or a full moon or when Jupiter is at mid-heaven—timeless. It's *ehipassiko*, always inviting us.

So what could that be? What is the Buddha telling Anuruddha, who is being honest about his situation? With his divine eye, he could see all these forms. He was being mindful, making effort. His samādhi was good. But he was doing stuff. And this recurring thought kept arising: "But I'm not free, I'm not enlightened."

The Buddha didn't say you must crush those thoughts. He didn't say you must obliterate them. Something more like abandon—rather than being preoccupied with them—he was talking about a softening, a widening, a letting be. Don't pay attention to that. Turn your mind to that which is not coming, not going.

This is a very important principle in the Dharma. The Buddha once said this heart is luminous. It is already luminous. But we lose touch with it when we get confused by what's moving through the heart. This is a clue. The heart is luminous, but we lose touch with what the Buddha called, on occasion, the original brightness—this source, this true nature. The phrase he used was *pabhassara citta*, radiant heart.

We lose touch with this when we get confused by what's moving through. What's moving through now? Tuesday night, Dharma talk, Kittisaro Dharma talk. Right now the sounds are touching the heart, but do they just stay there? They dissolve. But sometimes we don't notice what's moving through the heart if we're busy reacting: "I wonder how long he's going to go on tonight."

A little aside: once Ajahn Chah was giving a Dharma talk underneath his hut in Thailand. In the jungle, amid the sounds and the dark, he's in his chair giving the talk. A little way in, one of the novices grabbed his flashlight and turned it on. A beam of light opened up into the room and found the clock on the wall. Big mistake. There was a collective gasp—all the monks knew what that meant. That talk went on for hours.

I won't go on for hours. But notice: we lose touch with what's actually moving through the heart when our thinking takes over—"Oh, it's good, it's not good, I'm wondering if... will it be... like it, not like it." What if we come to the actuality right now? The sights of this hall, shifting as our attention moves and we blink. Those impressions are coming and going, appearing and dissolving in the heart. The sounds.

"Dharma talk" might sound like a noun that could get sent off to the library, given a title. Might be a great talk or, "Oh golly, that was an ordeal." It sounds like a thing. But as we have the chance, through wise reflection, to illuminate a Dharma talk, we find it's full of holes. Sounds that keep dissolving. The Dharma talk appears and dissolves. The sensations of our body, mixed with the sounds of the talk, feeling tones—a cascade of shifting and changing, which we've been contemplating as *anicca*.

Turn your mind to the deathless.

When one really notices change, notices what's arising and ceasing, noticing these thoughts, we can also, with just a slight shift of attention, notice what is not changing. The sounds are shifting and changing within an unmoving listening. That's just a name for it—an unmoving awareness. That's another name.

The name is coming and going. The sounds are moving within the true nature of the name. In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu said, "The name that can be named is not the eternal name." Any name is going to be dissolved. God, the supreme reality—dissolves. Nibbana, with a capital N—it's a name.

The first disciple who had a breakthrough after the Buddha's awakening was one of the five ascetics the Buddha used to practice with. When the Buddha was trying to figure out who might understand his realization, he remembered them. They had a lot of faith in the Bodhisattva, the prince, because he had left all that behind. He was the super-duper ascetic—he could eat less, endure more pain, make more effort than anybody.

You all remember that they abandoned Siddhartha when he had gotten so emaciated and realized he wasn't getting anywhere. He had that memory under the rose apple tree as a child, and he knew he needed to leave behind these ascetic practices. That's

when he returned to being with the breathing. He knew he needed to eat something to have the strength to do that. He accepted that offering from Sujata of milk rice, and the five ascetics just left him. "Slacker. He's reverted to luxury."

But after the Buddha was awake, when he was wondering who to try to share this with, he knew they would understand. He saw with his inner vision, his awakened vision, where they were—outside of Benares in the Deer Park. He made his way there, and as he approached, at first they said, "Hey look, he's coming. We'll let him sit down if he wants, but the slacker—we're not going to do any special things for him." But they couldn't help themselves. They couldn't help but make some gestures of respect.

When he declared he was awakened and would teach them, they said, "That's a bit too far. You're the slacker. You've reverted to luxury." Three times he said, "Look, I've realized the way. You practice it, so will you." They kept saying, "Look, you've reverted to luxury. That's impossible." They had some views.

And then he said, "Have I ever talked this way? Have I ever lied to you? Do you ever remember me lying to you?"

Somehow that penetrated their heart. They listened. He gave that first discourse on the Four Noble Truths. And at the end, the Buddha exclaimed—he saw what had happened during the discourse, during that talk—that one of the disciples, Kondañña, had broken through, had an insight. So he exclaimed, it's right there in the sutra at the end of the discourse: "Kondañña knows! Kondañña knows!"

What does he know? The Buddha restates it: he knows whatever has the nature to arise has the nature to cease. Whatever has the nature to arise has the nature to cease.

Doesn't sound very spectacular. But as I was speaking yesterday morning, that cultivation, that recognition of the changing nature, is so profoundly liberating. We start to see all the things that we think were me and mine, and as we see them coming and going, arising and ceasing, there's the recognition: what is it that's mine? As we see what comes and goes, we start to get the experience of the heart that remains—that which is aware.

Kondañña—it's not in that first sutra, but in a Mahayana discourse, Kondañña speaks a little more about what happened to him, what helped him break through. What's called entering the stream. He touched Nibbana. He knew the deathless.

So when Sariputra is encouraging Anuruddha, "Turn your mind to the deathless," that's what happened to Kondañña in that talk. He realized what he hadn't seen before—what was not coming and going.

He spoke about what helped him see that. He put it like this when he was recounting that experience. It was in an assembly where different disciples were talking about how they broke through. He said, "Of the elders now present in this assembly, I receive that name, Añña Kondañña—the one who knows. Because I was enlightened to the meaning of the words *guest dust*. Guest dust. And I realized the fruition."

And then he gives two similes. These are really helpful, I've found in practice.

It is like a traveler who stops as a guest at a roadside inn, perhaps for the night or perhaps for a meal. When he is finished lodging there or when the meal is finished, he packs his bags and sets out again. He does not remain there at leisure. The host, however, does not go far away. Considering it this way, Kondañña went on, the one who does not remain is called the guest, and the one that does remain is called the host. Guest, then, means what does not remain.

Like in this talk, the sounds, the words are guests. They do not remain. That's the first image.

Again, the second. When the sky clears up, the morning sun rises with all resplendence, and its golden rays stream into a house through a crevice to reveal particles of dust in the air. The dust dances in the rays of light, but the empty space is motionless. Considering it this way, what is clear and still is called space. What moves is called dust. Dust, then, means that which moves.

We've seen that—the dust, the light, the dust dancing. What if we wanted the dust not to dance? What if we were trying to make them move a certain way? What if we want the guests not to come and go? It is the nature of dust to dance. But what if we let the dust be dust? This gives us a clue when Sāriputta told Anuruddha, "Don't worry about those thoughts. Turn your mind to the deathless." When the dust is dancing, what if we just widen our vision and notice what is not dancing? The space remains untroubled.

Now we can look at this phrase, wisely reflecting—yoniso manasikāra. It points to the same phenomenon. Yoni means womb. It's talking about a space that then gives birth. It's the matrix, the context. Manasikāra means to do. Mana is the mind. So yoniso manasikāra is letting, putting the activity of mind into the womb of awareness. Wise reflection could be called radical reflection. It's returning to the root.

Every sound, every guest of moods and experiences is coming and going, but what remains? When the sound ends, do we just keel over dead? There's still the listening. There's still the knowing. There's the unmoving refuge. Buddha.

So right now, many of us are seeing we're not as accomplished as Anuruddha. But everyone here, we have some effort, some wholesome effort that's really been practiced. There's been some cultivation of presence. We definitely experience, I suspect most of us, some sense of struggle and stress. But Sāriputta and also the Buddha and certainly Ajahn Chah encouraged us to notice what happens if we get so caught up in trying to just get it right—always becoming, always getting on to a little more samādhi, or trying to get rid of that and thinking, "Well, as long as this is there, there's no way I can have a breakthrough."

What if we just let it be dust dancing? All right now, these sounds, these sensations, whatever we happen to be feeling—the mood, the thoughts—just as they are, can we let them be what they actually are? They're conditions that come and go. They're guests. That's their nature. It's like dust dancing. Trying to get the dust to stay a certain way is a recipe for frustration. The Buddha compared it to trying to grab air. You try to grab it, you reap weariness.

Ajahn Chah used a more earthy example. When we want conditions to be what they can't be

We're wanting a happy feeling to stay. We're wanting the painful feelings to be gone. We're wanting that sense of peace and understanding to be solid. But as we start to notice anicca, we realize that actually every sight, every sound, every feeling, every taste, every smell, every sensation, every perception is just like these sounds—becoming otherwise every instant, like the dust dancing.

And yet, looking for certainty in that which is uncertain, as Ajahn Chah said, we're bound to suffer. He said it's just like going up to a duck and saying, "Why aren't you a chicken?" I mean, ducks are all right, don't get me wrong, but you know—quack, quack. Think, if you cockle-doodle-doo, you could wake people up! Think of the good karma. I don't know if quack-quack is that good karma. He said it's like wanting a duck to be a chicken. Yes, that's what we do when we're wrestling with conditions.

By turning the mind to the deathless, what if for a moment we just let the feelings, let the sounds, let the moods just be as they are? And just widen the attention to notice what remains. Listening is so helpful. The sounds come and go, but the listening remains. The knowing remains. Resting in it.

The womb of awareness is wider. When we're contracted around the particularization, the atomization, we get contracted around me and this and that. We forget that every experience is happening within this ocean-like, boundless presence. So wise reflection is not denying the conditions, but recognizing how they return to this womb, this space, this matrix of awareness.

So it is said: just as form is to space—we're noticing the forms in this room, but we're also recognizing the relationship of these forms to space. We're surrounded right now by boundless space above, below, and all around. It's a fact. Just as form is to space, and silence is to sound, so too is awareness to all experience.

So for a time, rather than—we might still have liking this form, not liking that one—we can just let that be. We're not crushing anything. Whatever the habit happens to be, let it be for now. But just contemplate: just as space is to form, you can't have forms without space. We get so contracted around our opinions about forms that we don't realize—we're coming for this meeting, then in a while this room will be empty. The space remains. Forms come and go. As silence is to sound.

So, just a slight adjustment in our practice. It's not crushing anything. We still notice the thoughts and sounds, but we're noticing that they're coming and going within a silent listening. This is called radical reflection. It's called the Śūraṅgama Samādhi in this famous Mahayana discourse, because śūraṅgama means durable, unshakable. The deathless doesn't shake. The dust dancing in the sunbeam—it's supposed to shake.

So all the feelings we're having now, even the opinion, "Oh gosh, I don't know what this is. I don't know if I can really do it. I haven't had much samādhi. Usually you only have a breakthrough if you really..." What if we let that be dust dancing? That's dancing within a silent listening. Letting be. Letting things come and go by relaxing.

No matter how much we do. That's why Anuruddha couldn't do it. We keep trying to do it. In Zen they call it trying to polish a brick, hoping you get a mirror. It's squeezing the samādhi, wanting a little more, having to get the feelings just right. It's endless. Or as the Buddha said, it's like cooking sand, hoping you're going to get a nice meal.

He said this clinging at conditions and wanting them—my body, my feelings—wanting those to be stable, that's the problem. That's why recognizing change is so important, because as we see, all these things we're clinging to are shifting, changing. They're like a waterfall.

When we walk up close to a waterfall, it might be a famous waterfall. "I'm going to go see so-and-so waterfall." You might feel an attachment to it. "We've got one of the best waterfalls." But as we get close to it—the thunder sound, the incredible mist—wa-

terfall sounds like a thing, but as we then try to grab it, one can just appreciate it. It's like that dust dancing. When we really start to recognize that actually this life of ours is a cascading waterfall of sights and sounds, feelings and thoughts, wanting that to stay in a certain form is dukkha. That's why there's the relinquishment. That's the insight then into "not mine," because how could it be mine? It's not even a thing. It's an ever-flowing stream.

That's why the bowing is so important. Yes, effort. And a lot of us have beautiful effort here. Effort's important to cultivate presence and investigation and seeing change. But if there's only that yang, trying to get it right, that's the cooking sand hoping for the good meal. It's polishing the brick wanting the mirror. It's still sitting there asking that duck why it's not a chicken.

At some point there's the—and for all of us, we don't have to wait till things are perfect—there's that turning the heart to the unmoving. That's not somewhere else; it's our nature. It's right here. The silence is before the sound. Every sound dissolves.

Our teacher called it "minding the gap." He encouraged us to, yes, notice the thoughts, but even take a simple one: "I'm sitting." Listen to that inner voice, that inner sound. "I'm..." and notice it's vibrating. "...sitting..." and then notice it dissolves. Do we keel over dead? That moment after the thought is just bright knowing. He encouraged us to mind that gap, to attend to the deathless, to this womb, to this original brightness.

The Buddha called it this: "It is this primal bright essence of consciousness that can bring forth all conditions. But because of conditions you consider it to be lost. Living beings lose sight of this original brightness."

It's not somewhere else. It's always right here, inviting us. When we bow, when we relax, when we trust that it's not that we have to get somewhere else—that's endless. "No, no, no, excuse me. When I get there, I'll talk to you. I've got to get there. I've got to get rid of this." That's how conditions can cause us to lose sight of what is always here.

Every sound, every impression emerges and dissolves back into this original brightness. Again, the Buddha put it like this: "It is this primal bright essence of consciousness that can bring forth all conditions. Because of conditions you consider it to be lost, and then living beings lose sight of the original brightness. Therefore, though they use it to the end of their days, they are unaware of it, and without intending, enter the various destinies of birth and death."

So encouraging us to—yes, there's wonderful effort, but let's not overlook the soft effort sometimes. The just letting things be just like this. And honoring the perfection. The guests are showing themselves; our patterns are showing themselves. "Oh, but I should have been beyond this by now. I mean, I thought... I mean, it was really going good."

So-and-so really tripped me up. I'm not blaming anybody, but I can't believe they call themselves a meditator. I mean, you'd think there would be some screening or something. I know, I know, I shouldn't be worrying...

Just with whatever the pattern is, can it just be perfectly? When it's "me and mine," there's one big heck of a wrestling match going on. But when it's Dharma, then it is Dharma. It's part of nature. Let the dust dance. It's the guests coming and going.

What remains? What is it that's not coming and going? We rest into that. It's this ground of the heart.

I was such a doer. I wanted to do all the toughest practices because I was so strong. I used to be a wrestler. I could walk on my hands in my early days as a monk—a hundred yards. I used to teach the monks aṅga yoga before dawn in the early... I was just a postulant, making extra effort, doing this and that. And that wasn't bad. It's not bad to make effort. But I was just... I didn't have any sense of this. What does it mean that the peace is always here and now, always inviting us?

Well, it took a heavenly messenger to help me. I got typhoid fever, almost died. Months and months of diarrhea, then the fever, then urinating blood, and then really sick. I ended up being laid out for three years. I had to lie down pretty much for three years, feeling a bit like a failure, seeing all kinds of doctors. My teachers, my Western teachers, were worried about me. I was seeing all kinds of healers and doctors. When we moved to Chithurst Monastery in England from Thailand, I had this little attic room where I could just be sick. But I was still trying to get better.

Ajahn Sumedho remembered I was so strong. He remembered me when I had so much energy, and he so wanted me to get better. Then one day he realized, *Golly, I'm just putting a burden on Kittisaro.* I didn't know that's what he was thinking when I was lying there on my floor. I felt like I had a spear in my side for years—just burning, indigestion, internal bleeding. Really pale and thin and collapsed. He came into my room and sat down on the floor next to me and said, "Kittisaro, I just want to apologize."

I said, "You want to apologize?"

"I want to apologize that I've been putting all this stress on you—wanting you to get better, wanting you to get better, wanting you to get better." He said, "Kittisaro, I give you permission to die."

He didn't smile. He just said, "I give you permission to die."

And the relief. I cried for joy.

It's not that I didn't know these practices then, but that really gave me permission just to let being sick be being sick. Let it be a heavenly messenger. Let each of us honor our heavenly messengers—our karmic conditions appearing to us perfectly. Dissolving and flickering in this luminous heart that's never gone anywhere, never will go anywhere, is unstained. This original brightness is not somewhere else.

But that gave me permission. And I loved lying down. That was my practice. Each out-breath, I let go.

What's so wonderful when you're really tired and let go—the floor, the ground holds you. I kept letting go into this ground of awareness. There's a ground floor. It's our nature. Each out-breath, each sound, each word dissolves into this. Each out-breath, letting go. Really contemplating what remains. Pleasure and pain, they are perfect as they are. What remains?

We can do this. We don't have to get typhoid and lie down for three years. In ordinary moments—when Ajahn Chah was walking on alms round with the monks one day, he pointed to a really large boulder. He turned around to the monks and said, "Is that boulder heavy?" The monks were thinking, what is this, a trick question? "Yes, Luang Por, yes, Venerable Father, it's heavy." And Ajahn Chah said, "Nah, it's not heavy if you don't try to lift it."

All of us have patterns. Is the pain in the back heavy when you're trying to shift it, wrestle with it? Is being sick heavy? Yes—when I wanted to try to get better so that I could be a real monk and really do the right stuff, that was carrying a big boulder. When Ajahn Sumedho said, "You have permission to die," I had permission just to let it be. It was still painful, but I wasn't adding anything. It was just relief.

In moments we'll notice ourselves wrestling something, pushing, pulling. And this is important. It's not a waste of time. The Buddha didn't call it a First Noble Truth for nothing. Suffering isn't a waste. As Ajahn Chah would say, if it was a bad thing, he wouldn't call it a noble truth. So we open to it and get a sense for this wrestling. But as we practice letting be, letting go, and trusting that we're letting go into what is always here and now—that's what the Buddha taught. This peace is always here and now.

Even moments of noticing when we're generating suffering, and then a moment when it's just what it is—this is very important. Turning our mind to the deathless. Letting the dust and the sounds keep arising and dissolving into this unmoving, ever bright, fathomless, silent listening.

I'll give Ajahn Chah the last words tonight. I'm so grateful for his example and the example of my teachers—Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho, Master Hsuan Hua—and for my fellow practitioners, who keep encouraging each other.

From Ajahn Chah: "Do everything with a mind that lets go. Do not expect praise or reward. If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end."

May the blessings of this day be shared above, below, and all around. Blessings don't belong to anyone. The more we relax and let them be and let them flow, they expand exponentially—like a pebble dropping into a pool, sending ripples in all directions effortlessly. As we breathe out, so too may the goodness and blessings of our lives extend in all directions, touching all space, all forms, blessing all beings.

CHAPTER 203

Four Modes of Progress and Working with Difficult Emotions

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this engaging talk, Bhante Buddharakkhita draws from the Vitara Sutta (AN) to illuminate the Buddha's teaching on four modes of progress in meditation: painful with slow comprehension, painful with quick comprehension, pleasant with slow comprehension, and pleasant with quick comprehension. He emphasizes that these are not fixed categories but fluid states that can shift from moment to moment, encouraging practitioners not to label themselves or compare their experience with others.*
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> *The talk explores how the five spiritual faculties (pañcindriya)—faith (saddhā), energy (viriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā)—influence our progress, and how sharpening these faculties can transform painful practice into pleasant practice. Drawing from the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta (MN 20), Bhante offers five practical methods for working with unskillful mental states: substitution (replacing unwholesome thoughts with their opposites), reflection on the danger of negative states, redirection (bringing attention back to breath or body), retracing (investigating the root causes of difficult emotions), and resolution (making strong daily determinations through adhiṭṭhāna).*
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> *Through personal stories from his monastic life—including memorable encounters at airports and a night spent meditating in a Thai cemetery—Bhante illustrates these teachings with warmth and humor, demonstrating how even experienced practitioners face challenging mental states and can work skillfully with them. The talk offers accessible guidance for transforming our relationship with greed, hatred, and delusion in both formal practice and daily life.*

And my friends, I'm inspired by your practice. It's almost two weeks, in case you don't remember. It's so inspiring, really. And I think each of the teachers here is inspiring because they have been through it, they know. Three months. All these teachers you see here have been really practicing, and all of you have been practicing too. It's so inspiring to see other people really practicing.

So today I would like to talk about four ways of progress and working with difficult mind states or emotions.

Maybe by now you are beginning to ask yourself what you got into, especially if you have never done six weeks. You're wondering what's going on here. It's hard, it's painful. Is that familiar to you? I know, when I was here in 1999, the first week was so painful. And I was going to be here for three months. I had also signed up for the New Year retreat, so after three months, then another New Year retreat. I was wondering, how is it going to be for the next three months plus a New Year retreat? I think it was led by Rodney Smith. Sometime less than a week. But all the same, I was really trying to project what was going to be down the road.

So I want to talk about these four ways of progress. These are not failures, in case you fit in any of the categories. It's not failure, whether it's slow or quick. I'll draw from a discourse of the Buddha called the Vītara Sutta from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the numerical discourses of the Buddha.

In this discourse, the Buddha talks about four ways of progress. And maybe you can relate to them. One of them is painful practice or progress with slow comprehension. Is that familiar to you? Another one is painful progress with quick comprehension. What about that? Another one is pleasant progress with slow comprehension. Maybe some of you fit in this category. The fourth one is pleasant progress and quick comprehension. How many of you fit in that? I wish all of us fit in that category.

It's very important not to put yourself in a pigeon box and say this is where I belong. It's just pointing towards the way we progress, how the practice manifests, because you can switch. And this is not for the whole six weeks, by the way. Not for three months are you going to be fitting in one category. You can change from day to day, from one sitting to one sitting.

But what's very interesting about these four ways of progress is not to take it personally in case the practice is very painful. Not to take it personally, or not to compare with others who seem to sit comfortably and really cruise in for three hours, while for you, within twenty minutes, it's so painful.

So this is very helpful to know—that different people have different mental faculties. In Pali, these are called indriya, the five mental faculties, and they will change also. The first one is faith and confidence. The second is energy, effort. Some people have a lot of energy. They can sit until morning, maybe two AM, maybe eleven. The third one is mindfulness. It's also a mental faculty. Some people are very good at mindfulness.

They walk slowly, every time, all the time. These are simply different mental faculties at work.

And then there is concentration. Some people have more concentration than others. Some have moment-to-moment concentration, while others have really deep concentration. Those who practice the jhānas can even count them—one, two, three, four—and it goes to eight. Some people are good at that.

Some people are good at wisdom. They can discern details, the elements, and all of this. Wonderful people. And I've seen it at the Uganda Buddhist Center. My mother became a nun, and she is good at faith—faith and confidence in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. I have another devotee who is a staunch Buddhist. He can talk and talk about everything. But when it comes to faith, he has so much. So I've seen this happening actually.

I'll talk more about these five spiritual faculties—how to arouse them and how to sharpen them—in my next talk. But in this talk, I would like to discuss what makes progress painful, and how we can convert that pain, how we can shift from painful to pleasant, at least for a moment.

This is about the mental states that make practice difficult for us, painful for us, very stressful for us. These mental states are three: greed, hatred, and delusion. We can bunch all unwholesome mental states into these three.

Perhaps to help you understand how these mental states manifest in our daily life here at IMS, we can start with something very familiar to us: the notes board. How many times do you check the notes board? One time, two times, three times—reading the same thing again? We encourage you to check at least once, but it's amazing. It's truly amazing. Sometimes I pass by and see how this bulletin board becomes the focus of our attention throughout the day.

Usually, there's not much that changes, actually. There are some changes, no doubt about it. I don't want you to miss anything important—I don't want you to say, "From that last talk, I'm going to stop checking the bulletin board." But try to be moderate in how you check it. There might be an underlying state of mind called greed—that desire for stimulation, that urge to keep looking. Because we read newspapers daily, and now there's no newspaper. Now there's the notes board, a little substitute. So check your mind. See how it goes.

There is another mind state that perhaps you already know about: aversion, anger, hatred—these are all basically the same thing, given different names. You can check this today itself. How is the weather? Is it too hot? Do you like it? It depends where you come from. Me, I'm from Uganda.

But there's something coming up. Maybe it will be a little bit cold in another four weeks. And there's a tendency for me to not like the weather. Even though I can't do much about it, still there's resistance. Because I grew up in Uganda, and I went to India for five years. I spent five years in Sri Lanka. I spent two years in Thailand. So I like it when it's warm. For me, this weather is okay. But when you come from—we have ten countries represented here—yes, I've been to some countries which are cold. And maybe this weather is not good for you. And then there's aversion.

So try to watch your mind state as you go through the day.

Then there's a whole mind state called delusion, the deluded mind. Do you know what that mind state is? Deluded? Some people ask me, "How do I know that I'm deluded?" Of course you are deluded! Actually, most of the time as a teacher, as a monk, I've learned a lot from questions. People ask me so many questions and I say, "Wow, thank you very much for uploading!" Because most of the time I download—I come here and then go back to Uganda, I leave some stuff here. But most of the time when people ask me questions, I say, "Wow, that's a very interesting question."

So, what is delusion? A mind is said to be deluded when it's distorting reality. Taking things which are impermanent, it takes them to be permanent. "I'm angry for the rest of my life"—no, you've been angry for the last two hours. Anger is changing all the time. So that might be a deluded mind. Fixating. Taking things which are impermanent to be permanent. Taking things which are really suffering and taking them to be pleasant. Taking things which are of selfless nature and taking them to have a self. Taking things which are not beautiful, and the mind takes them to be beautiful. In other words, it distorts reality.

This reminds me of an instance that happened in Japan. Cows were dying because of drought. It was a dry season, and they kept giving these cows hay—very dry, brown, very dry—so they didn't eat. They didn't like it. So what the Japanese did was start manufacturing glasses, goggles, with green color. And they put them onto cows. I'm telling you, they ate every single bit. It's just amazing. They didn't even leave a blade of grass which was dry.

It's amazing what goggles we put on in our life that can distort reality.

Here's the good news. The practice is there for us to put on the real glasses.

Not the green goggles, the red goggles, and all that. Because we tend to see life according to our glasses, our goggles, our prism. That's how we see the world.

Sally and all of us are giving this series of practices that helps you to see things clearly—to see things as impermanent, as unsatisfactory, as selfless nature. And also the talk yesterday: seeing the body as the body, not just through your goggles, through your lens. This is very, very interesting.

Now, as my focus today is about these mind states, I would like to tell you that the life of a monk is not as easy as you think. You might think, "Wow, this monk lives in a monastery. Everything is very easy for that monk." And you might think maybe it's so difficult for you. But I'm telling you, it's not easy as a monk—mostly when I'm traveling, actually. Not so much in the monastery where people know me. Like in Uganda, people know me. I have followers. My mother. They know me. It's very easy. They feed me. We meditate together, chant together. It's very easy.

But as soon as I step out of the monastery, life becomes a little bit hard. I have to practice in the same way of practice. Not different. Not only in Uganda, but also here when I was staying in West Virginia for eight years in the monastery.

I remember one incident that challenged me very well. It's very vivid when I even speak about it—how I had to look at my mind state. I think that was 2007. I was scheduled to teach at Spirit Rock, the POC, People of Color retreats, and I was told that I was the first one to break the ice, open the retreat, give the five precepts.

So I left the monastery, arrived at Dallas airport with my alms bowl. I think you have seen my alms bowl. Have you seen my alms bowl? I put it in the check x-ray and then people told me, "What are you carrying? It's confusing the machine. We've never seen it."

I said, "What? You've never seen an alms bowl?"

"It's that we don't know. Please bring it out. Get it out."

I said, "This is my alms bowl. I eat from here."

It brought a lot of problems.

Another time, somebody asked, "We need to check you, we need to check you."

And then I said, "Please, you can check."

They said, "Please stand there. Male assist, male assist."

I looked at the time. Actually, it was getting close to my flight to California. And this is a five-hour flight, and that was the day the retreat was going to start. Some of you may have been on that retreat, I don't know.

But anyway, what happened is they kept on calling, "Male assist." There was no male assist. So I looked around. I said, "My flight is going to leave very soon."

Finally, a male assist came. And I said, "My flight is departing very, very soon."

He said, "Well, we need to check you."

I found that I was really thinking about losing my flight, having to go back to the monastery, which is one hour and a half away, and somebody just dropped me there and left.

So it had implications if I really missed the flight. I started to think about what would happen when I miss the retreat in California—how am I going to eat? I found that the mind was racing through all these mind states: fear, aversion, and all these things.

The male assist started to tell me, "Okay, please, I'm going to touch you." Then I said, "Please, it's all yours."

But as I was thinking about missing my flight and all that, my mind was getting tighter and tighter. So to loosen my mind, what I did was say, "Wow, thank you for the wonderful massage!" We all laughed, actually. It's amazing how everything was changing in the situation.

And then I thought it was over. He said, "Please, now sit down. I want to check your legs." And then he was doing this, touching my feet—I had socks on. It reminded me of 1994 when I did my first retreat in India, at Tushita. There was a Canadian who was teaching reflexology, and I had spent a lot of time having one. So I said, "Wow, this is wonderful reflexology!" And we laughed.

Then another time he said, "Okay"—I thought actually it's over. The second time, the third time he said, "No, just wait a minute. Just step here, step here, step here." Wow, the memory came of when I was in primary school in Uganda. We used to do gymnastics. I said, "Wow, I've spent a long time without doing gymnastics. This is so beautiful!" So we ended the whole thing and I said, "Thank you very much for the wonderful day." And then he told me, "You made my day wonderful."

This showed me that actually we can change our situation in life. We can change it if we want, or if we are ready. So if you have a painful meditation, it doesn't have to be painful. You can change. You can change your situation.

Up to now we have given many, many instructions, many ways on how to deal with the mind and feelings. We've talked about mindfulness. Can I talk about it again? I think you've had enough of it. By the way, can you have enough mindfulness? No. The more the better.

So the way you can actually transform your painful experience into pleasant experience is to be mindful of these mind states which are difficult. Some mind states are not so difficult. Let's say delusion—after all, you are deluded, so maybe it's not so difficult. It may also be pleasant.

Let's talk about greed. Greed is not so painful, but it can be very painful, especially when you go through your day with this attachment, this desire for the next sit to be better. Not to say that you should not have aspirations—you should have aspirations, as Carol talked about. We should aspire for the next sit to be peaceful. But we should not get so attached to how the next sit is going to be, with too many expectations and all that.

I'm going to give you a few ways on how to deal with difficult mind states, drawing from a discourse called the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta, which we find in the Majjhima Nikāya. It talks about how to deal with obsessive thoughts—how to deal with obsessive thoughts that make our practice difficult.

But before I do that, I would like to draw your attention to these five mental faculties, because some of you may not know where the Buddha mentioned them, but I just want to remind you. Sally has given beautiful talks about right mindfulness. These are words of the Buddha. He said, "Here in this teaching, in this dispensation"—in Pali, "bhikkhus," and you know who are bhikkhus now—"a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body," and it goes on, "feelings in feelings," and so on, "ardently, with mindfulness, and with clear comprehension."

So there are three mental states, or mental faculties, mentioned here. One is effort, another is mindfulness, and another is clear comprehension—sampajañña.

That's another way of saying wisdom. But the discourse doesn't seem to talk about faith and confidence as a mental factor—yet it's implied. Actually, when the Buddha is talking about practicing mindfulness and effort, it's implied that there's also what you call faith and confidence. How would you end up here without faith and confidence? How would you start practicing mindfulness or breathing without faith and confidence? At least you know that the body is breathing and the mind is aware that the body is breathing. That's faith and confidence. The discourse, of course, doesn't clearly men-

tion that this is the five mental faculties, but it's understood. Even concentration as a mental faculty is implied, because how are you going to move from mindfulness to clear comprehension without concentration?

Some people are complaining, "Oh, I don't get concentration." Actually, there's what we call moment-to-moment concentration that you develop when you practice mindfulness. So please keep on practicing mindfulness, even when you are experiencing very difficult states of mind. That's the first way of sharpening and really making sure that the practice can progress a little bit faster, not too slow.

When the Buddha is talking about these four modes of practice, he's describing different combinations. For the first one, he talks about when you have excessive greed, hatred, and delusion and you feel pain and sorrow. He's talking about when the five mental faculties are dull and not sharp. So you have to sharpen them by the practice of mindfulness. This is very important. And we have to reduce greed, hatred, and delusion—that's what I'm going to talk about. But this is just a reminder for you, because you may be wondering why the practice would involve painful progress and slow comprehension. That's the reason. It's slow comprehension because the five faculties are dull. And it's quick when the five faculties are sharp, very clear—with faith and confidence, mindfulness, effort, concentration, and wisdom. When they're sharp, there will be quick comprehension. But it's painful, of course, whenever there are mental states like greed, hatred, and delusion.

The best progress is when it's pleasant and quick. That's when you have reduced greed, hatred, and delusion, and the five mental faculties are sharp. Pleasant progress with slow comprehension occurs when there's no excess greed, hatred, and delusion, but there are dull faculties.

I think this is very important, but I don't want you to get caught up in labels. You know, "Yes, I'm a meditator who has pleasant and very quick progress"—and you label yourself. In the monastery in West Virginia, people used to put labels on themselves: "Silent Yogi." This was to help them not have discussions with the staff at the monastery. Here, you're not going to hit the newspaper of Barre—what's the newspaper in Barre? Maybe the Barre Gazette. You're not going to make the news that your practice is pleasant and quick. But don't get disappointed either. No need to have labels.

The key is: How can I make my practice, which is slower, a bit quicker by sharpening the mental faculties? How can I make it more pleasant by actually learning how to deal with unskillful states of mind, like greed, hatred, and delusion? And then you can transform them into skillful states of mind.

Now, a very common phrase used in English is "difficult emotions" or "negative emotions." This is a little bit difficult for me to understand. I understand, experientially of course, difficult emotions. But the word negative—I never understood why people call emotions negative. Difficult, I understand. I've gone through a lot of difficult emotions, in case you're not sure.

You still want to hear about my experience of difficult emotions? Before I give five ways of how to deal with them, we have time. We can enjoy the ride. What difficult emotions do I go through as a monk? Because there's a tendency for people to think that monk life or nun life—monastic life—is very easy. And for us who are not monastics...

It's very difficult. I tell them the difference between monastics and lay practitioners—there's only one difference. The way we practice, all of that is similar. The difference is that monastics don't have excuses not to practice. That's the difference. We don't have excuses.

You can say, "Oh, today I cannot practice because I was busy. I have to go to a wedding, there's dinner, I cannot practice mindfulness." Yes, yes, you're right. You are very busy. I understand. But for us, you cannot go to your teacher with such stories. As a monastic, you cannot go to Bhante Gunaratana and say, "Oh, I was busy teaching in Brazil, and I didn't have time to practice." You cannot do that. So that's the difference, in case you're curious.

Let me give you another experience, in case you think monastic life is easy.

In 2006, I left West Virginia for Bangkok. It was a long flight from Dulles airport to London. I waited twelve hours in Heathrow before I could board the connecting aircraft—twelve hours in a stretch. Then I traveled from London to Bangkok for a conference. I arrived at around 8:15 p.m., went out of the airport, and there was nobody to pick me up.

I was wondering what was going on. Can you imagine traveling from Washington D.C. to London, waiting twelve hours, then another twelve or fourteen hours going through Moscow, arriving in Thailand at 8:15, and you don't see anyone waiting for you? That's something, as a monk.

Sometimes as a monk it's very challenging when you are going to give a talk on how to overcome anger and anger is arising. Can you imagine? You're scheduled to give a talk on difficult emotions and here you are, going through them. That's a bit of irony.

So at 8:15, 8:30, I have no phone. I can't call anyone. I stayed in the airport the whole night. Breakfast time came—no breakfast, no one appeared. I thought maybe they would remember me at 8:15 a.m. I looked around. Nobody.

Meanwhile, I was getting really hungry. And difficult emotions were arising: Am I going to be left here forever? What am I going to say as a monk? I knew that fellow monks were the ones organizing this ride, but they had dropped the ball. Breakfast time, still no breakfast.

Since it's a Buddhist country and I had my alms bowl, someone told me, "Go around and get some food." I was getting ready to go out with my bowl—you can receive food in Thailand this way. But then the telephone attendant said, "Wait, wait, don't go. I'm going to bring you food."

I sat down patiently, really saying to myself, "Wow, that's amazing."

She came up with a sandwich with bacon, which I don't eat at all. I have allergies to bacon, beef, and basically anything with four legs.

So she brought a sandwich. I couldn't say, "Please take it back." You see, monks simply eat whatever we receive. Whatever doesn't mean that if they put bacon there you have to eat it, but we receive it, and then we have to bless people. As I'm doing this, I'm sitting there very hungry, thinking, what can I do with this sandwich? I opened it and started scraping off the bacon. It was dry. I'm telling you, I ate it, and I will never forget that sandwich.

Then I sat down and waited. And waited. And waited. Meanwhile, I'm getting impatient. Twelve o'clock comes—missing lunch. I thought, what's going to be my first word to the person who has made me go through all these emotions? Worry, fear, impatience, you name it.

So I started drawing from the Buddha's teaching. I thought, yes, let me go through the Buddha's teaching. What tools am I going to use? I was amazed. I found some tools that worked for me. As soon as I saw the first person, I simply said, "May you be happy. May you be peaceful."

Here are a few things I want to share with you that I thought worked. I've tested them. I'm not a person who's just reading the Tipiṭaka—"Here are the Buddha's words." No, no. I'm a person who is sharing things that I've actually tested, that I've gone through, and they work.

Here's the discourse that works very well. It's called the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta*. The Buddha here is telling us that whenever you have a thought of anger, a thought of greed, a thought of aversion, a thought of fear—all you have to do is substitute. Replace it with the opposite.

Now, what's the opposite of greed? Generosity. Letting go. It works. Just let it go.

For me, when I forget my umbrella in Sri Lanka, where I spent five years and it rains a lot—when I can't find my umbrella, I say, "Wow, may the person who's going to use my umbrella enjoy it." I just let go. It was always amazing: when I let go, I feel peaceful. Instead of saying, "I liked this umbrella that was given to me by Guy Armstrong, and I miss it," I found out that just letting go, wishing people to be happy—those who actually got my umbrella—brings peace.

Sometimes I go to a monastery with Birkenstock sandals. I go out and I can't find my shoes. I say, "May the dogs enjoy my shoes." It's amazing how shoes disappear in monasteries in Asia because they have dogs, and the dogs like shoes for some reason.

But one time I was in Malaysia, in a monastery in Kuala Lumpur. I could not see my shoes. I said, "There are no dogs here. Monks cannot take my shoes, of course." And they were Birkenstocks from Germany—very good shoes. I like them. I keep getting the same thing again and again. And monks, we don't travel with many things.

We have only one pair of shoes.

It was quite amazing. At 10 a.m., I woke up and couldn't see my shoes anywhere. I searched—no shoes to be found. I thought to myself, it's not the dogs, and it's certainly not the monks who took my shoes. As it turned out, there was a German monk who also happened to like the same style of shoes, and we had simply shared them without realizing it—code sharing, you might say. They were preparing to take me to buy new shoes when suddenly my shoes reappeared. It was remarkable how they turned up.

So anyway, letting go is very, very good. I had to let go of my shoes. And when they came back, there was no difference in my mind. This is the practice.

When there's a thought of anger, what should you do? Metta—loving-kindness. It's always better with metta. You can't have too much of it. I've heard that some people are afraid of cultivating too much loving-kindness because they worry that others will take advantage of them. I don't think so. The more metta, the better, the merrier.

Whenever there's aversion, send a little bit of mental loving-kindness. With delusion, you cultivate wisdom—reflecting on impermanence, the selfless nature of things, seeing phenomena in that manner. When there's fear, what should you do? You should cultivate courage. Have courage. Perhaps you're afraid of pain in your meditation. What should you do? Have the courage to extend your sitting for a few minutes—maybe two minutes, maybe five—and then see how it goes.

Substituting the opposite mental quality for whatever difficult state you're experiencing is very, very effective. I've seen it work for myself. Perhaps try it and see how it works for you.

The next method is called reflection on the danger of the mental state you are in—the difficult mind state you are experiencing. Here I should mention that I prefer to use "skillful" rather than "positive" state of mind, and "unskillful" rather than "negative" state of mind. This distinction should be very clear. I don't want to use positive and negative so much. I prefer skillful and unskillful because this involves a psychological distinction that perhaps I will give a talk about later. What's the difference between skillful and unskillful? That's another talk entirely. Otherwise, I'll stay here for another hour, and you're going to develop some difficult, unskillful states of mind yourselves.

So this next method works very well: you reflect on the drawback, the danger of a particular state of mind. Let's say it's anger. What's the danger of anger? The Dalai Lama said that anger is only one letter missing to become danger. If you write "danger" and "anger," they differ by only one letter—the letter D. So whenever there's aversion towards your fellow yogis who are walking too slowly, who are eating too fast or too slow, or toward anything that rises before you like Mount Everest—

So many people—we are here together, and actually it creates a lot of mind states, you know? So say, reflect on your thoughts of aversion towards a mind state or an inanimate object. Reflect: "Oh, whenever I get angry, I feel stressful. I feel unhappy. I can't sleep." When you do that, the unskillful state of mind can subside.

I can compare this with when you are driving. You are not driving now, but just have a sense of imagination in daily life. When you are driving and see what you call a police car—the one who's going to give you a ticket—what do you do? Do you increase speed or reduce? What do you do? Everywhere I've been—Sweden, Finland, I've been everywhere—you find people will give you a ticket if you are driving very fast. So what do you do? You increase or decrease? Of course you decrease. Why do you decrease your speed? Because you are going to get a ticket, a fifty dollar ticket, and that's not fun.

So the same thing when you have a negative, unskillful state of mind, and then you are indulging yourself in this negative state of mind—what I call an unskillful state of mind—and you reflect, "Oh, I'm going to suffer. This state of mind leads to stress. This state of mind leads to restlessness. This state of mind leads to whatever danger you have experienced"—then you can drop that thought like a hot brick and continue with skillful states of mind. Skillful states of mind you continue to cultivate.

So the next method: the first one was replacement or substitution. The second is reflection. Now, if that doesn't work, you redirect. The third method is to redirect your mind to something skillful. And we have given a lot of instruction about that method. Come back to the breath. Come back to the body. Feel the body. When the mind is wandering, please come back to the breath. Come back to the body. That works wonders.

In my experience, I've already shared with you—you remember when I was at Dallas airport? I redirected my mind to massage, to reflexology. So instead of thinking, "Oh, this person is wasting my time. I'm a monk. I keep 227 precepts. I don't have a single knife. I don't have a bomb." Instead of running this kind of thing—and it's easy to go through that actually, because I mean, what are you going to find in these robes?

But again, I go to some places and they search me. Even Bhante Gunaratana—we were teaching together in California. He's a monk. My teacher is now, I think, ninety. But when he was eighty-something, we went to San Francisco. They were searching and searching this monk who is not going to have a pin. They think that he's carrying something. It's not their fault. I'm not saying that's their fault. But it's just the perception. It's amazing, this perception we have—that you cannot even perceive who is somebody who is calm and peaceful. My teacher is pretty calm. He was doing like this and this and this. It's amazing.

So redirecting your mind—from maybe greed to the breath. Maybe when you have a lot of aversion towards everything, towards your fellow yogis, towards the schedule, towards meditation, towards yourself. I mean, we can have a lot of aversion just about anything. So you can redirect your mind to the breath. Breathe in deeply. You can do it now, okay?

Redirect from my talk and come back to the breath, okay? Let us try it. Feel the body sitting here. You have done it.

This is like when you are talking with somebody. You are in the middle of a conversation and someone says, "Can I talk to you, Bhante?" So you say, "Okay, just wait. Give me a minute." And then you look at Annie—wow, wonderful meditation!—so you talk to Annie. And then you go back. You go back, and... what were you talking about? You have forgotten what you were discussing. Isn't it?

I think this has happened to you when you are talking to somebody and someone all of a sudden interjects. By the time you go back, it's not the same energy. You have lost the storyline. So it helps.

The Pali word for this is very interesting. The Pali term is *amanasikāra*, which is fascinating because the Buddha talked about mindfulness, and here he is talking about *asati*—which means "not mindful." So the literal translation is "pay no mind"—pay no attention to the unskillful state of mind. What I call redirecting your mind to something wholesome. In the bigger picture, it can be taking a walk. You simply get up and take a walk, and then come back. By the time you return, you feel fresh again.

So the fourth method that works also very well is retracing—going backwards to find the springboards. Why are you the person who is always having fear? Why are you the person who is always having anger? Who is having difficult, painful mental difficulties? You try to go back and trace the origins.

This happened for me in Thailand when I was meditating in the middle of a cemetery. I wanted to see ghosts. There are no ghosts in America—do you have stories about ghosts here? Not so much. In Thailand, many stories about ghosts!

I was meditating in the middle of the cemetery because I was very curious. I wanted to know exactly how a ghost looked. Every time I would ask friends in Uganda, they would say, "Well... somebody told me the ghost looked like this." I went to that person and they said, "Oh no, somebody told me the ghost looked like this." And I kept going and going but never found somebody who could tell me precisely how a ghost looked in detail.

So luckily, in 2007, I went to Thailand. A monk told me there was a place in the middle of the cemetery where I would see ghosts there. I said, "Let me test the Buddha's teaching. Let me go there. If a ghost is going to come, I'll go with my robes and follow wherever the ghost takes me." I was ready—due to my frustration in Africa that nobody had ever told me precisely how a ghost looked.

There I was, deep in the forest, meditating, when fear arose—because I already carried that fear within me.

Branches breaking, and I thought it was a ghost.

So what I did was retrace. Why am I having fear now? I started retracing, and I found out where the fear was coming from—it was aversion towards these lions and tigers eating me, breaking me apart. I had tremendous aversion towards tigers. And I kept investigating: why am I actually having all this aversion? I found out that actually I'm attached to my life. Maybe not surprised, but it's amazing how much we are attached to our life, even as a monk.

But I said, no, forget about it. If this tiger gets me, I've done a good job introducing Dhamma to my mother. She's a nun now. She'll be able to hold the fort. My work in Uganda is established. I'm ready to go with the tiger. Ready.

But again, it was not working. I was still unsettled. I asked, why am I unsettled even with this kind of acceptance? I found out—wow, ignorance. I'm ignoring the truth. Then I discovered I was worried about dengue fever and malaria, all mixed together. It's just amazing.

For me, there's something that has humbled me in life—it's the mind, how it works. The one thing that is very fascinating for me is how the mind works. It's a mystery. It's a mystery.

With all good intentions to face a ghost, I was racing through mind states one after another. But retracing actually helped me so much. I found out the root, the root of all this stuff, and I was able to drop the whole thing. I just dropped it. There was no fear. There was no aversion. There was no attachment.

Finally, the last method. This last method works very well, and I practice it to this day. It is called resolution—making a strong resolve. Wherever your mind states take you, every time you go through a painful mind state, you make note of it, and you make a strong resolution. In Pali, we call it *adhiṭṭhāna*. Adhiṭṭhāna means determination. Make a strong determination. Nobody is going to do this for you. You have to do it yourself. Make a strong determination.

When I was at IMS, someone sent me this card. I still travel with it—it's from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I received it in 2000 when I was at IMS. My friend from England sent me this card. This thing you see here, it has been with me everywhere I go. I read it and say, wow, this is what I need. This is what I need.

And I'm going to read it for you. Making a strong resolve works.

This is the fifth technique—the way to transform unskillful states of mind into skillful states of mind through strong determination every day when you wake up.

A Precious Human Life.

Every day, think as you wake up: Today, I am fortunate to have woken up. I am alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others, to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

I put myself included—I don't want to miss the boat as a Theravada monk, you know. Mahayana, Theravada—to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, including myself.

I am going to have kind thoughts towards others. I am not going to get angry or think badly about others. I am going to benefit others as much as I can.

Every single day, as soon as I wake up—for me, this is like my meditation in the morning. I set up the stage for the day.

Here is a question: Are you going to get angry as the day opens? With this reflection, since the year 2000, I found out that yes, you will get triggers—this and that, big triggers. But you are going to remember. And as the saying goes, mindfulness is not difficult; what is difficult is to remember to be mindful.

That is the fifth method: strong resolution.

Thank you very much for listening. Let us sit together for a moment or two.

The arising of difficult or unskillful mental states is beyond our control. But mindfulness—right mindfulness—and wisdom can make a difference between being painful, being caught up in thoughts and difficult mind states, and being free from them.

May you have a pleasant and quick mode of progress.

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 204

Aspiration and Courage

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses the inevitable difficulties that arise in intensive meditation practice—not just the hindrances, but the deeper challenge of having our unexamined views and expectations confronted by reality. She explores how our assumptions about what practice should look like, informed by subtle habits of craving pleasant experiences and averting from unpleasant ones, can lead to doubt and confusion when things don't unfold as expected.*
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> *Wilson distinguishes between aspiration and craving, explaining how genuine aspiration turns the mind toward the wholesome without the narrowing quality of taṇhā (craving). She offers the Four Noble Truths as context for understanding the radical nature of the Buddha's teaching—that freedom requires seeing through our most familiar mental habits, which feel as comfortable as "an old bathrobe."*
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> *Drawing on personal examples including Burmese nuns, monks, Gandhian nonviolence, and a remarkable Tibetan refugee practitioner, Wilson illustrates how connecting with inspiring figures and teachings can rekindle our motivation. She emphasizes that awakening is not a self-improvement project that confirms our sense of self, but rather a courageous opening into the unknown, moment by moment. The talk concludes with Śāntideva's bodhicitta aspiration, offering a vision of practice dedicated to the welfare of all beings.*

So tonight I want to just offer some thoughts about reconnecting, motivating our aspiration and courage.

At this point on the retreat, I'm talking to various people and it's totally the normal time. Some people may be starting to notice that this practice can be challenging. Have you noticed that? And not in the way you expected it to be, which is really the main challenging part.

This is really normal. The first most obvious way is just that second week, third week, the hindrances come up, as John talked about last week. I don't want to go into those a lot, but that's just really kind of basic what happens. The way I think of it, it's like a two-year-old having a temper tantrum. You're saying we're going to sit and walk and pay attention to what's happening, and it's like, "No, I'm not going to, and you can't

make me. I'll get angry, or I'll get into desire, or I'll just get restless or sleepy or doubt." We just kind of go, okay, okay, fine. You have your little tantrum. We keep on going. We keep on sitting.

So that's the least of it. The hindrances are the least of it. That's obvious, even though it's a lot of suffering.

There are lots of ways, but what I want to talk about tonight is some of the ways it starts to be challenging: really our ideas, our views, maybe not quite realized, our expectations of what practice is or how it should be going or what's good—they all get challenged, one way or another. And we tend to take that personally and not recognize quite what's happening. And it's really difficult, which is why I want to talk about aspiration.

Just a couple of simple ways. I could give the whole talk just giving examples of how that happens, but I don't want to do that because you each have your own examples. But just two simple ones that I've noticed from talking to people the last couple days.

One way is sudden change in the practice. You're going along and you think finally the mindfulness got more steady, or the mind got more calm, or things were happening fast, or whatever. In your mind, there's the view that this is good—definitely it'll be more pleasant. We never think it's going well when it's less pleasant. So it's more pleasant, or it's more easeful, or it's matching some idea you have. And then suddenly, through no fault of yours, it changes. It just changes. You're going along fine. You didn't do something wrong. And suddenly the clarity's gone. You don't know what's happening. Everything's flying all over. That calm and peace is restless.

How many of us go, "Okay, that's what's happening now"? For a moment we try that, but secretly we're trying that so it goes away, right? No, that's what's happening. Then we think, "What did I do wrong?" That happens.

Another way that people are seeing too, and we will more and more, is you're going along and you're seeing things—you're seeing impermanence, say, in different personality patterns. Or just take something simple: the habit of wanting. Just wanting to be first in line for breakfast. And seeing that, and the suffering of it—the awareness really sees through it, feels the suffering of that wanting. In that moment it lets it go. You think, wow, I really see in all the ways in my life I need to be first, the whole nine yards. Yeah, I really got this.

I understand it. The suffering of craving, of my personality patterns. And, you know, that's great. Really, there was wisdom seeing it.

And then the next day at breakfast, you're dying because you've got to be first in line. And you go, "Why? I saw this. I know this. It's over. Why is this happening again?" Or you come back to another retreat and you go, "Again? This? Again? Didn't I go through this to a great degree of suffering the last time? I got it. I've handled this." Apparently not.

But you get a sense of what I mean, right? I'm not just talking off the top of my head—how we suffer from that, not so much from what's happening, but from the idea that it shouldn't be this way. Somehow I did something wrong in practice, or I understood it. Why is it back? There's a way we take it personally. And then what comes? Doubt. Huge doubt. In yourself, or in the technique, or in the Dharma, or in what we're telling you, or in whatever. And then the whole thing can start to spin.

It's not going to stay that way. This is normal. But I just want to speak to it, because what really could be starting to go on here—this is different from just the hindrances which come up—is in each of these simple examples, the big suffering is, of course, not wanting to be with the unpleasant, wanting the pleasant. That's almost always the bottom line, identifying with it. But it's also our views. Maybe we don't quite recognize they're in the background—views of what practice is supposed to be, how it's supposed to work—and then unrealistic expectations.

This, I think, is big time. Certainly for me. Our tendency in this speedy culture is to expect results quick, quick. We're not getting it. This is a whole life process. And that's already quick. If you look at how the Buddha talked about it, he's talking about eons of lifetimes. We'll just stick to one. But Sharon always talks about the first year IMS was opened and they got mail addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society." That's kind of what we think. Okay, I saw it. I got it. It's over. Let's move on. What's new? What's interesting? Greed again? No, I'm not interested in greed anymore. I got that one.

I'm making this sound simple, but I think it's really the radical nature, the profundity of what the Buddha is talking about—what real freedom from suffering is. We talk about it in the Buddhist context, but I'm not an expert on any other religion.

The little bit I know of other traditions suggests that at the heart of any mystical aspect of religion is the same kind of radical nature—seeing through the normal, culturally conditioned habits of our mind on a very deep level.

As I think I said the other night, or one of us did, the Buddha always said his teachings are kind of taking us against the stream of the current, against the main part of society—not everyone, even then. And of course, externally, just coming and doing this is really not the normal thing in the big picture.

What I want to talk about now is how we're coming up against the wall where our expectations aren't being met, where our ideas that we don't even know we're holding are being challenged. And this is so unsettling to us. It's in the really subtle—well, sometimes they're gross, but they're also very subtle—habits of our mind that are creating the suffering moment to moment.

So the Buddha's teaching is radical. Radical in looking at this. It encompasses all aspects of our life. His teaching that the real freedom of heart-mind is in a moment, or altogether, when the heart-mind consciousness is free from the greed that is clinging—whether it's taking the form of greed or aversion—and free from the delusion of not recognizing accurately, of taking it personally.

This he laid out in the Four Noble Truths, which I'm just going to name—it's a whole bunch of talks in itself. The radical nature of the first truth is the fact of dukkha, of the unreliable, unsatisfactory nature of all phenomena, all existence. It doesn't mean everything's bad or unpleasant, but not reliable in terms of lasting satisfaction. Everything.

Just even looking at life that way—wow. Most people don't even want to think that. And it's so radical, because it's not just the unpleasant things, it's everything. That's a whole other talk.

The second truth is the cause. As you know, the Buddha named the cause of our suffering, the cause that he is offering us tools to understand, and the understanding will free us. The word in Pali is *taṇhā*, which literally translates into English as thirst. This quality of craving can manifest as greed wanting something, or as pushing away the unpleasant. And it's not about the object—it's about this quality in the heart-mind, in the consciousness, just this leaning forward, this pushing back that clouds and distorts pure perception.

The real suffering of it, suffering in the moment, is that it keeps us from recognizing accurately. But what it really keeps us from recognizing accurately, when it's present and unrecognized, is the liberating truth of the pure heart and mind, that radiant nature of heart and mind. Someone read that quotation about the potential of recognizing the non-separation—that it's not me against the world, that Ubuntu that I read from Desmond Tutu last time. The sense of connectedness. The real pathos, I think, of craving is not only that it's unpleasant in the moment, but that we hold on to it and it's what keeps us from recognizing the truth. And the truth liberates. It's not that we have to figure something out.

The third truth is that there is an ending of this dukkha, of this unsatisfactoriness, of this moment-to-moment suffering that arises in our heart in a moment and ends in our heart in a moment. This is often called nirvana, and it's often described by the Buddha as the mind-heart in which greed, aversion, and delusion are not arising. Even the arhat, the so-called completely enlightened model, is one in whom even the tendency for greed, hatred, and confusion to arise has been cut off at the root. It's completely gone, not arising at all.

But along the way, even as Sayadaw U Pandita would say, a moment of mindfulness when those *kilesas* are not present—I'm going to use that word *kilesa*, I don't have to keep saying greed, hatred, delusion, and I don't like "defilements," so I'm going to keep saying *kilesa*—when they're present and unrecognized, we can't see clearly. But in a moment when they're not, and there's mindfulness, wisdom, we can call that a moment of freedom. We can taste that. We can recognize, as we go through our practice here, a moment of clarity, and then the next moment the wanting comes up, the aversion comes up, the sense of it's all going wrong comes up. And that's why the fourth truth is the path—the way of practice, the way of life to work with this, to come to understand it. Because it's radical.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, who for him the Four Noble Truths was really his major practice of his life, exploring it. This is just one little thing:

Living the Four Noble Truths as a daily practice and understanding them as a profound reflection provides a context for your entire life. But to sincerely live in this manner is not easy in modern life with its conflicting push-pull forces and confusing cultural messages as to what is valuable.

And I think this is where—and I don't think it's just modern life, because the Buddha wasn't living modern life, and he was saying the same thing. But as Bhikkhu Bodhi said, it's a lot harder, he said, in an age of easy pleasure. And that might be different from the Buddha's time. I like that: in an age of easy pleasure, the values of really understanding the Four Noble Truths, of renunciation and compassion and wisdom—it's a harder sell. It's a harder sell these days.

So what I'm saying is that the radical nature of the Four Noble Truths, and the subtle habits of reaction in our mind—the second noble truth, the craving, aversion, and wanting coming from identification with anything—these are so familiar, you could say. They just feel like the way things should be. It's cozy, like an old bathrobe you put on. That's just where we take refuge. And we recognize it sometimes in big things, but not when it comes around and starts to impact the way we assess or think about our practice.

And this is a sutta I love. Actually, I think Bhante referred to it—the two darts—the other night, where we hit ourselves with the second dart, aversion to something unpleasant. Well, the Buddha goes on in that sutta to describe how these habits of aversion and clinging and delusion are moment to moment arising and strengthened through this not recognizing what goes on, the ephemeral nature of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral sensation, just coming and going.

So he says very simply, whenever there's an unpleasant and the person beats their breasts and laments, as Bhante said, then it comes to be an underlying habit in the mind of resistance to unpleasant. It just feels normal. You go up to anyone—not just on the street, anyone here—you say, "Your hand hurts and it's unpleasant. Shouldn't you move away?" Yeah, right. Why should I stay with this when I can move my hand? Give me a good reason. And you can't really give a good enough reason when there's that mindset going on. But anyway, it becomes the habit.

And under that underlying habit—this is the Buddha again—of resistance to the unpleasant, the only escape a regular person, a worldling, knows is to go for some pleasant sense experience. That's the only escape an ordinary person knows from the unpleasant. So you experience something unpleasant, and we go to some pleasant experience. In the world it could be pick up the phone, turn on the TV, have some ice cream, go to your video, whatever it is. Here it might be the pleasant fantasy. Doesn't matter, but just to see—and to me that's so sad—that the only escape a normal person knows from unpleasant is to lust for pleasant. And so that becomes a habit, he says, that underlies the mind, this craving for the pleasant experience. And then he says when that's going on, in terms of neutral, you don't even notice neutral—what? And so then delusion underlies neutral, just to say that.

So this is one example. We can see it in the big experiences, like my little story I made up of craving to have breakfast. We can see it, and then we're surprised when it comes back again. But as the Buddha was saying, as Ajahn Sumedho was saying, we're noticing a moment or two of this real mindfulness, really seeing through, being able to hang out for a moment of awareness with the unpleasantness of craving. Wanting in itself is an unpleasant experience. So what do we do to get rid of it? We get the thing we want. Is it the thing we want that's making us happy, or is it that the craving went away? Check it out.

You can just sit and be with craving, craving, craving, craving. It'll eventually go away. I promise. Because everything does. Keep paying attention. Often you feel that sense of peace. Oh yeah, because the craving's gone. Yeah, it'll come back. But anyway, so we see it in those big moments.

But we may not recognize—well, we won't, because there are so many mind moments—how familiar these underlying habits of mind are. It's unpleasant. It's like that informs, for so many of us when there's not wisdom, it informs our worldview, really. When we're not quite aware, what we think is good, what we think is bad, what we think is good practice, what we think is bad practice. And when you hit one of those moments I mentioned in the beginning—it's going along fine and suddenly it all goes wonky and you think, "What did I do wrong?"—most of us, the mind's just going to start coming up with analysis. It just does that. That's okay. We can recognize that.

But mostly, we sort of recognize it while we're also in it. And the analysis itself is going to be informed by—if we don't quite recognize it—the worldview. You're looking at it through the lens of pleasant is better, unpleasant is worse. Something's wrong, you know? And so already the confusion is distorting the analysis, and we go deeper and deeper into confusion and doubt.

That's why I can say I really got this. Tejani is the one who first pointed it out to me, but I see it so clearly now, and it's such a relief when I can recognize that once my consciousness in a moment, my awareness is... I can be aware there's doubt, aware there's aversion or greed, but you know how sometimes the mindfulness really notices aversion, and you're really noticing it.

You can feel that the attention, the mindfulness is clear. You can trust that. Other times... not so much. There's aversion, but you can also feel—as someone said today—that you're embodying it. It's really here. Or doubt. Or greed.

When you know that, the thing that really is so freeing to me is to know that whatever thoughts are coming, whatever analysis, whatever you're trying to figure out is moving through that lens of kilesa. You can't rely on anything it says. It may be true, it may not. You can't trust whatever assessment comes up because it's through the lens of kilesa.

Knowing that, for me, it's like a huge relief. "I've got to figure out what to do. What's wrong with my practice? It's not like this..." Oh, you're totally in kilesa. It feels like this. All I can do is just sit and walk and notice as best I can and trust that steady awareness takes care of itself. "No, I've got to do something. I've got to fix this. That's not good enough." So just knowing that—okay, I just can't rely on anything the mind says right now. It'll keep on trying, you know. But I recognize I can't rely on it. That's really so relieving. If I could hand you that, I would love to.

Because what I want to explore tonight is this: when we're in that phase of running into this kind of hitting the wall—not just that it's difficult, but you're feeling that sense of something being shaken up, something untrustworthy, you don't really know where to stand, your assumptions aren't matching reality, your unrecognized views of practice are being challenged—it's really unsettling. And usually it's unpleasant. What's occurring may also be difficult in itself—physical pain, emotional trauma. You just don't feel like you have a handle on anything. For a moment, it changes.

But the point I want to talk about tonight is something that over the last few years has become more and more helpful to me, something I didn't used to call on so much. At these times, rather than trying to figure out how to practice correctly—because it's through the lens of kilesa, you can't tell—you just keep going steady. But also, tune into and reconnect with your deep, real motivating aspiration in your life, in your practice.

There's no right or wrong here. You can't do this wrong. It's a way of beginning with reflection, but it's not intellectual thinking—though that may be how you start. And there's no right way it should feel. But when I find myself feeling shaky, worn down, low energy, trying to remember to practice but maybe thinking "why?"—or maybe it's just dry and dead—then I just take a moment. Really just get quiet with yourself. It can go differently, but start by remembering or tuning into your aspiration: how you began your practice, why you're doing it now.

Let me backtrack and say what I mean by aspiration. Aspiration is a form of intention, a form of motivation. The intention that arises in any particular moment with any particular action of thought, body, or speech—that's one kind of intention. Aspiration is something more overarching, a broader sense of deeper purpose. What's really important to me? It can become a support, a reference point. It gives us a sense of resolution and courage to keep being present for a larger purpose than what's immediately in front of us.

For example, not even particularly dharmic, but we all know this—if you have children...

There's plenty of times—assuming you're a halfway decent parent—when you do something that wouldn't be what you would normally want to do, or that's really hard for you, or scary for you. But you do it without question, because it's for the well-being of your child, out of love for your child. You get a sense of what I mean? It's a bigger purpose, not just the moment-to-moment thing.

So in terms of aspiration in our practice, it's about tuning in—and this can change as we go through practice, as we have deeper understanding, as different things motivate us. But how is aspiration different from craving a goal?

The thing with aspiration, the way I'm talking about it, is that it's supportive in terms of turning our heart, mind, our consciousness toward the wholesome. Say, for example, at times my aspiration would be to really free the heart and mind from kilesa, to be of benefit to all beings. Those are the words. When there's a moment that my heart and mind are really in touch with that—wow, that might be a potential in this world—when it's truly an aspiration, the mind isn't looking forward, leaning forward, one eye on the goal. Because then you feel that sense of tanha.

Tanha can be for awakening, or it could be for an orange. It's the quality in the heart-mind that makes it tanha, not the object. And so you can feel when it's not this wholesome aspiration—when you feel that narrowing, the frustration, the "I could never do this, I'm a piece of garbage." That's not aspiration. That's wanting and aversion.

But aspiration may be this sense of: Wow, is that really possible? And thinking, for example, the Buddha often said, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." Just think that. And so then it comes back—aspiration brings a sense of brightness, of lightness to the heart, to the mind. It can energize. It just says, you know, okay, I can be with this another moment. That's how aspiration is different from expectation, from wanting—which leads to doubt, frustration, and self-involvement.

You can flip back and forth, but explore it and see. All of us—none of us would be here without some sense of aspiration. And as I say, the words I just said as an aspiration can really inspire me at some point. Or I could be lost in an aversive, self-judging mind state, and I hear that and think, "Yeah, fat chance. Who do you think you are?" Then that's not working at that moment.

So I want to say: find ways. As you go through the days, it can be a kind of wise reflection to take time, at various moments, to just reconnect with what your aspiration is. It may be words, or it may be—and this is what I've been doing more and more lately, and it really helps—it turns the mind to the wholesome, takes me out of just the self-identification, and brings in this real sense of: yes, this is the potential of this path. It does go against the stream. We need support in our aspiration.

So with wise reflection, you can bring in a sense of what helps you reconnect with that. For me—and I'm just going to give some examples, you find what's true for you—at times it's different people I've met who are manifesting different aspects of purity of heart-mind, or different aspects of devotion. These rekindle that aspect in my own

heart-mind. I mean, we're not inspired by somebody externally. We're inspired because it's touching that wholesome quality in our own mind-stream. Otherwise, it just misses. We don't know what they're talking about.

So one of the ways is just remembering. When I'm with something a little bit difficult, and I'm thinking, "Ah, I'm sick of this already. Let's move on to something else"—I just remember I really have a commitment to awaken, not just for myself, but to be of benefit to some beings in this world. That gives resolution, a sense of willingness to hang out with it another moment. It broadens things. If it's just for me, okay, a little aversion is good enough. It's not too bad. Let's move on. But if it's for all beings—no, that isn't good enough. That little bit of aversion comes out in something I say, and I can see it reverberate in the other person. Which is, you know, me and the other—not different.

It's not okay. But not okay in a way of not judging—rather, it's a recognition that we must come back and be with it.

I remember something Ajahn Sumedho was talking about when he was in his early years in Thailand as a monk in his robes. You've seen what the robes are—they're not cool. And in the heat of Thailand, in the hot season under a tin roof, you just cook. I've known this from personal experience; you cook. And so he was sitting there, just sweating through his robes hour after hour, day after day. He said, "I just couldn't bear this another moment." And then he'd find that he could. Just that—"I can't"—and then he'd say to himself, "What's so unbearable about this?" I often will say that, just for a moment. Okay, I can be with it.

That sense of tuning in to the aspiration—not just for myself, but for greater benefit in the world—that brings the courage, the resolution, which is one of the paramis. This quality of willingness to do what is wholesome. So that's one way.

Another way, as I was saying, is thinking of different people at different times who can inspire wholesome qualities of awakening in us. I'm going to tell a couple of stories, but you'll have your own, whoever it is. And it doesn't have to be Buddhist. It doesn't have to be that the person is totally perfect. If we're waiting to be inspired, to have our aspiration renewed, only by a completely awakened, perfect person—well, few and far between, huh? But wholesome, beautiful, awakened qualities—there are really a lot more of these, here and there, if we open to notice them and then take them in. It can really inspire us.

So, a couple of little stories.

I've been going to Myanmar every year for at least a month since 2001, and so I've come to know many nuns. There are many, many nuns in Burma. Most of the ones I know are relatively simple people. This one woman, Daw Uttara—"Daw" is just an honorific; women are Daw, men are U—she became a nun when she was around twenty because her health was really bad. She came from a farming family, a little bit poor, not really poor in Burmese terms, but she was really sick. She realized her family was about to sell everything they had, including their house, to pay for her doctor, and she didn't want that. She'd always kind of wanted to be a nun anyway, so she became one.

And she had so much faith. She said she had really long, beautiful hair, and when she shaved it, she sold it. Then she used that money to buy her first Buddha rupa, a Buddha statue. Many of the nuns I've met—their main meditation practice is actually Buddhanussati, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha. That brings them great faith, great inspiration. It's not my practice. I think it's beautiful, but it doesn't do that for me. That practice doesn't do it for me. But being around the nuns who are doing it, seeing this quality of devotion and faith, how they bring that into their lives—that helps to deepen my aspiration to purify the heart-mind.

So Daw Uttara was a nun, and she moved from her home village down in the Delta after a big cyclone when people lost their land and their lives. She was living around Yangon, and she and her sister nun went to a meditation nunnery. They really wanted to meditate. Not all nunneries or monasteries are meditation ones, but that was really what she wanted to do.

But her head sayadaw, her teacher in her home village, called and said, "No, there are these ten orphan girls. We're sending them to you to take care of."

Many nuns do this—take care of poor girls and orphan girls from their home village. There's no safety net, no other place for them. Sometimes parents send them because it's the only way they can get an education, or they'll be taught good values, or they'll simply be taken care of. So these young girls are sent, and then the nuns take them in. They become little nuns, and the older nuns care for them.

So Daw Uttara and her sister did a U-turn.

Her commitment was to awaken, to meditate. But now she had these ten little girls—now there are fifteen or twenty. And what I saw was how she made this complete U-turn. Not like, "Okay, I've got to do this; I'll make the best of it." But rather, a turning grounded in faith, in devotion: "Okay, now this is the life. This is what life is presenting,

and this is the path of awakening." No question about it. And you can see there's so much love and so much friendliness and so much care for these little girls. It's not an easy life. But just to witness that.

When I think of her—I'm not saying everything is all perfect—but when I see that willingness to embrace whatever is coming with a heart of devotion and stay true to one's commitment to awaken, but then recognize, "This is what it's about right now: loving and caring for these little girls." She says, "Okay, when they're grown, and if they don't want to stay nuns, that's fine. But they've had these years where we've really taught them how to be a good human being, and we've kept them safe. They don't have to go out on the street. They can choose whatever life they choose, but they've had a really good foundation. And then we can go off and meditate."

So that's one way. That inspires in me that sense of faith and surrender. It inspires me—and that's what practice is. Not about getting it the way I want, but this willingness, this ability of total trust and surrender to how things are right now.

Sometimes I think of just a person, just their being. There's another monk up in Sagaing, Ujjayanta. Very simple. He's the sayadaw of a very small monastery, only about three or four monks, up in the hills of Sagaing. We go to visit him every year. In fifteen years, he doesn't look like he's aged a day. He lives this quiet life, and he just... he doesn't know too much English, but you walk into the place and it just feels peaceful. He's a real metta being. That's all. It's not like we have these great wisdom discussions about the Abhidhamma. Just this simplicity—metta, metta, peace. I just love being there. We go and hang out, sit with him, visit, and after fifteen minutes there's nothing really to say. He's had his visit, so then we go on our way. But I have his picture on my desk. I'll just look at it, and it sparks that in me, and that deepens again my aspiration, my willingness. Okay, let's keep on with this practice. Let's keep on with this awareness. It turns the mind to the wholesome.

Here's another example, completely outside of Buddhism—a daily life one. Actually, it was just last week. One morning I was listening to the news. As you can imagine, I can get downcast. Sometimes just listening to news or seeing how things are, I think, "What am I doing on this planet?" I feel like everything is the opposite of what seems important to me. I don't know—I was telling Guy this story, and it didn't really go over with him, so maybe you'll also think this is weird. But anyway, this was it, last week.

The last piece of the news was about a big ceremony in Moscow. They were unveiling a new statue, and over 200,000 people came to this grand ceremony. The statue was huge, as they do in Russia—five meters tall on top of a giant pedestal—honoring Kalash-

nikov, who died a few years ago. Kalashnikov, who invented the AK-47 and other such lovely weapons. They were really honoring him as someone who brought honor to the fatherland with his creativity and his integrity, on and on—all these people celebrating.

But that's not just about Russia. I mean, that kind of thing is not abnormal. And they said he wasn't around to see this, but he had been a little disappointed. He was proud of what he did, but he was a little disappointed that some of the people who used the AK-47 weren't the right people—like drug cartels used it, criminals used it. He wasn't so glad about that.

I'm just kind of listening, thinking: what world am I living in? And actually, that left me feeling somewhat dejected. It was not deepening my aspiration in that moment—it was more like, *huh?*

But the same day, not much later, in my email inbox came a daily writing from a Christian mystic society. And it was talking about Gandhian nonviolence. The same day. I thought, you know, I just want to read a little of it because it reminded me: oh yes, *this* is also here. We just have to open our eyes and see it.

So I found myself reading where they were quoting Mahatma Gandhi: "Love is the strongest force the world possesses, and yet it is the humblest imaginable. Living a nonviolent life is no easy task. It requires courageous love drawn from the very source of our being."

Then they were quoting Thomas Merton on our dualistic mind—how we see evil as very cut and dried. This is good, this is evil, and the only solution is we've got to eliminate all evil. But Merton says: "Nonviolence, on the other hand, comes from an awareness that I am also the enemy, and my response is part of the whole moral equation. I cannot destroy the other without destroying myself. I embrace my enemy just as much as I must welcome my own shadow. Both acts take real and lasting courage."

And then there was Gandhi's coining of the term *satyagraha*, because "passive resistance" didn't capture the active and powerful nature of nonviolence. *Satyagraha* combines the Sanskrit word *sat*—which translates as being or truth—with *graha*, meaning holding firm to, remaining steadfast in. So *satyagraha*, nonviolence, is translated as truth force: holding steady to the truth coming from within, or soul force.

And that brought to mind Martin Luther King. Having read a lot about him, I know that "soul force" is really the language he used for the whole depth of nonviolence—this courageous, incredible way of meeting horrific circumstances from an inner place of

love that is only possible when it springs from connection with truth. Whether you want to call it God, or we would want to call it Dharma—just the way things are, reality as it is.

When we're connected with that, in a simple moment when there's no *kilesa*, the thought of harming doesn't arise. The notion that the only response to difficulty is aversion or harming—it becomes so clear that's not true. In that moment, you know.

And again, this soul force—there are people doing that, living from that, acting from that in the world now. John Lewis, the longtime representative in the House from Georgia, who in his autobiography talks a lot about soul force. He was one of the original members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which led the Freedom Rides in 1959 and 1960, and helped organize the March on Washington in '63. This sense of people now in the world still connecting to and acting from this depth of understanding.

The reading continued: "To create peaceful change, we begin by remembering who we are in God"—this is Christian language, but who we are in truth. Gandhi believed the core of our being is union with the truth. From this awareness, nonviolence flows naturally and consistently.

So again, just this sense for me of finding in different places—and I write them down and I'm saying them to you—because it re-inspires in me my own aspiration. And that aspiration is, in terms of my practice, just to find the courage, the willingness, the humility in a way, just for this next moment to show up. Not to figure it out, but to actually have the courage to know we're not going to figure it out. It's exactly not about our figuring it out—it's just the opposite. It's about freedom from clinging.

This freedom of heart and mind is absolutely uncompromising. There's not some part we get to exclude. And so as we practice, as our minds become more subtle, as we land in our views—it includes all views, all our ways of understanding. Even with our most sincere intentions, our sincere practice, we're going to be surprised, undone. We have to be, if the practice is working.

That's why when you're having these difficult times, we know the practice is working. You think it's not, but we know it is. If everything's all nice and safe and secure the whole time, going just as you like it—no, it's not really happening yet. So with our most sincere intentions, we can't imagine what it's supposed to look like, how it's supposed to be.

We want to know ahead of time. We want to know the path. We want to chart ourselves on the path, right? We want to know exactly where we are, even if that makes us feel like garbage because we're not where we think we should be. And even if we've read the path, you've read the progress of insight, you know it all—that just makes it worse. Because you never really know where you are, and we want to know. And you can't. You just can't.

So these times of confusion, they're really valuable. They're important moments in our path of awakening. Because what's required—we want to know where it's going to be, but what's required is this commitment, this willingness, this determination, this *adhiṭṭhāna*, which is just a moment of: okay, I can just be with this now. Like when Annie talked about it the other night, as Joseph calls it, "the sword of wisdom," where you just go, "not now." It's not with aversion or clinging, but it's a kind of collecting of the energy. Okay, I can just be with this for a moment. That's what's required—just to be with what is, this full commitment to open into the unknown.

It's not going the way we think. We have no clue where we are. We've lost a sense of path. We're not feeling safe and secure. Great. Just take a moment and say, "I can just be with this now." Trust in the awareness. Trust in that simplicity of just meeting what's happening.

Awakening, enlightenment—it's not a self-improvement project. It doesn't make us feel all better about ourselves and secure and safe. And I know, the sense of self... it's not like there's a self we're getting rid of. But the sense of me—when I try to imagine what it is, of course we imagine from the sense of me: I'm going to feel so good. I'm going to be floating down the street, the essence of Kuan Yin, the goddess of compassion. In a subtle way, it's kind of feeding us, confirming our sense of me.

Now, non-clinging—it's radical, it's uncompromising. The sense of me is what gets seen through. It's not what gets confirmed. And so at some point, all of the subtle holdings are going to be challenged. And sometimes it's scary, and then it'll be, "Oh wow, it's so freeing." And then, because these habits are so pervasive, the next day you thought you were free, they're back again. Okay. I thought I couldn't bear it, but then I found that I could. It's like this now. How can this be? What's happening? It's like this now. It's like this now.

This is really the courage, the determination to just moment to moment to moment open into the unknown.

I found without continually coming back and seeing what helps reconnect with my aspiration—there are times, for all of us, we just don't have the energy to do it. I mean, it's like that. But find what helps you, what re-aspirates, re-inspires, re-reminds you of what's really important to you in life.

So again, for me, I'll end with one more story. A friend was just telling me—a friend of mine and a long-term meditator yogi has been involved for some years in what's called the Tibet Oral History Project, something that the Dalai Lama actually asked her to do. What she does is she interviews Tibetan refugees, really elderly Tibetan refugees in India, in the States, wherever—just to get their stories, just to get it down. Not necessarily teachers or nuns or monks, just all different kinds of people.

So she actually gave me the whole interview. I'll just pick some highlights of this particular woman, an elderly woman. She interviewed her when she was seventy, in 2013. She's living in the States now, has been for many years. This is one of those stories where you read it and you think, well, this is the kind of stuff you read about Milarepa, or what people did in Tibet—these old, fantastic practitioners. But today? Couldn't possibly do that. And so this is her brief story.

She came from a nomadic family, well-to-do. When the Chinese were invading in 1959, they were trying to flee with her whole family. They got involved in a firefight, and her family was killed—many people were killed. She was shot in the leg. She was captured and taken back to her village and kept under house arrest, just living in her village.

But she had this deep commitment to escape, to get to India. Her deep commitment was that she wanted to be able to offer prayers for her parents. One must offer prayers when parents pass away, and there was no opportunity to perform prayers there. She also wanted to study and practice the Dharma. That was her deep commitment.

So she managed to escape. The whole long story—it took her almost a year. She's wandering. Some people help her. She's freezing. She doesn't have food. But she manages a year wandering around in Tibet without much to eat. It's a year after she was wounded, so she could walk okay. She gets to Mount Kailash with a friend. She's not in India—she's at Mount Kailash. And she really wants to practice.

So she stayed seven years at Mount Kailash, living in caves and practicing the Dharma, doing prostrations all around Mount Kailash. She ran into a lama who showed up after she'd been there a while. He sounded like he was really a tough lama—not like, "Oh yeah, you're doing a good job, keep going," but a radical sword of wisdom lama that really inspired her practice.

Let me share a couple of things he said. He says to her, "You really have to cultivate love and compassion as well as wisdom to really awaken. So how do you relate to the Chinese?" She said, "Well, to be really honest, I feel like they're my enemy." And he says, "Yes, of course you do. And you're doing really good practice. But you keep practicing like this, and the enemy will not be the enemy but like your relatives. If you can love your so-called enemy without any degree of difference—if you can learn to not make this difference—this is really part of what you need to do to really be free."

So she goes, "Okay." Well, she put in a tremendous effort to do this. It was really hard. She's not saying it was easy. It was really hard. "I exercised again and again, even while eating and doing pilgrimage and prostrations around the mountain, meditating, putting in every effort I could, concentrating single-mindedly on this. I couldn't do it for almost two years."

Imagine—just like, "I couldn't do it for almost two years." But somehow she did.

So now she's in the States, an old woman, just describing her experience. She said, "I can't really talk in great detail about the Dharma and the practice because no one really will understand. It's so subtle. But what I understand is the important benefit of peace. Through practicing peace, one realizes that the problems I suffer are also felt by the other person. When I face difficulties like illness and pain, when I feel happiness—I feel that is also felt by the other person. The suffering I experience is felt by the other. Whatever I feel, the other has the same feeling. If one understands that perfectly, the feeling of wanting to harm another person, of being spiteful and other things, just disappears automatically."

That's the sense of it—in a moment of wisdom, the hatred doesn't arise. That's just how it is. You don't make that happen. Take it as moments, not as you have to be that way completely. That's how I do it.

But she's really seeing that, you know? This is how she lives. And what my friend said when she met this woman, what she was really impressed by—before she heard her story—was just her great kindness. A great sense of love. She came in and the woman was just doing whatever she could to make my friend comfortable, offering her things, and this very simple, down-to-earth kindness and wisdom. You can feel that sometimes in people.

So that's another story that inspires me. This is a real person, not reading about Shabkar in the eighteenth century.

See what's true for you, what helps you. If this is helpful—to re-inspire, to reconnect to your aspiration, to give you energy and courage and uplift to open into the unknown again for this next moment.

I'll close with this from Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, quoted by the Dalai Lama. This is a vast bodhicitta aspiration, but it brings up that inspiration, that energy in me. So I'm reading it for myself, because it makes me really happy:

And now, as long as space endures, as long as there are beings to be found, may I continue likewise to remain, to soothe the sufferings of those who live. The pains and sorrows of all wanderers, may they ripen wholly on myself. And may the virtuous company of bodhisattvas ever bring about the happiness of beings. May the teachings—the only remedy for suffering, the source of every bliss and happiness—be nurtured and upheld with reverence, and throughout a vast continuance of time endure. May precious bodhicitta take its birth in those in whom it has not taken birth, and where it has been born, let it not cease, but swell and increase ever more and more.

Let's just sit a moment.

Thank you for your patient attention.

CHAPTER 205

Respecting the Defended Heart (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 42 min

In this heartfelt retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a profound reframing of how we relate to our psychological defenses and patterns of clinging. Beginning with the traditional practice of dāna (generosity), sīla (virtue), and paññā (wisdom), she explores why letting go can feel so difficult when we live in a world marked by systemic harm, violence, and disrespect for human dignity.

Wilson draws from the Abhidhamma's description of clinging as sticky like meat in a frying pan, and shares the traditional story of monkeys trapped by their unwillingness to release sweet coconut meat. Yet rather than approaching our grasping with judgment, she invites practitioners to honor the defenses we've developed as survivors of difficult conditions. This represents a compassionate reinterpretation of working with lobha (greed/attachment).

The talk includes the Buddha's teaching about monastics who transformed hostile tree spirits through mettā (loving-kindness), illustrating how safety comes not from shutting down but from the lawful power of wholesome intention. Wilson explains the law of kamma—that caring intentions inevitably bear fruit—as a foundation for faith in the practice. She offers contemplations from the Visuddhimagga for cultivating joy and strength, including reflecting on the Buddha's complete freedom from defilements and the inspiring example of the modern arahat Dīpa Mā, who found liberation through devastating grief. The talk concludes with Joy Harjo's 'Eagle Poem' and an invitation to honor both our beauty and our defended places with equal respect.

There are many different ways to name the awakening practice. One traditional approach is through the practice of *dāna*, *sīla*, and *paññā*—the Pali words for generosity, virtue or non-harming or ethical living, and wisdom. I wanted to use this gateway as our entry point.

The Buddha said that generosity was one of the easiest ways to come to awakening because that movement of the heart in giving liberates us from clinging, holding, or attachment. When we reflect on how that energy lives inside of us, it's easy—when we turn our minds to it—to see the innumerable ways that we are generous: the simple expression of holding the door while others go through, or how gracious some of you are

when we as teachers step into the lunch line. You're not like, "No, this is my place, you can't come in." You're like, "Yes, yes, step in." And there are countless other ways that you have expressed your generosity.

In acknowledging generosity, we also acknowledge its opposite: the holding on, the clinging and attachment, the contraction. It feels almost amazing when we consider that if generosity is a practice that leads to liberation, why is it actually so difficult? The Buddha pointed specifically and repeatedly to this particular force that lives inside of us—called clinging, greed, desire, or holding on.

In the Abhidharma, which is a compendium of mental states linked to the arising of consciousness, there are definitions and descriptions of all these mental factors. It's said that clinging is like when you're frying meat in a pan—interesting that they came up with this—and how sticky it is. You know how the meat sticks to the pan. Clinging is that stickiness when we feel the opposite of the open-hearted flow.

There's also another traditional story told in relationship to this, also culturally specific, about how farmers protect their crops from monkeys. I don't know if you've lived with monkeys. They're so smart. In South Africa, at the Cape of Good Hope, there are many wild monkeys, and as soon as you open your car door—there are lots of signs warning you—they are in the car. They are fearless, sniffing around for food, because most tourists going to that part of Africa have food in their cars.

So the farmers protected their crops by taking coconuts and cutting the top off so that there was this sweet flesh exposed. But they made the hole just small enough—or just large enough—for the monkey to put its hand in to grasp that sweet flesh. And even when seeing farmers coming to grab them, or maybe even do other things to them, the monkeys couldn't let go. They would hold on to that sweet meat.

This reminds me of how tenacious we all are, holding on in our different ways. When I reflect on my own holding on, and our holding on as it emerges through the group interviews, I am moved to acknowledge in one way *why* the holding on is happening.

Because over and over again, one thing this culture doesn't do—historically and continually, apart from in activist circles—is acknowledge the impact of what it means to live in a world driven by ignorance. Our experience of not feeling safe in the streets, in the fluid gender expressions that we have, living with that even in the Bay Area. All the increasing violence being targeted towards trans people, and especially trans people of color—there's more and more violence towards those of us in our community with that expression.

Or what it means to live in a country where the deepest striving is for profit, and the impoverishment of so many people, and the resulting struggle of so many of us. The impoverishment of those countries that have been colonized by large industries where wages are so low. Or when we hear about Harvey Weinstein and the sexual abuse of those women—sixty women—we're not surprised, because so many of us carry that in our lives. Young girls and women, and those of us who don't identify within the binary and are gender fluid or non-conforming, we carry that. It's no surprise to us. And how deep and profound it is to live in a culture where that's going on, and is going on.

Naming this is to acknowledge how understandable it is that each of us has grown the defenses that we have, and how we hold onto behaviors that express those defenses. Because in a world that didn't acknowledge our fragility and the tenderness of our hearts and beings, in a world that hasn't respected us—and that lack of respect is so pervasive—we have gathered whatever has been available to us to survive. We are survivors. And in some ways, those defenses worked, because we are here.

In acknowledging these defenses, it's easy—upon hearing the Dharma—to want to get rid of them. You remember in the sharing that Dal talked about judgment, and Larry said that while the practice might be not to judge the judging. Here, the practice might be not to judge the defense, or to want it not to be there, and to go into more of a cycle of wanting.

So perhaps, as communities, in acknowledging the conditions and how we have survived in those conditions, the practice is to honor and respect.

those defense mechanisms, and that holding. And this is a whole new way of talking about greed. So if you are a conservative Dharma practitioner, you might be thinking, what is she saying? But at least in this aspect of it, it makes sense to me. It makes sense in these conditions. If there's time, I'll go back to some of the more traditional understandings of this flow of energy.

So there is then this invitation to turn towards ourselves with understanding and respect. With the faith of knowing that those energies—caring, presence, understanding, respect—we are creating a new way of learning how to be safe. Because we sense and know, even if it's conceptual, that actually safety doesn't come from shutting down. We understand why we have shut down. No blame, no shame. And we also want to offer a new way of relating to what our protective mechanism has asked of us. That new way of relating rests with these qualities of the heart and mind.

Let me tell another traditional story of the Buddha. It was during the rains retreat, the traditional three-month retreat. The Buddha said to the Sangha, go out into the forest and practice. And so the Sangha went out into the forest. Now, in Buddhist cosmology, there are different realms, and in these different realms there are different spirits and energies. Some of these spirits were living in the trees and were quite happy there—until they became rather upset when the Sangha arrived. Basically: "Hey, you're in our space. You're sitting in our forest." So they started making sounds that disturbed the Sangha, moving the trees, essentially irritating the practitioners. And the Sangha felt they couldn't practice there. It was horrible, and it was frightening.

So they went back to the Buddha and said, "No, we can't practice with all these scary energies." And the Buddha said, "Go back and offer wishes of kindness and well-being and happiness to the trees and the tree spirits."

The Sangha was at that point where we all find ourselves in relationship to these places of doubt: Can I trust that? Can I let go of my defense and fear for my safety to actually offer kindness and well-wishing—for themselves and for these tree spirits?

And the energy of that kindness, that love—we know it, don't we? We can feel it. When we enter into a space, or when we're with a friend or a partner or any expression of life, those moments when the love is palpable, the waves of it. We can feel it not just through an idea but physically. That energy becomes the field in which the heart opens. And so the hearts of these tree spirits opened, and in that touch, they moved from wanting to get rid of the Sangha to protecting the Sangha.

This reminds me of the Las Vegas shooting. Perhaps you heard that in all that chaos, a woman had fallen down. A young man, seeing her fall with the bullets pouring down from that high hotel room, lay on top of her to shield her. Those moments of caring and protection that come from love are, the Buddha says, the real safety and protection. And that's what this path is offering us.

So we are not to take this invitation to love as a way to bang and hammer ourselves. Not: "Look, defense, you're not loving! Look, I'm supposed to offer..." No. Because we are being called to honor our history and have faith that the offering of kindness and acceptance over time, because it's lawful, will bring about the opening of the heart and mind.

There are many physical laws in the universe. I'm an insomniac, and I have been listening recently—I listen to YouTube all the time through the night when I can't sleep. My big thing lately is listening to Brian Cox and others talk about the Big Bang, about

two black holes fusing together 130 million years ago, and how over the multi-billion years since then, the gravitational waves traveling at the speed of light have finally reached us. And that's how we know what happened.

That vastness operating according to physical laws—it feels very reassuring to me. Something about realizing I'm part of something so huge, spanning eons. Which actually the Buddha talked about. He said there have been eons and eons and eons, and we're just beginning to name that through science—through the Large Hadron Collider, that enormous reactor where they're shooting protons and neutrons at each other.

There are physical laws that govern the universe. And the Buddha said that there are laws that govern the mind.

And he named that very complex set of laws as the laws of karma.

One of the simplest dynamics in how karma operates is this: for any wholesome intention, for any wish or blessing that has as its root caring or patience or kindness or mindfulness or love, that will be the outcome. This is an immutable law of the mind. If we have an intention to care, an intention of respect for something, absolutely—we might not know when—but absolutely the consequence will be a flowering, a manifestation, an expression of that energy. We don't know exactly how or when, but it will happen.

It is this law, this law of conditionality, that can become the basis of faith, and has been the basis of my faith for years and years. When I touch those places of grasping and holding on, where I wish they would open and they're not, I can offer: "I understand why you're here. And I want you to know I'm learning how to care for you and be patient." As I reflect on that wish, there comes this faith and strength that maybe in the next second or moment, or maybe in the future, that energy will manifest in relationship to this tightness and holding.

And if I continue to offer it—which is what we do with the metta guidance that has been offered, or the coming back into mindfulness: "May I come back and be mindful and present. May I not abandon myself"—whatever those beautiful intentions you have been working with, each one of them is building the conditions for that opening. Because in the environment of presence and love, there is the opening. That's the law of the Dharma.

When Lisa asked the question in the group sharing, "How can I let go? How can I let go of holding on to wanting things to change? How can I let go of that wanting?"—then we explored different aspects of calling in the beautiful qualities to hold the experience, to hold what was underneath that wanting, to hold the wanting itself. And in generating that field, things begin to open.

It is a purification process. And the purification process means that in the opening and that sense of well-being, we feel the delight of it, and we're like, "I got that one!" We're grooving. And because when we feel open, when things have opened and it's so much more pleasant, it's easy to forget that we're in and on a journey, and that actually each opening at some time will lift the next layer of defense that is asking to be met in the same way. And so it is an ongoing process.

So then I want to address: what happens when there's an opening and then all that stuff comes up and it's huge and it's big? How do I hold it? I'm saying to myself, "May I respect you," and then there's just this total wave of everything, and there's no way that I can even say that because it's nauseating. What happens when we offer these beautiful energies and we find ourselves so contracted? What do we do to help create a little more rest in order to sustain that opening?

One of the most beautiful cultivations of rest for ourselves when we feel swamped in this process is the traditional contemplations from the Visuddhimagga on the cultivation of joy. And joy is one of the great qualities for bringing rest and strength to ourselves on our journeys.

The first is to contemplate wise attention, or mindfulness, or awareness. The second is remembering the virtues of the Buddha. The third is rejoicing in the Dharma. The fourth is rejoicing in the virtues of the Sangha. The fifth is considering your own virtue. The sixth is remembering your own generosity. The seventh is considering the virtue of those evolved beings in other realms. The eighth is reflecting on perfect peace. The ninth is avoiding persons overwhelmed with anger. The tenth is reflecting on the suttas. And the eleventh is inclining the mind towards joy.

Because there isn't a lot of time, I'm going to speak on just two of these. One is what it means to contemplate the virtue of the Buddha, because it's a very traditional contemplation. And I love this contemplation because I have known myself, my own mind, and so many of us—teachers and sangha and students—who have moments of insight, maybe more than moments of insight and awakening, and are still sometimes held in the grips of these defenses and attachments. And what it is to contemplate a mind that is far away from all of them.

There is a person, a human being, who practiced the practice that we're practicing, who has come to a place where nothing—nothing—can get close to the strength of that peace and open-heartedness.

So it's said, and I love this: He has abolished all hundred thousand kinds of trouble, anxiety, and defilement described as greed, hatred, and delusion, as misdirected attention, as consciousness, as anger, enmity, contempt, domineering, as envy, avarice, deceit, fraud, obduracy, presumption. As pride, he has abolished haughtiness, vanity, negligence, craving, ignorance, and the three roots of the unprofitable kinds of misconduct. All defilements, stains, fictitious perceptions, applied thoughts. And I am only reading a little bit of pages and pages and pages.

It is said the Buddha stands utterly remote and far away from all defilements. They can't come near. So beautiful—it feels like the equivalent of all those eons of life, how magnificent that is. And that mind that is so far away from the defilements, how that's for us too, not just for a remote statue or representation, but is the offering for us. Us saying to each other, one moment at a time, walking the path to become remote from all those energies.

It might be that the Buddha doesn't do it for you—too far away, you've never been to, you know, just haven't read any of the stuff I'm talking about, and it's like, nope. So then I wanted to talk about Dipa Ma, who was considered an Arahant. She died in 1984, and a lot of our teachers studied with her. I'm going to read a little bit about her because she also, her mind ended up being far away and remote from all these defilements.

In ten years, Dipa Ma lost two children, her husband, and her health. In her mid-forties, she was a widow with a seven-year-old daughter to bring up on her own. Both her parents were dead. India was far away—she was living in Burma. And she was overwhelmed with grief and confusion. "I didn't know what to do, where to go, or how to live," she said. "I had nothing and no one to call my own." Months went by and all she could do was cry, holding a photo of Rajini, her son, in her lap.

During the next few years, her health continued to decline and her condition became so serious that she felt her only hope of survival was to practice meditation. She reflected on the irony of her situation. When she was young and healthy, she had wanted to meditate and been prevented from doing so by her husband. Now responsible for a child, totally exhausted and in despair—facing death, her doctor had said—she felt there was no other option. She would die of a broken heart unless she did something about the state of her mind.

She asked herself, "What can I take with me when I die?" She looked around at her dowry, her silk saris, and even her daughter. "As much as I loved her, I knew I couldn't take her. So I said, let me go to the meditation center. Maybe I can find something there I can take with me when I die."

At the lowest point in her life, the Buddha appeared to her in a dream, a luminous presence. He softly chanted a verse from the Dhammapada, one of the very early teachings: "Clinging to what is dear brings sorrow. Clinging to what is dear brings fear. To one who is entirely free from endearment, there is no sorrow or fear."

When Dipa Ma awoke, she felt clear and calm, and she knew she had to learn to meditate, no matter what the state of her health. She understood the Buddha's advice: if she wanted peace, she had to practice until she was free of all sorrow.

Joseph Goldstein tells a story of when he invited her to come to Insight Meditation Society. They were walking down the road, and in that part of Massachusetts there's this amazing color that happens in fall. The pond close to the center was reflecting all these colors, and Joseph said to Dipa Ma, "Isn't this exquisite?" She didn't say much, so he turned to her and asked, "What is in your mind right now, Dipa Ma?" And she said, "Only equanimity and mindfulness, wisdom and loving-kindness. Just that."

There's something so beautiful about contemplating what one of us has opened to, and that this is possible for all of us. So that is one of the contemplations—resting the mind in. Maybe not the Buddha, maybe not Dipa Ma, but someone who has touched you or inspired you. That one quality, perhaps, that's like, yes, that touches my heart and I want to contemplate it and keep it close by.

And then to contemplate our generosity, which is what we began this exploration with. In our culture, we are not really supported to think about what we have achieved or what we're able to give. But in this practice, there is this invitation: every time we give—

to take time to reflect—not to think conceptually, but to open to the blessing of that generosity, how it felt in the body, and the gift that it was.

The Buddha said you can contemplate the same generosity over and over again. If there's just one time you have been generous, you can contemplate that. If it's simply that you held the door open for someone behind you to walk through—to contemplate: yes, that beautiful quality that is living inside of me. Can I acknowledge it? Can I bow down to it? Can I respect it? And in doing so, strengthen it so that I have the strength to hold the process that sometimes feels so difficult.

So here is a contemplation by one of my favorite poets, Joy Harjo, and one of my favorite poems. It's called "Eagle Poem."

To pray you open your whole self to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon, to one whole voice that is you. And know there is more that you can't see, can't hear, can't know except in moments steadily growing and in languages that aren't always sound but rather circles of motion. Like eagle that Sunday morning over Salt River, circled in blue sky, in wind, swept our hearts clean with sacred wings. We see you, see ourselves and know that we must take the utmost care and kindness in all things. Breathe in knowing we are made of all this. Breathe knowing we are truly blessed because we were born and die soon within a true circle of motion like eagle rounding out the morning inside us. We pray it will be done in beauty, in beauty.

So acknowledging our generosity, bowing down to it. Acknowledging our resistance and defense, bowing down to it. And calling in this amazing capacity—through the power of intention—to create the conditions to strengthen what is beautiful and to heal what is grasping and closed and defended.

In this way, may we grow together in beauty.

CHAPTER 206

Liberation and Mindfulness (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this opening retreat talk at Spirit Rock, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of mindfulness (sati) as the direct path to liberation. She presents mindfulness not merely as a technique but as loving awareness—a quality that transforms our relationship with experience at three distinct levels.*
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> *The first level involves becoming present to the content of experience: the sensations, feelings, and thoughts that arise in body and mind. Wilson explains how this expands our "window of tolerance," allowing us to bear pain and pleasure with increasing equanimity. The second level reveals the process nature of all phenomena—their arising, changing, and passing away. Drawing on the Fire Sermon (Ādittapariyāya Sutta), she describes how we begin to see the impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and selfless (anattā) nature of all conditioned experience. The third and most liberating level is mindfulness of consciousness itself, where we shift identity from being caught in experience to resting as awareness—becoming "the one who knows," as her teacher Ajahn Chah taught.*
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> *Wilson weaves together teachings from multiple traditions, personal stories from hospice work, and contemporary neuroscience research on meditation's effects. She emphasizes that freedom is available exactly where we are—"this very body and this very mind is the place of liberation"—and that our practice ultimately serves not just personal awakening but the healing of a world burning with greed, hatred, and delusion. The talk culminates in an invitation to discover that wisdom sees "I am nothing" while love sees "I am everything," and between these two, life flows.*

Ringing the bell before a talk makes it sound momentous, but actually I just like ringing the bell. We received it on the opening day of this retreat hall. We were thinking we needed a bell, and then magically San Francisco Zen Center sent us a gift, saying, "We think you need a bell." And we did. So thank you, Zen Center.

You've completed one day of retreat practice. A few of you are on your first retreat, and many of you have done quite a few retreats—yet it still is a process of settling down. Tonight I'd like to talk about the core of our practice together. I'd like to talk about mindfulness, or what I will also be using as a synonym: loving awareness.

If you read in the Buddhist texts, they begin in the most wonderful way: there is a path for living beings to realize well-being and liberation, to overcome sorrow and grief and lamentation and despair. I think Spring talked about that. And it's the practice of mindfulness. In other texts, it says mindfulness is all-helpful—that mindfulness is the gateway to liberation and freedom. And so I want us to think together, those of you who've been practicing for a long time and those who are newer, about what this means and how it operates for us.

There are two ways to function in the world. One is without mindfulness. This is sometimes called the samsaric way, or cyclic way of living. Because without mindfulness, without some sense of awareness, when experiences arise, what arises with them is habit and reactivity. We get fearful, we get caught, we're blind—we like it, we don't like it. Without mindfulness, we live in a somewhat unconscious set of patterns that simply enact the conditioning around us: the cultural conditioning, the educational conditioning, and so forth.

As we do this, not only is there not much sense of awareness and freedom, but unfortunately, those patterns build. Because they're based in delusion, in fear, in a sense that we can't trust the world, that we have to protect ourselves. This is called the body of fear, and it grows.

Having just come back from teaching with Trudy in China, being in Asia, talking to people in Singapore and Korea—as those societies have modernized, there's a tremendous amount of stress. There's all the great prosperity that's happened, but there's also extremely high suicide rates among children in Korea and Singapore and parts of China who are being driven to be ambitious and fulfill the goals of their parents or society. And then there's the grief that comes and the struggle. All of this is a samsaric way of being, where things continue to operate but there's not a sense of inner freedom, of mindfulness, of being able to step back and really listen in a wise way.

If you read what is called the Fire Sermon, one of the first major talks of the Buddha, he begins: "This world is burning. This world is on fire"—which is something that I think you can taste in the air here. So it's not just metaphorical. But then he goes on: In what way is this world burning? It's burning with the fires of greed. It's burning with the fires of hatred and ignorance. It's burning with the fires of delusion. And these fires cause immense suffering. We can see those forces as they operate in the world and, to a certain extent, in our own lives when we're caught in greed and grasping, hatred and fear, ignorance and confusion. That's the samsaric nature, the repetitive nature of unconsciousness.

After his enlightenment, as the myth tells it, the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of compassion in all four quarters and saw that there were beings suffering everywhere, in different ways, from delusion and greed and fear. And he saw that it would be possible to teach them a way that brought inner peace, liberation, wakefulness, ease, a sense of trust, graciousness. The way that he taught was to offer what we're doing here: the training and practice of mindfulness.

Now, whether you're a long-term practitioner or somewhat new, you don't have to wait more years to find freedom, and you don't have to go on a long retreat in Thailand or Burma or travel to the Himalayas. Freedom and well-being is available exactly where you are. I mean, where else would it be? This very body and this very mind is the place of liberation. It's the place we can get entangled and lost and habitual and repetitive and reactive and fearful. And it's also the place where trust, graciousness, wakefulness, and compassion can be born.

As we find these qualities, or as we mature into them over the years of practice, we also bring them to the world that so much needs them. You're all familiar with the passage from Thich Nhat Hanh where he says that when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

And so as you train and practice in this great art of mindfulness and loving awareness, you become that person on the boat of the world that so much needs it. The invitation, however many years of practice you have done, has two sides to it. One side, which Spring spoke about this morning, is an invitation to ease.

This is from Zen Master Ryokan, the most beloved poet in Japanese history. He writes, "If someone asks what is the mark of enlightenment or illusion, I cannot say. Praise and blame, wealth and honor are nothing but dust. As the evening falls, I sit in my hermitage and stretch out both feet as an answer."

And so there he is in his mountain hermitage—praise, blame, gain and loss, wealth and honor. What is the mark of enlightenment? I stretch out my feet in answer. There's something so gracious and lovely about this. He's not in conflict with the world.

So one of the invitations for your practice is to find ease in your heart, in your body, in your mind. And the other, which is a complement to that, is the invitation of fearlessness.

Fearlessness doesn't mean you won't have fear. Anybody in this room not have fear? Raise your hand. You can have your money back. It doesn't work that way. Fearlessness is something else. It is the steadiness, the courage, and the discipline to be present for this world with graciousness and ease on one side, but also with your full being. This is the invitation of practice—both ease and a kind of fearlessness that grows as we sit and walk.

When you think about where we're going on the spiritual path, the goal is not so much to get somewhere, but rather to open to the mystery of life. As it's said, the mystery of life is not a problem to solve, but a reality to experience.

I think about sitting with one of the teachers from Spirit Rock, Marlene Jones. A couple of years ago, she had heart failure. Unfortunately, where she was in the circumstances, it took a long time for the paramedics to get to her—fifteen or twenty minutes. So she had no oxygen to her brain for a long time. They got her to the hospital, iced her down, put her in a coma, and brought her back out. For a week they tried everything they could to get any response from her. Nothing. They did all kinds of tests—brain dead, zero.

So sitting with her family, together we decided it was time to take her off all the life support machines. I was holding her hand and looking at her, saying, "Marlene, you know, you've been so important and such a great colleague. You're dying too soon. I'm going to miss you, and there are so many things you could have done with us. But the least you could do is give us a sign." Sort of teasing her a little bit, trying to make the people sitting with her—her daughter and so forth—smile a little as well.

And as soon as I said that, two tears rolled down her cheeks. A week, nothing. The doctors prodding her, the different electrical brain monitoring and so forth—nothing. "The least you could do is give us a sign," and then the tears.

Who are we? Who are you? What is that spirit that was born into your body and that will also leave your body when you die? I could tell lots more stories, but you get the idea—that we actually live in mystery. To be a human being is the most remarkable, mysterious thing you can imagine.

I was at the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering a couple of years ago. I don't think that will be happening again soon—but I'm going to leave that aside. I was able to give one of the key talks there on the Buddhist teachings of wise society: treating all members of society with respect, coming together in harmony and leaving in har-

mony. Taking care of the vulnerable—the young, the elderly, those who are sick, the women. This is a way, said the Buddha, that a society prospers and does not decline. And care for the environment. There's a whole text about wise society.

But it's also not all that different from what you'd find in the great spiritual traditions around the world—from the Native Americans, from the wisest teachings in Jewish and Christian traditions, from Native traditions in Africa, and many other places.

The difference, and what made this conference so compelling, was that while these are beautiful visions of wise society, there's actually a way to do it. With the five thousand studies and neuroscience papers in the last few decades on mindfulness and compassion, it's now in school systems—tens of thousands of them—in clinics, in business, in the arts, and so forth. I have a big packet that was sent to me called "Mindful Nation," signed by the eighty-five members of the British Parliament Mindfulness Group.

We can only hope that this initiative is transmitted across the pond to our side sometime soon.

With mindfulness comes an invitation to freedom here and now, where we are. It's the only place we can find it. And it manifests on three different levels. Call it mindfulness or loving awareness.

The first level of freedom is our ability to know and be present for the content of experience. So we're sitting with our breath and our body, and we have tension and pain and pleasure and ease and tingling and heat and fire. We learn how to sit with it. We can name it gently: this is tingling, this is tension. These are the different experiences we have. But as we sit and the body starts to open, we become aware of the content of our body experience—all the sensations and feelings that make up our embodied life.

What grows with this, in neuroscience terms, is called the window of tolerance. Because we live in a society that is pretty much terrified of pain. We live in a culture of comfort. Too cold? Turn up the heat. Too hot? Turn on the air conditioning. Do whatever you can to make yourself comfortable. If you're uncomfortable, the problem is out there.

But here's the thing: is there anybody in the room who doesn't have discomfort or pain in their life, in spite of all those attempts to keep it at bay? You don't have to bother raising your hand. This is simply the way it is—praise and blame, pleasure and pain. We have it all.

And so if we can actually be with the content of our experience, we start to find a freedom already. Freedom with pain, freedom with tingling and tension and hot and cold. Instead of being reactive, mindfulness allows us to be present for that experience.

Of course, it can get more extreme. Trudy and I had dinner in Hawaii while visiting some friends, and the world-famous magician David Blaine was there doing card tricks that I couldn't imagine how he accomplished. He said he loved doing them especially in front of scientists. He showed us videos he'd done with Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates, and they were going crazy asking, "How could you do that? What's the physics of this?" I just said, "This is really good magic."

He was talking about how he pushes his body to extremes—he's the guy who hung in a glass box over the Thames River for forty-three days, only drinking liquids without eating. He's an extreme kind of guy. I talked about living in a monastery where our training was to master the postures by sitting for twenty-four hours without moving, or standing for twenty-four hours without moving. He said, "Oh yeah, I once did twelve days standing without moving." I said, "Okay, you've got me there." But it felt like there was some kind of brotherhood with him.

What happens when we learn to be mindful is that we can actually tolerate this world rather than be frightened of it. And it's not just a personal freedom that comes. As James Baldwin writes, "I imagine one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

When we can't bear our pain or our fear or our insecurity, we project it out onto others—onto the communists, or the black people, or the yellow people, or the native people, or the Muslims, or the immigrants. It was Russia for a while. I think Russia is coming back as an enemy du jour; it's going to have a recurrence now. But we project it out because we live in a way that we can't bear the reality of insecurity. And yet, insecurity is the truth of the world.

So we learn more and more what it's like to be present for our body. In the same way, we learn how to be present for our feelings—the tears and joy and grief and all the things that will come up on retreat.

Here is a story from Frank Ostaseski, who started the Zen Center Hospice and is a good friend I've been teaching with recently. He writes about a woman named Jillian who worked in publishing. Her mother developed Alzheimer's, and Jillian decided to bring her mother to live with her and arranged for a caregiver. One day she came home and walked into the living room to find all her beloved books, including her favorite

Buddhist texts, scattered across the floor. Her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty books. I'm going to give them to my dentist." You can sense the mind state arising in Jillian.

And she became immediately angry, trapped and caught up, and started to scold the caregiver. "How could you let this happen? How could you let her do this?"

And the caregiver, who wasn't caught in that drama, replied, "Madam, today I pack the books up. Tomorrow I will unpack them. If this gives a sense of control to a woman who has lost so much, well then, that's okay with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

You can feel the graciousness of heart and the ability to be with uncertainty and change that's in that story. And this is why we call it loving awareness. We start to learn a graciousness with the body experience, with the feelings that we have, with the mind states that come. Because we'll have all kinds of views arise. Your mind tells you, "You're doing well. You're not doing well. The world is a mess, but it's so beautiful." And everything in between, because the mind has no pride and just keeps spitting out stories and plans and wise things and fearful ones and beliefs and so forth.

When I was eight or nine years old, probably around nine, we lived in Buffalo, New York—lots of snow. There was this huge snowstorm with icy winds, and my twin brother and I, along with my other brother a year younger, decided to go out and play. We got all wrapped up, but the wind was blowing wildly. My twin brother was a lot bigger than I was. He played football, and I was not a football player, we'll just say that. Much more robust. I was really skinny then, and I was shaking and shivering. It was freezing cold and I'm shaking out there. He looked at me and said, "It's not cold."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He took off his hat. He unwrapped his scarf. "It's not cold." The wind is blowing, freezing. He took off his jacket. Pretty soon he had stripped himself down to the waist and started dancing around saying, "You just think it's cold. You just think it's cold."

I remember this for my whole life. There was something about him, even as a young boy, knowing that mind states determine how we live in this world. And I didn't have to be caught in "Oh, it's terrifying and it's cold and I'm frightened and I'm shivering and I have to go inside."

As we become aware of the content of experience and can see the stories we tell and the beliefs, we go, "Oh, that's a belief. That's a story. How interesting." But we don't have to get caught in it.

Now the next level of mindfulness is mindfulness of the process. Those of you who've been practicing for some time over these months and years, as you quiet your mind and open your heart, the sense of freedom of being able to be with experience begins to shift because you start to look at the process of body and mind and senses in the world. What you see is that it's all impermanent. It's all arising and changing and passing away. And selfless, in the sense that you don't choose your thoughts—I hope not. Anyway, most of them in there you wouldn't choose. You don't choose your feelings very much. You certainly don't choose your body sensations. And you see that it's ephemeral, insecure, subject to change, subject to pain. This is the way it is. Everything you pay attention to arises for a time and vanishes. All of it.

In the time you listen to this one sentence, fifty thousand cells will have been born in your body and fifty thousand will have died. That's a billion in a day. Your body is always dying and being reborn and remaking itself, as is your whole idea of yourself.

As you start to see the process of experience, then a different kind of freedom comes, because you realize it's all changing and you don't want to hold on to it. Otherwise you get rope burn.

I remember walking with Ajahn Chah one day out on alms round, and there was a big boulder in the field nearby.

And he said to us, "Is that boulder heavy?" And of course we said to the master, "Yes, it is." And he said, "Not if you don't pick it up."

That was a kind of pith teaching about seeing the process of life and realizing that we can tend to it. We can respond, we can care for our family, our community, and the world, but we don't have to grasp it—because it's ungraspable. And there grows an ease with birth and death, joy and sorrow.

So the second level of freedom comes when we start to see the nature of things and we get easy with it.

Frank Ostaseski tells a story about a woman who died at Zen Hospice, and one of her sons was twelve years old with Down syndrome. They were afraid to bring him—Tommy—because they didn't know how he would understand his mother's death. But Frank said, "Let's try it out." The father said, "Maybe we should talk to his therapist." Frank said, "Bring the therapist along. We'll work it out."

So Tommy went in to see his mother and stood there for a bit. Everybody was frightened that he'd freak out. He looked at her and said, "What is gone?" Just kind of in wonder. "What is gone?" He looked at his mother for a while, and Frank said, "What do

you think, Tommy?" He started to talk about the Transformers movies, where one thing would transform into another. "She died. Maybe she'll turn into something else." Very wise.

Frank said he stood there with him, realizing that Tommy was trying to understand in his own way. And then he did a kind of remarkable thing. Frank said, "Is there anything else you want to say to your mother, or do with your mother?" Tommy went over and first touched her very gently on her cheek. Then he began to smell her. He sniffed her whole body, from her head all the way down to her feet.

Frank said he remembered one time driving in New England when a car ahead of him had hit a deer and killed it. There was a fawn with this mother—the deer that had died lying on the side of the road, and the fawn coming and sniffing its mother, trying to understand what happened. He said standing there with Tommy was so tender and so mysterious, to have him just go and be there and smell his mother. And then Tommy said, "Yes, okay." And he walked out.

This is us. We're in this mystery of birth and death. To know the process of things gives a profound sense of freedom—that it is natural to be born, natural to die, natural to have birth and death and joy and sorrow and praise and blame and gain and loss. There grows a graciousness and an understanding.

And then the third level of mindfulness arises: the mindfulness of consciousness itself. Content, process, consciousness.

My teacher Ajahn Chah had practiced as a monk in the forest for about ten years, very ardently. In those days the forest had tigers, and everybody got malaria pretty much. He did all these austere practices and lots of deep meditation—had visions and profound insights and so forth. He finally went to see the greatest master of that time, another Ajahn named Ajahn Mun. He told him all about his practices and said, "Do you have any guidance for me?"

Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, "Yes, Chah. You've missed the point." He said, "Those are just experiences. Dissolve your body into light, have a great vision, have some deep insight, overcome pain and pleasure and so forth—those are like movies. You get a war movie and a documentary and a romantic comedy, your love story. They all come and go. The only question for you to ask for your freedom is: to whom do these happen?"

So turn your attention from the content, or even the process of the experience, back to the knowing, and become the one who knows.

And this invites a shift of identity. "You live in illusion in the appearance of things," says Kalu Rinpoche, a great old Tibetan Lama. "There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you remember, you will discover that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all."

So there's something for you to reflect on for the next nine days. What it's pointing to is this—let me see if I can say it much more simply, because this is really a key to liberation.

When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged, right? We all have that experience. Losing its fur and sagging and doing the things that aging happens—wrinkling and all those things. But the weird thing that's very common is you don't necessarily feel older. You know how common that experience is. And that's because it's only your body that's aged. Your body exists in time. It grows. A little child, then an older child, then a teen, then a young adult, and it goes on. And then it gets older and it dies.

But the awareness that's looking at that body in the mirror doesn't exist in time. And it says, "Oh, well, how are we doing at this stage of life? Hmm, lost some more fur," or whatever your commentary on it is. "I wonder how much longer this one will last." Because, you know, you get it from Avis and then you have to turn it back in or something like that, right? It's just how it works.

So you start to look into the mystery of who you are, and you turn your attention back to become the awareness itself, to look into who you are and to become the knowing, the one who knows.

And you know this already in yourselves, you know this in your being. Alice Walker writes, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was, and it came to me, that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house." When it happens, you just can't miss it.

Walking in the high mountains, listening to a piece of sacred music, making love, sitting there with someone who's dying, or being there at the birth of a new human being—it's a really wild thing. Here's another person, you know, coming out of someone's body. It's wild. And you go, okay, all right, I don't really have the kind of intellectual answer, but I'm present for this mystery of life itself coming out of nothing.

And you start to become the witness. You start to trust that you can rest in awareness itself. And this level of mindfulness gives you, as Ajahn Mun said, the greatest freedom of all. The freedom to sit with birth and to sit with death.

And when you have this freedom—I think of my good friend and colleague and teacher, Maha Ghosananda, who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, nominated for the Nobel Prize many times. I've told these stories so often. But he went back after the Cambodian genocide and the Khmer Rouge and spent fifteen years leading people back to their villages on foot, saying, "You can't go in a bus or a car. You have to reclaim your land step by step with chants of loving kindness. Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed." Walking through the jungles and the killing fields, ringing a bell and chanting all the way back.

He was somebody who had had this very deep training. And he knew—all nineteen members of his family had been killed. There was a way in which he knew how to return to the world, because the end of this process of mindfulness from content to process to consciousness itself doesn't end in some kind of spaced-out realm. Rather, when you enter and discover that who you are is nothing, and being nothing you are everything, as Kalu Rinpoche said, then the world is your family. Then you return and you enter the world with a wiser heart and with a freer spirit, no matter what happens.

Now as you continue to practice on this retreat, you will sense these levels as you go through what are the foundations of mindfulness. As your body opens up more—and Christiana is going to talk more about it tomorrow evening—you can learn how to be present for your body, not by striving, but as Spring talked about, with a graciousness or an ease. And you let your body settle. Or if you can't be with your breath, you can pay attention to your hands or to the sound that's around you. But you keep gently coming back and steadying your attention.

And as you do, of course, at the content level, you become able to be aware of the different pains and tensions and the things that are carried in your body. But at the same time, you also will start to find moments of ease and pleasure. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment, peace and equanimity other factors of enlightenment.

For those who are experienced practitioners, one of the best instructions you can have is to look for the moments of ease and the moments of joy and the moments of presence, and invite them to expand. Let the sense of well-being that comes, that starts to come periodically as you sit or you walk—invite them to open, dwell in them, rest in them. You start to shift the figure-ground from the struggle with the body, even though sometimes you have to sit with things that are quite difficult and painful. Instead, you also invite a sense of ease and peace and well-being. This shift becomes really helpful.

Then as your mind gets quieter and you shift from content to process, the experiences of the body and the senses begin to break up and pixelate. Every sensation that's tight in the body, or the sounds you hear, becomes like many little vibrations. Whatever seems solid starts more and more to become visible to your mindfulness or your loving awareness as a kind of vibrating energy field that's full of life and not solid at all.

Trudy and I were at a conference together with Elissa Epel, and she works with Liz Blackburn at UC Medical Center here. Liz got the Nobel Prize for discovering telomeres. Part of their research, which completely shocked them, was that after eight weeks of meditation practice, the telomeres—which are the caps on the end of chromosomes that protect them and keep them longer alive—actually grew and extended. They couldn't believe it. They replicated it a few times. They were afraid to publish it because people would think they were kind of kooky. But that wasn't what she talked about. We kind of knew that.

She talked about some new research. Part of it—and I really want to read this study to figure out how they did it—is that they studied the telomeres in a community that had a big disparity between rich and poor. Those who are poor, as you would expect, had frayed telomeres. The stress and the poverty and the racism and all the kinds of suffering affects the body very deeply. But the thing that was interesting is that those who are wealthy in that community, even if they were in a gated community, their telomeres also had diminished. It's as if the cells of your body are tuned in to the environment. You are not separate from your environment. It's really wild.

So as you get deeper and quieter, you start to see the body as an energy field. Yes, you can be with the content, but you see the process of life itself. And then there comes the mysterious thing that happens where you both love the body and tend it and care for it because it's really precious—and yet I think of this quadriplegic who came to some Dharma teachings. I can still hear his voice at one point where he said, "I've discovered I am not the body." He'd been unable to move for a number of years. He said, "I've discovered I am not this body. Hallelujah!" He shouted it out. And so there's both the care for the body, but in this paradoxical way, there's also an understanding that you rent it, you use it, you love it, you care for it, but it's not who you really are.

In the same way, these levels work with feelings. You notice the content of your feelings. As C.S. Lewis wrote, you will discover inside "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, and a harem of fondled hatreds"—and every other feeling in between. I won't read it, but I have a list of five hundred different feelings.

So you start to see the content of the feelings and you're able to be present for them and to name them, acknowledge: "This is sadness. Sad, sad. This is excitement. Excitement, excitement." By naming the experiences, like naming the dragon, there comes a kind of freedom in relationship to them. Then, as that goes on, there comes a kind of maturing, because people often don't even know what they're feeling.

I have a friend named Arturo Bihar who was the vice president of Facebook for a while. His job, among other things—he was an engineer—but then he was in charge of problem solving for Facebook. He said, "So I was also the complaints department. And because we have nine hundred eighty million users, it didn't take very long to get a million complaints." Talk about a complaints department. He said about a third of them were engineering problems. He gave them to the engineers and they fixed them. That's what engineers do, mostly, if they're good. But two-thirds of them were the problems between people.

You posted a picture of me that I don't like, I don't look good in it. You posted a picture of my children—how dare you? You said that thing about me. It was conflict between people.

At first, he sent the boilerplate policy: if it's lewd or lascivious or hateful, then we'll take it down; this is our policy. Nobody was happy.

So then he realized they had to do something about these complaints. He thought maybe it would be good if people contacted each other. He started sending out a message: "Why don't you talk to the person that upset you? Message them." But then he realized people weren't very skillful at that. So he said, "Why don't you tell them what upset you and how you felt about it?"

After a little while, he found that people didn't know what they felt. So he sent out those little emoticons—angry, sad, whatever. You can show them how you felt about it. And then he suggested, "Why don't you get curious and ask them why they posted it?"

The people who answered would say, "Well, I thought you looked good in that picture," or "I love your children. I thought it was a great thing. I'm so sorry." It turned out that in ninety-five percent of the cases where people talked to each other, the conflict was resolved.

As Arturo said, "I get to teach social and emotional learning and conflict resolution skills to nine hundred eighty million people."

But this is something we're learning in a much deeper way in ourselves—to recognize what we're feeling. Often that means recognizing the trauma, the deep hurts carried in our body, the stories that come with it, the emotions, and being willing and able to be present for the content of it all.

Then something very interesting happens. Because you feel both the suffering you've been through and the beauty of your life, you open yourself to that. You become able to bear your measure of tears and your measure of sorrows. As the heart becomes more tender, as you've practiced—and many of you have for a long time—you actually become more sensitive. But you also become more courageous and wiser. You're able to tolerate both the tears and the joy of the world, to bear witness to them.

Then you receive something called the tears of the way, which are tears that are poignant. You feel the sufferings of the world and you see its unbearable beauty, and you let your heart be touched by them all.

The fact that we don't know this in our culture... As someone said, I'd like to take every mother by the hand and walk them next to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and have them read aloud the names of everyone who was lost before anybody votes for war. Do not send a man to war who does not know how to weep.

When we talk about our body politic, the conflicts that are happening and have happened—if that person isn't weeping, they're not paying attention.

So we become more sensitive, but we also increase our capacity for love, for presence. As we do, we start to see the river of feelings that make up human life: fear and longing and love and grief and loss and delight, the feelings of connection and creativity. We can bow and name them. Fear is like this. Longing is like this. Love is like this. Sadness is like this. Connection is like this. We start to inhabit, to feel—this is the nature of human incarnation. We see the process of life itself rather than taking it so personally.

Then we look at the mind—the third foundation of mindfulness—and the thoughts. This becomes really important as those of you who've practiced for a long time have matured, because we're talking about how we live and embody this, not just on retreat.

In the Buddhist texts it says: Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you worse than your own mind untrained. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than a trained and tame mind—not even the most loving parents or loving members of your family.

You start to see the stories and the attitudes, the content of it all, the whole inner dialogue that you build your sense of self and world out of. It's sometimes rather alarming for those who come on their first retreat. It's like you're stuck in Motel 6 late at night and the shopping channel is on and you can't turn it off. You start to realize that ninety-five percent of what's in there is reruns—the same bad show as from yesterday, or good show, whatever.

They keep repeating themselves. The mind secretes thoughts like the salivary gland secretes saliva. It just does. But you also begin to notice the attitudes that you glom onto, that you get attached to. This is right and this is wrong, and so forth. You start to see those different thoughts and attitudes.

And then, because you've been practicing for a while, you get to do what my beloved Trudy has taught me about, which she calls an attitude adjustment—where you see, okay, this is an attitude, but it actually doesn't have my best interest in mind. And you begin to realize that you can shift from one particular view or attitude to another. So you start to know the content and the stories, and you don't believe them so much. You don't take them so seriously. The stories of unworthiness or the stories of grandiosity, the stories of success or failure—you know what your mind does, all of those kinds of things.

And there comes a shift of identity where you're not so much identified with your thoughts. It becomes more about the process. There's that wonderful story I'd like to tell of Ram Dass coming back from India with his beard and beads as Baba Ram Dass, teaching, and a woman in the front row waving her hand saying, "Ram Dass, you're teaching all these Hindu things, Hindu guru, but aren't you Jewish?" And Ram Dass said, "Yeah, I am actually. I was bar mitzvahed, Jewish." And then he said, "There's a lot I love about Judaism. The Hasidic masters are like the Zen masters. If you read Buber's Tales of the Hasidim, they're fantastic. And the Kabbalah has all these maps of the levels of consciousness that are a great match to all the great Hindu teachings I like." But then he said, "Remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side." He was, of course, very witty as well as deep.

Because your identity is not your parents. And it's not even your gender or your race or your class. Those are things to honor and pay attention to, and without acknowledging them, we can have a lot of suffering. But that's not fundamentally who you are. As you become quieter, you start to see, oh, that's only the personality—when you look at the thoughts in the mind. Like your pet. You've got it. Unfortunately, in some cases you've got a mutt, one of those adopted from the shelter. But you start to realize that the thought structures and the beliefs and the things you've been told about yourself—not

only can you adjust your attitude, but you can also step back from them and see that those are just thoughts coming and going. They're like bubbles in a stream, and they don't last.

And it doesn't take that much. Here's a letter I received:

"Dear Jack, I really don't know how to talk to you directly, but I wanted to express how grateful I am just to be aware of your teachings. I found out about you through Duncan Trussell's podcast last year"—he's a kind of dharma comedian with a big following among millennials, and I did some things with him. The letter continued, "Little by little, your ideas of loving yourself and having compassion kept inching their way toward what I guess is my heart. They soothed me in darker days and given me a glimpse into a more loving reality for myself.

"Tonight, I finally gave in and tried meditating. I decided, after hearing you speak through my phone for months and months, I'd finally give in and just sit with myself for a while. I'm not sure I've ever cried tears of joy like that in the twenty-one years I've lived so far. For the first time, I stopped and really held my anger that I latched onto, my anxiety, my hatred, and everything else I criticized myself about, with softness and compassion, without judgment. And all of a sudden, I felt like I really could be loving to myself in the same way that I want to love others. I finally got some relief with what I felt inside, and I want you to know that I love you for it. Thank you so much."

It doesn't take that long. You don't have to go to the Himalayas. Maybe you have to come to Spirit Rock, but that's another story.

So you start to see these layers of mindfulness—that acknowledges the content, that sees the process, and then steps back. And the shift of identity, as Thomas Merton says—Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic—"There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from unseen roots of all creation, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with humility and humanity." He's talking about his meditation, that all these things come unbidden—the joys and sorrows—but underneath, as we shift our identity and become the one who knows, there comes a spaciousness, a freedom, and a beauty.

And that's the fourth foundation of mindfulness, which is mindfulness of the dharma, of the laws that are operating. For example, the law of cause and effect.

That if you practice anger, guess what becomes more your habit? Anger. And not only that, if you plant seeds of anger by getting angry at lots of other people, guess what you will get back? Anger. If you plant seeds of love and practice love in yourself, that's

what will grow. And you plant it in the world, that's what will return. If you plant greed in yourself, that's what will grow in you. And so you start to see this is very impersonal actually. This is simply how consciousness works.

And then you begin to see the emptiness of it, as it says in the Dhammapada and the Diamond Sutra: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream. Things arise—thoughts, feelings, experiences, whole years. I mean, what happened to 2016? It's back there with Y2K. And also back there with the Great Depression and the Egyptian empires and dynasties, all in the past. It went back to emptiness. There's this, and then it disappears.

And as you get quiet, you start to see—whoa, wait a second, it seems very solid, but all there is, is now. All there is, is this present. And as you become more and more able to rest in the awareness of this, you become the one who knows. There's a shift in reality for you. The experiences of the world still arise, but there's a sense of spaciousness, openness, graciousness, and of deep love.

As my teacher Nisargadatta in Bombay, the old guru, said, "Wisdom sees that I am nothing and love sees that I am everything, and between these two my life flows." Because as you get more empty and if you look to see who am I—am I the little awareness inside here, like that's yourself—you look and you can't find anything except that it's aware. There's no self, nothing separate. And you start to realize that awareness is what the world is made of, consciousness itself. All things born out of consciousness.

And from this place, you realize that it's your family then. This is who you are. Wisdom says, I am nothing. Love says, I'm everything. Between these two, my life flows. Mother Teresa puts it one way. She says the trouble with you is you draw your family circle too small. Life is your family. You come out of life. You are life. And you are what life is born from.

I think of Sharon Salzberg, our dear friend and colleague, who was walking down the street one day in Seattle when a somewhat toothless homeless man came up to her and said, "Don't you know me? Don't you know me?" And first she had to stop because we've had a lot of students on retreats—and I was at my 1978 three-month retreat, or whatever it could have been. But it turned out it wasn't somebody she literally knew. But she said the moment was so affecting to her when he said, "Don't you know me?" Because he's one of us. He is one of us. He's one of our family members.

And as you get emptier, or as you learn to rest as awareness itself, you discover that this is what's real. This, and love. Because in the end, the point isn't to perfect yourself. It's to perfect your love. To be able to open the heart and mind and realize that, as the

texts say, "Oh nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember your true nature. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. Everything is waiting for you."

The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

I feel so grateful to have had the years of practice and training where I've learned some of these things I speak about in myself. Sometimes I don't really know how people can even get through great difficulties without having some inner practices. It's so much harder. And I also just feel grateful that we have a community together to remind one another. It's welcoming and revolutionary—who you really are.

There's a freedom and an invitation. The beautiful thing that the Buddha says when he speaks about freedom is this: If it were not possible to free the heart and mind amidst all the changing circumstances of the world, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible—and possible for you—I offer these teachings.

You are sitting at the bedside of the world, the world of birth and death and joy and sorrow, and you're learning how to do it beautifully.

CHAPTER 207

Worldly and Unworldly Feelings

Carol Wilson · 1h03

In this illuminating talk on the second foundation of mindfulness, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's nuanced teaching on vedanā (feeling tone) from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). While we typically recognize feelings as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, the Buddha made a crucial further distinction: whether these feelings arise from worldly sense contact or from unworldly renunciation. This differentiation opens profound understanding about the nature of genuine happiness.

Wilson explores how worldly pleasant feelings—those arising from sense pleasures—contain hidden dangers including attachment, strengthening desire, and inevitable suffering when they change. Drawing from the Majjhima Nikāya, she recounts how the Bodhisatta's memory of childhood jhāna revealed that pleasure divorced from sensual craving could be the path to awakening. The talk includes the teaching exchange between the arahant nun Dhammadinnā and her former husband Visākha, where she explains that the underlying tendencies of desire, aversion, and delusion do not necessarily accompany all feelings.

Practically, Wilson identifies accessible gateways to unworldly pleasant feelings in daily life: the joy of generosity, the warmth of the brahmavihāras, the ease of keeping precepts, the simplicity of retreat life, and the happiness born of concentration and insight. She also addresses unworldly unpleasant feelings that arise in meditation—experiences of dissolution, fear, or despair—explaining how these lead not to aversion but to the liberating disenchantment that precedes awakening. The teaching invites practitioners to discern these different feeling qualities in their own experience without overcomplicating the practice.

Last week I spoke about the relationship between dukkha and non-self, anatta—how they relate to one another, the ungovernability of things relating to the sometimes afflictive nature of the physical elements, the whole process of aging, decay, death.

Tonight I'd like to discuss aspects of the second foundation of mindfulness: mindfulness of feelings. In Pali it's vedana. The Buddha placed a tremendous emphasis on this particular way of establishing mindfulness. Mindfulness of feeling, of vedana, plays a critical role in understanding both how our lives are unfolding with regard to suffering and happiness, and it also plays a critical role on the path to awakening.

In English, the word "feeling" can have a wide range of meanings. At one point I looked it up in the dictionary, and feeling had thirteen different usages. It can mean "I feel a sensation," or "I feel this way about something," or "I have a feeling that something is going to happen." There's a wide range of meanings, but in Buddhism it has a very specific meaning, and I think you're all familiar with it. Vedana, as it's used in the Buddhist teachings, refers very specifically to the taste we have of an experience—that is, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Every experience we have through all six sense doors, the mind included, comes with this quality. With every sight or sound or smell or taste or sensation in the body or mind object, we experience it as being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. When we're mindful of these feeling tones, it begins to decondition our habitual, very deeply habituated tendency to grasp at the pleasant, to have aversion for the unpleasant, and to space out or be deluded about what's neutral.

The Buddha's instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta are extremely simple in terms of how to be mindful of these feelings. It's so simple we generally just overlook it. He said when feeling a pleasant feeling, or an unpleasant one, or a neutral one, one knows: "I'm feeling a pleasant feeling," "I'm feeling an unpleasant feeling," "I'm feeling a neutral feeling." It couldn't be more simple. As these feelings arise, the instruction is to know: this is pleasant, this is unpleasant, this is neutral.

But then the Buddha went on in the Sutta to further delineate these three types of feelings in quite an unexpected way. And it's this further delineation which opens us to a deeper understanding of suffering and of happiness in our lives. He divides these three types of feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—into worldly ones and unworldly ones, or spiritual ones.

In this delineation, mindfulness of feelings goes beyond its simple affect. It also points us to look at the origin of these feelings. What's the genesis of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings? What do they arise from? This further delineation, when we look a little deeper at feelings—not simply knowing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, but looking further at what they are based on—has tremendous implications for our lives.

As we might expect, the Buddha talked of worldly feelings arising from contact with sense objects: the ordinary sense objects of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and mind objects. We enjoy a good meal. We feel a soft touch. A pleasant worldly feeling arises—a pleasant feeling based on a sense contact. Or perhaps we feel a painful sensation in the body, or a really unpleasant smell, or a jarring sound. That's an unpleasant worldly feeling, something unpleasant based on a sense contact. Or there's just

an ordinary sight as we're walking around, seeing things that are neither particularly pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a worldly neutral feeling. This is ordinary—just the ordinary play of our lives.

Unworldly feelings are something quite different. These are feelings—again pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—that are not particularly arising based on sense contact. These unworldly feelings arise based on renunciation. This takes a little exploration to understand what this means and what the implication is.

In Western culture, for many of us the idea of renunciation doesn't particularly inspire us. It's not a cultural value. I mean, with all the email spam you get, do you ever get a message that says "Renounce"? Probably not. But I've gotten lots of email spam for this or that: "Increase your desire"—as if somehow that's a good idea. Because in our conventional way of understanding things, we often think of renunciation as a kind of deprivation, something that might in the end be good for us but which we don't particularly want or enjoy in the moment.

But there's another way of understanding renunciation, really getting to the heart of what the experience of it is like, not what our thoughts about it are. This other way of understanding renunciation is really understanding it as non-addictiveness, where the mind is not addicted to different pleasures of the senses.

From this perspective, renunciation holds out the possibility of happiness now, because I think we can all at least have an intuitive sense that the mind is a lot freer and happier when it's not addicted to whatever it might be. The less addicted we are to the seductions of sense pleasures, the less commotion there is in the mind. Our minds have a chance to settle, to come to a place of ease. In this non-addictiveness—which is really another word for renunciation—the mind rests much more naturally in a place of spaciousness, of openness, of ease.

Just think for a moment what your mind would be like if it wanted everything that was advertised on television. With every commercial that came on: I want that, I want that, I want that. It would be like a hell realm—just that energy of wanting, of grasping, of desire, the relentlessness of it, and the inability to finally satisfy it all. In that simple example, we can see why we often mute the commercials. It's just so nice not to hear it and to have the mind be at rest.

This is what the Buddha meant when he said: "What the world calls happiness, I call suffering. And what the world calls suffering, I call happiness." The world thinks, yes, let me enjoy every possible sense pleasure—and generally for the world, that is happi-

ness. That is what the Buddha called suffering. And what the world would call suffering —like coming to the Forest Refuge, not speaking to anybody, being in silence, all the renunciations that you have here—wiser ones call happiness.

The distinction the Buddha makes between worldly feelings and unworldly feelings —that is, feelings associated with sense objects versus feelings associated with renunciation—when we begin to see that distinction, not theoretically, not intellectually, but when we're really experiencing it in our practice and in our lives, it opens up much greater subtleties of understanding about the path and the choices we make. We get a substantially different understanding of what constitutes happiness. This is not an insignificant part of the teachings.

But it also runs counter to our general conditioning, because almost every message we receive throughout our lives tells us that happiness comes from accumulating more and more sense pleasures. This is generally where people look for happiness. They want to be in pleasant surroundings, have pleasant food, have pleasant feelings in the body. This is simply the normal way most people live. And of course, these sense pleasures do bring a kind of happiness. The Buddha doesn't deny that, and we know it from our own experience. When we have different pleasant sense experiences, pleasant worldly feelings, we do feel happy for a time.

The problem is that these sense pleasures, these pleasant worldly feelings, also contain within them hidden dangers. We might call it the downside of the pleasures. They do bring happiness—we know that from common experience. But how often are we really examining our experience carefully enough to investigate the downside, to even be aware that it is there?

Consider a few examples of these hidden dangers that we either don't think about or overlook. One very obvious example is that sometimes the pleasure itself, the sense pleasure itself, is ultimately harmful. We see this in dangerous addictions—whether to alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sex, fame, or wealth. When these addictions are powerful, we can see in people's lives how harmful they can be. That is one hidden danger.

Another, which we all have some experience of, though perhaps it lessens as our wisdom grows, is that if we become attached to these pleasant worldly feelings from any pleasant sense contact, the more attached we are and the more we believe that is where happiness resides, the more we suffer when they change—and of course they always do. So that is another hidden danger: the danger of attachment and the subsequent suffering that comes.

A third hidden danger, which usually goes unnoticed but is perhaps the most dangerous of all, is that when we're not mindful of these pleasant worldly feelings based on sense contact, we are unconsciously strengthening the power of desire and wanting in the mind. Every time we go for another pleasure and another, thinking it will bring us lasting happiness, what we're doing is strengthening the very habit of desire, of wanting. Because the more we do something, the more likely we are to do it again. Unknowingly, we may be reinforcing this habit pattern of desire.

In the teachings on unworldly feelings, the Buddha is pointing out a very different kind of happiness, a very different kind of pleasure. Unworldly pleasant feelings are still pleasant, but they're not based on sense contact—they're based on renunciation. The Buddha is saying that with these kinds of pleasant feelings, there is no hidden danger, there is no downside. These unworldly pleasant feelings actually become the basis for our whole spiritual path, become the basis for our awakening.

And the bodhisattva, before his enlightenment—his understanding of this distinction between pleasant worldly feelings and pleasant unworldly feelings opened the pathway towards enlightenment for him.

I'll read from the text, from the Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle Length Sayings. This is the Buddha speaking, reflecting on his years of self-mortification:

"Whatever recluses or brahmins in the past, present, or future have experienced painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion—this is the utmost. There is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities, I have not attained any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to enlightenment?"

So he tried the self-mortification and realized that didn't work. Then, as I'm sure you all recall, he remembered as a young child sitting under a rose apple tree while his father was doing some kind of plowing ceremony in the kingdom:

"I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could this be the path to enlightenment?"

Following on that memory came the realization: that is the path to enlightenment. And this next sentence I think is really the key point: "I thought, why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states? I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states."

So the Buddha is pointing out a whole realm of experience—pleasure based on these unworldly pleasant feelings, secluded from unwholesome states. And he saw that it's through this kind of happiness that the whole path unfolds.

There's an important message for us here about the role of joy and happiness on our path. Very often in hearing the teachings, there's so much emphasis placed—rightfully—on the great truth of dukkha and its causes, on the need for right effort, for heroic effort at times, on the danger of continually indulging sense desire. It's sometimes easy, as we're engaged in the path, to overlook that essentially this is a path of happiness, of increasing happiness, leading onward to happiness. Let me repeat that: this is a path of happiness. That's the point of it. It's easy to forget at times, in the midst of one's particular struggles.

One discourse describes King Pasenadi from the Buddha's time, who himself was quite indulgent of sense pleasures. He wasn't one of the Buddha's most fervent disciples. But one time he visited the Buddha and described what he saw when visiting the Buddha and the order of monks and nuns:

"Here I see bhikkhus smiling and cheerful, sincerely joyful, plainly delighting, their faculties fresh, looking at ease, unruffled, subsisting on what others give, abiding with a mind aloof as a wild deer's."

It's a wonderful characterization of the simplicity and the joy and the ease of people who are practicing not for worldly sense pleasures, not for worldly pleasant feelings, but who are enjoying the happiness of the unworldly pleasant feelings. And after his enlightenment, the Buddha declared of himself that he is one who dwells in happiness.

Beginning to get a sense of the distinction between these two kinds of feelings—worldly and unworldly—we can see they have far-reaching ramifications in terms of the conditioning in our minds, the conditioning of our actions, and the choices we make in our lives.

In the time of the Buddha, there was a very wealthy merchant named Visākha. He lived in the ancient city of Rājagaha. Both he and his wife had realized the third stage of enlightenment, anāgāmi, non-returner. They were very adept practitioners. Soon after

they had attained that level, his wife ordained and became the nun Dhammadinnā. She quickly became an arahant, and the Buddha declared her to be the foremost nun in expounding the Dhamma.

At one point, Visākha, her former husband who was still a layman, went to the now-nun Dhammadinnā with a series of questions. Visākha asks: "What habitual tendencies underlie pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, neutral ones?"

Dhammadinnā replies, as we might expect: desire or lust is the underlying tendency conditioned by pleasant feeling; aversion is the underlying tendency conditioned by unpleasant feeling; and delusion is the underlying tendency regarding neutral feeling.

What's important in hearing these teachings—it's so easy to just hear them on a conceptual, intellectual level, but that's not the point. It's always to hear this and reflect back: what is my experience of this? Use the words to really look at your experience. See for yourself, reflect for yourself: when pleasant feelings come, do you ever experience desire for them, wanting them to continue? When there are painful feelings, do you experience the dislike, the aversion, the resistance? The delusion, the spacing out with neutral ones? The Buddha is really talking about our experience.

So this is what we would expect from Dhammadinnā's reply: we get attached to pleasant feelings, we resist unpleasant ones, we're deluded about neutral ones.

And just as a reminder about the importance of understanding this conditioning, the Buddha said that without abandoning these underlying tendencies—without abandoning desire for the pleasant, aversion to the unpleasant, and ignorance of the neutral—liberation is impossible. This is a tremendous charge to us, and it really frames what our practice is about. We're practicing the deconditioning of these tendencies because that is what frees the mind.

These teachings, although challenging for our practice and our lives, are teachings we're all familiar with. But then Visakha, the former husband, goes on to ask the nun Dhammadina another probing question—one that opens up this whole other realm of unworldly feelings. He asked, "Lady Dhammadina, do these habitual tendencies of desire, aversion, and delusion underlie all pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings?" He's asking whether, with every feeling that arises, these are the underlying tendencies for all of them.

She replies that these habitual tendencies do not underlie all feelings. They do not have to be abandoned with regard to all feelings. When the Buddha heard of her reply, he approved it, saying, "Dhammadina is wise. If you had asked me the meaning of this, I would have explained it to you in just the same way." He's giving his seal of approval to this answer.

What Dhammadina was pointing out was just this distinction between different kinds of feelings—between the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings based on sense contact, and the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings based on renunciation. This sets the framework for our understanding.

The question for us is: how do we apply these teachings? How do we apply them in our practice? How do we apply them in our lives? The challenge is that as we're living our lives in the world, we find ourselves engaged with both kinds of feelings. Many worldly feelings arise because we have all of this sense contact, and there are also times when unworldly feelings arise. It's interesting to start paying attention to the difference.

Generally in our lives, we go about seeking sense enjoyments. This is part of what our life is, especially as lay people living in the world. Even though we know their limitations, even though we know some of their downsides, still this is a big part of our lives—just the enjoyment of pleasant sense experience. And we know, in the ordinary course of our lives, that we do have aversion to unpleasant situations, to unpleasant sense experience, even though we know that aversion and resistance just cause more suffering. We have some wisdom about it all, but still these are very strongly conditioned habit patterns. We all partake of this. It's just our normal lives.

So on retreat and in our lives, we want to pay attention both to sense contact and to our reactions to it. We begin to get more mindful. There's sense pleasure, and we see the desire. There's unpleasant sense experience, and we see the aversion. A big part of our practice is becoming mindful of these worldly feelings and the reactions they condition.

But we can also practice recognizing the unworldly feelings, and this is something I think we don't often do. That's why I wanted to emphasize it tonight, because in terms of understanding our path, it's tremendously helpful to recognize and become clear about what these unworldly feelings are—the ones that arise in the course of our meditation, in the course of our lives—because this has tremendous implications for our practice.

On some level, you all do recognize unworldly pleasant feelings as being a source of happiness in your lives, or you wouldn't be here. If you were just looking for worldly pleasant feeling, would you come to the Forest Refuge? I don't think so. You'd be at the beach, or you'd be where sense pleasures abound. But we're all here, so there's some big part of our minds that already understands: yes, there's another kind of happiness, another kind of pleasant feeling different from what comes through sense pleasures. We are already attuned somewhat to these unworldly pleasant feelings.

But still, we might have some doubt. At different times we wonder: is this really going to be the condition for my happiness if I give up attachment to sense pleasures? The Buddha addressed this directly. He said—and I love this line—"Now you might think that perhaps these defiling mental states of attachment, aversion, and delusion might disappear, and you might still be unhappy." How could I be happy without desire? We might think these states could disappear and we'd still be unhappy. "That is not how it should be regarded. If defiling states—greed, hatred, and delusion—disappear, nothing but happiness and delight remain." It's the defilements of mind that are the cause of suffering, and the absence of those defilements that brings happiness.

So when we understand this, we no longer are deluded into placing our hopes for happiness in worldly pleasant feelings, because they just condition more desire, more attachment, more defilement.

Now, we may not yet be fully enlightened—possibly not. But all along the path we do experience many moments of non-sensual joy, of unworldly pleasant feelings. And I want to point a few of them out so you can begin to recognize that unique kind of pleasure and happiness that comes as we practice.

We experience non-worldly pleasant feelings in every moment of generosity. Generosity is an act of renunciation—we're giving something up for someone else. We experience the non-worldly pleasant feeling when the mind is free of stinginess, free of grasping, free of holding on. Every time we're generous, just think of times when you gave out of love, out of compassion, out of gratitude, out of respect. It's a very pleasant feeling. We feel happy, we feel joyous in those moments of generosity, and it's a very accessible gateway to happiness.

Practicing generosity is why the Buddha often began all of his progressive teachings with teachings on generosity—because it's such an easy way to connect with these unworldly pleasant feelings that bring a genuine sense of happiness in our lives. It's a very good practice to undertake.

Just as an example, it's a practice that I've really worked with over many years. One little way of practicing it—and it's been very interesting for me to watch my mind in doing this—I've undertaken the practice, as best I can, of when I have the thought to give something, to do it. Not to second-guess myself. Because very often we have a generous thought: "Oh yes, I'll give that to somebody," or "I'll do something for that person." And then we have all kinds of second thoughts: "Oh, that's too much," or "I really want it," or whatever. We second-guess ourselves and often we just let the thought of generosity pass by.

So the practice of actually acting on it whenever the thought comes has been very powerful. Sometimes it's just little things, and sometimes it's been really big things. And never have I regretted it. You might think, "Oh, then I'll be sorry I gave that." It's not like that, because the feeling of generosity is this unworldly pleasant feeling. It makes us feel good, as well as, of course, making the other person feel good. So it's a wonderful practice to attune ourselves to this quality of mind, to what unworldly pleasant feeling is about.

We feel non-sensual joy in the practice of the brahma viharas. When we're practicing metta, or compassion, or mudita, or equanimity, there's just that simple, warm-hearted connection that's not dependent on sense contact. It's an unworldly pleasant feeling.

There's one beautiful expression of this—and of course there are many—but the Zen poet, hermit, and monk Ryokan, a wonderful, wonderful figure, in one of his poems wrote: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world." You can just feel the love and compassion that he had, expressing it in that way. That's a happiness, that's a joy that's not dependent on sense pleasure, on sense contact. It's an unworldly pleasant feeling.

Sometimes we see this quality, this really beautiful quality of humanity, emerge in times of great suffering. Sometimes when there are great natural disasters or man-made disasters—like the Boston Marathon bombing—or when something terrible happens, there's an outpouring of support and generosity and love. This is coming from people not expecting anything in return, and it's not based on any particular sense pleasure. It's coming from an unworldly feeling of love, connectedness, compassion. So we know this; we can relate to this.

We feel a non-sensual joy in the following of the precepts. We're renouncing harmful actions. Again, remember, unworldly feelings are based on renunciation—so the renunciation of harmful actions. There's a joy that comes; it's the joy of non-remorse, of non-regret, when our minds are just clear. We all know from our practice, having in the course of our lives done our fair share of unskillful actions, how often they'll come to

mind in the practice, and they are a cause of regret or remorse. So when we are committed to the precepts, even having done, as we all have, various unskillful actions, once we are recommitted to non-harming, there is a wonderful unworldly pleasant feeling of ease of heart.

There's the unworldly pleasant feeling of just the simplicity of being on retreat. For most of us, our lives are so complex and so busy, with so much going on.

I'm sure you share this experience, but I know when I go on retreat and that first moment of just closing the door behind me and entering into a place of silence—it's blissful. You can just put everything down.

In contrast, sometimes when I'm meditating at home, I might be sitting up in my study. It could be dark, but there's the little light on the computer, the surge protector, the printer, the router, this and that. It's like general headquarters for my life—just a reminder of how busy and connected we are.

So appreciating the unworldly pleasant feeling of simplicity, of the renunciation that comes from being in a situation like this.

We experience unworldly pleasant feeling in states of concentration, where the mind is secluded from unwholesome states. As you know, when we first come on retreat or are just getting started, our minds are often restless and agitated in their reactivity to worldly feelings. Pleasant, I like; unpleasant, I don't like. So there's a lot of agitation in the mind. But as the mind settles and becomes more concentrated, less reactive, it becomes secluded from those unwholesome states, and we experience an unworldly pleasant feeling of composure, of stillness.

This kind of happiness is much greater and much more fulfilling than any kind of worldly happiness we might experience. Dipa Ma once sat in an absorbed state for three days, and said the Buddha could stay in that state for seven days. So just think for a moment: what sense pleasure could you enjoy for three days straight? Could you eat for three days straight? Or listen to music for three days straight? Or indulge your fantasies for three days? You'd be exhausted. And we would take refuge at last in what Munindra used to call "the worldling's highest pleasure"—sleep. Because sense pleasures don't have that power.

These unworldly pleasant feelings, born of seclusion, born of renunciation—there is a purity to them. They are divorced from unwholesome states of mind.

In just the examples I've given, and I'll offer one or two more, these are all things we've touched. We may not be sitting in samādhi for three days in a row, but we've all touched the happiness of generosity, of the non-harming of the precepts, of simplicity, and of some degree of concentration. So we all have an understanding and a taste of what these unworldly pleasant feelings are about. It's important to see the difference between them and the worldly pleasant ones. And this is something we don't generally do. We generally don't make that discernment.

There's the pleasant worldly feeling of insight, of understanding. The texts say: if the pleasure and joy experienced in vipassanā happiness, which is complete with the seven factors of awakening, were divided into 256 parts—I have no idea where 256 came from—but if vipassanā happiness were divided into 256 parts, one single part of that joy and pleasure exceeds the worldly joys and pleasures of kings among humans, devas, and brahmās. So great is the joy and pleasure inherent in these factors of awakening.

We want to remind ourselves of this and also to pay attention to it, because it's so easy to get caught up in the course of our practice and overemphasize the struggles we have, or the worldly unpleasant feelings and the dukkha that comes both from the feeling and our reaction to them. We just often miss the more subtle but also more profound aspect of these unworldly feelings. That's why I'm giving such emphasis to this tonight—so we can begin to recognize them, open to them, and appreciate them, because they are the source of genuine joy and happiness in the way we live.

It's also important to look at the unworldly unpleasant and neutral feelings. Unworldly doesn't mean only pleasant. There can be unworldly unpleasant feelings, and you're familiar with this. Often in stages of meditation, sometimes just at different times, we're seeing impermanence from a particular perspective. We're seeing the continual dissolution of things, and there's no place to take a stand. We're tuning in to the insecurity of phenomena. There are times when that can become fearful, and we can feel a lot of misery or despair in seeing that. At those times, enlightenment may really seem very far away. It feels like what Saint John of the Cross called the Dark Night of the Soul. Or there are stages of insight where, because of the particular stage we're in, unpleasant physical sensations become predominant. It's not for any other reason; it's just that in that stage of insight, that's what happens. This is an unworldly unpleasant feeling.

But these feelings, these unpleasant unworldly ones, play a critical role in our path of awakening. So again, it's important to understand them. The unworldly unpleasant feeling, rather than conditioning aversion, leads to disenchantment and disillusionment. This is something we read in the texts a lot: being disenchanted, we become dispassionate, and through dispassion, the mind is liberated.

So it's the unpleasant unworldly feelings that come in the course of practice—they're not conditioning aversion; they're conditioning disenchantment. And that disenchantment in the mind, that disillusionment, leads to dispassion. And it's dispassion which leads to awakening.

But one of the problems for us just in listening to this is that the words in English—disenchanted, disillusioned, dispassionate—don't sound that appealing to us.

"Oh, that person's really disillusioned"—we tend to think they're a little depressed. But when we look at the actual meaning of the words, it's really quite different. Being disenchanted means waking up from the spell of enchantment. We wake up into a fuller reality. We see this in many great fairy tales and myths: somebody receives a kiss from the good fairy, and the person wakes up from the slumber of enchantment.

It's very easy to see this process of disenchantment at work in our practice. Just watch those times when the mind is caught up in some desire, in some wanting. It might be for some little thing, or it might be a full-blown obsession. Pay attention to the next time the mind is caught by wanting. Notice the feeling of it. Really experience what it's like to be caught up in the wanting mind, in the mind filled with desire. We can feel the pleasant worldly feeling of it—it might have a worldly pleasant aspect. We want something desirable, something pleasurable. It energizes us. Maybe it's longing to be with somebody, or wanting a favorite food.

But then, if you can, notice that moment when the wanting disappears, when the desire passes. And it always does. Has anybody had a desire that didn't eventually pass? Whatever has the nature to arise will pass away eventually. If you notice that moment of going from being caught in the wanting to the end of wanting, the end of desire—that's the experience of going from enchantment to disenchantment. It's as if we wake up, we're let out of the grip of something, and we experience the unworldly pleasant feeling of the ease of not wanting.

Does this seem clear? It's so much a part of my experience, because the wanting—just to see over and over again how seductive it is. Those worldly pleasant feelings, they just seduce us again and again and again. We become enchanted by them. But if we're paying attention to that moment when we come out of it, as pleasant as the wanting

might have been in its own way, it's much more pleasurable to be disenchanted, to come out and simply rest in a place of ease, of openness, of spaciousness. Through disenchantment, we experience the unworldly pleasant feeling.

Unworldly neutral feelings we experience often when we're in a state of equanimity. Rather than spacing out, as with worldly neutral feelings, with unworldly neutral feelings based on renunciation, the mind comes to a place of tremendous equanimity, impartiality. There's a tremendous purity of mind at that time.

So how do we practice being mindful of all these different kinds of feelings? The Buddha in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta gave really specific instructions, and it's simply a summary of what I've been describing: "When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, one knows, 'I feel a worldly pleasant feeling.' Feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, one knows, 'I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling.'" The same with worldly unpleasant, unworldly unpleasant, worldly neutral, unworldly neutral feelings.

If you've connected with some sense of the meaning of this distinction, just investigate a little bit. Explore, pay attention to the different kinds of feelings that come up in the course of a day, based on whether the feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—is coming from sense contact or coming from renunciation.

The caution here is not to make this too complicated. It would be very easy, and I could easily imagine this happening, to spend an hour trying to figure out: Is this pleasant or is it neutral? Is this worldly or unworldly? Be watchful of that. You don't want to make this too complex, too confusing. Rather, use this as a general framework of understanding for the second foundation of mindfulness, and begin to notice the difference in your experience between sense pleasures and what we could call Dhamma pleasures. Feelings are involved with both. But see if you can begin to distinguish the difference between worldly sense pleasures and the unworldly or spiritual Dhamma pleasures. The more clearly we can see the difference, the more we can begin to make wiser choices in our lives, and it becomes much clearer what our aspirations actually are.

I'll close with a few verses from the texts:

"Just as many diverse winds blow back and forth across the sky—easterly winds and westerly winds, northerly winds and southerly winds, dusty winds and dustless winds, sometimes cold, sometimes hot, those that are strong and others mild, winds of many kinds that blow—so in this very body here, various kinds of feelings arise: pleasant ones and painful ones, and those neither painful nor pleasant. But when a bhikkhu who is ardent does not neglect clear comprehension, then that wise one fully understands feelings in their entirety."

This is really exploring feelings in their entirety—the worldly ones conditioning desire, aversion, and delusion, and the unworldly ones leading to dispassion, leading to awakening.

"But when a bhikkhu who is ardent does not neglect clear comprehension..."

So there's something here to explore. But do it, if you can, just from a place of interest—without obsessing about it and without letting the mind get confused by it all. Simply begin to sort out this very important distinction, and see the effect of that in your practice and in your lives.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 208

Shifting Perspective towards Freedom

Carol Wilson · 1h08

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson guides practitioners through an investigation of what we take to be ourselves, drawing on the Buddha's teaching of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā): form (rūpa), feeling tone (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa). She explains how our habitual identification with these constantly changing processes creates suffering, and how mindfulness practice offers a way to see through this constructed sense of self.*
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> *Wilson begins with accessible examples from her own retreat experience—bird neighbors, turkeys on the porch, and traffic—to illustrate how our fixed perspectives create unnecessary friction. She then unpacks the concept of personality view (sakkāya-diṭṭhi), one of the fetters said to be abandoned at stream-entry, and introduces the Buddha's vivid metaphors for each aggregate: foam on waves, rain bubbles, mirages, hollow banana trees, and magic shows. The teaching from the Saṁyutta Nikāya about the king searching for the sound within a lute beautifully illustrates how no essential self can be found when experience is carefully examined.*
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> *The practical invitation is to investigate these aspects of experience directly through mindfulness—not to arrive at intellectual conclusions, but to gain liberating insight through sustained observation. Wilson encourages practitioners to hold themselves with compassion throughout this humbling process, recognizing how deeply conditioned our habits of identification are. She closes with an embodied practice suggestion: to engage in evening activities like drinking water, brushing teeth, and going to bed with genuine mettā, treating oneself with the same care one would offer a beloved friend.*

I'm happy to get to spend some time with you again this evening speaking about the Dhamma. First I want to take a moment to appreciate all of our good fortune in being here. It's said that to encounter the Dhamma is rare, and to have the conditions in your life where you can go to practice is also rare—conditions of health, well-being, finding teachers, being in a place that's peaceful enough to do a retreat. You can also appreciate your own wholesomeness, your own sincerity and goodness in choosing to spend the week like this, or for some of you, several weeks.

I feel that for myself also, even on the side of being a teacher. I can tell every time that I'm teaching that this is good for me. I get to hang out with wise people who encourage me to also manifest in the wisest, best way possible. In some way, all of us are

on a kind of Dharma detox diet. When you take out all the other inputs you normally take in—all the TV shows or conversations or cartoons or whatever you would otherwise be inputting—and for this week, all that you're taking in is the Dhamma, it's a very purifying activity.

We're in a solid place in the middle of the retreat. We're in the midst of it now, so you're definitely cooking, whether you know it or not. I encourage you to take your own ideas about whether things are going well or not with a grain of salt, or sometimes a giant shake of salt. We're in this cauldron, this process of purification here. The heart and the mind are in some ways being cooked by the Dharma, by your practice, by holding the precepts. Sometimes I think of these square zabutans, and even the chairs, as little Dharma cooker burners. Every time you come in and sit, you're being cooked. So don't worry about what's happening or how many times your mind wanders. Just come back, put your sincere effort in, and the cooking will happen.

I'd like to talk to you about an aspect of the teaching that could be helpful for understanding what we're doing here and for being able to investigate your experience further. There's an aspect of the teaching that describes the way in which we take ourselves to be things. We take ourselves to be solid. We perceive there to be a "me" who is living this life. I want to engage in some inquiry with you through some of the Buddha's frameworks about whether this is actually so in the way we might experience it to be.

There's something called *sakkāya diṭṭhi*. *Diṭṭhi* means view, as in *sammā diṭṭhi*, right view. This particular view is called personality view or identity view, and it is said to be lifted—we are said to be relieved of it—when we reach the first stage of awakening.

Now, just briefly on this matter of awakening and enlightenment stages. You remember the last time I was speaking with you, I was talking about gravity and understanding nature. In a way, you could consider awakening as alignment with nature, alignment with the truth. In this process of practice, this process of human development and evolution, many people report that as they sit, they find themselves reliving a lot of things that have happened to them and also remembering a lot of things they have done that they might regret—things we've said, actions we've taken, sometimes even from a long time ago, when we were very small.

If this is happening to you, this is a normal part of this aligning process. To me, it's partly a recognition: as we come into alignment, we recognize the ways in which we may have been out of alignment. We experience the pain of that, both the impact it might have had on others, and we might feel some remorse about that, which is actually considered a wholesome thing. So if that's happening for you, allow it to be there.

Notice it. If there's a sense of regret or remorse, feel that. Try to avoid steering into guilt, which is when there becomes a sense of self around it—"bad me," "I did this," "I'm always like this." Feel the pain of it, and then forgive yourself. Allow it to be released.

In this process of alignment, it's said that there are different stages in which you sort of click into alignment more fully. When you click into that next level of alignment, you still might be wobbling around, but within a smaller range of wackiness, you could say, or delusion. There are several clicks that can happen. In the first click, you are relieved of this personality view, identity view, *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, which has to do with a false sense of individuality—a false sense of being a completely separate, independent, controlling entity.

So I'll give you some examples of that. We have a view, for example, that I am this body. That would be considered a certain identity view. Either I am this body, this body is me, there's a me who's in this body somewhere, or there's a me who owns this body. And you could say in our practice of mindfulness, we have the opportunity to investigate these claims in some way—to see if this is actually true.

The Buddha very helpfully outlined several different elements of our experience that we have a habit of mistakenly taking to be ourselves. This question of self or not-self is a well-known dilemma in Buddhism and in philosophical pursuits. In one of the suttas, the first one in the Dīgha Nikāya, he talks about sixty-two different views that were held at the time, and he basically refutes each one in various ways—views about the identity of self, views about life, views about cause and effect. In some ways, we've kind of whittled things down, so there may not be as many prevailing views today, but there are still a couple of views about self and not-self that persist.

And yet, in some ways, the Buddha himself didn't really take up this question of what you are or are not. The question he was more interested in helping us with is this question about suffering and the end of suffering. In this approach, the practice we're doing and our inquiry can be focused more around understanding how things work. How does it work that we feel like there is someone here? How does it work that suffering gets created? How does it work that suddenly there is an adversary in our life? What's going on there, and what is the way to be free of that?

This is really a different approach to the question—in some ways, very practical. The Buddha points us to different factors of our human experience that it's particularly helpful for us to understand in order to be free. So our inquiry is more into how what we call a human being, or what we call ourselves, actually operates. And mindfulness is a really helpful tool in trying to understand this.

This is partly why, for some people in the practice, I've given this advice—and others have too—what if you suddenly found yourself in a human body? You're like an alien who has been suddenly embodied. I know there are various films of this sort where an alien comes to Earth and takes up some human body. And in these films, the alien is actually really interested—how do the hands work? What does it feel like to walk? They're trying to drink water through their eyes and then discovering the mouth and what that's like. So what would it be like if you really took this fresh approach to understanding what it is to be a human being? What is this experience like? And then to be particularly interested in the aspects of experience where we start to get snagged, where there's some friction in the flow of experience—where there's a creation of suffering, of difficulty, of strain, of stress.

We have this experience of having a particular point of view and of feeling embodied. But I would suggest that this idea of a "me" in this is actually just a story that we have. This is a mental factor which, when we examine it more closely, doesn't actually have the kind of continuity that it seems.

The Buddha talks about this as one of the distortions that we have. There's a word called vipallāsa—distortions. And this framework of distortions, which can actually be applied to many different areas of life, is where we might have a view, and then that view informs the way that we perceive things. Based on that perception, we then have more thoughts. We think about things in a certain way, and that reinforces our view.

I'll give you a more mundane example of this. In the place where we're staying right now, in the campus here lower down, when I first came to my room, I found that there were some bird neighbors who had taken up residence. There's a bird's nest right above, near the door of my room. And I live in the city, in San Francisco, so when I come here, I get to be in nature. I both enjoy nature, but I also have this sort of idea of myself as someone who likes nature, right? I was just expounding this view actually to Jozen earlier—yesterday, I think it was.

So at first I was happy about these birds, these swallows. But then the first morning I found that my neighbors are on a different schedule than I am. About four a.m. they're all chirping, and the day has already begun for them. Very loudly. So then I had a different idea about my neighbors. Actually, first I accused Greg of chirping—Greg is my human neighbor. And then he told me it was not him. So then I found it was the birds.

You know, this view also arises: "Oh, this is my place. This is the Spirit Rock teacher place."

And then a little later in the day, I was trying to write the Dharma talk, and it turns out on the other side of the residence there's a nice roof that's very shady, and a group of turkeys likes to hang out there. They're actually not noisy, but they do poop a lot. So there I was, trying to write a Dharma talk—this very high-level activity—and there's a whole bunch of turkeys sitting one foot from me on the porch. I don't know if they could or couldn't see me, but they're looking at me and just pooping.

At first I had this idea: What are you doing here? This is my residence and you're pooping on the porch. But the mind has this view, and in this case, the view is based on human dominance, honestly. There's a certain unperceived human dominance—the humans have built these domiciles, and so this is my place, and you are smaller than me, and you are birds, and thus should be inferior and should know your place. It wasn't played out like this, but really there was a perspective like this.

Fortunately, my mind in some ways doesn't like to hang out in these perspectives too much. I feel like one of the benefits of practice is that we can become less and less tolerant of certain kinds of suffering. So rather than drill down and really hunker down, there's a way in which the mind is like, "What else is possible?" There's always at least one other perspective possible in a situation.

Through practice, this happens almost automatically, and sometimes it feels kind of like those robot vacuum cleaners. If they bump into a wall, they come back, and they'll go like this, and they'll keep going until they find some exit. The mind doesn't want to hang out in these areas of oppositional suffering, so it keeps searching.

In reflection with my turkey neighbors, it was like, "Oh, actually I'm here for this week, but maybe it's their residence. Maybe I'm visiting their area, not they're visiting my area. And maybe if it bothers me that they poop on the porch, I can sweep that away." Then it's interesting being a Dharma teacher because sometimes one's own advice comes back. Recognizing yourself as part of nature. So then it's like, "Oh yeah, actually it's kind of cool to have these birds around." That became somewhat more okay, even though the same thing was happening—even this afternoon they were looking at me and pooping while I'm writing this Dharma talk.

With the ones in front, I realized I could put on earplugs. Also, they've been here before me. And then I started to notice—rather than being caught in my view of "What are you doing? You're wrong"—that every time I opened the door, the bird would fly away. It seemed scared. I am much bigger than this bird, so when I open the door, it gets scared and flies away. This happens every time. I started to tune in: this is actually disruptive to their life too. I think they're being disruptive to my life, but there's another perspective from which I'm interrupting their life as well.

Even just some shift that way—there's a way in which we usually assume ourselves both to be here and also very substantially to be the center of the universe. Everything is in relationship to me, to what's good for me, to how I want things to be. This can cause a lot of suffering, as well as being actually false.

In a more mundane way in regular life: there's a billboard on an area of the highway where there's a lot of traffic. The billboard is for a bicycle coalition, and it says, "You are not stuck in traffic. You are traffic."

That shift from "everyone else is a problem to me, I have this thing I want to do"—that's the view—to "actually we're all in this together in some way." There's this flow of traffic, and to the other people, I'm in their way. We're all just trying to get home.

In an even more impressive way, a friend of mine had told me about a time that she was

mugged in Oakland. Someone had a gun, and it was late at night. She and her girlfriend were coming back from somewhere, and the person told them to put everything they had in their pockets down on the ground and then run. So they did that. She said she only had about four dollars and a chapstick, and the keys too.

So I asked her later, "Weren't you scared? That's a difficult experience."

And she said, "Yeah, I was scared, but actually I could see that he was scared too. He was holding the hand with the gun and it was shaking. So we were both scared."

This friend is not overtly a practitioner, but that's good practice—shifting perspective. It's not just about you. Even in these extreme situations where it feels like you're being wronged, where this is clearly a problem, where your view is that you are the victim in this—what if we had the ability to access multiple perspectives? The world would be a very different place.

So what can help us in this? Here in retreat, we have a good opportunity to actually investigate in a more detailed way: What is it that we take to be ourselves? The Buddha gives a particular scheme that I've found helpful, which concerns the five aggregates—particular areas of experience, particular ways in which our experience of self gets constructed. It's helpful for us to look into these.

We've already been examining several of them in our practice, but I'd like to mention them all, including a few that haven't been discussed yet.

The first one is form—the physical form. This one we've been practicing with from the very beginning. Usually we take this experience of the body to be a solid entity that we call "myself." Now scientifically, this is also not true. The body is not fully solid. It is actually a mass of shifting and changing cells. Blood is always flowing through. Cells are being born and dying. Everything is always in motion in that which we call our body. And in our experience of it, when we pay attention, we can notice that the experience itself is constantly changing. There is some experience of solidity, of fluidity, of mobility, of temperature.

The Buddha gave metaphors for each of these aspects of experience. For this one, he said it's something that might seem solid but is actually totally insubstantial. The body is like the foam on ocean waves. Through the motion of the wave coming in, sometimes at the top there are bubbles that seem to collect, and it almost appears to be something solid. But it's so insubstantial—it's going to hit the ground and dissolve.

A second aggregate the Buddha talked about is *vedana*, or feeling tone, which Greg mentioned and we discussed this morning. This quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant is actually present in every sense experience—every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch, every mental object. Every sensation has a valence of this sort.

We frequently misperceive this as something solid, something permanent, and as actually being ourselves. We misperceive a body sensation that is unpleasant to be ourselves. We label it "my knee pain," and then we have mental thoughts about that, and we proliferate and create a whole world. When we tune into this in more detail, we notice that feeling tone is actually constantly changing. In this way, it's not ours. It's not me. It's not mine. And it's not changing in the way I would like it to all the time. So I can't really own this. If I owned it, I'd make it do what I wanted, which would be to get more and more pleasant, period.

For feeling tone, the metaphor the Buddha gave was bubbles arising from raindrops on a puddle. It just arises from conditions in a moment, and then it's gone.

Investigate this and see. Check it out. There can be very interesting things to learn. With feeling tone, one area where you can notice this particularly well is in eating meditation, which you have several opportunities for during the day—or even drinking tea meditation, something like that.

Because there are ways in which the feeling tone can be both surprising—like this thing you thought would taste pleasant is actually not as pleasant as you expected. Or when you tune in, the opposite: you thought it was going to be unpleasant, but it's actu-

ally pleasant. You can also notice how you can't make it last. It comes, it goes, it fades out so quickly. And when you tune into that, you get a sense of how poignantly futile our attempt to line up pleasant experience for the rest of our lives is as a strategy for well-being.

The third aggregate has been mentioned briefly but not elaborated on so much. This is saññā, or perception. This is a mental factor that involves labeling or recognition that happens automatically in our mind. Sometimes it happens verbally, with a word, and sometimes there's just a knowing without the word. For example, when you take a fork from the silverware drawer, you don't always say "fork" in your mind. Maybe sometimes you do, but you're aware this is the implement with which you can eat your salad. This is an aspect of thought, and when we're talking about mental objects, it arises to the level of a label.

I was speaking about this when we were doing guided meditation with thinking or mind objects. It's noticing when this labeling comes, how it comes without your script. And what's particularly interesting is to notice when it is wrong—when we misperceive something around us. For me, sometimes it's misperceiving something in the environment that I think might be an animal, and then I realize it's actually just a moving leaf or a bush. It's helpful to recognize how often we're misperceiving in this way.

A friend of mine from the city came out for a retreat in springtime. Some of you might have been here in the spring when the creeks were running full—as Greg mentioned, there was a lot of rain. She told me the first night that she kept hearing these sounds and was thinking, "Wow, there are so many car alarms here. Why don't people turn their car alarms off?" And then she realized it was actually frogs. But her city perspective interpreted the sound as car alarms, as something happening that needed attention.

The particular perception that's most helpful to examine is, of course, this idea of "me" or "mine" that arises in relationship to our body, to experience, to things. The metaphor the Buddha used for perception was of a mirage—something that seems like it is a certain way, but as you approach it, you can see it's not.

The fourth aggregate is called sankhara, translated various ways, but we'll call it mental formations. Perception is one of these, but this category includes aspects of our mental life that arise—all of the emotions, your intentions, all of this. And as Joseph was saying this morning, we can take these to be me or mine. "I own this anger" or "this anger is mine," or even "I am angry, I am this."

The metaphor the Buddha gave for mental formations is about a banana tree trunk. We don't have too many banana trees here, but I've seen them in tropical places. A banana tree is basically like a big stalk. It looks like a solid tree, but it's empty inside. What's interesting for this metaphor is that it's kind of like a big blade of grass with these empty chambers within. And yet it has this huge, fancy production of bananas. The comb of bananas is very big and kind of showy—like strong mental formations. Yet when you examine it, it's actually also empty. It'll fall down. There's nothing there, nothing at the core.

So notice if you have these beliefs sometimes that "I am this emotion, this emotion is me"—or even "I am in this emotion, this emotion is in me," that there is a me related to this.

The fifth aggregate may be the more unusual one to consider, which is viññana, or consciousness. Even the knowing that arises with a sense experience itself is not me or mine. And this too, as it arises with a sense experience and then fades—the metaphor is that it's like a magic show. This consciousness is that which appears and reveals all of the others, this knowing quality.

In our practice, we have so far been examining objects—the experience of the body, body sensations as an object, thoughts as an object, emotions, the energy that moves through, mind states as an object. It could be that even if you're getting pretty good at seeing those all as not me, not mine, coming and going, it can be helpful to turn around and see whether there is a kind of hiding place for identity in the knower. The knower sometimes is also like "the meditator," the one who knows, the one who is directing the practice.

And it's very subtle, the identification that can be there. But also, it's not to be found when you examine it. So I encourage you to check this out. Is there anything personal, permanent, controlling, independent entity in even the knowing? Does it have any characteristics that could be called me or mine?

In some ways, you might feel like, well, what's the problem with that? If I'm able to not cling to or attach to or identify with the body, emotions, thoughts—aren't I doing pretty well? That's pretty good, right? Probably alleviated ninety percent of suffering there.

Ajahn Mahabua, who is one of the forest masters, says whenever there's a center in the knowing, there is dukkha. This is the thing: whenever there is some identification, whenever there is some clinging, however seemingly subtle it is, there still is something

we need to protect, something that we want to prevent from being harmed. And something that can be held in opposition to the rest of the world, whether it's experience or birds or the weather or body sensations.

The Buddha pointed these out, particularly these five, as areas for investigation specifically for the purpose of ending suffering. And I really appreciate this. It was like, well, there are these processes by which we seem to exist, and here highlighted are the ones in which we tend to get caught. And here's a practice of mindfulness, a practice of settling the heart and mind and being able to investigate these and to see through this for yourself. Not because you heard it in a lecture or because you read it in a book, but because you've seen for yourself.

As we investigate this body and mind, this human experience, we can see that there's nothing really there in the same way that we usually perceive it to be. This always gets a little bit tricky because there is a way in which we certainly feel like, ah, but there is this uniqueness to this body. Certainly when I'm drinking water, I'm feeling that and not this other person. So it's not saying that there's not a uniqueness to experience or to arising moments, but it's a little bit more like everything is constructed. Everything is constructed, everything is concocted in some way. It arises causally and then it will pass away causally also.

The best metaphor for this, I think, is the rainbow. A rainbow appears and it's beautiful, but it's not really a thing. It's an appearance that's there because of the way the light is shining through the prism or the mist, the rain. But when those things shift, which happens rather quickly, then it's gone. But was it really there to begin with? You can't really take the rainbow home. You can't package it. It arises causally and then when those particular causes and conditions end, it also is no longer apparent. In some ways, this is true about everything in our environment and most particularly about that which we call ourself.

Here's a story that the Buddha told about this, a metaphor for this as well. Supposing there were a king who had never heard the sound of a lute before—a stringed instrument. This king hears the sound of the lute and says, "Wow, that's so beautiful. It's so delightful, tantalizing, intoxicating, ravishing, enthralling. What is this instrument?" And then the people would tell him, "Oh, that is called the lute." And so then he says, "Go and fetch me the lute."

They bring the lute, and then he looks at it and says, "Enough with your lute. Fetch me just the sound. It's the sound that I want of the lute." And they say, "Well, you know, there are many different pieces of it. There's the wood and the skin and the neck and the frame. And when you play it with a certain human effort, then the music comes, but it's really just all these different components."

So the king impatiently says, "Enough with that. I'm going to get the sound." And so he breaks the lute into ten pieces—and still, of course, can't find the sound. Then breaks it again to a hundred pieces and pulverizes it, and still the sound is not becoming apparent. Finally he decides to burn it in a fire. And having burned it, there's just ashes. So then he's winnowing the ashes, looking for the sound in that. And still it's not coming, obviously. And then eventually the ashes might get washed away or blown away in the wind. And he would say, "Oh, it's a sorry thing, this lute, whatever this lute may be. People have been totally deceived by this." You can't find the sound.

In the same way, the Buddha says, a practitioner can investigate all of these aggregates—can investigate form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. And through investigating these can see whether there's any me or mine or I am within that. And no thoughts of me or mine or I am can be found within these.

So really what we learn as we attend to these is that there is this way in which we could be simply recognizing ourselves as nature—the arising and passing of each of these aspects. But unfortunately, because of delusion, we have a tendency to cling to these, to some aspect of this. We have this tendency to believe these, to take this to be ourselves. And then as they change, particularly as they change in ways that are not pleasing to us, we suffer.

In some ways, through repeated observation of the nature of these different aspects of what we usually call ourselves, through practicing this different kind of knowing with mindfulness, it's possible for us to see over and over again the ways in which the me, the mine, the I, is not found within this. And through this, there can be an effortless letting go, almost in spite of yourself.

The beautiful thing in this teaching is that we're examining, we're able to examine this process by which we're having experience and trying to understand that. And in this way, we have all of the equipment that we need for complete liberation, for complete alignment, right here in this body and mind system.

The Buddha offers another example about how we can relate to this—that these different aspects we usually take to be ourselves cannot actually be ourselves. They're not under our control. They're constantly changing. There's no inherent me or mine in that.

He says, "What do you think, monks, if a person were to gather or burn grass, twigs, branches, and leaves that they found here?" You can imagine here with all the high grass, what if they collected that? You might see the caretakers doing that. "And what if they were going to burn that or throw it away? Would the thought occur to you, 'Oh no, it's us that this person is gathering or burning or cutting down?'" And they say, "Oh no, because those things are not ourselves, nor do they belong to us."

"Even so, monks, whatever is not yours, let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. And what isn't yours? Form is not yours. Feeling is not yours. Perception is not yours. Mental formations are not yours. Consciousness is not yours. So let go of these, and your letting go will be for your long-term welfare and happiness."

On the way, of course, in this exploration, a lot of what we encounter is ourselves doing the opposite—clinging, misidentifying one or more of these to be ourselves. So in the practice, it's also really helpful to hold experience, to hold oneself with a lot of compassion.

Sometimes people come and they're frustrated because they say, "I've been practicing for weeks now, or a certain number of years, and still the mind is wandering, or I got duped by this emotion and was roiled around in it. I spent a lot of my time painting pictures of tigers and running away from them."

My advice is to allow yourself to be very humbled by the power of these habits of mind. It's a very humbling Dharma practice. Very, very humbling. And it's good to hold oneself with a lot of kindness and compassion too. Because you can include however long you have been practicing against however much the rest of your life was when you were not practicing. And if you believe in past lives, then you could include all of those as well. So our efforts here are good. Our efforts here are worthy. Trust that you're learning, you're cooking, whether you know it or not.

But the habitual strategy, the habitual view, the strong view is going to be: I am this body. I am these feelings. I am these emotions. The habitual view is going to be that the road to happiness is by aligning all circumstances to please me, to get everyone to agree with the way that I see the world, and to try to get everyone to follow my script. And as I mentioned, this includes humans and non-humans also. We want the birds to accord to our wishes, and the sounds, the weather.

So a lot of kindness in this approach. Interest and kindness.

Now, we've been doing the mettā practice here for some days, and I know we've practiced with the mettā for yourself. One instruction that could be helpful for the rest of the evening—I'll offer this for you—is to see if you can practice with yourself as you're walking and even as you're doing the things in your evening routine to get ready for bed, as if you were doing them with a quality of kindness.

If you're drinking water, what would it be like to drink water, to feed yourself lovingly? You do it with some care and attention. If you were actually feeding or giving drink to someone you cared about, you would do that with some intimacy.

You do it with some carefulness. What is it like if you brush your teeth with a sense of love, of metta, caring for this body, this precious body? What would it be like if you wash your face, change your clothes with a sense of goodwill, of kindness, of metta? What would it be like if you put yourself to bed with a sense of metta, tucking yourself in? Would you fling yourself on the bed? Would you fling someone you loved onto the bed?

The answer to this is not in words. It's a kind of koan of how we approach life. Like so many things in this practice, it's a lived answer—how we can care for ourselves, how we can care for others. In this way, we're cultivating this loving attention, this kind attention. And when we include that with curiosity and investigation, these are all excellent ingredients for living a good life, both here on retreat and when we go out into the world.

These qualities are also essential for gaining the insight, the kind of deep understanding that leads to greater and greater alignment with the truth, greater and greater freedom from suffering, spending less time in the caves of delusion and more time in freedom. That freedom gives you more space to connect with the world in ways that are true, to connect with nature, to connect with what matters most.

If there are aspects of what you've heard tonight that interest you, I encourage you to investigate them. If there are things that seemed cryptic or confusing, you can either hold them in the question mark basket, you can leave them on the floor here, or just take them as a hypothesis that you're in the laboratory of experience, able to check out for yourself.

Thank you for your practice. May we all be well cooked today and throughout the entire retreat.

CHAPTER 209

Applying the Practice

Carol Wilson · 44 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses the various landscapes practitioners encounter along the spiritual path. She acknowledges the common trajectory from initial inspiration—when the teachings feel revolutionary and results come quickly—through the inevitable plateaus where progress seems to stall. Wilson emphasizes that these quieter periods are natural and call for cultivating patience (khanti), one of the qualities the Buddha highly praised.*
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> *Wilson offers detailed guidance on the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa): sensual desire (kāmacchanda), ill will (byāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). She illuminates how each hindrance tells us something untrue about ourselves or our situation, and how we habitually take refuge in these false narratives rather than in what is genuinely liberating. The key teaching is recognizing hindrances as impersonal conditions rather than identifying with them as "who we are."*
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> *Practically, Wilson encourages meditators to trust their own wisdom in discerning what approach their practice needs—whether throwing oneself in with wholehearted energy or making subtle shifts of attention. She highlights the transformative power of small adjustments: softening the belly, connecting with the breath, bringing a bit more kindness toward oneself. The talk concludes with an invitation to clarify one's deeper intention for practice and to meet whatever arises with honesty, curiosity, and compassion rather than judgment.*

So I'd like to begin by just commending everyone here for taking the time out of your lives to come and give yourself this time of retreat. It takes a certain wisdom and a certain kindness to do that, or sometimes a certain desperation. So it's great that you made it here and that you give yourself this time of settling and deepening and opening.

It's not always an easy process. Pretty much everybody here has been on retreat before, so you know that already. We can forget in between retreats how challenging they can be while you're in the middle of them, and then you get to the end and you really feel the fruits and it's like, "Oh, that's great, I want to go back." And then you return to retreat and often the first three days are pretty challenging. A lot of stuff comes up and there's a huge change of gear from the life you've just come from to this very contained

and quiet experience where not much is going on. So it's commendable to go on retreat once and even more so to go on retreat numerous times. It takes a certain wisdom that knows this is good medicine and it's worth staying through the challenges.

We just had our first couple of practice interview groups today, and it strikes me that people are in very different places in their practice. There are people who are really new to the practice and people who have been practicing a long time, and those in between. I want to speak a little bit about how we apply ourselves in the practice.

When we first start, for many people at the beginning, it can be really inspiring. It's so uplifting to find in this world that's so much oriented around materialism, consumerism, and being a person, that there's this teaching—this teaching of emptiness and of change and of transformation from who I am when I begin to the potential of being a fully awakened being. That potential is there for all of us, and that can be so hugely inspiring. It still inspires me daily. In the beginning it can bring a lot of energy, a lot of delight, and a strong commitment and energy for the practice.

When we're in that place where it's early days and we're just discovering the practice and the possibilities, we're applying the practice and getting the results often quite quickly. It's often like that in the beginning—you really feel the results of the practice, and it's fantastic. It is wonderful. So at that time when we're beginning, it's really good to throw yourself in fully, even a little recklessly.

I was grateful to have nuns around me when I started practicing, who would encourage me to go past my limits. They would encourage me to do things that I wouldn't consider doing, things that would challenge my perception of what I could do and what I want, who I am and what I can and can't do. So I would try—okay, sister so-and-so is suggesting it and she's keeping an eye on me, so all right, I'll have a go. It was quite insightful and it opened things up.

There's a time when we can get into a flow of energy where you just want to completely apply yourself to the practice and keep an edge—keep that edge of not having quite enough sleep, eating just a bit less than you really need, practicing that extra half hour or hour. There's a time for that, and it can be a very potent time. So if you're in that place, it's really good to explore. It's also important not to force. It's not about forcing, but about knowing where the edge is and just going a little bit further and seeing what happens.

Then there's a time when we've been practicing for a while where things are settling down and we don't get such quick results anymore. It can seem like maybe there's something wrong because we used to get all of those insights, and now it's kind of a

plateau. But that's a natural part of the practice. It's meant to be like that. In the beginning we're making huge leaps and bounds because it's new. And then after a while it's not so new anymore. The breakthroughs that were just on the surface waiting for us to realize have already happened. And perhaps the deeper insights are still a little obscure. So we can be in that in-between state.

This is also an important time in our practice—not to give up. We might give up thinking we're not getting the results we think we should be getting. But actually this is the time to be cultivating patience. The Buddha highly exalted patience as a practice, the supreme practice of patience. So that's the time to be cultivating patience and also to get a little bit more subtle with what we're seeing, with our expectations. We're honing down our attention to the little things, the little changes. It might just be a period of endurance. I certainly had some time where it was just faith, really, that was keeping me going—trusting that the Buddha knows what he's talking about and not being interested in going off in a different direction.

And there's not an awful lot happening. This went on for a couple of years. So I just kept going. The meditation over that time was not very fulfilling. There were not many insights. The predominant feeling I was experiencing was not blissful or joyful. It was quite humdrum, really. It wasn't painful either, just sort of ordinary. And then sometimes doubt would arise—maybe I've made a mistake, maybe I've done something wrong—but it felt kind of too late because I was already committed to this path.

And then there would be remembering: okay, well, what's good in what's happening now? There's living an ethical life, keeping good ethics. This is really, really important. And that's good, that's better than what I was doing before I started practicing. And keeping a certain level of discipline. I'm not a highly disciplined person by nature, which is why I entered a monastery—it provided an external discipline that was really helpful. So keeping a certain discipline, that's good. Even though I wasn't experiencing many fruits of the meditation, I was still putting the time in, still sitting, watching the breath, getting to know what was going on in my heart.

And then learning to receive feedback from others. This is also one of the benefits of living in community—you get to hear how you are, to see yourself from other people's perspectives. And sometimes it's a little disconcerting. So then learning to receive feedback and thinking, okay, maybe I need to work on that a bit more. Those kinds of things would be going on, even if the actual experience of the meditation practice wasn't that great for a while.

And then we keep going and things shift and change. At some point the joy returned and a certain subtlety could come back. And then the practice has gone through many different landscapes. It's not that it just arrives in one place and stays like that. And that in itself becomes a teaching—that this is a spiritual journey going through many landscapes, and not to give up. Not to give up and turn back, not to give up and just sink down into a swamp, not to refuse to climb that mountain ahead. It's a journey. We keep going, we keep taking another step.

And then there's the time when we need to really assess what is happening in our life and in our practice, to look really carefully. Sometimes we just need to make a subtle change. And sometimes it's when our life seems most challenging, most difficult. Things can build up so huge that we feel like, oh my goodness, I can't possibly face this, it's just too much. What am I going to do next? I don't know.

Sometimes those big times, those overwhelming experiences—my experience has been that what they need is just a little shift of mind. Ironically, just a little shift of mind. From "oh my goodness, it's all too much, I've got to keep it away" or "I've got to dive in and let it consume me"—to just being a little bit more connected to the breath. Just letting the belly relax a little more and soften. Subtle things. Just having a little bit more kindness towards myself. A little bit of interest rather than trepidation about what's going on. These slight shifts of attention are huge—they're like night and day. And it's not a rational thing, it's counterintuitive. It seems like when something's really big, we've got to do something really big to deal with it. But sometimes it's just very subtle shifts that help the whole thing to change.

We're experiencing this life all the time through our conditioning, our perceptions, our fears and desires, hopes and regrets—all of that. If we just keep looking through the same lenses, we keep seeing in the same way. So it's about changing the lens a little bit, or maybe peeking underneath the lens if we can, and seeing our experience fresh—meeting it in the moment rather than treating it as this huge thing in my life that I don't know how to deal with. Instead: well, right now, what is that experience?

This retreat situation is a wonderful support for this, because we've all taken ourselves out of our ordinary life situations to come here. Life's going on out there, and it's going on in here too. We meet our life situation right here in this environment, in this safe place where there's nothing much happening other than a lot of holding, a lot of loving, a lot of support. And then there's what we brought with us. We can meet that right here, without having to have it all sorted out for when we get home. Just now, how it is in this body right now. In my belly right now, in my heart right now—not so much

in the mind. The mind tells all kinds of stories. But we can drop down from the thinking into the body, allowing the body to be met, listening to it, meeting the tensions and stresses. Softening around them. Taking a breath.

It's amazing. Taking a breath is kind of miraculous. You can be in the most intense situation, and then you just take a deep breath.

Everything stops for a moment, and there's a different perspective. Then there's a choice, because we've given ourselves a little bit of space.

So there are times when that's the appropriate way to meet our practice. And we have to discern for ourselves. There's nobody who can tell you, "Okay, now you should do it like this. Now you should totally throw yourself in and really push yourself to the edge. But now it's time to be really subtle." You have to know that. Your wisdom has to know that. And we all have that wisdom if we listen. The wisdom is there, and what we need to do changes. We only know what to do by giving the space to look and listen inwardly. So this is a great opportunity for that.

I also want to mention the five hindrances, which I usually speak about, because I think they're really important to know about. We tend to identify with these and believe in them. The title of this retreat is about taking refuge in what is true, but we often take refuge in what is not true. And each of those five hindrances is not telling us the truth.

The first is sensual desire—having the mind pulled out into sensuality. This is the story that if I just have this nice thing, this delicious thing, this beautiful thing, this comfortable situation, whatever it might be, then I will be whole and everything will be well. That's the story of sense desire. And there may be people here who know how that goes. First of all, it seems harmless enough. You just have that little something and it's nice and you feel good. Then maybe you feel like, "Oh, I need it again." And then, "Well, I'll be fine as long as I have that every day. Twice a day, three times a day, five times a day. I need it."

So that's what happens with sense desire. It never actually satisfies us longer than the shortest of times. And because it gives that little satisfaction, we think it's really doing the job, but it isn't. It's keeping us more and more caught up. It's like drinking salt water. If you're thirsty and you have a drink of salt water, you think, "Oh, thank goodness." It tastes a bit off, not quite right, but thank goodness. Then it just makes you more thirsty and more thirsty until it wears you out completely. That is the truth of sense desire.

It's the first hindrance and one that we all know very well, probably experiencing it numerous times a day. It can latch on to any of the six senses, including mind. So knowing sense desire as sense desire, and if we can, letting go. If we can't help following it, then follow it all the way through. Follow it through the wanting, the getting, the becoming one with, the gratification—how that's there for a while, then it falls away, and then there's the sense of lack again, and then the reaching out to something else. Seeing that whole process. And perhaps noticing the adverse effects on our own body and mind when we repeatedly follow sense desire.

Getting to know it, getting to know its trickery, and also having patience. It's not like the intellect can know it and then we're done. The emotions, the karma, the wanting is still buying into it. The rational mind, clever though it is, doesn't rule us as well as we would like it to. It's the yearnings of the heart. So we need to go deeper than just the rational. The rational can help, but it's meeting the yearning that actually transforms our addiction to sense desire.

Then there's ill will or aversion, which can be anger, resentment, hatred, irritability, impatience. All of those come under the category of ill will. And this is something we can also take refuge in, oddly enough. I'm sure everybody knows people who defend themselves behind an aversive personality. There's having an aversive personality and knowing it and working with it. And then there's having an aversive personality and believing in it and using it as a defense, as a means to remain right and separate and controlled and safe. It feels safe, but it isn't.

So we can take refuge in the hindrance of ill will, and this is surely a wrong refuge. With ill will, we get to know the feeling—where it resides in us, who we put it onto, the cause of our ill will.

It's not me, it's them, it's that—it's because of those things out there that I'm feeling this. So it seems like that, but really it's arising in the heart, in one's own heart and mind. And that's the only place where we can transform it. We can try to change other people, and if they're willing, they might change a bit. But it probably won't be enough to sort it out in our own heart, because our own heart is generating that ill will.

In this world, in this imperfect world, there will always be something wrong. There will always be something to complain about, always something unsatisfactory. It's made like that. So if we're always looking outside of ourselves for the cause of the ill will in our own hearts, we'll always find something to blame it on, and we'll never experience the freedom of having a heart that is free from ill will. Most of us experience it sometimes and then sometimes we don't, and that's nice. Some experience it more than others.

Getting to know when the hindrance of ill will has arisen, getting to know that that's what it is—it's a hindrance to enlightenment. We don't have to annihilate it. We don't have to have more ill will, judging the ill will, getting into layers and layers of one ill will over another. We don't have to do that. We just need to know it. This is aversion. It feels like this. It's really unpleasant. It's really unpleasant and I don't want to feel it. And then we know that. Then maybe knowing that gives us a little bit more space where we can let it be there and be felt. And then maybe we can bring a little kindness to it, a little mettā to the ill will. Then it starts to feel relieved.

If we don't know it as a hindrance, we believe it. We either believe it's who we are, what we are, or we believe other people are the cause of it. And so we're taking wrong refuge.

The next hindrance is sleepiness and dullness, or sloth and torpor. I've been experiencing quite a lot of that today myself. This can also arise during the changing of gear that we're doing here, from our lives before to this, and also being all together in a group like this. Everything kind of wants to shut down. It's all a bit too much.

Knowing that, for myself today struggling in the meditation with dullness—there's a lot of dullness and a lot of unconsciousness—there's also a knowing that this is what's going on now, and why, and that it will change, and also that I need to put in a little bit more energy. That's different from "Oh no, I'm just such a hopeless meditator" or "How embarrassing, all these people are seeing me nodding." That's selfing, and that doesn't free us; that just gets us more entrenched. But it's more like: okay, sleepiness, dullness, the body is heavy and dull, the mind is sleepy, the eyes are sleepy. There are things we can do—stand up, open our eyes, take some deep breaths. And maybe at the beginning of a retreat, the thing to do is to take a rest. The first day or two is often helpful. Take a nap, if I may say that, and then be more refreshed. But don't keep doing it throughout the retreat. That's buying into the hindrance again.

Then there's the hindrance of restlessness, which we all experience in different ways. The mind being restless, coming up with lots of thoughts and ideas and opinions. Or the body being agitated, restless. Knowing restlessness—it's very believable. We feel like we've got to move from it. When there's restlessness, we feel like we've got to do something. All we need to do in this context is know: this is restlessness and agitation.

Worry and anxiety also come along with restlessness. They kind of come together. It's like a little bit too much energy that's not grounded—the opposite of sleepy and dull. Too much energy that's ungrounded. And then we start worrying, getting agitated.

Knowing that as restlessness, the hindrance of restlessness and agitation. Not me, not mine, not personal, not personality, but a hindrance that is arising in that moment. We can use things like being particularly aware of the out-breath, letting go on the out-breath.

That can really help to ease the restlessness. And also focusing more strongly on the breath—sometimes that can help to just pull ourselves out of the restlessness. We have to experiment ourselves and see what works.

Sometimes just bringing the intention of calming this body, calming this mind, calming the bodily formation, calming the mental formations. Sometimes just that intention, those words, can help to ground us a little bit. But most important is the mindfulness and the understanding that this is a hindrance, not who and what I am. This is changing.

And then the hindrance of doubt. So whenever I say you have to use your own wisdom to know what to do, I'm sure lots of people will be going, "But what am I supposed to do? Should I do this? Should I do that? Am I at the beginning of my practice? Am I in the middle? What do I do?" So then that happens. We do that. I used to really want someone to just tell me what to do. Just tell me. And it's like, well, no. You have to know. I have to know. We have to know for ourselves.

Doubt will come in and it'll keep us spinning for eternity if we let it. So once we find ourselves caught in doubt—should I do this or should I do that? What should I be doing? I'm not sure—then we recognize, "Oh, there's doubt. The hindrance of doubt is present in the mind."

The way out of that endless loop of doubt is understanding one of the tricks of doubt, one of its lies and stories: it tells us that if we just stay with this long enough, if we just keep thinking about it, we're going to get the answer. Just keep going around long enough and you're going to get it. It's there somewhere. So that's the story, the lie of doubt.

Whereas the Buddha recommends us to use our discernment. What is the most wholesome thing to do? What is the most beneficial? What is beneficial? What is not beneficial? What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? And you may find that this can be very clear: "Okay, that's unwholesome, I'm not going to do that. I'll just work with this, it's more wholesome."

It might be that whichever way you go is going to be wholesome, so then you go into doubt again. But the thing is, if it's wholesome both ways, it doesn't actually matter which way you go. You just choose one and do it and see what happens. And if it's not going the way you think it should be going, or where you want to go after some time, try the other one. See what happens.

Because it's not like life is set out in some clear trajectory and we just have to know exactly what we do when. It's influenced by what we bring to it in the moment. Our life unfolds through what we bring to it in the moment. This is why knowing what is wholesome and what is unwholesome is really, really important. Because if we're carelessly cultivating unwholesome qualities and justifying them in our minds, that's influencing how things will be for us in the next moment, and the next, and the next. And so we get more and more entrenched.

Whereas if we can recognize when we are defending or justifying or judging or desiring or complaining—all of those things—or getting caught going round and round in circles not sure what to do, when we recognize, then we can choose to do what is wholesome. And sometimes we can drop what's going on and turn towards something that actually cultivates something more directly wholesome.

So there's ill will. I remember one of my first retreats I did in Amaravati, I had so much anger towards the person teaching the retreat. I felt so angry because there was so little silence. I just wanted silence.

I wanted to sit with other people in silence. There was almost no silence through the whole retreat—everything was guided. It was driving me crazy, and I was getting more and more angry. At one point I realized this isn't going to change, and it's a ten-day retreat. I need to do something. So with that energy of anger, I started to practice metta. And then the anger, the energy of anger, started to turn into the energy of metta. By the end I was totally blissed out on metta—I loved the teacher.

So sometimes it's like that, where we actually turn the energy around. And sometimes we can't do that, and all we can do is bring mindfulness to what is going on. We're holding it within our mindful awareness and we're not acting on it. That's already very powerful.

Sometimes the habit is so strong that we can't help acting on it. Then we act on it and we need to bring the discernment, the clarity, and the honesty to acknowledge: okay, I lost it there, or I'm going down that road again. I know I'm doing it and I kind of can't stop right now. I know it's not going to have good results. And then maybe we can acknowledge it to the people we live with. Because when we're not able to hold those kile-

sas with mindfulness, they spill out onto other people, and other people have to deal with them. The energy that we can't deal with—that's what happens. When we can't manage it, we generously give it to other people. And then they have to deal with it in whatever way they are able to, or not.

Once we start to wake up to that and be aware of it, then it becomes the humbling practice of acknowledging it. That can help give us an incentive to get on and start transforming the stuff that's here, because we don't want to keep being in that position where we're dumping on people and then having to apologize all the time. It's just kind of humiliating.

So these are ways that we can gradually transform the habits of our hearts and minds—transform them into the path, the path of awakening. It's not about becoming a good person who's all nice all the time, sweetness and light. It's not about that. It's about truth, and about aligning oneself with what is wholesome, what is good. And sometimes truth is hard to hear, hard to receive, hard to know. It's not always nice. But it's truth. So it's good. It's beautiful.

There are many ways that we can take refuge in what is not true, and if we don't have that simple map of the hindrances, we can so easily just get caught again and again in them—take them to be who and what we are, or take them to be caused by something outside of ourselves, or justify them. It's important to remember that we're on a path, there's a direction we want to go in, and then there's a road going off to the right with flashing neon signs saying, "Come this way, come this way." If we're not mindful and we don't know what's going on, we just get duped by it. We just go there. "Oh, that looks interesting. Let's go down there and see where we get to." And then we get way off track into some place we never wanted to go.

So to remember, to keep in mind the bigger intention of our practice. And if you aren't quite clear what it is, then take this time to get clear over these days. What is the greater intention of my practice? Am I just looking for a little bit of calm? Or is there something a bit more profound, a bit deeper, that's brought us here, that's drawing us to keep turning towards what we find here?

The path unfolds differently for every person, every individual. Who knows why and how and where it will take us. But we just need to know what's going on here, on our own path, where we are right now on this path of practice. That's all we need to know. We don't need to compare ourselves to others. We don't need to judge what's going on. We just need to know it and acknowledge it and take a step from here—or a leap, sometimes, from here. And wherever we are is good. It's good, and it's not the end.

So there's not a dead end here. If we turn and look and feel, "Oh my goodness, I'm just such a mess. After all these years, I'm just such a mess" — it can be like that. And then, well, *sadhu, sadhu, sadhu*. There's an ability, there's a strength and an awareness that can turn towards that mess. Without that, we're just going to pretend we're not a mess for the rest of our life. But with the awareness, we can turn towards it with some kindness, some understanding, some listening, and start to turn it around.

If when we turn and look here and we think, "Wow, I am so awesome, I am the best in the world," then you better ask a few more questions. Go and spend a bit of time with your family and ask them what they think about you. Don't stop there, because if that's where you've come to, it's not the end.

So we need to just keep on looking really honestly and keep on meeting our experience honestly — not being harsh towards ourselves or beating down on ourselves, but being interested and kind and encouraging.

When we apply mindfulness and turn it onto what's going on here, and what we find is not very inspiring — which sometimes it is like that — we can get too involved in what we find. We get too involved in the object of our mind and not enough in the awareness itself. Every time mindfulness arises and we turn and see what's going on, this is a wonderful moment. This is an awakening moment. If we're awakening to what is beautiful and inspiring, that's wonderful — there's joy in that. And if we're awakening to what is kind of grungy and uninspiring, that is also wonderful because it gives us a chance to transform. And if we're turning to what is kind of nothing in particular, if we can turn towards that and stay with it, that's pretty inspiring. That's not easy, and it's a large part of our lives, so it's actually very important.

So we have this time and these supportive conditions to turn towards our own body, mind, and heart. To learn to trust our own wisdom and exploration. And to experiment a little bit with what we find. What's the right thing to do? Don't just do what you've always done. Experiment a little bit. Be interested, curious, creative. And we will see what transforms over these days.

So I'd like to offer that tonight.

Anodana yantama kathaya sadhu karam tatamase. Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu. Anumodana.

CHAPTER 210

Suffering and the Illusion of Self

Carol Wilson · 1h07

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a comprehensive exploration of the Buddha's fundamental teachings on suffering and selflessness. She begins with the First Noble Truth, examining the three kinds of dukkha: dukkha dukkha (inherent painfulness), the suffering arising from impermanence, and saṅkhāra dukkha (the suffering of maintaining conditioned existence). Wilson emphasizes the importance of opening to suffering rather than resisting it, noting that resistance actually feeds our pain while closing us off from the wellspring of compassion.*
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> *The talk illuminates a critical distinction between compassion and sorrow—while both respond to suffering, sorrow contains aversion whereas true compassion does not. This difference fundamentally shapes our capacity for skillful action in the world. Wilson then turns to the Second Noble Truth, identifying the root cause of suffering as the deeply conditioned illusion of self. Through vivid examples—concepts of place, time, ownership, and self-image—she demonstrates how we live within mental constructs we mistake for reality.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's analysis of the five khandhas (aggregates), Wilson shows how what we call 'self' is merely a constellation of physical sensations, consciousness, and mental phenomena, each arising and passing moment to moment. The talk concludes with the liberating insight that through awareness of our identification processes—with sensations, thoughts, emotions, and even awareness itself—we can recognize the empty, constructed nature of self and abide in natural clarity. As she quotes Kalu Rinpoche: 'When we understand this, we see we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything.'*

There's one basic teaching common to all the traditions of Buddhism, in whatever culture or country it manifests, and that is the teaching on the Four Noble Truths. They really encapsulate the dilemma that faces us and the possibility—the experience, the realization—of freedom.

One of the things that's so amazing about Dharma practice is that it's like a hologram. Whatever part we look at, whatever perspective, whatever angle we're coming from, any part reveals the whole, if we look deeply enough.

So what is the first noble truth of the Buddha's teaching? The first noble truth is the truth of suffering. The Buddha saw the basic problem inherent in existence because he saw that in the realm of conditioned phenomena, suffering is inherent, inevitable.

What does conditioned phenomena mean? It's simple—it means everything. Everything that arises out of conditions. That's what conditioned means: things which arise out of causes. So everything in the phenomenal world is a conditioned phenomenon, and therefore unsatisfying.

The Pali word for suffering is dukkha, and there's a wide variety of translations. It means suffering, unsatisfactoriness, unreliable. How do we experience this? The great task for us is somehow to bring the abstraction of the teachings to connect with our actual experience. To study it as philosophy or comparative religion may be of some interest, but that's not really what transforms us. We really have to connect it to our own experience.

So what is this truth of suffering? The Buddha talked of three kinds. The first kind are those experiences which are painful in themselves. He called this dukkha dukkha, just to emphasize the point. This suffering that is painful in itself is really pervasive in the world. A lot of you are working right in the midst of it. We see political and social injustice and exploitation in so many different realms—the pain, the suffering of war, of violence, of cruelty, of hunger. These are conditions which are suffering just in and of themselves. They're painful to be with.

We can feel this dukkha dukkha, this pain, in our own bodies. When we have painful sensations, or through the process of getting older and weaker, getting sick, getting diseased—and often the process of dying is a painful one. We can see this suffering in the world. We can see it in our bodies. We can see this suffering in our own minds, all of the painful, unpleasant mind states. And there is a long list: anger, hatred, fear, boredom, jealousy, despair, discouragement, frustration, loneliness, unworthiness, self-hatred. Enough, enough already.

What's important is that we recognize this, that we're really open to it as a significant part of life experience. This is part of being alive. As I mentioned the other night, it's not that it's a mistake. This is part of our experience. This is the first kind of suffering that we can really connect with, be with, open to. It's in the world, it's in ourselves.

The second kind of suffering is the suffering that comes out of the impermanence of things. It's really the suffering of conditions being unreliable. We keep looking in our lives for happiness, for a lasting happiness in this conditioned world, and it never quite arrives. Have you noticed how we live our lives very often just waiting for the next nice event? The next vacation, or the next weekend, or the right relationship, or whatever.

And it's always, it seems as if this completion or happiness is always just ahead of us. If only this happened, if only this happened, if only this happened. But of course, even when they do happen, it is happiness for a time and then it's gone. Because the very nature of all conditioned things is change, impermanence. If we're looking for a lasting happiness in that which is not lasting, it's not a good move. Because we're looking in an arena which cannot provide what we're looking for.

And yet, we keep doing this. Sometimes in reflecting on this, I think back to all the wonderful experiences, the different ones that have happened in my life. Where are they? They were wonderful at the time and they're gone. So this is another kind of dukkha, another kind of unsatisfactoriness—really connecting with the unreliability of phenomena to provide a lasting happiness for us. So we can finally maybe start looking in the appropriate place.

There's a third kind of dukkha, and the Pali word for it is sankhara dukkha. It's the suffering of having to expend energy to keep things together. I told my house story the other night. It was great—I moved into my house and I was really enjoying it. But after a very short time living in it, I made this great discovery. I discovered that not doing anything, it got dirty. And that I had to clean it.

So my mind made this connection between this first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and the second law of thermodynamics, which I know almost nothing about, except the general principle that things tend toward disorder. Systems tend toward disorder. And so to keep them in order, it requires the input of energy. We're here for ten days. Our clothes get dirty. They need to be cleaned. We need to do whatever we do to have enough to eat. There's always this expenditure of effort and energy just to keep things together. So that's another kind of dukkha, another kind of suffering.

It really comes down to something very simple, this first noble truth. It can be summed up. All of these different kinds of suffering can be summed up: when we're associated with what we don't want, it's suffering. And when we're separated from what we do want, it's suffering. This is the push-pull that's happening throughout our lives. When we're with what we don't want, we suffer. When we're separated from what we like, we suffer. When we resist what comes, there's suffering. When we hold on to what's changing, we suffer.

So one question arises: so what? Why should we pay attention to all this? People seem to be living their lives who never give a moment's thought to any of this. Why should we? Why should we make this enormous effort?

I'll tell you. I'm not taking any chances. Because it really takes a very great kind of openness, and really a great courage, to see what is actually there. It's very easy to live—and I think we do much of the time, and many people do most of the time—it's very easy to live in a state of resistance, in a state of avoidance, in a state of denial. You're probably dealing with it a tremendous amount—people who are just not willing to open to see what is actually going on, the suffering that's there.

There's one story which epitomizes this tendency. A friend of mine told it to me. It was a story of his grandfather in the early forties, driving with his father

So the grandfather was driving with his son, and it was December 7th, 1941. They heard on the radio the news of Pearl Harbor. And the first thing the grandfather said to my friend's father was, "Don't tell your mother."

Now that's a hard one to avoid. That takes a real special effort. She probably finally found out. Of course, what's instructive is that we can laugh at that, and yet in our own ways we're all doing it. So we really need to see how it is that we avoid or deny or resist.

There are two very important implications of this way of living. One is that very often, in the very process of resisting whatever unpleasantness or suffering, the resistance is actually feeding that which we don't want to let in. So it's not a very productive strategy.

Just as a few examples: when there's pain in the body and we resist it rather than open to it, what's happening? We're tensing behind it, creating more pain. Our very avoidance of it is strengthening it. And the same thing happens with our resistance or avoidance of unpleasant thought forms or mind states. The more we resist them, the more they're fed, because we're imputing a reality to them which they don't actually have.

When we resist feeling anger or sadness or whatever it is, or certain thought forms in the mind, when we resist them and we don't want to see them or feel them, we're actually feeding them because we're giving them a concrete reality which in their nature they don't have at all.

An image came to mind some time ago as a way of relating to all of these unpleasant aspects of the mind which we might have a tendency to resist or avoid. I thought of it particularly with regard to the hindrances—desire and aversion and sleepiness and restlessness and doubt—but it could be anything. It could be states of fear or cruelty, whatever we don't want to let in.

It reminded me of kids in Halloween costumes. On Halloween, kids come to your door and they're all dressed up. The pirate comes—do you get frightened? Probably not, because you know it's just a kid in costume. So you give them candy or whatever. All of these thoughts, all of these thought forms which seem so fearsome to us are nothing more than kids in Halloween costumes. If we believe the costume, then we resist. "Get away. I don't want to be with you. Leave my doorway." When we see that it's just a costume, it's no problem at all. We can have a real loving relationship with them.

So this is the first implication of avoiding or resisting suffering—that we're actually feeding it. There's a second implication, which perhaps is more touching. When we live in a way that closes us off to the experience, to the awareness of suffering, when we become defended against it or armored against it or protected from it, what happens is that we are also closing off the wellspring of our compassion. And so it's a very significant consequence.

How does this happen? Compassion is that feeling in the heart that wants to alleviate the suffering that exists in the world, in other people, in ourselves. It's that movement to action. It sees suffering, it's open to it, and it wants to do something about it. That's the power of compassion.

It's described really beautifully by a little haiku poem by Ryokan. He was an eighteenth-century Zen poet, hermit, and monk, with very wonderful poetry.

He said, "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all of the people in this floating world." That's a feeling of compassion. "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all of the people in this floating world."

What opens us, what connects us to this feeling of compassion is precisely our ability to open up to experience the suffering that's there. So this realization of the First Noble Truth is essential. It's like the foundation of our spiritual path.

There's a very critical discrimination that has to be made here, and it's particularly critical for people who are already open to suffering and trying to alleviate it. That is the distinction between compassion and sorrow. These are two very different mind states. Both of them are responses to suffering—we can feel compassion, we can feel sorrow—but in sorrow there is aversion to the suffering, and in compassion there is not. It's this distinction which then leads to very different kinds of responses.

We really have to see this clearly. If we respond to suffering with aversion—aversion to it, we don't like it—the reactions that come from that aversion are sorrow, anger, hatred, fear. These become the motives for action, and they're not very constructive motives. When there's openness to the suffering rather than aversion to it, then our response is one of compassion.

Do you see the difference between these two? They start from a place that's very close. It's said that sorrow is the near enemy of compassion, which in Buddhist jargon means that it's a mind state which looks like compassion. We can mistake it for compassion, but it is not. These are two states of mind very close, but they end up in very different places.

Sometimes it's hard to see how we cannot have aversion to the immensity of suffering in the world. As you deal with the problems that you deal with and perhaps contemplate even much larger ones, how can we not feel aversion or hatred or anger towards the things that are going on?

I think it's helpful to look at our own experience of suffering because it gives us insight into the importance of this distinction. You're sitting here in the hall, sitting with this agonizing pain in the knee. Does hating the pain contribute in any way to its alleviation? No. It just further creates a struggle. The hating of the suffering, the hating of the pain, the aversion towards the pain does not contribute to the alleviation of it.

If you're sitting and you're having a run of awful mind states, awful thoughts—you're the worst person in the world, thoughts of cruelty and revenge, just imagine your worst kinds of thoughts—does hating those thoughts in any way alleviate the suffering of them? No. It just further pollutes the whole internal environment.

If we can be with the pain in ourselves—the pain in the knee, the painful thoughts, the painful emotions—with a sense of caring, with a sense of loving, with a sense of openness as opposed to aversion, then it is much easier to actually alleviate, to create a healing space. And the same thing that's true for us is true for the suffering in the world. Aversion towards it does not help.

So we need to see, we really need to examine within ourselves and learn to discriminate between the feelings of sorrow which may come and the feeling of compassion. We must get very clear about the difference.

This is a really difficult practice. It is not easy to open ourselves to suffering, to really be open—not with aversion, not with hatred—but just to let it all in. It's precisely because this is our practice that the realization of the First Noble Truth is the practice of compassion. To the degree that we realize, we open to, we're aware of the suffering that

exists in ourselves and in the world, this is the practice of letting everything in, not holding anything aside. We let all the conditions of the world in. We let all kinds of people in—our friends as well as our adversaries. We let all the sides of ourselves in.

This past year I saw two movies which really had quite an impact on me. They both had the same theme: how compassion grows from letting suffering in. One was Schindler's List, of course. And the other was a movie called Romero—I don't know if you saw that. It was about the archbishop in El Salvador.

And both of them started with beings who were in the midst of tremendous suffering but basically closed off to it in one way or another. Both movies portrayed the gradual opening of these people to the suffering that was around them, and the outpouring of compassionate action that took place. What was quite amazing was that even though they were documenting the most horrendous suffering, both movies were tremendously inspiring to me because they showed the power that can come when we open ourselves to this—open ourselves with compassion rather than sorrow, with openness rather than aversion. That's the key. That's the key point.

All of this is summed up again in a Japanese haiku. I love Japanese aesthetic because it's so exquisite. There's another little poem by Isa, who I've mentioned before. It says: "In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger." It just expresses for me this quality of opening to it all, of letting it all in. In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger.

So this is the first noble truth of the Buddhist teaching. It's about suffering and opening to it, and the compassion that comes from that.

The second noble truth of the Buddha's teaching is the cause of suffering. Why is there so much suffering in the world? Mostly we relate to it, both in ourselves and other people, on the level of symptoms. We're dealing with the symptoms of the suffering. What the Buddha saw—and this is the greatness of enlightenment—was the root cause of suffering. Why is it in the world? Why is it so pervasive?

No matter what we do, and this came up the other night in a little discussion, we can make our best efforts to really alleviate the pain that's here. But as long as there is greed in the mind, as long as there is fear in the mind, as long as there is hatred in the mind, as long as there is ignorance in the mind, suffering will continue. Because at its root it's not a question of fixing something. We want to fix what we can. We want to alleviate the symptoms. But the real root of it are these basic forces in people's minds. It's because of greed that there's so much injustice. It's because of hatred. It's because of fear. These are the underlying causes.

Now there's one aspect of ignorance which actually underlies all of these other unwholesome forces in the mind. There's one source point for suffering. There's one root cause. It is the great hallucination of our lives. We are living in a massive hallucination. And that is the very deeply conditioned idea or concept we have of self, of "I." Our lives embody this. They revolve about this notion of self, this notion of I. It's the construction of a reference point—a reference point of I to whom all experience is happening. So everything comes back to this: I'm feeling, I'm thinking, everything's back to that reference point.

As soon as there is the construction, the fabrication of the sense of self, automatically following from it is the sense of other. If there is self, built into the feeling of self is the feeling of other. So from the very beginning there is separation, there is duality. And it's in this context of self that so many unskillful actions proceed.

If there's a self—and whether we consider this personally, a personal self, or our national self—what happens? As soon as there's this notion, we need to defend it, we need to protect it, we need to gratify it, we need to aggrandize it. All of these unwholesome actions are happening based on this notion of a self, an I, a me, a mine. And it's this concept of self to which all suffering adheres.

What is so amazing about all of this is that we're making it all up. This is the hallucination. It's not something that is real. It's not something that is true. But it is a massively ingrained habit of mind. What does it mean to say that there's no self? Because often we hear it—

And for a major part of our mind, it doesn't make any sense at all. What does it mean to say there's no I, there's no one behind the process to whom it's happening? Who came here? Who's sitting in the hall? If there's no I, there's no self, who are all of you? Not to speak of me. Who has memories? Who falls in love? Who gets angry? All of these questions arise, and they're very commonsense questions.

We're talking about something that is very deep and very profound, something that goes well beyond our conventional notions of what is true and what is real. Sometimes people, even in hearing the notion of selflessness, get afraid. Perhaps the mind conjures up this image of just disappearing in a great cosmic flash—suddenly you're here and then you're not here. Oops. What will my family think?

But it's really not that at all. The deep understanding, the realization of selflessness—that is really the jewel of the Buddhist teachings. It's at the heart of a free mind. So how can we begin to understand it? How can we begin to touch that realization?

In order to have a framework for understanding what selflessness means, we need to look at the very great extent to which we live in the world of concepts. Because self is simply another concept. But mostly we have no idea how much of our experience of the world is really an experience of concept, not of reality. And that's why we get deluded into thinking that self is also true.

I'd like to give you some examples, but let me frame it first. Most of you are probably familiar with the famous parable of the cave in Plato's Republic. It's a very good metaphor for this. There's a cave, and people are chained in the cave in such a way that they can only face the back wall. Behind this row of people is a fire, and then there's a procession of figures going by, engaged in all the activities of life, casting shadows on the back wall of the cave. The people who are chained in the cave and can't turn around—all they see are the shadows. And so they take the shadows to be what's real, what's true.

Sometimes one person perhaps makes a great effort and loosens the chain and turns around and says, "Oh, there's fire, there are figures—the shadows aren't real at all. They're just a reflection of reality." And maybe with even greater effort, they cut the chains and can go into the sunlight, into freedom. To the extent that we are living in the world of concept, it's like being chained in that cave.

So what are some of the concepts that in many ways dominate our own lives personally and condition so much of what's happening in the world? I'll mention just a few—there are endless examples.

One of them we could call the concept of place, as if the world is actually divided up into separate states and countries. There's one story which reveals something ridiculous about this. It was told to me by a Greek friend who was traveling to India. Because she was Greek, she couldn't go through Turkey, so she had to go up through Russia and down through Iran, which was then—this was years ago—open. She described the border crossing between Russia and Iran. She said it was the middle of no place. Just a big, dry, barren, arid expanse. There was a dry riverbed, and over the riverbed was this huge bridge. In the middle of the bridge was a big iron gate, locked from both sides. Just picture the scene: we're in the middle of no place, nothing around for miles, and there's this bridge with a gate in the middle.

And to cross from Russia into Iran, the guards from one side had to go and open the gate, the guards from the other side had to go and open it, she had to get her passport stamped, and she crossed the border. It's like a Fellini movie. And yet, had she not done that, there would have been serious consequences, because people are very attached to this notion, to this concept.

You know, our attachment to this concept of place obscures a much more natural order of things. And there are many examples. When you think just of post-colonial Africa and how the countries were carved up, often without regard at all to the natural tribal alignments—so much of what's happening now is because of conflicts coming out of that arbitrary concept of place. Or even within the environmental movement, dealing with environmental issues. The difference between having to address them state by state, county by county, as opposed to perhaps looking at a whole bioregion and its interdependence. But our boundaries, our concepts, have fixed things in such a way that it obscures a more harmonious relationship.

That's just one concept. Another one, which perhaps touches us personally more directly—this is huge—is the concept of time. We have created concepts of past and future which dominate our lives. It's very instructive to look incisively at what our experience of past and future actually is. We take these things so for granted, we never really stop and examine. What is this thing we call past? How do we experience it?

It's amazingly simple. We're sitting here, minding our own business. Certain kinds of thoughts come—recollections, memories, images, remembrances. We make a category. We make a concept for these kinds of thoughts or images. We call them "past." And then somehow we toss it behind us, as if the past is a reality back there. Yet when we look carefully, how do we ever know the past? It's always as a thought in the moment.

This was the great and wonderful insight in Proust's masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past*. I read this years ago. I was in the Peace Corps, those long Bangkok afternoons. I plowed through those two thousand pages. The last—I mean, it was a wonderful book, but the last fifty pages were mind-blowing, because the whole book led up to this transforming insight: that the past is in the present. That's how we know the past, as a thought in the present.

Likewise the future. This great, big, looming future about which we have anticipation, hope, excitement, despair, whatever. What is it? How do we ever experience the future? We're sitting, certain thoughts come, certain images come. We label them "future," toss them out there. The future is out there waiting for us, waiting to get us.

You know, a thought is very light, very light. But the concept of past and future? Mountainous. To be walking through one's life carrying these mountains on one's shoulders—no wonder people feel burdened. But when we really see it, that's just a thought in the moment. It's a thought we may want to explore and deal with and respond to, but it is just a thought. There's an amazing collapse into the moment when we see this, when we realize this. The whole weight of past and future are gone. It's really quite amazing.

But the concepts are so ingrained, and we invest so much reality in them, that we go through life shouldering this burden. In the course of a day here, in the course of a sitting, in the course of one walking period, how much time is spent lost in thoughts of past and future? It's enormous. It's most of our lives, because we don't see it for what it is.

Some of my most profound insights come from my favorite genre of literature, which—Proust notwithstanding—is spy books. How often in these kinds of junk books they'll quote some highbrow person at the beginning. It gives them a certain legitimacy. Well, one of these books quoted St. Augustine. It was a great quote. It said, "If the past and future really exist, where are they?" I know why I'm reading this stuff.

Look to see how thoughts of past and future condition how you feel about your present experience. A very good example: on retreat, thoughts of time. "Oh, only two more days. I wish it lasted for another month." And so there's a certain feeling generated by that thought. Or it might be, "Oh, two more days. How many more mental notes do I have to make? I can't wait to get out of here." Both of those are simply thoughts. That's all. They're a momentary thought passing through. If we see them as a thought, there's almost no impact. When we take that construct of time to be real, it creates a whole world for us.

I could go on at length about this. Concepts of place, concepts of time, concepts of ownership. People have the idea that they own things. What does it mean to own something? "This is mine!" Mark Twain wrote a wonderful story about horse traders in Russia. He told the whole story from the horse's point of view. And the horses had no idea they were owned by anybody. They were in relationship to various humans—some were kind, some were cruel—but the idea of ownership never entered their nice little heads.

We may feel that... well, imagine how you would feel coming into the room and seeing somebody sitting on your cushion. You probably wouldn't go crazy, but there'd be a moment. There would definitely be a moment. "What are they doing on my seat?" This is another form of the idea of possessiveness, of ownership. "This belongs to me."

I want to say, before going further, I do not mean to imply that concepts are not useful. All of these concepts are useful—the concepts of place, of time, of ownership, and some of the others. We need to use them. But it's when we get attached to them, when we start taking them to be the reality rather than simply a mental construct that happens to be useful in a particular situation—that's where we get lost. That's where we're in the dream.

Concepts of place, of time, of ownership. Concepts of self-image. We create a lot of concepts around our self-image—our self-image in the world, our self-image as yogis. There are so many self-image stories. As you know now, since the third grade I had this self-image that I couldn't sing. And let me just say: certain self-images are true. They're not all false.

But to the degree that we get caught in them, it limits us.

So anyway, I was teaching at Naropa in the early years, in '74, '75, in Boulder. And I thought, well, I'm going to really work with this. I'm going to burst out of this prison. There was a class called "The Natural Voice"—kind of a new age singing class—but that's for me, I thought. So I signed up for this class, and it took a lot of courage because this image was very strong; I was identifying with it a lot.

So I go to class, and the first few classes are great. It's all group exercises and group singing, and I'm really having a good time. Then one day the regular teacher couldn't come and a substitute teacher came. She was an expert in Balkan folk singing. She had us line up in a circle, and one by one she sang a note and we were supposed to sing it back to her—match her pitch. I knew I was in very big trouble.

So we're going around, and it's getting closer and closer to me, and I'm getting more and more uptight. I'm really feeling it. She finally gets to me. She sings some note. I sing something back. It's not even close. It wasn't even in the ballpark. She was a very determined woman. She kept doing her thing. I kept trying to replicate it. Finally, the regular teacher came in. And quite skillfully, she started where I was rather than where she was, and note by note led me up to that place. When I finally got there, the whole class started to applaud. It was one of those moments.

These experiences, as they are, if we can either at the time or afterwards put them in a larger context—it was instructive because I saw the degree to which I was caught in a certain image of myself, in a certain inhibition, in a certain reluctance, and the amazing effort it took to try to break through that. We imprison ourselves in the images we create. We might create images of ourselves of being very smart or very stupid, beautiful or very ugly, very heroic or very cowardly, very this or very that. Whatever it is, it's a mold. We've just created a mold and we've poured ourselves into it. So we want to look at those personas that we create, because these also are concepts.

The last concept—which is getting back to the subject, and really it's the root one, the root cause of our suffering and the suffering in the world—is the concept of self. We have created a notion, we have created an idea of someone, of some being to whom experience is happening. But that is an illusion. And when we look carefully, we see that it

is not true. When we drop into the flow of experience, we see that instead of it being this—referring back to a "me"—experience is happening like this. Everything is arising and passing. Everything remains the same. Same thoughts, same feelings, same images, same emotions, same sensations. But we're seeing them as empty phenomena rolling on. We're not claiming them as being I, as being mine.

The really important question in our practice is to see how it is that we keep creating this concept of self. Why do we keep creating it? Because it's pervasive. We go up to anybody on the street—"Do you exist? Is there a self?"—and they'd think we were crazy. So it's very deep, really deep in our conditioning. We need to examine very carefully how it's created.

The reason we fall into the illusion of self, the reason we get lost in this concept, is because mostly we are not paying attention to the composite nature of our experience. Every morning we look in the mirror and we say, "Yeah, looks like the same guy as yesterday. This must be Joseph." And there's a kind of continuity to that.

And so we assume, yeah, there's a being called Joseph. But when we look carefully at experience, not just that surface appearance of things, when we look deeply, what is it that I'm calling Joseph? This is a name, this is a concept which I'm putting on a certain constellation of experience. When we look carefully, we see exactly what those experiences are, and we see that they're also continuously changing.

The Buddha laid out very clearly what the constellation is, and it's simple. It's really simple. What we call Joseph, self, I—each one of us—is a constellation of physical elements. We experience different sensations. We sit here and you feel pressure, tightness, tingling, the whole range. There's a whole range of physical tactile sensations. That's one aspect of the constellation. We experience consciousness, knowing. That's another part of the constellation. We experience all the mental phenomena—the thoughts and emotions and images. Each one of these in each moment is arising and passing away. Nothing lasts long enough to be called self.

When you're sitting and you feel the pressure in the knee, you don't say, "my pressure." When you're just there in awareness, it's just pressure arising. That's what's happening. It's not self. It doesn't belong to anybody. The thought arises and passes away.

But there's something more than this. Even when we get a little savvy, when we really are seeing that what we call self is a constellation of experiences, there's one other process that we get very involved in and which creates the felt sense of I. That is the process of identification with these elements.

Okay, we've gone past the appearance. We see, yes, there are sensations, there are thoughts, there are emotions, there are images, there are sounds. We see all the components. But still, unless we're very aware and attuned, in each arising we identify with it. And out of that identification, we create a concept.

I'll give you some examples of this. We're sitting. There's the pressure in the knee. As soon as there's an identification with that feeling, we create a concept around it: knee. We build a further concept: my knee. Knee, my knee—that is not the pressure. That's all a mental construct. There's knee, there's my knee, there's my knee hurts. And then there's the whole world of reaction to that: I hate it, I can be with it, I can bear it, I can't bear it. Do you see how the I is being built up on top of a very particular moment of pressure arising? That whole world of I is just a mental fabrication. It's a whole series of concepts.

We identify with thoughts in a big way. Even when we begin to see the sensations as being quite impersonal, the thoughts that are arising in the mind—we get lost in them, caught up in them, identified with them over and over again.

I'd like to suggest a few experiments. In the next sitting, imagine every thought that arises as coming from the person next to you. It's just a way of loosening this identification with thought, as if they belong to someone. One of my teachers had a great phrase. He said, "The thought is the thinker." There's no thinker apart from the thought. The thought is thinking itself. But because we usually are not aware enough, the thought arises, we get seduced by it. We get caught up into that thought form, that mind world. And we start living in what the Buddhists call the six realms of existence—the lower realms of suffering, the higher worlds of pleasure.

Notice, in the course of the day, how many times we inhabit a mind world created by thoughts. You think of your family while you're here.

Maybe you're missing them. The thought of your family is not your family. It's a thought. But it looks like your family, it feels like it, and so we get lost in it. And then whatever attendant feelings arise—love, or missingness, whatever. Or you think of work, or you think of... Our life is a progression of little cartoon bubbles of thought. They're mind-created worlds in which we are imprisoned, until that moment of awakening: "Yeah, that's just a thought." And you're right back with the next step on the ground.

What is so amazing about bringing awareness to thought is that when we're not aware of them, they are so incredibly powerful as to dominate our lives. We are led by our thoughts. And when we are aware of them, we see that they're nothing. They're just

these little, ephemeral blips, bubbles in the mind. They have no power at all. Tremendous freedom in realizing the insubstantial, empty nature of thought. And it doesn't matter what the thoughts are. They can be the worst thoughts in the world—if you see them as a thought, they come, they self-liberate. There's no effect.

We identify with sensations, we identify with thoughts, we identify with emotions. Anger comes, happiness comes, generosity comes, kindness comes. To the degree that we identify with them, we create this notion of self. "I'm angry, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm kind, I'm generous." We are building that construct of self in our identification with the emotion. It is anger which angers. It is love which loves. It is kindness which kindnesses. There's no one behind it to whom it's happening. Each of these emotions, each of these aspects of experience are doing themselves.

The last thing that we identify with—and most subtle—is awareness itself. We identify with the knower and so create the sense of witness. "Okay, I know everything else is changing, everything else is impersonal, everything else is not me, but I'm the one who's knowing it all." As soon as we identify with awareness, with consciousness, we obscure the natural empty clarity which is its nature. Awareness doesn't belong to anybody. If we look carefully, if we're really attentive, we can recognize and abide in the empty nature of awareness itself. And from that space, everything is simply appearing and vanishing, appearing and disappearing in this great, clear, open space of awareness, of emptiness. They're synonymous.

Through the awareness of suffering, we open to compassion. Through the awareness of selflessness, we open to wisdom. And this is what our practice is about. As we see how the sense of self is constructed, as we begin to see that it is just a concept, a mental fabrication, we abide more and more in that place of emptiness.

And it's expressed—and I'll end with this, finally—in a little poem by Li Po, a great Chinese poet. He said, "We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains." We sit together, the mountain and me. We sit together, the breeze and me. We sit together, the thought and me. We sit together, the sensation and me. We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains. We stop constructing the sense of I, the sense of self. And then we start abiding just in the natural purity of things.

A summing up of all of this was expressed very beautifully by Kalu Rinpoche, one of the great Tibetan masters. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality.

We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all.

We live in illusion, in the appearance of things. We live in the world of concepts and constructs. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything.

That is all.

Let's sit together for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 211

The Experience of No-Self

Carol Wilson · 44 min

> *In this profound exploration of one of Buddhism's most challenging teachings, Carol Wilson examines anattā (not-self) alongside the other two characteristics of existence: anicca (impermanence) and dukkha (unsatisfactoriness). She describes how practitioners often encounter experiences where the sense of 'I' naturally fades—during meditation on the breath, body awareness, or simply witnessing thoughts arising and passing without an owner. Yet she notes the paradox that arises when the 'I' returns to claim these very experiences of no-self.*
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> *Wilson offers a crucial reframing: rather than getting caught in the duality between self and no-self, we should examine whether suffering accompanies our sense of 'I.' When suffering binds to the self, it creates extraordinary substantiality and fixation. She cautions against elevating either no-self or a 'higher self' into ultimate categories, noting how easily spiritual ego can arise from such views. The Buddha himself used 'I' language regularly while teaching liberation.*
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> *The talk culminates in pointing toward what lies beyond the relative experiences of self and no-self—a shift of attention toward the ultimate, toward liberation itself. Wilson suggests that genuine realization brings steadiness that remains unaffected by the dance of phenomena, freeing the heart and mind from suffering. This contemplative dwelling on freedom, truth, and liberation—rather than endless work on states of mind—may be what finally brings the spiritual path to completion.*

The subject for this evening's talk is self and no-self.

Any length of time of exposure, generally speaking, to these kinds of teachings in this kind of facility will as a rule bring a person to hearing about and exploring what is often referred to as no-self or non-self. The area and issue of self, its appearance, the "I" and the "my" in this world—this is what we purposefully bring into focus. We look at our relationship to the question: What am I? Who is this? What is it to be in and of this earth and existence?

It is also spoken of quite regularly that there are three features or aspects of life's experience which we need to address with as much care and awareness as we can bring to them. This comes from direct quotes in the old texts of the Buddha and has been passed down from one generation of spiritual practitioners in the Dharma tradition to the next.

The first of these three characteristics of existence is impermanence—the field of change, both at its larger level and in its moment-to-moment unfolding. We've spoken about this during these days here, where awareness of change serves as a very important means and vehicle in life for staying in touch with the unfoldment of existence. So much difficulty arises in life through the mind's inability to live with change: change arising from within, change in the features of existence, and change coming through our senses. This awareness of change is not presented as the ultimate truth of existence, not as any absolute whatsoever, but as the way we experience existence through the mind and through the senses. We become aware of the feature of change, and we are told it is well worth our while to concentrate on it, giving genuine attention to it as a duty, as a dharma in our day-to-day life, being very clear about it.

Another characteristic of existence and our experience of it is the aspect of suffering, both in its large and formidable forms—personal and at larger levels of life—and also in its various expressions of unsatisfactoriness, known as dukkha in the tradition. These two characteristics of change and unsatisfactoriness we can witness and know and experience in a wide variety of circumstances. To some degree, the very apparent feature of change, of impermanence, informs us and tells us of the unsatisfactoriness of things. It helps reveal to us time and time again how little real control we have over anything, inwardly or outwardly.

Sometimes, of course, the feature of change works for our benefit. There are times when something is continuing and our greatest wish in life is for it to end, to pass, and therefore there is a corresponding relief. One is grateful for change, for something to finish, for something to be over with. In other relationships to change, however, there is something very painful and extremely difficult to deal with. That dynamic, that interaction, goes on.

As one looks in the field of change, inwardly and outwardly, there is something unsatisfactory about it. Nothing can be relied upon. Nothing can give real security. There is nothing we can truly stand upon in terms of states of mind, states of body, or states of the world—because it all changes. Even the continuity of life on earth has no assurance for any human being, and at a global level you and I are becoming more aware of all of

that. Therefore a certain fragility faces existence. Why? Because of the field of change, the activities of coming and going, and all that we as the present living generation have to work with, face, and deal with.

But then we come to the third aspect, feature, or characteristic of existence, and that is what is called anatta. The first is impermanence, the second is unsatisfactoriness, and the third characteristic is anatta. Atta means self—it means "I" and "my," it means ego. And anatta means not-self, not-I, not-ego, no-I.

In spiritual practice, people often report, "I've never had such an experience of no-self, no-I. I don't know what's really meant by that. I can't relate any of my experiences to something I could describe as having no I, no self, no me, no my taking place." Others can clearly and distinctly recall such situations, either in the near or distant past.

In relationship to this experience, we first need to observe and notice attentively the normal conditions of consciousness, the normal viewpoint which we as people on the earth come to agree about. A normal mind, an everyday conventional viewpoint, says: I am sitting here, you are sitting there. Through that mutual acknowledgment and understanding of oneself in relationship to other selves, we have our existence. We have a sense and some knowledge of who we are—one self appearing in contact with another self. All of that is the world of self.

Then this characteristic mentioned in the teachings speaks to us of no-self, of not-self. At the immediate level upon hearing that, it seems irrational, illogical; it doesn't fit in with my everyday normal mind. But the experience of not-self or no-self can be known and experienced in many different ways, and thus at times we may not be clearly aware of what we mean by it.

Let me take two or three examples. In relationship to any particular object of meditation—during these days we've explored breathing meditation, body awareness meditation, and states of mind meditation—quite naturally and frequently enough, the thought and the deeply rooted idea of "I" arises in connection with that. "I am breathing in and out. I am putting my attention through the body. I am experiencing these emotions. I am observing my thoughts." All of that is quite appropriate in description.

But it can be, and for some there are periods and moments, when the "I" doesn't seem to have a relevance. It doesn't seem to be really what's happening. It's as though the "I" is really an appendix to the simple, still conventional truth of what is taking place.

And thus there can be that simple, pure awareness—undiluted, in fact, by the "I"—where breathing in and out is just going on. There's a consciousness, of course, which apprehends it, and it's just consciousness in relationship to inhaling and exhaling. It's just an event. The potency of the "I," which says, "Well, I am breathing in and out, and this is my breath, and this is my body"—that strength and that potency and the idea of substance of "I" begins to drop and fade away.

And it's just sitting on this earth. There's just breathing in and breathing out which is going on—rather pure, rather undiluted—and the "I" itself doesn't seem to have any significance, any relationship to that. Thus the response is much more in impersonal terms than personal terms.

These may be short-lived experiences, but in the impersonal light they matter and give great support to spiritual awareness, because they begin effectively to question the substance of "I." The no-self awareness, the no-self experience—or the non-self awareness and experience—acts as bringing a certain light to life, to existence, to the immediate existence. It just questions—one may not be realizing it consciously—but just questions the authenticity of "I," the substance of it, the reality of it, whether it really has an ultimately true existence.

But as I say, it's not the only expression in life of not-self or no-self. There can be, in our experience, this dropping and fading away of "I," and in its dropping and fading away, there's the sense of just life unfolding itself. There's just the process of things which is going on.

And one looks in quiet reflection, in the immediacy of experience, and one might just see the aging process as an example—just going on moment to moment, moment to moment. No "I" on the earth, no matter how much will or effort, can stop that process which is going on. One is quite clear about it, and the clarity about it reveals unequivocally the non-I-ness of the process. It just goes on as it goes on as it goes on.

Awareness, in this case, sees that going on, and we can't arrest it. We can't live in eternity. We can't have an endless continuity of existence. Why? It's no-self. It's non-self. It's the process of life unfolding itself. And when that's clear to us, inwardly, and with some depth to it, we say, "Ah, this is what no-self experience is, what non-self awareness is."

As I say, it helps to sober up the truth of life, the everyday conventional truth of life. It helps to make our experience of life stand out much more clearly, because we are beginning to understand and know what not-self or no-self is.

Just as that can be applied to body in the long-term view, but also in the momentary view, it applies equally to our thoughts and our feelings and our emotions. The experience and the revelation of them doesn't always carry "I" and "my" with it. Thus we can speak from direct experience and say, "Here is a stream of thoughts just going on. They seem to have a kind of drift or life or momentum of their own." There's no owner, no self that owns these thoughts. There is just that witnessing which sees thought as thought as thought—arising and passing in the consciousness. That is just going on, and it's awareness which shows it.

But of course, in such experiences, either during or immediately afterwards, the "I" can arise, as it easily does, and says, "Oh, I have had a no-I experience." And it can produce a kind of conflicting or paradoxical relationship to that.

Whether it's seeing thoughts as thought but no owner, no real thinker; seeing and witnessing impersonally, with that intimacy that's necessary, feelings as feelings, waves as waves, emotions as emotions, bodily life as bodily life—in the experience of all of that, which is just life revealing itself in that impersonal light I referred to—when experiences like that do register very well and very clearly for us, it's quite natural and organic that in response to that, the "I" will arise and say, "I had this experience."

The "I," in connection to immediate memory or in the actual event taking place, the "I" as the deeply rooted sense, an idea that we have, does surface. It does present itself. It does draw that conclusion. And so one can find oneself, as I mentioned, in a kind of paradoxical or difficult situation.

Because it seems like one thing—no self, life just unfolding, body is body, feelings are feelings, perceptions are perceptions, thoughts are thoughts, emotions are emotions, states of mind are states of mind—they're just unfolding themselves, sometimes with "I" as it were embedded in it, sometimes not, just taking place. But a dilemma can arise because, as I say, either at the time or afterwards, it seems like the experience of "I" in life is giving confirmation to no "I."

One can find oneself, as some practitioners do, genuinely on the horns of a dilemma. Which is true? What do I accept? What do I believe? What's my normal state of mind, so to speak, or consciousness? Do I live and abide in a view of life that it's all no-self, non-self, and that's the ultimate truth of things, and I pin a great deal of faith in that? Or is my everyday experience of life very much in the conventional mode, where I keep confirming life through "I," through "I" and "my," and that's basically the reference point for existence—what is connected to, and sometimes stuck to, "I" and "my" existence? And therefore, whatever comes to "I" and "my," I take to be the reality, to be the truth, to be the way things are.

So in our awareness and in the seeing that takes place, as I said, the duality of life can have genuine and invaluable experiences of reality.

No self, non-self—whether arising through a specific perception, an unexpected experience, a developed experience, or the general process of life—all these and many other ways can keep revealing no self, no I, just events, just process. And yet, still the revelation of I and my arising happens. And there we are, our life going by, day in, day out, I and my rising, and no I and my showing itself.

And we ask: Is that it? Is that the truth of life? Is that the kind of final reality of our existence—a movement back and forth between experiences of no I, no me, no my, no self, and then back to I, me, my, and self, sometimes with a vengeance? This movement, this fluctuation between the two, seems to express our inner life and its unfoldment and its revelation.

Given all of that, it would be unwise, I would say, and unskillful, to highlight no self into something transpersonal. The Buddha never did it. The teachings needn't do it either. We might suddenly start saying, "Well, if I'm really going to live with the truth, then I would need to abide much more frequently in the no-I experience, because that's the real truth, because the I is a total lie, a total deception, a total fiction, and therefore totally untrue." But human experience has never supported that. Neither have the teachings of awakening, and certainly not the Buddha who, like other human beings, used with regularity the language of I in his teachings—fairly clear and self-evident.

So if in our experience of life we begin to elevate one no-I experience—spontaneously in meditation, when out in nature, when all the roles have dropped away, in a sudden perception that can take place, in the very descriptions that we speak about life just going on—it's all no-I language that's being used. You and I use it regularly. The poets have used it frequently. It's a common appreciation and realization. And then the I arises and appears and shows itself.

Here is the significant factor. It's not so much the presentation of I or its non-presentation in the ways that I've been speaking about. The question is: with the I, is there suffering? With the I, is there suffering?

The I itself, in a way, is not I. In a way, it's not I. It's another manifestation of life, another presentation that comes. There's been a dwelling on the character of I, I, I—but in a way, it's not I. This very I itself is an I which is shared with all humanity. That sense of I that I have when I sit here, that feeling of I, that quality, that notion, that deeply rooted idea or perception that I have, is the same I everywhere. The feeling of I, the notion of I, the experience of I, the quality of I, the language of I, the concept of I—this

is something pervasive. In a way, it is not I, as much as the experiences of not I that arise occasionally, sometimes with some insight, some realization, some penetration into these things.

There's a kind of evenness of awareness, an evenness of seeing, which stops this distinguishing between I and my on one hand, and not I, not my on the other. There's a kind of sameness to it all.

What makes the difference, as I pointed out a few moments ago, is this: with the I and my, is there suffering in it? Is it locked, bound up with suffering? When it is bound up with suffering, our distinction as a supposedly separate self is the strongest distinction. When we're free from that I and there's spaciousness, expansiveness, warmth or love or contentment or equanimity or stability or calmness, and there's not a grasping upon that, there's a sense of interconnectedness which comes easily and naturally for us.

But when I am suffering, it brings—and is the one factor which brings—an extraordinary degree of substantiality and reification and hardness and emotion and fixation to I. Suffering does that more than anything else for the I.

So as we explore that and bring our awareness to all of it, looking into the nature of suffering, of dukkha, of unsatisfactoriness, it naturally makes less of I. Because the I can't get separate from that suffering. And our capacity—inwardly, outwardly, together, with ourselves—then begins to help us change the conventions of perception, change the social norms and viewpoints that we have, and in fact begin to make a shift of consciousness.

There is a shift of consciousness which the teachings express again and again—a shift which is a final shift, a shift which is for once and for all. There is an end to the spiritual path, an end to spiritual practice, and therefore that shift brings everything to completion. The issues of I and no I have resolved themselves.

People in spiritual practice, in this duality of moving backwards and forwards, with all the exploration that it takes—looking at what is I, what is not I—can also get confused, understandably so, by language which I think is not helpful and not useful: the language of the higher self and the lower self, the language of the self with a capital T and a capital S, the language of a transcendental self or a pure soul.

Though that language can be used, it needs to be employed with extraordinary caution because of the confusion that can arise. The Buddha himself, and the healthiest aspects of the tradition, have never elevated self into some ultimate category. How easily in these fields the ego can confuse itself for all sorts of unsatisfactory motives and latch

on to "I am the supreme self"—the conceit, the arrogance, the power tripping, the ego that can flourish when one is fastening or grasping onto the self with a capital T and a capital S.

So if we can, in our awareness of experiences of I and no I, of self and not self, keep it as much as possible within the relative fields of experience—both of which we know, both of which we comment on in various ways—without elevating no-self to an ultimate category, which Buddhists have done from time to time, or this elevation of the self into an ultimate category, which has also taken place, most noticeably in the Hindu tradition.

If you say there's this movement, self and no-self, going on side by side or simultaneously together, where is the consummation? Where is the end of all this exploration, all this endeavor, all this inquiry? What's going to bring it to a final, once-and-for-all completion in which there's no self-deception left, no falling back into the dualisms, the backwards and forwards between self and no-self, between me and this, that, and the other? What is that shift which is spoken of with such assurance through the sages for generations—that which, as I say, has a finality to it, and the experience of life confirms that finality?

A number of you in this hall have had tremendous exposure to spiritual teachings and practices here and elsewhere, in fact worldwide. It can be rather easy, understandably so, to be almost constantly and consistently working on the relative. Working on the relative is to work on the state of mind. To work on the relative is to work on the I and the not I. Working on the relative is to work on the relationship to bodily experiences and all those processes I referred to earlier.

And it might need—and it can be scary and generate some doubt and difficulty—to really lose interest, and I mean lose interest, in working so much, so long, and so hard on states of mind and states of body. Somewhere in all of that working upon all of that, one has to say to oneself: enough is enough is enough is enough. Whatever the forms and strategies one has employed for that working on mind—remember, including emotions and every form of inner human experience—to be able to say to oneself, and this is no easy undertaking for a thoughtful and caring human being, enough.

And of course that can generate some restlessness. But what if I stop all of that? If I stop that, then what? Perhaps the attention needs to make a shift from the known and the familiar, which is heart, mind, and body, to that which is unknown and which is not of any of that.

It's as though we need for this a different type of concentration—the Buddha has referred to this, I may add—a different type of concentration, a concentration of that which is not mind and body. And the language for that, if one likes and uses language, needs to have a feeling response to, and is in fact ultimate in its feature, for those who have the language for that.

That language may be truth. That language may be ultimate dharma. That language may be liberation. That language may be enlightenment. That language may be God. That language may be realization. That language may be emptiness, which makes everything possible.

So one is actively forgetting, purposefully and quite deliberately, the incidental and irrelevant events that go on in the name of heart, mind, and body, and puts the concentration, so to speak, elsewhere—quite off that and quite onto that which is ultimate.

For some people, that shift of concentration, of attention, from relative matters—heart, mind, body, being in the world—to the focus and concentration and attention upon that which is ultimate, which is the fulfillment and the shift that matters, some feel, understandably and appropriately, no wish to bring a language to it, no wish to use a word.

The Buddha himself has been extremely and unusually cautious about using a word. Sometimes he'll say nirvana, sometimes he'll say liberation, sometimes he'll say the truth which never changes, sometimes he'll say enlightenment. Never fixing a particular word and keeping and identifying with it strictly again and again. Using language, I think, remarkably skillfully, so that we don't get a fixation about some word.

What is that to concentrate on which is not heart, mind, body, and the things going on around us? It requires a special kind of sense. So if one takes as an example: freedom. True freedom, and the understanding and the realization of freedom which is nirvana, which is the truth, which is liberation, which is enlightenment, which is God. What is that freedom? What is this freedom? What is this liberation? What is this enlightenment?

And the events of mind and body are quite marginalized, quite peripheral, because one is exploring and finding out what it is to realize the ultimate truth—not to be shy nor afraid of actually bringing that final and fulfilling element of the spiritual quest to completion. And therefore I say it's a certain kind of concentration, a certain kind of interest and focus. Why? Because we're willing to go from the known, which is oneself in the world, to that which is unknown.

But that which is unknown, in its shift, transforms everything about the way that one sees life. Everything, once and for all. And it's genuinely and authentically liberating.

But we may have to forget our self and our no-self. We may have to just put it aside. Those discoveries which can take place, which are immediacy for us, can of course happen quite spontaneously—not through any concentration, not through any special attention to words, not through losing interest in that duality of life of "am I or am I not," "what shall I do or shan't do," and all those dualities, the pleasant and the unpleasant that we were hearing about in the inquiry this afternoon. The realizations, of course, can occur which are liberating and have a steadiness to them.

Therefore, in that steadiness, it's the one valid means, the one instrument that a human being has to know if they've realized something. If they've realized something, it's real. If it's real, it stays steady. If it stays steady, it's not going to be lost by the events of the world. And if one hasn't had realization but has had invaluable and important experiences in the spiritual life which come and go, it's not a realization. Realization makes real, makes steady, makes present—not affected by the dance that goes on around us. And sometimes we do get confused between what we've realized and what we've experienced.

Here we're interested in experiencing and staying steady with the truth of things. The truth of things has got nothing to do with impermanence, nothing to do with unsatisfactoriness, and nothing to do with no-self. That's just the conventional way that you and I apprehend existence and function in it. But what is the truth of things? That which stays steady, not subject to coming and going, not subject to unsatisfactoriness, and not subject to the presence and absence of self. What is the truth?

As I say, that can be apprehended, realized, through spontaneity. And for some, that spontaneity comes in various ways. It can also be realized through the processes which we engage in the spiritual life—in the commitment to spiritual practice, the urgency and the love of the quest for what is the truth. Not something to cling to, to make an ideology of and completely misunderstand the truth of things. What is the truth of things?

And that contemplative indwelling is something which I would say often gets forgotten and neglected. What is liberation here and now? What is that which stays steady in spite of the movement of birth and death? And if we can allow ourselves to dwell and contemplate and reflect and abide in these things, perhaps that will be a contribution to that realization.

Otherwise we get caught on those common horns of dilemma which I hear frequently in and out of retreats, where sometimes one will speak in ways of just being. Nothing to do, nothing to gain, nothing to benefit from, nothing to pursue, nothing to run after. Just being. And it's an important and invaluable aspect of spiritual teachings.

And one will also hear from voices like mine and others: just being—that isn't enough. Just having a depth of calmness and stability and just being present and being with life in a personal or impersonal way—that isn't enough. And that does generate the sense, of course, of something more. And so one can go back: well, if I'm just being there, then perhaps it can come spontaneously, and that approach is valid and useful and significant. And if it's just being, then perhaps I need to do something more to accelerate, to bring something about—that shift which has its own finality to it. And there are experiences and movements where we can go back and forth between these approaches.

More important than the question of being and the question of doing is: what is the truth of things? What is this liberation which is spoken about and has been and will be spoken about from one generation to the next? What is this freedom?

And as I said, one of the features of that realization is, in terms of heart, mind, and body, it takes so much—and in some cases all—of the suffering that's tied up with the inner life. It takes it out. Because the inner life is freed up from it.

And all these things are what we speak about when we speak of finding God, living with God, being with God, knowing God, dwelling with God—if that language is comfortable for us. And it's nothing theoretical or abstract or distant or whatever. A person knows what that means. And for someone who says the word God—G-O-D—"I can't relate to it, it means nothing to me"—fine, fine. One doesn't ever have to introduce the word God. There is another word: what liberation is, what freedom is. And for some, not that word also. All can fade away from consciousness.

So let's be as clear as we humanly can with our relative experiences of life, which I've been referring to—their place in life, their usefulness in life—and that which is truly, truly.

And then we pay the greatest respect to life, to the truth of things, to the nature of things, and to what it is to be.

May all beings live with awareness and insight.
May all beings see deeply into the nature of things.
May all beings taste daily liberation.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 212

In Search For Self And No-Self

Carol Wilson · 52 min

In this profound exploration of identity and liberation, Carol Wilson traces the human journey from childhood conditioning through the cultural pressure to 'be someone' to the spiritual quest for no-self (anattā). She examines how our sense of self develops through the authorities we encounter as children, and how we become trapped in the tyranny of appearance and performance as measures of self-worth.

Wilson offers a nuanced perspective on the Buddhist teaching of no-self, cautioning against both the endless pursuit of a 'real self' and the spiritual bypassing that can occur when we try to deny or transcend the self through rejection rather than wisdom. She points out how even profound meditation insights can become appropriated by the self—'I saw no-self'—missing the deeper understanding that freedom is not about getting rid of something substantial, but about dissolving ignorance itself.

The talk culminates in a teaching on ignorance (avijjā) as the belief in separation and duality as ultimate reality. Wilson guides practitioners toward discovering what cannot be made into an object—a suchness that embraces all form and appearance while being limited to nothing. Using the metaphor of clouds in a vast sky, she points to an awareness that holds all experience without being dependent upon any of it, inviting us toward genuine freedom rather than simply a better or more spiritual self.

What I'd like to speak about this evening is the search for self and the search for no-self.

The self is clearly a very central figure in our lives. It's the axis around which revolves our stories and our dramas, our histories and our searches. The self is the link of continuity through which we weave together our past, our present, and our future. It is a central figure in our joys and in our sorrows, our successes and our failures, our hopes and our disappointments. It is clearly an enduring companion in our lives.

It seems that there is no experience that is complete without the self to make it happen or to have it happen to. At times we feel good about ourselves. At times we feel bad about ourselves. Rarely do we feel indifferent about ourselves. The self is like the monster under our bed, like the dragon in our closet. Even in those moments when we are not so conscious of it, it seems that it is lurking somewhere, waiting to pounce. It is clearly something of enduring interest. There's almost nothing more interesting to us in our lives than ourselves.

What I'd like to do this evening, firstly, is to reflect a little bit upon the history of the self. What we understand about it, how it has evolved, and what role the self actually plays in our lives in this moment. Is it a help to us? Is it a hindrance? Is the self a friend or an enemy? Is it real at all? Or are we simply shadow boxing with a shadow partner, engaged in an endless dance with an insubstantial shadow?

The spiritual journey is, one might say, a journey to discover who we are, if we use that in a very cosmic context. There are entire spiritual practices devoted to this one single question—to sit hour after hour, day after day, month after month, and year after year with this one single question: Who am I? That question is an endeavor to discover what is actually true and genuine, a quest to discover what is authentic, and also a quest to discover what is false, what is just conditioned and constructed and built.

The search in the spiritual life to discover who we are really mirrors much of the searches and choices that go on elsewhere in our lives. In a way, we might say that our lives are a map of our search for definition. Our lives are a kind of record of searching for self, searching for an identity that we feel in harmony with, that we feel is authentic. This search is very compelling for us because we equate certainty about our identities with happiness and security. To have certainty around who we are seems to provide us with inner authority. And we all know in our lives that to be deprived of inner authority, we end up essentially at the mercy of other people's authorities. If we don't have inner authority, we seem to become a casualty, at the mercy of other people's selves that are stronger than our own. We end up at the mercy of other people's expectations, standards, values, and demands. In one way it seems almost necessary to have a self in order to survive in a world of selves.

We can trace this search for self and identity really back to our earliest memories. No child is born as a kind of blank slate—I think I can say that with some certainty. From the perspective of parents, it seems that children are born with a kind of budding self. A little self. Sometimes a very loud self, but a little self that clearly and loudly expresses preferences, likes and dislikes, patterns and tendencies. From a parent's point of view, parents often feel that they really don't have much choice about the miniature self that has been introduced into their lives.

I know from a parent's point of view, to be in the face or in the company of a child who is going through some grand dramatic tantrum—parents often look at each other in bewilderment and say, "Where did it come from? It's not me. It's not mine. It didn't come from me." And yet it's there. One encounters parents who are dedicated to nonviolence, who bid farewell to their children as they enter military training camp. And one

meets parents who are perhaps very ambitious and assertive in their world and cannot understand their child's fascination with Japanese tea ceremonies. There seems to be little choice about, in some ways, what happens.

Those parents, of course, are very ready to abdicate all responsibility when their junior selves depart from their standards of acceptability and desirability, just as they're equally ready to claim credit when their junior selves seem to be doing rather well.

From a child's point of view, I think they often feel just the same.

We don't seem to have much choice either. From a child's point of view, I think it is true that there is no child who is born with an unshakable sense of self. There is something there, but it is not an unshakable sense of self. From a child's point of view, I think it often feels like clay—that our childhood identities, how we feel about ourselves, are very much shaped and molded by the authorities that we meet in our lives.

Our parents, our friends, our teachers, our social standards, our peers—all have their own standards and their own values which we are exposed to, which are at times imposed upon us, which are at times thrust upon us. And all of these standards and values and expectations that we meet as children, and the feedback we receive, all play a part in forming our sense of self.

Now no matter how benevolent the authorities are that we meet in our lives when we are children, those authorities do still carry with them certain expectations and values about what is right and wrong, what is acceptable, what is unacceptable, what is worthy and what is unworthy. We meet those dualities early in our experience as human beings. Those polarizations that we meet also carry with them certain consequences and certain shadows. We learn what the path is to praise and to love and to acceptance. We learn as children what the path is to blame and to judgment and to rejection. And when we are faced with a certain inner uncertainty, when we are faced with our own craving for belonging and for acceptance, then we learn which path is essentially the smart path to follow. We learn which path seems to be the one that is going to reap the rewards that we want—the affirmation, the acceptance, the approval.

Conformity can be one of childhood's guidelines, and it can also become a habit of a lifetime. Becoming what other people would like us to be, or seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, or internalizing the standards and the values and the expectations of others and adopting them as our own—so that we have our own standards, they feel like our own, of right and wrong and good and bad and worthy and unworthy.

There is no value, of course, in blaming anyone for this whole process and this whole cycle. Even the most loving and the most benevolent of parents bequeath a legacy to their children of their own values and their own standards. I know my children probably really look forward to the day when they don't have to be around someone who asks them all the time to pay attention. I'm sure when they grow up they will never want to have another moment of attention.

To some degree our self-definition is something that we inherit. To some degree it's based upon our own experience. To some degree our sense of identity is imposed upon us.

As we grow in our lives and grow more conscious, our search for self-definition, our search for identity goes through some changes. We go through some changes. We find ourselves to some extent less vulnerable to the expectations and the feedback we receive from others. To some extent, we find ourselves perhaps less governed by the need always to find approval and avoid disapproval. To some extent we learn through our own experience what benefits us and what limits us. And in our growing awareness and growing wisdom, no longer are all of our choices and directions and aspirations linked to or dependent upon only what we think the rewards will be.

Then we enter into another cycle, I think, of the self. We begin to search for what we sometimes call the real self. Not the one we inherited, not the one that was imposed upon us, but the real self. A self that we feel in harmony with. A self that embodies in some way, in a deep way, what we value and what we honor and what we aspire to.

This field of exploration for the real self is actually pretty vast. There are a lot of opportunities around, different selves to be. Sometimes we cast our eyes around the world and we think of all these different selves that would be nice to be, or what we might like to be. We could be the executive self, or we could be the earth mother self, or we could be the fast lane swinging type self, or we could be the nature lover self and live in the wilderness. We could be the mother self or we could be the independent, autonomous self. There are a lot of different selves that offer themselves to us.

We also meet, I think, as we begin our search for the real self, the incredibly powerful expectations in our culture to be someone. This is a very important thing in our culture—to be someone, to be someone special, to make your mark upon the world, to distinguish yourself, to succeed, to have a successful self. Being someone is something that has enormous prestige. Sometimes also we call it fulfilling the potential of ourselves. Being someone in our culture is considered to be one of the most worthy goals to strive for—to look for a label, to look for a description, to look for credentials that prove or that are evidence that we are special, that we have a special self, a successful self. We

have made it in the world. We have made our mark, we will be remembered. People admire us and applaud us. We try to arrive in many ways at this very hallowed destination of being someone.

In our culture it's almost a sacred pursuit, looking for acclaim, looking for prestige. We know that in our culture there's little room for no-ones. To be nobody, to be no one in this culture? This means you blew it, basically. You got lost on the way.

You faltered. You fell by the wayside. You're invisible. You wasted your life. If you are no one, if you are not someone, you've wasted your whole life—this is often the unspoken judgment. When you go out in the world and meet that inevitable question, "What do you do?"—you know, "Who are you?"—these credential questions start probing to find out what the self is. If you said, "There's no one home," the response is not going to be very rewarding. In fact, to be no one in our culture is essentially equated with being invisible. People who are no one in our culture are kind of ignored, sensed to be unworthy of attention, invisible to others.

Now searching to be someone can actually become quite a mission in our lives. And on one level we might say, well, this is psychologically very healthy and a very necessary process—to wean ourselves away from the authority of others, to wean ourselves away from the expectations of others, to wean ourselves away from the dependency upon other people to know who we are. In a way, we might say it's a healthy and necessary process of learning about autonomy, learning about inner authority, exploring our own potential. And of course, in many ways this is absolutely true. We need to go through this process of searching and questioning and looking to understand who we are apart from other people's expectations and images and needs and demands. It is a necessary and healthy process in our lives.

But we do need to be cautious also in our admiration of this process, and also to appreciate, perhaps, the endlessness of this craving to be someone, and how it can lead us into so very many detours in our lives. Because we see the nature of the self, it seems, is that it is never content really to be in a supporting role. It wants to be a star. It wants to be special. It wants to be visible. And sometimes you might even think of the self as being an appetite, as being a kind of hunger—a craving: *I want. I must be someone.* An appetite that may possibly never be satisfied. I've never met anyone who's satisfied that appetite.

So how do we achieve? And the reason we need to be cautious in our search for self, or even in our search for what is authentic—we need to be very careful in questioning: How do we actually achieve being someone? What are the avenues that we follow in order to find what is the real self, or in order to find a self that feels authentic?

Well, the primary ways in which our sense of self grows and is affirmed is through appearance and through performance. These two standards are the ways in which we evaluate the self, and the ways in which the self—who we are—is evaluated by others in the world: by appearance and by performance.

Now, I think we need to appreciate the tyrannical nature of these addictions to these two things of appearance and performance. They are the ways in which self seeks to find acceptance and praise. Appearance is one way of finding a credible self—looking for the appearance that tells us that we have the right body, the right mind, the right personality that we can present to the world. Appearance is the first basis of judgment by which we judge ourselves or others. Appearance also becomes the means to rewards in our world, the means to finding praise and love and acceptance.

But look what we do in servitude to this tyrant of appearance. How much that servitude or that addiction to appearance and to rightness is simply another name for self-abuse. How much restlessness, agitation, and fear in our lives feeds upon this tyrant of appearance—the fear of being unacceptable and the desire to find the right appearance. When the mirror in our lives becomes an endless authority. When the bathroom scales become a way of evaluating our sense of self-worth on a day-to-day basis. When how we judge ourselves on the basis of our bodies becomes a way of rejecting ourselves.

Now performance in our culture is the other path for discovering an acceptable self. And the addiction to performance manifests also in our obsession with perfection—being perfect in our work, in our roles, in our identities. Being the perfect partner, the perfect employee, the perfect mother, the perfect meditator. Performance is the way we win the admiration of others, and sometimes we feel the need to win the admiration of others before we can accept ourselves. This preoccupation with performance also naturally means an addiction to doing, because there are so many tasks to complete and so many improvements to make and so many things to fix. And sometimes it seems we'll never ever get to that point where we'll arrive at the right self.

Somebody else always seems to have it. We look around and everybody else must be doing it right, or better, or have the right appearance, the right way of looking, the right way of doing something. Somebody else is always a better mother, a better meditator, a better worker, a better writer, a better speaker—whatever it may be. Somebody else always seems to have the self that we would like to have.

Or else the self that we work really hard for—that we truly labor to get, all that effort we put into constructing that right self. Those hours and months and years of modifying ourselves. And then the self that we get doesn't really look like the one we wanted,

or the one we even seemed to be promised. Even when the rewards come, I sometimes feel that those rewards really do very little to heal the emptiness, or that sense of fear inwardly of never being right and never being good. The obsession with perfection is always a winning of halos, a working for halos. But trying to be good always has that companion of never feeling to be good enough.

Now we come to the spiritual path, we come to meditation. I think sometimes we feel quite relieved to hear about no-self—to hear, or even to encounter through our own experience, that we are not the mind and not the body. Phew. It's good news, isn't it? To hear that we cannot be defined by appearance, that we cannot be defined by any image, that we cannot be defined by any judgment, that we cannot be defined by any description. Instead, we are even encouraged to truly turn away from this quest of looking for a special self or a real self or a unique self. The goalposts are moved in our cycle of self. Suddenly the goalposts are moved. We hear instead the message that to pursue self is actually to pursue conflict, struggle, and alienation.

But I think it's also true that when we hear about the possibility of no-self, sometimes we have mixed feelings about it. On one level, certainly it's a relief to lay down this burden of relentless seeking for self-improvement and perfection. But on another level, no-self doesn't really seem like that great an idea.

There is a valid feeling—and I think for many women too—that we put so much effort into discovering what is authentic, into reclaiming our sense of femininity, into respecting ourselves, into learning how to honor ourselves and the forms in our lives, that we may feel very reluctant to hear this encouragement to let go, to not define ourselves by anything.

It is very true that all of us live in a world of form. We have relationships, we have work, we have bodies, we have aspirations. All of these are forms in our lives, and they are vehicles for embodying and manifesting what we most deeply hold to be true, authentic, and valuable. We need to honor those forms. They are vehicles of communication. The forms in our lives are the ways in which we communicate who we are, what is possible, and what we trust to be authentic. They are important to honor.

But sometimes the reluctance around no-self comes from a different source. Because I think actually we can trust that freedom does not mean negating ourselves. It does not mean negating the forms in our lives. It does not mean negating all of those vehicles for communication.

I think our reluctance about no-self sometimes comes from other feelings, often fear. How will we define ourselves without the guidelines of appearance and performance? Sometimes this is a great anxiety. How will we know what to do in the world without a self to tell us, without a self to want or not want, or to make choices? I think sometimes we feel that no-self might mean that we're going to be glued to a zafu for the rest of our lives, staring at a wall or at our navel. This whole idea of being no one sometimes evokes our greatest fears of floundering, of being invisible and homeless.

The underlying message, I think, that at times you might interpret as hearing in spiritual teaching—and sometimes you might hear it, it's true, I have to confess—is that there's something shameful about having a self. This is not my teaching, but you might come across it. That there's something shameful about having a self. There are certainly spiritual paths which entirely, totally discourage you from discussing anything personal because it's immediately pointed out: "This is just the self. This is just the self"—as if that makes it any better.

It doesn't make it feel any better just because it's "just the self"—it feels just the same. It seems the self has feelings.

But when we hear about this kind of shamefulness about having a self, about the I—you know, the dreaded I—sometimes we are almost tempted to swear allegiance to the anti-self organization. There seems to be some kind of imperative: I must get rid of the self. If I'm going to be spiritual, I have to get rid of this self. And there's that old Zen statement where they sit you on a cushion and say, "Die on the cushion." And of course I'd be happy to die on the cushion, but how? Tell me how.

So then sometimes we undertake a new cycle. The self sometimes goes through a new phase. From being bad news in one way, it becomes bad news in another way. It seems obvious in this world—one basic message here is the self can't win. That's a basic message. So we undertake this new quest to find no self.

Now, this quest to find no self, if it is based upon denial, if it is based upon fear, or if it is based upon rejection, has some inevitable and lethal side effects. When we try to focus upon getting rid of the self or disowning the self or transcending the self or negating the self or cutting through the self—all those things it's possible to try and do—often what happens is we make a very basic sacrifice of sensitivity and compassion and interconnectedness, because we undertake the quest for no self at times in a spirit of denial. And when there is denial rather than wisdom, when there is denial rather than understanding the body, mind, and spirit dynamics, then that denial extends itself in a very wide field. It becomes a denial of form, a denial of relationship, and a denial of nature.

I think we have seen this in the spiritual life—this incredible duality where we can be inhabiting and reaching for the heavens, reaching for all these wonderful spiritual attainments, while it's possible to live with total lack of integrity and impeccability in the world. It's possible to have fantastic spiritual credentials and be reaching for a wonderfully seemingly blessed spiritual life, and yet be so absorbed in that pursuit that we can exploit or deny the world around us at the same moment.

Now even when the quest for understanding ourselves is undertaken with wisdom, we must still be cautious. We must still have this element of inquiry.

In meditation, we do discover actually, on a very profound level, the transparency of self. This is what we do here. And we discover very quickly this transparency. When you sit and you're even just a little bit still, you see this endless parade, this endless arising and passing of thoughts and feelings and sensations and sounds. What happens through the stillness and through the calmness is that the glue that previously bound all of those things together into a sense of self, into a kind of puzzle picture, begins to come unstuck. The glue begins to come unstuck, and it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate anything which is actually enduring. It becomes increasingly difficult to isolate anything within that parade and passing show and to point to it and say, "This is what I am" or "This is who I am." The moment that we begin to look for it, it is already past.

We see the arising of objects—the thoughts, the feelings, the sensations. We see the arising of all of these different notions about ourselves: I am this, I am that, I was this, I will be that. I am, I have, I know, I listen, I see, I want, I don't want. With clear attentiveness and stillness, as that glue begins to become unstuck, many of those ideas don't seem quite so solid anymore. They don't seem quite so substantial anymore. They begin to dissolve.

Actually, when we begin to look for something that we can say "I am," we are already looking at what has already gone by. It's like you look around to try and find yourself, and the only self that you can find is the one that is already gone. It is always looking behind. "I was," you know. I was that thought, and there's a new thought. I was that image, and now there is something new. It is hard to find anywhere any center to rest in, anything that is substantial.

Now this can become, of course, very interesting. It becomes incredibly interesting. But it's also interesting the way in which we can take no self so personally. We see this arising and passing of these different selves.

And we can see this kind of lack of solidity, this lack of transparency. But we can also take it very personally.

I'd like to read you a story. One day a rabbi, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed in before the altar, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast crying, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on his knees shouting, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The caretaker was watching from the corner. He couldn't restrain himself either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with his elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody."

Now of course this is very humorous, but we might find ourselves also in somewhat of a similar position. We might come and say in an interview, "I saw no self." Really? "I had a wonderful experience of emptiness." Really? Where is it that we feel we can possess these insights? We feel we want to possess these insights. These are the best of the insights, the cream of the crop, the fruit that we've harvested, and we would like them to be mine.

In some way, even in the midst of that transparency and that passing show, we can still be preoccupied in a very subtle way with self—defining ourselves anew by our ability to see transparency. Have you ever had that experience when you sit and you have a moment of stillness, and this little voice comes in and says, "Ah, look, I'm quiet. Oh look, I finally let go"? We long to possess the insights. What a wonderful new self—a spiritual self we have now. An enlightened self. A very wise self.

It is true that in seeing this passing show, there is a sense of a great deal of transparency, a perception of transparency. And in some way we would like to make it into an experience that makes me look better, that makes me have a better self. In some way the self arises and wants to make a possession.

Now in thinking of no self as an experience in any way, there is some greater understanding of emptiness which may be missing—the liberating emptiness, the liberating understanding. In some subtle way at times, awareness is appropriated by the self.

Part of the responsibility for all of this that goes on around the self—whether it's trying to get a better self, or all of this that goes on around trying to have no self or trying to get rid of self—can really be laid at the feet of the bad rap that is given to the self. It's given such a bad rap, as if there's really some solid entity that we have to uproot from our consciousness. Sometimes the "I" is regarded as being so monstrous: the source of anger, the source of confusion, the source of delusion, the source of separation, the source of alienation. The self is blamed with so many things. It has a terrible reputation.

But all of this naming and blaming of the self leads to preoccupation with the self, whether it's pursuing a real self or whether it is pursuing no self. And I feel all of this naming and blaming is actually crediting the self with a level of power and substantiality which it simply doesn't have.

Trying to get a real self, trying to get rid of the self—sometimes these are two different enactments of the same dance, and both can rather miss the point. Trying to get rid of the self, we have assumed or given it an exaggerated responsibility. Sometimes then we can become preoccupied again with having the right performance and the right appearance, having the right kind of experience, the right kind of insight. It's another way of validating the self.

Now in meditation there is only one way that the self survives in substantiality, that the self manages to maintain an identity, and that is by making an object out of meditation. This is how the self survives meditation. The object becomes our experience, even when the experience is no-self. We might say, "I have good meditations" or "I have bad meditations." "I have great meditations" or "I have terrible ones." All the time we are making an object out of meditation, something to evaluate, and we evaluate ourselves on the basis of that object. Through objectifying meditation, making it into an experience—something that happens to me or something that I make happen—we actually pursue and preserve separation. We rest within those three areas of saying, "I have," "I am," and "I know."

Freedom is not the cessation. Freedom is not just the understanding of no self. Freedom is actually the cessation of ignorance. When I use the word ignorance, I'm not trying to offend you. What is ignorance?

Ignorance is believing duality and separation to be reality. Ignorance is to believe separation to be truth—to believe that there is reality in the divisions between inner and outer, I and you, us and them, black and white, high and low, inferior and superior, spiritual and worldly. Ignorance is believing that one object lives apart and separate from all other objects, just as we believe that we live apart and separate from all other selves. Ignorance is believing in those divisions and dualities to be the truth of how things are.

That ignorance then becomes expressed in the obsession with appearance and performance, with name and form.

There is no one to blame for ignorance. There is no one who can be judged for ignorance, and judgments make no difference. Where is the beginning of ignorance? Does it make any difference to trace our family trees and find which of our ancestors was the first one to start the cycle of self-hatred? It makes no difference. There is no one to blame for ignorance. But ignorance can be dissolved.

Believing duality and separation to be reality is like looking into a mirror clouded with steam and seeing ourselves all distorted, believing and mistaking what we see to be the truth of who we are. We can take steps to wipe the mirror clear. We take steps in meditation to cultivate attentiveness, to cultivate focus. We take those steps with grace and wisdom to bond, to find intimacy with this moment. But we don't want to spend our lives polishing mirrors. It would be much better to see what is true, to see what is not distorted.

We take steps in meditation to cultivate calmness and serenity and impeccability so that we know how to live our lives increasingly in a spirit of nobility, in respect of what is sacred. But we don't take these steps so that we are going to gradually find the perfect face. We take these steps so that we can learn to leave struggle, so that we can learn to leave behind us the appetite of wanting, so that we can learn that there does lie within us a place of profound peace, of profound contentment, of profound wisdom that we know how to rest within.

But if we really want to know who we are, then we have to inquire very deeply and seek that which we cannot make an object of. To seek that which we cannot make an object of. When what we cannot make an object of is discovered, then we discover what it actually means to be free.

Freedom emerges not through an experience, but through grace and stillness—through the awareness and stillness that dissolves the world of appearances. And in that dissolving, we don't necessarily see a perfect face. We might even see the face we wore before we were ever born.

There emerges out of grace and stillness a profound and unshakable understanding of what is unconditioned—a suchness that embraces all life, all form and all appearance, but that is limited to nothing. A suchness that embraces all things without limitation.

It is like looking into the sky filled with cloud formations. In one way we might be very admiring of all those formations and think how interesting they are. We might even look at the space between the cloud formations and observe the way the clouds are dissolving. We might even open our eyes to the vastness of the sky which is embra-

cing all of those formations but is limited to none of them and dependent upon none of them. We might discover in that looking the vastness of awareness, the vastness of suchness, the vastness of being.

May all beings live with awareness. May all beings deepen in wisdom. May all beings be free.

CHAPTER 213

No Person, No Problem

Carol Wilson · 44 min

In this penetrating talk, Carol Wilson uses a striking teaching story to illuminate the relationship between samādhi and vipassanā—the cultivation of both concentrated attention and clear seeing. Drawing from the Ānāpānasati Sutta's thirteenth contemplation on impermanence, she demonstrates how deep insight into anicca naturally reveals the other two universal characteristics: dukkha and anattā.

Wilson examines how we construct a sense of self through our relationship to body, feelings, and mind states, constantly attaching to experiences as 'me' or 'mine.' She offers the Buddha's essential teaching: "Under no conditions attach to anything whatsoever as being me or mine." This attachment, she explains, is avijjā (ignorance)—the root of saṃsāric existence. The 'birth' the Buddha speaks of as suffering isn't merely physical birth, but the moment-to-moment arising of ego-identification.

Through practical examples—from the experience of 'being breathed' during meditation to observing how greed, hatred, and delusion operate across all social classes—Wilson shows how mindfulness itself weakens the grip of self-construction. She emphasizes that while samādhi provides temporary relief from self-centeredness, only vipassanā can uproot it. The talk concludes with guidance on choiceless awareness practice, where simply attending to the arising and passing of phenomena reveals their empty nature, offering freedom from self-enslavement.

I know there's still a bit of confusion about the difference between samadhi or shamatha and vipassana, especially among some of the people who are rather new. There's an old Indian teaching story which may be of some help.

Apparently, there was a king who was also a very great yogi and meditation master. Someone came to him wanting to study with him, to also master what he knew. So the king said, "All right, here's your first training. Go through the entire palace with a bucket of hot oil on your head without spilling one drop."

This candidate went through the entire palace successfully with his bucket of oil on his head, went into every room, came back, and had not spilled a drop. He was very pleased with himself and thought he had completed the exercise.

The king then asked him, "Well, what's going on in the palace? Any intrigues going on? Who's sleeping with who? Any power plays, plots to kill me?"

He said, "Well, I don't know. I was so concentrated on not spilling any of the oil that I didn't notice what was going on."

So the king said, "Okay, now go back through the palace with the same bucket of oil on your head. Don't spill a drop, but give me a full report about what's going on."

That's what we're learning. We're learning how to do both.

The retreat has moved into the choiceless awareness aspect of practice, where when the mind is more calm or concentrated, we have the option of sitting quietly and being receptive to whatever turns up, to learning about it, to seeing its nature. Sometimes the term impermanence is used. Anatta, emptiness, no self.

I read a segment of Joseph Stalin's biography written by someone. I assume everyone knows he was a mass murderer and dictator; otherwise, what I'm about to say will make no sense. At any rate, he had a high-level assistant, one of his close assistants, who one day started to complain to him about someone who was just a little bit lower, who was his assistant. He was saying, "I don't know about Ivan. He's disagreeable and seems to have a lot of ambition and gives me a hard time. He's become a problem."

Stalin got quiet, supposedly, and thought for a moment, and then he said, "Hmm. No person, no problem."

The next day, Ivan was gone.

And I realized, wow—this is good, sound Buddhist teaching. Only old Joseph was a little on the coarse side. He didn't drop down to a level where he could understand it didn't have to be so messy.

That's our challenge. You hear all these book titles and sayings: nobody home, the lights are on but there's nobody home, going nowhere, being nobody. Do you really know what that means? We buy these books, we read them. That's what it means. No person, no problem. Only we have to do it ourselves. It's bloodless and very gentle—not always pleasant.

I'm going to come at this notion of selfhood by way of impermanence. In the Anapanasati Sutta, it's dealt with in the thirteenth contemplation, where the Buddha says to be aware of impermanence with every in-breath and out-breath. Because every time you breathe in and you breathe out, you're aware that all formations are impermanent. That's a little bit closer to the quote. That means everything having to do with

the mind and body is impermanent as you sit and breathe—though it's not limited to sitting, really. As you're mindful and breathe, you begin to see that all forms are in a state of flux.

When you read Buddha's texts, if you see anicca, that's impermanence. If you see it with two other terms—dukkha, suffering, and anatta, not-self—these are called the three universal characteristics that our practice is designed to probe. We're designed to probe into the mind and body and to see these principles at work, to see if they're indeed there. Are they really universal principles of human existence?

If you see anicca along with dukkha, which means unsatisfactoriness, or anatta, which means not-self, then it simply means impermanence.

But if you see it alone, as in this thirteenth contemplation where just impermanence is mentioned, it stands for all three. The reason it stands for all three is because if you deeply, profoundly see into impermanence, you'll see that the other two are really expressions of it.

When you deeply see how everything is changing constantly—and there are many levels, as we mentioned the other evening, depths of seeing this and levels of precision of seeing this—when you see this, some of what you learn, of course, is that a great deal of what we call suffering is because everything is uncertain. Everything keeps changing. The body keeps changing. Society keeps changing. Whatever level that you look at, wherever you look, you can see: when there's something unhappy, or if the body is unhealthy, or there's an earthquake, that means life has rearranged itself in some way because nothing is autonomous. Nothing has a core. Everything is dependent on other things which themselves are also impermanent.

So it's a staggering process of movement and uncertainty because it unfolds definitely. It's not asking for our permission. It's constantly unfolding. It's ungovernable. It's not concerned with what we think. It's constantly happening. And when it affects us in a certain way, we call it suffering because it's uncertain. We never know what the result will be. That grows quite naturally out of seeing impermanence. You begin to see that so much of our suffering is because of that. It's not simply the obvious—that we get old, we get sick, and we die. It's just that from moment to moment, change itself sometimes becomes burdensome.

It's also liberating, because if there were no change, for one thing, why would we bother practicing here? We'd just be hopeless, frozen into our ignorant state. But we're not. So impermanence is not all bad news. It's just news. But what we do with it, of course, we often make it into bad news.

And anatta—perhaps even more obviously to you—how could something be a solid self, an autonomous, independent self, if it's endlessly going through changes? Every representation that comes up in the mind, notions and images, characterizations of ourselves, they come and they go. They're inconsistent, they're contradictory. They change almost like fashions, the way we regard ourselves. So there's nothing that you can really point to and say, "That's really me"—although we behave as if that's so.

When you see impermanence, and if you look for it, see it in whatever realm—because it's everywhere, you can't miss it—when you see it at the level of mind, it's just a natural discovery to understand that that which we have clung to as being something solid is an illusion. As you probe more and more deeply into the mind to try to find out what's there or who you are, you'll see that it's ungraspable. Perhaps you already see that.

In the sutta, to make it a little bit more concrete, recall we've talked about the foundation of the body. Remember the four foundations of mindfulness? The foundation of feelings, the foundations of the mind itself. One way in which the practice is done classically—and you need a lot of time for it—is that you go through each contemplation, and as you practice it, at some point you begin to see from the inside that everything is changing.

So even with the breath, you start with breathing. Even if I had never mentioned this, if you've been following the breath for quite a few days now, you must know that the breath keeps changing. And it changes in all kinds of ways. It's extremely delicate. It's very sensitive. The breath can be very smooth, fine, gentle, just a joy to be breathing. And one ugly thought—it's changed. All of a sudden, it's a bumpy ride. The breath is now labored and shallow and not enjoyable. It's not enjoyable to be breathing.

And so you could just take the realm of breathing, just breathing alone, and as you get to know breathing, you can learn the law of impermanence from breath moment to breath moment.

It's all there.

As for anatta, some of you—one person definitely had an anatta experience today. I don't want to set up expectations, although the striving has already begun. There are a fair number of people who want to get these insights that you've heard about. You don't know what they are, but you know you want them. We're not sure what these insights are, but we know we want them, because it's valued here, right? It's a good thing. I don't know what it is, but I want it.

Sometimes this may happen to you. You're sitting and breathing, and the breath becomes very, very smooth. You're not forcing it. You're not controlling it. The attention is continuous. And suddenly there's a feeling as if you're being breathed. It's absolutely and totally effortless. Sometimes it feels like you're being breathed from on high somewhere.

In that moment—and you may have already had moments of it, sometimes it can last for a while—there's definitely breathing happening. In, out, in, out. That's going on. But see if you can find the breather. You won't be able to find the breather. What you'll be able to find is the mind saying, "Oh yes, I'm the breather." But that's a thought. Or the mind might even concoct an image of itself as some wonderful yogi. That's an image. You watch it, it falls away, decomposes.

So what is happening is there's definitely breathing going on, but no one could be found who's doing the breathing. That's a taste of it. That's a taste of anatta.

And not only that—it's wonderful. Because, you see, the ego can never be happy. I don't know if you're beginning to see that yet. Impossible. The ego will never be happy. No matter what you do with it, for it, because of it—nourish it, enhance it, win awards for it, become a trillionaire—it's never going to be happy. It's just in its nature. It's impossible.

Well, in that moment when you're being breathed, the ego is taking a little vacation, and you're just sitting and breathing.

So our natural koan—for those of you who've been in the Zen tradition, I know some of you have—would be: Who's breathing? That's the big question finally. It's all about that. There is breathing, but who's doing it? Who's breathing?

You can examine any aspect of the breath. By examine, I mean just be aware of it—or of expressions in the body, bodily sensations. By now you've seen that as well. It's just torture to be sitting here, and then you just love sitting here. You can't wait for the bell to ring, or the bell is ringing too soon. You're just getting started. It's just so lovely. Why did the bell have to ring?

The body itself is going through tremendous changes. As the mind calms down, awareness can become staggering if it gets very precise, almost microscopic.

You're going to see that it's just a field of energy. A number of you are seeing that already. This word *body* makes it sound like it's solid, but it's just a process. Turn to the mind, and the process is even more so. So it's just a mind-body process, and there's nothing outside of it. That's another meaning of what we're talking about.

As you get to see the body, as you breathe in and breathe out, it's of course a wonderful field to begin learning about impermanence and also this absence of selfhood—that there's no one who owns it or controls it or who *is* it.

Now here I'm trying to also tie up some of the loose ends from interviews and things that are going on in the retreat. Some people seemed a little unclear about what the nature of the body actually is. Because in that first field of mindfulness, remember the Buddha's phrase, "seeing the body in the body"—there's a lot of valuable learning that comes out of that. Of course, the most important learning is we're learning how to be free. But one of the objectives that the Buddha sets for us, in his own words, is to begin to see that there is this body. No one's denying that there's a body. But the body is not me and it's not mine.

What in the world does that mean?

As you begin to practice self-knowing, and begin to see your actual relationship with your body, and then tune into other people's relationships to their bodies—whether it's through the mass media or just the way people talk—we're showing our relationship to the body in so many ways. You can see that it's very clear that we do identify with the body. We do think the body is me and that it is mine.

One extreme is tremendous involvement with it, whether you want to call it narcissism or something not as insulting—just endlessly preoccupied with beautifying it and strengthening it and making it young and making it last, all kinds of things. Now there's nothing wrong with any of those activities except where they're done in the service of enhancing this sense of self, which remember is being suggested is just a concoction.

Or you get the other extreme of alienation from the body, either through some indifference or perhaps some spiritual sense of superiority that you're into higher things. Or you don't like your body, so you turn away from it, for whatever reason. But both of them are caught in the body. Whether you're fighting with it or glorifying it, you're caught in the body. And the body is important material from which you're building up a sense of "I am, I am this"—whatever that image is that you're constructing.

So what the Buddha offers are a number of exercises, which we don't have time to go into, all of which are designed to balance us so that finally we slip out of those extremes. And my understanding of it is that you can take very good care of the body. In fact, you should. It's sacred. And it doesn't follow that you have to be egocentrically involved in the body. Not at all.

The best image I have for all this comes from the first Dharma teacher that I had, which was J. Krishnamurti. He used this image a lot, and it's always been very helpful to me. When we would talk about things like this, he would say, "Well, yes, it's true, you're not the body, and you don't own the body, and it's not you, and so forth. But try living your life without it." What he would say is that the relationship is very much like a cavalry soldier. You're going into combat on your horse. And although you aren't your horse, you'd better take very, very good care of that horse if you want to survive. So there can be a very beautiful relationship to the body that isn't necessarily in the service of vanity or used to build up this sense of me.

Similarly with feelings. I think by now we've all had many of them—thousands, for all I know, millions of feelings since we've been here. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. They come and go, don't they? None of them are here now. Point to any feeling that you've had today. Is it here now? Any taste, any smell, any bodily sensation that's pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, sounds—they constantly change.

Moreover, if you examine them closely, they also lack self, unless you impute self to it. *My* feeling. This is happening to *me*. *I* am having a good feeling. *I'm* having a bad feeling. This painful feeling in my body is *my* body and *I'm* suffering.

I think, as you know, we've been over this: the direct perception of pain in the body discloses pain. No one's denying there's pain. But if the mind comes in and identifies with that pain and claims it, appropriates it as part of itself, then you have torment, not just pain. Because the pain is happening to *me*, the most important being on the whole planet, in the whole universe. And it's being attacked by this pain.

And it just shouldn't be happening, but it is.

So some of this insight work is seeing the difference between mind and body, letting go of the commentator—if you recall, the announcer who's always telling you what's going on—and just working with the sensations. The same applies to the other mind states.

When we go to the mind directly, remember we talked about three of the main modes. The mind is very often in wanting something, often called greed or craving. Or not wanting, sometimes called aversion or aggression. Or confusion, ignorance, where the mind is spinning around, not quite sure what to do or where it is, characterized by a lot of darkness.

None of those mind states remain either. We don't just grasp all the time. We don't just attack all the time. And sometimes we're not confused—we're pretty decisive and clear as to what we want. So all of that field is another rich field for seeing how life is constantly changing. Everything's changing, and it's not changing in ways that we can control.

You can take a vow: "I'm only going to have saintly mind states for this retreat." Good luck. The mind has a mind of its own. It doesn't care. It will churn up what it's going to churn up due to conditions that are beyond our grasp. It's too complex for us to understand. And it doesn't last because those conditions are based on other conditions that are impermanent. And so you can learn that.

Now, if you attach to, let's say, mind moments when there's craving—I want—then of course you have larger than life. "I want." And when we're living under the influence of self-centeredness, like under the influence of alcohol, it's the same thing. Then "I want" can do all kinds of things that are destructive, because it's got to get what it really wants. And it's I who want it. It's not just that the mind has some wanting in it—it's that I want. So when people are under the influence of that, get out of the way.

We see all of that is changing. And when you pay attention, it's very clear that there's no one who owns these states. They're just formations. They're aspects of nature. Just as clouds come and go, just as the tides come in and go out, just as the sun rises and sets, just as birds fly—anything can point to nature. And in the Buddhist teaching, the mind is considered part of nature.

So we're all naturalists here. Instead of watching birds, we're watching—well, we're watching birds, but they're in our mind. And we see them come and we see them go according to a lawfulness that is out of our control.

So what? In a number of places, the Buddha gave the most concise treatment of what his whole teaching was about. And it comes down to, slightly paraphrased: under no conditions attach to anything whatsoever as being me or mine.

That's what we've been talking about. To attach to anything whatsoever as being me or mine is what is called avijja—ignorance. When you attach to things as being me or mine, you're in a state of what is called ignorance.

And we've been brought up to do that. We've been brought up to construct a sense of me, to become a somebody. We are encouraged to do it. We're rewarded for doing it. We're constantly goaded into doing it. And if you don't, then you feel like you're nothing. So it's powerful. And we've been brought up to believe that it leads to happiness.

Now, this is what is called ignorant knowledge in the Buddhist teachings, or knowledge that is not knowledge, literally. Any knowledge that does not help us eradicate ignorance—and therefore suffering, because ignorance leads to suffering—doesn't have quite the same respect in this tradition.

Under no conditions attach to anything whatsoever as being me or mine. What we're doing all day long is attaching to things as me or mine. And if you look at it, you can see that we're constantly being born into one or another state, where we're this or we're that, getting X or getting Y.

The Buddha also said that birth is suffering. On one level, this means the physical pain of being born. But also, if you're born, then that means there's a body. If you have a body, then it must get old, it must get sick, and it must die. So just to be born is suffering.

Now, a lot of us New Agers and so forth, we don't like that one too much. But can you deny it? Here's what I'm trying to get at. There's another way of understanding it—there was also an inner teaching of it, where being born isn't referring literally to the body. When the Buddha says that birth is suffering, what he's talking about is birth of the ego, birth of me, birth of I and mine.

Because we aren't in that state all the time. If we were in the state of me and mine all the time, attached to it, we would be insane. Just everything would be taken personally. Absolutely everything would be taken personally.

What is being said is that from moment to moment, things happen to us. We see something, we think of something, something is shown to us, we smell or hear something, we eat something, and this process goes to work. There's a contact and a feeling. And if the feeling is a very pleasant feeling, then we grasp after it and then we get attached. And then almost simultaneously is the birth of me and mine.

In Buddhist circles, you hear that attachment is suffering. Attachment is virtually synonymous with me or mine. Anytime you're suffering, look and see: Why am I suffering? Am I attached to something? And if you find that you are, you'll see—well, who's attached? You'll see it's me. It's happening to me. I wanted that and I'm not getting it. Or I have it, but it's being taken away. And it's an affront to something, some psychic something in us that can actually be observed. It's very subtle and very deep and very powerful, but it can be observed.

What the Buddha is saying—you hear terms like *samsara* or *puthujjana*, which means a worldly one. Worldly doesn't necessarily mean that the only people who would not be worldly would be monks or nuns. It doesn't really mean that. It means the mode

of living. When your living is always under the influence of me or mine, when the energy that drives your actions and thoughts is constantly me or mine, then that is *samsara*. Because we are creating suffering, and very often, much of the time, not realizing that we are doing it to each other—whether it's on an individual level, or just look around at the planet.

The identifications with ethnic groups is to the point of insanity. Here we are, supposedly highly sophisticated, decked out in modern clothing with modern cars—caveman, tilt-down man and woman. It's the worst of tribalism. I don't want to get political, but this is our subject. We're part of that. We're not out of that. We're not exempt from that. The same dynamic that produces this attachment to me and mine—whether the mine are objects, buildings, practices, religions, children—it's just writ large when it becomes a country or an ethnic group or a race or whatever.

So that dynamic should concern us because we're destroying each other. It's not a joke. It really isn't. And yet the only person who can help us is ourselves—to at least help ourselves step out of that.

What's also being suggested is that this dynamic of greed, hatred, and delusion, me and mine, cuts through all social classes. It cuts through all—whether you're educated or ignorant, whether you're a farmer or a professor, whether you're a Nobel Peace Prize winner or you're a street person, whether you're dressed up or in tattered clothes, young, old, prosperous, poor. What it's saying is if you look closely, the dynamic is the same. The wealthy person may be driving themselves crazy around money, having so much and wanting more. The poor person is doing the same thing by not having it. But it's not the money per se that is the torment. It's that we identify with it and we use it as the basis to build up a sense of me or mine.

So what the Buddha is saying is don't get caught in all the different forms, how we're dressed up, the clothing we're wearing.

Underneath it, this dynamic is constantly at work. It can be highly refined, where what your mere mind is built up out of is an idea, a theory, or anything at all. And the proof comes out in the pudding—no matter how we speak and no matter how we dress, if we've not done any work on this, it shows up. We make life difficult for ourselves and others because that dynamic is at work. It's got a lot of force.

It's a little bit like this: in Japan, they have a traditional kind of show where they dress monkeys up for a classical play, which is a little bit like our Shakespeare—a battle scene. You have one set of monkeys on one side of the stage and another set on the other side. One set of monkeys are decked out as certain soldiers in those outfits that the

Japanese know all too well, with a famous general in his outfit. And on the other side, they're decked out in a different kind of outfit. Everyone's familiar with the play, and they're all having a good time because the monkeys are dressed up in these outfits and performing.

One time, apparently, someone in the middle of one of these performances threw a banana on the stage. And they all just—they were monkeys. That was the end of the show. You get my drift?

So none of us can be really cocky. Spiritual materials get used in the same way. Trungpa Rinpoche coined a very important term: spiritual materialism. All the different statuses and achievements and accomplishments and levels of this and levels of that—which is really the best method, and which brand of Tibetan Buddhism, or is it Theravada, is that the major vehicle or the tiny vehicle, or Zen, but is it Soto or Rinzai? It's not so different. So our challenge is seeing that.

Now, maybe this sounds insurmountable. But don't give up—it's not hopeless, because the truth is we're practicing weakening the sense of mere mind, whether you know it or not. Every time you're mindful, really in the moment, fully there with that attention—when you are really fully there, what's happening is, when it's really developed, it's called doerless doing. There's just the doing, and you're too involved in the doing to build a status out of it, or for the action to be driven from that place of me or mine. Rather, it's just happening.

Moreover, when me or mine turns up, if mindfulness is there alongside of it, it's not so dangerous. When we're awake, so many of these so-called negative states have come and gone, but they're really not dangerous when we're aware of them. They're just what they are. They come and they go. It's when we're unaware that we slip back, get caught in them, and then of course we're nourishing me or mine again.

All of us have tasted moments when we're free of that. As I mentioned, I don't think we would have gotten this far if we didn't get a break every day. We get a break sometimes gratuitously—just very good conditions. You're with friends that you love. It's nice weather. Everything is just working out. And everyone is relaxed and kind and not preoccupied with themselves. And we're just happy. Everyone's just happy.

Usually it doesn't last all that long because something happens to get the machinery going again. Who's got what and who's where and who's on top of who and who's underneath and who's equal—it starts in again.

Or when you get strong samadhi, you're given a respite. When the mind is very, very concentrated, it's not unusual that there isn't this sense of mere mind. There's just that concentration. So that gives you a break, and that's part of why it's so fulfilling and nourishing and refreshing when we enter into quiet, when the mind becomes still out of concentration. We've given it a rest, whether we know it or not.

Unfortunately, the concentration, as useful as it is and as helpful and as remedial as it can be, doesn't uproot this tendency to attach to things as being mere mind. Ajahn Chah used the image of putting a big stone on top of grass—it holds it down, but then when you move the stone away, the grass starts up again. And that's, of course, where insight comes in, or vipassanā, or wisdom—the uprooting of it. When we begin to see clearly with our own minds, with our own eyes, this process at work—

And in the seeing, we start to weaken it, take some of the sting out of it. We don't burn ourselves so much with ourselves. We're burning ourselves.

Do you want to be a monkey running after bananas your whole life? I don't, even if they're organic.

When we're sitting in choiceless awareness, just sitting and breathing, all of this is happening. From time to time, something happens in the body. If we attach to it and appropriate it as being me or mine, then we're caught. If we see it for what it is—bodily sensations—we're free.

When feelings come and go, if they're prominent and turn up, if we grasp onto them, hold them tightly, claim them, use them as materials to build up a sense of self, then once again, that's what we're strengthening. Ignorance, our vāsanās—we're under the influence of our vāsanās. And the same with the mind states.

And so just sitting and breathing, we're watching the show, the coming and the going. And when we're attentive and that flow happens, everything just arises and passes away, even if it's just for a few moments to begin with. There's no problem. The problem is unawareness. As soon as we take our eye off the road, we're liable to have an accident.

Mindfulness and discernment, working together as comrades. As we attend to things, we begin to see their nature. We begin to see what's happening. And we learn. We learn how to be free, how to get free of our own self-enslavement.

Trungpa Rinpoche once was giving out protective cords, these cords that you put around your neck that the Tibetans give you. Jack Kornfield told me this story: Trungpa gave him one and put it on his neck, and Jack asked him, "Well, what does this protective cord protect you from?" Trungpa looked at him a little annoyed and said, "From yourself, of course."

CHAPTER 214

Birth and Death of the Self

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses what she considers the core teaching of the Buddha: the understanding of anattā (non-self) or suññatā (emptiness). Drawing extensively from the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadāsa, the influential Thai forest monk, she reframes these often-intimidating concepts as deeply practical and accessible to all practitioners.*
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> *Wilson explains that emptiness is simply the experience of moments when the mind is empty of the sense of 'I' or 'mine'—what Buddhadāsa playfully termed 'I-ing' and 'my-ing.' Rather than approaching anattā as an abstract philosophical concept, she invites practitioners to investigate directly: when the sense of self arises, turn wise attention onto it and examine what is actually being called 'I.' Through this investigation, we discover that the sense of self is merely a condition arising when there is grasping and clinging—nothing more than momentary experiences of sensation, thought, or mental image.*
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> *The talk explores how identification occurs across different aspects of experience—body, vedanā (feeling tone), thoughts, emotions, intention, and consciousness itself. Wilson emphasizes recognizing not only the birth of self but also its death, noting how often we overlook the natural peace of non-grasping that exists between these moments of identification. She offers the metaphor of space and sky as practical tools for tuning into the mind of non-attachment, encouraging practitioners to notice the silence and spaciousness around arising phenomena rather than constantly fixating on objects. This, she suggests, is the doorway to freedom and the natural arising of compassion.*

In one of the suttas, someone asked the Buddha to summarize in one phrase what it is that liberated ones know, or how it is that liberated beings are. The Buddha answered that what they know is that nothing whatsoever should be clung to. He went on to say that those who have heard this phrase have heard every phrase of the teaching. To have put it into practice is to have done every practice. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.

In a way, this is one way of describing what I feel is the core, the pith teaching of the Buddha—the main, or actually only, thing we really need to know in our practice. And that's the understanding of no-self or of emptiness. I want to talk about this root teaching of no-self or emptiness, hopefully not in a theoretical way at all. I want to talk about it because it's very wonderful. It's the teaching closest to my heart.

I know that often when we mention no-self, there can be a sense of, "Oh no"—the heart kind of drops. "I never get this. It's too complicated for me. I'm not there yet. It makes me crazy to try and think about this." The mind starts spinning with all these what-ifs: "If there's no self, then..." fill in the blanks. My intention is not to engender a sense of confusion but to help point to the fact that this is actually not a complicated teaching at all. It's the most simple, the most simple expression of how things are. I actually think that we miss it because it's so simple and we get so involved in thinking about it.

What I hope to do is talk about inviting us to inquire in our practice, both into the sense of self when it arises, and also to recognize and explore the sense or feeling of emptiness, or simply non-self.

I'm going to be referring a lot to Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful Thai monk and meditation teacher. He died in 1993. He was sort of a radical in the Theravada tradition—which in the sum of all of Buddhism isn't too radical—but he synthesized different traditions and produced some wonderful writings on the understanding of emptiness or sunyata, which is mentioned in the Pali texts, believe it or not. He talks very simply about the sense of emptiness as being the experience of a moment when it's empty of self, empty of the sense of "I" or "mine."

I want to invite us both to explore the presence of the sense of self and the absence of it. We can sometimes worry that it's too complicated for us to understand. In fact, I just read something about Buddhadasa's early teaching. He was quite old when he died, so he started teaching as a young monk in the 1930s in Thailand. At that time, apparently, it was felt that the teachings on emptiness or no-self were too complicated for lay people, and so they weren't taught to them. Buddhadasa, feeling quite rightly that this was the core liberation teaching, began teaching it to lay people because freedom is what this practice is about. Any of us with wise attention can understand and experience this. He began teaching it to lay people, and now it's much more commonly taught.

The Buddha also taught sunyata, emptiness, non-self, to lay people. In fact, I read another sutta where one of his significant lay followers came to him and said, "Give us one teaching that will be to our benefit for a very long time." The Buddha gave him the teaching on emptiness. He said, "Really contemplate emptiness." And just like many of us, this layman—his name was Damodina—said, "Oh no, that's too hard for us. We're too involved with our homes and our children. We're too busy enjoying sandalwood paste and wearing perfumes. We can't be expected to understand and practice this. Give us something easier."

I guess we don't change much. But the fact remains that when the Buddha was asked for a teaching that would be of benefit for a long time, this is the one he offered. As he said in many suttas, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." He never put out something that was beyond our abilities or understanding.

This emptiness, this freedom from the sense of self—it's not, in fact, an esoteric or abstruse or rare experience at all. It's so normal, so natural. It's simply a mind that's undistracted. As Joseph spoke of last night, the nature of mind when not distracted is simply pure awareness. Buddhadasa calls it sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom. There's nothing more normal and more natural.

Many times throughout a day, this is our conscious experience, if we would only notice it with awareness—simply moments when there is this natural ease of being, natural awareness with no giving rise to a sense of I or mine. The thing is, so often we don't notice this, because it's not always spectacular. We tend to get much more involved in what we call distractions.

We might think the distraction is that loud sound, or this unpleasant emotion, or these obsessive thoughts that keep coming, or this pain in my knee, or just the creak of the floor. We get involved in the distractions, the emotions, whatever arises. But what we need to recognize is that it's not the appearance or what's arising that is the distraction. The root of all distraction, the root of all the resultant suffering, the root of our fear of pain and our yearning for pleasure is simply this false clinging that we call the sense of self—this false view of a someone here who is experiencing and keeping notes on it all.

Buddhadasa described it beautifully. He translates two Pali words in a way I particularly like. The momentary experience that we call me or mine—not even a view of self, but the momentary experience—he calls it "I-ing" and "my-ing." In a moment where there's born the sense of I, that is I-ing. When there's born the sense of mine, it's my-ing. I love that; it's really nice.

Because these are born many times in a day, and we leave them unexamined, we take it for granted. It feels like, it seems like, this sense of I or mine is an ongoing, ever-present aspect of our experience. Even at moments when it's not present, it's easy to overlook and then just say in memory, "Well, I wasn't noticing it then, but of course it was there. I just wasn't thinking about it." That's right—you weren't thinking about it, but it wasn't there.

Without investigating, it seems real. One of the traps we fall into in exploring the teachings of no-self is that rather than turning the discriminating awareness of investigation onto the experience of me itself, we tend to start thinking about it—thinking about how can there not be a self, I'm sure there is a self. The more we think about it, the more solid the sense of self seems, which only goes to support our idea in the first place.

What I personally find very interesting in my practice, what cuts through over and over again this unconscious belief in the ongoing nature of self, is when you recognize the presence of the feeling of I or mine and very simply turn the attention onto it. Bring the quality of investigation—not investigation of thinking, but of satipañña, of mindfulness wisdom. Turn it onto that experience that we're calling I or mine. What do we find?

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Is the mind real? It is but a collection of states, each of them transitory. How can a succession of transitory states be considered real? Even the basic idea 'I am the body' is a mental state and does not last. It comes and goes like all other mental states. The illusion of being the body-mind is there only because it is not investigated." Only because it's not investigated.

So when we do begin to investigate quite consciously, what do we find? Well, I'm going to tell you, but don't take my word for it, please. Continue to investigate each time you notice the feeling of I or mine arising. What we find is that the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. It's that simple—merely a condition that arises and passes, admittedly rather frequently, but that's all it is. And we can experience this with awareness over and over and over.

You can see this well with any sense-door contact. This is the dependent origination that we've talked about. There's the contact of a sense door, a thought, pleasant or unpleasant, the craving that arises. When that craving strengthens to grasping, there's the sense of I or mine, and it strengthens into becoming something. So the thought arises, "Hmm, concentration could be a little better." It could just be a thought that comes and goes. If there's a little clinging, it strengthens into grasping, and immediately is born "my concentration could be better." Strengthening even further into becoming: "I'm not doing so well in my practice."

Now, we often notice the suffering effects of clinging. Had the thought just come and gone, no problem. But what we can also do is consciously begin to notice, to explore with attention, that feeling of self that arises together with grasping. It's not just the grasping, but suddenly I have become quite strong and separate. You, or a meditation, or something else has also become quite strong and separate. We can feel experien-

tially, in some way, that we can direct the attention to what we're calling I. We don't have to leave it nebulous—"Well, there's I, but I don't really look at it." That's what makes it seem like a solid thing.

When you really look, what do you find? Well, there's a feeling of grasping. Maybe there's a kind of almost physical sensation internally of contraction or restriction or clutching. You might notice just a narrowed-down, restricted consciousness.

So notice it the next time that a sense object comes up and there's some clinging arising in the mind. It can be so simple as, "Hmm, I wonder what's for lunch tomorrow?" And the mind just moves right into that, and you notice the clinging, you notice the wanting and the sense of distance—but also notice how "I" have become very solid. And then see: what are you calling "I" in that moment?

Buddhadasa calls this birth—this emergence of "I." I as the hungry person. I as the bad meditator. I as the lonely person. I as whatever. And so there's birth and death. We're being born and dying hundreds and hundreds of times in any one day.

We can notice this sense of birth, and we can notice when this particular becoming dissipates, when it fades away, when I'm no longer the hungry person. That's gone. There's no more clinging in the mind.

And this, I think, is a very important point: to maintain the alertness of awareness, because at the point of the dissipation of that particular birth, whatever it might be, often that's a moment when there's just the emptiness. Joseph spoke last night of shifting our reference point of our practice to really cultivating the mind of non-attachment. When a particular self dies, often in that moment there's just that purity of awareness that is the nature of what we are—the mind of non-attachment.

Do we even notice that? Or do we tend to dull out, wait for the next birth, wait for something to happen again—even if it's unpleasant—wait for a new birth and just miss the spaciousness, the real true happiness and peace of a mind of non-attachment?

Well, we usually don't have to wait too long. And it's really interesting to watch how, out of just clear alertness and peace and awareness, the birth of self can be so sudden and so strong. It's really quite funny if we could look at it that way.

Just a story once that illustrated this for me very strongly. I was on a self-retreat in California in a very beautiful environment, and I was sitting outside on a bench up high, looking down over a very spacious natural view. With my eyes open, I was sitting and feeling just very spacious, peaceful, aware—not much thought, not much construction, no sense of me or mine. Just being.

And then, you know, noticing different animals. There was a little skunk, and it was in a place where they have herds of white deer, so you could see them way down below. It was quite lovely, just watching coming and going. And some turkey vultures were swooping down and circling—just that sense of being one with nature, which is actually something Buddhadasa really encouraged as a practice: to spend time in nature. His whole monastery, Suan Mok, in southern Thailand, is a huge forest monastery of some three hundred acres. I spent some time there when I was a nun. And his philosophy really was to just let people go live in nature, and the mind and the heart quiets until one realizes one is one with nature. The sense of clinging to self tends to dissipate.

Well, anyway, so that was my experience at that moment. But the birds started coming down from some trees near me. I thought, "Far out, they're really close. I've never seen them so close." And then they were circling. And then suddenly this thought arose in my mind: "Oh my God, I'm what they're circling."

And so fast—I mean, panic. Total panic arose in an instant. Definitely a real grasping of that thought, and that panic itself. I came very close to leaping up and screaming, "I'm still alive! I'm still alive!"

It was hugely amusing, even at the time. But it doesn't take much to come out of that peace, that spaciousness, into the grasping of self.

So let's just, for a moment, mention the various aspects of experience that clinging or grasping arises in relationship to—the various aspects of experience you could say we identify with. None of this is news to anybody. But this is not meant to make a list in your head. Rather, it's to encourage turning wise attention onto both the object or experience that is grasped and also that sense of me or mine in the feeling of the grasping itself.

Of course, one of the big areas of experience is that of our body, our physical sensations. When we're in the realm of thinking about it, the realm of view or opinion, the sense that I am my body—you might in one way be able to say, "Well, obviously I'm not, because the way I look now is very different from how I was when I was ten days old." You couldn't even say it was the same. We've got endless rationalizations about how I'm not the body. We can have various organs missing and that's gone, and we think, "Well, that doesn't seem to affect me. I guess I wasn't that."

But that's all rationalization, I would like to say, in my particular experience. Without really examining when it's present—the sense "I am the body"—that's where we can see what we're really doing, calling in our experience "I" or "mine." And when

we look, the sense "I am the body" breaks down every time. All we need to do is look, not take it for granted, not think our ideas about it are enough. Because in most cases, our ideas about it are not enough.

We don't sit here and think, "I am my body." It's not quite that clear. But when there's a physical experience and that sense of I, look—bring wise attention to the experience itself and see. The idea of our body may be "my knee hurts." But when we really bring attention in a sitting, there's no knee, there's no "my," there's just bubbling or vibrations or tingling. And even those words are concepts.

Then I'll notice a mental image of knee, or a thought: "That's my knee. What's going to happen to it if I don't move?" And often, if I'm not paying attention, that image is actually where the grasping of self comes. The grasping at I becomes this image of a knee, or this person who has a knee. If I don't notice that it's not actually the sensation that's being grasped at all—it's the mental image.

I notice this really often when I'm sitting. There's just sensation, sensation, and then a flash of an image. Maybe it's of my whole body sitting, maybe it's of my face, maybe it's of the body part—doesn't really matter what. If I can just notice the image—seeing, seeing, it's just an image. But often if I don't notice it, there's a real grasping at it, and I think I'm identified with the sensation. I keep looking at the sensation and just see bubbling. Clearly, I don't feel grasping around that. But there's still a sense of self.

So that's why it's so important: when I notice the sense of self, don't just say, "Well, I'm not clinging to this bubbling." Turn around and bring wise attention to the sense of I itself. Often I'll see, ah, I'm identifying with this image or this thought of body. It's often much more subtle than we might think.

"I'm so hungry," I think. But when we really bring attention to hunger, sometimes it's hard to even find it physically. It's a funny thing. All you can find is little movements or little bubblings or something. You think, "Why is this bothering me? There's nothing even here." But again, turn—don't just say, "I guess I'm not attached, there's nothing going on." Clearly something's going on. Turn again to the sense of self and see where it's landing. Where's the grasping? Again, it might be an image or a memory or a thought of the future.

I started this by saying a sense of identification with the body, and often it is around a particular sensation, but often it's around a thought or an image. When we really bring attention to the body in meditation, all there is is sensations coming and going, coming and going. There isn't anything solid. And when we say, "Oh yes, don't tell me there's nothing solid—in my experience there's something solid," that's an idea.

That solidity is an idea. If we really experience it, there's just a moment of sensation, another moment of sensation, and the thoughts make it seem solid.

So just noticing as it comes and goes, comes and goes, and noticing the thought. Not trying to change anything. Just noticing where this grasping is arising. What's it grasping at? Where's this birth of self arising in that moment?

And again, if anything I'm saying gets you really confused, just don't even think about it. Seriously, thinking about it is only going to lead to more confusion. Just bring your attention back to that experience of who's confused? What's that feeling of confusion? Turn around and feel the sense of I in that.

So there's body. And of course there's vedanā, the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. We've talked about it a lot, so people here are getting quite subtle in noticing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And even if you think you're not subtle in it, even noticing it is subtle. I mean, how many people on the street could you stop and say, "Now, is your experience as you put your foot down pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?" They would look at you like you're nuts. But we're actually noticing it quite a lot.

And it's interesting to notice because this is another aspect of experience that can easily be clung to and thought of with that feeling, to give birth to that sense of I or mine. And it can be easy to miss that it's the feeling tone, especially when it's pleasant.

For example, if you have a sitting where the breath is smooth and calm and the mind stays there fairly easily—and of course we like it—you really are noticing the smoothness and the calmness. And in your mind you're saying, "I know this will change. I know I like it, but it's okay. I know it will change." And it does change. And we're distraught when it changes, even though we thought we had it all set up. We could see, "I know I'm not this breath," and that was really clear. But sometimes we miss the fact that the grasping was around the pleasant feeling. And so the sense of self, the birth of I, was happening in each moment of grasping at that pleasant feeling without quite noticing it.

This might seem a little subtle, but it's really important because that's the place where the birth of self happens quite a lot. Buddhadasa gave as one of his ways of helping us see through the illusion of self to keep investigating at this point of vedanā, especially at pleasant feeling. Apparently he was really big on exploring the illusory nature of pleasant feeling.

By illusory nature, we mean it comes and goes—that's what we mean. He talks about it like wave-like nature. There's a nice physical sensation, it's pleasant. The pleasant feeling kind of comes up like a wave and it's really nice, and then it crashes like a wave and it's gone. Just keep noticing this over and over and over.

And he says—he sounds sort of uncompromising, but I think it's often true—that in contemplating how pleasant nature arises and disintegrates, arises and disintegrates, just noticing the impermanence of all these aspects of experience, as Joseph said last night, but especially with pleasant feeling, it can begin to undercut what we've talked about so much but we still get caught in: that underlying belief that really the way to value life is by how much pleasant feeling it affords us.

As Buddhadasa says, how many of your decisions, how many of the things you do, the jobs you have, the place you live, the people you hang out with, the people you get involved with, just the choices we make—how much of those choices really, when we're not paying attention, are driven by what we think will afford us the most pleasant feeling? It's really quite interesting, I thought, when I looked at it. And of course the mind says, "Oh, that's enough. I don't want to look at that. Don't look at that one anymore. Thank you very much."

So of course we're having to look at that here. That's the whole setup. That's why, I'd just like to point out, that's why it gets so difficult sometimes. And sometimes there seem to be waves, waves in yogi land, of difficulty.

I almost think it's contagious, you know—difficulty in the form of suffering. And how much of the suffering, all the suffering, is because there's the birth of "I" in that moment. How much of it is around the simple fact that we are being united with unpleasant feelings and we can't change that. Just that simple. The arising of the birth of "I" and "mine" around wanting pleasant feeling—it's really amazing when we truly look at it. So that's a quite important one, where the self is born.

And of course, there are thoughts and emotions. This is something we've talked about quite a lot. Thoughts are in some ways more difficult because the birth of the sense of self can come so quickly with them, and thoughts and emotions are so complex and feed into each other that it can be quite difficult to catch the moment of birth of self. But we can at least notice after it's born. We can feel its presence. And rather than hating it or thinking something's wrong, just turn attention to the birth, to the sense of self.

Just an example—I remember when I was sitting a couple of years ago, how such simple, mundane little thoughts can give rise to such solid clinging of "me." I was doing my walking meditation and again, just present, nothing going on, just kind of awareness. And I sort of felt an itching and ran my finger under my turtleneck, and was aware of it, was noticing it. And in that running of the finger, there was a sort of memory, a body-visual memory of many other times of doing that same thing. It just felt so familiar. And then there were a lot of mental images that flashed through—just of my body walking, of what I was wearing. And then I thought, "Gosh, I wonder how I look. I bet I look like a real schlump, the way I schlump around here when I'm doing walking meditation."

And that was all it took. That was a flash. I mean, that was less time than it took me to say one of those pieces. There was this strong birth of self and other, uncomfortable and self-conscious, and aversion. The whole story. It doesn't take much.

I'm not saying this to be discouraging. No, I'm trying to be encouraging, because then we can realize how subtle and quick it is. Rather than thinking, "Oh, I'm never going to see through this, it's too much," it's like, no, no—there are so many opportunities. It's true. I didn't even mean that to be funny. There are just so many opportunities. And it's only moment to moment.

Sometimes I used to find myself sort of sitting back and waiting for the big flash of no-self that was just going to end all the sense of self. Of course, I was positing that there is a self—the flash of no-self would somehow uproot it and throw it away, and then I wouldn't have to deal with all the suffering anymore. I'm still waiting for that particular experience to happen. But along the way, in twenty-whatever years I've been practicing, there have been an infinity of moments of seeing through this birth of the sense of self.

It's not something to be gotten rid of. It's simply to see for what it is. And any moment that we are aware of the sense of "I" or "mine" being there is a moment when we can meet it with wise attention and see, "Oh, it's just a momentary experience." It might be a sensation, it might be that sense of clutching, it might be clutching at an image. It's something slightly different each time I turn my attention to it. And whatever it is, it's no big deal.

Because all there is to experience is the six sense doors: touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing—I'm trying to think of them all—that's five, and the mind. The big one, of course. But that's all. Even what we're calling "sense of self" is nothing other than one of these sixth sense experiences, and it might be a slightly different one each time you investigate it. So really noticing that helps to break down any underlying sense of

unchanging nature that it might have when not investigated. When investigated, there's nothing really there. When uninvestigated, "I" am so solid—there's no way I could not be here.

With thoughts, similarly with emotions. We've talked a lot about the impermanence of emotions, watching them come and go. Even when you feel, "I've been so sad all day," really noticing the gaps in that. All of that, of course, helps to break the sense that I am my sadness, I am my grief, I am my excitement.

But just another piece I'd like to put in is that we can tend at times—or I can tend anyway—to think that it's the presence of the emotion itself that's the problem. Of course, I only think this when I'm really somehow grasping at that emotion or grasping at wanting it to go away. But to think it's the emotion itself that's the problem... We can, again, begin to notice when sadness comes, for example.

It could be anything. There's times when it's simply sadness, full presence, awareness, feeling it fully. I don't mean noting while the sadness is over there in the corner somewhere. I mean really in the middle of it, except there's nobody there in the middle of it. It's just sadness, fully felt. And many people say, no, there's no problem with that. You couldn't even say unpleasant—it's just what it is, sadness. And then at some point, that sense of clinging arises and becomes I who am sad, or becomes my sadness. And at that point, it becomes problematic. At that point, there's some extra twist, and the suffering begins.

So in exploring or investigating what I'm calling sense of self, we can notice when we're suffering in an emotion—notice not only the emotion itself, trying to accept it. We do all our little tricks: first to get rid of it, and then to try and accept it, and try to remember, you know, all the stuff we do. But also turn attention to the feeling of I in that sadness. It's part of it. And it feels different when I am sad than when sadness is arising—just sadness. It feels different. Simply begin to notice that difference. Give it attention. We can see the birth of me, the birth of mine in the sadness or the happiness or the stillness or the peace.

Just two other areas I want to mention quickly that we very often identify with. By identify, again, I mean this clinging of self around experience. Because they're so subtle: that of intention, obviously, and that of consciousness, the knowing itself.

And again, not to think about these, but one of the reasons that we bring into the instructions noticing before big movements that intention—because when we notice the intention, we see how fleeting, how fast it is, and how subtle an experience. But we also clearly see, as it comes and goes, that it's so clear it's not me. There's no grasping at it.

That's why it's fun for me—I like it when I start having an itch in a sitting, because I can just watch the intention to lift my arm come and go, and come and go, you know, ten or twenty times. And I really like that because each time the intention comes and goes, it's just so clear that it's another arising appearance that's conditioned by not liking the itch, and that's all.

When we don't notice intention, that's when we really easily think: Who moved? I moved. Who noted? I noted. Who's eating? Who's standing up? Who came here? I. But it's just grasping around intention.

Also with citta, consciousness, the experience—you could say—of knowing itself. Last night Joseph was talking about the natural nature of mind, just simply of awareness, and how spontaneously appearances arise and are known, quite effortlessly. And my mind, of course, in its more grasping mode goes: Yes, sure, spontaneously known by whom? By me. Clearly I am knowing and recognizing these appearances when they arise.

And a lot of that is because the sense of knowing, the experience of knowing, is quite subtle and hard to notice the coming and going of it. So it's very easy to identify, to grasp at it as me, because we don't even recognize its presence in the first place, never mind that it's coming and going. It's hard to even recognize its presence in a moment. And so we easily get into a sense of grasping, a birth of self around the knowing itself.

What I find with both of these two—intention and knowing—what even complicates and strengthens the sense of self further, is that because these are very subtle and hard to notice, and to notice the grasping, we then tend to think about it. So for example, with that example of grasping at the knowing itself: Who's knowing? I'm knowing. And then hearing what I just said, my mind would start to go: What do you mean, the experience of knowing? It comes and goes? What do you mean it comes and goes? I don't notice it coming and going. How can it come and go? How can it even exist? And then the more I think about it: How can you say that's not me? It feels like it's always ongoing.

The mind just takes off. And the end result of that is the birth of self happening in that moment—around the thinker, around the analyzer. So by the time we've thought that through, I feel much more solid than I did before I started that line of thought. And this tends to reinforce the belief that this line of thought is true, because the more I think about it, the more solid I feel.

I don't know if this makes sense, but I've been noticing this in myself. If I think about intention, if I think about consciousness or awareness, I feel really solid—because there's a clinging to the thoughts themselves. That's why it's so important in this whole area to simply use wise attention, wise discernment, and come right back to the feeling of "I" itself. It's not like you have to untangle everything.

I have spent a lot of time working my mind into this feeling of crack, trying to understand what "no self" could be, or how could I not exist, or how can awareness not be me when it so obviously feels like me—that kind of thing. I would just bring my mind to the point of implosion, and I would feel really solid. I wish I could spare you all that, because it never led anywhere.

But at that moment, you don't have to backtrack. When what I feel like is going to implode, simply turn the attention onto "I." What am I calling "I"? And all I feel in that moment is, oh—tension. That's it. Or contraction. Or mental image. Or a thought. I'm not trying to simplify. It really is simple. It just takes the cutting through of mindfulness wisdom, the cutting through of wise attention and wise discernment. Simply come back to see what's happening right now.

So we don't have to get rid of some idea of self. But by coming back with wise attention each time that we're aware of a sense of self, we see its illusory nature over and over and over, or its transient, its changing nature over and over and over. And it becomes easier not to get so caught in it, in these ideas, or even in the sense of self. We don't have to fight it. It's just another arising appearance.

So often when I'm on retreat—not in my daily life, but when I'm on retreat—I think I mentioned this one morning, one of the notes I'll be making: seeing, seeing, hearing, thinking, ah—self. What I'm doing is landing with my attention at that moment on what feels like me. And sometimes it's an image and sometimes it's a sensation. It's never anything very out of the ordinary. And it's always a different experience. It really breaks up the attachment to this idea. And it becomes much easier to incline towards stillness, to incline towards the mind of non-attachment, mind of pure awareness.

This has the feeling of this stillness to me. It's called "The Desert Has Many Teachings," from a woman from thirteenth-century Germany:

In the desert, turn towards emptiness, fleeing the self.
Stand alone, ask no one's help, and your being will quiet,
Free from the bondage of things.

I don't think this woman was ever in the desert. She lived in Germany in the thirteenth century. I really like that. Turn towards emptiness. Stand alone. Ask no one's help. And your being will quiet, free from the bondage of things.

It happens quite naturally. The sense of self becomes merely another appearance, coming and going, that we don't need to fear, we don't need to hate, we don't need to get caught in. It arises due to conditions and passes when those conditions change. And as Joseph said last night, over and over: all conditions change. There are no conditions which do not change.

Buddhadasa—again, I thought this was funny. He gets so emphatic.

He went back to that phrase: nothing whatsoever should be clung to. And then he added: as I or mine. The core of the Buddha's teaching.

And then he expands on it like this. He says, "No one"—and he writes underneath it, "that means no exceptions"—"should grasp or cling, give rise to ego consciousness, to anything"—"that means no exceptions"—"as being I or mine." No exceptions. No one should cling to anything. That means anything. No exceptions.

Not because to cling to anything is bad, but because it's the root of all our suffering and confusion. And because in the not clinging to anything is this vastness, this peace of just being, of awareness—the peace of non-grasping.

It doesn't have all the intensity of our high pleasant experiences. The mind and heart need to be somewhat refined to even think that "the peace of non-grasping" sounds like a good thing. That's why we sit for three months. I actually think that now, watching the incessant arising of the grasping of self—its death and its birth and its death—the peace of non-grasping sounds pretty good. And it's wonderful. And it's not something foreign to any of us.

So that's the other side of bringing investigation—investigating what we're calling self in any moment—but also noticing the peace of non-grasping when we can recognize it.

Buddhadasa writes: "If at any moment any person has a mind empty of clinging to I and mine, even if only for one instant, that means the mind has realized emptiness." Even for one instant. True, it's not the emptiness of total liberation, nibbāna, where the sense of grasping will never arise again. But still, in that moment where there's no clinging or grasping of I and mine, the mind is pure, radiant, and at peace. And we, each of us, experience this over and over.

So the other aspect of our practice that I feel is so important is not to overlook these times—to learn to recognize them. Clearly, you can't recognize it with grasping, right? Because as soon as we're grasping, the mind of non-grasping is not accessible. So simply notice with awareness, recognize the mind of non-grasping.

We tend often to skip over it. It's as if—I notice in myself—the mind is more comfortable relating to things, relating to objects, relating to experience: liking it, disliking it, analyzing it. It's more oriented toward doing. Of course, "I" am more there then. But we can consciously begin to recognize these moments of emptiness—many times a day, nothing so exciting, no big bang—but just recognize and consciously meet with awareness these moments of non-grasping of self. So that we gradually learn to be comfortable, to trust this pure awareness, to actually be content with the peace of non-grasping.

I read somewhere a reference to "the sky yoga of non-grasping." I really like that image—the sky yoga of non-grasping. And I've found helpful, as a metaphor, a way to practice at times that helps me tune into this mind of non-attachment: the metaphor of space. I suppose that's why I liked the idea of the sky yoga of non-grasping.

Joseph talked about shifting our reference point to the mind of non-attachment, rather than being so focused on objects, on appearances. And I found that tuning into space or silence was a way that helped me loosen up the fixation on changing appearances.

So notice when a thought arises: the space around it, the space before it. When the thought ends, rather than immediately clutching back to the breath so that there's no space without things arising, just notice the space. Notice the emptiness, the silence, and let the breath arise by itself, or whatever else comes next. The space as an emotion dissipates—just notice the silence, the space. In between breaths, in between actions. We're always filling up our time. Sometimes I would consciously make space—between when I end a sitting and when I get up to walk—just a space. And just notice the space, the silence.

Not spacing out—I'm not talking about that. The space of awareness where there's a vibrancy, a wakefulness in the silence. And don't make much of it. This is just a metaphor to help tune into the mind of non-attachment.

And it's interesting. That's precisely why we've been using hearing as one of our anchors—because it can help tune us into this sense of spaciousness. We tend not to get so involved with sounds. We don't make another one happen. And we can notice the space in between, the silence.

When we can bring this sense of space to an experience, you see the difference. When we're really fixated on, say, a difficult emotion—when we're fixated on that—it's so much more difficult. There's so much more suffering than when we can just open up and have space around it. When the mind is restricted, that one thing takes up the whole field.

I remember one time, the house I'm living in, there didn't used to be a little house next to it, which there is now. And in that period—between when there wasn't another house and there began to be another house—my sense of space got completely encroached upon. I would sit at my kitchen window and look out at the woods, and that's where the house was being built, right in that view. It got to where there were only four little stakes in the woods marking where the house was going to be. And I would sit at my window and all I could see was those four stakes, nothing else. There was aversion and anger and all different feelings. I got really miserable sitting at my kitchen table, until finally I saw what was happening.

Which is interesting. As soon as I saw it, I said, "This has to stop. I can't live the rest of my life here doing this." And I just opened up the space. And it's interesting—it just stopped being a problem. The fixation makes it so much more real. The sense of space around something makes it much more workable.

We can all practice this here with things that arise. You can see some little thing drives you nuts, and when you can just expand around it, it still might be unpleasant, but there's not that fixation of self on it.

It isn't always easy to maintain this sense of spaciousness. The energy needs to be balanced—the concentration and mindfulness. When they drop, being spacious turns to spacing out. That's when we need the precision of technique—to come back and feel the breath, feel sensations, use the noting, use connecting with objects and appearances, notice beginnings and endings. It wakes us up, brings vibrancy again.

But another thing I've noticed in myself is that tuning into space sometimes gets uncomfortable. My mind gets a little restless. It wants something to focus on. I was again sitting in California, a different place, and when I noticed this I was sitting with my eyes open, a very broad vista—meadows, rolling hills—just sitting, spacious. I was consciously tuning into space, and there were four little horses. They were so tiny. They were so far away, such an insignificant part of the vista.

And I would notice, as I would open to spaciousness, I could just be vibrant in that for not very long, and then almost as if by reflex, the mind would get uncomfortable or restless, and it would zoom in on these tiny little horses and sort of fixate on them, as if looking for some kind of stability or security. I could sort of see the rest of the spaciousness, but not very well. And this happened over and over and over.

I found it really fascinating because I could correlate it to my experience in meditation—how just resting and trusting that spacious quality of awareness, the mind has a kind of knee-jerk reflex to want to fixate on things. It's hard to trust, to relax, to not need something happening, to not need to have the birth of an "I."

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we're afraid of nothingness. And because we're afraid of it, the mind clings to a belief in a permanent self. And that's what's so strange. We're afraid of nothingness. But seeing through the sense of self isn't nothingness. It's not annihilation. It is the entryway to a peace and a happiness that all this grasping of self can never, ever give us. All that grasping gives us is confusion and suffering.

And this seeing through is not passive. It's not unfeeling. It's not uncaring or life-negating. It's the doorway to freedom and true compassion. As one Tibetan teacher said, once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously.

So in some ways I think this is our root practice. Just play with it. Explore the sense of self. Let the awareness, the mind, incline to space. Notice emptiness. Notice when it is empty of I-ing and my-ing. And just notice that. That's all.

There's nothing to lose except our suffering.

So let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 215

The Facts of Life

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the Buddha's fundamental teachings on dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) by examining the life of the Buddha himself after his awakening. Despite being the supremely awakened one, the Buddha experienced headaches, backaches, wars among his clansmen, quarreling within the Saṅgha, the murder of his disciple Mahāmoggallāna, and ultimately death. This reveals that liberation has nothing to do with having pleasant experiences and everything to do with our relationship to whatever arises.*
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> *Wilson explores how we habitually react to vedanā (feeling tone)—the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral quality of each experience. She describes how, without mindfulness, we immediately grasp at pleasant feelings, resist unpleasant ones, and ignore neutral experiences entirely. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of the two arrows, she explains how an unawakened person experiences both the physical pain of an unpleasant feeling and the mental suffering of resistance to it. The Buddha's simile of six animals—a snake, crocodile, bird, dog, hyena, and monkey—tied together and pulling in different directions vividly illustrates our unmindful condition, where whichever sense desire is strongest drags us along.*
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> *The path to freedom, Wilson emphasizes, is through establishing sati (mindfulness)—meeting each moment with non-judging, curious, open-hearted attention. She shares the Buddha's teaching that 'liberation through non-clinging' is the supreme state of sublime peace. Through stories of her own hospitalization, a retreatant facing possible death after heart surgery, and the cellist Yo-Yo Ma's childlike wonder, she demonstrates how this quality of presence transforms our relationship with life's inevitable changes and difficulties.*

It came up in some of the discussions today, and I think it's by no means an unusual discovery—being a little bemused, thinking that we're coming to this retreat, especially if it's your first retreat, to get away from the hustle and bustle and pain of our lives. And as you've discovered, guess what comes with us? That's not a mistake.

What I want to talk about tonight is really the way the Buddha described the facts of life and the potential for our freedom. I think a lot of our confusion and struggle comes from our ideas, perhaps unformed even in our own minds, of what we're actually expecting freedom or happiness, inner contentment, peace—whatever word you use—to feel like, to look like, to be like. Because if you're looking for a different reality from this one, a nice, happy, safe, secure place, you're not going to find it.

When we look at the Buddha's life after he was awakened—the supremely awakened one, free from anguish, free from confusion and suffering for the rest of his life, spending forty-five years teaching—stuff happened. He wasn't just drifting on a cloud for forty-five years. He was walking barefoot all around northern India, begging for food.

In terms of things that happened, he had physical problems. He had headaches. He had backaches. There are suttas where he says, "Ananda, you give the talk. I have to go lie down and rest my back." He didn't give him a day's warning either.

There were wars going on between his own clansmen, from his father's and his mother's clans, and they would be killing each other over water rights. How would you like it if all your in-laws were killing each other and you had to go and try to stop it? Everything wasn't groovy.

There was quarreling within the Sangha. Many suttas exist, and a lot of the monks' and nuns' rules come about from times when one of the monks or nuns would see another one doing something and run to the Buddha and tell on him, basically. "So-and-so is doing thus and so. It doesn't seem good." Often it was appropriate, but there's definitely this little element of envy and all of that.

His two main disciples, Mahamoggalana and Mahasariputta—the most awakened next to him, the wisest—Mahamoggalana, in his old age, was murdered. Both Sariputta and Moggallana died before the Buddha did. There's a lovely sutta where he's saying, "It's as if the sun and the moon had fallen out of the sky when they died." So he noticed that they were gone.

And his cousin Devadatta, who was very jealous of him, continually tried to sow seeds of discord in the Sangha and divide the Sangha, and actually tried to kill the Buddha. So seriously, the Buddha faced attempted murder. It's not as if everything pleasant was in his life. And in the end, he died. They all died. Everybody died. That's what happens.

So looking to the Buddha's life, the supremely awakened peaceful one, which he was, we have to see that inner contentment, true liberation of heart, must be about something else than having the perfect life, than having everything be the way we want it to be.

So what could that be? The way the Buddha introduces what it could be to us is by having us let our hearts and minds, our vision, open to be able to live face to face with things as they are, rather than as we might wish them to be or think they ought to be if we did things right.

When he lays out his Four Noble Truths, the basic facts of life, the first one, as most of you are very familiar with, is that there is unsatisfactoriness in this world, in our bodies, in our minds. There's birth, which is suffering, if you think about it. There's decay. Old age, sickness, death. There's separation from those we love and from things we like. There's having to be brought together with those we don't love and things we don't like. This is what happens.

It's not the only thing that happens. Luckily, there's beauty and joy and love and happiness within this realm of form.

But there is not a way of not having unpleasant experience arise. And if you stop and think about it—which obviously I have, a lot—you need to consider: okay, we all nod, sure, there's birth and death, we get sick, we have to be with things we don't like. But is that the way we really meet these experiences when they arise?

You don't have to think far. Just cast your mind back over today. That's as far as most of us need to go. If you're one of those for whom today was a good day, you can look at yesterday. We really don't have to go far to see that we're going to come face to face with difficult, painful, unliked experiences. And how did we relate to them?

I think the Buddha's not saying this in order to bring us down, in order to say life is miserable, suffer. It's really to wake us up to see: how do we relate to this? The fact that things are unreliable, that they're in constant change, that there is difficulty—we think we accept it, but do we?

The denial is so amazing. Just the denial of the fact of pain, of suffering, that things happen that we don't like. How much of the unpleasantness that has come up in your body or mind or in the surroundings today has your mind greeted as a mistake, or your fault because you're not mindful enough? If you were more mindful, this unpleasant thing wouldn't be happening.

I've got news for you. As we get more mindful, we actually begin to notice not only more joy, but also more of the unpleasant things that we've been in total denial about. Our denial mechanism is huge. Witness Michelle's story with her ice cake the other night. It's amazing.

I'll tell you another one. I really like this story because it's just so flat-out denial. Quite some years ago, maybe twelve years ago, I was in the hospital for some days and I was on an IV. I had some big infection. And you know how after a few days, the veins sort of collapse and it gets harder and harder to keep putting in the IV. So at one point, the nurse was trying repeatedly and failing. She was sweating. It hurts. It's not a pleas-

ant experience—you wouldn't call it that. And I could tell she started, in a little way, to panic. It's hard to know you're hurting someone, especially when your intention—her intention—is to help.

She finally kind of gave up and ran out in the hall and grabbed the nearest doctor who was passing by. And I wasn't completely cogent, but I was cogent enough to know that now I was really in trouble. Because who practices and puts in the IVs? Have you ever had the doctor, the surgeon come in and put in your IV? Not too often. So I was like, okay, right, just be cool, be calm.

And the doctor had the same problem. I wasn't my most equanimous. I didn't say anything, but little tears trickled down. And he looked at me with such an expression and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

It's just so amazing. And I could understand how hard it is to let in—if you really let in that it was hurting me—the pain of knowing that with really kind intentions, you're hurting somebody. That's so hard. It's hard for us to be connected and open-hearted in the face of painful experience, physical or emotional. It is hard for us. And so a lot of the time, we don't even know that we're blocking it out.

And that's just flat-out obvious pain. I mean, that's the most obvious, and we can deny it. So not to get down on ourselves about it, but I really think that this first truth of the Buddha's that he enunciated—certainly how it works for me—is as an invitation into my own experience. Not a philosophical point of debate. I mean, we can debate that, but for me, the point is that it brings our awareness in to look and see.

When I first heard this years and years ago, when I first began to sort of understand—oh, like stuff happens, it's not my fault.

What it was, really, was a huge relief.

When I was first introduced to the Dharma at about nineteen, I had experienced up until that time what you might call the 1950s storybook picture of America—the middle-class suburban happy life. My family stayed together. My parents weren't abusive. You just didn't talk about things. Our friend's mother who committed suicide down the road, or the divorce up the street, or my friend whose father had left when she was a kid and she never met him, or the fact that my mother never even met her own father—things like that. You didn't talk about it. Everything was happy, happy.

I actually couldn't point to anything that was really bad. And I had imbibed the idea that you grow up, you do whatever you do, get a career or whatever, and you have this happily-ever-after life—like the Donna Reed show on television, or the way all the movies end, going off into this happy cloud where nothing bad ever happens again.

I don't know if this will resonate—I'm really showing my age here—but when I was very young, the sense was that everything's good, nothing's bad. We don't talk about unhappiness. And my mother took me to see this Walt Disney movie called *Old Yeller*. I don't know if you remember it. It traumatized me for years. It's this loving family with their golden lab, this wonderful, perfect dog. Everybody loves everybody. And in the end, the dog saves the little boy from getting attacked by a rabid squirrel. Then the father has to shoot the dog because he has rabies.

This is Walt Disney traumatizing me—because I thought everything ends happily all the time if people are nice. It just didn't fit with my worldview. So when I heard about this first noble truth—oh yes, this is part of the facts of life; there's unhappiness, there's death, things you love go away, sometimes you have to be with things you don't like, and everything is changing all the time—I felt this huge sense of relief. Oh, I'm not crazy. It's okay that I'm not happy every minute. And I don't have to keep pretending. For me, being an aversive-type personality, this was a genuine relief.

So that really, I think, is the beginning of freedom—just to see, to come face to face with the fact that things aren't always the way we want them. Then the question becomes how do we relate, rather than what's wrong with me? What's wrong with things? Am I crazy? We begin to stop our lifelong habit of running and hiding from pain or from the unpleasant, or hating ourselves when we do something—or when something happens—that we think we should have been able to avoid.

On one retreat, a man was telling me in an interview how he'd spent all day seeing aversion in his mind to experiences he was having, to feelings in his body, to thoughts—just aversion to a lot of things. And he was labeling, in a subtle way, everything he was aversive to as bad. This is bad, this is good. And suddenly he stopped and said, "Wow. So much of my experience has been bad today. So what I'm saying is that much of my life is bad." And then he said, "No, that just isn't true. It's just part of how it is. Sometimes unpleasant, sometimes pleasant." That realization took a huge burden of judgment and negativity off the way he was relating to his life. It's just part of life.

Someone told me—this may be apocryphal, I don't know if it's true, but she said it was—that Robin Williams, the comedian, has already had his tombstone engraved, and on it says: "I knew this was going to happen." He's a step ahead of us. When we know it, we can stop being afraid. We can start to actually live each moment as it presents itself, instead of holding on, planning for the next moment.

So there's this being together with what we don't like, and also the quality of unreliability, the changing nature, the fact of impermanence, which is also included in this first truth. Again, we all know everything changes. But if we really knew that, how would we live? I think we would live very differently.

Someone said during a retreat we were doing together, focused on this subject of impermanence for a week—when I asked her, "How would you live if you really understood and accepted impermanence?"—she said, "You know, I would stop being afraid." Because when we know it's going to change, we don't fear it. We can relax into here and now. Sure, there's a poignancy to change. That's okay. But we don't have to grip so blindly.

I think one of the reasons for the denial of change on a deep level is this poignancy, this sadness that maybe it's not quite okay to feel. But it's fine. Let the poignancy in.

This is my favorite part of a poem I love, because it touches for me that place of love and knowing things change and the poignancy of clinging. It's by Galway Kinnell. I'm just going to read part of it. The name is "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight."

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up,
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard,
as if clinging could save us. I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I've stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
Little Maud, and yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

We are forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. It's poignant. It doesn't have to be awful. When we can relax into that moment just as it is, without needing to cling or change or look back at the last moment—there can be peace in that.

But I think, at least I certainly notice in myself, one response to this constant change, this unreliability, these shifting sands, is to look quietly but frantically, moment after moment, for some steady, unchanging place to abide. Whether it's a physical experience or an emotional experience—how much do we try to manage and control our lives so we get everything just so? Ah, finally. In a small way, it's like when you finally get the house all clean. How long does it last? This used to drive me crazy. It lasts two seconds, and then it starts getting dirty again. That's a little way, but I think we're doing that all the time—always looking for some place to abide, to rest and say, "here." And it's that very looking for an abiding place that keeps us suffering, off balance, and fearful.

The Buddha said once, "He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." This might not be what we had in mind, because our minds only know what they already know. You know Krishnamurti's famous book, *Freedom from the Known*. We can only imagine what we already know in some way. So to rest in peace—"he abides in peace who does not abide anywhere"—it really is the peace of letting go of that frantic searching.

But we won't and we can't let go. We can't even have a concept of it until our heart begins to understand through experience how much the searching itself is creating the suffering, the anguish, that feeling of being off balance. Because it's not the fact that things change. It's our resistance to that fact that's actually so poignant and scary and awkward.

Nyoshul Khenpo, a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said once, "Remember, whether or not you go with the flow, the flow always goes with you." We can't actually step outside of that. But we can start to just look and see: oh yes, that's what's happening. We can feel the poignancy. We don't have to fear it. As someone said, "Let's face it, I don't fear it when unpleasant experience is going away. It's only the pleasant ones that I'm holding on to." There's something important to notice about that.

So you might be thinking, who wants to look this closely? Maybe denial is ignorance, but it was working okay in a lot of situations. Often, on our journey, on our spiritual path, we hit moments where we say, "Oh God, I wish I could go back to not seeing quite so clearly." I meant it when I said—even though you laughed and I said it in a joking way—as mindfulness strengthens, as our ability to be present for whatever arises strengthens, we will be so much more at ease and happy. But we will also be much more aware of the unpleasant and the changing nature of things. That actually brings us to freedom, believe it or not. Knowing things the way they are is what releases our

heart and mind from this fruitless clinging, this fruitless searching for steady state in a world that is totally unsteady state. But the way out is in, and we go in kicking and screaming most of the time.

So looking at this first truth, it's a wake-up call—really a wake-up call—not just something to be demoralized about. As Ajahn Chah said, "There's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering." The difference is in the way we relate to the difficult, the painful, the poignant experience.

And that brings us to the second truth, the second fact that the Buddha describes: What is it that's the cause of the suffering, the anguish? Not the fact that there's unpleasantness, but how our hearts and minds relate to experience—this is the place of bondage or freedom. This is the place where understanding can really begin to flower. So how is the Buddha different from us?

If he went through experiences after his awakening, and if you believe that he was a human being, then his awakening holds the same potential for us to awaken. He wasn't some kind of divine being with different factors making up his mind and body.

So how, in his awakening, in going through these difficult experiences—what would be a way of describing how he was different from us? Or different from me? I don't want to project onto all of you.

One simple way I want to talk about it is in how he related through his understanding—that it's the clinging, the aversions, the longing for things to be different, the denial, all these reactions to the bare facts of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience. And then there's our total entrancement with our reactions. Look at it. We're totally entranced with how much we don't like something, or how much we like something, how involved we get. We go from an unpleasant sound to the history of our life in two seconds. Completely involved. So entranced that we don't even know it's happening.

It's our reactions, our identification with them, and our being totally entranced and off and running with them that hides the way things are from us and obscures the potential for really living in contentment, in peace, with things as they are—for rediscovering, resting in, and trusting the radiant mind, our basic goodness, as Chögyam Trungpa calls it.

This is not a state that you can get and hold onto and rest in. There is no steady state of heart and mind. But it's an attitude that arises and can arise no matter what state is coming in our body or in our mind.

The peace, the freedom, the happiness of the Buddha has nothing to do with what's arising in your experience right now. Freedom has nothing to do with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. It really doesn't matter. And it's the hardest thing for us to really believe. When you come in and you've had one of these crummy sittings, and all this stuff is coming up, and yesterday it was so clear—and we say, "Oh, yeah, fine. Yesterday was clear. Now it's really painful. Those are both good. Just pay attention." And you think, "Yeah, right." We don't really believe that very well. But the fact is, it's true. Freedom has nothing to do with the particular experience that's happening. It has everything to do with the relationship to it.

Someone came in—I think it was this retreat—and she was really getting at how the experiencing of pleasant feeling is not the same as happiness. Pleasure is pleasure. Sure, it's nice. If we had a choice, we'd probably take pleasure over displeasure. We can tell the difference. The Buddha could tell the difference too, I think. This practice is not heading toward some dull neutrality. But it's not getting into all those reactions. And that allows us to turn away from our entrancement with our reactions and ourselves and our stories, and actually come to live in this moment with total intimacy, wakefulness, loving, awake presence that can allow us again and again and again to glimpse, with more or less depth, the true radiant nature of our mind, our heart—big mind-heart, not this little heart—the radiant nature of what we truly are.

In the process of this shift from our habitual reactive mind to opening into whatever is happening this moment with totality of presence and intimacy, yes, we are more aware of the unpleasant, and more aware of the beautiful, the joyful. As someone was saying today, so beautifully, in the midst of a very difficult day, one little experience that we normally would completely overlook—in the middle of all the difficulty, she said, "You know, this doesn't seem like much of an experience," but it was giving her so much joy.

Someone was talking about the flowers. Franz and I planted a couple of peony bushes last year, little new ones. Two days ago, Monday, one of them bloomed for the first time. Now, for some reason, that day hadn't been a particularly joyful day. I forget—it was really hot. I forget what was going on. But I wasn't dancing in joy through the day. And just seeing that flower open over the course of a couple of hours brought so much happiness and joy.

When we're more present, it doesn't take winning the lottery to feel joy. We can be really present for suffering, and something just lovely happens, and we're really present for that. There's this immediacy, this vitality of presence that makes all of life so much richer in the little things. In the little things.

When we're not afraid of impermanence, we're really here.

The fire in leaf and grass, so green it seems each summer the last summer. The wind blowing, the leaves shivering in the sun, each day the last day. A red salamander, so cold and so easy to catch, dreamily moves his delicate feet and long tail. I hold my hand open for him to go, each minute the last minute.

You get a feeling of the presence in that poem. She's not saying, "Oh my God, each minute the last minute!" in a panicked way. It's more like: if this is the last minute, let me really be here for it.

I have a story about a friend of mine, a man who's been coming to retreats on the West Coast for some years. He told us this story a couple of years ago. He must be in his mid to late sixties, very hardworking. He said he'd had open heart surgery—he had to have a valve replaced.

He's one of these people, which I'm sure many of you can relate to, who felt that his practice was never going anywhere. No incredible bliss experiences, no wonderful jhanic concentrations, just kind of slogging through the days and the nights, year after year of meditation, trying to be mindful and getting nowhere. You can relate, yes?

So he woke up in intensive care after the operation, which apparently had gone fine. Family was there telling him so. And then something went wrong. He was hooked up to machines from every orifice, and all of a sudden they all started blinking and sirens going—which must be quite scary. Nurses running. He didn't know what was wrong, but something serious was happening.

He said he noticed his mind just start to go into total panic. "Oh my God, I'm going to die. This is really it." Which it very well could have been. And he saw his mind going into panic, his breathing got tight, and he said—he doesn't know where it came from—but the thought arose: "Well, if this is going to be my last breath, I might as well be present for it."

And he just came totally into that breath. The panic went away. He said he must have gone unconscious after that, and then he woke up and things were fine.

But you never know. We can't evaluate what's going on in our practice. That's the quality of real presence. And "each moment, the last moment" isn't a scary thing. It's an invitation into being alive in this moment, because this moment is really all we have. We can plan a lot about all the next moments, but who knows what's going to happen?

We really don't know. We really don't know what's going to happen in this next moment. Like that other night when the low water alarm went off in the middle of the sitting—no one knew that a moment before. We never know.

This moving out of our reactivity into open-hearted presence does not hide life situations. It allows us to live them more fully.

How do we get so sidetracked? Why is it that we get so into this clinging, which is so poignant?

One way—we've touched on it, and Stephen talked about it, and Susan did—I just want to go into it more deeply. It's only a habitual pattern, but it's so deep we mostly don't notice it. And that's the habit of how our heart-mind relates when confronted with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience.

The way the Buddha described our experience is that there are the six senses: the five—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—and the mind. So we can have any of those six sense experiences: thoughts and emotions, or any of the five senses. And that's really all that's happening. Keep looking in your experience. As Jack Kornfield likes to say, just these six things are happening over and over. And if one of you experiences something else, please let us know.

First of all, just by beginning to reduce it to that, it takes a lot of the hoo-ha out, doesn't it? Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, thinking, emotion, thinking, emotion, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. Oh, what's the big deal?

And then each of those—arising one after the other really quickly—we experience as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. A sound, for example. Same with touch, emotions, thoughts.

And we don't all experience things the same way, given our past conditioning and our karma. Take the sound of a crow—someone might hear it and find it pleasant, while for me it's unpleasant, and for somebody else, completely neutral. That could even be different for the same person at different times.

Now this is a relatively subtle thing, this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality, and it happens very fast. The habit of our mind—and in the dependent origination, the place where we can explore how suffering arises, how confusion arises—is that there's the sense contact, the hearing, it's pleasant, and without awareness, immediately there's that movement: "Oh yeah, I like that, that's good," or "I want more," or "Let's keep it going." If it's unpleasant: "Oh, bad. Get away. Not good. How can we fix this?"

And if it's neutral? Well, have you noticed many neutral experiences? That's what happens with neutral—nothing registers. We get bored. Nothing seems to be happening. So let's think about a really unpleasant fantasy, because that's better than being neutral. God forbid we should just be here with neutral experience. It's actually quite interesting to see how often our mind does that—choosing to suffer rather than simply being calm and neutral.

It happens so quickly that often we don't even know there's a difference between unpleasant and aversion. But those are two different experiences. There's a difference between pleasant and clinging, between neutral and spacing out. The second is a reaction to just the bare fact of the experience. But it's so deeply habitual in most of our minds that without mindfulness, we not only often don't recognize it, but we can easily evaluate our whole experience, the entire tenor of our life, on the basis of how pleasant or unpleasant or neutral it is. And this is where we really get off into being entranced.

For example, when you're evaluating your meditation, so often the good ones are the pleasant ones, the bad ones are the unpleasant ones. When you're having pleasant meditation, not too many people come in and say, "I'm useless, I'm worthless, I can't do this." But when it's unpleasant, it jumps from unpleasant experience to "I'm the worst yogi, I can't do this, I'm filled with doubt, this is stupid"—and self-hatred, really painful stuff, arising in just a moment from an unpleasant experience. Neutral, we don't even notice.

We get so entranced that we can actually base our whole life on wanting pleasant and avoiding unpleasant, without seeing what we're doing. Ajahn Buddhadasa, the wonderful Thai teacher, talks a lot about pleasant feelings. He says it's so fast—it just comes and goes so quickly. And he says almost everything you do in your life, the choices you make without awareness, we do for the sake of pleasant sensation. And how long does it really last? It's a little scary when we look at how long it really lasts.

There's a story I love from the suttas, really about Ananda, the Buddha's attendant. Ananda is a very personable character—he's the one who's very compassionate, always saying things, and the Buddha is kind of going, "Not so, Ananda. It's really like this." You can really empathize with him. He was very kind.

In this story, Ananda was off on a mission for the Buddha, and he passed a village well. He was very thirsty, and at the well was Pakati, a young outcast woman. He asked her for water to drink—one of the few things a monk was allowed to ask for. In India at that time, the caste system was very strong. An outcast couldn't even touch something and hand it to someone of higher caste.

So Pakati said, "Oh monk, I am too humbly born to give you water to drink. Do not ask any service of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste." She had so thoroughly bought into this system.

And Ananda replied, "I ask not for your caste, but for water."

The woman's heart leapt joyfully and she gave Ananda water. He thanked her and went away, but she followed him at a distance. She found out he was the Buddha's attendant, and she went to the Buddha and said, "Oh Lord, help me. Let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells so that I may see him and minister unto him, because I love Ananda."

The Buddha understood her emotions and her heart, and he said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you don't understand your own emotions. It's not Ananda that you love, but his kindness."

Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice toward you and practice it towards others.

Sweet, isn't it? But mistaking that pleasant feeling she associated with Ananda, she was ready to follow him and take care of him for her whole life for the sake of that pleasant feeling, without being able to understand exactly what was going on. We do that from time to time, and sometimes in far more confusing and destructive ways than that.

Or with the unpleasant. Again, sometimes in the whole field of experience, the mind can get so fixated on what is unpleasant, so lost in aversion to it, that we build up an entire world based on reactivity rather than clear seeing.

Have you ever had a time when part of your tooth breaks off inside? This happened to me last year while I was traveling, and I had to go for a few weeks with it just broken. You notice how the tongue cannot stay away from that place. You're sitting perfectly happy, and the tongue just has to go over there, feel how rough it is, feel how unpleasant it is, get upset. What am I going to do? My teeth are falling apart. I'm getting old. A million times a day.

Now, all the rest of my teeth didn't hurt. That's neutral. Did I notice that? No. We have one thing that's wrong and a million things that are neutral, and we don't notice those at all when we get completely fixated on the negativity. Frustration, self-doubt, judgment. And the neutral, we just don't notice.

So often, actually, the entrée into calm—a kind of radiant, connected peace—begins by seeming neutral. And we so much don't know what to do with that, that we bounce away, fall asleep, or create a diversion.

This is from the Buddha, really describing what we do with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Someone asks him, what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person—an untaught worldling, as the Buddha puts it. And he's very straightforward. He says, okay, here's the difference. An unawakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, worries and grieves, laments, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of unpleasant feelings: a physical unpleasant feeling and a mental unpleasant feeling. It's as if, being shot with an arrow, he shoots himself with a second arrow.

Sound familiar? That's what an untaught, unawakened person does. You experience pain from two arrows whenever you have an unpleasant feeling.

Now, it actually goes deeper than that, into how this becomes an ingrained habit. The Buddha says that when touched by painful feeling, we develop an underlying tendency to resist—push it away, don't feel it, resist. Many people have talked about just seeming to come up against a wall of resistance, subtle or not so subtle, in their practice. And they're right. We've cultivated an underlying tendency to resistance toward the unpleasant for most of our lives. We've got to begin to see it. That's why it's coming up. It's wonderful that it's coming up.

So what do we do? Unpleasant—no, this is bad. We shoot ourselves with another arrow again. And the Buddha goes on to say that unawakened people do not know of any other escape from painful feelings than to pursue a pleasant sense experience. Isn't that right? And so they also cultivate the underlying tendency to crave the pleasant.

We've developed these two habits: this ongoing resistance to the unpleasant, and as soon as there's something unpleasant, leaping after something pleasant, lusting, wanting the pleasant, because that's the only way we know to bring ourselves happiness. The only trouble is it doesn't work for longer than the duration of the pleasant feeling itself.

The difference with an awakened person? When an awakened person experiences an unpleasant feeling, that's it. They don't create anything around it, to paraphrase Ajahn Sumedho. They don't get into resistance, and they don't go lusting after something pleasant to hide from it. Same with the pleasant. Experience a pleasant feeling—that's it. Experience a pleasant feeling. The mind is calm, creating nothing around it. It's

not that you don't know the difference. You simply don't get into these reactions, being so entranced by them, caught in this ongoing tendency to move away from the present moment.

And that's what's so poignant. Our underlying tendency to resist the unpleasant and move toward the pleasant, totally ignoring the neutral—we're doing it without knowing we're doing it. But we do it in the service of our own real happiness and peace. None of us would continue if we really, truly knew it was keeping us confused and suffering. But we don't know. And I'm saying all this, yet I find myself doing it in subtle ways all the time. It's so ingrained when we're not paying attention, this moving toward what's pleasant.

The poignancy of it is that it's just this clinging and craving, just this pushing away, this checking out, that hides from us our true potential. It's just this looking in the other direction that obscures us from recognizing that freedom is right here. In fact, it's so right here that we're not usually right here enough to recognize it. We're always just a little bit leaning away.

The Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata"—meaning himself—"namely, liberation through non-clinging."

Now, that doesn't sound so exciting, does it? Liberation through non-clinging? I want bells and whistles. I want some fireworks going off. Liberation through non-clinging? But that's the way into recognizing our potential for awakening. Non-clinging allows totality, the intimacy of total presence.

Otherwise, the way we live our life is described by the Buddha as someone who does not have mindfulness established—because mindfulness is our way in to see what's really happening. In a moment of mindfulness, pure non-judging presence, there's no clinging, there's no aversion, there's no delusion, because it's connected. Just a quick moment. Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it "a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom." Not total absolute liberation where confusion never arises, but it's a moment of clarity. And that moment is what allows any experience to become a gateway into really recognizing our true potential.

Without that, a person without mindfulness established lives their life according to this simile the Buddha offers. As if a person catches six creatures from different parts of life—six, the six senses, everything always matches: eye, ear, nose, touch, taste, and mind. So, as if you took a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a hyena, and a monkey, and you tied a rope around each of them, and then you tied a knot with all those ropes together. These six animals are all tied together with a rope in the middle. And then what

do they do? They all start struggling to go where they want to go. The crocodile wants to go to the water. The bird tries to fly up. The dog tries to go to the village. The snake tries to go into the garden. And they're all pulling every which way. And the strongest one pulls all the rest along after. So probably the crocodile takes them all down to the water.

You get the simile? The Buddha spells it out. He says that is just like a person whose mindfulness is undeveloped and unpracticed. Each of those animals is like one of the six senses—the eye, the ear, the nose, the mind, the body, the tongue—and they're all struggling to go after pleasant experience and all struggling to run away from unpleasant experience. Whichever one's the strongest wins, moment after moment after moment. The eyes are often really strong. That's why when you're out doing walking meditation and a chipmunk runs across your path—seeing, pleasant, boom—everything else is gone. It's like the crocodile running to the water.

That's a rather exhausting way to live, I would say.

But for one who has cultivated mindfulness and presence, when seeing a form with the eye, the mind is not attached to pleasing forms and is not repelled by unpleasing forms.

And the same with all the other senses. It knows pleasant from unpleasant, but it's just not attached to the pleasant, not repelled by the unpleasant. And so she is one who has established mindfulness of the body and dwells with an unlimited mind and heart. Unlimited mind and heart.

Mindfulness is really our tool. It's like a rattle, one of my teachers says. We're like two-year-olds just going after what we want—I want this, I want that, take me over here, I want to do this. And he says, I just shake the rattle and say, turn around, look back here. It's right here. Come home.

That's all we're doing with our mindfulness. What's happening? Knee pain? Fine. Come home. What's happening? Sadness? Great. Come home. What's happening? Bliss? Fine. Come home.

Mindfulness doesn't say this is good, this is bad. It doesn't say I think this is more important to pay attention to than that, or I've seen this before therefore I don't need to pay attention to it again. Just noticing what's arising with a quality, as we talked about, of non-judging, total, kind attention. Coming back to the bare experience, not the reaction and the story and the hoo-ha we create around it. Not all the story about why that sound is so unpleasant, but coming back to the sound itself.

Ajahn Chah says the sound doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound. Just stay with the pure hearing. And bring to it this quality of no preconceptions, a kind of wonder, such curiosity, such willingness to discover something new instead of thinking we already know. Not "I already know what the breath is like, but I'll go to it," or "I've experienced these cramps before, I know all about them." This newness, open to discovery each moment.

I'll leave you with an image that really helps me get the feeling of this quality of open-hearted attention. In Germany, I saw a documentary about Yo-Yo Ma, the famous cellist. He has such a lovely attitude of openness. In this documentary, he was flying to Africa with his really fancy cello—I don't know how much that would cost—going to visit a tribe of Bushmen, to share music with them.

So here he is with these Bush people, and they bring out the old man who's kind of like the village shaman musician. The old man brings out his instrument, and Yo-Yo Ma brings out his incredible cello, and they start trading music. Now this man's instrument was literally a round kind of oil can with a stick coming out of it and one line or string. And he's playing along, and Yo-Yo Ma is saying, "Wow, this is so incredible! It's so beautiful, the sounds he gets, the music he gets out of this." And he was totally sincere.

Then he says, "Let's trade instruments." So he gives this old musician his million-dollar cello, and Yo-Yo Ma tries to play on the old man's instrument. He's saying, "I can't play this nearly as beautifully as he can."

He had such a childlike, open-hearted sense of discovery and wonder and appreciation and newness. We could have been sitting there thinking, "Oh yeah, an oil can with a string coming out of it." But he's saying, "Wow, what an instrument! What sounds he can get out of it! What beautiful music!"

It's really a different way to live with the same facts, with the same circumstances. It's just a difference in how we relate to them. That's really what we're practicing here. And it's okay that we blow it many times, because every moment we have another opportunity to meet what's happening with the simplicity of open-hearted attention and wonder.

CHAPTER 216

Five Spiritual Faculties: Mind

Carol Wilson · 48 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the five spiritual faculties (pañcindriya) that serve as controlling factors on the path of awakening: confidence (saddhā), energy (viriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). Drawing from Abhidhamma psychology, she explains how these wholesome mental factors gradually replace the unwholesome qualities that characterize the unawakened mind—dullness, doubt, restlessness, and confusion.

Wilson carefully distinguishes the type of faith needed in Buddhist practice from blind belief, emphasizing that confidence must be grounded in direct experience. She offers practical guidance on balanced effort, sharing her own transformative experience in Burma where her teacher taught her that spiritual practice isn't about enduring long painful sittings, but about maintaining balance—like a tightrope walker. The talk explores how mindfulness develops through connecting and sustaining attention on the four foundations (satipaṭṭhāna): body, feeling tone, consciousness, and mental states.

The teaching culminates in showing how concentrated attention reveals the deeper characteristics of experience, particularly impermanence (anicca). Wilson emphasizes that intellectual understanding of change isn't sufficient for liberation—only direct experience of phenomena's constantly shifting nature allows genuine letting go. This talk offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a clear framework for understanding how these five faculties work together cyclically, each supporting the development of the next on the journey toward freedom.

There are many ways to understand the path of awakening. There are many metaphors used to bring us to a realization of what it is that we're doing in spiritual practice. And so too in the Buddha's teachings there are many ways of understanding just what it is that we're doing here.

But in all of these metaphors, in all these ways of understanding, there is the reality behind it. What is actually happening over the course of one's walking a spiritual path is the gradual realization of our condition at this moment in time and an understanding that the mind can develop, the mind can be enhanced, the mind can be enlightened—to bring lightness into the mind.

The Abhidhamma, or Buddhist psychology, has an understanding that the unawakened mind has within it, or is composed of, a number of factors of mind—mental factors that go into and make up each moment of our experience. Many of them in the unawakened mind tend towards dullness and sleepiness and restlessness, confusion, inability to be present, doubt, disappointment, frustration, despair, hopelessness, low self-esteem—a very unbright, unawakened mind.

The way Buddhist psychology understands the path of practice is that we gradually replace those factors of mind with their opposites, or with factors of mind that oppose them, so that sleepiness or dullness of mind is opposed by energy and clarity of mind. Doubt or confusion is opposed or overcome by faith or confidence. The path of practice is seen as one of developing these positive and enhancing qualities of mind.

There are many different mental factors, many different attributes or qualities to the mind. We know them; we meet them every day. Sitting here today, we come into closer contact with them.

As I've mentioned, there are the famous five hindrances, or obstructions to a clear mind. Sleepiness or dullness. Doubt and wavering in our ability to proceed with confidence. Restlessness, an agitated state of mind that cannot come into and stay with the present experience, obstructing the mind from clearly being and seeing what's happening now. Strong aversion, dislike, or wanting to get away from experience, particularly unpleasant experience, whether mental or physical. If we react to it strongly with aversion, we no longer see that experience clearly. Our mind is obstructed, unbright, unclear.

And the same with desire. When a pleasurable experience is noticed—maybe it was the tofu pops at dinner time, maybe you really like tofu pops—as soon as you get attached and really want that, you stop seeing clearly the nature of what it is that's happening. Desire can blind us to the nature of reality.

So we gradually and persistently, with great energy, come to notice the qualities of our mind that are darkening and hindering and obstructing clarity of vision, and we gradually replace them, moment after moment. It's a very meticulous process and requires considerable persistence to, in each moment, see what's present and replace the dark qualities with light qualities.

In all of this vast exchange of energies and mental states and factors of mind, there are five which are, or gradually become, the controlling factors of mind—the factors that control the others and guide us along our spiritual journey. They're called the five spiritual faculties of mind.

Tonight I want to speak briefly about them and to talk about them in such a way that you begin to recognize them in your own practice—when they're present and when they're not present. So that if you notice you do not have these qualities in your mind, you can arouse them to enhance your clarity and understanding.

These five factors of mind have a relationship with each other where one is the cause for the arising of the second, the second is the cause for the arising of the third, the third is the cause for the arising of the fourth, and so on. They develop in our practice in a cyclical and gradual way, each feeding the other.

The first of these factors of mind is confidence. Confidence is the basis for and the arousing of energy or effort, the second spiritual faculty. Energy or effort is the causal condition for the arising of mindfulness. Mindfulness, the ability to observe and to see clearly, is the cause for the arising of concentration, or single-pointedness of mind. And when the mind is single-pointed and focused, we see into our experience more deeply, thereby gaining more knowledge or wisdom, the fifth of the spiritual faculties. Confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

So I'll speak about each one a little bit.

Confidence is the faith element in our practice. We who've been raised in a Christian or Judeo-Christian culture have a particular understanding of faith that sometimes does not accurately reflect the confidence needed in this type of practice. We're not talking about the blind faith of "believe in me and I'll give you what you need." It's not that type of faith that we need. What we need is confidence in ourselves, confidence in our teacher, confidence in the actual practice that we're doing.

That confidence needs to be based on our experience—not based on willy-nilly pie in the sky, but on what we have directly experienced in our own life.

We can't have great confidence at the beginning of our practice in something we haven't yet experienced. We start with just a little inkling: well, maybe this is so. Maybe I have some sense that this might be a useful practice, or this teacher might be someone who seems to know what he or she is talking about. And I feel myself that I have some confidence I can do the practice. We don't know yet, because we haven't practiced to such a degree that we feel fulfilled. But with a little bit of confidence, we can begin to practice.

When we have that little bit of confidence, it begins to settle the mind down. We live in America, where spiritual practices are as numerous as different kinds of cars. You can go shopping for a different spiritual practice each week if you like. And it's hard to know—the mind gets quite agitated when it's in shopping mode, not having really any

idea which practice is going to do it for us. Maybe a little bit of Dzogchen, maybe a little bit of Vipassana, maybe even a little shamanistic studies, a little workshop here and a weekend there. The mind gets very agitated, very confused.

But when we have investigated and looked closely into what each practice technique is talking about, and we come to some understanding of it, if we can have confidence in one of them, the mind begins to settle down. Confidence or faith has that characteristic of settling the mind from some of its agitations. When we have this little bit of confidence, the mind begins to get clear just from the settledness. Clarity of mind is a direct result—initial clarity of mind is a direct result of some confidence.

Another function of confidence is that when we have confidence in our practice, in a technique, or in a teacher, it can serve as the foundation for continued interest in that practice, in that teacher, in our own development. Without that confidence, we cannot sustain our interest. We're here today, gone tomorrow, without confidence that this practice, this teacher, this path—or I myself—can make that effort.

And so this confidence is really an essential initial ingredient to walking the spiritual path. It's not something that once you've got, you've got forever. The initial confidence and understanding—or understanding that leads to confidence—overcomes some degree of doubt, some degree of confusion or hesitation in the mind. But there come times of difficulty in practice when that doubt will come up again. We'll doubt that we have the ability to sit here with such a confused mind. Or we'll doubt that the teacher really knows what they're talking about, having given an answer like that to a question. Or we'll doubt that this technique or this practice can actually get a handle on the amount of confusion and darkness in our own mind. And when that doubt comes, our confidence is gone.

So it's important to understand that in the course of our spiritual practice, there are going to be times of great confidence and determination and faith in ourselves, our teacher, and our practice. And there are going to be other times when it's very doubtful that the teacher knows anything and that I can do it. When we understand that, then we don't get so strung out and so moved and affected emotionally by the presence or absence of confidence.

Some years ago I was in Burma, and after I'd been there for about three years, one Burmese monk—an elder monk who had been to America for three months teaching—came to the monastery where I was staying in Rangoon. He heard that I was there, that there was an American monk staying in the monastery, so he sent someone and asked if

I would come see him. I went to see him. He didn't speak very much English, I didn't speak very much Burmese, and we had a very poor translator, but we could communicate a little bit.

He said, "Well, how long have you been here?" I said, "Oh, I've been here about three years." He was quite surprised, because at that time in Burma, the longest visa you could get was for about three months. But I kept getting extensions, and through some good luck I was able to stay a little longer.

He said, "Oh, three years. To stay here three years, you must have a lot of confidence or a lot of faith."

I said, "Well, sometimes I feel like I have a lot of confidence and faith and I want to practice. And other times I feel like I don't have any."

And he said, "Ah, this is even better." He said, "Because when your faith or your confidence is down, not present, and you don't have any confidence in yourself, and you don't have any confidence in your teacher, and you don't have any confidence in your practice—and yet you stay in there and keep practicing—then this really strengthens your confidence."

And so it's good to go through those swings of confidence and no confidence.

It really strengthens your mind, and it develops your spiritual capabilities and your spiritual path.

But faith alone—confidence—is not enough. It's not sufficient just to be confident, just to have faith in your teacher or yourself or the teaching. You actually need to do something with that confidence. And with that confidence one can begin to make effort, to endeavor to do the practice.

Whatever practice it is—and in this case we're talking about insight—but whatever you intend to do in life, whether it's a spiritual practice or not, once you have confidence that you want to do something or that you can, then you have to make effort. Even if it's buying a house or a car, it doesn't happen just by wanting or having confidence that you can do it. You actually have to do something. The same is true with spiritual practice. We need to arouse some determination and energy in the mind.

And how do we do that? One thing that seems to be necessary, seems to be essential for most of us, is some sense of urgency. Spiritual practice is difficult—let's acknowledge that right at the beginning. We wouldn't do it unless we felt we needed to. And it's that sense of "I need to do this, I need to learn how to practice, I need to learn how to

meditate, I need to get a handle on my anxiety, my frustration, my fear, my anger, my whatever it is"—that sense of urgency, that sense of "now is the time to do what's got to be done," is what arouses and propels us. It generates the energy based on our confidence.

You might ask yourself, why is it that some people never get to spiritual practice? No urgency in their life. No necessity for it. And so it doesn't happen. But for all of us here, there has been some sense—it may be weak, it may be strong, it may be very obvious, it may not be so obvious—there is some urgency to be here. Something has brought us here this weekend. And when you look within yourself, you may discover what it is. Why is it so urgent to sit here in utter agony for so many hours today? It's not because it's fun. You need it. Some part of you needs to wake up. And some part of you recognizes that. And you're here.

Energy, effort, making the endeavor—this is a really tricky subject to talk about in meditation practice, because we in America are great strivers. We decide what we want and then we go get it. Whether it's a degree, a car, material goods, knowledge of some sort, or whatever it is, we are great strivers. We have really learned how to harness our willpower to get results.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work in spiritual practice.

The effort, the energy that's actually needed is not one of striving for some result, but rather the effort or energy to be present. To just be here right now. Not to be here tomorrow or later or next week or a year from now, but right now. Only right now. It doesn't take much energy to be here right now. And that's all the energy you need. That's all the effort you need—to be here.

But we misunderstand the whole path of practice and think that somewhere stretched out between here and some point in the future is our spiritual path, and that we've got to arouse tremendous energy and effort to walk that path from here to there. It's not necessary. The spiritual practice and the spiritual path is only here, now. We only need the energy to be here, moment after moment.

So the real key to the energy or effort necessary for spiritual practice is not how much or what quantity, but rather what balance of mind is necessary to just be here. If you're feeling sleepy, it takes a little bit of energy to overcome sleepiness. If you're feeling restless, that's a little too much energy and you need to back off. So it's the balance of energy that we're really playing with, the balance of our effort.

It's the direction, it's where we apply our effort and our energy that really matters in spiritual practice.

When I was in Burma, again, at this particular monastery, they start you out on a very rigorous schedule of about twenty hours of practice a day and four hours of sleep. That's just the nature of practice there. The first few weeks they ask you, "How many hours did you sleep last night?" And if it's more than four, you're dismissed pretty quickly.

I somehow got it into my head that good spiritual practice was being able to sit on my cushion for long periods of time, through utter agony—two hours, three hours, four hours, five hours, whatever. So I started developing my ability to sit with great pain, thinking that *that* was the energy, that was the effort, that was the type of effort needed to wake up.

After a couple of weeks I was into good pain and long sittings, and I was reporting it to my teacher every day. I'd go and say, "Oh, I'm sitting and I had this great pain, and I watched this pain for so many hours." He let me report like this for some number of weeks. Then one day he said, "Do you know why you have so much pain?"

I said, "No, I don't."

He said, "You sit too long. It's not how long you can sit still. It's the balance of mind in sitting." He told me I needed to learn how to balance that degree of concentration and energy. "You need to walk more. You want to sit a long time? You've got to walk a long time. Balance, balance, balance."

So that's the type of effort, that's the type of energy you need in practice—a balanced effort. One of the teachers I teach with uses the story of a tightrope walker. How much energy does a tightrope walker need walking across the tightrope? Well, quite a lot, but in a very balanced way. It's not so much about the quantity of energy, but the delicacy of the balance.

With confidence in ourselves, in our teacher, in our practice technique, we become willing, with a sense of urgency, to make some effort, some attempt at waking up, at being present with this moment's experience. And what happens when we do that? As we develop the energy, as we get a sense of urgency and develop some mental power to be present, we begin to notice: what's happening?

In the sitting, we focus our attention on the breath. In the walking, we turn our attention to the movement of the legs, and we begin to see what's actually happening. We begin to focus, to connect, to try to connect our attention to the breath—the in-breath, the rising and falling of the abdomen, the in-breath and out-breath at the nostrils. The mind begins to notice; we begin to observe what's actually happening.

That ability to see, that ability of the mind to see experience, for the mind to know and observe—this is mindfulness, the third of the spiritual faculties.

In giving the instructions today, I talked about focusing or turning your attention to the primary object of the breath and connecting your attention to it. That connecting is very important, because if we don't actually connect our attention to the experience, we'll never know it. And not only do we need to connect our attention, we need to sustain our attention. Connecting and sustaining our attention to the meditation object—that movement of the belly, that sensation at the tip of the nostrils—is essential for clear seeing, for observing what's actually happening.

When we can connect and sustain our attention, steady the mind for that brief moment of a rising or an in-breath—a second or two—it's as if we come face to face with that experience. And as we develop the ability to come face to face with the breath, we also develop the ability to come face to face with emotions, memories, thoughts, plans, other physical sensations in the body—the whole vast array of what it is to be human. We develop the ability to see clearly what's happening.

How can we be free if we don't know what we're attached to? The first step is to see where we are on the path, to see what our fears are, to see where our mind goes, to see what our fantasy futures are, to see what our shameful past is, to see what is going on in this body, where we're holding, where we're tight. This is what we need to see by connecting and sustaining our attention on the experience.

It happens to all of us. As soon as we get some clarity of mind, some ability to connect with our experience and stay with it, we find great discomfort in the body. Pain. There isn't anybody here that didn't sit with really uncomfortable pain today. It's the nature of the body at times. And when we focus and look clearly, carefully, that's what we see.

Learning how to deal with pain is quite necessary, an essential thing to learn. Initially, when we come in contact with pain—you know, the knee that's just on fire, or the back that's like a board, or the neck that feels like it has a meat hook through it—at first it's just a massive, solid pain. And the mind is so reactive to it, so afraid of it, so disliking of it, that the mind won't even get close.

The mind just skitters away before you can contact it. It's like splashing water on a hot griddle—it just skitters off without really landing. Pain is really hot, and the mind simply skitters off when it comes close.

It takes some persistence, some real perseverance, some care to gently bring the mind close to that level of discomfort. It's not something you can just jam your mind into and make go away. Simply enduring it, gritting your teeth and bearing it—that is not the way to get close to pain. Rather, you gently bring the mind to it. Around the edges. Skirt around the edges. Begin to explore around the pain. Take a quick look inside and see what's right in the center of that pain, but don't expect to stay there for long. And slowly, as you get comfortable with the periphery of pain, you can open to the outer extremities of it and gradually move the mind into the center.

And what happens to this solid block of pain that stretches from hip to ankle? We begin to notice that there's some movement in there, some shifting, some change, some fluxing. Some tightness, some tension, some pulling, some stretching, some bubbling, some heat, some stabbing, some ripping, some tearing. It's a massive change. It's not so solid. With steadiness of mind, we can begin to approach the solidity of experience and see its composite and fluxing nature.

Steadiness of mind—the ability to connect and sustain our attention. It's that sustaining of attention on the experience that allows the mind to open and accept that experience.

So what is it that we learn to observe, that we are mindful of? It is said in the texts, in the Buddha's teaching, that there are four foundations for mindfulness. Four experiences that mindfulness rests on.

The first of these is what we use as the primary object: our body, our physical, material experience. The movement of the breath, the stretching and tightness and tension of the abdomen, the tingling sensations at the nostrils, pain, heat, movement of the legs in walking. The physical body, the experience of it. This is the first foundation of mindfulness.

The second foundation of mindfulness is what's called feeling. And it's not emotion in this case, but the pleasant or unpleasant quality to each and every experience that we have. If you look carefully at your experience of your mind, of your body, you will discover that there is a tone to it in each moment. A tone of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality. It's hard to see a neutral experience because when things are okay and neutral, we tend to fall asleep. When they're very unpleasant, we know it. When they're very pleasant, we know it. And sometimes that's all we can know of our experience—that it's very unpleasant, or that it's quite pleasant. This is another foundation for mindfulness, another foundation for observing what's actually happening, the basis for observing.

So we have the body, or physical material experience, and feelings. The third foundation is consciousness itself—the nature of the mind to think. And who hasn't been thinking today? Into the past remembering, into the future planning, into fantasies fantasizing. It's the nature of the mind to keep really busy. When we begin to pay attention, as we do today, we begin to discover that the mind is rarely home. It's on the go all the time. Those thoughts, those fantasies, those futures, those memories are all foundation for mindfulness. We can learn to observe them happening without buying in. We can train ourselves to know planning is happening, remembering is happening, fantasizing is happening, without getting caught in the story of that particular memory, that particular fantasy, that particular plan. Training the mind to observe what's happening rather than indulging in what's happening. So consciousness is the third foundation for mindfulness.

And the fourth is the contents of mind, or mental states. These we more commonly know as the hindrances, the factors of enlightenment, the emotions that we have.

When we feel frustrated, when we feel disappointed, when we feel joy, when we feel confident, when we feel loving, when we feel hatred, when we feel depressed—these are the contents of our mind. These are the contents of our consciousness. They too are a foundation for awakening, for observing, for developing the ability to know what's happening, for mindfulness.

So these are the four foundations of mindfulness: the body, pleasant or unpleasant feelings, consciousness of thoughts, plans, fantasies, and remembering, and mental states or emotions.

As we develop the ability to know our experience, to observe it and recognize it, to see it—as we develop the ability to extend the continuity of attention from one moment to the next to the next—rising, falling, rising, falling, thinking, planning, knee pain, back to the back, back to the abdomen, back to the breath, rising, falling—we develop continuity of attention. The mind gets collected.

The mind, in all of its fragmented pieces that is strung out across the universe of the past and the future, we pull it in. We pull in these little bits and pieces from this memory. We bring back our mind from this plan. We bring back our mind from this part of the body. We collect our mind in one place. We focus the mind. More of the mind gets collected and focused on this experience right now.

It's as if we take a magnifying glass, a magnifying lens, and focus our mind on just what it is we want to look at. And that's really what happens in the continuity of mindfulness—the mind does not have the opportunity to fragment and scatter to other ex-

perience. It stays together, comes together, collects. This is the one-pointedness of mind. It can only come about when we are mindful or observing with some continuity. The mind becomes concentrated.

When the mind is concentrated, when we look at something through a magnifying lens, we see more detail of what it is we're looking at. When the mind becomes concentrated, whatever it is we look at, we see more clearly. We see more details. We gain more knowledge.

So if I hold up my hand here and say, "Well, what do you see?" You see a hand. And if you come closer and look again, you can see four or five fingers. And if you get even closer, you can see all the knuckles. And if you get really close, you can see the prints, the fingerprints and the lines. And if you get really close, you might be able to see the pores. And if you use a magnifying lens, you can see even closer than that. More knowledge about the same experience.

Concentration is like putting on glasses to see what's already there. We've lived our life for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years. We've been breathing every day of our life. And have we really noticed it yet? Did you notice something about your breath today that you never noticed before? As we practice into the night and tomorrow, you may begin to discover experiences in the body, experiences in the mind that you never noticed before. It's not that they haven't been happening. They've been happening. But the mind has not been powerful enough to see them.

When the mind gets concentrated, we see more clearly. We see more deeply. We gain more knowledge, more wisdom, more understanding. And it's this understanding that frees the mind from bondage.

Because as we see and look carefully into our experience, we begin to discover that there are characteristics to all of our experience. Everything is changing. Do you know what that means? That means that everything is changing. It means that nothing is going to stay still. Your body is not going to stay the way it is now. Your mind is not going to stay the way it is now. Thank goodness.

And yet, we don't live with that knowledge. We live with the endeavor and striving to keep our body youthful and strong and healthy, like it's nineteen years old still. It's not going to stay that way. Let go of that one. Free your mind from that bondage.

Very simple example. Think of what's going on in the mind. How attached are we to ideas of who we are? Ideas about what we want that will make us happy? Ideas about our spouse, or intended spouse, or who we would like to have as a spouse that will

make us happy? Our mind changes. We can know this intellectually, can't we? Everything changes. Why get attached? Why get stuck on something that's going to change anyway? We know this intellectually, but we can't let go.

We can't live with that knowledge until we experience it directly. This practice takes you to that experience—direct experience of the change of all phenomena. When you see that, it's not a struggle to let go. You see that you can't hold on anyway. Seeing into the nature of impermanence is a major step in spiritual practice, one which insight practice can take you to.

These spiritual faculties, these controlling faculties of the mind that I've been speaking about—confidence giving rise to and being the basis for our making effort, arousing energy to be aware, to observe, to look carefully at our life, to see what's actually going on here in this body, in this mind. And when we do, with some continuity, look carefully, the mind collects and focuses and sees more deeply into our experience. It sees more deeply into what it really is to be a human being, sees more deeply into the nature of our bondage to this body, to our mind, to our ideas. And it sees more deeply into the nature of freedom, of liberation, of enlightening the mind.

This practice is not insignificant. In an appreciation of the profundity of the Buddha's teaching—of guiding the mind into itself to free itself from bondage—just getting an appreciation for the profundity of that is worth your effort.

Well, I have talked enough. Let's just sit for a couple of minutes. Or if you're lying down, you can just lie like that, just for a couple of minutes, and let this whole talk settle.

CHAPTER 217

The Buddha's Prescription For Happiness: Seven Factors Of Enlightenment

Carol Wilson · 43 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson presents the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅgā) as the Buddha's prescription for the highest happiness—the happiness of the liberated heart. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she explains how these factors work together: three energizing qualities (investigation/dhammavicaya, energy/vīriya, and joy/pīti), three stabilizing qualities (calm/passaddhi, concentration/samādhi, and equanimity/upekkhā), and mindfulness (sati) as the balancing factor that cultivates all the others.

Wilson offers practical insights into each factor, explaining how mindfulness serves as a purifying force—every moment of clear awareness without grasping, aversion, or identification deconditions habitual reactive patterns. She shares accessible techniques for cultivating investigation, such as approaching each breath with the wonder of it being the first or last, and describes how genuine interest transforms mundane experience into something magical. The talk addresses how effort naturally generates energy, and how joy arises from wholehearted engagement with present-moment experience.

Particularly valuable is Wilson's explanation of how practitioners can use this framework diagnostically, identifying which factors need strengthening in their own practice. Whether one needs more calm, more investigation, or more joy, these qualities can be consciously evoked through intention. The teaching offers both a map for intensive retreat practice and practical wisdom for bringing greater aliveness and ease to everyday life.

So tonight, since we've been having a series of talks on this prescription for happiness that these authors wrote—oh, that reminds me of one other thing, the happiness books. Who's reading the happiness books right now? Who's in the middle of reading them? Remember, it's kind of a lending library, so when you finish—somebody was asking if there's one of those books available—if and when you do finish, please bring them up here so other people can use them.

That book on happiness has a prescription for happiness that we've been going over extensively. We're examining in detail over the course of nine weeks these nine different choices, and I've found it very valuable. I hope you do too. Last week we started talking about suffering again and that first noble truth leading to doing this practice.

Tonight I thought I'd give another prescription list for happiness, which comes out of the Buddha's teachings. He had a few different lists for creating happiness in your life. Probably the most well-known is the list called the Eightfold Path, which is his fourth noble truth. That is a prescription for happiness in the full spectrum of one's life, which includes our interactions with others—right speech, action, and livelihood—our meditation practice—effort, mindfulness, and concentration—and also the development of wisdom, of right thought and right understanding. That's one prescription he gave. He said if you follow this path, you will find greater and greater harmony.

Another list and prescription he gave—a recipe, one could say, for happiness, the happiness of the liberated heart—is the list of the factors of enlightenment, the seven factors of enlightenment. I wanted to talk about this recipe or prescription for happiness tonight. I realize that people who've done the beginning class have heard the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths and the Five Hindrances and those classical lists, but I have a feeling that there are a number of people who aren't so familiar with this list of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Buddhist prescription for the highest happiness.

This list, by the way, is in the discourse on the meditation practice, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The last foundation is mindfulness of the Dharma, or of the dharmas, and what that means are different principles for understanding the awakening heart. One of the main aspects of that fourth foundation is understanding the seven factors of enlightenment.

There are balancing qualities among these factors. Three of them are energizing, one could say activating factors. Three are stilling or stabilizing factors, tranquilizing factors. And then there is one factor that balances both ends of the spectrum and also cultivates all of them. So that's one way to see this list.

It starts with that balancing factor, and that is—guess what?—mindfulness. This is the first of the factors of enlightenment. Mindfulness is talked about as the most wondrous way for overcoming sorrow and lamentation and grief. In some translations, it's said this is the sole way—it depends what translation you use. In any event, this quality of mindfulness is really important for complete awakening.

What mindfulness is—probably you have your own definition of it—but the basic principle of mindfulness is simply knowing what's happening right now. That is being awake for this moment's experience. But being awake in a special way that is not only aware of what's happening, but not having a reaction to what one sees, not clinging to what is pleasant, not condemning or pushing away what is unpleasant, and not taking

ownership of your experience, not saying "I" or "me" or "mine"—this is my thought, this is my confusion, this is my pain, this is my fantastic meditation experience—but just seeing the whole process in an impersonal way: this is what is unfolding before us.

The awareness that recognizes that does not have to grasp at the experience and take ownership of it. This is what is called not identifying with your experience. When you identify with it, you take it to be mine. And this is where we create a lot of problems. There you are sitting, minding your own business, and all of a sudden a thought comes that triggers off some anger. There is often the tendency to say, "Oh, look what an angry person I am," or "Why am I having this thought? I have so much anger in me." That's the process of identification.

You just got caught. When you start to blame yourself for these emotions that arise, or these thoughts that arise, or these sensations in the body that arise—or start to take credit for all the good stuff. "Hey, that was a pretty neat thought. I hope everybody sees what a wonderful person I am if they only knew what a beautiful guy, because I just had this nice thought." And it just really popped into the screen. When you take ownership for it, you are setting yourself up for the condemnation when things aren't so sweet. Because as soon as you say, "Look at that," it's one step away from saying, "Oh, look at that." And it's very freeing to see this is just arising and passing away on its own.

This is what mindfulness truly is. Mindfulness has some amazing properties. One of the most powerful aspects of mindfulness is that it is a purifying force. Every moment you see things or are aware of things without grasping at the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant or that sense of ownership for your experience, you are deconditioning those habits of grasping, aversion, and delusion. So although it might not seem very profound to feel a breath and know that you're breathing, it is a moment of purification that is undercutting that habit of identification and reaction. Very, very powerful. It is actually the most powerful purifying force of all. You cannot create unwholesome karma in the moment that you are mindful. In fact, in a moment of true mindfulness, you can only create wholesome karma.

So, sounds like a pretty good motivation, huh? One of my main motivations when I practice—and I said this in the Labor Day retreat that just happened, which was a wonderful retreat—as I'm practicing, reminding myself that every single moment of mindfulness counts. Every single moment I'm deconditioning those habits of grasping, aversion, and delusion. So don't underestimate them. And they are planting seeds that are very powerful, have very powerful ripenings.

There are a number of different ways one can be mindful. In that discourse on mindfulness, the four foundations: mindfulness of the body; of our sense experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch; mindfulness of the feeling tone of experience, that is the flavor of experience, if it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. So you're sitting here and all of a sudden you might hear a bird, if it's during the day, a bird from the outside whistling. Now you might be very mindful and aware that there's that sound, and even if you don't take ownership or get into a reaction of, "Oh, I love that, that's so beautiful," it has a pleasant tone to it. The sweet bird song. And the Buddha said, if you're mindful of that flavor and just acknowledge it—"Ah, this is pleasant"—there is less of a likelihood that you will grasp out of trying to hold on. Just, "Oh, this is a pleasant moment."

Just like if you're sitting and there's a screech of a truck or some loud sound. "Ah, this is unpleasant," which is very different than, "Darn it, I hate when trucks interrupt me for my meditation." Catching that unpleasantness of it without a judgment, you are a whole lot more likely to not jump on that train of rejection. Just, "Ah, this is an unpleasant moment." Or, "This is a neutral moment." So he said that's another area of mindfulness.

He also said you can be mindful of all the thoughts and feelings that come through. Mindful of whether they're pleasant or unpleasant. "Ah, this is thinking. Oh, this is feeling." Confusion or joy or whatever. And the key to being mindful of thoughts and feelings is not to get caught in the story, but simply to know that thinking is happening or knowing that this emotion is happening. And then the last area is mindfulness of the Dharma, these different principles, like the Four Noble Truths or the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.

So basically, the idea is it doesn't matter what you're mindful of. The moment of mindfulness is a moment of clear recognition without attachment or aversion or identification. It's a purifying force. It's a balancing force between these other six factors—we'll come back to that at the very end. And it is also the way to cultivate all the other qualities; all the other factors are cultivated through mindfulness.

So now we'll go to the three activating qualities. The first of these is the quality of investigation. When I say these different factors, I'm talking partly on meditation practice, partly with reference to meditation practice, but also these can be cultivated in your life.

It's not like you have to wait until you do a retreat or you meditate to cultivate them. They are gifts that we can evoke that lead to happiness, just like the ones that those authors talked about. In the same way, you can consciously cultivate all of these factors.

Investigation. What that means is a kind of curiosity, a kind of interest in life. It's one thing to be attentive and be aware, but there's a quality of interest, of discovery, that is a very enlivening attitude to bring to your awareness. If you're sitting here saying, "Breathing in, breathing out," and you're feeling your breath because you know that that's the basic instruction, but you have the attitude of "In, out, here's another breath, we just had one a moment ago, what's the big deal?"—it becomes kind of boring. It seems like a very stagnant exercise.

But let's try this for a moment. Close your eyes and imagine you've just been born. Imagine you've just come out of the womb and you're about to take your first breath. Here it is, the start of your life. Can you be here for it? It makes it a bit more interesting, doesn't it?

Now, before you open your eyes, let's try one more. Imagine you've come to the end of a full life, and you're about to take your last breath into the great mystery. How present can you be? Here it is, your last breath. You probably don't want to miss it.

Now, one last thing. Let go of first and last, and just recognize that this breath has never been here before and will never be here again. This moment of life is here for us, and we have the capacity to be present for it. Can you be here for it? This breath is sustaining you, keeping you alive.

You can open your eyes if you like. Did you notice any difference in the flavor of your presence? That's not cheating. You might think it's a gimmick, but if it gets you here, it's okay. And actually, that last one isn't a gimmick—that's the truth. It's never been here before, and it'll never be here again, this moment. If it helps you to do something like first breath or last breath, which I do from time to time, use it. If your head was being held under water, that breath would be very precious to you.

This whole quality of discovery is, for me, one of the great motivators in practice. It's like letting a little kid in you come out that has this sense of wonder. Wow! Have you ever wondered how it was that you got in this body that we call you, that everybody agrees to call Marcial or John or Miriam or James? How is it that life got here and coalesced into that body? It's all quite mysterious and miraculous. And if you let yourself have that kind of awe and wonder, that quality of investigation and interest is not very out of reach. It's just remembering the childlike wonder and not taking this moment for granted.

That is a factor of enlightenment.

In the same way, you can turn this investigation toward any experience. Suppose you have a feeling of fear or sadness, a strong emotion. The usual response is, "Oh no, I don't want to go there." For most of us, most of the time, we distract ourselves or seek some kind of entertainment or diversion. But you can't run away from it anyway. Usually the more you try to run away, the more easily it catches up.

But if instead you turn your awareness to that experience and say, "Wow, what is fear anyway? What's the experience of fear? Let's check this out." For me, another little game that I play is imagining that I'm an alien from outer space who has landed in this body, and it's my job to report back to

my superiors what it's like to be in the human condition. Wow, what's fear? Look at that! Oh, what is happiness? What is joy? Not answering with an analytical answer—not "happiness is..."—but rather, what are the components of it? How does it feel?

It's bringing that kind of interest and curiosity that really helps you connect with experience and keeps it from just being another mechanical exercise. It brings a real juice to practice. This is the second factor of enlightenment.

The third factor, and the second of the activating factors, is the quality of energy or effort—these terms are often used synonymously. *Viriya* is the word. This practice takes some effort. It just doesn't happen on its own. If you brought somebody in off the street and said, "Okay, sit down here, feel your breath, notice what's happening, when your mind wanders come back to right now, try not to fantasize, and just be here, and do it for the next forty-five minutes"—most people would say, "Later for this. Don't sign me up."

It takes some real understanding of the value, or at least a real curiosity that tries it out. When you see for yourself that there's some value in it, then you want to put in the effort to pay attention. Because it's kind of like going against the grain, or going up-stream from the current of reacting to all the stimuli that most of us process all the time—stimuli which leads us to topple forward to the future or topple back to the past. It takes real intention to land here in the present moment. It takes effort. It takes energy.

The interesting thing about effort and energy is that as you put in the effort to be mindful, it actually brings about energy. It brings about an enlivening. When you do periods of practice, after a few days, when at first the energy seems low and the mind isn't reacting so much, it's common for there to be a lot more energy than most of us have available normally—because we're not reacting and we're not getting confused.

This is actually one of my motivations for practice, another little gimmick I use. I just get fascinated by the fact that one can go on a whole lot less sleep than one would in normal daily life. It's one of the motivations for me to be mindful as much as I can—this little game. How is it that I can go on five hours, or four hours, or even three hours, or even less sometimes, day after day? It's amazing, because an energy opens up to you. This is not all the time for everyone, but for some it's not uncommon at all. Energy picks up tremendously as you go through periods of practice, just because the mind isn't getting lost and reactive. Effort begets energy.

It's the same way in your daily life, probably, when you've got a project to do. At first there's the inertia that just says, "Oh, I don't know if I'm up to this"—which can also be, "Oh, I don't know if I'm up to getting this body out of bed in the morning." You can stay there for a long time in bed. But once you make the effort to get your body out of bed and you get going, there's a different kind of inertia—that of activity. Once you give yourself to a project and let yourself get into it, it's not that you have to keep pushing yourself: "Go ahead, go ahead." There's a point that most of us experience in activity where it just kind of gets you on a roll, and you want to put your heart into it until you get really tired. That initial effort leads to an energetic experience. So effort is a factor, and it's simply the effort to be mindful.

Investigation, effort, and then the third of the energizing factors of enlightenment is probably the most popular factor, called joy—also known as rapture. Sounds cool, huh? *Pīti* is the name in Pali. Pīti—not pity, but P-I-T-I—means a real joy that comes as you are more and more mindful. As that energy picks up, you become like this energy system, and sometimes it's quite exhilarating in a fantastic way.

Have you ever felt that wholehearted aliveness, where it's bubbling, the energy is bubbling through you? Sometimes it can actually be disconcerting when you feel that the energy is a bit more than you can handle. I remember one time in practice where I was paying attention and I was just filled with—not only this energy, but at first this excitement, and it felt really great, like I was getting higher and higher. I was saying, "Wow, who needs drugs?"

This is incredible. But at some point it became, "Whoa, what if I explode?" And I got really unsettled, to say the least, and went running to the teacher saying, "Hey, what's going on here?" At which point Joseph said, "You see, you thought this was a dry, brittle practice. Not much is going on." Because I wanted the juice of devotional practice. And he said, "Okay, you just do this, this, and this"—there are ways to ground yourself. And mostly it's getting used to opening up and becoming familiar with holding more and more energy.

Another way to define joy, another aspect of this rapture or piti, is a keen interest in what's going on. You just become very focused and interested. Just like in your daily life, sometimes when you've really given yourself wholeheartedly to something, there's a kind of fullness and aliveness and joy just from giving yourself fully over to it. This is very much akin to piti, to this rapture. And it comes through the development of strong mindfulness.

But it can also come in one's daily life, even not on an intensive retreat experience, just by letting your natural curiosity give rise to real interest. The more you pay attention, the more fascinating things become.

I've used this example some of you have heard. When I was younger, I would do this a lot, and even now I still do—looking at a shaft of sunlight. Have you ever looked at a shaft of sunlight coming through the window? Have you ever looked up close? What's going on there? How many people have done that? There's this whole dance going on there of dust. And if somebody said to you, "What are you doing?" and you answered, "I'm looking at some dust"—yeah, right, okay, sounds like an interesting day, I'll see you later. But actually, it's fascinating, isn't it? Wow. Look what's going on there.

For me, I used to do that a lot. It was like there was this doorway to this whole world that I was normally blind to. This intense, keen interest—you can bring it to anything. If you can bring it to dust dancing, you can bring it to anything. It's all magical.

I remember having this conversation with my son Adam when he was about four or so. He was talking about magic, and he asked, "Well, what is magic?" And I was saying how it's all magical. "Oh yeah? Well, what's magical?" I don't remember if we looked at some dust, but then I started going around the house. There was a cassette of Sesame Street on the table and a cassette player. I said, "Here, I'd like you to see this. What is this?" "Oh, it's a cassette." I said, "Bert and Ernie are ready to come alive for you. Watch." Press the button and there it comes: "Everyone makes mistakes, oh yes they do." That's my favorite Sesame Street song. How does that happen? We looked for Bert and Ernie. Where are they? I don't know.

I say, it's magic. And then we turn on the light switch. How does that happen? I don't know. How does it happen? I don't know either. It's all magic.

How does it happen that I'm having a thought and then giving rise to some words through potassium sodium chemistry in my brain, which translates into action and words that come through the vocal cords, travel through space, hit your eardrum, get

translated into information in your brain—and I can say something like "beautiful" and you can have one reaction, or I can say something like "ugly" and you can have another reaction? How does that happen? I don't know. It's magic.

That's the kind of keen interest or joy that you can have just by surrendering. That's this quality of awe and wonder, which is a kind of further step of investigation—letting yourself be amazed by it all. So all of these are quite enlivening aspects that come along with mindfulness.

Then there are three factors that balance out that energetic, activating side, which are stabilizing, stilling, composing. And the three factors begin with the factor of calm. It's wonderful, isn't it? You come to sit. That's probably one of the first things that people get in touch with when they're not very restless. As you sit here for forty minutes or so and you stop the busyness and the stimulation and you just try to go within, there's a calming effect.

Even if you're spacing out, even if you're drifting off, even if you're on Pluto for all intents and purposes, you might think, well, what's the point of that? But actually, one thing that you're cultivating, which is a very rare experience in this world that most of us live in, is calm. If nothing else happened, just giving yourself a break from the action is incredibly helpful.

And there can be all different levels of calm. There can be a deep, profound calm that is experienced in the meditation that perhaps many of you know for yourselves. This is a kind of tranquilizing, a stilling, a settling of the energy. And it's a factor of enlightenment.

A second of these stilling qualities is the factor of concentration. And it's slightly different. It can be with calm, but not necessarily. Calm is a kind of settling down, a stilling that comes from settling down. Concentration or samādhi is a stilling that comes from focusing. It comes from a one-pointed connection with what's happening. You can actually be concentrated and not necessarily calm, just like you can be calm and not necessarily concentrated. You probably know that one, right? "Oh, I wasn't quite here, but it's calm." Like I say, that's okay. But if you want the full flowering of the practice, concentration is a very key component.

And what concentration? There are a few different kinds of concentration. One kind of concentration is fixing the attention on one particular point, like the breath, or like loving-kindness and repeating a phrase over and over, or like an energy center, or some kind of visualization, or staring at a candle. Just unifying the mind. I think it's in Jesus'

teachings—he says, "If thine eye be single, then you will know the kingdom of heaven." That is what he's talking about: unifying the mind. The mind in samādhi, or in the deep states of concentration, what are called the jhānas—deep states of absorption.

But you don't have to have that kind of laser-like concentration in order for awakening to happen. You can have a concentration that is called moment-to-moment concentration, or khaṇika samādhi, which is a connection with this moment, and a connection with this moment, and then a connection with this moment. Even if it's changing experience, you can have an awareness of the breath, and then awareness of a sound, and then awareness of an emotion, and awareness of a sensation, and be connected from one moment to another. That is also sometimes called vipassanā concentration. That kind of connection comes from moments of mindfulness building on each other.

So the more effort you put into being mindful, the greater the moments of mindfulness, particularly in a retreat setting, and those moments of mindfulness build a momentum to develop into concentration. That is one of the reasons why retreats are so valued and so powerful—because they create a situation where there's minimal external input, external stimulation, where there's a whole support of other people having the same task or goal of being here, and you are gently reminding yourself over and over: come back.

come back. And the way you come back is the key to concentration—not with judgment, but with a sincere commitment to return. Through that kind of concentration, you start to penetrate through the veils of confusion and illusion.

So this is the second of the stilling factors. The third, which is the last of the seven factors, is the quality of equanimity, called upekkha in Pali. Equanimity is another facet of stilling. There's a stilling in the calm that comes from settling. There's a stilling of concentration that comes from focus. And the stilling of equanimity is that of non-reactiveness—a spaciousness that allows for anything, seeing all the joys and the sorrows, open to it all.

Equanimity is different from indifference. That's the near enemy of equanimity—indifference or apathy, where it seems like you're not ruffled or bothered by things, but only because you're removed or detached. "Oh well, who cares?" That's not equanimity. Equanimity still has caring in it, but there is a spaciousness and an ease. The moment that precedes the liberated heart or mind, that experience of awakening, is usually defined as high equanimity—where there's a balance, where all the factors come into balance, and there is a deep ease that lets go of any movement of trying, of making anything happen, of becoming. That opening of equanimity is the preceding moment to the liberated heart or mind.

So those are the stilling factors: calm, concentration, equanimity. The energizing factors are investigation, energy, and rapture or joy. And mindfulness is the balancing factor because it has both an alert and a receptive quality to it. That's where the balance lies. You have to have some alertness to know what's happening, but there's also a receiving of the experience—not pouncing on it, just being open to it. This curious property of mindfulness is that it balances both sides of that equation, and it also cultivates all the other factors.

So that is the prescription the Buddha gave. When all of those factors are ripe, there is the experience of waking up. The seven factors of enlightenment.

A student named John raised a question: "The way you presented that, it could easily be taken as very intimidating—that awakening is a big deal, that you have to go through all of these steps. The teaching I've loved so much is Ajahn Amaro's teaching that enlightenment is in every moment of existence."

Both are true. It's just what vantage point you want to take. Enlightenment is a big deal—it is. And it can be made to seem very distant. This is actually one of the fascinating things about a retreat blending Tibetan Dzogchen practice, which is really about letting go and not trying at all, with Theravadan practice. Although Ajahn Amaro is more of a Dzogchen style, most of the Theravadan world, and most of what the Buddha taught, emphasizes tremendous effort. "Strive on diligently," he said. It does take tremendous effort.

Now, if you get put off by that, the thing to keep in mind is this: to be in this moment requires very little effort. In fact, it's a not-doing—just receiving this moment. And that is absolutely true.

In the moment that you're mindful, all of those factors can be present. But if you're talking about the liberated heart—more than just this moment, but an actual uprooting of tendencies—this takes tremendous work. This is not something to simply kick back and wait to come.

At various times in my own practice, I've been very motivated to work my butt off because I could see the more energy and effort I put into being mindful, the more the practice would come alive. That's just how it works. And at other times, I could see I was beating myself, knocking my head against the wall because I was trying too hard. And I went a whole other direction, took a whole other approach of really just relaxing.

They're both true. It's not that one is the right way and the other is the wrong way. If you're looking at it from the perspective of surrendering to this moment, it's available in every moment. If you're looking at it as a process of purification, of cultivation, then

it's more than just relaxing back—it takes tremendous intention. So they're both true, and you use whichever one inspires you for where you're at in your practice, which can change over time.

Someone shared that they had an email from a friend who said, "I have been flying out of control all summer." That's the opposite of what we've been talking about. It means whirling from event to event without any mindfulness at all—that feeling of "Wow, this past month was a blur." The point is, once you get the habit of mindfulness, you know when you're passing through your life without any mindfulness. You're not there. Everything is on the periphery. It's as if you're flying along out of control. And the benefit of practice is that you can catch yourself doing that and say, "Wow, I haven't known what I've been doing. I haven't been mindful for the past week or the past month." And it's never too late. It's just starting again right in this moment.

One thing about these factors is that as you practice, if you know the list, you can take a look and see where you're out of balance. A lot of times when people come into an interview on retreat, I'll be looking at the factors in this way and seeing, "Oh, there's a lot of energy but not much calm." So that'll be the direction. Or somebody else might be very calm but low energy, and I'll look at that. Or somebody else might have not much equanimity, and that's the place to focus on. Or somebody might be doing the practice and it seems like they're really there, but there's very little investigation or joy.

You can look in yourself and see, "Ah, maybe I need a little bit more joy"—not only in your formal meditation, but in your daily life. Probably most of us could use a little bit more joy. It's not cheating. It's bringing some uplifting and nourishment into your heart so you can then be here more for your life. That's not to pretend that everything is okay, but to nourish yourself. Or maybe you need a little bit more investigation. What really is going on? Because it takes courage to investigate.

So you can use these factors. And the amazing thing about them is that you can consciously evoke them, just by having the intention. "Let's cultivate more investigation." You can pretend to be interested, and that gets the ball rolling. "Well, what would it be like if I was interested, even though I'm not? Well, if I was interested, then I'd look more carefully." And then all of a sudden, that starts it. With all of these, you can consciously cultivate them, evoke them.

So maybe play around with them this week. If you happen to hear one in that list and say, "Oh, that's one I could really use a bit more," just take it on as a practice this week. Nobody's giving you a grade, but just see what it's like to consciously bring it more into your meditation or your attitude in your life.

Let your heart be at ease. Breathe in kindness and goodness, letting it fill your whole body, and then breathe it out.

Send some kind thoughts to yourself: May I have happiness in my life. Just getting in touch with that intention. May I have peace in my life. May I express my love well. May I be happy.

And then share that thought with everyone here and with all beings everywhere. As I want happiness for myself, may all beings be happy. As I want peace, may all beings have peace in their lives. As I want love, may all beings grow in love and kindness and express their love well.

May all beings everywhere be happy.

CHAPTER 218

The Art of Wise Effort

Carol Wilson · 53 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the crucial distinction between ordinary effort and wise effort (sammā vāyāma) in meditation practice. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching about making "an island that no flood can overwhelm," she explores how we can find an inner refuge—a true home within ourselves—that remains stable amidst changing conditions.

Wilson carefully deconstructs common misunderstandings about effort in meditation. She explains that meditative effort is not about attaining particular states, changing the contents of consciousness, or fixing ourselves as objects. Instead, wise effort is simply the effort to be present, to be mindful, moment after moment. She introduces the essential question "How am I relating to this?" as a doorway out of our habitual patterns of grasping, aversion, and identification.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with resistance, which Wilson frames as a natural part of practice rather than an obstacle. She emphasizes that we don't need to feel like practicing in order to practice, and encourages treating each sitting as a fresh experiment. Drawing on teachings from Suzuki Roshi, Milarepa, and Ajahn Chah, she articulates the paradox of balanced effort: "Be impeccable and take it easy." The essence of practice, she concludes, is not achieving anything but resting within who we already are—"that which is always and already free."

The Buddha once said, "With wise effort and earnestness, make for yourself an island that no flood can overwhelm." And of course, what the Buddha meant by this is an inner island. I'm sure some of you at various points throughout the day today might feel that getting a little dirt together in the middle of the ocean and making an island that way would be a whole lot easier than what you've tried to do throughout this day.

What is being spoken about in terms of no flood being able to overwhelm is finding a place of refuge within. This island means refuge—finding a refuge within that is untouched, unaffected by conditions, by outer and inner conditions. Another way of saying this is that we are learning how to find ourselves at home with ourselves, wherever we are.

Some years ago, I went to a funeral of a friend's mother, and it was in a church that was evangelical Christian. What it was called—some of you may be familiar with this—was a "going home service" for this person. I thought that was great, just such a wonderful way of looking at death. And I also thought, can we go home now without having to die? Is it possible to find a way to go home right now? This is what is being spoken about. This is what is being encouraged by the Buddha: to find an inner home, to find an inner refuge that is stable and steady, that arena that is at ease.

How is this refuge or home realized? Through the awareness of our life, through bringing mindfulness to whatever it is that is occurring from moment to moment, seeing into conditions and seeing beyond conditions. What mindfulness means, by definition, is not clinging to whatever it is that's occurring—not grasping, not trying to hold on to, not trying to make last. It also means not trying to get rid of, push away, or react to with aversion. And mindfulness means not identifying with what is happening inwardly as being who we are. Sometimes we get more grandiose and think it's how the world is because of what we feel like inwardly. So mindfulness also means not identifying with what is occurring.

What happens when we're able to be mindful is that even though it doesn't always feel like it, it begins a process of dissolving the unconscious patterns within the mind, the unconscious ways that we suffer. So it's not a path of instant gratification—far from it. And at the same time, we can have the confidence that this is what is happening each time we're able to be aware and awake and mindful. Each time, we're chipping away at an unconscious habit or pattern within the mind that has kept us stuck for an awfully long time.

However, it takes effort to be mindful, usually quite a lot of effort to be mindful. I'll read you something that Milarepa, a great yogi from the past, wrote. This was after a very long retreat—not seven days, but over eleven months: "Not stopping at mere intellectual knowledge of the gradual processes of profound path teachings, I practiced without regard for fatigue or strain until the signs and marks of progress appeared. In one place during a practice retreat, I meditated strenuously for eleven months, never allowing my cushion to lose its warmth." I would also comment by saying he was in a really cold area of the world. So here, it's not really such a big deal. Maybe we leave for forty-five minutes to walk and our cushion still holds some warmth. But in a cold place, the cushion would lose it immediately. So he would have had to be sitting quite a lot.

Obviously, effort is really an essential aspect of the path. We can't get around it. We can't pretend we don't need it. We can't dream about the practice and think anything's going to happen. We can fantasize, but nothing is going to happen if we do. Effort is

really necessary. It is something that we have to work with, and it really is an art. It's not a science, it's not a formula—it really is an art. This is what I'd like to talk about tonight: the art of effort.

One of the questions is, what is wise effort? Notice that the Buddha didn't just say "with effort and earnestness," but "with wise effort and earnestness." So what is wise effort? In other words, what is effort in the context of meditation? The reason why this is important is because effort in the context of meditation is actually totally different than our usual definitions of effort. That's why it's so confusing. That's why we find ourselves sometimes struggling and not knowing what to do. We think, "Okay, I'll try as hard as I can," and we find ourselves completely coiled up and tense and caught and engaged in a struggle. A way to move out of this struggle is to understand more deeply what wise effort actually is in the context of what we're engaged in, which is the world of meditation.

Meditative effort is not the effort to attain or maintain a particular state of mind. Although we might like it to be—when once in a while a wonderful state of mind comes along, we might want to grasp onto it and try to make it last. We might want to think, perhaps because it makes us feel productive, that if we could only attain this particular state of mind or that particular state of mind, then everything will be over, everything will be easy.

But the problem is that when our effort is directed towards trying to attain anything in particular—a particular state of mind, a particular feeling, a particular emotion—it becomes problematic because it's our imagination, and it has everything to do with something happening in the future rather than what really works, which is mindfulness in the present moment. Being here, not in the future, not lost in our thoughts about what could happen, may happen, will happen, should happen at some future date. Every time we do that, we've lost our wise effort. So we must be aware of this tendency to aim towards a particular state of mind.

Meditative effort is also not the effort to change what is happening within, to change the contents of consciousness. The contents of consciousness do change, absolutely they change, but our efforts to change what is happening within involve non-acceptance. Instead of actually taking up what's happening, we're resisting, we're trying to push away. And pushing away brings us into struggle once again, brings us into turmoil, brings us into tension.

In our efforts to change the contents of consciousness, we think we should be having different thoughts than we're having, different feelings than we're having. We think we should be having the thoughts that we know the person next to us is having—even if

they're worse than ours, at least they're not ours. We think, "If this were gone, then I could really meditate. If only I had different thoughts happening right here, if only I felt a different way, if only this, if only that, if only the conditions were different, then I could really begin to meditate. If only my breath would cooperate, if only my mind would cooperate, then I could begin to meditate."

But meditation is being present. The effort is to be present with things as they are.

Meditative effort is also not the effort to try to fix or work on oneself. So often we treat ourselves as objects that need to be fixed. We relate to ourselves not as precious beings, not as radiant hearts, not as having inherent Buddha nature, but as these objects that absolutely need repair. We're here to do some manual labor on ourselves. Every time we do this, our effort again is unwise, coiled up. We're caught in struggle, caught in tension. Our efforts to try to become someone—even if that someone is a better meditator—this is really a problem.

Our efforts to try to become someone else, to imitate someone we've heard about or admire in some way, can also lead us astray. Of course, to learn from others is enormously wholesome. But when we think we can actually be in somebody else's body, this becomes problematic. When we're meditating in order to abandon ourselves and become someone else—in our imagination, I might add—we have left ourselves, and that is not meditation. That is once again unwise effort.

Effort that is not meditative effort is effort based on attachment, holding, grasping in some way. The attachment might be the effort to try to make pleasure last, or the effort to try to make that which is impermanent permanent. Both are absolutely impossible—despite how much we might try, it's not possible. We can make pleasure last for perhaps a few moments more, certainly, but eventually it will turn into pain. Pleasure in and of itself is wonderful; it's not a problem. But if we're trying to make it last, it involves tension, and once again, there is no relaxation or meditation occurring.

This non-meditative effort based on attachment is conditioned by the culture in which we live—understandably enough, the most human of things. Because practice values different things than the culture at large values. The culture at large values success above everything: fame, gain, appearance, accumulation. Meditation values freedom; it values understanding our inherent radiance of heart. This is the priority system in meditation.

The effort we're used to, this non-meditative effort, is based on what we know. Of course we bring the effort that we're familiar with—effort we've tried in our work life, our career path, our efforts even to feed ourselves. But this is a very different effort

than is required in meditation. We bring it into this environment because this is what we know, what we've been taught. The problem is that it really hasn't brought us much ease—or else why would we be here?

So there is a really big shift taking place in understanding what wise effort really is, effort that bears the fruit of freedom. We have to undergo quite a significant shift in our understanding. The first step is to notice when our efforts are misdirected and are bringing about tension and difficulty, and then try to aim in a different direction—towards meditative effort.

We must remember that some kind of effort is always happening in our life in one way or another: just to sustain ourselves, to take care of our bodies, to wash ourselves every day, to floss every day. All of these things require a huge degree of effort. The upkeep on a body, let alone a mind, requires tremendous effort. So effort is always happening—this is a fact in every moment of life. But the question is: what direction is it going in? Because this is what is important.

Are our efforts directed toward avoiding difficult feelings, difficult emotions? Because if this is the direction our effort is going, there will be huge parts of our life that are being left out. Perhaps on certain days ninety percent of our life, maybe seventy-five percent on other days, maybe ninety-nine percent on other days—left out through our habitual thinking that we can't stand certain feelings. The avoiding of difficult feelings. Is the direction of our efforts based on fear, being intimidated by the inner environment?

So one of our questions is: what is meditative effort? Meditative effort is effort that is informed by wisdom. It is actually really, really simple. And this might be the only important part of this talk. One line: it is the effort to be mindful. That is the effort we're interested in. It's the effort to be present. Over and over again, it's the effort to be aware. And that's it. No more than that. No less than that either, which is a big problem when we want to absorb into experiences. But no more than that.

Oftentimes we're overshooting the mark. We're striving. We're caught in pushing ourselves in the wrong direction. So remembering the relaxation of the effort being simply to be here, simply to be present. Not easy—I'm not saying easy—but simply to be present. That is the direction our effort needs to go in.

You could say that the untrained mind or the ordinary mind is a mind—and we might shift between the two, between ordinary mind and meditative mind, so not to label anyone as having an ordinary mind or a meditative mind—but an ordinary mind, or an untrained mind, is when we are lost in our experience, when we are caught in

obeying every instinct that comes along, when we are absorbed into our experiences. Whereas a meditative mind is a mind that is aware of experiences, allowing ourselves to observe our reactions, to be aware of what is happening, enlarging our capacity to be aware. This is what meditative mind is, what meditative effort is—learning more and more how to relate skillfully.

A question we might ask ourselves is: how am I relating to this? Sometimes when we get caught in trying to figure out what's happening, which is one of our fairly big habits, trying to fix what's happening, getting caught in the *what* of what's happening, getting caught in the contents of what is happening—the thoughts or the emotions that are occurring—or the *why* of what's happening, trying to find reasons from the past about why we're feeling what we're feeling in the present moment. When we get wrapped up and caught in this, we forget that the main question in terms of the growth of wisdom leading to freedom is: how am I relating to this?

This is a question we might remember to ask ourselves from time to time, especially when we're caught. How am I relating to this? Am I relating to it by trying to push it away, thinking that's going to work? It doesn't. It only strengthens it. Am I relating to it by trying to hang on to it, by grasping, by trying to make it last? It doesn't. It's going to go away anyway. Am I relating to it by identifying with it, thinking it's who I am, defining myself by what is occurring? And if we answer yes to any of those, then what we would want to do is simply see if we can know that it's happening. Remembering our capacity to be aware in that moment.

When we do remember—when we're caught in the *what* and the *why* and we remember the *how*, how am I relating to this—sometimes it's as if what opens up is just a little crack under the door. You know when a door is shut and completely sealed, you can't see under it at all. And then just a little crack under the door, light emerging. Sometimes it's like that when we remember to ask this question: how am I relating to it? Because it can sometimes make a great deal of difference. It's along the lines of wisdom. It's a question that actually goes somewhere, rather than being completely caught up in the usual habits of mind—the *what* and the *why*.

Not that these questions are unimportant. They certainly help with some level of understanding, of self-understanding, and so I'm not at all saying they're not important. But a real way out is this question of *how*. Is it possible to relate to this by simply being present with it, by relaxing into it instead of resisting it quite so much? Is it possible to relate to it by accepting it, by making more room for it? By even embracing it—embracing the difficult? Is it possible to relate to it differently than the ways we're used to?

Meditative effort, as I said, is the effort to be present. It's the effort to turn towards the present moment over and over again whenever we find ourselves elsewhere—not judging and not assessing, not measuring how well or how badly we're doing, but just over and over again the willingness to turn towards the present moment instead of diving back in. Whether it's wonderful thoughts or terrible thoughts, we tend to dive back in. Even if they're worry thoughts, we tend to dive back in at times. So refraining from diving back in and turning towards the present moment once again. Asking ourselves: do we have a clear intention to be aware right now?

Using our efforts—the efforts we so often use to judge ourselves and our experiences and others—using all of that energy for something different. You might have noticed this a lot throughout the day: judging one's situation, judging oneself, judging one's reactions, judging how other people are practicing or not practicing, looking at me or not looking at me, whatever it might be. Judging, of course, runs rampant on retreats.

So all of that effort that we might use in that direction—can we use that very same effort for awareness instead? It's there. It's good. There's effort happening there. So it's a matter of taking that effort and transmuting it into something useful, instead of leading to greater contraction of heart. Using that very same effort to try to turn around and see if we can be aware.

Now, we can be aware of our judging. It's not as if it shouldn't be happening or it's a problem. But if we use it to be aware of our judging, it's quite different than believing and justifying and feeling terrible because judging is occurring. It's quite different.

Meditative effort is based on understanding—the understanding of knowing what we can do and what we can't do. In other words, understanding what our responsibility really is in practice and what our responsibility really is not, because we have no say about it whatsoever.

What arises is not our responsibility. In the moment of its arising, it's not our responsibility because it comes out of the past. It's out of our control, and we can't say, "Don't arise right now." We do say that a lot—"don't arise right now"—but nobody listens. There's no wonderful response of it going away or changing. It just simply gets stronger, as you might have noticed, when we say, "Don't arise like this right now."

So the arising itself is something we have to learn how to surrender to because, again, in that moment of arising, it's a past accumulation. It's the past arising in the present. And then, if we can be aware, we can allow the dissolving to take place in the only moment it can happen, which is in the here and now.

Our responsibility, though, is to meet the arisings with awareness. Now, that is where wise effort comes in. Nothing happens magically. This is all very lawful. So if we can meet the arisings with awareness, then we're doing the best we can. We're doing the best we can. And then the results are truly out of our control.

We can't do anything about how the practice evolves or how it moves for us. This is something that you could say is karma, is grace. It's not like we can say, "I want an insight right now," or, "I'd like to have twenty insights right now, actually, not just one." We can't demand anything of the world or of ourselves or of this path or of the teachings or of the Buddha. None of this makes any sense at all. It really is out of our control. The results of practice are out of our control.

And so what we need to do is break the connection that can be so tightly bound between the efforts we put out and the results of those efforts. Because if we do, our practice can be easier and without as much struggle. It will be whatever way it is anyway, but it can be a really hard path, or it can have a little less struggle to it. So seeing if we can be mindful of the ways that we connect effort and results.

And I would say practicing with as much humility and humbleness as we can possibly summon up. Because when there is this bonding between the efforts we're putting out and expecting particular results, there's a tendency to feel a little bit entitled. "Because I'm trying so hard, I should get." Well, one will, but who knows how long? No one can predict that. No one can predict anything in terms of time.

It's really the earnestness to go in a direction that makes sense to you—to go in the direction of freedom rather than the direction of contraction and misery and more suffering. It's really the direction that matters more than the expectation of results, because we can really torment ourselves a lot with the expectation of results. And every time we're expecting a particular result, we aren't practicing. So it actually slows things down quite a lot.

It slows the practice, the movement, the development of practice down quite a lot.

Michael was talking earlier about continuity of mindfulness. When we're caught up in expectations and plans about how our practice should go and what we should be receiving or getting, we've lost our continuity of mindfulness. And so we're slowing things down.

It's really important to break this connection, to see if we can put out our best, really meeting our life with awareness, being as present as we possibly can be, and at the same time letting go, not being caught in the expectation of results.

Meditative effort is actually the effort to connect. It's bringing a newness, a freshness into each moment. Someone called the bamboo forest master once said, "Everything I touch becomes new." When there is this sense of freshness, everything becomes new. Instead of everything seeming like repetition, which is sometimes the way it is on a retreat, where we think, "Oh my goodness, one more sitting, one more walking, another sitting, another walking, another emotion, another same emotion"—it just seems so incredibly repetitive.

If we are mindful, nothing is repeated, and we see that it isn't repeated. It's not something just to make us feel good. Actually, nothing is repeated because we are fresh in the here and now. We are really actually here, not lost in any belief that we can repeat anything from the past. Everything I touch becomes new when we have this kind of beginner's mind.

And as well, each moment is seen as important. Sometimes we can think, "Ah, I haven't been mindful for the last five minutes, the last hour, the last eight hours. It's not worth it to be mindful right now. I might as well not be because I've already kind of blown it."

Actually, life is only made up of moments. We always get a fresh chance in practice. You can't blow it. It's not possible. Things can take longer or shorter, certainly, but you can't blow it. So every moment holds this possibility of being awake, of being mindful.

As Saint Francis said in our practice, if the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back to the point quite gently. If you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring the heart back, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed.

And if we don't do this, we might be caught in the position of this poor fellow who wrote to Tofu Roshi, who was channeled by a woman named Susan Moon:

"When I meditate, I am very distracted by uncomfortable physical sensations. I seem to spend the whole time fighting off feelings of hunger, sleepiness, or pain. Please help me to regain true focus, Tofu Roshi. Signed, Bill."

"Dear Bill, Let yourself be one with whatever happens in your body. Learn to notice the precise details of your sensations. A good time to practice this is when you eat. How does the feel of the broccoli in your mouth change as you chew? Become the warm green softness as it oozes around your gums and tongue. Do not make assumptions about how you feel. Do not jump to conclusions. Do not name your sensations good or

bad. Wait and observe. Do not say to yourself, 'I'm hungry, I'm in pain, a scorpion is stinging my left foot.' Just be one with the sensations—heat, tingling, piercing, burning, swelling of the toes—without changing them into ideas."

So, don't be like this guy.

Working with resistance is part of the practice. It's not other than meditation. It actually has to be taken in as a huge part of our practice. You could say, one could say, that retreats are controlled containers of suffering. I don't know if that resonates with you, but probably so. We also say that about our life.

Retreats are simply unadorned. There's no fanciness. There's no extraness. There's not anything happening other than life, other than we with ourselves being able to see what is happening a little bit more clearly because of the lack of the usual responsibilities and distractions in our life. So it's unadorned. We get to see our predicament more clearly, and the good news is—because if it were just that, this would not be a very good place to be—we get to see our predicament more clearly, and as well, we get to see our way out a little bit more clearly.

Now, to see one's predicament is the very first step in any path of freedom, because if we don't see, we won't want to change anything. We won't even know there is anything to do. We won't even know that there is any such thing as meditation or wise effort or freedom being possible.

So to see our predicament, to see the human dilemma, is of absolute essence. And then we can begin to see, and we can begin to apply mindfulness.

We notice that our resistance comes in different forms. Sometimes we notice that our resistance is happening because we find ourselves irritated. Nothing really is happening. We're just sitting there. Nobody is actually torturing us. But we find ourselves really irritated or cranky. We want to take a nap. We're sitting up straight and we want to take a nap. And we find ourselves a little bit, or a lot, irritated or angry. This is a sign of resistance.

We can find ourselves passive. We can find ourselves resigned or giving up. This too is a sign of resistance.

What is so important is to acknowledge our resistance and as well to be aware of our reactions to being resistant. Sometimes our reactions to resistance take the form of shame. We're not supposed to be feeling the resistance that we are. We're supposed to

be practicing in a different way or having a different experience. And so shame arises. This is a reaction to resistance. Can we simply know that shame is occurring and not get into it, not dwell on it, not embellish it, not believe it?

The other reaction that we can commonly have is that of rebelliousness. "Okay, I'm out of here. Maybe I'll make it for the next few days, but then I'm absolutely never going to practice again. I'm just telling you right now, this is it." Or we sit while everybody else is walking, we walk while everyone else is sitting, we eat when everybody else is not. Whatever it might be, this kind of sense of rebellion that we have to do everything differently. Maybe by the sixth day we attain the schedule, but it's a slow road up till then.

Obviously there are reasons for some people not to follow the schedule because of health or other circumstances. But one knows when it's because of health and really good reasons and when it's this kind of rebelliousness that is really only affecting oneself.

What is important is not to follow these reactions because they are strengthened whenever we follow them, but simply to form a new relationship to the resistance that we experience—when it's in the form of irritation or of anger or of resignation or passivity. All of us have different forms of resistance, so you can fill in the blank there. Probably a lot of what you felt today was simply resistance.

Every time we don't want to be present, every time we just don't want to be with things as they are, there is resistance occurring. If we can acknowledge this and be aware of it, this begins to allow us to form a very different relationship to it. We can see the resistance as more natural. We can take it less personally, rather than seeing it as absolutely part of our character to resist everything. It really is part of things because it's part of the path. And it will gradually change if we're willing to be mindful of it in its various forms.

There are ways to engage resistance more creatively than sometimes we have found up till now. I want to mention a few ways to creatively engage resistance.

One of these ways is to remember that we don't have to feel like practicing in order to practice. This is really such a big one, and I'm passing this on because it was a hard-earned lesson for me. I remember on a retreat many years ago, I was setting myself to get up very early in the morning and to go to sleep late at night, because sometimes this can help with focusing of attention, with concentration, with samadhi, with strength of

mind and heart. So I was setting myself to do that. But every time I woke up, of course, I was really tired. Why wouldn't I be? Because I had gotten very little sleep. So I would wake up, and the first thought I would have was, "I don't feel like getting up."

It was so liberating to realize that I could just get up. I could not feel like it, and I could get up anyway. Maybe not enthusiastically, not bouncing out of bed, not with enormous cheerfulness—probably good nobody saw me and it was a silent retreat—but I didn't have to follow the bidding of my feelings.

It's really profoundly liberating to not have to follow every feeling that arises, to not be so identified with our feelings, to think that we can't practice just because we don't feel like practicing. We can move into something so rich and so deep by knowing that we can practice even though we don't feel like it. And we can use the forms of sitting and walking through the different ebbs and flows of energy. In any day in our life, energy will come and it will go according to conditions, according to our health, according to our health situation overall.

You know, if we're dealing with something really difficult in terms of our health, of course we're not going to have as much energy. If the day happens to be one in which we're just not all that healthy, we won't have a whole lot of energy. The time of day matters too—some of us are very perky early in the morning, and some of us are enormously irritated early in the morning. Some of us are really wide awake at night, while others of us can't wait to crawl into bed. I used to live with somebody who was unbelievably cheerful in the morning. It was so hard for me, I can't tell you. But we won't get into that.

The real realization here is that effort can be applied whether there is energy or not, because it's the effort to be present. We can apply the effort to be aware that there is no energy. You will find that there's never a way out. There are no excuses on this path, because one can always be aware. Even if you don't want to be aware, you can be aware of not wanting to be aware. There's always a way to practice. There's always a creative way to practice. When we get caught and stuck, when we're engaged in unwise effort and in resistance, we forget our options. We forget the enormous creativity that is available to us.

Another way to engage resistance is to take each sit and each walk on as an experiment. Sometimes we have this idea that we have to already have a great deal of faith in order to practice. And sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. Everyone here has some, just because here we are and we're not at the movies right now. All of us have some degree of faith operating. And it is really easy for it to completely disappear at times. You can have a huge amount of faith in your daily sittings and feel quite good

and serene about them, and then come on a retreat and on the first day the faith just flies out the window. You think that you never had it at all. But it's just the nature of doing this over and over again—sitting and walking and being in this environment. Doubt very often opens, enters in.

So to take each sitting on with a beginner's mind, as an experiment—not planning, not expecting how things will be—saying, "I'm going to just try to be mindful for this sitting, period." Forget about past sittings, forget about the next sitting, forget about sittings to come, and certainly forget about seven days from now. Just this sitting. Is it possible for me to apply wise effort just in this sitting? And then be open to whatever the results may be. The same way with the walking—take them on as discrete entities. Just this sitting, enough. My whole entire life in this sitting. My whole entire life in this walking. And then reassess. I would prefer that you reassessed in seven days and not after each sitting or each walking.

This brings me to another way to engage resistance, which is the encouragement to be like a tea kettle. What I mean by this is to practice leaving the kettle on the stove. Suzuki Roshi talks about putting yourself in the oven until you're done, until the bread is baked. Another way is to just leave the kettle on the stove—not to keep picking it up, not to keep checking, "Is it boiling yet? Am I a Buddha yet?" Just leave the kettle on the stove and see what happens. This allows for a continuity of mindfulness as well.

What we are very interested in, in terms of this art of wise effort, is learning about balanced effort—learning what balanced effort actually is. Oftentimes we swing to either side, just because it's inevitable. This is how we learn in practice, by swinging to either side at times. I had a teacher once whose approach to wise effort was basically, "Sit until you die." That was it. I mean, he said a lot of other things, but you could really sum it up in that one phrase—or that's what I understood him to say. Sit until you die. And then another teacher's approach was, if you have any little slight discomfort or itch or difficulty or whatever, move right away.

Personally, I feel that balanced effort is what is necessary—finding a middle path for ourselves. "Sit until we die"—well, we may never want to practice again if we do that, if we really practice with that approach. And the approach of moving every time there's a little bit of discomfort means we will always be intimidated by discomfort. We will never find our inner strength and inner capacity to be with the pleasurable as well as the difficult if we move every single time. So we see if we can find the middle path, really work with the art of effort.

I had a teacher many years ago, a Tibetan teacher named Tara Tulku. I was going through some kind of difficulty at the time when I was practicing with him, a rather dramatic difficulty, and I couldn't meditate at all. I didn't know what to do. Of course, because of this "sit till you die" approach—I was really in that lineage at the time—I was trying to sit my way through it, continuing with this very striving approach and hoping that it would work. So I went to Tara Tulku and said, "Well, what do you suggest?"

I am trying my best, and yet I'm having a great deal of difficulty with this particular phenomenon.

And what he said to me was, "Go and have some cookies." Go and have some cookies. That was his teaching. That was his advice. Of course I loved it. I had no problem, no resistance at all to the cookie teaching.

But this sense of creativity, of finding the balance within ourselves rather than taking either a striving approach or a lax approach, a lazy approach—seeing if we can simply, from moment to moment, find the middle way. In a way, what we're aiming for is not being lax and not striving. Another way of putting this is the paradox of "be impeccable and take it easy." And you have to say that in the same moment, in the same breath. Be impeccable *and* take it easy. Not just be impeccable. Not just take it easy. But be impeccable and take it easy. This will serve us well.

What we are practicing is not feeding the fire within—not feeding the difficulties that arise, not feeding the resistance that occurs, not feeding the irritation and the angst and the doubt and the uncertainty and the confusion and the longing, the aversion and the hatred and the anger and the jealousy and the envy and the pain. What we are learning to do is to not feed the fire and to let it burn out on its own. This is the way of practice: to let the inner fires of torment burn out on their own.

We feed the fire by dwelling in the angst, by pushing away and thinking that's going to work when it doesn't, and by being identified with what's happening as who we are. In these moments, we have forgotten to be present. We have forgotten to be mindful. And so inevitably, we are feeding the fire of inner torment.

To stop feeding the fire—Ajahn Chah spoke about it as simply not feeding a cat that comes by. If you don't, then that cat will probably not come to your house any longer. Eventually, the cat will stop coming. It's the same idea: not feeding the fire.

And also, to offer a New England proverb: you can't help trouble from coming, but you don't have to give it a chair to sit down on. Not giving it a chair to sit down on is every single time we remember to be mindful—our efforts going in the direction of mindfulness, of knowing, of awareness, rather than in the direction of our habit of trying to hold on, push away, or identify.

As we all know, or know at least at this point, retreats really are full of a lot of ups and a lot of downs—maybe in the first few days more downs than ups. But life is as well. It's really not any different from being on retreat, other than the conditions. To understand our life, to be free, to find our home in the midst of our life, we have to be in contact. We have to be intimate with what is occurring.

Being with the breath in the way that we are right now, learning how to simply let go and to be with the breath over and over again—over and over again and over and over again—is a training that helps us to be able to sustain our contact with whatever is arising. This is the direction of the practice. We're basically just with the breath right now, and we will be with the breath over the next couple of days.

But eventually the practice opens up so that we are with whatever it is that arises—without being intimidated or crushed by or overwhelmed by or sucked into, seduced by. But we don't have a chance of doing this if we haven't trained our minds to some degree. And we train our minds, we are engaged in training our minds, by being with the breath.

Meditative effort is this effort to connect. It is allowing experiences to come and to go, remembering that happiness does not lie in experiences. It lies in awareness. By enlarging our capacity to be aware, by remembering to be aware—this is how we find a true refuge within. It is how we find this island that can't be overwhelmed by conditions, by floods. It is really how we find our real home.

Our essential work in practice is actually not to try to achieve anything whatsoever. It's actually not to try to get anywhere or achieve anything. Instead, it is to rest within who we already are—that which is always and already free.

Just to end with something by Suzuki Roshi:

"Even though the waves arise, the essence of your mind is pure. It is just like clear water with a few waves. Actually, water always has waves. Waves are the practice of the water."

May all beings have ease of mind. May all beings have steadiness of heart. May all beings live in love and in compassion.

CHAPTER 219

The Five Hindrances

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this comprehensive retreat talk, Carol Wilson provides an in-depth exploration of the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇā) that commonly arise in meditation practice: sensual desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (vyāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). Rather than viewing these mental states as enemies to be conquered, Wilson reframes them as potential gateways to understanding our true nature—using the metaphor of clouds temporarily obscuring an ever-present sun.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that these hindrances are not personal failings but impersonal energies arising from conditions. Drawing on teachings from the Dalai Lama, Chinul (the Korean Zen master), Thich Nhat Hanh, and Ajahn Sumedho, she offers practical guidance for each hindrance: the importance of naming and recognizing each state, turning mindful attention to the direct physical and mental experience without suppression or indulgence, and maintaining what she calls "affectionate curiosity." She shares personal examples, including a vivid account of working with fear at night, demonstrating how mindfulness can transform distorted perception into clarity.*
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> *The talk highlights how proper attention to these difficult states can become catalysts for awakening. Wilson encourages practitioners to explore the actual felt experience of each hindrance in the body, noting that desire feels like constriction and leaning forward, anger like burning, and sleepiness like heaviness. By learning to hold these experiences with tenderness rather than aversion, we discover that peace is not something to be achieved but is already present within us.*

In the beginning of a retreat, as all students know and as new ones have surely discovered by now, there are several very strong, very familiar emotional energies that arise in our experience. Although they're impermanent, our experience doesn't always seem to indicate that, especially in these early days.

These five emotions or energies are what the Buddha called the five hindrances, and I want to talk about them tonight. I'll name them briefly and then put them in a larger context of our practice before speaking about each one specifically.

These five powerful and common energies can take over our experience, especially in the first days of a retreat. First is the energy of wanting, of craving something. The flip side of that is aversion—anger, hatred, rage, or fear. The third one, which has been mentioned a lot already here, is sleepiness. The formal English name is sloth and torpor, which is just so perfect. The fourth energy is that of restlessness—physical restlessness and mental agitation or worry. And the fifth one, which usually comes along with any of the others, is doubt.

Before I go into them specifically, I'd like to talk a little about the larger context of why we're here. What's the purpose of meditation? Basically, why do we come and sit and walk in order, it seems, to experience the most unpleasant and difficult inner circumstances possible? What's the point?

The Dalai Lama said once, at a conference I was at, that it's crucial to investigate what the true nature of happiness is, what the true source of peace is, so that we can develop a peace that will last. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. Peace must first be discovered within ourselves and then gradually it will expand to include our family, our community, and the whole planet.

To me, that's the very real purpose of this practice of meditation: to discover the fact that peace is already here within ourselves, within our experience at the present moment. Peace is a manifestation of our true nature from which we're never separated. But somehow, somewhere, we don't know how to recognize this. We seem to have lost touch with it. We don't know how to pay attention in the correct way to recognize what is true. We keep getting distracted, confused. We look in the wrong place, identify with the wrong things.

Chinul, who was the person who brought Zen to Korea, says: "It's tragic. People do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddhas. They do not recognize that their own natures are the true Dharma. They want to search for the Dharma, yet they still look far away for holy ones. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds. I hope that you who cultivate the path will never search outside. The nature of the mind of the heart is unstained. It is originally whole and complete in itself."

That's us he's talking about—that the original state of our mind and heart is unstained, whole and complete in itself.

There are many different ways to talk about how we lose sight of this completeness, why we don't recognize our unstained nature and instead feel like we're in an ongoing struggle with sleep or anger or desire. One simile for how this happens—it's rather simplistic but it helps me put my experience in perspective—is to think of our original, unstained nature as the sun, which all day, every day, also at night, is shining brightly.

Various clouds come over at various times. Sometimes they're really wispy and we sort of see through them; they're no problem. Sometimes they're really thick and dark and strong, and we get so affected by the clouds, so involved in reacting to them, that we completely forget the sun is still shining. Even if we don't see the sun directly, there's still evidence of it in the fact that there's light, that we can see things. But for us, it's just this struggle. We like the clouds. We don't like the clouds. We wish they were different. We're scared they'll never go away. That becomes the limit of our experience, and we get lost in that struggle.

This is how I can relate to the experience of these five hindrances—these five particular emotional, mental, and physical experiences that arise for us frequently in our life and in practice. Sogyal Rinpoche refers to them as emotional and intellectual veils that obscure the nature of mind.

In a large way, I see our practice here, our practice of meditation, as cultivating a non-distractability of mind so that we can recognize and understand these veils, these clouds, for just what they are. We don't have to hide from them. We don't have to fear them or get lost in them. And at the same time, because we see them as they are, we also don't lose sight of the fact that the sun is still shining—that our pure nature hasn't gone anywhere.

And it doesn't mean the clouds have to go away.

The other thing I really like about the way this process of investigation works—learning to see what's really true—is that quite literally for me, the actual presence of one of these torments of the mind or disturbances of the heart (I like those terms better than hindrances, actually; they don't have to be hindrances) can become our avenue into clarity, into understanding. When one of them is present and there is the interest, the curiosity, and the non-distractability of mind to really see it for what it is, the presence of that difficult state can be the catalyst for a moment of awakening, of seeing clearly what's true.

Let me give a very simple example of how this can work. It's not big lights going off—it's just very ordinary experience. The other night, as I was in bed, not yet asleep, fear just arose in my experience. And that's one of the things about these energies: they're

not personal. They arise due to conditions, they last for some time, and they go away. Every single one of these goes away. It really doesn't last so long when you pay attention.

So fear arose as I was lying there, and it was a really great chance—on reflection afterwards—to observe both how we get lost in these experiences, how they cloud our perception of reality, and also how the ability to be fully present with it as it is opens up a whole other possibility.

At first there was this sensation of fear, and I got lost in it. When we're lost in these emotions, they cloud how we perceive our reality until they fill up the whole screen. I was lying there, aware of this fear, and there was a sound. I jumped and immediately thought, "My God, a gunshot! I wonder what's going on." It went into this whole spiral. I didn't stop and rationally think there wouldn't be a gunshot. It was just waves of fear. Another sound: "Oh, an explosion! What's going on?" And there would be another big wave of fear.

That's one way we get blinded and distort what we think is true—completely going with that energy, that emotion, letting it fill up the whole world. It distorts everything we perceive. It defines our reality.

The other way we get equally enmeshed is by resisting or denying. I could have lain there—which wasn't the way I went that time; we usually do one or the other—and said, "It's ridiculous to be afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of." Which is also taking it very personally. Someone of your age, at night, with all these people around—and it could go on and on about what I was doing being afraid, calling myself a big sissy, or attributing it to my conditioning, or something that happened when I was a child. Getting into a whole analysis of it, which I've done at other times. We're equally in the grip of it. It's just as much filling up the screen.

Both of these ways of reacting—really going for it or denying and pushing it away—keep us identified. And incidentally, they empower the emotion so that it really starts rolling along. This is how we usually deal with things because it's very deeply conditioned in us. It's a deep force of habit to either resist and deny, take it personally, or get really lost in it. And that's how we suffer. That's how we're blinded.

That night, it was going back and forth. After the sound—"Oh, it's a gunshot, what's going on"—I again recognized fear. And as I'll describe as we go along, what we do is take our mindful attention and simply turn it on the experience of fear itself. Without analyzing, without questioning, without judging it—simply being with fear. Feel it in the body, explore the thoughts that come, but come back and just be with the fear.

It's so interesting: just being directly with the bare experience itself, without expectation, it suddenly opens up into a really clear space. Without looking, my mind goes, "Oh, that sound was just a cabinet slamming in the next bathroom." Suddenly the mind clears up: "Oh, that was just the bath water running in the apartment behind me." In that space of directly being with the experience, clarity opens up by itself. It comes on its own. And it's so clear that it's not personal.

There's one Indian teacher who describes—and I think it's such a perfect description of how this distorts reality—"We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." It's kind of shocking how much this is what's going on.

In seeing things just as they are, in the willingness to simply be present in the midst of experience, a natural peace can emerge even though the experience might still be going on. For instance, the nature of fear is fearful.

I mean, fear is never going to feel happy. The nature of fear is fearful. But even in the midst of that, when there's a calm presence, there can be this opening into seeing that the picture is really much, much wider. Even though fears are rising, there's a huge space of emptiness and calmness around it or within it, however you might happen to experience it.

This is just a small example of how mindfulness—the power of the attitude of okayness and patience and curiosity that James spoke of last night—can transform what is a difficult or confusing experience into one that has the potential for opening us, for reconnecting us with what is true.

I want to speak a little more specifically about each of these energies, mostly to help us recognize them. Which might sound silly—I mean, we all know these states all too well. But when we're in the middle of them, perhaps the most important piece that helps with not identifying, that helps with seeing what's true, is the simple recognition of what it is that's happening.

So this first one: craving, this quality of wanting. It's not just a neutral need, like knowing that you're hungry and needing to go eat. And it's not so much a desire that's skillful, that's associated with intentions such as compassion—for instance, the desire to save a sick bird, motivated purely out of compassion. We're talking here about real craving. And we experience it in our lives pretty continually.

Whatever it is in our life—a new car, a better job, the perfect place to live, the perfect relationship—what's interesting is that when we come on retreat, the same quality of craving, the same degree of energy, can go into trying to find the perfect sitting position,

the perfect chair or the perfect zafu. It can go into searching the whole desert to find the best walking place so that your walking period is really pristine and clear. And we can suffer enormously. It doesn't matter what the object is. It's this quality of obsessive craving.

Our tendency to get lost in this is so strong that usually what we do is project it out into the environment, into the object, so that we can get completely absorbed in it. "If only the weather were different, everything would be okay." Well, the weather changed today. How long was everything okay? It just isn't where peace lies. And in our continuing to project the energy outward, looking to different objects to give us that peace, we just keep on going.

Okay, now it's warm—but something else comes up. Perhaps it gets too warm, or perhaps the food wasn't right today, or perhaps you wish you'd brought some different kind of clothes. On and on and on. It's endless. This quality of craving is endless when we don't stop and look at the energy of desire itself.

And it's really a kind of suffering, because we feel so discontented, so much needing something that isn't here. It's this constant looking outside for peace that keeps us from seeing that peace is right here all the time.

I could talk endlessly about craving—it's really a key part of the Buddha's teaching, one of the linchpins of how our ignorance is perpetuated day to day. So I could go on and on about this. I'm just introducing it very lightly here.

One yogi said at a retreat, just observing the endless quality of craving—she got so fed up with seeing it arise over and over that she decided she'd try to satisfy every craving that came up and see if that wore it out. She came in sheepishly a few days later and said, "Well, it only got worse. It didn't help at all."

So when we're caught in craving here, it might take us some time to recognize it. But at some point, after we've gone through "if only I had this, if only I had that, if only this were different," suddenly: "Oh, this is desire. This is craving." This is a very key moment—this point of recognition, of being able to name what is actually happening. Craving is an actual experience in the moment. Being able to take the attention, the mindfulness, and turn it onto the craving itself—this is really the key tool of mindfulness, one of the essential things we're learning to cultivate in this practice. And it applies to anything that's going on, but we're learning how to give bare attention to the experience.

So you're lost in desire after desire, and there's something subtly pleasant about desire when we're not paying attention. Notice how you can get into, say, a food fantasy, and you go on and on and it feels really pleasant—much more pleasant than sitting

here and being with the breath. But when you wake up and here you are again, what's the actual experience? Did that bring you ultimately more pleasure? Or does it make everything else more unsatisfactory?

So anyway, when you notice that desire is happening, naming is extremely helpful. Use this soft mental label—"desire, desire, desire"—and keep on labeling very softly for as long as it's there. Most of the attention then being not... now you're not taking a sledgehammer and going, "DESIRE, DESIRE!" You're simply acknowledging in a very non-judgmental way that desire is what's present right now. That's all. There's no shame, there's no judgment. It's simply an arising energy. So the label is very soft.

And then we take our attention and explore the experience itself. For instance, there's a kind of quality of desire in the mind, an emotional quality. But what I find for myself, by far the most helpful way to stay grounded in the actual experience of desire, is to turn the attention onto its physical manifestation. Explore: what does desire feel like? Sitting here, not thinking about what I want, not getting into the story, but turning around and feeling desire directly. When I feel this, I notice a kind of tightness, a constriction, a pressure, a heaviness, almost a leaning forward. You can change the note at that time from "desire" to "heaviness," "constriction," "tightness," "burning." Very simple. Very direct experience. It's not complicated. Really approach it with an air of curiosity. Well, what is desire? If it runs so much of my life, why can't I explore it and see what this thing actually is?

One thing you might discover—actually, I'm pretty sure you'll discover it—is that the actual state of desire itself is not so pleasant. This kind of yearning is physically unpleasant for me, this yearning for something else. It's rather unpleasant. And we begin to see why we get so intent on achieving the object of our desire. Because what happens when we get it? Ah, peace. Everything's okay.

When you're noticing and being mindful of desire, just staying with it, letting it do whatever it does without suppressing it but without feeding it by going and getting something—what do we find? Suddenly, at some point, without doing anything other than being with it, the desire goes away. And it might be ever so briefly, but notice the experience. When the desire is gone, it's just the same as if you'd gotten what you wanted. It's that same "ah, peace." The desire is not present.

This is a kind of clue. We begin to see that what we're really desiring isn't so much whatever it is out there, because that can keep being replaced with something else. It's somehow the sense of completeness that we yearn for. The sense of peace. The sense of unity, of oneness. And that's already here. That's already here.

Turning our attention onto the process of desire reveals something important. The process of desire is one of the things that fools us, one of the things that keeps us looking away from what's already here and always true.

Part of why we cultivate attention to the breath is simply to develop enough focus and non-distractibility of mind and heart, enough stability of attention, to be able to stay with a more complicated and difficult experience like desire and see it for just what it is. It's really fascinating, this process. And it might sound complex, but we'll all have plenty of time to explore it and to see how it works, just what the experience of desire is for you. Don't take my word for it. Really look and see for yourself.

The second torment of the heart, or hindrance, is the flip side of desire. It runs a whole range and stems from wanting to be separated from what is unpleasant, just as desire is wanting to come together with what we experience as pleasant. Aversion has a whole spectrum, from mild dislike, irritation, annoyance, to real anger, to uncontrollable rage. It also includes boredom, which is a sort of slight aversion to what's going on and an out-of-touchness with what's happening. And it includes fear, which is a kind of retreating aversion—whereas anger is going outward, fear is pulling back.

When we begin to see how aversion manifests, or how anger or fear shows up in our experience, it's pretty obvious that it's unpleasant. Anger is a kind of burning for me, especially in the heart, and it leaves an impression, a physical impression in my being, even long after it's passed on.

Again, when we're not noticing the presence of the energy of anger or fear or aversion itself, one moment of aversion tends to condition the next, so that it starts really spiraling in a way that can get out of control, seeming so huge. Or we can project it outwards onto our experience, and where what's really happening is just the arising of aversion in the mind, what we experience is that everything that comes into our awareness is disgusting and aversive.

And if we really think that's true, it leads to a lot of suffering.

I know on one retreat I was on, I saw this very clearly. I was sitting in the dining room and—this is what's so tricky—I thought I was really calm and clear. And yet somehow everyone who walked by was sloppy or unmindful or making a lot of noise, or wearing a stupid outfit, or showing off their slow walking. And these were friends of mine. I knew all these people. It took ten or fifteen minutes of this before I saw, "Oh, I guess this is aversion."

At that point, the willingness to shift attention from what was wrong with everybody who came by to the actual experience of aversion—in some ways it's a huge relief just to know what's really going on. It isn't pleasant. Again, as with desire, the experience of anger and aversion in our own mental and physical process isn't pleasant. And it's easy to see why we tend to go with the outer projections of it. This isn't to deny that things can happen that are really off, or that people do things that are genuinely harmful. But it's still important to know in ourselves what the experience of aversion, what the experience of anger or fear actually is.

So again, the ability to name is so powerful. It takes this experience of anger, fear, or aversion out of the realm of the magical, where it seems to be controlling everything—like that fear I was in the other night. It could have seemed like a magical experience that turned the most mundane into the most horrific things. The naming of it as "fear" has a huge effect of helping us not identify with it, of being in the actuality of the moment and not taking it so personally.

When you're aware—whether it's just as anger, aversion, or fear is arising, or whether it's three days into it—it doesn't matter. The moment that you can name it is very important. And continue just naming: "This is aversion, aversion, anger, anger, anger." Most likely, if you're just present with it, it's not going to go on all day. It'll pass. It might come back again, but it'll pass. And it's really important to see this discontinuity—it also takes away a sense of power that we can give to these states of mind.

As you're naming, turn the mindful attention onto the actual experience itself. It's very helpful to notice how it's manifesting in the body as well as in the mind. This is a very delicate line we're walking, a very delicate balance of not suppressing it—"I'm not angry, there's no aversion, there's no need to have aversion, everything's fine"—that doesn't help. And not getting lost in it, indulging it, as I was when I was just blaming everybody who walked by and taking that to be true.

A very delicate line of allowing the full manifestation of the fear, the aversion, the anger in the body. Tightness, burning, burning, burning. It's okay if it's burning for fifteen minutes. It's unpleasant, but that's just what's happening. That's where we bring in the patience, the okayness, the equanimity. At some point, we start to see its true nature—that it does pass, and it isn't personal.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh on being with anger, this line of balance: "The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don't suppress it and we don't run away from it. We just breathe and hold our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. Becoming angry at your anger only doubles it and makes you suffer more. But on the oth-

er hand, if you just leave it alone, it will become destructive and run wild. You can say and do angry things. Or if you don't say or do angry things, it will continue to destroy you inwardly. So the Buddhist practice is to recognize your anger as anger."

I like that image—we recognize it, but the recognition is a holding it in our arms with care. We don't hate it either. This is hard for us. It's not an easy thing to do, and we'll all get lost one way or the other many, many times. This is fine. This is how we learn. Please don't set up some ideal of perfection—"I notice anger the moment it comes up and then it's all clear."

It's not like that. It's a practice. But to me, just that image of recognizing anger and cradling it in your arms really helps give me a sense of the balance involved.

When we're exploring anger, fear, desire—any of these emotions—in this way, what I find is that it begins to open up a huge space around them, so that we no longer need to fear their arising. I know there are times I've been sitting under a tree, living in dread that aversion is going to come back. It's so pleasant now that it's gone. But this learning to just be with it as it is can open up a huge space where we don't have to be so controlled by these energies. We don't so much have to fear their presence. Rather, they can be a signal for us to pay attention and wake up.

Without that capacity, these energies really do tend to control our experience—even in little ways. A friend of mine was telling me the other day that he'd been in a fast food restaurant and had a little interaction with the man in front of him. Pretty mild, but the man clearly got very irritated at him. Then later, as my friend walked out—you know how sometimes you go to these places where you're putting in the ketchup and cream in your coffee—he just walked by at a distance, and this man caught sight of him. Just the sight of him got the man so upset he spilled his coffee. Just so irritated. What's really going on there? If we have the ability at that time of the first irritation to simply be with the anger, we don't have to keep letting it be re-energized in us from every sight, every sound. It might be unpleasant, but it's workable.

Now, sloth and torpor—the third hindrance. I know a lot of you are quite familiar with this by now. It's the falling asleep syndrome, whether you're on the zafu or walking. It's also a kind of dreamy, hypnagogic state that you can get into, one that's sometimes very pleasant and seductive. Often it's much easier to kind of dream your way through the sitting, or it can even feel like a sort of clear space. It's much more pleasant than coming back to the breath or the body.

One of our teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, describes sloth and torpor as like congealed butter—the mind is like congealed butter, with no flexibility. Someone said today that the experience of trying to practice with sloth and torpor is like walking through mud.

Again, recognizing its presence is the first important step. The second one that for me has been most helpful is not taking it personally. It took me years and years not to take sloth and torpor personally—as if it was somehow a sign of a deep personal failing that sleepiness arose in the meditation and it wasn't crystal clear. Saying it, it sounds crazy, but I know I'm not the only one. From talking to people, I know of practitioners who've gone through literally weeks of deep inner torment on a three-month course because sleepiness was arising.

So it's really interesting to look at how much we're caught by our reactions to a particular energy. What is sloth and torpor? It's an imbalance of energy. The energy that we have is always going to fluctuate. We come into a retreat having been really busy, really tired. What do we expect? That we're going to sit down and be incredibly crystal clear? Everything is a result of conditions. Nothing exists on its own. And the condition of most of our lives means that in the first few days of a retreat, it's almost inevitable that at some point the body is going to be really tired or the mind is going to be really sluggish. Once in a while that doesn't happen, but it's a pretty common experience, and it's not personal.

At other times in the retreat, this sleepiness or real dullness of mind arises because there's an imbalance in our experience of concentration and energy. It's possible to be really, really concentrated, but if there's not enough energy in your system, you think you're really concentrated—and you are—and the next thing you know you're waking up and you don't know how that happened. So it's also not personal when you start to see it's just the way that different mental factors come together in our experience.

Sometimes also, a real dullness or sleepiness of mind will come about as a sort of unconscious resistance to some difficult experience that's about to surface. Well, you can't do much about that. You don't know what it is, and you can't make it hurry along. That's not helpful.

So in all of these cases, the only obvious thing to do is to go, "Oh yeah, sleepiness, dullness," and name it—with kindness, without judgment, with affection, simply noticing its presence. Then, as a skillful means, there are different ways we can bring up energy, sort of balance the system. It won't always make us more alert. And if we're using the skillful means but with the motivation of aversion—"I hate this sleepiness, so I'm going to really note it until it goes away"—once in a while that might work, because actually anger and aversion are quite energizing.

But you've just moved then from sloth and torpor to aversion, and some people like that one better. We all have our favorites.

But if you can just notice the tone with which you're labeling, you can pretty soon catch on if that's your motivation. And then, as a skillful means without aversion, you can begin to really note and label and explore the experience of sleepiness itself, or dullness itself. It can actually get quite interesting. How do you know that you're sleepy? What are the physical sensations of sleepiness? Try to be really accurate in labeling it and in noticing it, because that takes a little energy to do. And instead of using up your last vestiges of energy by doing it, what actually happens is it brings on more energy.

But again, Sayadaw U Pandita says that sloth and torpor hates effort. You know, that voice that says, "No, if I really note this it'll just make me so much more tired." It's not like that. So when you notice you're sleepy, if you really explore—what is it? Is there a kind of heaviness? Heaviness, heaviness, heaviness. You notice a kind of grittiness in the eyes maybe. Grittiness, grittiness. Dropping, nodding, nodding. And then when you can't note anymore, you know the mindfulness has slipped away again. That's okay. When you wake up, even if you're only awake for two minutes of that sitting, that's still two minutes of presence. That's better than if you were sleeping the whole time. You have to look at the positive side. You can tell I've spent a lot of time in sloth and torpor.

I'm being a bit silly, but actually this real investigation at times brings a genuine energy into the mind, and the mind kind of opens up and the energy comes back. And it's really quite amazing, because one of our problems with these states is that we think they're going to last forever. When you're in sloth and torpor, if you knew it was going to go away in fifteen minutes, you wouldn't really be so upset. But somehow if you look at what's the assumption underneath your aversion, the assumption is usually, "This is how I'm going to spend the rest of my life," or at least the rest of this retreat, or even just the rest of this sitting. How about just taking things moment to moment? In this moment, exploring the actual experience of tiredness, of sleepiness—it's not so bad. It might be a little unpleasant, but it's kind of interesting, just seeing it for what it is.

Now, I know that there are times when this is way beyond the pale, and the ability to even make a label of sleepiness isn't there because it's way too far gone. Again, without aversion to it, but simply as a way to balance the energy, all the things we've mentioned before: you can focus a little bit on your posture, just sit erect—not in a forced way, as someone else said today—more kind of subtly, feeling your spine, tuning in inside. You can open the eyes, focus them down, not looking around. I've found that light, bringing in light, somehow energizes the system. Standing up can help. Something the Buddha

spoke of in one of his discourses, although it hasn't worked for me, is pinching your earlobes. But if the Buddha said it, it must work for some people. If I'm having a long wave of real dullness, I might tend to walk longer because it's often easier to be present in the walking.

And again, notice how and when this state of dullness and sloth and torpor dissipates. Because it will. There's no way it's going to last forever. And often we don't notice the endings of things, or we forget, and like six hours later remember, "Oh yeah, I was so sleepy this morning—I wonder what happened to that." So simply noticing that things end also helps us experience the fact that it's not ourselves, that it's really quite an impersonal energy.

So then the flip side of this is restlessness in the body—that you just can't sit still, you just want to jump out of your skin and run screaming out of the hall. Or the corollary in the mind of just a spinning, circling kind of thinking that's clearly not going anywhere, but the mind is just running at the speed of light. And you can't really focus on anything, you can't really settle on anything. It's the most uncomfortable experience.

And again, to recognize it for what it is. It doesn't make it go away. It doesn't make it more pleasant. But it really helps us to just be with what is. In the physical, you might notice you're changing posture, changing posture—this is wrong and that is wrong. Then suddenly you notice, "Oh, this is restlessness." What it does is really widen the frame. So instead of focusing on this particular little pain, that particular little nudge, this particular discomfort, there's a whole wide sky of consciousness, and within it is all the experience of restlessness coming and going, coming and going, coming and going.

If you really widen—it's almost as if you can imagine doing this, widening your consciousness so that it's as wide as the sky. Within that vastness, the restlessness can arise and pass, arise and pass. It's uncomfortable, but it can come and go. If you try to really focus down physically, you find it can actually increase the restlessness. Just as you find that if you move and keep moving when you're restless, what happens is you get more restless. You think, "If I don't move this leg, I'm going to die." But once you move this leg, then suddenly you have to move that toe, and suddenly you have to move your shoulder, and it just kind of escalates.

So sometimes just play with it. This is for physical restlessness—widening the scope and just letting it all come and go. As Jack likes to say, you know, die of restlessness. Be the first person to die of it and just see what happens. Chances are you won't die.

Now for mental agitation, this just spinning, spinning, spinning of mind, sometimes it's very helpful to simplify. Don't try to follow every thought and note every thought and get to the root of things. You're just exacerbating the restless energy of mind. It can be very helpful to simplify. Just go back to the breath. I know all these thoughts are running around. We know they're there. Just let them run around. Go back to the breath, sometimes even counting the breath, just from one to ten, one to ten. Get very simple. This can sort of calm us down enough to be there, at least to know that that's what's going on.

Again, restlessness is another imbalance of energy. It's way, way a lot of energy and not enough balanced with concentration and calm. This coming back to the breath and just being simple, just counting one to ten, is bringing in focus, one-pointedness of mind, and this can help to balance this out-of-balance energy.

And the last one is a very interesting quality of mind—that of doubt. Doubt can be experienced usually as thinking, and it often arises from too much thinking, and it leads to more thinking, so it just escalates itself on endlessly. Usually it's not that hard to recognize. We often get so caught up in the analyzing that we forget to recognize it. And it manifests just very simply as: "I can't do this. It's impossible. This is the stupidest thing. This is the wrong time. This is the wrong meditation. These are the wrong people. My back hurts too much. The weather's bad. It's just impossible." Just like that. So it's self-doubt, doubt in the meditation, doubt in whatever.

What's so insidious about doubt is that when it's present and we're caught in it, when we don't recognize it, it makes it impossible for us to actually wholeheartedly pay attention to what's happening right now. Because it just starts escalating. We don't believe in the efficacy of that. So we start trying to figure out, "Well, gee, maybe this is the wrong time. Maybe it would be better if I came next year, and it's the wrong time because I was sick two weeks ago and my energy's kind of low. Or maybe it's not. I don't know. How would I know that?" And you just start going on and on. Meanwhile, any sense of mindfulness or presence is out the window. It's very tricky.

Doubt, you'll also notice, tends to arise almost always when any one of the other hindrances is present in a strong way. So we get lost in aversion—we're having a lot of aversion, a lot of sleepiness—almost always, "Oh, it's too much sleepiness. I can't do this. I should go home. I should never have come."

And then we're into what we call a multiple hindrance attack. And that's usually how they come – it's rarely just one.

So with doubt, it's very important to recognize it, to name it as doubt, and to continue naming it without getting caught or sucked off into the content. And mind you, the content will be very enticing. It'll really be quite seductive.

I think one of the reasons that it can be so seductive is because noticing doubt and naming doubt and not giving into it as a hindrance is not the same thing as having to accept everything on blind faith. We are a very skeptical culture, and most of us are so taught that we're going to come to understanding through reasoning. I know for me this is very deeply engrained in an unconscious way. And so to be able to wholeheartedly say, "This is just doubt, doubt, doubt," and not somewhere get seduced into the "yeah, but" – it goes against so much of my conditioning that it's easy to get caught up.

I do want to say that recognizing doubt, continuing to note it, not getting sucked into the content is important. And it doesn't mean that you're giving up your own initiative. It doesn't mean that you have to accept everything we say, or the Buddha said, or anyone says on blind faith. One of the basic teachings of the Buddha was: don't believe anything just because I say it, or just because you hear it, but try it and see for yourself if it leads you to less suffering, if it leads you to peace.

So that's very important. But again, he said try it and see for yourself. If we're spinning in analyzing, we'll never have the chance to try it. So when I'm really hooked on a particularly seductive doubt in retreat, I'll acknowledge it and I'll say, "Okay, not now. At the end of this retreat there'll be plenty of time for reflection and for also seeing how this is affecting my life." It certainly is not putting aside our own understanding. But if every time something's difficult we get caught up in analyzing it, it's just going to be tremendous suffering, and we'll never be able to just see what's going on now.

The antidote to doubt in meditation is sustained attention. Because when doubt's going, you just can't focus. So keep on noting: doubt, doubt, doubt, doubt. And then really connect with something that's happening – your breath, a sensation in the body, another emotion, whatever else is arising next. Really notice it. Connect with it. And you might find you forgot that doubt was even going on.

So these are these five energies. I know it's a lot, talking about them all like this, but the way of working with them all – aside from a few little tricks for each one – is basically this naming, this affectionate curiosity, just exploring the actual experience of it. And they really do lead us into an opening that helps us see what's true.

Mindfulness is a huge ally in this. Thich Nhat Hanh likes to talk about how a rose becomes garbage when you throw it away, but then we use the garbage to make compost and that turns into another rose. And how can you separate any of it out? I really feel,

just in this way, any of these energies can become a vehicle in that moment for our greater understanding, can become a vehicle for awakening to what is true – when we can name them, explore them, have some balance of equanimity with them, and let them come and go and open into what's really happening right now.

Often they'll be overwhelming. We'll get really lost and the mindfulness is not there. This is okay. These are strong habits of our mind. But more and more often you'll find that it's not so. You'll be in the middle of some kind of mental rampage of restlessness, and suddenly out of nowhere: "Oh, restlessness!" And there's a sense of just releasing – these physical sensations, mental reactions, emotional overtones, coming and going – and it changes.

Even within that there can be the realization that this is not who we are. That there's something much vaster and always present that is not in the least bit affected, that actually is not even separate from the restlessness. We don't have to hate it so much.

I really feel like it's not a mistake that these energies come up so strongly in the beginning of practice. Because if they didn't come up, if we just came and sat in bliss the whole time – well, if it stayed like that for the rest of our life, that would be okay. Since most likely it doesn't, or won't, then the fact that these difficult energies come up is really a gift. Because how else are we going to be able to discover what they really are, and that it's not who we are? How else can we discover how we get blinded by desire, by aversion, by restlessness or doubt or sleepiness? How do we get so caught in them that we get so busy fighting them that we forget that peace is accessible right now? That the sun is always shining in our heart, and that we can

contact that, that we can recognize that more and more when we don't have to fear difficult or unpleasant experiences that are arising.

I want to close by reading my favorite quotation from Ajahn Sumedho about working with these hindrances:

"In life, wisdom arises within us when we understand the things we are experiencing here and now. You don't have to do anything special. You don't have to experience all kinds of extreme pain in order to transcend pain. The pain of your ordinary life is enough to be enlightened with."

So let's just sit for a couple of minutes. Whatever is arising right now in your experience can be the gateway to truth—if we can just trust that enough.

CHAPTER 220

Balancing Compassion With Equanimity

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this heartfelt dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of the most challenging aspects of spiritual practice: how to genuinely care about suffering while maintaining the equanimity needed to respond wisely rather than reactively. Drawing from the opening verses of the Dhammapada, she establishes that our happiness and sorrow originate within our own minds, setting the foundation for understanding how we can transform our relationship to pain.

Wilson shares personal stories that illuminate the difference between true compassion—described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering—and its near enemy of pity or grief, which involves separation and aversion. She explains how compassion requires openness to unpleasantness without drowning in it, while equanimity provides the understanding that allows us to face any pain without shutting down. The three marks of existence (anicca, dukkha, anattā) serve as perspectives that help us welcome difficult experiences like waves on a seashore, neither repressing nor indulging them.

The talk also explores the brahmavihāra practice of equanimity with its powerful phrase: "All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and sorrow depend upon your actions, not upon my wishes for you." Wilson emphasizes that freedom exists only in the present moment when we are not identified with what's happening, and that even small acts of genuine care can have transformative effects. She concludes with reflections on humor as an essential quality for maintaining lightness in the face of suffering, and the importance of doing what we can while letting go of control over outcomes.

Balancing Compassion With Equanimity

Balancing care with detachment. Balancing compassion with equanimity.

The very first lines of the Dhammapada start like this: "Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief. They are all mind wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts, suffering follows one like the wheel that follows the foot of an ox." The next lines are: "Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief. They are all mind wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows one like a never-departing shadow."

The Buddha taught that our happiness and our sorrow originate within ourselves. They are all mind-wrought. All beings who take birth want to be happy. The Buddha's teachings were meant to relieve suffering at the deepest level. Learning how to balance opening to suffering, caring about suffering, and having understanding or wisdom developing detachment—this balance is actually how we learn to relieve suffering at the deepest level.

Finding some context for understanding the suffering and the pain in our lives and in this world means facing this world, facing reality just as it is, accepting it with unconditional acceptance, and then coming to understand it. The process will then happen on deeper and deeper levels of reality, and hence deeper and deeper levels of wisdom or understanding.

There's a play called *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, written by Jane Wagner. Lily Tomlin plays the role of the person speaking these lines: "I made some studies, and reality is the leading cause of stress amongst those in touch with it. I can take it in small doses, but as a lifestyle, I found it too confining. Reality was just too needful. It expected me to be there for it all the time. And with all I have to do, I had to let something go."

Facing reality—it's not easy. That's why I read that. What we usually do is let it go. And that's why we're here at this retreat. As you can see, it's not easy.

I was sitting a retreat in Australia last year for about five weeks. We were all pretty quiet around, I think, about a month into the course, and this high school band started marching through the retreat center where we were sitting while we were all quiet doing walking meditation. The tune they were playing was "When the Saints Come Marching In." It was really loud, just going right by where I was doing walking meditation. It seemed really funny to me. I had one of those laughing fits that you can't control when you're doing Vipassana, but you hope nobody's around when you're having it.

Then I thought, well, this is a great song for a Vipassana retreat. It could be a theme song. When the saints go marching in—a saint is someone who has totally let go of control of life through complete surrender to how reality is, how life is. Life is this constant stream of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. Learning to open to life, to open to reality, to care about life, but also to be detached from it, to not have to hold on to pleasurable feelings, to not push away unpleasant feelings—this is the life of the saint. The mind becomes like water. It just flows with life, with reality as it is. This takes a tremendous balance of care, openness of heart, and detachment.

Coming to terms with the suffering within how reality appears for us in this world, opening to it, understanding it, and then responding in any way that we feel is appropriate, requires this balance I'm talking about—compassion and equanimity.

There was so much pain in my childhood. It was so overwhelming that the only refuge I had was nature, was my sanity. I learned that if I just went out in nature and waited—sometimes I had to wait a very long time—there would be this stillness and quiet, and I would have this rest and calm in which I could face another day of my family life.

I didn't learn how to open to pain in that process. What brought me to the practice was really seeing that that wasn't enough. It was a lot to learn how to be quiet and peaceful, to have the energy to face another day, but I wasn't really able to open to the suffering, to care about it, but also to be detached.

When I went to college I found a professor who was a naturalist. He was one of the first environmentalists in this country. One of the projects he gave me—he was like my first guru—was for a whole winter and spring semester to find a bush and spend at least thirty minutes to an hour every day with this bush.

That was my project for six months. Every day I would go to this bush and draw it, or meditate beside it, or simply stare at it. I read about it whether it was snowing or raining or very sunny. Through many different swings of mood—from very difficult to very happy to very neutral—I would go to this place I called my spot. And when spring came and the bush flowered, it was one of the most ecstatic moments of my life. I had become so connected to this bush, so caring about it. It was a very wonderful teaching.

This teacher hooked me because he understood my love of nature, but he also understood my total aversion to study. So he lured me into the world of studying nature by first letting me love it. That was my predilection, actually—just the loving of it. I ended up taking twenty-three credits studying birds and plants, botany, all kinds of things.

What struck me about him was that he had developed in his world this extraordinary balance of loving nature while also having this ability to keenly, very precisely study nature, to observe nature. He taught me that I could get to know anything in nature—whether it was a bird or an insect or a plant or an animal—in many different ways. I could write stories about them. I could spend time with them. I could learn their scientific names, and by learning their scientific names I could get to know their family, their habits, their conditioning, their history.

I trusted this teacher because he cared about what he was learning, what he was studying. I needed that love before I could trust him. What he was learning about wasn't a cold, detached study but a very connected and caring, intimate experience with nature. It wasn't separate, because he cared.

There's a great saying that I think exquisitely expresses this balance of care, love, and understanding. This is a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj. He said, "Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. And between the two my life flows." To me, that's all we need to know.

I wanted to speak a little bit about compassion. Sharon will talk more about compassion tomorrow night. You've probably heard this already—compassion, the Buddha taught, was the quivering of the heart in response to suffering. It's an openness to the suffering, not a feeling of being separate from it.

The near enemy of compassion or caring is pity or grief, because in those moments we feel a separation from the suffering. Near enemy means that it can look like compassion. It masquerades as compassion. But we're really feeling sorry for someone or ourselves. There's an aversion to the unpleasantness of the suffering; we're not open to it. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty—the actual harming of ourselves or another. The reason it's the far enemy is because we cannot feel this care or compassion and cruelty at the same time.

Compassion isn't sorrow. It's actually a very wonderful feeling of just caring. The heart is very tender. I remember when I was doing the compassion practice this spring, there were so many times when I would fall into grief or pity. I learned slowly, by noticing when it would shift to this very pleasant feeling of care, that this is what compassion was. But you'll find when you do it that a lot of grief comes up, a lot of sadness, because you're facing the suffering, facing reality, touching the unpleasantness.

I kept thinking I wanted to be compassionate all the time right now. But you'll actually learn about the near enemy a great deal if you practice it consistently. Eventually you'll start to see the difference between that pleasant feeling of care and the grief or sorrow, which includes aversion to the unpleasantness.

This openness of heart that's required for us to touch the suffering and not feel separate needs to be balanced with equanimity, understanding, or detachment. If the heart is overly engaged and not balanced with understanding, usually it will start to want to get rid of the suffering. We want to eliminate the pain in ourselves or others from this aversion to the unpleasantness. Our hearts can so easily be overwhelmed or broken by

too much suffering, too much pain, when we don't have this balance of understanding that makes the heart strong. This is when sorrow happens—when we get overwhelmed by the suffering.

If you consider how much suffering there is in this world... I don't want to go into the morbid details, but if you just look at hunger on this planet. Or any kind of violence, war, how children are treated, disease—just offhand as I'm thinking. There is so much suffering in this world. And it's actually possible to transform our awareness of suffering into compassion.

It takes practice, but we can do it. Compassion doesn't mean avoiding the pain. It means allowing it, accepting it, understanding it.

When I first came to IMS to be on staff, I was a cook here. I also had the job of taking care of the garden and all the plants in the building. I grew very attached to the plants here.

A monk named Taungpulu Sayadaw came, who was a very powerful teacher. I was having problems because the plants had a lot of bugs in them when I arrived, and I was trying very hard to keep this precept of not killing, which I was just learning about. I hadn't really been familiar with this precept before. So I was doing my best, but I was getting very frustrated.

I went to Taungpulu Sayadaw and said, "Can I kill the bugs on these plants? I can't stand it anymore." And he said, "Do the best you can to save the plants, but don't kill the bugs. Whatever you do, don't kill the bugs." It was really hard for me. It was a really hard teaching. I was very new to the practice. I had only done one retreat, and I didn't really understand.

There was a gradual process for me, and certain events helped deepen this teaching of care and wisdom. When I was on staff, I was driving to Amherst one day, and there was a huge snapping turtle in the road that had just been hit. I pulled off to the side and went out to see the turtle. It was still alive, but the whole shell had been smashed. It was obvious that it wasn't going to make it.

Again, there was this sense—that thought—"I want to put it out of its misery. I should kill it." But then there was this monk's voice saying, "Whatever you do, don't kill." So I scooped up the turtle and carried it under a pine tree. And I did metta with the turtle until it died.

But the turtle didn't ever leave me. The turtle kept coming up in my sittings from then on. At a certain point, I discovered that this was all on the surface of an experience I had as a child of watching my mother dying. As a child, I didn't understand that there could be that much pain in this world. And I think that with the amount of suffering in this world, we have very hard lessons in learning what compassion really is.

I saw a movie recently with Stephen called *The Doctor*. I don't know how many of you have seen it. It's a great movie about a doctor who had been trained very well technically. He was a great surgeon, but he had no idea what it was like to be suffering, what it was like to be a patient in a modern hospital, how it was to be treated there. And in the course of the movie, this doctor gets cancer. He's diagnosed with malignant cancer.

The story is this transformation of a person from being, I would call, almost nearly uncompassionate. They made it extreme in the movie—you didn't see a trace of compassion in him at the beginning. And then he slowly starts to open up, because he was treated just like he had been treating people. His heart started to open.

The movie was very hard for me to watch at times, and I wasn't quite sure what was going on for me. But when I left, I started to see—uh-oh, here's this difficulty I had as a child, because my mother was in and out of hospitals, in and out of nursing homes, and she was treated very coldly at times. So I had to, again, for what seems like the millionth time, sort out: there was the way she was treated that I didn't understand at the time, that I had a lot of aversion for. There was her actual death. There was the loss for myself. And then there was the way she died, which was so lonely.

I think that's the most painful thing for me—that she really didn't have anybody. Death isn't really so bad, really, if there's somebody supporting you. And also, what it felt like to touch her corpse. The warmth of the body to very cold. It really hit me like lightning when I touched her body and it was so cold.

I was very different from other children after that. I had a different way of seeing the world from that experience at such a young age. I was searching so deeply for understanding because of it. And so much of it was because of this thing I'm talking about—being able to open to the pain and also understand it. I was trying to understand it, but I couldn't even open to it as a child.

But it was just always pushing me to search for that understanding.

So we all have to learn over and over and over the difference between compassion and aversion. It's not like you get it once and then it's over. That's not how it is. We get these lessons over and over.

When we wish someone to be free from suffering, it doesn't mean that we're wishing them to be free from suffering out of aversion to the unpleasantness. It's very critical that compassion has this understanding with it—that we're just caring for the person, or caring for the pain in ourselves. Just caring. And we wish that it ends, but we can't control that it ends. So the wish is important, but we have to let go of control.

The way that we learn how to let go of control is through detachment and equanimity. We learn to open and care with compassion. The understanding comes through detachment, through equanimity.

There's a saying attributed to Kuan Yin, who is the bodhisattva of compassion: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?" This is a great one if you're having trouble. The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm? And this is all about learning this understanding, this detachment.

If there's sadness, we can start to see that there is no one sad. There is just sadness arising and passing away, like a cloud moving through the open, vast blue sky. There is no solid self behind the process. Sadness can be seen like emotional waves rising up on the seashore and then passing. We can learn to open to pain and not identify with it. That not identifying with it is the detachment. We can learn to be with it and let it go.

Some of our greatest teachers are the unpleasant feelings that actually arise in our life, because they teach us how to work with aversion rather than wanting to get rid of it. So if you're having knee pain or back pain, if you're having any emotional pain, or if maybe the sound of somebody snoring drives you crazy, or somebody coughing, or maybe we're having aversion to aversion itself, or aversion to fear—whatever it is, these are actually the things that help us learn how to work with aversion. They are the teacher.

So say we're having difficulty learning how to experience grief or anger. I'm talking about this in relationship to pain because that's what the talk is about—how do we open to suffering? Say we're having difficulty with experiencing aversion to pain, whether it's inside or outside ourselves. This has to do with unpleasant sensations. It's not that we want to get rid of the anger, because that keeps reinforcing the anger. But when aversion or grief arises, we can learn to accept it simply because it's happened.

And then we can start learning how to have the perspective of anicca—that it's impermanent. We can have the perspective of dukkha—that we can't control it, but it's arisen. There's this uncertainty, insecurity. And then we can have the perspective of anatta with it—that there's no solid separate self behind this process.

Wisdom, and the detachment that comes with wisdom, involves seeing with these three perspectives, or from one of these three perspectives at any given time. Dukkha is the understanding that we can't control that it has arisen. Anicca is that sense that it's just coming and going. Anatta is not taking it as me or I or mine. And if we have one of these three perspectives, or all three—which is when wisdom is really strong—we see that there's no need to repress the aversion or grief, and there's no need to indulge it. We can just let it come and go. We welcome it just like you would a wave on the seashore, and it will pass.

Equanimity is that very sweet, very deep balance of mind when we're not at war with things, when we're not fighting the unpleasantness that comes with life. It's so sweet because it's the opposite of the reacting mind. It's this deep, unconditional acceptance.

When this is strong, when we have the strength to actually let these unpleasant things in life come and go—we feel it fully and let it come and go—there's no more fear of feeling the unpleasantness, no more fear of feeling the anger, no more fear of feeling the grief, no more fear of opening to suffering. And it doesn't matter what kind of suffering it is, whether it's a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a thought, an emotion—whatever it is.

The true test of whether we're free is if something comes back. If the reaction is, "Oh no, I thought I got rid of you"—that's not quite freedom. That's not equanimity, not understanding. We're not seeing it clearly.

When we take birth in this human realm, on this planet, the given is that there's this great mixture of pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Freedom isn't opening up the body. Freedom isn't getting rid of emotions. Freedom isn't working anything out. Because all of that involves something in the future—we're not okay just where we are.

The transformation in this practice, this very deep transformation, occurs whenever we're fully present now, and when we're not identified with what's happening now. The only possibility for freedom is now. Freedom doesn't happen in the past, and it can't happen in the future, and it doesn't depend on what's happening. It can only happen in one moment—when we aren't identified with what's happening. This non-identification is only possible in the present moment. This is where understanding is, this is where detachment comes from, this is the real freedom. And it's the only possibility of balancing the suffering that happens in our life. It's the only possibility for freedom.

With this detachment, we're helped to face any kind of pain without drowning in it. We learn how to swim in it. We learn to live in life and grow from what's happening rather than to shut down or drown. We learn to open and let go. Understanding gives strength to our heart.

In some ways you might see being here as exercising your heart. There's so much emphasis on exercising the body in this culture, but what you're doing is really stretching the heart. Sometimes it hurts. True compassion, when we're open to suffering, means we don't turn to mush in the face of suffering. And we also don't turn to indifference. We're not shut down and we're not drowning.

The equanimity that I've been describing is the equanimity that comes with the Vipassana practice. In the Brahma-vihara practice there's also an equanimity practice that develops equanimity, but it's a different kind than what develops in the Vipassana practice. In the equanimity practice, which you'll be doing a little later after compassion and mudita, the phrases that one says are: "All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and your sorrow depend upon your actions and not upon my wishes for you."

I remember when I got to this part this spring, I thought it had a little punch in it. There's the most understanding in this Brahma-vihara. When you're saying it to someone, you can imagine the power of that: "All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and your sorrow depend upon your actions and not my wishes for you."

This is a great healing of a codependent heart. Basically, you're saying, "I'm not responsible for your pain." It's very powerful. It's amazing. And I think that the way this heals is that if the heart is very open, there's this tendency to want to control with it. There's a tendency to want results. We want the pain to go away, or we want to see results. I might be wishing some of my family members happiness for the next fifty million years, but I can wish it—I can't control with it.

With family members particularly it's very poignant. This equanimity from the Brahma-viharas is really important to balance an open heart. It's not just the understanding that there's no solid separate self behind the process; there's also the understanding that a person's actions are what will bring them happiness and sorrow, not our wishes for them. Our care will help influence somebody, but ultimately it's one's own actions that bring us happiness or sorrow.

I have a nephew that I raised for most of his young years. Then around when he was five I started drifting away. He's been a great teacher for me since he joined the Marines when he was seventeen. When he joined the Marines I felt like I'd been slapped really hard across the face, because it was sort of the opposite of where I had hoped he would go. It's been an incredible teaching for me, but also incredibly painful. He was sent to the Gulf this year when the war started, and my heart just felt like it was breaking. It was just horrendous. He was in all the action that happened. And he hasn't recovered. I don't know if he'll ever recover.

And I think that we can do and say what we say with other beings, and especially with the beings we're very connected to and very close to, but then we have to let go. And it's often the people we care about the most that we have to practice this openness of heart and still care, but also have that detachment. I have to understand that he chose that in whatever conditioning that brought that about, and that I can do what I can, but that's his karma. And if you think about all the people you care about so deeply, we need this understanding of karma. We care and we do the best we can, and then we have to let go of control.

Often we feel like there's this immensity of suffering in the world, and that we have to do so much. And it can seem overwhelming. Yet it's really the little things that we do that have a lot of power. This is a quotation from Mother Teresa. She said, "We feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop were not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be less because of that missing drop. I don't agree with the big way of doing things. To us, what matters is an individual. To get to love a person, we must come in close contact with them. If we wait until we get the numbers, then we will be lost in the numbers, and we will never be able to show love and respect for that person. I believe in person to person."

One moment of care, one moment of genuine mindfulness and care, is so powerful. And it might be rare that we can actually have that one moment of openness and detachment and really respond with care to suffering. But in that moment, there's this great transformation that takes place.

And it's important to remember that it's okay to be closed. It's okay not to be compassionate. Sometimes we just don't have it in us to open. We have to be okay with having a closed heart. That means it's too painful. We just have to wait. We rest the mind, rest the heart. That might take five years, it might take two minutes. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we trust the process of closing when it's too much, and then opening when we can.

Often we feel like we have to know everything before we can do something, or that we have to save the world, or that we have to figure everything out. But just one moment of care balanced with detachment will really make a difference.

There's an experience I had my senior year in high school that for me touches this. I hadn't had a history of any adults taking much interest in me. And I worked at this outdoor theater my senior summer, where all kinds of groups came—Jimi Hendrix and the Supremes and Stevie Wonder. A musician named Hugh Masekela came. I'm not sure if you've heard of him. He's a musician from South Africa who lives in the United States. I used to stand where all the performers would come down to the stage, and I'd wait there and talk. Most of these people didn't take much interest in me, to say the least.

But this man, Hugh Masekela, who I didn't know from anybody, came for a week, and every night he would spend about an hour talking with me. He really just took an interest in me. And there wasn't anything weird about it. It was very natural—just sitting down and having a ginger ale, just talking. And it had such an effect on me that there was this person who was actually interested in me. I consider him a benefactor. I only had those very brief moments in time with him, but they mattered. He cared.

Later on I heard that he has a very strong interest in teenagers and actually sets up plays in New York where he trains teenagers musically and in acting. And I think, what a great being. It's not like he did a lot, or maybe he didn't study psychology for fifteen years to figure it out. It was so simple, yet had a transformative, very deep effect on me.

More and more Stephen and I are trying to encourage people to take an interest in someone. And it doesn't mean that it's a big commitment. You know, that's sort of the C word in our culture—there's the F word, well, the commitment word is similar. It's not like you have to make a heavy commitment.

It can be that on a train, you simply take an interest in somebody. Or it could mean a slightly longer commitment, maybe an hour or whatever. But these little things make a difference for people. This is how metta and compassion are going to start coming into our culture more—maybe not from elders in our culture, maybe from us.

The last aspect of balancing equanimity and compassion that I wanted to talk about is humor. It doesn't seem to be on any of the lists in Buddhism, and I don't quite get it. I keep looking for it. Maybe it's in some sutta we haven't discovered yet. But then I thought, well, maybe it's because it's understood. Maybe it's just so important that it's understood to be in all the lists in Buddhism.

It's important not to take ourselves too seriously. Humor, even a little bit of humor, brings lightness, buoyancy to us. And in the face of suffering, we need that lightness.

This is another quotation from *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*: "You can't expect insights, even the big ones, to suddenly make you understand everything. But I figure, hey, it's a step if they leave you confused in a deeper way." Now that should be on the brochure: "Insight meditation—leaves you confused in a deeper way."

Mahatma Gandhi said, "If I didn't have a sense of humor, I would have committed suicide long ago." You know, we need it. Dukkha land is hard. You know what dukkha land is like. You just wish you were in anicca land or anatta land, but dukkha land is hard. And there's a lot of it.

When we were teaching in Yucca Valley this past spring, every night a group of us would go out a side door. Most of the yogis would go out one way, but a group of us in the front would go out the side door right after the talk ended. Then one particular night toward the end of the retreat, we were all walking out the door, and some of us noticed that our sandals were missing, our shoes, our sneakers.

It was quite interesting to watch what happened. At first people were saying, "Well, where are my shoes? Where are my sandals?" And then there was this immediate search for the sandals and shoes. And then there was this sense of being upset, really upset. They were gone. It turned out later that we found out that many yogis' Birkenstocks were missing as well. Some vandals took the sandals. Actually it was something like fifteen hundred dollars worth of stuff that had gone missing. It was serious.

But what happened that night is this: people were walking out getting upset about their sandals being missing, and the last person out the door was a monk. He walked out and he just looked, very mindfully—you could just see it happening—he just saw that his sandals were missing. They were just gone. That was it. There was nothing extra, no being upset, no looking for them. They were just gone, and he just started laughing and walked off in his socks.

It was great. The practice works, you know. That's equanimity. It was so wonderful to see. And then a collection was taken up later to get him some sandals.

I began the talk by talking about this professor I had in college. I consider him one of my greatest teachers. The college was in a city that was very polluted. He had a small greenhouse and gardens on the side of a dormitory. There was a lot of alcohol being drunk by students at that particular time, and many bottles would be thrown out of the dormitory windows into the garden. Sometimes the window of the greenhouse would get smashed.

Sometimes when he was working in the garden, he would actually get hit in the head by a bottle—really severe, really hard. Very few people that he was teaching had the slightest interest in what he was trying to teach. He was way ahead of his time, so deeply caring for the planet, for anything alive. He had such profound care for the earth. He was considered very eccentric.

There was the naturalist side of him, but there was also a very deeply contemplative side. When all the Vietnam War demonstrations were going on, when the Black Panthers took over a dormitory on our campus, when ghetto riots were happening—those turbulent times—there were a lot of professors leaving or getting fired. A lot of students were getting violent.

I remember one particular day when a dorm had been taken over. There was growing violence on the campus. And he was so angry, so disturbed. I had never seen him like that. He was so upset. I had never seen him take a day off, and he just left. He went out into the woods for the day, for the whole day.

The next day he came back, and I had never seen anybody so quiet. That quiet that he brought into my life had more of an effect than anything at that point. I saw the possibility for being touched by that much pain but also having balance. I had been feeling quite violent at the time, and I really felt like it had saved me.

If you think about those years back then, how very little awareness people had of the environment, and all the things I saw him go through, it would have been very easy for him to get discouraged. But he kept going. I never saw him stop what he was trying to get across. And I've seen that he's actually had a huge effect. There's such a growing awareness of the environment now. At that time there was so little.

I think also, if you consider the state of the earth and what's happening environmentally, we could get very discouraged at times. It's not looking so good for us. From one perspective, that's true.

Yet every time we have this compassion, this equanimity, this balance, and we take an action—every time we speak, every time we save a bottle, every time we turn off a light—whatever we do has a huge effect. We don't know what will happen. We don't have any idea what's going to happen with this earth. So we do the best we can, and then we let go of control.

This ability to see very clearly what's happening, to open to the suffering, and then to respond in whatever way we can—we do the best we can, and let go of control—takes this tremendous balance of care and detachment. Which, luckily, you're working very deeply on.

There's a poem by Chief Seattle. I read recently that someone said Chief Seattle could be heard from three quarters of a mile away—his voice was so powerful. I'm really impressed by that because nobody can even hear me if I don't have a microphone on. Three quarters of a mile.

Anyway:

Teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. This we know. The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected, like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life. We are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 221

Renunciation, Goodwill, and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson examines sammā saṅkappa (right intention), the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, exploring how wholesome attitudes of mind naturally emerge through deepening practice. Drawing from the opening verses of the Dhammapada, she illuminates how our thoughts shape reality and how intention forms the crucial link between understanding and action.

Wilson discusses the three aspects of right intention: nekkhamma (renunciation or non-greed), mettā (goodwill or loving-kindness), and karuṇā (compassion or non-harming). Rather than presenting these as ideals to force upon ourselves, she emphasizes that they shine through naturally as wisdom develops—like the sun emerging from behind clouds. She shares personal experiences from living as a Buddhist nun in Thailand, illustrating how simplicity and contentment arise when the mind is freed from constant wanting.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with these intentions in meditation, including softening the tone of mental noting, recognizing moments of non-greed, and cultivating self-compassion as the foundation for compassion toward others. Wilson shares the story of Milarepa greeting his demons with compassion, demonstrating how meeting our difficulties with kindness transforms our relationship to suffering. She concludes by emphasizing the far-reaching effects of our intentions, noting how even one person's calm presence can influence an entire community facing difficulty.

The Buddha spoke often and quite eloquently about the power of mind to shape our reality, to shape our experience of reality. I want to read the first pair of verses in the Dhammapada, which is a group of verse sayings of the Buddha. I couldn't find a translation I was entirely satisfied with—this is what comes of knowing a very little bit of Pali. Not enough to actually do anything constructive, but just enough not to be satisfied with everything I see. Really helpful.

All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner. They have mind as their chief. They are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows one just as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the cart.

And then the second verse, using a different translation: Our life is shaped by our mind. We become what we think. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows one like a shadow that never leaves.

Very powerful, the effect of our thoughts, the effect of the mind.

Sylvia spoke briefly the other night about the Eightfold Path, the path of practice that we're engaged on now. I want to speak about the second aspect of the path. The first one, right or skillful understanding, really speaks to how we understand life, the world, ourselves. And then the second path factor, variously translated as right or wholesome attitude, right thought, right intention—this really grows from our understanding. How we understand ourselves and the world then informs how we think about the world, what our intentions are.

This second factor, intentions or thought or attitude, is the crucial link between understanding and action. Because how we think is how we then act in the world. And in fact, the next three factors of the path deal with right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

A very simple example: there's a sense of understanding that perhaps there's more to reality, to my own life, than is apparent on the surface, in a superficial glance. That kind of understanding that there's something more tends to give rise to some thought or intention of, "Let me investigate. Let me try meditation. Let me try some spiritual path of learning more." And that intention, that thought, then gives rise to action—and here you all are, sitting here for nine days. Beginning from understanding, the understanding leading to an attitude or thought that leads to action.

And then, of course, the action that has you all sitting here leads to deepening of mindfulness, concentration, and energy, which are the last three of the Eightfold Path. And that in turn leads to deeper seeing into the nature of who and what we are—more understanding. It's a circle. We're back at the beginning of the mandala again.

So tonight I want to talk specifically about the factors of wholesome attitude. What are they? What does this refer to? These are wholesome attitudes of mind, intentions that shine through our awareness more clearly as our wisdom develops.

I use this language quite deliberately—shines through rather than manufacture or even develop—because it's not as if these wholesome attitudes of mind are something foreign to our being, something that we need to go out and manufacture and try to artificially graft onto ourselves. They're actually part of who and what we already are. They begin to arise spontaneously. The more that we bring our attention to this moment, the more that we investigate and come to see what we actually are, these wholesome attitudes of mind, intentions of mind, become more and more spontaneous expressions of our understanding.

I love to use the metaphor of the sun as being the luminous nature of mind. It's always there. And the more that we pay attention, the less we get so involved in the clouds that we think that's all there is. The more we're aware of the sun. But the sun's always there. We just become more aware of it.

Classically, right or wholesome attitudes, thoughts, and intentions includes three broad areas, and I'd like to speak a little about each of them—more as a reminder, to bring up in each of us a reminder of what we are, how we can be.

The first is the attitude of non-greed or renunciation. It balances the confusion of greed. The second is that of goodwill, or mettā—friendliness, loving-kindness—obviously balancing the inclination of mind toward aversion and ill will. And the third is the attitude of harmlessness, of compassion, balancing cruelty or harmfulness.

And a tendency to be in touch with these attitudes of mind, for these attitudes to arise in a moment as a response to a situation, is strengthened naturally, simply through our mindfulness practice. I promise. It may not feel like it. A lot of times in sitting, it seems like what we're seeing is just more greed, more ill will, more negativity. Sometimes you wonder if you were a much nicer person before you started sitting. But I promise it's really working the other way around.

A very simple example of how mindfulness is really working to strengthen these qualities. When there's no understanding, no clear understanding of the process whereby desire brings suffering, and we don't understand that, then whenever a thought comes up of "I want this" or "I want that," we naturally spring into action to try and achieve it. And that's how most of this culture spends most of its time.

This can be something really minor—from wanting seconds at lunch, wanting a better foam pad under your cushion, wanting cherry Life Savers. It can be really mundane. Or it can extend all the way up to what we see happening in the world: wanting more land, wanting more oil, wanting some sense of national safety, whatever. So from small to really large scale, when there's not this understanding that desire brings suffering, the actions that manifest from the thought of wanting something come from confusion and can breed incredible pain and suffering and conflict. Or at its least manifestation, it can simply increase unsatisfactoriness. Because the seconds at lunch don't really do it, do they? The foam pad doesn't really take care of it.

So that's kind of a normal way of being. But as we're sitting here, day in and day out, watching the process of desire and watching our continued efforts to fulfill it—the ones that are somehow in our power to fulfill here—you'll start to get it. From paying attention, you'll see there's just no peace coming from this. There's no lasting satisfaction

coming from fulfilling desire. And so as this understanding comes in—that fulfilling desire is not bringing happiness—from our mindfulness of just watching this, quite naturally our thoughts change.

When the thought comes up, "I think I should get up now and have a cup of tea," another thought comes: "No need to do that." And quite naturally, our actions change. It's not some big deal, but it actually is a big deal. We find there's a natural sense of renunciation. No forcing, but growing out of our understanding that's coming from this mindfulness practice.

Not necessarily dramatic. But I feel it's very helpful and important to notice and acknowledge these little moments, these little actions of thought, of speech, or body that are coming from intentions of kindness, of non-greed, generosity, compassion. I see it as a kind of positive reinforcement, just the noticing of it. Sometimes we get so focused on seeing the greed and the ill will and the self-judgment that we let a moment of "I really don't need that" pass by unnoticed. Not that we want to hold on to it, but it's important to acknowledge: "Oh, there was a moment of non-greed arising in the mind." It's very helpful.

So these attitudes of understanding arise quite naturally as our mindfulness increases, as our understanding deepens. I just want to say now that it's very important not to set up these attitudes, or any other, as some ideal. It happens a lot in spiritual practice that we have some ideal of "I should be" or "the end of the practice is to be this loving, compassionate, generous person," and then we try to force ourselves to fit that model when it's not what's really genuinely arising.

So I'm not talking about forcing ourselves or denying what's actually arising in a moment. What's important is to be really honest. True wisdom demands absolute honesty with ourselves, with whatever's arising in the moment. And I know that we can trust that honesty, that willingness to be with whatever's arising. Through that will come the understanding from which these beautiful qualities of mind are able to manifest. But it can't come through forcing or pretense, trying to make ourselves pretend to be other than we are. So I feel that's important: to know that you don't have to pretend to be anything at all. That non-greed, friendliness, metta, compassion do arise from our understanding quite naturally. It is an innate manifestation of our being. You don't need to force it.

So having said that, I'll flip to the other side, because everything's a paradox. And what's quite interesting is that at times we actually do have a choice as to where we let the mind dwell. We might not have a choice as to what situations come up, what immediate thought arises, but we often do have a choice as to how we respond to the situation and whether or not we want to let the mind dwell there.

The Buddha said, "Whatever one reflects upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline." It's fairly obvious. And if we sit and daydream for, say, an hour about something that we really want when we leave here, the longer we stay lost in that daydream, the easier it is for the mind to go back to that place. We have more choice than we think. We really don't need to feel enslaved by the habits of our mind. They're not set in concrete, though it might feel that way at times. We can't deny the arising of the habits of mind when they're arising in a moment, but we can choose very often how to respond.

A quotation from Nisargadatta: "You cannot escape from your obsessions, but you can cease nurturing them." I think that's quite lovely.

So instead of denying them, you simply cease nurturing them. I don't mean it's easy. The force of habit is really quite strong. And especially the habit of mind I'm talking about now is that towards greed, towards aversion, towards confusion.

There's a little comic I cut out once that I think illustrates this beautifully. It shows how easily the habits are ingrained. It's like six little episodes.

You wander alone down a crowded city street. Jostled in the bustle, solitary yet surrounded, you think, "These people are..." Multiple choice: A. My brothers, my sisters. B. Perverts, probably pickaxe murderers. C. Sure could go for a chili dog.

Second panel: Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse... A. I know what he feels. He feels fear. He feels hope. B. Why's that pervert looking at me? C. Maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

Further down, construction workers are tearing the street to rubble. "How symbolic," you marvel. "It reminds me of..." A. The path of life. B. The highway to hell. C. Rocky Road, my favorite flavor.

You know, these habitual inclinations just come up when you're not paying attention. But we do have a choice. And it's not like one life choice—"Okay, from now on, I'm going to stop being an aversive type." I tried that a while ago. It didn't work. But in each

moment, there is a choice. In each moment there's a choice of whether to go along with the aversion that arises, or whether to just let it be. Whether to go along with the greed, or see the desire arise and recognize, "I don't need that right now."

Working with this right attitude is about a willingness to greet each moment of choice as a chance to learn, a chance to grow out of the dullness of our habits of mind—not about expectations of perfection. It's not another standard to judge ourselves against, but about opening to this moment as a learning possibility. It's quite vital, quite rich. The learning never ends.

So I'd like to speak a little about each of these three attitudes.

First, attitude or thought guided by non-greed, or renunciation. I know renunciation has kind of a bad rap in our culture, but anyway, that's a separate conversation. Renunciation here does not mean enforced asceticism. To me, I experience it much more as a sense of inner contentment. Renunciation being not so caught up in needing, in acquiring, in wanting. And when we're not caught up in searching outwards for something, there's so much more capacity for appreciating what's right here, right now. It's a sense of ease, of contentment, simplicity.

And I would imagine that most or all of you have experienced simple moments of that, perhaps on retreat. Again, not dramatic. But you know a moment where you're just sitting having a cup of tea and it's just so fulfilling. There's such a sense of appreciation. Or looking at a sunset and just feeling the wind, feeling a little giddy about that. Something not specifically dramatic.

But there's a sense of real inner contentment, appreciation of that momentary experience. It's not because that's the best cup of tea that was ever made, or the most beautiful sunset you've ever seen in your life. It's that in that moment, the mind and heart are quiet. There's no desire in the mind. There's no reaching out. And so with this sense of inner contentment, this simple being in the moment, there's great appreciation for whatever it is that we happen to be experiencing.

This sense of renunciation, of non-greed, really, at least in my experience, runs quite counter to the input, the information that comes in from our society. Just the word itself—renunciation—often brings up connotations of forced asceticism, intentional suffering, a kind of grimness. And it's not that at all. In our society, giving things up, in many people's eyes, means suffering.

Just looking at the ads—I was reading the New York Times Magazine the other day, and the advertisements are amazing. Full-page ads for two-thousand-dollar watches, perfume that costs hundreds of dollars for a little bottle, and on and on. The intention, I

know from the effect, is to make you say, "God, I really need that." Or just looking at it, you feel a lack because one could never afford it. Really, most of the media input goes along in that direction, creating new needs. We're consumers, and we're conditioned to believe that we need more and more things.

Often, talking to people I meet that I don't really know, or even my family sometimes, they'll say, "Well, you don't have this, and you don't have that"—something that I'd never even thought about wanting. There's a sense of, "Oh, that must be really hard, not to have such and such." Well, it never even occurred to me. But not having, living simply, is equated with suffering in this society. And it's just not true.

Suzuki Roshi says, "Renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world, but in accepting that they go away." Accepting that whatever we have is going to go away, and that's okay.

I'd like to mention a couple of reflections which I find arise quite naturally as practice continues, which really help the mind incline towards non-greed, towards its natural sense of simplicity. One is an understanding that we seem to inevitably come to, on deeper and deeper levels—which I've already mentioned—and that is understanding the unsatisfactoriness which is inherent in desire itself. Not saying, "Oh, desire is bad, I should eradicate it," but really understanding how unsatisfying it is.

This retreat is a really good setup for that, because in a space of forced outer renunciation, this form takes away a lot of things you could normally do or get to satisfy desire. It's by choice, but it's also by force. Once we've got you in here, you're forced to renounce a lot of things. But it's a fantastic chance to explore the nature of desire, because most of the desires that come up here, you can't gratify—not if you want to stay. Most people say, "Well, once I'm here, I'm going to stay. I'm not going to run out just to have a pizza." So since you can't gratify it, this kind of enforced renunciation helps us, through our experience, sift through the barrage, the maze of desires and ways to pursue them that we're greeted with on a daily basis in our normal lives. We really start to experience the futility of all that. You have to try really hard not to notice that desire is suffering.

Two quotations I love about this. One is from Isaac Singer: "Hell is made up of yearnings. The wicked don't roast on beds of nails. They sit on comfortable chairs and are tortured with desire." And this is from Bashō, the Japanese poet. This one evokes the endless nature of craving: "Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto." This is so nice. This is desire for the sake of desire. Desire breeds desire, and that's what keeps us in this sense of bondage.

Sayadaw U Pandita said once that consuming sense pleasures is a form of self-oppression because it's tiring and insatiable. So the more we really notice, the more we're mindful of desire and the futility of it, quite naturally the mind begins to incline towards renunciation. By renunciation I mean a turning away from craving and its desire for gratification. Turning away from craving does not necessarily have to mean turning away from the things of the world, but turning away from craving itself. And I've found in my life that this leads quite naturally to a greater sense of simplicity—both outer, in the things of my life, and inner, just in the things that I want. Yes, I still want plenty of things, but they're less.

And it's easier to say, you know, tomorrow I won't care, and let it go.

I learned a lot about the sense of simplicity and the beauty, the real joy that can come from living in a simple way. Some years ago, for a period of several months, I was living in Thailand as a Buddhist nun. One lives quite simply, and the first few months are quite difficult, with massive aversion attacks, real kicking and fighting against wanting to be more comfortable, wanting better food, wanting not to be hot, not wanting bugs, just really wanting things to be different from how they were. And the inevitable culture shock of giving up, for me, all the comforts that we have in this culture.

But after two or three months, it really started to shift. And by the end of the time, my situation was no more comfortable. I had no more things than I had in the beginning. But there was such a sense in that simplicity, such a sense of appreciation and joy for stuff that I would normally not even have noticed in my comfortable, surrounded, normal life. And I remember—I know I'm not remembering this through a haze of memory because I was writing about it at the time—but it was really one of the happiest and simplest times of my life. Really joyful, not because anything fantastic was happening. Just get up, go get food, sit a little, walk in the woods, wash my clothes. It's very mundane on the outer level. But that sense of not wanting—I really understood in some ways what the purpose of a renunciate life in that form could be, to really get a sense of the joy that can come from a mind that isn't so engaged in getting and having.

And as I mentioned before, we all have moments like that. We've had moments like that here in practice. We have many moments like that when we're not here, still in our life practice. Acknowledge those. It's important. It's an important counterbalance to our ingrained habit of thinking more means more happy.

In a way, the whole practice is a process of deepening letting go. And actually enlightenment is the ultimate letting go. It's not about getting something. You cannot get enlightenment—contradiction in terms. It's about the ultimate letting go.

So, non-greed.

The second intention or thought or attitude that becomes more manifest is that of goodwill or friendliness, mettā, loving-kindness, thought guided by goodwill. And in a way that's infiltrating our experience here—simply an openness to whatever circumstance presents itself, which in effect is what this mindfulness practice is.

And I've often felt, actually, that the cultivation of mindfulness in a moment is, in a way, an expression of goodwill, of mettā. Because when in a moment of experience, whatever arises—a breath, a pain, a sound, whatever—when the attitude in that noting moment is one of openness, acceptance, fine, this is here, let's deal with it, whether it's to a noting moment or to a situation in life, that really is, in that moment, the intention, the attitude of goodwill, of kindness, of friendliness, openness to whatever's presenting itself in this moment.

And all the times that, instead of meeting something with friendliness, which is often, we meet it with resentment or ill will or wishing it was different, lack of self-acceptance—again, this obviously comes from aversion, the flip side. And one moment of acceptance, just one moment of acceptance of what's arising, is the attitude of goodwill. It's not like we have to do it over and over to cultivate that attitude. In that moment, that is the expression of friendliness, of goodwill. It's important to recognize this as a possibility, as a living expression that we can manifest and experience over and over, no matter how difficult our experience might be in a moment.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh speaking about our relationship to anger, though it could apply to anything: "I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with non-violence. We do not need to consider anger, hatred, as enemies we have to fight to destroy. That would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself."

So with this attitude of goodwill rather than doing violence to ourselves, we might be more open to a situation. Again, we sense that no matter how difficult a situation, we can use it as a stepping stone rather than an obstacle.

And some people would say, well, we need difficult situations because that's how we grow. There's a story I love about Gurdjieff, who had a community in France, I believe, with quite a lot of people living together under his guidance. And there was one man who was extremely difficult and drove everybody crazy, and nobody liked him or liked to be around him. And I guess people weren't very nice to him either, and he just got fed up one time and left. Everyone said, thank God, good riddance to him, now we can

really get down to what community is about. And Gurdjieff went after him and tried to talk him into coming back. And the guy said, forget it. I don't want to come back there. People aren't nice to me.

Who wants to live here? So the teacher said, "I'll pay you to come back." And so the man returned. Everyone wondered, "What is he doing that for? It's so nice of him." And the teacher said, "No, you need this man. He is a very important part of the community."

My belief is that we don't need to go out and look for trouble in our lives—enough of it finds us naturally. But this story makes the point beautifully.

Another example, and this is a key one that I really love, illustrates the possibility for transformation from extraordinarily difficult and debilitating circumstances through the power of this attitude of mind—of goodwill, of friendliness. I cut this out of a newspaper a few years ago. The headline read: "In Triumphant Return, Ex-Patient Takes Post at Mental Hospital." It's about a woman who says she was seventeen and clinically depressed when she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic and placed in a state mental hospital. She remained inside for seventeen years.

Now, fittingly for a woman whose antidotes to adversity are perseverance and forgiveness, she has returned as a full-time administrator at the same hospital. She says, "I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive. If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger."

The article goes on about many other difficulties in her life—the death of her husband from cancer, deaths by fire of other family members—and describes her deep sense of not blaming. It's not a false forgiveness, you know, but a deep sense that to learn to forgive and not dwell in the pain of the past allows one to really reach out to a brighter future.

I find this quite inspiring because it's true, and it's not a phony sense of pretending to forgive. It's the actual experience over many, many years of the strength of the attitude of mind of goodwill. This is a woman who is not stuck. And nor are we. None of us is stuck and needs to be stuck.

I do want to emphasize, though, that this is a gradual process. Again, we shouldn't set up an ideal suggesting that no matter how badly one might have suffered and been hurt, well, one ought to forgive this tomorrow and move on. We must really respect and be honest with what's arising in our experience. And then from this truth, the attitude of goodwill, of mettā, will arise. A whole other way of being becomes a possibility.

I love the saying from the Carlos Castaneda books: "A warrior sees everything as a challenge, while an ordinary person sees everything as a blessing or a curse." A challenge. Goodwill does not equal passivity or non-action. A lot of times people ask about that. They say, "Well, if we just remain open to whatever happens, does that mean we simply accept abuse and don't act appropriately?"

That's not the case at all. Actually, in meeting a situation with openness, without anger, without blame, you can see so much more clearly what appropriate action in that situation might be. And the energy becomes much more available to then act in that appropriate way. It's not so bound up in negativity or fear or self-blame or blaming others. So the attitude of mind of mettā is not at all passive. It leads to quite appropriate action—not just for oneself, not just for the other people involved, but for everyone concerned.

The third attitude or intention, quite closely related, is that of non-harming—thought or intention guided by compassion. In many cases, the action of compassion flows naturally from the thought of kindness, from mettā, from the thought of non-harming.

We don't have to go looking for a field to begin to experience and observe both what the intention of compassion in the mind can feel like, and also the power of that intention to affect our actions. We can start right here, in this moment, in this sitting and walking and the rest of the day's practice—with compassion for oneself, with compassion for what one is experiencing.

I can't overemphasize the importance of allowing and acknowledging and developing compassion for oneself. It's not selfish. Thich Nhat Hanh again: "If you cannot be compassionate towards yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others." And just in my experience, this is so true.

What we're doing here is often extremely difficult. I know from talking to many people in interviews—this is really hard, you know, to go through. Stephen Levine said once that we experience many forms of hell as we watch the mind and body. And it's really true. We're meeting all our demons just sitting here quietly on this cushion. Every day: our anger, fear, loneliness, self-hatred, lust, resistance, boredom—on and on.

And how are we greeting these difficult experiences? What about compassion for this suffering? Start to notice how the intention of mind, how the thought of mind, expresses itself in just one noting moment.

Notice the tone of the note. Is it sinking? It tells you something. Notice the tone of the commentary, the running commentary. Maybe you don't have running commentary—I have endless running commentary. Notice the quality of that. Is it "What's wrong with

you? You're off the breath again. David, why are you having another pain like that? Can't you learn to sit right? You were angry already half the day yesterday. You're angry again. Get over it."

Notice what's going on. So often we experience these really painful, difficult states and then blame ourselves for experiencing them.

Something I do a lot: soften the tone of the note. Instead of "thinking," try "I'm thinking." It's not real neutral, but notice the difference. And notice the commentary. Would you treat someone else that harshly? I often imagine, when I'm in a really knotted-up state, hating myself, blaming myself—"You knew how to do this right, for God's sake, after all these years this wouldn't be happening"—I think, if the person next to me was going through that and I knew it, would I think that? Is that how I would relate to that person's suffering? I wouldn't be in this job for very long. No, I would always say, "God, that's really hard. That's really painful." So turn that around to oneself.

Soften the tone of the notes. Notice the running commentary. Soften that as well. I used to have one really harsh running commentary that I started to note as "traffic cop," but actually "drill sergeant" would have been much more appropriate. It was like, "When you get back to the breath—you didn't feel that sensation closely enough—go back and do it again." And on and on. I softened that one. You start with "It's okay. It's okay." It helps a lot.

It's a little conscious, you know, but to notice the lack of compassion, the negativity and ill will toward oneself, and intentionally soften it, bring in a feeling of compassion—it changes the whole tone of practice. And after a while, it's not this sense of "Oh, I should be compassionate." But as the Buddha said, what the mind frequently thinks about, that's where it dwells. The compassion begins to arise quite naturally.

I just want to read this one kind of personification of working with our demons and compassion. It's a story about Milarepa, a great Tibetan yogi who meditated for years up in caves in Tibet. It's really about how to greet our demons with deep compassion for the suffering they engender. This is quite personified.

So Milarepa was up meditating in his cave, and his mind became blissful, and he carried some wood back up to the cave. When he arrived there, he found in the cave seven demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa, and some sat performing various magical tricks. It's kind of like what happens when you come back from lunch and sit on the pillow—seven demons spring up, and you were just blissful, minding your own business.

As soon as he saw them, he became frightened. So he meditated, he uttered a subjugating mantra, he performed the gaze, he aroused his deity's presence. Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness, but was unable to pacify them. He thought, "Well, they might be local deities of the place, and I've been here for years, but I've not praised them." So he sang a song of praise to the place. Three of the demons went away, but Milarepa was unable to make the other four go away.

Realizing that the four demons were magical obstacles, he sang a song of confidence, saying, "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time we should converse."

Three of them vanished like a rainbow.

The remaining demon performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So he sang a song as his view, the pinnacle of his realization, ending it with: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk about our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit. Let me pray to Lord Vajradhara. Grant your blessings so that this lowly one"—meaning himself—"this lowly one may have complete compassion."

And then, with friendliness and complete compassion, without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and vanished like a rainbow.

So out of great compassion for ourselves and our demons, can we just place our heads in the mouth? We might vanish and we might not.

There's one other thing I'd like to share from my own experience of compassion—of experiencing a slight dose of compassion. As we allow compassion, non-harming, towards ourselves, towards our own pain, quite naturally it opens up our hearts and minds to compassion for others in the world, for others whom we come in contact with. When we don't need to shut off to our own pain, then we don't need to shut off to others' pain. We really can be there for it. And this is really the arising, that quivering of the heart in response to pain, that is sometimes given as a definition of compassion.

Another thing I've found so interesting: when we're working with pain and compassion—our own pain, strong physical or emotional or mental pain—when we're caught in resisting it, which is natural, it seems so separated, so isolated, like I'm really alone in my pain, really disconnected. But as compassion comes in towards myself, to-

wards this experience, a sense of empathy and connection with my pain grows to include others. What had been a very isolating experience turns into one that dissolves the seeming sense of separation that we have.

Often in practice, many people talk about this and report it, and I've experienced it myself: what has been quite a personal pain that we're fighting, when we open to it with compassion, turns into an experience of universal pain. And a strong sense, an experience of our interconnectedness, grows out of it.

Just one last example—not a routine example. Once I was in the hospital, lying there wishing I wasn't there, lost in my pain. I was in a room with three other women, and something just opened out my attention from my own experience. I sort of softened to it and became aware of how much pain was going on in the two ladies around me. And then the awareness just kept spreading. How many rooms were there in this one hospital? How many hospitals? There were five hospitals just in the town I was in. And how many towns? On and on and on.

Rather than that seeming overwhelming, there was a sense of being able to acknowledge with kindness and compassion my pain, and opening to the others, in quite a deep sense of the universality of all of us. And that, far from being overwhelmingly painful, can actually bring quite a sense of peace and joy and acceptance.

So these three wholesome attitudes of mind: non-greed, the nature of good will; and compassion, non-harming. They develop naturally as we continue to investigate in each moment the nature of our mind and body, the nature of what's arising. More and more they become natural modes of thought, of intention, natural modes of being—not some forced idea.

And again, it's so important to realize that this reaches far beyond our individual self. How our mind is inclined, the thoughts that affect our actions—that really does affect everyone we come in contact with.

One last story, showing the power of one person's clarity of intention and action. Thich Nhat Hanh has written about the boat people, the ones who escaped from Vietnam, all crowded onto small boats. Many of them had a lot of trouble with storms—aside from the pirates—with their small, under-equipped boats in rough seas. He said that in talking with hundreds or thousands of refugees, together they came to see that the boats which had the best chance of survival, the ones that made it through the best when there was a storm or difficulty, were the ones where even one person remained calm. Even one person remaining calm had the thoughts, the intention of inner peace that could lead to appropriate action, and it infects, inspires other people.

So our actions, which are informed by our thoughts, which are formed by our understanding, have great power in the world. As one teacher of mine said to me recently, as a paraphrase: never underestimate the value of what you're doing here.

CHAPTER 222

Balancing Effort

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of meditation's central paradoxes: how to maintain vivid, alert awareness while remaining completely relaxed and receptive. She explores the Pāli concept of vīriya (effort/energy), examining how it manifests on a spectrum from heroic courage to joyous enthusiasm.*
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> *Wilson uses the memorable metaphor of "Super Bowl mind" to illustrate how genuine interest naturally generates effortless attention—we don't struggle to focus on what captivates us. However, she distinguishes this from wise effort, noting that craving-based interest depends on payoffs. True balanced effort requires non-discriminating awareness that doesn't evaluate experiences as worthy or unworthy of attention. She draws on Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings about interconnectedness, showing how even mundane moments contain profound truth.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing when effort becomes imbalanced—either collapsing into sloth or tightening into grim, forceful striving that masquerades as diligence. Wilson shares a personal story of practicing during her mother's cancer diagnosis, revealing how split attention can create the appearance of meticulous practice while lacking genuine presence. She emphasizes that spiritual urgency (saṃvega)—not panic, but a clear recognition that "our house is on fire"—naturally awakens interest and courage. When overwhelmed, she counsels backing off skillfully, cultivating "seeds of joy" rather than pushing through grimly. Every moment, she concludes, is the crossroads between recognizing our true nature or overlooking it.*

Tonight I want to begin talking about balanced effort or balanced energy. It's a topic that we will all talk about a lot in different ways. Our esteemed associate director Edwin contributed the title, which is "You Don't Pull No Punches, But You Don't Push the River." That's from Van Morrison. So that's what I want to talk about.

In our instructions, both in the hall here and in our interviews, we keep talking about how to have this quality of really relaxed, spacious, open awareness, yet at the same time very precise and alert. We say to summon up tremendous energy to meet each moment, yet at the same time don't do anything. How do we work with this seeming dichotomy, this delicate balance? How do we rest in vivid awakeness, yet at the same time remain very receptive and open, relaxed? Clearly, it's a dance of balance that involves our whole practice, moment to moment.

Tonight I want to talk about it in broad strokes—some aspects that help us to discover and cultivate this quality of balanced energy. I want to focus on two qualities of our experience that can help us over and over to access and recognize this quality of balanced energy: interest and urgency.

When the energy or sense of effort is balanced and strong, it quite naturally gives rise to mindfulness, a quality of simply recognizing, connecting with, and knowing what is present. Moment after moment of mindfulness naturally leads to a deepening of concentration. And all of this naturally leads to wisdom. It's a whole series of the way these factors of mind work together. And in a way it really happens by itself. We can't force any of it.

Looking at the quality of energy or effort—the Pali word is *viriya*, which is variously translated. On one end is heroic, courageous effort. Another way of talking about it is joyous effort, commitment, enthusiasm. It doesn't have to be so intense, but it needs that quality of inner joy and steadiness.

A quality factor of mind that helps us connect naturally with this sense of joyous effort and enthusiasm is that of interest. Really awake, alert, connecting with what's arising quite effortlessly and naturally, moment to moment. Sounds exhausting. Every moment, meeting every moment with this interest, with this kind of joyful alertness—it gets overwhelming even to think about it. It takes so much effort.

But that's where it's just the reverse. The interest itself gives rise to spontaneous effort, spontaneous connection that isn't tiring and isn't difficult. And we all have this capacity. It's an experience that we all have quite frequently in our lives.

If you go to a movie, that's an obvious one. The example I like to use, because I was observing it and to me it was much more intense, is watching friends—mostly male friends I have to say—watching sports events on TV. Recently, it was the World Cup this summer. A few years ago, I was in San Francisco just at the time of the Super Bowl. That's American football if you're from overseas. I was in San Francisco when the San Francisco team, the 49ers, was playing in the Super Bowl in the old days.

But what amazed me, and where I really zeroed in on this quality of interest leading to such a steadiness of energy and focus, was that everybody I knew in San Francisco—and I know a lot of people in that area—shut down their lives for that day. The whole city shut down to watch this game. Big groups would gather. So I was watching with a group of ten or fifteen people. Incredible focus on every moment of everything that

happened. And no one said, "Oh, what a chore. I have to focus on this game." It was spontaneous. It was joyful. I honestly can't remember who won. That shows I wasn't really quite that focused—I was more watching the people.

But you see, it's a quality that we all possess in abundance. And when the interest is there, the energy, the effort, the steadiness of focus springs up quite naturally. It's not a problem.

Now there is one drawback to what I call Super Bowl mind. It's not mindful because it's slightly tinged with a certain quality of craving or desire. There's a payoff that holds the interest. And even when someone says, "Well, I don't care who wins, but I'm watching the artistry of the game"—that's still a payoff. Because if it was just a bunch of schlemiels bumbling around on the field, nobody would be so interested. It has to be a certain level of artistry that gives one that experience of pleasure.

So this isn't wise effort in terms of our practice. It's energy leading to effort that stays interested because it's getting a certain payoff, something we want. Things are going the way we want them to, or we're getting this certain experience of pleasure.

But how come we can't bring this same quality of spontaneous focus to our life, to what's going on here? You'd think our life would be at least as interesting as a football game. But we bring the same tendencies, the same blindnesses to our life outside of here, to our day-to-day, hour-to-hour, moment-to-moment life that we bring to sports or anything else. Some experiences, yes, there's this natural interest and the energy is balanced and we're present. And some experiences don't quite make the grade. We're bringing in our same filters.

The ones we've spoken about so much before—they're not new information. Judging pleasant as good and desirable, unpleasant as something we don't want to be with. Or maybe something is intense enough to hold our interest, but when it's just mundane or not really intense, somehow that interest tends to fall away.

Often people will say in interviews, "Oh, nothing's happening." What do you mean nothing's happening? You sit and nothing happens? "No, well, it's calm. There are sounds, there are sensations, there are emotions, there are thoughts, but nothing very interesting about it. It's not very intense." That's not nothing happening. That's a lot happening.

Somehow it's as if we think the interest is inherent in what's happening, in the appearance, in the arising object. Some things have it and some things don't. But that's not it at all. The interest comes from within our own experience. As you can see for yourself, sometimes the breath is just the most boring thing you could imagine. And three

sittings later, it's just so fascinating, incredible. Do you think the breath is really that different? Probably not. But the quality of interest has led into an energy and effort that leads to mindfulness that really connects.

This tendency in all the different ways that it manifests in our experience—to evaluate what happens, to accept some experiences, to reject others, to be interested in some, to cringe away from others, to ignore others altogether—that's one of the tendencies we keep looking at over and over because it's so insidious. It is often so unconscious, and it surfaces in different and more subtle ways as we continue to explore our experience.

That's the power of the mindfulness we're practicing and this quality of interest that we can cultivate: it's non-discriminating. It's not picking and choosing which experiences to pay attention to, which experiences are worthwhile, which are worthy of our interest, and which are not.

Because when we're picking and choosing, what do we know? The basis on which we're picking and choosing comes from such limitation—from such views and opinions and limiting of our world. Everything's interconnected in ways that we can't even imagine. Sometimes the experience that we find the most mundane or the least interesting—just that one is the potential for opening to a real awakening insight. We can't know how things link together, how things interconnect.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that good and bad are only an idea of the mind. They have no ultimate reality. On this level of meeting whatever arises with interest, with mindfulness, that's true. Evaluating as good and bad is only an idea of the mind, no ultimate reality. That's not to say what Joseph was talking about last night—some experiences are wholesome, they lead to more peace and freedom; some are unwholesome, they contribute to suffering. On another level, that's also true.

As Suzuki Roshi says, there's no such thing as right and wrong. But right is right and wrong is wrong. That's how it works.

On the level of our moment-to-moment experience, however—of what's worth paying attention to—there's no distinction. Every moment of experience, every arising appearance is totally worth being interested in, paying attention to. Because in that moment, that's the expression of our life. It's the manifestation of truth. There's nowhere else we can go to discover truth but in that arising appearance at that moment.

I like the way Thich Nhat Hanh writes and talks about the sense of how we can't separate experience rationally into "this is good" and "this is bad," "this is worthwhile" and "this isn't"—because everything leads into everything else. If you've read him at all, I'm sure you've encountered the way he can take anything—an empty plate, for instance—

and by looking deeply into that plate, with some reflection, he opens up vast realms of understanding. This is reflection, of course, not sense perception in the moment, unless it's a thought. But in looking at that empty plate, we can experience it as a symbol of the finishing of our meal, a moment of gratitude and appreciation for all the cooks who prepared it, for all the farmers who grew the food, for the animals that helped take care of the food, for the people who transported it.

And then also a sense of sadness arises at the fact that many people didn't get to eat anything today. A sense of connection with that. A realization of how many people in the world are dying of starvation at this very moment as we sit here. And realizing that interconnectedness, we might also notice how hard it is to open to our sense of guilt—because one moment we're recognizing our interconnectedness with starving people, and the next moment we're moaning to ourselves because there are no seconds, or wishing we had a cookie.

Just seeing all the play of the mind, and not trying—in terms of mindfulness or interest—to say this one's okay and this one shouldn't be happening. They're all happening together. We can't separate it out.

Again, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, we tend to value a rose and not pay much attention to garbage. But a rose will die and we dump it in the garbage. It becomes garbage. And then we take the garbage and put it into compost and spread it on the flower bed, and it turns into a rose.

It's the same in our meditation here. That moment you felt so guilty about—feeling like "I don't care if people are starving, I really want another Snickers"—that might be the moment that opens us up to some real understanding of ourselves, some real sense of freedom, of disidentification, of not identifying yourself with thought in that moment, of seeing that it all comes and goes. You can't reject anything.

In the space of open, non-discriminating awareness, no experience is more or less interesting, more or less worth our total presence. And if it feels like—as we begin to discover the interrelatedness—sometimes there's a lot of shadow stuff, a lot of hard things to be with, a lot of difficult experience, or even more, a lot of just really mundane, not very interesting experience at all—still, this balanced perception, this seeing of interrelatedness, can come about partly through reflection. What I was describing with Thich Nhat Hanh is really reflection. But through our interested meeting of experience moment to moment, we begin to perceive things in that way quite naturally, without reflection. It becomes the natural perception of how things are.

A poem that reflects this, by a woman named Izumi Shikibu—a Japanese poet from the imperial court, around the tenth century:

Although the wind blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks
of this ruined house.

To me, that really feels like practice. The moon also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. That's how my mind feels a lot—like a ruined house. And somehow the moon manages to leak through when we're willing to be with the ruined house.

When there's that quality of non-discriminating interest, the energy, the effort, the willingness to be present with mindfulness becomes effortless. It's balanced.

The trick, of course, is how to sustain this quality of interest without the payoff—without somehow thinking, "Okay, I'll be interested for a certain amount of time, but then something big needs to happen to keep me interested." How do we sustain this quality without the payoff? It's not simple.

One tool—and it's only one tool among many—is this quality of spiritual urgency. I've found it tremendously useful both in times of difficulty, when the mind just wants to cringe back and turn away from what's going on, and maybe even more so in those times of seemingly endless mundane experience. The times when you're just thinking, "Why am I doing this? What possible relationship does the sensation in my big toe when I lift my foot have to anything that matters in my life? What am I doing this for?"

I hit that point around the second or third week of every retreat I do. At some point, it just eludes me—what I'm doing and why.

This quality of spiritual urgency is very profound and very strong. It comes about from really opening to the suffering aspect of our lives, of the world. Not drowning in it, but really opening our eyes, opening our heart, looking around us, inside us.

This sort of wakes us up to the point where we see the confusion, the pain, the suffering in our own experience—the unsatisfactoriness, the inevitability of death, of sickness.

So at some point, and over and over again, the urgency to understand, to be free from confusion, to be helpful to other beings—whatever form it takes for you—at some point that becomes more important than hanging out in our comfort zone, than living a life of denial. Which actually feels like a comfort zone, but it's not so comfortable at all. We're just not really looking at it.

At times this quality of spiritual urgency can be called up consciously. At other times it arises quite spontaneously, simply by opening our eyes and looking around.

When we don't have spiritual urgency, when we're just going through the motions of practice without that sense of interest which the urgency can inspire—even though your practice might seem really right on, very meticulous, even though you're not just going through the motions but really being very careful, and it feels like you're putting in a lot of effort—it's sort of meeting an outside model. Whether it's the model of how things should look or the model in your own mind, the motivation is trying to match some expectation you have, or you think someone else has, rather than arising from the inner urgency, the inner interest in your own heart. It doesn't quite work. You can practice in a meticulous way and it gets drier and tougher and you're dragging along. It can be torturous. And you can't quite figure out what's going on, what's missing, because it seems like you're doing everything just right.

I had an experience of this. A few years ago, I came here to sit a two-month retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. I was really up for it. But the day before the retreat, I talked to my mother, and she told me she'd just found out she had cancer and was going to have an operation. She had breast cancer and uterine cancer, both, and was going to have an operation within the week. She refused to let me come home. She said, "No, no, you must do your retreat. I don't want you to come home." She got really adamant about it, which isn't like her.

So I came and did the retreat. I would call home every day, and things were going fine. It wasn't an emergency operation or anything. She was doing fine. And I was practicing extremely meticulously. I was noting every moment. I thought I was really present. But it was getting drier and deader. It just felt like sawdust. It felt like I was dragging myself through it. But I thought my effort was really right there, really present.

I didn't quite wake up to what was going on until one day, after about three weeks. I always used to walk in the same place in the hall in the Catskills. I was walking up the stairs to my walking place, and this thought arose—it was more than a thought, it was like a real conviction: "If somebody's walking there, I'm leaving the retreat. That's it." And I meant it. That's what was scary. I really hoped somebody was walking there. Of course nobody was.

That sort of woke me up. I thought, what's going on here? What's the story? Because that just wasn't a moment of aversion. That was really a kind of deep-seated response to the quality of energy and effort that was going on.

What was happening was that I wasn't really wholeheartedly present in my energy, in my effort. It looked like it. It even looked like it to me. I was meeting the form which I knew from the past, trying to meet my expectations of what it's supposed to be like. I could do it and I thought I meant it. But somehow—and this is strange, because you'd think the quality of urgency would be stronger given what was going on—basically what was happening is that my mind, my interest, was split.

I wasn't using the fact of my mother's sickness to bring up urgency and put that urgency into my practice. I was simply splitting my attention, worried about my mother and not wholeheartedly present, moment to moment. I could put on a good show for myself, but it was all directed outward. That inner spring of urgency and interest wasn't there.

We can carry it so far and really feel like it's balanced effort, but at some point that's just not going to hold. We can't keep doing it. It withers the heart.

On the other hand, when the energy, the interest is present and balanced, it becomes the payoff in itself. The times I've felt most connected and balanced and present and really joyful in practice don't have anything to do with what was actually happening—whether it was pleasant or unpleasant, incredibly intense and insightful or just everyday stuff. But this quality of real, alive connectedness had everything to do with that balanced energy and effort that was wholeheartedly present, meeting what was happening moment to moment without evaluation, without resistance. When the effort, the energy is in that balanced groove, whatever's happening isn't a problem. The interest is there, and that's enough. That carries us.

I want to read something from Krishnamurti, a way of talking about this quality of wholehearted interest and attention: "When you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there is no room for fear, no room for contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

Can we attend to whatever's arising with complete self-abandonment? Our nerves, our ears, our eyes, everything of ourselves. That's the quality of really alert, interested energy that isn't looking for something special to happen. In that space, the urgency is there. We don't need to reflect on it. We don't need to look for it. Things are in balance.

Without this wholeheartedness, the energy flags. If things are difficult, there's that tendency for the mind to fall back, cringe away, shrink down. Remember Joseph was talking last night about how we can confuse sloth with compassion. Sloth is sort of like an absence of energy. In moments when the energy, the effort is strong and balanced,

you can experience what it's like: the mind is bright, clear, and interested. Energy has the quality of patience, of being willing to be with suffering or difficulty without that cringing back.

This is the tendency of the mind when there's no energy—when something difficult comes, we recoil. And if there's too much difficulty, one thing after another without energy, we just wither down, like a sopping twisted towel. "I just can't be with this anymore."

Energy, as Sayadaw U Pandita says, is a support in the mind, sort of like the support of a house. It supports the mind to stop flinching away from what is unpleasant, to open and be bright and meet it again with this quality of interest and presence.

So you can see why that first initial shrinking back, if we say, "Oh no, I must be kind to myself, this is really the way to balance"—they say when it's difficult we need to pull back, which is true sometimes, and I'll speak to that later. But this shrinking back is a sign. This is what Chögyam Trungpa called idiot compassion. Don't take the first sign of shrinking back as necessarily the sign that you need to pull back altogether, because that's just the natural response of the mind to something unpleasant. If there's interest, if there's energy, that will be a support where we can come back and meet it again.

As you see, energy isn't static—certainly not. It's a quality that comes and goes. It's also something we can easily identify with. So when it comes: "I'm doing really well now." And when it drops: "Somehow I've blown it. Big mistake. I've got to fix it somehow." This can lead to tipping out of balance either way—the cringing back and giving up, or, and this happens even more with most of the people I talk to, when the energy drops we think it's our fault. We push harder. Things still aren't the way we want them to be, so we push even harder.

And it's not actually interest or mindfulness or wise effort. It's totally trying to make things be a certain way. It's desire or expectation masquerading as wise effort.

Except the effect isn't one of bright, alert interest. It's one of frustration, self-judgment, tightness, more tightness, more heaviness, more grimness until we're just really tied in a knot.

It can be very subtle. Sometimes it's incredibly blatant, but sometimes it's very subtle—the way that we think we're meeting what's arising with interest. But if you look at the underlying intention, it's "I'll meet this in order for it to open up, in order for things to start flowing again, in order for that bright interest to come back"—a long, long list of whatever we're hoping for.

In either case, it can lead to that kind of loss of interest that just makes us say, "Who cares?" Back to that place of "I don't care what happens. I lift my foot, I put my foot down, I feel tingling, I feel pressure. So what?"

This is the time to open our hearts and minds to the quality of spiritual urgency. Now, urgency is not panic. It's not fear and desperation. But again, it's getting in touch with that motivation for why we came to this retreat, for why we're engaged in spiritual practice—the urgency of that. Getting in touch with that motivation where opening to truth is more important than anything else in our life at that moment. It encompasses everything in our life; it doesn't shut something out.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said—I'm paraphrasing—something along the lines of: if you deeply want to be free, to understand your true nature, you will be. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else. That's the quality of spiritual urgency. It gives courage. It gives interest. It gives this motivation and willingness to meet and explore and investigate whatever particular experience is getting thrown up at us. It gives us the courage and the interest to come out of denial over and over and over.

And we don't really have to sit and ruminate about it. All we have to do is open up our eyes, our ears, our hearts. Just pay attention to our experience for any short period of time without that evaluating and pushing things away. And the truth of impermanence, of the unsatisfactoriness of things, of the suffering that's within and around us—we can't escape it. We might want to. That's the denial we're coming out of.

This is from Chinul, who is the father of Korean Zen. He says, "The world is blazing in torments as if it were a house on fire. How can you bear to linger here and complacently undergo such long suffering? If you wish to avoid suffering, there's no better way than to seek Buddhahood." He goes on to say, though, "Understand that the Buddha is the mind. People do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddha. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds."

It's a strong statement, but to me it encapsulates this quality of urgency. When urgency is awakened, there's no problem paying attention. We don't have to look for interest—it comes naturally.

One of my teachers uses the same metaphor of the house on fire, and the Buddha used this one also. My teacher says if you were somewhere and someone came and told you that your house was on fire, you'd immediately start going home. And if on the way you ran into a friend you hadn't seen for a long time, you wouldn't say, "Oh, let's stop and have a cappuccino—there's this nice little place open." You don't have to stop and ponder, "Well, should I? It would be nice."

I haven't had a cappuccino for a while. No, no. You don't stop, and it doesn't even arise as a possibility. You just say, "Sorry, the house is on fire, I'm going home." That's the energy, the one-pointed interest that comes from urgency. Our house is on fire, and we are home. So it would behoove us to wake up and pay attention—discover what the fire is and how we can quench the flames. That's our practice.

And we're not going to discover it by shutting our eyes and putting on some nice music and pretending it'll just go away. It won't just go away. It doesn't mean we have to get lost in despair. As with everything, there's a balance. But we do need to wake up, and all we have to do is keep paying attention. When we have that urgency, when we're confronted face to face with the fact that our house is on fire, again, the interest, the energy, the mindfulness, the understanding comes quite without effort.

I'll give you an example because it really shows how the difference in understanding comes from that sense of awakeness, from urgency, not from the situation. I don't know if you saw a couple of years ago on Bill Moyers' special where he was exploring different kinds of things with the mind, and one segment featured Jon Kabat-Zinn's stress reduction course in Worcester. The profound effects on people who are sent to this stress reduction course at UMass Hospital, who have come to the end of what formal medicine can do for them—they're all either in extreme ongoing chronic pain, life-threatening illnesses, daily migraine headaches, whatever. And how simple mindfulness practice, coming only once a week and doing a 45-minute tape of mindfulness every day, that's all they're doing, has these profound effects.

Well, ten years ago, when I was managing here, myself, my other co-manager, and another dear friend who was cooking here—actually it was during a course with Sayadaw U Pandita, that one Joseph talked about, where the whole atmosphere was very tense. As tense as it was for the yogis, I want you to know for the staff it was ten times more tense. It was a difficult time. So we picked this time to go as interns to the stress reduction course, which means the three of us would drive in, take the course, do everything that the people in the course do. That was basically it, and talk a little bit about it after.

So we would fly in in the morning, an hour's drive, do this course, fly home, then do a staff meeting all afternoon—it was on that day. These people, in three weeks they're reporting experiences like, "I had a migraine every day for six years and now I haven't had one for two weeks." And all kinds of amazing stuff, really profound openings, understanding their life in another way. We, meanwhile, would fall asleep during the meditations. I mean, literally—I remember my friends snoring on the floor. We'd kind of be looking at our watch. We'd go flying home through traffic, would come back at

least half the time with splitting headaches, move into the staff meeting and just be going, "Please, just let me out of this meeting." It was stressing us out enormously. And we definitely went in with a little cockiness: "Well, we know this mindfulness gig."

It was really interesting. We would try to do the meditations at home, just as instructed. Have you—the first couple weeks, you'd lie down and do a kind of mindful moving through your body, starting at your feet. I don't think I ever got higher than my knee without falling asleep in the whole time. And the same with both of my friends. I mean, it was really pathetic. And as the weeks went on, eight weeks, profound changes in these people. Because they had a real urgency. The truth of things was hitting them. They couldn't avoid it. And it led to a natural effort and exploration and wisdom. And we were just in your basic arrogant denial, so to speak. I actually learned more about it later as I've reflected on it.

What I'm sharing now is that I really see how easy it is to be complacent, to take things for granted, to think, "Well, we've looked at suffering. We've looked at dukkha. We're meeting it every day." Yes, we're meeting it every day, but are we actually looking at it? Are we actually opening to it? That's another question altogether. It's so easy to be complacent.

After my mother had cancer that time, after I finally woke up in my practice, it really did inspire a sense of urgency, a deep opening to all of our impermanence and death, a real kind of cellular experience of dying. And then she got better. She's been fine for five years. And complacency rises. "Oh yeah, my mom's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine. There's no problem." It's hard to stay open to the unsatisfactory nature, to the fact that our house is on fire.

But it's worth it. Freedom, the real connectedness that comes out of it, the real aliveness—it's worth it, rather than living kind of shut off and dead and denying.

So we can use anything. Just notice what's happening. God knows. Just pay attention through the sittings and walkings in the day. You don't have to look any further. Notice how you're meeting the difficult and unpleasant. Is it a mistake? Is it something to get rid of? Or is it an inspiration to say, "Yes, this is how this life is. Do I want to just keep wandering in samsara? Or do I want to explore what's happening in order to wake up?"

We can just use nature. All the chipmunks squashed on the road—there are a lot of chipmunks this year. We've all been talking about it. It seems like we can't even drive down the driveway without six chipmunks darting out. It's really quite tricky.

Or when I go to my doctor at UMass, I really like going because it's a big teaching hospital. There are so many people I pass in so many stages—children with chronic diseases, old people seeming kind of bewildered and confused, lots of fear in people's faces. Sometimes there's a real spark of beauty and love as somebody connects or sees the fear and reaches out. It's a very alive time for me. I really use it to wake up to the fact that there's nothing to be complacent about. What am I waiting for to pay attention? Am I waiting until something really horrible happens again? Or am I waiting for something interesting enough to be worth paying attention to? The mundane is just fine. We can wake up with that as well as with anything.

The difficult experiences you go through here—it doesn't have to be life-threatening angst. It can be the frustration of pushing too hard. That can be enormous suffering when we don't see what's going on. Any kind of overwhelming suffering, that is a great time to see what's really going on and let the urgency come up.

Someone today, in an interview, expressed this really beautifully. It really touched me. She'd been going through a very difficult time, to the point that all of us reach at times where it just feels like, "I don't know if I can handle this." That does happen. She was at the lake looking at the leaves drifting here and there in the water, just thinking, "Do I want to live like that? Just tossed back and forth, back and forth?" And the answer was clearly, no, I don't. It doesn't make everything okay.

It doesn't make the suffering go away. It doesn't bring clear bliss. All the suffering is still there. But that sense of *no, I don't want to live that way*—it's worth coming back and being with this. Paying attention.

In fact, you don't even have to go that far. The attention, the interest, the urgency—it just arises naturally. And there's the energy again to meet what's happening for another moment. For another moment. And we only have to take it one moment at a time. We don't have to think, "Oh no, this and three more days of this—it's unbearable." That might be in your mind, but it's only this. It's only this moment. We have no idea what's going to happen in the next moment.

Sometimes the most difficult moments—when we've just thought, "I've had it. This is it. I cannot face another moment of this"—and then we face the next moment. And you never know, that can be the transformative moment where we really just open to something much greater and more profound than our fear and aversion of the difficult.

I want to read this poem about just that—sometimes the most difficult moments are the moments of our awakening. This is from one of the women who was a nun with the Buddha at the time of the Buddha. This is a book of different poems from those women.

Her name was Sama, and it's said that for twenty-five years her mind was always distracted while meditating. Two weeks isn't so hard, folks. And she was a nun, mind you, so she wasn't doing much else.

This is her poem:

It was twenty-five years since I turned away from home and I hadn't had a moment's peace. I had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror—that's the Buddha—*because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died.*

That's a way they have of talking about awakening—saying, "I've finished with craving, seventh day." *Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert.*

So it took her twenty-five years. Maybe it won't take us so long to realize that we can be alert no matter what's going on. And again, this alertness, this energy that comes from urgency—it's a balanced quality of connection and effort. Not desperation, not fear, not panic. When we're meeting difficult or not difficult experience in this balanced way, it naturally leads to balanced perception, where the difficult opens also into the sublime. And that's why we don't despair. That's what lets us have the energy to come back and meet the next difficult experience.

But sometimes we can tip out of balance and really feel that we're drowning in despair. We feel we're really open to the fact that our house is on fire and we see no way out, and it just feels like we really can't bear it. That's when the energy is beginning to tip out of balance.

This is from Anna Akhmatova, a Russian poet, written in 1921, just at the height of all the terrors and starvation and war of the Russian Revolution:

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold. Death's great black wing scrapes the air. Misery gnaws to the bone. Why then do we not despair? By day, from the surrounding woods, cherries blow summer into town. At night, the deep transparent skies glitter with new galaxies. And the miraculous comes so close to the ruined, dirty houses. Something not known to anyone at all, but wild in our breast for centuries.

That's why we don't despair. But sometimes we lose sight of the miraculous coming close to our dirty houses.

And we do despair. We can feel like we're falling into a great black hole or drowning in suffering—whatever the suffering, whatever the experience. Or we turn it into that kind of effort that's pushing, pushing, pushing, and then blaming ourselves because things aren't the way we think they should be, and the only way to remedy it is certainly to try harder, to make it be a certain way. Again, subtly mistaking balanced effort for wanting things to change.

At this point of despair, when we're overwhelmed perhaps by the strength and intensity and ongoing nature of suffering—whether it's terror or grief or this tight, tight pushing or fear or sadness, it doesn't matter what it is—but when it's just more than the mindfulness can meet, more than there can be a balance of perception, then our mind and heart really does wither. We really do tip off into a genuinely unbalanced quality of presence, quality of effort, where we can just get really lost.

Again, this is the place where it's not just that cringing back of sloth, but where it's really skillful means to pull back a little from what's happening. Because in our trying to meet what's happening with what we're thinking is wise effort, we're getting tighter and more forceful and grimmer and heavier. I just want to make it clear that grimness is not equivalent to wise effort. The grimmer you are doesn't mean the more mindful you are or the better you're doing. Sometimes people really ask, "Is it allowed to smile?" It is allowed to smile. It helps a lot sometimes to smile.

So if you find that you're falling into that, or even worse, that you just feel like you're drowning in a swirl of pain and confusion—that is the time when balance means back off. Instead of trying to drill a hole through that experience, instead of trying to meet it by God with openness (just listen to the tone of voice of that intention), it's skillful to back off, turn the attention elsewhere. Bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy, seeing that maybe you're not noticing the balance of perception, but you can deliberately bring it up.

For me, sometimes when I'm walking up in the castles, I'll just go stay on the fire escape on the second floor and look at the sky and the trees. Just open up to seeing, to hearing, to nature. It brings a spaciousness to the heart, to the mind, to the consciousness. See what it is for you. It might be just sitting and opening to hearing. It might mean going down and sitting by the lake. It might mean reading an inspiring passage—whatever brings up seeds of joy.

This is not cheating. It's not giving in. It's not being a wimp. And when you're in that pushing phase and judging it, you're not going to be able to trust whatever evaluation you make of your practice. So at that point the thought will come up, "Maybe I should

back off, open to hearing," and immediately you think, "No way. That's just giving in. That's just being a coward. That's just sloth. That's just idiot compassion." You can't trust the evaluations when you're caught in judgment.

So just look: if there's no mindfulness, if you're withering your heart, withering your mind, turn the attention somewhere else. Bring up seeds of joy. Take a walk. Do whatever helps to bring a sense of spaciousness and happiness into your experience. Maybe it's doing loving-kindness practice—whatever it is for you. This is skillful means. This is how to balance. And again, once there's that sense of openness, of spaciousness, even just that much, then the reconnection can come again. The natural interest and sense of the urgency of things can arise, and we can come back and maybe meet that difficulty just for a moment in a more balanced, open way.

So that's just broad strokes of this balance of energy that we work with moment to moment to moment. It's an ongoing dance. It's never static. We never get to, "Okay, this is it. Now I can forget about it and coast." Sorry.

I'll end with a quotation from Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche: "Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and beings, and this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives."

Every moment. It doesn't have to be daunting. It's a wonderful opportunity. Every moment is the crossroads between recognizing our true nature or not.

So, let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 223

Right Effort: Strive On With Diligence

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this inspiring talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to discover the profound potential of meditation practice—not merely to become skilled meditators, but to genuinely wake up and be happy in this very lifetime. Drawing on teachings from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita and her own experiences, she shares a transformative insight: every moment of mindfulness erases a moment of conditioning, like clearing scribbles from a blackboard.*
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> *Wilson illuminates the Buddha's teaching on sammā vāyāma (right effort) from the Noble Eightfold Path, explaining its four aspects: cultivating wholesome mind states when absent, maintaining them when present, preventing unwholesome states from arising, and abandoning them when they appear. She emphasizes that this isn't about passive observation alone, but about making skillful choices in moments of clarity. The Buddha's final words—"strive on with diligence"—serve as the talk's guiding theme.*
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> *Through candid personal stories, including a humorous account of her own grumbly mind, Wilson demonstrates how we often remain captive to habitual thought patterns even when we recognize their unwholesomeness. She offers practical wisdom about recognizing these patterns as impermanent, seeing through psychological conditioning, and exercising the freedom that comes with mindful awareness. The teaching points toward liberation not as the end of pain, but as the possibility of suffering less through wise attention and compassionate presence.*

I thought I'd talk a little bit about the potential of practice. I like the sense of potential of practice even more than the goal. The goal might be the same, but when I think about potential and the possibilities as I begin to understand them for this practice, I find it so exciting and so inspiring—that we could, in this very lifetime, be happy.

In This Very Life is the name of a book by Sayadaw U Pandita. Really understanding what that means about being happy—it certainly doesn't mean being pleased all the time. If being happy depended on being pleased, it would be really difficult to be happy, because much of the time it's hard to be pleased. Life is difficult in a body, in a relationship, in a world, on a planet that's in jeopardy. There are lots of things that we're not pleased to have happen.

And how to remain a person of faith, of confidence, prepared to engage oneself for the well-being of all beings in this world—with spirit, without despair, with contentment. A great deal of spirit and contentment for what is.

I think it's important to talk about the potential of this practice because, particularly for people who are new to the practice (and for people who are old to the practice as well), when we come determined to practice well and we listen to the instructions and all the techniques and suggestions—you could do this, you could do that—it's easy to get sidetracked into thinking that we're practicing here in order to become good meditators. That we're practicing to become good breath watchers or good walking masters or good mental noters. When we come to interviews, we talk about the difficulty with remaining attentive, resting in the breath, or remaining clear in mental notes. And it's possible to begin to think that we're doing this in order to get good at those techniques, and to forget that they are techniques—techniques to help in the process of seeing clearly. What we've really come to do is to try to wake ourselves up.

I have an image that I think about sometimes: how we're all just a little bit drowsy, but we don't know it because we think that asleep is asleep and awake is awake. When we are walking around on our feet and talking to people and operating heavy machinery, we tend to think of ourselves as being awake. I wouldn't think of driving my car asleep, or operating a lawnmower asleep. And yet there's a way in which we're not really awake. We're quite confused and befuddled and captivated and frightened by all kinds of mind habits that we've gotten so used to that we don't even know they're there.

A friend of mine said a wonderful line a few weeks ago. I met him on a trip I was on, and I've been thinking about that line ever since. He said, "I don't know who it was that discovered water, but I'm sure it wasn't a fish." I've thought about that so much in terms of the ways in which we get used to what's our natural habitat of the mind. We think that's normal, or necessary, or usual, or awake.

You know when you're sleeping in the morning, sleeping, sleeping, and you think you've woken up but you start to drowse off again, and someone is talking to you? They say, "Wake up, wake up." And you say, "I'm up, I'm up. Look, I'm up. I'm really up." But you're really not. You're kind of falling back asleep. And they say, "You're not up." You say, "No, I'm up." I think that's what happens to us in the course of trying to wake ourselves up.

I'd like for you to think of all of the techniques that we do here—resting the attention consistently with the breath, bringing the attention consistently to body sensations and awarenesses as we walk, or eat, or take a shower, or make a salad, or vacuum the steps—as techniques to clear the mind so that we wake up and see clearly and understand

what's true. So that in those moments of wakefulness, we will continue to make clear judgments about what's true and what's a wise response to what's true. So that in the moments that continue, we keep as much as we can a clear mind by not continually muddling it up.

I had an image one time. One of the teachers that I met along in my learning experience was a Sri Lankan monk who's been dead some years now. In the very last year of his life, in fact, he was teaching at a retreat at which I was a student in Southern California. I went in for an interview and told him my practice question at the time, which was that my habit when I sit is I like to go to sleep early at night. I like to go to bed when it's dark. My biological clock, I think, works so that when it gets dark, my energy isn't so clear. So if I go to bed early at nine or nine-thirty, I'll get up at twelve-thirty or one or two, and I'll be quite awake.

Particularly at that retreat center, the decision at one or two in the morning to go and sit in the meditation hall was more complex than here. Here you could get up, come sit in the hall, and if you found yourself asleep, you could go right back to bed. There, the meditation hall was at least a quarter of a mile from where our cabins were. It required getting up out of bed, getting dressed, going to the meditation hall. It was a decision to go. You didn't do it lightly.

So I'd get up and go to the meditation hall filled with zeal and wide awake. I would sit down, and five minutes later I'd start to become sleepy and drowsy. Then I'd wake up and sit a little bit more, then become sleepy and drowsy again. I'd wake up, walk a little bit, sit a little bit, and become sleepy. I spent the whole night sitting, walking, sitting, sleeping, sitting, sleeping, walking, sitting, sleeping. I continued because I was up and there.

I told him my story and asked, "Do you think it's a total loss? Do you think I should stay in bed and not come down at all?"

He said, "No, I don't think so. I think you should get up and come, even if you keep falling asleep." He said, "What matters is not that you fall asleep, but that from time to time you wake up, for however long." And then he said, "Keep in mind that every moment of mindfulness erases a moment of conditioning."

That was so inspiring to me. That was one of those lines that carried me through years of practice: every moment of wakefulness erases a moment of conditioning.

I had this image that somehow my mind was a giant blackboard, all scribbled up with conditioning—whatever that was—scribbled up, not clear. Every moment in which I was mindful was like erasing some of that scribble on the blackboard. Whenever my

enthusiasm or energy or effort was flagging, I would remind myself that I didn't know how much scribble I had left. For all I knew, I could have very little scribble left, and maybe I just had to erase a little bit more on that blackboard and I'd be completely awake. It also contributed to my effort and zeal to think that I had to have the erasing factor happening more than the scribbling factor—that if I erased more persistently than I scribbled, I would eventually erase the conditioning.

It's amazing to think that one line U Sivali said to me a long time ago was really so effective in my practice. I love to share it with people. His legacy goes on, and he continues to teach people. You'll tell it to somebody, and they'll continue to teach people with it.

What we are doing here with all of these techniques is trying to wake up. We're trying to see clearly. We're trying to cut through the habitual fog of hindrances and difficult mind energies and confusions that keep us from seeing clearly, knowing clearly the truth of the moment.

I like to think of the definition for mindfulness as "unwavering truthfulness"—a phrase I read recently in one of the commentaries on the Zen Oxherding Pictures. I like that phrase so much: unwavering truthfulness. Being able to stay balanced and know what is the truth of this moment, the whole truth of this moment. This means knowing not only what's happening, but also what I feel about it, what my response to it is, what the impulse of the heart is in response to it—either a neutral response, or liking it and the impulse to reach out and get more of it, or not liking it and the impulse to wish it would go away.

We see the impulse to disturb the mind with wishing to have more or wishing to have less, and we develop clarity around those impulses that allows us not to waver. Unwavering awareness: this is the truth of this moment. Along with it comes seeing clearly what the potentials are, what choices I have in this moment. Given this is the truth of the moment, what are the possibilities? And given the possibilities, what is the wisest and most compassionate response?

This isn't to say that we're unwavering in our response. Sometimes a wise and compassionate response is to move toward pleasant experiences, to rest in them and enjoy them. Sometimes when experience is unpleasant, it's possible to move away from it with ease and balance and grace. And sometimes it's not possible—and to be able to say, "I would have liked more," or "I would have liked less," but it's not possible, so I'll rest.

To be able to see clearly: what's the potential of this moment? What are the possibilities? What can I do that's wise and skillful, that does not create confusion in the mind? That's really, for me, the fullest way I think about mindfulness.

When I think about that, it seems to me so much the definition of freedom—the freedom of choice—to be able to see clearly what the possibilities are, what would be wise, and to be able to choose that. In that choice, we're choosing not only this moment of freedom but also a kind of conditioning of the next moment. It's a right effort moment. We can only really act in this moment, but how we act in this moment conditions moments to come.

I want to talk more about right effort as we go along.

is the dynamics of the mind in terms of its psychological patterns. Each of us thinks in a certain predictable kind of habitual way. Each of us has our main stories that are the stories of our life that cycle through predictably. Some of which—I remember thinking of some of them as kind of "oh dear" stories that I go to a retreat and think, "I only hope that I do not think about this and this. If I don't think about this and this, I'll be quite content. But if I think about it, I won't be quite content." And that is about as effective as telling someone, "In the next two minutes, don't think anything about elephants." Because as soon as you say that, and a person has the alarm, "Uh-oh, I might think about elephants in the next two minutes," there's no way that you can possibly not think about elephants in those two minutes.

But I thought I would say something more about the terrain of waking up—ways in which we can see waking up happening as we sit here day after day, just doing these simple techniques of keeping the attention as gracefully and as steadfastly and as easily as we can on quite the simple truth of every moment.

We leave the attention resting in the breath not because the breath is magic, but because the breath is here. When we sit here quietly in a quiet room with our eyes closed, not moving, if there is not another compelling experience happening in the body or in the mind, the breath is what's most predominant. It's the most likely place for the attention to naturally rest. It's actually, I think, not so much a question of resting the attention in the breath as much as the attention rests in the breath when everything else is quiet. It is where the attention rests.

I have very much the sense—not that I bring the attention to the breath, but that the breath presents itself to me as the prominent experience of the moment. It's quite a restful way to practice, just to wait for experience to present itself, not to reach forward for it. Here's this breath, here's this breath, here's this breath.

And with the extra effort of these first few days of choosing—when there's a choice, there's some awareness of breath and awareness of thoughts and awareness of moods and awareness of other things as well—choosing that awareness when we can, because breath is for the most part plain and neutral. Resting in a plain and neutral repetitive event is a way of building a certain amount of composure in the mind. And so when we talk about the balanced recognition of the moment as being what mindfulness is, that balance depends on a certain amount of composure in the mind. We build a certain amount of balance, concentration, composure through resting the attention in the plain event of the moment.

The plain event of the moment when we sit is the breath and the rest of the body sensations that are part of it. The plain event of the moment as we walk are the sensations in the feet and the sensations in the body. People especially new to practice sometimes don't quite understand the walking practice. It seems a little contrived and sometimes a little slower than people are comfortable with. So I'd like to remind you that all of the practice—sitting and walking and eating and doing your job, and going from place to place, and showering—are all different positions in which we practice resting the attention in a composed way in the principal experience of the moment. When we walk, the main experience is sensations in the feet. When we eat, the main experience are the experiences of moving the arm and tasting the food and swallowing and smelling and looking at it and delighting in it.

And so resting, letting the attention rest in those principal experiences that are right there, just being with what's here now—itself clears the mind of all the fogs and disturbances and confusions that come and go. And there are ways that we can tell as we practice day by day here that in fact the mind is becoming clearer, waking up.

Here are the ways that you can tell. One of them is quite simple, and it has to do with enhanced sensory awareness that just happens by itself as we sit here day after day in this quiet environment with a simple life, without continuing to overstimulate our mind and body. People begin to notice that sense experience is clearer, so that colors sometimes look a little sharper and sounds are a little sharper. Shapes seem to stand out sometimes a little sharper. Smells get a little bit more intense—sometimes they're quite wonderful, smelling a meal all the way down the hall. I used to be able to tell, as the days in a retreat center went by, that in fact the mind was a little bit clearer because I could smell the lunch further and further down the hall. Could smell the oatmeal from really far away.

I was always quite delighted to find that, but when you think about it, there needs to be a more profound reason to practice than smelling the oatmeal from down at the end of the hall—although it's quite interesting to do that. And it's not always delightful either, because if you spend a long time in a retreat center, there are days when the windows have been closed in here for a long time and you come in and you smell the fact that a hundred people have been in here all day, and that smell is more prominent to you. So it doesn't make only wonderful smells more keen; it makes all the smells more keen.

So we wake up to body sensations. It can be really quite lovely, but it's really just what it is. I thought if my taste was really waked up that everything would taste wonderful. And a dry apple is a dry apple. As a matter of fact, there's a certain way in which we're probably more aware it's a dry apple when we're waked up than not. And that's really just the first level of hints that the mind has become a little more clear. Aldous Huxley used to call it cleansing the doors of perception.

Another thing that becomes clearer, just presents itself as clear—you don't need to look for it—as time goes by and as we steadfastly just do this practice of attending to the breath and attending to the walking and attending to the eating and the most simple parts of our experience,

And to know that there are stories of our lives that are painful and grievous and tangled and fretful and worrisome—and they will, if they're part of our lives, come up. To have the understanding that such stories could arise, and that the possibility exists for us not to entertain them very long, not to be trapped by them—I'd like to tell you that this is one aspect of right effort in practice.

At the same time, there is real value in seeing what these stories are. We wake up to our psychological selves and say, "Look at that, I'm still really reactive to that. Look at that, I'm still held in the sway of this story. Look at this, this is still paining me." And it's fine to learn that. There really is no part of truth that is not valuable. The truth of the dry apple, the truth of the sad story or the grievous story—those are all truths that we are well off to know.

I think we come here principally to discover, in some very deep and direct and intuitive way, what the truths of all experience are. As I was thinking about this talk, I considered speaking about the truth of the sense experience moment, and the truth of our psychological individual lives, and spiritual truths. I don't want to present them hierarchically, because truth is truth and all truth is valuable. And yet there's another part of me that feels that ultimately, seeing those truths of all experience—which we might

call the spiritual truths or the truths of life—are perhaps hierarchically more important. Everything is important, and I think that the key to freedom is a direct and clear realization of fundamental truths. And everything else counts too.

As we see the truths of our stories, one of the ways it becomes possible to hold them without so much grief or pain is to know their temporal nature. Just the sense of "uh-oh, here comes my story again" is a reminder that the story isn't there all the time. So when it arises, we can acknowledge it and know it and even know the sadness or pain we feel about it.

We have emotional systems, we have nervous systems, and they vibrate. I imagine they vibrate—I can't see them—but I feel that they vibrate when I think about something about which I feel a lot of pain or grief. I feel shaken in my being.

I think one of the great rewards of this practice has been the experience, over time, that it's possible to be shaken in one's being, to hold that, and then have it pass, and then have the next experience. This has been really important for me to discover in the years of my practice, because I know I imagined, when I began, that if I practiced hard enough and meditated well enough, I would come to the end of pain. Of course, that's not true. We don't come to the end of pain in our lives. In bodies, in relational lives, alert to the truth of the world—I actually come to think that not only do we not come to the end of pain, but maybe we feel it more clearly. And maybe, in fact, that's really the cause of our deepened capacity for compassion.

What's been truly important for me to realize is that it's possible to hold pain, that it's part of the capacity of the heart to be present for pain—sometimes to be present for it without struggle, and even to be present for it with struggle.

I love to think about the notion that the end of suffering is possible, and that if we had enough clarity of vision and enough balance of heart, pain could come and joy could come and the mind would be so thoroughly deconditioned from reactivity that it wouldn't interact with them. We would have pain and we would have joy, but not suffering—which is the struggle with pain and joy. But I'm not there yet, so I don't know that for sure. I know it as an idea. It's an idea that I love. But it's been a very great source of freedom and excitement and indeed liberation to know that it's at least partly possible—that I can struggle less and suffer less.

I thought for a while that if I told people this, it would sound like sour grapes—that not being at the end of suffering, I would say, "Well, it's all right to suffer less." But it's terrific to suffer less. Wonderful to suffer less. We'll just suffer less and less and less, and that will be wonderful.

One of the things people see about their psychological patterns is the normal pattern of dynamics, the habitual pattern of dynamics of the mind. When they come to see that clearly, it begins to be possible to disidentify from it, to not take it so seriously. It's rather like the fish discovering that it swims in water. We say, "Oh, this is water." Beginning to see the dynamics of the mind, we're able to say, "Oh, this is my pattern. This is just my pattern. It's back again. That's interesting—look at that, still here. I still do that same pattern that I used to do and that I learned to do, that maybe I learned as a result of my childhood, maybe I learned from my parents, maybe I learned from my community. Maybe it's genetic, maybe it's karmic—genetic would be karmic anyway. Maybe it's all karmic: my genes and my family and my group."

But to be able to say: this is my karma in this life. I have this particular way that my mind processes experience. And that's okay. I don't really need to struggle with it too much. I can be alert to it so I don't get trapped by it and confused by it. But it can just come and go.

Someone told me a story not so long ago about something that had just happened to her. She had a tumor removed from her abdomen, and when it was removed, she received a diagnosis a day later that it was malignant. She said, "I wanted a second opinion, so I had it sent to a major metropolis near where I live." She explained that it took a number of weeks because they had to reprocess the slides and hold a tumor board meeting.

She said, "During those weeks, I had such incredible alertness. I practiced with such dedication. I was diligent. I was disciplined. In spite of the fact that I was very dismayed to find that I had been diagnosed with a malignancy, I was awake and clear, and I had a certain amount of joy in the clarity of my practice." And then she said, "Just yesterday, I got a phone call from the pathology department in this major metropolis—it's not malignant." She paused. "And I feel like I've fallen right back to sleep. All my zeal is gone."

It was wonderful. First of all, she was supremely happy, as was I, that the tumor was not malignant. What I told her was, "Give yourself a little slack. Probably you're a little tired from this three-week ordeal. Maybe you could actually take a little rest for a day." But it would be wonderful to cultivate the kind of zeal that the Buddha suggested. The Buddha suggested that we should practice as if our hair were on fire. Isn't that a great image? If your hair were on fire, we would really practice.

But in a certain sense, our hair is on fire. It's a very short life. I've gotten old incredibly quickly. We all have. I began to practice twenty years ago and it seems like yesterday. I got married more than forty years ago, and that seems like yesterday. The sense I have from this is that I'm quite likely to wake up tomorrow and find that I'm

eighty. And we all will. We'll find that our whole life has collapsed, disappeared. Doesn't it seem that way to you? That the whole life has disappeared? It has disappeared. There is nothing of it left—only memory traces. And here we are with very limited time left.

So how do we practice with zeal that's not fatiguing? Some people I interviewed today said, "I feel like I'm striving too hard. Maybe I shouldn't strive." Actually, I'm going to look over and see if I see a reaction from Joseph and Sharon, because we always say to people, "Don't strive." But I said, "Strive." I think it's good to strive. I don't think it's so bad to strive. What I think is very bad is to demoralize yourself about how badly you're doing. I would like to suggest that we strive, but not demoralize ourselves.

The very last thing the Buddha said was, "Strive on with diligence." His very last words: strive on with diligence. I find it very heroic.

On top of that confident diligence, Sharon told a wonderful story last week, so some of you who were here will remember it. It's a very important story about her beginning her metta practice with Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma. U Pandita asked her, "How do you think you're going to do in this practice?" Thinking that perhaps it was hubris to say she was going to do great, she said with all humility, "Well, I'm not sure. Maybe I'll do well. Maybe I won't do well." And he in essence said, "That's no good. You have to say, 'I'm going to do great. I am entirely confident.'"

Why not? None of us is trying to do anything that is beyond possibility. We're not trying to do anything outrageous. We're not even trying to become anyone that we aren't. We're trying to remember who we are. It's as easy as that, really.

When you think about the definition of the Brahma Viharas—really the essence of who we are—balanced, friendly, generous, compassionate, responsive—as being the essence of who we are, the natural condition of the mind. Not the condition of the mind of special people, but the condition of the mind itself. And for each of us, the task is to cut through all of the confusion that keeps us from being in touch with that, from remembering that.

In addition to thinking of this practice as waking up, I like to think of it as coming home. Truly coming home to ourselves in the fullest way. Waking up to ourselves, waking up to all the hidden things, waking up our bodies so that we feel fully. And just as I was mentioning before, not to underestimate how lovely it is to have our senses be fully awake. Here we are in a body—why not have it be an awakened body? And here we are, emotional beings with psychological systems—why not be awake to the dynamics

of our psychological systems? To see: these are my stories, these are my tendencies, these are my traits, these are my mind filters, these are the hidden secrets that I keep in the shadow.

But if I bring them out of the shadow, then I can address them. Not only be awake to them and know the truth of them, but if they're in the shadow because they're hard for me to see, because they're unskillful traits, after the initial dismay of seeing what's there, I can address myself to them so that I don't do them anymore. I can make those choices. What we are awake to, we are free to change. In moments of awakeness, there's tremendous freedom.

All the spiritual traditions that I know have stories about seekers who hear about a hidden treasure somewhere, a great jewel in some faraway place. And usually in these stories, regardless of tradition, the seeker travels over large distances and against all odds, finally arriving somewhere only to have someone say, "You made a terrible mistake. That very treasure is hidden under your bed at home." And then they go home, and sure enough, they dig under their bed, and there it is.

What if we discover, in fact, that the very treasure of our essence is right here at home? That it isn't a question of acquiring it, but a question of seeing through all of the delusion that prevents us from feeling it?

I remember that one of the things that was inspiring to me in the very beginning of my practice was the fact that my teachers all looked like regular people. Mostly they were younger than I was—plain people with plain lives. It was very inspiring to me because I knew that they had regular lives with regular stories and regular troubles, just like everybody else. And yet they seemed, in a way that I wasn't, happy. The notion that it was possible in this lifetime—aware of pain and dealing with pain, having a story like everyone else—to nevertheless be content in it, active in it, engaged in it, but not frantic, not trapped, was so inspiring to me. And I had tremendous confidence that I could do it, just because they looked plain. I thought, if they can do it, I can do it, whatever it is. Because at that point I was very much confused about how this all worked. I kind of understood the instructions, but I didn't understand how they worked. I got it about the technique—do this or do this or do this.

It was really important for me to learn, as time went by, how these different technical instructions—bringing the attention to the breath, for instance—actually related to cutting through the fog of confusion in the mind and allowing me to feel, for any amount of time, peaceful or happy. My zeal then increased about practice. It's very hard to do this practice if you don't really know where you're going with it. It's a tremendously odd thing to do.

I sometimes think to myself, what if a person from another planet—or even a person from this planet who never heard of this, who doesn't get it—came and looked at us? We look odd. Everybody's sitting here all day long, everybody absolutely blank of visage. You can't tell a thing about what's going on with people. It's amazing to think that this is such a passionate practice and that inside everybody's experience are enormous variations of experiences happening. I look at everybody and everybody looks the same. I have no hint of whether in that person's experience at this moment there is tremendous serenity or a tremendous explosion or absolute restlessness, or whether they're fast asleep, or what is happening.

If someone were to look at us, it's odd—to sit and to walk and to sit and to walk, and especially to walk in that slow way. It's odd to keep your eyes averted. It looks so unfriendly.

I've sat in the dining room here, depending on my mind state, at a time when my mind was one of despair or discouragement, and I look around and think, "Everybody looks like a zombie. Nobody home. This is the most dreary thing I've ever seen. We've all gone mad." And then the very next night, with a new mind state—peace or happiness or ecstasy happening within me—I look around at those very same people, the very same faces, the very same mode, and they look gorgeous.

Everybody looks like a saint. Everybody looks wonderful. I'm completely in love with everybody. And they're the same people. I've manufactured the experience entirely with my mind state.

To begin to see this, and to recognize that the phrase which enjoyed some popularity during the New Age era—"we create our own reality"—is actually true. Not in any magical way of making the sun rise in the west instead of the east. Any number of people tell me they have meditated fiercely for years, waiting for the relationship of their lifetime. They read all kinds of things that said if you wish it, it will come. And it hasn't come. That kind of reality I'm not sure we can create.

I think we create the reality of our mind states, and our experience then is a reflection of that mind state. The truth of our experience is really an internal truth, and everything else appears the way it does as a result of our internal truth. And I think we have a choice about that mind state.

So I want to talk a little about right effort. I didn't understand it for a long time because I thought right effort was simply trying hard, making as much effort as I could. A rather bland definition. But the Buddha gave a particular definition of right effort: to make the effort to be aware of the presence in the mind of wholesome mind states—

mind states that lead to happiness—and, aware of their presence, to cultivate them, to keep them in the mind. Aware of their absence, to cultivate them. And to be aware of the absence in the mind of unwholesome mind states—mind states that lead to unhappiness—and make some effort to keep them out. And aware of the presence in the mind of unwholesome mind states, to make an effort to exclude them from the mind.

This sounds perhaps to people just beginning practice like a contradiction. Wait a minute, that doesn't sound like those instructions I heard about just being alert to whatever's there, trying to maintain balance in understanding and knowing and accepting that this is the truth. But that's only half of it. Obviously it requires balance in knowing this is the truth of the moment. But then, in that balanced moment of recognition, there is complete freedom, and we can choose where we bring our attention in the next moment.

My teacher Sharon used to end interviews with a particular salutation. I'd be on my way out the door, hand on the doorknob, and she'd say, "Remember, Sylvia, be happy." I thought it was just a pleasant way to end an interview. Subsequently I realized it's an instruction. An important instruction.

I realized this because I would be going about my practice, doing whatever I was doing. There's a way in which you're going along—aware, mindful, present. And then all of a sudden some drama starts in the mind. You don't notice it starting. The mind gets all tied up in the drama. It carries on, frightens, confuses, and by and by, the mind getting tenser and tenser, a certain amount of suffering is present. And by and by, there's an awareness of the presence of suffering.

Often I would become aware of the presence of suffering because the voice of my teacher would float through my mind and say, "Remember, Sylvia, be happy." And I'd think, I'm not happy. But that moment is a moment of mindfulness. It's a moment of alert clarity about my situation. It was a moment in which I felt almost like free fall—you know, when people talk about jumping out of an airplane before you open your parachute. Free fall. You can direct yourself.

That moment of alertness: Hey, I'm not happy. That's the truth. And I'm awake. In that moment I get to choose. In that moment I can take a breath. Just that breath. In that moment I say, I'm awake, I'm unhappy, here I am, and I'm putting my foot down with complete clarity. That's all I'm doing—putting my foot down. Then I'm putting the other foot down. Then this foot. Then this foot. Moments of clarity about putting the foot down

are moments of clarity, just like moments of clarity about anything are moments of clarity, which are moments of presence and moments of happiness.

And in that moment of waking up, there's no custodial care that you need to do about what already happened. You used to think you had to tidy up the mess that you'd made in the mind. And it's a terrific piece of news to notice that you don't need to tidy it up. It disappears because it's nothing anyway. It just disappears. All you have to do is let it go and it's gone like bursting a balloon. It's not there anymore. In that moment is a moment of freedom, a moment of choice, a moment of moving forward.

This is going to be an end to the story for some of you. A little bit of true confessions too.

Those of you who were here last week will know that I said parenthetically, as part of the talk, that for one reason or another there had been a lot of grumbling in my mind that day. I told it in terms of what I hoped would make the point that from time to time the mind grumbles. And what's important is to know that the mind can grumble away and you can keep on anyway. I didn't stay in bed because my mind was grumbling. I think I probably was pleasant to people even with my grumbly mind. I showed up for all my interviews. I even gave a talk that night, mind grumbling away, but I did it anyway. And I probably gave that talk and mentioned it parenthetically just to make the point that we don't need to be held hostage to grumbling.

I'd like to make a further coda on that. I'd like to end the story. Because I really didn't make enough right effort, and I didn't have to spend the day grumbling. At the time I had said—though I didn't tell the complete truth, or maybe I didn't know the complete truth—I said my mind, for whatever reason, was in a grumbly mood. This is the reason it was in a grumbly mood.

I've been away from home for more than a week, a long time. And I will have been gone almost three weeks by the time I go home. I call my husband every night about ten o'clock, which is seven o'clock in California. In the beginning I said, "Why don't you fly to Barre on Saturday? Valentine's Day is a week from this Wednesday. Why don't you fly to Barre on Wednesday and then stay until Sunday, and we'll fly back to California together. You've never been to Barre. It's been my home for twenty years. It would be good for you to see it." I gave a lot of reasons why that would be a good thing to do. It's Valentine's Day.

And he said, "I'll think about it."

Every day I would say, "So are you coming to Barre?" And he'd say, "I'm thinking about it."

On the day of the grumbly mind, I said to him, "So are you coming to Barre?" And he said, "No. I thought about it, and I decided not to come." So I said, "Oh, I wish you would have come." He said, "No, I thought about not coming." I said, "Well, all right, I'll be home on Sunday." And I hung up the phone.

This was early in the day—I'd called him about something else. And I had the thought: *He doesn't love me. If he loved me, he'd come to Barre.*

At the time that I had that thought, I completely knew that it was nonsense. Complete nonsense. He loves me, fine. But the mind makes up a thought, and then it continues that thought. I knew it was a not-true thought, but there it was, and then it continues. It talks to itself, and it says, *So, I don't have to call him tonight. I mean, he'll notice that I didn't call him, but I don't have to call him.*

What's more, I don't have to call him tomorrow night either. Of course I'll call him on Friday, because I always call on Friday evening, but it would really be mean of me not to call before Friday evening, so I'll call Friday late afternoon. But I don't have to call tonight, certainly, and I don't have to call tomorrow. Let him stew a little bit.

And this whole conversation is happening while he doesn't have to come—he thought about it, he doesn't have to come—but I'm definitely not calling him tonight, so he'll get the message.

This grumbling continued. In the meantime, I had interviews with people, and some of you may have been among the people I saw that day. You probably thought, "She seemed pleasant as ever," but meanwhile, the grumbling was continuing over here. And it was taking a certain toll. I didn't feel good.

I mentioned it probably that night to Sharon. I said, "Well, I don't know if I'm going to give a good talk because my mind has been grumbling all day long." And it's debilitating to have a grumbling mind. It just grumbles along all day.

So I came and gave a talk. It was whatever it was, probably reasonably all right, but grumbly. Then I went back after the talk to the study center where I was staying, and I phoned him.

The thing is, I knew all day long I would phone. There was never a moment in which I sincerely thought that I would not phone. I knew this was just an extraneous tape loop running the whole day. What I didn't do is stop doing it.

And I could have. At any time during that day, since I absolutely knew I was going to call anyway, I could have said, "Why are you doing this to yourself? Why are you doing this? You're not happy. You're not comfortable." It was as if I had gone into a movie that was a bad movie, strapped myself into the seat, and determined to sit through several showings.

It's not necessary. Right effort would have been stopping the movie right away—saying to myself, "This is nonsense, don't do it." Every single time the tape loops, it's a habit. It's a completely ridiculous habit. I don't know why the mind does that sort of thing. It's not pleasant. It's not comfortable. But so often we do things that are not pleasant and not comfortable simply because we are not making enough effort not to do them.

It would have taken a moment of effort. I could have said to myself, "Sylvia, remember, be happy. You're not happy. Don't do it."

That same awareness—"my mind is grumbling"—which I went around with all day, it's a moment of almost-mindfulness. It's kind of in the ballpark of mindfulness. But if I had really been alert, it would have been, "My mind is grumbling, and it doesn't have to. You have a choice."

Instead I was partly grumbling and partly seduced by the grumbling and partly fatigued by the grumbling. That's not clear seeing. It's not really mindfulness.

I tell you this story because sometimes people get into a mood. Tomorrow night probably someone will talk about the different kinds of moods and difficult mind states that predictably come and go. So this is kind of an antecedent thought for working with those moods. Moods come and go. They come predictably. They come with all kinds of causes—sometimes a thought, sometimes a telephone call, sometimes "No, I'm not coming." Sometimes they just come because of the phase of the moon, who knows why.

But we don't have to act on them. We can notice them. We can really see them clearly. We can recognize: this is here. It's an unskillful mind state. It's conditioning more moments of cloudiness. It's unwholesome. I have a choice.

So I'd like to tell you: strive on with diligence. Make a lot of effort. We could be happy in this very lifetime. The Buddha taught that seven days of unwavering mindfulness—guaranteed.

So let's sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 224

Eightfold Path of Practice: Right Effort and Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 1h42

This comprehensive dharma talk examines the sixth and seventh factors of the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Effort (sammā vāyāma) and Right Mindfulness (sammā sati). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Dhammapada, the teaching explores how wise effort is fundamentally the effort to pay attention—to be present and awake to what is true in front of us.

The talk addresses the four aspects of right effort as taught by the Buddha: avoiding unskillful states that haven't arisen, overcoming those that have, developing wholesome states, and maintaining them. Using the famous parable of the lute from the Buddha's teaching to Soṇa, the importance of balance is emphasized—neither too tight nor too loose, but tuned to the perfect pitch. This balance is especially relevant in Western culture, where ambition and self-judgment can easily distort spiritual practice.

The teaching on mindfulness presents the four foundations of awareness: body in the body, feelings in the feelings, mind in the mind, and dhamma in the dhammas. Through mindfulness, we discover that the body lives its own life, feelings feel themselves, and thoughts think themselves—leading to the liberating insight that there is no fixed self residing in body and mind. The talk emphasizes that mindfulness is both practical (helping us release entanglement in daily situations) and radical (freeing us from the constructed sense of self). This awareness brings us into contact with the timeless, deathless dimension of experience available in each present moment.

So again, let yourself sit, listen. And the spirit of listening is a kind of meditative one in which what I'm saying is not necessarily true. It might be. But it's really more to test against your own experience and your own innate and fundamental wisdom, to look and see what you discover to be true that really works in your own life.

Over the course of this winter on Monday nights, since the beginning of the year, we've been working with a series of fundamental teachings called the Eightfold Path—the Buddha's instructions from the very first day of his teaching on how one can live a life of liberation or awakening, of a freedom of the heart. This Eightfold Path in some ways seems sequential, one after another, but in another way it's like a lotus flower with eight petals, or a mandala in which every part comes back to the center. And in the

center is that possibility of the freedom of the heart, here and now, wherever we are. Wise understanding, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood—all of them are both vehicles to free the heart and expressions of our understanding in this world.

Now this week we get to the next step, the sixth of the Eightfold Path, which is called Right Effort or Wise Effort. How to make wise effort is a key to spiritual life. Wise effort, or right effort—energy—most fundamentally is the effort to pay attention, the effort to be present and awake and see what is true in front of us. Of all the kinds of efforts we can make, the most fundamental wise effort in spiritual life is to be where we are and see it clearly, to be conscious or mindful.

From the Buddha: "Master your senses, what you taste and smell, what you see and hear. In all things be a master of what you do and say and think. Be free. Are you quiet? Quiet your body. Quiet your mind. And by your own efforts, waken yourself. Know yourself and live joyfully. Follow the truth of the way. Reflect on it. Make it your own. Live it. It will always sustain you."

In a certain way, the teaching of right effort or wise effort is a reminder of our nobility. It is a reminder of the human inspiration of spirit—not just to get through our life, but to honor it, to respect it, to be present for it, to delight in it as well. Yes, we have to be present for the sorrows of life, but also, if you look at figures that we commonly admire, like the Dalai Lama or my own teacher, Ajahn Chah, they have wonderful senses of innocence and humor and joy and presence and delight like a child, as well as deep compassion and wisdom.

Don Juan, in his teachings to Carlos Castaneda, said, "There are some people who are very careful about the nature of their acts. Their happiness is to act with the full knowledge that they don't have time. Therefore, their acts have a peculiar power. Acts have power, especially when the person acting knows that those acts are their last battle. There's a strange consuming happiness in acting with the full knowledge that whatever one is doing may very well be one's last act on earth. Only as a warrior"—as a spiritual warrior, he goes on—"can one withstand the path of knowledge. A warrior sees everything as a challenge while an ordinary person sees them simply as a blessing or a curse. For a spiritual warrior, there are only challenges, and challenges cannot possibly be good or bad. Challenges are simply challenges."

So there's a quality of impeccability that is invited, reminded in this wise effort. For all of us, we know the sense of joy that comes when we live with a whole heart. And if you reflect back on how many things we've done half-heartedly—whether work or school or family, all the things that we do while sleepwalking or not so present or not

giving ourselves to—reflect on those and feel the energy of that. Then continue to reflect and remember those times and things to which you have given your whole heart, which you did as fully as you could. What's remarkable is that it doesn't even matter how they turn out. What matters underneath it all is how much care and attention and love and wholeness we bring to that relationship, to that moment, to that garden, to that event that we are attending.

I just finished teaching this last weekend with Luis Rodriguez, Latino poet; Malidoma Somé, a West African medicine man; and Michael Meade, a mythologist. We were teaching and talking about what we learned from almost ten years of doing retreats for young men from Chicago and Los Angeles and Oakland—young men from the inner cities, many of whom are in trouble or in danger. They're in trouble or danger sometimes because they seek out danger due to the usual things: being abandoned, or poverty, or maybe being tested in the wrong way like standardized tests, as if we're supposed to have standardized people and standardized children. Or maybe because of the racism they encountered, or the laws like three strikes that fill our prisons.

But one thing that's come clear in working with these young men, these young people, is that if you listen to them underneath a lot of defensiveness and withdrawal, they care passionately about their life and what they do and who they are. To work with them requires meeting their passion and their fire, and even their love of danger, with something equally filled with fire. You see it in the Palestinian youth throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails, in the revolutionaries in the mountains in Mexico and San Cristóbal de las Casas, among the Kurds, and up in Seattle in the demonstrations last year. There's a certain kind of passion and fire and aliveness.

Now if you look in the monasteries that train these practices of awareness and compassion—

They also have a lot of fire in them. One monastery I practiced in, they would tell the story of how after the Buddha's enlightenment—in the myth of the Buddha, after his night of enlightenment and being under the tree, the Bodhi tree—he then stood for seven days and stared at the tree in gratitude, kind of just gazed on the tree as if to bow to it, with affection for sheltering him.

Well, standing seven days, it sounds kind of nice, you know, tree gazing. That's okay for the first hour or two. But in these monasteries, you would actually learn to sit for an hour and then for three hours and then for twelve hours and then for twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours. Or you would stand for twenty-four hours and not move. It's called mastering a posture.

My teacher Ajahn Chah said there were two kinds of friends. In Thai it's called *phuon kien* and *phuon tai. Phuon kien* are friends that you eat with—they're basically party friends. And *phuon tai* are the ones that are there with you until death. They're life and death friends. And he said there's the same thing in spiritual practice. There's that which is done kind of for comfort: quiet yourself down, be a little more kind or ethical—all very good things. Your life will be better, more in harmony with the Dharma or the Tao. But the second kind of practice doesn't have anything to do with comfort. And it doesn't matter what happens. It is the dedication to freedom. Or as one Zen master says, cut all your bargaining. Just do it.

Now, I worry sometimes—or I wonder, because we're in Marin County here at Spirit Rock—about it being too comfortable and kind of sugarcoating the teachings. Because in the monasteries you do a year retreat or a three-year retreat, or you go in a cave, or you sit out in the jungle in the forest where there are still tigers and a lot of wild animals and mosquitoes and malaria, or you sit all night in the charnel grounds watching the fire of the funeral pyres, or you sit with your boredom and heat in the tropical mosquitoes for weeks and weeks, and you hear the same dharma talk that's incredibly boring over and over again—the Eightfold Path for the ten millionth time. And in it somehow it awakens a steadiness and a fearlessness and a courage and a centeredness on the earth.

And certainly the two-month retreat that we teach, sitting and walking in silence for two months, begins to offer some of those practices. But I guess the question for us is: what would allow us to practice in a way that is truly wholehearted? To be reminded that we have a courage and a love of courage. O nobly born, O you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddha, remember that no matter what circumstances you're in—sorrow and betrayal and loss and praise and blame and anger and all those things—it is possible to awaken. And right effort or wise effort is that willingness to take the circumstances of our life and bring to them the spirit of attention and compassion. This too.

And in the Tibetan tradition, you pray for suffering. May I be granted appropriate sufferings, enough sufferings, so that I can truly develop patience and love and compassion, and truly develop a wise heart. Imagine asking for it. It's not our usual prayers.

So how to do this? There is in the ground of wise effort or right effort the need for acknowledging the suffering of this human realm. And its impermanence—that circumstances are always changing and they are not in our control. The eight worldly winds: praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain, are changing all the time. This is the truth. To reflect deeply on it. And also, for wise effort, it's said to remember our own death, the brevity of life, like Don Juan suggests.

Here's a poem from Galway Kinnell. I think about it. I was talking to my daughter the other day, and something came up in the conversation. Someone had died, and so we were talking about death and the end of life. And I said, you know, I remember when you were really little. You were just two years old. And the first time I had to tell you about death. And it was actually quite scary, I said to her. Because you were in your bedroom where you had this little bed. By the window there was this great big moth that had died and it was dried at the bottom on the windowsill. And you saw it and you wanted to pick it up, and I picked it up and showed it to you, and you wanted it to fly.

And in that moment I realized that no one had ever told you that things die. And it was a real moment for me. And finally I said, well, you know what happened—this died. It had a life for a time, and everything does. And then the form that it takes and the life that it lives ends. And you looked at me and you smiled and said "oh." You weren't disturbed about it at all, I said, actually. It was all right for you. But I think that's because when you're that little, you might say that they don't understand, but actually I think it's that you live in a world that's beyond birth and death, that you're still connected to that sacred time, that timeless reality.

This is Galway Kinnell facing death with his daughter: "I've heard you tell the sun, don't go down."

I've stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.

Little Maud, I would blow the flame out of your silver cup. I would suck the dirt from your fingernail. I would brush your sprouting hair of the dying light. I would scrape the rust off your ivory bones. I would help death escape through the little ribs of your body. I would alchemize the ashes of your cradle back into wood. I would let nothing of you go ever—until washerwomen feel the clothes fall asleep in their hands, and hens scratch their spells across hatchet blades, and rats walk away from the cultures of the plague, and iron twists weapons toward the true north, and grease refuses to slide in the machinery of progress, and men feel as free on earth as fleas on the body of man, and lovers no longer whisper to the ones beside them in the dark, "Oh, you who will no longer be."

And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry. This is the nightmare you wake crying from: being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. Being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

Because death is stalking us, life is mysterious and alive.

So what does wise effort mean? It means to come into the reality of this day, which we are given once, and use it to reawaken our own nobility, our Buddha nature. Traditionally, it's said that one dimension is to disentangle ourselves and stay free wherever we get caught—wherever we're obsessed and fighting and entangled and lost and frightened. That is the place to make the effort to release, to let go.

Again the Buddha says, "I know of no other thing, my friends, that brings as much suffering as an untrained mind. My friends, I know of no other thing that brings as much happiness as a cultivated and developed mind."

Or again, another passage: "If you are filled with grasping, your sorrows swell like grass after the rain. Like a monkey in the forest, you jump from tree to tree. But if you learn to release your grasping, your sorrows will fall from you like drops of water from a lotus flower, and you will rest free."

Disentangling. We are here in the present moment, and experiences come—sights and sounds and tastes and smells—all the time touching our senses. And here we are, sitting and breathing. It's possible to meet those experiences and get lost in them, entangled, fighting and struggling and needing. It's also possible to bow to them, to see them as they are, touch them with compassion, and release them—in any moment, to be free.

I was reading the account of a Vietnam veteran who every year, in a certain month, would go out and rob a store. He was put in prison a couple of times for this. He was living on the edge anyway, sometimes homeless. And finally it dawned on the people who were trying to work with him and help him to get the story. The story was that that particular month, that day in March, was the day when he had gone out with his platoon and everybody but himself and one other man had been killed. Every year that day would come. He didn't even use a real gun—he used a play gun—but he got a gun and went out and had to reenact it, because he didn't know how to let it go, that trauma.

And yet one of the great gifts of our humanity is to learn that it is possible to let go, that it is possible to heal, that it is possible through attention and compassion to touch those patterns that we've been caught in so long and release them. That's the first strong teaching of wise effort: to disentangle ourselves and stay free.

The opposite side—well, here's a little line from Hafiz. He says, "Dear ones, it is the time to end the mental lawsuits that clog your brain." Let go, he says. "Dear ones, it is time to end the mental lawsuits that clog your brain."

The opposite side that the Buddha speaks of: one is the effort to disentangle ourselves from greed and fear and obsession and entanglement. The opposite is that of nourishment—to nourish presence, to nourish equanimity, to nourish ease and loving-kindness and beauty and joy in the heart, to do that which brings those alive in our life.

Again, from the Dhammapada: "The farmer channels water to his land. The fletcher whittles his arrows. The carpenter turns his wood. And the wise direct their minds."

There is a training, or a remembering, or a directing—to live our life and attend to each moment as if we were planting seeds in a garden. To nourish in this moment, no matter what the circumstances: clarity, kindness, freedom, respect. Sometimes we do it from the inside; we remember it. And sometimes we do it through outer circumstances, by placing ourselves where we're called upon to love, to be present for another, to be noble in ways that we may not even be sure we can do.

The Dalai Lama puts it this way: "The moment you think of the well-being of others, your mind widens." That is to say, concern for others is not just the result of freeing oneself from self-centeredness; it is also a means to do so. The moment you think of the benefit and the blessings that can come to others around you, your mind broadens and widens.

As we free ourselves from the patterns of fear and grasping and clinging that keep us from our true state, out of that experience arises a natural compassion. The small sense of self dissolves, and you see the interconnectedness of beings.

You're less preoccupied with your own problems and therefore much more connected with the blessings and the needs of all together.

To disentangle ourselves and release, to nourish and plant seeds of that which is beneficial. Certain texts emphasize this kind of effort. What is wise effort? The effort to avoid, the effort to overcome, the effort to develop, and the effort to maintain, says the Buddha.

The effort to avoid: herein the practitioner rouses their energy to avoid the arising of unskillful things that have not yet arisen. Possessed of the noble direction of the senses, they inwardly experience instead a feeling of freedom and joy into which these entanglements cannot enter or stick. The practitioner rouses their will to overcome those unskillful things that have already arisen in them. They do not remain in the energy of greed, of hatred, of clinging, of delusion, but abandon, release, dispel them.

And what is the effort to develop? Herein the practitioner cultivates and nourishes through their energy those wholesome things that have not yet arisen and makes the effort to plant the seeds, rouses their energy for that which is beautiful to grow in them. And the effort to maintain is to maintain those things that have arisen and let them blossom into full perfection and maturity.

Now sometimes the texts become a bit more fierce. The Buddha says: "Truly for a disciple who is possessed with faith on this path, who knows that awakening is possible and has penetrated the teachings, it is fit to think: though the skin and bones wither away and the flesh and blood of this body dry up, I shall not give up my efforts to attain that liberation of heart that is possible for human beings." This is called right effort. I don't usually read that passage. This doesn't seem to fit our culture here in the Bay Area so well. Ramana Maharshi said of enlightenment that those who succeed do so only with proper effort.

But there's a danger, the reason I hesitate to read it, and that is that wise effort needs to be balanced in the culture in which we live—a culture of ambition and striving and self-judgment. The danger being that we can and do easily make things worse, tie knots in ourselves, increase our struggle, reinforce our unworthiness, repeat our trauma by trying to be somebody that we're not through the misuse of effort.

So wise effort also needs to be balanced. And almost everyone knows the parable of the lute, where the Buddha is sitting in the cool forest with Sona. Sona, his disciple, is thinking, "I am filled with energy, yet my heart is not yet free," and goes to speak to the Buddha, saying, "Can you assist me?"

The Buddha said, "Tell me, Sona, were you not a player of the lute, skilled in playing music?"

"Yes, I was, sir."

"And tell me, when the strings of the lute were too taut, was the lute tuneful and easily played?"

"It was not."

"And when the strings were too loose, was it then tuneful or easily playable?"

"Again, it was not, sir."

"But when the strings of your lute were tuned neither too tight nor too loose, but to the perfect pitch, then did your lute not have a wondrous sound that was easily playable and pleasing to the ears and hearts of those around?"

"Indeed it was." And so that was the instruction he was given in meditation.

We need to be wise about wise effort. What it asks of us, in some way, is an impeccability, a courage, a willingness to take the difficulties of life and make them into the place of compassion and wakefulness. But it also requires constancy, a steadiness, and a kindness or mercy, because awakening doesn't come by wrenching the heart open. Flowers don't open by pulling on the petals.

A Japanese proverb puts it this way: one kind word can warm three winters' months. Even a moment of kindness can make all the difference. There you are struggling, whether it's in meditation or in work or in a relationship, and just the moment of bringing that tenderness can transform it all.

So there's a paradox. One way of understanding wise effort is as a development, a practice to nourish, to let go, to abandon, to purify, to cleanse, to plant seeds, to become better. We do that and it's helpful. But this places it in time.

The second dimension of wise effort is that which is timeless. A young man came to a Zen master, very avid, the way only young men can be, and said, "I'm here and I'm going to really practice. How long will it take to attain enlightenment?"

The Zen master took the measure of the fellow and said, "Ten years."

"Ten years? What if I really give myself to it, really work at it?"

The Zen master said, "In that case, twenty years."

The young man protested, "Wait a second, that's not right. Why did you double it? I mean, if I really do it..."

And the Zen master said, "Ah yes, in your case, it might take thirty."

It's not about grasping or becoming something.

It is about the end of grasping, to be with what is true.

Remember this passage from Krishnamurti: "When the mind is still, silent, open, neither seeking nor resisting, then it is possible to see what is true. And it is the truth that liberates and not your efforts to be free."

Sacred effort is the effort to open and be aware of what is true. What we seek is what we are.

There's a longing for home, a longing for approval. The universe obviously approves of you—that's why you're here.

The traditional image is of this old pot that's being used by some homeless person. It was a beggar in the old Indian story, but it's a homeless person now on the streets of San Francisco or San Rafael or Berkeley, begging with this old pot. And then someone sees it and gives the beggar a little bit of money and sells it at auction. And it's this priceless antique. It's not what's in it that matters, but the pot itself. And we are the pot. We forget who we really are.

The sage Ramana Maharshi says, "There's no greater joke than this, that being the reality ourselves, we seek to gain reality. We think that there is something binding our reality and that it must be destroyed before reality is gained. It is ridiculous. The day will dawn when you yourself will laugh at all your efforts to be free and simply let go, and that which is on the day of laughter is also now."

In a much simpler way, everybody knows the old story of the Hasidic rabbi. A man came to see him, one of his disciples, and said, "I have a great unhappiness where I live, in my house. It is too crowded. It's too busy. The people are getting on my nerves. I don't know how to live with all this. It's terrible. What should I do, Rabbi? How do I live a quiet, contented life?"

And the rabbi said, "Have you any animals that you keep?" It was a village, of course.

"We have some chickens and a pig, yes. We have two goats out in the yard. And then, of course, the donkey I use."

"Well, it's quite simple, my friend. I give you a prescription. Bring the chickens, the goat, the pig, and the donkey into your house. Bring them in and have them live with you."

And so, of course, the man did. However bad it was before, it became dirty, smelly, raucous, horrible. And the master said, "We have to do this." This is sort of like, take two aspirin and call me next week, right? "Bring them in the house and visit me in a week."

The man came back. "Oh, it's horrible. I can't sit. However bad it was, it is so much worse now. What are you having me do this for? Oh, Master, why did you make me do this? It's so terrible."

The master said, "All right, now take them out."

So the man went home. Chickens in the yard, goat in the backyard, donkey tied up where it belongs, the pig back in the pen. He came back to visit the master a day or two later. The master said, "How is it at home?"

He said, "Oh, Master, it is so quiet. It is so spacious. It is so easy."

We go around looking for something that we don't have and not wanting to be with what we have.

My teacher, Nisargadatta, used to shake his head. He said all the time, "You are wanting what you don't have and not wanting what you have. If you wish to be enlightened, it's so simple—just reverse it. Why not want what you have and not want what you don't have? You could be free."

There is a simplicity and a balance in this wise effort. Not straining, not retreating from the world, being with just this much—that was my teacher's phrase, Ajahn Chah: "Just this much." This moment as it is. The suffering of this moment—to awaken to it, to bow to it, to give it its respect. The joy of this moment, the beauty of this moment—to bow to it, to give it its respect, to honor it. To be with things as they are. So simple.

The Gettysburg Address: 226 words. The 23rd Psalm: 118 words. The Sutra of the Buddha on the nature of selflessness, which was given and a thousand people sitting around him became enlightened: 86 words. The U.S. Government Department of Agriculture pricing directives for broccoli: 16,539 words.

Wisdom is really a simple thing. Love is really a simple thing, isn't it? Either it's here or it's not. It's that simple. Either the heart is open or we're frightened.

There is a simplicity and balance in wise effort—not by strain, nor by retreating from the world, but by taking the seat in the center of all things. As the Buddha: "O nobly born, you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas, of good families, remember who you are, moment by moment."

And then from this simplicity we respond. In the spring we plant seeds, in the fall we harvest. When there are people who are hungry, we try to feed them. And when there's injustice, we do our best to help.

Notice, if you will, in your own work—with your boss or your employees or with money. Notice in your family, with your parents or your children, in your love relationship. Notice in your meditation with your own breath or body or mind. Pay attention. When is it too tight? When are you really struggling? Too ambitious, entangled, caught up, too much judgment. It's pretty clear. It doesn't take but a moment to notice that.

And notice in your work or family or love relationship or money or meditation when it's too loose, when you give up, when you're without dedication, depressed, doubtful. Just notice that. And take a breath and then come back to that center, because we know

inside this ground of nobility. Unclench the heart. Steady yourself. Be present for things as they are. And then your activity becomes an expression of your awakening. It becomes a vehicle for the Tao.

And we all know this sometimes—you know it. I mean, you hear about it as the perfect game that some tennis player or basketball player describes. But you all know it, the perfect piece of music where the music just became the players and the players the music. We all know it. It's so simple.

From the *Tao Te Ching*: "If you open yourself to the Tao, you are at one with the Tao, you can embody it completely. If you open yourself to loss, you are at one with loss, you can accept it completely. If you open yourself to insight, you are at one with insight, you can use it completely. Open yourself to the Tao, to the way things are. Then trust your heart's response and everything will fall into place."

Or another: "Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill. Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt. Chase after money and security and your heart will never unclench. Care about people's approval and you will be in their power. Do your work, then step back—the true path to serenity."

When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everyone will respect you, and the Tao fulfills itself.

There's something mysterious about this effort or energy in spiritual practice. Yes, there's a part of dedication—purifying, abandoning things that are harmful, nourishing things that are good, changing and serving. But there's another part in which it really does it itself. All we have to do is love and be present.

"The bee gathers nectar and perfume from the flower without marring its beauty," says the Buddha. So the wise one learns to wander through this world bringing harm to none and blessing to all. And in the end, right effort is not about fixing ourselves or the human realm, but being with and seeing the world as it is—and loving it, caring for it as it is.

There's an old Apache story that Michael Meade told. The Apaches of the White Mountains tell of an old woman—the oldest woman, the grandmother, the great-grandmother—who lives far away in a cave, a mysterious cave where they haven't yet built roads into that part of the wilderness. And in fact, President Clinton signed an order saying there should not be roads built into the old woman's wilderness, I'm happy to say. She's been in that cave since the beginning of the world. Maybe she is the world.

This old great-grandmother is weaving, and on her loom she weaves a great cloak—the most luminous and radiant imaginable piece of fabric. Its radiance matches the world. She sits there and slowly weaves and spins and puts the most beautiful colors into this rainbow cloak. Then she starts to work on the edges. Into the fringes she ties eagle feathers and porcupine quills, fresh branches from the willow trees, and weaves them in.

But every once in a while she has to get up from her loom, this old woman who weaves the world, and go over to stir her big pot. You know, the great grandmothers also have the pot that cooks everything nourishing in the world. So she has to stir the pot that brings nourishment to all.

And as she's stirring, there's an old black dog lying by the fire. It gets up while she's stirring and walks over to where she's weaving, grabs the porcupine quills and the eagle feathers and the fresh willow branches, and pulls out all her weaving. Then she has to go back and start weaving it all over again.

Now the old ones, the elders who tell this story and who love the grandmother and the great-grandmother who made the world, also love the old black dog—because he's equally strange and mysterious as the woman. And the elders who tell this story say that it's possible that if this old woman ever finishes weaving the cloak of radiance, that will be the end of the world. So sometimes it is the old black dogs—troublesome, pulling things apart, making things more difficult—that are the very things keeping us alive and keeping the blessings of this world unfolding in the most amazing and creative ways.

The idea in the deepest place of this wise energy or wise effort is not to fix this world, because it's far too mysterious for that. But to see it as it is—the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, the weaving of beauty and suffering, the unbearable sorrows and the unspeakable beauty, the mystery of it—to see it as it is and to offer your compassion. Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to bring awakening to them all.

Let's sit for a minute. As you sit, a little reflection—just the tuning of your lute. Reflect on the key places in your life where it might be time to loosen the strings a little, to let go, to not grasp so much. You can know what they are. Then let yourself reflect and remember those places where your lute is too loose and you need dedication, impeccability, more care, more alive energy. Remember that you have this capacity to tune your instrument so that beautiful music comes even in difficulty. There can be wisdom and compassion. Do you think there could be a world without trouble?

Over the past eight weeks, we have gone through the fundamental Buddhist teachings of the Eightfold Path—a path laid out in the very first teachings of the Buddha, also called the Middle Path, the path of perfect balance between detachment and attachment. Neither detached nor attached, but perfectly in the midst of things as they are. This path is an invitation for those who would follow it to discover a liberation of heart.

It begins with what's called right or wise understanding: to see suffering and its causes in the world, and to see the possibility in our own hearts of greater compassion and greater freedom—to know that this is possible in us. Then wise aspiration, which is the openness and intention to direct our lives toward this possibility of freedom and compassion. Then right speech, right action, right livelihood—living in words and deeds, in conduct that creates harmony inwardly and outwardly. And then right or wise effort, which is really the effort to pay attention, to be where we are in a full and present and wakeful way, to see when we're entangled and to release that.

Last week I spoke of the two final steps of the Eightfold Path: wise concentration and wise mindfulness. Having spoken of concentration, tonight we conclude with right mindfulness—or wise mindfulness.

Mindfulness is better understood as fullness of mind. Sati is the word in the ancient Buddhist language of Pali. "Mindfulness," said the Buddha, "I declare to be all helpful." In every situation, the quality of mindfulness—of listening, of awareness, of remembering, of what one might call a sacred attention to life—is what brings us to awakening.

The art of living, as Alan Watts said, is neither careless drifting on the one hand nor fearful clinging on the other. It consists in being completely sensitive to each moment, regarding it as utterly new and unique, having the mind and heart open and truly receptive. This is the quality of mindfulness.

Now, if we look at our lives—our daily experience with the people around us, where we live, where we work, how we move—we discover as human beings that we can be asleep while we're awake. You know the life that's on automatic pilot. We can be identified and caught up with things, entangled in them, grasping for pleasures over and over, avoiding what's unpleasant. And we can be asleep in relation to our own bodies, not attentive or aware. Asleep in relation to our feelings, to our children, or our lovers, or our parents. We can be asleep to the injustices of the world, to the war, or racism, or hunger, the needs of those around us. All of that we can just block out—or we can pay attention.

I remember some years ago being at the Menninger Foundation in Kansas, invited to an international conference on the nature of consciousness. There were all these presentations by various psychologists and psychiatrists and religious experts about the nature of mind. And finally it was time for one of the invitees to address the group. His name was Mad Bear. He was an Iroquois Indian medicine man. And he said, "I can't speak in here. Come with me."

He led the whole group outside. We were in this retreat center in the midst of the Great Plains of Kansas. He had us stand in a circle and first just stand silent for a long time. And then, after that great silence under this huge Midwestern sky, vast, surrounded by the grains that just went out to the horizon, he began to offer a prayer—a prayer of gratitude.

He thanked first the earthworms for aerating the soil so that the plants could grow. Then he thanked the grasses that cover the earth for keeping the dust from blowing, for cushioning our steps, for showing our eyes their greenness and beauty, and for nourishing the creatures that live on them. He thanked the wind for bringing rain, for cleaning the air, for giving us the life breath that connects us to all things. Then he thanked the trees for cradling the birds, for granting us shade, for filling the air that the winds carry with sweet oxygen that fills our bodies and refreshes us. He thanked the stones for the foundation they give under our feet, for the steps of our life—the stones for remembering the ancestors, for holding the memories of human beings. He thanked the birds for singing to us, for showing us that the spirit can fly, for singing when we're happy and for singing when we're sad and keeping singing anyway.

And he went on and on, probably an hour of prayers while we stood out there. The wind was blowing on our faces, the sun was beating down, the insects—it was summertime—were making all their buzzing noises, the grain was blowing. And by the end of it, the whole conference was in an entirely different place than all those scientific words about consciousness. They were kind of erased and swept away. What it was, was a practice of mindfulness—the mindfulness of sacred attention.

In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is said to be the gateway to liberation, the gateway to that which is eternal, to the timeless, to the deathless. When we get entangled in our thoughts, in our worries, in our imaginings, in our fears—the author and psychiatrist Robert Hallowell finds that most people call themselves moderate to severe worriers in America; I don't know who he's talking about, but you can guess—when we get entangled in all these imaginings of how it's supposed to be and could be, the feelings and fears and thoughts, mindfulness allows us to let go of that and come into the reality of the present.

As the Buddha said, do not pursue the past, and do not lose yourself in the future. Rest where you are, here and now. The past no longer exists. The future is yet to come. And in this present moment you will find the freedom that is who you really are.

So mindfulness is the practice of being here in the present wherever we are. The poem that you've heard many times, but it captures it so well it's worth another reading, from Rumi:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival—a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all, even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture. Still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

When Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, has come to teach at Spirit Rock, he usually arrives in the summer, and we've had two or three thousand people gathered out on the hillside for his presence. They'll do some chanting, some meditation, perhaps a meditation of eating an apple or an orange mindfully. He's kind of the king of mindfulness, in a way. Everyone's sitting there, happy, chattering away. It's somewhat like a Grateful Dead concert, only quieter.

And all of a sudden it's time—not for Jerry Garcia, but for Thich Nhat Hanh to come on. He's usually somewhere meditating, or whatever he does. And he comes out to these two or three thousand people sitting there, and Thich Nhat Hanh walks out, taking each step so mindfully. He looks up so mindfully, smiles so mindfully, sits down so mindfully, takes the microphone so mindfully, then closes his eyes and breathes a little bit so mindfully—and everybody changes. He doesn't even have to say a word. Just by the way he walks in, the quality of attention he gives to his steps, to his body, to the earth, transforms the whole environment of everyone else's consciousness. This is what it means to really pay attention to the body.

When we do pay attention, instead of fighting against the body and wanting it to be different, instead of being filled with desire and aversion and lost in things, the more deeply we attend, the more we can honor the body and care for it properly. And the more we also see that it is always in change.

You sit in meditation and your body hurts. There's a pain. You say, "Oh, that's pain. I want to get rid of it." You move. You go away from it.

But pain is just a word. What is pain? You pay attention. Oh, it's tingling, it's throbbing, it's vibration, it's heat, it's fire, it's twisting. And the more deeply we pay attention, pain becomes a whole world, a river of sensations.

And pleasure—oh, this is joy. But what does joy feel like in the body? Some of us are afraid of joy. Oh, I expand. There's a different kind of tingling. There's pleasure, there's light, there's ease. We have the names for things, but the more deeply we feel, we discover that what we are is a river of life, and we can enter and rest in that river.

Also, as you pay attention, when you feel the pain or the feelings or the joy, after a while you begin to realize that it's not just your pain, and it's not just your joy or happiness, and it's not just your feelings, but it's the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings. It's the feelings, it's the pain that human beings have, it's the joy that human beings share. It is the life that we have been given.

To be mindful of the body brings us freedom. Freedom to be where we are, freedom to care with compassion, and also freedom not to be afraid of this body for what it is. To be mindful of feelings is the same.

To practice mindfulness of body in the body, to practice mindfulness of feeling in the feeling, means to be aware of what we feel without reacting so much. When we're not aware and pleasant arises, we tend to say, "Oh, pleasant, I want more of it." We cling, we grasp, we want more and more and more. When unpleasant arises and we're not aware, we tend to withdraw and shrink away and move. "Oh, aversion, I don't like this. How do I get rid of it?" And so we spend our lives trying to avoid half of life and trying to grasp the other half, all the time off balance.

When we become aware of feelings—pleasant, neutral, unpleasant, the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows—then we are free. Without awareness of body, without awareness of feelings, we cannot be present, we cannot be free.

So you sit or walk in meditation, and love comes or pride comes or delight comes or worry comes or grief comes. Someone said that in some way, to really be free, spiritual life is a long process of grieving—of seeing all the ways that we wanted it to be, and then realizing that it is the way that it is.

Some years ago in New York City, there was a professional seminar given by the senior analysts of the Jung Institute, together with Marie-Louise von Franz, who made a series of wonderful movies about the nature of dreams—one of Jung's great disciples. This panel of analysts sat up there, and after the films, they were going to answer questions about dream work. The audience sent up little cards with all their dreams written out on them.

After a few questions, the main analyst picked up a card that told the story of a recurring dream in which the dreamer was tortured and put through the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps, stripped of all their human dignity. One of the analysts read this dream out loud. This story is being told by a psychologist who attended the conference. She said, "I thought, well, I wonder how they're going to respond to that. The dream could speak about so much of this woman's own childhood, because it was a younger woman, and all that it might portend in her life."

Once the dream was read, there were no explanations given. Instead, Carl Jung's grandson stood up and said, "Would you all please rise?" And so the whole room of people rose, and he said, "We will stand for one minute in silence in response to this dream." And then everyone was invited to sit back down, and they went on to the next card and the next dream.

The psychologist in the audience was frustrated because she had all these interpretations and ideas—why didn't they do anything with this dream? Finally, someone raised their hand and said, "Doctor, why is it that none of you analysts had anything to say about the dream of this woman?" And Carl Jung's grandson stood up and said, "There is in life a vulnerability so extreme, a suffering so unspeakable, that it goes beyond words. In the face of such suffering, all we can do is stand together in witness, so no one need bear it alone."

To become truly mindful of our birth and our aging and our death, of our joys and our sorrows, means to allow the grief of human existence, the suffering that inhabits this realm—and the joy equally.

The poet Ryokan, the most beloved Zen poet of Japan:

Spring has begun.
Jewels and precious gold everywhere.
Please come visit me—
only two in the garden:
plum blossoms at their peak
and an old man full of years.

How can we ever lose interest in life?
Spring has come again.
The mountains are covered with mist and blooming cherry trees.
Gaily the warm spring days pass.
The children run to greet me the first time this spring—
how they have grown.

So here is the grief and the sorrows and the joys. We become aware of the body as this human body in its true nature—birth, aging, death, the senses, the life of the body. We become aware of the feelings, feelings in the feelings. We become free when we practice mindfulness of the mind.

The mind is such an amazing thing, especially the thought mind. We have picture thoughts and word thoughts. Sometimes on a meditation retreat, I'll have people count their thoughts. See how many thoughts you can count in one sitting. Hundreds of thoughts. It's phenomenal how many thoughts come trooping through. Thought is a wonderful servant. It is a very poor master.

Lama Yeshe puts it this way: "To become your own psychologist, you don't have to learn some big philosophy or go to graduate school. All you have to do is examine your own mind. You already examine material things every day. Every morning you check out what food is found in your kitchen, but you never investigate your own mind. Checking out what's in your mind is more helpful."

What you begin to discover as you pay attention to the mind is that the mind has no pride. It will do anything. It tells phenomenal stories. It's full of ideas and plans and memories and opinions. And the reality of your experience is not the same as your thoughts of it. The invitation of mindfulness is to come into the reality. The thought of your mother is not your mother, right? They are different things. But you have this thought and then a whole huge story comes.

The Zen ancestor says, "The great way is not difficult for those who do not cling to their opinions, who can see things as they are." In our mind are so many ideas about how the world is supposed to be.

Here's a story for you. One day, the manager of a store heard his salesman say, "No, ma'am, we haven't had any for weeks now, and it doesn't look like we'll be getting any soon." Horrified, the manager rushed over, took the arm of the woman, and said, "That isn't true, ma'am. Of course we'll have some soon. We placed an order for it a couple of weeks ago." Then he grabbed the salesman, dragged him to the side, and growled, "Never, never, never say we don't have something. If we don't have it, say we've ordered it and it's on its way. Now—what was it that she wanted?"

"Rain," he answered.

The poet Hafiz talks about ending your mental lawsuits. Chögyam Trungpa talks about stepping out of the bureaucracy of ego, which is all the constructs that we make about who we are and how it's supposed to be. Instead, with the mind observing the mind, seeing all the thought constructions—which is what the mind does; it just

secretes thoughts. It's an organ that secretes things. It secretes thoughts and you say, "Oh, that's very interesting. There's a happy thought or a sad thought or whatever." Don't believe it. I mean, it's very unreliable. I'm sure you've noticed that already. With the mind becoming aware of the mind, tremendous freedom comes when we're not identified with the mind.

And then, mindfulness of the dharmas. From Krishnamurti: "Dharma is the word that means the laws, the way things are, the truth. To understand truth, one must have a very sharp, precise, clear mind—not a cunning mind nor an ambitious mind, but a mind that is capable of looking without distortion, a mind that is innocent, open, vulnerable. Only such a mind can see what is true."

Learning, deep learning, is a radical openness to this moment, and this, and this. The invitation again is to see the Dharma in the dharmas, to see the laws of things in our direct experience. The Buddha goes on to describe how we notice when the mind is expanded, notice when it's contracted, notice when the mind and body and heart are entangled, notice when they are free.

To allow ourselves to rest is the invitation. To rest in the space of pure awareness. To swim in it. To relax in mindfulness.

To become aware of consciousness itself. Because as you start to see thoughts come and go, and feelings changing like the weather, and sensations of the body rising and passing, and days and nights coming and going, the body and mind doing what they do—from the place of awareness, it can feel like, okay, I'm the witness. I'm the one who sees all of this. It's a certain step to sense that.

But then, if you turn your awareness back to say, well, who is this witness? Who am I who's looking? Look for a moment. See, who is it that's listening just now? When you look really directly, you begin to discover that nobody's listening. That there's nobody there. What you find is openness, is space, is a consciousness that is knowing without a single person being there. Not me or mine—this is my sound, this is my feeling—but just a pure, open awareness.

And this freedom that is discovered by all who look comes in any moment. We realize, oh, I took it all to be mine. I took it all very seriously.

Here are the words of the Buddha: "When body and mind dissolve, they do not exist anywhere, any more than musical notes lay heaped up anywhere. When a lute is played, there is no previous store of sound, and when the music ceases, it does not go anywhere in space. It came into existence on account of the wood and the structure of the instrument and the exertions of the performer, and as it came into existence, so it

passes away. In exactly the same way, all the elements of your own being—physical, feelings, perceptions, mental—come into existence having not been existent, arise due to certain causes, and then pass away. There is no self residing in body and mind. But the cooperation of all these co-formations produces what people think is me or mine. Paradoxical though it may seem, there is a path to walk on but no one there who travels it. There are deeds being done but no one who can claim them. There is the blowing of the air, but there is no wind person who blows it. The thought of who you are, of this self, is an error, an artifact. And as you pay deep attention, all existence becomes hollow as a bubble, as an echo, a rainbow, a flash of lightning in the summer cloud, a dream."

This is not a philosophy that someone is supposed to believe or not believe. It is really an invitation to look into this human experience. Where is your childhood? It is gone. What happened to the twentieth century? Went out with a bang, more or less, right? Gone. Never to happen again. I mean, it was quite a century, remember that? All that's left is just an imagination. It is gone. This moment is here, and then it is gone. Reality comes out of nothing, exists according to certain patterns, and then disappears. To know this frees us. To not know it, we are bound.

It brings us face to face with the mystery. Mindfulness could also be called, as one Zen master called it, "don't know mind." Not knowing, not claiming. And there's a real happiness in not knowing. Who are you? I don't know. I mean, yes, I know my zip code and my phone number, but who are you really? I don't know. Oh, well, how about being in that not knowing? It's wonderful to meet somebody who's open like that. And the masters that I most loved, the ones that I studied with, they were so joyful.

And it wasn't by being something—"I'm an important master." They were just present and happy. They didn't cling to being someone. They were just alive.

To train in mindfulness is to remind the heart and mind that we can be free. And it brings a wonderful balance. We stop the struggle the minute we become mindful. You know, there you are with your teenager, or with your partner, or whatever it happens to be. And you're all conflicted about something. And then in a moment, with mindful attention, you can say, "Wow, I'm really caught in this, aren't I? Really caught in that one." And in just that moment's attention, like a bubble—"Oh, I really wanted it to be that way. I hated that. I could never forgive that." Oh, I was really caught in there. And then it's gone.

You're sitting in meditation and your knee begins to ache and your back hurts and you're like, "I'm getting older and God, what's going to happen?" And then you start to worry about your money and pretty soon you're a shopping bag lady out on the streets. It's only five minutes from when your knee began to hurt and you have this whole life scenario. And then you wake up and you say, "Caught in that one, wasn't I?"

Zen Master Ryokan never preached to or reprimanded anyone. Once his brother asked Ryokan to visit his house and speak to his delinquent teenage son. This is in the 1700s in Japan, just so you know that certain things are eternal. Ryokan came but did not say a word of admonition to the boy. He stayed overnight and prepared to leave the next morning. As the wayward nephew helped Ryokan place sandals on his feet, he felt a warm drop of water. Glancing up, he saw Ryokan looking down at him, his eyes full of tears. Ryokan returned home, and the nephew changed very much for the better.

There is a tenderness in this attention, a sweetness and compassion that comes because we're not trying to get or be something. We can see this person, this plant, this car that's moving in the traffic pattern that we're in, as they are now—and not with all our ideas and judgments and ambitions. It is so freeing.

And this liberation is both practical and radical. It's practical. You know the story I like to tell of the army officer who was studying meditation for stress reduction in his army unit. It happens now, you know. It's gone beyond these weird Buddhist places. Mainstream. So there he was in line at the grocery store with all these groceries, in a hurry—always in a hurry, trying to get somewhere—and very irritable. Then a woman in line in front of him, he noticed, had just one item and she wouldn't get in the express line. She was waiting in his line. Why didn't she go in the line that was meant for people like her? You know how it is. And then she got up to the cash register. She was carrying a baby and she handed the baby to the cashier, and they were cooing over it, you know, coochie-coo, nice baby. The guy was just going ballistic. "Hurry up, I'm in a hurry, you're in the wrong line, don't you see there are all these people," and so forth.

But because he'd begun to study mindfulness, he felt how much tension he was making, and he took some breaths. He just let all that frustration and anger soften a bit. And then he looked for a moment—he saw it was actually kind of a cute baby. So he gets to the cash register. He'd released all of that tension, or some of it, and he said, "You know, that was a really cute kid that she was carrying, that woman before me." And the cashier said, "Oh, did you like him? He's my son. You see, my husband was in the air force but he was killed in a plane crash this last year. So I've had to come to work and my mother takes care of our baby, but she brings him in once or twice a day so I can see him."

We have so many stories about who's doing what and how they're supposed to be. Liberation is so immediate. There we are, and then we can let go.

It's also quite radical. A poem from Wendell Berry called "The Mad Farmer's Manifesto"—which he is:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise, the vacation with pay. Want more of everything ready-made. Be afraid to know your neighbors and to die, and you will have a window in your head. Not even your future will be a mystery anymore.

Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer. When they want you to buy something, they will call you. When they want you to die for profit, they will let you know.

So, my friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and offer some to the poor. Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Ask questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you will not live to harvest. Put your faith in the two inches of soil that build under the trees every thousand years.

To become mindful is to become free, to have the capacity to step out of the rat race, the speed, the complexity, and be who we are, be true to our hearts. And there comes a great balance and ease with that. In any moment, we stop the war, we stop the conflict, we come back to be as the Buddha sits, as the Buddha walks, as the Buddha speaks—where we are, just present and alive. So simple, to be with things as they are.

A silly poem for you, from Bob Munson: Once upon a time, before time was invented, there was no daytime or nighttime. And yesterday, today, and tomorrow weren't here yet. There were no watches, clocks, sundials, no hours, minutes, days, seconds, years. There was no fast or slow. And everything just was the way it was when it was that way. And things happened in no time—they just happened when they did. Flowers bloomed when they did. Morning and evening just came and went.

Once upon that time there lived a frog who lived in no time. He wasn't fast or slow. When he jumped, he jumped, and when he didn't, he didn't. He got to where he was going in no time, because in no time it took no time to get anywhere. And anywhere was everywhere, so he was really where he wanted to be all the time. And he was always on time wherever he went. He got where he was going before he left. He didn't have to rush or hurry because in no time he could never be late. Wouldn't that be fine, to live in no time and be where you are all the time?

It's really natural to us. This is not foreign. It's as near to us as our own breath, as near to us as our own body. And when we practice mindfulness, we come alive. Our bodies come alive, our senses. Our food tastes different because we actually taste it. The people around us—their eyes, their spirits—are alive for us. Our words become more alive. The clouds and the earthworms, as Mad Bear said, our silence is more alive. We're present when we come, we're present when we go. We're aware of birth and we're aware of death, of joys and sorrows. We enter that which is timeless.

What a gift. Even a few moments a day is great. Practice is not to make perfect, but to remember that freedom is possible where we are, that our heart can open in this very life, in this very moment. The body in the body, the feelings in the feeling, the thoughts in the thoughts. You discover the body lives its own life. The feelings feel themselves. The thoughts think themselves.

So we see it in meditation. It's really just a little reminder, a reminding meditation. We feel the breath and the mind quiets and the heart opens. And things start to open up—all the things that come and go.

My teacher Nisargadatta used to talk about it this way. He said, usually we only see a small distance bound by our desires for what we like, our ambitions, and our fears and dislikes of what's wrong with this world. We create a net that entangles us, confines and limits our consciousness.

This is not who we are. To free ourselves, it is necessary to look beyond the net. And yet it is simple, for the net is full of holes. Any moment we look, any moment we bring mindfulness to, there is space, there is openness. We are not entangled and identified. And there is a tremendous joy in discovering this and remembering this.

Mindfulness is something like Sabbath. Six days you work and then you get a day off. Actually, in the Old Testament as it was written, not only was there a Sabbath every seventh day where you got to rest and simply appreciate life and not have to do things, but every seventh year was a fallow year where things were not planted, and you got a whole year—a sabbatical. A year off. Doesn't that sound fine? And every seventh seventh year in the grand cycle, all property was returned to its original owners, all debts were forgiven. It was like Monopoly—we did it for forty-nine years, and now we go back to square one again. Isn't that great? Mindfulness is like that. It is the get-out-of-jail-free card. There is an ease, a graciousness when we remember this mindfulness or heartfulness, where we can bow to this life as it is with its joys and its sorrows.

And we somehow sense the small sense of self, the body of fear that we talk about, the ambitions and confusions. We remember that this is not really what it is about. It is not who we are. Like Zen Master Suzuki Roshi, when he was dying of cancer, called everyone together: "If when I die, if I suffer, that's all right, you know. That's just suffering Buddha. No confusion in it. Maybe everyone will suffer from the physical or spiritual agony. If when I die, if I suffer, that's all right, you know. That's just suffering Buddha. Moon Buddha, Sun Buddha, Happy Buddha, Sad Buddha." The way things are is what we are given to awaken to. Through mindfulness we can bow to what is and be free.

The words of the Dhammapada, the Buddha: "How can they lose the way who are beyond the way? Their eyes are open, their feet are free. Who can follow after them? For the one who is awake, attentive, mindful, the world cannot reclaim them or lead them astray, nor can the net of desires hold them. They are awake, even the gods delight in watching over them."

There is not one moment that you are far away from this freedom. O nobly born, it is said, O you who are the sons and daughters of the Buddha, remember your own true nature. Remember that you can awaken and be free. Remember the path of awakening, this Eightfold Path of wise understanding—the potential for liberation and compassion in your own being. Of wise intention—to bring your awareness and care just where you are. Of wise speech, action, and livelihood—to make the very words and deeds of your life the place of practice, the place of awakening. Of wise effort—the effort to stay awake and present. Of wise concentration—that wholeness of heart and body and mind when we come into the present. Of wise mindfulness—that ability to be present and let go into the great space of awareness that neither struggles nor resists but is free in the midst of all things.

"Just as if, my friends, one who was faring through the forest, through the great woods, should see an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by people of former days, even so have I, O monks, seen an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by the rightly enlightened ones of former times." And it is this road that I invite you to walk.

You cannot do it wrong, you know. Either you are present or you are not. Either you are awake or you have forgotten. And then a moment later—oh, here we are again. It is great. You cannot make a mistake in that way. The path is immediate. It is inviting. It is generous. You are invited to participate, to remember, to follow the path of the awakened ones, to develop the heart of compassion, to quiet the mind, open the heart, to taste your own freedom.

I end with a little chant. And this chant is an offering of gratitude and appreciation for your attention over these weeks, and for the care that so many people in this room give to their lives and to those around them.

Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu, sabbe sattā averā hontu, sabbe sattā anīghā hontu, sukhī attānaṃ pariharantu.

Sukhitā kayena, kobhā abhivādanā, sīlena saṃyutto bhavatu, dhammaṃ carantu, āyu vaṇṇo sukhaṃ balaṃ.

This talk was given by Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in March 1992.

CHAPTER 225

Five Spiritual Faculties: Effort

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses right effort (sammā vāyāma), noting that the Buddha spoke more about this topic than any other—even more than nibbāna, jhāna, or vipassanā. This frequency points to the universal difficulty practitioners face in establishing balanced energy in practice. Wilson identifies five elements of right effort: confidence (saddhā), health, sincerity, energy (vīriya), and wisdom (paññā), exploring how each supports sustainable practice.*
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> *Drawing from personal experiences—including her early overconfident enthusiasm and lessons learned attending her stepdaughter's track meet—Wilson illustrates how right effort requires patience, perseverance, and letting go of expectations. She emphasizes that balanced effort is not about pushing to extremes or comparing ourselves to stories of accomplished practitioners, but about finding our own edge and taking just one step beyond it. The talk addresses common pitfalls: biting off more than we can chew, inconsistent practice that swings between intense effort and collapse, and keeping "one eye on the goal" rather than attending to the present step.*
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> *Wilson offers practical techniques for working with difficulty, such as asking "Can I be with this for five more seconds?" She emphasizes that mindfulness requires surprisingly little energy—what matters is the precision of attention, not its intensity. The teaching concludes with a Zen story suggesting that enlightenment may not be something we chase, but something that catches up with us when we learn to be still.*

It's been said that more than any other topic in all of the Buddha's teachings, the Buddha spoke on the topic of right effort or balanced effort. More than nibbana, more than jhana, more than vipassana, he talked about right effort. And that points, to me, to the difficulty of establishing a right relationship to effort or energy in our practice.

In all my years of hearing the teachings, practicing myself, and the readings that I have done, there seem to be some conclusions that I and others are able to draw from all of this talk about right effort.

The first is that most everyone struggles to find a place of balance in right effort. However, secondly, the imbalances create the most colorful stories. And the third conclusion is that there's no consensus on what right effort is.

So we are left with having to find our own way. Having to find really what is balanced effort—what is the balance for us given our conditions right now. We can hear stories of famous Zen monks and monks or nuns at the time of the Buddha or even our own teachers, and we think, "My God, I can't do that." And sure enough, you can't. That was theirs. That was their experience of wrong effort or balanced effort. And you'll find your own. In time, I'm sure you'll be able to tell the horror stories of your wrong effort and entertain people.

I got a good lesson in right effort when I first met Kamala and came to Maui to take up residence together. Kamala's daughter was then thirteen, Therese, and she was just going into high school. She went out for the track team, and wanting to be a good parent, I said, "Well, let us know when your first track meet is, and we'll come." So she told us when the first track meet was—it started at four o'clock in the afternoon.

We went, got there early, and walked up into the cement bleachers to sit down. You know how the first meet of the season goes: it's very unorganized, pretty chaotic, and you have a hard time following just exactly what's happening. We sat there and finally located Therese on the field doing her warm-ups—running and jumping and doing things like that. We saw a few people that we knew and talked to them a little bit, and started shifting around in our seats because the cement bleachers were so hard.

An hour went by. They'd gotten started on some of the events, but nothing that Therese was in yet. So we called her over to the fence. "Hey, how's it going?" "Oh, okay." We noticed that even though she wasn't competing at the time, she would always look to us every five minutes or so to see if we were paying attention. So we had to pay attention. We were interested—we wanted to be interested—but cement bleachers are hard.

Five o'clock came and went, and five-thirty came and went, and six o'clock came. We'd been there for two hours, and Therese was still doing her warm-ups and prancing around on the field and looking at us every five minutes. And we're paying attention, being very patient and persevering.

Six-thirty came and went, and seven o'clock came and went. Now it had been three hours past our dinner time, and we had canceled everything else we thought we were going to do that evening, and we were still waiting. Seven-thirty came and went. They said, "Oh, that's the end of the meet."

We said, "Well, Therese, what's happening? When are you going to do your thing?"

She said, "Gee, I don't know." So she went and asked the coach. They had forgotten to call her event.

They said, "Oh, wait, wait, we've got to do the last event. It's the triple jump for the girls." So they got the six or eight girls that were going to do this triple jump—you get three tries. They're all warming up and doing their thing, and then it's Therese's turn. She gets ready, she lines up, and then she runs. She runs, and she does her hop, skip, and jump.

It takes about three seconds. Got that done. And then they run through the second trial, and that takes about four seconds. And then she does the third trial, and that takes another four seconds. So the grand total time of her participation or competition was a little less than a minute, and we sat on those bleachers for about three and a half hours.

It was a lesson in how to pay attention, how to be present, how to really sustain your interest, how to manifest your thought. You think you're interested, and then you meet conditions. Hello. Welcome to the real world.

Well, I learned the value of persevering, of course, because Therese was keeping a close eye on us, making sure we were paying attention. I certainly had to let go of my expectations, because I didn't expect that at all. I finally had to give up my judgment of the officials and my blaming of them. And what I found after a couple of hours was that there's actually quite a lot going on that you can enjoy. There are all kinds of other events and sideshows and people doing all sorts of things, even if what you came for isn't happening.

Practice is a lot like that. You've got to show up, you've got to be interested, you've got to pay attention, even if nothing's happening. And it's helpful to let go of your expectations. And it's really instructive to pay attention to the sideshow, because that's where everything's happening.

So tonight I want to talk about how we can try to find this place of right effort, right energy, right attitude, really, to our practice. And I want to put it in the context of the five spiritual or controlling faculties that I spoke about last week.

The five controlling faculties, as you remember, are confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. When we have some degree of confidence, when we feel some degree of assurance, trust, devotion, confidence—we are willing to make the effort. As we make the effort, we become more mindful. As we undertake dharma practices or mindfulness practices of any sort, we become more mindful. The continuity of that mindful awareness deepens concentration. It collects the mind. It calms the mind. It focuses the mind on the present moment. As the mind gets concentrated, collected,

calmed, focused, we see more of what's happening. We see more details in this moment. We have an expansive vision. We have more understanding, really, of what's going on. This understanding is the development of wisdom.

The more we know about practice, the more we know about ourselves in practice, the more we know about our strengths and limitations in practice, the more confidence we can have. Understanding is the support for increased confidence, trust, faith, devotion to practice. And this development of these five qualities of mind, or these five factors of mind, gradually and incrementally supports each other and increases throughout our days and years of practice.

So I spoke about confidence, trust, faith earlier, and tonight I want to speak about energy or effort. There are five elements to right effort. Confidence is one, of course. Without it, we don't begin. But confidence alone is not enough. We also must be reasonably healthy in order to undertake practice. Health is the second factor. The sincerity of our practice is a third. Confidence, health, sincerity, energy, and understanding or wisdom. These are the five elements of right effort, and I want to speak about each of them a little bit.

The interesting thing about confidence, the first element, is that confidence is not based on, is not dependent on, what you actually know from the books. It's not based on intellectual knowledge. You can know everything in the books and have no confidence or faith to practice. Or, on the other hand, you can have no understanding of the books and have a lot of confidence, a lot of trust in yourself or the path of practice. And that was my experience.

I mentioned that after one retreat, I went to the Meditation Center of Massachusetts and joined the staff. I'd only done one two-week retreat, and one of the first days of my tenure there, I was up in the attic insulating the ceilings of the dormitory rooms with another person on staff, Rodney Smith, who is now also teaching in Seattle. We were having a discussion about the Dharma and our practice and Nibbana, of all topics, and I said to him, out of my enthusiasm and naivety, "I have absolutely no doubt that in this lifetime I will realize profoundly the Dharma." I also had no idea what I was saying. But I had that level of confidence. I had that level of enthusiasm and trust and just self-assurance—which was not yet confronted by reality.

And so when I suggested to Kamala that I give this talk tonight on right effort, she said, "Be sure to mention where you're coming from." Because sometimes it would be easy for me to give a talk on right effort wrongly—to really emphasize the striving, the playing the edge, pushing the edge, going over the edge. That kind of effort. And that's only part of the story. There are times we'll all do that. The hard part for me is talking

about the soft edge, the edge of balance, the edge of recognizing when you're pushing too hard and backing up, softening, letting the wisdom unfold that tells you it's time to back up. I have had a very hard time learning that lesson.

True confidence comes, though, with self-knowledge. When we truly know for ourselves, from our own experience, the nature of pain and how to deal with it, the nature of any of the hindrances—sleepiness, restlessness—and how to deal with them, this gives us a lot of confidence. When you can be with discomfort, when you can be with your hindrances for a period of time, it gives you a lot of self-confidence. It gives you a lot of self-knowledge that you can do it, you can be with this. And that kind of knowledge you don't get in a book. No teacher can tell you that. We can inspire you, inform you, entertain you, and try to get you to see that for yourself, but only by living through that experience will you know. Once you have lived through that experience, nobody can take that knowledge away. Nobody can tell you otherwise what you already know.

Doubts about ourselves, about practice, are not resolved by thinking or speculating, but only by practice. My teacher Sayadaw U Pandita used to say, at the end of my report when I would ask if I could ask a question, "If I let you ask this question and I answer it, you will have two questions for every answer I give you." But he said, "If you continue to practice, your practice will answer all your questions—if you can just be patient with the question." A lot of our doubt or lack of confidence is manifested as questions, when if we just practice, just extended our practice a little more, the answer would come.

Confidence is the foundation, the support, the cause for the willingness to make the effort. What effort is required? Some of you have just come to the retreat at its midpoint, and the first flavor of effort is really just getting here. Getting your whole body, your whole mind here. And kind of recovering from the deficiency of sleep, of energy, of interest. It's just getting ourselves back to a reasonable normal. Many of you come from traveling, from work, from stressful lives, and it takes quite a lot of rest, actually, for the first few days to be ready to practice.

But then there is a necessary adjustment once you've recovered some rest. There's an adjustment when you actually begin practice—I was going to say seriously, I mean continuously—when you arouse the intention to move towards fulfilling your aspiration by sustaining your energy, sustaining your attention. And that's really the effort of continuity, of just being there, just following the schedule, getting up with the bells, following the schedule, going through the motions, being willing to do that, fit the schedule.

Most of you who have been interviewing with me have noticed that I ask you: How's your sleeping situation? Are you sleeping okay? And your yogi job, is that okay? Not too stressful? Is the food okay for you? And the weather? Why do I ask that? It's not just to make conversation. It's because those are the conditions that will allow you to have good health—if you can sleep well, if you can get something to eat, and if the weather's suitable. And if you're healthy, if you come with reasonably good health or whatever level of health you have, these conditions support it.

Because if we're not healthy, if we're not well physically, if we're really sick, we don't have any energy for practice, or very little.

A woman who used to practice with us several years ago wrote me a letter telling me about what happened to her one day at work. She felt like she had a touch of cold coming on, maybe the flu, and she got in her car to drive home. She got home and became violently sick. Then she related this harrowing account of what happened over the next two or three weeks—a terrific fever, the most painful body nausea, aches and pains throughout her body, swelling. It was just unbelievable. Things in all her limbs were plugged in, taking things out and putting things in. As she called them, "the blood-take people" came and jabbed her every so often. It hurt like the devil. She was in such misery that all she wanted to do was die. She was hoping she would die because it was so painful, so miserable. And her mind was really driving her crazy too.

After a couple of weeks, the fever came down and she got stabilized to some degree. Then she had her first coherent thought. And what did she think of? She thought of yogis practicing on retreat. She said that's what inspired her to really come out of it, and she realized then how valuable her practice had been up to that point. She ended her letter by saying, "Whenever you're on retreat, tell those yogis: just practice, practice, practice. That's the most important thing, because you never know when your health is going to go."

What most surprised her was that when she was sick, when she was really not well, she didn't think about practice. She didn't care about practice. She didn't know anything about practice. All she wanted to do was die. But as soon as she got a little bit well, that was the first thing she thought of—doing her practice, doing more practice, encouraging others.

I've spoken about urgency in our practice. What moves us to be here at this retreat now? What moves us to make the efforts that we do? Why is it so important that now we're here practicing? What makes it urgent in your life?

Sometimes we have lofty urges—we want to get enlightened. Maybe we have a life-threatening disease. Maybe there's been a death in our family that's really shaken us up. Maybe we've been tremendously inspired by a Dharma teacher. We just have a lot of urgency. But sometimes that which brings urgency is really quite mundane, ordinary.

Once I was practicing in Thailand in the forest, in the jungle, and at this particular monastery we went for alms round at 6:30 in the morning. We got food from one village that raised tapioca, and mostly what we got in our alms bowl was tapioca and sticky rice—that was about it. Sometimes there was ground-up meat with herbs, but that was it, every day. It wasn't really very nourishing, but it was heavy. When you would eat at eight o'clock, you'd eat quite a lot, because by 8:30, that was it until eight o'clock the next day. And when you eat a lot of sticky rice, it feels like a bowling ball in your belly. You better not sit down or lay down for several hours.

So I would stand up in the shade of my kuti, which was up on stilts. In the jungle, you put things up on stilts so that the creepy crawlies don't come to bed with you. I was standing in the shade because the sun was up and it was hot. But the flies congregate in the shade. The monk's robes come down to about your knee, a little below your knee, and there are your bare legs and feet for the flies to play with. So I would keep a little tea towel in my hand, and I'd be standing, standing, standing, and then I'd feel this itchy crawling—flies crawling on my legs and feet—and I would flick it like a horsetail. They would fly up and off for a minute. Standing, standing, flick, flick. I would stand this way for two or three hours, just until I got my meal digested and could get a little more comfortable without falling asleep.

One day I was standing there and I felt something on my foot. It didn't feel like a fly. So I opened my eyes. You know what it's like after you eat a big meal—you're kind of dull, kind of lethargic, barely staying mindful. There was this snake going across my foot, and it was a big snake. Let me watch my musāvādā here—it was three or four feet. It was big. And I didn't have any problem with my urgency to practice. I felt a great spiritual urgency to be awake.

When I moved quickly, the snake took off, and it didn't go into the jungle. It went to the nearest tree and went up the tree.

Now I realized that the posts holding up my cabin were totally ineffective. If a snake can climb a tree, it can climb the post that my sleeping platform rested on. Sometimes our spiritual urgency comes in the most mundane ways.

But staying healthy, having good health—that's a condition for making right effort.

The third quality of right effort is sincerity. And it's important to consider what sincerity means, because all of us are here. We've made a lot of effort to get here, to be here. There's a certain sincerity in our wanting to be here, in coming here. And yet I'm sure you've discovered those times in your day when your practice is more casual than sincere, more just getting by than really making determined effort.

Sincerity refers to walking your talk. We want to practice. We want to be awakened. We want to be good yogis. We want to be diligent. We want to be worthy of the teaching. We want to be worthy of the efforts that everyone's making. And yet it's difficult to sustain that sincerity.

Sincerity really involves commitment. In the first month-long retreat we had here, there was a woman who was celebrating her twentieth anniversary of being in AA, right in the middle of the retreat. Twenty years of going to AA meetings every day, often two or three a day. I said to her, "Wow, that's quite a commitment you have to AA—to taking care of yourself and really getting a handle on this condition you have." She said, "Yes." I said, "It must get easier as you go on." She said, "No. Every day it's a decision. It's a recommitment every day to that decision made twenty years before."

And that's really how commitments are made—moment by moment. We don't make a commitment once and then say, "Oh, there, that's it. I've made a commitment to this practice. I've made a commitment to this relationship. I've made a commitment to this behavior or refraining from this behavior." And then it happens automatically. It doesn't work that way. Sustaining a commitment means reconfirming that decision, reconfirming that intention, moment after moment after moment. And yet it does build up a certain momentum, a certain quality of repetition and habit, and of course that provides a lot of support.

I mention this because it's important for us in practice to notice the times when our practice is less than sincere. You know how easy it is to start a bad habit? If you can get through the first time—all of the fear and the shame and the humiliation of doing it that first time—the second time comes easy. And so too with unskillful practice habits. If we allow ourselves to really hang out with unskillful practice habits, doing casual practice, insincere practice, just kind of drifting—and we know, we feel it—then it sets up a permission and the beginnings of a habit, which the more frequently we engage, the less likely we are to see it.

And so we want to see it. We want to see those times in our practice when we are less than sincere, so that we can catch that kind of practice and put it aside.

It takes a lot of willingness to stay in this practice. And I often ask you when you come to report on difficult experiences: Are you willing to look at it? Are you willing to open to it? Are you willing to be present with it? Are you willing to acknowledge it? Are you willing to feel it?

Practice is about being willing—at least willing. It's not overcoming. It's not defeating. It's not uprooting. It's not getting rid of. It's: Are you willing to put aside your fear, your inertia, your judgments of yourself, and to feel it, to open to it, to check it out?

Sincerity is really the quality of our intention and the continuity of our action. It's the only way that sincerity gets any grounding—through actually following through with our intention.

Confidence, health, sincerity. The fourth element of right effort is energy. And it's kind of paradoxical in this practice that we come and a lot of the instruction is to not do. We practice doing nothing—mindfully, with awareness. And that takes, as somebody said, a lot of energy not to do anything other than pay attention.

So what kind of energy are we talking about when we talk about energy for right effort? I talked about the energy of just settling in, overcoming your inertia, exhaustion, tiredness. I talked about the energy of sustaining your intention and attention on your primary objects, sustaining your willingness to just follow the schedule.

Another kind—or another quality, another quantum leap really—in energy comes when we meet difficulty, when we meet dukkha. Here we have two kinds of energy that we want to acknowledge. One is the energy of persevering, being willing to play the edge of what we can tolerate—what we can tolerate for fear, for pain, for sleepiness, for any of the hindrances, for insecurity. And we play that edge. Playing the edge is the way that we expand our capacity.

Christopher Titmus, one of my early teachers and another teacher of the Dharma, said that one of his teachers used to draw a line in the sand in Thailand and say, "Practice is all about coming to your edge and taking one step over the line." It's not taking a radical leap beyond your capacity into the unknown. It's just taking a single step beyond what you believe to be your limit, your edge, as far as you can go.

One way to do that in working with pain, for example, is when you meet overwhelming pain, to ask yourself, "If this pain doesn't get any worse, can I be with it?" And often, if we can somehow believe that the pain doesn't get any worse, we can be with it. Much of our difficulty or resistance in dealing with pain is the thought or the belief that it's only going to get worse. And that defeats us before we actually meet our limit of what we can tolerate and what we're willing to open to.

Another way of dealing with pain or intense demanding emotion is to ask yourself, "Can I be with this discomfort for another five seconds?" Give yourself permission to move. Give yourself permission to open your eyes—whatever it is you've got to do—and then say, "Can I be with it for five more seconds?" And often, just that placing a limit on what we have to tolerate allows us to relax, open, and be at ease, really, with what, up until then, was unbearable.

We use these little tricks of the mind to extend ourselves into the unknown, incrementally increasing our capacity, just bit by bit. And over the course of a day, a week, a month, years of practice, we grow in capacity. We grow in our ability to tolerate, our ability to play the edge, and the edge changes, moves.

Early on in my practice, I heard about this monk from Burma that I mentioned—the one who was in the cave for thirty-three years. Not only was he in the cave, he didn't lay down for fifty years. He sat up doing his practice. At night when he wanted to sleep, he sat up. So I thought, "Hey, that's a good practice. I'll try that." Where did I get this idea?

I remember one night during a retreat at the Meditation Center in Massachusetts, I said, "I'm going to sit up tonight, all night. I'm not going to lay down when I go to bed." This was a little bit too much of a leap for me. It was so excruciatingly painful. After an hour or two, I laid down. I said, "Forget it. That's the end of my commitment. I'm out of here. I'm getting some sleep."

When we bite off more than we can chew, we choke.

Later, after years of practicing in Burma, I went to Malaysia and was practicing in a monastery there, and I decided again that it might be interesting to experiment with not laying down, just to see what happens. I'd been told it's pretty easy, actually. Once you get past the first night or two, then you learn how to sleep sitting up, and it's really no problem.

So I was more mature, both in my practice and my understanding, and my ambition, I guess. And it's actually not so difficult. When you're practicing and just being relaxed, when you get tired, you simply collapse a little bit. You fall asleep and you wake up. When you wake up, you're already practicing. You don't waste time.

There are degrees of this, you know. The Buddha talked about his teaching being the middle path between the extremes of indulgence in sensual pleasure and the extreme of mortification of the flesh. In between those two is happy comfort of mind and body. Except that the Buddha did allow some of these what are called dhutanga practices. There are, I think, eleven or thirteen practices that he would allow the monks to under-

take. One of them was sitting up. One of them is eating only one meal a day, and a few other things. But one of them was sitting up. And even with that, there are degrees of sitting up. There are those who are allowed to use a back support and those who don't. So depending on where you are in practice, there's always an edge to play. There's always an edge, no matter where you are. You can come to your edge and take one step, one little bit more.

Many of you, Kamala mentioned to me today, have been reporting that you're waking up before the wake-up bell. The wake-up bell is at five o'clock, and people are waking up at four-thirty, four o'clock, three-thirty, three o'clock. And so I ask you, when you wake up and you have enough sleep, is it possible to extend yourself and start practicing? Is it possible?

We have beliefs about how much sleep we need. In our everyday life, when we work, in social life and whatnot, we may need seven hours, eight hours, nine hours, whatever it is you've seen you need in order to be efficient and effective during the day. But in practice, in intensive practice, everything is changing. How much you eat changes, how much sleep you need changes, how much energy you have changes. Be willing to explore. Enter the practice, enter this expansion of your practice with a kind of curiosity, not with a demand like my foolish attempt to sit up too early in practice. But explore the possibility. Explore the fear you have. Explore the resistance that comes, the belief you have about yourself being able or not able to do it. And then see what you can do.

Okay, so now I've been talking about effort and energy and extending yourself a little bit. Are you evaluating yourself now? Are you evaluating? Are you measuring and comparing and determining how much effort you made? Are you judging yourself?

Right effort has nothing to do with judging yourself. We do. We do. We measure ourselves, we compare ourselves, we hear these stories and we say, "Oh my God, I'm never going to make it." Right effort is about finding our own balance. I'm talking about finding your edge and taking one step beyond that. And if it's too far, if it's too big a step, you'll know. Because then you'll meet judgment and fear and exhaustion and a loss of confidence. Playing the edge can build confidence, a lot of confidence, while expanding capacity.

In the center where I was practicing in Burma, they have a general guidance for yogis. And Sayadaw U Pandita would tell us, "When you practice, act like a deaf, dumb, blind, sick person." Blind—don't look around. Deaf—don't listen around. Dumb—don't talk around. And ill—slow down.

Why do we do that? Why do we limit our engagement with the world?

To conserve energy. To preserve energy. When we look around, when we listen around, when we're moving around fast—not always, but it can be very unmindful—it becomes a dissipation of energy. That's the energy we need to conserve in order to build up the heat necessary to cook our practice, to break through, to extend ourselves beyond our current limits.

We do teach, as you know, walking practice, standing practice, sitting practice, which involves listening, seeing, and even walking fast. So it's not universally true that you can't do these things. When you do them, of course, you do them with mindfulness. But when we do them unmindfully, then it's a leak in our energy. It dissipates our energy.

Perhaps the most necessary or useful understanding for finding your own place of right effort, balance in your effort, is to talk about consistency. Finding your pace, finding your rhythm, and keeping with it. Just keeping with it. Just slowly, just incrementally expanding. Not making huge leaps and bounds, but being consistent.

There's a little trouble with the ovens here at this retreat center. When you set the oven for 350 degrees, it sometimes hovers around 350, sometimes hovers around 315. And you never know. If the recipe calls for 350 for 45 minutes, it means 350 for 45 minutes. You can't turn it up to 500 and hope to get done in half an hour. Neither can you leave it at 200 and hope to get done in two hours. It requires 350 for 45 minutes.

Practice is like that. Find your pace. Find your energy level. Work with it. Be consistent. Challenge yourself, for sure—but this approach is much more productive than huge effort followed by huge collapse. If we overextend ourselves one day, we'll be severely depleted for the next two weeks.

There's a story of a very enthusiastic novice who came to the monastery and went to the abbot and said, "I want to get enlightened."

The abbot had some wisdom. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, I really want to get enlightened. I want to do it as fast as I can. How long is it going to take?"

The abbot said, "Oh, it's going to take you ten years."

"Ten years? Oh my God! What if I work double time, day and night, work really hard, strive harder?"

The abbot says, "Twenty years."

"Well, what if I don't stop, just day and night, stay up all the time, practice really diligently, make every effort?"

"Thirty years."

The novice says, "How come? The more effort I make like that, the longer it's going to take?"

And the abbot said, "Well, if you keep one eye on the goal, you've only got one eye to find the path."

The path is the step before you. The next step that you must take is the path. Where you're going, where you hope to get—that's the goal. Forget it. Find where you are right now. How much energy do you need to take the next step?

We've been sitting here listening to a talk for nearly an hour. I'm going to ask you to become mindfully aware of your body.

Feel your body sitting right now. Sitting on the cushion or bench or chair. You feel what that feels like? How much effort did that take? How much effort did it take to be mindful right in that moment, or right in this moment? Almost nothing. That's how much effort and energy is required in each moment of practice. Almost nothing.

But what makes that amount of energy so valuable and so extraordinary is the precision with which we apply it. You can have a lot of energy scattered all over the place and not be mindful at all. You just overshoot the mark all the time. Hypervigilant, we call it. You can be really amped up and never land in the present moment, because the energy is excessive and the application is imprecise. It's in the precision of your aiming your attention that you actually land on the present moment. And for that, very little energy is required.

My father used to work on microwave towers—you know, those towers that send radio beams across great distances and carry lots of phone messages. They've got these great big towers, these great big receiving dishes, and all kinds of heavy-duty equipment. He asked me one time, "Do you know how much energy goes between one of those stations and the other?" I could only imagine this huge nuclear reactor amount of energy zapping out from one tower to the other. And he said, "No, it's some fraction of a watt. It's almost nothing." But the precision with which they're aimed and carry the energy—or whatever it is that they're carrying—is what makes them so powerful, so unique, so valuable.

The same with our mindfulness. The quality of our attention, where we're directing our attention, the precision with which we're directing it into the present moment—this makes all the difference in the world as to how awake we are. Finding our own way, finding what is the place of balance in the middle for us. Not easy, and it's ever-changing. What worked today might not work tomorrow. It requires that precise attention in the moment to know what is appropriate for me now, and being willing to meet the need. Whatever's needed, be willing to raise that amount of energy and open to the experience.

I want to end with a short Zen story. One of the devotees in the temple was well known for his zealousness and his effort. Day and night he would sit in meditation, not stopping even to eat or sleep. As time passed, he grew thinner and more exhausted. The master of the temple advised him to slow down, to take more care of himself, but the devotee refused to heed his advice.

"Why are you rushing so? What is your hurry?" asked the master.

"I'm after enlightenment," replied the devotee. "There is no time to waste."

"And how do you know," asked the master, "that enlightenment is running on before you so that you have to rush after it? Perhaps it is behind you, and all you need to encounter it is to stand still. But you are running away from it."

So let us sit still for a minute, and maybe it will catch up with us.

CHAPTER 226

Wise Effort

Carol Wilson · 49 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines one of meditation's most crucial questions: what constitutes wise effort (sammā vāyāma)? Beginning with a Zen story about grace and effort, she explores how the Buddha's own years of wrong effort—through asceticism, indulgence, and control—can save us from similar dead ends.*
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> *Wilson presents the Buddha's four noble efforts: fostering wholesome qualities already present, not becoming entangled in unwholesome states, encouraging skillful qualities not yet arisen, and wisely avoiding unskillful states. She emphasizes that our relationship to mental contents matters more than the contents themselves, and that clear comprehension —seeing without filters of judgment, likes, and dislikes—is essential for genuine letting go.*
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> *The talk offers profound guidance on distinguishing intensity from passion in practice. While intensity involves striving, goals, and denial of the present moment, passion embodies love of clarity and brings us closer to immediate experience. Wilson challenges Western practitioners' tendency to focus on faults while dismissing wholesome qualities, inviting us to trust our capacity for openness, compassion, and awakening. She suggests that wise effort means finding spaciousness within contraction, stillness within busyness, and clarity within confusion—recognizing that path and goal are one and the same.*

What I would like to talk about this evening is the question of wise effort.

I'd like to begin with a story, but first let me explain that I didn't make this story up, and therefore I don't mean to offend Catholics nor to praise Buddhists.

A Zen master was once invited to a great Catholic monastery to give instruction in Zen practice. He exhorted the monks there to meditate and to try to solve their koan, or Zen question, with great energy and zeal. He told them that if they could practice with full-hearted effort, true understanding would come to them.

One old monk raised his hand. "Master," he said, "our way of prayer is different than this. We've been meditating and praying in the simplest fashion, without effort, waiting instead to be illuminated by the grace of God. In Zen, is there anything like this illuminating grace that comes to one uninvited?"

The Zen master looked back and responded, "In Zen, we believe that God has already done his share."

The question of effort is one of the most crucial questions we encounter in meditation. It's very clear that in our lives, as well as in our meditation, some quality of effort is required if we are really going to deepen or bring to fulfillment anything that we truly honor and value. Probably the only thing in our lives that doesn't take a great deal of effort is going to sleep. Everything else, if we really value it, requires our attention—requires us to attend to it in a conscious and caring way.

In meditation, in this practice, we are initiating a movement. In many ways we're also reaching for qualities of mind and heart which we sense are possible within ourselves but which may not be fully present. We come to meditation often seeking understanding and seeking for changes to take place. And that understanding and those changes may exist somewhat apart from our actual experience in this moment.

We probably all have different objectives in meditation. But the qualities of calm, of spaciousness, of peace, the quality of open-heartedness, the possibility of awakening—these are what attract many of us to this path. I feel all of us have enough life experience by now that we really don't believe that much in fairy godmothers anymore, and we acknowledge that no one can make a gift of these changes to us. No one can wrap these qualities in a package and present them to us.

We probably also recognize, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, that fantasy, resolutions, desires, and yearning tend to do very little to bring about the changes that we truly honor and seek. And often, at this point in our lives and meditation, there's a deep acknowledgement that no one else apart from us can make changes for us. No one can substitute for us in traveling this path, in bringing about the emergence of wisdom and love. The effort that is really needed must come from within ourselves. The effort needs to be born within ourselves.

In meditation practice, effort is always talked about. It's a major part of developing this practice. It is one of the links in the Eightfold Path. It's one of the factors of enlightenment. And it's not just effort alone that is spoken of in this practice—what is spoken of is right effort, a word we sometimes have trouble with. We see that if there is such a thing praised as right effort, it clearly implies that there's such a thing as wrong effort. And if we understand that right effort essentially directs us towards the development of mindfulness, towards awakening, then it wouldn't be illogical to assume that wrong effort is going to take us in the opposite direction—that wrong effort might well lead us into greater confusion, conflict, and limitation.

I feel there are many things that we can be very grateful to the Buddha for. One of them is that he spent a whole lot of time developing wrong effort. As a matter of fact, he spent years doing it. This is not my interpretation—he quite honestly admitted this. He

spent years pursuing paths and approaches to meditation which essentially led to dead ends. He spent years developing self-denial and self-punishment; this was a particular path he followed for a period of time and perfected very well. He spent years following the path of indulgence in ways much better than we've probably done. He spent a lot of time exploring the whole avenue of control and a lot of time exploring the extremes, becoming an intimate master of asceticism.

We should be grateful, because essentially this could save us a great deal of time. If we can listen and perhaps even learn from what he did, we don't need to follow the same avenues in order to learn the same lessons—that wrong effort basically consumes energy and leads to limitation and confusion.

Understandably, we have tendencies that make us at times reluctant, and sometimes wisely reluctant, to accept the experience of another. We might tell ourselves that clearly the Buddha was a different person than we are, and what didn't work for him might very well work for us. We often have a feeling that we have to experience everything through our own eyes before we can trust it. It's clear that no one here, or anywhere else, can actually stop us from engaging in wrong effort. No one even necessarily knows, unless we tell them, that we're engaging in great ascetic practices or efforts at control. No one can actually prevent us.

But we still need to look at our own quality of effort in this practice. If we find ourselves repeatedly involved in struggle, in conflict, in pain during meditation...

It is very worthwhile asking ourselves to pay attention to what is actually going on—to really pay attention to the quality of effort that we are using in our practice, to really pay attention to our very approach to meditation. If you have spent days, never mind years, going through the same things, struggling with the same issues, coming to the same blocks or obstacles, going through the same extremes, then it is time and worthwhile for all of us to ask ourselves and to really look at our very approach to the practice.

It's not difficult for us to discern and to understand what wrong effort is. And wrong, I know, is a kind of charged word, but we could use unwise or unskillful. It's not difficult to discern what unskillful effort is. If you find that there are difficult mental states that continue, that don't change, that we experience in exactly the same way again and again; if we find ourselves assaulted by or feeling invaded by a repetitive process of thinking, of thought patterns that weigh like a stone in our minds; if we find ourselves struggling and battling and warring with ourselves or filled with resistance—all of

these experiences really do tell us a great deal about the quality of our attention. They don't necessarily tell us a great deal about who we are, but they can tell us a great deal about the quality of our attention, the kind of effort that we're making.

Sometimes what happens when you find something repeating itself again and again, when you find yourself up against the same walls and the same edges, is that we conclude we're experiencing this problem because of the contents of our minds—because of the problem or the issue or the memory or the image that keeps arising again and again. We conclude often that it's the kind of thoughts and feelings we're experiencing that are responsible for struggle, responsible for conflict and difficulty.

When we conclude or believe that the difficulty lies in the contents of our minds, in who we are, in what we're experiencing, what we tend to do is become very busy with strategies. We bring out our fix-it mind. How can I fix it? How can I make it different? How can I have a different kind of thought, a better one? How can I have a different kind of feeling or a different kind of memory? How can I have a different kind of fantasy even? We get involved in strategies of either trying to subdue what we're experiencing or trying to alter it, or we find ourselves responding with blame and judgment. I'm obviously a hopeless spiritual failure because I keep repeating and experiencing these same terrible thoughts.

If we're honest with ourselves, I doubt if anybody invited the contents of their minds in today. Maybe now and again. But how much of what you've experienced today in terms of content—thoughts, feelings, memories—did you actually invite? Did you get up this morning and say, "Well, this is a great day to be depressed"? Or finish your lunch and say, "You know, I haven't been angry for a while. A little anger wouldn't go amiss. Let's spend the rest of the day storming"?

How responsible do we feel for the contents of our minds? Often terribly responsible. We become so responsible for the contents of our minds, and at times so busy in trying to alter them, that what we miss or perhaps omit to do is to look at our relationship to them—to give the primary attention not to the contents but to our actual relationship to them in the moment that they arise.

As far as I understand, meditation is really not very concerned with redecorating our minds. Instead of the busyness of the strategies, instead of the blame and the judgment, sometimes it is really helpful to ask ourselves: What kind of energy are we bringing to our experience? What kind of effort do we make in relationship to our thoughts and feelings, in relationship to the pleasant and to the unpleasant?

There is surely nothing that is more guaranteed to perpetuate and reinforce mental states and thoughts and feelings and images than avoidance and holding. Resistance and clinging give a solidity to whatever arises within our bodies, feelings, and minds.

The second question I feel it's important to ask ourselves is: Do we actually need to? Do we actually have to experience this constant repetition? Do we have to experience this kind of solidity and all the struggling and the resistances that are born of it?

It may be that we don't seem to have much choice at times over the contents of our minds, but that doesn't imply that we have no choice in our relationship to them. It doesn't mean that we have no freedom in our relationship to what we actually experience. It doesn't imply that we have no choice and no freedom in the quality of energy and the quality of effort that we're able to bring to whatever we experience.

Wise effort or skillful effort—it's not difficult to define. It is simply the effort to be mindful. It is simply the effort to be awake and conscious. A quality of mindfulness, as Carol was speaking about yesterday, that brings us closer to the present moment, to our actual experience of it. And in coming closer to the present moment, we really begin to develop a sense of clear comprehension.

Clear comprehension means seeing without filters, without projection, without likes and dislikes, without prejudice, without judgments, without shoulds. It means just clear comprehension. There is very little in this world that calls upon us for our evaluation in terms of good, bad, wrong, right, negative, positive. Clear comprehension in a very real way means being able to clear ourselves of those filters, to connect with what we're actually experiencing. And that allows not only deepening in meditation, but it is what is the primary ingredient in letting go.

Unless we clearly comprehend what we're experiencing, it's quite impossible to let go of it, to let go of anything. Unless we clearly connect with what's actually going on, it becomes so difficult to let go, no matter how many times in our minds we say, "I must let go of this." As long as our experience is layered with projections, with likes and dislikes, it is almost impossible to have that freedom of simply letting it be.

If you have any acquaintance with Buddhism, one of the things you're probably aware of is that Buddhism is well known for its lists. Whoever wrote out the scriptures of the Buddha had an incredibly orderly mind, because there's list after list after list. And of course there is a list about effort. The Buddha spoke about the four noble efforts, sometimes even translated as the four heroic efforts—which might be a little extreme.

If these efforts are misunderstood, they very easily lead to striving and judgment. But it's important to know the different possibilities of effort that are helpful in this practice.

The first noble effort that the Buddha spoke of was the effort to foster and enhance skillful qualities of being that are already part of our makeup. These qualities are not strangers to us: sensitivity, openness, generosity, our capacity to allow, to give, to let go, to understand. All of these are skillful qualities of our being. To enhance and foster them means making the effort to consciously develop them.

I have to say that for many Westerners this is an extraordinarily difficult task—more difficult, I think, than for people in the East. We have a long history of learning how to focus on the negative, the imperfect, the faults, the weaknesses and failings within ourselves. If asked, most people can make lists of their own imperfections. We have extensive training in giving attention to them, in trying to do things with them. It's not always easy for us to honor and respect those parts of our being which are so rich, so wholesome, so conducive to well-being.

Many people actually find themselves feeling guilty. In meditation, something arises—a real openness, some breakthrough in sensitivity—and there's difficulty in acknowledging it. "Well, I had this moment today, but it'll probably go away. I'm sure it'll be gone by lunchtime and I'll be angry again. Or it's probably my hormones or something—I'm sure it's an accident." How difficult many people find it to actually trust and honor within themselves what is rich, opening, conducive, wholesome. We don't have that difficulty with the negative. We don't struggle to emphasize and highlight all that is wrong.

In a very real way, this retraining of energy, this redirecting of appreciation and gratitude inwardly, of sensitivity and loving attention inwardly, is one of the hardest tasks for us to develop in meditation. To foster and enhance that which is wholesome, that which is rich and truly opening, means that in every moment such qualities arise—a moment of sensitivity, compassion, generosity, or allowing—we become totally, deeply acquainted with that experience, experientially and intimately, within our minds and bodies.

Every time we experience a moment of peace, rather than dismissing it or holding our breath while we wait for it to disappear, we can explore deeply what that quality is within ourselves. It came from within. It didn't fall from the fan. It came from within ourselves. What does it feel like? What does it feel like in our bodies and in our feel-

ings? What difference do these qualities make in the way we see ourselves? In the presence of these qualities, what difference do they make in how we hold the world around us, how we hold others? We go deeply into them, explore them.

We foster and enhance these qualities, these parts of our being, not through clinging and not through holding—not by thinking, "Here's this moment and I better grab it before it disappears"—but rather through investigation. In those moments when rich qualities of being arise within ourselves, we see clearly the factors that made them possible. They may seem like accidents, but they are not accidents. We see clearly the factors that actually allowed them to arise.

Sensitivity and openness and compassion are not a question of luck, not a question of accidental encounter or of karma. The factors that allow these qualities to emerge within ourselves are the very capacity to let go, to connect, to open. And we know how true that is when we really are able to let go, when we really are deeply able to connect, when we're deeply able to open—how out of that comes forth this blossoming, this emergence of a real taste of sensitivity, a real taste of compassion. Love is born out of our capacity to let go and to connect. These are the factors that make it possible.

And are those factors of letting go, opening, connecting accidental? Is it just a random occurrence, that maybe we'll be lucky today and have something we can let go of? Or are letting go and opening and connecting real qualities of mind that we're consciously able to cultivate?

It's so important to remind ourselves that when we speak about conscious effort, it implies the absence of passivity. It means that we don't simply sit here, waiting in hope to be struck by a bolt of enlightenment or struck by a moment of compassion.

It doesn't mean either that we strive for them and reach for them, trying to make ourselves compassionate, trying to make ourselves let go. It really means consciously directing our attention and our energy toward our own capacities of being that are already present within ourselves.

The second noble effort the Buddha spoke of was not to become entangled in unwholesome, unskillful states that arise. Wiser words are hardly ever spoken. We could probably make lists again of unwholesome and unskillful states that we have experienced in the past and in the present. Even throughout today, it's not difficult for us to define what is unskillful. It causes pain, very simply. The unskillful states, the unskillful qualities, they cause pain. It's really nothing more than that. They cause separation, division, disconnection, conflict. Anger and greed—whatever leads to disconnection—creates pain and is an unskillful state that it is wise not to become entangled in.

I would say that it does take a certain effort to sustain the unskillful. There's very little in this world that is sustained through its own momentum. It does take a certain effort to sustain the unskillful, but we are often not conscious of it. When states of mind or feelings or images or projections or judgments arise, it often does seem that they have a life of their own, that they're somehow part of us and they just intrude and continue for a while until they pass away. But the energy that sustains negativity or anger or greed or jealousy or hatred—the energy that sustains those states of mind—is the energy of dwelling, the energy of holding, the energy of feeding them. This is what sustains those unskillful states of mind that bring us pain.

And it's not a question of judging that. It's really much more a question of whether we are able to redirect that energy. Think of the energy that is in judgment. Think of the energy that is in blame and in anger. It's a fantastic energy. The way that it goes may not be too helpful, but the energy itself is fantastic. Are we able to redirect it so that we don't feed into that which brings us pain? Are we able to bring that energy to truly make us mindful of what is arising and our relationship to it? We may unconsciously dwell upon things, but dwelling upon things is not a life sentence. It is not as if we're going to be there forever. Can we, in the moment of dwelling, in the moment of experiencing states of mind that bring pain, consciously cultivate spaciousness, openness, letting go?

Meditation is not only a conscious application of effort. I feel that such a major part of meditation is vision. It is really developing a deep sense of trust and faith in our own possibilities, in our own potential. And part of that trust and faith is trusting in our own capacity to open and to let go. Sometimes letting go of things is a very organic process, a very natural process. Sometimes letting go also comes through quite conscious determination.

Now when we hear the word determination, sometimes we get kind of antsy and think, "Well, aha, determination equals suppression." But I would make a distinction. To me, suppression is the unwillingness to see something. Determination, to me, is the clear seeing of something and the unwillingness to engage in something that we intuitively know is going to bring pain and conflict. And to me this is an incredibly important distinction.

Sometimes we have the conviction—we see difficult states of mind of anger and greed or envy arising, and we feel that these memories and these feelings must be arising for a purpose, that all things have their purpose in this cosmos. Especially in meditation cycles, we conceive of the purpose of this repetition as being that we haven't yet learned what we need to learn. And that's why it keeps arising.

Sometimes this is true. I would also say that in my experience, there's not that much new that arises in terms of thoughts. How many really new thoughts have you had today? How many truly unique, brand new, fresh images have you experienced today? In my experience there aren't that many. Many of the things that keep repeating themselves—actually we've already learned what we need to learn. How many things that we repeat have we already actually learned what we need to learn? The repetition is more habitual than a process of learning.

If we appreciate this—sometimes new things arise and then it's really worth reflection and inquiry and full attention. But if we see that we're simply replaying and repeating, then there's a place for skillful, conscious determination not to become entangled. It's like if you have a toothache. It could be quite helpful to hang out with it for a few days and learn about your relationship to pain.

So very similar with many of our repetitions—there's a point actually where we're not learning anymore, where actually we're punishing ourselves. And there's a point when there is some real conscious determination to see and not to be entangled.

The third quality of effort, the third noble effort, is to encourage and foster skillful qualities of being which have not yet arisen. It's hard to figure out how to do that. It seems somewhat of a challenge. How do we encourage something which has not yet arisen without getting involved in denial of what is, or getting involved in striving? How do we encourage the skillful without bouncing back between rejection and craving?

It's not an easy balance to find, and yet it's so much of what meditation is about, isn't it? I mean, if we were all fully enlightened and fully compassionate and fully awake and loving and wise human beings, we probably wouldn't feel that much call to be here. What we actually come here for is really to seek for qualities, to move towards qualities which may not be present in our lives. What attracts us to meditation is not to experience yet more of the same, not to have a closer intimacy with a chaotic mind or with sore knees or with pain. What attracts us to meditation is the possibility of change, the sense of possibility emerging within ourselves—of qualities, of potential that may not be right now present in our lives. Whether it's freedom, whether it's equanimity, whether it's clarity, whether it's open-heartedness, it is true in meditation that we're initiating a journey and a movement. And part of that, there is a quality of reaching for what is not here.

What I feel the important distinction is, is not reaching for clarity, for compassion, for love or for wisdom as some future destination or as some personal possession. To me this is wrong effort. What is more skillful and wise effort is to clearly acknowledge

that sense of possibility within ourselves, acknowledge clearly our capacity to be truly compassionate, truly awake, truly loving. Is it possible in this moment, in the midst of whatever we are experiencing, no matter how difficult, no matter how unpleasant? If it brings us back to this moment, to me it is wise effort.

It's so difficult for us at times not to think in a linear way—that the positive is going to come about as a result of getting rid of the negative, or that we're going to experience peace when we've got rid of the disturbing, or we're going to experience happiness when we've got rid of pain. We tend to think in such linear ways. And I think what meditation really suggests to us is a whole other way of thinking, a whole other way of seeing. What it suggests to us is the possibility of finding spaciousness in the moment that we're experiencing contraction, of finding a place of stillness amidst the greatest busyness, of finding a place of clarity even as the mind is going through places of confusion—the possibility of bringing clarity to this, of finding equanimity in those moments when we feel imbalanced.

Unfortunately, we grow up on a diet that suggests to us that seeking perfection or realizing perfection is what our lives are all about. Everything in our culture suggests to us the desirability of pursuing perfection, whether it's the perfect apple in the supermarket, whether it's a perfect lifestyle, whether it's a perfect body. And I feel we absorb this a great deal, and too often we are simply victims of our own delusions about perfection.

It seems to me that one of life's greatest challenges is in how we respond to the imperfect. I don't know about you, but I never expect my mind to be perfect. I never expect to have the perfect personality. I never expect that my life is going to come to a point where there is no crisis, where there is nothing to respond to. Quite frankly, to let go of our illusions about perfection is to lay down a tremendous burden. Think of the suffering that is created in the pursuit of perfection.

Now that doesn't mean a kind of passivity and resignation—that life is imperfect, too bad, and suffering is what it's all about. Just recognizing that there's very little in this world that fits in with our ideas of perfection, and there are very few times possibly when reality can conform to our images and our expectations. It is an actuality that we are actually never going to erase the past. It's also an actuality that our futures are going to remain uncertain and without guarantees. Our essential challenge as human beings is how we respond to all of this.

In the midst of anger, can we call forth love? In the midst of resentment, can we bring forth forgiveness? In the midst of pain, can we find a place of calmness within ourselves that knows no denial? In the midst of confusion, can we summon forth

awareness to bring clarity? These are our resources and these are our possibilities. And the effort that we use is to make the space, to make the inner environment in which those resources and those possibilities can emerge and can transform.

There's that wonderful saying of Don Juan, that to an ordinary person, everything in life is either a blessing or a curse, whereas to a wise person, everything is a challenge. And I feel that many of life's obstacles that we meet present us with the possibility of really discovering new depths of openness and compassion and understanding.

The fourth effort the Buddha spoke about was the effort to avoid the unskillful which has not yet arisen. Now again, that seems slightly paranoid. And avoidance does carry certain associations for us too—it's a very bad spiritual word.

Avoidance is considered really totally a no-no. You're not spiritual if you avoid anything. You're not open if you avoid anything at all.

But I think before we get too carried away with our associations, it is actually helpful to reflect a little bit. Reflect on the past. Is there anything in your life you have experienced which you know intuitively, directly brought pain, conflict, suffering, alienation—that you know would actually be wiser not to get into again?

Reflect in the present. Have you experienced in the days here states of mind that bring distress and sadness? States of mind that bring contraction and limitation? Ways of reacting that breed discontent? It might be fairly wise not to become entangled in them.

Think even in terms of the future. Do we see the mind reaching with ambitiousness, with goals, with striving that again create pain? Would it not be wise not to engage? Is it not also wise at times to avoid that which we know we do not have the resources present within ourselves in that moment to be with skillfully? There are times when stepping back and stepping out can be very skillful action.

Just one last thing about effort I would like to mention, and that is to look at the difference between intensity and passion. Sometimes in meditation people become very entangled in intensity and they mistake this for wise effort. They become so focused on getting somewhere and on goals that there's a rejection and denial of the present moment. Or they become so focused on being a perfect yogi that they become very judgmental of others and righteous. Or they become so concentrated on being concentrated that they become very tense and narrow.

To me, this kind of intensity is actually a real hindrance in the practice, because it tends to deny those qualities of softness and openness which are the essence of wise effort. Wise effort is not born of intensity, but of a certain quality of passion.

I feel in this practice that what is needed is much more than a lukewarm curiosity about transformation, much more than an ambivalence about whether we might be more peaceful or not. What is much more helpful is a real passion for clarity and understanding, a real commitment to openness and to love and to freedom.

Out of that passion, there comes inspiration—a willingness to open to and embrace each moment that arises as our teacher. Intensity has goals and passion has love. This is the basic difference. Passion has a love of clarity and a love of stillness, not in the future, but a love that brings us closer to this moment that we're experiencing, to understand its possibilities and to understand our own potential. Intensity always takes us further away from this moment.

From that inspiration comes interest, comes energy, comes effort to see and to explore both who we are and who we can be. To see and explore not only what we're experiencing, but how we can experience it. To see and explore this moment and ourselves just as we are.

In that wise effort, in that skillful effort, the path and the goal are not separate. They are just one and the same.

CHAPTER 227

Trust

Carol Wilson · 45 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson investigates the quality of trust as it manifests in meditation practice and daily life. She begins by establishing that genuine trust arises from clear seeing and what she calls "radical acceptance" — the unconditional acknowledgment of truth as it presents itself moment to moment. Drawing on teachings from various sources including the Sutta Nipāta, she illuminates how the Buddha taught that dependence creates fear, while independence from grasping allows for freedom from trembling.

Wilson examines the paradox at the heart of our search for security: the very act of seeking stability in external circumstances — relationships, careers, knowledge, views, or outer authorities — actually generates the insecurity we're trying to escape. She explains how this dynamic plays out subtly in meditation, where the mind grasps at particular experiences and creates models of "how things should be," turning away from present-moment awareness into conceptual frameworks that promise safety but deliver only more grasping.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with this pattern through the lens of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), particularly the sequence of contact, feeling, craving, and grasping. Wilson demonstrates how mindfulness at these junctures can interrupt the chain of becoming, revealing that there is simply nothing worth grasping. She concludes with a moving personal story that illustrates how accepting complete uncertainty paradoxically gave rise to profound trust — not trust in outcomes, but trust in awareness itself. The teaching points toward a radical simplicity: trust is not separate from clear seeing, and freedom lies in loving and appreciating what is present in each moment.

What I want to talk about tonight is the quality of trust—what it is in our practice, in our lives, how it manifests, and also what prevents or hides the manifestation of trust in our minds and in our practices.

Where trust really begins, of course, is with the ability to trust inwardly, to trust ourselves. And that requires the quality of soft receptivity, the quality of openness, the ability to unconditionally accept oneself as one is in each moment, as each moment changes. In order to accept, it implies that one must first see clearly what the truth is—just the truth of ourselves in each moment. Until we see it, it's pretty hard to accept it. And so this trust, this faith in ourselves, in the Dharma, in the reality of what we see in the moment, arises just out of our own clear seeing, out of nothing else.

Seeing the actuality of ourselves, of life—the trust which comes from that is the expression of real inner security. The quality of mind associated with both clear seeing and the arising of trust, trust in what is true, is the quality of total letting go. Or as one of my currently favorite authors, a man who calls himself J. John Noe, puts it, it's a quality of radical acceptance. It's a phrase I really like—radical acceptance. He defines radical acceptance as the radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways. To let go, to accept, it is necessary only to give up your concerns and your fears.

Another way of putting it, from a rather different tradition—Sayadaw U Pandita said, "Unless there is softness and receptivity of mind, unless one totally surrenders, it will be almost impossible to receive anything." Unless one totally surrenders. In this context, I'm not seeing surrender as surrender to a teacher or to an outer authority, but to the truth of the moment. And that's trust.

One way that I can often begin to familiarize myself with that experience—that sense of softness, open receptivity, clarity of mind—is the state of total listening, which I'm sure you've all experienced just during this retreat at one time or another. It's that state when you're sitting, the mind is really quiet, very clear, quite attentive, and the attention is just on the listening. There's a real sense of openness. Sounds arise, persist, pass away. They're perceived very clearly, but there's not a sense of clinging, there's not a sense of pushing away, there's not a sense of wondering what sounds are going to come next or wishing that last sound could have stayed. There's no grasping going on. There's no fear or avoidance going on and no holding. To me, that's a way of experiencing that sense of trust.

Trust isn't a sense that, "Well, now I've seen clearly, I understand how this works. I can relax, settle back, I've got it. Things will just continue on the way they are and trust is here and I can trust and it'll just be the way I like it to be. Things will be comfortable." I find I do that a lot in meditation on a real subtle level. And that's not trust at all. That's making up my own mentally created model of how things are or how they should be, and then looking to that model for security—which is a far cry from trust.

For instance, a more specific way of looking at that: say there's some particular pattern that's been going on in the meditation—a pattern of some emotion that arises, and then from that emotion tension arises, unpleasant sensation, aversion and fear. This pattern's been around a while. It's one that one's pretty familiar with. It comes up in a

lot of sittings. And suddenly, in one sitting, for whatever reason, one sees it very clearly with real acceptance, real allowing. It's just a series of processes. There's no aversion. There's no clinging. In that moment, that's trust.

And perhaps in that moment of seeing clearly, the pattern goes away. After it goes away, there could be a moment of pleasantness, delight, joy. If there's not mindfulness then, it can be almost immediately followed by grasping of the mind, immediately the creation of a new model, a new structure: "Oh, so when there's something like that happening, if I look at it in just this way, it'll go away." In that moment, there's no longer trust. It's a movement away from trust, from seeing what is. It's the movement of grasping—grasping for a mind-created model of what should be, of how it will be comfortable, safe, secure.

From this we can see that trust is not a static quality. It's not something we can gain. It's not something that, once experienced or known, is then there in every situation, in every mind moment. It's really a vital quality, very energetic. It takes place, it arises, on a moment-to-moment level. It's also not passive, because it requires the energy of mindfulness, of real clear attention to what is true in each moment.

And it also requires the active, open, and total acceptance of that reality as it is—without referring back to a model, with no comparison to any other thing, just as it is.

It's not that trust in ourselves in the moment is so unknown to us. As I said, it's not something that we don't have now that has to be achieved or attained. It's not something separate from our present experience or beyond our understanding—though sometimes it may seem completely out of our present experience. We can feel so alienated from that sense of deep inner trust, so separate from our own experience in the moment, that we cannot see ourselves clearly, much less unconditionally accept what we're seeing and be able to trust in that understanding.

So what prevents this? What prevents our living with trust, our living in trust?

We spend so much of our lives, on so many levels, searching for security, for stability, for something in the world we can rely on, something we can trust. And it's this search itself which actually prevents the manifestation of trust. Because when we're looking for security, all we can ever find is insecurity.

Krishnamurti says, "To seek the truth is to deny it." When you think about it, it's a very sweeping and powerful statement. Because to seek anything is a movement away from the reality of what's happening right now. It's an avoidance, a denial of truth.

So before we can live in trust, live with deep inner security, we must first look honestly at our lives, at the movements of our minds, to see just where we are grasping for security. Right now, what am I placing my trust in, really, right now? What am I hoping will make my world safe, secure, predictable? Because it's not that we don't have trust, but that we place it in things which can never provide the security we seek, because they'll never stay the same. They're bound to change.

This is another quote, from John Noe. Here he uses the word faith, and I'm using it interchangeably with trust:

"It is not a matter of whether or not faith is present in your life. It is. It is only a question of whether you place your faith in truth and reality or in your considerations, abstractions, judgments, and thoughts about it. Do not doubt that you are currently practicing faith. Consider only where it is placed. Do you place your faith in fear, resistance, and avoidance? Or do you place it in the very form of life you try to manipulate and limit? Radical acceptance is the practice of faith."

So where are we placing our faith right now? What are some of the things that we tend to look to for the security we seek? The list is endless, and some are quite obvious—some of the ways that we try to structure our environment, structure our outer world, so that we can feel safe, so that we think we can know what to expect and trust that it won't change. Just some of the first things that come to mind are stable relationships, a good job or fulfilling job, a comfortable and secure living situation, a compatible circle of friends, this body.

It's not to say that any of these things themselves are wrong or contrary to living in trust. Obviously they're rich fields for growth and understanding when we view them with the right attitude, when we're really clear about our relationship to these things. We see them clearly as they are and know deeply—not just intellectually, "yes, sure, things change and I can't rely on it"—but really know that none of these circumstances will last, or else we won't last. And so we're not relying on them unconsciously for security. We're not using them as ways to avoid being alone with ourselves, ways to avoid looking clearly at the reality of ourselves, the reality of each moment.

Are we using any of these situations to mask the awareness of the fact that our life, that the world, is in constant flux, constant change, and that there's no security to be found in it anywhere? If we are clinging to these outer circumstances for security, that clinging, that movement of grasping, is a movement away from clear seeing. It's a movement away from truth, and it's a separation from living with inner trust.

When we begin to look to see whether and to what degree we're placing trust in externals, it can be kind of tricky to determine if we're not looking really clearly, because it can vary from moment to moment. For example, take a steady relationship. There can be a time when we're really seeing the relationship, we're seeing ourselves in it quite clearly. We appreciate it as it is, we know it's not going to last, and it's really an opportunity for growth, and we're using it that way. There's a lot of love and compassion and understanding. That can be an expression of trust. The next day we could be holding on to it for dear life and in a panic because it's going to end. In that moment we're using it to hide from the reality and to avoid being with ourselves. So it takes a lot of clarity, a lot of looking, all the time.

One clear indication of whether we're using these circumstances to try and find security where there is none to be found is whether we're beginning to develop or experience a sense of dependency on any of these circumstances—dependency on them for stability, for safety, or for happiness, for contentment. Because if we're dependent on something for security, implicit in that dependence is fear. Fear that the situation will change.

And where there's fear, there's insecurity. So the very fact of relying on something, the very fact of dependence on something for happiness, actually brings about the opposite of what we're seeking. The dependence promotes fear and insecurity. And when we're fearful, obviously we're not living in a state of trust. We're living in a state of avoidance, a state of grasping.

This is a quote from the Buddha in the Sutta Nipata, talking about dependence and fear. He says, "One insight is that there is trembling for one who is dependent. The other is that the one who is independent does not tremble. The independent person does not tremble or get confused. But a person who is dependent on something is clutching, grasping at existence in one form or another, and cannot escape from existences, from becoming. There is grave danger in being dependent. Therefore, relying on nothing, the mindful monk wanders on, free from clinging, relying on nothing."

So when I look at the quality of trust, it seems to me that at the core of the lack of trust I feel in myself, the core of my feelings of insecurity, is actually the movement of grasping itself. Because the movement of grasping is a distortion of clear seeing. It's a rejection of truth in that moment when there's grasping. It's avoidance. And when I can't see what's real, I certainly can't accept it. There's no possibility for trust to arise. If we're separated from reality, we're unconsciously denying it.

This grasping for security, the attempt to structure our environment to meet our own concepts of what will provide safety, is certainly not restricted to the obvious external examples I mentioned before. You've probably noticed that the movement of grasping tends to arise in the mind on a fairly regular basis. So I want to mention a few of the common mental constructs or patterns that we create as we sit here and then clutch at for security. The list is probably endless, so I'll just mention a few that came to my mind.

The first one was knowledge—how being able to accumulate a certain body of knowledge about anything can lead one to feel secure. It's something to fall back on, especially if we're more knowledgeable about something than everyone else. Then we can really feel safe. And when I thought about knowledge, it led right into views and opinions, which is a different area, but I saw how often my mind confuses my views and opinions with knowledge. I'm so sure they're right, although they're just views and opinions.

This comes up a lot in my mind when I'm on retreat, in relation to the actual practice itself. For example, say I have a really clear sitting, and whatever that particular experience of mindfulness was during that sitting—maybe things were just really sharp, there was a lot of clarity, a certain movement of energy, it really doesn't matter what—my mind takes up that particular experience and forms a model. "Oh yes, this is how things really are. When one sees clearly, this is the reality of things." The mind makes up that model but doesn't see the movement of grasping in it, the holding on to it. And there's a grasping and carrying of that model of "how things really are" based on one experience throughout the sitting, into the retreat. That's a view, that's an opinion, but the mind takes it as knowledge.

Then say further into the retreat, the whole show changes—everything becomes more microscopic, or the energy moves in a different way, or whatever—some experience, and it doesn't matter what it is, goes away. In that moment the mind goes, "Oh, so that other way, it wasn't really like that at all. I was just grasping. I set up a model, but now I really see how it is." In one moment, it sees the other grasping and does the same thing again. It's really amazing. Then I can see it and do it again.

So that is the way the mind makes up a view, takes it to be knowledge, and then grasps onto it for security. It's tempting to build up a storehouse of knowledge about the meditation, about reality, as a platform of security rather than experiencing the meditation, experiencing the moment as it is. Again, that's trust in the wrong thing—looking

outside of the moment, outside of reality, for some experience which won't change, some experience to refer back to for security, instead of taking refuge in this moment only, instead of trusting in the awareness of the living presence.

Another construct along similar lines that the mind tends to grasp at is this whole concept of what is and isn't good meditation, real meditation, the right way to do it—which I think most of you are probably familiar with. One example of how we do that on a rather gross level is that after having a particular experience the mind has grasped onto as "the real thing"—this is really meditation—we may find ourselves structuring our whole day in order to recreate the conditions from which that particular experience arose. For example, say you happened to be walking on the walking path when that happened, at a certain speed, in a certain way. So the mind goes, "Well, okay, if I walk right after lunch when no one else is there, and I turn off the lights—or turn on the lights, depending which group you belong to—and I hold my hands in this certain way," and so on, "then I can repeat that experience," which is obviously much more desirable than what's happening right now. Is this freedom? Is this trust in awareness?

And we do it all the time.

So the last particular I want to mention—as I noted, knowledge, views and opinions, what is and what isn't right meditation—the last kind of big one that came to my mind was our tendency to look to some outer authority for security, something to rely on, to tell us what's true. That could be a teacher. It could be, in this situation, another person at the retreat that the mind has grasped onto as someone who really knows what they're doing—the model yogi—imitating everything that they do, the way they move, the way they eat. It could be something we've read. It doesn't really matter what, because often, especially in a situation like this, the authority is not being imposed from the outside. Usually we're giving the power to the outer authority by seeking refuge in something apart from our own awareness.

And so each time that we do that, each time that we reach out for security, we're accentuating insecurity. Relying on outer authority can lead to confusion because we're alienated from inner trust in that moment. We're not trusting our own ability to see clearly. We're looking for someone else to tell us what clear seeing is, or what we should be seeing if we were seeing clearly in each moment. And when we do that, we become increasingly unable to accept loss, to accept change, because we're looking for permanence. And we become increasingly unable to experience trust because the things we're trusting in keep belying it.

So, as I said before, it's the movement of grasping itself which distorts. When there's grasping in the mind, as I'm sure you've noticed, it creates a sense of imbalance in the mind, and you can even feel it in the body. When there's grasping at some object, we can't see clearly either the object that the mind is grasping at or anything else being experienced in that moment, because of the distortion created by the energy of grasping.

An easy example: say in the afternoon you smell bread cooking in the kitchen. It smells really good. The idea comes into the mind, "Oh, we're having muffins for tea." And there's grasping onto that idea that we don't really see clearly. Then tea comes and there's peanuts. No word about the bread. "Well, I guess the staff's having another party, and we're getting peanuts. Uh-huh. Okay. That's all right. That's okay. I can really accept that." But at that moment, as we're sitting eating the peanuts, how clearly are we seeing the thought that it's just a thought? "I wanted muffins. The smell was pleasant. I wanted muffins." It's just a thought. How clearly are we seeing that? And how clearly are we experiencing the reality of eating the peanuts? It's just taste, movement, sensation. The grasping distorts both the object grasped at—the thought "I wanted muffins"—and the reality of what we're actually experiencing, which is eating peanuts.

So to work with this, we need the basic willingness to directly confront our insecurities, to look directly at how fear and grasping are manufactured in our mind on a moment-to-moment basis. Because when we don't see it, we're in bondage to it. And when we're in bondage to grasping and fear, we can't know trust. We're looking for something outside of the truth of the moment. And where can trust begin except right now? There is no other time. There's only now.

The most helpful tool to look at grasping is obviously mindfulness. And one of the clearest ways to begin to observe grasping as it arises is to be aware of it through the links of dependent origination that Joseph talked about the other night—especially in this context, the links where contact gives rise to feeling, which gives rise to craving. It's at this point in the chain that we can see grasping arise clearly, and it's also at this point that we can really see how powerful mindfulness is.

Going back to the example of smelling the muffins: at that point, the contact would be the contact of the nose and the smell of the muffins and smelling consciousness. That's contact, which gives rise to the feeling of pleasantness associated with the smell, which gives rise to craving, wanting the muffins. If there's no mindfulness at that point, the craving moves on to give rise to grasping. And that grasping is like really grabbing hold, really grabbing hold of the idea. Then the whole chain of becoming proceeds on from that—all the wildness that the mind manufactures around this experience of wanting muffins, grasping at muffins.

Now the same process can occur, but when there's really clear mindfulness, we see the contact, we see the smell arise, we see the feeling arise of pleasantness, and we may see the craving arise.

Craving may not arise at all at that point; we may simply see the feeling arise. But if we're seeing clearly, craving may arise without necessarily proceeding onto grasping—without the whole becoming, the whole chain.

In that moment of mindfulness, the entire chain of becoming is broken at the point where craving does not move into grasping. And it's not that we're stopping it, not through any act of will. It's simply that in seeing clearly the contact, feeling, and craving, we recognize quite directly that there's nothing to grasp at. Mindfulness is established. It's not blinded by grasping. It's really settled in the truth of the moment, seeing this process clearly for what it is—just a conditioned, impersonal process.

The condition of contact arises. Because of the smell, the pleasant feeling arises. Because of the pleasant feeling, craving arises. And that's all that's happening. It's really very simple. When there's mindfulness present in that process, we see that the grasping is truly extra. We also see that there's nothing worth grasping onto.

This process continues—this whole cycle of dependent origination, this whole cycle of contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming. It continues on a moment-by-moment basis. While we certainly can't rely on having seen it clearly in the last moment, thinking we don't really need to look in this moment, that the last moment will free us from the bondage of craving now—we can't rely on that. But it's also true that each moment of mindfulness helps to condition the arising of future moments of mindfulness. Each time we clearly see and let go of the arising of grasping, we're weakening its hold on the mind.

And so trust arises on this same moment-to-moment basis. In each moment that we are seeing the reality of the moment that clearly, without the unseen movement of grasping or resistance or denial, in that moment there is trust.

As we begin to see this process of grasping more clearly, we begin to understand that even the slightest movement of grasping in the mind, just the slightest movement of it, leads to insecurity. Just the slightest movement of grasping leads us away from trust. Through this we come to see that nothing—nothing—is worth grasping onto. Not even ideas of unity, ideas of truth. Because no body, no thing, no idea, no concept can provide us with any security in this world.

This takes me back to that previous quote from the Buddha, which I just want to read the end part of again: "There is grave danger in being dependent. Therefore, relying on nothing, the mindful monk wanders on, free from clinging." I don't think the words were chosen lightly. Grave danger in being dependent. Relying on nothing.

When we are seeing clearly this reality of how things are, we begin to realize that we are really living with utter insecurity—that there's nothing in the world which can provide security. And when we really see and accept that, in that moment there's trust. In that moment there's no movement of grasping. That stillness, that utter stillness of mind, allows for the arising of trust and wisdom—the stillness of mind when there's no movement of grasping, no movement of avoidance.

Let me share an example from a couple of years ago, of how when the mind stops needing security so much, real trust can arise—needing the security of role, of location, or in my case, needing to know what was going to happen in the next moment.

I had been talked into, under great duress, going to another city to lead a weekend retreat, which I'd never done anything like before. I was totally petrified. I tried everything I could to get out of it, short of just flatly refusing. I tried to talk my way out of it to anyone who would listen, but I couldn't. I couldn't get out of it.

So I went. I had no familiarity with the location. I knew nobody there. It was a totally unfamiliar role. I had no past experience of doing the same thing. I just didn't have a clue how it would go. I didn't know if I could do it, and the thought terrified me. I was totally insecure, but I wasn't accepting the fact of the fear. I wasn't seeing that I was needing the security of knowing what would happen, that I was needing approval from other people, needing to be told, "You're great, it'll go fine, don't worry." Many people could tell me that, but I didn't believe it. I just wasn't seeing clearly how I was looking for security in the external situation. There was absolutely no trust.

Right before the thing started—it was in a room at a university and they were registering people—I went downstairs. There happened to be a chapel on the floor below, and I had nothing else to do, so I thought I might as well meditate. I was really sick of reading over the talk.

I'd really had it, so I said, well, I'll just sit. And in that moment, as soon as I quieted down, I confronted the fear and the insecurity and all that—everything just shifted. It was really interesting. None of that went away, but this incredible sense of trust arose. Not so much in the situation, not in myself, not in personality. The fear didn't go away, but trust arose in the seeing and the acceptance of the situation as it was in that mo-

ment—of the fear, and of knowing that since I had absolutely no idea of what should happen or what would be appropriate to happen, then what I wanted to happen didn't matter. And I could just trust in whatever was happening in that moment.

It was quite a powerful experience for me because it wasn't as if the fear or the insecurity went away. It was all still there, but there was this very strong sense of just being quite present with it. And the trust was like a palpable sense. It was really interesting.

From that experience is when I understood that trust is really very simple. I mean, this has been a lot of words, but it really is very simple because it's really not any different from awareness. It just comes down to the fact that there's nothing to do but see each moment's reality utterly clearly and acknowledge and accept that reality fully.

Sayadaw U Pandita uses the simile that clinging to anything for security is like trying to scoop up water in a butterfly net. I like that simile. It just shows the utter futility of it. And Krishnamurti says that reality has no continuity. No continuity. It is from moment to moment, ever new, ever fresh. I like that. Reality has no continuity.

So can we learn to live with that fact—that there's no continuity in reality? Can we live with the understanding that no security can be found anywhere in this world, that there's nowhere to take a stand outside of this moment, and that this moment has no continuity with the last moment or the next moment, because there's only this moment?

Or do we prefer, as I heard Christopher Titmuss say some time ago, to continue fooling ourselves, to continue hiding from reality by grasping at false security, by living with false trust? As long as we allow ourselves to prefer the illusion of being secure, we deny ourselves the chance to know what it means to be free. And in that we're denying ourselves the quality of trust.

As I said, all it takes is looking directly at reality right now and seeing clearly our fear and the grasping. When we are seeing clearly, each moment that we see clearly the nature of life, the nature of our existence, in that moment we have no more need to grasp at either external situations or at mind-created concepts for security. We have no need to grasp because from our own clear seeing, from the awareness of truth as it is from moment to moment, there's no more need to avoid. Because in that clear seeing there is trust, and in that trust is the end of grasping, the end of fear—because we see that there's no more need to grasp at anything. All that we need is right here in this moment.

I just want to end with a one-line quote from John Daido Loori again. He says, "We cannot love anything until we love and appreciate what is present in each moment." Until we love and appreciate what is present in each moment. It's really very simple.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 228

Working With Difficult Situations

Carol Wilson · 50 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses a question that arises frequently in meditation practice: what is the point of sitting with pain, restlessness, and difficulty? Drawing from both Tibetan teachings on turning adverse circumstances into a path of liberation and the Buddha's core teaching of the Four Noble Truths, she illuminates how our deeply conditioned tendency to equate pleasant with right and unpleasant with wrong creates much of our suffering.*
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> *Wilson examines the first two Noble Truths—dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and its cause in craving and aversion—showing how these ancient teachings remain immediately observable in our moment-to-moment experience. Through vivid personal examples, from traveling in India to an ordinary trip to the health club, she demonstrates how the constant movement of mind toward pleasure and away from pain distorts our perception of reality. Rather than finding this acknowledgment depressing, she suggests it brings tremendous release: "There's no more need for pretense."*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with overwhelming suffering, introducing the Buddha's concept of skillful avoidance—not the avoidance of aversion, but the wisdom to know when to widen attention and bring nourishment to the mind before returning to difficult experience. Wilson emphasizes that mindfulness is never strident or forcing; it is allowing. She closes with the Third Zen Patriarch's teaching that setting up what we like against what we dislike is "the disease of the mind," pointing to how understanding—not the manipulation of pleasant and unpleasant—is what truly liberates us.*

Something that comes up quite often in interviews is, what's the point of sitting with all this pain? What's the point of bringing my attention back to restlessness, to boredom, to negativity? It can start to seem like a long, difficult struggle, and it's easy to lose sight of why it's worth paying attention to these things.

There's a Tibetan teaching that talks about turning adverse circumstances or difficult circumstances into a path of liberation. And so that's what I want to talk about tonight—working with our relationship to what is difficult and painful in our life, in our sitting here, in our life at large. How to relate to what's going on so that we come to realize that situations that seem extremely adverse, extremely like obstacles, are actually, in

fact, a very intrinsic and necessary part of our path of understanding. Coming to understand that freedom, understanding, is attached to what is right here. Whatever is arising in the moment is a part of that, and there are no exceptions to this.

We get into so much conflict when we sit and in our lives because—well, this is rather simplistic, but largely because we're so conditioned to interpret anything that comes up that's unpleasant as meaning that it's wrong. Unpleasant equals wrong and pleasant equals right. And so when something unpleasant starts to happen, either it's wrong or I'm wrong. Here on retreat it means I'm doing something wrong, and I have to figure out what it is and change it so that things can get right, which usually means pleasant.

What's really vital for us to understand is that this perception, this interpretation, is completely inaccurate. What we're talking about is actually a radical shift in our relationship to life. Our relationship is what's coming up in this moment. Our retreat or even one sitting is a microcosm for the way that we relate in our whole life.

A difficult or painful experience arises here. It doesn't have to be anything super intense or deep. It can be a back pain, or maybe you get a cold, or maybe you're allergic to the food, or a lot of restlessness is coming up, or a lot of anger, negativity. Maybe it's simply that the breath isn't clear enough, and you know other times it's been a lot clearer. It's unpleasant because we don't like it.

Our tendency is, with any of these things—or anything else that you've probably experienced at least once today—to interpret it as an obstacle. If this would only go away, if I could only fix this, then I could really start meditating. Then I could really get into this retreat. It shows us that at some level there's an idea of what "good practice" means, and whatever it means, it definitely doesn't include this. So if this could go away, then maybe good practice could begin.

When we're involved in this—often it's quite conscious, but sometimes it's quite subtle and unconscious, and we don't realize we're making that comparison and assessment—we get involved in striving to change what's happening. In doing that, in trying to change what's happening and pulling away from it and denying it, we're denying what's true in this moment. We're moving out of the truth of this moment, trying to get somewhere else that matches some concept we have of what the truth is. A movement away from truth.

One of the things that's been most profound for me as my practice continues is that I keep understanding more and more that we grow in understanding, we grow in love and compassion, not in spite of all the difficulties and painful experiences that come

our way, but we grow through them in a way that they're almost necessary. I don't want to get into this kind of Pollyanna attitude of "Oh, I'm so glad I'm sick, it's such a gift." But really, we do grow through the difficulties when our relationship to what is coming is one of understanding and acceptance.

In the Buddhist cosmology, there are many different planes of existence, from hell realms up to these really high god realms. It's said that being born as a human is a very fortunate and rare birth, a very fortunate opportunity—and this is what's important, not whether you want to believe in the cosmology—because in our human realm, for most of us, there is a proper balance of pain and pleasure. In other words, there's certainly plenty of difficulty in our lives, but for most of us, it's not so much that we're completely overwhelmed. There certainly are humans in this world who are completely ground down by the amount of suffering, but most of us here—I would actually say all of us—that's not the case. And there's enough pleasure that we can open and be nourished and grow in understanding.

It's said that in some of the higher deva realms there's too much pleasure. Beings just kind of get into hanging out in these pleasure gardens and lose all their motivation—no desire to practice or be motivated to investigate. One teacher says that pleasure puts you to sleep and pain wakes you up. We wish it were the other way around, but it's not.

I want to acknowledge that certainly in my own life, and in this world, there are definitely times when the amount of suffering, the amount of pain, can seem quite overwhelming. Whether it's in our own being as we're practicing and we find some deeper levels of physical pain, deeper levels of emotional pain, some strong grief in our life. Maybe sometimes, as at this period in world history with all the conflict in the Middle East—how we're all involved in that and how it impacts us—sometimes the suffering that's going on, when you really open and turn into it, can seem unbearable and overwhelming. There are times when you think, how can I possibly begin to open to this suffering? It's too much; I just want to turn away.

But how can we begin to change our relationship to the unpleasant, to the difficult?

I want to share something that has been and continues to be really vital for me in working in this area, in giving me the energy to keep investigating, to keep meeting and opening to what is difficult. And that is really finding what inspires me to want to know the truth—what arises in me as a sense of commitment, a sense of urgency to really turn my energy toward facing what's true in this moment.

It might be different for each of us. For me, something that does this is a deep appreciation of the favorableness of my situation, often through an incredibly deep gratitude for the fortunate aspects of my life. This gets triggered when I open my eyes and start looking around at what's going on in the world.

For example, just last week I came back from India. Whenever I leave this so-called third world country, it really wakes me up to the amazing possibilities and opportunities I have in my life—seeing the grinding poverty, people working from morning to night under really horrible conditions just to get enough food to eat for that day, if they're lucky. There's no way to take a day off. To take a day off means you don't eat, you don't have anywhere to live.

Two years ago when I was in India, I went to Bodh Gaya, which is the spot where the Buddha was enlightened. It's a shrine now, with the descendant of the original Bodhi tree that he sat under. It's a real pilgrimage spot for Buddhists who come from all over the world, and I found it very inspiring—there's a real energy, a real power in that place.

I was struck by how many people live right there, making their living running tea shops and selling things to the tourists. But there's really no interest—not that there should be interest indeed at this moment—but there's just really no interest in awakening. They're simply living their lives.

And so there's the good fortune to have enough health to practice, enough leisure time, enough to eat, the opportunity to practice, and also the interest, which is really rather rare in the world. When I'm in a situation like that, when it awakens my sense of gratitude, it gives me the energy to inquire of myself: All right, I have this incredibly fortunate life—what's really important? What really matters to me? What do I want to do with my energy?

When that question comes up, for me the answer is really clear: to know the truth, to know love and compassion, to share the truth, to know peace. Really acknowledging that in one's heart, I find to be a very powerful force. It arouses, quite of itself, this sense of commitment, this sense of urgency, and a real willingness to open to and face whatever arises right now, because this is the way I can come to understand what freedom is, what peace is.

Sometimes it feels to me, and in talking with friends, that some people are almost afraid to really let that acknowledgment in—of what's really important to them. Almost as if they might be disappointed. They think, "Well, I really want to come to see the truth, but that might be for the Buddha, it might be for someone sitting in a cave in the

Himalayas. But I'm just an ordinary person trying to live my life. I'm not good enough for that." There's a fear of really letting it in, of really acknowledging the strength of one's purpose.

But I think it's important to realize that as human beings, we all have the potential for freedom. We all have the potential to be liberated. That's what's so inspiring to me, actually, when I reflect on the Buddha. When we took refuge the first night of the retreat, taking refuge in the Buddha to me was not refuge in the idea of him as a historical person, but in what he represents as a human being—same as me, same as you. That's our heritage as human beings. That's all of our potential.

Being at the Bodhi Tree somehow humanized it for me. I thought, "Oh, this is just a real place, a dusty little village, nothing so special." The Buddha might have been a special human being, but still he was a human being. And we're all special too.

Letting in that acknowledgment of that potential for ourselves, not holding back out of some idea we have of our limitations—this inspiration really gives me the courage, the conviction, to open to what's true right now, a willingness to face the moment, a commitment to simply bring full presence of mind, presence of being, to this moment. And that's all.

The Buddha said quite often, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." He's very pragmatic. And it is possible. For me, being willing to open to the possibility, to really acknowledge it to myself, inspires deep energy, a sense of urgency, and the willingness to meet whatever's arising.

This is a quote from Nisargadatta, an Indian wise man: "Because nothing physical or mental can give you freedom, you are free once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you."

And so we give our hearts and minds to this exploration, not binding ourselves with thoughts that it's too hard, that we could never do it, that this suffering is too much, let's just forget it.

Stop forging the chains that keep us limited.

One can have a moment, or even an hour, maybe even a day, of this really renewed openness and commitment—a courage that lets us come back to a difficult situation and be there in a new way, with openness, with mindfulness, with spaciousness. But still, a half an hour later, a day later, a minute later, everything clamps down again. It seems so continuously difficult. Drum up the inspiration again. Why? I keep asking myself this: why?

Joseph spoke last night about desire, about the power of that tendency in the mind. That's really what I want to speak to now, because it's such a deeply conditioned habit of mind that when a pleasant experience comes, the mind, the body even, leans into it. When an unpleasant experience comes, just the reverse—aversion, which is just the flip side of desire. Away, move away, block it out, deny it, change it. And when something neutral comes, you don't even notice it. You're bored and you space out and you look for something else.

This is really what the Buddha spoke to in his first and core teaching, the Four Noble Truths. Just this tendency of mind, grasping and pushing away, which can be so subtle, but it has such a profound effect on the way that we relate to our lives, on the way that we experience our lives.

I want to talk a little bit about it again, especially the first two of these noble truths, because they're really quite observable in action, even just in a few moments of sitting or walking here.

This first truth, this first teacher—the teacher of dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness—encompasses the whole range: from obvious deep pain and grief and sadness, unbearableness, to the unsatisfactoriness, the insecurity of impermanence, the fact that nothing lasts, that everything is transient, that no matter how pleasant something is, it's always fleeting. There's no resting place. There's nothing that can give us permanent pleasure. This is actually a very deep experience of unsatisfactoriness.

And it seems really obvious. When I think about it, I wonder, well, why do we have to make this grand proclamation—the first noble truth? It's not like it's a secret. But when you look, you don't really believe it. I saw this ad in the New York Times Magazine. It was for a top that said, "Permanent Pleasure." I thought, yeah, right, this is permanent pleasure. I'll buy some clothes. Anything can give us permanent pleasure! But we keep thinking we're going to find it somewhere out there in some experience.

This movement of the mind towards pleasure and away from the unpleasant is so deeply conditioned. And our ability to deny that it's happening, and our ability to deny the truth of painful or unsatisfactory experiences, is truly amazing to me.

A couple of examples. One was shocking to me in its obviousness. One time I was in a hospital and a doctor was doing some usual but fairly painful procedure and having a hard time doing it. It was really hurting. At some point, tears started coming out of my eyes. He just stopped and looked at me and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt." You can understand—it's too hard to let in pain. It's just steadier to deny what is even happening.

Or I watch myself when I'm traveling through India. There's so much pain and suffering, all right out on the street. In five minutes walking through a village in India, I see more physical pain and suffering than I see in ten years in this country. And I watch: how long can I stay open to all the starving people, people with just skin and bones, to the beggars, to the lepers without any fingers on their hands sometimes? Maybe five minutes, maybe ten minutes—it's overwhelming. And I just watch. I want to shut down, look straight ahead, not look around, not feel it. It's really quite an amazing thing to watch. I was watching that a lot this time.

On a more mundane, much more day-to-day ordinary level, I see how, from not really noticing what's going on, we keep grasping at ordinary experiences and then wonder why it doesn't satisfy us, why life still doesn't seem quite fulfilling.

This example I've used before. I belong to a health club near here, and one time in the fall I was with a friend. It was at the end of a long day, we were really tired, we needed to refresh ourselves and get out, and we said, "Well, we'll go swim in the pool together, and that'll be really refreshing." And it should have been.

And we thought it was. But then we got together and reconstructed what actually happened. It's quite illuminating.

We drive there—first it's a half-hour drive, and the whole time it's looking forward: "Okay, we'll get there, it'll be nice." We get there, I run into the women's dressing room, which they kept quite chilly, and I'm very sensitive to cold. So I was hurrying up, getting on my bathing suit, had to take a shower before I went in, it made me even colder, so this was extremely unpleasant. And I was hurrying through it to jump in the pool, which also was quite scary.

So I got in the pool, and I had goosebumps, but well, I'll start swimming. I'm swimming, swimming, swimming. After two laps, I finally got warm, and I thought, "Oh, this is nice." I got half a lap, maybe. Then my arms started hurting, and I started getting bored. I thought, "Oh, well, I'll hurry up and finish this, then I can go get in the sauna."

So I hurried up and finished that, and I got in the sauna, which was really nice. Well, you know, two minutes, three minutes. Then the bench started to hurt my sacrum because I can't really lie on hard wood. Then I'm really sweaty, really hot. "Oh, I feel really dizzy. I've got to get out of here." Went out, stood outside for about two minutes. "Oh, it's really cold. Now I'm okay. Now I can go back in the sauna." Went back in, came back out, got dressed, went upstairs, and my friend goes, "That was great."

And this is life. Which is nothing unusual.

The question might come up: who wants to look at life this closely? It's too depressing. You know, "I thought I was having a good time. Let's keep it that way." But I actually know none of you would be here going through this if you really thought that everything went hunky-dory. And I also really want to point out that that's not my experience. I don't think that's the experience at all—that looking this closely, that really acknowledging the extent of unsatisfactoriness, is depressing or oppressive. Quite the reverse.

In our daily lives, for instance when I was going swimming at this place, because we can keep moving—as soon as something unpleasant, even slightly unpleasant, not even a lot unpleasant, just a little unpleasant comes—we can immediately move, go to the next thing. We sort of mask the fact that things are so unsatisfactory, and so we don't understand why we're not feeling fulfilled. We don't really get it. What is this nagging feeling that something's out of sync?

But when you really open up and begin to look and acknowledge what's actually going on moment to moment, far from there being a sense of "Oh no, I can't bear it"—for me, it's quite the reverse. It's a huge release. It's like there's no more need for pretense. Sharon uses a quotation a lot from Miss America from 1950 or something, where they interviewed her twenty or thirty years later, and she said, "I'm just so tired of being tomorrow." And it's like that—there's no need for pretense. It doesn't mean complaining. It's just knowing what's really going on.

And I find this over and over. You have the same insight over and over and over, and sometimes it goes deeper and deeper. Each time I find suddenly in my life I feel caught up in some kind of struggle and I realize... well, I have to get to enough suffering that I'm actually driven to investigate. You know, if I think I can actually fix it, then I keep trying to fix it. But when that stops working and I'm actually driven to investigate, invariably I see that somewhere I'm still thinking there's some payoff. Somehow I'm still thinking I can arrange my external situation and my internal situation so that everything will be all right and I'll be happy.

And as soon as I see I'm doing this—and that's right, that's absolutely impossible; there's nothing, no experience internally or externally that's going to last, that can make me lastingly happy—knowing that is incredibly liberating. It just frees up this whole struggle, and there's actually a huge sense of joy and happiness arising. And this has happened to me over and over and over.

Another quotation from Reginald Perrin—when she had grasped the truth that the world is full of suffering,

You'll find the urge and the energy to go beyond it. Really seeing the calamity is the strong force of liberation. Really seeing what's going on.

This acknowledgement of suffering moves us from a relationship to our life of fear or blame or self-judgment or aversion to one of clarity, of the possibility of acceptance, of clear action instead of reaction, of joy. It allows for the clear stream that opens up into the true nature of reality. So the First Noble Truth is actually a very profound teaching. It has so much beneath its surface.

The second truth the Buddha spoke of: the cause of this unsatisfactoriness begins not in the difficult situations themselves, but in that movement of mind towards the pleasant—craving, clinging. The word actually translates as thirst, that yearning for the pleasant. And this also includes the movement of mind away from the unpleasant, that aversion.

This movement towards and away, this deeply ingrained, almost unconscious reaction to stimuli—this is what distorts our perception of reality. It's why we don't know and live in truth, because we're caught in this moving to and fro. And out of that we keep forging the chains that bind us. We keep looking for that permanent pleasant.

An example often used in the scriptures is of someone holding onto an iron ball that's red hot and burning, but somehow afraid to put it down. The very thing causing the suffering, and yet afraid to let go of it.

Mindfulness—the quality of clear, non-judging attention that we're cultivating here—is our very strong ally in waking up to and being free from this tendency of mind of clinging and aversion.

Using this example of the ball again: at first there's incredible suffering. One doesn't even know what's going on. You might not even acknowledge that pain is happening. It's assumed that we need that ball. It's just taken as a given.

With increasing attention, with mindfulness, we start to really notice the pain. And we know we could put the ball down, but we're not sure that we don't need it. We're really afraid to let go. Somehow we think it'll bring us happiness. Or maybe it's just so familiar, and we'd much rather have something familiar and painful than let go and move into the unknown. That's really scary. So we hold on.

With continuing mindfulness, we start to see that actually all that's binding us to that suffering is our desire and our fear. And at some point we really get the senselessness of it, and we can just let go.

Seeing the reality is the power that can free us from the burden. Understanding what's really going on is so powerful. We don't need someone to come from the outside and wash us all away. We really need continued presence of attention, and the truth reveals itself. We put down the burden.

That middle portion can be a hard time—the time when we know it's just because we're holding on that it hurts so much, but somehow we can't put it down. That can be really hard, and sometimes it can seem to last a really long time. We don't need to think of it in terms of time, because any moment is a moment that could be clear enough to let go. But even so, hard as it is, this is the suffering that wakes us up. Because in there is the right attitude, the willingness to be with it, open to it, and understand what's going on.

The Buddha said once that suffering either ripens as confusion or it ripens as wisdom. I really love that, because it's just so obvious—the two different ways we can relate to the same experience.

Take something really simple, not too complex seemingly: you're sitting here and there's a pain in the knee. What happens with confusion? There's a pain in the knee. We notice it. There's a lot of annoyance. "If I was only being mindful, then it wouldn't hurt so much. If I was relating to it correctly, I wouldn't be suffering. Why is this here anyway?" We get into self-judgment. We get into judgment about meditation. We get into a real struggle with ourselves. Then we say, "Okay, forget it."

I'm just going back to the breath, which seems to be impossible. And then we get into a whole other string of self-judgment. This is pain that is ripening as confusion. It's just getting into more and more of that—somehow confusing because there's a sense that the pain and the dissatisfaction have to be fixed, that it's a sign I'm doing something wrong.

The same suffering can ripen as strength. Because again, it exists in the attitude, not in the physical sensation. It's really important to remember that while mindfulness is a very penetrating awareness, a real clear knowing of what's happening in the moment, the reason we can know what's happening is because the energy of mindfulness is also totally non-violent. It's totally non-discriminating. With mindfulness, there's no imperative to be with pleasant experience and ignore unpleasant experience. When an experience or sensation arises, mindfulness doesn't say, "Well, I don't really want to look at that anymore. Let's wait until something more pleasant comes along." That's just the tendency of mind again—the craving and the aversion. Mindfulness is a very focused but totally non-violent quality, very interested but spacious.

And so when pain arises with that quality of mindfulness, we're simply noting, noticing, investigating the sensations. Simply noticing and noting the unpleasantness, and also any aversion or dislike or fear that arises in the mind—that's all fine. Just allowing it to be as it is and noticing it clearly. And whenever that whole whirl of thoughts and confusion starts, seeing that as thinking and gently coming back to the actual experience. Not to change anything. That's what's so important: to know for oneself what's really happening, because that's the truth of the moment.

We do this over and over, and we'll often find there might be just one moment when we experience quite deeply that suddenly what was so excruciating and unbearable and so aversive is suddenly—oh, it's just sensation, and that's all. It's totally okay. That's a difficult moment, but it's an incredibly illuminating moment. It's like suddenly, oh, right. It really is in the relationship that the suffering lies, not in the physical sensation. This is the movement from confusion to truth.

I think it was Ajahn Buddhadasa, a Thai meditation master, who said that there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering. And so that means that mindfulness, an opening to whatever is arising, is essential. Sometimes what's arising is suffering, but it's the suffering that leads to the end of suffering.

I do want to emphasize, though, that the end of suffering does not mean the end of unpleasant experience. The two are not equated. Again, the suffering is in the relationship, not in the pleasantness or unpleasantness of experience. In that moment when one was clearly with the sensation and suddenly it was just sensation—no aversion, no problem—that's when we really see that the suffering is in the resistance, in the denial of the situation, not in the situation itself.

This is what I call using adverse circumstances as the path, as a doorway into understanding what the truth of the moment is, into understanding that peace is beyond the presence or absence of pleasant and unpleasant.

As long as we're unaware of these tendencies of mind—of avoidance, of clinging—so long will our perception of reality continue to be distorted. An image that I like a lot, that speaks to me: it's as if, when we're unaware of these movements of mind, we're in a room and we think it's a prison. Although the door is wide open, we don't see it. Because we're so busy thinking, "Somehow if I can get the furniture all arranged right, then it'll be more pleasant." We're so busy rearranging the furniture to try and make it more livable that we never think to just stop a minute and open up. And then we see—oh, the door's wide open. There's no problem.

It's almost inconceivable, though, that the real suffering is in our need to make the situation more pleasant rather than just stop and be with what's there.

So in our practice here, know that any time there's a sense of struggle, a sense of conflict, it signals that there's something happening in that moment that's not being accepted, that somehow is not okay. It signals that in that moment there's a movement away from the truth of what's happening into some idea of what we wish was happening. We can use struggle as a signal to come home, as a signal to just come back to rest in what's happening right now. And knowing that that takes practice, that we can do that—we don't need to be afraid of this moment.

Nisargadatta again: "What the mind knows is restlessness, with all its many modes and grades. The pleasant are considered superior and the painful are discounted. What we usually call progress is merely a changeover from the unpleasant to the pleasant. Changes can't bring us to the changeless."

I feel like that's really profound. We could spend our whole lives trying to change all the unpleasant to the pleasant—because changes can't bring us to the changeless.

Let's stop rearranging the painful and just settle into being here in the truth of this moment.

I obviously don't mean to imply that this is easy, or always easy. It might be easy in one moment. But again, this movement of clinging and aversion is so strong and so often unconscious that it can be quite subtle and very hard to be aware of. I also want to say that even when we are aware of it, there are times for many of us when we don't become balanced and spacious all at once, and it doesn't just stay that way. Nothing just stays that way.

And so sometimes the suffering that we run into, as I said earlier, can seem in that moment to be stronger than the balance of mind that's there to meet it. I find for myself, and for most people I know, we all have moments or hours or days where we really feel like we're drowning—that we're overwhelmed with suffering. As I know now, with the war that's going on and just the constant influx of information and all the mists of our emotions and reactions, at least my own, it can be excruciatingly painful. There are certainly times when it seems like my clarity and the balance in my mind is not equal to the amount of suffering that seems to be coming in. That can even happen off and on in a sitting when you have that one particular pain that returns every sitting and gets worse and worse and just seems to be excruciating.

I could say that often, especially as we practice for a while, we can sometimes turn the concept of opening to pain against ourselves and use it as another way to beat ourselves up. "I should be able to face this. I should be able to stay without moving no matter how much it hurts. I should be able to stay open and loving in the face of huge conflict going on in the world. I should be able not to be drowning in grief even though someone I really love has died or gone away."

Sometimes in a sitting you can force yourself to stay in the pain, and sometimes this works—we come back to a place of balance and equanimity of mind. But sometimes we end up in a super struggle of willpower and self-judgment and forcing, and the conflict gets even stronger.

We need to remember that mindfulness is never strident. Mindfulness is not forcing. We can't force mindfulness. We can't force openness. We can't force acceptance—these are kinds of contradictions. Mindfulness is allowing.

And so from time to time, in retreat or in our life, we might find that there's a point where we're just feeling completely submerged, and opening is out of the question. We hardly even know who we are and what's going on. The Buddha spoke of what he called skillful avoidance, and it's important. Not the avoidance of aversion—this is not a concept to say, "Oh, it's skillful avoidance, I don't have to sit the rest of the day because I'm kind of tired." That's not it. But it's avoidance when you realize mindfulness isn't happening, when what's happening is we're getting overwhelmed.

And so we can move in gently, move in slowly. When there's really excruciating pain, it doesn't mean turn the attention there and stay for the hour until you feel like you're made out of concrete and you're going to crack from the tension. It's moving slowly, and when you really feel no more mindfulness is happening and you're just going to snap, open up the attention. Come back to the breath. Feel the whole body. Have a wideness of attention. This is skillful avoidance. It's not spacing out, but it's skillfully bringing some nutrients to the spirit, to the mind. And then again, gently move back in to what's happening. Never from forcing does the truth open up.

I also feel it's very important, as we begin to think about or reflect on opening to the difficult, to realize that difficult and unpleasant is part of our experience—it's not all of our experience. Sometimes people tend to get unbalanced on that side. They kind of discount or ignore or avoid anything pleasant that's happening. This is also aversion. If in the moment there is a sense of joy, that's fine—acknowledge it. Again, we don't want to cling, but we need to acknowledge that that's what's happening, not get imbalanced in the other direction.

By themselves, neither pleasure nor pain enlightens one. Only understanding enlightens us. Only understanding.

So don't undervalue a moment where you're present with whatever's happening with a clarity of attention—one of those moments where your mindfulness is non-judging, where you're seeing and feeling clearly, so you know there's no problem. Don't undervalue it, even if the next moment things seem like a total struggle. Because that one moment of real mindfulness, presence, clarity, and non-judging is very powerful.

When we know for ourselves what the true relationship is—that's the true understanding of the heart and mind. Not understanding through the intellect, but understanding from what we've seen and known for ourselves. And that's the understanding that can lead to liberation.

This is the understanding that gives us the courage, the conviction, to know that we can be with whatever arises from our past. We don't have to be afraid of facing whatever's arising in this moment. It's not like we have a choice as to what arises from our path anyway. Really, the only choice is how we meet it.

I want to close with a quotation from the Third Zen Patriarch. It's a long poem—this is just a small piece—but it's one of my favorite writings:

When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinion for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things.

CHAPTER 229

What Mindfulness Is

Carol Wilson · 46 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the precise nature of mindfulness (sati) and how it differs from ordinary awareness. She explains that mindfulness is not a vague general awareness but a quality of total, undivided attention—giving one's whole heart and mind to whatever is present without fragmentation or resistance.*
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> *Wilson explores why our experience so often feels fragmented and conflicted despite our potential for peace. She identifies the deeply conditioned tendencies of mind: moving toward the pleasant, pushing away the unpleasant, spacing out during neutral experiences, and identifying with changing phenomena as a permanent self. Drawing on psychological research from Daniel Goleman's work, she illustrates how these tendencies create perceptual blind spots that filter our experience of reality, keeping us out of touch with what is actually happening.*
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> *The talk illuminates how mindfulness practice works to heal this fragmentation. When we bring total, spacious, non-judgmental attention to experience—what Wilson playfully calls "Super Bowl mind"—we begin to distinguish between bare experience and our interpretations about it. This clear seeing naturally gives rise to both wisdom and compassion. Rather than struggling to change ourselves or achieve special states, we simply learn to be fully present, moment by moment, allowing the peace that is our true nature to shine forth. Wilson emphasizes that this is a gradual process of waking up again and again, building trust in our own direct experience of freedom.*

Tonight I want to talk about what I call a kind of nuts and bolts talk. Basically, I want to talk about mindfulness—the quality of it—so we get a feel for what this energy of mindfulness actually is and how it works.

As Christina spoke of last night so eloquently, our path as human beings, our path of awakening, is one that leads to harmony, to a sense of stillness, to peace, to real freedom from conflict. If that's the path of our awakening, which it is, it's our potential as human beings. And it's right here in this moment, this very moment, nowhere else. Nowhere to go, nothing else to try and get. But if it's right here in this moment, how come that's not our experience? I mean, what's going on?

When we come to this practice, we come with various ideas about what we're going to get, but overall, for most of us, we come with a strong intention, a strong commitment to open, to understand, to open our heart. We have to have a strong intention or commitment, or we wouldn't get through nine days of this. And so we're coming with this belief in our potential and the commitment to investigate and open, and we sit down and what happens? The mind's all over. We're attacked by the hindrances. We're lost in restlessness and knee pain. Our thoughts are flying every which way. And for many, the experience is definitely not one of harmony. If this is a path of harmony, how come after two days you can feel in less harmony than you felt for the last six months of your life? What's going on?

And how does mindfulness work? How is it that sitting and being present with the breath, being present with a pain in the knee, being present with the sound of the buzzsaw—how does this help us see through this false idea of separation, of conflict that we seem to be living under? How does being present with the breath, for example, help to bring us out of confusion?

So what is mindfulness? Vipassana meditation, translated loosely as insight—actually, one of the translations of it means just to see things as they are. Simply that. The key tool to seeing things as they are, to knowing things as they are, is this quality of mindfulness that we're cultivating.

The practice is not to become different from how we are. We're not trying to somehow change ourselves around to become perfect beings. We're not trying to achieve a certain mental state, a certain set of experiences, or get to some plane where there will be peace and then we stay there and that's it. It's not about that at all. It's to open deeply, to know fully, to the truth that is always here, already right here, right now, nowhere else. And this is what mindfulness can help us do.

We often loosely use the synonym of awareness for mindfulness, but this quality of mindfulness is actually much more specific than a vague, general sort of awareness. We can say, "Well, I'm aware that I'm sitting here and I've been thinking for ten minutes." If you asked me where I was, I would be able to say, "Yeah, I'm here in this room." There's an awareness. But mindfulness is much more specific, much richer than this kind of vague overall awareness.

It's a quality of total attention, giving one's total heart and mind to whatever is present in our experience at this moment. It's a quality of attention that is not fragmented in any way. And it's this total commitment to being present to whatever's happening in this moment that allows for our seeing through our mind-created confusion about what's really going on.

There's a quotation from Krishnamurti that I really love, which to me expresses this quality: "When you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there is no room for fear, no room for conflict, no room for contradiction."

It's this quality of total attention. We all have moments of that—when your attention is totally with a breath, say, or it could be anything. When you're totally with the breath, in that moment there isn't a sense of conflict. There's really no problem. It doesn't matter how the breath is. The attention is completely unified; our being is completely unified around this sensation of tautness, for example. In that, there's no conflict. There's peace.

So why is it so rare in our experience? Why do we seem to struggle so? Because it's not really so esoteric, just being present for a sensation of the breath. So what's the struggle?

There are strong tendencies in our mind. It's like a deeply ingrained habit, a groove that our minds tend to run into. If there's something pleasant or pleasurable in our experience, we move toward it, either mentally—just kind of wanting it—or physically if we can. If it's unpleasant, painful, fearful, just a little uncomfortable, the tendency of mind is to back off, get away, avoid, deny. If it's kind of neutral, we tend to not even notice it, kind of space out.

And the fourth tendency, really, is the one we call the tendency to identify with any particular aspect of our experience as being me, as being some unchanging, permanent entity that's me. All of these tendencies are very strongly conditioned. When you start to look at what we're identifying with as me, in one moment it's the body, a particular pain.

"Oh, my knee, I'm really going to hurt myself." Next moment, "I'm feeling so restless. This is really unpleasant. I don't like being like this." And the next moment that's forgotten and there's a nice smell. "Well, I'm really hungry. I'm just starving. I'll never make it to lunch."

Just start to notice how many different "me's" there have been just in the course of today. And each one, when it's unexamined, we think, "Oh, this is me. This is real. This is lasting." And when it goes, we kind of don't notice it because the next one's real, it's lasting, it's going to stay. Very deeply ingrained tendency.

When these tendencies are operating and we're not aware of them—and that's the key—when we're not examining them, we don't know they're operating. They filter our whole experience. It's like we're looking through the tendency to identify, or we're looking through the way the mind pushes away from something unpleasant. We don't know that's there, and that's how we interpret reality. We think we're perceiving accurately, but we're not, because we don't know in a certain moment, if we're not paying attention, that these filters are operating on our consciousness.

They're so deeply ingrained that, for example, with difficult or unpleasant situations—when we're sitting here, just a little one, a pain in the knee or restlessness, something mild, I'm not talking about really intense suffering—it's so deeply ingrained that the mind moves away that, just without thinking about it, we will interpret something that's difficult or unpleasant as being wrong. "I'm doing something wrong because it doesn't feel good." And then this situation becomes an obstacle. "Well, if this pain in my knee goes away, then I could pay attention. Then I could be meditating. If I wasn't restless, then I could start meditating. After lunch, I won't be hungry anymore, and that's when my meditation will be good."

You know, we notice, well, after lunch you're not hungry, but you're sleepy and tired. So just before tea, maybe that hour, then it'll be okay to meditate, and now I'll just stick it out or get up and walk.

The paradox that we don't see if we're not aware of this tendency is that when we quit trying to run away from the difficulty and actually give it our total full attention, it often ceases to be a problem. If there's a slight pain in the knee and we're really fighting it, you turn your full attention to it, total attention, and suddenly you're just with it. In that moment it's not a problem. It's an unpleasant sensation in the knee. It's not a big deal. The only difference is our attitude—this willingness to be totally present without fighting or resisting what's going on.

But because we're so conditioned not to be aware that we're fighting what's happening, our perception of our experience can tend to be really skewed. In other words, we have a kind of selective presence. We're present for certain aspects of our experience and we're just totally not present for others. And this can even operate on a very unconscious level. We don't even know we're not present.

My favorite example that really helped me to see how this worked is some experiments that were detailed in a book called *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* by a psychologist named Daniel Goleman, who's done Vipassana for years. These experiments show ways that our mind can block out perceiving stimuli that are perceived as potentially

anxiety-provoking or painful. It's not like we consciously say, "I don't want to pay attention to that"—it doesn't even make it to the point where we're aware of having a conscious choice.

He starts with a physical example, a description of a man—I think it was Livingston, of Stanley and Livingston—who at one point in his African adventures was being chewed on by a lion. And he remained conscious through this. He obviously lived through it because he wrote about it; I don't think he was writing at the time. What he noticed was that he was conscious and he was not conscious of pain. Obviously the body was being really hurt, but there was some kind of sensory blocking that kept the awareness of pain from making it through to his consciousness. This could probably be seen as a life-supporting factor of the human mind and body, because it would allow you that superhuman energy in a moment of crisis.

They went on to do experiments showing that this same function is operating in ways that are totally not helpful or especially useful. But what was perceived as threatening to life, as real pain, is now stimuli that our mind somehow sees as anxiety-provoking. So they did this minor experiment where they had a bunch of subjects and showed them several different pictures. All they had to do was look at the picture and then later remember and describe what had been in each of the drawings. And they had some kind of way—I don't know how they do this—of measuring where the eyeball looked. So they not only had what the person remembered, but actually they could measure where in the picture they had looked.

And so the pictures would be just normal—like a man sitting reading a newspaper—and then something that for certain people might provoke anxiety, like one would have a really sexually suggestive element, and then a guy sitting reading a newspaper. Two pieces that didn't go together at all.

They could measure where these subjects' eyes looked, and they found—that's the particular one I remember, but there were several different stimuli that could provoke anxiety—they found that in the people for whom, for instance, the sexually suggestive image provoked anxiety, when they went to say what the pictures were, they didn't even remember that part. They remembered a picture of a man reading a newspaper.

And even more strange, they could measure that somehow these subjects kept their eyes from even looking at the part of the picture that would provoke anxiety. It's fascinating to me.

So there's a way that we have of blocking that which is potentially unpleasant in our experience. And there are times when this is perhaps necessary for survival. Like many instances of young children who have been really mistreated, abused—if they were to remember that and have to stay in the same situation, it would be almost impossible. And so that memory is gone, really gone, until it can be retrieved decades later. But often in our experience this blocking is not necessary, and what we're doing is having a really skewed experience of reality. So that's how the mind moving away from the unpleasant filters our perception.

It's the same with the tendency of the mind to move toward the pleasant. They did another experiment. This demonstrates how when there's something you're fixated on, something you want, it gives you tunnel vision. You see what you're looking to see and nothing else.

So they had a short video of a basketball game, a real fast one, balls flying back and forth, and the subjects were instructed to count and report how many times the ball was passed. That was their job, and they did it. In the middle of this video, a woman dressed in white with a white parasol kind of ambled across the middle of the basketball court. Nobody doing the experiment mentioned this at the end. And when they were asked about it, they couldn't believe it had happened. If you went back and looked again, you'd never be able to miss it. It's like how when we're looking for something we think is lost and it's staring us in the face—because we think it's lost, we can't see it.

So our expectations skew what we perceive. They skew our experience of reality. This is what we call delusion. This is the confusion of mind.

And because we have these blind spots in our experience of reality—blind spots brought about through our not seeing the tendencies of mind to go towards the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, to space out if it's not interesting enough, to identify with things—we're not seeing. We don't know what's actually going on. If we don't pay attention, this is how we stay out of touch with reality. It's why we feel that there's this weird sense of separation and fragmentation and we can't figure it out.

I think it's one of the reasons that the Buddha said, you know, everyone wants to be happy. All people are doing is trying to find love and happiness. But we keep doing it in ways that increase our confusion and our suffering because we don't really see clearly. We can't see what's happening.

This fascinates me, just how this works—this skewed perception.

Now, as long as these filters on our experience are operating without our knowing it and without our understanding, we continue to act and feel confused, separated. So this is where the power of mindfulness comes in.

Wisdom, real understanding—just what really is—arises with our ability to be fully, totally present with just what is in any moment. That ability to be fully and totally present without conflict is what enables us to know and experience clearly, for just what it is. Because when we're with it without resistance, without expectation, nothing to protect, just there with it, open, vulnerable, we can really be with it, see what it really is.

So this quality of mindfulness, this total presence, as we cultivate it, the light of awareness begins more and more to shine equally on anything that arises in our experience. We start to be less discriminating, not so selective. More things start to come up into our awareness and we're fully with whatever it is, without this unconscious to-ing and fro-ing. And this includes beginning to be aware even of these filters, even of the movement of the mind of wanting, the movement of the mind of resisting, and aware of that energy of identification.

As experiences that have been fearful or unattended to in our life begin to be received with attention, we're not so driven to deny the painful. We're not so driven to only seek out the pleasant and suffer so much when we can't have it.

And it's this drive—this drive towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant—that is the source of our conflict. It's not the experiences themselves. It's our drive to deny and to cling that's the source of our conflict.

And with this mindfulness that begins to shine equal light on whatever arises, this to-ing and fro-ing of the mind begins to cease. There are moments when it isn't happening. There are moments when this to-ing and fro-ing of the heart and mind isn't going on, and the stillness of heart, the peace of what we really are, is able to shine forth. It's not like we're going somewhere else. It's just that this to-ing and fro-ing stops for a second, and there can be this sense of real peace, of harmony.

And that's really our true nature.

On retreats and off retreats, I think probably all of us have had moments of experience of this. I can think back to many times. It tends to happen more on retreat because I'm practicing being mindful—where there's just a moment of exquisite beauty. And if you were describing it later, well, it was the sunset, it was so exquisite. Or the way the

shadow filters through the leaves in a tree, or a flower, or the way a certain person was walking. A sip of tea, a step in walking meditation. There are these moments of exquisite stillness and beauty.

It's not that suddenly this tree is the most magnificent tree that ever existed on the face of the earth, or that this step was some kind of really special step. What's going on is that those filters of wanting and pushing away and identification aren't active in that moment. And so there's this real sense of connection, of harmony, of peace. It's not that the experience itself is so different. And if we went back and tried to recreate it—let me just drink this tea in the same way and have this sip again—it doesn't do it. Because the mind's wanting like crazy. Forget it. It'll never work.

But it's nothing so esoteric. It's a moment of the mind and heart being fully connected and present without this to-ing and fro-ing.

So these tendencies of wanting, aversion, pushing away, confusion, identification—yes, they're really deep and strong. They arise really often, and that's part of what's happening when we sit. You sit down and you're lost in aversion, you're lost in restlessness, and the mind's all over the shop. You're starting to see what's going on. When we're not paying attention, we often don't see it on such a subtle level. So they're deep and they're strong—and they're also impermanent. They come and they go. It's not our intrinsic nature. If it were, we'd be wasting our time here.

Something the Buddha often said, which lately has been inspiring me a lot: when he would talk about working for freedom from suffering and purifying the mind—in other words, moving so that we're not so caught in greed and aversion and delusion—he'd say, "If it weren't possible, I wouldn't tell you to do it." And that inspires me a lot.

So when we're willing to bring our full energy, our commitment, our attention to whatever's happening now—the pain, the breath—we start to see that what we assume to be so in a particular moment isn't necessarily true at all. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, poet, and peace activist—I quote him a lot—says that in order to have a correct perception of reality, we need to have a direct encounter with what's happening. Pretty straightforward. That's what mindfulness is: giving us a direct encounter right now with this moment.

So what are some qualities, actually energetic qualities, of mindfulness that we can experience when we're being mindful? Even as I talk, if you have a sense of feeling it in yourself, not just taking it in intellectually, that's helpful.

Mindfulness is a real alert, total attention, and at the same time it's relaxed. It's an alert attention that doesn't come from a driving force. It comes rather from interest. And attention that springs from interest is quite natural, quite connected. We're all capable of really strong interest. Sometimes you might think, well, the breath—it's not that interesting. How can I bring interest to it? But first, to know that you're capable of really strong interest helps a lot.

This is my current favorite example—I can only use it a couple more times this year. January in San Francisco was during the Super Bowl, and I knew quite a few people there. Every single person I knew or knew of was glued to their television set during the three hours of this match. The city kind of stopped. It was quite amazing. And watching it with people, the quality of interest—especially during the first half—was remarkable. No move went undiscerned that the quarterback made, or that special wide receiver. They were all San Francisco fans, so they were really into it. It was amazing. And this was just a wide, broad spectrum of people. We're all quite capable of this really connected, total attention. No sound, nothing else would go on. When the commercial came, attention completely dropped. As soon as the commercial ended—boom.

It was fascinating. So if we can do this with a football game, we can bring the Super Bowl mind to our life process. We might think that breath is boring, but really, our life process is a lot more interesting than we give it credit for.

ultimately interesting than a football game. And if we think the breath is boring, think about what it's like when you have a really bad cold. Then suddenly you're really fascinated with the breath. Or if you have the potential of lung disease. I just had to have a pulmonary test, and these incredible contraptions they use – it just tuned me in to how much could go wrong with the lungs and what that would be like, not to be able to breathe freely. It's really quite interesting, the breath. It's worth my attention.

So we can bring this quality, the Super Bowl mind, to whatever's happening in our life process. It's worth it.

Mindfulness has other qualities. Actually, when I'm talking about the attention with the Super Bowl, that is not complete mindfulness, because it has a quality of wanting a certain result, looking for a certain thing to happen. Those people definitely wanted San Francisco to win. It wasn't like, "Oh well, whoever catches the ball, that'll be interesting." So that quality is not mindfulness. The total attention is. But mindfulness is relaxed, totally non-manipulative, non-violent, not looking for any result, no expectation.

So we bring that same quality of attention, but with no expectation of any result, simply because this is the experience of our mind and body in this moment. This is life right now. It's almost attention with a spirit of loving-kindness, of mettā, towards whatever it is that's arising – towards one's sense of oneself, towards the emotion that's arising, if it's sadness, towards a pain, towards a sound, towards feeling hot. It doesn't matter. It's an attention that's alert but with a real loving spaciousness of mind.

I'm trying to give different images. An image that helps me a lot with this sense is an evening just when the moon is rising with a star. I remember this image really clearly. There's such a sense of the space around that, really holding and cradling the moon and the star. It's that sense of complete spaciousness allowing whatever were to come into that space. There's no sense of, "Well, the star's in the way, it's not in the right relationship to the moon, they should change." But a total spacious acceptance – whatever comes in is fine, it's held, it's cradled, it goes out, that's fine. Very loving, spacious, total presence with whatever arises.

And in this, the whole range of experiences comes and goes, and we're just totally present for each one.

So, for example, here in retreat, if we think we know what good practice feels like or looks like, or we have some idea of what it is we're wanting to get or do, and we don't notice that, it makes it really hard to have this sense of openness and cradling for experiences that come along that don't match our idea, our expectation. And then again, right away, we're in conflict. Right away, we're in struggle. If there's no special thing to happen but we're just fully meeting whatever arises with kindness, with spaciousness, with attention, there's not a problem. And then we can see, more likely, what's really going on.

This spacious non-judging quality of mindfulness is what allows for the next aspect. And even though I'm saying this sequentially, you realize this is all going on at once. It's just that to talk about things we have to separate them and break them out.

But in this non-judging spacious presence and alertness, it allows us to know the actual bare experience of a moment. As opposed to all our ideas about it, our interpretations about it, our concepts about it, it lets us tell the difference between what's actually going on and what we're thinking about and constructing on top of that. This is how we see directly without the veil of interpretation.

We all know the difference. But often our interpretations and concepts are so subtly tied into the experience that we get all caught up and intertwined and can't really tell the difference.

A real simple example. If you're going on with the breathing and your breath turns out to be really tight and rigid and controlling, and you start to think, "God, this is just what I'm like. I'm such a rigid, controlled, uptight person." And each breath this just gets stronger until each breath is a torment. Each breath is further proof of what a totally horrible person you are. This is a real example of confusing our actual experience with all our interpretations.

Bring the energy of mindfulness to the experience and what is it? Well, on the in-breath it's really tight and constricted. That's the experience. Tightness.

and constriction, and then there's a thought: "Such a rigid, uptight person." That's a thought. It might or might not be true, but in the moment the experience is simply one of tightness and constriction, and then this judging thought. When we can bring this total attention to it, it's much easier to be with the actuality of tightness and constriction.

Yeah, that's tightness and constriction. That's okay. Oh, and I'm really judging that. Okay. Just simply seeing what is and not confusing our interpretations for the actual experience. It doesn't mean we chuck out all concepts or all interpretations—of course, they're often helpful. But knowing it for what it is, and knowing what we're actually experiencing for what it is.

This comes about through the power of mindful attention, through simply being present again and again and again, without judging. The more we learn to be present moment by moment—and that's why we just be with the breath, be with the lifting of the foot, be with the pain in the knee, be with the sound—what we're learning the feel of is what that feels like, how it is simply to be present. A moment of that is what begins to allow for the stillness, as I said before, to shine forth.

When we're present, when there's a presence with what's going on without all these veils of interpretation, more and more the conditions are present for deep understanding to arise. Because understanding is simply seeing what actually is, what already is. And so when there's this stillness of mind that comes from our willingness to just be present without resistance or clinging, understanding arises, clear seeing arises, of itself—because we're no longer blinded by our interpretations and assumptions.

And what's so nice actually is that with the understanding, also arises—actually it seems to be mingled—a deep expression and sense of love and compassion. Really the twin wings of the Buddha's teaching are that of wisdom or understanding and that of

compassion and love. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Without understanding we are unable to love." And so with the arising of understanding—simply this clear seeing—love and compassion also begin to spring forth quite naturally.

As we develop this energy of mindfulness, we're no longer so driven to avoid pain and seek out pleasure. We begin to get it that it's not what's happening that brings peace or absence of conflict, but it's our relationship to what's happening that makes all the difference. And so, as we no longer hide from pain, we're able to open to our own painful and difficult situations—physical pain, emotional pain, difficult situations in our life.

It's when we can be with our own pain that we're able to open to and be with the pain of others. Because it doesn't trigger off fear of pain in ourselves. We don't have to be afraid of it anymore. And so difficult situations in our life are no longer so in the way. It's no longer, "I've got to get rid of this in order for my growth to continue." Actually, it's really true that the difficult situation—a sickness, a difficult situation in life, grief—can actually serve as the source of our growth, as the catalyst for our healing, for our coming to heal our sense of isolation and separation. That's when we give mindful attention to the difficulty. Whereas when we are afraid or don't know to pay attention, the difficulty actually becomes the source of our sense of fragmentation, simply when we don't remember to look.

Here's just a little example of how a difficult situation can really turn around when we change our attitude. Well, this is not really difficult, just unpleasant. But I was a couple of years ago on an Indian overnight train, in a sleeping compartment that you share with four people. I was traveling alone, and three middle-aged Indian men were in the other three bunks. You're just lying there eye to eye. And then their whole families moved in. I was really like, "I want my privacy." And they just stare. It's not impolite to stare in India—it's just a whole different way of relating to people. Physical proximity isn't considered rude. Lying there and staring at you isn't considered rude. To me it was like, "Get back. I just want my peace."

And so I spent a lot of the night feeling kind of closed off, aversive, paranoid. It was definitely me and them, and I wanted them to leave. And at some point I kind of got it—what I was doing—and I changed it from "me and them" to "Oh, here we are all together in this compartment." You know, it's us. I just quit fighting and decided to be present, instead of present in body but in mind trying to really not be there.

And the whole—I mean, there was no problem. We suddenly got chatty. They went out and bought me little snacks at the station. We ended up just having a great time the last couple of hours.

And I really learned a lot about where separation and conflict and fragmentation comes from. Even a minor unpleasant incident can really transform into a way to heal ourselves from our sense of separation. Really, all I had to do was remember to be fully present. It didn't take anything else.

As we're more and more present, seeing more clearly what is without fighting it, the sense of connectedness, the sense of love and compassion starts to shine, to spring forth from our heart naturally. It's no longer a "should"—you know, "I should be this loving person." It's not being compassionate out of guilt because I have so much and they don't. It's just a natural expression of who we really are.

I do want to emphasize that for most of us, this is a process. It's not like we have a few moments of clear seeing and then it's all done—we're just living in love and compassion and total understanding. It's a process. It means being willing to wake up and pay attention in this moment, now. And being awake in this moment is only this moment. And now, in this moment, it means waking up and paying attention in this moment. That's all. It's quite simple. It's nothing so esoteric. The experience of total presence and mindfulness is not necessarily some big fireworks going off. It's easy to overlook. But don't overlook it, because it's really important.

We'll all meet situations in our life—here, outside of here—that are too painful, too difficult to completely open to, to be fully present with. And that's fine. That's life. That's not a cause for self-judging: "Oh God, I blew it. I can't open to this." And it's not about forcing oneself. But that too is the truth of the moment right now: "I just feel completely overwhelmed. There doesn't seem to be the ability to be present and open right now." That's okay.

But then all the moments that we are able to give direct attention—it just strengthens in us so many things. One thing it really strengthens is that deep quality in our heart of trust. Trust in our own experience. Beginning to know that our potential really is that we're much more than this kind of random bundle of sensations and flying thoughts and wacky emotions. Sometimes we wonder, "Is this it?" But these moments of real presence, of stillness, that we each experience for ourselves deepen that quality of trust, the commitment and the willingness and ability to open further, to meet the next moment of our experience.

Because what we know for ourselves, what we've experienced for ourselves—no one can come along and say, "That's not true." I mean, they can come and say it, but we know it's true. No one can take that away from us. Just as no one can give it to us. You

can't come along to me and say, "Here, have a moment of total reality, free from suffering." No one can do that for someone else. And no one can take away what we know in our own hearts from our own experience.

I want to end with a short quotation from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer. He's writing about the day of liberation for people being liberated from the prison camps in Russia. It says: "The day of liberation—as if it were possible to liberate anyone who hasn't first become liberated in their own heart. And it's also impossible to impinge on the freedom of anyone who's been liberated in their own heart."

So that's what we're doing—watching the breath and knee pain.

CHAPTER 230

Right Effort

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this comprehensive exploration of balanced effort (viriya), Carol Wilson addresses one of meditation's central paradoxes: how to maintain alert, precise awareness while remaining relaxed and receptive. Drawing from both traditional Buddhist teachings and contemporary examples, she illuminates how genuine interest—rather than forced concentration—naturally gives rise to sustained, joyful effort.*
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> *Wilson distinguishes between the focused attention we bring to absorbing activities like watching sports (which is tinged with craving for a payoff) and the non-discriminating awareness of true mindfulness practice. She examines how our habitual tendency to evaluate experiences as interesting or boring, pleasant or unpleasant, creates the very obstacles to balanced effort we struggle against. Through Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings on interconnectedness and the metaphor of roses and garbage, she shows how every moment of experience—no matter how mundane—holds equal potential for awakening.*
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> *The talk introduces spiritual urgency (saṃvega) as a powerful ally when interest flags. Wilson shares personal stories, including her experience during a retreat while her mother was diagnosed with cancer, to illustrate how split attention masquerading as meticulous practice can leave us feeling dry and disconnected. She offers practical guidance for recognizing when effort has become grim pushing rather than wise engagement, and when backing off to cultivate 'seeds of joy' represents skillful means rather than spiritual bypassing. The teaching concludes with the recognition that every moment presents the crossroads between awakening and delusion.*

Tonight I want to begin talking about balanced effort or balanced energy. It's a topic that we will all talk about a lot in different ways. Our esteemed associate director Edwin contributed the title, which is "You Don't Pull No Punches, But You Don't Push the River." That's from Van Morrison. So that's what I want to talk about.

In our instructions, both in the hall here and in our interviews, we keep talking about how to have this quality of really relaxed, spacious, open awareness, yet at the same time very precise and alert. We say to summon up tremendous energy to meet each moment, yet at the same time don't do anything. How do we work with this seeming dichotomy, this delicate balance? How do we rest in vivid awakeness, yet at the same time remain very receptive and open, relaxed? Clearly, it's a dance of balance that

involves our whole practice, moment to moment. Tonight I want to paint in broad strokes some aspects that help us to discover and cultivate this quality of balanced energy.

I want to focus on two qualities of our experience that can help us over and over to access and recognize this quality of balanced energy: interest and urgency.

When the energy, the sense of effort, is balanced and strong, it quite naturally gives rise to mindfulness—a quality of simply recognizing, connecting with, and knowing what is present. Moment after moment of mindfulness naturally leads to a deepening of concentration. And all of this naturally leads to wisdom. It's a whole series of the way these factors of mind work together. And in a way it really happens by itself. We can't force any of it.

Looking at the quality of energy or effort—the Pali word is *viriya*, which is variously translated. On one end is heroic, courageous effort. Another way of talking about it is joyous effort, commitment, enthusiasm. It doesn't have to be so intense, but it needs that quality of inner joy and steadiness. A factor of mind that helps us connect naturally with this sense of joyous effort, this enthusiasm, is that of interest. Really awake, alert, connecting with what's arising quite effortlessly and naturally, moment to moment to moment.

Sounds exhausting. Every moment, meeting every moment with this interest, with this kind of joyful alertness—it gets overwhelming even to think about it. It takes so much effort. But that's where it's just the reverse. The interest itself gives rise to spontaneous effort, spontaneous connection that isn't tiring and isn't difficult. And we all have this capacity. It's an experience that we all have quite frequently in our lives.

If you go to a movie, that's an obvious example. But the example I like to use, because I was observing it and to me it was much more intense, is watching friends—mostly male friends, I have to say—watching sports events on TV. Recently, it was the World Cup this summer. A few years ago, I was in San Francisco just at the time of the Super Bowl. That's American football if you're from overseas. I was in San Francisco when the San Francisco team, the 49ers, was playing in the Super Bowl in the old days.

What amazed me, and where I really zeroed in on this quality of interest leading to such a steadiness of energy and focus, was everybody I knew in San Francisco—and I know a lot of people in that area. They shut down their lives for that day. The whole city shut down to watch this game. Big groups would gather. I was watching with a group of ten or fifteen people. There was incredible focus on every moment of everything that

happened. And no one said, "Oh, what a chore. I have to focus on this game." It was spontaneous. It was joyful. I honestly can't remember who won. That shows I wasn't really quite that focused. I was more watching the people.

But you see, it's a quality that we all possess in abundance. And when the interest is there, the energy, the effort, the steadiness of focus springs up quite naturally. It's not a problem.

Now there is one drawback to what I call Super Bowl mind. It's not truly mindful because it's slightly tinged with a certain quality of craving or desire. There's a payoff that holds the interest. And even when someone says, "Well, I don't care who wins, but I'm watching the artistry of the game"—that's still a payoff. Because if it were just a bunch of schlemiels bumbling around on the field, nobody would be so interested. It has to be a certain level of artistry that gives one that experience of pleasure.

So this isn't wise effort in terms of our practice. It's energy leading to effort that stays interested because it's getting a certain payoff, something we want. Things are going the way we want them to, or we're getting this certain experience of pleasure.

But how come we can't bring this same quality of spontaneous focus to our life, to what's going on here? You'd think our life would be at least as interesting as a football game. But we bring in the same tendencies, the same blindnesses to our life outside of here, to our day-to-day, hour-to-hour, moment-to-moment life here that we bring to sports or anything else. Some experiences, yes, there's this natural interest and the energy's balanced and we're present. And some experiences don't quite make the grade. We're bringing in our same filters.

The ones we've spoken about so much before—they're not new information. Judging pleasant as good and desirable, unpleasant as not wanting to be with it. Or maybe just something's intense enough to hold our interest. But when it's just sort of mundane or not really intense, somehow that interest tends to fall away.

Often people will say in interviews, "Oh, nothing's happening." What do you mean nothing's happening? You sit and nothing happens? "No, well, it's calm. And nothing—well, there's sounds, there's sensations, there's emotions, there's thoughts, but nothing very interesting about it. It's not very intense." That's not nothing happening. That's a lot happening.

It's as if we think the interest is somehow inherent in what's happening, in the appearance, in the arising object. And some things have it and some things don't. But that's not it at all. The interest comes from within our own experience. As you can see for yourself, sometimes the breath is just the most boring thing you could imagine. And

three sittings later, it's just so fascinating, incredible. Do you think the breath is really that different? Probably not. But the quality of interest has led into an energy and effort that leads to mindfulness that really connects.

This tendency in all the different ways that it's manifest in our experience—to evaluate what happens, to accept some experiences, to reject others, to be interested in some, to cringe away from others, to ignore others altogether—that's one of the tendencies we keep looking at over and over because it's so insidious. It is often so unconscious and it surfaces in different and more subtle ways as we continue to explore our experience.

That's the power of the mindfulness that we're practicing and this quality of interest that we can cultivate: it's non-discriminating. It's not picking and choosing which experiences to pay attention to, which experiences are worthwhile, which are worthy of our interest, and which are not. Because when we're picking and choosing, what do we know? The basis on which we're picking and choosing comes from such limitation—from such views and opinions and limiting of our world. Everything's interconnected in ways that we can't even imagine. And sometimes the experience that we find the most mundane or the least interesting, just that one is the potential for opening to a real awakening insight. We can't know how things link together, how things interconnect.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that good and bad are only an idea of the mind. They have no ultimate reality. On this level of meeting whatever arises with interest, with mindfulness, that's true. Evaluating as good and bad is only an idea of the mind, no ultimate reality. That's not to say what Joseph was talking about last night—some experiences are wholesome, they lead to more peace and freedom; some are unwholesome, they contribute to suffering. On another level, that's also true.

As Shunryu Suzuki says, there's no such thing as right and wrong. But right is right and wrong is wrong. That's how it works.

On the level of our moment-to-moment experience, though—of what's worth paying attention to—there's no distinction. Every moment of experience, every arising appearance is totally worth being interested in, paying attention to. Because in that moment, that's the expression of our life. It's the manifestation of truth. There's nowhere else we can go to discover truth but in that arising appearance at that moment.

I like the way Thich Nhat Hanh writes and talks about how we can't rationally separate experience into "this is good" and "this is bad," "this is worthwhile" and "this isn't"—because everything leads into everything else. If you've read him at all, I'm sure you've

encountered the way he can take anything—an empty plate, for instance—and by looking deeply into it, with some reflection, discover whole realms of meaning. This is reflection, not direct sense perception in the moment, except if it's a thought.

But in looking at that empty plate, we can have it as a symbol of the finishing of your meal, an experience of gratitude and appreciation for all the cooks who prepared it, for all the farmers who grew the food, for the animals that helped cultivate it, for the people who transported it. And then also a sense of sadness at the fact that many people didn't get to eat anything today. A sense of connection with that. A realization of how many people in the world are dying of starvation at this moment as we sit here.

And realizing that interconnectedness, realizing also how hard it might be to open to it—our sense of guilt, because one moment we're recognizing our interconnectedness with starving people, and the next moment we're moaning to ourselves because there are no seconds, or wishing we had a cookie. Just seeing all the play of the mind, and not trying, in terms of mindfulness or interest, to say this one's okay and this one shouldn't be happening. They're all happening all together. You can't separate it out.

Again, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, we tend to value a rose and not pay much attention to garbage. But a rose will die and we dump it in the garbage. It becomes garbage. And then we take the garbage and put it into compost and spread it on the flower bed, and it turns into a rose.

It's the same in our meditation here. That moment you felt so guilty about—feeling like, "I don't care if people are starving, I really want another Snickers"—that might be the moment that opens us up to some real understanding of ourselves, some real sense of freedom, of disidentification, of not identifying yourself with thought at that moment, of seeing that it all comes and goes. You can't reject anything.

In the space of open, non-discriminating awareness, no experience is more or less interesting or more or less worth our total presence.

Sometimes, as we begin to discover this interrelatedness, it might feel like a lot of shadow stuff, a lot of hard things to be with, a lot of difficult experience—or even more, a lot of just really mundane, not very interesting experience at all. But this balance of perception, this seeing of interrelatedness, can come about partly through reflection. What I was describing with Thich Nhat Hanh is really reflection. Yet through our interested meeting of experience moment to moment, we begin to perceive things in that way quite naturally, without reflection. It's the natural perception of how things are.

A poem that reflects this, by a Japanese woman poet named Izumi Shikibu from the imperial court around the tenth century:

Although the wind blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks
of this ruined house.

To me, that really feels like practice. The moon also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. That's how my mind feels a lot—like a ruined house. And somehow the moon manages to leak through when we're willing to be with the ruined house.

When there's that quality of non-discriminating interest, the energy, the effort, the willingness to be present with mindfulness is effortless. It's balanced. The trick, of course, is how to sustain this quality of interest without the payoff—without thinking, "Okay, I'll be interested for a certain amount of time, but then something big needs to happen to keep me interested." How do we sustain this quality without the payoff? It's not simple.

One tool—and it's only one tool among many—is this quality of spiritual urgency. I've found it tremendously useful both in times of difficulty, when the mind just wants to cringe away from what's going on, and maybe even more so in those times of seemingly endless mundane experience. The times when you're asking yourself, "Why am I doing this? What possible relationship does the sensation in my big toe when I lift my foot have to anything that matters in my life? What am I doing this for?"

I hit that point around the second or third week of every retreat I do. At some point, it just eludes me—what I'm doing and why.

This quality of spiritual urgency is very profound and very strong. It comes about from really opening to the suffering aspect of our lives, of the world. Not drowning in it, but really opening our eyes, opening our hearts, looking around us, looking inside us.

This quality of spiritual urgency sort of wakes us up to the point where we see the confusion, the pain, the suffering in our own experience—the unsatisfactoriness, the inevitability of death and sickness. So at some point, and over and over again, the urgency to understand, to be free from confusion, to be helpful to other beings, whatever form it takes for you—at some point that becomes more important than hanging out in our comfort zone, more important than living a life of denial. Which actually feels like a comfort zone, but it's not comfortable at all. We're just not really looking at it.

At times this quality of spiritual urgency can be called up consciously. At other times it arises quite spontaneously simply by opening our eyes and looking around.

When we don't have spiritual urgency, when we're just going through the motions of practice without that sense of interest which urgency can inspire—even though your practice might seem really right on, very meticulous, meeting all the requirements, really putting in a lot of effort—it's sort of meeting an outside model. Whether it's the model of how things should look or the model in your own mind, the motivation is trying to match some expectation you have, or you think someone else has, rather than arising from inner urgency, from inner interest in your own heart. It doesn't quite work. You can practice in a meticulous way and it gets drier and tougher, and you're dragging along. It can be torturous. And you can't quite figure out what's going on, what's missing, because it seems like you're doing everything just right.

I had an experience of this. A few years ago, I came here to sit a two-month retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. I was really up for it. But the day before the retreat, I talked to my mother, and she told me she'd just found out she had cancer—breast cancer and uterine cancer both—and was going to have an operation within the week. She refused to let me come home. "No, no, you must do your retreat. I don't want you to come home." She got really adamant about it, which isn't like her.

So I came and did the retreat. I would call home every day, and things were going fine. It wasn't an emergency operation or anything; she was doing fine. And I was practicing extremely meticulously. I was noting every moment. I thought I was really present. But it was getting drier and deader. It just felt like sawdust. It felt like I was dragging myself through it. Yet I thought my effort was really right there, really present.

I didn't quite wake up to what was going on until one day, after about three weeks. I always used to walk in the same place in the hall in the Catskills. I was walking up the stairs to my walking place, and the thought came—it was more than a thought, it was like a real conviction: "If somebody's walking there, I'm leaving the retreat. That's it." And I meant it. That's what was scary. I really hoped somebody was walking there. Of course nobody was.

That sort of woke me up. I thought, "What's going on here? What's the story?" Because that wasn't just a moment of aversion. That was a deep-seated response to the quality of energy, of effort, that was going on. What was happening was I wasn't really wholeheartedly present in my energy, in my effort. It looked like it—it even looked like it to me. I was meeting the form which I knew from the past, trying to meet my expectations of what it's supposed to be like. I could do it and I thought I meant it. But somehow—and this is strange because you'd think the quality of urgency would be stronger given what was going on—basically what was happening was that my mind, my interest, was split.

I wasn't using the fact of my mother's sickness to bring up urgency and put that urgency into my practice. I was just splitting my attention, worried about my mother and not wholeheartedly present, moment to moment. So I could put on a good show for myself, but it was all sort of directed outward. That inner spring of urgency and interest wasn't there.

We can carry it so far and really feel like it's balanced effort, but at some point that's just not going to hold. We just can't keep doing it. It withers the heart.

On the other hand, when the energy, the interest is present and balanced, it in itself —if you need a payoff—becomes the payoff in itself. Because the times that I felt most connected and balanced and present and really joyful in practice didn't have anything to do with what was actually happening, whether it was pleasant or unpleasant or incredibly intense and insightful or just everyday stuff. But this quality of real, alive connectedness had everything to do with that balanced energy and effort that was wholeheartedly present, meeting what was happening moment to moment to moment, without evaluation, without resistance.

In itself, when the effort, the energy is in that balanced groove, whatever's happening isn't a problem. The interest is there, and that's enough. That carries us.

I want to read this from Krishnamurti, a way of talking about this quality of wholehearted interest and attention:

"When you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there is no room for fear, no room for contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

Can we attend to whatever's arising with complete self-abandonment? Our nerves, our ears, our eyes, everything of ourselves. That's the quality of really alert, interested energy that isn't looking for something special to happen. In that space, the urgency is there. We don't need to reflect on it. We don't need to look for it. Things are in balance.

Without this wholeheartedness, the energy flags. If things are difficult, there's that tendency for the mind to fall back, cringe away, shrink down. In fact, remember Joseph was talking last night about how we can confuse sloth with compassion. And really, sloth is sort of like an absence of energy.

In moments when the energy, the effort is strong and balanced, you can experience what it's like. The mind is bright, it's clear and interested. Energy has the quality of patience, of being willing to be with suffering or difficulty without that cringing back.

Because that is the tendency of the mind when there's no energy—when something difficult comes, we're like, "Oh no, let me not feel this." And if there's too much difficulty, one after the other after the other without energy, we just wither down, like a sopping twisted towel or something. "I just can't be with this anymore."

Energy—and this is from Sayadaw U Pandita again—is a support in the mind, sort of like the support of a house. It supports the mind to stop flinching away from what is unpleasant, to open and be bright and meet it again with this quality of interest and presence.

So you can see why that first initial shrinking back, if we say, "Oh no, I must be kind to myself, this is really the way to balance, they say when it's difficult we need to pull back"—which is true sometimes, and I'll say that later—but this shrinking back is a sign. I think that's what Trungpa called idiot compassion. Don't take the first sign of shrinking back as necessarily the sign that you need to pull back altogether, because that's just the natural response of the mind to something unpleasant. If there's interest, if there's energy, that will be a support where we can come back and meet it again.

As you see, energy isn't static. Certainly not. It's a quality that comes and goes. It's also something that we can easily identify with. So when it comes, "I'm doing really well now." And when it drops, "Somehow I've blown it. Big mistake. I've got to fix it somehow." This can lead to our tipping out of balance more either way—the cringing back and giving up, or, and this I would say happens even more, at least with most of the people I talk to: the energy drops, "It's my fault, I need to therefore push and push harder," and things still aren't the way I want them to be, so I push even harder.

And it's not actually interest or mindfulness or wise effort. It's totally trying to make things be a certain way. It's desire or expectation masquerading as wise effort. Except the effect isn't one of bright, alert interest. It's one of frustration, self-judgment, tightness, more tightness, more heaviness, more grimness—until we're just really tied in a knot.

It can be very subtle. Sometimes it's incredibly blatant, and sometimes it's very subtle—the way that we think we're meeting what's arising with interest. But if you look at the underlying intention, it's "I'll meet this in order for it to open up, in order for things to start flowing again, in order for that bright interest to come back"—a long, long list of whatever we're hoping for.

In either case, it can lead to that kind of loss of interest that just makes us say, "Who cares?" Back to that place of "I don't care what happens. I lift my foot. I put my foot down. I feel tingling. I feel pressure. So what?"

This is the time to open our hearts and minds to this quality of spiritual urgency. Now, urgency is not panic. It's not fear and desperation. But again, it's getting in touch with that motivation for why we came to this retreat, for why we're engaged in a spiritual practice—the urgency of that. Getting in touch with that motivation where opening to truth is more important than anything else in our life at that moment. It encompasses everything in our life. It doesn't shut something out.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said—I'm paraphrasing—something along the lines of: if you deeply want to be free, to understand your true nature, you will be. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else. That's the quality of spiritual urgency. It gives courage. It gives interest. It gives this motivation and willingness to meet and explore and investigate whatever particular experience is getting thrown up at us. It gives us the courage and the interest to come out of denial, over and over and over.

And we don't really have to sit and ruminate about it. All we have to do is open up our eyes, our ears, our hearts. Just pay attention to our experience for any short period of time without that evaluating and pushing things away. And the truth of impermanence, of the unsatisfactoriness of things, of the suffering that's within and around us—we can't escape it. We might want to. That's the denial we're coming out of.

This is from Chinul, who is kind of the father of Korean Zen. He says: "The world is blazing in torments as if it were a house on fire. How can you bear to linger here and complacently undergo such long suffering? If you wish to avoid suffering, there's no better way than to seek Buddhahood." He goes on to say, though: "Understand that the Buddha is the mind. People do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddha. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds."

It's a strong statement, but to me it encapsulates this quality of urgency. When urgency is awakened, there's no problem paying attention. We don't have to look for interest. It comes naturally.

One of my teachers uses the same metaphor of the house on fire—the Buddha used this one also. My teacher says, if you were somewhere and someone came and told you that your house was on fire, you'd immediately start going home. And if on the way you ran into a friend you hadn't seen for a long time, you wouldn't say, "Oh, let's stop and have a cappuccino. There's this nice little place open." You don't have to stop and ponder, "Well, should I? It would be nice."

I haven't had cappuccino for a while. No. You don't stop, and it doesn't even arise as a possibility. You just say, "Sorry, the house is on fire, I'm going home." That's the energy, the one-pointed interest that comes from urgency.

Our house is on fire. And we are home. So it would behoove us to wake up and pay attention—to discover what the fire is and how we can quench the flames. That's our practice. And we're not going to discover it by shutting our eyes, putting on some nice music, and pretending it'll just go away. It won't just go away.

This doesn't mean we have to get lost in despair. As with everything, there's a balance. But we do need to wake up, and all we have to do is keep paying attention. When we have that urgency, when we're confronted face to face with the fact that our house is on fire, the interest, the energy, the mindfulness, the understanding comes quite without effort.

I'll give you an example because it really shows how the understanding comes from that sense of awakeness, from urgency—not from the situation itself. I don't know if you saw a couple of years ago on Bill Moyers's special where he was exploring different approaches to working with the mind. One segment featured Jon Kabat-Zinn's stress reduction course in Worcester—the profound effects it has on people who are sent there after coming to the end of what formal medicine can do for them. They're all either in extreme chronic pain, living with life-threatening illnesses, suffering daily migraine headaches, whatever it might be. And simple mindfulness practice—they only come once a week and do a forty-five-minute tape of mindfulness every day, that's all—has these profound effects.

Well, ten years ago, when I was managing here, myself and my co-manager and another dear friend who was cooking here—actually it was during a course with Sayadaw U Pandita, the one Joseph talked about, where the whole atmosphere was very tense. As tense as it was for the yogis, I want you to know that for the staff, it was ten times more intense. It was a difficult time. So we picked this time to go as interns to the stress reduction course, which meant the three of us would drive in and take the course, doing everything the participants do, then talk a little bit about it afterward. We would fly in in the morning—it's an hour's drive—do the course, fly home, then do a staff meeting all afternoon. It was on that day.

These people in the course, within three weeks they're reporting experiences like, "I had a migraine every day for six years and now I haven't had one for two weeks." All kinds of amazing things, really profound openings, understanding their lives in entirely new ways. We, meanwhile, would fall asleep during the meditations. Literally. I remember my friends snoring on the floor. We'd be looking at our watches. We'd go flying home through traffic and come back at least half the time with splitting headaches.

We'd move into the staff meeting just thinking, "Please, let me out of this meeting." It was stressing us out enormously. And we definitely went in with a little cockiness—well, we know this mindfulness gig, you know.

It was really interesting. We would try to do the meditations at home, just as instructed. The first couple of weeks you lie down and do a kind of mindful moving through your body, starting at your feet. I don't think I ever got higher than my knee without falling asleep the entire time. And it was the same with both of my friends. I mean, it was really pathetic. As the weeks went on—eight weeks—there were profound changes in these people, because they had a real urgency. The truth of things was hitting them. They couldn't avoid it. And it led to a natural effort, exploration, and wisdom. We were just in basic, arrogant denial. I actually learned more about it later as I've reflected on it.

What I'm sharing now comes from truly seeing how easy it is to be complacent, to take things for granted, to think, "Well, we've looked at suffering. We've looked at dukkha. We're meeting it every day." Yes, we're meeting it every day, but are we actually looking at it? Are we actually opening to it? That's another question altogether. It's so easy to be complacent.

After my mother had cancer that time, after I kind of woke up finally in my practice, it really did inspire a sense of urgency—a deep opening to all of our impermanence and death, a real kind of cellular experience of dying. And then she got better. She's been fine for five years. And complacency rises. "Oh yeah, my mom's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine. There's no problem."

It's hard to stay open to the unsatisfactory nature, to the fact that our house is on fire. But it's worth it. The freedom, the real connectedness that comes out of it, the real aliveness—it's worth it, rather than living kind of shut off and dead and denying.

So we can use anything. Just notice what's happening. God knows, just pay attention through the sittings and walkings in the day. You don't have to look any further. Notice how you're meeting the difficult and unpleasant. Is it a mistake? Is it something to get rid of? Or is it an inspiration of saying, "Yes, this is how this life is. Do I want to just keep wandering in samsara? Or do I want to explore what's happening in order to wake up?"

We can just use nature. All the chipmunks squashed on the road—there are a lot of chipmunks this year. We've all been talking about it. It just seems like we can't even drive down the driveway without six chipmunks darting out. It's really quite tricky.

Or when I go to my doctor at UMass, I really like going because it's a big teaching hospital. There are so many people I have to pass in so many stages—children with chronic diseases, a lot of old people seeming kind of bewildered and confused, lots of fear in people's faces. Sometimes there's a real spark of beauty and love as somebody connects or sees the fear and reaches out. It's a very alive time for me. I really use it to wake up to the fact that there's nothing to be complacent about.

What am I waiting for to pay attention? Am I waiting till something really horrible happens again? Or am I waiting for something that's interesting enough to be worth paying attention to? The mundane is just fine. We can wake up with that as well as with anything.

The difficult experiences you go through here—it doesn't have to be life-threatening angst. It can be the frustration of pushing too hard. That can be enormous suffering when we don't see what's going on. Any kind of just overwhelming suffering, that is a great time to see what's really going on and let the urgency come up.

Someone today, in an interview, expressed this really beautifully. It really touched me. She'd been going through a very difficult time, to the point that all of us reach at times where it just feels like, "I don't know if I can handle this." That does happen. And she was at the lake looking at the leaves kind of drifting here and there in the water. And just thinking, "Do I want to live like that? Just tossed back and forth, back and forth?" The answer was clearly, no, I don't. It doesn't make everything okay.

It doesn't make the suffering go away. It doesn't bring clear bliss. All the suffering is still there. But that sense of "No, I don't want to live that way"—it's worth coming back and being with this. Paying attention. In fact, you don't even have to go that far. The attention, the interest, the urgency just arises naturally. And there's the energy again to meet what's happening for another moment. For another moment. And we only have to take it one moment at a time.

We don't have to think, "Oh no, this and three more days of this—it's unbearable." That might be in your mind, but it's only this. It's only this moment. We have no idea what's going to happen in the next moment. Sometimes the most difficult moments, when we've just thought, "I've had it. This is it. I cannot face another moment of this"—and then we face the next moment. And you never know, that can be the transformative moment where we really just open to something much greater and more profound than our fear and aversion of the difficult. Sometimes the most difficult moments are the moments of our awakening.

I want to read a poem from one of the women who was a nun with the Buddha at the time of the Buddha. This is from a book of different poems from those women. Her name was Sama, and it said that for twenty-five years her mind was always distracted while meditating. Two weeks isn't so hard, folks. And she was a nun, mind you, so she wasn't doing much else.

So this is her poem:

It was twenty-five years since I turned away from home and I hadn't had a moment's peace. I had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror—that's the Buddha—*Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died.*

That's a way they have of talking about awakening, saying "I've finished with craving, seventh day." *Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert.*

So it took her twenty-five years. Maybe it won't take us so long to realize that we can be alert no matter what's going on. And again, this alertness, this energy that comes from urgency—it's a balanced quality of connection and effort. Not desperation, not fear, not panic. When we're meeting difficult or not difficult experience in this balanced way, it naturally leads to the balanced perception where the difficult opens also into the sublime. And that's why we don't despair. That's what lets us have the energy to come back and meet the next difficult experience.

But sometimes we can tip out of balance and really feel that we're drowning in despair. We feel we're really open to the fact that our house is on fire and we see no way out, and it just feels like we really can't bear it. That's when the energy is beginning to tip out of balance.

This is from Anna Akhmatova, the Russian poet, written in 1921, just at the height of all the terrors and starvation and war of the Russian Revolution:

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold. Death's great black wing scrapes the air. Misery gnaws to the bone. Why then do we not despair? By day, from the surrounding woods, cherries blow summer into town. At night, the deep transparent skies glitter with new galaxies. And the miraculous comes so close to the ruined, dirty houses. Something not known to anyone at all, but wild in our breast for centuries.

That's why we don't despair. But sometimes we lose sight of the miraculous coming close to our dirty houses.

And we do despair. We can feel like we're falling into a great black hole or drowning in suffering—whatever the suffering, whatever the experience. Or we turn it into that kind of effort that's pushing, pushing, pushing, and then blaming ourselves because things aren't the way we think they should be, and the only remedy must certainly be to try harder, to make things be a certain way. Again, subtly mistaking balanced effort for wanting things to change.

This, at the point of despair, is being overwhelmed perhaps by the strength and intensity and ongoing nature of suffering—whether it's terror or grief or this tight, tight pushing, or fear or sadness. It doesn't matter what it is. But when it's more than mindfulness can meet, more than there can be a balance of perception, then our mind and heart really do wither. We really do tip off into a genuinely unbalanced quality of presence, quality of effort, and we can just get really lost.

Again, this is the place where it's not just that cringing back of sloth, but where it's truly skillful means to pull back a little from what's happening. Because in our trying to meet what's happening with what we think is wise effort, we're getting tighter and more forceful and grimmer and heavier. And I want to make this clear: grimness is not equivalent to wise effort. The grimmer you are doesn't mean the more mindful you are or the better you're doing. Sometimes—I swear—people really ask, "Is it allowed to smile?" It is allowed to smile. It helps a lot sometimes to smile.

So if you find yourself falling into that pushing, or even worse, feeling like you're drowning in a swirl of pain and confusion, that is the time when balance means backing off. Instead of trying to drill a hole through that experience, instead of trying to meet it by God with openness—just listen to the tone of that note—it's skillful to back off, to turn the attention elsewhere.

Bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy. Seeing that maybe you're not noticing the balance of perception, you can deliberately bring it up. For me, sometimes when I'm walking up in the castle, I'll just go stay on the fire escape on the second floor and look at the sky and the trees. Just open up to seeing, to hearing, to nature. It brings a spaciousness to the heart, to the mind, to the consciousness. See what it is for you. It might be just sitting and opening to hearing. It might mean going down and sitting by the lake. It might mean reading an inspiring passage. Whatever brings up seeds of joy.

This is not cheating. It's not giving in. It's not being a wimp. And when you're in that pushing phase and judging it, you're not going to be able to trust whatever evaluation you make of your practice. At that point the thought will come up, "Maybe I should back

off, open to hearing," and immediately you'll think, "No way. That's just giving in. That's just being a coward. That's just sloth. That's just idiot compassion." You can't trust the evaluations when you're caught in judgment.

So just look: if there's no mindfulness, if you're withering your heart, withering your mind, turn the attention somewhere else. Bring up seeds of joy. Take a walk. Do whatever helps bring a sense of spaciousness and happiness into your experience. Maybe it's doing loving-kindness practice. Whatever it is for you. This is skillful means. This is how to balance. And again, once there's that sense of openness, of spaciousness—even just that much—then the reconnection can come again. The natural interest and sense of urgency can arise, and we can come back and maybe meet that difficulty just for a moment in a more balanced, open way.

So those are broad strokes of this balance of energy that we work with moment to moment to moment. It's an ongoing dance. It's never static. We never get to "Okay, this is it. Now I can forget about it and coast." Sorry.

Let me end with a quotation from Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche: "Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and beings, and this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives."

Every moment. It doesn't have to be daunting—it's a wonderful opportunity. Every moment is the crossroads between recognizing our true nature or not.

So, let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 231

Adverse Circumstances Become The Path

Carol Wilson · 54 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines how we can transform adverse circumstances from obstacles into vital components of our spiritual path. Drawing inspiration from Tibetan teacher Namkhai Norbu's phrase "turning adverse circumstances into the path," she begins by reflecting on the preciousness of human birth—a teaching found across Buddhist traditions—noting how witnessing poverty in places like South Africa and India deepens appreciation for the conditions that make practice possible: basic health, access to the Dhamma, genuine interest in awakening, and sufficient leisure time.

Wilson explores the Buddha's First Noble Truth of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and the Second Noble Truth identifying taṇhā (craving) as its cause. She clarifies that in Pāli, there are distinct words for different types of desire—taṇhā as thirst or craving that causes suffering, neutral desire for basic needs, and dhamma-chanda, the wholesome yearning for understanding that drives practice. Through vivid personal examples, including her challenging time as a Buddhist nun in Thailand, she demonstrates how our habitual movement toward pleasant experience and away from unpleasant experience creates suffering beyond the actual circumstances.

The practical heart of this teaching lies in attitude transformation. Rather than fighting difficult experiences, Wilson invites us to bring compassionate, non-judging attention to whatever arises. She distinguishes this from passive acceptance, emphasizing that clear seeing enables appropriate action. She also validates skillful avoidance when situations are genuinely overwhelming, encouraging practitioners to find the delicate balance between opening to difficulty and knowing when to back off. Quoting both Nisargadatta Maharaj and Ajahn Chah, she illuminates how suffering can ripen either as confusion or as the search for liberation—the difference lies entirely in our willingness to be present.

Tonight what I want to talk about comes from a phrase I read in a book by a Tibetan master, Namkhai Norbu: turning adverse circumstances into the path. This phrase has stayed with me deeply, and I use it often in my practice. I'd like to share some thoughts about working with this teaching.

The first thing that comes to mind is that in working with adverse circumstances, the most helpful thing for me has been a strong sense of commitment to my path—to the possibility of our human potential for awakening. I want to share something that strengthens this commitment in me, something that makes me reflect and renew my dedication.

When I travel in third world countries, which I have occasion to do from time to time, this commitment becomes vivid. This past year I spent some time in South Africa, which presents a unique situation: the white people live very well, much as we do, while the black people live in truly poor, third world conditions in some of the Zulu villages. It's much the same as being in India. Seeing the conditions people live in—real poverty, near starvation, grinding work just to survive—brings to mind another Tibetan reflection on the preciousness of human birth. Or more particularly for me, the preciousness of the particular human birth I have this time around.

There are certain conditions essential for being able to practice, and I often take them for granted without even examining them. So part of this work is appreciating my circumstances.

Some of these conditions include, first, a certain degree of health. All of us in this room, whatever our physical condition, at least have enough health that we can give some of our energy, our time, to understanding what our life is about—not the near-starvation conditions where all one can do is struggle to survive. It's really appreciating that.

We're also alive at a time when the Dharma, the Buddha Dharma, is alive in the world. In terms of Buddhist cosmology, there are times when these teachings aren't present in the world, and we would each have to discover the path entirely for ourselves. While we each must discover our own truth, at least we have teachers, texts to read, people we can sit with, others to inspire us. This is a great gift, one easy for me to take for granted, knowing as I do so many people interested in practice, in awakening, whatever form their practice takes. But it's a rare opportunity in life.

Another condition is that we're all actually interested in waking up, in hearing the Dharma. This might seem obvious, but not everyone is blessed with interest, even when there's opportunity. I've spent considerable time in Bodh Gaya in India, a Buddhist pilgrimage site because it's the place where the Buddha was supposedly enlightened. Many pilgrims come, but also many inspiring teachers of all the different Buddhist lineages—Zen, Tibetan, Theravada—and Hindu teachers as well come to Bodh Gaya.

We go there and visit, and we meet people. There's a family that runs a particular chai shop, a tea shop where everyone hangs out. There's nothing to do in Bodh Gaya but go to the Bodhi tree and go to the chai shop—and somehow those two things fill the entire day. The family is lovely, and they live there. They work hard but have leisure time. They're healthy. They're simply not interested. It's not where their attention goes. This makes me appreciate that I have this interest, that I'm willing and able to hear.

And then there's the fact that I have enough leisure time and the willingness to put the teachings into practice—that I don't have to work so hard at a subsistence level that there's not a spare moment in my life. Literally, many people in poverty-stricken conditions live this way. If you read *City of Joy* about Calcutta, it describes rickshaw pullers, men who pull rickshaws carrying passengers. They literally work every moment of the day just to earn enough money to buy food for that day. There's no way someone like that could have time to investigate the meaning of life the way we can.

When I reflect on these blessings in my life—and in all of our lives to some degree, or we couldn't be here—it wakes me up to a deep sense of urgency, of commitment. I start thinking: I have all these gifts. What do I really want from my life? What is my real purpose? What do I want to commit my time and energy to? How do I not lose sight of it?

As human beings, we have the potential to wake up, to know really deep peace, to come to freedom from this to-ing and fro-ing, this restless agitation of the mind. Sometimes it's almost frightening to really connect with this possibility in oneself, to truly commit to it. It's almost as if I think, "Well, yes, the Buddha could do that, or some Tibetan lama who lives in a cave, but not an ordinary person like me"—almost as if afraid I'm not good enough. To really, honestly get in touch with my purpose, my potential, is to acknowledge that I can awaken.

If I honestly commit myself to that, then I'll just spend the rest of my life being disappointed when I find out that I can't do it.

Again, a reflection that really helps me a lot is to remember that the Buddha was a human being, not a God. You can say, well, he was a really special human being, different from us. Anyone else who awakens is different from us. It's impossible. That thought holds us back. That thought is what limits us and keeps us from actually being willing to commit—only in this moment. Can I commit to really being present in this moment?

So the reflection that the Buddha was a human being, and we as human beings all have the same potential, can help me in times when I feel constricted by my fears. When you read some of the discourses of the Buddha, he often said, "If it were not pos-

sible, I would not ask you to do this." And from what I've read of what the Buddha said, or what comes down to us that he said, he didn't say things just off the top of his head. He really said what he meant. And that's quite inspiring to me. Whenever it's something really hard: if it wasn't possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it. Again, it helps me to connect with what is my real purpose, and am I willing to commit myself to it.

Another fear that sometimes comes up in talking with people is the fear of really getting in touch with our desire, so to speak, to be free, to awaken. There's almost a fear just of that word—the fear of desire. Because the more we practice and study this meditation, and what the Buddha said in his Four Noble Truths, is that desire is the cause of suffering, right? And we can certainly experience that moment to moment. So there's this hesitation: well, what am I doing awakening another desire? There's something off about that.

Something I've found very interesting—I've been studying Pali a little bit, which is the language that the earliest Buddhist texts we still have are written in. In Pali, there are three different words that can all be loosely translated as "desire" in English. One of them is the word that more specifically we could translate as craving: *tanha*. And that's the one that is really referred to as the cause of suffering. It's that needing, grasping, "I've got to have"—the mind going out and clinging to something, whether it's an apple or anything. It doesn't matter what you're clinging to. This thirst, really—that's another translation of it. That's the cause of suffering.

There's another word that denotes a neutral desire, you could say. You're sitting, you know you're hungry, and there's the desire to eat. Not craving, not "I've got to have a certain food"—just to know: I need to eat now. I need to sleep now. I need to go to the bathroom. It's not a huge thirst.

And then there's another word that our rough translation would be "Dharma desire." What that really is, is this impetus, this yearning for understanding—for understanding our true self. In some way, if we didn't all have it, we wouldn't practice. It's what drives us. And this is hard. We wouldn't just be sitting here on our bottoms for two days, going through all this, if there wasn't some desire or yearning driving us. And it doesn't have to be negative. It doesn't have to lead to suffering.

This is a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, from a whole different lineage—a Hindu Vedanta master—that speaks to this: "The desire to find the truth will be surely fulfilled, providing you want nothing else. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else."

I think on a moment-to-moment basis—not that every moment of our lives we never want anything else—but that quality of wanting to understand, to be free, that level of commitment is what, as human beings, enables us to heal from our perceived sense of separation and isolation. I mean, it's not a reality anyway, but it's our perception. And this deep commitment of our hearts, of our energy, is what allows us to awaken—if we are willing to give our hearts, our minds, to this quest, this journey.

To me, that means not to be afraid to commit myself inwardly. Over and over. It doesn't mean I commit myself and then from now on, every moment, I'm incredibly present and mindful. It means I'm willing to commit myself again in two minutes when I've spaced out or blown it or done something really stupid. That's okay.

I feel that this sense of deep inner commitment—and it can deepen and deepen—this is what can really serve to inspire us, or at least sustain us and uphold us on our path when we hit difficult times. In other words, when we hit seeming obstacles. Which is all the time—a lot. As you've no doubt observed, it's our tendency.

It seems to be the inbred tendency of our human minds, at least our deep, deep conditioning, that we perceive or interpret difficult situations that arise—whether it's a pain or a really difficult situation in our life—as obstacles. This is something that's in the way. It's either in the way of my being happy, in the way of my getting what I want, or in the context of our growth in understanding, it's in the way of my awakening.

So as long as I have this sickness, which keeps me from sitting cross-legged and doing this and that, and keeps me tired—that means it's in the way. When I get rid of it, then I can really practice in the right way. There's some ideal of what right practice looks like, and this is keeping me from it. It's an obstacle to be gotten rid of. The same goes for as long as I have this tiring, boring job that takes all my energy—I can't possibly give any energy to awakening. As long as I'm in this difficult, conflictual family situation, how can I possibly work to come to peace and harmony when I'm arguing with my relatives all the time? Substitute anything. It's our natural tendency to interpret this as wrong, something to get rid of, and then I can really begin to commit myself to practice.

Flipping it around, when we have a sense of commitment to investigate, we begin to see and learn that these so-called obstacles are not just something we can put up with. They actually can become part of our path, a very intrinsic and helpful part of our growth in understanding and awakening. We grow because of these difficult situations, not in spite of them.

There's something I like in the Buddhist cosmology, which talks about all these different realms of existence. It doesn't matter whether one believes it's literally true or not, but what I appreciate is how it describes why human birth is so precious and how obstacles can be helpful. They say that in the human realm—which on a level of thirty-three is about six up from the bottom, and it gets nicer the higher you go—there's enough suffering that we can use it to wake up. It's not, for most of us, so much suffering that we're completely crushed and overwhelmed. Though for some people in this world, it is too much. And in the higher realms, it gets so pleasant that there's not enough impetus to investigate. You just kind of groove and hang out in these really nice sensual realms or formless realms, whatever. So the human realm is supposedly the perfect balance of pleasure and willingness to investigate, with enough pain to keep giving us a jolt to wake up. Take that for what it's worth.

So how does one go about working with this, turning adverse circumstances into the path? How does it work? There are many things to say about it. I'm just going to offer some thoughts.

I feel deeply from my own experience that it comes down, really very simply, to our attitude toward this difficult situation—or pleasant situation as well. The pleasant ones we don't tend to fight so much when they arise. The Buddha, in his first discourse after he was completely awakened, talked about four truths of our life in this world, truths whose deep knowing would liberate the mind. The first truth was that there is unsatisfactoriness—sometimes translated as suffering, but more accurately unsatisfactoriness. He was speaking not only of the actual and obvious difficult situations—the painful, the emotional, the grief, the outward difficulty—but also the sense of unsatisfactoriness and pain that comes from pleasant situations that are continually ending. Which is everything. Everything is continually ending. And the cause of our suffering is not just that there's pain and pleasure; the second truth tells us the cause of suffering is this thirst, this clinging of the mind toward the pleasant and away from the unpleasant.

I used to think about this first truth—that there's unsatisfactoriness—and wonder, why did he have to proclaim that as a truth? It seems fairly obvious on the surface. I don't think—I mean, there are people who will dispute it, but mostly if we really look, we don't have to look that hard. It's clear that there is suffering in this world. But as I've reflected and observed more, I'm actually continually amazed by our ability to deny, resist, and avoid this in our own lives. And I see it in others.

The most obvious example that comes to mind is when I was once in a hospital and a doctor was doing a procedure. They were trying to put in an IV and not doing a good job of it. It had been going on for some time—they'd tried it five times, and finally they

called in the doctor. Then I knew I was in trouble, because nurses can usually do these things better than doctors. Anyway, he was digging around, and I was really at the end of my rope. I'd been there some time, and I started crying. He just looked at me and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

I thought, whoa. And I really could understand. Because to open to the fact of the pain I was in would mean he had to feel that in himself, and also be aware that in some way—out of good intentions, but still—he was a part of inflicting it. And that's too hard to open to sometimes. We can't feel someone else's pain because we can't open to our own. That's a kind of strong example, but in little ways we do that all the time.

And then on a more subtle level, I've been noticing that somehow acknowledging that many things just don't carry the satisfaction I like to think they do has been a huge relief in my life. It was like acknowledging my actual experience. Somehow I thought I should be happier than I was, because I have so much.

My life's so good. How come things aren't really blissful? There's something wrong with me.

Here's another example, very mundane, and I think we could all see this all the time. Once a friend of mine and I, it was during the fall, and we were working at the meditation center in Barre. It was very intense. We were very tired. We decided to go to this health club and go swimming. And we were looking forward to it all day. It'll feel great. We'll relax. We'll have a good time. We'll go in the sauna.

So we got there and split up—he was a man, so we were in different dressing rooms. It was freezing, and I'm really susceptible to cold. I was hurrying up, getting in my bathing suit, thinking, well, I'll get in the pool. It'll be great. I got in the pool. The water was really, for me, quite chilly. So I was dashing back and forth thinking, God, I can't wait till I get out of here. This is really nice, but I can't wait till I get out of here and get in the sauna. I ran into the sauna, and for a couple of minutes—oh, this is great. Then the bench got hard, then I started to sweat too much, and then I went out of the sauna and it was freezing again, and I went back in the sauna—oh, this is really great—for two minutes, then it got too hot, I was sweaty, I had a headache. I went out, took a shower, went up and met my friend, and said, "That was great."

And then, for some reason, we sat and talked about it, which is why I remember it in so much detail, and it was hysterical. There were a few really nice moments. But in being able to see that, it wasn't demoralizing, really. It was kind of, oh well, no wonder I don't feel completely blissed out. Some of it was nice, and some of it really wasn't very

nice at all. So it was a relief for me, acknowledging that there's a certain degree of unsatisfactoriness in much of my experience—not all of it, but much of it—and not having to pretend that it's otherwise.

And then again, the cause of the suffering isn't that the water's cold or the sauna is hot. It's that movement of the mind, that compulsive, conditioned, often unconscious movement of the mind towards anything pleasant and away from anything unpleasant. So the water's cold, my body contracts, my mind says, I don't like this, I want to get out of here. The sauna is hot. It's pleasant. There's a total relaxing into it. As soon as it gets a little unpleasant—I don't like this, I want to get out of here. That's the cause of the suffering, not the cold, not the hot.

This is from Nisargadatta again: "Our true self is peace. It's only the mind that is restless. All it knows is restlessness with its many modes and grades. The pleasant modes are considered superior and the painful ones are discounted. What we tend to call progress is merely a changeover from the unpleasant to the pleasant. Changes can't bring us to the changeless."

Changes can't bring us to the changeless. And as long as we're unaware of this tendency of mind—we merely need to be aware of it—as long as we're unaware of it, we continue to be caught in this maze of denying, discounting anything that's remotely unpleasant, waiting out the unpleasant, trying to hold on to the pleasant so that then things will be okay.

I call it, or some of us call it, rearranging the furniture. It's like we're in prison and the door's open, and it's unpleasant, but we figure if we can somehow rearrange the furniture, everything will be okay. As long as we continue doing this, trying to find the exact right arrangement that's most pleasant, it's this movement away from the unpleasant towards the pleasant, trying to control everything, that distorts our perception, that clouds our heart. We can't know reality as long as we're caught in rearranging the furniture.

And it's not necessarily the situation itself that needs to change. It's our attitude. It's our willingness to come back and be with the furniture, no matter how it is—whether it's incredibly peaceful or really discordant. It's that attitude of being willing to be fully present, fully here with it, allowing it just as it is, and bringing our fullness of attention to be there with it. That allows us to begin to see what's really true in this moment.

It's this shift in attitude that turns obstacles from being obstacles into being a very important part of our path. Adverse circumstances aren't necessarily a curse, because sometimes that's what wakes us up from all this to-ing and fro-ing of the mind.

Ajahn Chah, the great Thai meditation teacher and abbot, once said that there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering. So what's the difference? Again, it's the attitude.

Here's a very simple example. You're sitting here and your knee starts to tingle a little. Soon it turns into a throb. If it's suffering that leads to more suffering, the mind goes: "Oh my God, I'm never going to make it through this sitting. What am I doing here? I'm sitting wrong. Why don't they ring the bell? What's the matter with me? I should be able to sit better than this." Your mind starts spinning. You start judging yourself, judging the retreat. You're getting tenser and tenser, your mind screaming. This is suffering that leads to more suffering. It's our relationship of believing there's something wrong, that this pain shouldn't be here—and all the extra we add on when we're not aware of it. Pretty soon we're really over the edge.

The same pain in the knee. The shift in attitude is simply to give it attention just as it is. There's a throb in the knee. We notice it. If it's really mild, we just acknowledge it and go back to the breath. If it's really strong, then we move our full attention into that throbbing, simply because that's what's there. Not with any agenda, not to get rid of it, not to make it go away, not to prove we're such a great yogi—simply because that's the experience in this moment.

It's a real gentle, compassionate kind of attention—open, but really clear and firm. It's not just "Oh yeah, there's a pain," and then back to the breath. That's what's there. We bring the attention out of the whirling thoughts into the sensation, noticing the tightness in our body, noticing the resistance in our mind. That whole train of dislike can happen, but we're noticing it. Not to change it or judge it or place blame—just because it's there. To know for ourselves what's really happening in this moment.

This shift in attitude can change that pain from being the source of our future hospitalization and disability into a chance to observe how much extra suffering we're creating through resistance to experience. This is the quality of openness, of investigation, that changes our whole experience because we start to see reality.

Has it ever happened that you have a pain you think you're going to die from, and then the bell rings and suddenly it's just gone? What happened to it? It's all extra. Because we stop fighting the experience enough to simply be with it and see what that pain actually is, what's the experience of it.

Out of clear seeing, understanding can arise. Understanding, in this case, the nature of that sensation—its impermanence, its coming and going, its changeable nature. Understanding of the extra suffering that resistance and fear add on, how our fear of the whole hour is adding an immense amount of suffering onto the pain in this moment.

And because we understand, we have a choice. We can act appropriately in a situation rather than just responding out of blind reactivity. So you have, say, the choice of seeing: yes, I have a bad knee, and this pain I recognize.

It's the prelude to really hurting myself. It's appropriate to move. But it's not just a reactive "I hate this, I'm going to move." It's not coming out of aversion at all. It's coming out of really clear seeing and compassionate action. This is quite different from our usual pattern of denial and avoidance.

Because this reactivity is so strong, when something's unpleasant, we're usually unable to give attention to the actual situation. And we don't even know it. We don't even know what's happening. We just stay lost in confusion and resistance, and things get more and more painful.

The Buddha talked about unsatisfactoriness and suffering a great deal. But he said that there's suffering that ripens as confusion and suffering that ripens as search. Again, the difficult situation can serve as a signal to investigate, and a whole new understanding can come out of this.

The most powerful example I've had of this in my life was a period of time I spent in Thailand, practicing as a Buddhist nun in various temples. When I first went there, I had a hard time adjusting during those first couple of months. The conditions were very unpleasant. You just have to adjust to Asia, and I hadn't done it yet. It was very hot, with lots of poisonous snakes and insects, huts with tin roofs that baked—I mean baked, 120 degrees during the day—with holes so all the insects came in, and food that was making me sick.

I was in a really negative frame of mind, to say the least. I was committed; I didn't want to leave. But the suffering was ripening as confusion. I was just spinning in aversion. Every new thing that happened bummed me out more. I was in a kind of blaming mode: Why don't they do this? Why isn't the food better? Why couldn't they make the huts better? Why do I have to wear these seven layers of polyester in this kind of heat? On and on. I was really nursing my aversion without realizing it.

Finally, it got to the point where it was insupportable. I either had to shift my attitude or leave, which I didn't want to do—if anything, just because my friends would say "told you so."

The shift was to take back my energy from throwing blame outward, from nursing aversion, and bring attention back to the situation. Not to figure out how I could make it better, because I couldn't change the conditions, but just to start looking directly at my experience. In other words, to be in my experience rather than continually trying to get out of it so that I could practice. This was my practice—only I wasn't letting it be.

So, physically hot? Be hot. Feel the hotness. Quit fighting it and thinking about air conditioning. Just be with hotness. Be with the taste of the food, whether I like it or not. Be with insect bites. Be with my fear of ants and see how much of it is fear and how much of it is reality. Stop sending all my energy into useless complaining and just watch the aversion. Feel the aversion in my experience.

That willingness to come back over and over to my experience instead of trying to avoid it—it was amazing, really, over a period of some months. I saw pretty soon that what I had been doing was cultivating aversion, really feeding it. Just that acknowledgment of the aversion, that recognition of the movement of the mind away from the unpleasant—just seeing the power of that tendency allowed me to be much more present with the unpleasant.

And the whole experience changed. By the time I left, the conditions were no better. In some ways they had changed, but they weren't really worse or better. My sense of being there was completely different. It was one of the most joyful times I remember in my life. Really quite wonderful.

I'd spend half an hour a day brushing out the ants. That was just part of what I did each day. It wasn't a problem. And I learned so much from that experience—that in the very same conditions, there can be tremendous joy and contentment. The real suffering was my resistance, this movement away from the unpleasant, thinking I ought to be able to rearrange the furniture instead of just sinking into things the way they were. The unseen and unacknowledged resistance to the situation.

So far from being something I just learned to live with, that seeming obstacle has been a vital part of my growth in equanimity, in opening and understanding. I really learned a lot from that.

And I'm not saying it's easy for any of us, or at any time. This tendency of mind, this to-ing and fro-ing, is so subtle and so pervasive, often really unconscious, that it can be very hard to be aware of it. I sat for a couple of months with that situation, and it was pretty obvious, before I could actually recognize—oh yes, right, aversion, that's what's going on.

Also, I don't in any way mean to imply that all we have to do is see, "Oh, my mind is moving towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant," and then everything's fine and we're filled with this glowing peace. It is not so simple. Even when we're very aware of this tendency and really committed, deeply committed to our willingness to be present for both the pleasant and the unpleasant, and we truly know we can open to difficult situations—we can't open all at once to many things.

For almost all of us, certainly almost everyone I've met including myself, there are many times when, given our conditions, the state of our mindfulness, the state of our being at that moment, there will be difficulties, sufferings, pains that are simply too much for us to open to in that moment.

The Buddha also spoke of skillful avoidance as a great help on our path, knowing when to use it. He gave the example of when a mad elephant is charging at you, you step out of the way. We can all really benefit from paying attention to this. Sometimes the mad elephant can be a strong physical pain. Sometimes it's a deep emotional grief or memory or something happening in our life.

Many of us, at least here in the West, have a tendency to be really hard on ourselves. Once we enter into this path with the sense that we're opening to everything, when something comes up, no matter how overwhelming, we think, "I should be able to open to this right now. And if I can't, it means I'm doing something wrong."

Mindfulness is very attentive, it's energetic, but it's not strident. Mindfulness is not forcing ourselves to open no matter what. It doesn't work, for one thing. And it can lead us into a lot of pain and confusion and self-blame.

So for each of us, it's finding in each situation that delicate balance. Some pains, physical or emotional, arise and we can really be there with them. It doesn't feel good. We might feel lost in it, but there's some mindfulness. There's feeling the grief in the heart. There's letting ourselves cry. There's feeling the heaviness. There's seeing the memories. And then we can gently, gently be with it.

Sometimes it's so overwhelming that there's no sense of being able to be mindful and we just feel totally drowning. That might be a time to gently back off. It's not the same as repression. It's not shutting that down and pretending it's not there, going in the opposite direction from anything that reminds us of it. But it's for a time. We touch it. We open a little. We see we're getting overwhelmed and gently back off.

If you're sitting, you can move your attention to hearing. You can go back to the breath. You can go elsewhere in the body. If it's in our life and we're running up against a brick wall, you don't keep running into the brick wall. You try and move up to it, see if you can push it a little bit. It doesn't move. You back off. Come back again. Do something to nurture the heart and the mind. Take a walk.

Do something in your life that's nurturing. Be with somebody you love. Talk to a friend. We can't simply be over and over and over again with agonizing pain without some break. It's a rare person who can do that without being really overcome.

When we know in ourselves that we have the commitment to understanding and growth, we can trust ourselves enough to know that we're not just repressing, we're not just manipulating—we're using skillful avoidance. And if you find that every unpleasant situation suddenly calls for skillful avoidance, that's when you know: wait a minute, I think I need to look at this again. We learn to trust that balance and find it for ourselves.

Practice here in retreat can help a great deal because we can practice with the little situations. You can practice this with the small pain in your knee. Watch moving into it. Watch the mind wanting to run away. Feel all that fear and tension. Soften around it. Move back into the pain. Something little, but it's the same tendency of mind.

I'm sure we've all had experiences where something difficult—either in our outer life or our inner life here (I actually don't even like making that distinction, but just as a way of talking)—where there's been something we thought was nothing but difficulty to be gotten rid of. And through our willingness to just experience it as it is, through our attentive, present, non-judging being with it, it transforms, and we learn something very valuable. That kind of experience strengthens our commitment, our trust in the whole process.

I find it gives us a sense of courage. I've found that deepening in myself over the years—that whatever does arise as my path, as my karmic path, I know in this one moment I can be with it. I don't have to add, "Oh no, but what's it going to be like if this goes on for a year?" That's extra. I know in this one moment I can be with whatever is arising as my path. And as I was thinking this, I realized: ultimately, there's not much choice anyway. I don't really get to choose what's coming in the next moment. So I can simply know that I've understood—in this path I have the strength to be with only this one moment. And if that moment means backing off for a little bit, that's okay too.

It's this attitude, this willingness to be with whatever arises as our path, pleasant as well as unpleasant. We're not looking for the unpleasant in order to grow, and not denying the pleasant either. There are plenty of pleasant, joyful experiences—being fully present with that. But not this clutching: "Oh no, it's going away!" It comes, you really appreciate it, it goes, the next thing comes later. It's this willingness to be present without the to-ing and fro-ing, to see the to-ing and fro-ing, that allows understanding to arise. We're then beginning to know what's really going on instead of being lost in our distortions and confusions.

Thich Nhat Hanh—in case you haven't heard of him, he's a Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist, and I find him quite inspiring—says that without understanding, we are unable to love. When we understand what's going on in a situation, love and compassion naturally arise out of that. Because we're there with no preferences, understanding becomes possible.

Robert Aitken, a Zen master from Hawaii, says: "Practicing compassion goes hand in hand with practicing realization. On your cushions, you learn first of all to be compassionate to yourself. We vow to save all beings, but how do you save the roughnecks in your own mind? Treat them as neighbors who come to the door when you're meditating. Take a moment to acknowledge them. They're closer than neighbors, after all."

If we can take that moment to compassionately acknowledge the roughnecks that show up in our mind—the anger, the self-blame, the hatred, the wanting, the grief, the remorse, the guilt, the list goes on and on—that moment of clear mindfulness allows for clear seeing, for understanding to arise. And it is, in a way, an actual practice of loving-kindness and compassion. Because that quality of attention really is the quality of compassionate loving-kindness, acceptance of whatever roughneck appears in your mind.

It's been my limited experience that true compassion, really deep compassion, arises when we're able to be open to and present for what is difficult and fearful in our own experience. When we can open to deeper levels of pain in our own experience, we're able to be more present with the same pain in others. It's where the real sense of our interconnectedness emerges. In sitting here and practicing and opening to our own pain, we're really opening to the pain of all others, to the pain of the world.

The compassion that begins to arise when we see our own suffering—and how it's compounded by our not understanding what's going on—that compassion extends to every other being we encounter. We see that everyone is in the same predicament. And opening isn't selective. When we open to our own difficulties and compassion arises, so also does joy.

You find that in the opening, we have access to much greater depths of joy and love than when we're so busy trying to avoid anything unpleasant. We end up avoiding a lot of what's really beautiful as well, without knowing it.

Just one other thing I want to say, because it comes up a lot when we talk about opening to difficult situations. Just as mindfulness is not strident or forcing but very attentive and alert, so also it is not passive. Often, in the same way of being hard on ourselves—thinking "I've got to open to anything"—we can interpret this as meaning that anything difficult that happens, we just have to sit back and let it occur. This can really turn into a kind of victim mentality.

Mindfulness is not a passive quality at all. Mindfulness is very alert, inquiring, energetic. There can be a difficult situation where we don't close to it but meet it with real clarity of attention. Accepting the situation also allows for clear seeing. It doesn't mean we just sit around and let ourselves be abused. In the clear seeing, appropriate action becomes much more possible. We can act much sooner and more emphatically to get out of a situation that's causing us harm—one we don't need to stay in. But our motive is really one of compassion for ourselves and even for the people in the situation, rather than just blind hatred or fear.

This is not at all about "whatever happens that's unpleasant, I can't do anything about it." Compassionate action—that understanding that comes from clear seeing—can be very active. Much more appropriate action than when we don't see clearly.

The people who come to mind as embodiments of compassionate action and understanding—I think of the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa. They've seen incredible suffering. Just sometimes to walk through a street in India brings up so much pain. Sometimes it's hard for me to be with it. And someone like the Dalai Lama, who has seen so much suffering in Tibet, or Mother Teresa, who spends her time going out picking up dying people off the streets in Calcutta—they've seen incredible suffering. Yet the Dalai Lama is one of the most inspiring people to be around. He's light and filled with humor and kindness, and they're both incredibly energetic. Definitely not passive. Mother Teresa is eighty years old and she's just traveling all around the world doing things—ten times more energy than I have.

All our energy that's going into resistance and denial gets released for compassionate action, for the actions that come from clear seeing and understanding. So we're not talking about getting heavy and lost in suffering, but in fact just the opposite.

Really, even sitting here, we have plenty of opportunity to work with this. Even the simplest pain in our back, a simple feeling of "I'm bored and I wish I could go home"—it doesn't have to be some big, dramatic form of suffering. When we can summon up our sense of commitment and meet whatever it is that's happening with mindfulness, full attention, compassionate caring attention, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, we find that in that one moment the whole world can begin to open up for us. Our whole heart begins to open up.

CHAPTER 232

Opening Talk

Carol Wilson · 34 min

> *In this opening talk for a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the natural emotions that arise when embarking on such a profound journey into the unknown—the excitement, apprehension, and even terror that both teachers and yogis experience. She emphasizes that meditation practice is not about attaining specific states of mind, but about developing a quality of clear, precise, yet loving attention regardless of what is happening. This observing power of mindfulness remains steady whether we encounter pleasant or difficult experiences.*
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> *Carol explores the importance of examining our expectations and how unexamined ideas about what retreat "should" feel like can lead to frustration and disappointment. Drawing on Suzuki Roshi's teaching on constancy, she describes a quality of patience that goes beyond mere endurance—a spacious acceptance that remains undisturbed like the sky, even as clouds and lightning pass through. She offers practical guidance on slowing down, doing one thing at a time, and treating every moment—including washing dishes or doing yogi jobs—as the practice itself, not as interruptions to it.*
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> *Sharon Salzberg then leads the formal taking of the Three Refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) and the Five Precepts, explaining how these provide the essential context and foundation for intensive practice. The refuges affirm our potential for awakening as human beings, while the precepts create the conditions for harmonious community life and empower the depth of our investigation.*

This is really quite a moment. We're beginning tonight, the start of three months together.

I just want you to know that all the emotions you've described—feeling joy, excitement, apprehension, terror, wondering what you've gotten yourself into—I go through the same thing, whichever side or role I'm playing in a retreat. I'm sitting here thinking, "Three months? We're all here for three months? What's it going to be like?"

I think it's really natural to feel this way, but especially when you're a yogi, because this is such a journey into the unknown. As Joseph mentioned last night, each moment is an opening into the complete unknown. Actually, our whole life is that anyway, but we usually don't confront that reality with such direct, head-on looking as we're doing here, really every moment. And it's scary. The mind doesn't really like it very much.

I think that brings up a lot of our apprehension about what's going to happen. We tend to want some kind of pattern or a map—just let me know what I'm going to go through. If I have the hindrances in three days, that's okay as long as I know it. We don't like being in this space where we don't know what's going to happen in the next moment. And so the mind throws up all kinds of obstacles.

I was reflecting on this tonight and I realized that every retreat I've ever done, no matter how long or how much I'm into it, somewhere in the first week when I start getting really bogged down in the hindrances and I'm really slogging, I hit a day—and it usually lasts about a day—where I think, "Oh my God, I can't believe I did this to myself again. I should have known better." And it passes. Don't believe it. It's just the mind throwing up resistance out of a space of difficulty and fear. And no matter how many retreats any of us have done, we never know what's going to happen in the next moment of this retreat. That's just part of what the whole journey is about.

So I want to say a few things about attitudes that can help us as we begin this journey. Then Sharon will lead us in the refuges and the precepts, and we'll formally begin this period of silence, this remarkable thing that all of us are choosing to do together here this fall.

One of the things I've found tremendously helpful—Joseph touched on it a bit last night—is to give some attention to what expectations you're bringing into this retreat. What are the ideas, the pictures in your mind? Sometimes even consciously reflecting on them can help. Not that they're bad, but to know what they are, to bring them into conscious knowing.

Ideas about, for example, what a good retreat should feel like. What I expect to happen, what should happen. Lots of emotion. No emotion. Incredible peace. A lot of intensity. Really smooth and even. But no, that's dull—something really deep has to happen. Just notice what those ideas are. Things we've read. Whatever ideas we have about what it means to be enlightened. Notice what they are without a lot of judgment, and then put them down. It's extra baggage. It's stuff we carry around with us, and when we don't see it, it keeps us held in what we already know. It's what prevents us from being fully present and opening into the truth of this moment, the unknown truth of this moment. It keeps us in comparing and judging and disappointment.

I'll probably say this next thing a hundred times, but this practice is not about getting to, reaching, attaining some specific state of mind or body, some place where we can then hang out and know, "Ah, now it's right, now I've done it." It's not about that at all. It's about developing a quality of observing power, or mindfulness—a quality of clear,

precise, yet very loving attention, regardless of what is happening. And that's without exceptions: regardless of what is happening. It's this quality of connected attention that we're developing.

So when I begin a retreat, I usually consciously check for expectations. I go, "Got that one, got that one, now I know what they all are." And somewhere in the middle, or not so far from the beginning, when I hit into my first period of discouragement, disappointment, or frustration, rather than using that as a way to judge myself or evaluate—"Okay, I'm blowing it. This practice is wrong. I shouldn't have done this retreat. It's not the right time"—rather than using the frustration as a sign that there's something wrong, I see it as a signal. Okay, there's some expectation I'm not aware of.

There's some idea I have of what should be happening that I'm not aware of. So what is it? I can use the sense of discouragement as a signal to see what it is that I think should be happening that isn't. Because it's this comparison with our unseen idea that's bringing about the sense of frustration and disappointment.

Often merely the seeing—oh, right, I thought it should be pleasant all the time—can just allow us to again open to whatever it is that's happening. It's so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that if I'm having a difficult time, or even if unpleasant sensations are arising in the body, that means something's wrong. I've got to fix it. That means I'm doing something wrong, or there's something wrong with the practice. That's just not true. It just isn't true. Who in life has even a whole day of nothing but pleasant experience? It's not reality.

And hard times in our practice here are not just something that we put up with. They're actually a vital part of the practice. It's highs and it's lows and it's all the in-betweens. Developing this quality of clear observing power and open spaciousness of attention—acceptance with the hard times is just as important. Sometimes even more important. I find I've learned so much more, in a way, from the difficult times in practice. They're really vital.

Now, that's easy to say, sitting here. We can all give ourselves a little pep talk, and I would do that to myself all the time when I'm sitting. But when something really difficult comes along, that little pep talk—"Yeah, fine, right, this is vital. Uh-huh, good"—doesn't really always keep us there, get us over the hump.

Another attitude that is essential in allowing us to be present with this spaciousness—and it's something that we all are developing just through the hours of sitting and walking and sitting and walking—is what we usually call patience. By patience, I don't

mean just this sense of, "Okay, I can last through this until it's over." That's not at all what I mean. That's more like aversion—a kind of silent endurance. We hate this, but I'll sit with it until it goes away.

By patience, I'm really talking about a much broader quality of being. It encompasses attention, spacious acceptance, even appreciation, full presence with what's happening. With ourselves, with our restless, desiring, angry, doubting minds. With our aching, restless bodies. With our noisy, restless neighbor. With the job we don't like, with the schedule we don't like, with our experience we don't like. With days on end of sleepiness. With days on end of restlessness. With the cold. With whatever is going on. This broad, open quality of patience.

The best description that I know comes from Suzuki Roshi, the great Zen master. He writes: "The usual translation of the Japanese word *nin* is patience, but perhaps constancy is a better word. You must force yourself to be patient. But in constancy, there is only the unchanging ability to accept things as they are. Constancy is the way we cultivate our own spirit. Constancy is our way of continuous practice. We should always live as if we are the dark, empty sky. The sky is always the sky. Even though clouds and lightning come, the sky is not disturbed. Even if the flashing of enlightenment comes, after it passes, our practice forgets all about it. Then it is ready for another enlightenment."

This quality of true patience, constancy—we're always present, always there, prepared with our attention for whatever flashing comes. We can appreciate it, really appreciate it, and then forget about it as it goes. It's a beautiful quality of mind. And often in the long hours when it seems like nothing much is going on—another lifting, another placing, another breath—this quality of constancy, which also implies mindfulness, is being developed very deeply in our being. It's a very important and beautiful quality.

Along with this, our specific practice here helps us develop a very clear, direct, observing power of mind—a very strong power of mindfulness—which enables us to experience, to see the nature of ourselves, of our mind and body, the nature of reality, in a radically different way. A way that we often just don't experience in our busy lives. We don't take the time to really be able to look and experience in this way.

And it's really wonderful. This technique requires the development of a concentrated, continuous, precise quality of attention. And it does require a great deal of energy and effort.

Equally important, I feel, is that this development of focused attention is also held with an attitude of mind and heart characterized by spaciousness and acceptance of whatever's happening, by genuine interest in whatever's happening. Whatever is happening is okay. Anything that comes up in a moment is okay. And I think it's the putting of these two qualities together—the sense of concentrated, continuous, energetic focus held with a spacious attitude—that really allows our practice to develop quite fully.

A couple of hints in working with developing this observing power. And we'll talk more about all of these as the course goes on.

First, and we've mentioned this briefly: as you're moving through the day, not just in the sitting and walking but really everything else that you're doing, begin to work with slowing down, with doing one thing at a time. Ostensibly that might seem easy, but as we start to focus more closely, we see how easy it actually is to do two or three things at once. So begin here, as you're moving around, to break our habitual patterns of rushing, of doing rote activities without really having our mind on them.

Slowing down—that's one thing that really helps. You go to wash your face, just slow down. Just wash your face. As you begin to move a little more slowly, you find that it's much easier in the slowness to bring your attention into the actual experience in a much less superficial way. So there's washing the face and really being with the sensations of the movement of the arm, the wetness on your hand, the coldness of the water, the impatience in your mind. Simply being there with that.

Notice also how easy it is to want to wash your face and brush your teeth and plan what you're going to do in the next half hour all at the same time. And in noticing that, okay, begin again. It's a constant beginning again, back to feeling the movements of the hand as you wash the face. It's really simple. There's always right now, what I'm doing, to come back to. It's a continual beginning again. It's not something esoteric and difficult. It's just our willingness to be here now—for washing my face, for doing the dishes.

So doing one thing at a time and being willing to slow down so that we're really there in the experience. It's one wonderful thing about these three months: there's nowhere to hurry to. It's quite a gift you've given yourselves. Three months of no need to hurry. So when you find that you're hurrying—which undoubtedly will arise from time to time—you're hurrying to wash your face in order to get to the sitting so then you can meditate. Oh, whoa, wait a minute. That moment of washing your face is the meditation. That moment is this moment of your life, and that's all there is—this moment of life. And so our practice is to wake up, be present, connect with our life in this moment, not to hurry and get this moment over with so we can be present in the next moment.

This willingness to come back over and over to just be with, very simply, our experience—whatever we're doing—is what we're talking about when we're talking about continuity of mindfulness, continuity of awareness. And it's an extremely important and powerful part of this practice. I would say for myself and my practice, it has been at least as important a part of the practice as the formal sitting and walking. At times more so, because when there's this sense of real presence with what you're doing, connection with the sensations of the movement, the movement in your mind, it doesn't matter if you miss the whole sitting because you're very present for washing your face and walking through the dining room. That's the practice. It's not that you have to be sitting on the cushion at a certain time. It's really a very powerful part of the practice.

And I'd like to mention also, just briefly, that we can bring this same care to our yogi job. Sometimes this seems to be a little bit outside our area of what's worth paying attention to. I don't mean going microscopically slowly so that it takes you seven hours to wash the lunch dishes. Obviously, we have to take a little care with the sense of the total situation. But our yogi job is just as important a time. It's a moment, several moments, an hour of our life in which we can cultivate the qualities of mindful attention, concentration, connection with our experience.

And sometimes there's a tendency to discount it and want to hurry through it, get it over. Well, it's in the way. I have to move too fast. It's a disruption, a distraction. And I myself have often felt this way. I'd rather not do a yogi job; I just want to really be slow and sit and walk and sit and walk. And because I kind of have an in when I come here to do retreats, I often don't have to do a yogi job. But the last retreat I did here, last year, I said, oh, I'll be good—I'll sign up and vacuum. And it turned out to be a wonderful part of my practice. I was really amazed.

I thought, I've been missing this all these years. It was a really powerful part of developing the continuity. It was not only not a break in the continuity—it developed it even stronger. So I didn't have to hold on to the fear that if I move faster, it's all going to go away. It doesn't necessarily happen that way.

And I found that the attitude of thinking "this job doesn't count as the practice, it's outside of the practice"—that's missing the whole idea of the practice. Because nothing is outside of the practice. Nothing in our life, here or in our life outside of here. But especially here, since that's what we're concerned with now—nothing we do here is outside of the practice. It's all a vital part of developing our awareness and understanding.

So again, in the job you're moving more quickly, perhaps, but still there's always our bare experience to come back to. The feeling of the arms moving the vacuum. The coldness of the water as you're washing the dishes. The sense of feeling disgruntled or impatient or whatever arises in your mind. Whatever's going on, there's always the present experience to come back to.

This is what we're talking about when we speak of a willingness to totally surrender to the moment. It doesn't matter what's happening in the moment. Can I surrender my being into being totally here? Feeling it, being with it very fully, with power and force of attention, and this quality of acceptance.

And that's what these three months are. It's really just this moment. A lot of these moments—I don't know how many. But it always just comes back to this moment. There's nothing else. And in this moment, our strongest friend and ally is this power of attention. It can always be present as soon as we remember that we've spaced out—and then we're awake again. We can again focus our attention on whatever's happening. There's nowhere else to go. And really, for these three months, there's nothing else worth doing.

I want to close with this quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian teacher: "Do not undervalue attention. It means interest and also love. To know, to do, to discover, to create—you must give your heart to it, which means attention."

It's a privilege to share this three-month journey with you.

Traditionally, we've begun retreats by undertaking the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. The Three Refuges are taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, and in the Sangha. The act of taking refuge is something we'll probably be talking about much more extensively throughout the retreat, but just briefly, it's holding a sense primarily of what's possible for us.

All of you have given up a lot—of one kind or another—in order to be here. You've particularly given up all that which is familiar: the things that you might touch in with every day to remind yourself of who you are, what your values are, what you're going to get done, what you're going to accomplish that day.

Coming here, very often we have to let go of a lot of that. We're not speaking to one another, so there's not a kind of social portrayal of ourselves as being a certain person. We're not upholding an image of ourselves by how we dress—God knows—and all of the various ways we might in the world take on a role and feel secure about who we are.

Coming to a place like this, we let go of many of these aspects of our being and undertake, as Carol said, a journey of investigation or exploration. We're willing to let go of the merely familiar to see freshly and completely what is true for us.

But we don't do that without a context. It's not that we do this without any sense of security or understanding about what we're undertaking. This is taking refuge. It's providing the context. It's understanding why we're doing what we're doing and how we can do it in the most skillful way possible—which means the happiest way possible, and one that feels most complete.

We take refuge in the Buddha both as a sign of respect to the historical figure who lived 2,500 years ago, who was a pathfinder, who delineated a way for us so that we're not just coming in, sitting down, and trying to sort out of the confusion of our minds how to move forward. There is a path—a very clear path—that is laid out. We don't need to struggle to try to discover it as though there were no wisdom to sustain us.

We also take refuge in the Buddha as a symbol of our own potential. In all of the stories within this tradition about the Buddha, he is always described as being a human being—not a divine being. He's described as a human being who achieved or attained everything that he came to know through the power of his own awareness. It's also taught that this degree of understanding, this degree of purification of the mind, is possible for all of us as human beings, as who we are. So we take refuge in the Buddha also as a means of affirming our own potential for enlightenment, for freedom, for purification.

It's an act of recognition, really, that this is our potential.

We take refuge in the Dhamma, which can be translated as the teachings, or the way, or the truth, or the laws of nature. It's taking refuge in seeing things as they truly are. Joseph mentioned the other day surrendering to the Dhamma—surrendering to how things are in this moment. So we're not struggling and we're not fighting and we're not trying to deny what is happening, but we're seeing the truth of it, whatever it is. And understanding that this relative truth in this moment is our vehicle to a more ultimate or absolute truth. So we learn to trust our own experience and to use it in a way that is wise and skillful. We take refuge in the Dhamma.

We take refuge in the Sangha, which also has many meanings. The Sangha traditionally has meant the order of ordained monks and nuns who have preserved the teachings throughout all of these centuries, which has been an immeasurable gift. It means those beings who have practiced and attained a degree of purification of mind. Once again, it's an affirmation of what is possible for a human being. And in a very contemporary sense, it has come to mean the widest possible community of those who walk this path. So it's like we're all taking refuge, in that sense, in one another—with an understanding that in coming together here, even though we are silent and we're practicing aloneness and we're not making eye contact, really we could never be completely alone. We are supporting one another all of the time. This is the three refuges.

We then undertake five precepts, which are the absolutely essential foundation for the community to live here harmoniously and for our own practice to be empowered. In the world as we know it, as is convenient, as is culturally ordained, we don't think particularly of happiness and power as being tied up with our own virtue, our own actions, and the kind of strength that comes from living harmoniously and living simply, being straight and being honest. Yet there's tremendous strength and power that comes from that. It is really for the sake of making the practice as intense as possible and as deep as possible that again and again we call to mind this foundation. We understand that we must make this kind of commitment for our own sake, so we're not in any way weakening the power of our mind even as we need it to do this exploration.

CHAPTER 233

Right Action

Carol Wilson · 46 min

> *In this comprehensive talk on sīla (ethical conduct), Carol Wilson examines why right action deserves the same depth of attention as formal meditation practice. She reflects on how Western vipassanā has been extracted from its cultural context in Southeast Asia, where ethical practice is woven into daily life and supported by community, making it challenging for Western practitioners to fully appreciate the transformative power of working with speech and action.*
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> *Wilson illuminates the Buddha's teaching that concentration imbued with sīla brings great fruit, explaining how harmony between inner attitude and outer action is essential for genuine mental unification. Drawing on the understanding of kamma (action and its fruits), she emphasizes that it is intention—not the action itself—that determines whether conduct is skillful or unskillful. Skillful actions arise from non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, while unskillful actions stem from their opposites.*
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> *Through detailed exploration of the first two precepts—non-harming and not taking what is not given—Wilson demonstrates the ever-deepening subtlety available in this practice. She draws on teachings from Thich Nhat Hanh, Robert Aitken, and the Tao Te Ching to show how these guidelines extend far beyond their literal meanings into questions of environmental impact, economic systems, and inner contentment. Rather than approaching precepts with self-blame, she encourages practitioners to use any breach as an opportunity to investigate the underlying understanding that gave rise to unskillful action, transforming ethical practice into a genuine path of liberation.*

The end of the second full day. Right, right. That's usually what the second full day is like. No problem. You won't even remember this in December. If you're still here, please wait through it.

Tonight what I want to talk about is a huge topic, but I want to address it a little bit: sila, which is translated variously—none of which I'm crazy about—as morality or ethical conduct, the part of our path that comes under the heading of right action.

As most of you know, when the Buddha spoke of the path that leads us to liberation, he spoke of it as an eightfold path, having eight parts. And really we can't practice the meditation in isolation. I mean, we can if we want to, but it doesn't work very well. The Buddha was very pragmatic when he laid out this path of eight parts. The first two steps

deal with wisdom, with understanding. The second three steps deal with our speech and action in the world, specifically right speech, right action, and right livelihood. And then the last three steps deal more formally with meditation: mindfulness, concentration, and energy. None of these are isolated—it's not just isolated to meditation—but that's more specifically it. It's a very comprehensive and integrated path.

What I've found in myself over the years, especially in the early part of my practice, is that I would tend to put more emphasis on the meditation and the understanding aspects of the path and give cursory attention to sila, to right action. I would totally agree that I want to live a life of non-harming, but when I say cursory attention, I mean somehow not taking this part of sila, this part of the path, as just as valuable and deep and profound a practice as the formal meditation practice itself.

My opinion is that in the West, the way this practice of vipassana has come down to us, it's been taken out of the context of the culture in which it's been propagated and held in Southeast Asia all these 2,500 years. There the meditation occurs in the midst of a culture—for example, I spent some time in Thailand—that really values all segments of the Eightfold Path, including a very strong reverence and respect for the power of working with sila, with actions.

In the monasteries, in most monasteries that are anywhere near people, and they almost all are, the lay people would come at least once a week to hear teachings and to take the five precepts, to renew in themselves their commitment to working with speech and action. Sometimes the people could stay on overnight to do some meditation, or longer for weeks or months. In many cases the meditation isn't taught in these isolated retreats. People come to the monasteries, they can meditate, they go to their lives. It's all of a piece. And when they come to the monastery or they go back home, it's in and out of a culture that can hold the whole picture—a culture that respects not only the meditation but also the sila part of their everyday life. It's much more integrated, and so the emphasis on our actions is much stronger.

Here I often feel we've taken the retreat form because it's a good way to practice in this way and get the information across and really investigate. But it's so separated from our culture. In many cases when we go back out of a meditation retreat, even the basic respect for non-harming behavior is often lacking. There's not a sense of support. I've been reflecting on this a lot lately and feeling that this is one of the things that has helped me take so long to come to respect deeply, as I do now, the power of practicing attention to my speech and actions as a really beautiful path and a path of liberation.

The Buddha said in the last discourse before he died—actually it's a whole story of several months before he died—he said, "Concentration, when imbued with sila, with ethical behavior, brings great fruit and profit. Wisdom, when imbued with concentration, brings great fruit and profit. The mind which is imbued with wisdom can become completely free from the corruptions or the confusions of sense desire, becoming, false views, and ignorance." And he went around saying this over and over and over.

So concentration brings fruit when it's imbued with sila. On a very simple level, we can see this quite clearly. Concentration, one description of it, is a steadiness, a calmness, a unification of mind. Sila really means harmony—harmony of our inner attitude and our actions, and so harmony with others and with the world. Concentration, this integration of mind, is not really possible without harmony. And you'll have plenty of time to see that here, or in life outside of here.

You do some unskillful action—tell a fib, or yell at somebody, or take something that isn't yours—and then go sit. It's really hard to feel in harmony. The mind spins. I feel it physically in my body. It can be filled with remorse or guilt or fear that somebody will find out. It's not harmonious. The mind is not calm. You can see from this the obvious cause and effect relationship in such a simple example.

The Buddha's teaching of our work with sila is just this pragmatic. It's based on understanding—this is incredibly simplistic the way I'm saying this—but it's based on this understanding of cause and effect: that if we act in a certain way, certain effects are going to come. Essentially, this is the teaching of kamma, or karma. I'll go into that in a minute.

So this teaching of working with an understanding and harmony of behavior, with developing harmlessness as a way of being, is not based on a coerced adherence to some set of rules. It's not something that is to be forced on us from the outside. It's very interesting to me that sila, these three parts of the path concerning our speech and action, are not the first parts of the path. The first two steps of the Eightfold Path begin with right understanding, leading to right thought or intention or attitude, depending on the translation. So it is this understanding, this attitude of mind, that then leads us into our actions, not the reverse.

The precepts are not given as compulsory commandments, because that's not the way we work with them to develop understanding and freedom of mind. It's not about blind obedience. That's not where understanding arises. It arises through our open, non-judgmental acknowledgement and investigation of what's present.

So according to this Eightfold Path, the beginning of our journey of liberation is the beginning of insight—that we have some opening, some insight that changes our mistaken understanding of the way things are, that opens us up in some new way to the nature of reality. Some of these laws that Fred spoke of last night: of impermanence, of the unsatisfactoriness of this changing world, of the sense that there is no separate, solid self.

As we first begin to awaken, as our understanding first begins to bloom, sila then begins to come into our way of acting and being as the natural expression of our understanding. Our actions are the natural expression of our attitudes of mind, of how we understand who we are and our relationship to the world.

Again, a simple example—I'm trying to keep these really simple. Say one begins to get a sense of this experience of cause and effect in one's life. Actually, when we start to see that acting in a certain way brings a certain result, it's also a beginning of understanding of anatta, of no separate self, because you start to see that everything is arising dependent on the condition that precedes it, rather than some autonomous separate individual who can just do whatever they want and nothing will happen.

So one begins to have an understanding that if I act in a certain way, it brings certain effects. That can then lead to the thought, "Oh, when I lie, people don't trust me." And not liking that feeling, one then has a willingness to change one's behavior. Without that original understanding that how I act somehow has an effect on how people relate to me, there would be no willingness to even investigate what's making people relate to me in this way. What understanding am I coming from that's feeding my behavior?

For myself, in my own practice, I experience working with this area of action more and more deeply as a practice of the heart. Not so much anymore an imposed idea of "Well, it's bad to talk about other people. I shouldn't do it because people won't like me or it'll spoil my image" or whatever. Those kinds of shoulds imposed from outside, that outward conformity—it does have a certain effect in cleaning up our act. I mean, if that's the only way I can relate to the precepts, I'd rather do it that way than go around hurting people. But really, it's induced more from fear and shame—fear that I'd be found out somehow, or blamed. And that's not an experience of harmony. It lacks the inner understanding and commitment that really gives our work with our speech and actions the compelling power and understanding that can help us become free.

So more and more I experience my relationship to my actions, and I really feel it in my heart. It's like a movement of my heart. When I do something that's really out of harmony—I don't know, I tell a little fib or I speak in a very cutting way to someone—I

don't anymore usually have to even wait to get the reaction back from that person to know that I did something that's out of harmony or harmful. I feel it immediately. Like a tension, a heaviness, a clenching up. It's really quite symbiotic.

And it feeds the sense of harmony more and more, our understanding of the fact that we're all completely interdependent. In my doing something that is ostensibly harming someone else, I almost immediately experience a sense of disharmony, some level of suffering in myself. Sila is really grounded in this understanding of our oneness with all beings. It's the way Sayadaw U Pandita phrases it, which I find quite lovely: acting out of the understanding of oneness with all beings.

So when this is the basis, we can't help but begin to sense inwardly when our actions are having an effect of causing disharmony outwardly. It gets so you can't—I can't anyway—so easily separate whether I'm harming another person or harming myself. What's happening is an overall sense of suffering and disharmony. The sense of separation becomes stronger when I do something that's really out of sync.

So sila is based on and grows out of our understanding of a sense of oneness with all others. But then as we continue to investigate our actions, when we fall out of this sense of oneness, when we do something that's unskillful, that continuing to investigate again deepens and deepens our understanding of our sense of interconnectedness. It's really quite a lovely practice.

Another literal translation of sila is actually "practice." And I think that's really important to remember. It's a practice. It's not about expecting we should be these perfect beings, not harming ourselves or anyone else. It means we're continuing to grow always in harmony between our inner attitude and our outer actions. We're never perfect. Or anyway, so far I haven't met the person who is. There's always more to explore. And I don't find this discouraging. I find it inspiring and fascinating. It gives me the impetus to really investigate.

The Buddha said several times something I really like in working with this: that by protecting others through our actions of non-harming, we protect ourselves from the results of unskillful actions, from remorse, whatever. He also said that through protecting ourselves by not doing actions that will bring us unskillful fruits, we're protecting others. So it gets to a point where how can you tell the difference between self and other? There really isn't any.

This idea that we're protecting ourselves through non-harming action actually leads into the crux of understanding this practice of sila. Because it's not a practice of blame or of judgment, but it's an expression of the understanding, as I said, that certain types of action will inevitably, at some point, bring certain types of fruit or results. Very pragmatic, very simple.

This is the beginning understanding of karma, or kamma. The word kamma simply means action. Action and fruit. Cause and effect. And often it's quite observable and pretty pragmatic. If someone is a really violent, abusive person, that's the kind of reaction that they'll tend to get from people in life. They'll experience situations of anger and being used and abused quite often. Someone who is very generous and loving often will meet that same type of response in the people that they come in contact with.

Of course that's a simple and straightforward example. As we all know, it's nowhere near that simple and straightforward. And that's because while what we experience as results arises from how we act, the level that's really important for us to understand is that how we act flows from our understanding.

Sila or karma, both of these—they're a morality of intention, of volition in the mind. It's the intention that carries the importance, that carries the weight, that bears the fruit. All thought, speech, and action of we common folk who are not completely enlightened—all thought, speech, and action—each has a volitional force, an intention in the mind that brings about that thought, speech, and action. This can be very subtle, and a great deal of the time we might not be aware of it.

So the weakest intention would manifest as thought. For example, "Oh, I'd like an ice cream cone."

When the intention's a little stronger, it manifests as speech—you say that to somebody, or maybe out loud to yourself. And when the intention's at its strongest, you hop in the car and go down and get an ice cream cone. It's action. Just very straightforward.

So again, an action is seen or considered skillful or unskillful. It's not exactly bad and good. Skillful just means that's the kind of fruits it will bring. Unskillful will bring unskillful fruits based not so much on the action itself, but on the intention of mind that's driving that action.

An action is considered skillful when the intention in the mind is associated with mental states of non-greed—generosity, caring, renunciation. Skillful when it's associated with non-hatred—friendliness, metta, compassion, acceptance, the whole list. Skillful when the action is coming from a volition that's associated with non-delusion, non-confusion, not a sense of a strong ego or separate self—equanimity, insight.

And of course, the converse. An action is seen as unskillful when it's arising out of intentions in the mind of greed, of wanting, of anger, fear, hatred, of complete confusion, ignorance, delusion, a clouded mind.

So that desire for ice cream, if it's coming out of a really strong craving, it would be an unskillful action because it's driven by the volition of strong greed in the mind. But what's interesting is that the same action can be quite skillful when the intention driving it is different. If you're going to get ice cream because you want to bring it to another person as an act of generosity, the motivating force in that case is generosity. The same action becomes quite skillful.

So you see how it's very subtle—incredibly subtle, actually. The Buddha said there are four things that will drive people mad to think about them, and one of them is the workings of karma. So I don't want to go into it too much right now. I always fall back on that when I start to try and look at karma and figure it out. Oh, it doesn't make any sense—then I remember what he said.

The same action can be skillful or not, depending on what motivates it. There's a favorite story in the suttas of a blind monk who was doing walking meditation and was killing ants while he walked. The other monks all ran to the Buddha and said, "How can this guy be so enlightened? He's breaking the first precept. He's killing all these ants."

And the Buddha said, "He has absolutely no intention to kill those ants. He doesn't know it's happening. His intention is quite pure in doing his walking meditation. It's not an unskillful action."

This is where mindfulness becomes our best friend—being able to turn the mindfulness onto the sense of what's the motivation, what's driving this action. And to see that without judgment. We're not trying to blame ourselves and say what rotten people we are, but simply to see without judgment: what's the intention that's driving this speech, this action? What's the understanding that's coming from? And in this seeing, wisdom begins to arise.

I'd like to share some reflections—some mine and some other people's—on working with the five precepts themselves. Hopefully this will give some sense of what I've been experiencing, which is the increasing depth and subtlety and breadth that comes to be seen in working with each of these precepts. There are so many areas that each precept includes, until really each one covers all areas of our life, connected with everyone else's life. And I've been finding it wonderful.

First, working with the five precepts is a practice that has been in Buddhism really almost since very soon after the Buddha was enlightened. It's said that the first person he gave the five precepts to was a man whose son had just ordained. The son was the sixth person that the Buddha ordained after his enlightenment. The Buddha was enlightened and went and found his five former ascetic friends, taught them, and they ordained. Then this young man was the sixth person—a very rich young man. His father came to the Buddha, and he didn't really want to ordain, but he said, "Well, what can I do that will help me to live more like my son?" And the Buddha's answer was the five precepts.

I really see them as guidelines, as directions in which we incline the mind. For example, taking the first precept of not killing or not harming other beings—Thich Nhat Hanh, who is a wonderful Zen master, poet, and peace activist, in talking about this particular precept says it's a very difficult precept. And what is essential is not that we expect to begin by being perfect in not killing or not harming, but that we go in that direction, that we incline our mind in the direction of total non-harming.

He also suggests that we take mindfulness as the first precept. And I like this a lot, because he says, think of mindfulness as the fundamental precept. When you're mindful, you're responsible. And then the precepts are not needed to dictate our behavior. And it's really true. If I'm really paying attention, I'm not so likely to say something harsh or cutting. I definitely won't steal because you just can't do it when you're really paying attention.

So we use the precepts as guidelines, as signposts for the many times when we're not so mindful.

Not killing. It really is an incredibly complex and difficult thing—not to kill any living being, and expanding it further, to non-harming of any living being. Can anyone do it perfectly? Over the years what I've found happening is that it's been sinking deeper into my being as a way of being rather than as a way of acting.

This is from Robert Aitken: "The practice of peace and harmony is peace and harmony, not some technique designed to induce them." Like Thich Nhat Hanh says—being peace, not figuring out what we have to do to get peaceful.

Yet with all our really clear, unconfused intentions, not killing is a very complex issue. What about working in the garden? Never mind not using insecticides, but just killing the worms when you spade the earth. What do you do when a place is overrun with cockroaches? We've been debating that here for years, and seriously—it's a very difficult situation. How do you find the answer?

You know that story of the Zen Center—I'm not sure where it was, I think it was in Minnesota—that was getting overrun with cockroaches. And the students went to the master and said, "Nobody's coming to sit because cockroaches are crawling all over them. What should we do? It's against the precept to kill, but otherwise no one's going to come." And he said, "I'm not going to tell you."

But you see, that's throwing us back on the real power and value of working with our relationship to non-killing, to non-harming, in our own being. Just having someone else tell us what to do begs the whole question.

It's complicated. What about when a place is completely overrun with fleas and unlivable? That happened once to the house across the street when I was manager here. I walked in and walked out literally thirty seconds later covered with fleas all over my legs. What do you do when you're renting it to people and they need to live there? There are no easy answers. Only questions, and each of us finding our own really honest relationship to that.

And then I can feel, okay, not killing motivated by anger or aversion—that's pretty clear. And then I've started to see the levels where killing can happen in me from indifference, or laziness, or just not paying attention. For me, the classic example is when I step in a bathtub or a shower somewhere and I don't have my glasses on. Standing up, I can't tell what's on the bottom. Is it just a little speck of dirt or is it a little spider? And if I don't feel like squatting all the way down and looking, I could quite easily be killing things out of indifference. The effect isn't so immediately observable, but actually now I've reached the point where if I don't look down, I don't know whether I harmed anything—but I feel terrible. And it's getting really interesting.

And then it can expand further. How does what we take into our experience—into our mind through the sense doors—how does that affect our mind and heart? How does that affect others? Does it affect our actions?

For example, the incredible amount of violence in the culture in this country. And it is more in this country—I've just been in England, and I feel so different there, aside from London, than how I feel here. There's so much more violence here. Is it fed by the amount of violence in TV and movies? Many times I've read in newspapers of crimes, of murders that seem to be acted out from some show that was on TV a week or two ago—the exact similar motif. It's scary.

So I have to wonder, am I part of that? Am I participating in that? If I pay money to go see a movie that has that kind of violence in it, in a way I'm supporting putting that out into the culture.

If I even just flick it on on the TV, am I supporting it even by indifference? I don't know. These are just questions that come up in my mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh takes it further. He says, in his view, that because alcohol requires so much grain to produce it, when we drink alcohol we're using something that has taken grain that could have been used to feed starving people—because so much of the world's grain goes into making alcohol, which seems unnecessary. So then he questions: by drinking alcohol, am I unintentionally contributing to starvation in the world? You see, it's a very complex question. And that's without even going into the fact that every time we drive in a car, we squash bugs. Every time we boil water, we kill microbes. Things that, in a way, we really can't avoid as part of being human.

But I think you get the idea, and I could just go on and on. There's an incredible potential for deeper investigation. And as I investigate in this area more and more, it's not a sense of, "Oh, I'm so horrible—I'm walking and I'm killing unseen beings." It's much more that we become more and more finely attuned to our essential oneness in this world, oneness with all other beings. It's actually quite lovely. And as we bring our attention to this precept, this sense of oneness just gets stronger and stronger, and also more and more levels of subtlety emerge.

The second precept is taking the precept not to take what is not given. So this is already expanded quite a bit beyond simply not stealing—it encompasses much more. And again, most of us will say, "Well, not stealing is pretty straightforward and not so difficult. We don't do blatant stealing." But then, you know, what about when you go in the bathroom and someone left their shampoo and it's just the kind you've always wanted to try? They'll never care or notice. And probably they wouldn't care. But again, it's checking back: what's the intention that this action is coming from? Is it coming from an intention of "I really want to try this shampoo, I like the way it..."—so there's greed.

And again, expanding to find it not just in the passive mode of not taking what's not given, but more actively cultivating a sense of open-hearted generosity of being. On another level, I relate to this precept as having a sense of inner contentment—not being in that mode of needing, wanting something else. There's this Zen phrase: "The self and the world are just as they are." So can that be enough? The sense of inner contentment with just what is.

In looking at not taking what is not given, not getting into the mind that's needy—this is Robert Aitken's way of looking at it—it's much more than just not stealing objects. When we're in this state of inner poverty, in a gaining mentality, that's really where stealing or taking what's not given comes from. We're also, he says, in a way stealing

from ourselves. We're stealing time, but much more we're stealing from ourselves peace—the possibility of being able to be with what is, with appreciation, with clear seeing. There's no chance to be at peace in the moment when we're in this space of needing, gaining, inner poverty.

This is from the Tao Te Ching: "If you realize that you have enough, you are truly rich. Be content with what you have, rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you."

It's really true. And as this understanding becomes stronger and stronger in our heart, when we're content, when we know nothing is lacking, the whole world belongs to us. From this understanding, who could possibly steal? There's nothing to want. It's really quite beautiful.

And then I wonder sometimes: is creating needs part of our economic system? Is that what advertising does on a rampant scale? Is that stealing from people? And do I participate in it? I was looking at the New York Times Magazine the other day—I mean, how many new perfumes do we need in this world?

And there were several pages announcing this new perfume and that new perfume, all these seductive-looking women. Do we need any of this? It's certainly moving us away from a sense of inner contentment. Is it in a way stealing?

And of course, as we all know, the growing wants, the way that we live in the first world, in the industrialized countries—the corporations take so much in resources and timber from countries that are really very poor. It's hard for me not to think of this as stealing in a way. And I'm definitely participating in it in the way that I relate to using resources, in the way that I relate to just hopping in the car and driving an hour on a whim, and keeping the heat turned really up, or just not remembering to turn it down when I leave the house because there's always enough for us.

This again is almost indifference, just choosing not to pay attention to the effects that my actions are having in a wider sphere. And so I wonder, is it stealing?

This is from Mahatma Gandhi: "We are not always aware of our real needs and most of us improperly multiply our wants and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves. If we devote some thought to the subject, we'll find that we can get rid of quite a number of wants. One who follows the observance of non-stealing will bring about a progressive reduction of one's own wants. Much of the distressing poverty in this world has arisen out of the breaches of the principle of non-stealing."

So again, those are just thoughts that come to me in looking at this. And I really feel with this precept, as with all the others—which I'll just name briefly—that in working with all of them, I have a feeling I'll never get to the end of it in my lifetime. There's so much to learn about our interconnection, about the subtleties of my own intention and motivation and how I act, and the possibility of really moving into much greater freedom in the mind through my willingness to give this area attention. My willingness to investigate not out of self-judgment, not by blaming myself for being rotten because I broke a precept again, but simply out of a wanting to learn.

So it's the same for the other three precepts: not misusing our sexuality to bring harm to ourselves or another; not lying or using harsh or abusive speech; not taking intoxicants or drugs that cloud our mind. Basically, they throw us into a state of delusion. And as Sayadaw U Pandita says, then it's really easy to break all the other four and bring everyone else along with you. It's really true.

I find it inspiring when I notice I've done something out of harmony, breaking one of the precepts, to use that as a signal to check back into my motivation rather than thinking what a horrible person I am. I investigate what understanding I was acting out of that led to this action. When I'm aware of it and just feel awful, rather than saying, "Oh no, you're so bad, I'll never lie again, I promise, I'm really going to be good"—that doesn't really help. No understanding comes out of that, just a sense of self-blame and restriction and trying to adhere to some goal. It doesn't really lead on to liberation.

But if I take that awareness—oh, I lied—and ask, what was going on there? What was the understanding that arose out of? I look back and see, well, I wanted to look good. And wanting to look good came out of a feeling of fear that I wouldn't, or that I'd be seen for what I really was, that I did something I didn't want this person to know. And fear is a form of aversion. And going back further, that fear was arising out of some image that I'm identified with of who Carol is or who Carol should be. In bringing attention to that identification with that image, in that moment it can really dissolve. And in that moment there's a sense of freedom, a sense of just being with what is. No blame.

This is the possibility of freedom that can come to us from working with the precepts on deeper and deeper and more powerful levels. It really is part of our practice of liberation.

CHAPTER 234

Qualities of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 46 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a detailed exploration of sati (mindfulness) and its distinctive qualities that make it, as the Buddha taught, our greatest protection in life. She begins by examining how the mental defilements (kilesas) of greed, hatred, and delusion act as filters that distort our perception, citing psychological research demonstrating how we unconsciously avoid threatening stimuli or develop tunnel vision when wanting something intensely.*
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> *Wilson identifies four key qualities of mindfulness: its alert, energetic nature that springs from genuine interest rather than grim determination; its capacity to meet experience directly without hesitation or discrimination; its ability to know bare experience as distinct from our interpretations and concepts; and its fundamentally non-violent, spacious quality that allows all experiences to arise and pass without manipulation. She explains how mindfulness works together with effort and concentration—using the analogy of throwing a stone at a wet mud wall—and emphasizes that each moment of sati is a moment of purification where greed, hatred, and delusion cannot arise.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for practitioners, encouraging recognition that continuity of mindfulness is developed moment by moment, like rubbing brass until it becomes a mirror. Wilson concludes with the profound teaching that true liberation comes from within—through knowing the truth of each moment for ourselves through direct experience, a freedom that no one can give us or take away.*

Tonight I want to talk about the qualities of mindfulness. In Pali the word is *sati*, which I might use throughout the talk, because mindfulness is a fairly specific quality of mind. We've been talking about it a lot and we will continue to do so because it's the linchpin of our practice here.

I want to speak about it specifically because the qualities of mindfulness are something we can experience very directly when we're paying attention. My hope is to help us get more familiar with what these qualities of *sati* are so that we can recognize them when they're present and also understand that they can be developed. This isn't something we just hope falls from the sky by the grace of God. In my own practice, I find it helpful to explore and investigate these qualities.

The Buddha said once that *sati*, mindfulness, is the greatest protection we have in life—and it's the only protection we need in life. In a very obvious way, we can see that *sati* is a protection in our mind from being completely overwhelmed by the forces of greed, of hatred or aversion, of delusion. These disturbances of the mind and heart—*kilesas*, torments of the mind, defilements, all these different words.

Most of us know this, at least on a very obvious level. We know that when we're really consumed by anger or by wanting, we can't see a situation clearly. We're not protected.

I've seen this just in the last couple of days here. Several people have come to see me—and probably there are just as many others that I'm not seeing—who find themselves in some situation where they're either really angry at someone here or really wanting something very badly. They'll have this incredible string of machinations to go through to acquire something, and there's a sense of, "Is this a little out of balance? Is this really accurate? Am I getting carried away here?"

I think that's the beginning of wisdom. We know our perception of what's going on is really distorted. We can't trust it. We're being overwhelmed at that point by greed or hatred or confusion. Mindfulness can protect us from this.

We start to become aware of these distortions when we're really gripped by them. That's the first step to knowing actuality—to know that our perception is really distorted. But these disturbances work on many, many more subtle levels than this in our experience.

Joseph has spoken of this factor of perception in our experience, the recognition quality of what's happening that's present in each moment. The noting practice is in fact a function of this perception, its ability to recognize. When the qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion—in all their many ramifications, I'm not naming them all, but we all know them well enough—when they're arising in the mind, even in very subtle ways, those qualities act as filters on our perception. When perception occurs, we're actually not able to perceive correctly what the experience is. Then our responses and reactions are based on this incorrect, confused perception. It just goes from one confusion and difficulty to the next, and we wonder why things don't seem to work.

My favorite example of this comes from a book called *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* by Daniel Goleman. He gives examples of scientific psychological experiments that were carried out looking at how our perception can be so biased or distorted, how things can actually be shut out of conscious perception.

Let me begin with how aversion works. Aversion is simply that movement of the mind, of the attention, away from something that's unpleasant, difficult, terrorizing, excruciatingly painful, or just very mildly unpleasant. That movement filters our perception.

There are examples of ways the mind seems to block conscious knowing or even conscious perception of stimuli that are actually or potentially threatening, painful, or fearful. The first example he gives is from last century, of someone who was being mauled by a lion. This person was conscious throughout the experience and lived through it, reporting afterwards that obviously his body was really being ripped apart, but he was not in touch with being in pain. The speculation is that somehow it's a survival mechanism of our body—if he'd been overcome with the pain and the shock of that, he probably never would have been able to maintain presence of mind to get away.

The book continues theorizing that this defense mechanism might also work with stimuli that are not actually physically painful or threatening, but that are emotionally threatening or anxiety-producing, or only possibly anxiety-producing.

The experiment I remember involved subjects looking at a series of different pictures and then having to later remember and recount what the different pictures were. At the same time, the researchers had some device that could measure very precisely where the person's eyeball looked, so they could tell if they'd looked at the whole picture or if they'd avoided certain parts.

The one I remember is a picture where part of it would be completely neutral—like some guy sitting there reading a newspaper—and then the other half would be completely out of context with that. In this case, it was something sexually suggestive and really out of context with the rest of the picture. People for whom that was threatening or anxiety-provoking, when later recounting the pictures, wouldn't remember that part at all. They would only remember the man reading the newspaper.

But even more interesting, the researchers could measure that somehow their eyes had known not to even look at that half of the picture. This is really deeply conditioned. And so, of course, our perception is skewed.

It's distorted. And sometimes this might be necessary—repressing memories of things like childhood trauma when you have to continue in the situation and it would be literally unbearable. But we do it so many times when it's not necessary, like looking at a picture that's going to bring up a little anxiety.

The same with the tendency of mind of grasping, of moving toward. It gives us a sense of tunnel vision. Expectations of what we want tend to keep the mind from perceiving stimuli or experience that is outside of that or in the way. For this experiment, they showed subjects a four-minute video of a very fast basketball game—the ball passing back and forth between people a lot. The assignment was to count very precisely how many times the ball was passed. That was all that was said. And in the middle of this, apparently a woman dressed in white with a white parasol sauntered across the middle of the basketball court. Nobody commented on it when recounting how many times the ball was passed. When they were told about it, they were shocked. They couldn't believe it had happened. And then when they showed the video, of course you couldn't miss it. "How could I have ever not seen that?"

How often has that happened in our meditation? It's like, "Oh, right—wanting. How could I not see that was wanting?" It hits you in the face.

This skewing of our perception of reality—this is what we call delusion. And things don't work. No wonder we're out of touch. We are out of touch. We don't know what's happening half the time, but we think we do. We have these huge blind spots in our perception, in our idea of what our experience really is. Selective memory, selective perception, unconscious choosing of what to notice and what not to notice.

There's aversion—avoidance, denial of anything that's potentially painful or threatening to our worldview, which we might not even be aware of. Outright denial. There's the wanting mind—how greed gives us tunnel vision. We only see what we want or need and discount or avoid other things. And then there's identification—the sense of identifying with any part or moment of our experience as me, as a solid, lasting, unchanging I. Perhaps the most insidious of these qualities.

For example, we identify with the idea, "I am stupid." And then we proceed to only acknowledge any perception that fits that idea and to completely discount any perception that doesn't. I do it myself. Ten people will come up and say, "Oh, you did such and so really well." And I think, "No, they're stupid. They don't know. They didn't listen." The eleventh person comes and says, "That stank." And I go, "Yeah, you're really right."

We do this a lot. Delusion. Filtering, skewing our perception, which then colors and skews our whole experience of reality. This is suffering.

And this is where the power of sati, the power of mindfulness, comes in. It's an amazingly powerful force for cutting through this ability we have to avoid and deceive ourselves. Through cultivating this quality of mindfulness, what happens as we work with it is the light of awareness, of acknowledgment—it begins to shine equally on

whatever object, whatever experience is arising into our consciousness at any given moment. We're not discriminating: "I'll pick some, maybe I'll pay attention to that. No, no, no, I won't pay attention to that one. Ignore it." We just begin to shine the light of mindfulness equally on whatever happens to be arising, without choice.

And this then begins to include even the filters. In some ways, that's why after we've been sitting as long as we have now, sometimes things seem worse. Because what you're seeing is greed and aversion and confusion. You think, "God, I'm so much worse than when I started." But it's because the mindfulness, sati, is getting stronger.

And we're seeing what we previously didn't even know was there. Previously unattended experiences are now being received with this equal, non-discriminating quality of sati, and they begin to come into awareness. We're not so driven to deny and avoid painful things, or to desperately hold on to the pleasant. And a little bit at least, this to-ing and fro-ing of the mind and heart begins to be calmed down.

This drive, this to-ing and fro-ing, is the source of our conflict. And we all have moments—I'm sure you must have all had at least one moment in the two weeks that we've been doing intensive practice now—where this to-ing and fro-ing just for a moment ceases. And instead of having our perception colored with confusion, aversion, wanting, it's just clear. The stillness, the peace that is more our real nature is allowed to shine forth. It becomes apparent.

And thus, it's not always some spectacular moment. It's those times when you're just sitting there drinking a cup of tea, and suddenly that's all. It's just totally the lifting, or the sensation, or the taste. And later, in retrospect, you think, "That was the most wonderful cup of tea." There was nothing different about that cup of tea. It was that in that moment there was no wanting it to continue, no aversion, just total presence. Mindfulness was strong, that clarity of no delusion. Appreciating the exquisiteness of the trees today, but not wanting it to continue, just seeing it clearly.

Those moments are moments when our perception of presence is not so distorted, when mindfulness is stronger, and the sense of the stillness, the peace that is what we are, is more apparent.

These disturbances, these distortions—greed, hatred, delusion—they're really strong. They're also impermanent. Without sati, we tend to take them for granted. We don't even notice them. We think, "Well, this is the way it is." We think that's who we are. And it's not.

When we bring our fullness of attention to the experience, then we begin to find that what we assume to be true is not necessarily so. And sati is the quality of mind that does this, that lets us come face to face, as it were, with direct experience, and to know it for what it really is. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master and poet, said once that to have a correct perception, we need to have a direct encounter. That's what mindfulness is—a direct encounter with each moment of experience.

So what are these qualities of mindfulness, this observing power? It's much more than a kind of vague, general sense of awareness that we sometimes can think of it as. There are a few qualities I want to talk about, and hopefully, as I talk about them, see if you can really feel it experientially, what the quality of energetic experience is that I'm describing. Because at different moments, we've all experienced it. Rather than filing it away in the mind as another idea—"Oh, let me remember these four qualities of mindfulness"—forget it. That won't help. But just sit and let it come in and see if you can feel or recognize any of these qualities in your experience.

So the first is that sati is a very alert, active quality of attention. It's very energetic, but the energy springs not from a driving, grim force, but from interest—a really deep interest. And we're all capable of a very precise, sustained quality of interest. When you go to the movies, there's a certain quality of interest, unless it's really a lousy movie. There's a sense of not knowing what's going to happen in the next moment, even if it's not a suspense movie, but even more if it is. And so we're really present just to be there and see what happens in the next moment. And we can all do that for a period of an hour or two hours.

And it's the same in our life. We don't know what's going to happen in the next moment. When you sit down to sit, you have no idea what's going to happen in the next moment of sitting, or the next moment of walking. I often, when I'm on retreat, sit down and go, "Okay, what's the show going to be this time?" Who knows? And so, can we bring the same quality of interest to our life process that we can bring to a movie?

I was in San Francisco during the Super Bowl last year. For those of you from out of the country, this is this big American football playoff when for some reason the whole country has to stop and watch this game for three hours. And San Francisco was where one of the teams was from.

I have a lot of friends there, and everybody I knew—and everyone I didn't know—stopped and watched this game. So I watched it too. And the quality of interest and attention was unbelievable. Every single move. It was not a pure interest; it was definitely tainted with expectation and greed. It was not undiscriminating. But it was very powerful.

And I thought later, why can't we bring Super Bowl mind to our life? Why is our life so boring while what Joe Montana throws a football around is so fascinating? We have the ability, but are we willing? Are we interested enough to use it?

When we have that interest, then this alert quality, this energetic quality of mindfulness is present without forcing. We have this alert attention that moves without discrimination or hesitation.

This might sound kind of technical, but it's actually the way one can sometimes experience noting something. It's as if an experience arises into our consciousness—a sensation, a sound, a thought, whatever—and immediately the knowing mind rises up to meet it. Immediately the knowing mind moves to that sensation, that sound, notes it, and really sinks into it, knows it for what it is. There's no hesitation, and there's no discrimination. There's a sensation, immediately the knowing mind arises, it's as if it moves to it, notes it, sinks into it, becomes it. "Oh, there's throbbing, throbbing"—and just really with it.

We don't hesitate: "Oh, should I note this? I don't know, I don't like it so much, I'll wait till a nicer sensation comes along." That doesn't really work, because that moment of hesitation, of discrimination, is of course the moment when the distortions can come flooding in. If we hesitate, it's usually because something is a little unpleasant, threatening, or we're clinging possibly—there's wanting going on, there's something more pleasant going on. "This calm is so nice. And if I notice that pain, it might get worse and then the calm will go away. So we'll just pretend it's not there and stay with the calm. Calm, calm, calm." You're noting calm in a total state of tension. It doesn't work to hesitate or discriminate.

So mindfulness has this active quality of the knowing mind springing up and coming to meet whatever it is without time to hesitate or think about it. You can see from this that this alert quality of sati needs energy. We can't just kind of settle back thinking, "Well, something will happen and then the mindfulness will come—oh yeah, that sensation." It doesn't last too long. It tends to peter out.

I've spoken before about the Eightfold Path, how it's divided into three segments: one segment dealing with wisdom, one segment dealing with morality, and the last three-part segment is called the samadhi group or the concentration group. Those are the factors of right effort or energy, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These three qualities—energy, mindfulness, concentration—work together. So I want to give an example of how the energy supports and sustains the mindfulness.

The classic example they give—you can tell this comes from Asia—is throwing a stone at a wet mud wall. To throw the stone, to aim it and really throw it hard enough to connect with the wall, takes a certain amount of effort. It takes energy. Otherwise, there's never any connection that's going to happen, or you just miss it altogether. That's the effort. That's the energy factor. Then sati, the mindfulness, is like that stone hitting the wall and really hitting it squarely, directly, and sinking into it—clearly meeting the wall, knowing it. It's not a superficial quality. It doesn't just kind of hit the wall and glance off. It really sinks in, it knows it for what it is. Then with the help of enough energy to really reach the wall and the mindfulness to meet it, sink in, know it for what it is, the stone can stay stuck in the wet mud for a long period of time—and that's the concentration.

So you see how the three all work together and need to be balanced together. They support and strengthen one another. Sati needs this active quality of energy.

But in my own practice, I've found it important not to mistake effort for sati—that sometimes when I'm not quite knowing what's happening, there's a sense of just push, push, push and the mindfulness will get stronger. You can push, but you could be pushing in the wrong direction too. The mindfulness is: we need enough energy to reach what's happening, but the mindfulness is meeting and really knowing what it is that's happening.

So that brings me to the next quality of sati, which is that it knows what's actually happening—the bare experience—as opposed to all our concepts and interpretations and ideas about what's happening. And again, we all know this. That's what we're all trying to do. It just can be quite insidious, how a concept or interpretation can get so bound up, so tied up into the experience that we keep mistaking the interpretation for the bare experience.

A very simple example: someone is following the breath, rise and fall, rise and fall, and it's tight and unpleasant. And the idea, the interpretation, starts up: "I'm such a rigid, controlling, tight person." And it's believed, identified with, and it becomes inseparable in one's mind from the sensation of the tightness of the breath. When we confuse the two like this, we're taking "I'm a rigid, controlling person" to be the actuality of the experience. When we're confusing the interpretation with the actual experience, that's where these skewed perceptions begin to arise. In this case, the whole experience is colored with identification and aversion. We're losing touch with reality again.

Each breath then strengthens the concept. "Oh, I'm so rigid and controlling. I can't do anything about it. I'm so ungenerous." That gives rise to more aversion, which, unseen, gives rise to more proliferation of thought—memories of how rigid and controlling

we've been in our whole life, how we'll continue to be in the future—more resistance, more aversion. Pretty soon the whole thing is set in concrete and breathing becomes a torment. And we all do this in many ways.

It's right here, right when we're in such a place like this—even before we get there too, but once we're in it—that mindfulness is really such a powerful protection. When I was writing this earlier, I had a conceptual idea that this is true, and just before, walking outside, some things started going on in my mind—feeling nervous, thinking about something else, not noticing the trees, feeling tightness. And suddenly I realized: yes, sati is our strongest protection.

Because what one does is, in that moment of sati, coming out of all the "this means that" and "I feel like this" and "what about this," just dropping into the bare experience. Tightness. Hearing. Walking. Aversion. Thinking. In that moment of our conscious, knowing mind coming together directly with the experience—whatever it is, with the tight breath, with the sensation of tightness, with the aversion, with the unpleasantness, with the thought—mindfulness brings us face to face with that experience, just as it is.

And it's such a strong protection, the sati, because in that moment of coming into direct contact, really sinking into the sensation of tightness in the breath, in that one moment there's no room for overpowering greed or aversion or confusion to come up and overwhelm us. The attention and the arising experience are connected. They're really closely sinking into one another, and there's not room for all these disturbances to come in. This we can actually experience over and over and over. It's incredibly powerful—simply knowing and being with the bare experience.

Like just before, when I was walking over here from next door, what I just described: I was kind of knowing, "Oh, the trees are pretty, the wind is blowing, this is a lovely night, I'm feeling tension"—just all the kilesas starting to expand. And in that moment of connecting with tightness, the whole thing just drops away. There's just a sense of tightness and the knowing of it, and there's not a problem. It's unpleasant and the knowing of it, and it's not a problem. It just cuts through all that proliferation and distortion. That's why such moments—when we're just with the breath, or we've been fighting a pain the whole sitting and suddenly we're just with it and there's not a problem—are so fulfilling. Because again, that distortion, that clouding of our perception, is not there. There's no conflict.

This is what we call a moment of purification of the mind. Often we talk about this as a path of purification—a purification because in that moment, and a moment is quick, admittedly, but in that moment these disturbances of greed, hatred, and delusion are

not arising in that moment of mindfulness, of close connection with what's going on. In the next moment, they may arise again. But in this moment, they're not. And that is a very powerful moment. It's breaking the momentum of the delusion, the identification, the anger. It might not seem like much, and often it's no big deal of an experience to say, "Okay, big deal."

I had a moment of mindfulness and the rest of the day I was lost in confusion. Big deal. I'm going to do this for three months.

But it is powerful. It is a very powerful moment. Don't underestimate it. It's a moment of purification. It's a moment where instead of strengthening the power of anger, the power of confusion by just feeding into it, we're cutting. That momentum is being cut right there. And what is being strengthened and conditioned is the power of mindfulness.

It's been said that a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom. Just a moment. But it's also true that each moment that is conditioned by sati is the cause for succeeding moments of mindfulness to arise. And in fact, mindfulness is the strongest cause for mindfulness to arise. So each moment is slowly building on each preceding moment. And it's a very powerful conditioning force.

It's like Sharon talked about getting wet in the fog the other morning. We don't really notice it when it's happening. It's like filling a bucket drop by drop, and it seems to take forever if what we're looking at is wanting to get to the top. But this is why we emphasize continuity so much—because each moment of mindfulness has a real power of purification, of clarity, of deconditioning the distortions. And it has a real power of bringing us into the next moment of mindfulness, the next moment of mindfulness. And so the continuity is the very important aspect of this practice.

Sayadaw U Pandita once gave the example of trying to use a piece of brass for a mirror. You look at it and it's all cloudy and you can't really see much of anything. So you start rubbing it and rubbing it and rubbing it. And each rub doesn't seem to do much at all. But eventually you can really see yourself quite clearly in it. You couldn't ever really point to where in the process it changed. But each rub is setting the conditions for the next one and the next one and the next one. And it's all a process of deepening purification and clarity.

It's also interesting to notice, in working with continuity, that in some ways I find it a huge relief. Not thinking about it—thinking about it is an incredible burden. If you think about being continuous every moment of the day, it's like, forget it. But the actual doing of it, I find in many ways to be an incredible relief. Because the doing of it doesn't

mean "I'm going to be continuously mindful if it kills me for this next seventy-three minutes." The doing of it means, what's happening right now? Oh, tightness, releasing, lifting, drinking, washing. Whatever is happening, that's what we wake up and bring our attention back to.

And it's a relief because it takes away any sense of pressure that I've got to hurry and get through this and get to something more important. If eating is just as important as washing, is just as important as sitting, then all I have to do is be willing to bring my total attention and presence to this particular moment, whatever it is. It doesn't matter. And in some ways that takes away a sense of "I've got to really get there in the sitting, because the sitting is what it's all about." Turning the doorknob is just as important.

You start to see that it's the direct knowing, this quality of sati, that's important—not what the experience is that we're knowing. And for me, that took away a huge sense of striving to get some special experience so that then my meditation was okay. It takes it down to: Can I just be totally connected, bring the sati to bear to really face this experience of touching? And that's all.

I watched on a retreat once what happened—it was really kind of interesting. I guess I was in a mellow place because I didn't get into too much self-judging. I observed what happened when I had been quite continuous, and then what happened when I just kind of let it up. I remember clearly I was sitting in my room looking at a tree outside, looking at the leaves. I was very mindful. I was noting the seeing and the mind's reactions and the pleasantness and the liking. It was all very quiet. No big deal. And then, just sort of—I can't remember if I did it on purpose or not—I let up. I said, okay, I'll just take a break.

No noting, just being here. And it was a very peaceful experience because I was quite present. Within—I want to say like a minute, but I think it was more like a second—of not being particularly mindful, not in a striving way but just that willingness to be present, wanting and desire and aversion and opinions just came rushing in. It was really fascinating. A little disheartening. But just to see how when that connection isn't there, how mindfulness is such a protection. When there starts to be that space between the knowing mind and what's happening, the most conditioned things come in: "Oh, I like this, those leaves are nice, I'm kind of hungry, I think I'll go for a walk, what am I doing here? Oh, right, noting." And it was gone again. Really interesting.

The last really important quality: none of this is or can really be done through repression or forcing. Mindfulness does not function from repression or from forcing. It's energetic, yes, but it's not intense, tense striving.

If everything I've been saying sounds all very clear-cut, nice and clean—a lot of our experience isn't going to be like this. I am talking about these qualities to get us a sense of being familiar with them, as possibilities, as understanding the nature of sati, to recognize its energy, not to use it to beat ourselves up because every moment isn't this strong, face-to-face, alert, active attention and connecting. Often it won't be. And that's when this next quality is really important to bring in.

The quality that sati is totally non-violent, totally non-manipulative. It has nothing to do with trying to change experience or make it be a certain way or judge it. It's that completely allowing and accepting quality of mind—almost like a quality of mettā with whatever is arising. The quality that helps me most, and I'm just trying to use different words to invoke it, is a quality of spaciousness. This huge, wide spaciousness that directly acknowledges whatever is arising in our experience but is also totally spacious with whatever's arising.

The sense I got last night going outside with the beautiful, almost full moon, a couple of stars—that is an experience, very clear, very present. But the quality of all the space of the sky around it, acknowledging and holding that experience, almost as if cradling it. Yet there's no sense of, "Well, let's hold on. We don't want the moon to set." It doesn't make any sense. There's no sense of, "Oh, we don't like the moon, we wish it would go away and the sun would come back." In that quality of spaciousness, it can cradle and appreciate whatever comes and also let it go.

This is the other quality of sati that can balance the active, energetic quality. Yes, we really meet the experience, but with this wide, all-embracing spaciousness. The whole range of experiences can come and go, and it's not a problem. If we think we know what good practice looks like or what it should look like, and we don't notice this, then it's really hard to be spacious and allow any experience that doesn't fit that to really be met with mindfulness and spaciousness—to let it come, let it be present, let it go, and be there fully for it. With the spaciousness of the sky, there is no special experience to have. There's only the ability to be fully present, actively knowing it just for what it is, and letting it go.

So sati, our greatest protection, protects us from heedlessness—basically walking through life like we're asleep, not knowing what we're doing, performing unskillful acts, hurting ourselves or others from heedlessness, from not knowing what's going on. It protects us through purifying our mind, through moments of freedom from the distortions of greed, of aversion, of delusion. Sati weakens the power of these unwholesome mental states while it strengthens the power of seeing clearly.

Through the ability of sati to know deeply what is happening, just as it is, without discriminating in a superficial way, really deeply knowing—it lets us see and know the truth of any moment for ourselves, from our own experience, clear experience of the reality of this moment. A moment that's free from the distortions of these confusions, these disturbances of mind—that is a moment that is the condition for liberating insight and compassion to arise. Insight and compassion both arise from the direct knowing of reality in this moment.

Once we understand, once we know the truth for ourselves of who we are, what we are, what's the reality of this moment—to me that's the greatest protection of all. Because what we know for ourselves, nothing and no one can take away from us. No one can come and say, "That's not true." It doesn't matter. We know.

It's our own experience. No one else can give it to us either.

I'll close with a quotation by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was speaking about the day of liberation from the prison camps in Russia:

"The day of liberation—as if it were possible to liberate anyone who has not first become liberated in their own soul. Or as if it were possible to take away the freedom of anyone who is."

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 235

Balance of Perception

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses a fundamental challenge in meditation practice: developing an evenness of perception that allows us to fully meet both the painful and the beautiful aspects of experience without getting lost in either. She illuminates the paradox that as we deepen our practice, we simultaneously open to greater suffering and to the sublime—and learning to hold both without denying either is essential to genuine freedom.*
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> *Wilson draws on the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths, explaining how understanding dukkha requires us to meet and investigate our afflictions directly. She explores how the kilesas (defilements) of greed, hatred, and delusion color our perception like dye colors water, yet are not our intrinsic nature—they are like clouds temporarily covering the sun. Quoting the Third Zen Patriarch's teaching that "to set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind," she examines how our conditioned tendency toward duality creates unnecessary suffering.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing wholesome mental states when they arise, including the seven factors of enlightenment (mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity) and the ten pāramīs (perfections). Wilson emphasizes that moments of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion—generosity, loving-kindness, clarity—are equally valid objects of meditation as difficult experiences. She encourages practitioners to notice which experiences the mind isolates and identifies with, recognizing that no self-definition is solid. Through the non-discriminating power of sati, we can meet all experience with acceptance and gradually develop the balanced awareness that leads to liberation.*

Tonight I want to talk about another aspect of balance in practice. This is the balancing of perception so that we have an evenness of perception—balancing our opening to the painful and difficult while also opening to the incredible beauty and perfection of the Dhamma.

It seems to me this is one of the great paradoxes, the great mysteries of our practice, of life on this earth, of life in this body. As we go deeper and deeper in our practice and investigation, we find that we open more and more to what is painful and difficult. At the same time, we're opening to the sublime, to the incredibly wondrous. It seems to happen together.

What is very difficult for many of us is to be able to hold both with an evenness of perception—not to get lost in the unsatisfactoriness and pain, and not to get lost in ecstasy and beauty. That might not be your problem so far, so I'll probably focus more on the former. But it's hard to hold both without denying either.

Let me offer some examples of how both aspects are present when I start looking around in almost any experience. Walking outside a week or so ago, on one of those really beautiful golden days where the trees were on fire and it was warm, just incredibly beautiful—being in the woods, my heart felt uplifted. I really felt at one with things. Very inspiring. And then the wind blows, some leaves flutter down, and there's this shift. Right, all this beauty is the prelude to the death of all these flowers and trees. It's winter coming on. It holds both at the same time.

Another example: a very good friend of mine who is HIV positive, not really sick, but there's all the possibility, the fear and the pain and the oppressive, wearing nature of that, the fear that comes with any small thing that goes wrong. It's really heart-rending. And at the same time, this person is becoming more and more radiant, more and more able to share and express love of the Dharma, just love in general, more and more glowing as a person. People just want to be around this person. How can you separate the two? They're both happening together.

Or on a bigger scale in the world, take the events in the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe, and how there's this sense of the Cold War ending and tyrannies breaking down. Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize for, they said, his part in ending the Cold War. And then you read about or hear about what's happening in Russia. Actually, there's a huge increase in crime of all sorts, violence of all sorts. They have like now a Russian mafia starting to come up. Anti-Semitism is getting really strong. We met some friends from the Soviet Union a few weeks ago. They said it's really quite scary. And this also is happening at the same time as the ending of this tyranny. How can you separate the two? And why do we need to?

So part of our practice—and you can see it in your experience here—is to learn to hold both, to acknowledge whichever aspect of experience is emerging into our awareness at the present time without needing to deny or repress. We can have compassion, metta, for the pain and suffering, our own and others, and at the same time, appreciation for the mystery, for the wonder, for the beauty.

It's true that for many of us at different times, the painful unsatisfying aspect of our practice, of our mind, of our life, or sometimes of the pain in the world, can really start to seem unbearable or overwhelming. As we go deeper in practice, we begin to open to see more deeply the nature of the kilesas, the power of greed and hatred and confusion

in our mind. We open to depths of pain and difficulty that we've been so conditioned to avoid in our lives that we've just never really been able to muster the attention to look at it.

This is a necessary and vital part of our practice. We're so conditioned to move away from the difficult and unpleasant and painful and scary that we have to learn how to see it and open to it with mindfulness. That's what the Buddha talked about in his Four Noble Truths, and there's a reason for that. To know the nature of our disease—our disease being how suffering is created and how we can come to freedom from it—it's necessary to meet and investigate and thus understand the disease itself.

To do this, in some ways it seems like we plunge into seeing the kilesas, the torments in our mind, the suffering in our psyche, in our body, on a deeper and deeper level. And it's hard. I would venture to say that everyone here, in your own uniquely personal way, is meeting your own personal pains and torments—physical, emotional, spiritual, psychic, confusion. You're meeting it all, in whatever manner it's manifesting in your experience. You're meeting it, and it takes great courage. It takes a lot of honesty and humility, over and over and over, to come face to face with this. I wish that you could each acknowledge this for yourself.

This part of the practice is necessary. But what is also necessary is to meet our experience with an evenness of mindfulness. In other words, we can get so focused on the afflictions, so focused on seeing greed, hatred, delusion, pain, suffering, the whole gamut, that we start to think that's all we see.

And when this happens—and this is what I mean by not having an evenness of mindfulness—we're just focused on the painful, the scary, the negative. We can get very discouraged. When this happens, we really lose energy to be present, to meet what's happening in the moment. It gets really hard to practice.

Again, it's like the afflictions seeping in in a new way, coloring our perception of what's going on the way dye colors water. If we don't see it, it's like the plug comes out of our energy, and everything just starts on this downhill spiral.

Just for an example, look in your own mind. How many people, when I spoke of meeting your difficulties with courage and humility, said, "Yeah, right, that's everyone else but not me"? Or, "I don't really have that much pain." Or the reverse: "My pain is so much worse than everybody else's, but I don't have the courage to greet it." Just these little twists of how we relate to experience are the blinders, the filters that keep our mindfulness and perceptions skewed, that keep us out of balance.

I just want to remind us that greed, hatred, delusion, confusion—these are not our intrinsic nature. They're not intrinsic, inseparable qualities of the mind and heart. They seep in; they color our experience. They color the pure nature of our mind the way that clouds cover the sun. And we need to see and know the clouds. We need to recognize and acknowledge them, not run from them. But we need to know that they're impermanent and not mistake them for the sun. Not identify with the clouds. And we also need to learn to recognize the sun—to know when it's shining, instead of just thinking, "Oh well, there are no defilements present. Let me go look for some." Let's stop and acknowledge the sun when it comes out.

So our practice is about being clearly mindful, knowing for ourselves the unbearably painful, the exquisitely sublime, and everything in between—with evenness of mind, non-reactivity of attention. Neither avoiding the one nor clinging to the other, but just being present with a direct, unflinching openness of being, an energy of mindfulness.

So how can we work with developing this evenness? Chögyam Trungpa said something once that I like a lot—I'm paraphrasing a bit—because it's actually the experience of falling out of balance that wakes us up and enables us to come to balance. So rather than thinking when we're out of balance, "Oh God, I blew it again," that's the trigger to wake us up, to come back into balance.

When we're in a difficult, painful time, just when things are getting the most oppressive, the most unbearable, the most negative—when someone goes, "This is too much, I can't handle it anymore, and this can't be the whole show"—we realize, yeah, it's not. It's just at that point that things shift, that our mind opens into another perception, another possibility.

But we're so conditioned to view life through the veil of confusion, of negativity, of wanting, that we're used to looking at life as if it's a series of polarities. This duality. There's right and wrong. My practice is good or it's bad. I'm progressing or I'm going backwards. And we really take that to be the way things are.

Thich Nhat Hanh was talking about this once, and he said: really realize you can't have right without left. It's the same thing. It's part of the same piece. It's the same with good and evil, pleasant and unpleasant, positive and negative. It's completely interdependent. The polarity is just an idea that we have in our mind. We set these two sides of the same whole as polar opposites. We want one, we deny the other. We make one good, we want to get rid of ever hearing about the other. And then we really suffer.

Thich Nhat Hanh again: seeing how in ourselves, as in society, we only want to be with the good. So if that's so, and we've set up these polar opposites, that means we can't identify with the evil or bad. So we have to throw it out there, project it out onto the world. We need an enemy. And this is how we've been conditioned for a large part of our lives. Of course we bring that in here.

I noticed some time ago, right after I'd been thinking about this, I was reading a newspaper. Just with nothing particular in my mind, I started to notice the tenor of most of the main articles. They were about crimes, and the way that one dealt with them was courts and juries and punishment and prisons and executions.

There's a war on drugs, a war in Iraq—all this punitive, separated way of working with things.

I read something the other day that was just horrible. In Guatemala, there are more and more young teenage kids who are abandoned and living on the streets of Guatemala City. They're starving, and they sniff glue just to mask the hunger. And the army's way of dealing with this—what's considered a horrible blight on society—is to kidnap and kill them. If there's something bad, we don't want to see it. Get rid of it, annihilate it, so it doesn't exist. It's horrible, this sense of polarity taken to the extreme.

I used to work in a state hospital for severely mentally handicapped people—really severely handicapped. And it's amazing how many people live there, yet I never run into anybody like that in the course of my daily life. Again, it's this sense of getting it out there, extirpating it so I don't have to face it in myself.

We're so caught in this sense of opposites and duality that we don't know how to hold them both, to see that they're two sides of the same coin, to hold the mystery of it.

So what happens? We come here to practice, and in doing so we really begin to be more evenly aware of what's going on. Of course, the shadow side of ourselves begins to come up into consciousness—which is great. That's the practice. We begin to really experience the power of these torments of mind: greed, hatred, and delusion. We really come to know the power these have for confusing us.

But we still tend to be caught in this sense of duality, of opposites. And so we just turn it back in on ourselves. Suddenly we are seeing only the torments, only the so-called bad. "God, anyone with this much greed, hatred, and delusion doesn't deserve to live. How can I be with other people?"

My favorite example—a friend told me this last year, and he's given me permission to share it. He was on retreat, doing walking meditation, and the thought arose: "I felt I was not being respectful to the trees because I'm such an unmindful, deluded person." We're like this, you know. We just turn it in on ourselves and get really caught.

From the Third Zen Patriarch: "When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things."

To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind.

So our practice is not to cling to and not to reject anything that comes up in this moment of awareness—no matter what it is, and that has no exceptions whatsoever. But to meet everything with this mindfulness, this power of acknowledgment and attention, whether it's unbearable distress and suffering, whether it's an exquisitely beautiful moment, whether it's something mundane—the whole range.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about how we take our garbage, throw it out into the compost, then use that compost to plant flowers. We grow roses, and the roses go back into the compost. So when you look at a rose, you can't separate it. Compost, or garbage, is rose, and the rose is garbage. They're not two separate opposing things. They are each other.

The pain in us and the beauty in us is the same as the pain outside and the beauty outside. They are each other. This is what the world is. We can't separate it, make this wall.

We're not all horrendously evil beings. And we are also experiencing a lot of greed, hatred, and delusion in our moment-to-moment experience. Both are true.

In working with balancing my perception—especially when I'm caught in a round of really recognizing the painful, afflictive aspects while not really recognizing the more uplifting aspects—one of the most powerful aids is simply learning to recognize these helpful, uplifting states of mind when they're present.

These are qualities of the luminous mind. They're classically described in Theravada in typically bland terms as non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. But really, these are not passive, bland qualities at all. They are very active, uplifting qualities of mind. I'm going to describe just a few.

Non-greed includes generosity, thoughts and actions of sharing, non-attachment, renunciation, simplicity. Non-hatred includes mettā, loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness, patience, acceptance. Non-delusion brings real brightness of mind, clarity of perception. It can lead to equanimity, to insight, to understanding with clarity of perception.

These are all also mental states. They come and go. But pay attention, because we do experience them, all of us, in differing degrees at various times. There are times when confusion, greed, and hatred are not arising, when mindfulness is strong. And these really uplifting qualities are accessible to all of us. We don't have to be a Buddha to experience moments of these. It's very important to recognize them, note them, notice them, give them full acknowledgment and attention when they're arising in our experience.

Sometimes, even in just talking about these uplifting qualities, it can lead one to feel even more discouraged. We can really do a number on ourselves. "Okay, well, a mind of mettā, boundless equanimity—right, sure. That might be for somebody else, but I have a mind of boundless aversion and self-contempt. Don't talk about it, you know, it just makes me feel even worse." We get more caught in self-judgment, in comparison. You start looking around and go, "God, look how equanimous everybody looks, and I'm the only one fidgeting." And it just gets into more comparison. There's always someone better. I just want to say that. If you're in a judging mode, there's always going to be someone that looks better. It never ends.

But what's really more important than that is this: from this place where the mind is comparing—"compassion, equanimity, not possible for me"—the mind can't imagine at this point being brighter, being freer, because it's stuck in what it knows. The mind only knows what it's already experienced. It can't know a greater capacity than it's experienced. But that doesn't mean it's not possible. The mind doesn't know, but the heart can trust. And this experience, this opening to really positive qualities of our experience, is beyond the mind knowing. It's beyond thoughts. So it doesn't matter that the mind is filled with thoughts about, "Not for me, I'm not good enough, you have to be a bodhisattva," blah, blah, blah. That's just thoughts. It has no bearing on the reality of what is possible—except in that we choose to believe them and get caught there.

It's a lot about trust. Again, the Third Zen Patriarch: the non-dual is one with the trusting mind. It's about trust, not about figuring it out or holding on.

To help with recognizing more supportive and onward-leading experiences or mental states, I want to list some more, because I think it is helpful to begin to get familiar with them. Often we just kind of think, "Well, nothing's happening," as I mentioned the

other night. And what's happening is calm, which is actually one of the seven factors of enlightenment. But we can get so focused on wanting sati, mindfulness, wanting concentration and not having it, that we completely overlook calm, which is a very important quality that needs to be developed and balanced.

In working with the seven factors of enlightenment, yes, we've talked a lot about mindfulness, which is one, and we've talked a lot about samādhi, concentration. But there are also five others that are equally important to develop and bring into balance. On the calming side, there's concentration. There's also calm. There's also equanimity, this non-reactive quality of mind. Very important qualities. On the energetic side, there's energy or effort. Again, we've talked a lot about that. There's also this quality of investigation of states—interest, really interested in investigating what's happening. Very important. Also, the quality of rapture or joy, pīti in Pali.

All of these seven factors are developing and coming into balance. At different times, different ones will be more obvious, will be stronger, and other ones will be weaker. If we just focus on a couple, we tend to ignore all the others and really downplay what's going on in our experience. So for example, you may feel no mindfulness whatsoever, but investigation is actually coming up quite strongly. Or you have no energy, but calm is being developed.

A second list, and a whole other way of working with qualities in our mind, is called the ten pāramīs, or ten perfections.

These ten qualities are described as the supreme noble qualities of character or conduct. In the Theravada tradition there are ten; in the Mahayana there are six. These ten qualities are also considered contributory conditions to enlightenment. Traditionally it was taught that the bodhisattva, before becoming a Buddha, spent eons of lifetimes, in each life working to develop to perfection these ten powerful qualities of being. Each of them is very important in our growing into the openness that leads to understanding.

There is generosity. There is virtue, or sila. You can see that we're all developing all of these in different degrees at different times. The third is renunciation—just by being here, you're renouncing a tremendous amount, even if all you're seeing is what you still want. The fourth is wisdom. The fifth is energy. The sixth is patience or perseverance. The seventh is truthfulness. The eighth is resolution or determination. The ninth is metta, loving-kindness. The tenth is equanimity.

So when we're feeling really lost in a difficult, confused space—nothing but fear, nothing but aversion, nothing but clinging or depression—it seems so solid and unending and so useless when we want to be in a different space. It can be helpful to either

actually reflect on, or just tune into in yourself, that this particular experience might be the ground for really developing the power of patience, or of resolution, or of equanimity. Our willingness to just gently come back and meet it, and meet it again, could really be significant. This could be the lifetime that's devoted to the development of patience. Who knows?

It really helps me sometimes to step back and look at the bigger picture. I don't know which particular part of the path really needs to be developed in me in this lifetime. You're really looking at a big picture, I know. But maybe it is just patience. And that's not a bad use of a life, to really perfect the power of patience.

When we begin to work with this evenness of mindfulness, acknowledging what's present for just what it is, we stop discounting what we're experiencing just because it doesn't meet our idea of what good mindfulness and good concentration should look like. We think it should look like something else, not this, so this is out and I've got to change. Instead, you much more start to be able to fully meet what's happening. And in that meeting, the equanimity, the patience, all the paramis and all the seven factors of enlightenment actually get strengthened and developed from our simple meeting what's happening.

Sometimes I've noticed in myself, and in talking with other people, that when we do actually experience in our practice, in our life, some of these very powerful, uplifting qualities—like real rapture, love of the Dhamma, joy, metta, compassion—sometimes people talk about, in a subtle way, being almost afraid to really open to and acknowledge that experience. There's a slight hesitancy, a slight holding back, almost as if we're more hesitant to fully open and acknowledge joy, love of the Dhamma, real love of another person, or truly unbounded metta than we are to open to pain sometimes.

I'm not completely sure why. Some of the things that I've experienced are a sense of not trusting that it's real. "Oh, this is another false state. This is just going to lead me into more suffering, so let me pull back a little bit." It's kind of unconscious. Or, "This feels like real rapture, but it's not possible for me to be experiencing that. It's just some delusion." So we veer our attention away from that in a subtle way. Or, "I'm not pure enough. It couldn't possibly be happening to me." We don't trust it. Or it's not ecstatic enough—my idea of rapture is that it should really be this incredibly ecstatic experience, you know, it blows me out. And that's not what's happening, so it's nothing.

Or sometimes there's such a sense of the poignancy of the beauty of something. Poignancy because of its impermanent nature—there can be this subtle fear of opening to it because I'll just get attached and it's going to go away and I'll suffer. So what's the point of even opening to the beauty? It's just more suffering.

Can we learn to trust that we can fully open to what's happening without the need for fear, without the need for hesitation, that kind of bargaining? The Buddha said once that through dispassion the mind is freed. But dispassion doesn't mean grayness. It doesn't mean that we don't appreciate and fully experience these wondrous, uplifting states of mind or the beautiful in life. The Buddha also said that what is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one does not strive after it.

So we don't block it out, and everything doesn't turn into this muddle of grayness—no beauty, no pain. We really appreciate, we fully open to and appreciate the wonder, in a way even more deeply, because we know it will pass. There's no sense in clinging, and so there's no need to hold back either. It's actually a purer appreciation, a purer experience.

But I don't want to underplay the power of conditioning. Yes, I know, we have to come back to suffering. Even with deep experiences of these powerful states of mind or heart, when we really know that the kilesas—the torments of mind, the disturbances—are not our intrinsic nature, we know that they're impermanent. We know that in a moment of mindfulness they don't arise, and we might have a choice of how to act or react in our life. And then we wake up five minutes later and find we're again caught in wanting, in confusion, in aversion. It's like, "Oh, the clouds are all there is. What happened to the sun?" We forget there ever was a sun. We're just back in the clouds. How did I get here? Why does this keep happening?

We might have really gotten it. There's absolutely nothing to want—that was completely crystal clear. We've all had moments in different ways where we think, "I really know this." I don't know how many times I've really known that there's no self. I absolutely know it. And then I turn around and I'm acting as if I'm the most solid being that ever existed, going through all kinds of machinations and plans to get something that I really need that's going to make me happy.

The conditioning is strong. When there's a moment of unawareness, it's as if the old conditioning—the habit of mind to move towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant—just springs in and fills up that space. The mind rushes towards the pleasant.

We said it before, but I want to say it again: this is why mindfulness is so powerful. When we're present with mindfulness, it does counteract these habits of mind. That moment of attention where the attentive mind, the mindfulness, really meets the arising object—it connects with the pleasant thought, connects with the pleasant experience. In that moment, the greed isn't fed. This is the purification of a moment of mindfulness, and it's really powerful. Through this shining the light of mindfulness on whatever arises, our evenness of perception develops and gets stronger—shining the

light of mindfulness on whatever comes up in this moment without any hesitation, without any discrimination. This is what Bhante Bodhirakkhita was talking about the other night: not waiting and thinking, "Should I go look at this object or not?" No discrimination.

So each one of these moments of pure mindfulness is a moment of purification, and the habits of the afflictions are weakened, become less strong. We begin to see these torments of mind, these habits, much more clearly. They start to move from being unseen filters on our experience that we're not even aware of to being really observable—as someone said in an interview, palpable experiences. We really feel greed when it's arising, where before we just thought that's the way things are.

This stage, this part of our practice—which is actually due to the increasing mindfulness and the stronger purification—can be a very discouraging and painful time. It's like greed is just here everywhere, or aversion is just so experienced, and it really can be quite discouraging. So often people say, "Well, now that I'm aware of self-judgment or lust or aversion or whatever, that's all I see. I'm so much more neurotic than when I came." It can seem overwhelming.

Again, this is another filter, moving out of evenness of perception. So often we can have this tendency to accent the so-called negative and discount the so-called positive. This can happen on very subtle levels, when we move away again from bare mindfulness and start to put our energy into the interpretations and the identification.

It's a simple experience. I noticed this: I was driving yesterday and passing a place where I knew in advance there's a huge stand of trees on the side of the road. I know that they always lose all their leaves really early because they're in water. So I was ready for this before I even came up, because I really don't like it when winter comes. So I have this mindset.

So I came up and there was this whole huge expanse of totally gray trees, not a leaf left, on the left. And I was noticing this—oh, it's all gray. I feel so sad. Winter's coming. Autumn's over. It's getting cold. It's kind of depressing. I was just really caught in this. And then I happened to notice that on the other side, it was beautiful. All the leaves were gold. There was still a lot of green. I hadn't even noticed that—caught in the interpretations, identified with this feeling of sadness and "oh, poor me, it's winter and I get cold."

This perception is what prevents evenness. Instead of simply noticing, "Oh, there's gray over here—winter's coming. Oh, there's beautiful gold and green over here—isn't that lovely?" I was caught in all the story.

It's helpful at these times when we notice we're doing this. Thich Nhat Hanh asks, "Most of us ask the question, what is wrong? We forget to ask what is right." The example he gives, which I really love—it's so simple—talks about how it is when we have a toothache. We're really aware of it, aware of the pain, and it's quite excruciating, very painful. When something happens and the pain stops, oh, it's so pleasant, so nice. We really appreciate it and it's so peaceful. Now, most of the time we don't have a toothache and we don't even notice it, much less appreciate the pleasantness. It's really pleasant not having a toothache.

So we begin to notice in our practice here, as we're sitting—rising and falling, in and out, lifting, moving, placing, moving through the day—there's a fairly steady flow of changing objects, of experience arising, persisting, passing away. Emotion, sensation, sound, sight, thought, sensation—coming and going. Notice how many of them come, they're here, they go. There's mindfulness, there's recognition, there's no big fuss. Then notice how some of this flow of objects arises and somehow there's this lurch in the mind. The mind isolates particular experience from the flow, identifies with it. "Oh, this one's real. This is permanent. This is me. This one isn't okay. It's got to go."

Notice the difference. Begin to notice which ones get isolated and grabbed onto or pushed away, which get really identified with. When we're not in this evenness of perception, when the mindfulness is selective, we isolate the particular experiences that fit the particular filter we're seeing through at that time. And those are the experiences we believe.

For example, we're in the filter of "I'm so greedy." Every experience, every thought, every feeling of greed that comes up—that's what we pull out, that gets identified with, that one's solid. All the objects that came that we didn't feel greed about are completely ignored. And there are probably many more times that greed wasn't felt, but that's completely ignored.

Or "my concentration's no good." Just the sight of somebody walking past slowly is pulled out, isolated. "Oh my God, they're so concentrated. My concentration—I'll never be able to do that." Every experience through the day that's pulled out and isolated is the one that fits that filter. Whatever it is. "I can never do the practice. I'm stupid. I'm the best yogi that ever lived. I'm incredibly beautiful. I'm ugly." Whatever it is. All the experiences to the contrary that don't fit—they're just discounted or ignored or not given much attention.

Just begin to become aware of this. Just reflect at some point today on how many thoughts, how many emotions, how many experiences came and went. Impossible to count in one hour.

Which ones did the mind hook onto? Which experiences are defining your perception of today's reality? Which experiences are defining your perception of yourself?

Just becoming aware of this. And when we become aware of some such self-definition of the moment, whatever it is, we can begin to look very carefully at each moment—not only at the moments when that experience is present, but at the moments when it's not. And you can't help but begin to see that no self-definition is solid. It doesn't matter what it is.

"I'm angry. I'm such an angry person." There might be several isolated angry moments. There might be really a lot of isolated angry moments. But it will not be every single arising object of experience that happens in the day. There will be many where anger just isn't there at all—there's happiness or hunger or joy or sleepiness or neutrality or calm or concentration. And we isolate those moments that fit the filter: "I'm angry."

I think of it in my mind when I'm sitting, watching this happen—it's like my thought makes a bridge between several experiences or moments that happen minutes or hours apart. My thought holds them together and creates this narrative: "Oh, I've been angry all day." Just begin to notice. No self-definition is solid.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh talking again about noticing what is right. He's speaking about the Vietnam War, when he was working with a group of people at great risk to themselves:

"During the war, we were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage. So I would mention these herbs to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

Just notice what else is present.

Mindfulness—this magic power of mindfulness—really is the key to clear perception. Pleasant and neutral objects that arise in our experience are equally valid objects of meditation as the difficult and the painful. Mindfulness is a non-discriminating awareness. In a way, it's almost like meeting whatever arises in the moment with this active quality of attention and also with loving-kindness, with gentleness, with acceptance—whatever it is.

Real peace, real freedom, comes from meeting the excruciatingly painful, the sublime, and everything in between equally. No distinctions. We appreciate the beauty. We open to and understand the suffering through our own experience, and through this opening discover new depths of compassion and love. This really is possible through the power of our continuing development of mindfulness.

I want to end with a quotation that shows how even great suffering can open into great beauty of spirit. It's from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, writing in his trilogy *The Gulag Archipelago*—people enduring the unendurable in all the different prison camps through Stalinist Russia, really appalling suffering, unimaginable pain and cruelty. He talks about how many people—not everyone, but many—grew tremendously spiritually through this, really seeing the incredible beauty that can emerge in the human heart through being involved in such unbearable suffering. That's the only way someone could emerge from ten years in the camps as he did and then write something like this:

"Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states nor between classes nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small unuprooted corner of evil. Since then, I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world. They struggle with the evil inside a human being, inside every human being. It may be impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to transcend it within each person."

So let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 236

Craving and Grasping: The Crisis of Dukkha

Carol Wilson · 53 min

In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a detailed exploration of the Second Noble Truth—the origin of dukkha through craving (taṇhā) and grasping (upādāna). Beginning with the Buddha's initial hesitation to teach after his enlightenment, she reminds practitioners that even the Awakened One recognized how deeply beings are attached to their attachments.

Wilson systematically examines the four classical categories of grasping: sense pleasures (kāmupādāna), views (diṭṭhupādāna), rites and rituals (sīlabbatupādāna), and self-doctrine (attavādupādāna). Drawing from the Sutta Nipāta and teachings of Ajahn Chah, she illuminates how contact at the six sense doors can either lead to entanglement or, when met with mindfulness, to liberation. She uses vivid personal anecdotes and retreat observations to demonstrate how grasping distorts perception, creates separation, and generates a solid sense of self.

The talk emphasizes that the practice is not about condemning desire but understanding it deeply on a visceral level. Wilson highlights the retreat environment as a powerful laboratory for experiencing grasping without immediately satisfying it—a transformative practice that weakens the compulsive drive toward gratification. Through patient investigation and equanimity, practitioners can discover the peace of non-grasping: a completeness in this moment, exactly as it is, without needing to add or subtract anything.

Joseph talked the other night about the life of the Buddha. When he was first enlightened there under the Bodhi tree, some of the texts tell us that at first he was not so inclined to spend the rest of his life teaching. It says he looked around with his omniscient eye and thought that this truth he had discovered is so profound, so hard to see—you can't discover it just by thinking about it. And looking around, they tell us he thought people are relying so much on attachment, they're delighting in attachment, and so it will be too hard for them to see this truth. And so his mind favored inaction.

It really feels like that when we're in the middle of this process here. Often we're too lost in attachment and aversion. It's impossible to see the truth. At this point in the retreat, talking to different people and talking with the other teachers, you're really right down in the middle of your process. And I don't know if you realize it—it takes a

sense of perspective. Often it can feel like it's nothing but attachment, nothing but aversion. What am I doing here? Forget it. So this is really encouraging that the Buddha thought the same thing.

The story goes that at this point, Brahma, the head of the Brahma realm, came down and begged the Buddha to teach. He asked him to look around again and said that there are people with little dust in their eyes—which is a phrase that I love—and that they can hear and see and understand and know the truth. And this is when the Buddha's heart of compassion was opened, and he spent the rest of his life teaching.

As you know, the first teaching that he gave was of the Four Noble Truths, which we've talked about briefly. Tonight I want to focus mostly on the second one.

The first truth is the truth of unsatisfactoriness—just its existence, the different forms of it, our need to open to it. The second truth is the origin of this dukkha, the origin being craving. Craving which produces renewal of being over and over again. Craving which creates suffering because we're craving what is elusive, what is insubstantial, what is always changing and can't bring satisfaction. Because craving blinds us. When it's present in our experience, it blinds us to clear perception, to being able to see and understand the truth.

The third truth, just briefly mentioning, is cessation of this very dukkha. The words, the description, are cessation of this craving without a trace left behind. The abandonment, the renunciation, the liberation from, the detachment from this craving. Not hating it, repressing it, hating ourselves—but abandonment, liberation from, detachment from the craving. And then the fourth truth, of course, is the Eightfold Path: that there is a way leading to cessation of dukkha, and that this cessation, in a nutshell, comes from wisely seeing.

Tonight I want to focus on the origin of unsatisfactoriness—this craving, tanha, like thirst—and its stronger component, which is the one that in some ways we can see more easily: grasping. The simile that's given is that craving is like groping in the dark to take something. The mind inclines towards an experience, an object. Grasping is the actual grabbing it and stealing it. It's a stronger impetus, a stronger force. And this is what gives rise in the moment to concepts of me, I, mine.

In our experience, in our life, when we really are looking closely, when we break it down, there are only six possible sense experiences to have. And they just keep occurring over and over. There's eye contact, there's sight, there's hearing, there's taste, there's smell, there's feeling in the body, there's mental objects—and that's it. They just keep happening over and over.

When there's contact—when, say, sight, an eye object, and the eye come together and there's eye consciousness—that sense impression, that contact, in any moment of any of these contacts, craving and grasping can arise in relation to that particular sense impression, that particular contact. When this contact and the possibly resultant craving is met with mindfulness, right there with it, it doesn't especially need to go any farther. That's just it. And then it's a new sense experience.

But as is so often the case, when it's not seen at this point, the moment of craving strengthens into grasping. Oh, that smells so good. I really want it. How can I get it? And we go off into a whole world of need and fantasy and desire. And that grasping blinds us.

We get really fixated on whatever it is—that pleasant smell—and how can we obtain it? How can we have more of it? It clouds our perception.

There's a passage from the Sutta Nipata: "For some people, contact, which is the point where sense plus the sense object meet—for some people this is enthralling. And so they are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But others come to understand their sense activity. And because they understand it, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does and so their craving ends. They realize the total calm."

It's one of the more poetic phrases of the Buddha.

Put in a different way by Ajahn Chah, again speaking to the power of seeing what sense contact is, sense impression: "But really, this mind of ours is already unmoving and peaceful, really peaceful, just like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up, the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind. The fluttering is due to those sense impressions. The mind follows them. If it doesn't follow them, it doesn't flutter. If we know fully the true nature of sense impressions, we are unconcerned."

So really this is our investigation—to really know the nature of our sense impressions. How and why craving and grasping arise. And from that knowing, the mind can become still or unconcerned.

But often, most realistically, we're not aware of that process right at that point of contact. Perhaps grasping has taken quite a firm hold in our experience before we even notice what the original contact was. We wake up in a really strong fantasy, say, of food. We didn't even notice the pleasant smell, but the next thing we know we've been going for ten minutes in our mind about what's for lunch, really deciding what it is based on the smell, looking forward to eating it and all the pleasure we're going to get out of it. We're really grasping. And it blinds us.

We go to lunch. It's not at all, even remotely, what we had thought it was. And so we're disgruntled, dissatisfied with everything that's served. Grasping is blinding in this way. It distorts the object that's grasped onto and it distorts everything else. The idea of what everyone was expecting for lunch turns into this incredible, fantastic idea of a meal that was going to bring us lasting happiness. Completely distorted—nothing can do that. And then the lunch that is served is seen as a mud pile or something. There's nothing wrong with the lunch that is served. Everything's completely distorted. We can't appreciate what is present when the mind is fixated, grasping on some object.

There's a story about a pickpocket in the time of the Buddha who said he was at one of the Buddha's discourses but could only see people's pockets. Impossible to hear what's being taught when we're fixated on something.

So our practice here is not to judge it, hate it and hate ourselves, but to investigate, to see and come to understand this process. As Krishnamurti said, "Unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable."

And the Buddha also encourages us to understand how grasping works. He says, "There are many kinds of suffering in the world and all of them grow from the same source: grasping. When a person knows no better, he or she gives way to this grasping and slow and dulled goes through one misery after another. So use your knowledge to see how suffering begins and develops in attachment."

We can use our knowledge to see and feel and understand this process. And how can we do that except by investigating it very fully when it is present in our experience? Not hating it or fearing it or trying to pretend it's not really happening, but really looking. Because without an experiential understanding of the nature of desire and grasping, we can intellectually decide, "Yeah, right, it's clear how craving and grasping leads to suffering, so I'm going to stop doing it now." It doesn't work. We need to really understand this deeply on a visceral, gut level.

So what is it?

How do we experience grasping in a moment? We're sitting calmly. Experiences are coming and going. We're noting and being present. There's a sound. There's a thought. There's the breath. There's an image. There's a sensation in the body. And suddenly one particular object is grasped hold of. A smell. *The* smell. Not going any further—when that happens next, just notice: how does it feel? What is the experience of clinging, of grasping itself?

For me, there's actually a physical sensation of tightness, almost like an internal leaning forward. It feels really unbalanced, unpleasant. When out of this flow of changing sensations one sound is isolated and grasped onto, and that grasping is not really seen, then comes the identification. Immediately the sense of "me" gets strong, and all the constructions go along with it. Self-image is created in that process. One moment of grasping conditions the next. It gets stronger and stronger, and it gets really complicated.

Here's an example that's probably happened to almost everyone here. There's a sound. It's unpleasant. And out of all the sounds that come and go during one sitting, this particular sound is grasped onto, isolated. Immediately the sense of recognition and the sense of "I" comes up: "That's someone moving. It's not me. I'm not moving. I know better than to move and make noise during a sitting. What's the matter with that person?" Really solid. One grasping leads to the next. The sense of self gets rock hard. And the distortion again—that sound is exaggerated in our perception out of all proportion. Although some people might not believe that. But it really is exaggerated out of all proportion to what the sound actually was or will be again.

Our mind at this point is really unbalanced. It's wavering. It can't perceive clearly what's happening in this moment. And because of that, it's more difficult to perceive what's happening in the next moment—never mind appreciating what's happening in this moment or the next. Grasping sets up an immediate sense of separation, an immediate sense of me and other. There can't be a sense of interrelatedness going on when this is happening.

Another example—the classic example—the VR, the vipassana romance. There's someone that one's mind has fastened on. It could be a vipassana vendetta too; it really doesn't matter. But someone one's mind has fastened on in this way of really isolating out. You're outside walking, very present, a real sense of peace, aware of the trees, aware of the sensations of the foot. And there's a sight, which happens to be this person walking by. That particular sight, that form, that color—out of all the sights and forms and colors arising moment after moment—is grasped onto. In a moment of that grasping not being seen, thought arises: "Oh me, oh where's that person going? Maybe I should stop walking now and follow them."

I wonder if they know who I am. I wonder if we'll ever have a chance to talk to each other. And then the whole story unfolds. The sense of separation has become complete. The mind is really locked onto the object.

How aware can one be in that moment of anything else? Any sense of awareness of the sensations in movement is long gone. Maybe one still knows one's walking, but it's kind of vague. Any other person who might be in the way—if you're trying to follow—is perceived as just that: in my way, rather than as another being. Any sense of our mutual interrelatedness is gone. It's merely the object grasped and me very strongly, and everything else in the way. It's a very powerful force, and it happens over and over and over.

Contrast that with walking in the same place in those times when there's just that pure sense of nothing special—sensations of the lifting, awareness of sensation, possibly of the wind on the cheek, smell of freshness. You happen to open your eyes and see the exquisite vividness of the leaves. And there's nothing really special in that moment, but there's such an appreciation, such a sense of presence.

Often on retreat, when I have a moment like that which feels so peaceful, I've been stopping and asking, "Well, what's actually going on here?" And what's going on is the absence of grasping. The absence of that sense of me and other, of something taking me out of the moment. This is the peace of non-grasping. It's a completeness in this moment, exactly as this moment is, without needing to subtract anything or add anything.

Sometimes it can seem to be a subtler kind of happiness or peace than that which we experience from sense pleasures, for example. Often that's why I think we get seduced by more obvious seeming pleasures than the peace of non-grasping. But it is a very powerful kind of peace. And as we continue to see and understand the nature of attachment, this underlying tendency to grasp at the pleasant begins to weaken and fade.

We also begin to notice that when the mind is locked into grasping, at that moment we don't really have any clear discernment. We can't really judge what is appropriate or suitable action because we just follow the desire. It's so strong; our mind is just locked into it.

A personal story. I wasn't going to tell this again—I hadn't told it for a couple of years—but the other person involved I just saw recently. He didn't know I used it in a talk, but he brought it up. He said, "Do you ever remember that ride to the airport?" And I said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I use it in a talk." He said, "Well, you better put in my side of it and not just talk from your side." So I'm not sure whether I do or not. You can tell me later.

But anyway, it's a classic story of how grasping blinds us, how we can't use any kind of clear discernment in that process.

I was in England. I was in a relationship with this guy, and it was a new relationship. He lived in England, and I was living here as a resident teacher. I'd managed to squeeze a week off and go over to England to visit. He lived out in the country, and the day I was leaving to fly out, we had come back to London and were staying in a friend's flat. The friend was away, and everyone we knew in London was out of town.

The next morning, I was getting up and getting ready to take a taxi to the train that goes to the airport, which is very simple and direct. But he—this was his grasping—he got it in his mind, "Oh no, I want to drive you to the airport." So he could have some more time together, so he could do something for me. Now, two things: one, he's American and didn't know how to drive in England very well, and two, neither of us knew London at all.

I said, "Forget it. I'm really happy to take the train." And so we spent about an hour and a half bickering about this. This was our last morning together. His grasping was, "I've got to do that." We couldn't see clearly, and that ruined our whole last morning. I finally got to where I couldn't stand it and said, "Okay, you can take me to the airport."

Now then, that's when we realized we didn't know how to get there. The taxi was canceled, and it was too late to get the train.

In London they have these maps called London A to Z—very small pages with every street on them. But they don't give you the whole picture. You can know where you are and get to the end of the map, and it will tell you to go to the next map. But it doesn't tell you how to get from here to there. You can't look at the whole thing in between.

We started going crazy. And then I started really grasping: "Oh my God, I'm going to miss the plane." It was one of those instant purchase tickets, absolutely no refund. I didn't have money to buy another ticket, and I had to be back at work. I shouldn't even have left for a week.

So we finally called around, found a way to go, and got in the car. He was fine by this time because his grasping was over—he got to drive me. I was a basket case. We got in the car, and again, we were totally not enjoying our time together because I was just wanting us to be at the airport. Every moment that we weren't there was a moment that was in the way. There was no way to appreciate it.

We were doing okay. We whizzed through London, got out on the motorway. We were really cutting it close. And halfway down the motorway, it came to an absolute dead stop—complete traffic jam, not moving.

I just exploded in this frenzy of grasping: "Oh my God, I'm really going to miss it." And then I realized, yeah, I am going to miss it. Okay, so I'll miss the plane. That'll be interesting. I've never missed an international flight. I'll miss it.

And my grasping stopped. Then I was fine. I started looking around. "Oh, well, this is interesting."

He, of course, then realized, "Oh, she really might miss it." And he started grasping: "Oh my God, I've got to get her there on time." So he was going crazy. "Let me just get off at the next exit and take you a different way." I said, "But you don't even know where we are. If we get off at the next exit, we're really lost."

Anyway, we finally got to the airport. I think I had fifteen minutes before the plane. So then I thought I could make it again, and the grasping returned. Going through customs and everything, everyone in my way was a total object—someone to run over, someone to push aside, someone to get rid of.

The whole morning, never mind that the idea was to have a pleasant few hours together. And this is what grasping really does. We're totally blind to what we're doing, and in each step it seems to make sense because we're so fixated. The grasping itself is so unpleasant—that feeling of grasping—that we'll do anything to attain its object, basically to get rid of that feeling.

One thing I really think we need to appreciate is just how deep, how strongly conditioned this underlying tendency of the mind to grasp onto the pleasant is. We need to appreciate it not because that's discouraging, but because then we can understand for ourselves just how awesome this journey is that we're on. It's a possible journey. It's not impossible. But it's really an awesome journey of discovery.

And it takes a lot of commitment and a lot of courage—which everyone here has, or you wouldn't still be here, no matter what's going on. This points to the real importance of patience and equanimity.

It may not seem like much when you're sitting here and you become aware that your mind is filled with grasping—at the idea of whatever, wanting a sitting to be a certain way. And then noting, you note the grasping and it kind of fades out, and the mind is again calm. This can happen in many moments within one sitting, and it seems like no big deal because we tend to focus on how much the clinging and grasping arises again.

But that moment of seeing, of the fading out—it is a big deal. It is really important because that is a movement from distortion and blindness towards clarity and freedom. And I think it's important to acknowledge that in ourselves.

Classically in the Theravada, they talk about four different areas of grasping. I find it helpful to explore these as different ways of looking at how grasping comes up. There's grasping to sense desire, which is obvious. Grasping onto views, ideas about things. Grasping onto rites and rituals. And grasping onto the tendency to identification, the idea of self.

Sense desire—I'll just say something about it. It's nothing new to any of us. This is from Ledi Sayadaw, a definition of grasping which to me seems to apply particularly to grasping to sense pleasures: "It's laying a firm hold on. It implies the inability to shake off a thing, even after experiencing great pain due to it and perceiving its many harmful consequences."

I can really see this so clearly in the realm of sense pleasures. On some level, I know the next pleasant sight, the next pleasant sound, the next pleasant taste is not going to make me any more happy or peaceful than the last pleasant sound or the last pleasant taste. But I continue—we continue—to keep going after it, to keep trying to find the one that will do it, waiting for the sweet one.

The Buddha talked a lot, and quite graphically, about the perils of sense pleasures. Just to give you an idea of some of his similes: he compares them to a charcoal pit; to something borrowed, because the owner takes it back; to a dream, because on waking it's just gone. Those are some of the nicer ones. He uses these similes because the danger in sense pleasures is great.

What I feel is really important to understand in our own experience is not that pleasant sensation is bad. We're not striving to get rid of all pleasant sensation and only have unpleasant sensation, and then we'll be free. The danger is that when there's contact—a pleasant contact, a sense pleasure—the underlying tendency of mind to grasp is so strong. And this is what I find really interesting: in some subtle way, it's as if we delight in that. And because of that delight, we don't see the suffering. We don't see the danger.

We were talking about this in our Pali class a few weeks ago, going over this second noble truth. One way of translating it is that it's just this craving, leading from birth to birth, which is accompanied by delight and passion. The craving itself is accompanied by delight and finds pleasure and satisfaction now here, now there. As we were exploring, we're seeing that the subtle danger is that on some level we like to crave. The craving can be accompanied by delight when we don't really look, when we don't really pay attention. And so we don't recognize the danger, and we keep going through these endless rounds of craving the next thing, craving the next thing.

We can't see what's really happening. It's so easy to get lost in the cycle of grasping and becoming and suffering. The danger is not in sense objects themselves but in not seeing the clinging.

Suzuki Roshi says that renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of the world but in accepting that they go away. When we really, truly accept that this too is going to go away, there's just no reason to hold on. There's no reason to cling to it.

In our daily life—here too, but even more in our daily life outside of here, especially in this country—we're bombarded, just bombarded with sensory objects, with the possibility of pleasant sense experience. There's so much stimulation. It's like we're in a whirlwind, just moving from one sense experience to the next to the next. And because we can always move on to another object of clinging, to another pleasant sense object, it hides the fact that the search itself for the pleasant is what brings suffering.

We can feel bored or a little restless one night and decide to watch TV, and what's on starts to feel uncomfortable. So we change the channel, and then we go get ice cream, and then we try a different chair. Then we think of calling up a friend. And then we say, well, maybe I'll read the newspaper. Maybe I'll go out and get a video.

It's just endless. There's always some new object that we can move to.

One of the great things about a retreat environment is that it's so stripped away. Our sense pleasures are so much more restricted. But we can still do the same thing. You see, the mind's movement shifts from wanting to get a new Saab to hoping you can get two apples at tea time. But it's the same movement of mind. And we can often find ourselves doing the exact same thing. "Well, let me sit on this zafu. Maybe if I get a different chair from the dining room. Maybe if I eat in a different configuration. Or if I save this apple and eat it at nine o'clock, then it'll be better than if I eat two apples at five o'clock. And maybe tomorrow at breakfast I'll save the banana and have that at tea time instead of an apple. Maybe I'll have the apple for breakfast and the banana for tea." It's the same movement of mind. Go look in the back dining room there. I don't really need to say anything else. That could just be the talk—just go look in the back dining room.

But we have in a retreat environment what is actually a great opportunity. I know you've really been loving it so far, but it is a great opportunity to experience the process of grasping without being driven to satisfy it. Because sometimes in this restricted environment, you can't. It's the middle of a sitting and this intense desire comes up for that banana you've been saving for seven days. But you're not going to get up because it's the middle of a sitting, and so you just sit there and let mindfulness turn to the

process of grasping. It's an incredibly powerful thing. You can experience grasping itself without the immediate gratification of it. And yes, it's unbalancing and it's unpleasant and it feels really yucky, and that's all okay.

In the ability to do this over and over, we find that we're not so driven in our life to do anything just to avoid feeling that grasping. We don't have to spend the rest of our life just going for a new sound, a new smell, a new taste in order not to feel grasping. We really come to understand what it is and not be driven by it.

And this is the seeing that leads to detachment. Detachment meaning the ability to meet the contact, to be with sense objects with even-mindedness, with equanimity—not fearing them and not lusting after them. The equanimity, dispassion. And the Buddha said, through dispassion, one is freed.

The second area of grasping is at views. This is one of my favorites, probably because I do it a lot. It's the tendency of mind that leads one to think, "This alone is true, everything else is false." A very pervasive tendency of mind. And it's binding again, because to hold to any view—any view of the world, of who we are, of anything—limits our world. It limits our possibilities of what we can experience, of what we can perceive, because we tend to accept in our experience only the facts that accord with what our view is. And it can be quite insidious. We only take in the perceptions that corroborate our views and deny anything else.

You see this very clearly in politicians' debates. When the presidential debates are on, you can see that the rhetoric of each participant already reflects what their view is. They already know what they think. And anything they say is just to support that, and nothing can come in from the other person that could in any way be contrary to what they already think. And to me this is why debate is never like two real people talking to each other, because there's no way that either of them is willing to be shaken in the view that they have. And so there can't be any kind of real communication.

It's interesting because having a fixed view of anything, of who we are, can often provide us with a real sense of security, sense of safety, sense of belonging. "Well, this is what Buddhism thinks and this is the Buddhist view of things and I'm a Buddhist so this is what I believe." And it's safe. But it can be scary when anything comes along that doesn't fit with that. It shakes us. It rocks our safe, secure little view of the world. And when we're not aware of views as views, but we're taking them to be a representation of reality, then we just block out whatever doesn't fit.

It was in a book. I didn't read it, but someone told it to me—a story that is a good example of this. It was about a man who was traveling, I think in the mountains of Spain, though I'm not certain. He ran into a little girl who was two or three years old, and she had a tennis ball, a complete tennis ball. She held it out and showed it to him, and then somehow she turned it inside out and then turned it right side out again. He looked at it carefully—it didn't have any splits in it or anything.

Now, my mind immediately dismisses that story. That's impossible, you know. But he said this really happened. And he went back again some years later, same little girl, but she couldn't do it anymore because everyone had told her it was impossible.

Whether it's true or not, just the fact that one's mind tends to go, "That's ridiculous, that's a ridiculous story—obviously the man was misperceiving the first time and the second time, that's how it was." And that's what we do. We make everything fit the views we already have. When we're doing that, we're closed to the possibility of anything other arising in our experience other than what we already know.

This goes on all the time—here in the retreat, in our daily life. How often do we form and adhere to views through the day? "Oh, this is a good sitting. This is what a good sitting is supposed to be like. This is what it means to be concentrated. This is how practice is supposed to go when it's going right."

And we get so caught up in not recognizing it as a view. If we recognize it as a view, it's fine—it's a view, we don't have to identify with it. But when we don't recognize it as a view, we end up comparing it, this view of how it should be, with our experience now. We get locked into trying to recreate that particular view we have of how things should be.

And so other things that are totally unimaginable and not previously experienced are either kept from coming up, or they're discounted, or they're not given attention. They have no chance to arise because we're forcing the mind to try to perceive or try to have experience according to what preconceived ideas we already have. We're locked in, trapped in our views.

How many ideas just of good practice have come up in the mind during retreat? And how many of them have we recognized as views, and how many have we identified with?

The Buddha said, "Because you are obsessed with preconceived notions, you are holding fast." He talked a lot about not holding on to views. In many of the suttas, people would come to the Buddha as one of many spiritual teachers in India at that

time. These teachers used to argue and quarrel all the time, and many people would come to the Buddha with questions about all these various worldviews, wanting to know which was right and which was wrong.

He would always refuse to be associated with any view whatsoever, saying that holding to any opinion or belief brings conflict, brings contention. He said something to the effect that people with views just go around annoying one another. And he stayed completely clear of that.

Holding views brings you into conflict with other people. They go around annoying one another—"This is how it is," and anyone who doesn't agree, you're in a fight. We can see how many of the wars today come from exactly this.

And holding a view can also bring us into conflict with ourselves. That's what happens here so often. How often do you have a particular experience in your practice, and immediately, before the experience is even over, you've formulated an explanation of what it means, you've formulated a view about it? "Now this is good concentration. I'm doing well. I'm not having many emotions now."

I must be suppressing. I'm having too many emotions. I'm obviously not staying on top of the mindfulness. The practice isn't going well. My sensations are getting vaguer. I must be doing something wrong. The sensations are way too intense, and I've heard that they're supposed to get more subtle. I must be doing something wrong. And on and on and on.

You see, once we've formulated that view, not recognized it, and identified with it, then we're immediately in conflict with what's actually happening in our experience, which is different from this view we have of what *should* be happening. And sometimes, when we're locked in a view, we won't accept perceptions that arise even in our own direct experience that counteract that view. We just think, "That didn't even happen." Lock it away. It is scary sometimes.

There's sometimes a fear of not having any views, not having any explanations of the world, of practice, of what should happen, of where it's going—nothing to identify with. To just be in the moment without any constructions or explanations around it, and open into the unknown of the next moment without anything to compare it against, nothing to be reassured by—"Oh, this is how it should go." It's scary. And it's really freeing.

The Buddha again: "One who is freed does not concur and does not dispute with anyone. She or he employs the speech currently used in the world without misapprehending it"—in other words, without misunderstanding it.

So in relation to views, our practice is simply to know when a view has arisen and to see it as a view. To know when there's grasping in the mind in regard to it and when there's not. Some views are quite helpful as ways of explaining, as ways of communicating. And when we see them for what they are—as a view—and don't identify, we're not trapped by them. We're not limited by them. We can use the way of seeing, "the speech currently used in the world," without misunderstanding it to be an accurate description of the way things are. Any view is limiting when identified with. And this applies to views about enlightenment, about truth. You know that line from the Third Zen Patriarch: "Do not search for the truth. Only cease to cherish opinions."

So that's the first two forms of grasping—to sense pleasures and to views. The last two I'll just mention briefly.

The third one is grasping to rites and rituals. It's described by Ledi Sayadaw as the fixed view that a person is able to purify oneself or free oneself from suffering by means of external, outward rules and rituals. In other words, one way of describing it is having the idea that one can make oneself perfect by grasping at some kind of outer behavior to do so.

For example, thinking that just the outer behavior would free one. If you come in here and sit, and no investigation is going on, no sense of really looking and being with reality as it is in the moment, but you're just going through the outer form—you sit and you walk and there's no interest, no effort, no engagement. You're listening to a cassette of Stevie Wonder the whole time, and you think, "Well, if I just do this, if I sit and walk, then I'm going to be freed from suffering." That would be a kind of grasping at outer rules and rituals. It's different from committed investigation, in whatever form that takes, of the nature of our experience, of the nature of mind and body.

This doesn't mean that we necessarily have to discard method or technique. Obviously, these are incredibly helpful, valuable tools. We use the method to investigate the nature of our mind and body, of this moment, of our experience. But we don't mistake blind, unthinking use of method and technique for the truth. The Buddha said we need a raft to get across the river, but then once we're across the river, we don't keep carrying the raft on our back. Or in the Zen parable: don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

So that's grasping at rites and rituals—outer behavior to free us from suffering.

And the fourth, which is a biggie and we've talked about quite a bit already, is grasping at the self-idea. This is the big one underlying all of it. The self-idea. To consider the ever-changing world in the light of a permanent, unchanging essence. In other words,

it's this latent, underlying tendency to identify with any experience whatsoever. Any experience. Doesn't matter what. Again, you can see how this happens over and over and over, just as we're sitting here. It's what I described before: when there's contact, it's unpleasant, it's a sound, it's unpleasant, aversion arises, and that's grasped onto.

In that moment, watch and see when that grasping happens how the sense of self arises at that same time. And so in this process of isolating and grasping onto the sound, as the grasping strengthens, so also does the identification with that experience as "me." There's aversion, it leads into anger, it becomes *my* anger—leading into self-condemnation or self-justification, thoughts about the person or whatever is making the sound. See how solid that self-sense becomes through the process of grasping.

And then notice other times when there's a very similar experience arising, a similar contact, and the grasping just doesn't really happen. There can be sound and unpleasantness and aversion, and it's all seen, and it just kind of fades away. There's not this strong sense of "I" that comes up with it.

So really watching through the process of grasping and identification with experience, we can see how the sense of self arises and how it dissolves. Notice times when there's not grasping and the self is not present. It's not a solid, unchanging sense of self. It's arising and passing when the conditions are there.

All identification, all grasping, blinds us. It's bondage. It blinds us to what is true, blinds us to the perfection of this moment.

And so our practice is not to condemn the process of grasping. It's merely an impersonal process. It's not to condemn ourselves because we're not free from it, but simply to come to know it clearly for what it is—how grasping arises, how it comes to be. Watch how it dissolves. Learning not to be so blinded by the delight in it.

And through this seeing, through this mindfulness of this process, the power of grasping does begin to weaken. This mindfulness of the process allows for understanding rather than just acting from blind reactivity—real understanding, clear discernment of what's appropriate. And through understanding, deeper and deeper understanding, it is possible for this seemingly endless search for gratification to come to an end.

The Buddha taught: Because they understand their sense activity, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does, and so their craving ends. They realize the total calm—through seeing and understanding.

And every moment of our experience here gives us a chance to deepen that.

CHAPTER 237

Renunciation, Goodwill, and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this dhamma talk, Carol Wilson examines sammā saṅkappa (right intention), the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, exploring how wholesome attitudes of mind naturally emerge through deepening understanding and mindfulness practice. Drawing from the opening verses of the Dhammapada, she illuminates how mind shapes our reality and how our intentions form the crucial link between understanding and action.

Wilson presents the three classical aspects of right intention: nekkhamma (renunciation or non-greed), mettā (goodwill or loving-kindness), and karuṇā (compassion or non-harming). Rather than ideals to force upon ourselves, she describes these as natural expressions of our being that shine through as wisdom develops—like the sun emerging from behind clouds. She emphasizes that true renunciation is not forced asceticism but an inner contentment that allows deep appreciation of the present moment, sharing insights from her time as a Buddhist nun in Thailand.

The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing these attitudes in daily practice, from softening the tone of mental noting to meeting our inner demons with compassion rather than judgment. Wilson shares the story of Milarepa facing demons in his cave and a moving account of a woman who transformed 17 years of wrongful institutionalization through forgiveness. She concludes with Thich Nhat Hanh's observation about Vietnamese boat people—that even one person remaining calm could determine a boat's survival—illustrating how our individual practice of cultivating wholesome intentions ripples outward to benefit all beings we encounter.

The Buddha spoke often and quite eloquently about the power of mind to shape our reality, to shape our experience of reality. I want to read the first pair of verses in the Dhammapada, which is a group of verse sayings of the Buddha.

All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner. They have mind as their chief. They are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows one just as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the cart.

And then the second verse, using a different translation: Our life is shaped by our mind. We become what we think. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows one like a shadow that never leaves.

Very powerful, the effect of our thoughts, the effect of the mind.

Sylvia spoke briefly the other night about the Eightfold Path, the path of practice that we're engaged on now. I want to speak about the second aspect of the path. The first one, right or wise understanding, really speaks to how we understand life, the world, ourselves. And then the second path factor, variously translated as right or wholesome attitude, right thought, or right intention—this really grows from our understanding. How we understand ourselves and the world then informs how we think about the world, what our intentions are.

This second factor, intentions or thought or attitude, is the crucial link between understanding and action. Because how we think is how we then act in the world. And in fact, the next three factors of the path deal with right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

A very simple example: there's a sense of understanding that perhaps there's more to reality, to my own life, than is apparent on the surface, in a superficial glance. That kind of understanding that there's something more tends to give rise to some thought or intention of, "Let me investigate. Let me try meditation. Let me try some spiritual path of learning more." And that intention, that thought, then gives rise to action—and here you all are, sitting here for nine days. Beginning from understanding, the understanding leads to an attitude or thought that leads to action.

And then, of course, the action that has you all sitting here leads to deepening of mindfulness, concentration, and energy, which are the last three of the Eightfold Path. And that in turn leads to deeper seeing into the nature of who and what we are—more understanding. It's a circle. We're back at the beginning of the mandala again.

So tonight I want to talk specifically about the factors of wholesome attitude. What are they? What does it refer to? These are attitudes, wholesome attitudes of mind, intentions that shine through our awareness more clearly as our wisdom develops.

I use this language quite deliberately—"shine through" rather than "manufacture" or even "develop"—because it's not as if these wholesome attitudes of mind are something foreign to our being, or something that we need to go out and manufacture and try to artificially graft onto ourselves. They're actually part of who or what we already are. They begin to arise spontaneously. The more that we bring our attention to this moment, the more that we investigate and come to see what we actually are, these wholesome attitudes of mind, intentions of mind, become more and more spontaneous expressions of our understanding.

Again, I love to use the metaphor of the sun as being the luminous nature of mind. It's always there. The more that we pay attention, the less we get so involved in the clouds that we think they're all there is. The more we're aware of the sun. But the sun is always there. We just become more aware of it.

Classically, speaking of right or wholesome attitudes, thoughts, and intentions includes three broad areas, and I'd like to speak a little about each of them—more as a reminder, to bring up in each of us a reminder of what we are, how we can be.

The first is the attitude of non-greed, or renunciation. It balances the confusion of greed. The second is that of goodwill, or mettā—friendliness, loving-kindness—obviously balancing the inclination of mind toward aversion and ill will. And the third is the attitude of harmlessness, of compassion, balancing cruelty or harmfulness.

And a tendency to be in touch with these attitudes of mind, for these attitudes to arise in a moment as a response to a situation, is strengthened naturally, simply through our mindfulness practice. I promise. It may not feel like it. A lot of times in sitting, it seems like what we're seeing is just more greed, more ill will, more negativity. Sometimes you discover you're a much nicer person than you thought you were before you started sitting. But I promise it's really working the other way around.

A very simple example of how mindfulness is really working to strengthen these wholesome attitudes: When there's no understanding, no clear understanding of the process whereby desire brings suffering, and we don't understand that, whenever a thought comes up of "I want this" or "I want that," we naturally spring into action to try and achieve it. And that's how most of this culture spends most of its time. This can be something really minor—from wanting seconds at lunch, wanting a better little foam pad under your cushion, wanting cherry Life Savers—it can be really mundane. Or it extends all the way up to what we see happening in the world: wanting more land, wanting more oil, wanting some sense of national safety.

So from small to really large scale, when there's not this understanding that desire brings suffering, the actions that manifest from the thought of wanting something come from confusion and can breed incredible pain and suffering and conflict. Or at its least manifestation, it can simply be increasing unsatisfactoriness. The seconds at lunch don't really do it, do they? The foamy pad really doesn't take care of it.

That's a kind of normal way of being. But as we're sitting here, day in and day out, watching the process of desire and watching our continued efforts to fulfill it—the ones that are somehow in our power to fulfill here—you'll start to get it. From paying attention, you see there's just no peace coming from this. There's no lasting satisfaction

coming from fulfilling desire. And so as this understanding comes in—that fulfilling desire is not bringing happiness—from our mindfulness of just watching this, quite naturally, our thoughts change.

When the thought comes up, "I think I should get up now and have a cup of tea," another thought arises: "No need to do that." And just quite naturally, our actions change. It's not some big deal, but it actually is a big deal. We find there's a natural sense of renunciation. No forcing, but growing out of our understanding that's coming from this mindfulness practice.

Not necessarily dramatic. But I feel it's very helpful and important to notice and acknowledge these little moments, these little actions of thought, of speech, or body that are coming from intentions of kindness, of non-greed, generosity, compassion. I see it as a sort of positive reinforcement—just the noticing of it. Sometimes we get so focused on seeing the greed and the ill will and the self-judgment that we let a moment of sensing "I really don't need that" pass by. Not that we want to hold on to it, but it's important to acknowledge: "Oh, there was a moment of non-greed arising in the mind." It's very helpful.

So these attitudes arise quite naturally as our mindfulness increases, as our understanding deepens. But I want to say now that it's very important not to set up these attitudes, or any other, as some ideal. It happens a lot in spiritual practice that we have some ideal—"I should be this loving, compassionate, generous person"—and then try to force ourselves to fit that model when it's not what's really genuinely arising. I'm not talking about forcing ourselves or denying what's actually arising in a moment. What's important is to be really honest. True wisdom demands absolute honesty with ourselves, with whatever's arising in the moment. And I know that we can trust that honesty, that willingness to be with whatever's arising. Through that will come the understanding, and of itself these beautiful qualities of mind are able to manifest. But it can't come through forcing or pretense, trying to make ourselves pretend to be other than we are.

I feel that's important to understand—that you don't have to pretend to be anything at all. Non-greed, friendliness, mettā, compassion do arise from our understanding quite naturally. It is a genuine manifestation of our being. You don't need to force it.

Having said that, I'll flip to the other side, because everything's a paradox. What's quite interesting is that at times we actually do have a choice as to where we let the mind dwell. We might not have a choice as to what situations come up, what immediate thought comes up, but we often do have a choice as to how we respond to the situation and whether or not we want to let the mind dwell there.

The Buddha said that whatever one reflects upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. It's fairly obvious. If we sit and daydream for an hour about something that we really want when we leave here, the longer we stay lost in that daydream, the easier it is for the mind to go back to that place. We have a choice more than we think. We really don't need to feel enslaved by the habits of our mind. They're not set in concrete, though it might feel that way at times. We can't deny the arising of the habits of mind when they're arising in a moment, but we can choose very often how to respond.

A quotation from Nisargadatta: "You cannot escape from your obsessions, but you can cease nurturing them." I think that's quite lovely.

So instead of denying them, you simply cease nurturing them. I don't mean it's easy. The force of habit is really quite strong, especially the habits of mind I'm talking about now—the movement towards greed, towards aversion, towards confusion.

I once cut out a little comic that I think illustrates this beautifully. It shows how easily habits are ingrained through six little episodes. You wander alone down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle, solitary yet surrounded. You think, "These people are..." Multiple choice: A) My brothers, my sisters. B) Perverts, probably pickaxe murderers. C) Sure could go for a chili dog.

Episode two: Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse... A) I know what he feels. He feels fear. He feels hope. B) Why is that pervert looking at me? C) Maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

Episode three: Down the street, construction workers are tearing the pavement to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of: A) The path of life. B) The highway to hell. C) Rocky Road, my favorite flavor.

You see, these habitual inclinations just come up when you're not paying attention. But we do have a choice. And it's not like one grand life choice—"Okay, from now on, I'm going to stop being an aversive type." I tried that a while ago. It didn't work.

But in each moment, there is a choice. In each moment there's a choice of whether to go along with the aversion that arises, or whether to just let it be. Whether to go along with the greed, or to see the desire arise and recognize, "I don't need that right now."

Working with right attitude is about a willingness to greet each moment of choice as a chance to learn, a chance to grow out of the dullness of our habits of mind. It's not about expectations of perfection. It's not another standard to judge ourselves against. It's about opening to this moment as a learning possibility. And that's quite vital, quite rich. The learning never ends.

So I'd like to speak a little about each of these three attitudes. First, attitude or thought guided by non-greed, or renunciation. I know renunciation has a bit of a bad reputation in our culture, but here it doesn't mean enforced asceticism. To me, I experience it much more as a sense of inner contentment. Renunciation means not being so caught up in needing, in acquiring, in wanting. And when we're not caught up in searching outward for something, there's so much more capacity for appreciating what's right here, right now. There's a sense of ease, of contentment, of simplicity.

I would imagine that most or all of you will have experienced simple moments of that, perhaps on retreat. Nothing dramatic. Just a moment where you're sitting with a cup of tea and it feels so fulfilling. There's such a sense of appreciation. Or looking at a sunset, feeling the wind, feeling a little lift inside. Something not specifically dramatic.

But there's a sense of real inner contentment, appreciation of that momentary experience. It's not because that's the best cup of tea that was ever made, or the most beautiful sunset you've ever seen in your life. It's that in that moment, the mind and heart are quiet. There's no desire in the mind. There's no reaching out. And so with this sense of inner contentment, this simple being in the moment, there's great appreciation for whatever it is that we happen to be experiencing.

This sense of renunciation, of non-greed, really—at least in my experience—runs quite counter to the input, the information that comes in from our society. Just the word itself, *renunciation*, often brings up connotations of forced asceticism, intentional suffering, a kind of grimness. And it's not that at all. In our society, giving things up in many people's eyes means suffering.

Just looking at the ads—I was reading the New York Times Magazine the other day, and the ads in that are amazing. Full-page ads for two-thousand-dollar watches and perfume that costs hundreds of dollars for a little bottle, and just on and on. The intention, I know from the effect, is to make one say, "God, I really need that." Or just looking at it, you feel a lack because one could never afford it. Really, most of the media input goes along in that direction, creating new needs, making consumers feel that we need more and more.

Often, talking to people that I meet whom I don't really know, or even my family sometimes, they'll say, "Well, you don't have this and you don't have that"—something that would never have occurred to me to want. There's a sense of, "Oh, that must be really hard not to have such and such." Well, it never even occurred to me. But not having, living simply, is equated with suffering in this society. And it's just not true.

Suzuki Roshi says, "Renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world, but in accepting that they go away." Accepting that whatever we have is going to go away, and that's okay.

I'd like to mention a couple of reflections which I find arise quite naturally as practice continues, reflections that really help the mind incline towards non-greed, towards its natural sense of simplicity.

One is an understanding that we inevitably come to, on deeper and deeper levels—which I've already mentioned—the understanding of the unsatisfactoriness inherent in desire itself. Not saying, "Oh, desire is bad, I should eradicate it," but really understanding how unsatisfying it is.

This retreat is a really good setup for that. In a space of somewhat forced outer renunciation, this form takes away a lot of things that you could normally do or get to satisfy desire. It's by choice, but it's also by force. Once we've got you in here, you're forced to renounce a lot of things. But it's a fantastic chance to explore the nature of desire, because most of the desires that come up here, you can't gratify—not if you want to stay. Most people say, "Well, once I'm here, I'm going to stay. I'm not going to run out just to have a pizza." So since you can't gratify it, this kind of enforced renunciation helps us, through our experience, sift through this barrage, this maze of desires and ways to pursue them that we're greeted with on a daily basis in our normal life. We really start to experience the futility of all that. You have to try really hard not to notice that desire is suffering.

Two quotations I love about this. One is from Isaac Singer: "Hell is made up of yearnings. The wicked don't roast on beds of nails. They sit on comfortable chairs and are tortured with desire."

And this is from Bashō, the Japanese poet—this captures so beautifully the endless nature of craving: "Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto." This is so nice. This is desire for the sake of desire. Desire breeds desire, and that's what keeps us in this sense of bondage.

Sayadaw U Pandita said once that consuming sense pleasures is a form of self-oppression because it's tiring and insatiable.

So the more we really notice, the more we're mindful of desire and the futility of it, quite naturally the mind begins to incline towards renunciation. By renunciation I mean a turning away from craving and its demand for gratification. Turning away from craving does not necessarily have to mean turning away from the things of the world, but turning away from craving itself.

I've found in my life that this leads quite naturally to a greater sense of simplicity—both outer, in the things of my life, and inner, just in the things that I want. Yes, I still want plenty of things, but they're fewer.

And it's easier to say, you know, tomorrow I won't care, and let it go.

I learned a lot about this sense of simplicity and the beauty, the real joy that can come from living in a simple way. Some years ago, for a period of several months, I was living in Thailand as a Buddhist nun. One lives quite simply, and the first few months were quite difficult, with massive aversion attacks, real kicking and fighting against wanting to be more comfortable, wanting better food, wanting not to be hot, not wanting bugs—just really wanting things to be different from how they were. And the inevitable culture shock of giving up all the comforts that we have in this culture.

But after two or three months, it really started to shift. And by the end of the time, my situation was no more comfortable. I had no more things than I had in the beginning. But in that simplicity there was such a sense of appreciation and joy for stuff that I would normally not even have noticed in my comfort-surrounded normal life. And I remember—I know I'm not remembering this through a haze of memory because I was writing about it at the time—but it was really one of the happiest and simplest times of my life. Really joyful, not because anything fantastic was happening. Just get up, go get food, sit a little, walk in the woods, wash my clothes. Very mundane on the outer level. But in that sense of not wanting, I really understood in some ways what the purpose of a renunciate life in that form could be: to really get a sense of the joy that can come from a mind that isn't so engaged in getting and having.

And as I mentioned before, we all have moments like that. We've had moments like that here in practice. We have many moments like that when we're not here, still in our life practice. Acknowledge those. It's important. It's an important counterbalance to our ingrained habit of thinking more means more happy.

In a way, the whole practice is a process of deepening letting go. And actually, enlightenment is the ultimate letting go. It's not about getting something. You cannot get enlightenment—a contradiction in terms. It's about the ultimate letting go.

So, non-greed.

The second intention, or thought, or attitude that becomes more manifest is that of goodwill or friendliness—mettā, loving-kindness, thought guided by goodwill. And in a way, that's infiltrating our experience here, simply as an openness to whatever circumstance presents itself, which in effect is what this mindfulness practice is.

I've often felt, actually, that the cultivation of mindfulness in a moment is, in a way, an expression of goodwill, of mettā. Because when, in a moment of experience, whatever arises—a breath, a pain, a sound, whatever—when the attitude in that noting moment is one of openness, acceptance, "Fine, this is here, let's deal with it," whether it's in a noting moment or in a situation in life, that really is, in that moment, the intention, the attitude of goodwill, of kindness, of friendliness, openness to whatever's presenting itself in this moment.

And all the times that, instead of meeting something with friendliness—which is often—we meet it with resentment or ill will or wishing it was different, lack of self-acceptance: again, this obviously comes from aversion, the flip side. And one moment of acceptance, just one moment of acceptance of what's arising, is the attitude of goodwill. It's not like we have to do it over and over to cultivate that attitude. In that moment, that is the expression of friendliness, of goodwill.

It's important to recognize this as a possibility, as a living expression that we can manifest and experience over and over, no matter how difficult our experience might be in a moment.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh speaking about our relationship to anger, though it could apply to anything:

"I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with non-violence. We do not need to consider anger, hatred, as enemies we have to fight to destroy. That would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself."

So with this attitude of goodwill, rather than doing violence to ourselves, we might be more open to a situation. Again, we sense that no matter how difficult a situation, we can use it as a stepping stone rather than an obstacle. And some people would say, well, we need difficult situations because that's how we grow.

There's a story I love about Gurdjieff, who had a community in France, I believe, with quite a lot of people living together under his guidance. And there was one man who was extremely difficult and drove everybody crazy. Nobody liked him or liked to

be around him. And I guess people weren't very nice to him either. He just got fed up one time and left. Everyone said, "Thank God he's gone. Now we can really get down to what community is about."

And Gurdjieff went after him and tried to talk him into coming back. And the man said, "Forget it. I don't want to come back there. People aren't nice to me."

Who wants to live here?

So the Jesuit said, "I'll pay you to come back."

And so he came back. People said, "What's he going to do that for? It's so nice without him."

And the Jesuit said, "No, you need this guy. He's a very important part of the community."

My belief is that we don't need to go out and look for trouble in our lives—enough of it comes to us—but this story kind of makes the point.

Another example, a key example that I really love, is about the possibility for transformation from extraordinarily difficult and debilitating circumstances through the power of this attitude of mind of goodwill, of friendliness. I cut this out of a paper a few years ago, about a woman whose story was titled "In Triumphant Return, Ex-Patient Takes Post at Mental Hospital."

It's about a woman who says she was seventeen and clinically depressed when she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic and placed in a state mental hospital. She remained inside for seventeen years. Now, fittingly for a woman whose antidotes to adversity are perseverance and forgiveness, she has returned as a full-time administrator at the same hospital.

She says, "I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive. If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger."

And then it goes on about many other difficulties in her life—the death of her husband from cancer, deaths by fire of some other people in her family—and just her deep sense of not blaming. It's not a false forgiveness, you know, but a deep sense that to learn to forgive and not dwell in the pain of the past, one can really reach out to a brighter future.

I find it quite inspiring because it's true. It's not a phony sense of pretending to forgive, but the actual experience over many, many years of the strength of this attitude of mind of goodwill. She's a woman who is not stuck. And nor are we. None of us is stuck and needs to be stuck.

I do want to emphasize, though, that it is a gradual process. Again, not to set up an ideal that no matter how badly one might have suffered and been hurt, well, one ought to forgive this tomorrow and move on. We must really respect and be honest with what's arising in our experience. And then from this truth, the attitude of goodwill, of mettā, will arise. A whole other way of being becomes a possibility.

I love the saying from the Carlos Castaneda book: "A warrior sees everything as a challenge, while an ordinary person sees everything as a blessing or a curse."

A challenge. Goodwill is not equal to passivity or non-action. A lot of times people ask about that. They say, "Well, if we just be open to whatever happens, does that mean we just accept abuse and don't act appropriately?" That's not the case at all. Actually, in meeting a situation with openness, without anger, without blame, you can see so much more clearly what appropriate action is in that situation. And the energy is actually much more available to then act in that appropriate way. It's not so bound up in negativity or fear or self-blame or outward blame. So the attitude of mind of mettā is not at all passive. It leads to quite appropriate action—not just for ourselves, but for all the other people involved.

The third attitude or intention, quite closely related, is that of non-harming—of thought or intention guided by compassion. In many cases, the action of compassion is a natural outflow of the thought of kindness, of mettā, the thought of non-harming.

We don't have to go looking for a field to begin experiencing and observing both what the intention or thought of compassion in the mind can feel like, and also the power of that to affect our actions. We can start right here in this moment, in this sitting and walking and the rest of the day's practice—with compassion for oneself, with compassion for what one is experiencing.

I can't overemphasize the importance of allowing and acknowledging and developing compassion for oneself. It's not selfish. Thich Nhat Hanh again: "If you cannot be compassionate towards yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others." And just in my experience, this is so true.

What we're doing here is often extremely difficult. I know from talking to many people in interviews—this is really hard, you know, to sit with oneself. Stephen Levine said once, "We experience many forms of hell as we watch the mind and body." And it's really true. We're meeting all our demons just sitting here quietly on this cushion. Every day—our anger, fear, loneliness, self-hatred, lust, resistance, boredom, on and on.

And how are we greeting these difficult experiences? What about compassion for this suffering? Start to notice how the intention of mind, how the thought of mind, expresses itself just in one noting moment.

Notice the tone of the note. Is it stinging? It tells you something. Notice the tone of the commentary, the running commentary. Maybe you don't have running commentary—I have endless running commentary. Notice the quality of that. Is it, "What's wrong with you? You're off the breath again. David, what, you're having another pain like that? Can't you learn to sit right? You were angry already half the day yesterday, and you're angry again. Get over it."

Notice what's going on. So often we experience these really painful, difficult states and then blame ourselves for experiencing them.

Something I do a lot, besides softening the tone of the note—instead of "thinking," "I'm thinking," it's more mutual: "*I'm* thinking"—is to notice the commentary. Would you treat someone else that harshly? I'll often imagine, when I'm in a really knotted-up state, hating myself, blaming myself—"You knew how to do this right, for God's sake, after all these years; this wouldn't be happening"—I think, if the person next to me was going through that and I knew it, would I think that? Is that how I would relate to that person's suffering? I wouldn't be in this job for very long, I'm sure. And when people share these struggles with me, I always respond, "God, that's really hard. That's really painful." So turn that around to oneself.

Soften the tone of the notes. Notice the running commentary; soften that as well. I used to have one really harsh running commentary that I started to note as "traffic cop," but actually "drill sergeant" would have been much more appropriate. It was like, "When you get back to the breath—you didn't feel that sensation closely enough, go back and do it again." On and on. I softened that one, and you start hearing, "It's okay. It's okay." It helps a lot.

It's a little conscious, you know, but to notice the lack of compassion, the negativity and ill will toward oneself, and intentionally soften it, bring in a feeling of compassion—it changes the whole tone of practice. And after a while, it's not this sense of "Oh, I should be compassionate." But as the Buddha said, what the mind frequently thinks about, that's where it dwells. The compassion begins to arise quite naturally.

I want to read this one personification of working with our demons and compassion. It's a story about Milarepa, a great Tibetan yogi who meditated for years up in caves in Tibet. It's really about how to greet our demons with deep compassion for the suffering engendered. It's quite personified.

So Milarepa was up meditating in his cave, and his mind became blissful. He carried some wood back up to the cave, and when he arrived there, he found seven demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa, and some sat performing various magical tricks. It's kind of like what happens when you come back from lunch, sit on the pillow, and seven demons spring up—and you were just blissful, you know, minding your own business.

As soon as he saw them, he became frightened. So he meditated, he uttered a subjugating mantra, he performed the gaze, he aroused his deity's presence. Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness, but was unable to pacify them. He thought, "Well, they might be local deities of the place, and I've been here for years, but I've not praised them." So he sang a song of praise to the place. Three of the demons went away, but Milarepa was unable to make the other four go away.

Realizing that the four demons were magical obstacles, he sang a song of confidence, saying: "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time we should converse."

Three of them vanished like a rainbow.

The remaining demon performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So he sang a song as his view, the pinnacle of his realization, ending it with: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk about our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit. Let me pray to Lord Vajradhara. Grant your blessings so that this lowly one"—meaning himself—"this lowly one may have complete compassion."

And then, with friendliness and complete compassion, without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and vanished like a rainbow.

So out of great compassion for ourselves and our demons, can we just place our heads in the mouth? We might vanish and we might not.

There's one other thing I'd like to share from my own experience of compassion—of experiencing a slight dose of compassion. As we allow compassion, non-harming, towards ourselves, towards our own pain, quite naturally it opens up our hearts and minds to compassion for others in the world, for others who we come in contact with. I find that when we don't need to shut off to our own pain, then we don't need to shut off to others' pain. We really can be there for it. And this is really the arising, that quivering of the heart in response to pain, that is sometimes given as a definition of compassion.

Another thing I found so interesting: when we're working with pain and compassion, with our own strong physical or emotional pain, when we're caught in resisting it—which is natural—it seems so separated, so isolated, like we're really alone in our pain, really disconnected. But as compassion comes in towards ourselves, towards this experience, a sense of empathy and connection with our own pain grows to include others. What had been a very isolating experience turns into one that dissolves the seeming sense of separation that we have.

Often in practice, many people talk about it and I've experienced it myself: what has been quite a personal pain that we're fighting, when we open to it with compassion, turns into an experience of universal pain. And a strong sense of our interconnectedness grows out of it.

Just one last example. Once I was in the hospital, lying there, wishing I wasn't there, lost in my pain. I was in a room with three other women, and something just kind of opened out my attention from my own experience. I softened to it and became aware of how much pain was going on in the two ladies around me. And then the awareness just kept spreading. How many rooms were there in this one hospital? How many hospitals? There were five hospitals just in the town I was in. And how many towns? Just on and on.

Rather than that seeming overwhelming, being able to acknowledge with kindness and compassion my own pain allowed me to open to the others, and to the others' pain, in quite a deep sense of the universality of all of us. And that, from being overwhelmingly painful, can actually bring quite a sense of peace and joy and acceptance.

So these three wholesome attitudes of mind—non-greed or renunciation, the nature of good will, and compassion or non-harming—they develop naturally as we continue to investigate in each moment the nature of our mind and body, the nature of what's arising. More and more they become natural modes of thought, of intention, natural modes of being—not some forced idea.

And again, it's so important to realize that this reach extends far beyond our individual self. How our mind is inclined, the thoughts, affect our actions, and that really does affect everyone we come in contact with.

One last story, showing the power of one person's clarity of intention and action. Thich Nhat Hanh has written about the boat people, those who escaped from Vietnam, all crowded onto small boats. Many of them had trouble with storms—aside from the pirates, these were small, under-equipped boats facing rough storms at sea. He said that in talking with hundreds or thousands of refugees, together they've come to see that the boats with the best chance of survival, the ones that made it through the best when there was a storm or difficulty, were the ones where even one person remained calm. Even one person remaining calm had the thoughts, the intention of inner peace that could lead to appropriate action, and it infects, inspires other people.

So our actions, which are informed by our thoughts, which are formed by our understanding, have great power in the world. As one teacher of mine said to me recently, as a paraphrase: never underestimate the value of what you're doing here.

CHAPTER 238

Compassion

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines one of meditation's most essential balances: how to genuinely care about suffering while maintaining the equanimity needed to respond skillfully rather than reactively. Drawing from the opening verses of the Dhammapada, she establishes that happiness and sorrow originate within the mind itself, and that the Buddha's teachings aim to relieve suffering at its deepest level.*
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> *Wilson distinguishes true compassion—the quivering of the heart in response to suffering—from its near enemy of pity or grief, which involves separation and aversion to unpleasantness. She explains how understanding the three characteristics (anicca, dukkha, anattā) provides the detachment necessary to face pain without being overwhelmed. Through personal stories, including caring for a dying turtle that connected to childhood trauma around her mother's death, she illustrates how we repeatedly learn the difference between genuine compassion and aversion disguised as caring.*
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> *The talk explores both the equanimity developed through vipassanā practice and the brahmavihārā equanimity practice with its powerful phrases: "All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and sorrow depend upon your actions, not my wishes for you." Wilson emphasizes that freedom happens only in the present moment through non-identification with experience. She encourages practitioners to trust both the closing and opening of the heart, reminding us that even small moments of genuine care—like the musician who simply took interest in her as a teenager—can be profoundly transformative.*

Compassion

Balancing care with detachment. Balancing compassion with equanimity.

The very first lines of the Dhammapada start like this: "Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief. They are all mind wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts, suffering follows one like the wheel that follows the foot of an ox." The next lines are: "Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief. They are all mind wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows one like a never-departing shadow."

The Buddha taught that our happiness and our sorrow originate within ourselves. They are all mind-wrought. All beings who take birth want to be happy. The Buddha's teachings were meant to relieve suffering at the deepest level. Learning how to balance

opening to suffering, caring about suffering, and having understanding or wisdom developing detachment—this balance is actually how we learn to relieve suffering at the deepest level.

Finding some context for understanding the suffering and the pain in our lives and in this world means facing this world, facing reality just as it is, accepting it with unconditional acceptance, and then coming to understand it. The process will then happen on deeper and deeper levels of reality, and hence deeper and deeper levels of wisdom or understanding.

There's a play called *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, written by Jane Wagner. Lily Tomlin plays the role of the person speaking these lines: "I made some studies, and reality is the leading cause of stress amongst those in touch with it. I can take it in small doses, but as a lifestyle, I found it too confining. Reality was just too needful. It expected me to be there for it all the time. And with all I have to do, I had to let something go."

Facing reality—it's not easy. That's why I read that. What we usually do is let it go. And that's why we're here at this retreat. And as you can see, it's not easy.

I was sitting a retreat in Australia last year for about five weeks. We were all pretty quiet around, I think, about a month into the course, when a high school band started marching through the retreat center where we were sitting. We were all quiet, doing walking meditation, and the tune they were playing was "When the Saints Come Marching In." It was really loud, just going right by where I was doing walking meditation. And it seemed really funny to me. I had one of those laughing fits that you can't control when you're doing vipassanā, but you hope nobody's around when you're having it.

And then I thought, well, this is a great song for a vipassanā retreat. It could be a theme song. "When the saints go marching in"—a saint is someone who has totally let go of control of life through this complete surrender to how reality is, how life is. Life is this constant stream of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. Learning to open to life, to open to reality, to care about life, but also to be detached from it—to not have to hold on to pleasurable feelings, to not push away unpleasant feelings. This is the life of the saint. It's like the mind becomes like water. It just flows with life, with reality as it is. This takes a tremendous balance of care, openness of heart, and detachment.

Coming to terms with the suffering within how reality appears for us in this world, opening to it, understanding it, and then responding in any way that we feel is appropriate—this requires the balance I'm talking about, of compassion and equanimity.

There was so much pain in my childhood. It was so overwhelming that the only refuge I had was nature, my sanity. I learned that if I just went out in nature and waited—and sometimes I had to wait a very long time—there would be this stillness and quiet, and I would have this rest, this calm, in which I could face another day of my family life.

I didn't learn how to open to pain in that process. What brought me to the practice was really seeing that that wasn't enough. It was a lot to learn how to be quiet and peaceful, to have the energy to face another day, but I wasn't really able to open to the suffering, to care about it while also being detached.

When I went to college, I found a professor who was a naturalist. He was one of the first environmentalists in this country, and he was like my first guru. One of the projects he gave me was, for a whole winter and spring semester, to find a bush and spend at least thirty minutes to an hour every day with this bush.

That was my project for six months. Every day for six months I would go to this bush and I would draw it or meditate by it or just stare at it or read about it—whether it was snowing or raining or very sunny, and in many different swings of moods from very difficult moods to very happy moods to very neutral moods. I would just go to this place I called my spot every day. And when spring came and the bush flowered, it was one of the most ecstatic moments in my life. I had become so connected to this bush and so caring about it. It was a very wonderful teaching.

This teacher kind of hooked me because he understood my love of nature, but he also understood my total aversion to study. So he lured me into this world of studying nature by first letting me love it. That was my direct path—that was my predilection, actually—just the loving it. And I ended up taking twenty-three credits studying birds and plants, botany, all kinds of things.

What struck me about him is that he had developed in his world this extraordinary balance of loving nature but also having this ability to keenly, very precisely study nature, to observe nature. And he taught me that I could get to know anything in nature—whether it was a bird or an insect or a plant or animals—in many different ways. I could write stories about them. I could spend time with them. I could learn their scientific names, and by learning their scientific names I could get to know their family, their habits, their conditioning, their history.

I trusted this teacher because he cared about what he was learning, what he was studying, and I needed that love before I could trust him. What he was learning about wasn't a cold, detached study but a very connected and caring, intimate experience with nature. It wasn't separate, because he cared.

There's a great saying that I think exquisitely expresses this balance of care, love, and understanding. This is a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj. He said that love tells me I'm everything, wisdom tells me I'm nothing, and between the two my life flows. To me, that's all we need to know.

I wanted to speak a little bit about compassion. Sharon will talk more about compassion tomorrow night. You've probably heard this already—compassion, the Buddha taught, was the quivering of the heart in response to suffering. It's an openness to the suffering, not a feeling of being separate from the suffering.

The near enemy of compassion or caring is pity or grief, because we are feeling in those moments of pity or grief a separation from the suffering. Near enemy means that it can look like compassion. It masquerades as compassion. But we're really feeling sorry for someone or ourself. There's this aversion to the unpleasantness of the suffering. We're not open to the unpleasantness of the suffering.

The far enemy of compassion is cruelty. There's this harming, actual harming of ourselves or another. And the reason why it's the far enemy is because we can't feel this care or compassion and cruelty at the same time.

Compassion isn't sorrow. It's actually a very wonderful feeling of just caring. The heart is very tender. I remember when I was doing the compassion practice this spring, there were so many times when I would fall into grief or pity when I was doing this practice. And I learned slowly, by noticing when it would shift to this very pleasant feeling of care, that that's what compassion was.

But you'll find that when you do it, you'll have a lot of grief come up, a lot of sadness come up, because you're facing the suffering, you're facing reality, and you're touching the unpleasantness. And I kept thinking, well, I want to be compassionate all the time right now. But you'll actually learn about the near enemy a lot if you practice it a lot. And eventually you'll start to see the difference between that pleasant feeling of care and the grief or the sorrow, which includes this aversion to the unpleasantness.

This openness of heart that's required for us to be able to touch the suffering and not feel separate needs to be balanced with equanimity, understanding, or detachment. If the heart is overly engaged and not balanced with understanding, usually it will start to want to get rid of the suffering. We want to get rid of the pain in ourself or others from

this aversion to the unpleasantness. Our hearts can so easily be overwhelmed or broken by too much suffering, too much pain, when we don't have this balance of understanding that makes the heart strong. And this is when sorrow happens, when we get overwhelmed by the suffering.

If you consider how much suffering there is in this world—I don't want to go into the morbid details, but if you just look at hunger on this planet, just hunger. Or if you look at any kind of violence, war, how children are treated, disease—there's so much suffering in this world. And it's actually possible to transform our awareness of suffering into compassion.

It takes practice, but we can do it. Compassion doesn't mean avoiding the pain. It means allowing it, accepting it, understanding it.

When I first came to IMS to be on staff, I was a cook here, and I also had the job of taking care of the garden and all the plants in the building. I grew very attached to the plants here. A monk named Taungpulu Sayadaw came, who was a very powerful teacher. I was having problems because the plants had a lot of bugs in them when I arrived, and I was trying very hard to keep this precept of not killing, which I was just learning about. I hadn't really been familiar with this precept before. So I was doing my best, but I was getting very frustrated. I went to Taungpulu Sayadaw and said, "Can I kill the bugs on these plants? I can't stand it anymore." And he said, "Do the best you can to save the plants, but don't kill the bugs. Whatever you do, don't kill the bugs." It was really hard for me—a really hard teaching. I was very new to the practice. I had only done one retreat. I didn't really understand.

There was a gradual process for me, with certain events helping to deepen this teaching of care and wisdom. When I was on staff, I was driving to Amherst one day, and there was a huge snapping turtle in the road that had just been hit. I pulled off to the side and went out to see the turtle. It was still alive, but the whole shell had been smashed. It was obvious that it wasn't going to make it. Again, there was this sense—that thought: I want to put it out of its misery. I should kill it. But then there was this monk's voice saying, "Whatever you do, don't kill." So I scooped up the turtle and went under a pine tree. I did metta with the turtle until it died.

But the turtle never left me. The turtle kept coming up in my sittings from then on. At a certain point, I discovered that this was all on the surface of an experience I had as a child of watching my mother dying. As a child, I didn't understand that there could be that much pain in this world. And I think that with the amount of suffering in this world, we have very hard lessons in learning what compassion really is.

I saw a movie recently with Stephen called *The Doctor*. It's a great movie about a doctor who had been trained very well technically. He was a great surgeon, but he had no idea what it was like to be suffering, what it was like to be a patient, what it was like to be a patient in a modern hospital, how it was to be treated in a modern hospital. In the course of the movie, this doctor gets cancer—he's diagnosed with malignant cancer. And the story is this transformation of a person from being, I would call, almost nearly uncompassionate. They kind of made it extreme in the movie, but you didn't see a trace of compassion in him at the beginning. Then he slowly starts to open up, because he was treated just like he was treating people, and his heart started to open.

The movie was very hard for me to watch at times, and I wasn't quite sure what was going on for me. But when I left the movie, I started to see: here's this difficulty I had as a child, because my mother was in and out of hospitals, in and out of nursing homes, and she was treated very coldly at times. So I had to—again, for what seems like the millionth time—sort out: there was the way she was treated that I didn't understand at the time, and I had a lot of aversion for it. There was her actual death. There was the loss for myself. And then there was the way she died, which was so lonely. I think that's the most painful thing for me, that she really didn't have anybody. Death isn't really so bad, really, if there's somebody supporting you. And also, what it felt like to touch her corpse—this warmth of the body to very cold. It really hit me like lightning when I touched her body and it was so cold.

I was very different from other children after that. I had a different way of seeing the world from that experience at a very young age. I was searching so deeply for understanding because of it. So much of it was because of this thing I'm talking about—being able to open to the pain and also understand it. I was trying to understand it, but I couldn't even open to it as a child.

But it was just always pushing me to search for that understanding.

So we all have to learn over and over the difference between compassion and aversion. It's not like you get it once and then it's over. That's not how it is. We get these lessons over and over.

When we wish someone to be free from suffering, it doesn't mean that we're wishing them to be free from suffering out of aversion to the unpleasantness. It's very critical that compassion has this understanding with it—that we're just caring for the person, or caring for the pain in ourselves. Just caring. And we wish that it ends, but we can't control that it ends. So the wish is important, but we have to let go of control. The way

that we learn how to let go of control is through detachment and equanimity. We learn to open and care with compassion. The understanding comes through detachment, through equanimity.

There's a saying attributed to Kuan Yin, who is the bodhisattva of compassion: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?" This is a great one if you're having trouble. The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm? And this is all about learning this understanding, this detachment.

If there's sadness, we can start to see that there is no one sad. There is just sadness arising and passing away, like a cloud moving through the open, vast blue sky. There is no solid self behind the process. Sadness can be seen like emotional waves rising up on the seashore and then passing. We can learn to open to pain and not identify with it. That not identifying with it is the detachment. We can learn to be with it and let it go.

Some of our greatest teachers are the unpleasant feelings that actually arise in our life, because they teach us how to work with aversion rather than wanting to get rid of it. If you're having knee pain or back pain, any emotional pain—or if maybe the sound of somebody snoring drives you crazy, or somebody coughing, or perhaps we're having aversion to aversion itself, or aversion to fear—whatever it is, these are actually the things that help us learn how to work with aversion. They are the teacher.

Say we're having difficulty learning how to experience grief or anger. I'm talking about this in relationship to pain because that's what this talk is about: How do we open to suffering? Say we're having difficulty with experiencing aversion to pain, whether it's inside or outside ourselves. This has to do with unpleasant sensations. It's not that we want to get rid of the anger, because that keeps reinforcing the anger. But when aversion or grief arises, we can learn to accept it simply because it's happened.

And then we can start learning how to have the perspective of anicca—that it's impermanent. We can have the perspective of dukkha—that we can't control it, but it's arisen. There's this uncertainty, insecurity. And then we can have the perspective of anatta with it—that there's no solid separate self behind this process.

Wisdom and the detachment that comes with wisdom involves seeing with these three perspectives, or from one of these three perspectives at any given time. Dukkha is the understanding that we can't control that it has arisen. Anicca is that sense that it's just coming and going. Anatta is not taking it as me or I or mine. And if we have one of these three perspectives, or all three—which is when wisdom is really strong—we see

that there's no need to repress the aversion or grief, and there's no need to indulge it. We can just let it come and go. We welcome it just like you would a wave on the seashore, and it will pass.

Equanimity is that very sweet, deep balance of mind when we're not at war with things, when we're not fighting the unpleasantness that comes with life. It's so sweet because it's the opposite of the reacting mind. It's this deep, unconditional acceptance. When this is strong, when we have the strength to actually let these unpleasant things in life come and go—to feel them fully and let them come and go—there's no more fear of feeling the unpleasantness, no more fear of feeling the anger, no more fear of feeling the grief, no more fear of opening to suffering. And it doesn't matter what kind of suffering it is, whether it's a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a thought, an emotion.

The true test of whether we're free is if something comes back. If our reaction is, "Oh no, I thought I got rid of you"—that's not quite freedom. That's not equanimity, it's not understanding. We're not seeing it clearly.

When we take birth in this human realm, on this planet, the given is that there's this great mixture of pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Freedom isn't opening up the body. Freedom isn't getting rid of emotions. Freedom isn't working anything out. Because all of that involves something in the future—it means we're not okay just where we are.

The transformation in this practice, this very deep transformation, occurs whenever we're fully present now and when we're not identified with what's happening now. The only possibility for freedom is now. Freedom doesn't happen in the past and it can't happen in the future, and it doesn't depend on what's happening. It can only happen in one moment—when we aren't identified with what's happening. This non-identification is only possible in the present moment. This is where understanding is, this is where detachment comes from, this is the real freedom. And it's the only possibility of balancing the suffering that happens in our life. It's the only possibility for freedom.

With this detachment, it helps us to face any kind of pain without drowning in it. We learn how to swim in it. We learn to live in life and grow from what's happening rather than to shut down or drown. We learn to open and let go. Understanding gives strength to our heart. In some ways you might see being here as exercising your heart. There's so much emphasis on exercising the body in this culture, but what you're doing is really stretching the heart. Sometimes it hurts.

True compassion, when we're open to suffering, means we don't turn to mush in the face of suffering. And we also don't turn to indifference. We're not shut down and we're not drowning.

The equanimity that I've been describing is the equanimity that comes with the Vipassana practice. In the Brahma-vihara practice there's also an equanimity practice that develops equanimity, but it's a different kind than what develops in Vipassana. In this equanimity practice, which you'll be doing a little later after compassion and mudita, the phrases that one says are: "All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and your sorrow depend upon your actions and not upon my wishes for you."

I remember when I got to this part this spring, I thought it had a little punch in it. There's the most understanding in this Brahma-vihara. When you're saying it to someone, you can imagine the power of that: "All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and your sorrow depend upon your actions and not my wishes for you." This is a great healing of a codependent heart. Basically, you're saying: I'm not responsible for your pain. It's very powerful. It's amazing.

I think that the way this heals is that if the heart is very open, there's a tendency to want to control with it. There's a tendency to want results. We want the pain to go away, or we want to see results. I might be wishing some of my family members happiness for the next fifty million years, but I can wish it—I can't control with it. And I think that with family members particularly it's very poignant. This equanimity from the Brahma-viharas is really important to balance an open heart. It's not just the understanding that there's no solid separate self behind the process; there's also the understanding that a person's actions are what will bring them happiness and sorrow, not our wishes for them. Our care will help influence somebody, but ultimately it's one's own actions that bring us happiness or sorrow.

I have a nephew that I raised for most of his young years, and then around when he was five I started drifting away. He's been a great teacher for me since he joined the Marines when he was seventeen. When he joined the Marines, I felt like I'd been slapped really hard across the face, because it was the opposite of where I had hoped he would go. It's been an incredible teaching for me, but also incredibly painful. He was sent to the Gulf this year when the war started, and my heart just felt like it was breaking. It was just horrendous. He was in all the action that happened. And he hasn't recovered. I don't know if he'll ever recover.

And it's very hard for me. And I think that we can do and say what we say with other beings, and especially with the beings we're very connected to and very close to, but then we have to let go. And it's often the people we care about the most that we have to practice this openness of heart and still care, but also have that detachment.

I have to understand that he chose that in whatever conditioning brought that about, and that I can do what I can, but that's his karma. And if you think about all the people you care about so deeply, we need this understanding of karma. We care and we do the best we can, and then we have to let go of control.

Often we feel like there's this immensity of suffering in the world, and that we have to do so much. It can seem overwhelming. Yet it's really the little things that we do that have a lot of power.

This is a quotation from Mother Teresa. She said, "We feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop were not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be less because of that missing drop. I don't agree with the big way of doing things. To us, what matters is an individual. To get to love a person, we must come in close contact with them. If we wait until we get the numbers, then we will be lost in the numbers, and we will never be able to show love and respect for that person. I believe in person to person."

One moment of care, one moment of genuine mindfulness and care, is so powerful. And it might be rare that we can actually have that one moment of openness and detachment and really respond with care to suffering. But in that moment, there's this great transformation that takes place.

And it's important to remember that it's okay to be closed. It's okay not to be compassionate. Sometimes we just don't have it in us to open. We have to be okay with having a closed heart. That means that it's too painful. We just have to wait. We rest the mind, rest the heart. That might take five years, it might take two minutes. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we trust the process of closing when it's too much, and then opening when we can.

Often we feel like we have to know everything before we can do something, or that we have to save the world, or that we have to figure everything out. But just one moment of care balanced with detachment will really make a difference.

There's an experience I had my senior year in high school that for me touches this. I hadn't had a history of any adults taking much interest in me. And I worked at this outdoor theater the summer of my senior year where all these groups came—Jimi Hendrix, the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, all kinds of groups. A musician named Hugh Masekela came. I'm not sure if you've heard of him. He's a musician from South Africa who lives in the United States.

I used to stand where all the performers would come down to the stage and wait there and talk. Most of these people didn't take much interest in me, to say the least. And this man Hugh Masekela, who I didn't know from anybody, came for a week, and every night he would spend about an hour talking with me. He was really interested in me, and there wasn't anything weird about it. It was very natural, just sitting down and having a ginger ale and talking.

It had such an effect on me that there was this person who was actually interested in me. I consider him a benefactor. I only had those very brief moments in time with him, but they mattered. He cared. Later on I heard that he has a very strong interest in teenagers and actually sets up productions in New York where he trains teenagers musically and in acting. And I think, what a great being. It's not like he did a lot, or studied psychology for fifteen years to figure it out. It was so simple, yet had a transformative, very deep effect on me.

More and more Stephen and I are trying to encourage people to take an interest in someone. And it doesn't mean that it's a big commitment. That's sort of the C word in our culture—there's the F word, and then there's commitment. But it's not like you have to make a heavy commitment.

It can be that on a train you simply take an interest in somebody. Or it could mean a slightly longer commitment—maybe an hour, whatever it might be. But these little things make a difference for people. This is how metta and compassion are going to start coming into our culture more. Maybe not from elders in our culture. Maybe from us.

The last aspect of balancing equanimity and compassion that I wanted to talk about is humor. It doesn't seem to be on any of the lists in Buddhism—I don't quite get it. I keep looking for it. Maybe it's in some sutta we haven't discovered yet. But then I thought, well, maybe it's because it's understood. Maybe it's just so important that it's understood to be in all the lists in Buddhism.

It's important not to take ourselves too seriously. Humor—a little bit of humor, at least—brings lightness, buoyancy to us. And in the face of suffering, we need that lightness.

This is another quotation from *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*: "You can't expect insights, even the big ones, to suddenly make you understand everything. But I figure, hey, it's a step if they leave you confused in a deeper way."

Now that should be on the brochure. Insight meditation: leaves you confused in a deeper way.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "If I didn't have a sense of humor, I would have committed suicide long ago." We need it. Dukkha land is hard. You know what dukkha land is like. You just wish you were in anicca land or anatta land, but dukkha land is hard. And there's a lot of it.

When we were teaching in Yucca Valley this past spring, every night a group of us would go out a side door. Most of the yogis would go out one way, but a group of us in the front would go out the side door right after the talk ended. One particular night toward the end of the retreat, we were all walking out the door, and some of us noticed that our sandals were missing, our shoes, our sneakers.

It was quite interesting to watch what happened. At first people were just saying, "Where are my shoes? Where are my sandals?" Then there was this immediate search for the sandals and shoes. And then there was this sense of being upset—really upset. They were gone. It turned out later that we found out many yogis' Birkenstocks were missing as well. Some vandals had taken the sandals. Actually it was something like fifteen hundred dollars worth of stuff that had gone missing. It was really serious.

But what happened that night is this: people were walking out getting upset about their sandals being missing, and the last person out the door was a monk. He walked out, and he just looked. Very mindfully—you could just see it happening—he just saw that his sandals were missing. They were just gone. That was it. There was nothing extra. No upset, no looking for them. They were just gone. And he just started laughing and walked off in his socks.

It was great. The practice works, you know. That's equanimity. It was so wonderful to see. And then a collection was taken up later to get him some sandals.

I began this talk by speaking about that professor I had in college. I consider him one of my greatest teachers. The college was in a city that was very polluted. He had a small greenhouse and gardens on the side of a dormitory. There was a lot of alcohol being drunk by students at that particular time, and many bottles would be thrown out of the dormitory windows into the garden. Sometimes the window of the greenhouse would get smashed.

Sometimes when he was working in the garden, he would actually get hit in the head by a bottle—really severe, really hard. Very few people that he was teaching had the slightest interest in what he was trying to teach. He was way ahead of his time, so deeply caring for the planet and for anything alive. He had such a deep care for the earth. He was considered very eccentric.

There was the naturalist side of him, but there was also a very deeply contemplative side. When all the Vietnam War demonstrations were going on, when the Black Panthers took over a dormitory on our campus, when there were ghetto riots and all those turbulent times—there were a lot of professors leaving or getting fired, a lot of students getting violent.

I remember one particular day when a dorm had been taken over and there was growing violence happening on the campus. He was so angry, so disturbed. I'd just never seen him like that. He was so upset. I'd never seen him take a day off, and he just left. He went out into the woods for the day, for the whole day. And the next day he came back, and I'd never seen anybody so quiet.

That quiet that he brought into my life had more of an effect than anything at that point in my life. I saw the possibility for being touched by that much pain but also having balance. I had been feeling quite violent at the time, and I really felt like it had saved me.

If you think about those years back then, how very little awareness people had of the environment—and of all the things I saw him go through—it would have been very easy for him to get discouraged at times. But he kept going. I never saw him stop what he was trying to get across. And I saw that he actually had a huge effect. There's such a growing awareness of the environment now. At that time there was so little.

I think also that if you consider the state of the earth and what's happening environmentally, we could get very discouraged at times. It's not looking so good for us. From one perspective, that's true.

Yet every time we have this compassion, this equanimity, this balance, and we take an action—every time we speak, every time we save a bottle, every time we turn off a light—whatever we do has a huge effect. We don't know what will happen. We don't have any idea what's going to happen with this earth. So we do the best we can, and then we let go of control.

This ability to see very clearly what's happening, to open to the suffering, and then to respond in whatever way we can—doing the best we can and letting go of control—takes this tremendous balance of care and detachment. Which, luckily, you're working very deeply on.

There's a poem by Chief Seattle. I read recently that someone said of Chief Seattle that he could be heard from three quarters of a mile away—his voice was so powerful. I'm really impressed by that, because nobody can even hear me if I don't have a microphone on. Three quarters of a mile.

Anyway:

Teach your children what we have taught our children—that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. This we know. The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected, like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life. We are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 239

Nature and Cause of Suffering

Carol Wilson · 54 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers an intimate exploration of the First and Second Noble Truths—dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and taṇhā (craving). She begins by recounting how the Buddha, after his awakening, initially hesitated to teach, perceiving that beings "relish attachment and delight in attachment." Yet moved by compassion upon seeing that everyone simply wants happiness while unknowingly doing the opposite, he chose to share his realization.

Wilson illuminates how we habitually deny suffering—whether a doctor dismissing a patient's pain or our own tendency to shut down when confronted with beggars in India. She explains that this denial disconnects us from truth itself, since we cannot selectively close ourselves to pain while remaining open to joy. Through personal examples, including a memorable trip to a health club and a futile search for a chocolate milkshake, she demonstrates how even pleasant experiences contain unsatisfactoriness when examined closely.

The talk clarifies the Pāli terminology around desire, distinguishing taṇhā (thirst/craving) from simple needs and wholesome aspiration. Wilson describes craving as a physical sensation of "leaning forward and tightening," noting how it distorts perception and creates separation. She emphasizes that retreat practice offers a unique opportunity to experience craving without acting on it, allowing practitioners to see that this movement of mind simply arises and passes away. Through mindful attention to this process, the chains of bondage become visible, and understanding naturally leads to freedom.

Last night Stephen spoke briefly about the Four Noble Truths—the first teaching that the Buddha ever gave, and really the core teaching.

If you recall, the first truth is that of the unsatisfactory nature of our life. Not just painful, but unsatisfactory. The second truth is that the cause of this—the word is *dukkha*, which we translate as unsatisfactory—the core cause of this is the movement of craving in the mind. It is the cause of suffering or unsatisfactoriness because we crave what is insubstantial, ephemeral, not lasting. We crave for happiness where it can't be found. The third truth is that there is an end, a cessation to this movement of craving—a liberation, freedom, peace. And the fourth truth is the Eightfold Noble Path, the way that the Buddha laid out for us to develop, to touch more and more deeply the truth of who we are, this truth of freedom.

Tonight I want to talk mainly about these first two noble truths.

It's said that the Buddha, after his years of practice and his full deep realization, his great wisdom, was at first not so inclined to teach. He was reflecting on this depth of truth that he had realized and thought that this truth is profound and very hard to see—that a person cannot come to it by thinking about it, but only by direct experience. The wise will understand this truth of our being through only direct experience. But he continued: this generation, where he was alive at that time 2,500 years ago, this generation relishes attachment, delights in attachment. So it's hard for them to see this truth.

I guess things haven't changed very much.

Thinking this, he thought, well, what's the use? I might as well just hang out in the bliss of *Nibbāna* for the rest of my life. He thought he wouldn't be understood. So the legend has it that a Brahma being from one of the high Brahma realms came down and begged the Buddha to teach out of great compassion for the world. And it's said that the Buddha used his all-seeing wisdom to survey the world. One of the things he saw, and what touched his great compassion, is that everyone just wants to be happy. All of us, deeply in our heart—what do we want? We want to be happy. Yet through our blindness, through not understanding, he saw that people were doing, in their efforts to be happy, just the opposite of what would make them happy. In pursuing happiness, they were doing it in a way that was only bringing more suffering. Out of great compassion, he decided to teach, to share what he had discovered, and so spent the next 45 years of his life doing that.

The truth is hard to see, not because it's somewhere else, not because we have to somehow be different in order to see it. It's hard to see because we look to the wrong things for happiness. Because we see in an incorrect way. Because we don't look at what's really happening now and so don't see the truth of things.

That's why I want to talk about the first two truths. I love talking about them because the understanding of these—the truth of the unsatisfactoriness and of craving—is so liberating. It is the key to understanding what happiness is, what truth is.

When we touch our true nature, in that moment, the truth of who we are beyond body, beyond mind, beyond this duality, this sense of me and you—in that moment, craving doesn't make any sense. There's nothing to crave. And so it's not a problem. But paradoxically, what blinds us to touching this truth of who we are is just this movement of craving in our minds, in our hearts.

So I feel it's very important—it's vital, actually—for us to inquire into this process of craving, to really come to understand it, to see it for what it is: this movement of mind, this cause of suffering. And in inquiring into craving, we also begin to see what leads us into craving in the first place. That is our not really deeply understanding the truth of *dukkha*, of the unsatisfactory nature of things.

Not understanding this truth of the unsatisfactory nature of existence, we basically keep thinking that there's some experience, some physical object, some emotional or mental or physical experience that we can have that is going to be ultimately satisfying, that's going to bring us lasting happiness. We don't put it that way so broadly in our minds, but through our not investigating, that's the way we're acting. And so we keep craving, we keep looking for this satisfaction where it can't be found, and we keep suffering. We keep being confused, we keep feeling shut out and separate from who we really are, from peace.

I think that's what the Buddha meant when he talked about how everyone wants to be happy, but we keep doing just the opposite—what will only bring us more confusion and suffering.

So let's examine these two truths, and just look a little bit at how our misunderstanding of these facets of existence continues to bring about confusion and suffering.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was an Indian wise man, said once that the obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain.

And that's the first two truths in reverse: fear of pain, desire for pleasure.

So this first noble truth, the truth of dukkha or unsatisfactoriness—the unsatisfactoriness of pain, the unsatisfactoriness of impermanence, that what we love, what we cherish, changes, goes away, or we change.

When I first started hearing about this, the thought that came was, "Well, suffering is no big secret. Why is this such a big truth to proclaim? All you have to do is pick up the newspaper any day and read it, talk to five people you meet on the street. It's pretty clear that there's a lot of suffering and unsatisfactoriness in the world. So what's the big secret?"

But when we really start inquiring into it in our day-to-day life, begin to look at how we're relating to our experiences just on a mundane, day-to-day level, it's quite fascinating to me to continue to see how limited—at least for me—my ability to open to the absolute truth of unsatisfactoriness or suffering is. The tendency to deny and avoid is enormous. So I see why the Buddha proclaimed it: to wake us up, to start paying atten-

tion to what's really happening. Not to develop a depressive, aversive relationship to life. In fact, it's just the reverse. He's saying, let's look at what's really going on in order to wake us up, in order to open us to the potential of living in truth at this very moment, rather than living in denial, rather than living in fear, even if we're not aware of it.

So what are some of the ways that we deny? Just a couple of examples, and you can find them in your own life. Go through a day and we're doing it all the time. But these are real obvious ones, where we deny another's pain right in front of us, or deny our own internal pain.

Once I was in the hospital and a doctor was doing a procedure on me that was relatively painful—not killer, but relatively painful. And he was having trouble doing it, trying it over and over and over. It was really hurting. I was pretty on the edge anyway, so I started crying some. He just looks at me and says, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

It's really interesting. Looking at it on another level, it's the same process exactly. I notice when I go to India—I was just in India a couple of months ago—it's a very painful place. So I pay attention to when I first get into a city, and one, especially a Westerner, is accosted by beggars. Really, not just kind of panhandlers, but truly emaciated people, lepers, people who are quite maimed, in really poor condition, obviously in great need. And it's not just one or two. If you give any amount of money to one, you can literally be mobbed by a group of them.

So I pay attention: how long can I really stay open to this suffering, to connecting with these people? And it's sad—it's not long. Maybe in ten minutes I notice I'm shutting down, I'm kind of averting my eyes, I'm walking past a little more hurriedly. Maybe the next day I start out open again.

So what's going on? Why do I shut down? Why did the doctor have to deny my obvious pain? I feel that to open to the immensity of pain in another, the immensity of pain in the world, triggers off the same immensity of pain in myself. And to the extent that it's too much for me to handle, sometimes we just don't want to acknowledge it. Sometimes it's really overwhelming; sometimes it's just more than we can open to and handle at a time. So I'm not saying we should immediately open to all the pain in the world.

But just watching that process of shutting down and why—and can I then bring my attention back and feel that pain and know that that's okay? Pain, suffering is part of life in this mind and body on this planet. I don't have to be afraid of it.

But the question might come up: why do we have to open to this pain? What's the point? I thought I was doing okay. But really, I know you all don't think you're doing okay or you wouldn't be here going through this torturous process of sitting and walking and watching everything that arises. I know I wouldn't do it if I thought everything was completely okay.

So notice—I notice when I shut down to the beggars, when I shut down to pain, my own and others' pain—what's the effect of that? I no longer make contact. There's no longer a sense of connection.

I'm actually shut down to the truth in that moment. Because the thing is, we can't shut down selectively. We tell ourselves, "I'll shut down to pain, but I'll stay open to compassion and joy and appreciation." It doesn't work that way. When I shut off to the truth of this moment, there's disconnection, separation, a sense of being out of touch.

And one learns that in shutting ourselves off, in denying—whether consciously or unconsciously—the truth of this moment when it happens to be painful, that's actually in the long run much more painful and difficult. It leads to much more isolation and confusion than actually just acknowledging that this moment is painful and allowing that experience to be as it is. Because what's so amazing is that often that also opens into great compassion and appreciation and joy. But the basic reason is this: in shutting off and denying what's happening in this moment, there's no way we can touch the truth of who we are, because we're denying it.

So we begin to notice how and when and why this denial of what's happening takes place.

We deny as well the dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness, of change. We all know intellectually that everything changes. But I just watch it in my life. For example, I recently moved into a new house that was freshly built. And within no time, I'm noticing the black marks on the wall and the little cracks appearing as the house begins to settle. There's this real sense of, "They did it wrong. They made a mistake." But they didn't do anything wrong. Everything decays. It changes. That's the nature of things. If I can't acknowledge and allow that, I'm going to suffer.

This culture—and this culture is crazy—we're in one mass denial of the fact that we're aging and dying. Just the other day, several of us fell into this conversation about facelifts, and it got quite intricate about what's involved and what goes on. At the end of it, one of us said, "We must be getting old. We've known each other for a long time, and we never had this conversation before." What's going on in our culture that we need to do this? We need to deny what's happening right in front of us. Why is that so scary?

This denial gives us a really skewed view of the world. I know I grew up with a really unconscious, skewed view of life. There was an unspoken assumption in my house that I didn't even recognize until I was about twenty-five: you're supposed to be healthy, you're supposed to be happy, you're not supposed to have a lot of emotional mood swings. And if you're unhappy? "Well, don't be sad. Come on, smile." So the unspoken assumption was that there was something really wrong with me. If, having a quite blessed life as I did, I could still feel miserable and discontent—well, maybe there's something wrong with me as a person. It led to a lot of confusion and frustration and self-blame and self-judgment.

That's why this teaching of the First Noble Truth—the fact that there is unsatisfactoriness inherent in our existence—came not as a depressing thing but as a huge relief. It was like, "Oh, right." It acknowledged my experience. I didn't feel so crazy anymore. Finally, an explanation of what's really going on. Because it's not just talking about the obvious painful or changing situations, which God knows is enough—and we still manage to hide from even that at times. But it also helped me begin to tune into the unsatisfactory nature of experiences on a more subtle level.

Let me tell you a little story. It could be almost any experience, but this was when I really woke up to it and realized why I felt so crazy, why I thought I should be happy and wasn't. One fall, a friend and I—I was teaching a three-month course in Massachusetts—belonged to a health club where we would go swimming and work out. We were really tired that day. It had been a long week, and we decided to go swimming to refresh ourselves. We got really happy at the idea.

So I'll describe blow by blow what actually happened, rather than what I thought was happening. We got in the car, drove for half an hour, arrived—it was really cold—got out and went in. The dressing room was quite chilly, and I'm very susceptible to cold. So I was freezing getting into my bathing suit.

Took a shower, walked out to the pool—I was even more freezing. Got into the water, which wasn't particularly warm, so I was quite uncomfortable and shivering. I started swimming really fast, and after about two laps, I got warm. For about one lap, I was really enjoying it. And then my arms started to hurt, and it just started to be boring. I thought, "Well, I can't wait to get in the sauna."

So I dragged myself through a couple more laps, got out—cold again—went into the sauna, relaxed, and thought, "This feels great." And it felt great for about five minutes. Then the wooden board started to really hurt my back. I got really sweaty, kind of dizzy, developed a headache. So I decided to go out. I went out—it was really cold. I sat there and cooled off. "Oh, now I'm cold. I'm going to go back in the sauna." I went in the

sauna. It felt good for about two minutes. Then again I started to sweat, got dizzy, went out, took a shower—it was cold—got dressed, went upstairs, and met my friend. He's a man, so he'd been in the men's room. He said, "Boy, that was great!" A typical experience. And I would wonder, how come I don't feel really incredibly good now?

Of course, again, you might say, "Well, who wants to look this closely? It's really depressing." And I want to say again: it's not. It's not depressing at all. It's quite the reverse. It's quite liberating. It's seeing what's actually going on, and it allows for much more appreciation of what's actually happening—when I'm not trying to twist the experience to meet some idea I have of how good it ought to feel, how it ought to be, how it should make me happy for good.

The Buddha said at one point that he teaches one thing only: dukkha and the ending of dukkha. This beginning to see on a more subtle level the unsatisfactory parts of our experience serves as a way to wake us up. It's like we begin to really pay attention. We begin to come back into the present moment. And when we're paying attention and alive and present, that's when we open to the truth of who we are—not when we're trying to twist our experience to meet some idea or expectation.

A real simple example from retreat, just from talking to a few people here: you might find that you sometimes go through the day always leaning into the next experience. You come to the sitting, you sit down, and within five minutes you've got this thought: "Forget this one, but I can't wait till I get to the walking." You get out to the walking, and after ten minutes it's like, "God, this is driving me crazy, but soon it'll be lunch." You get to lunch and it's okay, but it's not really quite doing it for you, so you think about your nap. And it just goes like that—leaning into the next thing, leaning into the next thing.

What's going on? That movement in itself is quite unsatisfying. It's really quite a suffering experience to always be waiting for the next thing because this one isn't doing it. That suffering in itself can wake us up. Come back. What's going on right now?

You'll almost always see that when we bring our full attentive being into this moment, there will be something unpleasant happening right now. I don't mean every moment there's something unpleasant. I mean when you find yourself leaning into and wanting the experience to be different, and you come back, there's almost always something unpleasant. Maybe something just really mildly unpleasant.

A slight unpleasant sensation in the knee, a little bit of boredom, a little bit of restlessness going unrecognized. Somehow the sitting just isn't meeting our expectations of what we want to be happening. And our conditioning is so strong to avoid, to deny the unpleasant, that when we're not aware of tuning into that, we just immediately start leaning into wanting the experience to be different, looking forward to the next thing.

When we look at it, the suffering that comes about from this moving out of our present moment's experience is often so much stronger than if we just opened into the fact of restlessness. Okay, there's restlessness. It's unpleasant. And that's okay. It's not such a big deal.

So we see in looking at an experience, just a simple experience like this, through bringing attention and mindfulness to the unpleasantness, we see in operation the second truth: that the cause of the real suffering in that experience isn't the unpleasant twinge in the knee or the restlessness per se. It's the craving—this leaning forward, wanting the experience to be different, to be better, looking for something to always be pleasant, as if that's going to bring us happiness.

This movement of craving is the real suffering. It's the real blinding factor in our experience. It's born of denial of unsatisfactory or unpleasant experience, born of denial of the fact that things change, that everything changes. By themselves, neither pleasure nor pain enlighten. Only understanding does.

So can we bring our mindful attention to this movement of craving in order to come to understand it, to come to be free of this misperception that happiness will come about through craving?

When we talk about craving or desire, I want to clarify a language thing. In Pali, the language that these Buddhist texts are written in, there are three different words that in English tend to all be translated as desire. What I'm talking about, this movement of craving, is a word that literally translates into English more as *thirst*. It's like when you're really just thirsting for something—for sense experience, for an idea, for a pleasant sensation, for anything. Just this craving that pulls you out of yourself.

There's also the desire that simply knows you're hungry and you need to eat, that you're sleepy and you need to sleep—just taking care of the basic facts of our existence without this thirsting in the mind. That's not what we're talking about. And there's also a type that's translated as desire that's really the desire for freedom, for understanding—perhaps what brings us to this practice, to our spiritual path. And that can actually be quite helpful.

So in talking about craving as the cause of suffering, I'm talking about this energy, this thirsting for experience, for things to be different.

How can we explore it? How does craving arise in a moment? Because as with any experience, it's something that arises due to conditions. It lasts. It passes away. It's not permanent. It's not something always lurking in our experience. It comes and goes. And we can come to understand that.

In all of our field of experience, there are only six possible types of sense objects. Six types of things to crave. It really reduces it to a minimum when we look at it this way. There are sight objects, sounds, tastes, smells, touch or sensory experience, and mental experience. And that's it. Everything else is just ramifications of that, which we prettify and make more complex.

These different sense experiences are arising and passing as we sit, as we walk, as we move through the day—coming and going quite rapidly as we begin to notice. When there's an object, a sense object, for example a sight, that comes together with a sense organ like the eye, and there's consciousness of that called sight consciousness, that's what we call contact—that moment of those three coming together. In that moment of contact, a feeling arises. It's either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

Say there's a smell and it's pleasant. From that pleasantness, craving can quite naturally arise—just this movement towards that pleasantness. With mindfulness, we can be quite aware of this whole process, seeing it clearly, and it doesn't really go any further. There's not a lot of proliferation about it. It's no big deal. It's not a lot of suffering. It doesn't really take us away from this moment.

But when we're not aware of it, and it happens quite quickly, the craving strengthens. Now there's a smell, it's pleasant, you start thinking about how hungry you are, you imagine pancakes, you start thinking about what you'd like to have for lunch, you start thinking about your ideal breakfast. It gets really complicated. The craving and all the thoughts and associations start proliferating, and you end up in this really solid fixation on something. Suddenly the present experience—just sitting and being with the breath, which a minute ago was very peaceful and calm—is not okay. It's really unsatisfying.

Yet what is interesting is that when we don't really inquire into this process, we tend to take it for granted,

There's something about this craving—for the pancakes, for example—that when we don't look at it, somehow there's something we kind of like about it. Have you ever noticed that?

The Buddha, in describing this truth of craving, says at one point that this craving is accompanied with delight, finding pleasure or satisfaction now here, now there. Somehow, when unexamined, we kind of like to crave. We think it's pleasant somehow, and so we don't recognize the danger of what's actually happening. And what's actually happening is that the craving is blinding us to the truth of this moment.

For example, that craving for food, the extended food fantasy—it seems kind of pleasant. I know so many times we're sitting and it's really hard to pull back from a fantasy because it feels nice. We think it's really enjoyable. But what's the effect? Pay attention to what the effect is when something finally does snap us out of it. We wake up and here we are, still sitting here. "Oh no, fifteen more minutes to go." It's unpleasant. We're much more out of touch. The breath seems really dull. Our sensations are hard to get in touch with. We're much more discontented than ever.

We go to lunch, and instead of blueberry pancakes, there's lentils and steamed vegetables—which we normally love. But because we had something else in mind, we're really disgruntled and dissatisfied with what's actually there. Much more out of touch, unable to appreciate what's actually happening in this moment.

This is what craving does. It distorts our perception—our perception of what is craved and of everything else. There's a saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. Craving distorts our perception. We can't appreciate what's really happening.

So our mindfulness practice is not to condemn craving or ourselves, not to judge, but to begin to see this process clearly, to begin to understand it, and through understanding to come to liberation from it. Krishnamurti said, "Unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable."

So let's investigate together for a moment. What is craving? How do we actually experience this movement of craving, of grasping?

We're sitting, for example, with the breath. Experience after experience arises. We note it, and it passes. There's the breath. There's hearing. We note it. There's a sensation. We note it. It diminishes. There's a sound. We note it. It diminishes. No big deal.

Then suddenly, one experience is sort of isolated and grasped onto. This one is it. This one is really important. For instance, the sound. What does it feel like just in that moment, this movement of craving?

I personally experience it almost as a physical sensation, as if somewhere inside there's a movement of leaning forward and tightening, grabbing onto that sound. It feels unpleasant, and I feel unbalanced. Whereas before there was a calm, clear seeing, suddenly the inner experience feels unbalanced.

And then comes a stronger identification with the wanting—all this proliferation, these constructions, explanations, stronger desires, self-image, judgment. Everything gets stronger and more complicated and much more unpleasant.

So, for example, there's a sound, a movement of craving, really grasping onto it. "Oh, that's a bird outside. That's so beautiful. I'd love to go outside and see that bird." And it just gets stronger, and pretty soon it's really hard to sit still. The whole sense of the hall is dark, it's dank in here, it's really depressing, it's so beautiful and spacious outside.

It's really strange to be in such a beautiful environment and just be sitting here inside in the dark. I should go out and appreciate the bird. Oh, what's the matter with me? I came here to meditate and I'm just using this as an excuse. And it gets into self-judgment—a really solid sense of me and other. It's a lot of suffering.

If at some point we actually leap up and run out of here, ostensibly to go see the bird, if you're paying attention, you'll see we're really leaping out so that the feeling of craving will come to an end. Because it's so unpleasant, we act on the craving basically so we don't have to feel the experience of craving itself. That's what happens when we get the object we're craving—to end that uncomfortable state.

So notice when this experience of craving comes up. It probably will come up sometime before the rest of the night is over. Our perception is distorted. Our mind is unbalanced, kind of wavering, unsteady. We can't really see what's clearly happening.

I'll give an example. The other day I was with a friend and craving got triggered. Someone mentioned the words "chocolate milkshake." I had been perfectly happy the moment before, peacefully sitting in the sun. But someone said "chocolate milkshake" and then mentioned a place to go get them. I know this isn't fair to mention to you as yogis, so I'll just say the ending now—the place was closed and we never got it. So you've got nothing to envy.

Craving got established and we sat around talking for fifteen more minutes. I was getting more and more uncomfortable. I was no longer happy sitting there. I had to get out and go get a chocolate milkshake. So that movement of unpleasantness drove me and my friend into the car.

We're driving. The place is closed. Real disappointment. We decide to go down the whole strip of Yucca Valley looking. This is how craving distorts our perception—you know how when you really want something, you twist around what you see until it fits what you're wanting, even though that's not what's there at all? So we're driving and my friend is trying to read all the signs. He goes, "Oh look, Yogurt Cup! Yogurt Cup!" I looked over. It said "Urgent Care." It was a little hospital. This is what happens.

So we distort our perceptions. We can't appreciate what's in the moment—which is, I was quite happily appreciating sitting in the sun until this craving arose. When we're with a strong craving and not mindful of it, which clearly I wasn't, we don't have clear judgment. We're driven to end the craving. Do anything to get rid of this feeling. Hop in the car and drive around all day just to not have to feel craving.

A third way that the movement of craving distorts our experience is that again, it takes us out of what is true, out of being able to be present in the moment. It becomes impossible to know and experience our basic interconnectedness, the ultimate unity, the perfection of what is in this moment. Because when one thing is isolated and grasped onto, there's an immediate separation of that from everything else—of me and what I want out there to make me happy. You become lost in the experience of duality.

Again, a simple retreat example. I know James mentioned the other morning this phenomenon of vipassana romance—someone you know nothing about, that you're just incredibly drawn to, the object of a lot of craving in the mind. So imagine you're doing walking meditation very carefully, pretty calm, very peaceful, feeling the sensations, just very present. And suddenly there's a sight. We recognize that sight as the object of our vipassana romance, and strong craving arises, leading to a whole series of thoughts. We're not mindful of it, obviously. The craving gets stronger, culminates in this really strong grasping. I need to go talk to that person. How am I ever going to make it through the rest of the retreat?

In that moment, if you were just to stop and notice what was happening—how aware are you? How connected are you with the actuality of your experience? How aware are you of others, of the surroundings, of the beauty of the desert, the wind on your face?

The mind becomes locked onto its object, and there arises a strong sense of separation—"I need that." In this state, there is no peace. There is no ability to appreciate what's actually present. And in fact, this strong separation extends to everything else, because other people simply become objects standing in the way of gratifying our craving, rather than beings with whom we share a basic unity.

Contrast this experience, which is actually quite unpleasant and deeply separating, with the same experience of walking when the mind is quiet—in touch with the sensations of lifting, moving, placing, occasionally noting hearing, the wind on your face. No big deal. Nothing special going on. But often in such moments, we notice times when we feel so exquisitely alive, when perception becomes really quite clear. Some walking meditations for me have been the happiest moments of my life. And what was happening? Nothing special, except that the mind was at peace. There was no grasping, no aversion—just the ability to be totally present with what is, with a real clarity of perception. We can only know and appreciate what's true, what's present, when the mind is not clouded by grasping.

This completeness in the moment, this taste of non-grasping, becomes less rare as we continue to practice, as we continue to wake up and bring our mindfulness, our awareness, to what's happening right now, no matter what that is. Through this power of mindfulness, this waking up, the underlying tendency of the mind to grasp at the pleasant begins to weaken, to fade.

As you sit, as you walk, it may not seem like much when a moment of craving arises—say, wanting a sitting to be a certain way—and you become really mindful of that. You note the craving, and it weakens, dissipates. Nothing really happens; it goes away. And again, you're calm and present in the moment. It doesn't feel like any big deal, because we're kind of looking for big lights to go off. But actually, this is a big deal. Because in this moment, there is a movement out of blindness and distortion into clarity and freedom. This is really what our practice is all about.

There is no lasting sense pleasure, opinion, view, no solid thing that is "I" that is going to make us lastingly happy. As long as we're looking for that, so long will we be lost in craving, cycling around and around. But the more we're able to open to and acknowledge whatever is here in this moment—pleasant, unpleasant, painful, beautiful—the more we can see the movement of craving and not need to act on it, not get lost in all the proliferation. We come back and simply open to what's true here and now, and the more our potential for living in the truth of who we really are becomes activated.

Suzuki Roshi once said that renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world, but in accepting that they go away. With that acceptance comes the potential for great appreciation, joy, and compassion—appreciation of what's beautiful, and the understanding that it's really okay that things go away. We know that's not the true nature of peace, the true nature of who we are.

One of the helpful qualities of retreat—and this is really exciting—is that we get to experience this process of craving and grasping without being so driven by it. In our lives, as I said, the experience is so unpleasant that we just jump to act on the craving, to get rid of feeling it. And in most cases, there are so many potential things to crave—sense objects, mind objects, views and opinions—that we can keep moving from one to the other. This kind of hides the fact that the real suffering is coming from this very process of chasing after something to make us happy.

Here on retreat, we've really limited all of that. The cravings will still come up. Maybe instead of for a spa, it's for two apples at tea time. But it's the same process. Because we've so limited activities, you're sitting here and craving comes up, and there's not really too much you can do about it except sit and come back and feel what it feels like—the experience of craving, of grasping. It's not pleasant, and that's a lot of the reason we think it's so hard to be here. We're sitting here lost in craving or aversion, wanting things to be different.

But it's a rare opportunity. When we can just sit, become mindful of the experience of craving, experience that it's unpleasant or unbalanced—and it's okay. We don't have to be driven to act every time a movement of craving arises in our experience. We don't have to keep running just to avoid the experience of craving. We sit here, we feel it, and then we see it comes up and it just kind of plops down. It's no big deal. It's not so fearful. This is really what can allow us to become free of this cycle of craving and fear. It can allow us to open to the truth of the moment.

So really, all craving, all grasping is bondage. It's bondage because it distorts our perception and because it blinds us to what is true. Craving distracts us from the true nature of who we are. We get lost in trying to fulfill the objects of craving, and we get taken away from the ability to open to the truth of who we are, which is always here and now. When we're craving, we're always looking somewhere else.

But through our mindfulness, through this power of simply bringing our full non-judging, non-violent attention to what's happening here and now, the possibility of understanding this process arises—and so understanding who we are becomes possible. Through understanding, it is possible for this seemingly endless search for gratification to come to an end. Right now, in this moment. Not ten years down the road, but right in this moment of clear seeing.

I want to end with two quotations. The first is from Nisargadatta Maharaj:

Nothing physical or mental can give you freedom. You are free once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you.

So that's what our practice is about—seeing and understanding.

The second is from Thich Nhat Hanh:

Meditation is not evasion. It is a serene encounter with reality.

That's what we're doing: serenely encountering reality with our mindfulness in order to understand who we are.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 240

Right Intention

Carol Wilson · 53 min

In this comprehensive talk, Carol Wilson examines right intention (sammā saṅkappa), the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, exploring how it serves as the essential bridge between right view and ethical action. Building on Joseph Goldstein's teaching about the luminous nature of mind and the kilesas (defilements) as visitors, Wilson presents right intention as a powerful method for working with greed, hatred, and delusion alongside mindfulness practice.

Wilson illuminates three levels of working with right intention: the precise aiming of attention in each noting moment, understanding thoughts as manifestations of underlying intentions, and cultivating wholesome attitudes toward life situations. She explains the threefold right intention—renunciation (nekkhamma), goodwill (mettā), and harmlessness (karuṇā)—as direct antidotes to greed and aversion. Drawing from her experience as a nun in Thailand, she describes the profound joy and fearlessness that arise from simplicity and letting go.

The talk offers practical reflections for inclining the mind toward wholesomeness: contemplating the inherent unsatisfactoriness of desire, appreciating the beauty of renunciation, and remaining awake to the Dhamma teachings present in everyday experience. Wilson emphasizes that difficult experiences are not obstacles but stepping stones for growth. Through the story of Milarepa meeting his demons with compassion, she illustrates how we can greet even our deepest challenges with kindness. The teaching concludes with the Dalai Lama's reminder that inner peace, cultivated through compassion and understanding, is essential not only for personal happiness but for human survival.

Joseph spoke last night about the nature of mind, of consciousness, remembering how our pure nature is clear, luminous, and spacious, and how the kilesas—greed, hatred, and delusion—are simply visitors that come and stay a long time and maybe go away.

As we know, what our practice is doing, our mindfulness practice, is allowing us to see the true nature of our mind more clearly, as well as the true nature of the defilements. A deep understanding of reality, which is what mindfulness is helping us to develop, is what uproots these kilesas altogether. Moments of mindfulness, moment after moment, recondition the mind so that the power of these kilesas is weakened.

Tonight I want to speak about another way of working with these strong roots of defilement—greed, hatred, and delusion—in conjunction with mindfulness. It really is a part of mindfulness, but it also includes a little reflection. And that's working with the concept or idea of right intention.

Right intention is the second path factor of the Eightfold Noble Path. The first part of the path is right view, right understanding. It's first because obviously if we didn't have at least some little bit of right understanding, there would be no impetus to step onto the path at all, and none of us would be here. Right intention is second. The third, fourth, and fifth parts of the Eightfold Path are right speech, right action, and right livelihood. So you can see that this factor of right intention is the crucial link between how we understand the world—right view—and how we then act from that understanding. The intention is what informs the action.

There are various translations of this path factor of right intention, just to give you a feeling for what it is. Right intention is often called right thought, sometimes right attitude, sometimes even right aspiration. In some way, it's a directing of mind, the application of the mind that's necessary in order to act. As has been said here often before, thought is the forerunner of all action. This is right intention, right thought.

We work with this on different levels of experience, different levels of application. There's application of right intention in just one single moment of noting. There's working with it on the level of seeing our thoughts, understanding the thoughts as the manifestation of the intention that's in the mind. And there's an even broader way of understanding it as right attitude—how we apply our attitude to situations that arise in our daily life. What's our intention? What's our attitude toward daily life situations?

I want to speak mostly about the second level, but just briefly about the first: in one noting moment, this path factor of right intention is what we've been calling right aim. That quality of aiming the attention directly at whatever arises in the moment. That willingness to aim and connect precisely with whatever it is that's arising without hesitating, without choosing, without saying maybe this, maybe that, without going to the ones we like and avoiding the things that we don't like. It's this precise moving of the mind to what's happening, but with constancy, without hesitation, the same energy, no matter what's coming up.

You can see how this quality that we develop in moment after moment of noting and observing can have broad applications to how we meet situations in the rest of our life. Can we meet whatever situation comes up in our life with that same constancy, that same willingness to be open and give our full attention of mind to what's happening, simply because it's arising, without first deciding whether we like it, whether we wish it

was something else? This is the broader application of right attitude. It's a willingness to greet all situations in life as practice, a willingness to learn from whatever is arising. It really changes our life when we work in this way.

Now, this middle level of working with right intention, with right thought: as I said, it's like the aim, the inclination of the mind. And this inclination, this thought, is the forerunner of all action. The intention is formed from our understanding. Obviously, a mind without understanding, or with what we would call wrong view—the thoughts that lead to that person's actions and speech are thoughts that are manifestations of greed and hatred and confusion. They lead to confused and painful actions. It leads to the state of the world that we're living in.

Just the other night, a couple of us were watching the news on TV. It was kind of scary. It was going on and on about the situation in the Middle East. There's not a war yet, but all these countries, including us, are moving hundreds of thousands of armies and tanks and airplanes and military supplies and weapons.

And there's all this rhetoric being thrown around. We were just watching it, and it's a total manifestation of insanity. You could really feel a sense of the kilesas running wild in the world. Every person they had on speaking, the different leaders—it was just amazing. But this wasn't just a movie. This is what's happening in the world.

When there's not a clear understanding to direct our intentions, the intentions arise from confusion and greed and hostility. And it's scary. In our own little way, sometimes we're in the same boat. Not all the time, because we really have developed quite a lot of understanding, but sometimes. For example, the fan wars that Joseph was talking about last night, where two people came to blows over the fan being off or on. The window wars we have here, and the light wars. This happens every year—it isn't something unusual.

In those moments, our understanding isn't clear, and the forces of greed or confusion and anger are what form our intentions and actions. As someone said to me in an interview, "This is how world wars start." And it is. It's a direct correlation.

And the reverse is also true. As our understanding deepens and changes, this is reflected in a change in our intentions. Our intentions spring much more from non-greed, from non-hatred, from clarity. And thus, again, there's a change in our speech and actions. So too here—there might be wars about the windows, but there are also so many loving and kind and generous thoughts and speech and actions going on here, in each

one of you at different times. It's very important to be aware of this, to acknowledge it as well. This is a manifestation of right intention. It's a way we can see that our understanding is changing and deepening, through the way we're manifesting in action.

Full liberation, liberating understanding, is said to uproot these tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion altogether—meaning there wouldn't even be any more upcropping in thoughts of greed or anger or confusion. It would be quite a nice way to live.

Our mindfulness practice is what works with us on this level. The Buddha, it seems to me, was an eminently practical person, and he recognized that we can work in other ways as well. Working with the intention of mind, we can work quite consciously at times to redirect it. Of course, without mindfulness, we wouldn't even be able to know what the intention is, much less redirect it, so the two are working quite together.

Greed, hatred, and delusion—those forces surface in the form of thought. Thoughts of wanting, thoughts of dislike, thoughts of anger, thoughts of confusion or boredom. The mindfulness, the simple, bare, powerful mindfulness of that thought and the underlying force, is a real purifying power. It's what really weakens that tendency. In that moment of mindfulness, that tendency is actually not present.

But sometimes—and I find especially when it's not just every single greedy thought that comes up, but when you're kind of on a roll and there's an ongoing spate of thoughts that you recognize as greedy or aversive—sometimes it's helpful to work on the level of the thoughts and intention themselves when they're persistent. This works so that when we're having persistent thoughts driven by a kilesa, we can actively cultivate the wholesome counterpart. We can cultivate right intention. We're not really just helpless victims of whatever condition happens to arise.

In working with this, there's what's spoken of as threefold right intention. This deals especially with the unskillful roots of greed and aversion. These can be weakened, really counteracted, through cultivating threefold right intention. It's said that delusion, the unskillful root of delusion, is much more counteracted through understanding, which is what we're working on overall anyway. Actually, they all work together. But working specifically with this threefold right intention counteracts greed and aversion strongly.

So the first is the right intention of non-greed or renunciation, which obviously is the counterpart to greed. The second is the intention of goodwill or mettā, which counteracts ill will, anger, and aversion. And the third is the intention of harmlessness or compassion.

Again, a form of aversion, but more specifically counteracting the intentions of cruelty, harmfulness, or harmful thoughts.

This is based on a very practical principle. It's a kind of thought substitution, based on the principle that these opposing intentions cannot coexist in a single mind moment. The Buddha often said that whatever one reflects upon frequently, whatever we let the mind dwell upon frequently, that becomes what the mind more naturally inclines towards. It's pretty basic.

As we develop subtlety in our mindfulness and self-knowledge, we discover that it's often possible to choose where the mind dwells—that we do have a choice when we work with resolution. We don't need to be enslaved by these ingrained habits of mind, simply responding with aversion if we're an aversive type, or responding with greed if we're a greedy type. If we're committed simply to look, to give our attention, and to be willing to bring up the energy to counteract, to work with right intention.

It's true that the force of habit is very strong. This is nothing new. The more we sit, the more we really get to know this on a deep level. That's what we're seeing here—that our mind might have a tendency to move with delusion, to move with aversion, to move with greed.

I read this little comic I got off a friend's refrigerator. It's called "What Is Your Philosophical Outlook?"—six little scenarios, I call it a right attitude quiz. Number one: "You wander alone down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle, solitary yet surrounded," you think—and this is multiple choice. These people are: A, my brothers, my sisters. B, perverts, probably pickaxe murderers. C, I sure could go for a chili dog.

Two: "Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse..." A, I know what he feels. He feels hope. He feels fear. B, why is that pervert looking at me? C, maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

Then it goes on, further down: "Construction workers are tearing the street to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of..." A, the path of life. B, the highway to hell. C, rocky road, my favorite flavor. Three basic types.

The habits of mind are strong. When we're not paying attention, that's what pops out. And when we don't notice that, that's how we act. But with our mindfulness, we're seeing this habitual inclination of mind, and with resolution, with a willingness to work with it, we can greet each moment as a choice, as a chance to learn, to grow, to come out of the dullness of habit.

I'm not talking about a sudden expectation of perfection—"I'm going to pay attention and from now on I'm never going to react from greed." But merely that we can have a choice in this one moment, that in this one moment there's the possibility of redirecting our intention.

So what are some ways to work with right intention, with redirecting the inclination of our mind?

First, intention or thought guided by non-greed or renunciation. Obviously this is to counteract the inclination, the intention of greed. Fred spoke quite beautifully the other night of renunciation, so I don't feel I need to describe it at length. But there is something that can help the mind incline towards non-greed.

In addition to our mindfulness practice, there are three reflections arising out of our close examination and investigation of our mind-body process—three reflections that can be very helpful in inclining the mind to non-greed, to renunciation. I don't mean that every single time you notice a thought of greed you should start this whole period of reflection, because really, just stay with noting, stay with the mindfulness. But in times when you're feeling really caught, really caught up in it or overwhelmed, this can sometimes be helpful.

The first reflection is to reflect on our growing understanding of the unsatisfactoriness inherent in desire. Nothing new. But the more we practice, the deeper this understanding comes into our bones, really, into ourselves.

which is what being on retreat really is. It's a huge form of renunciation. This outer renunciation, I find, is a tremendous help in that it lets us sift through the barrage of desirable experiences that we have in our normal life and allows us to start to really experience more directly the nature of desire. When we're closer to desire, we start to really grasp the futility of it. Being on retreat, the outer renunciation actually helps us experience in ourselves the unsatisfactoriness of desire, which in turn leads quite naturally to a stronger sense of renunciation.

Two quotations that I love about the painfulness of desire. One is from Isaac Singer. He says, "Hell is made up of yearnings. The wicked don't roast on beds of nails. They sit on comfortable chairs and are tortured with desire." And then this is from Bashō: "Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto." I love that one. Just the sense of it. Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto. It's hopeless. Desire breeds more desire. It's almost like desire for the sake of desire when we're not paying attention. And it keeps us in bondage.

Sayadaw U Pandita says that pursuing sense pleasures is a form of self-oppression. It's so painful and so insatiable. The more we see this, the more we experience the suffering of it, the more we can come to know, as Nisargadatta says, "Nothing physical or mental can give you freedom. You are free once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you." Chains of desire. Simply, our practice is allowing us to see this on deeper and deeper levels.

Sometimes reflecting on this when we're feeling lost in desire can help the mind naturally incline towards renunciation. By renunciation, I don't necessarily mean forced giving up of outer things, but a turning away from the craving, a turning away from the desire for its gratification. As Suzuki Roshi said, "Renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of the world but in accepting that they go away." When we really accept that they go away, we really stop wanting them. It just naturally leads to more of a sense of simplicity, both inner and outer.

So that's the first reflection that helps with inclining the mind towards renunciation, non-greed. Another reflection is just the reverse—not on the painfulness of desire, but on the benefits or the beauty of non-greed, of renunciation. We've all had moments of that here.

My strongest experience of it was when I was a nun in Thailand, after the aversive period I talked about before. When I had worked through that and settled into the experience as it was, it was an incredibly simple life. The conditions were no better. But the simplicity, internal and external—there was really nowhere to go. You get up, you take a wash, you go get your meal, you wash your dishes, you come back, you sweep out the ants, you sit, you take a walk, you sit. There's nothing really to look forward to. There's nowhere else to go. There's nothing very upsetting going on, apart from one's mind.

Really, the last few months of that was a period of such joy and peacefulness, springing out of the simplicity, both inner and outer. One of the most beautiful times of my life. It was not intense or ecstatic. There was nothing whatever to show for it, nothing to demonstrate what a better kind of person I was. But really seeing from that experience that where desire and needing and having things and wanting to get more things—whether material things or attainments or whatever—desire breeds fear and sorrow. The simplicity of letting go of that brings a real fearlessness and a joy.

Fearlessness because what is there to fear losing? There's nothing that one needs to hold on to, so there's nothing really to fear. And the joy, it seems to me, comes from this sense of nothing to hold on to and no fear—a real openness of mind and heart simply to what's there in the moment. The mind's not reaching out. Meal's over, that's it for the

day. There's nothing to reach out to. There's nothing exciting going to happen. There's no diversion to go look for. And so the mind doesn't reach for it, and is really open and fully present in whatever's going on.

And there's not even a sense of mundane or not mundane—sitting or brushing your teeth or taking a walk, whatever. Each is equally important. One is equally open to it. It was really quite a beautiful experience and a powerful lesson for me in the joy of renunciation. And again, the renunciation is that the mind had let go of wanting. Several months earlier, in the same situation, there was not the joy of renunciation because the mind was wanting like crazy. So it's not just the outer circumstances.

On retreat here, I know we all have moments—more than just moments—of the same experience of the joy and the peacefulness of just being here with what is, and not wanting or needing anything that is not present in this moment. The power and the beauty of renunciation, of simplicity.

It seems to me that practice is just a continual deepening in letting go, in renunciation. Every time I sit a long retreat, I feel like a little more of Carol gets let go of. Enlightenment is like the ultimate relinquishment. We don't get something. It doesn't make us a more spectacular person—more ordinary, more nothing, you know. It's the ultimate giving up.

A third reflection that personally has been helpful for me in strengthening both of the other two—the joy of renunciation and the pain of desire—and just in general waking me up to pay attention, is simply our willingness to be awake and present with what's going on in the world around us. In other words, it's our sense of commitment, a sense of commitment to waking up.

When we have that sense of commitment to wake up and pay attention, there are messages. Everything in the world speaks to us, can inspire us, can reawaken our understanding. As if we're being taught the Dharma constantly by whatever we come in contact with. You can see the Four Noble Truths at every turn. In the little chickadees that come and sit in your hand. And the whole story that goes on around deer hunting season—both sides of it. In the weather changing.

There's something from Thich Nhat Hanh, a little short piece saying this: anything can help you wake up. "When I'm alone and a bird calls me, I return to myself. I breathe and I smile. And sometimes it calls me once more. I smile and I say to the bird, I hear already."

Not only sounds, but sights can remind you to return to your true self. In the morning when you open your window and see the light streaming in, you can recognize it as the voice of the Dharma. That is why people who are awake see the manifestation of the Dharma in everything. A pebble, a bamboo tree, the cry of a baby—anything can be the voice of the Dharma calling. So we should be able to practice like that.

When we practice like that, anything wakes us up to seeing the truth. And then it's quite easy to work with our intentions of mind. The mind quite naturally inclines towards non-greed. It's not a struggle.

So that's the first right intention: intentions of renunciation, non-greed. The second is intentions of goodwill—really mettā—counteracting ill will or aversion. This is thought that's guided by mettā. Or in a broader context, openness to whatever circumstance presents itself. Just complete openness.

One way we have of cultivating this, which we've been doing through the whole retreat, is the practice of mettā itself. It's a very deliberate cultivation of this right intention of mind. It's a very deliberate sitting down and calling up intentions of loving-kindness to ourselves and to all other beings—really working with, transforming our intentions of anger and ill will. We've all worked with that a lot this retreat.

Another way that I find helpful is just to look at, to understand our intentions and to work with them—to look at how we relate to what is arising, back just on this moment-to-moment level of experience. Not even thinking of the thoughts, but seeing what is our attitude in one noting moment to what is arising. Realizing that this attitude is going to be our attitude to larger situations in life as well. I don't mean to imply we always have the same attitude, but: Are we open, willing to learn from whatever's coming up?

Whether it's anger or pain or boredom, or do we tend to meet it with resentment, with ill will or self-pity or blame? All of these ways that we can be with something in the moment while simultaneously pushing it away, resisting, blaming ourselves—all of this is a manifestation of the intention of aversion, the intention of ill will.

We can counteract it with metta. Not necessarily thinking thoughts of metta for all beings, but with that attitude of metta, of loving-kindness, of acceptance for just this one arising experience, whatever it is.

Thich Nhat Hanh again, taking anger as an example, though it could be anything—the experience of anger and how to generate this sense of goodwill towards anger when it's arising in our practice: "I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with nonviolence. We do not need to consider anger, hatred, or any

other experience as enemies we have to fight to destroy. Because that would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself."

So can we bring metta, intentions of goodwill, to whatever experience is arising in this moment? Knowing that difficult experiences, difficult situations, are not in the way. I know we've said this a lot before. It's so hard for us to believe it. They're not in the way—they're stepping stones. They're opportunities for growth and self-understanding. We need them. Not only are they not in the way, but we need them. They're a vital part of practice.

You know the story about Gurdjieff, who had a community in France—a large group of people who lived there and paid to live there and all worked together. There was one older, crotchety man who lived there and just drove everybody crazy. He was nasty and ill-tempered and very unpleasant to be around. And people responded in kind, of course. Eventually he left. I guess it just got too unpleasant for him, the way people were treating him. Gurdjieff went after him and begged him to come back, and in the end agreed to pay him to come back. When he showed up again, everybody said, "What is he doing here? Why did you go and get him?" And Gurdjieff said, "We need him. He's a very important part of this community. We need him to grow."

We all need what's going on, much as we might wish it were otherwise. So can we bring an attitude, an inclination of mind, of metta, of goodwill to whatever it is that's arising in our experience? Can we meet our life with this openness of heart? In that way, whatever is happening becomes the vehicle for growth and self-transformation.

This is my favorite clipping of what's possible when we're working with meeting whatever arises in the moment with this attitude of openness of heart. It's about a woman who was seventeen and clinically depressed when she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic and placed in a state mental hospital. She remained inside for another seventeen years. Now, fittingly for a woman whose antidotes to adversity are perseverance and forgiveness, she's returned as a full-time administrator at the same hospital.

She says, "I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive. If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger." She says it wasn't deliberate—she shows not a trace of resentment or anger over her misdiagnosis and seventeen-year hospitalization. "It wasn't deliberate on the part of the doctors in the hospital. Not much was known about panic disorders back then. A person who had panic disorders was identified as a little bit crazy."

Her recovery was painful and gradual as she overcame a catatonic despair that often left her unable to eat or move. She contemplated suicide more than once and went through immense suffering even aside from the hospitalization—a ten-year bout with cancer, the death of her husband whom she married when she got out, the death of her brother. And still she spends her life trying to help other people. She says, "Everybody has problems. Life is not trouble-free. I try to help people see that. The mental health issue is only one aspect of suffering."

There are powerful possibilities for all of us when we cultivate the intention of goodwill, of openness, of forgiveness. This woman wasn't stuck. It was a long, painful, difficult process for her, and probably for us as well. We're not stuck either. It doesn't mean we're going to suddenly say, "Okay, fine," and forgive every horrible thing that's happened, suddenly be free of anger. For all of us, it's a gradual process.

But our willingness to redirect our inclination of mind, our willingness to be open to the situation and experience goodwill—it won't always be possible, but that willingness opens up to us a whole different way of being, a whole other possibility of how we can relate to our life, how we can live. So we become, as Don Juan talks about, a warrior who sees everything as a challenge, while an ordinary person sees everything as a blessing or a curse.

Cultivating intentions of goodwill, of metta, of openness—simple openness and acceptance of whatever might be arising as our path at this moment. And that really leads into the third aspect, which is closely linked: intentions of non-harming.

In fact, often our openness to the situation and our working with understanding and forgiveness will lead us into compassionate action. Intention of non-harming, counteracting thoughts and intentions of cruelty or harmful thoughts, is basically thought guided by compassion. Again, we've been working with that in a very directed and formal way when we work with compassion meditation, very actively wishing that all beings, or any one specific person, may be free of their suffering.

Really it's the contemplation of how all of us, all beings, wish to be free from suffering, and yet all of us, all beings, still suffer. Often that contemplation alone is enough to arouse these intentions of non-harming, of compassion. We don't have to go far to observe this desire to be free from suffering and the experience of suffering nevertheless.

I want to talk a little about how intentions of compassion can start right here, right where you're sitting, with compassion for yourself, with compassion for what you are experiencing in any particular moment. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "If you cannot be compassionate towards yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others."

What we're doing here, this practice, the work, the hard work that you've all been doing—it's incredibly difficult. As Stephen Levine writes, "We experience many forms of hell as we watch the mind and body." And we do, all of us here. We're meeting our demons over and over, whatever our particular demons might be, whether it's anger, fear, loneliness, boredom, lust, sleepiness, impatience, resistance—the whole list. It's really hard and it's really painful to meet these demons over and over, whether we judge them as petty or whether there's some grand grief of the universe. It doesn't matter.

Can we work to cultivate the intention of compassion toward this suffering, toward ourselves in this experience? We can notice how the intention of our mind expresses itself, whether it's the intention of compassion or the intention of harmfulness. Ways we can notice it before it's even a clear thought is sometimes just in the tone of the note, the tone of the noticing. Noticing anger with that real harshness: "Boredom." "Resistance." "Grief again." "Boredom." You're all quite familiar with this. Just noticing the tone of the note—it's manifesting from an intention definitely not of compassion toward the experience.

And then, as a friend was talking about in an interview, we can go on to notice the tone of the running self-commentary. Maybe you don't have running self-commentary. I have running self-commentary that goes on when I'm sitting—the self-judgment that arises when we experience a painful state. Is this self-commentary compassionate? "Oh, you're really doing a good job. That must be really hard for you." Or is it, "You stupid jerk. You're angry again"? Just noticing this. When we experience these incredibly painful physical and mental states and then we blame ourselves for it—noticing this in the mind.

If we knew someone else were suffering in the same way that we are, would we treat anyone else so harshly? Often when I realize I'm caught in this sense of self-judgment, I'll pretend that the person next to me is going through all the stuff that I know I'm going through. Do I hate them for it? Really not. A really strong sense of compassion comes up. But when it's myself, the tone is just this running sense of hatefulness.

We can work with this really consciously when we become aware of it. We can deliberately cultivate the intention of compassion toward our experience, toward ourselves. Soften the tone of the note. It really makes a difference—from "Anger!" to "Anger..." It really changes things. Soften the running commentary. It can move from—I used to have a note I called "traffic cop." That was my running commentary: "Get back to the breath. Pay attention to that sensation. Get out of that thought."

And it was quite a common note—that inner traffic cop voice.

But it can change, you know. It can soften into something gentler: "It's okay. Okay, there's thinking happening. That's okay. Oh, you haven't been with the breath for a while. That's okay."

It really changes things. This shift in inner speech is the manifestation of the intention of compassion. It transforms the whole tone of our practice. And then we can learn to greet even our deepest demons with compassion for the suffering that's being engendered.

I love this story of Milarepa, the great Tibetan yogi. It's a beautiful personification of meeting our inner demons with compassion. This is from his years of retreat up in a cave—an outer personification of an inner process.

Mila's mind became blissful and he carried some wood back up to the cave. When he arrived there, he found in the cave seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some grinding tsampa, and some sat performing various magical tricks. As soon as he saw them, he became frightened. He meditated on his deity, uttered a subjugating mantra, performed a gaze, and aroused the deity's presence. He then meditated on compassion and friendliness, but was unable to pacify them.

He thought, "These might be the local deities of this place. Although I have been here for months and years, I have not praised them or given them any torma." So he sang a song of praise to that place. After the song, three of the demons who were performing magic went away, but Mila was unable to make the other four go away.

Realizing that the four demons were magical obstacles, he sang a song of confidence in his experience and view, ending it with: "It is wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time we should converse."

Three of the demons vanished like a rainbow. The remaining one performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, "Ooh, this one is vicious and very powerful." So he sang a song of the view, the pinnacle of realization, ending it with: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk about our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit."

And he prays: "Lord Vajradhara, whose essence is Akshobhya, grant your blessing so that this lowly one may have complete compassion."

Thus Mila sang. And with friendliness and compassion, without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and so vanished like a rainbow.

So can we place ourselves with great compassion in the mouths of our demons? With compassion for the demons and compassion for ourselves. No difference.

I think that's enough. I just want to end by saying that obviously working with cultivating these right intentions—intentions of renunciation, of mettā, of compassion—is an ongoing process. It's a lifetime practice. Our habits of mind are very well ingrained. But they're habits, and they can change. They're not our intrinsic nature.

And as long or as difficult a practice as it might seem, what else in our life is so worth doing? Is there anything more important to spend our life doing? Not only for ourselves, but more and more we see it's for the happiness and peace and well-being of the whole planet.

I want to close with this from the Dalai Lama:

"Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. An atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet. In order to create inner peace, what is most important is the practice of compassion and love, understanding and respect for human beings."

Developing such attitudes as love and compassion, patience and understanding between human beings is not merely a source of personal happiness, but has become a condition for human survival.

So let us sit together for a few minutes in silence.

CHAPTER 241

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson presents the Buddha's teaching on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna) as outlined in the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta. She begins with Ajahn Chah's insight that meditation is fundamentally about finding balance, explaining how cultivating awareness across all four foundations—body, feeling (vedanā), consciousness, and dhammas—creates harmony and completeness in practice.

Wilson explores each foundation with practical clarity. For the body, she discusses breath awareness, postures, and the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) as a way to directly experience materiality without identification. She emphasizes how contemplating sensations as elements—burning, twisting, throbbing—dissolves the solidity of "my pain" into impersonal, changing phenomena. The feeling foundation reveals how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral tones arise at the point of contact, and how mindfulness at this juncture can break the cycle of craving and suffering. The consciousness foundation addresses mental states and emotions, showing how awareness prevents identification with fleeting states. The fourth foundation covers mental objects including the five hindrances and seven factors of enlightenment.

Throughout, Wilson demonstrates how these foundations are deeply interrelated in actual practice, cycling naturally from sensation to feeling to mental state to recognition. She explains how this comprehensive awareness leads to direct, visceral understanding of anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and anattā (not-self), culminating in the Buddha's promise that the four foundations, repeatedly practiced, perfect clear vision and deliverance.

Ajahn Chah, the great Thai meditation master, once said that to calm the mind means to find the right balance. In many ways, our whole practice is about coming to balance. Really, every talk we give is about balance in some way or another.

One way of understanding balance is that when certain factors of mind—what we call the seven factors of enlightenment, qualities of mind—are in perfect balance, it allows the mind to open to the unconditioned. But I'm not going to talk about the seven factors tonight. What I'm going to talk about is what can bring our mind into this perfect balance, what can help to bring the seven factors of enlightenment into balance. And this is the development of what the Buddha called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

This is really a huge topic. It's laid out by the Buddha in the main discourse called the Mahasatipatthana Sutta, which is translated as the Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness. I want to give an incredibly brief overview of what is a vast subject, but I want to describe it especially in ways that relate to our practice as we're doing it here, because I find it very enlightening, very helpful. Really, it's a brilliant way that the Buddha had of laying out our whole field of practice—really the whole field of our life experience—in these four areas of mindfulness.

They're completely all-inclusive of any mind-body experience that we can have, whether we're in meditation or in our life. When we cultivate and develop a mindfulness, an awareness that covers all four of these foundations of mindfulness, our practice, our life, our understanding becomes quite harmonious, quite well balanced.

In working with Vipassana—so that we are working with all four, as opposed to Samatha where we're just focusing on one object—you find that actually these four fields are completely interrelated. When we're not arbitrarily fixing on one selected object, you find it's quite difficult not to pay attention to all four of these areas of mindfulness. And so we come to a harmony of being, a completeness of understanding, with nothing unduly emphasized, nothing left out.

So what are these four areas? The first one is called Contemplation of the Body in the Body. This repetition of "the body in the body" is repeated throughout the sutta, and I'll speak to that a little later.

Several different contemplations are offered by the Buddha for working with this foundation of mindfulness in the body. One is the breathing—paying attention to the sensations of breathing. And this is incredibly brief; each one of these things could be talks and talks. So, awareness of the breathing. Awareness of the bodily postures: walking, sitting, standing, lying down. Clear comprehension of our acts, of our movements, of our actions throughout the day. Again, we're developing all of this here—clear comprehension of what we're doing when we're eating, when we're dressing, when we're walking, when we're taking a shower, when we're falling asleep.

Then there are given nine cemetery contemplations, which I'm not going to go into here simply because it's not what we're doing here, but it's another way of giving attention to this foundation of the body.

Another aspect of giving attention to the body is contemplation on our material nature in the way of looking at it through the four elements. Now, this is a way of looking closely at our material experience, broken down into the most primary way we can

experience materiality. The four elements is a way of describing the building blocks of our material experience, but it's pointing to direct experience. It's not as conceptual as it sounds.

For example, there's the element of earth, experienced as stiffness, hardness or softness, solidity—earth element. It's stiff, it's hard, or it's soft. The air element is the sense of movement, of extension. Water element is the sense of cohesion, what holds things together, always present there. Fire element is the sense of temperature, of hotness or coldness. Also, and this is interesting, the sense of maturation. For example, the examples given are that as we grow old, that sense of maturation is like burning up—the fire element.

What I find very helpful about working with our physical experience in this way is that it really brings us into the direct experience. It helps us approach the experience of sensation in a way that the sensation doesn't seem so monolithic, so solid and forbidding. And it's much harder to identify with. So, for example, there's the pain in my knee—it's killing me, this practice is impossible, I'm impossible, forget it, it's horrible. And then that switches to: "Oh, the fire element."

It's burning. And it just takes this whole level of solidity and craziness away. It's a lot harder to identify with a burning, changing to twisting fire element than it is with "my pain in my knee."

As we begin to directly experience our material nature in terms of the elements, we find it's much harder to identify. It becomes much more impersonal. Also, we see the impermanence much more clearly, because when you're looking at a sensation in terms of temperature burning and suddenly it changes to throbbing, it's changed. A different element is predominant. It's a different sensation. The seeming solidity of our experience really begins to break up. Even one sensation changes from burning to twisting to throbbing to different points of intensity, back to burning again. But in being with this in terms of elements, there's this constant sense of arising and falling, of nothing personal there.

So we're really seeing, just in being with that one experience in that moment, anicca, impermanence, and anatta, not-self, pretty clearly. Even if we're not consciously notching it up—"Oh, there's a moment of anicca, a moment of anatta"—we're viscerally experiencing that. Also the unsatisfactoriness: there's no solid me there. It's just this insubstantial, changing experience. There's no control, which is another way that we experience anatta or not-self. We can't say what sensation is going to come next. "I think I'll just be with the water element today." Fat chance. Or how long it'll last. Or what the

next sensation will be. Or whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. There's a lot to be seen and understood from being with a moment of this first foundation of mindfulness of the body.

The second foundation is called contemplation of feelings in the feelings. We've spoken some about this, about the feeling element. I'll just briefly go over it again because it can be quite subtle, being in touch with the feeling tone of an experience. And it can also be quite crucial in our understanding of how suffering is created on a moment-by-moment basis in our mind.

Feeling, as we've said, has a very specific meaning in this context. It's that quality of an experience that is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. And it is one of the five aggregates, the five things that make up a human being. So it is present in each moment of our experience. It won't always be predominant, but it's present.

Feeling arises from what is called contact. In other words, we have the sense base—the eye, the ear, the nose. Take the ear. A sound arises, and in the coming together of that with consciousness, the knowing of it, this is called contact. When this happens in a moment, these three coming together, a feeling arises from that. That sound is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. No big deal. There's no value judgment in any of this.

It happens so much and it's so subtle that when it's unseen, this is where we get into big trouble. Where the pleasant leads to liking, a kind of craving, wanting more, and without seeing, into grasping, into fantasy, into all the things we do to perpetuate pleasant sensation. Same with unpleasant—all the things we do to avoid it. And with neutral, all the things we do to change it because we don't even notice it. I can't say how many times people have, just in this last couple weeks, talked about boredom as a really difficult experience. Not quite noticing what's happening.

So this is this quality of feeling. And it can be so important to notice because it is one really observable place in our experience where this ongoing cycle of perpetuating suffering and confusion can be broken. The cycle that starts with ignorance, leading through this contact, the pleasant or unpleasant or neutrality, the craving that arises from that, going on to clinging, going on to becoming, going on to more pain and suffering. This cycle can be broken when it's touched with mindfulness.

We don't have to stay trapped like this. Mindfulness itself is an incredibly powerful tool that allows the power to go out of this cycle. Not by hating it. Not by saying, "I'm never going to experience anything pleasant again, so I don't have to get into craving." Simply by seeing it with the power of mindfulness. That's why this foundation of feeling is a really important one.

I know it may sound oversimplified when we're in the middle of some really strong emotional experience, and someone comes along and says, "Well, if you would just notice the feeling of unpleasantness, it would all just drop away." I know it doesn't always work like that. And feeling won't always be the predominant experience. But we can begin to bring it to our awareness and give it more attention, because it is really powerful.

So when there is something going on that we're caught in, stop a minute. Can we bring the attention back to the bare experience? You're sitting here. There's a recurrent noise in the hall from someone. You're aware of the noise. You're not off in fantasy, but really spinning in the aversion: "How can that person be so inconsiderate? Don't they know they're spoiling my concentration?" And on and on. Aware of anger, but not really completely gone.

When we can come back even closer to the original contact, we begin to see what Ajahn Chah said—that it's not that the sound disturbs us, it's we who go out and disturb the sound. It's just a sound. Hearing. An unpleasantness arising with that.

When we're sitting there, lost in anger, then there's the imagination: "Oh, they're gonna do it again." And then we're really angry, in anticipation of something that hasn't even happened yet. But you know it's going to happen. Okay—the next sound. Bring your attention open to it, fully to that actual contact, the hearing. Really note it. Be with it fully. And perhaps one will notice then the quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality with it, that might or might not lead into this whole mental torment that follows. But each moment that we can be right there at that contact point, really aware of the pleasantness or unpleasantness, it's much less likely that we'll get so lost.

It's also a lot harder to identify with unpleasant feeling than it is with "that insensitive brute of a person ruining my meditation." Unpleasant feeling—there's not much to do about it.

The experience that I always bring up, one that was very strong for me, happened once when I was doing walking meditation late into a retreat one summer here, during one of our plagues of the flies, which we had really badly at times. I was walking very slowly, and this fly was just—you know how they are—crawling all over my face. And I was noting it. But I was noting sensation, and I was noting aversion, and growing aver-

sion. And it was a lot of trouble, the way I was describing the eating meditation. I mean, I was going about that slow—to lift and move and intend to wipe and wipe. And by the time my hand got there, the fly would be long gone. By the time I got my hand back down, the fly was back. So it was a losing battle.

And finally I kind of said, "Maybe I could notice the unpleasantness." I got very careful with the sensations, and sure enough could really get a sense of that unpleasantness. And that was fine. It took really staying right there at that sense door, right at that contact, because each little movement of the foot brought up unpleasantness. But when I was there with it—it's just a little tickle. Unpleasantness. Now there's nothing to hate or really get off into aversion about. It's really quite freeing.

This is sort of an aside note. Why does the Buddha repeat, in each of his instructions, this "be aware of the body in the body, the feeling in the feeling"? I've read different explanations. The one I like best, because it really speaks to my experience, is this: often when we talk about observing the feelings, observing the body, the consciousness, objects of consciousness—

It sounds incredibly dualistic, like I'm standing over here somewhere observing the feelings in the consciousness, which is down there. The way Thich Nhat Hanh explains it, which makes a lot of sense to me, is that this phrasing repeatedly emphasizes in the language of the sutta that the Buddha is pointing to our direct, bare experience—not to thinking about experience.

This is what Thich Nhat Hanh says: "Remember the phrase from the Satipatthana Sutta: contemplate the body in the body, contemplate the feelings in the feelings, contemplate the mind in the mind, contemplate the objects of mind in the objects of mind. This means that you must live in the body in full awareness of it and not just study it like a separate object. Live in awareness with feelings, mind, and objects of mind. Do not just study them. When we meditate on our body, we live with it as truth and give it our most lucid attention. We become one with it. The flower blossoms because sunlight touches it and warms its bud, becoming one with it. Meditation reveals not a concept of truth, but a direct view of truth itself."

To me, that makes a lot of sense—what the Buddha is pointing to.

Often we won't be able to be aware of or contemplate the feeling quality of an experience. It's not always predominant. We might be really angry, way lost in being angry at that sound, with no chance of getting close to the contact and seeing the unpleasantness. That's fine, because feeling is only one of the four foundations.

The third foundation is the one we're paying attention to when we're aware of anger or aware of calm. The third foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of consciousness, or state of mind, and this includes mind states and emotions. What I love about this is there's no sense of hierarchy. It's not that we're doing a lesser contemplation when we're aware of consciousness rather than feeling. It's just as valid. It's simply that a different foundation is predominant in this moment. No one of the four foundations will always be prominent when we're working with vipassana in this way—it will continually shift and change. In my experience, that's not only not a problem, it's incredibly helpful because it keeps us from getting stuck in one way of seeing, stuck in our blind spots.

So, contemplation of consciousness. One way of looking at it is that there are two component parts of a moment of consciousness. Consciousness itself is that quality of bare knowing of what's happening, the bare awareness. But in any particular moment, arising together with the bare knowing will be some mental factor or emotion present with consciousness. It colors the consciousness, so to speak, in that moment. They arise together.

Mental factors might include greed, lust, happiness, faith, joy, boredom, or gratitude. In that moment, the bare knowing quality and the mental factor can't really be separated. It's like you're looking at consciousness through this mental factor. That's why it's so important to include this foundation of consciousness in our practice, in contemplating it—because that mental factor, that emotion, is coloring our perception, our experience.

This can be quite obvious. When you first fall in love with somebody, suddenly the world is beautiful, the sun is shining, and people you couldn't stand—you don't know what was the matter with you—they're so wonderful now. That happiness is coloring our experience of everything. When you're having a bad day here, suddenly this place is the pits, a prison; everybody is grim and forbidding and sick. And you really believe it.

I remember once, on a retreat I did a while ago, this first really hit me. I was sitting in the dining room and wasn't aware of the state of my consciousness. I was sitting quietly, noting, and each person that walked by—something about them was incredibly annoying. "Oh God, look at the way they walk. Look at that person—they haven't been mindful since the day they got here." Something like that, about ten people in a row. Finally it hit me: "Hey, wait a minute. I think there's anger in the mind here. And it's got nothing to do with the people."

This sounds rather obvious, but so often it isn't—until we remember to turn our attention to the quality of consciousness in that moment. When we're aware of it, it's very, very powerful. And when we're not, it becomes a veil we look at everything through.

So we simply, again, need to recognize the state of consciousness, acknowledge it, and allow it.

We're not trying to manage it or manipulate it—simply allow it. And this applies not only to difficult states of consciousness, but also to really pleasant and positive ones, and to neutral ones as well. It's quite common for people to come in and say, "It's just calm, nothing's happening." But calm *is* something. Calm is a mental factor. It's happening. We need to notice it. It's a worthy experience to give our attention to. It's the truth of this moment. The third foundation—state of consciousness—is important to pay attention to.

How do we pay attention to it? Again, it's simply knowing the quality of consciousness at that moment. That's all—the bare knowing of it, the direct experience. There's a phrase from the sutta where the Buddha says that a bhikkhu, or in our case a yogi, knows a consciousness with lust as a consciousness with lust, and knows a consciousness without lust as a consciousness without lust. That's all. It's not that complicated. We don't have to do something about it. It's simply to know it for what it is. Be with it. Feel it. Allow it.

Often in a strong mental state we can feel it in the body. And here's where the foundations start to interrelate, because you're moving into awareness of the body again. But just let the state of consciousness be as it is, with our mindful awareness of it—whether it's restlessness, sleepiness, joy, excitement, bliss, concentration, or calm. The key is alert attention and acceptance of whatever state the consciousness is in, knowing it.

As we begin to give our attention more to this area—because it can be quite subtle; mental states aren't always strong and can just nebulously color what goes on—we find that it also becomes clearer and easier to be aware of the subtle shifts of mental states. And this is where it moves into wisdom, into understanding. Because as we continue to observe this, we really see that no state of consciousness lasts very long. It really doesn't. How many times do you note calm, or do you note sleepiness? It might seem like forever, but it changes. Even the really heavy, seemingly negative states of mind that we feel caught in and identified with—when we really look on a moment-to-moment basis, no matter how solid we think it is, we start to notice moments when it's just really not there.

So we're really sad, filled with grief, and it hurts. It's hard. We're noting it. And suddenly there's a moment: "God, I'm so hungry. I wonder what's for lunch." And then we're back to, "Oh, I'm so sad." But that moment happened. The sadness was completely gone, and the mind had moved into hunger and desire for lunch. Just watching this carefully, this awareness of the impermanence of mental states begins to poke holes in the seeming solidity of what we think is our identity, of what we think is our experience of our mind, our consciousness. We see quite strongly that mental states come and go.

Sometimes as we practice for a long time, we find that really strong mental states are flipping back and forth with a seemingly crazy rapidity. This is quite common, and it's not a problem—except if we keep thinking each one is who we are. Then we're flipping back and forth between all these identities, and in one hour we go from exaltation to despair to starvation to murderous rage to loving-kindness, and we think, "My God, I'm crazy." But we're only crazy if we think each of those is who we are and we're trying to find some kind of solid core there, some kind of continuity. When we really start looking, there isn't a solid core and there isn't continuity. The more we're aware of the state of consciousness, the harder it is to really identify with it for very long. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, none of them last too long.

One might find—I've found this is quite perverse—that with really painful and unpleasant mental states, when I start to see how impermanent they are and they're beginning to dissolve away, there's a real clutching after them. "Wait a minute, if that goes away, then who am I? I'm this really screwed up, pained, depressed person." There can often be this kind of perverse holding on to really difficult and unpleasant states. Just notice that if it comes up. You'll see it when you begin to acknowledge the changing nature of consciousness.

No mental state will last. It can't. How much pain comes from identifying with and yearning for pleasant states of mind?

Concentration, rapture, bliss, calm—these also are mental states. They also arise and fall. They're also not us. No mental state is going to bring us lasting peace. It can't do it for us. And in that continuing to yearn for something solid and satisfying where it can't be found, until we bring our attention to actually look at the nature of mental states, we'll continue to suffer.

The paradox is that the peace that comes when we quit fighting the state of mind that's happening now and looking for something else—that acceptance, that total mindful acceptance of what's happening right now, is where the peace can come.

Sometimes I get the impression from talking with people that there's an almost unconscious tendency not to give full attention to states of consciousness. Sometimes because it's painful, something hard to be with. But sometimes I get the impression there's this sort of sense of hierarchy: "Well, being with mental states isn't as important as being with the breath. Somehow that's a more valid and useful object of contemplation." If you're feeling a sense of struggle in that way, sometimes stop for a minute. Check out the third foundation of mindfulness. What is the quality of consciousness? Is there something we're not seeing in trying to push it away and hold on to some idea we have?

Peace and freedom isn't about achieving the perfect, unchanging state of consciousness and then just floating there for the rest of our life. It doesn't happen. Peace isn't the absence of difficult or unpleasant experience, but the seeing of it for what it actually is —seeing the impersonal, ultimately unsatisfying nature, the sense that there's no abiding self here. And being aware of, noting and noticing and fully allowing our states of consciousness to be in our awareness when that's the predominant experience is an incredibly helpful part of understanding this.

One other thing I want to say about working with emotions, mental states, states of consciousness, because it's a strong one for many of us: seeing the mind state for simply what it is requires the use of what we call wise attention. Both of these are very powerful. The power of mental states is obvious; the power of wise attention is also very strong.

A good example of the power of both of these is in that phenomenon we've spoken of called yogi mind. In our normal life, in our normal experience, we have a tremendous amount of energy that's expended in activity, in going here and there, in our minds going here and there. And one of the things that's happening now as we sit and we focus and we pay attention and we really limit our activities and our movements is that this tremendous energy is being gathered together into the power of our meditation. It's really a strong energy. It builds and builds as the retreat goes on. It's very powerful when directed into mindfulness, into seeing. It's equally powerful and can be directed into total identification with what's going on in a particular mental state. And this is where we get yogi mind.

So a simple experience: you have a little sniffle, it's unpleasant. The thought goes through, "Uh-oh, I'm getting a cold." Fear comes up. There's identification with the fear. There's the thought, "Maybe if I had some echinacea, I must have some echinacea. I know I'll get better, I won't get sick if I have echinacea." And this fear builds, and all the energy we've been building up is going into this total identification with, "If I don't get

echinacea by tonight, I'm going to have pneumonia." And you know, you come bursting into the office at 6 a.m.—"I've got to have echinacea!" And the poor people in the office are just sitting there: "Okay, sure, echinacea, right, okay." The incredible power of energy directed into identification with the mind state of fear. This is yogi mind.

Now we can also, at whatever point of the process we become aware of it, move that energy from identification with the fear into paying attention to the fear—into the noticing, the noting, the observing of it. We're not saying, "Fear, bad, go away." But shifting where the energy is going, from identification into observing the fear itself, back into the third foundation of mindfulness. This is wise attention—simply shifting the focus of energy.

And it's very powerful.

The fourth foundation is a very complex one, so what I'm going to say is incredibly cursory. The fourth foundation is contemplation of the dhammas, a word which can variously mean many things. One of the usual translations in this context is "contemplation of mental objects," or "objects of mind," sometimes "contents of mind," "the process of mind." Again, it's the bare knowing of what we call objects of mind.

This is not license to spend the next three and a half hours fantasizing about what you're going to do when you leave here. "Well, this is an object of mind. I'm being quite mindful of the fourth foundation here." No, sorry. It's awareness, bare knowing of the objects of mind.

The Buddha actually, in the sutta, is very specific. Fred and I were just talking before about how the list of what he gives as the objects of mind basically comprises the whole of the Buddhist understanding. Each one of these could be a huge talk. I'm just going to list them and give an example of one.

He discusses very specific dhammas, objects of mind, listing the five hindrances, the five aggregates—the five factors that make up a person—the six internal and external sense bases (which are eye, ear, nose, touch, smell, and the mind base internally, and their objects externally), the seven factors of enlightenment, and the Four Noble Truths. A huge, huge area. And we're not talking about thinking about these things, ruminating, philosophizing, trying to remember, but much more the bare knowing.

To give an example using sense desire as one of the five hindrances: knowing when sense desire as a hindrance is present in the mind, and knowing when it's absent. Not getting lost in fantasies of desire, but rather the process being that you're having the thought, "What would the perfect lunch be? If I could dream up the perfect lunch to make here, what would it be?" And then you're aware, "What would be the perfect

zafu? How can I get my sitting arrangement just right so there's no pain? What would be the perfect concentration experience?" And then suddenly, "Oh, wait a minute. Desire. Sense desire is present in the mind right now." That's the knowing, the bare knowing of the objects of mind, of dhammas—fourth foundation of mindfulness.

It could be the same knowing of the presence or absence of concentration, of investigation, of energy, of calm. Not judging, but simply knowing when it's there, when it's not. Knowing the absence of sleepiness, the absence of restlessness.

You can see that as we begin to become aware on this subtle level of the presence or absence of these objects of mind, it gets very subtle. And our awareness of the balance of our experience also begins to get accordingly subtle. This bare recognition really cuts into the power of identifying with, for example, sense desire. When we see, "Oh, the presence of the hindrance." Or when it's gone, it's like, "I'm doing so great. I haven't had any desire." You notice, well, there's the absence of that particular hindrance—but there's the presence of pride at this moment. Simply noticing it, the experience becomes much more one of cause and effect, one condition leading to another, and much less "I'm doing so badly" or "I'm doing so well."

Another very interesting part of being aware of the dhammas, the mental objects, is this: as we allow careful and repeated observation of the presence or absence of these mental objects—not trying to do anything but simply noticing, without a lot of fighting with the experience or judging it—we begin to notice, to understand through repeated recognition, what conditions (both inner conditions, qualities in mind and body, and external conditions) lead to the presence or absence, the arising and dissolution of these various qualities. This can be a very useful experience in our practice. It's useful information.

We begin to see from our own experience which conditions favor the arising of desire, which conditions keep it going, which conditions favor desire's dissolving away, which conditions inner and outer favor desire not arising so much. So we find, for example, that when desire has arisen and we just let ourselves keep thinking about all the different nice things we could have, suddenly desire has gotten incredibly strong. After a while, we see there's a moment of choice where we've noticed that desire has arisen, we're fantasizing about what we're going to do when we go home, and suddenly we think, "Oh, this is desire." And we know that if we keep going like this, it just gets a lot worse. We have that moment where we say, "You know, I don't really want to do this." And we come back to just noticing the desire itself rather than the fantasy.

Our experience becomes much more that it's a series of conditioned processes. It's not personal. We begin to know what conditions allow sloth and torpor to arise. Instead of it being, "Oh no, I'm this slothful, decrepit yogi," we start to notice—as one yogi said this summer at a retreat we were doing in England (it was very warm and these big bumblebees would come in and just buzz all around the room), this person said,

They recognized that something about the sound of a bee buzzing brought up associations of fields and lying around and sleeping, and they would get incredibly sleepy listening to this sound.

It's just kind of interesting to notice. It's a very personal thing, but we all have our personal conditions that will bring up either the hindrances or the seven factors of enlightenment, or contribute to their dissolution. So just notice this. Notice what brings energy. Notice what sustains it. And notice all the different qualities, the factors of enlightenment. It's very helpful. And again, we could talk much more about what these are, and we will later on.

So these are the four foundations of mindfulness in brief. And as you'll see, these four include everything in our experience. There's nothing left out. It's important to give attention to whichever one of these four happens to be arising predominantly in the moment—not to have the feeling that sadness is more important to pay attention to than tingling, or that unpleasantness is really where it's at, or that feeling is better to be with than objects of mind. Just allowing ourselves to be fully there and recognizing whichever foundation is arising predominantly in our experience.

This leads into a really harmonious, broad, direct seeing into all aspects of our life—physical, emotional, mental—as well as a deep seeing into the laws of nature: the impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness, the sense of not-self that we often don't see when we're not paying such careful attention.

The other thing I want to say is don't make it complicated. Please don't sit here with a checklist and make sure that you're running through all the four in the right order. They're actually so interrelated that in my experience I find it quite hard not to be in touch with all four. For example, there's a sensation in the body. You're aware of that. It moves into unpleasant feeling. Moves into aversion. Moves into restlessness. You recognize that—oh, there's the hindrance of restlessness. Right there you've covered all four foundations. And it just keeps on going. "Oh, I'm really good. I recognized restlessness." Then there's pride. Back to the sensation in the body, back to a pleasant feeling, up to desire, into fantasy, into recognizing it. It just cycles around and around and around. The sense of interdependence is so strong you can't really isolate one from the other.

The Buddha said once: mindfulness of breathing, developed and repeatedly practiced, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness, when developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect the seven enlightenment factors. The seven enlightenment factors, developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect clear vision and deliverance. It's a strong statement. Mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of the four foundations, perfects clear vision and deliverance.

Why? How? In each moment of mindfulness, there's that clear, direct, intuitive knowing of the arising experience just as it is. And because in that moment of mindfulness the mind is undistorted by greed, hatred, or delusion, we can know the experience as it's actually occurring. This repeated, moment-by-moment direct experience, direct knowing of what's actually occurring, repeated over and over and over, allows us to have a very deep, visceral experience of the laws of nature—of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, anattā, not-self. Not thinking about it, but viscerally experiencing on a deep level how these laws are present in each moment of our experience. And this understanding—this intuitive understanding, not a thinking-about-it understanding—can open the mind as it deepens to liberating insight.

I want to use an experience of the breath as an example of how we experience these things over and over. The taken-in breath, just breathing in, breathing out. And continually, over and over, this deep intuitive knowing of the bare experience of it. It could be the breath, it could be a sensation, it could be anything. After a while, you just really become aware each time of the arising of the breath, of the dissolution of the breath, the arising of it, the dissolution of it. Impermanence isn't a thought anymore; it's the actual moment-by-moment experience. And then the breath breaks down. It's not just an in-breath.

There's all these different sensations that comprise an in-breath—perhaps experiencing them more finely as different elements: pressure, tingling, vibration. And then each time one becomes aware of the arising and the dissolution of each of these smaller experiences in the breath, sensations rapidly arising and passing, over and over and over.

The more we keep bringing in our attention and simply being with the experience, the more it keeps breaking apart. The more we see there is no solid breath there at all. It's just coming and going. And then even the gross breath itself is changing all the time—from long to shallow, from deep to rough to smooth. Where is there any substantiality there? Any substance?

There's no I. There's no sense of who's in charge. Can we control the breath? Not for long. We can hold it a little bit, but we can't determine whether it will be shallow or rough. Am I going to feel pressure or tingling with this breath? There's no control over what will arise.

And in a way, there's a deeply unsatisfying nature to this. It's all shifting, moving away. There's nothing solid there. We experience this over and over with each breath, with each sensation that arises, with each mental state that comes and goes. A really deep wisdom—intuitive—is being developed through this experience.

And even further, we begin to see that there's no separate existent entity. We see the interdependence of everything: that the breath arises only due to conditions. There are lungs, there's the heart beating, there's a body, there's air, there's life, there was food that kept the body going. When conditions change, the breath will change. When the physical nature changes—if we get sick, if we catch a cold—the breath will change. If the state of consciousness changes and we're really lost in fear, the breath will change.

Nothing exists separately. It's all dependent on previously arising conditions. The more we look into it, the more the illusion breaks apart. And we repeatedly have a deep personal experience of anicca, dukkha, anatta from any one of the four foundations of mindfulness in any moment. It's very powerful.

So as the Buddha said, the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect clear vision and deliverance.

I have to say, in reading the sutta and seeing how the Buddha could break all this down for us in a way that's really comprehensible is amazing. It's such a comprehensive and practical instruction for the realization of liberating insight.

I want to end by saying again: don't get complicated. Whatever is happening, whatever is arising in this moment is one of the four foundations of mindfulness. There's nowhere else to go but this moment—being fully present with whatever is presenting itself as the truth of this moment. That is one of the foundations, and it's a sufficient object of our attention to contribute to the arising of liberating insights.

CHAPTER 242

Five Spiritual Faculties

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers an in-depth exploration of the five spiritual faculties (pañcindriya): saddhā (faith), vīriya (energy), sati (mindfulness), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom). She explains how these qualities, when strengthened and balanced, exert powerful influence over the mind and transform both meditation practice and daily life.

Wilson distinguishes between 'bright faith'—the initial inspiration that draws us to practice—and 'verified faith' that arises from our own direct experience of truth. She emphasizes that trust requires radical acceptance of each moment as it is, without subtle aversion or attempts to arrange experience. Drawing on teachings from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita and the contemplative writer J. John Noé, she explores how genuine trust means complete openness to whatever arises, including difficult experiences.

The talk provides practical guidance on balancing these faculties: faith with wisdom (preventing both blind devotion and dry intellectualism), and energy with concentration (avoiding both restlessness and dullness). Wilson clarifies the distinction between thinking about dharma concepts and actual intuitive wisdom (paññā) that arises from direct experience. She uses the vivid simile of a lion versus a dog responding to a thrown stone to illustrate how we can remain steady with the process of practice rather than chasing after thoughts, even inspiring dharmic ones. Throughout, she emphasizes that working with these faculties is not about self-judgment but skillful investigation into the natural energies of the mind.

I had a friend visiting here today who hadn't been here for a while. She used to be on staff and has sat a lot. She was saying how seeing all of you here walking really slowly, really quiet and pulled in, at first felt really bizarre because she'd been out of the scene for a while. But after being here and beginning to feel the energy, you don't know how powerful it is what you're all doing here. It kind of exudes by osmosis. The rest of us get to pick it up once in a while. And it brought back to her some of the feelings of the joy and delight that can come with practice, that she's experienced in the past in practice. I know probably a lot of you were not feeling joy and delight today, but you taste it at times. Just realize that it's having a powerful effect on everyone that comes into contact with you, and even people that come into contact with the people that have come into contact with you. So what you're doing is really wonderful.

As a second little aside, I don't think any of them are here, but I wanted to really appreciate our maintenance department because they have been working so hard these last few days trying to get the water going again. They're working like eighteen-hour days down there in the bowels of the building, and I just wanted to appreciate them publicly for what they're doing.

What I want to talk about tonight is the five spiritual faculties. Another list. Sometimes I know it might seem endless—the eight this, the seven that, the five that, the four this. Not to try and remember them all or just sort them out. A friend of mine said recently, "Which one's the most important? I've got to figure out which one is the one I need to memorize and learn." Not to have it with that attitude at all. I relate to it as these are all different conceptual ways of talking about our spiritual development, the arising of insight, and relating to the specific work of practice that we're doing here. At any particular time one or the other might be a helpful guidepost or reference to you. I have particularly found these five qualities of mind to be very helpful to me in my own practice.

These five spiritual faculties, or controlling faculties, are so called because as they strengthen through our practice—and they do strengthen—and as they come into balance, which is very important, they come to exert a very powerful influence on our mind, determining the state of the mind at some points almost continuously. They also have a powerful influence on the way we live our lives when we're not in retreat.

These five qualities are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. The way I personally have found helpful to work with them is first in hearing about them, in reflecting on them, to develop a kind of recognition, an intuitive feeling for these qualities of mind—knowing when they're present, knowing when they're absent. When we've done that, we learn how to balance them with each other in a way that allows them to develop to their full potential in our minds. When they are balanced in this way and strengthened, it's a very strong support for our practice and for our life.

The first of these qualities is faith. When I was reflecting on this, to me the two aspects of faith that come up that helped me get a feeling for this quality are the aspect of trust and the aspect of confidence.

Faith itself is totally basic to our being able to practice. None of us would be here if there had not been some faith in our hearts to bring us here, and none of us would stay here if faith did not keep being strengthened. Faith tends to arise at first perhaps when we encounter someone or something that really inspires us—someone whose way of being touches something deeply in us, or just a scene in nature that also touches something deep in us. Many different things can inspire faith, something that moves us. This

type of faith really fills the mind with a sense of devotion, a sense of brightness, a sense of love and appreciation. We can experience it in different ways. It's a real brightness in the mind, and this is what we call bright faith. It can be very strong and deep and can motivate us in very powerful ways in our life. As I said, we wouldn't be here if we had not touched that in some deep way.

The problem is that like everything else, it's not stable. It doesn't last. It doesn't stay. While it can be incredibly strong at first and motivate us to do many things that we would have thought very difficult or impossible to do, it tends to lose its freshness. It tends to lose its power, its impelling force after a while. It needs to be strengthened because this type of faith is often referenced externally, looking to something outer to inspire the faith again. This is certainly valid, but it needs a lot of reiterations, and it's not strong enough to really keep us going sometimes in the darkest points that we come to.

What reinforces bright faith is the faith that comes from our own deep intuitive understanding of the nature of reality, the nature of suffering, impermanence—a deep intuitive understanding that comes from our own clear seeing. Perhaps we just see that we're able to experience our patterns of mind with more of a sense of freedom, more of a sense of spaciousness. It's not like you have to have the ultimate enlightenment experience to have verified faith.

But the small insights that we have, the possibility of more freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion—those are the kind of intuitive understandings that lead to verified faith.

So while bright faith, the original faith that triggered us off, can be very strong, because it's dependent on an external source for reinforcement, it can also be blind. It doesn't have a reference to our own inner experience of truth, and we can be led wildly astray. When the faith becomes verified by our own inner experience of truth, on all the different levels that we can experience that, it becomes, after a while, almost unshakable. Because what we know for ourselves, no one else can take away or can say isn't true. It doesn't need to be verified by anything external.

So faith and wisdom need to be balanced together. But since faith is not constant—even verified faith flickers—and short of deep realization, really deep enlightenment, how can we develop it? I find this a very interesting area of exploration, because there are lots of little tricks to develop concentration, to work with mindfulness. But faith is so basic. Without it, it's so hard, if not impossible, to keep practicing. Yet it's not something one can give to somebody else.

This is where the quality of trust comes up very strongly in my mind when looking at developing faith. Trust meaning the ability to open to, to be connected to our experience in each moment, whatever that is. And the quality of mind that embodies that trust is one of total acceptance, or what a phrase that I really love—from a man who calls himself J. John Noe—*radical acceptance*. He says, "Radical acceptance is radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways. To let go, accept—it is necessary only to give up your concerns and your fears."

And Sayadaw U Pandita says the same thing. He says that unless there's softness and receptivity of mind, unless one totally surrenders, it will be almost impossible to receive anything. In surrendering to what is happening right now, total radical acceptance of what's happening right now.

So what are we resisting? Just looking in the mind and body right now, what are we resisting? What are we unwilling to receive in this moment, in our practice today? It can be very subtle.

When I was sitting recently in Australia, I was having a lot of very deep grief and sadness, which was impossible not to notice. And it was impossible not to note. So I was noting sadness, sadness, grief, grief. This was going on for days. And I thought I was really acknowledging it, really present, really accepting. But there was a very subtle sense of, you know, if I was really doing it right, this wouldn't be here. Very subtle. Just this tiny little aversion.

But that's enough. That subtle sense of, well, it's just not quite right if this is here—that is not trust. It prevents acceptance. It prevents being present in the moment. And it leads to lack of faith, because faith arises from our own clear seeing, and we can't see what on some level we won't accept, won't allow to be present.

There's a great difference between trusting in the moment just as it is, no matter what's happening, and subtly trying to arrange experience to meet our expectations. Even though those expectations may match all the things you hear in the dharma talks and all the things you read in the books, it doesn't matter. If you're trying to arrange your experience in any way, in any way, that's not trust.

The other thing about trust is that it's a very vital quality. It's not a static place that one reaches and then there's trust and then it's okay. Because our experience is changing so quickly, moment to moment, and acceptance, openness, must move with it. So

each moment is opening to a new experience of whatever it is. It's very vital. It takes great commitment, great willingness to be present and open to whatever's arising in this moment. And as soon as it changes, opening to the next thing.

It can be very unsettling. Indeed, it *is* very unsettling. The tendency of the mind is often so strong to look for something solid, to make things secure, to make them safe. Just some place of firm foothold of knowing—and then it'll be okay. And usually that firm foothold is going to be somewhere pleasant, and then it'll *really* be okay.

Krishnamurti says, "To seek the truth is to deny it." The search itself prevents trust. Because when we're looking elsewhere for anything, we can't be present with what is here. And what is here is what there is in this moment. That's all there is.

So how much of our time, on subtle levels, do we spend trying to find something to trust in? Not only in our life—which is a whole topic in itself—but on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour basis in our practice. Trying to restructure our environment, get the perfect sitting place, so then our sittings will be really concentrated. How often does one find oneself, after having a particularly clear walking period one day, the next day trying to recreate all the circumstances exactly the same way? Eating the same thing for lunch, taking the same amount of time before going down to the walking hall, holding the hands in the same way with the same amount of light. It's almost like a ritual, trying to recreate a certain experience. And then when the experience comes again—"Oh right, my faith is verified. There's trust."

It doesn't work that way. The trust comes first, because there's a total letting go into experience, into whatever's happening. Then the wisdom, the clear seeing, arises. And that wisdom does lead to more trust. But real trust doesn't come from having arranged things so that we have an experience we like. If we think we're trusting in that, we're going to be really devastated when the situation changes and something different happens.

So can we have trust without any conditions placed on it whatsoever? Total radical trust.

This is J. Krishnamurti again: "It's not a matter of whether or not faith is present in your life. It is. It's only a question of whether you place your faith in truth and reality, or in your considerations, your abstractions, your judgments, and your thoughts about truth and reality. Do not doubt that you are currently practicing faith. Consider only where it is placed."

Radical acceptance is the practice of faith.

And Sayadaw U Pandita again—I seem to like juxtaposing these two. He says, "Clinging to anything for security is like trying to scoop up water with a butterfly net." And that includes mind states, meditation states. It includes anything.

Another factor of faith or trust that can be difficult is that opening completely, trusting completely, being fully present with what is happening in this moment, often requires being with something that is quite difficult or unpleasant. I've been working with this factor a lot in myself recently. I have many unknown things going on in my body. I don't have any answers for it, and it's requiring a great deal of attention just to be present and see what's going on. Working with the quality of trust, I see how tricky it is—where one wants to be open to what's happening, but there's the subtle sense that real trust means when I get it right, then things get better.

That's not what it's about at all. It's about the willingness to totally open into the experience as it is and trust *that*—that this is the reality, and that it's okay. That one can be fully present with it no matter how unpleasant, how scary, or how contrary to one's ideas of what it means to live a life, to be spiritual, to meditate. Just how it is.

This willingness, as it develops in our practice, to open into the unknown in each moment, leads to the other aspect of faith: a strong sense of confidence. Confidence in one's own ability to be present for whatever's happening. Confidence in one's ability to practice. Confidence in the practice, in the Dhamma.

That confidence manifests as a willingness to come face to face with our experience, just as it is—our insecurities, our pains, whatever is arising in the moment. This confidence is also a quality of not hesitating, so that when some object arises, the mind goes forward to meet it right away, without confusion, without holding on to past experience, not afraid to face anything. Because of the quality of trust, one knows one is able to face anything, and that this is where the truth is—in this moment. There's nowhere else to go.

We begin to see that confrontation, even with our imperfections, can give rise to clear understanding. And this lends a lot of confidence and faith. So it's a kind of cycle. The faith leads to confidence, which leads to wisdom, which leads to more faith. We come to have a real sense of trust in our own strength, our own understanding, and our own willingness to be present for whatever arises.

This trust and confidence, this faith, is accessible even when the mind is cloudy, even when experience isn't what one wants it to be. It's not dependent on good noting or good meditation experiences. And we can learn to trust that much.

This faith lends a quality of real brightness and confidence to the mind. And this engenders a willingness to do, a willingness to confront things. This leads to the second spiritual faculty, which is the quality of energy or effort. Other ways of talking about it are enthusiasm, joyful effort, or heroic effort, as Michelle spoke about the other night. Commitment is a word I find helpful too.

I just want to say a little about effort because it's been discussed quite a bit before. As we know, energy is really the root of our ability to investigate, which is the root of our practice. And we see how hard it is to maintain energy when faith is lacking, because it takes so much effort to keep with the work, and if there's not some faith behind it, it's really hard to sustain.

I want to talk a little about the balance of effort, which most of us are constantly working with in our practice. I remember the first three-month course I did. I went to one of the teachers early on and said, "I just can't find the right balance of effort. I go too far one way, then too far the other." And he said, "Yeah, it'll be like that your whole practice." And he was right.

But it doesn't have to be a problem that it's like that. It stops being a matter of judging oneself—"Oh, I've blown it, I'm trying too hard," or "I kicked back, I took a nap, I've ruined the whole six weeks, I've got to start over." It comes to be, for me actually, quite an interesting investigation—noticing how the balance of effort is working, when there's too much, when there's too little.

As you know, when there's not enough energy, the practice can become a total drag. You're dragging through the days, dragging the mind trying to note. It becomes tedious. These thoughts arise: "I really could be doing a lot better if I was anywhere else but here." And so doubt comes up really strong, and it can become a circular thing.

The reverse, I find, is that when the energy is flowing, when there's a real sense of connection with what's happening, the sense of really being fulfilled and connected in the practice—for me, this is not a function of nice objects arising or pleasant meditation states so much. I find it much more a function of the wholehearted quality of effort. When I'm feeling like I'm just there with what's happening—the effort simply to be present in the moment, not an effort of strain or striving, but just to be with what's happening—when that effort is wholehearted, it's like it doesn't matter what's going on. In some ways it matters; there's aversion and everything, but that's just noted too. There's a sense of real connectedness and commitment. And that comes when the effort is balanced, wholehearted.

Another important aspect of effort, I find, is that that wholehearted quality arises when it's generated from within ourselves, from within our own heart and mind. If we try to impose it from without—and for sure, often in the beginning we do have to impose it from without until we have the faith to keep going from within—but if we try to practice in conformity too strictly, to mesh ourselves into some kind of model of how we think our practice ought to look, to meet an ideal that's all outwardly imposed, at some point it just doesn't work. If it's not connecting with the inner energy, with our heart energy, the practice can become one of struggle and resistance. And that's often a sign that the effort is forced rather than coming from within, from our own interest and enthusiasm.

We all swing back and forth all the time, and we'll all have times when the energy is really low.

And I'm not implying that when energy is low one should say, "Well, I'll just kick back. It's low, I don't want to impose it from without, so I'll just wait until it springs from my heart and then I'll start practicing again." I wish it were so easy, but that's just not the facts. What we know is that effort does bring energy.

So in those periods when the energy is low, we shouldn't whip ourselves or say, "Okay, my energy is low, so I'm going to sit for three hours and walk for three hours and try not to sleep tonight until my energy comes back up, by God, and then I'll be able to practice." That could get a bit rigid. But neither should we give up. Not to just slack off, because it just gets harder and harder to get the energy moving again.

So working in the low energy times means continuing to note whatever's arising. And the noting may be weak and the object may not be clear, and that's okay. Don't be discouraged by that. As the effort continues—to just keep noting, keep trying to see what the object is, see it as clearly as possible—the energy will eventually begin to build. It's like the difference between one weak string in that first weak noting, and as it continues, it's like a bunch of strings that get wound together and become very strong. The noting will become more clear. And as that happens, the interest will revive. The enthusiasm will come back and you'll be in a cycle again with stronger energy.

It's really helpful in the low energy periods to remember the importance of patience, because it plays a big factor in our practice. Another thing I've found very helpful is that though there's a difficult period or the energy's low, shrinking back from it or falling away from the practice in those times makes it much more difficult. It becomes so much harder to regenerate the momentum once we've actually taken a big chunk of

time out. It might seem like there's no momentum going. It might seem like you're just dragging through. But there's more going on than might seem observable at first. And to stop altogether makes it much more difficult to kick in again.

Also, not to berate oneself for the quality of experience, which I find is very easy to do. Once again, when I was sitting in Australia, I went into U Pandita once and I was having a little fit of "Oh, everything's horrible, I can't see what's going on and there's nothing but fear and there's nothing but aversion and I can't really get to anything and none of the objects are clear"—and I tantrumed on like that for a little while. He just looked at me and said, "Well, can you note it?" I said, "Yeah, I can note it, but none of it's clear." And on and on I went. He said, "Are you lying about idle all day?" And I said, "Well, no, I'm sitting and walking all day. I can note the stuff." And he said, "So, what's your problem?"

So yeah, right. I just wanted it to be different. I wanted it to be nice. I wanted the energy to be strong. It really helped me a lot.

As we continue to work with the effort, with the continuing to note, continuing to connect with the object, that grows stronger and leads to a strengthening of mindfulness and a strengthening of concentration that follows on quite naturally. These are the next two spiritual faculties, controlling faculties.

Mindfulness is the factor that balances all the others. It's always helpful. It encompasses all our experience. There's nothing that's extra or outside of mindfulness or that doesn't count. One way of describing mindfulness is as observing power—a very specific definition. Observing power that rushes directly towards whatever object arises. You can almost experience it that way. An object arises in consciousness and the mind just rushes directly towards it without hesitation. Again, this comes from confidence and it comes from effort. But it rushes directly to it without hesitation, without thought. Immediately moves to and falls into the object. Covers it completely. It's not a matter of thinking about whether I want to pay attention to this object or not. In that thinking about it, the knowing of the object is missed. But the observing power has the quality of just taking possession of the object immediately, not slipping off. One example is that mindfulness is like pouring water into a cup. It doesn't just stay in one place, but it covers the whole surface.

It spreads out and covers the whole cup. And that's how mindfulness spreads out and covers the whole object, covers every part of whatever's arising. There's not a sense of discrimination or distinction that some objects are more worth paying attention to, more worth giving mindfulness to than others.

Another quality of mindfulness is that it's non-coercive. It's completely non-violent, totally accepting. That quality of mindfulness is very active—that moving toward, completely covering, not slipping off. It's very active. But it's not trying to change what's happening at all. There's no sense of control, no sense of trying to change things, to make things different. It's just fully present with the thing as it is, without judging, totally accepting.

And that happens, that full sense of presence, when there's no discrimination of thought getting in between the movement of mindfulness toward the object. This mindfulness has, as I'm sure you've all observed by now, incredible power for leading to the unfolding of things that one would never have imagined or expected—just from sitting and watching object after object come and go in our experience when we're not controlling.

When we persevere with a continuity of this mindfulness—and it does take perseverance, these streams of moments of mindfulness building one after the other—the mind becomes more steady, calm, and clear. From this, the fourth faculty of concentration becomes strong, becomes quite well established.

The characteristic of concentration is that the mind sticks to the object without a lot of fluttering, movement, or wavering. It's just very steady on whatever the focus of consciousness is in that moment. It's a way of collecting all the mental forces, all the mental factors together in a moment, in one aspect, so that all our energy—which tends to be scattered, flying off in many different directions, and which we're often not aware of because it's so dispersed—becomes unified and focused on one thing. And that's very powerful. It leads to a mind that can be very calm, very quiet and peaceful. That sense of non-fragmentation, that sense of unity, gives such a feeling of completeness. That's why there's such a sense of happiness that can come with concentration—a kind of happiness much different from the happiness of sense pleasure, say, the happiness of eating a peach. That unity of mind is very powerful.

In talking about concentration, I feel we must be cautious not to set it up as some goal—this is what a concentrated mind is like, and this is what I need to have in order to practice. That can lead to a lot of suffering. I know from personal experience. Concentration is not something to arrive at at some future point. We're working with developing it right now, just in this moment. It's not a matter of getting concentrated for the next hour or concentrated for the next minute. Just in this moment, can the mindfulness really move right to whatever the object of attention is? Can the attention stick there, stay there steadily? Just connect with this one object. That's all. Not to make it a

big project to fill our days with—getting concentrated so that tonight I'll be really concentrated. But just bring it back to this moment of awareness, this moment of connecting and sticking with the object.

In Vipassana, what we're working with is a steadiness of attention to a flow of changing objects, as opposed to, say, just staying with the breath and never moving from it. We're cultivating a steadiness of attention, but the objects are constantly changing. It's helpful to know we don't need to limit ourselves by thinking that concentration is only possible when certain types of objects are arising, or that it's only possible in certain situations. That steadiness of mind can be developed under possibly a broader range of circumstances than we might expect.

If you're feeling really unfocused or a lot of discouragement, know that there's a lot of judgment that comes up around concentration. Many people I talk to will come and say, "Well, I'm really not concentrated." What does that mean? One just makes up an idea of what it means to be concentrated, then decides one isn't it, and then gets really discouraged about it and suffers a lot. To some extent there's a lot of concentration in almost anyone's mind here. How many people can just sit for an hour without a great deal of focus and concentration? Or walk for an hour, never mind sitting and walking for six weeks. There's a lot of concentration.

So not to give in—if there's discouragement, rather than thinking, "Because it's discouragement, the energy is low, I can't concentrate," let the discouragement itself become the object of attention, the object of inquiry.

Keep bringing the noting mind back to it. Note the sensations in the body. Really let the trust come in that this is the reality of the moment. And with that trust can come real attention, effort, energy. By continuing this effort of noting and being with the discouragement, that's the object in the moment, the mindfulness again restabilizes. Concentration again becomes strengthened, using discouragement as an object. It doesn't have to only be the breath. And that's again seeing that nothing is outside the scope of practice.

What we find as we go along in practice is that the mind might still go off and get creamed or get really lost. But the restabilization process might take much less time, and it might be much less of a period of confusion and despair. Often we lose sight of that because it still seems really intense when it happens. But what threw you for three days two weeks into the retreat might be a bubble of intense confusion that lasts for an hour or an hour and a half now. And that itself is a product of increasing mindfulness and concentration.

So concentration brings calmness, depth, and steadiness, and it must be balanced with effort, which brings energy and clarity. I'll talk about that more in a minute.

Then out of these qualities of mindfulness and concentration, the fifth factor, the fifth faculty of wisdom, will arise. It does arise. It arises of itself. It's not something one can sit down and make happen.

By wisdom, I mean intuitive, deep intuitive understanding. While concentration clarifies and purifies the mind—when we're mindful, when we're concentrated, greed, hatred, and delusion are not present in those moments—and that lends a real strength to the mind, it really purifies the mind. But it's not enough to eradicate deep underlying tendencies for greed, for anger, for fear, for ignorance to arise. What eradicates those is understanding, wisdom.

Nyanaponika says that greed, hatred, and delusion are abandoned not by acts, not by doing things, but by wisely seeing. And this wise seeing unfolds of itself through our being fully present with object after object as it arises, with trust, acceptance, and steadiness of mind.

Classically, the intuitive wisdom I'm talking about is a deep, visceral understanding of the nature of impermanence, the nature of unsatisfactoriness, the nature of the insubstantiality of self—of the sense of self—that there's nothing solid anywhere to be called "I." It's not that this happens all at once. We all have varying levels and degrees of insights, of understanding happening over and over. It's as if we experience the same thing over and over on deeper and deeper levels. And each of those seeings adds to our faith, to our deep intuitive understanding of the way things are.

And it can be experienced more or less directly. A metaphor that I really like: it's like seeing a light at night in the distance. You don't actually see the fire, but because of the reflection of the light, one knows without doubt that there's a fire there. That's one way of experiencing understanding. And then the actual seeing of the fire itself is likened to liberation.

In the unfolding of this wisdom, the quality of investigation is very important. But investigation is not the same as thinking. This deep intuitive wisdom is not coming from thought. It's not coming from feeling. I think this is a place where we can often be caught, confusing thinking with understanding, with wisdom. We often take thinking about something to be the understanding itself. But wisdom can only arise from direct experience, experience beyond thought.

One place I find we can easily be caught is when we have Dharma thoughts. We would all agree that thinking about the past, thinking about the future—what am I going to do when I go home in three months?—we know that's thinking, and sometimes we get caught in it. But when the thought's a Dharma thought, somehow that often doesn't count. We can easily be misled into thinking it's real wisdom.

A concept I find very helpful in learning not to get caught is that of wise attention. Wise attention is based on the fact that when our attention is directed fully in one direction, it can't be so focused on something else. That's pretty basic and simple. With wise attention, keeping that in mind...

We can learn to take real care of where we give attention, where we give energy in any given moment. And with wise attention we can learn to direct the energy, the attention to the process rather than the content, no matter what the content is.

For example, you're sitting and you have some very blissful experience in meditation. And then the thought arises, "Wow, this is great." Then there's pleasantness, and you note the pleasantness. And you note, "Oh, well, it's impermanent. It'll go away." And you note that. And then you think, "Wow, the practice is really working. I didn't get attached to that." And it goes into more thoughts about impermanence. "It's really incredible. The Dharma is really fantastic. And it's really working because I'm not caught in this." And on into deep thoughts about the nature of impermanence and the power of that in changing one's life and the quality of existence now that impermanence is understood. These are really far out thoughts and on some level very helpful. But this is getting caught in dharmic thoughts, in the content. It's not wisdom. That moment of intuition, of seeing the nature of impermanence—that's a deep intuitive understanding.

Wise attention would be directing the energy not to the thoughts but seeing them as a thought and directing the energy back to the process. A thought is a thought no matter what the content is. And so we don't give favoritism to certain thoughts because the content is so inspiring.

I find that this takes a lot of trust. The trust being that the deep insights we have are not based on thought, and we don't need to cling to thoughts about them in order to hold on to the understanding, the wisdom. A real trust that insight has arisen, it's passed, and now another thought is arising in this moment—and to be able to see it as a thought and just note it.

I heard a Tibetan Lama give a talk a couple of weeks ago and he gave a great simile about working with thoughts. He said if you throw a stone at a lion, it'll just sit there. It won't even look at the stone. It'll just look right at you, where the stone came from. If

you throw a stone at a dog, it goes running after the stone and doesn't even stop to look at you. That's how we often are with our thoughts. A thought comes flying by and we run after it. Then another one comes and we run after it. We're just running around in circles. So can we not be misled by the stone but keep our attention steady on the process and not fly off after thoughts?

From this we begin to see, we come to recognize that actually our minds are incredibly unreliable. The thoughts that come up are totally unreliable. They're unreliable because we continue to perceive the permanent in what is constantly changing. We continue to look for happiness where it only brings us suffering. And the mind and thoughts continue to see a self, to try and construct a self out of what is insubstantial. We don't have to keep buying into this. We can see it happening over and over and over. And that's fine—it's a thought. We don't have to run after the thought when it comes.

From these direct experiences of wisdom, faith is strengthened and the whole cycle starts over again.

So those are the five faculties and how to work with balancing them. Faith and wisdom are two faculties that we work at balancing with each other. They serve as a natural balance. If there's a lot of wisdom without faith, it can manifest in really two ways. One is a kind of false wisdom where there's a lot of thinking, a lot of imagining, maybe inferential knowing. One really thinks one knows, one thinks one understands, but it's really more from hearsay than direct experience. You think you know without really looking.

It's a kind of conceit. And this can grow very easily into skeptical doubt, into an unwillingness to actually look. There's no faith in this at all.

The second form of how wisdom can be unbalanced without faith is when there is real intuitive wisdom arising, a real insight. But without faith, it can turn shallow. It can lead to too much thinking about it—what I was just describing of having the insight but not having the confidence, not having the clarity to be able to let go of the insight and continue with the practice. Without faith, the mind gets caught up in a lot of thinking, a lot of running around in circles, afraid to let go of the thought. And again, doubt will arise, disguised this time as investigating power. Because often when we're having these really interesting dharmic thoughts, it seems that we're really investigating into the nature of things. And it can easily lead to skeptical doubt.

When this happens, we tend to lose energy. The mind starts to waver more, can become a bit indecisive, and begins to have a lack of clarity. And from this, of course, can come disappointment or a sense that the practice isn't working—"I don't see the benefit

of the practice"—and doubt is really in strong again. What's lacking here is faith's quality of commitment, of clarity. In these moments, it's important to remember that every moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom, and to just keep going, even though it seems that the clarity has come lacking. Just keep going.

On the other side, faith needs to be balanced by wisdom. Because faith can be too excessive. It's kind of, "Wow, this is it! I really know the answer!" It's so enthusiastic, really over the top. The kind where you sit and think about how you're going to turn everyone you know onto the Dharma, and you really go through these great Dharma talks in your mind, and you've really done wonderful things. But you can't practice. There's just so much faith, but there's not the balance of wisdom to keep one going. There's no discriminating judgment.

The simile for the balance of these two is like a real turbulent river. There's a group of people on the bank, and they really need to cross to the other side. When there's a lot of wisdom without enough faith, it's all these people running up and down the banks of the river looking very busy and important, but they're not getting anything done. There's no results. The person with too much faith might boldly plunge into the river, but maybe not in a very wise way, to the point that energy gets frittered away. Maybe they get washed away, or they're just floundering in the river. They're very courageous, but without the discriminating wisdom to do it in a way that helps.

The balance of the two would have the courage and conviction to plunge boldly in, but the judgment to be able to do it in a way that brings oneself and others to safety. This is the balance we work with between confidence, real trust, and a discriminating wisdom and understanding that backs up the faith—so that the faith isn't blind and our energy isn't uselessly frittering away.

So wisdom and faith are balanced with one another. Concentration and energy need to be balanced with one another. And this is one I'm sure you're all familiar with, day after day in your own practice—balancing the calmness and depth of concentration with the energy and clarity of effort.

When there's an unbalanced effort, an excess of energy, the mind can become really restless or really scattered. It's as if the consciousness and the object can't stay together. The consciousness hits the object and flies off, or it seems to leap past it. There's not a sense of real connection. So if your mind is kind of slipping off what it's trying to pay attention to, it's a good sign that there's too much energy, too much effort going on. At this point, it's very helpful to simplify. Simplify the number of objects you're noting in

your sitting. Simplify the walking—just lifting, placing, or just stepping, stepping. Don't try to note a lot of different objects. If you're doing touch points, don't try to do a lot. Just simplify when the energy is too high.

If there's a deficiency of energy in proportion to concentration, again, you'll find the mind kind of drifting along with the rise and fall, very comfortable, very nice, and very sleepy after a while. Sayadaw U Pandita likened it to a mind that solidifies like butter—unfresh and slimy. You need to heat it up with energy, so it's real supple again.

And at that point, it can be helpful to work with very precise aiming and very precise timing of noting the object, and with very clear noting, because it takes more effort and that brings in a little more energy. You may need to add a couple of touch points and more objects because that also picks up the effort. It brings in more energy. Be sure that you're balancing the sitting with walking if the mind is getting more concentration than energy.

And really important to remember—it's all skillful means. It's not a judgment that there's something wrong with one's practice or wrong with you. It's just the natural course of things. That balance is a very fine line, and since conditions are constantly changing, so is the balance. And it can be a real—I find it a very interesting, fascinating place of practice to just investigate these qualities and see when it's tipping one way and tipping the other way. It becomes very skillful, and there's no judging necessary in it at all. It's just really a continual learning, a continual refining of our understanding of the nature of these energies as they manifest in our mind.

So wisdom balanced with faith, energy balanced with concentration, and mindfulness is kind of like the overseer. You can't have too much mindfulness. It can't be unbalanced unless—well, it would be unbalanced if you don't have any. You could bring a little in. But it can't get out of balance any other way. It serves as a balance for everything.

So these are the five spiritual faculties. And I've just found it very helpful working with them in my own practice. And as we continue in our practice, these faculties will become more balanced, more refined, and really grow in strength and power. They develop into quite strong powers in our mind that affect our lives far beyond our time sitting here at IMS. I've found that they really contribute to an enduring clarity of mind, enduring steadiness of mind. A trust that goes beyond just sitting. The ability to trust in the moment. To trust in our own understanding. And a wisdom that really changes our relationship to our lives and to our experience far beyond what happens just sitting here.

So this is much more than faculties of mind that we develop from meditation. They affect our whole life in very deep and powerful ways.

CHAPTER 243

Three Noble Truths

Carol Wilson · 1h49

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a penetrating exploration of the first three Noble Truths, leaving the fourth—the Eightfold Path—for a companion talk. She begins with dukkha, examining its three aspects: ordinary suffering (dukkha dukkha), the suffering inherent in change, and the subtle oppressiveness of conditioned existence. Rather than presenting these truths as depressing, Wilson frames them as profoundly liberating—once we stop struggling against the nature of experience, a spaciousness opens that allows genuine appreciation of life.*
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> *The talk delves deeply into craving (taṇhā) as the cause of suffering, illustrating through vivid personal stories—including a memorable milkshake pursuit—how craving distorts perception and drives us toward confusion. Wilson explains that craving arises from blindness: not seeing the impermanent, insubstantial nature of phenomena, and then constructing elaborate stories about what we mistakenly perceive. The practice of mindfulness allows us to observe craving directly, watching it arise, persist, and fade without needing to act on it.*
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> *Wilson concludes with the third Noble Truth—cessation—describing both the ultimate freedom from craving and the momentary tastes of liberation available in each moment of clear mindfulness. Drawing on teachings from Nisargadatta Mahārāj, Tibetan sources, and Thich Nhat Hanh, she points toward our true nature as already complete, requiring only that we cease forging the chains that bind us through understanding.*

Tonight I want to speak about the core, the central teaching that the Buddha gave, the basis for all our practice here together, which many of you have heard before, called the Four Noble Truths. Actually, I'm going to talk about the Three Noble Truths, and tomorrow night Sylvia is going to talk about the fourth one—kind of keep you coming back. The fourth one's the nicest one.

In some ways, if you just hear these three truths, especially the first two, and not look deeply into them, but just hear them and take them at face value, it's a very difficult teaching. Because the first truth is that the nature of much of our life, of our mind and body, is essentially unsatisfactory. The word is dukkha, sometimes translated as suffering—essentially there's an unsatisfactory quality to our life, which I'll go into more. The second truth is that the cause of our suffering is this quality of craving, of thirsting, which I'm sure many of you experience just sitting here. The third truth is

that there is a cessation, an ending to this craving, to this confusion, to this living in such a confused and suffering way. And the fourth is what is called the Eightfold Noble Path, a path of living both in and out of formal meditation that helps us continue to see, to stay in touch with the truth of what we are, to live in a non-harming way and in a way that helps us continue to stay awake with what is true.

But as you can see, the first two are a little heavy.

I have a lot of respect for people who are on their first long retreat, because as a couple of people said to me just today, "I had no idea what I was getting into. If I had known beforehand, I probably wouldn't have come." We have this idea that meditation leads us to greater peace and bliss—which is true—but the path it leads us through is not one of greater peace and bliss. For the odd moment, we might have that. But when we really sit down and walk and go through the day, it's really hard. Not always, but frequently. And the question arises as to why. Why does it have to be so hard? That's what I want to talk about in speaking of these truths.

It's said that when the Buddha first came to his great awakening and with his omniscient eye could look all around the world and see everybody, what he saw was that everybody in the world only wants to be happy. But in our ignorance—ignorance really meaning blindness, not seeing what is true—in our ignorance, in trying to be happy, we keep on doing just the thing that makes us more miserable. And not getting it, we do it more, and we do it more, and then we don't understand why our lives feel like such a mess. This is what motivated him, it is said, to teach, out of his great compassion for our poor, ignorant, confused condition.

When we speak about ignorance, ignorance being like the root of our confusion and our actions, one of my teachers described ignorance as having two manifestations. I like this a lot as a way to help me understand it. Ignorance, as I said, is really blindness. In one aspect of this blindness, we don't see what's here. We just don't see the truth of what's right in front of our face. Actually, it's closer than the front of our face. It's inside of us. It's what we are, and we just don't see it. And then, in not seeing what's true, we take what we do see, construct all kinds of confused things about it, and proceed to see what isn't here and act as if that's true. That's what we live from.

I feel that the Buddha, especially in his first two truths of unsatisfactoriness and craving, is speaking to this blindness. It's sometimes hard to hear because we don't want it to be that way. We want it to be different. Yeah, that's the whole problem—we want it to be different. If we can just allow ourselves to open and see things how they

are, then a whole other possibility of how to be, how to exist, of knowing what we are, opens up to us. This is really what our practice is about. This is what we experience here many times in small ways, if you allow yourself to notice it.

Actually, coming to understand, to open to this unsatisfactory quality and the power of craving, is not depressing at all. It has been and continues to be an incredibly freeing way of being in the world.

So we'll talk a bit about each of these three truths that the Buddha spoke of. There's a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a great Indian wise man: "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain."

And so that's what the Buddha is talking about. What this does is obscure our true being. It doesn't deny it. It can't change it. All it does is serve as a mist between what we know and what our true being is.

Speaking to these forms of blindness, this truth of unsatisfactoriness, the Buddha enunciated it in a couple of different ways, in his usual clear list-making fashion. One form of dukkha—I like to use that word because "unsatisfactoriness" is sort of okay, but it doesn't quite give the real meat of it. Dukkha is a great word. Anyway, one is just plain dukkha dukkha, the pain of pain.

Now this one seems clear enough, you'd think. All we have to do is sit here—most of us. There's the odd person here who's not having any experience of physical pain, but most of us just have to sit for a few hours and hello old friend, we're introduced to physical pain. Or read the newspapers. It doesn't seem like it's a big secret. So why does he proclaim it?

But when we really look, when I really look at my own experience—are we really open to the fact that there is physical, emotional, mental pain in the world? The Buddha described it as birth, aging, sickness, old age, death, pain, grief and despair, separation from the loved, not getting what we want, coming together with what we dislike. This is dukkha dukkha.

What's our real attitude to it when one of these things arises? Do we really say, "Oh yeah, that's how life is. There's separation, there's pain"? When you're sitting here and something difficult comes up in your physical or mental experience, isn't the usual, perhaps subconscious attitude, "This is a mistake. It shouldn't be happening. If I was doing this right, it wouldn't be happening. Something's wrong with me, with the practice, with whatever."

And in life as well, when someone's really ill, when someone we love dies—these things are really sad. We're not talking about how it shouldn't be sad. But somehow, deep inside, it's hard to accept that this is really an aspect of life. It's not going to go away. Even if we're totally and completely enlightened, we're going to get sick. People we love are going to die. We're going to have to be with things we don't like. There's going to be difficulty.

And the real suffering of it is that we continually try to fight this. It's the struggle against something that we absolutely cannot change that blinds us to the clear perception of our true being.

This doesn't mean that if there's something difficult in life, or our job is horrendous, and we can with great care and attention make a switch, we shouldn't do it. This isn't saying go out and look for pain or don't act in an intelligent manner. But it's just saying: acknowledge what's really happening when it's really happening.

It has been to me a very deep and ongoing teaching to see how much I struggle and how much I try to change, to pretend things aren't the way they are. And that's the real suffering, really, much more than the pain or the unpleasantness itself.

And this to me is not depressing. I know it sounds really cheery. It is not depressing because it opens the possibility to relate to life in such a different way.

The denial runs really deeply. Here are a couple of examples. Sometimes we deny because it's really hard to feel in ourselves. All our life, our training, our deep conditioning is: as soon as it's difficult, go in the other direction. And as long as this works, it's fine. What happens when we sit down here is it doesn't work anymore. So we develop all kinds of denial, outer and inner.

I've told this before, but once I was in the hospital and a doctor was doing a relatively painful procedure—not terrible, but painful. I was kind of stretched thin and I started to cry. And he looked at me and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

And just, you know, if he let in that it was hurting me, that would be really painful for him.

Another way I look at denial in myself is when I go to India. India is a very painful place to be because all the suffering that we hide away is just right out there on the street. Life, birth, death, sickness, filth—it's all just right out there. So one thing I watch in myself—I've gotten better at just observing and not judging too harshly—is how long do I stay open to all the beggars? Because anywhere you go, there's just a stream of beg-

gars, really sad and painful to encounter. People that are really emaciated, small children, people who are maimed with withered limbs, people with leprosy. It's really quite painful for me to see.

And everyone does their own dance with how much to give and when to stop. Because you could give everything you have in five minutes and it's over and it does nothing. It doesn't end it; just more people come until you're besieged. But anyway, I just watch in myself: how long can I stay open, and when do I shut down? And I shut down simply by pulling down a wall, averting eye contact, no longer making a connection. Because I could stay open and still not give. It's not the giving as much as the being willing to be there and present and participate in this aspect of humanity. And it's hard.

I think for most of us, we do hit a place where the suffering, inner or outer, is just overwhelming and we need to shut down. Well, we do. It's kind of out of our control. It's like there's some mechanism that says, "Okay, that's enough," and we shut down and take a break. On retreats and in life, I respect that. But that's different from a total mass denial where we're not willing to investigate this aspect at all.

One thing I find helpful is to investigate when I do shut down—what's the nature of shutting down, what goes on in that process. Because that helps me to see, well, what's the point of opening to all this anyway? I could just, as a friend of mine did, go to India and find the pain is really just too much. So he would stay in a nice hotel, just go eat at the American Embassy. And I can respect that's the level of pain one can let in at that time. But investigating why, and what happens when we open—why is it worth it?

I can see that for me, the shutting down usually comes out of fear. And the fear comes again out of this blindness, of not seeing clearly what's really true. So the fear is that, "Oh no, it's going to be this way forever. I'm going to die from this. I'm going to be destroyed." Even if the mind doesn't actually say that, that's the feeling: this is going to destroy me.

Now what's interesting is that this "that's going to destroy me" could be a cramp in my toe during a sitting, or it could be some really overwhelming painful experience in life. It's that same quality of, "Oh no, I can't be with this. It's going to destroy me." There's not seeing the impermanence, that everything changes. And also for me, a sense of misidentification. Somehow that pain, physical or emotional, inner or outer—I think that's me. The pain that I feel has become so big it fills the whole world, and that's me. The burning in the knee, if I just be with it as burning—it hurts, it comes, it goes, it's more or less intense—but it doesn't have that gripping quality of "this is who I am and it's never going to change and I got to get out of here."

So when I start to see this, you see that the fear of the pain again comes from our not seeing clearly what is. And this is where our mindfulness practice is so helpful.

The other thing I see is that when I'm shut down in fear, in pain of whatever sort, we can't shut down selectively. So for example, again with the beggars in India—because it's a really clear example to me—as soon as I shut down because I can't take in the pain anymore, also what shuts down is any sense of our human connectedness, any sense of joy, of compassion, of love, appreciation of the moment. It's all shut down. I can't say, "I'm shutting down, I don't want to feel the pain, but I'm also going to really appreciate the beauty of the moment." It's not possible.

When our energy is sucked into fear and denial of what is, that's the struggle that keeps us from seeing and appreciating the truth of who we are. And so I notice when I open up that again, there's a sense of eye contact. The people, whether I give or not, I feel the pain.

I feel the pain of not being able to give. The pain of not being able to do anything. But there's also a human connectedness, a sense of our own interrelatedness, and also the possibility of appreciating just what is in this moment, however it is. The possibility of knowing ourselves as we truly are. Pain still stays pain. It doesn't all transform into clouds of bliss. But the attitude shift allows something else to emerge.

I've found in my life that the more I'm able to acknowledge and be with difficulty, the more I've been discovering a commensurate increase in equanimity, yes, but also in real appreciation and joy in life. I really feel a lot happier than I did twenty years ago, and I honestly feel that it's from the willingness to be with things as they are, not needing outer things to support it.

The second aspect of dukkha that the Buddha talked about is that of change—that things change. Again, this is one that intellectually is incredibly obvious. We would all agree on that. But it's also a truth that while we intellectually agree on it, we actually viscerally live as if it's not true. And so this again can bring in a real sense of confusion and conflict. Because if we look to anything—any sense experience, any emotional state, any person, any situation, any condition—as that thing which is somehow going to bring us lasting happiness, it can't do it. It's impossible because nothing is lasting in the long term. And because we forget this, we keep running into confusion. This is that blindness.

It's not to say that because things change that means they're bad or that we can't enjoy. Actually, the appreciation of experience can be much richer and deeper. I was thinking about this as I walked up here tonight, looking at the sunset. It's incredibly

beautiful and people are out there looking at it. If the sunset stayed all day and night, it somehow would lose some of the poignancy, some of the sense of beauty. We can really appreciate it. And we don't really think, "Oh no, the sun went down again. It's so sad." There's a way that some things we can really accept.

Well, all of life can be that way. We can really appreciate, really value, really live quite richly with whatever it is that we're meeting in our experience at this moment. The fact that it's impermanent doesn't mean we shun it—"Oh, I hate it. It's never going to give me lasting pleasure, so let's not have it at all." It doesn't lead to aversion in that way, but just to seeing things as they really are.

And again, we often tend to see change as a mistake. A year ago, I moved into a little cottage that had just been built brand new. After about a month, I walked into the main living room and there's this big crack on the wall where the plaster was settling. And I thought, "Oh my God, they did it wrong. The house is falling apart." And then I realized, oh no, this is what happens. Things change. Nothing stays the same and perfect. I really noticed there was like one second of that house when everything was clean and new and perfect. And that was it. Since then it's been just ongoing decay. It's sort of like our bodies—some of them decay faster than others.

And we still are amazed by it. I must say I've been noticing this retreat, for some reason the conversations, especially in the staff dining room or among the teachers, keep coming around to old age and middle age and how we're all creeping up there, and decay of the body. Somehow we put on this nice veneer—of course we know that. But why are we talking about it like it's a shock if we really, really lived as if we know this is what's going to happen? Somewhere deep down, it's amazing. How did I get to be forty-one years old? I'm still a kid. And I imagine I see my father. He's seventy-five and he's sitting there going, how?

75? I still feel 20. And it's really so interesting to see how we can keep on doing this.

So really getting it, really opening to the fact that everything comes and goes, can open us to a life of much more appreciation and a whole lot less suffering. Because what the Buddha saw is that we keep doing just the opposite of what would make us happy. The main thing we're doing is looking, craving for insubstantial, impermanent things to bring us happiness. And when one doesn't do it, we go on to the next, and we don't see this. When we really deeply know in our guts that nothing's going to last, a huge space opens up.

Why it's so hard to really, really know this, I don't know. I would think I really know it, but on retreat, you're sitting here—how many mind states have you had today? And how likely is it that the next strong one that comes, like, "Oh no, this is it. I'm going to be like this the rest of the retreat, I can't stand it, I'm going home"—even though we know it's all just flashing through.

Sometimes people say, "Who needs to look this closely?" It just seems a little too overwhelming and depressing, especially since I haven't added the third form that the Buddha spoke of. And I'm just going to touch on it lightly. But it's a very subtle underlying sense of the oppressiveness of things that we're not usually even aware of. See, I knew you'd really want to hear this one.

I'll just give one really simple example, which I actually read about in one of Jack's books. There's a type of vipassana meditation where you just really focus on when you move—why are you moving? And if we really pay attention, when we're lying in bed, if you didn't have to get up for the bell and you could just lie there as long as you wanted, you'd think that would be the most comfortable position. But sooner or later, what happens? You have to pee, your back starts to hurt, you get hungry, or you get bored, or you get restless, or something gets uncomfortable. And so we get up and move. And then we take a shower and that feels good, but how long can you stay under the shower? You start to wither up and turn into a prune and it doesn't feel good, and—oh—get out of the shower. And you can just follow this through the day.

Now admittedly, if this is all you focused on, it could get really demoralizing. There are times in practice when quite naturally, not of our choice, the mind does sort of focus on these things. We call those dukkha times. And they really are. Because what you're seeing is true, but it's imbalanced. It's out of balance. You're only seeing that, and none of the joy, none of the peace, none of the equanimity—just overwhelming dukkha. So it's true, but it's not in balance if that's all you see.

But even so, this truth of unsatisfactoriness has been to me one of the most freeing things, over and over, in my experience. And so that's one of the reasons I really feel it's important to talk about. Like for an example, I'll be in some situation in my life where I have to figure out, should I move here or should I move there? Some kind of big decision, and I'm all knotted up trying to figure out the right thing. And I could be like this for days, and suddenly it hits me: there is no right thing that's going to make me always happy. What I'm caught up in is thinking that if I figure out the exact right thing, then I'm always going to be happy. There's no such thing. That immediately, when that

thought comes up, I get tremendously happy, because I'm not looking in the wrong place anymore. And I can still go ahead and make the decision, but there's such a freedom and spaciousness about it. That happens to me quite a bit.

So anyway, that's the first noble truth. And in a way, it's one of the ways of blindness—not seeing what's here, not able to accept things as they are.

The second noble truth, the cause of suffering, the cause of a lot of our distress, is this energy, this movement of craving, this thirsting for something. Whatever it is, the object actually doesn't make any difference. It's this movement of craving that we think is going to make us happy. Craving—and it is always—craving for that which changes, that which is insubstantial. There's no solidity, no solid self-existence. This craving has never given peace to anyone. This is really the crux. This is what the Buddha saw us doing endlessly. And we keep focusing on the object.

We think, well, this one didn't do it, so I'll try another one. It goes from money to cars to family to relationship to spiritual practice to states of mind to states of absorption. It's just endless. The objects can get more and more refined, but the suffering and the delusion are still running our lives.

So much of our life is spent in this tandem: it's unpleasant, let me out of here; it's pleasant, let me go have it. And then grieving when it's gone and wondering why we're so confused. Craving is born of not seeing what's true, born of the denial of the unsatisfactory nature of experience and the fact that everything is going to change.

In the instructions this morning, Sylvia spoke about noticing the pleasant or unpleasant or neutral aspect of an experience. This feeling quality arises with every sense experience we have—mental sense experience, sight, sound, taste, touch, smell. What's fascinating about mindfulness practice is that we can begin to see how, on a moment-to-moment level, this energy of thirsting, of craving, arises. And how it doesn't have to get so out of hand.

Every time there's a pleasant feeling, when we're not paying attention, our natural conditioning all our life is that the mind moves forward to it, the heart moves forward to it. When it's unpleasant, we push it away, back off. When it's neutral, we usually don't even notice it. So that's again the ignorance, the blindness. It becomes a good time to just zone out or feel bored and try to make something happen.

It's important to really begin to look at this because, in a funny way, when we don't examine the nature of craving and our actual experience of it, it feels like there's something really sweet about it. The Buddha even said once that craving is accompanied with delight.

When you're sitting here and you go off in a long daydream—maybe a food fantasy, or you've gotten involved in what we call a VR, a Vipassana romance, where you've really latched onto someone you've never met, never talked to, know nothing about, and the mind is just off into craving and wanting and fantasy building—in that moment, it can feel really kind of sweet. That moment usually goes on for twenty-five moments when it feels really sweet like that. We're not really examining it.

When we come out of it, what's the result? You suddenly wake up and you're sitting here. Has that really made things a lot sweeter? It's usually, "Oh, here I am sitting here again with the breath. Right, right. And that person doesn't even know me and nothing's going to happen." We usually end up more discontented with the way things are, less in touch with the way things are. If it was a food fantasy and you go to lunch and that thing wasn't served, it makes us much more disgruntled with what actually is served, much harder to appreciate.

So though we think it's sweet, when we examine it, what we find about craving is that it distorts our perception. We don't see things the way they are—things become kind of distorted so we see what we want. When you're having this strong Vipassana romance, the things that you make up about that person... could anybody be so perfect and loving? No way! The mind is completely distorted, and usually you only need to have two sentences with that person after the retreat and you think, "Oh my God." Once in a while I do know some where the people got together and got married, but it's rare, believe me. And then they also found out that nobody's that perfect. Nobody.

There's the saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. That's how we distort things through the energy of craving. So it's not about hating it. Our mindfulness practice is to understand it. It's through understanding that we're freed from the confusion, from the distortion.

Krishnamurti said, "By themselves neither pleasure nor pain enlighten. Only understanding does." That's what our practice is about. We're not looking for pain. We're not looking for pleasure. They're both fine when they come. It's the understanding of what's happening that allows us to open to the truth.

To understand craving, again, we use our practice of simply coming back and being here when it arises. How does it feel in the moment?

You're sitting here, there's a thought, a sound, a sensation, another thought, you're noticing it, or perhaps you're a little spaced out, and suddenly—*glom*—something in your experience has been clutched onto, and craving has started.

If in that moment it's noticed, *ah, craving*, then in that moment the craving is not increasing. It's not being fed. Simply seeing, in that moment of mindfulness, we're seeing craving, but actually it's not being created. It's not arising in that moment. It doesn't necessarily have to go on.

When we don't see it, it builds. It leads to more fantasies, more solidity. And besides the fact of the craving getting so strong that you might find yourself jumping out of the hall and running to satisfy it, what's really happening is this: it's not that the thing you're wanting so much is so important. The craving itself is so uncomfortable that we do anything not to have to feel it. And mostly in our culture, we can get away with that to a huge extent. We can satisfy a lot of our cravings. So again, we have the feeling that if I'm craving and I can't have the thing, something is wrong.

With our practice, we can just sit and be with the craving, watch it come, feel its discomfort, explore it. And you know, it just fades away at some point, no matter how strong. This is really an amazing process that we're putting ourselves in, that we're opening ourselves up to explore. Not to have to spend our lives running back and forth between avoiding the unpleasant and trying to get what we crave. It opens up a huge space of intelligent choice, a huge space of freedom.

So play with it, sitting here. Play with it with little cravings. Wanting an apple. Wanting to go get water. I play with it—sometimes I'll walk into a store and look at clothes and see myself really want something and just walk out. It's kind of fun to play with. We're not going to die from craving. We might die from trying to satisfy it.

When we're lost in craving, really lost in it—not observing it mindfully, but lost in it—both kinds of ignorance are present. Craving arises in the first place because we're not seeing what's true. Because we're not seeing the insubstantial, impermanent nature of things, we're somehow thinking that satisfying the craving is going to bring us lasting fulfillment. And when it's present, as I said, craving not only distorts so that we don't see what's here, it also distorts so that we see what's not here.

I told this story last year, but it's so perfect I can't help using it again. It actually happened here last year with an anonymous, unnamed person. It was late in the retreat, really hot in the afternoon, and I was sitting talking to some people who had come by to visit for a little while. In the course of it, one of them mentioned some new place down the road where they made these great milkshakes.

Now, in that moment, craving arose in my mind. It was not noted, it was not noticed, and it got really solid. Immediately the distortion began. I wanted those people to leave—like immediately—so I could go and get a milkshake. Two minutes before, I hadn't thought of a milkshake for two weeks. It wasn't something I needed, but the mind gloms on.

So I was no longer appreciating these people. I kind of stopped talking, shut down, and said to my friend, "Let's go get a milkshake, let's go get a milkshake." And they left, finally.

When we're in the grip of craving, it also distorts our perception of appropriate behavior. I think we had maybe twenty minutes before the next sitting. We leapt in the car, went flying out looking for this milkshake, and got to the place. It was maybe five past three and it had closed at three.

So instead of stopping there, we said, "Well, there must be somewhere in this whole strip that we could get a milkshake." You can see, at this point, the craving itself has taken over. There's no sense—I mean, who even cared about a milkshake at this point? It was just the craving energy.

So I'm driving. We're going down the road, trying to look at all these different places. And my friend yells, "There it is! There it is! Yogurt cafe."

That's it. And I said, oh, great. And I looked over, and it said, "Urgent Care." I swear.

This is a little example of what happens to us all the time. This is craving. You just don't know what the heck is going on, and you'll do anything to satisfy it.

So that's why I say, when you're sitting here, no matter what the craving is for, just some little thing, and you can really be mindful of it—notice it's coming, its movements, and how it just fades out—this might not seem like much, but it's really an important and powerful experience. Because it's a movement out of the distortion of ignorance to clarity, to really being able to see things as they are and to not be driven by habit and by discomfort. It really allows for us to open into freedom.

And that brings us to the third truth that the Buddha spoke of: that there is an ending in our experience to confusion, to getting lost in the movement of craving.

So if craving is the mist between us and freedom, the good news is, yes, it's only a mist. There are a lot of ways to talk about this ending of suffering, this ending of the movements, the pain of craving and aversion. On the deepest level, it's really living in a

way that craving does not arise. And that comes about through really deep seeing, experiencing the true nature of existence, of who we are beyond the temporary manifestations of our mental functioning, of our body.

And it really is impossible to describe, you know. I was with one teacher, and he was pointing to different people and saying, "Well, everyone describes and manifests this differently. For you it's love, for you it's peace, for you it's silence, for you it's emptiness, for you it's fullness, for you it's joy." But what the truth is, is that it's here and now and always accessible when we're not lost, when we're not seeing things in a distorted way.

I wanted to read one poetical description. This is a Tibetan poetical description of our true nature. Again, it's poetical. Anything you say isn't exactly it:

When left to itself, ordinary mind is fresh and naked.
If observed, it is a vivid clarity without anything to see.
A direct awareness, sharp and awake.
It is not permanent, since it does not exist at all.
It is not nothingness, since it is vividly clear and awake.
It is not oneness, since many things are cognized and known.
It is not plurality, since the many things known are inseparable in one taste.
It is not somewhere else.
It is your own awareness itself.
The face of this primordial protector dwelling in your heart can be directly perceived in this very instant.

In this very instant. And when we touch that and acknowledge, allow ourselves to know that, clinging just doesn't make any sense. So of course it doesn't arise. Why should clinging arise when, in Thich Nhat Hanh's words, the idea is that you do not put something in front of you and run after it, because everything is already here in yourself. Everything is already here in yourself. It makes absolutely no sense to run after anything. And this is true for all of us with no exceptions.

Mindfulness is really a tool that facilitates our cutting through our confused and distorted ways of perceiving, of thinking about things, to just touch things as they are in any moment of our experience. It makes no difference what it is that's happening. No difference at all.

And that's another level that is sometimes spoken of as freedom. Sometimes a moment of mindfulness is spoken of as a moment of freedom. It's a way of tasting. Because in a kind of microscopic sense, mindfulness is this quality of direct, bare attention, being fully with something just as it is. Say craving—knowing it just as it is, sensations,

without a lot of story, without any interpretation, just clearly knowing it, without wanting and without pulling away. In that moment of direct being with, knowing without any movement of mind, in that moment greed, delusion, anger are not arising. Even though the next moment they might, in that moment they're not. And we all have many moments of this. Sometimes they're so

They're not lights going off. We sometimes don't notice them. But I really would like to suggest starting to pay attention. There's a real peace in these moments when the mind isn't caught in craving and aversion and confusion. Some are more noticeable than others. I can't imagine you could be here this whole ten days and not have lots of moments like that—moments when things feel so exquisite. It might be the sunset, or a little lizard that you see, or a particular cup of tea that you have, or a particular footstep that you take. It could be anything. But just that sense of the exquisiteness of a particular moment.

A lot of times—and I can remember lots of particular moments like that—they're more vivid usually in retreats because there's more stillness in the mind. And for years I would attribute the exquisiteness of that moment to the thing that was happening. That was a particularly beautiful rose, or a particularly cute lizard. I remember one lizard from fifteen years ago, sitting in a chair and this little blue lizard went by. Why do I remember that moment as being so exquisite? It's not that that lizard was any different from any other lizard, not more special. But the exquisiteness comes from a mind and heart, a being that's at peace. It's not wanting, it's not pulling away. It just is, touching that primordial protector—whatever you want to call it—that space of emptiness, of fullness, of love.

We all touch that. See if you can just be with and appreciate that, and not look for an object as the cause of it. You'll find that if you try to recreate that cup of tea again, it doesn't happen, because it's not the cup of tea. So just noticing these moments of mindfulness—a little taste of a moment of freedom, momentary freedom from suffering and confusion. It's really amazing what just this gentle paying attention can do, how it can work such wonders.

So that's the three noble truths. Sylvia will talk tomorrow night about the path, the Eightfold Path of living, of developing both in and out of formal meditation, of living in a way that continues to open us to the truth of what is.

I want to end with a couple of things. One is that in a way, yes, we put in a huge effort to be mindful, to be with what is. But in another way, we don't have to try so hard. Sometimes we try so hard that we don't see what's right here, closer than our nose. So can we just, with our mindfulness, settle back into what is, just as it is, and allow that to unfold under the sunlight of mindfulness?

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Nothing physical or mental can give you freedom. You are free once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you." And that comes about simply through understanding.

Let's sit together for a few minutes.

It is not permanent since it does not exist at all. It is not nothingness since it is vividly clear and awake. It is not oneness since many things are cognized and known. It is not plurality since the many things known are inseparable in one taste. It is not somewhere else. It is your own awareness itself. The face of this primordial protector dwelling in your heart can be directly perceived in this very instant.

around the world are involved in the same process or quest or opening that we're involved in here.

One of the great preoccupations of human beings over the millennia has been to find that which brings transcendence, or brings us to touch that which is sacred or timeless—that which takes us beyond the small and limited sense of ourselves and the world. In all cultures, this is the journey of the yogi, the healer, the wise man, the medicine person, the wise woman, the shaman. And although it may take many forms, in some ways it's a universal journey. A journey from being unconscious or lost, from living in an ordinary kind of reality, to opening beyond that and discovering that which is sacred or holy. The root of the word "holy" is "whole"—not cut off, not separate from anything in life, wise in all the realms.

So here we are together in the desert, participating in this great universal journey. There are six stages or aspects to this journey.

The first is that of renunciation. Our life may be fine in an ordinary way, but often there comes to us a sense of some other possibility. There must be more, even if we're successful. One very famous and rich author wrote, "There must be more than having everything. There must be more to life than having everything." There's some sense that we come to that there's some other possibility within us and in life.

For some, life isn't okay. We look out at the world and see one war or one revolution supplanting another, whether in the Middle East or Central America or Asia. The democracy in the Soviet Union, which is so wonderful and exciting, and then all of a sudden the ethnic fighting and rivalries in Eastern Europe and parts of the old Soviet Union. We see that something is amiss in the world. Or we see in our own culture a kind of loss and sadness, a longing for connection that we used to share. So many people busy and isolated, lost in consumerism or desireism. As Joseph Campbell said, you climb the ladder only to discover it was against the wrong wall.

There was a cartoon in The New Yorker which showed the three monkeys sitting—one with hands over the eyes, one with hands over the ears, one with hands over the mouth—and then a fourth monkey in the same room saying, "I think there's some denial going on here."

The addicted society. Anne Wilson Schaef writes that the substance and process addictions so common in our culture—gambling, alcohol, drugs, sexuality, workaholism, so many kinds—usually have a meaning beyond our personal dilemma. The modern society in which we live needs addictions, and its very essence fosters them. It fosters addictions because the best-adjusted person in this society is the person who is not dead and not alive, just numb—a zombie. When you're dead, you're not able to do the work of society, and if you are fully alive, you are constantly saying no to many of the processes of the society: the racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threat, the arms race, drinking unsafe water, eating carcinogenic foods. Thus, it is in the interests of modern society to promote those things that take the edge off, that keep us busy with our fixes and keep us slightly numbed out, zombie-like. Consequently, the society itself not only encourages addictions—it functions as an addict. A very powerful indictment of the way we can sleep in our culture.

For some, the renunciation comes very personally—because of our own isolation or loneliness or pain that we've suffered, or past abuse, or because we face the fact of death in someone we love. We want some understanding of this, or we live along and all of a sudden we're surprised.

One day, when the Sultan was in his palace at Damascus, a beautiful youth who was his favorite rushed into his presence, crying out in great agitation that he must fly at once to Baghdad, imploring leave to borrow His Majesty's swiftest horse. The Sultan asked why he was in such a hurry. "The cause," the young man answered, "is that as I passed through the gardens of the palace just now, Death was standing there. And when he saw me, he stretched out his arms as if to threaten me. I must lose no time in escaping from him." The young man was given leave to take the Sultan's horse and fly. When

he was gone, the Sultan went down indignantly to the garden and found Death still there. "How dare you make threatening gestures at my favorite," he cried, "in my own garden!" But Death, astonished, answered, "I assure Your Majesty, I did not threaten him. I only threw up my arms in surprise at seeing him here, because I have a tryst with him tonight in Baghdad."

So that happens. We think it won't happen, or it doesn't happen to people close to us, or to ourselves. But we start to look and see that life changes. Karma changes, said the Buddha, like the flick of a horse's tail. Praise and blame and gain and loss and pleasure and pain. And if we don't want to live at the mercy of these elements, we must sense that there's some other way to be in the world—not just following what we like and what we don't like.

Somewhere in us we sense another way, and we let go for a moment of our habit, our usual way, and begin—not by doing something, but by stopping. To listen to the stars, to our breath, to the wind around us, to our hearts.

Often it's a lonely journey, at least in part. We have community and sangha. In many traditions there's a company of those who practice. But in the end, one does it alone. The wonderful old Huichol Indian shaman from Mexico, Don José Ríos, with whom I studied at some point early in my practice, wrote: "I've practiced my apprenticeship for eighty-four years. Many times have I gone to the mountains alone. Yes, I've endured much suffering in my life."

But to do this, to hear the voices of the gods, you too must go to the mountains. For it is not I who can teach you the ways of the gods. The gods are heard only alone and only in solitude.

That being alone is really the solitude of the heart. It's what the silence here allows you—that listening in yourself. There's a turning from the ordinary of our life to listen in a deeper way, sensing that there's some mystery, some possibility.

Then the second stage of this journey is a sacred question. Each of us will have our own version. Each of us has to listen for our own sacred question.

During the Kuwait war this last winter, a friend of mine, a poet and peace activist, was very upset by it. She went to Europe to try to come to terms with the war. She visited the concentration camps and spent a couple of weeks there after the war broke out, sitting in the crematoriums, sifting the sand and the ashes of the bones of people. She meditated on what makes enemies and how we learn to hate one another, writing letters from there to everyone she could as the understanding grew in her. That was her question: What makes us do that to one another?

Another friend sought the answers to his sacred question through working with the dying, through hospice work. He's done years of hospice work now. Recently when I was with him, he told me about a man dying in his hospice—fifty, a hundred, two hundred people die a year there. He said this was an older man and his two children were attending to him. They came in alarmed one day and said they had just received an emergency phone call. Their father was on the verge of death, but the phone call told them that his youngest brother had been killed that day in a car accident. Should they tell him? Would it disturb his process of dying?

They went back and forth. Maybe they shouldn't say anything. Finally, they decided just to leave him be in peace. They went into the room where he was indeed near death and sat by his bed with my friend, the hospice director, together there with them. After they sat down for a minute, he looked at them and said, "Don't you have something to tell me?" They said, "What do you mean?" He said, "About my brother dying." They said, "How could you know? How do you know?" He said, "Oh, I've been talking to him." Then in a few minutes he said the last things he had to say to his son and his daughter, closed his eyes, and died.

Now, how do you understand that? How does anyone understand this mystery that we're born into this life? Where does it come from? And where does it go?

During the three-month retreat one year at Barre, at the end of the retreat, this great Korean Zen master, Kusan, came to visit. People had been sitting and walking like this for weeks and weeks. He came and gave a little Zen lecture and asked a few questions about vipassana. Then he said, "Oh, you're doing it all wrong"—which was pretty alarming to these people. He said, "Don't waste your time with vipassana." He said, "Only one question: What is this? What is this? Forget all the rest of that meditation." Of course, what you're doing actually is sitting and seeing what is this. Or maybe your question is, how can I love well? Or how can I live fully in this life? Or what does it mean to be free? But somewhere in us there comes this wanting to awaken, to know, to see.

Now, based on this renunciation, this question that comes in our being, we must then undertake some discipline.

It requires a vehicle, some discipline, some practice, some way to break open the shell of our habit, of our conditioning, of this small sense of self that we have been caught in.

Sometimes, of course, it happens by accident. Travel or birth or death or some special event in life will awaken us for a moment or a day. But to really awaken and integrate it, the path of the yogi or the wise person or the shaman generally requires some repetitive discipline—chanting over and over, praying over and over, going into solitude, seeking visions.

In the Native American tradition, one group of Indians in their shamanic practices would have a large ground stone and a small one, the small one representing the sun as it went around the earth, as it seemed to go around the earth. And the person seeking a vision would go and sit day and night, simply rolling this small sphere around the larger one, concentrating on it and looking at the mystery of the circularity of those two until something opened up in them.

Here we're doing it with the breath and our steps. We meditate. We take a seat. And it's really very simple. As James talked about last night, it's manual labor. It's repetitive. It's just like being a parent. You have a young child and the child wakes up at night and you have to go in there. In the morning again, you get the child dressed and you feed the child. And then the child needs its diaper changed. As soon as you've gotten all the clothes on, you take them all off, change the diaper, put them all on again. And you do that over and over, a thousand times.

Boredom is a part of meditation. In fact, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche said that when you get really bored, it should be considered good news—that you're finally letting yourself be here and not somewhere else. A kind of appreciation for the monotony of life itself. The rhythms of the sunrise and sunset and the moon rising, the rhythms of the seasons, the rhythms of your breath.

There's a story of a somewhat crabby dowager who lived in an apartment building in New York. She went out of her apartment and pressed the button for the elevator, and it didn't come for a while. She pressed it again a number of times and waited more and more impatiently. Finally the elevator arrived and she looked at the elevator boy and said, "Where have you been?" And he looked at her and said, "Lady, where can you go in an elevator?"

It's like that. You're sitting here, you go up, you go down, you go up, you go down. Your breath comes in, it goes out. You're happy, you're sad. And part of what really brings the learning in meditation is that willingness to stay with these things that make up our life and pay attention to them.

The Buddha begins the four foundations of mindfulness, speaking to the Kurus in the marketplace, saying, "My friends, there's a most wonderful way to realize purification and overcome grief and sorrow and pain and anxiety and realize freedom, or nirvana." And he says, "Sit yourself down under a tree or in a quiet place. Be aware when you breathe in and when you breathe out. Be aware of the feelings that arise. Be aware of the thoughts as they arise. Be aware of contraction, grasping, fear, desire. Be aware of releasing, letting go. Openness. Freedom."

We do it over and over and over again.

Now traditionally, there are outer circumstances—forest monks sitting in the woods with tigers in the distance roaring, sitting out in sun and rain, in caves during storms. We don't need that. All you have to do is sit here with your boredom, your doubt, your fear, your longing, your pain, the storms that come. There's plenty of difficult weather. There's plenty of circumstances. Just sitting here and being with yourself.

Gandhi said, "I have only three enemies. My favorite enemy, the one most easily influenced for the better, is the entire British Empire. My second enemy, the Indian people, is far more difficult." And if any of you have traveled in India, you understand just what he means. "But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him, I seem to have very little influence."

So what it is, is this discipline to sit and walk and breathe and pay attention and acknowledge what's here, and do it over and over and over. And distractions come and the elevator goes up and the elevator goes down. And we discover in the midst of this a capacity of our heart and our mind to stay present.

I have had a number of friends and members of the sangha who have died over these past years in the AIDS epidemic. One close friend I used to go and sit with at times got to the point where he couldn't speak much, and we would just sit and hold hands and breathe together. Or when I couldn't visit him, I would call him on the phone and I would chant to him on the telephone, and then I'd say, "All right, let's breathe together." And we would just breathe together.

There's something really significant in being there, that present, with death, with pain, with whatever it is—bringing yourself again and again into the moment, facing the difficulties. It's only by doing it over and over, facing the difficulties, letting things come and letting the difficulties teach us, that that which is indestructible in us can be born.

Now it's not done by force or fighting against yourself, but rather it's done by awakening within you this greatness of heart, by your sincerity.

Martin Luther King—I read this passage from him very often—speaking at the most difficult moment of the civil rights marches, when his church had been bombed, when people had been killed, when the kind of freedom and justice that was so obviously necessary for African Americans was so tangibly there, and yet in seeking it, the very seeking brought this immense amount of difficulty and suffering. He said, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win your freedom as well."

So that's the spirit of doing something over and over again with your sincerity, with your whole being.

Now whenever a person undertakes a genuine practice or discipline of truth—as a yogi or a meditator in prayer or meditation, or as an artist, or as someone in marriage, or as a parent, something that you give yourself to really fully—what inevitably arises is the next stage, which is hardship. It's called Mara in the Buddhist tradition. Mara is the name of the god of darkness, the shadow, that which is difficult, the forces of greed, fear, delusion, prejudice. And Mara has the capacity to arise in a thousand different forms.

I don't know if you've noticed Mara during this retreat, but I'll read you a poem from Kabir. He says, "Friend, please tell me about what I can do about this world I hold on to and keep spinning out. I gave up sewn clothes and wore a robe, but one day I noticed how well woven was the cloth. So I bought some burlap, but I still throw it elegantly over my left shoulder. I pulled back my sexual longings and now I discover that I'm angry a lot. I gave up rage and now I notice that I'm greedy all day. I worked hard at dissolving the greed, and now I'm proud of myself. When the mind wants to break its links with the world, it still holds on to something." Kabir says, "Listen, my friend, there are very few that find the path, yet it is right here in front of us."

So there are these thousand forms of Mara. Mara comes in the form of temptation, distraction. "Let's get a little more comfort. Let's go for tea instead of taking a walk. Let's follow this fantasy. Let's have a nap. Let's do this or that." It kind of comes and taps you on the shoulder and says, "Come on, if you do this, you'll be happy." And then you say, "Yes, that sounds really good to me." And off you go in fantasy or action. All those things, and yet you've done it a thousand times, but the voice still is very believable. "Come on, this time it'll really work."

You know, Socrates lived quite frugally, but yet he was often seen going into the marketplace. And so his students said, "What are you doing? You live without even sandals, barefoot and very frugally." And Socrates said, "I love to go to the market and discover how many things I am perfectly happy without."

So Mara comes with all these other things you could be doing or having or feeling. And you see those temptations, the temptations of desire. Or Mara comes in other forms—as fear, "This is too hard, too painful." As aggression. As restlessness. And what you're asked to do is sit and acknowledge, as Carol talked about, these different energies, to name them. Fear, fear. Restless, restless. Desire, desire, desire. Whatever they happen to be. Simply to stay present again and again. And to say, "Oh Mara, here you are in a new form. Nice to see you again. What do you have to say today?"

To really let yourself see it.

I remember being with my teacher Ajahn Chah at one point. We took a trip to a monastery on the border of Cambodia, about eighty miles over dirt roads in this back province. The driver was one of those crazed—I would say third world drivers. You would find them in this country as well, except that there are more policemen here. It was a one-and-a-half-lane dirt road going around over hills and mountains, with water buffalo and ox carts and bicycles and buses, and he was just passing everybody, leaning on the horn half the time, completely unable to see what was ahead. I was sure I was going to die. I mean, it was clear that this was the end of my life.

So I'm sitting there, not even wanting to see as he's passing this bus on the curve, holding on really tight and breathing in meditation, thinking, "Well, maybe I'll use my meditation to die well as a monk anyway." And I look over at Ajahn Chah who's sitting next to me, and his knuckles were white. That felt very good somehow. That was reassuring.

Obviously we made it there—as you can see, I'm still here. After all that time, the car came to a stop at the monastery. He turned over to me and looked at me and said, "Scary, wasn't it?" It was such a lovely moment, because I don't think he was afraid to die. He seemed pretty much at peace with birth and death and whatever it was. That was simply the fact of it. It was the way it was.

So this is what you do with Mara. "Oh, fear arising. Hi, interesting to see you again." Fear, fear. What does it feel like in the body? You name it. Fear, fear. As long as it stays. "Let's see how big you get." Fear, fear, fear. Terror. "Oh, interesting." Terror, terror, terror. If you really acknowledge the feelings that come, they last ten notes or twenty or thirty

labels, and then they turn into something else. Maybe it turns into sadness or calm or interest or anger. Who knows what will happen? But it's just to see that which arises, these hardships.

Then Mara has more subtle temptations. Once you get good at it, as Kabir says, then you feel, "I'm really doing well." Pride arises. Or clarity—"I'm doing so well, I just want to keep this clarity." Or you feel joy or rapture arising. These too are simply to be acknowledged. Joy, joy. "I really like this." Liking, liking, liking. "I hope this doesn't go away." Hoping, hoping. Simply seeing what arises. All of the temptations, pleasant and unpleasant, and sitting in the midst of them.

This is really what the Buddha did. He sat under the Bodhi tree and took a vow to open his eyes and his heart to the entire mystery of life without withdrawing from a single thing. To really let himself see it and know it all. To sit as if in the eye of a storm. To face what Zorba the Greek called "the whole catastrophe."

This, in the shamanic tradition, is called the equilibrium of a shaman—this capacity to enter all the realms of existence and stay balanced.

One of the great inspirations for me in practice was a Tibetan lama and master named Karmapa. His Holiness Karmapa, when he visited this country, was for the most part this most joyful, beautiful being—like a big fifty-five-year-old baby who loved everybody and loved everything. I remember when I first went to see him, he arrived at the airport in Boston. Some friends of mine said, "This great Tibetan lama has come to visit and we're going to the airport. Do you want to come along?"

And I said, okay, sure. Why not? I hear he's a fine teacher.

So there were about twenty of us to meet him at the airport. People brought flowers and bowed and so forth. It was kind of a line. And then it was my turn. And I looked at him. I'd been in monasteries for so long, I thought, well, another fat monk. He seemed like a nice man. He was a little bit round. Nothing good or bad.

And I went up and I kind of bowed a little bit. And he took my head and pushed it all the way down to the floor. Which I think I needed.

Then I got up and I looked at him and I smiled and I walked away. I got about ten feet away from him and all of a sudden I felt cold. It was this complete shock because I wasn't expecting anything. I felt this coldness and all I wanted to do was walk back up and sit at his feet and hug his robes. There was this tremendous field of warmth that was completely unexpected to me.

He would perform the black crown ceremony with this wonderful black hat, a crown that was given to him a thousand years before in a past incarnation by the emperor of China, in which he would become the bodhisattva of infinite compassion—surrounded by monks chanting and Tibetan horns and ancient ceremony. He performed it a number of times in this country, in halls filled with thousands of people. He would place it on his head and take out this crystal rosary and become transformed into the bodhisattva, the god or goddess of infinite compassion.

And I would look at his face and it was the saddest face I'd ever seen. His eyes were as sad as anything I'd ever seen, looking out into the world and seeing the sorrows of every single being. And he would do 108 beads on his rosary and say 108 prayers of compassion for beings everywhere. And then he would put the crystal beads away and put the crown away and complete the ceremony and turn into this big baby again.

It was remarkable. He could be in any realm. He could be anywhere.

In bringing awareness to our practice, in facing hardship, there is a profound healing that takes place if we are willing to not put anything out of our heart. When we sit, we will see our own fear that we've run from, our grief and loss. In fact, one meditation teacher and psychologist at Harvard, a good friend, sees the whole process of meditation as really one of grieving, of letting go of deeper and deeper things.

We'll feel the wounds that we carry in our bodies and in our hearts, the loneliness, the suffering of the world around us that we know—homelessness and warfare and children who don't have enough to eat. We'll feel the pains in our own body that we've carried for such a long time. And what we're asked to do is sit and discover a new way to touch all of this within us.

Here are words from Chögyam Trungpa. He says: "This is the practice of the sacred warrior. What is the awakened heart of a warrior? It is the heart of tenderness and sadness. When you awaken your heart in the face of all the difficulties of the world, you find to your surprise that your heart is empty. You find that you are looking into outer space. What are you? Who are you? Where is your heart?

"If you really look, you won't find anything tangible and solid. Of course, you might find something very solid if you have a grudge against someone or you've fallen possessively in love. But that's not the awakened heart. If you search for the awakened heart, if you put your hand through your ribcage to feel for it, there's nothing there except for tenderness. You feel sore and soft, and if you open your eyes to the rest of the world, you feel tremendous sadness.

"This kind of sadness doesn't come from being mistreated. You don't feel sad because someone has insulted you or because you feel impoverished. Rather, this experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely open. It is like pure raw meat."

Even if a mosquito lands on it, you feel so touched. It is this tender heart of a warrior that has the power to heal the world.

So there's a way, as hardships arise in our practice, that we are asked to learn to transform them—an alchemical transformation from lead or difficulty or pain into the gold of compassion and patience and steadiness and kindness. Thomas Merton says, "True prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone." Just when it is the most difficult is actually when your practice becomes the most interesting and the most compelling. To sit and awaken in the center of those difficulties is to recreate what the Buddha did under the Bodhi tree, for yourself, in this very life, in this body.

One of the most remarkable paintings of the night of his enlightenment is a Tibetan thangka. The Buddha sits there under the Bodhi tree, attacked by the forces of Mara—temptations and aggressions and fear, all the sorrow of the world thrown in his face. Arrows and bows and weapons launched toward him. And he sits under the Bodhi tree facing all of that with his hands raised in this gesture. There's a kind of line painted from his heart to his fingertips, indicating compassion. And he touches each arrow and each spear as it's thrown to him with compassion, and it turns to flower petals and falls at his feet. He's surrounded by mounds of flower petals.

"This is the last lesson," says Don Juan. The transforming power of our own presence, of our love and attention—it is always left for the very last moment, for the moment of ultimate solitude when a person faces their death and aloneness. Only then does it make sense.

So we come through hardship, we face difficulties, and we still stay seated—present, open, wakeful—transforming them with our awareness and our compassion. And from that there comes the next stage, which is transformation itself, or awakening itself. We let go. We surrender. We open. We die a little bit at a time. You do. You die in here every day. You expand yourself. You let the whole capacity of your being open over and over. And then the old sense of yourself starts to shift.

Remember the story of Mullah Nasruddin going into the bank to cash a check? The Sufi fool and wise man. They say, "Could you please identify yourself?" So he pulls a little mirror out of his pocket, looks at it, and says, "Yep, that's me, all right."

We have these notions of our identity. And as we sit and pay attention over and over and over again in deeper ways, and the different parts of ourselves and life and the world show themselves, and we let each arise and acknowledge it with attention and compassion and allow it to pass, then our whole sense of identity opens in a new way. Not through fighting, not through struggle, but by being willing just to be, to open, to let go—we discover something new that is timeless.

Kalu Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama, wonderful master, says, "You live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you understand this, you will discover that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all."

So you discover that none of these things can you possess or hold or say, "This is me." They all come and go—different forces of the heart and body and mind. And there's this space in the middle that knows what is true. Discovering that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. There's this opening, this awakening.

Whitman puts it another way. This is his vision: "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars, and the egg of the wren is equally perfect, and the grain of sand, and the tree toad is the chief work of the highest, and the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven. And the cow crunching grass with lowered head surpasses any statue. And a mouse is a miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

A mouse is a miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels. There's this amazing thing which is our life in front of us. And no one knows how we got here.

How did we get in this body with a funny hole at one end into which we stuff dead plants and animals? That's what we do, right? And move the tube around by kind of falling in different directions against gravity. And come out of the vagina of another person, out of their belly, out of their womb. How does that happen? And here we are, born into this thing, or we are this thing, or something. And then you look out at night and there are all those stars hanging out there, billions of galaxies spinning around.

So there comes somehow this awakening, this realization that's not about solving your problems, but seeing the mystery of birth and death itself—and discovering that what we've longed for, what we've sought for so long, is here, just now, where we are.

Zen Master Suzuki Roshi could say, "If when I die, that's all right, you know. If I suffer, that's all right, you know. Just suffering Buddha, no confusion in it." Sun Buddha, Moon Buddha, Happy Buddha, Sad Buddha—to rest in that which is timeless, that holds birth and death and joy and sorrow. The heart of the Buddha.

When Thomas Merton visited the statues at the great monastery of Polonnaruwa—two-thousand-year-old Buddhas carved out of the cliff of marble—he walked across the grass in bare feet in the early morning. He said they were the most beautiful pieces of art he'd seen in the world. These huge Buddhas smiling, this half-smile knowing of tremendous peace. The peace not of emotional resignation, but of openness that has seen everything without refutation, without argument, without trying to discredit anything. The peace and compassion just of openness.

The Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, and when he awakened, seeing all of life, birth and death, he sang a song. He said, "O house builder, thou art seen at last. The rafters are shattered. The ridge pole is broken. No longer shall you build this house of sorrow." The Buddha had broken out of the house of desire and grasping. "No longer shall you build this house of sorrow. Freed am I from birth and death. Awakened the unshakable deliverance of heart."

So there comes to each of us in our own way—in days or moments, in ordinary ways or extraordinary ways—some sense of opening beyond the busyness of our life, some transcendence. And then we realize that it is we who know, and not someone else who will tell us, that we found it in ourselves. Tremendous joy in that opening and discovery.

And then of course one has to go back. You go out into the wilderness or up into the mountains only to return again. But because we have let ourselves touch our fear and our sorrow, our aloneness, our death, our rapture, our ambition, our hopes—for some people, their life is more difficult than their death—because we've let ourselves feel and face and sit in the midst of all of this, there comes a kind of fearlessness. The fearlessness of one who has traversed the territory of humanity, of birth and death. And so we become a wise man or a wise woman, a seer, a healer, a bodhisattva—someone who's journeyed through the center of the earth to touch all of these things.

I see retreats as having two great functions: one teaching us how to live, and the other teaching us how to die. Teaching us how to die because if you sit even for ten days or twenty days and really just be with everything that comes, there grows this great capacity. So that when someone you love is dying, you can sit there and hold their hand and breathe with them. And when they feel pain, you can say, "Yes, I know what it's like to sit in pain." Or fear arises and you say, "Yes, I know what it's like to be afraid, to not know." Restlessness arises, boredom arises, all the difficult states. And you can sit there and hold their hand—or when it's time for your own death—and say, "Yes, this I know, this I've learned." It's an enormous gift.

But it's also the gift to be alive. Because as we sit and walk and sit and walk, breathing and feeling our steps and eating and paying attention and reclaiming with our attention the whole of our life, we become more alive. We see more, hear more, and feel more fully. And in being alive, we live from ourselves and not from someone else. It's a wonderful way to live. And out of that, we become happy. That's what the Buddha was called—the happy one.

In the Zen ox herding pictures, the monk goes off in the forest seeking the ox, and then finding it, and taming the ox, and then losing oneself and the ox in both, just in the emptiness of things. Going through this whole journey. And finally in the last stage, returning back to the world. Emptiness let go of, ox let go of. Coming back, there's this wonderful old man with his bag and his bowl and his stick. And he says, "I go to the marketplace with my wine bottle and return home with my staff. I visit the wine shop and the market, and all whom I look upon become enlightened." He speaks of the wine bottle and wine shop because he says, "I go anywhere."

It doesn't matter where it is now. I can enter this world without fear because I don't carry that fear in the way that I used to in my own heart.

And this is really what's offered here—that we too go through this journey. Out of this, we learn the gifts of our heart that we can bring and return back to all of those we touch in our lives. Sometimes it's little by little in monotonous, regular ways: one breath, one step, one sitting. Sometimes it's great moments, mystery of reawakening. It doesn't matter. The elevator goes up, the elevator comes down. And where can you go except here?

So let's sit together.

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars. The egg of the wren is equally perfect, and the grain of sand, and the tree toad a chief work for the highest, and the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven, and the cow crunching grass with lowered head surpasses any statue, and a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

Breathing in and breathing out. Being awake and present. The feelings of the body and heart and mind. Thoughts and images arising and passing. Staying present. Wakeful. In the center of them all.

As we come into the middle portion of this first ten-day retreat, really let yourself settle into the practice. The one thing that you can do—not to strive or force anything—but one of the things that really helps the whole process open is your continuity. Take

care as you stand up and walk out. Take care as you eat. Take care as you change clothes. Just bring that spirit of presence, that spirit of being awake and mindful, and make it a thread throughout the day.

As you take a walk, you can walk far into the desert. That's fine. It's not about denying yourself enjoyment. Some days will be pleasurable. Some may be terrible. That's fine too. But it's to be present and to keep coming back again and again to simply be where you are. And all of the process will open from that.

CHAPTER 244

Nature of Thought

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson investigates one of the most fascinating aspects of meditation practice: the nature of thought and how profoundly it shapes our experience. Beginning with the opening verses of the Dhammapāda—"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts"—she explores how thought, while an amazing tool for communication and understanding, becomes a source of tremendous suffering when we misapprehend its true nature.*
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> *Wilson examines how perception itself becomes distorted when craving, aversion, or delusion operate unseen in the mind, leading to what Buddhist psychology calls "inverted perceptions"—seeing permanence in what is impermanent, satisfaction in what cannot satisfy, and a solid self where none exists. She introduces the concept of papañca (mental proliferation), showing how a single moment of bare perception can rapidly expand into elaborate stories, self-definitions, and emotional reactions that take us far from what is actually happening.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from Nisargadatta Mahārāj, Kalu Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh, Wilson offers practical guidance for working with thought through wise attention (yoniso manasikāra). Rather than fighting thoughts or trying to eliminate them, she encourages practitioners to return again and again to the source of experience—the bare perception before interpretation begins. She closes with the Buddha's profound instruction: "In the seen, there is only the seen"—pointing toward the simplicity that underlies our seemingly complex mental life.*

I want to speak about something that I personally find fascinating. I want to talk about thought—about the power of thought, and how we get so confused by it.

These are the first two verses of the Dhammapada, which is one of the books of the Buddhist suttas, translated in various ways. This is one translation:

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind and suffering will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable.

That speaks to how powerful thoughts can be. Thought is amazing. It's amazing that I can sit here and make these noises and it vibrates in your eardrum and we understand each other—that these sounds in our mind turn into coherent thoughts. It's an amazing tool, and in a way it really does construct the world. When we understand it, it's such a powerful ally.

But how much in our practice, in our lives, do we find ourselves struggling with thought? Countless times people come in for interviews and it kind of slips out somewhere: "I'm trying to get rid of these thoughts," or "I'm still having thoughts. When will I get to the point where there's no more thoughts?"—as if that's what the practice is about. The reason we want to get rid of thoughts is because somehow we know we're suffering tremendously from what we perceive as the presence of the thought.

So really I'd like to suggest that instead of fighting with thoughts, we can turn our attention to seeing them for what they are, understanding how we can get so confused, so caught up, how they can seem so powerful.

If we really look as we sit here and just look at thoughts, what is a thought? It just comes, it goes, it's nothing. It's so ephemeral. "The sky is blue." "The sun just set." "How long will this talk be?" "My hand hurts." A thought is just nothing.

Kalu Rinpoche said—and I think Jack read this quotation from the last retreat, a very powerful one: "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. You are that reality. But we live in illusion and the appearance of things."

So much of that illusion, so much of that appearance of things, is created through thought, through our misperception of thought. We live in illusion through not seeing what's really happening. We live in a dream that we're just making up every moment as we go along, and then we start suffering from it because we believe it's real. Thought is a big contributing factor to this—not thought per se, but our misapprehension of thought.

It seems to be true that we in the West, in our culture, are really a thinking culture. Whenever I've sat a retreat with an Asian teacher, they tend to be really amazed at how much Westerners—or Americans anyway—think. They say, "Ah, you're always thinking." We can't just come in with an experience. We analyze and interpret and compare and try to figure out our motivation and connect it to what happened in our childhood. We can't just sit and feel pressure. We're tortured, and I really have sensed this sometimes in Asian teachers, this sense of real bewilderment at how agonized we can be about simple experiences.

So we try to get rid of the thoughts, but that's not really the source of the suffering. Nisargadatta Maharaj talked once about how if we examine our mind closely, we see that it's seething with thoughts. We don't have to look that closely to see that it's seething with thoughts. And it may go blank occasionally, but as he says, a becalmed mind is not a peaceful mind.

So often we mistake that for peace. The exact quotation is: "This peace is very brittle. What you're calling peace is only the absence of disturbance, temporary absence. Real peace cannot be disturbed."

Real peace is not about the absence of thoughts, necessarily. If that's all that peace was about, we could just have lobotomies and go home. It's true, right? That's all we needed to do. So real peace, as we've said ten million times, and we all need to keep reminding ourselves, comes when we know and understand what's really true in this moment.

So how do we get so caught up in creating this dream world out of misperception and thought? I want to talk about just a few ways, because obviously it can be quite a complex topic.

One of the ways we get confused, which leads to further confusion, is on the basic level of perception itself. Perception, as defined in Buddhist psychological terminology, is a quality that's present in every moment. It's the quality of recognition. It involves memory. It's like a quality of discernment. For example, you recognize warm or cold or blue. This is perception—just seeing what's there.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. In a nutshell, that's our whole practice. Mindfulness practice is about direct experience, which allows for the arising of true knowledge.

So what's this mistaken perception? Why does this happen? How do we misperceive? Some of this I've spoken about before. When in a moment there's present in the mind, unseen, our old friends—and you can guess what old friends they are: craving, aversion or anger, confusion or delusion, or you could call it blindness, really—they actually can affect how we perceive. So we don't perceive accurately.

I've given some examples before. I want to use one that someone told me in an interview, and I hope this person doesn't mind because it's a perfect example. Being in a state of aversion, walking in here, and reading "perceptory" as "purgatory"—but really reading that, you know. The mind does that. And then when you flip back and see

what's really true: "Oh, how could I have ever done that?" But in the moment, you totally believe that perception is accurate. And it leads to a whole constellation of more thoughts, more emotions, more feelings, a really solid construct of what's going on.

So as we said before, that first mistaken perception arises because there's aversion or greed in the mind. And that arises when there's pleasant and unpleasant feeling that we're not aware of, and the mind just naturally moves into craving, aversion, confusion. Even closer to home is what really comes from confusion: not even noticing the feeling, or seeing how one thing is leading to the next. This is happening on a very fine level, but perception is happening in every moment. And so a lot of the time we get really far, far away from what's actually happening. Then we wonder why we feel so out of touch and confused.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When you look at a pencil"—or you look at this, you perceive it, say "okay, gong, bell ringer, whatever," I don't even know what you call this thing—"but the stick itself may be different from the stick in your mind." And that's really how it is.

One example I've used other times in talking about mindfulness, in seeing how the presence of wanting in the mind can distort what we see, was a scientific experiment, a psychological experiment, where the subjects were instructed to watch a video. Given some reward, it was about four or five minutes of a very fast basketball game, and they were instructed to count how many times the ball was passed. So they were really focused—just seeing that tunnel vision you get when there's grasping, when there's wanting in the mind. That was their task.

At the end of the experiment, as they turned in their thing, the experimenter said, "Well, what about that woman in white?"

They said, "What?"

The experimenter said, "Oh yeah, in the middle of the video, this woman dressed all in white with a white parasol kind of sauntered through the middle of the basketball court, in one side and out the other."

Nobody had seen this. Nobody could believe it. You totally trust what your perception is. So they showed them the video again, and there was this woman in white. From then on, you could never see the video and not see the woman in white. But before that, there's no way they could have been convinced that had happened.

Just examples of how perception can be so mistaken. Wow, that's interesting.

[An earthquake occurs during the talk]

There's no reason to go anywhere. Just sit down and relax. Stay right here. Just stay with what is. There's nowhere to go anyway. That was interesting. We're a few miles from the San Andreas Fault actually—it slips once in a while. Just sit down and ground where you are now. Just feel yourself sitting here.

May we be peaceful. May we be present with equanimity and clarity. May we feel our connection with all other beings. We retouch that place of trust in the Dharma where there's nothing to fear. We send love to all beings in this area, wishing for all beings freedom from fear, freedom from danger, freedom from confusion.

Just let your attention come to rest in this present moment. Can we be right here, right now, in this moment?

It's interesting—I was never in an earthquake before. I thought it was kind of interesting. See, we never know. We construct all these ideas out of thought about how things are and what's going to happen. We plan, and you never know.

Not knowing can be like trust in the unknown. It's freedom.

So, where were we? The basketball video, that's right. Anyway, when there is craving or aversion in the mind that goes unseen, it can so color how we perceive that we just don't know what's really happening.

In a way, the root—the even more basic quality in our experience that leads to misperception—is that of ignorance. Perhaps blindness is a better word.

Sometimes when we talk about ignorance, I know I tend to have the feeling that it's this solid thing—something we're born with that we can never escape. But it's really just another experience that arises and passes, same as craving, same as joy. And we can actually begin to feel and experience the qualities of it. In a way, you can sort of recognize sometimes when this blindness is present in your experience.

One way it manifests is simply as confusion, dullness, heaviness—like a fog. Or I think of it like those times when you've slept too long or too warmly, and in your dreams you're trying to wake up and there's this kind of struggle. For me, I'll try to see and everything's upside down, and I just can't come out of it. I can't see clearly, though I know I'm not seeing clearly. That's the quality of fogginess, cloudiness, that this blindness or ignorance can introduce into our experience.

When this is present in a moment, what arises out of it is what's often called wrong view, or a basic distortion of perceiving what's happening due to the cloudiness and fogginess. There's a classic example given in the Buddhist sutras of walking in a forest, although actually here walking in the desert is just as good. If you're walking at night without a flashlight and you really can't see stuff clearly at all—you can kind of tell the trees, you can kind of tell the big cactuses, but everything is really not clear—as you're out walking, you see a really big snake. And it scares you. "What am I doing out here at night? There's snakes all over." You get scared and hurry out, thinking it's dangerous. "I'm out of here." Then if you go back in the daytime, you see it was just a big piece of dead cholla lying on the ground.

So that basic misperception coming about through the cloudiness or confusion—you see how that misperception gives rise to a whole series of assumptions. First there's an unpleasant feeling and fear, and we act on that fear, and we draw assumptions about the desert at night, and it just proliferates. You go back and see it's nothing, and you think, "Oh, how obvious." That's how it is when ignorance, this blindness, is active in our experience. We recognize in a mistaken way, and then that mistaken recognition defines how we relate to the experience, and all our actions are based on this mistake.

Once I was in Thailand walking in the forest, where there are lots of cobras and poisonous snakes. I was walking along in the daytime with my glasses on, so I wasn't worried. I saw what looked like vines hanging all over, and I walked up and almost brushed into one—then I saw it was a green snake hanging down. I had thought it was a vine. So it works both ways.

This is what's happening often, a great deal of the time, in our basic perception of who and what we are. We perceive what we are as humans in this mind-body process in an inaccurate, mistaken way. We organize our basic perceptory input—the sense data that we're experiencing moment after moment after moment in our practice here—we organize and construct it in our minds inaccurately. And then our actions and assumptions and how we live come out of that mistaken perception.

They talk about three inverted, upside-down perceptions that we have: seeing permanence in what is constantly changing and in flux; seeing satisfaction, or rather the possibility of satisfaction, in this changing flux, which can never give lasting satisfaction; and then in a way the root one—seeing a solid self-existence, an unchanging self-nature, a person, where there isn't such a thing. This leads to our confusion, our sense of separation, and a great deal of our suffering.

As we continue to be here, to pay attention in our practice, we see over and over and over that what we call "me"—generally this mind-body process—is a series of constantly shifting physical and mental experience. Sensation, sensation, feeling, thought, sound, smell, sensation, sensation—constantly changing. It never stops for a moment. It's not static. There's no place where everything stops and rests in this mind-body process. But they say, because it happens so fast and because often we don't really look, it seems really solid and unchanging and permanent to us. Like if you take a lit torch and twirl it around really fast, it looks like a solid circle.

And it's sort of like that with us. Everything is always coming and going so fast that it seems really solid.

Some misperceptions are easy to see through. You come back and look at the sign and you really see, "Oh yes, it says 'directory.'" You go back and look at the cholla and realize, "Oh yes, that's really not a snake." And once we've seen through it, there's no way we could ever mistake it again.

But others, like this basic misperception of what's going on in this mind-body process, are much harder to see through—partially because of the quickness of its happening, but also because we don't really examine very carefully. We're so used to it that we take it for granted. And in the taking for granted, we don't really look. We just assume this is how it is, and we act from that. We build our thoughts from that, and we don't really stop to look.

This is the power, really, of this meditation, this process of mindfulness. At times when we do look, we all have little glimpses where this veil is lifted and we realize, "Oh, yeah, it's so obvious." But then suddenly we get lost again. The blindness arises once more. We stop looking so carefully because it does take a willingness to keep looking.

But in those moments when the veil is lifted, it's so simple. And what's interesting is that before such a moment, we're afraid. "What about me? I'm going to lose who I am." But we don't lose anything, because there's nothing there in the first place. You can't lose what's never been here.

One of our teachers once said: when you look, you don't see anything—there's nothing solid or permanent there. When you don't look, you see samsara. Samsara is just the endless cycle of suffering and birth and death that seems to be our experience of life. So all that changes is our relationship to what we experience. We don't lose anything.

But another reason that it's so difficult to shift these inverted perceptions, to shift our perception of who we are—and this is coming back to the thought process—is because we describe our experience and who we are with our thoughts, and then we take

that description to be true. This is something that really fascinates me. We take that description to be true without really examining it, and then any perceptions that arise that don't fit into that description, we just completely discount. We don't even notice them, or we find some reason to think they're not true.

Here's an example. Sometimes when people in meditation are just sitting very mindfully, noting, and things are coming and going, they come in and say, "I can't sustain attention on an object for very long. As soon as I know it, as soon as I'm mindful of it, it goes away. I can't do it. I can't be concentrated." And we say, "Right, that's because things arise and pass very quickly. You can't sustain attention for long because nothing's lasting very long." But people don't want to let that perception in. Instead, they turn it around to say, "I should be able to sustain attention." We don't want to let in the perception of how quickly everything's arising and passing.

On a larger scale, I see it in myself and I see it in friends and in people I speak with on retreat. We'll have some self-description that we're currently caught in: "I'm so morbid." "I'm never happy." "I'm a really selfish person." "I can't meditate." "I'm lazy." Whatever your particular self-description—it might be one you've carried with you all your life, or it might be one that's gotten locked in really solid in the last couple of days. And you come and talk about that self-definition, that self-description, and I'll ask, "Well, was that what you experienced every moment?" "Well, no. There were times of joy, and there were times of peace, and there were moments of hunger, and there were lots of neutralities." "Well, what about this solid self-description you're talking about?"

And the other experiences are just ignored, forgotten, discounted. In fact, something that fascinates me is how often the negative self-definition is really bought into. People say, "Well, sometimes there are moments of joy, but that's just kind of a mistake, or it's grace, or it's not really my experience. This morbidity is my true experience, my true nature. This other stuff happened by mistake, and it'll probably never happen again, so don't count it."

This is how we take thoughts, string them together, make them solid, and then ignore everything else that doesn't fit into them. We give thought an amazing power to define us, to limit our perception, to keep us from seeing what is actually happening, because we try to fit our experience into our thoughts.

So our challenge here is this: can we let go of self-definition? Can we be with the bare perception of what's happening right now? Just let it in. Just notice how it is—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Craving arises. Aversion arises. Thoughts and interpretations arise from that. That's okay, but know that for what it is. Can we just come back and be with the bare experience?

in an unbiased way, not choosing some and discarding others. This is really the function of mindfulness—to be with what is, without discrimination. And this is what begins to open up to us the possibility to perceive accurately the truth of who we are.

And then, just to have a moment of clear perception of what's happening—pressure in the body, whatever—as we watch, we can see how quickly the whole thing flowers into a story, into a description, into a really solid reality.

For example, just walking here and some person walks by, somebody you don't know. The actuality of that experience is seeing form and color. It's unpleasant. We don't really quite notice that. Aversion arises. And then the whole thing: "Ah, they look so sloppy. Look how they dress." The association with being really judged and criticized all one's life by one's parents for being sloppy. A real negativity, a real judgment of that person. Not only that, they're dirty. They probably can't meditate. I know I don't want to be near that person in the hall. I'm sure I couldn't stand to eat across from them. It reminds me of this guy in sixth grade I had to eat across from who made me nauseous. And pretty soon this solid reality has developed around what was basically a perception of form and color and that it was unpleasant.

And that can turn into a Vipassana vendetta. It goes on the whole retreat. I'm really solid then in that definition of me as opposed to that person. And this can happen in that amount of time. It's really fascinating.

This process is one of my favorite words. It's called papañca. It means proliferation. And you can really see how it is. There's form. There's color. There's unpleasant. There's aversion. And suddenly, boom—there's proliferation of thoughts and more unpleasant feelings and association and memories and more thoughts and pleasantness about feeling "I'm so good and they're so bad," on and on and on. Papañca is how we get so far away from what is true, when we don't see it happening.

So there are a couple of strong ways that papañca is fueled. I've already talked about a couple of them. The first is this: proliferation is fueled by that basic wrong view I spoke of—the sense of a solid, separate entity of myself. This is really what gives rise to the desire for pleasure and the fear of pain. If I'm really in a space of knowing there's no separation, that what is is just what is, that it's all connected, this fear of pain and desire for pleasure just doesn't make much sense. But it makes total sense if I think this is solid and real. And so this is one of the basic fuelings of this proliferation.

Another way that this really takes off—and again, we've spoken of this a lot—is through the energy of craving. Just notice: you're sitting, having a fairly mindful sitting, and just a little thought comes up. "Gee, I wonder if I got that call from home." And then

that's pleasant, and a little craving comes up, and it's not really noticed. And suddenly that thought has huge power. "I really want to get that call, because if I get it, then I can do this, and then that means that, and I'd better not have to make that other call, and I have to plan on this, and what am I going to do on Sunday, and I wonder what happened to this." And it's just this blossoming up of thoughts, getting stronger and stronger and stronger. And maybe you make it through the sitting, but you beeline for the bulletin board the second the bell rings.

This is the strength that comes from this proliferation of thought fueled by craving. What happens is we start to think the thoughts are an accurate reflection of reality, which they may or may not be. But in not seeing the thought for what it is and letting it be fueled by that craving and just taking off, we've lost all touchstone with what's actually happening in the moment.

It's interesting to see on a small scale like that here. It's scary for me to see it on a large scale. For example, with countries. The whole war in the Middle East that we were in last year could basically—and this is rather simplistic—but it could basically come down to craving for oil, craving for comfort, for power, and then all the proliferation of thoughts that arise from that. The thoughts are basically a justification of the craving. And then the thoughts become real in themselves, and further actions to support and justify the thoughts. The whole source of all this confusion is usually lost by the time all the justifications have gotten really solid.

of proliferation that happens is this craving for becoming. Becoming is an interesting one. It's really a sense of how we describe and define ourselves, how we become moment by moment through the energy of craving and grasping and identification. We keep creating a new becoming, a new identity, a new self-definition.

This is really, again, I find this fascinating to just watch the process when you're aware of it. Say you're doing your yogi meditation, your yogi job, doing the dishes, and suddenly there are a few more thoughts, but you're present, and then: "Oh, I'm so mindful." That's pleasant. And that leads to more thoughts. "Yes, I'm so mindful. I'm sure I'm the best yogi here. I've always been really good at whatever I did. I remember when I was in college, I was such a good student, and I went to law school, and I won these awards..." This whole solid sense of who I am, becoming this really good yogi, good lawyer, whatever. Solid.

And the next moment: "Oh, I really spaced out." Back to the dishes. "God, you're so unmindful." Unpleasant, leading to aversion. Leading to memories: "Yeah, you did really well when you started school, but did you ever finish? You dropped out. You nev-

er finished anything you started, and you probably won't finish this either. You might get to the end of the retreat, but you'll never get any further. You're just wasting your time." Another solid self-definition.

And both are believed in the moment, because unquestioned, because unseen. We take that thought to be an accurate description of reality. When we watch this and can just see it happening over and over, sometimes it's really funny if you can have that little space of not quite believing it. But it's also amazing to see. The Buddha talked about looking at impermanence, how fast these things come and go. He said the tendency is to take your body to be permanent, but the mind is changing so much quicker than the body. Just to be aware of that. And to see, through these self-definitions, how the thought leads to the feeling, leads to the emotion, and we've created a whole gestalt.

When I was on a retreat last summer for a couple of months, one day this was just so amazing to me—to really see how we're making up the world in each moment. I was sitting in my room, and the thought came up, "God, I'm really alone here." It was kind of a neutral thought. And then I went, "Yeah, I'm really alone." This sense of sadness came up, and that was unpleasant. "I'm so alone in my life. I live alone. I could die in this room, and no one would know for two days." It was unpleasant. I felt the sadness. I was on the verge of tears.

And suddenly it came to me: "Yeah, but you're making this all up." I said, "All right, let's just try changing it." "It's really great to be alone," I said. And all the emotions changed. "Yeah, it's so beautiful to have this time alone. And look at the tree outside. It's just glistening. I'm so blessed to have two months alone." And the emotions went along with it just as real as literally thirty seconds before. I thought, "Whoa. This is it, folks. This is what I'm doing moment to moment in my whole life." And it's really true that we're doing that.

So in some ways you could say, well, we might as well make up a nice dream, as long as we're going to make up a dream. But we should still know what's actually really happening. Again, from an Indian teacher: "If you become something, death awaits you. If you don't become something, there is neither birth nor death." Moment to moment, just noticing what we're becoming.

And in that clear seeing of it, there is no birth or death, because in the seeing of it, there's no longer the believing and the becoming.

Just one last way I want to mention that gives rise again to this proliferation of thought, and that is what is called in Buddhist terminology *mana,* or conceit. But what conceit really means is comparing: I'm better than, I'm worse than, I'm equal to—any of

those. And I'm sure you've all experienced one or another of those in some rare moment. But notice just how quickly it comes up and how it leads again to such a strong sense of self-definition.

Someone walks by slowly. "They're better than me. I'm no good." The whole story unfolds. Half an hour later, you're slower than someone else. "I'm so much better than they are." Or: "We're just equal. We're just the same." This whole sense of comparing, of having to find one's place, of having to define oneself in terms of some idea—again, it totally takes us out of perceiving what's actually true.

Because what are we comparing ourselves to? There is no solid, unchanging thing to compare ourselves to. Is there some unchanging speed of walking that's the right speed, some base we can always refer back to? There's nothing solid. There's nothing to refer back to in the comparison. It's just a movement of proliferating thought away from the truth of what's happening in this moment.

In talking about how thoughts proliferate, how they define ourselves, how we get lost in that and confused, I want to again emphasize that thought is not the enemy. The way that thought can construct and communicate and build things is amazing. And some of the definitions, some of the constructs that we put on experience are really useful. It mostly works when we all agree on the same definition.

Like, we all agree that this is a meditation retreat. And we agree that I'm talking and you're listening. Now, if we didn't all have that same shared understanding—if just whoever felt like talking talked, whoever felt like listening listened—if you didn't agree it was a meditation retreat but thought maybe you could dance in here, or maybe you want to build a bonfire in the middle of the room—if we didn't all have the same kind of agreement of thoughts, it would be quite chaotic.

But the thing to be aware of is to know that it's an agreement, and just because we all seem to agree doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. In our relative relating, we all act as if we're separate, as if we're unchanging. We recognize each other, and we unconsciously reinforce our misperception in the first place. So we can use thought, we can use our constructions—and we need to—but we must see them for what they are, so they don't have to blind us.

The Buddha told a story once about a widower who had a small son living in a village. One day he was away working, and some bandits came and burned down his house along with some other houses in the village, and kidnapped his son. When the

man came back, he found his house burned down, and he also found a small body that he assumed was his son. That was his understanding, his perception. Those were the thoughts and the description he built around it, and that was it—solid, he believed it.

Sometime later, his son escaped from the kidnappers, found his way home at midnight, and started banging on his father's door. The doors were locked, and the father called out, "Who's there? Who's there? Go away."

"It's me, Dad. It's your son. I found my way home."

"Go away. My son is dead. I carry his ashes with me in this little bag. I don't want you coming and trying to prey on my emotions like that. Go away."

The boy kept banging. The father said go away, wouldn't come down. Eventually the boy left, and he never saw him again.

Just because all the facts fit the interpretation we've made up, and we're sure that it's true, we still need to come back and be willing to be with the bare experience. We must be willing to be open to perceptions that don't fit what we've decided is true, or we're locked in a self-definition that might not be accurate.

The Buddha said, "Sometime, somewhere, you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you won't open it."

So our practice here—the key to coming out of clinging to our idea of truth so much—is just this key of mindfulness or wise attention: the willingness to open our attention to the bare experience of what's happening, without any preconceived ideas or notions about it.

With thought, there's an example often given for how to use wise attention. Thought is like throwing a rock. Unwise attention is like a dog—if you throw a rock and hit the dog, it gets all excited, runs all around, and goes chasing after the rock. If you throw that rock at a lion, it just sits there and stares straight at the thing that threw the rock. That's wise attention. Go back to the source. Don't just go running after the thought.

Some thought comes and we go running after it, like Jack talked about those trains the other day, and you wake up in Bali or wherever. We don't have to go running after it.

That's unwise attention. Just come back to the source of the thought, the source of the experience—from where did it arise?

A simple example in practice, one that we all experience often: there's some unpleasant sensation, or more likely a whole constellation of unpleasant sensations. Perhaps there's pressure, perhaps there's tingling, perhaps there's an ache and a kind of sleepiness. It's generally unpleasant, there's aversion, and it keeps cycling over and over. That's the bare experience—it's unpleasant, and aversion happens.

But by the time we talk to somebody, this has proliferated into a whole series of interpretations and explanations: "Well, this is happening because it's a kind of release," or "I'm building up too much energy, and if I could just find some way to shift the energy and release this and let it go and bring in more energy and sit in the right way, if I could bring up my faith, if I could find the right effort..." And then it goes into a whole complicated story of what to do and what this means and what kind of a yogi I am.

Can we just bring the attention with wise attention back to the experience? We say, "Okay, what's happening?" Well, there's pressure and there's tingling and there's unpleasantness. Okay, that's what's happening. All the rest is interpretation and aversion and confusion and fear and desire and remembering how good it was last retreat and remembering what we heard our friends say and what we've read and what the teachers have said and what it should be like and what we've made up about what it should be like.

What's happening? That's all that matters. That's all that there is. So our practice with wise attention is simply quit following the rock and come back to the source.

The thing is, we can't just do that once. It's an ongoing willingness to meet the bare experience in the moment, over and over.

Once a friend had me do "drawing on the right side of the brain," where you sit down and the premise is that we don't so much need to learn how to draw as we need to learn how to see. So he sat me down and said, "Okay, this is the task—you've got to draw me."

It was really fascinating because immediately I was assaulted by all my self-definitions and memories from back in the third grade when the teacher told me I couldn't draw, and I always did poorly in art, and I can't draw now. It was so strong that I literally couldn't move through that and actually begin to draw. It was really fascinating how solid that self-definition was. I was looking at him and saying, "Draw you? That's really complicated. Drawing a person? I can't do that." Real bondage.

And then I kind of said, "Okay, just sit down and look." And to really look at an eye—not my concept of what an eye was and what it meant to draw an eye, but just really see what was there. Just little flecks of form and color and shape, and then starting to

draw that. It was fascinating to cut through all that idea about myself and what it meant to draw and what he was and what I was, and just be with the bare experience. I could actually sort of draw the eye and draw him.

But it also took a willingness moment after moment to keep coming back to the bare experience. Because as soon as I would space out a little, in would come rushing all the thoughts and all the self-definition. "You can't draw. What are you doing? Who are you kidding?" Oh, what am I seeing? Little flecks of gold, little flecks of brown. It was a very interesting experience.

So with wise attention, we see the power of thoughts and learn that we can use thought. They're our friends. We like them. They'll always be with us. But we don't have to be confused by them. We don't have to be afraid of them. We can use them but not get lost in thought—to understand thought for what it is, and to direct our attention back to the source, the source of the thought in this moment, the source of who and what we truly are and always are.

The more we can do that, in a moment of coming back to the source of experience, that's a moment where this blindness is not coloring our perception, where greed and confusion and anger are not coloring our perception. Just being with pressure, just being with sadness—this can be the opening to really touching the source of all that we are, to really touching the possibility of true peace. Peace that is not just the absence of thoughts, but the peace that comes from really knowing the truth of who we are.

Our life seems so complicated, so complex, when we don't see a thought as a thought. But in reality, it's so simple it's awesome. It's so simple we can't believe it.

This is my favorite stanza from the Buddha. Really, just let this sink in. Just kind of feel it:

In the seen, there is only the seen. In the heard, there is only the heard. In the smelled, there is only the smelled. In the tasted, there is only the tasted.

In the cognized, there's only the cognized. In the sensed and what is felt, there's only what is felt. That is all. That is all. Everything else is interpretation.

Can we live that simply?

I'll close with one stanza from the Tao Te Ching. I think James read it before, but I really like it:

Empty your mind of thoughts. Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings, but contemplate their return. Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity. If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you. And when death comes, you are ready.

Let's sit for a couple of minutes.

May all beings everywhere live in the peace of their true nature.

CHAPTER 245

Nature of Thought

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines one of meditation's most universal challenges: our relationship with thought. Opening with the powerful verses from the Dhammapada—"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world"—she explores how much of our confusion stems not from thoughts themselves, but from misunderstanding their nature and giving them power they don't inherently possess.*
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> *Wilson explains how the process of papañca (mental proliferation) works, showing how a single perception can rapidly expand into elaborate stories, self-definitions, and emotional reactions. She traces this back to the three "inverted perceptions": taking what is impermanent as permanent, seeking lasting happiness in what is inherently unsatisfactory, and perceiving a solid self where none exists. Through vivid personal examples—from mistaking sounds for machine gun fire to constructing elaborate narratives about Marine bases from a simple boom—she demonstrates how quickly bare experience transforms into believed reality.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that true peace cannot depend on the absence of thought. Using the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya—"In the seen there is only the seen, in the heard only the heard"—Wilson points toward the simplicity of wise attention: returning to bare experience rather than chasing the content of thoughts. She invites practitioners to notice how self-definitions arise and pass, how wanting and aversion fuel proliferation, and how mindfulness serves as a magnifying glass revealing the constructed nature of our seemingly solid world.*

This is one of my favorite topics because it so universally concerns all of us: the nature of thought. I find this particular aspect of life fascinating.

I want to start by reading the first two verses of the Dhammapada, which is one of the books of the sayings of the Buddha, about just how powerful thought can be—in case you didn't already recognize that.

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind and trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable.

Now, if you think that the Buddha is speaking not in hyperbole but actually just stating what is so—that we are what we think, and all that we are arises with our thoughts—that's an extremely radical statement. What I want to talk about today is really how true that is, and how much of our confusion and suffering comes not from the thoughts themselves, but from our not understanding the nature of thought itself. From taking thought to be something other than it is, something much greater. By giving it a power it doesn't need to have through our not understanding it.

Thought is obviously really important to us. It's an amazing tool, a powerful ally in the world. Just that we can sit here and communicate—that I can move my mouth and my vocal cords and make noises, and it means something to you, hopefully. Or if someone were up here speaking in Swahili, the same process would occur, but we don't have the same agreement as to what the thoughts mean, so it doesn't make any sense. Thought is really useful, incredibly important.

But how much of our life, or how much of our practice, can end up feeling like it's a struggle against thoughts? How often do you find yourself—and maybe you don't, but I know I often do, and it certainly comes up in talking with people—slipping into: if I could just get rid of thoughts, if I could just stop thinking, then practice could really happen. Then maybe I could know my true nature. If only thoughts would go away. And it gets into such a struggle.

But if we look at just thought itself, when we talk about thought as another phenomenon appearing in the vast space of awareness—just like a sound, just like a sensation—what is a thought? It just comes and goes. "It's evening." "The rug is pink." "My back hurts." "I'm a really bad meditator." Can that one just come and go too? When it doesn't, when we stop seeing it as just thought arising in space, that's when all the seeming trouble starts.

Basically, through misunderstanding, through misperceiving the simple nature of thoughts, we're spending the greater part of our lives creating an incredibly complex world of dream and illusion, living in it, fighting against it, and suffering because of it—through not knowing its true nature.

Remember the quotation from Kalu Rinpoche that Howie used, and I think Jack also used it: "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. You are a reality. There is a reality. You are that reality." Well, the illusion and the appearance of things is largely created through our misunderstanding, our misperception of thought, and our sometimes rapid reactions to it.

I think I mentioned sometime in this retreat how surprised Asian teachers often are by how much we think. When you go into an interview sometimes with an Asian teacher—with Sayadaw U Pandita, for example—you can just sense this feeling of bewilderment that we can't come in and just say a simple thing like, "I experienced pressure arising and noticed it getting stronger." It turns into this whole story: "There's this pressure in my left knee, and it has something to do with the way I sit, and I remember an accident I had in my childhood, and perhaps..." And we go on. It's like this. Pressure can't just experience pressure. There's just this real bewilderment about what a story we make up. And we really believe it. We will often fight to the death anyone who challenges us to see it as a story. "This is true!"

Something we often suggest, just as an experiment, is to get a feeling for the ephemeral nature of thought. It comes, it goes. Like Joseph likes to say, it's just a bubble. Where did it come from? Where did it go? When it goes, notice that space between thoughts that it comes out of. So sometimes we'll suggest: in a sitting, try imagining that every thought that arises comes from the person behind you. Try it in your next sitting. It really gives a good sense that the trouble isn't with the thought. I'm serious—try it.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, in talking about thoughts, that when we look closely we see that our mind is seething with thoughts. And it's true—the more we look, the more seething it seems to be. He goes on to say, and this is where we often stop looking: "A becalmed mind is not a peaceful mind. This is a peace that's very brittle. What you're calling peace is only an absence of disturbance." Maybe we'll settle for absence of disturbance sometimes, but it doesn't really go very far. True peace cannot be disturbed.

If true peace only meant an absence of thought, then does that mean that the whole rest of our life, when thoughts are arising, peace is impossible? Peace is inaccessible? That's unacceptable to me. Truth cannot be dependent on the absence or presence of anything, and that includes thought.

So a lot of our challenge, I feel, is to begin to understand a thought as a thought, and also how it is that we get so carried away in thought—that it builds up such a world of illusion and confusion that we take to be so real, so real that we come to equate the presence of thought with suffering.

One place where our confusion, our misunderstanding of thought, sort of begins—where thought kind of begins in the process—is on the basic level of perception. Perception, meaning in this context the simple quality of recognition of something. In the Buddhist psychology, perception arises in every moment whenever there's a sense contact. Perception is this quality of recognition, of discernment as such. It involves memory. So for example, I know seeing, and I can recognize this as a rug, or as pink. We see each other and we perceive a person; we perceive a male or a female; we perceive someone that we know. This is all perception. I perceive this as a hand.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. On this bare level of perception, it's really fascinating. This is, I believe, why the emphasis in our mindfulness practice is so much on simple, direct experience. Why one of the definitions of mindfulness is knowing what's arising in a moment accurately. Because so often we are reacting from a mistaken perception.

I'll give you an example. What is a mistaken perception, and how do they arise? Basically, it's recognizing incorrectly. If I were to say this rug is green, that would be a mistaken perception. Someone who's colorblind would have what they thought was the correct perception of a green rug, but in our common agreement, that perception is incorrect.

So in our ongoing moment-to-moment process of perceiving different experience, the three roots of confusion, the three roots of suffering that we were talking about this morning—the arising in the mind of blindness or ignorance, the arising of greed and wanting, or the arising of what's called hatred but is really aversion, pushing away—when in the moment of perception one of those is arising, it tends to distort our recognition. We perceive wrongly, and we don't know it.

Someone last year told me that she was walking up to the preceptory here in a really foul mood, having had a really dismal day. Walking into it, she looked at the sign that said "preceptory" and actually read "purgatory." That's a mistaken perception, fueled in that moment by aversion. But that one was easily corrected—she could go back and see that it said preceptory. Yet this is happening to us all the time, and we don't know it. We think what we're seeing is true. We're not noticing the mistaken perception, and that leads to our opinions, our conclusions, our reactions. Before we know it, we're in a whole gestalt of activity that is so far away from what's actually happening.

That's why mindfulness is so insistent: come back to the bare experience, the bare perception, and see what's so. We get so far away in no time. You can all think of, if you really consider it, hundreds of examples in any day. This is what we're doing, creating this dream over and over.

An example that comes to my mind is from when I was in Vancouver, staying in a friend's apartment. It was at night, and my friend was in another friend's apartment, so I was there alone, sort of falling asleep around ten or eleven o'clock. In that state when you've just fallen asleep, some loud noise woke me up—that moment when you don't have your usual storyline going yet. I just heard these sounds. They were like booming sounds. They sounded like shelling or something, and in fact, my mind immediately turned it into machine gun fire.

I was lying there, and it kept happening. Machine gun fire. That was the perception, the recognition, and it got locked in really quickly so that there wasn't a freshness of just being with the bare sound. From machine gun fire, the mind went into a whole story: "Well, that's impossible on the streets of Vancouver, there's no reason... Well, it could happen in Beirut. What makes you think if it happens in Beirut it couldn't happen in Vancouver?" I started getting images of guys in fatigues running door-to-door, shooting machine guns at each other. I was really getting out there. I leapt out of bed.

I turned on the radio to see if there was some kind of war going on in Vancouver. There was of course nothing on the radio. I looked out the window; the streets were just dead empty. And it was really escalating and quite real. If I had had any other perception that could have strengthened my belief that there was some kind of war going on in the streets of Vancouver, I would have believed it. Fortunately for me, absolutely no following perception strengthened that. I could see people watching TV in the apartments across the street, and I thought, "Well, I guess there's not a war." I never did find out what was going on. But this is how far and how fast we can get.

Wanting in the mind, or in this case fear in the mind, ignorance in the mind—it completely distorts our perception of what is happening. Like Jack said the other night, the Indian saying: when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. Wanting distorts perception. So does aversion. So does fear. So does blindness. We don't know what's happening. This is going on, I must say, for a lot of us in the greater part of our moment-to-moment experience. When we're not looking, when we're not investigating, we're taking stuff for granted, acting on it, responding to it, and wondering why our lives can feel so confused, why when we talk to someone else our experiences don't seem to match exactly.

The real root cause of our basic misperception is this quality of blindness that we were speaking about this morning—usually translated as ignorance, but I like blindness better. It also arises moment to moment in our experience. It's not monolithic, here

since beginningless time while we're chipping away at it, a little chip, a little chip, a little chip. It really arises moment to moment when the conditions are there, and when the conditions are not there, it also passes away.

What's interesting about ignorance is that we can learn to recognize its presence in a moment of our experience in the same way that we can recognize aversion, or recognize wanting, or recognize sleepiness. It's very helpful, I think, to begin to recognize this quality of blindness. Because then we often know—we can go to the next step and know—well, it's a good bet I might not be completely perceiving the situation accurately. And just give it a little space.

When ignorance is present, it clouds discernment, and that's one of the ways it feels—this experience of cloudiness, of dullness. You're not going to have that really pristine clarity of mindfulness when ignorance is present, because its function is that it clouds things. The way I think of it when I'm trying to feel it, really to get a sense of what it's like experientially, is like sometimes when I'm waking up in the morning. I've slept kind of late, or I've slept too warm, and there's this sense of knowing it's time to wake up and trying to wake up. In the sleep, you're trying to wake up but can't quite get there. When that happens to me, everything seems upside down, and I can't quite tell what's going on. There's this sense of knowing something's off, but not being able to be any clearer about it. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's how blindness feels to me—this kind of cloud of confusion and dullness.

When it's present, it gives rise, as I've said, to misperception. And the basic misperception is that of wrong view, that of not knowing what is so. The basic wrong view that most of us operate under is the wrong view of who and what we truly are.

Let me give a more simple example of how ignorance gives rise to misperception and wrong view, and acting out of that misperception. This is the classic example given in a lot of the Buddhist texts: walking in the forest, like in Thailand where there are lots of snakes, lots of poisonous snakes—cobras and such. It's dusk, and you can't see clearly. That's the confusion mode, the blindness mode, that time of dusk when you can sort of see and you think you can see better than you really can.

Walking through the woods, you come upon a snake coiled in the path. It's really sudden and really scary. It gives rise to a lot of fear—the sense of "What am I doing out at night without a flashlight?" which in Thailand is literally risking your life, because if you step on a poisonous snake and you don't know what it is, you can really die. Seeing a snake can give rise to a lot of fear, which then gives rise to further thoughts about the

unsafety of the forest, or one's own foolishness for coming out without a torch, and a sense of "Just let me get out of here, I'm never going back"—a whole proliferation of story around that.

Then you go back in the daytime and see that that coiled snake was just a rope that somebody had left lying there. It's a whole different story. When the perception is accurate—oh well, there's nothing to be afraid of, it's just a rope—all the fear and all the personal reactions and all the way that we responded changes completely.

So you can see from that how our fears and assumptions, our conclusions about what is true, arise so quickly from our basic perception. And when that perception is incorrect, all the basic assumptions and conclusions that we're acting on, that we're basing our understanding of life on, are not accurate.

This is going on all the time in our basic perception of who we are, perceiving ourselves as this mind, this body. Ongoing basic misperception that gives rise to so much confusion, to wanting, to aversion, to separation—deep basic misperception. Out of the constant arising and passing of sense data, as you sit, as you walk, what's the experience? It's one sense perception after another: hearing, seeing, sensation in the body, another sensation, thinking, an emotion, hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, thinking. It's just the same six sense perceptions over and over and over—maybe different specific sense perceptions, but the same six senses.

Out of this basic sense data coming and going, coming and going, we organize it through our misperception, through our thoughts about it, our assumptions and conclusions about the sense data. We create a whole inaccurate idea—and maybe not even a conscious idea—of who and what we are, and then we suffer from it.

They talk about three inverted perceptions, or three upside-down perceptions, that are the ongoing support for our mistaken idea of who we are. We've spoken of these a lot; you'll recognize them. The first one is that we take what is impermanent and constantly changing to be unchanging. We don't see the change. That's really fairly obvious.

As I just said, this constant flow of changing sensations—we take it to be one solid train of thought, for example, or one solid body sitting here. And when we really look, it's just sensation after sensation arising. There's nothing solid there. But we take it to be solid and unchanging.

The second upside-down perception follows on this first one. Once we think there's something unchanging here, we are looking for happiness where it can't be found. In other words, what is changing and unsatisfactory, we're looking there for lasting peace, for lasting happiness, and we don't see that it can't be found here. This is what keeps us looking in the wrong direction for peace, for truth, for beauty.

And of course, both of these lead to the third upside-down perception, which is thinking or seeing or feeling that there's a solid self here—a solid, unchanging, everlasting self—when in fact there isn't one. This is the place where, as much as we might want to believe that there's not a solid self, most everything in our unquestioned experience leads us to continue to believe and continue to act from the strong conviction that there is a solid self.

It's like when Howie was speaking the other night, having us turn our attention into questioning it. It's exactly this—it's such an unquestioned assumption that we don't even know we're making the assumption. We don't think to even question it, never mind bringing our attention back to the basic perception that gave rise to that assumption in the first place.

Some misperceptions are easy to see through. For instance, that one of "percolatory"—just come and look at the sign and it's really clear. Once you've seen through a confused perception like that, it's so obvious you can never imagine how you didn't see it before, and you don't usually make the same mistake again. Unfortunately, others aren't quite so simple and easy to see through.

Or it's more that so much is happening so fast. For instance, the sense that there is no solid mind and body here—it seems solid. It seems like I'm the same mind and body, pretty much, that I was yesterday. When I look in the mirror I recognize myself. And if I look at a picture of me when I was two, I sure don't look the same, but I feel like I've not changed at all—I'm the same person that I was then. Oh, that's so obviously ridiculous if you look at the facts.

It's sort of like everything's happening so fast in the mind and the body, this flow of sense experience. I can't even speak as fast as it's happening. Hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, cognizing. Hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, cognizing. According to the Buddha—and translated into modern language—each perception can happen in one thought moment, and there are seventeen trillion thought moments in the blink of an eye. It's really fast. Is it no wonder we don't see through it?

I think it's sort of like recently someone showed me a color photograph—just of whatever—and had me look at it through a magnifying glass. I had never seen this before, but it just resolves into four different colors of dots. That's all it is, just all these little dots put together. And when we look at it without the magnifying glass, it's this solid photograph of a landscape or a person. It's just exactly the same.

Mindfulness is really our magnifying glass here. When we turn it on to our actual experience, moment to moment to moment, when we really examine—not even our assumptions—but coming back to the bare experience moment to moment, we start to see the sense of solidity break up. Or more what it is, is that we start to see what's really happening, free of our concepts and interpretations about it. If we really paid attention, we would see that everything was changing all the time. It's just that we get so lost in our interpretations. We take what we think is true so for granted that we don't even question, we don't even inquire.

I've read this before, but it's so appropriate—Nisargadatta: "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." And we're just sitting here doing that all the time. Excess of imagination and lack of attention.

And when, in the process of simply being, without all the extra interpretation, without believing all the interpretation—just being, hearing, or spaciousness, sensation, thought, it doesn't matter what phenomenon is appearing—we're not identifying with it, simply being. It's so obvious when there's a moment of no ignorance. It's so obvious that we're not this thought, that this thought is not an accurate reflection of who I am, that I'm not this sensation or this sound, that everything's coming and going and I'm not any of it. What is true is just so painfully obvious, so apparent, and we think there's nothing to do. It's so simple. It just is. How could I ever have missed this?

Just like with seeing the signs as "percolatory." Only it seems this particular clarity of perception—or rather, the misperception of who we are—arises again so easily because things are happening, as I said, so quickly. Somehow we drift out of that clarity of seeing, another sense experience arises, another perception arises, and we don't see it clearly and we're off again on a whole other creation. What had been so clear that we can't imagine ever not living in that space becomes, in that moment, as if it's just a memory.

Or sometimes, in the space of just spaciousness, of clarity, of no story being constructed, it's so simple—and sometimes fear comes up. "Well, what about if I'm not really here? How am I going to go to work after the retreat if I'm not really here?" How many times does that start? "If there's no self, then..."—and you can add whatever particular thing we think we won't be able to do.

Nothing changes. What can change? It's not here in the first place, so we're not losing anything. The only thing that changes is our relationship to experience. But otherwise, nothing changes. The fear is again coming from a misperception, from a confused notion.

How we understand our experience informs all of our responses to it, all the ways that we behave. A very simple example—it's not from seeing no-self, but it's just an example of how we interpret experience and how that inspires how we behave. A yogi told me on a retreat last summer that he was really noticing this. He would get certain sensations, just kind of prickly little sensations all over, like a fly landing all over him—which I'm sure many of you have had that experience here. And when in his mind he knew it was a fly, there was a lot of aversion, a lot of restlessness. It was very difficult to deal with. But then he started noticing that in certain—to him, what he defined as—very concentrated states, he would get exactly the same experience of these little pricklings all over that felt exactly like a fly walking on him. So if he thought it was from concentration, well, it was fine. He really liked it. It was no problem at all to deal with.

If he thought it was fly feet walking all over him, a lot of aversion arose. The experience itself, the actual sense experience, is just what it is. It's no problem. It's pleasant or it's unpleasant, no matter. The way that we interpret it is what creates the struggle or the sense of ease in being with it.

One of the ways that confusion, that blindness, works to continue us in our misperception—once we've made an original misperception of who we are—is that we use the thoughts that arise quite naturally to describe and define our experience. For instance, "the flies walking all over me." We take that experience, that definition, to be accurate. And then, without continuing to examine, we think, "Well, now I know what's so." With that certainty, our future perceptions become skewed, so that very often we don't even acknowledge or recognize perceptions that don't fit with the story we've made up. We've rigged it so that we're never going to see anything other than what we think to be so.

This is one of the things we do with impermanence. We all know it intellectually. We all nod. But the way that we live our lives is somehow never thinking we'll get old, being really shocked when something goes wrong with our body, being really shocked at the thought of death, being really shocked when a new pain comes up. "What's this pain doing here? I was feeling so good!" We don't really let it in.

A couple of examples, even on a more basic level, of how we construct a definition and then disallow any information that would challenge it. It happens often in meditation where people will get some idea of good concentration. Good meditation means

when a particular phenomenon arises, the attention can really land on it, can focus on it and stay with it for a long time. "I should be able to stay with the breath for half an hour. When pain arises, just be able to stay with that pain and really explore it. Stay with that emotion and really explore it." That's the idea, the perception that gets locked in.

People often will come and say, "Well, you know, concentration is no good. As soon as I notice the pain, I just can't stay with it—it goes away. I notice the emotion; it dissolves, it goes away. I just can't hold on to it. The concentration is no good."

Let go of this self-definition and look at what's actually happening. Things are changing really quickly. That's how it is. No one can hold on to things when they're really changing. But instead of just seeing what we see, we twist it to fit our self-definition, and then we suffer.

Or consider how often we make up a particular definition of ourselves for that day, or that year, or this lifetime. "I'm such an aversive person." "I'm such a kind person." "I can't do this meditation; I never could and I never will be able to." "I'm an incredibly great yogi." "I'm a mother." Whatever our particular self-definition is.

And then notice how all the different thoughts that arise from all our different perceptions—how many there are that have absolutely nothing to do with that self-definition. "I'm such an angry person." Has every moment of your day been angry? How about all the moments of peace, or just enjoying the lunch, or just having a sense of pleasure looking at the owls, or a sense of sleepiness, or just calmness, or boredom, or fear? Many, many, many experiences. And out of that, we take the ones that fit our perception and don't pay much attention to the others if they don't bolster our idea.

Often, especially, we tend to glom onto the negative self-definitions. "I'm no good at this." And if something else arises—like half an hour of real joy and gratitude and happiness—we say, "Yeah, that's grace." But there's a twist to it. "That's grace. It fell from the sky. It has nothing to do with me, and it'll pass. But the real core of who I am is anger. The real core of who I am is this self-judgmental, negative person."

Somewhere, we don't give equal credence to all our perceptions. And look at that one anyway—the one about the core, "This core of who I am is anger." Like everything else is arising and passing, but somewhere in a core of nothing solid anywhere, there's a little rock of anger that's sitting, that's solid, that's who we are. Look at what we're thinking. Look at how we create this sense of confusion.

So even here, even with the sense of "I'm such an angry person," it's not the thoughts themselves that are the problem. That thought could arise and pass with as much of a bubble as "Today is Tuesday." It's allowing the thoughts to define reality. It's believing that that thought is an accurate description of who we are, and really giving it that power through aversion, through clinging, through identification.

Self-judgment, as an example, is so acutely painful mostly because we believe it—or we don't even notice it. We take that string of self-judgment to accurately define who we are, and then do our best to live up to it. Or else we fight it and hate it and say, "It's not who I am"—and that's the same thing. We're really believing it.

This misunderstanding—that it's the thoughts themselves, and not seeing where this power comes from, where this confusion comes from of believing them—this is what gives thought such amazing power. And this is where we can get so confused.

And one way to see our challenges: can we let go of self-definition altogether? Notice how as we go through the day there can be such an ongoing stream of talking to ourselves, describing our experience, defining who we are. Can we just let that be a stream of thoughts without holding on to it, without believing that is our self-definition, without using it to define the world? Can we be with the bare experience just as it is, without getting so engrossed in the content of the thoughts?

That's our challenge, and that's the function of mindfulness. That's what we're learning how to do—simply coming back to bare experience. And as we all know, it's not a simple process. It's very subtle how quickly we get lost in the thoughts, how quickly we're believing what they say without recognizing that. But this willingness to come back to the bare experience without expectation, without a preconceived notion of what it means, just with an openness to explore, an openness to be present—this is what allows us the possibility to really know who and what we are. To really touch the truth, the spaciousness of what we are, unencumbered by thought. Thoughts not in the way, whether they're present or not present.

When we can have a moment of just being with the bare perception of hearing, of sensation, just peacefully there—that's when you can begin to notice, and this is what gets really fascinating to me, just how quickly the whole show can spring up out of nowhere. This is really what makes thought so powerful and why it's so easy to get lost in it. In that instant, that quick, we can go from bare perception to a whole world.

You can watch it in yourself. I watched it this morning in the 8:15 sitting. Do you remember there were a couple of loud booms? I didn't know what they were. I was very present, there was this boom in hearing, and then a moment of not-mindfulness,

and within no time at all my mind had constructed an incredibly elaborate story of what those booms were. Moving from "an earthquake"—no, it couldn't be an earthquake from how it is other times, when the booms are different—to the marine base. Must be coming from the marine base, although it's different from last week when they were shelling. And from that into a whole construction of who I am in relationship to the Marines, what my opinion is of people who become Marines, and of Marines who are shelling in such an environmentally sensitive area as this desert. Within no time, from a bare experience of hearing—no problem—there was a really solid little reality created: me in all my self-righteousness versus the Marines who are jerks. In the blink of an eye, we're really solid and we really believe it.

This process of all this flow of thoughts is called papañca, which is a word that I love. Papañca is usually translated as proliferation, diversity. And it's just this: from one perception, an endless flow of associations and memories and thoughts and self-definition. It's how we get so far away from what is true when we don't see it as a process.

So I just want to talk briefly about what fuels this papañca, this proliferation. What energy gives it the strength that we get so lost in it, that it carries us so far?

Papañca is fueled by wrong view, which I spoke of—the sense of a separate "I." This is really, I think, the bottom line for most of our confusion. When I'm in that space—me and the Marines, "I"—there's a sense of separate self, and this is what gives rise to wanting, what gives rise to aversion. The sense of separation, the sense of discontent. You can see how all of that gives rise to more thought about how to fix it.

Papañca is also fueled by wanting, by craving. This is also pretty obvious, and you can explore it in your own practice—in a sitting, in a walking—over and over and over. Not by hating it, just by watching how there can be a moment of wanting that's not really experienced clearly as wanting. See how it fuels a whole show of thoughts and self-definition, leading to proliferation, even into action.

For example, someone told me about seeing an article of clothing on another yogi that she really liked. Wanting arises, and it gives rise to thoughts: I wonder where they got it, I wonder where I can get it. It can give rise to whole sittings of shopping sprees and comparing stores. It can give rise to writing notes to the other yogi and scheming of ways to find out, how to meet at the end of the retreat. It can actually give rise to the action of hopefully, when the retreat's over, getting in the car and going to the store to buy whatever this thing is.

This is the papañca, the proliferation of thought and more wanting leading to action, fueled by this energy of wanting. And not seeing the wanting, it just keeps going. As you know, we could just come back to the bare experience of wanting. Say, "wanting, wanting."

I remember one retreat I somehow got it in my head that I wanted pink shoes. And this was a two-month retreat. I spent so much time on that retreat scheming about these shoes and what they would go with and where I'd go get them. And then, you know, alternate times hating myself for being so stupid. And then it's over, you go to the store—I remember I went shopping and I looked—I don't want pink shoes. What's that all about? It's just wanting proliferating itself. There's nobody there.

We think these thoughts are a reflection of reality, though, and that's what's scary. Because they might or they might not be, but we really think they're true. On a large scale, I mean, it's funny when we're talking about pink shoes. But when we look at the world, this craving for whatever really proliferates—from wanting clothing, to wanting food, to wanting land, to wanting other people not to be on your land. It ends in a situation like with the Serbs and the Croats today. It's really scary to see how far the proliferation gets from the basic perception, from the wanting, and how solidly entrenched the views become, and how lost we get in that, and how far we'll go to get what we want.

Craving for becoming is another really powerful fuel for this energy of papañca, this energy of proliferation. Becoming, basically, is how we describe and define ourselves, moment to moment. Each time there's an identification with a particular experience, a particular thought, in that moment, that's what we become. There's a grasping, a becoming, and again, a whole little self-definition leading to suffering. Watch the process—it's fascinating. And see how quickly what we become can change and how much we believe each one.

It can come up a lot just in, say, walking meditation. Walking very slowly and mindfully, someone walks past more quickly—"I'm such a good yogi." In that moment we really identify, and it leads to more thoughts, more proliferation. "I'm such a good yogi. If I keep on doing this, maybe I'll go to Dharamsala and study with the Dalai Lama. Maybe I'll go and live in a cave there for a few years and practice tummo yoga and come back and teach at Harvard. Or maybe I'll become a great guru..." And we give Dharma talks in our heads, and it goes on and on and on.

And we all do this. It's really solid. This is who I am.

Two minutes later – two seconds later – someone walks by that you've got in your mind pegged as the best yogi here. You just have to see them walk by. "Oh gosh, I could never do it the way they're doing it. If I had to walk that slowly, I might as well just give it up right now." And it goes on to our memories of all our failures in life, and this is just going to be another failure, and what's the point? It goes back to childhood and kindergarten and the fights we got into. "My older sister was always better than me anyway – she would have been able to do this. I'll just go off and wash dishes somewhere for the rest of my life. That's all I could do anyway." And that's really solid.

All we have to do is pay attention. It sounds so ridiculous, right? Unfortunately, on some level, this papañca, this craving for becoming, takes over. And without coming back to the bare experience, we're just off on the train. We really believe it.

What's the bare experience here? It was just seeing. Seeing, and a pleasant feeling arising. Seeing, and an unpleasant feeling arising. And then thoughts, memories, associations – but that's all they are: thoughts, memories, associations. It's not who you are.

The Buddha said once that if we're going to identify with either the mind or the body, it would be better for us to identify with the body, because the mind changes so much more quickly. But usually we reverse it. It's a little easier to see we're not the body.

So this is how we're making up the dream. We're making up reality, moment to moment, over and over. And instead of really turning around and inquiring – where's this coming from? What's the source of this? – we're simply believing each reality as it arises.

Once, a couple of years ago, I was on retreat. The sense that it's really true that thoughts are making up our reality – it's not just a nice metaphor; it's actually the case – became very clear. I was sitting in my room way back at the end of a corridor, and the thought came up: "I'm so alone here. I'm so lonely." In that particular tone.

Immediately following came this sense of sadness. The emotion was really present. And I was really quite mindful, so I was noting all of this – the emotion, the sense of "I live alone, I've been alone for so long, on this retreat in these back rooms here." You know, people could die and you wouldn't notice for three days until it started to stink or something. And it just went on and on, this deep grief.

But it was pretty mindful, and just the thought occurred: "Well, I'm making it all up. Let's just flip the story." So quite consciously I said, "You know, it's so wonderful to have this time to be alone." That was all.

Immediately there came up emotions of – wow – what gratitude to have two months to spend alone. "It's so beautiful here." I noticed the beauty of the summer and the trees outside. There was a real joy, a real peace.

This is really amazing, because it's not just that I picked one thought. The thought led to a whole train of associations and emotions and identification, and it really felt solid. "This is me." It's as solid as it gets. Really fascinating.

That's when I really got it: we are making it all up. We are making it all up.

Sometimes we have the choice, and if we know we're making it up, sometimes we can make up a more pleasant one. There's nothing wrong with that. Someone told me once – I think it was Roger Walsh – that they read somewhere from *A Course in Miracles* that actually, to awaken to truth, in a way it's easier to awaken from a pleasant dream than from an unpleasant dream. So that's kind of nice. We have the choice. But most important is knowing that this is a dream, and knowing how it's being created, and being willing to come back and be with just what is.

And the key to being with just what is, is again this process of mindfulness, of wise attention.

So just quickly, to describe wise attention in working with the process of thoughts: it's being able to bring our attention to the source of the thought rather than running around in the content. A common example given is to think of a thought as if throwing a rock. The thought's kind of flying like the rock. Unwise attention is like a dog that gets hit by the rock and gets really upset and goes running around after the rock – following the thought, lost in it and fighting it. Wise attention is like a lion. If you throw a rock and hit a lion, it just ignores the rock and stares straight back at the thrower of the rock, at the source of the rock. It just cuts through and goes right back to the source.

That's wise attention. That's what we're cultivating here. And wise attention, in coming back to the source of the perception, the source of the thought, allows us to see, to know much more deeply that we are not thoughts – and much more than that.

So when you're in a constellation of a really difficult experience – pain in the body and tension in the mind and stories about it – I remember one story a teacher told where a man came in and said, "I have this tension in my jaw, and it's so painful, and it just shows me what a tense person I am, and how I've lived my whole life in a really rigid way, and how that's affected my family, and how I can never really be a kind person."

And so the teacher said, "Oh, you mean there's tension in your jaw?"

He said, "Yeah, and I'm such a rigid person, and I'm so uptight..." This went on for like three or four times.

Where is the tension when we come back? There's tension. It's unpleasant. That's all. Can we just deal with that? And notice the interpretations and the associations – they can come, they can go. It's all extra.

Forget the story.

Come back to what's really happening.

And when we're willing and able to remember, to bring wise attention, to be with what's really happening, it's so simple that it's awesome. The truth of who we are, the truth of our life is so simple we can't believe it. Because it's got nothing to do with thought, being or not being. It's so simple.

My favorite stanza from the Buddha—he's describing this to a man, and he told this man just this one stanza. Immediately after, the man was killed by a wild cow, but the Buddha said that's okay, this stanza was enough. He got it.

And so it's this: In the seen, there is only the seen. In the heard, there is only the heard. In the smelled, there is only the smelled. In the tasted, there is only the tasted. In what is felt and what is sensed, there is only that sensing. In what is cognized or felt with the mind, there is only that cognizance, nothing else.

That is all.

And that was the stanza of the Buddha. That is all.

Can we be that simple? Can you deal with pressure, and that is all? No problem, no me, no suffering.

Let's just sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 246

Balancing The Five Spiritual Faculties

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson presents the five spiritual faculties (indriya) as essential qualities that develop through meditation practice: faith (saddhā), energy (vīriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). Rather than viewing difficulties in practice as personal failures, she reframes them as imbalances among these five mental qualities—an impersonal understanding that makes investigation both easier and more interesting.

Wilson distinguishes between "bright faith"—the initial inspiration that brings us to practice—and "verified faith" that develops through direct experience. She explores faith as radical acceptance and trust in the present moment, whatever it contains. The discussion of energy emphasizes finding balance between the extremes of giving up and grim, forceful determination, suggesting that balanced effort springs from a joyful, interested heart rather than harsh self-discipline.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with these faculties: when energy exceeds concentration, simplify your objects of attention; when concentration dominates, add precision or touch points to enliven practice. Wilson emphasizes that mindfulness serves as the balancing factor for all five qualities. Drawing from Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings on cultivating "seeds of joy" during difficult periods, she validates skillful backing off as sometimes the most powerful way to allow the practice to continue. The teaching concludes with the understanding that these qualities strengthen not just in retreat but throughout our lives, becoming increasingly accessible as we grow more familiar with recognizing and balancing them.

The art of this meditation practice that we're doing together here is really one of balancing. There are all kinds of different balances we could talk about, and we will as the retreat goes on. What I want to talk about tonight is five specific qualities of energy—a different five from the five hindrances. These ones are hopefully more on the positive side, if you want to make such a distinction.

These are five qualities of mind, mental states really, that we all experience on an ongoing basis anyway, but that develop strongly as our practice grows and continues. As we continue to practice, we can learn to recognize each of these mental states and learn how to bring them into balance.

It's been an incredibly useful tool for me in my own practice to learn that what I think is the practice going wrong—in other words, it's not the way I like it in this moment, so definitely it's not working—to start to see that one way of looking at that is not that I'm bad, I'm wrong, I'm useless, but that these five energies are out of balance. It's not personal. And it makes it much easier, and actually interesting, to investigate: How can I bring these together? What's low? What's out of balance? How to bring it back into balance?

I think it was Trungpa Rinpoche who said once that the way we come to balance is by falling out of balance. That's how we notice it and come back to balance. So it's not such a big tragedy when things get a little out of balance.

These five mental states, these five qualities, are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. I'd like to speak in an introductory way about each of these tonight. When I'm talking about them, if possible, rather than just intellectually listening or thinking about them, see if you can get a feel in your own experience for each of these mental states, because they're all ones we're familiar with. Learning to recognize when they're present, when they're absent.

Faith, the first quality—these are called the five spiritual faculties, by the way, if you like list names. A definition that I particularly like for faith is "the drive towards that which cannot be described." It puts you right in the middle of what faith is about. It's about opening into the unknown. Sometimes we tend to think of faith as being based on some kind of knowledge—if we have a certain knowledge or we know the outcome, then we'll have faith in it. But it's just the reverse.

There are two aspects of faith that I'd like to talk about. First, knowing that faith is intuitive; it has nothing to do with intellectual rational knowledge, which is why it's so frustrating for our minds. But we all have experiences of faith. And I would say for everyone here, to some degree quite strongly, or you wouldn't have come here in the first place, and you definitely wouldn't still be here.

They talk about how when faith first arises in the mind, it's called bright faith. You can see why, because it has this quality of brightness, of energizing, of clarity. This is the kind of faith that's usually inspired in us—either hearing the Dhamma, meeting someone, or hearing someone that you find very inspirational. For instance, I get that from the Dalai Lama, or from some of my teachers. Just this sense of brightness and confidence and willingness. I get it often from talking with yogis in interviews, just seeing someone lighting up from touching the truth. And it doesn't mean they're having a pleasant experience either. But often I'll come out of an interview feeling this bright faith, this real sense of confidence.

It's what gets us going. It's really what brings most of us to this practice, or any other practice, in the beginning—a real sense of lighting up. And it's wonderful. It's also impermanent, as is everything. It wavers. Usually on a retreat, for me about the second day, when you start to hit the hindrances, almost always my mind says, "Oh no, I can't believe I did this to myself again. What am I doing here?" And for most people, at some point when we hit the wall, whatever that happens to be, the bright faith really starts to flicker. It's not sustaining, because bright faith is basically aroused from an outside source.

But as we continue to be with our own experience, what develops that is more sustaining than bright faith is what we could call verified faith—verified because it's not arising from an outer inspiration but is verified through our own immediate experience.

This is really what our mindfulness practice allows us to discover—through our moment-to-moment willingness to simply be with what is happening right now, with the truth of what this moment is presenting. This allows for intuitive understanding to arise: understanding into the nature of our mind and body, perhaps into impermanence, into the fact that there is no solid, unchanging self here. Faith that in being willing to open to and explore something difficult, it can transform into a completely different and unexpected experience. Faith in all kinds of areas of wisdom—all these things are wisdom, which is really the fifth faculty—but when these come from our own experience, it's a much deeper, more sustaining quality of faith than this bright faith that gets us started and gives us energy.

Really, the Buddha's teaching is based on this verified faith. It's one of the things that always made me trust the Buddha's teaching more than a lot of others. There's one sutta that we love in the West. In the East, they don't need it so much. But in the West, it's kind of our favorite—the one where he says, "Don't believe anything just because I say so. Don't do it because anyone else tells you to. But try this and see for yourself. What are the results? Does it lead to less suffering? Does it lead to freedom?" So even though it takes an initial kind of bright faith—even blind faith—it's very much that we need to verify it through our own experience. And this is what the Buddha talked about. From this faith comes a great deal of confidence, a great deal of energy.

I want to talk about one other aspect of faith that has been very alive for me in my practice the last few years. It's one aspect of faith, really the quality of trust. I see trust as the willingness to connect with, to simply be with the truth of this moment. Really, the trust is the willingness, the ability to take refuge in this moment, whatever it happens to be that this moment is presenting. It's also a kind of innocent, childlike quality,

because it's willing to take refuge without having any guarantees, without having any outcome promised—just simply without knowing. And that's how life is. You never know what's going to happen in the next moment.

My favorite way of describing it comes from one teacher who calls it radical acceptance. He says, "Radical acceptance is radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways. To let go, to accept, it is necessary only to give up your fears." Only. These guys always make it sound so easy. But really that's the quality of trust—to accept truth in all forms in this moment.

And so right now, today, what have we been unwilling to accept? What have we been resisting, unwilling to accept as truth in this moment? This can be very subtle. The mind is very tricky in this way. And the fears—it's necessary only to give up your fears—the fears also can be very subtle, so that we hardly notice they're there.

I see it often myself in my own practice, in my life. It's really no different. For example, I remember one time I was going through a wave of deep grief and sadness. It was lasting days and days and days. And I felt I was being very present with it, very mindful with it, noting it, allowing it, accepting it. But really, somewhere quiet in the background was the sense, "You know, if I was doing this right, this wouldn't be happening." And no matter how subtle a thought that is, what it's coming from is not accepting. Somehow that isn't okay as truth in this moment.

And when I really look at it, most often that fear isn't so much about what's happening right now, but more the fear of, "If I really let go into this, then what will happen? Then it will really overwhelm me. Then it will get worse." And then the whole fountain opens up. So it's really interesting just to notice that point—because when we're not moving, opening into the unknown in that way, we're often shut down through fear. And fear is almost always of something that isn't actually happening yet.

So trust is this kind of radical acceptance that what is now is the truth in this moment.

There's nowhere else to go. It might be really unpleasant, but there's a sense of trust that I can take refuge in that. It too is a gateway, a doorway to understanding.

And it is scary at times when we are really living in that space where we know we just don't know what's going to happen in the next instant. We really don't know what the next thing is that's going to arise in our experience. You think you're going to take

another breath, but suddenly there's this shooting pain in your knee that wasn't planned. When we walk out of this room, we have no idea. It doesn't mean we don't make plans, but really living in that space where we know we don't know—it's scary.

But it can also be incredibly freeing. It opens the doorway to so much energy and possibilities. Because when I'm holding back, afraid, wanting to know what's going to happen next, so much of my energy goes into trying to control, trying to organize, trying to manage what's uncontrollable in the first place. It's a futile tying up of energy.

But still, we like to know. We want to have some basis of knowledge. And it's kind of frustrating when we keep looking for more knowledge and more security, and instead what we find is greater and greater mystery. The more we look, the less we know. I have to say, the more I've practiced, every time I come out of a long period of practice, I really don't know anything. I know even less than I thought I knew the last time.

I came across a science article in the New York Times. The largest galaxy ever detected—the discovery was announced last week—includes more than 100 trillion stars and measures more than 6 million light years in diameter. This galaxy is 60 times the size of our own Milky Way. Now, this new galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump, a cluster of about a thousand galaxies called Abel 2029. But then they said that further study will provide clues to the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter. Since there doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would seem necessary to cause all these clumpings of galaxies, they think it's caused by this dark matter. According to the prevailing wisdom of scientists, some 99% of the universe consists of this missing mass. Which means that what is generally thought of as astronomy actually concerns only a tiny subset of particles that happen to be detectable by human nervous systems.

So we just don't know. And when we stop trying to know so hard, it's really wonderful, because what I find happens is we can open up to the wonder of things. I mean, it's wonderful that 99% of the universe is some unknown substance. It's really amazing. Who can explain just the wonder of a simple thing like a baby bird? Or why are robin's eggs blue? Or what makes it rain? You can say the scientists can explain it, but you don't really know. These things are wonderful. And that sense of awe, that sense of playing in the beauty and wonder of it all, is really what opens up to us when we can just be with what is in this moment, when we can begin to move from this space of trust.

Krishnamurti said, "To seek the truth is to deny it." We simply just be the truth in this moment. This practice for me has been wonderful that way, because no matter how difficult a particular experience might be, no matter how overwhelming, how much we're caught in fear and resistance—and we do get caught, and we are caught, and it can be

for days—at some point, there can be just that one moment of: *Ah, all right. This is how it is. I don't have any idea what's going to come out of it. It's okay. This is just what is.* That moment of trust—that's a moment of faith. It's really where wisdom arises from. And it's almost as if this is a practice of trust, and it grows the more we do this meditation. It's really quite lovely.

So you might notice something that we often do in practice which is sort of the opposite of trust. I call it manipulating meditation. When you find yourself trying to recreate a certain state of mind, a certain physical state that you've had, a certain really high concentrated state where you thought, "Now this is it, now I'm doing it right." And you find yourself going back to the same place to walk, at the same time of day, or holding your hands the same way. There are all kinds of ways we can get into these little routines, almost like magical routines, trying to recreate what we've decided is the right way for things to be. And if it happens, then we think, "Oh, I've got so much faith." And if it doesn't happen, we feel really frustrated. This is not trust. This is not faith. This is basically craving and manipulation.

But notice when you catch yourself doing it—we all do—what's the state of mind that's being fostered in that state? And often, for myself, this can be quite subtle: a feeling of either fear, dissatisfaction, or neediness. The sense that somehow what's happening now isn't okay and I've got to make it different. And then when we see that and again just say, "Okay, sleepiness, this is what is," and there's a surrendering to that—again, this trust and confidence grows.

So this faculty of faith gives us a great deal of confidence that builds our capacity to be with, to face whatever it is that's arising in our experience in this moment. And that confidence leads into the next faculty, which is that of energy. Sometimes I've heard it called "willingness to do," of a sort. Energy—sometimes I like to call it joyful effort, because it's not this grim, determined "I'm going to do this no matter what." That has energy in it, but it's not balanced. So it's a kind of joyful effort and interest. And as you can see from your own experience, it's a vital quality to continue in this practice at all. No question. This sitting and walking all day with alertness takes an incredible amount of energy. People who haven't done it can't believe how much effort and energy it takes just to sit and walk slowly all day. But it takes a lot. It's really, in a way, the root of our practice.

It's really important to be aware of energy as an impersonal mental state or force. I myself find it so easy to identify with especially low energy as being me, being a bad yogi, being my fault. But if you just start to notice, energy always ebbs and flows. There are always roller coasters of energy. As with every other mental state, nothing is static.

Everything changes. When the energy is low, even with the best intentions, the practice just starts to drag on and drag on. The enthusiasm wanes. It can become kind of tedious—I don't know if any of you have experienced this. The ideas start to come up almost inevitably: "Ah, I should be doing something else. I'm not suited for this. This is the wrong time." Whatever. And it's really easy to interpret it as "I'm not doing this right." But that's just not the case.

Begin to notice the reverse. It took me a while to discover that when I was feeling—or am feeling—really present and fulfilled in my meditation practice, really interested in what's going on, it's not necessarily that what's going on is really cosmic. It's that the quality of energy is strong and balanced, so that I'm pretty connected, paying attention, interested in what's happening. What's happening could be total dukkha. But when the energy is balanced and present, it's okay. There's not this kind of self-flagellation: "You should be doing it better, you should be doing it better."

Balanced energy and effort is, I think, one of the most ongoing dances that we work with in our lives and in this practice. These faculties are present in our lives outside of formal meditation practice as well. For energy to be balanced, it really comes from inside ourselves, from within our own hearts, and actually springs from a joyful, interested heart. It's true that sometimes we have to just make a commitment and do it. There are times when the energy is low and we have to just keep going. But when it's really flowing, when it's balanced, it comes from an inner joy and interest.

And if that dies and we're too much just trying to impose an outer form on ourselves—for example, just walking slow, incredibly slow, no matter what's going on, not paying any attention to the conditions within or without—often that is such an effort that the heart and mind can start to wither. When it's no longer springing from inside, everything can get really dull, really dry. Sometimes you need to check in and see what's going on.

I remember one time in my practice it was like that for about two weeks, which is really long for me for it to feel that way. And finally I came to this point. I was coming up these stairs—I always walked in a certain hallway—and I said to myself, and really meant it, "If someone else is walking there, I'm leaving the retreat and going home." Of course, I live two doors away, so I don't know if I'd really have gotten away. Luckily, no one was walking there.

But that's the kind of state it can reach when the energy is out of bounds and becomes dull and dry and forced.

When that's happening, it's tricky, because our mind can tend to go two ways. One is like, "Okay, forget it. It's not springing from inner joy. I'm just going to kick back and read and walk and sketch until I feel like doing it again." I wouldn't really advocate this, especially as the first thought that arises in the mind. It's really true that when the energy is falling down low and it's feeling dry, usually what's happening at that point is difficult. That doesn't mean we should just stop.

It takes a delicate balance. But if we're willing to just gently—not forcing, but gently—say, "Okay, it's dull, it's dry now, but I'll just keep doing it." Not out of strain, but just in a gentle, loving way. Keep doing the sitting, keep doing the walking, and let it be just as it is. That willingness to continue.

It's like Sayadaw U Pandita uses the image of polishing a brass mirror. At first you can't see anything. You just polish and polish and polish, and it gets brighter and brighter until you can see really clearly. It's not like you're pushing your fist through the metal. You're just gently being willing to be sustained and continuous.

But don't confuse not quitting—don't confuse continuing in this gentle way—with trying to make things different. It's not that at all.

And that's the other place. I think it's the place where most of us get really hung up in an imbalance of energy. The tendency for so many of us, when something difficult begins to happen, as I said earlier, is to interpret, "This means I'm doing something wrong. This shouldn't be happening." We're just so conditioned that pleasant is right and unpleasant is wrong. So as soon as it gets unpleasant, it must be wrong.

When that happens, for many people—I know I see it in myself—the more difficult it gets, the more I interpret it as wrong, and that starts to mean that *I'm* wrong, *I'm* bad. It gets into a whole feedback loop of self-judgment and criticism and negation.

I remember once I was doing walking and noting my thoughts, and I realized I was in an unbelievable state of self-judgment and hatred. I'd gone all the way back to third grade—everything I had done wrong, the people I had offended. It was really heavy. "How did I get here?" And I just said, okay. I tuned in, and what was happening really was a pain in my big toe. That's all. Which was unpleasant. I hadn't really noticed that. But I had judged it and then turned it around that it shouldn't be happening and gone into this whole story of self-hatred.

That can happen when you're in a long, extended period of low energy. It can happen really strongly. And because the energy's low, it's also harder to notice that that's what's happening. We start to believe it.

From that space, rather than giving up, the other extreme is, "No matter what I do, it isn't enough. No matter how hard I try, I'm not trying hard enough." And we drive and we push and we get grim, and we say, "I'm sitting with this no matter what," and grit our teeth. Literally, people sit and sweat is pouring off them and they're shaking, and they finally move, and they come in feeling defeated—their practice is no good because they moved after an hour and a half of torment.

This is not balanced energy either. Grim, heavy determination does not equal balanced energy. It's not the same thing.

So while we don't want to just automatically give up, it also isn't helpful to swing the other way and push our way through no matter how painful and overwhelming an experience might be. The mind and heart just wither when we stay pounding through a difficult experience, whether it's physical pain, emotional pain, or psychological pain. Yes, we want to acknowledge, we want to be present—but not with this grim driving. This is not balanced energy either.

So if you're finding that the effort arising in your practice—look at it and see: Is it the effort to change something? Is it the effort to make things be different or to make something happen? Is there some expectation there? Almost certainly it's an unbalanced quality of effort, and it leads to frustration and tenseness and difficulty.

When you find that you're really lost in this flip side of unbalanced energy—this heavy, grim pushing—the mind is judging. And at that time, sometimes you just can't clearly evaluate what the quality of energy is.

I know when my mind is lost in self-judging, any evaluation I try to make is colored by that judgment. No matter how you try to evaluate the quality of effort, that mind is going to come in and say, "You're not doing it good enough, you're not trying hard enough, you're a wimp, you're a coward." You can't trust it in those moments.

One thing I have found helpful when you're feeling lost in the heaviness of some overwhelmingly difficult, fearful experience is some of what Michelle was talking about last night—to deliberately bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh called "seeds of joy."

I'll read some things Thich Nhat Hanh wrote. He said, "Most of us ask the question, what is wrong? We forget to ask what is right. There are many things that are not wrong. When you focus your attention only on what is wrong, things can get a lot worse. Therefore, it's wise to be aware of your capacity to enjoy peace, happiness, joy—your capacity to be in touch with what is refreshing and healing in the present moment. During the war in Vietnam, we were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the coun-

try. But we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage. So I would mention these to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them. Each of us has moments of difficulty. When at times we are not able to deal with them, we can ask our seeds of joy to come up. In this way we can counterbalance the suffering."

Sometimes that's the most skillful thing to do in our practice. There's something the Buddha talked about as skillful avoidance. It's not that, "Oh no, I'm never going to look at this again—anything not to know that this fear is present." But it's knowing that we're grim, that we're overwhelmed, and just finding a simple way to bring up our own seeds of joy.

It could just be shifting the focus of attention to hearing—it's a very spacious field of attention. For me, when I am on an intensive retreat doing vipassana, I tend hardly to go outside. I used to, when I'd get like that, just walk out on the fire escape on the second floor of the Catskills for four minutes. Just that little bit—not noting for four minutes—just opening up to the sky and the tree that's there. And that would be so refreshing to my heart, to my mind. Just bringing in a sense of softness.

It might be doing metta or compassion for yourself or for others. It might be deliberate reflections—any of the ways Michelle talked about last night of cultivating joy. At times, a skillful backing off is the most helpful and powerful way to allow the process to continue in its own way. Again, the difficult situation arises, but there's more balance, more freshness of energy. There's not this withering of the mind.

So just play with this in yourself. There's no rule of thumb. It's really about being aware: What's the quality of energy? What's the quality of mind in this moment? And as the energy continues to become more steady—and it does, it still fluctuates, but it becomes more steady as we go on—this is what strengthens the quality of mindfulness.

I'm not going to say a lot about mindfulness because I think Steve's going to talk about it tomorrow night. But obviously mindfulness is kind of the core tool of this practice. Mindfulness is sometimes translated as "observing power"—that non-coercive, non-violent quality of attention, knowing what's happening clearly, the mind connecting with the experience without hesitating, knowing it just as it is, without all the concepts and interpretations.

Knowing pressure as pressure. Not the whole story about how this pressure means I'm so rigid, which means I'm such an uptight person, and how come I acted like that back in the third grade, and on and on and on. Pressure as pressure. It's unpleasant. Maybe there's aversion. Mindfulness is just connecting with what's happening as it is.

Alert, clear seeing, yet also relaxed—again, not that tension.

This mindfulness is so powerful because in the moment of true mindfulness, really connecting with knowing what's arising just as it is, we're not clouded by confusion, by aversion or anger, by greed. There's just this clear knowing, and it's from this clear knowing that deep wisdom arises. Each moment of mindfulness is very powerful.

You can see how balanced energy and attention leads to this balance of mindfulness. I have a little story that to me was a good example of it. I was in a game reserve in South Africa where you drive through and look for all these animals. But it wasn't one of those ones with wide plains where you can see ten miles off. It was all jungly and thickets and overgrown. So you'd drive really, really slowly on these roads and just peer through all the undergrowth and the tall grass looking for lions and giraffes and elephants and everything.

When we started, we were all excited and looking specifically for elephants, giraffes, lions. A lot of energy, a lot of interest, but it was really tight—looking for, you know, very tense. And we would see some things, but we didn't actually see elephants and giraffes and lions. After a while, because you do this all day for days, just drive around on these roads, eventually I got quite tired. I just couldn't stay that tense, and also frustrated because I wasn't seeing what I wanted to see. That's the quality of energy when we're just too tight, too expecting.

So then I just said, okay, forget it, and lay back and just cruised in the car, spacing out, not really paying much attention at all. And then the energy came back again, and I just quit looking for anything and started appreciating—oh, the grass is really nice. Look at the dew on it from the morning. I was really appreciating the freshness and being quite alert and present with just what was, without looking for lions and giraffes and elephants and everything.

It was really interesting because I started to see very subtle things that I would never have noticed, that I didn't notice at all when I was looking so tightly. I remember the first thing I saw—I was just looking at the grass and I saw a baboon up in a tree. It was almost exactly the same color as the tree. I never would have noticed it when I was looking so hard for something. But just being relaxed and present with what is, things stood out very clearly. And it was also much more enjoyable. I was just very appreciative of whatever was presenting itself.

That really felt to me like the balance of energy that leads to mindfulness, where it's just connecting with what's right there in a very clear way. And when we're content with what is like that, life is really so much more enjoyable. It's so much easier than wishing everything was different. I don't know why it's so hard to live like that.

So, as I say, each moment of mindfulness is a powerful moment. It's not going to feel powerful, like things going off, but it's a strong moment. And it kind of builds moment by moment, and it leads to a strengthening of concentration, which is this fourth faculty. Concentration becomes strong, becomes well established through this continuity of mindfulness.

By concentration, I mean just feeling it in your mind. We have all these ideas about what concentration is, but it's really that quality in one moment. Just think of it in one moment. Don't try and stretch it out over time. It's that quality in one moment of how the mind, the attention, sticks to the object—whatever's happening, the breath, the sensation, the motion. It sticks to that object steadily, without a lot of fluttering, without a lot of unsteadiness. Just pain in the knee, knowing it. Rising, knowing it.

Concentration has the function of being a unifying force, a gathering force. Usually the mind, our energy, is dispersed and scattered all over the place. In a moment of concentration, it's all brought together. It's unified in this one particular experience. It's amazing how powerful, how much strength there is in the mind when it is all unified in this way. This unification, this feeling of non-fragmentation, leads to a very deep sense of peace. We have contentment. Strong states of happiness come about through periods of one-pointed concentration. It's really so lovely when our mind and energy is not flying off in ten million different directions at once.

Part of that's what we see when we first sit down and in the first few days of a retreat. Part of why it's so difficult is that what we're starting to consciously experience is just how scattered the energy is—the physical and mental energy. In our daily life, we couldn't believe how scattered it really is until we try to say, okay, just stay with the breath, and we see how incredibly difficult that is. And how joyful it can be.

You tell someone, "I was with two breaths – it was so wonderful, I felt so happy!" And it doesn't make sense to somebody who hasn't tried it. But it's that sense of non-fragmentation that's so lovely.

In working with this form of vipassana, we're not cultivating one-pointed concentration or samadhi practice in that way. Rather, we're developing a steadiness of attention, a concentration that grows on objects that come and go, come and go, come and go. But

in each moment that there's a real connecting with what's happening, knowing it clearly – that's the mindfulness. With this sticking quality, this non-fluttering – that's the moment of concentration.

I know I used to get all bent out of shape. I'd go into an interview and say, "I'm not concentrating." I had some idea of what concentration meant over a whole day – my mind was never supposed to wander, never supposed to do anything except go to the breath and stay there. And the most helpful advice I ever got was: forget all the rest of it. Just frame this one moment. In this one moment, whatever is predominant – the breath, the lifting of the foot, tingling, it doesn't matter what – is there a sense of the mind really connecting with that experience and sticking there? Not kind of vaguely noticing it, not kind of pushing past it, but really connecting and sticking there. Then that's concentration growing.

And you also will begin to see, as concentration does develop over these days – and there's no way it can't, sitting here like this – we'll still fall out of balance. We'll still get scattered. But what happens is that, quite naturally, the restabilization does not take as long, and it happens more naturally. Where something would blow me out of the water for three days, then it might take one day. Or it might be three hours. Notice that. Because often we tend to say, "Oh no, this again – it threw me off again," and we forget that a little while ago it would have been three days of hell instead of half an hour. We still focus on the difficult. But notice that we come back to balance sooner and more naturally. And again, you can't force concentration any more than you can force mindfulness or force effort. It also arises out of this moment-by-moment attention, and really out of a rest and ease and joy in our being, not from forcing.

Now, quite naturally as these four factors I've talked about – faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration – all develop through this practice, arising out of that, quite by itself, is insight or wisdom. Really, that's the point of this practice. It's a wisdom practice, a practice of insight. As I said in the beginning: intuitive understanding through our own experience of the nature of life, of who and what we really are, of what's true about our experience. And that can only come from being with our experience, allowing ourselves to know it as it is, without all this trying to filter it and make it different and explain it so that it fits our preconceived notions.

When with mindfulness we're able to simply be with what is, then there's a chance – oh, that's what's really going on! Of course I never saw it before. As long as I persist in thinking I'm a solid, unchanging body and I can't let go of that concept long enough to just feel vibrating, then that's going to be my experience of the world. Through the willingness to be with sensation, whatever it is, all of a sudden there's a moment where –

wait a minute, there's nothing solid here. And that's not a concept. That's the experience in the moment. These kinds of moments arise over and over. That's the arising of wisdom. Oh, things really are impermanent. There really isn't a substantial self hanging around here.

And what's so magical, really, is that this unfolds by itself through such a simple process as sitting, walking, washing dishes – whatever you're doing – and simply being with things as they are. We don't need any kind of fancy special subject to be paying attention to. Anything will serve.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "The world reveals itself even when the eyes are closed. The world is neither inner nor outer. It is vital and complete in any object of contemplation – the breath, the tip of the nose, or anything as tiny as a speck of dust or as huge as a mountain. Whatever it is, it is not fragmented from ultimate reality. In fact, it contains the vast totality of reality."

Anything.

And so as this intuitive wisdom continues to develop, again it strengthens our faith. Faith becomes more verified, and it kind of comes full circle.

Just a tiny bit about balancing these qualities. In your practice, you can see that the quality of concentration and the faculty of energy balance each other. When they're out of balance—like more energy, too much energy in relationship to the concentration—the mind is all scattered, can't really land on an object. You have a lot of energy; restlessness, in other words, is what develops. It can be helpful sometimes to be spacious, as I was saying this morning in answer to the question. Sometimes if there's been enough steadiness previously, it helps to actually simplify what's going on. It's like too much energy—pinpoint your attention. Just pinpoint it on the breath, or pinpoint it on one part of the foot as you walk. Take fewer objects to pay attention to, because having a lot of things to pay attention to just kind of gets the energy going more.

When there's a deficiency of energy and actually more concentration, we tend to think you can never have too much concentration. But you can have too much in relationship to energy. You can get into this kind of nice space. The mind is calm. You're pretty much on the breath or something. You know what's happening. It's fairly pleasant. It's just going along. And it starts to get really drifty. It's easy to think, "Oh, this is a nice state of concentration." But pretty soon it just turns into a nice state of torpor.

So to notice at that point: it's comfortable, but it's not so helpful. Just bring in a little bit of energy. Again, you can note very clearly, like when you're sleepy—note clearly and steadily. You can try to be very precise in aiming and connecting with the breath,

with the sensation, with whatever's happening. If it's really dull, you can add a touch point, a feeling of some touching point in your body between breaths—like your buttocks or your hands touching together—because adding another thing to pay attention to takes more effort, and more effort brings in more energy.

And it's a continual adjustment. Nothing is static. The forces are always shifting back and forth. So it just requires mindfulness to notice. And none of this is about judging. It's not like, "Oh, I'm so sleepy, I'm so lazy." It's, "Ah! The energy's a little low. The concentration's stronger." It's taken such a huge weight off of me to be able to look at it that way instead of it always being my fault somehow.

Wisdom is balanced with faith. And it's interesting because they say when there's an imbalance of faith and wisdom—when the wisdom is stronger—what tends to happen is it turns into analytical thinking. Notice how you can have an insight, some deep seeing into something that just arises. And it's not a thought like, "Oh yeah, everything's vibration," or "Oh, that's what this pattern of self-judging is about." It's just a knowing in the moment. And then there's an excitement and we start thinking about it. "Wow, that's really fantastic. Wait till I get home. Wait till I tell everybody. Now I really understand the Dharma." And you start giving talks in your mind.

This is really like an imbalance of wisdom. There's not the faith that gives the energy to do, to just say, "Okay, but keep practicing. What's happening right now? Thinking." That's the faith, the energy to do. Without that, the wisdom quality just takes off and we end up in analytical thinking, and it can even end up in skeptical doubt.

The other side is probably more obvious.

When there's a lot of faith but not much wisdom, we can become blind. We put faith in all kinds of inappropriate places and people. Someone told me once about her teacher, "I'd jump off a cliff if he told me to." You have to find the balance for yourself, but too much faith without the counterbalance of wisdom can lead to excessive zeal. "Yes, yes, I understand, I'll do anything, anything"—but there's not the counterbalance of real understanding.

I was talking with a friend who lives in Cambridge about how to deal with walking alone at night in the city. She said she used to have this excess of faith where she thought, "The Dharma will protect me," no matter what, and wouldn't take care. Yes, the Dharma will protect you if you also use some wisdom. You don't walk at midnight into a group of five men hiding in the shadows. You cross the street. And that's not acting from fear. That's simply seeing what the situation is and acting appropriately. Balance of faith and wisdom.

We need all of these factors. Mindfulness is what helps us balance all of them. You can't have too much mindfulness. And it takes mindfulness to even notice that the other factors are out of balance.

As we continue in our practice, in our lives, these qualities strengthen—not just in retreat, but in our daily living. They really work together. When you come to sit again, you'll find that your practice starts out more balanced and stronger. These qualities become much more accessible. We become more familiar with them.

I want to end with a little poem by Kalu Rinpoche, a wonderful Tibetan teacher:

When you practice the Dharma, the clouds of sorrow will drift away and the sun of wisdom and joy will be shining in the clear sky of your mind.

CHAPTER 247

Inner Contentment

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson examines the deeply ingrained mental habits that prevent us from experiencing our natural sense of completeness and inner contentment. She explores the three root reactions—craving toward the pleasant, aversion toward the unpleasant, and delusion regarding the neutral—and how these patterns distort our perception of reality before we even consciously respond to experience.*
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> *Wilson discusses the four areas of grasping (upādāna): sense pleasures, views and opinions, rites and rituals, and the notion of self. She illuminates how grasping at views can be even more difficult to relinquish than attachment to physical objects, using the Buddha's parable of the father who refused to recognize his returned son because he had become attached to the view that his son was dead. The talk explores how identification with experience—the moment-to-moment arising of the self-idea—creates suffering and separation.*
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> *Drawing from her experience as a nun in Thailand, Wilson offers a compelling reframe of renunciation: rather than deprivation, it represents an opening to profound joy and appreciation. She explains how the outer simplicity of retreat life creates conditions for touching inner contentment. Quoting the Pāli term appanihita (wishlessness), she describes the understanding that everything is already complete within ourselves. The talk weaves together Buddhist teachings with passages from the Tao Te Ching to illuminate how releasing grasping naturally gives rise to compassion, generosity, and the capacity to appreciate life's beauty without the agitation of craving.*

Last night Michelle spoke about opening and understanding. I want to speak tonight a little about some of the habits of mind, the inclinations of mind that block, that hinder what seems like it should be a natural process of opening. These habits block our touching, our living with a sense of inner contentment. They keep us from knowing that we are complete and whole in ourselves.

When we're just going along normally, there's not a real attentiveness or care. There's not mindfulness in our experience in a moment. The natural way that our minds—that all of us—react to situations, these really deeply ingrained patterns of response, of habit, is our natural kind of way of being. Or it feels like our natural way of being because it's so familiar to us.

These root habits or patterns I've spoken of before are that when we come in contact with the pleasant, the impulse is of craving, of wanting. When there's contact with some unpleasant experience, the impulse is of pushing away, aversion, hatred in the strong sense of talking about it. And in contact with neutral, the impulse is just not seeing what's going on or spacing out. It's really a root habit of perceiving, a habit of reacting, that keeps us so out of touch with what's true, but it feels so natural. Of course, that's the natural way to be. How else would one respond?

There's a little cartoon I got from a friend's refrigerator. Refrigerators seem to be a great place to find important information. It says, "Science has noted three basic types." You wander alone down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle, solitary yet surrounded—just like here. You think, "These people are..." and it's multiple choice. A: my brothers, my sisters. B: perverts, probably pickaxe murderers. C: I sure could go for a chili dog.

Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse: A: I know what he feels. He feels hope. He feels fear. B: Why is that pervert looking at me? C: Maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

Then the last one: further down, construction workers are tearing the street to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of A: the path of life, B: the highway to hell, C: rocky road, my favorite flavor.

It's natural, part of our experience. What's really quite fascinating to me is the subtlety of these tendencies of mind. Because not only can these energies of greed, of hatred, of delusion inform our reaction, they are also so subtle that they can actually color our perception so deeply that we don't even consciously, accurately perceive what's happening. That's even prior to the response.

Here's an example. I read in a book by a friend of ours about psychological tests that were testing just this kind of perception and how it's skewed by desire, by aversion. In this one test, they had a four-minute video of a very fast basketball game, and the subjects were told to count how many times the ball passed. There's a sense of focusing, of really wanting to see that particular aspect. So they did that and were questioned at the end about how many times the ball was passed.

In the meantime, throughout the basketball court during this fast game, they had a woman in white with a white parasol come stately walking from one side to the other. Nobody mentioned it later when they were asked about how many times the ball was

passed. In fact, when they asked the subjects about it, they said, "I never saw that," and absolutely would not believe that had been part of the video—until it was shown again. And then it's like, "How could I miss that?"

This is how the habit, the impulse of craving, can distort our perception so that we really consciously are not relating to what's actually going on.

You can see this both with craving and with aversion just in our day-to-day life. When you walk down a street, do you ever notice that what you particularly notice is kind of the set that your mind has? If I'm hungry, I'll notice restaurants. If you're looking to buy a new car, you notice the kinds of cars that drive by. If you have a particular aversion—like on retreats sometimes people get, you know, the opposite of a vipassana romance, a vendetta, a vipassana vendetta, where someone just drives you crazy—there's a setup of aversion. Do you ever notice that somehow you see that person more than everybody else in the whole retreat?

These habits are very strong. They arise frequently, almost automatically when we're not aware, when mindfulness is not present in our experience. They arise based on our not seeing or knowing in that moment what is true—that we are complete and whole in ourselves, that there is nothing to want, that nothing can give us lasting satisfaction. When we truly know this, craving doesn't arise.

Our mindfulness practice gives us the space, the opportunity to actually become aware of these habits, these patterns of mind. Sometimes painfully so. In fact, often people will come and talk about how aware they've become of craving, how aware they are of aversion. It seems like that's all they see. So now we not only notice craving, we judge it. And then we're back into that same tunnel vision—craving and aversion are all we notice. It can be very frustrating, very discouraging, because it can seem as if we're getting worse, that things are more difficult, that we're more caught in these unskillful patterns of mind than before we started paying attention. The sense of living in inner contentment might seem much more removed than before we began practice.

Of course, I'm going to say that this is not an accurate perception. It really does help to have patience and some faith, because it may seem that we're drowning in these habits—or in the noticing of these habits—but truly, this beginning to see, to know how the mind reacts to pleasant, to unpleasant, to neutral, is opening up space for a whole different possibility of how we can be in life, how we can relate to life. A whole possibility of living in our true potential, of being with the truth of things just as they are.

A couple of expressions of this. From the Tao Te Ching: "The Tao never does anything, yet through it all things are done. If powerful men and women could center themselves in it, the whole world would be transformed by itself in its natural rhythms. People would be content with their simple everyday lives, in harmony, free of desire. When there is no desire, all things are at peace."

And another: "The way is perfect, like vast space where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things."

So it is through choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things. These habits grow and blind us through inattention. The care, the attention of mindfulness, the opening up to see what's really going on—this is what opens up the potential to see and know the true nature of things. It allows understanding to arise quite naturally. As Michelle said, we don't need to force it. It arises quite naturally, through seeing and not fighting these seemingly inherent habits of mind.

As we see, and as understanding arises spontaneously, what we can actually begin to notice in our moment-to-moment experience—as a result, as an effect of understanding—is that our attitude, the way we think in a particular situation, begins to change. Another way of saying it: we begin to notice from time to time, on rare occasions, that the inclination of aversion or anger might actually not arise, and instead what arises is compassion, caring. The inclination of greed, of grasping, suddenly and spontaneously gives way to renunciation, to non-greed, to a sense of contentment.

A simple example of how this change in attitude happens quite naturally. Thich Nhat Hanh uses this example often. I appreciate him because he's so simple, so down to earth. He talks about a small brother and sister. The younger sister is sick—whining, complaining, yelling, driving her brother crazy. It's unpleasant. His attitude is one of anger and annoyance. When his mother explains to him, in a way he can understand, how his sister feels—that she's sick, she has a fever, a headache, she hurts—in a way that he can see and relate to, without any forcing, his attitude spontaneously transforms to one of compassion, of feeling-with.

So it's nothing esoteric. It's the natural result of understanding that our attitudes of mind begin to shift. The Buddha spoke about this—actually, the second stage of the Eightfold Path is that of wise attitude, wise thought, wise intention, as it is variously translated. The first stage is understanding. And how we understand our lives, the world, is what gives rise to how we think about the world.

What our attitude is, how it arises in a particular situation. And of course the next three stages are concerned with wise action in the world. So how we think, how we relate, what our attitude is in a situation is what gives rise to how we act.

The Buddha was so practical. It doesn't seem like he talked about anything just for the heck of it. From what I've read, it's all very practically directed to helping us understand the nature of our minds and how to be free from suffering and confusion.

In speaking about this wise aspiration, wise intention, there is also a very practical application—helping us see that when there's mindfulness, there are times when we actually do have a choice where the mind dwells. In other words, these strong habits of aversion, craving, and confusion will arise quite naturally. With mindfulness, there are times when we have the space of choice. The Buddha said that what we reflect upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. It seems obvious.

When we're doing formal metta practice, one aspect of what's happening is that we're deliberately choosing where to let the mind dwell. We're choosing to move it from unthinking aversion and confusion to a deliberate dwelling in thoughts of love and kindness. This has great power. With our work of mindfulness, it's quite obvious. We can notice when this happens, and we can also notice how we can use this rather obvious principle.

An easy example: sitting here, a pleasant thought of home arises, and it turns from craving into really strong grasping. Grasping is the next step after craving. There's an impulse of craving—the example given is like looking for something in the dark. Grasping is when you grab it, you seize it, you've got it. You're really in the grip of it now.

So this impulse to go home comes up and turns into really strong grasping. That's the mind motivated by greed. And we can sit here, really feel it, and quite deliberately decide not to do that—quite deliberately bringing up the intention to renounce that particular grasping, that particular desire, for the purpose of something that seems more important: for the purpose of understanding. Simple. But this is the kind of space of choice that mindfulness opens up to us.

While this transformation happens quite naturally from understanding, being aware of the possibility and of what these strong habits can transform into, there are also times when we can use this quite consciously and be surprised at how much power that can have to change how we're relating, to change our confusion with experiences. We don't have to be enslaved by our habits of thought. We don't have to feel like constant victims.

Wise attitude can also be looked at as a willingness to greet any moment—each moment—as a chance to learn rather than as something we've got to fight against or just put up with. In any moment there's the possibility of choice, the possibility of growth and transformation.

The attitude that craving can transform into is really one word: renunciation. I like much better the sense of inner contentment, also of non-greed, actively of generosity. The sense of inner contentment—not being caught up in needing, in acquiring, in wanting—basically arises from the understanding that we're full and complete in this moment and that nothing outside is going to bring us any kind of lasting happiness. It's not really an intellectual understanding. It's more a visceral one in the moments.

In that inner contentment, which is a very deep and profound touching of truth, there is the space to deeply appreciate whatever is here right now. When we're caught in grasping, that's just the thing we can't do—appreciate what's here and now.

Moments of this wholeness, this completeness, this inner contentment arise quite frequently in our life on retreat. Those times of clarity, of fullness, of deep appreciation. And it doesn't matter what's happening in that moment—whether you're drinking a cup of tea or hearing a birdsong, just taking a step, watching the filter of light on the leaves, or brushing your teeth. It really doesn't matter what's happening. These moments are so full. The truth is emptiness, but another way of experiencing it is sometimes fullness—such a fullness that the thought of wanting anything or pushing anything away is inconceivable, just makes no sense. That inner contentment exists because there's no desire, no aversion in the mind.

I want to speak about the four different areas of grasping, of being aware of what areas we get easily pulled into, somehow thinking this is going to make us happy. The first is the most obvious, the one I tend to think of when I speak or think of craving: sense desire. Objects, relationships, sexuality, food, whatever. The five physical senses and the mind. The area of sense pleasures is the first area of grasping.

In our society, when we speak about renunciation, that's usually what comes to mind for me—either extreme asceticism or in any way giving up sense desires. It's definitely not a big thrill in our society. It's not really supported. It's not even respected so much. In the East, when people become monks or nuns in Buddhist countries, even though the majority of people don't want to live that way themselves, there's a tremendous respect for the willingness to give up sense pleasures on a certain level.

In our society, we're bombarded with possibilities for sensual fulfillment. Just reading the New York Times magazine presents things to want that I never would have even thought of. Have you ever had the experience of looking at an ad or hearing something on television and suddenly being gripped with desire for something you never knew existed half an hour ago? It's like this blast, and inner peace is gone.

The Buddha said often that his teachings were contrary to the ways of the world. And it's really true in this area—in all the areas of grasping, but particularly in the area of sensual grasping, the pull is very strong. I haven't been all over the world, but I feel that we in the West are somehow so inundated with possibilities for sensual gratification that it's really hard for us to even get a feeling for what it's like to renounce some of that. We could renounce so much and still be bombarded. It's just incomprehensible to me how much stuff we have.

I want to talk a little later about the joys of renunciation, because they're very real. But in the way that we've been brought up, with the constant information we get from the media, from other people, it's considered very strange not to want things. I got a television a couple of months ago, the first time I've ever had one. I thought it was really strange to have one, but I would meet friends who couldn't comprehend that I did not have a TV—as if that were some extreme form of suffering, which it definitely was not. It was a pleasure not to have one.

So that's the first area of grasping, and perhaps the most obvious to us.

The second area of grasping is grasping at views, grasping at opinions. This one is really fascinating to me. It's so easy to get caught in this—views about explaining the nature of the world, explaining the nature of ourselves, views about spirituality, views about politics. It just goes on and on. Views about the nature of this body, views about death.

It's defined as thinking, anytime you think, "This alone is true, everything else is false"—only usually we don't bring it to consciousness that clearly. Then we're grasping at a view. Remember, it's the grasping that's the root of confusion and suffering. When we're grasping at a particular view, a particular explanation of the world, a particular way we think things are, it leads us to perceive—again, it's like tunnel vision—it leads us to perceive the world, to perceive information in the light of the particular view that we hold. We discount any facts that come our way that don't fit it, unless the fact is so overwhelming we can't avoid it anymore.

I remember Roger in one of his talks at the last retreat speaking about near-death experiences and a man who was a complete atheist—that's a view. He would reject any kind of spiritual experience that anyone told him about, anything that would seem to suggest the existence of some greater power. But then when he had such an incredible near-death experience that he couldn't deny the truth of it, he said, "Well, maybe I was mistaken." Sometimes it takes a huge knock over the head to shake us out of grasping at views—sometimes even to notice the views that we're holding.

The Buddha tells a story about a man in a small village who had a son. He was a widower. He went away one day to work, and in the meantime bandits came, kidnapped his son, and burned his house and the rest of the village. So there was no one there to tell him what had happened. He came home terribly distraught, of course, found some bones of a child in the ashes, and said, "This is my son." He lovingly wrapped them in a velvet bag and carried them with him. He rebuilt his house.

Quite some time later, his son escaped from the bandits and came home late, like at midnight, banging on the door: "Father, father, let me in!" By this time, the father had so grasped onto the idea that these bones were his son, that his son was dead—that was his grief, that was his life—that he just said, "Go away. My son's dead. Don't come to torment me like this." The son banged again. The father said, "Go away." He wouldn't open the door. Eventually the son went away, and they never saw each other again.

The Buddha says, you know, somewhere, sometime, you take something to be the truth. And if you cling to it so much, when the truth comes and knocks at your door, you won't let it in.

It's fascinating and it's very subtle. Views—we form them, we grasp onto them on a moment-to-moment basis. It's not some solid, unchanging thing. Nothing is. But perhaps you can start to notice over the course of the days together here. Notice how we'll have a particular experience, and it's amazing—immediately we'll formulate some view explaining it: "This is what this means, and now I know what practice is." Then without realizing it, we grasp that as the truth, use it to evaluate the rest of our experience, and the net result is conflict.

This is what happens when we grasp at a view. We come into conflict with others who don't agree with our view. We come into conflict with ourselves.

So notice: I've been with three breaths of very distinct sensations. This is good concentration. This is what's supposed to happen. And when that doesn't happen at the next sitting, that view of "this is good concentration" is used as a club. Or: I'm not having enough emotions. I must be suppressing. The last retreat was more emotions.

And then that becomes a view. Or: I'm having too many emotions. I'm not concentrated enough. People sitting right next to each other will each be holding these different views. If they could switch, then they'd be happy.

I've noticed often when I'm sitting that this will come up. I'll be caught in it for a while and go, "Oh, that's a view. An opinion." It drops away. And immediately a new view is formed. It's really quite interesting to watch.

View in itself is not a problem. We certainly need to formulate views and opinions to exist in this world. We need to vote. We need to make choices. If you have money, you need to decide how to spend it, where to invest it, who to give it to, which organization you like better. We need to have views. It's the grasping. It's the not seeing a view as a view, taking it to be the truth. That's where we come into conflict.

In talking about or thinking about the idea of renouncing, of giving up the grasping, is it harder to give up grasping after some physical object or at a view of how we think life is? I find the latter much more difficult to really renounce.

And the views come down to our mistaken, our inaccurate view that things are unchanging, that somehow we're not going to die, that this is a solid body here, that we are a solid, separate self-entity. When our views are threatened or challenged, often the result in the moment is a lot of fear. It can be very scary. It's like having the ground shaken out from under us.

Often in a meditation retreat, when someone has an experience of anicca, of impermanence—the body dissolving, or any other kind of sense of impermanence, or just a little quick hit of no-self, of "there's no me here, things are just happening"—what is ultimately quite freeing, in that moment, is very often accompanied by terror. Real terror. In fact, sometimes if someone says they've had a momentary experience of anatta and they're just in a panic, we'll think, "Oh yeah, they probably really did." Because the fear of having our view shaken, of having our idea of the world shaken, can be so strong. But the grasping at the view is what's keeping us feeling separate. It's what's bringing us into conflict with the way things are.

The third and fourth types of grasping I don't want to go into so much. The third one is grasping at rites and rituals, which could be described as the view—again, it's a view—that a person is able to purify oneself or free oneself from suffering by means of external outward rules and rituals. In other words, as the Buddha said, we need the raft to get to the other shore, but then you don't carry the raft along on your back once you get there. We don't mistake the pointing finger for the moon. Devotional rituals, that's

one form of ritual, can be very helpful. In a way, sitting in formal meditation practice is a method, is a ritual, extremely helpful. But we don't mistake the outer form for the truth of who we are.

The fourth field of grasping—and this is like a whole talk in itself—is grasping at the idea of self. It's really a view again. It's grasping at the idea, often not on the conscious level, that there's some permanent unchanging essence sort of sitting here viewing the world that comes and goes. Or the way I can relate to it on a more immediate experiential level is the grasping onto, the identifying with, any particular experience in a moment as being me.

A simple example: sitting, there's an unpleasant sound that someone near you is making. You notice the sound, you notice unpleasant, aversion, anger. Why is that person doing that? Or self-judging.

How can I be so horrible as to be so angry at that person? That is the movement of identification. That's the impulse, the grasping at that particular experience as being me. My anger, my judgment, my self-righteousness. We might not be saying all that or even clearly knowing it, but it's quite a different experience. You can feel then, if you turn the attention onto it, how solid the sense of "me" becomes. In that moment, I'm angry, I'm judging, I'm suffering.

The same experience without the grasping, without the identification—you could have that same experience in the very next moment. Where there's hearing, it's unpleasant, there's aversion, but there's no grasping around that, and it just goes. And there is no real sense of "me" in that moment. Nothing so special, just not the grasping at the self-idea.

So you can start to notice how and where the self-idea is grasped at. When does that arise as a grasping in any particular moment? It's a becoming that happens over and over on a moment-to-moment basis. It's not some solid self-idea waiting there that we're knocking out with a hammer, finally going to chip it away for good. It's something that arises on a moment-to-moment basis, and we can notice when it's solid, what's the grasping at that moment, and when it's not.

So these are the four areas of grasping. I wanted to mention them all because often when I think about it, when I feel the sense of renunciation and the beauty of inner contentment, I sometimes forget about the last three and tend to just focus on the sensual, sense pleasures aspect. So I just wanted to broaden it a bit.

When we start to tune in to the nature of grasping, the nature of craving, we can't really help but notice that it's not so wonderful. It's not really so pleasant, and ultimately more suffering arises from the craving than pleasure comes from getting what we want. In that way, this natural renunciation, this getting in touch with inner contentment, comes quite by itself.

But this space to make a choice also arises quite often. It can be helpful just to reflect a bit on the nature of craving and the joy, the benefit, so to speak, of renunciation, because sometimes that can help us in that moment make a choice. As I said, our society often thinks of renunciation as equaling suffering. When I was a nun in Thailand, I felt people respected what I was doing a lot, but I really felt, out of that respect, they were treating me as though I were giving up so much. On a physical plane that was true. But there was this real sense that renunciation is so hard to do.

But it isn't. Once we've actually done it, what arises is a joy, an appreciation that is so much more powerful than any sense gratification.

This is from a Christian priest, speaking about the renunciation of celibacy. He says, "To be alive is to love. The ultimate purpose of monastic life is to create an environment for lovers. One reason for being celibate is to be a greater lover. The only reason to renounce one particular pleasure is to enjoy the unbearable pleasure of God's company."

I really love the feeling of that. Renouncing one particular pleasure to enjoy the company of the truth.

One little haiku I love that just gives me the feeling of the self-feeding nature of desire and also the futility of it: "Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto." We do that, and desire breeds desire. It just keeps us looking in the wrong direction, and it's futile. It keeps us in bondage.

As we begin to naturally experience renunciation, Suzuki Roshi said a lovely thing: renunciation does not so much mean giving up the things of the world as accepting that they go away. It's lovely. This begins to arise quite naturally in our experience as we feel and know the futility and the pain of this energy of grasping and desire. Craving arises and grips the heart because we're not knowing and seeing what is true—as if something outside can give us security, can give us wholeness, the sense of inner contentment.

There's a word in Buddhism—this is from Thich Nhat Hanh—*apranihita*, which means wishlessness. The idea is that you do not put something in front of you and run after it, because everything is already here in yourself. That's the sense, that's the inner contentment—really knowing that everything is already here in yourself. It begins to arise quite naturally.

But as I said, it can also be helpful to deliberately work with making a choice of renouncing. Renouncing a particular desire—to get up and leave in the middle of a sitting.

Anyway, by the end of that time where there was really no outlet, the desires for the most part fell away, and the space of appreciation, the space of contentment with just what was—you know, so it was really humid, but there was contentment with seeing the humidity and the dewdrops on the trees, just appreciating the beauty of that instead of the mind immediately racing to do something to make it more comfortable. Just that contentment with what is.

And that's really the strongest, most powerful teaching from that whole time for me, and one that has been strong with me ever since then. I honestly know that the depth of that learning would not have been possible without the outer renunciation and the inner renunciation of desire and grasping that went along with it.

That's, I think, one of the powerful lessons of a meditation retreat. You all are in a state of very strong natural renunciation even to be here, to go through the day, to live the way we're living here. And that opens up the possibility of moving out of these habits of greed and aversion and confusion and touching what is true.

Geshe Raptin, a Tibetan teacher, said, "Having great compassion for oneself is the same as renunciation"—renouncing the delusion, the attachment that keeps one bound to samsara, to this endless cycling of suffering. The point of renunciation is a development of love and compassion for oneself. Only then is compassion for others possible.

So far from being an avenue to greater suffering and discontent, working with and noticing this attitude, this shift of attitude in our being—the willingness to just let go of grasping in this moment, that's all, just in this moment—is actually an act of great compassion and love for ourselves.

Sometimes people ask, you know, "If I give up desire—not all desire is going to go, but I'm willing to renounce desire in the moment, to not just move towards pleasant and away from unpleasant—does that mean everything is just all neutral and boring? That you can't tell what's pretty from what's ugly and life's just one dull gray blur?" There's often a fear of this.

And it's really not so. We're not giving up seeing how things are, not giving up being able to tell differences on the relative level of life. What we're giving up in that moment of renouncing is the craving, the fear that this particular thing is going to change, the needing for this particular experience to be in my life right now in order for me to be happy—giving up the craving that binds us to samsara.

The Buddha said, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it."

That's the space of inner contentment.

In fact, there's so much more in the world that's beautiful, that we never even notice when we're in the grip of grasping. When we're living in the space of inner contentment, there's so much more beauty in the world than we're ever aware of in our normal state of dull habit.

I want to end with one more reading from the Tao Te Ching—this feeling of just living in the simplicity of inner contentment:

Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings but contemplate their return. Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity. If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kind-hearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you. And when death comes, you are ready.

Everything is already here in ourselves.

CHAPTER 248

Sīla/Precepts Update

Carol Wilson · 51 min

> *In this deeply personal talk, Carol Wilson invites us to reconsider our relationship with sīla (ethical conduct), moving beyond viewing the precepts as mere rules to follow before "getting to the real business" of meditation. Drawing from her year as a nun in Thailand and decades of practice, she shares how working with conscious conduct has become one of the most profound and subtle aspects of her path.*
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> *Wilson explores how the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path begins with wise understanding, which then informs intention, which in turn shapes action—revealing that ethical conduct is not blind rule-following but an expression of awakening itself. She examines each of the five precepts with remarkable honesty: the complexities of non-harming when confronting cockroach infestations or ants in the shower; how stealing relates to inner poverty and our consumption patterns affecting billions worldwide; the subtleties of truthfulness discovered when practitioners tried not lying for just one day; and the challenges of wise speech.*
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> *What emerges is a vision of sīla as a practice of oneness—where protecting others through non-harming simultaneously protects ourselves, and where skillfulness depends not on external results but on the mental factors present in our intentions. Wilson draws on teachings from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, Thich Nhat Hanh, Robert Aitken Roshi, and Dōgen to illuminate how mindfulness is "the fundamental precept" and how, when we realize nothing is lacking, "the gate of emancipation is open." This talk transforms ethical practice from obligation into a joyful expression of interconnectedness.*

I just wanted to speak a little bit tonight about the practice of sīla, or conscious conduct, which we always mention briefly at the beginning of a retreat. We run down the five precepts or the eight precepts, and I think for myself, over the years of my commitment to practice, I've been finding that working with awareness of my speech and actions is such a deep and profound aspect of practice, such a rich path of understanding. I would like to talk about it because I have found it very inspirational and also very subtle and quite difficult in many ways. And I think it's very important.

Joseph mentioned last night that our meditation practice can come from the foundation of loving-kindness—that it really can be a practice rooted in joy. Not every moment joy, but really rooted in loving-kindness and joy. This is how I relate to ethical conduct, or sīla, often translated as morality. It's a practice rooted in loving-kindness, in our un-

derstanding of the oneness of all beings. It's both an expression of that understanding, and in our continued mindful attention to our speech and actions, it serves to deepen that understanding.

We often speak about sīla as being the foundation for the more formal meditation practice. Really, I feel it's much more than that. It both opens the gateway to liberating understanding in itself, as well as being the expression of our understanding.

As most of you probably know, the Buddha spoke of his Eightfold Path—eight areas of our life that are an expression of an awakened life. These are divided into three areas: wisdom, wise action, and the so-called samādhi group, which deals with meditative aspects of mind.

Much of what I say tonight I'm speaking quite personally from my own experience of meditation retreats and working with sīla. I'm not claiming to speak for the Theravāda tradition per se—I'm just speaking from my own experience.

I've always acknowledged that sīla is important, but for me, often in the past, there was this feeling of, "Yes, sīla is important. It's an aspect of the Eightfold Path. So we'll take the five precepts or we'll take the eight precepts. Of course it's important not to harm, but let's then just get onto the real business of doing the meditation. That's where the understanding is going to come from. That's what's really important." And we just put up with sīla as a necessary—and of course important—byproduct.

I feel that attitude does us such a disservice because in a way it shuts out such a rich area of life. It's all of life really: our speech and our actions, our intentions. When we somehow think that it's just rules to follow, when we don't have the same care, the same interest, the same willingness to learn from paying attention to our speech and actions, we somehow think that freedom isn't really going to come from paying attention to this—it's going to come from getting certain states of mind in meditation. This is a bit of a gross dichotomy I'm creating, but it's a way to explain a feeling I've had over time of somehow not giving ethical conduct the profound importance it can have in our understanding.

When I relate to sīla, when I relate to paying attention to conduct as just as viable a path, an opening to freedom as formal meditation, it opens up an area of such beauty in all of life, in all of action. It makes appreciation of whatever's happening in this moment so much more possible and so much deeper.

Sometimes I think that for me, some of this sense of separation came about because when we first brought this style of meditation to this country from Asia, it was taken out of context. The way we do ten-day or three-month meditation retreats is separated

from the rest of our life and from the context of the society we're living in. Whereas in Thailand, for example, where I was a nun for a year, the meditation is very much rooted in the context of people's lives. Sīla, samādhi, and wisdom—paññā—are really integrated in people's understanding. People come to the monasteries daily or weekly to take the five precepts and they go home again. They might come once a month or so and take eight precepts and spend the night, do meditation for a night, or stay for some days and do meditation, and then return again to their life. There's not such a sense of dichotomy, such a sense of separation. Even when doing the formal meditation and returning to daily life, there's a real appreciation of sīla as being the groundwork from which the meditation is coming.

Of course we have a strong sense of ethical conduct in our society, but it's not so seamlessly woven together with the meditation. It's been easy—especially when I first started practicing—to just go and do a retreat, have good moral conduct at the time of the retreat, but somehow not quite get it that it was also just as important how I acted and how I paid attention to my mind outside of the retreat. The culture I went back to had no understanding of what I was doing, and so there wasn't a sense of support for that. I had to kind of do it on my own.

Over the years, I've been appreciating more and more—I think it happens quite naturally—the profound depth of understanding that can come from this practice of sīla. And how interwoven paying attention to our speech, our actions, our intentions of mind is with the growing of understanding, with the development of the qualities of mind: energy, concentration, and mindfulness. They all come together.

What I find interesting when I think about the way the Buddha laid out the Eightfold Path is that wise action is not the first step.

The Eightfold Path begins with wise understanding. The second step is wise thought or intention, and it is then that it moves into wise action. What I hear in this is that our understanding is what informs how we think, our intentions of mind, and that is what our actions arise from.

From this we can see that working with sila, with conscious conduct, is not a matter of blindly following some set of rules. Rather, as we begin to awaken to the nature of reality, to the nature of our own existence—even just a little, the first initial recognition perhaps of impermanence, the sense of non-separation or connectedness—whatever a beginning of understanding is, this then is what can give rise to the beginnings of our caring about our conduct. To the beginnings of caring about how we act and move in

the world. To paying attention and seeing that how we act, how we speak, affects everyone else we come into contact with. We begin to see that our actions are the natural effect of our understanding, and so the whole path is really very intertwined.

A simple example: we begin to notice the nature of cause and effect, that if I act in a certain way it has this effect. If I tend to lie, if I tend not to be truthful, I begin to notice that people don't trust me. It's quite natural. And then that doesn't feel very good to me—I want to be trusted. This is obvious, but it is a result of understanding cause and effect. Actually, when we begin to understand cause and effect, that's the beginning of seeing anatta, a sense of no-self. Because when we're seeing that this cause brings this effect, this effect makes me feel like this, we're seeing that we're not separate autonomous beings. There's a cause and an effect and another cause and another effect, and there's no way to be separate. We are all one.

That understanding then gives rise to the caring and the interest to continue paying attention to our actions and speech. Perhaps then I try to be more truthful. And being more truthful tends to lead to more harmony, both outwardly and inwardly, which allows for more space to really pay attention to the fact that there is a connection between all of us. The sense of understanding oneness and the sense of harmony grows deeper through the behavior. It's like a cycle that keeps spiraling deeper and deeper.

I know for me in the beginning, I did try to follow the precepts, but it was more out of a sense of, well, I guess it sounds good. Obviously, intellectually, I don't want to harm people. I'd like to be a good person. It was basically good motivation, but more a sense of should. What's been happening more and more is that it moves, in my experience, from being a sense of should—my relationship to actions and speech feels more like a movement of my heart. The actions become an expression of a greater harmony that I feel inwardly, and I also get more immediate feedback from myself when I'm not acting in harmony.

I don't like to really use the phrase "break a precept," because that sounds so much like this is a rule and you broke it and you're bad and you're guilty. This really is not about guilt. None of this is about guilt or judgment. It's about being interested and being able to pay attention in order to learn, in order to grow—not to make ourselves bad, simply to see what happens.

I've been finding that as my relationship to working with conscious conduct comes more from my heart, more from a willingness to learn, when I blow it, so to speak, the feedback is so much more immediate, and in that way it actually serves again to deepen my understanding. A small example, but a common one: if I'm not paying much attention and I say something abrasive, something cutting or harsh—and that can happen

quite easily—usually now, as soon as it's out of my mouth, I don't have to wait for some kind of feedback from the other person. I viscerally feel a sense of separation, a sense of contraction in the heart or the mind. Right away that action has contributed, in that moment, to a greater sense of separation.

But because there's this willingness just to pay attention, rather than having that sense of separation turn into an even greater sense of separation through blaming and judging—"Oh, what a horrible person I am"—or having to justify myself, just noticing that, being willing to bring this non-judging, mindful attitude to what happens, the fact that we're really not separate, the fact that how I act affects others, that I can't separate my pain from another's pain, becomes more clear. It becomes more of a visceral experience.

As soon as I've said something harsh, I actually suffer myself, even before that other person says, "Wow, that really hurt. Why did you say that?" Sometimes they'll say that to me, and sometimes they won't. But what becomes clear is that action coming from harming, from harsh speech, has brought in that moment a pain that can't be separated, whether it's me or the other person. And so even by blowing it, it can be an occasion to again experience the oneness of all of us.

Actually, Sayadaw U Pandita, when he speaks about working with the precepts, I've often heard him say that acting from the precepts is acting from our understanding—it's an expression of the oneness of all beings. So it's really a very powerful practice.

The Buddha said, and I like this a lot, that by protecting others through our care with non-harming actions, we protect ourselves—protect ourselves from suffering and pain. And similarly, by protecting ourselves, by being careful with our actions so that we don't suffer the unpleasant consequences, we're simultaneously protecting others. Again, no difference.

What really helps us understand how to protect ourselves and others—and this is just a very short synopsis because we'll talk about this in much more detail over the course of the three months—is understanding that when we talk about conscious conduct of speech or action, of what is skillful, we're really talking about a morality of intention. Every thought or speech or action has a volitional force, an impetus that drives it, that makes it happen. And this motivation, this intention that brings about the thought, the speech, or action, is seen as skillful or unskillful depending on what mental factors, what qualities of mind are present feeding that intention, so to speak.

For example, an action or speech would be seen as skillful if the intention is associated with the mental factors of compassion or wisdom, equanimity, loving-kindness, among many others. And of course, unskillful if it's associated with rage or greed or hatred or cruelty, confusion. You can see how subtle this can be, because what it means is that the same action can be coming from very different motivations, and it's the motivation that determines the skillfulness of the action. It's the motivation that we can work with, that we can pay attention to—in a way we have no control whatsoever over the results of our actions.

An action can be performed with the deepest sincerity and very skillful intentions, and the results might look very harmful or might actually be harmful. An example that is given in the suttas is of a blind bhikkhu, a blind monk, who was doing walking meditation. As he was walking in the forest, he was walking on all these ants and killing them. Some of the other monks saw this and they went running to the Buddha. I have to say, there seem to be a lot of suttas where monks are running to the Buddha and kind of tattling—so-and-so did this and so-and-so did that. It sounds like it's no different from today.

Anyway, they went and said, "He's supposed to be free, he's supposed to be enlightened, and he's killing ants. Clearly that's a precept, that we don't kill, so what's the story?" And that's when the Buddha explained that being blind, he had absolutely no way of knowing he was killing ants, and his intentions in the walking meditation were completely pure. And so his action was not unskillful.

You see, it's very interesting, and this is why I find it so fascinating, when we begin to open up to a really deep commitment to explore how we relate in our speech and action to ourselves and to the world. Because it requires a great deal of honesty with ourselves. Also a great deal of mindfulness to even be able to tell honestly what the intentions, what the motivations are. And to be willing—mindfulness means a clear attention, but it also means a non-judging, accepting quality of attention—so that when, for example, we see ourselves doing something that's really disgusting, we can just see it for what it is and explore it without adding a whole extra load of self-hatred and judgment and guilt, because that doesn't help us to learn.

So sila is so much more profound than just five or eight or two hundred twenty-seven rules that we follow. It's not just a list. I feel for myself, when I am committed to paying attention, when I am committed to working with my relationship to my speech and conduct—and it takes a huge amount of energy; I certainly can't say every moment I feel actively committed to working on it—but when I am, I really feel that it's an actu-

al practice of oneness. It really is practicing loving-kindness and compassion. It really, to me, feels like a practice of freedom when I relate with real integrity and commitment.

So I'd like to briefly share, just again this is personal, some of my reflections and some of other people's on just the basic five precepts—just showing, sharing with you how subtle it can be. And I'm sure my just mentioning a few things will bring up many more ideas in your own mind, in your own experience. And also I think how exciting and how interesting it can be to explore these nuances of intention, of behavior and speech.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, talks a great deal about working with the precepts. He says to really see them as guidelines, as directions in which we incline the mind. It's essential that we not begin by expecting to be perfect. And I know for myself and a lot of people I talk to, we tend to have that tendency to right away think that we should be perfect. I'm going to observe the five precepts of not killing, not stealing, not harming with my sexuality, not lying or using harsh speech, not taking intoxicants to cloud the mind—and right away I'm going to do it all perfectly. It's really difficult.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we try all our lives to understand and practice the precepts better. I really think it's like that. The more I pay attention, the more I see subtler and subtler ways that I haven't been paying attention before, that I am not coming from non-harming. And you can see why mindfulness is so necessary.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Mindfulness is the fundamental precept. Think of the precepts as the manifestation of mindfulness. Because when you are mindful, you're responsible."

When we truly pay attention, when we're genuinely present and open in a moment, we naturally don't do things that are harmful to ourselves or others. When we're not paying attention or feeling disconnected, having the precepts as guidelines can serve as a helpful reference point.

So, not killing. At first, this seems fairly clear. Most of us probably don't kill other human beings. We probably don't kill animals. But it gets very tricky, especially when we expand it to non-harming. Even not killing animals—can any of us do that perfectly? What about when we're digging in the garden? What about when there's an infestation of cockroaches, something we've been dealing with here for years? What about when the house across the street that we at IMS owned and were renting to tenants had an in-

festation of fleas so severe that I walked in and walked out thirty seconds later with my legs black with fleas? How can you ask tenants to live in a house like that? What do you do? It's genuinely complicated.

Robert Aitken, the Zen Roshi in Hawaii, once said that the practice of peace and harmony *is* peace and harmony—it's not some technique designed to induce them. In other words, we don't try to do something in order to become peaceful and harmonious. Rather, as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, we practice being peace and then acting from that space.

When I first arrived at the temple in Thailand where I ordained as a nun, I had very long hair. You sleep on the floor in these kutis, these little huts. That first night I woke up with ants streaming through my hair—there was a river of ants crossing the kuti with no way to stop them. I didn't know what to do. Being new in Thailand, I ran to the assistant of the abbot, who was actually quite well-known. I asked him, "What do I do? How can I get rid of them?" I was shocked when he went into the kuti and came back handing me a can of Raid. I was just blown away.

There are questions without easy answers. At that time I desperately wanted easy answers. Now I've come to love that there aren't any, because if there were, I could just tune out again—follow the list of what to do and stop paying attention. But because there aren't easy answers, I have to stay truly aware. I have to remain connected. I have to care about what I'm doing, care about other beings, care about the environment. I have to be awake. Working with the precepts helps me stay awake and wake up again when I fall asleep.

Perhaps I feel—and it's rather presumptuous to say—that I understand about not killing animals out of anger. But what about out of indifference? If I don't have my glasses on and step into the shower, I can't tell what's on the bottom. I can't distinguish between a piece of lint and a tiny ant. If I don't take the trouble to bend down and check before turning on the water, and it is an ant, I've just washed it away. Because I'm aware of this, because it's happened more than once, it's not like the blind bhikkhu who genuinely didn't know. It's an action arising from delusion or laziness. How do I relate to the precept of non-harming? How much effort am I willing to put in, even though I don't consciously want to harm?

It keeps expanding when we consider it as non-harming. I think a lot about the violence in our popular entertainment culture—what effect does it have on my mind, and what effect does it have on others? If I pay to see a violent movie, in a way I'm support-

ing that. Does this contribute to the violence in our culture? I don't know. But if I think it might, yet decide to go anyway just for entertainment, what does that say about my commitment to non-harming?

I just heard on the news about the ongoing controversy around certain rap songs and the violence in them. There was some new song they were having a controversy about, again talking about killing cops. And some young guy was driving in a stolen car, and a cop stopped and pulled him over and walked up to the car, and the kid killed him. In the tape deck was this song about killing cops. And the kid said, "Well, you know, I was all jacked up from listening to this song, and that really is what made me kill him."

I mean, who knows? But then I have to wonder, what am I doing that might be contributing to that? And what I found is that this kind of reflection doesn't bring on more guilt if I'm really trying to look honestly. Rather, what it does is help me become so much more attuned to our oneness, to our interconnectedness.

I was just in Germany, and I don't know if you've heard, but there's a lot of violence going on between different cultures, really, is what it is. A lot of young people who are out of work are attacking refugees—they call them asylum seekers—in different parts of Germany. And how much of this stems from the sense of not perceiving our oneness, that somehow this group of people is other than me? I just got a letter in the mail asking for money and talking about various episodes of the same kind of racial violence—Asians against Latinos, whites against blacks—taking place in this country, just lots of isolated little incidents.

So then I have to look at myself and see: when I shut off my sense of oneness enough that I don't bother to look down and see if it's an ant, that might seem really minor. But what's the effect in my consciousness? If I pay attention at that moment, I notice that it's as if the consciousness contracts, the heart shuts, there's a feeling of separation. And it might sound silly, but I really have to reflect on whether that has an effect in the culture. When I'm contracted like that, when I'm not willing to take an extra little bit of energy not to harm, how is that energy reflected in the culture and what's my responsibility? How am I contributing to the greater violence that's taking place in our cultures?

You can see it just keeps expanding, actually and infinitely, and we each have our own areas in which we can look at this.

The same applies to the second precept: not taking what is not given, which is another way of saying not stealing, but a little broader. And again, it's looking at it as intention. What's our intention? It's much more than just not stealing. And even just on that level, blatantly, none of us are probably going to go into each other's rooms and riffle through people's stuff looking for money—or maybe chocolate as the retreat goes on.

But it's much broader than that. For instance, when I'm in the bathroom: "Oh, look at that neat shampoo. I've been wanting to use that for a long time. I'm sure that person wouldn't mind." Probably they wouldn't. But what's the motivation in that?

If we flip it from the negative way of saying it—not stealing, not taking what's not given—and give it a more positive aspect, it would be really coming from a sense of inner contentment, not just abstention from unskillful action. Dogen, the great Zen master, said, "The self and the world are just as they are—the gate of emancipation is open." When we're like that, when the self and the world are just as they are, in that sense of deep inner contentment, there's no thought of neediness even. If you saw that shampoo —"Oh, that's a nice shampoo"—the thought of wanting it doesn't even arise. In that state, the gate of emancipation is open. To me this is really the deepest expression of this second precept. And can this be enough for our life? A deep appreciation of what is just as it is, without needing something more.

Aitken Roshi, again talking about stealing and how much stealing comes from the sense of inner poverty, the sense of lack of contentment—and he's talking not just about stealing objects, that sense of inner poverty that we need more objects. He asks how much do we steal from ourselves? Do we steal peace from ourselves? When we get lost in some gaining idea, even in meditation, when we try to make ourselves someone else or try to gain some other state that we don't have, in that moment we're stealing peace from ourselves. We're stealing from ourselves the possibility of opening to what is true because we're so busy reaching for something else—the sense of inner poverty.

It says in the Tao Te Ching: "If you realize that you have enough, you are truly rich. Be content with what you have. Rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you." When we're living with that understanding, when you realize that nothing is lacking, it makes no sense to want anything. That's the sense of the self and the world being just as they are. That's when the gate of emancipation is opened.

And when I continue to reflect on stealing, again it broadens from just my own immediate action to how I am as part of society. I question a lot whether stealing is part of our economic system. The whole capitalist system is set up in order to manufacture more wants for us. If you look at the ads on TV or in magazines, look at ads for kids'

toys—the whole focus of them is to make the kids want that toy and go out and get it. I look in the New York Times Magazine and they have all these different perfume ads, all these new perfumes. Does the world need a new perfume? And then somehow I can find myself thinking, "Oh yeah, I really would like to have that perfume."

Where is that coming from? And what kind of society is it that runs on manufacturing more wants?

I got this statistic from the Union of Concerned Scientists talking about environmental crisis, and it hit me hard. Energy consumption in the United States, for example, is so high that 250 million Americans consume as much as all 4 billion people in developing nations. That's amazing. We consume as much as 4 billion other people in the world.

When I read that, I can't think of it as anything other than taking what is not freely given. And by my actions—when I turn the heat up in my house and keep it really warm—I'm stealing from other people in the world.

When I come back from England or Germany, England is a good example. It's really cold and they really keep the heat down. Once I was there in December, it was freezing. The house had a big meeting the first of December to decide whether to turn on the heat. They decided to turn it on and kept it at 58 degrees. We wouldn't dream of that. It was hell. It was really hard. I don't know if I could live like that.

But that kind of statistic is just enough to make me look. Every time I turn on the heat, it's an act. I don't mean I shouldn't have heat. But what's my intention? What's my motivation? Am I aware of my connectedness to everyone else in the world when I turn the heat up really high? Or if I decide to eat a hamburger? Am I aware that we are so interconnected that that hamburger has something to do with the fact that people are starving in the Horn of Africa? And I mean that quite literally.

I don't say this to bring up guilt about having a hamburger, but to really open my awareness to the depth of our interconnectedness. It becomes not a practice of guilt or feeling bad about everything that I do that other people in the world don't have, but rather that the choices I am able to make to let go of some things come out of love—out of the feeling of our oneness. With those choices, the visceral experience of our oneness deepens, and it's actually a practice of great joy, of deepening love and compassion and connection with the rest of the world.

When I shut off from that and just get back in my own little routine with a sense of disconnection, that's a real feeling of suffering. The openness to how we're all connected, even though it might make our life more difficult on the outward physical level, is actually so much richer.

I want to briefly mention the other three precepts because you can see from the ones I've talked about how carefully we can examine our intentions and how subtle it gets.

The third precept is not misusing sex—honoring our commitments to ourselves and to each other. Of course, on retreat you don't have much chance to act on sexual energy, but we can pay attention to where the impulses are coming from, simply to learn. Do we use our sexual energy from love and commitment? Or do we use it from fear, from neediness, from exploitation, for a sense of personal power, for self-image? Really to learn and to see how we affect each other. And when we talk about not hurting people through our sexual activities, I always like to add: remember that you're one of the people involved too. It also means not hurting yourself.

The fourth precept is working with wise, non-harming speech. Sometimes, for me anyway, this is the most complex and difficult area. It's so easy to stray off into harmful or frivolous speech. There are four areas that are traditionally spoken of: not lying, not using harsh or abusive speech, not using speech to divide—that kind of backbiting that causes division among people—and not just spending time in idle frivolous chatter. You can see that covers an awful lot of our speech.

I want to talk a little about just the complexities of the first one, not lying, which seems simple. I felt, "I don't lie. I don't have any intention to lie and no need to lie." But once a friend and I were leading a weeklong "sandwich retreat" in the city, where people would get together and sit in the evening, then everyone would go to work during the day, and come back the next evening. We were working with right speech. So one day we were all going to focus simply on not lying, just paying attention.

And I think we all went out feeling a little cocky, like, well, we don't lie, but we'll pay special attention today. When we came back to talk about it that night, every single one of us had at some point caught ourselves in a lie. And sometimes it was hours later before we realized it. It was really fascinating. And they were subtle. Some people found that they were lying through their actions—trying to give the impression that they were working really hard at work when actually they were completely spacing out. Someone else found that they were lying in order to protect someone else, or lying to maintain a particular self-image. Or they had a job in sales and found that in just doing their job, trying to sell, they found themselves telling lies. It was really fascinating to see.

And then I started paying more attention, noticing how many little exaggerations I might make in describing something. And what's the intention behind that? For self-image, to give a certain impression of myself? Or I don't really want to admit how many times I've done something stupid, so I sort of scale it down to about half. Just paying attention to things like that.

In retreats, I think this commitment to honesty in looking at our own minds, our own motivations, is one of the most powerful parts of the meditation practice for me. Because I see how much—just in paying attention to what's happening in my own mind, not even that I have to tell anybody about it, just to observe it for myself—how much of what's going on I somehow don't want to quite acknowledge. It's too painful, or it's too difficult, or it's too disgusting, or somehow I can't believe this is coming up again after twenty years. And to just really be honest with that, that that's okay. Honesty is so powerful.

It's said that of all the different perfections of a Buddha, the different qualities of mind that the Bodhisattva who's going to become the Buddha cultivates over eons and eons of lifetimes, truthfulness is the one that was never broken. Very powerful, this willingness to be honest.

And the fifth precept: not taking intoxicants or drugs that cloud the mind and lead to heedlessness. Again, that seems obvious. Or as Sayadaw U Pandita says, once you break the fifth precept and take intoxicants, it's so much easier then to mess up all the other four. But just watching that in ourselves, more out in life than here.

I just want to end by reading a short passage about how powerful this practice of working with the precepts can be, from Thich Nhat Hanh. It becomes really moving—from a sense of "should," perhaps, or a dry doing of what seems like it might be helpful in order to move the meditation along, it comes much, much more from an inner understanding, from a movement of the heart. And then the practice of sila is also a very powerful purification—purification of action. And it really is, in this time, the strong and necessary foundation for the deepening of our meditation practice. But it's much, much more than that.

This is a strong statement of the potential of our work with sila:

"In summary, it could be said that these precepts issue a clarion call of emptiness and non-ego in action. Each precept is permeated with the understanding that concepts, thoughts, and actions are inherently impermanent and insubstantial. Each precept enjoins a form of moral action that is based on non-separation and an aware state of compassion. Not holding on to a notion of self, we are invited to engage ourselves courageously in the world and, with discriminating awareness, to undertake the task of liberating all sentient beings."

It can be a very powerful practice.

CHAPTER 249

Arousing and Stabilizing Interest

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines the quality of interest as essential to sustaining vividly awake awareness in meditation. She discovers that what she calls "interest" naturally comprises the three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path: wise effort (viriya), wise concentration (samādhi), and wise mindfulness (sati). Using the memorable example of "Super Bowl Mind," she illustrates how we can sustain intense, focused attention without fatigue when genuinely engaged—but notes that without mindfulness, such attention lacks the non-discriminating quality essential to practice.*
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> *Wilson explores how our habitual tendency to evaluate experience as pleasant or unpleasant creates subtle filters that distort perception, causing us to value some experiences over others and even affecting what we consciously perceive. She draws on psychological research and personal examples—from autumn leaves to the fall of the Berlin Wall—to demonstrate how beauty and sorrow, joy and suffering, cannot be separated. True mindfulness, she emphasizes, means equal willingness to be present with whatever arises, without preference or interpretation.*
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> *The talk then turns to two mental factors that feed and strengthen interest: saṃvega (spiritual urgency) and investigation (dhammavicaya). Wilson recounts the Buddha's awakening to the four heavenly messengers and shares her own experience of urgency driving her spiritual search. She concludes with the seven conditions conducive to investigation—including questioning, cleanliness, associating with wise people, and total commitment to truth—and closes with the awakening poem of the Elder Nun Paṭācārā, reminding us that any moment can open us to liberation.*

It's really nice to see you all. It feels like so long, as Sharon said the other night—it feels so long in between times of connection and seeing old friends, the people I don't work with. I feel like saying hi, hi. You're not supposed to. Sometimes we forget it's supposed to be in silence.

What I want to talk about tonight is interest—the quality of interest.

We've been speaking often in interviews and in the instructions about relaxing into this natural open space of awareness in which appearances arise spontaneously and effortlessly. The knowing of appearances also arises instantly and effortlessly—a kind of

vividly awake awareness, as somebody describes it. And it sounds wonderful. The times that this is our experience, vividly awake awareness, we really know what it means: there's this bright connection and it's effortless.

But at least speaking for myself, perhaps more often than I care to admit, the experience of this open space of awareness is more like one of being lost in space. So what I want to talk about is how we can learn to stabilize this vividly awake awareness—just one aspect that might be helpful.

Because it has these qualities, this instantaneous knowing, this clear seeing. It has the elements of energy, of mindfulness, of concentration. And then we turn around and say, well, but it's relaxed. It's effortless. The question comes up in my mind: how to be in this non-distracted open state and at the same time be relaxed? It comes up a lot in interviews.

For many of us, what we've learned as a way to cultivate concentration and effort and mindfulness is a real striving, pushing kind of effort—a kind of clutching at the appearances, desperation in case we don't see them clearly enough before they go away. God forbid we should miss something. For many of us, this sense of striving, of pushing, is exhausting. Our whole practice is really an ongoing dance of learning what it means to be relaxed and at the same time vividly awake and energized.

I only want to speak to one hopefully helpful aspect of that tonight. I have no idea that I'm going to be covering this whole thing, but the aspect that to me has been very helpful, even essential, in getting a feeling for this is that of interest.

Now, I'm using the word interest rather broadly. What I'd like to talk about tonight under this heading of interest is first to describe an experiential sense of some aspects or factors making up what I'm calling interest—which surprisingly enough, and it was surprising to me, turned out to be the three factors of the Eightfold Path: energy, concentration, and mindfulness. I want to describe some of those as aspects of interest, and then also talk about two particular mental factors that we experience in our practice, factors that we can at times cultivate, that feed and help strengthen interest. These are the factors of spiritual urgency and investigation.

So the three qualities of interest first, just broadly describing it.

I was just told yesterday that there are different ways you can describe how people take in information. Many different ways you could organize it. But anyway, I was told by someone who was listening to me talk that I'm kinesthetic. I never thought about

that. But in putting this together tonight, I realized it was true, because I was just feeling my way into what interest feels like in my experience. What are the essential qualities?

In doing that, I realized that there's a lively, energetic quality of attention. Interest is very awake, very present, very alive.

The second quality is that not only is it lively and awake, but interest also has a focused, steady quality of energy—non-distracted. If you're really interested in something, the mind isn't just flittering all over the place with restlessness. It's steady and focused.

The third quality is that with interest, when it's lively and focused like this, it allows us to know, to see what is, what we're interested in, as it is—without the bias of interpretation or preference, without a filter, but to know the truth without distorted perception.

And then I looked at these three and I said, oh, well that's wise effort, wise concentration, and wise mindfulness. Very interesting.

But a lot of times in thinking about—intellectually or imagining—being interested, staying interested over a period of time, this alert, focused quality of energy, we tend to think, oh, I can't sustain that. It's really tiring. It's draining. I can do it for a little while, but I just get burned out after some time of it.

But with a balanced interest, this isn't so at all. When we're truly interested in something, it brings energy. It's actually a delight to be fully present with whatever it is that the interest is connecting with. And we all have this experience. This quality arises quite naturally and spontaneously in our lives outside of here as well as in practice.

My favorite example of this—because it shows how universal and spontaneous this sustained quality of vibrant interest is—comes from two or three years ago when I was in California in January during the time of the Super Bowl. For those of you who are not from this country, this is the big playoff game of American football. The San Francisco team, the 49ers, was in this playoff—I think it was their second year in a row.

The quality of interest this generated was amazing. I know a lot of people in that area, and every single person I knew—that's all they were going to do that day. I was with a group of friends, and I mean, it's sort of a nice thing to watch, but I don't really care very much about football. Without exception, when the game was on, every single person was completely focused and attentive and filled with interest for every little nuance of movement of anybody on those teams.

And I realized it wasn't just my friends, because traffic stopped. During halftime, traffic started up again. Then it stopped again when the game started. And this was not a tiring experience. People at the end of the game didn't say, "Oh, I'm so exhausted from being so interested in the football game." They were much more energized, really taking a delight in everything that happened.

You can see that this quality of interest—and this is the energy and the focused part of it—arises quite spontaneously in our lives. And when it's like that, it's not tiring. We don't think, "I have to take a break now from being interested." It's really when we feel most alive. So I've been calling this quality in my mind "Super Bowl Mind."

But Super Bowl Mind is not really a balanced interest because it lacks mindfulness. It lacks mindfulness because, with perhaps rare exception, this is a quality of consciousness that is definitely colored with greed. I mean, there were few people, I would imagine, watching that game purely for the delight of each movement. There was a definite desire for a certain result, and everything that happened was judged or evaluated by how it related to that result.

If we can put so much interest into a game like football—and ultimately, how meaningful is that for our life? Some people, and I have a friend whose voice I can hear now, to him it's very meaningful. But for many of us it's not all that meaningful. Yet that same vibrant energy is accessible for the whole dance of our life. It's always accessible if we can but open to it.

This is where the quality of mindfulness comes in—bringing that interest to know the dance of life just as it's happening right now, without looking for a particular result, without needing for some particular thing to happen, but simply bringing this full force of energetic attention and steadiness to whatever is happening right now. This is the quality of mindfulness, or *sati*—to know things in themselves just as they are, without expectation, without looking for any kind of payoff. This nondiscriminating awareness, awareness of just what is without preferences, is a very essential quality of the factor of mindfulness. And it's this, coupled with the energy and the steady focus of mind, these coming together, that allows for interest in whatever it is that's happening.

I want to say a bit about this essential aspect of nondiscriminating awareness. Because our habit, as I'm sure you've noticed here—the habit, both conscious and unconscious, of our minds—is to evaluate, to judge our experience or any particular aspect of experience as either good or bad, positive or negative, based on whether we experience it as pleasant or unpleasant. Neutral experiences we just tend not to even notice.

This is an amazingly subtle tendency. It causes us to value some aspects of life, of our mind-body process, any particular experience—it causes us to value some more than others, to give interest and attention more to some aspects of our experience than to others. And this tendency to judge things according to pleasant and unpleasant is so subtle that it can even affect what we consciously perceive.

I've used this example other times. I got it out of a book called *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* about the psychology of self-deception—a very interesting book. In it, the author, Daniel Goleman, talks about one particular psychological experiment testing what people were conscious of perceiving, of noticing.

There were two aspects to this experiment. The first involved setting the mind to want a particular thing, making that thing pleasant. There's a short video, four or five minutes, of a fast basketball game—I guess this is sports night—and the subjects were ordered to count how many times the ball was passed, which was a lot. So they were very focused; that was the object of attention, what was wanted. And in the middle of that, a woman in white with a white parasol strolled through the middle of the basketball court, in one side and out the other.

What was so interesting was that the people in the experiment didn't notice this.

And when they were asked about it later—you know how when you just can't believe something, absolutely no way, I was watching every second, that couldn't have happened. And then they showed the video again and of course it was blatantly obvious.

That's how this fixation of the mind, this preference towards a particular thing, can completely distort what we consciously perceive.

They did another experiment, this one geared to stimulus that was frightening or threatening—just drawings. Subjects had to look at different drawings and then later remember what they'd seen and describe them. Certain aspects of experience that were particularly fearful or threatening to some of the subjects' psyches would be included in some of the drawings. They would not remember that part of the drawing.

For instance, say one part of the drawing was just an innocuous person reading a newspaper. Perhaps the other part was some scary, violent thing that was particularly threatening to that person. They wouldn't remember that part. And somehow—this I don't remember too clearly—they had some way of measuring where the people's eyes actually looked when they were looking at the drawing. They saw that in some subliminal way, people managed to know where not to look. They picked up some kind of preconscious signal and consciously didn't even look at the threatening part of the picture.

Very interesting, this predilection to value our experience by pleasant or unpleasant.

Mindfulness is completely non-discriminating. Equal interest, equal willingness to be fully present with whatever aspect of experience is arising right now, without valuing or interpretation or judgment. This is what cuts through our confusion, allows us to know just what is, without filters, without interpretation. It allows a balance of perception, not leaning towards one side or the other.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about this quite often. He talks about the need to be mindful of both great beauty and great suffering. I myself find it one of the paradoxes of my practice that as I open more, I open to both—much more depth of appreciation and joy and beauty, and simultaneously to deeper experiences of anguish and pain, both my own and the world's.

You can see it in your own experience, over and over and over. Can we hold both experiences, allow both experiences without judgment, without choosing one over the other? It doesn't even sound right to us. How could we possibly say that you can't choose what is good and beautiful over what is ugly and distorted and violent? It doesn't make sense in our world. But in the space of non-discriminating mindfulness, it is just that—allowing what is, without the judgments.

Just a couple of personal examples that to me show how it's hard to say what is good, what is bad, what is positive or negative.

A simple one, given how beautiful the leaves have been this fall. I just look out the window of where I live and it's like the woods are on fire. It's incredibly beautiful. I have a moment of deep opening to this, really deep appreciation. So far, the last week, I've been watching this. Every single time, almost immediately, there's been an uprising of deep sadness, a kind of poignancy, a sorrow. It's like they kind of go together—personal sorrow, a sense of poignancy at the ending of things, sometimes a more universal sorrow, sometimes no thought at all.

When I find myself contracting around, trying to shut away the sorrow—thinking this is in the way of my appreciating the leaves, go away and let me just see how beautiful it is—as soon as I contract around the sorrow, there's no more appreciation of the beauty going on. There's been the sense of a barrier coming down, and it's just seeing, seeing, very pretty.

It's really interesting. How can I say the sadness is bad and the appreciation is good?

In a bigger scope, in the world—thinking back to when the Berlin Wall first came down, there was a sense of euphoria. When some of the countries in Eastern Europe first became free to self-determine their own government and way of living, there was such a sense of how wonderful this is, how positive, how thrilling and exciting.

And now, from that same situation—that's still true, all of that. And there's also so much confusion now. The freedom to self-determine in some places has turned into the freedom to hate and actively act that out against peoples who are somehow perceived as different. It's turned into wars. It's turned into real conservative, anti-foreigner violence. It's really painful and scary.

How can one be separated from the other? How can one say, well, they should have just stayed how they were and then all this wouldn't be happening? Who knows?

One more example: I have two friends, different people, who are both HIV positive. Watching them over the years—neither of them is particularly sick—watching them over the years as the diagnosis and the implications and the various things that come up have been sinking into them, I've seen the fear and the ongoing physical discomfort, the suffering of that. And at the same time, both of them in their different ways are just radiating light and love. People more and more just want to be around them. They're opening up and filling the people who come around them with metta. They're really deepening their understanding and their wisdom. It's very obvious when I'm around them. It's beautiful. How can I separate one from the other, or say this is bad and shouldn't be happening while this should be?

So with mindfulness, there's an equally vivid interest in whatever it is that's happening, without knowing—no way of knowing—what effect, what result might come from that. And knowing that we can see, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, the profound nature of reality in anything, who are we to say which appearance is going to open up the nature of reality to us and which one is a waste of time?

Again, Thich Nhat Hanh talks about this a lot—how we value a rose and disdain garbage. But when a rose dies, we throw it into the garbage. It becomes the garbage. And when the garbage goes into compost and we put it on the garden, that garbage itself becomes the rose. There's not any separation.

This sense of balance of perception—nothing unduly going towards the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant—because that's just how appearances present themselves. And it continues to be fascinating to me in my own inquiry, as it keeps on going, to keep seeing more and more the subtle levels of this tendency of the mind to somehow value the pleasant as more true than the unpleasant. I mean, it's certainly more

pleasant. It's more desirable. We're not arguing about that. We're not saying we can't tell the difference. It's just that subtle valuing of it. And if I'm not really awake, it's easy for practice to drift into a subtle pursuit of the pleasant without really knowing it.

Just one example, if this ever happens in your own practice. You're feeling pretty clear and aware. You're noticing whatever appears. If you're noting it, you notice it as soon as it comes. It's pleasant, it's unpleasant, it's neutral. It comes, it goes. You know, just—I'm really here. And suddenly, a new kind of state comes up, really light or really peaceful or really spacious. It's like, "Ah! I'm so clear now. There's no need to note this. It just gets in the way. I'm so vividly awake I can just hang out with this."

That is a red flag, because usually what the noting is getting in the way of is not the experience. The noting is getting in the way of seeing our attachment to what is very pleasant. And so as soon as I notice I'm drifting into this—"I'm so clear, I don't really need that noting anymore"—just check it out. What's really going on?

Some people, of course, do this in the reverse, where the mind gets so hooked into noticing the painful or the unpleasant. This is often the case when we're in a state of strong self-judgment or self-hatred or self-doubt. You might be quite clear but seeing through this filter, and then the pains are really noticed, all the fear is noticed, all the stupid thoughts that come up are noticed, all the patterns that you've seen a million times are noticed. Then there's a moment of real clarity—it's not noticed. It's discounted. It was a mistake. It came in here by mistake.

Or often people come into interviews and describe really being filled with something pleasant, perhaps love or compassion. And so often there's this disclaimer: "Well, I'm probably not remembering it right." Or, "It felt like compassion, but it probably really wasn't compassion. It's just, you know, I'm mistaking pity or something else for compassion." There's this sense of—and this is just as much identification as being identified with the pleasant—"It's not possible that I could experience a pleasant one of the Brahma-viharas, or some concentration, or whatever experience."

Both of these, Upandita calls these

getting attached to the pleasant or the unpleasant—stopping within. It's like in the space of clarity, of awareness, appearances come and go, and there's one that the mind clutches around. Even if so subtly, you're not quite aware of the clutching, it's like we stop. The mind stops within and hangs out there, either in this pleasant open space or sometimes we stop within the most painful, excruciating experience. Simply to notice that all of this is coming from our interpreting experience through the quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and putting some kind of value judgment on it.

This is a question for me—I don't know if it's true. Sometimes I wonder, is there any interpretation of experience that is not based on valuing pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? I'm really curious, so if you notice an interpretation that's not based on that, I'd like to hear about it.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian man who certainly from his writing seems to have been quite awake, said: "The mind is restless. All it knows is restlessness with its many modes, its many varieties. The pleasant are considered superior and the painful are discounted. What we call progress is merely a changeover from the unpleasant to the pleasant. Changes can't bring us to the changeless." And then he goes on to say from his own experience: "I experience pleasure and pain in consciousness, but I am neither consciousness nor its content. I am neither consciousness nor its content."

This is, to me, a really powerful expression of knowing things just as they are, without interpretation, without judgment. And this is the quality of mindfulness, clear knowing, non-discriminating awareness. This clear knowing together with energy and focused, non-distracted attention—these taken all together is what I'm calling interest. It's vivid, alert awareness that can sustain itself in a non-distracted way.

Here is a description of that from Krishnamurti: "You will discover for yourself that the only way to look at yourself is totally, immediately, without time. And you can see the totality of yourself only when the mind is not fragmented. What you see in totality is the truth. So when you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there's no room for fear, no room for contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

This totality of interest and attention, and therefore no fear and no conflict—this leads into what I want to talk about next: How do we wake up this quality of total interest, complete self-abandonment? How do we keep renewing it, keep it alive?

There are two mental factors that I've personally found very helpful. The first is spiritual urgency, called in Pali *samvega*. The second is investigation.

Krishnamurti's description of this total quality of attention is in a way a good description of the quality of interest that's aroused through this mental factor of spiritual urgency. It's a powerful and compelling state, often arising—although not always—after awakening to our own suffering and confusion, or to the world's suffering and confusion. It's this urgency to be free from this, to know the truth. And in this state of spiritual urgency, this becomes more compelling than any other condition in our lives. It's that complete self-abandonment that Krishnamurti talks about.

Here is a short description of how this urgency can feel, from Chinul, who brought Zen to Korea. And this is strong, but this is how urgency feels: "The triple world is blazing in torments as if it were a house on fire. How can you bear to linger here and complacently undergo such long suffering? If you wish to avoid wandering in samsara, there's no better way than to seek Buddhahood."

And that's the energy: How can you want to keep lingering here? So seek Buddhahood. You can see it takes us right into interest, inquiry, investigation. For me, all these questions come up: What is Buddhahood? What is suffering? What did the Buddha discover that put an end to this feeling of being in a house on fire? How can I discover it? It becomes compelling. It wakes us up. When urgency is awakened in us, interest isn't a problem—it quite spontaneously arises.

Also, we're not easily distracted. The classical example is given: if you're away from home and someone comes running to tell you that your house is on fire, you start going home immediately. You're not going to be distracted by friends coming up and saying, "Let's go have a cup of tea, let's stop and have a chat." It's not even a question. The urgency of wanting to see what's happening, to get out of that suffering, is so compelling.

I do think that urgency needs the balance of sati, of mindfulness, because I can imagine it turning into a blind kind of expectation or efforting, or even despair at the depth or quality of suffering. But this is shading into something else entirely. That is not urgency. Samvega is this energy, this deep interest to inquire, to come to freedom, to understand the nature of suffering and how to be free of it. It's not about feeling sorry for ourselves or getting lost in despair. And it's not about looking for a particular result or how things should be. It gives us the energy to stay very present and focused, to inquire into what is in order to understand it.

As I mentioned, this urgency is often aroused through suffering, either our own or that of others. The classical example is that of the Buddha before he was the Buddha, when he was the Prince Siddhartha. I'm not going to go into the whole story, but as most of you probably know, he was this very wealthy prince protected by his family from any signs of sickness or death or decay. They even snipped off the flowers before they wilted, so he would have no intimation of impermanence.

What aroused his urgency was going outside his palace walls and seeing what are often called the four heavenly messengers: an old person, a sick person, a dead person, and then a monk, a renunciate. Upon inquiry, on realizing that old age, sickness, and death would inevitably happen to him and to everyone else in the world, and seeing the impermanent, unsatisfactory nature of his experience, it just became impossible for

him to any longer enjoy his life, to go back and become complacent again with his comforts. This urgency to be free, to understand, to know truth outweighed everything else at that time.

I wanted to read something I really like as a statement of urgency. This is not from the suttas but from some commentarial material, purporting to be what the Buddha was speaking to his charioteer, who was going back to his father who was grieving. This is right as Prince Siddhartha had left, the night he departed:

"So that my father's grief may be dispelled, tell him that I have gone to this penance for the purpose of putting an end to old age and death. And by no means because I yearn for heaven, and not because I feel no affection for him, or from resentment. Since I have left for the homeless life with this end in view, there's no reason why he should grieve for me. Someday, in any case, all unions must come to an end. It is just because we must reckon with perpetual separation that I am determined to win salvation. For then I shall no more be born away from my kindred. There's no reason to grieve for me who has left for the homeless life so as to end all grief. Rather grieve over those who greedily cling to the passions in which all grief is rooted. My father will perhaps say that it was too early for me to leave for the forest. But there's no such thing as a wrong season for Dhamma. Our hold on life is so uncertain. Death confronts me all the time. How do I know how much of life is still at my disposal?"

This is the sense of urgency. It might not always be so dramatic. The Buddha is clearly our most shining example. But I remember in my own case, it wasn't so much some kind of clear-cut suffering as an undercurrent of something just not being quite right—an undercurrent of the unsatisfactory nature of things that awoke the sense of urgency to know, to be free.

I was in college, just starting, and I remember really clearly I started to have this sense of: what's the purpose of this? I go and I learn these things, and what can I do with it? I was studying literature. Then I can teach it to other people. And what will they do with it? They'll teach it to other people. And it just keeps going around in this circle. I felt so strongly the meaninglessness of it all, with no understanding of it. But I see now that's really part of the cycle of samsara.

It drove me to quit college in my first year, and then the next year to go to India—not having a clue what I was looking for, traveling alone and scared to death, really miserable actually. But this urgency, this compelling need to understand, to be at peace, gives us strength and courage, a kind of commitment to go through obstacles and fears that we could never go through without it.

And it was there that I ended up doing my first ten-day meditation course that year. It was much as Steve Armstrong described his—not understanding a thing about what was going on, going through ten days of physical pain and torment, and walking out of there with my life completely changed. I knew when I walked out that it really did change my life.

That urgency enables us to go through all kinds of difficult things and lets us put down, move away from what we hold as dear, what we think we need in order to live. Urgency feeds this interest, this inquiry, and that in turn can continually reawaken the sense of urgency. Because like everything, urgency is a mental factor. It arises due to conditions and it passes away when those conditions fade away.

And so easily—sometimes I feel that the whole last twenty years of my life since that first course has been a struggle against complacency. It's so easy to get comfortable and think, "Oh well, just now I've got it. It's peaceful. I know this is good enough. I'll float along." But when we're really wanting to wake up, everything in life kind of conspires to reawaken the interest, to reawaken the urgency.

Our culture here does a good job of hiding those four heavenly messengers. Old people, by and large, aren't so mingled with the families anymore and live in the same housing or apartment developments. Sick people are put away in hospitals. Dying people—you never see a dead person lying on the street. You hardly ever see a dead person. In Asia, you don't see monks very much or nuns either; they're put away in cloisters. In Asia, it's all just part of life.

But still here, if we just are interested, even for a moment, again it wakes us up. The other day, I spent the afternoon in a big hospital in Worcester. And just for a little while, I kind of came out of my self-involvement, started looking around. And just seeing the pain and fear in people's faces—people of all ages from the very old to young children with chronic diseases walking around or on stretchers—it really hits. What am I waiting for? What makes me think I have time to be complacent?

And this one image that's with me so clearly: a woman in the elevator clutching her overcoat, her clothes, in desperation, and there was so much anguish in her body language and her face. I have no idea what her story was, but it just zapped me really strongly. Again, it reawakened my sense of urgency—of I don't have time to fool around. I can't take it for granted.

So you can see how urgency is a very strong factor in awakening and keeping interest alive. Interest arises quite spontaneously.

The last quality of mind I want to speak about just briefly is this factor of investigation. Investigation is one of the seven factors of enlightenment—seven mental factors, qualities of energy that when balanced allow the mind to open spontaneously to what is true. They'll be talked about a lot more over the course of the three months.

Investigation is this non-thinking, non-thought-based inquiry. It's described as the ability to know by non-intellectual discernment, to know the true nature of our mental and physical experience. When investigation is present, they describe it as lighting up the field of awareness. Investigation lights up whatever appearance is arising as the object of awareness, and so the mind can penetrate into the true nature of whatever is arising.

You could kind of feel how when there's this lit-up quality to the awareness, to whatever is arising, there's quite naturally an interest. Oh, what is this coming? How is it acting? How does it disappear? What is it actually? And you could feel how investigation is one of the three energetic factors of enlightenment because it brings energy.

While they say that the immediate cause of investigation arising is insight—and you can see how that's so, when you have a strong insight everything lights up, the awareness lights up, the mind lights up, there's lots of interest, there's really this close investigation of what's going on, things are energized—this is how insight brings about investigation.

But also, it's classically spoken of that there are seven conditions that are conducive to the arising of investigation. In other words, we don't have to just sit there and hope that an insight will arise so that we can have some investigation be present. These are interesting, these seven factors. The first one is questioning.

Questions related to Dhamma, related to practice, simply questioning what has happened now, what is happening right now. Nisargadatta again: "In its own place and time, nothing is wrong. But when you are concerned with truth, with reality, you must question everything, your very life." That quality of questioning clearly would arouse interest.

The second condition, and I think this one's quite interesting and unexpected, is cleanliness and neatness of our own body and of our surroundings. They call it cleanliness of the inner and outer sense spaces. It says that when things are clean, when things are neat and tidy, it helps brightness and clarity of mind. So I started paying attention. It's true—when things are dirty and untidy, the tendency of the mind is to be confused. I started to notice this: if I walk into my room, whether I'm on retreat or not,

and everything's thrown all over, my mind kind of gets scattered. It starts here and it goes there and can't quite decide which thing to do first, or it just feels oppressed, not very light. That was quite an interesting observation.

The third quality conducive to the arising of investigation is the balancing of the five spiritual faculties or powers that Stephen Smith talked about the other night—faith balanced with wisdom, concentration balanced with energy, and mindfulness as the overall balancing. I would think this would be conducive to the arising of almost any of the seven factors of enlightenment, because when the five powers are balanced, we're energized, we're seeing clearly, mindfulness is strong, we're not unbalanced. Kind of an obvious one.

The fourth and fifth conducive conditions are avoiding foolish people and associating with wise people. If you think about it for a minute, it's pretty obvious. When we hang out with people who are foolish, often our behavior kind of sinks down to the lowest common denominator. Spending time with really wise people lights us up. When I go to hear the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh, I come away really energized. What do they know? How did they get like that? What do they know that I don't know? And how can I find out? It happens quite naturally. It's not effortful.

Being here with each other, we all serve in that way for one another here in the Sangha. Yes, at moments, each of you is the wise person that everyone else is admonished to spend time with. None of you is the foolish person—I hope you're thinking that. But you can see when your energy lags, you're tired, you feel like you can't do it anymore, and then you see someone who's so steady it really brings up the inspiration: "Oh, I'll just look a little harder." Or if you see someone who's clearly suffering a lot, that will also often arouse us out of complacency and say, "Well, how do I know I don't have another minute, another hour before that's what's going on for me? Let me really pay attention. Let me investigate." Listening to each other's really sincere questions can light up a whole area of investigation. The Sangha is such an invaluable support. You're all such an invaluable support to one another in this field of investigation.

The sixth conducive condition, also sort of obvious: wise reflection, used in moderation. Reflection on any insights you might have had on impermanence, on the preciousness of our human life, on the unknown time of the ending of our human life, the shortness of time. Sometimes I reflect on the three refuges, on just what it is I can really take refuge in—in truth, in the Dhamma, in the Sangha. That will also arouse my interest in investigation.

And the last one is interesting too: real commitment to cultivation of investigation. Actually the notes I had said *total* commitment to cultivation of investigation. Nisargadatta again—this is an expression of total commitment: "The desire to discover the truth will be surely fulfilled, providing you want nothing else. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else."

There are moments when that might be true for each of us. Simply reflecting on what I really want all those other moments—that in itself arouses investigation again. It's quite fascinating. What do I really want right now more than truth?

It's kind of embarrassing sometimes. Luckily you don't have to tell anybody else.

So you can see how these factors of investigation and urgency contribute quite strongly to this interest in recognizing and stabilizing the non-distracted quality of this vividly awake awareness—this effortless noticing of appearances as they arise and pass.

And in that awareness, there's no question. We know that any activity, any appearance whatsoever can show us the profound nature of reality. There's no choice. We don't need to pick and choose.

I want to close with one short poem, showing how any activity can open us to the truth. This is from one of the first women who ordained as a nun during the time of the Buddha. Her name was Patachara. An interesting story, but I don't have time to tell it—that's just a lead for you to follow. She went through immense suffering, lost her mind, was really quite lost. She came to the Buddha, and he basically said, "I can't take away your suffering. You've cried mountains of tears in all your lives." And she came back to her senses and ordained as a nun.

This poem was written sometime later, describing her moment of awakening. You can also hear the suffering in it:

I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher.
I'm not lazy or proud.
Why haven't I found peace?
Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope.

We never know when or where.

Just sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 250

The Nature of Attachment

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers a detailed examination of upādāna (grasping or attachment), one of the key links in paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination). She distinguishes between taṇhā (craving)—the mind inclining toward something—and upādāna—the firm taking hold that follows when mindfulness is absent. Drawing from the Buddha's own hesitation to teach because "this generation relishes attachment," Wilson illuminates how each moment of unnoticed grasping strengthens the next, creating a blinding quality that obscures the peace always present.*
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> *Wilson explores two primary domains of attachment: kāmupādāna (grasping at sense pleasures) and diṭṭhupādāna (grasping at views and opinions). Through vivid personal stories—including a memorable journey to Heathrow Airport—she demonstrates how suffering arises not from circumstances but from the grasping itself. She references the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Thích Nhất Hạnh's commentary, emphasizing that when we simply observe "my mind is desiring" without fear, we see the impermanence and selflessness of both the attachment and its object.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for retreat practice: noticing how consciousness contracts around grasped objects, tracing attachment back to simple sense contact, and discovering that peace emerges naturally when grasping dissipates. Wilson emphasizes patience and non-judgment, reminding practitioners that understanding attachment—not fighting it—is what opens us to freedom. She closes with the Third Zen Patriarch's teaching: "When the heart exists undisturbed in the way, nothing in the world can offend."*

I'm sorry I had to cancel last night at the last minute. I appreciate your coming back tonight.

Tonight what I'd like to talk about is a highly unusual and original topic: attachment, or grasping. One of the things the Buddha said to himself during that period when he was trying to decide whether to teach—I love this quote—he was reflecting on how hard the truth is to discover, and he said: "Because this generation relies on attachment, this generation relishes attachment, delights in attachment, it's hard for them to see the truth."

That describes us at times pretty well.

What I mean by grasping is this: when we talk about craving, it's compared to the mind inclining towards something, groping in the dark to steal an object. Grasping is like, "got it." You've really grabbed it. It's taken a firm hold. In the chain of dependent origination, craving arises on contact with pleasant feeling when there's not mindfulness. Grasping is what develops in the next moment, and each moment of grasping strengthens the next—this really grabbing hold and not being able to let go.

So that cheery topic is what I would like to discuss tonight, and really in some ways on quite a fine level, on a microscopic level.

But I want to share something that helps put things in perspective. After some period of sitting, some weeks, as you've all been here now, we are working and seeing things on a very minute, very microscopic level. I love being able to talk about, for example, the arising of grasping as a moment-to-moment experience. But sometimes, often actually, people say after a period of practice that it feels so inward, so self-involved, that they start to feel disconnected or wondering if it's relevant—sitting here obsessed about attachment to having a certain seat in the cafeteria, for example.

The other night, there was a brief, maybe twenty-minute special. Some film crews had gone to Somalia, and it was quite affecting for me. They were filming and talking to people who looked like they were going to die the next minute from starvation. Very real. Just hundreds of these people—women, children, men. They were also filming how the whole famine there is not caused by drought or natural conditions. It's caused by people's greed and delusion. They filmed gangs of men with machine guns and anti-aircraft guns going around literally stealing food and blankets with guns, just ripping them away from starving women and children, then selling them on the black market for money, attacking relief warehouses with fifty machine guns. It's really amazing what's going on. And in the midst of it, lots of volunteers, many of them Westerners, just trying to help bring in the food, bring in some medical aid.

It was very affecting to me. And it had the effect, in my heart anyway, not of thinking, "Oh, what are we doing here obsessing about our minute little problems while this is going on?" Rather, this is what happens when we don't understand the nature of attachment. When it runs wild and blinds us in a huge way, it leads to this kind of thing in the world, all over the world. It's exaggerated, but the process isn't any different from how attachment or grasping arises in a moment of our experience—how it feeds itself when we're afraid of it or don't understand it.

I really feel quite deeply that what we're doing here is not irrelevant to that. It's a very deep way of learning that peace and freedom is accessible, learning how not to be blinded by grasping—and that's going to have a profound effect on anyone we come in

contact with. I feel so strongly the connection: everyone here has such a commitment to understand this process in themselves, to know what peace is. We really are doing it for all beings. We're not irrelevant. We're not isolated. We're not just playing with mental ideas. What we're doing here is very real.

So, from the big perspective down to a much smaller perspective, let's talk about this experience of attachment or grasping.

In your experience, there's really only six things that happen: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical touch, and mental experience. That's it. Six objects just coming over and over and over. It's amazing what a big deal we make about it.

Any one of these six sense objects that arise—there's contact. There's the eye, there's a sight object, there's eye consciousness, contact, feeling. If the feeling is pleasant, there can be craving. If it's unpleasant, aversion. In the next moment, if there's mindfulness—if there's sati in that moment—then with the sati we understand the nature of the craving, the nature of the object of craving. In a way we see its impermanence, we know its ephemeral, non-satisfying nature. Wisdom arises in that moment and the craving dissipates. That moment might seem like nothing special—many, many moments like that in our life on this retreat.

But when the sati's not there, when the wisdom doesn't arise in that moment of craving, the next moment that's conditioned is one of grasping—that really grabbing hold of the experience. And that's what blinds us, where the mind gets fixated on a particular thing.

Something simple: there's a pleasant smell. We don't really notice the pleasantness. It's grasped at. The mind gets fixated in some fantasy of food, not really even noticing where that fixation began. This is the grasping that blinds us.

This is from the Buddha: "For some people, contact—the point where sense plus object meet each other—this point is enthralling. And so they are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But others come to understand their sense activity. And because they understand it, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does, and so their craving ends. They realize total calm."

Really, here he's saying that because of understanding the nature of our experience, the craving ends. We realize total calm because of understanding. That's why I want to talk about this nature of attachment or grasping tonight—to help us continue to look at it, to understand it. Through that understanding, we touch the peace and calm that's always available quite naturally. We don't have to create anything.

Of course, often we're not going to notice this right at the point of contact. Quite often we wake up far, far along in the experience of grasping. Perhaps there was a pleasant feeling of warmth, clinging, craving that feeling, and then it gets into clinging, and the next thing you know you're in a long extended fantasy about a vacation in the tropics—what you're going to do when you leave here, on and on and on, really lost in it. You can see how it's blinding, but there's no sense of what's happening here, no appreciation for what's happening in the moment. And when we wake up, it's even worse to wake back up in Massachusetts when you've been hanging out in Bali for the last ten minutes.

When we talk about craving, how blinding it is, I use that quotation: when a pickpocket sees a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. A blinding quality of grasping.

This is the Buddha again: "There are many kinds of suffering in the world and all of them grow from the same source: grasping. When a person knows no better, she or he gives way to this grasping and slow and dulled goes through one misery after another."

He doesn't try to sugarcoat things. "So do not create this misery for yourselves. Use your knowledge to see how suffering begins and develops in attachment." See—over and over, he doesn't say hate it, fear it, get rid of it, pretend it's not happening. He's saying use your wisdom. See how suffering begins and develops in attachment.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh commenting on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, where it says, "When the mind is desiring something, one is aware: my mind is desiring." It's very simple. You don't have to be afraid of it. You're simply aware: my mind is desiring.

His commentary: "In identifying the mind of desire, in observing the nature of that mind and the nature of the object of desire, we will see the impermanence, the selflessness, and the interdependence of it, and we will no longer be dominated by that mind."

The attachment itself is ephemeral, has no inherent nature, arises because of conditions and ceases when those conditions change. With wisdom, with mindfulness, we see this and we can see through the attachment to the peace that the attachment blinds us to.

On an experiential level, how can we experience the nature of grasping? I love watching this happen in a sitting—unless I'm in a really judgmental frame of mind—because it's so interesting. We're sitting or walking or anything, but it's easier to observe in sitting relatively calmly. Appearances are arising and passing. There's hearing and

seeing and thinking and sensation and the breath coming and going. There's that sense of open, spacious awareness. It's peaceful. It's calm. No appearance is a particular problem.

And suddenly, out of this flow of changing perception, one perception arises. "Oh, the breath should be clearer," I thought. And that particular perception—the mind inclines to it and grasps. It's almost like a physical contraction in that moment. I can feel as if the consciousness, which has been open and spacious as the sky, suddenly becomes as contracted and small and hard as a little pebble around this thought. It could be anything. It doesn't have to be a thought. "I wonder what's for lunch," or "I want to hear that sound again," whatever it happens to be.

In that contraction, the mind is unbalanced. Almost physically, the body could feel unbalanced. There's a sense of solidification. And that one isolation and grasping and identification, not seeing, leads to a whole flow of constructs and story and endless suffering. In that moment of the consciousness contracting, there's immediate separation. There's an immediate sense of me or self, and other, the object grasped. Immediately there's a sense of there's a problem, where before there was no problem.

A simple example: if you've experienced the VR phenomenon—you know, Vipassana romance—you're just simply walking outside, minding your own business, lifting, moving, placing, noticing, hearing, smelling, feeling. And suddenly there's a sight. This person walks by, but the experience is simply seeing. And it's pleasant, and that's not noticed, and a craving arises, and there's a strong grasping. What is the experience in that moment where things have been quite peaceful? There's such a sense of self and other. A whole construct begins of me and them and what I want and what do they think about me and what do I think about them. I wish all these other people weren't here in the way. Everything has become constricted. It's extremely unpleasant. It can really feel like a prison. And one moment of grasping not noticed leads into stronger and stronger grasping—to get rid of the grasping, trying to tell ourselves to stop it. It just goes on and on.

Contrast that with the same kind of walking outside when the mind is clear, simply noticing the sensations, noticing the sounds. Clarity. A sense of peace. There's such an exquisite appreciation of whatever—just the sense of the foot lifting, a little caterpillar going across the driveway, the sound of the leaves. When things are so vivid and it's so exquisitely peaceful.

What's the difference? It's simply that the mind, the consciousness, is free from attachment or aversion—really two sides of the same thing—in that moment. It's not a peace that's created. It's that the attachment is so blinding that we can't recognize or

touch this peace which is always present, here and now. It's always what is true and accessible. It's the attachment, the grasping, that blinds us to this. It's attachment that gets us thinking we have to do something special to know what it is to be peaceful, to be free, when really it's always available. It's the absence of being caught in attachment itself. It's not the situation.

Here I will dredge up an old story that I haven't told for a few years, but it's a good grasping story about the difference between when grasping is present and when it's not.

A few years ago, I was in a relationship with a man who was living in England. I was working here and had gone over there for a week. It was one of these special week-long tickets that you can't change—if you miss it, you just lose the money. Plus, I had to be back here.

We were in London the night before my flight. He doesn't know London. Neither of us knew London. He's American. We were staying at a friend's apartment, but the friends were away, so we didn't have anyone around who could help us.

We get up in the morning. It's all fine. I'm getting ready to call a taxi to go to the train to the airport. No problem. And he got it in his mind that he really wants to drive me to the airport so we can have more time together. He really got it in his mind. It was very strong grasping. I was saying, "Well, you don't know the way. I don't know the way. And it's really easy to take the train."

We spent the next hour—when we could have been enjoying each other's company—arguing about this. Finally, I just gave up. He was just so strong. I could really see the grasping quality. I said, "Okay."

Now, of course, it's late because we spent all this time arguing. The only map we had was one of these London A to Z guides, which has a page for each block or something. Very detailed, but if you don't know how to get from A to Y, it really doesn't help to have all these pages in between because you don't know which to use. So that's what we had, and we're trying to figure out how to go. We're in the car. I'm looking at the map. Get on this street, and then I have to find the next page, and by the time I'd find it, we'd be off of the next map already. We were really quite late.

Now, I was really grasping: "I have to make this plane." That was the thought in my mind, totally grasped onto. This time together was really pleasant, I can tell you. So I was wildly looking through this. He was driving like a maniac. We finally got on the right motorway, got partway out, and hit a total dead-stop traffic jam. Neither of us knew if we'd gotten off there where to go to take a shortcut.

I was in a total frenzy, just totally gone in this grasping, really suffering. And suddenly, when we hit this traffic jam, it all blew up in a bubble. I thought, "Oh, I'm going to miss the plane." It really hit, and the whole grasping just dissipated. Confronted with the facts, there was nothing to grasp. It completely dissipated, and in an instant I was quite relaxed. I was looking around going, "Oh, look at all these cars. Well, I've never missed a plane internationally." I was quite in a pleasant space again.

Nothing had changed except the grasping had gone away. All the suffering wasn't about missing the plane or him having a different idea from me. It was because of the grasping in the mind that blinded me to anything else.

To go on, I ended up not missing the plane. I used to not say this, but then people would really ask me the next day what happened. We got to the airport with like ten minutes to make the plane, and then all the grasping came back. Everybody was in my way. I ran to the head of the immigration line, pushed myself in, ran to the plane. I was the last one on. They shut the doors, and we sat there for forty-five minutes.

This is life. But it was such a clear experience of: it's not the situation that's suffering, it's the grasping.

I saw this guy a year or so ago, and out of nowhere he said, "Remember our ride to the airport?" I said, "Yeah, I use it in a Dharma talk." He said, "Well, do you tell my side?" So I'm probably not telling his side.

When we begin to investigate the nature of attachment, of grasping, in this way, for one thing it's fascinating. But for another, we can't help but see how often it arises and how easily the mind is seduced. And so I want to say about this: the importance of patience, equanimity, and non-judging. We're here to explore, to discover, not to judge ourselves for what we're seeing, because it's the nature of our human condition. We're all in this together.

There are a few areas where I find it helpful to identify this process of attachment where we so easily get lost. Traditionally they talk about four areas. I'm really only going to talk about two tonight.

The first kind of grasping they talk about is the obvious one: sense pleasures. This is a definition of sense-pleasure grasping by Ledi Sayadaw, who was a Burmese meditation master from early this century: "Laying a firm hold on something, it implies the inability to shake off a thing even after experiencing great pain due to it and perceiving its many harmful consequences."

This is really, to me, one description of grasping at sense pleasures. Just a little thing, like I sit down and start eating ice cream and keep going until I finish the carton. I know this is having a painful effect on me in the here and now. And the grasping just keeps feeding on itself if I don't stop to look at it.

It's like the story of Nasruddin sitting there eating a whole basket of hot chilies and tears just pouring down his face. Someone comes along and says, "What are you doing that for?" He says, "Well, I'm waiting for a sweet one." And we keep doing that. "Well, I've done this a hundred thousand times and it hurt, but maybe this time it's really going to make me happy." I just keep coming back to: in my mind, there's pleasant sights, pleasant smells, pleasant sounds, pleasant touch, pleasant taste, pleasant mental objects, and that's it. So what? Why do we keep needing new ones? But we do.

Once I went to U Pandita complaining about something that was going on in my practice, and he just said to me, "So what do you want? Different things to note?" It just really reduces it. Oh yeah, that's all it is. What difference does it make?

The Buddha spoke often, very graphically, about the perils of sense pleasures. Some of the more accessible ones: they're dangerous because they're like a dream—when you wake up, they're gone. Or it's something that's borrowed—you just start to get into it and the owner takes it back.

But the danger, the perils—we want to emphasize—it's not saying that pleasant sense experience is bad or that we have to be afraid of it. The Buddha went through extreme asceticism, and that was not what he was advocating. He was advocating the middle way. But I think it's important for us to really notice what the peril, what the danger is of sense pleasure. It's not the sense pleasantness itself, but simply that the tendency to grasp is so strong. The idea that somehow this one is going to do it is so seductive that we so easily get lost. And that's dangerous to us because, in that getting lost, in the grasping as it strengthens itself, it keeps us looking in the wrong direction for peace. We're looking and waiting for that sweet one instead of seeing that peace is available right now if we'd stop looking so hard.

I think one of the reasons we don't get it is that in our day-to-day life, we don't really look that hard. Our culture especially, but all cultures in some way, we're just bombarded with opportunities for pleasant sensory experience. As soon as one sight doesn't do it, we can go to another one. As soon as one taste doesn't do it, we can go to a pleasant feeling or a pleasant sound. You can come and sit here and go on endlessly into pleasant thoughts. So if we don't look, somehow the rapidity of the movement hides the fact that the search itself is the suffering. It hides the dukkha, the same as when we move our body, it hides the unsatisfactoriness of the senses until the body starts to hurt.

On retreat, the simplification is really helpful, because the possibility of sense pleasure is so amazingly reduced. This is a kind of choice of renunciation. And the mind might go crazy at first. The first week is really hard. The mind's just kind of fighting and wanting more sense things and more things to do. And then it settles down.

The renunciation of simplicity helps us to look. Because what do we see when the mind settles down? The grasping doesn't get any less. It just changes its object. Where before we were grasping for something really important—your husband or wife or children or cats—something really major in life, now it's down to an orange instead of an apple. But the strength of the grasping is no different. This is what's scary. It can be for anything.

But the other side of the simplicity of retreat is that because the object of our attachment can be so greatly reduced, almost to the point of the absurd, we can't hide from the intensity of the attachment. It really makes us look. Because at some point we all wake up and go, "Why have I spent half a day filled with craving and anger because I had to sit in a different seat than usual?" And we all do it.

So the retreat is a wonderful opportunity to really notice what's going on. When you're caught in grasping, notice what it is arising from. You can trace it back and see it's coming from one simple sense experience—a sight or a sound or a feeling or a thought—that this simple contact has given rise to this whole series of grasping moments. That's fascinating to me.

And the other thing we can do is to know that when we're really gripped with attachment, we don't have to do anything about it. Our whole life is spent doing something to get out of that feeling. Here we can see, "Oh, I don't have to avoid this. I can just sit here. I can just stand here. I can just lie here." Whatever's going on when we notice it, we really bring awareness to the process itself—to see how one moment of grasping, when we're not aware of it, really feeds the next, and how much the strength of it grows through one moment conditioning the next.

We can sit there and see how, if we're just noticing, noticing with a calm attentive awareness, sooner or later that grasping, that attachment, dissipates by itself. And notice the experience when it's dissipated—because we see that the peace, the happiness that we thought we could get by attaining the object of grasping, when that grasping dissipates, that peace is right here. That's what we were looking for all along.

When we meet and explore grasping with sati, it allows for the peace that's camouflaged by the grasping to again be acknowledged, recognized, touched. And that's a wonderful experience, because it's the wisdom, the beginning of the wisdom, that helps us know we don't have to spend our lives running around driven by this energy of grasping or craving.

Sometimes I think that the peace of non-grasping is more subtle at first than the kind of intense gratification that might come from sense pleasures, any kind of sense pleasures. It takes the quietness, the calmness of mind that you're all developing here to really appreciate how much more exquisite and subtle it is. But when we touch that, actually, sense pleasures lose their pull. It's a kind of natural renunciation.

I remember one retreat where I'd been for weeks going through all this kind of grief about the end of a relationship—oh, actually it was that same guy—even though I knew I didn't want to be in it anymore. Going through, going through, going through. And then I just got into that place of non-grasping that is so peaceful and lovely and calm. At some point, the thought of sexuality came up, and it was totally unappealing. Just really gross compared to—I don't mean that in a judgmental way, but gross compared to subtle in comparison to that calmness, that peace of equanimity.

We don't give ourselves the chance to recognize that a lot in our daily life. Here, you're all touching moments of that over and over. Please recognize them, acknowledge them when they're happening.

One other thing that I think lends to the seductive quality of grasping at sense pleasures is that when we're not examining craving, as the Buddha said, there's almost a sense of pleasantness. He says, "craving accompanied by delight." That feeling of just one more fantasy. It's so pleasant.

There's a poem I love that to me evokes this feeling, by a Japanese woman from about the year 1000 named Shikibu, from the ancient court of Japan: "Although I try to hold the single thought of Buddha's teaching in my heart, I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well."

So we don't have to be afraid of the crickets' voices. We just have to recognize them for what they are. We don't have to cultivate fear or aversion to pleasant sense experience, but we can see the difference between attachment and appreciation.

The Buddha says, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it."

With the clarity of non-grasping, we really can appreciate what is beautiful in the world. Knowing that it will pass, there's no need to strive after it.

Suzuki Roshi says that renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of the world, but in accepting that they go away.

When we see contact clearly, the nature of sense objects and sense desire, when we are open to exploring the quality of grasping and how it leads to suffering, this sense of natural renunciation arises quite spontaneously.

The other area of attachment I want to talk about tonight is grasping or attachment to views and opinions, which is a really interesting one to me. The Buddha speaks about it quite a lot.

That could be described as the tendency of mind to think, "This alone is true, everything else is false." Unfortunately, we don't usually think it quite so clearly, so we're not so aware there's a view forming. But any view or opinion that we're grasping onto, that we're not seeing as a view, is of course blinding. It limits our world. It limits the possibilities because we don't even let in the facts that don't fit into our view. We only perceive what fits.

Remember when I talked about that basketball video and no one noticed the woman in white? It doesn't fit in with anyone's view of a basketball game, that that should be happening. So we limit the possibilities of what can be perceived, of what we can know about life.

We see this everywhere. Such suffering is created by this attachment to views, by holding these views to be some kind of absolute truth. Right now, you're lucky you're missing the presidential debates that have been going on. It's really been something to watch. There's no sense—debate is a joke. There's no sense that there's any kind of open communication happening. Each person gets up and lays out their views. The other person gets up and lays out their views. There's no sense of meeting. There's no sense of actually hearing. There's such a rigid clash.

People go to war about such differences of views, of holding on to such an idea. When one is listening without subscribing to any of the views particularly, what one hears—or what I hear—is, they don't sound very different. What are they fighting about? There's much more agreement than there is disagreement, but it turns into this rigid conflict.

Most of us can probably see at some time the way that we are rabidly attached to some opinion that we have, such that if it's challenged, we get really angry or frightened. It can be about anything—politics, the environment, our spirituality, religion, medical things—and we'll hold on to our view in spite of the evidence. It gives us some kind of security.

One example—and I'm bringing this one up on purpose because I don't know if it's controversial, but it might touch things in people—I read a book recently going through the history of the discovery of AIDS and the first few years of how it developed in this country, both in the gay community and other parts of the country, and how the medical establishment reacted, how the government reacted, how the newspapers reacted, how the blood banks reacted.

It's so interesting because all of the different groups had their own particular views that they were grasping onto and protecting much more strongly than wanting to listen to the evidence that was coming out. The government didn't want to spend money on it, didn't want to hear it was a crisis, and basically held views like "It's only gay people and Haitians, we don't need to worry about it." The media, in a way, treated it the same way. The doctors were squabbling amongst themselves about whether it was true or what wasn't or who was going to get the credit. The discovery of the virus wasn't really talked about in the American media for a year because it was discovered by some French people, and the Americans wanted the credit. The gay community—a lot of them didn't want to hear about how it was spread through sexual activity because of the view that they were just coming into a sense of sexual freedom and not wanting to be told how to behave because it was moralistic. And on and on—the blood banks didn't want to hear that it was contagious and kept putting out the blood for some time after the facts were really out.

It's horrendous. But it was fascinating to me because everybody who was at all involved was holding on to some kind of view, and in the meantime a crisis developed. This is how we are. None of us are outside of that. Our views are more important, when we're holding on to them, than knowing the truth.

It can stop your mind, how strange or unsettling it is when we come up against some kind of evidence that we can't ignore, that shakes a view we don't know we have, that we're really grasping.

A friend just told me this story I like. A Tibetan Lama, Lama Gendun, was giving a talk to quite a large group of people. He was talking about, in their language, a pure land. It's a place where one can be reborn, a happy realm, a practiced realm. Amitabha Buddha is there. It's a great place to be reborn and practice and be happy. He was going

on and on about it, describing it in detail, all these tiny little details. Finally, the people in the back of the room started to snicker. "Where is he coming off talking about all this? He's really in delusion." He just stopped and looked at them and said, "Well, you might not think I know what I'm talking about, but I've been there."

It just stopped. Everyone just kind of stopped. Doesn't fit in with their view of what's possible or what's true.

Can we just begin to notice a view as a view? That's all. Notice when grasping or attachment to a view is arising. Then we don't have to be so gripped by it. Then we can continue to be open for discovery, open to see what is true in this moment, what is actually happening, not colored by our views and opinions.

One of the things the Buddha says about views a lot is how holding to views brings us into conflict—conflict with others, conflict with ourselves. Just talking to people this last week, I can see this happening so much. We all do it in practice. We set up a view and immediately grasp it and then start suffering because our practice does not match the view that we're holding onto.

Anything that's said in the instructions, anything that's said in a talk—the mind just somehow, this particular line comes up, that grasping takes place. "Right, that's what noting's supposed to be like. Right, that's what the breath's supposed to be like. This is what spacious awareness is supposed to be like." And it's not what my practice is like. Immediately there's comparison and suffering.

It's really funny in a sad kind of way to see how we create so much suffering for ourselves. People will come in and say, "I'm having too many emotions. Clearly my practice is no good." The next person will say, "I'm just not having any emotions. I must be suppressing. My practice is no good." Someone will say, "I'm just too much on the breath. I don't have spacious awareness. My practice is no good." The next person will say, "I'm hardly ever with the breath. I only have spacious awareness. My practice is no good."

We just take whatever form of view and immediately we're in conflict. This comparing mode—comparing is actually the quality of conceit or māna: better than, less than, or equal to. But if we watch what the comparing is arising out of in our practice here, it's grasping at a particular view. So it's not to hate the view, but to see a view as a view, to explore it.

I find it fascinating to do because I'll say, "Oh, that's the view of what practice is supposed to be like. Just relax." And the next minute, whatever starts happening in my mind goes, "Oh no, this is how it's supposed to be." And it might be five minutes or it might be five days before, "Oh, that's another view." Okay, see through it.

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "The state of craving for anything blocks all deeper experience. Nothing of value can happen to a mind that knows exactly what it wants. Because nothing the mind can visualize and want is of much value."

This moment-to-moment mindfulness, just pure being with present experience, is a constant challenge to our unacknowledged views. That's one of the reasons it can be so difficult, really noticing what's happening moment to moment. It doesn't fit—or rarely—our ideas about what's supposed to be happening.

When we're in a struggle like that, just check and see: Is there a view here? Is there grasping?

It's not to say that views are bad or opinions are wrong. We need them in life in order to vote. We need to have a view and an opinion. But we need to know that that's what it is and not hold it as the absolute truth. If I felt my vote was the absolute truth, I would have had to commit suicide twenty years ago because no one I vote for ever wins.

One of the wonderful things about retreat is our views do start to break down. Our view of ourselves as a solid body—is that our experience? I defy anyone to actually look and say their experience is, "I'm a solid, separate body." You see it breaking down, like with a lot of people being sick now. You come in, your experience is a sensation here and an emotion there and a heaviness here. A lot of times people can't put it together because the views, the concepts, are falling away. That's wonderful in retreat. That's what retreat is for.

Now, out in life, sometimes we need to be able to put the concept together and go, "Oh, I think I have the flu," or "I think I have bronchitis, I should go to a doctor." That's quite helpful. To know that that's a view, that's an idea we've built up around certain sensations. It's knowing how

CHAPTER 251

Disentangling Your Thoughts

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines the nature of thought and its role in creating both suffering and liberation. Beginning with the opening verses of the Dhammapada on mind as the forerunner of all actions, she explores how our moment-to-moment perceptions become distorted by the kilesas (mental afflictions) and how these misperceptions cascade into elaborate mental constructions.*
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> *Wilson introduces the crucial concept of papañca—the mind's tendency toward proliferation, where a simple perception rapidly expands into complex webs of thought, emotion, and self-identification. She explains how this process is fueled by three primary forces: wrong view (particularly the misperception of a solid self), craving (including craving for becoming), and māna (conceit or comparison). Drawing from the Bāhiya Sutta, she offers the Buddha's radical teaching: "In the seen, there is only the seen; in the heard, only the heard"—pointing to the awesome simplicity beneath our conceptual elaborations.*
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> *Practically, Wilson guides practitioners to notice the space between sense contact and recognition, to observe how quickly the mind constructs stories from bare perception, and to use wise attention (yoniso manasikāra) to return to direct experience. Rather than fighting thoughts or seeking a "becalmed mind," she emphasizes recognizing thoughts for what they are—empty, arising and passing—which naturally loosens their grip and reveals the peace that cannot be disturbed.*

What I want to talk about tonight is the subject of thought.

The first two verses of the Dhammapada, which is one of the books of the suttas, of the sayings of the Buddha—different translations exist, but this is a pretty typical one:

Mind is the forerunner of all actions. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows, as the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart.

Mind is the forerunner of all actions. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with a serene mind, happiness follows as surely as one's shadow.

The power of the mind, the power of thought in our life—as I'm sure I don't need to tell you after you've been sitting here for six weeks—is really amazing. We create our whole world with thought. Just that I can sit here and force air through my vocal cords

and make noises and it communicates, hopefully, to you in some kind of sensible way. It doesn't communicate to the two nuns here because English is not their language. It's just amazing how powerful this process of thought is. And I don't need to add how much we struggle with it and fight with it, suffer from it. How much, just talking to people, it seems like the unspoken or unacknowledged goal is to get rid of thinking once and for all.

But when we really look at a thought—and we've said this a lot—what is it? It's just nothing. It just comes out of nowhere. It vanishes back into wherever it came from. It's like a phantom, phantasmagorical. There's nothing to it. So what was that tangle of thoughts that you were hitting your head against the wall about yesterday? It was so real. Where is it now? What was it then?

I find this whole thing fascinating since we suffer from it so much, and I want to talk a little about it. You know that quotation that Stephen and Joseph both read from Kalu Rinpoche about how we live in illusion and the appearance of things. Why? What is this illusion and how do we get so tangled up in it? Why does it seem so real?

A big contributing factor is how we understand—or don't understand—and relate to thoughts, to the thinking process. Often Asian teachers, when we're working with Asian teachers on a retreat, will comment about how much we Westerners think. It really amazes them. We'll take any sensation or experience and explain it and define it and interpret it and make up the story. Actually, we do it with almost every experience, much more than seems to be the case in Asia. "You Americans really think a lot." Yeah, it's true. There will be a sensation, and oh, this is a blockage, it's here from my childhood, it's always how I related to my mother—and just on and on in this whole story. And we're really suffering from it. And one of us will say, "Well, what's happening right now?" Oh, yeah, twinging.

But just fighting with thought—I don't think it's the answer somehow. Nisargadatta Maharaj says once that if we examine our mind closely, we'll see that it's seething with thoughts. It may go blank occasionally. A becalmed mind is not a peaceful mind. This peace is very brittle, this peace of the blank mind. What you're calling peace is only an absence of disturbance. Real peace cannot be disturbed.

So often I think if what we really are looking for is this becalmed mind, we could just have lobotomies and go home. That's not what it's about.

That's got nothing to do with peace.

So how does this dream world created by thought become so real? Why does it get created in the first place? I want to talk about a couple of different aspects of this.

The first one begins on the basic level of perception. This is where we first begin to get confused. Perception, as we've said, is that quality of recognition, of discernment in the moment. It includes memory, but it's not just memory. If I clap my hands, there's hearing, and when the mind goes, "Oh, clapping the hands," that recognition is perception—present in every moment of consciousness.

Now, the trouble can start right here. It doesn't have to get far from perception at all. The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. All of them, he's saying. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. That's what our whole practice is about—emphasis on direct experience.

So what do we mean by mistaken perception? And why do we misperceive? When in the moment of perception, that moment of recognition, there is present in the consciousness any of our friends the kilesas—the afflictions or torments of mind: greed, hatred, delusion, fear, pride, conceit, identification—when any of these, or many others (you know the list), are present in a moment of perception, it distorts the basic perception so that we're not seeing what's actually happening.

You can experience this yourself. You can play with it during this retreat because it's a great time to observe this point of perception. Notice that instant of sense experience prior to recognition, prior to perception. For example, you might know that it's hearing, but it hasn't been recognized yet. You might know that it's smelling, but you don't know it's bread cooking yet. That moment just prior to recognition—and then you can easily see how, if in that moment you happen to be wallowing in a fit of aversion, that really colors how we perceive, how that perception arises.

At this place we teach in California, the meditation building has a big sign on it that says "Perceptory." One woman came one day in a fit of aversion, and she looked at it—she'd seen it a million times—and as clear as day, it said "Purgatory." That's the kind of way that perception is mistaken.

Or imagine, to see how this mistaken perception then leads to a whole string of associations and memories and ends up in action based on this whole story—imagine being alone at night in an unfamiliar empty house. An empty house can make all kinds of noises. This can happen to me if I don't know the noises and I'm alone and it's at night. Each new banging, cracking noise—there's that moment of just hearing without recognition. And then if I happen to be afraid or nervous, that colors the perception: "Someone's trying to beat down the door!" And I really believe that. That's the explanation. That's the perception. And it leads to a whole series of emotional reactions—fear and judgment. It leads to running around the house, checking all the doors, making sure everything's locked. And then I think, "Oh, well, I guess it wasn't that."

And then there's another noise again. Bang. "Oh, it's mice running around. There's mice, you know." And that builds up a whole story. And that's the truth.

And then it happens again. And I'm looking out the window and think, "Oh, it's just the wind banging this limb against the window." And that happens to be an accurate perception. But each of those previous ones was just as true in the moment—the whole story, the whole reality of thought and reaction and emotion that gets built up from it.

So those are kind of obvious examples about how the presence in a moment of any of these qualities, these torments of mind, distorts perception, and that leads to a whole basic story that isn't true.

The root distortion really is ignorance. Ignorance meaning this confusion, cloudiness, dullness of mind so that we perceive wrongly. Ignorance is an experienceable

It's not like some monolithic thing, unchanging from the beginning of time—ignorance as our given condition that we can never recognize. It arises and passes on a moment-to-moment basis, just like anything else.

I was in Switzerland last summer, walking in the forest with a friend. I looked up through the trees and said, "Wow, look at that—this big yellow and white striped circus tent. I wonder what that's doing here in the woods." My friend looked. It was a rock. Just a big rock with lichen growing on it.

That's a basic distortion of perception from ignorance—just not seeing what's there. The mind pulls out a few bits of perception, puts it together from memory, and simply makes something up. A circus tent. We do this more than we might like to think. That's the problem. That's why there's such value in beginner's mind, where we just see something without having to draw on all our past memories to make it into a little package that fits what we already know.

This experience, this quality, this mental factor of ignorance—we can begin to recognize when it's present, in a dull sort of way. It's like a fog, a sense of dullness, a kind of darkness. You might really want to see clearly, but you just can't. It's foggy and dull. You can't quite tell what's going on. I liken it in myself to those dreams you have in the morning when you're trying to wake up and you just can't. The whole dream is about trying to wake up—that happens to me a lot. Everything's upside down and backwards, and I know everything's wrong, but I can't get out of it. That's what ignorance feels like to me. We can start to recognize when we're just really zoned out and dull, even though we're trying to be present. It's not our fault; it's just that ignorance is present in that moment.

From this cloudiness, this fogginess, what tends to emerge in our perception is wrong view—confusion, not seeing clearly, like I described with the tent and the rock. The classic example given in the texts, and I like it because it's so straightforward while encompassing all the cloudiness: imagine you're walking in a forest at twilight. You can sort of see, but you can't see clearly. You can sort of see the path, the trees, the big rocks.

It reminds me of when I was a nun in Thailand, staying in a place that was jungle. The paths are broad and you can sort of see, but you can't quite see clearly. There are lots of vines hanging down. You get close and see something hanging from a tree, and as you approach, it appears to be a snake.

In that moment of perception, of seeing it as a snake, that gives rise to thinking about it, to all our associations with snakes. There are lots of poisonous snakes in Thailand, so it can give rise to fear—the emotional reaction that goes with that recognition, the feeling that the woods are unfriendly, the thought that you don't have a flashlight, wondering how you'll get out without being hurt. We get scared, and it affects our whole reaction to the situation.

If someone comes along with a flashlight and turns it on, you see—oh, it's just a vine. The misperception vanishes, and so too does all the reaction to it.

This is what we're doing so much of the time—really, all the time when we're not paying attention—in our perception of who we are. This basic root of ignorance is the fundamental misperception of ourselves. That's what we're hammering away at every night when we're talking.

When we don't really look at our experience, in that fresh way, without assumptions, moment to moment, we usually act from what they call three inverted perceptions—three upside-down, inaccurate perceptions that we don't investigate and assume to be true. They're the three we talk about a lot: we see the permanent in what is constantly changing; we keep thinking we're finding satisfaction where it's not to be found; and we keep thinking there's a solid self-existence when there isn't one anywhere.

It's not just that these are thoughts. These are conclusions and assumptions that we make unconsciously, and we then perceive our experience in that light. From there, the illusion just takes off.

Some misperceptions are easy to see through.

Like, for example, as soon as I saw a rock, I never again could see a circus tent in the rock. When you see that the snake is a vine, you know it's a vine, it's over. But this basic misperception of ourself is much harder because it's so fundamental.

For one thing, it's how we think we've experienced the world and ourself for so long that it's hard to remember to even look at it freshly. That's really one of the points of meditation practice—to learn how to be fresh with each perception. We take it so for granted we don't even know that we have that assumption. And also, as we've said, the change is so rapid, it's hard to see unless we look really closely.

Not long ago, I was at a printer's, and they were showing me how printing of color photographs works. They took a very elaborate, lovely color photograph and had me look at it through a certain kind of microscope, something printers use. And when you look at the photograph, it completely breaks up. It's nothing but dots of four different colors, and only four different colors of these dots. That's all that photograph was. It was really amazing to see that. Looking that closely, it's clearly nothing but dots. I don't see any kind of solid wholeness to it. In that way, when we look, the veil of our illusion is completely lifted and it's no problem. It's just so clear. It's not that we lose anything because there was nothing solid there in the first place. The fear that comes up about it isn't about actually losing something. It's just a kind of unfamiliarity.

But on the other hand, when I take away that little microscope thing and I look at the picture, I don't see colored dots anymore. It's again this very elaborate, lovely color photograph. And so it's a lot like that with us. Even though I know, I really know from experience that there's nothing solid here—it's just a constant process of mental, physical change arising and passing away—as soon as I'm not really looking, that perception isn't there and I feel really solid. So it really takes this willingness to keep looking.

One of my teachers said that when you look, you don't see anything. There's no problem. When you don't look, you see samsara. That's where we get caught. And that's why our expectations are so blinding, because they're based on our prior conclusions and not on this freshness of seeing.

Another reason it's hard to see through these inverted perceptions—like I'm just using for an example the one of impermanence—is because once we've made these unconscious conclusions on permanence and we perceive things in that light, we tend to ignore or discount perceptions that don't fit in. We've talked about this before, I know, in relationship to emotions, where people will say, "I've been in this one emotion all day." And we'll keep saying, "Well, really, look." And everyone discovers, "Well, I haven't been gloomy all day. I've been gloomy and happy and bored and hungry and sleepy and... oh, gloomy." A lot of people here have reported having that experience.

We can do it on a more subtle level, too. Often people will say, "I really want to explore my emotions, but they just don't last long. I'm doing something wrong." Or they come in really upset and say, "I just cannot sustain attention on any object very long. I

have no concentration." But when we probe, we find out, yeah, it's because no object is lasting very long. Things are really changing rapidly. And rather than let in that perception, we try to twist it to fit our previous conclusion that things are solid. When it shakes up our conclusions, our tendency is not to want to let in the perception.

So that's why there's so much emphasis on just being with the bare experience. Whatever definition we make up—and we're making them all up—doesn't last very long. It's never true across the board all the time. When we see that what's true today as a description of your experience has absolutely no relevance tomorrow as a description of your experience, it becomes a lot easier to let go of the definition and the assumption and just come back to the bare perception. And that is what our mindfulness is all about.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, to have a correct perception, we need to have a direct encounter. So that's what we're doing here—just having direct encounters, moment to moment to moment.

So that's one part—how the illusion, how we get so tangled up in a construction of thoughts, starts with this basic misperception on a moment-to-moment level.

The other part I want to talk about tonight is something I'm sure you've seen: just how amazingly quick the mind is to move from that perception to a whole incredibly elaborate construction of thought and story and emotion and self-identity. Just like that.

I mean, just a cough. Recognition of cough. Depending on the mental state, depending on how much pain there is in your body, depending on your prior conditionings about coughs—in this amount of time, you could have constructed a whole world of yourself in the hospital with pneumonia. You could have constructed a whole sense of what an incredibly insensitive, vile person that is sitting in the other part of the hall coughing. Really solid. And in no time. In no time. Such a solid reality, and it seems really true in that moment.

This process of moving from bare perception of hearing, recognition of cough, to a whole story about the disease process and your history of disease and what you think about people who don't cover their mouth when they cough—this is called *papañca*. It's one of my favorite words. It is translated usually as "proliferation"—this immediate and endless expansion, proliferation, entanglement of thought that arises from perception, where the initial experience is so quickly and so completely hidden by the whole construction that comes on top of it.

The Buddha, in describing this process of *papañca*, is talking about visual consciousness, and then he goes through, as they do in the suttas, each of the six sense doors. He talks about visual consciousness arising when there's contact with the eye, the visual object, and visual consciousness—that's contact. Due to contact arises feeling. What one feels, one perceives—that recognition. What one perceives, one thinks about, has thoughts about. He's just describing this bare process. Out of these associations, these thoughts, *papañca* is manufactured. That's the translation Vimala uses: manufactured. And *papañca* is the proliferation, projection, ideas, descriptions—you name it.

Then, in a loose translation of the next couple of lines: these notions, this *papañca*, assail and overwhelm a person who's not mindful of the process. And it really feels like this. "Assail" is like being attacked, being overwhelmed. It's like you're just completely under the power of these ideas, of this *papañca*. Or as one commentator puts it, it's the tendency of imagination to break loose and run riot. That's really what it feels like when we've been spending five minutes or an hour just struggling with some construction of thought. It really does feel like we're under attack.

This is *papañca*. It gets so solid and so concrete. It's fueled just as misperception arises due to the confusions, the *kilesas* present in a moment of perception. *Papañca* is also fueled by these mental states in the mind.

For example, there's the original misperception based, say, on aversion, which then projects—it's as if it projects the inner experience out onto the object and then fuels our reactions, our emotions, our thoughts.

A simple example: once I was in the hospital, and sometimes when you've been in the hospital a while, you can get into a state that's not quite psychotic but a very distorted state of mind. I was in that, just very fearful. And this nurse came at six in the morning to wake me up, to weigh me. And that's another thing—why do they need to do that? But anyway, I was in a fearful state of mind. And the misperception, the fear, projected onto my visual perception of her, and I really saw her as demonic, as really evil in that moment of her coming. And then that fear proceeded to fuel my reactions and my thoughts, and I ended up just screaming at the poor woman. Really lost in fear.

That's how *papañca* not only distorts perception but continues to fuel our actions. And the next time she came, I was fine—and she was really afraid. I could see it in her face. I felt terrible.

Papañca can be fueled by any of these *kilesas*, any of these habits of mind. There are three particular *kilesas* that they speak of often as being really strong and frequent fuel for this takeoff of *papañca*.

One of them, as we've talked already, is that of wrong view. And as we all know, that's kind of really the basic fuel for *papañca*. Anytime we're referring back to a sense of a separate, solid self, we know we're in for trouble, one way or the other, because we're already out of sync with what's really true. The whole desire for pleasure, the fear of pain—it comes out of this basic fuel: wrong view. And all the thoughts and emotions and actions that follow. I mean, really, if you look at it—if I look at it—how much of my life is driven by this basic form of *papañca*, proliferation based on a sense of myself and wanting pleasure?

So I'm not going to say a lot more about that. It's really our whole practice, exploring that. But a place to really watch the process of *papañca* itself, just to become mindful and aware of the process—and I think this isn't just scientific interest.

It really does lead to not being tangled up in this web of construction.

The second great fuel for papañca is, of course, our other old friend: craving. Really watch how it works. In the moment of craving, the mind projects desirable qualities out onto whatever object is craved—like that Tibetan saying I mentioned the other night about putting feathers on the object, making it attractive. That's the first movement of papañca.

But then watch in your experience how, once craving has entered into perception, it leads to so much mental, emotional, and even physical activity. See how far the papañca, the proliferation, takes us from the bare experience.

For example, something simple: you're sitting, you're pretty present, and suddenly you remember the yogi need request you put in a couple of days ago. You think, "It should be here by now. I really need those cough drops." Suddenly craving comes up. "I've got to have those cough drops. I'm sure it must be here. They've certainly had time to go to Barre Circus by now." Thoughts just proliferate. Emotions proliferate. And it's all you can do to keep from jumping up and running to look at the note board to see if your note is there. You're just sure it's there. In fact, you might even go and read your name on a note that doesn't remotely look like your name, because you're so certain it's there. This is papañca. This is proliferation. It not only leads to constructions of thought; it also proliferates in action.

You'll see when you leave here—if you can even imagine that; you probably can't even imagine it now—you'll feel calm. Things are simple. We do one thing at a time. Watch how fast the papañca moves from thinking into action. Suddenly you have to do this and make this phone call and make this date and go do that and go to the store. It's really amazing to watch how fast it happens.

So here, it's wonderful. You can just watch it in relationship to wanting a note on the board or cough drops or something. But in the world, this type of proliferation based on craving is what leads to solidified nation-state identities. It leads to wars. It leads to a sense of "this is my land, this is your land"—so solid. And at that point, to try and tell somebody, "This is all just proliferation based on craving from a particular sense datum"—forget it. Way too far gone.

Another aspect of craving that I find very interesting to watch is not just craving for things, but craving for becoming. How many different becomings, different definitions of yourself, do you go through in a day? Watch how the proliferation of thoughts begins as we hook into a particular idea, a particular definition, and that begins to really solidify into a becoming. It's so quick and changing, but we keep believing in it. And this too is papañca. It's also a form of craving.

I like to play with it when I'm on retreat. Just notice—I'm sure you all have—how you tell yourself stories all day, describe your experience, make up definitions of what you're doing, on and on and on. What is so amazing is that we keep believing it, on and on and on. And this, again, is papañca.

Notice: you're doing your yogi job, just vacuuming, being very mindful, and the thought comes, "I'm being so mindful. I'm really getting this down—how to be mindful in motion." Pleasant. This is nice. Pride: "I'm doing great." Right then there's craving. It's like a becoming—becoming in that moment a mindful person, a good yogi. And, as we all know, it expands into being the next great spiritual world teacher, being introduced to the Dalai Lama, whatever the particular story is.

That's papañca, that is a total illusion. And in that moment, that's really who we think we are. And the next moment—oh my God, I've been lost in thinking. Unpleasant sensation, aversion, judgment. How could I even think such things? I can't even be mindful of vacuuming for more than two seconds in a row. I'm the worst yogi here.

Or someone said to me, "I have a congenital defect. I can never be mindful. I won't be mindful for more than two minutes. I might as well leave." And that's really solid—a whole tangle of thoughts. And we're making it all up. We're making it all up.

I was sitting in my room back in the Catskills a couple of years ago. Just sitting, as you do, minding my own business. And the thought came up: "Oh, I'm so alone." Kind of neutral. And then immediately it glommed onto something more: "Oh, I'm so alone here. I could die back here. No one would notice for three days. No one knows how lonely..." And not just the thoughts—the emotions came up really strong, a real sense of self, the whole story going on and on.

Suddenly I thought, "Well, since we're making it all up, I think I'll just try a different story." I did this really consciously. So I was still in the "oh, I'm so alone," and I deliberately said, "You know, it's really wonderful to have the opportunity to be so alone." And immediately, all the attendant emotions on that particular thought came up. I started feeling really joyful. I felt so inspired and grateful to have the chance to be so alone for two months in practice.

It was really amazing. Because there was no way I could pretend either of those was true. It was thoughts and emotions—true in that moment, yes, and those were the thoughts and emotions in the moment. But that's all they were.

The Buddha says that if we're going to identify with any part of our experience—which of course he's saying we shouldn't—but if we're going to identify with any part, it would be better to choose the body, because at least it doesn't change so rapidly. He said the mind is changing so much quicker than the body that it's really crazy to identify with that. But that's really where we can so easily get caught.

Again, one of my Indian teachers said, "If you become something, death awaits you. If you don't become something, there is no death or birth." And we're talking moment to moment—becoming and not becoming.

But can we live without self-definition? Can we do that? It doesn't mean to destroy the definitions, but just to see—like when I was sitting back there—that that's all they are. They're just proliferation of thought and emotion and description based on a sense experience. It's very freeing. It can also be scary not to have a sense of definition. Even a bad definition you might like better than no definition.

The third fuel for papañca that's often spoken of is māna, the Pali word translated as conceit. It's not just pride, but as we've mentioned before, this sense of comparing: I'm better than, I'm worse than, or I'm equal to. All of this is this mental factor of conceit. And I know from talking to people that just about everybody here has had real attacks of experiencing this nature of comparison—and just how unpleasant and how much suffering it can be.

It comes up in interviews so much. And it arises about anything, anything. People comparing one breath to the next breath, one sitting to the last sitting. All it takes when conceit is present in the mind is for someone to walk by slowly. That's it—it's finished. They're slower than me, I'm no good. I'm slower than them, I'm fantastic. Or we're going at exactly the same pace—but they're not one of the people I think is a good yogi, and we're only going equal. Or they're the person I think is a fantastic yogi, and I'm walking just as slowly. And this whole mental activity unfolds from there.

It's very strong, very subtle, this comparison, this conceit. It's said to be one of the last delusionary qualities that goes on our path because it's so subtle and so pervasive. But one thing that weakens it is our ongoing understanding of, our perception of impermanence, of anicca. You can see how that can weaken a sense of conceit, because when we see that everything's changing, there's no solid thing to compare anything to. In walking, for example—oh, I'm walking so slow. But five minutes later, I'm walking fast and they're walking slow. There's no solid thing to compare to. We start to see that everything's in continual flux, and comparison makes no sense because it's just constantly shifting sets of conditions. Comparing absolutely makes no sense when we are seeing things in this state of constantly changing conditions, rising and passing. It really weakens the sense of conceit.

Now, this proliferation, this papañca—again, it's not like we have to get rid of it. The way the Buddha described it, it's a natural process. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about turns into this whole story of papañca. But then if we're not mindful of it, it really assails us. We really struggle. The thoughts, when we know them for what they are, can momentarily define our reality—and that's actually helpful, especially when we all agree on the definition. It works pretty well, for example, that we pretty much have an agreement on what it means to be a yogi, that at this moment we agree on the definition of reality that I'm talking and you're not talking. You know if you're a yogi, if you're a cook, if you're working in the office. We know what's appropriate behavior for each of those roles. If one of you suddenly got up in the middle of the room and started screaming and dancing and jumping around, it would be really disturbing because it doesn't fit with our agreed-upon definition of things. So the definitions are helpful.

But the key is to know that it's only a definition. In these conditions, right at this moment, you are yogis. But that's not your definition for your whole life. If you thought you had to behave like this all the time, there would be some big problems. If I thought I had to go around lecturing people all the time, there would be big problems too. So it's recognizing the definitions and what they're built on, but not attaching to them. That's the place where we get lost in the illusion and the tangle.

First, it's to see thoughts for what they are, to understand how papañca arises and gets fed and created, and then not to attach to it, not to take it for more than it is. Just because thoughts are powerful, just because they seem solid, just because they're connected with really strong emotions—that doesn't necessarily mean they're an accurate description of anything. We tend to think that the stronger the thought, the stronger the emotion, that must mean it's true. It's just not the case.

There's a story the Buddha told often, one you've probably heard, about a widower living with his young son, five or six years old, in a village in the time of the Buddha. One day some bandits came while the man was out. They burned down the village, burned down his house, and kidnapped his son. When the man came home, he found the village destroyed, his house destroyed, and the remains of a little corpse that he assumed was his son. He was grief-stricken, just devastated. He saved the little bones in a velvet bag and carried them around with him, grieving and grieving.

Quite some time later, the son escaped from the bandits and came back home. His father had rebuilt the house. The boy arrived about midnight, banging on the door. "Father, let me in! Let me in!" But the man was so convinced of the reality he had constructed that he said, "Go away, don't torment me. My son is dead. Don't torture me in this way." The boy kept banging, the father kept refusing, and finally the child left. They never saw each other again.

The Buddha ends the story by saying: Sometime, somewhere, you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it.

This is the difference between recognizing papañca and proliferation for what it is, and really being caught in it, not recognizing it for what it is. That's all we need. We don't have to get rid of it. We just have to recognize it. That's one way we begin to find clarity and peace in this whole jumble of explanation and confusing experience.

Another way, when the concepts are apparently so solid—and this comes up a lot in interviews—is when there really somehow just isn't space to say

well, maybe my son really didn't die. There's not even space to think that.

Then the key in coming out of proliferation and back to bare experience is just what we've been practicing here: wise attention. Wise attention is a concept of the Buddha based on the fact that we can really pay full attention, give our full attention, to only one thing at a time. So when you're feeling really caught in the papañca, really in a solid concept and struggling, just notice: where is the attention right now? That's why so much of mindfulness is coming back to the direct perception.

An example that's often used, a simile by Buddhist teachers, is that a thought is like throwing a rock. That rock being thrown is like a thought. And if you throw that rock and hit a dog, the dog gets all excited and it thinks the rock is the cause of its problem and it runs around chasing the rock. That's what we do when we're just following out the concepts, following out the thought, the proliferation, running after it like a dog. They say if you throw a rock at a lion, it completely ignores the rock and just stares

straight back at the source of the throwing. It cuts through all the extra and gets right back to the source. That's the sense of wise attention—bringing the attention to the direct source of the perception, of the experience. We can do that.

So again, a simple example. You're sitting. A constellation of sensations. They're unpleasant. There's aversion. Again, it gives rise to this whole interpretation: "I'm so blocked. I can never get feeling in this part of my body. I'm such a rigid, blocked person." And you're back into the whole story. "I've got to release this. I've got to move through this. I've got to transform it." That's just the beginning, and you find yourself in a whole series of struggling and self-judgment and condemnation and comparing and suffering.

If you can, when you notice that, not try to talk yourself out of it, not try to make up a different explanation, but simply go, "Oh, what perception is this arising out of?" And come back and simply feel that horrible sensation that proves what a blocked, dreadful person I am. And just keep coming back, moment to moment. "Oh, yeah, this is burning. This is tightness. This is hardness." Just being with the direct perception without needing to make up a story or an explanation about it.

In that direct perception, you'll notice all the explanations and the papañca that comes flying out. That's fine. Let it fly out and keep bringing the attention back to the direct perception, the bare experience that generated it.

So with mindfulness, we have the ability to know thought, to know proliferation for what it is, to be able to be with the bare perception and know what's actually true, and to tell the difference. We don't need to spend our lives fighting an illusion or lost in a dream. We just don't need to do that. And that's really what we're doing every moment that we're with our bare experience here.

So acknowledge the thoughts. Notice the mental state, the kilesa, that's feeding the proliferation. Notice how much and how fast the proliferation moves and how it leads to action. Bring the attention back to the source, the bare perception. You can even notice, at times, that moment of sense experience before the recognition. Just keep noticing that when it happens. Notice the space between thoughts. Notice the times when we're not lost in a becoming, in an identity, in a definition. Just begin to notice all those times, coming back to the source of all of it—the source that's beyond any of this changing, confusing, unsatisfactory nature of things, the source beyond all the distortions and clingings.

When we are caught in this illusion, when we are not seeing this process of proliferation and instead believing these descriptions to be an accurate reflection of the world, life is incredibly complicated and difficult at times and confusing at times. But in fact, at the level of what's actually going on, it's so simple. It's so simple, it's awesome. Unbelievable. Our mind won't believe it.

This, I think, is a paraphrase of my favorite—I think it's my favorite—sutta of the Buddha.

This man came up to the Buddha while he was on his alms round and begged him to give some teachings. The Buddha said, "Wait until I finish eating. I'll go on my alms round and come back." But the man said, "No, I must have it right now." Finally the Buddha assented, and this is the teaching he gave him. It was a good thing he did, because five minutes later a wild bull came along and gored this man, and he died. But he had this teaching, and it had opened his heart and his understanding, so it didn't matter.

Can we really be that free of concept that it doesn't matter if we die? That's so amazing. The Karmapa is said to have declared on his deathbed: "Nothing happens." That's really extraordinary to me. It's one thing to talk about these things when we're sitting here feeling mindful and aware. It's another thing entirely to be dying and truly know that nothing happens.

This is the sutta the Buddha offered, expressing just how simple things really are:

In the seen, there is only the seen. In what is heard, there is only the heard. In what is smelled, there is only the smelled. In what is tasted, there is only the tasted. In what is felt or sensed, there is only the sensed. In what is cognized, known with the mind, there is only the process of cognizing.

That is all. Everything else is interpretation. It is awesomely simple.

There's one last quotation, from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. This reflects the Mahayana view: "Mind creates both samsara and nirvana, yet there's nothing much to it. It's just thoughts. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us."

What is cognized is just the cognized. That's all.

CHAPTER 252

Foundations of Practice

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common discovery among retreat participants: that the difficulties of life follow us even into silent practice. Drawing from the Buddha's own life after awakening—his physical ailments, the wars among his clansmen, conflicts within the Saṅgha, and the deaths of his chief disciples Mahāmoggallāna and Mahāsāriputta—she demonstrates that inner peace has nothing to do with having a perfect life.*
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> *Wilson offers a detailed exploration of the Four Noble Truths, emphasizing that dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) is not meant to demoralize us but to wake us up to how we actually relate to experience. She examines the dependent origination of suffering through our habitual reactions to vedanā (feeling-tone): how we cling to pleasant experiences, resist unpleasant ones, and completely ignore neutral feelings. The Buddha's teaching that "he abides in peace who does not abide anywhere" points to freedom through non-clinging rather than through finding some permanent, secure state.*
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> *Using the Buddha's simile of six animals tied together—representing our six sense doors each pulling toward their preferred experiences—Wilson illustrates how an untrained mind is constantly dragged about by craving and aversion. She contrasts this with the unlimited mind and heart that arises through established mindfulness, where we can experience pleasant and unpleasant without attachment or repulsion. Through poetry, personal stories, and the example of Yo-Yo Ma's childlike wonder, she invites practitioners to meet each moment with open-hearted attention and curiosity, recognizing that every moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom.*

It came up in some of the discussions today, and I think it's by no means an unusual discovery—this being a little bemused, thinking that we're coming to this retreat, especially if it's your first retreat, to get away from the hustle and bustle and pain of our lives. And as you've discovered, guess what comes with us? That's not a mistake.

What I want to talk about tonight is really the way the Buddha described the facts of life and the potential for our freedom. I think a lot of our confusion and struggle comes from our ideas, perhaps unformed even in our own minds, of what we're actually expecting freedom or happiness, inner contentment, peace—whatever word you use—to feel like, to look like, to be like. Because if you're looking for a different reality from this one, a nice, happy, safe, secure place, you're not going to find it.

When we look at the Buddha's life after he was awakened—the supremely awakened one, free from anguish, free from confusion and suffering—he spent forty-five years teaching. But if you look at his life, stuff happened. He wasn't just drifting on a cloud for forty-five years. He was walking barefoot all around northern India, begging for food.

In terms of things that happened, he had physical problems. He had headaches. He had backaches. There are suttas where he says, "Ananda, you give the talk. I have to go lie down and rest my back." He didn't give him a day's warning either.

There were wars going on between clansmen—his own clansmen from his father's and his mother's clans—and they would be killing each other over water rights. How would you like it if all your in-laws were killing each other and you had to go and try to stop it? Everything wasn't groovy.

There was quarreling within the Sangha. Many suttas exist, and a lot of the monks' and nuns' rules come about from times when one of the monks or nuns would see another one doing something and run to the Buddha and tell on him, basically. "So-and-so is doing thus and so. It doesn't seem good." Often it was appropriate, but there's definitely this little element you get. There is envy and all of that.

His two main disciples, Mahamoggalana and Mahasariputta—next to him, I suppose, the most awakened, the wisest—Mahamoggalana, in his old age, was murdered. And both Sariputta and Moggallana died before the Buddha did. There's a lovely sutta where he's saying it's as if the sun and the moon had fallen out of the sky when they died. So he noticed that they were gone.

And his cousin Devadatta, who was very jealous of him, continually tried to sow seeds of discord in the Sangha and divide the Sangha, and actually tried to kill the Buddha. The Buddha was tried to be murdered. So it's not as if everything pleasant was in his life. And in the end, he died. They all died. Everybody died. That's what happens.

So looking to the Buddha's life, the supremely awakened peaceful one, which he was, we have to see that inner contentment, true liberation of heart, must be about something else than having the perfect life, than having everything be the way we want it to be.

So what could that be? The way the Buddha introduces what it could be to us is by having us let our hearts and minds, our vision open to be able to live face to face with things as they are, rather than as we might wish them to be or think they ought to be if we did things right.

When he lays out his Four Noble Truths, the basic facts of life, the first one, as most of you are very familiar with, is that there is unsatisfactoriness in this world, in our bodies, in our minds. There's birth, which is suffering, if you think about it. There's decay. Old age, sickness, death. There's separation from those we love and from things we like. There's having to be brought together with those we don't love and things we don't like. This is what happens. It's not the only thing that happens. Luckily, there's beauty and joy and love and happiness within this realm of form.

But there is not a way of not having unpleasant experience arise. And if you stop and think about it—which obviously I have, a lot—you need to consider: okay, we all nod, sure, there's birth and death, we get sick, we have to be with things we don't like. But is that the way we really meet these experiences when they arise?

You don't have to think far. Just cast your mind back over today. That's as far probably as most of us need to go. If you're one of those for whom today was a good day, you can look at yesterday. We really don't have to go far to see that we're going to come face to face with difficult, painful, unliked experiences. And how did we relate to them?

I think the Buddha's not saying this in order to bring us down, not in order to say life is miserable, suffer. It's really to wake us up to see how we relate to this. The fact that things are unreliable, that they're in constant change, that there is difficulty—we think we accept it, but do we? The denial is so amazing. Just the denial of the fact of pain, of suffering, that things happen that we don't like.

How much of the unpleasantness that has come up in your body or mind or in your surroundings today has your mind greeted as a mistake, or your fault because you're not mindful enough? If you were more mindful, this unpleasant thing wouldn't be happening. Well, I've got news for you. As we get more mindful, we actually begin to notice not only more joy, but also more of the unpleasant things that we've been in total denial about. Our denial mechanism is huge. Witness Michelle's story with her ice cake the other night. It's amazing.

I'll tell you another one. I really like this story because it's just so flat-out denial. Quite some years ago, maybe twelve years ago, I was in the hospital for some days and I was on an IV. I had some big infection. And you know how after a few days, your veins sort of collapse and it gets harder and harder to keep putting in the IV. So this one time, whatever time of day it was, the nurse was trying repeatedly and failing. She was sweating. It hurts. It's not a pleasant experience—you wouldn't call it that. And I could tell she started, in a little way, to panic. It's hard to know you're hurting someone, especially when your intention—her intention—is to help.

She finally kind of gave up and ran out in the hall and grabbed the nearest doctor who was passing by. And I wasn't completely cogent, but I was cogent enough to know that now I was really in trouble. Because who practices and puts in the IVs, huh? Have you ever had the doctor, the surgeon, come in and put in your IV? Not too often. So I was like, okay, right, just be cool, be calm. And the doctor had the same problem. I wasn't my most equanimous. I didn't say anything, but little tears trickled down. And he looked at me with such an expression and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

It's just so amazing. And I could understand how hard it is to let in—if you really let in that it was hurting me—the pain of knowing that with really kind intentions, you're hurting somebody. That's so hard. It's hard for us to be connected and open-hearted in the face of painful experience, physical or emotional. It is hard for us. And so a lot of the time, we don't even know that we're blocking it out. And that's just flat-out obvious pain. I mean, that's the most obvious, and we can deny it.

So not to get down on ourselves about it, but I really think that this first truth of the Buddha's that he enunciated—certainly how it works for me—is as an invitation into my own experience. Not a philosophical point of debate. I mean, we can debate that, but for me, the point is that it brings our awareness in to look and see. And when I first heard this years and years ago, when I first began to sort of understand—oh, stuff happens. It's not my fault.

And really what it was, was a huge relief.

Because when I was first introduced to the Dharma, when I was about nineteen, I had had up until that time what you would call—like in the fifties storybook picture of America, you know—the middle class suburban happy life. My family stayed together. My parents weren't abusive. You just didn't talk about it. Our friend's mother who committed suicide down the road, or the divorce up the street, or my friend whose father had left when she was a kid and she never met him, or the fact that my mother never even met her own father—things like that. You didn't talk about it. Everything was happy, happy.

And I actually couldn't point to anything that was really bad. I had sort of imbibed the idea that you grow up, you do whatever you do, get a career or whatever, and you have this happy ever after life—like the Donna Reed show on television, or the way all the movies end, going off in this happy cloud where nothing bad ever happens again.

I don't know if this will resonate. I'm really showing my age with this. But when I was really young, and it was really the sense of everything's good, nothing's bad, we don't talk about unhappiness—my mother took me to see this Walt Disney movie called *Old Yeller*. I don't know if you remember. It traumatized me for years. Because it's this loving—I mean, all I remember is it's a loving family with their golden lab, this wonderful, perfect dog. Everybody loves everybody. And in the end, the dog saves the little boy from getting attacked by a rabid squirrel. And then the father has to shoot the dog because he has rabies.

So this is, you know—Walt Disney traumatized me. Because I thought everything ends happy all the time if people are nice. And it just didn't fit with my worldview. So when I heard about, "Oh yeah, this is part of the facts of life—there's unhappiness, there's death, things you love go away, you sometimes have to be with things you don't like, and everything is changing all the time"—I felt this huge sense of relief. Oh, I'm not crazy. It's okay that I'm not happy happy every minute, and I don't have to keep pretending. Which for me, being an aversive type personality, was really a relief.

So that really, I think, is the beginning of freedom—just to see, okay, to come face to face with the fact that things aren't always the way we want them. And then it becomes: how do we relate? Rather than: what's wrong with me? What's wrong with things? I'm crazy. We begin to stop our lifelong habit of running and hiding from pain, or from the unpleasant, or hating ourselves when we do something or something happens that we think we should have been able to avoid.

In one retreat, a man was telling me in an interview how he'd all day been seeing aversion in his mind to experiences he was having, to feelings in his body, to thoughts—just aversion to a lot of things. And he was labeling in a subtle way everything he was aversive to as bad. This is bad, this is good. And suddenly he stopped and said, "Wow. So much of my experience has been bad today. So what I'm saying is that much of my life is bad." And then he said, "No, that just isn't true. It's just part of how it is. Sometimes unpleasant, sometimes pleasant." And that took a huge burden of judgment and negativity off the way he was relating to his life. It's just part of life.

Someone told me—this may be apocryphal, I don't know it to be true, but she said it was—that Robin Williams, the comedian, has already had his tombstone engraved, and on it it says, "I knew this was going to happen." He's a step ahead of us, you know. When we know it, we can stop being afraid. We can start to actually live each moment as it presents itself, instead of holding on, planning for the next moment.

So there's this being together with what we don't like, and also the quality of unreliability, the changing nature, the fact of impermanence—which is also included in this first truth. And again, we all know everything changes. But if we really knew that, how would we live? I think we would live very differently.

Someone said in a retreat we were doing together, just about this subject of impermanence for a week—she said on reflection, when I asked her, "How would I live if I really understood and accepted impermanence?"—she said, "You know, I would stop being afraid." Because when we know it's going to change, we don't fear it. We can relax into here and now. Sure, there's a poignancy to change. That's okay. But we don't have to grip so blindly.

I think one of the reasons for the denial of change on a deep level is again this poignancy, this sadness—that maybe it's not quite okay to feel. But it's fine. Let the poignancy in.

This is my favorite part of a poem that I love, because it touches for me that place of love and knowing things change and the poignancy of clinging. It's Galway Kinnell. I'm just going to read part of it. "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight" is the name of it.

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up,
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard,
as if clinging could save us. I think you think
I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I've stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
Little Maud, and yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

We are forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. It's poignant. It doesn't have to be awful. When we can relax into that moment just as it is, without needing to cling or change or look back at the last moment—there can be peace in that.

But I think, at least I certainly notice in myself, one response to this constant change, this unreliability, these shifting sands, is to look quietly but frantically, moment after moment, for some steady, unchanging place to abide. Whether it's a physical experience or an emotional experience, how much do we try to manage and control our lives so we get everything just so? Ah, finally.

In a small way, it's like when you finally get the house all clean. How long does it last? This used to drive me crazy. It lasts two seconds, and then it starts getting dirty again. That's a small example, but I think we're doing this all the time—always looking for some place to abide, to rest and say "finally." And it's that very looking for an abidance that keeps us suffering, off balance, and fearful.

The Buddha said once, "He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." It might not be what we had in mind, because our minds only know what they already know. You know Krishnamurti's famous book, *Freedom from the Known*. We can only imagine what we already know in some way. So to rest in peace—"he abides in peace who does not abide anywhere"—it really is the peace of letting go of that frantic searching.

But we won't and we can't let go. We can't even have a concept of it until our heart begins to understand through experience how much the searching itself is creating the suffering, the anguish, that feeling of being off balance. Because it's not the fact that things change. It's our resistance to that fact that's actually so poignant and scary and awkward.

Nyoshul Khenpo, a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said once, "Remember, whether or not you go with the flow, the flow always goes with you." We can't actually step outside of that. But we can start to just look and see, "Oh yes, that's what's happening." We can feel the poignancy. We don't have to fear it. As someone once said, "Let's face it, I don't fear it when unpleasant experience is going away. It's only the pleasant ones that I'm holding on to." There's something important to notice about that.

So you might be thinking, who wants to look this closely? Maybe denial is ignorance, but it was working okay in a lot of situations. And often, on our journey, on our spiritual path, we hit moments where we say, "Oh God, I wish I could go back to not seeing quite so clearly." Because I meant it—even though you laughed and I said it in a joking way—as mindfulness strengthens, as our ability to be present for whatever arises strengthens, we will be so much more at ease and happy, but we will also be much more aware of the unpleasant and the changing nature. That actually brings us to freedom, believe it or not. Knowing things the way they are is what releases our heart and

mind from this fruitless clinging, this fruitless searching for steady state in a world that is totally unsteady state. But the way out is in, and we go in kicking and screaming most of the time.

So looking at this first truth, it's a wake-up call, really a wake-up call, not just something to be demoralized about. As Ajahn Chah said, "There's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering." The difference is in the way we relate to the difficult, the painful, the poignant experience.

And that brings us to the second truth, the second fact the Buddha describes. What is the cause of the suffering, the anguish? Not the fact that there's unpleasant experience, but how our hearts and minds relate to experience—that is the place of bondage or freedom. That is where understanding can really begin to flower.

So how is the Buddha different from us?

If he went through experiences after his awakening, and if you believe that he was a human being, then his awakening has the same potential for us. He wasn't some kind of divine being with different factors making up his mind and body. So how, in his awakening, in going through these difficult experiences, what would be a way of describing how he was different from us? Or different from me—I don't want to project onto all of you.

One simple way I want to talk about it is in how he related his understanding: that it's the clinging, the aversions, the longing for things to be different, the denial—all these reactions to the bare facts of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience—and then our total entrancement with those reactions. I mean, look at it. We're totally entranced with how much we don't like something, or how much we like something, how involved we get. We go from an unpleasant sound to the history of our life in two seconds. Completely involved. So entranced that we don't even know it's happening.

It's our reactions, our identification with them, and the total entrancement that has us off and running—this is what hides the way things are from us and obscures the potential for really living in contentment, in peace, with things as they are, for rediscovering, resting in, and trusting the radiant mind, our basic goodness, as Chögyam Trungpa calls it. This is not a state that you can get and hold on to and rest in. There is no steady state of heart and mind. But it's an attitude that can arise no matter what state is coming in our body or in our mind.

The peace, the freedom, the happiness of the Buddha has nothing to do with what's arising in your experience right now. Freedom has nothing to do with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. It really doesn't matter. And it's the hardest thing for us

to really believe. When you come in and you've had one of these crummy sittings, and all this stuff is coming up, and yesterday it was so clear, and we say, "Oh, yeah, fine. Yesterday was clear. Now it's really painful. Those are both good. Just pay attention." And you think, "Yeah, right." We don't really believe that very well. But the fact is, it's true. Freedom has nothing to do with the particular experience that's happening. It has everything to do with the relationship to it.

Someone came in and said—I think it was this retreat—she was really getting that pleasure, the experiencing of pleasant feeling, is not the same as happiness. Pleasure is pleasure. Sure, it's nice. If we had a choice, we'd probably take pleasure over displeasure. We can tell the difference. The Buddha could tell the difference too, I think. It's not heading toward this dull neutrality. But it's not getting into all those reactions.

And that allows us to turn away from our entrancement with our reactions and ourselves and our stories and everything, and actually come to live in this moment with a total intimacy, wakefulness, loving, awake presence that can allow us again and again and again to glimpse, with more or less depth, the true radiant nature of our mind, our heart—big mind heart, not this little heart—the radiant nature of what we truly are.

In the process of this shift from our habitual reactive mind to opening into whatever is happening this moment with totality of presence and intimacy, yes, we are more aware of the unpleasant and more aware of the beautiful, the joyful. As someone was saying today, it was really beautiful—in the midst of a very difficult day, one little experience that we normally would completely overlook. And in the middle of all the difficulty, she said, "You know, this doesn't seem like much of an experience," but it was giving her so much joy.

Like someone was talking about the flowers. Franz and I planted a couple of peony bushes last year, little new ones. And two days ago, Monday, one of them bloomed for the first time. Now, for some reason, that day hadn't been a particularly joyful day. I forget—it was really hot. I forget what was going on. But I wasn't dancing in joy through the day. And just seeing that flower open over the course of a couple of hours brought so much happiness and joy. When we're more present, it doesn't take winning the lottery to feel joy. We can be really present for suffering, and something just lovely happens, and we're really present for that. There's this immediacy, this vitality of presence—all of life becomes so much richer in the little things.

When we're not afraid of the impermanence, we're really here. This is called "Living" by Denise Levertov.

The fire in leaf and grass, so green it seems each summer the last summer. The wind blowing, the leaves shivering in the sun, each day the last day. A red salamander, so cold and so easy to catch, dreamily moves his delicate feet and long tail. I hold my hand open for him to go, each minute the last minute.

You get a feeling of the presence in that poem. She's not like, "Oh my God, each minute the last minute!" It's more like: if this is the last minute, let me really be here for it.

I have a story of a friend of mine, a man who's been coming to retreats on the West Coast for some years. He must be in his mid to late sixties, very hardworking. He told us this story a couple of years ago. He said he'd had open heart surgery—he had to have a valve replaced. And he's one of these people, which I'm sure a lot of you can relate to, who felt that his practice was never going anywhere. No incredible bliss experiences, no wonderful jhanic concentrations, just kind of slogging through the days and the nights, year after year of meditation, trying to be mindful and getting nowhere. Right? Yeah, you can relate.

So he woke up in intensive care after the operation, which apparently had gone fine. Family was there, telling him everything was okay. And then something went wrong. He said he was hooked up to machines from every orifice, and all of a sudden they all start blinking and sirens going—which must be quite scary—and nurses running. He didn't know what was wrong, but something serious was wrong.

And he said he noticed his mind just start to go into total panic. "Oh my God, I'm going to die. This is really it"—which it very well could have been. He saw his mind going into panic, his breathing got tight, and he said he doesn't know where it came from, but the thought arose: "Well, if this is going to be my last breath, I might as well be present for it." And he just came totally into that breath. The panic went away. He said he must have gone unconscious after that, and then he woke up and things were fine.

But you never know. We can't evaluate what's going on in our practice, but that's the quality of real presence. And each moment the last moment isn't a scary thing—it's an invitation into being alive in this moment, because this moment is really all we have. We can plan a lot about all the next moments, but who knows what's going to happen? We really don't know. We really don't know what's going to happen in this next moment. Like that other night when the low water alarm went off in the middle of the sitting—no one knew that a moment before. We never know.

So this moving out of our reactivity into open-hearted presence does not hide life situations. It allows us to live them more fully.

How do we get so sidetracked? Why is it that we get so into this clinging, which is so poignant? One way—we touched on it, and Stephen talked a bit about it, and Susan did—I just want to go into it more deeply. It's only a habitual pattern, but it's so deep we mostly don't notice it: the habit of how our heart-mind relates when confronted with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience.

The way the Buddha described our experience is that there are six senses: the five—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—and the mind. So we can have any of those six sense experiences: thoughts and emotions, or any of the five senses. And that's really all that's happening. So keep looking in your experience. As Jack Kornfield likes to say, just these six things are happening over and over. And if one of you experiences something else, please let us know.

First of all, just by beginning to reduce it to that, it takes a lot of the hoo-ha out, doesn't it? Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, thinking, emotion, thinking, emotion, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. Oh, what's the big deal?

And then each of those arising one after the other really quickly, we experience—like a sound, for example—as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Same with touch, emotions, thoughts.

And we don't all experience these in the same way, given our past conditioning and our karma. So take the sound of a crow—someone could hear it and find it pleasant, while for me it's unpleasant, and for somebody else it's neutral. That could even be different for the same person at different times.

Now, this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is a relatively subtle thing, and it moves very fast. The habit of our mind—and this is the place in dependent origination where we can explore how suffering and confusion arise—is that there's the sense contact, there's the hearing, it's pleasant, and without awareness, immediately there's that movement: "Oh yeah, I like that, that's good," or "I want more," or "Let's keep it going."

If it's unpleasant: "Oh, bad. Get away. Not good. How can we fix this?"

And if it's neutral? Well, have you noticed many neutral experiences? That's what happens with neutral. "Huh? I'm bored. Nothing's happening. Let's think about a really unpleasant fantasy because that's better than being neutral." God forbid we should be neutral. It's actually quite interesting to see how often our mind does that—"I'll suffer rather than be calm and neutral."

It happens so quickly that often we don't even know there's a difference between unpleasant and aversion. But those are two different experiences. There's a difference between pleasant and clinging, between neutral and spacing out. The second is a reaction to just the bare fact of an unpleasant or pleasant experience. But it's so deeply habitual in most of our minds that without mindfulness, we not only often don't recognize it, but we can easily evaluate our whole experience, the whole tenor of our life, on the basis of how pleasant or unpleasant or neutral it is. And this is where we really get off into being entranced.

For example, when you're evaluating your meditation, so often the good ones are the pleasant ones and the bad ones are the unpleasant ones. When you're having pleasant ones, not too many people come in and say, "I'm useless, I'm worthless, I can't do this." But when it's unpleasant, it jumps from unpleasant to "I'm the worst yogi, I can't do this, I'm filled with doubt, this is stupid"—and self-hatred, and all this really painful stuff, just in a moment from an unpleasant experience. Neutral, we don't even notice.

We get so entranced that we can actually base our whole life on wanting pleasant and avoiding unpleasant, without seeing what we're doing. Ajahn Buddhadasa, the wonderful Thai teacher, talks a lot about pleasant feelings. He says it's so fast—it just comes and goes so quick. And he says almost everything you do in your life, the choices you make without awareness, we do for the sake of pleasant sensation. And how long does it really last? It's a little scary when we look at how long it really lasts.

There's a story I love from the Buddha, really about Ananda, his attendant. Ananda is a very personable character. He's the one who's very compassionate, always saying things, and the Buddha's kind of going, "Not so, Ananda—it's really like this." You can really empathize with him. And he was very kind.

In this story, he was off on a mission for the Buddha, and he passed a village well. He was very thirsty, and at the well was Pakati, a young outcast woman. He asked her for water to drink—one of the few things a monk was allowed to ask for. You must remember that in India at that time, the caste system was really strong. An outcast couldn't even touch something and hand it to someone of higher caste. It was that rigid.

So Pakati said, "Oh monk, I am too humbly born to give you water to drink. Do not ask any service of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste." She's so thoroughly bought into this.

And Ananda replied, "I ask not for your caste, but for water."

The woman's heart leapt joyfully, and she gave Ananda water. He thanked her and went away, but she followed him at a distance. When she found out he was the Buddha's attendant, she went to the Buddha and said, "Oh Lord, help me. Let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells so that I may see him and minister unto him, for I love Ananda."

The Buddha understood her emotions and her heart, and he said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you don't understand your own emotions. It is not Ananda that you love, but his kindness."

Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice toward you and practice it towards others.

Sweet, isn't it? But mistaking that pleasant feeling that she associated with Ananda, she was ready to follow him and take care of him for her whole life for the sake of that pleasant feeling, without being able to understand exactly what was going on. We do that from time to time, and in sometimes far more confusing and destructive ways than that.

Or with unpleasant. Again, sometimes in the whole field of experience, the mind can get so fixated on the unpleasant and lost in aversion to it that we build up a whole world based on reactivity rather than clear seeing.

Have you ever had a time when part of your tooth breaks off inside? It happened to me last year, and I was traveling, so I had to go for a few weeks with it just broken. You notice how the tongue cannot stay away from that place. You're sitting perfectly happy, and the tongue just has to go over there, feel how rough it is, feel it's unpleasant, get upset. What am I going to do? My teeth are falling apart. I'm getting old. A million times a day.

Now, all the rest of my teeth didn't hurt. That's neutral. Did I notice that? No. We have one thing that's wrong and a million things that are neutral, and we don't notice those at all when we get completely fixated on the negativity. Frustration, self-doubt, judgment. And neutral, we just don't notice.

So often, actually, the entrée into calm—a kind of radiant, connected peace—begins by seeming neutral, and we so much don't know what to do with that, that we bounce away, fall asleep, or create a diversion.

This is from the Buddha, really describing what we do with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Someone asks him what the difference is between an awakened person and an unawakened person—an "untaught worldling," as he says.

And he's very straightforward. He says, okay, here's the difference. An unawakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, worries and grieves, laments, beats their breast, weeps, and is distraught. They thus experience two kinds of unpleasant feelings: a physical unpleasant feeling and a mental unpleasant feeling. It's as if, in being shot with an arrow, they shoot themselves with a second arrow.

Sound familiar? That's what an untaught, unawakened person does. We experience pain from two arrows whenever we have an unpleasant feeling.

Now, it goes actually deeper than that, into how it becomes habitual. The Buddha says that when touched by painful feeling, we develop an underlying tendency to resist that—push it away, don't feel it, resist. Many people have talked about just seeming to come up against a wall of resistance, subtle or not so subtle, in the practice. And you're right. We've cultivated an underlying tendency to resistance to unpleasant for most of our life. And we've got to begin to see it. That's why it's coming up. It's great it's coming up.

So what do we do? Unpleasant—no, this is bad. We shoot ourselves with another arrow again.

And the Buddha goes on to say that unawakened people do not know of any other escape from painful feelings than to go after a pleasant sense experience. Isn't that right? And so they also inculcate the underlying tendency to crave the pleasant.

We've cultivated these two habits: this ongoing resistance to unpleasant, and as soon as there's something unpleasant, leaping after something pleasant, lusting, wanting the pleasant, because that's the only way we know to bring us happiness. The only trouble is it doesn't work for more than the lasting time of the pleasant feeling.

The difference with an awakened person: when an awakened person experiences an unpleasant feeling, that's it. They don't create anything around it, to paraphrase Ajahn Sumedho. They don't get into resistance, and they don't go lusting after something pleasant to hide from it. Same with pleasant. Experience a pleasant feeling, that's it. Experience a pleasant feeling. The mind is calm, creating nothing around it. It's not that you don't know the difference. We just don't get into these reactions, being so entranced by them and this ongoing tendency to move away from the present moment.

And that's what's so poignant. Our underlying tendency of resisting the unpleasant and moving towards the pleasant, totally ignoring the neutral—we're doing it without knowing we're doing it. And yet it's all in the service of our own real happiness and peace. None of us would continue this pattern if we really, truly knew it was keeping us

confused and suffering. But we don't see it clearly. I'm saying all this, and yet I find myself doing it in subtle ways all the time. It's so ingrained when we're not paying attention, this going after what's pleasant.

The poignancy of it is that it's just this clinging and craving, just this pushing away, this checking out, that hides from us our true potential. It's just this looking in the other direction that obscures us from recognizing that freedom is right here. In fact, it's so right here that we're not usually right here enough to recognize it. We're always just a little bit leaning away.

The Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata"—meaning himself—"namely, liberation through non-clinging."

Now see, that doesn't sound so exciting, does it? Liberation through non-clinging. I want bells and whistles. I want some fireworks going off. Liberation through non-clinging? But that's the way into recognizing our potential for awakening. Non-clinging allows totality, intimacy of total presence.

Otherwise, the way we live our life is as the Buddha describes someone who does not have mindfulness established—because mindfulness is our way in to see what's really happening. In a moment of mindfulness, pure non-judging presence, there's no clinging, there's no aversion, there's no delusion, because it's connected. Just a quick moment. Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it, "A moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom." Not total absolute liberation where confusion never arises, but it's a moment of clarity. And that moment is what allows any experience to become a gateway into really recognizing our true potential.

Without that, a person without mindfulness established lives their life according to this simile the Buddha offers. Imagine a person catches six creatures from different habitats. Six—the six senses. Everything always matches: eye, ear, nose, touch, taste, and mind. So imagine you took a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a hyena, and a monkey, and you tied a rope around each of them, then tied a knot connecting all those ropes together. These six animals are all bound together with a rope in the middle. And then what happens? They all start struggling to go where they want to go. The crocodile wants to go to the water. The bird tries to fly up. The dog tries to go to the village. The snake tries to go into the garden. They're all pulling in every direction, and the strongest one pulls all the rest along after. So probably the crocodile takes them all down to the water.

You get the simile? The Buddha spells it out: that is just like a person whose mindfulness is undeveloped and unpracticed. Each of those animals represents one of the six senses—the eye, the ear, the nose, the mind, the body, the taste—and they're all struggling to go after pleasant experience and all struggling to run away from unpleasant experience. Whichever one's the strongest wins, moment after moment after moment. Eyes are often really strong. That's why when you're out doing walking meditation and a chipmunk runs across your path—seeing, pleasant—boom, everything else is gone. It's like the crocodile running to the water.

That's a rather exhausting way to live, I would say. But for one who has cultivated mindfulness and presence, "when seeing a form with the eye, that mind is not attached to pleasing forms and is not repelled by unpleasing forms."

And the same with all the other senses. It knows pleasant from unpleasant, but it's just not attached to the pleasant, not repelled by the unpleasant. And so she is one who has established mindfulness of the body and dwells with an unlimited mind and heart. Unlimited mind and heart.

So mindfulness is really our tool. It's like a rattle, one of my teachers says. We're like two-year-olds just going after, "I want this, I want that, take me over here, I want to do this." And he says, "I just shake the rattle and say, turn around, look back here. It's right here. Come home."

And that's all we're doing with our mindfulness. What's happening? Knee pain? Fine. Come home. What's happening? Sadness? Great. Come home. What's happening? Bliss? Fine. Come home.

Mindfulness doesn't say this is good, this is bad. It doesn't think this is more important to pay attention to than that. It doesn't say, "I've seen this before, therefore I don't need to pay attention to it again—I'd rather pay attention to that." Just noticing what's arising with a quality, as we talked about, of non-judging, total, kind attention. Coming back to the bare experience, not the reaction and the story and the hoo-ha we create around it. Not all the story about why that sound is so unpleasant, but coming back to the sound itself.

Ajahn Chah says, "The sound doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound." Just stay with the pure hearing. And bringing to it this quality of no preconceptions, a kind of wonder, such curiosity, such a willingness to discover something new instead of thinking we already know. Not "I already know what the breath is like, but I'll go to it" or "I've experienced these cramps before, I know all about them, but all right—cramping, cramping." Not that. This newness, open to discovery each moment.

I'll leave you with an image that really helps me get the feeling of this quality of open-hearted attention. In Germany, I saw a documentary on television about Yo-Yo Ma, the famous world cellist. He has such a lovely attitude of openness. In this documentary, he was flying to Africa with his really fancy, beautiful cello—I don't know how much that would cost—going to visit a tribe of Bushmen, of Bush people, to share music with them.

So here he is with these Bush people, and they get the old man who's kind of like the old village shaman musician. He brings out his instrument, and Yo-Yo Ma brings out his incredible cello, and they start trading music. Now, this man's instrument was literally a round kind of oil can with a stick coming out of it and one string or line or something like that. And he's playing along, and Yo-Yo Ma's going, "Wow, this is so incredible! It's so beautiful, the sounds he gets, the music he gets out of this!" And he was totally sincere.

Then he says, "Let's trade instruments." So he gives this old musician his million-dollar cello or whatever it is, and Yo-Yo Ma is trying to play on the old man's instrument. He's going, "I can't play this nearly as beautifully as he can."

And he had such a childlike, open-hearted sense of discovery and wonder and appreciation and newness. I could see how we might be sitting there thinking, "Oh, an oil can with a string coming out of it," while he's saying, "Wow, what an instrument! What sounds he can get out of it! What beautiful music!"

It's really a different way to live with the same facts, with the same circumstances. It's just a difference in how we relate to them. So that's really what we're practicing here. And it's okay that we blow it a lot of the time, because every moment we have another opportunity to meet what's happening with the simplicity of open-hearted attention and wonder.

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Let's sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 253

The Possibility of Inner Contentment

Carol Wilson · 50 min

> *In this accessible and heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson addresses a fundamental question at the heart of Buddhist practice: why do we struggle to find the peace and contentment that is supposedly always available to us? She explains that our deeply conditioned assumptions about happiness—that it requires pleasant experiences and the absence of unpleasant ones—keep us perpetually looking in the wrong direction.*
>
> *Wilson illuminates how the habits of craving pleasant experiences, pushing away unpleasant ones, and ignoring neutral ones create a kind of blindness that obscures our natural capacity for peace. Drawing on teachings about vipassanā (insight meditation) and the five hindrances (desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt), she shows how these mental patterns not only distort our perception but actively prevent us from recognizing contentment in the present moment. Using vivid examples—from a student's jaw tension that spawned elaborate self-criticism to her own milkshake-seeking adventure that led to mistaking a hospital for a yogurt café—she demonstrates how desire literally blinds us to reality.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with difficulty on retreat and in daily life, emphasizing the importance of self-compassion and the deliberate broadening of attention to include what is beautiful and peaceful, even amid suffering. Wilson draws on teachings from Thich Nhất Hạnh and Ajahn Sumedho to remind us that the conditions for awakening are already present in our ordinary experience—we need only learn to touch each moment with what she calls 'affectionate curiosity.'*

Tonight I want to speak about the possibility of opening to inner contentment.

Last night I mentioned that this practice has come to us from Buddhism of Asia and that the word Buddha actually translates as "one who is awakened." To me, that speaks to the whole purpose, the whole reason that I—and hopefully all of us—engage in this form of practice at all: in order for ourselves to awaken. To awaken to the fact that deep, lasting inner contentment, peace, and happiness is available to us here and now, in whatever particular situation we might find ourselves. The possibility exists in any moment that we can awaken to our true nature, come to recognize it more fully, and rest here more completely.

I'm sure that's what your experience today has been like. And that's what the mind tends to throw up: "How, for God's sake, does sitting here and trying to find one breath in a hundred and feeling pain—what has that got to do with contentment or peace?"

Vipassana, which is what we call this practice, actually means "to see into," to see clearly. In the actual form, the technique that we're cultivating, we're not cultivating the technique as some end in itself—to become a perfect breather or a perfect walker, or to develop the perfect ability to label every arising experience. That's not the point. Vipassana means seeing into what is true about our experience here and now. Seeing clearly. And in seeing clearly whatever's arising, we can't help but begin to awaken to fact, to what is true.

What we begin to see is that as difficult as our experience might have been today or tomorrow or any other day, one of the main reasons we are not recognizing the potential for deep inner contentment right now, in this experience, has a lot to do with our assumptions about what happiness is, about what peace is. Until we really look, until we really see into what is true without prejudice—which is what the quality of mindfulness lets us learn how to do through inquiry—we begin to see that it's not the experience that's blocking peace. It's our assumptions that keep us looking in the wrong direction.

Our inquiry is not a thinking inquiry. The simple inquiry of mindfulness into this moment's experience will begin to let us see the assumption that is very common in our culture. I don't want to speak for everybody and say this is your assumption, but it's certainly been mine: that happiness or contentment or peace has to do with having all the circumstances in my life right. Basically, there should be no unpleasant experience going on, or at most it should be very minimal. And that to come to inner contentment is either some kind of state where everything is under control, or I'm in some altered ecstatic state of bliss. It might sound funny, but really looking at our own assumptions reveals what keeps us looking in the wrong direction.

Based on these assumptions, one of the things we begin to see about how the mind works as we sit here—and if you've heard this talked about, you've heard it talked about a lot, and if you haven't, you've seen it over and over but might not have thought of it in this way—is that based on the assumption of whatever it is that we're looking for that will mean contentment or peace or happiness or nirvana, it's often the underlying assumption that leads to a certain habit of mind, a certain way that our mind responds to situations, that keeps us confused.

And that's sort of the assumption that any pleasant experience is good and to be desired. Any unpleasant or painful experience is bad, it's a mistake—get away as fast as possible. Neutral experience? A lot of times people say, "What's a neutral experience?" Because we don't even notice it.

The habit of mind, when I talk about pleasant or unpleasant—I mean in any of our sense experiences. Seeing a pleasant sight, the lilacs that you see, and there's this "Ah, isn't that nice?" And the sense of wanting arises in response to that experience. "I don't want to go inside. I want to stay outside longer and see the beautiful lilacs, or smell the beautiful lilacs, or hear the sweetness of the birds singing, or taste some more of this lunch, or feel some more of the pleasantness of the wind on my face. I'm not going to go sit this time." Or think again this really pleasant thought—the thought of your vacation comes up, so pleasant, at least the first hundred times it's pleasant. And the tendency is to keep going. When pleasant comes up, the habit of mind is to want more, to crave, to go towards it.

When it's unpleasant, it's just the reverse. Your body's hurting in the sitting, and it's not a pain that signals that you're hurting yourself—it's just a hurt, a painful sensation. And all our training is: this is bad, this is wrong, do anything to avoid it. Similar with emotional pain. Similar with just mildly unpleasant visual experiences, or hearing someone next to you who keeps coughing, and the scenarios we can go through of how to throw them out, how to move our seat, how to write a note that this person should obviously be secluded.

Someone just called me from another retreat somewhere else in the country with some Burmese teachers, and he said, "You know, this guy came late and he was coughing and breathing loud, and he had a respiratory ailment so he couldn't be told to stop, and they literally wanted to seclude this guy away from the whole rest of the people." What is it? It's a sound. It's unpleasant. That's all.

Neutral. The breath is often neutral. Why do you think we find it so boring sometimes? Because our habit with neutral is to generate a little interest. If we can go for pleasant, that's preferable, but watch yourselves. As often as not, the mind will reach for a really unpleasant fantasy rather than be with a neutral experience. This is just our habits of mind. There's no blame about it. But it's so deeply conditioned in us that we often don't notice it.

Or if we do notice it, we might think, "Well, of course. I mean, who wouldn't want to go for what's pleasant? Who wouldn't want to avoid what's unpleasant? That's just sensible." So what's the point?

And it's true if we have the choice. But how many of you would be here if you could work it so that you only had pleasant experiences in your life? If that was happiness and you could arrange it, I bet you wouldn't be sitting and walking here for three days, fourteen hours a day or whatever it is. Something about this conditioning of the mind, this habit of how we relate to experience, doesn't work. It isn't bringing us happiness.

And this is what we begin to see when we relate to our experiences with mindfulness. What these habits tend to do is solidify our sense of separation—separation from what is true, from each other, from the world, from contentment. The habits keep us looking towards the next pleasant thing, or wondering when we can get away from this unpleasant experience. "Then I'll be happy. Then peace will be available. Then I can meditate. Then I'll be more spacious." Whatever. There's always another carrot.

And because this is endless, and because until we stop and inquire—not through thinking but through our moment-to-moment being with what is—until we stop and inquire, we don't really see what's going on. We keep thinking that peace is elsewhere, that we somehow have to be different before we can recognize true contentment, before things can change.

These habits are very deep and ingrained, very subtle. I could really talk a long time about how subtle they are. In a way, just as a simple example, they're so subtle that they can even distort what we actually perceive. When desire is very strong—say you're hungry, not just a normal hunger where you go eat, but that kind of craving for, say, a pizza—and you're walking down a street, do you notice how all your eye picks out is restaurants?

There's a saying in India that when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. These habits of mind, of wanting and resisting unpleasant experience, really distort what we see. And it gets very, very subtle. Until we begin to notice this pattern in itself, we continue looking for peace in the wrong place, in the wrong way, and really don't understand why things seem so confusing.

This is from an Indian wise man, Nisargadatta Maharaj. He says, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination. What we're trying to do with our simple practice of being present is reverse that—to pay attention to what is real and learn to recognize imagination as imagination. Imagination is fine if we know it's imagination. If we think it's the truth, we're in big trouble. And a lot of the time, that's what we're doing.

A simple example comes to mind from years ago. Joseph Goldstein was teaching a retreat, and a man came in to talk to him and said, "Oh, I'm so tense. I'm just so uptight, and nothing's good in my life. I'm so striving, and I just can't conduct my life in any kind of way. My attitude in business is just off. I'm really a horrible human being."

Joseph said, "What's the experience?"

The man said, "Well, I have this tension in my jaw, and I can see from this tension that the way I relate to life is really striving, and I'm never in the present moment, and the way I conduct..."

Joseph said, "Yes, but what's your experience right now?"

"Well, I have this tension in my jaw, and I'm so bad..."

This went on back and forth until finally the man said, "Oh, you mean it's just tension in my jaw?"

That was the real—tension in the jaw. All the rest? There might be some truth in it. There might be some striving in the way he relates to life. There might be things that the tension in the jaw points to, things one can associate with it. But in the moment, the actual, the real experience is simply tension. All the rest of that association, in this moment, is imagination.

So much of the time we are living in the imagination and not really noticing or giving credence to the actual experience. It's as if we're a little bit away from what's actually going on. And so we can get so lost, so caught up in these habits, in what are sometimes called torments of the mind—or what I like to call disturbances of the heart. When we're lost and really gripped by craving or anger or aversion, or just this total dullness of confusion, it's really hard.

It's really unpleasant. It's a lot of suffering, and we really struggle with that. What we forget in the struggle is how to notice that even in that, there's a potential to touch peace and contentment.

There's an analogy that's used a lot for the way we lose sight of the radiant nature of our hearts, of our minds—a radiance that never fades or goes away, but we just don't know how to notice it. The analogy is to think of the sun as the radiant, pure nature of mind, of consciousness, of heart. Sometimes it's really clear. A lot of times it's covered with clouds—sometimes little wispy clouds that don't bother you too much, sometimes dark storm clouds. And you can get really involved in resisting them or fighting them or wishing they'd go away. We can get so involved in the clouds that we completely forget

to notice that the sun never went anywhere. It's untouched by the clouds. And even though it might not be shining so clear, the evidence of it—in that everything is still radiating the light of the sun—is always here when the sun is out. We can forget that because we get so busy fighting and involved with the clouds.

So yes, clouds are clouds. We need to know them, understand what they are, not pretend they're not there. They can still pack a punch. And yet, when you're flying through them, you can never really find them. You know how it is when you fly through clouds? You never really get to the clouds somehow, but the plane's really going up and down—something's going on. It's sort of like that. You can't deny it, but it doesn't have much solidity, whether it's a strong emotion or a pain in the body. It's here, but it also goes away. And the sun, the radiance of our nature, never leaves.

That's just an analogy—not exactly accurate, but just to help us remember we don't have to stay lost in these patterns. We can wake up. And hopefully that's what mindfulness, this attentive awareness without discrimination, without judgment, can help us do: to really learn for ourselves that we don't have to react to situations always with fear or desire or falling asleep. That there is another possibility altogether.

It's quite radical because it's so obvious. It's that we can simply be with things just as they are, knowing it clearly, accepting it without judgment, because it's what is in this moment—and you can't change this moment anyway. We're not talking about a life of passivity or not taking action, but in this exact moment, really being with what is. The real openness of heart and mind. The real fullness of attention without looking for something better.

As simple and obvious as it might sound, as I'm sure most of you have seen today, it's not easy. Our deep sense that the unpleasant cannot be borne, that separation from the pleasant cannot be borne, is so deep that just to be with what is can seem excruciatingly difficult. Yet this has the power to transform our lives in unimaginable ways.

It continues to amaze me how something so simple as being with the breath, being with sensations, just sitting and walking and being with whatever arises moment after moment, can powerfully and deeply transform our understanding of ourselves—and through that, our relationship to all aspects of our life. Because once we stop fighting what is and allow our attention to be fully with it, our heart to be fully with it, first there's the opportunity to really know what's happening for a change, because we're not so involved in our ideas of how to change it. And in knowing what's happening, there's the potential to begin to recognize something other that's always here: the radiance. We can always notice it, but when we're so busy fighting or looking for something better, we never stop to notice. We never stop to recognize.

Really, these habits of craving and pushing away—it's almost like if someone was making all this up, they couldn't have thought of a better way to keep us running around in circles and not seeing what's so obvious.

One of the things the Buddha said would drive you mad if you tried to think about it is the first beginning of things. I used to wonder: why is it like this? Why is there... And it really does make you crazy. So he would say, "Look, I know a lot more than I'm teaching you, but what I'm teaching you is all you need for peace and freedom from suffering and confusion." And basically he would say: just do it and quit asking all these questions. That works in Asia; it doesn't work so well here.

I think one of the reasons retreat is so hard—especially in the beginning, especially if you're new—is that just beginning to cultivate mindfulness, simple awareness of what is, without letting the mind just run where it will, just being with the breath, just being with whichever sensation comes up, whichever sound comes up, without choosing so much... it runs counter to all this ingrained habit of avoiding the unpleasant and being with the pleasant. We're opening to a field of choiceless awareness, equal interest in whatever arises.

You know how it is when we have a strong habit and we begin to try to break it. It's almost like the habit rears up and does anything to pull you back into the old way of doing things. It's sort of like that. Things get magnified; difficulties get magnified. When you go home and you think about it—what was that all about? You were in such a snit because you only got one piece of cake, or you wanted oranges and they were bananas. You'll go home and think, "I don't understand what that was all about."

But in the middle of the experience, the suffering is intense—and I'm not making fun of it, it's really so. The habits of craving and aversion are really, really strong. What's more, we fully believe that's the way things are, and that makes it much harder to see through them.

It's said that when the Buddha first came to his deep and full enlightenment, when he emerged from it, he could—and this is one of the powers of a Buddha—survey the world with his Buddha eye and see what all beings were doing and what was happening with them. What he saw, and what awakened his deep compassion, was this: everybody, no matter who they are or what their conditions, everybody only wants to be happy. And in our confusion, in our wrong assumptions that we never think to question—assumptions about who we are, about what is true—in wanting to be happy, most everybody continues to do just the things that bring more suffering upon themselves. Fully convinced that what they're doing is going to bring them happiness. Seeing this is what aroused his deep compassion and brought him out to teach.

I think a lot of this energy of wanting, the wanting mind, is what engenders this confusion about what will bring us happiness. Craving blinds us. Notice it should it come up—tonight or anytime tomorrow. If you suddenly notice you're feeling a little crazed, tune in and see. There might be something you want. It doesn't matter what it is. Perhaps you suddenly decide, "If I just had one more piece of foam rubber, then I wouldn't have any pain in the sittings." And the mind just gets obsessed. What else do you see? What else can you think of? Nothing counts until you can get back there and go through looking for the foam rubber.

Or if you're hungry and just wanting to get to lunch and you're at the back of the line, how do you feel about the people ahead of you? Are you filled with the warmth of sympathetic joy? "I'm so glad they're getting to take as much food as they want, heaping it on their plates." The craving, the need to get what we want, blinds us to everything else. We think that contentment will come when we get to the front and get the food on our plate. And so in standing in line, we're completely blind to the fact that contentment is accessible right here and now.

If you can notice the craving and just tune in to standing—so often I'm just standing. Okay, there's standing. There's craving. There's thinking. And then suddenly you'll notice something completely outside of this little scenario. Perhaps a person who seems really beautiful walks past, and there's a thought: "Ah, what a nice looking person." Just a little sense of joy that is possible because we came back from trying to jump ahead to the table and just landed here, right now.

They say there are two different ways that ignorance—or really, blindness, the blindness of craving—operates in our experience. One thing it does is this: when craving is present, and I don't mean just you're hungry and need to eat, I mean this lusting after whatever it is—you can't and don't appreciate what's here now. That's where we're blind to the truth, blind to peace. Blindness also functions by not letting us see or recognize what's here and appreciate it. And it can so distort our perception that we see what isn't there at all. Have you ever really wanted something so much that your mind creates it, even though it's not there?

I'll tell this story. A friend of mine and I were teaching in the desert in California a couple of years ago. It was a beautiful afternoon. We were sitting outside, warm, talking to some friends. One of them mentioned they'd just been down the road somewhere and had a really good milkshake. It was a hot afternoon, and somehow that just went into us. Really strong desire, craving arose. I really want to have a milkshake, and I want it now. It was instantaneous, and I was caught in it, so I didn't really notice this until later. I quit enjoying the conversation with the friends. My friend and I looked at

each other and kind of said, let's go. You could tell we just pulled back from the conversation, started going "yes, no, yes, no" until they left. We ran to the car and got in it to go get this milkshake.

Craving leads you to do things that lack judgment too, because we only had about fifteen minutes until one of us had to be at the next sitting. So we went racing down to this place—and it had closed ten minutes earlier. We turned around. Did we come back? No, because craving really had a grip. We kept going way down, miles down the road in the other direction, just looking on either side for any Baskin Robbins or something that would have milkshakes.

I was driving and he was looking around. We'd both been down this road many times—I mean, we knew what was on this road. He looks over and goes, "Look, there it is! Yogurt Cafe! Quick, go in there." I looked, and I said, "That says Urgent Care. It's a hospital."

This is true.

So it's good when something like that happens. We were quite chastened. We said, "Well, I guess desire was driving this car." We turned around and went back.

That's the blinding quality of desire, of craving when it's not seen. And what's kind of interesting—one word for it is how often it's working in this way. And then we wonder how come we're not happy. We wonder why we feel disconnected. How come I can't find peace?

This is from the Tao Te Ching: "The Tao"—like another word for truth or Dharma—"never does anything, yet through it all things are done. If men and women could center themselves in it, the whole world would be transformed by itself in natural rhythms. People would be content with their simple everyday lives, in harmony and free of desire. When there is no desire, all things are at peace."

When there is no desire, all things are at peace. That's always available to us, just in a moment when we're not blinded by desire or by aversion, when we're not trying to change things. Truth reveals itself by itself in just a moment when things are at peace. And the natural expression, it seems, of understanding, of recognizing our truth, is compassion. That's why the two wings of the Buddhist teaching are great wisdom and great compassion.

I love the way Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist, speaks about this. He has such simple examples showing how compassion is just the natural outcome of understanding. He talks about this one example of a small boy and

his younger sister. She's really cranky and whining and driving him crazy. As brothers and sisters do, he's really annoyed with her and arguing back. They're really starting to get into it, and he's really aggravated. And then he learns—his mother tells him—that the sister is really sick. She has a high fever. She explains the kind of pain that the sister is in, in a way that he can understand. And as soon as he understands—oh, that's what she feels like, of course that's why she's cranky—without having to do something, a natural compassion arises. It's an understanding of the pain, an empathy, an acceptance that it's okay.

And it's the same with us. It can be the same with us towards ourselves, not just towards others. As the Dalai Lama says, our truest expression as human beings is the expression of compassion, arising out of our truest being—that of contentment, that of peace.

You can certainly see for yourself in a retreat like this, in our lives too, but retreats are really good microcosms. There's ample opportunity to begin to open towards yourself with compassion. What goes on here—just in talking to people today—what goes on here is often really difficult. There's a lot of physical pain. There's a lot of deep emotional pain. There's the pain that comes up for everyone of the emotions the Buddha called the five hindrances.

Almost nobody escapes going through these on a retreat or in our lives. There's sleepiness, or sloth and torpor—we love that word. There's restlessness of mind and of body, the mind just spinning and spinning, the body just wanting to jump out of your skin.

There's desire that's just outrageous. When you're sitting and you want this and you want that and you need a new car and you want a new job and you're changing your relationship and you're going through everything in your life that you want—and suddenly, oh, just recognizing it as desire is very helpful.

And the flip side: aversion. This often comes up on retreat, where you just hate the person next to you, you hate the food, you hate how the bulletin board looks, you hate how the hall's set up, you hate how the bell sounds. It just goes on and on until you finally realize, oh, I think it's simply the emotion of aversion arising in my experience—after we've projected it out onto every single sense object that comes our way.

And doubt, which obviously tends to come up with any or all of these.

These are very common emotional, energetic experiences. Just about everybody goes through them to some extent on retreat. And they can seem really magnified, really blown up, because—back to the quality of mindfulness—we're not trying to hide them.

We're not distracting ourselves from them. We're not jumping up and going for a drive as soon as we feel restless, hopefully. We're not going out and satisfying every desire, or at least going down to the convenience store to satisfy something. We're sitting here, we're walking here, and we're noticing it. And it's really difficult. It's painful. And mostly we're not used to being with this kind of difficulty, this kind of pain.

And it's funny, because so often the response to our situation is not one of compassion. It's either "there's something really wrong with me, I'm doing this wrong, you can never do anything right, and here you are sleeping, you're useless." Or it's the reverse: "This whole place is stupid, this whole meditation is ridiculous, I don't know what made me come, the friend who told me about this is in big trouble." One way or the other.

Does it ever occur to us to say, "Yes, this is really painful, this is really hard. And I'm really working to open to it, to soften to it, but sometimes that's just not possible"? To really begin to bring in compassion. The compassion can begin from the understanding that yes, this is part of life.

This happens to everybody. Part of why it's so difficult is that I think it shouldn't be happening. And I'm learning how to relate in a different way. So right now it's hard. And to really bring in some softness to ourselves, to really bring in some kindness.

Thich Nhat Hanh, I was just reading in a book, gives a little exercise that you could try later to just get the feeling of compassion—of just touching your one hand with your other. Often we just do it mechanically. But to do it with a real feeling of compassion: touch your left hand with your right hand, really feeling a loving, kind compassion toward your left hand from your right hand. And you see that it works both ways because both hands feel touched with compassion. We can touch all aspects of ourselves—all aspects of our body, of our emotions, of our life—in the same gentle, compassionate way if we'd only remember to do it.

Mindfulness is really this compassionate touching of whatever aspect of life is presenting itself right now. Whether it's the breath, whether it's sleepiness, whether it's sadness, whether it's boredom, whether it's joy—doesn't matter what—learning how to touch whatever is arising with mindfulness. I like to think of mindfulness as affectionate curiosity. Whatever comes up: "Oh, okay, what are you about? What's this about right now?" Not choosing this one I'll pay attention to, this one out the window. Because it doesn't work anyway.

As we learn to touch ourselves, our experience, with this compassionate mindfulness, we don't have to do a lot else. All by itself, this mindfulness that doesn't discriminate begins to broaden our experience of life, to balance our perception of who we are and what's going on in a really amazing way.

Sometimes it might seem that what we're talking about is just opening to the difficult—opening to the hindrances, to the pain—because that's what many of us are so versed at shutting out. But with the balancing perspective of mindfulness, with the opening to whatever's happening, we begin to find that we're also opening to what is beautiful, to what is very warming in our heart. Actually, we begin to open without even realizing it to inner contentment, to peace—because it's not somewhere else we have to look for. We just have to let down our blinders and open up to what's here.

What's interesting is that in this broadening of our perspective, we begin to notice that little aspects of peace, of contentment, of joy are always available—and in a much more simple way, a much more so-called mundane way than we might have expected when we were looking for whatever we were looking for, the big bliss trip or whatever.

This is again from Thich Nhat Hanh, speaking of how he works consciously when drowning in suffering, when really caught in difficulty—to consciously balance the perspective, the perception, by noticing something that's happening right now that's beautiful, that's peaceful. He says: "Most of us ask the question, 'What is wrong?' But we forget to ask, 'What is right?' There are many things that are not wrong." During the war—he's talking about the war in Vietnam—"we were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage. I would mention these to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

It's sometimes hard to imagine, in the midst of what was probably to most of us unbelievable horror, to actively stop and say, "Okay, smell the coriander that's growing right here." And yet that's a really important aspect of being able to be centered and open and present with unbearable suffering. Even in that unbearable suffering, there is a real peace that's possible.

It doesn't have to be the middle of war. Anytime—here on retreat, experiment. Not just as soon as something a little unpleasant comes along; that's not what I'm talking about. But when you're really feeling caught up, tight, overwhelmed—and that happens to all of us—don't think you just have to grit it out. Deliberately soften. Open your heart. Open your perspective.

I used to go in the middle of a long retreat—I was on the second floor and I hardly ever went outside—but I used to just go stand on the fire escape and look at the tree at the end for just four or five minutes. It was summer, when I was really tight and caught up. And that was enough. Just letting in the beauty of nature would bring such a spaciousness and, again, a receptivity to my heart. I could again be with whatever was going on. Look at the sky. Just take a quiet breath. Whatever touches joy, whatever touches peace for you—and there's something almost always available here and now. It doesn't have to be so fantastic.

So we can do that consciously, but it also begins to happen quite naturally as we continue to work with mindful awareness, because mindfulness includes everything and doesn't just choose one or the other. What we begin to see is that what was supposedly neutral or mundane can put us in touch with so much joy, contentment, or appreciation.

I just read an article somewhere—in a newspaper—about a young twenty-one-year-old woman who was born with cystic fibrosis, which completely clogs up your lungs; you usually don't live very long. She had just had a partial lung transplant from each of her parents so that she could keep living. And she was saying, "It's so nice to be able to breathe like a normal person." She said, "I love air. It's so wonderful. Breathing is the most wonderful feeling I could ever imagine."

I thought, gosh, how many breaths have I been really present with? Quite a lot in twenty years of practice. But how often have I really appreciated with that depth the miracle of breathing?

It's wonderful, you know. There's so much in our life that when we simply notice it, it's that wonderful. And it's so easy to lose sight of that, to take it for granted.

Again, Thich Nhat Hanh talks about how when we have a painful toothache and it stops—ah, it's so wonderful. How much of the time do we not have a toothache? Do we ever notice, "Wow, my teeth feel really great"?

There's a lot that's available to us if we can come out of our tunnel vision of just going away from what's unpleasant or towards what's pleasant. When we get in touch with our eyes, our heart, our breathing, and our non-toothache and really enjoy them, we see that the conditions for peace and happiness are already present.

When we walk mindfully and touch the earth with our feet, when we drink tea with friends and touch the tea and our friendship, we get healed—and we can bring this healing to society. The more we have suffered in the past, the stronger a healer we can become. We can learn to transform our suffering into the kind of insight that will help our friends and society.

It's really possible, and it doesn't take all kinds of amazing circumstances. Everything that we need to awaken is right here and right now in this moment. There's nowhere else we need to go. We don't have to wait for some better experience to present itself so that then we can pay attention.

A lot of times we either think, "I have to be in a better, more spacious place, and then I can really explore." Or we think things are nice—well, what happens to me is I think I have to start suffering more to give me an oomph, a little push, because things are nice enough, so who cares? It's good enough.

That was one wonderful thing about the Buddha. It was never good enough until he really knew in his heart what was true in a way that's unshakable, so that the inner contentment that's always accessible was really always accessible to him.

And that's possible for us. At least we can touch it in moments and recognize that it isn't going anywhere else—we just lose sight of it. We just forget that it's possible here and now. Whatever situation is presenting itself is an opportunity for affectionate curiosity. Whatever situation is coming up right now is the gateway to inner contentment. Your knee pain is good enough. Sleepiness, irritability, sadness, joy—it's good enough. We never have to wait for something else to begin to open with loving attention to what's happening right now.

One teacher said, "We can't love anything till we love and appreciate what is present in each moment."

So rather than trying to create ourselves into a different, better person, can we just open to love and appreciate only this one moment? That's all. Don't worry about all the next moments. Never mind the last moments. Can we just practice a little bit loving and appreciating what's present in this moment just as it is, and recognizing it for what it is? That's the power of mindfulness.

I want to close with a paraphrase of one of my favorite quotations from Ajahn Sumedho, an American who's been a Buddhist monk in the Thai tradition for twenty or twenty-five years and has a monastery in England. He says something to the effect that you don't have to experience all sorts of extreme pain and difficulty in order to overcome suffering. The pain of your ordinary life is enough to be enlightened.

And again, from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Practicing Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life. Happiness is available. Please help yourself."

I don't mean it's simple, but it's just to open ourselves to another possibility.

CHAPTER 254

Closing Talk: Integrating Practice into Daily Life

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *This collaborative closing talk offers practical wisdom for transitioning from retreat to daily life. The teachers begin by examining the first two steps of the Noble Eightfold Path: sammā diṭṭhi (right understanding) and sammā saṅkappa (right intention). They emphasize shifting from a quantitative orientation—the cultural conditioning toward accumulation and achievement—to a qualitative appreciation of each moment. Central to this reorientation is adopting an attitude of learning, where every situation, especially difficulties, becomes an opportunity for growth rather than a personal problem.*
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> *The discussion expands to cover sīla (ethical conduct)—wise speech, action, and livelihood—as an indispensable foundation for awakening. Rather than rigid rules, these are presented as areas for ongoing investigation of our intentions and motivations. The teachers acknowledge honestly that the microscopic quality of mindfulness cultivated on retreat typically doesn't persist in daily life's complexity. What remains available is sammā vāyāma (wise effort): the willingness to wake up again and again, even through simple practices like taking three conscious breaths.*
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> *A powerful story illustrates the teaching on generosity: a nine-year-old girl dying of cystic fibrosis who, despite her own suffering, created an 'I love you' poster for her grieving father. This exemplifies how investigating what inhibits our natural expression of heart—usually our own suffering—allows generosity to flow naturally. The talk concludes with mettā bhāvanā (loving-kindness meditation), extending wishes for happiness to oneself, benefactors, loved ones, and all beings.*

We'd like to spend a little time talking about the subject of returning to our daily lives and bringing the meditation back into our workaday world.

Let me start by prefacing Mike and Carol's comments by saying that no teacher that I know of has this completely down. All of our responses are incomplete; the book is still being written, so to speak. So given that, we can start discussing from the point of view that each one of us has.

What I'd like to do is just talk briefly about the first two rungs on the Eightfold Path, the first two steps. I think it will become obvious that given the right orientation to life, given the right attitude to life, the practice unfolds in a moment-to-moment quality just through our interfacing with that right attitude.

It's sometimes easier to start where we should start rather than to try to go straight to mindfulness and being meticulously aware moment after moment, doing everything—picking up the coffee cup, opening the door. We lose that ability very quickly in the hubbub of a very active and hectic existence unless we have the right attitude on which to approach our living experience.

The first rung of Buddhism is right understanding, having a sense of what the purpose of life is all about. The purpose of life, as it's being conveyed through the television sets and movie screens, is very much based on quantity—the more the better. The bumper sticker reads, "The person who has the most toys when they die, wins." This is sort of the way we govern our existence.

But on a more introspective level, that also means we have to look at our own ambition, our own sense of gain, our own sense of priorities. What is it that we're doing, and how is it that we're approaching life? Are we approaching it on a quantitative basis? Self-improvement is part of that. In many, many subtle ways, we're involved in that competitive striving. And it has left us rather poverty-stricken—inwardly poverty-stricken.

At some point we have to change over, re-look, and reassess our lives so that we gain a renewed understanding and appreciation for the quality of the time that we spend here on earth. That change, that flip from quantity to quality, is really the movement from unskillful to skillful understanding.

When we're focused on quality—the quality of our life—then we start appreciating ourselves in the moment as it's expressed in its fullness. We start expressing an appreciation for just being in relationship, regardless of how that relationship moves, or the motivations for being in that relationship, or whatever happens eventually to that relationship. Just the bare expression of relating to someone else, relating to life, smelling the flowers—not trying to grow gardens and gardens of flowers, but being able to appreciate a single flower—is really a shift. You can feel the impact and the orientation, the posture that would have if we would just embrace it.

Now, given that right orientation, that right understanding, we have to have the right attitude that we bring to that understanding. And that is the attitude of learning—being able to say that every situation in this process I have the ability to open to and to learn and to grow from, regardless of what is happening. Every situation is the optimum strategy for our own personal growth. There's nowhere else I need to go to grow when the opportunity is laid bare before me.

This means that all of the problems, the perceived difficulties that we have with people, with ourselves, with our job—all of that, all of our own personal suffering—is an opportunity to move in a different direction. Ajahn Chah used to say that there are two types of suffering: the suffering that leads to greater suffering, and the suffering that ends suffering. When we grow and open ourselves to those areas of ourselves that are less than complete, imperfect, we are moving away from these problems as being personal problems to being opportunities for our own growth.

I leave you with that as being the main focus, the main intention, the main way that we should be leaving the retreat. If you have gained some techniques which are helpful to you along the way about being mindful in the moment, then so much the better. Certainly for people who use their hands a lot, as we all do from time to time—like in dishwashing and laundry—there will be that immediate groundedness in mindfulness.

But to assume that we'll be able to carry that moment-to-moment mindfulness, that meticulous, careful attention in most of the ways we live, didn't prove true for me. If you're able to do it, fine. I just needed a different direction. I needed myself to say, okay, what's all this about now? What are we really doing here with this mindfulness? Mindfulness accesses ourselves, accesses our relationships so that we can learn from them. So let's go to the learning. And when we learn, we're already awake. We're alive. We have to be participating in that moment fully, and therefore we are mindful. It's putting the horse in proper relationship to the cart.

The other thing I would encourage you: if there was a word or a description that rested well with you this weekend—like "true and useful" or "generosity" or "love" or "learning"—I would encourage you to take that word and move it into your life, into a field of investigation, to see how deeply you could move with that word. Like, let's take generosity. I think it resonates with me. I'd like to be a generous person.

So I'm going to find out what it is that keeps me from being generous. I'm going to see if I can make a life statement, a posture to the world that will be in terms of generosity, in terms of service, because it resonates with me. It feels like that's the way people should live. It's the way I should live.

And so I move out into my life with that sense of generosity. And suddenly I feel myself very caught in my own problems, in my own selfish desires, in my own way of life, at the expense of everything else. And I look at myself and say, this doesn't feel generous. Now what is it that is inhibiting that generosity? What is it that's inhibiting my ability to serve and to reach out beyond myself?

And so we start looking at the things that inhibit that. What we'll find, almost always, is that it's our personal suffering that inhibits our ability to listen and to move out beyond our own patterns.

They talk about acceptance in dying. If I can share with you a story about a nine-year-old girl with cystic fibrosis who was dying. Frequently when people die, they get lost in their own drama in a way that keeps them or prohibits them from being able to listen or to reach out beyond their own pain—which is what our problems do in relationship to our generosity.

But this young girl, nine years old, whose mother and father had just recently split up in divorce—the divorce was instigated by the mother, but both parents had rejoined to come to their dying daughter's bed. There was obviously a lot of pain in the father, who was suffering both the pain of the separation and the pain of seeing his daughter at the end of her life.

And this young girl—I had the privilege of being there—she said, "Okay, I would like everybody out of the room." There was the mother, the father, and myself. We thought she was trying to send people out of the room so she could die alone. She was craning her neck so that she could breathe, because in the end stage of cystic fibrosis, it's very difficult to pull in the amount of air that you need. We felt she was very close to dying.

She asked everybody to leave. And after everybody had left, she got up and drew a big "I love you" poster for her father. Then she asked people to come back into the room and offered that to her father—reaching out beyond her pain to be able to touch somebody else's, even as she was dying.

That's generosity. And we need to understand that this is not always available to us. To be able to explore and investigate why, and what inhibits that natural expression of heart—we all have that natural expression. Understanding what inhibits us allows it to occur in its normal and natural way.

I leave you with that, and my appreciation for all of us having been together this weekend.

Since Rodney began with the first two steps of the Eightfold Path, I'll round it out by talking about the remaining six steps, which are really two segments. The Eightfold Path is what the Buddha offered as a way of living that both actualizes our understanding of truth—of who we are, of our interconnectedness—and also a way of living that

helps us keep waking up. As Rodney said, it helps us keep investigating, helps us keep seeing to the roots of our experience, to the roots of our suffering. Why is this situation so difficult? Where am I attached and confused here? How can I touch the truth?

The second segment contains three steps, and the third segment contains three steps. Both are really fundamental tools for use in our lives to help keep us awake.

The first three of these deal basically with our speech and our actions, our expressions of ourselves in the world, in our relationships with others. They give us a way to reflect back on ourselves. How am I behaving? How am I speaking, and why? What effect do my actions and speech have on others, and what effect does that have on myself?

It's really back to those five precepts that we talked about at the beginning, but simplified into wise speech, wise actions, and wise livelihood—including all the active aspects of our life and really giving attention to them.

Why speak? How do I relate to others through my speech? When I use untrue or wounding speech, rather than making ourselves bad, we really look and see why. What was the deep inner pain in me that brought about this harsh response to someone, or this actually untrue expression?

Not again as "I will never again tell a lie" or "I will never again bark at somebody in an unkind way." Please don't set yourselves up for that. It's not about that kind of rigidity at all. It's much more a pointing to let's use our lives to wake up, and let's use all aspects of our lives as a way to pay attention, as a pointing to truth, as an area to learn, as Ravi said.

So this second portion of the Eightfold Path points to looking at our speech, looking at our actions—basically actions of harming, actions of stealing, actions of misusing our sexuality in ways that are harmful to ourselves or others, misusing power, misusing authority. Basically, any action that harms another, and seeing almost immediately, really feeling in ourselves, that that harms ourself.

Working with our speech and actions, you can see how it actualizes the sense of our oneness with each other, with all beings. And at least in my experience, it's an infinite area of exploration—far more subtle than it would seem from just thinking, "Well, I just will work with not lying, I'll work with not killing." It's a very subtle area, one for ongoing investigation of our intentions, of our motivation.

You know, because it's all about what we mean, what's our intention in our actions. So if you're walking and you don't see and you step on an ant, and there's really no intention whatsoever to hurt that ant—there still might be pain in ourselves, compassion, when we realize that it's been killed through our step, and that's appropriate. But there's no need for blame. But then other times, when we see a bunch of ants and think, "I can't be bothered to walk around, I'll just walk through them"—that's a little different. And so we just look at how we act, and why, and how we feel after doing that. Because I've done that, and I feel so much worse than if I had just taken two minutes and walked around the ants. So we continue to explore.

And with our livelihood—how do we make a living? The Buddha specifies this quite directly: not making a living in arms trading or in selling drugs, the things that obviously bring harm to people. And again, for me it's been an ongoing exploration of really looking at what my relation to livelihood is, what's the truest expression of who I am and how I want to be in the world. And whatever we're doing, what's our intention in doing it? Of course we have to have a livelihood to make money—of course that's part of the intention. But also, how do we actualize that? How do we relate to it?

Whatever we're doing, it doesn't matter if it's something that seems socially really responsible, or if my job is sweeping a driveway, or taking care of kids, or working in a supermarket. All of these relate with people, relate with our environment, and we can do that with an attitude of connectedness and caring. It doesn't matter so much what the surface livelihood looks like—it's much more our inner relationship to it.

And as I said on the first night, working and giving attention to our actions, our speech, our relations to ourselves and others is an indispensable foundation for a life of awakening. It's an indispensable foundation for being able to continue questioning really honestly. And as Rodney said, if you have the attitude of questioning, sooner or later you start questioning how your actions and speech are, so it all works together. But really giving attention to this area lays a basis of harmony with ourselves, harmony with others, with life, with what is—a foundation that can help us continue to open in very deep ways to the potential for peace and happiness, for harmony in our life as it is now.

The last segment of the path is really the tools, in a way, that we've been learning in the formal sitting and walking in mindfulness meditation here—the tools of mindfulness, concentration, and energy. The willingness to give energy and commitment to our awakening, to our questioning, to caring about ourselves, really.

One of the things that somehow took me years to understand—I was really slow about this—is that, as Rodney said, mindfulness and concentration, that very careful quality of attention that lets us be somewhat microscopic and present and minute in our experience on a retreat—that level of mindfulness is not going to last, most likely, when you walk out the door. You start driving on the highway and reading the signs, and you might make it a few miles before you suddenly have to turn on the radio. Nowadays, talk on the phone. I was driving with a friend in L.A. and she's talking on the phone, switching lanes, drinking a cup of coffee, and talking to me. I was a nervous wreck. And then I saw everyone else on the freeway doing the same thing. It was really scary.

But in other ways, we can all relate. How often, if we're eating alone, do we have to have a newspaper to read, or listen to the news, or something? Just eating somehow isn't enough. But you can see here from eating what an incredibly rich and varied and full activity eating really is, if we would but pay attention.

So in our daily lives, the same quiet, microscopic quality of mindfulness is generally not available, nor is the concentration—that real sense of one-pointedness, of just sticking with one thing at a time. It's available, but not in the same degree that it is here. Of course mindfulness is available in the larger lens of clear comprehension that Rodney spoke of.

The third quality, and the one that lets us be mindful, wake up to what we're doing, be concentrated enough to at least just do two things at a time instead of four—the one that lets us keep questioning, that turns difficult situations in our lives into potentials for growth—is the last aspect of the path, and that's wise effort.

This is what took me so long somehow to put together. Maybe that's my particular bugaboo; yours might be something else. On a retreat, we're putting in an immense amount of energy, of effort, through our willingness to look, to sit, to walk, to bring our attention back to the here and now, whatever we're doing, over and over and over. How many times in these three and a half days have you woken up and realized, "Oh, I'm spacing out," and just gently come back to the walking, to the eating, to the sitting? That's effort—just that willingness to see what's so.

When I do a retreat, I'll put in a tremendous amount of effort. And for years I thought then I could just walk out the door and cruise—that that was all you needed to do, and life just takes care of itself. But it just isn't so. What we learn on retreat is really what is possible for us as human beings—that it's possible, and we can develop that quality more, to be, as Rodney was saying this morning, in the middle of the storm and really have an island of peace.

We can touch that peace from moment to moment. And it's in our daily lives that the storms really rage. It's so easy to forget that this, too, is the opportunity. This is a storm. It might be a lot more complicated than what we experience on retreat. Instead of just me and my mind, there really are three other minds involved.

Now that you know how complicated your mind is, can you imagine what's going on when you get four of you together and you're all in some kind of storm? You're all projecting and imagining. You don't even hardly know what's going on for you, and you all think you're going to relate in some reasonable way. No wonder things can get so out of hand so quickly.

I remember one teacher said to me once, "The worst thing you can do—and we all do it—is put yourself at the mercy of another person's mind, now that you know how crazy yours is." And we all do it, letting other people judge us and taking that in and accepting it as true.

But the willingness to say, whatever's going on in our life, however difficult the situation is, "Right now, I can wake up"—that's the effort. And the tool we have is just this mindfulness, this meditation. You can wake up. As Thích Nhất Hạnh says, just take three breaths. Just stop, take three breaths, connect with your breath, connect with your body, with this moment. That can make a huge difference.

You don't always say, "Let's have this argument after I go meditate for an hour." But we can say, "Let's just take three breaths and really connect with what centeredness is and start again." Really connect. Let yourself connect with the other person, with their pain and their confusion, and start again.

Sitting a little bit every day really helps us stay in touch with this possibility. If you sit forty-five minutes, great. If you can sit an hour, great. If you can sit two and a half minutes, great. Don't get into judging that you should be doing more. Appreciate what you are doing so that it's a joy rather than some grim duty.

There are many ways to continue waking up, many ways to remember: How can I wake up in this moment? How can I at least just connect with this moment? A lot of the formal meditation opens us to the possibility and gives us some tools. Hopefully that's what you might have touched this weekend.

Rather than trying to cover everything we could think of about coming back into daily life or how to keep practice awake, we wanted to see if you have any questions. Please feel free to share. If you've done this a lot, you'll often have more helpful things to say than we do. As Rodney said, everyone has a slightly different experience, and I haven't met anyone who really has it down, who is always awake.

A participant asked about the connection between generosity and family, and whether people can give too much.

Rodney: I do think so. And usually that comes from not really understanding one's boundaries and giving too much, giving in excess. It's often based upon a need within oneself to feel appreciated through generosity or to receive something in return.

The generosity I'm speaking of is really a life posture in which we know our boundaries very well. We give what we can and we don't give what we can't, and we keep that well defined. Yet it's keeping ourselves on the edge of our selfishness, so we're always exploring how we can be more generous—but not to a fault.

In every situation, we could always be giving more, but we're on the edge of what we can possibly give. We look at that edge to see where we're holding back, where we're protecting ourselves, why we need to do that, and who it is we're protecting. And we also see what we're able to give and share within that limit. As we grow in the practice, that boundary becomes more transparent and permeable.

Another participant asked about the loving-kindness meditation from the previous evening.

In a way, this goes into the core of compassion. What I was saying last night—"May I be happy," or "I deserve to be happy"—that's also okay. I was talking about mettā, loving-kindness, which is a sort of unbounded love for yourself and for all beings. Compassion is really an aspect of that.

Compassion is a little more specific in that it's that love turned towards your pain, or turned towards others' pain and suffering. There is actually a similar compassion meditation where you would focus on yourself or another being and say the words, "May you be free from suffering." It's more tuned into the suffering aspect, but with love. Whereas with loving kindness, you can feel that same wish for love even toward someone who's really happy and doesn't seem to be suffering.

We'll practice again at the end this morning. It can be quite peaceful and calming. And for some people, actually, the compassion aspect is more alive and more accessible, and that's fine.

Is there anything constant? I'm not trying to be flippant, but I invite you to really examine your experience to see if there is anything constant. My answers come through my own experience, and they mean very little to you unless you've explored everything within yourself—your body and mind—to come to your own conclusions about that.

One thing that we sense as permanent is some abiding soul or self within this process. We haven't spoken too much about that this weekend, but it's worth a great deal of inquiry as to whether that is what we think it to be. To examine that, to see whether there is something back there that maintains itself through time, unperturbed and undisturbed, or whether there are just qualities that come and go within a whole process that we call personhood. So I invite us all to inquire into that.

Faith is one of the really vital aspects of awakening—the sense of trust and having to make an inference beyond our actual experiential knowledge, or else none of us would ever even start looking. It gives us a sense of confidence. And then, through our own experience, our own experiential understanding, what gets added to it they actually call verified faith. It's no longer because of something someone said; you have a sense that it's really verified from your own experience. Both of those are really necessary.

I think it depends upon what your need is in a particular situation. There are times when sitting, your heart just longs to sit and to do long retreats and just to spend quiet time. It calls out with that kind of urgency. And there's something that needs to be done in relationship to that sitting practice; it's calling out for growth in that area.

At other times we feel very alive and awake and active and energetic and in movement, which is much of our life, most of our life actually. If it just ended up that meditation was defined by the time we spent on retreat, then it wouldn't be very useful, to be honest. We have to be able to carry it out into interfacing with life, to experience how—because there's a part of ourselves that doesn't get touched in the same way on the pillow as it does when you're talking to your mother.

The walking meditation is an expression of meditation in movement. It's the bridge between ourselves in stillness and in activity. It requires the same kind of effort to bring that same quality of attentiveness to ourselves in movement—perhaps more effort than we do in stillness when we're not moving. The body's at rest; it's a little easier to focus on. And you can spend, if you have half an hour a day, walking if that feels more comfortable to you, more fitting for your own heart. Or you can spend it sitting if you say, "Oh boy, I just want to quiet down here." It's what calls out for you to do. Sitting and walking are equally valuable at different times in anyone's practice.

The time of day is a matter of personal preference. I personally prefer to get up and sit first thing in the morning. And actually, it's nice if you can do it just before you go to bed too—a little of both times is good.

I think the most important thing for helping establish some stability in daily practice is to pick a regular time that you know you can maintain, and a realistic amount of time. Saying "now I'm going to sit two hours a day" is really hard. But if you know you can get up and do it in the morning for half an hour before you do anything else, and you make it a regular part of your day, I think that's the most helpful.

And then you could add ten minutes over your lunch break. I know people who go and sit in their car in the parking lot at work and sit for ten or fifteen minutes at lunch, and they say it really helps their day be much more balanced and focused.

Regarding sitting with a tape that has affirmations—for doing Vipassana, I wouldn't recommend that, since it's very much about just being with what is right now. Metta is perhaps the closest thing to affirmations, but even that is trying to get in touch with the actual feeling as it's manifesting now. So from the point of view of Vipassana, I would suggest sitting in silence and really just being with the breath, the body, the thoughts and emotions as they are now.

Something that's really helpful is sitting with other people. Even if it's only once a week or once a month, it gives some juice and sense of community to the practice.

One participant shared: "What I frequently do is look at areas of myself where there's some blindness, some areas of selfishness, and give myself a positive affirmation such as 'I can listen to people.' When I'm starting to do ten thousand things and not really listening, having that reminder points me towards where I'm not listening and reawakens me to my potential to listen."

Yes, and as Carol said, the way I use it is to point myself towards the experience of how it is that I'm not listening, rather than using it as some kind of mantra that I just repeat mechanically.

I'm not sure I can say anything that hasn't been said this weekend because there's no secret teaching here. It's been communicated as best we're able in the course of these three days together. To understand this, and to be patient with the process of coming to that point, is probably more important than any single thing that we do.

To know that we're going to get stuck and we're going to react, and to keep the attitude that as long as I'm learning from this, it's not going to add more reaction to that which is already there. The right orientation to all of this going on in whatever hectic environment we live in is to really work upon our own reactivity in that situation. And ultimately that will have the most benefit on everyone around us.

There is no little trick, but in a way we can each find our own little reminders. For example, if there's a particular kind of situation you call "high drama"—a way that you get sucked in or a way that you feel—you can find a particular thing that works for you, something quick to get you back to the present for just a second. The trick will be to remember it.

As I said before, take three breaths. For me, if I just remember to bring my awareness back from out there, involved in the mania, and come back and drop into feeling my body—that's enough. It takes no time; it just takes remembering. Then you have one particular thing to do when you remember, and it can land you in the moment. "Oh right, this is high drama." And once you recognize it's high drama, even for an instant, you might have the possibility of choosing for this minute not to get involved in it, because now you've recognized it and in that moment you're not a participant in it.

Some people use the sound of bells or clocks to wake them up. Or you could use the recognition itself—when you say "I can't stand this thing," oh, high drama! As soon as you can name it, you're aware. Just come back and feel your body. For an instant, you're out of it. And it expands from there. You find your own ways to do that.

Someone asked about running and whether it's possible to practice mindfulness while running. Sure, it's possible. But they also shared that sometimes they let their mind wander during runs, and it's become the most beautiful time of their life.

That sounds good to me. It doesn't sound exactly mindful, but in this life that we live, we all need periods of time when we can reflect on situations or when we can allow creativity to come up. It's true that when you're sitting, sometimes you get the most creative ideas, but if you were jumping up and drawing and writing the whole time, you'd never have the quietness.

But if you're an architect, say, you've got to have creative ideas once in a while and let them roll. So this sounds like a very conscious period when you're letting the subconscious and unconscious flow in a very fluid and creative way. In a very broad sense, it's not moment-to-moment mindfulness, but you are aware of what's happening. You're aware that you're letting the thoughts run.

You're aware that creative ideas are coming. You're sort of present with that. And I think that's really important. It's different from just the mind going chit-chit-chit-chit all the time.

So we wanted to end with about ten minutes of loving-kindness meditation together. Please let yourselves get comfortable. Stretch for a minute if you need to.

Sitting in space, here and now, feeling your body on the chair or the cushion. Just let your mind, your heart, your body relax. Relax into here and now. Just forget all the trying to create, to be, to be different. Forget all the judgments and comparisons. Even forget all the ideas about who you are, all your self-identifications. And just feel yourself alive here and now, without limitations or descriptions. Notice the sense of living presence.

In some ways, this living presence can manifest as loving-kindness—all-embracing, all-connecting loving-kindness. Begin by feeling the sensations in your heart center area, sensations of life, living energy of the universe. Let this living energy manifest as love, as a gentle friendliness. Let this loving energy radiate outwards and fill your whole being. In a way, knowing that who you are is this love. How can you be separate from it?

Loving yourself just as you are right now, it doesn't even make sense to have some limitation or exception on it. Just showering love still in your body. And out of this deep love, wishing for yourself the deepest peace and happiness that you would wish out of all-embracing love.

May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering. May I live with a heart of compassion.

Really deeply wishing this happiness for yourself. You, as much as any other being in the universe, deserve it.

May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering. May I move with a heart of compassion.

Now bring to heart, to mind, the image of someone dear to you that you easily feel love for—not sexual and not complicated. Someone you feel a lot of love and appreciation for. Perhaps a benefactor, someone who has really helped you somewhere along in your life. Holding their image in your heart, feeling and directing this all-embracing loving energy towards this person. Feeling in this love the deep wishes for happiness for them that you would also wish for yourself.

May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be free from suffering. May you live with love and compassion.

Feeling how this energy of loving-kindness encompasses our dear friend in the same way it encompasses us, no different.

Just now, for a minute or so, if any other images come to heart—perhaps people you're going back to see, family members, friends, co-workers—just focus on the parts of them that you easily love, on their so-called good part, and then feel this loving energy for the entirety of these beings.

Really wishing: May you be happy. May you truly be happy. May you live in peace. May you be free from suffering. May you live with love and compassion.

The connection through loving-kindness dissolves all differences, all judgments and separations. A connection from one heart to another. Feeling our deep unity, really. Our deep interconnectedness.

Now include all of us here in this room in the circle of this unbounded energy of loving-kindness. Appreciation for the support we've given each other through our steady inquiry and presence. Letting this loving energy extend to the staff, the cooks, the maintenance workers, the managers, the office people upstairs, people in the front office. Everyone trying as best as possible to express their understanding and love. Letting the loving energy extend outwards in all directions. As the Buddha said, all beings only want to be happy.

May it truly be so.

May all suffering beings find relief—those who are seemingly causing the suffering, those who are dying, those in prison, those who are sick, those just being born. We are all equal in that we only truly want happiness and peace.

May all beings everywhere be free from suffering.

May all beings know true peace and happiness.

May all beings live with a heart of love and compassion.

May all beings know the truth.

CHAPTER 255

Intentions and Thoughts

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of meditation's most common challenges: working with thought. Rather than promising to dissolve distractions, she guides practitioners toward understanding the nature of thought itself—recognizing that thoughts, like all phenomena, arise through conditions and have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence.*
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> *Wilson explores how mistaken perception, colored by greed, aversion, or delusion, leads to papañca (mental proliferation), where one perception spirals into elaborate stories we mistake for truth. She shares vivid examples, including her own experience of mistaking fireworks for artillery fire, to illustrate how we construct reality from assumptions built on potentially inaccurate perceptions. The practice involves returning to bare experience—seeing thought as thought, just as we learn to feel sensation as sensation.*
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> *The talk beautifully connects the wisdom of emptiness with compassionate action, drawing on the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path to show how right understanding naturally gives rise to purified intentions, which then manifest as skillful speech and action. Wilson emphasizes that recognizing our interconnectedness doesn't lead to passive detachment but to vibrant engagement with life. She concludes with the aspiration of bodhicitta—practicing not merely for personal liberation but for the awakening of all beings, transforming even the most ordinary activities into expressions of wisdom and compassion.*

I received a letter from a dharma group in the mail, and it had a little advertisement in it that said: "Deepen your meditations, improve concentration and absorption, dissolve distractions and inner chatter." It was an ad for a hypnotherapist. So I'm just offering that—if that's the way you want to go, you can go.

After the instructions this morning, when Sharon just mentioned we were going to pay attention to thought, everybody cracked up. It made me think maybe that would be something to talk about tonight: working with awareness of thought.

I can't promise what the hypnotherapist promises—that you will dissolve all distractions and inner chatter. Nor is that the aim of the meditation. When working with thought, it's really about learning to understand the nature of thought, just as we bring our attention to understand the nature of every other experience. And within that wise

understanding lies freedom. It's not about getting rid of thought, although all of us, at some point, spend a large amount of our time thinking about how we can meditate in order to get rid of thought. That's not what it's about.

Thought is an amazing thing, isn't it? We'd really be lost without it. It's incredible—we need it. It creates so much. It's a wonderful tool, when it's a tool. Unfortunately, a lot of the time it can feel as if we're victims of our thoughts.

This is from the Buddha: "How can a troubled mind understand the way? Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts, unguarded. But once mastered, once understood, no one can help you as much—not even your father or your mother."

Thoughts are incredibly powerful. Yet if we could look at a thought just as a thought, what is it? Right now, deliberately think a thought: "It snowed last night." Poof. What is that? It's nothing. How is it that we get so caught up in such a struggle, so imprisoned by our thoughts? How did they become so problematic?

One way is that we confuse the thought itself for the reality of what we're thinking about. Here is a short poem from the Polish woman who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Wisława Szymborska. It's called "The Three Oddest Words":

When I pronounce the word future,
The first syllable already belongs to the past.
When I pronounce the word silence, I destroy it.
When I pronounce the word nothing,
I make something no non-being can hold.

The thought, the word, is just that—it's nothing else. It's not the actuality of what the thought or the word symbolizes. But this is a hard lesson. It's hard for us to really believe that, because we get so attached and identified—either to the thought, or the reaction we have to it, or how it makes us feel, or what it means—that actually we don't even notice what a thought itself is.

From Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "Myriads of thoughts have run through our minds, but all they have done is increase our confusion and dissatisfaction. When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors, yet a rainbow is not something we can actually clothe ourselves in or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way, through the conjunction of various conditions. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all."

He's not speaking metaphorically here. This is actual: they have no tangible reality at all. "There is therefore no logical reason why they should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them. Once we recognize that thoughts are intrinsically empty, they will no longer have the power to deceive us."

They're not bad. Once we recognize what a thought itself actually is, it doesn't have the power to deceive us, and then we can use it in a way that's helpful.

But again, it's that we don't see, we don't know how to use our wise attention to recognize the transparent nature of a thought. We get so hooked in, as I said, from our reactions, from the sense of who I am and how this thought affects me or reflects me or *is* me.

And I want to say: just because a thought occurs frequently, or arises together with a strong emotion, does not make it more accurate. It does not make it more true—although that's often what we tend to think.

Like, "It snowed last night." Now that happens to be in the realm of relative reality, an accurate thought. There's no big thing necessarily connected with it. But "I am a stupid jerk"—because it keeps arising, because it comes with a lot of baggage attached to it—it's actually less true than the other. We can learn to look at the thought itself as distinct from the sense of self and story that grows around it.

Some of you may have read Mark Epstein's book, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*. Just the title says it all. The thoughts are without a thinker. Now, use your thought and think about that. If the thought doesn't have a thinker, it's really not a problem. Actually, the thought's not the problem. The thinker's the problem.

I don't know if anyone here has mentioned one of Joseph Goldstein's more brilliant recommendations along this line of getting a sense of thoughts without a thinker, which is to imagine that every thought that arises that you're aware of comes from the person behind you. It's brilliant, isn't it? If it's not your thought, it's really not problematic. Just some weird thought that came and went, just like a sound. This is a really good way to approach it because, you see, it's the thinker that gives it all the oomph, not the thought.

So we can begin to learn how to bring wise attention to the experience of thinking, or thought itself. And by itself, it's the same as we bring attention to sensations, to emotions, to our breath. By just meeting it with bare attention, we begin to see through various layers of where we get hooked—which I can't pretend to talk about all of them tonight. I just want to talk about a couple.

One is on the level—actually it's the moment pre-thought—of what we call basic perception. Now, perception in Buddhist psychology is a very specific quality that arises in every moment of consciousness. When there's a sense contact—a moment when there's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or mental activity—when there's a moment... take something simple like hearing. There's something that makes a sound. There's an ear door, an ear that works. And there's consciousness. If you were in a coma, we wouldn't say hearing was occurring. So when those three things come together—a sound, an ear door that works, and consciousness—that's called contact, a moment of hearing.

Perception is said to arise in every moment that there's contact like that. And it is what we would call the quality of recognition or discernment. So with a finger snap, for example, it might not even be a whole thought, but it's recognizing. It's based really on memory and it arises out of being aware of what's happening.

But that perception—often people have said, when we talk in the interviews about opening to hearing, someone will say, "Oh, you know, I can be with the bare experience, but of course right away my mind's going, 'Well, that's a bird, and that's a car going by...'" Yeah, that's perception. There's some way, if it's something we've heard or known before, we recognize it.

Now, I don't know if Sharon mentioned at this retreat, but at the last retreat she talked about her favorite word in Pali: *papañca*. Papañca is generally translated as proliferation—this proliferation of mind that just goes wild on something. More technically, it's said that in a moment of perception, what often happens is, first, we often don't even recognize perception happening and we're on to the thoughts about it. Our reactions are the next thing it reminds us of. This is what's called papañca.

What one perceives, it's said in the texts, one thinks about. And then what one thinks about, there's associations and memories and on and on and on. And it says these notions then assail and overwhelm a person. It's the tendency of the imagination to break loose and run riot. These are from the old commentaries. This is papañca. We have one perception—finger snap—and when we're not really attentive, the mind just does a riff on it, goes into this whole papañca, and you wake up who knows where. And that's just a normal tendency.

Now what confuses it even further is this: if we're aware, we can bring our wise attention back to the original sense contact, the perception—finger snap—and nothing much happens. That's a lot of what we're doing in meditation practice. We're learning how to just be with the breath rather than the whole story of how uptight and type A I

am because my breath is shallow. We're learning how to just walk. Learning how to just feel a sensation in the knee rather than the whole story about being in the hospital. All of that is just coming back to the bare experience.

But often we don't recognize this perception part. And what gets really interesting is that on the level of basic perception, a lot of the time our perception is not correct—and we don't know it. The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. So it's not only that the imagination meets the perception, breaks loose and runs riot. First of all, it met a perception that wasn't even accurate, and then goes wild on that. No wonder we don't know what's happening. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge.

Mistaken perception is said to occur when, in that moment of contact, the consciousness is colored with one of our three friends that Sharon mentioned last night: delusion, greed, or aversion. These can actually color the perception itself, and we don't realize it if we don't know they're present.

Take Sharon's example of the chili pepper. Biting down on the chili pepper, if you go to the bare experience, it's stinging and hot. That's just how it is. But the perception of chili pepper could be colored with "I want to get out of this country, I can't believe people eat this food, this is horrible." Or it could be colored with "this is an indication of something healthy." And then the papañca goes off in two completely different directions, when really it's just stinging and hot—and everything else is extra.

This quality of mistaken perception can be more or less obvious. I remember one time I was in the hospital. I'd been there a few days, and when they give you drugs and such, the mind can go into a kind of weird state, definitely. One morning, real early, like five o'clock, a nurse came. It was her job to wake me up and get me out of bed to weigh me—that was really important, how much I weighed. My consciousness was filled with paranoia, which I didn't realize. And I actually visually perceived her as demonic. It's really how I saw her. And the poor lady—because I reacted according to the perception—I screamed. I don't remember what I said.

But the next day, the same lady had to come at the same time, get me out of bed, and weigh me again. This time I didn't have that paranoia coloring my perception. Instead, I saw what was probably more accurate: a nice-looking lady who looked a little scared. I felt really bad.

But that's an example of how, when the perception is that distorted, don't we really believe that's how it is? If someone else had a different notion, we'd say, "Look, I know what I see. Don't tell me otherwise." How often do we do that?

This is why it's so tricky, because the bottom line of this practice is that you absolutely can only open to wisdom through your own experience. It has to come down to trusting your own experience. But you see the layers of subtlety here—we have to keep looking, not take anything for granted, because superficially our own experience can be absolutely not correct. And then we can take that mistaken perception way down the road.

Greed and aversion can really color perception. They're a little more noticeable. But delusion—this quality of confusion or just not knowing—that's actually harder to recognize when it's present. One of the things we do when we don't actually know what the perception is, is make something up based on past experience and go from there.

A story—I know I've told this before, but it's a perfect story, so I'll tell it again.

I was teaching in Vancouver and staying in a friend's apartment by myself at night. It was a daytime, non-residential retreat, so I'd go home to her apartment each evening. And before bed, I was reading a book about the civil war in Beirut by a reporter who had lived there during those ten years. It was really gripping and interesting. But you can imagine reading that just before you go to bed—that was the state of mind I was in. A kind of paranoia, cars blowing up on the streets, a guerrilla war going on in the city.

I fell asleep in that state where you're not really deep. And I woke up to these loud booming sounds. I lay there for a while, you know, how you slowly come into consciousness and you don't know where you are or what's going on. That's delusion right there. And then I just heard this booming, and the mind immediately goes: artillery firing.

Now, sometimes I teach in Southern California near a Marine base where they actually do artillery firing all night. It sounded and felt a little bit like that. So I thought, okay, this is artillery firing. And part of my mind says, "I don't think so, Carol." But I said, who knows? Just because it's Vancouver, you never know when civil war could break out.

I got quite agitated. I jumped out of bed, looking out the windows. I didn't see anything. I said, well, that's natural—there's nobody on the street because, you know. I turned on the radio trying to get news. I said, well, of course there's no news because the first place they ever go, they want to lull everybody into thinking it's normal. Really, I worked myself into it.

This went on for about ten minutes. I thought, should I call up my friends? No, that's too stupid. I did have some element of knowing, some little tiny thread of knowing. I think there's delusion happening here.

And finally I walked to the front window and I didn't see anything, but it looked over a field that had had a world exposition some years ago. Somehow seeing that, I just knew it was fireworks. Although it was no holiday—I don't know why there would have been fireworks—but I knew that. Okay, right. It clicked in. I went back to bed.

But that's what we do. We take some perception, fill in the blanks, and then make up a whole story based on it. We act and react, and we're lucky if we find out within ten minutes what's going on.

That's delusion. Not quite knowing, and not really knowing that we don't know.

And this is, in a way, what's underlying a lot of the confusion that leads us to get so wrapped up in identifying with thoughts, or holding onto them, or running away from them. We use thoughts based on any perception to tell a whole story, and then we believe that story—even though it changes the next minute and we don't seem to notice that.

So our practice is one of coming back to the bare experience and not taking anything for granted. It's not that you want to dig everything up and question and get all unstable. Just look fresh in every moment. Because when we don't look, we might be making assumptions based on misperceptions we don't even know are happening.

There's a story I love from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and anthropologist, from his book *An Anthropologist on Mars*. One of his stories is about a man who was basically blind from the time he was five until sometime in his fifties, and had pretty well adapted. He worked as a masseuse and had his life. He was quite at ease, at home in his world. His perception of things was put together based on hearing and touch.

At some point around when he was fifty, they found they could do an operation that would give him back his sight, which he hadn't had since he was five. So they do the operation. Everyone's standing around so excited, taking off the bandages, thinking he's going to be so happy to see.

And Oliver Sacks says, you know, when the bandages were removed in the first moment, the man had no idea what he was seeing. Everything was just a blur—light, movement, all mixed up, meaningless. And out of one part of the blur came a voice that

said "well," and only then did he realize that this chaos of light and shadow must be a face—the face of his surgeon. But he didn't really see that. He just knew that voices come out of faces, so that must be a face.

It was really interesting because actually his life got a lot harder from that time on. The perceptions never really came together the way they do for someone like me, having been born sighted, where it seems like that's just how things are.

The way the mind puts together all this visual information—I don't question it. It seems like an accurate perception. But as Oliver Sacks said, we can't really imagine his confusion because if you're born with the full complement of senses, we've learned how to correlate all of our senses to create a sighted world from the beginning. When we open our eyes each morning, it's upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning to see. We've learned to give meaning to visual objects, to have concepts that accompany them.

But when he opened his eyes after being blind for 45 years, there were no visual memories to support a perception. There was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence. His brain could make no sense of the visual perceptions. And it was stressful. His life got chaotic. It was an enormous strain. When he finally couldn't take it anymore, he'd close his eyes and go back to not being able to see. And then he'd feel at ease and sure and could shave himself or eat or do whatever he needed to do.

I love that because it's not just in that field, but in our whole experience of who we take ourselves to be as an unchanging, distinctive, solid human being. That's what's going on all the time. We are not—if we're not really looking, if we're taking it for granted—my body's solid, my sense of who I am is solid. And in fact, it's changing all the time. I'm not saying this to make you believe that, but just to have us look.

When the Buddha talked about mind moments, about how fast thought moves, a mind moment is every moment that there's a new experience—something that is translated to seventeen trillion in the blink of an eye. It's fast. It's fast. And he said no wonder things seem solid, because it's changing so quickly we don't notice the change.

What we learn to do physically, emotionally, mentally is to keep bringing our attention to the experience over and over, and then suddenly we'll perceive a discontinuity. Sometimes people notice this in meditation physically, where they're sitting and we just assume it's my solid body, and suddenly there's just an experience of a sensation coming and going, coming and going, in a vast expanse. It suddenly isn't within this solid

body. And then that goes away again. And we think, well, that was kind of a neat experience. But we don't really consider—hmm, maybe that's just as valid as this lump of solid flesh that I drag around with me most of the time. Maybe that's also true.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, look deeply. We look deeply. We never stop at the surface appearance. You don't have to think about this, but this is what our mindfulness practice leads us into.

Since I want to talk about this in terms of thought, we see how, when we continue to look deeply and consistently, thoughts are arising and passing, describing ourselves and our world to us almost constantly. And if we don't look, we don't even realize it. We take those descriptions to be true and accurate and react from them, just like I took the war in Vancouver to be true and accurate.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once that the world appears to you to be so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. Cease thinking about it and it will dissolve into thin mist. And we think, well, do I actually want it to dissolve into thin mist? Do I want to feel like thin mist? Maybe not. And we start thinking about it. But all of these series of thoughts, unobserved, unrecognized—rather than just seeing them as the perception of "oh, that's a thought"—they contribute to maintaining this false perception or assumption of an unchanging solid self. Each of these contributes to the vast proliferation of becoming—becoming this, becoming that—over and over, that keeps us locked in this cycle of confusion and keeps us reacting to thoughts. Because again, if the thought has nothing to do with you, it's really not a problem. But how many of the thoughts are describing us, our reactions, defining us, giving us a sense of meaning? And we don't maybe quite want that to dissolve into thin mist.

But it gets really ultimately fascinating, and I find it sometimes hilarious, to really begin paying attention to these thoughts as they describe things rather than just believing them. To notice how that comes from the simplest perception.

I'll give the basic kind of things that happen on a retreat, but you can expand it out to our life. You're just sitting, minding your own business, feeling very mindful, and somebody goes rushing by, gets a cup of tea, slops it down, and you think, hmm, I'm pretty mindful here. I'm doing pretty good.

Now, what's actually happened there? Seeing, and then the perception based on memory of "that doesn't look very mindful to me." And then some kind of pleasant feeling, another thought, "I'm doing better than that." Comparing, which is ego conceit. We don't notice; those are just things arising. And from that: I'm pretty mindful here. Within thirty seconds, you know, we're meeting the Dalai Lama. We're opening spiritual cen-

ters. Somehow every yogi here is bowing down to us, and we remember everything great we ever did in our life and all the things that show what a success we are. Everything—our whole life is here in that moment, but selectively chosen.

And then after that, however long that was, we wake up and say, "Huh, maybe they're slurping their tea, but they might know they're doing it. Whereas I, on the other hand, don't even know where I am. I think I'm in Dharamsala." So actually, I'm not doing too well at all.

And again, it's the same thing. There's just a perception of a thought, again seeing that person, another memory, and an unpleasant feeling. And then you drag in everything—all the times you've failed in your life, all the unfinished business, all the unkind things you've said, all the moments you weren't mindful, all the completely unfair judgments and comparisons you've made of other people, what a total worthless jerk you are. And again, your whole life. And again, selectively chosen.

In each of these movements, if we're not seeing what's actually happening—that it's just a series of thoughts coming together with different emotions and memories—if we're not seeing that, each of them feels really real. It's me. And if we don't look at it, it seems like the same me, although actually they're totally different me's. But it feels like the same me. And we're doing this all the time, with any little perception.

I remember walking in a retreat once and I looked out the window and it was snowing. Okay, seeing. That's all that was happening—seeing. From that seeing, I went into a whole thing about snow and my childhood and what it felt like and pleasant feelings and snow days off from school. Just seeing whiteness, that was it. All the time we do that if we don't pay attention.

There's a great line from Lily Tomlin where she says, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific."

Our tendency is to try and think our way out of this. When really our practice, as the Dalai Lama says, to have a correct perception we need to have a direct encounter. In other words, wise attention—it simply is our challenge to notice: this is a whole story, explanations, concepts, self-definitions. What's actually happening? Bring wise attention to the bare fact of experience.

A thought. Just like that thought, "It snowed today." Or "I'm the most worthless yogi here." Or "I'm incredible, I'm brilliant." Or "That person is hopeless." Whatever it is, it's just a thought. Tightness. Unpleasantness. Burning. Memory. Bringing our attention to simply meet the experience as it is.

It's radical. It's always available to us. And it's not that if we do this we're going to get so into bare experience that we forget who we are or where we live, that we can't find our zafu in the hall anymore. Somehow all of that still works. But it's just being able to come out of these stories and meet the bare experience.

That's what we've been doing. That's what the whole mindfulness practice is. And learning to do it with thoughts is exactly the same. It can seem a little trickier, absolutely, because thoughts are actually so ephemeral. Something we give so much power to is actually the most ephemeral of our experience. So it's learning to bring a skill to it, that's all—to recognize thought as thought.

One approach is what I mentioned before: just because a thought comes with strong emotion doesn't make it more real. It's very helpful when there's a lot of repetitive thought to recognize—and this is like a kinesthetic way, the way it feels to me—to recognize thinking and drop my attention under it, to recognize and touch the emotion that's going along with it. Seeing that they feed each other, but they're not the same thing.

Another way, when you're looking at thought itself and bringing attention to thought itself, is to rest in this quality that Sharon spoke of, that we've all spoken of—spaciousness. So that it's not just glomming onto the thought, but seeing it in the vast space of awareness.

The image Sharon talked about, of the bird flying through the sky—that's a perfect image. If we think of any thought that comes as the bird, but our awareness is the sky, the thought really isn't such a problem. We notice the thought, it kind of comes through and flies out. No matter what kind of bird it is, whether it's a beautiful parrot or a lovely nightingale or a turkey vulture, it doesn't really matter.

But instead of that, we don't notice the sky and we get caught up—*I've got to have this bird, I've got to have this bird*—and we throw up nets and we try to hold on to it. We can't, but we get completely bent out of shape. Or it's flying by and it's hideous. We think, *Oh my God, get rid of it. Get out the air rifle. Pop it away.* Actually, that makes it hang around longer because it gets a little hurt. It flutters down. It goes around our head. If we'd left it alone and just noticed it flying through the sky, it would just fly on out. But we get so involved in the reactions.

If you can just have the inclination to notice the space around thoughts, the space between thoughts—it takes them out of being so deadly important, every thought. And in terms of sitting here on the cushion, it really doesn't matter what thought arises.

Because you're going to sit here until the bell rings, you know. Even if it's just from shame, you're still going to do it. So no matter how strong the thought is, just notice the space around it. Notice what it does. Let it go away.

Space is actually a wonderful metaphor—not just for making things more relaxed, more nice, just kind of spacing out. That quality of spaciousness that allows us to bring a clear knowing to what is, is what actually allows our understanding to deepen, to see underneath that surface reality and open quite profoundly to the truth.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho. He's talking about space as a metaphor. He says Buddha wisdom is very humbling, very humbling. "Knowing the unconditioned"—now the unconditioned is another word for nirvana or true nature, freedom—"is knowing the unconditioned very interesting or fascinating? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be incredibly fascinating to know, something blissful, something ecstatic.' And so you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Look at the space in this room. Is it interesting to look at?" He says, "Not to me. The space in this room is just like the space in the other room. It's the things in this room that we get involved in. They're interesting or uninteresting, attractive, good, bad, ugly, whatever. But the space—there's not really much you can say about it. It has no quality except being spacious. And to be really spacious one has to be patient. As there is nothing that one can grasp, one recognizes space only by not clinging to the objects in the room."

When you let go, when you stop your absorptions, your judgments, your criticisms, your evaluations, your clinging to the people and the things in the room, you begin to experience the space of it. But that takes a lot of patience and a lot of humility. Humility in that we can just let go of how important our assessments and attitudes and reactions are. We get that sense of the space by not clinging or reacting to the objects in the room. We begin to recognize the space. And that space, that not clinging, is what allows us to begin to recognize the great wisdom of the Buddha, the great wisdom that is really the potential of all of our hearts and minds, where we really begin to have a correct perception of who and what we really are, of what is true.

And at this point, the question often comes up: Well, what is it, just some kind of space, space out? That's what's true? Is this it? Actually, this came up in a few groups. Is this it? You just let go of reacting and being aversive and clinging and you're left with a traffic jam and not being upset. Is that it? We sit here and thoughts come and go and we're at peace with them.

Is that it? Yes and no. It's not that we're just left with a kind of spaciousness, a seeing the emptiness of thoughts, of our sense experience, that they come and go and have no intrinsic selfness, and so who cares? It doesn't matter what happens. Sometimes when people hear talk about emptiness, it can be misunderstood as "well, nothing really matters, so it doesn't matter what I do," and there's a kind of no sense of responsibility. It's not that at all.

So the question becomes—staying with thoughts—where do these thoughts begin to matter? How does this deep understanding that we are not our thoughts, we are not our sense experiences, we are not this temporal coming and going—how does that manifest in our lives? Because it's not nihilistic. It allows us to see through this sense of separateness, this sense of trying desperately to hold on to constantly changing experience for a sense of security, which breeds only fear.

When we see through that, what we see is not the emptiness of nothingness, of noncaring, but the emptiness that leads us into our intrinsic wholeness, our absolute connectedness. To me, there are two quotations that express this beautifully. One is John Muir saying, "I find if I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe." That's emptiness. When we're not clinging to anything, that's how we can experience our lives. That's how we can experience the world.

And then this gives rise naturally to the balancing aspect of great wisdom, which is great compassion. It's the reflexive expression of our clear seeing, of wise understanding, that we begin to meet ourselves and the world with great compassion. In fact, wisdom and compassion are often spoken of as the two wings of the bird of the Buddha Dharma. A bird can't fly without both wings. Great wisdom can't really arise without great compassion, and vice versa.

So it's right at this point of wisdom and compassion that we see how we can begin to recognize and use thinking in a way that comes from truly understanding the nature of life, the nature of who we are, and the nature of thought. You know the quotation from Nisargadatta, it's really well known: "Wisdom tells me I'm nothing, love tells me I'm everything, between the two my life flows." It's really like that. When we see that we're nothing—I'm not all these thoughts about my past and my future and even my present—when I see that, then I see that I'm everything.

How does that manifest in our lives? This is where I think the Buddha laid out his teachings so elegantly, so brilliantly. When these factors of mind—when you have a thought coming together with greed or hatred, or coming together with compassion—when these thoughts manifest as intention, the application of mind, the energetic direction of mind that gives rise to speech and action, these intentions often manifest as

thought. So when a thought is coming as intention and we act on it, then it makes a difference, then it matters. If you're sitting here on the cushion, the most murderous, awful thoughts—they really are empty. But when the thought manifests as intention, a murderous thought becomes truly a murderous action, and it matters.

This is where the Buddha's teachings are so elegant. When he laid out his Eightfold Path, the way to live a life of awakening, the first step is understanding—wise understanding, right understanding—how we understand ourselves and the world. And how we understand ourselves to be gives rise to the second step, which is translated as wise intention, wise thought. And the intentions and thoughts give rise to the next steps: speech, action, and livelihood—how we live our lives in relationship to ourselves and others. So this is where they come together. How we understand things to be gives rise to how we are motivated to speak and act in the world. It's just so elegant to me.

You can see this clearly. If we're in a moment where we're feeling unsafe or paranoid, very separate, feeling that we need to protect ourselves and that other people are a threat, then our speech and actions will be motivated accordingly. The intention comes together with that state of mind, and the intention arises from fear. That will be how we speak and act.

But if in another moment we're touching that place of just seeing that things are as they are—someone said to me today, "It's just breathing, just touching the floor"—in that moment, it's so clear there's nothing in excess, nothing that needs to be gotten rid of, nothing missing. In that moment, the sense of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls wishlessness, the sense of touching everything—if I touch this, it touches everything in the universe—then the natural purification of our intentions happens. Out of that moment, an intention of desire or greed or hatred is simply not going to arise. It just isn't. When you're in one of those states, you don't think, "Well, let me run and get the last muffin."

Who cares? Everything's perfect.

I love the way Thich Nhat Hanh describes it. He says, "The idea is that you do not put something in front of yourself and run after it, because everything is already here in yourself."

Don't try to think, "How am I going to experience my whole life like that?" Just a moment. Our whole life is only a moment, ever. It's only this moment. Each time we are awake in a moment of recognizing that sense of everything being here in ourselves—that if I touch anything, it's connected to everything—the natural result is that our thoughts and intentions purify to ones of letting go, of generosity or non-greed, of love and compassion.

You can see this happening in little ways on retreats all the time. Notice it in yourselves. So often people describe how somebody in the hall is coughing or sniffling, and all the things they go through—from feeling annoyed to thinking "I should be compassionate," which is not the same as the natural arising of it. But that thought is still coming from some understanding that somehow compassion is a more natural response. We're just not totally there yet, but still, honor that.

But not really being there takes really being honest, paying attention to our intentions—attending to the wanting to kill, to turning the anger in on oneself, to just resting in that anger for a moment. And suddenly, as if effortlessly, there's actual compassion. It's like, "Oh, wow, that must be really uncomfortable having a cold. May they be free from their suffering." And so often people say, "Where did that come from? I didn't make it happen."

That's what happens as our moments of wisdom increase, as we touch our true nature and honor it more and more—our intentions of how we relate in little moments and in big moments purify. That's the P word. Sometimes people hate that word, but it really happens. They transform. They change. It gets easier for compassionate and loving and non-greedy intentions to arise than for actions and speech based on neediness, fear, and cruelty.

Learning to recognize when thought is manifesting as intention is a wonderful tool, both here and in our lives. It comes into play whenever we're making decisions, when we're having to make choices. If we can just notice "I'm about to say or do something"—which isn't always possible, but if we can—it gives us a moment of choice. And that's so wonderful, because so often then, in that choice, we'll be able to choose consciously to come from our connectedness rather than from our fear.

Sometimes it might seem a little bit forced, but that's okay. It's still better than coming from our fear or our greed. And other times we won't be able to make that choice, but we'll be able to see what's happening. You still meet that with kindness. And in that kindness, again, meeting the bare experience—like meeting that anger at the person in the hall—naturally again, some compassion may arise.

Sometimes we work on it very consciously in our lives. It's not that we just sit back and wait. But once we understand, once we've had moments where we've touched this truth, it can become a very deliberate intention to cultivate these purified intentions.

A person who inspires me a lot with her compassionate action in the world is Sister Chan Khong, the woman who works with Thich Nhat Hanh. What's interesting is that as our understanding of emptiness deepens, it doesn't lead to passivity. Actually, the com-

passion and the mettā and the non-greed lead to a much more active engagement, in whatever form. Our sense of vibrant aliveness, of real connectedness with our experience and with others, gets palpably stronger—because we are connected. That's what lets us see the truth.

Sister Chan Khong has basically, from what I read in her autobiography, spent her whole life since she was young involved in social work—in the middle of the Vietnam War, working in very difficult circumstances. Not being a perfect human being, I'm not saying that; we all have our stuff. But with this dedication. What inspired me is that, at least from what I could tell from her autobiography, she doesn't take it for granted. Even at this point, she's working very consciously to choose to act from intentions that grow from understanding, from compassion rather than from anger.

She talks about being involved in recent years in a campaign of writing letters to the government in Vietnam, who had been arresting many nuns and monks and artists. She said, "Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew I had to do walking meditation." Now, is that one's normal response? "I'm angry, I better do walking meditation." So that in itself is very interesting.

She continues, "Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

To me, that kind of encompasses it all—the deep seeing of our interconnectedness, the emptiness of our thoughts of anger, of our reactions, the commitment to acting from the awareness of our interconnectedness and knowing we can't always access it. And that's okay. But knowing that if we have the choice, we'll make it to come from our deepest understanding, knowing that it's a process, that it's our whole life. And it gets so that it's less and less something amazing and more and more the natural expression of understanding.

Shantideva says it in a way I love: "Even though I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

And just one last thing is noticing how both consciously and naturally the intentions that can inspire us in our spiritual journey—which at times is boring as hell and at other times incredibly arduous and at other times so wonderful—really do begin to ex-

pand from the intention of my own happiness and peace to that word we often use of bodhicitta, that sense of a deep commitment to awaken so that I may serve all beings and help awaken all beings.

I've noticed in myself—I was talking to someone today who was noticing this herself—that in the beginning when one hears that and thinks, "Well, I'm practicing for the sake of all beings," it can actually sound quite egotistical. Like, who do I think I am practicing for all beings? But that's our misunderstanding. It really starts to change when the motivation begins to shift and move and take on this vastness beyond our limited sense of my own personal happiness, my own personal freedom. Truly there become moments when you're practicing for the awakening of all beings. It's not egotistical at all. It actually brings such a vastness of connectedness and compassion, a strength and a courage that lets you sit through things, look at things, hang with things, that if it was just for you, you'd say, "I think I'll go get a pizza now. That's enough. I don't really need to wake up now."

But when you really get it—that you can't awaken without all beings, and that practice really is to affect all beings—it brings such a depth, such a power to what we're doing that again it keeps bringing us back into a deeper and deeper understanding. And it lends such a meaning to our lives. Not in the big sense, but that even the most ordinary activities become activities of awakening.

So I just want to end with a quotation from Geshe Rabten, who's a Tibetan teacher, because I really like the way he says this. He says for himself, "All actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings."

It's just a possibility. All actions—washing the dishes, changing the diaper, eating your soup—for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings. That's kind of like the ultimate purification of intention. But starting where we are, that's the aspiration.

CHAPTER 256

Faith

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this profound Dhamma talk, Carol Wilson explores the nature of the deluded and non-deluded mind, drawing from a teaching that our mind is naturally luminous and pure, only temporarily obscured by visiting attachments and aversions. Using the metaphor of the sun and clouds, she illustrates how we become entranced by our passing mental states and forget the radiant awareness that is always present.*
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> *The heart of this teaching examines the five spiritual faculties (pañc'indriya): faith (saddhā), energy (vīriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). Wilson offers particular depth on faith—distinguishing between "bright faith" that initially inspires us, and "verified faith" that deepens through direct experience. She emphasizes the Buddha's teaching of "ehipassiko" (come and see for yourself), encouraging practitioners to trust their own investigation rather than blind belief. The quality of faith as trust—the courage to open into the unknown moment by moment—becomes central to practice.*
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> *Wilson provides practical guidance on balancing energy and effort, cautioning against both grim determination and checking out when practice becomes difficult. She teaches that balanced effort means simply being present with whatever arises, without expectation of particular results. The talk offers skillful means for working with overwhelming experiences, including deliberately nurturing the heart through appreciation of beauty and stepping back when needed. Throughout, she returns to the essential teaching that every moment presents the crossroads where recognition of our true nature is possible.*

In a very unmindful way, so please raise your hand or something if I do that.

One Tibetan teacher said once that the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is, one, to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, as well as how the deluded mind works. It's very to the point, I think. I actually love this quotation.

So what does that mean? Discovering the nature of the non-deluded mind is, in a way, to my understanding, the ultimate, the whole point of our practice. Unfortunately, there's very little that one can say about it that makes much sense because it's beyond all concept or thought. The Buddha did say one time that the mind is naturally luminous, naturally pure. And this is a translation by the esteemed Gil Fronsdal: "Luminous is

the mind, brightly shining. Yet it is colored by the attachments that visit it." Another way I've seen it said is that it is temporarily obscured by visiting torments or defilements—meaning attachments, aversions, angers. Temporarily obscured.

So the mind in its natural state is luminous, radiant, naturally peaceful. This is in a way what we could be referring to as our Buddha nature. Remember when we took refuge on the first night in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—really in the Buddha, taking refuge in our own potential for awakening, our own enlightened Buddha nature. This luminous, radiant presence—or absence, or however you want to talk about it—is not something that we need to create. It's not something that can be changed or improved upon, and you'll be glad to hear this: there's no way, no matter what you do, that you can damage it in the slightest. And it is who we all are. It is all of our essential nature.

So that's the good news.

The other part, which is really what's easier to talk about and what a lot of our meditation practice is working with, is how the deluded mind works. The deluded mind is just that aspect of the temporary attachments, aversions, and confusions that obscure this radiant nature of peace.

An image that is often used—and it's an image, not an exact perfect way of describing—is to think of our radiant nature as the sun and the temporary passing obscurations as clouds. The clouds could be really thin and scattered, and you don't really notice them too much, and you're really in touch with the sun. Or they could be really thick and dark. What our deluded mind does is when a cloud floats by—whether it's a cloud of anger or fear or desire, restlessness, sleepiness, a lot of the things Mary spoke about last night—we get so entranced with the cloud. We get so involved in it. If it's nice, we want it to stay and get bigger. If it's not nice, we want to change it, fight with it, get rid of it. We're so involved that we completely forget to notice the sun.

Even if it's a big dark cloud, even if it's raining and stormy all day, there's still evidence of the luminous warming nature of the sun everywhere. The fact that we can even see what's around us is evidence of the luminous nature of the sun, but we tend to forget that and get lost in fighting with and rearranging the clouds.

Because we get so involved in our moods, in our explanations, in the stories of our lives, in the fact that we have a pain in our toe, in whatever it happens to be—and these can range from really small and ludicrous to very deep and profound experiences in our life—it's not to negate our experience. But what we learn in working with the nature of the deluded mind is not to take any one experience as anything more than

what it is. It's here now. It will pass. It has no self-existent, unchanging reality. Nothing that arises in our experience here of the five senses or the mind is going to stay. Nothing. There are no exceptions to that. I know we're not supposed to use absolutist language, we're supposed to temper it, but in this case, that's how it is.

So a lot of what we're doing, a lot of what we speak about in our practice, is to get more familiar with, to really understand what the deluded mind is and how it works. And this is essential.

This is not a waste of time. It's equally essential because understanding the deluded mind will help us learn to recognize what we so easily ignore. Kempo again says that the only difference between Buddhas and regular beings is that Buddhas simply know what other beings ignore—the true nature of one and all.

And this is even more interesting: this recognition of our true nature, this borderline between Buddhas and other beings, is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives. It's not that we have to practice and change and work for twenty-five years or seventy-five lifetimes to maybe have a moment where we could possibly, if we're lucky, recognize our true nature. That potential, that great crossroads, is present at every moment of our lives.

I feel that this is really the reason why we do this practice. The reason we don't recognize our potential for living in peace, for living in spaciousness, and for the natural compassion that is its expression, is simply because we are so unfamiliar with the deluded mind that we keep getting tricked by it over and over and over. Really, that's what mindfulness does. It gives us the opportunity, moment by moment, to come out of all the hullabaloo and the running after illusions, to just be with what's happening this moment, very simply. And in that, there's a possibility to see what's true, when we're not being tricked by our deluded mind.

Last night Mary spoke about several of the most common and often very difficult aspects of mind to even recognize, much less work with, much less see through as ephemeral clouds—anger, desire, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. Tonight I want to speak a little bit about five helpful qualities of our mind and heart that are present with us from time to time throughout our life, but which can get strengthened quite noticeably through the process of formal meditation. In learning to recognize these qualities and balance them in our experience, this balance can help us moment to moment to be so present—in a way that's not leaning forward or tilting away—that there is the possibility to suddenly just turn around and say, "Oh yeah, right. Radiant, pure, peaceful."

These five qualities of heart and mind will strengthen naturally as the retreat goes on. I want to talk about them to help us recognize them. It's not only important to be able to name and be open to the difficult aspects. Sometimes we forget that it's equally important to be able to name and recognize and open to the pleasant aspects, the helpful aspects. Mindfulness is a balanced awareness. It's not just zooming in on what we don't like, nor is it just zooming in on what we like. It's really balanced.

These five qualities are called the five spiritual faculties. And as they really strengthen in our practice, they change to the five spiritual powers. They are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. It's not so esoteric—you've all experienced all of them quite many moments of each day. I want to say something about all of them, although I think I'm going to focus more heavily on faith and energy, the first two.

Faith is an interesting quality. I read somewhere—I can't remember where—a definition of faith as the drive towards that which cannot be described. To me, it really speaks to the movement, the opening to trust in basically our true nature, that which cannot be described. It's intuitive. Faith in this way that I'm speaking about it is not a faith of surety, where if I do this, that will definitely happen.

Faith first awakens in what's called, in Buddhist terminology, bright faith—which is really quite an accurate description. It arises when one first comes in contact with someone who deeply inspires them. Maybe a teacher. Maybe it's a personage like the Dalai Lama that you might not know personally, but whose dedication and commitment really inspires one. Maybe it's a friend. Maybe it's someone whose sincere commitment to their awakening lights up that same feeling in you.

Bright faith often gets lit up in me during interviews with people. I'm just talking to someone often who's going through extreme difficulty, and it's hard, and there's no pretending it's not. But there's this simplicity and this faith and commitment to just simply be here with it, without a lot of expectation. And it often comes for me at the end of a retreat that I've been teaching. You often don't realize it yourself if you're the one sitting, but you all just light up. There is such a change in the course of ten days, such a beauty that shines out of people when they've been sitting. And I know enough now—it's not personal, it's not that you've become a more beautiful person. It's just that the inner truth is shining through more.

We get a little more out of the way, and something like that can light up this sense of bright faith. It's bright—you feel bright, you feel energized, you feel confident. It's really what motivates us in some way or another to begin or to continue on our path of awakening, whatever that particular path happens to be.

I would venture to guess that in some way each of you has felt that over and over. Something got you to drag your body here to this retreat, and it takes some kind of awakening of bright faith, of recognition. To me it's like a recognition of something we've always known, albeit perhaps not at all consciously. It's really a recognition of our true nature. When I feel that sense of bright faith, it's like coming home to somewhere I didn't know I wasn't home. It's just, "Oh yes, this is home." And it's wonderful, that quality of faith. It could be inspired by nature, it can be inspired by anything—it can be inspired by going through a difficulty in your life with presence and seeing it open into something so wondrous and unexpected.

The thing about bright faith is that it's impermanent. It's bright, it's energizing, it's really motivating—but it flickers, it wavers, it disappears. It may come back again many, many times, but it doesn't really often have the staying power. You'll feel this in the early days of a retreat, when the going gets a little patchy, when you're hitting the skids and you think, "Why did I come?" There's this memory of what brought you here, but it just doesn't do it, that memory. It's not exactly lighting us up.

I hit that almost every retreat I've ever done. Somewhere in it, I'm dragging along. I've been up for eighteen hours. Why am I doing this? I don't exactly remember. That's not a problem really—it's just that bright faith at that moment isn't alive to energize you. And so it needs to be strengthened by the understanding, the wisdom that comes from our own experience.

The other thing about bright faith is that as we're lit up, as we're inspired by a being, another person, the environment, some experience—that's valid, extremely valid and helpful. But it's so easy for us then not to recognize that the brightness we're experiencing is actually, whether conscious or not, an intimation, a recognition of the truth of who we really are. It's easy not to notice that and to keep the attention turned outward, to think, "This is so great because of this person, because of this situation." In that case, when the person leaves, or if it's some teacher that you're putting all your need for faith into, at some point you'll likely be disappointed.

We need to use the energy, the awakening power of bright faith to turn back into our own experience and let the faith deepen into verified faith through being fully present with our experience, acknowledging what is true for us.

One of the things I love about Buddhism—what probably drew me to it in the beginning and has kept me there—is that the Buddha spoke very strongly against any kind of blind belief or blind faith. There's a line he said often: *Ehi passiko*, which means, "You too, come and see." He always said, "Don't believe what I'm saying just because I say it.

Don't just take it for true because someone you respect says it. Give it a try and see for yourself what is true. See for yourself if this practice, if this path leads you to more peace and happiness, to less suffering. Only then believe it."

This is the aspect of deepening faith, verified faith. It could be verified faith in a particular teaching, faith in the Three Refuges, faith and confidence in your own ability and willingness to simply be here for whatever arises in this moment's experience. This leads me into the next aspect of faith I like to talk about, because it's been very central to my own practice and continues to be: the aspect of faith as confidence—the confidence to trust.

Not to trust in a particular result. Not even to trust that if you do this practice, such and such will happen in a certain way. But the ability to trust that we can open into the unknown, moment by moment, that we can open into the unknown and really be present for it.

There's a quotation from a book I read long ago that embodies this aspect of trust. It was speaking about radical acceptance: "Radical acceptance is radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing—nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all forms, in all times." Meaning, whatever is happening right now, can we accept that as a manifestation of truth?

To let go, to accept—it is necessary only to give up your concerns and your fears. Only. But think about it. Just reflect for a moment. What in your experience today were you fearing? What in your experience were you not able to radically accept? What was not seen as an aspect of truth in this moment?

And reflect on that as you go through the day tomorrow. Just notice, and it can be very subtle things. I often find that it's not the big things I'm having so much trouble accepting. It's the little nudgy ones that somehow slip in, that are not okay, that are not accepted.

So this aspect of faith is the trust, the confidence, the courage to live consciously, to open to the not knowing, the unknown in this next moment. And it's uncomfortable, you know. But it's true—we really don't know. Who knows what experience is going to arise in your mind and body in the next moment?

You sit down prepared to have a really pleasant sitting. You had a great walking, you're really focused, you're just going to sit down and really be present—and twenty minutes later you wake up and wonder, how did I get here? Or just when everything's gotten cooled out, some extreme pain has the nerve to present itself out of nowhere,

and that's your meditation for the next hour. You just never know. Or like that little tremor of an earthquake this morning—you couldn't predict what was going to happen in the next moment. You can't plan out your sitting. Our whole life is like that.

The thing about meditation, taking these ten days, sitting, walking, being removed from our day books and our hourly plans—it strips away what normally hides from us the fact that we never actually know what's going to happen. We think we know what's going to happen every hour of the day. And unfortunately, in this culture, it often happens that way. I don't quite get how it does it, but we tend to do every hour what we wrote in our day book, and it really hides the fact from us that we don't actually know a thing of what's going to happen next.

In meditation, sitting and walking and really being present moment to moment, we can't hide from this fact. We try really hard, and that's a lot of the reason it's so uncomfortable. But we are forced to confront the fact that we just don't know.

And because that can be scary, it's easy to fall into many forms of control—having some idea of a desired result and then trying to shape our meditation, shape our actions to make that happen. I think Mary mentioned last night how common it is, manipulating meditation. You have a certain walking and you think, that was great. Next time I'll walk in that place. I'll hold my hands in that way. I'll drink just the same thing before I did it. I'll wear the same hat. I'll look the same way. I'll always walk at this time of day in this place. And the same with the sittings. Or if we have a really terrible walking or sitting, then it's like a jinx—we'll avoid everything that had to do with that. I'll never sit next to that person again; I picked up their bad vibes and it ruined my meditation. This kind of magical thinking.

Next time you find yourself in a manipulating meditation mode, just check out for a minute what the actual quality of your heart and mind is at that moment, as you are desperately trying to recreate a pleasant sitting. Is it peaceful? Is it spacious? Do you feel like you're potentially opening to the truth of things? Or is it contracted, fearful, grasping? Just notice these things.

We can't control anything. How can we possibly recognize the radiance of peace when we're lost in trying to rearrange the clouds? No way. Nisargadatta Maharaj once said that nothing of value can happen to a mind that knows exactly what it wants. We're locked in.

He's quite uncompromising. Because nothing the mind can visualize and want is of much value. I just dropped that one in. Do with it what you will.

And what's even more fascinating is that the closer we look—as we keep coming back with our attention to this emotion, this sensation, this breath—rather than finding a kind of security, some solidity, the closer we look, the more we find space. The more we find emptiness. The more we find that there's nothing solid.

I clipped an article out of the New York Times a couple of years ago from the science section. Some astronomers were announcing that they had discovered the largest galaxy ever detected—more than 100 trillion stars, more than 6 million light years in diameter. It's 60 times the size of our galaxy, the Milky Way. And then they found that this new galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump of a thousand other galaxies, which they call Abel 2029. It makes you wonder how many others there are.

They said they hoped that further study of this galaxy would provide clues to the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter. There doesn't seem to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would be necessary for all this clumping together of galaxies that's going on. So scientists proposed the existence of vast amounts of this invisible matter. According to the prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this missing invisible matter—which means that what is generally thought of as astronomy actually concerns only a tiny subset of particles that happens to be detectable by human nervous systems.

We're just the same as that. The closer we look, the more we find out that there's nothing solid there. And the more we want solid knowledge, the more we'll find incredible mystery.

When we can have the confidence, the trust, the faith—even for a moment—to just open into "don't know," into not knowing, then it's not so fearful, even for that moment. And in fact, it gives us great energy. It allows us to really move and dance in the beauty of the mystery of life and to respond to whatever arises out of a natural compassion and love—not from preconceived ideas of how we should be, but from what naturally springs from the source of this mystery.

It's a wonderful way to live, even for a moment. Not to set it up as an expectation. We all have the possibility to experience just this—resting with the unknown, being okay with whatever arises in this moment—at any time, in a retreat, in our life. And it happens over and over. It gives space for so much appreciation of things you wouldn't expect.

Someone said the other day that she'd spent time in another retreat just hours lying on her back watching a hummingbird. And it had seemed like such a joyous, awake, clear experience. That's what happens when we're not so focused on achieving results.

Many, many moments arise like that. You notice them more in the course of a retreat in this beautiful desert. And again, it's easy to put the emphasis outward and say, "Well, it's because the desert's so quiet. It's because these animals are so cute. It's because, because, because." But just for a moment, turn the attention back and see: maybe it's just because we're not filling up the space with conclusions and results and needs and wants that we're able to just open into what's always here.

So that's an aspect of faith, trust, and confidence that I wanted to speak about in exploring these lines of faith. And this confidence, this willingness to be present, leads quite naturally into the next spiritual faculty I want to discuss: energy.

Without some faith, without some willingness, some inner inspiration, it's really hard to have the energy or the interest to do this practice. At those times when bright faith wanes and you can't quite touch your own verified faith, it's like you're dragging yourself along. The energy we're talking about here is a vital, absolutely necessary function of our practice. It's necessary for practice to continue.

I think this is one of the most delicate balancing acts in the whole practice—finding over and over the balance of wise energy, of wise effort. And again, because everything is in flux, nothing is static, it's not like you're going to work out wise effort, balanced energy, put it on cruise control, and have it stay there for the rest of the retreat. No, sorry. It means understanding how we fall out of balance, how we push too hard, how we don't try enough—what that feels like—and then we begin to intuitively know from our verified internal experience how to balance.

In speaking about energy or effort, I want to say that this energy is really the energy of enthusiasm. An energy born of interest. Not of some outer force. Not of trying to match some goal or form that you have in mind.

Because then you might push, push, push. You might think you're putting out a lot of effort, but it turns into drudgery.

I find that when I feel most connected with my practice—really alive, really present in it, really feeling fulfilled—it's when my energy is strong and balanced. But it means the energy, the willingness to be present for whatever is, to simply meet what's happening with attention. So when I feel really there, really fulfilled or so-called happy with my practice, it has nothing to do with what's actually going on. I could be walking, I could have pain, my mind could be scattered, and I could be frustrated—but there could be the quality of energy, of effort, that's willing to simply meet each of those experiences just as it is. And that's balanced effort.

Balanced effort doesn't mean things are nice. It doesn't mean your experiences are all going to be pleasant. And that's something that really goes against our unconscious conditioning. So I want to talk a little bit about all of that.

First, the quality of effort when there isn't energy. And I actually prefer to think of it as energy rather than effort, because it's less personal that way. And by the way, none of these qualities of mind and heart are personal. They're forces that arise due to conditions, and when the conditions change, they change. The quality of energy is one of the easiest ones to see this with—to see this impersonal nature. But it's also one of the ones that we tend to identify with the most.

So if the energy is really low—and you know how it is when you're really sleepy, really tired at the beginning of a retreat—you drag yourself along and it's hard. Nothing's very interesting. You could care less about the breath or your feet or anything else, and it just becomes a drudgery that pretty soon breeds into a whole ball of doubt. You know, what's the point of this anyway? And it just kind of goes downhill from there when there's no energy.

Sometimes we try to meet that in this imbalanced way of, okay, I'm going to walk really slow, I'm going to sit really still, I'm going to do everything in the form that they tell us and try to make it match. And that's the way to have balanced effort. But that also just breeds frustration and tightness.

I remember one retreat I was doing not that long ago, a seven or eight week retreat with this Burmese teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, who's very demanding, very exacting. And there's a real form to follow. Everyone walks extremely slowly, noting. You note really every single moment that you're awake—you're noting what's happening, whether you're eating or going to the bathroom or walking or whatever.

I was doing that every moment, but there was a lot going on in my life just before I came into the retreat. I was having to call my mother every day; she had just had an operation for cancer. A lot of things were going on. And I was just making myself conform to this structure for three weeks—lifting, moving, placing, noting, noting, noting. And it was so dry and so dead. And I know from experience that this same practice could be really vital and alive and energizing and beautiful. So I had that faith, my own verified experience.

It got to the point which finally woke me up that I was really in unbalanced effort. I came upstairs to my walking place one day, and the thought in my mind was: if someone else is walking there, I'm leaving the retreat, I'm going home. And that thought can come, but I meant it. I was really going to do it. Luckily nobody was walking there.

That really was what woke me up. Something's wrong here. Three weeks of this is long enough. This is not balanced effort—although we often mistake it because we know we're putting in a lot of effort. But on the other hand, our other tendency can be, well, things are tough, this really stinks, I'm getting nowhere—so let's check out. I'll just go downtown, have a cup of coffee, maybe take in a movie. In fact, one retreat I had to beg someone not to go away for the weekend to a motel and watch videos. This was a three-month retreat. I really don't think it will help.

That's the flip side. And it can easily come up, because when things become difficult—not just that the energy is low, but when you run into quite a difficult experience, either frustration or deep grief or just physical pain or just boredom, restlessness, agitation—it doesn't have to be a life trauma, but anything that's difficult and ongoing—mostly our conditioning says, "Oh, this is wrong. I must be doing something wrong." If it's unpleasant, we tend to think we have to change it.

And so the effort that we then try to put in is usually, if we're not quite clear, somehow the effort to make it be different. Somehow the effort to get back to that clear sitting I had yesterday or last year or ten years ago. Or somehow the effort to get rid of this particular tiredness or this particular grief or this particular sensation in order to then really begin to develop and deepen in the practice.

We can put in very sincere energy and really think we're just being present, being present—but we're confusing effort with expectation. If you think you're bringing your attention just to be here, but there's this subtle edge of "in order for something to happen," it's generally unwise energy, unwise effort. Unwise, why? Because you're going to end up suffering. It usually becomes frustrating, difficult. And that's the clue. If you don't notice the expectation, you'll generally at some point notice the frustration. That's the clue that there's something we want to happen that isn't happening. And it's the clue to say, "Oh, wait a minute. The only energy or effort I need to do here is be here with what is happening." So what is happening? Just bring your attention back to the bare experience and see what it is.

It's very easy for us, without having gotten really familiar with the quality of mindfulness—which is just being with the bare experience—to confuse all our stories and interpretations with what's actually going on.

For example, this is an old story, but it's a good one. Someone came in years ago to a friend of ours, Joseph actually, in an interview and started talking about, "Oh my God, I've got so much tension in my jaw. It just shows what an uptight person I am, and I'm not able to meditate, and this runs through my whole life. I just see how everything I do is tight and controlled, and it affects my relationships." And Joseph goes, "Oh, you mean you're feeling tension in your jaw." "That's right, tension in my jaw, and it goes to show that no matter what I do, I do in such a—" and on and on. "Wait, you mean you're experiencing some tension in your jaw." And this went back and forth and back and forth. It's so simple. It's so much simpler just to feel the tension in the jaw. But we're so used to all the elaboration that sometimes we just can't get there—just to the basic experience.

Try it here. Next time the person behind you is sneezing and sniffling and moving and clearing their throat, see if just for a moment you can get to what's the actual experience here. That's perfect. It's hearing. It's just hearing. So what? Maybe the hearing experience is pleasant, maybe it's unpleasant. All the rest—and I can't tell you how many people have described the murderous rages they've gone into on this retreat—all the rest is interpretation and elaboration and story on a simple experience of hearing. I say it's simple. We all know it's not simple to come back to that place. That's when the energy is balanced, the wise effort to simply be with what is. It's a little more possible to do that with that open receptivity to just what's happening.

Sometimes another way we can get into really unbalanced effort—usually we'll have that element of trying to change, if not giving up. But often there'll be something very difficult going on, either very difficult and chronic physically, or very deep and strong emotional pain or difficulty: terror, fear, anger, rage, grief. And our tendency, especially in our culture—the only kind of effort we seem to know is push, push, push. So often the feeling is, "If I just stick with this, stick with this... it's happening because I'm not staying with it hard enough, or I'm feeling overwhelmed because my mindfulness isn't strong enough, and so I've got to push and be here with it and be here with it and be here with it"—as if grinding is mindfulness. And it isn't.

It is quite possible through just our grim determination to go into the terror, go into the terror, go into the terror. Well, we get completely terrorized. Mindfulness is gone and we're really thrown back out of balance. It's not helpful. And one of the hardest things for most of us—not all of us, but most of us—to learn, to really begin to take in and trust, is that there are times in a very ongoing difficult and painful situation where the most skillful aspect of this practice would be to gently back away. Not forever, but for a time, before you get overwhelmed.

People always say, "No, but that's quitting. That's cheating. That's giving up. That's distracting myself." Well, gently backing away does not mean you check into a hotel and watch videos for two days. There are other ways of gently backing away. You can, for instance, if you just find terror coming up really strongly, quit trying to dive into the middle of it every single time with the hope that you're going to blast out the other side and never see it again. Back up. Move your attention to your body. Go out and walk and really feel your feet hitting the ground. Move into the body. Open up if it's a lot of pain, a lot of sadness.

There can be times when going outside and really opening up the field of awareness is what's needed. Just be with hearing. You're not spacing out—you're very mindful, very present. The hearing is the actual experience of this moment. And it brings a real spaciousness and nourishment to the heart, to the consciousness. Then the next time grief or laziness or terror or the pain in your knee arises, there's more of a balance of consciousness, a spaciousness of heart to really be with that experience in a clear and balanced way. Again, the effort to simply be present for what is can become much more spontaneous and heartfelt.

I think this is a very important lesson to learn, and you learn it by doing it. Sometimes you might back off too early when you don't really need to. How can you tell? Because you'll end up totally zoned out, getting more distracted—you want a cup of tea, then you want more food, then you want to go for a drive, and then you think, "Wait a minute, how did I get here?" Time to come back and be a little more present.

Other times you might find you've pushed too much. How do you know? You get really grim or frustrated. You get so overwhelmed by the difficulty that you feel not just a passing feeling of wanting to give up, but you can't face another sitting. You can't face seeing the meditation hall. You can't face seeing all of Yucca Valley. It's just too much. You've pushed too hard. And it's never too late to back up, to open up, to bring some nurturance into your experience.

For me, walking out in the desert will do that. You don't try to get nurtured—you just open up and let it happen by itself. For some people, doing loving-kindness practice, whether for themselves or for someone else, is the way. For some people, just getting up and walking is enough. Sometimes you might need to just have a cup of tea, relax, and not try so hard to be mindful.

One thing I really want to emphasize is that grimness, heaviness, a kind of dead feeling—that look—is not equivalent to mindfulness. And it is not the sign of balanced effort. It doesn't mean you're doing it right if you're grim. It doesn't mean you have to smile all the time, but it doesn't mean you have to be grim if that's not how you're feeling.

One other thing that can sometimes help when you're in very deep physical or emotional pain, when turning to sounds or other objects just isn't even accessible because the pain is so strong and overwhelming—Thich Nhat Hanh talks about deliberately bringing up in your mind seeds of joy. Now, this is a little different from Vipassana because you're not just letting it arise by itself. It's a deliberate cultivation in that moment, a deliberate reflection, a deliberate noticing of what is present now that is beautiful and nurturing. This can bring a real lightness to the heart.

He talked about this in one article I read, describing how during the Vietnamese War the social workers he was working with were so busy helping the wounded, helping their friends, trying to go back and forth between sides—just enmeshed in unimaginable suffering. And he said they would forget to stop and smell the beautiful fragrance of the herbs at night, the rosemary, the thyme. He would remind them: Stop. Smell the herbs. Smell the beautiful gifts that nature is giving us. Appreciate what is beautiful in your life.

That's not some kind of Pollyanna-ish "let's pretend everything is okay." It's a deliberate balancing of perception, a deliberate balancing of mindfulness. Because that beauty is also true, here and now. And sometimes when we really feel like we're drowning, it's extremely helpful to deliberately recognize it. Whatever is true and beautiful and nurturing for you in your life, there can be times when it's very helpful to just touch either the memory of it, if it's someone who's not here, or the beauty of nature, or the fact that we all have the capacity and the ability to practice the Dharma together—whatever it may be. Let yourself nurture and nourish your heart.

What happens is you learn to balance the energy more and more. And the only way we learn balance is by falling out of balance. So don't be discouraged. You fall out of balance and say, "Oh, I was pushing too hard. Okay, nurture a bit, come back, feel the breath, feel the sensations." Another time you're just zoned out, falling asleep, and you think, "It's not so much that I'm exhausted—it's that I just kind of quit paying attention here."

I wasn't really too interested. So try to cultivate some interest—not forcing, but genuine interest. And you just keep learning how to come back, how to come back to balance. It's no problem when we fall out. It's another chance to learn. As the steadiness of energy grows, as it becomes more balanced, we find that the quality of mindfulness grows stronger and stronger.

I have about two minutes for each of the following three factors now, so I just want to mention them briefly.

Mindfulness we've talked about a lot, and we'll continue to talk about it. In some way, it's the most balancing of all the factors. Mindfulness balances everything. You can't have too much mindfulness. Faith needs to be balanced with wisdom—they help each other. Energy and concentration need to be balanced—they help each other. Mindfulness balances them all.

By mindfulness we mean that quality of bare knowing, just what is. It can know tension as tension. It can know "Oh my God, I'm so controlling" as thinking and fear. So it's not about getting rid of everything, but knowing our experience for what it is. It's noncoercive, simply being with what is without attachment, without pulling away, without judgment.

It's sometimes said that a moment of mindfulness is like a moment of freedom. Because in a moment of pure mindfulness—just being with that tension—there's no hating it, there's no desiring it. There's not the dullness of ignorance or confusion. It's simply being with what is, without interpretation. And in that, there's the purity, the spaciousness of mind that isn't lost in the clouds. That opens the possibility in any moment of pure mindfulness to recognize something other—to recognize that there's much more, something much greater than just what we think of as our limited mind and body. In a moment of mindfulness we're not lost in the clouds, and there's the possibility of turning around and noticing the radiance that we are.

We have lots and lots of moments here, opportunities for one of these little moments of mindfulness, moments of freedom. Mindfulness is an incredibly powerful tool. And it's really amazing because it seems so simple and unassuming. It's hard to imagine how by simply noticing our breath, noticing sensation, noticing emotion, the whole world unfolds—all our psychological processes, all our memories, and much more. Seeing deeply into the nature of our phenomenal existence, of the clouds. Seeing the impermanence, seeing the fact that nothing lasts, the ephemeral nature. Seeing that none of it is who we are, because how can it be who we are if it's coming and going, coming and going?

Somehow the balance of all five faculties, with mindfulness at the forefront, allows all of this to open up in its own way. We don't do anything. All we do is be here with what is, and everything else opens up by itself.

With the steadiness of mindfulness, the continuity of mindfulness, the willingness to come back and be present whenever you can in the sitting, whenever you can in the walking, and in the times in between—not grim, but just that willingness to be present as you stand up, as you walk to lunch, present as you eat, as you take a shower—this leads to the development of concentration. Continuity of mindfulness in practice is actually an extremely strong tool for developing concentration.

Concentration is the fourth spiritual faculty. I feel that concentration is sometimes, at least in talking to many meditators on retreat, misunderstood or becomes a sticking point. Often people say—almost out of all these qualities—concentration can become the goal. Sometimes it seems that people judge themselves or evaluate their practice or their progress, which again is a waste of time, by how concentrated they are. This leads to a lot of confusion and misunderstanding.

When we talk about concentration, it's really an observable mental quality where the mind is steady with whatever is arising—steady with this one breath, steady with a sensation, steady with an emotion. It can stay there without a lot of fluttering around, without jumping off. Concentration has a unifying quality, stability, so that all our energy, which as you may have noticed by now can get very dispersed—mental energy all over the place, one thing after another—as concentration strengthens, that dispersion comes together and the mind becomes quite unified.

Concentration can be taken to incredible depths of real absorption and one-pointedness, which is not what we're cultivating here. But it's understandable why people can get hooked on it, because that unification of mind is really lovely.

Instead of all this monkey mind jumping all over the place, all this stuff going on, you just get completely absorbed into one thing. It can lead to a lot of bliss and peace and happiness. There's one aspect of practice that just develops concentration, but that's not what we're doing here. Because what we want to do is bring in the insight aspect, the aspect leading to the development of wisdom.

And so we open up the field of awareness. We don't just stay with the breath. We open it to sensations and emotions and thinking. But that doesn't mean we're not cultivating concentration. Concentration is that quality of really being steady with whatever is arising. We're cultivating concentration on changing appearances. It's called momentary concentration.

So it's like there's a sensation of the breath, then there's tingling, then there's burning, then there's thinking, then there's sadness, sadness, tightness, tightness, burning, rising, falling, rising, thinking, thinking. Now that can be very strong concentration on each arising thing. But it doesn't necessarily give that sense of harmony and peace, because a lot of what's arising isn't so nice.

Often when we've experienced deep concentration, which is very helpful to the practice because it helps us cut through all that telling of stories—it's the concentration that strengthens the mindfulness to come back from how controlling you are to just feeling the tension in the jaw—but sometimes when people experience a real depth of concentration, of one-pointedness, it comes to be in some way the goal of practice. To get back to that peaceful sitting. To get back to that sense of bliss. Admittedly, it's nice. But then what? It's not going to last. And it's not freedom.

What we're cultivating here is a concentration that can really strengthen the mindfulness, the energy, that can really help us see what's actually going on, feel what's actually going on, and then the mindfulness helps us let it go and be really present as the next thing arises. It's these qualities together that give rise to wisdom. Wisdom being, again, our own intuitive understanding of our own nature, of impermanence, of the fact that nothing that's arising and passing is our essential self. Wisdom can arise into our personality patterns, into deep personal insight.

And then of course we do tend to think about whatever it was that we really recognized, and that's fine. But don't confuse the thinking about for the wisdom of our own verified inner experience. It's just not the same thing. In fact, wisdom that just turns into thinking and thinking and thinking turns into skeptical doubt. Doubt can actually come about from too much thinking about an insight.

That's how wisdom is balanced with faith. If there's just wisdom, we think, we analyze, we discuss, but faith gives us the energy to just come back and do it. Just come back and feel the knee pain, instead of analyzing it endlessly. Wisdom gives faith the balance it needs not to just be blind. Someone said to me once about her teacher, "I'd jump off a cliff if he told me to." That's blind faith. Not so helpful. They balance each other.

Concentration and energy balance each other. Concentration is calming. Energy is uplifting. They give each other a balance. And mindfulness balances them all.

So those are the five qualities that are present in many moments of all of our experience. It's helpful to recognize them, notice how they balance each other. And just remember what Nyoshul Khenpo said about every moment—we're at that great cross-

roads. Every moment is the moment when we can recognize our essential purity, our essential peace. This moment, whatever's happening, there's nothing we need to shut out. And nothing needs to be any better or any different than it is in this moment.

CHAPTER 257

Intention

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates intention (cetanā) as the crucial bridge between wisdom and compassionate action. She explores the Buddhist teaching that our practice requires two wings—wisdom and compassion—and shows how intention is the observable link between understanding and how we move through the world. Drawing on the Eightfold Path's progression from wise understanding through wise intention to wise action, she demonstrates how our view of reality shapes our motivations and subsequent behavior.*
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> *Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching on kamma (karma), emphasizing that the skillfulness of an action depends entirely on the intention behind it, not its outward appearance. She illustrates this with the example of someone leaving a meditation hall while coughing—the same action could arise from embarrassment, self-hatred, or genuine compassion for others. This points to why mindfulness practice is so valuable: only through awareness can we truly know our own motivations.*
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> *The talk addresses how habits of greed, hatred, and delusion often unconsciously drive our actions, even in seemingly noble pursuits like environmental activism. Wilson suggests that while anger can be energizing, it ultimately burns out and cannot sustain balanced action. She offers loving-kindness (mettā) practice and the cultivation of bodhicitta as methods for consciously inclining the mind toward compassion. The practice of clarifying one's deepest purpose becomes a beacon for navigating life's choices, allowing practitioners to act from wisdom rather than fear or habit.*

The main theme I want to talk about tonight is this area of intention, which I think is a really key area of understanding and freedom. It's the link between understanding and action. In my life in the last couple of years, it's becoming a focal point of my practice. By practice I don't mean just sitting on the pillow. I mean the waking up, or attempting to wake up, from moment to moment throughout the activities of our life.

When Buddhism is spoken of in the big overview, it's spoken of as having two wings, the way a bird needs two wings to fly. The wings are that of great wisdom and great compassion. And just as a bird can't fly with one wing, true freedom and deep understanding do not arise without both of these aspects.

I was listening to a talk by Bob Thurman once, who is quite an interesting Tibetan scholar, former monk, kind of a wild man actually. He said something that I found very interesting. He was talking about wisdom and compassion, and he said the wisdom of emptiness—which is what we speak of, the sense that everything is empty of a separate self—this wisdom that we look at as we notice that all thoughts, all sensations, all emotions arise, we're with them, they pass, none has any more intrinsic importance than any other as we sit here on the pillow. This wisdom of emptiness can seem quite cool, quite removed. We generally, at least at first, touch it in silence with concentration in our formal practice. I think that coolness of touching in silence is what often can lead some of us to think, "Well, what's this got to do with the rest of life?" or to feel like being a bit self-absorbed in this practice.

When wisdom is imbued with compassion, met with compassion, the compassionate aspect comes from the heart. Compassion is an energy that connects. And in fact, compassion only arises from connection—with ourselves, with our own pain, connection with the world and with other beings and the pain of other beings. So compassion does not arise just from the coolness of emptiness. The two need to go together.

Luckily for us, that's the natural way it works. The natural outcome, the natural manifestation of wisdom, of understanding, is that of compassion. It's been said that compassion is the link between Buddhas and beings. Buddhas don't just, when they're fully enlightened, turn their back on the rest of us poor souls and go off and sit in the bliss of emptiness for forty-five years until their life peters out. But they spend—and you notice it today because there are these whole worldviews of eons and eons, not just our little minuscule one of this life—Buddhas don't just go off and sit alone, but they really spend their time helping others, and that's through the enormous power of compassion.

So compassion is the link, you could say, between wise understanding and wise action. And how this link is observable, or how it manifests in our experience, is something we can explore more easily in the silence and simplicity of a retreat. The way compassion—or anything else for that matter, which I'll get into in a minute—manifests is as intention, in this quality of intention. And that's why intention can be so important.

For example, when we're just sitting, as I said, the wisdom of emptiness: everything comes and goes. Greed, hatred, anger, rage, self-love, pain in the knee, murderous feelings, total feelings of unity with the world—the whole litany. And this could all be in an

hour. You sit, you watch it, it comes, you notice it, very nice, it goes, okay. The same attitude this practice brings to whatever arises, no discrimination whatsoever. That's the wisdom of emptiness.

And then we can say, well, but that doesn't work so well in the world when we have to act. Where these states of mind and heart, where the way we understand things begins to make a difference, is when these murderous impulses or these feelings of great love and unity manifest as an intention giving rise to speech or action. Then it does matter. It's fine for the murderous feelings to arise. We really note it with acceptance. It passes. That's really fine. But if it manifests as an intention and you get up with a hatchet and go to the person next to you, it's not so fine.

It's really important to incorporate both of these aspects in our practice. Padmasambhava, who is seen as the person who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet—he's revered in Tibetan Buddhism as the father of the whole lineage—said once, "Although my view is as spacious as the sky, includes everything, the view of ultimate truth, my respect for cause and effect and my actions are as fine as grains of flour." Both aspects are necessary.

So I see intention as a key factor for how our understanding, our insights, transfer to the way we are in the world. And this was, at least the way I interpret it, what the Buddha said. You have to realize it's all coming through little veils of not complete clarity always. But how I interpret what the Buddha said in speaking about intention: he gave it really strong importance in the Eightfold Path that Jack spoke of the first night. The first aspect is wise understanding, how we understand the world. And this gives rise to the second aspect, which is often translated as wise aspiration or wise thought. It's also translated as wise intention. And then the third, fourth, and fifth aspects are how we move and speak and act in the world: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood.

Just by the ordering of that, you can see really clearly that how we understand the world gives rise to our intentions, to our thoughts, which then inform how we act. So if our understanding of the world, for example, is that the only thing that brings true happiness is having as many material possessions as possible, that's going to inform our intentions of how we act.

We will act to get more things, and that will be seen as the greatest good. If our understanding as a small child was that speaking up, saying how we really feel, or asking for something we need would result in being beaten, then we truly learn our view of the world. Our understanding becomes: don't ever open your mouth to say the truth because you'll get creamed for it. And that informs how we speak, how we act, how we live our lives.

So you can see how, as our insights into what is true arise—on or off retreat—it quite naturally informs how we think, what our intentions are, and then how we act.

To say a little bit about what intention is: we talked about it this morning in the instructions, noticing that basic sense that informs a movement—a feeling of "about to." About to move, about to get up, about to open your eyes. Sometimes it manifests as thought, a thought of "I'm going to do this now." Sometimes it's just a little sense. But it's the link between the mental and the physical.

In the way the Buddha described how things work in the world, in the big picture, I'm sure you've all heard of karma. The word karma translates specifically as "action." And the teaching of karma is really a teaching of action and result, cause and effect. Whatever we do, there is some effect that arises from that. That effect in itself then becomes the cause for another effect, and this whole chain of dependent origination goes on and on.

Many of us, when we're not really thinking, tend to look at whether an action is good or bad—or the terminology is more "skillful" or "unskillful," which is a little less loaded—by examining what the effect or result of that action is, or what that action looks like from the outside. But in the way of looking at karma, in the way that the Buddha described our life, what really determines the skillfulness or unskillfulness, the karmic result or feedback that we'll receive from a particular action, has nothing to do with what it looks like from the outside. It has everything to do with the intention.

The intention that informs an action is what seeds both our own karmic result and how it manifests in the world. This is in some ways a very subtle point, but it is so key because it's so easy to overlook.

The second factor is that an intention that arises in the moment—like everything else—arises, has its effect, and passes. Another one arises, has its effect, and passes. But as an intention arises, take for example the intention to leave the hall. That intention can arise from a whole variety of mental experience. It can be accompanied by any of our whole palette of mental states that we're getting familiar with. Intention can come from greed, from hatred, from self-loathing, from generosity, from boredom, from compassion, from wise seeing, from mindfulness. So intention can have a whole range. Someone pointed out this morning that it seemed like there were different kinds of intention—that's absolutely true.

Take the example of someone in the hall having a coughing fit who gets up and leaves. From where we're sitting on the outside, there's no way to really know what the intention behind that action is. That can only be known to the person themselves, and

that's really what determines for that person the skillfulness or unskillfulness. I could leave the hall coughing out of acute embarrassment, out of fear of what other people think, out of self-hatred and just not wanting to stay and submit to that, or out of real concern and compassion for other people's silence, or fear that I'll give them a cold. It can run the whole range. We can't tell from the outside.

So you can see how important and how valuable mindfulness is for our own experience, because it really takes the ability to bring our awareness back to the point of intention to have some clue for ourselves about why we're doing what we're doing. And this is really the key of all our actions in life: Why am I doing what I'm doing? This is how we find out so much about ourselves.

Often we just look at the results of our actions and wonder why our experience of the results isn't matching what we think we want to happen. But we're often not really clear about what our intentions are, which is understandable because they're often quite mixed. It's very subtle.

We've been talking about, in the instructions this morning, just that sense of "about to"—the intention before movement. Even that can be very complex, but it's the most simple to notice. Sometimes it can manifest as thought. And in a broader sense, which I'll talk about a little later, we can look at intention as manifesting as our purpose in life or in bigger situations—not just a momentary movement, but our larger intention in some of the big decisions we make, in some of the choices we face.

I want to go back to this point of saying that the natural fruit of understanding is compassion. This is something Thich Nhat Hanh says often. And I can't say how many people I've spoken to here on retreat who have described some little annoying experience they had. I don't know if you recognize that what you're talking about is just this: the experience you had that was so unpleasant, the way you were able to deal with it in a mindful way, was really showing how understanding leads to compassion.

Just for example, there have been innumerable little stories about difficulties in the hall. This person's too close, this person's too far, this person took my place, this person's coughing—whatever. And it's great. It's great to have so many people in the hall. It's great to have these little bumpings and rubbings coming up. There's a Korean Zen saying, I believe—I'm not exactly sure—that the way they clean potatoes is to put them all into a big vat of water and then just bump them all against each other. That's sort of how our...

I don't think I need to say any more about that.

For example, someone will say that another person near them was just driving them insane—all the anger, all the rage. And they were aware, as we're all aware, that this reaction was a little bit out of proportion. But we're also aware that it doesn't just evaporate. We try to say, "Oh, it's okay," but it's not okay. We hate it, and we know that. Yet something in us keeps us from either running out in total frustration or getting up and yelling at the person. We choose the middle way, and that's the whole path of Buddhism—the middle way. And you sit with it.

At some point, much like I was talking about with fear, you stop just sitting and hating, and you start sitting and hating but with mindfulness of hating. Now that's a huge difference. We always think the hating has to go away first, but it doesn't. It's just that mindfulness of hating is what arises. And that in itself is a natural purification.

So often it happens that at some point, the person says, "You know, it went on for an hour, it went on for a day, it went on for a week"—it doesn't matter. At some point you say, "I just started really softening. I saw how the suffering was for me, and I really realized that person was just doing the best they could." This is the natural arising of compassion from understanding. Understanding not intellectually, but understanding that arises from our willingness to bring our attention, our mindful awareness, simply back to the present moment experience. That's all we have to do. The understanding of what's really going on arises by itself.

This happens over and over and over. I'm just trying to point it out because I think often we know it happens, but in a way, later on, you don't give yourself credit. You think, "Oh, you're talking about practicing out of compassion for all beings. Forget it. I have no compassion. That's too much. I don't even know what compassion means." But we do know what compassion means. It arises often for ourselves and for others. Just that little feeling of, "Oh, that must be hard." Or, "Oh, this is really hard. I'm doing pretty good to hang out with this." That's compassion. It doesn't have to be a big show. You don't have to join Mother Teresa's nuns. It doesn't have to be grandiose. We can start little.

I think one of the reasons compassion is the natural outflow of understanding is because in that moment, whenever we really touch or even have an intimation of what is true, of our true nature—that sense of luminous clarity, whatever you want to call it—there is in that, whether we're conscious of it or not, no separation. In that place of knowing what we all are, there's no more sense of separation or incompleteness. And in that total completion, in that sense of unity, the idea of craving or of anger or of needing to pull something in or push something away doesn't even arise. It's irrelevant.

Even though that might not be what we're consciously knowing, I think intimations of this truth are what arise. And in that, there's the melting of separation—the ability in that moment, in feeling my own pain, to feel another's pain. Or just the sense of, "Yeah, we're both here together trying to fit into this space." Instead of my space, your space, it's our space. That just arises quite naturally. It is, I think, in a very simple way, how wisdom gives rise naturally to compassion.

Okay, that's the upside. We can't just talk about how nice it is, because we all know that's part of our experience, but it isn't the totality of our experience. At least not mine—I'll say it's not the totality of my experience. Compassion and love, I think, are our truest expression. As the Dalai Lama once said, he thinks compassion is the truest expression of a human being.

That little children, he observes, show compassion more naturally than other emotions. So yes, of course hatred is also an expression of human beings, but not our truest one. Our truest one is compassion.

But when we're not touching understanding, when our habits of mind are predominating, when those clouds I talked about the other night are really obscuring the sun, when all we can see and recognize are the clouds, when our experience goes unexamined—the habits that commonly arise in many of us, deeply ingrained habits, are habits of wanting, of greed, desire, fear, self-protection, anger, just spacing out and wanting distraction. The three basic so-called poisons, and they really do poison our understanding: greed, hatred, and confusion. They're deeply ingrained habits. They're not our truest nature.

Something I've been becoming more and more aware of in the last couple of years is how often, in the world at large, the force of these habits of mind serves as intention. Habits of greed, or of anger, or hatred, or indignation with a tone of judgment—they are very powerful forces for action. And what I've found interesting is how often these particular habits of mind go unquestioned as the most valid or useful intentions that give rise to action.

This is why intention is such an important aspect of how we act, not just the result. Think how many really valuable and important things come to be—how many people work for the environment or work in science or work for peace—and the motivation is really anger, rage, and fear. It's a huge motivation for action. It's very energizing. And it seems to get a lot done.

But if you pull back and look at the big picture, at some point it goes slightly awry. The results seem to go slightly awry. Last summer, for example, I was at a retreat specifically for burned-out environmentalists. People very active, for many years deeply active in the environmental movement—lawyers, scientists, doctors. Some had a spiritual practice and some didn't. And it came out in many of the discussions that what had motivated them most deeply, what had kept them active all these years, was anger. And why were they so burned out? That was a lot of it. This wasn't my observation; this is what people were telling me. Anger kind of burns up the ground that feeds it. It can't sustain itself as a reliable and balanced motivating force for action, even though it seems to get so much done.

It's painful, but I've been fascinated to watch what's been going on in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. When some of the totalitarian regimes first started to break apart, there was—at least from here, at least as it was reported—some sense of euphoria. The good is finally winning, fear and despotism is falling apart, now everything will be flowers and beautiful. And look what's happened. It's incredibly painful, but what we're seeing is that one fear, the fear of the totalitarian regime, was just keeping a lot of other really deep fears and greeds submerged. Now, rather than fear of whoever the dictator is, it seems like every little group hates every other little group. There's a great fear of the other, the stranger. And there's also a lot of greed that arises. The purification really has to come in our own hearts, in our own intention. We can't just rearrange how things are outside and then everything will be okay.

The suffering, the immense suffering in this world—it's unthinkable, absolutely unthinkable. But we're not that different. The suffering all arises from human action. And human action is driven by intention. Without investigation, without a willingness to look, the deepest habits of intention are those of confusion and greed and anger and fear—all with the deep, somehow thinking that this will make me happy. That's the confusion.

So in some ways it might seem self-serving to sit here on a pillow, to be in this idyllic environment while there's so much suffering going on in the world. But I feel deeply that if we have the willingness to keep bringing our attention back, to really be honest and accepting of whatever we see in our experience, to really notice our intentions—they will begin to purify, to change, and it will have an enormous effect in our lives. It really ripples outward to everyone we're connected with.

And I'm not exaggerating to say that what we experience here matters. One yogi said to me, after some pillow wars in the hall—who sits where, this is my turf, fighting over who gets first in the lunch line—we have all kinds of wars during the three-month

course. Wars of turn on the light, turn off the light, turn on the light, turn off the light. It's really intense. Can you imagine something that's been blown out of proportion, and you're sitting with it for two months, and it gets aggravated each day when you see the person who turns on the light? Once in Burma, two monks—foreign monks, really committed people—came to blows over whether the fans should be on. As one yogi said to me once, this is how world wars start. Luckily all we have here is pillows.

What strikes me, and what's actually kind of sad and amazing, is an underlying assumption that often comes up in conversations: well, but if I give up desire and anger...

How will I ever do anything? Someone said to me once, "Well, if I don't have desire, what will I do? Just sit in my room all day?" You see, the unconscious assumption is that desire and fear and anger are all we have to act from. It's really kind of sad. But it gives us a chance to really open up and explore other possibilities.

And it isn't so easy, necessarily. Last summer I took a self-defense course called Model Mugging, which is very intense. Honestly, the conscious intention I had to take it was as a way to cultivate compassion. I know that might not make sense, but that was really why I went. I thought, well, if I really confront my fear of being attacked, then I won't be so afraid to move into what I perceive as dangerous situations, and I can be more open to the fear and respond with compassion. That was my thinking. Whether that was self-delusion, I don't really know.

The way this course works—this is just for women, the men's course is different—they have guys who are all padded, I mean really hugely padded, with these huge helmets and pads and everything. Because you're taught to defend yourself full strength when they come and attack you. It's not just that you do this move and this move. You really have to practice doing it with your full power. There were five sessions, each one five or six hours long. It was really intense and exhausting.

I found out pretty soon I actually wasn't going to confront my fear, because even though these guys would come to attack me, I knew they weren't going to hurt me. Still, the whole point is to encourage you to get up your energy and really do the techniques they teach you with all your strength, with all your power. And the way they cultivate bringing up that energy, of course, is anger.

In many cases I can understand this. I'm not saying anger is not important to feel. Many of the women in the class had been raped or abused, and the fear had been so paralyzing that they could not even say no or defend themselves. To get in touch with the anger and free the energy and let it out—I think that's extremely important. So I'm not saying that isn't a valuable part of it.

But what struck me was there was never any intimation that there could ever be any other motivation than that. I remember the first day, after all the group work where they're trying to rev us up, keeping us screaming all the time—well, it breaks the freezing, actually; it's a helpful technique; if you ever need to fight, screaming really gets your energy going—at the end of the group, one of the assistant instructors stomped over to me and said, "Great, let's go, kick-ass." And I thought, oh, I don't know if I'm in the right place.

So I spent my time really challenged to get my energy up, because I never got angry. I also don't have a history of being attacked or abused, so I didn't have something like that to draw on. But I consciously kept asking myself: can I bring up this level of energy to repel an attacker out of some other motivation? Can we have clear, direct action just out of clear seeing? No, I'm not going to let you punch me in the face—but without hatred, without fear. Can it actually come from compassion?

I can't say I got to that place. I got to where I could act without feeling angry and really bring up a lot of power. I can't say I actively felt compassion. But it was very interesting for me as a way to begin discovering how to act without it having to be only from the so-called negative force of intention.

And if we look around—again, we can only know from the outside—some of the people who seem most driven by the intention of compassion, whether or not you agree with their viewpoints, demonstrate how that intention can lead to much deeper and more long-lasting action and effect than rage or fear ever can.

Take someone like Mother Teresa. Again, whether you agree with how she does things, that little lady has done an incredible amount. Or Gandhi. Or Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh. She is, to me, an amazing woman, just a powerhouse of energy and commitment. She's involved in ten million different projects and seems to have very deep understanding, and a lot of compassion—what you'd call tough compassion, not "oh, you poor thing." It seems to me that she acts from a strong intention of compassion. I just want to read something she wrote once, if I have it here somewhere.

I don't seem to have it. Something... oh, here it is.

This to me is an expression of the real strength of compassion that greed and anger can never have. This is part of a eulogy she wrote for some friends during the Vietnamese war, some close friends who had been killed by grenades that were thrown into their school:

We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that people are not our enemies. Our only enemies are ambition, jealousy, hatred, and the misunderstanding that leads to such acts of violence. Please allow us to remove all misunderstanding so that we can work together for the happiness of the Vietnamese people. We must share the responsibility for the poverty and injustice in our country.

I think it takes an amazing understanding and greatness of heart to even write something like that, much less mean it. And I believe there's a strength from that, a strength that none of our confusion and delusion can ever come close to matching. It's just that the habits are so strong we sometimes forget there's another possibility.

That's the beauty of this practice of mindfulness. By our willingness to simply look, first it wakes us up to our habits. By even remembering to notice the intention, it can give you a moment of choice. Some people reported just kind of playing with that in movement today—noticing an intention to move arising and then not moving. Noticing it arise and then not moving. And getting to the place where quite a few people said, "Well, what will ever make me move?" It's fun to play in. But then suddenly some intention arises that is somehow powerful enough, and you move. That's on the simple level.

But we can notice that, and it is the noticing that gives us choice, that purifies naturally the intention. Again, the time when you're so filled with rage at someone here and you don't do anything about it and you just stay—that's the purification, noticing the intention, and it purifies naturally. It changes to care, to compassion.

Or when you see there's one last piece of cake and everything in you wants to throw the person ahead of you out of line and grab it, and you restrain yourself. And maybe real joy comes up: "Well, isn't it great? They look so happy to get that piece of cake."

Now, the noticing of the intention with mindfulness—that might have seemed like something you did. You noticed it. You made a deliberate choice not to act. And then the intention sort of purifies, changes quite naturally. It's not always that we have to work so hard.

And sometimes I think we can get discouraged because we think, well, once we see that this intention of greed isn't so helpful, that attachment brings suffering—once we see it, that should be it, right? It's clear. I've really felt the suffering. The habit should go. And it can get quite discouraging at times when it doesn't.

Last summer I think I heard an analogy that I really love. Our old habits don't just vanish—I'm sorry to tell you, but they don't just vanish. This person said it's sort of like they slowly wear out, like a piece of cloth. At first you can't see through it at all, and you use it and use it for years and years and years—I don't know how many years, a lot of

years. And it slowly gets thinner and thinner, and it's sort of translucent, and you can see through it, and it gets some holes in it, and then it's really clear. It just slowly, slowly wears out. And in the end you hardly notice that it's gone. It's been so gradual. That really fit with my experience. That's a lot what it's like.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, "Do not be afraid of freedom from desire and fear. It enables you to live a life so different from all you know, so much more intense and interesting, that truly by losing all, you gain all."

So just notice sometimes the tendency: if I let this desire fade away, where will I be? Who will I be? Who will I be without this self-hatred? Who will I be without constant judging? And I love it so much.

You know, it's as if anything would be preferable to freedom from desire and fear. It's really quite wonderful.

Our intentions do purify naturally, quite a lot, through our willingness simply to be with them. But the Buddha was so practical—there are also ways we can consciously, gently help to guide our intentions, to incline the mind toward compassion, toward loving-kindness, just in gentle ways.

That's actually what we've been doing with the loving-kindness meditation. Sometimes people find themselves confused about this. They'll say, "I don't get it—you're telling us to just be with whatever is, and then you turn around and say wish that people's suffering may go away, wish that things can be different." But we're not doing loving-kindness as some kind of naive wishing, like rubbing a magic gem—if I wish, then everything will be okay. What it really is, is a cultivation of intention. Each time we say, and truly mean, "May I be free from suffering"—that's an intention. We can't control the result, as you well know. You can't even make the feeling of loving-kindness come up, much less can you declare, "I will no longer have suffering."

But in this working with simply feeling—not just repeating the intention in a rote way, but tuning into it and meaning it—it has a profound effect. Often, again, one that's not noticed at first. The Buddha said once that what you think about, what you reflect upon often, toward that the mind will naturally incline. Which is sensible. It makes sense. In continuing to reflect upon and arouse the intention of loving-kindness, that begins to manifest in a much more spontaneous way.

It's quite interesting because very often, especially if you've been doing an intensive loving-kindness retreat, practicing a great deal, many people have said—and I found this to be true myself—you can say it and feel it, but it doesn't really feel like that much is going on. Especially if we have the idea that strengthening the intention of loving-

kindness means from now on I'm just walking around in this bliss of unity and love, with love spontaneously arising, a sense of oneness with every being we encounter. It's not like that.

But I found, and many people I've talked to have found, that on leaving a retreat and coming back to your everyday activities, your everyday relationships, you might think, "Nothing happened. I don't feel any different. I don't feel any more loving." That's because we're looking too big, looking for something too significant, too noticeable a change.

But what you begin to find—and it's really very profound—is again, it's on the level of intention. You walk into a little situation that before would have just made you crazy, and you start to get crazy, and then all of a sudden will come up: "Oh, that's okay. This is hard, but that's okay." And the whole situation just broadens out. It's okay to feel the difficulty, and in that there's a breadth of feeling—it's also okay for the other person or for the other situation to be just as it is.

I've noticed this happening in myself over and over and over. Loving-kindness and the intention of it doesn't jump over the difficulty. It opens to that and then has a much broader range, a much more all-inclusive range of intention that really lets everything be as it is and is okay with that. And it's really fascinating to notice how this arises. It's not like saying, "I think I'll make things be okay." It comes by itself. What we reflect upon frequently, toward that the mind will naturally incline. And so it does itself. You think you're just sitting here feeling like a stone, saying, "May I be happy, may I be happy, may I be happy." But if there's an intention to meet it, it's having an effect. It's having an effect.

So it's not just what I call a pillow practice—something you do on your pillow that doesn't have anything to do with the rest of your life.

Another way I've been working lately with conscious cultivation of the intention of compassion is borrowing a little bit from the Tibetans—cultivating the intention of bodhicitta, which translates as "enlightenment heart" or "enlightenment mind." Citta is a Sanskrit and Pali word that shows the split we have—we distinguish between heart and mind, but that word means both. They don't make the differentiation.

The cultivation of bodhicitta—again, it's intention, not looking so much for the result—is to clarify in oneself the intention to awaken in order to help all sentient beings awaken. Now this might sound very grandiose if we look at the big picture. People might think, "I can't do that. I can just barely be here for my own pain. I can't be here

for the pain of all beings in the world. That's just too grandiose for me." But that's jumping over the intention and thinking that somehow we've got to go out and save all beings.

This has been a very wonderful practice for me this last year or so—simply cultivating that intention at the beginning of a sitting. The way it was recommended to me is simply to move my attention inside, get in touch with what's my purpose, really what's my purpose in practice, and tune into just the suffering in the world, the suffering of beings. This is not a guilt trip. It's just tuning into what is. And in that tuning in, it's so easy for just in that one moment to arise a sense of, "Yes, I'm really doing this difficult practice so that I may awaken to help all beings awaken."

Just that simple. And it has a profound effect—it can. Again, the intention comes, it goes. You don't try to hold on to it through the whole sitting. But that intention can give rise to a real vastness of mind, of heart.

It's said that that vastness, that all-encompassing nature encompassing the pain of all beings, the willingness to practice for all beings just for that moment—that vastness is akin to the vastness of our original nature. It approximates, the same way that the unlimited quality of metta approximates that spaciousness.

So notice, if you're interested, try it for yourself and see how the quality of the sitting can change. I don't mean you get better experience. I don't mean you get all pleasant. I don't mean anything like that. But the quality of our intentions that keep arising in the sitting shifts.

If I'm just sitting down and I don't really check in and clarify my intention to awaken, to help all beings, and I sit and I start to hurt, it's easy: "Okay, I've had it. I think I've got something else to do. Who needs this? What's the point of sitting with this pain? It's too difficult."

When there's that intention, that vastness of connection with the suffering of all beings and that intention to somehow be of service, it's a lot easier to be here for what's happening. It's not nearly so self-confined. And I'm not talking about some grandiose idea of "I'm so important." Actually, we're not important at all individually. But in the whole scheme of things, what else is there to do? At least finish the sitting and be as present as possible, because it's not just for me. It really is a connection with all beings.

As I say, it's been a wonderful practice for me. It gives one much more energy, less discouragement. You can act without so much fear, without so much hesitation. When your actions are not just for yourself, it's like a mother with her child. If the child's in

danger, you don't think, "Well, I don't know, I'm a little afraid. I don't want to go talk to that weird guy talking to her. What if he doesn't like me?" You don't think about stuff like that. You go over and you do what has to be done.

Working with the intention of metta, intention of bodhicitta, of compassion, can have that same effect. We can act much more directly. We still have our stuff, but we don't have to be so limited by it. It's quite powerful. At least I've been finding it that way.

I was going to talk a little more about other aspects of compassion, but I'm not allowed to tonight. That's okay—I could go in two directions here and there's not that much more time, so I'll continue.

This isn't so much on the compassionate aspect of intention, but again, another way I have found in daily life that our ability to tune into intention, to notice it, can be an extremely helpful and valuable tool—in broader aspects of our daily life, in areas of activity where we need to make a choice, where we need to make decisions. The ability and willingness to tune into intention I've found extremely helpful in this area.

This is an aspect sometimes called clear comprehension. It's taking the microscopic aspect of mindful awareness that we cultivate here—really looking at intention, that little moment before you stand up, before you move your finger, before you turn around. It's a little hard to do that at work, or when you're in a busy conversation, or when you're taking care of your kids. But the same quality of attention, the same understanding of how intention works to link our understanding with our actions and decisions, can be used in a more macroscopic way of looking at things, at our larger activities.

And again, the fact of being aware of our intentions, of our purpose, gives us a little space of choice. It might close up again the next second—that's okay—but it gives us a little space of choice where we might not have to just act blindly from habit.

So in this larger area of working with clarity of purpose, it's the same inquiry: What's my intention in this action? Is it skillful? Is it not skillful?

Am I taking this cake out of greed? Or is it okay? Am I just hungry? These are simple things.

But there's also, on a larger scale, a kind of tuning into: Is this action, is this decision—and again, this isn't every little thing you do; you go and take a shower, you don't have to do this—but is this action, is this decision in accord with the most important purpose, the most important intent that I hold for myself, that I hold for my life?

This I've also found extremely valuable over the last few years. Of course, this necessitates reflecting and really looking at yourself, at your choices, and what you hold to be most dear, what's most true for you, what's most important in your life—really consciously clarifying that for yourself, for now. Of course it can change. Everything can change. Hopefully it just refines and refines.

But in our lives, in this culture anyway, most of us are so bombarded by choices. It's not like in the old days. We all have endless choices about where to live, what job to have. So many people in this culture change jobs every couple of years. My father had the same job for forty years. He's lived in two houses in my whole lifetime. And for me, hardly the longest I'm in one place in the last some years is three months, and that's because of the three-month course.

Our lives are really different. We're bombarded by choices and actions—should I get married, should I have kids or not have kids, should I adopt? We have untold choices, on and on.

The point I'm trying to make is that without some kind of reflection, without some kind of clear intention of what really is our deepest purpose, it's easy to just drift from one thing to the next. We wake up and years have gone. We wake up and our whole life has gone. We think, wait, but what about what was really important?

So I find it valuable to take some time to really reflect, or just notice when it arises spontaneously. And I would encourage you to really honor yourselves and honor that purpose—not to get into some kind of self-judgment or self-denigration, thinking "I'm not good enough to have such a noble purpose," or whatever.

When this first ever arose as an issue for me, I was on some short retreat some years ago, and it just spontaneously came out of nowhere, but with real resolve and clarity: my purpose in this life is to serve the Dharma. I thought, "Oh, who said that? Where did that come from? What does that mean?" I didn't know what that meant.

But the tendency that next followed was, "Well, who do you think you are? Who do you think you can ever help? How do you think you can serve the Dharma?" But if any of us aren't the Dharma, that's all we are. And whatever we do can be a service to truth and a service to other beings. There's no way it has to manifest.

I'm not saying that should be your purpose. Whatever is really true for you, whatever is really at core, what's most important—honor that in yourself. Don't let yourself get beguiled by all those little matterings in the back of your mind: "I'm not

worthy, I'm not good enough, I don't know what this means." No, you don't know what it means. But I found it to be a beacon, a really powerful kind of guide in times of decision.

When I first started teaching, I would never have done it had it not been for the clarity of that intention arising in me. This is my purpose. It was within two months of that arising that I was kind of nudged into teaching. I would never have done it without that. I hated the whole idea. I was petrified. I would have done anything to get out of it—which I could have done by just saying no.

But I was nudged and nudged, and a couple of good friends who usually, if I said no, would just go "okay"—they wouldn't take no. At some point, like a light bulb went off, and I said, "Oh right, that thing that came up before: my purpose is to serve the Dharma. This is where I have to apply it."

I'm not looking for this. It just came. And all the fear and all the dread and all the unpleasantness—that just becomes part of our practice. It's not a problem. I mean, we don't like it, but to have fear of being uncomfortable make my decisions in life isn't really how I want to live my life.

Let's close with this from Thich Nhat Hanh:

The interdependence of all beings is not a philosophical game removed from spiritual and practical life. In bringing to light the interdependence of all phenomena, the meditator comes to see that the lives of all beings are one, and she or he is overcome with compassion for all. Seeing and loving go together. Seeing and loving are one. Great understanding goes with great compassion.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 258

Patience in Mettā

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common experience among practitioners: the discouragement that arises when we see our mental afflictions (kilesas) more clearly through practice, yet they seem to persist or even intensify. She reframes this perception, explaining that our increased awareness of suffering is itself evidence of deepening purity of mind—we see more because we're more awake.*
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> *Wilson introduces the concept of āsavas (biases or tendencies of mind) as underlying conditions for ignorance to arise, using the Buddha's metaphor of a seed that only grows when supportive conditions are present. She emphasizes that ignorance is conditionally arisen and therefore can cease when those conditions are absent. Rather than drowning in discouragement about our defilements, she encourages practitioners to notice those moments when the mind is free from kilesa—to pause and recognize the quality of pure consciousness.*
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> *The talk focuses on two pāramīs (perfections): generosity (dāna) as the manifestation of non-greed, and patience (khanti) as the perfection of non-hatred. Drawing from her transformative experiences as a nun in Thailand, Wilson illustrates how generosity creates interconnectedness and how patience arises from seeing things as they truly are. She concludes with Ajahn Sumedho's teaching that Buddha-wisdom is humbling rather than fascinating—knowing the unconditioned is as simple and spacious as the space in a room, requiring the profound quality of patience to recognize.*

In speaking with people over just the last few days, I'd say one of the themes I've noticed—not with everyone, of course, but running through a lot of the conversations—is a sort of underground, or not so underground, sense of discouragement, a kind of impatience manifesting in various ways.

Partly, people speak of really having deep insight into some of our very painful patterns of personality, or really experiencing on a deep level the dukkha of craving, or the pain and misperception brought about by self-judgment, just to pick two common ones. And despite this deep understanding, this seeing, it's still going on. It seems actually to be going on more than it was before, or more tenaciously, or they're seeing more subtle levels of it—which indeed can be discouraging.

Another way it's talked about is this: as mindful as I've been all this time, it seems that as soon as the energy drops or somehow the mindfulness goes away, in like a rush come our friends the kilesas, the torments. It's like, if that happens here, where the conditions are so supportive, and where I have such a relatively small amount of distraction, I might as well just give up. Because when I get out of here, it's just going to be so much more.

These are common kinds of themes that have been coming up. I don't know if you can relate. And I mean, those are perhaps accurate perceptions. But I would like to posit that the conclusion drawn—that it's hopeless—is not an accurate conclusion.

I want to talk tonight about really two aspects. The main thing I want to do is to shift our focus for a while from our obsessive attention to the kilesas to perhaps reminding us to also notice the pure aspects of mind, which are also getting stronger. We forget to look sometimes. But the first aspect I want to speak to is the impatience and the seeming strength of these torments of mind, how quickly they come flying up.

And I think that's true. When we first start practice—not even when we first start practice, I mean on and on and on—it's hard to appreciate. At least it is for me; it's always a new revelation to appreciate the depth and the subtlety of ignorance. I know this morning someone told me that Steve was saying, you know, we've spent at least however old you are now—that amount of your life, more or less most of the time—cultivating greed, hatred, and delusion. And that's only if we speak of one lifetime. But somehow we think that we just have to see it a few times in three months and it'll go away.

I mean, we really deeply believe this. It's like a betrayal somehow that this stuff keeps coming up. It's still for me—it's been twenty-some-odd years—and I'll think, "Oh no, again this. I saw it to its depths years ago."

The Buddha spoke of this as a causal condition for ignorance to arise in a moment. He calls it āsavas. A translation I like for it is "bias of mind" or "tendency of mind." What we're talking about with these is the subtlety—it's not the full-blown presence of the kilesa or the hindrance itself, for example desire. The āsava is this underlying tendency for becoming, or sense desire, or wrong view. It is the underlying tendency for this to arise in a moment when the conditions are supportive for it to arise—which usually means when we're not really present, when there's not mindfulness, when we're acting or responding to stimulus out of habit. That's often the supportive condition for these āsavas to burst into full flower, so to speak, as craving or as becoming.

The Buddha gives the example of a seed. Say it's the seed of a rosebush—the seed has the potential to become a rosebush, but only if all the necessary supportive conditions are present for that seed to become a rose bush. It's the same way with this concept of these biases of mind, these āsavas. It's not like no matter what happens, if something pleasant arises, we're going to be gripped in craving. It doesn't have to happen. But when the supportive conditions are there—wow, that's really nice, just imagine how it would be if I really... Unmindfulness, liking, not noticing, grasping—the supportive conditions—and craving arises. It's subtle. It's pervasive. It can be discouraging.

I remember once a couple of years ago I was sitting here in a pretty mindful space, not really spacing out much, just really watching. As an experiment, I was seeing just leaves of some tree, and I was noting "seeing," I was noting "pleasant," very peaceful, calm, nothing else arising. And I deliberately—it was almost as if I pulled the energy back from the knowing, from the noting, and quit being mindful on purpose.

It was really fascinating. Just like that came up, like a whole—like the armies of Māra—this whole slew of desire and fantasy, nothing to do with the leaves. I mean, it was just leaves on a tree. I don't even remember what the story was. But what was amazing to me was how fast and how strong these tendencies came shooting up into actualization in my mind at that moment.

So if I just thought, "Well, that's what's going to happen no matter what," it would be quite discouraging. But I don't think that's the case. I know that's not the case. It was more an experiment to see what happens when conditions are right. And this tendency is, I think, much more pervasive and more subtle than we like to believe or like to give it credit for. It's also not personal, so we also like to blame ourselves for it every time craving or aversion or wrong view comes up.

But what it does point to, to me rather than discouragement, is the fact that ignorance is not unending. Ignorance is a mental factor that arises due to causes. And when those causes are not present in a moment, ignorance will also cease to be present. It comes and goes. It's not like the big bang—one day ignorance started and now it's here forevermore. The Buddha said that ignorance in fact is known as something that is conditionally arisen.

What we're doing here, besides learning to recognize the presence of ignorance and its manifestations as wrong view, craving, and aversion, we're also learning the conditions both for the arising of ignorance, for getting caught in blindness. We're also learning the conditions for recognizing the truth.

We're learning this not intellectually, but experientially. We're discovering that mindfulness, equanimity, and wisdom are the causal conditions that allow us to open to what is really true—that allow us to recognize our true nature, the true luminous nature of mind. We come to know that truth which is not colored by these biases, these tendencies of mind.

I think it's really important for us to keep recognizing this aspect and not let ourselves drown in our reaction to how strong and pervasive these tendencies toward ignorance are. What we're doing is learning the conditions that let us open to truth.

In the process, another part of the discouragement is this: because we're seeing more clearly, that's precisely how we're able to be aware of how pervasive, how subtle these biases of mind are. Because of the strengthening purity of mind, I was able to deliberately do that experiment of pulling back the mindfulness and watching how these tendencies rushed in. It's because of the deepening purity, the deepening mindfulness, that we are experiencing the painful nature of these torments, these afflictions. And we're experiencing the pain much more consciously, much more fully, with a much more open heart and an open mind.

The result is that it hurts more. We notice it more frequently. And we get so enmeshed in this process that we forget to notice why it's hurting more. We only notice that things we never would have noticed two months ago are now agony. We think, "Is this what I'm giving three months of my life for? To find new and various and subtle ways to suffer?"

If we let ourselves rest in that concept, it is overwhelming. It's also not accurate. It's another filter—another filter on our perception that's distorting what we see, distorting how we understand our perceptions.

So I'd like to offer a suggestion. As we open to the truth of dukkha, as we recognize and learn to open to the torments—and we really are doing this, there's so much more equanimity, so much more wisdom, so much more ability to be with the difficult, even though you might not really remember what it was like two months ago—but sometimes we forget. We get so involved in noticing these difficult aspects that we forget something essential.

When you're being fully present with one of the torments, one of the difficulties, and it goes away, stay really present. Also notice that moment of anger vanishing, that moment of craving dissipating. Don't just go, "Oh great, now it's going back to the breath." Wait a minute. Just a second. Really notice the quality of consciousness free from kilesa. Notice the quality of consciousness in that instant of purity.

It might not be spectacular, and then we hurry back to the breath: "Let's get the concentration going now that the anger is gone." Give it a break for a minute. Notice what's happening in that moment of peace. Begin to recognize the pure nature of consciousness. You don't have to be in such a hurry to get something else happening.

Along those lines, the rest of what I want to talk about tonight is just this: some reflections, some ways of talking about the manifestations of the pure nature of consciousness, of the purity of mind. There are many ways to speak about it, so I'm going to speak specifically in terms of the paramis, the perfections.

None of this is new. It's all reminders. I just want to balance our perception a bit.

Classically, in the Theravada tradition, when speaking of the luminous nature of mind, it doesn't really have any qualities. So in trying to talk about something with no qualities, it gets difficult. But I almost experience it as if whatever qualities we speak of are like reflections, manifestations of this luminous consciousness, not actually it itself.

Classically it's spoken of as non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. That's the very—I don't want to say dour, but unexcited—Theravadan way of speaking about things. But these are much more than neutral, unnoticeable qualities.

Non-greed, as I've spoken of before, is the quality of non-attachment, renunciation. It also has the more active aspect of generosity—thoughts and actions of sharing, of service. Non-hatred encompasses acceptance, compassion, metta, patience. Non-delusion is that brightness of mind, that clarity of perception you all know quite well, that allows for the arising of equanimity, of insight, of understanding. Because in that illuminated clarity, we just see what is, without all the extras.

What I'm going to speak about specifically tonight are two of the paramis: generosity and patience, which are spoken of as being the perfection of non-greed and non-hatred.

But first I want to share an experience, because sometimes I find in myself, or in talking with others, that speaking about the perfection of these qualities—or even the possibility of recognizing the purity of our true nature, or that word which to some people is almost anathema, enlightenment, because it sets up so much difficulty in comparing—becomes challenging. Sometimes I've found it difficult for myself or for others to not just think about but really open to the possibility of experiencing quite deeply, or recognizing very honestly, any of these qualities of awakening: metta, compassion, generosity, patience.

There can be this sense—again coming from the space I started talking about, where we're seeing how much craving there is, how easily anger and delusion arise—a tendency to say, "Yeah, great, in some other lifetime maybe. When I can go and renounce the world. Or maybe I can experience moments of purity here, but forget it once I'm back in New York City or Boston—it's out of the question." Sometimes even thinking about these so-called awakening qualities leads one further into comparison and discouragement.

An experience that's been a kind of metaphor for me, showing that this is not true at all, happened at the first retreat I ever did, some twenty-something years ago. It was in Bodh Gaya in India, the little village where the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree and came to his deepest realization. Now it's still a small village, but it's obviously a big tourist attraction, with a temple there and everything. I hadn't been back for a long time.

since that first retreat, and I went back maybe four years ago with some friends. I'm not especially a devotional type, so going to a stupa, a landmark like that, I wasn't really expecting anything. I just went because I thought it would be nice going back to Bodh Gaya, a nice idea. So I wasn't prepared for how powerful an experience that was for me.

And it was really along these lines of helping me wake up to the fact that what is true is accessible to us here and now, as we are now. They have a successor to the original Bodhi tree there, a descendant, with a big temple behind it and a fence around it. So you can't actually sit underneath it, except some of the people we were with got permission and they unlocked the gate. We actually did get to sit underneath the tree one day, which thinking about it now, I think would be very humbling. What right do I have, defiled as I am, to sit underneath this tree?

But the effect of being there actually had the opposite effect. This is just a dirty little village. This is a real place. And it made me get it that the Buddha was a real person who was struggling with the same things we are, who sitting under this tree came to this understanding in this human realm. It took it out of being a myth for me and into being reality. It really touched me very deeply. I found myself just weeping, which for me is very unusual in public. It was very moving. And I thought, wow, it's really possible. It's not just some story.

Being in Bodh Gaya went on as an even deeper metaphor for me, because it also took the sense of understanding who we are, of freedom, out of the idea of, well, only if I go and spend thirty-five years in a cave, or since I stopped being a nun, I might as well hang it up. I'm lost in the frivolous life again. It can't happen in the marketplace. Bodh

Gaya itself served as a real metaphor that that's not so, because this temple is just in the middle of everything. Bodh Gaya is a dirty, dusty little Indian village with all kinds of things going on outside the temple grounds. But never mind even that—within the temple grounds, you're sitting around near the tree or walking around the stupa, and there are hordes of tourist groups coming in with microphones in all different languages—Japanese, Thai, Hindi, American—running around. There was a whole group of Tibetan monks sitting on the side doing some chanting ceremony for three days. There were starving dogs fighting. There's all kinds of noise from outside. There was a mad Tibetan woman who was just running around screaming and yelling at anyone who stopped for more than a moment. There are lines and lines of beggars leading up to the temple because it's a great spot for begging. In fact, I was told some of the beggars live in the next village and take a rickshaw over to work every day to do their begging. Honestly. It's a lucrative place. I mean, there are also beggars who are truly starving, but both exist there. And Sharon or somebody told you this story about how the Hindus catch the fish out of the ponds and sell them to the Tibetans, because then they'll go and release them back into the pond to save them. It's quite a scene.

And I thought, there's no sense of let's remove ourselves from the hubbub of life. It's all right here. It was a wonderful metaphor that reminded me it's not about having to disengage from being human, from all the beauty and total insanity that's part of life in this world. It was very inspiring for me.

That particular experience gave me more faith that it's okay to open to these supportive, these awakening qualities of experience. And again, I find—in talking with people I find—that tendency in ourselves to not trust when we've experienced generosity or metta or non-delusion, clarity. People so often say, "Yeah, well, I was compassionate then, but you should see how I feel now. I was loving, but that was only for a minute, and since then I've been lost in anger." We're so quick to try and knock it away, to deflect these really important experiences—important because if we would really recognize and honor them, they can help us to recognize what is really true. Instead, we're in such a hurry to move on to how defiled we are.

Another thing I've noticed is that when we do truly open to compassion or peace or patience, there can be a kind of poignancy, because what comes in so soon is, "Oh, this is so nice, but there's no way it can last." People are saying, "Now there's only a little more than two more full weeks of intensive sitting. How am I going to hold on to this? It's almost like I don't even know if I want to feel it because then I just start suffering because I'm craving for it." This poignancy of the ending of things. Although we know

that it's not the case, that of course it's going to end—every experience is going to end, every physical and mental state is going to end—that's not a problem. In fact, when we know from the outset that whatever we're experiencing is of course going to end,

it allows us to experience it much more fully, with a much greater depth of appreciation for it just as it is, without needing it to continue for our happiness. It's really quite wonderful, and in itself it deepens and opens our potential for resting more easily in the natural state of awareness—instead of being so afraid to touch it that we run back to our familiar pain.

I'm not talking especially about an ecstatic high. That's kind of another way we get sidetracked. That's why I'd really suggest you just keep looking at those moments. Notice, feel the quality of those moments when you're not caught in kilesa. Don't get distracted by looking for something with fireworks. Just notice those moments of purity.

So that was the introduction. I can see I'm not going to make it through this whole thing. We'll edit as we go along. Maybe we'll talk about one parami tonight, I don't know.

To continue, I wanted to talk about these qualities in terms of the paramis, which I know has been spoken of a little before. Paramis are often translated as perfections or noble qualities, described as perfections of character or conduct—especially the perfections in the bodhisattvas or the noble ones. I see the paramis as a reflection in action, a reflection in character of the true understanding of our nature, of what we really are, of truth. As this reflection of the luminous, pure nature of mind, it manifests in our daily activities as something you can get a handle on. You can notice your conduct. You can notice your character. It can serve as a radiance back to the luminous pure nature, if you want to put it that way. But it's also a way to work in relational activities—to notice these perfections of character or conduct in our activities, in our relations to each other.

I want to list the ten paramis, not for you to remember or hold onto intellectually, but just so you can recognize them experientially when they arise. They're not just some offhand experience. The first is generosity. Then sila, or conscious conduct. The third is renunciation of attachment. Fourth is wisdom. Fifth is energy. Sixth is patience or perseverance. The seventh is truthfulness. The eighth is resolution. Ninth is metta. Tenth is equanimity. You'll recognize that many of these have been ongoing themes we've been speaking of.

On first hearing or looking at the list, I wondered, what about compassion? That's not on the list. I thought that was the other wing. But quite interestingly, in looking at the commentaries about the paramis, it says that all the paramis, all ten of them, have the characteristic—in other words, what you can tell about them—of benefiting others. And that the immediate cause for a parami, for any of the ten to arise, is compassion and skillful means. So what that's saying is that intrinsic to all of these paramis is compassion and skillful means.

Tonight I want to talk more about the paramis of generosity, and hopefully patience—we'll see.

Generosity, as I say, is related to non-greed, which is non-attachment. But generosity is a movement of that, like a spilling out, the generous giving out of energy and connecting with the world around us, connecting with others, really moving out of being enclosed in ourselves into an active state of interconnectedness.

If you think of attachment, you can feel how it's this state of mind that compulsively refers everything back to myself. What can I have? What does this mean to me? What do people think about me? What's going to happen to me? Everything that happens, we refer back to how it's going to affect me. It's a very contracted, separate, closed state.

Non-attachment is not only free of that constriction, but the energy that goes into holding that—and it's a huge amount of energy—is then free to turn back out to others, to sort of spill outwards into the movement of generosity. So with the arising of non-greed come natural generous impulses in any of a variety of forms. You all see that here. You see as the retreat goes on, people are doing all kinds of sweet little generous acts for each other, or just having generous thoughts.

A generous thought is also the same intention. And so it shows that generosity, this *parami*, arises and is strengthened quite naturally by our mindfulness. Each moment of mindfulness in which greed dissolves—that compulsive referring back to "I"—that moment of purification allows for the potential of generosity to arise in consciousness.

As with all of the *paramis*, as with everything, we always come back to say that mindfulness practice is one of the strongest protections we have, and really the most powerful way that allows all these qualities to develop naturally—or really to be uncovered, I would even say, more than developed.

We can also see how the practice of generosity itself is a very powerful practice, not only to develop the feelings of generosity, but actually as an opening into wisdom, into understanding, into interconnectedness. In fact, as you know, often when the Buddha spoke of his teachings, he broke them into three very basic practices: *dana*, which is generosity; *sila*, which is moral conduct; and *bhavana*, which is mental development.

Generosity doesn't have a specific form, of course. They talk of threefold generosity. The first is giving of material things. The second is giving of fearlessness, which I think is very interesting—giving of fearlessness described as protection of beings from harm. One very powerful way we have of giving fearlessness is through our moral conduct. It's often said that through our conduct of non-harming, we are giving other beings the great gift of fearlessness in knowing that we will not harm them. And the third is giving of the Dhamma, in whatever way that manifests in us.

Of course, working with Dhamma as practice, it's not so much in the observable results, but it always comes back to intention—the intention in consciousness, the intention in the mind that gives rise to the thought, the speech, or the action of generosity.

In this country, *dana* isn't so culturally instituted as a practice. When I was a nun in Thailand, I think one of the most profound learnings I had was on the power and the beauty of the practice of generosity, because it's part of the culture there around the practice of Buddhism. It was really very profound for me. It's very strong in the culture.

Being there as a nun or a monk, you're completely supported by people in the temples. Even as a lay person, you can go to pretty much almost any temple in the country—and there are thousands and thousands of temples—and no matter how poor or how crowded, you just walk in and say you want to practice and you're made welcome. You're given a place to stay, you're given food. If you need some supplies and they have it, they'll give it to you. And there's not the slightest ounce of begrudgingness about this. It's done with so much openness and so much joy that it really blew me away.

Even when I first went to ordain, I went to a temple north of Bangkok, a very rich temple where the abbot was old and revered and well-known. I mean, I was just somebody who walked off the street. He didn't know anything about me. And he was showing me around a little *kuti* I could stay in—the abbot himself, which he didn't need to do—and it was very dusty. He said, "Oh, it's so dusty, you know," and he starts trying to clean it up for me. Very pure, just: let's make this as nice as possible. And it continued like that however long I stayed, anywhere I went.

I was in one small temple in the north that only had about six little *kutis* for women, a serious practice temple, and the *kutis* were all filled with Thai nuns. On any day, unexpectedly, any number of people could show up and want to stay. Once about ten women showed up, which is a lot when there are only six huts. The head nun, every time this happened, in an instant she'd give up her hut, put as many in it as possible, and go stay in the cave or stay in the woods with such joy. And then all the other Thai nuns would pack in as many as they needed to in each *kuti*. And me being the honored guest, they never put anyone else in my *kuti*, even though it meant they were sleeping four to one of these tiny little huts. It was really beautiful.

I would think back to when I was on staff, and I thought: was I ready to give up my room so another yogi could come and stay when the place was full? Did the idea even cross my mind? It's very beautiful to see.

I could go on and on, but my whole year there was just the experience of one act of beautiful generosity after the other, none of it forced. Really seeing how it works in people—because generosity kind of drives away, doesn't leave room for unwholesome states. To give, you have to first look at your attachment to something and let go of it. And then in the giving there's some affection, some *metta*, some caring, a real unity. It brings a real brightness, a joy, like sympathetic joy.

You could see that in the generosity of the people I met in Thailand, over and over and over—a happiness and a joy that arose in their consciousness in the process of their acts of generosity. That was really beautiful and very deep and profound. It's something I see on occasion here, on occasion in myself, but not in such an ongoing, spontaneous, and really deep way as I experienced in Thailand.

You can also see how in the act of generosity it strengthens our understanding of interrelatedness. In the giving, you can't give without a receiver. You can't receive without a giver.

Giving is an openness into our interrelatedness with another person. I think that's one of the reasons it's often suggested that if you're having difficulty with somebody, you give them a gift. This doesn't mean throwing them some piece of junk that you don't want anymore—"Here, take this." We're talking about real, deep, genuine giving, true intention of giving.

The teachings say not to give with resentment. As stated in the commentaries, "Do not give detesting the gift or those who ask for it." That's not the intention of generosity. When we're giving with pure intention, there's that volition to give up whatever it is completely, without any expectation of return.

Just in that moment—and don't use this as another club to beat yourself because you're not a hundred percent pure in your intentions of generosity. It's a practice.

Some of the teachings from Sayadaw U Pandita speak about how to work with an act of giving as a conscious practice for opening our own understanding. First, in an act of giving, really give attention to the volition, to the intention, so that it purifies through our intention. In other words, if we're giving and we see that we're really giving because we want something back, the noticing of that in itself can be enough to purify the intention.

Also, as we're giving, we can see the clinging we have to whatever it is we're giving, whether it's our time or a thing. In that seeing of the clinging, we allow that clinging to dissolve, giving the gift freely.

And then something I learned directly from U Pandita is, if possible—but not here, please, until the retreat is over—to give directly, hand to hand. I had given him a book that I knew he wanted, and it had been passed to him while I was sitting. When I went over, he made me sign it, and I just kind of put it down. He said, "No," correcting me. He made me pick it up and give it to him hand to hand, really looking at each other.

There is such a different depth of power and presence in the act when it's done in that way. I really felt full faith and confidence in the act of giving, being fully present for it, and also much more aware of the interrelatedness of giver and receiver—that both are present. The sense of the metta moving back and forth, so that you really couldn't tell whose was whose, made the whole act so much more alive, so much more profound. It was really quite a beautiful lesson.

At the same time as giving, we give with the mind really focused on the act of giving—in other words, just being really present. Not just "here" and then "now I'm going to go do whatever I want to do, glad that's over with," but being really present.

This next point I thought was interesting because it acknowledges the momentariness of all experience: after the act of giving, continue to be aware, mindful of the intention, of the volition, because of course it can easily change. We all know that—giving with the purest of intention, and ten minutes later the thought comes up, "Oh gee, I wonder if I should have given that. I could have really used it." Just to notice that. Of course things change, and again, in the noticing is the purification.

Also, to be aware of the broader context of giving—I think this also comes in with purity of intention. In other words, giving what is really useful and what is helpful. The commentaries go into long lists of the kinds of situations and things in which you wouldn't give. For example, you don't give something harmful, even if it's what the person really wants.

It reminded me of when my sister was very severely ill and was in intensive care in the hospital, on one of these respirators for days. She couldn't drink; all she could have was ice chips. I've never been on one, but apparently it's just torment—your throat is dry and horribly unpleasant, and all you want is something to drink. And that's the one thing you can't have. I just remember her begging, pleading. It was really heartrending.

That's an extreme example, but in that instance, it's not compassionate and it's not a true act of generosity to give water when she's going to choke to death on it. You give what you can—the ice chips that would be helpful. Or you give compassion, or you give love in that instance. You give what is helpful, and that's the true giving.

Also, allowing oneself to receive in the same focused, present, allowing way is equally powerful, and I think it's vital. It's really a way of looking at the purity of our intentions of giving. If we can only give but we can't receive, it doesn't work that way.

For instance, one of the other powerful lessons about being on the receiving end in Thailand—knowing how we live here and how poor the people were there, and how much they were giving. I knew I could write home and have anything I wanted or however much money I wanted, and these people were really sacrificing to give me food. It's hard, given our conceptual framework, not to feel totally rotten about myself, completely undeserving.

Now, there are a couple of mistakes in that. One is taking it personally. The giving is not personal. It's supporting the Dhamma. It's supporting anyone who practices and carries on true intention of spreading and supporting the Dhamma. It's not "I like you as a person" or "I don't like you as a person," so "I support this one and not another." It's not personal.

And it's also seeing that in blocking—by not receiving really deeply and genuinely and openly—we block the flow of generosity. There was so much joy coming to the people from the giving. It was wonderful to watch. And if I were to say, "No, I won't take that," you can feel how it just stops the energy. Or if I say, "Well, I'm not deserving of that"—that's just a way of... It's really, in a way, a giving to receive when what you're receiving is being given with such pure intention.

Notice it here, even in our culture, in one common way: in receiving compliments. Never mind thanks, but how...

how hard it is for some of us to just really let someone say something very positive about us. We say, "Oh, well, you know..." We turn it away, we're incredibly uncomfortable, we want to list all the reasons that's not true. It stops the flow of interconnectedness. It brings us into feeling quite separate.

To receive with the same purity of intention is equally a part of this movement of generosity, of non-attachment. And of course, giving—I'm not just talking about things. It includes service, giving of our time, giving of our care, any way in which this movement of non-attachment, of generosity, moves out to others.

The second parami I want to talk about is patience. Patience is said to be the perfection of non-hatred in character and in conduct. And I can really feel how that's the case. It has the characteristic of acceptance, obviously—this quality of acceptance, a kind of equanimity. But it really means enduring difficulties, harmful or difficult situations, whether brought on by other beings or by internal formations.

So sitting here, you know, it's being patient not only with the external situation but with all the internal difficulties as well. It's not a state of endurance tinged with aversion—"Please God, let me get through this until something better comes my way." That's not patience. Patience is the state of consciousness, the act of consciousness itself. It's not only the span of time that you can be with something, but it's that momentary arising of consciousness that is dominated by non-aversion or acceptance, again accompanied by compassion or skillful means.

And what I think is really interesting is that another immediate cause, the proximate cause for patience to arise, is seeing things as they really are. Patience isn't just something we do because we can't do anything better—"I'll be patient until I can get really clear and mindful." Patience arises from seeing things as they really are. I don't think we should underestimate the importance of the consciousness of patience in opening us to wisdom and to truth.

Again, I don't know why I'm in Thailand tonight, but Thailand was also one of my best teachers in learning patience. Because aside from how beautiful and generous everyone was, it was a very difficult experience. I went there to practice with the idea that I would do a long period, a couple of years, of intensive practice. I had places like IMS or similar retreat centers in England as my model—long, quiet, peaceful. Forget it.

I thought I'd be out in the woods, a real nature retreat. Instead, I spent months in Bangkok in this temple where I ordained, which was actually very nice for Bangkok but incredibly noisy. Loudspeakers blaring all the time. Three in the morning, a hundred roosters decide to wake up every single morning. People everywhere, hordes and hordes of tourists.

Even when I got to the woods, the temples would have people come in on tour buses because it's sort of like their parks. They come on Sunday, have picnics, wander around, look at the monks and nuns, take pictures of you as you're doing walking meditation—right in your face. And incredibly hot. Incredibly hot. In Bangkok during the hot season, I'd wake up and see that ball of sun coming up over the horizon and think, "I can't bear another day." It would just go on and on. Finally I got out to the country, out to the woods, to this little temple I was telling you about, way back in the forest by a riverbed.

It sounds idyllic. The forest is not quiet. The forest is so loud I could not believe it. So many insects and lizards and snakes and bats and birds and monkeys. Incredibly loud. You can't imagine it if you haven't been sitting there, waiting for mangoes dropping on the tin roof like explosions during mango season.

One night there was a strong rain and the river, which was really low, rose about five feet. It was a river with woods on each side and then sheer cliffs going up, so the sound just reverberated back and forth between the cliffs. I remember thinking—literally—that I was going to lose my mind that night from the noise of the river. I was losing it. I was losing it in aversion. I thought this stuff was an obstacle to my practice. There's no way to practice in this kind of environment, never mind the bugs and the ants, and poisonous—I could go on forever.

So this was two or three months or more into my stay. When I finally got it, I said, "Oh, these things are not an obstacle to my practice. My reactive mind is an obstacle to my practice." If I didn't start paying attention, I could see that what I was really cultivating was aversion. I could spend years cultivating aversion, or I could start to work with patience. The choice was mine.

It made a huge difference to see that. I mean, it didn't make it more pleasant—I didn't like the conditions any better—

But as that reactivity that made everything a struggle began to fall away, there arose this quality of simply being with whatever it is that we cannot change.

Now, the Buddha spoke also of skillful avoidance. Patience doesn't mean enduring a really harmful situation that you can actually do something about. For example, if there was a particular food that made me violently ill and there were other things to eat, it

wouldn't be patience to think, "Well, I'll just eat this food along with all the others and be violently ill." That's not necessary. Sometimes we get a little confused and think that skillful discernment means we're not being patient. But that's not the case.

It's with the things we can't change that patience reveals its true nature—pain in your body, having the flu, the person next to you who moves a lot, an unexpected message from home that stirs up a whole whirlwind in your mind. With situations we cannot change, this quality of patience is not just a way to help us get through to something better. It is the quality that arises because we know what's true, and it allows us to deeply open into the truth of who we are instead of looking for something spectacular.

I want to read something Ajahn Sumedho says about patience, about this sense of not looking for something spectacular. Ajahn Sumedho is an American monk who practiced for many years under Ajahn Chah, the great Thai forest monk, and now has a monastery in England.

He talks a lot about being patient in Thailand, about how hard it was and how he eventually stopped wanting to be really interesting and fascinating. He realized that was a waste of time, sweating in a kuti in Northeast Thailand. He started looking at the water buffaloes and thinking, "There's the most stupid-looking creature in the world—a Thai water buffalo." So he would sit there trying to tell himself, "That's what I need to do. Be like a Thai water buffalo." He'd just sit and create the image in his mind of a water buffalo—becoming more stupid, more dull, more patient, and less fascinating and clever and interesting.

He's talking about this quality of patience, not just getting through something, but how it opens in us quite deeply the truth. He says:

"Buddha wisdom is a very humbling wisdom, and it takes a great deal of patience to be wise like the Buddha. Buddha wisdom is not a particularly fascinating kind of wisdom. It's not like being a nuclear physicist or a psychiatrist or a philosopher. Buddha wisdom is very humbling because it knows that whatever arises passes away and is not self. So it knows that whatever condition of the body and mind arises, it's conditioned, it passes away. And it knows the unconditioned as the unconditioned."

And this is the part I think is interesting:

"But is knowing the unconditioned very interesting or fascinating? Try to think of knowing the unconditioned. Would it be interesting? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be an incredibly fascinating thing to know—something blissful and ecstatic.' So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the

space in this room. The space in this room—is it very interesting to look at? It's not to me. The space in this room is like the space in the other room. The things in this room might be interesting or uninteresting or whatever—good, bad, beautiful, ugly. But the space, what is it? There's nothing you can really say or think about it. It has no quality except being spacious."

And to be able to be really spacious, one has to be patient.

CHAPTER 259

Patience in Mettā

Carol Wilson · 52 min

In this loving-kindness retreat talk, Carol Wilson illuminates an often underappreciated dimension of mettā: patience (khanti). She challenges common misconceptions about loving-kindness—that it should feel like sentimental bliss or passionate ecstasy—and instead points to the quiet, unflamboyant quality of open acceptance as mettā's transformative core.

Wilson explains that true mettā arises from wisdom (paññā), specifically from recognizing our intrinsic wholeness and completeness. She explores how our habitual reactions to experience—clinging to the pleasant, resisting the unpleasant, ignoring the neutral—perpetuate a false sense of fragmentation and separation. This pattern, rooted in not truly understanding impermanence (anicca), keeps us searching outside ourselves for happiness that already resides within.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with difficult experiences during meditation. Rather than struggling against physical discomfort, boredom, or emotional challenges, Wilson encourages bringing bare attention grounded in mettā directly into the experience itself. She shares a personal example of transforming tiredness through patient acceptance, demonstrating how this quality creates spaciousness and allows us to embrace the whole show of life—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral alike. Drawing from both Buddhist teachings and a passage from Dostoevsky, she shows how this all-embracing acceptance is not weakness or passivity, but a courageous and powerful way of meeting life as it truly is.

If this is the first time that you've done a loving-kindness retreat—or maybe even if you've done other ones before—you might be discovering by now that metta, or loving-kindness, has many different aspects. You can experience it in various ways, and perhaps some of those aspects have very little to do with our expectations or our ideas about what loving-kindness should feel like or how we should experience it.

Tonight I want to talk mostly about a particular, less flamboyant aspect of loving-kindness, but one which is, I think, particularly helpful to tune into at this time of the retreat. It's also an aspect that really opens us to deep acceptance and freedom. This is the aspect of metta that is sometimes called patience, or open acceptance. It's not too flamboyant.

I remember a conversation I had a couple of years ago with a man who was on a Vipassana retreat. He really wanted to talk about loving-kindness and his resistance to it—his sort of negative feeling about loving-kindness and why he didn't really want to practice it or think it was a good idea. I think this shows one of our inaccurate expectations or ideas about what love is. To him, metta conditioning us to really accept whatever arises, to meet whatever arises with friendliness, was a form of weakness, of real passivity, leading to victimization, to letting ourselves be used as a doormat. Just this kind of namby-pambiness where everything's okay, everything's lovely.

This corresponds, I think, to some of the ways that in our culture we experience the idea of love—ideas that carry over into what we perhaps unconsciously associate with metta. One aspect that we often think of as love is what you could call sentimentality: everything is kind of soft and rose-colored. It's the kind of thing in movies when lovers are tripping through a beautiful field of flowers and Mozart is playing in the background and everything is just so perfect. And of course they have to end it with "they lived happily ever after"—which, as we know, is impossible—but they have to end it there because you really can't keep up that illusion of soft, beautiful, everything's-nice perfection.

It's easy to drift into that sort of sentimental idea of love and to bring that into what we might expect of metta: that somehow all our experience turns nice, and if we're filled with metta, everyone we meet is really so sweet and pleasant, and the world takes on that rosy glow. But we can forget that that's not what happens exactly, and looking for that just sets us up for trouble. That's not love with wisdom. And metta comes with wisdom. Metta arises from wisdom, is associated with wisdom, with seeing things as they are.

The flip side of our inaccurate assumptions about love is not weak but really strong—the real sense of passion, which is usually blind, but leads to incredible strength and sacrifice and willingness to be together, willingness to die for love, love of country, love of another person, whatever. This real strength can lead to a sense of blind passion. In our loving-kindness practice, it can subtly, at times, lead us to expect that the metta should be these throes of ecstatic bliss. Most of the time, that's really the culmination of it, and if we're not experiencing it that way, we think we're not there yet. In fact, we may believe we've never experienced one single instance of metta at all, because we don't experience it that way. But I can promise you will not always experience it that way. And it would be exhausting, I think, personally. I'm one of the people who rarely experiences things that way. But again, that blindness, that passion is associated with clinging, with attachment. And this is also not the true love, the pure love that comes from wisdom.

Metta arises from wisdom, and one way that I like to express the essence of wisdom is the deep recognition of our intrinsic wholeness, of our essential inner completeness. Metta is a powerful force that lets us access this deep truth—not an intellectual truth of "oh yes, we're essentially complete," but experientially knowing, living from that place of inner wholeness, of completeness.

The Buddha often said that everybody wants to be happy. I think—this is me now, not the Buddha—that the real yearning, that yearning for happiness, that yearning for whatever it is we're yearning for, is at least in my own experience a yearning for that unity, a yearning for coming home to deep inner connection, to true peace.

The sad aspect of our experience is that in that yearning for deep completion, we don't really see—we somehow have lost sight of the fact—that we've already got it. We keep looking outside to experience, to people, to whatever, to try and somehow feel whole again, somehow feel complete.

I read in a newspaper last year a little description of an Oprah Winfrey show. I assume you all know this is a talk show—I've actually never seen it. But she was mimicking a movie called *Sleepless in Seattle*, which I think was about a widower who called into a radio show to try and meet a partner. On Oprah's show, she had five men who had, in some recent period of time, lost their wives. I think they had children too, and good jobs—doctors or lawyers or something. I assume they were probably nice-looking; it didn't really mention that. But the point of this program was simply introducing these guys. I mean, what can you really get to know about some guys sitting on Oprah Winfrey for an hour? And then she invited any women who were interested—so this was rather heterosexually biased—to write in letters asking for a date.

Two weeks later, she came on her show with a bulldozer. She had received 60,000 letters. These guys had actually received 60,000 letters from women looking for love, looking for happiness, looking for a partner. It made me really sad in a way—the loneliness in our culture and the lack of connection, of family, of whatever. We can read all kinds of sociological interpretations into it, but my point for now is simply this: that deep yearning for completion, for wholeness, keeps sending us outward when what we seek is already here.

is that to me this was a great example of how we posit our happiness, how we think that somehow completion can only be found outside of ourselves—sometimes way outside of ourselves. And it's precisely this looking that keeps us from recognizing we're already home.

Loving-kindness, this mettā practice that we're doing, is opening up our heart, opening up our experience so that more and more deeply we can come to recognize this place of inner completion—to dwell here, to rest here more and more frequently, and to respond to other beings and to the world from a place of unity rather than from a place of fear, separation, and fragmentation.

There's a passage from a Tibetan text about how the sense of completion is already here within us:

Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that this state is never impaired or improved on in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is realized by just resting at ease in whatever happens.

Resting at ease in whatever happens. This is really one of the aspects of mettā, one of the ways of being in our life and in the world that mettā opens up to us. And that's the aspect I want to talk about tonight.

What we call in English "patience"—which is pretty undramatic and even boring, we could say—opens us up to this resting at ease in whatever happens, which is truly connected and beautiful as a way to live our lives. It's transformative. And this acceptance, true acceptance, patience, is mettā.

I think it's often something you might experience here in the retreat, but because it's so unflamboyant and often nothing special—just a kind of mild friendliness, a sense of okayness with things—we can easily overlook it and think, "This isn't quite good enough. It's not quite juicy enough." We try to work it up a little bit. Or we might think, "Patience? I didn't really come here for that. I was expecting some kind of really blissful, far-out unitive state that I would reach at least by the end—hopefully by the fifth day—and stay there, maybe with breaks for eating, until the retreat ends. And if I do enough retreats, that'll be it for the rest of my life."

You can see that there's a way—I know that's a little exaggerated, but it hits the nerve—there's a way that we're still looking for loving-kindness to bring us out of our sense of fragmentation. And it's a false sense of fragmentation. We're not fragmented, but we think we are. We live as if we were. We perceive experience as if we were somehow separate or fragmented. And we look for mettā as a way to take us out of it—out of the fragmentation, the separateness, the loneliness—but also it should take us out of everyday mundane experience as well.

I mean, the stuff that's been going on the last two days, the large part of some of your experiences—does that count? Is that what you're looking for? The knee pain, the sleepiness, the incredible boredom with these four phrases that pound in your head like a drill, this over and over coming back, coming back, the effort it requires. And then when you say you're putting out effort, we say, "Take it easy." And then the next minute we say, "Be continuous, keep it up no matter what you're doing—but take it easy." Not exactly what—well, we might not have even consciously known what we had in mind, but usually it's not that. Usually that's not what we think when we think about practicing mettā.

And this is exactly the place where patience—not as "okay, I'll wait it out till it gets better," which is not patience but a mild form of aversion—but a true "okay" with what is. It's in these difficult places, or simply mundane places, or just sort of boring places, that we begin to discover truly what mettā is and truly what the power of this open, accepting quality that mettā brings to experience.

Acceptance and patience arise from mindful, clear seeing. So it's arising again from wisdom. As we pay attention to our experience throughout these days, we can see that one of the ways mettā, acceptance, and the clear seeing from which acceptance arises helps to heal us from fragmentation is by allowing us to discover moment to moment how this sense of fragmentation is being perpetuated—how it's arising in our moment-to-moment relationship with experience, how it's being perpetuated throughout the day through more moments of experience. Through not really looking at what's happening and then drawing conclusions and interpretations about what's happening, we take ourselves really far away from just being here and now.

Let me give an example of what I mean. Just reflect for a minute on any of the various experiences you've had today. I know that we're pretty much doing the same thing as a form—holding to the sense of self or benefactor, repeating the phrases. Within that, there are varying degrees of loving-kindness or friendliness or acceptance—or heart of stone. And there are also other experiences. Physical experiences of comfort or dis-ease or pain or heaviness or sleepiness. Mental and emotional experiences of frustration, discouragement, love, boredom, self-judgment, self-loathing, sleepiness—whatever.

So just for a moment, reflect on all the various beautiful experiences, difficult experiences, sort of boring experiences. And if you can remember: what was the attitude of heart, of mind, that would flow into and meet these experiences?

Or did actually, on the unpleasant experiences, was there any semblance of flowing in and meeting the experience?

Now the attitude of heart, of metta, of true acceptance, of patience, is a real open-hearted, full meeting of whatever's arising. Without judgment, without trying to change, without hating, without loving. It's a wholehearted embracing of each event—whether it's knee pain, whether it's heart like a stone, whether it's feeling really loving and fulfilled, whether it's just ho-hum, another sitting. Whatever it is that arises, this willingness to be fully present, to experience it quite openly, not cling to it if it's beautiful, not try to make it stay, not flinch away if it's difficult or unpleasant or not what we had in mind. That's the attitude of metta.

But is that our habitual reaction to experience? If things are just coming and going and we're trying to get into loving-kindness? It becomes more habitual through this cultivation of the intention of metta that we're doing, absolutely. But one of the reasons that we are really working so hard, devoting so much time and energy to the cultivation of the intention of deep loving-kindness, of self-acceptance, is because it's not, for many of us, the habitual response or reaction of heart to experience that comes up.

Most likely, most habitual is that if something is difficult or unpleasant—painful physically, painful emotionally, or unpleasant simply in that it's not what we wanted, that it doesn't meet some idea we have of what should be happening—that in itself can be extremely unpleasant. The tendency when we're not really meeting or paying attention, when any of these experiences come up, is: "Ah, this is a mistake, this shouldn't be happening, I've got to get rid of it," or "I've done something wrong," or "Somehow this has to change so I can do the practice properly, so I can get on with things."

If a pleasant experience arises—feeling very loving or very light and at ease in the body, or in some way it meets your expectations, even if only for a moment—quite insidiously, the thought can come up or not even quite form: "Ah, this is right. Now somehow I've got on the right track and I've got to figure out how to make it stay this way, and in fact get more this way until it doesn't change anymore."

And if it's neutral, actually, we just don't even notice it. And then it becomes difficult because it's not intense enough, and so then we've moved into difficulty.

Right here, in this very basic relation to emotional, physical, inner or outer experience—this rejecting of certain things, denying, avoiding, this clinging to others, kind of madly trying to make things happen or make things stay, choosing one experience as the way things should be and throwing others away—this in itself is creating a sense of real fragmentation in our lives. We're rejecting half of our life experience as not being valid, as not being okay. We're looking for other things that aren't here that we need to be complete, to be fulfilled. And then there's a whole level in the middle that we're just ignoring completely and not really alive and vital in.

These filters of clinging and attachment, of aversion to what's difficult, of not even noticing what's neutral—they become filters through which we experience and evaluate and perceive experience. And they keep us spinning in confusion. Because it's through this filter then that we'll try for something more pleasant to come back, to find that sense of completion, to find true happiness. And of course, whatever pleasant thing we find, at some point it changes, it goes away. So then we look for another and we look for another, not seeing that we need to see through the filters themselves.

This whole sense of confusion, fragmentation, limitation—the habit of mind that keeps us in the sense of separation, this particular one I'm speaking about—is fed very deeply by not recognizing the truth of impermanence. By somehow, even though consciously we know everything changes, we're all born, we all die, there are seasons, nothing lasts—even though consciously we know that, to really on a deep level live from that place, so that we respond to experience knowing that things change, that I cannot control that, that if something beautiful goes away it's not my fault, and if something difficult comes up I'm not to blame, that none of it will last—if we really related to our life, in our life, to experience from that deep understanding, you'd see so much of our sense of struggle, of our sense of fragmentation and limitation, would fall away. Because the sense of looking outside for something that's changing to bring us ultimate satisfaction would go away.

And if you think of it, any time during the next day or so when you realize that the metta sort of faded and you're in a sense of some kind of struggle with whatever's going on—whether it's knee pain or back pain, whether it's a feeling of sadness or a sense of self-judgment, whatever—see if you can notice that there's some underlying, maybe not quite conscious assumption. One, that what's happening is never gonna change: "I'm gonna have to live the rest of my life feeling this miserable, with my knee hurting, hating myself this much, being this unconcentrated," or whatever. Or how much comes from a sense of something that you liked having gone away, and the despair and the sense of self-blame that can come from that—that somehow I've done something wrong, I lost it, and I have to find a way to get it back.

And it's just this shrinking back from the unpleasant and lunging into the pleasant that keeps us from opening fully to what's here right now. It's what keeps us from seeing that we're already whole.

So metta, this loving-kindness practice—why it's so revolutionary is because it's a real training in opening our hearts and opening to our life experience in a whole other way. It's revolutionary because it's a real training. It's not like we just have to wait and hope that a bolt of insight hits our heart and we suddenly see through all the clinging

and all the aversion. That'll happen from time to time. But along the way, each time that we can come back to a moment of metta, strengthen in that moment simply the intention of well-wishing to whoever it is, to whatever the situation is, that's a moment of strengthening that ability to be really patient and accepting and not feeding our old habit of looking for happiness where it can't be found.

So this: a moment of metta brings a real equality of attitude. We cultivate that through the formal practice. As you know, we'll go through different sets of people. We start with people that are supposed to be easy to feel metta for—not a contradiction. I say "supposed to be" because often for ourselves it is a contradiction. But a benefactor, a dear friend. Then it moves to a neutral person, and then we move to a so-called difficult person, cultivating a true well-wishing, a true equality of attitude to each of these people.

And it really works. I know that at some point the person I was using for my neutral person—I didn't even know her name, I was sitting here and she was sitting there—and after a few weeks, if I saw her somewhere

I would get so happy—just this happiness would come up. I knew nothing about her, just from the cultivation of well-wishing for somebody.

As the metta practice goes on, it's very carefully planned so that we open up the field and consciously begin to cultivate the ability to tune in to some lovable aspect of anybody or any situation. And then you find that this begins to be the attitude we bring into meeting whatever experiences arise.

Since we're here on retreat, you might think that if you're not saying the phrases, you're not cultivating metta. But each time you bring this openness, this equality of attitude, this really flowing into experience—that is metta, that is loving-kindness. And it's not blind, it's not one-sided. Actually meeting the difficult with this open acceptance brings a spaciousness and an inclusivity of experience that's quite amazing.

I'll give a small example. Yesterday I was driving home in the afternoon, and for some reason I was physically just really tired and heavy. I was driving home aware of that, feeling "I'm so tired, I'm so heavy. Why am I so tired?" I was aware of it—I knew that's how I felt—but it wasn't the awareness of mindfulness, of non-judging, needing acceptance. My heart and mind were really shrinking back from the experience of heaviness and tiredness. There was aversion to it. And that was all I was aware of—that and the road. That was my world. It was very constricted.

Then, not consciously, I didn't decide "Oh, I should do metta." What I did was simply let my real open attention flow into the physical experience of the tiredness and heaviness itself—whereas before I had been shrinking back, I just flowed all my energy and mindful attention into it. Feeling heaviness. Feeling tiredness. Just being fully present without judgment or expectation.

Very interesting—in just a moment the tension eased, because so much of the tension was the result of aversion, resistance to what I was experiencing. The tension eased and a real spaciousness came in. I stayed tired, of course, but all of a sudden, quite spontaneously, I said, "Wow, isn't this a beautiful day?" Then I started noticing little chipmunks, which are all over, playing on the side of the driveway as I was driving. "Oh, isn't that cute? Isn't that sweet?" Just this whole sense of inclusivity of life—that there's a lot of beautiful stuff, some really pleasant things happening—and I was still feeling tired and heavy, yes, but it really didn't matter very much.

That's just a little example. But that's what I mean by bringing the attitude of metta, of patience and acceptance, to our experience.

Especially in these first days of retreat—well, really all along, but especially in the first days when the focusing and the being pulled inward of the metta hasn't developed as strongly yet—you'll be much more aware of physical discomforts, annoying sounds outside, things going on, emotional states. There will be times when what else is going on is a little too strong to simply notice it and come back to the metta. That's the time when our mindfulness, our awareness practice, can really come to our aid. And the awareness is really grounded in the field of metta. In a way, the two are corollaries—they're really intertwined, especially the attitudes.

Bringing in the quality of bare attention, of moving directly into experience when you're beginning to feel a struggle, not able to stay with the metta—bring your bare attention immediately into the experience with this attitude of patient, loving acceptance. Bare attention to the bare experience, as opposed to our interpretations and ideas and judgments about experience.

With my tiredness yesterday, before I used bare attention to flow right into the physical experience of tiredness itself, what I was caught in—knowing I was tired—I could easily have said, "Oh, I'm aware that I'm tired. There's awareness." There was awareness, but there wasn't mindfulness. There wasn't bare attention grounded in metta. Instead of really feeling the tiredness, I got into feeling I don't like it, I wish it would go away, it's happening because of X, Y, and Z, there's something wrong with me, something physically wrong, I should go to a doctor, I need a full checkup. You know how the

mind just goes. And if we're not really paying attention, we say, "Oh yeah, I'm aware of that. I was really aware that I was tired"—sort of aware of this whole process, but not bringing attention into the bare experience.

And so that's something to really begin to pay attention to over these days, because there will be times when this is an invaluable tool—this bare attention grounded in metta.

When a difficult experience comes up, notice how you habitually respond. What constructs, what interpretations does the mind tend to get hooked into? If it's unpleasant, does it bring up aversion or fear? "I've got to get rid of this. Something horrible is going to happen. It's a mistake." Does it bring up self-judging? "This shouldn't be happening. It's happening because I'm no good, because I'm worthless, because I'm useless." Does it bring up a sense of outer anger? "It's happening because these people sitting around me are total jerks. It's happening because this place is really out to lunch. It's happening because the food isn't right."

Once you notice that you're beginning to get hooked into some interpretation, you might try to come back to the metta. "Okay, I know my knee hurts, I'll just come back. May I be happy." You send metta to the knee. "Uh-oh, another forty minutes. Uh-oh, I wonder if I'm going to have to go to the hospital. I wonder why Carol sits on the chair. I bet she really blew her knees out." And the mind goes on and on.

When you can begin to notice that that's what's happening, that's the time to see that you're getting hooked. Take your attention at that point off of the phrases and bring it right into—very lovingly but very openly—the actual experience of sensation in the knee itself. No expectation, no judgment, good or bad, no "it should go away if I do it right." Nothing of that. Just simply, lovingly, openly being there for it, being there with it. Notice what happens.

That is the quality of all-embracing metta—simply being with what is because it's there. It doesn't mean that we can't tell the difference between a painful sensation and a pleasant one. And of course, given our preference in life, we're not going to say, "I don't care if I stick my hand in a fire or not." We're not talking about losing discriminating wisdom. But we're talking about being able to open to life as it presents itself.

And as life presents itself, it's going to have the whole show. There are going to be many painful and difficult moments in our bodies, in our hearts, in external experience. There are going to be many beautiful and loving and connected moments and pleasant moments. And there are going to be many that are sort of neutral. The quality that transforms our life is to meet each moment with a real open, affectionate curiosity

—with an all-embracing willingness to be present because it's what is so. In that, you can find that we meet life with a real peace and spaciousness that is not dependent on having things change. And it's not dependent on receiving something from the outside in order to feel happy.

That's really one of the wonderful things about this loving-kindness practice. We see over and over that the happiness, the connectedness with ourselves, with other beings, with our own experience that's generated in the loving-kindness—no one else is beaming that into you and making it happen. And it's not that somehow it's being created artificially. It's really much more of a purification, a clearing away of the barriers, clearing away the false sense of limitation, of separation, of preference, that lets the loving-kindness, that lets the unitive energy begin to shine forth more and more.

So patience, metta, acceptance is not a sort of stepping back from experience. "Okay, I can be with this. I can be with this. I know it'll change." Not really. That's sort of indifference or fake patience. Real metta patience is actively connected—really actively connected to experience, very wholeheartedly present in experience, actively aware—yet with the bare experience itself, not constructing some tower of interpretation and personal story about it.

And seeing the whole show. The proximate cause in the commentaries, the proximate cause for patience to arise, is seeing things as they are. Patience is a result of true wisdom, of seeing things as they are. That's really quite profound. When we really see that things are changing, when we really understand that, patience—active connection without expectation, open acceptance—arises quite naturally. And it's not a kind of passive submission, "I can't do anything about it anyway." It's not passive at all. It's not victimization. It's active, very powerful, and it lends great strength and courage. Much more so, actually, I find, than the sort of pretend "I can put up with it" kind of false equanimity.

It's transformative. Seeing things as they are lets us meet whatever arises with deep acceptance. I don't know why it's so difficult for us to really get this—how things are.

Even just the simplicity of change. Look in your own practice and see how often we resist it. Look at the world, the rhythms of nature, the fact of seasons, the fact of day and night, the fact that we're all aging, that sometimes we're healthy, sometimes we're sick, sometimes we're happy, having a good year, and sometimes it's like a year from hell. You can look around and see how some friends are going through very beautiful times while others are going through very difficult times, and then two years later it will be switched around.

I have a good friend who said to me last year, "You know, I've been so happy. I wonder what's going to make it change." I thought that was a very wise thing to say, because he knew, of course, it would change. He was just wondering what would seem to be the catalyst for it.

Or we can see that even when something's beautiful, it isn't all beautiful—there's also difficult experience. We go outside, it's finally so beautiful after all these months, and the black flies are there immediately as soon as it gets warm. I can't stay outside for more than five minutes. It's just how it is. There are both sides—just like being really tired and it's also a beautiful day.

Opening deeply to one aspect, we open to all aspects. Trying to block out one aspect, even unconsciously, we block out access to our own completion. We block out access to true love and connection.

So in your practice here, in the simple metta practice, really know this: sometimes the practice will be calm, centered, connected, and the metta will seem to flow. Sometimes it will be restless, jumpy, boring. Your heart feels like a dead stone. Nothing's going on. That's just the way it is. There's absolutely nothing going wrong in that.

If we get away from knowing this, if we get lost again in our expectations, you can see what a rich field that creates for self-judgment. Getting lost in one slightly unpleasant experience that we don't see we're resisting or avoiding or thinking is a sign of our badness—it can lead into a whole world of self-loathing and everything bad we've ever done, everything we've ever failed at since we were five years old. You've had five thoughts in a row, one of them lasted five minutes. You come back and say, "See, I could never focus. I can't do this. I can't concentrate. I failed math when I was in third grade." And it'll just keep going and going. Then you wonder why you don't feel loving-kindness for yourself.

It really starts with something so simple as not accepting that in this moment the mind is wandering. In another moment it won't be wandering. Both are okay.

When we're not deluded anymore by changing conditions—not deluded into thinking that there's some lasting, unchanging condition we can create or hold onto that's going to bring us happiness—when we stop looking outside ourselves for that, this is what metta can open to us. Not that we think the metta itself stays in some unchanging way of experience. It will experience the whole range. But metta as an attitude, as a way that we greet life, far from being weak and passive, opens us up to the whole show with great courage—the courage of seeing things as they are, and the willingness to act that comes from real love and compassion.

And that sense of inclusivity—for me it's a kind of knowing that in any situation going on in the world, among people, when I'm really tuned into acceptance and patience with myself and others, I know that I could probably at some point act in any of the roles unfolding in that situation. Who am I to judge or say that one is better than another, or to withhold including a sense of well-wishing for one person because they don't deserve it?

What made me think of that—I just want to read something from the newspaper this morning. Just a little scenario, one of however many millions are happening in the world. It's a painful scenario. It's in Sarajevo. A young man, about twenty, was just walking across the street and was hit by sniper fire. It struck him in the back, knocked him down, and he's paralyzed now.

But the scenario is this: as he was walking across and got hit, there was a television cameraman filming it. There was a United Nations peacekeeping soldier standing on the side under cover, frozen, watching the whole thing. And then there was a civilian who was galvanized to action, who came and yelled at the United Nations soldier to move his vehicle to cover the wounded man from the sniper. Then the civilian ran and dragged the young man out of the street.

It's interesting—a very strange scenario, but just a little synopsis of so many different ways of being happening in one situation. There's the sniper, the civilian shot on the city street, the television cameraman waiting there for something like that to happen so he can film it, the United Nations soldier who is really afraid and frozen and doesn't know how to act, and then the civilian who is galvanized and simply goes and helps.

It's just a scenario of life. To me it represented all the different ways that humans can be, captured in one little synopsis. And I could really see how, at different times, I could be any of those people.

The sense of metta is not to say, "Well, it doesn't matter if you shoot somebody, who cares?" I don't mean that at all. But for me, the challenge is: can I find the place in my heart that can open, really deeply open, to the fact that each of those things is happening? That is life. It isn't all beautiful. It isn't all ugly. It's the whole show.

And the power of metta, of this patience, of this open acceptance, is that it lets us be really alive there in the middle of the show. We embrace all aspects of ourselves, and in that way we really heal our sense of fragmentation. In embracing all aspects of ourselves with acceptance, we find that we can embrace aspects of others with acceptance and understanding.

This doesn't mean that we encourage people to kill. We might be able to be the one who could act. When we're not lost in fear, when we know things change, we might be the one who could act. But at another time we might be frozen in fear. And can that be okay too? Can we embrace all aspects of ourselves and all aspects of life?

This power of metta really lets us begin to do that. And in doing so, it absolutely transforms how we relate to ourselves and how we relate to life.

I want to end with a quotation from Dostoevsky. The language is a little different from ours, but I think he's basically talking about metta and embracing the whole show:

Have no fear of human sin. Love people even for their sin, for that love is the semblance of divine love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of light, love the animals, love the plants, love everything. Because if you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.

Or just an all-embracing acceptance.

CHAPTER 260

Balancing Aspects of Mettā

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this Vesak full moon talk, Carol Wilson reflects on her transformative experience at Bodh Gayā and draws profound connections between the chaos of ordinary life and the potential for awakening. She describes how the bustling, dusty pilgrimage site—with its beggars, tour buses, and ceremonies—became a powerful metaphor for practice: liberation doesn't require removal from life's difficulties but can emerge within them.

Wilson examines how mettā practice serves as a crucial counterbalance to vipassanā insight practice. While vipassanā opens us to the truth of dukkha (suffering), this opening can sometimes become overwhelming, leading to what she calls seeing through a "dukkha lens" where everything appears unsatisfactory. Drawing on Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings, she explains how loving-kindness naturally broadens our perception, allowing us to acknowledge suffering while remaining connected to beauty, joy, and interconnection.

The talk offers penetrating insight into how mettā illuminates the nature of attachment—the "near enemy" of true love. Wilson shares personal observations of how easily pure loving-kindness can shade into wanting something back, creating subtle conditions and needs. Through careful practice, we learn to distinguish between boundaryless, fearless mettā and the tunnel vision of attachment. This discernment reveals that genuine happiness is not dependent on external conditions but arises from touching our essential completeness and interconnection with all beings.

The full moon of May in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, which is what we here at IMS practice in, marks the Vesak festival. The Theravada teaching of the elders represents the schools of Buddhism from Southeast Asia—Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos. This is really the most significant day in the Theravada Buddhist calendar because it's said that the Buddha was born on the full moon of May, came to his full enlightenment on the full moon of May, and also died on the full moon of May in our tradition. In Thailand, for example, where I spent about a year, it's quite a big occasion for celebrating the Buddha and the teachings that have come down to us. So I wanted to mention it since it's the full moon of May now.

This also made me think of the last time I was in Bodh Gaya, the small village in India where the Buddha is said to have reached his awakening. At the end of his six years of ascetic practices and wanderings and very intense practice, it was under a Bodhi tree

in what is now the little village of Bodh Gaya where he sat and had his full, complete opening experience into enlightenment, into freedom—which he then proceeded to spend the rest of his life sharing with us.

In 1989, I went back to Bodh Gaya with several dear friends. I had not been there for maybe eighteen or nineteen years. The first meditation retreat I ever did was in Bodh Gaya. But since at that time I knew nothing about meditation or Buddhism or anything else, I didn't really appreciate the spiritual and symbolic significance of that village or its meaning as a place to begin my acquaintance with Buddhism. When we went back in '89, it turned into quite a metaphor for me of our life and practice. It was really quite a powerful experience.

Bodh Gaya is a dusty little town in the state of Bihar, which is by far the poorest state in India, if you can imagine that. It's very dusty. The people are very poor. It's very dry. And Bodh Gaya is a little village in the middle of all that. When you go, there's of course a beautiful stupa next to a descendant of the original Bodhi tree that the Buddha is said to have sat under. The stupa is located in what's a very pleasant park—lots of green and trees and bushes. It's really a very lovely spot with a little pond and walls around it that are locked at night.

As you walk up to this sacred space, which is quite a pilgrimage spot for Buddhists from all over the world, there's just the village life of India. You have to walk past a whole line, a huge lineup of beggars. They just sit one after the other. And just before you get to them, there are a couple of little guys sitting selling coins that you can buy to give to the beggars. For a rupee, which is worth 100 paisa, you can buy nine 10-paisa pieces to give. So that guy makes ten paisa and each beggar you would give ten paisa, which is basically worthless—there's nothing you can really do with ten paisa.

There are people running up with little plastic bags filled with water and fish that they're trying to sell to you, because these fish are taken and liberated into the ponds inside the temple grounds by Tibetans, people who are really valuing life and setting a life free as a way of earning merit and good karma. Then different people, Hindus, will go and catch the fish and put them in little bags and come out and sell them to people. It's just this kind of atmosphere—all of life.

We went in, and sitting underneath the tree on the wall nearby, it was a very profound experience for me. Somehow it brought to me the sense of the humanness and the reality of the fact that this isn't just some mythological story. The Buddha was a real man, a human being. And that potential for liberation that we always say is possible for all of us—I got it. It really is possible for all of us, and this is accessible here and now.

We were sitting quietly trying to meditate on a small wall near the tree. And again, it turned into a metaphor for the whole mandala of our human existence. Being inside the temple ground and near the sense of reality of it, it's also not particularly removed and peaceful. Tour buses come up constantly bringing big tour groups of Thai people, Japanese people, Indian people, Westerners coming through talking in megaphones, talking really loud, staring at us sitting there trying to meditate. There was a woman who roamed around screaming the whole time. There was a group of Tibetan monks sitting on the side for three days doing a ceremony, which was quite lovely, but with loud chanting and blowing of horns and banging of cymbals. Dogs running around. It's wild.

And still, within this whole show of humanity, it's as if it's not in spite of that—it was because of it somehow. Seeing that this potential for awakening doesn't have to be so removed. That it can happen in the midst of the whole show. That became the metaphor for me.

And that we don't have to be some kind of incredibly special, unique being—that awakening is possible and accessible for all of us if we really open to that, if we can really commit our hearts to it.

So just as there are so many ways to manifest in the world, there are also so many ways to manifest in the mandala of our practice. Sometimes our practice will be being in the world, being in the chai shop, having a tea. Sometimes we're the people on the tour bus, kind of going through, checking it out, but not quite getting involved yet. And sometimes we're taking time to do really serious, intense practice in a more removed way. All of it is part of our life and part of our growth. There's not one way that's better than another—it all comes together in a circle.

I've come to think of the way we cultivate and develop in love and understanding in the same manner. The Buddha taught vipassana, the insight practice, very much as coming to liberating understanding, coming to the end of suffering and confusion, the sure heart's release, the happiness of peace, by seeing deeply into the nature of suffering and the cause of suffering—his first two Noble Truths, the nature of suffering and the cause being attachment. In vipassana we tend to inquire along that mode.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is the ways that metta has really expanded and broadened both my understanding of the nature of suffering and also of the nature of attachment. It is another piece of the mandala of practice. I've found that intensive loving-kindness practice and its after-effects in my life and understanding provide a very important balancing effect to the understanding that comes about from vipassana.

Let me speak about what I've learned about working with aversion and noticing attachment from the view of metta practice.

Aversion first. As Michelle was talking about last night, two of the five hindrances she spoke of were aversion—anger, fear—and the other being attachment, desire, grasping. She mentioned that these two have very deep roots in our mind, much deeper than, say, sloth and torpor or restlessness.

Aversion, fear, anger, hatred—all are reactions to the difficulty or pain or suffering that we experience or perceive, or do our best not to experience or perceive, in the course of our life, in the course of a day, in the course of a sitting. When difficulty arises, we respond with aversion, fear, or else overwhelm or denial.

Very briefly, metta offers us as a balance to this the potential not to shut off to the suffering, but to be able to expand and broaden our experience so that we're not blind to the suffering, while also opening to the potential for happiness, for joy, and for love. I have found that metta lends a real breadth, a real inclusive aspect of experience, and a real strength to be with the difficulty without drowning in it.

On the other side, with attachment: as we've said several times, affection or love with attachment in it is the near enemy of metta because it's so close we can confuse it. Yet at the same time, I've found that by cultivating and becoming deeply familiar with the actual experience of the state of pure loving-kindness—and all the times that I get lost in attachment—it has very much deepened my understanding of and recognition of attachment, the nature of the suffering that attachment can bring when not recognized. Through seeing and feeling more and more deeply what the nature of true love that doesn't want something back is, it really highlights the suffering aspect of attachment.

To begin first with speaking about aversion, fear, difficulty: whenever in sitting and walking, in our daily life, aversion or fear arises, it's in response to a difficult or painful physical, emotional, or mental experience that's actually happening here and now in this moment.

Physical, that's obvious—you can tell. If you hurt, there's a response of fear or aversion to it. That's clear, it's here and now. But even mentally, we might be thinking about something that happened in the past, fearing that it will repeat itself in the future. So that actual thing isn't happening, but the thought about it is happening in this moment.

The freedom, the sure heart's release that our practice hopefully guides us to, that it points to moment by moment, comes from truly knowing things as they are without a lot of interpretation, without getting carried away into stories. And freedom comes from being able to meet directly with openness whatever is happening here and now in this moment. That allows us to see it clearly.

This obviously makes it necessary to be able to meet fully, to open in a balanced way to the painful aspects of life. Because quite a bit of our moment-to-moment experience is not going to be pleasant—that's just the way it is. And if we cannot open to the difficult when it arises, if we need to deny it, if we need to always move away, or if we get really lost in the fear and the aversion, then rather than being able to open to truth, we end up spending our time lost in struggle, trying to control, to manipulate, to change.

Yet—and this is something that can often happen in our practice—as we do begin to truly open to the pain of the world, to the pain of our own experience, to injustice, the opening can sometimes seem so vast, and the confusion and the pain can seem so overwhelming, that we can just feel like we're drowning in it. The sense of seeing things as they are can really start to be unbalanced. We start to see and experience things through what I call a dukkha lens. Dukkha is a word for unsatisfactoriness or suffering. And there are times in life and practice, as we begin to really acknowledge the suffering in ourselves and in the world, when all one notices is the unsatisfactory or suffering aspect.

I remember one time I was on a long retreat, and I was really opening to this. I would walk in the room I was in—which was a very nice room, sunny, with a little plant in the window that made it very pleasant—and I would see the plant and think, "It's just going to die." Anything that would come into my experience I'd see through this lens of the potential of change. Two friends who had just gotten into a relationship would be walking down the driveway, and I'd think, "In two months they're going to be suffering."

Anything that came into my experience would be seen through this lens of change and inevitable loss. Yes, that plant will die. But also in the meantime, it can be very beautiful, it can bring a lot of joy, and it might be ten years from now, and death is also just a natural part of things. The view was unbalanced.

Thich Nhat Hanh, who talks a lot about working with this balance, says that it's very important for us to stay in touch with the suffering of the world in order to keep compassion alive in us, in order to keep the connection with the world alive. But getting in touch with suffering is not enough.

It can get really unbalanced. It's not the whole picture. We can start to drown. And instead of staying in touch through the suffering, instead of staying in touch with compassion, our response can easily turn to that kind of negativity I was describing, or anger, or frustration.

This is where I found the broadening and strengthening aspect of loving-kindness to be so helpful. It helps me to hold the whole range of life without having to focus on just one way or the other.

It seems like a real paradox to me that in opening to what is true and opening to beauty, to love, to interconnection, we also open to great depths of sadness and suffering—and vice versa. For all of us, this mystery can be quite hard to hold. It seems our minds have a tendency to want things either one way or the other. If there's suffering, something difficult going on in the world, then we don't know how to notice what's beautiful, what's wonderful, what's connected. If we're feeling filled with love and happiness, we kind of don't want to hear anything about war and difficulty, because it might bring us down.

Opening to the whole show is something I have found metta to be extremely helpful with.

During the Gulf War, when it first started, I was in India. Somehow it felt much closer to what was going on, and you also got a whole different perspective on how the world felt about the war than you got from the newspapers and media here. In the middle of it, I came back to the States. It was actually quite interesting to see. In India, people basically hated the Americans and hated the war. I came back here and it was so rah-rah. It was really interesting compared to the attitude during the Vietnam War.

I was walking near my cottage down the road during the war, just feeling the pain of it and the sense of helplessness—all that goes on when we're really feeling the suffering and feeling there's not much we can do about it, but still feeling responsible in some way, part of it. It's a very lovely driveway, and as I was walking, I suddenly noticed, wow, this is so beautiful here. I had a moment of deep appreciation of what a beautiful place I live, how peaceful and silent it was. This was followed immediately by a wave of guilt and self-hatred: Who are you to think that you have the right to enjoy such a beautiful, peaceful experience when people are fighting and dying? Somehow it wasn't okay to let in both perceptions.

Talking to people here in the course of our small group meetings, this has come up quite a few times in different ways—either a feeling of guilt at taking the time to send loving-kindness to oneself, a feeling that this must be selfish to just sit here and cultiv-

ate loving-kindness when there's so much suffering and grief in the world, or even a sense of mistrust, of not being able to trust that this is true happiness. A sense that somehow we're deluding ourselves, that there's got to be some kind of catch, and when we really see the whole picture, this is all going to evaporate because it can't be true.

It's very sad to me in many ways to see how hard it is for us to be able or willing or to trust that there can be happiness and love while also acknowledging quite deeply our connectedness with all beings who might be suffering, who might be confused. We try to separate the two, when actually opening to the metta, allowing the sense of really pure love for ourselves and for other beings to be nurtured, to flower, to really grow to a depth—this actually brings us much more vividly, much more viscerally, into a real living experience of knowing our connection with all beings. But it's so hard for us to trust it.

You might not feel this profoundly on retreat, but I've noticed very much in my life outside the intensity of retreat that in subtle ways, that's where the loving-kindness begins to bear fruit—where you might find it beginning to flower, to broaden and balance our experience.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "If we see deeply into the nature of interbeing, that all things inter-are, we will stop blaming, arguing, and killing. To practice nonviolence, we must first of all learn ways to deal peacefully with ourselves. If we can create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with family, friends, and associates. Most important is to become nonviolence, so that when a situation presents itself, we will not create more suffering. To practice nonviolence, we need gentleness, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity directed to our bodies, to our feelings, and then to other people. With mindfulness, the practice of peace, we can begin by working to transform the wars in ourselves."

I think this is very profound. It's not just nice words. By directing gentleness, loving-kindness to our bodies, to our feelings, and to other beings, we are transforming the wars in ourselves. This is the most vital place where we can then begin to open to the wars in the world and do whatever little we can to transform them. We can't separate them.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers some conscious techniques, one that's a little different from metta, for working with balancing our perception—for working with the times when we're really drowning in the suffering, drowning in the pain. What I found interesting is that through the practice of metta, the technique he offers is what naturally happens in my day-to-day life as a result of cultivating the intention of metta.

What he suggests is this: most of us ask what is wrong. We forget to ask what is right. He describes working during the war in Vietnam with the young people and students who made up what was called the School for Social Work, who worked in villages trying to ease the life of people and trying to bring reconciliation between the two sides in the war—which means that everybody hates you and nobody trusts you because you're not taking sides.

And a lot of their friends and workers were killed.

He says, "During the war, we were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage." He would mention these herbs to the social workers and peace workers so they would stay in touch with them.

It might sound like a small thing, but the idea behind it is that in times of difficulty, we can consciously expand our field of awareness and notice that even in the most difficult situation there can be seeds of happiness, seeds of joy—or just noticing the mint, noticing the beauty of the countryside, even when your heart feels weighed down.

What happens with loving-kindness is that this begins to happen naturally, without consciously thinking of it. And I know this is not only my experience, because quite a few people have commented to me that in small ways, when they left a metta retreat, in much more subtle ways than they expected, they found the metta would arise to counterbalance what could have been an overwhelmingly difficult experience.

You might have come in thinking that when you leave, you're going to be brimming with love for yourself and all beings and spend your life floating on a cloud of happiness and love. You might have some times like that, and that's nice. But what I've found is that in a much quieter way, I'll notice some difficulty. In fact, the metta seems to highlight states of aversion, states of fear—but it also allows them without struggle, and immediately there's a counterbalancing response.

For example, I noticed at one period when I was doing intensive metta that I began to see just how much fear was underlying my response of aversion. When I first noticed this, it was one of those little things on retreat that shouldn't be eliciting the response it was, which makes you really ask, "What's going on here?" It was during a time when there were two lunches, one at twelve and one at twelve-thirty, and halfway through the course they changed the times.

So what? My mind went into this state of total aversion. What was interesting was that I wasn't really into food. I wasn't particularly hungry. It wasn't like I didn't want to wait the extra half hour—I really didn't care. Yet I could see my mind going into this state of aversion. As I continued doing metta, it just allowed the aversion: "Oh, that's okay, aversion. May you be happy, Carol."

And underneath began to surface a sense of fear that turned into panic. I was just sitting there thinking, "What is going on? What is this panic about?" I was tuning into the panic, this little blip of fear that arises in the conditioning of my mind whenever anything new comes into the range of experience. It was really quite fascinating.

As I kept watching the thoughts, there was panic. "Oh, I have this little table I always sit at, and the same people sit there, and now different people will be sitting. Or I might not even get to sit at that table." And then, "Who cares? I don't even care if I eat lunch." And then it would start up again: "Oh no, what if, what if?" It was just the fear of any change, of anything new.

Without the metta, I usually wouldn't see that fear. It would just move right into aversion and stay there until something major came to blast it out. With the metta, it let me see it—it highlighted the fear much more than it normally would have.

And of course, as soon as I sat down at the lunch table, because the metta was there, there was a sense of "Oh, this is really nice. These people are quite lovely. This is actually even more pleasant than it was before." And the difficulty was gone.

What I've noticed is that this same quality—highlighting the fear and the aversion, with an almost immediate counterbalancing of seeing something really lovely or appreciating something else about the situation—has come up more and more in my daily life. And it's not conscious. It's not like I say, "Oh, I should find something to balance the fear." But the cultivation over time of the intention of loving-kindness to oneself and to other beings has the effect of really broadening experience and lending a balance to the fear, to the aversion. Not blinding us to it. Not pretending that the difficulty isn't there. But simply seeing, "Oh, there's this fear—and there are also some really nice aspects to this situation."

So I'll see it now if I'm in the middle of something and the phone rings. There's this little quick fear, and then aversion: "I don't want to talk on the phone."

And then I pick up the phone and hear someone's voice and feel this surge of loving-kindness. How nice to talk to this person. So the fear and the aversion don't catch hold. And my experience of life is so much broader and not unbalanced—not unbalanced in a "let's pretend everything's wonderful" kind of way.

I also see quite clearly that this sense of aversion to difficulty, or fear, comes so much from a sense of separation, a sense of limitation. There's a fear that I need or want certain things to make myself complete, to make life pleasant. A fear that those things might get taken away. A fear that somebody else might have more, and then the mind starts comparing and begins to suffer a sense of emptiness and neediness that it didn't even have before it saw that somebody else had more.

All this is coming from not understanding things as they are. The whole sense of seeing ourselves as a separate, limited being needing something—anything—from outside to be fulfilled is the core delusion of our existence.

And how mettā is so powerful is that without our even having to have any intellectual understanding of it, as we continue to cultivate the loving-kindness just to ourselves, it begins to spread to other beings. True mettā does not discriminate. When you're experiencing a moment of mettā, there is not with it that sense of, "Well, only me but not somebody else." In fact, in that moment you're not really making any discriminations at all.

Mettā is fearless. In fact, the Buddha taught it as the antidote to fear. It's boundaryless, and at its most pure and powerful moments it's also centerless. The experience of mettā is not referring back to me having this experience, this feeling, and sending it to you. I mean, that's the way we have to think about it when we begin practicing, of course. But the actual power of it is that it leads us into a real visceral experiencing of the boundaryless interconnection of all of us, of the sense of no separation.

And from that space, from that knowing of non-separation, there is no fear. There is no neediness. There is no need for something outside to fill us up, because we're touching the essential purity and completeness of who we are. And mettā is an avenue into this understanding. It's really quite wonderful.

And so again, that leads me into talking about the way that working and practicing loving-kindness can highlight or deepen our understanding of attachment—and the ultimate suffering and confusion that comes about from attachment.

Attachment is that sense of wanting or needing something outside of us. Whether it's a sense experience, another person, a particular experience in life, another job, a particular emotion, whatever. Needing or wanting some particular passing experience to fill us up, to make us happy. And as we've just seen, that isn't true happiness. But it's so hard for us to trust that. We're so used to looking outside, and the idea that we are somehow intrinsically incomplete, intrinsically lacking—this tendency to keep looking somewhere else for the answer—this is the deep suffering that comes from attachment.

And it's so strong in our culture. I read in the newspaper, it must have been a few months ago, about an Oprah Winfrey show. She had done a show based on the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, I guess, which was about a couple on opposite coasts who met through hearing about a lonely widower on a radio talk show. Anyway, the newspaper said Oprah Winfrey had done what she called a "Sleepless in Seattle show." She had, I think it was five, relatively young middle-aged widowers—men who had children, whose wives had died, and who were clearly good relationship material. That's how it was set up. What can you say?

So I didn't see the show, but I guess she interviewed them all and really tried to put them in a good light. And then she said, I guess kind of casually, "Well, if any of you out there are interested, send in letters." Two weeks later—this is what the article said—she came on the show with, like, a bulldozer. She had gotten sixty thousand letters from people who wanted to meet these guys. One guy alone, I don't know what made him so special, got forty thousand.

And you know, it's funny, but it's really not. Because I just felt like, oh, it's so sad in a way. I mean, maybe somebody will meet someone. I don't know how he picked who to go out with out of forty thousand people. But how much we're really yearning—for sure, for intimacy and companionship and a relationship in life, and that's all very positive. I'm not saying that's not. But somehow the depth of the inner yearning for real love, for a sense of our completeness, for real happiness in life, and how deep the sense is that we need it from somebody else—or from something else, but really from somebody else—is much more powerful and more subtle than we realize.

And it's hard to trust when we begin to be able to connect with and actually cultivate and experience deeply a love, a pure love, that is not dependent on anybody or anything else. It doesn't fit what we've unconsciously, perhaps, grown up believing.

In practicing with mettā, getting more and more deeply familiar with that experience of pure love that has no conditions on it, that wants nothing back, and experiencing how happy, how freeing that quality of love is—it began for me to highlight more and more the difference between that love and the nature of attachment, and the kind of happiness that I thought was coming from attachment.

If you think of attachment in the really gross sense first, without moving to the near enemy where attachment and love are sort of mingled and it's more confusing—if you just tune into what attachment is, what desire or craving is in a gross way—it's easier to see its ultimately unsatisfying nature. We can see it in a moment and then forget it the next moment, but attachment or desire, being this wanting of something that grows so strong we get really holding onto it, grasping, gives us a kind of tunnel vision.

To make a very simplistic example: you're sitting, you're walking, it's very peaceful, you're very present, there's a sense of happiness or love or simply peace, and suddenly the thought of pizza comes up. Or potato chips. Or chocolate cake. Or jelly beans. Whatever it is for you. And it comes up and there's some desire. *That would be really nice. I wonder if there's pizza for lunch.* And it gets stronger. *I really want pizza for lunch.* What happened in that moment to the sense of peace, to the sense of appreciation for the environment, for your state? It's sort of like Michelle said yesterday—the happiest moment in her life and the thought comes up, *What's for tea?* And that happy moment's gone.

But we tend not to recognize this and continue to focus on the object, the thing we're wanting. And if pizza isn't for lunch, do we appreciate what is for lunch? Not so well. Everything pales in comparison. And depending on how strong the attachment grows, you might find yourself on a pizza mission into town. It happens. I've on many occasions met yogis in the supermarket. I don't suggest it.

Attachment gives a real kind of tunnel vision. All we see or look for is what we want. Other things we're not able to appreciate. There's a saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint, he only sees the saint's pockets. We focus on what we want. And we're not happy because the wanting is suffering. It's uncomfortable until we get what we're after.

So say we get pizza for lunch and—*ah*—peace. Again, we tend not to recognize that the peace isn't the pizza. The peace is the absence of that craving, of that attachment. It's gone. It's like, *ah.* And if you just watched it—wanting, wanting, wanting—and at some point it faded away, that same peace would be here. But instead we think, *Oh, if one piece of pizza made me this happy, two pieces would make me even more happy,* and we'll have three or four. And then somehow it didn't work. Somehow we feel worse. But we still don't get it, and instead we say, *Well, okay, maybe something else.* And we keep focusing on the thing that we want and not noticing that it's the process of looking to something outside of ourselves for happiness—something that's always changing—it's that process that's bringing the suffering.

And on a slightly more subtle level, sometimes we can even confuse the process of the longing itself. You can find that kind of pleasurable. It's a little strange, but I was watching the movie *Shadowlands*, and there was one point where the character playing C.S. Lewis was teaching literature to his class. I just remember one section where he was talking about the code of chivalric love during the Middle Ages. He said something to the effect that the ideal of this chivalric love is that the knight would love a woman

who could never be obtainable, someone he could never have a relationship with, because that longing that could never be satisfied was the most exquisite happiness. I was just cringing.

I thought, a life of misery, and they think it's the most exquisite happiness. It's so interesting. Somewhere in there, some of that conditioning—I can see it still in myself, somehow confusing the experience. When you're falling in love with somebody but you don't really know if it's going to happen or not, if you really look, I experience that as torture. But somehow the mind puts it into, "Wow, love! It's so wonderful." You're mooning around, you can't eat, you're miserable, you want the phone to ring—oh, isn't it wonderful, love! It's very strange. We're so inculcated not to quite see what's going on, even in something as gross and simple as attachment to pizza or a new car. Then moving into how confused the messages become when we start to think of romantic love.

When we begin to work with metta, or when it becomes concerned with someone we do truly love—whether someone we're romantically involved with or a very dear friend—you can see, if you haven't already begun to explore this, how easily, without real attention, without real grounding in metta, we can get confused. We think what we're calling real love actually is real love, without looking and seeing that it can so easily slide into a subtle mode of longing or attachment or need.

At the same time, I've found that because the two—metta and real caring for someone with certain conditions attached—can so easily move back and forth, I could learn a tremendous amount about the quality of pure love with someone I'm in relationship with, and about the nature of attachment. But I do want to say: it takes first getting really grounded in recognizing and trusting, in knowing the feel of pure metta.

That's the reason why, in giving the instructions and going through the categories of people, as Michelle was saying this morning, it's traditionally taught that for quite some time you don't use someone of a sex to which you would be attracted, or someone you're romantically close to, because the two are so easily confused. We're not really so clear about what pure, true love is. But as we spend time getting more and more grounded in recognizing the qualities of metta—the whole range from very subtle to really strong—we begin to tell the difference.

I found it fascinating, first with not a partner but just a dear friend, to see how easily and subtly what was really pure metta would begin to shade into affection with attachment. I'd be sending metta to the friend, just feeling happiness and closeness, wishing well for them, wishing well. And then: wouldn't it be nice to see each other more? Pretty soon there was this slight change of wanting something back. At first I wouldn't

notice the moment of change, but suddenly I'd realize that the feeling was not this outflowing, happy, spacious movement of energy from the heart, but a little grabbing—like from a lower chakra—just a little wanting of something. A little bit of condition, a little bit of fear, a little bit of need.

Then I began to notice that as soon as that happened—and it was still quite subtle, you wouldn't call it suffering by any means, it was still masquerading as metta—the little discursive thoughts that arose, which didn't seem to have anything to do with my dear friend or myself, suddenly had a lot to do with attachment to this or that. I'd think of my house, and wouldn't it be nice to get this, and I wonder if that's happening, and what's happening with my family, and what's for lunch. Just that attachment had begun to come up in the experience, almost as if, as the metta shaded into attachment, it lifted attachment generally, making it more easy to come into my experience.

Once I noticed that, it became really fascinating to explore—not to be afraid of attachment, but to have clarity and willingness to recognize both attachment and metta, to explore the difference. I learned a great deal about it. Toward the end of a long period, very lightly and easily, I would from time to time begin to include my partner as one of the categories, just to see what would happen. As you know, when you're sending to a person you know, you get a sense of that person and send metta. Different situations I'd been in with the person would come up—a certain conversation we'd had, a certain image, a certain situation.

I really began to see how different it could be if my speech and actions came from loving-kindness, versus that subtle shading again into thinking I was wishing well, thinking I was really wanting the best for the person, but with this little shading of attachment: "But you should act in a certain way. I want the best for you, and that means you will then do X, Y, and Z for me." Or even more subtle than that.

Coming out of retreat, I really noticed that actions and speech that on the surface might seem very loving, very caring for the person—when they came from seeming caring but with the little unspoken condition of "But what about me?" somewhere in there—the response would be one of resistance or some kind of resentment. Before really tuning into metta, my reaction would have been puzzlement, because I thought I was just acting out of love. But it feels different. And then the same speech or action coming from true metta—this unbounded moving outward of energy, truly wishing that person well, even if it means you never see them again, wanting them to do whatever they need to be happy with absolutely no conditions attached—it's so different. And the response that comes back is so different. It's amazing.

All of this might be going on at a quite subconscious level. The other person might not even consciously realize what's happening. But it's been very powerful to explore the difference. As we get more grounded in the real, open-hearted, completely unselfish quality of metta—

Even when you're sending it to yourself, the quality of metta is unselfish, unself-centered. As we get grounded in that, it becomes easier to notice when we're sliding into attachment. And we really can see that the joy, the happiness, the love that arises with the practice of metta is so much more profound, so much richer than what we call love that's mixed with attachment. It's like two different worlds.

As Thich Nhat Hanh likes to say, practicing Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life. He says, "Happiness is available—please help yourself." That's really what we're trying to cultivate here with loving-kindness: a way where happiness and peace are always available, no matter what the external or internal conditions. It's not dependent on needing anything to fill us up.

We can be—we *are*—happiness and peace itself, if we will only trust that enough and commit ourselves to cultivating it, allowing it to flourish whenever it might happen to arise by itself.

So could we sit for a moment?

CHAPTER 261

Mettā With Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential relationship between wisdom and compassion as the two wings necessary for liberation. Drawing from Śāntideva's inspiring verses on the awakening mind, she explores how the cool, spacious quality of emptiness (suññatā) must be balanced with the warmth and connectedness of compassion (karuṇā) for genuine spiritual development.*
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> *Wilson focuses extensively on the crucial role of intention (cetanā) as the bridge between understanding and action. She explains how the Buddha placed wise intention (sammā saṅkappa) between wise understanding and wise speech in the Noble Eightfold Path, emphasizing that the skillfulness of our actions is determined not by results but by the quality of intention that gives rise to them. Through the practice of the brahmavihārās—mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā—we engage in a conscious purification of intention, reconditioning the mind away from habitual patterns of greed, hatred, and fear.*
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> *Drawing on powerful examples from Sister Chân Không's work during the Vietnam War and her own experiences in a self-defense course, Wilson challenges the assumption that anger and fear are the strongest motivations for effective action. She demonstrates how compassion, balanced with equanimity, provides sustainable energy for engagement with the world's suffering. The talk offers practical guidance for bringing this purification of intention into daily life, from supermarket lines to airplane seats, and introduces the aspiration of bodhicitta as a way to expand our practice beyond self-concern into the boundless intention to help all beings awaken.*

I want to start tonight by sharing a short expression of what might be called joy in the practice or the Dharma from Shantideva, who was a Buddhist teacher at Nalanda University in India in the 8th century. This isn't actually so connected to my talk, but since we've been playing with joy today, and this really makes me happy—hopefully it will you also:

As a blind man feels when he finds a pearl in a dust bin, so am I amazed by the miracle of awakening rising in my consciousness. It's the nectar of immortality that delivers us from death. The treasure that lifts us above poverty into the wealth of giving to life. It's the tree that gives shade to us when we roam about scorched by life. The bridge that takes us across the stormy river of disturbing emotions. The cool moon of compassion that

calms our mind when it is agitated, the sun that dispels darkness, the butter from the milk of kindness made by churning it with the Dharma. This awakening mind is a feast of joy to which all are invited.

So if you can't think of any other reason for mudita toward yourself, even one moment of the awakening mind arising in our consciousness is all of that. It's really quite wonderful.

Buddhism as a practice, as a path, is often described as having two wings. In the way that a bird needs two wings to fly, so our opening into liberation has to include both of these aspects: great wisdom and great compassion. As we've hopefully been exploring over the weeks, they're not really very separate, and just as it's natural for both wings to balance each other, so also is the case with great wisdom and great compassion.

Once I was at a talk by Robert Thurman, the Buddhist Tibetan scholar who works in New York. He said something that really struck me, and I've noticed it in my own experience. He was talking about how the wisdom of emptiness, that understanding of anatta —the emptiness of no inherent separate self-existence—can seem, just on its own, kind of cool, kind of removed. We tend to touch it in silence, in samadhi. We come to silent retreats. And while it's quite liberating, when not balanced by compassion, it can seem to be quite freeing, but it lacks a certain sense of depth or connection.

Compassion is a movement of the heart that arises through contact with the world, with ourselves, with other beings, contact with suffering. But again, compassion can get quite unbalanced if it's not balanced with the wisdom of emptiness, with the wisdom of equanimity. And so the two wings really support each other.

What I want to talk about tonight is one way in which we can begin to discover and explore how compassion, metta, all the Brahmaviharas form the link between our understanding and our actions and speech in the world. It's been said that compassion is the link between Buddhas and beings. The Buddha didn't just spend the last forty-five years of his life sitting in the bliss of emptiness in a cave. He could have. But he spent it tirelessly meeting with people, trying to share, trying to awaken people to the joy of the freedom that he discovered. This is the action of compassion, the tireless energy of compassion that can't be discouraged by our perhaps feeble responses to such wisdom.

This compassion as the link between Buddhas and beings, as the link between our own understanding and wisdom and how we act in the world—it expresses or manifests in the function of intention. That's what I want to speak about tonight, this quality of our experience that we call intention.

In the way that the Buddha describes our action in the world, a key element in action, in coming to understand what is skillful and what is unskillful in the way that we speak or act or even think—whereas our tendency is to look for the results. And that's something that we've run up against as a hurdle in a lot of the questions, or in speaking with people in interviews, in cultivating this practice of loving kindness, compassion, and mudita: our tendency to look for the results or to focus on the results or to get confused because we can't see the results. In fact, the whole crux, the whole nub of speech and action, of what determines whether it's skillful or not, is in this quality of intention.

In a Vipassana retreat we pay some attention to intention. It can be seen before any action. It's easier to see before a large action. It's the sense of the impulse, the impetus that gives rise to the action—just a little "about to" feeling before the action. It's the impetus that gives rise to speech. And there is even intention before thought, although often intention is unconscious and we don't recognize it.

Working with noticing and paying attention to this quality of intention is, I think, key when we begin to wonder: How does this practice that I'm doing move from the pillow into the world? And what good is it if I sit here and think loving thoughts and then just continue to sit here? How does it translate? The place that our understanding moves from the cool remove of emptiness into the connectedness of action and compassion is via this area of intention.

An intention to move, an intention to get up and leave the hall, an intention to eat—the impulse will arise to do it, and arising with it is any of our whole vast array of mental states, mental and emotional experiences. This is where it's really interesting, because whereas we tend to judge by results, you can't actually tell by the result or the action. You can't necessarily tell from outside what was the intention that informed that action.

And that's really where the heart of skillfulness or unskillfulness lies.

An intention could be accompanied by greed or fear or hatred or boredom, compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, equanimity—the whole show. For example, someone in the hall starts to have a coughing fit and leaves, which happens all the time. We sitting here can't tell which of a variety of intentions gave rise to their leaving. It could be true compassion, not wanting to disturb other people. It could be a sense of self-centered embarrassment—what do people think of me? It could be a sense of total relief and desire: finally, I have a reason I can get up and leave this sitting. We can't tell from outside.

In the same way, something that came up in the question periods the other day is that the same intention of compassion could manifest in vastly different actions, because it will be filtered through the particular understanding a person has, their particular view of the world, or their idea of what compassionate action is. You may remember the question about an inchworm on someone's hand. For her, the sense of compassion moved the intention to act, to get up and leave. That is compassion forming as an intention that leads to action. The intention that gives rise to thought is actually not as strong as the intention that gives rise to speech, and stronger still is the intention that gives rise to action. Someone else said that with that same intention of compassion, his response would have been to do something different. So again, by the outer action, we looking in from the outside cannot assess what that person's intention is.

You see how subtle this can be, and how our tendency to leap over intention and focus on results can get us into all kinds of confusion, leaving us out of touch with where the real heart of the matter is.

The Buddha, to me, really pointed to the powerful and important linking nature of intention when he laid out his Eightfold Path. I'm not going to go into the whole Eightfold Path, but it's his main outline of the qualities we cultivate and develop throughout our life to continue in our practice of awakening. The first stage of this path is wise understanding—seeing things as they are. Since it's the beginning, it doesn't mean we start from perfect wise understanding, but at least there's some little glimmer somewhere that things are not as they superficially seem, or we wouldn't begin practice or a whole life of inquiry or spiritual development anyway.

The second step is translated in various ways, but one of them is wise intention. Understanding gives rise to intention; how we understand the world informs our intentions, which then lead to speech and action. The third, fourth, and fifth steps deal with wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. To me—and this is just the way I look at it—by putting wise intention between understanding and action, the Buddha is making it really obvious how important this particular aspect of our experience is.

He says in one part of the Dhammapada that how we understand the world colors how we act. Someone who is a psychopath, completely self-centered with no sense of connection or cause and effect, will just do whatever they want with no sense of remorse or understanding of the pain they are inflicting on others. This is in the opening of the Dhammapada, one of the books of sayings of the Buddha: "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable." And he gives a similar refrain saying that if you speak or act with an impure mind,

trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. "How can a troubled mind understand the way? Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own unguarded thoughts. But once mastered, no one can help you as much—not even your father or your mother."

Intention often manifests in our experience as thought. The practices of the brahmavihāras—one way you can look at them is that what we're doing is a very conscious purification of thought, a purification of intention. Each time we sit with "May you be free from suffering," or affirm "I care about you, I care about your suffering," that is a conscious reconditioning of intention. We can't control the effects, as we know, but we're working on this much more subtle level.

In a moment when there actually is that intention—"May you be free from danger"—just that there's that intention in the mind, in that one moment, is quite a deep purification. Because in that moment, we're not strengthening the habit of greed or hatred or delusion. In that one moment, there's the purity of the intention of loving-kindness or of compassion. You might not really notice so much about that at the time, again because we're so keyed to results. But each moment of that purity of intention, of that willingness, that commitment to again come back and condition that pure intention—it has an overall powerful purifying effect on our own being and our experience.

Just as the wisdom of emptiness—that there is no separate self, no lasting substance I can call "me"—just as that understanding, whether we touch it in a meditation retreat or in our life, gives rise to its natural expression of compassion and love, the brahmavihāras are all of them a natural expression of emptiness. And so the other way around, through the deliberate cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, we might begin to find that the reverse is also true.

Through the cultivation of these pure intentions, we move again into the same truth of emptiness, only on its flipped side of interconnectedness. In touching these boundless, limitless states, we see that there is no way—in that moment of metta or karuna—to say this is separate, I am separate from you, your pain does not affect me, my pain does not affect you. There is no way in the moment of compassion to think that the pain of any one being is somehow isolated, that we are somehow separated from it. And in that boundless, limitless aspect of the Brahmaviharas, we again have a doorway into the liberating understanding of no separate self, of total interconnectedness.

Whichever doorway we want to take—emptiness or love and compassion—we end up at the same home, the same potential for liberation. In a moment when we're touching that boundless connectedness or that boundless emptiness, whichever way your

mind later wants to conceive of it, in that moment the caring, the love is just natural. When we're seeing that there is no separation, the sense of inner completeness is total. In that moment, greed, aversion, hatred, clinging makes absolutely no sense.

It's not that we have to somehow hate ourselves or get rid of clinging or give up everything we've ever wanted in order to touch completion. In that moment of completion, there's absolutely nothing to want, and there's no need to push anything away. The natural outcome, the natural intention giving rise to speech and action from that understanding is going to be connectedness. It can manifest as metta, love. It can manifest as compassion, when faced with suffering. It can manifest as mudita, when faced with joy. It can manifest as equanimity when faced with any of it.

Through the depths of our practice, whether it's Vipassana or Brahmaviharas, our intentions are going to be purifying spontaneously. This purification is happening even in those moments where you think not much is going on.

But also, at least for myself, there are many, many moments where this particular purity of intention is not manifesting quite so obviously, shall we say. We've talked before about the deeply conditioned and ingrained habits of our mind—confusion, aversion, greed, longing, fear. When we're not paying attention, or when we're not cultivating love and compassion or wisdom, what so often arises and forms the intentions from which we act are these habits of mind, especially greed and hatred and anger and fear.

What I find—and I've been really exploring this in my practice the last few years—is that it's kind of scary to me, and also very sad, that unexamined, it's almost as if we accept the validity of anger, of fear, of greed as motivation for action. They certainly can be incredibly strong motivations, and a lot gets done out of the intention of greed, of wanting things, or of fear, or of anger. How much of our economic progress and all the comforts that we enjoy in this country comes from these motivations? Some of it might be done out of compassion, out of caring. But a lot of it, I would venture to say, comes out of greed.

It's almost as if we accept that these are the strongest motivations for action, and we get confused—as people often do—at the idea of giving up desire. "Well, if I give up desire, what am I going to do? Just sit in my room?" People have asked me that very seriously. "Without anger, how can I protect myself?" That's a more complicated question, because at first we might need anger as a protection. I'll speak about that in a minute.

But it's this sense of looking at the results. So many peace demonstrations over the years seem to have good intention, but actually the momentary intention is one of anger or rage or even self-righteousness, which has a tinge of anger. If you want to just look pragmatically at what doesn't work about these, even if we're only looking at results and not tuning into intention, it's that if the intention is unskillful, at some point that begins to taint the action and the results. It's as if anger kind of eats itself up—it eats up the ground that it feeds on.

There's a passage from Thomas Merton: "The rush and pressure of modern life are perhaps the most common form of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes their work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of their own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes the work fruitful."

It might seem more difficult or hard to trust that as our intentions purify, we can be just as effective—even more effective. But I deeply believe it's true. Last year, Joseph and I were teaching a retreat billed for burned-out environmentalists. There were some who had practiced a lot and some who had never really done any kind of meditation practice—a whole range. In talking to some of the friends there who had done a lot of practice, they could articulate for themselves that the burnout, the stress, the problem came from two things: how hard they were working, and that so much of their energy was fueled by anger and rage. Anger cannot sustain itself as an intention or motivation for fruitful action—hence burnout, and somehow needing to find another inner source, another inner wellspring of energy from which to act.

We can also see in the larger world how something that from the outside might look wonderful tends to break apart when the intentions really aren't as skillful as they seem. One of my favorite examples lately is Germany, because I have a lot of German friends and I've spent some time there. I remember the fall when the Berlin Wall came down. Even here, there was this feeling of euphoria, a real sense that love and connection was winning, that it was really getting stronger. Since then, my friends who used to love Berlin don't like to be there anymore because the whole feeling of the city has changed. Between East and West, the people who lived in the East with different cultures and different economic needs and backgrounds, there's a sense of competition, a sense of struggle, a sense of antagonism.

And my friend Franz told me there's even a T-shirt that says, "We want our wall back"—on the West side, not the East.

But it's not all that it seems. In fact, I had a friend—I remember seeing on TV when the wall went down that first night, it looked like this beautiful, loving, euphoric party. But I have a friend who was in Berlin, and she said it was like that for a few minutes, but actually it was horrible. People got really drunk and it was really wild. She said, "I was really scared. I left." I thought, oh, that's really interesting.

And so even the most helpful or seemingly wonderful things—when our own intentions, our own understanding isn't purified, the hate and the fear might make way for greed. Or the greed gets more evened out and it makes way for hatred of the person who's different.

To take it back from the larger world, I'm sure many people here have seen—and it's said almost every retreat—in looking at how some sense of anger or some sense of desire built up in the mind about some petty little thing, this is not any different from how world wars start. And it's not.

We've had in three-month courses here what I call "light wars"—people want the light on, other people want it off. I was just talking to a friend who remembers it from five years ago: people unscrewing the light bulbs, people putting tape over the light bulbs, people hating each other because some of them want the light on and some of them want the light off. And we have friends who were practicing in Burma when two Western monks actually came to blows over whether a fan should be on or off in the meditation hall. This is true. Scary, right?

I'm sure most of us can think of at least some incident where we could relate. If you can't, then good for you.

This is why, even if we think we have the vast wisdom of emptiness, we can never think we're so far removed as to disdain the very fine level of intention that gives rise to our actions. This is from Padmasambhava, who is the father of Buddhism in Tibet. He said, "Although my view, my understanding, is as spacious as the sky, my actions and respect for cause and effect are as fine as grains of flour."

So this is the work with intention—really beginning to explore in ourselves: Can we trust? Can we find a way to come from the intention of loving-kindness, the intention of compassion? Can we see that it is an even more powerful force in the world, or in our own lives, than greed and fear and hatred? It is hard to trust.

Last year—it seems like a couple of years ago now—I took a self-defense course called Model Mugging. Actually, Michelle did it too, though not at the same time. We had different kinds of experiences.

What it turned into for me—it's a very intense kind of course where you go five times and each session is about five hours long. It's set up so that for women, they have a separate course from men. In the women's course, the men who are called the "model muggers" are padded with these huge helmets and pads because the idea is you learn ways to deflect certain kinds of attacks, and you have to practice at full strength. You have to really be able to kick and hit and gouge eyes. It's very down and dirty—there's nothing too clean or elegant about it.

My personal motivation in going might sound crazy, but somehow I felt that my motivation was this: I saw how fear was preventing me from acting out of compassion. I saw that over and over. For example, if I was in a city and there was some disturbed person or a beggar, someone who wanted something but looked really kind of off, I would see that the fear got in the way of my being able to go over and connect—whether I gave money or just connected human to human. The fear was in the way. So somehow that motivated me. I don't know how that link happened, but anyway, I found myself in this class.

And I saw that, at least in the way the instructors in my class taught it—and other instructors might have done it differently—what was assumed as our joint motivation was anger and rage and fear. Now, in many cases, women who have been raped or abused or really hurt or damaged in some way, and who had been frozen and paralyzed, unable to contact the energizing quality of anger—for them it can be very appropriate to get in touch with that anger to break the paralysis and act. So again, I'm not saying anger is never a helpful or appropriate emotion, necessary to contact.

And they really taught how to do this. They scream a lot. I mean, you run up and down the room screaming. I'm serious—a lot, just to get the energy moving. And you always say "No!" right at the beginning to bring up the sense of anger.

But what began to strike me was that there was no even idea that there could ever be any other motivation than anger or fear. And I actually wasn't very angry because I don't have a history of having been abused, so I couldn't contact that in my own experience. And the guys who were the muggers were so clearly getting beaten up over and over and over. They were clearly such nice guys—who else would come and do a job like that? I really couldn't work up to getting angry at them.

So for me, it became a kind of koan, a riddle. Can I find a way to access the energy? And it also became clear they were never going to hurt me. They might not let me win, but they weren't going to hurt me, so fear just didn't happen. I didn't really get to work with that aspect. But it really became a koan: Can I access an energy of deep action and

response and protecting myself out of some other intention or motivation than anger or fear? Can I really come from a place of compassion and loving-kindness? I'm not saying I achieved that, but it was a very interesting area in which to explore.

And I think that's when it really began to sink into me how much it's assumed that if we've got to do something really active and really energetic, the best source is anger. I just don't buy that. But it's more subtle, and it's less what we're trained in, and it's less what's supported—to see how much energy can come from compassion, can come from loving-kindness.

If we look around in the world, in literature, in the newspapers, or if I look in retreats, you can always find people who are achieving amazing things who, from at least as much as we can tell from what they say and their way of being, seem to come from compassion.

One of my big inspirations—Steve mentioned Aung San Suu Kyi last night—one of my big inspirations is Sister Chân Không, who has been working with Thích Nhất Hạnh for years and years and years, since the early sixties. Even when I first met her in 1986, I didn't really know anything. I'd never heard of her. I knew nothing about her. But even then, spending some weeks with them, I was really blown away by her. As far as I could see, everything she was doing—and I'm not exaggerating—was coming out of taking care of people, both at Plum Village or when she was on retreat here, or taking care of people in Vietnam. And that would take her to any action that needed to happen, from bringing in bug spray and clearing fleas out of somebody's room, to sending money to orphans, to digging in the gardens, to whatever.

I really deeply felt that the motivation for her energy was true compassion. And I have rarely met a person more filled with energy and who gets more done than Sister Chân Không. I tend to sit and go, "May all beings be happy." Meanwhile, she ran around and did five hundred things, all while at the same time genuinely wishing people could be happy.

Recently I've been reading her autobiography, which is probably why she's more in my mind tonight, because there's just stuff on every page that shows the depth of her willingness to work with compassion—and that it doesn't just come totally naturally. It's something we need to meditate on, to get ourselves attuned with over and over and over. And it's so powerful. This book is filled with events of friends getting killed in the Vietnam War, on and on and on.

This is one particular eulogy she wrote after some dear friends of theirs at the School for Social Work were killed. These were young people just trying to help the poor villagers in the midst of the war. Because they wouldn't take either side and worked for peace, both sides feared them and killed them and bombed them, so they were in constant danger. This is the eulogy she wrote after some of her dear friends were killed:

We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that men are not our enemies. Our only enemies are misunderstanding, hatred, jealousy, and ignorance that lead to such acts of violence. Please allow us to remove all misunderstanding so that we can work together for the happiness of the Vietnamese people. Our only aim is to help remove ignorance and illiteracy from the countryside of Vietnam. Social change must start in our hearts with the will to transform our own egotism, greed, and lust into understanding, love, commitment, and sharing responsibility for the poverty and injustice in our country.

The thing is, I get the impression that it's not just an idea—that she has the idea and writes the words of what would be a compassionate thing. Because she mentions later another eulogy she wrote for four other friends who were killed simply for belonging to their social work group, where she said she had to spend three days and nights, hardly able to sleep, in deep grief, just coming back over and over and over with mindfulness to meditate on compassion and love and interconnectedness. Until she could finally hit the point of true love and interconnectedness for the people who had murdered her friends—only then could she write another eulogy.

So it's not that for some people it might be more natural, or that these people who truly have dedicated their lives to such action are simply different from us. It's the willingness to continue clarifying and recommitting and restrengthening the intention of compassion, of connectedness, of mindfulness. That's what gives it the strength. And that's actually what we're doing here, even though it might not seem quite so dramatic in this particular setting. But that commitment, that strengthening, that clarification is, to me, what our brahmavihāra practice is about.

Again, sometimes people, in thinking about purification of our understanding and intention—another thing people sometimes ask besides "If I don't act from desire or hatred, will I just sit in my room forever?" is "Does it mean I won't care about anything anymore?" Like some sense that if I'm not acting from desire and hatred, everything's just this dull, blobby gray and boring. You don't care. "I don't care what's for lunch."

I don't care if it's burned. I don't care where I go for the movies. Anything's fine. We could have kasha every day for breakfast for the next year, and it wouldn't matter at all. I haven't reached that point yet, by the way.

Again, it's not so. Two quotations I'd like to read. One from the Buddha, who said, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it." You get that? Things are still beautiful. All that goes away is the striving after it. It doesn't mean we can't tell what's beautiful. It doesn't mean you can't tell if someone sticks a pin in you. You'll feel it. You won't say, "Is that pleasant or unpleasant?" You'll know. But there won't be that sense of, "Oh my God, someone stuck a pin in me! How could they do that?" with all that suffering. It's just, "Oh, okay. Unpleasant."

Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "Do not be afraid of freedom from desire and fear. It enables you to live a life so different from all you know, so much more intense and interesting, that truly by losing all, you gain all."

The mind of desire trying to project out into the rest of our life—how is it going to be without acting from desire and fear—isn't going to be able to figure it out. You cannot trust the mind of desire. You cannot trust the intention of anger and hatred and fear to give us an accurate sense of what life would be without it.

So what we do is begin to notice when our intention is colored by desire and fear and anger, and when it is not. And this is where the equanimity and the balance of Vipassana come in. Because it's not that we should begin now judging ourselves: "Uh-oh, I acted with the intention of greed. No good, I'm a bad person." Just to notice it and to notice the difference.

You'll also see when you go home that you might not have noticed the impact of the purification of intention here because it happens in little things. But when you go home you might begin to notice it in little things as well.

For instance, here you might be standing in the food line wanting that piece of blueberry coffee cake, and you see that there's only four pieces left and six people in front of you. And the sense of greed that could arise—suddenly everyone else is not a being with needs and wants but something in your way, because that's the effect that greed has on consciousness. And it might not be this particular example, but many others. And suddenly there's a moment of, "Oh, that's okay. I want it, but I can live without it. And isn't it nice that these people get to have a piece of cake?" Just a little shift like that. Sometimes we're looking for the big explosion and we don't notice the little moments.

Or similarly, so many people report on retreats, and on this one too, where someone in the next room or someone in the next seat is somehow doing something that is just unacceptable behavior. Unacceptable, why? Because we don't like it, of course. It both-

ers us. And we can go through the range of righteous indignation, of self-judgment, of hatred of the other person, of all kinds of murderous fantasies. And if you've had any, you're not alone. It's really normal.

And suddenly there's this sense of, "Oh"—really connecting either with, "I can stand this unpleasantness," and immediately there's a sense of spaciousness and caring for the person. Or it might turn out, "Oh, they're really suffering." And the sense of connection with their suffering gives us the space to really be okay with what's going on and connected.

Again, it's a small moment of shifting of intention, giving rise to thought and our response to a situation. But it's powerful, important to notice.

And so there are different ways that we can consciously cultivate this strengthening of a pure intention. It will arise spontaneously the more that we practice, and we can also cultivate it consciously.

A large part, and perhaps the most powerful way I know, is just what we've been doing here. The practice of metta, the practice of karuna, of sympathetic joy, and equanimity—which we get to tomorrow—is really that, as I've mentioned: a conscious cultivation and purification of intention.

And again, it's not naive wishing, or affirmations. "May such and so happen because I want it to." It's really coming back over and over to that intention that wishes well for someone with no attachment at all to the results. And this is really what gives it the purity. As soon as there's an attachment to wanting something to happen, the metta or the karuna has gotten mixed with some attachment, has gotten mixed with some wanting. Not bad, but just to notice that there are now several things going on at once. But each time we come back, that pure intention is strengthened.

The Buddha said once that whatever one reflects upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. And that's what's happening. It's not that we can sit here and make ourselves feel loving-kindness, connected to all beings, radiating outward. You know by now you can't make that happen. All you can do is say, "Okay, I'll come back. May I be happy." That's all we can do. But with the mind reflecting upon it frequently and frequently, that's when suddenly you'll find that little blip of, "Oh, so what? Let them have the cake. It makes me really happy." And you think, "Where did that come from? Somebody else must have said that. That's not the voice I'm used to."

We can't control the outcome. And this is where our compassion, our metta, really gets boundless—because it's balanced by equanimity.

Again, a story from Sister Phong. She was talking about one time, sometime in the sixties, when she was in jail in Vietnam because she was caught traveling with subversive literature, which was some of Thich Nhat Hanh's peace writings. She was in jail for quite some time under very horrible conditions. A lot of high monks and people knew her and agitated for her release, so she was freed after a few weeks, not very long.

She was writing in her book about how when she came out, she said to the head of the police or whoever released her—she talked about two young twelve-year-old girls who were in the prison under these really bad conditions. She said they had just been arrested because they happened to be around when some guerrillas were arrested, and because they were just in the vicinity, they were also arrested and thrown in jail. Out of compassion, she was saying, "Thank you for releasing me, and these two young girls who've done nothing are here. It's clearly such bad conditions for young minds—maybe could they be released?"

And her words, which were pure intention, had the effect of the police officer saying, "Oh, they've been talking to each other, the prisoners. We have to make the regimen more strict."

We can't control the outcome. With all the best and clearest intention, that's out of our control. And without the balance of equanimity—of really seeing that we are not in control of any results, of really seeing that things are as they are, and that all beings will have joy and all beings will have suffering—without that, we can just drown in the pain as we open with compassion, with love. Or we get so hooked on judging by results that we say, "Well, compassion is clearly too weak. I should come in here with an Uzi and blast them out of jail."

It's really a way of such strength and courage. It's unimaginable to me, actually, the courage of people like this who can continue to face such responses of ignorance and hatred and continue to come back with the courage of compassion and love. It takes far more courage than it takes to be angry. Because it takes really taking in, opening to the seeming unfairness of the world, to the pain that there is, and still finding some way to connect—even to that police officer who responded in that way.

Equanimity again with ourselves, for all the times that we can't do that. Not to have unrealistic expectations that from now on all my motivation should come from love and compassion. We know how hard that is. We know how hard it is even to be compassionate with ourselves for ten minutes sitting here in relative comfort and ease, being so hard on our experience. How then can we expect that we're going to be able to bring that to others?

But it's in just this way—working with your knee pain, with your judging voice, with the anger at someone who's making noise during tea time or whatever. It's our willingness to see and accept our own difficult responses, our own lack of compassion for others and ourselves, that brings this practice, that makes the link from what is just a pillow practice to real action in the world. And it's just these little times when you notice the intention shifting that can maybe give you the strength to keep going.

In our daily life, not only the formal practice of metta, but bringing it up in situations where you feel a little difficulty or even just separation. I'll use it a lot in the supermarket line when I'm impatient and somebody with seventy-five things and seventy-eight coupons is trying to write a check and wants it to be more, and I only have three minutes. That's the time to bring in metta. It's astounding. Just a couple of phrases, a little dropping in, and instead of me and them and in my way, we're just all together. It's us in this situation.

Or on planes—I do it on planes all the time. I go on a plane and I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to even look at the person in the next seat. It's kind of my time alone. And within a couple of minutes, I notice how completely isolated and fearful I've become, because if I don't want to talk, that leads to fear. I'm sitting there cringing, my head under a blanket. And I just begin to send metta to myself and everyone on the plane. It's astounding. It's never failed that within about ten seconds, there's this really happy sense of being family together for this little period of time in this little metal shell in the sky. It's very amazing.

Another way we can consciously cultivate intention aside from our formal silent practice—and I've heard this from both a Tibetan teacher and also Sister Phong—is simply having the thought, as you do particular activities, of using that activity as a way to remind you to cultivate compassion. So, for example, as you're going to rest, saying, "May all beings rest in the peace of understanding." Or Sister Phong mentioned again that time when she was three days and nights coming back to mindfulness in order to connect with the people who had killed her friends. She'd be washing her hands and she'd say, "May my heart be cleansed of anger and hatred. May the hearts of the people who killed my friend be cleansed of ignorance and violence."

It's very simple, so simple. It takes no time. You're already doing something. And what I found interesting is how easily resistance can come up to doing it. It might feel effortful. I'd rather think about what's on at the movies. It's interesting again just to see that this is the conditioning of habit—the mind's used to running on in its own little distracted way or amusing itself way. And just to notice that and make that little commitment to open to the potential for compassion, to wishing all beings well.

One other practice I wanted to mention because it's actually becoming more and more powerful for me. And again, it's a conscious cultivation of the intention of compassion. It's what's called in the Tibetan tradition the aspiration bodhicitta, to develop the wish of bodhicitta. Bodhicitta, very briefly, could be translated as "heart of awakening." And the cultivation of this wish is simply the generation of the aspiration or the intention: I want to awaken to freedom in order to help all suffering beings to awaken.

Again, stay with the intention, not with the thought—"Who am I? How could I possibly help all beings awaken? This is too much. I couldn't..." Just let all that stuff rest. Come back, and it's simply at the beginning of a sitting. At the beginning of almost every sitting, I'll just sit and form that intention. Notice the different quality it brings to our actions, or sitting, or life.

This aspiration of compassion—of wanting to awaken in order to help awaken all beings—lends such a vastness, such a spaciousness to the compassion, to our practice, that it's a vastness that approaches the vast emptiness of truth. And the intention of compassion lends so much more courage, so much more strength. It just expands us beyond our separate little self and our self-concerns, just in little ways. You're sitting and you really connect with a sense of the suffering of beings and the intention that may my practice be for the awakening of all beings. It's a lot easier to sit with knee pain. Or when I'm sitting and it's unpleasant and there's some unpleasant emotion—ah, why should I stay with this?—and it comes up: well, you're not just doing it for yourself. There really is this intention to help awaken all beings. The sense of "why should I stay with this?" just vanishes.

There's so much more depth and breadth and joy that comes from what we're doing. And the question of silent meditation practice or sending compassion to yourself or sending love to yourself—the question of that being selfish, of that being limited—just vanishes when our whole life and practice is put into this broader context. I'm not saying one should do that. I'm just giving that as an example of how the conscious cultivation of connection and compassion adds a whole depth and breadth to our experience that can't be imagined when we're coming from our own wanting and fear.

You've probably heard Thich Nhat Hanh speak about, or write about, how our own practice, our own purification of intention and action and speech, affects all with whom we come in contact. He gives the example of one calm person in a boat. He talks about some of the boat people during the period when there were many refugees leaving Vietnam in boats, really packed into these rinky-dink fishing boats. And a lot of them were

pirated, but a lot of them also ran into very severe storms. From talking to hundreds of refugees, they found out that in some of the storms, everybody on the boat panicked, and a lot of people didn't survive.

But they found out that in the really bad storms, if just one person on the boat stayed really calm, that calm communicated itself to the people around, which then affected the people around them. One calm person on a boat seemed to make enough difference that the rest of the people calmed down and they would survive through the storm.

You know, we tend to want such large results. But if we can just send enough compassion, enough loving-kindness to ourselves—that's all we do—the natural purification of intention that happens will mean that we will be, in some ways, that kind person, or the courageous person, or the loving person, the connected person, whatever it happens to be, however it manifests through our own personality. And that can have an effect on all with whom we come in contact that we can't imagine sitting here trying to envision it. And we don't need to.

So I just like to encourage us all to honor the difficulty that you're going through. Honor each moment that there's a spontaneous transformation of intention.

CHAPTER 262

Patience: Active Acceptance

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *Carol Wilson opens with the Dalai Lama's teaching that genuine world peace must begin within ourselves, then examines how our conditioned habits of craving, aversion, and delusion keep us from recognizing the peace that is our true nature. She illuminates how we habitually filter experience through pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral reactions, creating elaborate stories of suffering from simple sensations—a mild toe pain spiraling into self-hatred, or a cough triggering murderous fantasies.*
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> *The talk redefines patience not as passive endurance or resigned waiting, but as an active, spacious acceptance rooted in mettā (loving-kindness). Wilson distinguishes true patience from aversion masquerading as tolerance, emphasizing that patience actively meets all experience—pleasant and unpleasant alike—with compassionate, non-judgmental presence. She suggests replacing "letting go" with "letting be," pointing to a quality of full acceptance rather than subtle rejection.*
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> *Drawing from her year as a nun in Thailand, Wilson shares how cultivating patience amid extreme heat, insects, and discomfort transformed her experience completely—not by changing conditions, but by changing her relationship to them. She quotes Ajahn Sumedho on recognizing the unconditioned through patient non-clinging, and the Dalai Lama's teaching that patience is strength while anger reveals weakness. The talk closes with Thích Nhất Hạnh's poem written during the Vietnam War, demonstrating how patient, compassionate presence can meet even unimaginable suffering with invincible love.*

I want to read one of my favorite quotations from the Dalai Lama. He's talking about the need for peace and freedom and how calling on governments to provide peace and freedom is not sufficient:

"It is crucial to investigate what the true nature of happiness is, what the true source of peace is, so that we can develop a form of peace that will last. The question of real lasting world peace concerns human beings, so basic human feelings are also at its root. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. Peace must first be discovered within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet. Developing attitudes such as love, compassion, patience, and understanding between human beings is not merely a source of personal happiness, but has become a condition for human survival."

Tonight I want to talk a little bit about one of the deep-rooted habits of our conditioned mind that keeps us from recognizing true peace and profound happiness. I also want to explore how this quality that the Dalai Lama spoke of—patience—can be helpful in our practice and in our lives to open our awareness, enabling us to recognize and abide in true peace and happiness.

Throughout these days we have been speaking, and will probably continue to speak, of how this is a practice of awakening—of how our true nature is peace, that peace is our very existence. But is that actually our experience in an ongoing way? We may have glimpses of our true nature of peace. Maybe for some people the glimpses last a little longer. Maybe you have frequent glimpses. I know for many of us the glimpses are much less frequent—if we even notice them at all. They're there, but whether we notice them is the question.

What seems to come up in talking with people, especially in the first days of a meditation retreat, is that what we actually seem to be opening to is frustration, pain, discontent, sleepiness, boredom, doubt—the whole list—with an occasional moment of happiness and peace and quietness maybe to balance it. So how do we lose sight of what is our true nature?

The Buddha said that one of the things that motivated him to teach, that really deeply touched his heart of compassion, was that in looking through the world he could tell that the deepest motivation of everybody—something we all share—is that we want to be happy. It seems like that's something that links us all. What is so sad is that through our not understanding clearly our own nature, the nature of reality, what we tend to do in our pursuit of happiness—which we're guaranteed in this country—is things that increase and continue the cycle of suffering and confusion. It's really sad because it's so unnecessary.

One of the great benefits of taking time like this, these ten days on a meditation retreat, is that for a little while we've stopped some of our cycle of frenzied activity and we're taking the time to really inquire into what's going on here. What's the nature of happiness? What's the nature of suffering? How does suffering arise? How is it created? How does it continue?

Khenpo Rinpoche said once that the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind as well as how the deluded mind works. You'll find that experience fluctuates between the two. There are times when we're really seeing, knowing, understanding the nature of the non-deluded mind. And

there are other times that we're deeply entrenched in discovering how the deluded mind works. That's the point of our mindful awareness practice—to be with the suffering, the difficulty, and pay attention to see what's really going on.

I feel that one of the basic manifestations of our deluded mind is a core misunderstanding of what will really make us happy. This is what sets up the ongoing cycle of craving and trying to get and being dissatisfied.

Some very simple examples: Our idea of happiness or peace might be, very crassly, getting what we want. Getting what we want could be physical comfort. It could be certain physical conditions. It could be having people treat us the way we want them to. It could be having all the injustice in the world disappear. It could be having certain types of sitting—spacious, alert, aware, really concentrated, really focused. It could just be absence of pain. You can add whatever comes up in your own list.

As we begin to inquire into what's really happening in our experience through the process of mindful, undiscriminating, choiceless awareness, we begin to see that inquiry challenges these basic assumptions of what happiness is. If you can imagine or remember, or even touch for a moment, times here—sitting and walking or just having tea—one of those moments of very alert, awake, spacious awareness, regardless of what particular experience or appearance is arising. It might be that there's hearing and just that vivid awakeness that's fully present. Or it could be seeing, or sensation in the body.

It could be an emotion. It doesn't matter what's happening. But in that moment where the relationship to whatever is arising is not one of clinging or grasping, not one of resistance or pushing away, not in any way involved and stuck to that experience, but very clearly awake and present, knowing quite clearly what is arising—in that moment, what's the problem?

In those sometimes all too brief moments of this vivid non-grasping awareness, nothing that arises is really such a problem that we're acutely suffering. We're not lost in fighting or holding on. Moments like this point to the nature of our mind, point to the peace that is who and what we truly are. And in that moment there's nothing we have to do. It seems so simple.

And yet so quickly—at least for me, I won't speak for anybody else—so quickly, over and over and over, the attention in the mind gets distracted, gets somehow involved in a particular experience. Either struggle or conflict with myself, conflict with my experience, wanting things to be different.

If we look at what's happened in that moment where we get distracted, we can find that on one level we've begun again to believe that our happiness or peace depends on some changing condition. We're looking for it where it can never be found. As soon as there's a sense of struggle, as soon as there's some grasping or desire going on, somewhere, somehow, I'm thinking that this particular internal experience that's happening is going to make me happy. That ease of body will make me happy. That the weather is the thing that will make me happy. That the way other people behave is the thing that makes me happy or makes me unhappy.

We find that we're looking either to internal changing experience or to so-called external changing experience. But it's all, all of it, in constant flux. There is no experience that lasts. This goes to what Joseph spoke about last night as one of the mind turnings: the deep, visceral understanding of impermanence. Because when we really, really get it, then that clinging to some changing experience is not going to arise. And it's that clinging, that resistance, that turns us away from recognizing the potential for peace here and now.

It's not that that particular experience—the leg pain, the beautiful day, whatever—has to go away. It's the clinging and the resistance that blinds us to what is possible.

So one of the root ways that we get in the habit of getting lost in this confused way of relating to experience is what I want to talk about. And that's the deep-rooted habit of mind of relating to experience with craving and holding on if it's pleasant, with pushing away, resistance, some kind of aversion or anger if the experience is unpleasant. And if it's neutral, we tend not to notice it too much. We get bored, we space out, we create some whole melodrama that at least holds our attention more than a neutral experience.

In Buddhist psychology, in the way of describing our mental and physical experience, it's really brought down to the very basic, bare experience without interpretation. In any moment we're experiencing one of six sense experiences: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, and whatever mental experience might be arising—thoughts, emotions. The mind in that way is treated as a sense door. And in that moment of, say, hearing, it's said to be experienced as either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

Now this can be really obvious sometimes, but a lot of times it's quite subtle. And it's not what we're so tuned into noticing. So what happens in that moment, if it's a pleasant sound, for example, and we don't notice that, there's not awareness at that point of contact at the sense door—then almost immediately the habit of the deluded mind will say, "Oh, that's nice. I like it. Let's have some more." If it's unpleasant, it almost immedi-

ately moves into, "This isn't really good. In fact it's bad, it's a big mistake, and it needs to change." And it can go on from there, depending how long the experience lasts and our particular propensity. If it's neutral, we tend not to notice. It just kind of passes us by.

These three reactions are spoken of as some of the roots of unwholesome behavior in the mind: the root of greed, of hatred, of confusion or delusion. In a lot of the way Buddhist psychology describes experience and suffering, it often comes back to one of these three roots as the motivation or intention of thought, speech, and action.

What I want to talk about tonight, though, is how when we don't realize this process is happening—and it's a habit, it's not inevitable—when we don't realize the sensing of pleasant and wanting more, it becomes a filter through which we tend to interpret our experience without even realizing it. So if it's pleasant: "Oh good, this is good, this is how things are supposed to be, this is correct." If it's unpleasant: "It's bad or evil or a big mistake, it's not supposed to happen." And again, neutral, we don't interpret, we just go and create something else.

What's interesting is that often people will come in during a long retreat and say they've begun to notice that they're very calm. And rather than that being something they're relaxing into, they're realizing that they found the calm sort of neutral and boring. And the mind then began to create suffering scenarios in order to wake up.

These filters of our conditioning, these ways that we interpret experience, are very strong and powerful if we don't recognize them when they're present. What we often find happening in a day of sitting or walking on retreat—it's easier to notice there, but it's the same thing that goes on when we're at our jobs or with our family—is that when we're caught in the blinders of attachment or aversion, we're not able at that moment to open up to the big picture. It's sort of like tunnel vision; we're locked on that particular thing.

We get so entangled in either trying to prolong or bring back the pleasant experience, or in fighting and struggling with the unpleasant experience, judging it. We get so entangled, and we suffer so much from that, that the activity itself keeps us so occupied we don't notice another possibility altogether. I've used this example before: it's like being in prison and spending all your time trying to rearrange the furniture and make the room nice so it's as comfortable and spacious as possible—and that keeps you so busy you don't notice that the door is open all the time and you can just walk out. It's sort of like that in the way we engage with experience, with this push-pull and judging of it.

So as you go through the day, tonight, tomorrow, see if you notice this filter on experience happening at all. And again, it's not to judge it as bad or good, but simply to begin to notice the filter. Simple retreat examples: you have a sitting that is pleasant. Pleasant could mean simply that it meets your expectations of what's supposed to be happening. Or it could be that it's comfortable, or that you felt really concentrated, or really spacious. It really doesn't matter what it is—it's just the fact that it was pleasant, and immediately, without realizing it, there arises: "Oh, this is how it's supposed to be. This is correct meditation. This is what's supposed to be happening."

And then another sitting that's spacey, all over the place, or the body's really painful, or thoughts are arising every half of a breath, and there's this sense of uncomfortableness. It's so easy not to notice the filter that says, "This is wrong, this is bad, this is a mistake, I'm not doing it right, this isn't what's supposed to happen." Both of these filters, when unseen, are taking us far away from the actual bare experience. This is how we get so lost, so out of touch with the bare experience of what's happening now.

A lot of what we're doing in the very simple practice of sitting—coming back to the bare experience of hearing or breathing or sensation in the body, whatever's arising—is to help us begin to actually know what's happening and tell the difference between that and all the interpretations and stories and hoopla that we build up and then take to be so without realizing it.

For example, say in the hall there's somebody coughing. It's unpleasant. Without noticing that, it's so easy to move into aversion and judgment and hypochondria and anger. Quite literally, I'm not exaggerating—there are some retreats where people have reported that they felt they were barely restraining themselves from throttling the person next to them because they were sniffing or coughing or something. And they would have a little sense: "I think this is out of proportion." But the pain, the suffering, is very genuine. I laugh to try and lighten it, but the person is really in deep suffering about this.

Our practice is simply: "Oh, can I come back to the experience of hearing? Just the sound itself." And in that, you might notice if it's unpleasant. You might even see the whole build-up from the unpleasant. And in the seeing, that's enough. We don't have to get so lost in all of that. But part of the problem is we don't like to come back to the unpleasant. That's the whole point of patience, and why I want to talk about that in a minute.

Our whole training is: if it's unpleasant, it shouldn't be happening, and I don't have to be here with it. All our training is to get away if it's unpleasant. If it's pleasant, all our training is to hang on, make it last, do it again. And desire can lead to the same kind of elaborate story that an unpleasant sound can. Strong, strong habit. Not inevitable.

Another example, and this is a little bit more subtle: someone experiencing a strong tension in the head. Happening a lot, throughout a lot of sittings. It's so easy to build that up into a whole thing: "This tension is unbearable. Eight more days of this. I'll never last eight more days. I'll never even last the rest of the sitting." And moving even from that into: "This tension is reflective of the way I relate to life, of the way I relate to myself. This tension is here because I am such an uptight, rigid person. I'm unloving. I'm harsh." And it can just go on and on and on until by the time—

someone's actually speaking about this experience in an interview, the tension in the head is barely acknowledged. It's mushroomed into a whole story of self-hatred or unworthiness or whatever. And the habits of our mind—they're really expert at picking the particular story that's really going to hook us, that's sort of hard to see through.

Now, somebody coughing is a lot easier than something that leads into our deep-rooted psychological patterns. And I'm not saying the psychological patterns aren't true—they might be true—but what's actually happening in the moment is an experience of tension that's unpleasant. And if we can see that, that that's just what's happening, it does not have to mushroom into such a whole story. Sometimes when we notice we're really caught in some story, it's possible to bring the attention back to the trigger, to the bare experience that's going on. And it's amazing how that can cut through and bring us back into a balanced relationship to our experience.

I remember one time I was on a long retreat, doing walking meditation, and I thought I was very present—noticing thinking, noticing the sensations. I wasn't spacing out, so to speak. I was quite present. And then I started to notice that the thoughts were becoming very judgmental, very self-hating. They started to move into stories that dealt with the present, and then they started going backwards in time. When I realized I was back to the third grade and the horrible things I had done to other kids, and that proved what a worthless person I was, I said, wait a minute. I think I'm missing something in this experience.

I just stood there and opened up the field of attention. I said, well, what's going on now? And it was amazing, because what was going on that I hadn't noticed was a mild pain in my toe. That was all. It wasn't even a bad pain. But it was unpleasant, and I hadn't noticed it. And out of habit, I started to react to unpleasantness with aversion

and resistance, and then my particular personality propensity was to take that anger and turn it inward. Someone else might turn it outward, or might go off into a different pattern altogether.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, "We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." What we're trying to do here is help us, moment by moment, to recognize the real in the whole range of its manifestations. Not to judge these habits of mind as bad—that's just falling into the same filter—but to understand how they work.

When unseen, these habits of reaction to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral are what keeps our sense of separation going. It's what feeds and strengthens desire, fear, hatred, confusion. It keeps us looking elsewhere, looking outward, looking to another time, another place, another experience for freedom or peace. It keeps us from recognizing the potential for peace and freedom here and now, keeps us from noticing the essential purity and completeness that is here—here and now and always.

So our practice of mindful awareness, of simply and gently coming to connect with and recognize our experience—what's happening, without judgment, without agenda, without reaction—it opens us to another possibility altogether of how to be with our experience, which is to be fully present with things just as they are. It's simple, but so difficult to be in that place of open acceptance, moment by moment by moment.

And so we practice being with things just as they are. The different techniques—tuning into hearing, tuning into breath, tuning into sensations, emotions, whatever—that sense of waking up, "Oh, I've really been spaced out," and coming back, it functions as one of my teachers described it: like a rattle with a two-year-old. A two-year-old is really locked onto something, screaming, having a tantrum, wanting something so badly. And on the other side of the room, you just shake a little rattle, and they just forget the whole story. They turn around and go, "Oh yeah, look at the rattle."

It's sort of like that. Each moment we can wake up and just connect. It doesn't even matter what we're connecting with—just connect with what is. It's like that rattle. It's simple. We don't have to do so much. We just have to stop our confused involvement.

As a little aside, speaking about the different techniques that we use as a rattle, I just wanted to say again that we've talked about beginning a sitting by staying with hearing, or maybe being with the breath, being with sensations. We wanted to emphasize that there is no one correct or right way that you're supposed to do it. For some people, beginning a sitting and opening to hearing, or using hearing as the rattle the whole time, is extremely helpful. Helpful means not that it's always pleasant, not that we're going to

enjoy every minute. Helpful means it helps us stay alert, awake, and able to relate in a balanced way. For some people, that's not helpful, and moving right into a balanced and connected experience of the sensations of breathing is what's helpful.

For some people, beginning with breathing and then opening up to sensations in the body is what's helpful. We're offering different techniques, and I want to say: really look at your own experience. Not by whether you like it or not—that's got nothing to do with it—but whether it helps you come back over and over to reconnect with a sense of ease, connectedness, and clear seeing. And it's going to vary a lot. So don't set up some expectation that if you figure out the right way, then you'll always be open and connected and spacious. Sorry. Doesn't work like that.

One aspect of the non-deluded mind, an expression of the non-deluded mind, is this quality of patience. Patience is extremely important in this practice, this work that we're doing here together. I want to talk a little bit about patience and what I'm meaning by it, because I mean something quite specific.

Patience is an aspect of loving-kindness. We use the word mettā in Pali, which is a sense of very active connection with beings, with experience, that is limitless—not discriminating, not feeling loving-kindness for this person but not for that person because I don't like the way they act. A moment of loving-kindness is very spacious, very active, very connected. And patience has this quality.

I think patience gets a bad rap in our culture. In meditation too, people come and say, "Well, this horrible thing is happening and everything I've tried doesn't work, so I guess I'll have to be patient." It's like the last resort when nothing else works. This is not exactly what I'm referring to. We call it patience, but it's more like passive endurance: "Okay, I'm putting up with this until it goes away. I'm really cultivating patience." That's not patience. That's aversion—just masquerading in a mellower form.

There's another way we call it patience: "Okay, I know this is difficult. It's here. I've seen it. I've really accepted it. I've really allowed it. Now I'll sort of detach and not really pay attention to it until it goes away." That's also not being patient.

Patience has the characteristic of acceptance and of spaciousness. And it's also an active connection and acceptance with whatever experience is arising. As the Dalai Lama spoke of the necessity for patience between human beings, what we can discover and cultivate here is the quality of patience within ourselves, with our own experience. It's a very powerful force.

Patience actively meets whatever experience is arising. It's not like looking at it from a distance and saying, "Okay, later we'll check it out." It's really opening to meet very directly and very fully, and it's accompanied by compassion. So if it's a difficult experience, that meeting has an open, non-judging quality that is really present for and okay with the difficulty, the unpleasantness in the situation.

Patience is also the same way we meet pleasant experiences. We tend to think of patience only with the unpleasant, but that same quality of open, active connection, non-judging, non-violent, is the same way patience meets pleasant experience and neutral experience—knowing it clearly, allowing it fully, but not reactive, not caught up in trying to make it different or trying to keep it from going away.

There's one other way that people often seem to get confused or mistake aversion for patience, and it's the use of this term "letting go"—which is used a lot. "I just have to let go of my attachment. I have to let go of my anger." I'm personally on a little crusade to change that particular expression, because over and over again people will be saying, "Well, this is going on, I just haven't been able to let go of it yet." And reading between the lines, what it means is: it's still here, it hasn't gone away, I haven't been able to get rid of it yet.

In the aspect of patience, if you could change "letting go" to "letting it be"—it's just totally okay that this experience is happening, really present with it, quite awake, and really okay when it goes. Because it will.

Everything does.

And one other aspect of patience that I found very interesting. I was reading a commentary on different aspects. We call the perfections of the Buddha different qualities that during all the many eons of bodhisattva-hood that Joseph talked about last night, he was cultivating—in the Theravada it's ten, in Mahayana it's six—ten different qualities, bringing them to perfection. And patience is one of them.

So I was reading this treatise about patience, and it said that the proximate cause, the immediate cause for patience to arise in our mind, is seeing things as they are. I really like that a lot, because so often we say or think, somehow subtly, that patience is passivity—that it doesn't act, that it doesn't really get how difficult things are in the world. But patience actually arises from seeing things as they are.

And I think that can come back to one of the things we see as they are—this aspect of impermanence. Our impatience arises from wanting things to be the way we think they should be: wanting all the difficulty to go away, wanting the injustice to go away, wanting people to stop. Sometimes I just get crazy wanting people to stop doing such stupid,

hateful things. Wondering when people can stop polluting, when people can stop torturing. It just can make me crazy. That's an aspect of impatience, and it's also an aspect of not seeing things the way they are—meaning that everything changes, and the way this life is in this realm, the samsara realm that Joseph spoke about last night, is a constant flux of beautiful and horrible.

Even if we look at nature, it's all a rhythm. This beautiful green time now; other times it's really dry and begging for rain. I understand, although I haven't been here, that in the winter it's just solid snow for months on end. Such different environments. The tides that come and go, the moon that waxes and wanes, the dead of winter, the bounty of summer.

And in our own personal experiences, I'm just beginning to get it at this point in my life—that life isn't just this linear process where things get better and better and better until then suddenly you die. In my twenties I'd think, okay, now when's it all going to get better? And you do whatever you do, you get married or whatever, you find the perfect job, and then everything is just sort of hunky-dory and you live the rest of your life. But I think I'm starting to get it. It's a constant flux. Sometimes some years are wonderful and happy and everything seems to be clicking along. And a couple of years later, it's like a year from hell. It's so easy to think, uh-oh, I blew it. What did I do wrong? And I'm just starting to know—hmm, it's been pretty good for a while. I wonder how it's going to change. Because it is going to change. And that's not necessarily bad. That's just how life is.

Working with this aspect of patience, with our mindful awareness, allows us to be just as open and present with all sides of life without trying to deny one—seeing the interrelatedness. As Thich Nhat Hanh talks about so often: Can you look at a rose and see the garbage that it goes into? Can you look at the garbage and see how it becomes compost to become the rose? Can you see that there are two sides and you can't separate them? You can't just have a rose and no garbage.

This is just a little image that stuck with me. A few years ago I was in Ulm in Germany, which is a town with a large cathedral that sort of dominates the town. We were just walking around and we looked at a store window—one of these with a door and then a big picture window on each side. We were looking in the first side and it was all statues of the Madonna and Mary and Jesus. Oh, a spiritual store. That's nice. We walked to the other side and it was all beer steins and guns. We said, oh, that's the other side of things. That's what it's like. And it is. That's what things are like.

If we struggle with it, instead of just seeing it as it is, there's so much more suffering. And it's worth it. It's really worth it to be willing to open to the unpleasant, the difficult, the so-called downside of things. To meet that with the same open acceptance we can meet the beautiful, the touching, the so-called positive.

Remember Joseph read last night from the Dalai Lama? He said that the Buddha taught that patience is the supreme means for transcending suffering. The supreme means for transcending suffering.

Not for pretending that it never happens, but for meeting difficult experience in a way that can transform that experience completely because it transforms our relationship to it.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does, because it—meaning acceptance of pain—ends the false sense of self by ending its habit of avoiding pain. By opening up and meeting with active, spacious acceptance the difficult experiences in our sitting, in our life, the effect... I continue to be amazed by the effect.

One aspect is that we find out we cannot shut down selectively. If we could just screen out all the pain and all the unpleasant experience, but be really open and connected to life and connected to other beings and just really be feeling alive—that would be great, right? We'd all do it. But it doesn't work that way.

I've noticed over and over again, when I start to feel really disconnected, self-involved, caught up or separate from other people, however that manifests, if I stop and look, I almost always see there's some kind of painful or difficult experience that I'm going through that I'm not actively meeting and accepting. And granted, sometimes there's so much difficulty and pain. We can certainly have such painful experiences in our childhood and in our present that we can't open to them right away, that we would be overwhelmed or drown. So I'm not trying to say it's simple—it's a process, little by little.

But what's so fascinating is that as soon as I say, "Oh yeah, I'm really feeling lonely right now. Can that be okay? Can I be really present with that?"—almost immediately the experience transforms and the sense of openness and connection comes back. Because if I shut down to my pain, I'm shut down to other people's pain. If I can open to difficulties in my experience, then I don't have to shut down in the face of somebody else's difficulties. It just seems to work like that. And so the acceptance, the active acceptance through patience of the difficult experiences that we have, can transform our relationship not only to ourselves but to others and the world.

A practice example: About a long time ago, ten years ago, I spent a year in Thailand as a nun practicing in different forest monasteries. And of course I had expectations and ideas of the experience I wanted, what I thought it would be like when I went. Of course, as you know, things are never the way we think they're going to be.

The first few months I was acutely physically uncomfortable. It was extremely hot, and I was in a temple in the city rather than out in the forest—not the idyllic forest setting I had imagined. I was staying in a little wooden hut with a tin roof. You have to wear all acrylic clothes and really long sleeves and this long robe over everything. So imagine it much, much hotter than it's been here in the middle of the day, a hundred percent humidity, wrapped up like this and sitting and cooking in this little tin shack. Aversion comes quite naturally to this particular set of conditions. So there was a lot of aversion.

And the insects—constant, constant. Bugs and scorpions and spiders, and the food wasn't agreeing with me. It just was going from bad to worse. And when I went out finally to the forest, tropical forests, they're not quiet places. They're incredibly loud. I couldn't believe how loud this forest was—the bugs. I'd hear this huge thump on my tin roof and look out, and it would be a giant snake just sticking its head off the roof. And I was under a mango tree, so I'd be sitting, trying to be so peaceful in my meditation, and unripe mangoes would fall off onto the tin roof. It was like an explosion. Okay, calm, calm, calm—forgetting to include that in the meditation.

Well, I was really miserable until at one point—a little slow, I'd say two or three months in—I realized that what I was actually doing was cultivating aversion. We can cultivate patience, we can cultivate love, and we can cultivate aversion and greed. We do that a lot, actually. Whatever new thing was coming into my experience, I didn't even wait to meet it with any kind of openness. Aversion would spring up right away. Instant judgment.

Realizing that helped a lot, because I saw: Okay, this is how it is. And that came first, before the patience. This is how it is here in Thailand. I can leave, or I can adjust to it, or I can stay here and be miserable for the next year and a half. Those are my choices. And once I realized that, over just a month or so, my relationship to the experience changed completely. Obviously, the conditions didn't change.

But by the time I left, I was so happy and really peaceful. And it wasn't that I was in some kind of samādhi that was removing myself from experience either. I was just living a very normal day-to-day life, very simple life. And the simplicity had become so powerful.

What made the difference was that as I began to cultivate patience—just an active, open connection with the experience rather than resisting it all the time—it allowed the space to recognize something other. It allowed me not to be so caught up in my little story and to recognize the peacefulness that's accessible when we're not fighting, when we're not clinging. It was, really, one of the most wonderful times of my life. And I think if I hadn't noticed how caught up I was in aversion, I never would have been able to experience the other.

So that's just a small example, but it's one way that the attitude of patience can absolutely transform our experience, transform our life. It reveals that happiness and peace is absolutely not dependent on any particular set of circumstances or any particular situation.

There's one other way that I think patience can really help to open us up to the potential to recognize our true nature, the peace of our being. I want to read from Ajahn Sumedho, who is quite an inspiring man—an American who is a monk in the Thai Theravāda tradition and has a monastery in England. He's talking about patience:

"Buddha wisdom is very humbling because it knows that whatever arises passes away and is not self. So it knows that whatever condition of the body and mind arises, it is conditioned, and that whatever arises passes away. And it knows the unconditioned as the unconditioned."

The unconditioned could also be what we're calling the nature of mind, prajñā, true nature.

"But is knowing the unconditioned very interesting? Try to think about knowing the unconditioned. Would that be fascinating? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma—it's going to be incredibly fascinating, something blissful and ecstatic.' So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Look at the space in this room. Is it very interesting? Is it very fascinating to look at? It's not to me. The space in this room is just like the space in the other room. The things in this room might be interesting or whatever—good, bad, ugly, beautiful—but the space, what is it? There's nothing you can really say or think about it. It has no quality except being spacious. And to be able to be really spacious, one has to be patient. As there is nothing one can grasp at, one recognizes space only by not clinging to the objects in the room. When you let go, when you stop your judgments, your criticisms, your evaluations of the people and the things in the room, you begin to experience the space of it. But that takes a lot of patience and humility."

I really love that paragraph because it's really what we're doing—learning how to stop our judgments and our abstractions and our clingings to all the people and the objects and the thoughts. And when that clinging isn't arising, it's possible to recognize the space. That's all. There's nothing we have to do or create.

Just one last thing I want to say about patience. The Dalai Lama said that many people think patience is a sign of weakness—that we'll put up with something, we won't really work to change it. But he says this is wrong. Actually, anger is a sign of weakness. Reactivity is a sign of weakness. With real, true patience and open acceptance, it's far from passive endurance or weakness or fear. It actually gives a strength and a courage to be with things and situations that we might have previously thought were unendurable—and to be in these situations in a way that isn't reactive, but that is more open and connected and seeing clearly than we could have ever imagined.

Far from passive or weak, the courage that comes from patience, that comes from mettā, from unlimited loving-kindness, lends a clear seeing—seeing things as they are—and a courage and strength to act in a way that's far more appropriate than when we're responding or reacting from anger. It is possible at times to do so and still not be withered or destroyed by such depths of suffering and pain as we might encounter in the world.

I want to close with an example of this.

It really touches me—a poem Thich Nhat Hanh wrote during the Vietnam War as a response to suffering and hatred and violence that would seem to be unendurable, from a heart that has opened to it and is clearly acting. It is a poem offering a way we can relate to seemingly unendurable suffering.

Promise me,
Promise me this day,
Promise me now,
While the sun is overhead
Exactly at its zenith,
Promise me:

Even as they strike you down
With a mountain of hate and violence,
Even as they step on you and crush you like a worm,
Even as they dismember and disembowel you,

Remember, brother,
Remember:
Man is not our enemy.

The only act worthy of you is compassion—
Invincible, limitless, unconditional.
Hatred will never let you face
The beast in man.

One day, when you face this beast alone,
With your courage intact,
Your eyes kind, untroubled,
Even as no one sees them,
Out of your smile will bloom a flower,
And those who love you
Will behold you
Across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.

Alone again,
I will go on with bent head,
Knowing that love has become eternal.
On the long rough road,
The sun and the moon
Will continue to shine.

Let us sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 263

Attachment

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson delves into the nature of attachment (upādāna) and grasping as the fundamental obscurations that prevent us from recognizing our true nature. Drawing from the Buddha's Second Noble Truth—that craving (taṇhā) strengthening into attachment is the cause of suffering (dukkha)—she explores how these mental patterns create separation, distort perception, and lead us away from the peace that is always available when grasping ceases.*
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> *Wilson examines the mechanics of how grasping arises at the level of sense contact (phassa), referencing teachings from the Sutta Nipāta about understanding our sense activity. She identifies three key fields where attachment manifests: sense pleasures (kāma), views and opinions (diṭṭhi), and attachment to rituals and techniques. Through candid personal anecdotes and practical examples, she demonstrates how grasping blinds us to what is present while making us see what isn't there—the dual manifestation of ignorance (avijjā).*
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> *The talk offers the retreat setting as a laboratory for investigating attachment experientially. Rather than suppressing desires or judging them, Wilson encourages practitioners to turn attention toward the physical sensation and mental quality of grasping itself, watching how it arises and naturally dissipates. She emphasizes that the peace of non-grasping, though subtler than sense gratification, reveals the completeness that was always present—our innate purity that grasping only temporarily obscures.*

Tonight I want to talk about, in an experiential way hopefully, something that I find really fascinating. I get really happy somehow talking about this. And the subject is attachment, or grasping. Not that grasping is happy, but I just find the exploration of it so interesting. It's really key to the nature of suffering and the nature of freedom.

Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche said once that Buddha nature, the essence of awakened enlightenment itself, is present in everyone, all the time. It can't be improved upon, it can't be changed, and you'll also be glad to know it can't be degenerated. We can't harm it, no matter what we do. Buddhas simply recognize what the rest of us ignore—the true nature of all of us.

In working with our meditation practice, it's really on the principle that what keeps us ignoring our true nature is that it's veiled by temporary obscurations, temporary things in the way. The example often given is the way that clouds hide the sky or seem to block the radiance of the sun, although actually having no effect whatsoever on the sky or the radiance of the sun.

Our conventional meditation practices, this is also from Nyoshul Khenpo, can work in two ways to uncover our true nature. One is by dissolving the obscurations, which then lets our innate purity shine through. And the other is by simply recognizing these obscurations for the ephemeral, impermanent, insubstantial phenomena that they are. In either case, letting us notice, revealing what has always been present—our Buddha nature, so to speak, or our innate purity.

The phenomenon of clinging, of grasping, of attachment, is in some ways one of the key obscurations that we get blinded by. So much so that the Buddha, in elucidating his Four Noble Truths—the first one I'm not allowed to talk about because it's the nature of suffering; that's all I'm going to say about suffering—the second one is that the innate cause of suffering is craving or clinging, strengthening into attachment. It's that important. It's that key as an obscuration.

So I want to explore it together.

Several people have commented either about yesterday or other times during this retreat, and at times not on retreat, where there's been a sense—whatever you want to call it—of just this pristine, total interconnectedness. No sense of self, no sense of separation from environment. Maybe just warmth, maybe just hearing, maybe just seeing. Just the sense of being—a totally interrelated, all-encompassing experience with actually no me, no other, no sense of separation.

That's not some unusual experience that's been somehow created out of the intensity of a meditation retreat. It's not like taking a drug that can put the mind into some kind of altered perception that's dependent on the drug. This clarity, this state of just being but in vivid awakeness, is an intimation of the purity of our nature. And it's not that we've created it. It's just that for once there's a moment where it's not being obscured by the contraction of grasping, the contraction of wanting, the contraction of self.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once that the obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain. Both of those can really come under attachment, under grasping.

So I want to experientially describe attachment or grasping—how it functions in our experience, how it affects our experience and obscures the truth.

Craving or wanting, which we've spoken about quite a bit in relationship to pleasant experience and the mind inclining towards it, could be likened to groping in the dark for something. The mind is inclining towards it. If we don't notice at that point what's going on, it just strengthens. And where we were just kind of groping for something, it's like—ah, gotcha. And then the whole train starts. That's grasping or attachment.

What is going on at the basic, very basic level of our moment-to-moment experience? You may have noticed that as complicated as we can make everything in our interpretations and descriptions, when you get down to moment-to-moment awareness, there are only six types of experience that we're having. Just flowing through over and over. We're just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling sensation in the body, and mental experience happening in the moment. That's all. Over and over.

Broken down to that, there are the sense doors—those six. There's a sense object: a sight or a sound, a thought, whatever. And when there's consciousness, when those come together and there's consciousness knowing of it, that's called contact. Just a moment of seeing, a moment of hearing. And as we've said, then there's the pleasantness, the unpleasantness, the neutrality that comes with it. And following that, if we're not paying attention, the craving can come.

Or if it's unpleasant and we push it away, again it moves into grasping for something else. If there's just clear awareness, even in that moment of "ah, I kind of like that sound," that could just be it. It doesn't have to lead into a whole story and a whole field of suffering.

But when we're not really noticing—and this happens so fast and so frequently, quite a lot of the time—we're not really noticing, and it so quickly strengthens into this sense of attachment or grasping.

So just the thought comes up: a walk might be nice. That could be all it is. But without noticing it, there's a sense of "yeah, a walk would really be nice. In fact, right now I really want to go for a walk. I don't know if I can last through the rest of the sitting. It's really a mistake that I haven't taken a walk." And it can just lead us off into a two-and-a-half-hour walk.

It's nothing to do with a value judgment of walk or not. The whole discussion of attachment and grasping has nothing to do with the thing grasped at, but only with looking at the process of attachment and grasping itself. And as complex as the thing grasped at might become—a walk and my sense of union with nature, and after all I came here from the city and I should see it, and I haven't been over that ridge, and on and on and on—it all started just at that basic sense contact. No matter how complex

any of our desires and fears are, it's starting at that basic moment of sense contact. Which is one of the reasons a meditation retreat can be quite interesting, because it gives us the chance once in a while to notice that moment, fast as it is.

This is from the Buddha, from the Sutta Nipata, which is one of my favorite books of suttas—it's sometimes quite poetic:

For some people, contact, the point where sense plus object meet, is enthralling. And so they are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road.

He never minced words.

Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But others come to understand their sense activity, and because they understand it, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact is, and so their craving ends. They realize the total calm.

He doesn't say get rid of it—simply understand our sense activity. And in the understanding, this getting lost in craving and grasping ends. We can experience the calm that is always accessible when we're not blinded by grasping.

For me, a large part of my practice over all these years has been an active inquiry into the nature and experience of grasping, of attachment, as it arises. Krishnamurti said once that unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable.

So here we have a great laboratory. Just sitting, just walking—it's not too complicated—and we really have a chance to notice the moments when grasping arises. What's it like?

Take a sitting. Simply relaxed, alert awareness, whether it's tuned with hearing or the breath—doesn't really matter—but there's not the sense of tightness. Just awake. All the various six experiences are coming and going. There's hearing, there's internal images, there's sensations, there's thoughts, there's emotions, coming and going. And there can still be just this sense of spacious, alert presence. No problem.

And then suddenly, whatever it happens to be, some experience arises, just floats up: "I wonder if I should make that phone call." And it's grasped at. What does it feel like? What's the experience? How is it different from the instant before?

For myself, I feel it actually as a physical contraction around that "I should make the phone call," whatever it is. And from that moment, there's a strong sense of separation, a tension, a discomfort. What had been just what it is—actually no analysis, you wouldn't even say there was no sense of self or other because you aren't even thinking about that—but from that sense of "I should make the phone call," it becomes a very

strong sense of me versus what I need to do, versus what I want. The object grasped, the phone call, all the things. The sitting, which previously had just been what it was, fine, is now in the way. Where we might have been quite open and appreciative of whatever was happening, in the moment of grasping, that appreciation, that connection is not accessible.

Separation. Tension. Strong sense of me and other.

And if we don't notice what's going on, we tend to just focus rather on the thing we're grasping at. The whole story proliferates enormously. It's very seductive, this energy of grasping.

It's so easy to get drawn into this energy of grasping. Most of our training tells us that when you want something, if it's attainable, you're supposed to go get it. That's the obvious thing to do—it gets rid of the suffering of the wanting.

What we can do here, however, is shift our attention to what's actually going on when that grasping is present. We begin to see how it's the grasping itself that's creating the suffering, the separation, the lack of peace.

Sayadaw U Pandita, our Burmese teacher, said once that you can see ignorance manifesting in two different ways. One is that when ignorance is present in a moment, we don't see what is here—we simply don't recognize what is here clearly. The second way it manifests is that we misconstrue what we do see, and then we see something that actually isn't here at all.

This has many levels. Certainly on the ultimate level that I started with, we don't see our innate purity, and we do see a lot of separation and unhappiness and wanting. But even on a more mundane level, the way that grasping works when it arises in our experience and we don't notice it is exactly in these two ways: it blinds us to what is here—we can't appreciate what is here—and we can see something that absolutely isn't here at all.

A small anecdote. I was told at a retreat I was doing in California this spring by friends on staff that I wasn't allowed to tell this anymore, because they'd heard it too much. Well, probably not too many of you have heard it. Besides, I thought if Joseph could tell his chicken story, I could tell mine.

It's just a perfect little anecdote on a mundane level to see how attachment functions. I was at this retreat in California—it's in the desert—and I was sitting talking with another friend I teach with. Someone had come from outside to visit in the middle of

the afternoon, quite hot and dry. We were having a very pleasant, relaxed conversation, quite appreciative, quite at ease, until this visitor said, "Well, I just had this great chocolate milkshake at this new place down the road."

For some reason, that particular idea just hit us. My friend and I looked at each other. We didn't have to say anything. We both knew: we've got to go now. And really, we stopped being interested in the conversation. We were answering in monosyllables, just kind of wishing the person would leave so we could go get a milkshake. Not noticing this process at all—it was all in hindsight. Because if you notice, you can say, "I don't really need this."

Anyway, we jumped in a car because we had to be back for the next sitting, and went flying down to this place, which had literally closed ten minutes before. So we're like, "Oh." But this is where the energy of grasping is really seductive—it feeds on itself. One moment feeds the next. Instead of the sensible thing, which is just to go back and give it up, we said, "Where on this road could we get a milkshake?" It's one of these strips. We've been up and down it hundreds of times. We should have known.

So I was driving, and we're driving in a frenzy. My friend is looking, trying to see where there might be something. He looks over and says, "Over there—Yogurt Cafe!" I looked. I said, "That says Urgent Care."

It's embarrassing, but true. And that didn't even stop us. We kept looking. We didn't find anything. We came back.

And then, poof, it was over. But this is precisely what's so scary about it—because it's so obvious. How much of the time is this going on when it's *not* so obvious? A lot. Really a lot.

So grasping distorts what we see. It brings us a sense of separation, an inability to be connected and appreciative of what's happening now. And it seriously impairs judgment. That's the very nature of it.

One of my friends spent some years with a Chinese Taoist master in Colorado, and he's always telling me different little lines this teacher used to say. One that he repeated often was, "Stop this slavish behavior." And that's exactly what we're doing when we're in the grip of grasping—we're slavishly following this mental state that says we can do anything to get whatever it is we want.

I'm using simple examples here. Of course it's much more complicated in our actual lives. And it's really important to understand that looking at the pain and confusion that comes with grasping is in no way a negative evaluation of whatever the particular object is. It's *how* we're relating to any object that's blinding us.

So if we could really use the rest of our days here as a laboratory to explore this phenomenon of clinging and grasping when it arises—and probably it might even come up once or twice tonight before you go to bed, you never know, certainly a few times in the next days—just see if you can remember, which is not our natural conditioning, to turn the attention away from whatever elicited the grasping and onto the actual experience arising in the moment.

Notice the physical clenching. Notice—don't believe me—look and see if you feel a sense of separation. Look and see: what does it really feel like? What's the relationship to the environment? What's the relationship to other people? What's the relationship to the object that's grasped?

And it's not about trying to talk ourselves out of it—"Oh no, I don't need this, I can do without it." Really look at the clinging, look at the grasping, because that's how we learn about it. Let ourselves experience it quite fully.

And you can also see that it's nothing to be afraid of. The experience of clinging is simply another arising appearance. It doesn't have to be so overwhelming. We don't have to get so wrapped up in it. We can turn our awareness to it, and in this way see through this obscuration as simply another ephemeral appearance that doesn't have to have this power to make us slaves.

In trying to turn our attention to this area of attachment or grasping, it's often spoken of in four different areas, just as a way to help us tune in—some more obvious than others—to places where we might not even recognize that clinging is going on.

The first and perhaps most obvious area where we get caught in grasping is around sense pleasures. Most of the examples I've been giving have been sense pleasures. It's kind of concrete, kind of obvious. We all do it.

It's interesting, because the moment we're caught in thinking, "This rice cake at tea is really going to be the thing that makes me happy"—no, it gets that bad sometimes on a three-month course—or this walk, or this swim, or this whatever. Not that it won't be pleasant. But as soon as the grasping is in the mode of "This is what's really going to make me happy," clearly it stems from

that stems from — first, the delusion that there's a "me" in the first place, but I'm not allowed to talk about that too much either. That will come up tomorrow. And second, the total denial of impermanence. The notion that any particular impermanent, passing experience is going to really make us happy — this is such a way to keep us suffering.

In our society, at least here, I actually think it's a misfortune for us because we are just bombarded by sense pleasures, the possibility for one after the other. And even though we might choose to live quite simply compared to the rest of our culture, it's really easy. I find myself, if I come back from Asia or even from England, when I come back to the States — I live relatively simply, but within a few days I'm just overwhelmed by the potential for pleasant sense experience.

Anything you want to eat, you just have to go out and get it, or you can get it frozen at the health food supermarket down the road. Anything you want to see, any game you want to play, anyone I want to talk to anywhere in the world — I can just pick up the phone. Anytime I want to take a walk, it's just endless. Anything I want to buy, anything I want to wear, it just goes on and on and on.

And what this does is that instead of really being able to see the suffering, the discontent that comes from the wanting, it's just so easy. As soon as one wanting is satiated, the mind immediately jumps to the next. And if it can't get that, it just makes a little lateral trip and gets something else. It never has to last without sense pleasures in our culture for too long without finding some kind of substitute.

It's too bad for us because it makes it harder to see the point that the happiness of getting what we want isn't getting the thing we want. It's the fact that in that moment, the grasping has stopped. It's this peace that comes from the ending of grasping. But unfortunately, we associate it with the rice cake or the orange or the new relationship or the ice cream milkshake or whatever it is. And since that one did such a good job, maybe I should have two. I should have one every day. We can just keep expanding.

I think it's for this reason the Buddha — again, he could get pretty intense — talked a lot about the dangers of sense pleasures. I'm just going to say a little bit. I'm not going to go on as strong a riff as he does. I just want to give you an idea.

These are some of his examples. Sense pleasures are a piece of raw flesh, a piece of waste meat of a butchered animal that a bird might pick up in its beak. That's not the worst. Sense pleasures are a pit of burning charcoal into which we may be pushed and burned to death. Sense pleasures are a poisonous snake, dangerous beyond measure.

Actually, these next ones I relate to more. Sense pleasures are a dream, short-lived and not real. Sense pleasures are borrowed possessions — they do not belong to us, and we cannot hold on to them. That's actually more my experience. But I wanted to put out how dangerous the Buddha says it is.

In my understanding, it's not a value judgment on pleasant experience. It's not a value judgment on eating nice food or having a relationship or whatever. Rather, it's to alert us to how seductive this energy and the pattern of grasping is, and how easily we can get drawn into trying to satisfy our yearning for inner completeness by trying to fill it up, pulling in pleasant things from the outside. It's like trying to quench thirst with salt water. It doesn't work.

There's a kind of intensity of pleasure that can come from satisfying a sense desire. And I've noticed in myself that sometimes, at first, the idea of the peace that comes from the absence of grasping doesn't quite feel like it would do it. It's not quite so intense. It doesn't have the charge of the next, more intense sense experience. I think, at least personally, that can be another seduction that keeps us from seeing that it's the grasping itself that's the real suffering, that's the real obscuration.

So play with it. Here again, in this laboratory of being on retreat, when you're sitting — or maybe more when you're walking, because when you're walking and a really strong sense of something you want comes up and you feel it really turning into grasping, whether it's a phone call or having a cup of tea or taking a walk or taking a shower, it doesn't matter what it is — if you're walking, there's this sense: "Oh, I could go do this now."

It's a good thing to do. Just stop a minute. Don't say, "No, it's bad, I shouldn't do it." But stop and really let yourself, as I was saying, be with that grasping, with that whole attachment. Just feel like you're going to die from wanting whatever it is. And just stand there with it, as spacious awareness as possible, feel it in your body, notice the thoughts, let it be, and notice as it dissipates. And it definitely will dissipate, since it's also impermanent.

It might be intensely uncomfortable, because all our conditioning tells us you're not supposed to be with this. But just hang out with it, and then notice what's the experience when the grasping is completely gone. I know for me, if I tune in, it's really the peace of non-grasping. And in some ways, the same peace or even a more profound peace than if I went and did or got the thing that the grasping was about. It's reconnecting again to the peace of completeness that grasping only obscures.

So use it, and use the little things. Don't pick the most difficult time in your life, but just the little things, and watch it. I play with it a lot in my day-to-day life sometimes, when I'm not totally obscured by delusion. I do it a lot shopping, going in, looking at clothes, and this desire will come up, and I'll just walk out of the store and watch it. Of course, it helps that everything's so expensive I can't afford it, but that's another thing.

Just play with that and go out and let the desire come and go and see: my happiness is not dependent on having this thing. And there's not a negativity in that. This is not a judgment. It's just giving yourself a chance to play with this to see we don't have to be driven. The peace of not grasping might not have the oomph, but it's a lot more stable even though it's subtle.

Sometimes we get entranced, not even by the thing that the grasping is after, but the actual energy, the movement of mind, of grasping itself, is somehow entrancing, enthralling. There's a haiku I really like. I think it's by Basho. It says: "Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto." You just get lost in that longing without any sense of where you are.

I saw the movie *Shadowlands* some months ago and there's just one line in it that really hit me. The character playing C.S. Lewis was teaching a class and talking about the chivalric ideal of love, which was—I'm paraphrasing—that the perfect chivalric ideal of love is one that is absolutely unattainable, so that you have this perfection of longing for the rest of your life. And I thought, oh my God, what a way to live. To have the mind actually turn that longing into an ideal to be strived for is really very telling of how we can get so far afield from being able to recognize what is true, by confusing the longing itself for happiness.

This doesn't mean, and I really don't feel the Buddha was advocating, that we adopt a kind of grim negativity to any sense of pleasure or joy, or that we become grim ascetics. Sometimes, and I've experienced it in talking with people, and sometimes in Thailand, some of the monks or nuns can take the rules that are set up—which are very much made to strip away the possibility of getting caught in sense pleasures—and turn them in a way that becomes this grim fear of anything pleasant. Where a monk gets into this state of fear and negativity to even see a woman, or vice versa. And I've seen some people eating one meal a day, supposedly for restraint and renunciation, who could pack in more in twenty minutes than you would think is humanly possible. Mounds of food. It's really awestruck, actually. I don't think that's exactly restraint of the senses and really cultivating freedom from grasping.

Again from Thích Nhất Hạnh, on how to strike that balance: "We have to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. Attachment to sense pleasures can bring about suffering and entanglement, both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and for others. The joy and happiness of a peaceful mind bring neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others." Two quite different things.

And again, when there's not grasping, the appreciation for what is, for the beautiful, is actually much more poignant. The grasping actually blinds me to the real connected appreciation. The Buddha said once that to a wise person, what is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it. It's not that we cease to appreciate, but with just the willingness to restrain the instant gratification, we can open up a whole new world of appreciation, of joy, of presence and connectedness.

So that's sense pleasures. The second

field of grasping, as it's spoken of, is called grasping at views and opinions.

This one I find very fascinating, and usually most of us will hit some point where we rapidly disagree with it—when we begin to hit the view that we're really attached to.

View, in this context, means the tendency of the mind to think, "This way of looking is true and everything else is false." It's obvious when we know that's what we're doing. Where it's much more insidious is that a lot of the time we don't even know we're holding a view or attached to a view. We just honestly, deeply think this is how it is. And that's when it's really threatening.

When we're attached to a view, obviously, people with opposing views come into conflict with each other. When we're attached to a view, it really limits our world because what we tend to do in the attachment to a view—certainly we use views, but in the attachment to one—we tend to not let in any perceptions that counteract our view. We say, "This is true," and when someone comes and says something opposite, my mind immediately goes, "Well, what do they know? They don't know about this. I know. This is true."

This is something you must run up against all the time in the work that you do. It might be easier for us to see how other people are attached to their views and how their views are so clearly incorrect and based on false information. The challenge, of course—I don't even need to say it—is how closely are we willing to inquire into what's a view for us?

The real damage, the real dangers that can come in this world from rabid attachment to views and not knowing it are obvious. I don't even need to mention it, but I'll take just one example from a book that I read, just because it's so heartbreaking. Many of you may have read Randy Shilts' book *And the Band Played On*—how the whole AIDS epidemic began to be investigated and discovered and gradually mushroom out of control. Again, being aware that anything I read, the person writing—and Shilts was incredibly, incredibly clear—is also going to be slightly distorting information through their own view. It's just what we do.

But anyway, even within that, to see in the whole process of the disease first coming to light and the investigation of what it could be and starting to make the links between people that had it—how the information that was coming out of it being sexually transmitted, of it growing in logarithmic proportion, really scary. There are sort of a couple of heroes and heroines in the book, the people who were really discovering, just scientifically collecting the data and trying to put it out. And every single group that was at all involved was somehow being threatened in whatever particular worldview they had and not being able to let it in.

The government didn't want to acknowledge the ramifications and the immensity and didn't really fund research for years and years. But also the different scientists were at war with each other because having the recognition of having discovered the virus was more important than getting it out and getting the healing going. The newspapers, based on their view of what would attract readers, didn't really print much about it for quite a while—because people weren't that interested in reading about gay people and Haitians. Look at how much room they decided to give the whole thing with O.J. Simpson. Unbelievable. That was their view of what would sell papers.

And in the gay community, for example in San Francisco, having—as Shilts described it—just come into a real sense of not being so oppressed and being able to express their sexuality openly and freely, they got incensed at the word coming down that this was sexually transmitted and that they should close the bathhouses. "Absolutely not—this is just sexual oppression." They wouldn't hear it for quite a long time. And the blood banks also refused to hear it for years and continued to send out contaminated blood because it would be too expensive to screen it all. It's heart-rending. And that's just one example.

As I was thinking about this today—thinking how horrible, this could have been stopped—there's underlying even my reaction a view: that somehow disease isn't supposed to happen, that people are not going to get sick and die, that somehow that's going to be prevented. There's a little hit in that moment of me not really accepting the in-

evitability. Which doesn't mean for one minute that we shouldn't do everything we can. I don't mean that. But just really looking clearly: where are my views getting in the way of just seeing what is so?

I think that's a real challenge for me. I think it's a real challenge for all of us in opening to what is really true. It means really looking. And it's extremely unsettling.

You can know when you're really hitting something—that we don't even know is a view, as I said, we think it's true—you can know when you're beginning to get some information that doesn't fit with our views because it's scary, it's unsettling, or we get really angry, or we find ourselves getting defensive, or simply wanting to dismiss it out of hand.

A friend told me—he has been with a lot of Tibetan teachers—about this one time where a Rinpoche was giving this whole long talk to a big group of Western students about the pure land, which is a realm, a higher realm than our human realm that coexists with us now, a very happy realm where the Amitabha Buddha lives and teaches. He was describing this realm in intricate detail, on and on, the way any of us could describe this ranch and the people here and what goes on and what it's like. He was that detailed, going on and on. And then my friend said he noticed the teacher beginning to see the students kind of rolling their eyes, getting like, "Come on, why doesn't he get off it?"

He just looked at them and said, "You might think I'm making this up, but I've been there."

Can we even let that possibility in? What does the mind do with that? And that's a nice example—that's a nice one to let in. There are a lot of not-so-nice ones.

As we begin to look, we can see how what we don't even realize are views—the way we think the world is, the way we think experience is or how it should be—is based very much on our own particular perceptions of our own experience.

As a simple example, last night Joseph and I were having a little conversation, in the course of which he said to me, "Well, do you have a lot of emotions in the day? Like, how many emotions do you have in a day?" Without even really thinking, I said, "Oh, thousands." Then I said, "No, that's too many, but hundreds—oh, definitely hundreds." And I just went back to the last sitting and started reeling off, you know, twenty, twenty-five that had just come and gone in that sitting alone. No big deal, just arising, passing, arising, passing.

And he couldn't really think of any. Good. No comment.

But that's my point. There's not a right or wrong about that—although we certainly have opinions about it. The experience forms the opinion, and that will form our view about certain aspects of life. For example, a relationship. It's just how it is. If we can know, "Well, that's a view, that's an experience"—there's no problem to it. When there starts to be a right and a wrong, when it starts to come into conflict, then we can see we're taking some particular momentary experience and making it a thing, how it's supposed to be.

You can notice that a lot in practice. Mostly I notice the mind likes to have somewhere to rest. "This is how it is." It's uncomfortable to be in that "who knows?"

A lot of meditation practice—I find it fascinating to watch—either I'll hear some instruction, and immediately the mind makes up some construct: "Well then, this is how I'm supposed to be with the breath," or "This is what a sitting is supposed to feel like," or "This is what open awareness is," or "This is what freedom is." The list is endless. And then our experience either matches that or doesn't, and we suffer. Or we have some kind of "Ah, this is how concentration is supposed to be." Finished.

And I watch that happen over and over. I'll watch my mind congeal an attachment to a view and think, "Ah, that's a view. Look at that." It dissipates. And the next instant —"Ah, but now *this* is how it's supposed to be." Just kind of retreating one step back, but wanting somewhere to rest, wanting it to be clear. "This is the nature of reality. Give me a list."

I have a good friend on staff at IMS. He's always coming and saying, "You know, I just want the list, Carol—the ten things of how it's supposed to be and what do I do and what's freedom. Just give me the list." He's joking now. He wasn't the first time. Now he's joking, but it's sort of how our minds are.

The Buddha talked really a lot about the dangers of attachment to view and how much conflict it brings. I just want to read this one little last paragraph about it: "For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who have grasped after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world, annoying people."

He thought he wasn't a funny guy.

Again, I'm not saying we don't use opinions. We have to function. We have to vote in elections.

We all have our views of what's important to do in the world, of how to work with the environment, our political views, our views of who we are, our views of family. And they're important. We need to use views to function, absolutely—but not to be attached, not to hold those views as truth.

The underlying view—this is actually the fourth field, and I'll just mention it now—the underlying view that is the delusion leading to all of our grasping is the view of a separate, abiding self. For most of us, this is something we can't actually get to, realizing it's a view, because it seems so experientially solid: our solid body, our emotions that feel like who we are, our thoughts, our experiences, our families, our relationships. I'm not going to talk extensively about this because it's very complex. But just to point to the fact that even the sense of self itself is simply a view. It's that radical—the willingness to let go of all views and rest nowhere.

Are we willing to abide free from any view whatsoever, even for an instant? It's incredibly freeing. The thought of it can be really scary. And it's radical. The Buddha went that far in saying that even his own teaching is not to be clung to, is not to be attached to, is not to be used as a view. That can kill it.

There's a very famous parable he gave, the parable of the raft, where he talks about being on the side of a river that's very stormy and dangerous, wanting to get over to the other side, which is calm and peaceful—this being our spiritual journey. You build a raft, put it all together, make this really nice raft. It's very helpful. We need it. It takes you across the river. And then what do you do? Do you look at it and think, "This is a great raft. It's beautifully made. I think I'll carry it on my back for the rest of my life"? You don't. You leave it. You let it be. And he says that's the same with his teachings.

Here is Thich Nhat Hanh paraphrasing: "I've given you this teaching on the raft to remind you how necessary it is to let go of all these true teachings, not to mention those which are not true." Don't hold on to anything. And he defines *true*, by the way, as not believing what he said but investigating, inquiring, and experiencing for yourself what is true peace and happiness and what is suffering—never going just by belief or just by assuming it's so because someone said it.

The same thing applies to technique. This is the third and final area, and I'm just going to mention it. A field of grasping is grasping at rituals, grasping at rites, grasping at the idea that some particular set of things we do is going to bring us freedom, is going to make us perfect. It takes real dedication, real commitment not to be blinded by our views in whatever form, not to be blinded by grasping.

Thich Nhat Hanh sometimes might sound a little flowery or nice—notice the happiness and all—but I always feel underneath a real strength: *this is how it is*. He says, "We are not determined enough to liberate ourselves from our deepest suffering. We remain attached to words and ideas, both in our study and our practice." The way we are with our breaths, the way we practice loving-kindness meditation, the way we recite mantras, the way we do any practice—all can lack in skillfulness. We can get caught in the forms. It doesn't matter what; we can get caught in the forms. It's not easy to give rise to awakened understanding.

And as I've said, it's not that we can assume we've seen through it once and attachment will not arise again. It happens on a moment-to-moment basis. It's the nature of grasping, of attachment, that when it arises and we get caught in it, it obscures the recognition of our innate purity.

But it's also true that this recognition, as Khenpo says, is the borderline between Buddhas and beings. This moment of recognition is the great crossroads, he says, at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives. Every moment is a potential opportunity to either get caught in our attachment—our views, sense pleasures, technique, sense of self—or to recognize what's actually going on, to recognize our innate purity.

And if we wake up from a whole nightmare of being caught in some story or some grasping or some suffering—never mind. Because this moment is again the great crossroads at which we find ourselves.

I feel like we never need to despair. We never need to be frustrated or give up. But we can never take it for granted. We can never think, "I've seen it once, finished. Now I'm just going to float in the bliss of nirvana from now on." In that moment, attachment to views arises again. In that moment, we can see it again and be free from it.

As Nisargadatta Maharaj says: "Nothing physical or mental can give you freedom. You are free once you recognize that your bondage is of your own making, and you cease forging the chains that bind you."

CHAPTER 264

Question and Answer

Carol Wilson · 45 min

> *In this Q&A session, Carol Wilson offers practical guidance on common challenges that arise in meditation practice. She begins by exploring the different streams of mettā (loving-kindness) practice—the phrases, the feeling, and the recipient—explaining how these elements eventually integrate after initial experiences of them seeming disconnected. Wilson addresses the difficulty of sending mettā to those committing harmful acts, sharing Sister Chân Không's powerful practice of meditating for days to find compassion for those who killed her friends during the Vietnam War.*
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> *The discussion turns to how perception shapes our experience, using the example of how we automatically create mental images when hearing sounds. Wilson explains that while this perceptual process aids survival, it can also reinforce the delusion of a solid, unchanging self—making direct sensory awareness a valuable practice for loosening our fixed views. She also addresses questions about dreams in practice, the persistence of intense mental states after retreat, and the effects of mettā on its recipients.*
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> *Wilson provides detailed guidance on working with intention (cetanā), cautioning against trying to catch every intention before each movement, which can create tension. Instead, she recommends settling back and noticing what arises as predominant experience, using bigger movements like turning or standing as opportunities to observe intention more easily. The teaching emphasizes fluidity and relaxation rather than rigid effort in mindfulness practice.*

The question was about doing metta as a concentration practice and two different experiences of it. Sometimes the focus is very much on the phrases and they're very clear and it feels very concentrated, though not particularly emotional. Other times it's a real heartfelt feeling that doesn't feel so concentrated.

When there's that heartfelt feeling, are you aware of the phrases or the beings you're sending metta to? Yes, exactly—sometimes both at once.

This was my experience too. There are three streams of focus: the feeling, which comes and goes; the phrases; and the person you're sending metta to, or all beings. I found that at times one would really be highlighted, or maybe two, and it seemed kind of awkward, like they weren't all coming together.

But they do all come together. I remember it took me ages where I could really focus on the phrases and the sense of the person, but metta just wasn't there. I didn't feel hateful or anything, but I wasn't really in the feeling. After some time, the phrases themselves became imbued with the feeling. I'd have to pull back and focus, being really clear with the phrases or the person, and begin to feel the meaning with each phrase—consciously feel the sense of myself meaning that phrase. Not as a heavy thing, but just a reminder.

For some weeks, it was like jumping back and forth, and then they all came together. So don't worry. It is like that with the different streams.

Another question came about sending metta to all beings. When mentally scanning the earth or thinking about different beings, sometimes it's difficult because there are many beings now doing horrible things, and it's hard to send loving-kindness to them.

Very true. Are you doing loving-kindness as a full-time practice, or just at times during the day? Part-time—yes, it is difficult. And metta is meant to be done in the way that's easiest. That's why before we do all beings, when we're going through ourselves, a benefactor, a friend, the last being we come to is the difficult one—someone doing atrocities or someone we've had a hard time with in our life—because it is difficult to really genuinely feel the connection of loving-kindness with a being like that.

So first, know that this is normal. Second, don't try to push it or do the most difficult metta first. If I sit down and I'm not really in the flow and I think, "Well, I'll send metta to the people killing each other in Rwanda," I can't get to metta with that. It's just too appalling.

But if you want to work toward that, at a time when you really are feeling the loving-kindness flowing, start in the way that's easiest and then gradually expand. In working with difficult or hateful people, we still try to tune into their lovable aspects with metta. That's hard, especially with people you don't know—when all you know about them is the horrible things they do.

For me, I try to tune into the fact that whatever they're doing is from ignorance, and in some twisted way, what they're doing is somehow what they think will bring them happiness. Or they're doing it out of fear of retribution for themselves.

Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh, has some beautiful passages in her recent autobiography where she talks about times during the war in Vietnam when their friends had been killed by grenades or deliberately killed by people from

either side of the conflict—they never knew who. She would have to write eulogies for them, and she would meditate on it for days until she could feel some sense of connection with the people who had killed her friends. It could take a long time.

One time, she got to a place of understanding because someone had survived and reported that the killers had said, "We have to do this." She took that and really meditated on it until she felt that they were doing it because if they didn't kill her friends, they themselves would be killed. So it's like out of fear—and you can come to understand the humanity even behind horrible things. That's one way to access it.

But again, for doing loving-kindness here, the practice is really to cultivate the feeling in yourself and begin to spread it out—not to be super-metta warriors, beaming with love for all beings every moment. So don't force it. If you're getting tight around it, pull back and do what's easy, what comes clear.

You identify it and probably picture it. But it's likely a survival mechanism in a way—you know what's making the sound and whether or not it's a danger to you.

"So I guess what I'd like to know is, is there any advantage to knowing sound in some other way than that? Why would one cultivate the capacity for just hearing sound with no picture of it and no identity?"

His question is about sound, but it really applies to all the senses—that when the sound arises, he doesn't just hear the sound. There's an immediate mental picture of airplane, and they almost come together. You never just get the sound without that. It might be helpful to know it's an airplane as opposed to something potentially dangerous, so perhaps it's a survival mechanism. Is there any point to knowing just bare sound without that arising image?

There can be. It's true that there's the immediate perception of what it is and then the superimposed mental image. There are really three different things going on there, but it all happens so quickly. We are really geared to the perception—the recognition, the identification of what it is. Definitely, it helps us a lot in our day-to-day life to know what's what, what's the sound, what's the sight.

The danger of it, and the reason it's helpful to just recognize hearing as hearing at times—and it happens sometimes in a long retreat where that visual image might not arise—is because our perception is not always accurate. Many times, and we'll talk about this more, we might be responding to a sound and the mental image that arises is actually not what is creating that sound.

In an even more subtle way, many of our perceptions give us the sense that we're a solid, unchanging self. And it seems really true—that's the arising image or thought or feeling that arises with sense contact over and over and over. So we think, "This is me, I'm solid." That's just the truth. And we can go through life in real delusion.

So certainly, a lot of what we're doing when we say "just come close to the sense contact, just notice what it is"—it's not to deny the perception, but it's to bring in the possibility that our perception might not be accurate. It opens up a whole field of investigation. It jars us loose from the solidity of thinking we know what we are. So it is very helpful.

"Well, an interesting observation in relation to what you just said. Yesterday, in listening to sounds, I heard a lawnmower being started up. It sounded like a car that wouldn't start. And then finally, it started."

Exactly. We can get ourselves into a lot of trouble by misperceiving. That's really one of the roots of ignorance.

Okay, we need to stop. So have an insightful day, free of misperception.

I want to make a few more clarifications in our ongoing illumination of the nature of practice.

"Do you reflect about dreams when you wake up in the morning, or not at all?"

The question is about dreams. Does one—or do I personally, I'm not sure which—reflect on them?

"No, just in practice, because I've experienced that sometimes dreams showed me some strong patterns of behavior, identifications, goals, and so on."

So it's about the skillfulness of reflecting on one's dreams when you wake up. Can it be helpful? She goes on to say she has found it very helpful in illuminating patterns of behavior and roles—or should one cut it altogether?

I think at times, as you described, it can be helpful if the reflection is really kept to a minimum. For myself, it's not every dream by any means. It certainly isn't getting into dream analysis. In most cases, I can treat my dreams very much like my thoughts—okay, it's done, it's over, there's nothing to think about.

Occasionally, though, you can feel that a dream has some power in it, that there really is some strong sense of intentionality or some pattern revealed in it. I usually tend to feel that emotionally. If there's something lingering when you wake up, then really pay attention to that. You're paying attention to what's happening in the moment—that lingering, that sense. A short reflection can be helpful, the same as a psychological insight that might arise in your sitting. We give some conscious reflection time to it.

With reflection though, really be aware—I find the actual usefulness of reflection time is pretty short. And then what we're calling reflection becomes "oh yeah, and that happened, oh yeah, this, and then..." It's the same thing—just spinning. It's not reflection anymore. It's just letting off into thinking.

So be really watchful for that difference, and it's usually shorter than we think—like one thought we need for reflection, and then it changes quality.

The question is about whether yogi mind states can persist after retreat. I suppose I need some clarification. Do you mean being in tune with aversion, or do you mean out of control aversion? Or desire? That kind of explosive quality?

So you mean getting locked into some desire or aversion about a particular person in the retreat and then for the next year having no way to change your mind. Hopefully nothing is that solid and unchanging that it will persist the same without movement for a year. But as I said last night, that sort of exaggerated quality of wanting or aversion—we call it yogi mind, but as I said, we could also call it staff mind, or a teacher might experience it. We all experience that at times in our life, when we find ourselves doing really stupid things or really out of control. We've experienced that exaggeration of mental state.

So it certainly can happen out of retreat. And I think I have experienced coming out of a retreat—not for a whole year—but maybe for a little while after the retreat, it can vary where I haven't quite sort of closed up or balanced up again at the end of the retreat. Because in the retreat we get very vulnerable, very open, with exaggerated mental states. And also we kind of regress, so that around November, you know—exactly, she put her thumb in her mouth.

So everyone's internal rhythm is different, and it's possible for retreat to end and we're still back there, you know, at two and a half. That's one of the reasons we have integration week—to sort of get the armor back on. So things could be a little exaggerated afterwards. But that you'd stay locked into it for a year? I don't think that's so likely unless you're really not looking at it for a year. Or there's something that came up in relationship to that person, some really deep wound or some deep holding or resentment

that is still there and you're not really seeing, haven't really moved through, and so it's still active. It just is more practice. I wouldn't worry about being out of control from now on. No, no, it passes.

The question is some confusion about whether in doing metta, it's just for the cultivation of that quality in ourselves, or if there's some magical aspect where the metta really does affect the people that we're sending it to. I don't know if I like to use the word magical.

Technically, in doing it, it's a cultivation of intention in our practice. So in the doing of it, I'm really cultivating the intention that truly wishes well to myself or whoever, the person. I'm not at all focusing on a sense of effect—that if I really wish well, then the person's suffering will go away, then they'll be okay. It's really bringing the attention to the intention, for that feeling, that mental state, that brahmavihara to arise in us more and more easily.

And on the other hand, it is said in the commentaries that if you're really, really concentrated, it does affect the person. And certainly there are many stories of the Buddha. Like there's one story where by the power of his metta, he stopped a raging elephant. He just stood there and this elephant was raging, killing everyone in its path. And he just stood there and radiated metta. The elephant felt it and stopped.

And actually, often after a retreat or after a period of doing metta, I've had the experience where it seems magical, where I'm going out in the world and just doing my thing and people respond with this real warmth. A friend once was watching this and didn't know what had been going on. She said, "What is in your body? Why are people being so nice to you?"

So something definitely does communicate and is felt, but in doing it, the focus is on our own intention, not trying to change. You can't change someone's karma.

And if I do that, then it would change all the time. Should I just drop the noting altogether?

The question is, as he's with the breath and noting with rising and falling, but he loses rising and falling. Changes to hearing or changes to something else? Changes to something else—it's almost like the in-breath seems like it's falling or something, or else he's getting confused.

I see. So somehow you're still in the experience of the breath, but rising and falling doesn't seem to fit what's actually happening. But you're continuing to note rising and falling, and it gets confusing.

I'd certainly say if you're noting anything like rising and falling and it doesn't seem to be matching what's happening, leading to mental confusion, it's not helpful. As soon as the noting starts to somehow seem that it's not fitting, it pulls away from the sinking into the experience, which is the point of the mental labeling in the first place.

So if you're finding a dissonance, and that's creating any kind of mental activity, maybe at that point actually drop the noting. I mean, for this point with the breath, because you could really start thinking, "Now does it feel like rising? Last time it felt like falling. Now is it rising?" You know, it's like, please.

If you really know it's hearing, note hearing. If you know it's pressure, note pressure. Or otherwise, you could just be very carefully with the breath, and when rising and falling seems to fit again, use it.

I'd say that's in distinction to, say, noting rising, falling, or in-out, which seems to fit, but you're noticing a lot of other sensations. For example, during the rising, you might notice there's pressure, tingling, burning. Don't try to note all of those sensations—that's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying when there's this dissonance.

Noting is never meant to lead to more thinking or analyzing. That's not the point. If it gets like that, just simplify. Use a really generic note like "sensation" or "emotion" or "thing happening" just to get your attention into it.

Another question is about doing metta practice while walking. When one is doing full-time metta practice or any of the Brahma-viharas, you do it all the time—sitting, walking, eating, whatever you're doing. And if you're not doing it full-time, it could still be quite fine if you're doing it, say, once or twice a day here now, to do it while walking.

Essentially, it's just the same as sitting. You're walking back and forth, the same as in the Vipassana walking, but you don't pay attention to the walking. In other words, the mindfulness is not with the walking or your physical sensations at all. You do exactly the same thing: you bring up a sense of yourself if you're sending it to yourself, or the benefactor, or the friend, whoever. You really do just the same—you hold the image of the person, have a sense of it, although please do walk with your eyes open. And repeat the phrases, and if the feeling is there, sink into that. It's exactly the same.

In that walking, you might find you don't have to focus so much on going slowly. Often you can tell people who are doing metta because they don't have that slow mindfulness of their movements that happens when you're being mindful of mind and body in Vipassana.

Sometimes I find for myself, when I'm walking with the metta, even if I'm staying with dear friend, starting with myself for five or ten minutes and then moving to the dear friend, I might find that if it starts to feel a little tight or encapsulated, and say a chickadee goes by or a dog comes by, then just for the next set of phrases I'll send it to that being. It's just a nice way of opening it up and connecting to whoever's around. Somebody walks by, a squirrel goes up the tree, whatever. I found myself sending it to the crickets a lot last year. It's just a way to open up the field a bit but still be connected, and then again go back to whoever your subject is. It's fun doing it in the city.

Quiet day. That's nice. That's how I feel too.

You're keeping a graph.

So that I'm not feeling full at the first sitting, but I'm not starving at 10:30—something like that. I can keep going, working to that end, trying to not feel too full and not end up being hungry. Is there anything you have to say about that? And also, is there some innate benefit in just not eating a whole lot—like not eating dinner? I could pay attention to hunger, hunger. I can do that, but is there some innate benefit?

The question was about eating. It's really two questions. One is he's just sharing that he's in the process of finding exactly the right amount to eat—so he's not too full and not too hungry. I don't have a whole lot to say about that except please don't get too tight around it, because it changes all the time. The balance shifts. Some days you might, if you really pay attention when you're eating, come to sense: okay, that's enough now. Rather than looking outside and trying to think about how much food would be enough.

The second question is whether there's some innate value in, say, not eating much—for example, not eating dinner. He says he knows he could just be with hunger, hunger. But is there some innate value in that?

Really exploring that is one of the points of taking eight precepts. You know the eight precepts—the one that really changes things for us here is that you don't eat solid food after noon. Of course, all the monks and nuns, all ordained people live that way. And in Buddhist countries, anyone who is coming to a monastery or going on a retreat, most retreats are conducted in that manner, where you don't eat in the afternoon.

It's different for different people. I myself, of course, lived that way for a year or so when I was in Thailand. And I found, for myself and given my body type, it was really fine. I found I didn't actually need any food after noon. And it's not just noting hunger, hunger. Actually that passes fairly quickly, at least it did for me. And it wasn't this actual craving for food. What it did was release this whole amount of energy and obsession

and mental thought that went into food—what can I have, when will I eat, how much will I eat. From noon on you just knew that was something you didn't think about. It actually was great. It gives so much time and freedom, really. Like when you fast, all of a sudden there's so much time in your day that you didn't have before. Not eating in the afternoon can really open that up.

And it also, of course, is very instrumental in showing us relationships we might have to food, or to fear of not having enough. Of course, in monasteries you don't see other people eating in the afternoon because nobody's doing it. So that's harder here.

But I must say we haven't been pushing it so much this retreat because we've also found that for quite a few people, on a long retreat, it's physically quite difficult for them. We have quite a few friends who lose a lot of weight when they're on eight precepts and get a little bit weak. And it's not so much obsession in the mind, but that physically it's hard on them. They come back from Birmingham, Joseph comes back twenty pounds lighter. It's hard to imagine—where does he lose it from?

So we're not pushing it, but personally, I found it very interesting to play with. My first three-month retreat I ever did, you could decide to do it or not. I did it, I think, for about six weeks. And I had a kitchen job putting out the tea. One of the maintenance guys, who's since turned into one of my good friends—but I didn't know him then—every day I was putting out the tea, he'd come in and make a cheese and tomato sandwich. And every day he'd go, "Carol, you want a cheese and tomato sandwich?" I was craving cheese so much. And I'd say, "No, Rodney, I'm on eight precepts." The next day, the same thing. It went on for a month.

It was a real test. It's worth playing with.

There's no guarantees with these practices. You don't say, okay, I don't eat dinner and I suddenly drop three levels in samadhi. There's no guarantees. Certainly, overeating is one of the five obsessions with senses that the Buddha talks about. And in this society, mostly we're not too heavy on the starvation side. So I would say, if you have a lot of questions coming up about it, explore it for yourself. But there is no automatic formula where if you don't eat after noon, your practice suddenly gets better. Sorry.

One of the techniques for dealing with sleepiness is to visualize white light, which is true. Bringing light into the mind is supposed to help. But not everyone finds it easy. I think different techniques might work better for different minds. For instance, some people can visualize very easily and some people can't. So I don't think there's one technique that's easy across the board.

You might try, though I wouldn't make a big thing about it, visualizing like a circle. Just imagine seeing it, so to speak, rather than trying to bring it in. Imagine that you're seeing a circle of white light. Don't push too hard, and just see if it expands. Go to the other techniques if it doesn't help. Or sit with the eyes open and then when it's light inside, close the eyes.

Yesterday morning, in response to a question about working with angry thoughts and the difficulty of not getting caught up identifying with them, Joseph recommended dipping down into the body level, the sensation, to feel the contraction. Someone tried this and found it was fine in the sitting, but in the walking they got into some sense of struggle about how much to stop or when to start walking again.

The thing is, if it's really strong, these contractions, so strong that you want to stay with it instead of starting to walk—then it becomes standing. So what? Standing is fine. Stay with it. Let it be there, really explore it. You might find, you know, it's not like we do better however many walking passes we make. We're not keeping a record. So if you spend the whole walking period and you only go from here to there, but you're present, great.

You might find, though, as emotions come and go, as the feeling begins to fade but is still present, you don't have to wait until it's totally, completely gone to start walking again. When it's not so engrossing, when it's not catching your mind so much, when you still have some background sensations but they're no longer overwhelming—you can go ahead and reconnect with the walking at that point and start moving. If the anger zooms up again, stop again. That's my song. It doesn't need to feel like a struggle. Just be with what's predominant, not some idea of what you should be doing.

One practitioner raised a question about working with intention—not the intention propelling the practice, but intention itself as an object of awareness. He'd been starting to work with it, and it seemed like there was just too much to do now before every step. There's feeling, and feeling goes away, and then keeping track of thinking—it felt like everything was getting jammed up. Was it useful to let go of noticing thinking?

This is what starts to happen: you begin to realize it's not just adding intention as another thing to notice. God knows there's an intention before every single movement or thought. You're not going to notice all of them. Trying to catch every one—this cat-at-a-mouse-hole kind of energy—isn't so helpful because you get really tense. It's like jumping into the next moment. *What am I missing? I'm missing it.* Just settle back. You're not going to catch every intention, just as it's quite difficult at times to notice every thought. Things are happening so quickly. And in fact, as the practice goes on,

rather than feeling calmer, you might notice just more and more things happening—seventeen million, or is it trillion, in the blink of an eye. That's how fast. So there's no way we're going to notice them all.

Working with this practice, yes, it is helpful to notice intention. It's extremely helpful because it's that link that really helps us see cause and effect. It really helps us see how the mind gives rise to some intention and the body moves. There's an unpleasant sensation in the body; it gives rise to some intention and the desire to move. Just this cause and effect—it can really lead us into a deeper experience of impersonality, of anattā. You see how we identify with the intention, but it's really just another arising phenomenon based on conditions. So it is very useful to explore, just as thoughts are.

But not to set up the idea that now you're going to notice every intention, or now you're going to notice every thought, or every sensation when you lift your arm. We work with a sense of settling back and relaxing in this moment, and then noticing what arises as predominant experience. So sometimes intention—maybe before turning or before beginning a step—might be more noticeable. Maybe you don't notice the intention because there's this big thought of "I'm so sick of this," and that's the predominant experience. Do you see what I mean? It's having the fluidity of momentary concentration to notice what's up.

If we set the mind too strongly looking for intention, you might notice more intentions, but the thoughts could be completely derailing your mindfulness and leading you into judgment. You don't notice it because you're so busy looking at intention. It's subtle.

Someone observed that the feeling of intention is subtle—you need to make some effort to look for it. You can, but pick big movements. For example, the ones I use a lot when I'm first starting and haven't begun to feel it, because it is subtle. It's hard to describe. It's not really physical sometimes. It's sort of a mental click.

It's hard to describe. It might be physical, it might not be. It can be different for different people, and at different times for you it can be different as well.

So pick large, obvious movements—say, about to stand up, or about to start walking. When I'm walking, if I'm not yet at the point of noticing the beginning of each step, I can really try to notice intending to stop, intending to turn, intending to start again. You can play with it during walking meditation. It's a good place to explore this. Just stop. And see if you notice what that feeling is just before you take the step.

I know Joseph has this story about how he was waiting for intention one time while walking, and he stood there for half an hour because he couldn't find it. So you can do that—there's nowhere to go. And you might be feeling it without knowing it. You might be looking so hard that you're not just noticing what's already there.

So just pick big things. Reaching, turning—those are good ones.

Have a mindful day filled with intentionality.

CHAPTER 265

Question and Answer

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this comprehensive question and answer session, Carol Wilson addresses a wide range of practice concerns that arise during intensive retreat. She begins with skillful approaches to working with memories—from fleeting recollections to deeply suppressed trauma—emphasizing the importance of feeling emotions fully in the body while noting mental content without getting lost in story.*
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> *The discussion explores the subtle resistance and fear that can arise as practice deepens, particularly around states approaching absorption. Carol points to how the sense of self has an 'incredibly intuitive way of catching us,' and how true trust in practice isn't about knowing what comes next, but rather a letting go like leaves falling from a tree. She addresses the difference between breath meditation at the nostrils versus the abdomen, noting tendencies toward concentration or mindfulness with each approach.*
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> *Practical guidance is offered on working with anger toward others in the silence of retreat—emphasizing returning to one's own bodily experience rather than rationalizing or prematurely applying compassion. Carol also clarifies the nature of intention (cetanā), explaining how intentions arise moment to moment and condition subsequent mind states, rather than single intentions controlling outcomes. The session concludes with discussion of how physical sensations can arise without emotional content, and how thoughts can pass without identification—illustrating the natural arising and passing of experience when clearly observed.*

The question is about how to skillfully work with memories—strong memories that come up over and over with emotion attached and story. Is it skillful sometimes to really go into it in a cathartic kind of way?

There are different qualities and intensity of memories that come up, and I think how we deal with them can vary depending on that intensity.

For example, when one sits there are often floods of memories—everything from when you were two years old, just little snippets of stuff. They might have a little feeling attached, but they're not really killers. And then you can just really notice it: seeing, or remembering. If there's a feeling, an emotion attached, definitely notice and note that, always. But then let it go.

Then there's more intense ones that really come back over and over, up to the level of intensity of maybe past trauma that's been repressed. That can surface as memory on retreat. And that's a whole other level. The strongest level of real suppressed trauma can at times, when it surfaces on retreat, blow you away. It just can be too intense, and so there's different ways of dealing with it. You certainly can't just say "memory, memory" and dismiss it. No way. And going into it is, at times, unavoidable—but at times going into it is too overwhelming and you need to skillfully back off. So that's a whole other level.

The medium level, and this happens a lot on retreat, is strong memories coming up with visual images, words, thoughts, and emotion attached. I think there's a balance. I find when a strong memory keeps coming over and over, or any strong thought, for sure I would note "remembering." But I'd also be really careful to feel, notice and feel, and really fully allow in my body the emotion that's happening with it. To let that happen for as long as it happens. To be wary that in noting "remembering," I'm not sort of pushing it away and saying, "Okay, stop now. Right, there's sadness. Right, okay, on to the next thing." But really feel in the body, bring the attention into the physical experience of that emotion, and note it and be with it until it fades.

I'm a little leery of saying this, but I will anyway. Once in a while I've found that some particular strand of memory—that comes maybe in a lot of different ways with a strong emotion associated—has a feeling that there's something underneath it. Once in a great while, really once a retreat, I have found it useful to actually stop, reflect on it a bit, go into the content. Not so much thinking about it, but let myself really notice the content of all these memories, because it's usually a lot of different ones. And underneath, often there's some psychological understanding about myself or my personality patterns, or some way I've been relating throughout my life to a particular experience. I'm getting that information through the different memories that are coming up and the emotion.

But as I say, that's once in a great while. Mostly, by far, the real understanding—both psychological and more on the level of dharmic truths—has come from simply allowing it fully to be there, the expression of the memory, but not going into thinking about the content.

But yet there's this little subtle resistance that I can't get into it, because I'm afraid it's the old Catholic in me or something that doesn't want to give it up. I've heard Bhikkhu Kamala talk about possession and all of this. I don't know where I am. But I mean, just real journeys. Nothing needs to be noted. It's all happening by itself. And it's extremely pleasant.

The question is something about trust and songs in the mind. The sense of I—that's what I get from it.

Well, the one piece I guess is it seems like the experience is happening by itself, perhaps moving into what might be perceived as a deeper level, which we can't necessarily trust that one. But the sense of subtle resistance in the mind—maybe it's manifesting in all these whacked-out ways like songs and this and that, or the kind of fear of just letting go and letting the process happen. Is that sort of the nub of it?

It's a good point. You're right, the resistance, that sense of I arising and passing. It seems to have its own intelligence—or lack of, I would really say.

That's our practice. If we could at any moment completely, completely let go of any attachment whatsoever, no matter how subtle, in that moment we'd experience our true nature. There would be no problem. And theoretically it's simple. But your question really points to why, in some ways, we do this difficult practice—so many of us, our whole life—because the subtle clutching itself, or the resistance to whatever's happening, can be experienced as the sense of self. And you're right, it seems to have an incredibly intuitive way of catching us so we'll grasp at it. It's got just the right way for the resistance to come up that will really grab at us, or just the right song or whatever to make us get sidetracked, or fear, or whatever.

It's our practice. And the sense of trust isn't a trust that I know what's going to come next. That's what we usually tend to think of as trust—if I do this, then this will happen, it's familiar, I know what it means, and I can relax. The trust is like when the leaves flutter down: they don't know where they're going to land. They don't know what's going to happen. They just let go of the tree, and that's it.

So intellectually we can know that. The subtle resistances that come up, the fear—all of it's just part of the show. None of it is something we have to get rid of. None of it. That having to get rid of is just another agenda. But the simple opening of the attention into the resistance, into the fear, even into Popeye and Olive Oyl—it's just stuff happening. And you're right, it does it all by itself. You and the resistance. Just somehow we can learn to trust that much.

So, it's time for walking. Do you have any questions about your practice?

Yogi: I've got a question about the breath as an anchor, and some considerations about observing the breath in the nostrils versus the abdomen. Here's some background: for me, it's easier to get concentrated with the breath in the nostrils. However, there's one drawback to that. There tends to be a component of visualization. So it's not body in the body with the breath—it's sort of seen with the breath. And that leads to

conceptualization. My experience with the breath in the abdomen is that it does ground you more, connect you with the body, and tends to be more conducive towards mindfulness. What are your thoughts on that?

His question is about using the breath as an anchor and the differences he's noticed in his experience between being with the breath in the nostrils and in the abdomen.

What are my thoughts about that? Of course, there's no one way for everybody, for sure. Just one question: when you talk about being with the breath in the nostrils and there's this component of visualization, is there also a component of physical experience? Are you using noting? Do you note the visual as seeing?

This is something I don't have a lot of experience with, though I've just been noticing it lately. Certainly one isn't right or wrong. I think there is, for many people—not everybody, but for many—a tendency with the breath in the nostrils where some can find it much more focusing, but the other side is that for some people it feels much more heady, and for different reasons could lead into more thinking or more tightness.

Whereas in the abdomen—again, this is not true for everybody all the time, so please don't think your practice should be this way—moving into the abdomen can be a kind of deeper moving into the body. In some ways it's a larger experience and it might not seem so finely focused. That's my experience. If I'm moving with the abdomen, I get much more into mindfulness of all the various things that happen. I don't stay with it as one-pointed as when I'm with the breath at the nostrils.

And I've heard—I'm not sure this is gospel truth—but I've heard passed down that one of the reasons Mahasi Sayadaw really taught noting the rising and falling at the abdomen is that you have to really fight to get up to your nose from there. One reason I've heard is that they thought people tended to get too one-pointed and concentrated at the nose, and the idea is to open up to all experience, not just hone in.

But the thing about the visualization—that can happen at the abdomen too. That happens for me. Or with any experience where you think you're feeling it but there's this visual overlay. If you can not think of that as a problem but note precisely what the experience is—if it's the feeling tone, note the feeling; if it's sensation, note that; but when the visuals are in the forefront, just note seeing—then it doesn't matter. You're within a foundation of mindfulness. Maybe not the one you want. Does that make sense?

The next question is about whether, when many sensations are happening in the body, it's fruitful to let the attention be with them in changing patterns as they're happening, more or less at some points abandoning the breath. Or should you try and go back to the breath anyway? And similarly, should you try and stay with a sensation until it ends, even if a lot of other things are happening?

This comes up a lot. As always, there's no absolutely tried and true answer, but the tendency would be that we're not trying to control what we pay attention to or to control experience. In other words, we're using the breath as a way to steady and focus the attention—or the body, or hearing, whatever you're using—but it's not because the breath is better. It's not that we want to stay with it, and the better your sitting is the more you're with the breath. That's not true at all.

Everyone's practice will differ, and your practice will differ at different times. But there will be times when there are a lot of sensations or a lot of visualizations or a lot of things happening, and the attention can be quite present with each one as it occurs by itself. Know what's happening. Don't try to hold on to the breath at all—it's just another form of trying to control experience.

There can be times—I know I'll take two breaths, and it might be twenty minutes before I'm noting breath again. But I've been noting consistently, steadily, that whole time. It's just that so many different things are happening. So if a lot's happening and you can be with it, know what's happening. See what happens to it.

Fine. If you're trying to be with a lot of sensations and it turns into a mishmash where you don't know what's happening—you know a lot of sensations, but you're nowhere, not able to land on anything or truly know it—that's when you consolidate and go back to the breath.

Similarly, if there's a lot happening, don't try to stay with any particular sensation until its end. In a way, that's a kind of holding on. There are going to be times when no matter what you do, you don't see the endings of things, and you can't change that. There are times you'll only be with something in the middle—just when you know tingling, a pain arises somewhere else, and just when you know burning, itching arises. It's just like that.

The mind doesn't like this. It wants to know, "I'll just stay with this until it ends, and then that." But it's simply not like that sometimes. Again, if it's going really fast and you can't tell what's happening, that's when you come back to the breath. But then let go of it and open up again, and you notice a lot.

One student shared: "I thought I discovered something very useful just now. When I'm with a very strong sensation of pain, whatever it is, I discovered that when I go back to the breath and concentrate there, the pain really diminishes. It becomes secondary."

She discovered that with strong pain, when she went back to the breath and really stayed with it, the pain became secondary, and that was quite wonderful. But now she's concerned—could this be used as a form of avoidance or control?

It could be. But it also can be skillful. See, this is what's so complicated. What's happening for one person is different than what's happening for another, which is why these question periods are tricky. You can't take what's said to one person and necessarily apply it to yourself.

In working with strong physical pain, it most likely isn't going to change really quickly or just go away when you notice it, especially early on in a retreat. There's a balance between moving into it—noticing it very carefully and gently, but fully present with it, noting it, noticing whether it's burning or tingling, what happens to it, with a mind that's non-reactive, just being there—and knowing when to step back.

When the pain lasts some time, the mind can begin to tighten. You begin to get aversive or you're just fighting with it. It's skillful then to go back to the breath and let that pain recede, reconnect and refocus, calm with the breath. That can be very skillful. When you again notice the pain, though, it's not to hide in the breath, but to then move back, explore it as if for the first time, and then again return to the breath as a way to keep the attention soft and pliable—not to avoid what's unpleasant by just staying with the breath.

Does that make sense? And keep talking about it in your interviews, because it will clarify.

Notice how even sitting inside we're so affected by the wind. We're not separate at all. I think it's interesting to notice.

One student asked about merit—what the term means. Joseph had said a little bit about it, that it's not gold stars, and that helped. And then he said, well, it is. The questioner couldn't remember what came after.

I actually don't think I'm the right person to ask, to tell you the truth. I'm being really honest. It's a concept that I don't relate to very well, and so I actually don't want to say something because I don't think I could be that helpful.

Another student began: "I've got a question, but I'll give you a preliminary question first. The key to the whole thing is that the five skandhas are all impermanent, and I go, yeah, yeah, yeah. But then you get to consciousness. The Buddha asked, is consciousness permanent or impermanent? And yeah—but wait a minute..."

That's not my experience. I mean, it may be somebody's experience, but consciousness feels continuous to me. It's a sticking point for me. So let me ask you a two-part question. What does it mean to say that consciousness is impermanent? And even if it is, why is that unsatisfactory? Why is that dukkha automatically, necessarily?

His question relates to the sutta Joseph read last night about the five skandhas being impermanent. He's saying that in his own experience, he doesn't experience consciousness as being impermanent. And he's asking, why is that unsatisfactory if it is impermanent? He also said, you know, if we all understood that, of course we'd be enlightened. And that's true.

Just because you don't experience consciousness as being impermanent—and I think that's the whole point of our practice, not just consciousness but any of the five skandhas—even if we intellectually understand or think we understand that it is impermanent, or we intellectually say no it's not, neither one of those makes much difference. The whole thing of the practice, the reason we do this, is to keep exploring, keep looking, really with an open mind, to viscerally, over and over, experience what your actual experience is—consciousness or whichever of the skandhas.

If you don't experience it as impermanent, that's great, because you're really looking at what you are able to tell for yourself and not trying to make your experience fit an image. And so if you keep looking, I think you'll see that it is impermanent, but it's so subtle. All of the skandhas are arising and passing much more rapidly than we typically notice. And in some ways consciousness—that arising of knowing that arises together with whatever is known—is a very subtle thing to even notice, to have that be the main thing we're aware of. It's very subtle.

And so the identification with it is also quite easy to arise, that sense of "I know." Even though the knowing is coming and going, somehow that identification can easily come with each knowing, and there's this sense of continuity that actually isn't there. It's sort of strung together as a subtle memory from each last one. But the most important thing is not to believe it because you hear it. Keep looking, keep looking, keep looking.

And why is that unsatisfactory? You could think of unsatisfactory not necessarily in the nature of immense suffering, but unsatisfactory in the nature of there's nowhere to rest. There's nowhere to take a stand. There is nothing but just this constant, constant moving. A sense of satisfactory would be some place to finally land—ah—and there isn't. There just isn't. So I take it personally at that level of unsatisfactory. But don't think about all this too much. Just keep looking. Just keep looking.

The next question was about helpful hints on skillfully dealing with anger that arises at the perceived unskillful behavior of others, especially in silence.

The question is about anger arising in the mind and heart, especially in relationship to other people here—something which no one else has experienced during these weeks—and how to deal with it. One thing she did was try compassion, which often doesn't cut it at that moment. Another was sort of saying, well, it's my ego bumping against the other person's, and that didn't do it either.

I was thinking, actually—you said bumping into it—maybe someone's used that image before of how they clean potatoes in Korea or something. They put them all in a huge, big barrel of water and just keep stirring them around and bump them all into each other. And that way they get clean. So for some reason that occurred to me in the sitting room. I must have been picking something up.

It is in the kitchen, yes.

Really, the thing is coming back to the fact of the anger in your own experience. Both of the things you mentioned are sort of rationalizations. And compassion toward someone when we're actually angry is a way of trying to sidestep accepting the anger. It doesn't work for just that reason. You know, "may you be free from suffering"—but you're the one who's suffering.

Compassion toward yourself might help, but the first step really is to just tune in to your own body-mind experience and accept and tune in to the fact that anger is arising. Feel it in the body, notice it in the mind, keep coming back to the physical experience. Note it very clearly, because that can help you stay there and not go off into the story. If the story's hooked into self-righteousness—yes, they really are, that person really is acting like a jerk—that self-righteousness can really keep feeding it.

And often here in the silence, it works both ways. Because of the silence, you can't really work it out with the person. I actually think that's a gift, because then we come back and really deal with what's going on in ourselves about it. Whether or not it seems

justified in terms of the situation, unless something incredibly harmful is going on, mostly there's no need to say something. It's really a chance to work with the experience of anger in ourselves. And it's not easy—it's really painful.

So it's really about pulling back that sense of needing to blame, needing to figure out who's right and who's wrong, which is so much what we try to do. And knowing that in the world, of course, we would be able to get in touch with our own anger, see what's clearly so, and not act out of a deluded attachment or fear from the anger. But when you can really be centered in the experience of anger, be with it, let it come—it does fade, and then we can act in a more appropriate way without all the fire in the mind of anger.

Here there's just a lot of opportunity to be with what comes up in ourselves and take back the blame that we so easily put out on whatever the situation is with the other person. And not blaming oneself either. Seeing that conditions have come together and I am really angry. Okay. Feel the anger. That's okay. It's simply coming up. We don't have to hate it, and we don't try to sidestep it, but really be in it without being driven by it. And notice—it doesn't last all that long. It might come and go, but it doesn't consume us necessarily the way we think. It might feel like it for a while, but that's really our work here. It's a good one.

Just a practical note: if you feel anger is consuming you and you're going to do something, please talk to one of the teachers rather than act, because we think we're acting when we're calm and often we're not. That's one of the reasons we really ask everyone to just stay in your own experience, because it's so easy to affect each other so much anyway. Even in reaching out to do what we think is nice, we have no idea what space the other person is in. It can escalate amazingly because you don't know—you don't know how sensitive and open you are now. The slightest nuance sets up huge reverberations in each other's minds and bodies. It's just how it is right now.

Question from the room: Why is it that we really can't be objective in seeing where we are right now? You just mentioned we're a lot more sensitive than we realize, and I've seen from experience that that's true. But why does this just feel like normal, everyday life? In a way, now it actually is normal everyday life for the next few weeks—it's just the same. I see things, I hear things, I feel things, I think things. I don't talk, I don't read or anything. I always have a sense at the end of a retreat that I've wasted my time. Really. I've done about fifteen retreats, and at the end of each retreat it feels like a waste of my time. Often it takes months, and I'm still seeing subtle changes, subtle ways I'm relating to life differently. I've never really understood why you just can't see that happening when you're in the middle of it.

You know what I'm asking? Why does it seem so normal, and why can't we tell in the middle of it what's going on? Why can't we be objective?

When you say you feel like you've wasted your time at the end of each retreat, but then you see changes later—does that mean you don't feel like you wasted your time once those changes appear?

No, it's just a feeling I have. I used to think it was counterproductive. But now I've progressed to the point where they just feel like a waste of time. I realize that's just the impression.

Right, clearly. Actually, in a way, in my mind you've answered your own question. Saying that you feel it's a waste of time is an impression you have. You know that's not actually how it is for you. That's sort of how it is on retreat.

We're not objective because we're not objective. We're identified. We are so in the middle of experience, whatever our particular experience is—even though that can change wildly from day to day—but we're so in the middle of it. And we're getting really inside, so delicate, so subtle in what we're experiencing that we're not relating to our experience as if from an outside reference point.

Because we're saying, quit comparing, quit thinking about what it was like six months ago and what it'll be like when you're back in daily life. Just be totally here in this experience. And so without that outer reference point, there isn't really anything to compare to. So yes, it feels like daily life. And in another way, you don't really have the tools here—and it wouldn't be so helpful anyway—to be trying to assess what's actually going on.

It's sort of like you're in a boat and you've been put out to sea, and you've lost sight of the shore, which is your daily life. And you haven't come to the other shore, which is back in your daily life. You're just at sea, and the little things that happen at sea are everything. There's nothing to bounce it off of, to see.

So, for example, when something happens and you get angry, you might get so furious. And if you could compare it to daily life—well, if that person cut across my walking path, would I be murderous? Probably not. But the experience is so vivid, so real, that we don't stop and make that comparison, which is fine. It's not necessarily helpful to make it. It's more useful to just go into the anger and be there. But we are losing touch with our daily life, our regular ways that we assess experience. And since everyone else here is doing the same thing, it seems really normal that we don't.

So, have a normal day. Tonight there will be a talk, but there won't be a talk tomorrow night. Not normal. Pretend today's tomorrow.

Are there any questions this morning? Quiet minds finally. This is it, the last moment, the peak moment of your whole retreat.

One thing I wanted to say, sort of as an adjunct to the talk last night: there's still quite a lot of time left in this retreat, but it might be a good point—just a feeling I've been getting sitting here and talking to people—to notice in a very gentle way if you've fallen into certain habits of how you're relating to your practice. Not routine necessarily—there's nothing wrong with a routine—but it can become a rut. And a rut can be comfortable even though it might be difficult.

You might have established a certain habit of how you're relating to practice that, for instance, might have felt like wise effort and now is really pushing. Or you might have had to back off a while ago, and now you're in a routine of being good to yourself but you're actually really spacing out.

Our mind so easily forgets that each moment is fresh and new. We think we've discovered the right balance and we don't have to look anymore. We don't like it that every single moment requires fresh presence and fresh looking.

I don't mean to make a big deal out of this, but it's something I've noticed in my own practice a lot. It's very easy to think I've got it figured out and be in some kind of a rut—hide in a rut, even though it's not a comfortable one.

So, please continue.

Questions about working with intention or noticing intention arose. Someone had set the intention to have a seamless day but had a terrible morning, and wondered if the intention was one of desire instead of a so-called good intention.

I think it's complicated. For one thing, intention is arising in almost every moment. So I could say, "I have the intention to have a seamless day." That could be arising as desire in that moment—an intention associated with desire. It could be an intention associated with resolution, which is skillful, or intention associated with aversion. That thought manifesting as intention could be associated with many different mental states. It might have been a skillful one or not. I can't know, not being there. It might have been associated with desire.

But even if it's extremely skillful, resolute—"I will have a seamless day"—that's arising in one mind moment. That intention, that single one alone, cannot control what happens in the day. It's like the next mind moment, that intention might not arise. An unpleasant sensation might arise. There's aversion. And there isn't really the intention, say, to notice it, and we get carried off.

So it's much more complex because so many intentions arise with every thought, every speech, every action. We're not going to notice them all. And each of them can be associated with any of the mental states.

Not to be discouraged. Sometimes it sounds like—as in the story of the strength of the bodhisattva's intention last night—"I will someday be a Buddha." Well, that didn't happen that morning. It was eons and eons of so many lifetimes and so many ups and downs. That intention might have run like a thread, arising over and over again in all those lifetimes, along with fear and lust and hatred and generosity and all the other things.

Someone asked whether the intention had come and gone or whether it was continuous, making a thread.

It arose again. That intention could make it likely for a similar intention to arise in the next moment, and for another similar one to arise in a later moment. So it's the thread of conditionality, of cause and effect. It's not that same one intention, but the strength of it could make it arise again.

Just as the strength of our intention to be mindful here—that might give rise to mindfulness in the next moment, and then the next moment might be a total space-out. Suddenly we wake up again, mindful. Again there's the intention of mindfulness arising on the strength of it having been conditioned. But it's not the same one making it happen. It's happening over and over and over. One moment conditions the next.

So a clear intention like having a seamless day—that doesn't mean the day is going to automatically be seamless. But you might notice you're spacing out ten minutes later, half an hour later, and it would make it easier for the intention—"Right, I want to really be clear today"—to arise again, and to arise again later the next time you notice you're spacing out. Do you see what I mean? It's much more complicated than just "I have it and then it happens."

And when we don't notice or make a clear intention, then the intention for discouragement, the intention for restlessness arises. We don't notice it, and the next moment's more restless. Another intention with restlessness arises. The next moment's more restless, the next moment's more. We're not noticing it, but intentions are still arising and strengthening the ease with which that mental state arises again in another moment.

She's saying the mind and body seem to be separate in that two different things are actually happening. One, sometimes she feels physical expression of emotion, but there's actually no mental or emotional content. So it's physical experience, basically, with no emotional or mental trigger. And other times she's experiencing very strong, ugly thoughts, but no physical or even emotional manifestation. They just come and go like a flower.

I wouldn't say that the mind and body are disconnected. I mean, those are two very different experiences. And sometimes we can have emotion that expresses itself physically, and there is no story going with it. It's just what it is. We're so used to having a story that we want to make one up.

And I would even caution you. There are times I've experienced what I would call fear in the body. But when I really looked, it wasn't fear. There was no fear going on. It was just physical manifestation that had nothing actually to do with fear. And I was calling it fear out of old conditioning.

So I would look, if you can, when you have a strong physical manifestation that feels like anxiety. Really look and see if there's actually no anxiety there. It may be simply physical experience. It's not separate from mind because the knowing of that is *nāma*, is the mind. There's the knowing and there's the physical experience. They're not separated. But it's not always that there's an emotion and there's a feeling in the body and they have to happen together, or that every feeling means an emotion.

And similarly with thoughts. What you're experiencing is really just the fact that a thought arises and passes. It can be just like a balloon. It just comes and goes and the content makes no difference at all. You weren't identified with that thought. It just kind of—ah, that was really ugly. Ah, that was really beautiful. Gone. Nothing.

And again, at that moment, that isn't a physical experience. That's a mental experience. But it doesn't have to be that we grip on and have an identified emotional reaction to every thought that appears. In fact, it's beginning to see that thoughts arise, that sounds arise, that sensations arise, that smells arise. No difference. So that's quite common.

I'm just saying, don't assume. Don't assume that because you have a little quiver, it's anxiety. Really look.

We make so many assumptions from past conditioning. This is a great deal of what keeps us in our not seeing clearly, in our delusion. So I'm not saying it is or isn't anxiety, but really look. Don't assume. Don't assume it's anything. Be with the actual, bare experience without any interpretation. And just see what happens to it, how it behaves. Watch it come and go.

CHAPTER 266

Question and Answer

Carol Wilson · 42 min

> *In this intimate question and answer session, Carol Wilson responds to practitioners' inquiries about various aspects of meditation practice and the broader context of Buddhism's transmission to the West. She reflects on Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings about saṅgha and the importance of mutual support in keeping the Buddha Dhamma alive, noting how Western Buddhism is evolving away from devotion to individual masters toward a more community-centered approach.*
>
> *Wilson offers practical guidance on working with the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅgā), particularly the balance between energizing factors like rapture (pīti), investigation (dhammavicaya), and effort (vīriya) with calming factors such as concentration (samādhi), tranquility (passaddhi), and equanimity (upekkhā). She addresses how to skillfully work with strong energy before it becomes restlessness (uddhacca), suggesting techniques like one-pointed attention on the breath or careful attention to pleasant and unpleasant sensations.*
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> *The discussion explores the relationship between citta (mind/heart) and how Western linguistic distinctions can create artificial separations in experience. Wilson also addresses the common retreat experience of intense emotional reactions and periods of confusion, encouraging practitioners to stay present with these states rather than avoiding them. She discusses how deep inner practice gradually permeates outer experience, even when visual perception continues to appear solid and separate.*

So welcome to our lovely New England winters. It goes on like this for months and months. Any questions about your practice?

Anything I might say would be my own opinion and interpretation of what he's saying, which I don't think I should presume. I think he's being inspirational and speaking to what he sees as the need now for mutual support and growth in keeping the Buddha Dharma alive, and in continuing to deepen and find ways to bring Buddha Dharma into practice in our present-day world, in our present-day conditions.

Right now, at this moment, if we're waiting for a Buddha to come down the pipe in the next eon, we're kind of putting it off. And what we have to look to now—it does seem to me that if we're looking to one person, at least the way things are going in the West, looking to one teacher to exhibit perfection, we do have eons to wait.

It seems that more in the culture of Buddhism coming to the West, there's a growing sense of having to not pull back from teachers entirely—the sense of devotion to masters can really awaken our hearts—but the practice of giving over to a master all perfection keeps being blown apart. I don't even have to go into it, but you know what I mean. One master after another gets caught in some kind of scandal—sexual, money, power, whatever—and it's been continuing this fall. Not here, of course. But then we don't claim to be any kind of masters. Couldn't get away with that.

So this is totally my sense of what he's saying: use teachers, use great beings, but spread it out to appreciate and support one another as a sense of sangha. I mean, it's really amazing. Everybody here, a hundred people—really a hundred and twenty if you count the ones coming for the first six weeks—so devoted, in whatever form it takes in each of our minds, to awakening, to living a life of integrity, a life of harmlessness. It's powerful. That's what I think is going to help awaken the planet. And so that's my view of what he's saying. I could be completely off.

As for what's happening as Buddhism comes to the West and starts to grow, I have an opinion, though I don't like speaking first.

There are different aspects of Buddhism in Asia. There's Theravada Buddhism, which is basically what this practice comes from, and that's more Southeast Asian. Whereas Zen, say, is Japan, Korea, used to be China, and there's still some in China. So there are different facets. I certainly am more grounded in the Theravada tradition.

If you look at just the countries that were the real strongholds of Theravada: Sri Lanka is in the middle of a civil war and really struggling. Thailand still has a lot of practice, as does Burma, but Burma is in an atrocious sort of civil war. Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam was a stronghold of Buddhism—it's sort of decaying, with politics taking over. In many ways it's not dead by any manner of means, but it certainly doesn't enjoy the flourishing support that it did quite some years ago.

So yes, it does seem like Buddhism is moving out of the Southeast Asian countries and more into the West, and of course changing as it does so. Because at least in those countries there's the support of the culture. For instance, in Thailand, if you say, "I'm trying to observe the five precepts in my daily life," that's more or less understood, respected, and supported. And here, if you say that kind of thing in a lot of situations—you go to a party and you say, "Well, I don't really drink, I'm observing the five precepts"—you're kind of looked down on sometimes. So there's not quite the same support here culturally, but maybe that's what Thich Nhat Hanh was talking about. We can help it grow. Opinion, opinion only.

As for the observation about Buddhism not really taking hold in certain regions, I certainly share that observation. At least, I know the Vipassana scene—I don't know Zen or Tibetan as well—but it certainly seems to me to be more than predominantly white middle class.

And so I can't speak from within the Black or Hispanic communities. That, I think, is actually part of the limitation—a group of white middle-class people brought at least the Theravada Vipassana over and started teaching it, and it seems to be emerging from within that particular culture. I don't know if it's partly about the leisure time that's necessary to devote to this practice. I can't speak from other cultures, so I can't say why it hasn't taken root there. I certainly share your observation. It's only a small pocket, and it hasn't spread throughout the country or taken root in all the different cultures. There are so many cultures in this country. So it's a severe limitation. I really agree. That's all I can say.

Question from a participant about studying continuously with one teacher in Theravada Buddhism in the States.

Continuously? Well, I know that Bhante Gunaratana has a small monastery retreat center in West Virginia called Bhavana Society, and I think he's there quite a good deal of the time. I know people who have gone and spent a year or so there, so that would be under his guidance to some extent. He travels also, but that would be one option.

In this little Vipassana world here at Spirit Rock, the teachers are pretty much on the move, and it's mostly discrete retreats or sitting groups. Lucila Nanda, again these are both monks, is in the Bay Area of California, but I don't believe he has any kind of retreat facility. If you don't want to stay at a retreat facility, you could live in Cambridge and practice at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center with Larry and Ryan on a day basis. There's lots of that kind of ongoing connection if you settle in a city where there's a sitting group—you could have continuous contact with a teacher. There's not a residential facility that I can think of other than Bhavana, and maybe Ajahn Sobin in Southern California.

The teacher then addresses the group.

Please sink into your practice. Seriously. You're not doing yourself any favors by thinking about all this stuff. There's nowhere to go. Please, we're still in silence. You're not doing yourself or anyone else any favors by talking. I really hope we don't have to say this every day for the next three weeks. Please really settle into the practice. You're

here—really be here in this moment. It's the only moment. Anything we're thinking of a month from now is only a thought. It doesn't matter how powerful—it's only a thought. Really just be here now. That's all there is to do. And it's everything.

A participant asks about the separation between body, heart, and mind in how the teachings are presented, and whether this separation dissolves with deepening practice.

And with less deepening practice it doesn't exist either. It seems to be a distinction in your experience between the mind and the heart. I think in my experience too, and I think in a lot of us, there seems to be a distinction between the mind and the heart.

I think part of it is actually a linguistic distinction we make here in this country that's unnecessary. The word *citta* in Pali is used for both mind and heart. There's not like... and often mind is pointed to here. So I actually, well, I'm rooted in this culture, but I think we certainly exacerbate that sense of difference talking about the mind, the mind. When we talk about metta as the practice of the heart, okay, that's a way of speaking that I think can exaggerate that seeming distinction. It's a way of also bringing home the fact that many people talk about their practice, experiencing it all in their head and as if seeing it from the head. And we're a very head-oriented culture.

In my experience, though, it's true, as my practice goes on, I begin to experience everything as if it's arising from here, whether it's thoughts, sensations, whatever—that there actually isn't a distinction. And I remember one talk Sayadaw U Pandita gave, I don't know, sometime when I was sitting, where he actually talked about that, which surprised me because I didn't know if it was just my own weirdness, but actually he talked about how that's how it is, that everything arises from the heart, so to speak. It's not actually arising from the physical heart. It just seems that way.

But you can even begin looking now rather than thinking, "Oh, if my practice deepens, I'll see that distinction fall away." You can even notice many ways that we are creating, through the way we describe experience, through the way we perceive or interpret experience, that we're creating the sense of a distinction.

All I can say is it's true and it's difficult using language in a way that doesn't create dualism. Difficult. I find it impossible. Don't let yourself get hung up on words, whether it's words you're hearing from us or the way they're being interpreted through your own experience. When you notice you're having a hang-up and it seems to be around words, it's not worth getting caught in it. Really, it's true. Drop it and go to your own experience and see what's really going on.

The next question is about when he feels strong energy or so-called positive energy rising, and at some point he notices it changes to restlessness. Where before he didn't catch it until he was about to jump off the cushion, now he's catching it sooner, wondering if he's doing something wrong or if it's just happening or what.

It's a good question because it points to one of the ways that we work—I mentioned it briefly in my last talk—which is balancing the different factors of the seven factors of enlightenment. And one of the balances is between the tranquilizing factors and the energetic ones. One easy way to look at it, though it's not always this simple, is the balance between energy and concentration.

So often what happens as all the factors are building, as mindfulness increases, energy can get very strong. There comes a lot of energy in this practice. And often when we don't see what's happening, the tendency is to just let it build. If the energy gets really high and we don't quite notice, we're paying attention to the energy, but there are actually ways that we can work to bring up, to balance the energy with concentration, with calm, or with equanimity, rather than let the energy just keep building. If it builds too much without that balance, it does turn into restlessness.

So it's not like a right or wrong. It's just really to notice the way these mental factors are arising and how they work together. So for instance, when you can feel building energy, if you can, when you notice it, bring in mindfulness—really continue to note it, to be aware of it on a very steady, ongoing basis. And you can also bring in concentration. So for example, if there's strong energy and it's in a sitting, and it's not to restlessness yet but you see it sort of building, you could get a little bit one-pointed on the breath for a while—not to block out the energy, simply to bring in some concentration and calm, and then open up again. Or if you're doing the walking, you can get really absorbed in just feeling the bottom of the feet. This isn't a forcing. You're not trying to force the energy down.

You're using that energy in the service of balancing the practice—balancing mindfulness and concentration. So that's one way to work with it. And really, that's what all the instructions about restlessness are trying to accomplish. At this stage of retreat, when you're noticing the subtlety of energy coming up, you can bring in some one-pointed concentration or some equanimity. If you see there's energy and you're starting to become really reactive to whatever's happening, start really noticing pleasant and unpleasant, liking and disliking. That's one of the ways—not that it makes equanimity come automatically—but noticing the reaction, noticing the pleasant and unpleasant, tends to bring more of the spaciousness of equanimity into the mind.

One question that arose was whether acute awareness of pleasant and unpleasant is itself a sign of restlessness. Not necessarily. You could be very clearly aware of pleasant and unpleasant and be totally equanimous, or you could be acutely aware of subtleties and really what you're noticing is the reaction itself. Those are two different things. But even suspecting it might be restlessness suggests there's some to-ing and fro-ing around the pleasant and unpleasant, and you're noticing it on a more subtle level. It doesn't have to be restlessness—in a way it is restlessness, but we're also starting to see what actually goes on, how subtle this pulling toward the pleasant and avoiding the unpleasant really is. It's extremely subtle. It's happening on levels far beyond just the huge, obvious desire and aversion. So it's really helpful to see it. When you start to feel like you're truly lost in the reactions, that's when we need to work with equanimity.

Another sign of restlessness isn't always physical. It's the mind jumping all over the place, or worrying—an agitated mind. That's another manifestation.

Someone shared that a few times during this retreat, she'd had hours of almost hysterical reaction to sensations, waking up the next morning thinking, "What was that?" You know, sensations become unpleasant and the mind really goes into aversion or fear. She felt almost embarrassed to say it. But you're not alone. Almost everyone, at some point on retreat, has times when they feel like they're going off the deep end. It's part of it. It's not a mistake. You could say it's an imbalance, but it's actually a necessary part of this process.

If you were just even, even, even all the time, you'd never truly get the suffering of attachment and aversion. You'd never understand how much we're gripped by wanting things to be the way we think they should be. If we could see it all neat and tidy, we'd never really get it. So for some reason, part of how this process works is that things become incredibly exaggerated. If you pull back the next day and look, it seems extreme. But in that moment, the forces you're gripped by—they're exaggerated in relationship to the particular experience. They're not really exaggerated in relationship to how they actually run our lives.

In a way, you're seeing it on a microscopic, exaggerated level. There is an imbalance for sure, and we're really identified and caught in those times when we feel like we're going over the edge. That it comes back to balance in a day or two—that's fine. If it goes on for a month, okay, something is out of balance and needs to be adjusted.

One student shared, "I cried for two hours about sensations I felt in my body and the awesomeness of life. And then the next morning I woke up and thought, God, they were just sensations."

I know. And you don't normally do that, right? That's why we come here, so you can have such an experience. There's also a kind of beauty to this—it's not always just difficult. In a way, we get so sensitive that sometimes we can be crying or seem imbalanced out of just an appreciation of the awesomeness of life. As you say, many of us don't often feel or experience life with that level of connection and vulnerability consciously in our daily lives.

It really is, in some ways, like peeling away layers of protection or confusion—or just not quite feeling or seeing through them when we're so busy and running around. So I don't think that's exactly yogi mind. It's part of the process, an important part of it. And sure, the next day you think, "Just sensations, what's the big deal?" That's true from that vantage point. It is. But at the time it's happening, it's a valid, real experience.

So just be as present as you can within it. You don't have to say, "Hey, come on, this is just a sensation. What am I weeping about?" You don't have to do that. But just keep the balance. If you can stay somewhat mindful—know that you're crying, know the feeling of awesomeness, know the sensation, know if it's pleasant or not—just keep coming back. That's really all you need to do, and not worry about it.

Another student asked about the energizing factors—rapture, restlessness, excitement. She mentioned feeling a lot of energy arising, knowing it's near the end of the retreat, and then refined her question to ask more about rapture.

When we talk about the energizing factors, usually we refer to the helpful ones, which doesn't include restlessness and excitement. When we discuss the seven factors of enlightenment, the energizing ones are rapture, investigation, and effort—or energy itself. They're best understood, all three of them, when we realize that they're balanced with the calming ones: concentration, tranquility, and equanimity. And then mindfulness serves as the overarching balance for all of them.

What can feel like restlessness—an overabundance of energy—in gross terms can be physical, or it can manifest as that feeling where you just want to run around and talk to people and do things, this really high energy. Rather than seeing it as something to get rid of, when we've been in deep practice, we have the facility to bring up the calming factors to balance that, rather than just blowing it all out. That's a lot of what you all actually have the potential to explore and play with now.

One thing about this kind of high energy is that it turns into restlessness when we don't bring in mindfulness. Notice the energy. Turn the mindfulness into being present with feeling and noticing the energy, rather than saying, "Oh, this is uncomfortable, I have to do something about it." You can use concentration—not in a stifling way, but in

a calm way. If in the sitting your mind's all over, just count the breaths, one to ten and start over. Or in the walking, just walk very aware of the sensation of the foot rather than trying to take in too much. That can sometimes bring in a little bit of one-pointedness, which can help balance the excitability.

Notice it, and know that it's contagious. It really is. We think we're these separate beings, but actually we're just not separate. We pick up each other's energy, and that's part of why coming to the end of a retreat—no matter how committed you might be, how deep in your practice—there's no way the mind doesn't start thinking, the body doesn't start picking up each other's energy. It's just the law of nature. But what we can do is not hate it, keep being mindful of it, keep balancing it.

Now, rapture per se is an energizing factor that can manifest in different ways.

And one way rapture manifests is just this really keen interest in what's going on. Not the kind of interest that we manufacture—"Let me get interested in the breath" in order to bring in some concentration—but those times when the breath is just sparkly and you are simply drawn into it and it's so fascinating. Or excitement, or whatever's happening. This kind of real keen, deep interest—that's a manifestation of rapture. As are lots of weird physical manifestations that you wouldn't necessarily think of as being rapture.

Marjorie raised a question. The more she sees, the more she's struck by the split between her inner experience and her outer experience. Over time, there's no question she experiences the inner as something real—her eyes able to experience everything that happens, healing, life, everything. And then she opens her eyes and everything is the same old solid. She was curious why the inner doesn't translate to the outer. It doesn't seem to.

Yes, hopefully they will continue to come together. Her question is how the inner doesn't translate to the outer experience—meaning internally she can experience herself as being nothing but energy, impermanence seems clear, and when she opens her eyes, solid and normal again.

First of all, it can be different for different people. But I also experience that sight is in some way the most solid sense. I can just know there's nothing but energy, but the interpretation that goes along with my sight is really deeply ingrained.

But first I'd say that now it might seem like the inner doesn't translate to the outer. And certainly we need to function. If we went through life and all we saw was pulsating energy and we really couldn't bring it into form, it would be difficult. There are mo-

ments—I've had moments when it is like that on retreat, and I'm really glad I'm on retreat and don't have to function. That's, I think, one of the purposes of this intense so-called inner work.

And I say "so-called" because as we continue to practice, that functional division between inner and outer, which is helpful, we more and more begin to experience as a functional interpretation. Even if I open up and see things as solid, the experience that that's not how it is becomes more deeply understood—more cellular, you might say.

You're right, we've spent at least this lifetime so conditioned to see things as separate, to experience things as separate, that that conditioning springs up. It's a very strong habit. And even a few years of sitting and practicing and really deeply experiencing in a so-called inward way that it's nothing but energy, there's no solidity, there's no permanence, it's all connected—we open our eyes and it's solid. A few years of that isn't enough to make the whole conditioning we've had go away.

But it begins to become more permeable. You can see it's conditioning and don't necessarily believe it, but we can use it. And we can use our practice—the formal practice—because I don't think practice stops when we stop sitting or when we walk out of here. The experiences and the deep understanding, the visceral understandings that come over and over and over through the deep inner looking, do begin to permeate the way we live and the way we relate. You might not experience everything visually as that, but the understanding of what's so is what begins to permeate. You'll see it really does start to change how we relate.

Another practitioner shared something along the same lines. Sometimes sitting here he feels very confused, doesn't know what's what. So he tries opening his eyes and there doesn't seem to be confusion. He shuts his eyes and there's total confusion. Opens them again and there's no confusion. He hasn't been able to figure it out—wondering if he's walking around confused all the time in his everyday life.

I don't know. All I can say is keep looking. In a question like that I certainly can't say. But when you're sitting with your eyes closed and noticing confusion, can you just note it and be with it, or do you open your eyes because you don't like it?

He said it takes him a while to realize that it's just confusion. Once he starts noticing it, it's clear it's confusion, but he's still feeling it. So he got curious—what happens if he opens his eyes? It was a way of exploring that.

It just wasn't clear to me what was going on between opening my eyes and shutting my eyes. That's why I was interested in your perspective.

I could make things up, but not knowing quite your experience, I wouldn't want to. I'd say, since it was confusion, of course you're not clear what's going on—that's the nature of confusion. My tendency would be, not to focus on what's happened, but to hang out with confusion more rather than trying to move out of it. Really keep exploring confusion until you get familiar with it. Then when you open your eyes, you can have it sort of in the back of your mind—okay, things seem solid, things seem clear—and just maintain an open sense of awareness and notice if there's confusion with that too.

Also, I know for me, that sense of the world springing into solidity that Marjorie was talking about with opening the eyes is a very strong experience. So it might be that that just gets so strong it takes you out of the confusion of not quite knowing what's what. I don't know if that's particularly helpful. It might be good to hang out with not knowing what's what.

When things are starting to dissolve?

Yes, different things. One is, again, with every experience—every sense experience, every mental experience—it's actually happening so quickly that it's not like I'm looking at you and it's one long solid experience. It's visual image arising, you know, 17 trillion times in a second. Just as internally with the eyes closed, as the mind gets more concentrated and more still, there are times when the perception is of things coming incredibly quickly—arising and passing, arising and passing. The same is true of the visual field. There are times when the mind is quite concentrated and still that visual experience can begin also to be coming and going. And there are also periods in practice when what is noticed is the dissolution of everything. It's just that way for a while. And that will include the visual as well. Everything just is dissolving.

Hopefully it will pass?

Yes. And until it does, don't drive down the freeway.

Please really appreciate this day. When we fully appreciate something, we don't hold onto it when it ends.

CHAPTER 267

Patience and Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson offers profound guidance on how mindfulness (sati) and patience (khanti) serve as essential allies in the practice of awakening. She explains that the Buddha's teaching points us toward recognizing our essential completeness—a radiant nature of mind that cannot be created or destroyed, only remembered and recognized in each present moment.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how we habitually look in the wrong direction for peace, mistaking pleasant conditions for happiness and treating unpleasant experiences as obstacles rather than doorways to freedom. She describes how feeling tone (vedanā)—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of each experience—becomes an unconscious filter that shapes our reactions and keeps us spinning in confusion. Through vivid examples, including her own experience of how a small pain in her toe spiraled into self-judgment, she demonstrates how bare attention cuts through layers of interpretation to reveal what is actually happening in each moment.*
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> *The talk explores patience not as passive endurance but as an active, openhearted engagement with experience—a quality intimately connected to loving-kindness (mettā). Wilson emphasizes that the proximate cause of patience is seeing things as they really are, particularly the truth of impermanence (anicca). She includes moving poetry to illustrate how opening to change, even when sad or frightening, allows us to experience genuine connection and aliveness. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, she concludes by pointing toward the unconditioned—likened to the space in a room—which can only be recognized when we stop grasping at the objects within it.*

It looks a little bit from here like the honeymoon is over. Starting to look a little serious.

I want to talk tonight, in a kind of general way, about mindfulness and patience.

You may know that one of the translations of the word "Buddha" means "one who is awake." And that is appropriate since this practice is a practice of awakening. Awakening, in the first place, to simply being awake in this particular moment of our life. To start really being here—vital, alive, not sleepwalking through our lives. And on another level, awakening to the potential for profound inner contentment. To awaken to our es-

sential nature, that of completion: nothing needed, nothing can be taken away. To awaken to that reality here and now, in this moment—always and only in this moment, nowhere else.

And in that recognition of our essential completeness, the natural manifestation in our speech and actions, in our intentions in the world, is that of compassion, of love, of manifesting a recognition of our interconnectedness.

Mindfulness is, in a way, our doorway in—our beloved friend, in a way, to this recognition, over and over and over. I deliberately say "recognition." We're not creating some state of peace brought about by certain conditions, because when those conditions change, that peace would also change. So we're not trying to get to some certain pinnacle. What we're practicing here is a way to help us really land fully present, open and wide awake, here and now in this moment, no matter what's happening. And whatever it is that's arising in our experience in this moment—that experience thus becomes our doorway into that recognition, or perception, or resting in our inner unity and completeness.

So you might, over the days, have even had a moment of mindfulness already since you've been here. It's possible. It doesn't matter what's happening. Maybe you're just putting your foot down and really feeling those sensations. Or maybe you're hearing the rustle of leaves or the sound of the rain on the roof. Or maybe you're drinking a cup of tea. Maybe you're just stretching out to go to sleep but you're really still aware. It doesn't matter what's happening. But in that moment of mindfulness, of deep connection with whatever experience is arising—without interpretation about it, without pushing into the next experience, without somehow holding back—take a moment of stepping. Just that clear, full presence of sensations, without story, without resistance. It can be so exquisite, so alive.

And in that is a glimpse, an intimation of what the Buddha called the radiant nature of our mind. It might not seem like anything so special, and we tend to then think, "Wow, walking is so great. I'm gonna walk for hours now and forget the sitting." Of course the next minute that's gone. Or you think, "The rain is so wonderful. I hope it rains the whole retreat because the sound of it really wakes me." Some of you have the reverse: "The sun is so beautiful. If only the sun would come out, my heart would open up and I would be able to experience the true unity of myself and all life."

In that moment, though, without the story I just put around it, in that moment is the glimpse of what the Buddha called the radiant nature of our mind—potential for real peace, for true happiness within present moment experience, not in spite of present moment experience. In this way, we could say that this is a practice of freedom. We're not creating it, but we're recognizing, over and over and over.

But just as the Buddha said the mind is naturally radiant and pure, the next line of that particular quotation is that it is obscured by temporary obscurations from time to time. You may also have had a glimpse of that over these few days. Both of these are the nature of our life and the nature of our practice.

The Tibetan teacher Nyoshul Khenpo said once that the main purpose of these dharma teachings is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, as well as how the deluded mind works. You see, we're doing both of those. When we are talking up here, we talk about both of those—both equally important aspects. It's actually easier to talk about how the deluded mind works, because it's hard to put words on the nature of the non-deluded mind. We can only sort of point.

So what happens? There's that vivid, wakeful clarity, pure presence, no sense of conflict or struggle. And the next moment it's gone. We become distracted. There's a sense of struggle with our experience, a sense of conflict with what's going on—with ourselves, with others, with the environment. Something seems to have changed. This radiance is hidden.

It's so hidden, it's like we can't even believe it ever existed. And then we become lost in this struggle to somehow make it come back again and stay here—for the rest of the retreat, if not the rest of our lives.

There are many different ways to talk about what happens as we move into this sense of conflict and struggle. I can really just talk a little bit about one way tonight; this is really what we talk about for three months.

One thing that's happening here goes back to what Steve was speaking about last night—the different types of happiness. I feel that basically, until we really begin to look at and be with our experience with mindfulness, being with what is without trying to interpret and analyze it all the time, until we really are investigating our experience, we don't really know what happiness is. And so we continue to look for peace, look for happiness—in my mind I put it in the wrong direction. We keep looking where happiness, true peace, cannot be found: in changing temporal conditions. Over and over we

get caught in it. We're looking to pleasure for happiness, which again is one of many changing conditions. So we put our attention on the wrong aspect, the unhelpful aspect of experience.

When we have that moment of clarity, so easily we look to the circumstances, to what the particular sense experience was, and look to that as the source of that sense of peace in the moment. Whether it's the weather, whether it's the food, we look to having the proper room, the proper sitting, the proper schedule. We are affected by other people's behavior. If we could only get everybody else in line, then this retreat would go like cake. And pretty soon, we're just moving into the real potential for the hindrances to get out of control.

I just want to mention that this tends to come up on retreat. We start to get notes—total love notes, total hate notes—usually signed "Metta." I'm not kidding. "If the person next to me doesn't stop breathing so loud, I'm going to strangle them. Metta." We get notes like this. And in that moment, the suffering in that is genuine. We acknowledge the suffering. But the source of the suffering is not being seen clearly at all. And that's where we get so lost, where we get so into a sense of conflict with what's arising—external, like other people, or internal.

The sitting has pain in it. The last sitting, the thoughts were kind of quiet and wispy, and now they're like a freight train and I don't like it. Or there's pain in the body. Or I think the breath should be really smooth and light and yogic and sattvic, and instead I'm gasping here like I'm strangling. I don't like it. This again, internal or external—whatever it might be, it may be a really unpleasant experience, but none of this is going to last longer than that. It's all in constant flux, and we keep focusing on the outer or inner, on the changing experience. We're looking in the wrong direction. We have a mistaken idea of happiness, of peace, and that mistaken idea can keep us spinning in suffering and confusion. It has kept us spinning in suffering and confusion for a long time.

The conditions, the arising experience, are not the problem, not the source of the distraction or the real confusion. The radiant nature, our real nature of completion, is not affected one whit by whatever condition happens to arise. But what is affected is our ability to remember this, to recognize it. That is affected really strongly by arising conditions. We get so engrossed in struggle with what's happening that we simply forget that peace is accessible even within this experience.

My favorite simile for this is like being in prison. You have a room, you have some furniture, and you're so busy trying to make it as comfortable as possible—it might be a little bit like here, getting the right blanket, getting the right window, getting a little

flower for your windowsill, setting up your little altar—you get so engrossed in that, that you don't notice the prison door has been open all the time. You could just walk out. It's sort of like that in any particular moment.

Two of our allies, the ones I want to talk about tonight, in helping us cut through this confusion and land again back in the potential for peace, in awakeness here and now, are of course the tool of mindfulness, but also the attitude of patience. I want to talk a little bit about patience later. By patience, I also mean open-hearted acceptance.

Now I want to talk about one of the many ways—but one of the ways—that we get so entangled in what's arising, in our reactions to it, without noticing. Michelle spoke briefly about this, and we'll certainly be talking about it more: the root obscurations, you could say, the root torments that arise from moment to moment in our experience—the experiences of greed, desire, clinging; hatred, aversion, pushing away, fear; and delusion, basic confusion, not knowing what's going on and not really recognizing anything very clearly. Rather than thinking of this abstractly or conceptually, what we begin to notice through the tool of mindfulness is how these root obscurations manifest in our experience on a moment-to-moment level.

These three responses—liking or not liking or just plain ignoring—then become a sort of filter. We're so habituated to respond in this way that, without mindfulness, without attention, when we're not really paying attention to what's going on, the mind responds automatically. And when we don't notice, that response becomes a filter, quite easily, as if you're looking at the world through blue glasses and everything looks blue and you don't know it. You just think that's how everything is.

So if you begin to notice when you're evaluating your sittings or your walkings or your retreat or your life or what happened at work three weeks ago—whatever you're evaluating—we tend to think that if it's pleasant, it's right, it's good, it's the direction to go in, we're doing well. If it's unpleasant, it's so easy to think, "This is a mistake, this shouldn't be happening, I've got to fix it somehow, I've got to try harder, I've got to practice harder," whatever way your mind goes. And if it's neutral—well, as Steve said last night, the different experiences of happiness get more and more subtle. At first we often experience them as being neutral, so boring, like nothing's happening. So we have two choices: fall asleep or make something happen. Because mostly this culture is so intense, and we're getting more and more used to needing really intense sensory stimulation to even notice something. So if it gets more intense, then maybe we'll wake up and maybe something will really be happening.

Notice this in your practice, because often what we do is make something intense but unpleasant happen. During the last three-month course I taught, I had a whole string of people come in one day, halfway through the course, reporting that they had become aware they'd been experiencing calm and peace but it was boring and they didn't like it. Their minds then created whole scenarios of suffering and unpleasantness—bad memories, imagining unpleasantness in the future—in order to sort of feel alive again. It's interesting.

So when not noticed, these biases or habits of mind really filter how we evaluate experience, what our expectations are, how we're judging what's going on today. And it keeps us looking in the wrong way for peace. Because generally—well, for me anyway, I can't say for anyone else—when my mind's working this way, peace generally means pleasant, absence of pain, absence of restlessness or anything that I don't particularly like. Or it can mean meeting my expectations. And what are expectations based on? Something we've read, something we've heard, something we've experienced before and decided is generally pleasant or good. Only based on the past. Only on the known. Incredibly limiting.

But anyway, generally, when I've decided this is happiness, this is peace—have you ever thought "this is happiness" when there was something really unpleasant going on? So it becomes the filter, the definition for the peace, the sense of inner completion, whatever we're looking for. And it's not so. It keeps us looking in the wrong direction.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian teacher, said once that what you are calling peace is only absence of disturbance. Real peace cannot be disturbed. Not by the rain, not by someone coughing.

Not even by snoring. Not even by pain in our knees. Not even by the thought arising, "Oh no, I could never do this. I'm doing it wrong. I'm so worthless." Real peace cannot be disturbed. And it cannot be created. We simply learn how to recognize it over and over and over.

This is where the tool of mindfulness—*sati* in the Pali language—is really going to be the main tool of our practice here together. This is where it really shows its power and its strength. Any moment of pure mindfulness cuts through all these habits of interpretation and storytelling and looking in the wrong direction, and brings us right here, recognizing what's happening just as it is.

By mindfulness, I mean clear connection with whatever is arising—whatever of the six sense experiences, thought, emotion, whatever is arising. A clear connection without interpretation, without a story, without analysis. We call that aspect bare atten-

tion: just as it is. But also a clear, open-hearted, accepting connection. Not judging it, not wishing it were different. Simply being fully present because this is so in this moment. Recognizing and knowing it clearly just as it is.

I want to give a couple of examples because this is what, moment by moment, cuts through all the layers and layers of obscuration that can arise like this over the simplest experience. And actually, to me it becomes fascinating to watch how these obscurations, these levels of complexity, can arise like that from a simple sense experience.

Hearing. There's just hearing. It's unpleasant. We don't notice it. It becomes, in the identification, "That's a person coughing." We don't like that. There's a sense of contraction in the body, a startling, a pulling away. The thought comes up, "If they have a cold, why don't they sit in their room? Don't they know how close we all are in here?" That leads into a sense of remembering how you had pneumonia when you were four and a half, and what if it happens again, and how sick you can get, and more anger at the insensitivity of all these other people. And besides, they're all sitting so still—don't they even hear it? What's the matter with them? And on and on. "I'm so bad. They're so peaceful. Why can't I just..." And it goes on forever. Then you're anticipating the next cough. It doesn't even happen, but you're just in a frenzy of tightness waiting for it. You see, you know what I mean.

What's actually happening in that moment? And that's where we learn to bring this cutting-through clarity of mindfulness. In that moment of hearing, can we bring the attention right to hearing? Just hearing. Mindfulness doesn't hesitate and moves right into the bare experience of hearing. And that's all that's happening.

If it's unpleasant, if you're right there, you might notice the unpleasantness. Or if it's gone way too far and it's murderous rage, well then, at that moment what you notice is the actual experience of murderous rage as it's arising here and now in this moment. Not the story and all the other people, but simply mindfulness cuts through to here and now. And there can actually be a moment—of course the coughing can just be sound—but there can even be a moment where murderous rage is just emotion and sensation. A moment. I'm not saying that's easy, and I'm not saying it lasts. But you get a sense of the difference between being so convinced in our rightness or our wrongness, either way, and the difference between that and simply being with what is so.

Another good example, and one that comes up a lot and has already been coming up today for people, is pain in the body. This happens all the time. People will come and say, "I have this tension in my shoulders and in my head. I'm contracted, and it's a result of the way I've been relating to my practice, or to my life, or it's the way I've been ever since I was two years old. It shows I'm uptight, I'm type A, I can't learn how to be

flexible. I came here to learn openness and all I'm doing is getting more contracted. This noting and this mindfulness is only increasing it." You know, just this. And every time the pain arises, it's treated as a confirmation of the sad deficiencies in our character. And it gets really concretized, really locked in.

If you say that to any of us, we might nod, and after a while we'll say, "Well, what are you really feeling?" And the answer comes: "Oh, there's tension and pain, and I'm type A."

What are you really feeling? Well, there's tension. There's pressure. And when you really look at it, what happens? Well, it might get stronger. Maybe it changes to tingling, or maybe it kind of fades away. Or, you know, I didn't even notice it after a while, and then I was just hearing the rain. It's just what it is.

And even if it's accurate that the pressure, the tension, the constriction is a result—because everything's a result of conditions—even if it's accurate that it's a result of the way we've been relating in our life, here and now in this moment we're not back in the office. We're not back at two years old. In this moment, we're right here. And what's happening now is tension, pressure, here and now in this moment.

Our mindfulness gives us a chance, over and over and over, to simply rest in that. Because it is so, but recognizing it as it is, without all the extra. Even a moment of that can be so illuminating, because then we begin to feel, to know, the difference between being really here and being here through the veil of our interpretations and filters. And it's really different.

It's not easy. I don't mean to imply that it's easy. And I don't mean to imply that we can just dismiss all our interpretations and our memories and our conditioning like that. That's certainly not the case. There will be times when the memories or the interpretation or the persona of how we present ourselves in our life will be what's really arising strongly to pay attention to. But then we'll know that that's so. We won't be being led by the nose by it.

I've found that the mind is incredibly good at picking the interpretation or the story that's going to really hook us about any particular experience—the one where you say, "Yeah, but this is really true." It's amazing that way.

I remember one time—for me, the hook of not being good enough, of self-blame and judgment, is quite strong—I was doing walking meditation, pretty aware. I wasn't spacing out; I was present, but mostly noticing thoughts and emotions. I wasn't really noticing physical sensations. Walking and present and noticing thoughts, and suddenly I realized that the thoughts had taken a turn for the unpleasant. They were getting more

and more unpleasant. In fact, I was running through every selfish and horrible thing I'd ever done. I was back to the third grade by the time I kind of caught the drift. I said, "Hmm, something's going on here."

And just for a moment—the tendency would be to try and stop it, or say, "Oh no, you're so good," or something—but just stop. Okay, what's going on here? Sort of widen the field of attention and notice. And this is really true: there was a little sharp stabbing pain in my big toe. That was all. But I wasn't noticing it. And so every time I stepped, the stabbing pain would come—sharp, unpleasant—and I didn't notice it. I would recoil sort of internally, rather than mindfully just meeting it. I'd recoil with attention away from what was happening, and that aversion would then get the hook that works so well in my mind—"I'm no good"—and just take it and go for a really long ride.

As soon as I could bring my attention—oh yeah, pain in the—I mean, it was funny. I just started laughing when I saw that. But as soon as I could bring the attention—oh right, sharp pain, unpleasant—that was it. Just present with what was happening.

And even a pain in the toe can be the avenue in to serenity, to peace, to completion. It doesn't matter what it is. What does matter is the presence and the attitude of presence. The mindfulness and this attitude of real open-hearted acceptance, of patience. It's like another possibility entirely of relating to life presents itself to us in every moment. And that's the possibility of simply being with things just as they are.

It's so simple. It's so peaceful. It's so un-effortful. It's so impossible so much of the time. I mean, I know what it's like. Last year I was sitting out there in your place, and it was great. I'm envying all of you.

But in that moment that it is possible—to be with what is just as it is—it transforms everything. It doesn't transform what's happening, but the relationship to what's happening transforms experience entirely. It transforms our life. It transforms our understanding. It's incredibly powerful.

Notice it when it happens, instead of waiting for the big lights to go off. Notice those moments when you're totally present and really accepting. We stop looking in the wrong direction then.

But it takes a real commitment and a real sense of integrity with ourselves, because it is really hard. The mind is really tricky. And there are many, many difficult experiences that will arise over the course of this time, and pleasant ones that will go away over the course of this time.

So mindfulness is the tool, and the attitude of patience is so vital. Patience is one of the ten perfections spoken of by the Buddha. Before he became, in that particular lifetime, the fully enlightened Buddha, it's said that he spent many, many previous lifetimes in all different types of roles, perfecting these ten qualities of heart and mind. I'm not even going to name all ten because I don't have time tonight, but one of them is patience. And by patience, I mean a much broader description than I would think of normally in day-to-day usage.

We tend to think of patience as the last thing to do when something's going on we don't like and nothing else has worked to get rid of it. Then we say, okay, it's time to be patient. But what does that mean? It's time to passively endure with gritted teeth, saying, "Yes, I'm being mindful and patient and I know it will change because everything does. Thank God for impermanence." That's not what I mean by patience. That kind of patience is tinged with aversion, with this pushing away.

True patience is very active, and it's an aspect of metta, of loving-kindness. With patience, there's actually an active engagement with whatever is happening—open-hearted acceptance, but really connected and engaged. It's not like the acceptance of something unpleasant happening over there on the other side of the trees. It's really engaging with that unpleasant sound, that real meeting of it wholeheartedly, just as it is. In that moment, there's no fear and there's no clinging.

Patience with the desirable as well as the undesirable. Meeting what we like equally open-heartedly, without that little tug of "let's make it stay." So patience has an alert and very spacious quality, yet at the same time is very connected and nonjudgmental. You can see how it's really the attitude that goes with mindfulness.

It's not passive submission to abuse. Patience doesn't mean not knowing what's going on. "Oh, that guy can be patient because he's totally deluded and doesn't see how much suffering is being inflicted on him"—that's not patience, that is delusion. Patience is actively engaging, but out of an open-hearted acceptance. It's accompanied by compassion.

In the commentaries which speak of these different qualities, they talk about what's called the proximate cause—the conditions that need to be there for this quality of mind or heart to arise. And this I find really interesting: the proximate cause of patience is seeing things as they really are. It's not being deluded, so you're patient until things change. It's seeing very clearly just how things are. And in this, it gives rise to the potential, the possibility to open-heartedly engage with and meet with acceptance whatever's happening, because we really, as Joseph put it the other night, begin to know what's what.

So it's transformative again, this quality of patience. Seeing things as they really are.

One of the main characteristics that we see as it really is, is this one of impermanence that Joseph spoke of the other night. And as he said, we intellectually know that things are impermanent. But the next time you're really struggling with your experience—whether it's wanting something to come back or wanting something to go away—in that moment of struggle, just check in. Are we acting from the heart's knowing of impermanence in that moment? Or have we again started treating that experience as permanent?

Whenever I'm in some emotional state, I mean—how many emotions have I seen come and go in my meditation, in my life? Millions! How many have you seen come and go since you've been here?

Or how many thoughts? Next time you're feeling angry or sad or bored or restless, just check in. Is there some little current under there that thinks this is how it's going to be for the next three months, just like this, and I can't bear it?

Not seeing things as they really are makes it hard to bring this open-hearted acceptance to the experience. We start to struggle. What I mentioned earlier—the filters on our experience of judging pleasant, evaluating pleasant as good, not wanting the unpleasant, thinking it's bad—this of course figures in quite strongly in our difficulty in truly living from the understanding of impermanence. Because you see, we open to the truth of change from time to time, and sometimes it's really sad. And sometimes it's really scary. And that's hard. First, because we just don't know how yet to be with the difficult. Patience and mindfulness will teach us that. But also because there's this judgment: if it's sad, it's wrong. It is sad. Sometimes it really is sad. Can that be okay? Can that even be beautiful?

This is a Chinese poem:

Green leaves that dawn after dawn grow yellow,
Red cheeks that fade with the passing days—
If our world is made up of such changes as these,
Is it strange that my heart is so sad?

Sadness is okay. Let it in. It's not the only experience of impermanence, but if we judge that or think that it's wrong or evaluate it as incorrect or as too hard to feel, we deny ourselves so much else. We deny ourselves the real beauty and connectedness and love of ourselves and others and appreciation of the moment that can come through our life when we're not trying to block out the fact that this too is rapidly changing.

In fact, opening to another being or to ourselves with a real care, with a real connection, with a real love is often the experience that paradoxically leads again into opening to the impermanence. It works both ways. You can't just block out what's sad or scary and then have this really connected, vital relationship to life, because your relationship is trying to be with something that isn't true. So sometimes it's real caring that opens us into impermanence. And that's okay too.

This is one of my favorite poems, from Galway Kinnell. Just part of it I'm going to read. The same subject:

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight,
you cling to me hard, as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I have stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
Little Maud, and yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

We have to at times recognize that that's what it's like—being in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. And sometimes it's scary and sometimes it's sad. And sometimes it opens us to such connectedness and potential for joy and serenity and real peace in our life that it's wonderful beyond anything we could imagine.

And often it's that connection—like the love of the man for his little child—that can open one to the realities of life, both the scary and sad and the wondrous and the magical. It takes both sides.

And this quality of mindfulness and patience, open-hearted willingness to be with whatever is without putting on top of it the overview of how we think things are or how we want things to be—just meeting moment by moment by moment. We don't have to think about it. The whole world opens up. It doesn't stay sad. It doesn't stay scary all the time. Yes, there's that insecurity, that pre-trembling. We never know when the house is going to fall. But when we know that we never know and stop trying to figure it out, then all of that energy is released for appreciation and real presence of being

here and now. Our energy is withdrawn from attachment and fear and can move into connection and aliveness. We can find a real serenity even in the midst of not knowing, even in the midst of pleasure and pain. We can even relate to the not knowing

in a way that's humorous, that's filled with lightness because we're not holding on.

So this willingness to meet both sides of experience—the scary, the beautiful, the pleasant, the painful, the boring—this lets us see things as they really are. And when we deeply see things as they really are, that's when we have the potential to open into the vivid wakefulness of freedom, of peace.

So in our time here, can we remember, if we don't recognize it in a live way in the moment, that life is change? Life is filled with cycles of expansion and contraction, with beautiful, with ugly, with whatever. Meet each one.

A symbol of that to me is a story from Germany, in a cathedral town. It was one of these stores with a door, and on each side of the door was a big picture window filled with what they sell. I was walking with my friend and we came to the first one—it was all statues and pictures of the Madonna, of Mary, and trinkets and all kinds of things. We thought, "Oh, that's nice, a religious store." Then we walked to the other window and it was all beer steins and guns. I thought, "Oh, that's interesting. Kind of an interesting store here." You know, both sides are there, right together.

Or as a friend of mine said last year—I asked how she'd been doing and she said, "Oh, I've just been so happy for the last two months. I've just been so happy. I wonder what's going to happen to make a change." Quite realistic. That wasn't depressing. That was like, "Oh yeah, something's going to happen. It is going to change. I wonder what it'll be." Can we relate in that way? There's so much freedom in that. There's so much potential for aliveness and appreciation.

Can we do that here? Next time you're really spacious and your breath is so calm and you're really focused and the thought comes in, "Wow, now I'm really doing it right"—see if the next thought can be, "Oh, I wonder when it'll change." Without a lot of hating of that thought. Without a lot of holding on.

When your knee is killing you, when it feels like you just sat down and there's that twinge and it's, "Oh no, I can't bear it"—see if you can, first of all, notice what's really happening. Are you in the hospital yet? Are you on crutches? Does it even hurt or is it just a little twinge? You know, that's one thing. Bring the mindfulness to what's actually happening. And see if there can be that moment of patience. "Yeah, this is unpleasant." Be fully there and know it will change too. But not rushing to "it will change too." Yes, it will change, and while it's here, can I experiment with being fully here for it?

Another aspect of patience is how it really does open us into the ability to perceive what is truly so. This is from Ajahn Sumedho, an American monk in the Thai tradition who has a monastery in England. He's talking about patience. He's talking about knowing the unconditioned, which is different ways of saying the radiant nature of mind, or freedom, or liberation:

"Buddha wisdom is very humbling because it knows that whatever arises passes away and is not self. Whatever condition of the body and mind arises, it is conditioned, and so whatever arises passes away. And Buddha wisdom knows the unconditioned as the unconditioned.

"But is the unconditioned very interesting or fascinating? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be incredibly fascinating, something blissful and ecstatic.' Do you have that thought sometimes? So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Look at the space in this room. Is it very interesting to look at? It's not to me. The space in this room is like the space in the other room."

The things in this room might be interesting—good, bad, ugly, or whatever. But the space, what is it? There's nothing you can really say or think about it. It has no quality except being spacious.

And to be able to be really spacious, one has to be patient. As there is nothing that one can grasp or hold onto, one recognizes space only by not clinging to the objects in the room. When you let go, when you stop your absorptions, your judgments, your criticisms and evaluations of the people and the things in this room, then you begin to experience the space of it. But that takes a lot of patience and humility.

Buddha wisdom is just that much: knowing the conditioned as the conditioned—the people and the things in this room—and the unconditioned as the unconditioned—the space. Buddhas are no longer deluded by any conditions, and they incline to the spaciousness, the emptiness, rather than towards the changing conditions within the space.

So we investigate the nature, the workings of the deluded mind. We investigate the nature and conditions of the people and the things in this room as they arise. We investigate the nature of the clinging and the aversion and the pushing away and the judgments and the absorptions. And we begin to notice how much suffering and confusion comes from all of that.

And then, just maybe, there will be a moment when we can simply stop—all of that absorption in the people and the things and the space and the thoughts—and we get a glimpse of the spaciousness.

That's all it takes. It's not so complicated.

So let's just sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 268

Balancing Effort

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of the most nuanced aspects of meditation practice: finding the balance between vigorous effort and effortless presence. Drawing from the Pāli concept of viriya (energy/effort), she explores how genuine interest and spiritual urgency naturally give rise to balanced, joyful effort without forcing or straining.*
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> *Wilson uses the vivid metaphor of "Super Bowl mind" to illustrate how spontaneous, sustained attention arises naturally when interest is present—yet distinguishes this from wise effort by noting how ordinary interest depends on getting a "payoff." She examines how our habitual patterns of evaluating experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or mundane fragment our attention and drain our energy. Through personal stories, including her own struggle with split attention during retreat while her mother faced cancer, she demonstrates how even meticulous practice can become dry and torturous when disconnected from wholehearted presence.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with both extremes of imbalance: the tendency to shrink back from difficulty (which shouldn't be confused with genuine self-compassion) and the equally common pattern of pushing harder when energy flags, mistaking desire for wise effort. Wilson emphasizes that spiritual urgency—rooted in opening to dukkha and impermanence—provides the natural fuel for sustained, balanced attention. She concludes with skillful means for times when we're overwhelmed: deliberately bringing up "seeds of joy," turning attention to nature, or practicing mettā to restore spaciousness before re-engaging with difficulty.*

Tonight I want to begin talking about balanced effort or balanced energy. It's a topic that we will all discuss a lot in different ways. Edwin, our esteemed associate director, contributed the title, which is "You Don't Pull No Punches, But You Don't Push the River." That's from Van Morrison. So that's what I want to talk about.

In our instructions, both in the hall here and in our interviews, we keep talking about how to have this quality of really relaxed, spacious, open awareness, yet at the same time very precise and alert. We say to summon up tremendous energy to meet each moment, yet at the same time don't do anything. How do we work with this seem-

ing dichotomy, this delicate balance? How do we rest in vivid awakeness, yet at the same time remain very receptive and open, relaxed? Clearly, it's a dance of balance that involves our whole practice, moment to moment.

Tonight I want to talk about it in broad strokes—some aspects that help us to discover and cultivate this quality of balanced energy. It can also be spoken of in a very precise, minute way, and there's so much to say. I had to choose, so tonight I want to paint with a broad brush stroke. I want to focus on two qualities of our experience that can help us over and over to access and recognize this quality of balanced energy: interest and urgency.

When the energy or sense of effort is balanced and strong, it quite naturally gives rise to mindfulness—a quality of simply recognizing, connecting with, and knowing what is present. Moment after moment of mindfulness naturally leads to a deepening of concentration. And all of this naturally leads to wisdom. It's a whole series of the way these factors of mind work together. And in a way it really happens by itself. We can't force any of it.

Looking at this quality, which is experienceable as a factor of mind—this quality of energy or effort—the Pali word is *viriya*, which is variously translated. On one end is heroic, courageous effort. Another way of talking about it is joyous effort, commitment, enthusiasm. It doesn't have to be so intense, but it needs that quality of inner joy and steadiness.

A quality or factor of mind that helps us connect naturally with this sense of joyous effort and enthusiasm is that of interest. Really awake, alert, connecting with what's arising quite effortlessly and naturally, moment to moment to moment. Sounds exhausting. Every moment, meeting every moment with this interest, with this kind of joyful alertness—it gets overwhelming even to think about it. It takes so much effort.

But that's where it's just the reverse. The interest itself gives rise to spontaneous effort, spontaneous connection that isn't tiring and isn't difficult. And we all have this capacity. It's an experience that we all have quite frequently in our lives.

If you go to a movie, that's an obvious one. The example I like to use, because I was observing it and to me it was much more intense—I couldn't miss it—is watching friends, mostly male friends I have to say, watching sports events on TV. Recently, it was the World Cup this summer. A few years ago, I was in San Francisco just at the time of the Super Bowl. That's American football if you're from overseas. I was in San Francisco when the San Francisco team, the 49ers, was playing in the Super Bowl in the old days.

I thought, you know, I can get mildly interested in both the World Cup and in watching football. But what amazed me, where I really zeroed in on this quality of interest leading to such a steadiness of energy and focus, was everybody I knew in San Francisco—and I know a lot of people in that area—they shut down their lives for that day. The whole city shut down to watch this game. Big groups would gather. So I was watching with a group of ten or fifteen people. Incredible focus on every moment of everything that happened. And no one said, "Oh, what a chore. I have to focus on this game." It was spontaneous. It was joyful. I honestly can't remember who won. That shows I wasn't really quite that focused. I was more watching the people.

But you see, it's a quality that we all possess in abundance. And when the interest is there, the energy, the effort, the steadiness of focus springs up quite naturally. It's not a problem.

Now there is one drawback to what I call Super Bowl mind. It's not mindful because it's slightly tinged with a certain quality of craving or desire. There's a payoff that holds the interest. And even when someone says, "Well, I don't care who wins, but I'm watching the artistry of the game" — that's still a payoff. Because if it was just a bunch of schlemiels bumbling around on the field, nobody would be so interested. It has to be a certain level of artistry that gives one that experience of pleasure.

So this isn't wise effort in terms of our practice. It's energy leading to effort that stays interested because it's getting a certain payoff, something we want. Things are going the way we want them to, or we're getting this certain experience of pleasure.

But how come we can't bring this same quality of spontaneous focus to our life, to what's going on here? You'd think our life would be at least as interesting as a football game. But we bring the same tendencies, the same blindnesses to our life outside of here, to our day-to-day, hour-to-hour, moment-to-moment life, that we bring to sports or anything else. Some experiences, yes, there's this natural interest and the energy's balanced and we're present. And some experiences don't quite make the grade. We're bringing in our same filters.

And the ones we've spoken about so much before — they're not new information. The ones of either judging pleasant as good and desirable, unpleasant as not wanting to be with it. Or maybe something's just intense enough to hold our interest. But when it's mundane or not really intense, somehow that interest tends to fall away.

Often people will say in interviews, "Oh, nothing's happening." What do you mean nothing's happening? You sit and nothing happens? "No, well, it's calm. And there's sounds, there's sensations, there's emotions, there's thoughts, but nothing very interesting about it. It's not very intense." That's not nothing happening. That's a lot happening.

It's as if we think the interest is somehow inherent in what's happening, in the appearance, in the arising object. And some things have it and some things don't. But that's not it at all. The interest comes from within our own experience. As you can see for yourself, sometimes the breath is just the most boring thing you could imagine. And three sittings later, it's so fascinating, incredible. Do you think the breath is really that different? Probably not. But the quality of interest has led into an energy and effort that leads to mindfulness that really connects.

This tendency in all the different ways it manifests in our experience — to evaluate what happens, to accept some experiences, to reject others, to be interested in some, to cringe away from others, to ignore others altogether — that's one of the tendencies we keep looking at over and over because it's so insidious. It is often so unconscious, and it surfaces in different and more subtle ways as we continue to explore our experience.

That's the power of the mindfulness we're practicing and this quality of interest that we can cultivate: it's non-discriminating. It's not picking and choosing which experiences to pay attention to, which experiences are worthwhile, which are worthy of our interest, and which are not. Because when we're picking and choosing, what do we know? The basis on which we're picking and choosing comes from such limitation. From such views and opinions and limiting of our world. Everything's interconnected in ways that we can't even imagine. And sometimes the experience that we find the most mundane or the least interesting — just that one is the potential for opening to a real awakening insight. We can't know how things link together, how things interconnect.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that good and bad are only an idea of the mind. They have no ultimate reality. On this level of meeting whatever arises with interest, with mindfulness, that's true. Evaluating as good and bad is only an idea of the mind, no ultimate reality. That's not to say what Joseph was talking about last night. Some experiences are wholesome — they lead to more peace and freedom. Some are unwholesome — they contribute to suffering. On another level, that's also true.

As Suzuki Roshi says, there's no such thing as right and wrong—but right is right and wrong is wrong. That's how it works.

On the level of our moment-to-moment experience, however, when it comes to what's worth paying attention to, there's no distinction. Every moment of experience, every arising appearance is totally worth being interested in, worth paying attention to. Because in that moment, that's the expression of our life. It's the manifestation of truth. There's nowhere else we can go to discover truth but in that arising appearance at that moment.

I appreciate the way Thich Nhat Hanh writes and talks about how we can't rationally separate experience into "this is good" and "this is bad," "this is worthwhile" and "this isn't"—because everything leads into everything else. If you've read him at all, I'm sure you've encountered the way he can take anything, even an empty plate, and by looking deeply into it with some reflection, open up whole realms of understanding. Looking at that empty plate, we can have it as a symbol of the finishing of our meal, an experience of gratitude and appreciation for all the cooks who prepared it, for all the farmers who grew the food, for the animals that helped take care of the food, for the people who transported it.

And then also a sense of sadness arises—the fact that many people didn't get to eat anything today. A sense of connection with that. A realization of how many people in the world are dying of starvation at this very moment as we sit here. And realizing that interconnectedness, realizing also how hard it might be to open to that, our sense of guilt at ourselves—because one moment we're realizing our interconnectedness with starving people, and the next moment we're moaning to ourselves because there are no seconds, or wishing we had a cookie.

Just seeing all the play of the mind, and not trying, in terms of mindfulness or interest, to say this one's okay and this one shouldn't be happening. They're all happening together. You can't separate it out.

Again, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, we tend to value a rose and not pay much attention to garbage. But a rose will die and we dump it in the garbage—it becomes garbage. And then we take the garbage and put it into compost and spread it on the flower bed, and it turns into a rose.

It's the same in our meditation here. That moment you felt so guilty about—feeling like "I don't care if people are starving, I really want another Snickers"—that might be the moment that opens us up to some real understanding of ourselves, some real sense of freedom, of disidentification, of not identifying with thought at that moment, of seeing that it all comes and goes. You can't reject anything.

In the space of open, non-discriminating awareness, no experience is more or less interesting, more or less worthy of our total presence. And if it feels like, as we begin to discover this interrelatedness, there's a lot of shadow material arising, a lot of hard things to be with, a lot of difficult experience—or even more, a lot of just really mundane, not very interesting experience at all—this balanced perception, this seeing of interrelatedness, can come about partly through reflection. What I was describing about Thich Nhat Hanh's approach is really reflection. But through our interested meeting of experience moment to moment, we begin to perceive in this way quite naturally, without reflection. It becomes the natural perception of how things are.

A poem that reflects this, by the Japanese woman poet Izumi Shikibu from the imperial court around the tenth century:

Although the wind blows terribly here, the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house.

To me, that really feels like practice. The moon also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. That's how my mind feels a lot—like a ruined house. And somehow the moon manages to leak through when we're willing to be with the ruined house.

When there's that quality of non-discriminating interest, the energy, the effort, the willingness to be present with mindfulness becomes effortless. It's balanced.

The trick, of course, is how to sustain this quality of interest without the payoff—without somehow deciding, "Okay, I'll be interested for a certain amount of time, but then something big needs to happen to keep me interested." How do we sustain this quality without the payoff? It's not simple.

One tool—and it's only one tool of many—is this quality of spiritual urgency. I've found it tremendously useful, both in times of difficulty when the mind just wants to cringe back away from what's going on, and perhaps even more so in those times of seemingly endless mundane experience. Those times when you're just asking yourself: Why am I doing this? What possible relationship does the sensation in my big toe when I lift my foot have to anything that matters in my life? What am I doing this for?

I hit that point about the second or third week of every retreat I do. At some point, the purpose just eludes me. What am I doing and why?

This quality of spiritual urgency is very profound and very strong. It arises from really opening to the suffering aspect of our lives, of the world. Not drowning in it, but really opening our eyes, opening our hearts, looking around us, inside us.

This quality of spiritual urgency wakes us up to the point where we see the confusion, the pain, the suffering in our own experience—the unsatisfactoriness, the inevitability of death, of sickness.

At some point, and over and over again, the urgency to understand, to be free from confusion, to be helpful to other beings—whatever form it takes for you—becomes more important than hanging out in our comfort zone, than living a life of denial. It actually feels like a comfort zone, but it's not so comfortable at all. We're just not really looking at it.

At times this quality of spiritual urgency can be called up consciously. At other times it arises quite spontaneously, simply by opening our eyes and looking around.

When we don't have spiritual urgency, when we're just going through the motions of practice without that sense of interest which urgency inspires—even though your practice might seem really right on, very meticulous, even though you're not just going through the motions but really being very precise, and it feels like you're putting in a lot of effort—but it's sort of meeting an outside model, whether it's the model of how things should look or the model in your own mind. The motivation is trying to match some expectation you have, or you think someone else has, rather than arising from the inner urgency, the inner interest in your own heart. It doesn't quite work. You can practice in a meticulous way and it gets drier and tougher. You're dragging along. It can be torturous. And you can't quite figure out what's going on, what's missing, because it seems like you're doing everything just right.

I had an experience of this. A few years ago, I came here to sit a two-month retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. I was really up for it. But the day before the retreat, I talked to my mother, and she told me she'd just found out she had cancer and was going to have an operation. She had breast cancer and uterine cancer, both, and was going to have an operation within the week. She refused to let me come home. Said, "No, no, you must do your retreat. I don't want you to come home." She got really adamant about it, which isn't like her.

So I came on and did the retreat. I would call home every day. Things were going fine. It wasn't an emergency operation or anything. She was doing fine. And I was practicing extremely meticulously. I was noting every moment. I thought I was really present. And it was getting drier and deader. It just felt like sawdust. It felt like I was dragging myself through it. But I thought my effort was really right there, really present.

I didn't quite wake up to what was going on until one day, after about three weeks—I always used to walk in the same place in the hall in the Catskills. I was walking up the stairs to my walking place and the thought came, more than a thought, it was like a real conviction: "If somebody's walking there, I'm leaving the retreat. That's it." And I meant it. That's what was scary. And I really hoped somebody was walking there. Of course nobody was.

That sort of woke me up. I thought, what's going on here? What's the story? Because that just wasn't a moment of aversion. That was really a deep-seated response to the quality of energy, of effort, that was going on.

What was happening was I wasn't really wholeheartedly present in my energy, in my effort. It looked like it. It even looked like it to me. I was meeting the form which I know from the past, trying to meet my expectations of what it's supposed to be like. I could do it and I thought I meant it. But somehow—and this is weird because you'd think the quality of urgency would be stronger because of what was going on—basically what was happening is my mind, my interest, was split.

I wasn't using the fact of my mother's sickness to bring up urgency and put that urgency into my practice. I was simply splitting my attention, worried about my mother and not wholeheartedly present, moment to moment. So I could put on a good show for myself, but it was all directed outward. That inner spring of urgency and interest wasn't there.

We can carry this kind of divided effort so far and really feel like it's balanced, but at some point it just won't hold. We can't keep doing it. It withers the heart.

On the other hand, when the energy and interest are present and balanced, it becomes the payoff in itself—if you need a payoff. The times I've felt most connected and balanced and present and really joyful in practice don't have anything to do with what was actually happening, whether it was pleasant or unpleasant, incredibly intense and insightful, or just everyday stuff. This quality of real, alive connectedness had everything to do with that balanced energy and effort that was wholeheartedly present, meeting what was happening moment to moment to moment, without evaluation, without resistance.

When the effort and energy are in that balanced groove, whatever's happening isn't a problem. The interest is there, and that's enough. That carries us.

I want to read something from Krishnamurti, a way of talking about this quality of wholehearted interest and attention: "When you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there is no room for fear, no room for contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

Can we attend to whatever's arising with complete self-abandonment? Our nerves, our ears, our eyes, everything of ourselves? That's the quality of really alert, interested energy that isn't looking for something special to happen. In that space, the urgency is there. We don't need to reflect on it. We don't need to look for it. Things are in balance.

Without this wholeheartedness, the energy flags. If things are difficult, there's that tendency for the mind to fall back, cringe away, shrink down. In fact, remember Joseph was talking last night about how we can confuse sloth with compassion. Sloth is sort of like an absence of energy. In moments when the energy and effort are strong and balanced, you can experience what it's like: the mind is bright, clear, and interested. Energy has the quality of patience, of being willing to be with suffering or difficulty without cringing back.

That cringing is the tendency of the mind when there's no energy. When something difficult comes, we think, "Oh no, let me not feel this." And if there's too much difficulty, one thing after another without energy, we just wither down—like a sopping, twisted towel. "I just can't be with this anymore."

Energy, as Sayadaw U Pandita says, is a support in the mind, like the support of a house. It supports the mind to stop flinching away from what is unpleasant, to open and be bright and meet it again with this quality of interest and presence.

So you can see why that first initial shrinking back, if we say, "Oh no, I must be kind to myself, this is really the way to balance"—this shrinking back is a sign. I think that's what Chögyam Trungpa called "idiot compassion." Don't take the first sign of shrinking back as necessarily the sign that you need to pull back altogether, because that's just the natural response of the mind to something unpleasant. If there's interest, if there's energy, that will be a support where we can come back and meet it again.

As you can see, energy isn't static—certainly not. It's a quality that comes and goes. It's also something we can easily identify with. When it comes, we think, "I'm doing really well now." And when it drops, "Somehow I've blown it. Big mistake. I've got to fix it somehow." This can lead to our tipping out of balance even more, either way—the

cringing back and giving up, or, and this happens even more with most of the people I talk to, the energy drops and we think, "It's my fault. I need to push, and push harder." And when things still aren't the way we want them to be, we push even harder.

And it's not actually interest or mindfulness or wise effort. It's totally trying to make things be a certain way. It's desire or expectation masquerading as wise effort. Except the effect isn't one of bright, alert interest. It's one of frustration, self-judgment, tightness—more tightness, more heaviness, more grimness—until we're just really tied in a knot.

It can be very subtle. Sometimes it's incredibly blatant, but sometimes it's very subtle—the way that we think we're meeting what's arising with interest. But if you look at the underlying intention, it's "I'll meet this *in order for* it to open up, *in order for* things to start flowing again, *in order for* that bright interest to come back"—a long, long list of whatever we're hoping for.

In either case, it can lead to that kind of loss of interest that just makes us say, "Who cares?" Back to that place of "I don't care what happens. I lift my foot. I put my foot down. I feel tingling. I feel pressure. So what?"

This is the time to open our hearts and minds to this quality of spiritual urgency. Now, urgency is not panic. No, it's not fear and desperation. But again, it's getting in touch with that motivation for why we came to this retreat, for why we're engaged in a spiritual practice—the urgency of that. Getting in touch with that motivation where opening to truth is more important than anything else in our life at that moment. It encompasses everything in our life. It doesn't shut something out.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said—I'm paraphrasing—something along the lines of: if you deeply want to be free, to understand your true nature, you will be. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else. That's the quality of spiritual urgency. It gives courage. It gives interest. It gives this motivation and willingness to meet and explore and investigate whatever particular experience is getting thrown up at us. It gives us the courage and the interest to come out of denial over and over and over.

And we don't really have to sit and ruminate about it. All we have to do is open up our eyes, our ears, our hearts. Just pay attention to our experience for any short period of time without that evaluating and pushing things away. And the truth of impermanence, of the unsatisfactoriness of things, of the suffering that's within and around us—we can't escape it. We might want to. That's the denial we're coming out of.

This is from Chinul, who is kind of the father of Korean Zen. He says, "The world is blazing in torments as if it were a house on fire. How can you bear to linger here and complacently undergo such long suffering? If you wish to avoid suffering, there's no better way than to seek Buddhahood." He goes on to say, though, "Understand that the Buddha is the mind. People do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddha. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds."

It's a strong statement, but to me it encapsulates this quality of urgency. When urgency is awakened, there's no problem paying attention. We don't have to look for interest. It comes naturally.

One of my teachers uses the same metaphor of the house on fire—and the Buddha used this one also. My teacher says: if you were somewhere and someone came and told you that your house was on fire, you'd immediately start going home. And if on the way you ran into a friend you hadn't seen for a long time, you wouldn't say, "Oh, let's stop and have a cappuccino. There's this nice little place open." You don't have to stop and ponder, "Well, should I? It would be nice."

I haven't had a cappuccino for a while. No. You don't stop. It doesn't even arise as a possibility. You just say, "Sorry, the house is on fire, I'm going home." That's the energy, the one-pointed interest that comes from urgency.

Our house is on fire. And we are home. So it would behoove us to wake up and pay attention. Discover what the fire is and how we can quench the flames. That's our practice. And we're not going to discover it by shutting our eyes and putting on some nice music and pretending it will just go away. It won't just go away.

It doesn't mean we have to get lost in despair. As with everything, there's a balance, but we do need to wake up. And all we have to do is keep paying attention. When we have that urgency, when we're confronted face to face with the fact that our house is on fire, the interest, the energy, the mindfulness, the understanding comes quite without effort.

I'll give you an example because it really shows how the difference in understanding comes from that sense of awakeness, from urgency, not from the situation. I don't know if you saw a program a couple of years ago on Bill Moyers' special where he was exploring different kinds of things with the mind, and one of them was Jon Kabat-Zinn's stress reduction course in Worcester. It showed the profound effects on people who are sent to this stress reduction course at UMass Hospital, people who have come to the end of what formal medicine can do for them. They're all either in extreme chronic pain, liv-

ing with life-threatening illnesses, daily migraine headaches, whatever. And how simple mindfulness practice—they only come once a week, and they do a forty-five-minute tape of mindfulness every day, that's all they're doing—has these profound effects.

Well, ten years ago, when I was managing here, myself and my other co-manager, and another dear friend who was cooking here—actually it was during a course with Sayadaw U Pandita, that one Joseph talked about, where the whole atmosphere was very tense. As tense as it was for the yogis, I want you to know for the staff it was ten times more tense. It was a difficult time. So we picked this time to go as interns to the stress reduction course, which means the three of us would drive in and take the course, do everything that the people in the course do. That was basically it, and talk a little bit about it afterward.

So we would fly in in the morning—it's an hour's drive—do this course, fly home, do a staff meeting all afternoon. It was on that day. These people, I mean, in three weeks they're reporting these experiences: "I had a migraine every day for six years and now I haven't had one for two weeks." All kinds of amazing things, really profound openings, understanding their life in another way.

We, meanwhile, would fall asleep during the meditations. Literally. I remember my friends snoring on the floor. We'd be looking at our watch. We'd go flying home through traffic, come back at least half the time with splitting headaches, move into the staff meeting and just be going, "Please, just let me out of this meeting." It was stressing us out enormously. And we definitely went in with a little cockiness. Well, we know this mindfulness gig, you know.

It was really interesting. We would try to do the meditations at home, just as instructed. The first couple weeks, you lie down and do a kind of mindful moving through your body, starting at your feet. I don't think I ever got higher than my knee without falling asleep the whole time. And the same with both of my friends. It was really pathetic.

As the weeks went on—eight weeks—there were profound changes in these people. Because they had a real urgency. The truth of things was hitting them. They couldn't avoid it. And it led to a natural effort and exploration and wisdom. We were just in your basic arrogant denial, so to speak. I actually learned more about it later as I've reflected on it.

What I'm sharing now reveals how easy it is to be complacent, to take things for granted, to think, "Well, we've looked at suffering. We've looked at dukkha. We're meeting it every day." Yes, we're meeting it every day, but are we actually looking at it? Are we actually opening to it? That's another question altogether. It's so easy to be complacent.

After my mother had cancer that time, after I finally woke up in my practice, it really did inspire a sense of urgency—a deep opening to all of our impermanence and death, a real kind of cellular experience of dying. And then she got better. She's been fine for five years. And complacency rises. "Oh yeah, my mom's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine. There's no problem."

It's hard to stay open to the unsatisfactory nature, to the fact that our house is on fire. But it's worth it. The freedom that comes out of it, the real connectedness, the real aliveness—that's worth it, rather than living shut off and dead and denying.

So we can use anything. Just notice what's happening. God knows, just pay attention through the sittings and walkings in the day. You don't have to look any further. Notice how you're meeting the difficult and unpleasant. Is it a mistake? Is it something to get rid of? Or is it an inspiration that says, "Yes, this is how this life is. Do I want to just keep wandering in samsara? Or do I want to explore what's happening in order to wake up?"

We can use nature. All the chipmunks squashed on the road—there are a lot of chipmunks this year. We've all been talking about it. It seems like we can't even drive down the driveway without six chipmunks darting out. It's really quite tricky.

Or when I go to my doctor at UMass, I really like going because it's a big teaching hospital. There are so many people I pass in so many stages—children with chronic diseases, old people seeming kind of bewildered and confused, lots of fear in people's faces. Sometimes there's a real spark of beauty and love as somebody connects or sees the fear and reaches out. It's a very alive time for me. I really use it to wake up to the fact that there's nothing to be complacent about. What am I waiting for to pay attention? Am I waiting until something really horrible happens again? Am I waiting for something interesting enough to be worth paying attention to? The mundane is just fine. We can wake up with that as well as with anything.

The difficult experiences you go through here—it doesn't have to be life-threatening angst. It can be the frustration of pushing too hard. That can be enormous suffering when we don't see what's going on. Any kind of overwhelming suffering is a great time to see what's really going on and let the urgency come up.

Someone today, in an interview, expressed this really beautifully. It touched me. She'd been going through a very difficult time, to the point that all of us reach at times where it just feels like, "I don't know if I can handle this." That does happen. She was at the lake looking at the leaves drifting here and there in the water, thinking, "Do I want to live like that? Just tossed back and forth, back and forth?" And the answer was clearly, "No, I don't." It doesn't make everything okay.

It doesn't make the suffering go away. It doesn't bring clear bliss. All the suffering's still there. But that sense of, *no, I don't want to live that way*—it's worth coming back and being with this. Paying attention.

In fact, you don't even have to go that far. The attention, the interest, the urgency just arises naturally. And there's the energy again to meet what's happening for another moment. For another moment. And we only have to take it one moment at a time. We don't have to think, "Oh no, this and three more days of this—it's unbearable." That might be in your mind, but it's only this. It's only this moment. We have no idea what's going to happen in the next moment.

Sometimes the most difficult moments, when we've just thought, "I've had it. This is it. I cannot face another moment of this"—and then we face the next moment. And you never know, that can be the transformative moment where we really just open to something much greater and more profound than our fear and aversion of the difficult. Sometimes the most difficult moments are the moments of our awakening.

I want to read a poem from one of the women who was a nun with the Buddha at the time of the Buddha. Her name was Sama, and it said that for twenty-five years her mind was always distracted while meditating. Two weeks isn't so hard, folks. And she was a nun, mind you, so she wasn't doing much else.

So this is her poem:

It was twenty-five years since I turned away from home and I hadn't had a moment's peace. I had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror—that's the Buddha—because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died.

That's a way they have of talking about awakening—saying "I've finished with craving, seventh day." *Because of the pain of things, I love to be alert.*

So it took her twenty-five years. Maybe it won't take us so long to realize that we can be alert no matter what's going on. And again, this alertness, this energy that comes from urgency—it's a balanced quality of connection and effort. Not desperation, not fear, not panic. When we're meeting difficult or not difficult experience in this balanced way, it naturally leads to the balanced perception where the difficult opens also into the sublime. And that's why we don't despair. That's what lets us have the energy to come back and meet the next difficult experience.

But sometimes we can tip out of balance and really feel that we're drowning in despair. We feel we're really open to the fact that our house is on fire and we see no way out, and it just feels like we really can't bear it. That's when the energy is beginning to tip out of balance.

This is from Anna Akhmatova, a Russian poet, written in 1921, just at the height of all the terrors and starvation and war of the Russian Revolution:

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold. Death's great black wing scrapes the air. Misery gnaws to the bone. Why then do we not despair? By day, from the surrounding woods, cherries blow summer into town. At night, the deep transparent skies glitter with new galaxies. And the miraculous comes so close to the ruined, dirty houses. Something not known to anyone at all, but wild in our breast for centuries.

That's why we don't despair. But sometimes we lose sight of the miraculous coming close to our dirty houses.

And we do despair. We can feel like we're falling into a great black hole or drowning in suffering—whatever the suffering, whatever the experience. Or we turn it into that kind of effort that's pushing, pushing, pushing, and then blaming ourselves because things aren't the way we think they should be, and the only way to remedy it is certainly to try harder, to make it be a certain way. Again, subtly mistaking balanced effort for wanting things to change.

At this point of despair, being overwhelmed perhaps by the strength and intensity and ongoing nature of suffering—whether it's terror or grief or this tight, tight pushing or fear or sadness—it doesn't matter what it is. But when it's just more than the mindfulness can meet, more than there can be a balance of perception, then our mind and heart really does wither. We really do tip off into a genuinely unbalanced quality of presence, quality of effort, where we can just get really lost.

Again, this is the place where it's not just that cringing back of sloth, but where it's truly skillful means to pull back a little from what's happening. Because in our trying to meet what's happening with what we think is wise effort, we're getting tighter and

more forceful and grimmer and heavier. And I just want to make clear that grimness is not equivalent to wise effort. The grimmer you are doesn't mean the more mindful you are or the better you're doing. Sometimes—I swear—people really ask, "Is it allowed to smile?" It is allowed to smile. It helps a lot sometimes to smile.

So if you find that you're falling into that, or even worse, that you just feel like you're drowning in a swirl of pain and confusion, that is the time when balance means back off. Instead of trying to drill a hole through that experience, instead of trying to meet it by God with openness—just listen to the tone of voice of that note. It's skillful to back off, turn the attention elsewhere.

Bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "seeds of joy," seeing that maybe you're not noticing the balance of perception, but you can deliberately bring it up. For me, sometimes when I'm walking up in the castle, I'll just go stay on the fire escape on the second floor and look at the sky and the trees. Just open up to seeing, to hearing, to nature. It brings a spaciousness to the heart, to the mind, to consciousness. See what it is for you. It might be just sitting and opening to hearing. It might mean going down and sitting by the lake. It might mean reading an inspiring passage. Whatever brings up seeds of joy.

This is not cheating. It's not giving in. It's not being a wimp. And when you're in that pushing phase and judging it, you're not going to be able to trust whatever evaluation you make of your practice. So at that point the thought will come up, "Maybe I should back off, open to hearing," and immediately go, "No way. That's just giving in. That's just being a coward. That's just sloth. That's just idiot compassion." You can't trust the evaluations when you're caught in judgment.

So just look—if there's no mindfulness, if you're withering your heart, withering your mind, turn the attention somewhere else. Bring up seeds of joy. Take a walk. Do whatever helps to bring a sense of spaciousness and happiness into your experience. Maybe it's doing loving-kindness practice. Whatever it is for you. This is skillful means. This is how to balance.

And again, once there's that sense of openness, of spaciousness—even just that much—then the reconnection can come again. The natural interest and sense of the urgency of things can arise, and we can come back and maybe meet that difficulty just for a moment in a more balanced, open way.

So that's just broad strokes of this balance of energy that we work with moment to moment to moment. It's an ongoing dance. It's never static. We never get to, "Okay, this is it. Now I can forget about it and coast." Sorry.

Let me end with a quotation from Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche: "Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and beings, and this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives."

Every moment. It doesn't have to be daunting. It's a wonderful opportunity. Every moment is the crossroads between recognizing our true nature or not.

So, let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 269

Grasping

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to explore the nature of grasping (upādāna) not as something to hate or overcome through force, but as a fascinating process to understand deeply. She explains how the Buddha taught that suffering arises from attachment, and that through truly seeing how clinging functions moment to moment, we can open to the peace that is already present.*
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> *Wilson examines how grasping develops from initial craving—using vivid examples from retreat life like waiting in the food line or longing for a walk around the lake. She describes the 'tunnel vision' effect of clinging, how it creates separation between self and other, and blinds us to our innate completeness. Drawing from traditional commentaries, she explores the four fields of grasping: sense pleasures, views and opinions, rites and rituals, and the sense of self. She illustrates these with memorable stories, including her own 'milkshake incident' that demonstrates how unexamined craving leads to confused action.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing the difference between appreciation and clinging, and encourages practitioners to notice both the arising of grasping and the peace present in its absence. Wilson emphasizes that freedom doesn't require never having pleasant experiences, but rather understanding the process of attachment itself. As Nisārgadatta reminds us, 'You are free in a moment of recognition.'*

The Buddha often said, when being really simple, that what he taught was suffering and the end of suffering.

A lot of what each of you is doing, in your own unique way, what you're confronting day to day, moment to moment, is your own particular flavor of suffering. Whatever the particular story, the physical and psychological components, more or less intense—it takes a great deal of ongoing courage and commitment to do what each one of you is doing here, in whatever form that happens to be taking.

Of course, luckily, the point of confronting our suffering is that by truly understanding it, seeing it for what it is, understanding through that open seeing how the suffering and confusion arises, is created, is maintained moment to moment—in the power of this understanding, of this knowing itself, that's sufficient to open us to the end of suf-

fering. It's not like we're here with a shovel trying to dig up every moment of defilement or suffering until we finally get it all and there's this big hole of emptiness. Sometimes it seems like that.

Whatever the particular variety of manifestation—and part of how we get caught up is by looking at our own uniqueness in it—underneath how it manifests in your own experience, there are some really basic core principles, one of which I want to talk about tonight. One of the most core causes of our suffering, of our confusion, moment to moment, is the experience of attachment. Big surprise.

Tonight I want to talk about it not as a bad thing, not as another means to engender self-loathing, but as a way to actually get fascinated in the process of clinging, of attachment itself. Because through that willingness to explore it without hating it can come about the deep understanding that lets us let go of it altogether and open again to our original nature of peace.

It's really poignant in a way. The Buddha also said, early on before he began teaching, that one of the things that moved him to compassion was seeing how everybody deeply wants to be happy. We can see this if we look around, if we tune into ourselves. But in our confusion, in our not understanding what is so, the things that we do to try to make ourselves happy are the very things that keep us spinning in suffering and confusion. And the harder we try to be happy, the more we get lost in this suffering. It's very poignant.

This is really why exploring the field of clinging, of grasping, can be so important, because that is one of the key places where we get lost in this confusion.

The Buddha said, "The truth is profound and hard to discover. You can't attain it by thinking about it—but for the wise to experience. But this generation relies on attachment, relishes attachment, delights in attachment. So it's hard for them to see the truth."

Well, we haven't changed much in 2500 years.

I hope tonight we can together have a sort of experiential exploration of the nature of clinging, of attachment, as it arises in our experience. Just to begin to explore it without fear of it. How it affects us. How it distorts and hides the truth.

We've talked a lot about craving—the mind inclining towards something pleasant, or when there's something unpleasant, inclining towards something pleasant to get away from that. Clinging or grasping is simply the next step of really grabbing hold. It's given

in the commentaries the simile that if craving is the mind groping in the dark to steal something, grasping or clinging is actually grabbing it and stealing it. It's just a strengthening of mind moments into a real holding on to something.

And it has this quality of blinding, of thirst. We're not talking about when you're hungry and you know you need to eat and you go to eat—a very neutral, straightforward activity. We're not talking about that kind of desire. We're not talking about the aspiration for freedom or the aspiration to help all beings that's coming from not a blinding, distorted place, but a real sense of motivation. We are talking about that blinding, driven quality of grasping or attachment. And I'm sure you can all tell the difference in your experience when it arises.

So how does it arise? On the basic level of experience, whatever of the six sense doors—this is one of the ways the Buddha talks about our whole life experience—is simply the six sense experiences, six sense contacts arising one after the other, after the other. And that's all. Seeing, hearing, thinking, emotion, tasting, smelling, just happening, coming, going, coming, going. And suddenly one of them is like—stopped. And it might just be a moment of craving.

Oh, that's pleasant. Without the mindfulness, without noticing it, as we know, it just kind of hardens into grasping. There's no wisdom there. The grasping gets more solid. Each moment of it makes it easier for the next moment of grasping to arise. And it gives rise to all kinds of thoughts and actions and sense of self and the whole picture.

Just walking outside back and forth, minding your own business, and suddenly this thought arises: "Ah, a walk around the lake would be nice." Just a thought coming and going. But there's that mind inclining towards it. And the next time it comes up: "It really would be nice." It inclines a little more. The third time it comes up, there's no more sense of spaciousness or peace. It's like, "Yes, I must walk around the lake right now. I'll never be happy again." And we go, or we don't. But that quality—that's how the grasping arises.

That's a simple example. Obviously sometimes it's so complicated that we can't even see where the point of contact was that triggered it. But no matter how complex, each moment of grasping or attachment begins at that point of contact, which is one of the things we can begin to recognize when we have the silence and the mindfulness being developed over a long retreat. Teasing something out of a complicated experience to the point of contact can be quite difficult in our daily life. Here is the unique laboratory to explore that.

This is the Buddha again: "For some people contact, the point where sense plus object meets, is enthralling. And so they are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But others come to understand their sense activity. And because they understand it, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact is, and so their craving ends. They realize the total calm."

I love that. It doesn't say you get rid of anything. It says you simply see just what contact is, what it does. And in that seeing, the craving ends. It fills one with delight, that sense of calm—the calm of the mind that's free from clinging, that's free from pushing away, that simply is resting in things the way they are. It's wonderful. It's exquisite.

And we all experience moments of that over and over on this retreat. Notice them. And we experience lots of moments that aren't that, over and over. Notice them. That's what we are cultivating the mindfulness to help us understand: just what's going on. Understand our sense activity. Inquire into the nature of clinging, of grasping itself, when that is what's arising. It's a key way to again recognize what is true.

Krishnamurti said that unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable. Inevitable, because, as Nisargadatta goes on to say, the obstacles to the clear perception of our true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain.

So this is a great laboratory. Not to hate clinging—"Oh, I hate it, here it is, and it's my obstacle to my clear perception of my true being now." That doesn't help; it really doesn't do it. But we can begin to inquire into it whenever it arises, to begin to understand how it functions to blind us to what is true. How it functions to cloud our knowing of that stillness.

So play with it when you're sitting, when you're walking. Just as I was saying before, you sit, things come and go. This is my big insight for the week. It's a little embarrassing that this is it for the whole week, but I was looking at a mail order catalog yesterday, and I kind of got it: "Oh, it's just like a sitting." Looking at a mail order catalog is exactly the same as being in a sitting and kind of watching reactions of mind arise. The things come and go. There's a sight, a sound, a thought, an image.

Or I was turning the pages. There wasn't anything particular I was looking for, just being there—oh, this, this, this. And suddenly something arises, and the little pincers come out. *Ah, that.*

Notice in your sitting: what does it feel like? Things are just flowing—big things, little things, emotions, thoughts, wisps, the breath, it doesn't matter what. And suddenly something stops the flow. There's that feeling of *this*. Feel it in your body. Feel it in your mind. Really recognize what it's like. I know for me it's really as if internally I went like that—if it's a bigger thing. If it's really subtle little thoughts that you hardly notice, I was noticing just this little pincer in my mind going, *eh, eh, eh*. Notice how that works, and keep paying attention to the function of that grasping as it's still present.

So for example, you're standing in the food line. Just present, standing, seeing what's for the meal, and that's fine—just seeing and hearing and thinking, and judgments come and judgments go, but there's no real charge. And suddenly the perception comes up: *Oh, there's only six more muffins, and I'm kind of far back. What if that person takes two? What if I don't...* Around the idea of muffin, around those thoughts, it gets stronger and stronger and stronger.

First, looking at the clinging itself: what's the effect it has on the whole experience? What had been a sense of presence, coming and going, spaciousness, connectedness—*isn't this nice, we're all here together in this one beautiful retreat*—suddenly everyone in front of us is an obstacle, the enemy, in the way. There certainly is such a strong sense of self and other that comes up almost immediately with that movement of grasping. The grasping could be just a simple wisp of a thought, but the sense of self gets really hardened very quickly in that moment.

Clinging has the effect of giving us what you might call tunnel vision. We get really focused on the object clung to, the object desired, and other things—such as the people in the way—are just ignored or seen as something else. Really a sense of separation. And clearly there's no sense of peace or stillness in that moment. It really distorts both our ability to be open and appreciative of whatever else might be happening, and it also can distort our perception of the thing that we want. There's a saying in India that if a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets.

So clinging is this tunnel vision, and it blinds us. This is really how it works—to blind us to the possibility in that moment of recognizing our innate completeness. What do you mean, innate completeness? I won't be complete unless I get that muffin. Then everything will be okay. I mean, why don't we get it? I don't know why we don't get it, but over and over—the muffin, a new car, a better relationship, it doesn't matter what it is—it's that same movement. It's not the lack of muffin or a car that is hiding the radiance of the sun of our innate purity. But it is that movement of clinging that completely blinds us. It keeps us looking in the wrong direction.

So on the ultimate level, you could say—well, on both levels, both ultimate and the kind of relative *we're-separate-people-and-let's-keep-it-that-way* level of reality—Sayadaw U Pandita said once that there are two ways a moment of ignorance manifests in our experience. When ignorance is present—it's also something that comes and goes, a rising mental state—it has two functions. One is that we don't truly see what is here, what is present. So we don't recognize the stillness. And the second manifestation of ignorance is that we misconstruct what we do see. We misperceive what we do see and see what's not here—such as this incredible muffin that's going to make everything okay.

That also works on the relative level. And when we don't see what's going on, as you may have noticed, we can go to amazing lengths—all kinds of thoughts and activities and energy expended in order to gratify some particular craving—because we're not really seeing what goes on. We're seeing things as they're not.

Well, some of you have heard this story, but I'll tell it for the ones that haven't, because it's a perfect example of this—something that we all do so much of the time by not seeing how the grasping in the mind distorts our perceptions of reality.

So I was teaching in Yucca Valley some years ago, and it was a beautiful, warm, sunny afternoon between sittings. I was sitting and talking with my friend, one of the other teachers, and another friend who had come to visit. Just peaceful, things were lovely, very spacious—we were talking, present.

And suddenly, this other person who was visiting started talking about how they had just been to a new place down the road and had this great milkshake. And that was the particular experience that my mind just grabbed onto, totally unmindfully. I looked at my friend—not the one who said this—and it was kind of like this immediate, *yeah, let's go get one*.

From then on, no appreciation anymore of that situation in the moment. No more appreciation of being with this other person who had come to visit. It was like, we've got half an hour until the next sitting—let's end this conversation right now and get going. And that's basically what we did.

We jumped in the car, drove down the road to this place, which had—I'm not exaggerating—closed ten minutes previously. So that should have been enough, but it wasn't, because when you don't really see the strength of grasping, it just strengthens into the next thing, and the next. You do really stupid things.

So we said, well, where could we get a milkshake? I mean, we knew this strip of road. We go there every year. And we only had now fifteen minutes to get back to the next sitting, which one of us had to lead.

So we go flying—I was driving, flying down the road, looking for somewhere to get a milkshake. Just kind of madly reading the signs on the side. And my friend says, "Oh, over there—yogurt café, yogurt café!" And I looked over. It said *urgent care*.

That's what we do. And even that didn't stop us.

The thing is, we're doing that all the time. All the time. The lengths we go to, the activity we get involved in to satisfy some craving. Do you think—oh, we never did get a milkshake—do you think it would have made us really happy? No, we would have gotten it, slogged it down, and whizzed back into the sitting because we were late. It was just a little episode of craziness.

As one of my friends says, "Stop this slavish behavior." That's what we're doing. We're enthralled to the idea that if we can end this feeling of craving, we will have peace. That's true. That is true. And we had peace before the feeling of craving arose.

All we have to do is simply notice that that clinging itself is another arising appearance. It doesn't have to drive us. A lot of the times it will—don't be setting up some expectations, like, "Ah, just see craving, la-di-da." A lot of the times it will drive us. But simply, if we can relate to it as another arising appearance, explore it, feel it, notice how it comes, just stay there with it—and you know what happens? It goes. It vanishes. At some point it vanishes, it dissipates.

And again, in that moment, notice the potential for wakefulness, the potential for freedom, for peace, in that moment of the clinging's vanishing. Whether or not you obtained what the clinging was about is irrelevant. And that's what's so hard for us to believe. That's where we get so seduced.

As one of my friends said when I told him this milkshake story, "Well, I get it, but the thing is—when do we get to drink the milkshake?"

This leads into the four areas of grasping, of clinging, talked about in some of the commentaries: the area of sense desire, clinging to views and opinions, clinging to rites and rituals or making oneself perfect, and of course, the big one—the sense of self.

So this "when do we get to have the milkshake" leads right into the first of these areas—the clinging to, the grasping at sense pleasures.

It's very interesting because often we'll hear or think, "Okay, it means I can never have the milkshake. It means the only way to be free from clinging is never again to act on clinging, never satisfy it, and that way I'll be free from it." Now, there is a lot to be said for renunciation because it does give us the opportunity to see that the peace is not dependent on getting what we want. But it's also possible to renounce out of self-hatred, out of fear, out of grim negativity. That's not what we're talking about. So there's a balance.

I want to talk a little bit about this area of clinging to sense pleasures. One definition of sense desire comes from a Burmese meditation master of the last century, Ledi Sayadaw, defining sense desire as implying laying a firm hold onto something and the inability to shake it off even after experiencing great pain due to it and perceiving its many harmful consequences.

And doesn't it feel like that sometimes? It's like, "I don't want to want this. It's killing me." But still the clinging can be so strong.

Sense desire is a very seductive aspect of our experience, and certainly in our culture it's overwhelming. We have just a barrage of possibility to satisfy sense desire. The Buddha spoke about the dangers of sense desire in incredibly strong terms. I just want to give you a couple of milder examples. He's talking about the danger of indulging, of being obsessed by sense pleasures: They're like a skeleton, bare bones thrown to a hungry dog that do nothing to appease its hunger. They're like a burning torch—its flame might burn the hand of the person holding it if the wind shifts suddenly. Sense pleasures are like a dream, short-lived and not real. Sense pleasures are borrowed possessions; they do not belong to us and we do not hold on to them.

Those last two really seem true. I'm leaving out the stronger examples—really, really strong teachings about the dangers of getting lost in clinging to sense desire, to the desire for sense pleasure.

We know it doesn't work, that trying to make ourselves happy through more sense pleasures is like trying to quench our thirst with salt water. Theoretically we know it, but if we really look at our behavior, much of the time what is the underlying understanding? I'll speak for myself. The underlying behavior I often seem to be acting from is that somehow some sense experience over there is going to fulfill my sense of need for inner completion. And I don't quite notice that's what's going on. We don't get it. That's the danger.

And in our society, even here, with so much stripped away—and it's really a true renunciation, spending three months like this—even here there's an endless potential to gratify sense desire. Whether it's the meals, or just thinking about the meals, fantasizing, writing a letter, going to look for mail, looking at the bulletin board, taking a walk (which can be skillful, but can also just be wanting some pleasure), having a cup of tea, washing your socks. One thing after the other can be for many different reasons. But if you look, how often is the motivation, the intention, coming out of some feeling that clinging to something pleasant is going to make me happy?

I noticed we just don't get it. When something happens and we feel a little peaceful—or we don't—rather than stopping and noticing the process, we simply move on to grasping after the next sense pleasure. When we get it or we don't, we're frustrated or we're happy, either way that particular grasping ends, and the next moment another one comes up. And we just keep moving to the next, to the next, to the next. In our life, of course, it's endless how much we can move on. And moving on can so easily hide the fact that it's the search itself, it's that grasping in the mind itself that's bringing the sense of incompleteness, that's bringing the sense of suffering.

But we forget. We get so focused on the thing grasped, whatever the sense pleasure is, even just a fantasy in the mind. There's a saying that desire puts feathers on the object desired, makes it more attractive, and then we really go after it. When we stop and look at the process, we're kind of brought up short—which is why we don't like to stop and look. We keep going.

I noticed last year when I was sitting during this course, at one point it just really dawned on me—it was around lunch—how, not that I was craving lunch all morning, but so often thoughts would come up: "Oh, lunch will be in a couple hours. That'll be nice." Not intense craving, but it's subtle.

It doesn't always have to be intense. But over and over, that leaning into turns into a grasping. *Oh, lunch. Lunch will be the high point. Lunch will be pleasant. This will be the sense hit for the day.* I mean, the mind didn't say it that clearly. And one day I really noticed. Lunch came. What actually happens at lunch? Notice how many moments are actually this pleasant sense experience and how much are judgments and waiting and just chewing and the tedium of lifting and placing and lifting and placing. *Oh, that's a nice flavor.* Wanting more. Just really notice it. And then all of a sudden, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, it's over. It wasn't what we'd imagined.

But does the mind really look at that? It goes, *Oh, well, four and a half more hours, there'll be tea.* And even after a month of peanut butter and crackers every day, my mind was saying, *Oh, peanut butter—four and a half hours.*

Another seductive aspect of this serial craving, so to speak, or serial clinging, is that unlooked at, it's as if in the experience of clinging itself—clinging to sense pleasure, going for the next one, the next one—there can be almost as if the clinging itself is its own sort of intensity, even a kind of pleasure or delight. If you really look, it isn't. But unlooked at, it's almost as if we can get addicted to the clinging itself.

In the movie *Shadowlands*, there was one scene where the C.S. Lewis character was teaching a literature class and talking about the European Middle Ages ideal of chivalric love. He said something to the effect that the most ideal chivalric love is that which can never be obtained—and that's the most exquisite pleasure of love. I was cringing. A lifetime of yearning for that which cannot be obtained. I'm not a scholar of the Middle Ages, so forgive me if I'm getting this philosophy a little wrong; I'm just coming from the movie. But that this could even be thought of as an ideal to be held up—constant yearning that can never be satisfied. What a hell realm.

Well, we do it to ourselves. We might keep changing what we're yearning for, but we can easily get seduced by that sort of intensity. One of my favorite haikus by Bashō is: *Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto.* Just longing, for the sake of longing—almost as if it makes us feel alive. And that's what's so poignant, because the real vitality of life is already here, and the longing only blinds us to it.

It's so wonderful that we have the opportunity now to stop and turn the attention around and really begin to experience that, so we know it for ourselves. The peace we seek is already here. Always. And it's only that grasping, that clinging, that keeps us from seeing it.

I say "only." I don't mean to imply that it's simple. It's incredibly subtle and ingrained, and sense pleasures are actually the easiest of the four areas to notice. It's actually rather obvious. And in fact, the peace of non-grasping—this is in my experience—is a much, much more subtle and quiet type of peace or happiness than I generally, or ever, have experienced in the gratification of sense pleasure. But we're like an intensity-junkie society, so it can be easy to miss that if we're not paying attention.

Not so easy here, because your minds are getting more and more tuned to stillness. You can recognize it more. The kind of gross overabundance of sense desire isn't available to you here. And even though that might seem like suffering moment to moment, in the big picture it's a blessing, because it really will let each of you begin to explore the process itself rather than being so blinded by the possibility for so-called satisfaction.

It's not that we can never have the milkshake—but know what we're doing when we're doing it. And opening up to paying attention to the seductive quality of clinging, of getting lost in obsession with sense desires, that's not the same thing as developing an aversion for life, or a fear of experiencing pleasant experience because you might get attached. Aversion and fear is not freedom.

It's only aversion and fear. It's not what we're cultivating here.

So the invitation is to really begin to explore the difference between real appreciation of what's true in the moment—which actually is not possible when we're clinging—and clinging itself. The difference between appreciation and clinging. Neither of them is aversion or pushing away.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh: "When we are obsessed by sense pleasures, we lose our freedom. This was taught by the Buddha. But we have to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. Attachment to sense pleasures can bring about suffering and entanglement both in the present moment and the future for ourselves and others. But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind bring neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future for ourselves or others."

The peace and happiness of mindfulness, of an open mind. The joy of a peaceful mind brings neither suffering nor attachment. Explore that.

When you look at the sunset, there can be just a moment of pure appreciation, of joy. That's possible because we know how things really are. You know the sun's going to go down—no two ways about it. And we don't stand there trying to wish it wouldn't happen. And so there's no clinging, and there's the possibility of just pure presence. It's lovely. And we don't weep with sorrow that the sun's gone.

Notice when that moment changes to a moment of clinging. You might actually not weep that the sun's down, but there's just a little "oh, that was so nice." We're clinging to pleasant experience just in that moment. Not the sun, but wanting that pleasant feeling. Notice the difference.

Or like I said the other day, I was looking at the leaves with that same appreciation, and suddenly it changes to clinging. It's nice. We want it to last longer. We want to hold on to it somehow. Notice that as soon as that clinging comes up, the peace is gone. The spaciousness is gone. The sense of interconnectedness is gone. It's like I somehow separate from these colors and these leaves, and I have to grab them all and hold onto them somehow.

Notice. Just notice the shift. That's all. That's all we have to do. And those moments of clear presence, that stillness of seeing just what contact is—notice that too. Just let it be, but really let that peace, that quality, begin to sink in, to counteract our unconscious ideas of the intensity of pleasure we can get from sense pleasures.

So that's the first field of grasping.

The second one, which I find very interesting, is clinging or grasping to views and opinions. This is defined as thinking, the tendency of the mind to think, "This alone is true; everything else is false." At least that's easy enough to see if the mind would actually consciously think that. Then you'd have the awareness—view, view coming up—and that would help a lot, because at least you'd know what it is you're clinging to.

Clearly, views that are clung to limit the possibility of what we can experience. They divide the world, create conflict. Because what tends to happen is when we're holding fast to some view, we tend to perceive or accept only the facts that corroborate that view and sort of ignore the perceptions that don't fit in.

We can see this quite clearly in the world if you look at various areas of conflict—religious wars, all the weird things that go on, really horrible things that, if we're not involved, we can look and say, "Oh yes, that's so clearly clinging to views," which complicates and leads to war.

For example, Northern Ireland. To an outside observer like myself, the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland seem really very similar to one another—much closer to each other than I am to any of them. But the view can create such hatred and fear and division. Or the view in this country on abortion, pro or con, leading to people actually murdering one another over that particular view. Such a holding to "this is right, this is the only way."

I just heard on the news tonight that some academics at Cornell University had invited some intellectuals from Cuba, from Castro's Cuba, to come and speak. And so the people at Cornell who'd invited these intellectuals received death threats from anti-Castro Cubans in Miami.

Death threats, because they invited someone to come and speak at the college who held a different view. This is the power of holding to views and opinions.

And it's, as I said, easy to see from the outside. But what about when you really believe it, that it's true? Whatever it might happen to be—whether it's politics, whether it's medical, whether it's gay rights, whether it's abortion, whether it's your view in a family argument, your view of who you are. When I feel I'm really right, I know I'm right,

how open am I to really hear the possibility that maybe the other person's right? And what about when you both really know you're right, but somehow you have opposite ideas of what's right? Have you ever had an argument like that in a relationship? I know what happened. No, you don't. This is what happened. And you both are positive that you're right. It doesn't make for a lot of free play of "okay, let's hear your opinion." This is how it is. That's what views do. And when our deeply clung to view is threatened, it brings up such anger, if not fear. It's as if our whole life is threatened. And on some level, our whole understanding of life is threatened in that moment.

In Vietnam, during the Vietnamese War, when Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Phong were simply trying to help people who were hurt by the war without taking sides or adhering to either side's view, that was so threatening to both sides that held the view. It's like it's more undermining almost than the obvious enemy. And they would kill the people in the School for Social Work who were only trying to rebuild villages or educate children, because of the deep unsettledness of having your views not accepted, of having them challenged.

So at least we can work with this when we recognize it's a view. What about when we don't?

A friend told me a story—this is kind of a light story so I like it—of a Tibetan Lama who was giving a long talk to Westerners, talking about the pure land, another higher realm, a higher plane of existence where a future Buddha is residing and giving talks and teaching the Dharma to other celestial beings. He was going on and on, describing this realm the same as you would describe this room here, in that amount of detail, that amount of precision. And the Westerners were clearly getting more and more restive—yeah, sure. At one point he just looked at them and said, "You might not believe me, but I've been there."

Do we even let it in? Or does the mind go, yeah, sure.

On the level of our own day-to-day experience, never mind opinions about politics or anything else, this is what we're doing moment-to-moment, day-to-day: constructing views out of our own particular experience, clinging to them, and then judging everything else or comparing by that view. And just not letting in perceptions that don't fit. That's where we get really blinded.

An example. One summer, quite some years ago, I spent the summer in England with someone I was in a relationship with. It was a new relationship, and we were staying in this really exquisitely beautiful place in England—a little cottage boathouse right on the river in Devon, on this beautiful estate. I had been there many times before, and I had

many friends there. It was like the most idyllic setting you could imagine. So unknown to myself, I had formed the view: well, of course I must be happy. You couldn't possibly not be happy in a situation like this. The relationship was terrible, but because I had decided I couldn't not be happy, I didn't even let that in. The whole summer was like that. I left. We broke up the day after I left. Clearly, it wasn't like this idyllic summer. I still never let that in the whole time I was there.

I didn't realize it until the next summer when I was back again in the same place, visiting friends, and I was walking through a field. I remember this so clearly. At this point I didn't have any particular view to protect. I was just walking through the field, quite open and present. And you know how sometimes your body will have a bodily memory of a time? I wasn't thinking about the year before. I just walked through this field I'd walked through many times the year before, and the bodily memory of how I'd felt came up. I just felt that. Oh. Oh, that's how I felt? I must have been miserable. That's really unhappy. I never let that in to my conscious experience because it didn't fit the view I held.

We do that a lot.

Probably that happens to you once or twice here in a day. A rich time for this is the question period in the morning. People hear a question, and without even realizing it, they think: "That person's hardly having any emotions, and I'm having so much. It must be that the way not to have emotions is right practice, and mine isn't." Immediately we start comparing and judging. Or just the reverse—the person with no emotions hears another person say they're having all these experiences, and they think, "Oh my God, I'm suppressing. I'm supposed to be having these huge emotional releases, and I'm not. This is how the practice is supposed to be."

Or people who are a lot with the breath hear someone else talking about many different experiences and think, "Oh, my practice is so boring, it's not really moving, it's not really free-flowing mindfulness." And the reverse happens too. Then we take experiences just in our own internal life and think, "Ah, now I see what mindfulness is." I watch my mind do this all the time. "Oh, I thought it was that, but I see that was a view that was wrong. This is how it is." And immediately another view is formed. It's fascinating, if we can notice that. If you don't, you find yourself comparing, judging, expecting. See if you can pull back and say, "What's the opinion here? What's the view? What's being clung to in this moment?"

In a way, I'm going to the fourth field now—the biggest, but also the most subtle. The view that we cling to most deeply is that of a separate, solid, unchanging self. By not realizing that it's a view, we think that's just how it is. Even if intellectually we can all

say, "Oh no, I know, that's one of the main teachings—anattā—that's not so, it's all transparent, we're all interconnected." That's nice talk, but what do we really cling to unconsciously as the view, as the way of being? And then we don't let in perceptions that don't match that.

For example, that of impermanence. When we really look, really feel sensations in the body, there is nothing permanent there. But it's hard to let that in. It's kind of, "Oh yeah, that's interesting, but..." And then there's the image of the solid body, or the memory of myself since I was five, or whatever particular way that view arises in that moment—that sense of clinging to self.

This is, of course, extremely subtle—all the different aspects of experience that arise in a moment and that are clung to as a sense of self. Simply, again, beginning to notice it. Don't think you're going to just eradicate it, but notice. The clinging to any experience itself—it can be clinging to a physical image, it can be to a sense of personality, to a particular emotion, to the experience of knowing, of consciousness, clinging to intention. They're coming and going, coming and going. A particular experience arises and there's that contraction, that identification, that sense of self arising around it. Just notice it. That's all. And notice that it keeps changing. Just begin to let in the possibility of perceiving things in a different way.

We'll talk more—this is a huge topic, I'm only just touching on it—but it's the fourth area of grasping, this subtle sense of self. When you notice it, see if you can feel that grasping, how out of the spaciousness, the clarity, there's suddenly—it might be a huge grasping or it might be just ever so subtle—just, "I'm clear." Or, "This clarity is nice. This is how it should be. I wonder when it'll go away." However it arises, just notice that subtle movement and notice the effect of it: that in that moment there's me and other, and it seems solid. But we don't need to accept that just because it seems solid, it is. That's how we fall back on views.

It's scary not to have views. It's scary not to rest with some solid sense of self. Can we imagine living without clinging or resting in any particular view? People sometimes get actually quite angry to hear about that or think about that. How can we live without views? How can we vote? How can we take part in things?

No one's saying we don't have opinions. We're talking about the clinging to them as if they are the truth—a clinging that doesn't let in another possibility. The Buddha often said that people who cling to views go about in the world annoying one another.

Thich Nhat Hanh again: "Because we human beings are afraid of nothingness, we cling to the belief in a permanent, indestructible self."

The Buddha said—or asked, really—is there any view of self in which you can take refuge that will not cause anxiety, exhaustion, sorrow, suffering, and despair? Of course, they all answered, "No, Reverend Teacher." But look for yourself. Can you find any view of self that you can take refuge in that does not lead to anxiety, sorrow, suffering, despair, exhaustion? Just keep looking. Somehow this fear comes up about letting go of that clinging, but it's just the same as the clinging we spoke of earlier. It's the clinging itself that's creating the suffering, that's keeping us bound, that's keeping us from simply stepping back and seeing: it is perfectly complete here and now, just as it is. There is nothing that needs to be done.

The last area of grasping is any kind of rite or ritual—the idea that some outer form in itself is going to bring me perfection, is going to purify me. Again, it's like looking outward and holding to something external. The Buddha, in the famous parable of the raft, talks about even his own teachings. Incredibly useful as a raft to get across the river to a safe shore. But when you get there, you don't pick the raft up and walk with it on your shoulders for the rest of your life. It's useful. We use it.

So just using this time here, one of the ways to explore how the movement of grasping, of clinging—whether incredibly gross and we're acting out all over the place, or really, really subtle—just that movement out of stillness and knowing, how that obscures the peace of mind, how that obscures the recognition of our own innate completeness and has us looking outside for perfection and for happiness.

I said in one other talk how Nyoshul Khenpo has said that this recognition of our true nature is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives. Every moment is another chance to recognize, in a moment of just pure being—without grasping, without delusion, without aversion—that innate stillness of peace. Just know when that's how it is. And recognize how the clinging, how the wanting, how we start looking elsewhere for what was always here, and how far and fast that can take us, seemingly. And how the next moment, if you just stand there and be with the craving and be with the clinging—it's okay, I'll explode from clinging—and just see what happens, the next moment it could be gone, and again there's the potential for recognition. It's a great exploration. It's really fascinating.

Let's close with Nisargadatta. He says, "Nothing physical or mental can give you freedom. You are free once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you. You are free in a moment of recognition."

CHAPTER 270

Abandoning the Causes That Give Rise to Ignorance

Carol Wilson · 1h06

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching on how ignorance arises not as a fixed state but as a conditioned phenomenon that can be understood and abandoned. She explores the concept of āsava—the subtle underlying tendencies or biases of mind toward sense desire, becoming, wrong view, and identification—that condition ignorance to arise moment by moment. These tendencies are so subtle that we often find ourselves lost in confusion without knowing how we got there.*
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> *Wilson presents seven methods the Buddha taught for abandoning these causes of ignorance: wise attention (paying attention to the right things in the right way), restraint at the sense doors, careful attention to how we use necessary resources, skillful avoidance of what we cannot handle, patience with what cannot be avoided, removing or cutting off unwholesome states with wisdom, and developing the seven factors of enlightenment. She emphasizes that these approaches aren't hierarchical but situational—what's appropriate depends on internal and external conditions.*
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> *Drawing from her personal experience as a nun in Thailand, Wilson illustrates the interplay between patience and avoidance, showing how feeding aversive tendencies only strengthens them. She offers encouragement that while these patterns are subtle and pervasive, the very seeing of them opens the door to freedom. The talk concludes with the reminder that mindfulness practice naturally develops and balances the seven factors of enlightenment, and that recognizing what is before us allows what is hidden to become clear.*

The longer we continue our path of practice and exploration, the more it seems to me that we begin to become aware of the vastness which Joseph spoke of this morning. Just how vast the whole journey is. How vast and mysterious the process of our mind is. Almost incomprehensible.

Sometimes that vastness is delightful—a real joy opens us into freedom, into letting go. But that's not what I'm going to talk about tonight. I talked about that last week. This week I'm going to talk about when the vastness kind of flips and we get overwhelmed by the vastness of ignorance.

As you get quieter, you're really noticing, you're really more tuned in to experience. Often people will comment—and I comment on it a lot in myself—it can sometimes seem amazing and discouraging how quickly ignorance arises, how suddenly the kilesas come shooting in when you think you've just been so present and calm. This can have its discouraging moments when we're looking under that lens.

Of course, it's not a discouraging thing ultimately, because the seeing of this subtleness of the arising of ignorance is the key to our freedom. There's a quotation from a Greek Orthodox abbot of 1000 AD, Simeon was his name: "The more a person enters the light of understanding, the more aware she is of her own ignorance." And that's really what begins to happen.

We might start on our path kind of blithely thinking we'll practice for a week or three months or a couple of years and then we'll sort of be free. We'll be happy. Things will be okay. And instead we find we're plunging into—now I'm definitely giving the downside, it's only one bias—sometimes we can feel we're plunging into this morass that we had no idea existed under the surface. But each bit of seeing, the seeming complexity of this, is actually our key into freedom and understanding. It's just that we lose sight of it from time to time.

The Buddha said quite often that ignorance is not some solid state that we're stuck with, but that ignorance is something that arises in the moment due to conditions. And when those conditions change, when those conditions cease to be, then so also the ignorance ceases to be. You can see that from both sides: ignorance can arise over and over because the conditions that cause it keep arising, but also it vanishes, it dissipates over and over and over. We're not stuck with some unchanging mess that there's no way out of.

Tonight I want to talk about a particular discourse of the Buddha, just sort of describe what he's talking about in it. He's talking about the conditions for ignorance to arise, which he mentions briefly, and then seven ways that we can work with transcending or abandoning the causes that give rise to ignorance. None of this is going to be anything new. It's all what we've been looking at and doing already. I just like it because it shows us that there's a whole array of ways to work.

I've noticed a lot recently that many people are sort of recapping or trying to make sure they've got everything before the end of the retreat. "Now what do I do about this? How do I do this? What are these seven? What are these five?" Somehow trying to get everything and make sure it's the right way. I kind of like this sutta because he just lists out seven different ways to work, and of course there are many, many more. There's no one right way. It changes all the time depending on what's appropriate at a given time.

The cause that the Buddha gives for ignorance arising in a moment, when he's listing his chains of cause and effect, is this: ignorance arises in a particular moment of experience due to the presence or the arising in the previous moment of what he calls subtle underlying tendencies of mind. I know this gets a little subtle; I hope it's not too intellectual. Certain latent tendencies or biases of mind, when present, give rise to ignorance.

In other words, he's saying ignorance doesn't arise because there's a huge full-blown mind state, say, of sense desire. That's already after ignorance. But in a moment in the mind there can be arising the subtle tendency or bias—the conditions for sense desire to arise, if the conditions are right.

He lists four particular biases, any of which arising is the condition for ignorance to arise. Because it's so subtle, I think it's hard to see until we've been on a retreat looking at our minds this amount of time. And because it's so subtle is also one of the reasons that we find ourselves so often lost in a manifestation of ignorance—a pretty mild one—and not knowing how we got there.

These underlying biases—and the ones the Buddha lists specifically—he calls them *āsava*, that's the Pali word. And "bias" is a nice translation. Some of the other translations are "canker"—I mean, they're like nasty translations.

Anyway, I'll say what they are. The bias towards sense desire, the proclivity for sense desire to come up. The second one is towards becoming—becoming anything, something. Towards wrong view, of course, are main ones. Any view that we establish of self or a view of not-self, a view of who I am, or any underlying tendency to identify with anything.

Oh, they're broad. You see why they come up a lot. It's broad and it's subtle.

So this tendency is not the full-blown state itself—not the full-blown state of craving or identification, of being totally lost—but simply the possibility for it to arise. And not noticing that, it becomes circular. There's a proclivity, say, for sense desire. We don't notice it. It arises. We get really into a state of desire. And again, all of this without mindfulness, it strengthens the tendency for desire to arise again in the next moment. And so it just keeps going—the biases condition ignorance, which conditions the biases.

I have to say, when I look at this on paper, it's not a satisfying explanation to me because it's so circular. It's descriptive. But my mind always wants to say, well, let's get back to the very beginning one—that's the start of it all—and just get rid of that. And of course that's not how it works, because it's all conditioned. One gives rise to the next,

gives rise to the next, gives rise to the next. And as the Buddha said over and over, there is no one beginning point of ignorance or anything that we can go to and look at. It's all arising due to conditions. And when they fade, it fades.

And so again, as he's so pragmatic, he's showing us how to look at, how to notice, and how to work with abandoning these underlying tendencies. Often he describes freedom or enlightenment as the total extinction of these underlying biases of mind. That's quite remarkable—not always; he describes freedom in different ways, but that's one of the ways. A mind that has become completely free of these tendencies in which there's no more bias for sense pleasure or conceit or a sense of self to arise.

We can experience that in a moment, anyway.

Again, these are subtle and quite pervasive. And I'm not trying to be depressing. I'm just trying to bring home the sense of the subtlety, and also that it's not personal. So that in fact, you don't get caught in some sense of defeat or discouragement or failure.

Why, when we see clearly some painful, unhelpful pattern of our mind and we really see it and abandon it in that moment—why isn't that it? Why does it come back later? This is something we can only wonder at: "I really saw it, and now it's back. I didn't do something right." But that's not the case. It's just that we're not appreciating the level of subtlety with which all these conditions are operating.

For me, when I begin to appreciate that level, it takes away any sense of personal blame or failure. And again, it opens up to the vastness, and to the recognition: okay, this is for the long haul. I might as well relax and settle in and just pay attention.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, this word *āsava*, these underlying tendencies—it actually means either "to flow in" or "to flow out." And so one description I like, because it gives the sense of these tendencies as if exuding, coming out from the unguarded sense doors like water from cracks in a pot—a sense of constant trickling. Trickle, trickle, trickle. I mean, that's a metaphor. It's not actually like we're sitting here and things are trickling out of our ears and our eyes.

Don't take it literally. It's a way of talking.

But it really points to something important. These biases aren't inherent in our experience. In other words, they're not there no matter what. Otherwise, there would be no point in practice, obviously. In the clear seeing, there's the abandoning of these tendencies. But in the not seeing, there's this sense of constant trickling—well, I don't like

"constant," but it's trickling a lot. The sense of how easily these biases of mind can give rise to thought and speech and action is what can be so surprising when we're on retreat.

Here's a simple example that I was quite aware of at the time. A couple of years ago I was sitting some weeks, and I was very quiet and mindful and present. It wasn't a big space-out or an overwhelming or emotional time. I was just being with what is, noting quite steadily. And I remember—these moments are just so vivid—I was looking at a tree. It was summer, out the window of my room. And I was noting, "seeing, seeing." That sense of attention connecting with what's happening, this very balance. And I could just feel, it's almost as if for some reason I consciously let down the mindfulness, just kind of backed off, so to speak, and quit just meeting, quit just noticing. Okay, seeing, seeing—just kind of backed off.

Immediately—it blew me away actually—immediately there was the sense of, "Oh, isn't that a pretty leaf?" And desire just came up. I mean, about a leaf on a tree, for God's sake. The mind leaned towards the pleasant and desire came up, and memory started, and the whole story started, just fueled by sense desire. Like that. I thought, wow, that's really amazing.

That was such a clear example to me of how this tendency, if the conditions are there, how easy it is for it to give rise to ignorance. The ignorance is what clutches at a sense of pleasure to make me happy, and then just on into the whole story. The bias exerts an influence; it flows in.

In our daily life, our normal life, this is so quick and subtle we're mostly not going to notice on this level. But here, at times—not always, but at times—we can. And again I want to emphasize, rather than that being depressing, it's just that seeing is what's opening the door to our freedom from it. Normally we're so inured, so used to these biases that we don't even notice them. Again, we've talked a lot about how when a *kilesa* is present in experience, like greed, it colors our perception. This is the same dynamic on a very subtle level. Here we begin to see that, and rather than getting distressed by the seeing, it's the door to letting go, to liberating understanding.

And I know probably half of you are sitting there going, "That's all fine for her to say, but she doesn't know what my mind's like and how identified I am and how caught up I am. Forget it. I really am getting worse no matter what." So you guys have no perspective, really.

Let me share a little newspaper article. Steve Smith is actually really laughing at me because he says I talk about renunciation and then clip things out of the newspaper all the time. This is a little article about unexamined ignorance. You can see the difference. I don't think anyone here fits into this category.

A 94-year-old career criminal is heading back to prison again, this time on assault and gun possession charges. Ninety-four years old. "Pop," they call him—Pop Honeywood—was sentenced to serve seven years at 94. He pleaded guilty to armed assault and possession of a firearm for pointing a gun at a man who warned him not to eat grapes growing in the man's yard. Since 1946, Mr. Honeywood has been charged with 46 crimes and has served eight jail sentences. Under one of his sentencing options this time, Mr. Honeywood could have been sent to a nursing home. But he resisted that option, saying, "If I go to jail, I may be out in a couple of years. If I go to a nursing home, I may be there the rest of my life."

That's the difference between examining our ignorance and just living with it, not even knowing it's there.

There are three levels of experience, three levels of mind from which these biases give rise to manifestation—this might have been mentioned before. The first is the level of speech or action, clearly the strongest level. They've really come up and gotten strong and led to speech or action. Whether we speak in anger, whether we hit somebody, whether we write an angry note. Whether we point a gun—whatever it is we do. And this level is worked with or purified through *sīla*, through purification of conduct. We can really control speech and action through working with *sīla*.

The second level, in these layers of decreasing intensity—

The second, slightly less intense level is the obsessive layer, where we're fueled by the bias towards craving or anger or identification. We're really lost and spinning, feeding the thoughts and the story—that sense of really spinning in it. And each thought, each emotion strengthens the potential for it to rise again in the next moment. I'm sure you all know how that goes.

This level is really purified through samadhi, through mindfulness and concentration, where we can come out of the obsessive thinking and return to the actual experience itself.

Both of these levels—both sila and samadhi, the mindfulness and concentration—when they're functioning are in a way not giving these underlying tendencies room to expand, not giving them room to develop. And that's the third layer, the one I'm talking about tonight: underlying the latent, the potential for these obsessive or stronger acting-out defilements to arise if the appropriate conditions are there.

The example often given is that it's like a seed. In that seed—say for an oak tree—there's the latent, underlying potential for an oak tree to grow if the conditions are right. If it's watered, if it has the proper earth, if the climate is correct. But in that actual acorn, we could tear it apart and we're not going to find a tree. The tree isn't actually there. And if it's not watered, if it's not fed, it just withers and dies. It does not grow into a tree. It's not inevitable that it grow into a tree. That's an analogy for how these underlying tendencies are said to work.

While the first two levels can be purified through sila and samadhi, the third level—really the tendency for these things to arise—is abandoned by seeing clearly, by really seeing things as they are on the level of visceral understanding, and the natural letting go that happens from that.

We can see why our practice of sila and of mindfulness, concentration, wise effort, all the factors of enlightenment—they're so vital. Because in each moment that there's presence, that there's mindfulness, that we're seeing, maybe we're seeing the beginning of anger, the beginning of identification, or even further along, but we come in and we're just there with it—it's not giving it room to expand. It's setting the conditions for us not to be blinded, not to be obsessed by these potential tendencies of mind.

When the mind is not clouded by the obsessive nature of the defilements, when that's not coloring our experience, it gives us the potential for deep seeing, for awakening to what is really true. And as we've said, when there's just a moment of touching that which we really are—whatever way you want to describe it: emptiness, interconnectedness, the ultimate true nature, inner completion, peace—in that moment of actually recognizing it, for that moment, and maybe for longer, even the underlying tendency for these confusions to arise is eradicated.

You can see that in your own experience. Often people will say, when they have a moment of just knowing impermanence—not remembering knowing it, not saying, "Oh yes, I know everything's impermanent, so I won't be bothered by this knee pain"—but in that moment of really knowing it, automatically the grasping, the wanting it to change, goes away. The grasping, the sense of self, goes away. There's no tendency for it even to arise in that moment. And so that's the way, at least momentarily—and the deeper we see, the more full it becomes—that these tendencies vanish altogether.

You can see: it might not be what your experience is a lot of the time, but every moment that we're not confused by the obsessive quality, every moment that we're simply present with what is, is setting the conditions. It's not allowing the tendencies to arise and strengthen, and is in fact opening us up to clear seeing.

Let me give an example of how, if the conditions are right and there's no mindfulness, the tendencies flower—and how, when there's really clear seeing, they don't.

Without mindfulness, without a sense of clear seeing, the tendency for grasping, the tendency for identification—just little things. You go to your walking space where you've walked every walking period since the beginning of the retreat, and someone else is there. And you know they know that you always walk there. Anger, grasping, whatever, just shoots up. You're lost in it.

Then another time, when there's not only mindfulness but there's also been that clear seeing at some point—just of interconnectedness, for example—you walk there, the same situation, and nothing happens. It's not like you're sitting on it and saying, "I will not get aversive." It just simply doesn't come up. Or even more, metta comes up instead.

Many people have mentioned this, and there's this sense of: who was that? Where did that come from? It's not what we're used to. But again, this is an example of that underlying tendency not even being there, not giving rise.

So, the seven ways—seven different ways we can work, that the Buddha spoke about. Ways to abandon, to transcend. They're all things that we're doing now, and they're not all that radically different. I just want to run through them a little bit. There's no hierarchy, no one way that's better. It's just whatever's appropriate given your situation, both internal and external, and what's accessible, what's possible in a moment.

The first one is obvious: seeing wisely, wise attention, seeing clearly. And of course, ultimately, it's what I just spoke of—that clear seeing of our interconnected nature that just abandons quite spontaneously. But on a more prosaic, moment-to-moment level, the Buddha speaks about wise attention. He talks about this a lot. Wise attention, he says, has two components: what we pay attention to, and the way in which we pay attention.

And again, he's so practical. He says, for what we should pay attention to, wise attention is simply, quoting him, "When we're not familiar with the Dharma, or we're undisciplined in it, we don't really understand which things are fit for attention and which things are not. So we pay attention to the wrong things."

I think it's just so basic. And of course it's very obvious. The "wrong things" is simply —it's not a matter of blame—but it's simply those things that as we pay attention to them, it causes states of desire, aversion, becoming, and ignorance to either arise, or if they're already arisen, we pay attention to things that make those states get stronger. Those are the wrong things. And it's just so obvious. It's not some moralistic good or bad.

And of course the right things is just the opposite. What we pay attention to that does not cause states of greed, aversion, becoming, identification to arise. Or when those states are already present, like we're lost in anger, what we pay attention to that does not cause them to increase and causes them to fade. It's obvious. And what we've been emphasizing the whole retreat—basically paying attention to the process, to the bare experience, rather than to all the papañca and all the story about it.

So just a simple example. You're walking, someone walks past, they're walking slowly, and there's the thought, "They're a better yogi than I am." Or maybe there's the thought, "They're showing off. I know actually that they're not a better yogi than I am." Either way. And then we pay attention to the content. Are they? Aren't they? Am I? I'm being pretty picky here right now. I'm being pretty aversive. I really should be paying attention to my own feet. And the whole self-blame, judgment, whatever it goes into. And then we say, "Oh, I shouldn't be thinking these things. It's not good." And it just keeps going. Paying attention to the wrong thing. It's not that those thoughts are bad, but we're paying attention to the wrong thing. We're just feeding it and it keeps on going, sort of like inertia. Once it's set in motion, it just has a tendency to stay in motion. It's really hard to stop.

So the right thing is not, "Okay, I won't pay attention to this, I'll pay attention to my breath." It's coming back and being with the experience as it is. Whether it's the feeling of anger, whether it's the sense of shame, whether it's simply the contractions of sensations in the body—simply being with things the way they are. The bare experience, or as it's sometimes talked about, with total attention, freedom from the three times. That's how to pay attention to our experience. The three times being past, present, and future.

So how to be with that sense of contraction, of aversion, the sense of self-judgment, the sense of envy, whatever it is. Whether you feel it as a physical contraction, whether you feel it as a tone in the mind, whether it's observable as an image—doesn't matter. But that willingness to be with that experience in that moment with total attention. When we're with it with whole and total attention, the past and the future don't come

up. And if we're with total attention, we're also not analyzing, interpreting, or comparing. We're simply with contraction or seeing. Whatever it happens to be, in whatever form it's taking.

When it's not that total accepting attention, as Sayadaw U Pandita says, it's like past and future come up. Say there's a pleasant experience. It's not the total attention to it, although it's sort of there. And then he says it's like we start remembering all our past pleasant experiences that were sort of like it. As U Pandita says, we bring up past pleasures and relive them over and over like a cow chewing her cud. And then we move into the future—potentials for the future times, "I could have the same pleasant experience in the future." Or we get really into analyzing, interpreting what's happening in the present.

How did it get to be like this? What does it mean? How can I keep it going?

Total attention—this is the other aspect of wise attention—is just simply there, free of the three times. Not bringing in past or future, not analyzing the present. Just what is.

So this first of the seven ways, wise attention, this quality of wise, total attention, is what opens the door to liberating insight. It keeps us from being sidetracked by our interpretations and biases. Without it, with unwise attention, we fall into what the Buddha called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views—all those views of "I am this, I am that. I am a self, I am not-self. I've been this in the past, what will I be in the future?" He lists all these views.

You can really see how unwise attention, even if it's as simple as remembering past pleasant experiences, imagining future ones, and analyzing the present, leads us into all kinds of opinions and views about who we are, who we're going to be, who we were in the past, and what's really going on. By and large, they're a waste of time. They definitely aren't helping us to see clearly.

So that's wise attention.

Another attitude—and a lot of these are attitudes, not necessarily techniques—for understanding and abandoning some of these biases in the mind is restraint at the sense doors, guarding the sense doors. In first reading the sutta, it could be easy to think it just means real restraint of not looking around, not reaching out to sound. This can definitely be helpful. Many of us have talked about how much the desire to look around leads to so much suffering—so much wanting, comparing, negativity both inner and outer. And how just the simple act of restraint of the eyes doesn't give these tendencies room to expand.

But it could be easy to take that a little far. Actually, a friend of mine once did, going around the retreat blindfolded for several days. That's not exactly the point—to try to go around blind and deaf and not feel anything. It's not about engendering a loathing or fear of sense experience.

Rather, restraint at the sense doors is really what we've talked about regarding papañca, the proliferation of mind. It's being able to notice what's happening at the sense door. If someone walks by where we're seeing, there might be perception of who it is, and we just keep it there. We keep the attention there. We don't have to expand it into that whole story of judgment and comparing and craving and envy.

Of course, sometimes we can't do this. Again, this is just one of many ways to work. But sometimes we can really work at restraining the proliferation at the sense door, being just as in that sutta of the Buddha I quoted earlier: "In the seen there is just what is seen. In the heard there is just what is heard. In the sensed, just what is sensed. In the cognized, simply what is cognized. That's all."

It's not like some aversive holding back, but more a relaxed settling back—simply seeing, hearing, sensing, thinking, inner seeing, emotions. Just what is, without any problem. This is really restraint at the sense doors.

When there's that simply being with what is, the tendencies for sense desire, identification, whatever, simply do not flower. They do not sprout. Without that, as we all know very well, it leads into fields of proliferation and story. And as I said before, each moment of really getting into who I am and what can I do to make myself better, to be a good yogi, to have a better sitting—each moment of that we're not aware of, that isn't met with mindfulness, is actually strengthening that bias, the tendency of the mind to move into craving in the next moment, to move into judging in the next moments. Just how it works.

Ajahn Chah said, "When the nose smells an odor, let it go. Just leave it at the nose." So that's what we do. Just leave it at the eyes. Leave it at the ear. Leave it at the nose. There's nowhere to go with it. It's just empty anyway.

The third way is interesting. I wouldn't have thought of it myself, which luckily we have the Buddha for—we don't have to think of these things ourselves. It would be a mess.

see the field of meaning out of which it comes—you know, impossible. Amazing. It was amazing the way the Buddha put all this stuff together. How many of us could sit here and come up with a theory that there are these underlying biases of mind that give rise to ignorance in a moment? I mean, it's quite amazing.

I'm saying this not to indoctrinate or suggest that this is simply how it is, but rather as a way to turn each of you, each of us, back to our own experience. Simply look at your own experience and see what is so. See what holds up. See what's true in your experience. What leads to more suffering? What leads to less suffering? And that's what you believe.

I'm so appreciative that the Buddha laid out so many maps and ways to at least begin to move into understanding our experience. This is a way to start.

So this third way of abandoning the bias for greed, bias for identification, for becoming, for wrong views, is through careful attention to the attitude with which we use things—the attitude with which we use those things which are necessary for our existence. The Buddha is talking to the monks about the attitude with which they use food and clothing and shelter. And I think it's really interesting. We can certainly see the outer effects in the world of so many centuries of using all our resources with absolutely no care whatsoever to the attitude with which we're using them. That's the outer effect. Here we can begin to pay attention to the inner effect.

Do we use things out of an attitude of care, using just what we need to take care of ourselves? For example, however many blankets you need to keep warm. The amount of food that we need to be healthy, to be wakeful, to be strong. Where does it tip over? When we're using something out of care and respect for ourselves and others, when does it become fear that we won't have enough, or greed in case we won't be happy? When do we run around and save a few extra blankets that we don't actually ever use, just in case, even though someone else might need them?

But even leave aside that someone else might need them. Consider the way that it strengthens the bias for fear to arise. If we're using, say, more blankets than we need out of fear, holding on to them, a moment of using in that way is strengthening the tendency for fear to come up again. So we're really bringing on the potential for more suffering in ourselves.

Or when we take three extra rice cakes at tea after we've finished—what's the attitude? It might really be that you know your energy drops at nine o'clock, or when you get up in the morning you need them, and you take them out of real care and appreciation. Fine. Or is it that lurch of fear? And they're piling up on the back shelves there in the small dining room—ten rice cakes from the last week and a few old moldy bananas.

Never mind the outer effects. Okay, you're feeding the cockroaches and they're very appreciative. But what's the effect on our inner nature? This is what is really important to see: that what's happening in that moment of using resources out of an attitude of fear is we're bringing on ourselves more suffering.

And again, this isn't about looking from the outside and saying what's bad or good, or practicing out of some kind of austere asceticism. That can be done out of hatred for oneself, which is also not helpful, because then that's just propagating the tendency for hatred to come up. This is really looking at how we relate to the things that we use.

When we can just use what's needed with this sense of trust, not worrying or fearful about tomorrow—probably no one here is going to starve tomorrow. Probably there'll be breakfast. Probably there'll be lunch. Probably there'll be rice cakes and peanut butter for tea. You can probably count on that. And if not, that's something else.

You know how it just feels so free when we can let go of that fear or that greed, just in a moment, and appreciate what's here—without that scarcity model in which everyone else becomes a rival for a limited amount of resources. Instead there's a sense of just taking what we need and flowing, which is really such a lovely way to live.

Or just notice that difference between when you're appreciating the lunch—just eating, appreciating, no problem, open, spacious—and then you hear that scraping of the spoon on the serving table. You think, "Uh-oh, there's not much left. I wonder if I should get up now and get seconds before it's gone." And that thought, unnoticed, expands, gets going. And where's the appreciation? Your plate's still half full. But where's the appreciation of the rest of the meal? Gone.

You know, it's just a struggle. Do I jump up now or do I wait? No, I'll wait. I'll just be open. I won't be craving. But we're just tight. And the difference between that appreciation and letting it go—we don't need to act out of fear. Well, sometimes we do need to act out of fear; we don't have a choice. But when we have a choice, we don't need to. And to just expand into that way of relating to resources is quite lovely.

So that's the third way. The fourth way—and this one, often people don't believe us when we try to talk them into it in interviews—the Buddha said, yes, one way of working with difficult experiences is to avoid them. Of course, he didn't say avoid means "I don't like this, so I think I'll leave the retreat." Not exactly that level of avoidance. The examples he gave were things like avoiding a savage elephant, or avoiding a poisonous snake, or avoiding unwholesome company. But it's really, I think, looking with discernment and realizing that we can't handle every experience.

Sometimes the savage elephant or the poisonous snake is a so-called internal experience in ourselves. Something's just coming up so strong and overwhelming that it's just as if we were run over by a wild elephant. And so easily, people seem to get the idea that true mindfulness means I can be with anything, every moment, and if I back off, I'm wimping out. So I think it's really important to understand that the Buddha said yes, this is one of the things to do. You avoid what is unwholesome, what is difficult, what one is unable to meet with any kind of balance at a particular time.

Now obviously this is going to vary in your own experience widely from time to time. What you might need to avoid at one time you might be quite able to be with at another time. So there's no cut and dried experience here. But you can see just in the way the retreat is set up there are a lot of experiences that we've arranged for you to avoid. We ask you not to get your mail, not to talk to each other, not to read Newsweek every week. We don't have TVs in the back dining room. There's a reason for that. We set it up so that you avoid certain situations.

We're not saying communication is a bad thing, that it's really unskillful to communicate with your family, or that hearing the news is wrong. Nothing like that. But to be inundated, to have so much contact, so much input, so much communication just makes it so much easier in a situation like this for the tendencies to come up, for sense desire to arise. All you need to do is see one commercial for something on TV and go, "Oh yeah, Jamaica"—you just see a commercial of Jamaica and that's it for the next two hours. And those who've received a letter suddenly in the middle of retreat know it can just send the mind flying with either fear or wanting or self-identification, whatever.

So it's a wise avoidance, in order to set the conditions where these tendencies don't arise so that we can then see what is so—set the conditions for knowing truth, for knowing things as they are. It's avoidance of discernment, not of aversion. So if you find you're working with avoidance and you discover that the motivation doesn't seem to be a balanced one of seeing "I can't handle this," but rather one of total aversion to what is happening, avoidance might not be the right attitude. And it probably won't work anyway. When we're doing it from that point it usually doesn't work.

So, aside from avoidance, the next one that the Buddha spoke about is patience. In other words, the things that we cannot avoid, the difficult experiences that we cannot change, we meet with patience—which we've spoken about quite a lot. That quality of total acceptance of things just as they are, with a real equanimity that isn't flustered by whatever's happening.

You know the phrase: develop a mind that is like the earth. Whatever we throw on the earth, whatever we do to it, however ravaged it might be, it accepts all things equally. And at some point it begins again to nurture all people equally. It doesn't say, "I like you, I don't like you. You can drink the water, you can't breathe the air." It's just this sense of spacious acceptance of whatever might come.

And I really love to see how if there's just a little crack in the pavement, a flower or grass will start to grow up. However much we try to pave over the earth, whatever we do to it, somehow the life, the nurturing aspect of the planet begins to come through no matter how hard we try to suppress it. I think of that image when I try to call up in myself the attitude of patience, this open acceptance. I talked about last week this radical acceptance of the things we can't change, external or internal. Again, it's quite a discerning thing to know when to use acceptance and when avoidance.

And it's going to be changing a lot back and forth.

When I was in Thailand for a year or so during that time as a nun, I learned actually quite a lot about patience but also about avoidance—when to use each, and when I would try to avoid what was unavoidable, how much suffering comes from that.

I went there with at least a year planned, maybe a couple of years, having sat mostly here and in England, with highfalutin ideas of going off into the forest and living this life of solitude and peace and bliss, really getting deep in my practice—all these expectations and self-conceited ideas about what it would be like. Which of course, forget it.

I thought I would spend months alone in the beautiful forest, and instead I spent probably the first four months in a temple in Bangkok. Very noisy, extremely noisy, not quiet. Very hot, extremely hot. It was the hot season, and I didn't have much time to grow into it—I arrived pretty close to the hot season. Outside the walls of the monastery, there were all kinds of loudspeakers blaring rock music, Western rock music, Thai rock music. Inside, there was a plethora of animals. What I remember particularly are the roosters, because there must have been hundreds of them, and they would start maybe at three in the morning. One by one, they would all crow over and over and over. And I said, "Please, please stop. I'm not ready to get up yet." But forget it. You have to get up. And the dogs and the cats, they screech and they howl. It was just wild.

The heat was, for me, unbearable. Very humid, probably 120 degrees, plus my little hut had a tin roof. So it was just bake, bake in there. And yet I was in a temple where the abbot was wonderful to me. I didn't know at the time how really radical he was being, because he ordained me as a nun and there were no other nuns in this temple. He ordained me, then he let me stay in a kuti. They had little kutis with grass around them,

and it was very nice for Bangkok—which I didn't realize at the time. I just got into aversive mode. I was in a little kuti surrounded by kutis filled with monks, which is almost unheard of. But it basically meant I could never step outside without being completely covered. You have these long-sleeve shirts, always polyester, with a polyester undershirt. I tried to get cotton—it was really, really hard. And then you have to put this robe over, again polyester. So I would just kind of walk out and drip. Go back inside and wash and curse a little bit and say, "Oh, that's ruined speech."

I could go on and on, but it was not engendering light, blissful mind states. I was there for probably three months, and finally I went to the forest. I did have a nice kuti in the forest. Actually, I was treated wonderfully everywhere I went, and it wasn't until a month later that I could appreciate it.

The forest, I want to tell you, is not quiet. I thought the forest would be quiet. It is so noisy, it's incredible. Just the insects and the tukke lizards that go off all night in your kuti, out of your kuti, really very loud. I was under a wild mango tree, again with a tin roof, so I'd be sitting in the middle of meditation and these mangoes would drop on the roof like an explosion. Really, I'd jump, about to settle down again.

And then of course, the wats in the country are beautiful, like parks. So on weekends, tour buses of people from surrounding areas come and they all kind of troop through in front of the kutis. The women's kutis, of course, were on the side where all the people are, so it would be safe. The men are across the river, nice and quiet. That's how it always is. So they'd troop by, two tour buses of people, go off into the woods, have their picnic, troop back out. It's nice they could come and enjoy and support the temple—it's really part of the symbiotic relationship, it's lovely. But I wasn't in that mind state at the time. People would come up and look in my door: "Oh, look at the farang mae chi!" They'd just stand there and stare at me while I was sitting. Or I'd be walking and they'd come up—I'd turn around, they'd be right there with a camera to take my picture.

It was a trip. So, working between patience and avoidance.

I thought, okay, I can put up a sheet over my screen so people can't look in. And that would really help me avoid engendering a lot of unpleasant mind states. But there was a lot I couldn't avoid. And it was at least a couple of months before I saw clearly that I was so much feeding the tendency for aversion to arise that it actually got to the point where almost anything that came into my experience, aversion would arise. It didn't even have to be particularly aversive.

And I got it. Oh, I'm conditioning aversion here. I'm practicing aversion. This is not helpful. The seeing of that really did help. That really, just the seeing was like a releasing, a letting go, an opening up. And that's the opening into patience. Wait a minute—this is how it is here. I can leave or I can stay, and if I stay, this is how it is.

That patience really broadens the experience. That's when I could start to appreciate actually how wonderfully I was being treated, and of course the many positive aspects that I talked about another time. It's really quite interesting. Patience is a wonderful tool. It's not just a way to get through something we don't like.

In a moment—just in a moment of being with what is—all the times when you're sort of present but you're not really concentrated, you don't really like what's happening, you can't say "I'm having good practice," but there's patience, there's that acceptance—in that moment, through the patience, the underlying tendencies are not being given room to flower. And that's a lot. Because each moment that these tendencies aren't flowering is a moment that's conditioning patience, metta, and clear seeing. It's letting clear seeing be possible.

So really, when we get to these subtle levels, don't undervalue patience. It's actually an amazing tool. It's not flashy, but it's really a huge aspect of allowing us to open to truth.

Now of course I have one minute to talk about the other two. The sixth method for abandoning the habits of mind—the translation I read called it "removing." What I would call it is what Joseph calls the sword of wisdom. These are the times when we're not meeting experience right at that door of perception, when we can't just guard the sense doors, but we land in the middle of an already arisen state, whatever it is—wanting, fear, greed, identification. But there's that moment of recognition when we can bring in that kind of clear seeing: okay, that's it, enough now. Don't let it expand any further.

Now, this gentle sort of wisdom—I'm not talking about a hammer, you know, "that's enough, get away." That's just more aversion. But that place where we can see, I'm really getting into aversion. Okay, so it took two months. And sometime I saw it—that's enough. There's no need for this to expand anymore. Of course we can't always do that, but there are many times when we can. I think we don't do it nearly as often as we could. Sometimes we get seduced by thinking we're being mindful, but actually we're getting sucked in. So there's this—just, okay, you think you're no good because that person walks slower? That's enough. Just come back to the experience. That's enough. Removing, not giving them a chance to expand.

And the last method is happening quite spontaneously, simply by virtue of your mindfulness practice. This is the development, the strengthening and balancing of the seven factors of enlightenment. Has anyone given a talk about all the seven factors? No one has. We've talked about each one of them separately. But one of the ways—conceptual perhaps—but one of the ways of holding a sense of what's going on in meditation practice is that each of these seven factors is being strengthened and balanced.

I'll just say what they are. There are three tranquilizing factors, three calming factors. One is calm, tranquility.

One is equanimity—that real non-reactive space of mind. And the third calming one is concentration, focus, steadiness of mind. It just stays with what is, doesn't move around.

Then there are three energizing factors. Energy, obviously—effort or energy. The second one is rapture, pīti, which sometimes manifests as this real vivid interest in what's going on. And the third energizing factor is investigation, which I know Michelle gave a whole talk on. Investigation—not thinking about, but the investigation of being with what's happening, seeing what happens to it without interpretation.

So three energizing, three calming. And the seventh is mindfulness—what else—that balances all of them. Mindfulness can't be too out of balance. You can't have too much mindfulness.

A lot of what we do, one of the ways we look when we're talking to people in interviews, is seeing which factors are stronger, which factors could be boosted a little. These seven factors are all quite naturally being developed through the practice. It happens by itself. But sometimes people tend to get fixated—we talk a lot about mindfulness, a lot about concentration. We mention all the others, but often people just tend to focus on concentration, maybe on mindfulness, maybe on effort. We forget it's a whole range of all seven.

What happens naturally—and as you become more familiar with the energy of each—you can tune in. I'll do that sometimes when I'm sitting and things are feeling off. Not that I don't like what's happening, but it just feels not quite right. I'll tune in and see if one of these isn't quite happening. Sometimes there's maybe no investigation. I'm trying to be mindful, but there's this underlying feeling of "I don't really care what's going on." Oh, okay—let me see if I can get a little interested here. Sometimes there's not much energy; that's obvious. Sometimes we're really with it, but there's no calm, for example.

So a lot of what goes on in interviews is just steering toward whatever seems to be a little out of balance. It's a constantly evolving and shifting process. And don't get all hung up on it because it's happening by itself.

So again, that's the seventh way that he speaks of—the developing and strengthening of the seven factors of enlightenment. I don't know if you remember earlier when I read a quotation from the Buddha where he said that mindfulness of breathing, developed and practiced, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness, which developed and practiced perfects the seven factors of enlightenment, which developed and practiced perfects clear vision and deliverance.

So you see, it's a natural progression. I've talked all night and then I say it's actually happening by itself. Sometimes the noticing can be really helpful to see where we're stuck. Sometimes it can get too intellectual and you're thinking about it. In that case, forget it, because it's all happening by itself.

And again, as subtle and pervasive as the tendencies might be for confusion to arise, for wanting to arise, for identification to arise—the seeing of it, don't let that be discouraging, because the seeing of it is the opening to freedom from it.

This is actually a quotation from Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas: "Recognize what is in your sight, and what is hidden will become clear to you."

That's what we're really doing here. Recognizing what is in our sight. By itself, what is hidden will become clear.

So let's sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 271

Miracle of Awakening

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this Thanksgiving reflection, Carol Wilson opens with Śāntideva's beautiful verses on awakening as "the nectar of immortality" and "a feast of joy to which all are invited." She shares a powerful personal experience at Bodh Gayā, where sitting near the Bodhi tree amid the chaotic hubbub of pilgrims, beggars, and vendors, she was struck by the profound humanness and immediacy of the Buddha's awakening—not as myth, but as real possibility accessible in all conditions of life.*
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> *Wilson explores how we construct a sense of solid self through identification with the five khandhas (aggregates): body, feeling, perception, consciousness, and saṅkhāras (mental formations). She describes how mindfulness reveals that what we call "I" is actually a rapidly arising and passing phenomenon—sometimes a subtle sensation, sometimes a contraction, sometimes an image—never the same twice. Rather than fighting this process, we can simply turn attention to observe how quickly each sense of self vanishes upon investigation.*
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> *The talk culminates in a teaching on faith and radical acceptance. Wilson distinguishes between "bright faith"—the initial inspiration that draws us to practice—and "verified faith" that arises from direct experience. She invites practitioners to embrace the fundamental uncertainty of existence, quoting Suzuki Roshi on appreciating the rain without knowing what the next moment will bring. True freedom, she suggests, comes not from controlling experience but from surrendering to the mystery, accepting truth "in all forms, at all times, in all ways."*

So it looks like you all survived the day, more or less.

I'm going to talk about a few different things tonight. Hopefully a theme will emerge—maybe, maybe not.

I want to start by reading something that, since it's Thanksgiving, feels to me like a beautiful expression of the real thing there is to be thankful for. It's from Shantideva:

As a blind person feels when she finds a pearl in a dustbin, so am I amazed by the miracle of awakening arising in my consciousness. It is the nectar of immortality that delivers us from death. The treasure that lifts us above poverty into the wealth of giving to life. The tree that gives shade to us when we roam about scorched by life. The bridge that takes

us across the stormy river of life. The cool moon of compassion that calms our mind when it is agitated. The sun that dispels darkness, the butter made from the milk of kindness by churning it with the Dharma. It is a feast of joy to which all are invited.

That's our true feast of joy—the miracle of awakening that arises in each of our consciousnesses. And the real miracle is that it's an open secret to which every being on this planet, every human, is invited. What's more amazing is why so many aren't drawn to listen. But it's so immediate, so human, and this miracle of awakening is accessible to us not just here on some three-month isolated retreat but in all situations. It's part of our human condition. It's amazing.

I want to share an experience that in my life has served as a metaphor for this—both for the humanness of our quest, the humanness of awakening, and the fact that it is part of all life, accessible in all conditions. It's a metaphor, but it really brought this home to me.

The first retreat I ever did, my first introduction to Buddha Dharma, was in a town called Bodh Gaya in India, which is the town where the Buddha supposedly sat under the Bodhi tree and came to his full awakening. Now it's a real shrine. There's a descendant of the original Bodhi tree—at least they say it is. It's in a big park with a wall around it, and there's a large stupa right next to it. The tree itself has a little concrete platform built around it.

When I was there in 1971, it was still pretty much a dusty little village. I didn't go back for years and years. Then maybe five years ago, I returned to Bodh Gaya with some good friends. It's gotten much busier since then. I'm not a particularly devotional person or one who's given to visiting shrines, so my reaction surprised me.

Sitting there—actually it's pretty hard to sit directly under the Bodhi tree because it has a locked fence around it, but you can sit near it on the concrete wall where pilgrims make circumambulations of the shrine—something hit me so powerfully. Oh, the Buddha's not some myth. This was a real guy. Maybe he was really sitting in this place. It's not a made-up story. And the potential for freedom is not some airy-fairy idea. It's as real as me sitting here now on this concrete wall.

It touched me so much. I was just weeping, which is also not that common for me. But just that sense of humanness and immediacy.

And the second piece of it for me was that this was happening in the midst of incredible hubbub. We're not talking about some esoteric peaceful shrine in the middle of a beautiful country village. Bodh Gaya is in the middle of one of the poorest states of India. It's really dusty and dirty. As you walk up, it's just the regular hubbub of a little Indian street.

But as you walk up to the shrine, to the park surrounding it, first of all there's a huge row of beggars sitting against the wall. And just before you get to that row, there's a guy sitting there selling little coins. He'll sell you a pile of nine or ten anna coins for a rupee—which is really ninety or a hundred annas to a rupee—so he's making ten annas off the transaction. Then you can give one of these coins to a beggar.

Now, a coin like this is basically useless. It's less than a penny. You can't buy anything with it. So you can purchase these and relieve your sense of guilt or whatever, creating some gesture of generosity, but you're not really doing anything for anybody. Someone told me that for these beggars, it's like their job. I don't know if this is true, but someone who lived in Bodh Gaya told me that some of them take a rickshaw from neighboring villages over to their begging spot for the day. I don't know if it's accurate, but that's the tone of things—this press of humanity getting in, getting out the door.

Once I was almost literally lifted off my feet just from the crowd of people trying to go up the stairs and get out the gate of the shrine. There was no particular panic. It's just a lot of people in a hurry to get out the door.

And as you're sitting or walking around the stupa, there are pilgrims from all the different Buddhist countries—very touching. They come in huge groups from tour buses with loudspeakers, from Japan, from Thailand, from other parts of India. There weren't any American or European tour groups when I was there. People going around talking really loud. There was a whole group of Tibetan monks doing some kind of three-day chanting puja, sitting on the side with their horns—really beautiful. There was literally a mad Tibetan woman who would run around screaming and yelling at anyone who sat down. Starving dogs, all kinds of people coming and going. Hindus who would fish—they would take fish out of the lakes in the park and put them in little plastic bags and sell them to Buddhists, because then the Buddhists could earn merit by freeing the fish back into the pond. I'm not making this up.

So you can't really get into "Oh, how beautiful, how esoteric, how sublime." It's the whole show. And that's what became the metaphor for me. Sometimes, sure—it wasn't like that when Gotama was sitting under the tree. But still, it was so powerful. And there was no sense whatsoever of seclusion from the world or any of the craziness of the world.

Again, it brought home to me that freedom, our potential for awakening, doesn't have to wait until we can do a three-month retreat, or until we've arranged the perfect circumstances, or until our mind is calm and quiet. There's nothing to wait for. There's no reason to wait. As Shantideva says, it's a feast of joy and we're all invited. All we have to do is accept the invitation. And it's so amazing how difficult, how scary it can sometimes be to accept that invitation—or when we look around in the world, how few people really do.

The other big thing to do in Bodh Gaya is hang out in the chai shop and drink chai all day. There's not really much else to do. So hanging out there, Joseph was commenting how the people that live there—the guys who run the chai shop—are good people. He's known their families for years. But they're not really interested in awakening. So many wonderful Buddhist teachers come through Bodh Gaya from all different traditions, and the people that live there are interested, they're nice, they like to meet the teachers. But there isn't this pull to really delve into the teachings, to awaken. It becomes so clear that even having the opportunity handed to us isn't always enough.

What that brings up in me is such joy and appreciation for all of us—that something in us has recalled us to our true selves, has awakened in us the willingness to really begin exploring, to come home again to what is true. You might not have known it before you came here, if this is your first retreat, but now you do: it isn't easy. It isn't necessarily fun. It isn't every moment a moment of the joy of the miracle of awakening arising in your consciousness. It is—you just don't notice it.

It's tough. Nisargadatta says that the search for reality is the most dangerous of all undertakings, because it will destroy the world in which you live.

I mean, it's true in a way. It's not that it obviously destroys the outer world or makes us unable to live in the normal world. But it subverts all our perceptions. It destroys the world in which we live by destroying our clinging to all of our previous preoccupations—all of our holding on to this constant birth and death of the self. It destroys our sense of what is true and who we are. And this, obviously, can be very unsettling.

But it doesn't mean—and I want to emphasize this—that once we awaken, we don't live a normal life. In fact, it might be more normal than ever.

This is from a Sufi master: "The true person of God sits in the midst of her fellow men and rises and eats and sleeps and marries and buys and sells and gives and takes in the bazaar and spends the days with other people, and yet never forgets God even for a single moment."

That's the difference.

And for some reason, when we're still in the grip of the constant rise and fall of the self, still clinging to our old perceptions, it feels like the world we know will be destroyed. Opening to that insecurity can be so frightening, so threatening. We don't know that on the other side of that is a life so filled with joy that never forgets the truth even for a single moment—and yet is thoroughly in the midst of all beings, of all life. Not at all separated. In fact, more completely connected than ever.

The Buddha said once that what is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer thirsts after it. Just a shift of perspective. And that main shift can come about through part of what we're observing here with our mindfulness.

When we begin to explore what we're calling this continuous "I," when we let go of that constant referral of every sense contact back to a sense of me—there's a sound, I'm hearing the sound; there's a thought, I'm having the thought—it's not even that gross as "the thought, I'm having the thought." But that moment-to-moment referral of experience back to some unquestioned sense of solid self.

One reason it can get so disorienting as our consciousness lets go of old perceptions and assumptions, as our mindfulness strengthens and we begin to explore more, is because we begin to see: it's not that there's some solid "I" that we have to somehow see and define and annihilate—and then we're scared, wondering what we're going to do when there's no I. But as we begin to look, we see it's more like there's this sense of the birth and death of a sense of me, Carol, separate. That birth and death of that sense arising and passing so quickly, almost moment to moment. Again, so fast we don't see it.

It's actually much more simple than some solid thing we've got to get rid of. But on the other hand, it's so subtle that you can see why it can be hard to see through. Or more so, it's not even that it's hard to see through—but we see through it once and then we wonder why in the next moment it's back. "I really saw it that time. How many times have you had the experience of a new layer coming up? Oh no, I dealt with that one before. I saw it to the depths. I really understood it. Something's wrong—it's coming back."

It's because in some way we keep falling back into this sense of unchangingness, this sense of permanence.

So what we can begin to do with our mindfulness is not think about it, not analyze it—forget it, we do that way too much. But when there's just that subtle sense of me, don't try to figure it out. Just turn the attention back on what you're calling "me." It's almost like you can note it the same way you note any other sensation or thought or experi-

ence. For example, when I'm practicing and it's to the point where the noting is very, very steady, I've started to notice that almost every third note I make might be "self" or "me" or "Carol."

That's the note. But the perception that the note is arising out of is a different experience every time. And so that's why we need to turn around and look. We say, "Oh, there's me again. There's me again." But there's no "again." One moment it might have been a subtle sensation. Another moment it might have been just a sense of contraction. Another moment it might have been an image. Another moment it might have been a thought. Another moment it might have been, again, a sense of contraction.

And as soon as we turn our attention to it, we see that this so-called "I" is vanishing. As soon as it arises, it's vanishing. And the next moment, another is arising. If you really look at it, you'll see that one, too, is vanishing. And the only reason there's continuity is because we don't really look, and we think, "Oh, that felt the same as the last one." Actually, we don't think that—we think it *is* the same one. That's what happens without mindfulness.

With mindfulness, when we turn onto the experience and really look at it, we see that all of this is contact, sense contact, knowing, feeling arising. And without mindfulness, there's some clinging, some aversion. It might be as subtle as that, or it might be ten miles down the road and worlds and worlds away from here, feeling much more solid. But it's all the same process.

I find it really fascinating to just keep turning around and looking at that. Not trying to get rid of something. Not on some big crusade to rid the experience of "I." It's not an enemy. It serves us well in functioning in life when we see it for what it is—just a sense, a contraction, a clutching of experience, a holding on and solidifying. It's what we call identification. All that's happening is just contact, sense experience, and knowing of it. Perception.

I just want to briefly mention, not really go into them, but to put it in your minds again because it's been talked of before: in this looking at the experience in the moment that's being grasped and experienced as "I," it's going to be one of the five khandhas—or skandhas in Sanskrit.

Just to mention what they are again: we might be experiencing a sense of body, body sensation. And as you know, probably all of you have had at times the experience where there's just tingling—there's no sense of anything else going on with it. Notice the difference between when it's just tingling and when it's *my* tingling. So that's one way: sense of body, when grasped, gives a sense of self.

It can also be more subtle. Not so much contracting around a particular sensation, but more around an image that we don't quite notice of the body. For example, there's tingling, and a mental image comes up of the knee, or a mental image comes up of the whole body. There's actually a kind of identification, a clutching around that image, which is actually mental. This isn't the body itself, but an image of it.

Or sometimes for me, there'll be a subtle felt sense, almost an imagining of my whole body, when if I'm really attentive there's just sensations. But then this felt sense arises of it landing in the body, or even looking in the mirror, or even remembering how I looked the last time I looked in the mirror as I'm sitting here. And that's actually all mental. That's actually not the body. But in a way, it's one of the ways that subtle sense experience can be clung to, and it gives us a feeling of solid body.

Of course, there are feelings—the second of the skandhas—the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, which we've talked about quite a lot. The clutching around any of that experience gives this real sense of separation between me and other.

Perception is the third. That quality of recognition, which includes memory. It's interesting to notice that the grasping of perception, the identification with perception—and again, this is so fleeting, but it can be so solid. Just for example: how much do you trust your perceptions? As I think I talked about once, the perception that we're unchanging is a total delusion. But on an even more noticeable scale, have you had the experience of really having a perception of someone else here who you don't really know? "That person is so arrogant. They're so angry."

They're so self-centered. They're so whatever. And then a couple days later, as the mental state affecting consciousness lifts, you look at that person again and realize, "Oh, I think maybe it wasn't them that was so arrogant and so angry and so self-possessed. Maybe it was me."

Or vice versa—if you're filled with metta, our perception of people is one of friendship. People look beautiful. We see the light shining out of their eyes. We see them as walking embodiments of truth. Which we are. But generally, if someone at any of those moments came up and said, "Do you think your perception could be a little off?" we'd probably fight to the death. "No, I know what I'm seeing, and don't take it away from me." Solid clinging.

Consciousness, the fourth skandha, is that quality of knowing. Hearing and the knowing of it. Seeing and the knowing of it. The awareness of it, you could say. Again, very subtle to notice. It's sort of like a foreground-background shift. We're more aware of, or in some subtle way tuned in more to, the appearance that's arising—the sound,

the sensation, the thought, whatever—and not quite as tuned into the knowing quality. But sometimes that knowing quality is very vivid. Yet again, rising and falling so rapidly with each new sense contact that first it's even hard to notice, and then it's hard to see that it's coming and going. So that sense of continuity gives a sense of solidity, and there can be a subtle clinging to that. Subtle clinging to the sense of being the knower. A subtle clinging to the sense of being the witness. It's tricky.

The fifth skandha is called sankaras, or mental formations. This includes everything else—emotions, thoughts, everything. One I'd particularly like to point out is intention, because you can see how that arising of intention is so easily clung to and identified as self. "I'm getting up. I'm going to generate metta. I'm reaching." Who's deciding to do this? Who decided to come here? It's very easy to identify with intention.

I'm just mentioning these. I don't want to engender a lot of thought. But if, in that moment of realizing there's an "I" in the picture, you simply turn around and see what the "I" is emerging out of in that particular moment—I wanted to bring these up as possibilities. They're called the five skandhas of grasping, really. And again, it's not that if there's no grasping in that moment, they all fly apart and we're not a human being anymore. But the sense of permanence, that sense of referring everything back to some unchanging thing, comes when there's grasping at these experiences.

Sometimes that sense of contracting around, identifying with a personal experience, a sense experience, is obvious and easy to see—and can even be quite funny, how it just arises out of nowhere. Sort of like the miracle of awakening. Sometimes the miracle of a solid sense of self just seems to arise out of nowhere.

One time I was doing a self-retreat in a very beautiful hilly area in California. I was sitting up on the side of a hill on a bench, looking out from pretty high up, in one of those states where the mind just feels open and clear, experience just arising and passing, no contracting, no sense of me. Some turkey vultures were flying out of nearby pines and whizzing past really close. Far out, just appreciating whatever was arising. This went on for some time, and there were more and more of them—five or six flying around. I thought, "Wow, this is far out."

And then suddenly—I guess what I first identified with was seeing, and then there was a thought—I realized they were circling. And I realized they were circling me. I had this moment of total panic. I had to hold myself back—I just wanted to stand up and scream, "I'm still alive!"

It's funny when it's so solid, so quick. And it's always right after you've been sort of thinking, "I'm so free. I'm so open."

But other times the sense contact that gives rise to that grasping contraction of self is so fleeting and subtle that we don't even notice the contact, and we wonder why the self seemed so solid. It really takes a situation like this, perhaps—of silence, of some kind of development of mindfulness and concentration—to even notice these subtleties.

I think it's very interesting. Last year I was sitting, and this is where I first really saw how this could work. Out of just such a little nothing experience—I was doing walking meditation, nothing special, just present. I had a turtleneck on, and I just kind of ran my finger under my turtleneck. That contact somehow gave rise to an unclear, physical memory—how to say it—almost like a physical memory of myself, not even very formed. It wasn't something I could have put words to at all, but it was just this feeling of myself. And then it gave rise to a stronger image of myself walking, and then another memory of myself, this time more solid, and then a sort of projecting out: "I wonder what I look like walking back and forth like this." I think I was bouncing up and down, wondering if I looked a little weird. And all of a sudden I realized there was this solid construction. Just from a very, very subtle experience.

That was very interesting to me. There's nothing to fight or hate about that, but it just gave me some information about how it can seem so empty, and suddenly the awareness of that emptiness seems to have vanished. In its place, there's this sense of Carol again doing her little dance. Very quick, very subtle movement. And in the seeing of it, it all just fades away again, no problem.

So I find it fun to explore, fun to play with. Gross or subtle, it doesn't really matter. But knowing this, it's not something to fight or to be afraid of. Yes, sometimes fear comes up when our little cozy sense of security and permanence gets threatened. It does bring up fear. That's okay. That's just fear coming up. But in the bigger picture, sometimes not out of fear, but often people will say, "Well, who wants to live like that? Detached and dispassionate and not part of things." Again, that's not how it is. It's just the reverse. It's not about a gray, empty life.

Nisargadatta again: "The world, the sense of self, by its very nature, is painful and transient. But when you see it as it is, you divest yourself, you rid yourself of all desire and fear. When the world does not hold and bind you, it becomes an abode of joy and beauty. You can be happy in this world only when you are free of it."

Happy in this world. Free of it doesn't mean rejecting anything. It really means liberated from our enclosed and resistant sense of self and liberated into a life of real beauty and joy. It's really a movement from a life of clinging and fear and trying to control what can never be controlled into a life of faith, of deep trust and deep surrender. And scary as that might be, or difficult as it might be for us, it's so miraculous.

I think everyone here has touched that somehow, somewhere, over and over—or none of us would be here. No one comes and does something like this just because you don't know what else to do for three months.

So in a way, it's the movement of faith that allows us to begin to open to the miracle of awakening. And it's the retouching of that truth that lets us move deeper and deeper into a life of faith, a life of trust and surrender. I read somewhere—I don't remember where—a definition of faith as "the drive towards that which cannot be described." I really like that: the drive towards that which cannot be described. It fits with my personal relationship to the experience of faith as trust. Trust in that which cannot be described or defined or known or owned or contained.

Sometimes two types of faith are spoken of, and I want to mention this briefly. The first sort of reawakening to our true nature, this recalling of the beauty that we really are, is sometimes called bright faith. We might be inspired by anything—by another person, by something we've read, by just seeing another yogi here, by hearing a story of some master in the world, whatever. That first recalling of what we really are awakens a kind of brightness in the mind, a joyous confidence, a real energy. You know, you really have this sense: "Yes, I'm going to do this. I'm really going to commit my life, whatever form it takes." And that's wonderful because that's what gets us going. It can be reconnected with, reawakened throughout our life.

In fact, in times here when you're really feeling like faith is gone and you don't know what you're doing here and your practice is dead—the second type of faith is verified faith, which really deeply arises from your own experience. And you might think, "I never had any experience that any faith could arise out of." But you can reconnect, you can find ways to reconnect with so-called outer inspiration to reignite this bright faith, to recall ourselves again to the miracle of awakening. And that again can give us the energy to come back to our own experience, which will open into verified faith.

For me, over and over, talking to yogis, to you in interviews, it awakens a sense of bright faith in me—so much to see just the light of truth, the light of Dharma, kind of shining out from everybody. And it wouldn't be in the moments you might think, either. But just to see how the truth works its magic, no matter how hard we try to stop it. We do everything we can not to just be with what is. But the Dharma is stronger than we are. So it just shines out. And every day something happens that wakes up again in me deep appreciation and love of the Dharma and total awe of how it works, of the mystery.

You can see it in other yogis here. Sometimes when you just don't have the juice, you see someone working really hard. Or it can be tuning into someone who's in difficulty and seeing that they're really meeting that difficulty with fortitude or with their own faith. Or a sudden spurt of compassion comes up in your heart where you least would have expected it. Whatever it is, just know that this tuning in to whatever inspiration awakens the bright faith can be a way back into the trust to drop into your experience.

And out of that will come what's called verified faith, which is intuitive experience, real understanding that comes from your own experience, whatever that experience might be. It might be one of impermanence. It might be just emptiness, interconnectedness. It might be of the power of metta, of non-separation. It might be just a moment of suchness standing in the snow—whatever it is. A sense when again we touch the possibility. And when that's been touched for ourselves, it's called verified because if someone comes up and says, "No, that's not so," you don't even want to argue. It doesn't matter. We know. We know. It's not of the mind, but we know. And no one can take that away.

From that place it becomes possible to move more and more into this trust of the unknown. And we're all living in the unknown anyway—mostly we try to control it. A life of faith, to me, is really moving into that with trust. Not to confuse it with getting more knowledge, trying to understand things, trying to be able to explain everything. The way it's been for me is the more I practice, the more I look, the more I see that I don't know anything. And I know even more of nothing than I thought I did twenty years ago, or last year. And it gets more and more okay not to know anything.

There's a science article from the New York Times—it's talking about astronomy. This is from a few years ago, but I heard an update on the radio the other day, and the update wasn't very different, so I'll just read this. Astronomers discovered the largest galaxy ever. It includes more than one hundred trillion stars, measuring more than six million light years in diameter—sixty times the size of the Earth's galaxy, the Milky Way. Sixty times the size of the galaxy we're in. This new galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump of galaxies, a cluster of one thousand galaxies called Abel 2029. Somehow, okay, if we name it, we've controlled it.

But then it goes on to say—this is just the introduction—that they hope further study will provide clues to a mysterious substance called dark matter. Since there doesn't appear to be enough matter in the universe to account for the gravitational forces that would be necessary for all this clumping of all these galaxies, scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that escapes detection because it emits no radiation. In other words, they're making it up. They have no idea.

According to this theory, 99% of the universe consists of this missing matter. So confronted with this, the more we look, the more we see – it's a total mystery. A total mystery.

And the attitude that really makes life with this knowing possible is one I encountered in a book I read once. The author called it radical acceptance. He says that radical acceptance is radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways. Radical. To let go, to accept, it is necessary only to give up your fears. Only. But it's radical.

Can we accept truth in all forms, at all times, in all ways? Whatever is manifesting, can we accept that radically as an expression of truth here and now? Sometimes. And when we can't, when we feel that resistance, just looking and seeing – what have I been resistant to today? What hasn't been acceptable as an expression of truth in this moment? And it can be really obvious or it can be really subtle.

I know there can be ways that one feels one is accepting, but there's a certain not giving in to the mystery, to the unknowing, that actually manifests as resistance. I remember one retreat I sat where I was having wave after wave of grief and sadness. It went on for days and days to the point where this one mental image would come up and I'd go, "Oh no, it's starting." Then I'd start noting, and I really felt like I was feeling it, accepting it. I was noticing all the images. I was saying, "It's okay, it can be here." But very subtly underneath, a certain lack of trust, a certain feeling that if I was doing it right, it should go already. And really under that was more – it was okay in this moment, and I knew that, I was there with it in this moment. But a subtle fear of what might happen in the next moment. Just this settling, this "what if it gets worse?" – even though I'm totally okay with how it is now. It's not really a problem.

This radical acceptance, really living in trust, is knowing that willingness to be totally okay with what is just as it is now, knowing that we never know what's going to happen in the next moment. We have no idea. I mean, we think we do. We think I'll keep talking and the bell will ring and we'll walk out and you'll do walking. And often what we think will happen sort of happens in the big picture, so we get this delusion that there's some kind of order and we can plan things. But we don't really know what's going to happen in any moment.

When you sit down to a sitting, you have no idea what's going to happen in that sitting. Can we sit down and just say, "Whatever happens in this moment, I surrender to the Dharma," and just let it happen? It's hard. Just this subtle expectation, trying to arrange experience to meet our expectation, is a movement away from this living in un-

knowing. Manipulating meditation. Somehow trying to hide the fact that we don't have a clue. If we could just surrender to not having a clue, it's actually not a problem. It's kind of exciting. It's interesting.

But on the way there, it's scary. And the mind so much doesn't like this constantly shifting ground, the sense of uncertainty. It's so easy to fall into expectation – whether it's expectation trying to recreate an experience you had before. Do you ever find yourself doing that? Trying to figure out just the right amount of sleep. Exactly this amount of sleep and eating these certain things. And at this time of day I had this perfect meditation. How was I sitting? How did I hold my hands? How did I move my head? What was my attitude?

And you find yourself falling into patterns, into rhythms, trying to recreate, to manipulate what should happen. This comes out of fear, out of controlling, out of this trying desperately to hide from the vastness of the mystery.

Expectation is really a way of searching for somewhere to rest, coming out of this constant shifting ground. And it's another form of control, a sense of self. Sometimes the expectation, the preset idea, almost determines what we experience. So watch out what you're expecting.

One of my teachers—he's so kind of earthy—he said, "Expectation is like garbage on your head." He says, "You become what you think. If you think garbage, what do you smell? Garbage." He goes on to say, for example, the thought "I'm not free, I can't know freedom, I'm hopelessly trapped" can set up that expectation, and that's what we find.

So just being aware—to stop looking for answers, stop seeking for explanations, stop trying to recreate the familiar—that's really moving into a life of trust and faith. A true warrior is willing to step into the mystery every moment. But the fact is, we are anyway. There's nothing we can do to change it. It's just a difference of: can we do it with grace? Can we really just let go and dance with the changes? Or do we get caught in the resistance and the fear?

This is another science article from the New York Times. It's about spiders. They're talking about how in 1884, after the huge volcanic explosion of Krakatau that just blew up the whole island—all life killed, scorched—nine months later, scientists were exploring to see how life would start coming back. And the first life they found was this tiny spider. And they wondered, how did a spider get here? Because they can't fly, right? And there was no other life there.

Apparently, a lot of kinds of spiders, at some point in their life, do something called ballooning. On the tip of a leaf, they attach their little strand of spider web and just let it out and fly with that web. It says they can go—not just baby ones, but really big spiders—they can occasionally reach thousands of meters of altitude and travel hundreds of kilometers before they come down. Clearly, they're not directing it with a rudder. It's like, just let go and fly. They could come down anywhere.

I don't think that's so different from our life. The difference is just how much resistance there is to the willingness to let go and fly. And that's not always in our control. There's something about the mind that really doesn't like insecurity. Something in the psyche is deeply wounded by this.

A few years ago, at a retreat in Yucca Valley in California—some of you were there—we had a couple of earthquakes. Not huge ones. The second one was scary for some people, but they weren't huge, and there wasn't really any damage. But for the next two days, hundreds and hundreds of aftershocks, just every few minutes that first night. I didn't actually find the earthquakes that scary; I'd never been in one before. But after two days of aftershocks every five minutes, there's something deeply unsettling about that. Not just to the mind, but visceral to the body. Just as soon as you settle down... and you never know if you have to run outside because it's a big one. Of course the radio always says, "Twenty-five percent chance of the big one in the next thirty-six hours." I don't know why they do that. It doesn't help much.

The sense of growing insecurity, and the mind just frantically wanting to find some solid place to rest—the mind and the body. You can imagine what a world of good it did for the yogis on that retreat. But it was fascinating. The psyche hates it, but it's fascinating to see the resistance that comes up. But that's really how it is all the time. And it's not the unknowing, it's not the mystery that's the suffering.

You know, it's the resistance that's the delusion. It's the trying to steer things in some weird way that we think we want it to go, trying to desperately grasp on, to know what's going to happen—when if we could just let go from that leaf and let the wind take it, there's really not a problem.

There's a beautiful passage from Suzuki Roshi that captures this perfectly:

"While you're practicing zazen, you may hear the rain dropping from the roof in the dark. Later, the wonderful mist will be coming through the big trees. And still later, when people start to work, they'll see the beautiful mountains. But some people will be annoyed if they hear the rain when they're lying in their beds in the morning, because they don't know that later they'll see the beautiful sun rising from the east.

If our mind is concentrated on ourselves, we'll have this kind of worry. But if we accept ourselves as an embodiment of the truth or Buddha nature, we will have no worry. We think, now it's raining, but we don't know what will happen in the next moment. By the time we go out, it may be a beautiful day or a stormy day. And since we don't know, let's appreciate the sound of the rain now.

This is the right attitude. If you understand yourself as a temporal embodiment of the truth, you will have no difficulty whatsoever. You appreciate your surroundings and you appreciate yourself as a wonderful part of Buddha's great activity, even in the midst of difficulties. This is our way of life."

If you can appreciate yourself as the embodiment of truth even in the midst of difficulties—even for one moment—it can change everything.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 272

Aversion and Attachment: Making Friends Through Mettā

Carol Wilson · 1h03

In this intimate dharma talk, Carol Wilson shares her personal journey of discovering unexpected insights through intensive mettā (loving-kindness) practice. Drawing from the Mettā Sutta's teaching to "cherish all living beings with a boundless heart," she explores how cultivating loving-kindness transformed her relationship with the very obstacles to love itself—aversion and attachment, traditionally known as the far and near enemies of mettā.

Wilson offers a refreshing perspective on working with difficult mind states. Rather than trying to uproot negativity through force of will, she describes how mettā creates a safe space for making friends with our habitual patterns. She illustrates this through candid examples from retreat life—noticing her mind's tendency to fixate on what's unpleasant, experiencing fear when lunch schedules change, or feeling aversion toward new people in the meditation hall. Through mettā, these moments become opportunities for deeper understanding rather than occasions for self-judgment.

The talk addresses the subtle ways attachment can masquerade as love, particularly in close relationships. Wilson distinguishes pure mettā—an unconditional outflowing of well-wishing—from love with conditions attached, noting how the latter creates a sense of wanting something back. She offers practical guidance for navigating intense practice periods, suggesting when to stay with mettā phrases, when to shift to vipassanā, and when to consciously bring in joy and spaciousness. Throughout, she emphasizes that spiritual practice isn't about achieving perfection but about embracing our full humanity with kindness and clear seeing.

I first began practicing metta intensively, and I suppose before I practiced it, I had a bias towards Vipassana or insight practice, since that's what I'd done for so many years. I had this sense that metta would be wonderful—to really cultivate loving-kindness and this all-embracing care for beings—but that the bottom line for freedom is wisdom, understanding. I wasn't really expecting much insight to arise from doing metta practice.

I was quite surprised. I continue to be quite surprised, both in the formal practice itself and in the effect that I feel as it blends more and more into how I relate to experience in my daily life. What I've found through practice of loving-kindness is a deeper experiential understanding of the nature of both attachment and aversion—which,

oddly enough, are the near and far enemies of loving-kindness. So we get to experience both of these aspects, these so-called enemies, very much in our loving-kindness practice.

The different angle that metta brought into the mandala of my practice has helped deepen my understanding and sense of freedom from enslavement to aversion, to fear, and enthrallment with attachment and clinging. With Vipassana, I could subtly have the sense—even though we say you open and accept things as they are—that I have to uproot all the attachment, uproot all the negativity, the defilements. There was a certain sense they had to be done away with. Somehow metta really strengthens my ability to make friends with these aspects of experience.

When attachment or aversion arises in my experience and I'm practicing metta, rather than "bad, get away," there's a sense of really flowing into seeing clearly and accepting this aspect of experience. This acceptance leads to clear seeing, which leads to deeper understanding and ultimate disengagement from either attachment or aversion—from these forces of suffering. That's really what I want to talk about tonight: some experiences of working with attachment and aversion as they come up in metta practice, ways that it's been helpful for me.

Really, it's in everyday small experiences, not always the big boom—which is another thing I had expected. Somehow in practicing loving-kindness, I thought the sense of all-embracing love would be so powerful that it would just supersede all other experience. And it can do that at times. But I expected it would stay that way somehow, and if I didn't hit this pinnacle of perfection of loving-kindness, I wasn't doing it right. I could get into an even deeper dejection about it.

This is a partial piece of the Metta Sutta said by the Buddha when he was describing loving-kindness practice:

Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will.

When I read that, when I feel it in my heart, there are times it's so beautiful, so inspiring, because it evokes that unbounded loving-kindness in all directions. I really can feel: yes, let me never harm another, let me never deceive another.

Then there are other times when I read that or hear that and my gut reaction is: it's impossible. That is so far from my moment-to-moment experience, how I live my life, even with the best intentions. I'm not there. I'm not perfect. So much ill will can still come up. Aversion still comes up. So much desire can still come up.

I want to talk a little on that level, because I used to think there was this huge gap. And I see that metta is really working, really transforming us on these little moment-to-moment levels. We don't have to think nothing's happening because we can't feel it boundlessly in all directions.

Another thing the Buddha said often is: *Hatred can never cease by hatred. Hatred can only cease by love. This is an eternal law.* It's powerful. It's beautiful. But when I look deeply into my conditioning, into my life and the way my habitual responses have been through much of my life, I'd have to honestly say: do I really believe that? That hatred only ceases by love? Is that what deeply motivates some of my reactions and responses?

Rather than blaming myself at all, it's just to begin to look honestly. And this is the attitude of loving-kindness. I can look back at how I was brought up and what I really learned in my family life. I didn't have an abusive or horrible family life at all. But I saw recently an advertisement for a book called *How to Argue and Win Every Time: Ways to Win Arguments at Home and at Work,* and I thought: yes, that's what I learned when I was growing up—that the real strength is knowing how to win your argument no matter what. Ultimately it usually came down to who could get the angriest with the most force. I don't mean actual physical force, but anger has a real power to it at times, a real sweetness almost. And it also has a real discrimination—when I'm really angry,

to the point where my mindfulness is being overpowered, the things I say can be hurtful. They're hurtful because I'm also seeing right into the other person's weakness. There's a real discrimination that goes on with anger, but used very unwisely.

Well, that's what I learned, really, about where true strength is, about how to get what you want. And although there was lip service to kindness and generosity, and there was real caring, when the chips were down you kind of went for the jugular a little bit.

Today, I hadn't really thought of this particular aspect of my life this way before, but when I was about eleven or twelve, I started taking piano lessons. The woman who taught me I came to know very well over the years. She sort of became like a grandmother—I didn't really have any living grandparents. I took piano lessons for more

years than I care to remember, considering how awfully I play the piano, although I like it. But this woman and I became very close, and in her way, she was a great inspiration to me, showing me that there's another way to relate to life.

She was a Christian Scientist, which I'm not going to try to explain because I know I wouldn't get it accurate. It's not a way of living that I came to myself. But what really deeply impressed me about her was this: as I understood it anyway, the way she talked with me and the way she lived her life—not that she was any perfect being—but there was this deep and conscious faith and commitment to live a life that was based on love. That love was really stronger, is really stronger, than pain, than our fears, than our anxieties.

As I understood the way she explained it to me, a lot of that sense of being so sure of love's power was part of not going to doctors—being so certain that love is stronger than our ideas about our materiality. I never really quite embraced that aspect. But who she was as a being, her deep faith and her commitment to try and live a life that came out of her conviction that love is stronger than pain, that love is stronger than fear—I realize now that really opened me up to the fact that there's another way of living. And not that we have to be perfect in that way of living, but that we can simply explore the possibility.

That's how I would really hope we could approach our loving-kindness practice. Not with this sense of perfection that we must get to. If the perfection is an inspiration, an opening of the heart, that's wonderful—it really can point to that boundlessness. But when we fall into aversion or self-judgment and start to compare ourselves and judge ourselves by that idea of perfection, then could we let go of it and look at our practice as simply an opening to exploration? To really explore the nature of love and connectedness. And as someone said today, in that exploration we begin to see what blocks love and connectedness.

Two of the big blockages, so to speak, that we will experience head-on in any metta retreat are the far enemy and the near enemy. I want to talk a little bit about each of those in the context of loving-kindness practice.

So this anger, aversion, fear, and all the different ramifications—irritation, grief, sorrow, murderous rage, self-judgment, self-loathing, terror, just slight irritation and pushing away. You can add your own particular flavor, whichever one happens to be coming up for you. Or maybe not, maybe none is coming up for you.

If we begin to look at what's actually going on, how do we experience whichever of these manifestations is present at a particular moment? You see, it's not just some big amorphous blob of emotion that somehow descended from nowhere, a curse from the gods. Really, if we can bring our attention into just what we're experiencing here and now, we can see that it's arising—take aversion or fear—it's arising in this moment, here and now, as a response or reaction to some experience that's happening here and now. It's something we can really come to know quite intimately. We don't have to be afraid of it.

Something difficult or painful is happening—a physical sensation. Aversion is a reaction of pulling away, of not liking that particular physical sensation. Or it might be a particular emotional experience, or it might even just be a thought. The thought might be of something in the future, but it's the thought happening right now that actually engenders the aversion.

The thought might be, "Oh no, this pain is bearable now, but I'm never going to be able to make it till ten o'clock tonight. Forget it." We so easily think that's in the future, but what's happening is that thought, right then, projecting some experience into the future. We're experiencing fear as a result of that thought here and now.

So fear and aversion are always experiences that are reactions and responses to physical, emotional, and mental experiences happening right now. Which to me simplifies it enormously, because then I can get a handle on coming in and seeing how it's happening.

When I realize there's knee pain, and there's aversion to the knee pain, and then there's that projecting it into the future, that thought, and then there's fear—how do we actually experience the fear or the aversion in a moment of experience? It's experienceable as the mind, the heart, the attention flinching away, pulling away from whatever it is that's happening.

I remember the other night when I was talking, I mentioned how I had this feeling of real heaviness and tiredness in my body. There was a knowing of it, but when I really brought my mindful attention in to feel it fully, I saw that what had been happening in the aversion—

the not wanting to feel that way, the attention, the awareness is pulled back. It's not connecting. And it's an absolute, literal experience of disconnection, of separation. It's exactly in that moment we can see why we feel disconnected or separated. It's almost literal with the attention—it's pulled back and we're not connecting with what's hap-

pening. That's really how aversion, how fear works, so to speak. That's how they manifest when we're just exploring them, paying attention to them on a moment-to-moment level.

Now with mettā, it's the opposite. When we meet that experience of pain in the knee, or when I meet that experience of heaviness and tiredness and aversion with mettā, what happens is the attention just flows right into that experience—whether it's right into the pain, right into the heaviness, right into the emotional experience of aversion. There's no hesitation. There's no preference, no inner questioning of "Do I want to feel this or not? Maybe I'd rather go there." It's just: this is happening. Flow right into it.

And there's also no clinging to it. There's no agenda of "Let's make this stay." There's no agenda whatsoever. Just this moving right in, into it and surrounding it. It's not blind. The mettā doesn't only see that pain and nothing else. It sees the pain, knows the pain, and whatever else is going on around it.

What's interesting is that as we are working with cultivating mettā, that's not the idea we're having. We're not sitting here saying, "May I cultivate mettā so that in a moment the attention can flow into the experience." We're very simply cultivating the intention of mettā, coming back to that over and over. May I be free from danger. May you be free from danger. But what happens is that quite spontaneously, as this intention has been strengthened, as other difficult experiences come up—whether it's physical pain or emotional pain in our own experience—almost as if all by itself, you'll find that the mettā begins to activate in that way, to really let us move into the difficult experience rather than flinching away from it.

So in a way, energetically you could say, or awareness-wise, you can see how mettā is the opposite of aversion or fear, that it works in the opposite way. And it's in this way that the power of loving-kindness really begins to manifest itself. The strength and protection that it offers us—to be with the difficult, to heal us from our sense of separation—comes not by overpowering or getting rid of what is difficult, what we don't like, what we fear. It comes by making friends with it, by including it in the whole context of our experience.

The mettā flows into and softens and includes what is difficult, but then—at least in my experience—it expands outward and beyond it. Rather than drowning, getting lost in the knee pain, or getting lost in the aversion I feel or the fear that I feel, rather than "I'm so heavy and tired, I can't stand it"—the mettā flows into that, really experiences it in a very full way, and then, because it's non-discriminating, it also allows the rest of our experience to be noticed and seen equally clearly.

So: "My knee is really killing me, I can't bear it." Flow in, and it's tingling, it's pressure, it's hard, it's tight. And then: "Oh, but you know, it's really very peaceful in this room. It's really quite nice today. I like the sound of the raindrops." It just opens up the whole field.

In some ways, that's what I meant when I said the other night that loving-kindness helps us open to the whole show of life—all the beautiful, all the horrendous, and everything in between. It helps us open to the whole show of ourselves. It does this by softening into what's difficult, but also because it gives us a whole context in which to hold what is difficult.

If all we saw were the painful, horrific, difficult aspects—which sometimes in our practice are highlighted, and we call those dukkha times or difficult times, when everywhere you look is suffering or pain or anguish, whether internally or externally in the world—we can drown, it seems, at times in that. With mettā, those aspects are included, but because the context is so much larger, because it's held in this sense of totality, of acceptance, of softness, of non-judging, the mettā can bring a real safe space to let these difficult aspects surface. We begin to feel at ease in accepting them and being with them. It gives a real safe, protected context. It's very powerful that way.

And it happens by itself. In the groups over the last couple of days, quite a few people have expressed, in varying ways, experiences of being able to be more present for difficult aspects of themselves or their personality.

Either to be able to be softer with their self-judging, to be a little more kind when a sense of worthlessness comes up. The things that normally are so painful, we try not to even feel them. Or if we do feel them, we're so aversive to them, so fearful of them, that we just shut down altogether, or we fall totally into self-flagellation.

It's painful, but the metta, because it includes it in the larger context, makes it all much more workable. Much more workable. It broadens it. It gives us the courage to see and open to the difficulties, because so clearly we know that's not all there is. And again, this is the wisdom aspect.

When you're feeling a sense of metta and suddenly some people say, "It comes up, but I don't deserve to feel this. There's something really wrong if I'm feeling happiness. I don't have that right in this lifetime." And in the context of metta, even if you're just feeling for a moment that sense of pure loving and well-wishing, it's so clear that that sense that you don't deserve it isn't really true. It's so clear on some level that that's not

who you truly are. Even though, believe me, our mind wants to keep believing, "That's who I really am, and that's my conditioning." But on some level, having just touched metta, we know that's not true.

And this gives us the courage to be able to more clearly, with the metta, move into this difficult aspect and not be so overwhelmed—to really have the courage to open to it and see more and more that it's not nearly as powerful, that it doesn't nearly have the grip that we thought it did when we were afraid to be with it, without even realizing we were so afraid.

Just sharing some of my own experience of this: it's not always in the big moments. For me, it's often been in the really small experiences of opening to the difficult aspects, to fear and aversion, that don't seem like much at the time but that I really see changing my relationship to myself and to fear and aversion over the course of years in my life.

Metta, as you know, can really highlight aversion. It can really highlight fear, these difficult aspects. It's almost as if with the nondiscriminating, open, loving attention of metta and awareness, because we're not pushing things away, it sort of makes a space for the subterranean stuff sometimes to come up much more clearly to the surface.

I know some people today were expressing the sense of hitting a wall. It's going along fine and suddenly there's this wall. We each have our own particular manifestation of wall that we hit—whether it's terror or fear or self-hatred or just nothingness or disconnection, or again, fill in the dots.

But it doesn't always have to happen in the form of a huge wall. What I noticed often is just that, as I was practicing metta, the little aversions that come up would be highlighted. Because it was so—at least with aversion and anger—you can tell that it's not metta. You can at least tell that it's different, and because of that, you really notice it. Really often my metta phrase would turn to, "May you be filled with suffering." And I'd think, "Oh, I think I've drifted off here," and kind of come back.

So the tendency in my mind towards aversion, which happens to be a rather large tendency in my particular mind—we all have different degrees of all of it—has become over the years much more highlighted. I see it in finer and finer detail. And what metta has done... I thought in the beginning that what it would do is bring me to this pinnacle of being this perfect, loving, compassionate being, kind of beatific and glowing and always saying the loving, kind thing. I've given that one up long ago, and that's a relief.

What it's done actually—and I don't know how to be encouraging to you all—what it's done is I've really made friends with the aversive tendency of my mind. It's not even my mind. I just see it as this habit of mind.

I remember one time when it became so clear to me. I was on a ferry in Thailand, about an hour and a half ferry ride. Beautiful day. Perfect day. And I was standing up on the deck. There were so many beautiful aspects to the day. I was at peace. There was no problem. And I could see down to the lower deck, and there were all kinds of people—mostly foreigners. And there was one woman whose behavior just drove me nuts. That was the only thing I fastened on. Immediately I saw her being totally inappropriate, and my mind said, "I'm sure she's an American." And I always, you know, "God, another American. I hope no one can tell I'm American."

And I really saw that out of this multitude of perceptions and sense data, my mind went unerringly for the one that was unpleasant and really stuck there and built up a whole story and got into all this aversion. It was really interesting.

It was funny because it was so clear, and I thought, "Oh, that's the tendency of my mind. Okay."

Now with metta, what happens so much is that my mind will do that about myself, about anything new that comes into my experience. I noticed when I was on retreat here a couple of years ago that anytime something changed—somebody new came into the dorm area, somebody different sat next to me at lunch, the schedule changed, anything that changed even slightly—immediately aversion would come up in my mind.

Whereas in the past I would have been quite judgmental of myself about that. "What are you so aversive? The poor person's coming here to practice and here you are sending them all this negative energy." Now I would just notice it in that same way as I noticed my mind on the ferry. And immediately in that noticing with the friendliness of metta—"Oh, look at that aversion"—without any conscious intentionality on my part, the scenario would immediately broaden. Within the context of "Oh, that person, they're making so much noise in the bathroom," the next thought would be, "Well, but they're really here practicing. Isn't that wonderful?" And that would be true. It wasn't like a rationale trying to deny the aversion. When the aversion was really accepted, included in the field of metta, the field of experience would immediately broaden and I'd have the whole picture.

It has continued in that way, to be really lovely. I haven't changed that much. It's not that the mind doesn't still go to what's aversive. But whereas before it wouldn't have been able to notice the other aspect very well, now immediately that's included. And that's the inclusivity of metta. It makes the aversion so much more minimal, so much less powerful. I don't get reactive to it. I don't act out the whole scenario. It's just, "Oh,

there's aversion, and isn't that funny?" It's almost like, "Oh yes, my old friend aversion is coming up again." And then there's a sense of appreciation for the other person, for myself, for the situation.

You see how that inclusivity of metta gives the strength and the courage to open even more deeply into seeing how aversion arises, because I'm not so afraid of it. I don't try so much anymore to put on some outer attitude of how I think I should be. I used to internally deny a lot of the little slight aversive reactions in my mind, trying to give an outward appearance of the perfect person. It just led to a whole lot of confusion. When I'm not so fearful or afraid or hating of the aversion, and I really include it, it loses its power quite a bit. I mean, I guess you have to ask my friends if I'm exaggerating. Maybe I feel a lot freer and more flowing because I'm not all clogged up. But on the other hand, I'm not censoring so much anymore either. And that's been safe, more or less.

I was reading the Dalai Lama's autobiography last year. Of course, he's always in my mind—Mr. Compassion, just one of the more wonderful beings on the planet. I was really shocked, but then I got a kick out of it when I read that he was talking about how he had all kinds of food out for the little birds, but bigger birds would come to prey on them, so he'd shoot at the bigger birds with an air rifle to send them away. And I thought, "Okay, even the Dalai Lama. I can get off my case a little bit."

So the fearlessness and the sense of true interconnectedness that can come through metta can come in these small ways—not always just living in the bounty of happiness, but in bringing a kind of general boundlessness, opening up the boundaries of our experience. When we're meeting the difficult in that way, with the fearlessness of acceptance, it allows us to see more deeply into the dynamics of what's actually going on.

Again, personally, with the sense of aversion, as I've become more and more friendly with it, more okay with it, I began to see during the last metta retreat that every time something new came in, there was aversion. When I stopped flinching away from it and was just with it, that allowed me to begin to see that really what was underneath each little hit of aversion is fear. And it was such a subtle, quick fear that in thinking about it or looking for it, I never would have seen it. But by being really okay with the aversion, I began to get much more in touch with the fear that was feeding it—the fear of being intruded on, the fear of my space being taken away from me, just the fear of instability, the fear of change. I was really beginning to see how across the board, how often that fear came up.

Again, because of the metta, because of being okay with aversion and then being okay with the fear, not thinking I had to change it, I got so I could even laugh. Remember on the three-month course how halfway through the retreat they just change which lunch you go to? I went into panic that day. And even then, part of my mind was saying, "Carol, get over yourself."

Panic, because the lunches are changing. But I could laugh at it, let the panic be there, and then just watch what little situations would bring up a new spurt of fear. Fear that somebody different would be sitting across the table. I'd been sitting across from one person, and now I had to sit across from someone else. My mind would ask, why am I afraid of that? It doesn't make sense. But it doesn't matter. It just allowed me to really begin to open into what had been such a difficult experience before—that as soon as the fear came up, my mind would react with aversion. I'd push the whole experience away and never even notice the fear. So really, through metta, it allowed a much deeper understanding of the dynamics of the process that had been going on in my experience.

And with this, again in the context of real okayness, as soon as a thought would come up—these people are really so annoying in here, so pushy, they're not at all like the ones at the other lunch, it's different people—immediately the balancing feeling would arise, the balancing understanding. Either I could feel the pain of a person who was in some kind of hyper state about the food, or who had to be first in line. It's painful sometimes around the lunch line. Really, I think an enormous amount of joy, but also suffering sometimes when I'm going through that lunch line on a retreat.

And that's another way metta is a protection, actually. When I'm in a deep vipassana retreat, very open but very tuned into the suffering, I'm really not exaggerating—I can barely stand to get through the lunch line. Sometimes it's so painful to me I almost feel like I'm going to throw up. I'm serious. With metta, there's that pain, but again, there's the love, there's the connection with the pain rather than holding off from it. And it was really a protection. I was amazed that I could go through the line, still feel the pain, but it was much more balanced, much more broad—not just that one experience.

So just in these ways I've discovered very deeply, and it continues in my daily life, which isn't really that different—how the metta, the willingness, and it's not even a conscious willingness sometimes, just to flow into the situation, naturally expands beyond it. Fear and aversion can really open into appreciation, into acceptance, into connectedness. And in that way, through the metta, experience can become more and more boundaryless.

Because the sense of fear, the sense of aversion, very much sets up a sense of me and other. Whatever I'm afraid of, whatever I'm aversive to—whether it's something in my own experience, a sense of disconnection, whether it's someone else doing or being or saying something that brings up fear or aversion—very much me and other, and somehow needing to fix it.

With the metta, almost immediately for me, the me and other somehow turns into us. And the metta is not blind. It doesn't mean we don't see and feel the difficult aspects. It just gives a broader context for it. And a real fearlessness that comes from being able to see things as they are.

And knowing that as difficult, as sometimes overwhelming—I've been giving little experiences, but I know many, many times it's much more overwhelming than this. It just all seems to shoot up: the fear, the aversion, the terror, the rage. And it's so hard to meet that. Sometimes the metta isn't strong enough at that moment to seemingly meet it. But ultimately it is. Ultimately, love and truth are so much stronger than fear, than anger, than terror, than pain.

These difficult things can definitely seem to hide the love, the connectedness. They can definitely seem to hide what is true and what we truly are. But ultimately, the power of metta, love, and awareness cannot really even be touched by pain or fear or anger. It can be obscured a bit, but it really can't be damaged or touched by it.

A teacher of mine used to say that a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. And really, it can be that way. We can be struggling or angry or so caught in feeling worthless and self-blaming. And there can be just one moment, one spark of loving-kindness that comes. Even though it might fade again, in that moment it completely shines away, shines through all the self-hatred, all the fear. In that moment, however short it is, there's no room for doubt about what we're actually experiencing. We don't say, "Huh, I wonder, is this a real experience?" Well, sometimes people say, "Am I making it up?" But already they're out of it at that point and back to the self-doubt.

In a moment when the love, the connectedness is really shining, it's so clear. There's no question. It's so clear that we don't need to make ourselves different to be happy, that we don't need to somehow be perfect, make ourselves perfect in order to achieve loving-kindness, in order to achieve completion. It's so perfect that this becomes obvious in that one moment—that it's all here now and there's nothing we have to be different. There's nothing we have to actually change in ourselves to make that true. It's already true.

And then there are the times when that seems so far from our actual experience, and the memory of it—that's when we're saying, "I made that up. That never happened." When you're hitting that wall, as people have described today. I just want to acknowledge that this is a very important part of the practice. These intense aspects come up because of the strength of the loving-kindness practice. Because of the inclusivity of the heart and mind of loving-kindness, we're no longer censoring or pushing away the painful or so-called ugly aspects of ourselves. They are coming up.

It can seem like your practice has been growing stronger and stronger and you feel, "I'm really getting the flow, I'm really getting the knack of it now." And then—wham. At those points it's so easy to think, "Oh no, I blew it. I had a little period of grace but my true nature is really surfacing and this is how it's going to be for the rest of the retreat. This is what I always suspected was true all along."

So I just want to say this: it's going to happen, most likely, at some point. It's not a mistake. It's part of it.

There will be times when we can just softly be with it. Okay, wall. Just be with it and gently keep up the loving-kindness practice. Fine. But there will be times when that just isn't feasible—when the wall is too strong, the fear is too strong, or the anger, the self-judgment. We just feel like we're contracting and beating ourselves and shrinking. That's the time to let go of the formal metta.

Our first fallback is to move to vipassana—to really open into the soft presence and experiencing of: how do I experience the wall? Where are the physical sensations? What's the emotional tone of it? Can I just consciously acknowledge it? Let it be here. Not try to change it, but be present for it.

You can hear how that's not that much different from the attitude of metta. But it's taking an attitude of metta and bringing it into conscious presence with things just as they are. Sometimes in that we can get enough grounded in what's happening that we kind of find where we are again. Whereas when something really strong is going on and we keep trying to do the metta phrases, it's like something huge is happening—the elephant in the corner—and we're over here going, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful." A huge thing is going on and we're ignoring it. When we do that, this keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and the metta gets smaller and smaller. That's the time to really stop and turn around and say, "Oh yeah, here you are. Let's really be here together and see what's going on."

And then sometimes—and this can be true at times for almost everybody—what's going on just gets too strong. Or our contraction, or just the sense of trying too hard, we just get worn down. It's exhausting and wearying. That's the time to really step back, to take a break, to open up your field of awareness, open up your heart, and deliberately bring in some joy. Because that's the time when the difficulty is getting so large and looming so big that we can feel we're drowning in it. This could be whether it's a so-called internal experience, say of self-judging, or whether somehow we're just tuning into the pain of the world—and God knows there's enough—and we can seem like we're just drowning in that.

This is something Thich Nhat Hanh talks about a lot: that we have to open to suffering for understanding and compassion, but suffering isn't enough. At times, what metta does automatically is broaden the field. Sometimes we can do that quite consciously. When we say, "Okay, it seems like it's really hard right now, why don't you just put down the practice for a minute and take a walk and open up your senses—smell the apple blossoms, listen to the birds, feel the wind on your face—and just be in nature for a little bit." It's a deliberate way to try and bring in some spaciousness, some joy, to counteract the intensity of the involvement with the pain and the fear.

It's a very skillful means. So we really encourage you to find ways to consciously balance when things are getting difficult. It's not running away.

It's different from saying, well, I'm a little bored now, I think I'll get into that fantasy I had yesterday that really made the hour go fast. That's not exactly what I mean. But rather, some way that can bring in, in an aware way, something that really touches your heart, touches your mind, or just brings in some ease. It might be taking a bath. It might be taking a walk. It might be having a cup of tea. Find a way for yourself and know that this is a skillful part of practice. It's consciously bringing in what metta does by itself.

Well, there's not much time left for attachment. We're both aversion types, and when we teach with Josie, he'll go on about attachment and make it sound so wonderful, and he'll never get to aversion. But I do have some things to say about it.

So attachment is the near enemy of loving-kindness. What I experienced in doing the practice of loving-kindness is that I learned quite a lot, and I continue to learn quite a lot, about the subtler aspects of attachment. Whereas loving-kindness is this real outflowing of the heart—a joy or well-wishing or friendliness that really meets the experience wholeheartedly—its near enemy, love with attachment, can also seem to be really flowing into the experience, into the specific object wholeheartedly. But there's a certain grasping at the end of it. And whereas loving-kindness sees all aspects quite clearly and has wisdom with it, attachment is blinding, even in its subtler forms.

For example, with loving-kindness flowing towards a person, maybe even someone you don't know that well, there's just this real well-wishing, a loving joy, you're lit up, but it doesn't blind you to what that person is truly like. It's loving, it's appreciating them as they are. Attachment, clinging—there's a Tibetan saying that clinging puts feathers on the object. It prettifies it. We don't really see it in a clear way.

Think of the sense of first being in love, as we call it. There are certainly aspects of true metta, of real caring for someone, absolutely. But as we practice metta and get more grounded in what pure metta really feels like, we can see when it moves into attachment. There's some subtle sense of needing something back. Even if it's just that they love me back, or that they be a certain way, or at least that they don't hurt me. There's a subtle shift of needing something in return, and we are no longer seeing that other person or that object so clearly. It's somehow prettied up.

You know the phase after you fall in love—the other person is so perfect and so wonderful—and then suddenly the feathers fall off and you start to see that all the things you loved them for are the things that are driving you crazy now. How can that be? They've come down off their pedestal. Attachment can really feel let down, can really feel cheated. Whereas metta, there's nothing that is wanted, so there's no way that it can feel let down, no way it can feel cheated.

In practicing loving-kindness, what I saw in my own experience was that just as it seems to lift up the far enemy, I also found that it would easily shift slightly into attachment and seemed to bring up all kinds of attachments. I'll speak about this in a subtle way, not the huge blinding attachments—like "I've got to have a pizza, I've got to have it now, I don't care who's in my way, I'm getting in my car, I don't care what happens." That's really obvious clinging, blind. It's not too subtle, and we can usually tell it's happening. If we don't get what we want, we can pretty much agree that it's suffering. It's not too hard to see.

But the subtler levels—this is what I found really helpful—the way they would sneak into metta: say I'd be sending real metta to a dear friend, really wishing her well, and all of a sudden I'd find, "Oh, may she really be happy. We don't see each other very much anymore. I wonder if there's a way we could get together. I wonder if there's something going on."

I wonder why she hasn't called me. And suddenly I'd think, sort of, that that was still loving-kindness. But when I'd tune in, I could feel that the feeling had, little by little, quite shifted. From being an outflowing of the heart, it had moved a little down, and there was a little wanting coming out, and it was no longer free from suffering.

I'd find many ways that the loving-kindness, quite purely, could easily shift. One way is starting to think of things that I want back from the person I'm sending it to. Another way I find it is in how I'm relating to the practice itself—moving from truly wishing well to whoever, to wishing well in order to feel the loving-kindness, which is different. That's no longer metta, and you're not going to feel it at that point because that's not what's being cultivated. Wanting is being cultivated, and that's what we'll feel.

Another way is again in how we relate to the practice, where rather than just resting back in the wishes and the feeling and who we're sending it to, we start getting into some kind of expectation, some subtle striving for some result—whether it's concentration, or trying to get a clearer image of the benefactor, or trying to be more steady with the phrases. And just this shift, from this real settled-back flowing out, to a little leaning forward. It can get more and more subtle.

What was very interesting to me is that, the same way it worked with fear and aversion, the metta didn't make me hate attachment or fear attachment, didn't make me afraid to practice metta because I might get attached. It's like, sure, attachment is part of my life as a human being here. It's going to come up. It's not the most horrible thing that ever happened. I can see it clearly. It's going to arise. And the more I practice metta, the more I really see the difference. So it can really begin in our life—to know more and more clearly when we're coming from metta, and to notice as it shades into attachment, and to pay attention to the results.

After I'd been practicing some time and felt more grounded in the metta, really recognizing it, knowing when I was shading off, at that point I started to bring in my relationship partner. That's really one of the reasons we suggest not bringing in someone you're so close to at first—because of how subtle the difference between metta and love with some kind of attachment can be. Until we get more and more familiar with the purity of the loving-kindness, we can in some way delude ourselves. Because it can feel like really caring, but there's just that little bit of wanting something.

So after I felt a little more grounded—certainly probably not grounded enough—I would sometimes deliberately work with sending loving-kindness to my partner and just feel the difference. I'd imagine a certain situation and feel these loving feelings coming out, this well-wishing for him, really seeing how all I wanted was for him to be happy, whatever that meant. There was no "but we should stay in the relationship" or "he should change this or that." Just really wishing he should be happy. And then suddenly there'd be this little shift, and I'd see the same situation and I'd think it was love. But there was this "but"—"you really shouldn't act like that towards me anymore." And I could see, when I came out in the situation, that even if you're not mentioning it to the

other person, when I would say or do something that overtly looked the same but came from true metta, with none of that conditioning I was putting on it, he would really feel it. The response would be so much more open.

And I could say or do the same thing, and I could see now how often I had deluded myself that it was coming from pure metta, when there was really this unspoken need or want. And boy, he picks up on that right away. The response is totally different.

Now, of course, I'm not saying there'll never be need or want, or that there shouldn't be. I'm not at all saying that. But to be able to more clearly differentiate—and at times when I'm feeling really tangled up, or the communication is really breaking down, things just aren't satisfactory—when I can go and have access to some sense of pure metta, get back to that metta space where in the deepest heart of the relationship it's about really wanting the other one to be happy, to be free, not about getting what I want... when I can really access that even for a moment, at least for me, it changes all the suffering, all the need. And that was wonderful to see.

In many other ways too, attachment will come up. Not to be afraid of it. Not to think we have to hide from it. It's part of life. And with metta, you'll see that it disentangles of itself. It begins to let go of itself. The revelation to me of metta is that we don't have to do anything to make ourselves perfect. The all-embracing nature of love embraces ourselves, our humanity, deeply, just as we are.

It's a true, deep acceptance of humanity because it sees all the warts. It's not blind to any of it. This doesn't mean we can't act—we do whatever we can to bring more peace or change or whatever seems necessary. When we can see clearly, it's easier to act. But this embracing of my own humanity, not having to be different, has been such a revelation. It has led to so much more ease with myself, and so much more free-flowing happiness and ease to be present for other people than I used to experience.

Our world doesn't suddenly become perfect. As one friend said to me the other day when she's been practicing or feeling more metta: we roll with it better. We see it clearly, and we roll with it better. It doesn't suddenly change.

I want to end by reading a little paragraph that really inspired me, from a book a friend from Holland just sent me. You might have heard of it—it's called *An Interrupted Life*, the diaries of Etty Hillesum, who was a young Dutch woman in Holland during World War II. She was Jewish, and she died in one of the camps eventually. But the book is her diary, and it's really about her spiritual opening—a really beautiful person.

There are many stories of people where the sense of love can truly triumph over amazingly horrible conditions. And the triumph of love doesn't necessarily mean that those conditions go away, which is really hard for me to grasp and understand. At the same time, I find I get quite inspired by people who can manifest this. What's inspiring about this book is that she's not just this perfect being. The whole book is a struggle—feeling overwhelmed and coming back, feeling overwhelmed and coming back again.

CHAPTER 273

The More You Love, The More You Know

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses a question that often arises for practitioners: must wisdom precede love, or can cultivating the brahmavihāras lead to genuine understanding? Drawing from both Buddhist and Hindu perspectives, she illuminates how these two aspects of spiritual development are not sequential but arise together as two sides of the same wholeness. A Tibetan teacher's insight frames the discussion: in moments of pure, unconditional love, the radiant nature of mind shines unobscured, allowing the wisdom of emptiness to dawn nakedly.*
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> *Wilson offers practical teachings on how the brahmavihāras help us experientially understand non-attachment. Through loving-kindness and compassion, we taste a peace and happiness far more profound than the satisfaction of getting what we want—revealing the subtle suffering inherent in craving. She examines intention (cetanā) as the crucial meeting point of wisdom and compassion, explaining how our practice recondititions habitual mental patterns at their root. Each time we return to phrases of mettā or karuṇā, we strengthen wholesome intentions that will eventually arise spontaneously.*
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> *The talk addresses the balance needed between tender-hearted compassion and the wisdom of equanimity. Using examples from Sister Chân Không's activism and environmental workers, Wilson shows how genuine compassion—far from creating passivity—gives rise to fearless, effective action in the world. This warrior's heart remains connected without burning out, acting from care while releasing attachment to results. The practice begins modestly with ourselves, but its effects ripple outward to touch all beings.*

Tonight I want to speak about the ways that wisdom and love and compassion work together, supporting one another. Or you could say they're the same thing.

It's said generally that the natural fruit of understanding, of wisdom, is compassion, is love. That's the way we would naturally be in the world. Sometimes in doing these Brahmavihara practices, the question comes up, and several people have posed it to me in different ways: Aren't we doing it kind of backwards? Trying to cultivate metta and compassion without necessarily having the base of wisdom, of understanding. Another way people have brought it up is: How can I expect to generate pure metta or pure compassion without pristine understanding? It's bound to be somewhat tainted.

There was a time when I used to think like that. But I really know now that that's not so. It's not a case of it having to move always in one direction—that you have to start with wisdom and then maybe, by some grace, touch love and compassion, or vice versa. They both arise together, like two sides of the same wholeness, the same spiritual wholeness.

Either way, it seems to me, practiced quite sincerely, each leads into the other. For example, the insight, the wisdom of emptiness, of unity, of interconnectedness—quite naturally, as soon as we touch that sense of total completeness, it naturally expresses as love and compassion. It makes complete sense. But on the other hand, as we deepen in loving kindness, as we deepen in our cultivation and experience of true compassion, we can find that this also becomes a pathway to deeply knowing and experiencing the truth of non-separation, the truth of emptiness of a separate self, the truth of total interconnectedness.

So in a way, either aspect—the practice of insight, the practice of the Brahmaviharas—both become gateways to truth. And either way, you end up with the other one. You can't really separate them. You can't just practice one. You can't stay lopsided, really, if we're practicing this sincerely.

A Hindu teacher that I know, using slightly different language, said: To be on a wisdom path, such as insight practice, is to know. And the more that you know the Dhamma, the truth, the more you love. To be a bhakti on a devotional path is to choose the path of love. And the more that you love the Dhamma, the truth, the more you know. It works both ways. After a while, you can't really separate it.

I feel quite deeply that a true, authentic, full spirituality is going to be deeply rooted in both insight and in love and compassion. Really, in my mind, it's inseparable.

So I'm going to talk a little bit about some of the ways that these two aspects—divided for the sake of our rational, sometimes linear minds so we can talk about things—can develop and support each other. How can compassion, how can love open us into that heartfelt, intuitive understanding of truth beyond words, beyond any concepts?

One Tibetan teacher, quite a high Lama, wrote in one of his books that in his opinion—and it's probably not just his opinion—the supreme method, the supreme way to become quickly and deeply at home with the radiance of our true nature, to recognize this pristine truth and to really become more and more familiar with it, is that of devotion and compassion.

He explains it in this way: In a moment of pure love, pure compassion, when the mind and the body and the speech are just filled—just think, if you've had a moment, it just has to be that amount of time; we're not talking about dwelling here unchangingly, we're just talking about a moment—when the body, speech, and mind are filled and overflowing with unconditional love, with unconditional compassion, in that moment, if you were to look inwardly, the way he describes it, it would be as if the radiant nature, the pristine true nature, would be shining like the sun when it's unobscured by clouds. It just shines in the center, so to speak, of love, of compassion. Or as he puts it: in the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly. It's just there. Nothing we have to do. In fact, there's nothing we can do. It's because in the moment of love and compassion, for that moment, somehow we've managed to stop trying to do. That allows this unobscured nature to shine, to dawn nakedly.

In that moment, in all these different moments when they happen—it might be quick—but in that moment, we're really vividly awake. It's not a dulled-out sort of "this is nice, but I don't know where I am or who I am." We're vividly awake, and the heart at that moment is completely free from any attachment or any aversion. Just in that moment. So there's vivid awakeness, no attachment, and no aversion. That's what allows this knowing, this connection, this potential to open to freedom of heart, freedom of mind.

So through the practice of the Brahmaviharas, through moments of love, of compassion, we begin to discern the wisdom of non-attachment through the vehicle of joy, through the vehicle of love, which you've got to admit is sometimes a lot nicer than through the vehicle of suffering, which is also a way that we discern quite profoundly the wisdom of non-attachment. Both are useful. I think we need both.

But as a lot of people here have said, "Something has to be wrong because either this feels too good, or it's feeling easy. It's not supposed to be so pleasant. It must not be the right feeling. I'm cheating." All of those things somebody has said, because we're so inured to thinking that only through the depths of suffering can we discern truth. And we need to be able to discern truth in suffering—we can't only discern it through joy either. But we can sometimes. It helps. It's really quite powerful.

One of the ways I feel that my understanding of the peace, the joy that comes from non-attachment, has been strengthened through metta and compassion practice, and the other Brahmaviharas too, is because these Brahmaviharas, in that moment of just touching the pure state, we really experience quite profoundly and unmistakably a peace or a happiness or a connectedness that is so much more peaceful, so much more

happy than the happiness that comes through attachment. It's so much more profound a happiness or a connectedness or a unity than the feeling of completion that I get when I get what I want.

On the general level of life in our culture, when we haven't really been investigating, it's so easy to associate happiness with getting what we want. And so attachment itself comes, in a funny way if we're not really looking, to be associated with pleasure. Attachment or grasping or wanting can almost carry a sweet delight in the longing for something. Do you notice yourself sometimes going back into a fantasy that is total longing? And when you wake up from it, it's just so clear that whatever you were longing for isn't here. But we get seduced back into it over and over again. If we really look, what's so pleasant about it? What kind of fulfillment is coming? But we keep getting seduced by that unclear association of longing with happiness, present or future.

So it is important to begin to understand more and more deeply the nature of attachment. And this is where our wisdom practice, our insight practice, is a very important balance and tool. With the loving-kindness we might have experienced intuitively such a profound peace and happiness that when we're back in the attachment, we can sort of feel how washed out that kind of happiness is by comparison. But to bring in some investigation, some insight, will really help us to see more clearly, to understand more clearly what's going on. And perhaps we won't get so seduced so often by attachment.

As I said with aversion the other night, the attachment is the same thing. When there's a feeling of clinging, of grasping, of wanting, it's arising in relationship to something that's happening right now, in this moment. It might be that there's a pleasant sensation in the body, or a pleasant emotional experience that's happening, a pleasant meditative experience. Or, and this is more subtle and we're more likely to miss it, a pleasant thought about a future pleasant experience that might happen, or a past pleasant experience that happened once ten years ago and it might happen again.

We don't often, without paying attention, notice that the thought itself is the pleasant experience that's keeping us, that's leading into this feeling of attachment. It's easy to bypass that and get really involved in: How can I make this experience happen that's so pleasant? How can I get back to that experience that happened before? We get sucked into whole worlds of desire and making things happen and trying to change behavior, not noticing that it's just the mind, the heart, pulled towards something pleasant that's happening right now.

Just as in aversion the mind cringes away, in pleasantness it's like, "Yes, yes, this is the one, this is it! Let's just dive right in and hold on to this as long as possible. Obviously this is how things are supposed to be and it'll never change. And I'll do whatever I

can to ensure that it never changes." And of course we all go, "Well, that's a setup for suffering." And of course it is. But without paying attention, how often is that how we behave? Quite a lot.

So when we begin to notice when attachment is present in the mind, not to hate it—

Not to say, "This is evil and I'm an evil person," or "I'm hopeless because so much attachment is arising." It's our human condition. The mind is drawn towards the pleasant. It's just how it is. But we can begin to be a little more aware of the experience of attachment when it's happening. Because when we really pay attention to it, a lot of the pleasant, seductive aspects can really drop away.

So when you're really wanting something to happen, when you're really attached to a thought, a sensation, an emotional state—what's going on in relationship to any sense of connection with yourself, with life, with other beings, with anything else that's happening in experience? Attachment gives us tunnel vision. This thing is good. Other things are generally in the way.

Even something so simple as having a certain place you like to sit in the dining room at lunch. You're really happy if you get to sit in that place. So how do you feel if you're a little late and you see someone heading towards your place? Just something really stupid like that. But we're attached to it. The people ahead of us in line are in the way. The person sitting in our place is really a villain. We might be able to work up some sense of loving-kindness toward ourselves and them, but it's not the first reaction. And other places are dismissed. Somehow that place is glowing golden and everywhere else is just down in the dumps.

That's a silly example, but our mind—as I said the other night—craving puts feathers on the object. It distorts our perception so there's a sense of separation, me and other. There's also an unreliable perception of whatever the craving is leading us into as being so beautiful. And we can't trust that perception at all.

I had this experience this spring. I did a month-long self-retreat, and it was difficult. A lot of fear, a lot of difficult stuff was coming up. At one point, longing was arising, craving, and the object that would incite the craving—what my mind would grab onto—was an image, a thought that kept coming up about a particular street corner in Bangkok. It would bring up this longing. And even with that happening, my mind was saying, "There is nothing—this street corner in Bangkok is a pit. There is nothing about this street corner in Banglampoo that is remotely attractive. I never hoped to be back

on that street corner in my life." That's how I felt at the time. I had just come through Bangkok on my way to this place. And my mind is going, "What? What is looking so enticing about this street corner?"

But then the image would come up and my heart would go, "Oh, to be back on that street corner in Banglampoo," and it would start adorning these little shops that sold locks and electric sockets. I mean, really, it was very interesting. This kept happening over and over, and it got very amusing to me because it was so clear—there would be that moment when the image would arise and that street corner would just be so beautiful, so attractive. And then the next moment I'd go, "Oh no, not again."

Well, that's what craving does. Only a lot of times it's not so obvious to us how really out to lunch it is. And so we get sucked in.

In that moment of attachment to whatever it is—the attachment doesn't make the thing we're attached to bad, or mean that we have to reject it. We'll be attached to our friends, we'll be attached to our families at times. It doesn't mean that therefore I should never have anything to do with my family because attachment comes up. It's more looking at the attachment itself in the moment that it's there and seeing the effect it has.

In the moment of attachment, there's no freedom of heart. There's no freedom of mind. There's not true love or compassion in that moment of attachment—which can also be just as short as that. But the moment of attachment is a moment of separation. It's a moment of positing me and other. A moment of positing incompleteness and needing something else to find fulfillment.

But it's not to be hated. It's just by accepting that we begin to see through it. As Krishnamurti said once, unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable.

So on the side of understanding, of wisdom—and our Brahmavihara practice helps us in this—it's just our challenge to begin to understand more and more deeply the ways of desire. With insight we see the impermanent nature of everything that's desired. We begin to feel more deeply the suffering nature of desire itself, of attachment—that attachment that's craving, clinging, I'm talking about—itself.

And we can see how the sense of grasping, the blindness, follows so closely and quickly on an experience that's simply beautiful and pleasant that we can easily begin to confuse having any kind of being able to enjoy and really appreciate the beautiful, the pleasant, the wonderful in life. Because the tendency of mind is that so easily that

can turn into attachment, sometimes it turns the other way and you think, "Well, I shouldn't enjoy beauty. I shouldn't even practice loving-kindness because I'm just going to get attached to it. So forget it—just stay away from anything pleasant."

I'm certainly not talking about that. It doesn't mean to live a life of fear of beauty or fear of love. It doesn't mean no joy. But it really is seeing the difference between deep love and appreciation of an experience or what's happening and how it switches over to attachment. And if we can do that with interest rather than with aversion or self-blame, it can be really fascinating.

Another small example from my retreat this year: I was in a beautifully landscaped retreat center in South Africa. It wasn't a wild landscape at all, really sort of an English garden kind of landscape. And along the paths, they're lined with huge bushes of white irises—bush after bush after bush, quite a beautiful vista. For the first couple of weeks, there weren't many blooms on the bushes. For a few days, it was very rainy and cold, and my experience wasn't exactly cheery to go along with the weather.

Then one day the sun came out really bright, and everything was so green and beautiful. Suddenly, on just about all of these iris bushes, lots and lots of these very delicate, beautiful white blooms came out—white with a little center of violet. So many on these vistas of bushes with blooms. It was just so delicate and exquisitely beautiful. It matched the kind of delicate happiness that was beginning to come into my experience. So the two together kind of blew me away. I was filled with this delight and joy and a real sense of just love of being.

I was appreciating it for a few minutes. And then it sort of switched to: "This is so beautiful. And I know it won't stay this way. It would really be good if I could take a picture of this, because it's so lovely. And my mother—I know she would love to see this, she loves to garden." And this went on. "But I don't have a camera. How can I get a camera?" And it went on and on for quite a while, maybe ten minutes, until I suddenly realized that here I was standing—the beautiful thing I was appreciating hadn't even gone away yet. It was still here, and already I'd moved from real joy and happiness into suffering, because it was going to go away and I didn't have a camera to capture it.

It was funny, sort of funny, but really clear—how easily it can slide from one to the other, how easily we can confuse it.

So mettā, muditā, even compassion give us an experience of a much purer connection, joy, peace, a unity of total presence that, as we experience it over and over in varying degrees—even if you're not conscious of it—will begin to loosen our bonds of

attachment, our inclination to always respond with attachment to what is beautiful. That's one way that wisdom of non-attachment and the practice of the Brahmavihāras work together.

Another way that brings the two practices together shows that without this joining, there's a sort of incompleteness to our spiritual being. Sometimes I've felt that the wisdom of emptiness, of non-attachment, of no-self, without a practice of the Brahmavihāras, without the compassion, without the love—the wisdom of emptiness can seem to me a bit aloof, sort of removed. We sit, we walk, everything comes and goes, we see very clearly. It's all impermanent—whatever emotional state, whatever physical state, whatever thought arises and passes, terrifying, beautiful, whatever. It's all impermanent. It's not self.

It comes and goes. And we're saying that in this practice too—there's nothing that's going to last.

So in this wisdom of impermanence, of emptiness, without it being connected to life with compassion, with love, it's kind of easy to wonder: what matters? Who cares? What difference does it make what I do? Because everything's coming and going, as am I. In fact, I'm not even here to come and go anyway. What difference does it make?

And on the other side, I'm cultivating the Brahma-viharas without awareness of a sense of wisdom. Sometimes I would, in a kind of dull moment, feel like this as well. It's a wonderful feeling of being connected—it's lovely, it feels really good. Or maybe it doesn't feel really good; I'm just repeating these phrases over and over. And on the other side, we're accepting whatever comes up in our experience with compassion. That's okay. I'm acting like a jerk—that's okay. I'm really angry—that's okay. I wrote a horrible note—that's okay. Everything is to be accepted. So what about any kind of response in life?

Are we just either going to be cool, removed, distant, untouched by things? Or do we become these really moist, compassionate wimps that can't really respond in any clear way? These are like an exaggeration of the two sides when they don't come together, or when at a moment practice can feel out of balance, not always rounded all the time.

So one place I want to talk about where they do come together is in the aspect of our experience that is intention. We've talked about this before—that what we're actually developing and cultivating in our Brahma-vihara practices is a strengthening of the intentions of mettā, of karuṇā, of muditā, and of equanimity, tomorrow.

I want to talk a little about what that means and how intention is really the coming together of wisdom and compassion. It's really the way that we then act in the world.

Intention, as many of you have experienced, is the impulse of mind that gives rise to speech, gives rise to action, and even to thought—although that's really hard to notice. Sometimes people sitting here will notice the impulse before they stand up. And if you feel it, then you can choose to stand up or not. Or the impulse before you move your arm to scratch an itch. If you notice it, sometimes there's a moment of choice to scratch or not.

These intentions, these motivational forces to act, are arising due to conditions, of course. They don't just arise out of nowhere. They arise from conditions and are accompanied by certain mental states. So an intention to stand up could arise from aversion. It could arise from fear. It could arise from a pain in your leg. It could arise from hunger. It could arise from just kind of clear seeing—the bell rang and it's time to go walk. There's a whole range. And you can't tell from the way an action looks, or even from the result of an action, what the intention is. The same action could actually have sprung from many different kinds of intentions.

The way that cause and effect, or karma, is understood in Buddhism is that the seed of whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome, skillful or unskillful—the seed of that action is determined not by the result but by the intention. All the motivation and all the effect that will come from that action karmically, whether we'll suffer or not from it, is in that seed of intention. This is a little different from how we might normally evaluate our actions. I might do something that I feel sort of angry about, but I say something to someone and it doesn't seem to have a bad effect. I say, "Well, even though I was coming from anger, it worked out okay. They didn't really get it, or the right thing happened."

It doesn't work like that in this understanding of cause and effect. If I speak with the intention of anger, even if the seeming effect looks like it's okay, it really is an unskillful action, and at some point I'm going to suffer from that anger.

Which actually, if I'm paying attention, I suffer as soon as I say something from anger. I'm speaking quite personally now—as soon as something angry comes out of my mouth, I really feel a lot of pain, even physical pain, but definitely emotional pain and separation. And that's not from judgment. That's not from hating myself. It's from the actual effect of the anger in my experience.

So this seed of intention is extremely powerful. Because how we understand things is what gives rise to our intention, which can manifest as thought. And it's the intention that leads to how we speak and act in the world, how we connect who we are, how we respond to situations. It all comes out of intention. It's really very crucial.

What we're doing moment to moment here in our Brahma-Vihara practice is working on the level of conscious intention. Each time we manage to remember, each time we have the energy and commitment to come back and say "may I" or "may you be safe from danger, may you be free from suffering"—whatever phrase we're offering—we're working deeply at the core of our habits of response, at the very intentions that shape how we're going to be ourselves and how we're going to be with other beings.

Far from being a passive practice where we're just sitting here like mummies saying things over and over—"may you be happy, may you be happy," what's the point of this?—we're really, whether you're aware of it or not, engaged in crucial reconditioning. We're beginning to soften our habitual responses and allowing the intentions of kindness and compassion to surface more naturally, more spontaneously.

When we're unaware of our intention, when we're not really paying attention to what's going on, our habits of mind—which often are aversion and confusion and attachment—give rise to so much speech and action in the world, even from the smallest experience.

So back to my experience with the irises. Even though I saw the suffering being created, even though I recognized I was missing something still present, that attachment still continued to arise in the mind enough to give rise to an intention to actually see if I could borrow a camera. This necessitated calling my one friend in South Africa, who wasn't there. The phone kept being hit by electricity and was out for five days at a time. You know how it is on retreat—a simple phone call should be easy, but you end up putting so much energy into walking to the place, finding a time when no one's there, then the phone doesn't work or the line's busy, and you go back. It can occupy so much energy and so much mental time to do one simple thing.

Now, each of those actions, each time I went back, each time I thought about it, each time I actually made a call and couldn't get through and then tried again—each of those is a separate intention. It's not like just one intention arose, "Oh, I'd like to get a camera." It was being strengthened over and over and over. And the intention of action is stronger than the intention of speech. So in a way, in all that little scenario, I was quite unconsciously—sometimes somewhat consciously—strengthening and cultivating the intention of attachment.

We can be quite good at cultivating attachment, cultivating aversion. We don't really think of it that way, but it's a habit. Even with our overall best intentions—my overarching intention to go on retreat certainly is to cultivate more freedom of heart, more understanding, more compassion—I certainly don't go thinking, "Let me see how many

different ways I can cultivate attachment." And I don't go thinking, "I want to hate myself because I will cultivate attachment and then I'll hate myself for wasting my time." No.

I'm sure whatever your conscious intention was in coming here, it's something very beautiful, very skillful. You didn't come here thinking, "How many ways can I abuse myself for the next ten days?" But the habits pop up. They're going to pop up. And that's okay. Part of our process here is being able to see them.

That's why in every retreat we have space wars. We have conflicts over rooms. We have battles over who wants the lights on and who wants the lights off. Every retreat this happens. And we all have the best overarching intentions, but the habits that give rise to thought, speech, and action are just really deeply ingrained.

The Buddha said that that which the mind dwells upon frequently—towards that the mind will naturally incline. In other words, if we're thinking about aversion, if we're sitting here hating ourselves frequently, then in a moment of unawareness, that's going to be the easiest slope for the mind to go down.

So it might seem a little rote sometimes, cultivating love for yourself, cultivating compassion for yourself. But where do our minds dwell if we just leave them to their own devices?

This is from Ramakrishna. He says, "In effect, one is constantly repeating, consciously or unconsciously, 'I am not free.' The conditioned person obsessively repeats, 'I am worthless. I am superficial. I am incapable of transcendent insight.'" So the more we repeat this, the state of illusory bondage becomes increasingly vivid and convincing.

Does that sound familiar to anybody? It just doesn't seem like so much work to keep saying this to ourselves over and over because we're so used to it. And it seems like so much work to keep coming back to something different because we're basically going against the grain of habit. So many of you have seen just how difficult it has been or can be—how coming back and saying, "Yes, I really do care about myself. Yes, I really do accept myself just as I am"—how that can almost raise the sleeping demons of all the ways we've been used to speaking to ourselves, describing ourselves, affirming ourselves unconsciously for so much of our life.

This is one reason that loving-kindness, karuṇā, muditā can seem so difficult. Another is simply that concentration practice is difficult because it means disciplining the mind, and the mind is rather undisciplined. But it's also because we're going against our deeply habituated intentions of thought, speech, and action. Where better to start strengthening these intentions of mettā and compassion than with ourselves?

It makes us really happy to see that most people here have been quite okay, willing, and even eager to spend a lot of time with themselves—to really begin to see that this is not a cop-out, that this is not selfish. What better place could we start to cultivate and strengthen these intentions, even just the intention of thought, than by bringing it into how we relate to ourselves and into our moment-to-moment experience here? Not trying to be grandiose. Not expecting that after ten days here we'll walk out and meet everything that comes our way with wisdom and love. Just starting in little ways with our simple practice.

But you can really see how it begins to bear fruit—not only in that the ability to come back to our conscious intention via the phrases gets easier, not only in that the feelings during formal practice might become stronger or more accessible at times, more flowing—but also in the seemingly other aspect of the practice: all the so-called difficulties, the demons that come up and rear their heads. That's just as important, in fact sometimes even more so, both as feedback that perhaps even a tiny, tiny bit, the intention of caring, of compassion, is actually becoming easier to arise, and also as a way to more consciously practice not just in thought but also in action.

That's why we speak so much about really paying attention to how you meet the difficulties that arise in your time here. How do you relate to yourself when you're filled with petty irritation at someone else's behavior? Rationally you know it doesn't make that much difference. But inside you really want to kill. It happens to all of us at different times. How do you relate to that in yourself? How do you relate to the sleepiness? How do you relate to the intensity of judgment because your mind wanders off more than you want it to, or because you want to feel loving and instead you feel bored, or to a really powerful sense of self-judgment or self-hatred or lust or fear or restlessness—any of the demons that come up, whether they seem petty or whether they're truly overwhelming?

Still, this practice of compassion, of mettā, is giving us the opportunity over and over again to respond from an intention of caring. And amazingly enough, at times it actually happens. Sure, then we fall back into habit, of course. We tend to be impatient. Once we've been able to accept that we get irritated very easily at people who are doing nothing except clomping their feet a little loudly, we think, "Okay, now I've accepted it. That's it. I've accepted it. That's it for that particular demon." And of course it doesn't work that way. The next moment we might be irritated again. Okay—another opportunity to cultivate the intention of compassion toward myself, because irritation is suffering.

And it happens. It's really quite amazing to see that by cultivating intention as it manifests as thought—the thought of the phrases that we're saying, which seem so rote, so dry—suddenly stuff really starts to happen.

Now, do you feel like you're actually making any of this stuff happen? Do you feel like you could, if you wanted to? For me, this whole practice is one of very powerful experience of the uncontrollability of experience, of no-self. As much as I say, "May I be free from suffering," I don't actually feel like I can make myself feel compassion for myself by saying that. I feel like I'm just saying it and trying to mean it. And then suddenly I'm really suffering and—poof—up comes this spurt of real caring for myself, where another time I would have really taken out the whip.

So try not to be too cynical or think that even if you don't feel anything much going on except that you can say the phrases a little more easily than you could eight days ago—please don't think that that's all that's happening.

There's a lot happening on a very deep level. Really learning to meet our demons as they are, however huge or however small, is very, very powerful. Love and acceptance for the demons and for ourselves.

And it's not, as you know, compassion and love is not necessarily the easy way. It sometimes might sound like it—oh yes, accept everything and everything's really nice. But especially if you started with compassion yesterday, you find that quivering of the heart in connection to pain. It's not that it's a painful practice. Ultimately compassion is very beautiful, very connected—this soft, quivering heart. But I wouldn't say it was the easy way. It's really very difficult, what we're doing here.

But this true compassion grows and strengthens from the way you're relating to yourself in even these littlest demons that come to visit. I want to emphasize that because so often we pass that over and think that nothing's happening, the big stuff isn't happening. It's in these little moments that these intentions are being more strongly cultivated.

But true compassion, as soft and tender and quivering as our heart is in response to our own or another's pain, actually gives so much strength and so much courage. Somehow, again, the softness of the connection—it's not about wimping out and not being able to act. It gives the strength and energy and courage of a warrior, so to speak.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa. He's talking about how compassion gives us the strength to be very connected, to be with great difficulty:

"At the awakened heart of the warrior, there's nothing there except for tenderness. Your heart is completely exposed. Even if a tiny mosquito lands on it, you feel so touched. You would like to spill your heart's blood, to give your heart to others. For the warrior, this experience of sad and tender heart is what gives birth to fearlessness. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. You are willing to open up without resistance or shyness and face the world. You are willing to share your heart with others."

To me, I just love that as an expression of the exquisite tenderness and connectedness to others' pain. But this connectedness, rather than causing us to shrink back, gives us fearlessness and courage. Because of the connectedness, compassion when met with wisdom will spontaneously lead to clear action. It's not at all about cultivating some sense of total acceptance of everything that then does not lead to any kind of clear action or any kind of relational connection in the world. Just the opposite—it gives us the courage to act.

You can see this from role models. As Steve mentioned last night, talking about Aung San Suu Kyi—just how amazingly fearless a woman like that can be on the strength of the tenderness of heart, of compassion and love. When we really feel that quivering of pain and the clarity, the clear seeing that can come from wisdom, then there's the fearlessness and courage to act in a way that's appropriate. But that is also acting from intentions of compassion, not confusing the result. In other words, knowing that you can't control the result, but doing whatever is clear action coming from compassion and not anger.

So often when we're not deeply rooted in compassion and wisdom, it can be so painful. We're opened with some compassion to the so much suffering in the world of others or in ourselves, but there's still either that pain that is so overwhelming that we don't know how to balance it with equanimity, or we're still attached in some way to a result, somehow thinking we can control the outcome. And this can lead to so much frustration. Action that begins out of compassion is continued in anger and frustration, and it starts to burn up its source.

I taught a retreat the last couple of years for—in quotations—burned-out environmentalists who want to connect or reconnect with their spirituality. Some of them have told me their hours are grueling, the work is endless, the cause just goes on and on and on, and the work itself can be totally maddening and frustrating. They say it's difficult, almost impossible, not to fall into frustration and anger, which can be a really energizing emotion—but it's exactly what leads to the sense of being burned out. At some point

we lose the tender heart of the warrior, because it's so tender. It's so tender that without the balance of equanimity, we almost can't bear it. And so we've got to do something to change this.

This is how compassion and love really must, as we deepen and deepen in this tenderness, be balanced with the wisdom of equanimity. With knowing that deeply as we care, deeply as we're connected, we can only work from our intention. We cannot in any way think that we can control results.

or think that somehow with our best intention we're going to be able to end all suffering.

Someone here was telling me that she has friends who work with the homeless, and they've said the way they can continue their work without getting burned out is by knowing they're not going to be able to help everybody, they're not going to be able to end the problem of homelessness, and they may not, with all their caring, be able to help specific people.

I'm sure you've run up against this in your metta, in your compassion practice, where we feel so much caring for a particular person and wish that if we could just care hard enough, we could change perhaps self-destructive patterns, or outer events in their life, or health that we have no control over. And how to be able to stay that connected in compassion, in love, not flinch away because we can't always change things.

This is the real dance of wisdom and compassion, of equanimity and knowing we can't control, but at the same time not giving up because we can't control. How to act from compassion and with wisdom. It's quite a delicate dance that we do. But it doesn't have to mean that we just shrink back and say, forget it.

Another role model for me, much like Aung San Suu Kyi, is Sister Chan Khong, Thich Nhat Hanh's colleague. Ever since I met her some ten years ago, she was just this amazing dynamo of energy. And of course one can never tell looking from outside, but as far as I could see, so much of what she is doing really comes out of caring for other people and trying to help—trying to help people in prison in Vietnam, trying to help the boat people. When I was at Plum Village, it was trying to help anybody who had a problem, whether it was spiders in their room or wanting to stay in a nicer room or needing some kind of special food or organizing whatever needed to be organized. No drawing the lines that this is too mundane or this is really great, but just doing whatever needed to be done to help people, with a tremendous amount of energy, a tremendous amount of courage.

When I read her autobiography recently, what touched me very deeply is that she really does seem quite motivated by compassion, and she very openly acknowledges that in her whole thirty or forty years—since before the war in Vietnam and during the war in Vietnam—she was in situations of enormous suffering that I can't even begin to imagine. Seeing friends killed by grenades from either side in the war, and somehow finding an ability to care deeply for her friends, to say eulogies at their funerals without blaming people. Saying, you know, "I see our enemies are hatred and ignorance, but our enemies are not the Vietnamese people."

What touched me even more, though, is that this wasn't something that just came naturally to her, that she's just always connected and always loving. Starting back when she was young and even now, she has to really continue to work at it, continue to cultivate how to come from an intention of caring, an intention of compassion. Even now, she says, when she hears of new nuns and monks or artists being put in jail in Vietnam, she's initiating whole letter-writing campaigns and trying to speak to people in authority to try and get them out of jail. But she says even now she'll get really angry when she first hears about it, and she will not do anything as long as she's angry. She'll meditate. She'll consciously cultivate compassion. She'll consciously cultivate mindfulness and loving kindness until she can find some way to feel a connection of some kind with the people she's going to write to. And only then will she actually write a letter. Sometimes, she says, it could take weeks.

I'm just very touched by the depth of that commitment. It's an inspiration to me, both in that compassion doesn't turn us into weaklings—I think just the reverse—and that it must come with the wisdom of not just expecting it to be automatic, being willing to really look and see what our intentions are. And if we have that moment of choice, to say, okay, let me see. Can I go back to the karuna practice? Can I go back to the metta practice? And if I can wait until I act until I can come from a clearer intention, I will. Of course, there are times when we can't wait or we don't wait or we don't have that clarity to see. And that's when we bring in the compassion and the kindness to ourselves, not expecting that we're somehow going to be perfect. Our life isn't perfect.

So our start here may seem kind of modest. We're starting with ourselves. The results might not be what you had hoped for or expected. They might be much more than you hoped for or expected. They might be totally different from what you hoped for. But even if you're having some really beautiful, peaceful experience now, that'll change. It's nice, it's wonderful, but the experience itself, as you're experiencing it now, will change.

But on a much more profound and subtler level, a much deeper change is going on—a real shift in our understanding of who we truly are, our understanding of the world, of what the potential of true happiness is. And somewhere in each of you there's a little seed of knowing

that that potential for true happiness is your birthright and is part of who you are, and that we all have access to it.

And whether you're feeling that or not right now, I don't think that's the main point, because these changes in how we relate to ourselves, how we relate to and connect with others, and how we will be and can be in the world—both connected and effective—are going on at the often unconscious level of our habits of mind, our habits of belief, of really knowing what's true.

And I think you might be surprised. I know I was, to find that once I was no longer in retreat—and not even consciously necessarily thinking "I want to be really connected to all beings"—this would just start to come up spontaneously. I would say or do something out of metta or compassion without thinking I was going to do that. Whereas before, I could do something out of aversion and attachment without thinking that I was going to do that.

And even though it might seem like it's still pretty conditional love right now—to ourselves, to people we care about, maybe sometimes to all beings or an enemy—often people hear themselves saying, "Well, it still feels quite conditional." Don't worry about it. Because it just will fill up and fill up and spill over by itself.

And even if you never have the conscious intention to want to have compassion for all beings, or to be practicing for all beings, it sort of starts to happen anyway. Because in this connection of this tender heart with yourself and others, in that moment of connection when someone's pain is your pain, you can't tell the difference. In that moment, it's so clear that we really are all beings. All beings are us. And even if we don't put that into a conscious thought, we have a profound effect on all beings we come in touch with.

This is from the Dalai Lama:

Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. Peace must first be discovered within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet. Developing such attitudes as love and compassion between human beings is not merely a source of personal happiness, but has become a condition for human survival.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 274

Finding True Happiness

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses a fundamental question at the heart of Buddhist practice: What is true happiness, and why do we so often confuse it with pleasant experiences? Drawing from her own early attraction to the Buddha's teachings on the ending of suffering and the "sure heart's release," she examines how our habitual reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences keep us trapped in cycles of confusion and dissatisfaction.*
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> *Wilson explains how the three unwholesome roots of mind—greed, hatred, and delusion—arise from our automatic reactions to experience. She offers practical guidance on using bare attention held with kindness and acceptance to see through these deeply conditioned habits. Through personal examples, including a vivid account of working with physical tiredness and aversion, she demonstrates how genuine mindfulness transforms our relationship to experience. Rather than hovering around difficulties or grasping at pleasures, we can learn to meet each moment with "affectionate curiosity."*
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> *The talk culminates in an exploration of impermanence as the gateway to freedom. Wilson suggests that truly understanding constant change—not just intellectually but through direct experience—naturally loosens our clinging and opens us to what the Buddha called "the emancipation of heart through wisdom." She emphasizes that this equanimity is not resignation or indifference, but rather an unbounded awareness that allows for both deep appreciation of life and compassionate action in the world. Even difficult meditation sits, she notes, are valuable opportunities to break the chains of conditioning and discover that peace is always accessible, regardless of circumstances.*

The attraction for me in the early days of my practice to Buddhism and meditation specifically was rooted in the philosophy of what the Buddha spoke of. He was always so clear that what he was teaching was the highest happiness—the ending of suffering, the sure heart's release. In a way, and this sounds rather crass, though I didn't put it to myself that way at the time, there was this sense of, well, that's what to go for in life: the highest sense of happiness, whatever will make me truly, lastingly happy.

Talking to people who come on retreat, I find that in one way or another, this tends to be what draws us to go through this rather difficult and sometimes strange process—a kind of hope or faith, or whatever word is suitable for you, of some higher happiness, some greater sense of serenity or ease in one's life.

In first practicing, in my first retreats and in many people's experience, you might touch moments of what seems like a higher happiness, or a sense that we're somehow heading in the right direction. It could be the momentary peace of concentration, that bliss of a unified mind. It might be an ecstatic sense of interconnection. It might just be the simplicity and peace of being fully present. There's a whole range of things it can be.

For some time in my practice, it was experiences like that which kept me coming back, thinking, "Oh yes, this shows I'm heading in the right direction." And it really took a while before I began to get it on some deep level that all this was is a continuation of the search for pleasure. I was taking pleasant experience—maybe a little more transcendent, maybe a little more subtle than I experienced in my daily life—and equating that with true happiness.

What the Buddha is talking about, and what our meditation practice here is about, is finding that the true happiness the Buddha was speaking about is of a whole other order. What most of us think of as happiness is not what the Buddha was speaking about as the true source of happiness, the true heart's release. We mostly don't know what true happiness is. And a lot of what I think our practice here is about is finding out what we're doing wrong, so to speak—how we're relating to our lives and the world in a way that, rather than furthering our happiness, keeps us spinning in confusion.

What is it that the Buddha is talking about? What is it we're doing here that can lead us, that can open us into experience of real happiness?

It's a common misconception, and I find myself, when I'm not really being aware, falling into it often, that meditation practice or this process of purification will somehow create in ourselves or in our minds a subtler, more eternal kind of state. The misconception is that through meditation, through purification, we're going to create some transcendent other reality in which we will live, from which we will relate to this mundane world of affairs and somehow float on a cloud somewhere or be the serene Buddha in the midst of it—but that somehow we've got to create something different. We've got to get away from who we are, from what we are, from what's happening now.

What we begin to awaken to, if this is a practice of awakening—Buddha really means one who is awakened—is the fact that this is a much more radical proposition. We're not trying to get out of this reality or create some other reality from which we look back. Rather, we discover that that which we're seeking, however you describe it to yourself, is always and only accessible in the immediacy of the here and now, whatever experience happens to be present as here and now.

We're awakening into fullness of presence, to full aliveness, connection, and acceptance of this moment—fully, totally this moment. And in that is where true peace and happiness can be found, never by looking to something else to somehow create another reality.

So whether it's an itch that's arising, whether there's sadness, whether there's total boredom or doubt or just the pure breath or ecstasy, pain, a footstep—it doesn't matter what. Each experience, as it arises, is like a messenger, a calling to say, "Awaken now. I'm your gateway in this moment to the possibility of awakening to your essential inner completion." In moving away from this pain, in moving away from this happiness, in any way trying to construct something other, we're effectively bringing down the blinders and not noticing what is always accessible to us.

And that's the paradox of spiritual practice. If our truest nature is this pure awareness—Joseph spoke last night of pure awareness that is absolutely untouched by any arising experience—if this pure awareness is always present and accessible to us, why don't we notice it if it's so obvious?

This is the paradox of practice. It's said this way in one Tibetan text, and I just love this little poem:

Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few of us see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that this Buddha mind is never impaired or improved on in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease in whatever happens.

Just resting at ease in whatever happens. It's so simple. Why do we have so much trouble doing this? Just resting at ease with awake intelligence and quite accepting, open awareness within whatever happens. Not our natural inclination, is it?

Yet we all have moments of it. Joseph referred to a moment like that in his talk last night, and someone mentioned it to me today—a moment where there's just a sense of ease, of presence. It might be, as Joseph was talking about, when you feel so vividly awake and connected, and somehow the shimmering leaves of the tree seem so exquisite. Or someone mentioned today just really being present for eating, being with one's meal, maybe for the first time. Or it can happen just taking a footstep. There's just this sense of such peace, such ease, such presence. It can happen no matter what we're doing. And if you're paying attention, we all experience moments of this, more or less frequently.

What these moments are pointing to is that it has nothing to do with what's actually happening in that moment. The leaves of the tree aren't suddenly more vivid. The breakfast wasn't suddenly a superior breakfast to any we ever had in our life. That footstep wasn't somehow different from other footsteps. But we tend to take that moment and instead of noticing just that ease, that awakeness, that vivid awareness that has nothing to do with what's happening but knows what's happening, we instead tend to fixate on the wrong thing. We tend to keep looking to changing conditions. So somehow if the leaves were beautiful and it was two in the afternoon, we'll try again at two in the afternoon when the sun's a certain way and we've had a cup of tea, to go look and see if we can hit that space again—without realizing that it's got nothing to do with those external or internal conditions.

It's only that in that moment there was an awakeness, and a heart and mind that was free of resistance, free of grasping or clinging, that was in no way reacting or trying to change or resist what was happening. Just total awakeness and presence. That's really what allows us to rest at ease in what is happening and to notice the potential for serenity and peace within whatever is happening. So if you have a moment like that, see if you can just notice the whole show and not fixate on the changing conditions.

Because that's our tendency, whether it's so-called external conditions—the weather, the way we're sitting, the clothes we brought, the way other people behave, the food we're eating, the schedule, whatever. We tend to focus on those conditions as what can make ease and peace possible or not. They might be more or less pleasant, and again we're confusing pleasant with true happiness, with peace. We do the same with internal conditions: our state of mind, our thoughts, the absence or presence of physical discomfort. Trying to somehow arrange and manipulate these conditions, and if we can get them somehow in the right order, in the right coming together, then—ah—this is peace, this is happiness.

And all the while not noticing, although it's so obvious we would all agree when it's pointed out, but not noticing that there is no condition, so-called external or internal, that lasts. Everything is changing. If we're positing any sense of happiness, any sense of true peace on any changing condition whatsoever, we're in trouble. But because things change so fast, it's always easy to say, "Well, this one didn't do it," and somehow our mind leaps to "but the next one," or "I can get this one back again when it changes." And we somehow don't stop and look at what's really going on.

That's the whole purpose of our meditation. It gives us the clarity and the focus and the tools to actually begin to look inward and see what's going on. It's said that the Buddha said on his enlightenment that he felt so much compassion for all of us in our

human state, because he could see that most deeply at the core, every person, every one of us—and this sounds simplistic, but I really believe it's true—that at our deepest core, each of us truly wants to be happy. But through our not seeing what is so about ourselves, about the nature of the world, through not really understanding what is so, many of our efforts to bring happiness to ourselves and others actually only succeed in increasing our confusion, in increasing our sense of struggle, because we don't know what true happiness is.

Mark Epstein, a psychiatrist who's been a practicing Buddhist meditator for a long time, talks about happiness, saying that his experience as a psychiatrist trained in Western medicine and in the philosophy and practice of Buddhism has given him a unique perspective. He writes, "I have come to see that our problem is that we don't know what happiness is. We confuse happiness with a life uncluttered by feelings of anxiety, rage, doubt, and sadness. But happiness is something entirely different. It's the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning."

Happiness is the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning. I would actually go a step further: that non-reactivity of mind, in any one moment—we're not talking about every moment of life, just take one moment—when there's this total receptivity, non-reactivity of mind to whatever's arising, in that moment of alertness and stillness, that gives the potential, the possibility to recognize something much more true than our passing reactions. A place of awareness from which whatever arises is not a problem.

So I want to talk a little bit about this habit of grasping at the pleasant and condemning the unpleasant—a very incredibly strong and subtle habit of our mind. What we can begin to notice using our tools of mindfulness and concentration is how these habits of conditioning are working on a moment-to-moment basis. We can see how they arise, how they lead us to certain forms of mental, physical, and vocal behavior. And by paying attention we can see how those behaviors don't really work, and how these habits of mind really aren't serving us. A lot of our practice is beginning to observe this.

Taking it on a real moment-to-moment basis, it's not theoretical—you can really begin to notice how this happens. When we pay attention to what we're experiencing on a basic level of bare attention, in the Buddhist psychology you can see there are six different experiences that happen over and over.

There's seeing, there's hearing, there's smelling, there's tasting, there's physical sensing and physical sensation, and then there's the whole field of mental experience—thinking, emotions, mental images. In Buddhist terminology, these are called the six senses, with the mind being the sixth sense.

All that's happening is these six things arising over and over and over. And then we make up story, which is just another mental experience arising.

As each experience comes—say a sight appears—we experience it as being either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. But when we're not really looking, this seems sort of intrinsic to the experience. I look out and there's seeing, and it's just this pleasant feeling. Without paying attention, the habit of mind moves toward: "Oh, that's nice, I like it." And it could stop there, or it could intensify: "I really like it, I'd like to go out and really be with it and see it more"—this kind of grasping at the pleasant.

If it's unpleasant—the rain comes and it's cold—the body shrinks away, the mind contracts: "I don't like that, I don't want to feel this, let's do something to change it." And when it's neutral, most of the time we tend to not even notice it. We sort of ignore it. Often, notice this in your experience, we almost experience the neutral as unpleasant, and our mind will create something a little more stimulating to wake us up.

These are the three unwholesome roots of mind that the Buddha said lead to suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion or confusion—based on reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

This is so important because it's happening really almost every moment, and we're so used to it. It happens so fast that we don't notice it's a habit of mind. The reactivity to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral becomes like a filter through which we judge or evaluate experience. Without paying attention, when you're sitting here and you have a pleasant sitting, it translates almost as: "This is right, this is good, this is how it's supposed to be, I've got to make it happen some more." When it's unpleasant—we're restless, there's pain in the knee—it's not only unpleasant, it's wrong, it's a mistake. Something isn't happening in the right way and we've got to do something to change it. And when it's neutral? Forget it. We just go off into daydreams. Sometimes we'll actually find our mind creating whole scenarios that are quite unpleasant as a reaction to hanging out with neutral.

Often in retreats, people come in and start to talk about their experience and they'll say, "Oh, nothing's happening, and I don't like it." "So there's calmness?" "Oh yeah," they'll realize, "I guess that's calm. I don't know what to do with calm." And their mind has been creating all these suffering scenarios. We don't know how to be with neutral. Yet in a way, neutral can be so pleasant, so wonderful.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about this. One example he gives: when we have a toothache, it's so painful, so unpleasant, and when it stops, it's like, "Ah, how wonderful—no toothache!" But when we don't have a toothache—and most of the time we don't—do we even notice anything? Tune into your teeth right now. It's really nice if they're just kind of neutral. It's actually quite pleasant, it's peaceful, but we don't notice that.

I was at a movie a few weeks ago—I don't even remember the film—but the coming attraction was for *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. It starts with this humongous explosion that practically blows you three feet back in your seat, and it just gets worse from there, so intense. I was thinking, "My God, that's our culture." No wonder we don't know what to do with calmness or with neutral experience. We're so hyped up in this culture that things have to keep getting more and more intense just to get our attention. But anyway, that's a little aside.

Begin to notice. Have you found that this sense of pleasant becomes a basis for your whole evaluation of how your practice is going? It becomes a filter for self-judgment. You have a "good" sitting—meaning basically it's pleasant. How many of you have had a sitting where you were really restless, where there was pain in your knee, where your mind was wandering, and you came away saying, "That was a really good sitting"? But we have to have sittings like that. There's no such thing as only pleasant. I don't know if you've noticed this in this life, but there's no such thing as only pleasant. Yet somehow we operate from thinking that unpleasant is a mistake and we're going to fix it.

Our retreat is just the same way—there's no such thing as only pleasant. When you have a sitting like the unpleasant one I described, it's so common for the evaluation to be: "This is wrong, I'm not doing it right, I'm a bad meditator." Or we reverse it outward: "This is the stupidest practice I ever heard of, clearly they don't know what they're talking about, it's a waste of time." Either way, there's no sense of equanimity, no sense of peace or spaciousness. We're making our happiness, our rightness, our sense of truth dependent on things being pleasant, meeting our expectations, being how we want them to be.

That's a setup, definitely, for deep suffering.

Our practice lets us begin to see these patterns. Without the awareness, it's like we're living blindly, following these habits of mind. It's like we're stuck in the ruts on the road here.

It made me think of when we drove in. Joseph and I and Grove and some friends drove in two cars on Friday. It was really raining that day, and the roads were muddy and soupy. Franz and I were in a car with two friends—just a rental car, some Ford. It

wasn't four-wheel drive and it actually had very low clearance. So we're driving behind Grove's big suburban, and we're sliding all over, really muddy. The friend who was driving was really good, but we were going all over the place. It was tough. Each corner we'd come around would be harder than the next, and Grove kept calling back, "Get in the ruts, get in the ruts, you've got to get in the ruts." He finally stopped us and came back and said, "Wes, you've got to get in the ruts."

It was really funny. Wes was going, "Get in the ruts, get in the ruts." If only we'd bang into the ruts—but then you're really stuck in them. And I really felt like that's how we are when we're following these tendencies blindly. Because for our car, the ruts didn't necessarily work. They'd work for a little while, and then suddenly there'd be this huge hump and the whole bottom of the car felt like it was scraping off. Wes is going, "Oh no, the oil pan, the oil pan! Get out of the ruts, get out of the ruts!" The whole thing was just this dance. And when you're in the ruts, you can't get out of them anymore.

So what our practice really lets us do is begin to see the ruts and how they're working—this rut of blindly following pleasure, of blindly moving away from the unpleasant, of totally spacing out when it's neutral. When you can see the rut, sometimes it works. Like Joseph said, if your hand's in a fire, it's a good idea to follow the impulse to move away from the unpleasant. But there are plenty of times that it just doesn't work. There are plenty of unpleasant experiences that we're not going to be able to move away from.

When we can see how those ruts work, we can also see when it's helpful to move out of them. Then we have the whole field of experience available, and we can act and respond appropriately—not out of blind reactivity.

If you reflect on it, watch over these days: how much of our physical and mental activity is just to forget ourselves? How much of the time are we physically or mentally just blindly trying to move away from discomfort, trying to get away from something unpleasant? There's a little practice in Vipassana that one teacher in Thailand used to teach, which is simply this: every time you move throughout the day, watch why you move. See how much of our movement arises as a slight discomfort comes up and we shift. Not that we have to stay and hurt—I'm not saying that—but just begin to see how much of our activity is a mask for slight discomfort, how much is trying to move towards pleasure.

If this strategy worked, none of us would be here. So it's about finding, within all of that, how we don't have to be so driven, how we don't have to be caught by this dualism. This is where our mindfulness and concentration begin to serve us, begin to help us learn how to see through this conditioning over and over. And that seeing through gives us the space to respond appropriately.

There are a couple of aspects of mindfulness we've talked about that I want to emphasize. The first is this quality of bare attention—bringing the attention into the actual experience that's arising, whether it's a physical sensation or a sound or a sight or a thought or an emotion. Bringing the attention into the actual experience rather than confusing the interpretation with the experience.

The only way we can come into the experience is when the mindfulness is held in an air of kindness, really of softness, of loving-kindness and acceptance toward whatever is arising.

An experience comes up—say it's a physical sensation of pain in the knee, like Joseph was talking about in the instructions today. Mindfulness is non-discriminating. It doesn't say, "Hmm, should I pay attention to this? Should I pay attention to that?" As soon as something arises, mindfulness moves directly to it in a non-discriminating way, but meets it with an attitude of real softness and openness. You could say affectionate curiosity. Just feeling: What is this? Just being with it without any preconceived notions.

The concentration gives us the focus to stay with the actual experience—the twinging or the burning or the twisting—as distinct from, "Oh my God, I don't know how I'm going to get to a hospital in time, and what if it rains? It takes hours to get out of here." That's not the experience. It's just a twinge.

It's amazing, the transformation that can happen when we use our mindfulness to be with the experience itself. It changes our whole relationship not only to it but to everything else.

I'll give you a little example.

A couple of weeks ago I was teaching a retreat in Barre, and for some reason I was very physically tired and heavy, quite exhausted, but I couldn't find any reason for it. I wasn't particularly overworked or anything. I lived just about two minutes down the road by car, so I was driving home, and I was aware of being tired and feeling the physical heaviness—but it wasn't mindfulness.

The difference being: "Oh, I'm so tired, I'm so heavy. I wonder what's going on. Maybe I must be getting sick. There must be some resurgence of disease. There's something really serious going on. I really hate it. I feel so horrible. There's eight more days of this retreat and I'm so heavy." This is not mindfulness. This is really aversion and resistance.

But often we can fool ourselves, because there was also a knowing of the fact that I was heavy and feeling the heaviness—but not with the bare attention that just feels the heaviness alone, and not with the attitude of affectionate caring, of open patience and acceptance of what is. It was total interpretation.

And I caught what I was doing. All it took was just a minute, just to say, "Oh, be with heaviness." I mean, that wasn't like, "You stupid jerk, be with heaviness"—that's also not mindfulness. It's just, "Oh, right, I'm thinking about it." And it's as if I let my attention just gently drop into feeling heavy and tired in my body. That's all. I just kept driving.

And I saw that in that moment, although before I knew there was heaviness, the aversion—the way aversion works in the mind—will keep your attention a little bit away from the experience. Like, I know it's heavy, but let's just hold it over there and not quite really sink into it. Notice that when you have a pain, you kind of hover around it. We sort of look at it, but we don't want to quite go there.

So I just dropped into it. Full surrender. Just feeling heavy and aversive and tired and fearful, with no expectation of anything.

It's amazing. The whole response to that changed. I just thought, "Oh yeah, heaviness, tiredness, that's okay." It was really okay. It didn't feel any different, but it was really okay. And all the other story went away. I was just being heavy, tired, and all of a sudden, without any kind of conscious volition—and this is what happens when we really are mindfully open to what's happening, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—the whole field opened up, and my heart just opened up. It was such a beautiful day. The spring was coming out, the trees were budding, and I just suddenly had this burst of joy and connection with the environment, with what else was going on.

That's really what happens when we open fully to whatever's presenting itself as truth in that moment. It's just the opposite of what we might think if we don't pay attention. We think that if we don't really let ourselves feel the aversion or feel the pain, if we can just a little bit keep it in the background, then things will be okay and we can kind of appreciate life more. And it's just the reverse.

If we try to hold away the unpleasant, we can't open selectively. We can't ignore the unpleasant and open to beauty and connection. We need to be connected with whatever's happening. And when we soften into, "Oh yeah, unpleasantness, tiredness"—boom—the beautiful day is also suddenly apparent. A sense of self-acceptance can also be there.

It's just a moment, it's just a little thing. But that's what our life is made up of—just these little moments. And that's really what we're learning how to do with bare attention held in this attitude of open-hearted acceptance. It cuts through these deeply conditioned habits of running away from the unpleasant and our ceaseless pursuit of happiness through pleasure, which ultimately doesn't work.

So the patience, the kindness, the acceptance is what lets us be able to come back over and over and over when there's a difficult experience. We also come back over and over and over when there's a pleasant experience too.

We're not only attending to the difficult, but it's important—and one of the reasons we tend to emphasize the difficult more is because our habit is much more ingrained to try to avoid it. And it's this avoidance that keeps us closed off from truth, that keeps us distant from true connection with our own selves, with our own hearts, and with those of all others.

There's a saying from Rumi: paradise is surrounded by what we dislike, and the fires of hell are surrounded by what we desire. So we tend to go towards what we desire and land in hell. And if we can just open to what we dislike, we land in paradise. It's somehow the opposite of the way we might think it is.

The more we can practice this, it's not like all of a sudden everything changes. But even one moment of coming out of the ruts of following habit—just this opening into what is—you can begin to see how transforming it is. It opens us into another possibility altogether for how we relate to ourselves and to life. This is really what is the intimation of the potential for true serenity and peace. The possibility to be with things just as they are, to meet ourselves and our experience and others with a true kindness. Not the kindness of idiot compassion, but the true kindness that, by being with things in totality as they are, opens our hearts and our minds to the potential for liberating understanding.

It absolutely transforms our life, because we meet things with a peace that is not dependent on having a situation be a certain way—because there's no way we can control that. And it might seem like a long way to come from just noticing our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant, but this is very profound, as subtle as it is.

This is from the Buddha. It might sound a little archaic, but see if it makes sense. He says, "Someone seeing objects with the eye"—and then he goes through all the different senses, so we'll just talk about seeing—"someone who is attracted to things that are pleasing and repelled by things that are unpleasing, that person dwells without mindfulness and her mind is restricted. She does not experience the emancipation of heart through wisdom. But another person, seeing objects with the eye, is not attracted to things that are pleasant and is not repelled by things that are unpleasing. She dwells with mindfulness present and her mind is unbounded. Thus she experiences the emancipation of heart through wisdom."

Simply by being able to be so equanimous that we're not drawn helplessly into the pleasant and repelled by the unpleasant, our mind is unbounded and we experience emancipation of heart through wisdom. To me that's really a profound statement. And it's also very immediate. It's not like some impossible ideal a million years down the road. In any one moment it's possible to see the difference between the restriction of heart and mind by being caught in desire and aversion, and a moment of that boundlessness of heart and mind when we're just present without needing things to change. Really awaken to that.

This is not a kind of equanimity of indifference, or a kind of gray "who can tell the difference?" It's pleasant, it's unpleasant, who cares? I'll take whatever comes. I can't change what happens in life. This person's mistreating me—that's okay because it's all the same anyway, there's nothing I can do. I'm not talking about a kind of acceptance of resignation or defeatism or fear, but really that sense of unbounded serenity that arises from seeing things as they are. Actually, acceptance and patience, clear meeting of what happens, arises because of seeing things as they are.

When we're seeing something clearly, if something is abusive or needs to change and it can be changed, there's the spaciousness in that clear seeing to know what can be done and the energy to do it. But it can come out of the intention of clarity and of caring about the whole situation, not out of just some knee-jerk reaction of fear or aversion. So this unboundedness of heart is not just some mishmash of grayness, of dullness, of who cares. It's so connected. It's much more alive and connected in life.

Mindfulness allows us to see things as they are. On a moment-to-moment level—like, for example, seeing the way I saw the tiredness. Rather than seeing it as this whole immensity of some horrible illness coming on that I didn't know what to do about, it's simply heaviness and aversion. And that's okay, it's just what it is. There's seeing things as they are on that level, and you can see how that loosens the restrictions of heart and mind.

But it's also seeing things as they are on a much deeper level—the sense of the nature of how things are in this world, of what we really are, the nature of existence. The Buddha often referred to it as the three marks of existence. But basically it can come down to the uncontrollability of things in our life, the uncontrollability of experience, the fact that everything is constantly changing. As long as something's pleasant and we're happy with it, it's going to go away. Unpleasant is going to come and we can't change that. We keep trying to keep things the same and it's all totally out of our control.

As long as we're not really deeply living from that understanding, as long as we're caught in some sense of trying to keep things from changing, of trying to have some kind of control—this almost obsessive self-referencing of how every experience somehow refers back to me and how it affects me—as long as we're not living from understanding the uncontrollability, we're going to be caught in the suffering, in this confusion. But true acceptance comes as we begin to see this.

The easiest aspect to talk about tonight, and the only one I want to address, is this fact of constant change. Which, again, we all say is obvious. "I know things are changing." But looking at our experience, do we deeply, genuinely live and respond from that knowledge? Much of the time, for many of us, probably not.

Because if you look closely, this wanting pleasant experience, the shying away from the unpleasant, any attempt to manipulate and control experience—it basically arises from not deeply recognizing impermanence. When we really, truly know that however wonderful this moment is, at some point conditions will change and it will go away, that doesn't decrease our appreciation. In fact, the appreciation becomes all the more poignant. We can be all the more present with it because we're not somehow grasping, trying to make it stay.

When really unpleasant, painful, sad, grief-stricken experiences arise, no matter how hard they are, there's often somewhere in there the feeling that this is never going to change—that I can't bear to be with this for the next forty minutes, for the next year, for the rest of my life. Again, that's not being with bare experience, but it's also not really moving from the fact that everything is changing and it's all out of our control. And we take it all so personally. We refer it all back to ourselves.

Take, for example, the weather. It's so obvious, and in a place like this it's wonderful because the scope is so vast. Just the other day—I think it was the day before you all came—it was a pretty day, really bright and beautiful. Then suddenly, like this afternoon, rain clouds came. In just a moment it started pouring, and then just like that it turned to hail. There was this really vicious, wild hailstorm for a while, and then just

like that it stopped, the clouds cleared, and it was so silent. It was amazing. There are moments like that where you think, "Gosh, totally out of control, always changing." That's so obvious. We can just see that's how things are, and it seems—who's going to try and change the weather?

But as a friend said to me last year, someone who's been really looking at this for years and years, she said, "You know, it's just coming as a revelation to me. All this time I'm watching everything in the world changing, the whole world is changing. And suddenly I realized—oh, it's happening to me too. It's not me here watching everything else change. What I'm calling 'me' is also a process of constant change."

And that somehow, for many of us, is sort of the sticking point where we don't really quite open to the fact. Even with other meditation teachers who've been doing this stuff for twenty, thirty years, we sit around going, "Oh my God, my hair's getting gray. Look at my wrinkles. I have to wear reading glasses." Like, big surprise! You go into your forties and your fifties and your body starts to decay. What else did you expect? But somehow it's amazing—it's a surprise. All of a sudden our parents are getting older and they're dying, and somehow we're the first generation this ever happened to. It's totally amazing how hard it is to really take this in.

I heard this interview on the BBC last year, very serious. They were interviewing some man who had invested, I think, a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in a company in Greece that will freeze you when you die, and then hold your body until—I guess—they can cure whatever you died from and bring you back to life. You have the option of either freezing your whole body, or you can just have your brain frozen. And that's cheaper, if you just have your brain frozen. This is very serious. People do this, and it's a hundred and fifty thousand dollars—I think that's for your whole body. They were interviewing an English man who had done it. He was very serious. I wrote this down. He said, "It seems quite a sensible idea. There's no guarantee, of course, but there's a reasonable expectation." It's amazing. A reasonable expectation of what? You know—living forever. And it's our culture, but it's not just this time. It's the world.

In opening to the constant changing, there are times, both in formal practice and in our lives, where as we open to it more and more, it's hard sometimes. You see why there's a resistance in our hearts and minds to really live from that, because then there really is this sense of things ending, so much. You can go through what's sort of like a phase of practice that can last a more or less amount of time, where there's a real sadness about it, a real sense of loss. And in a way that's true, but it's not the whole picture.

But I see why, when I go through those times, there's this resistance. It's because of not wanting to feel sadness. It's just back to the same not wanting to be with what's unpleasant, being afraid of it.

So there are times it's sad. But I know for myself that what's even more sad and more fearful is to live in that denial. Because again, we're denying ourselves the opportunity for a much deeper connection with ourselves and with all life. Even knowing something's changing—well, then I'm so much more present for it. And the opening to change is our opening to connection and real tenderness and caring for other beings too. Sometimes it's our tenderness that opens us to the truth of change.

I just want to read you part of one poem. It's by Galway Kinnell, called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I've stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old,
don't die, little moth.
And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

Forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

But it doesn't just have to be sad and scary, because when we truly see this—moment to moment in meditation practice, moment to moment in our life—when we truly see it, the clinging, the aversion to unpleasant, the trying to keep things, is so patently useless and so obviously increasing our suffering that it's not like we have to talk ourselves out of it. It just stops making sense. It opens up.

Again, this is the boundlessness of heart, the boundlessness of mind that can really be fully present for what is and can still be fully present when that changes. It gives us such a serenity and a sense of happiness and peace, and also a much deeper connection. So opening to impermanence can also be opening into great joy, a great kind of dancing, a playing in life.

There's a story—maybe you've heard—of a Hasidic rabbi in Eastern Europe, early in the century, who was very renowned for his scholarship and his wisdom. A young student from another country came to visit him and was sitting in the rabbi's house talking. The student was quite astounded by how simply the rabbi was living. He looked around and said, "But you know, you've lived here so long and you're so renowned—where are all your things? Where are your books? Where is your furniture? Where are your clothes?"

And the rabbi said to the student, "Well, where are all yours?"

The student said, "Well, I'm just passing through."

And the rabbi said, "Well, so am I."

That kind of lightness with life.

Our practice here—even the little nudgy stuff that happens, the little twinges, the boredom, the restlessness, not to mention the obvious sadnesses and pains and difficulties we go through, or the happiness or the boredom—it's all a microcosm for what's happening in life. It *is* our life. And the way our heart and mind is relating to these little things is exactly the way we're relating to the bigger, more complex issues in our life. This kind of pares it down and lets us begin to cut through the complexity and come into the bare experience and see the conditioning, and gives us moments of potential to move out of that conditioning—to respond in another way altogether.

So even when you think your practice is so-called bad because nothing that you want to happen is what's happening—not only is that good practice, sometimes we say that's the best practice, because that's where we're going to be able to break these chains of getting lost in pleasant and unpleasant and constructing a sense of who we are out of that.

In a way, each time you just open for a moment into a pain in your knee—even if it gets too intense and you move, fine—but a moment that you're just with it as it is, that's a moment where we're coming out of confusion, where we're learning not to be deluded by changing conditions, where we're learning that even for that moment, there's a possibility of real ease and freedom. Even when something unpleasant is happening, even when something pleasant is happening, even when nothing particular is happening.

And again, this acceptance is not that of a kind of blind dullness. It comes from clear seeing, and it gives such courage, such a strength of understanding. You'll find, even here, that it gives us the courage of clear seeing but also the compassionate heart—to soften into what is, not to be hard about it, not to try and push it away. The energy of compassion allows us to respond in a way that's appropriate.

Whether it's the pain in the knee or whether it's later in our lives—some situation that comes up that we can't change, that seems beyond the bounds of endurance, whatever that is for each one of us—there might be a moment where, with the courage of clear seeing and the kindness of compassion, we find that even the unendurable is possible. Not only to endure, but to have some moment, perhaps, of serenity within it. We discover that ultimately our true happiness and peace has absolutely nothing to do with what is happening internally or externally.

All our efforts to change things—they can be useful in the world of cause and effect. They can be useful in the functional world. I'm not saying give up our work. But understand where it's coming from. It can come from the compassion that arises out of knowing that as much as we do to help people, to help the earth, to make things better, and we can have some real effect—at bottom, the true peace is going to come from being able to rest at ease in how things are. So that when we can't make a difference, when we can't change things, we don't have to give in to despair. We don't have to give in to frustration and come back to anger and confusion and pain.

When we can meet life with the serenity that that rabbi was meeting it with, then all the energy that previously goes into struggle and fear and confusion and rage—all that energy can go into action, into relating to the world, into relating to ourselves, into really dancing with whatever's happening. So much more energy is available to us from the space of wisdom and compassion.

So hang with it when your knee hurts, when you're bored, when you're sleepy. It's not real.

CHAPTER 275

Wise Effort/Balancing Energy

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of meditation's most subtle challenges: finding the balance between wholehearted effort and complete non-doing. She explores how the Buddha's teaching on right effort (sammā vāyāma) isn't about pushing harder, but about discovering a quality of relaxed alertness where sustained attention becomes effortless.*
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> *Wilson draws on the Buddha's famous analogy of tuning a lute—neither too tight nor too loose—to illustrate how we must continually adjust our approach based on present conditions. She distinguishes between genuine balanced effort that springs from authentic interest and the exhausting striving that comes from trying to match an external form of "good practice." Through personal stories, including a powerful account of practicing while her mother faced serious illness, she reveals how effort that doesn't arise from the heart ultimately withers our capacity for presence.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing when we've tightened the string too much—when grimness and heaviness signal we're pushing rather than being present. Wilson emphasizes that opening to joy and beauty isn't a diversion from practice but essential skillful means (upāya) for maintaining the spaciousness needed to meet difficulty. She encourages practitioners to trust the wisdom of backing off when drowning in suffering, using nature and sensory opening to restore balance. The teaching points toward a profound truth: when effort is truly balanced, practice becomes its own reward, independent of what's arising in experience.*

A lot of what we've been trying to describe in the instructions and a lot of what we do in the interviews is trying to help each of us find what we call balanced effort, balanced energy—the place that we keep talking about of really relaxed yet very vividly awake and alert. It sounds like such a paradox.

A lot of our practice is really not so much about what's going on, but about finding, recognizing, and learning how to dwell more often in this space of absolute non-doing and total presence. So, for example, when we talk about opening to hearing, it's to give that sense of nothing to do, yet the knowing is spontaneous. The sounds arise by themselves. And then going to the breath and noticing that same thing.

And then the next thing we're talking about is really connecting with the breath, really sustaining the attention, getting very precise. And you can wonder, what happened to open, total non-doing? Here we're being asked to put forth this incredible effort to meet every moment of experience. And at the same time, we're being told to do absolutely nothing. What are we talking about in the first place? And how do we find that? How can we learn to dance that line in our practice?

I want to try and talk a little bit about this tonight—this delicate balance of relaxed alertness. How to work with the openness without it becoming lost in space. How to work with precise, connected attention without it turning into tight, controlling effort, being wound so tight we're about to break.

This is really about learning to recognize and explore, to begin with, this mental quality of energy. It's something we often don't recognize as a mental state, a mental factor that comes and goes. Energy is impermanent like every other experience that we have, every other mental state. Sometimes the energy is strong and present and flowing, and sometimes it's really low.

Often we don't recognize that it's simply a mental factor rising and falling due to conditions. We tend to identify with energy and take it very personally when it leaves and think that we're doing something wrong and think that the answer is to push, push, push. Strive, strive, strive. If we force, then the energy is going to come. And we tend to think relaxation means you just disconnect altogether. Just open up, space out, kick back. Turn on the TV if you had that option.

There happens to be a broad middle ground between those two. I want to talk about some ways tonight that have been helpful to me to keep reconnecting with this delicate balance of energy, what's called wise effort or right effort in the practice.

One aspect I want to begin with that I find essential to being in that space of really flowing, balanced attention is this quality of interest, which we've been going on about—get interested in the breath, get interested in your feet. And I know that's not always exactly what the experience is. The thought is often, "Interested in my breath and interested in my movements all day? This is such an exhausting proposition. How can one possibly sustain that level of interest? It takes too much energy. It's too tiring." And then we're tired just thinking about it before we've even explored if it's possible.

But when there is true interest in our experience, then actually sustained focused attention is quite effortless. In practice here, of course, you might experience it momentarily, but in our lives we all know this experience. I know all of you have different work that you do that you're all quite involved in, and I'm sure you can think of different

times in your work—not just five minutes or so, but over a period of maybe some hours—where your interest was just totally engaged, where you weren't wandering. Maybe you were working at the computer, maybe you were working in a courtroom, maybe you were working with a group of people or writing or singing or whatever. When the interest is completely engaged, there's not this sense of, "Oh, I can't pay attention to this anymore, it's too much trouble." It's effortless at that point.

A lot of what brings the interest in the beginning might be a sense of greater motivation. In your work, you might begin it and what might sustain the interest is a sense that you're doing it for some particular good cause, or it might just be for the payoff of having something be the way you want it to be. But when you're actually immersed in the work, if you're getting lost thinking about the motivation, the interest actually isn't there. When you're really interested, you're just there with the work. All of us know that.

And it doesn't even have to come from a so-called pure or wholesome motivation like compassion or trying to help people. One of my favorite examples that really brought home to me the universality of how interest brings focused attention—and that this is effortlessly available to all of us—was a few years ago. I was in San Francisco visiting friends in January during the time of the Super Bowl. I'm not a football fan particularly, but everybody I know in San Francisco basically is a football fan. That year, their team, the 49ers, was playing in the Super Bowl.

It was fascinating to me because for those three hours or so, it's like the whole city stopped. I know a lot of people in San Francisco, and they all got together in little groups between five and twenty people, just fixated. I was in a group of about ten people fixated on this game. As soon as the game would start, no talking—it wasn't even thought about. There was no diversion, nobody did anything else, just totally, totally focused.

And no one was saying, "This takes so much energy to pay attention to this game, it's really so hard, I don't know if I can keep it up." It was completely effortless. It's also interesting that as soon as the commercial came on, that quality of interest was totally gone, just turned off like a switch.

So it's not that the interest and that focused attention and the steadiness of it isn't accessible to us. What's more interesting to me, actually, is to see what it is that we choose to get interested in, and why it is that so many people can get so fascinated by a football game. I mean, these are people who are deeply committed to non-harming and non-violence in their lives, who are really spending their lives trying to do things to

help themselves, one another, and the planet—and they're so engrossed with these guys beating each other up on the field. It's really quite an interesting phenomenon to me. But okay, that's an aside.

What's even more interesting is that I could care less about football, but being in their company, I got really involved in the game too. And that's what's fascinating to see—it's sort of catching. So partly on this retreat, you can catch interest in the meditation from each other.

Now, I'm not trying to say that the interest, the quality of attention in that football game, is exactly the same as the quality of attention in our practice, because there are certain elements of motivation that aren't so wholesome. For example, I don't think anyone was watching that game without a real desire for one particular team to win. So there was an ongoing quality of craving in the motivation—or maybe hatred of the other team, or whatever—but it's not just pure interest. Even though there's a lot of talk about the artistry of the game and all this stuff, there's definitely a sense of a not-so-wholesome motivation. But still, the potential is there.

And why is it, whether we're a football fan or something else, whether it's a movie, why is it we can get so effortlessly present for periods of time for some things, but it can be so difficult when we come here to bring that quality of interest to what's happening in our life? I mean, whatever's arising in our experience in this moment—that is absolutely all we have in the world, in our life, is this moment. And how much of the time are we not that interested in it? We'd rather have another moment. We'd rather think of a different moment that happened five years ago. We'd rather make up something that could happen next. But we don't have that interest that just lets us be fully present for this moment.

There's a sense of picking and choosing. Of course, I talked some about that the other night—that part of that picking and choosing comes from our liking the pleasant and not liking the unpleasant. It also comes from our sense of evaluating what we think is worthwhile, what we think isn't worthwhile. And a lot of the time in practice here, what we are present with is just something that is sort of mundane. It's maybe not intense enough, or it's really familiar. I mean, have you ever had the thought, "Oh, the breath again. I've felt the breath so many times. I really know the breath. Let's move on to something more interesting."

I read an article in the San Francisco paper a few years ago about a young woman, twenty-one, who had cystic fibrosis—was born with it, of course. And so at twenty-one, she was on the verge of death, and she got a partial lung transplant from both parents.

It was just quoting an interview with her, and it was so beautiful. She was so upbeat, and she was saying something like, "It's so wonderful to breathe. Air, a clear breath, is just the most wonderful thing I could imagine in this life."

I thought, ah, you know—how many breaths have I taken in my life? Even that I'm aware of, I've taken a lot of breaths in my life. But how often have I brought that quality of real interest to it? And how would it be if we didn't breathe for five minutes? Even two minutes, we'd be pretty interested in it.

So it's often this not even conscious judgment: "It's too familiar. I know it. I've experienced this before." "I don't have to pay attention to this pain. I know about this pain. I've looked at this pain." "Oh, I know this emotion, this anxiety. I've experienced it a thousand times. Let's move on to something else." And what we're doing is denying ourselves the interest for our life, because that's our life at this moment.

So really, what our practice is—the practice of mindfulness—it gives us the skill to bring our attention more closely into whatever's happening. And sure, at the first moment, we might not be interested in the breath. But what we find out is that when our attention is more connected with what's happening, the interest is actually enhanced. So when you're really there with the breath, there can be times when the breath is just fascinating. It's not that the fascination or the interest is inherent in the object or in the breath.

The interest is in the quality of attention. It's that willingness to bring the attention that will again arouse the sense of interest.

This unconscious—or sometimes conscious—tendency we have to evaluate what is worth being interested in is so insidious that we don't even notice it. And what makes it even more insidious is that this tendency to only be interested in certain things, due to whatever conditioning, actually distorts our perception of reality. Without realizing it, by just following what we're interested in like a leaf in the wind, we're not even perceiving what's actually so.

An example from Daniel Goleman's book *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* illustrates this perfectly. He describes a psychological experiment where subjects watched a four or five minute video of a basketball game—a very fast-paced sequence with a lot of rapid ball-changing. The assignment given to the subjects was to notice how many times the ball was passed. That's what they were really focused on, what they were interested in.

That interest so narrowed their vision that while this fast game was going on, a woman in white with a parasol strolled through the middle of the basketball court—and nobody noticed. When the experiment was over and the subjects were asked how many

times the ball was passed, they all answered. But nobody mentioned, "What was that woman doing on the basketball court?" In fact, when the experimenters asked about it, the response was essentially, "What woman? What are you talking about?" Most of them hadn't even noticed her.

It's amazing because once that's pointed out, you couldn't watch that video and not see the woman. But when we're just going with selective interest, we miss so much and we don't even know it.

This is why we have discipline in our practice—because there will be times when we're not interested. God knows. And the discipline is not about pushing, but that gentle coming back to let us again connect: just with the breath, just with the sensation, just with the emotion. Not choosing what's happening, but simply connecting with what is. In that gentle being with it, the interest will come again. And once more, this connection and presence will begin to seem effortless. It won't be this sense of push, push, push anymore.

The more we begin to pay attention in this way, the more mindfulness allows us—consciously or not, it just begins to happen—to drop these distinctions of what's worth our interest. We begin to see, to really experience, the interrelatedness of all experience. We start seeing that our evaluations—this is good or bad, right or wrong; this particular experience is going to lead to opening in my practice, while this particular experience is a total waste of time that we'd better get rid of—we begin to see that this is a totally useless form of thinking. Although of course we all do it, mostly unconsciously.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master who teaches meditation—he's a Buddhist monk and also a peace activist, in case you don't know who he is; he's become quite well known in meditation and mindfulness circles in recent years—talks a lot about interrelatedness in very simple terms. He speaks about how we can't really say "this is good" and "this is bad" and divide experience or divide the world up in this way, because everything is cause and effect. We can't say what cause leads to what effect.

He uses the example of how we tend to like a rose and disdain garbage. But actually, as a rose dies, it becomes garbage. And then we take the garbage and use it for compost, and it turns into a rose. How are we making these distinctions? How are we saying one thing is worthwhile and another isn't worth our interest? Actually, sometimes it's the thing we think isn't interesting that can open us up to much more profound understanding. The sublime and the painful are two sides of the same coin. In my experience, they often come so close together that I couldn't separate them.

I was doing a self-retreat this spring, about four or five weeks. I was going through a period where it was a painful retreat—a lot of terror, a lot of fear, a lot of confronting the uncontrollability, the imminence of death, how one moment can change our whole life and nothing can change it back. That kind of retreat.

And nature was playing along too. It was in South Africa, in a really beautiful location overlooking some green, beautiful hills. They had the most incredible thunderstorms I have ever experienced in my life. There weren't many people there, and I didn't know anybody. I'd only been there a few days. And the day I hit into this sense of terror—complete uncontrollability, imminence of death—that was the night nature decided to have the most amazing display of fireworks I've ever seen. Lightning every second, flashing for miles across the hills and flashing right into the room. It was really amazing. It went on for two or three hours.

And of course, I was terrified. I was hiding under my blanket, saying to myself, "Oh, just fear, fear, just empty fear."

But I really liked the way the universe will conspire to let us know what we need to pay attention to—in case I didn't notice that it was out of control, and that that brought up fear, here's another dose.

On that retreat, there were also moments of just opening to the beauty, to the exquisiteness of nature, and the joy of being alive. And it was so interesting because I found it was impossible to open to that without immediately there being a rush of fear—of the uncontrollability, of the imminence of death. In fact, they were so close together, the incredible joy and connection with all life. Of course, as soon as we're connected with all life, we've got to connect to impermanence, to uncontrollability, because that is life. But it was like the beauty and the pain were so close together that at times I really couldn't even tell the difference.

It was so clear that I couldn't pick one and say, "This is worth paying attention to, and I think I'll ignore this other one." At that point I didn't have a choice. But when we try to ignore one and just get interested in how beautiful something is, it doesn't work for very long. We need to be really open to the whole and see that they feed each other.

Another example where sometimes what seems horrible, so painful, is actually the door to real opening: I have a friend who has AIDS. He's had HIV for some time, and in the last few years, as it does, it's getting more intense. He's not dying immediately, but he has varying sicknesses. What's been really interesting to watch—because I've known him for some ten years or so, well before he was diagnosed—is to see how almost it goes together. The more often he gets sick, the deeper the disease goes, the more he's

opening. His heart and his being are opening into a kind of radiance that people are just drawn to. His understanding just flows out of him. He's a real beacon to many, many people in their lives. And at the same time, he's going through a real depth of suffering and terror. It's not like he's dancing through it. It's really the deeper the suffering goes, the deeper the radiance is coming out of him. And almost—I mean, I'm not wishing he were ill, you understand what I mean—but it's almost like you can't separate the two. It's how life is. The two go so close together. There's no such thing as only beauty.

And even just opening to the mundane. It doesn't have to be the horrible suffering of age or illness—just the mundane. Just opening to our footsteps. Just opening to being present when we think it isn't very interesting. Like the other night when I talked about opening to the sense of just being tired—that's all. Just being with the tiredness. Not that interesting. I don't expect anything to happen from it. There's no big payoff. And suddenly there's the awareness of beauty. It comes together.

This is a poem from a Japanese woman of the tenth or eleventh century:

Although the wind blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house.

I love that. Although the wind blows terribly here, the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. And opening to one, we open to all of it.

Having experiences of that for yourself—my telling you might, for a moment, make you say, "Oh, well, maybe I'll look at something I didn't think I'd be interested in." But then when you do that, and you really have an experience for yourself of how something that normally wouldn't be interesting can be compellingly interesting and open us to a much deeper understanding of ourselves—then, again, that will fuel the interest and the willingness to be present that lets this effortless awareness begin to flow more easily.

So often—and people have said it here—it can happen on a retreat where there's a pain, and after we've exhausted every possibility of avoiding, of bargaining, of moving, of trying to pretend we're paying attention while we're really paying attention to something else... you know the whole scenario. And finally it dawns on us that maybe I could just really pay attention to this pain and nothing else and just be there with it. That takes a balance of energy. That takes a time when the energy is sort of fresh and you can be there with it. And we really move into that pain and it gets really interesting. It might go away, it might not go away. Later the energy falls and you can't be there with it.

But in that moment, it's really interesting. And often what is seen is that actually, sometimes you can't even call it pain. So much of what was difficult was the fear, the aversion, the thinking about it, and all the resistance that was going in. The same is true with difficult emotions. And seeing that for oneself, even if it's just for a moment, can be transformative. It gives us what is called verified faith—faith coming from your own experience. And that's really where the confidence comes to bring interest, where interest will spring from in your practice. It doesn't take hours of seeing something like that. It just takes an instant to give more of a sense of verified faith. "All right, I don't think this is worth paying attention to, but maybe if I really do let myself sink into it, it gets interesting. It's my life. It's worth it." And we have more of that motivation that isn't so hinged to wanting a future result—that's much more about being willing to be awake in our life.

So when this interest is present—and of course this comes and goes too—when it is present, the quality of balanced effort, of balanced energy where we're just there, we're not thinking about pushing or changing or needing to relax, we're just totally there, it becomes its own reward. There's no need at that point for a motivation or trying to get to some other goal.

I've actually found in my own formal meditation practice, meaning on retreat, when I'm noticing these qualities much more finely—of course, it's present in our life all the time—but when the effort is balanced in this way, it's its own reward. I've come to feel that when I find a sense of real fulfillment, of almost happiness in my practice—and it can happen, it can happen that you actually are happy to be practicing this form of meditation—that real sense of fulfillment and happiness comes not from something nice happening. It's got actually nothing to do with what's happening. It's when there's that quality of wholehearted interest and attention and effort, the effort of just being present. I know that I can be having what would seem like a day from hell in my practice, and what makes the difference between me calling it bad practice or me feeling fulfilled in it is this quality of interest. When I'm really there and willing to be with whatever happens, then whatever happens, I feel like the practice is going fine. And there's nothing to do or nothing to change. And of course, that changes too, because everything changes.

So you can be in that quality of really balanced energy and effort, meeting what's happening with interest, without making distinctions. That effort, though—and I've said it before, I'm going to say it again—the effort we're making, the energy that's coming, is only to be fully present with what's happening. That's all. There is no quality in this

balanced effort of trying to change things, of trying to move it on a little to the next place, of trying to make it more clear, of trying to get it to open. The effort can be wholehearted, absolutely complete, but only to fully be here for what is.

You see how delicate that is. It's so delicate. For many of us, the deep habits of our lifetime are that we do something to make a certain result happen, and that's the only way we know how to put out an effort. And so we might for a moment meet something fully, but so easily the expectation or the motivation, the idea of what we're trying to make happen, comes in. And we think it's still this balanced effort, but it's really expectation or wanting in disguise. We think we're meeting something fully, but somehow it gets a little bit skewed. And you can begin to tell because it won't have that fulfilling feeling anymore. It won't have that sense of ease or effortless presence anymore, because somehow, somewhere, what's happening has suddenly stopped being quite okay.

And at that point, our response can be one of two things. It can be—which it often is, if we've really learned how to strive in our lives—"It's not right, so put out more effort." But again, this effort is skewed. It's expectation. So it's push, push, push. And we're not meeting what's happening. We're not meeting the breath. We're not meeting an emotion. We're not meeting the pain. We're pushing at it. We're hammering at it. We're trying to shift it. And it's really exhausting. It really withers our heart and mind. The other extreme is, "Let's just blow this off. It isn't happening."

But first, I want to talk about this point when effort gets a little bit skewed, but you think you're still really trying wholeheartedly. It can be very deceptive. It can really fool us. You get this sense of pushing, pushing, bringing up more effort, needing it every moment. But because it's skewed, because we're trying to make something happen, the effort we're putting out is not skillful means. Skillful means is perhaps adjusting the way we're relating—not to change the arising appearance, but simply to find again that balance of relaxation and attention.

The example the Buddha gave in talking about finding this balance of effort was to a person who made lutes, an instrument like a guitar. He was very skillful in who he would talk to; he could always find the thing that would exactly meet the way their mind worked. So he gave the example of a lute, that it has to be tuned just right to sound good. You can make it a little bit tighter, and that might help—but if you keep going, just tighter, tighter, tighter, it doesn't necessarily work. Eventually the string will snap. But if it's a little bit too tight and you loosen it a bit, then it sounds fine. Yet if we think, "Well, loosening is the way to go," and then we loosen, loosen, loosen until you can't play the string at all. And even though you can get it at perfect pitch, you play it a little while and the pitch changes again, and you have to check it out. You can't assume

that because last time you loosened it, this time you should loosen it too. You don't know. You have to play it. You have to see what the conditions are right now. Is it too tight? Too loose? Try a little bit. You tighten it—no, no, it was too tight, so you loosen it. It's really being very immediate, looking at what's happening right now, finding that balance, learning how to play. And we usually learn by going too far one way, seeing how painful that is, seeing that it doesn't work. We might go a little too far the other way, and then we come back into balance.

I really got this one time in my own practice—the sense of how it can look like perfect practice, total effort, and yet be dry and torturous without you even recognizing it. I was doing a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, who Joseph has mentioned. He is a real taskmaster. You don't go there expecting him to offer some of the things I'm going to say later about opening up and going out in nature—you're not going to hear that from U Pandita. So it's very easy to tighten the string and tighten the string until you're about to snap, and not really get any other kind of feedback. I had practiced with him often before, and I could be very present, noting every single movement, every single thing I was doing, from the morning I got up until the moment I went to bed.

The day before this retreat started, I talked to my mother on the phone, and she told me she had just been diagnosed with cancer. About ten days into the retreat, she was going to have a mastectomy and a hysterectomy. I said, "Of course, well, I'm coming home." She said, "No, you're not. I don't want you to come home. No way. You have to do this retreat." This was my mother, who wasn't really into sitting, and she was usually not that firm. She said, "I do not want you to come home." All right. Okay. She doesn't want me there. I won't come home.

So I went and started the retreat. I was calling home every day, and that was fine—it wasn't sending my mind spinning or something. So I thought I was fully present. I was doing this retreat perfect to form, from the moment I got up to the moment I went to bed. It looked perfect. I felt like I was really putting out complete balanced effort. And it was getting more and more dry and arid. I didn't quite realize how bad it was until about three weeks in. I was coming up the stairs where I would always do walking meditation in a certain hallway. And I thought—and this wasn't just one of those passing thoughts; this thought I really bought into—"If someone is walking there, I'm leaving the retreat." I really meant it. I opened the door, and no one was walking there.

I thought, "Oh, I have to stay. Something's going on here that I'm really not noticing." It woke me up.

And I really saw that it can look like—to yourself, never mind anyone else, but to yourself—that the effort you're putting out is really there, really balanced. I was meeting every moment. But if it's not really springing from your heart, if it's not really springing from within, it won't work.

So in a way, what I was doing was putting in an effort to match an outer appearance of how the practice is supposed to be, how I knew the practice was supposed to be, and I could conform to that. But there wasn't a true interest in it springing from myself, from my heart. It was really fifty percent show. And when I saw that—because half of me was home with my mother, that's where I really felt I should be—actually, after that, I did go home. I left the retreat and went home, and she's fine. She's been fine ever since. And I stayed home for some days. It was the right thing to do. And then I went back and I was totally present. It was like a six or eight week retreat, and I was totally present there for the rest of it. Really different. You know, not always joyous, but the interest was there. It was springing from myself.

So really seeing that in the beginning, we can think right effort means to match the form perfectly. But if we're doing it with this outer forcing, it's going to wither our heart, wither our mind. We're not going to be able to keep it up. And something will wake us up to that.

So a lot of our practice is learning how to find this balance. Because when there's the real balance of interest in the mind, the mind is bright. It's interested in being with what is happening. And there's a patience, a willingness, just an ease to come up and meet what is difficult. If there's not that balance of effort and interest coming from inside ourselves, we won't be able to meet what is difficult.

Because as you've seen, when there's painful or unpleasant sensations or emotions or any kind of experience, when it comes up, the mind's immediate reaction is to kind of shrink away, to fall back. That's the first reaction of aversion. Also, when Joseph was talking about sloth and torpor last night, the tendency of the mind is to just pull back, shrink away, fall down. And if there's energy, if there's interest and energy, that serves as a support to the mind. So when there's a tendency to shrink back, the energy can come in—that balance that can be fed by interest—and it's like, "Oh, you can come back and meet it."

A lot of people have reported how some kind of difficult experience tends to come and go, often throughout the day. In the morning, for example, there's a kind of freshness. There's more energy and it's easier to really meet that experience and be there with it. And later in the day, there's not that freshness. The energy is lower and so it

doesn't give the support, and the tendency of the mind to shrink away and get fatigued is stronger. There's just not that energy there to balance it. And we don't quite know at that point how to find that energy again.

But in the times before we've gotten so fatigued from really fighting or struggling with something difficult—in that first moment of coming to something difficult, the pain, anger, difficult emotion, and there's that tendency to shrink away—we can see again why we say it's not necessarily being kind to yourself to give in to that. Because that shrinking could just be for a moment. We can summon mindfulness, interest, and energy and come back and meet that, and it's not even a difficulty anymore. But if we just get into that tendency when it first arises, it's really, as Joseph was saying, that sloth and torpor, and it just leads to more fatigue, more disconnection, and we really get lost.

This is from Thomas Merton. These words might seem a little strong. I would just call it the mind shrinking away. He's calling it laziness and cowardice:

Laziness and cowardice are two of the greatest enemies of the spiritual life, and they are most dangerous of all when they mask themselves as discretion. This illusion would not be so fatal if discretion itself were not one of the most important virtues of a spiritual person. Indeed, it is discretion itself that must teach us the difference between cowardice and discretion. Laziness and cowardice put our own present comfort before the love of God—or I'd say the love of truth—*they fear the uncertainty of the future because they place no trust in God. Discretion warns us against wasted effort.*

But for the coward, all effort is wasted effort. Discretion shows us where effort is wasted and when it is necessary. Laziness flies from all risk. Discretion flies from useless risk but urges us on to take the risks that faith and the grace of God demand of us. Sooner or later, if we follow Christ, we have to risk everything in order to gain everything. We have to gamble on the invisible and risk all that we can see and taste and feel. But we know the risk is worth it because there is nothing more insecure than the transient world. For this world as we see it is passing away.

So it's different language from what we use in Buddhism, but the same feeling. Discretion is our skillful means—knowing when the shrinking away of mind is really what he's calling laziness or cowardice, or what I would simply call low energy or our tendency to avoid. And discretion can bring us back in to be with what is happening in a gentle way.

Discretion can also tell us when the energy is low and the mindfulness is not present, when what is happening is too painful, too ongoing, when the mind is withering from constant battering against the painful, whether physical or emotional. By continuing to

try to meet it with an effort that's a little askew, we're only going to bring on a sense of defeat, a sense of frustration and greater pain. At that point, discretion says move the attention away. This is not cowardice and this is not laziness. This is skillful means born of clear seeing—the recognition that there are times when the energy is not balanced enough, when we're somehow caught in struggle, and the only way to come out of that tightness is to move the attention away altogether.

Even when we have a deep commitment to be with what is so in our practice—it might be something very painful, and there is a genuine wanting to understand it—even when our motivation is quite pure, quite sincere, somehow just creeping in, we've gotten caught in trying too hard, tightening the string too much, coming at the pain, coming at the emotion. Sometimes a well of grief opens up in us, a well of memory, a well of terror, a well of physical pain, and it comes so strongly that it seems we're drowning. We're just drowning in it. Or we're somehow so wanting to be with it that we keep battering against it, getting tighter and tighter. At these times, it's skillful means, it's discretion that tells us we're losing the spaciousness. In fact, spaciousness is a word that hardly seems relevant at times like that. We just feel like we're being engulfed.

It's important to open to difficulty and suffering, yes. And we've talked a lot about that. In fact, one of the ways we can cultivate commitment and interest when it starts to flag—one of the classical ways this is taught—is to consciously reflect on the suffering in ourselves and in the world. This is not morbid, not about making ourselves miserable. This is for those times when we're sitting and we think, "Why should I bother paying attention? What's the point? I've been looking and looking—what am I doing this for?"

There are classical reflections that bring up a sense of commitment, a sense of urgency. One is on the imminence of death, the fact of impermanence. It awakens a sense of "I don't have time to waste." Another is tuning into our own suffering or the suffering in the world around us—what is sometimes called the defects of samsara, of this round of birth and death. We begin to see that it somehow doesn't quite work in the way we think. Another reflection is on the preciousness of our human life.

For everyone here, just by virtue of having the time and the willingness and the interest to be here, we are incredibly graced. Out of all the possibilities for existence on this planet, as we all know, there are so many people whose suffering is so intense that even the thought, the possibility of beginning to explore the nature of themselves and the nature of truth seems too far away, where all of life is engaged in a struggle just to eat.

Going to Asia is always a wonderful reminder for me of this—both an awakening to the immensity of suffering on this planet, which spurs me to see what I can do in my little way to at least not bring more suffering, and if I can do something to alleviate it, even better. But also a sense of such gratitude and appreciation for the health, the willingness to really look at what is true, the opportunity. And there are many people who have both the health and the opportunity but just plain aren't interested.

When we go to Bodh Gaya—Joseph mentioned it the other night, where the Buddha was enlightened—this really struck me. There are people like those who run the chai shop where we hang out, who have lived there all their lives. Streams of Buddhist pilgrims come and go, all kinds of teachings happen, all the Tibetan lamas pass through, any Buddhist who's anybody comes through there at some point, as do Hindus, as do all kinds of spiritual people. And this man is living and running the chai shop and he's not really too interested. It's just not a priority, just not a particular value. So even to have this as an interest, we are so blessed. When I reflect on that—one of the classic reflections—it can bring up motivation.

"Okay, okay, I'll go back and be with my knee pain. I don't have so much to fret about after all."

So there's a way that opening to suffering really brings up this sense of spiritual urgency—if we open to it, not in the way of drowning, not in the way of "oh my God, this is unbearable," but if we meet it as an inspiration. There's a Thai teacher who recently died, Ajahn Buddhadasa, who said that there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. And it's not the particular suffering—it's in our attitude. So when we really open and see what's around us and in us, that can bring us back to this interest, this motivation to investigate, to be genuinely curious about what's happening for us.

We can be in the same situation and yet become so complacent that it can be really helpful sometimes to bring in these reflections.

About ten or eleven years ago—you've probably heard of Jon Kabat-Zinn by now, and his stress reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Hospital in Worcester, which happens to be very near Barre, where our meditation center is. For a period of eight weeks, once a week, seriously ill patients who've been referred to this program by doctors who basically can't do anything else come together. They might have ongoing chronic pain, they might have cancer, they might have anxiety—all different conditions, but basically very serious ongoing pain and stress that the medical profession can't help them with anymore. And what they teach in this program, without any of the Buddhist terminology, is basically just the meditation we've been doing here.

With each program, they have a group of interns—people who can sit in on the program who aren't patients, but who go through it exactly the same way just to see how it's done. So about eleven years ago, I was managing the retreat center with my friend, the other manager, and another dear friend who was cooking, and we did this internship program.

It was so fascinating. What I learned the most about was complacency—and the power that comes from real spiritual urgency.

We went in definitely complacent. Well, we know this meditation stuff. We not only work in a meditation center, we've been doing it for fifteen years, and so on and so forth. We would come into the class, and while he'd be doing the meditations, having us lying down, the patients would be really getting into it. We would fall asleep. And then we'd have to listen to this body scan tape every night at home. I don't think I ever got higher than my knee without falling asleep. I don't normally fall asleep every time I meditate, but I just didn't have this interest.

And we'd come home exhausted, with headaches, really stressed out. We actually got really stressed out from doing this. Meanwhile, the people in the program were having amazing experiences. I remember one woman said, after about four weeks—I mean, they're only coming to this for three hours a week and doing forty-five minutes a day of meditation at home, that's all—after the fourth week, she says, "I've had about four migraines a week for the last several years, and I haven't had a migraine now for two or three weeks." My friend and I just looked at each other. We were going home with splitting headaches from this.

And we knew it. We already knew all of this.

So there was something—both about the freshness, but I think it's even more the motivation. Being faced with pain and suffering when you've been told that the medical profession you believe in has basically said, "Sorry, folks, we can't do anything"—it's like, "Oh, we've really got to look. I've got to wake up. I've got to see what's going on." It was profound, and it continues in that way to this day.

You can see how I came out of that thinking: What am I waiting for? Do I have to wait until I get a terminal disease before I really start paying attention to my life? I mean, we all have a terminal diagnosis anyway. And just because we might feel healthy now, the truth is—who knows what's going to happen when we walk out of the door? And I just take it so for granted.

So that's a way that opening to suffering doesn't have to be overwhelming. It can really be an inspiration to us, to get interested again.

And again, opening to suffering in the bigger picture like this, or in our practice when something is happening—that's what I started to say before I took this digression. When there's something happening that we're trying to open to, but it's just too much. Or sometimes the suffering in the world, or the suffering in our lives or in people around us, is just more than we can be with at that time. And there are going to be times like that for all of us, in our practice and in our life—where you just feel like you're either beating your head against the wall or you're drowning, just drowning in the suffering.

And it seems like it's all futile and pointless. The idea of effortless attention, of interest, of a kind of joy and fulfillment in practice becomes a totally alien idea.

Part of what's happening is we're leaving the comfort zone. When we begin to open and pay attention—as Joseph was saying, as we get more concentrated—things that we didn't notice before really start to come into our field of attention. And with the practice of paying attention, we don't really have an out of running away. So it looms larger and larger. We're leaving the comfort zone that we've set up for ourselves, and we've all found ways in our lives to try and stay comfortable. Of course, that keeps us restricted. It keeps us in denial. And the only way of opening is by coming out of the comfort zone.

But sometimes it's just too much. And the skillful means, the discretion, is knowing that the most skillful thing you can do is take your attention away from that difficulty and turn it to something else. Pushing, pushing, pushing is not necessarily the answer. In fact, it usually isn't. Grimness and heaviness is not balanced effort. If you're feeling really grim and heavy, I'd say there's a ninety-eight percent possibility that you're pushing too hard, or that something's going on you can't quite see or be with, and that the skillful thing to do at that time would be to take your attention and turn it elsewhere.

It's hard for most of us to believe this. Because generally, in my experience, when that grimness comes in and I'm pushing so hard because something isn't right, what's also come in is a sense of self-judgment. It's not right because I'm not doing it right, because I don't understand the practice, because I don't have balanced effort, because whatever. And in that state of self-judgment, which I'm very familiar with personally, if you don't recognize its presence, that self-judgment is going to filter any evaluation you make of what's going on.

So when you're pushing and you're in self-judgment—I'm not doing it right, it's my fault—and someone says, "You know, it's too heavy, you need to back off, you need to open up," your mind will never believe it. No, I'm being a wimp. Wimps don't open up. Clearly the schedule is sit, walk, sit, walk. That's for a reason, and if I don't do it,

somehow I'm not good enough, I'm not doing it right. A lot of what we do on meditation retreats is beg people to back off, because it's really hard for someone to get it that that's the most skillful thing to do, that that is good practice at that time.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about how it's important to open to suffering, but when we're drowning, we need to consciously bring up seeds of joy. So sometimes that means here, in a way, we're graced. It's one of the reasons it's so helpful to do a meditation retreat in such a beautiful environment—because the balance, the potential for opening to joy, for touching what is beautiful, for bringing in the spaciousness of heart and mind, that is accessible to us pretty immediately.

So when you're feeling this gripping, this heaviness, when you're just pounding your head against a wall, go outside. Take a walk. Go down and sit by the river. Open up your senses. Smell all the different smells of the grasses and the wildflowers. Just listen to the birds. Watch them playing. Watch Miss Faye roaming around here looking for scraps. Watch Elvis the dog, who Franz and I decided is the perfect impersonation and manifestation of restlessness, of restless energy. If you want to see what restless energy is, watch him down by the river. He can't sit still. He can't follow one thing for one second. It's really great—it makes you laugh.

Bring in some joy, some lightness. It's the most skillful thing you can do at those times. It's not a diversion. It's not cheating. It's not wrong in this practice to be happy, to have joy. We need it. We need it because it's the only way we can find the balance to open to how painful things can be at times. The two really support each other.

So if you even have the suspicion that things are too grim, give it a try. Go out, open up, and just be with what is. Not with clinging—appreciation of things as they are, not with clinging.

And you can tell when the clinging comes in because the joy kind of stops.

I had an experience again at this place in South Africa. It was beautifully landscaped, the retreat center, and the paths were lined with huge bushes of white, very white and delicate lavender irises. Mostly it was bushes, but one day it was really hot and they just all bloomed and it was so exquisite. I came out, and I was just looking at that, drinking it in—just beautiful, so happy, the joy.

And then there was this one moment where it went, "This is so beautiful. It will only last a day. I wish I had a camera. Maybe I could get a camera and take a picture, and then I can really preserve it, and then I can show it to my friends." And I really got into

this—"Got to find a camera, got to preserve it, it's so beautiful." Well, I was no longer appreciating it at all. I was totally caught in clinging, and it wasn't pleasant. But somehow if we don't notice that, we think we're still appreciating.

So just have an eye out for that when you go out—when it stops being joy and turns to clinging. Or on the other hand, when it stops being awareness of joy and you're just totally spacing out. You're walking, but you're not aware of anything; you're just thinking again. Then that's gone too far in the openness direction and it's time to come back and sit, or do your walking meditation.

I just want to encourage you all to know that opening, changing the attention—opening to hearing is one thing to do in the sitting. Opening to the whole of nature is the next step when it's really getting too tight. And trust it. Pay attention to the effects. If you do it and feel a sense of more spaciousness and ease, and you can come back and sit a little easier, it's helpful. If you go out and find all you want to do is keep walking—and in fact you think you'll just walk right on out of here—then that might not have been what you needed in that moment. It's a delicate balance, and you have to just pay attention. How tight is the string?

I want to end on that note with a poem by Ryokan that embodies for me that sense of presence and appreciation of nature that comes when we're really interested and attuned. And the same can be tuned to ourselves.

A Poem of Early Fall

After a night of rain, water covers the village path.
This morning the thick grass by my hut is cool.
In the window, distant mountains the color of blue-green jade.
Outside, a river flows like shimmering silk.
Under a cliff near my hut, I wash out my sore ear with pure spring water.
In the trees, cicadas recite their fall verse.
I had prepared my robe and staff for a walk, but the quiet beauty keeps me here.

So let's explore the quiet beauty in ourselves for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 276

The Illusion of Self

Carol Wilson · 1h08

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to move beyond conceptual understanding of anattā (not-self) into direct experiential investigation. She addresses the common tendency to analyze selflessness intellectually, identifying this as a form of doubt (vicikicchā) that prevents genuine insight. The antidote, she explains, is sustained attention and a quality of verified faith—confidence based on personal experience rather than blind belief.*
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> *Wilson explores how our deep-seated need for security leads us to grasp at a sense of self as a "resting place" amid constant change. Drawing on the five aggregates (khandhas)—body, feeling tone (vedanā), consciousness (viññāṇa), perception (saññā), and mental formations (saṅkhāra)—she offers practical guidance for investigating where the sense of "I" actually lands in each moment. Through vivid examples, including earthquake aftershocks and mistaking movie memories for personal identity, she illustrates how identification with passing phenomena creates the illusion of a solid self.*
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> *The talk offers two complementary approaches to practice: the precision method of turning attention directly toward the experience of "I" or "mine" when it arises, and the spaciousness approach of attuning to emptiness and noticing when grasping emerges. Wilson emphasizes that liberation comes not from destroying the ego but from seeing clearly that what seemed so solid was never truly there. This seeing naturally brings ease, joy, and freedom in the dance of arising and passing experience.*

So now we're back from the world of just pure presence and nature to the world of concepts and ideas. Even though we sit here talking about no concepts, the whole fact of sitting here making noise and exchanging words and it means something—hopefully—is so amazing, but it's so conceptual.

I want to go on a little bit more from what Joseph was talking about last night, about this experience of no lasting self. I want to talk about it in a very experiential way, pointing our practice, our moment-to-moment awareness, back to this sense of self as it seems to arise, and exploring what it is.

But first, I want to take a little diversion. Because when we begin to talk about concepts and what's the reality underneath them, almost without fail—especially for people whose first retreat this is—if Joseph had done a question period this afternoon,

he would have been bombarded with questions about "if there's no self, fill in the blanks." Because the concept of it, in hearing about it, until it's our actual experience, until it's experiential, intuitive understanding, true or not, it's just another concept.

What that tends to do for us—certainly I spent years in this—is we take that concept, and the concept alone isn't enough to blast through, to help us see through the inaccurate perceptions or the inaccurate concepts we've been living with all our life. And in fact, there's no real reason to believe that the idea of selflessness is any more true than what seems like our experience of being a pretty ongoing, identifiable self.

What often tends to happen is that it sets up a sense of the mind just starting to spin. You start to think about it, try to bring it into experience, try to analyze it, and you can really get into quite an energy—a mental energy of thinking about, analyzing, figuring out, comparing. What is this sense of no-self? Trying to figure it out with our minds, with our reason, with our logic.

I wish my saying this would be enough. I know it won't be, but I'll say it anyway: it won't work. It will never work. We can never figure out with thinking, with our mind, with opinion, with logic—we can never somehow figure out or make sense of this idea of no-self, because it can only be understood experientially. It can only be something we touch with our awareness free of previous concept.

What can start to happen is that we take really fascinating ideas like no-self, and analyzing and thinking about them can be really interesting. It can feel like we're really practicing, really grabbing hold of something juicy here. But what it actually can turn into is doubt.

Doubt is somewhat obvious when it manifests as a thought of "I can't do this," or "this is stupid," or "I don't think they know what they're talking about." But another way that doubt arises in our experience is that it masquerades as analytical thinking. So we're sitting there, we start to pay attention, and the mind goes: "But that's not me. That can't be me. Is that pain me? If there's no me, how come I feel that pain? How come I have an opinion?" And the mind just starts going and going.

The way doubt manifests as a hindrance, when Joseph spoke of the hindrances the other day, is just this: the mind is spinning and spinning, thoughts are going, and there is a complete inability when doubt is present for the attention, for the mind, to just land on anything. It will keep landing and skittering off. When doubt is masquerading as analytical thought, each experience will just trigger off a whole other set of ways to think about it.

Believe me, I've spent a lot of time doing this. At first it seems somewhat fulfilling. It's a lot more interesting than all the other thoughts I was sitting with for days before. "These are Dharma thoughts, so this is okay to hang out with." Just notice: if it's this sense of spinning, spinning, not able to touch anything, it's doubt—no matter what the content is.

On a level of moment-to-moment practice experience, as you're sitting or walking and you notice this, the antidote to doubt is sustained attention. If you're thinking about whatever—I'm using no-self as the example since that's what I'm talking about—and you're analyzing, "what about this?" and you notice that, simply label doubt as the hindrance. Then bring your attention to something that's happening. It doesn't matter what, but hopefully not the thought, because you get too sucked in. Come back to the breath. If that's too subtle, come back to a sense of your body sitting, a sense of your seat on the pillow, your hands touching—any physical sensation.

Sound, if that's a clear one for you—but if it's a little vague, you might get sucked back into the thought. Come back to your feet walking.

If you can get the attention just to land on something, and as soon as the thoughts come back again, sustain the attention, what happens is the attention deepens, lands in the present moment, and those thoughts just start to fade. You don't have to resolve them one way or the other. You're just coming out and landing in the moment. That's sustained attention. That is the momentary, the practice-level antidote to doubt.

Of course, the big trick is recognizing it as doubt.

On the level of what gives us the energy to do that—beyond the moment-to-moment practice—we have to come out of our usual way of trying to figure things out. This is beyond just doubt. It's a willingness to move from our reliance on knowledge, from our reliance on reasoning, to surrender into whatever's happening without prior expectations. In a way, you could call this faith. Faith is another strategy for being with our experience, one that's different from knowledge.

I'm going to give you two definitions of faith. It's a word that—I don't know how you all relate to it, depending on your backgrounds and conditioning. For me, I didn't have much of a religious upbringing. Being Protestant, we went to church and all, but somehow it didn't seem to stick or really have much impact. So my association with the word faith was more secondhand, more the demand for belief—belief in what somebody told me, belief in a particular doctrine or a particular person. Of course, my logical mind would want proof, but faith seemed to demand following and believing without any kind of proof, without anything to rely on.

The faith I'm talking about in our context of practice is not that at all. It's not blind belief. It is definitely not anything that demands an abandoning of our own intuitive sense of wisdom or understanding. It's not the Jim Jones kind of thing, where you follow the leader and drink poison Kool-Aid and everybody dies. That's the worst connotation of faith, and I'm not talking about anything like that.

Here are two different definitions of faith I've read in various commentaries. One is the drive toward that which cannot be described—that yearning, the drive toward truth, toward whatever you want to call it. The second is that faith is confidence based on verified knowledge. You might call it verified faith. And this is really where this Vipassana practice takes us.

Faith is a kind of combination of confidence and trust. Trust that allows us to be willing to be with our experience without expectation, without need for payoff or justification, without knowing what's going to happen or having a preset idea. And confidence is the strength, the willingness, the fearlessness that lets us meet experience without any kind of promise. It's what lets you sit here and be with an unbearable pain in your knee. There's no promise that anything wonderful is going to happen from that. But there's some confidence and some trust that allows one to do that. Hopefully it's not blind faith. Hopefully it really begins to come from our own verified experience—confidence based on verified knowledge. But knowledge here means intuitive knowledge, not the kind of knowledge I grew up valuing as the highest truth, as the point of safety and the place of finding self-worth and self-value.

I don't know about you, although I imagine many of you, given the training you've had and the jobs you do, have spent a lot of your life acquiring certain sets of knowledge—even just going through regular school. I was really very good at it. I could take in whatever things I was supposed to know: reasons, facts, ways to do things, explanations for what the universe was. Take it in, memorize it, internalize it, spit it out. But also, unknowingly, taking that knowledge as a view of the world—and even more, as a kind of security, a resting place. If I have knowledge, a way to describe a certain event or experience, if I can go out in the woods and name the animals and the trees and the weather patterns and what kind of clouds, then I feel like I have a certain kind of safety, a certain kind of security, someplace to rest.

Sometimes this sense of a body of knowledge—which can certainly be very useful; I'm not talking about throwing out all knowledge—becomes a bastion against insecurity. A way to avoid having to live and dance in what's actually true: the constancy of unknowing, the fact that we never know what's going to happen, even in the next moment. For me, and I'm probably not the only one, certain sets of knowledge can really

serve as a comfort, but it's a way to hide. Even without wanting to use it that way, with that sense of security, we really can identify with the knowledge, and it blocks our potential or our willingness to perceive other possibilities, to open to another possibility at all.

There's a story the Buddha told that illustrates this. A widower, a poor peasant, had a young son and lived in a small village of huts. The father had gone away for the day, and while he was gone, some bandits came and destroyed the village, burned all the huts, killed the people. But they kidnapped his son and took him away. The father comes back, finds everything destroyed, finds some bones he thinks are his son's. He weeps, so distraught, so upset, certain this is what happened. He took the ashes and wore them in a little bag around his neck, and was just devastated, unable to recover.

Rebuilt his house and was living, but was just totally miserable—yet had totally bought the story that this is what happened. That became knowledge: these bandits came, destroyed the village, killed my son.

And at some point his son escaped. Late at night, he came back to the village, found the hut, was banging on the door, calling, "Father, Father, let me in." But the father was so caught in his description of what had happened as being truth that he yelled down, "Don't mock me, my son is dead, this is so painful." The boy kept calling, "Father, let me in." And the father couldn't open to the possibility that maybe he was wrong—to the point that he went down and shooed his son away, and they never saw each other again.

It's a heart-wrenching, exaggerated story. But it makes the point of how locked we can get in knowledge, in what we think is a true description. It blinds us to being able to even explore—to even stick his head out the window and say, "Oh yeah, maybe it could be my son, let me check it out."

This is what we're doing all the time. Assumptions of who we are, what Joseph was talking about last night in our assumptions of time, our assumptions of past and future, our assumptions of body—all of that keeps us locked in.

What this quality of faith offers—the confidence to meet what's happening with a trust to enter it unknowing, really fully—is that it lets us meet experience freshly.

What I've found in my practice, and in talking with other people, is that I've approached it wanting to find the answer. What's the truth? I'm basically looking for another explanation, for another set of knowledge, because that's what the mind knows how to do. I think, well, okay, maybe this understanding isn't right, but if I find another perfect explanation, then I can rest in that.

But the more I look, with just the simplicity of mindfulness, into the knowledge we have, the more it seems to break apart. And instead of more answers, we find more mystery.

Here's something from the New York Times a couple of years ago—I just saw an update recently and it hasn't changed that much—from the science section. It's talking about the largest galaxy ever detected, whose discovery was announced last week, which includes more than 100 trillion stars and measures more than 6 million light-years in diameter. The galaxy is 60 times the size of the Earth's galaxy, the Milky Way. Big, big.

This newfound galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump of galaxies, a cluster of some 1,000 galaxies called Abel 2029. We had to name it. What is naming a clump of 1,000 galaxies? What does that do? Do we somehow own it? Do we have it under control or something?

Anyway, this is just leading up to the point. The astronomers hope that further study will provide clues to the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter. Since there doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would seem necessary to cause all this clumping of galaxies, scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that elude detection because it emits no radiation. And according to their prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this missing mass.

It's like us. It's the same, actually. What did Joseph say? All our matter is not the size of a particle of dust. But we can't just take that on word value. It's funny, but it doesn't mean anything until we verify it ourselves.

What we need is the faith, the willingness to try, that will keep bringing our attention into our experience—to really look, to really meet it, to really be willing to open into the possibility of the unknown.

And of course, since this faith is based on our verified experience, when you first come to a retreat like this, your first retreat, you can't have that kind of verified experience. The question often comes up: what got you here the first time? It comes up in my mind for anybody who comes on a first retreat.

But there's a quality talked about, that before there can be verified faith, there's a quality of mind called bright faith. In some way, something in us is lit up by a quality we experience in someone else. It might be someone you talk to, and either something they said kind of lit up this something indefinable, indescribable in us that gets us to

say, "Well, maybe that's worth a try." Or some quality in the person, something you read, something you observe in how certain people behave—whatever it is. Something got each one of you here.

When there's this quality of bright faith, it's like a brightness, an energetic quality of mind and a willingness to look. And if you came without that, it would really be hell.

Because it would be so hard, especially in the first few days, without something inside of us—that yearning towards what cannot be described—that keeps us looking, that keeps us coming back to the practice, beyond the reasoning intellect.

But this kind of bright faith is not sustainable. It's really based on looking outside of ourselves for verification or for strength or for confidence. And that can't be sustained when you hit a really difficult patch. When you start a retreat and your first really difficult patch comes before any kind of bright patch has arrived, it's really hard, because there's no personal experience yet to give us the confidence with which to meet this, to trust that it's somehow worthwhile.

So this bright faith is going to shift. It's not sustainable. It's going to waver. It's going to fade away. When you hit that space of, "Why did I come here? It's so dreary. It's so controlled. There's so much suffering." That bright faith is really fading, and it fades fast sometimes.

But luckily, I have so much real trust in just the truth of things—that if we simply have enough willingness to keep meeting our experience with freshness, it begins to open up. And in some way we begin to experience for ourselves various aspects, not just of what we've been talking about, but of the truth of how things are.

Just one little experience of sitting with pain, and then seeing that you can just be with it, and all the fear and all the aversion either fades, or you see the difference between the aversion and the pain, and you see that the pain itself is not suffering. Even if it's just for a second, that is an insight, a sense that things are different from how they seem on the surface. And even such a moment can somehow energize us for days, which is lucky, because sometimes we just get a couple of little moments of insight like that, and many more moments of being caught in the seemingly ordinary way our mind has of relating to experience. Because that seemingly ordinary, normal way has been conditioned throughout our entire life, so much more deeply.

What I have deep trust in is that actually the power of truth is so recognizable when we touch it, in whatever form. It's just so obvious, somewhere in our hearts, in our beings, that this is what's true, that it's truer than our ordinary ways of relating. One moment of truth is more than enough to really light up days of seeming to struggle in the mire.

One of my teachers said that a spark of truth can burn up a mountain of lies. It's not like we have to have equal time somehow.

So what begins to happen—and it will happen uniquely for each person—is that you begin to have experiences that somehow show us our ordinary assumptions, which we might not have even known we had, aren't exactly accurate. And it gives us the strength and the courage and the trust to keep going, to meet the new experience with a faith that doesn't need to know what's going to happen.

Gradually, what this quality of faith I'm trying to describe enables us to do, or opens us to, is to much more consciously be able to enter into each moment knowing that we're entering totally into the unknown. Maybe when you came on this retreat there was a sense of that. Somewhere in the unknown—"I don't have a clue what's really going to happen here. It's something I've never done." But what's actually the case is that this is true of every moment of our life. We think we know.

It's funny—I'm talking about opening to the unknown in every moment, and we have this incredibly rigid schedule where almost every moment of the day is planned. If I say, "Two thirty-five, where are you going to be?" you'd answer, "Oh, I'll be in the meditation hall, sitting on my pillow." Maybe. Probably.

It blows me away when I come back from India, which is a wonderful place for much more consciously experiencing the fact that you never really know what's going to happen. No matter what I plan to do when I get up in the morning, the one thing you can be sure of is that's not what's going to happen that day. It's great for that. It keeps us off balance, but it's much truer to how things actually are.

What amazes me is coming home. After a couple of weeks, I have my day book, and I have my hours planned, and I look at it, and mostly that happens. That's what really amazes me. I can tell you where I'm supposed to be on August 15th of next year. And probably there's a good chance that might happen, which is amazing. It's really amazing. But it sustains the illusion that things are under control.

And then it stopped. I said, okay, well, that was neat. That's fine. But what didn't stop was a series of aftershocks, like every three minutes, every five minutes, for the next at least twenty-four hours. And then, with decreasing frequency, for the rest of the retreat. Where I had felt like I really handled it with great equanimity—very present, seeing things change, no attachments—those aftershocks really got to me.

Because the one thing I always felt I could depend on was the ground beneath my feet. You know, the weather might change, relationships might shift, but at least the ground stays still. And suddenly that was gone too. There was nothing solid to fall back on.

This is what practice reveals to us, again and again. We think we've let go of one thing, and then we discover we've simply transferred our sense of security to something else. It's like a game of finding the next resting place, the next solid ground. And mindfulness shows us: there is no solid ground. There never was.

This doesn't mean we live in a state of perpetual anxiety. That's not the point. The point is that our usual strategy—finding something solid, something unchanging, something we can count on—that strategy doesn't work. It never actually provided the security we thought it did. We were always living in this groundless reality; we just weren't paying attention.

When we sit in meditation and experience the body dissolving into sensations, the breath arising and passing, thoughts appearing from nowhere—we're not creating groundlessness. We're simply seeing what was always true. And there's something liberating in that, even though initially it can feel terrifying.

The question becomes: can we learn to be at ease without a resting place? Can we discover a different kind of stability—not the stability of finding something solid, but the stability of being present with what is, however it changes?

By the end of a night of aftershocks every three minutes—and of course the radio kept saying there was a twenty-five percent chance of the big one coming in the next three days, which just puts that thought in your mind, *is this an aftershock or is this the big one?*—by the end of twelve hours of that, my nerves were a wreck. Every time a shock would start, our heater would rattle loudly, so it couldn't just pass unnoticed. We'd hear rattle, rattle, rattle every two minutes.

I came out of that experience deeply feeling this sense of how unquestioningly I had relied on the earth to be there for me—to be solid, to be someplace I could just rest. The worst that can happen, you think, is you fall on the earth. But to viscerally get it over and over—sorry, not that one either—it really touches into this sense of anattā, of not-

self, and the fear that comes from ongoing insecurity. Not quite franticness, but the mind wanting to find somewhere to land. It's not okay hanging out in nowhere, trying to take a stand.

But actually, it's not even the movement. It's not the inability to take a stand that's the problem. It's not the never knowing or the unknown. The problem is that sense of "I" that's there in the midst of the unknown—that "I" arising, clinging to whatever, positing a need for security. The aftershock's not a problem. What it's doing to me is the problem. *Where am I going to find security?* is the problem.

When we're just opening into the moment as it is, there's no problem. If you had even one moment today where it was just pure beingness—maybe it was hearing, maybe smelling, maybe warmth—where there was no discursive description, no trying to figure anything out, no trying to name the species of bird, just simple being—in that moment, where's the problem? There's no needing to know what's going to happen next. There's no referring back to someone it's happening to. There's no needing to know what happened before. It's just this moment. And in that, without the obsessive, ongoing referring back of every sense experience to a sense of self, with just the pure experience, there isn't any problem. Whatever needs to occur in the next moment, the next moment occurs. If some response needs to happen, that also occurs. We don't need to figure it all out ahead of time.

This sense of pure being doesn't mean—which is one of the questions that comes up a lot—*if there's no self, then how am I ever going to do anything? Who's going to do things?* We can talk about this sense of pure being and say, well, that's really nice, but what about if it starts to rain and there's lightning and you have to get up and go inside? Actually, the two have nothing to do with each other. There's a sense of being, and then there's a sense of being with lightning, and then there's a sense of a thought arising: *It could kill me. I think I'll go inside.* That could be done with or without clinging to a sense of self. It can just be clear seeing.

This sense of faith is what can, over and over, give us the confidence and trust to be willing to meet experience with this quality of not knowing. And the quality of not knowing will let us investigate—not with thinking, but with presence—in a much more open way. We look at the data freshly, so to speak, without having interpreted it before we've even perceived it.

When we begin to explore the sense of "I," of "mine"—even the thought of not clinging to something as a sense of I or mine—it can really shake up that sense of deepest resting place. I think that's why, often, whether in or out of formal practice, when in a space of awareness you touch a deep place where there's really a visceral, intuitive

getting it—*oh, there really isn't any me*—often what comes up is fear. It's a kind of natural response to losing something we've never actually had in the first place, but something we think we had. A sense of fear, even terror, can arise.

And that's fine. We don't like fear very much, but the fear itself doesn't mean something's wrong. Often fear, as we touch it in our practice, is really more like a messenger that we're moving into unknown territory. Rather than being afraid of the fear—again, we have to have some confidence and clarity of practice—we can just meet the fear as another arising emotion, be with it, see it come, see it go. We don't have to take it as a messenger of doom. We don't have to take it as evidence that something must be going wrong. Often it means something's going really right, and we're hitting the place of our unquestioned assumptions, which are beginning to break down.

We don't always understand that rationally, but that's the process that's unfolding.

So, to begin to use our practice in this way—I find it really fascinating. It's one of the ways I truly love to explore when I'm on retreat: to consciously use mindfulness to explore the actual sense of "me" or "mine" when it's arising in a moment.

Everything I'm going to say now about exploring it comes from what I've discovered in my own investigations and in working with others. But I'm not sharing this so you'll take it as another explanation. Hopefully it will simply spark your interest to look and explore on your own. And never take any answer that your mind arrives at—"Oh, this is what the self is" or "This isn't what it is"—as a final resting place. If you can keep that interest alive, keep that childlike innocence, that trust, to keep meeting the data, keep exploring without stopping at any assumption that now you know what the self is or isn't—then you can really begin to look.

What we begin to see, what I begin to see, is that what seemed so solid and unquestioned... it's not that we're destroying the ego through our practice or getting rid of the sense of self to substitute something else. It's that we begin to see that what seemed so solid is nothing. There's nothing solid there at all. And in touching a sense of anatta—which is the Pali word for no separate self—and losing the sense of self, we don't actually lose anything. It's not like something changes and we can't function, because it's not there in the first place. It's just that our perception has been inaccurate. We're interpreting perceptions inaccurately, and that's all that's going on.

This is from a man named Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian sage who died in the last decade. He says: "My actual experience is not different from yours, but it is my evaluation and attitude that differ. I see the same world as you, but not the same way. Every-

body sees the world through the idea she or he has of herself. As you think yourself to be, so you think the world to be. If you imagine yourself as separate from the world, the world will appear separate from you, and you will experience desire and fear."

It really is all our perceptions, our descriptions, and our imaginings—which is so hard to believe. And when we begin to really look and see this over and over, then what's truly hard to believe is how powerful these inaccurate perceptions and imaginings and descriptions are. So amazingly powerful. It takes this willingness to keep looking.

So we look, and we see that when you have this feeling of "I," of "mine"—however it manifests—it might just be the thought, "I'm really hungry." Or it might be, "I'm bored now. I wish this talk would end. I wonder what I'm going to do tomorrow. My knee hurts." It doesn't matter the content. But when we have that sense, when you notice it there, rather than focusing on the object, see if you can—and your mind needs to be somewhat quiet for this, obviously—see if you can turn your attention back on that "I" or "mine." The actual experiential feeling or thought or emotion, whatever it is. In that moment, what are you calling "mine"?

We might be focused on "I'm hungry" and actually be focused on the feeling of hunger or wanting food. But that might not be the actual sense of "I" who is hungry. Sometimes we're so accustomed to that "I" feeling, it just seems like it's always there, so we overlook it. When your mind is a little quiet, it can be really wonderful—I really love this—turning around the attention and seeing, "Well, what is 'I'? Who is 'I'?" I don't mean investigating with thought, but with this sati, this mindfulness, that just lands right on that feeling of "I" to see what it actually is.

We begin to see that the sense of "I" or "mine," the birth of self, is arising and passing moment to moment. There isn't anything lasting that we thought was unchanging. Buddhadasa, the renowned Thai meditation master, says: "The self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind." That's all it is. And in my experience so far—which I've not come to the end of—so far that's really true.

So when there's that sense of "I"—"I'm hungry. I want this. This hurts. I want this to go away"—turn around and see what experience is being grasped and clung to.

Don't even assume it's being grasped and clung to because I say it. Turn around and feel and see for yourself.

Every time that sense of "I" arises, there's a moment of sense contact. Maybe there's a smell. There could be a grasping at that smell. There could be a thought: "Mmm, smells like pizza." And then there could be another thought: "Oh, I'm really hungry." So there's grasping arising with that sense contact. Turn the attention not to the thought of the pizza, but to the "I," and see what it's landing on.

What I find is that each time I do this, it's a different actual momentary experience that is somehow being interpreted as "I." For example, when I say "I'm talking right now," there's this sense of "I." I turn toward my experience, and it's a sort of very vague physical sensation that I can't even quite locate. Sometimes it could be an image. Sometimes it could be an actual sensation of pain. Sometimes it could be a thought. I have a friend who said that often when he'd turn toward his sense of "I," it was as if he had this very subtle mental image of his face, and that would be "I," as if experience was coming out of that. I'm just giving examples—it could be anything.

But turning and looking, what's been really liberating for me is that each time it's something different. There isn't, so far, some thing there, or some emotion, or some experience, or some anything that's "I." And that's what gets really fascinating—to begin to see. If you can see it, if it's something that one can experience right away, it's an arising and passing phenomenon. There's no continuity to it. There's no ultimate solidity. It's clearly not self. So just beginning to explore in this way.

Classically, and Joseph spoke about some of these last night, in Buddhist psychology they talk about what makes up a person, so to speak—the different aspects of experience around which there tends to be this clutching, this identification, which is really just a contraction of grasping around an experience. There are five aspects, the five aggregates, which make up all our experience. These are what we tend to land on as "I" in any given moment.

There's the body, which Joseph mentioned last night, which is obvious—sensations in the body, the whole sense of our body as a whole. What I've found more subtle, which isn't actually body but which I think of as body if I don't look carefully, is the image of the body. There might be a sensation, and over that, subtly, there's an image of me. There's a sense of identification, of grasping—"me," "my," "mine"—and that's "I" in that moment. It can be very subtle.

Often as I'm sitting, there's just sensation and there's no sense of self, no sense of body. It's as if sensations are coming and going in a vast space of awareness. And then there's this subtle background image of my body sitting here—just an image of this

body. Not seeing that, in that moment for me, it becomes a sense of Carol, a sense of self. It's as if it's a container placed over an experience that has no containment and no location, but it gives a false sense of container. That's just something to look at.

The second aspect of experience that often becomes the grasping point of self is what is called feeling tone. The other night I spoke about how each sense experience we experience as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, which can come quite subtly. Usually from pleasant we move right away to wanting more, from unpleasant we move to aversion, and from neutral to spacing out. But often we don't notice that feeling tone because it's quite subtle. This is one of the five aggregates that makes up what a human is—one that we easily fail to notice, that we identify with, that we cling to.

Say there's a pain in the knee, and it's unpleasant. You might really be looking at it, mindful of sensation, really seeing the sensation, and there's not a sense of "I'm that sensation." But somehow there's a real sense of involvement and self-identification there, and you can't quite figure out where. You're clear you're not the pain. Often the clutching is around that subtle feeling of unpleasantness, of pleasantness, of neutrality. I mention this as something else to notice. It creates that real sense of separation. Sometimes we don't notice that feeling at all.

The third aggregate, which Joseph also mentioned last night, is consciousness itself—the knowing faculty, which seems ever-present and very subtle.

And that is easy. I think in some ways that's the last one we identify with. It's the most subtle and the most difficult to see as separate from me. I know hearing. I know that I'm paying attention. I know that there's unpleasant feeling. I know that there's awareness. It's easy to think of that as "I."

So without saying it is or it isn't, just notice if that's where this sense of I or me or mine is landing.

The fourth area is perception, which Joseph talked about again last night, and which is another really fascinating area to explore. Because we can really begin to see, sometimes in simple ways, how easily we identify with our perception, take it as true, and then how something else can come in and we can say our perception was totally whacked out. It had nothing to do with what was going on, but we would have defended it to the death. Yes, this is how it is.

Just a little example. The other night, about two nights ago, I was sleeping with the window open for the first time. And I woke up in the middle of the night with some weird stuff going on in my body. You know, that kind of weird, vulnerable, not quite—you haven't quite put all the pieces together yet—state when you wake up in the middle

of the night like that. So I was just lying there. And I gradually became aware of this really loud roaring noise, just so loud coming in. First thought: well, that must be the river. But I didn't really have too much confidence in that thought, in that perception. And it just seemed to get louder and louder, with all these undertones and currents. I thought, I've been here for five days, and this is the third year I've been here. I never heard the river sounding like that. There's no way that can be the river.

And then I remembered when I was a nun for a while in Thailand and I was staying at one place that was in the forest, on a small river deep down in a gorge. And one night, all of a sudden, just like that, this tiny little river got huge. It came all the way to the top of the gorge. It flooded our whole area and it made so much noise. It was unbelievable. So I thought: either there's some weird mechanical kind of plane or tank coming in here, or this river is flooding, and it must be totally up to the porch by now.

And I was absolutely convinced of that, because my perception was that I had never heard the river be that loud. Impossible.

So I finally went back to sleep, checked it out in the morning, walked out. Of course, the river's really loud. I mean, it's been there all along, really loud. I just never noticed it before. Now I can't walk down the road without hearing the river babbling. It's really there. It's really loud. I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles or whatever that that river never made a noise like that before.

So just that willingness to check our perceptions, and where we can be so sure and so identified, and we can be so wrong. That's what we're doing.

And the last area is everything else. I sometimes think that's kind of how the Buddha did it—all these categories, and then there's one that sort of lumps in so much. It's called mental formations. So it includes what we're doing today in the instruction: intention.

Intention is a really interesting one, because you can see how subtle it is. Intention to move, intention to do something, intention to direct the mind in a certain way, intention to come back to the breath, intention to move to hearing. And it's so easy to feel like, that's me. Well, who's meditating? Who's paying attention to the breath? Where does this intention come from, if not from me?

It's a very subtle place of investigation. So again, just look and see when you identify with the intention. If that's you, then where are you when the intention goes away? Sit there and notice the intention to scratch your eyes, like Fred was saying. If that was you, then during those ten breaths when you didn't scratch, you were gone, right? And then you come back again, if that's how intention is us.

But explore it. And that's where I mean don't stop. We turn to intention.

It feels so much like us, there can be a tendency to stop really looking. And then we move into, "Of course it's me. What else could it be? And where could this intention come from?" And we're back into that spinning mind of doubt again. So exploring intention is essential.

The other aspect I want to mention of mental formations is, of course, our old friend thought. Thought is really something. Sometimes we can see thought, obviously—it's a lot of what our practice is. But because it can come so often, and we get so used to it, we sometimes don't notice that the thoughts can turn into an ongoing commentary that is actually making up our sense of self. We're kind of describing ourselves to ourselves as we go through the day, telling ourselves different stories. If you stop and look, you might be telling yourself a lot of different stories about yourself. In a way, we're making it up as we go along.

But if we don't notice thought, there's this identification with certain ones. For instance, some might go through—"Wow, I'm really doing good. I'm really a far out person." Those kind of go by maybe. We don't really identify with them too much. Another one comes up: "I am such a schlump. I'll never be able to do this right. I'm too tight. I'm too this. I'm too that. I'm a failure." Those ones we might really buy into and believe and carry around, just like everything we do—telling ourselves, "I don't wash the dishes right, I made a big clanging noise when I was serving myself, everybody was looking at me, I'm not working mindfully enough, I'm moving too much in the hall." And not noticing all the times in between when these thoughts aren't happening, when there's no sense of self at all, but stringing them together and telling ourselves this self story—it gets really solid.

One time, a couple years ago, I was on a two-month retreat, and it got really clear to me. I had just seen a movie just before the retreat, which—if you can avoid that, or listening to music just before a retreat, I'd advise avoiding it unless you want to really watch the replays for a long time. So I had seen The Fugitive. At least it wasn't too bad of a movie—it could have been worse. But I'd be sitting there and I'd be getting flashes of scenes and dialogue and this and that of the fugitive, not of course in order, jumping forward and back in time.

And then after a while, it hit me. That would go for a while, and then it would switch, and the Carol movie would come on, and there would be flashes of memory and future planning and images of myself and things that happened, forward and back in time. At some point, it hit me. It wasn't like they were correlated, like a simile. They were exactly the same. There wasn't any difference. It wasn't that the Carol story was more real

at that moment than the flashes of memory from The Fugitive. Not at all. It was just images coming up and thoughts. But there were particular ones that there was a sense of grasping, a sense of identification around. And so I made that Carol. I didn't think I was, you know—I can't remember his name—but I didn't think that was who I was. I knew that was a movie.

Well, guess what? So's the other.

It doesn't mean that I don't know what happened in the past and that I can't relate. But in that moment, what was really happening was just images arising, thoughts arising, emotions arising, and passing. And whether it was about Carol or what's-his-name, it really wasn't any different.

And that's what we're doing all the time. We're telling ourselves stories. There's thoughts. We don't notice which ones we clutch at and make a story of and the other ones that go by. So pay attention. See which ones

You grasp at a sense of self around certain thoughts while others simply pass by. Just because there's a grasping sense of self around some thoughts doesn't necessarily make them true. I want to point that out.

In fact, often—not with everybody, but for many people I talk to in retreats—the tendency can be to really identify with the negative ones, the negative self-images, the ways we're not good enough, our failings. And if something beautiful happens or we have some beautiful experience, and a thought arises, "Well, I'm really a very kind person," the mind comes in right away: "Don't get too carried away with yourself. Remember when you did this? You didn't give that." And we think, "Oh yeah, that's right. Thank you for bringing me back to truth." Because we're buying into a particular story.

It's all just thoughts. Imagine the freedom, the spaciousness, of not having to grasp and solidify around any of them.

This is another way we can approach exploring the sense of self. The way I've been talking is really the way of precision—being with the breath with precision, bringing your attention precisely into the experience of "I" or "mine." We can also approach it from the way of spaciousness, somewhat like being with hearing. At times we tune into whatever word you want to use—spaciousness, awareness, or emptiness, which is really the more classic term. Things arise and pass. Emptiness doesn't mean nothing is happening, but it's empty of clinging, empty of aversion and grasping, empty of self. And in that openness, without looking for anything—just as Joseph was describing with

cars going by, not looking for anything—when the sense of grasping arises, the sense of clinging, the emergence of self, you really can't help but notice it when you're attuned to the emptiness.

I'll give an example. One time I was on a self-retreat in a really lovely spot in California. I was sitting high up on a hill, just as you were doing today, hopefully—just sitting and being aware with my eyes open. Nothing particular, just spaciousness and peace and everything coming and going. Really beautiful, no thoughts of "me," just presence.

Some turkey vultures came flying out, really close because I was so high up. "Oh, that's far out." There wasn't really any clinging, just "that's far out"—another arising experience, spaciousness, peace. Of course, somewhere in it a thought arose: "This is really far out. I'm so empty, I'm so spacious." But that came and went too.

More turkey vultures came, and they started circling. All of a sudden they were circling right over me, getting closer and closer. And suddenly the thought arose: "I'm the thing they're circling. They think I'm dead." I had this moment of genuine panic. It only lasted a moment, but it took everything I had not to stand up and scream, "I'm alive! I'm alive!" It was really interesting.

In that moment, the emptiness, the spaciousness, the no-sense-of-self, the real freedom and ease—it vanished, just like that. Total contraction. Solid sense of me and other, fear, something to do. That's how it is.

When we're letting ourselves attune to the emptiness, when it's present, we can notice it. Sometimes we can't—there's just too much going on, too much clinging, too much stuff. But other times, when it's quieter or there's not a particular identification with anything, we can open up and really let ourselves tune in to the emptiness. Get comfortable with it.

Buddhadasa talks about this often as a way of practice. It's not like we're in total silence, complete cessation of all suffering—I'm not talking about ultimate enlightenment. Just inclining toward emptiness. As he says, we experience many, many moments of this emptiness in our ordinary day-to-day life. Often we just don't notice them, but we can begin to incline our awareness toward them. Not to do anything, not to be "me," not grasping—just to get more comfortable, more content with that ease, with that emptiness.

In that spaciousness, when the sense of grasping at some experience arises and the sense of self is born in a moment, it's really quite obvious. It's not something we have to fight; it's just really interesting to see how it can go from a moment of total ease to a moment of complete panic and fear that I'm going to be attacked by turkey vultures. And the next moment, it can all dissolve again.

So really seeing the arising and passing of this sense of self, not being content to stop anywhere, but keep exploring—watch it come, watch it go.

And in each experience of that, the old conditioning, the old assumptions begin to weaken. And without logically knowing it, we begin to experience much more of an ease with what comes and goes in our life, with what comes and goes in our emotions, with what comes and goes as experience. Just an ease in the dancing with things.

It's not that stuff disappears, but it's that sense of *I*, that constant self-referencing that begins to ease—that we don't take so seriously, that we see through altogether. And in that comes a real sense of joy and dancing.

I just want to end with this from a Tibetan Lama:

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already there in relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself. There's nothing to do. Whatever arises in the mind has no importance at all, because it has no reality whatsoever. Don't become attached to it. Don't pass judgment. Let the game happen on its own, springing up and falling back without changing anything, and all will vanish and reappear without end. Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you relax this grasping, space is there—open, inviting, and comfortable. Nothing to do, nothing to force, nothing to want, and everything happens by itself.

So let's just do nothing.

CHAPTER 277

Mindfulness In Action

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this practical talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of the most common questions meditators face: how does the precise, concentrated mindfulness developed on retreat transfer into the complexity of daily life? She introduces the Buddha's teaching on clear comprehension (sampajañña), the essential corollary to mindfulness that expands awareness beyond microscopic attention to include the whole context of our actions, speech, and relationships.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes the crucial role of intention (cetanā) as the seed of karma and the moment of genuine choice in our lives. She explores the paradox articulated by Padmasambhava: holding a view "as spacious as the sky" while attending to intentions "as fine as grains of barley flour." Through personal stories—including a challenging self-defense course and her unexpected path to teaching—she illustrates how connecting with our deepest aspirations can guide difficult decisions and transform our relationship to action.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance on expanding mindfulness to include skillful means: recognizing how weather, energy levels, and circumstances affect our mental states; speaking what is true, useful, and timely; and breaking down the walls between "practice time" and "non-practice time." Wilson encourages practitioners to ask: What aspects of life do I consider outside my practice? She suggests simple methods—feeling the breath during phone calls, using bells or environmental sounds as reminders—to weave presence throughout ordinary activities, ultimately imbuing all of life with profound meaning.*

Sometimes when I'm just walking down here from our little house, being with the beauty and the expansiveness, the feeling is just so complete and wonderful and mysterious. I was just feeling that now, and I had to say it. It's so hard to come and speak a lot of words, as if somehow the words are trying to point to something that is so ineffable. Sometimes it seems like a real dichotomy.

What I want to speak about tonight is hopefully going to be of practical help in developing and noticing the expanded quality of awareness, of mindfulness. That's what's really important to us when we leave here—in our daily activities, when we're involved in the world of action, of choice, of decisions, of so much coming at us. One of the questions that comes up a lot is: how does this precision with the breath, this being in such quietness, transfer? How is it going to help us? Of course it helps us, but it's not the whole picture.

There are some corollary aspects to mindfulness that we've been alluding to. This isn't going to be new information, but I want to bring it out more clearly because it helps to give conscious attention to these areas in our daily life. In fact, it's what makes this practice really deepen and begin to extend as tendrils throughout all of our activities.

As is fortunate in Theravada Buddhism, everything is broken down into lists and nice, convenient ways of talking about it. It's actually very helpful for remembering because it was an oral tradition for five hundred years, so it seems like that was a helpful way for people to remember.

The corollary to mindfulness—which is bare attention, this nonviolent, open, accepting, clear attention—and concentration, which is that steadiness of mind that connects, the corollary to mindfulness is what usually translates as clear comprehension. Mostly, when the Buddha talks about mindfulness, he would always talk about mindfulness and clear comprehension together.

Clear comprehension, in the various ways I'll point to it, is basically about expanding out of the microscopic experience—not abandoning that, but expanding out of it to the whole context within which we are speaking, acting, being, relating. At first, it doesn't always feel like mindfulness because we're used to that microscopic concentrated form. When you leave here, one thing we don't guarantee much, but one thing I can guarantee is that over time, that microscopic clarity and concentration will go. That's one of the few things we can guarantee. So if that's what we're thinking of as what mindfulness is, and the only way for wisdom to arise in our life, then we're going to be really frustrated and disappointed. It's an important piece, but it's not the whole piece. Even so, we never abandon this piece of the clear seeing, the mindfulness.

The first aspect of this clear comprehension, coming into the world of action, of speech, of choices—and this we've spoken of, but I want to highlight it—is beginning to pay very conscious attention to the experience of our intentions in our speech, in our action. I can't express enough how vital to transformation awareness of intentions can be. It's absolutely crucial. It can change the whole way we relate to our lives.

As Joseph has said often, intention is the seed through which an action has the karmic results for ourselves of being either wholesome—leading to freedom from suffering, to happiness, to peace—or unwholesome, bringing more suffering on ourselves.

But there's a paradox when we talk about this and look at the way we've been practicing here on retreat, where we say: sit or walk, be fully present with whatever arises—wholesome, unwholesome, love, mindfulness, rage, murderous rage, self-hatred, anxiety, fear, joy—they're all the same. Be with them, open to them, don't try to change them. Watch every thought come and go. No thought is more important than any other.

It's pretty natural out of this for questions to arise: well, how do you act? How do you make any choice? What about social activism? What about affecting change in the world if this is the attitude we bring to every experience?

On one side, that's the attitude of wisdom. As Joseph said last night, there are the two sides: wisdom and compassion. That's the wisdom of really seeing the emptiness of things. Where these arising states of mind, especially mental states, do make a huge difference—where they do start to matter—is when a mental state, a mental factor is arising that brings about and informs an intention to speak or act. A thought of anger can come and go. Or a thought of anger can come and give rise to the intention: I'm really going to let that so-and-so have it.

And you can say it, and then you can actually go and do it. So that's more than a passing thought. It's turned into an action. It's become the intention for an action that could bring suffering both to ourselves and another person.

So we have this paradox: nothing matters, and every intention that arises in our heart and mind matters totally in that moment.

There's a saying I find beautiful from Padmasambhava, who is the founder of Tibetan Buddhism, you could say. He expresses this paradox: "Though my view is as spacious as the sky, my actions and my respect for cause and effect are as fine as grains of barley flour."

How do we hold both of those? A view as spacious as the sky—non-judging, non-grasping, non-clinging—and at the same time, such attention, such respect for the intentions leading to action, and such respect for the consequences of acting from either wholesome or unwholesome motivations.

If we didn't have the spacious view, it would be easy to get either incredibly judgmental with ourselves when our intentions aren't so hot, or to fall into a kind of fear of hell—you know, if I did too many bad things, I'm going to go to hell. If you read some of the Tibetan texts, they talk very graphically in those terms. But it doesn't have to be this kind of dread or panic. Rather, it's a real respect that if we act in ways that come from anger, from fear, from hatred, from greed, from delusion, somewhere those results are going to manifest in our own heart and mind, if not outwardly.

And so this willingness, this ability, this interest to bring mindfulness to intention—this is the crucial point where we actually have a choice, where we can affect change in the way we are in the world, in our actions, and in the way we relate to ourselves and other beings. It's the moment of choice. It's the moment of potential transformation.

Without awareness of intention, it can seem that we're just acting habitually, reactively, out of control. If I have a temper and certain things make me angry, it just comes up, I say the thing, I feel bad later, and I keep repeating that cycle over and over. There's no freedom in that. There's no transformation in that. I feel bad later, tell myself I won't do it again. But when the next time happens, without mindfulness, there's no choice, no sense of being able not to do it again.

When there's that moment of noticing the intention, there's a moment of seeing: Ah, that's not so helpful. That would lead to suffering. Maybe I won't do it.

This is called mindfulness wisdom, *satipaññā*. The mindfulness with which we can notice our motivation, and the wisdom that tells us this might lead to suffering for myself and others. It can just be an intuitive sense—it doesn't have to go into words like that. Maybe it's not such a good idea. Maybe I'll just zipper my mouth and walk out the door before something else comes out of it.

Now, as we've noticed, we gave the instruction to pay attention to intention the other day. And as some people have said, "Forget it, I haven't even noticed that." It's very subtle at times—that sense of just about to. But often, and in daily life you might notice it more this way, intention can manifest as thought. Like what I just said: "I'm going to really let that so-and-so have it." It's a thought, but it's the manifestation of an intention of anger or vengeance or rage. We can use the content of those thoughts to give us a clue about the intention, because the intention actually informs that thought.

If we don't notice the intention, it'll rise again more strongly and lead to speech. And an even stronger intention leads to action.

So we practice having that moment of choice. The mindfulness practice we do here might seem a little like a mindfulness exercise. You itch, you notice the intention, you tell yourself don't lift your arm—and the next thing you know, you're scratching it. You don't know how that happened. Another time you notice the intention, tell yourself don't lift your arm, and then you catch it, as Fred said, halfway up.

That's huge. That's huge, because that moment of catching is the moment of potential for mindfulness wisdom to come in, for us to have a choice.

I hope this leads to understanding why, when we're faced with action, when we're faced with a difficult situation—and of course it's more complicated with difficult situations—but when we have to act, why is it important to be present? Because if we're not present, we might act quite easily, and it might be that the actions are effective in the outer world, getting the result we think we want. But the reactions might actually be increasing pain to ourselves.

I might be getting in big trouble bringing this up as an example, but what if you had a toxic waste dump in your backyard and it was going to hurt your child?

And that's a real situation. Mindfulness doesn't mean we sit and be aware of our feelings, aware that things came about due to causes, acknowledge it's not personal, and conclude there's nothing to do. So what if it hurts our child? It hurts it, but that's what's happening. No—it doesn't stop there.

Mindfulness gives us the opportunity to sit, notice the whole situation, and also notice the emotions that arise in us, the intentions to act that emerge from it. And we can see: there might be what seems like a very good course of action. Perhaps we would move, perhaps we could go and really give hell to the people who created the toxic waste dump, perhaps we can motivate a whole big cause to clean it up—whatever. But if we can keep paying attention also to our own emotions and intentions, we might do the same action in vastly different ways.

We could do what seems like it would effect change out of rage, panic, vengefulness. We might go to the people responsible for the dump and just blast them, hate them, or try to change them out of a really strong will. And first of all, we'd probably be met with a similar kind of energy. But even without that, acting from such deep anger or panic or fear is really harming ourselves. It's like bringing in such a darkness. It's making it easier for us to act from anger, to act from hatred, to act from fear in the future—even if it seems to get helpful results.

Being aware of the intention doesn't mean we don't have to act. But sometimes we can just sit and be with the anger, be with what's happening, and give it time. We can use the wisdom to see if we can find a way to consciously connect with the humanity—as much as Joseph mentioned in his talk last night—to not just act from our immediate reactions, but to find a way underneath. To act from more serenity, from more calm. To find some sense of common humanity with the people we're needing to work with, and see if we can work from a different motivation.

I'm not saying it's easy. And these things are incredibly complex. I'm not trying to say it's simple. But these moments of paying attention—only if we're present do we have the opportunity to act from the wisdom that grows from mindfulness. And to act from a different intention transforms our lives. It's what purifies our conduct. It's what purifies our mind. It's what really—and I'm only speaking for myself now—one of the main aspirations of meditation practice: to really transform myself from a person who tends to act from greed, from hatred, from delusion, to someone who acts with much more awareness, with connection, with compassion. That's the place I have to start before I feel like I can expect that from anybody else in the world.

And we do have a choice—much more than we think. Different intentions may arise, but when we have that awareness and the willingness to look, we do have a choice of how we act. It's quite amazing how much choice we have. Again, I'm not saying it's easy. And sometimes I'll deliberately pick situations to explore that: to see if I can take really decisive, effective action without coming from the habits of rage or the habits of anger. Personally, I find that very difficult.

A couple of years ago, I signed up for a self-defense course for women called Model Mugging. Extremely intense. I know—I can tell you the reasons why, but when I look back now I can't believe I did it. It's set up in five or six sessions, each five or six hours long, deliberately so that it's really intense. It's really meant to push you to the limits of your capacity in whatever way. It's called Model Mugging because they have these guys all dressed up like they're the muggers, with padding all over them—giant padded helmets, padding everywhere. Because what you're taught to do is specific moves: kicking, gouging, all of this. I know, it's intense. But you have to do it at full strength. That's why these guys are so padded—so that you actually have to pull out of yourself the energy it would require to repel an attack.

The reason I consciously told myself to do it—this might seem really bizarre—was that I noticed fear of violence would come up in situations where it was completely uncalled for, just from my conditioning as a woman. I don't even have a history of violence, and I still have this fear that's very ingrained. I would notice that this fear would actually get in the way of my feeling connection and compassion with other people. Walking in the city, I'd see a homeless man and the fear would come up and block my sense of common humanity, my willingness to go over and meet him. I really didn't like that. I wanted to do something to change it. So I chose this course.

I really went into it trying to see if I could find the place of acting very fully without coming from rage or fear. I'm not saying I found that, but it was a very interesting exercise. And I found out later, talking to a friend who did the same course in another state,

that the teachers I had actually weren't so skillful because they didn't emphasize that. For my friend, they really emphasized finding that place—when the attacker would come and you'd have certain things you're supposed to do, but they might break out of the script.

So it wasn't really always just scripted, and you had to respond spontaneously. In her class, they really emphasized finding—not coming from terror or anger, not immediately just flailing—but really finding the still place inside that wasn't affected by that terror or anger. Just being patient and watchful, and then responding like a coil spring. The energy comes out and you respond, but it's not hatred or anger. It's just what you need to do to defend yourself. You stop as soon as that's done. You don't keep wailing on the guy. You stop and go call the police. That's how they teach it.

Mine, on the other hand—you get in a circle at the first class and the teacher says, "All right, let's go kick ass." I thought, "Oh, I don't know if I'm in the right place here."

It was an interesting experience. I still think it's possible. I found once in a while, because I wouldn't really get angry—I didn't have that—but I would sometimes get afraid. And I would find that action would come out quite spontaneously. I'm not sure I found the place of real clear decisive action in the face of something that's clearly inappropriate and wrong without it coming from anger. I certainly never felt compassionate toward the guys, I have to say that. But I still believe it's possible, and finding ways in our life to activate that—not just assuming it's too much and we can't do it.

At any rate, in any particular situation when we're confronted with choices and decisions, learning how to tune into intention, noticing how it manifests in you, knowing that it often won't be obvious. Sitting here and there's the intention to scratch an itch—that's sort of obvious, although we often don't even actually notice what's fueling that intention, whether it's desire, whether it's aversion, whether it's restlessness. But it's not a huge big deal.

In life, however, there could be layers of subtlety of intention. For example, at work someone asks you to take on another responsibility even though you feel overloaded, and you agree. Do we notice what the intention is behind it? It could be many things. It could be a real willingness, a real dedication to the bigger picture. It could be total codependence and trying to take care of everyone else, even if you burn out in the process. It could be fear of what people would think, or protecting our self-image, or trying to be the perfect person in all ways. It could be a lot of things.

Some of those intentions won't be conscious to us at first. If we have tendencies of personality or mind that we haven't quite let come up into the light yet, we might not notice them. And so that's what the more clear mindfulness practice is about. Working with intention takes a lot of clarity, but also a lot of honesty. It's not about trying to make ourselves look good to ourselves. It's not about pretending I'm acting from compassion when I really wish this person would drop through a hole in the ground. It's about being really honest and not judging that.

This is where we go back to the spaciousness of awareness. If I want to be compassionate but really I hate this person's guts, it's to be really honest about that without any judgment. And in that honesty, that's the place where we can see the painful, unwholesome mental state. Be with it. Allow it. Don't try to change it, but not act on it. Eventually it will move off and something more profound can take its place.

In our daily life, the one other aspect of intention that I want to touch on—picking up on what Joseph spoke about last night—is intention in the macro aspect. You could call it our aspiration, a sense of our deepest, most heartfelt purpose in this life. This is also spoken of as a real beacon, a real guiding light.

When we need to make choices, we might be aware of our more immediate intention, but sometimes the intention could seem fine and we still have choices. How do we make them? Should I live in California? Should I live in Barre? Should I take this meditation course or not? Should I do this or that?

They both seem fine. Neither one's bad. Neither one's particularly harmful. Having a really clear, heartfelt sense of what our highest aspiration is can guide us through such moments. Joseph mentioned last night the bodhicitta as an aspiration—a sense of real deep commitment to awaken for the benefit of all beings. That might be an aspiration that deeply motivates us as we meet situations in our life. That might not be your aspiration. It's not that there's any one aspiration that it's supposed to be.

But what I've found has been deeply personal in the last few years: the honest tuning into my highest aspiration and really bringing it consciously into awareness, clarifying it, even verbalizing it, truly acknowledging it to myself—and not just once, but when faced with decisions—has been an enormously powerful change of motivation and actually an aspect of transformation in how I live my life, in the choices I make. It's merely bringing that intention to light, that aspiration, and honoring it. That in itself can have a powerful transforming effect, even without knowing how.

In my own experience and in talking with other people, I find often it's something we think we know—what our aspiration is—but we haven't really been quite so conscious about it, haven't quite embraced it quite so fully, honored it really, and honored ourselves by honoring that aspiration.

Another thing that people often say, and I felt myself when this first came into my consciousness: it just kind of arose from nowhere. It's like, "Oh, that's really a powerful aspiration. Who am I to think that I could live up to that?" You know, just a piece of dirt or whatever. But it's easy for that doubt to arise.

The one that first arose—and it might change as our understanding of ourselves and life changes over the years—but what first arose in my mind on a retreat was a deep sense, and it came up in words and surprised me, as though: "I want to serve the truth, the Dharma, in whatever way that needs to happen in my life." And I thought, "Oh." A real, almost a sense of shame came over me. It was really interesting—almost a shame to acknowledge that—and then all the worthlessness and all the feelings of "that's too high an aspiration for someone like you to have."

Now, if anyone else would say that was their experience, of course you'd say, "That's silly. Of course that's beautiful. Anyone can have whatever aspiration." But just to notice: there might be this kind of backlighting of our tendencies. Don't let it get in the way. Really bringing this aspiration up and then using it as a conscious reference point when confronted with confusing or difficult decisions—I found it's been amazing, really fascinating, and powerful in a way that I don't understand, sort of beyond reasoning. The honoring, the acknowledging of the intention, the aspiration itself seemed to begin to change things without my consciously trying to do anything.

So, just as a personal example again: soon after that aspiration came, I acknowledged it. I had no idea what that meant or what I should do, and I didn't try to figure it out or change anything. I was working as a manager then at our retreat center, IMS in Barre. It must have been '83, '84, I don't know. Fine, I just went back to my work, which I also felt was serving the Dharma, helping this retreat center run.

Sometime later, maybe only a couple of months—and I had no sense of wanting to teach at all. It's not sort of... let's put it this way: it's harder than not teaching. A couple of months after that, there was a weekend retreat happening in Vancouver, the other side of the country, and the teacher who was going to teach got really sick and couldn't do it. Everyone else was busy. A couple of other teachers, good friends of mine, decided I should do it, which I thought was not a good idea in any way, shape, or form. And I said no.

And these people—one of them was Sharon, actually—she's not usually pushing. She's usually, "Okay, you don't want to do it, fine." But she wouldn't stop. She wouldn't let up. She kept pushing and talking to me and telling me what to do. Another friend would call me up in California like forty-five minutes a day trying to talk me into it. So they wouldn't let me be. I kept saying, "No, no, no."

And then finally, it kind of arose in my mind: "Didn't you just acknowledge this aspiration a couple of months ago? And that it didn't matter what form it took—you were just willing to do whatever was needed?" It was kind of like Fred this morning. It was kind of like, "Oh yeah... oh yeah, I remember that. Oh yeah." And as soon as that came into my awareness, there was no choice anymore. It was obvious.

It's not that it makes the doing of it easier. Often, when I'm aware of really feeling in tune with my highest aspiration, it's sometimes the harder choice. But the attitude with which you meet the choice is totally different.

I was like a basket case going to do this retreat. It didn't make it all calm and easy. I remember hoping the car would crash on the way to the retreat—but only I would get hurt, not the guy driving—you know, stuff like that. But the attitude is really okay. This is my practice: the fear, the pain, the self-image, all this stuff. This is my practice to be with. And whatever comes up, it's whatever needs to happen. If somehow this is going to serve the truth and also help me awaken to freedom, then it's what has to happen. And it gives such a resolution, a strength of purpose and clarity to go through whatever little blips life happens to send to us.

That's just my little personal example. But what I found is it's not like that just happened once; I continue reconnecting in a really heartfelt way with what my aspiration is, really reaffirming, reconnecting. It's not just a thought, but a whole experiential dropping into what is really true, what is really most profound for me, and not being afraid of that. And it's okay if it changes too—that's how it does, you know, shift over the years. But it's a wonderful reference point for resolution, and it gives such conviction and strength to do things we would never have thought possible, because it was in service of an aspiration or a truth that is much greater than ourselves. It takes us out of personal self-referencing. It takes us out of the comfort zone for sure.

One of my little sayings I say when I find myself in this choice again is: "Do I want to be comfortable, or do I want to be free?" And as soon as that comes up—oh, yeah.

So that's something that's been really helpful to me. And again, working with intention, whether it's in the service of our highest aspiration or even just wanting to be as wholesome as possible in our day-to-day life when it doesn't seem to have a big effect—

it's important to have the spaciousness to know that we're not going to always be totally right on with either wholesome intentions or totally right on target with something we do in service of our higher aspiration.

I want to share that because I spent years beating myself up every time I did something I didn't consider dharmic. If I watched some stupid show on TV for half an hour, I'd go, "Oh, half an hour! I should have been meditating. I should have been reading the Dharma. I should have been helping beings or something. Instead I watched MASH for the 55th time." Really, it was a lot of suffering, because I'd sort of do more of the thing I was dreading. It's just like here in practice: when you hate something that's happening in your mind, it keeps coming back. So I'd watch more TV because I hated the way I was feeling about watching TV. It makes a lot of sense.

Have some spaciousness. Have some kindness with yourselves and know that we're going to deviate. It's okay. Partly because there's not always awareness of our intentions, partly because the intentions are so complex, like the example I gave of taking on more stuff at work.

I used to have the impression when I'd go home to visit my parents—we have quite a good relationship—I'm really going home to really be there for them, to really spend time together. Consciously, that was my intention. That's really in line with my highest aspiration. And I'd get there, and within two nights, I'm off by myself. I'm reading. I'm watching videos. I'm doing whatever. They're there in the other room doing crossword puzzles. We're hardly speaking. And it's not angry—we're just separate. And I really did this for years. I'd go to bed, and as I'd go to bed, I'd just be filled with self-recrimination for about twenty minutes.

You know, you're selfish. You're a jerk. You come down to be with them. They want to be here with you. Then I'd go to bed. Then I'd wake up, and the next day would be just the same. Then I'd go to bed filled with self-recrimination again. I couldn't understand what wasn't matching.

And it's partly this: when we have an aspiration and we're trying to force our outer activity to match it, but there's not really either a deep seeing of what's going on in us or an acceptance of it.

So when I finally quit hating myself and just paid attention—when I was watching the video, when I was reading, when I decided to get up and leave the room with my parents—first, I could see that partly I was coming down exhausted. I had really been

around people continually, and I needed some space of peace and quiet, which actually my family was giving me. They were fine that I needed that. They were offering me a gift. So I began to take that gift more and not hate myself for it.

And then, when there wasn't that tension, I found quite naturally I would turn off the video or the book and go in and sit down and chat. Because there wasn't that tension anymore. I had accepted my other intentions, and then we finally begin to harmonize much more organically with what we hold as our highest aspirations.

This sense of spaciousness, bringing it all up into the light, not just trying to meet some ideal we've made up—that will never work. We've got to include all of ourselves. And then we can harmonize much more naturally. And we must be willing to bring some consciousness into that process.

I want to share from someone who inspires me greatly. Her name is Sister Phương, or Sister Chân Không. She's the woman who works with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Master who was mentioned before. She has been working with him since the sixties in Vietnam, so she was also very active during the Vietnam War, simply trying to help people who were suffering from the war without taking sides, watching friends get killed, herself being thrown in jail, seeing more pain and suffering than I could ever imagine. And that was only in the sixties. She was also kicked out of Vietnam, couldn't go back because she'd probably be thrown in jail. But she's completely devoted to a life of freedom and compassion through her practice, and also one of activism—helping those who are suffering, being actively engaged in working with Vietnamese refugees, working with people in prison in Vietnam.

Having met her, I can say she's one of the most dynamic, energetic people I know. In the time I could think, "Wouldn't it be nice to do such and such," she would have done fifteen things. And there's no hierarchy in her service. She'll either spray out somebody's cabin that has spiders, or be packing boxes of medicine to send to Vietnam, or be collecting money for Vietnamese orphans, or getting up and giving a Dharma talk.

But here's what inspires me: after all these years of deep commitment to her understanding and to activism, it still doesn't come automatically that, faced with a difficult situation, she naturally responds with compassion. What inspires me is her patience and her commitment to work with this consciously.

This is a paragraph from her autobiography. She's talking about the present day, where she's working with news of arrests in Vietnam—monks, artists, nuns, people being thrown in jail. She tries to go through whatever channel she might have access to, any figure in power there, to see if she can get them out of jail:

"Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry, and I knew that I had to do walking meditation. Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

And she goes on to describe some of the changes she's managed to affect. So it's not easy, it's not simple. But if we can have a commitment to what's truly important for each one of us, that can bring the resolution and the patience to truly act in as appropriate and wholesome a way as possible—ways we might not think we could, just from sitting casually where we are.

So that's working with intentions. The second aspect of this broadening—broadening the field of mindfulness, broadening the field of awareness—is really a sense of spatial broadening. Classically, it's called working with skillful means, the clear comprehension of suitability, of what's appropriate in any situation.

What it means is this: when we're making a decision, choosing an action, we're not only looking at our own intention and its wholesomeness, but we have to locate ourselves and the situation in the context of the whole. It's really broadening mindfulness from the microscopic—how do the sensations feel when I lift my foot—to being aware that we are part of a whole situation. We can't really take ourselves separately.

Sometimes on a meditation retreat such as this, where we're really learning to develop focus, we lose sight of this aspect of clear comprehension of the whole situation. So you find people moving incredibly slowly through the doorway with forty people behind them. We run into this in the three-month course a lot—someone's just going so slowly in the food line. You just want to wake them up.

This is not where our practice is leading us. We're tuning into the whole situation and seeing that what's appropriate, totally appropriate in one situation, could be really not so appropriate at all in another situation. And so we have to bring in a real flexibility, a real adaptability. And again, this brings in wisdom. It brings in mindfulness wisdom, satipañña—mindfulness to notice what we're doing and the wisdom to see what's appropriate in the broader situation.

This highlights the wisdom of impermanence—that what's appropriate in one situation is going to be different in another situation. For example, what we played with on retreat here, talking about balanced effort: at one point your effort, the energy, might

be balanced and calm. It's the morning, and there's something difficult going on, and you can just sit and go right into it. There's a calmness and you're present, and it's fine. It may not be great, but it's fine. You can be with it.

Later in the afternoon, it seems that the same painful experience is arising. You try to do the same thing, but you forget to notice that the internal conditions are totally different. The energy is really low. There's a kind of restless, distracted mind. Aversion is coming up very easily. And instead of noticing that things are impermanent, that everything is a result of cause and effect, and that the situation is different now from in the morning, calling for a different response—instead of seeing all that, we just barrel ahead. Both responses could have been undertaken with a really clear, wholesome intention. But if we don't see the bigger picture, our wholesome intention is going to be misguided because there's not the wisdom of seeing what's appropriate.

So that's a lot of what we're trying to bring out in working with skillful means in meditation. Of course, it's exactly the same in our life—seeing impermanence, seeing how we're affected by so many different causes.

One that's really interesting to me, something I've noticed a lot on retreats, is the weather. Not just the obvious—it's cold and I don't like it, or it's hot and I like it or don't like it—but very often when there's a shift in weather patterns on a retreat, like when the barometer drops as a storm's coming, there's a kind of buildup and it affects people's mental states. You just see in person after person over a day or so that there starts to be this kind of anxiety, a kind of pressure building up. And it's so rare that someone actually doesn't take it completely personally. They're finding a story to explain it, and you're saying, "Well, you know, it could just be the weather." And they say, "The weather? Are you telling me that I'm all upset, that I have this fear and this anxiety because of the weather?" We're so easy to think of ourselves as isolated and not really look at the whole picture.

When it was cold here the first couple of days—when I'm cold now, I really notice the kind of, it feels as if the cellular structure of my body changes. I'm sure that's not so, but there's a tightness, there's a resistance. I'm much more aversive. New experiences are not met with an open heart. And as soon as the sun comes out and it's warm, everything's wonderful. Whatever comes up, I'm really ready to be with. I can't really take credit for either one of those. It's just a cause and effect response.

Once I was on a retreat, an Upandita retreat. Upandita retreats give really good stories because they're so intense and you really notice any variation. About a month in—and one of the ways of practice there is to move very, very slowly, like that person in the food line, noting every sensation, every emotion, you're just really there—so it was

about a month in and I was doing walking meditation in my hallway. Very slow. It was in Barre in the summer. It was very humid, and it was building up to a thunderstorm. The humidity was hanging in the air so heavily. I felt like I was walking through molasses. I could hardly lift my foot. And the insects, the birds were really still. There was just this pregnancy, this heaviness. You could hardly move. And just silence throughout the building.

And then the thunderstorm let loose, one of these all-at-once torrents of rain, from heaviness to total rain in one second. And so much energy was released, I felt like dancing down the hall.

And I would have thought it was just me, except that right at that moment I felt that change – it's a hallway with a door on either end – at each end the door just flew open, slammed open, and two different yogis, who both the last I'd seen them had been moving as slowly as I, came running down both sides of the hall. I don't know what they were doing. They kind of tore through the hall and out the other door. I thought, what? What's going on? And it was so clear. None of this is personal. We're affected by so many different conditions.

Just to begin to expand our view of cause and effect, of interrelatedness, of situation – to see that. And then we can make our choices, our decisions, a little more intentionally based on what's going on.

In speech, which is a huge area of mindfulness – wise speech, and finding the intention before we speak – I find that really tricky. But in a bigger sense, the Buddha gave the guideline for wise speech of saying what is true and what is useful, so that what is useful is tuning into the clear comprehensions. And also, I would add, finding the appropriate time. I've learned if I want to have a real heart-to-heart relationship talk or do some processing, eleven o'clock at night is really not a good time to initiate that particular occurrence. I learned this years ago, unfortunately, from many experiences. Sometimes we dance and it takes a long time. But really seeing what's appropriate – when to say something to someone when they're receptive enough to hear it, and not when I think they should hear it. And then again, looking at what's my intention. Is it coming from a sense of wanting to be useful? Is it coming from some subtle sense of wanting to get even or wanting to prove I'm right? Just really looking at all of that.

Taking in the wider circumstances doesn't deny using our really skillful mindfulness to come into experience and intention, but it means for sure remembering to widen. Not like a friend of mine who was having acupuncture and, you know, they burn moxa on you and burn it down. The way this practitioner does it, you burn it down until you just feel it burning and then you say, and he takes it off so it doesn't really burn you. My

friend was lying there, noting to himself, "burning, burning, burning," but forgot to say anything. And so he really burned himself quite badly because he forgot to just speak. That's mindfulness without clear comprehension. That's not what we want to do.

Clear comprehension of the bigger situation – our interdependence, our interrelatedness, the fact that all the conditions change. You'll notice that now in retreat as we're coming to the last day of practice. I wonder if there's anyone who hasn't noticed a shift in the content of your thoughts, in the kinds of emotions that come up, in the way you relate to each other, to particular experience. I've never known a retreat where that didn't happen. I think it must be almost impossible because the conditions are slightly changing. It's not that you're losing your practice, just the conditions are changing, and then we catch it from each other.

The last area I want to mention, and skillful means brings us to it, is one that people mostly think to ask about. It's called the domain of meditation, but it really means: how do we make the meditation our life, or how do we make our life our practice? If you think of meditation not just as the sitting and walking formally here, but as the attitude of investigation and the attitude of willingness to be present, how can we bring that more fully into our life?

The two things I've been saying before have a lot to do with this – widening the scope and looking at intentions. Thich Nhat Hanh said we have walls in our mind which separate our practice time from our non-practice time. When we're practicing, we practice intensively. When we're not practicing, we practice not practicing intensively. So the trick is how to break down those walls, which are self-created. It's really an attitude.

In my mind, the question I ask is: What am I considering as somehow outside of my practice? What is either too difficult to pay attention to or too familiar to pay attention to or too boring? What part of my life do I let just run on habits? Really question this with yourself. When you go home, really see – is it taking a shower in the morning? Is it all day at work? Is it when we get in a really difficult situation and if I were to pay attention, I'd have to really acknowledge my anger and I'd rather just spit it out?

I see this a lot being with friends who practice and who can really call you on things when you're starting to get really identified. If I'm really getting identified with a point of view and anger is starting to come up, and that person can say, "Hmm, why don't you try being mindful of anger?" – I can tell if it's at that moment outside of what I want to consider practice by whether I want to strangle them or whether I'm willing to come back.

Sometimes that's the worst thing you can say to somebody when they're really caught up. "Don't you think you could be mindful of that?" Find a more skillful way. But help them, because that's what sangha is about—helping each other to wake up, not just colluding in our falling asleep, in our unwholesome patterns. That's not helping us, and it's not helping them.

Our challenge is: Where are we falling asleep? Where do we not think it's worthwhile to pay attention? And again, it doesn't mean that we can only pay attention if we're really concentrated, if the mindfulness has this sparkly, precise, microscopic quality, because a lot of times it won't. But the trick to waking up doesn't take time, and it doesn't take having all these clear qualities of mind. It simply takes remembering. Sometimes this has been called the practice of remembrance, because all we have to do is remember—oh yes, turn my attention around and come back to see what's going on with me.

If I'm sitting in a meeting, for example, paying attention to what's being said, feeling attentive, and I have a kind of generalized sense of being tuned into the whole situation—which includes me. The whole situation isn't everybody else with me somehow shut out of it. The whole situation includes me. And I can be very attentive. I'll notice, even though I'm not microscopically aware, if a feeling of anxiety arises, or a sense of anger, or somehow I just freeze or tighten up. I'll notice that that's happening.

The remembering doesn't take time. It just takes turning my attention inward and feeling that, rather than acting blindly from it. Just feel the anger. Notice it. Feel it in the body. Maybe that means I don't say anything for a minute and let other people talk. But even that can give enough space around it that I can then say something or do what I need to do with more freedom. Maybe it's almost as if here's the anger, and I sort of step over here and then act. That's how it feels to me. It's not denying it, but it's giving us again the space of choice.

When you notice something clutching or grasping in your experience, rather than resisting it, use it as a wake-up call. Turn the attention around. Pay attention. Be present.

You can find all kinds of skillful means for waking up. Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about a mindfulness bell—they'll ring the bell every hour, you stop and breathe three times, just come out of the craziness and be present. You can use the telephone, a clock that rings, a beeper watch, ambulance sirens. We can find all kinds of ways to remind ourselves to wake up, to just pay attention. It isn't difficult. It's just the willingness, the commitment.

Sitting every day can really set a tone. It's not that the sitting is going to be so fantastic necessarily, but it makes it easier to remember, to come back. And whatever we're doing, we can simply feel the breath. In the middle of the tenth phone call, getting more and more frantic—just stop. Feel your hand on the phone. Take three breaths. You're present. That can make a huge difference. You can do that many times in a day. It doesn't get in the way of the day. And it totally changes how we relate. We begin to find the awareness of presence in our life easily expanding outward.

You can do this with children. Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about this—having the place where you sit or go with the kids as a kind of breathing room.

When you're upset, or you and your spouse are upset, you say, "Okay, I'm going to go to the breathing room" before you have a fight—you go sit and be with the breath, just be with it and calm down a little bit. And then when the children see that, and they've said they want to try, you go with them. Maybe just three breaths, but gently including your whole family, including all aspects of life in a very gentle way in how you wake up.

The last thing I'll say—because I could go on about this for hours—is that there are many ways you can find to use situations to wake up. Seeing the difficult situations, rather than viewing them as a curse, if we can meet them with interest, if we can meet a difficult situation as a way to learn how to shift from habitual patterns of response to a more connected, compassionate level, it changes the whole attitude. It makes it sort of interesting.

This willingness to make every aspect of our life equally important as practice—it might sound a little daunting. But my experience is that it's not mindfulness for the sake of mindfulness, just to somehow say, "I could be totally mindful in a day." It's much more about how, for me, it imbues all the activities of life with quite a depth of meaning. Rather than just doing the mundane things to get on to something important, even the mundane activities, even washing the dishes—in this moment, this is the vehicle for really awakening, for being fully present.

Even if my aspiration is to awaken to serve all beings, washing the dishes in this moment might be the most profound expression of that, depending on how I relate. Our deepest aspiration can manifest in as many different ways as there are people. I'm not trying to find some way that looks right. Using this sense of making our life our practice—even brushing our teeth, it doesn't matter what—I find it imbues all of life with a really profound meaning. And it doesn't mean becoming a contemplative, but it means entering life much more fully.

I want to end with this little statement. This is by a Sufi person from about a thousand years ago:

The true woman or man of God sits in the midst of her fellow men and rises and eats and sleeps and marries and buys and sells and gives and takes in the bazaars and spends the days with other people—and yet never forgets God even for a single moment.

It doesn't have to be a sense of separation between the two. Whatever we do can be practice.

Let's just sit for a couple of minutes.

CHAPTER 278

Precepts: The Practice of Kindness

Carol Wilson · 50 min

> *In this talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson offers a rich exploration of sīla (conscious conduct) as far more than a foundation for meditation—it is itself a gateway to liberating understanding. Drawing on the Dalai Lama's statement that his true religion is kindness, she examines how the five precepts are expressions of loving-kindness (mettā) and our essential interconnectedness with all beings.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that the heart of ethical practice lies not in blind adherence to rules but in attention to intention (cetanā)—the volition that gives rise to speech and action. She references the Buddha's teachings from the Parinibbāna Sutta on how concentration imbued with sīla brings great fruit, and how wisdom imbued with concentration leads to complete freedom. The Eightfold Path's structure, beginning with wise understanding leading to wise intention before wise speech and action, illuminates how our conduct naturally flows from our understanding.*
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> *Through candid personal examples—from sarcastic humor to childhood unkindness to community struggles with cockroaches—Wilson demonstrates how mindfulness makes the effects of our actions immediately visceral, removing the need for external rules. She explores the boundless nature of non-harming: where do we draw the line when our actions ripple outward to affect all beings? Quoting Thich Nhat Hanh that "mindfulness is the fundamental precept" and the Tao Te Ching on contentment, she invites practitioners to let mindful awareness naturally transform conduct into an expression of deepening realization and love.*

I'm having a lot of trouble realizing that this is actually happening, this three-month course. It just feels like another day so far. It hasn't quite sunk in, the enormity of what we're all doing here together. I don't know if it's sunk into you yet. You're a little closer to it now, but not yet. You're still talking and having a good time. You have a nice sit, and it seems so pleasant. And then you go off and play again. But here we are, and it's a wonderful thing.

I want to elaborate a bit tonight on the subject of the precepts, conscious conduct, morality—the term in Pali is *sīla*, the term that we usually use. Let me just preface this by saying all five of us will be taking turns every night giving talks, and so you're going to hear five quite different ways of expressing the Dharma and our understanding of it and the way it comes out. And then you'll be hearing it in a hundred unique different

ways of what that actually means and how it connects to your own experience. They're all quite unique. They're all a different piece of the mandala that is this expression of truth, of Dharma.

I just put that out to say: enjoy the differences, enjoy each piece of the puzzle, and if something doesn't fit for you, let it go. Don't get into a lot of time analyzing how something I said isn't quite the same as something Steve said, wondering who is right and who is wrong, when you actually think it's a third way altogether. You'll make yourself crazy, and it doesn't really accomplish anything, since analysis never gets us anywhere in this practice. Enjoy the dance, the manifestation, and if something seems like it doesn't work for you or doesn't make sense, let it go and just be here for the next thing.

The Dalai Lama has said at times that his true religion is kindness. That really strikes a profound note with me because it is seemingly, on the surface, so simple and maybe almost naive. But for me, when I really explore the aspect of our meditation practice, the aspect of working with conscious conduct, I find that to be a very profound way of expressing the truth of how we relate to life, to ourselves, to other beings.

As Joseph mentioned last night, we cultivate our meditation practice—the formal sitting and walking, the mindfulness from moment to moment—from a foundation of loving-kindness. We're cultivating through the mindful attention clarity, clear seeing of things just as they are, but this clear seeing is imbued with loving-kindness, with open-hearted connection with ourselves, with whatever experience is arising, and with a deep-seated acceptance of ourselves and of whatever experience is arising. Loving-kindness is an attitude that is really hand in hand with our Vipassana practice.

Kindness to others, kindness to the environment. Working with conscious conduct is really an outer manifestation of loving-kindness, of this attitude of kindness. It's an expression on the verbal and active level of this commitment to true kindness.

I just want to name the five precepts again, because they are part of the very basic agreement that we begin our practice here together with, that holds us together as a community. These being: the agreement not to take any life, not to harm other beings. The second one, the commitment not to take what is not freely offered. The third, for the period of the retreat, not to engage in sexual behavior; in our daily life, it's to refrain from sexual behavior that brings harm to ourselves or others or challenges or breaks in on another couple's commitment. The fourth is commitment to wise speech—not to lie, not to deceive ourselves or another, not to use harsh speech or divisive speech, and even not frivolous or gossip speech. Of course, here we're in noble silence, so that helps a lot. And the fifth, not to take drugs and intoxicants that cloud the mind, that cause heedlessness, that impair our judgment.

We say over and over that these basic five precepts, this commitment to non-harming in the most basic form, is the foundation of our practice. But I feel for myself it goes much, much deeper than simply a foundation from which we can just get this right, follow these precepts, and then get on to what's really important—concentration, the mindfulness, let's really get somewhere with our practice.

I feel that the practice of mindful attention to conscious speech and action, non-harming speech and action, is in itself a most profound gateway to liberating understanding. My speech, my action, is an actual expression of the stability and depth of my understanding of our essential oneness, of the love and compassion that is the natural expression of a free mind. By working with paying attention to how I am speaking and acting, how I am relating to the world, to others, to my environment—by nature of the quality of that attention, by the intention to understand and to purify—the depth of understanding then again grows deeper from the attention to speech and action. It's like a circle, but not a vicious circle. It's the other way, a beautiful circle.

So my religion of kindness is far from a naive or simplistic statement. In some ways, I see that it holds all the breadth and depth of the Buddhadharma, of our meditation practice, just looked at from different aspects.

The Buddha talked quite a lot about how morality or *sīla*, conscious conduct, is the foundation of our practice. He says in the Parinibbāna Sutta—and it's really not just one discourse, it covers a whole period of time before the Buddha's death—he says: concentration, when imbued with *sīla*, brings great fruit and profit. Wisdom, when imbued with concentration, brings great freedom and profit. The mind that is imbued with wisdom becomes completely free from the torments of sense desire, becoming, false views, and ignorance. It's one of those building block statements that begins with morality as the foundation for the freedom of deep understanding.

Even if we were simply to take these five precepts—not explore them very deeply, or their effect on our behavior very deeply, but simply obey them blindly as some kind of outer rule, thinking, "Okay, I have to do this to get on with my practice," or "I have to do this in order to be here," whatever reason—even with that attitude, were we to simply observe in speech and action these five precepts, it would be extremely powerful.

Imagine if we just never killed another living being. Imagine if no one ever killed another human being. Or we never took another thing that wasn't offered. It's extremely powerful.

It is said that simply by following the precepts, change will naturally arise in our mind, in our understanding. Following the precepts gives power and control to our body, to our expressions in the world, to our actions, to our speech. Some increase in purity and clarity of mind will result simply from this practice, which is obvious, I would think. And also it gives rise to stronger loving-kindness and compassion.

You can see this even when I don't really deeply feel a sense of oneness with all beings, but I still refrain from slapping that mosquito. That has an effect. It just leaves a little space where I might get more of an inkling that we're actually beings here on the same planet, that to that being, life also matters. Simply paying attention to wise use of speech can create, in my own experience, much greater harmony with others and thus a sense of harmony and peace in myself. There's a lot less processing to do if I watch my mouth. And that leaves a lot more space to pay attention to what else is going on and to begin to actually notice our essential interconnectedness.

The Buddha says frequently that by protecting others, one protects oneself. Following the precepts, adhering to these simple rules, is outwardly a way of protecting others from harm, from our unskillful actions. And in that protection of others, we're then protecting ourselves from the direct result of our unskillful actions. For example, sarcastic, angry speech usually gets something similar coming back, just in a simple, obvious way.

It protects us from the remorse of things that we've done either out of hatred or greed or simple confusion, not knowing what was really wise. And this is something you'll probably notice from time to time over the course of these three months. It commonly comes up for us on retreat. Not guilt—not saying, "I was a bad person, I should suffer"—not tormenting yourself with self-judgment and self-hatred. That might happen too. But the remorse, the sense of reliving unskillful things that we've done with awareness, really allowing ourselves to experience in a way the pain that accrued to others and to ourselves from unskillful speech, unskillful action that we might have done in the past.

You might find the strangest little memories coming up. I remember one sitting when I started reliving a way I had been unkind to a friend of mine in the sixth grade. I had kind of blown her off to go be with some other little girls that I, for some reason, had some idea would be more socially advantageous for me to be friends with—I don't know what was going on in my little sixth-grade mind. But I really went through the pain of how selfish and unskillful and insensitive that had been. So it doesn't always have to be the most horrific thing you've ever done. Just the little ones arise, and we see that remorse and that experiencing of pain is one of the effects of unskillful action.

Through our mindfulness, through our willingness to be open to and explore this, that's how we begin to deepen in the visceral understanding of the fact that we're actually not separate. That by doing something inconsiderate and unkind to my friend in the sixth grade, I was hurting myself. Not just in some idea of hurting myself, but an actual visceral experience of pain.

So by protecting others, we're protecting ourselves. It's really quite beautiful, the interdependence there.

But for me, over the years I've been finding that working with conscious conduct has become much more subtle, much more profound than a simple adherence to a set of rules. It gets much more interesting, too, when you're really looking at the subtleties of it.

As you probably know, and which we'll talk about in much more detail in later talks, when the Buddha laid out his teachings of how to live a life of awareness and of freedom within what was called the Eightfold Path—eight aspects of life, of cultivation of heart and mind, the way to live—conscious conduct is three of those eight spokes. But it is not the first three.

The first step on the Eightfold Path is called wise understanding: understanding of how things are. This leads into the second step, which is variously translated as wise thought or wise intention or wise aspiration. And that then leads to the next three, which have to do with speech, action, and livelihood: wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood.

What I get from this is that our understanding—how we understand the world—informs how we think, our intention, and that is what leads us to wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. If we didn't have some sense of understanding, we wouldn't be motivated to pay attention to our conduct and our speech at all. Whatever level, whatever degree our understanding is, it doesn't matter. There's some little glimmer there that this is important. Even if the glimmer is simply, "If I yell at people, they yell back at me and I don't like it." That's an understanding of cause and effect and of suffering. And that's enough. Even if it's only, "I really want to do this three-month course. I don't see what my behavior has to do with anything. I just want to sit on the cushion and get really concentrated. But they say I have to do this, so I'll do it." Even that somehow gets us to pay attention.

But on a level that to me is much more interesting and more subtle, we can look at our speech and our actions not only from the effect, the result of what happens when we say something, what happens when we do something—because that's not always in

our control—but recognize that the core of our speech, the core of action, is in the intention, the volition that arises, that gives the energy for that thought, for that speech, for that action to occur.

So sīla is actually a morality of intention.

The intention is the place to which we can bring our mindfulness, our awareness and investigation. And that's much more workable and to me quite fascinating—more so than just waiting to see what the result is.

So what do I mean by intention, skillful or unskillful? This we will talk about a great deal, but simply put, there's a volition in the mind, a kind of impulse, that leads to thought, speech, or action. And it can be associated with a whole variety of mental states, states of mind or heart. So the intention to speak could be associated with hatred, with fear, with loving-kindness, with attachment, with generosity, with delusion, with indifference. You get the picture. The outer result—what one actually says—could be very similar and yet be coming from very different intentions. The same with how one acts.

For example, you could act with a really clear intention of compassion, but the conditions in the situation are such that the result is not at all what you would expect to happen. I was reading a biography of Sister Chân Không, and she was talking about having been in jail in Vietnam during the war. After some weeks in a very difficult situation, France had interceded and she was released. In the cell with her, which had been very crowded, there were two young girls, I think around twelve years old, who had been arrested because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time when a sweep was being made of Viet Cong—this was in a South Vietnam cell. As she was leaving and checking out with the head of the jail, she simply said, "You know, they didn't do anything, and this is really a bad environment for young girls. Wouldn't it be a great thing to let them go?" The effect was that the jail chief got really annoyed and said, "It's clear the prisoners are talking to each other. This is a bad thing." And he made the conditions much worse.

We can't control the results of conditions. The place we have to look when working with our morality, when working with our conscious conduct, is in our intentions. What is imbuing the intention with which we speak and act? It's very rich and interesting, I find.

And so you see, when we look in that way, I could be adhering to the letter of non-harming, I could be never taking what is not offered to me, but the intention behind it could be one of pride, or self-righteousness, or a sense of derision at other people who

aren't living up to my high standards. Or it could be a real sense of caring. Or it could be a sense of total fear that if I do something wrong, I'll go to a hell realm. There are many possibilities for intentions. And of course, intentions arise anew in each moment, so we're never locked into one unchanging intention—which is a huge relief as we begin to explore why we say and do what we do. We might notice, "Okay, that one was a little ugly, but we're willing to look at it and see that it passes and be more present for the next speech or action."

So working with sila becomes much more profound than following a set of rules of behavior. I feel for myself that if I really practice it with integrity, with a real commitment—commitment to exploration, commitment to honesty, commitment to attention—it becomes a practice of freedom in itself, an expression of understanding and of connection.

I've also been discovering that the more I am able to use mindfulness as the tool to pay attention to my behavior, rather than just blind adherence to rules, the more space there is to really notice the subtlety of cause and effect. My relationship to conscious conduct, my relationship to the precepts, has less and less to do with any set of rules anywhere. More and more, it becomes internalized, completely experiential. I don't really like to use inner and outer as such a dichotomy, but I'm saying inner as opposed to a set of rules.

The relationship to conscious conduct becomes quite experiential. For example, as soon as I move out of harmony, as soon as I speak or act from an intention of anger, an intention of greed, an intention of fear or self-righteousness—as soon as I speak or act from that place, I get feedback immediately. Not necessarily from the other person, although that's part of it, but from my own inner experience. The disharmony, the disruption of connectedness between me and the action and the person, gets much more easily experienced.

For example, I tend to be quite sarcastic in my humor. And the less attention I'm paying to myself—and the more tea I drink—the more sarcastic I tend to get. I'm quite amusing to myself; I'm having quite a good time. If I stop paying attention, at some point I often go over a little edge and say something that isn't at all amusing to the person I'm saying it to. It used to be that I would sometimes be completely oblivious to that. If the person didn't tell me something—and you know how usually people tell you a week later or three years later—I wouldn't even know it. But now it's much more immediate. As soon as it's out of my mouth, I know. Even before the person flinches in

some subtle way, I know, because I feel it. It's actually a visceral experience. I think, "Oh, that was really unkind," or "out of harmony," or whatever particular terms you want to use. It's so clear. And it's not an intellectual thing.

I can't actually ignore noticing that anymore. It's easy, of course, to notice it and then, if one has a particular pattern, to simply move on rather than stop and say, "I'm sorry." But I really can't not notice it anymore.

And that's just a simple example. The sense I'm describing is that I don't need to say, "Oh yes, right, I'm not supposed to use harsh and abusive speech." I don't need to refer to the precept, because the experience in itself is one of shattering harmony, of acting as if we are not somehow living in oneness.

This becomes really interesting, because after a while you can't pretend anymore. It requires real honesty with myself. But this is the beauty of mindfulness—it's honest without being judgmental. It doesn't feed into a sense of self-worthlessness or thoughts like, "I'm a bad person, I'm disgusting, how could I say such a thing?" That thought might arise, but we just watch it come and go. That's our mindfulness practice.

What mindfulness does allow us to see, much more potently, is the reality of cause and effect—the immediacy of suffering that arises from speech that does not come from an intention of non-harming, but from an intention of self-aggrandizement or whatever the motivation might be.

In a way, all the precepts really come down to mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way: mindfulness is the fundamental precept. Think of the precepts as manifestations of mindfulness. Because when you're mindful, you're responsible. And then the precepts are not needed to dictate our behavior. When we're mindful, it's so obvious. We don't have to think about it. It's simply obvious: be kind to one another and to ourselves. There's not a lot more to say.

Just as our wisdom grows through attention to our behavior, our motivation, our intentions—and also through our meditation practice, through our willingness to simply be open and present for whatever happens—through all of this, our understanding of the nature of ourselves, of life, of freedom is bound to grow. We can't stop it, no matter how we try. And we'll try every way we can think of. But as long as we're willing to be really present and open and clear, a sense of understanding and wisdom will continue to develop, broaden, and deepen. It just keeps going on and on.

For me, in working with the precepts, I've found it's the same way. As I pay attention and notice more subtleties of cause and effect and intention, as wisdom develops, my relationship to the depth and profundity of each precept also widens and grows.

And I start to wonder—I do wonder often within myself—where do I draw the boundaries? In seeing more and more how widely my speech and actions affect others, where can I draw the boundary? Do I draw it at myself? At myself and the person I'm directly in relationship with at that moment? Do I draw the boundaries at the family, the community, the state, the world? Do I draw it only with people? What about the environment?

Where does my self stop and another begin? Where do we reach the boundary of the depth and profundity of following these precepts, of seeing how our actions and speech ripple outward and touch and affect all other beings, all other aspects of this universe?

Metta and compassion—loving-kindness and compassion—are described as boundless states. Boundless meaning no limits can be placed on them; you can't come to the end of it, to some place that is somehow excluded from the state of love and compassion. They are expressions and manifestations of the boundlessness of freedom. And if the precepts, if our conscious conduct, is an expression of our understanding, then that too must in some way approach a boundlessness—an understanding of where and how we are all interconnected, and how our actions and speech affect one another.

I'm not going to go through all five precepts, perhaps just the first couple. But I want to share some of the way my mind works when I start reflecting on or paying attention to a precept itself, and how it continues to grow and develop and get broader and broader. There are no answers. I really see how you can't have a fixed rule of how to behave, because it's far too complex.

What do I mean by that? Thich Nhat Hanh speaks a lot about working with conscious conduct. He says it's essential that we not expect to begin by being perfect—because that's very difficult—but that at least we incline our minds in that direction.

Looking at the first precept, not harming other beings, not killing other beings—it's incredible. That one commitment not to harm other beings, how much of our behavior does it involve? And where, in any particular moment, do I draw the boundary? Where do I consciously or unconsciously choose not to see the interrelatedness?

Where do we each make our choices? Because who can do this one perfectly? How can we live in this world, the way it is, without ever harming another living being? It seems almost impossible. Just taking antibiotics is harming those little organisms—except for some of us, because it doesn't work at all.

But boiling water. Driving in a car—I'm really aware every time I'm driving of all the bugs smashing against the windshield. And some people, like the Jains, will make choices that we don't make, wearing masks so as not to breathe in insects, and so forth. There are all levels to how far we take this.

You can see there's no way to make a rule and say, "This is what's right, this means non-harming, and this part's okay." But for each of us, in our own willingness to pay attention to our conduct—and again, here is where it comes back to intention rather than focusing so much on outer results.

Robert Aitken Roshi, a Zen Roshi in Hawaii, says that the practice of peace and harmony *is* peace and harmony, not some technique designed to bring it about. I think of that a lot—of really bringing my intentions, how I relate to the world, to be those of compassion and love, to try to *be* peace and harmony, rather than trying to draw up a list of things. "Well, if I never eat meat, that's how I'm not going to harm other beings. If I only drive a car when I have to, that's how I'm never going to harm other beings." It's not an easy answer.

Here at IMS, we've gone through lots of bouts with trying to find our communal relationship to this. And if you think it's hard finding your own relationship to difficult situations, try to do it with twenty-five people. And then every year the group changes and you go through it again.

Or with the cockroaches. You might have a chance to make friends with some of them this fall. I don't know quite how vital our cockroach population is this fall—it varies from year to year. But we've gone through a lot over the years in relationship to our deeply held commitment to non-harming behavior, to a sense of our interconnectedness, to whatever sense each person brings of connectedness or disgust at cockroaches, to our need to abide by health laws out of fear that we're going to get shut down, to our need not to have the yogis be really disgusted seeing too many cockroaches in the wrong places. There's a whole list of where we make the decisions and out of what.

I remember a period just a few years ago where we had sessions of all getting together and doing metta meditation to the cockroaches, asking them to leave because if they didn't, we were going to have to do something stronger. Then we all made a commitment to go home and do metta every day, each one of us, for a certain period of time for the cockroaches. Then we got in touch with some bug psychics in Vermont. We really tried, you know. And it didn't work. It didn't work at all. They were very happy and multiplying.

And it's difficult. When you have to do something that is actively harming another being, there's a certain level where you can't get around that fact. In that moment of doing it—but at least it's done quite consciously, really paying attention to the effects and to the whole rippling impact of what's going on.

So that's just one example, but there are no easy answers in this.

When I first went to Thailand, before I ordained as a nun, I was staying in the temple north of Bangkok where I was going to ordain. It was my first night there, and my hair was very long—I hadn't cut it yet. I was sleeping on the floor of the little hut, the little kuti. I woke up in the middle of the night, and somehow the place was just infested with ants. My hair was filled with ants. They were all over me. And I was new in Thailand. I wasn't quite equanimous yet.

So in the morning, I went to the abbot, a very well-known abbot in Thailand. His secretary, another monk, said, "Oh, no problem." He came running out with a big can of Raid. And I was shocked. I was really shocked. Oh my God. It was just pragmatic.

I ran into the same thing at Plum Village with Sister Chan Khong, where they had some kind of little spiders that really freaked out the guests staying there. And the next thing I knew, she was in there with bug spray. And again, I thought, I can't believe it.

There are no easy answers, but a refuge—my refuge—is in the sincerity of intention, of commitment to integrity, and in the willingness to see as far as possible the ramifications, to be as conscious as I'm able to in this moment. In some moments that's more conscious than others. And then to take responsibility for the action I take part in.

So how do we practice peace and harmony?

It's possible, for example, to be a vegetarian out of a deep respect for not harming animals. And it's possible to be a vegetarian filled with disdain and loathing for the people who eat meat. Not the same thing. That's not practicing peace and harmony exactly. It's possible to really live a non-harming life outwardly and be filled with hatred for the people who are harming. No, that's also not really quite a non-harming life.

This is from Robert Aitken again: "The industrialist says it's a dog-eat-dog world. The bodhisattva does not deny that fact, but only the spirit of such a statement. He or she follows the way of compassion, nurturing all beings and being nurtured by them."

So where do we draw the boundaries? I wonder a lot at the violence in our culture here, and of course I don't know, but I wonder how much of it has to do with the violence on TV, the violence in the movies. It becomes a really deep question for me: if I pay to go to a violent movie, am I contributing to the violence in the culture? I don't know.

Thich Nhat Hanh actually talks about this aspect under the fifth precept—not taking in intoxicants or drugs or substances that cause heedlessness or cloud the mind. Under this he includes paying attention to the shows we watch, what we take in through television and media. And you can really see this. I haven't done this in a long time, but I remember I used to come home from work and turn on the TV, which was total trash, and sit there like a zombie for three hours, like I was stuck in glue, completely unable to get up. I might as well have drunk myself into a stupor. It was just the same effect.

So where do we draw the line? Each of us will find that for ourselves, and for me it's constantly shifting and changing. It's the beauty of mindfulness—that it's just about being awake in this moment. And this moment is constantly changing, so it's not that we can take some static line and say, "This is it." It takes awakeness, awareness, and new integrity and honesty in each minute. The more we do that, the more we become attuned to our essential oneness, and the more natural an expression of non-harming becomes.

The same is true with the second precept: not taking what is not given. It's obviously about not stealing, not taking other people's property. But it's not always that blatant. For example here, what about that really nice shampoo somebody left in the bathroom? Even if you don't know for sure, you think it's been there for a few days, and probably nobody would care. But you don't really know that. Again, look not at the action, but at the intention that's giving rise to the action.

If you turn it around to a more positive expression, rather than not taking what's not given, this precept to me is a way of expressing a deep sense of inner contentment. When I'm deeply in tune with a sense of unity, a sense of innate completeness, I don't need things. I don't need to take anything from anybody. There's not that sense of needy want.

Dogen, the great Zen master of Japan, said, "The self and the world are just as they are. The gate of emancipation is open." That mind of wanting, the mind of greed, of needing—you know, whatever it is: "That zafu, nobody's sat on that cushion for four days now, and I'm sure it's a much better seat than the one I have"—that mind is what shuts the gate of emancipation. And so this not taking what's not given is really a way of opening us to the inner contentment that opens our mind and heart to freedom. Very powerful.

Can enough be enough? Deep appreciation of life, of experience, of this moment, of awareness, just as it is. Not much else is needed. Aitken Roshi says that not only in stealing are we stealing from others—we're stealing the potential of inner peace from ourselves in that moment.

Is stealing part of our economic system? I just read this the other day in the New York Times, interviewing different people with different opinions during that human population conference in Cairo. This was one man's opinion, the president of the World Watch Institute. We're talking about food needs, and he said that we've entered a new era in which satisfying the need for seafood, for example, of the ninety million people being added each year requires reducing the consumption for those already on Earth. Satisfying the demand for grain also means reducing the consumption of those already here.

That really hit me—the sense that every time I eat grain, there's more for me and less for somebody else. There's a direct correlation. If I eat seafood, that means somebody else doesn't get it. It struck me in some way. I mean, that's maybe how it always is, but in terms of population, we're reaching the outer limits. Before, it always seemed like there was so much it didn't matter. Now, it matters.

And so when I pay attention—of course we need to eat—but I certainly begin, hopefully, to pay more attention to how much I eat and how much I throw away. I don't pay as much attention to that as I could, but I am beginning to be aware how vital that is.

Where do we draw the line at not taking what is not given? Who can make that distinction for us?

From the Tao Te Ching: "Be content with what you have. Rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you."

In many ways, that's our practice here together. When we can appreciate just what is, we realize that nothing is lacking. The whole world belongs to us. And that's how it is, actually, in every moment. When we can stop just for an instant, just long enough to be fully awake and present right here and now—in that, we touch our essential completeness, our deep interrelatedness, the fact that we cannot speak or act without affecting others, and vice versa.

It's our mindful awareness that allows for this growth in depth and subtlety of understanding, that allows for change. It's not that we have to suddenly start panicking—"Oh no, everything I do affects everyone else in the world, and I have to stop eating! Maybe if I starve to death somebody else can eat in the Horn of Africa!" It's not about that. It's not about guilt. It's not about self-righteousness. It's not about fear.

It's simply to let this tool of mindfulness shine its light on our connections, on our intentions, on our speech and action, with a willingness to simply look honestly. And I think that's enough—that our conscious conduct will naturally become an expression of our deepening understanding, an expression of love, an expression of realization, an expression of our oneness with all beings. And again, lead us into a deeper and deeper relationship with that.

So let's just sit together for a moment.

CHAPTER 279

Precepts: The Practice of Kindness

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this opening talk for a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson offers a deep exploration of the five precepts (pañcasīla) not as mere rules to follow, but as a transformative practice of freedom and actualized understanding. Drawing on the Dalai Lama's teaching that "my religion is kindness," she illuminates how working with conscious conduct becomes a direct expression of our interconnection with all beings.*
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> *Wilson explains that the heart of skillful action lies in intention (cetanā), making sīla a morality of motivation rather than blind obedience. She shares personal examples—from resisting the urge to use someone else's shampoo to navigating institutional decisions about pest control—demonstrating how mindfulness of our speech and actions reveals the immediate feedback of suffering when we act from greed, hatred, or delusion, and the expansiveness that arises when we let go.*
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> *The talk explores the boundless nature of each precept, examining how not killing extends to our entertainment choices and environmental impact, and how not taking what is not given points toward the profound happiness of inner contentment. Wilson emphasizes that this practice requires not expecting perfection but inclining the mind toward wholesomeness, meeting even violent thoughts with compassion. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, mindfulness itself becomes the fundamental precept—when we are truly aware, ethical conduct flows naturally from our understanding of oneness.*

It feels really different somehow beginning to speak to all of you sitting here at the beginning of a three-month course. It feels quite different to me from the other retreats that I teach throughout the year—I feel quite humbled and very honored to be able to be part of each of your three-month retreat. It's so rare and wonderful in this world to spend time with people who are so committed to bringing some light into their lives and into the world. In whatever way you might phrase that to yourself, it's quite an honor to be sharing this time with you.

I hope we can all keep coming back in our minds during the difficult times, or during the drudgery times, to the immensity of what each of you is doing—the immensity of the commitment that you're making to your path, to your freedom, to your awakening. Because a lot of the time this path is not an easy one. And that's something all of you already know, which makes it wonderful to be spending time and talking with people who already understand that.

When we're leading a retreat with many people who are new to practice, it's quite a shock for them. You might remember your first couple of retreats when you began to get it—that not only is it not easy, it's not a bliss trip, and it doesn't necessarily just go into lighter and lighter modes of being until we float away. We're really opening to the whole picture. So I feel very honored and humbled, and I thank you all for being here, being on the planet.

Tomorrow night, when we formally begin the full retreat, we will do it as we always begin retreats—by the taking of the three refuges and the five precepts. Tonight I want to speak about the precepts as practice, and tomorrow Steve will speak about the refuges.

I want to address the precepts so that when we take them, hopefully it's not another ritual that's nice—where of course we don't want to harm one another, so we'll take the precepts, get them out of the way, and get on with the real work, with what's really important. For me, over the years, working with conscious conduct, with trying to live in this world with an attitude of non-harming, an attitude of connection, has become more and more profound. In some ways, it is becoming the practice—in a way I never would have thought or expected in my early years of practice.

Thinking about why we come here, why we are doing this difficult practice, what really matters—I used to think I was coming to retreat, maybe I didn't put it quite so bluntly, but coming for some more ecstatic states of mind, for some greater depth of seeing and clarity, for greater concentration. All of these are very wonderful, but somehow I was looking for something a little more spectacular than paying attention to my speech and actions.

The Dalai Lama has said that his religion is kindness. For me, that's becoming not just a nice thing to say, but more and more one of the more profound expressions of understanding, of true open-hearted wisdom that I have heard. It's so simple, but to me it encompasses such a breadth and profundity of the wisdom that comes from our practice.

Working with the five precepts, commitment to conscious conduct, is actually learning to actualize the depth of understanding of our interconnection, of our oneness—that who I am and how I speak and act affects all other beings, and vice versa. To really pay attention to how I speak and act in the world is to begin to actualize freedom. Working with the precepts, working with how and why we speak and act, really becomes a practice of freedom, an expression of our deepest possible understanding.

In the way we do this practice, we practice from a foundation of loving kindness, from a foundation of compassion—beginning with the attitude with which we meet ourselves in these three months, with which we meet our experience, the attitude of loving kindness and compassion with which we meet one another, especially with which we meet the staff and teachers. They really need to be met with loving kindness and compassion. This becomes the framework for everything that we're doing here.

I've found in myself that in life or in retreat, it doesn't really matter—since we're in retreat, I'll speak to that. In retreat, for me, it's quite easy at times to lose track of, to lose sight of this broader foundation, this broader attitude of compassion and loving kindness to myself, to others, to experience, or to just paying attention to how and why I do what I do. The intention of practice can subtly turn into one of ambition, or a kind of materialistic attitude that we can bring to achieving certain states, experiencing certain states of mind, or changing the personality in certain ways.

For years I practiced in order to come out and be this certain kind of wonderful, fantastic person—loving and kind and filled with light. And of course, everyone would notice that when I came out of retreat. I'd judge how good my retreat was by how glowing I was at the end. Now, you might come out in a really glowing, loving space. Hopefully, as our understanding deepens, we do become more compassionate. But if our intention is to get that, then we're acting out of greed. We're not acting out of compassion to ourselves—we're strengthening our sense of separation.

Working with the precepts, these five very simple guidelines for behavior: not harming other living beings; not taking what is not freely offered; not misusing our sexuality to harm ourselves or other beings—in the context of retreat, of course, we are being celibate. The fourth is not to use speech in a way that harms ourselves or others—not lying, not using harsh speech, not using speech to divide or create separation between people, and not gossiping or using idle chatter. Luckily, since we're in silence, that's a whole lot easier, at least outwardly and verbally. But we can still look at speech in the little times that we talk here. I think that's one of the reasons interviews can be so intense sometimes—because it's just ten or fifteen minutes that you're really speaking, and so much goes on in that time that you can reflect about for days afterwards. The fifth precept is to really pay attention to keeping our hearts and minds clear, not taking drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and heart, that cause heedlessness.

Again, here on retreat, that's a lot easier. Even if we only took these five precepts as blind rules, if we didn't really pay attention to why we were doing it but just said, "Okay, I'm going to follow these"—what a difference it would make in the world. It would be so amazing.

That's one of the reasons a retreat space such as this comes to be such a sacred space. We're creating a very protected and sacred space here together simply by observing these five very simple guidelines for behavior. Even if you don't pay attention to why you're doing it, even if we just blindly obey them, we're giving each other such a profound gift: the gift of fearlessness. To know that we can be in this place, not be afraid of one another, knowing that we're not here with any intention to cause harm.

When I come back here after traveling—I live in a little cottage down the road—it's such a powerful experience to feel completely safe, just in the world, so to speak. We leave the keys in the car. I never lock my house, and I never have one thought that somebody is going to come in and take something or trash something. There's just this sense of care, of protection, of fearlessness that we're giving to one another.

The Buddha advocated paying attention to our speech and actions as a deep form of protection for ourselves. There's a real happiness that comes when we are being in the world in a non-harming way. Have you ever noticed that in yourself? When you're being with people and you're not being harsh, you're not taking things, you're not actively wishing them ill—which, yes, sure, that comes up in our minds—but the times that we're not, there's such a happiness that comes from it.

So the Buddha advocated following conscious conduct as a way to protect ourselves from the results of our unskillful speech and actions. Protect ourselves from anger, from results coming to us from others. Protecting ourselves from remorse, for when we've done something unskillful, often it comes back up again in our hearts, in our minds. This often comes up in a long retreat, and we're protecting ourselves from the suffering of that. And by protecting ourselves, the natural result is that we are protecting others. Again, we can't separate ourselves from others.

The Buddha said once that all the joys and sorrows of beings come from their actions. When we are acting with care, from kindness, from a sense of our connectedness, from compassion, we are protecting ourselves from great suffering and giving others the gift of fearlessness.

So even if all we did was relate to these precepts as five rules that we had to follow in order to be here and get on with the practice, even that would be great. But it wouldn't have the profundity, the great depth; it wouldn't be a practice of freedom, a practice of liberation, if that were how we were relating to it.

What makes it so much deeper, what makes working with our speech and conduct so much more profound, is that the heart of an action, the seed of what makes our speech or action skillful or unskillful—skillful meaning leading to happiness, unskillful mean-

ing leading to suffering, not like a good-evil judgment—what makes it skillful or unskillful is that the whole seed of action is in the intention, in the volition that leads to our movement of speech, our movement of action.

So sila, which is the Pali word for virtue, for morality or conscious conduct—sila is a morality of intention or motivation. When we begin to bring mindfulness to our speech and actions, not so much focused on how it looks or on what the immediate noticeable result is, but when we look at the volitional force, the state of mind giving rise to the speech and action, that's where this practice of mindfulness of our speech and action becomes quite profound. And really interesting, too.

I mean, it's much more interesting to look at why I've said something unskillful than to just make another black mark: "Oh, you blew it again. Bad." "Oh, you said the right thing. Good." That's not so interesting. But to see when I've said something that has brought a feeling of discomfort to myself, or I see somebody else flinch—instead of just saying, "Oh bad, you blew it again," I can really look at the motivation behind that action. That's where understanding really begins to percolate, where we really begin to viscerally experience the connection between myself and others, that it can't be separated.

So what makes an action skillful, in the Buddhist way of speaking of action, is if the motivation, the volitional force, is arising from skillful states of mind. In the sort of negative way of phrasing it: non-greed, which is really non-attachment, generosity, inner contentment, renunciation. Or when our intention is arising from non-hatred, which is really compassion or loving-kindness. Or from non-delusion, which is really wisdom, clear seeing, equanimity, awareness of our interdependence.

An outer action might look like we're really doing the right thing. We could obey the letter of the precepts and have our intention be bringing suffering to ourselves. For example, I could not only not take what's not given, but seem to give something in a very generous way, while all my intention is in wanting other people to see how generous I am—which is actually both a kind of greed and a kind of delusion, comparing myself and wanting to look good. So all the seed is in the intention.

There's a little story about a Tibetan practitioner named Geshe Ben. One day he was expecting a visit from a large number of his benefactors. That morning he arranged the offerings on his shrine in front of the images of the Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and he arranged them particularly neatly. Examining his intentions, he realized they were not pure; he was only trying to impress his patrons. So he picked up a handful of dust and threw it all over the offerings, saying to himself, "Monk, just stay where you are and don't put on airs."

When his teacher heard this story, he said, "That handful of dust that Ben threw was the best offering in all Tibet."

It's this kind of examining our intentions that makes bringing awareness to conscious conduct such an exciting and wonderful practice. Rather than just observing rules, we're learning how to practice oneness—how to express, to viscerally experience our non-separation from each other.

When we relate to the precepts with integrity and commitment, I deeply believe that working with them becomes a practice of freedom. You can experience this for yourself, even in very small ways. We don't have to look at the most horrendous so-called breaking of the precepts.

Here's an example. Recently I was teaching at a retreat in New Mexico where there's a group shared shower. Everyone leaves their shampoos, and I was examining them—oh, that looks nice, that looks nice. It's one of my little fetishes; I like to try different shampoos. There was one that looked really interesting, one I hadn't seen before. And there was this moment of the mind saying, "Oh, who cares? No one will know. I'm sure she wouldn't care." How easy it is to just go and do that.

But I noticed it. Sometimes having the precepts as a set of rules can help us wake up. It's like, "Oh right, I'm not supposed to take what isn't offered. That's one of the rules." This can serve as a way to remind us to pay attention. Then, tuning into my own intentions, I could feel viscerally—and in my mind—the feeling of greed, that contraction of wanting, that sense of self quite strong. "I need to try the shampoo." It sounds ridiculous, but sometimes it's the ridiculous examples that help us see what's going on, because I couldn't get too upset about whether I tried the shampoo or not.

Feeling that contraction of self, that sense of real separation and grasping—it was suffering. And in the letting go, in not trying the shampoo, rather than feeling deprived—"Oh, I can't do it because that's what the precept says"—in really letting go of needing that shampoo, there was a movement from grasping and separation into oneness. That sense of contraction moved into expansiveness. And luckily, in that moment, not into a sense of pride (which would have been back into contraction again), but simply into: right, we're all part of the same show here. That isn't mine to take, and I don't need it.

It really was a movement from suffering to happiness, from separation and contraction to a glimmering of the potential of freedom—the spacious expansiveness of a mind not obscured by craving and aversion.

That's just a small example, but we can experience this way of relating to our intentions in countless moments. Even when we don't fully understand our motivation, we have this little list: "Oh, this isn't a helpful thing to do." Then we can pay attention to what changes when we act from skillfulness, from non-greed, from renunciation. It really is an opening into the potential of freedom, of clear seeing. And we have that opportunity over and over, in all kinds of small speech and actions.

This practice of relating to precepts moves from blind obedience or trying to be good into a real movement of the heart, where we get immediate feedback when we begin to move out of harmony with other beings and with ourselves. When we begin to speak or act not from kindness, but from some sense of "me, separate, I need, I'm better than you, I'm worse than you"—somehow needing to be taken care of at the expense of someone else. It becomes immediate feedback, a mindfulness of cause and effect rather than blind obedience to some rule.

Working with the precept of wise speech, of right speech, is in some ways the most tricky, the most difficult. Often I find I haven't had a moment to notice my intention before something comes out of my mouth. I don't know the intention; I don't even know what I'm going to say as it's already being spoken.

I have a tendency toward humor, and at times it can get a little out of control. Over the years, as soon as something that's just a bit unkind leaves my mouth, I can almost feel the flinching, the pulling back of the other person, as I feel it in myself. It's immediate feedback: saying something unkind is harming myself in that moment at least as much—and probably more—than it's harming the other person.

It's an immediate feedback that I've moved out of kindness into self-interest. And right away, rather than going from that into judgment—which is just taking the same kind of aversive intention and turning it back on oneself, and that isn't any better—but instead of moving into judgment, to then begin to explore with mindfulness: Oh, what was the intention behind that? Not with judgment, not with a view to making ourselves wrong, but with a view to understanding.

Very often I'll see, oh, there was some sense of not feeling very good about myself and wanting to somehow be one up. Or sometimes just an exuberance that gets carried away. Sometimes it's just being in a bad mood—all kinds of things. But rather than just continuing the aversion towards oneself, by looking at the intention, by honestly seeing it with mindfulness, that's where we naturally let go of that need to look better, or of the attachment to exuberance and wanting to continue it.

So ultimately mindfulness comes down to be the main precept. In some ways, the only precept we need to really pay attention to. Thich Nhat Hanh says that mindfulness is the fundamental precept. He says, think of the precepts as a manifestation of mindfulness. When you're mindful, you are responsible—and then the precepts are not needed to dictate our behavior.

And that's so true. When we're paying attention, as I was just saying with speech, we don't need to have some list of rules. We know when we're acting from kindness, when our intentions are connected, when our intentions are coming from caring. And we know when they're not. It's really quite simple in that way.

Another aspect of loving-kindness and compassion as the framework for our speech and actions, as the framework for our practice, is that they are ultimately boundless. Compassion and loving-kindness grow and grow, almost spatially in a way, but they're boundless. They're not limited such that certain people deserve compassion and loving-kindness and certain people don't. Or that certain aspects of myself, certain aspects of my experience, deserve to be met with compassion, but others are really no-no, get rid of them. Not at all. So compassion and loving-kindness are boundless, profound—no limits, no separations.

I find for myself, in relating this to working with the precepts, that taking any of the precepts and looking more deeply into my own relationship to that way of being, seeing and feeling the depth of our interconnectedness with one another and with all life in the world—where do we draw the line? Where do I draw the line in working with a precept? For example, in not killing, or in right speech—where does that line draw? Just with the bare outline of what the words say?

The boundaries between self and other just begin to melt away. The longer I've been paying attention to behavior, just to these simple five rules of behavior, the less I can perceive any kind of real boundary. The boundary used to just be me and how I was relating to the person or the animal immediately in front of me. Then maybe to the ring of people I know. Or maybe to the group of all of us here. But because in this culture, in this world, we have so much information about human beings all over the planet, we can't really hide from even the intellectual knowledge that how we act is affecting beings in all parts of the globe. And so where do we draw the boundaries in working with these precepts? Where do we set the limits of our behavior?

I find this a really fascinating area of exploration—one in which there isn't, I don't think, an answer that anyone can say this is how it should be for you. But I've found for myself that it takes away any sense of cockiness I have, for one thing, to continue to explore how boundless each of these precepts is. It takes away any sense of arrogance

that, oh, I'm really deeply at heart a kind person, or I'm going through life without harming anybody—I don't really have to pay too much attention to it, you know, I'm a good person. I don't mean to bring in guilt, as in "I'm not a good person." I'm just talking about taking away a sense of arrogance or thinking I don't have to examine this anymore. I don't kill beings. I know I don't kill beings. Let's move on to the second precept. But to really see how boundless it is.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that when we enter a meditation hall, we bring all of society with us. In a way, the suffering, the pain that we feel in our own heart is the suffering of all of society. And in some ways, I feel that's true in our practice here, and that's also how I relate to working with these precepts.

So I just want to give some examples of what I mean by exploring them in this way of boundlessness, because they just seem to get more and more refined. Thich Nhat Hanh, again, in talking about trying to really uphold each of these guidelines of behavior without getting judgmental towards ourselves—it's essential that we don't expect to begin by being perfect, because these precepts are very difficult, very difficult. But we incline our mind in the direction of working towards being perfect.

The Buddha said once, "I say that even the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit. If even the inclination of mind is of great benefit, then what should be said of bodily and verbal acts that arise from such states of mind?"

Incredibly powerful, incredibly beneficial. But also to know that we can even just have the intention—sometimes the intention doesn't make it past the thought, but still that's beneficial.

So in looking at the first precept, for example, the precept of not killing, if you just take it as a blind rule without exploring more deeply, is it even possible to live a life on this planet as a human being and not kill? Whenever we drive a car, we're squashing countless bugs. Whenever we boil water, when we take antibiotics, we're killing little bacteria. Where do we draw the line? Each of us has our own area that we're comfortable with. And I find for me, it necessitates keeping looking more deeply. Keep looking more deeply. Because if it's just a blind rule, then I can say, "Well, forget it. I just won't kill the big things." Sizism, you know. But little things that I can't see, then it doesn't matter.

But if we look at it as intention, then it takes on a whole other form. Knowing that I can't drive without killing, but beginning to look at where we can look—at where I act from an intention of aversion or of ignorance, of just not wanting to know. How often

do we, maybe we don't deliberately go out and kill things very often, but I find for myself, more often anyway, there will be times when I can see that I just don't want to know.

I've used this example before. If I don't have my glasses on and I go to step into the shower, I can't tell what's on the floor. I can't tell if that little brown dot is just a piece of lint or a little spider. And I can see if I'm in a hurry in the morning, there's part of me that just doesn't want to know. And if I don't take the time to lean down and look, and I turn on the water and I still don't know as it washes down the drain, that doesn't absolve me. That's an intention of delusion, of not caring really, of thinking my own being more important, not feeling the sense of connectedness or caring for life, if that was a spider. And not knowing doesn't save me from having acted in an unskillful way.

So I can pay attention to when I do something like that, even if I still don't know, but there's a feeling of separation. There's that contraction of self, making me more important—my ten seconds of time that I save by not looking down, somehow making me more important, more separate. And there's a real shutting off of the world, a contraction that's actually suffering in that moment.

Of course, there are other times when we do know and it's a real dilemma. And that's where each of us has to look very carefully to consciously do what we need to do.

I know some of you might have been here some years ago when we were having the beginnings of our ongoing relationship with the cockroaches here at IMS. Because in the first years we didn't have any cockroaches for some reason. And some years ago we began to have a real infestation. It's the kind of thing we went through so much trying to find ways to work with it. I remember numerous staff meetings, board of directors meetings, teacher meetings, discussing every which way. We called in insect psychics from Vermont to try and send them out. We all made a vow for some period of time every night—we would all do loving-kindness to the cockroaches, asking them to leave. This went on, I don't know how long—at least a year. And in the meantime, it was really getting out of control, and we run a center that has to be certified by the Board of Health and all kinds of things like that.

So what to do? And as you can imagine, as many people as there were, are, that's how many different opinions there were about what to do. You can see we're faced with these dilemmas in our life. And sometimes we might each meet them differently. So it's to bring in a real awareness of our intention, bring it as much into our heart, into light as we can, and then do whatever our particular decision is at that time.

Another time, I was a manager here, and the house across the street that staff lives in now, we used to rent it to friends. For some reason, the couple that lived there had gone away for a week or two. I went over to get something and the house was just infested with fleas. I walked out and really my legs were covered with fleas just having been in the house for a minute. It was really—you couldn't live there with it like that. So again, it's the dilemma of what to do, who would take the responsibility of calling the exterminators, because that's what it came down to. And I felt that was my duty to do that, and I did. I can't really say what all the karma is, but I felt that was something I had to do consciously, and I had to do it looking at the bigger picture that we were responsible for that building. Other people might have made other decisions.

So there's that level.

Can we live as human beings in the way that we live without ever taking life?

And then there's the level of how do we relate to the decisions that we've made. I've met people who are vegetarians out of a deep commitment from not wanting to kill animals, but who are so enraged at people that do eat meat that the violence they're suffering in themselves—in holding to that view and in blaming other people—that's also violence, that's also hatred, that's also giving rise to the intentions of separation and anger. And really looking at that.

This is from Aitken Roshi: "Practicing compassion goes hand in hand with practicing realization. On your cushions, you learn first of all to be compassionate toward yourself. I can recall occasions when I was sitting in zazen with my mind a turmoil of murderous thoughts and feelings. Perhaps you have had such experiences also. We vow to save all beings, but how do you save the roughnecks in your own mind? Treat them as neighbors who come to the door when you are meditating. Oh, there you are, you violent thought. With this recognition, you are at ease with yourself because you are no longer blindly responsive to your thinking and feeling, and thus you are no longer at the mercy of your karma."

So in a way, greeting the violent thoughts that come, the thoughts of harming, the thoughts of killing—that might seem distant now, but I happen to know from personal experience of people who, well into a retreat, had definite murderous thoughts and visions of people sitting around them, for whatever particular obscure reason it might have been. "Oh, there you are, you violent thought." In that moment, we're meeting it with compassion. In that moment, the intention of violence, the intention of anger and hatred has been shifted to the intention of compassion, to the intention of acceptance.

This is not a small thing. Because each time that the intention shifts, each time we can move from the violence to even the inclination towards kindness, that's the beginning of actualization of understanding. It's a huge thing. And we have many, many moments when we can experience this.

So just with this one precept you can see how it gets very subtle and profound. It also stretches out boundlessly in all directions. How do we define killing?

Thich Nhat Hanh is really wonderful, I find, in the way that he quite naturally seems to see the interconnection of one act with all acts in life. So, for example, something I think about: I wonder if there are ways that I support violence in entertainment. If I go and pay to see violent movies, or if I enjoy watching violent TV shows or reading violent books, is there a way that I am contributing to the ongoing violence and the increasing violence in our culture? I don't know, but it's something that I feel I have to look at very deeply.

Or when I'm too lazy to do some bit of recycling, am I contributing in that moment to killing a portion of our environment, to actually killing some of the sustaining force of nature that supports all life on this planet? I don't know, but it can get very profound.

And talking about vegetarianism again, just the sense of—if I eat meat, because cattle take so much more grain to feed than if the grain was just used to feed people, am I in eating a hamburger actually contributing to starvation in Africa? I don't know if that direct correlation can be made, but that's one way of exploring the parameters of really trying not to have intentions of killing or harming other beings.

I also look at the ways that my mind creates a sense of us and them. Whether the "us" is meditators versus non-meditators, whether "us" is my family versus outside people, whether "us" is two friends versus somebody else who looks dangerous walking down the street.

A couple of years ago, my partner and I were in Thailand and we met a young man traveling who was from Croatia—he was a Croat. And he just seemed like any of the travelers you meet in Thailand from anywhere. We were on the train and he was reading the paper about something going on in Bosnia, some particular battle between the Croats and the Serbs. The Croats had won this particular battle. And in that instant, he changed from being just an average guy. He was cheering the way some people I know cheer football games. He was cheering about how the Croats had won this battle and how great it was. "I just hate all Serbs." This was said with so much vehemence, so much real fear and vitriol and separation. It was shocking to me.

But of course, more shocking is that he was just, you know, in a battle zone. Yet that's not something I'm unfamiliar with. I find ways that my own mind sets up divisions and distinctions between us and them. It creates fear and separation and the need for some kind of action to get what I need and protect myself. Is that promoting violence in the world? Is that promoting harming other beings? I think so.

So it really gets quite intricate. And not to look at any of this with a sense of blame or self-judgment—remember what Thich Nhat Hanh said: it's not about expecting to be perfect. If we don't expect to be perfect, it opens up the range to really be willing to look.

So the second precept, very similar: not taking what is not given. That's the sort of easy way of expressing it, but if we turn it around and make it more positive, to me this precept is really pointing us to the possibility of living with inner contentment—the real sense of knowing that just what there is here is enough. I don't need to take something else to find perfection or happiness or contentment.

Dogen, the great Zen master, said, "The self and the world are just as they are. The gate of emancipation is open." Not taking what is not given turns around to: can we live in this sense of inner contentment? These three months are a great opportunity to play with this idea. Can we live with the understanding that the self and the world are just as they are, and the gate of emancipation is open?

In that space, no thought of needing to take what isn't offered even arises. If I were in that space of inner contentment, when I see some shampoo sitting there, I don't think, "Oh, I wish I could have it, but I can't," and feel deprived. The thought doesn't arise. "Oh, that looks like a nice shampoo"—and it just sits there. There's no sense of neediness because there's not a sense of incompleteness. Again, this is opening to the potential of freedom.

In our retreat here, this inner contentment—it's another way I look at renunciation. We can tend to think of renunciation as deprivation, as a kind of hardship on ourselves. But really, when it's the space of inner contentment, it's the greatest happiness. And that's what we can practice here in not taking what is not given.

You have a lot of chances, even more here than you might have in other places, to look at whether it's possible to find contentment with what is given. That can be the food. It's rare that you spend three months with no control over the food that you're given to eat three times a day. This gets to be a really big deal. It's a lot. And when we're going through a difficult time, food is a great place to displace all that energy.

I remember my first few years of long retreats where I would just be thinking about if only I could have a big chunk of cheddar cheese or something, or a piece of bread—stuff that normally I don't even have to think about. And so much mental energy would go into wanting this piece of cheese or whatever it was. So much suffering.

In a way, as Aitken Roshi says, it's almost like stealing from ourselves in that moment. We're stealing from ourselves the potential for peace, the potential for recognizing happiness in that moment, because we're throwing all our happiness out onto the piece of cheese or the rice cake or whatever your particular mind might dream up about what would make you really happy if you had it.

So that's okay, the mind does that. We have the precept to stop us from actually going into the walk-ins in the middle of the night and taking it. A friend of mine has a great story from years ago. He was manager here about fifteen years ago, so nobody here now is involved in this story. He went into the walk-in refrigerator late at night, and there was a yogi in there with his hands in the dried figs or something like that. My friend said, "Oh, can I help you?" being polite. And the guy says, "I'm just looking for the maintenance office."

Before we get that far—I mean, nothing horrible would happen—but before we get that far, open to the potential for letting go and seeing that it's not deprivation. It's opening us up to the possibility of freedom, you know, to let go of the fig or the cheese or whatever.

It can be hard here, and there's a lot of opportunity for that—with food, with rooms, with your yogi job, with meditation. There's a way we're all giving to one another through our renunciation. And there will be times, believe me, when something is just going to seem like it has got to be fixed, it has got to be given. And if it's not given, I've got to take it because I can't make it another day.

When your mind gets into that mode—we'll talk more about it later—we call it yogi mind. Just give it a couple of days. Don't trust it right away. Don't necessarily believe that's the true path of happiness, whatever that thing is. But maybe then you can remember the precept: "Oh yeah, don't take what's not given."

It's not just a rule to make things easier for the people who run this place. It's a guideline for my liberation. And we can open up and explore in that way.

And again, not taking what's not given—where do we draw the lines in the world? I read an article in the New York Times from a population conference in Cairo, talking about food and the shortages that are coming. And another concern is water. Someone from the Worldwatch Institute was saying that we've entered a new era, one in which

satisfying the needs for seafood, for example, of ninety million people being added each year—ninety million people each year—satisfying their needs for seafood requires reducing consumption for those already on Earth. Satisfying the demand for grain also means reducing the consumption of those already here.

So if that's true, it doesn't necessarily mean I should starve myself to death, but to me it does entail looking at that salmon spread I had the other night for dinner. Did I have a choice? Is that actually reducing the consumption for somebody else? There might be times I really need it and times I don't, and I can bring more awareness to that.

Or being out in New Mexico just recently, which is like Los Angeles—it's basically a desert. That blows me away, that Los Angeles is a desert and how much water is needed for how many people there. In New Mexico, water is going to be a major difficulty in the upcoming years, and to have a really nice garden someplace like that literally means taking water from other people when there isn't enough to go around.

So it's not about guilt, but for me it's about really looking at how I use resources, and looking at when I don't examine how I use resources because I just want to be comfortable, or because I can't be bothered—again, delusion—and seeing how different it feels when I do pay attention.

It's not a giving up, not self-denial, not some kind of harshness or self-hatred. You know, "I will never turn the heat on again in the winter because that takes away fuel from other people." That's ridiculous. I couldn't live in this climate if I did that. But when I turn it down a little bit, I can see that that's not a deprivation—that's an actualization of my sense of connection with the earth, with other beings. It's actually a movement of love and compassion, not a movement of deprivation.

It's quite a wonderful way, for me, to look at how I act. It is an actualization of our interconnectedness, of coming out of the obsessive self-referencing that happens when we're going against the precepts. We come out of that obsessive self-referencing into a sense of acting with kindness.

Because at bottom, we all just want to be happy. We're all the same in that. And if I do what makes myself and others happy, life works. If I think I'm making myself happy by taking from others, nobody's happy.

That's the gift of mindfulness—that when we pay attention to what we do and why we do it, we begin to discover that what we thought was making ourselves happy, taking more things, working in this consumer economy that seems to operate by making

us want more things... I get the New York Times on Sunday, and it's just page after page of new things to want that we never even heard of before. You can come away thinking, "Wow, I've really got to have that."

Moving out of that sort of self-referencing, thinking that's what makes us happy, and seeing that acting out of kindness for all beings is what truly makes us happy—it's a wonderful, wonderful practice.

I always do this. I only got through two precepts. So just extrapolate to the other three.

For here, sexuality we don't have to work with too much at all—hopefully not at all. We're not working with it while we're here.

I mentioned the four aspects of wise speech. I just want to say them again: not lying; not using harsh or abusive speech; not using divisive speech, like two people talking and putting down a third person, or trying to come between two people out of jealousy or whatever; and not gossiping, just idle and frivolous talk.

One Tibetan teacher, Patrul Rinpoche, says that when you really look at gossip that seems to arise spontaneously and seems sort of harmless, really examine the intention. How often is the intention fueled by craving or aversion or hatred? Or, I would also add, conceit—the need to make oneself feel better or put oneself down. Just look at the intention behind gossip.

So working with our intention, with a real commitment to kindness to ourselves and to others, and using these precepts as guidelines—sometimes I feel this in itself is such a profound practice that it would begin to encompass all the rest. We can really learn how to rest at ease in ourselves, in whatever's happening, with other beings.

And we can feel quite viscerally, actually experience, that when we come into the meditation hall here, we do bring all of society with us. Quite literally, none of us is practicing for ourselves alone. In some way, we're practicing for all beings. We're practicing for the planet. How we really come to understand ourselves in the world is going to manifest in the way that we relate to ourselves in the world—through our speech and through our actions. There can't be a more powerful way to express our understanding than that.

There's one last line from the book: "These five precepts are a vehicle of happiness, a vehicle of good fortune, a vehicle for liberation. Let our virtue therefore be purified and shine forth."

Let us sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 280

Balanced Energy

Carol Wilson · 1h05

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson offers a profound reframing of meditation practice: shifting from evaluating progress to examining the balance of mental factors, particularly the quality of energy or effort (vīriya). Drawing from the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅgā), she explores how balanced energy manifests as effortless, interested presence rather than striving or pushing.*
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> *Wilson examines the common pitfalls practitioners face with energy—both pushing too hard until reaching exhaustion, and backing off prematurely out of what Chögyam Trungpa called "idiot compassion." She shares personal stories from intensive retreat practice with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, illustrating how even diligent outer form can mask an inner dryness when we ignore what truly needs attention. The key insight is that genuine interest—the kind we naturally bring to activities we love—generates its own effortless energy and doesn't require artificial cultivation.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing when we've fallen out of balance: noticing grimness, self-judgment, and the subtle shift from meeting experience to trying to control it. Wilson introduces the concept of saṃvega (spiritual urgency) as a skillful motivator, distinguishing it from panic or aversion. She encourages practitioners to use both gratitude for this precious opportunity and the reality of suffering as wake-up calls that naturally energize practice, while also knowing when to back off, open to spaciousness, and nourish the heart with what Thích Nhất Hạnh calls "seeds of joy."*

Hopefully what I speak about tonight will be in the service of helping us begin to be able to evaluate our practice from the terms of balance rather than looking at it in terms of progress. It's a shift from worrying about what's happening to simply being, able to evaluate what's the balance of mental factors, what's the balance of energy here. It's a really different way to relate to what's going on, and it takes a lot of the suffering out.

This is my only current reading that I can share with you this talk—from the front of a magazine in the supermarket. Cosmopolitan. This is advertising an article which I did not read. It says, "Just when you've found perfect happiness, it's gone. No, but that's not the end. How to get it back." That's not what I'm promising tonight. That's progress. That's not what we're looking for.

So this notion of balance—and specifically I want to talk about the mental factor of energy, sometimes translated as effort. It came up the other morning in the questions when I was here, this question about how sometimes we give instructions for very precise, focused concentration, connecting with experience, and sometimes we talk about resting in spaciousness, open awareness. But the trick is this: open awareness must be vivid, alert, wakeful. And this precise, connected quality, this tremendous energy that we put out, has to also be effortless. How do we do that? That's a good question.

A lot of the ways or models in which one can speak about this practice of insight meditation are ways of looking at balance. For example, for those of you who came to listen to the tape talk last Friday by Sayadaw U Pandita, he spoke about the first of the seven factors of enlightenment, which is mindfulness. Big surprise. But this paradigm, this way of describing our experience as seven mental factors, is one of the ways of looking at our experience, our practice, in terms of balance.

Rather than asking, "Am I having a far-out sitting? Am I feeling happy? Are things really clear?"—or "No, I'm having too much emotion, things are difficult"—really, when you come into interviews, I'll let you in on a secret: we don't really care what's happening. We really don't. What we do care about, often, is looking at how these seven factors of experience, these seven factors of mind, are manifesting. Are they in balance with one another? Are they even present? They are, believe me, they are. But a lot of what we're doing is bringing them into balance with each other. And what particular appearance is manifesting really doesn't make any difference.

These seven qualities: the first is mindfulness. Then there are three energetic qualities, which are investigation—Dhamma investigation, not thinking about things—energy, or sometimes translated as effort, and rapture or joy. And then there are three tranquilizing or calmer qualities: calm or tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Tonight I want to talk specifically about the quality of effort or energy. But I just mentioned that one way of understanding balance is within these seven factors. It takes a lot of the identification away if you look at your experience in that way.

The reason I like to use the translation "energy" for the Pali word *viriya* rather than "effort" is because personally, in my experience, I tend to identify more with the word "effort," as if somehow I should be able to control it. In that way, I think it's one of the ways we misinterpret and relate to the quality of energy in a way that brings on suffering—by not recognizing that it's impermanent and that it's not self. For me, it's really easy to identify or take personally, as me or mine, the quality of experience that manifests as energy.

If you keep coming to U Pandita's talks, you'll hear him speak of courageous heroic effort. That's an aspect of it. But if I think I should be putting out courageous heroic effort every moment or else I'm lazy, we run into difficulty when we hit the other aspect of the fact that energy is impermanent and rises and falls.

So how do we come into a relationship that can help us explore what's really happening with an attitude of interested evaluation, skillful means, rather than "I blew it" or "I'm the greatest yogi going"? How do we avoid relating to energy as if it's good and we should push harder and harder and harder until our head is hitting against the wall—in which case we totally give it up? "I'll just give up and take a few days off until it comes back." There's a middle ground here.

And that's what we can learn to work with in exploring this quality of balance—of energy, of effort.

The first aspect I find helpful is learning how to recognize and become comfortable with the experience of effortless energy, those times when there really is this strong, connected quality of energy that is not pushing. It's something Michelle spoke about on Monday: the quality of interest. I just want to make a couple of points about it.

We tend to think, as we know, that when there's interest, clearly the energy is there. It's not such an effort to pay attention. But if we think, "How can I be interested all day in this stuff that's going on?"—it just seems exhausting. Just the idea of getting interested in these things, as if somehow inherently the breath is not interesting or sensations are not interesting. Somewhere we have to crank up artificially this quality of interest, and that takes too much energy, and we don't have energy. So, you know, forget the whole thing.

Instead, we might look at it differently: that interest actually brings the energy, and that each of us has the capability to be really, effortlessly interested for long periods of time. Here we think, "Oh yeah, right. I can't stay with one breath. I can't stay with two breaths."

But how interested are you when you're really involved in working on your computer? I see people just drawn into the computer screen—they can't get away from it for hours. People who might think, "I don't have a very long attention span." Or watching friends watch sports on television. It's actually quite enthralling to me to watch my friends just glued for hours. They're not saying, "It's so exhausting to pay attention to this sports game. I just don't know if I can keep the attention, the interest going." Quite the contrary. If one were to try to start another conversation, it wouldn't even be heard. Total samadhi on sports. It's fascinating to me, actually.

In this country, it's football. In Europe, it's soccer. I remember when the World Cup was happening—my boyfriend's German, so being American, I never would have turned it on. But he's just as into it as Americans are into the Super Bowl. We were traveling around the country teaching, and everywhere we went we'd have to find a television. We were working at a retreat in California in a convent. We had to dig up a television, bring it into the one free room there, and run in and watch the World Cup in between every free moment. And the interest is infectious, because pretty soon all the women who were cooking for us on the retreat were in there watching too. Then one time we came in and they had already turned it on—they'd been into it for an hour before we'd even arrived. Nobody's saying, "I'm so tired of this." It's very enlivening.

I'll tell you a secret: there's not something inherently interesting about soccer or football that we cannot find in the process of our own life here. It is really so much more interesting than a stupid game on television. Why do we find it so difficult to contact this quality of interest, which in itself brings effortless energy? Interest is not inherent in the particular experience, but we relate as if it's so.

We think, "Well, if something's really intense, I'll get interested." Or in our days here—now we'll come back to the retreat environment and out of football—if what's happening in your sitting or your walking or your eating is really different all of a sudden, or intense, or if it meets some idea you have of what's good practice, then we get interested.

But so often people will come in and say, "Yeah, nothing's happening. It's not very interesting."

I'll say, "Nothing?"

"Oh, yeah, well, sure, there's the breath and there's a lot of calm and sensations come and go and thoughts and emotions."

"So a lot of things are arising and passing and there's calmness?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess there's a lot of things happening, but it's all so familiar. So it's not that interesting."

I read this in a San Francisco paper a couple of years ago. A young twenty-one-year-old woman born with cystic fibrosis—a lung disease you're born with that gets progressively worse; you rarely live much past thirty. At twenty-one, she had a partial lung transplant from each of her parents to keep her alive longer. And she said—it's quite

young and naive, but it's so sweet—she said, "It's so nice to be able to breathe like a normal person. I stand up straight all by myself now, and I don't have blue fingers or blue lips. I love air. It's so nice."

Breathing is the most wonderful feeling that I could ever imagine. It's wonderful.

We don't really know if we're ever going to have another breath. And that's just the fact of life. How can it get so mundane to us? It's so easy for us to lose this quality of interest, of connection that brings everything so alive—that then lets the energy, the effort become much more balanced without our striving so hard.

One thing that happens when we begin to experience what's happening as familiar or a bit mundane, not very interesting, is that really the mindfulness, the attention, is just sort of skimming the surface of experience. That's why there's so much emphasis on experiencing mindfulness as that stone that drops in—a stone that drops in, not that's thrown in. It drops easily by itself. Sometimes it just touches the surface and floats a little, and then if you just let it sit there, it'll start to sink. Even that cork. So many people have come and said, "I don't want to be like the cork. I want to be like the stone." No, no. Even if you just let the cork sit, it'll eventually get waterlogged and sink.

But that's a lot of why the emphasis on mindfulness is sinking in, because when there's that gentle connection, the interest comes back. The breath is interesting. Sensations are interesting. Frustration is interesting. Boredom can even be interesting—when there's just that willingness to touch it with attention. That's why we have such an emphasis on the sinking in quality of mindfulness.

And again, that non-discriminating quality that we've mentioned—of not choosing "this is worth being mindful of and this isn't"—because another way that helps us balance the energy through balancing interest is to balance our perspectives, or balance our perception, our interpretation of experience. And again, I've spoken of this, I'll just touch on it, but the balance is not to get so caught in our evaluations of "this is good practice, this is bad, this is a horrible experience, this shows I'm worthless, this is a great experience, this shows I'm really getting it." All this interpretation is what gets in the way of a commonality of interest and a balanced energy.

Because when we define something as painful, bad, not worth attention, or going in the wrong direction, we tend to pull away or get involved in struggle. Immediately the energy gets out of balance. It turns to pushing. Or, "this is good, this should stay"—again, the energy gets out of balance. It turns to "hold on, hold on, make this happen more."

The only energy or effort that we are cultivating, wise effort, is simply the energy to meet what happens fully. To meet it, to sink in, just as it is. That's all. As soon as it tips over into trying to push away or change or hold on to, we've moved out of balanced energy into striving or aversion, and we start to suffer.

So again, one way, another way that helps us come back to balance is to balance our perspective, our perception. And sometimes a little reflection on our experience can help. Because reflection can be helpful—permitted thinking. You get about three sentences to reflect, and then when the first sentence repeats, it's time to stop and reconnect with something else that's happening. But a little balanced reflection can be extremely helpful.

So when you're thinking, "Oh no," as for some reason a lot of people—not everybody, but a lot of people in the last couple of days—are like, "Oh no, it's all going to hell now. And it was going so well." And implicit, even though we say, "Well, I know it all comes and goes and I'm just being with it," but often that nub down there: "What did I do wrong? How can I get it back like it was?" Right away you know you're going to be in unbalanced effort, unbalanced energy.

So a little reflection, just to notice. You can't say, "This is good and this is bad, this should be here, this shouldn't." You can't separate the two. Thich Nhat Hanh has a wonderful way of describing it. He says, you know, we love a rose—really beautiful. Garbage—not worth our attention. But if you have a rose long enough, like those beautiful yellow roses up here, they decay and decay, and pretty soon we throw them in the garbage. And they are the garbage. How can you separate them?

Then we take the garbage, turn it into compost, put it on the flower beds, and it grows more roses. You can't separate this is rose and this is garbage. They're absolutely part of each other.

And it's the same in our meditation. You have an incredibly perfect, brilliant day of flowing clear mindfulness—or whatever for you constitutes a perfect, brilliant day, whatever your mind decides is perfect, brilliant practice. And what happens within probably two days maximum? Gone. Gone. And instead, a turmoil of emotion. Overcome with anger or restlessness, lost in a flurry of doubt or self-hatred or whatever it might be, or just plain frustration.

It's so easy to think those are two separate events, when in fact, we can never trace all the causes and effects, but I would posit from my experience that they are absolutely mutually interdependent—both equally vital aspects of the unfolding of our practice.

We don't get it all one way. And in fact, most of the really deep understandings that have arisen in my mind in practice and in life, the ones that have really served me, so many of them have come out of the most god-awful times in practice.

Because sometimes, if we can get over our "this is bad, make it go away, try, try, try"—if we can just see that this is also an opening into truth—this absolutely dreadful experience of self-hatred and frustration can be the opening into connecting again with the sublime. When we can have that attitude, the interest comes back and the effort comes back into balance. In other words, the effort stops trying to change it and simply meets it. And then the flower opens by itself.

A poem I like that expresses this, from Izumi Shikibu, a Japanese woman of about the tenth or eleventh century:

Although the wind blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks
between the roof planks
of this ruined house.

I love it. As we look up because the wind's blowing and the roof planks are exposed and the house is ruined—just when we're ready to get into a rage, we notice the moonlight streaming in. I feel like that a lot. A ruined house with moonlight streaming in. That's our life. That's our practice.

So we're learning, when the interest is there, how to recognize and become familiar with this quality, this mental factor of effortless energy, of balanced effort. Become familiar. Recognize it. Because in the recognition, it becomes easier to find it again.

I've found that when the energy is balanced like that and the interest comes, it's its own reward. One of the ways I know that my energy is balanced is because I really don't care anymore what's happening. That quality of meeting whatever's happening with a fullness of presence is so fulfilling that I really am not needing for what's happening to be better or worse. I'm not needing for something nice to stay. It just feels so wholehearted.

Recognize. You all have that experience at times. Recognize it. Because it will change. There is no way it's not going to change. It doesn't mean we made a mistake. But recognize it, because when it does change, the way we learn how to come into balance is by falling out of balance. That's something Chögyam Trungpa said once. Balance implies a kind of tilting, right? Balance doesn't imply a static sense—"Oh, I've gotten there, I'm

balanced, it stays." We get that sense, what it feels like, that wholeheartedness of effortless energy, and then it tips out. Because we learn to recognize its presence, we learn to recognize when it tilts out and how it tilts out. So rather than blaming, it's information.

One way—and maybe it's the most subtle way, but it's probably the most common—is that in a space of wholehearted effort, just being present, really present, one can put out a tremendous quality of energy in this space of balanced wholeheartedness. And then somehow, slightly somewhere, we don't notice, but the motivation shifts a little bit. It doesn't take much. And the energy that we put out, which was just to meet what's happening very fully, moment to moment—

There can come in just a little bit of wanting to change, or "I meet this so that it can open, so that the process can continue." You know, "I will meet this to control it." Or somehow the mind is just leaning forward a little bit into the future, just thinking how this present space is going to turn into something else.

It can be very subtle. You'll find your own way. But you already have your own ways—you'll start to recognize them. And often we don't notice that first change right at the beginning. It can be a little subtle. But it starts to feel different. The quality of effort takes on a kind of tightness, a striving. A little bit we're falling out of balance, or leaning forward, or looking back, rather than being right here.

And maybe we don't notice that. It still feels like we're putting out a really strong effort. This isn't when we've given up. This is when we're heading towards the beating-our-head-against-the-wall phase. Where it goes from feeling fulfilling, it starts to feel a little strained. We begin to feel frustrated. Self-doubt starts to come in—some kind of "I can't do this, I'm no good," or "this is no good," whatever form it takes. Judgment. And all of a sudden, it's one big drag. We don't quite see how it got there, and it doesn't matter.

But it's interesting to notice, to look back at the motivation, because you can be putting out an enormous amount of effort and energy, but because the effort is tinged with wanting or expectation, we've fallen out of balance. And it leads into such tightness, striving, doubt, frustration—all of those.

So this quality of interest, this really heroic enthusiasm, in some way has to come in a balanced way from within ourselves. Once it's not there, if we don't recognize that and try to come back into balance, it's easy to practice very diligently but in a dead, dry sort of way—meeting the outer form, but the inner connection isn't there. And ultimately, you can't keep it up. It cracks somehow.

I'll give an example. A few years ago, I came here to do a two-month retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, which does require an enormous amount of energy and effort. It's not like you can go into him and say, "Well, I felt a little tight, so I went out for a walk in the woods, and then I took a walk around the pond and read a little bit, had some tea, and I'm feeling much better." He doesn't cut a lot of slack, the way that he teaches.

Now, when I'm in a balanced space, as I said, a tremendous effort can be put out. And I know what that looks like because I've done it before. But at the beginning of this particular retreat, the day before the retreat began, I was flying here from somewhere, at an airport somewhere, and I spoke to my mother on the phone. She told me she had just been diagnosed with cancer and was going to have an operation—a double operation—in about a week. It was a shock. I didn't even know this was in the works. It really hit me.

So I said, "Well, I'm coming home." She said, "No, I don't want you to come. You can't come"—which was not like her. She said, "You have to go do your retreat. It's very important to you. You must go do your retreat." But she was so adamant that I felt, well, she really doesn't want me to come. So I came to do the retreat, which you can imagine I wasn't in the most wonderful space.

So I came and I just started. I would call her every day, and it became clear that the operation went well and things were fine. The call didn't feel like much of a disturbance—I'd call and go right back to the practice. So outer form, I was really matching it: sitting, walking, noting, not moving away from effort. I knew how to make it look right, even to myself.

But there was something so dry and dead. There wasn't the balance of interest and spontaneous connection. I was just trying to match a form. It took me three weeks to realize this. I felt like I was being slowly strangled somehow, until finally one day—I used to always walk in a hall on the second floor of the Catskills—I was walking up the stairs to my place, and this thought came into my mind. But you know those thoughts that you know are more than thoughts? You really believe this one, like the voice from the divine or something. Whatever this says, that's how it is. And this thought said, "If someone else is walking in my place, I'm leaving the retreat."

And I thought, huh, I think I'd really do it too. And fortunately—or not—no one was walking there. But that really woke me up. I said, what is going on here? And it just actually woke me up to the fact that half of me wasn't here. Doing the form without that balance of interest, I could have done it for ten years and all I would do is get drier and drier.

So actually I did leave the retreat and go home, and it was the perfect thing to do. I stayed home for ten days and came back and really enjoyed it—just sank right in, because that sense of split wasn't there. I could be wholehearted.

It's not always such a dramatic thing, but sometimes we fall into ignoring a major issue that's going on and trying to just make our effort, our practice, meet an idea we have. But we can't be wholehearted because we're ignoring some major experience that's happening. So sometimes when you hit that real dryness, open up, pull back. What is going on? Because balanced effort—it's not about how it looks to yourself or anybody else. It's not about matching some ideal experience. It's about that quality of energy and interest that can just meet experience, moment to moment to moment.

Now, on the other side—and I'm going to keep going back and forth because there's never any one way—sometimes we push too hard. The effort becomes dull and dry out of expectation, or out of not seeing something major going on that we need to give attention to. But on the other side, that doesn't mean that at the first sign of something difficult or dry, we go, "Uh-oh, turning into dry, I better check out, I better open up, I better just give myself some kindness." It's not that either.

As we've said with aversion or with sleepiness—as Joseph mentioned the other night about sloth and torpor—the first effect of unpleasant experience or tiredness, low energy in the mind, is that the mind pulls away from what's going on. And if there's a lot of difficulty, it has the effect of withering the mind because it keeps pulling away. And if you just pound at it, pound at it, you do get exhausted. The energy does really drop. It falls down. We get fatigued.

It's said that energy is like a support—it's like it supports a house, holds it up. So when there's energy, you can be with something that's difficult in a fresh, balanced way. You notice, depending on your energy cycle, if you're fresh in the morning and you have a chronic ongoing pain that comes up throughout the day, in a fresh time you can really meet it, be with it, be interested. In a low energy time, it's almost impossible because the energy just isn't there to meet it freshly.

But rather than just give up, we can withdraw from what's difficult—and I don't mean give up, I just mean take the energy away from pounding at the difficult, that "I'm going to be with this sensation no matter what." Pull it away and freshen it. Which, as we've said often, means open up to sounds, open up to seeing if you're outside, take a walk. This is not giving up; it's deliberately doing things that can freshen and bring back some energy, and then meeting what is difficult or tiring. It really helps to have the mind bright, clear, and alert.

But it is important to find that balance of when to keep meeting what's difficult without giving up and when to back off. At the first sign of difficulty to back off is really, as Joseph said, confusing sloth and torpor with compassion. Or another phrase from Trungpa that I love: idiot compassion. It's not really compassion. It's saying, "Yeah, it'll really be hard on me. I'm just so tired. If I keep practicing, it'll just make things harder for me. They say refresh, so I'll just take a five-hour nap and refresh." That's idiot compassion because it actually increases suffering. It doesn't help suffering ease, which is the point of compassion. So it's not necessarily kind to yourself.

Something I've discovered when I'm in this state of low energy, not real interest—but not when you're overwhelmed by something like terror or something really, really difficult to be with, just this sort of "eh, this is just too much, who wants to keep doing this, it's boring, it's not interesting"—

I'll just check out. That's the time to fall back on—not pushing, not unbalanced effort—but to fall back on continuity. I found it's actually much easier to be here 100% than it is to be here 80%. That might sound odd, but look and see.

When things aren't going the way I want, I don't try and change it, but I say, as we've said before, just sit, just walk. When I'm done with the walking, I just go sit. What happens in the sitting is absolutely out of my control. I'm not sitting and trying to get clear or trying to have things be a certain way. But just sit, and if I can, I come back when I space out.

When I get up from the sitting, if you're at 80%, you'll think, "Well, maybe I should have a cup of tea now because that would really kind of soothe me. Tea is so comforting." Or, "Maybe I should do something energetic, like do all my laundry. That would be a good thing to do." On and on, and the energy is just leaking out through the thinking and all the sense doors. "Maybe I'll read the bulletin board for the 450th time today. There just might be a note for me."

If I'm here 100%, I get up from the sitting and I think, "Oh, I'd like to—" but it doesn't matter what you'd like to, because you're going to walk out of this room and start walking and that's it. It actually saves a tremendous amount of energy to just do that instead of letting your mind and body run hither and thither. So you just sit, you just walk. When the walking's done, you just sit. And don't worry about what's happening. That's where all the suffering and strife is—worrying about what's happening. It's not actually in doing the sitting and the walking.

This has saved me in so many periods of boredom or frustration or low energy. I just die into the practice. Now you can see this is just the opposite of what I was telling you a minute ago, right? That's how it works with trying to balance energy or effort. You can't take one thing and say this is how to do it.

On the Sayadaw U Pandita retreat, it looked like that's what I was doing—dying into the practice, sit, walk, sit, walk. But actually I was ignoring something major. Other times, when there's nothing really major going on and I just basically have low energy and would rather not put out any effort, when I just wish things were different—then I do die into the practice. Just sit, just walk, but don't try to be brilliant about it. Just let it happen. And you know what? The energy comes back by itself. The interest comes back.

That's where we can begin to see that energy is simply a factor of mind. It rises and falls. It's affected by conditions. This to me is where it gets really interesting instead of personal. It's affected by conditions.

Skillful means interventions can sometimes change conditions if we do it with a motivation that isn't out of wanting it to be a certain way. For instance, I know with sloth and torpor that the energy's low. If I aim very carefully at the breath or at sensations, if I make the noting quite precise, that takes effort and it brings up the energy. It's just a balanced activity. It's not that I do it because I hate sloth and torpor. If restlessness is there, I know there can be a lot of energy but not enough concentration. I can deliberately cultivate concentration by really coming back to the breath over and over and over without trying to notice too many things. The concentration gets stronger and comes up to balance with the energy, and again the restlessness can shift. That's just two examples. That comes from not identifying with energy, but simply seeing that conditions can change it.

One other aspect that I find very helpful: when it's past the point of skillful evaluation and energy just seems to have dropped out of the bottom and interest is gone, then again we're coming back to wise reflection, which can really be a helpful ally on the quality of spiritual urgency. In Pali, that's samvega. It's a particular quality. It comes from really recognizing the suffering aspects of all life, of our life—not with terror, but with an urge to understand, an urge to be free, or to help other beings, so that this becomes more urgent.

more important than avoidance or denial. Spiritual urgency is a very energizing state. It's not panic. It's not terror. It's not some frantic sense of "Oh my God, I better get out of this quick!" But it's very energizing, helping us meet whatever difficulty is arising.

There are a couple of reflections or contemplations that we can reach into our bag of tricks when energy has gotten really low and you can't generate interest in a balanced way and you don't want to push. One, of course, is appreciation of the preciousness of our current life. Being here on retreat is a rare opportunity, because each of us can consciously reflect on the preciousness of having this time in life, in any one life. The preciousness of having the time to deeply explore what is true, what is suffering, what is peace, what is freedom. That we not only have the time and the health to do it, but that each of us has the interest—which in some ways is the most rare of all.

I think often of being in Bodh Gaya, which as you know is the town where the Buddha was supposedly enlightened. The descendant of the tree under which he sat has a big temple stupa in the middle of a park, and it's a focal point for Buddhist pilgrims from all the Buddhist countries of the world. It's this dusty little village—well, it's not so little anymore, it's really grown—and you can see the interest and devotion that people bring. I also often reflect on the people who live there and run the chai shops, the tea shops, and who do all the things to make money from the tourists, and who maybe have access, have opportunity to hear many teachings and just aren't interested. It's simply not important to them in this life. And here we've schlepped from halfway around the world to go and just sit under this tree. I actually got very inspired, which surprised me because I'm not so devotional, but it was very moving. And the people who live there could care less.

So just to reflect: even though I don't feel any energy, even though nothing's happening in my practice and nothing ever will, still there's this precious opportunity and I have the willingness and the interest to come and put myself here and to stay here. No mean feat. To really let yourself feel the gratitude, the appreciation for that. Not guilt—this is not a guilt trip. We're talking about real appreciation for our opportunities. Often that can bring up, again, energy and interest.

There's a little something I read from Colette, the French woman writer. She said, "What a wonderful life I've had. I only wish I'd realized it sooner." So this is our chance. This is sooner. It's now. What a wonderful life we have.

And then the other reflection—I'm going to condense the three into one—is basically our old friend and inspiration, the fact of suffering in all its aspects. Suffering is a tremendous motivator for urgency, for understanding. Again, not for panic. I'm not talking about panic. But it's what got the Bodhisattva before he became the Buddha. The story is that he lived this pristine life where all death and impermanence and sickness was hidden from him. And he left his palace grounds and went out, and it's called the Four Heavenly Messengers, where he ran into an old person, a sick person, a dead

person. He was so shocked, asking his charioteer, "Well, what's that? Does it happen to everybody? Will it happen to me?" Just seeing that suffering, he couldn't rest anymore in a life of pleasure. It woke him up to compassion for the situation of all of us, including him, and to wanting to find the freedom from that pain and confusion. The fourth messenger being a renunciate, which represents a path to understanding.

These messengers are available to us at all times in our lives. I personally find it an enormously helpful and inspiring way to relate to suffering, whether it's your knee pain here, or your frustration, or your boredom, or whether it's in the bigger picture, watching someone else. You can feel when someone here might be suffering. You can see it. Or just looking at nature.

Or I often have to go to a hospital in Worcester to see my doctor, a big teaching hospital. And in some way I love going there. Now this might sound strange, but I love going there because it wakes me up. I just go there and make it a point to really look around, to see people from all walks of life—from young children to the very old, people who don't speak English, with all kinds of suffering and all kinds of responses to that suffering. You can see confusion and terror, or a real spark of light, or someone who's kind to someone else and how much it lights them up. I always come back from being at the hospital feeling much more connected and attuned, and also more resolute in my willingness to meet whatever's arising in my experience—using the experience of suffering in whatever aspect as a wake-up call rather than as something fearful or as something to try to hide from. It helps us see what's really important.

This is a little bit from a man who has a degenerative lung disease. This is my second lung disease story, I didn't realize that. To me, this is really about urgency and seeing what's important:

"Walking anywhere with friends, especially uphill, is an occasion for silence. I cannot walk, talk, and breathe at the same time. Every gram of oxygen must be used for locomotion. There is nothing left over. Superfluity must go. Whatever is extra must go.

This becomes an amazing metaphor. In my life, in my mind, what is superfluous? What is extra? Anger that freezes into resentment, jealousy, greed, gossip, ego clinging, pretense, embarrassment, any form of fixation, running after pleasure, the discursive thought that maintains the storyline of me. These things are very costly in terms of the life energy that it takes to keep them going. They are what conversation is mostly about. I cannot take in enough oxygen to support them anymore, except by holding completely still and doing nothing else.

When the oxygen is diminished below a certain point, you must choose absolutely between feeding all your mental bloodsuckers and taking care of your true business. You cannot afford to keep them around as pets. What an opening, what a discovery follows from that simple realization. Could I ever afford it? Can anyone? What made me think that I could not let go of this expensive baggage before now?"

That's not spoken with a quality of aversion. That's just with the quality of spiritual urgency. What's really important? Is freedom important enough that I can bring my attention—feeling for him the suffering of his lungs, for us whatever happens to be arising? That's all.

And the urgency brings us a resoluteness that we sometimes can lose touch with otherwise. As one of my teachers said, comparing urgency to your house being on fire—which the Buddha also used as a metaphor often—when your house is on fire and someone comes to tell you, you immediately start home. And if you meet an old friend who says, "Hey, let's go have a cappuccino, let's sit and talk for a while," you don't have to stop and ponder, "Well, should I have the coffee, should I go home?" No, we go home. That's the quality of energy that urgency can bring up in us. It just clarifies what really matters.

And so we can use reflection to reconnect with that space, both from gratitude and from suffering as a wake-up call. In some ways we're all here as the fourth messenger—all have, in a way, answered the call of the renunciate to be here for three months, to clear away the complexities of life so we can really explore. In some ways we've each, for now, made that clear decision about what is really important. It's not that you don't each already know for yourselves. So the urgency isn't stirring up something new. It's just a way to help us reconnect with what we already know, at times when we're getting a little lost or a little low in energy.

And of course, it can always flip to the other side. I could just go on forever—this side and this side, this side and this side. Urgency, again, can drift out of balance and backfire. As urgency inspires interest, inspires commitment, inspires effort, an opening to suffering, gratitude—again, it can get to be a little out of balance, both ways. Leaving the comfort zone with urgency waking us up, or opening more to suffering, or really seeing what's so—sometimes the energy and the mindfulness isn't quite as strong as the amount of difficulty that comes in, as we all well know. And sometimes, rather than just being able to resolutely meet what's happening, it's as if we're washed over, overwhelmed.

The suffering just becomes so great that it's as if we're getting sucked into a black hole, just getting lost and spinning. And it's not a matter of "oh, let me just meet this mindfully." It's a matter of simply not drowning anymore.

At that point, what is really skillful before we completely wither is to back off out of skillful means. But in this state of feeling overwhelmed by suffering, it's very hard for most people to trust that backing off is what is skillful. Because usually what most people I know or talk to tend to do is to think, "This is hard, so I must try harder. I must really sit with this. I must really meet this." And so we push and push, and again we start moving into trying to change things. We get grimmer and grimmer, and we think, "Well, if I try harder, then I'll really be with it."

But grimness is not equal to balanced effort. The more grim you are does not mean you're doing better practice. It means, all it means, is that you're grim. That's really all it means.

So when we're getting into that space of "it's too much pain, so push, push, push," the absolutely skillful thing to do is to back off, open up, bring in what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy. He talks about being in Vietnam during the war, working with the social workers, and they're so busy and there's so much death and pain around them and they're so busy working with it. He would say, "I have to remind them to open up, to smell the beautiful smells of the herbs at night, to smell the flowers, to really appreciate the beauty of nature here in Vietnam."

And you can see, we can get so involved in suffering it seems—what do you mean, smell the nice smells of the coriander? People are dying! But it's very important. We need to back off to refresh the heart and mind, which in itself brings back energy.

So bringing in seeds of joy. I don't mean immediately go into some erotic fantasy, but more open your attention to seeds of joy that are present here and now. Smell the mint, as Thich Nhat Hanh says. When we are endlessly exhorting you to open up to sound, that's the way to bring in spaciousness.

I used to, in really hard times in retreat, when I would never go outside because I was just so slow, it was too much trouble—I would just go open the door of the fire escape, my little walkway there in the Catskills, and stand on the fire escape and just be with that big tree that's right outside there for a few minutes. That's all. I'd just be with the tree. I'd quit trying to be mindful or know. Just, ahh. The tree and the sky would bring in a spaciousness, a happiness. It was wonderful. And that was usually all I

needed—just enough to balance the grimness, the heaviness, the trying. And with that spaciousness, I could go back to my walking or sitting and just meet whatever was happening.

Sometimes we need a little bit more than being with a tree for a few minutes. Sometimes you really need to go outside. You might need not to sit or walk, but just take a walk. But it's coming from skillful means, not from aversion or "I've had it."

And the catch is this: when you're in this state where you really need the skillful means of backing off, what usually is also happening is strong self-judgment. "I'm not good enough. I'm not doing this right. I'm not trying hard enough." And when self-judgment is happening and we don't see it, you'll never believe that it's skillful to back off because self-judgment is right there to say, "Uh-uh, you're not trying hard enough. You're lazy. You're not doing it right. What did they say about do it 100%? Go, go, try!" You're back in the football game.

Whenever your mind says, in that tone of voice, "You're not trying hard enough," it almost always means back off. But we just don't trust it. So I've learned over the years how to recognize the presence of self-judgment. That's a big step—just recognize its presence and then realize that all your evaluations at that moment are filtered through the lens of self-judgment, and you can't believe them.

So when you feel tight and grim and dour, and you're pushing, pushing, pushing, and you think, "I need to push harder"—just pause. Think, "Oh, maybe I'm actually pushing too hard." And try to open up and back off.

That's how we discover balance: by falling out of it. The worst that can happen is you back off and the energy drops a little bit. So what? Probably what will actually happen is you back off, everything becomes more spacious, and the energy comes up again. The interest comes up. We reconnect with the inner spring of interest and contentment.

Another trick: when you feel that voice saying "push, push, try harder," and you're wondering whether to back off, see if you can notice the intention behind the need to try harder. Is the intention just to meet what's happening? Or are you trying harder out of fear that you're going to lose it? Or trying harder in an attempt to make something happen? Or out of some kind of self-blame—"I have to try harder because I'm so useless"?

All of those are good signs as well. Self-judgment is coloring your evaluation. Back off.

So this is our constant, ongoing challenge in working with balancing energy: how not to get lost in pushing, in expectation, in dry striving; how to bring in spaciousness and nourish our heart; and at the same time, never give up, never abandon energy either.

Something that actually inspires me—I read in the Dalai Lama's autobiography that even now, the Dalai Lama, you'd think he could take it easy. He gets up early and does formal practice of four to five hours a day. I thought, "Wow."

Now, if you're in self-judgment, that will only make you feel worse, so forget I said it. But if you can use it as inspiration—"Oh, there's no way it's ever going to be perfect"—then let go of that and just play with this ongoing balance. Every time we tip out of balance, it's just another way to learn. It's not a big mistake.

This is our ongoing challenge.

CHAPTER 281

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this comprehensive teaching, Carol Wilson offers a detailed exploration of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), the Buddha's foundational discourse on the four establishments of mindfulness. She emphasizes that these teachings are not measures of perfection but practical tools for awakening, noting the Buddha's bold opening claim that this is "the direct path for the purification of beings."*
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> *Wilson carefully unpacks each of the four foundations: mindfulness of body (kāya), feeling tone (vedanā), consciousness and mental states (citta), and mental objects (dhammā). She stresses that the "how" of practice matters more than the "what"—abiding with ardency, full awareness, and freedom from craving and aversion. Drawing on her experience as a nun in Thailand, including attending autopsies as contemplation practice, she illustrates how body awareness can transform our relationship with physicality and mortality. The teaching on vedanā receives special attention as the crucial link in dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda) where suffering can be interrupted.*
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> *Throughout the talk, Wilson emphasizes participatory mindfulness—being fully present within experience rather than observing from a distance. She quotes Thich Nhat Hanh: "You live in the body in full awareness of it, not just study it like a separate object." The teaching culminates in understanding how continuous mindfulness reveals impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self, naturally loosening our entrancement with appearances and opening us to the true nature of mind.*

Tonight I want to talk about actually the very basic root of our practice, the Discourse of the Buddha on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

But first I just have to share something with you. It seemed to me such a perfect example of how outside of the normal stream we are—or I am anyway. I was watching the news tonight and an advertisement came on that showed a beautiful nature scene and then a beautiful sunset. The announcer said, "How can you put a price on a beautiful sunset?" Then it showed another beautiful nature scene from a distance, a wilderness and a river and a little trestle railroad going over, and said, "Can you put a price on a journey of discovery?" And then it got very upbeat and said, "This is America—of course you can." I thought, we're in trouble.

So countering that way of thinking, I want to talk about the very basics of our practice, the four foundations of mindfulness. Remember this morning I mentioned how the Buddha talked about the leaves in his hand and the leaves in the forest, and the leaves in his hand being all we need to know for freedom. I think this sutta, this sutra on the foundations of mindfulness—or the establishments of mindfulness, or it could be translated as four ways of setting up mindfulness—could maybe be one of the most important leaves as a tool for our awakening. Not as a measure of perfection that we have to live up to, but as tools to help us relate to our experience in a way that can open us to freedom within it.

The Buddha doesn't mince words. This is how he begins: "Bhikkhus"—which means monks, but it also is used to refer to anyone who is on the path of practice—"Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana, namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

So this is serious stuff. And it's also very practical, very simple and basic as a way to practice. He talks about four different areas that comprise the whole of our experience, our mind and body experience, and just gives systematic ways to be aware, to be in relationship to all aspects of our experience—these four foundations. This leads to a penetrating understanding of the characteristics of each and all aspects of experience, of the true nature of who we are, of mind and body. It allows for the unhooking of the mind from attachment or aversion to any and all of these manifestations. And it allows for recognition of our true nature. It's extremely profound.

So there are these four areas which I'll describe, which we're practicing. But it's not just the what—these four, and you should be with them. What's much more important is the how. Throughout the whole sutra, after each specific establishment or domain of mindfulness, he reiterates over and over the how.

What are the four? They're mindfulness of body, mindfulness of vedana (feeling or feeling tones), mindfulness of consciousness and emotions (citta), and mindfulness of dhammas, which is usually translated as objects of mind. He mentions those, but he says it's the how. One abides contemplating each of these—feelings as feelings, body as body—ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. Or you could say having put away craving and distaste for the world. So it's not just glomming on with mindfulness, but in each moment of mindfulness there's ardency, the fullness of energy, fully aware, mindful, without craving and without distaste or aversion. This is a moment of mindfulness. And over and over he emphasizes these qualities.

I want to describe a bit about each of the four foundations. We're familiar with them all. It's what we've been doing. It's just putting it into a more specific context. And really getting it that there's no hierarchy. It's not like if you're doing better you're more aware of feeling tone, and if you're really not doing well then you have to stay with mindfulness of body. The point is it really doesn't matter. It's not the particular foundation or the object of mindfulness that matters. It's the quality of mindfulness connecting with each experience that lets any experience of our life be the potential gateway for the heart's liberation. Anything, everything, if we pay attention to the way the Buddha describes for being present with it.

In mindfulness of body, he actually talks about fourteen different exercises, and within those fourteen there are many, many other refinements. So you can see it's not about trying to get some particular technique. It's just whatever way helps us be present with the body. There's mindfulness of breathing—we're all very familiar with that. There's mindfulness of each of the four major bodily postures: walking meditation, standing, sitting, lying down, and the intervals in between. There's a practice called moving the attention through the body, paying attention to the thirty-two parts of the body, which is a really good way to work with the body if you're experiencing a lot of lust. Because the thirty-two parts go from hair of the head and skin and bone and nails and sinews and pus and blood and spittle and phlegm and the different organs.

And by the time we spend a good long while doing this practice, there's not a lot that one really wants to cling to. But it's not meant to generate disgust—it's simply to see things as they are.

There's clear comprehension, which is what we've been emphasizing in moving through the day: being fully aware of your body, the sensations in your body as you act, whatever it is you're doing. Being aware of bending, washing, stooping, turning, going to the toilet, dressing, eating. Being fully present in the actual sensations, not in a concept about what we're doing. All this is very familiar to you, I hope.

The Buddha gives nine different cemetery or charnel ground contemplations, which I suppose was more possible during his time—sitting in cemeteries and observing corpses in varying stages of decay. This might seem an odd notion to us. But actually, when I was a nun in Thailand, they would let nuns and monks in Bangkok go to hospitals and sit in on autopsies as a way of honoring this aspect of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. I did that a couple of times. They would let us not only sit in the room like a classroom with students, but they also let us go in the back room where the bodies were laid out on tables before the autopsy. We could go right up and just be there.

It's really powerful. It's a very powerful practice for coming up against ideas one doesn't even know one has—perhaps, if you haven't spent time around dead people. I don't know if "dead people" is an accurate phrase, but around bodies that no longer have life in them. Just to be in that, to see how everything looks alive but something's really missing. It's a fascinating place for running up against our fears and attachments and identifications, and even just the questions of what life is. I really found that very powerful. In retrospect, it really puts one's own life and relationship to one's body into perspective.

Another way the Buddha speaks about mindfulness of body is to experience sensations not through interpretation—"pain in my knee," "sinus infection," "clogging in my chest," or even "breath"—but in terms of the four great elements, which the Buddha taught make up both the world and our body: the earth element, fire element, air element, and water element.

Now, this used to drive me nuts. I really thought, "Well, that's just as conceptual as talking about pain in my knee. I'm sitting here wondering, is this water element? Is this earth element?" It didn't seem worth doing. But if you just let the idea sink in, something shifts. The earth element is the sense of solidity—heaviness, tightness, constriction, solidness, weight. The air element is movement, pressure, any kind of motion. The fire element is temperature—coolness, heat, changes in temperature, and also decay. The water element we can feel in the fluids moving in our body, in tears, in saliva. Classically, though, it's described as cohesion.

I just really understood the other day what that actually means, the cohesive quality of water. I was watching someone pour water out of a tea kettle, holding it up high so the water would travel a ways before it hit the pot. It's interesting that the water stays all together in a little stream—it doesn't just go all over the place. "Oh yes, that's cohesion. It holds together." So that quality of cohesion is present in each moment of material physical experience, kind of holding it together. We might not always feel it.

One way this approach—experiencing physical materiality or body sensations on the level of elements—is really helpful is that it breaks down our sense of continuity. It's really hard to identify with "earth element." "My knee is killing me" is a solid "me" thing. But heaviness? Stabbing? Movement, air element, earth element—we don't get too excited about "my earth element is going wild now." It's just heaviness.

Even more, this practice can give us a real sense of interconnectedness. Because it's not that the earth element in this body is sort of like the earth element in the earth—it's the same. Same with the water, same with all of it. We can actually experience that we are nature, that we are part of nature.

I read somewhere recently that in humans, our internal environment is still chemically similar to the makeup of seawater. Even though we came out of the sea as amphibians or whatever, millions of years ago—if you believe in evolution—internally, it's still like seawater. The different salts in the blood and tissues, the liquid in the tissues, the combination of salts and minerals in the cell are still a very similar combination to seawater.

I really like that. It gave me the sense that if we don't just hold on to our concepts about the body, but bring ourselves into experiencing it as it is...

The sense that we're separate somehow from the rest of the world completely goes away. And there are times when we can actually experience it as just a field of arising and passing elements, dancing around.

All these different aspects of being with the body—they're not for the purpose of being a perfect meditator, or because you have to get to some particular experience of the body. For instance, what I just said about experiencing sensations as dancing elements—that's not something you have to try for. Perhaps your experience of the body is one of simple, concrete pressure. That's the same. Pressure is air element, heaviness is earth element, and it's just what it is. It's not a particular experience but the way of being with it.

At the end of each segment in this sutta—each of the segments of being with the body, and all the others throughout the text—the Buddha puts in a little "how to be with it" called the insight section. Because the point of mindfulness is insight. Mindfulness isn't an end in itself.

"In this way, one abides contemplating the body as a body"—or some people translate it "the body in the body"—"internally. One abides contemplating the body as a body externally." And it goes on to say, "One abides contemplating the body in its arising factors, or in its vanishing factors, or arising and vanishing factors." So it's seeing that nothing is existing on its own—the quality of cause and effect, which I'll say more about in a minute. "Or else mindfulness that there is a body is established just to the extent that it's necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness."

Two aspects I want to bring out of this insight paragraph. Mindfulness of the body, I think, is a good avenue for understanding and experiencing both of these aspects, although we can with all of the four foundations of mindfulness.

This first phrase—"body in the body" or "body as a body"—whichever translation you use, I kind of like that they can't quite decide which translation is accurate, because I can see a good meaning in both of them. "Body as a body" means just that: no apprehension, no interpretation, no big story about my body and what it's like and what it's compared to and what it means. Just body. Materiality. That's it.

"Body in the body" points to an extremely important aspect of mindfulness that sometimes takes us a long time to get. True mindfulness, being with the body, is participatory. In other words, it's not being mindful of the body somewhere over there, from a distance. Being fully present within the experience is really the quality of mindfulness.

Thich Nhat Hanh explains it well. He quotes this same paragraph: "Observe the body in the body, feelings in the feelings, mind in the mind, objects of mind in the objects of mind." He says, "This means that you live in the body in full awareness of it, not just study it like a separate object. Live in awareness with feelings, mind, and objects of mind. When we meditate on our body, we live with it as truth and give it our most lucid attention. We become one with it. The flower blossoms because sunlight touches and warms its bud, becoming one with it. Meditation reveals not a concept of truth, but a direct view of truth itself."

That's the quality of mindfulness I think the Buddha is pointing to—directly being at one with the body in whatever way it's manifesting in any moment. It's not about whether we like it or we don't like it, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, but just living in full awareness in our body, really embodying mindfulness.

In some ways the body is an easy way in, to get a feeling for this quality of mindfulness, because it's much more tangible. And even so, I noticed today how often I'm as if aware of what I'm doing, aware of my body, but the attention is holding a little way back. There's a line from T.S. Eliot: I don't remember the man's name, but he lived a short distance away from his body. We're like that.

Even though our culture is so obsessed with bodily image—how the body looks, whether the body is healthy—the effect on so many women, at least those I know, is that in trying to have the perfect body, they all hate their bodies. I don't know any woman who could say, "I really like my body. I'm really at ease being totally present and open in the way this body feels in this moment." I'm just saying women because I know women, but I suspect it's much the same with men—for whatever reason: sickness, or the way it looks, or weight.

Participatory mindfulness is not rejecting the body. It's also not attached to the body. And it's not mistaking the experience of the body for any of these ideas and interpretations we have about it. It's just bringing attention to the bare experience and melting into it, letting it be what it is.

Someone told me a lovely quotation from a Zen nun of the last century who said, "I meet life with my whole body." Just that—can we meet each moment with our whole body? This is the quality of mindfulness of body in a moment. And again, there's no clinging, there's no aversion. This is the last line of that insight paragraph.

And she abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides, contemplating the body as a body.

It doesn't mean independent, not clinging forever—just in this moment, meeting whatever physical experience is arising. In that moment of clear, participating mindfulness, one is abiding independent, without clinging to anything in the world. And in this way, the heart is free.

So that's the first foundation of mindfulness. And as I said, it's got nothing to do with whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant. A lot of the time it's not pleasant, which is another reason we're often a little bit away from the body.

This brings us to the second foundation, the foundation of vedana, which we call feeling—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of experience. I'm going to try to use the expression "feeling tone," because in English we so often use "feelings" to mean emotions, and it gets confusing when we're talking.

We've talked about feeling tone, vedana, quite a lot—just how important this aspect of experience is, present with every moment of contact. A quick review: contact is a sense door—the eye, the ear, the nose, the mouth, the touching of the body, the mind—coming into contact with a sense object: seeing, hearing, thinking. There's consciousness at that moment. When those three come together, contact, there's seeing. That moment of seeing is experienced as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

And that's just what it is. It's no big deal in one sense, yet it's so key that the Buddha made it the second out of four foundations. He picked it out of all of our experiences to highlight, because as you know, on the chain of dependent origination, the way that suffering arises is created in a moment of mind experience. Beginning with ignorance, going to contact, to feeling—when there's not awareness of the feeling tone, of the pleasant or unpleasant or neutrality, the habit of mind is to go into clinging, or aversion (which is really wanting something else), which leads on to the whole realm of suffering.

We've gone over this a lot, but it's so key because in any moment of this dependent origination arising, in any moment of contact and the potential of suffering, the potential of cutting that chain of suffering, of seeing through it, of being able to just come out of the tangle and rest with things as they are—that possibility is always there if we can be aware of the feeling tone, if we can just be with it as it is.

I know that can sound either simplistic or impossible when the tangle that's arising from pleasant or unpleasant contact has gotten quite big. And it's true: if we've missed the unpleasant and we're way down the road in a whole aura of self-judging, and we don't even know what the unpleasant contact was that triggered it, well, it might not quite be possible to just start noting "unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant" and have the whole thing evaporate. So that's why we have the third foundation of mindfulness, which is consciousness and mental states.

But I want to say a little more about the tangle that's created from the feeling tone when we don't notice it, because actually it often is very possible to cut the whole field of suffering in that moment if we can come back to pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral and just notice it as it is.

I remember one time I was doing walking meditation. I'd been in retreat for quite a while and was moving very slowly—one of those types of retreat where I was just noting every moment. It was summer, and we get a lot of flies here in the summer. We haven't really had a fly plague this year, but sometimes we really do.

I was walking, and a fly kept landing on my face. I would get annoyed and go to brush it off. But because I was moving so slowly and noting everything, it was a lot of work: intending to lift, lifting, lifting, lifting, intending to brush. The fly would be long gone by then. I'd put my hand back down, and then the fly would come back. You know how that goes.

I was definitely getting irritated. The annoyance was building, and I could see I was moving into a state. At some point I remembered: oh yeah, right—unpleasant. It's actually kind of fun with a repetitive pleasant or unpleasant experience, because you can keep coming back to it and explore getting to the feeling tone. So next time you have a repetitive pleasant or unpleasant experience, you can be really happy about it, because then you can explore.

I came right into the little tickle tickle, the little feet—tickle tickle tickle. And once I could feel the tickle, I thought, "Yeah, this is unpleasant." Unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant. And then it got kind of amusing. "Oh, tickle tickle, unpleasant." The whole state that was building up just evaporated. As long as I could stay right with that tickle tickle, unpleasant, unpleasant, there was really no problem.

Granted, it's easier with the little things. But we practice with the little things, and it works the same way with pleasant. Sometimes, for me, this is harder to see—being outside and looking at a really beautiful scene, like a beautiful sunset. It's seeing, seeing, and it's really nice.

And pretty soon, we're either into kind of la-la land, spacing out—maybe I'll take a walk, maybe I'll have a cup of tea, maybe I'll write home—and it just starts escalating. We don't quite realize that we need to simply come in and notice the pleasant. Beautiful, pleasant. Beautiful, pleasant.

That doesn't mean pushing away the beautiful or not appreciating it, but noticing that pleasant quality. Because without noticing it, so easily the mind just moves into its habit of craving and clinging. And then, since it can't have the beautiful scene, it'll start to crave something it can have—like a cup of tea or a walk or whatever it is. Just noticing pleasant, pleasant, and that whole potential tangle just falls away.

You can also begin to see that sometimes we get in a tangle because we don't quite recognize which sense experience is unpleasant. For example, the sound of the shower running here. There might be a time at 5:30 in the morning when you're in your room, you hear the shower running, and you just hear it. It's actually relatively neutral. Nothing much comes up.

The next day, it's 4:30 in the morning. The sound of the shower starts running. And you get really, really annoyed. 4:30! Even if you were already awake. Even if you were already up. *I* can't take a shower at 4:30. Why are *they* taking a shower at 4:30? Don't they know it's not shower hours? You get really annoyed, come back into the hearing, and it's not really unpleasant. But we just label it unpleasant, unpleasant—not recognizing that it's actually not the sound at that point. The sense contact that's unpleasant is the *idea* that this isn't shower hours.

So we have to bring our noticing of unpleasant to land on the actual experience that's unpleasant. You can't just note it randomly—unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant—and not have the note landing on what's actually unpleasant. It doesn't really do any good. I think we do that a lot. We know something's unpleasant, but we don't know what it is.

So the mindfulness is actually meeting what's happening—pleasant, unpleasant. And it all happens so quickly. That's one of the ways we miss this, because it's a very quick experience.

This is from Ajahn Chah, talking about this whole chain of dependent arising and the importance of the feeling tone. He says: "The whole chain of dependent arising—beginning with ignorance, going to contact, feeling, wanting, clinging, becoming, all the suffering—all of these things are simply events in the mind." It's a whole chain, but really, in truth, when you come into contact with something you don't like, there's immediate suffering. That feeling of suffering is actually the result of the whole chain of paṭicca-samuppāda, of dependent origination. But the mind passes through all this so quickly that we can't keep up with it. The changes are happening so quickly. All we know is, "I don't like this and I'm suffering."

He says it's the same as when you fall from a tree. Before you know it—thud—you've hit the ground. But on the way, you've passed many branches and twigs, yet you couldn't count them all. You couldn't remember them because you're falling so fast. That's his analogy for how dependent origination works. We hit something unpleasant or pleasant, we fall out of the tree and hit the ground. We're at the end of suffering, and we don't see all those little links along the way.

One of the benefits of our intensive practice is that—I don't know if we actually fall a little slower, or if our awareness gets a little keener—but instead of freaking out when we're falling, we can kind of notice the branches a little more. So at least you might be able to notice the feeling tone more often and experiment with coming in on it, noticing it, right in the middle of it, and just see what happens. It really can, at times, untangle the tangle.

And then at times it cannot untangle the tangle. That's when we are working with the third foundation of mindfulness: awareness, mindfulness of citta—of mind, of consciousness.

For purposes of speaking about it, we could think of a moment of consciousness as having two components. Consciousness basically means that quality of bare knowing. If there's seeing, just the knowing of the seeing, prior even to recognition. It's not necessarily the perception, "Oh, I'm seeing an apple"—just the knowing of seeing itself. Just the knowing of hearing. Hearing is a good one to play with, this quality of knowing.

The times when you're sitting and there's just sound arising and you don't quite even get to a name for it. Just knowing of hearing. That's this quality of bare consciousness, of bare knowing. It's arising spontaneously when sense objects arise and there's a sense

base. We don't have to make it happen. We don't think, "Oh, there was a sound, now there needs to be knowing of it." No, as soon as there was a sound, it just happens by itself.

Okay, that's one component. And it arises together with—and is colored by—whatever mental factor or mental state or emotion is present in the mind in that moment of knowing. So when the Buddha talks about bringing mindfulness to this aspect, he talks about knowing, for example, the mind with lust and knowing the mind without lust. And then he doesn't say we hate the mind with lust and we like the mind without lust. He just says knowing the mind as it is in this moment. So we recognize whether there's craving or no craving, whether there's greed or no greed, hatred or no hatred, love or not love, calm, boredom—whatever any of the mental states are. This is being aware of, in that moment, being aware of consciousness, being aware of mind.

And as we've said, it's so important—not just the knowing, but also recognizing and being present with the mental state, because it colors, in the moment of its presence, the knowing, the recognition. It's like a dye in the water or wearing colored glasses. I was talking to someone today about how sometimes the dye or the glasses are really vivid—you can't miss it. Rage, bright red, we know it's there. Sometimes it's very, very subtle, just barely a tinge of rose, and you can hardly recognize that there's any coloring of the knowing happening. This is when our practice gets more subtle, but we also need to notice that this too is a coloring, an aspect of mind coloring how we know things.

You can see in your own experience how the mental state colors the knowing. I'll take a big example. If you're in love—that state of newness of being in love when everything is so wonderful and everybody that you meet you love and the world is just so beautiful. And six months later, when the whole thing's over and it ended badly, you think, "What did I see in that person?" You can't actually even look at the person and see with that rosy color. In fact, if it still isn't completely over, if it's in the negative phase, you think, "That person is such a jerk. There's not one redeeming quality about them." And in fact, the whole world is bleak and harsh and dull. This is how much the mental states color the aspect of knowing.

So our practice here, the practice of being aware of the mind, aware of the consciousness, in the consciousness—it's the same as with the body, the same as with the feelings. It's participatory. It's not recognizing the contracted mind or the mind of anger somewhere over there. And it's also not pretending it's not here and being taken over by it. It's a very tricky balance that we find.

This is again Thich Nhat Hanh on being with the emotions: "Mindful observation is like a lamp which gives light. It is not a judge. It throws light on our anger, sponsors it, looks after it in an affectionate and caring way, like an older sister looking after and comforting her younger sibling."

Can you relate to your anger like that? Or your lust? Or your contracted mind? Or your self-hatred? Or calm? Or bliss? Or peace? Or concentration? Just shining the light of mindfulness on it, warming it, taking care of it and letting it live its own life. That's all the mindfulness is doing. Not changing or trying to prolong or trying to make something different happen.

And realizing that, as with each of the foundations, it's not about which mind state we're being present with. It's about knowing that no matter what the mind state, no matter what the state of consciousness, it's our avenue in for knowing the nature of mind. Whatever mind state is present, recognize that knowing is also present. And although the way we experience things through the knowing is colored by the emotion, the awareness itself isn't touched. At times in this third foundation, a lot of the time, the mind state, the mental factor, is going to be the predominant aspect. So just being with that as it is, like an affectionate sibling.

Whether it's horrible, beautiful, subtle—not holding on, not pushing away.

At other times, though, the mental states might be quite tranquil, alert, receptive, but not really strong or very much coloring experience at all. And at those times, the knowing quality might be more predominant. Just this fact of simple knowing arising with each arising experience.

So there are times in practice when our mindfulness, our being with this third foundation, can take the aspect of just knowing the knowing. For instance, when we open to hearing, it's a way to help us move in that direction, to get a feeling for that quality of awareness. Because so often with sounds, it's easier to just be receptive and alert without putting on a story, without having a huge reaction, without personalizing. So we simply recognize: a sound arises, immediately there's the knowing of it. Just that. A sensation arises, right away there's the knowing of it. When an emotion arises, there's the knowing of it. At times, this is the aspect of being with the third foundation, and this can be really interesting.

At other times, forget it—that's not what's happening, and we're just being present and accompanying our wanting mind. But we know that all mental states help us see this quality of knowing.

And again, as with feeling, as with body, as with mental states, the object isn't just to be the most mindful person and win the prize. The mindfulness is taking us into the deeper qualities, the deeper aspects of experience.

When we really look at feeling tone, when you really notice it, you see how impermanent it is. Pleasant feeling doesn't last very long. That's our big problem in life—it doesn't last long at all, and we've got to try and get another one. And you might not believe it, but unpleasant feeling tone also doesn't last very long. It might arise again soon, but each instance doesn't last long.

And also, when you're just being with feeling tone, it really cuts through identification. When there's an unpleasant sound—the shower running—and we're really upset, and we get back to simply "oh, unpleasant," very few people can get really worked up about "this unpleasant feeling is who I am, my unpleasant feeling, and I've got to do something about it." It's just so much an aspect of nature. So attending to feeling tone really cuts through the sense of permanence and the sense of identification.

Just in the same way, when we're paying attention to the aspect of consciousness, of knowing and the mental states that color the knowing—and a lot of you have been mentioning it in interviews—it's like one of the benefits of sitting a long time. We can't avoid the fact that mental states are constantly changing. A lot of people have been coming in this week a little thrown back. "I can't believe how quickly the mental states are all changing." And they can go from being really lost in aversion, to the next moment really peaceful, to the next moment really judging, to the next moment starving, to the next moment there's a lot of wanting, to the next moment there's boredom. And we wonder: when does it stop? Where can I rest?

Because the thing is, we want to keep identifying with each one of them. And when they last a little longer, we can sort of delude ourselves. Each mental state feels so real—that's sort of how they trick us. It feels so real, it's got to be me, it's got to be true. And then when the next minute the exact opposite one arises, we think, "Yes, this has got to be me, this has got to be true." And after a couple of hours of that, it starts to feel really flippy. Well, what is me? What is true? We'd almost rather be able to grab hold of some highly unpleasant mental state, but at least we could take a stand on it. "This is me, this is real, this is true"—better than all this change.

And the same is also true with the pleasant. As practice goes on, this gets into the seductions, the corruptions of insight and of concentration. We all at different times get a taste of calmness or peace or some pleasant experience, some sitting that meets whatever idea we might have of what practice is. And this—even though it's obviously

all too impermanent—can really be grabbed hold of as "this mental state is what I'm practicing for." Forgetting that there's no such thing as any mental state that's worth practicing for, because they're all going to pass.

The only point of being fully present with our mental states, with our consciousness, is to be able to know it in its true nature—which is that there's nothing here to take a stand on. There's nothing that's going to last. There's nothing that can give any lasting satisfaction. And in the moment of recognizing that, again, as the Buddha says, we're abiding independent, without clinging to anything in this world. That's the purpose of mindfulness, the purpose of mindfulness in all of these foundations.

The fourth foundation, the foundation of dhammas—a word which can be translated in many ways—is usually rendered as "objects of mind."

It's somewhat difficult to wrap up and explain concisely, so I'll simply share how the Buddha talks about it. I'm always looking for the best explanation for this fourth foundation, because the Buddha simply gives a series of lists. He says one is aware of objects of mind in terms of the five hindrances. One is aware of objects of mind in terms of the five aggregates—the five aspects of experience arising in any moment that we call a human being. These are form or materiality, the body, feeling tone (so those are the first two foundations), perceptions and mental formations, and the fifth is consciousness, which corresponds to the third foundation. Some people, in describing this fourth foundation, say that it's a way of talking about perceptions and mental formations, which could be, because perceptions are recognitions, the labeling of things, and mental formations are all the thoughts and attitudes and constructions of mind, volition.

The lists the Buddha gives in this fourth foundation are the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense bases and the six sense objects and the fetters that bind—basically greed, hatred, and delusion—the seven factors of awakening or enlightenment (the seven wholesome qualities that we're developing: mindfulness, concentration, calm, equanimity, energy, investigation, and rapture, all of which we talk about, all being developed), and the four noble truths. It's a lot.

I don't want to go into talking about each of them, obviously, but you can think of it in a way that helps me: not trying to hold a list in my mind, but seeing that this is a way of holding experience, seeing how it functions, how the process unfolds in the categories of the Buddha's teaching.

To give an example using the hindrances: awareness of aversion—that's the third foundation, awareness of consciousness, awareness of mental state. But if you're thinking of it in the terms of the fourth foundation, you could recognize it not just as "oh yes,

it's a hindrance" without thinking about it, but recognizing how it's functioning as a hindrance to concentration, a hindrance to being present, a hindrance to awareness. Again, this is not to lead to analytical thinking, but it's a way to see how things work. To see how that anger, that aversion, is actually leading to suffering in this moment is a way of seeing it in terms of the Four Noble Truths, for example. This isn't about getting into thinking about it too much. You can also see how it's describing the process of our experience in terms of the formulations of the Buddha's teaching. It points to discriminating wisdom, investigation of how experience functions.

Very interestingly, the way he describes knowing the hindrances—knowing mental objects in terms of the hindrances, knowing when craving is present—he also goes on to describe knowing the conditions that help craving to arise. For example, a lot of pleasant experience that goes unnoticed. Noticing what feeds the continuation of craving in your experience. Noticing what helps craving to diminish, to be abandoned. And noticing what supports the non-arising of craving.

He's really asking us to look at cause and effect here, to see that nothing is really functioning in isolation. Craving doesn't just drop from the sky out of nowhere and then vanish. It arises from the tendency of mind to move into clinging when meeting pleasant experience and being totally unaware of it. And it continues when that is fed through lack of awareness. When awareness comes in, that favors the abandonment of craving. Continued awareness, continuity of mindfulness, favors the non-arising of craving. This fourth foundation is actually very profound.

The most important point to remember, I think, is that these four foundations cover our whole experience, and there's no hierarchy. They're all just different ways of talking about how to meet this moment's experience in a way that can enable our heart and mind to experience freedom from clinging and identification in that moment. The Buddha repeatedly emphasizes this: being present fully in the experience without adding all the extra of interpretation and story, of me and mine, without clinging.

And mindfulness is not for its own sake. Sometimes we can really get caught in thinking, "If I could just note everything that's happening, then I've got it made. Then I'm the perfect yogi. Then my practice is really going well." And we're getting lost in the technique. It's not about how it looks. It's not about noting everything that happens. It's about this quality of presence with whatever's arising—skillful means to help us awaken. Any of the four foundations is fine, and any aspect is fine.

As Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "When the object of our mindful observation is totally clear, whether it's breath or sensation or anger, when the object is totally clear, the mind which is observing is also revealed in great clarity. To see dhammas clearly is to see the mind clearly. When dhammas reveal themselves in their true nature, then the mind has the nature of the highest understanding."

That's really what we're doing here. We're using the avenue of mindfulness of these four foundations to reveal the nature of mind clearly, to reveal the nature of heart, the nature of reality clearly.

Because when we really look with continuity of mindfulness—and the continuity is extremely important—we see with any one aspect of experience, we see past the superficial appearance. Anything reveals the whole nature of reality.

Take a sensation. Take the breath. With continuity of mindfulness, we see that what at first seems solid breaks down, dissolves into many different sensations. What at first seems like a solid breath breaks into countless sensations, and even these sensations begin to break down, arising and dissolving, arising and dissolving in any moment. It breaks down into elements coming and going. There's nothing really there that one can find that is breath. Breath is a total concept—as is any other experience when we really look at it.

Even an emotion, when we really look with continuity of mindfulness, breaks down from this solid thing into a thought, a physical sensation, a tone in the mind, a different thought, another sensation. It's this whole conglomerate of arising and dissolving experiences we call anger or happiness or whatever. There's nothing really there, nothing solid. In that way, it's unsatisfying in terms of anything I can land on to call "me."

But in seeing this, there's a real freedom. This is how the heart and mind let go of our subliminal grasping and aversion, let go of our clinging to any aspect of experience to make a sense of self, to make a sense of "me," to try and hold on to any aspect of our experience to be happy. In the continual mindfulness—whether it's breath or body or emotions or hindrances, whatever it is—the continuity of it breaks down all aspects of permanence, any aspect of something to hold on to, any aspect of me, of separate self.

And it also highlights the interconnectedness. Seeing that what we call breath is totally dependent on conditions. Without a body, there can't be breath. Without lungs, there can't be breath. Without air, there can't be breath. And dependent on the emotions, the quality of the air, whether we have an infection in the lungs—the breath is changing all the time. All of it is totally out of our control, which is something we notice

in every moment. We can't sit down and say, "Now I will have calm breath. I will only have pleasant experience. I will just feel these sensations in this hour." Totally out of control.

What this participatory mindfulness does—it's not that we want to perceive the perfect breath or the perfect sensation—but just by meeting experience over and over and over, these truths become so obvious. On a cellular level, they're already obvious. It's just our hardcore minds that are holding out. They're the last to know what's already true. On some level we're experiencing truth over and over and over, and every now and then a little shoot comes up into the thoughts: "Oh yeah, things are changing." And then we have to keep observing over and over and over, and then another thought: "Oh yeah, I can't control this."

That's what the continuity of mindfulness is doing—highlighting interdependence, emptiness, transparency. Even without our knowing it, the clinging, the aversion, the identification is loosening. We're really experiencing a weakening of our entrancement, our obsession with appearances, with objects, with experience. This entrancement naturally fades, and the mindfulness opens us up to recognizing, as Thich Nhat Hanh was saying, the true nature of our mind that is untouched by appearance.

Whatever's arising in this moment, it's one of the four foundations. It doesn't matter which one. It doesn't matter whether you like it or not. It can be this knee pain, this bliss, this anger, this pleasant feeling. It can be the gateway into the recognition of the true nature of the mind and heart that is absolutely untouched by appearance. And it becomes our direct encounter with reality. That's the point of our practice. The foundations of mindfulness are all our tools for awakening. They're not an end in themselves.

Just to end with Thich Nhat Hanh. He says, "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It is a result of the long process of conscious awareness."

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 282

Perception & Thought

Carol Wilson · 45 min

In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching that "we are what we think" and explores why our unguarded thoughts can become our worst enemy. She investigates two key factors that keep us enslaved by thought: unwise attention (paying attention to content rather than recognizing thought as thought) and misperception (distorted perception fueled by the three root afflictions of greed, hatred, and delusion).

Wilson explains how perception—the recognition and discernment that arises with each sense contact—becomes distorted when colored by afflictive emotions, particularly ignorance. Using vivid examples including the classic Buddhist illustration of mistaking a rope for a snake, she demonstrates how misperception leads to cascading reactions of thought, emotion, and action. She emphasizes the Dalai Lama's teaching that all difficulties stem from mistaken perception, and that the antidote is simply correct perception of things as they are.

The talk addresses how we continuously misperceive our own mind-body experience as solid and continuous, when direct investigation reveals constantly arising and passing phenomena—sensations, perceptions, feelings, and mental formations. Wilson encourages practitioners to bring wise attention to direct experience without preconceptions, noting that when we have a direct encounter with sense contacts rather than dwelling on interpretations, the tormenting power of thought naturally dissolves. She concludes with practical guidance on returning to bare perception as the path to freedom from conceptual proliferation.

Watching you all walk in here, I felt like there were so many different realities walking through the door. The same, seemingly the same experience, but probably so many different interpretations going on.

Tonight I want to talk about perception and the power of thought.

Sharon briefly mentioned this saying from the Buddha a few weeks ago: that we are what we think, all that we are arises with our thoughts, with our thoughts we make the world. Scary, isn't it? He goes on to say, "Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts unguarded. But once mastered, no one can help you as much, not even your father or your mother." It's a pretty powerful statement.

After sitting here for—how long is it, five weeks?—you probably are getting some taste of how bad an enemy our unguarded thoughts can be, how powerful thoughts can be. Thoughts are amazing. They really do create the world in a very concrete sense. Somebody had the thought, "Let's buy a meditation center," and twenty years later, this is here and all of us are here, as a result of that one thought. It's quite amazing.

And yet we so easily get lost, tormented in our thoughts. How much of your meditation time has been spent in some kind of struggle? And when—say yesterday—that tangle of unbearable experience was brought about by thought, where's that tangle of thought now? What was so difficult about it? Why do those thoughts have so much power to torment us, to assail us?

Because when we really look at thought as a thought, what is it? If you take a really neutral thought—"the carpet is red"—gone. Ephemeral. There's nothing to it.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "Like waves, all the activities of this life have rolled endless on, yet they have left us empty-handed. Myriads of thoughts have run through our minds, but all they have done is increase our confusion and dissatisfaction. When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors. Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in exactly the same way. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all. There is therefore no logical reason why thought should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them."

Does that make you feel better? No logical reason.

Well, I want to talk a little bit about some of the—in a way they are logical reasons—how we get so caught in thoughts. Why do we get so enslaved? Two specific areas I want to speak about: unwise attention, which is fueled by misperception.

Unwise attention is basically paying attention to the wrong thing. Wrong meaning it takes us into more suffering. So in thought, unwise attention is getting caught in paying attention to the content, to the emotional story, not seeing thought as thought, not bringing attention right to the bare experience. And misperception is what fuels this unwise attention.

Really, the beginning of our confusion—of not seeing the ephemeral nature of thought and of being so tormented, spending our whole meditation trying to have better thoughts, or no thoughts (that would be the preference, of course, but since that's a

rare occurrence, better thoughts would do), and hating ourselves, fearing our thoughts when they're not what we like—it's so much suffering. Of course, the root of it is not seeing that thought is nothing to be afraid of.

But what fuels this on a very basic level, and I find this particularly fascinating, is that the beginning of our confusion is at the level of basic perception.

Perception is this: when there's a sense contact, you hear a sound. The moment of hearing is just hearing. Perception is the recognition, the discernment of what it is. So that's hearing a bell, knowing it is a bell. It involves memory, but it's one of the basic mental factors that is said to arise in every mind moment. In fact, when the Buddha speaks of the five aggregates—the five factors of mind and body that he calls a human being, each arising in each moment—perception is one of these five.

So this recognition, this memory recognition of a sense contact, is perception.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. All of them. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. Mistaken perception is, in a way, on a moment-to-moment basis, at the very root of so much of the following confusion and suffering.

So what does this mean, mistaken perception? Why and how does it happen?

Well, you might have guessed that when our old friends happen to be present in the mind—our old friends the afflictive emotions, our three root afflictions: greed, hatred, and confusion or delusion in any of their manifestations—when in a moment of perception one of these three is present as a mental factor, it tends to distort the perception. And if we're not aware of it, it's really fascinating because we actually perceive incorrectly. From that perception comes more interpretations and emotions, and then we can actually act on that incorrect perception.

For example, in one place that we teach in the desert in the spring, the meditation hall has a big sign on it—it's called "Perceptory." One woman who was obviously having a very bad day told me as she walked up to it, she looked at it, really looked at it, and read "Purgatory." That's just what it said. Mistaken perception, simply clouded.

We do this in lots of ways. When the mind is filled with fear, we can actually perceive a person or a thing that's fairly innocuous as being really fearful or really ugly.

One time I was in the hospital, kind of out of it for a few days. I was under drugs and in a lot of pain, and a nurse came in very early in the morning to wake me up, to weigh me, about six in the morning. I woke up in a lovely frame of mind—angry, but also

really filled with fear, this kind of weird paranoia you can get in the hospital. And I visually perceived her as demonic. I mean, she really looked like an evil demon person to me. And once perceived, we act on it. So I practically bit her head off, the poor lady.

The next morning she came, same woman, same time. I was in a different state of mind, and I saw a very nice, scared-looking lady coming to wake me up. And I felt really bad.

But you see, it's not even that we see something and then think about it in a different way. We actually perceive incorrectly. And once that perception has entered incorrectly, it leads to all kinds of actions, all kinds of doing. This is basically how we can, in our actions, get so far afield so quickly.

The examples I have given are ones of aversion, but really the root distortion, the root that leads to misperceptions, is the mental factor of delusion or ignorance. We've talked about craving, we've talked about aversion, we've talked about delusion, but what we can begin to see is that delusion is only another mental factor. Ignorance, delusion, confusion—we can actually begin to recognize it when it's present and when it's not.

It's not like delusion is some massive, monolithic, unchanging state that we're chipping away at little by little and someday it'll be gone. It arises and passes in moments of the mind just like any other state. So it has characteristics: confusion, cloudiness, dullness.

What tends to happen when there's confusion in the mind is we don't recognize correctly. Sometimes we'll just see or hear or feel or think a part of something, and then out of not seeing it all, the ignorance will use memory to supply the rest, but it comes up with an inaccurate perception.

Once I was walking in the woods in Switzerland behind a retreat we were leading, very nice lovely woods, with my boyfriend. I looked over to the side and I saw this huge yellow and white striped circus tent. I thought, that's really weird for a circus tent to be in these quiet woods. And I said as much to my friend. He looked at me like I was really weird. Because, of course, as I looked again, there was no circus tent. It was just a big rock with a little bit of yellow lichen running on it.

That's the way ignorance functions in the moment to give a misperception. We sort of recognize a few things, don't either look clearly or don't have all the information, but ignorance makes up a perception. Well, that one's not too difficult to see through. Some can be much more complicated. But just to recognize the state of the mental factor of confusion itself begins to be very helpful.

This quality of dullness manifests as a kind of knowing that you don't quite know what's going on. One way it can manifest—and this happens to me far more than I care to admit—is when I'm driving somewhere and suddenly I won't have a clue where I am, what part of the world I'm in, what season of the year it is. Often I'll be driving into Barre and I'll have this moment of complete delusion: Is this April? Is this October? It's Christmas time! Then I'll have to look around for clues as to the season, and gradually I'll remember where I'm going and what I'm doing and sort of get back to reality—alright, this is October, we're in the middle of the three-month course. That's delusion, one way it shows up.

The classic example given in the Buddhist texts is a kind of twilight state—really, the twilight zone—where you're walking in a forest at twilight, so you can just see but not quite clearly. In that seeing, you notice something hanging from a tree, and in that moment of recognition comes the perception: a snake. If it's somewhere with poisonous snakes, or depending on your relationship to snakes, that moment of recognition leads to more thoughts—how many snakes might there be, I'd better get out of here—which leads to emotions, to fear. It begins to color the way we relate to the whole forest. We thought it was nice here, but really it's dangerous. It's not good to be here alone at night. In Thailand, this is literally true. To walk in a forest at night without a flashlight is risking your life because there are poisonous snakes everywhere. They won't bother you, but if you step on one, well, too bad for you. So such a perception could genuinely inspire a feeling of danger that we react upon.

Now, if we go closer and really look, the delusion might clear away and we see it's only a hanging vine. That affects the way we think, the emotions that arise, the way we act—we might keep walking calmly—and the feeling we have about the rest of the forest. It's very powerful, this one perception, and it leads into a whole field of reaction. This is the basic way that misperception functions, especially when fueled by ignorance.

The Dalai Lama says the antidote to ignorance is the correct perception of things, because this dispels the visiting obscurations. This sounds easier than we might think—just simply the correct perception of things. That's what our practice is all about here. It's not always as complicated as we might make it. It's simply learning how to have a correct perception of experience, moment after moment after moment. All that matters is just this one moment, having a correct perception.

But this misperception—mistaking a rock for a tent, or a rope or a vine for a snake, not perceiving accurately—this is the basic misperception we are experiencing about ourselves, moment after moment. We're misperceiving our mind and body experience. And this leads to the sense of self, to craving, to aversion, and to all the attendant confusions.

From the standpoint of perception, the reason we misperceive so greatly and so continuously is this: in every mind moment, as we said before, there are a lot of mind moments—seventeen trillion in the blink of an eye. A trillion is like million, billion, trillion. That's a lot. I don't know how many zeros. It's a lot of mind moments. If perception is arising in every mind moment—even forgetting the numbers—it's happening constantly. There's no way we're noticing every single perception that arises. I assume, anyway. I don't speak for everybody.

What we're calling "me"—this perception that seems like a continuous, ongoing self—we can actually begin to notice breaking down as we get quieter, as our mindfulness increases. What we're calling "me" is really a series of constantly arising and passing experiences: physical sensations rising and falling, changing, with perceptions rising and falling; vedanā—feeling tone, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—coming and going; the knowing faculty coming and going with each new sense contact; and any of the mental formations, any emotions. Each of these is just coming and going, coming and going, so quickly, one after the other, not in any particular order. But it's so fast that when we don't really look, it seems solid, it seems continuous.

In some ways, it's like looking at a color photograph under a magnifying glass. This amazed me when I did it just a couple of years ago. I didn't know it was just a series of dots—four or five different colors of dots. That's all a photograph is when you look closely, like those impressionist pointillist paintings where, up close, it's just dots with no recognizable form at all. Then when we pull back, the picture clicks into place and looks completely solid.

So that's our practice: to really look deeply, not to stop at the surface appearance. And it's not easy, because seeing through it once isn't quite enough. How many times are we re-experiencing the misperception, the sense that we're solid, without even noticing?

aware of it in a conscious way. It's a background perception that might be going on a great deal of the time. When we don't really look, when we don't really explore, it's easy to take the perception for granted, just an assumption that this is how it is. We seem solid and continuous.

In fact, it's so obvious that even if intellectually we try to understand the idea of no continuous separate self, the idea of impermanence—and we really can on some level understand it—it isn't quite enough. That's why meditation, this ongoing looking, looking, looking, just to experience what's actually happening, matters so much. The intellectual understanding alone isn't enough to counter the ongoing misperception that we might not even be aware of.

It's so easy to assume that because we perceive things in a certain way, that's how it is. And because we mostly agree on perceptions, that's even another step—we tend to agree, so that's really how it must be. In fact, a lot of people here will mention in interviews that they'll talk about an experience and say, "Of course, I could never explain this to anybody else who wasn't here. I'd sound crazy." Sometimes people even wonder themselves, because the perceptions you're starting to become aware of don't always match the ongoing assumptions of how things are that we've been living with all our lives without recognizing it.

I read one of the little stories by Oliver Sacks, the neurologist who writes about all kinds of different, strange neurological distortions—really interesting. He was writing about a man who was blind. I forget whether he was born blind or became blind very young. Up until his forties or fifties, he was blind and had quite adapted. He worked, I think, as a masseur at his local YMCA and was going to get married. At some point, doctors found out they could do an operation that would remove the cataracts and restore his sight, which everyone was excited about, and which he did.

What was so interesting, really poignant—why Oliver Sacks was writing about it—is that of course, when the bandages first came off, his fiancée and others were there asking, "Oh, wow, what do you see?" Well, of course, he couldn't make any sense whatsoever out of the visual field. It was just this jumble of sight and form, and actually quite scary, because it didn't conform at all to the world as his perceptions had formed it. He had to really work hard at it, and I think over time he got to where he could make some sense of the visual world. But it was never easy for him. In fact, it was very anxiety-provoking.

He would say that sometimes while eating, trying to use a knife and fork in the way sighted people do, at some point it would just get so stressful that he'd say, "I have to give it up. I have to lapse back into my older behavior." Because for him, all the perception and construction of the world was through touch and sound. Shaving in a mirror was extremely difficult, but just closing his eyes and shaving in the dark—no problem. In fact, in some way the quality of his life really deteriorated after the operation, even as he could begin to see, because he never could really make that perceptual shift.

This is so interesting. How I just take for granted that what I see is how it is. It's not true at all. It's not the least bit how it is. But we've gotten so used to these perceptions.

So that's our practice here: to look deeply, moment after moment, into our mind and body experience without preconceptions—or at least noticing our preconceptions—and letting the actual perception of what happens be received without having to twist it to fit a preconceived notion.

There can be times in practice where we literally begin to perceive the body in a different way, where there's just a sense of arising and passing sensations—sometimes slowly, sometimes more quickly, sometimes nothing lasting longer than a flash. Once, someone was describing to Sayadaw a sense of a sensation arising in their arm and moving up the arm, describing how it was moving all over. And he just looked and said, "Nothing's moving. There's not one sensation that's moving all around. It's lots of different sensations arising, passing, arising and passing. We're giving it some kind of continuity with thought. That's an interpretation."

So it's really going back and being with the sense contact, the perception. Sometimes sensations are rising and passing, no longer than a flash. Sometimes there's no outline, no shape to the body, no sense of where the body begins or ends. Sometimes you're just noticing sensation, and then you'll notice an image arise of "knee," and then an image arise of knee in relationship to body, and you become vividly aware: that's all that's happening. A sensation arising in awareness, an image arising in awareness. Just because there's an image of knee, that's not the same as solid body sitting here. It's simply an image arising and passing. And in that moment there can literally be no perception whatsoever of solid body.

Now, a lot of times we don't like this too much.

And in fact, when this isn't a thought, when it's an actual perception, there's no solidity, there's no body one can even refer to, just very fast arising and passing. It can feel quite threatening, and often fear will come up as a result of this shift in perception.

But that's all it is—fear arising. It's as if somehow we're going to lose our body and never be able to come back together again. But I'll say, so far, of all the three-month retreats that I've heard of, nobody has disintegrated into a cloud and not been able to find their body and walk out of here again. Because nothing is actually changing.

Our perceptions can begin to shift when we're just meeting the direct experience. But it's not that the body was solid and now it's disintegrating. It's the same as it's always been—constantly changing. In fact, the Buddha said once that if you must

identify with something, it's better if it be the body, because the mind is changing even so much faster. At least the body is changing a little bit more slowly. It was just his way of saying: don't bother identifying with anything.

But this fear comes up as if somehow it's all going to fly away and we're not going to be able to function anymore. Rationally talking about it isn't going to keep that fear from arising. I just want to mention that it's often a normal response. You don't need to believe the fear. That's just another emotion, another mind state arising and going away. With wise attention, you simply notice that fear is fear. Just because fear arises doesn't make it true. Just because a thought arises with strong emotion attached doesn't make that thought more true. "The rug is red" is as equally important a thought as "Oh my God, I'm never going to be able to walk again." A thought is just a thought. The strong emotion doesn't make it more accurate, but we tend to believe it because there's strong emotion.

A friend of mine was telling me once about his experience in a retreat. He was really seeing the non-solidity, and the sense of self-attachment to mind and body was falling away for him. He said—and I loved this image, I don't know if it translates—he said, "It's not that anything's gone away or changed." He said, "It's like a cake that's baked in a pan, and after you've run a knife through and loosened the cake, it's still sitting in the pan, still has the same shape. But if you turn the pan over, the cake just drops out. There's nothing attaching it anymore." He said it felt like that for him. It looks the same, but there's no more attachment in it.

Well, that's how it is for us. We really are already cakes in the pan, and the knife's already been slid under—we just haven't noticed it yet. So our practice is really to bring this wise attention into our experience.

With unwise attention, which we practice a lot without realizing it, it's unwise attention that gives thought so much power. It's what makes thought such a burden. With unwise attention, we tend to isolate either a particular perception or the thought that arises from that perception, and then really dwell on the thought, on the interpretation, on the emotions that might come up—really dwell on it. And it makes it seem true. The more we think about it, somehow the truer it must be. And then we don't even notice, or we shut out, perceptions that don't match. This is unwise attention.

So for example, you can see how we do this in our perception of ourselves. I'm talking more on the personality level here. Think about whatever your most recent perception or description of yourself is, or how you think of yourself over the long term. That

description, whatever it is, is bound to be a little bit one-sided and inaccurate. Any description is. But it can become so solidified from a particular perception that's probably inaccurate and then really dwelt on.

I'll give you an example that I had forgotten until recently in my life, but I see how this memory and this perception has colored my relationship to things for years. When I was about ten or eleven, in the fifth grade, I was taken along with some other girls and put in what I think was probably formally called a "remedial gym class." Of course, in the charming way of children—and I know this isn't politically correct, but this is what we called ourselves—we called ourselves "the retard gym class." There were about ten of us, and I don't know what occasioned our needing remedial gym, but for some reason we were in this class.

So the perception was that we were total klutzes, weren't fit to play kickball or whatever we were supposed to be playing with the other girls in the class, and had to go in this special class to learn how to function. That's all I can remember about it. I can't remember at all what we did in this class. But it really solidified my self-perception of being a very uncoordinated person who was no good at sports. And as a result, I came to really dislike any kind of physical games. As soon as the idea—"Let's go play baseball"—would come up, I would freeze inside. The perception would arise: "Well, I'm no good at baseball, and no one wants to play with me because I was in the remedial gym class."

And it's persisted to this day. I didn't even remember about this gym class until this spring, when something brought it up. But any kind of formed physical activity—walking is fine, anyone can just take a walk, that's okay—but anything with some kind of form to it, I immediately have a resistance. And it's very strong, to the point that even if I do the activity, I don't enjoy it. That perception is really set.

So this is how an early perception and the memory of it can really structure our ideas of ourselves. And it's unwise attention to really dwell on it, because what that blocks out, what I don't let in, is all the times that I do physical things and really enjoy it. I really like to swim, I like to take walks, I like to do qigong—if I don't get into comparing it to a form and trying to do it right or to look good. But if I don't notice the times that I enjoy it, I'll only notice the times that I don't, because it fits into all the interpretations that have arisen out of that perception.

We do this in our practice as well. We've made a certain perception and then, rather than let in the perception that's actually arising, we'll twist it, we'll misperceive to try and make it meet our previous ideas. Like that sense of solidity of body—when it goes away, rather than saying, "Oh, the solidity of body wasn't really true," we think, "Oh my God, I'm losing it, something's happening."

Or in another way, often people will report, "My mindfulness is gone. My concentration is gone. I can't hold to any object. As soon as the object comes, I can't stay with it." And we'll question, and we'll find out: of course you can't stay with it, because the object isn't staying. As soon as it comes, it vanishes. But it's easy for people to say, "Oh, I have no mindfulness. I should be able to just glom onto this arising appearance and stay there as long as I want."

So our challenge with wise attention is simply to come back to the direct perception. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, to have a correct perception we need to have a direct encounter. That's all we're trying to do here—have a direct encounter with each of the six sense contacts without preconceived notions. That's our challenge in any moment. Can we let go of all self-definition, all concepts, all explanations, and just be with whatever it is? Pressure, hearing, seeing, thinking, emotion? Can we just be with the sensation in the body without having to have an explanation, without having to understand how it relates to my childhood and its arising because of this particular conglomeration of experiences that I've had, and that if I could really open and get to the bottom of it, I know all my sadness would open up and I would really move in practice? Could we just feel tightness without all of that?

It's not so easy. Who used to go in and report to Sayadaw U Pandita? Really, all he wants is: "Pressure arose. I noted it. After the third note, it passed. I went back to the breath." He doesn't want, "This pressure arose, it's from my childhood, and on and on and on." In fact, after a while, they just look at us as if to say, "Where are you guys getting this stuff? It's so simple. Pressure arose. You noticed. What happened to it? It went away. You make everything so complicated."

We do. And the point is not to note perfectly. The point is that with all our complications, with all our misperception, we're keeping ourselves from noticing the radiance of truth, our own radiant nature.

This is from Huang Po: Can we stop being blinded by our sight, our hearing, our feeling and knowing, and from the conceptual thinking arising from it? When blinded by this, we don't perceive the radiance of the source. When we're not deluded by conceptual thinking, this source will appear like the sun rising through the empty sky and illuminating the whole universe.

Simply being with the actual experience, with the actual sense contact—have a direct perception. This is wise attention. Don't try to analyze perceptions or think about them at all. Just bring wise attention back to the direct encounter. When we try to talk our way out of it or think our way out of it, it's like the mind is a ghost, and it's like a ghost fighting a ghost.

But with wise attention, we can really bypass all the conceptual thinking and come right back to the source of the perception. It just cuts all the extra.

To give you an example: this summer I was staying in a friend's house in Washington State on an island, a lovely place. One evening I was the only one there, and it actually felt quite safe. I didn't have any worry about intruders or anything. But that evening I was in the bathroom washing my face, and I heard this banging noise outside.

Again, the mind colored with ignorance. I couldn't recognize that sound, but immediately the mind had to supply a perception, whether it knew what it was or not. If there was no ignorance, we would just think, "Oh, hearing. I don't know what that is." That's clarity. But instead: "Oh, hearing. I don't know what it is. It must be somebody breaking in." And immediately this rush of fear.

I was trying to just keep on washing my face, but the thoughts were going: "It couldn't be somebody breaking in. I know it's perfectly safe here. This woman has lived here for years. I feel perfectly safe. It couldn't possibly be." And of course, it's like fighting a ghost with a ghost. The fear is just streaming out, getting stronger and stronger. I couldn't bear it. I had to open the door, go out and look. Of course, there was nobody there.

So, okay, nobody's there. I go back in, shut the door again, and the fear starts: "Oh, somebody's breaking in." The thoughts would start. I said, why don't I try what I'm always talking about? Wise attention. I took my attention right back to feeling my hands in the water, feeling the washcloth.

It's amazing. As soon as I came back to direct contact with that moment's contact—because the sound wasn't happening anymore—the fear was gone. Just being with what is. No extras, no interpretation. As soon as a thought would come up—"Yeah, but what was that sound?"—back to the bare perception itself.

With the bare perception itself, we can be free of this tormenting struggle that we have with the sense door of thinking.

So let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 283

Q&A

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this Q&A session, Carol Wilson addresses fundamental questions about meditation practice with warmth and precision. She clarifies the nature of investigation (dhamma-vicaya) as a factor of enlightenment, explaining how genuine investigation differs from intellectual questioning—it's an energetic staying with experience rather than a thinking process.*
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> *The discussion explores how practitioners relate differently to pleasant and unpleasant states, particularly when deciding whether to continue sitting after the bell. Wilson encourages examining the quality of mindfulness rather than the nature of what's being observed, while reminding practitioners that guilt is 'extra' and unhelpful. She offers a comprehensive review of meditation instructions, emphasizing the dance between focused attention on breathing and the relaxed awareness of hearing.*
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> *Wilson addresses the balancing of the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅgā), explaining how mindfulness, energy, investigation, and rapture (the energizing factors) must be balanced with concentration, calm, and equanimity (the calming factors). The session also touches on practicing with persistent difficulties like physical discomfort or environmental distractions, the relationship between contentment and compassionate action in the world, and how strong emotions can arise even after extended mettā practice. Throughout, Wilson emphasizes kind, non-violent attention and the importance of staying close to direct experience rather than getting lost in thinking.*

How can investigation happen skillfully without it becoming a question-and-answer process in the mind?

Well, personally, I experience investigation of states as one of the seven factors of enlightenment. Speaking of it in that way, it really has nothing to do with the thinking process at all. It's hard in using English, because as soon as we say "investigate," right away the mind says, "Okay," and starts asking questions. Occasionally, I must admit, if I'm tuning in to my experience and feeling that investigation is low, I might actually frame a question like, "What's going on?" or "What's happening?" just to tune me in. But that's the maximum.

The state of investigation is really a turning of attention to whatever appearance is there because of the sinking in of mindfulness—a sort of energetic staying with it. It's not from thinking. Any kind of understanding arises from that opening up. I might tune

in and realize, "Oh, it's a mental state." Okay, that's words, but that's really the result of recognizing, of putting a note on what was pre-verbally recognized. And then in staying with it: Which one? Could this be sadness? Could this be grief? Not through that kind of questioning at all, but just staying really close within it. And so—oh, grief. Stay with it a little longer. Oh, no, sadness. But it's arising out of being with the experience, not from trying to think about and describe.

One student shared that sometimes when she's in a really positive, blissful state during a sitting, and the bell goes, there's a tendency to want to stay with that and keep investigating. But in another sitting where she's equally clear and mindful, yet what she's mindful of is pain, when the bell rings, it's like, "Okay, I'll come back to this later." She feels a little guilty about this.

It's great to notice that. Always, guilt is extra. Notice guilt. Guilt is extra. We don't need it. It doesn't help. So notice that first. Because of course that's our tendency: it's nice, we stay; it's painful, we go. That's exactly that root tendency—avoid the unpleasant and stay with the pleasant. To notice it on more subtle levels is wonderful. Not to feel guilty about it. That you're noticing it is helpful, because it's true that we'd prefer to just be with pleasant states.

For myself, when I become aware at the end of a sitting that the energy is present, the mindfulness is clear, I'm quite with whatever's going on, and I feel I have the energy and mindfulness to sit longer, when the bell goes, that's what I use as a deciding factor—the quality of attention, not what is happening. I kind of just make a pact with myself.

Tune in more to the quality of mindfulness and notice, "Oh, I don't want to be with this pain, the bell's gone, I'm out of here." Okay, start noticing that. Start noting desire to go, or aversion, whatever it is. You might only stay four more minutes. It's not that you have to stay the whole sitting period. But just give yourself a few moments to explore that tendency—"Thank God I don't have to look at this anymore, the bell rang"—to just gently move through that and begin to tune in more to the quality of balanced mindfulness.

And again, that's not to sit and hurt yourself. It's not saying you should sit with pain and cause yourself injury.

I'm not saying that. It's simply that when there's general discomfort but the mindfulness is clear, it's wonderful to notice that process. And if you do get up when things are unpleasant, keep noting as you get up so that guilt doesn't expand. Guilty, guilty—just notice that and stay with your experience. It's okay either way, really.

Since we're at the halfway point of the retreat—or for some of you, the first day—we thought it would be helpful to offer a brief review of the instructions. If you've been here a while, this might be a useful review, or it might not be what's happening for you now. If that's the case: hearing, hearing. Let it go through. Don't get into thinking, "Oh no, I have to go back and just be with the breath." Simply let it come in, let it go out. If something useful sticks, that's nice.

When you sit down, don't just jump onto the breath with some kind of desperation. Let yourself come to an ease of sitting here. Connect with feeling your body, the sitting posture. Let your mind and body come together in this moment, in this posture, in this room. Relax into this moment.

Then, if it's been helpful to you, let your awareness open up to the experience of hearing—how without striving, sounds arise by themselves. They are known by awareness quite effortlessly, and they pass. We're learning to use awareness of hearing to reconnect with a quality of alert yet relaxed awareness: awake presence without trying to do anything.

In the same relaxed way, when one is ready, begin to notice the physical sensations of breathing—in just the same relaxed, non-doing way that we notice hearing. Noticing sensations of in-breath as they come by themselves and go by themselves. Feeling the sensations of out-breath in the same relaxed yet alert way.

Using the mental tool of labeling, wherever you're feeling the breath more clearly —"in" at the beginning of the in-breath, "out" if you're feeling it in the nose or chest, or "rising, falling" if you're feeling it in the abdomen. The labeling is very soft. It's a tool to help connect the attention with the actual sensations. It's not a command. Then simply feeling the sensations of in-breath, the sensations of out-breath.

Throughout the retreat we've been using both the feelings of breath as the primary focus or primary anchor of attention, and also, for some people at some times, the experience of hearing. We use the breath when attention feels scattered, spacey, very unfocused—using the sensation of in-breath and out-breath to aim the attention at the sensations, connect, and sustain throughout each part of each breath, helping mindfulness come to alertness.

Yet at times this quality of precision can turn to clutching or tightness, striving, becoming involved in a struggle to make the breath more clear, to make it better. At times like this, opening to the non-striving aspect of attention via hearing can be very

helpful. Just relax and let sounds arise by themselves and the clear knowing arise by itself. Then, when we reconnect with that aspect of knowing, we can come back and bring the same relaxed attention to the breath. So it's a dance.

As the attention begins to feel a bit more settled, we're feeling the breath, noticing when thinking arises, offering a soft mental label of "thinking," and when the thinking vanishes, coming back again to feeling the breath. If you've just arrived, you might want to keep it that simple for a couple of days.

But as the mind settles a bit, for the rest of us, when we're being fully present with one breath, this aspect of choiceless awareness or momentary concentration begins to open up. In feeling one breath, we become aware of a sensation in the body. In the moment of noticing it, if it's stronger than the breath, we give that sensation full attention. Just leave the breath be. Move full attention to the sensation with a soft mental label—burning, itching, tingling, whatever—and explore it with kind, non-violent attention. Simply knowing how the sensation behaves without needing to like it or dislike it or change it in any way. As it lives its life, we come back again to the breath.

In the same way, when emotions, moods, or mental states arise, we notice them. Giving them a soft label or name is very helpful in knowing what's happening without getting lost or identified with it. Happiness. Happiness.

Excitement. Boredom. Grief. Metta. Anger. The soft label, the noticing, the allowing—letting the component parts of the emotional experience simply be, cradled with our loving attention.

So with anger: feeling the physical body manifestations, perhaps there's tightness, tension, burning, contraction. Simply noticing and being with, without an agenda. Perhaps there are thoughts, a story that is bringing up the anger or carrying it further. Notice the thinking and come back to the in-this-moment physical experience of anger. Or notice the mood tone in the mind. As it fades, come back to the primary anchor. Or if you begin to get too lost in the story, make a more clear notation—thinking, anger—but pull out of it and come back to breathing.

Similarly with noting thinking: notice what happens to it. For certain repetitive thought trains, the label can be more precise—planning, fantasizing, remembering. Notice what happens to it and come back to the breath or hearing.

It sounds like a lot all at once, but it's really very simple. Using either hearing or the sensations of the breath to connect with this present moment with alert and relaxed attention, you never need to look for anything else. All other experiences, when they

arise, arise by themselves. When there's mindfulness of breath or hearing, you'll spontaneously notice any other appearance. All we do then is simply acknowledge what's already happening and give it full and kind attention. That's all.

Whenever you're confused, there's too much happening or there's nothing else happening—use your friend, your primary anchor, and simply rest in whatever's arising in this moment, the breath or hearing. You don't need to do anything else.

Someone asked about the balancing factors among the seven factors of enlightenment, specifically what balances joy and investigation. Both joy or rapture and investigation of states are two of the three energizing factors, the third being obviously energy or effort. Mindfulness balances all of them—mindfulness is always a balancing factor. And the three calming balancing factors are calm, equanimity, and concentration.

It's a great way to evaluate or simply observe your practice when you're not in a self-judging mode. If you're really energized and there's a lot of joy and investigation, you can work with mindfulness always, and also bring in some more concentration—that kind of sticky steadiness on the object—and equanimity. With joy, we can get really attached to it, so you bring in equanimity by just noting "liking, liking," and that will be fine.

Another practitioner shared that in the last sitting at night, she's usually very tired. She'll go into the driveway and jog a bit where no one can see her, or breathe in some cold air or drink some water. But she finds that still, just a few minutes into the sitting, there's simply no mindfulness and no energy at all to bring mindfulness there. Is there any benefit to sitting where there is no mindfulness?

I personally have vast experience of this exact sitting state, and I hate to tell you that I have found there is a benefit. For myself, often—and it isn't always, and that's what's important to recognize, it's usually not always—from eight or eight-thirty on, my mindfulness and energy just goes down. It's like that in my life too.

I do a couple of things. One is I've begun to sit a half hour, then walk a half hour, which I know is hard if you need to sit in the hall. But if you do shorter segments and alternate, it keeps the energy flowing a bit better.

And I've found that I will almost always sit and walk, at least one sitting or one walking, past the point where I'm feeling like you're describing—especially if it's happening every night, and particularly if it happens early. Because I've discovered, even though it feels like there's no mindfulness and nothing's happening, that by continuing to prac-

tice, over time I've actually been able to tell there is some mindfulness there. And certain other of the enlightenment factors are actually being cultivated. For example, equanimity.

This is important. We tend to think practice is all about mindfulness and energy, but it's not. Freedom is possible with no energy. It's not necessary to have this totally pristine balance in every sitting, or else the sitting is a waste of time. But I grant you, it's hard to feel like there's any benefit.

Over time, by experimenting—saying, "Okay, I'm tired now, I'll go to bed," and going to bed really early—I noticed that my mind actually gets duller over time with that approach. And by just pushing it a little, being willing to sit with low energy and not much mindfulness and no sense of inner fulfillment whatsoever from the sitting, I notice a real strengthening of actually all the factors. I can tell that it's going on even through the tiredness. So it really can be helpful.

And then for each of us, there's a point. I hit the point where it's not just no energy—I'm falling out of the chair. And then I'll say, "Okay, time for bed." So I'm not a total Spartan about it, but this approach is useful.

Again, we would like to welcome the people who've come to join us and acknowledge those who've been here.

A practitioner asks about the nature of consciousness and whether such questions are appropriate.

I hear many different questions in your question, which I could not hope to answer all of them. And I'm not even sure which is the heart of your question, which one to come in on.

You're asking whether these types of questions are appropriate. I think certainly they are—if they're coming from your experience, not from something you've read, though even that could be helpful. But I certainly find questions about the nature of consciousness, where thoughts come from, things like that arise in my own practice, as certainly valid questions. Not questions with a final answer—"Okay, where do thoughts come from? This is it. Finished." But more the type of question that leads me to turn my attention around and investigate.

So for instance, what you were saying about consciousness continuing forever, and something about consciousness that is "I" never ending, and how it makes you tired. One thing I'd like to say is that consciousness, as defined in the Buddhist Abhidhamma—that quality of knowing—arises and passes moment to moment. It's not a solid state that, once beginning, never ends, and here we are stuck with no change possible. That would be exhausting. That thought I find tiring. And if that were the case, practice wouldn't be of much benefit, since nothing could change.

So the way consciousness can be investigated is to notice that quality of knowing that arises with knowing a sound, knowing a thought, knowing a sensation—and then to see that as the experience passes, so too does the knowing. Another knowing arises the next moment. So it's a sort of endless process, but it's not a solid state.

And what you said about the thought of it going on and on through reincarnation and rebirth being tiring—I would say that thought, that sense of the ceaselessness of arising and passing, is one of the definitions of dukkha, as described in the First Noble Truth.

It's one of the more subtle descriptions of unsatisfactoriness, of dukkha—this ceaseless arising and passing, arising and passing, of whether it's consciousness or physical sensations or sounds. Of course, it's when there's a sense of me that's identified with it that the ceaseless arising and passing becomes exhausting.

So that's the second piece of what you raised—this consciousness that's "me." I'd suggest looking into that in your experience. Consciousness feels like me in a moment. Don't just accept that that is so, but keep exploring with mindfulness the nature of consciousness in a moment. It feels like me—often that's true. It does feel like me. So too sometimes does a sensation. So too sometimes does volition or pleasant feeling.

Our practice of mindfulness is such that when these questions come up, they're great questions. And in a way, to ask them isn't to get some answer handed to us, but rather a way to bring it up into our awareness and then really look. Next time you're aware of consciousness that feels like me, or a thought comes—where does it come from? Don't think about it, but really look, notice. What happens when a thought ends? Where does the thought begin from? Notice the space between thoughts.

These questions are very important when they're arising from your heart, from your experience. There are no easy answers, but they're in some way the crux, the nub of our practice—to really look at these issues.

A yogi raised a related question about the ceaselessness of it all, describing how challenging it is when there's a ticking clock nearby. She explained her approach: noting "ticking, hearing, aversion," then doing metta, then reflecting on impermanence. She asked how to make friends with something so relentless, how to surrender to it.

You didn't mention noticing aversion and hatred, I said. Do you tune into those also?

She acknowledged feeling oppressiveness.

All the ways you described practicing are helpful. But with something like that, something really oppressing me, I would personally stay with vipassana. I would keep coming in close, right at the ear door—ticking, ticking—really let in the ticking, feel it vibrationally if you can feel it that way. Rather than pulling away even the slightest from it, which is where aversion really spills in and takes over, I would move right to the ear door. Ticking, ticking, unpleasant. If you notice the unpleasant, or if there's already a little tightening in your mind or body, notice that tightening.

The key is really being fully in it. We tend to sort of notice it—you can even make all the notes accurately—but there's a subtle, ever so subtle pulling away from being right in the experience. The clock is a good example because it just goes on and on, but so many people encounter someone or something next to them that is difficult. And really, so often that becomes the catalyst for deep insight, for real understanding of surrender.

The oppressiveness of the clock, that endless ticking—it's similar to the oppressiveness I was speaking of, the endlessness of arising and passing. It's oppressive when we're clinging to a sense of self. When there's no self that is reacting to the arising and passing, it's not oppressive. And you can notice the difference.

There can be a moment—like I noticed the ticking actually, this sitting, and the thought arose: "I wonder if this bothers the yogis, this ticking all the time." And then I went back to whatever I was doing and didn't even notice it for half an hour. Then all of a sudden: ticking, ticking, ticking, ticking. Oh, that's funny. I wonder how Mark feels sitting right here with this ticking all the time. Maybe that's why he's never in the hall. And then I didn't notice it again for a long time.

You can actually play with it. Take it as an example of the oppressiveness of experience arising and passing, and the way to experience freedom—the arising and passing doesn't have to stop. So it could get interesting.

First, I could really feel my body sensations. And I could let it go. And then all of a sudden, it would come in. And then I was noting sweating, and tachycardia. And I would note them all and kind of dissipate in it. But part of me thought that it was too important to let go of.

I got the drift, I think. There were two parts. The first part was just clarifying about intention and thought. So I'm not sure which part wasn't clear, but what I was trying to say is that one way we can notice intention is that often it manifests as a thought. Often it manifests pre-thought, pre-verbal as well. And to make it more complex, technically even a thought arises from an intention. There's an intention before a thought. That's pretty hard to notice, so I didn't talk too much about that.

But when the Buddha spoke about wise thought or wise intention as the second stage of the path, he very specifically talked about unwise intention as thoughts of greed, of harming, of ill will—and wise intention as thoughts of renunciation and friendliness or mettā and compassion. Thoughts of compassion, mettā, and renunciation constitute wise intention. Sometimes that arises naturally, but we can also consciously reflect, which is what I was talking about. Sitting there thinking, "I've got to have this"—well, for example, your second part of your question: "I've got to ask this question." Which might or might not be true. I'm not saying it's wrong, but there's that sense of "I've got to have it." And then the thought arises, "Maybe not. Maybe I can put it down." That was intention.

The second part of the question is quite broad, so I can only just touch on it. It's about whether mindfulness can be a safeguard in daily life, which we certainly hope so. He asked whether when we come in, busy in our daily lives—not in a quiet meditative space a lot of the time—can we put that aside? I can only speak for myself. Also, there are the things that have to do with the Dharma specifically, because those seem to be the ideas and thoughts and reflections that the mind seems to permit a little bit to enter. They seem relevant and not stray thoughts, but thoughts that perhaps are wise thoughts. They're more seductive.

Dharma thoughts are more seductive, definitely. To me, that's sort of a different question. In the state I'm in, sometimes Dharma thoughts are more seductive, sometimes it's "How am I going to juggle these three things I have to do?" But certainly at a certain phase in retreat, as the mind gets more silent, I find this myself: I can really notice other thoughts. They come. You don't hate them, but there's no real hook. Dharma thoughts, however, can be incredibly seductive. We think, "Well, I don't really need to note and notice this because this is really important. I'm describing my practice. I'm describing the Dharma, the truth."

On one level, it might be true practice—but that's not the point. That seduction, that pulling, getting pulled in, is still craving. And so that's the point. It's not whether the thought is good or bad or interesting, but the craving is just feeding more craving. I saw at one point how I had to be really quite ruthless—not angry. Just, "Okay, I'm thinking. This is thinking. It's an incredibly wonderful, beautiful thought, but it's a thought." And as long as I know it's a thought, there's no problem.

As long as I know there's craving, it's no problem.

But what about the rest of our lives? Well, certainly mindfulness is a protection and a refuge. It might not be on such a subtle level as when I've been sitting for seven weeks. I don't notice a thought before it starts very often, and it really varies. Some days I come in and I'm really right here. Some days we come in and we're planning our talk through the whole sitting. The difference is that I simply realize that's what thought is doing. I don't sit here getting really upset with myself on the days there's a lot of thinking.

The way mindfulness is a refuge is that if there's a sense of really being caught, or some struggle, I can call it in quite strongly. Just as you were noticing sweating and tachycardia and various things, I can start noticing and noting and really get to the center of what's happening and rest in that, rather than being confused and upset and wondering what's going on. Sometimes I choose to think about something. Sometimes I consciously decide, "I'm going to think about my talk now for ten minutes."

Yesterday, Sharon suggested that in walking meditation, we note just before the action—so if it's lifting, you note "lifting," then lift, then note "moving," then move. When you tried that and got caught up in the moment of noting lifting, you were actually noticing your intention. This is how complicated it gets when trying to say things to a whole group. What I would say is that I would note "intending" at that point, because that is what you're actually experiencing. The noting, I find, is meant to land on what we're actually experiencing. So if you're aware of intention but trying to note the lifting, there's a kind of leaning ahead in that moment. For you, in that moment, I would note "intending." I don't know the context of what Sharon said or who she said it to—it could be quite different at other moments and for other people.

She was referring to not using the noting after the action. After the action, yes—after the action, it's gone. Usually the noting should be concurrent with the experience, at the same time as the experience. I've personally found that if I try to note "lifting" before the lifting, it turns into a command. I'm kind of giving myself marching orders or something.

It's been said in other contexts by other teachers at this retreat as well—for instance, Michelle said that before you reach for the doorknob... Well, if you find that's helpful. You did find it helpful, actually, but also confusing. Well, you see why. We all have different experiences. Really, again, I think it points back to looking at your own experience, because what can be helpful in one particular phase of practice, as practice shifts—gets perhaps more subtle or less subtle—that same thing isn't helpful anymore. Something's different. So in a way, it's good that you stay really right there with your experience instead of just assuming, "All right, this is going to be good." You really look and notice, "Wait, this is confusing me." If it's confusing you, then I would try to note exactly what you're with in that moment, not try to get too tricky about it.

Have an interesting day. Are there any questions this morning?

You were talking about the civil rights movement. I guess it's hard for me to understand the boundary between contentment and then deciding that a Black person ought to want to sit at the back of the bus—where that boundary is. I understand inner contentment on a mundane level. You have agreements with people, then you walk into the house and it's not the way you like it, and that's something I suffer with too. So it's not just about world change, but this is actually one of my biggest fears about Buddhism—that we'll just be cloistered in this room in a tent with our practice and we'll forget there's a world out there. And it goes deeper, because I think about who's here and who chooses to do this practice. I don't want to make assumptions about who's here, but we do tend to be white, and there's—

Could you all hear her question? It's about contentment, which I can't go to what Steve said last night since I wasn't here, so I can only speak from my own understanding. And her difficulties with the balance between contentment, and does that mean we all just sit here and never take any action in the world, not care about the world.

To me, contentment and passivity are not the same thing. When you describe sitting here and not caring about anything or anyone else and we're all just happy—that's not how I think of contentment. Contentment does not preclude skillful action, or action from compassion, from wisdom, action motivated by love or connection. Those are very motivating energies that actually arise from the contentment of resting in truth.

That sense of inner contentment when we touch the place—it's not a place, it's hard to talk about—but when we are awake in the understanding that we're not a separate being, that there isn't a me that needs to be protected, that is separate from other beings... Or another way of putting emptiness is a sense of inner completion where wanting and fear have no place, they just don't arise. From that place, it's not a place of

delusion that sees everything as hunky-dory in the world, thinking, "Who cares what happens to anyone else since it's all empty anyway?" That sort of wisdom that isn't balanced with the connecting energy of compassion.

So in my own experience, take a very mundane example. Let's not think too much about what's going on in the civil rights movement or who chooses to come. Because those are important questions, but they just lead to endless thinking. I want to keep the discussion simple, here in the grounds of our practice, because I believe that all of that can be seen in our own practice here.

Take a more mundane example: you come home and the house isn't cleaned according to the agreement. Or take an even more mundane example—you come in the dining room and someone's taking food before the bell, something really immediate. Inner contentment would mean if I'm recognizing the truth in a particular moment, I could walk in the dining room or walk in my house, be centered in emptiness and compassion, see that things haven't been done according to agreement, and I don't lose it. I don't get filled with hate. I don't get filled with anger because I've been disrespected, because I've been hurt. There's an equanimity of, "Oh, this didn't happen." There might be valid reasons why it didn't happen. I find those out first because I'm in a place of balance and connectedness. There might not be valid reasons—the agreement just wasn't respected because the person didn't feel like it. And even then I wouldn't have to respond from anger or self-protection or hurt. There could be a balanced way to respond.

But that response looks at the whole situation. It wouldn't be, "Okay, you didn't feel like it, so we'll just assume there was no agreement." Metta and compassion look at the whole and what's good for the whole. It's not just self-centered, "I'm happy, who cares about the world?" That isn't contentment to me. That's kind of a pleasant resting place in the moment, but it isn't connected to wisdom, the wisdom of compassion.

The questions you raise about the world are huge questions. I don't know the answers to those, but I do know that the inner contentment of peace does not preclude wise action. It can come from a place that's more connected and loving rather than from a place of frustration, or anger, or our own confusion. That's how I relate to contentment.

Question from the audience

Thank you for what you just said. It was terrific. It applies to me because I've been doing solid metta for two months and I'm feeling loving and nice. But this morning something happened and I'm so angry. I feel that I don't have the mindfulness... There's

a huge ocean and my sails are blown off, but I have a navigation of things. Doing metta feels like a band-aid on this huge wound. I am so angry. I want to get even. I want to do something physical that satisfies my bloodlust.

One thing I'd say, Lorna, is don't despair about that. It's true that when you've been practicing metta for two months, the mindfulness is only going into the metta—which is not a bad thing—but it's true we're not practicing vipassana at that time.

And I would not agree that metta is a band-aid. But as you know, part of what happens with metta practice or karuna practice is that at times, as the purification unfolds, the opposite will come shooting up. And as you're experiencing right now, it can happen very suddenly and with great intensity—anger arises. Because we're just with the metta, it sort of blindsides us. If you were doing vipassana, you might notice the beginnings of it. Doing metta, we don't notice that. And so when you suddenly become aware, it's like *whoosh*—this huge wave, so sudden and so strong.

So first I just want to say, that's not wrong or a mistake. In a way, these difficult aspects get lifted up more via the metta, part of the purification. So don't blame the metta, don't blame yourself. Something horrible hasn't happened. It's like, "Oh yeah, right. We can do metta, but we're not completely living in the divine abode. We can still notice once in a while these other intentions come through." That's not wrong—it's going to happen. And you're right, it's hard after two months to just switch into vipassana with it. It's a little rusty.

I just want to encourage you not to feel that something has failed, not to give up about it, not to let your thinking mind take over with "Oh no, it didn't work, something's wrong." And do try—the thing you will find is that because of the two months of metta, you might have to work a little to get to the mindfulness of vipassana with the anger, but you'll have a steadiness of mind that, once you get there, will surprise you.

So it's okay. Do try to use the steadiness and vipassana with the anger, not the thoughts. Just feel it. You might just be able to hover right there kindly with the murderous rage—whether it's in your body (especially helpful if it's in your body) or in the emotional tone. The vipassana means you don't have to do something about it. You don't have to satisfy the bloodlust physically—and clearly there's enough mindfulness that that's not going to happen. And you also don't have to get rid of it in order to be loving.

Simply use the steadiness and the vipassana to feel the feelings that arise together with the anger in your body. Notice the emotions and just gently, gently, gently let it be there. It's okay that it comes up. It's part of all of our practice. You don't try to metta it away. It's another piece to accept, and that in itself is metta.

So it might be bumpy for a little while. If you can not worry about that, not judge it, and just keep trying to feel it gently with the vipassana—it will of course shift. But yeah, I just want to say: it's okay, don't worry, just a little rocky for a while.

CHAPTER 284

Where Can We Find Refuge?

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this mid-retreat dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common tendency among practitioners: the search for some concrete body of knowledge, specific experiences, or final explanations that will resolve all doubts and provide lasting security. She observes how easily we slip into assessment mode, wondering if we've "got it" or if our practice is going correctly.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teachings about attachment to views (diṭṭhi-upādāna), Wilson examines how even verified faith—confidence born from direct experience—can solidify into rigid views that cause suffering. She illustrates this through examples ranging from the nature of the universe (where 99% consists of undetectable dark matter) to the civil rights movement, showing how clinging to views limits our perception and can lead to enormous suffering. The Buddha's teaching on Transcendental Dependent Arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) reveals that suffering itself can be the supporting condition for faith, which leads through joy, tranquility, and concentration toward liberation.*
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> *Wilson calls practitioners toward radical acceptance—a complete surrender into the present moment without trying to control outcomes or manufacture particular experiences. Quoting Suzuki Roshi, she describes this as appreciating ourselves as "a wonderful part of Buddha's great activity, even in the midst of difficulties." True refuge, she suggests, is not found in any view we can cling to, but in moment-to-moment spontaneous awareness where truth is always present.*

Where Can We Find Refuge?

Tonight I want to talk about the search for knowledge, or where can we find refuge.

At this point of the retreat, coming up on the midpoint, about twenty people are leaving at the end of this week. And for those who are staying, there's still a real sense that the retreat is about half over. I've noticed in quite a few of the interviews that the mind tends to move into a sort of assessment mode—evaluating, "Well, how am I doing? Have I got it? It's over and I have to leave, and did I really get it yet? Do I understand it all? Will I ever? How is my retreat going? It's not quite going in the way that I had planned." Ha! Big surprise.

But this is coming up a lot, and it makes me reflect on how for many years my own practice was—of course I was practicing to be free from suffering—but in some way, if I was asked, I would think it was for understanding. And understanding, my mind would translate as some body of knowledge, or some specific set of experiences, or some final explanation that was going to resolve all my questions, all my doubts. Everything would make sense. It's really only something to have so that there's nothing to worry or wonder about anymore. Some *something*, you know. And of course, some proof, at least, that we're getting somewhere other than here, whatever that might be in each of our minds.

And of course, as I'm sure you know I'm going to say, it's just the opposite—that the closer we look to find this explanation, this body of knowledge, this set of experiences that we can use to satisfy our mind that we've gotten it, the closer we look for this knowledge, for something concrete to take refuge in, the more we don't find anything.

One of my teachers would say, "When you don't look, you see samsara. When you look, you don't see anything."

That's really how it is.

This little article—some of you have heard me read this before—to me it's a metaphor of our practice, of our search for some knowledge and understanding. It's a science article about the nature of the universe.

A couple of years ago, some scientists discovered a new galaxy, the largest galaxy ever detected. And by the way, even on the news last night, they were talking about this: there are one hundred billion galaxies that they know of—one hundred billion. And our galaxy, only one of them, has something like one hundred billion stars. It's unthinkable. Anyway, somehow they discovered a new galaxy, the largest one ever discovered, which has one hundred trillion stars—sixty times the size of Earth's galaxy, the Milky Way.

So that just sets the stage.

This new galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump of one thousand galaxies called Abel 2029. And in studying these galaxies, scientists hope that further study will provide clues to the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter. Because there doesn't appear to be enough ordinary, regular matter in the universe to account for the gravitational forces that would be necessary to clump all these galaxies together. So they propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation.

According to the prevailing wisdom, ninety-nine percent of the universe consists of this missing mass. Ninety-nine percent. Which means that what is generally thought of as astronomy actually concerns only a tiny subset of particles that happen to be detectable by the human nervous system.

I think it's like that when we begin to really explore our mind-body process. Ninety-nine percent of it, we don't have a clue what's really going on. The more we look for answers, the more we discover mystery, unknowing.

And so what I want to talk a bit about tonight is taking refuge in radical acceptance, radical faith, radical trust.

Once I read somewhere—I forget where—a definition of faith as the drive towards that which cannot be described.

I really like that. It takes faith out of the realm of definition and intellect—the movement of heart towards that which cannot be described.

You'll probably remember when Joseph spoke about faith some time ago, about this aspect of faith first arising in us, which is often called bright faith. That sense of brightness, confidence of heart and mind, almost as if internally something lights us up, energizes us. It brings us to explore. It brings us to practice. It's really a wonderful mental state, a wonderful feeling. And it can come from hearing some teacher, from talking to somebody. It can come from being in nature. It can come from an experience of suffering that one somehow transcends or transforms into something very profound.

I'm sure—maybe not—but at times reflect on the first arising of this bright faith for yourself, because I find that can often inspire energy and confidence. And of course it fades, but it's not a one-time experience. Even here, you can notice often the reawakening of this state of bright faith. I experience it so many times in interviews, talking with people, just seeing the inner light as somebody is opening to a new aspect of how things are. Somebody is letting go of some pain, some long-held idea, some way that suffering is being created. Or when I see the power of metta, somebody's kindness. Just the way that one of you can inspire another one of you. The incredible dedication you're all putting out—really, it's a gift for us as teachers to be able to meet with all of you daily as you go through your process. Even though sometimes bright faith might be the last thing you think is emanating, and sometimes it is the last thing that's emanating, many other times—more than you'd realize—I get such a hit of this inspiration from talking with each of you.

One thing about bright faith, one way that we often can misplace it, is that that first brightness feels like a reawakening in us of a recognition of truth, a recalling us to our truest nature. And sometimes we take that faith, that bright lit-up place, and instead of seeing it as a calling back to our own truth—that we are an expression of truth—it can be easy to direct it outwards, to turn it into blind faith. Faith in the person who inspired it, faith in the teachings. I don't mean that we can't trust people and teachings, but this blind faith that says, "I can only feel awakened and enlivened if my teacher is with me, or if I can somehow hold on to teachings in a certain way." It's again a looking outside of ourselves, a giving away of our own potential to awaken to truth, saying, "I need this other being, this other teacher, this other situation, whatever it might be." And then it turns into blind faith.

Someone told me once about one of her teachers. She said, "You know, I trust him so much. If he told me to jump off a cliff, I would do it without thinking." I thought, oh—that could possibly be blind faith. So blind that it doesn't really look to see what's true in each moment.

So bright faith—never mind blind faith—but bright faith of course is not stable. It wavers because it's at first dependent on something outside. What's wonderful about this practice is that as the faith energizes us and gives us the confidence to sit down and look, then through our own personal moment-to-moment experience, bright faith changes or is strengthened by verified faith. This faith means confidence in what we know to be true through our own experience.

This is what many of us love in particular about the teachings of the Buddha as they are in the Pali suttas. There's that very famous line he said often, *ehi passiko*—that's Pali, which translates roughly as "you too, come and see." He said many times, don't believe anything just because I say so, just because someone that you respect or revere says so—and he goes through a long list. He says, but if you hear it and it sounds helpful or good, then come and see for yourself. Try for yourself and see what is true. See what leads to less suffering, what leads to more suffering.

So verified faith is what arises out of this seeing what is actually true for ourselves. And something you know from your own experience to be true—anyone telling you otherwise, it just doesn't matter, because you know. You don't get upset about it. You don't get defensive about it. You just know this is true, and I'm sorry you don't know that.

Of course this gets tricky, and that's what I'm going to get into in a minute. It leads me to the radical aspect of faith or trust, because this verified faith so easily—what is true, what my experience tells me is true—so easily becomes faith in what? It can again become faith in something concrete.

I'll give you an easy example of how easy it is to slip from this really radical trust and faith into forming a view, an opinion, and attaching, grasping at that view and mistaking that for truth—which hopefully will make sense by the time I finish this talk.

For example, you might have an experience in the moment: strong pain, the mind suffering, and just simply with mindfulness, being with it, there's an easing of the mental tension. At a point the mind goes into equanimity, and maybe the pain completely goes away. And even before the pain went away, there was an ease in the mind, and you know in that moment: ah, there's a real difference between pain and suffering. Physical pain does not have to be mental suffering. And you know that, absolutely, in that moment. It was an intuitive experience, which of course our mind will then put into words, a way of describing it to ourselves.

So easily that experience can then be taken, remembered, solidified, and become a view—that when pain arises, if I pay attention correctly, the mind will get calm and the pain will go away. So easily we can make that slip, that little movement from just being open to the experience as it is, just resting in that pain with spacious awareness, to holding the view that if I do it right, my mind will be easy and the pain will go away. And then of course, the next time—or the tenth time—that doesn't happen, we start to feel confused or struggling, and there's more suffering. At this point, we've confused verified faith, faith in what we know is true, with attachment to a view. And this is very tricky.

The Buddha spoke about this realm of attachment: when there's contact, there's feeling of pleasantness or unpleasantness, which leads to craving, wanting, and in the next moment it strengthens the wanting into grasping or clinging or attachment—just a stronger movement of craving. He talked about different areas of this, sense pleasures being one, of course. The second area is attachment to views and opinions. He spoke an awful lot about this, so I'm going to return to it a little later.

First I want to say what I actually mean by true radical faith or trust. It's really trust and confidence not that something particular will or should happen, but that truth, that real refuge in the Dharma, is found within this moment, with resting within this particular experience, whatever it might happen to be, just as it is. Faith gives us the confid-

ence that we can truly open and find refuge in this moment, in this experience. And the real faith is that we know truth and freedom is only here, and never anywhere else. We forget it, but that's what faith can bring us back to.

This radical acceptance—I read somewhere once—radical acceptance is radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways. To let go, to accept, it is necessary only to give up your concerns, your ideas, and your fears. I admit that's not so easy. Necessary only to give up your fears. So what have you been fearing today? Trying to control, not able or even recognizing its presence to radically accept? Because radical acceptance is this faith to surrender completely into this moment—to live consciously in not knowing, not controlling, and not being able to organize things so that they happen the way we think they ought to. And that is scary for us a lot of the time.

We definitely want facts, some kind of certainty. If I do this, then that will happen. Or if I'm sleepy, it's because of X, Y, and Z, and if I do A, B, and C, the sleepiness will go away. And of course, to some extent we need some facts. We need to hear other people's experience. We need some guidance, some idea of helpful ways to practice, something to go on. No question about that. But when we again begin to mistake ideas, helpful suggestions, or how things might tend to happen in the usual sense—when we mistake any of these for absolute truth, this is the way it is—when we begin to try and take refuge in any of these so-called facts, in any of these ways of practice, we're going to find ourselves suffering. We're going to find ourselves in confusion at some point.

Living in not knowing, though, is very unsettling. And generally in this culture especially, I find it's set up in a way to really hide the fact that we don't have a clue what's going to happen in the next moment. Actually we don't, but our culture is set up so we can really avoid facing this for large portions of time.

A couple years ago I spent three months in India. On reflection when I came back, it was so interesting, because something about India doesn't let one take refuge in the assumption that if I plan out the day, that's how it's going to be. In fact, after a while I realized whatever I thought was going to happen that day would be the one thing that probably wouldn't happen. So if I thought I'd get up, go here, go to the post office, go have a chai—probably not. Maybe I'd have the chai. That was usually first on the list. But the other things weren't up to me.

It can be extremely frustrating, and it was for quite a while. And then suddenly I realized: this is just how life is anyway. The only problem is I think I should be able to have my plans work. Give it up. And it got to be very delightful—like just dancing. Get up and make my plans and then throw it all in the air and see what really happens today. It's fun. It's much more enlivening. Much more like I was dancing with life.

When I came back here—and I'm the same way myself—everyone I know has day planners and hour planners. And even more amazingly, most of the time that stuff happens. Like right now, I know where I'm supposed to be almost every day of 1996.

And every other year, that's actually happened. I mean, that is to me the miracle more than anything else. But it can really lull me into this sense that feels like security. It feels like comfort, a sense of somewhere to rest. I can look in my little day book and know where I was on August 15th and where I'll be next August 15th. My life has some order. All's right in the universe, that kind of thing. It seems like a comfort, but really it's a great enforcer of delusion on a big level.

The same tendency goes on here in retreat, or in our minds, on much more subtle levels. I'm sure you've probably planned where you're going to be every day for 1996 too—but not taking it so seriously. Bringing it down right to here, the way this retreat is structured can also give us a false sense that everything is very orderly. We know what's going to happen next. The bells and the time and the meals are served at the same time every day. If it's ten minutes late, it's a huge upheaval. Why was it so odd to come in here and have pumpkins? Because something was different. After six weeks, something was different in here when you came in, because it seemed so worldly. And of course the truth is, who knows what's going to happen in this next moment? When you sit down in your next sitting, when you stand up and go to the next walking?

It's scary to live consciously in this not knowing. It can be scary if we're caught in wanting security, if we're looking for some explanation, some knowledge to use as a final resting place, to take a stand in. I'm not saying to just intellectually tell yourself, "Okay, now I don't know what's going to happen next," and keep reminding yourself until you make yourself totally anxious. That's just another view. You don't really have to do anything except keep paying attention, because our practice is a moment-to-moment experience of this fact. It's a practice of radical trust. And that's why sometimes this practice can be so uncomfortable, why things can feel so scary. When something you've thought—without even knowing you thought it—about how things are gets suddenly blasted apart by an experience, it's like for an instant there is nowhere to take a stand.

I have a friend who described once, years ago, having an anattā experience, an experience of no-self, which many people have. It's not like you have one and everything's over, but we often have little experiences of no-self. He said it was like he went out for a Sunday drive, but then there was nowhere to go home to. That sense of—where's the reference point? We want so much to have one reference point that we can always look back to, to hold on to.

So this radical trust is the recognition that our true refuge, our true home—there actually is always somewhere to go home to. But it's in this very moment, in this very experience, that we can discover our true home: the radiant nature of heart, of mind. As long as we're looking to some set experience, we're missing our true home. But because this home has no description, no particular ways to recognize it always, because it's within constantly changing experience, it's so hard for us. We want to get a handle on it. It's hard to just surrender into this moment with total confidence that this is taking refuge in the Dharma.

As our practice continues—and it's happening for everyone here—we more and more come to trust that this is where home really is. But at times, like my friend's experience, or when we begin to lose our reference points, it can be extremely unsettling. It's like being in an earthquake.

One time, some of us here were teaching and cooking and sitting at Yucca Valley in California. We have a big retreat every spring, and towards the end of this ten-day retreat we had a pretty big earthquake—a 6.1 or something. I'd never been in an earthquake before. The first part was interesting. I was standing outside in the desert at night, and it was just a little scary, but also sort of far out to see the ground roll and everything shake. But then these aftershocks, which are really little earthquakes, kept going every few minutes—every three, four, or five minutes all night and into the next couple of days. It stopped being far out and fun pretty quickly. You're just falling asleep and everything shakes. And of course the radio would always say, "35% chance of the big one," which is really a big help. So you can't just say it's an aftershock—it might be the big one. You have to wake up.

What was interesting to me was to see how, on every level, not just my mind—actually my body felt more jangled and upset than my mind. It was visceral. The body thought it could trust the earth.

to be solid, to be there. Guess what? No.

It was a really interesting experience, and I think for me it was very much an absolute all-senses experience of the fact that there really is no concrete place to take a stand. The scary part about that was I wanted it to be different, of course. I didn't want this to be happening. I wanted the earth to stay like I always thought it should be. And when it didn't, I suffered.

When we start trying to control the results, when this happens in our meditation, so easily we get into manipulating meditation. You know what I mean, I'm sure. Either you've had a really good experience, which immediately the mind translates as "this is how it's supposed to be and I'm doing it right." And then we try to recreate every situation that seemed to have an effect on that particular state—the time of day to sit, what you ate for lunch, where you walked, how long you walked, what you're wearing, your posture, how you hold your head. We try to get back into that good sitting again. Just take three breaths, then let it go, then open to hearing—we get it all down. Or just the reverse, of course, if you had an awful experience, trying to do everything different from whatever led to that.

Without looking at it closely, we really think that we're trying to meditate correctly, that we're looking towards truth. But look at your state of heart, your state of mind, when you find yourself involved in manipulating meditation. Is there a sense of confidence, of trust and openness to the moment, to experience? Personally, I've experienced a contraction, a real kind of tightness, a leaning forward, fearful actually, wanting. It actually strengthens the sense of isolation, of separateness, and quite likely leads into striving, self-judgment, frustration. There is no room in manipulating meditation to recognize our inner radiance. There's no space to recognize that our true refuge is here, because we're so busy trying to recreate whatever idea we have of good meditation that's going to take us to truth.

And of course, this is what can drive us nuts, because we all have the opposite experience. After the manipulation, the striving, the frustration—hopefully before we've completely driven ourselves into a tight mess of suffering—at some point you realize, "Oh, right, just let it go." Just be with things as they are, and space opens up. Peace is possible. There's a sense of ease and happiness. We know that. We all know that, but still so easily we slip out of that knowing.

When we're in that space of acceptance, when we are able to surrender with this trust, with this faith, no matter what's happening, we're open again to the wonder—the wonder of ourselves, the wonder of the world. It's when you walk outside and marvel: how can nature be so beautiful and so fragile and so powerful, so cruel? How can our hearts be so infinitely tender one moment and so unbelievably hardened an hour later?

How can each of us be able to bear the immense suffering that each person bears in their own particular life pattern, and then turn around and be so joyous at something simple like the chickadees landing? It's really beautiful when we open to the wonder in this way.

And that's what this radical trust is—it's the gift that it gives us. There's no one thing we can hold to, but it's the trust that allows us to open into the infinite mystery, the infinite wonder and beauty of life.

I don't mean to be naive or simplistic, suggesting that if we open, if we trust, everything from now on will be wonderful and happy and nothing bad will ever happen again. Of course I don't mean that at all. Because again, that would be looking for some result, for some proof. It's easy to relax into the joyous moments. It's very difficult to find this trust when something difficult is happening.

I thought I'd read this from the Buddha. To me it's an acknowledgement that the difficult is often not what it seems—that even the difficult, when surrendered to, is the opening to truth. This is from a sutta called the Transcendental Dependent Arising. Remember on Saturday, Steve talked about the classical dependent origination, about how ignorance is the origin of suffering, those twelve links. This is another series of twelve links the Buddha gave that starts from the endpoint of the first. Suffering is the first link in this dependent origination. So it begins with what's truly difficult, what we would have trouble opening to.

I'm not going to explain each of these. I just want you to hear that suffering can be the causal condition for something quite other. Suffering is the supporting condition for faith. Faith is the supporting condition for joy. Joy is the supporting condition for rapture. Rapture is the supporting condition for tranquility.

Tranquility for happiness. Happiness is the supporting condition for concentration. That's right—happiness is the supporting condition for concentration, not striving, tightness, or teeth gritting. Happiness is the supporting condition for concentration. Concentration is the supporting condition for the knowledge and vision of things as they really are, which goes on to support disenchantment, dispassion, and the supporting condition for emancipation.

Beginning with suffering. It doesn't say get rid of suffering and then this stuff can happen.

I find this really fascinating. This is a way that views and teachings can be helpful—if they give us some confidence to again look and see for ourselves. So don't believe it. Look and see for yourself. Can we trust in a particular moment that even this suffering can be the seed of opening to truth?

Often in life when something difficult happens, we think, "Oh, this is horrible, this shouldn't be happening." And often when we look back years later, we wouldn't have chosen it, but it actually led to very beneficial effects. This happens a lot in my life.

Just as an example, when I got quite sick a few years ago, it made me look more carefully at how I was living my life. Without actually knowing what I was doing that might have contributed to the sickness, by looking more closely and really accepting the experience as it was, it caused me to make some radical changes in how I was living, how I was relating to my life—changes that have been wonderful and have led to things I could never have imagined.

We think we can plan our life, plan the next five years, plan our retirement. And we do our best. But I've found that what really happens, I couldn't have thought it up in my wildest dreams. And often it's much better than I could have imagined.

For example, I think partly as a result of the sickness and the changes I made, I now live behind a study center in a really cute little cottage that didn't even exist then. I remember about ten years ago, what's now the study center was a farmhouse, and the family that lived there—their dog used to come up here all the time. She was sort of part of the staff. We would house sit for them and take care of their dog when they went away. I have a very clear memory of sitting in their backyard, which was lovely, peaceful. I could never have sat there and said, "Well, in six years this will be a study center, and I'll be living in a cottage that hasn't been built yet back here. That's what I think I'll try and manifest." I couldn't think of that in my wildest dreams. It's amazing how stuff happens.

So we don't really know, but we sure as heck want to know—what's going to happen, what has happened, and how to explain it all. This is where we get into grasping at views, clutching at views. The way it's described, grasping at views is the tendency of mind to think, "This is true, this is how it is. Everything else is false. Every other explanation is not accurate." That's a little hard and fast. But without putting it quite so clearly, we are doing this all the time.

The Buddha talked quite a lot about this, actually—many of his suttas address the dangers and suffering that arise from people clinging to views. Here is one example: "For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world annoying people."

You might have thought the Buddha was a sober guy, but he had his funny sides.

Now, mind you, we're talking about grasping at views. Of course we have to hold views and opinions—we couldn't function in the world. But when we cling to them with that attitude of "this is true, everything else is false," it limits our world, it limits our possibilities. We don't even perceive that things could be otherwise.

There are ten million examples of this in daily life. We can see so often how grasping at views causes so much strife and suffering. Politics is a great example. Next week is Election Day in this country, and there aren't actually any big elections. But I notice for myself there are two particular politicians—whom I won't name—and if I just see them come on the TV, I get almost nauseated. There's no way I can hear what they say with any kind of openness. They could say something really great.

All I have to do is see them, and my view is so hardened. "This person is so bad for the country," I think. "I'm right, they're wrong. They couldn't possibly do something beneficial." Cut and dried. Finished.

And I know I'm probably quite mild in this, because I'm not a very politically active person. Just look at what goes on in the rest of the world. But to see how blinding that is, how strong that feeling of "I'm right." Think about the times when you're so sure you're right. How hard is it when someone comes along and says, "Well, you know, that's a view and an opinion. Can you see the other side?" Don't tell me that's a view and an opinion. I *know*.

Views can be really strong—so strong that they can cut through all kinds of other experience. For instance, the view of being a particular nationality, being American, or the sense of "my country, right or wrong."

There's a kind of funny story. A friend of mine who's German told me he once took some visiting friends in Munich to this big tourist attraction, the Hofbräuhaus, which is a huge beer hall. I don't know if Germans even go there, but all the tourists do. And there are a lot of American soldiers, army people, in Germany. So he was there with his friends when some American army guys—they must have been in uniform—got into a big fight. Punching and cursing, really a very physical fight. And my friend saw the manager or someone tip a note to the oompa band that was playing along this whole

time. Immediately, without a break, they swung into "The Star-Spangled Banner." Clearly this was not a one-time event. And as soon as the national anthem started, these guys stopped their vicious fight, stood up with tears running down their eyes—all "my country, right or wrong." Really powerful.

Being attached to views can hide us from the truth. It doesn't let us see what's really going on. I read just recently that in 1988, in the Soviet Union—this must have been after Gorbachev came in but before it broke up—the Soviet authorities canceled all national history exams. They acknowledged that through all the years of lies and changing history to meet the prevailing view of the country, of that particular government, the actual history had become lost. And so they couldn't in conscience hold history exams because they didn't even know what the history was. Interesting. I didn't know that.

And of course, holding to views can lead to enormous suffering. Enormous violence has been carried out in the world because of attachment to views and the fear and anger that comes up when our views are threatened. Many wars are this, of course.

I've been reading lately a very interesting history of the American civil rights movement in the South in the late 1950s and early 1960s, around Martin Luther King, during the time of John F. Kennedy. I was a young girl then, so I didn't really know so much about it. But just to see—it was basically a movement, if you're not American, coming out of the Southern Black churches, joined by some whites, trying to break the segregation. Because at that time, in public places, Blacks had to eat in separate places from whites, sit in separate places on the buses. That was truly how it was.

So it was a nonviolent campaign to break down the segregation laws—by sit-ins at lunch counters, by not using the buses, by Blacks and whites riding together on interstate buses. And it was quite strongly nonviolent, trying to base itself in Gandhian principles. How frightening it was to white supremacists who were relying on that separation, who certainly held the view that it was right, that they were superior. There was so much fear in having that view challenged. There was all kinds of horrific violence—bombing of churches because the movement was coming out of churches, setting fire to buses that people were traveling on, bombing of people's houses, murders, lynchings. All because of having one's idea of how things should be challenged—even though the people in the civil rights movement were in no way physically threatening anybody. They were quite committed to nonviolence.

The power of views. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, you can kill five or ten people with a gun, but somebody really holding tight to a view, if they get in a position of power, has the power to hurt millions of people. Views are so strong.

So that's on the biggest picture. But of course, we have the same tendencies in our minds—to manufacture views and explanations of experience, of how things should be—and often we don't recognize them. So are we willing to begin in our practice to truly look? Not that views are wrong, not that opinions and explanations are wrong—of course not. They're very helpful. But it's important to recognize a view as view, not to mistake an opinion, an explanation, or a view for a totally accurate description of reality.

There's no view we can hold to, that we can cling to forever, that will not bring us suffering and confusion. Any view is relative. See, we're back to the shaky ground again.

We want some view that isn't relative. Are we willing—can we live without holding to any view at all?

This is from Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master. He's dead now, but he wrote quite wonderful things. He says, "I've discovered that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing." He's being quite radical here. "No matter what God or doctrine you believe in, if you become attached to it, your belief will be based more or less on a self-centered idea." Because of course attachment is self-centered. "So then you strive for a perfect faith in order to save yourself. You will be involved in an idealistic practice. In constantly seeking to actualize your ideal, you will have no time for composure."

I love the way he puts that, because exactly when we've become attached to some doctrine, we start striving to actualize that, we become involved in idealistic practice, trying to get our practice to meet some ideal, and then there's no time for composure.

I really love in my own practice looking at how views form, how I get attached to them, how I see through them, and how immediately the next instant another view comes up. It's really amazing. If we can see through them, it's not a problem.

How often here in the morning question period, or in something we say in a talk, or in instructions—we hear someone else describing something in their practice and immediately, without recognizing it, a view can come up: "Oh, is that what's supposed to be happening? My practice isn't like that." Or, "Oh, that happened to me last week, but now I know that it's supposed to be the way it's happening this week." Or, "Last time I sat, the breath was so fine and refined and everything was quiet, and now I'm just being washed in waves of emotion—this is wrong and that was right." Or vice versa.

It's really great from the side of getting to listen to so many people, because it just makes me see there is no one right way that practice can ever manifest. Everybody's so different. Sometimes right after each other, someone will come in saying, "I'm just hav-

ing too many emotions. I can't practice because there's too many emotions." And someone else will come in and say, "I can't practice because there's no emotions." Someone says, "I can't feel the breath—there's too many thoughts." Someone says, "I can only feel the breath. I wish I had something else happening." I'm exaggerating a little, but not that much.

And to see how as soon as a certain sitting has clear mindfulness, it's like, "Ah, that's how it's supposed to be." And then it forms into a view. Or, "I'm suffering, I'm struggling," and suddenly there's letting go. "Ah, right, that's how it's supposed to be." Just watching one view fall, another come up. One view falls, another comes up. Really, really fascinating to me.

Even to have the idea that practice means it should be intensive practice—sometimes we have to so let go of the view we have of practice that we wouldn't even recognize what we're doing as meditation practice. That's a real challenge. At different times, each of us might meet a place where what's happening is either so powerful or so intense or so scary that our practice has to take a form we couldn't even think of as intensive practice. Generally, the tendency is to think, "I can't practice, I'm failing." But actually, that person might be meeting the most difficult, challenging aspect of living in trust of anybody here. Who knows?

There's no one view of practice or anything that we can cling to. We can use them, but not mistake them for the truth.

Even the teachings of the Buddha—anything we say—notice how sometimes when we say something and it doesn't jibe with your experience at all, it's really different. How immediately the mind has to either make yourself wrong or make us wrong. There can't be a possibility that sometimes this is true and sometimes that is true. No, no, we've got to find out which is right and which is wrong. And often it's not that way.

The Buddha—this is another thing I love about him—he's not saying, "You've got to only trust me." In a very famous simile in one of his suttas, the simile of the raft, he talks of his teaching as a raft.

While you are practicing, you may hear the rain dropping from the roof in the dark. Later, the wonderful mist will be coming through the big trees. And still later, when people start to work, they will see the beautiful mountains. But some people will be annoyed if they hear the rain when they're lying in bed in the morning because they do not know that later they will see the sun rising from the east. If our mind is concentrated on ourselves, we have this kind of worry. But if we accept ourselves as the embodiment of the truth, as Buddha nature, we will have no worry.

We can think, now it is raining, but we don't know what will happen in the next moment. By the time we go out, it may be a beautiful day or a stormy day. Since we don't know, we appreciate the sound of the rain now. This kind of attitude is the right attitude. If you understand yourself as a temporal embodiment of the truth, you will have no difficulty whatsoever. You appreciate your surroundings and you appreciate yourself as a wonderful part of Buddha's great activity, even in the midst of difficulties. This is our way of life.

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CHAPTER 285

Q&A with Carol Wilson

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this question and answer session, Carol Wilson addresses a wide range of practice concerns arising during retreat. She begins with a reflection on gratitude as a practice that opens the heart to both joy and sorrow, noting how conscious appreciation can inspire faith and connectedness rather than dismissing our difficulties.*
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> *The discussion explores several key themes in meditation practice. Wilson examines the nature of vedanā (feeling tone) and whether pleasant and unpleasant experiences persist when mindfulness is strong, referencing Ajahn Buddhadasa's perspective that with precise awareness at the point of contact, feeling tone need not arise. She offers extensive guidance on working with aversion, emphasizing the importance of acceptance, grounding in physical sensations, and recognizing the subtle hooks of identification that perpetuate reactive patterns.*
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> *Particularly valuable is Wilson's nuanced teaching on working with physical pain, distinguishing between forcing attention onto difficult sensations versus approaching them with balanced, equanimous awareness. She also addresses the skillful expression of strong emotions like anger, clarifying the difference between mindfully acknowledging intense feelings and watering the seeds of reactivity through identification with storylines. The session concludes with a discussion of awakening—not as a state to be maintained, but as a recognition of what is always already true, requiring constant re-recognition and letting go.*

So I guess you know today is Thanksgiving, which in this country is one of the big feast holidays, sort of a harvest festival. But literally, it is purporting to be about what the word says: Thanksgiving.

And I know in my kind of upbringing and generally moving around the world, it seems sometimes the Thanksgiving part is sort of lesser and it just becomes a time to get together. I guess the guys watch football. I just heard something on the radio, some commentator bemoaning that he didn't really like Thanksgiving because all people did was get together with your family who gets on your nerves and then watch football. I thought that was really sad.

So anyway, maybe Michelle mentioned this in her talk on gratitude, but something that I find very energizing and really helpful is to just take a few minutes and consciously reflect on all the things I have to be truly grateful for. I don't have to be feeling

gratitude at the time—it doesn't really matter what I'm feeling. I just bring into my heart what I feel grateful for. And there's always so much more than I would have expected. Things that I hadn't even been thinking of for ages come popping up.

I find it really quite faith-inspiring and energizing because it in no way belittles the sorrow or the sufferings or difficulties that we experience. You know, that sense of, "Well, I have all this to be grateful for so I have no right to suffer"—about whatever things we're suffering about here, small or large. But it's quite the reverse. I find the gratitude opens up a sense of faith and connectedness that lets me bring more openness and compassion to my suffering and sorrow rather than thinking it should go away. So anyway, I just offer that if you feel so inclined.

We have a few moments for questions if you have any. Really, this is a time for questions about our practice here, what's coming up here, because this is where we are.

Question: Concerning feeling tone, when mindfulness is strong or perhaps pure, are there pleasant and unpleasant experiences, or simply neutral?

I think that's an interesting question. Interesting because from my own experience, I would reply that I still find pleasant and unpleasant experiences, but so toned down, so to speak, because there's no reactiveness of mind, that it does, for me, tend to merge towards neutral—sometimes hard to even tell.

But what I think is interesting is, again, this is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, and he does tend to sometimes go his own way in interpretation. But I found this interesting. He was speaking about dependent origination and the point of contact giving rise to feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant—and that leads into the craving and clinging. And he claims that if we're very mindful and meet the experience right at the point of contact, that pleasant and unpleasant feeling does not have to arise.

So I'm sure he's talking from his experience, and he even acknowledges that a lot of people don't believe him. I'm not saying that's what we should practice for or look for or expect or evaluate our practice by, but I just offer that as another opinion from someone who's quite learned.

Question: What determines whether something is pleasant or unpleasant? Is it the nature of what is felt, or the nature of the knowing?

What determines whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—the nature of what is felt or the nature of the knowing—is said to be karmic. For instance, one experience, say a sound, could at the same moment be experienced by one person as pleasant and by another person as unpleasant, or by the same person as pleasant one moment and un-

pleasant the next moment. So it's not the nature of the knowing per se, which is just pure awareness, but the karmic conditions that are coming together at that moment. It's a really subtle and interesting subject just to explore. Don't set up a view, you know—"You're doing good if it gets more neutral." Please don't. But just keep looking.

Question: I really appreciated your talk. I was wanting to know about emptiness—what is it? It seems to me when you describe those moments that we all have, of not clinging, not pushing away, those moments that are clean, so to speak—I think you describe that as emptiness. To me, that feels like a full moment, like a complete moment. And what feels empty to me are those times when I get strung out on an idea and then the pleasure of it goes away and I just see how there's no substance to pleasure.

To me, it's one of the reasons this is hard to talk about—because we get caught in semantics. And no word covers all the different aspects or manifestations of this. So yes, I too often experience or could say the emptiness when it's empty of the clinging or grasping of self. Also, there's alertness. There's wisdom in mind.

It is not diluted or zoned out. It could also be described as fullness—a total completion, an inner completion, contentment where nothing outside or extra is needed, nothing to push away.

Emptiness might not work for you as a word. It's just a word. We use emptiness to mean empty of the sense of self. And the way you were also using emptiness—seeing the emptiness of phenomena—is another aspect of it that I didn't talk so much about last night. Seeing the emptiness of pleasure, or the emptiness of anything that we cling to, because it's ephemeral and vanishes. The illusory nature, so to speak, of all experience, because it all goes. There's nothing to cling to. This is another aspect of emptiness, of selflessness, because there's nothing unchanging and self-referencing in any experience at all.

So that's why this is hard to talk about. I personally feel there are no words to use in any aspect of trying to speak about the truth—whether it's emptiness or selflessness or the illusory nature of phenomena. There are no words that can hold it all, because it's beyond words and concepts. We just try to patch it together the best we can and maybe point our awareness beyond the concepts. So it's tricky.

Question: Would we choose experiences that are more neutral if we're mindful?

I don't necessarily think so. That's like saying that somehow neutral is better than pleasant or unpleasant. Again, that's setting up one particular thing as better than another. For me, I find that choices, when I'm mindful and there's some wisdom present, come more out of a sense of the totality of the situation and what's most helpful or ap-

propriate. Not so much about whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—that's sort of not the issue. It's about what seems appropriate. Sometimes what's appropriate might also be very pleasant. Sometimes it's not. That's just not how the decision is made, at least in my experience.

Have whatever kind of day you have. Just know it for what it is with mindfulness.

Question: Can you say something about eating meditation? For most people, certainly for me, there are a lot of thoughts about eating—before, during, after—about how much, how fast. Other than noting and feeling the body, I wonder if there are other ways of working with that.

You're right, eating is an extremely, sometimes very intense activity during the day for many people. It often comes up in interviews. A whole range of stuff can go on, as I'm sure you all know.

There really isn't a magic trick. But part of it, I find, is to go into the cafeteria first with a kind of intention—okay, let me really explore what goes on. Not an intention to somehow change anything. Often some of the difficulty that comes around eating is that people think they're eating too much or too little, or they're wanting to have less greed or less judgment or whatever. So it's a kind of setup before going in: I want to have less of this or more of that. And the eating experience becomes a struggle before it even begins.

So it's a combination of going in with the intention to be mindful, but also with acceptance—just the clear being with what is, without necessarily trying to change. A real acceptance.

Then I find in eating, as in all large activities through the day, that precise mindfulness helps. For example, standing in line, really feeling your body. Use the body sensations to come back to. Standing in line, really feeling the body, really grounding. As you reach your arm, you can note "reaching, reaching" as you reach for the plate. "Touching" as you touch the coldness of the plate and move it back. That helps to stay grounded in the present moment.

And in that grounding, if I'm touching the plate, I'm standing, and a lot of thinking starts, I see myself leaning forward, wishing the people ahead would hurry up—you notice that more. If you're grounded in just the sensations of standing, you notice when you start to lean forward, when annoyance starts to arise. And rather than "Oh, I'm bad, I should be a good yogi and be calm"—

Oh, annoyance, annoyance. Come back and feel the sensations of annoyance in your body. Notice the thoughts. Notice the seeing contact that gives rise. Seeing, it's unpleasant, they're going too slow, annoyance. So you can get closer and closer to the sense door contact. That's the kind of precision aspect of mindfulness.

But in a situation like the dining room, we also need to bring in clear comprehension—the other aspect that goes with mindfulness of being aware of the totality of the situation. Sometimes you'll see someone going through the line looking so perfectly mindful, but so slow. And there's forty people behind them. It's not really a balanced mindfulness. Mindfulness needs to include clear comprehension of the whole situation. So it's like knowing when it's appropriate to go slow, knowing there's a whole situation. Then when you get to your place, if you want to take two hours to eat and feel every mouthful, that's fine. So it's kind of both of those.

And you're right, when you're eating, lifting, you might feel lifting. And then forty-five thoughts between lifting and swallowing. And we didn't notice chewing. Okay. When did you wake up? Swallowing. Right there. Note swallowing. Never mind the thoughts you missed. And if somehow in the swallowing you're feeling really tense, somehow those thoughts you missed brought up tension, then you notice tension, right? Then you don't have to retrace it all, but start where you are. You notice tension, tension, tension—just like that. It takes infinite patience and not any expectations.

A question arose about rebirth—why it gets mentioned so much if it's not relevant to our practice.

You probably should ask Joseph, because you might not have noticed, but I've actually never mentioned it. I don't mean to imply that I don't believe it's true or that it's not relevant. From my own experience, I can't remember my previous rebirth and I don't know the next. So for me, it's on the level of a belief. Deeper than a belief, I have a faith because it makes total sense, but I have no proof whatsoever. And I can't offer you anything stronger than that.

In some way, I have a faith that we just keep going, that rebirth happens because it doesn't make sense otherwise. If I didn't believe that, it would be sort of completely nihilistic—just do whatever you want and this is it. You've got to get out in this lifetime. Doesn't look good sometimes. I'm only talking from me. And I can experience karma within this lifetime, and it makes sense to me that it would continue, but I don't have proof for that.

And as far as belief goes, Joseph says you don't have to believe it because believing anything is only a view. Views and opinions are helpful at times. If we are attached to them, they're hindrances. They can block our freedom, our understanding. And if you're trying to create a view that you want to believe because maybe it would make you feel better, that kind of wanting it is what's going to lead to the obsession of mind.

I don't think something as subtle as rebirth is something we can simply decide to believe or not believe. It doesn't work that way. Somehow the belief has to arise from a faith that emerges from your own experience—and experience can mean many different things.

Personally, I think if rebirth or anything else you hear any of us say engenders a lot of confusion in your mind, it doesn't mean it's right or wrong. But trying to think through it can engender doubt and obsessive thinking, and that experience is not helpful. Doubt is a hindrance. When the mind is caught in obsessive thinking, or wanting to believe something, or becoming upset by what we've heard—at that time of obsession, it's not helpful to keep trying to figure it out. It has simply turned into the hindrance of doubt.

So at that time, really note it as doubt, wanting, obsession—whatever it is—and put it aside. Many doctrines of Buddhism that twenty years ago I couldn't relate to, that made no sense to me—it was true, you don't need them to practice. You absolutely do not need any of these doctrines to practice. We only need to pay attention to what's happening right now, and out of that, understanding will come.

You don't have to try to direct your experience to meet some doctrine you've heard us say. Forget the doctrines. Just bring all your attention to being with present moment experience, and understanding and freedom will come out of that. Whether or not that ever results in being able to take the view of rebirth and say, "Yes, this is true"—if you can leave that aside and just really be with your experience, I think the faith and understanding will come that takes the pressure off of thinking, "Oh my God, only this lifetime—I'm going to make it or bust." A deeper faith will come where you see that is actually an irrelevant thought in some way. And that needs to come from your own experience—it will come from your own experience if you just keep looking.

So noticing doubt, doubt, doubt—any kind of analytical thought can turn into doubt. Just notice that, and recognize that now's not the time. Come back to this moment.

A student asked about working with aversion that seems quite strong—strong identification with a particular thing that keeps triggering the aversion, seeing thoughts of being the victim, but still feeling really caught in it. It could easily last all day. It's really suffering.

When that's going on with me, or any particular thing triggers us and seems to go on for a long time—whether aversion, sorrow, greed—we know we're seeing it on some level. There's some mindfulness, definitely. But it keeps getting triggered. Usually the trigger keeps happening over and over—not something that happened once three weeks ago, but at least the memory of what happened arising again and again.

Can you notice points where it keeps getting re-triggered? Sometimes it's subtle—like it starts, you get into the aversion, then the trigger happens again and it just keeps going, spinning out of control.

I try to come in on whatever level I can at a particular moment. It takes, I feel, a great deal of patience and acceptance that this is happening. It means seeing if there's judging of oneself, thinking that this ought to stop—I'm seeing it, so it ought to stop. I find this is one of the biggest hooks that keeps things going for me: on some level thinking that because I'm seeing it, it ought to stop. By this time in the retreat, enough already—there's no excuse for this to be happening.

Really notice that kind of adds on top of it. It's like aversion to the aversion—multiple layers of regression. And it's actually not the original trigger sometimes anymore. These subtle thoughts of "this shouldn't be going on"—that's actually the aversion of the moment, if you know what I mean.

So I try to come in with attention wherever I can. If it's only at massive aversion, then I do stomping aversion meditation. *Aversion, aversion, hating, hating. I hate everybody and everything.* And just feeling that in my body. Very important to keep coming back to feeling the experience physically if you can in this moment.

A hundred million times pull out of the train of thought—whatever it is, whether it's about the trigger, whether it's this subtle "why is this still happening," whether it's trying to analyze—all of which takes you out of it. Just come back and feel the aversion for the hundred millionth time. *I know this already. I don't need to feel it now.* Feel it. That's what's happening.

Land in the middle of it over and over with as much acceptance as you can muster. *This is just what's happening.* Because what I find is the more I can do that, the more I can accept the whole sordid train of events, the more I land in the middle of it over and over, I start to see what is actually the hook of identification.

It might seem that the identification is with the whole story, but there might actually be one little piece of the experience that the sense of identification is really gripping around. It might be the unpleasantness of the trigger. The identification might be with a subtle thought: "This shouldn't be happening." It might be with a view: "My practice should be better than this by now." It might be that the trigger elicits an unpleasant physical sensation that we don't quite notice, and the aversion is actually being triggered over and over from that unpleasant physical sensation. Do you see what I mean? There are lots of different little pieces, but we have to start by accepting that the whole thing is happening, or we can't get to the more subtle levels of seeing the different component parts and where the identification comes in.

Yogini: Well, with me, the acceptance is really no problem. As soon as I get my balance, I try to just stay with it. What I needed to hear was that mindfulness—just because I'm mindful doesn't necessarily mean it's going to go away.

No. We get caught in that view.

Yogini: I think for me, if I see where I'm identified, great. But sometimes identification can go on so deep that I'm never going to get to it. It's not that crucial to see how I'm identified—that allows advice.

Although in some ways, I wouldn't say identification runs deep. I would just say it arises frequently, moment to moment. It's not some deep thing down there. It's just arising in a moment around a momentary experience. So it's not that it's necessarily so hard to see.

Actually, for me, I'll see the thing that's really hooking me. I can see the different pieces. And if some piece comes up—it's like, "Oh, I'm really angry now"—I go, "Oh, that's where it's kind of poking at me." Just on that level, nothing more subtle than that.

But you make a good point. We think mindfulness often means it should go away, and that's not the case at all.

About aversion to physical pain—it seems like there's fear around it at times, and as she goes into the pain sometimes it gets worse. She could stay with it, stay with it, but it just seems unbearable.

There are many different ways of working with physical pain. And it's very important, as you said, to be not only aware of the physical sensation, but also of the mind's relationship to it.

It's true, sometimes when we move attention into an unpleasant sensation, it gets more intense. That's absolutely true. Sometimes that happens. And the point isn't to bring our attention to it to make it go away. So we see immediately if that was our point, because as soon as it gets more intense, we think, "Oh, pull back, this isn't working."

It's really important in working with pain to find a balance—being able to move into it very gently with calm attention, simply because that's what's happening. Explore the sensations with a balanced, equanimous mind, but notice when the mind is not balanced and equanimous. When there's fear, when there is aversion, when there's this kind of contraction, be able to note and notice that. In fact, in the moment of fear, that's the strongest experience perhaps, not the pain. And they're two different experiences, although they go together. So really noticing the quality of mind that's with the unpleasant, difficult sensation.

It's not necessarily the most skillful thing to just stay with it, stay with it, stay with it. If we're staying with unpleasant sensation and the experience is, "This is unbearable, this is unbearable, I can't handle this"—that's not mindfulness. There's a quality of real aversion, of contraction, of fear in that, which is very important to notice and feel.

In fact, it might be helpful to move away from the pain, to reconnect with either your primary focus or hearing or something else that's happening, to re-establish a more balanced quality of awareness. And then move back to the difficult sensation with a more calm mind. You'll notice then, "Oh yeah, this is more equanimous." And you'll notice when the aversion starts to come in. Notice that, soften again.

I've had sittings where I could sit a long time with strong pain because the mind could go into it in a very calm way and not get really tight. The next sitting, the mind was tired. As soon as I touched the pain, it was gritting the teeth time. And you could sit like that, gritting your teeth and hating it for an hour, but look at what's being cultivated in the mind. Is that mindfulness? Is it equanimity? Or is it subtle aversion and willpower? That's not the point.

So it's either to keep playing, because you can often go into it, notice the aversion, and back out and give it a bigger focus. You don't have to be precise when it gets tight. Really be within the field of the whole room, not even just your body, but the whole room. The pain is there, but there's this much more spacious quality of awareness that can help to ease it some. Go back and forth with that, noticing the mind states.

And of course, sometimes if it's at such a point that you just feel overwhelmed and moving would help, that could be an appropriate time to shift, if that's done with awareness of the intention and quite mindfully. So it's a process of balance.

For all of us, there are times where moving doesn't help, the mind is tight and constricted, trying to open up doesn't help. We're in aversion, and that's our practice. At that moment there's no perfect solution—it's going back and forth between it all.

Okay, time to walk. Thank you.

Are there any questions this morning about practice?

I'd just like you to comment about stomping. On Wednesday you mentioned it, and also at the beginning of the retreat you mentioned going out into the woods when you were very angry one time and stomping up and down. You described it as unskillful.

Did I? No, I don't think so. I mentioned stomping up and down in the woods when angry, and she says I said it was unskillful, which I don't think I would have meant. I certainly wouldn't have meant it was unskillful.

Is that the question?

She sees moving physical expression as being helpful. I certainly never meant to say, and I don't think I would have said, that stomping in the woods when you're angry is unskillful.

When I've mentioned stomping meditation, so to speak, I really mean it. When there's a feeling of anger, for example, that is so strong that trying to sit or walk very slowly downstairs—it just feels like the energy is so powerful. It feels as if you're going to explode or scream or do something unskillful around a lot of people. I've practiced it myself, where I go off where no one's around and I really am stomping up and down, and I am aware of anger. There is a modicum of mindfulness there, in a broad sense. Not like noticing the perception that gives rise to unpleasantness, that gives rise to anger—we're not on that level. But there's a feeling in the body that's unmistakable, and I feel my foot hitting the ground. You're present, and anger, anger. I might just be stomping, screaming inside, anger, anger, anger. And it calms down a little bit. So that's what I mean by stomping, and I don't think it's unskillful. It's much better than just imploding and trying to pretend you're sending loving-kindness to all beings. It's acknowledging what's happening. Sometimes I do find it useful to move the energy. It's so big there's no choice, so we walk more briskly, go where there's no one around.

Trish's question follows on this, talking about how Thich Nhat Hanh will say that by expressing anger, we're sort of watering the seeds, and the anger gets stronger and stronger.

I would say that is true, and I would make a distinction between the two things we're talking about here. When I talk about stomping, as I said, it's still with some mindfulness. I'm not stomping saying, "Right, that person who made me angry is wrong, I'm right, let's get it going, let's do something." That is nurturing the seeds of anger. That's being caught in the story, identification with right or wrong, "I should be angry," or hating yourself for being angry. And it's expressing it physically but not with mindfulness—it's feeding it. I would call that watering the seeds of anger, and I've seen that in myself.

One time, I remember on a retreat, I was very angry at someone over something that happened. I was feeling the anger, and it felt mindful, but there was real identification. I just kept going over the story: "Yeah, I should be angry, and that was wrong of him to do." At one point, I noticed the anger was just getting stronger and stronger each time I recommitted to the fact that I was right to be angry. "I deserve to be angry. This is really a rotten thing to have happened." That's definitely watering the seeds of anger. I could feel it sprout.

Stomping is different. It's bringing mindfulness in on whatever level we can, but to the experience of anger itself. Yes, anger is present. Don't pretend it's not present—that's not mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh also says you have to treat your anger with gentleness, with kindness, like a younger brother or sister. You can't treat your anger with violence. There's always something for both sides, but it's about finding the balance in mindfulness of truly acknowledging what's happening.

With total acceptance and non-violence, if anger is happening, we need to truly acknowledge it. We can't pretend it's not there. But with mindfulness, we're simply acknowledging anger itself—its presence, its physical expression in the body, the pain, the images in the mind—what's happening in this moment. Feeding it, watering it in the way Thich Nhat Hanh spoke of it, is getting really identified with feeding the story, keeping it going, acting it out, and then actually doing something out of the space of "Yes, this is justified." Or its opposite: "I hate myself."

Do you see the difference? One approach is bringing in mindfulness in whatever way we can—whether precise or vast, it doesn't matter. The other is simply diving into the experience and saying, "Yes, let's really get going on this anger." This is our delicate

balance in practice: not to suppress, not to pretend that something unpleasant isn't there, and not to fan the bonfire and let it really take over. It's a balancing act that we're all dancing all the time. It's tricky.

A question arose about awakening: Is awakening a state that one reaches, or is it a state to be constantly maintained? Is awakening something we're all experiencing moment by moment? When one is awakened, does one still practice?

There are many different ways this could be answered, so please don't think I'm giving a definitive answer. There's a Tibetan saying I like: it's easy to become awakened, but it's hard to stay awakened.

Sometimes I think it could be said like this: first of all, awakening is not a state, not something to be maintained. That would imply a conditioned state—that if you set up the right conditions, you can hold those conditions and that state will remain. Forget it. There isn't any such state. In a way, the whole talk about becoming enlightened can imply we're going somewhere, and when we get there—plop—here we are, all the work is done.

When you read the suttas, the arhats seem to be in that state. Perhaps so. None of us here are there, and it's not the sense of anyone I have met that they feel their work is finished, that there's no more need to practice, that they've got it.

My experience is on a much more different level from the arhats—we won't even talk about it in the same breath—but there's a sense, not of some state to get to, but of a recognition of something. It's not even a thing. It's what is always true, what we truly are, only we don't recognize it. The potential of recognition is here now, always. It's not somewhere else. It's never somewhere else. The whole problem with craving is that it takes us away from right here, which is the only place and time to recognize our potential of awakening.

I personally feel that recognition is possible in many moments, and we forget, we lose it, we can't remember. The times when there's an insight of anything—"Oh, that's so obvious! That's so true!"—we've all had that. "I'll live like this now, forever." It's so clear. And how long before the next moment comes along? Even though it was so clear, we can't by will make it happen again.

So that's the dance. I think it's the dance. The whole practice is one of constant re-recognition and letting go. But there's no state to maintain.

Another question arose about thoughts—when you have one thought that leads to a whole series, as they do, and you wake up to find yourself at the end of the series, how useful is it to trace the thoughts all the way back to the first thought that triggered it?

It can be interesting. Overall, I don't know how useful it is. I have found it at times interesting just to see how far we can get, how really disconnected we become in our thoughts from present moment experience. Finding yourself on the coast of Mexico in your imagination and wondering how you got there, then tracing it back to the fact that your little finger was cold—that can be interesting once or twice, just to see the way things work in this mind.

Or if I'm waking up in the middle of something very emotional or difficult, sometimes tracing it back reveals something: "Oh, there's something difficult happening here and now, and I've projected it into this thing that happened ten years ago." That I sometimes find useful or interesting.

But I really want to qualify this, because it can turn into a kind of "how can I amuse myself" mind game—let's trace back all the thoughts. And it is ultimately just more thinking.

there isn't any perfect way. And it's all going to be precise and it's all going to match up perfectly. And if we could not really let go of thinking it's all going to be perfectly matched, always precise or always general or whatever.

Sometimes, and this is my opinion, only my opinion, we can get a little sidetracked into trying to make the reports so precise and perfect that more emphasis gets put on trying to describe it accurately to the teacher. Yes, it needs to be somewhat clear, but too much emphasis and energy and concern and desire can go into trying to make the report accurate. I don't think personally that that's as useful as being precisely with your experience. That's where the understanding is going to come.

So I would say, in terms of which is the priority, the precision with the experience is primary. And then sometimes when we describe it to teachers, it may sound general or not quite adequate. That's okay.

The other thing is that sometimes the experience is quite precise. And we don't always know. There may or may not be a sensation in the right or left part of the nose. In some moments, at some times, with some levels of concentration, there isn't that much data there. There's just, there's smelling.

So don't assume that the experience always needs to be precise. It may or may not be. Sometimes there's just a general knowing of smelling without a lot of detail about what's happening. And that's what's happening. If you look and there's not a lot of data, that's what the experience is. Sometimes there is a lot of detail, and then that's what's happening.

One more thing about the labeling: the labeling is really not meant to stand for or capture the experience in all of its intricacy. It's just meant to support the mindfulness. So if the label is general and it's doing its job of pointing the attention, of pointing the mind, of cultivating the simple knowing of what's here, that's enough. The label has done its job. It doesn't need to capture everything.

And I found for myself there are times when you can be with a sensation and you just know it's burning. And you can tell it changes to tingling. You're not thinking about that so much. But there are times, as Steve said, where you might almost be in a pre-verbal state where that part of the mind that's very verbal, very rational, very adult, isn't working so well. Maybe somebody noticed that during this retreat. And when it's not, don't worry about it.

To be really with the sensation, there are times I'll just note "sensing," because it's not worth moving away from the experience to try and find the perfect word. So if I'm in a state like that—first of all, none of us is Sayadaw U Pandita. We're not going to challenge you harshly for coming in and not describing whether you felt the sensation in the left nostril or the right nostril. You can say, "I felt I was with it, but somehow today the words were not clear." And that's actually a clear perception. When you can say that, it's different from coming in and saying, "Well, I don't know, it was some kind of sensation, I wasn't really there with it." Those are two different experiences, and you can describe them differently.

It's not always going to be so precise. And you don't have to later make up some precise words in order to tell us about it if that isn't really accurate to your experience. Most important is to just try and convey your experience as close as you can to how it was at the time. Words will not always be so accurate, because we're really trying to convey something that's beyond words.

And in the same vein about smelling and hearing—you're right, "smelling" and "hearing" is not that precise, but I think it's helpful because it is bringing our attention to the process. Which is the point. So if I'm just noticing "smelling," it's not as precise as "acrid, bitter odor that reminded me of a chemical explosion in the fourth grade." But it is more important to be with the smelling aspect, with the process. Actually, being a little less involved in the content is fine. All that's really happening is the six sense

experiences. So just resting a little more generally is really okay. It's really okay. And don't worry so much about getting it precise to describe it, either to the teacher or to yourself. Sometimes the words aren't there. It's really okay.

CHAPTER 286

Birth and Death of the Self

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson illuminates what she considers the Buddha's most essential teaching: that nothing whatsoever should be clung to as 'I' or 'mine.' Drawing extensively from the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadāsa, the influential Thai forest monk who helped bring these teachings to lay practitioners, Wilson reframes anattā (non-self) not as an abstract philosophical concept but as a simple, observable aspect of moment-to-moment experience.*
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> *Wilson introduces Buddhadāsa's accessible language of 'I-ing' and 'my-ing' to describe how the sense of self arises and passes away hundreds of times daily through the process of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination). She guides practitioners to investigate where self-grasping actually occurs—often not in raw sensations but in mental images, thoughts about the body, or the subtle clinging to pleasant vedanā (feeling tone). Through vivid personal examples, from vultures circling overhead to horses in a distant meadow, she demonstrates how quickly the mind grasps at selfhood and how natural it is to rest in spacious awareness.*
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> *The talk offers practical instruction for recognizing both the presence and absence of self-clinging. Wilson encourages practitioners to turn wise attention directly onto the experience called 'I' whenever it arises, discovering it to be merely another changing phenomenon—a sensation, contraction, or thought. Equally important is learning to recognize and trust the peace of non-grasping, the natural spaciousness of awareness when empty of 'I' and 'mine,' which she calls 'the sky yoga of non-grasping.'*

In one of the suttas, someone asked the Buddha to summarize in one phrase what it is that liberated ones know, or how it is that liberated beings are. The Buddha answered that what they know is that nothing whatsoever should be clung to. He went on to say that those who have heard this phrase have heard every phrase of the teaching, and to have put it into practice is to have done every practice. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.

In a way, this is one way of describing what I feel is the core, the pith teaching of the Buddha—the main, or actually only, thing we really need to know in our practice. That's the understanding of no-self, or of emptiness. I want to talk about this root teaching tonight, hopefully not in a theoretical way at all. I want to talk about it because it's very wonderful; it's the closest teaching to my heart.

I know often when we mention no-self, there can be a little sense of "oh no"—the heart kind of drops. "I never get this. It's too complicated for me. I'm not there yet. It makes me crazy to try and think about this." The mind goes off with all these "what ifs" and "if there's no self then..."—fill in the blanks. So hopefully my intention is not to engender a sense of confusion but to help point to the fact that this is actually not a complicated teaching at all. It's the most simple expression of how things are. I actually think that we miss it because it's so simple, and we get so involved in thinking about it.

What I hope to do is invite us to inquire in our practice, first into the sense of self when it arises, and also to recognize and explore the sense or feeling of emptiness, or simply non-self.

I'm going to be referring a lot to Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful Thai monk and meditation teacher. He died in 1993. He was sort of a radical in the Theravada tradition—which in the sum of all of Buddhism isn't too radical—but still, he synthesized different traditions and produced some wonderful writings on the understanding of emptiness, or sunyata, which is mentioned in the Pali texts, believe it or not. He talks very simply about the sense of emptiness as being the experience of a moment when it's empty of self, empty of the sense of "I" or "mine."

I want to invite us to explore both the presence of the sense of self and the absence of it. We can sometimes worry that it's too complicated for us to understand this. In fact, I just read something about Buddhadasa—he was quite old when he died, so he started teaching as a young monk in the 1930s in Thailand. At that time, apparently, it was felt that the teachings on emptiness or no-self were too complicated for lay people, so they weren't taught to them. Lay people couldn't get that, it was thought. Buddhadasa, feeling quite rightly that this was the core liberation teaching, began teaching it to lay people, because freedom is what this practice is about. Any of us with wise attention can understand and experience this. He began teaching it to lay people, and now it's much more commonly taught.

The Buddha also taught sunyata—emptiness, non-self—to lay people. In fact, I read another sutta where one of his prominent lay followers came to him and said, "Give us one teaching that will be to our benefit for a very long time." The Buddha gave him the teaching on emptiness. He said, "Really contemplate emptiness." And just like many of us, this layman—Damodina was his name—said, "Oh no, that's too hard for us. We're too involved with our homes and our children. We're too busy enjoying sandalwood paste and wearing perfumes. We can't be expected to understand and practice this. Give us something easier."

I guess we don't change much. But the fact remains that when the Buddha was asked for a teaching that would be of benefit for a long time, this is the one he offered. And as he said—not in that sutta, but in many others—if it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. He never put out something that was beyond our abilities or understanding.

This emptiness, this freedom from the sense of self—it's not, in fact, an esoteric or abstruse or rare experience at all. It's so normal, so natural. It's simply a mind that's undistracted. As Joseph spoke of last night, the nature of mind when not distracted is simply pure awareness. Buddhadasa calls it sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom. There's nothing more normal and more natural.

Many times in a day, this is our conscious experience if we would just notice it with awareness—simply moments when there is this natural ease of being, natural awareness with no giving rise to a sense of I or mine.

The thing is, so often we don't notice this, because it's not always so spectacular. We tend to get much more involved in the distractions. We can tend to think the distraction is that loud sound, or this unpleasant emotion, or these obsessive thoughts that keep coming, or this pain in my knee, or just that creak of the floor. We get involved in the distractions, the emotions, whatever.

But what we need to recognize is it's not the appearance or what's arising that's the distraction. The root of all distraction, the root of all the resultant suffering, the root of our fear of pain and our yearning for pleasure is simply this false clinging that we call the sense of self—this false view of a someone here who is experiencing and keeping notes on it all.

Buddhadasa translates two Pali words in a way I particularly like. For the momentary experience that we call "me" or "mine," he calls it "I-ing" and "my-ing." In a moment where there's born the sense of I, it's I-ing. When there's born the sense of mine, it's my-ing. I love that—it's really nice.

Because these are born many times in a day, unexamined we take them for granted. It feels like, it seems like, this sense of I or mine is an ongoing, ever-present aspect of our experience. Even at moments when it's not present, it's easy to overlook and then in memory say, "Well, I wasn't noticing it then, but of course it was there. I just wasn't thinking about it." That's right—you weren't thinking about it, but it wasn't there.

So without investigating, it seems real. One of the traps I think we fall into in exploring the teachings of no-self is that rather than turning the discriminating awareness of investigation onto the experience of "me" itself, we tend to start thinking about it—

thinking about how can there not be a self, I'm sure there is a self. The more we think about it, the more solid the sense of self seems, which only goes to support our idea in the first place.

What I personally find very interesting in my practice, what cuts through over and over again this unconscious belief in the ongoing nature of self, is when you recognize the presence of the feeling of I or mine, very simply turn the attention onto it. Bring the quality of investigation—not investigation of thinking, but of satipanya, of mindfulness wisdom. Turn it onto that experience that we're calling I or mine. And what do we find?

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Is the mind real? It is but a collection of states, each of them transitory. How can a succession of transitory states be considered real? Even the basic idea 'I am the body' is a mental state and does not last. It comes and goes like all other mental states. The illusion of being the body-mind is there only because it is not investigated." Only because it's not investigated.

So when we do begin to investigate quite consciously, what do we find? Well, I'm going to tell you, but don't take my word for it, please. Continue to investigate each time you notice the feeling of I or mine arising.

We find that the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. It's that simple. Merely a condition that arises and passes—admittedly rather frequently—but that's all it is. And we can experience this with awareness over and over and over.

You can see this well with any sense door contact. This is the dependent origination we've talked about. There's the contact of a sense door, a thought, pleasant or unpleasant, the craving that arises. When that craving strengthens to grasping, there's the sense of I or mine, and it strengthens into becoming something.

So the thought arises: "Hmm, concentration could be a little better." It could just be a thought that comes and goes. If there's a little clinging, it strengthens into grasping and immediately is born: "My concentration could be better." Strengthening even further into becoming: "I'm not doing so well in my practice."

Now we often notice the suffering effects of clinging—in that case, had the thought just come and gone, no problem. But what we can also do is consciously begin to notice, explore with attention, that feeling of self that arises together with that grasping. It's not just the grasping, but suddenly "I" has become quite strong and separate. "You" or "a meditation" or some other has also become quite strong and separate.

We can feel experientially, in some way, that we can direct the attention to what we're calling "I." We don't have to just leave it some nebulous "Well, there's I" but don't really look at it. That's what makes it seem like a solid thing.

When you really look, what do you find? Well, there's a feeling of grasping. Maybe there's a kind of almost physical sensation internally of contraction or restriction or clutching. You might notice just a narrowed down, restricted consciousness.

So notice it the next time that a sense object comes up and there's some clinging arising in the mind. It can be as simple as, "Hmm, I wonder what's for lunch tomorrow?" And the mind just moves right into that, and you notice the clinging, you notice the wanting and the sense of distance. But also notice how "I" have become very solid. And then see—what are you calling "I" in that moment?

Buddhadasa calls this birth. This emergence of "I." I as the hungry person. I as the bad meditator. I as the lonely person. I as whatever. And so there's birth and death. We're being born and dying hundreds and hundreds of times in any one day. We can notice this sense of birth, and we can notice when this particular becoming dissipates, when it fades away, when I'm no longer the hungry person. That's gone. There's no more clinging in the mind.

And this, I think, is a very important point—to maintain the alertness of awareness, because at the point of the dissipation of that particular birth, whatever it might be, often that's a moment when there's just emptiness. Joseph spoke last night of shifting our reference point of practice to really cultivating the mind of non-attachment. When a particular self dies, often in that moment there's just that purity of awareness that is the nature of what we are—the mind of non-attachment. Do we even notice that? Or do we tend to dull out, wait for the next birth, wait for something to happen again, even if it's unpleasant—wait for a new birth and just miss the spaciousness, the real true happiness and peace of a mind of non-attachment?

Well, we usually don't have to wait too long. And it's really interesting to watch how, out of just clear alertness and peace and awareness, the birth of self can be so sudden and so strong. It's really quite funny, if we could look at it that way.

I'll share a story that illustrated this for me very strongly. I was on a self-retreat in California in a very beautiful environment, sitting outside on a bench up high, looking down over a very spacious natural view. With my eyes open, I was sitting and feeling just very spacious, peaceful, aware—not much thought, not much construction, no sense of me or mine, just being.

I was noticing different animals. There was a little skunk, and it was in a place where they have herds of white deer, so you could see them way down below. It was quite lovely, just watching coming and going. Some turkey vultures were swooping down and circling, and there was just that sense of being one with nature. Buddhadasa really encouraged this as a practice—to spend time in nature. His whole monastery, Suan Mok, in southern Thailand, is a huge forest monastery of some three hundred acres. I spent some time there when I was a nun. His philosophy really was to just let people go live in nature, and the mind and the heart quiets until one realizes one is one with nature. The sense of clinging to self tends to dissipate.

Well, anyway, so that was my experience at that moment. But the birds started coming down from some trees near me. I thought, "Far out, they're really close! I've never seen them so close." And then they were circling. And then suddenly this thought arose in my mind: "Oh my God, I'm what they're circling."

And so fast—I mean, panic. Total panic arose in an instant. Definitely a real grasping of that thought, and that panic itself. I came very close to leaping up and screaming, "I'm still alive! I'm still alive!"

It was hugely amusing, even at the time. But it doesn't take much to come out of that peace, that spaciousness, into the grasping of self.

Just for a moment, I'd like to mention the various aspects of experience in which clinging or grasping arises—the various aspects of experience you could say we identify with. None of this is news to anybody. But this is not to make a list in your head. Rather, it's to encourage turning wise attention onto both the object or experience that is grasped, and also that sense of "me" or "mine" in the feeling of the grasping.

Of course, one of the big areas of experience is that of our body, our physical sensations. When we're in the realm of thinking about it—the realm of view or opinion—then the sense that "I am my body" might, in one way, be something you could argue against. Obviously I'm not my body, because the way I look now is very different from how I was when I was ten days old. You couldn't even say it was the same. We've got endless rationalizations about how I'm not the body. We can have various organs missing and that's gone, and you think, "Well, that doesn't seem to affect me. I guess I wasn't that."

But that's all rationalization, I would like to say, in my particular experience. Without really examining when it's present, the sense "I am the body"—that's where we can see what we're really doing, calling in our experience "I" or "mine." And when we

look, the sense "I am the body" breaks down every time. All we need to do is look, not take it for granted, not think our ideas about it are enough. Because in most cases, our ideas about it are not enough.

We don't sit here and think, "I am my body." It's not quite that clear. But when there's a physical experience and that sense of "I," look—bring the wise attention to the experience itself and see. The idea of our body may be, "My knee hurts." But when we really bring attention in a sitting, there's no knee, there's no "my"—there's just bubbling or vibrations or tingling. And even those words are concepts.

Then I'll notice a mental image of a knee, or a thought: "That's my knee. What's going to happen to it if I don't move?" And often, if I'm not paying attention, that image is actually where the grasping of self comes. That grasping at "I" becomes this image of a knee, or this person who has a knee. If I don't notice that it's not actually the sensation that's being grasped at all—it's the mental image.

I notice this really often when I'm sitting. There's just sensation, sensation, and then a flash of an image. Maybe it's of my whole body sitting, maybe it's of my face, maybe it's of the body part—doesn't really matter what. If I can just notice the image—seeing, seeing, it's just an image—then it passes. But often if I don't notice it, there's a real kind of grasping at it, and I think I'm identified with the sensation. I keep looking at the sensation, I just see bubbling. Clearly, I don't feel grasping around that. But there's still a sense of self.

That's why it's so important: when I notice the sense of self, don't just say, "Well, I'm not clinging to this bubbling." Turn around and bring wise attention to the sense of "I" itself. And often I'll see, "Ah, I'm identifying with this image, or this thought of body, or something like that." It's often much more subtle than we might think.

I think, "I'm so hungry." But when we really bring attention to hunger, sometimes it's hard to even find it physically. It's a funny thing. All you can find is little movements or little bubblings or something. You go, "Why is this bothering me? There's nothing even here." But again, turn—don't just say, "Well, I guess I'm not attached. There's nothing going on." Clearly something's going on. Turn again to the sense of self and see where it's landing. Where's the grasping? It might be an image or a memory or a thought of the future.

So I started this by saying a sense of identification with the body, and often it is around a particular sensation, but often it's around a thought or an image. When we really bring attention to the body in meditation, all there is is sensations coming and going, coming and going. There isn't anything solid. And when we say, "Oh yes, don't tell me there's nothing solid—in my experience there's something solid," that's an idea.

That solidity is an idea. If we really experience it, it's just a moment of sensation, another moment of sensation, and the thoughts make it seem solid.

So just noticing as it comes and goes, comes and goes, and noticing the thought. Not trying to change anything. Just noticing where this grasping is arising. What's it grasping at? Where's this birth of self arising in that moment?

And again, if anything I'm saying gets you really confused, just don't even think about it. Seriously, thinking about it only leads to more confusion. Just bring your attention back to that experience of: who's confused? What's that feeling of confusion? Turn around and feel the sense of "I" in that.

So there's body. And of course, there's vedana, the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Now, we've talked about this a lot, so people here are getting quite subtle in noticing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And even if you think you're not subtle in it, even noticing it is subtle. I mean, how many people on the street could you stop and say, "Now, is your experience as you put your foot down pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?" They'd look at you like you're nuts. But we're actually noticing it quite a lot.

And it's interesting to notice because this is, again, another aspect of experience that can easily be clung to. That feeling can give birth to that sense of "I" or "mine." And it can be easy to miss that it's the feeling tone, especially when it's pleasant.

So for example, if you have a sitting where the breath is smooth and calm and the mind stays there fairly easily—of course we like it. And you really are noticing the smoothness and the calmness. In your mind you're saying, "I know this will change. I know I like it, but it's okay. I know it will change." And it does change. And we're distraught when it changes, even though we thought we had it all set up. We could see, "I know I'm not this breath," and that's really clear. But sometimes we miss the fact that the grasping was around the pleasant feeling. And so the sense of self, the birth of "I," was happening in each moment of grasping at that pleasant feeling without quite noticing it.

This might seem a little subtle, but it's really important because that's the place where the birth of self happens quite a lot. Buddhadasa gave as one of his ways of helping us see through the illusion of self: keep investigating at this point of vedana, espe-

cially at pleasant feeling. Apparently he was really big on exploring the illusory nature of pleasant feeling. By "illusory nature" we mean it comes and goes. He talks about it like wave-like nature. There's a nice physical sensation. It's pleasant. The pleasant feeling kind of comes up like a wave, and it's really nice, and then it crashes like a wave and it's gone. Just keep noticing this over and over and over.

He sounds sort of uncompromising, but I think it's often true. He says that in contemplating how pleasant feeling arises and disintegrates, arises and disintegrates—just noticing the impermanence of all these aspects of experience, as Joseph said last night, but especially with pleasant feeling—it can begin to undercut what we've talked about so much, but we still get caught in it: that underlying belief that really the way to value life is by how much pleasant feeling it affords us.

As Buddhadasa points out, how many of your decisions, how many of the things you do—the jobs you have, the place you live, the people you hang out with, the people you get involved with, just the choices we make—how much of those choices, when we're not paying attention, are driven by what we think will afford us the most pleasant feeling? It's really quite interesting when you look at it.

And of course the mind says, "Oh, that's enough. I don't want to look at that. Don't look at that one anymore. Thank you very much." So of course we're having to look at that here. That's the whole setup. That's why, I'd just like to point out, it gets so difficult sometimes. And sometimes there seem to be waves—waves in yogi land of difficulty.

I almost think it's contagious, you know—waves of difficulty in the form of suffering. And how much of the suffering, indeed all of the suffering, arises because there's the birth of "I" in that moment. How much of it revolves around the simple fact that we are being united with unpleasant feelings and we cannot change that. Just that simple. The arising of the birth of "I" and "mine" around wanting pleasant feeling—it's really amazing when we look at it closely. So this is a quite important arena where the self is born.

And of course, there are thoughts and emotions. This is something we've talked about quite a lot. Thoughts are more difficult in a way because the birth of a sense of self can come so quickly with them. Thoughts and emotions are so complex, feeding into each other in ways that make it quite difficult to catch the moment of birth. But we can at least notice after it's born. We can feel its presence. And rather than hating it or thinking something's wrong, we simply turn attention to the birth, to the sense of self itself.

I remember an example from when I was sitting a couple of years ago—just such a simple, mundane little thought giving rise to such solid clinging to "me." I was doing walking meditation, present, nothing special happening, just awareness. I felt an itching and ran my finger under my turtleneck, aware of the sensation, noticing it. And in that running of the finger, there arose a kind of memory—a body-visual memory of many other times doing that same movement. It just felt so familiar. Then mental images flashed through: my body walking, what I was wearing. And then I thought, "Gosh, I wonder how I look. I bet I look like a real schlump, the way I schlump around here during walking meditation."

That was all it took. That was a flash—less time than it took me to describe even one of those pieces. And suddenly there was this strong birth of self and other, discomfort, self-consciousness, aversion. The whole story. It doesn't take much.

I'm not saying this to be discouraging. No, I'm trying to be encouraging, because then we can realize how subtle and quick it is. Rather than thinking, "Oh, I'm never going to see through this, it's too much," we can recognize: no, no, there are so many opportunities. It's true. There are just so many opportunities. And it's only moment to moment.

Sometimes I used to find myself sitting back, waiting for the big flash of no-self that would somehow end all sense of self forever. Of course, I was positing that there is a self, and that this flash of no-self would somehow uproot it and throw it away, and then I wouldn't have to deal with all the suffering anymore. I'm still waiting for that particular experience to happen. But along the way, in the twenty-some years I've been practicing, there have been an infinity of moments of seeing through this birth of the sense of self.

It's not something to be gotten rid of. It's simply to be seen for what it is. Any moment when we are aware of the sense of "I" or "mine" being present is a moment when we can meet it with wise attention and recognize: "Oh, it's just a momentary experience." It might be a sensation, it might be that sense of clutching, it might be clutching at an image. It's something slightly different each time I turn my attention to it. And whatever it is, it's no big deal.

Because all there is to experience is the six sense doors: touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing, and mind—the big one, of course. Even what we're calling "sense of self" is nothing other than one of these sixth sense experiences, and it might be a slightly different one each time you investigate it. Really noticing this helps to break down any underlying sense of unchanging nature that the self might seem to have when left uninvestigated. When investigated, there's nothing really there. When uninvestigated, "I" am so solid—there's no way I could not be here.

With emotions, similarly, we've talked a lot about their impermanence, watching them come and go. Even when you feel, "I've been so sad all day," really noticing the gaps in that experience. All of this helps to break the sense that "I am my sadness, I am my grief, I am my excitement." But I'd like to add another piece: we can tend at times—or I can tend anyway—to think that it's the presence of the emotion itself that's the problem. Of course, I only think this when I'm somehow grasping at that emotion or grasping at wanting it to go away. We assume it's the emotion itself that's problematic. But we can begin to notice what happens when sadness comes, for example.

It could be anything. There are times when it's simply sadness, full presence, awareness, feeling it fully. I don't mean noting while the sadness is over there in the corner somewhere. I mean really being in the middle of it, except there's nobody there in the middle of it. It's just sadness, fully felt.

And many people say there's no problem with that. You couldn't even say it's unpleasant—it's just what it is, sadness. And then at some point, that sense of clinging arises and it becomes "I who am sad," or becomes "my sadness." At that point it becomes problematic. At that point there's some extra twist, and the suffering begins.

So in exploring or investigating what I'm calling sense of self, we can notice when we're suffering in an emotion. We notice not only the emotion itself, trying to accept it—we do all our little tricks, first to get rid of it and then to try and accept it and try to remember, all the stuff we do. But also turn attention to the feeling of "I" in that sadness. It's part of it. And it feels different when "I am sad" than when sadness is simply arising. Just sadness. It feels different. Simply begin to notice that difference. Give it attention. We can see the birth of "me," the birth of "mine" in the sadness or the happiness or the stillness or the peace.

Just two other areas I want to mention quickly that we very often identify with—by identify, again, I mean this clinging of self around experience. Because they're so subtle: that of intention, obviously, and that of consciousness, the knowing itself.

Again, not to think about these, but one of the reasons we bring into the instructions noticing, before big movements, that intention—because when we notice the intention, we see how fleeting it is, how fast it is, and how subtle an experience. But we also clearly see as it comes and goes, it's so clear it's not me. There's no grasping at it. That's why it's fun for me—I like it when I start having an itch in a sitting, because I can just watch the intention to lift my arm come and go, and come and go, ten or twenty times. And I really like that because each time the intention comes and goes, it's just so clear that it's another arising appearance that's conditioned by not liking the itch, and that's all.

When we don't notice intention, that's when we really easily think, "Who moved? I moved. Who noted? I noted. Who's eating? Who's standing up? Who came here? I." But it's just grasping around intention.

Also with citta, consciousness, the experience of knowing itself. Last night Joseph was talking about the natural nature of mind, simply of awareness, and how spontaneously appearances arise and are known, quite effortlessly. And my mind, of course, in its more grasping mode goes, "Yes, sure, spontaneously known—by whom? By me." Clearly I am knowing and recognizing these appearances when they arise.

A lot of that is because the sense of knowing, the experience of knowing, is quite subtle and hard to notice the coming and going of it. And so it's very easy to identify with it, to grasp at it as me, because we don't even recognize its presence in the first place, never mind that it's coming and going. It's hard to even recognize its presence in a moment. And so we easily develop a sense of grasping, a birth of self around the knowing itself.

What I find with both of these two—intention and knowing—what even complicates and strengthens the sense of self further is that because these are very subtle and hard to notice, and to notice the grasping, we then tend to think about it. So for example, with that example of grasping at the knowing itself: "Who's knowing? I'm knowing." And then hearing what I just said, my mind would start to go, "What do you mean, the experience of knowing? It comes and goes? What do you mean it comes and goes? I don't notice it coming and going. How can it come and go? How can it even exist?" And the more I think about it: "How can you say that's not me? It feels like it's always ongoing."

The mind just takes off like that. And the end result is that the birth of self is happening at that point—around the thinker, around the analyzer. By the time we've thought that through, I feel really much more solid than I did before I started that line of thought. And so that tends to reinforce the sense that the line of thought is true, because the more I think about it, the more solid I feel.

I don't know if this makes sense, but I've been noticing this in myself. If I think about intention, if I think about consciousness or awareness, I feel really solid—because there's a clinging to the thoughts themselves.

That's why it's so important in this whole area to simply use wise attention, wise discernment, and come right back to the feeling of "I" itself. It's not like you have to untangle everything. I have spent a lot of time working my mind into a feeling of near-collapse, trying to understand what no-self could be, or how could I not exist, or how can

awareness not be me when it so obviously feels like me. I would just bring my mind to the point of implosion, and I would feel really solid. I wish I could spare you all that, because it never led anywhere.

But at that moment, you don't have to backtrack. When you feel like you're going to implode, simply turn the attention onto "I." What am I calling "I"? And all I feel in that moment is—oh, tension. That's it. Or contraction. Or mental image. Or a thought. I'm not trying to simplify. It really is simple. It just takes the cutting through of wise attention and wise discernment. Simply come back to see what's happening right now.

So we don't have to get rid of some idea of self. By coming back with wise attention each time that we're aware of a sense of self, we see its illusory nature over and over and over, or its transient, its changing nature over and over and over. And it becomes easier not to get so caught in these ideas, or even in the sense of self. We don't have to fight it. It's just another arising appearance.

So often when I'm on retreat—not in my daily life, but when I'm on retreat—I think I mentioned this one morning, one of the notes I'll be making is: seeing, seeing, hearing, thinking, ah, self. What I'm doing is landing with my attention at that moment on what feels like me. And sometimes it's an image, and sometimes it's a sensation. It's never anything very out of the ordinary. And it's always a different experience. It really breaks up the attachment to this idea. And it becomes much easier to incline towards stillness, to incline towards the mind of non-attachment, the mind of pure awareness.

This poem has that feeling of stillness to me. It's called "The Desert Has Many Teachings," from a woman from thirteenth-century Germany:

In the desert, turn towards emptiness, fleeing the self. Stand alone, ask no one's help, and your being will quiet, free from the bondage of things.

I don't think this woman was ever in the desert—she lived in Germany in the thirteenth century. But I really like that. Turn towards emptiness. Stand alone. Ask no one's help. And your being will quiet, free from the bondage of things.

It happens quite naturally. The sense of self becomes merely another appearance, coming and going, that we don't need to fear, we don't need to hate, we don't need to get caught in. It arises due to conditions and passes when those conditions change. And as Joseph said last night, over and over: all conditions change. There are no conditions which do not change.

Buddhadasa—again, I thought this was funny. He gets so emphatic.

He went back to that phrase: nothing whatsoever should be clung to. And then he added: as I or mine. The core of the Buddha's teaching.

And then he expands on it like this. He says, "No one"—and he writes underneath it, "that means no exceptions"—"should grasp or cling, give rise to ego consciousness, to anything"—"that means no exceptions"—"as being I or mine." No exceptions. No one should cling to anything. That means anything. No exceptions.

Not because to cling to anything is bad, but because it's the root of all our suffering and confusion. And because in the not clinging to anything is this vastness, this peace of just being, of awareness—the peace of non-grasping.

It doesn't have all the intensity of our high pleasant experiences. The mind and heart, I think, need to be a bit refined to even think the peace of non-grasping sounds like a good thing. That's why we sit for three months. I actually think that now, watching the incessant arising of the grasping of self and its death and its birth and its death, the peace of non-grasping sounds pretty good. And it's wonderful. And it's not something that is foreign to any of us.

So that's the other side of bringing investigation—investigating what we're calling self in any moment, but also to notice the peace of non-grasping when we can recognize it.

"If at any moment any person has a mind empty of clinging to I and mine, even if only for one instant, that means the mind has realized emptiness." That's Buddhadasa again. Even for one instant. True, it's not the emptiness of total liberation, nibbana, where the sense of grasping will never arise again, but still in that moment where there's no clinging or grasping of I and mine, the mind is pure, radiant, and at peace. And we, each of us, experience this over and over.

So the other aspect of our practice that I feel is so important is not to overlook these times, to learn to recognize them. Clearly, you can't recognize it with grasping, right? Because as soon as we're grasping, the mind of non-grasping is not accessible. So simply to notice with awareness, recognize the mind of non-grasping. We tend often to skip over it. It's as if—I notice in myself—as if the mind is more comfortable relating to things, relating to objects, relating to experience, liking it, disliking it, analyzing it. It's more doing. Of course, I'm more there then.

But we can consciously begin to recognize these moments of emptiness—many times a day, nothing so exciting, no big bang—just recognize and consciously meet with awareness these moments of non-grasping of self, so that we gradually learn to be comfortable, to trust this pure awareness, to actually be content with the peace of non-grasping.

I read somewhere a reference to "the sky yoga of non-grasping." I really like that image—the sky yoga of non-grasping. And I've found a helpful way to practice at times to help me tune into this mind of non-attachment. It's the metaphor of space. I guess that's why I liked the idea of the sky yoga of non-grasping. Joseph talked about shifting our reference point to the mind of non-attachment rather than being so focused on objects, on appearances. And I found tuning into space or silence a way that helped me just to loosen up the fixation on changing appearances.

So notice when a thought arises the space around it, the space before it. When the thought ends, rather than immediately clutching back to the breath so that there should be no space without things arising, just notice the space. Notice the emptiness, the silence, and let the breath arise by itself or whatever else comes next. The space as an emotion dissipates—just notice the silence, the space. In between breaths, in between actions. We're always filling up our time. Sometimes I would consciously make space in between when I end a sitting and I get up to walk. Just a space. And just notice the space, the silence.

Not spacing out—I'm not talking about that. The space of awareness where there's a vibrancy, a wakefulness in the silence. And don't make much of it. This is just like a metaphor to help tune into the mind of non-attachment.

And it's interesting—that's why we talk about hearing. We've been using hearing as one of the anchors because it can help tune us into this sense of spaciousness. We tend not to get so involved with sounds. We don't make another one happen. And we can notice the space in between, or the silence.

When we can bring the sense of space to an experience, you see the difference. When we're really fixated on, say, a difficult emotion—we're fixated on that—it's so much more difficult. It's so much more suffering than when we can just open up and have space around it. When the mind is restricted, the object takes up the whole field.

I remember one time the house I'm living in—there didn't used to be a little house next to it, which there is now. And in that period between when there wasn't another house and when there began to be another house, my sense of space got completely encroached upon. Because I would sit at my kitchen window and look out at the woods,

and that's where the house was being built, right in that view. So it got to where there were only four little stakes in the woods where the house was going to be. And I would sit at my window and all I could see were those four stakes, nothing else. And there was aversion and anger and all the different feelings. I got really miserable sitting at my kitchen table until finally I saw what was happening.

Which is interesting. As soon as I saw it, I said, "This has to stop. I can't live the rest of my life here doing this." And I just opened up the space. And it's interesting—it just stopped being a problem. The fixation makes it so much more real. The sense of space around something makes it much more workable.

We can all practice that here with things that arise. You can see some little thing drives you nuts. And when you can just expand around it, it still might be unpleasant, but there's not that fixation of self on it.

It isn't always easy to maintain the sense of spaciousness. The energy needs to be balanced—the concentration and mindfulness. When they drop, being spacious turns to spacing out. And that's when we need the precision of technique, you know, to come back and feel the breath, sensations, use the noting, use connecting with objects and appearances, notice beginnings and endings. It wakes us up, brings vibrancy again.

But another thing I've noticed in myself is that tuning into space sometimes gets uncomfortable. My mind gets a little restless. It wants something to focus on. I was again sitting in California in a different place, and when I noticed this, I was sitting with my eyes open again—very broad vista, meadows, rolling hills—just sitting, spacious. And I was consciously tuning into space.

There were four little horses. I mean, they were so tiny. They were so far away, such an insignificant part of the vista. And I would notice as I would open to spaciousness, I could just be vibrant in that for not very long, and then almost as if by reflex, the mind would get uncomfortable or restless, and it would zoom in on these tiny little horses and sort of fixate on them, as if looking for some kind of stability or security. And, you know, I could sort of see the rest of the spaciousness but not very well.

This happened over and over and over. I found it really fascinating because I could correlate it to my experience in meditation—of how just resting and trusting that spacious quality of awareness, the mind has kind of a knee-jerk reflex to want to fixate on things. It's kind of hard to trust, to relax, to not need something happening, to not need to have the birth of an "I."

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we're afraid of nothingness. And because we're afraid of it, the mind clings to a belief in a permanent self. And that's what's so strange—we're afraid of nothingness. But seeing through the sense of self isn't nothingness. It's not annihilation. It is the entryway to a peace and a happiness that all this grasping of self can never, ever give us. All it gives us is confusion and suffering.

And it's not passive, it's not unfeeling, it's not uncaring or life-negating. It's the doorway to freedom and true compassion. As one Tibetan teacher said, once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously.

So in some ways I think this is our root practice. Just play with it. Exploring the sense of self. Letting the awareness, the mind, incline toward space. Noticing emptiness. Noticing when it is empty of I-ing and my-ing. And just notice that. That's all.

There's nothing to lose except our suffering.

So let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 287

Q&A

Carol Wilson · 48 min

> *In this intimate question and answer session, Carol Wilson offers practical guidance on a range of meditation challenges that arise during intensive retreat practice. She begins with mindful eating, emphasizing the importance of setting intention without trying to force change, using clear comprehension (sampajañña) to be aware of the totality of each situation while staying grounded in physical sensations.*
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> *Wilson addresses the challenging topic of working with persistent aversion, describing her approach of 'stomping meditation' when emotions become overwhelming—acknowledging strong feelings with mindfulness rather than suppression or identification. She makes a crucial distinction between expressing emotions with awareness versus 'watering the seeds' of anger through identification with stories. When discussing physical pain, she emphasizes finding balance between moving toward difficult sensations with equanimity and recognizing when the mind has become contracted with fear or aversion.*
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> *The talk also explores questions about rebirth and Buddhist doctrine. Wilson shares her personal approach of holding teachings like rebirth as faith rather than belief, noting that clinging to views—even Buddhist ones—can become hindrances. She encourages practitioners to set aside doctrines that create confusion and simply attend to present-moment experience, trusting that understanding will arise naturally. The session concludes with reflections on awakening as ongoing recognition rather than a fixed state, and guidance on balancing precision in practice with acceptance of more general, even pre-verbal, awareness.*

You could all hear that, questions about eating. Some magic trick other than paying attention and noting what happens. Would that there was.

You're right, eating is an extremely, sometimes very intense activity during the day for many people. It often comes up in interviews. A whole range of stuff can go on, as I'm sure you all know.

There really isn't a magic trick, but part of it is going into the cafeteria first with a sort of intention. I set my intention: okay, let me really explore what goes on. Not an intention to somehow change. Often some of the difficulty that comes around eating is that people either think they're eating too much or too little, or they're wanting to have

less greed or judgment or whatever. So it's a setup before going in: "I want to have less of this or more of that." And the eating experience becomes a struggle before it even begins.

So it's a combination of going in with the intention to be mindful, but that also means acceptance—just the clear being with what is, without necessarily trying to change. A real acceptance.

And then I find in eating, as in all activities, all large activities through the day, that the precise mindfulness helps. For example, standing in line, really feeling your body, using the body sensations to come back to. Standing in line, really feeling the body, really grounding. Reaching with the arm, you can note: "reaching, reaching" as you reach for the plate. "Touching" as you touch the coldness of the plate and move it back. That helps to stay grounded in the present moment.

And in that, if I'm touching the plate, I'm standing, and a lot of thinking starts, I see myself leaning forward, wishing the people ahead would hurry up—you notice that more. If you're grounded in just the sensations of standing, you notice when you start to lean forward, when annoyance starts to arise. And rather than "Oh, I'm bad, I should be a good yogi and be calm," it's just "Oh, annoyance, annoyance." Come back and feel the sensations of annoyance in your body. Notice the thoughts. Notice the seeing contact that gives rise. Seeing, it's unpleasant, they're going too slow, annoyance. So you can get closer and closer to the sense door contact. That's the kind of precision aspect of mindfulness.

But in a situation like the dining room, we also need to bring in clear comprehension —the other aspect that goes with mindfulness of being aware of the totality of the situation. Sometimes you'll see someone going through the line looking so perfectly mindful, but so slow, and there's forty people behind them. It's not really a balanced mindfulness. Mindfulness needs to include clear comprehension of the whole situation. It's knowing when it's appropriate to go slow, knowing there's a whole situation. Then when you get to your place, if you want to take two hours to eat and feel every mouthful, that's fine. So it's kind of both of those.

And you're right. When you're eating, lifting, you might feel lifting, and then forty-five thoughts between lifting and swallowing, and we didn't notice chewing. Okay. When did you wake up? Swallowing. Right there. Note swallowing. Never mind the thoughts you missed.

And if you somehow in the swallowing you're feeling really tense, somehow those thoughts you missed brought up tension, then you notice tension, right? Then you don't have to retrace it all, but start where you are. You notice tension, tension, tension. Just like that.

It takes infinite patience and not any expectations.

Questions about rebirth and the kind of, he gets obsessed, would like to believe it, doesn't really, why is it mentioned so much if it's not relevant?

You probably should ask Joseph, because you might not have noticed, but I've actually never mentioned it. I don't mean to imply that I don't believe it's true or that it's not relevant. From my own experience, I can't remember my previous rebirth and I don't know the next. So for me, it's on the level of a belief. Deeper than a belief, I have a faith because it makes total sense, but I have no proof. And I can't offer you anything stronger than that.

You're right, in some ways. Well, I do know—in some way I have a faith that we just keep going, that rebirth happens, because it doesn't make sense otherwise. If I didn't believe that, it would be sort of completely nihilistic—just do whatever you want and this is it. You've got to get out in this lifetime. Doesn't look good. For me, I'm only talking for me. And I can experience karma within this lifetime, and it makes sense to me that it would continue, but I don't have proof for that.

As far as belief goes, Joseph says you don't have to believe it because believing anything is only a view. Views and opinions are helpful at times. If we are attached to them, they're hindrances. They can block our freedom, our understanding. And if you're trying to create a view that you want to believe because maybe it would make you feel better, that kind of wanting it is what's going to lead to the obsession of mind. I don't think something as subtle as rebirth, we can just decide to believe it or not. It doesn't work that way. Somehow the belief has to come out of a faith that is there, that arises from your own experience. And experience could be many different things.

So personally, I think if with rebirth or anything else you hear any of us say, if it engenders a lot of confusion in your mind, it doesn't mean it's right or wrong, but to try and think through it can engender doubt and a lot of, as you say, obsessive thinking. And that experience is not helpful. Doubt is a hindrance. And at that time, whatever it is—rebirth, karma, not-self, whatever it is—when the mind is caught in that obsessive thinking, or wanting to believe it, or hearing it's making us upset, at that time of obses-

sion it's not helpful to keep trying to figure it out. It's just turned into the hindrance of doubt. And so at that time, really note it as doubt, wanting, obsession, whatever it is. Put it on the side.

Many things, many doctrines—I use that word—of Buddhism, that twenty years ago I couldn't relate to, made no sense. It was true, you don't need it to practice. You absolutely do not need any of these doctrines to practice. We only need to pay attention to what's happening right now. And out of that, understanding will come. You don't have to try to direct your experience to meet some doctrine you've heard us say. Forget the doctrines. Just bring all your attention to being with present moment experience. And understanding and freedom will come out of that.

Whether or not that ever results in you being able to take the view of rebirth and say, "Yes, this is true"—if you can leave that aside and just really be with your experience, I think the faith and understanding will come that will take the pressure off of "Oh my god, only this lifetime, I'm gonna make it or bust." A kind of deeper faith will come where you see that is actually an irrelevant thought in some way. And that needs to come from—it will come from—your own experience if you just keep looking. So noticing doubt, doubt, doubt. Any kind of analytical thought can turn into doubt. Just notice that, okay, now's not the time, and come back to this moment.

Okay, it's time for me to go talk and for you to go walk.

Do you have any questions about your practice this morning?

There's a lot of aversion.

You mean like a lot of different things that happen trigger the aversion? Is that what you mean?

If it was one thing, it would trigger it, but there's strong identification with that. That's why there's all this reaction. Most of the thoughts, even if they—

But you see it, you're mindful of it.

Still it's—

It's painful.

If you couldn't hear the question: How do we work with aversion that seems quite strong, with strong identification? A particular thing keeps triggering the aversion, but there's a strong identification with it. We see it, we see the thoughts of being the victim, but we still feel really caught in it. It could last all day easily. It's really suffering.

When that's going on with me, or when any particular thing triggers us and it seems to go on for a long time—whether it's aversion, sorrow, or greed—we know we're seeing it on some level. There's some mindfulness, definitely. But it keeps getting triggered. I assume the trigger keeps happening over and over. It's not like it happened once three weeks ago. At least the trigger might be a memory of what happened, arising again and again. Can you notice points where it keeps getting re-triggered? Like it starts, you get into the aversion, then the trigger happens again and it just keeps going—spinning out of control.

So I try to come in at whatever level I can at a particular moment. It takes, I feel, a great deal of patience. Acceptance that this is happening. Seeing if there's judging of oneself—that this ought to stop. "I'm seeing it, so it ought to stop." I find this is one of the biggest hooks that keeps it going for me: on some level I think because I'm seeing it, it ought to stop. "By this time in the retreat, enough already. There's no excuse for this to be happening."

Really notice how that kind of judgment adds on top of it. It's like aversion to the aversion, in multiple regression. And actually, it's not the original trigger anymore sometimes. It's these subtle thoughts—"this shouldn't be going on"—that become the aversion of the moment, if you know what I mean.

So I try to come in with attention wherever I can. If it's only at the level of massive aversion, then I do stomping aversion meditation. "Aversion, aversion. Hating, hating. I hate everybody and everything." And just feeling that in my body. It's very important to keep coming back to feeling the experience physically, if you can, in this moment. A hundred million times, pull out of the train of thought—whatever it is, whether it's about the trigger, or the subtle "why is this still happening," or trying to analyze. All of which takes you out of it. Just come back and feel the aversion for the hundred millionth time. "I know this already, I don't need to feel it now." Feel it. That's what's happening. Land in the middle of it.

Over and over, with as much acceptance as you can muster: this is just what's happening. Because what I find is that the more I can do that, the more I can accept the whole sordid train of events, the more I land in the middle of it over and over, I start to see what is actually the hook of identification.

It might seem like the identification is with the whole story, but there might actually be one little piece of the experience that the sense of identification is really gripping around. It might be the unpleasantness of the trigger. The identification might be with a subtle thought: "This shouldn't be happening." It might be with a view: "My practice should be better than this by now." It might be that the trigger elicits an unpleasant

physical sensation that we don't quite notice, and the aversion is actually being triggered over and over from that unpleasant physical sensation—we just don't quite see it.

Do you see what I mean? There are lots of different little pieces. But we have to start by accepting that the whole thing is happening, or we can't get to the more subtle levels of seeing the different component parts and where the identification comes in.

"Well, I think with me, acceptance is really no problem. As soon as I get my balance, I try to just accept it. What I needed to hear was that mindfulness doesn't necessarily mean it's going to go away."

No, it doesn't. We get caught in that view.

"Right now, I think for me, if I see where I'm identified, great. But sometimes the identification runs so deep, I'm never going to get through it. It's not that crucial to see how I'm identified."

Although in some ways, I wouldn't say identification runs deep. I would just say it arises frequently, moment to moment.

It's not some deep thing hidden down there. It's just arising in a moment around a momentary experience. So it's not that it's necessarily so hard to see. Actually, for me, I'll simply notice the thing that's really hooking me. I can see the different pieces. And if some piece comes up—like, "Oh, I'm really angry now"—I go, "Oh, uh-huh, that's where it's poking at me." Just on that level, nothing more subtle than that. But you make a good point. We often think mindfulness means the experience should go away, and that's not the case at all.

A student asked about working with aversion to physical pain—how there seems to be a lot of fear around it, and how sometimes when moving attention into the pain, it gets worse. Even when trying to stay with it, stay with it, stay with it, it just feels unbearable.

There are many different ways of working with physical pain, and it's very important, as she noted, to be aware not only of the physical sensation but also of the mind's relationship to it. It's true that sometimes when we move attention into an unpleasant sensation, it gets more intense. That absolutely happens. And the point isn't to bring our attention to it in order to make it go away. We see immediately if that was our intention, because as soon as it gets more intense, we think, "Oh, pull back, this isn't working."

So it's really important in working with pain to find a balance—being able to move into it very gently with calm attention, simply because that's what's happening. Explore the sensations with a balanced, equanimous mind, but notice when the mind is not balanced or equanimous. When there's fear, when there's aversion, when there's contraction—be able to note and notice that. In the moment of fear, that's perhaps the strongest experience, not the pain. And they're two different experiences, although they go together. Really notice the quality of mind that's with the unpleasant, difficult sensation.

It's not necessarily the most skillful thing to just stay with it, stay with it, stay with it. If we're staying with unpleasant sensation and the experience is, "This is unbearable, this is unbearable, I can't handle this"—that's not mindfulness. There's a quality of real aversion, of contraction, of fear in that, which is very important to notice and feel. In fact, it might be helpful to move away from the pain, to reconnect with either your primary focus or hearing or something else that's happening, to re-establish a more balanced quality of awareness. Then move back to the difficult sensation with a more calm mind. You'll notice then, "Oh yes, this is more equanimous," and you'll notice when the aversion starts to come in. Notice that, soften again.

I've had sittings where I could sit a long time with strong pain because the mind could go into it in a very calm way and not get really tight. The next sitting, the mind was tired. As soon as I touched the pain, it was gritting-the-teeth time. And you could sit like that, gritting your teeth and hating it for an hour, but look at what's being cultivated in the mind. Is that mindfulness? Is it equanimity? Or is it subtle aversion and willpower? That's not the point.

When it feels like you can't move away, you can often go into it, notice the aversion, then back out and give it a bigger focus. You don't have to be precise when the mind gets tight. Really be within the field of the whole room—not even just your body, but the whole room. The pain is there, but there's this much more spacious quality of awareness that can help to ease it some. Go back and forth with that, noticing the mind states.

And of course, sometimes if it's at such a point that you just feel overwhelmed and moving would help, that could be an appropriate time to shift, if that's done with awareness of the intention and quite mindfully. So it's a process of balance. And for all of us, there are times where moving doesn't help, the mind is tight and constricted, trying to open up doesn't help. We're in aversion. And that's our practice at that moment.

There's no fixed approach—it's going back and forth between it all.

Okay, time to walk. Thank you.

Any questions this morning about practice?

A participant asks about "stomping meditation" mentioned earlier in the retreat.

I'd like to clarify what I meant about stomping. And also, you mentioned that at the beginning of the retreat I described going out into the woods when very angry and stomping up and down, and that I called it unskillful. Did I say that? I don't think so—I certainly wouldn't have meant it was unskillful.

When I've mentioned stomping meditation, so to speak, I really mean it for those times when the feeling of anger, for example, is so strong that trying to sit or walk very slowly downstairs just feels impossible—the energy is so intense that it feels as if you're going to explode or scream or do something unskillful around a lot of people.

I've practiced this myself. I go off where no one's around, and I really am stomping up and down, and I am aware of anger. There is a modicum of mindfulness there, in a broad sense. Not the refined awareness of noticing the perception that gives rise to unpleasantness, that gives rise to anger—we're not operating on that level. But there's a feeling in the body that's unmistakable, and I feel my foot hitting the ground. You're present. *Anger, anger.* I might be stomping, screaming inside, *anger, anger, anger.* And it calms down a little.

That's what I mean by stomping. And I don't think it's unskillful. It's much better than just imploding and trying to pretend you're sending loving-kindness to all beings. Just acknowledge what's happening. Sometimes I do find it useful to move the energy when it's so big there's no choice. We walk more briskly, go where there's no one around.

Another participant raises a related question about the expression of strong emotions, particularly referencing Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that expressing anger waters the seeds and makes it stronger.

I would say that's true, and I would make a distinction between the two things we're talking about here.

When I talk about stomping, as I said, it's still with some mindfulness. I'm not stomping while saying, "Right, that person who made me angry is wrong, I'm right, let's get going, let's do something." That is nurturing the seeds of anger. That's being caught in the story, identification with right or wrong—thinking I should be angry, or hating yourself for being angry. That's expressing it physically but not with mindfulness; it's feeding the anger. I would call that watering the seeds of anger. I've seen that in myself.

One time on retreat, I was very angry at someone over something that happened. I kept feeling the anger, and it felt mindful, but there was real identification. I just kept going over the story: "Yeah, I should be angry, and that was wrong of him to do." At one point, I noticed the anger was just getting stronger and stronger each time I recommitted to the belief that I was right to be angry, that I deserved to be angry, that this was really a rotten thing to happen. That's definitely watering the seeds of anger. I could feel it sprout.

Stomping is different—it's bringing mindfulness in on whatever level we can to the experience of anger itself. Yes, anger is present. Don't pretend it's not present.

That's not mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh also says you have to treat your anger with gentleness, with kindness, like a younger brother or sister. You can't treat your anger with violence.

There's something here for both sides, but it's about finding the balance in mindfulness—truly acknowledging what's happening with total acceptance and non-violence. If anger is happening, we need to truly acknowledge it. We can't pretend it's not there. But with mindfulness, we're simply acknowledging anger itself: its presence, its physical expression in the body, the pain, the images in the mind that are happening in this moment.

Feeding it, watering it in the way Thich Nhat Hanh spoke of, is getting really identified with the story, keeping it going, acting it out, and then actually doing something out of the space of "yes, this is justified." Or it's not—we hate ourselves and beat ourselves up for being angry. Do you see the difference? One is bringing in mindfulness in whatever way we can, precise or huge, it doesn't matter. The other is just diving in and saying, "Yeah, let's really get going on this anger."

It's our delicate balance in practice—not to suppress and pretend that something unpleasant isn't there, and not to really fan the bonfire and let it take over. It's a balancing act that we're all dancing all the time. It's tricky.

Someone asked about awakening—is it a state? Like one pops into it, or is it something to be constantly maintained? Are we already awakened and experiencing it moment by moment without knowing it? When one is awakened, does one still practice?

There are many different ways this could be answered, so please don't think I'm giving a definitive answer. There's a Tibetan saying I like: it's easy to become awakened, but it's hard to stay awakened.

Sometimes I think it could be said like this: first of all, awakening is not a state, not something to be maintained. That would imply a conditioned state where if you set up the right conditions and hold them, that state will stay. Forget it. There isn't any such state. In a way, the whole talk about becoming enlightened can imply we're going somewhere, and when we get there—plop—here we are, all the work is done.

When you read the suttas, the arahants seem to be in that state. Perhaps so. None of us here are there, and it's not the sense of anyone I've met that they feel their work is finished, that there's no more need to practice, that they've got it.

My experience—on a much different level from the arahants, we won't even talk about it in the same breath—is not of some state to get to, but of a recognition of something. It's not even a thing. It's what is always true, always what we truly are. Only we don't recognize it. The potential of recognition is here now, always. It's not somewhere else. It's never somewhere else. The whole problem with craving is that it takes us away from right here, which is the only place and time to recognize our potential of awakening.

I personally feel that recognition is possible in many moments, and then we forget, we lose it, we can't remember. At times when there's an insight of anything—"Oh, that's so obvious, that's so true"—we've all had that. "I'll live like this now, forever," you know, it's so clear. And how long before the next thing comes along? Even though it was so clear, we can't by will make it happen again.

So that's the dance. The whole practice is one of constant re-recognition and letting go. But there's no state to maintain.

Someone asked: when you have a thought that ricochets through a whole series of events and you end up thinking, "Where did that come from?"—how useful is it to actually trace it back to its source, the trigger, which takes quite a bit of effort and is itself thinking? But sometimes it can be quite interesting.

It can be interesting. Overall, I don't know how useful it is.

I have found it at times interesting just to see how far we can get and how really disconnected we are in our thoughts from present moment experience. So for instance, finding yourself on the coast of Mexico and wondering how you got there, then tracing it back to the fact that your little finger is cold. It can be interesting, once or twice, just to see the way things work in this world.

Or if I'm waking up in the middle of something very emotional or difficult, sometimes to trace it back and see, "Oh, there's something difficult happening here and now, and I've projected it into this thing that happened ten years ago." That I sometimes find useful or interesting.

But I really want to qualify this, because it can turn into a real "how can I amuse myself" sort of mind game—let's trace back all the thoughts. And it is ultimately just more thinking. So I would say with great caution, occasionally it can be useful and instructive. If you're doing it more than really occasionally, look at the motivation. It's just another way to pass the time and not feel the pain in the knee. So I would just check that out. And I don't think that's just earlier in the retreat—that's still happening, isn't it?

One yogi asked about something from an earlier talk where I spoke about sensation in the knee, but also how we might have an image of that. What I was saying—I didn't mean to imply that only because of the image of knee is there discomfort or aversion or reaction. What I was trying to say is that there's sensation, unpleasant. We might be identified, or the grasping of self might be around that sensation. What I've found for myself is that quite often there is an image as well as the sensation—an image that's fleeting or often not noticed—and that the real identification, what I might be calling identification with the body or that sensation, is actually in that moment the contraction of sense of self around the image. And I often don't notice the image. I don't mean to imply that if you notice the image, that necessarily means there's no identification or reaction to the sensation either. Both could be present.

In addition to that, this yogi mentioned the wind blowing that morning. Obviously hearing it and noticing, it was very difficult not to conjure up images of the trees and the snow and the area. He kept noting and seeing images, and it kind of dissipated a little bit, but it felt like it was just back and forth. Is that useful or a problem?

No, it's just what's happening. I think the only reason it would so-called take us away to be in the image is if we don't realize it's seeing and we're sitting here really thinking we're in the trees and the snow. But when you know this is hearing, you know this is seeing or imaging—that's just what's happening. There's hearing arising, there's seeing arising. There's no problem. One isn't better, just as long as we know what's what. No, it's not a problem.

Another yogi brought up a tension he perceived: A few days ago, someone said they can't find enough words for labeling. And I said that sometimes it's recommended to label as if you were a child, meaning non-verbally. There are some kinds of practice happening that way. On the other side, the teachers always point out how extremely precise you can be.

What I would say is this: The sensation must be very precisely experienced, but the labeling may be quite general. The precision is in the knowing, in the direct experience—not necessarily in finding exactly the right word. This means one thing: before you come to teach and report, you have to do the work of actually experiencing. If you wouldn't report, if this all would have been non-verbal, that's fine. And when you just label "hearing" or "smelling," this is more of a stress on the process, on the nature of this sensation. It doesn't need to be "the smell in the right part of the nose or the left part of the nose." The discrepancy you're sensing between precision and being more general—that's actually not a real discrepancy. The precision is in the experience itself, in the quality of attention. The label can remain simple.

You notice you don't like it, right? There's a lot of ways I could go with this. The first thing that comes out of me is... there isn't any perfect way. And it's all going to be precise, and it's all going to match up perfectly. And if we could just really let go of thinking it's all going to be perfectly matched, always precise or always general, or whatever.

Sometimes I think—this is my opinion, only my opinion—we can get a little sidetracked into trying to make the reports so precise and perfect that more emphasis can get put on trying to describe it accurately to the teacher. Yes, it needs to be somewhat clear, but too much emphasis and energy and concern and desire can go into trying to make the report accurate. I don't think personally that that's as useful as being precisely with your experience. That's where the understanding is going to come.

And I've found for myself there are times when—your first part of the question—you can be with a sensation and you just know it's burning. And you can tell it changes to tingling. And you're not thinking about that so much. But there are times, as Steve said, where you might almost be in a pre-verbal state, where that part of the mind that's very verbal, very rational, very adult, isn't working so well. And maybe somebody noticed that during this retreat. And when it's not, don't worry about it.

To be really with the sensation, there are times I'll just note "sensing." Because it's not worth moving away from the experience to try and find the perfect word. So if I'm in a state like that—first of all, none of us is Sayadaw U Pandita. We're not going to cream you for coming in and not describing whether you felt the sensation in the left nostril or the right nostril. You could say, right?

And you can say, "I felt I was with it, but somehow today the words were not clear." And that's actually a clear perception. When you can say that, it's different from coming in and saying, "Well, I don't know, it was some kind of sensation, I don't know, I wasn't really there with it." Those are two different experiences, and you can describe them differently. It's not always going to be so precise. And you don't have to then later make up some precise words in order to tell us about it if that isn't really accurate from your experience.

Most important is to just try and convey your experience as close as you can to how it was at the time. Words will not always really be so accurate, you know, because we're really trying to convey something that's beyond words.

And in the same vein about the smelling and the hearing—you're right, smelling and hearing is not that precise. But I think it's helpful because it is bringing our attention to the process, which is the point. So if I'm just noticing "smelling," it's not as precise as "acrid, bitter odor that reminded me of a chemical explosion in the fourth grade." But it is more important to be with the smelling aspect, with the process. Actually, being a little less involved in the content is fine. It's just all that's really happening is the six sense experiences. So just resting a little more generally is really okay. It's really okay.

And don't worry so much that we have to get it precise to describe it either to the teacher or to ourself. Sometimes the words aren't there. It's really okay.

Okay, it's time to walk. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 288

Living Our Deepest Purpose

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this inspiring talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common pitfall in meditation practice: becoming so focused on precise, microscopic mindfulness that we lose sight of the larger purpose of awakening and freedom of heart. She introduces the Pāli concept of sampajañña (clear comprehension), which traditionally accompanies sati (mindfulness) to create a more complete practice called sati-sampajañña.

Wilson explores the four aspects of clear comprehension, particularly emphasizing awareness of our deepest purpose and the appropriateness of our actions within the bigger picture. Drawing from her own experience—including a pivotal moment when she recognized her life's dedication to serving the Dhamma—she encourages practitioners to honor their profound inner aspirations rather than dismissing them with self-doubt. She illustrates how connecting with our true purpose can transform decision-making, using the example of overcoming fear to teach her first meditation course.

The talk offers practical wisdom for integrating practice into daily life, from chopping vegetables mindfully to navigating major life decisions. Wilson emphasizes that awakening can happen anywhere—not just in Asia or on retreat—and that even mundane activities like cooking can become avenues for profound insight. She encourages practitioners to appreciate the rarity of their commitment to the Dhamma, drawing on teachings from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche to remind us of the precious opportunity of human existence dedicated to truth.

I was really happy last night when Joseph ended his talk by reminding us all that the purpose of our practice is freedom of heart, of mind. Really, the purpose of our practice is awakening in each moment.

Sometimes I think it's possible for each of us at different times to become a bit myopic in the way that we practice, to be a bit narrowly focused. By really narrow-sighted or close-looking, I mean we can get into thinking in the moment that our practice is about just getting clearer and more precise noticing of everything. We can really work ourselves into quite a snit, trying to get each sensation a little clearer, our noting a little more precise. Sometimes I know for myself, at the end of a retreat or in the middle of a retreat, it somehow seems like the whole reason for my practice has become to be a really good meditator. I kind of lose sight that there's actually a larger purpose than just being the best possible yogi going.

Sometimes people have said to me that they feel their mindfulness is quite good, but somehow they're feeling more disconnected from others or from the situation—somehow very mindful but also rather separate. That's in the moment-to-moment picture. And in the bigger picture, somehow we've learned how to be very mindful but we feel so rarefied, so sensitive. How can we possibly not only carry this into life but actually live a life in this world? Somehow, the more we practice, the more we wonder: are we practicing to avoid life? Is that what it's about?

Obviously, I'm not going to say that's what it's about. I think it's just the reverse. There's a Sufi saying that the true man or woman of God—now substitute for God our Buddhist lingo; you can substitute Dharma or truth or awareness—sits in the middle of her fellow men or women and rises and eats and sleeps and marries and buys and sells, gives and takes in the bazaar and spends her days with other people, and yet never forgets the truth even for a single moment.

To me, that really inspires me. That's, in a way, the way I think of practicing: to be able to live fully in the midst of the world, without aversion, without avoidance, and yet to stay connected with truth, never forgetting it for a single moment.

So tonight in speaking I want to highlight an aspect of mindfulness that we've mentioned but not talked about a whole lot—one that I think helps in broadening our perspective, in bringing us out of this sometimes sense of being a little too rarefied, a little too separate. It's this quality called in Pali *sampajañña*, translated in English as clear comprehension. Often when right mindfulness is spoken of, it actually means the combination called *sati-sampajañña*: mindfulness and clear comprehension.

We've often been speaking of mindfulness, *sati*, as this quality of very clear connection, knowing what's happening, very precise, and of course non-coercive, non-judging. As we practice in this way, our mindfulness can get quite microscopic. It gets sort of mixed with all the other enlightenment factors—with the kind of starry glitz of concentration sometimes, with the real calmness of tranquility and equanimity, with the energizing factors. All of those are together, but I find we can often think that if we don't have all that intensity or the starry quality or the microscopic precision, we've lost or abandoned mindfulness.

What clear comprehension does is bring mindfulness into a wider focus, because actually we can get so precisely microscopic and be quite out of balance. It's fine when we're just sitting on the cushion; it's absolutely appropriate. But when we move out of the isolation and are engaged in any activity where we need to interact with others,

make choices or decisions, or even—God forbid—speak, then we move out of this kind of secluded microscopic quality of mindfulness and need to bring in the aspects of clear comprehension.

These, of course, in the classic Theravada way, are broken down into four different areas. The two main areas are awareness or clear comprehension of our intention or purpose, and of the appropriateness or wider suitability of an action—looking at what we're doing in the context of the bigger picture. This seems obvious, but sometimes we have to bring it in consciously.

I think a good place to look at this might be in your yogi job meditation. It was brought home to me quite clearly a few years ago when I took the job of vegetable chopper, which is a really great job. It can be lots of fun, and it requires a lot of interaction, a lot of cooperation. I could really see the difference between when I was trying to hold on to mindfulness in the very precise, focused way—kind of a samādhi concentration mindfulness, just chopping the carrot, feeling every sensation of movement of the hand and chopping the carrot—and, you know, ten minutes later you've chopped one carrot. Meanwhile, everyone else has to work like mad because you're going so slow. You're not getting the work done, and there's something lacking in this, not really taking in the whole picture. It can feel that to let go of that and open up is losing something. I could tend to hold on tightly to my idea of mindfulness and concentration, but in effect not be appropriate in the situation.

To bring in clear comprehension means to broaden my sense of purpose. The small purpose is to be as mindful as possible, to get good meditation. Let go of the small purpose and open to the larger one: we're all here together as a group to do this job, to cut up the vegetables in order to help the cooks serve all the yogis lunch. It's actually quite a lovely purpose. And to let go of my sense of being just one separate person and see that I'm part of a continual flow and change. The situation is always changing. When you can let go of the intensity, the inward focus, and really begin to move and shift with the flow of things, you can see that if someone else has a lot to do and I'm finished, you don't just walk out and say, "Good, I'm done." You help the other person because it's not just my job or your job—it's our job. And to see that what works one day, the next day the situation might be totally different. Or I come in with a particular preference—I'll do anything but I don't want to have to peel the beets—and I need to be able to let go of that. If I get there and I'm handed the beets, can I just let go and peel the beets and actually enjoy peeling the beets as part of the larger purpose of what's happening?

It went from a feeling of trying to hold on tightly to some form of meditation to get somewhere, to a real open-flowing sense of connectedness. What I found in that ease is that true mindfulness and concentration actually developed much more naturally without this sort of artificial separation, without this forcing to be microscopic. What I thought was letting go of mindfulness to open up to the big picture, to the whole shifting situation, was actually a deepening into the broader qualities of mindfulness.

And this is really, to me, what our practice is about—not to just get stuck in trying to be microscopic. So on a retreat level, that's an example of the difference between *sati* just on its own, just the microscopic precision, and *sati* combined with clear comprehension of purpose and appropriateness or suitability, matching our actions and decisions to what's actually happening in the bigger picture.

So I want to talk a little more about each of these areas.

This first area, clear comprehension of purpose, of course on the moment-to-moment level, is what we've talked about often: knowing our intention before we take an action, before we say something. This is obvious. And when we're in tune with, able to notice our intention, as many of you have noticed through practice, that moment of noticing intention gives us a moment of choice. Do I really want to do this? Is this really going to be beneficial action—beneficial for myself, beneficial for others? And it's wonderful to have that moment to reflect.

On a larger, more overarching level of our experience, this clear comprehension of purpose can refer not just to the momentary intention as it arises prior to each action, but also to a larger sense of what is really my truest, my deepest purpose in this life, in my life. And I have personally found that consciously tuning into this—what is my deepest purpose—being willing to clarify that for oneself, becomes a very powerful and inspiring beacon in our life.

Without a sense of what is really my deepest purpose, I can take decisions haphazardly: well, this feels good, or I don't know, this kind of has the right feel, or maybe this would be good. But we're just acting at random, and our energy can get a bit dispersed. There are so many possibilities that we are confronted with, especially in our culture. Where to work, where to live, should I move, should I switch jobs, should I switch relationships? It's just endless in our culture. And to have a deep sense, a guide light of what is really most deeply true for me in my life—I have found this really inspiring, very profound. It can be a powerful cause for transformation in our life and how we live our life.

And it's interesting, because I've found in myself and also in speaking with other people—often here, actually—that someone has had a very profound and touching moment, an inner sense of something that's deeply true for them, which I would call getting in touch with their truest purpose, their deepest purpose. And people tend to be almost embarrassed, very shy to say so. What I've often found—I found it in myself, and when I hear it in others I feel really sad—is there's often a sense of: who am I to dare to have a really profound purpose, deeply connected to truth or to serving beings or to whatever it happens to be for you? I'm not saying there's a right purpose.

But for example, when it first came up for me consciously, quite some time ago, I was on a short self-retreat. Out of nowhere—I wasn't sitting there thinking, what's my deepest purpose in life? I was just following the breath—out of nowhere came a very deeply felt sense: my life is really about serving the Dharma, and I dedicate my life to that, whatever it means.

And I thought, where did that come from? And the next moment was: who do you think you are? You little twit.

It was really interesting. Those two voices clearly came from such different places. One of them was just the usual self-judgment, the second one. The first one felt very profound and didn't feel like Carol persona at all. It was very moving, and I could tell there was something true about it. It was also very scary, and immediately: well, what does that mean? How can I do that? I'm planning out the next ten years.

What's interesting is, forget all of that. You don't have to plan out anything. But when it comes up for you—and sometimes we can just connect with our real inner purity, which is there for all of us and will manifest in probably a slightly different way for each one of us—when we touch that, when it arises, I beg you, really honor it in yourself. Never mind all the voices that say you have no right, or you have nothing to offer, or it's too scary, I might have to change my life. It's true, we might have to change our life. But that's not so bad sometimes. And we don't have to know any of that ahead of time. In fact, we can't.

But to really honor, amidst all the multiplicity, that depth of beauty and commitment, that manifestation of truth—once you consciously acknowledge it to yourself, it can become a conscious reference point when you need to make decisions, either life-changing decisions or smaller decisions. Granted, I don't mean every time you're trying to decide what to have for dinner: well, my purpose is to serve the Dharma, should I have French fries or baked potato? I'm not talking on that level. And I made myself crazy like that for a while, so I hope you'll spare yourselves.

But in seemingly big decisions, when we remember our purpose—and not just something in the mind, but reconnect with it in our hearts—actually the decision becomes obvious. And it's very energizing.

It takes out a lot of confusion.

I've told this story many times before, but it's such a good example that I will share it again. Sometime after this sense arose that my life was about serving the Dharma, I actually forgot about it. I was a manager here at that time—this was some time ago, 1984 I think—and I wasn't thinking about anything in the future. I was just here to practice, and that was it.

Through a series of circumstances, a weekend meditation course needed to be taught. It was all planned, and the person who was going to teach it got sick. No one else could do it. A couple of friends of mine here, other teachers, decided I should go do it. I thought that was a really bad idea. A very, very poor idea. And I basically said, "No. No way."

These two friends embarked on this campaign of intimidation to make me do it. They just wouldn't stop. It was interesting because one of them—it was not her personality to be pushy. And they just kept at me. I was saying, "No, no."

Then suddenly this memory came up. Oh yeah, right. My purpose in life is to serve the Dharma. And I don't get to choose really how that's going to manifest. It doesn't mean the way I like it. That's not part of the contract necessarily.

As soon as I remembered that, it became so clear that my intention in saying no was totally fear—self-preservation and avoidance of humiliation. That was basically my reason to say no, and it doesn't stand up under scrutiny. There was really nothing else to think about, so I said, "Okay, I'll do it."

It was such a lesson. The fear didn't go away. The whole flight—it was in Vancouver—the whole flight from here to Vancouver was horrible. I was just in terror. Up until the moment I started teaching, and then somehow the Dharma takes over. It's really amazing.

But the lesson was that once it was clear how my action would align with my purpose, then everything else that arises from that decision—the fear and the panic and all of that—is clearly part of practice. It's what I can use to grow, to understand the emptiness of fear, to realize that fear doesn't mean I can't do something. It was so empowering to know that once I'm in alignment with my purpose, everything else is okay. That doesn't mean everything else is comfortable.

In fact, I often ask myself now when I'm wavering about something: Do I want to be comfortable, or do I want to be free? As soon as I phrase it that way, again, it's kind of, "Oh, okay, can't really hide from this one." It's obvious.

So it's just a little experience, but it's a way of seeing that when you acknowledge to yourself what's truly valuable in your life, and you reconnect with that, it is a powerful force—both energizing us to do things that are of value to ourselves and others, and also a force of transformation in how we live our lives.

One teacher said once that in every moment of activity, we are committing ourselves to something. It's a question of what. Are we willing to look?

We shouldn't use this, though, as another way to beat ourselves with a club because this particular activity is not serving the Dharma. It's not another way to make ourselves wrong or bad. But it's a way to deeply inspire us, to keep our connection to truth alive in our lives. It's really a wonderful help in this.

Of course, we need our practice, the mindfulness of being present, to even remember to question our motivation.

And we need the aspect of mindfulness that is non-judging, that is willing to honestly see why we're doing what we're doing and not to judge it.

This tuning into our deepest purpose has to be what's really true for us, not some idea of what we wish. For a while—really some years, I think it was actually before the story I told—I had this sense that I should live a very dharmic life, whatever that meant. It wasn't clearly defined. But that "should" is always a kind of giveaway. If you tune into your purpose and it comes out as "I should be like this," watch out. Because it often means it's an ideal that we try to live up to by judging ourselves or trying to twist ourselves to fit an outer ideal.

When I had this idea that I should live a dharmic life, every time I would go to a movie or watch a TV show or just waste time—not somehow be studying or practicing or going out doing good or I don't know what—and it was a lot of my time, believe me—every moment that I felt I wasted, I would berate myself so heavily. It was as if I was walking around with this weight of guilt all the time for not being pure enough, not being dharmic enough. It's horrible. It is not a helpful way to live. This is not what I'm talking about.

But I found that when we really tune into our purpose in a genuine way, with compassion, with mettā for ourselves, and with mindfulness, then the times when we deviate, we see it, we accept it. Because of course we're going to deviate. You may have no-

ticed that this happens sometimes here in your practice. I mean, even with big intentions. "I'm not going to look at the bulletin board again until tea time." Clear intention, and you walk out, and the next thing you know—"I know I don't have interviews today, but let's memorize everybody"—how did I get here? Clear intention, but we forget, and we deviate. It's okay.

I remember one retreat I was teaching in California. It's always embarrassing when you make your intentions out loud. We were sitting at the table at lunch, eating pieces of watermelon off a platter, and I said, "Okay, this is the last piece—it's really making me sick." Of course, a minute later I was eating another piece, and all the other staff people gleefully said, "Ah, look at you! You just said it was making you sick. So much for your intentions."

We're going to deviate when there's not awareness of our intention. We're back with habit. Often, as well, many of our decisions are incredibly complex. Even being able to tell what our motivation is for entering a particular relationship—my God, how complicated is that? Or for leaving a relationship. Or just some of the complicated things you might have to do in your job. Of course there's a multiplicity of purposes and intentions in something like that, not to mention the subconscious ones that we might not be able to tune into. So not to blame, but simply to pay attention with a kind of kindness.

What I found has happened for me over the years is that when I finally stopped beating myself up for not being totally pure and dharmic in every moment of existence and said, "Okay, you want to watch a really stupid show on TV? Go ahead, watch it with all my love, watch this show"—and then watch it with attention—about halfway through I'd go, "You know, this is really stupid," and I'd turn it off. The interest was just gone. And I found, just as you find in your practice here, that the purpose, the deepest purpose, begins to come in more naturally. Our actions and choices begin to harmonize much more naturally.

So here, for example, our purpose might be to be a good yogi, to be mindful, or it might be to have good sittings, it might be to get back to that bliss—whatever our purpose is, let's be honest about it. And you're there for a while, and then of course the next day you're just overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions and it's gone. I know everybody here has had this experience, and it just feels like it's all gone down the drain, whatever our story is about it.

What's so interesting—and I've noticed this in talking to a lot of people just in this last week or two—is that we're really starting to get it. At first we start fighting: "Oh no, the thinking, the emotions, I've got to get back to how it was before, get back to the breath, get back to the breath." But we've started to learn that the forcing of motivation

doesn't work. And time after time, people have said—sooner now, much sooner—they're giving that up and saying, "Okay, agitation. Okay, restlessness. Okay, endless thinking. That's fine." And lo and behold, with much less struggle and much sooner than expected, the mind and heart come back into balance. All of a sudden there seems to be mindfulness, there seems to be energy, there seems to be a modicum of equanimity, and we think, "Where did this come from? I didn't make it happen."

But it comes much more naturally, and in that we develop a much deeper faith and trust that when we fall out of our purpose, we don't have to panic. The times of connection with it have so deepened our understanding and the power of heart and mind that we come back into balance much more naturally and easily. And just as this happens day to day on retreat, it can happen week to week or year to year in our life.

And yet, we do need to actively keep coming back to stay in touch with our purpose. There are so many things that come up in our lives, so many possibilities pulling us in so many directions.

I can't remember if I've read this before, but I love this verse from the Japanese poet Izumi Shikibu, expressing the different pulls on our hearts, on our intentions:

Although I try to hold the single thought of Buddha's teaching in my heart, I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well.

Just lovely. I try to hold a single thought of Buddha's teaching, but I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well. I love it because we also hear the beauty sometimes of the crickets' voices—not hating them. And we will move in different directions. But when we can hold our purpose with deep love and connection, with real trust and faith in the purity of the Dharma, and in the understanding that we ourselves are manifestations of that purity, then again and again our purpose will resurface easily, and we'll reconnect with it.

We do sometimes have to actively find ways to help us reconnect. One I want to mention, because it's been coming up in my heart a lot these last few weeks, is sangha—we help each other reconnect. Sometimes in the silence here, simply by seeing another person's commitment, you don't know what's going on inside them, but when we're in one of those "I've had it, I'm out of here, why am I doing this?" moments, just seeing somebody else, it's not that we want to mimic them, but it retouches that place of faith, that place of trust in us.

Finding, or having the good karma to connect with, even from a distance, really wise beings—to connect with teachers or beings who are somewhat awakened—has been an incredible good fortune in my life. Some of the teachers I've been with... I remember

one time I flew across the country for a weekend to be at a huge symposium with the Dalai Lama, something like six thousand people. It's not like we were having some personal connection, but just being in the presence of beings whose lives are so clearly dedicated to awakening and to the service of others. It doesn't have to be particularly Buddhist, but to let that in, to even search it out at times, can so deeply awaken and reconnect us to that place of faith, of inspiration. It doesn't mean we have to follow that teacher—I don't mean that. But just to be with other wise people, other people committed to a path of awakening, committed to a life of compassion, to me it somehow bypasses the rational and awakens quite deeply a resonance with my true purpose in life.

There's a Tibetan saying that if you look into the essence of devotion—and devotion here can mean faith in the Dharma too, it doesn't have to be personal devotion—if you look into the essence of devotion, you meet naked awareness directly. They feed each other. So in moments of just sitting with a really peaceful or wise or compassionate being, it can touch that in us, reconnect us.

And at different times each one of us might be that wise or awakened or compassionate being. We don't have to be it every moment, but we can be it for each other at various times. It's such a gift for us as teachers being able to share this time with you, because at times each one of you is lighting up—a little Buddha, a little awakened being. You usually don't know it at the time, but there's a sense of little rays coming out. I'm exaggerating, but there's a sense of purity just manifest, and it touches all of us in silence or in speech, whether we know it or not, and it deeply helps us continue on this path.

One of the reasons we all talk so much about our practice time in Asia is, I feel, in this light. In Asia you have a combination. First, I don't know if there are more wise beings, but at least up until recently, Asia has been more supportive of a really spiritually dedicated life. Being in Thailand or Burma, you feel the incredible faith of the people in the Dharma itself, and that faith manifesting as such generosity to support anyone who is so committed to Dharma that they will dedicate their lives as a monk or nun. Even people who might come to sit in a monastery for five days would be supported. There's such faith.

I want to say it's pure—of course it's not always so pure, it's contaminated with all the kilesas just like we are—but it's so alive, and you get the sense of yes, this is really true. It is possible to live like this. To come in contact with teachers and nuns and monks and renunciates who have dedicated their lives to awakening in a very conscious way, it's so inspirational. Combined with a simplicity of life in Asia—I find simplicity in my life makes it much easier to even remember that I would like to connect with

my deepest purpose. It's easier to remember when I'm not running around trying to do ten different things in ten different places in one day, on the highway every fifteen minutes. It's easier to remember.

But it doesn't have to be Asia. I want to bring that out. I remember myself in the first three-month retreats I did here—well, actually my first practice was in Asia, so I guess I already had that hit of "Asia's so wonderful for practice." But often people think, "Well, if I really want to do it, I have to go to Asia." That's baloney. The truth is everywhere. There are wise beings, committed beings everywhere—all sitting here in this room. It's not about where; it's about finding our purpose and finding ways to keep connecting to it.

One of the people I really hold in my heart as someone who inspired me deeply, though I didn't realize it at the time, is my piano teacher from junior high school. She was a woman about my grandmother's age who was a Christian Scientist, which I didn't know anything about. I'm sure I still don't really understand it. But what I got from her was that she really, deeply in her life, was trying to live truth. And to her, truth was really manifested as love. The phrase "God is love" is what she based her life on, and she truly lived that way—a struggling person who was dedicated to living a life of love.

And it was a revelation to me that this was possible—that people lived so sincerely, and it wasn't some kind of hokey idea, but that someone could dedicate their life to living that way and just be a normal person. I still know her, actually. She's ninety-two now, living in Maine. She's gone through hardship, like everyone. But just that depth of commitment deeply inspired me. And I think we can find that really all around us when we look.

So looking to awakened people isn't about restricting ourselves to some sense of elitism. It's more about opening up to seeing the beauty and truth everywhere in life.

And yes, it's true that as we tune into our deepest aspiration and begin to use that as a beacon, a guideline in making choices, there might be changes that come in our life. When we think of it from now—oh my goodness, will I have to give up this or that? How will I be able to keep doing whatever it is I'm doing?—it can be scary or overwhelming. I hate the thought of this. I don't want to live like a nun in Thailand. Get over it. It isn't like that.

I've found for myself that whenever I've made a decision out of really tuning into my commitment to serve the Dharma, and it's not too egocentric, the decision at the time might feel like giving up. Often, when I look at how I've lived my life now, on one level it's amazing. I feel incredibly blessed in the life that I have. I could never have imagined

this. On the other hand, it's also meant that I'm on the road most of the year. I have very little feeling of a settled home life. I've not had children, and I'm clearly not going to have children or any kind of family life in the normal sense. At times I could look at it and say, well, that's really a huge renunciation, something I really gave up.

But it happens so gradually that there's no sense of renunciation at all. It's really that things that distract us from what's truly important just sort of fall away. And I mean, this looks different for everyone. I'm not upholding the way my life has been as the way it should be—I only have myself to use as an example. But it doesn't feel so much like renunciation as like an opening to such a greater possibility, to be able, from time to time, to connect with truth and inspiration.

A friend of mine told me—this is a paraphrase—about Anandamayi Ma, an Indian woman saint, a great saint of the last century. Some people were coming to her and really lauding her for being such a great renunciate, for having given up the world and for living so simply. And she just started laughing and laughing and laughing. They said, "What's so funny?" And she said, "You're the ones who are the renunciates. In living the life that you're living, you're giving up the great joy of living in God's presence. You're the renunciates."

And it's really true, in whatever words, in whatever way we contact that in our life.

So we needn't have some harsh ideal of how one should live. We can contact the presence of truth living life in any form. There's a poem by Rumi—the last two lines I love: "Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

Whatever we do in our life, when it can come from this connection to what is truly valuable, what is our true purpose—having children, washing the dishes, raking the lawn, cleaning the sewer—it doesn't matter what we're doing when we're doing it with an attitude of: How can I awaken in this moment? How can this activity be in the service of awakening and of compassion for all beings, as Geshe Rapten said?

To me, this is what clear comprehension of purpose, of deeper aspiration, brings into our life—this overarching sense where truth begins to shine through all aspects of life.

And this brings in the last two parts of clear comprehension, which begin to develop naturally when we meet life with this clear sense of purpose. They're really the aspects of making our life our practice, and recognizing truth or reality or non-delusion everywhere. The insights we have aren't just some isolated "Ah, anicca, yes, everything comes and goes"—precisely noticing the ending of sensation and the beginning of the breath on the cushion. Rather, these insights translate into our life. We begin obviously to see

truth everywhere when we have this sense of overarching purpose, because the truth begins to shine out everywhere. Not just in Asia, not just in spiritual situations, not just when we're on retreat.

Because we begin to look with the eyes or listen with the ears of truth. And the truth shines everywhere. It cannot be hidden. All of life, even the most difficult circumstances—perhaps in a way especially the most difficult circumstances—become the avenues for awakening.

Sometimes on leaving a retreat, or even during a retreat, we find that we're so much more attuned to the suffering aspect of life, the impermanent aspect, and it can feel a little overwhelming. I remember once at the end of a three-month retreat, for some reason I decided to go to the mall in Worcester and walk around. I don't know if it was good or bad. It was a suffering experience, for sure. I just felt it—the suffering on everybody's face.

But that suffering doesn't have to be a bad thing, because I found that really it's the avenue into connection with all beings, the avenue into compassion. When we close down, hating the pain, we're separate. But when we can look through the eyes of truth to see that yes, this is a suffering being, this is a suffering experience—mine or another's—when we open to it, it's actually an avenue in. It's a connection to all other beings, an avenue into our interconnectedness, our non-separation.

This can happen spontaneously, as this man was describing. It can also happen through reflection, through consciously bringing in this non-delusion. Once I was in the hospital, lying there in a lot of pain, and it's easy to start feeling rather self-centered and caught up in one's own story. I noticed this happening, and I consciously began to expand, to reflect. I was in a room with three other women, old women, all suffering—actually a lot more than I was. And I just started: oh gosh, just in this room, the four of us. And how many people, how many rooms, just in this hospital? And how many hospitals just in this little area of a few towns—there's five or six, just in this little area. I kept expanding out into really an infinite number of people in pain in hospitals at that moment, or at this moment. It started as a somewhat intellectual exercise, but before long my whole sense of self-concern and isolation had vanished, and I felt this really loving connection with all beings. Sometimes it's all beings in pain, sometimes it's all beings in joy. But whatever the situation, it can consciously be an avenue into interconnectedness.

The truth shines everywhere, no matter what we're doing. We can really use this.

One other little story, just to illustrate that no matter what we're doing, in this moment we can awaken. There's a book of poems by the nuns who were women practitioners at the time of the Buddha, containing little stories of each woman's life and what led to her poem. There's one woman whose name they don't have—she's simply called "an anonymous wife," the wife of a Brahmin in Vesali, where the Buddha spoke often. She was quite devoted to the Buddha and wanted to become a nun, but her husband would not allow her to. You had to have your husband's permission, and theoretically husbands had to have their wives' permission too, just so you know it was sort of fair. But her husband didn't give her permission.

So she kept up her duties, her obligations as a Brahmin wife, while continuing to be sincerely devoted to truth. And it's said that one day while she was cooking the curry in the kitchen, the vegetables caught fire. With a real loud crackling fire, the whole meal just burned up. And in that moment of watching the whole meal go up in flames, she had such a deep insight into impermanence that she became free—a third stage of enlightenment. Third stage, mind you, not just the first.

So you could even be burning your food and that could be your avenue for awakening. It really isn't the activity; it's the attitude we bring. Nothing is too mundane.

In tuning into this broader aspect of clear comprehension—a sense of your deepest purpose—I'd really encourage you not to be intimidated. Connect with what that is for yourself, and don't undervalue, don't underestimate the strength of your commitment. I know you know all the moments you haven't been wanting to be mindful, all the times you've wished you never set foot on this path. I realize we have those moments. But I hate to tell you: it's too late. You can't turn back now. We cannot go back to ignorance. And it wouldn't be so good if you could, really. It wouldn't be so good.

But don't underestimate yourself. I just want to share this, from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "Ask yourself, how many of the billions of inhabitants of this planet have any idea of how rare it is to have been born as a human being? How many of those who understand the rarity of human birth ever think of using that chance to practice the Dharma?"

How many of those who think of practice actually do? How many of those who start continue? How many of those who continue attain ultimate realization?

I just want to stop here and say all of you are continuing. All of us are continuing. So don't be saying, "Yeah, I'm back there in the beginning, I'm someone who doesn't appreciate." Appreciate the depth of your commitment. Who would have thought, at your

first weekend retreat or the first sitting group you went to, that you'd end up at a three-month course? That depth of commitment just creeps up on us. But it's here now for each of us.

As long as you fail to recognize the true value of human existence, you will fritter your life away in futile activity and distraction. When life comes all too soon to its inevitable end, you will not have achieved anything worthwhile at all. But once you really see the unique opportunity that our human life can bring, you will definitely direct your energy into its true worth by putting the Dharma into practice.

I just want to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to all of you for being some of the rare beings who are putting the Dharma into practice, who are realizing in your action, in your speech, in your thoughts, in your intentions, the real value of the truth and of a human life—and are being part of the rare inhabitants of this planet who let the truth really shine through and light up the world for everyone else.

It's been a real honor for me to be able to share this time with each of you. And there's nobody here who isn't exhibiting that quality of deep purpose and commitment. Whether your little mind wants to let you believe it or not, it's really true.

So thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 289

The Habit of Mettā

Carol Wilson · 53 min

> *In this opening talk from a loving-kindness retreat, Carol Wilson addresses fundamental misconceptions about the nature of mettā (loving-kindness) and guides practitioners toward understanding unconditional love as distinct from both passionate attachment and passive sentimentality. She clarifies that true mettā springs from wisdom rather than delusion, enabling us to meet all experience—beautiful and difficult alike—with courageous, open-hearted presence.*
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> *Wilson examines how our habitual patterns of grasping at pleasant experiences and pushing away unpleasant ones create an illusory sense of fragmentation and separation. Drawing on insights from Buddhist psychology and citing the poet Rumi, she explains that our deepest yearning for completion and connection is actually always accessible when we recognize that our sense of disconnection is created moment to moment through misperception. The practice of mettā helps us see through these thought-forms that obscure our natural radiance.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with difficulties that arise during meditation—physical pain, aversion, doubt, or restlessness—by turning loving-kindness toward these very experiences. Wilson emphasizes that when we fully connect with any aspect of our experience through mettā, we touch the interconnectedness of all life. She quotes Shantideva's teaching that genuine loving-kindness is as natural as feeding oneself, arising without expectation of return. The Dalai Lama's observation that compassion is the basic human quality reinforces this understanding that mettā is not something we acquire but rather our true home that we learn to recognize and trust.*

I'd like to ask you, just as I begin the talk tonight, to take a moment to reflect quite deeply on what your purpose is in being here, what brought you to come to this retreat. And I mean really your deepest purpose, not the most superficial one that comes to mind—not "Well, I had nothing else to do for 10 days, and this was cheaper than Aruba." But really, in your heart, the deepest reason you come to attend a loving-kindness retreat.

And when we say in the instructions to wish yourself what is most true for your deepest happiness, what really comes up for you? What would that look like? Your deepest, most profound happiness. Your truest well-wishing for yourself. Don't be hesit-

ant or shy—whatever it is, whatever form it takes in your mind or heart, don't be shy that somehow you don't deserve to experience that, or that it's for others but you're too blighted to be able to wish such happiness for yourself.

I feel sure in my heart that whatever words each one of us might use, on some level what we are all united in wishing or searching for is a sense of truth, of deep connectedness, unity, wisdom, love—whatever word you might want to use—inner completion. In a way, all beings are one, are interrelated in this as our most profound yearning. Although the explanations and words we give to it could be quite different depending on our own conditioning.

And why is it such a yearning? Because for many of us—I would never say all, but for many of us—what we actually experience at times, and maybe much of the time, is just the opposite: a sense of disconnection or fragmentation, separation and fear of other beings, yearning to be accepted, yearning to know love, to be loved, yearning to know how to truly love another being or to truly love ourselves, to accept and feel no longer fragmented within ourselves.

I think one of the roots of this dichotomy—that while we're yearning for completion we're experiencing fragmentation—is something that the loving-kindness practice can help us to see through and heal. At the core of our being, we don't really know or trust that we are already complete. Our sense of fragmentation is an illusion, brought about as a trick of our ideas, our interpretations, our misperceptions of ourselves, of others, of reality. Mettā can help us begin to see through these thought forms, see through these ideas we have about what happiness is, what peace is.

Mostly what we tend to do is to either look to someone or something outside of us to give us somehow love or happiness or peace. Somehow if we could arrange things in a certain way, then everything will be okay.

I read a couple of years ago in a news magazine a report on a particular Oprah Winfrey show where she had a group of five widowers—men who had been married and whose wives had died. She was doing a sort of takeoff on the movie Sleepless in Seattle, where a woman got together with a guy who was on a talk show saying how he was looking for his perfect mate. So Oprah Winfrey did a talk show with these five eligible widowers, and they had kids—you know, it makes them more reliable. They didn't get divorced; their wife died. It was sad, but you could trust that they really wanted to be married. She just kind of had this show introducing these guys. And in a week, she received 60,000 letters from people who were interested in getting together with any particular one of these five men.

It really hit me somehow. It resonated—our loneliness and our yearning that somehow that guy on the TV show is going to make it okay, is going to bring love, a sense of richness, of fulfillment. And it would bring richness, perhaps, but it's not going to bring total inner contentment. Yet we posit it out there somewhere.

Or we do the same thing internally. And most likely, it may have even come up today in your retreat—if not, it might sometime in the next ten days—where we think, "If only this particular state of my body would stay this way for the rest of the retreat, the sitting is comfortable, then I can really get cracking, then I can cultivate some loving-kindness. If only this noise would stop, this fly would go away. If only this sense of lightness and happiness would stay. If only I could arrange my pillows in a certain way." Then happiness would be accessible. Then I could get in touch with loving-kindness.

It's really just the same thing: waiting, looking internally, trying to arrange conditions; externally looking for confirmation, trying to arrange conditions. We don't even know what true happiness is. And I think this is one of the sources of our continual yearning and our failure to recognize the fact that true love, connectedness, feeling at home is from within and is always accessible to us.

So there are a couple of misunderstandings I wanted to speak to tonight. One is actually the nature of love—real love, unconditional love. And the second is how practicing mettā can help us see through our habit of seeming fragmentation. We'll be talking more and more about that through the whole retreat, of course, but let me say a little bit about the nature of mettā.

I know for myself, before I had really practiced loving kindness in depth—just little bits here and there—when I would think of what unconditional love must be, I found my ideas about it were really colored by what I grew up with in this culture. So boundless love, undiscriminating love, moving in all directions, touching all beings—I would imagine something really ecstatic and blissful, which sometimes it can be, really passionate, almost kind of blind.

I could see that this comes from what's been drilled into my mind and heart ever since I was little about the nature of love. True love, the great loves: "I would die if you leave me. I would do anything, anything, in order to have you with me." That kind of love. Romeo and Juliet—if we can't be together, then let's just both die; nothing else is worth living. This sense of real passion and love.

Obviously—maybe—I think it's obvious that this is love with attachment. Sometimes it isn't always so obvious to us. That's part of our problem.

A friend of mine pointed out to me a couple of years ago, and I looked it up tonight to be sure it's true, and it is, that *passion* actually comes from a Latin word that means to suffer. And of all the different English definitions of passion, only the one that means "ardent affection" was number five. The others all had to do with suffering. Ardent affection, affection with attachment, is also suffering. Only sometimes we forget to notice that. So that's not what loving kindness is.

Another misconception we might have is more on the softer, sentimental side—everything lovely and rosy. I couldn't remember the name of this movie; I just flashed on it tonight. These are really the stories of our culture—movies and TV and books. It was about two lovers, and I just remember this one scene: beautiful Mozart piano sonatas playing in the background, and they're romping through flower fields, and everything's hazy, and everything's beautiful. That's another way we sometimes think of love. Everything's nice, everything's roses, nothing unpleasant ever happens.

This is also not loving kindness. This is a really limited idea—kind of passive, no shadow allowed. I've spoken with many people who, in just hearing about loving kindness or reading a little about it or having it introduced very briefly in a retreat, feel that it's very passive, very one-sided and wimpy. It's just coloring everything, only looking at the bright side, not coming to grips with how things are.

This is also a misconception. This is not true at all. Because that would be springing from delusion. And metta, loving kindness, springs from wisdom—from knowing, seeing, experiencing ourselves, life, reality, as it is. That includes the beautiful, it includes the difficult, it includes the whole show.

The heart that is imbued with loving kindness, that comes to recognize it, can be willing and open to connect with ourselves, to connect with others, to connect with all experience, even when that may be difficult. In fact, it's one of the most courageous and powerful acts of heart that we can do. There's nothing wimpy about loving kindness. Unconditional loving kindness, unconditional well-wishing.

At times it can feel very blissful, very broad, spacious, connected—but it's not always strong emotion. That's another misconception. Sometimes it's just very simple connection of friendliness, of caring, just the natural response of the heart to ourselves and other beings: just to connect, to be present.

There's a lovely saying from Shantideva, who was a great Buddhist teacher of India—I'm not sure exactly when, around 900 A.D., something like that. And this to me embodies the simplicity of loving kindness: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It's just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

Just the spontaneous movement of heart, of mind. Loving kindness is just like having fed myself—no big deal. It doesn't even arise to think of something in return. It's just the natural response of acceptance and connection to whatever is arising in ourselves, in our hearts, and in another being in their hearts, without judgment.

Loving kindness does not make difficulties or unpleasant situations vanish. I'm sorry to tell you if you thought that's what was going to happen in these ten days. I bet you found out already.

You think maybe tomorrow that'll start. It does not make difficulties vanish, but it softens our heart, it softens the mind so that we meet the difficulties with a willingness to connect rather than from our habitual reactive mind. So in this acceptance, this softness—this is the ground for discriminating wisdom to arise. Rather than a knee-jerk reaction of "I don't like this, get out of here," there's a real soft presence, and from that we can make an appropriate decision.

One of the examples the Buddha gives in his mettā-sutta discourse is that just as a mother loves her only child—that sense of a good mother who loves her only child. I know sometimes our culture doesn't quite grok that, but it's possible: that sense of unconditional love that would do whatever is for the good of the child, which sometimes means tough decisions. It's not necessarily wimpiness. Out of mettā, out of clear seeing of the non-reactive mind, true discriminating wisdom can arise. It's quite different from everything in that soft focus that needs to hold all difficulties at bay.

So when I say the heart of mettā, the non-reactive, soft, open heart does not respond from habit—what habit of heart-mind am I referring to? That's the next thing I'd like to speak about, because it's this particular habit that fosters and keeps us locked in our pattern of fragmentation, of separation, of liking and disliking, of fear and loneliness. So how can mettā help us see this habit and also begin to see through it?

As I'm sure you've already seen today, and as you'll see more and more over the next ten days, as we continue this basically simple practice of cultivating loving-kindness—just saying some phrases, coming back to those phrases and a sense of ourselves and another being, our benefactor—it should be very straightforward. We're here with good

intention. But somehow, the whole show of our experience—the beautiful, the atrocious, the boring, the whatever—it all manages to come springing up as we just quietly sit here trying to say four phrases.

And we get to discover, not only in the fact that all this stuff comes up, but in the way we spontaneously relate to it—we get to discover how we are either perpetuating our sense of separation and fragmentation or learning to see through it to the unity, the connection that's our real and natural home.

So first: how is this illusory perception, this interpretation, this idea of separation, of needing completion elsewhere, of needing love from some situation—how is this being created? Because it's created moment to moment. It's not a cloud sitting over our heads. It's just a moment-to-moment creation.

This is from John Donne, the English poet: "I throw myself down in my chamber and invite God and his angels hither. And when they are here, I neglect God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door."

Get a sense of what he means? With all our good intentions we sit down to invite loving-kindness in, but we'd much rather get all worked up over the buzzing of a fly. It might be a black fly. It might come and land on me. I'm allergic. I get these horrible welts. I can't just sit here and be fresh meat for these flies hour after hour. It's beyond human endurance. And we can go like that. How long can we go? Oh, yeah, right. All right. May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from difficulties.

Reflect on your various experiences today. Not big adventures, just the little things that have come up in your mind, in your experience as you're sitting, as you're walking, as you're eating, as you're doing the movement. All the times that there was a sense of ease or comfort, physical or mental, that the phrases were flowing—perhaps there was a sense of warmth and connection, or maybe we were just in a pleasant fantasy, but at least the hour passed quickly. Or the other times: the body's restless, irritable, jumping out of your skin. If you hear one more cough, you're just going to lose it. If you have to say this phrase one more time with your heart feeling like a stone, you're just going to scream. The stupidest practice you ever heard of.

How did we meet each of these experiences when they arose? Because this is really the crux of our experience—whether it's one of fragmentation, of difficulty, of separation, or whether it's one of connectedness, of loving-kindness, of presence.

The attitude of heart, of awareness, of attention that is mettā, that's loving-kindness—is also acceptance, patience. Both of these are aspects of loving-kindness. So in a moment of mettā, of patience, acceptance, a moment of pure awareness is very much the

same as in the vipassanā practice, the mindfulness of what is. We would meet whatever was arising—happy feeling, pain in the knee, buzzing of the fly, feeling of mettā—whatever arises, we would meet with an open-hearted sense of presence without hesitating, without discriminating: this is good, this is bad, I like this, this can go. Just meeting what arises with presence, with openness, with a relaxed attentiveness.

In that sense of full presence with open acceptance, there is no fragmentation in that moment. There's just what is. And whether what is is pleasant or unpleasant doesn't really matter.

In that moment, we're experiencing our wholeness, our unity. That sense of presence, of acceptance, of open-hearted connection, of friendliness—that is metta in that moment. And I'm sure you've all had moments, perhaps many of them, even today, where that was your experience.

But without paying attention, our habitual response tends toward fragmentation, confusion, separation. More habitually, if it's pleasant—the body's comfortable, things are going the way we think they should, we're feeling a nice warmth in the heart, the hour passes quickly—we think, "Ah, this is good. This is right. This is how it's supposed to be. I'm doing the practice correctly."

Then the next sitting, your knee is hurting, your back is itching, you're really irritable, you can't seem to keep your mind on the idea of metta or even remember the phrases, never mind bring your mind back to them. Do we meet that with the same open-hearted acceptance? Or is there some sense of, "No, definitely something's wrong. I'm not in sync. I'm not doing it correctly. It's a mistake. I've got to get rid of this pain, get rid of this fly, get rid of this mind, get rid of this thought—get rid of whatever—in order to get back to any possibility of cultivating loving-kindness, any possibility of happiness."

This is from Mark Epstein, a psychiatrist who's also been a Buddhist practitioner for many years. He wrote the book *Thoughts Without a Thinker*:

"My experience as a psychiatrist trained in Western medicine and in the philosophy and practice of Buddhism has given me a unique perspective. I've come to see that our problem is that we don't know what happiness is. We confuse it with a life uncluttered by feelings of anxiety, rage, doubt, and sadness."

If I wasn't really thinking about it, that would sound good to me—a life uncluttered by anxiety, rage, doubt, and sadness. I'd say, "Yeah, that sounds like happiness." But he continues: "Happiness is something entirely different. It is the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning."

The ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning. This habit of our mind, of our heart, is so deeply embedded that half the time we don't even realize we're doing it, and we're evaluating our entire world through it. We want the pleasant to stay and the unpleasant to go away, and we evaluate all of life in that way. I'm not saying that the longer we practice we won't know the difference between pleasant and unpleasant. But this confusion, this deeply held reaction of pushing away the unpleasant and holding on to the pleasant, of thinking that if we can arrange our world—internally or externally—correctly...

When you really think about it, what are we looking for? On some level, and I keep finding it in myself in more and more subtle ways, I'm somehow buying into the idea that I'm eventually going to get it so that only pleasant things happen and nothing unpleasant comes up anymore. Forget it. There's no way, because that's complete delusion. That is not the way the world is.

This is one of the basic confusions on which we base our interpretation of who we are and what happiness is, and it keeps us looking in the wrong place. This confusion does not recognize the fact of impermanence—that everything changes, that pleasant comes and it goes, unpleasant comes and it goes. To think that we can make the pleasant stay is to completely ignore a basic fact of everything in our life. And to fear the unpleasant so much, to hate it so much, is also overlooking the fact that it's going to go too. It's simply in the nature of life that everything is evolving, that winter turns to summer. We're happy when that happens. Summer turns to winter—well, it has to happen. We don't really fight it so much, although I know every November I start to say, "Oh, this is depressing, it's starting too soon." How many years do we have to live before we really open to each phase of change?

It seems obvious if we look at the world that everything is in flux. The tides come and go, the moon waxes and wanes, our breath comes in and goes out. Life is all about expansion and contraction. There are times of health and times of sickness, times of birth and times of death. There are phases in my life when I look around and all I see—my mind is focused on the happy—couples getting married, people having babies, everyone flowering. And then there are other phases when I look around and I see couples breaking up, people getting sick, a lot of sadness. They're both there all the time, and in each of our lives we're going to experience this constant ebb and flow.

But somehow, deeply ingrained, there's a little seed of denial of this, a sense that somehow maybe I can lick it. We don't say it so crassly because it sounds ridiculous, but I keep finding myself, even in deep meditation, with this subtle sense of, "If I could just manipulate it a little bit, it would be more pleasant, thus better." And this is not freedom.

This sense of needing to push away the painful, the unpleasant, the difficult; this needing to pull in what is pleasant—this is exactly what keeps us feeling separate from ourselves, fragmented in our experience, fearful and separate from others, or needing others to validate us.

but simply boredom, sleepiness, or grief, or fear, or restlessness, or doubt, or any of the whole range of experience that comes up—none of it is actually, as we open our practice, an obstacle to happiness. It may seem an obstacle to happiness, it may seem an obstacle to practicing loving-kindness at first, but this is really what's revolutionary about our practice, about the non-discriminating, boundless quality of loving-kindness. Because when we're cultivating loving-kindness, it can meet anything with this open-hearted acceptance, this quality of patience, this quality of connectedness.

Oh, we may try to control even the weather. We may think there's something wrong when spring is so beautiful here but the black flies are so obnoxious one can hardly stand to walk outside. But that's just how it is.

I was in a cathedral town in Germany, and just this little vignette comes up in my heart a lot as a sense of holding both aspects of life and not trying to control it or just have it one way. It's Ulm, the town of Ulm. We were passing by a shop—a door with a big shop window on each side. We came to the first window, and it had all statues of the Madonna. It was a real Catholic town. "Oh, this is nice," I thought. "Sort of a spiritual icon shop." Then we passed the door and walked to the other window, and it was all beer steins and guns. I thought, "That's really interesting. Get it both in the same place." You don't have to experience a sense of separation about it. Well, that's how it is.

When we're not really getting it—that pleasant and unpleasant both are our life, and that we cannot control the change—when we're not really getting it, then the kind of happiness we're trying to build is really fragile. It's predicated on an impossibility, basically.

This fragile sense of happiness—you might know it. To bring it into retreat: if you're sitting and having kind of a peaceful, nice sitting, there can often arise a sense of, "I hope nothing happens. I hope that obsessive thought doesn't come back. I hope my knee doesn't start hurting. I hope they don't ring the bell yet—I'm just getting into it." Already it's gone, that peaceful happiness, because we're trying to hold on to it. It's so fragile.

Any happiness, any sense of peace, any sense of love that's predicated on conditions that can change is not true happiness. It's not unconditional loving-kindness. In true loving-kindness there is no fear of losing it, because it's so clear there's nothing to lose. True loving-kindness is that outflowing movement of well-wishing—like Shantideva said, it's like feeding myself. There's nothing to want.

And you can feel the difference. When this habit, this sense of just peaceful presence with what is, open-hearted acceptance, warmth, loving-kindness—there's no fear in that. There's no iota of "I need something back." And we can feel when it starts to shift. All of a sudden, "What if?" comes in. Or "Maybe..." Or "How can I keep it going?" And it's already subtly begun to shift.

That's okay. Because these habits of attraction, attachment to the pleasant, aversion, fear, pushing away the unpleasant—these are the habits that keep us confused. They also happen to be the near and far enemies of loving-kindness. Steve will talk more about it tomorrow; I'll just mention it.

We say "near enemy." The near enemy of loving-kindness is love with attachment. Near because we can confuse it. We think it's just loving-kindness—friendliness, warmth, outpouring, connection. And we might feel connected, but suddenly there's this little "I need," "I want," "What am I getting out of this?" that slips in. It can be very subtle. It's natural that it comes up when we're practicing loving-kindness. It's not a mistake.

And the reverse, the aversion, the not liking—that's the far enemy. Much more recognizable, obviously. It's clear when we're hating something, when we're pushing it away. In that moment, we're certainly not experiencing open-hearted acceptance. It's just the reverse.

But just because we might be caught, in a particular moment, in either the near enemy of wanting or desire or yearning, or the far enemy of "I hate this, I want this to go away, I can't wait for this to leave, it's a total obstacle to my practice"—or any of the whole range in between:

And so this is often when we feel that we're drifting away from being able to say the formal phrases—because irritation has come up, or pain in the knee has come up—and we feel split. Actually, this is also a moment when we can strengthen and cultivate a quality of loving-kindness that manifests as connection, patience, and acceptance.

I'll give a couple of examples. Say you're saying your phrases and pain in the knee comes. At first you can just notice, okay, that's painful. And you can come back and continue with the phrases in the sense of loving-kindness for yourself. There's no feeling of split. There's no problem. But after a while, the pain gets stronger and the mind says, "There's no way. What do you mean, 'may I be happy'? I'm sitting here in agony. I've got to do something to get rid of this." And you get this feeling of split. To say the phrases, say to your benefactor, just feels ridiculous at that point.

You can actually take the loving-kindness and turn it onto the experience, say, of the pain in the knee. In a way, you can take your attention, gently move it to the pain, and send the phrases to the pain. Now, at first this will feel like a gimmick. And it will be, because underneath will be: "If I really send loving-kindness to this pain, obviously it will soften and go away, because that's what loving-kindness does—it makes everything nice." So we'll try that for a while, and then we'll try all our other bargaining tools, and we'll say, "Well, this isn't working, forget this."

And then we'll begin to see that what's really the problem is the aversion. With loving-kindness you can then say, "Okay, this is aversion. Can I connect my attention with this too?" And when you really connect, simply allowing aversion to be present and feel it in your body, allowing the pain in the knee to be present and feel it in the body—that moment of connection, of kind acceptance, that is loving-kindness.

And you can tell when it happens because the feeling shifts from one of "May you be happy, may you be peaceful, may you go away" to... "Oh, yeah. Things are just as they are. And it hurts, but it's okay." There's this immediate sense of connectedness, of spaciousness, and there's no longer that sense of being in conflict or fragmented. It's really quite miraculous, even momentarily, to experience this.

Another example which happened to me recently is feeling very tired, heavy, physically uncomfortable, and aware of it—but not really meeting it fully with this open, full, connecting attention. Sort of, "Yeah, yeah, tired... may I be happy, may I be peaceful... I'm so tired... may I be happy, may I be peaceful." And finally turning around and going, "Okay, really feel tired," and meeting it with a fullness of loving attention, without judgment, without wanting to change it, without interpreting it in any way—simply being fully present.

That moment of connection changes everything from feeling tired, contracted, separated, disgruntled, to feeling tired but no longer contracted, disgruntled, or separated. It's like, "Oh yeah, right. This is just tiredness." That sense of connection then immediately moves—when I no longer feel fragmented because I'm denying a part of my own experience—immediately, without even thinking about it, the next thought moment was, "Wow, what a beautiful day this is." And then a smell of the lilacs, and then an appreciation of the sunshine, and then a feeling of tiredness.

The sense of the interconnectedness of all is again loving-kindness, both an expression of it and a result of that connection with just what is in a moment. And with loving-kindness, we only need to connect with totally one aspect of our experience in any moment to see that it spreads out and connects us with all.

John Muir said once—and this is from the Wall Street Journal, which I also thought was interesting—John Muir once said, "I find that if I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe." It's very much like that in our loving-kindness practice in meeting the difficulties that arise in our experience here. When we truly touch anything—a knee pain, a feeling of happiness, a feeling of loving-kindness for the benefactor, our disgruntledness, our annoyance at the sound of a fly—when we truly touch it with fullness of presence, with loving-kindness, in that moment, for that moment, we're healed from our false sense of fragmentation.

That total presence, nothing left out of our experience, nothing that needs to be denied or hidden or kept away in order to be happy. When we're fully connected with ourselves through loving-kindness, we are fully connected with all life, with all beings. Any moment of full connection is our avenue into recognizing this interconnectedness, which is the truth of our life at all times.

And our journey together in these ten days—a great part of it is cultivating formally the heart space of loving-kindness so that we trust it, so that we recognize it more, so that we don't need to worry that it's fragile. It's stronger than anything else that our mind and heart can throw up at us, although we might not believe that yet. Because another part of our journey is to meet with this loving-kindness all the other stuff that the mind and heart does throw up at us. It's not only not a mistake—it has to happen in this way.

As the metta strengthens, as you continually develop your intention of loving-kindness with each phrase, with each mind moment of turning the heart to loving acceptance, each moment that metta strengthens, there's less fear, there's less need to keep the darkness, the shadow, that we fear away. And so, as a natural result of our loving-kindness practice deepening, all the other stuff starts to come up into the light.

It's not only not bad, but this is where we'll begin to really trust the power and depth of metta—that it really is our true home. Our fears, our self-hatreds, our fears of others, our grief—all these things are part of our field of experience. They all come and go, but we don't have to live there. We can really come to trust that metta cannot be distorted by anything that arises. In fact, meeting these difficulties will only strengthen our trust.

This is a poem from Rumi:

"This being human is a guest house, every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all. Even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."

I'm not saying that every moment we're going to manifest that attitude. But just to bear it in mind—this really is the attitude, the welcoming attitude of metta: that love is stronger than pain or fear or disturbance, and we don't need to be afraid of anything that arises in our experience. It may shake our concentration, we may waver for a while, but then when we can turn around and meet it with the gentle strength of acceptance, of patience, the connectedness of loving-kindness, we'll see that it really was a guest that perhaps is sweeping us clean for new delights. It's nothing we have to run from. It's nothing we have to shut out. The shutting out is the fragmentation. The shutting out is what blinds us to love and happiness. We don't need to do that anymore.

As the Dalai Lama said, he believes that little children are born free of any religion or ideology, but not free of compassion. He believes that compassion and love is the basic human quality. With our practice together—the concentration practice of metta and the willingness to see that everything else that arises is part of the path, that even the intention to be willing to greet our difficulties with love, even though we can't do it, we still might have that intention—this is beginning to really clear our hearts from our sense of being so isolated and allowing us to trust from our own experience much more deeply that love and compassion really is the basic human state.

The Buddha said often that the mind is naturally radiant and pure. All these other things that come really are guests, just as Rumi said. So what we're doing is learning to strengthen our recognition, our familiarity, our at-homeness with an aspect of this radiant purity—with loving-kindness, which is an expression of our completion, of our unity.

And it takes great courage to do this. Each one of you here, to meet everything that arises with this attitude, with this intention, to let stuff that we've been trying to shove down into the sewers for ages—maybe we don't even know we're doing that—to let it come up and try to greet it with warmth of heart takes incredible courage, patience, and real compassion for yourselves. So have a real sense of kindness toward yourself, because there'll be many times when we feel like loving-kindness is the furthest thing from our experience. "What am I doing here? Who am I kidding?" Let that doubt come and go. The fact that you're still here, the fact that you have this intention, is bearing fruit in a really beautiful way. We often can't tell in the middle of it. But really, ultimately, love and compassion is stronger than fear, or hatred, or anger, or self-judgment.

And what's even nicer is that it's contagious—that you'll all catch it from each other. When you're having a hard time, someone will walk by, and just the air of calmness, of peacefulness, elicits that same thing in us. It's really quite wonderful.

I just want to close with a little story that Daniel Goleman recounts in his book *Emotional Intelligence* about the contagiousness of our peace, of our love.

It was early in the Vietnam War, and an American platoon was hunkered down in some rice paddies in the heat of a firefight with the Viet Cong. Suddenly, a line of six monks started walking along the elevated berms that separated rice paddy from rice paddy—those little mounds you can walk along. Perfectly calm and poised, the monks walked directly toward the line of fire. And this is a quotation: "They didn't look right. They didn't look left. They walked straight through," recalls David Bush, one of the American soldiers. "It was really strange, because nobody shot at them."

And after they walked over the berm, suddenly all the fight was out of me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore, at least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody, because everybody quit. We all just stopped fighting.

Metta, compassion—these are perhaps the most courageous and strong mental heart states that we can experience. And they are our true home. And they are contagious.

So let's all catch it from each other.

CHAPTER 290

Near and Far Enemies of Mettā

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a question that often arises during intensive loving-kindness retreats: how does mettā practice, which can initially seem dualistic, actually deepen our experiential understanding of selflessness? Drawing from her own journey—including initial skepticism about mettā as an "aversive type"—she reveals how the brahmavihāra practices and vipassanā represent two gateways to the same ultimate truth.*
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> *Wilson examines the near enemy of mettā (attachment) and the far enemy (aversion) not as problems to eliminate, but as powerful teachers. She explains how in moments of pure loving-kindness, the "empty nature dawns nakedly"—there is no attachment, no aversion, just boundaryless, centerless awareness. Through vivid personal examples—from missing an elephant walk by while consumed by craving, to watching mettā for a friend slide into conditional attachment—she illuminates how craving creates tunnel vision and distorts perception, while aversion causes contraction and separation.*
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> *The practical heart of the teaching emphasizes that every moment of sincere well-wishing, even without feeling results, cultivates pure intention and weakens habitual patterns of grasping and pushing away. Wilson shares how mettā practice has transformed her daily life, naturally arising to meet aversive reactions with spacious acceptance. She concludes with the inspiring words of Etty Hillesum, who maintained loving-kindness even in Auschwitz, pointing to our deepest human potential for freedom.*

The question has come up a couple of times, at least that I'm aware of in this retreat, and it's one that I held myself when I first began doing intensive loving-kindness practice. The question is: how does this practice, which can seem somewhat dualistic or somewhat self-centered or "me and others" centered, deepen our understanding or our resting in the truth of selflessness, the truth of no separate self?

Some people have noticed how in the beginning it seems like we're cultivating a sense of "me" sending mettā to "you," and it can seem quite dualistic. Before I had practiced mettā intensively, I think I had a little bit of a bias against it for that reason—which was totally in my head, based on projection and not knowing what it's about, because you can only know by doing it. There was also the fact that mettā is a very helpful practice for a personality that has a tendency toward aversion. And for that reason, a

personality with aversion tendencies doesn't really want to do mettā, because it's counter to what seems comfortable and normal and the natural way to be. I'll talk about that a little later.

But what I want to talk about tonight is one of the ways that I found, to my surprise and in quite a profound way, that the practice of loving-kindness as we're doing it here, very formally, is actually a manifestation of truth, of our true nature, of selflessness. It also deepens not our intellectual understanding but our experiential understanding of interconnection, of selflessness. Actually, they each lead into the other.

An Indian sage once said that to be on a wisdom path—which you could say Vipassana is—is to know. And the more that you know the truth, the more you love. To be a bhakti, being on a devotional path, is to choose the path of love. And the more that you love the truth, the more you know. I found for myself that this really rings true. Whichever form of practice I might be doing, whether it's insight practice or the Brahmavihāra practices, they are like two gateways that come around to the same ultimate truth. No surprise, really, since what's really true is what's true—any real practice is going to take us in that direction.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who died recently, was a great Tibetan teacher. He said once that the supreme method to quickly become at home with the radiance of our true nature, the supreme method for quickly recognizing and coming to rest more easily in that radiance, is devotion and compassion. And that's really what we're practicing here: devotion as mettā, and compassion, which we'll move into as karuṇā.

You could explore in your own experience a moment when your heart or mind really does feel overwhelmed or filled up with this love, this devotion—not to a particular being necessarily, but just the boundaryless energy of loving-kindness. If in that moment we were to look inwardly, to bring in mindfulness to explore or learn to recognize what it is that we're experiencing, we would really see—this is again from Tulku Urgyen—our radiant nature, much like the image that Michelle used the other night of the sun unobscured by clouds. It can often feel like this in a moment of mettā: just this beaming radiance, this joyful energy. And in that moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly.

What does that mean? In the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly. What's different? How is that moment somehow different from other moments when you don't feel this boundless love? What is it that's different?

If you look carefully, one of the things you'll notice is that in that moment of purity, of boundless love, of compassion, of the empty nature dawning, there is absolutely no attachment and no aversion present in the heart or mind. I want to emphasize tonight that I'm really talking moment to moment, because moment to moment we can all experience these things. If we envision that it has to be endless moments of love streaming out in the empty nature, then we all say, "Well, forget it, I don't know that experience." We're talking about one moment here of loving-kindness arising. That is an experience all of us can have. And I don't care who you are—in our daily life too, it's an experience we can all have. What we can do here is begin to explore more what that's about.

So when we say the empty nature—no attachment, no aversion, boundaryless, centerless—whoever it is, it might be me sending mettā to my benefactor, in that moment of boundless love there's not so much thinking about "me" sending something "there." There's a kind of centerless, boundaryless experience. And when we say it's the empty nature, empty doesn't mean dead or dull or blacked out, nothing happening. Empty of separate self. Empty of separation. But it could also be talked about as fullness, as a sense of inner completion, where absolutely nothing is lacking and absolutely nothing needs to be pushed away or shut out of the experience to make it better. In fact, the concept of something lacking or needing to be pushed away doesn't even occur, because it's so obvious in that moment that it's just all there is. It's perfection. Whatever word you want to use—just simple completion. The radiant nature of who we really are.

In Vipassana practice, one of the ways that we come to this understanding of our radiant nature, of the transcendence of being caught in attachment and aversion, is really by looking at the nature of arising experience. For example, really noticing the impermanence of all things that arise; the suffering nature, because things change, because we get attached to things that change, and nothing is wholly satisfying; and again, the selfless nature.

In looking at these aspects of our arising experience—whether it's the breath or emotions or a sound or a relationship or anything—the bonds of attachment and aversion, the suffering of those, become more obvious, and they gradually begin to loosen their grip. A little bit, a little bit, a little at a time.

In working with the brahmavihara practice, I find it comes to the same understanding from a different route. It comes not so much through the suffering route—you might be surprised to hear that after these few days, that this isn't really a suffering practice. Compared to Vipassana, though, it isn't. We'll check in again after ten days. Whereas Vipassana kind of goes into suffering, this slightly moves away, eventually.

But in a way, with metta or any of the other brahmaviharas, we're coming to discern and really strengthen in the wisdom, in the intuitive wisdom of non-attachment, of selflessness, of no separate self, through experiencing over and over and learning to trust that experience of these boundless states of heart and mind. So rather than looking at and seeing the unsatisfactory nature of everything through metta, we're actually experiencing a state of heart that approaches—that is—boundless in itself. It's a manifestation. Metta, karuna, all the brahmaviharas are manifestations of the wisdom of no separate self, of selflessness. Because true metta cannot arise if we're clinging to any particular need one has for oneself. If you're clinging to any sense of separation in that moment, true metta doesn't quite arise.

So we're coming to more deeply experience the truth of selflessness through experiencing a happiness of metta, of the other brahmaviharas—a happiness that comes from living in this truth of selflessness, from living from our radiant, pure nature. And we experience every little moment of metta, even if we don't consciously recognize it. It's like we're tasting a happiness that is much deeper and much more fulfilling than the happiness of getting what we want, or managing to have only pleasant experience, getting rid of what we don't want.

And that's why metta becomes such a happy practice. It doesn't mean only pleasant things happen. It means we're beginning to learn how to recognize, cultivate, and rest more and more in a happiness that is much deeper and much more fulfilling than our ordinary happiness that comes from attachment and aversion. Until we experience something that is more arising from wisdom, we think getting what we want is really the highest happiness.

So in cultivating the loving-kindness practice and saying all these things, this really arises out of one's own experience in a very moment-to-moment way, where we not only get more and more in touch with these boundless qualities of heart and mind—and in the beginning it sounds like, "Oh yes, boundless, oh yes, metta-filled," as if they're really kind of talking in hyperbole, a bit of an exaggeration, but it sounds nice—but actually it's not an exaggeration at all. We're trying to describe accurately an experi-

ence that is much stronger than anything we might have imagined, but at the same time more simple and direct. It's not about living in ecstatic bliss all the time. It's much more a kind of moment-to-moment connecting and friendliness.

So one way that I find the practice of loving-kindness strengthened and really began to build a stronger confidence in the truth of selflessness is, as I've described, resting in these boundless states. But another way surprised me even more, because I really did have this bias that only Vipassana gives wisdom and metta is really nice and these states are really nice, but it's not going to really strengthen my understanding in any way.

What it did do, though, and continues to do in my daily life, has helped me see through much more profoundly than I had before the so-called obstacles to loving-kindness—which happen to be exactly the things that keep us from recognizing our intrinsic radiant nature: the so-called near and far enemy, attachment and aversion. And as you've noticed, they come up a lot in this loving-kindness practice. Rather than that being a problem, it became quite liberating—not exactly the word I want, but a really profound teacher. Because in the way that they came up, and in the way that the metta begins to strengthen to meet these qualities of attachment and aversion and also to open up and disclose their nature more clearly, I learned an awful lot about them. And the metta also begins to become stronger than attachment and aversion, than these habits of mind. It's really been a wonderful practice, and it's had effects in daily life much more than I had expected—and again, on a much more simple level.

So I want to talk a little bit about how in this practice we can begin to recognize and use and explore when these near and far—I want to use "obstacles" instead of "enemy," since enemy definitely has a bit of a connotation of aversion to it, and we don't want to cultivate aversion to aversion. Not so helpful.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian wise man, said once: "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain." It's really true. These are the two obstacles that, when we're caught in them—when we're caught in desire for pleasure, when we're involved in fear of pain—it's those very activities of looking for pleasure and pushing away pain, the activities themselves, that keep us blind, that keep us from recognizing our inner completion, our potential for happiness here and now.

And so it's really a wonderful gift that they're brought up so strongly on a retreat like this, and that they're brought up in a metta space that actually allows us to meet them more fully and with more friendliness.

So I want to talk a little bit about each one of these, starting with the near obstacle of love with attachment—or simply lust, desire, attachment. And I want to talk about these pretty much as we can experience them arising moment to moment. This is not meant to be theoretical, but as something that we can experience as we sit and walk and pay attention. And in a way, it's a sort of Dharma 101—this is the basic gist of any dharma understanding: the suffering that comes from desire and aversion, that these are the two main things that get in our way of experiencing freedom.

So love with attachment, desire, lust, or a more subtle sense of clinging is basically looking outside of ourselves, looking outside of the totality of present moment experience, looking for something else to somehow bring us completion, fulfillment, happiness. I mean, that's so obvious, but that's really what we're doing over and over. And as I've said, the great revelation of loving-kindness is that that completion and happiness we're looking for is already here, always, and only right here. The more we experience metta, the more we might come to trust that—to see that we have a home that is complete, that can bring us happiness right here, right now, in this moment. Nothing needs to be added.

The real mystery is why, even if we just taste that for an instant—in that moment it's so obvious—why in the next moment are we again yearning and looking outside, somehow trying to complete ourselves again? It slips away so easily, and again we're in that desire, that subtle yearning, not realizing that it's the desire itself, the wanting, the needing itself, that's blinding us to the potential for completion and peace right now.

So when this comes up in your experience here—I'll talk about it on a more gross level first, and then on the subtle levels of how metta shades into attachment—but when it comes up and you realize you're in some kind of clinging, some kind of attachment, don't hate it. Let the softness of metta allow you to move toward it and explore it. What is the experience of clinging or attachment in a moment of your experience?

The first thing I think it's really important to remember—it's obvious but we forget—is that the clinging is arising about something that's happening right now. It arises when a pleasant experience comes up. Maybe there's a pleasant feeling in your body, or a pleasant sound, or a pleasant sight. Maybe there's a pleasant emotion like metta. Maybe there's a thought or a memory that comes up and feels pleasant. Any of these things arise in this moment—a pleasant memory, anticipation of something pleasant when you leave here. And without noticing that pleasant experience now, the mind, the heart, the energy all sort of flow toward that pleasant experience.

Without recognizing it, you think, "Oh, when I leave here, I'm going to go and do this and see this person. I'm going to be so loving. I'm going to go patch up this quarrel." We get into the whole story without realizing that it's all a reaction to a pleasant thought arising in this moment. If we can even recognize that—oh, right, fantasizing is pleasant—and just stay with feeling the pleasantness, that's fine. Nothing wrong with that. But we tend not to notice that and fly off into getting really involved in how to get more of the pleasant thing, how to keep it going, what we're going to do about it. We get all into the story.

The second aspect is to recognize when clinging or attachment is present, whether or not you recognize what it's attached to, but that it's happening now. Look and see what's the nature of your experience in that moment. How does attachment function? Because one of the misrepresentations of attachment or desire is that without really looking at it carefully, it has a sort of connotation of pleasure with it. We keep getting into that pleasant fantasy because somehow that pleasant feeling is enjoyable. We can almost associate the wanting itself with a kind of pleasure. So it's really helpful to come back and look at what's happening when there's a moment of attachment going on in your mind. It's not evil, but it isn't really all that it's cracked up to be if we stop and look at it.

In a moment of getting lost in wanting, or wanting to hold on to something pleasant that's here, the first thing it does is create a kind of tunnel vision. Have you noticed that? If you want something, the mind gets completely moved toward that, focused on that, and everything else you either don't notice or it's in the way. It's amazing how much we cannot notice when the mind is gripped in craving.

This winter I was in Thailand, and there was a little vignette that illustrated how strong craving's tunnel vision can be. I was standing on a narrow little road through a small town. There was traffic—some bicycles, motorbikes, cars—just one lane, kind of dirt, with stores on either side and a lot of people. Fairly busy. I was standing just close to the side of the road. I can't remember what I was looking for, but I suddenly had to look into my passport pouch. I think I was looking to make sure I had my traveler's checks or something. I was totally consumed: I've got to see this, I've got to do this right now.

Traffic was going by, and suddenly something caught the corner of my eye. About as far as from me to that wall, an elephant was walking by, driven by two little boys who didn't look like they really had it under control. The elephant had passed me and I didn't even notice it until it had gone all the way past me—and it was in my field of vision from the front. I was so engrossed with looking for whatever I was looking for.

When I looked at it, I mean, it's huge. The vibrations of it are amazing. I don't know how I could have missed it. And it was scary too, because he was veering from one side of the street to the other, and there wasn't really anywhere to go, so I just kind of jumped out of the way. But I thought, wow, when you talk about the elephant in the middle of the room that you don't see, it's really possible.

So clinging and attachment can really give us tunnel vision like that, and it does it in subtle ways all the time.

Another thing it does is distort our idea or perception of the thing we're attached to or craving. You know when you first have a crush on somebody and there's that real surge—there's love, but there's definitely attachment. It's as if they're the most incredible being you ever ran into on the planet. How wonderful they are. And if that's a crush that doesn't really mature into anything, six months later you run into that person and you go, "What was that all about?" You can't even connect with all the incredible qualities that the mind of craving had projected onto them. This is how craving distorts. The thing craved becomes so incredible.

So check it out—the wonderful, beautiful fantasies that are coming up of what you're going to do the first day you leave here. Go ahead and do them, and check out if the pleasure that comes from those activities comes anywhere close to the projected incredible nature of those activities now. Maybe it will. In all my years—twenty-five years of practice—I've never had a time where what I thought I was going to do was remotely as pleasurable as I imagined it to be. Other things might have been better, more pleasurable, but the projection of craving really distorts.

And the last thing I want to say about craving, which is somewhat obvious, is that as soon as there is attachment or craving, there's separation.

Because obviously, as soon as there's craving, there's a sense of incompleteness. And our essential peace is shattered—not by the lack of that thing, but by the perceived need for it, by that movement of leaning out, of craving itself. Explore this whenever any kind of attachment or craving comes up.

Another simple example: recently I was on a night flight to Germany or somewhere, and I boarded the plane and was sitting in my seat waiting while people boarded. I can never sleep sitting up on a plane—only if I ever happen to get the whole row to lie down, which hardly ever happens anymore. I was sitting on the aisle, on the edge of the middle row, and it was getting near the end of boarding time. I was quite happy just sitting there, very at peace. Then I suddenly noticed, "Oh, nobody's sat in these rows yet, and there's not that much more time."

My peace was totally shattered—from just sitting there quite at ease, I got really tight, really fretful. Instead of being able to just read my book, every person who came in, I tightened and watched where they went. They went past, and aversion would come up. Every person who entered the plane was my enemy. It was so unpleasant.

I managed to notice how unpleasant it was at the time, which is a great victory for mindfulness, because we often don't even catch what's going on. I just sat there, and even noticing it didn't help—I couldn't go back to my former state of peace. I was locked into "Maybe I'll get to lie down. Wouldn't that be great?" I did get to lie down, actually, so that was a nice end to the story. But just to see how the lying down wasn't that important, to have one's peace shattered like that for nothing—just a thought arising in the mind and this clinging to it, and so much suffering dependent on it.

Well, that's how much fun it is to be lost in attachment or craving or clinging. But it's such a strong habit when pleasant experience arises. I'm not saying this to make us hate it or think it's bad. Luckily, when we're practicing metta, it allows craving to come up into the light, and we can recognize it and work with it in a much softer, more accepting way.

On the gross level, like I just described with the plane, that's not masquerading as metta. You would not call that form of attachment the near enemy of metta. It's got nothing to do with metta—it's just craving, plain and simple. But on a more subtle level, and this will come up a lot in retreat, there's just plain craving. The mind's sick of the phrases, sick of sitting here, so something will come up to crave that seems to offer peace, and we get fooled by that over and over again.

But another, more subtle way that craving comes up in a metta retreat is in the form where attachment is masquerading as metta. It's a little more difficult to see because they're closer together. We don't often notice it at first, which is okay, because we begin to notice it after a while.

They're similar in that metta and attachment both follow very closely on pleasant experience. We don't usually get attached to really unpleasant experiences—although there are ways we can, but I don't want to go into that. Usually both attachment and metta follow on very pleasant experiences. The pleasantness of attachment, though, has conditions. And so while the pleasantness of attachment can seem to simulate metta for a while, it has conditions, and when we hit the limit of those conditions, suddenly the pleasure's gone out of it, and we begin to suffer. Metta can easily slide into this form of attachment because they're both so associated with pleasantness.

A very simple example: I was on a self-retreat last year in a beautifully landscaped place in South Africa, and on one of the walks they had huge iris bushes lining both sides of the path. I'd been there quite a while, and occasionally there'd be one or two irises on a bush. But one day, after a lot of rain, I came out early in the morning. The sun was just coming up, and all the bushes were filled with these beautiful, delicate, little whitish-lavender iris flowers. It was breathtaking.

I had just a moment of real awe and appreciation, that upswelling of love and connectedness to nature and the world. That's metta too—it doesn't always have to be directed to a person. It was lovely: a feeling of real connection, pleasant appreciation, and just exquisite beingness for a few moments.

And then it suddenly started to shade. "This is really beautiful. I bet it won't be here tomorrow. I wonder if I could take a photo. I'd love for my mother to see this." Why? I don't know why my mother had to see that. But it started shading into "How can I hold on to this? It's so beautiful." Of course I could take a photo, but I don't have a camera.

How could I get a camera? Who do I know here that I could borrow a camera from? And the mind starts going. What had seemed like—what *had been*—a real metta experience, and what I still was thinking was pleasurable, was actually shading into attachment from the pleasant. And they feel similar.

Experientially, metta is a real outpouring, a real outflowing of energy. If you're feeling a sense of coming from *me*, it flows out towards and into whatever it is that the loving-kindness is connecting with. It flows into it, around it, surrounds it, completely meets it—but with no hesitation, with no discrimination, with no conditions. Just an outflowing connection.

Attachment can sort of feel like this. It starts with this outflowing, moving toward, but at some point it hardens. For me, I can feel a sense of contraction, or as if I've hit some kind of hard wall—but it's really a contraction, and somehow wanting to pull it back towards me. That's where the feeling of metta changes when it turns to attachment. But in the beginning, they can kind of masquerade as each other.

What's also interesting to see when the attachment begins to take hold is that it can feel like—it felt like—the attachment was to the image of the irises, wanting to perpetuate that. But if you look really closely, the attachment is more to the upwelling of pleasant feeling itself, just wanting to keep that pleasant feeling going. Looking at the irises was bringing an upwelling of pleasant feeling, and at some point clinging to that pleasant feeling came up: What can I do to keep having this sense or experience of seeing irises, seeing irises?

So that's how attachment can drift into metta as the near obstacle. Because metta itself, when we're experiencing it, is definitely a pleasant experience—extremely pleasant at times, which is great. We're not saying no pleasant experience should happen. But when there's real pleasant experience and then somehow our awareness drifts away a little bit, the mindfulness drops down, just a moment of not being quite deeply present with the metta and the pleasantness, without being present with the intention of wishing well—we can start to focus a little bit more on the pleasantness without realizing it, and subtly attachment starts to come in. How can I have more of this pleasantness? If the mind would be so clear as that, then it would be good—we'd know right away attachment was coming in. But it takes more sneaky turns, of course.

I know when I first noticed how this would happen, I was sending metta to a dear friend, just feeling the love. It was coming very easily, just flowing. And all of a sudden little thoughts would come in: I really haven't seen her much lately. It would really be nice to see her more because she's so wonderful—and may she be happy. How come she doesn't call me as much as she used to? It took a while, because it was subtle, to see that somehow we'd hit up against a condition, that somehow it was so pleasant sending her love that the mind wanted more pleasantness.

So it can be very tricky. It feels like metta, but it hits the condition. This is not bad or a problem. I actually came to think that it was really far out that this would happen. And I found it happened in this subtle way the most with the people I'm closest to, obviously, because with the people I'm closest to it's really easy to feel, at times, a really boundless well-wishing. It's so easy to wish them well. And of course it was so easy to drift into all the conditions because I do know them so well. The two are very closely linked.

That's why sometimes we say that choosing your mate, or someone you're very close to in that way, as the benefactor category or the dear friend is a little bit fraught with complications—because it'll merge over either into just wanting more input back, or into sexual attraction, or maybe into difficulty. But once we really get a feeling of what the metta is, I found it very enriching to play with moving into sending loving-kindness to my partner, or my mother, or my sister, or someone I'm very close to. It can get more complicated, but it got really interesting to see the difference when it shaded over into attachment. And after a while, what had seemed subtle became glaringly obvious.

With my partner, I could be imagining him in a situation, really sending loving-kindness, and suddenly the situation would slightly shift. What I'd been saying with all the love in my heart—I was saying exactly the same words, but the tone, you know, it had just come from underneath, and I was saying it in order to get a certain response back. And it's worlds apart once we tune into that difference.

You can experiment with this in your life too. I went home and would actually do this when we were having, not a hard discussion, but just in little situations where I'd want to say something. If I really connected with metta and said something like, "It's really hard for me when you don't wash the dishes," but I was connecting with metta—which meant I really wasn't wanting something back, I was communicating from this space of love—that would be felt. And if I said exactly the same thing, exactly the same thing, trying to fool myself that it was from the space of metta, but it was really from the space of, "You stupid jerk, why don't you clean up the dishes already?"—*that's* what was felt, even though the verbal communication was identical, and even though I was fooling myself.

So the chance to notice how we slide into the near obstacle here is a wonderful opportunity. It's not a mistake. It's not something wrong that's happening. It's a chance to see: Oh yeah, this is attachment. This is how it feels.

Let me stop, come back, reconnect with myself, with the being I'm sending loving-kindness to, reconnect with their wonderful qualities, reconnect with the feeling of metta itself, and to do this over and over and over.

Just a couple of other ways that attachment masquerades as metta in our practice, other ways it manifests, is as attachment to the practice itself. I think this is pretty common, where we get attached to the pleasantness of the metta feeling, and instead of just being able to sit back and offer the well-wishes with the purity of intention, completely letting go of wanting to get anything back, we say the phrases, we mean it, but the meaning should manifest by letting us feel the nice feeling of loving-kindness. And if we don't feel that nice feeling, there's a little sense of hitting up against a wall. It's really hard to just keep saying these well-wishing phrases and not get a nice feeling to go along with it. It's hard to trust that.

And when the nice feeling comes, it's quite easy, rather than just settling back and letting it move by itself, to grasp on, to push it along, to lean into the next moment. Or the same with concentration—to try and push into the phrases or try and get deeper, try and get more concentrated, but there's a wanting there, a leaning off balance.

Another way that attachment comes in is when we move out of the purity of our simple well-wishing and somehow get involved in wanting to effect change in the person we're sending metta to, which might be ourselves or someone else. Either wanting our metta to help them, or wanting our metta to make ourselves feel better—"if I send myself enough metta, I'll stop being such an aversive person"—or just some subtle way we're moving out of the simplicity of intention into attachment to results or affecting change.

If you notice this, it's very simple to reorient. You say, "Right, just come back. What does it mean, may I be free from danger? What does it mean, may you be healthy and strong?" Just the sincerity of that wish without trying to make it be so. That continual reorienting keeps us in the purity of intention, because that's all we're really cultivating—the purity of motivation. Whether the feeling comes, whether anyone else feels it or benefits, whether we change or anyone else changes, is totally outside of anything we can control or need to control. All we're doing with this practice is cultivating, moment by moment, a purity of intention of well-wishing to ourselves or to others.

What's so amazing is that the practice takes care of itself. Without our knowing how it works, it does itself, which is really nice. If we could just keep our fingers out of it and quit trying to manipulate it, it actually works very well.

Now I don't have so much time left for aversion. I did desire first this time because I usually get really into aversion. There's always time for aversion. Aversion is my friend.

Aversion doesn't really slip up as much as attachment—it's much more noticeable. The far enemy, rather than being similar to metta, is really quite the opposite on a moment-to-moment experiential level. So again, how do we experience aversion? It's always here and now. By aversion I'm talking about the whole range: just the subtle pulling away to anger, rage, fear, irritation. All of these are aversions.

Technically, in a moment of experience, the way aversion functions is just the opposite of craving. There's an unpleasant sense experience—maybe a physical experience, a smell, a sight, a sound. It might be an emotion, an unpleasant mental image, an unpleasant thought just passing through, arising in this moment. And in not noticing its unpleasant nature, or not realizing that by noticing it we don't have to give in to habit, the tendency of our heart-mind energy is to bounce back, shrink back, shut off and contract against that unpleasant experience. It might try to push it away by lashing out in anger, or it might contract as in fear. But in any case, the effect is one of pulling back, closing down, bouncing away from the experience. And it's always something happening right now, even if we're locked into feelings of hatred and anger about something that happened ten years ago.

Again, that moment of shrinking away, not being noticed, feeds on itself. That moment's unpleasant. Then the next thing arises—the same thought, "Yeah, and he said this ten years ago"—that's unpleasant. We're already in a contracted state, so we pull back a little stronger, contract a little more. It feeds on itself. You know how if you wake up in a bad mood, it just seems to go downhill from there until the slightest little thing can make you ready to scream, because it builds on itself.

But even if it's about something that happened ten years ago, we get lost again into the story, into the projection, into the imagination, into past or future. It's really only about thoughts, emotions, sensations, sense experience arising in this moment, because that's all there is. So if we're caught in "Oh, I can't believe he did this"—that's a thought arising right now. We can notice it. We can notice its unpleasant aspect. We can notice the flinching away. It doesn't have to build.

Now that's mindfulness practice. But sometimes when we're really getting lost, it's helpful to bring that inquiry in, to see: what is it that's arising now that's feeding this continual getting lost in aversion?

The result or effect of this flinching back is that because the attention isn't really meeting the experience, there's no way we can actually know or understand that experience clearly. We can't know something that we're not really meeting with fullness of being, with fullness of attention.

This is how metta works as just the opposite. An unpleasant experience can arise—say it's an unpleasant sound—and we shrink back. There's a moment of aversion. And that shrinking back is itself unpleasant, so that's another unpleasant experience. Then we bring in metta, just the simple feeling of metta: "May I be free from suffering." The experience of metta is just the opposite of that shrinking. The energetic feeling is that it flows out, into, around, surrounds, and meets that experience quite naturally, quite gently, but without any kind of discrimination or hesitation. Where instead of shrinking back, metta just opens up the field.

So what had been something we needed to hide from—and then we don't see clearly at all the whole situation—the metta lets us meet it in a very kind, gentle way. Then our whole perception of things expands, broadens. Before I had practiced metta a lot, being an aversive type as I said, one sees quite clearly. Aversion has a way of being quite discriminating and thinking it sees things clearly, which some things it does. But it can tend to think it's seeing everything that clearly, which it's not—especially the thing it's aversive to. Metta balances that out. It can include the aversion, it brings the energy fully into meeting the experience, and it broadens everything.

I'll give you an example of when I first noticed how the aversive mind works. Having an aversive tendency doesn't mean you're going around locked in rage all the time. We're just talking moment to moment. I was on a ferry in Thailand one year, and it was a beautiful day. Sunny, lovely, the water was calm, just sitting on this ferry with a lot of people. Basically, it was an extremely pleasant experience. But there was one person, a tourist, who was really making a spectacle of herself. Out of all the pleasant experience, my attention was consistently drawn to the one unpleasant thing, which it would then expand on. It would shrink back: "She's probably American. You can always tell Americans when they travel. It's embarrassing to be an American." And there weren't that many other Americans. "I'm sure they can all tell I'm American too." I would just keep being drawn back to this person.

I thought, "Ah. There is an abundance of pleasant experience here, and the habit of this particular mind is to fasten onto the aversive, keep shrinking back, and then just build on it until I'm really suffering enormously."

What the metta does—and after we've been practicing it intensively, you find what it does in daily life—is that without even thinking about it, it comes flowing in. It meets these things: "Oh, well, she's just sort of ignorant. It's too bad she's making a spectacle of herself. I hope she doesn't get into any trouble. And it's really a beautiful day." Where that would have sounded really false and hokey to me some years ago, this is now just quite a natural experience. The metta balances out the shrinking back of aversion, and it is a much more inclusive, clear-seeing state. It doesn't make that sense of separation —"the rest of us are okay, she's a loser." All of us are here together. She's acting like this, I'm acting like that. There's no judgment, and there's connection with the whole thing.

I find this happening over and over and over, not just on retreat but even more surprisingly, in my daily life. I think the reason for this is just that strengthening of intention that we are cultivating on the retreat here, even when you don't feel any particular result happening. Like talking to someone today who said, "For three days, nothing. You just do it, do it, do it, and nothing's happening. Dry, dead, awful." We all have that experience. Then you might do something to shift it, but the next day somehow it breaks open and we think, "Wow, how did that happen?" We want to pin it on maybe having taken a walk or having done something different. We just tend to write off those three days. Why?

We didn't feel anything. We expect immediate feedback. But every moment that we are consciously saying the wish—may I, may you, be happy and peaceful—that is a moment of pure intention. Even if you don't feel it, there's a purity of intention that even allows the mind and heart to say that. And it's also a moment where aversion is not being cultivated.

All those other moments—gee, I hate this, why can't it be better, why are they acting like that—all those moments of aversion are being strengthened and cultivated, and that habit is getting into a stronger groove. Every moment that you sit here and really say, "May you be happy and peaceful"—I don't feel a thing—"May you be happy and peaceful"—what's the use of this?—"May you be happy and peaceful"—every moment that you're saying that, that is a moment of pure intention.

And it seems like magic when all of a sudden it comes shooting out in our life. But it will, because it's just the law of things that intention is really the seed of karma. We're cultivating that in a very powerful way here. And sure, we'd like to have the dessert. We'd like to feel really wonderful all the time, and we'll have moments of that. But I would guess that even if you don't feel ecstatic all the time here, you might find that this has a much more powerful effect than you would expect in your daily life. On a much more simple level, just balancing out the feelings of attachment and aversion that create the sense of separation, finding that the power of metta just naturally flows out of our heart and we're again connected.

I really do find this happening a lot, which is a revelation for someone who's used to the mind just saying, "That's no good, that's no good, that's no good, this is okay." Because that's no good. Well, you know what? It's fine. And this is fine. I'll be somewhere and my mind will start judging: "Ah, the people in the dining room are so annoying. How can people be like that when I'm on retreat?" And the next thought that comes is, "Isn't it wonderful that all these people are here with such sincere intention?" And then my mind goes, "Who said that?" But it's true. And that connection is really there.

After you begin to trust this a little, there'll be times when it doesn't come quite so spontaneously, but you can remember that it's possible and simply say, "Oh, may I be happy." And you know what? That feeling of outflowing acceptance comes up. It's really amazing. And in many ways, it's much more simple than we would expect.

The Buddha said that what the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. So what we're doing is just helping the mind and heart naturally incline towards the connection of loving-kindness, and later of compassion and the other brahma-viharas. Think of all the time we've spent inclining to attachment and aver-

sion. It's a lot of time. So it might be heavy going here sometimes because the mind is strongly used to inclining to attachment and aversion. Of course a lot of it's going to come up.

But the power of metta is that we meet even the attachment and the aversion with the outflowing kindness of metta. Attachment and aversion don't have to be enemies. And each time that we can do this, that inclination of heart towards loving-kindness, towards resting in our radiant nature, is strengthened. Now we don't get a little balance sheet so we know how far we've come, but you can really experience that in your lives.

And it is possible—I mean, there are rare beings who seem to be able to manifest such a power of this loving-kindness, even in situations that seem unbearable, and that's so inspiring to us. I think not because it seems impossible, but because somewhere in us we know that's really the truth. It's so inspiring to me to read about or meet someone who actually manifests that, because it touches in me the place that knows: yes, this is possible, not just for that person, but for me and for everybody.

So I just picked this one up tonight. I hadn't read this in a while. It's from a woman named Etty Hillesum. She was in the concentration camps during World War II. She died in Auschwitz. A young woman—these are her diaries. This is towards the end of her diary.

All I wanted to say is this: the misery here is quite terrible, and yet, late at night, when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire, and then time and again it soars straight from my heart. I can't help it. That's just the way it is, like some elementary force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. And if we should survive unhurt in body and soul, but above all in soul, without bitterness and without hatred, then we shall have a right to a say after the war.

Amazing. This is our potential.

So let's just sit together for a few moments.

CHAPTER 291

I'm Right, You're Wrong: Attachment to View

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this profound exploration of aversion (dosa), Carol Wilson examines how this root of suffering manifests across a wide spectrum of mental states—from subtle irritation and resistance to intense rage and terror. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that afflictions are abandoned not through willpower but through wise seeing, she guides practitioners toward making friends with these difficult experiences rather than fighting or suppressing them.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how aversion arises from the fundamental misconception of separateness, explaining how the pulling back from unpleasant experience creates disconnection and perpetuates suffering. She offers practical guidance for working with aversion at the level of sense contact, noting how unpleasant vedanā (feeling tone) triggers reactive patterns before we're even aware of them. The talk addresses how cultural conditioning leads us to judge aversion as bad, making it harder to investigate openly.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes that mindfulness must match the intensity of experience—from precise noting of subtle sensations to what Wilson humorously calls "stomping meditation" for overwhelming states. She shares the insight that recognizing aversion as an impersonal, conditioned tendency rather than a personal failing brings tremendous lightness and freedom. Whether we're dealing with physical discomfort, emotional pain, or the background irritation of ongoing unpleasant experience, diving into the wave rather than running from it reveals the gateway to liberation in each moment.*

Or meeting aversion with wisdom and compassion—mostly our own aversion we'll be talking about.

Of course, of the three roots of suffering—greed, hatred, and delusion—the roots of suffering that arise in our own minds, aversion is probably the easiest to recognize as a source of suffering. I don't mean that we always recognize when it's present, but we recognize that it leads to suffering, especially when it's present in other people.

Lately I've just felt bombarded, as we are sometimes, by periods where you hear of suffering in friends, the amount of hatred and wars and terrorism going on in the world. And realizing that we can't hold ourselves separate from that. When we begin to practice, to look inside our own experience with compassion and honesty, of course we

see at times the same roots of suffering—of anger, of fear, of terror—in ourselves. This should actually be an awakening experience, something that we meet with compassion and gratitude to see. I feel that deeply.

But often the amount of suffering that we see in the world from aggression, from fear, rebounds onto how we meet the experience of our own fear and aggression and aversion. We think: "It's really bad. It shouldn't be happening." Or "I'm really bad. I shouldn't be happening." Or "You're really bad for making me feel this way. You shouldn't be happening." Or in fact, "None of this is happening and everything's fine." All the gradations of that just keep us in an endless cycle of not really opening to what is happening in the moment.

This makes it hard for us to really make friends with all the experiences of aversion, which to me has been one of the most freeing aspects of my practice in the last few years—making friends with aversion. And as with all friends, we don't always like them. But we are willing to be present and open with them and see what's really going on.

We can't hold aversion away by an act of will. I'm sure some of you have tried: "I will no longer get upset at this situation. It doesn't bother me." And it doesn't work.

The Buddha said—and I think this is a really important remark—that our afflictions, really our roots of suffering, are abandoned neither through speech nor through the body by actions, but only through wise seeing. So we can't decide through an act of will, "I will no longer get angry. I will no longer feel afraid." We can restrain our actions in speech, and that's a good thing. We don't want to denigrate the importance of that. But that's not freedom. It leads to freedom, because the restraint of acting allows us the space to really use our wise attention to explore what's going on in this experience that we call aversion.

I'd like to investigate together, starting tonight, and depending on how it goes this might continue into next week—I could talk a long time about aversion—to investigate, to bring wise attention and interest to this aspect of the deluded mind.

Now, aversion is a word in English that covers a wide range of mental states, states of mind and heart. Let me give you some examples: ill will, irritation, boredom, resistance, denial, impatience, annoyance, anger, rage, guilt, depression, sorrow, dislike, self-hatred, self-judgment, regret, violence, aggression, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror, holding a grudge.

What was your reaction to hearing all of that? It's like, "Oh God, give me a break." Already, all of our conditioning—partly cultural and partly personal—around the whole experience that we package up and call aversion can easily begin to seep in as soon as we even recognize some form of dislike or rage or annoyance or fear or self-judgment or whatever is present.

So I think to begin with, it's really important if we can hold this investigation—now and in your practice—of these various mental states in the frame of the non-deluded heart and mind. Not from the framework of "I'm such a bad person, I've got to uproot this, they're disgusting," but rather from the framework of: How does this state of heart and mind function to obscure the radiance of our pure nature? It's not that they're horrible. It's that these states actually function in a way that obscures our basic purity, the innate wakefulness of mind.

The image that's always given is of clouds covering the sun, and we spend our time fighting the clouds. So we can begin to investigate the clouds from the framework of knowing they're transitory visitors, rather than from the framework of thinking this isn't a transitory visitor—this is really my true nature finally coming out in the light of awareness. It feels like that sometimes, doesn't it? The more I look, the more anger and fear I see. And if I look more, I'm afraid I'm going to hit the bottomless well.

Remember, Nyoshul Khenpo, a wonderful Tibetan teacher, says that the way that conventional meditation practices work, one of the main ways they work, is to uncover our innate wisdom and purity by recognizing the obscurations that hide our innate wisdom and purity—recognizing these obscurations for the changing, insubstantial appearances that they are. And once we recognize something, in a moment, as a changing, insubstantial appearance, it no longer needs to block this innate purity. What's always been here can be revealed. This is on a moment-to-moment basis.

So not holding aversion as personal. I know this is hard sometimes to believe, but it's just arising due to ignorance present in a moment and fed by conditions, as is everything else. We can begin to look at it from this perspective—the ignorance of not knowing in a moment things as they are, thinking that somehow I am separate from experience. And so this unpleasant experience that's arising, I can hold myself separate from it, either through aversion or through fear or through anger. We don't think that so clearly, but that's the sense of delusion that aversion arises from.

Joko Beck says, "Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate." It certainly looks as though we're separate. I feel separate from you. It looks that way. And as long as we think we're separate, we're going to suffer, because we feel we have to defend ourselves, we feel we have to find something out there in the world to make us

happy. Aversion arises from this misconception that if I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience that's happening right now, I can be happy. And just like desire—how the desire itself sends us on the cycle of suffering—so too does the aversion, the fear, the pulling away. It actually elicits a sense of disconnection and continues and strengthens the disconnection, because the more we pull back, the more disconnected we feel. We think, "Oh good, I'm getting away from this. This is making me feel disconnected." We pull back more, we feel more disconnected, and it just starts a whole cycle.

Before I want to go into the details of how we actually notice in a moment the experience of aversion, I want to mention that each of us might recognize the strength of whatever cultural or personal biases or beliefs we bring to the experiences of the whole range of aversion—of anger, dislike, fear, boredom. As I said, mostly unpleasant things we tend to consider as bad or wrong. Most forms of aversion are quite unpleasant, so they're bad or wrong. And societally, culturally too, because the expressions of anger and fear are so harmful, it's quite easy—without even realizing—to hold the belief that if we're really a spiritual person, we wouldn't be experiencing this anger, this fear, this murderous rage over such a petty thing as somebody breathing loud or opening a window. And then we're really disgusted at ourselves, and we can't just bring an open-hearted investigation to the experience. So there's the societal or cultural assumption we might bring, that aversion is bad.

Coupled with this, you know, the energy sometimes of anger is really kind of cool. There's a way that when we really are angry and it's so clear it's the other person's fault, it's a lot harder to just look at the anger. It's so much more fulfilling to really cruise on, "I can't believe how incredibly insensitive..." or "I feel really compassionate for that poor fool, but somehow..." We cruise on the anger, or we deny it altogether, or we suppress it. And of course, we all know how that explodes.

I heard something on the news the other day—sort of a combination of pretending we don't have anger or negative feelings, but at the same time using them in a way. They were talking about a new cosmetic treatment for wrinkles that both men and women are using. It's a facial injection, temporary, called Botox, which stands for botulism toxin. Believe it or not, people are injecting—and if you don't know from English, botulism is a food poisoning that's deadly. People are injecting botulism toxin in their face. What it does is temporarily paralyze some of the muscles. This is serious. It started just for wrinkles, for cosmetic reasons, but they found out a really good side effect is that the muscles it paralyzes are the ones that let you frown. So when you've had one of these injections, you can't really frown. High-powered lawyers and bankers and stockbrokers are taking these shots—I swear, I heard this on the radio—so they can go into

high-powered meetings and their face won't give away what they're feeling if they're frowning or upset. This is our culture. We are products of this culture. So we have to take our conditioning seriously. We do it to ourselves in a way.

Our freedom rests not in suppression or denial or acting out in order to really allow the feelings, but in bringing an open-hearted, mindful awareness to just what is happening right now, whether it's just a little annoyance or you feel swept away in rage and fear. Presence here and now is the point of freedom.

So just to begin by looking at what is going on in the moment of arising aversion, in any of those forms. It's so amazing to me—it's what I love about this practice of moment-to-moment awareness—that even the hugest patterns of our mind can be discovered in how we're relating in a moment. So starting from a moment and then expanding it.

When aversion in any form arises, it's arising as a state of mind and heart in this moment, as a response or reaction to one of the six sense experiences that's arising in this moment. Whether it's sight, sound, taste, smell, bodily feeling, or the sixth sense—the mind, a thought, another emotion—one of those arising in this moment that we experience as unpleasant, probably without really noticing the unpleasantness, maybe without even quite noticing that whole sense contact altogether.

We experience unpleasantness without real awareness, and the natural response, the conditioned response for most people in the world in a moment of unpleasantness, of dukkha, is pulling back. It's natural. We're not bad because that happens. It's just natural. That pulling back is the movement of subtle aversion.

And again, just as Michelle was talking about in the dependent origination, that moment of noticing—contact, feeling, craving; contact, feeling, aversion—it can be the case that if the sense contact is mild enough and our awareness is strong enough, and both those happen at the same time, then in noticing contact and unpleasantness, the pulling back doesn't go anywhere. It's just that.

But what often happens is in that pulling back, we don't quite notice it. And it's as if, instead of awareness connecting with what's happening, there's a little gap. Just a little gap. And into that little gap can rush all the furies. It almost doesn't matter how mundane the particular unpleasant experience might be or how really intense. In that unseen pulling back, it can go into murderous rage or total self-judgment or terror. But it's all an effect of just the continual pulling away from experience, cringing back without noticing it.

Even fury or terror at a memory of something that really happened ten years ago is still a response, a reaction to that thought arising in this moment. To me, when I remember this, it's really helpful because I know that since the initial impetus for the strength of the aversive reaction is arising in the moment, so too that's the place that I can rest with mindfulness. At least that's the place I can try to enter with mindfulness—rather than try and figure out what's going on, to bring awareness into my present moment sensory experience, any of the six senses, and see if I can just notice what's happening.

Now, it's not always easy, I acknowledge that, because it goes so fast from a subtle pulling away to a really big story. Just the sound—I'm very sensitive to cold—just the sound, if I'm sitting in a room in the winter, of somebody opening the window. That's already an interpretation; it was just hearing. And the pulling back, and the aversion, and the thought: "Now I'm going to be freezing." Just into the whole cycle of them and me and my past. Finally, if I bring my awareness to the moment, there's just hearing. Unpleasant. Or I'm really cold. There's goosebumps. But I just bring my experience to that. It's, "Oh, cold feeling. Unpleasant."

Without bringing the awareness into the experience, I can go back and relive the past ten years and the next one hour and really get worked up. And as you know, it can really go on for a long time if we don't think to bring the mindfulness to meet what's happening at the point of contact.

This is the first ally, the first form of presence—to see if we can bring awareness to what's happening right now on the sense contact level. What's the unpleasant experience that's fueling this? It's always our way back into clarity, strength, and awakeness.

It's not always that easy. If we don't notice right away, as the disconnection increases, as the mind begins to spin, we start being aversive not to the original contact but to the experience of anger or fear or annoyance itself, which we experience as unpleasant. So then we begin to pull back from the second level of experience—from the aversion, the fear, the annoyance itself—and we pull back and that gets stronger, and we pull back and that gets stronger.

If we have no awareness at all, that's the point where we say something or do something or strike out, often reacting by this point to something that's not even happening anymore. We don't even know what started the cycle. We're responding to somebody who's walking so slowly and mindfully that it's driving us crazy, and they're going through the door slowly—and that's not what triggered it at all. But we don't know that anymore.

Dan Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, describes various scientific psychological tests that showed that the physical reaction of anger, the physical effects of anger, lingers much longer in our experience than the mental effects. This is actually in line with what the Buddha said. He said one time, if you must identify with some part of your experience, it makes more sense to identify with the body because that doesn't change nearly as quickly as the mind. He wasn't advocating identification with the body. He was just pointing out how quickly the mind changes.

And we can see this. In a way, Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it the physical residue of anger. It feels like black ash, just dark ash lingering in our body. And the mind could have moved on and be quite okay. But there's still this physical agitation, and so the next unpleasant thing that arises doesn't need to be nearly as strong for our reaction to get kind of amped up. If there's some ongoing unpleasant experience, even as it goes away mentally, we're still with the physical residue.

If we haven't noticed that, we get into a real cycle. Have you noticed sometimes you think you're really managing your aversion, the anger, the annoyance, the fear—think it's sort of under control—and then some little thing happens and you just go over the edge? You think, "What? Why? I've been on top of it all day." But sometimes we don't quite notice that physical residue.

A friend told me a story that was kind of funny. He was at some public place like Disneyland or Universal Studios, standing in line at a fast food place to get a soda. He had to wait and wait and wait. The man in front of him was getting more and more agitated and impatient at having to wait for his coffee. By the time he got to the clerk, he was really agitated and, I guess, unfriendly. So my friend, in the spirit of helping, tried to say something soothing to this man. You know how well that goes over in your own experience. Of course, the guy got really agitated, got his coffee, stared at my friend, and stomped out of the place.

My friend got his Coke or whatever and was walking out. Just as he came out, he saw across the whole wide area of these little tables—where you'd stand and drink your coffee—the man that had been in front of him. He was just standing there looking calm. But just seeing my friend walk out, he got so agitated again that he spilled his coffee. Just that sight got all that aversion going again.

So it's easy to bring mindfulness into the point of sense contact when it's a small thing, when it hasn't had a lot of time to expand. But a lot of the time it's going to expand. And still, what's really important is to be willing to bring our awareness into the experience—the physical-mental gestalt of the mental state of aversion or fear or whatever it is—however we're experiencing it in that moment.

A friend of mine, she's sitting here actually, told me a really great image. She describes how she has two grown sons who, whenever they go to Hawaii or someplace where there's really big surf, are always trying to explain to her how the safest way, when a huge wave comes, is to turn around and dive into it. She says, "I know intellectually that's the place of ease, of safety, but I just can't do it. So I see the wave coming and I always turn around and run, and it clobbers me."

It's the same with difficult, aversive, fearful experiences. We want to run from the aversion. We want to run from the whole experience. And that's actually what lets the wave get bigger and bigger and bigger. The place of freedom is if we can remember to just turn around and dive in. What is going on with this wave?

It's not always easy. She said once she's been able to do it. We'll be able to do it more than that when we start to learn that we don't have to be afraid of the aversion or afraid of the fear. Sometimes it's so big that we think by diving in there's no mindfulness at all. At first you can dive in and just be with the sensations. How is fear manifesting? Name and note the sensations in your body. Notice the waves in the mind. The same with aversion, the same with anger.

A lot of times, the fear in a retreat situation is, "I'll lose my mindfulness. If I really go into this, I'm just indulging, I'm just wallowing, I'm just dwelling, and it's bad karma, so it's better if I don't." It's another way we have of thinking, "I'm creating bad karma, so it's better not to feel this." Instead, it comes from behind and knocks us over.

It can get to the point where it really feels like there's no mindfulness at all. But still, you can just let your awareness get so big that you're simply feeling and letting the waves of energy—of anger or fear—move through you.

I know for myself, I've developed what I call stomping meditation. It's hard to sit when it's that strong. I remember one time I was on retreat here when I was a manager, and we would get two or three days to sit. Very cherished, because it was hard to make the time. I began one of my little cherished three-day blocks of sitting, and somebody, who should have known better, came to me at the beginning with some big problem, something they wanted me to do during my retreat. And I got so...

I was furious to have my retreat interrupted by someone who should have known better. And I would sit with it and become more and more convinced: I'm really right. They should have known better. It really was wrong of them. I got so angry that sitting there, noting "anger, anger, anger, anger" – a lot of times, that's what people seem to think it's like to be mindful of anger. You sit: anger, anger, anger, anger. Burning, burning, burning, burning. And when it's not like that, you come and say, "You know, I'm just

getting lost in it." Hey, sometimes it's really big. The mindfulness just has to get that big too. It's not going to be refined. It's not going to be precise. Sometimes you just can't sit – the energy is so big.

What I noticed with this particular time is that I was indulging. Now, indulging doesn't mean feeling the anger. It means indulging in how right I was, how justified the anger was. But I watched myself indulging, and I noticed that the more I kept on that train – I'd feel it in my stomach, all the agitation, then get into the story of "Yeah, he was really wrong, yeah, that's really..." – this sense of letting it happen but feeding it got it stronger and stronger and stronger. That's where I really learned that expressing anger isn't necessarily the key to ending it. In this case, it was the key to keeping it going for as long as I cared to.

Until it finally got to the point where I developed stomping meditation. I went way out where no one would see me and literally stomped up and down, internally yelling, "Anger! Anger! Anger!" That was as precise as I could get. But it was good enough – feeling it, really just letting that energy rip through the body, not trying to contain it, not trying to be precise. That's also mindfulness, you know. Mindfulness comes in many forms, from very micro-precise to really, really big – just knowing what's happening with a clear, open-hearted attention.

So you might stomp for a minute, you might stomp for an hour. It doesn't matter. At some point, of course, it begins to shift and I came a little bit more into balance, seeing what was going on. That's just as valid as being able to bring mindfulness right into that point of sense contact and unpleasantness. It's just matching the quality of mindfulness to the quality of experience – diving into it, no matter how little or big it is, without being afraid.

Now sometimes the experience of aversion, whether it's in the fear mode or in the annoyance, irritation, and anger mode – the source of it isn't always so obvious. And still, it can be a really strong experience throughout the day. Have you ever noticed when you go through a whole day, or what feels like an eternity, and suddenly you realize there's been a background mood – basically of total irritation with everybody and everything – the whole day, and somehow you didn't notice it? Which, of course, once we notice it, we wonder: How could I not? And you can't really pinpoint it at that moment.

But I've discovered that still, quite often when you notice that, not always but often, if you again dive into your mental-physical experience in the moment, there's some relatively subtle and not even that unpleasant experience happening – but sort of a repetitive experience that we don't quite let in, or we don't quite let in the unpleasantness in a clear way.

For example, I've noticed in my daily life, when I'm physically tired – and this isn't that subtle, but it took me a while to notice it – when I'm really physically tired, it's unpleasant. My body feels unpleasant when I bring my attention to it. So of course our first line of reaction is, "Well, then don't bring your attention to it, you know?" So I don't bring my attention to it, but it's still physically unpleasant. And by not bringing my attention to it, there's this little, almost constant aversion going on, which then manifests as a negative reaction to the people around me, or to what somebody says, or to something that normally wouldn't bother me. I'm really aversive. And it's not actually to what's out there. I need to turn around and notice: Oh, yeah, I'm tired. The body's hurting. Oh, that's what's going on.

Once, a couple of years ago, I gave that example and a friend said that he started paying attention after that. He noticed that all day he'd been feeling a little off, and at the end of the day he realized: Oh, my clothes are a little too tight. Just a little thing, you know, that we don't notice. If we were to notice it, it's like, "Oh, okay, unpleasant. No big deal." Or – and this is a little apt at the moment – some sound, like an ongoing, monotonous, grinding whine.

Lasting most of the day. And we start by bringing our attention to it, saying, "Well, that's okay. It's not so bad. That's enough of it already—I don't need to pay attention to it anymore." In, out, rising, falling, aversion to aversion to aversion. But we can just come back and notice: oh, yeah, monotonous grinding whine, unpleasant. Don't be afraid to keep turning into the experience and being there. We don't have to be afraid of unpleasant experience. Moving in is the point of liberation. You may get down on your knees and thank those guys by the end of this retreat, because it was your point of liberation. It could be.

I'm not trying to make light of it—it's definitely, for most of us, extremely difficult to be able, or even willing, or to believe that it's worthwhile to rest with ease, fully and openheartedly, in the midst of a difficult or unpleasant experience. All our training has been otherwise. So whether it's an unpleasant sound, or our clothes are too tight, or the body is tired—or whether it's really strong and unpleasant, a huge rage, a huge terror, some memory that elicits something really powerful—the whole range, it is difficult to trust enough that I can rest at ease in the midst of this.

Or as Joko Beck says, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness? Not to make the confusion and the unpleasantness go away. Just a willingness to say, "This too—this is the truth of this moment." Whether it's the initial sense contact or a whole reaction doesn't matter. Just to rest at the moment we can recognize that confusion or unpleasantness is present. You don't have to analyze it all the way back to the beginning. Can I find, for a moment, the willingness to rest here? That's the gateway to freedom in this moment.

It really doesn't matter. You don't have to be filled with bliss to open to truth, to open to emptiness, to open to compassion. Believe me, a moment of aversion can really serve us. You can welcome your moments of aversion. It does help to bring a little lightheartedness to it.

For me, when I began to recognize that the aversive tendency of mind is just a conditioned reaction and not take it so personally, it brought such a lightness and spaciousness that aversion isn't any more difficult as an experience. I don't judge it more than I judge greed, or sleepiness, or happiness—if I'm awake. It's really possible.

I remember the first time, years ago, when we would play the Buddhist parlor game of "Are you a greedy type, an aversive type, or a deluded type?" I'm not going to go into much detail, but we all experience all of it, believe me. Some minds simply have more of a tendency for aversion to be the reactive response. Some tend more towards greed. Some tend more towards delusion. The first time someone said to me, "Oh, you're clearly an aversive type"—which had never occurred to me—out of my mouth, without a thought: "Oh, I don't like that." And I thought, oh, maybe there's something to it.

It was years later when I really began to notice, without any judgment of it, that the way this mind is conditioned really is that if I scan a room or scan a situation, the mind is just drawn to whatever is unpleasant. It's just what it does. And I don't have to take that personally. It doesn't mean I'm a hateful, angry person. It just means this mind is going to scan the territory for what it doesn't like.

If I can just keep my mouth shut for thirty seconds and know that anything new anyone presents—like in a meeting, if someone says, "What about this idea?"—my mind immediately goes, "No, that's no good," for ten different reasons. If I can just notice my mind do that, let it do that, then it automatically broadens. Oh yeah, there are some good aspects to that. Oh yeah, that's beautiful over there. It's not a complete cutting off of beauty; it's just the tendency. And it's no worse and no better than the conditioning of mind that always goes to the beautiful and gets attached. It's just different conditioning.

In fact, I've been finding it quite humorous. It just isn't personal. We don't have to take it on as a statement of who we are. Once I really started noticing that, it just cracks me up a lot of the time. And as soon as it cracks me up, it's not personal anymore. The mind opens up, and I can look at a situation with more balance, whether it's internal or external.

I mention this because it's a way of trying to bring some wisdom and some compassion into your experiences of aversion, in whatever mode they arise.

And if you're taking it as really personal, that balance isn't going to be possible in that moment. In a moment when we're really identified with aversion—whether it's fear or whether it's anger, it doesn't really matter—you'll start to notice that the mental state of aversion itself actually colors our perception of what's happening. Have you noticed that? When you're angry at someone, they look really ugly. When you're in love with someone, they're so beautiful.

This effect is especially increased by concentration. When your concentration is balanced with mindfulness, great. But sometimes concentration can get really strong and the mindfulness—the knowing what's happening—slips away. Aversion might, for example, slip in there. So you're really concentrated and a sound goes off, and it feels like a gunshot went off next to your ear, and you react as if that's what happened. You don't even really know what the sound was.

Or more often, the aversion is projected outward in a way so that we perceive and experience, particularly with other people, how they look or what they do or what they say. This is one of the reasons we ask you not to write each other notes during retreat. You think you're coming from real clarity, and actually streams of aversion are going through it. We just don't see it.

A woman told me—it's really a perfect illustration of how this works—someone who, by her own admission, experiences aversion as a reaction to situations quite frequently. She was describing how it worked: she would notice a person come in looking really down, frowning when he looked at her, and she would just get triggered into waves of anger, aversion, reactivity to this person, building up the whole story.

She's been a really sincere practitioner of mindfulness, genuinely wanting to look at this stuff, not just suffer in it. So she would begin to dive into the wave rather than just riding it—rather than following the thoughts of "What's the matter with them? What have I done that they're so angry with me?" She learned to ride the wave of her own experience and really begin to see that the initial trigger, the initial unpleasant sensation, was the sight of the frown, and that was unpleasant.

But what was really keeping the whole cycle spinning, as she brought her attention into her own experience, was that the frown actually triggered her own feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, not being loved, loneliness—the whole litany. That is actually a much more unpleasant feeling than the sight of the frown, but not recognizing that this is what's keeping the whole cycle of aversion and anger going. It's not the guy frowning. It's the feelings of her own inadequacy and fear that are unpleasant.

As soon as she recognized that, that's the place of freedom. Then it was so clear. She said, "That guy—he wasn't even looking at me when he was frowning. He wasn't even thinking about me. It was something he brought in with him. He had a fight with his wife." It was just so clear that from her own feelings of inadequacy and shame and worthlessness, she'd projected a whole story out onto the world.

The point of freedom is always diving in. And often we'll see that the trigger really isn't the same sense contact we thought it was, but something actually much more difficult to be with—yet much more freeing once we face it. So: what's happening now?

Mark Epstein says, "It's our fear at experiencing ourselves directly that creates suffering."

Let me read you a story from Michael Crichton. This is a true story. He's talking about his own traveling experiences. He was on a safari with his wife in Africa, where you hire a guide and sleep in tents and go all around taking pictures of animals. They were in their tent one night, and just before they camped, he'd said to the guide, "I'm a little afraid of elephants." The guide said, "Don't be. There are no elephants for miles. There haven't been. Don't worry about it."

So in the middle of the night, he and his wife both woke up startled—huge noise, crashing, banging outside the tent. He said he was just lying there paralyzed, thinking, "Oh my God, it's an elephant, it's an elephant," totally frozen. Finally it just got so bad he couldn't stand it anymore. So he picked up his flashlight.

Unzipped the tent flap, shone out the flashlight, and it shone right—he said—on a huge brown eye. And he said, "Oh, it's an elephant." At that point, he said, he zipped up his tent flap, lay back down, and went right to sleep.

The next morning, he was reflecting on it. And this is the interesting part—his reflection. He said, how was it that I was so hysterical? And as soon as I saw what it really was, I just went to sleep. At first, he thought it was something peculiar to himself. But then he realized we're all that way. We can work ourselves into a hysterical panic over

possibilities that we won't look at. What if I have cancer? What if my job is at risk? What if my kids are on drugs? What if I'm getting bald? What if there's an elephant outside my tent?

And the hysteria goes away the instant we are willing to hear the answer—even if the answer is what we feared all along. Yes, you have cancer, but now you know what's happening. Yes, your kids are on drugs. Yes, there's an elephant outside your tent. Now the question becomes, what are you going to do about it? The subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops. Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on. It actually promotes the unwillingness to look. So whether the hysteria is fear or anger, it actually keeps us from looking at what's really going on. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that keeps us afraid. The minute we look, we can cease being afraid.

That's really a great summation of the power of mindfulness: it's not looking that keeps us afraid.

I do want to acknowledge there are times with fear especially—or really strong anger—when the energy of it is so intense that we actually can't get mindfulness there at all. It's way beyond. There are times for that. We'll talk about this in other talks, but sometimes the thing to do is to back off altogether, to take some walks, to not try to keep focusing because the energy is just too strong. So just remember that this can be the case. But usually you've pushed yourself a lot to get there. So at the first feeling you have that maybe it's too strong, try diving in first. Because so often it's really the not looking that keeps us afraid.

Sometimes, talking so much about aversion or really opening to it as much as you have to in practice—because it's a lot of what comes up—it can feel like it's boomeranging. There are times when you come in and say, "I just feel like I'm a hundred times worse than I was when I started this practice, just filled with fear and aversion and negativity and whining and irritation and judgment." And it's just, as I said, really important to find ways not to take that personally and to know that we have to see it. It has to come up into our awareness. That's the first step of becoming free from the grip of fear, from unpleasantness and all the ways that we hide from unpleasant experience.

Not until we are completely liberated are we going to be going along with no grasping and no aversion. And if that's what you're holding as the way you judge yourself, please throw it out the window. Don't think that you're getting worse because you're seeing more difficult aspects. The power of mindfulness is that it gives us enough courage, it gives us the heart, it gives us the balance to be able to see the obscurations with more and more space. The seeing of them is the start of being free from them. Please

don't let yourself get into some kind of endless regression—aversion to aversion, judging yourself and judging the practice and judging. Just wrap it up in one big ball of negativity and simply feel what's happening in your body. Quit trying to figure it out.

Another couple of more subtle ways aversion might manifest. One is as resistance. And I know for me sometimes this is quite hard to catch. It's easy when it's the two-year-old mind throwing a tantrum: "I can't, I don't want to do this and you're not going to make me. I will not come back to the breath. I will not walk slowly." That's obvious. But sometimes resistance is much more background until we notice it.

I was sitting last fall for quite some weeks, and I kept moving into this mental state that I was calling doubt. But I was doing mettā, and I would get into this state of, "Well, what good is sitting here sending mettā to everybody? I should be going out and doing something to ease suffering in the world." You know how the mind can get on that track.

I might as well just go home. Now, home for me is a five-minute walk through the woods. So to have the thought "I should just go home" a hundred times a day and not act on it was really interesting. And it would pass. It took me ages, it seemed, before I quit believing this whole story and recognized, "Oh, it's just the mental state of resistance." As soon as you notice it, it's really like the elephant in the room—but it's more subtle, more background.

Someone described resistance to me once as something so comfortable it was like wearing an old blanket for protection. I've noticed that in me, resistance is a way to keep things a little bit at a distance. You don't quite notice that's what's happening sometimes, but it keeps that sense of disconnection going.

One other way that aversion manifests—one we sometimes don't recognize—is as desire. Did you catch that in the little line Michelle read the other night from the sutta about the two darts? She read it, but I just want to emphasize this one piece. Remember, it was about when you have an unpleasant physical feeling, and the unawakened person then meets that by shooting another arrow into themselves: "I'm so bad for having this unpleasant physical feeling." Or it can be mental: "I'm feeling fear, and that really shows what a bad person I am"—another dart.

But this is the piece I want to emphasize: Someone who's untaught does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense pleasures. So in that person, an underlying tendency—not even quite conscious—to lust after sense pleasures gets settled in, comes to underlie the mind.

Do you get a sense of that? It's like when there's something unpleasant, without realizing it, the pattern of mind that gets deeply conditioned is: the only thing I can do is go after something pleasant. And often we don't realize that this wave of desire—whether it's you suddenly going off in fantasy over and over and you can't figure out what's happening, or suddenly you're so hungry you've been going along fine and then you have three helpings at lunch and ten chocolate chip cookies and can't quite figure out what's going on. You're looking at craving, you're being really good, you're noting craving, you're noting desire. But sometimes you just need to open up, back up a little, and notice if there's maybe something unpleasant going on. Again, it could be some ongoing physical thing, or often some subtle unpleasant mental state we don't quite recognize. And that leads to just a wave of desire.

In my life, I've gotten to notice this. I'll be driving along somewhere, just going home, and suddenly it comes up: "I've got to go into town and get some cookies. I've got to get some ice cream." And it just feels like this physical impulse—I've got to do this, this hand reaching out. I've learned to recognize it because I'll be asking, "Why? I buy it and then I don't even eat it half the time." And I'll realize: I don't actually want that thing. It's the underlying tendency to avoid the unpleasant. So I'll just come back and ask, "What's going on?" Oh—I'm lonely. Okay. It's quite okay to be with loneliness. The ice cream really doesn't hide it anyway.

My first three-month retreat—I'm saying this so that you don't have to do it—I unfortunately had a car. Somewhere around November, I really didn't understand what was happening, but in retrospect I was filled with this emptiness, this loneliness. It seemed unbearable, mostly because I didn't notice what it was. I went into town. I got a really big bag of chocolate chip cookies. I went back to my room and quite mindfully ate about two-thirds of the bag—which, I don't normally do that. For me, that's really quite unusual behavior. It took me two-thirds of the bag to notice that the cookies were dropping past the empty place and not filling it up. It was a physical experience. Finally a light went on: "Oh. Okay, I guess I'll put these away and just feel this empty place."

Oh yes, loneliness. It's painful. It's scary. And it's okay. It's just what it is.

The opening to truth—however truth is presenting itself in this moment—is what frees our heart and mind from fear, from selfishness, from aversion. Only what's happening in this moment is our avenue to truth. It doesn't matter whether we like it. Awareness doesn't care whether experience is pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, whether we like it or don't like it, whether it seems spiritual or not.

Whatever is happening, if we can have the faith in ourselves, the confidence in the power of awareness, the power of mindfulness to meet what's happening—even if only for a brief moment—then something becomes possible. If we dive into the wave, there's the possibility to recognize, just for this moment, our innate purity. Rather than fighting with the clouds, rather than getting clobbered by the wave, we meet experience directly.

And if we don't recognize it? That doesn't matter, because there's the next moment. There's this moment. There's always only this moment.

When we begin to believe that we can make friends with all these aspects of aversion, that's the beginning of a way into a really deep connection with ourselves, with life, with recognition of freedom. We no longer need to fear the unpleasant or let our reaction to it continue to block our awareness of the radiance of truth, of our true nature.

CHAPTER 292

Working with Aversion

Carol Wilson · 1h05

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines dosa (aversion/hatred), one of the three root defilements, with characteristic honesty and humor. Rather than approaching aversion as an enemy to be conquered, she invites practitioners to investigate it as an obscuration of our essential peace—a conditioned response arising from the fundamental misconception of separation.*
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> *Wilson maps the full spectrum of aversive states: irritation, boredom, resistance, impatience, anger, rage, guilt, fear, anxiety, self-judgment, and depression. She explains how aversion functions as a disconnection from present-moment experience, creating the very separation that causes our suffering. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "hate never yet dispelled hate," she explores how aversion distorts perception, impairs judgment, and can snowball through accumulated physiological and mental reactions.*
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> *Particularly valuable is Wilson's discussion of subtle resistance—that comfortable, familiar stance of holding ourselves slightly away from experience that we may not even recognize as aversion. She shares personal examples, including her tendency to avoid difficult conversations and how fear operates even in small daily choices. The talk offers practical approaches: meeting aversion with mindfulness at whatever level is accessible, deliberately balancing perception by noticing what is not wrong, practicing mettā (loving-kindness) beginning with oneself, and cultivating patience as genuine connection rather than mere endurance. Throughout, Wilson emphasizes that recognizing our Buddha nature—our essential peace unmarred by these passing states—is available in every moment.*

Tonight I'd like to share some observations and have us investigate together one of the three main aspects or manifestations of the deluded mind. This particular manifestation is what in the Pali is called *dosa*, translated as hatred or our friend aversion—one, I am proud to say, of the few subjects on which I am an expert.

I think it's really important in speaking about this that the mood I'd like to hold is not one of "we hate aversion and we have to get rid of it," which is often the way we greet this particular visitor. Rather, I want to hold this exploration of this aspect of suffering, this aspect of the so-called deluded mind, in the context of our potential for freedom and peace. We can realize that aversion in all its many forms and grades is not who we are. It is not our personal possession, and it's not a sign of personal failure—that you're an evil person when you experience it. We need to really be able to recognize that it's

simply an obscuration of our essential peace. In that way, rather than hating and fearing it, we can get interested in understanding: How does this manifest? How does it function to keep me deluded, to keep me lost in suffering, to distract me from essential peace?

Here is a brief list of some of the manifestations of *dosa*: aversion, ill will, irritation, boredom, resistance, denial, impatience, annoyance, anger, rage, guilt, dislike, hatred, depression, sorrow, regret, violence, aggression, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror, self-judging, self-hatred—and anything else you can think of in your own experience.

I really want us to look at this with the intention to understand rather than to judge, because it's really very interesting. Aversion—and I'm going to use "aversion" instead of *dosa* as shorthand to cover all of these aspects—arises due to ignorance. A definition of ignorance is not knowing things in their true nature. A lot of times we think of ignorance as "I'm stupid, I can't do it right." But think of ignorance in a more open way: simply not knowing things in their true nature. This is actually why aversion arises in any moment.

Joko Beck says that our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. And certainly it looks as though I am separate from other people and separate from all phenomenal existence. So as long as we think we're separate, we're going to suffer. We feel we have to defend ourselves. We feel we have to find something in the world that will make us happy.

Aversion, in whichever form, arises in a moment from this misconception that somehow I'm separate. If you look at it, whether it's aggression or fear, there's somehow the perception that I'm separate from this painful experience and somehow I can hold myself apart from it—that somehow we can get it out of here, and I'll just continue on my happy, merry, separate way. Except that we're miserable instead of happy and merry.

In the moment, aversion arises from this misconception of separation and also functions to strengthen it, because it pulls back from experience and in fact creates that very separation that is the cause of our suffering. And so it continues in this cycle: ignorance, confusion, aversion, separation, more ignorance, confusion, separation.

Thinking that ignorance is the cause of aversion, maybe we can hold our investigation of aversion in this attitude of interest. How does that work? How does it work to keep the cycle of suffering going? How does aversion function in a way that keeps this sense of separation feeling so real? How does it keep me distracted from resting at ease in whatever arises?

One of the famous quotations from the Buddha: "In this world, hate never yet dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate. This is the law, ancient and inexhaustible. You too shall pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?"

I wonder, if you're really being in touch with yourselves, how does our heart or mind—or rather our conditioning—relate to this statement? "Only love dispels hate. We will pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?"

When I really look, I can find mixed responses, and I start with this because I just want us to be aware of our conditioned views around anger, fear, aversion. When I hear this in one way, I think, "Oh, that's beautiful. That's wonderful. That's a really beautiful ideal and a great way to live." And then I come down to myself and go, "Possible? Forget it. It's really nice, but it doesn't seem too rooted in my experience of what is possible."

It's helpful to realize that the Buddha isn't given to making nice metaphors that aren't related to our experience. He's talking very literally here: that hate never dispels hate, that love is the strongest power. How can we, no matter what, hold on to annoyance with another? Can we even let that in as a possibility—that it's not just true for the Buddha, it's true for all of us at any particular moment?

Not to hold this up as an ideal that if I don't do this, therefore I'm bad, awful—we call this aversion, this particular form of thinking. Not to hold it up like that, but to open into our minds and hearts the possibility that for me too, in this moment, I might be able to recognize that.

And so with that in mind, we begin to explore our attitudes towards aversion, towards fear, towards pulling away.

In another place, the Buddha said that lust, hate, and delusion—think of hate—is a maker of measurement in the mind, meaning that hate imposes limitation upon the range and depth of the mind. Quite literally, the natural mind and heart is unbounded. So think about when we're caught in a moment of aversion in any form—the experience is quite distinctly one of constriction, one of separation. The sense of heart-mind unbounded is not there. Can we also let in the possibility that the heart and mind that is unbounded is actually our truest and natural state, not the constriction of fear and separation?

This certainly has not been the conditioning that I grew up with, or that I find prevalent in the world around us. I don't know about you. Where I grew up—I mean, actually kindness and generosity was the baseline of my family. It wasn't a horrible, violent family. But what I really learned, when I look back—because I see it with me now, I don't have to look too far back—is that discussions can start out amicably, but when it

really comes down to the nitty-gritty and there's something I really want, the person who gets the loudest and the angriest wins and gets what they want. That kind of adage that there is in this culture: the squeaky wheel gets the grease. We see that happening all the time. Last year there was a book on the bestseller list called *How to Argue and Win Every Time*. It was on the bestseller list in the New York Times, and the subtext was "ways to win arguments at home and at work." That's really, you know, when it gets down to it—forget this nice loving-kindness stuff and get to the point.

And when someone does act, really, from a heart and mind unbounded, it's so inspiring to us. First, because unfortunately it's much rarer than "how to argue and win every time," but also I think it touches that place in us where we know this is really the truth. This is really a potential for us. And I think maybe that's why little news stories about such people can get national airplay—because in some way it's touching that place in all of us that knows love is really stronger than hatred.

I won't read this whole article. This was just in the paper this week. The gist of it is about a man who's in his thirties, and when he was ten, he was kidnapped by somebody and shot and left for dead. There was a grudge against his father. He lived, though the man didn't know it and abandoned him. This boy was found and survived, although he's blinded in one eye from the bullet. They never found who did it until recently, when the sheriff—the same police officer who was on the case then—was still working. He always had a suspicion who it was. And the person he thought it was turned up in a nursing home, really an old, decrepit man who was dying. In fact, I think he just died when this article came out. The police officer went and talked to this man, who was dying and lonely and completely miserable, and he admitted that he'd done it.

The man who was shot had completely forgiven this man already. And he became his only visitor at the nursing home. He would go and visit him every day until he died. This is just one thing he said—he was blinded in his eye, but he said he did not feel that he had been permanently traumatized, adding that he bore no ill will toward the man who had kidnapped him and left him to die. "It was not hard for me to show compassion given his circumstances," said Mr. Carrier, who is married, has two daughters, and until recently worked as a youth minister. "I moved on. This event did not haunt me all my life." And he goes on to say, "I'm glad he was able to put the past behind him." He went and really kept trying to help him know that he was forgiven. "I tried to let him know he had a friend."

It's just very touching. Very sweet. And this man's not making some big deal about it. He's just very matter-of-fact. That's our potential in any particular moment. We get plenty of moments here to work with it—that's one of the functions of a retreat.

So what I'd like to do for a few minutes is just talk about some of the ways that aversion arises in our experience here, just so we can recognize and begin to see how it functions, without prejudice, without thinking, "Oh God, the hated enemy"—just to explore it.

I think the first and most important thing to recognize is that in whatever form we're experiencing aversion—from very mild to very strong anger or terror—no matter what the content is, it is a mental state that is arising always, here and now, as a response to a present moment sense experience. In other words, either a sight, a sound, a thought or emotion, a physical feeling in the body, a taste, a smell—any of the six sense experiences—an unpleasant experience that's arising in this moment.

We're lost in fury at something that happened ten years ago or that might happen ten years from now. What's actually happening is a response of aversion to an unpleasant thought in this moment. I find that very helpful because it takes me out of getting lost in content and into being able to see what's happening right now that's causing this explosion of story.

Once we can recognize that—and of course it's easiest with little things, smaller versions, don't pick the biggest one in your day—see what happens when you can notice the sense experience arising, when you notice the response of aversion. What's actually going on? There's contact. Say there's an unpleasant sound. There's the sense contact, hearing, the unpleasant feeling, and the aversion is the mind, the attention, the energy as it were, flinching back, just ever so slightly, disconnecting from that particular sense door experience. It really, literally feels like a gap between attention and the particular object of experience. So it is actually a disconnection. That's why it feeds the sense of separation—because what it does is pull back from experience and not be able to connect.

And of course in that gap, which takes absolutely no time, this whole surge of associated thoughts, emotions, other sense experiences, memories, and reactions, fueled by the aversion, can just come flying up and the whole thing cycles into a much stronger experience.

A slight example: unpleasant sound, the window being opened. We look up and see an unpleasant sight, and immediately just thought—that sound, that's just like what my mother used to do. Every time I just got comfortable, she'd come in and throw open the window. She had no respect for what I was thinking, and that's really affected me my whole life. And then you have a glimpse of that person again, so there's another seeing contact, and then a wave of rage. What had just been an unpleasant sound, an unpleasant sight, gets completely blown up out of context. There's a whole story, a whole spill-

ing of unpleasant experience. That particular person gets so categorized by our mind, they become the demon of the ages. And there is, at this point, no seeing clearly. There's no wisdom, there's no sense of just knowing what's happening. And it can go on, as I'm sure you know, for hours—something that was really quite minor in the beginning.

One moment of disconnection, and we don't notice that. Another moment of disconnection, and we don't notice it. And pretty soon, we can be really in rage or terror about something that isn't even happening, that maybe never happened, or that maybe will happen ten years from now. If this keeps going, I'll end up in whatever—if this is how I keep behaving—and on and on and on. Completely out of touch.

And if we don't recognize what's happening at some point, then the mental strength of this leads us to unskillful conduct. We say something, we do something, we write something. Here we don't do too much—the worst we do maybe is write a note, which can elicit a lot of pain. But out in the world we can do a lot more than that. All I'm saying is once we get out of touch, then we continue to respond, not being able to see clearly what's actually happening.

This is really where mindfulness is always our strongest protection. I'll keep coming back to mindfulness, but I'll talk more about the way aversion works. In that moment, at any point in that process, if you can remember: however strong this feeling of fear or aversion is, it's arising right now in response to an unpleasant, difficult experience right now. Can I bring my mindful attention in and connect either with that sense experience—the coolness of the air on your skin if it's from the open window, or the sound if it's that which is eliciting it, or the sight of a person if it's that sight that keeps triggering it—right to the sense door, or else come and feel the sensations in your body, just being with the unpleasant, the aversive feeling itself?

Because as soon as we're doing that, we're countering the disconnection of the aversion. Again, the heart, the mind, the attention is connected with present moment experience. That's the protection of mindfulness. In a moment of mindfulness, there's complete connection with what's happening. And in that moment, there's no room for greed or aversion to arise. There's just what there is. Coldness, unpleasant. Sound, unpleasant. Sensations, unpleasant. Thought, unpleasant.

Just there, what there is. In that moment, the mindfulness is a protection. It's always our ally. It can always be accessible. It doesn't have to be precise. But we must recognize any form of aversion as a disconnection and call on our ally of mindfulness to connect again in this moment. It only takes that moment to reconnect, no matter how far and how long we've been gone.

And I know it's not that simple. I mean, it's simple when we're aware of it. It's simple when it's a little thing. I know very well that a lot of the time it is far from being that simple. When I'm totally caught in fear, I can't simply reconnect—"Fear, fear, fear. Oh yes, fine, that's right." It doesn't work that easily. But that doesn't mean to give up on it.

In Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence*, he has a section where he's talking about anger and aversion, citing several physiological studies. I don't have all the science precisely, but I can give the overview. When something unpleasant happens and brings up a reaction of anger in a person's mind, it has a corresponding physiological, physical response—which is hardly news to any of us. We didn't need a study to know that.

What these studies then showed, and this is also what the Buddha said, is that the experience of anger might pass fairly quickly from the mind. But the residue of the excitation in the body, of the hormones releasing, takes longer to fade from the body than the angry experience does from the mind. The Buddha also said this—that the mind changes so much more quickly than the body.

Because of that, and this is what we can experience here as part of how the yogi mind works, if we're triggered by anger, the aversive, difficult experience passes, but the body is still slightly reacting. Then another unpleasant thing happens, there's a reaction in the mind of anger, and physiological stimulation comes into the body. But the body is already still a little bit triggered, so the response is even more intensified.

By the time the cycle keeps going, you can think in your mind that unpleasant things have come and gone, that you got angry but you relaxed. And then all of a sudden, one little incident happens—what we call the straw that broke the camel's back—and we just explode in rage or fury. Sometimes we don't even know why. But it's because there's been this snowballing effect, so that by the end, a little unpleasant experience that we haven't been mindful of can really elicit a huge response.

A friend of mine was telling me a good example of this. He was at some sort of amusement park, Universal Studios in Hollywood I think. He went into a fast food place and was in line to get a Coke or something. The man ahead of him was really in a hurry and very impatient—you know that kind of feeling when you just have two minutes and you want to go have some fun again. The people were slow, the waitress was slow, and this guy was just really angry and impatient and hyped up. So my friend tried to say something very nice and soothing, which you know how well that goes over with a stranger. The guy got really, really aversive and angry at my friend, got his coffee or whatever, and stomped out.

Then my friend waited in line, got whatever he wanted, and after some minutes went back outside. The man was standing way across the area where you stand at those little tables and drink your coffee. He seemed like he'd sort of calmed down, but just the sight of my friend walking out the door so upset him that he got completely jangled and spilled his coffee. My friend could see this, and he thought, this is the kind of way that without awareness, aversion just builds on itself, and we find ourselves really reacting off the wall without knowing why.

So that's one way anger can build and get out of control. Another way I've noticed is that we can find ourselves at the end of the train of ongoing, building anger without realizing how we got there—incredibly negative, or suddenly in a long, vitriolic chain of self-judgment with really no idea how this arose.

I often find it helpful to step back and give a big picture, because what can happen is you could be having an ongoing, very mildly unpleasant experience. I've noticed when I'm physically tired, which can of course last all day, that when I tune into my body, it's very uncomfortable. There's pain, but it's very low grade. It doesn't call my attention unless I deliberately look at it.

But it's unpleasant. And so it can be arising many moments during the day, and when I don't notice it, when I'm just not aware of it, there's slight aversion, slight impatience, slight annoyance—that's so quiet I don't really know what's going on until suddenly I just turn around and snap at somebody. Or I sit down and notice that my mind is in a litany of everything horrible and selfish I've done since I was ten years old—I didn't go to this party with this friend of mine—really with hatred. And I think, "Whoa, what is going on?"

When I look, I see: oh, my body hurts. It's just mildly unpleasant. But the ongoing nature and the unseen quality of it can lead to a whole mood of actually a lot of unpleasant aversion or fear. As soon as I notice it, recognize it, land the attention—"Oh yeah, tiredness, tiredness, tiredness, unpleasant"—it's just that. It doesn't have to lead into this whole taking us away. But again, it means the willingness, the ability to connect with what is unpleasant.

So that means the wisdom to know that ultimately we are not separate. If somehow there's still the underlying belief that I can really be separate from this unpleasant experience, then we'll keep trying all the manipulation to make that happen. So really what it takes is a seeing of: all right, unpleasant. It's just what's happening. And in that can be the freedom from getting so lost in the aversion.

And then, of course, there are the times when whatever's unpleasant is going on is far less genteel, and the response is definitely not one of just noticing subtle sense experience arising and passing. You can still bring in mindfulness—just don't worry about being too precise.

I noticed this some years ago. I was beginning a few days' retreat when I was manager here. It's really hard when you're working here, when I was managing, to even get three days in a row to sit, even though you're supposed to have five a month. It was very hard to do that. It had been two or three months and I was really holding on to my three days.

And someone—we won't say who, but someone who definitely should have known better—waited until just as I was going into sitting to bring up something that they said was really urgent, that couldn't wait. I had to, during my sitting days, meet with somebody and interview somebody, all this stuff. I just got furious. The kind where, of course, one is right. The self-righteous kind, where obviously they should have known better. The kind of anger that really justifies itself and just grows and grows.

Then I went on with my sitting, and it was really interesting because as I paid attention, I learned something in a way that I've never been able to ignore again. As much as I believed and acted out the anger, I wasn't really doing anything other than saying, "Yes, it's true, he's a jerk, he should know better," and all these things. "I can't believe it." Writing letters to him in my mind and actually storming into his room and telling him what I thought of him. The more I did that with some mindfulness, the more I saw that this was not releasing the anger. I think I really got it that it's a false concept that if I really let it out, it releases it. It just got bigger and bigger and stronger and stronger until it was like a black fire burning in my gut. So painful and unpleasant.

Until finally I gave up. I mean, I gave up thinking I could do something about it. And I just went out and said, "Okay, I'll just be with anger." That's when I learned about stomping meditation instead of walking meditation. I went way out in the backfield and I was just stomping, stomping. Anger, anger. That was as precise as I could get with mindfulness. But it was good enough.

I stomped for a while, an hour or so, and then gradually it becomes walking. And huge anger becomes burning and tightness and black ash in my stomach. I really learned, first, that it is possible to be with anger. It doesn't feel good. There's nothing pleasant about it. It's not like I came out of that like, "Yes, I'm really a great yogi." It felt bad from beginning to end. But I really saw the suffering and the nature of separation in the experience of aversion that strongly.

This is again Joko Beck. She says, "Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness?" That's what's so hard. Can we just find in ourselves the willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness? She calls it letting the mud settle without having to do something right away. It's hard, whether the confusion is anger or fear. And all that is, is mindfulness. So we just do the best we can, but finding how to rest in it.

It is difficult. And the other form of aversion that is fear—one of the things that makes it difficult—our fear of experiencing the unpleasant, our projection of how bad it's going to feel to be with this unpleasant experience, is already aversion. It's the fear, and that's what keeps us holding life, holding experience at a distance.

We can go to incredible lengths to avoid an imagined unpleasant experience. I don't know if you've ever noticed yourself doing that here. I do it a lot in my daily life. When I notice it, it's really helpful, because the fear of unpleasantness causes me to subject myself to so many contortions and so much more difficult and unpleasant experience than just meeting the original unpleasant experience. It's quite amusing, actually.

Just a recent example: some months ago a very good friend asked me if I would come teach a weekend with him in Canada at a certain time next year. I knew the minute he asked me that it was not going to be possible because my schedule was really packed. I knew that. But he was really trying to talk me into it. He's a very good friend. I never see him. I hadn't seen him for three years. And so right away, this coagulation of fear arose: If I say no, I'll feel badly because he'll feel badly, and he won't like me anymore, and he'll think I don't like him.

So I stalled. That was months ago. And I went through all kinds of contortions, trying to shift around all these commitments I have for next year to find a way to fit in flying up to Canada for this particular retreat at this particular time—even though I already feel overextended, and I'm really working to find balance in the way that I teach, and I get really stressed. Even with all of that, I went to huge lengths to try to switch everything around in order to avoid the projected unpleasant feeling of his disappointment and being mad at me. It's ridiculous, really. And it turned out to be impossible—I couldn't do it. So then for the last three weeks I've been putting off calling him to tell him. Every day I think, "I've got to call him." And fear comes up, fear of how he's going to feel, and then he's not going to like me, and oh no, another person doesn't like me, I can't make the world happy. Every day I have this thought. And so there's this heavy... it's ridiculous.

Finally, last night, I got home from talking in Cambridge. I got home at midnight, and there's a message from him on my machine. I thought, "No, I've got to call." His message said, "Please call before nine in the morning." So I called him. I was trapped, no way out. It was totally pleasant. He completely understood. It was lovely to reconnect. None of the unpleasantness that I projected even happened. I submitted myself to four months of ongoing unpleasant experience to avoid that moment that didn't even turn out to be unpleasant. It's insane. This is really ignorance at its highest pitch—separation, disconnection with reality.

And if I would just meet a moment of fear, we would save ourselves months of suffering and torment. So think of that next time you find yourself going to some incredible contortions here to avoid the pain that's going to come in the next moment, or the next sitting, or the next time you hear that sound. Just dropping into the experience will save you all that grief. I wish I could just pass it on to myself.

So not only does aversion separate us from experience, it completely distorts our perception of reality. It distorts our judgment. When we're in fear or anger or aversion, we can't make any kind of balanced, clear decision because we can't come from knowing what's really true. Really, once I'm done with the fear of what my friend was going to say, knowing him all these years—did I really think he was going to blast me and hate me because I happened to be busy a particular weekend next year? Of course not. That's ridiculous. But the fear, the separation from experience, completely distorts our judgment. So we can find ourselves doing all kinds of unwise things and really not knowing it.

Okay, that's kind of broad and obvious. Well, it's broad—maybe it's not always obvious. I want to mention another manifestation of this aversion, which you think of as holding back from experience, that's very prevalent. It's been coming up a lot in interviews. But it can be much more subtle, so sometimes we don't recognize it. And it's the form of aversion that we would often call resistance.

Resistance just means, "No, I just don't want to be here with this"—whatever *this* is.

Sometimes resistance is really obvious. The two-year-old throwing a tantrum: "No, no way, I don't want to walk now and nobody's going to make me." That's obvious.

But sometimes—and someone brought this up in a really clear way today, I really liked the way he talked about it—sometimes it's a very soft and quiet but pervasive background mental state of resistance that's actually coloring our perception of anything arising in the moment. We're not really recognizing it because it's not hard, it's not harsh. In fact, as he was saying, often it's a stance, a mental state that has become

very familiar to us throughout our life. Maybe for some of us resistance has been, as it were, a protection against pain and suffering that perhaps as a child was actually too great to think we could bear. Even without that, we just have developed a stance of holding ourselves a little bit away from experience, feeling that it's a protection, a friend.

And so when this mental state, this pervasive mind state of resistance arises, we might not recognize it as such. But how it actually feels is really comfortable—like an old friend. Or as this person was saying, it's sort of like wrapping yourself in a warm old blanket. You know, you just think, "Oh, I just don't think I'll sit right now. I don't really think I need to pay so much attention to the breath or noting. I'll just kind of sit and be at ease." And it just feels kind of nice and comfortable. But if you could really notice it, it's resistance. It's a form of aversion. The effect it has is of just keeping attention a little bit removed from experience.

So you might find, trying to meet the breath, that because there's no big thing going on, you just can't quite get there. You try to notice sensation—you're aware of it, but there's really this feeling of disconnection. The energy isn't quite there, and you can't quite figure out what's going on.

Again, open up. I'll often just ask myself, "What's happening now?" And then in this big background picture, I'll notice: oh. I just kind of don't want to be here. I just don't want to be feeling my mind and my body. It's that simple.

And rather than try to push through it, simply turn around and notice the resistance. Actually, if you use noting, note it. If you're not using noting, really notice it. Let that be the place of connection. Resistance, resistance. Just kind of let it wash through and really feel it. And again, it doesn't have to be unpleasant even. It's almost like, "This is my old friend, I don't want to let go of this." But at least we're noticing, we're connecting, and the resistance is not being fed.

One other way that resistance often manifests—and in this way can be unrecognized—the Buddha said, using this phrase, "an untaught worldling" (that's people who don't really look at how the mind is working): "An untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness." Therefore, one proceeds when faced with painful feelings to look for and enjoy sense pleasures. And in doing that, the tendency of the mind and heart to lust, to grasp after pleasant feelings, comes to underlie the mind, comes to be a sort of underlying pervasive tone in the mind.

And so sometimes we might notice—we don't actually notice aversion—we notice we're getting lost over and over again in pleasant fantasy. And you really notice it, you notice the pleasantness, and you come back and you get this feeling something else is going on but you don't know what. Or sometimes it's not even just as simple as pleasant fantasy, but we find ourselves actively going after pleasure. Somehow food, the pleasantness in food, suddenly assumes a tremendous importance on a particular day, a series of days. Or we're just lusting after reading anything. You know those times when you just read the toilet bowl cleanser over and over and over? Anything, for some reason. Some pleasant hit, but we don't quite realize what it is we're doing.

At times it is wanting pleasant. At times, again, back up and look a little more broadly. It might be a manifestation of resistance, a slight holding ourselves away. There's something going on that's difficult or unpleasant to be with that we're not even aware of, and it's manifesting in this restless search for pleasure.

And really that's why we're so lucky to be on retreat, because I feel in life we do this a lot. Ever find yourself in the car on a quest for ice cream or cookies? Or you go out to do an errand and suddenly you must stop in the bakery and get a cookie.

And I'll check in and ask myself, why? I'm not even hungry. I've really learned to do this now, because nine times out of ten, some vague unpleasant or unhappy memory has come up, or some emotion, some longing, some loneliness that I didn't really notice. And it channels into this impulse: well, let me just get something sweet, and then I'll be happy again.

I actually learned this during the first three-month course I ever sat. I hope to save you from doing this. It was well into the course, sometime in November. It's the only time I kind of broke retreat. I had a car here, and I went into Barre and bought a big bag of chocolate chip cookies. Not the good kind—you can't get the good kind in Barre, so don't even go looking, because you won't find any. This was a really bad thing I did, so don't think about it.

But I brought the cookies back to my room, and I started just eating one after the other after the other. I don't normally binge; it wasn't a typical thing for me. It took me two-thirds of the bag to notice what was actually happening—this empty, gnawing, lonely, fearful feeling. Each cookie I ate, I was hoping for it to drop into that feeling and fill it up. But it missed and went to my stomach. And then my stomach started really hurting, and I thought, oh, I get it. These two don't connect at all. Eating cookies doesn't help this feeling.

It was a major learning. Being with that feeling, with nurturing mindfulness—that's what was actually helpful. I could be with it, just hang out in it. It's okay. That's where the wisdom comes. That's where the freedom comes. So I hope I've saved you from having to learn that lesson the same way.

And then the last aspect of aversion I want to talk about—one that can easily arise even in just beginning to look at your experience here. Whenever we begin to think about a particular phenomenon, whether aversion or clinging, we become aware of how often it's actually arising, more than we ever noticed before we were mindful. It's easy to let that aversion turn against oneself and become quite judgmental, quite self-critical. "Oh no, I didn't realize how completely hateful I am as a person." Or "My practice is really awful because look how much I'm getting caught in this. She said be mindful, and I'm mindful, and it doesn't go away—it just gets bigger." Sometimes there's even a real fear: "All this aversion, this fear is generating more negative karma." And so there's resistance to being with it at all.

Just recognize that any form of judgment toward self or others is simply another form of aversion, another pulling back from experience. You don't have to believe it. Judgment is not an accurate evaluation of who you are or your experience—almost never. It only increases the cycle of distortion and denial.

I say this because the thing I've found most helpful in learning to understand these patterns, to feel a lot more spacious around the tendency of the mind to get locked into aversion or fear, is to make friends with it. See the judgment as just judging—don't believe it. Okay, it's just another arising condition, the lesson of anattā. It is not who I am.

As soon as I can see aversion arising due to conditions—the conditions of this particular mind—there's so much space around it. And in that space, it's become really fascinating to explore, to see just how a mind that has a long habit of aversion actually works. It brings in a lot of humor, a lot of lightness, and more and more sense of impersonality.

So let me share with you some of the things I've seen about how that conditioned, aversive mind works. Not everybody is the same, of course. When I said I'm an expert on aversion, it's because—well, we joke around about the different personality types, how some people's conditioning tends more toward aversion while other minds go more easily toward greed, and some more easily toward delusion. We don't get away with anything—we all get all of it, don't worry. But some of our minds tend more in one direction than another.

This way of talking about things can be useful if it helps you see how the mind is working. It's not useful if you're going to start identifying and typing yourself and making yourself crazy. But in that way of looking at experience, my mind is definitely a classic aversion type. They say, for example, if you want to check your type: when you walk into a room, what do you notice first?

Aversion types will walk in—if you're traveling with someone, going into a hotel room together—and I'll immediately notice what's wrong with that bed. It's kind of sagged. It's too close to the bathroom. The mattress looks a little lumpy. That one's near the window—I'll take that one.

My friends who are more greed-oriented would walk in and say, "Oh, that's a beautiful bed. The light from the window is really nice. It's sitting very lovely. I like the sense of space around it. And this area over there—I'll take that one."

We both focus in on the same bed, but one from what's wrong and one from what's nice. And the delusion type just wouldn't really notice. So my advice is to travel with a delusion type. It works out really well.

I can see I'm not going to get through all this tonight. I didn't want to leave you on a totally depressing note—I did have some things prepared about working with aversion, but I don't think we're going to get to them. I'll have to continue next time.

I just want to continue this train of thought because it's gotten really interesting to me. It's lightened things up completely to notice that what happens in a mind conditioned to aversion is that given a whole field of experience, the mind will go right to what's unpleasant.

I was on a ferry in Thailand a couple of years ago. A beautiful sunny day, lovely water, just about an hour ride to get to this beach. Everything was pleasant—with my friends, sitting up in the sun, looking down at the water. There were a lot of people on the ferry. And I completely zeroed in on one woman who was really making a spectacle of herself. And my mind said, "She's obviously American. Americans are always the ones. People hate Americans when they're traveling. Everyone can tell I'm an American too." And I went through this whole thing. She was American—it was true. And over in Thailand there aren't that many Americans, more other nationalities. But anyway, I pulled back and noticed this. Actually, there was so much pleasant and neutral experience happening, and that unpleasantness was really minor. But this mind just goes right for that, and then pulls back and separates from everything else, and the whole story builds up. It's quite amusing if you can just see the mind do that.

I've also noticed that if anything new arises in experience—something new, unexpected, some change—if you come and ask me, "I have this new idea for something," the immediate response, before it even bypasses conscious awareness, is no. It's no good. I don't like it. It's not going to be as good as it is now. Even if how it is now is horrible.

I've learned this about my mind. If I can keep my mouth shut and let it go—"No, that's no good, it stinks"—and then, okay, that's done with, I can evaluate in a quite balanced way. Yeah, maybe that would be nice. Really look at it.

If we believe or get reactive to that aversion, then right away we're caught in it, and I have to defend why it's a bad idea. Or then I have to let down and say, "Oh, I'm really sorry, I'm being a jerk," and then I turn the negativity against myself. But if you can just see it without reaction, there's space again. You don't have to buy into it.

And underneath that, you begin to see that what triggers the negativity is actually fear. Anything new coming into my experience elicits fear. Nothing to do with rationality. It's very slight.

Don't even notice it. As soon as I can see that, it's okay. Unseen, it triggers a whole solidified reaction.

And it can be so subtle. I noticed the other morning, whenever I fill the tea kettle to heat the water, I invariably put in way too much water, and it takes a lot longer to heat, and I'm always in a hurry in the morning. Franz is always saying, "Why do you put in so much water? It's obvious, it's too much." I noticed the other morning—it's fear. I put in the water, I can tell it's enough, and then I think, "But it might not be enough. And then I'll have to heat up some more." So I throw in another bit of water, that whole extra bit is too much, and I have to wait the extra time. Every single day I do this. That level—just a little shoot of fear—it's fascinating. It doesn't have to be any judgment, but just to see how the mind works. And then it's operating in a ground of freedom, in a ground of anatta, in a ground of selflessness.

I'm really not going to be able to finish this tonight. I think I'll continue next time because I don't want to just leave you with, "Here's all the ways we're aversive—go deal with it." I'll give a very quick summary of how to work with it.

The first and always resort, our greatest protection, is mindfulness. At whatever level you can bring the mindfulness in, because it's connection. Whether it's to the immediate sense contact that's eliciting the reaction of aversion, whether it's on the broad level of stomping, stomping, anger, anger, or whether it's in the subtle background

sense of a flavor of resistance or denial in the mind that you can't really touch but you can intuit, you can feel—all of those levels of mindfulness are helpful. They connect us with reality, take us out of identification with the negativity.

A second mode of balancing is something I talked about last week in wise attention: to see when we're hopelessly caught, or you can't really tell where you're getting caught in the negativity—you just know it feels too big or too confusing—and that's to deliberately balance your perception, to bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy. For example, I notice myself thinking on retreat at the end of the day, "This has been a really crummy day. I feel rotten, my practice has been awful, the people here are a pain in the neck, this has just been horrible, the weather is bad." And I'll just stop and say, "Okay, balance. Deliberately notice what's not wrong." Almost like counting my blessings. At first I have to stretch a little bit. "Okay, I have a nice warm bed to lie in on my break. I have my health. Actually, it's lovely to be here." At first it feels forced. Pretty soon it's just flowing—all the beautiful and pleasant and all the grace in my life. And it really balances the coloring of unpleasantness. Or just open from the physical to hearing, to seeing, or go take a walk. All the different ways we've talked of backing off, balancing perception.

The third, and this is what I want to talk about more next week especially, is to work with the metta practice. The Buddha talked about five different ways of working with annoyance or a grudge you hold against somebody when you're caught in it. And the first one is to practice metta. Practice metta to yourself. And then to the person or the thing you're upset with—but I would really advise to yourself first, so it's not this kind of, "I hate this person's guts—may you be happy, may you be peaceful," and fooling ourselves. Open to your own pain. The metta does not deny that. It actually gives it the ground of acceptance so that rather than judging ourselves for not being perfect, there's a sense of metta, of acceptance, of just who we are that gives an open-heartedness and strength and courage to then be with whatever it is that's difficult.

And the fourth is—again, I don't mean to make this sound like a last resort—but again, it's patience. Not the patience of, "Oh God, all right, until it's over." But again, it's connection to just be with things as they are, to give up any expectation, to give up any sense of what should be happening, or wishing that things were other, just making friends with the experience of fear, aversion, whatever it is, as it is in this moment.

All of these are aspects of wisdom, because these are ways of connecting, of really knowing what's true rather than being lost in the aversion which keeps us from knowing reality as it is. The connection again accentuates, lets us re-recognize our essential

completion, whether it is with fear or aversion or self-judgment or knee pain or beauty or joy. So this aspect of patience, of just being with what is, and giving up any grandiose thoughts of getting somewhere, is actually a great manifestation of wisdom.

I'll end tonight by saying that I don't mean to make it sound simple. Aversion, dosa, fear—these are very difficult states to recognize, to be with, to have spaciousness and kindness toward ourselves and them when we're experiencing them. Please don't judge yourself or think that if we could really see this clearly, it's all going to go away.

And on the other hand, we don't want to make such good friends with our aversion and fear that we actually think, "You know, it's really not too bad. In fact, it's kind of serving me, this aversion. I think I won't really do too much about it. I'll just wallow in it a little bit."

I'm exaggerating, but there's a way we cannot quite summon enough—I would say commitment—in ourselves. Commitment not to hate ourselves, not to think we've got to uproot this with a pickaxe, not to think it's never going to arise. But the commitment to keep meeting the unpleasant with a willingness, as Joko said, to sit in the middle of it. Not to feed it, not to push it away, but to really let ourselves just sit there with mindfulness, knowing that our greatest purpose is really liberation.

And in order to come to freedom, it's only in this moment, going into the experience in this moment, rather than trying to avoid it in any way.

This can take great courage. It can sometimes be discouraging because it's moment after moment. But you can turn that around and say, "Okay, this moment I got lost. Now this moment, there's a new opportunity."

I'll close with this from Yoshio Kenpo:

"The essence of awakened enlightenment, Buddha nature, is present in everyone. It can't be changed or degenerated, no matter what we do."

And that's really good news.

"Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded."

This recognition of our true nature is the borderline between Buddhas and ordinary beings, and it's the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives.

So every moment is a new crossroad, a new opportunity to recognize our Buddha nature.

Let's just take a moment.

CHAPTER 293

Perception and Thought

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines why thoughts—which are inherently substanceless, "less than a cobweb"—come to have such power over us. Drawing from Buddhist psychology and her own meditation experiences, she traces how suffering arises through the combination of misperception (saññā) and unwise attention, leading to the proliferation of thought known as papañca.*
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> *Wilson explains how the three roots of unwholesome action—greed, hatred, and delusion—distort perception in each moment of consciousness, causing us to perceive what is not actually there. She shares vivid personal examples, from perceiving a nurse as demonic while in a fearful mental state, to mistaking fireworks for warfare in Vancouver, illustrating how misperception leads to solid-seeming conclusions and reactive behavior. The talk explores how papañca is fueled by three factors: wrong view (the basic sense of self), craving (which "puts feathers on the object craved"), and māna (conceit and the comparing mind).*
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> *Referencing the Buddha's teaching "In the seen there is only the seen, in the heard there is only the heard," Wilson invites practitioners to recognize that everything beyond bare sensory experience is interpretation—"we're making it all up." Through direct encounter with experience, moment by moment, the seeming solidity of thought dissolves, revealing that thoughts need not enslave us. When we understand a thought as simply a thought, arising and passing in awareness, we discover the liberation inherent in wise attention.*

I want to speak about the nature of thought and how we tend to get wrapped up in something that is so completely ephemeral—how much of our experience at times in meditation comes to seem like a battle with this experience of thinking, with the process of thought.

So often it's almost as if someone will come in and evaluate their practice by how many thoughts they had or the quality of the thoughts, and thinking assumes this incredibly solid, suffering aspect of experience. How does it come to be that way?

Certainly thought is useful. We wouldn't deny that if we understand the nature of thought, we can certainly use it. The process of thought, of course, got each of us here. Without thought, these noises I'm making with my mouth wouldn't really be able to make sense when they come into your ear. It's quite amazing, the process of thought. But how does it come to be such a struggle?

Because if we really look at a thought, just the thought itself, what is it? How much substance does a thought have? How much power does a thought have? If you're looking at the thought itself, it's nothing. It's less than a cobweb. There's just nothing there.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says: "Like waves, all of the activities of this life have rolled endlessly on, yet they have left us empty handed. Millions of thoughts have run through our minds, but all they have done is increase our confusion and dissatisfaction. When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors. Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the coming together of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way. They have no tangible reality at all. There is therefore no logical reason why thought should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them."

Helpful, right? No logical reason when you look at it, because there's nothing there. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us. But as long as we take our deluded thoughts as real, they will continue to torment us mercilessly, as they have been doing throughout countless lifetimes.

It feels like that sometimes, doesn't it? It feels like just in the five weeks here, you've gone through countless lifetimes of thoughts tormenting us.

So I want to talk a bit tonight about directing our attention to thought itself and seeing some of the ways that it seems to become so solid. The obvious way we get enslaved is through a combination of perceiving wrongly and unwise attention. In other words, we don't look at the thought itself, but we get completely seduced and believe in the content.

Why is the thought of judging so painful? Just "I'm a stupid jerk"—there's nothing to that. If you see it just as thought energy... We really give it power by identifying and grasping at the content, and then we suffer. And we don't seem to notice that the content can be totally opposite from one thought to the next. We still continue to get seduced in this way and really suffer.

A friend told me he heard Andrea Levine say at a workshop, speaking about the unreliable nature of our thinking mind. She said, you know, for example, your mind will say, "Oh, have another piece of chocolate cake. You'll really like it. It'll be good for you." So you eat it. As soon as you've finished: "I wouldn't have done that if I were you. It's not really so good for you. You're really kind of giving into craving." And we believe in both. And we suffer.

Really, one of the revelations of our continued exploration in practice is that we don't have to be afraid of thinking. You don't have to make the ending of thought the goal of your practice, the ideal of freedom and peace. First, that's a waste of time—it won't last even if you do manage to get there. And second, it's still giving thoughts this power.

So can we begin to just explore their ephemeral nature instead?

One way to start at the very beginning of the arising of a thought—one way that we get so far afield from just the basic simplicity of experience, "you're a stupid jerk," a thought arising, gone—is through misperception.

I know Joseph spoke a little bit about the factor of perception in his talk the other night. Perception meaning, quite specifically in Buddhist psychology, this quality that arises in each moment of consciousness of recognition, of discernment. It involves memory. So, for example, there's hearing, and it can be like a quick moment pre-perception, and then—ah, the bell. Even the words "the bell" might not form, but there's a knowing, a recognition: that's a bell, or *the* bell. Or you might recognize it's a bell, but not *the* bell. It's a different bell, and I don't know which bell that is. But you still recognize the general quality "bell." Or if we're really clear, if there's no delusion in the mind, there could be a sound, and we recognize: I don't know what that is. That's also, in a way, perception.

One of the ways that we get so lost in thinking begins with misperception—perceiving wrongly. The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from misperception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge. That's exactly our whole practice. The whole emphasis of mindfulness is on direct experience, and each moment of direct experience cuts through misperception.

So I'll give some examples of what I mean. How do we misperceive? It's one of the ways that our old friends—greed, hatred, and delusion—manifest in our moment-to-moment experience. If any one or some friendly combination of these three is present in consciousness in a moment of contact, in a moment of perception, and we're not aware of it, it can completely color or distort the perception so that we actually perceive what is not there. This is one of the functions of ignorance. Our perception is distorted through the lens of whichever one of these *kilesas*, these torments of mind, is present.

Here's an example—this happens in our life all the time. What's scary is that mostly we don't recognize it. We really think, "This is how I'm seeing things."

One time I was in the hospital. I'd been there some days, and they give you drugs because I was in a lot of pain. After some days I started to get into a weird mental state. I later heard there's something called ICU psychosis, where your mind is just a little gone for a while. Well, I was in this incredibly fearful, aversive mental state, not quite recognizing it. And a nurse came at six in the morning to wake me up and weigh me—very important to know how much I weighed. I woke up totally in fear and anger, and I visually perceived her as demonic. I mean, her face, the way she looked—like an evil demonic creature. Which is how I responded to her, because we respond from how we perceive. This is the way misperception continues. I think I really yelled at her and pushed her away.

The next day, when I was in my more normal state of mind, the poor same lady had to come and wake me up at six o'clock to weigh me. And I could see she's a perfectly nice-looking lady—only she looked really scared on this day. And I felt really badly.

If I hadn't seen her the second day, though, really how I saw her that first day was how she was. We really believe—we don't know this misperception is happening. What's scary is how much this is actually going on in our experience, and it leads us to all sorts of action.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When you look at a pencil, you perceive it, but the pencil itself may be very different from the pencil in your mind." This is the basic misperception. And it can be through any of the *kilesas*, but of course the root distortion, the root cause of misperception, is confusion or ignorance, delusion—just not seeing what's there.

It can seem relatively benign. We just see something, don't really recognize it, but instead of knowing we don't recognize it accurately, the mind sort of reaches into past memory and makes something up—that that must be what it is.

I remember once I was walking up on Hoes Hill Road, on the dirt road off of that, and I looked over to the side in the woods. I saw this kind of cliff with a lake of snow, melted snow, at the bottom. I got really confused because, you know, I've lived here for twenty years and I'd never seen a cliff down there right off the side of the road. I started getting extremely disoriented and confused and upset. Then I stopped, went back, and looked again. It was just a puddle with reflections from the trees and the sky in a certain way that, unrecognized, my mind just made up into the closest thing it could get to. That's the way delusion or ignorance functions to distort perception.

And it can take us much further than that.

I was in Vancouver teaching a course, staying alone in a friend's apartment. I was reading at night a book about the civil war in Beirut, and just as I was going to sleep in this unfamiliar apartment, I started hearing these big booming sounds going off. There was no holiday or anything, and these big explosions kept happening. First I just went and looked out the window, couldn't see anything. And then I thought, well, it's mortar fire, it must be, because it's not a holiday.

My mind went into this whole thing: just because it's Vancouver doesn't mean that something like that couldn't happen. What makes you think it only happens in Beirut? What makes you think you're safe just because you're in the West?

I kept running from window to window. I actually turned on the radio and tried to listen to see what was happening. And then because nothing was on it, I thought, well, they always go to the communication centers first and they're lulling us into being relaxed. Really, they've taken over—I don't know who "they" even were—but they've taken over the city. This went on for twenty minutes or so, and I was working myself into quite a state.

Finally—I never actually saw it, because if I'd seen what it really was, it would have broken through right away—I went out to the front room and looked over toward where the World's Fair had been some years ago. And it just clicked. I said, "Oh, I bet there were fireworks," even though it was no holiday. I just knew it was fireworks. It's that kind of sound. And the whole thing dropped away.

It was funny, you know. I could laugh about that one. It didn't go any further. But that's how a misperception—and we really think we know—leads to action, to not seeing clearly. The thoughts that come out of the misperception are very strong and solid. We really identify with them and we act. This is our basic delusion.

It's fine when we can recognize it. It's great when we can recognize it. Would that we could recognize it more often than we do.

The delusion part is that sense of not being able to recognize, not being able to know something for what it is—like being in a fog. Or like times, I don't know if it happens to you, but it happens to me a lot: I'll be driving and just all of a sudden have a moment of complete blankness where I don't know where I am, what country I'm in, what season it is—just completely blank. I could look around, and even though it's Barry, I can't recognize anything. It can last for a moment or two until I can find something in that present moment to glom onto. "Oh yeah, oh yeah, right, this is the white car. That belongs to IMS. I must be here now. That means it's the three-month course"—some line of logic like that.

That's just a moment of delusion. Unrecognized, what it leads to is wrong view—misperceiving and then acting on it, as I did when I was in Vancouver.

And of course the basic wrong view, the basic misperception that underlies most of the confusing and painful things that we get ourselves involved in through thought and through action, is the misperception of ourselves. It's the misperception of our moment-to-moment experience that gives us the perceived sense that we're solid, we're separate, we're sort of unchanging through time.

While some perceptions are easy to see through—like the puddle in the woods or the war in Vancouver—some perceptions are much more difficult to recognize as inaccurate. One of the reasons our misperception of ourself is so difficult to see through is because things are happening so quickly. That's why there's such an emphasis, I think, on the insights into anicca, into impermanence. Because when things happen so quickly, it seems solid—like if you spin a torch really fast at night, it looks like a solid circle.

So it might be fine that Buddhist psychology tells us there are seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye, and that they're all discrete, happening one after the other. And that what seems like a solid body I have, continuing in time, is actually just a series of elements arising and passing, arising and passing. Or that what we call our whole sense of "me" is just a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a thought—just happening, arising and passing so quickly.

But that doesn't really help us that much, to read that or to be told that. I can say, "Yeah, that makes sense." But my perception, moment to moment, is that I'm really solid here. And I can feel like I extend back in time as far as I can remember.

So if we don't really look, we find that even if intellectually we want to believe something other, the inaccurate perceptions that are happening—that we don't recognize—are actually forming the assumptions and conclusions we draw about who we are, about our moment-to-moment experience.

Again, that's why our practice is about direct encounter—directly meeting experience over and over and over, without assumption. And it's not so easy, because a lot of the time we don't even know we're making any assumptions.

Intellectually, I find it helpful to know this stuff, but it's never really cut it as far as any sense of freedom. It's taken this continual looking, looking, looking, until suddenly we see: oh, things aren't the way I thought they were at all.

This is from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist. He's writing about a man who was in his fifties and had been blind since he was about five, and had adapted quite well to his life.

He lived by himself, was engaged to be married, worked as a masseur, and was quite at ease getting through the world. His mode of putting the world together was through touch, of course, and he was quite competent and at ease in that mode.

When he was about fifty, doctors found that they actually could do an operation that would give him some sight. His family, his fiancée, everyone was all excited about this. They did the operation on one eye, and everyone stood around waiting for the great unveiling when they took off the patch, just so excited about how happy he was going to be to be able to see.

This is Oliver Sacks: "Virgil told me later that he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of that blur came a voice that said, 'Well?' Then, and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this blur, this chaos of light and shadow, must be a face—the face of his surgeon."

He only realized that because he knew that voices come out of faces. So that must be a face, but it didn't coalesce into any sense.

Oliver Sacks goes on: "For those of us who are born with sight, we can scarcely imagine his confusion, because we who are born with a full complement of all the senses and correlate these together constantly, we create a sighted world from the start—a world of visual objects and concepts and meanings. When we open our eyes each morning, it's upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning to see. We are not given the world of sighted objects. We make our world through incessant experience, memory, and reconnection. But when Virgil opened his eye after being blind for forty-five years, there were no visual memories to support a perception. There was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence."

His nerves were working, his eyes were working, but his brain could make no sense of the visual input. As Sacks continued following Virgil, it got a little better, but not much. In fact, his life was actually much more difficult for him after he got some sight back. It would be so exhausting trying to make sense of the world through sight that he would often just close his eyes and go back to eating with his fingers or shaving in the dark, because he never really could make a lot of meaning out of the world of sight.

I love that example because it helps me break down this sense of how assumptions I make—that things are the way they appear to be—operate without my even realizing I'm making that assumption. We take these perceptions for granted until something gets us to really look.

Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "We don't wake up because we have not really understood that we're dreaming, and we are renewing the dream from moment to moment."

So our practice, the practice of mindfulness, is to get us—as Thich Nhat Hanh often says—to look deeply. To look past assumptions, to even look past what we think the recognized perception is, and just meet the bare experience: the sight, the sound, the thought, the sensation, the smell, whatever it might be.

When we can look deeply without believing all the thoughts and conclusions and assumptions that seem to make reality so solid, when we can just keep meeting experience, then some of these assumptions about how things are, about how we think we're perceiving our experience, begin to break down. And that's what's happening in its own way for each person here, whether you believe it or not.

Sometimes it's dramatic. I know different people have brought up this sense of, "Well, if the sense of impermanence is supposed to be this arising and passing of elements—sensations just coming and going..." I get from a lot of people a sense that this is what we're supposed to experience to really know impermanence. And it's true—it's one experience that does bring in more of a sense of impermanence, because you really see that there's no solid connection.

But it also happens in other ways. It happens in seeing the impermanent, ephemeral nature of emotions, of the sense of self. It happens when we see that we're sitting in what feels like "my knee is killing me," and when we really let go of that idea and just note the arising appearances. There's sensation, there's unpleasant, there's a thought "my knee," and actually there's no sense of where knee actually is. Then there's an image of me with my knee in it that arises, and then, "Oh yeah, my knee." This coming and going of different sense experiences that, without examination, we put together into one gestalt: "This is my knee and it's killing me."

And there are many other ways. Look for yourself. With any of the sense experiences, notice how our assumptions begin to break down. Sometimes it's exhilarating. Sometimes it's really scary. Sometimes it's very disorienting. A lot of the times when you feel like you're breaking into new ground, so to speak, this is what's going on. In some way, an unquestioned assumption is being challenged, and we don't have a new one yet to put in its place to make us feel comfortable.

Our sense of self-image, especially when we're suffering from it, arises in very much the same way. We isolate a particular perception—whether it's a thought or a felt sense, or we look at ourselves in the mirror, whatever it is—we isolate that particular perception, all the thoughts and conclusions that come out of it, then we dwell on it, ignore any perception to the contrary, and it seems really true. That's when thought is a burden. That's when we're really enslaved by thought.

So notice when we're doing this. For example, some people will often say, "My concentration is no good, I can't stay on the breath." That's a particular experience, a perception, a conclusion. Any other perceptions that would challenge it are not noticed, and this self-image of "my practice stinks, I can't concentrate" is carried around, and there's a lot of suffering from it.

Quite often when we talk about it, what emerges is that you can't stay on the breath because so many different experiences are coming and going that actually impermanence is just streaming as experience. But we're trying to make it permanent and stay on the breath, and you just can't do it.

You can't actually fight the fact of impermanence happening. So it's simply a matter of switching the perception. "Oh, in fact, my practice is really good—I'm seeing impermanence!" And then that changes too, and we keep looking for impermanence instead of recognizing, "Well, things are quiet now. Just stay on the breath."

This same dynamic plays out in the whole perception of who we are in our lives. "I'm such a negative, aversive person." You might have ten, twenty, thirty thoughts that are kind, that are generous. You might have all these really loving impulses. And then one selfish, aversive thought comes up—and that's the one we notice. The rest are ignored, totally not identified with. They have no reality. But this one negative, aversive thought? This is true. Our self-image becomes wrapped around it, and there's no balance of perception.

This is one of the ways we become enslaved by the content of thought—by picking out a particular perception, ignoring all the others, and then dwelling on it. The perception itself might even be somewhat accurate, such as "that was an aversive thought." But it's just a thought, and we don't recognize the extra identification with it, the way the mind perceives it, takes it, and runs.

So this is the next aspect of thought I want to explore: starting from the mistaken perception and believing it, dwelling on the conclusion—which is powerful enough on its own. As Nisargadatta says, "The world appears to you so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. If you stop thinking of it so much, it will dissolve into thin mist."

It's not the thoughts themselves. They can come and go. They dissolve into thin mist all by themselves. It's this holding on to the conclusions and then building on that with a sense of self that makes the world so real. So there's an inaccurate perception, a description of it, a conclusion fueled by the mental state—greed, hatred, or delusion coloring consciousness in that moment. And then there's this quality we call proliferation, where the mind just takes that perception and runs with it, far and fast, like the way my mind could go from "boom" to a war in Vancouver to turning on the radio in ten seconds.

This process, as you know, is called *papañca*—one of my favorite Pali words. I just love the way it sounds. *Papañca.* It's defined or described as not the misperception itself, but there's a perception, and then, the texts say, "what one perceives, one thinks about." It's just natural that thoughts arise accompanying experience—"this is the bell, that means it's the end of the sitting," or "does that mean it's lunchtime?" Those in themselves are not a problem, just thoughts arising, then associations.

But out of this, proliferation is manufactured when there is in the mind one or several of the disturbing mental factors—which I'll discuss in a moment. There's the perception, there's association, some stray thoughts, and all of a sudden this energy of craving, of comparing, of a sense of self comes up, and whoosh—it's turned into what the texts call "notions that assail and overwhelm a person." We're just beaten back, it feels like, by the power of this proliferating mind. Or it's called "the tendency of imagination to break loose and run riot." These descriptions are from the old commentaries.

And I would say it isn't even so much that the mind runs riot—the problem is that we believe it. The mind is breaking loose and running riot, and we're sitting there going, "Yeah, that's really the way it is." And then we are so far from being in touch with reality that we don't even know it. That's how suffering really happens. Boom, and we're at war.

Or here in retreat, as some people describe it: you're just sitting there minding your own business, somebody walks by, and so fast come all our associations with them, with ourselves, what we think of them, what we think of ourselves. Maybe we've never spoken to this person, but we really know what their past was like, what their personal-

ity is like, what their practice is like, what's going to happen to them in the future. As someone said to me the other day, "We really know it." We really think we know it. Things feel solid.

And what really happened in that moment? Very little. There was seeing. There was pleasant or unpleasant. And there were some thoughts. That was it. But out of that, so quickly, a whole solid reality arises. This is the process of proliferation. Seeing it is enough to cut the power of believing it.

It's fueled by—in the classic commentaries, they talk about three mental factors that tend to really fuel this proliferation. I just want to give examples of these, though I think there are really more, and you'll recognize them for yourself. I love seeing this process happening. It's not like we have to hate it. Once you see it happening, it just becomes really funny to observe how we are living in this totally mind-created world most of the time. It's much simpler than we actually think it is.

The first fuel is wrong view—the basic sense of self. This is obvious, because most of our suffering and misperceptions and identification is fueled by this. I'll just give one example, since it's always at the bottom of everything. One of my teachers said, "When the 'I' thought arises, in the twinkling of an eye, whole universes are created." This is really true. You could just be seeing, but as soon as there's "I'm seeing that," in a minute whole universes arise.

Here's an example of how just the subtle sense of "I" can lead into a whole papañca, even without any big story. This winter when I was sitting, I remember doing walking meditation, pretty focused. I just stopped and looked out the window when I got to the end of my line, and it was snowing—as it seemed to always be snowing. It was very present, but there was just this subtle sense of "I." I guess I wasn't even aware of it, but there was seeing, perception of snow. And then with that little sense of self came memory of snow in the past and how I felt about snow, the different times there had been snow in my childhood, and projecting snow into the future. Each thought itself was pretty light—there wasn't a lot of craving or aversion—but there was that subtle sense of self. And it went into this whole papañca about snow, basically about me, just from that seeing, just from that simple sense contact. It's not a huge experience of suffering or anything, but it's definitely getting involved in story that isn't happening at all. There's just seeing and thinking happening.

The second energy that really fuels this proliferation is—big surprise—craving. This can also be really fun to watch, because of how it works. There's a saying that craving puts feathers on the object that's craved. The craving actually invests the thing that the

mind is craving with desirability, with a sense of pleasurableness that might not actually be there in the particular experience at all. And then we just get lost in a whole proliferation of thought about it.

For example, again while I was sitting last year, this thought kept coming into my mind—an image of a street corner in Bangkok that, for some reason, every time it arose, the mind was colored with craving. I would go into this whole yearning for this street corner in Bangalampu that has absolutely nothing attractive about it. I don't care if I never see it again in my life. I have no idea what would seem so pleasant about it. So I could really see the process of how the craving feeds papañca in this moment. The image would come up and it would look so pleasant, so attractive. This yearning would come—I was in South Africa at the time—and I'd think, maybe I can change my flight and go back to Bangkok. I'd get into a whole thing about how I was going to call the travel agent, and this would go on for five minutes. Then suddenly: wait a minute, I never want to go back to Bangalampu, I don't want to change my flight. And it would stop. But it kept happening over and over and over. It was really a perfect example of how it's the craving itself that gives the sense of attractiveness to the particular object. And if it's strong enough, it could have led me to change my plans, to actually try to go back there.

Papañca doesn't just have to mean thoughts, you know. If it gets strong enough, it can lead us into all kinds of action. Those times when you're sitting in your room and suddenly you have to leap up and run out the door—to look in case you got that note you've been waiting for, or check the mail, whatever it is—the craving got so strong that it leads to action.

I was walking again this winter, and it was so strong. About half an hour previously, I'd been in one of those spaces where I just want to be on retreat forever—it's so wonderful, this is really it, you think you'll give up your life and stay on retreat. And I was walking, and a thought of my parents came up, a very loving thought, like an image of them, and a sense of wanting to see them. It got so strong so quickly that I was about to stop walking and go to the phone and make a reservation. It was really strong, so strong that it brought me up short. The only thing that stopped me was remembering that half an hour previously I had been so into the retreat that I never wanted to stop. So I thought, maybe this will pass too. But that's the strength of it.

of the proliferation of mind when we don't see it. The thoughts become a totally solid world.

So this is a really important thing if we can remember it: just because a thought arises together with a strong emotion, it doesn't make it true. And the stronger the emotion doesn't make it more true. Really, they have very little correlation—whether something is true or accurate and how strong the emotion is. I found that really helpful, if I can remember it.

The third mental factor that feeds proliferation—and this is very strong and also very subtle—is what is called *mana* in Pali, translated usually as conceit. I was just flipping through the references to it in the Majjhima Nikaya, and usually when it's referred to there, it's referred to as "the conceit I am"—that really subtle underlying flavor almost, or scent you could say, of a sense of self. That's the very subtle part.

But there's another aspect that is not so subtle, that most of us experience really a lot. And that's the mind of comparing—the sense, actually it feels constant sometimes, of comparing every body or every experience to something else. Either it's better than I am, or it's worse than I am, or we're the same. This mental quality of comparing is one of the strongest impulses for a huge amount of proliferation and an equally huge amount of suffering.

I don't know if you've noticed how unpleasant the sense of comparing can be, but it's helpful to really notice it and notice what's actually happening.

We can compare with others. That's obvious. Just that sense of walking and somebody walks past, and the comparing mind cannot let that happen without making a comparison. Better, worse, faster, slower, about the same. And of course it's endless, because we have to figure out comparing ourselves with every other person here. And since everyone changes from day to day, then we have to do it every day. We have to constantly reassess where we are on the scale of comparing. I mean, if you're really bored, okay, it's something to do—it'll keep your mind busy. But it's a lot of suffering. To just be, without seeing, is a lot easier.

We can also compare to the past, either to our own past experience, to memories. I remember, again, I was walking—I seem to notice a lot of this stuff when I'm walking—and was just aware of tightness. And then a memory arose of a walking period on another retreat, and it wasn't tight. That was all. That could have been all. Except then the mind says, "Yeah, it's really tight now. That other time was better. In fact, your practice stinks. How come you're so tight?" And then into the whole "I'm no good."

And in fact, if you notice, the whole sense of worthlessness, unworthiness, all the judgment—comparing is a really rife pool, you know, to breed the sense of unworthiness, the sense of worthlessness. Or if it happens to come up by itself, comparing is a really good way to strengthen it and keep it going. So to notice comparing is really, really helpful.

We can also compare to some image or ideal we have of how things should be—to something you heard in the instructions, to something you read, to something you didn't even read but you think maybe you read, but that's how the practice is supposed to be. Whatever it is, comparing is of course very subtle at times, but it's a really strong way to solidify the sense of self.

One teacher I was reading said that comparing arises when the mind fixates on differences. She was asked a question: "Why do people take this apparent world to be so real?" And the answer was: because they concentrate, they really focus on things, on specific things, and see differences, see diversity rather than unity.

It's not to say that seeing things necessarily means a sense of separation. But there is a way in comparing where we're really focused on this as compared to me. We're really seeing differences. And in that, there can only be a stronger sense of self and a stronger sense of separation.

But I noticed once, and I don't know if this will make sense—I really liked it. It was like a little insight that even when the mind is caught in delusion, there's a way that the ultimate truths show themselves.

I was noticing when I was in a really strong comparing mode, where if anyone would walk out of a door, there would be some judgment. They walk too close—they have no respect. They walk too fast—don't they know what's going on here? They walk too slow—they have no clear comprehension. Whatever it was, I suddenly realized it was totally self-centered. There's this sense of an unchanging reference point.

But the fact of total interdependence was really clear, because anything anybody did completely affected me. There was actually no way that anything could happen anywhere within my sense perception that I didn't feel a relatedness to it. It was just deluded, because all the relatedness was: how does it affect me, solid little me. But still, hidden under it was the sense of the interconnectedness of it all.

So somehow that quite amused me. And it also, in a strange way—this is sometimes how my mind has to find hope—that even when I'm totally caught in comparing and self, there can be a way to see through it to the fact that yes, we are all interconnected. I just have to see that I'm not the center of it all.

Looking at impermanence, awareness of impermanence, is what breaks down the comparing mind. On a logical level this makes sense, because in one way you see there's nothing solid to compare to. Either on the end of who's the better yogi—well, it's constantly changing. As I said before, there's no solid reference point externally, so to speak; it's always changing. And internally, there's no solid reference point to come back to for myself either.

Because just something as simple as: do I walk fast or slow? Some days fast, some days slow. Is my practice the way I like it? Some days yes, some days no. Some days it's the same, but the way I like it changed. So there is no really solid reference point. And the more we see that, any sense of comparing—there is no sense in it. So it starts to fall away.

Another thing that's helped me when I notice the comparing mind is strong: the most helpful approach is just to notice "comparing" and see if you can see what's actually happening. Often it's triggered by seeing. So a good practice at times when you feel pretty trapped in it is to deliberately just notice seeing, especially walking around, around other people.

For me, the dining room practice is really a great place to play with seeing how the comparing mind functions, and also to notice the peace on the odd moment when it's not there. It's like, oh, there's just what is. I don't have to do this relentless counting up and comparing—just tasting a bite.

I've found when the comparing is strong and when there's walking into the dining room with a really solid sense of me, kind of being barraged by all the activity and this constant measuring of this against me, this against me—that if I turn into a really open kind of practice, where instead of being so involved in my sensations or really careful with lifting, moving, placing, I actually open up and start being very present with hearing, with seeing... If I do that for some moments, sometimes the sense of solid Carol, or even a reference back to Carol, goes away, and there's just seeing and hearing. If there's a loud noise, there's just hearing, just sensation. And quite by itself, the reference point of me and them—who's that jerk who dropped the plate? Don't they know how to be mindful?—falls away. There's just seeing, hearing, sensing, emotion. And it all gets a lot lighter. The sense of separation tends to go away. So that's just something you might play with if you're noticing dining room practice is getting difficult.

All of these aspects that drive papañca tend to feed into strong storylines which contribute to maintaining our false assumption of self, the false assumption of me. One of the ways we can begin to notice that the sense of a continuing me is created is actually through our thoughts—this running commentary that you might have going all day. Or

not even the running commentary, but the way we take perceptions, make a conclusion, and then tell ourselves stories, describe ourselves, describe our experiences, make comparisons, all day long. Unless we really look, it can feel as though it's the same me. The same me is telling this story as was telling the one yesterday. But if you really look, they're completely different experiences.

So we can begin to see how a sense perception, whether it's accurate or not, can lead into a whole proliferation based on craving or sense of self or conceit or comparing—that we end up becoming. This whole process of moving from bare perception to becoming this quickly is really quite often at the basis of our sense of self. It's one of the ways thoughts seem so solid, one of the ways that thoughts can really be a strong suffering aspect of experience, where we can feel really enslaved—unless we look. And in the looking, that solidity just vanishes, and a thought just becomes a thought.

A simple example: when you're walking or sitting and you're really present, it's pretty common for, at some point, the thought to arise, "This is it, now I've got it," or "I'm doing well, mindfulness is strong, I'm a good yogi"—whatever the story is. And as the papañca runs, and it doesn't have to be strong, we pick out all the perceptions that affirm that, all the past wonderful things we did in our life, all the times we were successful, all the times people liked us. We imagine into the future how we're going to inspire, how our friends are going to be awestruck when we return home in a radiant halo glow. They'll just say, "Oh my God, what happened to you? It's amazing."

And then, of course, we catch this. And the next thought is, "Oh my God, what an idiot I am. So self-centered." And then just the reverse—everything we ever did wrong, everything we started and never finished, all the ways we've never been able to function in any kind of clear way, and on into the future where we come home and our friends say, "You went for three months and you're worse of a mess than when you left." It's possible.

And we get involved in each of those, and we don't stop to look—it's just thoughts. Joseph has this saying I really love: "We're making it all up." And it's absolutely true. We're completely making it up.

You know that pretty well-known sutta where the Buddha is talking to a man who has very urgently said, "You've got to teach me right now, I have no time." The Buddha was on his way to alms round and he didn't want to. He said, "I'll do it when I come back." And the man asked three times, so he gave him this very pithy teaching which says: In the seen there is only the seen. In the heard there is only the heard. In what is sensed, felt with the body, there is only that. In what is cognized, known with the mind, there is only what is cognized. That's all.

It's very pithy. Can you imagine actually living like that? Everything else is interpretation. It's helpful that we often have the same interpretation, because then we can sort of function together—the interpretation of what a retreat means. It's helpful we all more or less agree on that. And who's in which role, that we come in here and we know who's supposed to talk and who's supposed to listen, or it could be really confusing. And we know that's only for this moment. If I thought I'm supposed to talk, that's my role all the time, I have to talk every minute, be giving dharma talks—I'd be insufferable.

So it's helpful interpretation, but what our practice is doing is helping us come back to absolutely the bare experience, seeing that we're making everything else up. This can be scary, but it's incredibly liberating. Experiment with it.

One time I was sitting in my room, and I heard crickets outside. Usually, and it did then, this brings up a whole welling of nostalgia and poignancy—fall and endings of things and sadness and loneliness, the feeling of "I could die here and no one would know for three days." It was really going down that road. And I said, okay. I'm making it all up. A thought is a thought. Let me deliberately shift it.

So I went back to hearing, hearing the crickets. And I thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely? The sound of the crickets, to be here in this beautiful spot in nature." And that felt forced, okay? I was doing that on purpose. But that's as far as I did on purpose.

And then the whole papañca just took off. "Isn't it wonderful? Life is so great! Here I am at this retreat center, and I have the opportunity to sit with all these other wonderful people." And it was just as real as the one before—which is to say, neither of them was real. It was just the mind making up that particular story, that particular sense of self.

Lily Tomlin said, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific."

So that's our job. Let's be a little more specific. Let's just notice what's really happening as opposed to what we think is happening. And then, if we know it's thoughts, it's nothing to be afraid of. It doesn't have to be an enslavement. When we understand that a thought is a thought, it's so liberating to have the sense that it's okay if thoughts come. It's okay if they have a little zing to them. But then we can just bring our attention back: a thought is just a thought. In what is cognized, there is only what is cognized.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "To have a correct perception, we need to have a direct encounter."

So that's our practice—the wise attention. Moment by moment, let's have a direct encounter, either with the perception that's giving rise to the thought, or if that's already gone or you can't notice it, with the thought itself, just the quality of thought arising. Its ephemeral nature. Notice the space around it, the space between thoughts, just so it doesn't have such a sense of solidity. Don't try to fight thoughts with thought. It's like a ghost fighting a ghost. You don't need to fight the mind with the mind. All we need is to bring attention onto the thought itself.

I just want to end with this from Huang Po. He says that we tend to be blinded by our sight, our hearing, our feeling and knowing, and the conceptual thinking arising from it. When we're blinded by this thinking, we don't perceive the radiance of the source. But when we're not deluded—when there's just the sight, hearing, feeling, and knowing, when we're not blinded by all the conceptual thinking—this source will appear like the sun rising through the empty sky and illuminating the whole universe.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 294

Wisdom and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 20 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson addresses a question that often arises in insight meditation practice: if everything is empty and impermanent, what's the point? She responds by highlighting the Buddha's teaching that liberation requires two wings—great wisdom and great compassion—and that these are not separate but intimately intertwined.*
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> *Wilson examines how the wisdom of emptiness, impermanence, and non-self translates into the world of action and relationship. She focuses on intention (cetanā) as the crucial meeting point where understanding and compassion converge. Drawing on the Noble Eightfold Path, she explains how right understanding naturally gives rise to right intention, which the Buddha defined as renunciation countering greed, mettā countering ill will, and karuṇā countering cruelty. These wholesome intentions then shape our speech, actions, and livelihood.*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom about examining our motivations honestly. Wilson illustrates how the same outward action can arise from vastly different intentions—fear, compassion, self-consciousness, or anger—and how karma is determined not by results but by the quality of intention behind our actions. She encourages practitioners to recognize that compassion and loving-kindness are our true home, the natural expression of clear seeing, rather than the kilesas we've grown so familiar with. This teaching invites us to feel at home with wholesome mind states and to understand that the inner work of watching our intentions with honesty is itself a powerful contribution to the world.*

Tonight I want to speak about compassion and wisdom.

A lot of the emphasis in this particular style of practice is on the development of wisdom, on the uncovering of the nature of things as they really are. And sometimes questions come up, both in interviews and in our hearts and minds: What's the point of it? When we come to the place of emptiness, where all things arise and pass, when we emphasize so much in our practice that we're not here to achieve any particular state of heart or mind, that we're not here to change anything, that it really doesn't matter what's happening—the question comes up: Well, I didn't come here to stay the same, really. So what are we doing this for?

I'm being a little facetious, but the question does come up in that way. It's easy at times to forget that the Buddha's teaching is comprised of two wings—a bird has two wings to fly—that of great wisdom and great compassion. So I want to speak a little tonight about how they come together, with the emphasis more on compassion. This is really just an introduction.

The wisdom of emptiness, of no separate self, of impermanence—that there's nothing to cling to—this experience of liberation through non-clinging is really in some ways the crux of what we speak about, of what our practice is about. And in a moment of that experience, or really more in the moments after that experience when we're thinking about it, or thinking ahead to what it's going to be like in daily life, questions come up about the world of action. How does this wisdom of emptiness, this freedom of non-reactivity, manifest in the world of choice, in the world of interrelationship with other beings, in the world where we have decisions to make and actions to take? How does wisdom translate?

It's here that the second wing of compassion comes into flower. We need to really see and understand the importance of this, because the natural expression of wisdom is love and compassion. It's almost not something we have to crank up. In a moment of knowing things as they really are, deeply, the natural manifestation of that is love and compassion. Sometimes one side is highlighted, sometimes another in our experience, but a really rich, developed wisdom will have both aspects.

We can see in ourselves times when the impermanence, the emptiness, the no-self is really strong. There can be a real peace, a loveliness in that, a sense of freedom, but it can also feel somewhat cool, a bit removed. Not indifferent, but you could see how it could go in that direction. And then on the other side, there are times when we're just practicing karuna, compassion, or metta, loving-kindness. A lot of the questions that come up around that are: Well, this is nice when it's working. It feels lovely. It's a really good mental state—which seems to be fostering the sense of self. Or: Metta is just seeing the nice side of things. I've had people actually say to me that they are resistant to the idea of metta because to them it gives the sense of being a wimp—you just love everything, you accept everything, you forgive everything, and you just let people walk all over you.

We can see how both of these are exaggerated, but also how a true, deep, rich freedom of heart and mind encompasses both.

One place where wisdom or understanding and compassion or metta come together is in this aspect of mind: the mental factor of intention. I really love the way the Buddha put these things together. He had such an incredible mind.

When we're sitting, when we're walking, when we're here on retreat and to a great extent insulated from having to make any huge decisions—certainly any life decisions; we wish, we beg you not to make any life decisions while you're here—then you can sit and walk and watch every state of mind and heart come and go and really see that none of it is who you are. A moment of aversion, a moment of love, a moment of reactivity, a moment of boredom, a moment of wisdom—all are empty. They can all come and go, and the vivid, awake nature of mind doesn't care. Awareness doesn't really care what's arising within it. It's untouched, unstained, and we can experience that.

But where these states of heart and mind, where the way we understand reality, ourselves, and the world does begin to matter, does begin to have an effect, is when these states of heart and mind become the factors that give rise to intentions.

As you know, we've spoken of intention. It's this inclination of mind that gives rise to action, that gives rise to speech. It often manifests as a thought, but not always—that little "about to" that we've been talking about through the retreat, that you've been noticing and experimenting with in your sittings and walkings.

Intention, of course, doesn't arise without conditioning. It's conditioned by the previous moments and by whatever state of heart and mind is accompanying it. This is where the state of heart and mind that's giving rise to intention does begin to matter. When the Buddha speaks of karma, wholesome and unwholesome karma, the word karma translates simply as action. And as we've said, the seed, the heart, the strength of all action is not in how it looks or in the result that comes from the action or speech, but completely in the intention that gives rise to that action. That's why we give so much emphasis to beginning to be able to even notice that there's an intention at all before an action, and then noticing what actually is the nature of that intention—what states of heart and mind are giving rise to it.

This volition, this impulse, is the crux of what is creating wholesome or unwholesome karma, actions, and results in our own lives and in the lives of others with whom we come into contact.

So, for example, the same action that from the outside might look identical could be motivated by many different intentions. And we, looking on from the outside, can never really know what somebody else's intention is—unless we have developed the psychic power of mind-reading, which some people think teachers have cultivated.

Once when I was in Thailand, staying in a monastery in Bangkok that many Western monks would come through to get their visas, a number of them arrived from a forest monastery in northeastern Thailand. They were convinced that their Ajahn could read

their every thought, even when they were in Bangkok. It was really interesting, because they were so paranoid about it. It wasn't like, "Oh, he can read my mind, so I'll maintain perfect sila." They did maintain their conduct, but with this total paranoia. Very interesting.

From the outside, though, we normal worldlings cannot read each other's minds. But what we can do is look in our own mind and heart and see what intention is giving rise to an action. This is a different way of looking at our activities from what we're normally used to in daily life. We tend to judge an activity by its results. Was it a good thing to do? It was if it got the results we wanted, or if we came off looking good, or if people feel good, or whatever. But you could do something with a really clear intention that doesn't turn out the way you want. And in this aspect of karma, that's not what matters. It's the intention.

So if you get up now and start coughing and run out of the hall, there could be numerous intentions giving rise to that action. It could be one of total terror—that you look like a fool and have to get out of here because people are going to hate you. It could be real compassion, just genuinely feeling like, "I might be bothering people, I might upset the talk," and so you leave. It might be self-consciousness. It might be anger. It might be relief that you can get out of here. It could be a lot of different things. And the action looks exactly the same.

Knowing the importance of intention, seeing how the Buddha placed this in the second step of the Eightfold Path, you see how significant it is. The first stage of the Eightfold Path is right understanding or wise understanding—the beginning of the path, how we understand ourselves, how we understand the world, which of course is deepening and changing throughout our whole practice. But we begin with how we understand things, how we understand the world. And that leads into the second step, which is variously translated as wise thought, right thought, or right intention.

How we understand ourselves and the world gives rise to how we think about things, our intentions, which lead to the third, fourth, and fifth stages of the path: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. So it's right at this crux of intention that wisdom and understanding intersect with all the choices, all the actions, all the ways that we as active, connected human beings are and act in the world.

When the Buddha spoke about right thought as this second stage of the path, or right intention, he was very clear about what the three so-called right intentions are. And the point I really want to make clearly tonight is that these right intentions arise naturally through our understanding, through the wisdom that arises from mindfulness. It's not some fluke that happens simply from paying attention.

The three right thoughts or right intentions the Buddha spoke of are: renunciation or generosity, counteracting the tendency to greed; metta or friendliness, counteracting the tendency to ill will; and compassion, which arises out of clear seeing and counteracts the habit of cruelty.

I want to speak tonight about this way of looking at compassion—that it is the natural manifestation of a heart and mind of understanding. It is much more the manifestation of who we really are than all these kilesas we talk about so ceaselessly, that we've made such friends with, that we feel so much at home with: greed, hatred, and delusion. It's time for us to really recognize that compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity are our true home. These are really the intentions that arise out of clear seeing. And we can begin to feel more at home with these, recognize these, rest in these, and not think it's some mistake when they happen to arise in our experience.

It's true that the seed of intention ultimately flowers—or as Ruth Denison describes karma: you don't get away with nothing. At some point it manifests. And we can see this in the world, God knows, in politics with all the rhetoric. Oh, because we just had the election—you all are really lucky you haven't had to listen to all this stuff for a month. Just rhetoric, rhetoric, rhetoric. And I really think many of the politicians believe what they say about wanting to help the country and show kindness to all beings. But when we see where the actions actually lead, at some point it's quite obvious what intentions are actually guiding decisions and behavior.

I don't want to just dump on the politicians—it's not like they're the only ones on this planet. But friends, good friends who do a lot of environmental work, will talk often about starting with really clear intentions of caring for the planet and running into so much suffering, so much delusion, so much greed, that the motivation naturally turns to frustration and anger. They may continue to act with great energy and caring, and the actions seem good in themselves, but because the intention starts turning to anger, the people themselves—it's as if the anger begins to eat them up.

And in this way, an intention, even if the actions are for the good, will flower. We can't really hide from it.

So what we do here—and this is what I mean by let's not just pick out the politicians—is we look in ourselves. Someone said to me on a retreat last year, I think during one of the periods when Bosnia was really strong in the news, and it's a valid question. It was a question really: What good are we doing here? Sitting here watching our minds, our thoughts, our emotions come and go, the breath come and go, cultivating thoughts of goodwill and compassion—just sitting here safe and secure. What good is this doing anybody when people in Bosnia are killing each other?

In the past I would have thought my answer was a nice rationalization. I really believe it's true now—not as a start, but as something fundamental.

To begin with, what we're doing is very powerful because we're bringing all our care, our honesty, our compassion to ourselves, to look with great honesty at why we're doing what we're doing—just in our little actions day to day here. And we discover both great wisdom, great compassion, great love. And we do run into our old friends, the torments of mind, from time to time.

And we see, when we look deeply, there's a level on which I'm not really any different from somebody in Bosnia or Rwanda who really loses it and kills somebody. I mean, how many of us have had really serious murderous fantasies here?

CHAPTER 295

The Joy of the Way

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *Drawing from the Dhammapada's invitation to "know the sweet joy of living in the way," Carol Wilson offers a deeply encouraging teaching on how the Buddha's path is fundamentally one of happiness. She addresses the common difficulties that arise in the final days of long retreat—whether clinging to peaceful states, feeling discouraged by persistent conditioning, or confronting unmet expectations—reminding practitioners that these challenges signal opportunities to investigate clinging rather than signs of failure.*
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> *The heart of this talk explores dāna (generosity) and sīla (ethical conduct) as complete practices of liberation in themselves, not merely preliminary supports for meditation. Wilson shares vivid stories from her time as a nun in Thailand, illustrating how generous giving and receiving dissolve the sense of separation and actualize the "heart and mind of non-clinging." She offers practical guidance for working with generosity as a moment-to-moment practice: purifying intention before giving, being fully present in the act, and learning to receive openly as an expression of interconnectedness.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that conscious conduct springs from compassion and strengthens our understanding of oneness with all beings. Referencing the Sallekha Sutta's teaching on effacement, she highlights how the Buddha placed wholesome speech and action among the most powerful means for eradicating mental defilements. The talk concludes with an invitation to consciously reflect on our kind actions—not from conceit, but to gladden the heart and strengthen awakening. This accessible teaching reminds us that the path of freedom is available in every moment through our simplest acts of care and generosity.*

Tonight I want to talk about the happiness of the path.

A short excerpt from the Dhammapada: "By your own efforts, waken yourself, watch yourself, and live joyfully. Follow the truth of the way. Reflect upon it. Make it your own. Live it and it will always sustain you." And from another line in the same Dhammapada: "Know the sweet joy of living in the way."

Sometimes the fact that we're really on a path of happiness gets a little lost. We forget. And I know that the last week or so of a long retreat can at times be quite difficult, for different reasons. I'm putting this out because I want you all to know it's normal if you're feeling that sometimes things seem more difficult than they have been.

Sometimes it seems difficult because actually things are going really well and we like it and it's tranquil and peaceful and there's so much insight, and the thought comes: "How can I hold on to this when I leave and I get busy?" And sometimes it's just the reverse—that we begin to see how strongly our old familiar conditionings and patterns can come popping up at the drop of a hat, so to speak. And we can feel rather chagrined at times. "Well, what was the point of all this? Here I am, just the same me." In fact, we can get quite wrapped up in that. It can seem rather discouraging.

Or a third possibility is we're coming up against some last view we were holding of what freedom really should look like and what should have happened by now. And it didn't, obviously, whatever it should have been. If there's still some holding to that view, for all of these reasons, it can seem a bit bumpier, a bit more difficult at times in this last week.

Again, none of this stuff happening needs to be a problem. None of it's a mistake. Of course the same conditionings arise. If you keep paying attention, you'll see that there is actually the potential for meeting them with a lot more wisdom, a lot more spaciousness. You just don't remember, really, what it was like the first week of the retreat. You won't remember that until your next retreat, the first week, and then you'll go, "Oh yeah." So even though it might feel the same, it's very different.

I'm bringing that up because sometimes in this, we begin to engender a sense of struggle. Remember, if anything arising is a problem, it's not the thing in itself. It's because somehow we think it should be different. Just take the conflict not as a sign that something's wrong, but as a signal to look: Where's the clinging in this moment?

Simeon the New Theologian said once that the more a person enters the light of understanding, the more she or he is aware of her own ignorance. Think about that. It's true, and it's not a bad sign.

When we're in the phase—which can last a long time in our practice—where we're seeing and feeling the painful nature of clinging, the completely ephemeral nature of pleasant feeling, it feels like we really know: clinging is bondage, the heart of non-clinging is freedom, there's nothing to cling to. And we turn around in a moment of awareness, and just some pleasant thing arises, and we're gone out of our walking path and out the door. We don't even know how we got there. Well, how did that happen? I'm so clear that clinging is bondage and there's nothing worth clinging to. Why am I gone so quickly?

We can get wrapped up in discouragement at that if we don't see that that's just another identification. We can look at it a different way: the craving came up, it's strong. We learn to respect—a healthy respect—for the power of habit and conditioning. It really eases our way in this life. And you can also see that as strong as that craving came up and drove us, just as quickly the awareness was there and cut through the whole dynamic again.

Just as craving can arise and drive us, so too can awareness, connectedness, resting at home in the nature of mind be present just like that. And at times we have a choice in how we view our practice—whether the glass is half empty or half full. So in this, I want to remind us to notice how quickly, how easily, how immediately wakefulness is again present. And recognizing the power of our conditioning is the beginning or the middle of our becoming more free from it. It's not that we're worse than ever.

So this is just the preamble. What I want to talk about is really our path—the path that the Buddha has given us as teachings. It is a path of happiness, and we can forget that the path he showed us is much more vast than a meditation retreat. As vast as our meditation practice is, as vast as the Brahma Viharas are, and all the ways we can learn to be present with mindfulness—as vast as all this is, a retreat is only part of our path.

When the Buddha would give his teachings, he didn't simply start with meditation practice. He always talked about three aspects of our path: dana, sila, bhavana. Dana being generosity, sila being ethical or conscious conduct, and bhavana usually translated as mental development. You could say our formal meditation practices come under bhavana.

I'd like to talk a bit tonight about the first two aspects of this path, because I think sometimes we acknowledge that they're important, saying "yes, yes, they're important so that we can have a little peace, so that we can meditate." But seeing that dana and sila are in themselves paths—ways of living that bring deep peace and happiness—is essential. Each of these, and this is my opinion now, are practices of liberation, of freedom, of actualizing the heart and mind of non-clinging, of realizing through speech and action the wisdom of compassion.

The Buddha said over and over that there's no higher happiness than peace. The peace of a heart of non-clinging, the peace of resting in the clear, vivid wakefulness that is our birthright. That's the peace of what you could call emptiness. It's also the happiness of metta, the happiness of compassion—two sides of the same coin.

And everything the Buddha taught, if we really read or listen to his words, it seems like—okay, this is a generalization—but it seems like he really wasn't into fluff. He said, like he said over and over, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering. The sure heart's release." If you think of that and then see how much he emphasized the teachings of dana and sila, you realize that these weren't secondary instructions—as in "I'll teach the laypeople dana and sila because that's the best they can do, and save the good stuff for the monks." Sometimes it might feel like that, actually.

When I was in Thailand, it was interesting to be in a country where Buddhism is the main cultural context, because you can get a feeling both for the depth of understanding of how it's practiced, but also—as with any formal religion—I shouldn't say any, but from what I've seen of the formal religions in this country, especially Christianity and Judaism, similar to Buddhism in Thailand, it is met and understood on all different layers of wisdom. On the deepest layers, of course, there is the practice of freedom. But on the layers of just taking it in as culture, many of the Thai people are really quite wonderful in working with dana and sila. Yet I would get the sense when I was there as a nun, even speaking to people, that the dana culture, while quite inspiring, didn't quite have the depth—it was sort of, "the best I can do is be generous; you do the meditation for me." People would actually say that.

I think this really downplays the depth of the practice of dana and sila. Because if we look at them deeply, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, if we really inquire into these two aspects of the Buddha's teaching, we can see that besides being a way of living happily in the world with ourselves and one another, they are also moment-to-moment actualizations of a heart and mind of non-clinging.

Living happily, experiencing joy, gladdening the heart—I don't mean the specific mental factor of rapture, but a more broad feeling of gladdening the heart, of happiness—is actually very important in our practice, on our path of awakening. We've talked a lot about dependent arising, beginning with ignorance and going through all the cycles and ending with suffering. And there's another, called the transcendental dependent arising, that begins with suffering and then proceeds through to awakening with different steps. Suffering gives rise to faith, and faith gives rise to this joy, this gladdening of the heart. And this is a supportive condition for awakening.

So we've gone on a lot about how suffering is a supportive condition for awakening. But it is important because it brings faith, because it brings gladdening of the heart, which then leads on to tranquility, and then happiness—a kind of lightness—which then leads to concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are. I'm not going to go through all of them—disenchantment, dispassion, emancipation. But the point I'm

trying to make is that living in a way, relating to ourselves and one another in a way that brings happiness, is not just about holding on to pleasant feeling. This gladdening of the heart sets the conditions for awakening.

The practice of dana, of generosity—the Buddha emphasized this very strongly. It was usually one of the first things he taught, especially to laypeople. For me, it continues to take a lot of very deep inquiring into it and paying attention to the effect of generosity in my heart and mind. I think I'm only just beginning to appreciate the power of generosity as a practice of liberation. And along the way, it brings so much happiness, so much joy into our lives.

In fact, when I reflect on generosity and on how in the Buddha's teachings nothing he taught was extra, nothing was extraneous, I have a huge amount of respect for how he set up his sasana, how he set up the way that the nuns and monks and laypeople related to each other—because it was totally based in generosity.

From, of course, it's clear for the nuns and monks—they were completely dependent on the generosity of lay people for food, for their requisites, for any kind of place to stay. And a lot of the strict rules that were laid down would ensure that this sense of connection to the lay people through generosity couldn't be broken.

Just a simple example: you can't keep food overnight. So you get enough food for that meal, that one meal for that day, and if there's anything extra, you give it away. There's no holding on, so that each new day becomes another day where the different groups of people meet each other through generosity.

In the monasteries, it's really something to see. When I was a nun in Thailand, at the monasteries I stayed at, the monks would go out on alms round, but the nuns didn't so much. The one place I know where a nun did go, she didn't receive as much. The monks would get huge amounts, and the nuns not so much because the lay people weren't really used to nuns coming around.

At one place I stayed in Bangkok, which was in a very wealthy area, the amounts were enormous—really unbelievable. On the Sundays, which are sort of like a church day here, rather than going on bindabat, the monks would all sit on a curved stone wall, and lay people would come, much like going to church, bringing food to the monks, hearing a talk from the Ajahn, eating all the leftovers, having a big picnic together—like a social, really a very nice gathering.

The monks would be sitting there, and part of the dana is also receiving, so they don't say, "No, I don't want that, take it back." By the end of all the lay people bringing their food, these monks would have a pile of little plastic bags of curries in front of them. I mean, I'm not kidding—it would be this high. Huge amounts of food.

Well, that food would feed everybody in the wat. After they took what they wanted, they sent it all back to the middle, and I was the only nun there, so it would go to me, and then to all the young boys, the temple boys, all the lay people who were there, then any visitors. After that, we'd pass it on to all the dogs and the cats and the chickens, and nothing goes to waste. It's really quite a nice system.

And on the other aspect of it, the lay people receive the generosity of the monks and nuns because it's so clear—the Buddha, from the very beginning, as soon as any of the nuns and monks had reached levels of understanding, immediately sent them out to teach. Go share this with all beings. That's the point of this. So it's this way he set up the sasana in this symbiotic relationship based on generosity of heart.

And it's really giving everybody—not saying you have to be generous, you have to be nice—but giving people every day the opportunity to practice through action the heart and mind of non-clinging. Because that's what generosity really is. It's both aspects: the emptiness of not holding on and the fullness of metta, the generosity of heart that freely gives whatever is needed.

One of the things I really learned about generosity from my time in Thailand was the power of joy that living and acting from this deep commitment to generosity brought to people there.

At one of the temples I stayed at, a small one way out in the woods, all the temples of course are completely supported by the generosity of lay people. At this particular temple, the number of monks and nuns fluctuates all the time because the way these temples operate is also on generosity. You don't call up and make a reservation and they say, "Let me see if I have room on this day." People just show up. And when you show up, they find somewhere to put you. And it's not like, "Here's another one, where are we going to put her?" There's this happiness, this welcoming.

So this place I was staying, Tam Tong—on the nuns' side, it was back in the woods, nuns on one side of a river and the monks on the other. There were just five or six little kutis, little huts for the nuns. This was the practice area, the silent area. When I showed up, a foreigner, they really went out of their way to be kind, and they gave me a little private hut. That was fine for some time. There were just as many of us as there were huts.

Then one day, maybe five or ten nuns showed up. And without a murmur, the first woman to give up her hut was the head nun, a young woman who was very committed to her practice, very inspiring. She was the only person there who spoke English, and I actually got to know her some. Instead of saying, "Oh well, since I guess I'm in charge, I have to give it up," she was so happy. She'd have nuns come and stay in her hut. All the other nuns doubled up, tripled up, quadrupled up in these tiny little cottages.

But me, of course—they never even thought about it because I was the foreigner, the guest. I should be treated special. So I always had a hut by myself. But it wasn't just the ease. It was the joy that would come from this experience.

This not even thinking about the quality of giving.

And I reflected at the time both on how constricted I felt. *Gee, I hope they don't put somebody in with me*—that was really my thought. *Oh, I wish I too could be generous.* The feeling of constriction I felt, and the happiness I could see in the other nuns.

I thought back to the times I was on staff here, when the place was really full and overflowing. We didn't have a stampede of who was going to give up their room so more yogis could come and sit. I'm not saying we should, but I just really did contrast the difference in attitude. And I felt, who's happier? Who's more at ease here? Who's actually learning to live from compassion and non-clinging through this generosity?

Everywhere I went in Thailand, there were just innumerable examples. I had to stay in the city for a while, in Chiang Mai, going to physical therapy every day. A young woman, a nurse, took me into her home—begged me to come, would have been insulted if I didn't—and insisted on getting up every morning at four to make me breakfast. I was wishing she wouldn't do it.

And this is where I learned the other aspect of the joy of generosity: to be the open and connected receiver. She was acting out of real connectedness and love. When I would say, "No, please don't do it," it was like a block to that connectedness, to the movement back and forth of metta and of generosity. When I could just open up and really receive—not in an "oh, I'm so glad she's taking care of me" way, but simply feeling the love and the generosity coming from her—it was transformative. And it wasn't really for me. Being a member of the Sangha, you remember that you're always simply a representative, and what's done for you is done for the Dharma, not for you as a person so much. Receiving in that way is extremely powerful. You see that it's not about this person being generous to this person, but about the flowing energy of compassion, of non-clinging. It was a wonderful experience of the joy of generosity.

Often I've seen that the poorest people are the ones who can be the most generous and have the most joy in that generosity. Recently, in April I think, at Yucca Valley, we were watching a video called *Home to Tibet* about a Tibetan refugee who lives in western Massachusetts. He's a stone mason—he builds stone walls, so you can see why living here is a good place for him. In this video, after many years living in America, he was going home to Tibet to visit his family, whom he hadn't seen for so long. An American couple went with him and secretly filmed this reunion.

I don't remember the whole thing, but I remember him getting back to the small village where his sister lived with her family, and of course how happy and sad the whole reunion was. But also his being somewhat shocked to see the hardships of their life and how old his sister had come to look. You could really see the two of them together in the video, how much she had aged. You could feel the sense of the hardships—just barely having enough food, very severe living conditions.

At some point towards the end—I forget the details—but I guess he had brought a lot of gifts and also some money. The sister, now having a little bit of money, was so happy, radiant with happiness. Because since she had just enough to eat, she could take this money and finally make offerings to the monasteries and monks near her, whom she felt as her spiritual support.

Seeing her, it was so clear this wasn't a "should"—not "I haven't paid my dues and I'm going to the hell realms." This was a source of such joy for her. You could see it radiate. It was so powerful to see, and to see in that moment that generosity is so clearly a liberation practice. Someone in that state—there wasn't any holding to something for me, no sense of separation, but just that joy: what I have is yours. It was really beautiful.

Metta is a kind of generosity—generosity of the heart, you could say. Just that straightforward well-wishing that wants nothing back.

Generosity can be quite spontaneous, as in some of these examples. And like everything else, we can bring our mindful attention to this area of generosity and really explore consciously how it works and what the effects are. During one of the times I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, the monk who was with him, Sayadaw U Janaka, gave this wonderful talk on dana and some of the ways we can work with it. I want to share some of what he said then about working with generosity.

Again, aside from it being a practice of happiness and a nice thing to do, if we really look deeply in a moment of true generosity, we see that first it's about intention—not about just how it looks. As they say, not to give with resentment, not to give detesting the gift or those who are receiving it. It's possible. "Okay, take it then, you stupid jerk." That's not what we're talking about in generosity.

One could give millions of dollars that way—to look good, or to get something back, or for tax purposes. I don't know. But it's really about looking deeply at the intention, at the motivation. That's the heart of generosity.

And when we look, we can see how obviously an action of generosity brings a sense of unity, a sense of connectedness. That's why it's often said, if you're feeling difficulty with someone, try giving them a gift—a real heartfelt gift. Because to do that, there has to be a sense of connection. To really give from that space of letting go, there's a sense of connection, and that helps. That brings us together again.

So working with dāna as a practice of freedom, a moment-to-moment practice of heart, of non-clinging—starting with the volition. That sense of: can I give this without wanting anything in return? Even recognition. Even having the person know, "It is I who gave this." How interesting it is. There can be just such a little sense of confirmation we need back. But remember, it's a practice.

And as with every wholesome act, it is accompanied by compassion. Compassion is the root cause of every wholesome action. So in a way, both dāna and sīla basically spring from compassion, and as such strengthen our understanding of connectedness.

These are the steps that Sayadaw and Jan Panika talked about. In deciding to be generous—whether you're giving a thing, whether you're giving of your time, whether you're just giving energy, a willing ear to listen, it doesn't matter what—pay attention to the volition. Let the volition purify, because of course often we have very mixed intentions when we go to give. So just let it settle and see what our intention is. Purify.

As Robert Aitken says, with every generous act, let it be the generous act of the bodhisattvas. At our deepest level, our intention can be: with this act, may all beings be free from suffering. That's one level, but any level down to simply "can I give it" works as well.

See and abandon the clinging to that thing—whether it's your time, whether it's an object, whatever it is, whether it's service. Can we look at our intention and see and abandon the clinging to it?

Sometimes, of course not always, we find that the giving is face-to-face, hand-to-hand. If it's your time or energy and you're doing something with a person—face-to-face. Or if you're actually handing somebody an object—hand-to-hand. This isn't always possible or even advisable. But if that is the case, to do it hand to hand, to really be there with full presence and commitment, is a very powerful way of inhabiting the act of generosity.

I got a good lesson in this from Sayadaw U Pandita about the powerfulness of this interrelatedness in generosity. I was giving him a book, which I think I had had somebody else buy for me since I was on retreat. I had inscribed it but had them give it to him. And when I went in for my next interview, he took the book and basically told me: there's the book, pick it up and you give it to me, face to face.

And it was really lovely, because it wasn't like he said, "Okay, thanks," and put it down. He was really there—one hundred percent present with a really open heart, really a mettā heart. I could feel it, just really honoring that intention of generosity. And that made me be there, fully present.

I could see the ways that sometimes I might want to just give something and not really quite own it—all those feelings of "what if they don't like it?" or "what will they think of me?" or "is it good enough?" None of that has anything to do with generosity. Generosity isn't about the bigger the better. It's not even about the person having to say, "Oh, aren't you incredible? This is the best book I ever received." It's simply about that intention of connecting, of mettā, of letting go.

What he was doing was really teaching me to inhabit fully, with mind and body, that act of generosity. It was very powerful.

And so then, whether you're face to face or not, give with your attention fully focused on the act of giving. Of course, again, we're fully inhabiting it. This strengthens the power of the volition of generosity. It strengthens the compassion. Rather than, "Oh, okay, here, take it and I'll be on my way."

Just be fully present. And then afterwards, continue to pay attention, because often we notice how we do something really wholeheartedly and then, "Ah, gee, but maybe I could have used that." Or, "That was good, but maybe I could have done something else with my time." These little regrets can come in. Just be mindful of that. So we purify the volition beforehand, we purify the volition afterwards.

And then, as with all acts, being aware of the broader context—that whatever giving or doing is not just to satisfy our own need to give, but that it is truly useful, that it's in a context where it's helpful. For example, if I have a friend who's manic depressive and

she's in a really manic stage spending all her money, my idea to give her a gift of a lot of money at that time might not be very skillful. It might be much better to wait until she could use it in a healthy way. It's simply putting the generosity in a context of what's really helpful.

And then I added this last one, which I mentioned before: allowing oneself to receive in a very present, wholehearted, and open way. Because when we receive in this way, we are also moving out of our self-cherishing. When people give you a compliment and we want to deflect it, that's really self-cherishing. It stops the connectedness. Or when in Thailand, if you just talked about money, I had so much more at home—even here I don't have much, but compared to there I had much more than the people giving. But to say, "No, no, don't give me anything, I'll go out and buy an omelet," really stops the whole flow of compassion and connection.

So practice receiving generosity in a really open-hearted and present way. It's a wonderful practice of liberating ourselves from our sense of self-cherishing, from our sense of separateness. If you're really receiving someone's compassion and generosity, I guarantee you're not going to feel separate. And that is really the practice of compassion and emptiness. And it's joyful besides. It's a really beautiful way to live.

Even years later—for instance now when I'm talking about the time in Thailand—just the memory coming up of the joy and the incredible generosity of the people brings up in me such a happiness, such a joy. It brightens and gladdens the heart in this moment. It's really karmic fruit. When we talk about karmic results, we tend to often look at, "It's so bad, so this is my result from that," and then we rebel against it. But these moments of happiness are also karmic results of that generosity at that time. And so over all these years—it's been a long time—I can feel just the same strong sense of oneness with these people as I felt then. And the happiness and gladdening of the heart leads one into the ability to be more awake, more present, less clinging.

So we practice, and sometimes it might seem like a practice of generosity, but it moves from practice into such a natural way of being that one doesn't even think of it as generosity anymore. It's just of course. As Shantideva put it, who wrote the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return." Just that. You couldn't even call it generosity. It's just like having fed myself. The actualization of our oneness. It's the beginning of our practice and it's also the pinnacle of our understanding.

Sila is much the same way. I'm not going to talk as much about sila—I know Steve talked about it quite a bit the other night. I just want to emphasize these two aspects: the happiness it brings to our hearts and minds through our commitment to ethical conduct, and that just as with dana, attention to our speech and actions is not only laying a foundation for our awakening, but is a moment-to-moment practice of freedom and compassion.

Really, commitment to conscious conduct is an act of compassion towards ourselves and all beings. It's an actualization in speech and action of our understanding of our oneness with all beings. Even the smallest act of kindness, even the smallest act of non-cruelty, of care, of carefulness with our speech—it doesn't have to be amazing renunciations—but even the smallest act of care with our action and speech is an expression of compassion, of our understanding that we are all one.

And again, I find that by really investigating with care why we do what we do, why we say what we say, and the effects—again without judgment, but with interest and investigation—what are the effects on ourselves and others of what we say and do, all we have to do is pay attention. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, mindfulness is really the only precept. Because if we're really mindful, we take care, we're responsible. And as soon as we're paying attention, we can't help but notice that anything we do that comes from cruelty, from carelessness, from anger, has such a strong effect on ourselves, sometimes even stronger. As soon as I see—usually I have to say, for me it's usually going to be wrong speech—it's out the mouth.

It kind of missed the censor. The words didn't even show up on the screen, and it's out the mouth. Hopefully you won't discover this happening to you next week.

So when that happens, it's gotten to be so much that I just have to see the slightest ripple on somebody's face and already I feel reverberations that are so painful. It's not even something—it's not an idea. It's so obvious that carelessness which brings suffering to somebody else is immediately the same suffering, or even more, that I'm feeling. There's no way to separate it.

So when the Buddha talks about protecting ourselves to protect others, we often speak of paying attention to the five precepts—just the five basic lay precepts: not killing, not taking what's not given, not hurting ourselves or others with our sexuality, not lying or speaking maliciously, and not using drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind. Just those five. It doesn't seem like a lot to ask, but as Steve said the other night—what did he say? Some huge number, right? Ten trillion or something actual rules that it turns into.

But if we don't think of it as rules, if we just think of it as paying attention, it's so obvious that by protecting ourselves from the pain of remorse, from the pain of disharmony, we're protecting all beings.

I know that often when morality is spoken of or thought of, we begin by thinking of it on this level as a foundation for practice. "The bliss of blamelessness" is a phrase that's often used. And I'm sure you can all relate to those times sitting here when some unskillful thing we've done in the past—whether it was yesterday or when we were five, whether it was something seriously awful or just some slighting comment we made to a third-grade companion that we know hurt their feelings—comes to mind. I've gone through agony over stuff like that, really feeling the pain, the remorse that comes from unskillful, uncaring conduct. We can all relate to the bliss of blamelessness, the happiness of simply not making waves in the world.

That is, of course, one level of working with sīla—just the bare basis so we can have a relatively calm mind to then get on to the real stuff: the mental development, the samādhi, the wisdom. But thinking about what we do when we can't hold on to the samādhi four weeks from now, three months from now, in the middle of New York City, trying to walk down the street—lifting, moving, placing—what about my nice samādhi? Forget it.

But we can pay attention to why we're doing and saying what we're doing and saying, walking down the streets of New York. Do we say, "This is my right of way, you move over, buddy," in our mind? Or can we just step aside with a real sense of connection and kindness? Nobody else even knows it's happening. What's the difference in the effect on our heart and mind? The difference between conflict, separation, fear, holding my space—and spaciousness, connectedness, a heart and mind of non-clinging, compassion.

I feel very deeply that paying attention to sīla is a very profound path of liberation. And the Buddha spoke of it in this way. There's one sutta called "Effacement"—really about erasing all the kilesas, you could say. It describes different ways of radically removing these kilesas, these torments of mind, which is another metaphor for freedom. And he says in this sutta, "I say that even the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit." Just the inclining of the mind. "So what should be said of bodily and verbal acts conforming to such a state of mind?"

The power of bodily and verbal wholesome actions is so strong that he then goes through—I'll spare you the list—but it's a list of forty-four different ways that contribute to this complete eradication of the defilements. And each of these forty-four, he goes through in about five different ways, but it's the same list. The first on the list is non-

cruelty, or compassion, because compassion, as I said, is the root of all virtuous action. And of the first fifteen on this list, thirteen deal with simply wholesome speech and action—just the basics: non-cruelty, non-killing, non-lying, non-malicious speech, all the basic precepts.

He's saying these are ways to completely eradicate these torments, these defilements of mind. He's not saying this is just a nice thing to do so that later you can get enlightened. These are first on the list.

So here it's really saying that not only does conscious conduct—acting from our sense of oneness—bring happiness here and now, it is also a very powerful path of freedom, of touching through our actions that place of pure awareness, of non-clinging, of non-separation. Because in order to act from compassion, from any of the precepts, we're acting from compassion. And every action of compassion further strengthens our living experience of our oneness, which again deepens our understanding of emptiness. It's like a whole cycle that keeps going.

And another thing I think we sometimes overlook is the gladdening of the heart in the present moment when we are acting from non-harming.

This is very powerful. Again, it's the same as with generosity. An act of non-harming plants what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy—seeds that can ripen at any time, that gladden our heart in the present and in the future.

This can arise spontaneously, but it's also something we can call on as a skillful means, in or out of formal practice, to help us become more connected to ourselves, to others, to our experience in this moment.

I'll give you an example of a spontaneous arising just the other day. Out of nowhere, a memory came of years ago—twenty years ago—when I was working in a sheltered workshop in North Carolina with severely mentally handicapped adults. It was a place where people would come during the day and do some kind of little task, like putting two nuts in a plastic envelope, and then someone else would staple it. That was actually a complicated job for those folks. I was one of the instructors there. We'd just spend the day with the people, and it was intense. I won't get into the whole story, but it was intense.

This memory came back of one day—because I really came to love the people in the workshop, the people who came every day. There was one day in particular that came up in my mind. When I walked in, a lot of the different people, for some reason, were all coming up and hugging me. It was just a happy day where the sense of our togetherness and the kindness that I had been able to offer—I mean, I wasn't trying to be kind, it

just came out of me because I felt connected to the people—was coming back to me. The sense of connectedness was palpable, and it was a really happy day. I can see all the different people now. Just the memory of that brings up again such happiness. It lightens and gladdens the heart. It brings in a brightness, a faith, an energy. And then from that, if there's something difficult going on, it's a little easier to open to it. If there's nothing special going on, it's a little easier to have energy to be with it. This is how seeds of joy can really strengthen our awakening, our intention.

So that's spontaneous. Something we might not always think to do, but that is actually taught as a skillful means, is to consciously reflect on our kind, our ethical, our non-harming conduct. I know it feels a little egotistical maybe to us. We tend to consciously reflect on all the bad things we've ever done—we do that very well. We can, at the drop of a hat, list off forty-five horrific things we've done in the last three days. And we feel like that's good practice, that's being honest. But if we say, "Sit and really reflect, feel in your heart all the kind, compassionate, non-selfish, non-self-cherishing things you've done," we feel like, "Oh, that's so pompous. That would make me so conceited."

But it's a very skillful thing to do. Again, not with clinging. Not with a lot of identification—"Aren't I incredible? I've done all these things." But just as I was describing that memory from the workshop, just feel the happiness of an act of oneness, of compassion. Because when you're really acting in that way, there's not a lot of "me" there. It's just doing the obvious, doing what needs to be done, what doesn't harm. And that is a very helpful way to bring some joy into our experience in the present moment—not to hold on to pleasant experience, but to gladden the heart, awaken the energy, reconnect us with the fact that we are all one, that the root of all conscious action, all wholesome action, is compassion. And each time we can speak or act from that, we're strengthening our understanding of emptiness.

This doesn't take huge concentration. It doesn't take powerful meditative states. It doesn't matter if all of our beloved psychological tendencies and patterns are still with us. Practicing with generosity and with sila is accessible to us in every moment. And when we forget, okay, the next moment is accessible again. And it's a moment where we have access to the twin wings of emptiness and compassion through very basic everyday activities.

I really think it's wonderful—the vastness of this path and the depth of this path that the Buddha has given us. And it really is, I think, a path of happiness and joy. Not that we don't experience sorrows. In fact, we're more present for all the sorrows of the

world. But we're also more present for the joys. And the greatest joy is just that of being so awake and alive that we're really present in this moment. Joyful, sorrowful, whatever it is, we're not afraid to face it.

So I just want to end with a poem that expresses to me this quality of joyful presence in life, from E.E. Cummings:

I thank you, God, for most this amazing day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and the blue true dream of sky, and for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes. I, who have died, am alive again today. And this is the sun's birthday.

This is the birthday of life and of love and of wings, and of the gay great happening illimitably earth. How should tasting, touching, hearing, seeing, breathing—any lifted from the know of all nothing, human merely being—doubt unimaginable you? Now the ears of my ears awake, and now the eyes of my eyes are opened.

CHAPTER 296

Our Highest Purpose

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this closing talk from a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the crucial transition from intensive practice back to daily life. She challenges the common misconception that formal retreat is the "real" practice, reminding practitioners that every moment is practice time—only the form changes. Drawing on her own journey, she shares how she once mistook the glittery qualities of concentration and precise mindfulness for wisdom itself, when true practice lies in meeting each moment with presence of heart and mind.*
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> *Wilson explores the four aspects of clear comprehension (sampajañña), particularly emphasizing clear comprehension of purpose—connecting with one's deepest aspiration. She describes how this sense of purpose, once honored rather than dismissed by the critical mind, becomes a guiding light through difficult decisions and life transitions. The key, she suggests, is watching ourselves "with the intention to understand rather than to judge," as Nisargadatta Maharaj taught.*
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> *The talk also addresses clear comprehension of suitability—recognizing that we never exist in isolation but are always in relationship with circumstances, environment, and other beings. Through personal stories and practical examples, Wilson illustrates how mindfulness without this broader awareness can leave us "completely oblivious to what's going on around us." She concludes with an invitation to recognize that each person is a unique manifestation of Dhamma, encouraging practitioners to find their own way to "kneel and kiss the ground" in service of awakening.*

Tomorrow our practice changes form. And it's an interesting time. It can be easy, actually, in all the different things that come up in this change of form, to at times get into various spaces of clinging to the particular form of practice we've been cultivating these three months.

I know I've spent a lot of my practice years mistaking the form of the practice for the heart of the practice, for the heart of awakening, and feeling that when one retreat was over I would madly begin planning when I could do the next retreat and forget that this whole part of my life that's not called formal retreat is actually practice. There's no such thing as a moment that's not practice time. It's just about changing the form.

It's easy to mistake the kind of glittery, microscopic, really precise, really far-out qualities of mindfulness, concentration, clarity—it's easy to mistake those for wisdom. They might help awaken our heart and mind at certain times, but if we try to hold on to these particular conditions, we're just getting stuck and clinging again.

And so part of the grace of our shift of form is to see what practice is about. What's the heart of the practice about for you?

The two aspects that helped me the most in my life are very basic and simple: the aspects of wisdom and compassion, the Dalai Lama's statement that my religion is kindness. Couldn't be more simple. And to meet every aspect of my life, each situation, holding the question: How can I awaken in this moment?

Not to try and hold on to whatever insights have arisen in some form so that then I can click through the roster in my daily life and haul out the appropriate insight at the appropriate time and apply it in a given situation—but to trust that when we meet each moment with a presence of heart and mind, all the wisdom and understanding arises in that moment to meet that situation. Whatever we've understood, all of our wisdom and love is present, arising in a moment of our life. We don't have to hold on to it, which is good since we can't, because there's only arising moments. There's only our daily life.

I want to read from Bo Lozoff, who started the Prison Ashram Project quite some years ago. He does a lot of wonderful spiritual work, not particularly Buddhist. This is from the newsletter he sends out from the Human Kindness Foundation, called "A Little Good News."

"Everyday life is all we've got. The deep, wonderful secrets of life, the mysterious presence of the divine, the joy of cherishing each other, the beauty of nature, the satisfaction of helping out, our journey into the ageless wisdom—all exist only in our everyday life. There is no bigger ball field on which to find meaning. It's either right here today or it's nowhere."

And he quotes Jesus as saying, "The kingdom of heaven is within you. I tell you, the kingdom of heaven is at hand." At hand—not after the revolution, not when the next golden age brings worldwide peace and harmony. Here, now, you, me, our kids, in the middle of the ghetto, in the middle of prison, in the middle of our endless details, our ceaseless worries about the future.

"How many simple, peaceful, truly happy adults do our kids get to see? How many adults are deeply content with their lives and enjoy what they do? How many are happy about getting older and unafraid of dying? How many are relaxed and calm, with time to take off from work every now and then in order to mentor a young per-

son? We seem to be knocking ourselves out in pursuit of a vague image of success and meaning, while the real quality of our everyday life with our families and communities steadily declines. We're asleep at the wheel, swept up in a fitful agitated dream, and we're missing some gorgeous scenery which only passes by once.

"When the Buddha experienced his great enlightenment, he got up from where he had been sitting and walked toward the village. The first person who saw him was awe-struck by his radiance and power. The man approached him and said, 'Sir, what are you? Are you a god?' And the Buddha said, 'No.' And he kept asking questions. And the man said, 'Well, what are you then?' The Buddha replied, 'I am awake.' And then he spent the rest of his life making it clear to us that we can awaken too. The joy is right here. We just need to wake up to it."

I think that's a beautiful expression of the purpose of practice. Not to be some incredible yogi.

I just heard on the radio that the oldest standing record in the Guinness Book of World Records dates from the time of Jesus—some monk in Syria who sat on top of a pillar for forty-five years. They don't have a record of why.

That's the potential for our life. I don't think that's what practice is about.

The form practice takes might be becoming a monk or a nun. It might involve doing an awful lot of intensive practice. It might involve not doing much intensive practice at all. But the form isn't really the point. The point is waking up. And through our awakening, we touch and communicate that potential of living in truth to every person we come in contact with, whether we know it or not. If we are really committed to this in ourselves, it truly has an effect on the world.

So in some ways, this changing form that we're entering is the most important aspect of our practice. And I know for me, for years, it's been so easy to not give it the quality of care and attention that I give the rest of formal practice. Why? Because in some ways it's difficult. It's not an easy time.

I want to talk about the broader aspects of mindfulness that can help us—intellectually help us—to stay awake in this period. Also to let go of, as we constantly must, the ideas we're still holding about how practice should look, what it means. Because when we find we can't hold on to them, does that mean practice is gone? We can see that practice can be broader and broader and more vast. It's just a constant letting go into the vastness.

Much of what we've discussed regarding mindfulness on this retreat—*sati*, the Pali word—has been the precise mental factor of mindfulness: knowing fully what's happening. We've worked a lot in this way of moment-to-moment continuous mindfulness, and we've developed it very strongly.

Have you ever noticed in your own practice here when you felt really, really mindful and at the same time completely oblivious to what was going on around you? This is what we call mindful, but lacking the broader element of clear comprehension.

I'll tell you a really embarrassing story. I wish it didn't come into my mind just now, but it did. Years ago, I was practicing here, a long time ago, walking very carefully, very present, really inward, really noting. I came to the coat room, took off my shoes, bent down to pick up my zafu—that's how long ago it was—and started to walk into the upper walking room. I completely didn't notice there were steps. I just walked right off the top step and fell on my face at the bottom. Of course, there were a lot of people walking in that room. I didn't hurt myself, only my self-esteem.

That's a good example of mindfulness that lacks clear comprehension. I think we do it a lot. We wonder why we come out of retreat and literally cannot do two things at once. I remember my first three-month course—I was working in the kitchen, and one of the teachers had just been sitting for a while and came in to get something to eat. They made such a mess all over the place, didn't clean it up, talked a mile a minute, and walked out. I thought, my goodness, is that what we're heading for?

I realized we can get so concentrated, so into the microscopic mindfulness, that we skip the fact that we're not isolated. We're part of a bigger picture always. We're never separate.

On the conceptual level, there are ways of talking about clear comprehension that help us understand how practice is much wider. Clear comprehension comes into play when there are choices, when we realize we're in relationship to experience and other people, when we have decisions to make. There are four areas, which I might not get to all of them.

The first is called clear comprehension of purpose. I have found this to be one of the most helpful aspects of attention, of inspiration, of really forming a guidepost in my life. It has a lot to do with what Kamala was talking about last night—aspiration.

Clear comprehension of purpose on one level is about intention. We've talked a lot about the importance, when making choices and decisions in our life from little ones to big ones, of bringing our awareness to the intention, the motivation for that action. Obviously this requires mindfulness—remembering that there is an intention, and that if

we looked, we might notice it. The awareness that noticing intention often gives us a moment of choice, in little things and in big things. Do I need to go get an ice cream now? Maybe yes, maybe no, but we can notice why.

That's the micro level. On the macro level, clear comprehension of purpose is aspiration in a much larger sense—what Kamala was speaking about last night. Getting in touch with what is your deepest aspiration, what is the deepest purpose in your life? As Bo was writing about in his letter: What is your life about?

By consciously bringing this into our heart, into our mind, by affirming it to ourselves consciously, it has an amazing power of consolidating our restless, diffuse energy. It gives us a real sense of focus, a light, a beacon to refer to when we have important decisions to make.

It's really a very powerful thing. Often, in talking to people—and it was like this for myself for a while—we can tend to just not even think about this at all. Or if we do, it's on an intellectual level, still coming from a place of identification with our worthlessness or our sense of "I don't really have any skills" or "there's nothing I can offer the world"—whatever our story is. Which is all an ego trip.

By holding on to this belief—"I'm not a person who's worthy enough to have a really deep intention to guide my life, that's for other people"—we're denying the beauty and truth that each one of us is. In our own unique way, we all have something completely different to bring to the world. And we don't have to be somebody special to get in touch with that. It's true for all of us. We don't have to deny that to ourselves.

Although often, I know when I first began to feel a sense of this arising in my heart, the first time it came to me, I think the way it was phrased was, "I'm here to serve the Dharma, whatever that means." And immediately, the critical mind comes in: "Who do you think you are? Give me a break." You don't have to listen to that. It'll do its thing, but we have a choice. Do we want to identify with the small fears and limitations that we're used to identifying with? Or do we want to say, "Okay, thank you for your opinion. The Dharma is greater than me or my little fears, and I don't have to know how my purpose or aspiration is going to manifest." Not only do I not have to know—I don't know. And we won't know. We never know what's going to happen.

So it's being willing to simply honor the depth of each of our commitment, in whatever form that takes for you. There isn't a right form. For some people, bodhicitta—the sense of one's whole life being practiced in order to awaken the heart of enlightenment, in order to help awaken all beings—that's a wonderful aspiration. But it might not be your aspiration. What's important in this is not having a sense of should, another

intellectual overlay: "That sounds good, and I should live up to this ideal, and I should want to awaken in order to awaken all beings." That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about really honoring the deepest truth in your heart and mind—what brings you to practice, what guides you in your life.

Give it some time to tune in, to intuitively see what arises. And when it comes up, like that time it came up for me, it was out of the blue. It was so not my usual train of thought that it really caught my attention. Once you know—and it might be changing—but if I hadn't had that particular conscious acknowledgment of a sense of my deepest purpose, I know I would never be here now. I never would be teaching.

Because that sense of honoring one's purpose is what will take us through difficult decisions in our life—when we come to crossroads, when we come to turning points and we're trying to make decisions. It comes up often. People will say in retreat, "I have to either take this job or move here. I have to either sit for another year or go back and visit my parents." The choices are endless. And they'll say, "How can I decide? I list the pros and the cons—they're all just thoughts. I have emotions about them both ways—they're all just emotions. They come and go. How can one make a decision that has any kind of basis?"

And it's true, it's hard. What I found is that the sense of one's deepest purpose comes in thoughts and emotions, but it has that deeper intuitive feel, that sense of trust that somehow moves beyond thought and emotion. And then, when one is faced with a decision—should I do this or should I do that?—that sense of purpose can guide us.

The first course I ever taught, I wouldn't have done it. I was dragged kicking and screaming. Going by my habits and by what kept me comfortable and what I felt at ease doing—what would we do? We would never grow. We would stay in our own little limits. I never would have gone to be teaching meditation in a million years, sitting up in front talking to people. It's totally not my personality. I like to go hide in the corner.

I would say, no, no, no, no—until this popped into my mind: "Oh yeah, that's right. My deepest purpose is to serve the Dharma." I don't necessarily get to choose what that looks like. It doesn't mean I'm always going to like what the choices are. But once it's clear to ourselves and we have a sense of alignment with that—as soon as that came into my mind, there was no more wavering. It was clear that's what needed to happen.

It really helps, because otherwise we just stay in our habit patterns. It might be comfortable, but it's not necessarily about freedom. One teacher said once, "In every moment of activity, we are committing ourselves to something." It's a question of what. Are we willing to really look?

This isn't with a heavy judgment. It's just with the honesty of mindfulness and wisdom—of satipañña. Really look at the choices we make day to day, the big choices, and what we're actually committing to with those choices. We have to be willing to look with honesty and with love. Because otherwise we'll go, "Right, you're committing to greed. Once again, you've blown it. You thought you were here for the Dharma, you thought you were here for awakening, and all you're doing is feeding your face." Then, "Now I'm committing to aversion because I'm filled with self-hatred"—and you can really get into that cycle.

So this willingness to look has to be with satipañña, with wisdom, with mindfulness, with compassion for ourselves. But once we're willing to meet our life like that, willing to honor—an intention to honor—our deepest commitment, not expecting we're going to do it every time, but once we can let that light shine... we really are shining our heart, shining our mind. Once we can honor it to ourselves, it strengthens the depth of our commitment in a really profound way. And I found it helpful to keep bringing that into consciousness over and over, this willingness to look. Because things change. The commitment changes. And our life changes to go along with it.

So on the macro level, clear comprehension of purpose is getting in touch with your deepest aspiration and honoring the depth of it, and then bringing in our mindfulness practice of remembering to see why we're doing what we're doing—but to see it with kindness.

From Nisargadatta Maharaj: someone asks him a question about mental suffering, how to set right a tangle which is below the level of consciousness. And he answers, "By being with yourself, with the 'I am,' by watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge because it is there. This is the great work of awareness. It removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom, and alert attention is the mother of intelligence."

That one line I love: "By watching yourself in daily life with the intention to understand rather than to judge." If we can meet ourselves with that attitude, notice our intentions on the micro level and on the macro level, in order to understand, not to judge—I found that once I could bring that attitude in, my actions, both big and little, began very naturally to harmonize more and more over the years with the deepest level of what's most important for me.

Now, when I was scrutinizing my life with the intention to judge rather than to understand, that didn't happen. For years, way before I had this first sense of my deepest purpose, I was really quite devoted to practice, to the Dharma, but my attitude was:

every time I did something that I didn't consider dharmic—which, let's face it, is most of the time, because my idea of dharmic was pretty narrow—I'd get out the whip. Any time I turned on the TV, or went to a movie, or read a mystery novel, or just sat and zoned out. In other words, if I wasn't reading the Dharma, or practicing the Dharma, or being the most loving bodhisattva on the planet—and most of the time I wasn't—I was a failure. A dharmic failure.

This makes it really hard. Dharma almost becomes our enemy, and there's this sense of just being a failure all the time. And most of life comes outside of practice. When I quit trying to force myself to always live a so-called dharmic life and just paid attention—as Nisargadatta says, with the intention to understand rather than to judge—I'd see why I would so-called deviate, with a lot of understanding. And actually it got to be not such a problem.

So if I watched some stupid TV program, okay, that's not the end of the world. It doesn't mean I'm a failure in life. And I could see the conditions. I was working in this sheltered workshop I mentioned before. I was completely exhausted mentally and physically every night by the end of a day working there. I was basically useless for any kind of human activity that required energy or intelligence or communication. I was a vegetable. So every night I'd just sit there like a vegetable, beating myself up for being a vegetable—until I could finally see: "Oh yeah, cause and effect. You spend a day like this, what do you expect?"

And then the softness comes in. There's no sense of judging, and it becomes the practice. In that, I found that what had felt like a struggle to try and make my choices fit some ideal—which is another way to use our aspiration against ourselves—instead, quite naturally, extraneous things began to drop away.

For example, if I was watching a really stupid TV program without judgment and just paying attention, after five minutes I'd go, "This is really stupid," and turn it off. It didn't really take any struggle; it was just obvious. I know this sounds funny, but somehow accepting what's happening makes it a lot easier. And we have a real multiplicity of possibilities in this life, in this culture. Our practice becomes more inclusive. Everything becomes included rather than shutting things out.

This is from Izumi Shikibu: "Although I try to hold the single thought of Buddha's teaching in my heart, I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well." We can appreciate the crickets' voices calling. Sometimes they're beautiful. We don't have to hate them. We don't have to try and make ourselves deaf.

When we have this inclusive attitude, when we're in harmony with our experience, then our deepest aspiration comes to the surface more and more easily. It becomes a joy to live from that rather than a duty.

It's true that sometimes when we get in touch with our aspiration, when we feel it almost reverberating through our heart, through our body and mind, there are times it can be a little fearful. Often the thought will come up—and it would for me—"This means my life might have to change," or "It means I might have to give something up." And that's true. Our lives will probably have to change. But you think they wouldn't change anyway? They're going to change no matter what we do. Still, there's definitely a sense of, "Oh, what about..."—whatever your particular "what about" is.

Over the years—it's been some twenty-five years now since I was first introduced to the Buddha Dharma, to this practice—there have been amazing changes in my life. A lot of activities that I thought gave me pleasure, a lot of dreams I might have had about what I thought would be the happy life for me, or what I thought would make me happy, or what I thought life was worth living for—maybe a lot of those things never manifested.

For some reason the other day, I was reading a few little notes I took during a retreat I was sitting six or seven years ago. There was one page that quite surprised me. I had been teaching for three or four years at that time, and I could see in reading it that there was much more of a sense of struggle still going on—trying to find my relationship to teaching and to the demands that this lifestyle was making on my ideas of what I thought would make me happy in life.

I wrote in one place that I saw my idea of renunciation was really changing. It's easy for me to think of renunciation as living a simple life, or being a nun again, or a monk—we give up a family and sit a lot. Renunciation going in the direction of simplicity. What I was seeing at that retreat was that what I was really having to renounce was my ideas about what I thought my life should be about and what I thought would be a happy life—which actually meant my life moved towards more complexity, not towards more simplicity.

Could I find a balance with that? Could I give up ideas of having just one place to stay in and not traveling, or having a family, or choosing a location that wasn't quite so cold, or whatever the particular idea was? But I thought it was quite poignant that renunciation can take a different form from what we think. Little deaths all along the way to my particular idea of what Carol is or how Carol should manifest. And then in that, the surrender to one's aspiration has space to manifest in ways one could never imagine.

So yes, our life might change, but it's little by little over time. There is no way that I could look back and say, "Oh, I wish something had happened differently." Every falling away, every sense of renunciation might have a little sadness, some grief in it at the time, but it's always been an opening into something so much more connected, so much more alive in the truth—something we can't imagine from where we are now. So it's really a lot about trust. And it gives us a power to concentrate our dispersed energy—not just floating here and there—but to really focus our energy, just like concentration does, and do things one could never imagine.

Think of ten years ago. Most of you—did you imagine you could sit a whole three-month course? Forget it. Impossible. And now it's like nothing, right? You could start another one tomorrow. So that's working with purpose, with aspiration.

The second aspect of this clear comprehension, this broadening of our mindful awareness, is to see that we're not acting or existing in isolation—which of course isn't news, but it's easy to forget. And even with this sense of purpose, everything has to be adapted to the particular situation, to the particular moment. This is what we've been hammering at when we talk about skillful means. What is skillful means one moment, we just do out of memory the next moment, and it's totally inappropriate.

So this second aspect of clear comprehension is called clear comprehension of suitability—really seeing cause and effect, recognizing that conditions change, that what's suitable one moment is different. Something else is appropriate in a different moment when the conditions change. It's what Ram Dass calls "knowing your zip code." And if you don't remember your zip code, if you're American, then tomorrow it's time to start putting it back on again, knowing where you live.

This is another piece that we're often missing when we feel like we're so mindful. Sometimes people say, "I feel like I've been practicing a lot and I'm really mindful, but I feel like I'm getting more self-centered, more self-involved than when I started practice." And there can be phases like this, you know. We're so engrossed in the sensations in our big toe or in our particular emotions, and that's totally appropriate deep in a three-month retreat. But then we have to expand and realize that we are always in relationship with the environment, with other people, with the weather, with animals, and that our clear comprehension, our mindfulness, has to include all of this—what's appropriate.

A friend who went to acupuncture one time, and the acupuncturist was burning moxa. You know, they burn moxa down to your skin, and then when you just begin to feel it burn, you tell him and he takes it off so it doesn't hurt. So this friend was lying

there in his mind noting, "burning, burning, burning," but he didn't say anything. So he really got a burn. This is lacking this particular aspect of suitability. What's happening in the bigger picture?

This takes us out of our sense of separation—to notice impermanence, to notice cause and effect, to notice that there's no separate independent individual self ever. We can never act independent of circumstances. We can't exist independent of circumstances. We're affected by the weather. Have you noticed that? It's really amazing, isn't it? As if somehow we're separate from the weather. I used to get on retreats really annoyed. "I don't want to be depressed just because the weather is so gloomy. It's got nothing to do with me. I'm stronger than that." Forget it. We are the weather. There's no difference. We can't really expect it to be otherwise.

You notice, I'm sure you've noticed this, in the last two days as it comes close to the end, that you pick up each other's energy? Have you noticed that at all? It's like moving through the building. Actually, it's a little less this year than some years. Some years it feels like the windows are going to blow out of here by this day. But it's sort of circling. The staff feels it very strongly and we don't always realize what it is. And just talking to different ones of you, just feeling the energy as I walk through the dining room, there's no way one can be immune to it. We try, you know, but it doesn't work. So it's simply acknowledging that we are in the middle of a bunch of causes and we're feeling the effects at this moment.

So, for example, when you start talking, it's not that we just say what's true, but also what's useful. And that takes having a bigger view of the whole situation. Saying what is not only true and useful, but tuning into the receptivity level of the other person. And you'll see that a lot when you leave here and someone says, "How was your retreat?" And you start out on a three-hour discussion of the first week, and after two words, you can see they're gone. That's really where we pay attention. What does this person really want to know? What's really the level of receptivity here? What's skillful?

Or the kind of deep discussion you might have in a relationship about some difficulties. I learned a long time ago that starting one of those discussions at midnight was not a very skillful idea. And in the morning some things can be discussed in a very helpful way. So it's really paying attention to cause and effect. The behavior that's appropriate here will get you in a lot of trouble walking down the streets of New York City. Maybe not in New York City. In some places.

So this is just noticing cycles of cause and effect, cycles of change, that who we are affects everyone else, and everyone else affects who we are. You know Thich Nhat Hanh's story, although I've often wondered how he knows this. The story of the boat

people during that period when there were so many people escaping from Vietnam in fishing boats, just really packed fishing boats with a couple hundred people on little boats.

And a lot of those boats were attacked by pirates. Many would run into heavy storms, and of course they were way overloaded. What Thich Nhat Hanh says is that from talking to so many of the boat people, he found that the boats that came through the difficulties the best were the ones in which there was just one calm person on board—someone who could stay calm and meet the situation with clarity, with centeredness, with presence. That calm would affect other people and begin to radiate out, and there would be enough centeredness and balance to come through the difficulty.

What I wonder is, how does he know that if the other ones didn't come through the difficulty? But I think the point is well taken. If we can, in a difficult situation, be that one calm person—if we can meet a situation seeing it as it is—then we have the intelligence that comes from awareness, the adaptability, the skillful means that arises out of being so present in that moment to meet the situation appropriately. That's exactly what we've been practicing here with our practice all along. What's skillful in this moment? It might have been skillful yesterday, but we can't just do it from memory. We have to look fresh in this moment. The conditions are different. So that's the clear comprehension of adaptability.

And when we have these two—the overarching sense of aspiration, of purpose, commitment to that, commitment to look; and the presence of mind of suitability, of adaptability, that ability to be fresh and aware in each moment—then the other two aspects of broader awareness, of clear comprehension, follow naturally. This is really about our life becoming our practice, the whole of life becoming a domain of meditation, our whole life becoming lit up with wisdom, with non-delusion. These two naturally follow from the others.

So really, can we bring in the attitude of meeting our life as practice and see what aspect of life we somehow hold outside of being important or necessary to be present and awake for? When I hold the question in my heart, "How can I awaken in this moment?" then I need to look: what particular moments do I always forget to ask that question?

In one of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's books, *The First Circle*, he has one of his main characters talk about what he calls "the final inch." I haven't read this for years, but it's always stuck in my mind. *The First Circle* was a gulag prison for hotshot scientists who were set to work on very esoteric projects. This character's premise of the final inch is that people work really hard, really diligently, with a lot of care on something that's

very complicated until they're just almost finished—just that final inch to go. And then somehow the care or the attention or the constancy falls down and we tend to get a little careless.

It's so easy to do that. It's easy to see how we do it on a retreat. Someone today gave me a great example in an interview of how we do it in daily life. She was describing being so mindful while eating and then noticing how the last couple of bites she'd really hurry through, and the mindfulness would fade away. Really seeing with wisdom that it's because the pleasantness, somehow she knew the pleasantness was about to end, and there's a clinging there and it's painful, so we hurry through it and don't really pay attention. That's how I think of this final inch.

What are the things that are a little difficult, a little uncomfortable, or maybe so pleasant that we really don't want to have to bring in mindfulness? That's where I fall down. Things will be really smooth, really equanimous in my mind, and I think, "Well, I don't really have to pay attention now. I'm just cruising. Equanimity is firmly established." Which maybe it was for a couple of moments, but not for two weeks without attention, I don't think so.

Just look in your life. What are the areas that are somehow outside the domain of awakening? And again without judgment, just bring some awareness to them. Remembering that our practice is not an activity; it's an attitude with which we meet our lives.

This is from Geshe Raptin, and it really inspires me—his way of meeting his life: "All actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings." Not a should. But if I can imagine washing the dishes with that attitude—all actions, even the most simple, for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings—there's no action that cannot be used for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion. I mean wholesome actions, okay, I don't know about really unwholesome ones. But with that intention, it doesn't matter how we manifest in our life—whether we're, as Kamala said, changing the diapers, whether we're washing the dishes, or vacuuming, or working for seva, or teaching school, or raising a family, or meditating in Burma. It's not about there being some right way to manifest.

But can we bring this attitude? This is one way of expressing it. I'm not saying it should be expressed for anybody else in this way. But when we can meet the actions in our life, even the most simple, with the question, "How can I awaken in this moment?"—that's the attitude of our deep practice. The form it takes has many, many possibilities.

And when we meet our life in this way, everything we do begins to be shot through with wisdom, with truth. The aspects of impermanence, of the unsatisfactory nature of things—they become more apparent at times. Also, the fact that we're not separate autonomous beings, as I was saying in the area of adaptability, becomes more obvious. Sometimes we might bring it in consciously, reflect on impermanence, reflect on suffering, reflect on anatta. But if we're just meeting each action of our life with this intention to awaken, then without it being such a formal thing we have to try and make happen, just by itself the truth begins to shine everywhere. It shines in your heart. You notice it in other people—and not just in so-called spiritual people, but we see it everywhere, because that's really what life is. And as we begin to wake up to it in ourselves, we see that it's always been everywhere. It's just somehow our own shutting down to our own pain, our own fears, that keeps us from seeing that truth is everywhere.

You might notice when you leave here that we're a lot more open, a lot more sensitive. So the truth is beautiful. It's also a lot about seeing impermanence and suffering and having an open, compassionate heart. I remember after my first three-month course, for some unknown reason, a couple of days after it ended, I went to a big mall in Worcester. Worcester's not a cheery city—I don't know if you spend much time there. I'm sure there's happy people in Worcester, but it's not one of those cities that lights me up to go into. And I remember walking through this mall just wide open, and it's just something... you could feel the kind of suffering in people's faces. That kind of numbed out look was really what I remember. In some ways it was devastating. It was devastating because I wasn't locking around it. In other ways, it was really connecting. We're so much more sensitive, but we're so much more alive. We're so much more present in life.

That didn't lead me to hate Worcester or hate those people or think I can never go out in public again. It was just a sense of the poignancy of our life and a much deeper connection. And I find when I'm willing to at least have the intention to meet life this way—of course we don't do it all the time—but I find that the situations around me really become tools to wake up. This I can do consciously if I'm feeling shut off, or it happens spontaneously when I'm more open and vulnerable, as in that mall.

So for example, when I go to see my doctor in the teaching hospital in Worcester, I really like going because it's a huge hospital and all kinds of people come there with all kinds of problems. Poor people, a lot of people who don't speak English, little kids in wheelchairs—just the whole range. And I love going there because it wakes me up. Because I really just try to be open and try to look at people and try to just let it in. And I come away feeling so much more alive in my heart and connected to the world. It might sound kind of weird, but it's really a way of waking up.

The hunting season here, this deer hunting season—I think it's amazing that it happens every year during the three-month course because it touches so many different aspects of life. We tend, well, many of us tend to get really identified with the beauty of the deer, their helplessness, and the hunters going out shooting always feels so violent and so harsh. I remember once I was driving with a good friend who was very intense and very exuberant and very expressive. She was driving the car and we're going down Pleasant Street out there during hunting season, and some hunter was crossing the road. She goes, "Oh, those hunters! They make me so mad. I just want to take this car and run them right over." That's just how she is.

And I said, "You know, I wonder about the quality of the energy you're expressing—how different is that from the hunters going out killing the deer?"

And she said, "Oh my God, you're blowing me away!" It was so funny. She had never thought of that. But it's true—can we take in the whole picture?

There's pain and there's fear—and can we have compassion? Many of the hunters actually need the meat to eat. And in fact, we need equanimity because this is how the world is, even as we still have our opinions. Can we be connected with the whole picture? Feel the suffering, feel the beauty, feel the compassion, balance it with equanimity. I think it's a great practice, and it can wake us up.

Notice times when you're feeling really separate. Sometimes we can consciously extend our awareness to include the whole picture.

An example of this: one time I was riding on a train in India, on a sleeper—a second-class sleeper where there were just benches, really, two on each side of a little compartment. I mean, you just pull a curtain over it. For some reason, I had one top bench, and usually they try to put women together, but I had three Indian men in the other three spaces. I was traveling alone and I wasn't particularly comfortable.

During the day, of course, there are forty-five people sitting on the benches. But at night, when you own the bench that you bought with your ticket, the other people have to leave—which it turns out were all the men's families, their wives and children and in-laws. God knows where they went to sleep, but the men each got a bench, and me.

So I was lying there. They were perfectly nice; they didn't bother me. But I was feeling such a sense of separation. *These guys, leave me alone. What are they doing here?* It was me and them. It was a very uncomfortable night.

Then in the morning, I noticed what my mind was doing. Without actually saying anything, I just shifted it and said, *Okay, why don't I think of us in the compartment instead of me and them.* That's all I did.

The day comes, we all sit back down again on the bottom benches, forty-five people come back in the compartment. But because I was thinking *us*—that's all—something shifted in my vibe, and it really turned into an *us*. They started being very friendly, went out and bought me little snacks. I got to taste chai and little pakoras. They wanted to show me Indian snacks, and we had very nice conversations. The only difference was my inner attitude—that this happened in the morning and not the night before. Just the shift from *me and them* to *us*.

We can do that consciously at times, and it's amazing the power it has. So just in little ways like that, using the situations in life to wake up rather than just reacting—*this is a curse, this is a blessing*—no, this is a chance to wake up in this moment. And that's all we have, just this moment. And then the next moment, in case we spaced out the last moment. Here we are again, this moment.

So just in these days in your life, please don't undervalue yourself. Know that you, just as you are, are a unique manifestation of truth, of Dhamma—however you express it in your life, and we'll all express it differently. You know that verse from Rumi: "Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." Each of us will do it differently. So find your own way to kneel and kiss the ground.

I want to close with this quotation from Nyoshul Khenpo: "Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who overlook or ignore it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and beings."

And this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives. Every moment of our lives, we can recognize our true nature.

CHAPTER 297

Mettā as Liberation: Recognizing Our Intrinsic Connectedness

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson dismantles common misconceptions about mettā (loving-kindness) practice, revealing it not as a mere feel-good exercise but as a powerful path to liberation. She explains that mettā is an actualization of the deepest truth of existence—that there is no separate, alienated, independent existence. Through this practice, we consciously recognize the living fact of our connectedness to all beings.

Wilson examines how our habitual patterns of aversion and attachment function as obstacles to recognizing our intrinsic wholeness. Drawing on teachings from Nisargadatta Mahārāj and Ajahn Sumedho, she illustrates how fear and desire create the illusion of separation, while mettā meets all experience—pleasant or unpleasant—with spacious acceptance. She shares the remarkable story of Chris Carrier, who forgave the man who had kidnapped and shot him as a child, demonstrating the boundless potential of mettā practice.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with the "near enemy" of mettā (attachment masquerading as love) and the "far enemy" (aversion). Wilson emphasizes that mettā practice is about cultivating purity of intention rather than controlling results, and that each moment of goodwill—even lasting just a finger snap—strengthens our capacity to live from a place of ease and connectedness. Through Rumi's poem "The Guest House," she invites practitioners to welcome all experiences, including difficult emotions and self-judgment, as opportunities for deepening the heart's capacity for acceptance and liberation.

For some years in the beginning of my practice, I felt a little bit resistant to doing a long period of intensive mettā practice for two reasons.

One of them being that, especially in the beginning, it's so much work. I don't know if any of you have discovered that today—over and over, the same phrases. Sometimes it feels like digging a ditch. And the second reason is something that Sharon mentioned: my misconception that it's nice, just sort of a feel-good practice, but I'm really after enlightenment and freedom. So it's nice to feel good, but I want to get to the root of things.

I'm happy to report that that was a misconception. You're not wasting your time doing mettā practice. In the beginning it is a lot of work—that's just the facts of it. But it gets better. It ends up being a lot easier, actually, than vipassanā. But it's not just a feel-good practice by any means. It's actually a way of bringing more consciously into our experience the visceral fact of our intrinsic connection to all beings, to all creation.

Mettā is an actualization of the deepest truth of our being, of this universe: that there is no separate, alienated, independent existence. There's no way that we can live in isolation and separation. It just feels that way. And so what mettā is actually helping us do is function as a conscious tool to help us recognize, over and over again, the living fact of our connectedness. It helps us recognize and learn to rest in this truth, to be nurtured in and to really trust this truest context of our heart and mind.

Mostly we trust our aversions and our attachments and our fears. And mettā is a nice idea. But what we can learn is that mettā is really an expression of the deepest truth. Our attachments and fears and aversions and confusions are just that—confusion.

This is from Joe Goldstein: "Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. Certainly, it looks as though I am separate from other people and other phenomena. As long as we think we are separate, we're going to suffer. We feel we have to defend ourselves. We have to find something in the world that will make us happy." And we do this with passion—we defend ourselves and look for something in the world that will make us happy.

What mettā helps us do—the practice itself, in two ways—is counteract this. It helps us begin to and continue to deepen in the recognition of what it feels like to know that we're not separate and to trust that. And in the process, this practice highlights the ways that we get sidetracked into defending ourselves and looking for something in the world to make us happy. Those ways of getting sidetracked are the experiences that function as seeming obstacles to recognizing our connectedness, to living in a state of real happiness, of real ease in the world with others and with ourselves.

We really do look very hard for something in the world to bring us happiness. How do we do that? Just think of all the ways in your life that you're looking for something inside or outside to bring happiness. And then think about what is the happiness that you're actually looking for. Both of these are important to recognize.

I read a couple of years ago an article about an Oprah Winfrey show that was a takeoff of this movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, which was about a man whose wife had died. He had a son and he was very lonely. Somehow he was on a radio call-in show, and a

woman on the other coast heard him and knew this was the man for her, even though she knew nothing about him except for that. And then the whole wonderful, happy-ever-after story went on from there.

On this Oprah show, apparently she had five men just like that whose wives had died and they had young children. They were all very respectable—doctors or lawyers. And so they were on the show, and then she invited any woman who was interested to write in. Two weeks later she came on and she had received 60,000 letters from women—serious letters.

I'm not making fun of this because this is what we do. Relationship is wonderful. There's a lot of joy in it. But to look, to think that anything out there so unknown to us is going to do it for us—this is a source of great confusion and separation and suffering. Because if I need someone from the Oprah Winfrey show, that means that until I get that, I can't know peace.

I can't know happiness. Or we look inside, believing something in ourselves has to change in order to be happy. We have to change our hairstyle, change how we look, get a better personality, whatever. Internal, external, changing conditions—as long as we're looking there for happiness and love, we're creating in that very moment the experience of separation and alienation.

So what is metta? What is this loving-kindness? And again, we can so easily get caught up in our cultural ideas about love—just the obvious ones, and you each might have your own little twists on them. One is that love is a grand passion, and we can take it out of just the realm of being focused on one other person, but you might find that bias comes into our ideas about loving-kindness. If you're not feeling a total, ecstatic, unitive experience, if tears aren't streaming down your face, if you're not at one with all existence, the metta isn't really working. That might happen sometimes. You might feel that. I promise it won't stay. Because that's not what metta is about. It's an aspect of it.

And then there's the other side—the sort of soft focus, sugar-coated version. What Sharon was talking about: the fear of people thinking metta is just too mushy and not for the real world. I get images of some movie a long time ago where there was this Mozart piano sonata, and all I remember about it was these two beautiful lovers romping through fields of flowers. I have no idea what else happened in the movie, but that's like one image of metta that is just too sickening to hold up. And that's where I've run into a lot of people who do avoid practicing loving-kindness because they think it leads to weakness and passivity and not seeing clearly.

True metta, of course, is none of these things. It's at once so much more simple, basic, and down to earth, and so much more courageous and profound than any of these ideas we might have about it. The Buddha called metta deliverance of the heart, and it springs from wisdom and clear seeing, not from blindness. It can be as basic as a simple good wish for oneself or for someone else. A simple wish for someone's happiness that doesn't set any conditions or want anything in return. That's simple. Just a generous movement of the heart. We experience that all the time. That's metta.

And it has courage, a moment of metta, because it's not blind. It sees whatever is painful, difficult, or unfortunate—if anything, more clearly than when we're caught in our reactions. And yet, even though there's difficulty, the heart does not react with closing down, separation, or judgment. Even though we see the difficulty, the pain, the confusion more clearly, there's still the connectedness of energy, of heart and mind. There's still the capacity to wish another well, or to wish ourselves well—even if we don't like or approve of what we see. It's a radical shift in our understanding of freedom and happiness.

And I believe we all have the capacity to be as courageous as this man—maybe you read this in the newspapers last fall, it was all over the news—a man in Florida named Chris Carrier. He recently went to visit his ailing elderly friend at a nursing home, took along some gifts, comforted the man, made sure that he was warm and well taken care of. It was the last time he saw his friend, who died later that night.

The friend, David McAllister, was a blind, frail, and lonely seventy-seven-year-old with no one to look after him. He had also recently confessed to abducting, stabbing, and shooting Mr. Carrier in the head and leaving him to die twenty-two years ago, when Chris was nine or ten years old.

Mr. Carrier says he was blinded in his left eye as a result of the shooting, but he said he did not feel that he had been permanently traumatized, adding that he bore no ill will towards the man who had kidnapped him and left him to die. "It wasn't hard for me to show compassion given his circumstances," Mr. Carrier said. He was married, had two daughters, and until recently worked as a youth minister. "I moved on. This event did not haunt me all my life. I'm glad he was able to put the past behind him."

It's in the news. Yes, it's unusual. And I'm not saying that's how we should be. What I'm saying is that potential of freedom from hatefulness and revenge, that potential of being able to meet even that amount of horrific behavior with compassion, with an openness of heart—that's the boundlessness of metta, of loving-kindness. And that boundlessness is not reserved for just an occasional person. Of course, that might not

be our experience. Maybe never, maybe not most of the time, but it is our potential. And we can each experience moments of that. We don't have to start with such an intense experience.

What our practice here this week, in however long you have, what it's helping us do on a moment-to-moment basis is learn how to meet whatever arises in our experience—in our body, in our mind, internal, external, beautiful, ugly, fearful, enticing—to learn how to meet what arises with this open connectedness of heart and mind. A connectedness that sees clearly and allows it to be just what it is. A space of heart and mind that does not have to create separation in order to protect ourselves, does not have to look somewhere else for something happy in order to find peace. We discover that the capacity for love and peace is boundless in each of us, and nobody else can stop it in us.

It's not dependent on having someone love us or having perfect circumstances in our life. It's something that each of us can open to and recognize over and over, learning to trust it and living our lives more and more from this potential. No one else can stop us from recognizing this potential.

What does seem to stop us is simply our habits of mind and heart. They're simple—incredibly deep-rooted, but simple to talk about—these habits of how our mind and heart respond to situations in ways that create the sense of separation and isolation. As Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain." We're talking about our old friends: attachment and aversion. You can't get away from them in any talk of basic Buddhism that you ever come to. Why? Because that's the root of our sense of seeming separation, of pain and fear and confusion. It's very basic, but it's very deep-rooted.

Each moment of metta, of open-hearted connectedness to whatever is arising, is actually cutting through these habits of attachment to pleasure and fear of pain. As the metta practice continues, though, you may have already noticed this today. If not, you'll probably notice it happening at some point during the next few days. We might have the idea that we just progress in metta—metta, metta, love, love, openness, openness—and that just gets stronger. But there's a possibility that you might experience from time to time that aversion and attachment seem to be blossoming. They get highlighted with this practice.

It's easy to feel, "I came here to practice loving-kindness to myself, and instead I'm sitting here saying, 'May I be filled with suffering.' 'May I be happy'—fat chance. 'May I be healthy'—in some other life. What is going on here?" It can seem as though aversion or clinging is being cultivated. It's not that they're being cultivated, but the development of the intention of loving-kindness, the meeting of experience with openness, the

non-discriminating quality of metta actually begins to highlight these confused ways that we respond to situations. It lets us begin to see more clearly how the aversion, the fear, or the attachment functions in our experience to create a sense of separation.

This is really great to see, because once we see it, we're not so seduced by these states of mind and heart. We see them for what they are. We don't have to hate them, but we don't believe them so strongly. And this is where we then, almost despite ourselves, begin to trust more deeply in the connectedness.

Is this familiar to you—what a habit of mind it is to meet most situations with either attachment or aversion? I noticed this when I sat last year for several weeks. One day it really struck me how habituated my normal mind was, when I'm not paying attention, to constantly evaluate, to assess every situation and meet it with "this is good, this is bad, I like this, I don't like that."

I noticed this, and it's really apparent on retreat because although we're not communicating verbally, something happens with every single person who comes into our field of vision or crosses our walking path. I noticed one day that everybody who came in, there was this assessment: "They look nice. They look good. I want something from them. I want them to notice me. I want them to like me. I want them to think I'm really looking like a hot shot yogi." Or I don't like something about them, and so what I want is to create distance—keep that person far away from me. Or somehow in the assessment, some fear would come up. "I want them to like me, but they're not going to like me because they're so much better than I am." And so there's fear, and their presence becomes a threat.

This is an exhausting way to live. But I noticed it was extremely rare that if I wasn't paying attention, this wasn't just what happened. To bring in a moment of metta—just a person walks across, the assessment doesn't have to happen—it's simply, "Ah, may you be happy. May I be happy." Just a simple outflowing of energy, of connectedness. Just as you are, just as I am, that's fine. It's such a relief. It's so simple. It's so connected. There's just no problem in that moment. And there's no need for the sense of separation to be created.

So I want to speak a little bit about recognizing how these two very common energies—aversion or fear and attachment—function in a moment of experience to create a seeming sense of separation, how they seem to block the heart flow of connectedness, how they block our recognition of the fact that we are and always have been perfectly complete and at ease.

Aversion, which ranges from simple dislike to pulling back to anger, rage, grief, fear—all of these stem from the misconception that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant or painful experience. That's an almost literal description of how aversion or fear functions in a moment of experience: "I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant or fearful experience."

Something arises in this moment. When we experience aversion or fear here on the retreat, let's just keep this very simple to the moment-to-moment retreat experience. When aversion or fear arises, it's arising as a response to an experience that's happening right now, in this moment. It might be an unpleasant physical sensation, or a sound that's startling or unpleasant, or a smell, or a sight. It might be an emotion, a mood. It might be a thought that's really unpleasant or scary or painful. It might be a memory. Even if it's a memory of something that happened ten years ago that's painful, it's actually the memory as a thought arising that's unpleasant in this moment.

And this misconception that I can keep myself separate from it manifests in that moment as the energy, the attention, the heart and mind—you can almost feel it flinch back, pull away from that experience. And in that, there's immediately created a sense of separation. Because of this sense of distance, of separation, more ignorance arises, because when we're pulling back, we're not actually able to recognize clearly what's actually happening. So, for example, it might be an unpleasant memory, and then, "Oh, I don't want to feel that, I don't want to know that," and the mind just starts taking off, and the unpleasantness, the fear is increased a thousandfold.

Metta is just the opposite of this. It simply doesn't discriminate; it doesn't say this is bad, this is good. It simply flows in, around, includes and accepts the experience of that memory just as it is. And in that connectedness, we see it much more clearly. "Oh, it's an unpleasant memory." It's still unpleasant. But the whole extra story and the whole sense of separation and fear just gets cut with the clear seeing and acceptance of metta.

Let me read you a story that's an example of this, from that well-known Buddhist writer Michael Crichton. He's talking about being in Africa on some kind of safari, in a tent with his wife and a whole group of people. They were in the tent at night, it was dark, and he wakes up—they both wake up—and there's all this crashing and banging and huge noise outside the tent. He's lying there, and it sounds like an elephant. Even though they said there were no elephants, it sounds like an elephant walking right by the tent. He went into a total panic, just lying there not knowing what to do, and the whole thing was just taking off for ten, fifteen minutes, I don't know how long. Finally,

he just couldn't stand it. He took a flashlight, unzipped the tent, looked out, shined the flashlight out, and it was shining right into the big, huge eye of an elephant, maybe ten feet away.

Well, as soon as he saw that, all the panic disappeared. He was like, "Oh, it's an elephant." Zipped up the tent, went back to bed, and fell right asleep.

And this is what he says about that. He says he had really slept well when he stopped worrying, and he was very impressed with the instantaneous flip in his own emotional state—from barely controlled hysteria to a detached calm once he saw the giant eye. How had that happened?

He reflected on it and said, "I realize later we're all like that. We can work ourselves into a hysterical panic over possibilities that we won't look at. What if I have cancer? What if my job is at risk? What if my kids are on drugs? What if I'm getting bald? What if an elephant is outside my tent? What if I am faced with some terrible thing I don't know how to deal with? And that hysteria goes away the instant we are willing to look, to hear the answer, even if the answer is what we feared all along. Yes, you have cancer. Yes, you're going bald. Yes, there's an elephant outside your tent. Now the question becomes, what are you going to do with it? Subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops. Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on, and it promotes an unwillingness to look. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that makes us afraid. The minute we look, we can cease being afraid."

In an odd way, he's describing an aspect of metta—the willingness to just be with whatever it is that's presenting itself. We don't have to like it. We don't have to approve of it. But just in the being with it, the hysteria stops.

And we can meet what's happening with a sense of wholeness, of completion, of ease. The sense of separation doesn't come from the fact that there's a difficult experience arising. It comes from getting lost in that fear, that aversion, that reactivity to the difficult experience.

And obviously—and you'll see this probably quite a bit here on this retreat—the difficult experience isn't always an elephant outside somewhere. A great deal of the time we take that unwillingness, that sense that if it's unpleasant it's a mistake, it's bad, it's wrong, and we turn that negativity against ourselves.

Our old friend self-judgment can be elicited at times quite strongly for some people when working with sending loving-kindness to yourself. That sense of, "I don't deserve it. How can someone who's so fill-in-the-blank deserve metta?" And it could be anything

that we're judging about ourselves—whatever we cannot accept. The way our bodies look. If we have some illness, if we have some disability, something we see as weakness. Certain emotions that we're experiencing that we judge ourselves for: anger, grief, sadness, rage, pettiness, jealousy, self-judgment itself. Patterns of our personality. We anger too easily. We're not as generous as we would like to be. We find that we're selfish. We find that hatred comes up.

Whatever it is, it really doesn't matter what it is. This sense that when these particular aspects of our physical, mental, emotional experience arise—aspects that we dislike or fear or judge so harshly—they're not okay. When they arise, often our deep-rooted pattern of flinching back, pulling away, creating distance is so strong that we pull back from the thing we're judging in ourselves. Say, for example, jealousy. We pull back so quickly that it's almost below the level of consciousness. Jealousy might come up, and I've pulled back and reacted and started judging myself about it before I even consciously acknowledge, "Oh, jealousy is present." And in that pulling back, that sense of separation from ourselves, that sense of incompletion, that sense of needing to somehow fix ourselves, becomes so strong. And it's actually in the service of denial—of simply not feeling the jealousy.

So our practice of metta is this: if jealousy arises or self-judgment arises or anything in our experience that we judge as not being okay, the metta simply meets it with an outflowing quality of spacious acceptance. Because as Jung said, the parts of ourselves that we do not accept will become hostile to us. Metta functions by bringing all the parts of ourselves that we don't accept up into the light. It's not always a pleasant experience, definitely. There's a reason we're not accepting these parts—we don't like them.

But what metta does, as Ajahn Sumedho describes it: with metta, one isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. In other words, we're not saying, "I'm sending loving-kindness to myself because I'm such a wonderful, perfect, ideal person." Actually, the metta gets stronger as we open to and accept all the little warts that we don't like so much. He says, "Metta isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, thing, person, or in oneself. Witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it."

I love the felt sense that gives me. Thinking of myself, something I really detest about myself arises very clearly. With metta, with the heart of metta, we witness it in all the space of an open heart without creating anything around it. No ripple of aversion, no ripple of "Oh, that's okay, I'm really okay anyway." It's just what it is. It arises into the space of metta, it lives its life, and it passes.

The field of metta, as Sharon says, is like the sky—you can throw anything into it and it doesn't disturb it. The field of metta is undisturbed. A beautiful quality arises, we see it as beautiful, we don't create anything around it. An unpleasant quality arises, we see it as unpleasant, metta doesn't create anything around it. There's space for it all to arise, be met with clarity, with greatness of heart, and non-reactivity of mind.

Acceptance, kindness, and patience are three aspects of metta that it's very helpful to remember, especially when we find we're getting caught in aspects of self-judgment. This is where metta begins—by befriending all these little things or big things that have been kept in the dark. When they come up in our practice, and they will, it's not a mistake. It's because the metta is strengthening and deepening. Our heart becomes more courageous, more able to allow these difficult experiences to arise, because our deeper understanding and faith in our connectedness, in our intrinsic wholeness, is getting stronger and stronger. We know that can't be blasted. It doesn't matter what arises, and so we can greet it.

We can greet it as Rumi talks about in "The Guest House":

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows
who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Many hidden joys and sorrows will come up. We're not going to have perfect, balanced metta with each of them, of course. But each moment—just in a moment—that there's the intention to connect with and accept and be kind to whatever's arising, that is a moment of metta. That strengthens our understanding of our connectedness.

So that's noticing how aversion, fear, and anger work to hide our sense of connectedness. This is called, in the classical terms, the far enemy of loving kindness. It's the far enemy because it's really the opposite. It comes up a lot in the practice, and it's pretty easy to notice. You know when you're caught in fear and aversion. You don't tend to confuse it with loving kindness.

Now attachment, clinging, the subtle quality of desire—this is sometimes called the near enemy of loving kindness. The near enemy, because at times, not always, but at times we can actually confuse the experience of attachment for metta.

Let me describe that a little bit. Recognizing in the moment of your experience how attachment or clinging arises and how it functions is pretty simple, pretty obvious when we're paying attention. Just as aversion or fear arises with an unpleasant experience, attachment arises with a pleasant experience. A pleasant sound, a pleasant sight, a pleasant emotion, a really nice thought about something pleasant that might happen ten years from now—but it's a thought arising in the moment, and there's this pleasant feeling that goes along with it.

When we're not paying attention, we tend to think, "Yes, this is right. This is good. This is happiness. This is how life is supposed to be." And there's just this subtle movement of energy, of mind, of heart towards that—or not so subtle. And if we're not noticing: "What can I do to make this stay forever?"

Now, I'm not saying that a pleasant experience isn't a kind of happiness—certainly it is. But it has conditions, the main one being it isn't going to stay forever, no matter what it is. And when we don't see that, what was actually experienced as happiness becomes the cause for greater suffering in the form of this delusion of separation, of needing something for love, needing something to complete me. In its grossest experience, as soon as the sense of wanting arises, we're caught in a sense of separation.

I'll give you an example. On a gross level, you wouldn't confuse this with metta because the suffering is obvious. I was getting on an airplane for an overnight flight, which I'm not fond of because I really can't sleep sitting up. I never sleep on those flights. I was on the aisle of one of those middle rows, and about ten minutes before I knew they were going to close the doors, I suddenly realized nobody had sat in the other seats. That was a moment of "Oh, that would be nice"—a moment of pleasantness.

And immediately, immediately, it turned to such suffering because of the grasping. How can I hold on to this? I've got to keep those seats. All my senses were strained. Everybody who walked through the door of that plane, my attention was just glued to watching where they were going, tightening. Hatred if they started to come down that row. Everyone on the plane became my enemy. It was a most unpleasant experience.

This, in its gross form, is how clinging works. It was just a pleasant sight, a pleasant thought—maybe I'll get to lie down—and it immediately created a sense of separation, suffering, and neediness.

It's a happy story because actually nobody sat down next to me. I got to lie down, and I also got to say, "Oh well, may everybody on this plane be happy."

So that's clinging on a gross level. We all know it. It's suffering. We wouldn't fool ourselves that it's not. But attachment often arises more subtly. Attachment and metta both follow on pleasant experience—they both arise in pleasant experience.

So we associate attachment with pleasant experience, but it has conditions. Metta also, when you're experiencing metta, is very pleasant. And it becomes more pleasant. And it's so easy for the attachment to slip in there and not be noticed. We can still think it's the metta functioning.

A couple of examples. Once I was on a retreat in a beautifully landscaped place in South Africa, way up in the mountains. It was really very exquisite. There was a circular walk lined with huge iris bushes. I had been there some weeks, and one morning I came out early just as the sun was coming up, which was my favorite time, with all this mistiness. A really beautiful spot. And all those bushes had suddenly bloomed that morning—this exquisite, very pale lavender white. The beauty was overwhelming. I can feel it now.

In that moment, standing there, there was just a sense of real appreciation. A sense of metta, really. Appreciation and connectedness to nature, to beauty, to the world. There were no thoughts. That's a moment of absolute connectedness—metta, no separation. Just as it is. A moment, two moments, three moments.

But the mind cannot leave well enough alone. After some moments of looking, this thought came in: "They won't still be here tomorrow. Maybe I should get a camera and take photos. Then I could show my mother—she would love to see this, she loves landscaping. I could show my friends. I could remember it."

I sort of noticed what was happening, but not really. It was masquerading as still appreciating with this loving, connected heart the beauty of the situation. But actually clinging had come in, and I was trying to hold on to it. Thinking I was enjoying just being present with metta, I was actually caught in clinging, in attachment. It took a little time to recognize, until I realized I had started running around—"I think I have a friend I can borrow a camera from"—and in fact, with all that beauty there, I was completely separated from it, running around like a nut looking for a camera so I could hold on to how beautiful it was.

This is what we do. It's not the irises that were the cause of the clinging or the attachment—it's the upwelling of pleasant feeling. It could have been anything. The irises, a nice thought, a pizza for lunch. It really didn't matter what it was. The attachment comes in to that upwelling of pleasant feeling. And if we're not alert, we might not notice it.

So metta, at times—in the times when all the shadow stuff isn't coming up—can be extremely pleasant. It's beautiful, that sense of connectedness, of completion, of easiness, of no need to shut out any experience. And it can easily drift into attachment.

I was sending metta to my dear friend, and I noticed suddenly, "Oh, we don't see each other as much as we used to. May she be happy. May she be free. How come we don't see each other so much? May she be free from danger." And then kind of back and forth, and suddenly there was just this little bit of longing. Sometimes longing can have a little edge of pleasantness, and you can keep going with it for a while and not quite recognize it's not metta—it's attachment.

That's attachment functioning as the near enemy of metta. It's not bad. It's not a mistake. We notice it because as you keep paying attention, after a while you notice it doesn't feel connected. And that's the difference. "I really would love for us to spend more time together"—it sounds connected, but it's actually creating this sense of separation. "I need to see her."

I need to be together. I need something from her in order to be complete. Whereas loving-kindness is just this outflowing of "may you be happy"—it doesn't matter if I never see or hear from you again. It has nothing to do with that. It's just a total wishing of well-being and happiness. And in that, we are perfectly happy and complete. It doesn't matter who you're sending it to—yourself, your friend, a benefactor, an enemy when we can get to that. The experience of metta itself is complete and connecting.

So knowing that attachment can masquerade as metta doesn't mean we then pull away from everything beautiful. Not at all. It's a great opportunity to learn the difference. At that point when I noticed I was getting into "how can we spend more time together," I brought my attention to my experience, felt the neediness, the separation. "Oh, this isn't metta." And you simply reconnect with the person's beautiful quality, reconnect with the phrase. Again, establishing that intention.

Metta is a practice of purity of motivation. It's not about results or controlling the results. And that's another way attachment can slip in and masquerade as metta—in how we're relating to the practice itself. I would find myself getting caught in this so often. "How am I doing? Am I feeling it yet? Is this really metta? Is this strong enough?

No, not really good enough, okay. Really feel it—may I be free from suffering! May I really feel it for him." And we're leaning into it. Or maybe we'll say, "Okay, it doesn't matter if I don't feel it, but if I really drop into each phrase, I'm going to get really concentrated. How concentrated am I?"

This is attachment slipping into the practice. If you're leaning forward a little bit, doing a kind of check—how good am I doing, how strong is the feeling, comparing it to yesterday, comparing it to someone else—you're slipping into attachment. Remember, all we can do is establish in one moment the purity of our intention, of our motivation. I wish to wish myself well. I can't control the results.

One other way the practice sometimes leans into attachment: we hear the phrases as trying to change how things are. For instance, if I'm sick and I'm saying "may I be healthy," that can just be the pure motivation of caring for my body—or it could be "may I really get healthy, I hate this sickness." Or for someone we really care for who's having a hard time, when we're saying "may you be happy," there's that subtle moving into thinking if I do this, maybe it'll change their unhappiness. Maybe it will, and it would be great if it does, but all we can do is cultivate the purity of the well-wishing.

If you find yourself sliding into frustration, or leaning forward, or feeling somehow out of sync, you might check and see if the practice has started focusing on results rather than simply resting in the intention to connect, to wish well. If we can just rest in that intention, it takes a lot of pressure off. We realize it's all out of our control how it goes. All we do is when we notice we're off anywhere else—oh, okay, come back. Connect with myself, connect with the benefactor, whoever you're sending it to, and just gently, delicately drop into your heart with the next phrase. That's all. You don't have to go anywhere beyond that. In any moment we can just come back and do that. We're cultivating metta. We're cultivating this quality of loving, accepting connectedness.

It sneaks up on us. A lot of the time, we really don't notice that anything is happening. But each time we repeat the phrase, each time we connect with whoever we're sending it to—even when we don't feel a thing—that is a reinforcing, a strengthening of that intention of heart and mind. And that's all we have to work with. The intention of metta is what counteracts the habits of ill will and greed, the habits of seeming separation, confusion, and suffering. Each intention of metta allows our faith and trust in our absolute connectedness to get stronger.

I want to end with something the Buddha said. He said, "If just for the lasting of a finger snap, a person indulges in a thought of goodwill, or gives attention to a thought of goodwill, of metta, just for the lasting of a finger snap, such a person is called a bhikkhu"—which means someone who is really devoted to the practice. "Not empty of

result is her meditation. She carries out the teaching. She responds to advice. She does not eat the country's alms food in vain. So what then would I say of one who makes much of such a thought?"

It's so powerful.

Just for a finger snap. Think how many finger snaps you've cultivated thoughts of goodwill already today. We have no idea of the power of that, but it's immense.

In these moments where we consciously recognize that metta, that open acceptance, over and over, we really experience the potential to live our life in another way—in another way altogether. To find an ease and a happiness of heart and mind that is not dependent on any changing circumstance.

This is really how the practice of metta opens us to true liberation of heart and mind.

CHAPTER 298

Getting Off The Hamster Wheel

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses a fundamental question that arises early in meditation practice: why do we want to be aware? She examines how our deeply ingrained habit of equating happiness with pleasant experience keeps us trapped on a "hamster wheel" of dissatisfaction—constantly chasing pleasure and fleeing from discomfort, yet never finding lasting peace.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of the Two Arrows (or Two Darts), Wilson illuminates how we compound our suffering through mental reactivity. When we experience physical pain, we add a second arrow of worry, resistance, and interpretation. She explains that an awakened person experiences the same pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings as anyone else—the difference lies in not creating elaborate stories around these experiences. Through vivid examples, including being stuck in Boston traffic and Michael Crichton's encounter with an elephant outside his tent, she demonstrates how meeting experience directly dissolves the hysteria that accompanies our unwillingness to look at what is actually happening.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance on working with mindfulness as "bare attention"—bringing awareness to actual sensations rather than our interpretations of them. She emphasizes that mindfulness is non-judging and non-discriminating, meeting each moment with kindness. This quality of attention, combined with concentration, allows us to step off the hamster wheel at any moment and discover that peace, happiness, and our capacity to love are always available. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Happiness is available, please help yourself"—our practice simply teaches us how to recognize what has always been here.*

Today in one of the groups a question came up which I feel is very important, one that arises at some point at the beginning of every retreat, especially if you haven't done a lot of this form of meditation practice before.

The question is very basic: Why do we want to be aware?

I think it's a crucial question. Because often, though not for everyone, after two days of being aware, what we're aware of seems to lack depth and profundity and great insight. It veers towards the mundane or the uncomfortable. I find myself often in retreat asking, "Why? Why is feeling the breath going to liberate my heart? How does that work?"

I want to talk a little bit about that.

If you reflect for a moment on why you came here, just let yourself feel again what it was and is that brought you to such an endeavor as a ten-day silent retreat, whatever words you might put on it. We would all probably have different ones. My guess—of course I can't know—is that in some form each of us would be looking, in our own way, for what we might call happiness or peace or an open heart, or to live with more love and compassion, more connectedness, more joy, whatever way we would describe it.

And instead we might find ourselves confronted with restlessness, boredom, out-of-control thinking, an occasional moment of breath, dissatisfaction, doubt—whatever might come up. Our tendency at that time is to think, "Well, this certainly isn't the happiness or peace I came for. It seems to be going in the other direction."

So how do they come together?

I'm sure some of you have heard this before. One of the things that supposedly motivated the Buddha to teach after he was awakened was that, in looking through the world, he could see that every human being—all of us—are one in our heartfelt desire to be happy, whatever that means for us. That's part of what connects us as human beings. And the sadness, what moved the Buddha to compassion, was seeing that in our very sincere efforts to be happy, no matter how twisted they might come out, because we don't really understand true happiness, we do the very things that keep us spinning in dissatisfaction and anguish and unhappiness.

It's like a hamster spinning on a wheel—the faster we go trying to be happy, the more oppressed and unsatisfied we feel. Until we stop for a moment and take a look, we don't see, we can't understand what our confusion is, how we're misinterpreting our experience, misinterpreting the nature of happiness.

Einstein once said that everything in the world changes—everything changes except one thing: the way we think. We need to find a new way to think.

So that's what we're here for, in some ways. To begin to explore how the ways we think about ourselves and the world might not be accurate. And to begin to discover how to experience ourselves moment to moment in a way that is accurate, integrated with truth, in a way that allows us to rest at ease in the nature of our true hearts.

Put very simply, breaking it down to bare bones, one of the main ways we tend to misinterpret or misconstrue happiness is that we tend to think—and we don't often realize this is what we're thinking—that happiness is equivalent to pleasant experience. If I have a pleasant or enjoyable sensation or thought or emotion or smell or whatever,

then that's happiness. Which it is. It's a moment of pleasure. There's no question about that. But how long does it last? It's a moment of pleasure, but it's not the happiness of peace. It's not the sure heart's relief that the Buddha was talking about.

So without realizing it, we can end up spending our lives looking for pleasant experience. When pleasant experience comes, we do everything we can to make it stay. We try to arrange and rearrange our lives to get more pleasant experience. And when painful, difficult, unpleasant experience comes, it means we did something wrong. We blew it somehow, because happiness is more and more and more pleasure.

In trying to create a life like this, often without realizing we're doing it, this chasing after pleasure and running from what's unpleasant is what has us running on that wheel like a hamster. And even with our best intentions, we think, "I'm a good person. How come things aren't working out?" Because our understanding of what's going to make us truly happy is skewed. We can find ourselves in really unhappy circumstances and not know how we got there.

An example that felt so sad to me: I read an interview a few weeks ago with Marlon Brando. He said, "I never was a good father or a good husband."

I was always busy with my own life. Now I am a guilty old man who feels ashamed of his life. Besides food, there is nothing else in the world for me. That's the only thing in my life. I know this eating will kill me, but I just can't stop."

It's so sad. And not like, "Oh, he's some kind of weirdo." I can see in myself how easily I can get lost in following whatever he was following in his early life to give him pleasure. It's not making him happy now, and what's left? The pleasant experience of eating.

We're a society that has some extremely addictive tendencies. And it's played on, of course, by the media and advertising very strongly. In some ways, when I've been overseas or in Asia, I notice that the same tendencies of mine are everywhere. I'm not saying only Americans—remember, the Buddha was an Indian man who lived 2,500 years ago. It was the same story. But it definitely seems to me, in my experience, exaggerated when I come back to the States. Just want, want, want, want. And then we suffer so much.

In our lives, whatever it is we're chasing after to give us more extended pleasant feeling—whether it's more money, more fame, a better job, a better house, better friendships—not that there's anything wrong with any of those things per se. It's that

feeling that if I have this pleasant thing, I can keep it, and then I'll be happy. That leads us to fear and deny any unpleasant aspects of experience, which of course is going to happen.

We so easily bring that into the retreat here. Just look at your experience through the day. What do you find yourself looking for that would be a "good retreat"? You probably don't think, "It doesn't matter whether I have a lot of back pain or I'm really in bliss. I'm happy with whatever comes up." When you have a somewhat quiet sitting and the next one your mind's all over the place, it's rare—and I don't mean just if you're new to this either—it's rare to sit there and go, "Fine. Peacefulness, distractedness, it's all one in the Dharma."

And we laugh. It's almost like not a possibility. But that is the way of peace. That's the way of true freedom. If we come to the retreat looking to create some other reality than the one that's here right now in this moment, then we're jumping on that hamster wheel and running as fast as we can.

The secret is that we can just step off that wheel at any moment. Because the secret of freedom and the secret of our practice is that it really doesn't matter what's happening in your experience. It really doesn't. We use tools and we use technique, and I'll talk more about that, but the end result isn't to become a perfect breather or a perfect sitter or the best walker or to be able to sit down and never have a thought. Those are all experiences that come and go. Even if you had a whole sitting without a thought, so what? I bet when you stand up, there'll be a thought. Sooner or later, there'll be a thought. So what? That's not the point.

What we miss by getting so involved in our reaction to experience—wanting the pleasant, fearing the unpleasant—what we miss is the fact that real ease of heart, happiness, peace, connectedness with ourselves and all life is our natural state. It's our birthright. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Happiness is available, please help yourself."

But we don't know how. And that's what's such a mystery—because it's so available and we don't know how to recognize it. When we can, for just a moment, stop becoming so involved in our reactions to experience and just be with what is, very connected to it but without wanting it to stay or wanting it to go, just being with it—in that moment, we step off the wheel. In that moment, peace is available. Happiness is available. But it's not the happiness of necessarily ecstasy or a pleasant experience. It's just the happiness of peace, of connectedness, of acceptance of things as they are.

I'll give an example. Experience doesn't change; our relationship to it does. Being in a traffic jam.

Once—it's happened more than once, but this particular time—I was on the way to the airport in Boston very early in the morning, about six o'clock, to catch a flight to California that would connect to a flight to Bangkok. That's worse than missing a direct overseas flight, because if you miss the connection, you really miss everything.

We were cruising along, and in Boston, to get to the airport, you have to go through this increasingly narrow funnel of highways—six lanes down to one lane into this tunnel. Once you're committed to that way, there really isn't another route to the airport. We had just pulled off onto the exit that starts the maze of roads into the tunnel when everything stopped dead. You know those traffic jams where you're not even inching forward? You're just stopped. You turn off the motor. You can't go back, you can't go out, you can't go anywhere.

We sat there for twenty-five minutes. And I really watched my reactions—there wasn't much else to do. I went through the whole gamut. "Oh, it's fine, it's fine." I'm not calling this acceptance. I'm calling this pseudo-acceptance. "It's fine, no problem. We'll just sit here." Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. Now it's getting a little too long. This isn't okay anymore. The nervousness, the impatience—what can I do? Well, there's nothing to do. The whole anxiety. This is running on the wheel. This is suffering.

And finally I said, you know what? If I miss the flight, I miss the flight. That's all that happens. It's just what it is. And the whole extra fell away. For some moments, it was quite okay. I'm not saying it falls away once and that's it, folks, we're done. No, we keep practicing moment by moment by moment. But really, all the suffering, the fear, the nervousness—it was just gone. My friend and I started to have a nice conversation. It was quite amazing to see the difference.

That was some moments—five or ten—and then, as often happens when you stop getting so upset, the traffic started moving again. I made all the planes because they were late, and it was a nice ending. But to see that in that moment—it was not like a transcendent experience of leaving my body or being in a state of bliss. We were just sitting in the car in the traffic jam. Very ordinary. And in that ordinariness, we can find a real peace of heart and happiness.

This is one aspect, we could say, of freedom. I'm not saying it's the ultimate, absolute nibbāna, but it's an essence, a taste of freedom and peace that is accessible to all of us in any particular moment of our experience. It doesn't matter what's happening. It could also happen in a very pleasant experience, where the stepping off is to let go of our trying to hold on, knowing that this is really groovy but it's going to end sometime—and that's okay too.

The Buddha said once, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by me, namely liberation through non-clinging." It's not so exciting as we might be looking for. We just stop trying to control everything and become really present with things as they are.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, our capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love—what you could call our Buddha nature—is always here. So our practice, this technique of vipassanā, is not to create some alternative reality. It's to help us learn how to recognize this potential to understand and to love that's always here. And because we're so used to not recognizing it, every single moment is another chance.

The day might have seemed really long and dreary sometimes. How many moments do I have to keep paying attention? It's wonderful, actually. I should have figured out how many seconds there are in a day, because every one of those is an opportunity to step off the wheel and recognize your capacity for peace, your capacity for love, your capacity for understanding. It doesn't matter what's happening. So when you get really disgruntled, when you're really fed up—fine. That's a moment to notice. Capacity for freedom.

It's great because there's nothing that has to block this. And once the question was asked: if it's so easy, how come we don't recognize it? If it's so simple, how come we have to sit through this long and sometimes grueling form of practice? How does doing something as mundane as being aware of our breath, feeling the sensations of our footsteps, noticing the pain in our knee—how does that help us wake up to our potential for happiness?

One of the reasons we don't recognize this potential is what I mentioned at the beginning, and I want to elaborate on it now. Our habits of reactivity to pleasant and unpleasant are so deep, so ingrained, that we don't even recognize when it's happening. For example, when we have a pain in the knee, we can become so involved in thinking about how it's going to be for the rest of the sitting, wondering what it means, wondering how we can fix it. Perhaps wondering if the teacher sits in a chair because she hurt her knee from sitting too long. I didn't, so I'll tell you right now. All of that thinking—"I can't bear it"—none of that is being mindful of the pain in the knee. None of that is actually being connected with mindfulness to the bare experience. And we don't even recognize this because we're so used to confusing our interpretation with reality.

The paradox of recognizing the potential for ease and peace in any moment is not that it's far away or somewhere else. It's that this Buddha nature, this resting at ease in whatever arises, is so close that it requires an immediacy, a totality of presence and attention to recognize and rest in it. Any reaction of mind—whether pulling away from

unpleasant experience, or trying to lean forward and hold on to pleasant, or just zoning out and not connecting at all—any of those reactions actually pulls us back. I feel it almost physically, this pulling back from the immediacy, the totality of experience, and so we don't recognize. We don't even realize sometimes that we are not wholly present.

When we talk about concentration as a bringing together, a unifying quality of mind and body, it's not just that it's a nice state. It's not just that it helps us focus. This unification is what lets us really rest in the present moment. It's what lets us be totally here. And so our practice becomes, moment to moment, learning how to open into and accept whatever experience is arising right now—because that's all there is. In learning how to be fully present with kindness, we're learning how to accept and open to ourselves and to all of life. We're learning how to be free.

This habit of not liking unpleasant, liking pleasant, and ignoring neutral—did you even know that there were neutral experiences? They happen a lot. We tend not to notice them at all. This habit is so deep that we don't even realize it's only a habit. As I said before, it's very common to evaluate our experience by how pleasant it is, and if it's unpleasant, we assume something's wrong. If you're sick, you've somehow broken the fabric of harmony in the universe—as if we're going to live our lives without ever getting sick. And I suppose we're going to die without ever being sick too? Or somehow if we can get the perfect balance of health, we'll never die. There's some element of denial, I think, in this attitude.

But I want to talk specifically about how this works, this relationship to pleasant and unpleasant, and how it blinds us to the potential for peace. The Buddha describes it—and I hope this is helpful because I think it's very elegant. He asks: what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person? He says an unawakened person experiences pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, and neutral feeling. An awakened person also experiences the same three: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling. So what makes the difference between them?

This discourse is called the Two Darts, or the Two Arrows. He says when an unawakened person experiences an unpleasant physical feeling—pain in the knee, for example—he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Thus he experiences two kinds of unpleasant feelings: unpleasant physical feeling and unpleasant mental feeling. He says this is like two arrows. It's as if a person were shot with an arrow, and then with the beating of the breast and the worrying and lamenting, it's as if he shoots another arrow into himself. Thus, instead of suffering from the pain of one arrow, he suffers from the pain of two.

How often are we shooting that second arrow at ourselves?

But then he goes on, and this is what I find so elegant. An unawakened person, he says, in experiencing an unpleasant feeling, knows of no other escape from painful feeling than to look for a pleasant sensual experience. If you have a pain in the knee, you look for some pleasant feeling. If you can't move, then you might create a pleasant mental fantasy—something pleasant to get away from the unpleasant. This creates an underlying tendency, which is where we fall into the deep habit of resistance and reaction to unpleasant, and of real greed. The translation uses the word "lust"—a real yearning, a holding on to the pleasant. And so an unawakened person becomes caught.

in sort of this duality. As soon as there's unpleasant, there's a resistance, and then a trying to go for the pleasant. And we're back on the hamster wheel.

The Buddha says the difference with an awakened person is they experience the painful, unpleasant sensation, bodily or mentally—and that's all. They experience it. They don't grieve and lament and beat the breast. And so there's not created the unconscious tendency to resist the unpleasant and hold on to the pleasant. And so there's peace.

Or as Ajahn Sumedho wrote once, one is able to witness the pleasant and the unpleasant without creating anything around it. It's just what it is.

Now granted, this might not sound really exciting, but it's extremely wonderful. It's just what it is. The reaction and the interpretation is what creates and maintains our dissatisfaction with ourselves, with our experience, with our life. And without experiencing this for ourselves over and over, it's really hard to trust, to have the faith that when something arises, pleasant or unpleasant, we just really be with it. We just open to it without resistance or clinging.

It's almost counterintuitive. Oh, pain in the knee? Let me just open into it. It's not our normal reaction. But we offer it as a radical alternative to these underlying tendencies the Buddha was speaking about—to simply meet the experience of this moment. Only this moment. You don't have to look beyond this moment. Simply meet this moment's experience just as it is, without judgment, without making up a big melodrama about it, simply being present with non-judging attention.

This is radical. Be with things just as they are. But it's the path of freedom. I'm not saying it's easy. Sometimes it's our fear, our habit of not meeting experience, that makes it seem as if it's impossible. When we actually just meet what's happening, it's just the dark. It's just a painful sensation. That's all. The interpretation is all the suffering.

An example. This is from Michael Crichton—he's a great Buddhist author. You might not have known that. He was writing about one time when he was on an animal safari in Africa, staying in tents with guides who knew the bush and everything. He was in his tent in the middle of the night with his wife, and there was a huge banging noise and brushing and rustling. He woke up just petrified. He's lying there thinking, "There's elephants out there." The guides had said there's no way elephants were in this area—they hadn't been around for a long time. But he was just lying there, and his wife woke up, and they're both terrified and shaking, creating all these ideas in his mind.

Finally, finally he said, "Okay, I'll get up and look." He creeps to his tent and unzips it, looks out—huge brown eyes, an elephant, right outside the tent. And he thought, "Ah, there's an elephant." Zipped up his tent, went back into his sleeping bag, and went to sleep.

This is what he said about it the next day. At first he was a little surprised that he got so calm and went to sleep after he saw what it really was. But he said later he realized we are all like this. We all can work ourselves into a hysterical panic over possibilities that we can't look at. What if I have cancer? What if my job is at risk? What if my kids are on drugs? What if I'm getting bald? What if an elephant is outside my tent?

And that hysteria always goes away the instant we are willing to hear the answer—even if the answer is what we feared all along. Yes, you have cancer.

Yes, your kids are on drugs. Yes, there is an elephant outside your tent. Now the question becomes: what are you going to do about it?

Subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops. Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on. It promotes an unwillingness to look. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that makes us afraid. The minute we look, we cease being afraid.

And I love that. It doesn't mean that when we look and cease being afraid, everything is wonderful. But it means we're connected with things as they are. And in that moment, intelligent action is possible. Opening again to life, to ourselves and others, is possible. Compassion is possible.

This is the way of the compassionate heart and freedom. It transforms our life by transforming how we relate to our life, not by necessarily changing the outer circumstances. No amount of meditation is going to stop illness. No amount of meditation is going to make everyone we know happy, or stop sorrow and loss and death and conflict. Nothing is going to give us constant bliss. And that's not what this meditation is about.

But the meditation we're practicing here gives us the tools, on a moment-to-moment basis, to learn how to come out of a life of blind reactivity—to really drop that being afraid to look that keeps us being afraid to look—and just look. Whatever we see is just what it is. And this opens us to a life of great compassion and connectedness to ourselves and others.

The main tool we're using here is mindfulness—mindfulness combined with concentration. I'm going to mostly talk about mindfulness now.

Mindfulness is a quality of attention, an energy of focused awareness that arises on a moment-to-moment basis, one that we can become familiar with and experience consciously. I want to describe some qualities of mindfulness.

Perhaps the most important: we sometimes call mindfulness "bare attention." It's bringing our awareness to the actual experience of something, as opposed to all our ideas about that experience. It actually makes things very simple.

For example, when we talk about feeling the breath, we might ask: can you describe what you feel when you feel the breath? And you begin to see how difficult it can be for us to know what the bare experience is. Because we can go through the whole range —"The breath is like a waterfall, and I feel it flowing down in sparkles, moving in and out." That's an image. That's a thought. Which is fine if you know it's an image or a thought, but it's not the sensations of the breath.

Then we might say, "Okay, I feel the stomach moving against my clothes." And in a way, that's what we feel—but that's also an interpretation. Because when your eyes are closed, you're not really feeling stomach or clothes. You might be feeling pressure, or scratching, or tension, or tightness. Even these are words we put on the experience.

But how can you actually feel "t-shirt"? What does t-shirt feel like? What even does t-shirt mean when you come to the bare experience? All I can say about t-shirt is: image in my mind—that's seeing. I can feel a kind of warmth and scratchiness—that's the experience of touching. I can look and see a color I call lavender—that's seeing, and also thinking. The t-shirt is just an idea.

The power of practicing bare experience is simply this: the ideas aren't bad, but we bring our attention to the actual experience, over and over. This begins to cut through our habits of reactivity and allows us to just be with what is. Being with the breath in that way. Being with sensations in the body. Later, being with emotions, being with sounds.

So mindfulness has this aspect of bare attention—the experience, the sense experience itself. Feeling, hearing, tasting, touching, seeing, smelling, thinking.

That's all. Just the sense experiences, including the mind of thinking.

So there's the bare attention, and there's also the quality of mindfulness that is absolutely kind, non-judging, non-discriminating. With mindfulness, with the breath, a breath starts. We don't say, "Well, I don't really like this breath too much. It's a little rough. I'll wait for the next one." We feel the sensation; the attention is there. Non-discriminating, non-judging—it's just what it is.

With the breath, that might be easy. But when we begin to open up to sensations in the body, we see how this discrimination slips in. We feel the breath. "That's painful. A little too painful. I think I better just stay with the breath. I need to develop a little more focus before I feel that." Or certain kinds of cramps—I remember one time a friend was saying, "Well, I have these cramps in my stomach." "Oh, I'm really familiar with them. I get them all the time." So what? They're happening right now. But often we think, "That's familiar, I don't need to pay attention to that." Or we can easily think, "This is more pleasant," and without even knowing it, we just slip over and pay attention to the pleasant. Or the unpleasant—we can have a bias either way. But mindfulness doesn't discriminate. It meets whatever is happening in a very kind way.

Let me give an example of how this really cuts through our suffering, our interpretations, the confusion we place on reality. This is a very common experience. A yogi on retreat last year, in Barre, a retreat just like this, told me this after she'd been going through it for a few days. It's always nice when you go through it yourself and come to understanding from your own experience.

She said there was a repetitive noise in the hall—I think it was probably the ticking of a clock, though she didn't say. She'd be sitting there quietly, being with her breath, feeling very calm, and then hear the noise. Hear the noise. And she first became annoyed, then became just filled with rage and anger. "That noise is just destroying my concentration. It's ruining my practice." She was having a miserable time for days, until finally something—of course, we'd been saying it all along, but we always hear it when we can hear it—she heard one of us say, "When you become aware of the experience of hearing, just be with the bare experience of hearing."

All of that—"Why is that noise in here? How dare they put a clock in here! It's ruining my meditation, my concentration is shot"—none of that is the bare experience of hearing. So she said, "Okay, let me try it." When the tick would come, attention right with ticking. Not even saying that, just right there with the hearing. And she said the

whole suffering just died away. She became very peaceful and calm. There was just sound arising. And she said, "You know what? That clock wasn't bothering my concentration. My mind was disturbing my concentration. It had nothing to do with the sound."

This is really how coming back over and over to just the simple experience can help us—unknown to us how it even works—come to deep insight about the nature of our experience in any moment, and how suffering is created, so much of it, by our mind's reactions. And how just a moment can cut through it all. Which is really lucky for us, that it only takes a moment of connection to cut through it all, because we've spent an awfully long time building it up.

One reason retreats can be so uncomfortable is because we're cutting through our habits of mind. And as we know, habits might be really bad for us, but they can also be really comfortable. It's really hard to break a habit, no matter how destructive it might be. And our habit of reactivity—judging pleasant and unpleasant and neutral—is very deep.

So when we say, "Please come to the sitting and just stay here until the sitting ends," part of the reason for that is because it helps you not give in to the habit. Even if the reason you stay is simply shame—you don't want everyone else to know you got up and left. And believe me, that comes up at times. That has served us all at some point.

Sooner or later, you get over the shame, and there's nothing to do but come back and pay attention to whatever it is that's bugging you. And that's the moment when it's possible to say, "Ah. Oh, that's just an unpleasant feeling. It's just vedanā. I don't have to shoot the second arrow. That's just somebody clearing their throat. It's just hearing. I don't have to construct a whole reality around that." And if we don't make it in that moment, we get another moment to try again.

Tomorrow, as we begin to expand the instructions to include physical sensations in a broader way—not just waiting for the really intense ones, but any physical sensation—you'll see that this is a fertile ground for exploration. Physical sensations are a good place to investigate the quality of attention and the difference between this non-judging, kind way of being with experience versus how different it feels when we flip into being identified with or caught in the interpretation or the reaction.

For example, the breath. It's been nice and soft and calm, and then you sit down and all of a sudden it's tight and constricted and you can't breathe deeper than here. How easy is it to build up a whole life history around that? It's not just tight and shallow—it's a sign of my ongoing constricted heart, my shallowness of emotions, my inability to do

anything right, my inability to relate to other people, my type A personality, my great ambition, my driving inconsideration for others. No wonder it's torment! We come back and there's tightness, and instead of recognizing that that's all it is—just tightness—we shoot about twenty-five arrows of everything that's ever been wrong with us. Pain in the knee, pain in the back, anything it might be.

It's interesting to watch before it gets to be really strong, unbearable pain, because granted, it's very difficult for us to be at ease in the midst of strong and ongoing pain, whether physical or emotional. It's possible, but it's difficult, and it's not the best place to start learning. The place to start learning is with the little, nudgy ones. So when you feel a little nudge in your back and you think, "Well, I won't pay attention to that until it gets worse," you're losing a really good opportunity to practice mindful awareness.

Instead of doing all the things we usually do to avoid discomfort, bring your attention gently into the unpleasant feeling itself. This is mindfulness. Don't even call it pain—I find as soon as I say "pain," I've got a whole idea around it. This sensation: what does it really feel like? Is it tingling? Is it burning? Is it heat? Can you just get interested in the actual experience? This affectionate curiosity brings in the kindness, brings in the undiscriminating quality of mindfulness, brings us right into bare experience.

And then you can see the difference when there's just a moment of resting at ease in that unpleasantness, and then you feel, "Oh my God, but there's forty-two more minutes to this sitting. I don't think I can make it." That is the second arrow—fear, projecting into the future, tightness, aversion.

Aversion or fear, in my experience, really arises from the mistaken belief that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant or painful experience, that some way I can avoid actually being fully present for it. And in fact, if you notice how your attention behaves in that moment of "Oh no, I can't stand this for forty-two more minutes," your attention has actually pulled back. I feel it almost physically, as if pulling away from the experience of the pain, so that we're actually not connecting in that moment. And thus our experience of life when there's something unpleasant becomes an experience of unconnectedness, of separation, because that's what we're actually doing—we're pulling away from experience.

Now, if that worked, if substituting pleasant experience when there's something unpleasant actually worked as a strategy all the time, that would be okay. But obviously it doesn't, or none of us would be here. What brings us back into peace is actually going back and connecting with the experience.

A small example: sometimes when I sleep funny or something, my neck goes out and I'll have a strong headache that goes on all day. And I feel from that sort of disconnected and spacey—today's been a day like that. And I do what we often do when we think we're being mindful of something unpleasant. There are lots of ways we can kid ourselves, like, "Oh yeah, headache. I acknowledge it. There's a headache."

You feel it, sort of feel it. Call it a sideways glance. You know it's there, you let yourself feel it for a second, and then kind of pull back and pay attention to something else more compelling. And the headache just kind of goes on and on. And we start to feel really not that present, not quite connected, not so alive.

Because the problem is we can't shut down selectively. When we shut down to anything, we're shutting down globally. When I shut down to my headache, when I pull back from that, I'm pulling back from everything. I do feel disconnected, but it's not because of the headache. It's the pulling back.

Just before I came in here tonight, I was standing right by our apartments looking out over the desert, and I saw a coyote wandering around, actually very close to the first little road you come to when you're going down into the desert. I got totally engrossed in watching it, so that I was completely unified and connected in that. Watching him for about five minutes. He didn't seem to see me at all, just meandering around. And then he turned and started toward me, almost came up the hill. And then I saw him look up and see me. He literally went like, "Oh my God, what's that?" and turned around and went in another direction. Just then Franz was walking in from the desert, and the coyote saw him—"Oh my God, there's another person!"—and went off in yet another direction.

I got really happy, very connected. And then I saw, right. I connected with my head. Oh yeah, right. There's a headache here, and I've been avoiding it all day. Boom. So the coyote, the connection that I felt, brought me back into connection with the headache, and again I'm present. Sometimes you might connect with something else, and then that lets you come back again to the difficulty. But there's no way we can avoid it and really be open and present in our lives.

So in learning to bring this mindful awareness to pain, it's just this: how can we soften into the bare experience? Not bargaining—"I'll pay attention if you go away in ten minutes. I'll pay attention if I get a really good insight from this." Any bargaining has an edge of aversion. The sideways glance isn't quite there. Gritting the teeth and enduring it, the willpower, is also not the gentle strength of mindfulness.

And one other relationship we can sometimes develop in practice toward pain—physical and emotional pain and suffering—is that we make it better than pleasant. I've often had people come and say, "Things are too nice. The practice is too easy. I must be doing something wrong." Whatever's happening is okay. Just as the difficult is totally fine, so is the not difficult. It's not that the more I suffer, the better I'm doing. Just as it's not the less I suffer, the better I'm doing. It's neither of those. Can we just throw those out the window and simply be with what happens without preconception, without pre-judgment? That's our practice. Participatory, fully present in whatever's happening without needing to judge it.

Obviously this requires infinite patience. And patience actually arises from the wisdom of seeing things as they are—seeing that in this world, as we open to our moment-to-moment experience, we learn to open and embrace the whole show. That there is no happiness that does not sometimes turn to sorrow. That everything in the world is in constant flux, ebb and flow. The seasons. Day and night. The setting sun, the rising moon, the tides. Periods of health, periods of sickness. Periods of great happiness, periods of great sorrow. Periods of really nice, peaceful breath, and periods when you can't stay with more than two breaths if it meant your life.

Everything's in constant change, and it's also completely out of our control. If we could really get that—that we can't make things stay the same and we can't control what's going to happen next—can you imagine how much more at ease we'd be in our lives? If we could just meet what happens without needing to know what it's going to be?

So what happens with this practice is that we learn to hold both of these. And it's not easy. To be able to be with great suffering is what opens us to the joy and the beauty and deep compassion. We can't have one without the other. Sometimes it's hard to hold them both.

This is from a woman named Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch woman who was writing this from a pre-concentration camp in Holland in World War II: "It is possible to suffer with dignity and without dignity..."

I mean, most of us in the West don't understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair. God knows it's only too easy to understand why.

We have to accept death as part of life, even the most horrible of deaths. And don't we live an entire life each one of our days? I am in Poland every day on the battlefields, if that's what one can call them. I often see visions of poisonous green smoke. I am with

the hungry, with the ill-treated and the dying every day. But I am also with the jasmine and with that piece of blue sky beyond my window. There is room for everything in a single life—for belief in God and for a miserable death.

When I say I have come to terms with life, I don't mean I have lost hope. What I feel is not hopelessness, far from it. It's a question of living life from minute to minute and taking suffering into the bargain. And it's certainly no small bargain these days. Suffering has always been with us. Does it really matter in what form it comes? All that matters is how we bear it and how we fit it into our lives.

And that's the koan for all of us. It's not that we only open to suffering, but when we can open to the difficult—that's the reason we sit with these little nudgy pains—we find that we can use our own particulars of suffering. They don't have to be grandiose. But when we can be with our own difficulties, this is what opens our heart to the vastness of wisdom and the action of compassion that lets us be fully present for the joys and sorrows of others, that lets us live a really full and joyful and peaceful life, really awake and intimate in our life, but not caught in this blindness of reactivity.

So that we can live a life that's really heartfelt, filled with compassion, unafraid. We don't have to say at the end of our life what Marlon Brando did. We don't have to say with Colette, "What a wonderful life I've had. I only wish I'd realized it sooner."

A wonderful life includes all aspects. And what we're doing in this practice, as Joko Beck says, is moving from a self-centered view of life and practice to a life-centered view of life and practice. We're part of life, but we're not the central focus.

CHAPTER 299

Introductory Remarks at Mettā Retreat with Sharon and Sylvia

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this opening talk for a mettā (loving-kindness) retreat, Carol Wilson, alongside teachers Sylvia Boorstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Myoshin Kelley, welcomes practitioners to what she describes as a homecoming—not just to the retreat center, but to our truest selves. Through a deceptively simple story about a flight attendant encounter, she illuminates how the relaxed, clear mind naturally recognizes our genuine connectedness with all beings, spontaneously giving rise to kindness and compassion.*
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> *The talk establishes the foundational framework for retreat practice through the formal taking of the Three Refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) and the Five Precepts. Carol explains these not as rote traditions but as profound reaffirmations of our commitment to awakening and our confidence in the potential for liberation that exists in every moment. She emphasizes that taking refuge in the Buddha means trusting in our own capacity for awakening; refuge in the Dhamma means opening fully to truth in the present moment; and refuge in the Saṅgha honors both awakened beings and our community of practitioners supporting one another.*
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> *The five training rules of non-harming—abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, harmful speech, and intoxicants—are presented as ways to create sacred space and cultivate fearlessness within the community. Carol encourages practitioners to observe their own minds when impulses toward harm arise, noting that harming others inevitably harms ourselves. The talk closes with guidance on using breath awareness as a foundation for the mettā practice to follow, inviting practitioners to simply arrive and settle into presence before the formal loving-kindness instructions begin.*

Welcome to this retreat. My name is Sylvia, and this is Sharon, and this is Carol, and this is Myoshin. It's a great honor and pleasure for all of us to be here. Thank you very much for coming.

It's a very great pleasure—the biggest probably for any of us—to be able to teach. So it's a wonderful gift that we all give each other by coming here to practice together.

It would be wonderful for me to know for how many people this is their first time here. Welcome. And for how many people their tenth or more. Welcome. And everybody else in between.

I realized as I came in that because I couldn't be here last year for this course, it's been two years since I was here in February. Some of us were here together at that time. And I realized two things: I realized how happy I was to be here, and how it really seems like yesterday that I was here. I'm quite sure that both of those have significant meaning.

As I listened to the instructions, which were really wonderful and very complete and certainly showed a lot of thought about all the kinds of questions that could come up in people's minds—they're really very well thought through—I thought perhaps for people who haven't been here before, it really seems like you've come far away from home, because we have quite a particular way in which we live and practice together. So I thought it was important also to say that my sense of what we've all done is that we've actually come home. We've begun to come home.

I just arrived, as all of you did today, and when I set out from California this morning, I had been looking forward very much, as I'm sure you all have, to coming here to this time to practice. I felt excited in the way that I feel about coming home to a place that's been so special to me, where I've done so much of my practice and spent so much time.

Of course, we start out with trusting that we can be at home to our truest self wherever we are. We don't need to be in this certain place. But it's very wonderful to be in this certain place.

I wondered about how all of us would teach tonight because we hadn't planned who would make welcoming remarks and who would give the instructions, since we'll all take turns through the week. But I thought to myself, what if when I arrive, everyone says, "Why don't you make the opening remarks, Sylvia?" So I thought, I hope something really interesting happens on this plane so I can tell a story that will be a Dharma story, something I can teach about what we are doing here in terms of our practice. Then I wouldn't have to say something as vague or as broad as coming home to ourselves. What could happen on this flight that I could teach about? The truth of the natural mind at ease, manifesting itself with kindness and compassion for all beings. So may a story happen.

That's called intention practice, by the way, where you begin a sit or a walk and you say, "May it happen that I have the clearest understanding of whatever." So I said to myself, may it happen that there's a story.

You may know that the weather on the West Coast has been very tremendous for the last several days, and so there was some question about whether planes would fly. But in fact, my plane took off exactly on time in a torrential rain. It wasn't a difficult takeoff. It took off through this torrential rain and very shortly was above the clouds, bumped a little bit, and then smoothed out.

So I thought, well, I guess I could teach about that—that we all come from lives that are tremendously busy and complicated, and we come to a place here where it's less complicated and less busy. We have the opportunity, the habits and style of living, and the techniques of practice that allow the heart to come to a place of some steadiness and some increased malleability, some spaciousness of vision. Just as I at 35,000 feet could look out and see a very large terrain.

I could tell the metaphor of coming through the confusion and the clouds and coming to feel quite relaxed with a broad view of how things are, with a clear mind.

But then I thought, well, that's not much of a story. And in fact, I flew across the whole country and nothing much happened. I was all right; just nothing much happened. I did some embroidery. I listened to some tapes and did some embroidery.

Not long before we were landing, one of the flight attendants sat down next to me for a little bit of time and said, "I've been looking at your embroidery." We had a little talk about embroidery. She said she used to do that kind of handwork, but her job was very busy, so we talked about her job as a flight attendant. Then I said, "Are you based in San Francisco?" She said, "Yes, I am." And I said, "Oh, do you know so-and-so?"

who's a flight attendant on this particular airline, who sits quite regularly with me at Spirit Rock. And she lit up and said, "Oh, yes, of course I know her. We've known each other for thirty years. We've been flying together." And I heard that she had gotten married, and I said, "Yes, she did." We both shared some great happiness, mudita, about the good fortune in her life—that we both knew this person who had met someone really wonderful and was happy.

We said to each other, you know, you don't have to talk very long to anybody to realize the lines of connection. There are not that many degrees of separation. All of a sudden, the person goes from being someone you don't know at all to being someone who knows someone you know. And if we're awake, we realize that we're all connected, that we all know each other, and that we can share happiness together about someone else's good fortune.

So we talked about that a little bit. We had this little dharma discussion without calling it that.

Then the pilot announced that we were about to start landing. He said, "Anybody who needs to get up now"—which is a euphemism for use the restroom before we need to fasten seatbelts—"do it now." So I said I needed to get up. She looked toward the back of the plane and said, "Oh, there's a very long line back there. Come with me. I'll escort you through first class." You can't normally go up front, you see.

If I retell this as a dharma story, it's the most mundane of stories. I flew across the country on an uneventful flight and I got to use a restroom when I needed it. That's the whole story.

But the metta story is this: when the mind is relaxed and clear, it recognizes that we are genuinely all connected to each other. And then we care for each other with kindness and compassion, and we take special care. If the whole world realized this, the whole world would be changed.

This is what we are here to do this week. We are here to discover our capacity to recognize that all beings are our kin. We may not know their names, may not even know what they work at or who they married, so that we can't rejoice or feel compassion for particular events in their lives. But we can touch that level of intimacy—recognizing that we are all human beings sharing a life of feelings and challenges—and we can all really take care of each other.

In the ten minutes that remained, strapped back into my seat, I read some of the mail I'd brought along. I had a letter from a student who said, "I've just seen Titanic." Everybody saw Titanic. I haven't yet, but she said, "At first I subjected it to a tremendous"—I wasn't sure exactly what that meant—"and when I did that, I didn't think it was so special." But she said it stayed in her mind for many days afterward.

She realized what stayed with her was thinking about the different ways people related to each other in the film during a time of catastrophe, a time of imminent death—the ways in which people either took care of each other or didn't, were able to be at ease with the moment or in terrible suffering with it. She said, "I guess what I came away thinking about is: I don't know how I would be when the chips are down."

That was really the end of the letter.

We don't any of us know, of course, how we'll be when the chips are down. But there are two ways to think about that. One is to realize there's a whole continuum of ways to be—from a particular person engaged fully in a particular life, to a person fully aware of interconnectedness with all beings and in the service of all beings. We are always living both of those lives, moving back and forth in a way that's wholesome, I hope, and balanced. And we are facing ourselves more and more, as we do this practice, in the

direction of being aware of that connection with all beings—remembering our story, touching more and more into the great pleasure and happiness of interconnectedness. That's what we are practicing as we do metta. All of our practice is really on behalf of all beings.

And then the other piece: the chips are always down. We don't really need to wait for catastrophe. I trust that we will not, any of us, wait for the catastrophes of life to discover the parameters of our heart. Every moment of our life becomes a practice session for discovering that we can really be ourselves, awake in our life, remembering our life, and knowing that our life—as everyone else's—is in the service of all beings everywhere.

So my great hope for all of us is that our practice together this week should be in that spirit. My great gratitude again—all of us are tremendously grateful to you for having come to practice. Everybody shares with me the wish that everyone's practice be greatly fulfilling and gratifying.

Where do you tend to go mentally, physically for refuge? What do you turn to? Do you turn to physical stimulation? Do you pick up the phone? Do you call a friend? Do you go to the movies? Do you eat some chocolate? I know chocolate ranks very high—we were having this discussion today about how good chocolate is for you. I'm not saying any of these things are bad. I'm simply inviting you to look and see where you go for refuge. Do we find that we go to fantasy in the mind, or do we withdraw into some kind of fear or negativity, some kind of mental or emotional movement of separation, of protection, a moving out of the present moment? Just not to judge, but to notice—as Sylvia said, when the chips are down in a little way, where do we go for refuge? Because what we do when the chips are down in a little way is going to be indicative of what we're going to do habitually when the chips are really down and they're not going to come back up again.

So taking the refuges invites us to examine what's really our refuge. The Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha—the Buddha meaning not the Buddha as a historical person, but as a representative of the fact that as a human being, the potential of each of us is to awaken fully to the peace, the happiness, the ease that is our true nature. Right now, in this moment, that's your potential. You don't have to be different from how you are. If you really believe that, begin to have confidence in that—that's what taking refuge is. A re-commitment to that truth, a re-honoring in your heart: yes, my potential is to awaken, and I'll take refuge in that. Taking refuge in the Buddha.

Taking refuge in the Dharma is also another way of honoring our commitment to take refuge in truth. Dharma can mean the specific teachings of the Buddha, the path, and for some people the specific teachings are very helpful to turn to, to bring some inspiration, to trust. But dharma also means the truth of how things are, the laws of nature, what is actually really true. What am I really? And that is only discovered when we are willing to take refuge fully and completely in this present moment, no matter what's happening. When we can honor the fact that our freedom of heart and mind is accessible, recognizable, when we can open to and take refuge in this moment—that's where we discover love and compassion for ourselves and our connectedness to all beings.

It's a hard practice. There are a lot of moments we don't really want to take refuge in. It's hard to believe that this is really where the truth lies. And so the formal taking refuge in the Dharma, refuge in the truth, saying that is a way of really bringing up that confidence, that motivation of reminding ourselves what's really important.

Taking refuge in the Sangha. Sangha means community, as most of you know. Originally its meaning was the community of awakened beings. It doesn't have to be someone we know, but just to know that such beings are on the planet is a very powerful reinforcement—for me—of the fact that I can trust that I'm also a human being. It takes me back to the first refuge, and that as a human being I have the potential to awaken as well, in any moment. Which takes me back to the second, taking refuge in the Dharma. They all cycle around.

But also taking refuge in community is taking refuge in the community of all of us who have come here with this sincere and profound intention to awaken our hearts more deeply to our interconnectedness, to live more fully from the metta, the loving-kindness and the compassion that arises naturally when we recognize our true nature. So the fact that all of us are here with this intention—in some form, in your own words—this intention to awaken, to nurture the love that we are, is an enormously powerful support for each of us and really for all the world.

And there will be times when the other people drive you crazy, of course. But there will also be times when we're just so grateful—when we're having a hard time and we're so grateful for all the other people who are going through this with us, when someone else's strength turns out to be our strength. We really see how connected we are on that level. And that's a way of taking refuge in the Sangha, refuge in the community.

For me, when I'm on retreat—and even when I'm not, but definitely when I'm on retreat—I begin every day by taking the refuges, and sometimes every sitting. And sometimes when I'm having a hard time, I take them in the middle of a sitting or in the middle of a walking, because it's a way of consciously reaffirming my commitment and reestablishing my confidence in the possibility of this—for me and for all beings.

So in a moment we will take the refuges together, if it feels appropriate to you. It's not about becoming a Buddhist, but about really reaffirming why you're here, to yourself, and letting yourself feel the depths of the truth of that. It's not an idle rote thing that we say. It's also about creating a sacred space.

We have come here from our daily lives. We're not different—it's the same mind, the same heart. The things that come up here are the same things that come up in our daily life. But what we're doing, both with the way we've set up the environment here, taking the refuges, and also with the precepts of non-harming behavior—what we're doing is creating a sacred space. A space where we are reminded, over and over, of what's really true and what's really important.

It's a little sad to me that we need to consciously create a sacred space out of our society and out of our life to be reminded. But that's how it is. It helps. After a while, we take that reminder with us in our hearts. But it's a lot easier when we have a space that continually helps us remember.

So another way of creating this sacred space, this sense of safety, and also a way that we work together as a community, is to make a commitment for the time that we're here to non-harming speech and action—to really give care to how and why we do and say what we do and say, so that the intention for our speech and action comes from a real commitment to non-harming. Not out of some blind obedience to outer authority, because that's an intention born more of fear. I'm talking about non-harming behavior that comes from the inner intention of love and respect for ourselves and for all life. That's really the manifestation of an awakened heart.

So by having an agreement to abide by five very basic aspects of non-harming speech and action, we're reinforcing that inner sense of connectedness to one another.

And pay attention. It's not that if you break one of these precepts, it's horrible and we throw you out of here on your ear. It's not a matter of once you've taken these precepts, that's it—you have to abide by them or you're failed, you're doomed. Because they're so subtle when you look at them that we all have ways we're stepping over the boundaries, often. The point is, in this retreat, just pay attention.

So if you find you're wanting to harm somebody, or an animal, or you find that you want to take something that's not freely given, or in fact you did take something that wasn't freely given—don't just sit and hate yourself. That doesn't help. But pay attention. How and why did you do it? And what's the effect on yourself and on others afterwards?

If you really pay attention, you might start to see that when we do something that harms another, physically or verbally, it's also harming ourselves. I've never been able to do something harmful that I didn't really suffer from, if I was awake and paying attention to my experience. It's back to what Sylvia was saying: we can't separate. You can't even say that's your pain or my pain, because it's so mingled. It's just pain caused by carelessness, really.

So we ask everyone to agree to pay attention to and live by these five training rules, they're called, for the opening and awakening of each of our hearts, as well as for creating an atmosphere of fearlessness. Fearlessness meaning we each know we have nothing to fear from one another.

Isn't that a wonderful way to live? It's so rare in our culture. No one here is going to hurt you. No one's going to steal anything from you. No one's going to speak harshly. It helps that we're in silence—it really helps. But that gift of fearlessness is a wonderful gift, and it allows us to let the process of the meditation happen. We're here on a metta retreat this first week, developing loving-kindness. Well, if you've done it before, you know.

If you haven't, you might be surprised to find out that loving kindness isn't the only thing that's going to arise in your heart and mind. I guarantee—that's the one thing I can guarantee—something else will come up at least once that won't be so pretty. And the space of fearlessness is what allows us to open to this. Opening to the difficulty with loving kindness *is* the loving kindness practice.

So the five training rules are precepts. The first one is not to kill or harm any living being—not just people. It includes insects. But you're lucky it's February. You're not going to be too taxed on that one. Come back in May with the black flies and try it. Then it's really a precept.

Not to harm any living being. And here, we're pretty safe. We won't do that. But just watch when your mind wants to harm someone or yourself. Remember, you're included as a living being. Just watch and pay attention and see what happens, how it feels when wanting to harm comes up.

The second is not to take what is not freely given, not to steal. Again, in the big ways, of course, we're not going to do that. But look at the little things—when you just really want some food that's not offered. You know, you go through all these mental machinations figuring out how you can get it, how no one will know, all of this stuff. Stop a minute and notice what's going on in your heart and mind. Do you feel good? Do you feel connected to other beings? Are you manifesting loving kindness? Or are you really suffering? And is getting that cheese going to be what alleviates the suffering? Or is letting go of the desire and just being again in the sense of non-harming, not taking what's not given? Explore that.

The third, in lay life—in other words, in your daily life—is not to harm ourselves or others with our sexual activity. Not to intrude on another relationship, committing adultery. Not to be in abusive relationships, not to use sex for power trips or whatever. It's a big one. In terms of the retreat, we agree to not engage in any sexual activity. This is really similar to being in silence, so that we're using our energy for cultivating concentration, loving kindness, and investigation rather than just moving the energy off in other directions. So for the purpose of the retreat, we take a precept of remaining celibate.

The fourth training rule is not to use harsh and abusive speech, not to lie, and not to gossip or be involved in frivolous speech—all of which is subsumed under noble silence. And this is really one of the treasures of these retreats, to be able to spend a week or two and a half weeks in silence.

Is there anyone here who's never done a retreat before? A few people. If you've never done one before, sometimes the idea in advance of staying silent for so long can be a little daunting. And there are times when it's difficult. Admittedly, there are times when you're longing to talk. Again, as with all of these training rules, rather than getting upset about it or blaming yourself or blaming the rule, look and see what's really going on in me right now that needs to go and talk. What is it that I'm either wanting to communicate or wanting to get away from?

But most people find after a couple of days that the silence is a tremendous gift. It's really wonderful because there are times when you don't want to have to be nice to anybody. You don't have to smile. You don't want to have to be involved in social amenities. You just want to be with what's going on. And here you have the freedom to do that. You don't have to worry that you're insulting someone if you sit down next to them and don't acknowledge them. Please don't. Really let the silence be a support for your practice. It's a tremendous support.

And there's plenty of harsh and abusive speech that might go on inside your own mind.

So you can just notice that.

The silence also includes not reading and not writing. These activities can be very helpful, of course, but for the most part, the real insight and the real cultivation of metta comes from being fully and totally with our own experience. Even reading Dharma material can be a way of moving out of our experience. Or you can end up trying to make your experience match what you've read, or what we say, for that matter. Don't. Really trust what your experience is as it unfolds in the moment. It will unfold slightly differently for each person. Trust that. Honor your experience. So please don't read or write.

The fifth training rule is not to take drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and the heart, which is rather obvious since we're here to cultivate open-heartedness and clarity.

So we'd like to formally begin the retreat. I'll say the refuges and the precepts and ask you, if that feels comfortable, to repeat them after me. We'll do it in English. If you don't want to say it out loud, it's fine to just do it inside. We do the refuges three times—maybe one of the three times you'll be here for it. That's how I think of why we do it three times traditionally. The precepts we say just once. And again, really let yourself feel these in your heart. Don't let it just be rote.

I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Sangha.

For the second time, I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Sangha.

For the third time, I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dhamma. I take refuge in the Sangha.

I undertake the precept not to harm living beings. I undertake the precept not to steal. I undertake the precept to remain celibate for this retreat. I undertake the precept not to lie or use harsh or abusive speech. I undertake the precept not to use drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind.

By the way, that last one does not include any particular medications you're needing to take for physical or mental conditions. We're talking recreational.

So thank you. That is the formal beginning. We have now entered the noble silence and the beginning of the retreat.

We'll have a short sitting together. If you would like to stretch a little or stand up for a minute, please go ahead.

Tonight we're not going to begin the metta or loving-kindness instruction, but just have a short sitting of following the breath, letting ourselves arrive here. Bringing in a little calmness, a little centeredness. If you find you get up earlier tomorrow or stay up later tonight and want to sit, quietly stay with your breath. Let your mind come to a little bit of centeredness, of presence.

Let yourself sit as comfortably as you can, but also in a way that's erect—finding that balance between being upright yet also relaxed, not tense. The posture will really reflect the quality of the mind. Keep your back straight, whether you're on a chair, a bench, or a cushion. Place your hands any way that's comfortable.

Most people find it easy to meditate with the eyes gently closed—not tight, not squeezing, just relaxed and closed. But if you're used to sitting with the eyes open and unfocused, that's also fine.

So if you want, just let your eyes gently close. Take a couple of quiet but slow, deep breaths and let yourself feel the breathing. Nothing special—just breathe in, and on the out-breath, let yourself, your body, relax. Come to a sense of presence in the physical body as you sit here. You might feel a sense of your posture, maybe your sit bones on the cushion, your knees, perhaps the erectness of your spine. Notice how your shoulders are resting, your hands.

Come to a gentle sense of presence in your physical body, a sense of sitting here—relaxed but awake. Within the field of your physical experience of sitting, begin to notice the feelings in your body as the breath comes in and goes out.

Nothing special, no big deal. Just feeling as this breath comes in, as this breath goes out. Feeling as this breath comes in, as this breath goes out.

You might feel it in the nose. You might feel the rising and falling of the abdomen or the chest. Wherever you feel it is fine. But let all your attention softly rest in this in-breath and this out-breath. The sensations arising.

And don't worry when your mind wanders off. But as soon as you notice you're thinking about something, just let it be and come back to feel the sensations of this next breath. Just gently and easily, but with commitment.

Don't try to create anything special. Simply feeling this in-breath, this out-breath. Meeting each breath freshly. Starting over with each new breath—nothing to hold on to, nothing to look forward to, resting at ease in this one breath.

During the whole retreat, always feel free to come back and rest in the breath as a way to gather your energies or simply bring in some relaxation if you find things getting tough. And we'll talk more about that as the week goes on.

So tonight, please, if you can, take rest.

CHAPTER 300

Five Hindrances in Mettā Practice

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *In this intimate dharma talk from a mettā retreat, Carol Wilson addresses a question that often arises by the second day: how is this practice actually an act of kindness to ourselves? She explains that each phrase of loving-kindness plants a seed that breaks down our illusion of separation and counteracts the deeply ingrained habits of mind that keep us confused and distant from our "true home" — the heart of connectedness that manifests as mettā and compassion.*
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> *Wilson offers a detailed exploration of how the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇā) appear specifically within mettā practice. She distinguishes between desire as the "near enemy" of mettā — a state that can masquerade as loving-kindness while actually being wanting — and aversion as the "far enemy," the more obvious opposite. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, she clarifies that mettā does not mean liking everything, but rather "witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it." This connected, non-judging attention is itself an expression of mettā.*
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> *The talk includes practical guidance for working with each hindrance: how wanting concentration or wanting the mettā feeling can hijack our practice; how sleepiness naturally arises from the calming quality of concentration practice; how restlessness might manifest as endlessly tinkering with phrases; and how doubt often disguises itself as intellectual analysis comparing mettā to vipassanā. Wilson emphasizes that recognizing these hindrances without judgment, then gently returning to the phrases, is itself the practice — reminding practitioners that "what the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline."*

So sometimes about the end of the second day on a metta retreat, once in a while people will ask us, "Remind me again how this is being kind to myself?" Because certainly you're a rare person if you haven't discovered by this time that many, many things arise in our mind and body. And many, many of them are not metta.

Even if you've done loving-kindness retreats before, we kind of tend to forget. But if you haven't, it would really be normal not to be expecting such a variation. And I know how much of the stuff that comes up is difficult, painful—pain in the body, really deep emotional pain sometimes, some that's not so deep but that's really quite painful nevertheless, just basic aversion or sleepiness or restlessness.

So I just want to reiterate that actually we don't recognize it in the middle of the retreat, but it really is an act of deepest kindness, of ultimate kindness to ourselves to be willing to practice in this way. Because with each phrase that you plant that seed, that you drop the phrase into your heart, that you repeat it—each phrase is a moment of breaking down our dream, our illusion that we live in, of separation, of isolation, of neediness, of loneliness.

And each time that we make that intention to cultivate loving-kindness by saying the phrase, we are counteracting the habits of our mind, the habits of our heart that are keeping us confused and in delusion, that are keeping us away from our true home.

St. Augustine said once, the reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home. The context of the heart of connectedness that manifests as metta, as compassion—that's not some weird altered state we have to create. That is our true home. And we're not living there. We think greed and aversion and restlessness are really who lives here. We don't recognize that that's not our true home. And the heart of kindness, the heart of non-judging, the heart of compassion really is our true home. So what we're doing really is an ultimate kindness.

However, we don't get the instant results that—I don't know what it is—I think it's so deeply inbred in us in this Western culture that even when we think we're being patient and taking the long view, we're not even close. The long view is three months. That's the long view. Let's read the Buddha. He's talking about eons and eons and eons. I'm not saying that's encouraging. I'm just trying to give a comparison for what could be the long view. Three months isn't it. Seven days isn't it. That's not to be discouraging. That's so that we don't have completely unrealistic expectations—think that because anger is coming up in my mind on the third day, I'm wasting my time here, I might as well go home.

But that these difficult states of mind and pain in the body come up, that's normal. It's part of the practice. It's not a mistake.

One of the ways you could look at the formal practice of metta as we're doing it here is that part of what we discover is a moment-to-moment training in seeing how we create with our mind the dream, the illusion of separation, of alienation, of suffering. It's not that this sense of being separate, this sense of loneliness, this sense of neediness is some big thing that's in us, that's hanging there, that we have to chip away at. It's only this moment. And the sense of separation, the sense of distance, our sense of suffering, of fear, of neediness, is created in the moment by how the mind and heart responds or reacts to whatever particular experience is arising.

Now to me, thinking of my experience or looking at it in this moment-to-moment level is enormously freeing because it takes a huge load off—that I somehow have to undo the whole last forty-nine years of my life and make sure I never in the future, for however long, make a mistake again, both of which is obviously impossible. I can at least pay attention to this moment sometimes. Sometimes. But that at least seems within the range of the doable, to pay attention to how the mind and heart is reacting in this moment to whatever's arising.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of my favorite quotations, said, "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain." Sound familiar? Desire for pleasure and fear of pain—desire and ill will, right?

Greed and aversion—the first two of the five hindrances. It's not that they're evil. But when we don't recognize those habits, when those habits basically run the show, run our life—even though we think that desiring pleasure and fearing pain is what's bringing us happiness—those tendencies are actually what's perpetuating, moment to moment, our sense of isolation, of neediness.

One of the reasons that metta practice, and vipassana practice too, can be quite uncomfortable at times is because they're working from different angles on the same thing. We're counteracting very deep habits. And as you know, breaking a habit doesn't feel good a lot of the time, even though we know that once the habit's gone, or it's a lot less, we're a lot happier. But in the meantime, the habit is what's comfortable. The habit is where our mind naturally goes.

So it's natural that as we deepen in this practice—and I know you might not feel like you've deepened at all, but don't go there. That's a completely irrelevant judgment that the mind makes based on some made-up idea. You are deepening. You're still here. You're still doing it. It's deepening. You say, "I'm not deepening because more aversion, more greed is coming up." No, that's proof that it's deepening. Because as we continue strengthening the intentions of loving-kindness, each time we say the phrase, it's as if the obstacles get highlighted. I know I rather naively thought they would just vanish into the background, but they get highlighted. One of my teachers used to say that as the light of awareness shines, all the snakes come up out of their pits. And there are moments when that really feels like what's happening.

There are also plenty of moments when it's not like that at all—the goodness, the connectedness, the sense of non-judging. It's important to notice those moments too. For neither of them do you need to take credit, which makes it a whole lot easier. You only have to notice them.

So it's natural that the obstacles get highlighted. One model for understanding some of the difficult states that come up is the five hindrances, which I know, if you've done any meditation in this style before, you're quite familiar with. In metta practice, sometimes we forget to notice them. They come up in just the same way, with just as much strength as they do in vipassana practice. They might manifest in a slightly different way, and I'll talk about that at times. Also, because the practice is a little different, we don't always notice them as quickly as we might in vipassana.

The challenge for our hearts—really, how to meet these difficult emotional and physical states in metta practice—is not to think, "Well, I can't do metta because they're here," or "These are obstacles." The key is simply the recognition of desire, for example—the first hindrance—the recognition of it rather than being driven by it, and then how we meet it with our attention. That's how the metta continues: in the recognition and the meeting of what's arising with clear, non-judging attention. That's really metta. I think Sharon said something like that last night—that really connected, non-judging attention is an aspect of metta.

So when you're feeling really sleepy, or really aversive toward yourself or something that's happening, or filled with doubt, recognizing it is essential. And then notice what's the habit of how your awareness greets that. One way is what Sharon said last night—how we think, "Oh, great, come in, you live here, settle down." Suzuki Roshi once said, "In zazen, leave your front door and your back door open. Let the thoughts come and go. Just don't serve them tea." So that's one way we greet them: "Oh sure, it's your house, it's your home."

Another way is the opposite, which in my mind is personified by an old blind Swami I met in India a few years ago. I was staying in a small ashram, which was just rooms built around a kind of concrete courtyard. There was this really old Swami, a renunciate dressed in orange, a little crazy, whom they had taken in off the street and were letting sleep on a bed in that courtyard. When we arrived in the afternoon, he was just lying there, seeming out of it.

In the middle of the night, like two in the morning, the whole place started reverberating with these huge banging sounds. It just rattled everything. And it would go on for ten or fifteen minutes. You'd bounce awake, and then it would stop. You'd fall back asleep, and in another couple of hours, it would start again.

The next day, I came walking back at some point and the Swami was actually up. I saw that he was the one making those sounds. He had this huge piece of rope—like a big length he'd made himself out of old little pieces of cloth woven together, so it was

very thick and frayed at the end. He would just be lying there, seeming out of it, and suddenly he'd leap up, grab this rope, and start whacking the floor with all his strength. He'd just go at it for five or ten minutes, and then he'd lie back down again.

After a couple of days, I asked one of the young guys who lived there, "What's he doing?"

He said, "Well, you know, he says when he's meditating, evil spirits come and disturb his meditation. So he's getting rid of them."

That's the second option, which I also don't recommend.

But look and see. We often engage in either whacking the unpleasant visitor or whacking ourselves for having the unpleasant visitor. Not mettā. Definitely not mettā.

So I'll talk a bit about these five hindrances in the context of the mettā retreat. Recognition is very important.

The first two hindrances, of course, are desire—or sense desire—and aversion, ill will. They're the first two of the hindrances, and they are much larger than just hindrances. They're really the key to how we keep ourselves suffering and in delusion. But in mettā practice, these two states of mind, states of heart, have a very specific relationship to the mental state of mettā.

Desire, clinging, is called the near enemy of mettā. And ill will, aversion, fear, is called the far enemy.

What does that mean? Near enemy means it's a state of mind or heart that can fool us. It can look like mettā, and we can actually think that we are cultivating mettā or feeling mettā when we're actually in wanting. Just logically hearing that, we think, "But they're not the same at all." It's really quite interesting how that happens.

If you look at the two states, they're almost opposites of each other. Look at desire in your experience when you start wanting something—whether it's some little thing like wanting the bell to ring or something special for tea, or something huge like wanting a particular relationship, wanting something major to happen in your life. Looking with your attention at the state of wanting itself, the essence of desire is separation. The sense of desire is that I am somehow separate from whatever it is. There's a sense of neediness for completion, for wholeness, for collectedness. Something is lacking and needs to be acquired or held onto. It's actually the energy of the craving or desire itself that creates and sustains this sense of inadequacy, insufficiency, neediness. But we often don't recognize that and just think, "If I had this thing, then I'm whole again."

So the whole essence of desire is separation, insufficiency, while mettā is just the opposite. Mettā is the clear connection without judgment, without creating limitation, without creating separation. It's a simple example of how desire really disturbs our essential completion, our essential peace, but we get sidetracked by it. Mettā recognizes things as they are—a sense of friendliness, a sense of connectedness, a sense of no problem, really.

I'm on airplanes a lot. On one overnight flight, I was sitting in the middle row, and about five minutes before the doors closed, I suddenly noticed no one was sitting in the rest of the row. I had been sitting there quite peacefully—no problem, no wanting, no aversion, just at ease—until I noticed that. The pleasant thought arose that maybe I could lie down, and I clung to it.

In that moment, what had been quite peaceful became really antsy, anxious, nervous. Everybody who walked onto the plane, I was really focused on them, and I wasn't with mettā, I can tell you that—until they walked past my aisle. Then it was, "Ah, may you be happy," you know.

What had been a very peaceful situation became one where each person was evaluated, judged as my enemy, as a threat until they passed—and then they were okay. I was really, at least, noticing this as it happened. That's about all I can take credit for. But it was a really uncomfortable state.

Contrast that to the state before, where I'm just sitting there and when people come in, it's just me, just them, no problem. Me as I am, they as they are. Nothing needs to change. Nothing needs to happen. We're just right here. There's quite a sense of peace and connectedness. That's the difference between mettā and clinging.

When looked at that way, you think, "How could we confuse them?" Mettā is a divine abode. We talk about the four brahmavihāras: mettā, compassion or karuṇā, sympathetic or empathetic joy, appreciative joy, and equanimity. Divine abodes—limitless, boundless. Well, I'll tell you, the state of desire is no divine abode. And I think that's something we can really discover for ourselves in the next two hours.

So how do we get confused? Because we do.

It really is fascinating if you can take the personal out of it—fascinating to explore in your metta practice that shifting sand between the sense of friendliness and connectedness, and then subtle wanting, and then blatant wanting.

One thing is that craving, clinging, wanting as a habit arises as a result of connection with pleasant experience. When we're not paying attention and it's really pleasant, the habit of our mind is to want more, or hold on to it, or keep it going. And in the practice of metta, to begin with, we're saying deliberately focus on the good, on the beautiful in someone. So even if you're not feeling anything you would remotely describe as metta—that doesn't mean you're not experiencing metta, but you're not feeling some huge upwash of beautiful, pleasant energy—you're still focusing on the good in someone. It's very easy for that pleasantness, when we don't quite notice it in a moment, for clinging and craving to start coming up.

A simple example. I noticed on one retreat when I was with the friend category, I'd be sending metta to her. This is a pretty happy person, and so I'd be feeling happy. I'd be feeling, "Yeah, she's really nice. She's so great. Why don't we see each other more? That would be really nice, to see her more." Before I knew it, I had a whole story about when we could get together and how we could see each other and maybe I'd go call her and... That's not metta. That's wanting.

And that was relatively easy to notice. Sometimes it would move from one pleasant thought into another pleasant thought, into another pleasant fantasy. We don't really pick it up. And suddenly we're into a full-blown attack of wanting, where it's really the hindrance of sense desire. Nothing to do with a dear friend, nothing to do with anything you could remotely call the metta practice, but we're just gripped. How did I get here? I was so diligently sending loving kindness to the benefactor, and here I am off in Bali, skin diving. How did that happen?

So of course there's nothing to judge or get upset about. It's interesting. When you notice—say when I noticed, "Oh, I'm off, and how am I going to get to see her?"—rather than going, "Oh no, get back to the metta," just for a moment, notice the wanting. That leaning forward, the tightness, the sense of neediness, however you're experiencing it, so that we really recognize that it's not metta, and we really learn to recognize it. And then, not with any harshness, put it down, gently come back and refocus. In that case, I refocused on the friend, and I came back and simply offered the next phrase as a gift. So it's the starting over, over and over, but noticing the difference. And then you start to notice sooner. You'll think you're in the metta and you've just a little bit slid into wanting, but you'll pick it up sooner because it really is a different experience.

So when there's wanting as the hindrance, when it's just full-blown, eventually you'll notice that you're just wanting a different seat, you're wanting different food, you're wanting different weather, you're wanting different people sitting next to you. That's the classic hindrance that we talk about in the first days of a retreat. With that, it's

simply a matter of noticing it, really noticing it, naming it, recognizing it without judging. You can take what I call a few minutes of a Vipassana break, a mindfulness break. If it's really strong, just bring your mindfulness to your body and your breath and just be with that feeling of wanting, so that you're not pretending this elephant in the closet isn't there and in some tiny little voice saying, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful," while really filled with lust or something. This is what's happening. Let's just feel it for a moment. And then from within that, you can reconnect with the next phrase, with the intention of loving kindness.

There are a couple of specific ways, particularly in the metta practice, that are a bit more subtle than this, more like what it was with my friend, where the metta gets a little co-opted by the wanting, where the wanting really is masquerading as metta.

One way is that we are doing our practice very diligently, repeating the phrases, but subtly or not so subtly, our motivating force is really wanting the metta feeling. And this is pretty hard not to fall into sometimes. We really want some kind of good feeling. I mean, why the heck would we be here if we didn't? I didn't come here to feel nothing and say these phrases for seven days. Of course we want some metta feeling. We just need to recognize it and realize that's not the metta practice—to be sitting there going, "May I be happy. Do I feel it yet? May I be peaceful. Do I feel it yet?"

So if you notice that happening, recognize it. Come back. Or we get into wanting concentration. And there's a way with both of these where it's almost as if after every phrase or after every set of phrases, we're subtly checking back.

Am I more concentrated than before? Do I feel it a little more than before? Do I feel a little more connected than before? And if you start to feel that you're leaning forward, that's often a sign. If there is a nice feeling, which sometimes comes, you'll know that you got into wanting rather than just being with the metta feeling, because when it goes and you're really frustrated, that's always a sign that we were deep in the wanting.

None of this is with judging. This is simply to see what's what, to see where we suffer. And metta, just that simple connectedness—no feeling, it doesn't matter—but metta is not about suffering. It can connect with suffering. It's not about hiding suffering. But when we're really in that connected, present moment of metta, it's not going to cause us suffering. Wanting, expectation, ambition, holding on—these are going to cause us suffering. And all we have to do is keep noticing to see the difference.

One other subtle way that at some point most of us get into in the metta practice: in saying the phrases, whether to ourselves or to another, there's a subtle shift where we're not just saying the phrase as an offering of the heart—we're wanting something

to change. I really want that person to be happy. It often comes up with phrases like "may you have physical happiness" or "may you be healthy," and if the person isn't so healthy, you notice that dichotomy more easily. But it's quite easy to slip into. In one sitting, you can go back and forth between the simple intention and suddenly leaning forward—you know, if you just did this, you would be happy. Or for ourselves, of course: may I be happy, may I be happy, may I be happy.

So it's just to notice when it's moved from the simple intention of well-wishing, the simple intention of friendliness, to wanting some result. It's also common, if you've spent a few days on the benefactor or your friend, that people want to go home and see if they noticed anything, if they're feeling better, more happy. Just notice. Of course we're interested. But don't be doing it for that, because it gets into the wanting.

These are some of the ways, especially in metta practice, that the near enemy can masquerade. But as soon as you notice it, it's no big deal. It's so obvious once you notice it that we wonder how it masqueraded—until the next time.

The far enemy, well, that's more obvious. The far enemy is more obviously opposite: aversion, ill will, all the gradations of that, including fear. But again—and this is sometimes not what people expect when they begin a metta practice—because ill will and fear really are obstacles to the perception of our true being, and they are kind of the opposite of metta, it's quite common that they begin to come up rather strongly at various periods in our loving-kindness practice. And often the person experiencing it interprets this as blowing it in some way. But you're not. It's an almost inevitable part of an intensive loving-kindness practice. If there are habits in our psyche of fear or ill will or irritation—and I suppose it's a rare being who doesn't have some habits of those—they're going to arise.

And so, again, our challenge, our practice, is not to get caught in hating them or blaming ourselves or going into a real downward spiral of self-judgment. This is really common on all retreats, but in metta practice sometimes it seems highlighted—where sending loving-kindness to oneself encounters the endless list of what's wrong with us, and the inability to really feel loving just proves what we always suspected. I don't need to say more. And from that, every unpleasant experience becomes further proof.

So I think it's helpful to take a moment, as we did with clinging, to see how aversion is experienced in the moment, to have a sense of how ill will or fear really functions in the moment. We're not talking about our big psychic patterns, but just how these states arise in the moment to begin with.

Just as clinging or craving arises when we come in contact with something pleasant and we're not particularly paying attention, when some unpleasant thing—a sight or a sound or a thought, or a physical sensation in our body, like sleepiness, which is physically unpleasant—when that unpleasant experience arises and we're not particularly noticing, it gives rise to aversion or fear. And what is that? It's a pulling away. In that moment, it's a disconnect from the reality, from the simplicity of that moment's experience. Ill will or anger is sort of like "no," lashing out, "get away." Fear is more like pulling back, retreating. But it's a disconnect, energetically.

If you tune in—say you have a pain in your knee and you notice aversion to it—you can almost feel how your attention pulls back. Sometimes our whole body pulls back like that. And of course, because of that, we're not going to see clearly what's actually happening in that moment, because we're not connected. And that is the moment.

It's unpleasant. We pull back. That moment of disconnection, that space, is all that our patterns of mind need to rush in and say, "Yes, you are sleepy. You are really hopeless. You slept for a week before you came here so you wouldn't be sleepy, and here you are sleepy, and that just proves..." And there you are, back on the downward spiral.

If we don't recognize, "Oh, this is just aversion arising," or if it's fear, we project it into the future: "I'm sleepy now. I've been sleepy the last sitting. It follows that for every sitting from now on, I'm going to be sleepy. And it's unbearable. There's no way I can do it." And then again, the spiral starts.

The more this happens, it's as if we're wearing colored glasses. Every experience that arises, once we start to fall into whatever pattern of negativity is our common one—whether it's judging ourselves, hating ourselves, fearing the future, getting angry at everyone else, whatever our particular story is—once we start believing it and not recognizing it as aversion, we get farther and farther afield from the reality of what's going on in this moment. Each moment of fear, aversion, negativity just feeds the next.

I've learned to recognize when a worthlessness pattern is operating in my mind. Any perception that comes up—a sight, a sound—when that worthlessness pattern is really strong, is interpreted in such a way that it confirms I'm worthless. It could be anything. And it gets to be funny when I notice it.

A small example: I could come down the stairs outside, and you know those rows of clips where you put notes? Usually I look and think, "Oh good, no notes. That means everyone's fine." That's a normal response, right? When worthlessness is on, I'll come

down, there are no notes, and I'll look and think, "Oh my God, nobody likes me because I'm useless." That level. And when I see that, I can just laugh. It's just what the mind does.

But when we don't see it, that's another unpleasant experience that we didn't recognize. We pull back, and we're completely disconnected from reality in not much time. We wonder, "How could anyone...?" We look at ourselves and think, "I'm not that bad of a person. How come I feel like this about myself?"

This is where metta comes in. With any unpleasant experience, it doesn't have to be turned in on ourselves, but that's a significant way that the hindrance of ill will arises in a metta retreat. It could also be the lashing out where you're just hating everybody who comes into your field of vision or your field of hearing, or the weather, or maybe you've just picked one pet peeve, but it's really taking over.

I notice when I'm on a retreat and I suddenly have to write a note to the cooks—for the good of all beings—and they need to hear it. I start paying attention to the quality of energy that's convincing me I need to write the note. And now I know enough to say, "Okay, that means you don't write that note for three days." Because by that time, the urgency is gone—it was just the hindrance of ill will.

You could pay attention to this. If you urgently have to write a note to the maintenance people or the snow shovelers, if you have a brilliant idea for how the place could run better, why don't you wait till the end of the retreat and see if it still feels so brilliant? Maybe it is brilliant, but then it will still be brilliant at the end of the retreat.

Metta really is the antidote for fear and ill will. Now, the mind of ill will—and I can say this from experience—doesn't want to hear that, or doesn't believe it. Often, when one is sort of comfortable in a negative way of looking at things, or it's just a strong habit of mind, it will come up when you do metta, so metta is difficult at that time. And that's when you'll hear yourself say—I've heard myself, I've heard a lot of people say—"I hate metta. I hate practicing metta."

I'm not going to do it. And that's because it's going against a strong pattern.

We often have—and again, it's this kind of habit of ill will speaking—a mistaken concept about how metta is the antidote to ill will. This is often what the resistance, the intellectual resistance, is about. I think Sharon alluded to this the other night, when we think of metta as being stupid. Oh, I see these really difficult, painful, horrible things in myself, but I'll just say, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful," as if just covering it over,

suppressing it, or pretending it's not there. Or in somebody else, it's even more obvious. They have this really harmful thing that they do, and I'm just going to say, "May you be happy, may you live with ease," and completely ignore that. That's stupid. That's naive.

But that's not metta. That's what we often think it is—just a covering over.

Or the other thing that we can quite fall into is almost the opposite: thinking that I have to really love that person, I have to love their stupidity, I have to love my pettiness. "Really, you're wonderful, and so is your pettiness." That doesn't seem realistic either. So we're kind of in a quandary. That's not metta.

Metta is simply, clear-eyed and clear-heartedly, with the attention connecting with what's happening—without judgment, without expectation. Just connecting. You don't have to love it. You don't have to think anything about it. In fact, don't think anything about it. Just connect.

From Ajahn Sumedho—do you know who Ajahn Sumedho is? He's an American man who ordained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand with Ajahn Chah, the well-known forest monk and meditation teacher. Ajahn Sumedho has been a monk about thirty years. He lives in England now and is the head of the whole Western order of Buddhist monks and nuns in this tradition. He's very down-to-earth and simple in the way he describes things. He says, talking about metta: "Metta does not necessarily mean liking anything at all. It means an attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or fault of any situation inside or outside of oneself. Now with metta, one isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, a person, or oneself. You're witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it."

I love that. This witnessing, connecting with the unpleasantness, and you don't create anything around it. Just let it be in the light of awareness. You simply don't get into thinking, "I hate it, I hate it, I don't want it."

This is metta. I don't think that's easy, but doesn't that seem a lot more doable than loving everything that's really hard? It's the power of non-judging, unlimited, kind attention. That's really what metta is. It's so much more simple and so much more powerful than our ideals about it might have us believe.

So really, whether it's a pleasant experience or an unpleasant experience or neutral, it doesn't matter. This is really where metta leads into wisdom. The attitude, the connectedness of heart, of attention, of mind, of metta, automatically opens into wisdom. This is something I didn't really believe until I practiced it quite intensively, but it seems to.

When we allow, as Sumedho was saying, just that connecting with the unpleasantness or the pleasantness—don't create anything around the pleasantness either, such as "Isn't this wonderful? Isn't this great? How can I have more?"—just what it is. When we really allow that, the inclusiveness, which we would call metta, that sense of acceptance, that sense of all-inclusiveness, that sense of limitlessness, naturally arises. It's not that we have to try to feel inclusive about that person, this aspect of myself, that experience. But simply by steady, connected, non-judging attention in various ways, the connectedness, the inclusiveness, the lack of limits becomes apparent.

Let me read you this poem that I really like.

To me, it really expresses this—the willingness to come back and meet with unflinching kind eyes something that's a little difficult or unpleasant—and how that opens into connectedness.

It's by Mary Oliver, called "Singapore."

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it. Kingfishers say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant and, of course, trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem, but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays as big as hubcaps with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life, and I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen, but maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. And neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth, the way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So much more simple and so much more vast and powerful than anything our complicated minds could make up. We just really need the willingness—the faith, really—to trust enough to keep practicing and not be discouraged when we're caught in wanting, when we're caught in aversion, when we're caught in complete boredom because nothing is happening. We don't know. It's so much vaster than we can know. So it's really an urge to keep going.

I need to mention the other three hindrances. But first I wanted to say that sometimes people feel a strong urge to stay with themselves as they're practicing the method, to stay more with themselves than going through all the categories as quickly as we are—which is fine. But it's common to feel that it's somehow wrong or selfish or greedy. We should be sending it out to all beings, and here I am just sending it to myself. Don't believe it. Because again, just like in that poem, if you can really touch your own experience with loving-kindness, it expands outward, past the limits. It doesn't stop at some made-up idea of the edge of my body with everything out there being separate. So please trust yourself to keep going if you feel drawn to send it to yourself, and you'll see that ultimately the illusion of separation begins to break away. Even against all your best efforts, you'll find metta leaking out to other people, even when you didn't intend it.

In one of the groups, I mentioned that sometimes, if you're having trouble connecting with phrases to yourself, or it feels like too much wanting, you might use a phrase somewhere along the lines of, "I love and accept myself just as I am," rather than trying to make yourself feel something different.

Now, the other three hindrances, just to mention: sloth and torpor or sleepiness; restlessness and agitation—that physical restlessness where you just can't sit still—and obsessive worrying spinning in the mind; and doubt. Just as in a Vipassana retreat, they arise sometimes very strongly in a metta retreat.

One thing I've noticed, because of the nature of metta as a concentration practice where we're not investigating so much other things that arise—you notice you're thinking, and you just come back to the phrases, you don't necessarily name what's happening at first if you can just come back—sometimes that's fine. There's a little anger, a little restlessness, you notice it, you come back to the phrase, and it's gone. Fine. But sometimes, because we didn't notice, all of a sudden it wallops us over the side of the head. You'll just be in a frenzy of doubt, for example, and not know how you got there. So if that happens to you, you're not doing something wrong. As soon as you can recognize it, recognize it. That's the main thing.

Again, because this is a concentration practice—we're coming back over and over to the object or focus of the phrases and the person we're sending them to—that concentration is one of the calming factors of mind. Investigation, which we're not doing as much here, is more energizing. And so in the early days of a concentration practice, you can be really right there with your phrases, feeling quite connected, and the next thing you know, you're nodding off. You don't quite know how that happened. It's just because the calm and the concentration got stronger than the energy. That's all. No big thing.

So when you notice that, do the usual things. One is to really aim more clearly at each word in the phrase. That action of aiming, called *vitaka* in Pali, is actually the mental antidote to sloth and torpor. It's not hitting it with a sledgehammer—it's just gently aiming. *May I be free from danger.* Just that little extra energy can sometimes wake us up, balance the concentration, and you're back in business.

Sometimes, of course, you're too far gone, so the usual things apply: open your eyes, look at the light, stand up. Sometimes changing the speed of the phrases can help you refocus. If they've gotten into a lullaby modality and you're singing yourself to sleep, you might want to vary the speed in how you're saying them. But it's really important not to get into judging about this—it's just a natural effect of the practice at times for everyone.

The opposite, restlessness and worry, is again recognizable: too much energy, not enough calming, not enough concentration or focus to balance it. Sometimes you feel like you need to walk more, just walk off the energy. One way we sometimes don't recognize restlessness in metta is that we find ourselves ceaselessly tinkering with the phrases or with which person to send them to. If you find you have seventeen phrases, or your phrases have become paragraphs, or you're changing them all the time—*that doesn't feel right anymore, let's try this*—or you've been through thirty-five different friends, I would at least suspect there could be some restlessness. And if you can name it as restlessness, rather than thinking, "Oh, the method hasn't clicked yet," that can be really helpful. *Oh, restlessness. Okay.* Simplify. When you feel restless, don't complicate—simplify. Go back to only four phrases, or cut down to two phrases. Go back to only one friend and just stay very steady, very simple on the phrases.

And doubt, of course, is very interesting. We know how to recognize it: *I can't do this. This is stupid.* We're used to that, I assume, if you've done meditation practice before. One interesting way doubt can arise—if you're new to metta but you're used to practicing vipassana—is that it takes the form of criticizing and analyzing the metta practice and comparing it to vipassana. *Well, what about mindfulness? What about wisdom?*

What's the point of this I and you? I thought there was no self, and here we're going "may I be happy, may you be happy." All we're doing is reinforcing... And you're thinking about all the precepts, all the things you learned from mindfulness retreats, and how metta is just the opposite, and you're completely lost in thought, thinking that you're analyzing the practice. This is major doubt. And it's very, very helpful to notice it and name it.

You'll never think your way into deciding which is better—mindfulness or metta—or whether you're doing it right, or whether metta is really emphasizing a sense of separation by the use of these words. Thinking will never get you there. And so, as with any doubt, recognize the hindrance of doubt as just this spinning in the mind. The recognition of it is, *Oh, okay, that's doubt.* You put it down and simply connect your attention. That's the antidote: connected attention. You come back to the phrase and it's sort of like, "Okay, just do it."

We're not giving up our discriminating wisdom here. It's not that we just blindly, for the rest of our lives, believe anything that's said. But it's in that famous sutta where the Buddha said, "Don't believe it just because I tell you, but try it and see for yourself."

Well, that second line is really important: try it and see for yourself. As long as we're spinning in doubt, we can't try anything, because we'll never do it. So you have to recognize, "Oh, doubt." Okay, just do it. And at the end of the retreat, definitely evaluate. See what your experience is. Of course you'll evaluate. See if it's useful. See if it's true for you. No question about that. But it's impossible in the middle of it—you're just in doubt.

So noticing, not judging it, but having the commitment to try the practice: "Oh, that's doubt." Recognize it, center in your body again, and then just start by focusing on the next phrase. And you might notice—I've noticed—that doubt rarely comes up when you like what's happening. It often comes up when what's happening isn't meeting your expectations. So that's just a little piece that you might not completely believe the doubt next time it comes.

One of my favorite lines from the Buddha is: "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." That's actually, I think, a very deep statement. So what we're doing here, each moment that we are planting that seed of intention, of friendliness, of connectedness, of loving-kindness—each moment that we actually say the phrase, in that moment that's what we're dwelling upon.

And if you think about what our mind dwells upon left to its own devices, what it naturally inclines towards left to its own devices—I don't know about your mind, but I can tell you in my mind it's not a pretty picture. To really have the sense that we are

affecting a change as to where the heart, the mind, will naturally incline through this practice—we really are. And so that helps me enormously in those dry times when it seems like nothing's going on. But if I can just summon up the willingness to offer the next phrase, it's a very powerful act of kindness, of wisdom, and of really coming out of our dream of separation, of fear and neediness.

CHAPTER 301

Basic Goodness

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses the fundamental human predicament: we want to be happy but don't know how. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of the Two Darts (or Two Arrows), she illuminates how we compound our suffering by adding mental reactions to unavoidable pain. When unpleasant sensations arise, we don't simply experience them—we worry, resist, and create elaborate stories that multiply our distress.*
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> *Wilson introduces Chögyam Trungpa's concept of 'basic goodness'—the natural peace and ease that is always available but obscured by our habitual reactivity. She explains how our deep conditioning to chase pleasant experiences and avoid unpleasant ones keeps us spinning on what she calls 'the hamster wheel' of dissatisfaction. Through the practice of wise attention (yoniso manasikāra), which she beautifully describes as 'an active quality of mind that is nurturing and supporting,' we learn to meet each experience with bare attention—fresh, non-judging, and wholehearted.*
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> *Using vivid examples from traffic jams to retreat hall clock-ticking, Wilson demonstrates how liberation comes not from changing our circumstances but from transforming how we relate to them. She emphasizes that meditation doesn't create special states but rather reveals what Thich Nhat Hanh calls our Buddha nature—our capacity to wake up, understand, and love. The talk offers practical guidance for working with physical discomfort and pleasant experiences alike, showing how both become gateways to recognizing the peace that, as the Dalai Lama suggests, can only be known in the present moment.*

Last night in her opening talk, Sharon said a great thing that one of her teachers told her: the Buddha's enlightenment solved his problem, and now it's up to us to solve our problem.

I thought I would talk a little about the first question that comes up: what actually is our problem? And then how does this practice help us to solve it? I don't claim to answer all of that in one talk, but we'll just begin the process, hopefully.

Actually, I think our problem is very simply put: we want to be happy and we don't know how. We think we know how, and that's the problem—because it doesn't work. Until we stop and really pay attention, we don't realize that it's not working. We don't even know what we're doing, never mind that it's not working or how.

So what our practice is about is stopping and taking a look at what's really going on, as opposed to what we think is going on. There can be a wide difference between those two things in any given moment.

It's said that one of the things that motivated the Buddha to teach, rather than just hang out in Nibbana for forty-five years, was that by looking through the world, he could see with his omniscient Buddha eye that everyone is united in wanting to be happy—but that we do just the things in pursuing our happiness that keep us spinning and suffering. The very things we do to be happy are the things that keep us lost in confusion. And so he taught out of great compassion.

We get so hooked into somehow trying to manipulate, control, and rearrange our environment—our outer environment, our inner environment—to manage experience in such a way that we'll finally hit that place of lasting happiness. And the cosmic joke, in a way, is that this very trying to manipulate keeps us from noticing the fact that basic peace and ease, basic goodness, as Chögyam Trungpa calls it, is actually available. It's who we are, here and now, in this moment, in every moment. We don't know how to notice it. We don't know how to recognize what's really true.

What we're actually running after, trying to find, is already here. But it's not what we think. We're looking for some big goodies, some final blast, some incredible bliss, some pleasant experience that never goes away. And when that doesn't happen, we don't remember to turn around and notice that peace. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, peace is available, happiness is available—please help yourself. But we keep going, "No thank you, I think I'll look over this way and see if it's somewhere else."

Trungpa's phrase is "rediscovering our basic goodness." That to me is really what our meditation practice is about—not to create some special state, not to become Olympic meditators, but to rediscover our basic goodness, which is available in each and every moment of experience. So we've got to learn how to notice that, how to see it or hear it or feel it or be it.

What stands in the way, seemingly? Just think about today, because a day here is a microcosm of our life. Whatever tendencies of your mind are happening here, they didn't just arise for the first time today. I really will bet that for anybody. This is a microcosm of our life.

Have you had an experience today of being totally at ease, at peace, at one with whatever happened throughout the whole day? No. You might have had some moments of that, and that's really important to notice. But when you think about it in the normal way our mind thinks—well, what was in the way today? Why wasn't I happy? What was

the problem?—there's a whole variety of things. I was sleepy. My knees hurt. I kept having this unpleasant memory. It's not nearly as nice as it was two days ago. I should have come to another retreat because I have all this unfinished business at home. Or I had a headache. Or I didn't bring the right pillow. Whatever it happens to be.

We really get involved in thinking that these particular things are our problem, whether it's an internal experience of pain or sleepiness or boredom or restlessness, or the externals—the person sitting next to me is the wrong person to be sitting next to me, whatever it happens to be.

This is where we get so lost. We get so entranced by our reactions to experience that we mistake the reactions for what's real. We pay so much attention to our reactions that we don't know how to turn our attention back to simply rest at ease in whatever's arising.

At the root, one of the deep patterns underlying this—Sharon mentioned it last night, and I want to talk about it a little—is that deep misunderstanding that we often don't even recognize: that pleasant experience is what's going to give us happiness, that unpleasant experience is what's causing our suffering and is bad or a mistake, and that neutral experience—we don't even know what's happening, so we make something up. The thing is, we make something up whether there's pleasant or unpleasant experience too. We're making up the stories about what's happening continually. And when we don't recognize it...

What we can end up doing—in a day here or in our lives—is spending our life chasing after pleasant experience: a pleasant sight, a pleasant sound, a pleasant thought, a pleasant emotion. Running away, doing everything we can to avoid or change or get rid of the unpleasant.

And certainly, if we have a choice, no one here is going to say, "I think I will take restlessness and a pain in the knee as opposed to bliss, because I really don't care—I can't tell the difference." We're not talking about moving in that direction. But if you *need* the bliss to be happy, and if you can't have sleepiness and find peace, then we're in big trouble. Because meditation doesn't mean that we get more and more pleasant experiences, like we're heading to some dreamland of constant pleasure and no more unpleasantness and no more boredom.

But isn't it easy to see how we slip into evaluating our experience in this way? And in our life, without realizing it, this is what can guide so many of our choices, our decisions. With all good intention, really trying to be happy, really trying to do what seems most important in life, we can end up so far from where we ever meant to be, or what we ever thought was important, and not quite understand how we got there.

This really moved me. It was an interview with Marlon Brando in a German magazine, which a friend translated for me. He says, "I was never a good father or a good husband. I was always busy with my own life. Now I'm a guilty old man who feels ashamed of his life. Besides food, there is nothing else in the world for me. That's the only thing in my life. I know this eating will kill me, but I just can't stop."

It's intense. This was a couple years ago, so change is possible—I actually read he was doing better somewhere. But that's an extreme of a state we can all get into by pursuing what we think is the best, while underlying it is the tendency to go after what is pleasant. Whether it's more money, a better career, or having people think well of us so we have a nice feeling about ourselves—whatever it is. Always looking for some reality other than this one in order to make things okay, in order to find ease, in order to find peace.

And we bring that tendency here, of course. In doing that, if we don't stop to notice it, we're missing the truth. We're missing the secret. The secret of happiness, of our meditation, of happiness today in this next sitting, is that it really doesn't matter what's happening.

See if you believe that.

It really doesn't matter whether you're sleepy or whether you're really concentrated. You believe that? It really doesn't matter. But when we get lost in our reactions instead of being fully open-hearted and lovingly present with what is, that open-hearted connection allows any aspect of our experience to be the avenue in to re-recognizing our basic goodness—because it's always here. The only thing we have to do to recognize it is be fully present, awake, and non-judging in whatever's arising. The moment we're off into wanting something else, into pushing away experience, into getting lost in interpretation and extrapolation, what that's doing is just taking us out of being awake and present. And so we just can't recognize what's always here—that basic ease.

Here is an example of how ease, this natural peace, is available. It's a very simple example of being caught in a traffic jam.

I remember one time I was on the way to the Boston airport early in the morning to catch a flight to Thailand or somewhere—some flight where you have to make connections and go overseas. It was real early, like six in the morning, and if you know Boston at all, to get to the airport you can come from all directions, but you end up funneling through this one tunnel. About ten different routes come down with not much form or structure into two lines going through this one tunnel.

We were flying along at six in the morning, and just before we were coming off the highway onto the exit—which still is about a mile down and around to get to the tunnel—everything stopped dead, just as we got into the line to get off. It's the kind of place where there's nowhere to go. It stopped dead. It's not like there was another route to take, because you have to go through that tunnel unless you have an extra hour to go back around from the north, which we didn't.

It was really interesting to watch my mind, which of course didn't say, "Oh well, let's just rest in natural great peace here until the traffic starts again." That's not our first usual reaction, although it can become that. I fretted. I pretended that my first reaction was okay: "Oh yes, it's fine. Let's just hang out. It's nice." And underneath: "Let's go, let's go, let's go. It's been twenty minutes now. I'm going to miss the flight."

Until the point when I actually consciously took my attention and turned it around onto my experience and met it fully. Oh—anxiety, tightness. Pretense of being okay. But let me feel what's really going on. And in that willingness—this is our mindfulness practice—to simply be fully present with that, without making a story, without projecting into the future, just feeling that anxiety without adding to it: "Oh, okay. It's just what it is." It stops defining our experience, and we can recognize the vastness of ease of heart that is always accessible.

It's like: okay, the worst thing that can happen is I miss the flight. I mean, in the big scheme of things, so what? I don't know any flight that is that life-and-death—that I've ever taken—although they all feel that way. And when I really saw that...

The situation didn't change, but the sense of really resting at ease, of reconnecting with natural peace, was absolutely palpable.

I'm not saying that's a steady state. The very next moment, it's easy to lose it again because we're so inured to getting lost in our reactions. So our practice is simply to recognize the difference between the reactions and what's actually going on, and just rest in what's going on. In that, peace is always available. Learning to trust this is what allows us to open fully into experience, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

There's a passage from a Tibetan text that speaks to this natural peace:

Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that it is never impaired or improved in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease in whatever happens.

I love that last line: resting at ease in whatever happens. Participatory in whatever happens, not standing five feet away. That's our challenge. That's our practice.

When we recognize this even for a moment, there's the potential of finding our true refuge, our true home, once again—even if only for a moment—within the headache, within the back pain, within the fear. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, our capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love is our Buddha nature, and it's always here. Or as the Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging."

That moment of recognizing our basic goodness—we recognize it because the heart is not clinging to wanting things to be other. And we're awake. You have to be awake. You can't be totally zoned out and non-clinging. You have to be really awake and connected. That's the undercurrent. So we're learning both of these: how to be awake and how to recognize that quality of non-clinging.

So how do we get so sidetracked? Why don't we recognize this deep habit? As I said, it's really around being so caught in our reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral that we don't even see that we're evaluating all experience through that filter.

There's a wonderful sutta from the Buddha that I really like because it explains what keeps our suffering going. It's called the Two Darts—like arrows, two darts. Someone is asking him, essentially, what's the difference between an awakened being and ordinary beings? His words for ordinary people is "an untaught worldling." That's us. We're getting a little taught, but we're worldlings anyway.

He says that we experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. And an awakened person experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. So what's the difference? It's really interesting to hear that, because somewhere in the back of our minds, don't we think that the Buddha didn't have problems? He didn't have pain. You transcend that.

But he said the difference is this: when an untaught worldling experiences a painful bodily feeling, a painful sensation, he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Thus he experiences two kinds of unpleasant feeling—unpleasant bodily feeling and unpleasant mental feeling.

It's very basic, but so true. He says it's as if a person were hit by a dart, pierced by an arrow, and following that first piercing, he is hit by a second arrow. That person experiences pain caused by two arrows. And that's what we do. In a similar way, when we have a painful or unpleasant feeling—physical, mental, or emotional—we add to it by sticking ourselves with another arrow. And then of course we judge ourselves for that, so we stick ourselves with yet another arrow. He only mentioned two, but we can really go on and on down that road.

Being touched by that painful feeling, he resents it. And because we resent the unpleasant, we go looking for something pleasant. We get caught in lusting after some pleasant experience to escape the unpleasant one, and that becomes our pattern of mind.

When an awakened person is touched by a painful feeling, he experiences a painful feeling—that's it. When he experiences a pleasant feeling, he experiences a pleasant feeling—that's it.

It's so simple we can't stand it. So we're hit by one dart and we don't add another one to it. That's the difference. That's really the difference. It's not so complicated, but it's not easy.

So our practice isn't to say, "Okay, from now on, no more reactivity." That's already sticking yourself with a dart. Our practice is to learn how to see how this is happening. And it becomes fascinating rather than blameworthy. Like, "Wow, that's amazing. I can't just hear an unpleasant sound. I've got to bring in my past, my future, everything that's going to happen, what's wrong with all the other people here, and get into a complete knot of pain and aversion and everything else that goes back to my early childhood." We laugh, but we do it, and it's immense suffering. We're not choosing to do it, God knows. But it really helps to begin to see what's actually happening here.

A good example: a few years ago someone told me this in an interview. It was after quite some days of the retreat, and she said—it's always nice when you hear the story after it's been worked through because you really see the power of understanding what's really happening to bring us back to peace. She said it was a metta retreat, actually, and she was starting to feel really concentrated, a lot of metta, and then she started

to notice some ongoing noise in the hall, kind of a repetitive, ongoing noise. She didn't say what it was, but I actually surmised she was sitting in the front row, and if you get really quiet, you can hear this clock ticking. I think that's what it was, but she didn't say.

She said she went through days of so much anger and aversion. This sound was ruining her meditation. It was ruining her concentration. It was ruining her metta—implied but not said. She didn't go on, but I can certainly extrapolate all the things that would come out of that: "I can't believe the teachers are so insensitive as to have a clock that ticks. Don't they know how sensitive..." It just goes on and on, whatever your proclivity is.

And then one day she said she heard us say for about the ten millionth time, "When an experience arises, bring your kind and full attention to the bare sense experience itself. So hearing—bring your attention to hearing." So she said, "Oh, maybe I'll try that." Brought her experience right into the hearing, without holding back, without making a story, just meet it fully. And she said, "Oh, hearing. It's unpleasant." That was it. She said, "Oh! The sound wasn't disturbing my concentration. My mind was disturbing the concentration."

Or Ajahn Chah had a great line: when the sound arises, it doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound. All that suffering—that's the second dart. That's the second arrow. It's all extra. Once we can learn how to bring wise attention to what's really going on, that's where the skill of our practice comes in. That's where we are developing here with mindfulness the tool of wise attention to help us see what's really happening.

It's often counterintuitive because, as I describe it a little more, you'll see—especially if something's unpleasant, the wise attention says, "Bring your full-hearted, no-holding-back awareness right into the experience, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant." And what we feel is our intuition saying, "Let me get as far away from this as possible." The thing is, that's not our intuition. That's our habit that says pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad, and I have to somehow control this—which we can't.

So it's a little counterintuitive, but it's radical. It's a radical change because as soon as we give up fighting and controlling and manipulating, just drop into that—"Oh, hearing. Unpleasant."—I mean, it doesn't work like a charm every time because we have to be really wholehearted and awake. But when we are, there's that moment when it all just vanishes and there's hearing and unpleasant and that's it. Natural great peace. Our basic goodness.

So our path of wakefulness and compassion to ourselves and others is not about cultivating some really far out, incredible state of mind and heart that's going to last us for the rest of our life. It's transforming our life by transforming how we relate to our life. And the little things that happen here are the stuff of our whole life. It's just in this little microcosm.

No amount of meditation is going to stop illness, old age, disease, and death. It's not going to stop separation and loss. No amount of meditation is going to make everything in the world hunky-dory, get rid of injustice and poverty. It just doesn't happen.

But what meditation does, what mindfulness practice does, is give us the tools to see clearly, to meet our experience wholeheartedly, and to come out of a life of reactivity, dissatisfaction, and fear into a life of wholehearted connectedness—to ourselves, to others. It offers us a life that allows us to trust in the true potential of resting at ease in whatever arises, rather than thinking we have to manipulate and control and keep everything at bay. Because that is such a difficult and tension-producing state.

Our basic tool is mindfulness—wise attention. Learning how to pay attention and what to pay attention to. How do we pay attention in a way that keeps us coming back to clear knowing, to clear seeing, to openheartedness? How do we meet this moment with balanced awareness, as Sylvia said this morning? That's really what mindfulness and wise attention are about.

This word, wise attention—the Pali word for it (Pali being the language the first Buddhist texts were written in) is *yoniso manasikara*. You don't have to remember that, but I'm mentioning it because I was talking to Andy Olenski, the executive director of the study center. He's a Pali scholar—if you didn't know, he's our resident Pali scholar, so we always go to him for his very insightful translations and history. I asked him how he translates *yoniso manasikara*, and his answer is very interesting.

The word *yoniso* comes from the Pali word for womb. So he translates it as womb-like—nurturing, protecting. *Mana* is mind, and *kara* is from the same root as *kamma*, which means action. Taken all together, he puts it as "an active quality of mind that is nurturing and supporting." I love that.

If you can get a sense—not think about it, but get a sense—of bringing attention to any experience with that quality... It's active; you really connect with what's happening, but in a way that's nurturing and supporting, supportive of being fully present with an open heart. That's the quality of mindfulness: an active quality of mind that meets the experience fully, but in a way that is nurturing, non-judging, non-reactive—that supports our open-hearted presence.

Hopefully this isn't just intellectual, because it's so important. You can take the words in, but then really play with that quality of attention in your experience—in the attention you bring to the breath, the attention you bring to your steps in walking, or as we open up to physical sensation, emotions, whatever is arising. This quality of nurturing, active attention.

This quality has a couple of aspects that help us really be with the experience rather than our interpretation of it. The first aspect we call bare attention. That's really seeing the difference between a sound and all the mental extrapolations that go on with it. This seems obvious when we're sitting here talking about it and we're not caught up in something. But really watch, with your breath, the difference between bringing that full, open-hearted attention to the bare experience of sensation without confusing it with the interpretations and stories we tell about it. It's very interesting to begin to see the difference.

It's like bringing a sense of wonder, of freshness, no preconceptions. Someone sent me this birthday card last year—I don't know if you can see it. It's a picture of a little baby with wide eyes and an open mouth, like, "Wow, what's that?" That's the kind of attention. Not, "Ah, another breath." But rather, "Oh, this breath!" It's tight, it's controlling, I can't really get it deep—and then the story begins: it really shows what a shallow person I am, it's all tight... But no. It's just sensation. Wow, what's that sensation?

And not, "Now it's deep. It's flowing like a waterfall. I'm connecting with all the molecules of air in the universe. This really shows my sense of oneness, and it's good. I've been doing my yoga and it's really bearing fruit." No—it's just sensation. There's just pressure, or coolness, or tingling.

And then we often get into the neutral territory, where it's like, "That's not very interesting. I've got to spend all day with in and out, in and out, pressure, tingling, coolness. Where's the fruit of this? I didn't come here for that."

Pressure, tingling, coolness. Pressure, tingling, coolness. But each time it's a fresh pressure, a fresh experience. It's not like last time it was pressure, tingling, coolness, so now I know this next time it's going to be pressure, tingling, coolness. Just meet it with this freshness, this bare attention, and in that moment, what's the problem? Whether it's tight, whether it's loose, whether it's pressure, whether it's tingling—it doesn't matter. That quality of open-hearted attention is all we need. In that quality, we are able to recognize again our basic goodness, open to discover rather than to judge.

And really, for those of you whether you've been on the metta retreat or not, perhaps you can get a sense of how this quality of mindful attention is actually imbued with metta. Metta has the qualities of inclusiveness, non-reactivity, real connectedness, real kindness, non-judging. That's the way we meet each experience—non-manipulating and inclusive.

This brings us to the next aspect: meeting the bare sense experience itself without discriminating. As Sylvia said this morning, this is where the instructions start to sound paradoxical, because we're saying just come back to the breath. And in this, that is a discrimination. It's saying, for right now, I'm choosing the breath as more important to pay attention to than anything else. But if you can see that this is a skillful means only, meant to bring in a steadiness of focus, as she said this morning, so we can then open to everything else—don't get into the habit of thinking somehow the breath is a superior experience to knee pain. It's not. But we need to develop some steadiness of attention to be able to open to knee pain or bliss or boredom or excitement, to be fully present with the bare experience and able to tell the difference between it and our reactions. So that's why we need some steadiness of mind. But in this quality of open-hearted, wise attention, it's also non-discriminating.

As you'll see when the instructions go on, we're with the breathing, and a knee pain arises. We don't say, "Knee pain—I don't want to really be with that. I think I'll just stay with the breath until something nice comes along." It's not like, "Well, I've seen that knee pain before. I know all about it, so I don't really need to investigate it. I think I'll just hang out here in the breath." You see, our discrimination will generally come from this sense of going to what we like and avoiding what we don't like. Or if you have a perverse mind that's drawn by the unpleasant, the reverse—going to what we don't like and ignoring what's pleasant because it's somehow a mistake. Either one, it doesn't matter; one's not better than the other. But the quality of open-hearted mindful attention doesn't discriminate. Something arises, fine—meet it fully, no judging. It goes away, fine—it's gone away.

Now, can you imagine that with no matter what comes up? No matter what? No exceptions. There are no exceptions. Some great, incredible meditation experience is not an exception. Some really awful pain, some really yucky emotion is not an exception. Whatever arises, we learn how to meet it just as it is in this moment—open-hearted, no judging—notice what it does, notice the reactions of mind without believing them, let it go when it goes.

It's quite a challenge. We're just not used to it. We're afraid of the difficult. We get really lost in the pleasant, of course. That's what we do. And so a lot of the form of the practice and the concentration is to help us cut through these patterns of discriminating and just rest at ease in whatever arises. Just what presents itself.

This cutting through our basic habit is one of the reasons I feel retreats can be so uncomfortable. You know how it is to break a habit—even though the habit itself is engendering suffering, it's comfortable, it's familiar. And quite a few people have said in groups that in moving into some experience or some space that's unfamiliar, even though in itself it's not particularly unpleasant, just the unfamiliarity brings up a real thrill of fear. And that fear in itself is interpreted as, "Oh, something's wrong. I better fix this"—because that's how we respond to fear. So a lot of the way the retreat is structured, the way we keep saying just meet what's happening, is breaking our habit of avoiding the unpleasant by moving into it. It's breaking our habit of holding on to the pleasant by allowing it to go away. And at times that's very uncomfortable. But that's okay.

So, bringing our full, gentle attention to the experience just as it is. You'll see with physical discomfort—that's a really good place. We haven't talked about it yet, but either tomorrow or the next day, that's where we'll go with the instructions in the morning. That's a great place to really watch and notice the difference between the bare experience, the physical discomfort, the sensations, and all the response and reaction of heart and mind around it.

And to see how intertwined they can get. To see how hard it can be to tell the difference. Because in my experience, as soon as I label something "pain," there's already a whole lot of baggage connected to the way I perceive that experience.

So when I have a sharp feeling in my knee, if I move my attention there and notice, "Oh, sharpness," that's one thing. If I move my attention there and think "pain," there's already a mental reaction of fear, of holding back, of judgment, just in the way I label it. You see how subtle it can get.

It's not about judging ourselves that this happens. It's more about using the discomfort—not to martyr yourself. In this practice, we're not glorifying discomfort either. I'll talk about the comfortable in a minute. It's both. But to be able to just move toward the discomfort and see if you can, just for a moment, touch it lovingly with attention, just as it is, free of preconceptions. It's not easy.

Pain in the shoulders translates as tension, which translates into the way I live my life and all the things I have in my job and the way I respond to myself and the way I hold back from other people and how shy I am—on and on and on—when it's just, you know, tightness or pressure.

I've experienced headaches since I was a teenager. From time to time, I get really debilitating headaches, not migraines, but the kind where I can't really function too well. I can sort of deal with other pain, but headaches—I always really hate them. They're such a veil on experience that I would just be lost in some kind of aversive snit whenever I had one. There was no sense of being able to see through it. It colored the whole world.

And just in the last few years, I've really been able to experience this differently. Some days when I'm teaching, I wake up with one of these throbbing headaches, and I watch my reaction: "Oh no, how am I going to get through the day? I have to talk to people all day. I have to be nice. I can't be snarly. I can't be in an aversive snit." And I watch myself projecting that headache and how I'm going to react and everything that's going to happen through the whole day—all within the first two minutes of the headache coming on.

We do that, don't we? You have a pain in your knee and you're already in the hospital having arthroscopic surgery, and it's only been two minutes. What are you going to do with the rest of the day? It can only go downhill from here.

To watch all of that, and then deliberately bring my attention to the actual sensations—it's so amazing because they're just what they are. "Oh yeah, this throbbing and tightness." And when I'm really present with it, that's all it is. I pull back a little bit, and in comes: throbbing, tightness, "Oh my God, how am I going to get through the day?" Oh yes—and aversion and fear. Come back to the throbbing and the tightness.

Now, it's not magic. It doesn't make it go away. And a lot of times people get into evaluating. It kind of slips in: "If I'm really mindful properly, the unpleasant thing is going to go away." Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. Eventually it always will, but not on our time frame. And that's not a way to evaluate the practice.

But I've really come to where I can have this throbbing headache and at the same time be in touch with basic goodness—with the fact of our basic okayness, no matter what's happening. We can really connect with that in ourselves. And we can use our little pains here to just experiment with how to do that, how to tell the difference between the second arrow and the simple, bare, unpleasant sensation.

So that's why when we say, "If you have a little unpleasant sensation, don't move that first second"—what you're really doing otherwise is depriving yourself of an opportunity to discover that peace is available. It's not about being macho. It's not about winning an Olympic gold medal in the longest sitting you do here or the slowest walking. It's not about that. It's about using whatever arises as our opportunity to touch basic goodness, through the avenue of opening into it just as it is, rather than getting lost in the second arrow and all our stories.

I just want to give an example of how we do the same thing with the pleasant, where we mistake the pleasant feeling—we get entranced by it. In fact, we get so entranced we often don't even notice there is any pleasant feeling, and we think the thing that is pleasant is the best thing that ever happened. We believe our happiness depends on holding on to that forever, because we don't know how to see what's really happening: a sense experience, pleasant, clinging to the pleasant, and thinking, "Now life is great."

This is a story from the Buddha's time that I really like. It shows this beautifully. The Buddha had an attendant for the last twenty-five years or so of his life named Ananda, who was a monk.

Apparently, he was a wonderful attendant and very loving—just very kind, very supportive of all the people who came to the Buddha for teaching, really trying to help them gain access to the Buddha. He was simply a kind person.

So in this story, Ananda was sent on a mission by the Buddha, and he passed by a well near a village. There he saw a young outcast woman. In India, they have these different castes, with the lowest caste being the untouchables. There were all these rules that you wouldn't take any food from an untouchable, you wouldn't go near them, and so forth.

Ananda saw her and asked her for a drink of water—it's permitted for monks to ask for water, though they can't ask for other things. And she said, "Oh monk, I am too humbly born to give you water to drink. Don't ask any service of me lest you be contaminated, for I am of low caste."

And Ananda said, "I'm not asking for your caste, I'm just asking for water."

Her heart leapt so joyfully. She gave Ananda water to drink, he thanked her, and went away. But she followed him at a distance. And she heard that Ananda was a disciple of the Buddha. So she went to the Buddha and said, "Oh Lord, help me and let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells, so that I may see him and minister unto him, because I love Ananda."

And you see what happened. The Blessed One—thus the Buddha—understood the emotions of her heart at once and said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you do not understand your own sentiments. It is not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice towards you, and practice it towards others."

You see the basic mistake that we always make. There was so much pleasure, so much happiness at his kindness, and immediately we make the leap from the pleasant sensation to the thing that engendered it. Now I have to have Ananda for the rest of my life because I feel so pleasant—because he took water from me!

And really, that's how we mess up our lives, isn't it? Somebody does something nice, and so I've got to have this person, I've got to have this thing, I've got to have this car, whatever—and I'll do anything to get it because it's going to make me happy for the rest of my life. And it's just pleasant feeling.

Which again, it's sort of like the breath—just tingling and pressure. "Oh, I like..." But it's a much better story, isn't it? "Ananda is so wonderful. Let me minister unto him. Let me follow him around." Pleasant feeling, you're saying? It's just pleasant feeling? I'm just attached to pleasant feeling? That doesn't make such a good story.

Are we willing to give up the stories in order to touch our peace? What's interesting is that a lot of the time, no, we're not. We'd much rather hold on to the story, even though it keeps us spinning. Running after the pleasant—the image that always comes to me is like a hamster on one of those hamster wheels. We're running, running, running. And the faster we go, the more dissatisfying our experience becomes, because we never get there. Even if we get something pleasant, sure, it's nice. No one's debating that. But it doesn't last. So then we have to run after something else, and something else. Run away from the unpleasant.

But sometimes we don't even know it's a story, or we do know but we can't quite put it down yet. So that's okay. That's why we practice. And that's the power of this aspect of mindfulness, or wise attention—okay, in this moment I can't put down the story, but now there's the next moment. And you don't have to think about it or figure it out. Just bring your attention to the bare experience that's happening, and everything else takes care of itself. You'll notice if it's pleasant or unpleasant, or you'll notice that there's a reaction, or you'll notice that there's suffering. Or you'll just be able to touch that breath—and there's no big bliss, there's no big story, it's just simply what it is. And in that, we can again rest at ease in whatever arises.

I think really the reason we don't recognize it so much is because it's so simple and so close and so present—just this total awareness, total presence—and we're looking for fireworks. Through these days, through moments, little moments when you're feeling really present and awake, there's no problem. But nothing special is going on.

You're having a cup of tea, or you're just feeling a breath, or just feeling your foot as you take a step, just lying down in bed, brushing your teeth, whatever it is—but one of those moments where you're really exquisitely present, and that's all. Let it in. Learn to begin to recognize it, because these are the intimations, these are the guideposts that will bring us more deeply to trust and rest in the peace that can be available when we stop manipulating and fighting and trying to control.

The Dalai Lama said, "Why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it is the only place where you will know love." It's the only place where we will know love. It's the only place where we can awaken to the true potential for peace and ease, no matter what's happening.

So that's our practice.

CHAPTER 302

Five Hindrances

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson reframes our relationship with the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa), teaching that these challenging mind states—sense desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (vyāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā)—are not obstacles to eliminate but opportunities for deep understanding. She suggests we are often "hypnotized" by pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance, and that practice is about "de-hypnotizing" ourselves to recognize our innate wholeness.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance for working with each hindrance through mindful awareness rather than suppression or identification. For sense desire, she encourages staying present with the physical experience of wanting itself, noticing how desire creates a sense of separation and incompleteness. For aversion in its many forms—anger, fear, boredom, irritation—she teaches bringing attention directly to the sensory experience that triggers the reaction, or to the bodily sensations of the aversion itself. Drawing on teachings from Thich Nhat Hanh about "sponsoring" anger with mindfulness, she describes how awareness can transform these energies.*
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> *The talk connects these practical instructions to the Four Noble Truths (cattāri ariyasaccāni), showing how the hindrances become our "practicum" for understanding suffering and its cessation. Rather than the cause of suffering being these states themselves, Wilson clarifies it is our relationship to them—the thirst (taṇhā) for things to be different—that creates unnecessary pain. She concludes with Dogen's reminder that truth can only be found right where we are, in whatever arises.*

And what's been your experience today? Probably not nothing, but maybe not what you think you came here for either. Perhaps some peaceful, happy moments, maybe some lovely moments, maybe some turmoil, maybe some boredom, maybe some aversion. Perhaps a lot of sleepiness, a lot of restlessness, maybe fear, maybe desire. Not nothing though—but maybe not what we're looking for.

I saw an ad recently. Actually, it was in the Northwest Dharma News, which really surprised me. The ad says, "Deepen your meditations"—which immediately would pull the eye. "Improve concentration and absorption. Dissolve distractions and inner chatter." It's an advertisement for a clinical hypnotherapist. This is in a Dharma newspaper.

That's one way to go. It's not this way.

Actually, in my opinion, a lot of us walk through our life as if we're hypnotized. We're hypnotized by the lure of pleasure, by the hope of the next thing making us happy and being better. We're hypnotized by our fear of the unpleasant, of things not turning out the way we want. And in this cycle of trying to maintain that dream, we actually hypnotize ourselves into a dream of separation and alienation—the sense of loneliness, the sense of needing something somewhere else to fulfill us and make us happy. It's not the truth of things. It's really almost as if we hypnotize ourselves into it.

So I'm here, and I hope you're all here, in some way to de-hypnotize ourselves, to wake us up to aliveness, to presence, to really being fully awake in whatever life brings us in the form of our mind and body experiences in this moment—because that's all we have.

Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche once said that the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is twofold: one, to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, and two, how the deluded mind works.

So we're getting to see a lot of the second one. That's not a bad thing, because it serves as our tool. Exploring how the deluded mind works is actually our avenue into recognizing the nature of the non-deluded mind. And by mind in the big picture, I don't mean particularly thoughts and emotions so much as the nature of awareness or consciousness itself, or even beyond that—the sense of purity or radiance of our non-deluded mind, our innate wholeness or completion that we don't recognize when we're hypnotizing ourselves into thinking we need something somewhere else.

What's so amazing is this one line from a Tibetan text: the non-deluded mind is actually liberated by simply resting at ease in whatever arises. Resting at ease in whatever happens. That's our practice, and that's a huge challenge.

Because mostly, did you come here to rest at ease in restlessness? Was that your idea when you came? "Let me just find that place of harmony within intense sleepiness and grumpiness—that's the point of my practice." Well, guess what? That actually is our practice.

Now, if we put that in the brochure, we might not have 140 people here. But that's actually what we're given to work with. And it's not a mistake. It's not something we have to get rid of.

Early in a retreat, we get a lot of chance to explore how the deluded mind works. Our tool is mindfulness. And these things that are arising—these emotional storms, the sleepiness, the restlessness, the desire, the aversion, the boredom, the frustration, the doubt—these are our practicum in the Four Noble Truths that Gil was talking about last night. The Four Noble Truths make a lot of sense intellectually, but they don't do us much good until they become our visceral experience of life.

Tonight I want to talk about some of our friends that we might call the workings of the deluded mind—particular states of mind and heart that we always discuss early in a retreat because they visit just about all of us strongly in these first days. These are the states of mind of sense desire, aversion, anger, fear, sleepiness, tiredness, restlessness and worry, and doubt. You probably recognize at least one of these from sometime today, or maybe yesterday.

These are our friends. Rather than being a problem that we have to get rid of, our challenge is to bring the attitude of awareness and understanding that their presence is actually how we can experience the Four Noble Truths: suffering and the cause of suffering. And the cause of suffering is not the presence of any of these states. The cause of suffering is the relationship of our heart to the presence of these states—the thirst for it to be different. Aversion, or wanting it to go away, is similar. It's like the flip side of the thirst for it to be different.

The ending of suffering doesn't mean that state goes away. It means we find that place of resting at ease in whatever's happening. We let go of the thirst. And the practice we're doing here—the tool, the coming back over and over with clear, kind, non-judging attention—is the path that we're using to recognize over and over the qualities of the non-deluded mind.

So, and I really mean this: when sleepiness comes up, when sense desire comes up, if we can meet it with this attitude of willingness to fully be present and understand suffering and the end of suffering in this moment, it becomes our avenue of liberation in that moment. It really does. And don't just believe me—try it the next time it comes up.

In the early days of a retreat, these five particular states tend to arise in varying degrees of strength for most anyone. But what I say about working with these states is true for any difficult state of heart or mind, and also pleasant states of heart and mind. These tend to come up really strongly in a retreat, and not always just the first day. Sometimes as the retreat goes into the third, fourth, fifth day, sense desire or aversion or restlessness might actually seem to increase. And you can wonder, what's going wrong? I thought it should be getting better, and instead it's getting worse. That's our value judgment based on the deluded mind.

I have a teacher who used to say that mindfulness is like a light. We're shining the light of awareness without discriminating on whatever's arising. So for example, when we say in the instructions, "be present with sensory experiences," we didn't say pay attention to the ones you like and pretend the ones you don't like aren't happening, or go into a fantasy in order to avoid it. I don't recall that being the instruction. It's whatever arises, you meet it with full attention. You don't stop to check out first whether it's worth attention. You just go there.

This is the non-discriminating, vast quality of mindfulness that begins to break down our unconscious suppressions. And so, as one of my teachers said, as the light grows stronger, all the snakes start to come out of their holes. That starts to happen. And it's not that something's going wrong—it's actually that awareness is getting stronger. Another happy thing to know.

I know it seems like we just keep talking about suffering, but do you notice how happy it makes us? That's some of the paradox of this practice. The stuff comes up and we go, "Oh yeah, great, another snake. Let me meet it with mindfulness."

So the challenge of our hearts, of our practice, is to begin to notice not only what state of heart and mind is present, but how we're relating to it. Because without awareness, we relate out of old habit patterns. And that's where we get caught in the cycle of unnecessary suffering.

All of these are frequent visitors. Desire and aversion particularly are deeply, deeply ingrained habits of our conditioned mind. That's what I opened with in the beginning—it tends to be our default stance, how we're going to be happy in the world. So it's important to begin to notice them.

Notice overall how we react when any of these states—sense desire, aversion, sleepiness or sloth and torpor in the lingo, restlessness and worry, or doubt—arise. There are two sort of common ways we relate when we're asleep.

One is that we're so familiar with them, we think, well, this is really who I am. They belong here. It's like a friend of mine was telling this story. He was living in a pretty ritzy area of Hollywood, one of these houses with electronic gates and surveillance. And somehow somebody got through all that and just walked in the door—a guy who looked like a homeless person, or kind of an alcoholic or something. He just walked in the door. And my friend was really shocked and said, "What are you doing here?" And the guy said, "Well, I live here." And just for a moment, my friend said, "Oh, does he?"

We kind of do that. Sense desire, aversion—welcome, make yourself at home, run the show. This is really what it's all about.

Now, the other reaction, especially in meditation when we're a little more aware, I think is maybe the most common, and it's a pretty suffering reaction.

I'll tell you a story to illustrate it. Recently, Franz and I were in southern India staying in a small ashram—a very quiet ashram, which is unusual in India. There were several rooms, maybe ten or fifteen, arranged around a central courtyard, with a few rooms just off the back.

In the central courtyard, a really old swami, an old man dressed in orange, a sadhu, was staying. They were sort of taking care of him. He spent most of the day lying on his bed or sitting on his bed in this courtyard. At some point late in the first day we were there, I was just walking by and he sat up. He had constructed for himself, out of all bits of cloth and twine and rope and I don't know what, a huge kind of—I don't know, it was sort of like a big piece of rope, about a meter long and at least as thick around as a thigh, really big and heavy. He'd constructed this out of all these bits of things, frayed on one end with a little handle on the other. I have to show you—so he would all of a sudden sit up in his bed, grab this thing, and just whack it on the floor with all his strength on this tile floor. It made an incredibly loud noise that reverberated through the whole ashram. Really, really loud. He would sit there and just whack about ten times, and then he'd lie down again. Half an hour later, he'd suddenly jump up, whack, whack, whack, and then he'd lie down again.

Finally I asked somebody who worked there, "What is he doing?" And he said, "Well, he sort of has inner visions. He thinks evil spirits are coming to disturb his meditation." I thought, I can relate to that.

That night, about every half hour all night—clearly there were a lot of evil spirits around that night—every half hour, whack, whack, whack. I was in the back. I couldn't imagine what it was like for the people who were right around the courtyard. It was incredibly loud.

So that's another way. I think a lot of us might engage in that. Sleepiness arrives—whack, whack. What's that doing here? Or maybe you actually turn it on yourself. Whack, whack. I'm so sleepy. We got really tickled. We had visions of everybody in the ashram picking up this thing at the start and just traveling from room to room, whack, whack, whack, all the way down.

I do not recommend that. That is not really the way of practice. But it is one we can easily fall into. The evil spirits have come to disturb my meditation, and if I can get rid of them, then it'll be hunky-dory. Then mindfulness can really get going. Then I can find some peace.

Our challenge is actually to shift our relationship from such total welcoming that we identify completely with the state—not into total hatred and pushing it away—but to shift the energy into the power of recognition, of full presence with it just as it is. Without hating, without identifying, without getting lost in all the stories and the past and the future, but simply recognizing what's happening in the moment. This is desire. This is aversion. What is the experience of it as it's happening right now? So that all the energy comes into awareness and presence rather than feeding reactivity, fear, and clinging.

I want to talk a little bit about helping us recognize and be present with each of these five energies. Hindrances is the classical translation of this grouping of five, but I think it's a little bit unfortunate because it has such a negative connotation. If you hear "hindrances," the next thought is, well, if they're hindrances, let's get rid of them—and we're caught in the whacking again.

But I read a definition once that described them as emotional and intellectual veils that obscure the nature of mind when we're not aware of them. That's different from being intrinsically a hindrance. When we're not aware of the presence of these states, they function as veils that obscure the pure nature of mind, our intrinsic wholeness. When we are aware of them, they're just what they are. No problem. Really no problem. And that's something we can each experience over and over again until you really know and trust that for yourself.

So to talk a little bit about each one.

Sense desire—that's fairly obvious what it is. I want this. I want that. I want a better cushion. I want something different for lunch. I want the weather to change. I want the person next to me to stop moving. I want something different to happen in the sitting. I want the person leading metta not to be leading it. I want metta now instead of later. I want a new job—whatever, whatever.

As one friend of mine said very succinctly: I want, I need, therefore I am. It feels like that a lot of the time. Things are a little boring—let's go into a fantasy. Let's whip up desire, in fact, if things get peaceful. And this includes meditative experiences. It includes wanting your breath to be different, wanting to be concentrated, wanting anything at all.

It's really fascinating when we begin to shift our attention from being caught up in the content of desire, which is mostly what we do. We focus on what I want, how can I get it, how much better everything will be once I do get it. Isn't it amazing how, underneath each thing we want—unspoken, because if we really looked at it, it wouldn't

make sense—there's a sense that if I get this, everything's going to be okay. I'm going to be happy. This is going to do it for me. Whether it's a rice cake or having a baby—whatever it is, in that moment, they're equally important. Because it's not the thing; it's the desire.

And it's so seductive. We get entranced by it. We think it's leading us into the happy, perfect world. But what is it actually leading us into? More desire. It feeds on itself. It seduces us into wanting more because, obviously, either we don't get the thing and we're miserable, or we do get it and the rice cake is gone—and then what? If only I would have put peanut butter. Oh, but there's apple butter and I already ate my rice cake. I could have had apple butter on it. Now what am I going to do? It's just endless.

So what we do with our attention is simply begin to notice the presence of desire itself. Take the attention off the object of the desire and put it onto the experience of desire in the moment you're experiencing it. This is the power of naming, of recognition—the power of mindfulness. It begins to break the spell, because somewhere in there, it's almost as if we unwittingly think desire is pleasant. But if you stop and really tune into desire, I personally don't find it so pleasant.

Try an experiment the next time strong desire comes up while you're sitting or walking. Just keep sitting or walking. The Buddha used to say he'd do this with fear, but you can do it with desire. When strong desire comes up, just stay in whatever posture you're in when it arises. Keep staying in that posture and keep paying attention to the experience of desire itself until it goes away. I promise it will go away. I don't promise how long it will take. I don't promise it won't come back. But it will go away, because everything goes away eventually.

And what do you begin to discover when you bring your attention to the experience of desire in the moment it's happening? I'm going to share some things, but I really want you to look for yourself. Don't believe me. Just take what I say as an incentive to explore it for yourself.

Notice what it's like in a moment when you're just present—sitting, walking, eating, whatever—no desire, and boom, desire arises. "I need seconds." There's that scraping of the spoons on the bottom of the pan, and what if there's no seconds? "I need seconds right now."

Notice the difference first. It's like the presence of desire shatters our essential peace. We're just at ease, present with whatever's happening, and suddenly, "I've got to have seconds." Don't focus on the seconds. Don't judge yourself for the desire. Just feel it. Tune into your body. Use your physical experiences, as Gil was saying this morning, to ground in the experience. What does it feel like?

For me, desire is really an unpleasant experience. It's almost as if internally I'm clutching, I'm tight, I'm clenching, I'm completely shut off in a way. So that's the thing desire does—it creates a sense of separation. Whereas before there was an essential peace, a feeling of wholeness that I wasn't really aware of, the moment there's desire, there's me separated from what I want, separated from everyone else who's actually become my enemy if they might get to the seconds before I do. There's a real strong sense of separation and neediness that's set up.

And it seems to us that if we can satisfy the desire, then the neediness is gone. Again we're complete. Again we're whole. But it's tricky, because it's the desire itself that's setting up that sense of incompleteness, that sense of neediness, that sense of needing something to fill up the space so I can experience essential completeness.

So play with staying in the posture and notice. Just feel desire—tightness, burning, burning, tightness. Keep noting. Just hang with it. See what happens. Notice as it fades. And keep noticing after it fades, because often what you'll find is, "Ah, peace." And that's really so often what we wanted all along. If we get the thing, there's this sense of peace, this sense of presence, this sense of completeness again. But it's because the desire goes away, not so much that we get the thing. We're no longer caught in the desire.

Once we're just with the experience of desire as an experience, not something that has to drive us, then it's okay. We don't have to be afraid of it. It's going to come up. Sense desire comes. We don't have to let it run us.

So that's just beginning to tune in to sense desire, to craving—to see how, if we're not aware of it, it actually feeds and sustains itself and keeps us moving from this sense of inadequacy, of not-enoughness, of incompletion. Whereas all we have to do is bring our attention to it and we're home again.

It doesn't mean we never go eat. It doesn't mean we never go do anything. But it doesn't have to be from this thirst. As Gil translated *taṇhā* last night—this thirst, "I've got to have this or I'm going to die." So sure, the bell rings for lunch, you're hungry, you

go to eat. That's normal. That's not the same kind of sense desire as this thirst. You're tired at night, you're sleepy, you want to go sleep. Fine. That's fine. It's not this thirst that runs us.

So that's the sense desire of the hindrance. And that's what we can really begin to tune into—the desire itself, rather than the object desires.

And it's the same for the opposite, so-called opposite—the second of these states of mind that obscure our intrinsic completeness when we're not aware of them. That's the one called aversion, which has a broad range of gradations of emotion that go along with it. There's your basic, "I don't like anything or anybody."

which can arise very easily at this stage of a retreat. And if you don't recognize it, you really get caught in the story about what's wrong with each person who happens to move through your field of perception. With this many people, you can really get into it.

So there's that basic irritability. But aversion can also extend to the level of murderous rage. It includes self-judgment. It's also slight irritation. It's also boredom. And it's also fear. The reason all of these can be grouped together under the big label of aversion is because the function of aversion in one moment of experience—the way it works, the way you can notice it when you're paying attention—is that it always arises in response to something unpleasant that's happening in your experience right now.

Take the cold, for example. The physical sensation of cold that you might experience as unpleasant—you may not even be aware of that. Aversion functions as the attention of the mind pulling back from that, disconnecting from it, so that the experience is one of disconnection. Literally, your awareness, your attention, is not meeting what's happening. We pull back from the cold, and into that space can rush all the forms of reactivity—from fear: "What's going to happen? This is only the third day and it's going to get worse. I've used up all my clothes. When are they going to do the laundry? Where am I going to get more blankets? What about the next retreat? There's even more people..." And it just goes on. Or it can turn outward into real anger and rage, usually at people, because we know getting angry at the weather is kind of useless. But if we get mad at somebody, maybe that would do something.

Even boredom is a slight pulling away. We're bored because we're not really connected with what's happening. If you've had the experience where sometimes the breath is just fascinating and other times it's really boring, do you think the breath is that different those different times? It's really the quality of connection of attention.

So all these forms of aversion are a pulling away. And because we really aren't alive, embodied, connected in our life, the experience of being separate, alienated, disconnected gets stronger. Irritation and anger and aversion have a way, when unrecognized, of really feeding on themselves. The cold is unpleasant, and we get irritated. Actually, the experience of irritation itself is unpleasant. So we don't really want to know that, and we get more irritated. Before we know it, sense experiences happen that we're not even aware are happening. We react to that, and it just goes in a really long chain.

Franz told me a story once about how we can get caught in this chain of reactivity and anger if we're not aware of it. He was at Universal Studios or some big theme park where it's always crowded, waiting in line at a fast food place for coffee. Everyone had been waiting for a while. The man in front of him was very impatient, had clearly been waiting and didn't want to be waiting. You know how that is—he was sort of hassling the clerk, who was harried and just trying to serve people their coffee. I don't know exactly what Franz said, but it was something meant to be soothing and relaxing. Now, you know how it is when you're irritated and some stranger comes up and says something soothing and relaxing. With what an open heart we tend to greet that kind of thing. And that's about how it was greeted. The guy stormed out.

Franz got his coffee, walked out. He said as he walked out—this was maybe five minutes later—the man was across the way at the tables, holding his cup of coffee. Just the sight of Franz... he got so agitated that he spilled his coffee.

That's the way it is when we're not aware. It's as if aversion—the same with desire—becomes a filter, a veil through which we're viewing all of our perceptions, so that just the sight of this person walking out is seen as an irritating perception.

So our practice is, rather than letting ourselves be caught in this and spending the day or the retreat judging everybody and everything—and then turning around and judging yourself for judging everybody else—to notice: "Oh, I think aversion might be arising in my mind and heart in this moment. Let me bring my attention to it."

This is really a powerful shift. This is what the practice is about. It's not necessarily pleasant, but this is the transformative movement—from being caught in the suffering to seeing that the cause of suffering is the way we're relating to the experience. We don't have to say that if we see it, the aversion goes away. But we can tune in, really look at what's happening, rather than believing the veil of aversion.

There are two ways I'd like to suggest for doing this. One is—and this is before you're in really murderous rage—

Because at that point, subtlety isn't going to cut it. But in the beginning, when you're in that state where you notice that everyone who comes by just seems a little schlumpy today, everyone just seems a little more rude and a little less mindful than usual—after a while, you start to notice aversion.

The first step is to bring your mindful awareness with wise attention. Recognize that aversion is present, but come back to the immediate sense experience, because what's happening is we're not meeting it directly. If you meet the experience directly, then often that mindful awareness cuts through the field of aversion and we're just present again.

A really simple example. A couple of years ago, a woman was on a long retreat at IMS in Barre, where I was teaching. She was sitting in the front row. She told me this story after it was over. She said there was some repetitive noise in the hall—I think it was the ticking of the little clock we had. It's really quiet, but when everything gets very still, you can start to hear it. And she said this repetitive sound was driving her crazy. She was just getting lost in anger every sitting. It was ruining her concentration.

We kept talking about mindfulness, wise attention. When you hear a sound, bring your attention to the sound. When you feel a sensation, bring your attention to the sensation. You notice anger, bring your attention to the sensations of anger in your body. So after about four or five days, she said, "Oh! I get it. They're saying when you hear a sound, bring your attention to the sound. Let me try that."

Which she did, because what aversion does is prevent you from actually meeting the sound that's triggering the aversion. We hate it. We pull back. We think somehow we can keep ourselves separate from this unpleasant experience. And we get lost in it instead. So when she brought her attention right to the sound, there was hearing. There was the sound. That was it. It was like a light bulb going off. She said, "Oh. There was no problem. The sound wasn't bothering my concentration. My mind was bothering my concentration. The sound is just a sound."

As Ajahn Chah used to say, the sound doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound. The sound is just happening. The sound could be a sight. It could be somebody walking by. It could be an unpleasant physical experience. It could be the cold.

So the first way of meeting the aversion head-on is to bring our attention into the actual sensory experience, see what it actually is, as distinct from all the hoo-ha about it. And this can be amazingly powerful.

This is from Phil Jackson, the coach of the Chicago Bulls basketball team. He's a meditator:

"Little by little, with regular practice, you start to discriminate the basic sensory events from your reactions to them. Eventually, you can begin to experience a point of stillness within. As the stillness becomes more stable, more accessible, you tend to identify less with fleeting thoughts and feelings, such as fear, anger, or pain, and experience a state of inner harmony regardless of changing circumstances. For me, meditation is a tool that allows me to stay calm and centered—well, most of the time—during the stressful highs and lows of basketball and life outside the arena."

This is just to show you don't have to be passive. He continues: "During games, I often get agitated by bad calls. But years of meditation practice have taught me how to find that still point within so that I can argue passionately with the refs without being overwhelmed by anger."

It's possible. That's what's so great about being able to bring mindfulness to the actual experiences. We have, in that point, a moment of choice of how to respond—with both desire and aversion.

Without being driven, you see the state, you come to the actual sense experience, and there's a moment of trust. Yes, I think I will go get that, but it's not out of thirst. Yes, I will argue passionately with a ref, but I don't hate his guts. There's a difference.

So that's the skillful means when we even have a clue what the sensory experience is that's eliciting our aversive response. Often, though, it's way down the road and you have no idea what triggered it. You just know that there's really strong irritation, anger, or fear. At that point, the practice becomes recognizing and bringing our awareness into—using the body again—the state of anger, fear, or irritation itself. As distinct from all the thoughts and stories and past and future and "what if." Feel it, just as with desire. Bring your attention into your body. Let yourself burn with anger if that's what's happening. Let yourself feel the contractions, the palpitations, the heat. Use the noting as a way to keep your attention moving into the actual experience.

This is the middle way of our Buddhist practice. We're not suppressing—"Oh no, I shouldn't feel anger, I shouldn't feel desire, those are bad." We really let ourselves feel it, but with awareness. And we're not jumping on the train and letting it carry us—"Yeah, I am angry, and I have a right to be angry, and that person is really wrong." Maybe they are. At this moment, as far as practice goes, that's not the point. The point is

to learn that we can be in the midst of anger, boredom, desire, and find that place of resting at ease that does not have to deny or fear the experience. It's wonderful to know that you don't have to be afraid of anger because you don't have to be driven by it.

It's not always neat and tidy here in the meditation. I've done plenty of what I call stomping meditation when I'm really angry. It's not "lifting, moving, placing... anger." It's not "in, out... anger." It's truly stomping—anger, anger! I'm so angry! I hate everything and everybody! Just let it move. But there's still mindfulness there. It's not that I'm going out and telling everybody why I hate them and what's wrong with them. I'm just letting myself be with the anger. And it shifts. It moves. You just see that it's strong energy. We don't have to suppress that energy. It can actually transform through the power of awareness and become available for our practice.

It's also nice to begin to experience the presence of aversion, judgment, irritation, frustration—rather than as a problem—as a signal. When I start to experience that as a signal: "Ah, what's going on right now that I'm actually trying not to acknowledge?" And the anger says that it's unpleasant, and what I'm trying not to acknowledge is for sure going to be unpleasant. But once I really meet it with awareness, there's this sense of relief. "Oh, okay. It's loneliness. It's this aching emptiness." But touching it with awareness, I can be here. Once again, I'm whole. I don't have to build up the structure of fear and avoidance in order not to feel something. That's actually much more exhausting.

So desire, sense desire, aversion in all its phases—recognizing, not being afraid of it, but coming into feeling it as it's manifesting here and now. Use your body to ground yourself rather than getting into the stories. Come into the sense experience that's eliciting the desire, that's eliciting the aversion. And again, you're present in that moment, just resting at ease in whatever's arising.

I talk the most about those two because they're much more than just states that arise early in a retreat. Desire and aversion—along with confusion, delusion, not knowing what's what—are really the underpinnings of our continuing to cycle in states of suffering. So they're really important to explore. And they're not going to just go away once you see them. Don't worry about that.

Make friends with them. Not like a friend of mine—oh, I should say this. This is from a friend from Massachusetts who likes to talk about this kind of, you could call it, deluded compassion. You know, "I should be nice to myself," or sort of massaging the defilements. That's not what I mean.

So when I say make friends with anger, it's not like, "Yeah, come on, let's just be angry whenever we want." Make friends in the sense that Thich Nhat Hanh talks about: sponsor your anger with mindfulness. It's really lovely. The important thing is to bring out awareness of your anger in order to sponsor it. Then the anger is no longer alone—it is with your mindfulness.

"Anger is like a closed flower in the morning. As the sun shines on the flower, the flower will bloom because the sunlight penetrates deeply into the flower. Mindfulness is like that. If you keep breathing and being mindful and sponsoring your anger, mindfulness particles will infiltrate your anger." You didn't know it was little particles, photons. "When sunshine penetrates a flower, the flower cannot resist. It has to open itself and show its heart to the sun. If you keep breathing in your anger, shining your compassion and understanding on it, your anger will soon crack and you will be able to look into its depths and see its roots."

And once we begin to see the roots of a particular anger, it shifts. It doesn't have power over us anymore, but we don't have to hate it and fear it. The power, the transformative power of mindfulness.

So just a word about the other three: sloth and torpor—sleepiness—and worry and restlessness, and doubt. The trick is working with skillful means. Skillful means is really a way of discovering what helps us bring a kind and balanced awareness to these states, not getting lost in them but also not hating them and trying to get rid of them.

With sleepiness, I find this particularly challenging and delicate because we have all kinds of ways to help us be more aware when sleepiness arises. Skillful means really comes from your intention. For example, as I said the other day, if you're really sleepy, stand up. If that comes from the intention to be as aware as possible and feel the state of sleepiness, fine. But the same action can come from the intention of, "I really hate this. It shows how bad I am. I better stand up and get rid of it." It looks the same, but you're really cultivating aversion. So skillful means is something we all play with—how to bring in the most skillful way to be present, not out of aversion, but out of a commitment to being awake.

Being awake sometimes means being awake to the experience of sleepiness. I personally have spent uncounted hours of my life working with being aware in the state of sleepiness. It's not easy, but it is possible. And I've actually come to have a deep knowing that it's worth it.

For years, every night on retreat at eight o'clock, I'd be just falling out of the chair, falling off the cushion, and the mind goes, "What is the use of this? This is totally stupid. If I would just go sleep, then I'd feel better." At some point there definitely is a point at night when you're really tired and need to go to sleep. But eight o'clock wasn't really it—that was a little early.

It took me years to see that actually, through that period, there would be moments of sleepiness and moments I could bring my attention there, that the mindfulness and the concentration and the equanimity were strengthening through that, that each day it was growing stronger. Even though in the sleepiness you don't get the goodies—you don't feel like it's so clear, it's not fulfilling—still those things are developing. So it's really important just to notice that, to be willing to at least open to exploring the state of sleepiness before you just check out.

Now, early in a retreat it's true that most of us come in from being busy. This is such a change that in the early days, for many people, there's a real physical and emotional exhaustion when a little extra sleep or an occasional nap really helps. You don't have to torment yourself.

But if I pay attention when I take the nap and when I wake up—if I wake up and I'm really feeling refreshed, present, alert, more balanced—then it was helpful. And suddenly there comes a day when I wake up from the nap and I'm actually feeling worse, more out of it, more spaced out. I realize, "Oh, I need more sleep." No, I don't need more sleep. I need *less* sleep. I was actually just sleeping out of fear rather than out of tiredness.

One thing on retreat: don't worry about "I better sleep now in case I'm sleepy later." What do you have to do later? Any time of day or night, we're not going to come looking for you. You can go take a nap. So it's really about paying attention to what's happening right now.

With sleepiness, one thing about it is we take it so personally. Gil was saying in his story last night—that was perfect. He's such a horrible yogi because he got up at two and was sleepy at four in the afternoon. And it's pathetic how long it takes us to say, "Oh yeah, duh, it's normal I would be sleepy now." It's taken me years to accept that my particular energy field runs low and the first three weeks of a retreat I'm going to have a lot of sloth and torpor. It's just how it is. This is for me—I'm lower than any of you, energetically. And then all of a sudden it goes. For you it's probably only two days. But the sleepiness isn't personal.

Sometimes it's actually an imbalance of energy. For some people, the sitting is very calming and concentrating—these are calming factors—while walking brings up energy. Sometimes people get the feeling that the sitting is really nice, really calm, they feel really present, really tuned into the breath, and suddenly they're asleep. They don't know how that happened because they were really concentrated. It's because there's an imbalance of concentration and energy. At that point, we would say, "I don't care how nice and calm your sitting is. Get up and walk." Because we need to balance the calming factors with energy. Walking, or using the noting a little more clearly—these take effort, but they bring energy.

Now, one thing about sloth and torpor: if you think you're not in sloth and torpor and the idea comes into your mind, "Maybe I could stand up, maybe I could note more vigorously," and your mind goes, "No, I don't need to do that"—our teacher Sayadaw U Pandita used to say sloth and torpor hates effort. So that's a sign. Something like, "I could stand up." "Nah, I don't need to do that. I'll just watch it." Stand up.

But you can get interested in the experience of sleepiness itself rather than hating it. That's another thing I've done. I spent years actually not nodding when I'm really sleepy because I was completely filled with the tension of trying not to be sleepy, of hating the sleepiness. This is tremendous suffering and completely unnecessary. It's just a state of body and mind that comes and goes. Recognize it. Bring your attention, maybe not to the breath, but to the sensations of sleepiness itself with awareness. And when that's not possible, open your eyes. Stand up. Do more walking. If you're having real sleepiness, do more walking than sitting for a while until the energy comes into balance.

But don't take it personally. Even sometimes later in a retreat, sleepiness comes up and you know you're not really tired. It can function as a kind of resistance to something that's about to emerge. But even then, don't take it personally, because we're not doing it on purpose. And you still treat the sleepiness in the same kind but attentive way.

The flip side of sleepiness—and what's so strange is sometimes you can be sleepy one minute and then restless the next—is restlessness and worry. Restlessness is the physical opposite of sleepiness: too much energy and not enough calm and concentration, where you just want to jump out of your skin, changing position every two seconds. And worry is the mental component of that.

cyclical thinking, over and over—what about this, and what about this, and what's going to happen—and then it starts over again. It's an extremely unpleasant state. Recognizing it rather than going down the road of trying to figure it out every time is very helpful.

With energetic restlessness, sometimes it's helpful to get really big with your attention. Rather than trying to focus in on little sensations—that's like taking all this big energy and trying to put it in a little box. It feels like it's going to explode. Let your awareness get bigger than the room, as big as the desert. In fact, walk out in the desert and let that be your awareness, and just let all the energy move in that big space. It's not such a problem. If you're sitting and it's unbearable, stand up again and let your awareness get really big.

With the worrying mind, sometimes the opposite helps. Just don't pay attention to those thoughts. They're there—don't try to make them go away. But really see if you can get interested in your breath, sometimes counting one to ten, and whenever you lose track, starting over again at one. You're not trying to get anywhere; it's just a way to corral the energy. What that does is raise the level of concentration and calm, which can then balance the energy. So that might be helpful. And again, recognizing, not taking it personally.

The last, and perhaps most interesting and elusive, is doubt. Now, doubt is obvious when it takes the form of: "What am I doing here? These guys up there don't know what they're talking about. This is the stupidest thing I ever did in my life." Or: "I can't do this. Everyone else is doing so great, and I am failing miserably." All those thoughts.

Doubt, though, almost always arises when we don't like what's happening. Let's just notice that. Have you ever felt doubt in the moments when you're taking a step and the world is beautiful and you're so present? Do you doubt at that moment? Not usually. Usually it arises with one or more of the other hindrances. And that's kind of the downside—they can come together. We don't always get them one at a time.

So doubt is obvious in those forms of thoughts: I can't do this, they can't do this, nobody can do this, the Buddha couldn't even do it. But another form of doubt that we sometimes don't recognize is analytical thinking. "Well, Gil said this, Carol said this, Jack said this—they're all a little different. Now I wonder if I tried this, would that be better? If I tried that? What about that Tibetan teaching? Let me really think, maybe I can figure out how this works and then I could apply it." And it seems like we're really thinking about practice in a useful way. But if you notice what's happening after a while, you haven't felt the breath, you haven't felt your body, it's been forty-five minutes and

you're getting completely disconnected from experience. It feels like you're thinking about practice, but it's just spinning. This is also doubt, and this is a way we can get fooled.

I want to say also about doubt: it doesn't mean suspending our discriminating wisdom. Because the antidote to doubt is to just do it—connect your attention to something that's happening now. Sustained attention is the antidote to doubt. So when you're spinning in all these thoughts—"I can't do it, no, no, no"—just feel the breath. Just feel a sensation in your body. And then notice the next sensation. Notice the next breath. And pretty soon, as the attention continues to be sustained, the doubt is gone.

Now, I want to say that doesn't mean we don't have discriminating wisdom, because it's something we could get up here and say: "Just do it. Don't have any conflicting thoughts about it."

You've got to believe everything we say. You don't. As the Buddha says—and I think there was a quote on the first night that was so beautiful—he said, don't believe everything I say. Try it and see for yourself.

Now, the trick is we've got to try it. And thinking about it is not the same as trying it. So really bring your attention, connect, do the practice. And at the end of the retreat, yes, give yourself space to really evaluate. Notice how it affects your life. See if it's useful for you. See if it's appropriate for you. Don't just believe it—but you'll never know if you don't do it.

You might in the middle need to take a few moments to evaluate, but I can tell you that in the middle of a retreat, you really can't tell what's going on. Even in the middle of our own retreat, we can't tell what's going on, because you don't really have the whole picture. Each thing that's happening is looming so large that you can't really evaluate in the big picture. If you're really filled with doubt, come talk to one of us. We won't say "just do it." We'll let you talk about it. But the antidote is sustained attention. Try that, noticing you can evaluate later.

So these are the five: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness and worry, doubt. Recognize them, bring kind attention, be willing to be in the midst of them without fear and without needing to jump on the train. And each one, really, in the moment that we can meet it that way, becomes in that moment the avenue to liberating understanding.

From Pema Chödrön: Without the hindrances, would the Buddha have awakened? Would he have attained enlightenment without them? Weren't they his best friends, since they showed him who he was and what was true? Meaning he wasn't them, and

he had to really look at them to see that. All the hindrances point the way to being completely awake and alive by letting go. When we wake up, we can live fully without seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. We can let ourselves feel our emotions as hot or cold, vibrating or smooth, instead of using our emotions to keep ourselves ignorant and confused. We can give up on being perfect and instead experience each moment to its fullest.

And as Dōgen said, if you cannot find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?

CHAPTER 303

The Five Hindrances

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa) that commonly arise during meditation practice: sensual desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (vyāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). She frames these challenging mental states not as obstacles to be fought, but as veils that temporarily obscure our innate clarity and peace—much like clouds passing before an ever-shining sun.

Drawing on teachings from the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Korean Zen master Chinul, Carol emphasizes that our original nature is "unstained, whole and complete in itself." She offers detailed practical instructions for working with each hindrance: recognizing and naming the experience without judgment, turning mindful attention to its physical and mental manifestations, and allowing it to arise and pass without suppression or indulgence. Through a personal example of working with fear, she demonstrates how direct, curious attention can transform difficulty into an avenue for clarity.

This talk provides both newcomers and experienced practitioners with essential tools for retreat practice and daily life. Carol's teaching reveals how the very presence of these "torments of the heart" can become catalysts for awakening—the ordinary pain of life being sufficient for enlightenment when met with wisdom and compassionate presence.

In the beginning of a retreat, as all students know and as new ones have surely discovered by now, there are several very strong, very familiar emotional energies that arise in our experience. Although they're impermanent, our experience doesn't always seem to indicate that—especially in the early days.

These five emotions or energies are what the Buddha called the five hindrances, and I want to talk about them tonight. I'll name them briefly and then put them in a larger context of our practice before speaking about each one specifically.

These five very powerful and very common energies can take over our experience, especially in the first days of a retreat. The first is the energy of wanting, of craving something. The flip side of that is aversion—anger, hatred, rage, or fear. The third one, which has been mentioned a lot already here, is sleepiness. The formal English name is

sloth and torpor, which is just so perfect. The fourth energy is that of restlessness: physical restlessness and mental agitation or worry. And the fifth one, which usually comes along with any of the others, is doubt.

Before I go into them specifically, I'd like to talk about the larger context of why we are here. What's the purpose of meditation? And basically, why do we come and sit and walk in order, it seems, to experience the most unpleasant and difficult inner circumstances possible? What's the point?

The Dalai Lama said once, at a conference I attended, that it's crucial to investigate what the true nature of happiness is, what the true source of peace is, so that we can develop a peace that will last. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. Peace must first be discovered within ourselves, and then gradually it will expand to include our family, our community, and the whole planet.

To me, that's the very real purpose of this practice of meditation: to discover the fact that peace is already here within ourselves, within our experience at the present moment. Peace is a manifestation of our true nature, from which we're never separated. But somehow, somewhere, we don't know how to recognize this. We seem to have lost touch with it. We don't know how to pay attention in the correct way to recognize what is true. We keep getting distracted, confused. We look in the wrong place, identify with the wrong things.

This is from Chinul, who was the person who brought Zen to Korea. He says: "It's tragic. People do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddhas. They do not recognize that their own natures are the true Dharma. They want to search for the Dharma, yet they still look far away for holy ones. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds. I hope that you who cultivate the path will never search outside. The nature of the mind of the heart is unstained. It is originally whole and complete in itself."

That's us he's talking about—that the original state of our mind and heart is unstained, whole and complete in itself.

There are many different ways to talk about how we lose sight of this completeness, why we don't recognize our unstained nature and instead feel like we're in an ongoing struggle with sleep or anger or desire. One simile for how this happens—it's rather simplistic, but it helps me put my experience in perspective—is to think of our original, unstained nature as the sun, which all day, every day, also at night, is shining brightly.

Various clouds at various times come over. Sometimes they're really wispy and we sort of see through them; they're no problem. Sometimes they're really thick and dark and strong, and we get so affected by the clouds, so involved in reacting to them, that we completely forget the sun is still shining. Even if we don't see the sun directly, there's still the evidence of it in the fact that there's light, that we can see things. But for us, it's just this struggle. We like the clouds. We don't like the clouds. We wish they were different. We're scared they'll never go away. That becomes the limit of our experience, and we get lost in that struggle.

In a way, that's how I can relate to the experience of these five hindrances—these five particular emotions, these mental and physical experiences that arise for us frequently in our life and in our practice. Sogyal Rinpoche refers to them as emotional and intellectual veils that obscure the nature of mind.

And so I see, in a large way, our practice here, our practice of meditation, as cultivating a non-distractability of mind so that we can recognize and understand these veils, these clouds, for just what they are. We don't have to hide from them. We don't have to fear them or get lost in them. And at the same time, because we see them as they are, we also don't lose sight of the fact that the sun is still shining—that our pure nature hasn't gone anywhere.

And it doesn't mean the clouds have to go away.

The other thing that I really like about the way this process of investigation—of learning to see what's really true—works is that quite literally for me, the actual presence of one of these torments of the mind or disturbances of the heart (I like those better than "hindrances" actually; they don't have to be hindrances) becomes our avenue into clarity, into understanding. When one of them is present and there is the interest, the curiosity, and the non-distractability of mind to really see it for what it is, it actually becomes our gateway. Often the presence of one of these difficult states can be the catalyst, so to speak, for a moment of awakening, of seeing clearly what's true.

I'll give a very simple example of how this can work. It's not big lights going off—it's just very ordinary experience. The other night, as I was in bed, not yet asleep, for some reason fear just arose in my experience. And that's one of the things about these energies: they're not personal. They arise due to conditions, they last for some time, and they go away. Every single one of these goes away. It really doesn't last so long when you pay attention.

So fear arose as I was lying there, and it was a really great chance, on reflection afterwards, to observe both how we get lost in these experiences—how they cloud our perception of reality—and also how the ability to be fully present with it as it is opens up a whole other possibility.

At first there was this sensation of fear, and I got lost in it. When we're lost in these emotions, they cloud how we perceive our reality until it kind of fills up the whole screen. So I was lying there with this fear, which I was aware of, and there was a sound. I jumped and immediately said, "My God, a gunshot! I wonder what's going on." It went into this hole. I didn't stop and rationally think that there wouldn't be a gunshot. It was just—and watching the waves of fear—another sound: "Oh, an explosion! What's going on?" And there would be this other big wave of fear. That's one way that we get blinded and distort what we think is true: just completely going with that energy, that emotion, and it fills up the whole world. It distorts everything we perceive. It defines our reality.

The other way that we get equally enmeshed is by resisting or denying. I could have laid there—which wasn't the way I went that time; we usually do one or the other—and said, "It's ridiculous to be afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of." Which is also taking it very personally. Someone of your age, at night, with all these people around her—and it could go on and on about what are you doing being afraid, you're just a big sissy, or it's due to my conditioning, or this happened when I was a child. We get into a whole analysis of it, which I've done at other times, and we're also equally in the grip of it. It's just as much filling up the screen.

Both of these ways of reacting—really going for it or denying and pushing it away—keep us identified. And also, incidentally, they empower the emotion so that it really starts rolling along. This is how we usually deal, because it's very deeply conditioned in us. It's a deep force of habit to either resist and deny, take it personally, or get really lost in it. And that's how we suffer. That's how we're blinded.

Now this experience was kind of going back and forth, because after the sound —"Oh, it's a gunshot! What's going on?"—I again recognized fear. And as I'll describe as we go along, what we do is take our mindful attention and simply turn it on the experience of fear itself, without analyzing, without questioning, without judging it—simply being with fear. Feel it in the body, explore the thoughts that come, but come back and just be with the fear.

And it's so interesting: just being directly with the bare experience itself, without expectation, it suddenly opens up into a really clear space. And without looking, my mind goes, "Oh, that sound was just a cabinet slamming in the next bathroom." Sud-

denly the mind would clear up: "Oh, that was just the bath water running in the bathroom in that apartment behind me." In that space of directly being with the experience, clarity opens up by itself. It comes on its own. And it's so clear it's not personal.

There's one Indian teacher who describes it—and I think it's such a perfect description of how this distorts reality—"We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." It's kind of shocking how much this is what's going on.

In seeing things just as they are, in the willingness to simply be present in the midst of experience, a natural peace can emerge even though the experience might still be going on. For instance, the nature of fear is fearful.

I mean, fear is never going to feel happy. The nature of fear is fearful. But even in the midst of that, when there's a calm presence, there can be this opening into seeing that the picture is really much, much wider. Even though fears are rising, there's a huge space of emptiness and calmness around it or within it, however you might happen to experience it.

This is just a small example of how mindfulness—the power of the attitude of okayness and patience and curiosity that James spoke of last night—can transform what is a difficult or confusing experience into one that has the potential for opening us to reconnect with what is true.

I want to speak more specifically about each of these energies, mostly to help us recognize them. Which might sound silly—we all know these states all too well. But when we're in the middle of them, perhaps the most important piece that helps with not identifying, that helps with seeing what's true, is the simple recognition of what it is that's happening.

This first one, craving, this quality of wanting. It's not just a neutral need like knowing that you're hungry and needing to go eat. And it's not so much a desire that's skillful, that's associated with intentions such as compassion—for instance, the desire to save a sick bird, motivated simply out of compassion. We're talking here about real craving. And we experience it in our lives pretty continually. Whatever it is—a new car, a better job, the perfect place to live, the perfect relationship.

What's interesting is when we come on retreat, the same quality of craving, the same degree of energy can go into trying to find the perfect sitting position. The perfect chair or the perfect zafu. It can go into scouting through the whole desert to find the best walking place so that your walking period is really pristine and clear. And we can suffer enormously. It doesn't matter what the object is. It's this quality of obsessive craving.

Our tendency to get lost in this is so strong that usually what we do is project it out into the environment, into the object, so that we become completely absorbed in it. "If only the weather were different, everything would be okay." Well, the weather changed today. How long was everything okay? It just isn't where peace lies.

In our continuing to project the energy out and look to different objects to give us that peace, we just keep on going. Okay, now it's warm, but something else comes up. Perhaps it gets too warm, or perhaps the food wasn't right today, or perhaps you wish you'd brought some different kind of clothes. On and on and on. It's endless. This quality of craving is endless when we don't stop and look at the energy of desire itself.

It's really a kind of suffering because we feel so discontented, so much needing something that isn't here. And it's this constant looking outside for peace that keeps us from seeing that peace is right here all the time.

Craving is really a very key part of the Buddha's teaching. It's one of the linchpins of how our ignorance is perpetuated day to day. So I could talk on and on about this. I'm just introducing it very lightly here.

One yogi said at a retreat, commenting on the endless quality of craving—she got so fed up with just seeing it arise over and over—she said she decided she'd try and satisfy every craving that came up and see if that wore it out. She came in sheepishly a few days later and said, "Well, it only got worse. It didn't help at all."

When we are caught in it here, it might take us some time to recognize. But at some point, after we've gone through "if only I had this, if only I had that, if only this were different," suddenly—oh, this is desire. This is craving. This is a very key moment, this point of recognition, of being able to name what it is that's actually happening.

Craving is an actual experience in the moment. Being able to take the attention, the mindfulness, and turn it onto the craving itself—this is really the key tool of mindfulness, one of the key things we're learning how to cultivate here in this practice. It's really so for anything that's going on: learning how to give bare attention to the experience.

You're going desire after desire, and there's something subtly pleasant about desire when we're not paying attention. Notice how you can get into a food fantasy, say, and go on and on, and it feels really pleasant—much more pleasant than sitting here and being with the breath. But when you wake up and here you are again, what's the actual experience? Did that bring you ultimately more pleasure? Or does it make everything else more unsatisfactory?

So anyway, when you notice that desire is happening, naming is extremely helpful. Use this soft mental label: "desire, desire, desire," and keep on labeling very softly for as long as it's there. Most of the attention then being—you're not taking a sledgehammer and going, "DESIRE, DESIRE!" You're simply acknowledging in a very non-judgmental way that desire is what's present right now. That's all. There's no shame, there's no judgment. It's simply an arising energy. So it's very soft.

And then take your attention and explore the experience itself. For instance, there's a kind of quality of desire in the mind, the emotional quality. And then what I find for myself—by far the most helpful way to stay grounded in the actual experience of desire—is to turn the attention onto the physical manifestation of it. Explore: what does desire feel like? Sitting here, not thinking about what I want, not getting into the story, but turning around and feeling desire. When I feel this, I feel a kind of tightness, a constriction, a pressure, a heaviness, almost a kind of leaning forward. You can change the note at that time from "desire" to "heaviness," "constriction," "tightness," "burning." Very simple. Very direct experience. It's not complicated. Really with an air of curiosity: Well, what is desire? If it runs so much of my life, why can't I explore it and see what this thing is?

One thing you might discover—actually, I'm pretty sure you'll discover it—is that the actual state of desire itself is not so pleasant. This kind of yearning is physically unpleasant for me, this yearning for something else. It's rather unpleasant. And we begin to see why it is that we get so intent on achieving the object of the desire. Because what happens when we get that? Ah, peace. Everything's okay.

When you're noticing and being mindful of desire, just staying with it, staying with it, letting it do whatever it does without suppressing it but without feeding it by going and getting something—what do we find? Suddenly, at some point, without doing anything other than being with it, the desire goes away. And it might be ever so briefly, but notice the experience: when the desire is gone, it's just the same as if you'd gotten what you wanted. It's "ah, peace." The desire is not present.

It's kind of a clue that we see that what we're really desiring isn't so much whatever it is out there, because that can keep being replaced with something else. It's somehow the sense of completeness that we yearn for. The sense of peace. The sense of unity, of oneness. And that's already here. That's already here. Turning our attention onto the process of desire—it's really the process of desire that is one of the things that fools us. One of the things that keeps us looking away from what's already here and always true.

Part of why we cultivate attention to the breath is simply to develop enough focus and non-distractibility of mind and heart, of attention, to be able to stay with a more complicated and difficult experience like desire and see it for just what it is. It's really fascinating, the process. And it might sound complex, but we'll all have plenty of time to explore it and to see how it works and just what the experience of desire is for you. Don't take my word for it. Really look and see for yourself.

The second torment of the heart, or hindrance so to speak, is the flip side of desire. It runs a whole range. It stems from wanting to be separated from what is unpleasant, just as desire is wanting to come together with what we experience as pleasant. Aversion has a whole range from mild dislike, a kind of irritation or annoyance, to real anger, to uncontrollable rage. It also includes boredom, which is a sort of slight aversion to what's going on and an out-of-touchness with what's going on. And it also includes fear, which is a kind of retreating aversion—whereas anger is going outward, fear is pulling back.

When we begin to see how aversion manifests, or anger or fear, in our experience, it's pretty obvious that it's unpleasant. Anger especially is a kind of burning for me in the heart, and it leaves an impression, a sort of physical impression in my being, even long after it's passed on.

Again, when we're not noticing the presence of the energy of anger or fear or aversion itself, it tends—one moment of aversion tends to condition the next—so that it starts really spiraling in a way that it can get out of control, really just seems so huge. Or again, we can project it outwards onto our experience. Where what's really happening is just the arising of aversion in the mind, what we experience is that everything that comes into our awareness is disgusting and aversive.

And if we really think that's true, it leads to a lot of suffering.

I know one retreat I was on, I saw this very clearly. I was sitting in the dining room, and this is what's so tricky—I thought I was really calm and clear. And yet somehow everyone who walked by was sloppy or unmindful or making a lot of noise or wearing a stupid outfit or showing off their slow walking or something. And these were friends of mine. I knew all these people. It took ten or fifteen minutes of this before I saw, "Oh, I guess this is aversion."

At that point, the willingness to shift attention from what was wrong with everybody who came by to the experience of aversion itself—in some ways it's a huge relief just to know what's really going on. It isn't pleasant. Again, as with desire, the experience of anger and aversion in our own mental and physical process isn't pleasant. And it's easy

to see why we tend to go with the outer projections of it. This is not to deny that things can happen that are really off, or that people do things that are genuinely harmful. But it's still important to know in ourselves what the experience of aversion is, what the experience of anger or fear is.

So again, it's the same—that ability to name is so powerful. It takes this experience of anger, fear, or aversion out of the realm of the magical, where it's kind of controlling everything. Like this fear I was in the other night—it could have seemed like a magical experience that turned the most mundane into the most horrific things. The naming of it as fear has a huge effect of helping us not identify with it and being in the actuality of the moment. And not take it so personally.

So when you're aware, whether it's just as anger, aversion, or fear is arising, or whether it's three days into it, it doesn't matter. The moment that you can name it is very important. And continue just naming: "This is aversion. Aversion. Anger. Anger. Anger." It doesn't matter how long. Most likely, if you're just present with it, it's not going to go on all day. It'll pass. It might come back again, but it'll pass. And it's really important to see that discontinuity—that also takes away a sense of power we can give to these states of mind.

As you're naming, turn the mindful attention onto the actual experience itself. It's very helpful to notice how it's manifesting in the body as well as in the mind. And this is a very delicate line that we're walking, a very delicate balance of not suppressing it —"I'm not angry. There's no aversion. There's no need to have aversion. Everything's fine." That doesn't help. And not really getting lost in it, indulging it, as I was when I was just blaming everybody that walked by and taking that to be true.

A very delicate line of allowing the full manifestation of the fear, the aversion, the anger in the body. "Anger. Tightness. Burning. Burning. Burning. Burning. Burning." It's okay if it's burning for fifteen minutes. It's unpleasant, but that's just what's happening. That's where we bring in the patience, the okayness, the equanimity. At some point, we start to see its true nature—that it does pass, and it isn't personal.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh on being with anger, this line of balance: "The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don't suppress it and we don't run away from it. We just breathe and hold our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. Becoming angry at your anger only doubles it and makes you suffer more. But on the other hand, if you just leave it alone, it'll become destructive and run wild. You can say and do angry things. Or if you don't say or do angry things, it will continue to destroy you inwardly. So the Buddhist practice is to recognize your anger as anger."

I like that image—we recognize it, but the recognition is a holding it in our arms with care. We don't hate it either.

This is hard for us. It's not an easy thing to do, and we'll all get lost one way or the other many, many times. This is fine. This is how we learn. Please don't set up some ideal of perfection, thinking, "I notice anger the moment it comes up and then it's all clear."

It's not like that. It's a practice. But that image of recognizing anger and cradling it in your arms really helps give me a sense of the balance involved.

When we're exploring anger, fear, desire—any of these emotions in this way—what I find is that it begins to open up a huge space around them, so that we no longer need to fear their arising. I know there have been times when I've been sitting under a tree, living in dread that aversion is going to come back. It's so pleasant now that it's gone. But learning to simply be with these energies as they are can open up a vast space where we don't have to be so controlled by them. We don't have to fear their presence so much. Instead, they can become a signal for us to pay attention and wake up.

Without this capacity, these energies really do tend to control our experience, even in small ways. A friend of mine was telling me the other day that he'd been in a fast food restaurant and had a little interaction with the man in front of him—pretty mild, but the man clearly got very irritated at him. Later, as my friend walked out past one of those stations where you put in the ketchup and cream for your coffee, he passed at a distance. This man caught sight of him, and just the sight of my friend got him so upset that he spilled his coffee. Just so irritated. What's really going on there? If we have the ability at the time of that first irritation to simply be with the anger, we don't have to keep letting it be re-energized by every sight, every sound. It might be unpleasant, but it's workable.

Sloth and torpor is the third hindrance. I know a lot of you are quite familiar with this by now. It's the falling asleep syndrome, whether you're on the zafu or walking. It's also a kind of dreamy, hypnagogic state that you can slip into—sometimes very pleasant and seductive. Often it's much easier to dream your way through the sitting, or it can even feel like a sort of clear space, much more pleasant than coming back to the breath or the body. One of our teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, describes sloth and torpor as being like congealed butter—the mind is like congealed butter, with no flexibility whatsoever. Someone said today that the experience of trying to practice with sloth and torpor is like walking through mud.

Again, recognizing its presence is the first important step. The second one that has been most helpful for me is not taking it personally. It took me years and years not to take sloth and torpor personally—as if it was somehow a sign of deep personal failing that sleepiness arose in meditation and the mind wasn't crystal clear. Saying it aloud, it sounds crazy, but I know from talking to people that I'm not the only one. I know practitioners who've gone through literally weeks of deep inner torment during a three-month course because sleepiness was arising.

So it's really interesting to look at how much we get caught by our reactions to a particular energy. What is sloth and torpor? It's an imbalance of energy. The energy we have is always going to fluctuate. We come into a retreat having been really buzzy, really tired—what do we expect? That we're going to sit down and be incredibly crystal clear? Everything is a result of conditions. Nothing exists on its own. And the conditions of most of our lives mean that in the first few days of retreat, it's almost inevitable that at some point the body is going to be really tired or the mind really sluggish. Once in a while that doesn't happen, but it's a common experience, and it's not personal.

At other times in retreat, this sleepiness or dullness of mind arises because there's an imbalance between concentration and energy. It's possible to be really concentrated, but if there's not enough energy in your system, you think you're concentrated—and you are—but the next thing you know, you're waking up, and you don't know how that happened. So it's not personal when you start to see that it's simply the way different mental factors come together in our experience.

Sometimes a real dullness or sleepiness of mind will also come about as a sort of unconscious resistance to some difficult experience that's about to surface. You can't do much about that. You don't know what it is, and you can't make it hurry along. That's not helpful.

In all of these cases, the only obvious thing to do is recognize it: "Oh yes, sleepiness, dullness." Name it with kindness, without judgment, with affection—simply noticing its presence. Then, as skillful means, there are different ways we can bring up the energy, balance the system. These methods won't always make us more alert. And if we're using skillful means but with a motivation of aversion—"I hate this sleepiness, so I'm going to really note it until it goes away"—well, once in a while that might work, because anger and aversion are actually quite energizing.

But you've just moved then from sloth and torpor to aversion, and some people actually prefer that one. We all have our favorites.

But if you can just notice the tone with which you're labeling, you can pretty soon catch on if that's your motivation. And then, as a skillful means without aversion, you can really begin to note and label and explore the experience of sleepiness itself, or dullness itself. It can actually get really interesting. How do you know that you're sleepy? What are the physical sensations of sleepiness? Try to be really accurate in labeling it and in noticing it, because that takes a little energy to do. And instead of using up your last vestiges of energy by doing it, what actually happens is it brings on more energy.

But again, Sayadaw U Pandita says that sloth and torpor hates effort. You know, the mind says, "No, if I really note this it'll just make me so much more tired." It's not like that. So when you notice you're sleepy, if you really investigate—what is it? Is this kind of heaviness? Heaviness, heaviness. You notice a kind of grittiness in the eyes maybe. Grittiness, grittiness. Dropping. Nodding, nodding. And then when you can't note anymore, you know that the mindfulness has slipped away again. That's okay. So when you wake up, even if you're only awake for two minutes of that sitting, that's still two minutes of presence. That's better than if you were sleeping the whole time. You have to kind of look at the positive side. You can tell I've spent a lot of time in sloth and torpor.

I'm being a bit silly, but actually this real investigation at times brings a real energy into the mind. The mind kind of opens up and the energy comes back. It's really quite amazing, because one of our problems with these states is that we think they're going to last forever. When you're in sloth and torpor, if you knew it was going to go away in fifteen minutes, you wouldn't really be so upset. But somehow if you look at what's the assumption underneath the aversion, the assumption is usually, "This is how I'm going to spend the rest of my life"—or at least the rest of this retreat, or even just the rest of this sitting. How about just taking things moment to moment? In this moment, exploring the actual experience of tiredness, of sleepiness—it's not so bad. It might be a little unpleasant but it's kind of interesting, just seeing it for what it is.

Now, I know that there are times when this is way beyond the pale, and the ability to even make a label of sleepiness is not there because it's way too far gone. Again, without aversion to it but simply as a way to balance the energy, all the things we've mentioned before can help. You can focus a little bit on your posture—just sit erect, not in a forced way, as someone else said today, but more subtly, feeling your spine, tuning in inside. You can open the eyes, focus them down, not looking around. I've found that light, bringing in light, somehow energizes the system. Standing up can help. Something that the Buddha spoke of in one of his discourses, although it hasn't worked for me, is

pinching your earlobes. But if the Buddha said it, it must work for some people. If I'm having a long wave of real dullness, I might tend to walk longer because it's often easier to be present in the walking.

And again, noticing how and when this state of dullness and sloth and torpor dissipates. Because it will. There's no way it's going to last forever. Often we don't notice the endings of things, or we forget, and like six hours later we remember, "Oh yeah, I was so sleepy this morning. I wonder what happened to that." So simply noticing that things end also helps us experience the fact that it's not ourselves, that it's really quite an impersonal energy.

The flip side of this is restlessness in the body—that you just can't sit still, you just want to jump out of your skin and run screaming out of the hall. Or the corollary in the mind: a spinning, circling kind of thinking that's clearly not going anywhere, but the mind is just running at the speed of light. You can't really focus on anything, can't really settle on anything. It's the most uncomfortable experience.

And again, to recognize it for what it is. It doesn't make it go away. It doesn't make it more pleasant. But it really helps us to just be with what is. In the physical realm, you might notice you're changing posture, changing posture—this is wrong and that is wrong. Suddenly to notice, "Oh, this is restlessness." What it does is really widen the frame. So instead of focusing on this particular little pain, that particular little nudge, and this particular discomfort, there's a whole wide sky of consciousness, and within it is all the experience of restlessness—coming and going, coming and going, coming and going.

If you really widen—it's almost, you can imagine doing this—widening your consciousness so that it's as wide as the sky. Within that, the restlessness can arise and pass, arise and pass. It's uncomfortable, but it can come and go. If you try to really focus down physically, you find it can increase the restlessness. Just as you find if you move and keep moving when you're restless, what happens is you get more restless. You think, "If I don't move this leg, I'm going to die." But once you move this leg, then suddenly you have to move that toe, and suddenly you have to move your shoulder, and it just kind of escalates. So sometimes just play with it. This is for physical restlessness—widening the scope and just letting it all come and go. As Jack likes to say, you know, die of restlessness. Be the first person to die of it and just see what happens. Chances are you won't die.

Now for mental agitation, this just spinning, spinning, spinning of mind—sometimes it's very helpful to simplify. Don't try and follow every thought and note every thought and get to the root of things. You're just exacerbating the restless energy of mind. It can

be very helpful to simplify. Just go back to the breath. I know all these thoughts are running around. We know they're there. Just let them run around. Go back to the breath, sometimes even counting the breath, just from one to ten, one to ten. Get very simple. This can sort of calm us down enough to be there, at least to know that that's what's going on.

Again, restlessness is another imbalance of energy. It's like way, way a lot of energy and not enough balanced with concentration and calm. This coming back to the breath, and just being simple, just counting one to ten, is bringing in focus, one-pointedness of mind, and this can help to balance this out-of-balance energy.

And the last one, a very interesting quality of mind, is that of doubt. Doubt can be experienced usually as thinking, and it often arises from too much thinking, and it leads to more thinking, and so it just escalates itself endlessly. Usually it's not that hard to recognize. We often get so caught up in the analyzing that we forget to recognize it. And it manifests just very simply as: "I can't do this. It's impossible. This is the stupidest thing. This is the wrong time. This is the wrong meditation. These are the wrong people. My back hurts too much. The weather's bad. It's just impossible." Just like that. So it's self-doubt, doubt in the meditation, doubt in whatever.

What's so insidious about doubt is that when it's present and we're caught in it, when we don't recognize it, it makes it impossible for us to actually wholeheartedly pay attention to what's happening right now. Because it just starts escalating. We don't believe in the efficacy of that. So we start trying to figure out, "Well, gee, maybe this is the wrong time. Maybe it would be better if I came next year. And it's the wrong time because I was sick two weeks ago and my energy's kind of low. Or maybe it's not. I don't know. How would I know that?" And you just start going on and on. Meanwhile, any sense of mindfulness or presence is out the window. It's very tricky.

Doubt, you'll also notice, tends to arise almost always when any one of the other hindrances is present in a strong way. So we get lost in aversion. We're having a lot of aversion, a lot of sleepiness. Almost always: "Oh, it's too much sleepiness. I can't do this. I should go home. I should never have come."

And then we're into what we call a "multiple hindrance attack." And that's usually how they come—it's rarely just one.

So with doubt, it's very important to recognize it, to name it as doubt, and to continue naming it and not get caught or sucked off into the content. And mind you, the content will be very enticing. It'll really be quite seductive.

I think one of the reasons that it can be so seductive is because noticing doubt and naming doubt and not giving into it as a hindrance is not the same thing as having to accept everything on blind faith. We are a very skeptical culture, and most of us are so taught that we're going to come to understanding through reasoning. I know for me this is very deeply engrained in an unconscious way. And so to be able to wholeheartedly say, "This is just doubt, doubt, doubt," and not somewhere get seduced into the "yeah, but"—it goes against so much of my conditioning that it's easy to get caught up.

I do want to say that recognizing doubt, continuing to note it, not getting sucked into the content is important. And it doesn't mean that you're giving up your own initiative. It doesn't mean that you have to accept everything we say, or the Buddha said, or anyone says on blind faith. One of the basic teachings of the Buddha was: don't believe anything just because I say it, or just because you hear it, but try it and see for yourself if it leads you to less suffering, if it leads you to peace.

So that's very important. But again, he said, "Try it and see for yourself." If we're spinning in analyzing, we'll never have the chance to try it. So when I'm really hooked on a particularly seductive doubt in retreat, I'll acknowledge it and say, "Okay, not now. At the end of this retreat there'll be plenty of time for reflection and for seeing how this is affecting my life." It certainly is not putting aside our own understanding. But if every time something's difficult we get caught up in analyzing it, it's just going to be tremendous suffering, and we'll never be able to simply see what's going on now.

The antidote to doubt in meditation is sustained attention. Because when doubt is going, you just can't focus. So keep on noting: doubt, doubt, doubt, doubt. And then really connect with something that's happening—your breath, a sensation in the body, another emotion, whatever else is arising next. Really notice it. Connect with it. And you might find you forgot that doubt was going on.

So these are these five energies. I know it's a lot, talking about them all like this, but the way of working with them all—aside from a few little tricks for each one—is basically this naming, this affectionate curiosity, just exploring the actual experience of it. And they really do lead us into an opening that helps us see what's true.

Mindfulness is a huge ally in this. Thich Nhat Hanh likes to talk about how a rose becomes garbage when you throw it away, but then we use the garbage to make compost and that turns into another rose. And how can you separate any of it out? I really feel in just this way, any of these energies can become a vehicle in that moment for our greater understanding, can become a vehicle for awakening to what is true—when we can name them, explore them, have some balance of equanimity with them, and let them come and go and open into what's really happening right now.

Often they'll be overwhelming. We'll get really lost and the mindfulness is not there. This is okay. These are strong habits of our mind. But more and more often you'll find that it's not so. You'll be in the middle of some kind of mental rampage of restlessness, and suddenly out of nowhere: "Oh, restlessness!" And there's a sense of just releasing—these physical sensations, mental reactions, emotional overtone, coming and going—and it changes.

Even within that, there can be the realization that this is not who we are. That there's something much vaster and always present that is not in the least bit affected, that actually is not even separate from the restlessness. We don't have to hate it so much.

I really feel like it's not a mistake that these energies come up so strongly in the beginning of practice. Because if they didn't come up, if we just came and sat in bliss the whole time—well, if it stayed like that for the rest of our life, that would be okay. Since most likely it doesn't, or won't, then the fact that these difficult energies come up is really a gift. Because how else are we going to be able to discover what they really are and that it's not who we are? How else can we discover how we get blinded by desire, by aversion, by restlessness or doubt or sleepiness? How do we get so caught in them that we get so busy fighting them that we forget that peace is accessible right now? That the sun is always shining in our heart, and that we can

contact that, that we can recognize that more and more when we don't have to fear difficult or unpleasant experiences that are arising.

I'd like to close by reading my favorite quotation from Ajahn Sumedho about working with these hindrances:

In life, wisdom arises within us when we understand the things we are experiencing here and now. You don't have to do anything special. You don't have to experience all kinds of extreme pain in order to transcend pain. The pain of your ordinary life is enough to be enlightened with.

So let's just sit together for a couple of minutes. Whatever is arising right now in your experience can be the gateway to truth—if we can simply trust that enough.

CHAPTER 304

In The Seen, There Is Only The Seen

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson guides practitioners through the fourth foundation of mindfulness—the contemplation of mental phenomena—with particular attention to how thoughts construct our sense of self and reality. Drawing on the Buddha's concise instruction to Bāhiya in the Udāna, "In the seen, there is only the seen," she illuminates how we habitually add layers of interpretation, memory, and projection onto bare sensory experience, creating suffering through our attachment to these mental constructions.

Wilson introduces the Pāli concept of papañca—the proliferation of mental projections that distort our basic perception when filtered through craving, aversion, or delusion. She offers vivid examples from her own experience, including misperceiving a lichen-covered rock as a circus tent and seeing a nurse as demonic through the veil of fear. The talk explores how attachment to views and opinions, which the Buddha identified as a major cause of suffering, freezes our experience and blocks the freshness of each moment.

Practically, Wilson encourages meditators to notice how thoughts continuously construct an identity story throughout the day, and to recognize that these self-descriptions are constantly changing rather than solid. She suggests that when suffering arises in meditation, we can ask: "What view am I holding?" The talk concludes with the liberating possibility that releasing our grip on mental constructions doesn't lead to nihilistic emptiness, but opens us to our fundamental interconnectedness and the natural arising of compassion and love.

I'd like to wish you all a happy Easter Sunday, this day of death and transformation, which is a wonderful thing to be aware of—not just on a retreat, of course, but any time in our life. To be aware of the fact that really every moment of our life is a moment of death and transformation. And that's not a scary or a sad thing. It's actually an incredible gift of being able to surrender into the newness of each moment, into the unknowability of what's going to happen next. And the only way that can happen is if we're willing to let go of whatever ideas and perceptions and concepts we've constructed about the meaning of this moment. That's not so easy.

What I want to speak about tonight is just that. We're slowly working our way in these talks through the four foundations of mindfulness. Ana spoke about awareness of aspects of the body, which is the first foundation. Jack spoke about mindfulness of feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—which is the second, and of emotions, states of

mind and heart, which is the third. Tonight I want to speak in part about the fourth foundation, which is more contents of mind, or our old friend and sometimes foe: thoughts, the process of thinking, which is really such an amazing, fantastic tool, isn't it, thought? And at the same time, when it's not a tool, when it's in charge, it's a horrific master. It's just torment. And it all comes down to our being able to bring wise attention to the experience of thought itself.

Once we understand thought as a thought, it's really no problem. So how come we're so tormented by our thought processes? Just talking to people in the last couple of days—it's not just our thought processes that torment us, but they can really do a good job of catching us up.

Beginning by just looking at thought itself: in the meditation that Jack led this morning, that sense of the vastness of mind, as vast as the sky, things, sensations, sounds, thoughts arising and passing—did you have a moment where there was just a thought coming and going like a cloud, just empty, transparent nature, nothing to it? What's the problem?

Well, all thoughts are just that transparent. There is no thought that is anything more than a thought. They're like nothing, like that rainbow the other day. Beautiful, incredible, we've got all our reactions, and it's just ephemeral. It comes with conditions, the conditions go away, and it's gone. Thought is just the same.

So how do we get at times so completely caught up in this? Mark Epstein's book, the title of it, is *Thoughts Without a Thinker*. That's all you need to know. The thoughts aren't the problem; it's the thinker that we construct out of thoughts that seems to make it a problem.

How can we relate to thoughts with wisdom, from wisdom, rather than making our meditation into some kind of goal where the fewer thoughts we have, the better, or thinking we have to change the kind of thoughts we have? Or don't you have those certain thoughts that you're really afraid to have come up? It's like, "Oh no, anything rather than that thought. I can't bear the road it's going to take me down." But it's not the thought. It's all the constructions around it.

This is another really important thing, if you can really believe it: just because a thought arises frequently and together with a lot of emotion or force doesn't make it more true. It doesn't make it more accurate. It just makes it more forceful. There's more of a tendency to identify with it. The thought is me, or it's about me, or it says something about me, or I have to own it. And that's where the suffering comes.

Back to this thoughts without a thinker. One of our colleagues, Joseph Goldstein, has a great line, which if you really could apply it, you'd see that it's not the thoughts. He said: take a sitting and imagine that every thought that arises in your mind comes from the person behind you. It really changes it, doesn't it? "My, what a sicko that person is!" But since it's them and not me, it's really not a problem. If you can relate to your thoughts in that way, you're back in space.

When there's the space, when the thought's just a bird flying through the sky, fine. Then you're really recognizing the nature of thought, and then there's no problem. Thought arises like sounds arise, no problem.

Of course, the rest of the time when it is a problem—that's what I want to talk about now for the rest of the talk. If you can hang out in open sky mind, do so, please. You don't need to get into all this deconstructing where we get caught in thought. But for the times that we are caught, I'm going to talk about some helpful ways to bring in our awareness that might help to deconstruct where we're caught.

Hopefully this won't be thought-provoking, but will be a guide for how to pay attention to what's really happening as opposed to what we think is happening. Sometimes those two things are worlds apart—what we think is happening and what's really happening. Our practice is to recognize what's really happening.

One place that these two things, what's really happening and what we think is happening, begin to diverge is at the point of basic perception.

So I'll explain what we mean by that in Buddhist psychology. We've talked about—Annas especially has discussed—the five sense experiences and the sixth sense experience, which is the mind. There's seeing, tasting, smelling, feeling, sensing, hearing. And the sixth sense door is the mind, so thoughts and emotions.

These basic sense experiences—a sight, a smell, a taste, a thought, an emotion, a sound—that's all that's happening, over and over, in all different orders. That's all that's happening. And in a moment of its arising, say a sound, what we call perception is that first recognition: "Oh, that's a bird call," or "That's a car." It doesn't even have to be in words, but it's that perceptive recognition. It's based somewhat on memory, so of course it comes out of our past experience. For instance, sometimes there will be a sound and you hear it, but you don't know what it is. There's that moment of no recognition. Perception hasn't come in yet.

Now, what often happens at this point of perception is that we actually recognize incorrectly. There's a sound and we don't know what it is. Well, we don't like to not know what it is, so we just make something up. And we don't necessarily know we're making it up. This is really a function of delusion operating in that moment.

I'll give an example. A few years ago, Franz and I were walking in the woods in Switzerland. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a big yellow and white thing. Immediately my mind said, "Oh, that's a yellow and white striped circus tent." I said to Franz, "That's odd, a circus tent here in the woods." He looked at me like I was out of my mind. Because it wasn't a circus tent. I had just taken in some visual perception without really turning and meeting the experience, and my mind put together "circus tent." When I turned and looked, it was a big rock with some streaked lichen, some yellow and some white. It didn't bear any resemblance to a circus tent as soon as I actually looked at it.

That's an easy misperception to correct. You just turn and really look. I had Franz there to say, "Are you nuts?" which made me turn and really look. But a lot of the time we don't realize that we're doing that.

There's the classic Buddhist story about walking in the forest at twilight and seeing something hanging down. Immediately the mind goes, "Snake!" You've heard all the stories about people being bitten by snakes in Thailand if they walk out at night without their flashlight. You know there are poisonous snakes. Fear arises, a sense of vulnerability and unsafety. We react both with thoughts constructing the story and with the appropriate emotions—all our memory, all our history in relationship to snakes, everything we've seen or ever had to do with snakes. Until someone comes along with a flashlight and you see it's a vine. "Oh, okay, excuse me," and all that vanishes. But until we know, we are basing our whole perception of reality on that one basic misperception.

So this happens when there's ignorance and we don't have all the information. It also happens when our perception, the way we're meeting experience, is veiled by a state of mind—specifically our friends craving, aversion, and self-identification. Comparing is a form of that.

There's a great word for this in the Pali language: *papañca*. I love the definition in the commentaries. It means that the projection of the mental state distorts our basic perception so we don't see what's really happening.

For example, once I was in the hospital, very sick, in a lot of pain. A nurse came and woke me up at five in the morning to weigh me. I had to get out of bed so she could weigh me. Very important. I'd been there two days—what, had I lost twenty pounds? I was actually seeing her visually through the mental state of fear.

I visually saw her as sort of demonic, and I reacted—the poor lady—I reacted in that way through the veil of fear and aversion, seeing this really distorted-looking woman. I just lashed out at her.

The next day, five in the morning, the same lady was on the same rotation. She comes to wake me up. But I didn't have that veil of fear and aversion, and I just saw a very nice-looking, somewhat nervous woman kindly waking me up. I was seeing clearly then.

So it's at this level where, when we're not aware of the mental state, it completely distorts our reality and we don't know it. This papañca—the projection of the mental state distorting our perception—is further fueled by the resultant emotions, the thoughts, the descriptions, the reactions. It just takes hold and runs. In fact, they say these are "the notions that assail and overwhelm a person." Or as the commentary says, papañca is "the tendency of the imagination to break loose and run riot."

Can you relate? That's what's going on half the time. And we wonder why we feel a little out of sync with things, why we're a little out of sync with ourselves—because we're way down the road from the basic perception.

This distortion can happen through fear, and it can happen through craving. Like that incredible story the other night about the man with the weather balloons. He didn't just recognize a pleasant thought; with his view distorted by craving, he really got out there, way down the road.

You can see this phenomenon we often talk about in retreats: either vipassana romance or vipassana vendetta. The mind becomes veiled with craving, with desire, or with hatred, vitriolic judgment and hatred. With romance, you'll see at the end this person who will "stay nice forever"—the most incredible person. Everything they do is just so right on. You can't believe such a specimen of humanity has landed here, right here, sitting next to you. It's unbelievable! And if you met the person two months from now in Safeway, your mind would kind of go, "Yeah, they look nice enough, but what was that about?"

There's a Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object. It decorates it up.

So these are very simple ways of understanding what we call papañca. The actual perception is not accurate. We don't recognize that because we're not even paying attention at the level of perception. And we are off and running.

That's one of the ways our constructions of thought operate—because what happens out of papañca is we construct a whole world of description and thought and knowledge: who we are, who you are, what the world is like, all based on our perceptions. And this can lead into forming what we call views and opinions.

Any sense of recognizing any views or opinions arising in your experience in the last couple days? No, none at all? Sure.

These views are based on our perception. And once we've formulated a view, it's fine if you notice it—just like any thought, it's fine, no problem. But when we don't notice it, attachment to views becomes one of the big areas the Buddha spoke about as a cause of our suffering.

When he talked about attachment or craving, he talked about sense desire, which we've spoken of a lot as a big area of attachment. The second one he talked about is attachment to views and opinions as being absolutely suffering-inducing and confusion-inducing.

What we do is construct a view, a description, that explains things based on our perception. And once we're attached to that view, it's as if all of our mindful awareness is shut down. We don't even let in perceptions that counteract the view. We don't even notice them. And should you happen upon someone whose view is different, it can really lead to conflict.

The example Jack gave last night: the experiment where they put their hands into hot and cold water, and then put them into warm water. Well, imagine if that were two different people. They put their hands into the same bucket, and one says, "No, it's really hot." The other says, "No, it's really cold." And they're both absolutely convinced, due to their experience, that that's how it is.

Now, you could notice that's a view based on conditions and say, "Oh, that's interesting. You feel it as hot, I feel it as cold. That's interesting." How many of us can do that? How many of us didn't argue?

You're kind of weird. I am freezing in this bucket. This is attachment to views—when we don't realize it, it brings us into great conflict with other people, with ourselves, with our own experience. It's one of the ways that thought gets frozen into a construction that causes suffering. And it's easy not to notice until you actually notice the view.

A really good place to explore view is in work meditation, particularly if you have a job where three or four of you are doing the same task. A few people have mentioned to me noticing that clearly there's a best way to do it—and it's theirs. Luckily we ask you not to talk, because it can really come to blows.

You know the story of the two foreign monks in Burma? One was really hot and kept turning on the overhead fan, and the other found it noisy and distracting and kept turning it off. They actually did come to blows over this fan. They both got kicked out of the monastery.

So look in your work meditation. We can still prefer our own opinions—we're not saying we can't tell what our opinion is. Of course it's better if you line the things up like this, and you wash this first, and you dry it in this order, and you do the dirtiest things last because it gets the water dirtier, and anybody could tell that's how it's supposed to be. We can notice that without attaching to it as the only accurate description of the world, the only possibility.

Work meditation is a wonderful place to see if, as Pema Chödrön says, you can even let in the possibility that maybe this is just an opinion. It's not so easy.

I think I'll read what she writes: "When you are in meditation, you could begin to notice your opinions just as you notice thinking. This is an extremely helpful practice because we have a lot of opinions and we tend to take them as truth. But actually, they're just our opinions. Opinions are opinions, nothing more or less. We notice them, we can label them as opinions, just as we label thoughts. By this simple exercise, we are introduced to the notion of egolessness. All ego really is, is our opinions, which we take to be solid, real, and the absolute truth about how things are. Even to have a few seconds of doubt about the solidity and absolute truth of our own opinions, even just to begin to see that we do in fact have opinions, begins to introduce us to the possibility of selflessness, of egolessness."

Now, we often actually don't like the possibility of being introduced to the notion of egolessness. We like our opinions because they're so obviously correct. It's really hard to make that space.

Here's an example from IMS: the power of our opinions about healthy food. This can be a big one. Take the notion that white sugar is not healthy—a lot of people might agree with that. We have a retreat at IMS in Barre every summer for young adults, young people between twelve and eighteen. One year, there were two or three kids from the inner city eating a diet very much like what we serve here—not much sweets, no white sugar or refined food at all. These kids were basically used to eating fast food

and junk food. And it wasn't just a preference; they actually physically began to be ill, like withdrawing off of something, because there was no grease and no white sugar. The body can't just adjust like that.

So the teachers—I wasn't one of them—went to the cooks and said, "Look, you've got to put out some sugar for these kids." But the particular cooks at that time were so into their healthy food that they just couldn't do it. They finally prevailed on them to give the kids a little secret stash of white sugar, but they had to hide it. I thought, you know, that must have been so weird for these kids.

But this sense of not being able to expand beyond our view is a way that we use thought to freeze the world. And we don't just do it in things like food. A great way you can begin to explore views, attachment to views, and the way it freezes and solidifies experience and creates suffering is to notice what opinions may have arisen about what good meditation is in the days you've been here. Or if you're leaving, or even if you're not, as you approach the middle or the end, there might be some slight view arising as to what was supposed to happen and didn't—and how you feel about that.

It's really helpful to notice a view and notice how, when we're attached to it, we almost deny the perceptions that counteract it. And nowhere is it so obvious as in a group of people like this with opinions about what good meditation is. The questions in the morning in the hall—isn't that a great place to find out what your views are and how they get triggered? You hear someone crying, having a lot of emotion, and you're cool as a cucumber, and the view could go either way.

My God, what's the matter with me? You know, Ajahn Chah says, if you haven't really cried, you haven't really meditated. That is a line guaranteed to send about half the people through the roof and the other half to say, "Wow, I'm really doing great." It's a view either way. Sometimes you cry, sometimes you don't. One isn't better than the other. It's all about just being present for what's actually happening, free of the interpretations we put on top of it.

So you'll hear someone say it's better to just be with the breath, and anything else that comes up is a distraction. The more you're with the breath, the better you're doing. And the next person will say, "I'm not doing well because I'm hardly with the breath. There's thinking and emotions and sensations and sounds, and I'm noticing it all really clearly, but I should be with the breath."

There was a woman once at a retreat a few years ago who came about the fifth day and said she had been in absolute agony—not physical agony, though it was hurting because sitting cross-legged was really painful for her—but absolute despair because she

couldn't do the practice, because she couldn't sit cross-legged. About the fifth day, she looked up at me and said, "Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe you can do the practice and sit in a chair." Five days to let in a perception. And she's not unusual. That's just one particular story. I've known times when people go for years and suddenly say, "Oh! You mean just being with whatever's arising is okay? It's okay to feel anxiety? It's okay not to feel anxiety? It's okay to just be with the walking? It's okay to be with the breath? It's okay not to be with the breath? You mean it's okay that it changes?" Whatever. It's fascinating.

And you don't have to listen to anyone else, because what I notice for myself is that as soon as I have one particular experience—a good experience, and a good experience usually means you like it, right? Have you ever come out of a sitting that was really unpleasant and said, "Wow, that was really a good meditation"? Probably not. Do you detect a little bias? There might be some bias going on in the way you evaluate meditation.

What's good practice? Notice how something happens that's completely unexpected—some strong energy movement, for example. It never happened before. You don't know what's going to happen, so you're really there. You're present. There's no expectation. There's no view or opinion. It's like, wow. And the next sitting, can you bring that beginner's mind? It's hard. The first twitch, and you're like, "Ah, here it goes again. Last time it was like this, this is what's going to happen." Or there's no twitch, and it's like, "Oh no, now this is really boring. Where's the juice? Where's the movement?"

That our mind does this is fine. It's no problem. It's just what it does. If we're aware of it, then it's just thoughts—it's funny. If we're not aware of it, we've solidified our experience. There's no freshness. There's no beginner's mind. And guess who's suffering?

That's a sign. When I'm suffering in meditation, one thing I do is ask, "What's happening now?" Often it's because I'm just not letting myself be with what's happening now. Or, if I see I'm really feeling what's happening but I'm still suffering, I back up and see: What's the view I'm holding to? What do I think should be happening? That's a real way in to see the view you're holding.

So, looking in your meditation, notice how thoughts coagulate experience into view and freeze it. And even though it's suffering, our tendency is to keep doing it because overall, we don't like shaky ground. Without a view, an opinion, a description that explains everything, we feel unmoored. We think, "Okay, now I know what that's about. Now I know what meditation is like. Now I know what sadness feels like. Now I know how to work with pain. Now I know what impermanence is like."

So often people come after sitting for years, and I say the same thing to myself: "This is coming up again? I dealt with this in my last retreat. I dealt with this in therapy. What's it doing coming up again? I had it all figured out." It doesn't work that way. But it's almost as if we want to freeze experience because even if it's a suffering description, at least I'm familiar with it. I know where I stand. And I'd rather have concrete tight around my ankles and feet than to be able to dance in the mystery of constantly arising and passing experience, of never knowing what's going to arise next. We find it comfortable, but really it's not, if we really look.

Our whole practice is about actually looking instead of just coasting on our ideas and interpretations. Never take anything for granted in this practice. Never assume, "Now I know how this is." Look again. It's different now in this moment than it was in the last moment.

The Buddha said once, "Let one, calm and independent, not desire any resting place." Can you imagine that? Not desire any resting place. It sounds sometimes a little scary. I mean, we want a resting place. If there were one, and we could get there and rest, that would make a lot of sense. But because every moment is opening fresh and new, there isn't really a resting place that stays a resting place for more than this moment.

If we're not desiring a resting place, when we talk about taking refuge in the Dharma, taking refuge in the truth of this moment, for this moment, right here and now, whatever's happening—that is our resting place. But the challenge is, it's our resting place now, and when it changes, we don't hold on because there's a new resting place, a new resting place.

When we stop fighting that, it's just a dance of joy. It's like we're really living in harmony with life as it is. Thoughts are a part of that. When we see them as thoughts, they come, they go. Our descriptions of ourselves are constantly changing. But when we don't recognize that, then often one of the ways we try to create a resting place, a safe ground, is through our descriptions.

Just as I talked about our descriptions of our practice, the views we make of our practice, we do the same thing through thoughts. Thoughts is one way—that's the way I'm talking about tonight. We do it in our descriptions of who we are: our self-identity, our life stories, our moment to moment stories. Paying attention through the day to thoughts in this way, do you notice how you're sort of telling your identity story to yourself all day long? And without looking, it really feels real, right? Well, this is who I am. I recognize this story. It feels comfortable. It's awfully painful, but it's comfortable. I know it. It's safe somehow. And again, we don't like that shaky ground.

Do you remember, those of you who were here that year, when we had the earthquake?

And then the earthquake was okay, but it was the ten million aftershocks that went on all night and all the next day. It was just physically, cellularly unsettling. It was a great teaching for me because I realized, oh, I always thought the earth was at least my solid ground. I guess not. I'm still holding on somewhere. Can I just go and dance? No, not too well.

So in a way, noticing through the day—pay attention tonight and tomorrow to the way that thoughts are constructing what seems like a solid, recognizable self. Me, my story that goes on. But really look, because what's fascinating is when we look, we see that there is no one story even. How many different "you" stories have you told yourself today? Really notice.

Because what we do is we have a view, an opinion of who we are—our basic story. "I'm a worthless, no-good meditator." That could be your story. Or your story might be, "I'm really hot stuff. Occasionally I don't do too well, but mostly I really got it together." Most people don't seem to believe that story, but some people do, and it really doesn't matter which one you believe. But notice—instead of buying the story, don't take it for granted. Pay attention.

Notice how from a basic perception, a basic sense perception—remember, all that's happening is the six sense experiences over and over and over, including thought. That's all that's happening. Everything else we're making up. This is really a radical aspect of awareness.

There's a sutta of the Buddha's that I really love because it says this quite directly. It's called the Advice to Bahiya of the Bark Cloth. Bahiya just came and stopped the Buddha on his alms round and said, "I'm in a real hurry. You've got to give me the basic teachings in five minutes." And the Buddha kept trying not to. "You just wait here. I'll go do my alms round. I'll have breakfast. I'll come back." But Bahiya just kept asking until, on the magic third time—usually if you asked the Buddha something, he would refuse twice, but then if it was something grantable, he would grant it on the third time.

So the Buddha gave him just this very succinct teaching. He said, "Okay, in the seen, there is only the seen. In what is heard, there is only the heard. In what is sensed in the body, there is only what is sensed"—so that includes the other physical senses—"and in what is cognized, the mental realm, there is only what is cognized. That is all."

That's all. It's so simple we can't stand it.

So you're out walking and somebody goes by looking really fast and spaced out and unhappy. And immediately you think, "Huh, I'm not doing so bad. I'm really feeling my sensations here." Now already we didn't notice what actually happened there. Seeing—seeing is all that was happening. Seeing, then a perception of a person. That was the perception: person walking quickly, looking unhappy. Then comparing arose in the mind. "I'm doing better than that person." And comparing is one of the big energies that gets papañca going.

So from that basic seeing, pretty soon you've become a high lama in Dharamsala. The Dalai Lama is consulting you about how to relate to the Chinese. This might have taken thirty seconds. Memories of all the past things in your life that really went well are coming up.

Selective memory, selective perception. You just notice all the things that feed that particular sense of self, and it feels like, "Yeah, that's who I am. That's true."

And then the next moment you trip over some cholla. You think, "God, am I unmindful or what? I'm really incredibly arrogant and conceited. Maybe that person was walking fast, but at least they probably knew what they were doing. Here I am making a fool of myself, stumbling over the cholla." It reminds you of fifth grade when they sent you to the remedial gym class. "I can't even walk properly. And that's showing up in the way I do the walking, just as it shows up in how I do the meditation and everything else."

This is in a five-minute period. Selective memory, selective perception—that other stuff didn't really happen. All those positive things, they didn't happen. That was just warped arrogance and conceit. And this feels really true.

Then five minutes later, the lunch bell rings. Both of those are forgotten. There's just hunger sensations and moving. "I have to wash the pots. I hope they didn't make a mess today in the kitchen." And now "I'm the pot washer."

Without examining it, we would say all of that was a steady stream of me, I, my self-story. But it's completely changing. There's not some solidity there. Each is a use of thoughts running off of perception and creating a description. It could be a viewer opinion or a description of the world that's unquestioned when we don't bring our attention back to what's really happening in this moment.

It's so fascinating to watch this once you just tune into it—how any basic sense experience can be the cause for a whole construction of a view and story of self. Just hearing the rain on the roof the other day, I could have gone back to my whole childhood and the smell of the desert and the sense of being cozy in a hurricane, and on and on.

Five minutes later, you can do this consciously sometimes—play. Take the same sense data. Bring up a memory or a feeling. Let the thoughts run. Notice how the emotion congruent with that story will come up and be real. "Oh, I feel so cozy. I had such a nice childhood. Isn't it lovely, all of the sangha here together in this room, the rain on the roof?"

And then switch it. "It's cold. It's so bleak. It's just how my heart feels—bleak and cold and barren like the desert. And here we are, 150 of us not speaking, not looking at each other." And you get so incredibly depressed you want to run out of here screaming.

The feelings, the emotions are just as real. The thoughts are thoughts. It's not like one is more true than the other, not necessarily. So you cannot think you have to believe either one. But like Pema Chödrön said, just maybe make this much space—maybe this is an opinion, a description, a view.

Even our really painful stories that come from our experiences in life—you know, they explain, like the story Jack told last night about the little girl whose father left her. There's always the possibility there's another explanation. The same so-called facts could have a different story, a different explanation. We may or may not ever know the right one. But just holding the possibility that the thought construction isn't so solid opens up a potential for enormous freedom in our lives in the moment.

One of the ways we can play with that is back to the advice to Bāhiya: to come into our basic experience in any particular moment. Really see what is it that's actually happening right now. You don't have to understand it.

You don't have to have the whole story. You don't even have to name the emotion. You're walking in the desert, you're in that story, you're feeling like you're totally worthless. In the seen, there's only the seen. What's actually true right now? It might be sensations in the foot or the body. It might be smell. It might be hearing. It might be thinking. Thinking is true, but that doesn't mean the content is true.

It's like Munindraji used to always say: a thought of your mother is not your mother. It's a thought. There's a big difference there. So the thought might be "I'm completely worthless." It's a thought. That might be what's true in the moment—that there's a thought arising. Or a taste. Or an emotion.

But to have that radical simplicity that the Buddha was talking about to Bāhiya—that we are willing to just let go of our attachment to the construct and drop into whatever's presenting itself as sense data, as perception in this moment—that is, in that moment, a potential for enormous spaciousness and freedom.

It doesn't mean we can't use our concepts, our thoughts, our psychological understanding. We can use them when we don't have to be gripped around them. We say, "Well, maybe this is right. Let's try it on." Sort of like scientists with a hypothesis. They try it on until some data comes in that doesn't match it. And then they go, "Oh, maybe that wasn't correct"—if they're good scientists.

So we're doing the same thing. Instead of freezing it and saying, "Now I've got it," we recognize: we've never got it. We keep meeting new data in every single moment. That's the radical simplicity of this practice.

When I say this can open us to enormous freedom, I imagine everyone here must have had some moments of that during this retreat. We often don't notice them—where you're not particularly spinning out some big description. It might be there, but you're not really caught in it. And there's just what's happening. Maybe you caught a whiff of the creosote walking through the desert and it's just the smell. It's just so pure. Or just a sensation when you're walking. Or the taste of the tea. Or the sound of a bird. Or the smoothness of the breath. Or a moment of sadness. Just a moment of sadness. Or a thought going through the sky of your mind. "Ah, it's just a thought."

The simplicity of pure presence without all the falderal that we add on top of it—the layers that hide the basic experience.

Of course, not every moment is going to be, "Oh, just seeing, smelling, thinking, tasting. No constructions whatsoever." We're still functioning. Sometimes people think, "Well, if that's all there is, how can I do anything? How can I work?"

How can I find my way home again? What we're doing is trying to let go of some of the glue that keeps us suffering, and then we can use the concepts. As James used to always quote Ram Dass: "Know your zip code." We know our zip code, but we don't think we *are* our zip code. Who are you? "I'm 01005." Who are you? It's the same with all of our mental constructions.

So when we talk about wise attention, it's being able to take that advice to Bahiya and know just what's happening—to come to rest in that, as opposed to jumping into and buying all the interpretation. And it's really interesting to watch when we don't do that.

I'll describe an experience I had, because it's fascinating to me to watch the mind do this. I was sitting once, and I'd had bronchitis a couple of times in the past year. The first couple of times I didn't really do anything about it and got really sick. So I was on a long retreat, pretty calm, and I was just being with bare perception. I started to realize I was noting: tickle, tickle, tickle, tickle, cough, tickle, cloudy, cloudy, heavy, heavy. Then the

thought arose: "Oh my God, I've got bronchitis." And I was like—whoosh—into this total panic. What am I going to do? I'm on retreat. No, no, no. I've got all this work I have to do. I have to teach all these retreats. I can't afford to be sick. The retreat's about—I was just gone.

Luckily, I'd been sitting a while. I had some presence, and I said, "Oh yeah, I think this is panic." Okay, what's happening right now? Panic. Feel the sensations. Oh, yeah—tickle, tickle, cough, cough, tickle, tickle. And it was just gone with that. Then I watched the mind choose to go back into panic. Let me just get into the whole story of what might happen. Oh my God, I've got bronchitis.

Ajahn Buddhadasa has an expression he uses in a different context: volunteering for suffering. I felt that's what my mind was doing. I could stay with bare experience, but who wants to suffer? Me. Let's go into this story. Oh my God, I've got bronchitis.

Coming back over and over, after a while it was so much more obvious. There's peace in this. It doesn't deny that it was bronchitis. It didn't keep me from recognizing it and acting appropriately. The difference between just being with the sensation and the panic is that in the panic, I wasn't actually with the experience of the bare sense data. I was with the thoughts and the construction and the future and the past, drawing up all the selective memory—not with awareness. That was the truth of things.

So once I could come back and just be with the bare experience—okay, this really feels exactly like it felt a year ago. I think if I go to the doctor and get an antibiotic, that'll keep me from getting really sick. I'll do that. I did, and I got fine, and I didn't get really sick. So it doesn't keep us from acting intelligently. In fact, we act *more* intelligently, because I could have seen myself running around for days—oh my God, I've got bronchitis—and not really doing anything with any intelligence.

I think of this a lot: volunteering for suffering. Being willing to meet experience with that radical simplicity the Buddha spoke to Bahiya takes a trust that actually, out of that, the appropriate response can arise. We have a better chance of recognizing what's actually happening when we're really turning around and meeting the experience, as opposed to constructing all our thoughts and imaginations and fears about it.

And there can be—often people say, when we talk about thought and attachment to views and descriptions as our self-identity, and people just approach the possibility of looking at that without taking it for granted, recognizing that it's just a story, that it's really as simple as the Buddha spoke to Bahiya—there can actually be a sense of, "I

don't want it to be that way." Almost a sense of going back to that shaky ground, back to that death and transformation moment by moment, back to that wanting someplace to recognize ourselves.

But there is an ongoing natural letting go as we pay attention—not this letting go that we say is letting go but is really pushing away, throwing away, pretending something isn't happening. That's not letting go.

That's aversion. True letting go is when something really just falls away without will. We simply let go of the holding.

Throughout my whole practice, I've seen stories of Carol—levels of self-identification, aspects of personality, memories of who I thought I was. As I begin to see that they're nothing concrete, that they're nothing that isn't changing, the sense of identification with these different levels starts to go, little by little. And sometimes it really can feel like a little death.

I remember times in retreat where I would—okay, I was amping it up a little bit, some of it was the story of Carol, you know, letting go of her personality. But there really can be a feeling of, "Oh, that part of who I thought I was is going away." Really, it's not going away. It was never really there. But what's happening is we're seeing through what we thought was there. It feels like aspects of our personality, our self-story, are going away. And it's okay to feel a little sad about that.

I remember times in retreat where I would do a little puja, a little acknowledgment of, "Okay, that part of Carol's story might have to go now. And I feel like I'm going to miss it." But you know what? When it's really gone, we don't miss it. Because any construction of thoughts that we're holding to creates a sense of solidity, and actual fear comes from wanting to hold on to that. When we can truly let the construction go, we're not left in some nihilistic nothingness. It opens us up—it's the doorway to recognizing our vastness. It's a little bit what Wes was talking about in his talk the other night, seeing that we are nature.

As John Muir once said, "I find that if I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe." Anything. The twitch of an eyelid. A feeling of helplessness. The sound of a bird. The sadness at some idea of some part of my personality going away. The judgment that I shouldn't feel that sadness.

When we meet it, like the Buddha said to Bahiya, with that radical simplicity, we find that rather than nihilistic nothingness, it's our avenue into recognizing our vastness—that we are connected, we are part of everything in the universe. And when we're rest-

ing even in that moment of simplicity, like when you just heard the bird, just the vividness of that. Or the smell of the creosote, or the sunset. Not all the stories about sunset, just the seeing. Or the tea. Or the sadness.

When there's just that—that moment of total presence—that's our opening into real peace. That's our resting place. Not the thing itself, because that's definitely going to change in the next moment. But that ability to bring awareness to whatever comes in its place—that's where we begin to find our real resting place.

And out of that, we find not this kind of indifference—"it doesn't matter what thoughts come and go, nothing matters, nobody matters, it's all just empty." Rather, from that place of connectedness, kind attention naturally expresses itself. Our connectedness manifests in actions of generosity, love, and compassion. It's just natural. In that place of nothing to protect, no construction to hold onto, of openness, we're open to really seeing what's true. And the natural expression of that is to feel, to know, and to act from the compassion and love that comes from knowing our interconnectedness.

I'm going to close by reading a poem that I really love because it expresses this to me—this sense of recoiling from something we don't like, something that doesn't meet our ideas or the way we want things to be. And how just the quality of bringing our attention to what is opens up the vastness of the universe in this one experience, and the experience of love and compassion.

This is by Mary Oliver:

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.
Disgust argued in my stomach,
and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.
A poem should always have birds in it,
kingfishers say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees,
a waterfall, or if that's not possible,
a fountain rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.
When the woman turned, I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together

and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled.
What kind of nonsense is this?

Everybody needs a job. Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem, but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She is washing the tops of airport ashtrays as big as hubcaps with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life. And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course it isn't.

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

Let's just sit quietly for a minute.

CHAPTER 305

Loving Aversion

Carol Wilson · 42 min

> *In this guided mettā (loving-kindness) meditation session, Carol Wilson leads practitioners through the classical progression of the practice, beginning with oneself and moving to the benefactor category. She offers practical wisdom on selecting the right person for each category, emphasizing that the goal is to find whoever most easily opens the heart rather than proving one's spiritual advancement by rushing to difficult people.*
>
> *Wilson addresses common challenges that arise in mettā practice, particularly the near enemy of loving-kindness—love mixed with attachment, lust, or wanting. She explains why it's important to choose a benefactor without romantic or sexual complications, as these feelings can obscure the pure quality of mettā we're trying to cultivate. For those who struggle with self-directed loving-kindness due to self-judgment or self-hatred, she suggests starting with an easy person and "boomeranging" the mettā back to oneself at the end.*
>
> *The teaching emphasizes that mettā phrases should be generic enough to extend to all beings, and that practitioners have permission to find their own phrases and rhythm. Wilson clarifies that we're not trying to change anyone or produce specific results—the practice is simply an offering of open-hearted affection. She guides practitioners through connecting with wholesome qualities in themselves and their benefactor, using either felt sense or mental imagery, before offering the traditional phrases of well-wishing.*

We continue with the guided loving-kindness practice. Our intention is to take you through the classical categories as metta is traditionally taught, allowing you to choose for yourself how to practice in whatever way is easiest for you. By "easiest," I mean using whichever person—whether it's yourself, a dear friend, a mentor, or any of the categories—most readily evokes feelings of well-wishing, friendliness, and connection in your daily practice.

There's no need to be in a hurry to move from that person to the most difficult person, as if somehow to prove to yourself that you've gotten it down. It doesn't work that way. If you were to simply stay for six weeks with yourself and the person that's easiest, that would be a very helpful way to cultivate loving-kindness practice. But we want to present to you the whole breadth of the classical teaching, and that's what we'll be doing over these evening guided metta sessions.

You'll also notice that each one of us does it in a slightly different way. Our phrases will probably each be a little different. Rather than taking that as a sign of confusion, you could take it as a sign of permission to be creative in your own method of practice. Find the phrases that work for you, that have the most ability to connect in your heart with what you're wishing.

One thing to keep in mind: if you do make up your own phrases, they should be fairly generic. As a friend of mine says, "May I have more hair" doesn't really translate to all beings. You get the picture. "May you be free from danger"—that can translate to all beings.

I know Joseph began with having you pick any being that really opens your heart and is easy for you. Tonight I'm going to start with the classical way, which is with yourself. After about fifteen minutes of sending loving-kindness to yourself, we'll move to the category classically called benefactor or mentor. This is someone who has done a lot for you, who really inspires you, or for whom you feel much gratitude. The traditional examples include a teacher, a mentor, someone who has helped you.

If a person like that comes to mind, you might have to try a few. Sometimes the most obvious person doesn't really work if there's a little other stuff on the side—you think it doesn't matter, but it might get in the way. You never know; it's a surprise. So I like to say you may have to audition a few benefactors. See which one is easiest—not who you should be able to feel it for, not who deserves it, but who is doing you another favor by being the person that lets you offer this gift of well-wishing, this generosity of heart.

If you have someone in that category, it should be someone for whom there isn't going to be any sexual interest likely to arise, because obviously that complicates the issue. This is actually a very important piece, because we're trying to practice in the way that's easiest. The near enemy of metta—the state of heart and mind that we can actually confuse for loving-kindness—is love with attachment, or lust, or wanting. If there's someone for whom the real, true well-wishing can easily slide into wanting something back, it makes it harder to really come to rest and find your home in this mental state, this heart space of metta. So pick someone more or less uncomplicated.

Sometimes people can't find someone who would classically fit into the benefactor category. In that case, use the person Joseph brought up last time—someone really easy, like your grandchild. Some people even use their pets. It's whatever really lets you offer this gift of caring. That's the purpose.

And of course, with ourselves—well, that's complicated, but we start with ourselves. If it's dead, if it's flat, that's okay. If it's worse than dead and flat, that's also okay. Just gently keep coming back to yourself, and then when we're ready, we'll move to the benefactor or the easy person for you. In your daily practice of metta, if yourself really brings up a lot of self-hatred, judgment, or anger—nothing even close to metta—then start with the easiest person and try at the end to boomerang it back on yourself a little bit. You're learning to play with this.

So sit in a way that's as comfortable as possible, so you're not putting any extra strain on your body. Take a couple of deep breaths. Just let out any tension, any holding, any expectations. See if you can come to a sense of relaxed presence in your sitting, with your body, with yourself right now.

Take a moment to consciously reflect on some of your good qualities. This is a very skillful act—whether it's some kind or generous action or speech that you've done, or just one of your wholesome qualities. This isn't to bolster ego. This is really to open our hearts to the fact that we're worthy of loving-kindness, just being who we are right now in this moment.

As you bring something wholesome about yourself to mind, let it in.

Open yourself to appreciate that the way you would appreciate it in someone else who's dear to you.

And then take this sense of appreciation, however mild it may be, even if it's only a thought, and open it into yourself. Connect that appreciation with a sense of yourself—whether it's a felt sense of your body as you sit here, connecting with yourself physically here and now. If you're more visual, then bring into your heart and mind a mental image, a memory, a memory of a photo of yourself. Connect that appreciation with a felt sense or image.

And when you're ready, begin offering to yourself the phrases that you have been using. I will one time give an example of the ones I use, but then let you find your own words and your own rhythm:

May I be free from inner and outer danger.
May I have mental happiness.
May I have physical happiness.
May I live with ease of well-being—or *may I care for myself happily.*

Just offering the phrase one at a time to yourself as you would offer a precious gift. Not trying to feel any particular emotion, but simply the offering of a generous heart.

Don't worry about how much your mind wanders off. When you notice you've wandered, you don't need to investigate where it's gone. Simply take a moment to re-connect with the sense of yourself or the image. And when you feel here with yourself again, then offer the next phrase, gently, steadily.

Now bring into your mind, your heart, a sense or image of the person you want to use as the benefactor. Again, see if you can have a memory or an image, a felt sense of this person. Take a moment to consciously focus on their wholesome, their lovable or inspiring qualities—the qualities that allow your heart to open easily when you think of this person, someone you don't know well or someone you do know well.

And as you get a sense of them—appreciation or gratitude or love or happiness or friendliness—when you're ready, then offering each phrase one at a time. Not to change this person, not to make what you're wishing be so. The phrases are an expression of our open-hearted affection. They're not an attempt to change things. We're not looking for results. We're simply offering.

May you be safe from inner and outer harm.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you have physical happiness.
May you live with ease of well-being.

And again, when you realize you've been lost, take a moment to bring up again the sense or image, the beautiful qualities, and then connect with each phrase. There's no hurry. Give it some time. If you don't feel the connection is happening, give it a little time before you decide it's not the right person. If other more difficult aspects of this person start to surface, see if you can just leave that in the background, consciously refocus on the qualities that open your heart, and again offer the loving-kindness.

For the last few minutes of this sitting, you can either stay with your benefactor or come back to yourself—whatever intuitively you feel you'd like to do. And just for a moment, send this loving-kindness to someone sitting next to you, or behind, or in front of you.

May the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings for their well-being and awakening.

CHAPTER 306

Wise Attention 2 of 3

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this second talk of a three-part series on wise attention (yoniso manasikāra), Carol Wilson continues her exploration of the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), examining how appropriate attention can starve the deeply rooted tendencies (āsavas) of craving, becoming, and delusion. She offers specific guidance on working with each of the five hindrances through wise attention—turning to the stillness of awareness when restlessness arises, or withdrawing energy from stories when caught in sloth and torpor.*
>
> *The talk moves into the second and third methods the Buddha taught for abandoning the āsavas: restraint at the sense doors and wise use of requisites. Carol clarifies that restraint doesn't mean avoiding sense contact through fear, but rather bringing satipaññā (mindfulness-wisdom) to the moment of contact—knowing 'seeing, pleasant' without proliferating into craving and papañca. She shares a vivid personal story about encountering blooming irises on retreat and watching her mind spin into attachment and planning.*
>
> *The teaching on 'using' requisites wisely—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—proves equally practical. Carol examines how our relationship to everyday necessities can either feed or starve craving and becoming. Through humorous examples of retreat food hoarding and attachment to favorite clothing, she illustrates how this investigation extends far beyond monastery life into our daily choices. Throughout, she emphasizes that the practice isn't about rigid rules but about noticing what's being fed in the mind moment to moment.*

So there are times when it can just be coming in, and I can really just turn to, "Oh, torpor, sloth, dullness." By doing that, the wise attention has actually moved into the awareness. And moment after moment of really turning to the awareness within which one is aware of, "Ah, this is just too hard right now," or "My eyes are just too sleepy," or "My body's just too heavy. This is useless. There's too much sloth and torpor. I can't keep paying attention." Just turn to the awareness and keep noticing it. I'm not saying it magically disappears, but it really shifts from unwise to wise attention. It stops feeding it and begins to starve it.

With restlessness and worry, the Buddha says you can actually pay attention to the stillness of awareness. In other words, it doesn't mean all the phenomena stop coming and going. It doesn't mean you're sitting there so worried about whatever obsessive thought is there and think, "Oh, let me just notice stillness of awareness," and the whole thing falls away. But stillness of awareness is actually accessible. Stillness of awareness

means the mind's jumping all around—"I'm worried about this, I'm worried about that"—and awareness notices it all. It's similar to the sloth and torpor one. Just withdraw the energy from getting caught in the stories and the obsessive thoughts. Turn it back to the moment of knowing itself. Knowing obsessive thought. Knowing obsessive thought. That awareness isn't jumping around. It's not going anywhere. It's just in that moment. Everything's happening in the stillness of awareness. Just play with it.

And of course, with uncertainty, it's like quit paying attention to all those thoughts. The Buddha says, at times, really look clearly and see what's what, instead of just speculating about things. Come out of the speculation and just bring your bare attention to know what's arising in this moment. It's really sustained attention, rather than thinking you're going to think your way out of this one, which just keeps feeding the doubt.

Those are some of the examples I wanted to give under the first category, which is how wise attention actually starves these tendencies, with some very specific examples of that.

And this leads into the second, which is how the āsavas, or these habits of mind, are abandoned by what the Buddha calls restraining—in other words, restraint at the sense doors. Now, we think of restraining sometimes as putting someone in a straitjacket—that's our violent image of restraining, or holding somebody back. In a way, it could be that. But restraining is really what Ajahn Buddhadasa calls bringing sati-paññā, mindfulness-wisdom, in at the moment of sense door contact.

So in the moment of seeing, if we're right present with mindfulness-wisdom, we know seeing. We know, "Oh, that's beautiful. It's pleasant." It doesn't expand. It doesn't turn into craving or becoming or some whole papañca about what it means in the future. It just becomes, "Oh yeah, seeing, pleasant." Mindfulness-wisdom at the point of sense contact—that's really what restraint at the sense doors means.

Without that restraint, as you know, there's a moment you might notice that you're seeing something pleasant, but not quite with the wisdom factor, not quite with strong enough mindfulness. And then it goes off, like I said, with a hindrance to the gratification of the pleasant, the sense of me, and to thoughts about it and what it means. And those thoughts lead to action. This is what we call papañca, proliferation—stories of the past, stories of the future, actions it can lead to—all because just in that moment of sense contact, there wasn't restraint.

Now, sometimes we can think of restraint as being so afraid that the desire or the ill will or the sense of self is going to proliferate that we're almost afraid to look around. I have a friend who some years ago on retreat at the retreat center was working with restraint in this way, which was that he walked around blindfolded all day for several days. He knew the place, you know, up and down the stairs.

That way, you know, he was restraining sense contact at the eye door, which is true. And we can go a little far that way because, of course, there are still the other five senses, right? Sense contact at the ear door, touching sensation, taste, smell, and the mind—we can't really just put a blindfold on that.

Wise attention means both seeing how restraint at the sense door allows the whole proliferation to fall away, and seeing how far down the road we go when there is unwise attention, when we get caught up in lack of restraint.

I'll give you a simple example from my practice. I was practicing one time for about a month in this really beautiful retreat center in South Africa, up in KwaZulu-Natal. It's more lovely than here as far as the environment. One day I came out—the grounds are very beautifully landscaped with a kind of oval drive—right around dawn. All around the whole drive were huge iris bushes, and on this particular dawn, they had all bloomed at once. They hadn't bloomed before, and I still remember it. This was almost ten years ago. So beautiful and subtle—this white with a tiny violet color in the middle. I was just overwhelmed with the beauty.

I did not have wise attention at the sense door. "This is so beautiful." For a moment, it was just appreciating beauty. Then it was, "Ah, so pleasant." I didn't say "so pleasant"—if I had, that would have been wise attention. Instead it was, "How can I hold onto this?" "Oh, my mother would love to see this. She's such a gardener. If only I could take photos."

Of course, I didn't have a camera. But that didn't stop me. I went back in for photos. My friend Gavin—he's over there, he's on retreat, but never mind—I bet he has a camera. So I'm running around the place, looking for my friend who is staying in another part, trying to borrow a camera, all really in service of continuing the sense of pleasant in that moment. Total non-restraint at the sense door.

We're not talking about evil or something. We're talking about what was feeding craving in that moment. This is what we look at: What's increasing in the mind and what's decreasing? What was increasing? Craving. I finally took the pictures. I brought

them home. I showed them to my mother. "Oh yeah, that's nice." Nothing to do with the original experience. It doesn't translate. It was just, "How can I hold on to this? It's so beautiful." Nothing wrong with beauty, but it's that attachment.

So keeping it simple here. Shankara, who was an Advaita master in India centuries ago, points out that we nourish craving. Craving is intensified when we let our thoughts dwell on sense objects and seek temporary satisfaction in those sense objects. That is what increases the habit of craving in our hearts, in our minds.

Practicing with restraint, satipañña, at all the sense doors really just cuts that tendency. It's starving the tendency for craving or for aversion, if you focus in the same way on all the unpleasant things. Some of us are cursed with that particular habit—at least you don't kid yourself that you're enjoying it and that it's nice. You know it's suffering.

This one, you may not quite notice the suffering aspect, but really pay attention and notice. Even when you talk, you can tell yourself, "Oh, this is really good. This is really wholesome. It's a little papañca, a little proliferation, but I'm noticing it. And it's really for the good of all beings, or at least it's for my own well-being right now. I need a little beauty. It's so dreary. There's so much dukkha."

The skillful means isn't about what it looks like. It's about what's being fed in your heart, in your mind. Sometimes, if you're in a real dukkha, in a space of lots of suffering, you go and sit outside, look at the beauty, and it just brings more stillness of awareness, more peace. That's not feeding. That's not lack of restraint. That's skillful means. But if you watch and what's being fed is more, more, more—less peaceful, less peaceful, "I need this object, I don't want that object"—then it's unwise attention. Really notice. We can see the moment-to-moment effect. It's really very useful. You can see how it works.

There's a quotation from Sogyal Rinpoche that I think describes this very well. He's saying that at the present moment, in our unawakened, not very mindful state, our mind faces away from itself. Mind—or you could say attention, or mana, as in manasikāra—the mind bends towards whatever we experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, texture. The mind leans towards it. The attention then is also caught up by thoughts about the past, about the future, and about the present in association with that object. That's the habit of our mind.

Yet restraint of the senses doesn't mean that we then get afraid to have sense contact. Like my friend, you know: "God, if I see anything, I'll get lost in craving, so better to be blind. Better to be deaf. Better to be dead." Rather, it means to see that there can be exquisite presence. It's not the sense contact; it's the clinging.

Sogyal again: "Yet we are not dragged into hell just by experiencing something. Neither are we elevated to a heavenly state by experiencing something." As Tilopa said to Naropa, "Son, you are not bound by perceiving, but by clinging. So cut your clinging, Naropa."

Satipañña, wise attention at the sense door, is really what we mean by restraint of the senses. See the contact, and by wise attention, cut the clinging, or the aversion, or the endless proliferation. And again, as Shankara says, when we cease dwelling upon sense objects, peace will arise in your heart. We call this liberation while living. Liberation while living. Peace will arise in your heart, even if for a moment. Then restraint becomes a beautiful, supportive, happy state.

The third way that the Buddha spoke in this sutta about abandoning all these tendencies, really letting them wither—and this is something useful not only in retreat, but all of these are useful in life, though this one very much in our daily life—is called āsavas that can be abandoned by using. By paying attention to our relationship to how we use things, to how we use the requisites of our life.

He, of course, is talking to monks. And here's an example: "Here, a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, paying careful attention, uses a robe only for protection from the cold or from heat, for protection from insects and burning, for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience." In other words, you're not using it for beautification. You're not dressing for amusement. It's just the way you use your clothes. And he goes on to talk about how we use alms food, how we use resting place, how we use medicines. Those are the four things that a bhikkhu can have. We, of course, can have many more things.

But I have found this so useful and very widespread—on retreat but also in life—to pay attention to the way I use clothes, requisites, you know, where I live, what keeps me warm, things that I think I need. All the things that really expand in a lay life: how we use food, how we relate to food. In other words, do we use these things simply for protection, to keep us comfortable? That's okay—to be healthy, to not be suffering. Or do we get caught in using clothes, food, requisites, supplies, home, for further pleasure? Does the way we relate to our clothes, for example, increase wanting in our mind?

Does it increase a sense of becoming, of who we are? Does it increase our tendency to perceive inaccurately?

So I'll use some simple retreat examples, but really look in your life. It's a fascinating thing. Food. And this isn't—remember, all this is looking carefully. This isn't some judgment: "Oh, I should only eat X amount of food, and if I eat more, then I'm using it for pleasure, I'm using it to increase craving." It could be different at every meal. It's to look and see.

I saw for myself at some point—I think it was on a retreat where I wasn't on eight precepts, which means not eating after noon, but it was just too much trouble to come to tea. It was a three-month course, and it's like a zoo in the dining room when there's a hundred people at mealtime, and it was simply too much trouble. But I would start to worry: what if? And this is really where I see this, looking at how I'm using food or clothes or blankets with this "what if" mind. What if I get hungry later? So maybe I better save some extra from lunch. Maybe I better take two or three pieces of fruit at breakfast. Maybe before I go to the retreat, I have to go buy a bunch of jars of almond butter to have in my room. All of this.

And at some point, as I started to notice how much extra trouble and dukkha and desire saving that food meant. Take the banana—but where can you save it? Here, thank God, we don't have what they have over at IMS, which is this back dining room with shelves. Most of you have sat there, and when you come in the second month of a three-month retreat, it's a crack-up if you're teaching or on staff. These shelves are packed—packed with food and old rotting oranges, and people with seventeen thousand jars of vitamins, and little saved rice with mold growing on it. People are back there cooking, and I'm not talking about people with health needs, I'm talking about all of us. Here you don't have that. God knows what's going on in your rooms, and I don't want to know.

But taking the banana back to the room, and it's up there, and then you're really hungry later—but where can I eat it? It's nine at night. I have to go all the way back to my room. I shouldn't eat in the room. I have to go all the way back down here and eat, but then they'll see me eating, and what will they think? They'll think I went in the kitchen and stole it, and I don't want them thinking that. Or maybe they're hungry, and I'll have to share it with them. Otherwise, I'll feel selfish or whatever. It's like, oh my God, who needs this? Who needs this?

So I'm a little hungry later. It's so much easier. That serves to starve desire, ill will, and sense of self. It just doesn't matter, you know? How are you using it? So it's not the outer appearance. What's increasing? Desire and becoming. "I'm going to become a hungry person. Oh my gosh, I'm becoming a very..."

Or you could not eat. You could eat one tiny little bit of food, and what that's serving in your mind is: "I hope they notice how really abstemious I am. I hope they're noticing what a really ace yogi I am." Well, then I'd say pile your plate with food and eat like a pig, because what you're feeding with being so delicate is a sense of becoming, very strongly. Break it.

When you take three blankets when there are only two apiece because "I might get cold later"—I see myself doing that all the time. And we don't really like it when our comfort level, or what we think we need, is being threatened.

I was listening to a tape of a talk by Ajahn Sumedho at Spirit Rock. He was talking about restraint and renunciation. And he's funny. So I was just listening to this tape, and the audience was really laughing pretty solidly at all the stuff he was saying.

And he was saying it in a humorous way. Now at his retreats, everyone is expected to be on eight precepts. That's just part of the retreat. So partway into this talk, he started talking about how at Spirit Rock everyone's on eight precepts, but he noticed there's a refrigerator especially for yogis with special needs. He said, "I noticed how really very full that refrigerator is. And supposedly here we're all on eight precepts. That means not taking anything extra." And he's laughing, saying this in a light way. Then he said, "I had the idea we should just empty out that fridge and give it all to the homeless." There was not one chuckle in that crowd. It was the most dead kind of silence after he said that. It was, to me, really funny.

So we're looking at this not with a sense of right or wrong, but examining how we're using things. Another example, because there's no way I'm getting through the other four tonight anyway. I noticed on one retreat, in relationship to clothes—this just popped into my mind tonight when I was writing. It can really be very subtle, what we see.

I was on a retreat in Australia with Sayadaw U Pandita, and I had this one dress. It wasn't even a nice dress, but something about the colors I really liked. It just flashed in my mind tonight as I was writing this. I remembered one day I had that dress on, and the room I was in had a big mirror. I didn't particularly look in it, but as I was walking past, I caught a glimpse of myself in that dress, and there was immediate "Oh, that's such pretty colors," and it went into this whole craving.

In a relatively subtle way—it wasn't that I thought I looked so beautiful or that anyone else was noticing me, because nobody was—but just in my own mind, by liking and wearing that particular dress, every time I saw it, craving would come up in my mind. It doesn't mean never wear a nice dress, but if the mindfulness wasn't quite acute

enough to notice it, then I could suddenly wake up in a fantasy, some really pleasant craving fantasy that actually got triggered by simply noticing the sight of that dress, liking it, going into "Wow, this is really pretty," and boom—craving really strengthened and off into some fantasy that has nothing whatsoever to do with the dress or clothes or anything. You wouldn't even notice how it got started. This is the subtlety of these habits of mind and the wonderfulness of having this time and this space to explore it. Not with judgment at all, but like, "Wow, that's really interesting."

Perfume is another one. Aside from all the aversion that people get going on retreat—that's just feeding aversion. But again, I like perfume. I like the smell of perfume, on me or on somebody else. I just like the smell. I love pleasant smells. And I can notice when I smell perfume—I really can see, like in the world of fashion, the function of it—because what it does is elicit craving, elicit clinging, whether that moves into sexuality or not. Just the pure clinging. That's the function of the whole fashion world.

I know personally from being a nun, you can bring that same thing into being in robes. The whole purpose of robes is that it cuts that, and it's wonderful. When I just had three robes and it was simply wear the clean one, soak the dirty one, and the other one's drying out—that was great. It was so freeing.

But I've seen nuns and monks who can really get into—I've known monks, nobody present—who have really gotten into the colors of their robe. This is in Thailand, where some robes are too much on the neon orange color, which is kind of the schlock city monk color. And they really want to have that dull forest monk color, being really upset when the robes they were given were way too much on the neon side and not enough on the worn out "I'm a real renunciate forest bhikkhu" side. I don't see any difference between that and wearing perfume and a flower dress. It's just the same qualities of mind.

Granted, living a simpler lifestyle makes it easier because there are fewer things to get lost in, fewer things to have to relate to. But you can see how really valuable this examination is in our life as well. How am I relating to food? Is it increasing desire and clinging and becoming? Or is it bringing me freedom? Just peace in this moment in the mind. How do I relate to clothes? How do I relate to where I live? How do I relate to medicine? Never mind entertainment and all the rest. You see how really, really helpful this is.

Well, that's it for tonight. We only got through four. I thought we'd get all the way through six and then just talk about the seven factors of enlightenment, which is the seventh one, next week, but I don't think we're going to get there. So I'll just say what the next ones are that we'll talk about next week. Those are the hindrances that are

abandoned by patience, or by enduring. And then, because the Buddha doesn't say just endure everything, those that are abandoned by avoiding—avoiding what is harmful or potentially unskillful. The next one is those that are abandoned by removing, and this is really how to not tolerate, which is very different from patience, persistent unskillful thoughts. And the seventh one is through feeding the seven factors of enlightenment, which is also in itself a very helpful balancing and development tool for the meditation practice.

I just want to end by telling you how the Buddha ends this sutta.

After he's gone through it all, he says, "Once one has abandoned the taints that can be removed by these seven ways, then he is called, or she is called, a bhikkhu who dwells restrained with the restraint of all the asavas, one who has severed craving, who has flung off the fetters and has made an end of suffering with the complete understanding and removal of conceit."

Conceit is the comparing and the subtle sense of self. So we're talking about many different ways of working with tendencies that are sometimes gross, sometimes extremely subtle. But this is not an idle or intellectual exercise. As he says over and over, this leads to complete freedom of heart and mind in this very life. And as he says, if it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so.

So may we all come to complete restraint of the asavas in this very life. Or as they say in Burma, may you attain nirvana in the shortest possible time. People just say that to you casually when they pass you in a monastery. Isn't that nice? "May you attain nirvana in the shortest possible time."

And may our practice, may our listening to and speaking the Dhamma, may our sincere efforts in this day and in these last days, may the beneficial energy of this be joined with the beneficial energies of all the three times—past, present, and future—of all beings. And may all these merits, this beneficial energy, be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms, in all states of existence. May all beings be freed from suffering. May all beings be freed from confusion. May our practice be the cause for the liberation of all beings.

Yoniso Manasikara is turning into the endless topic. I have to tell you, I'm really enjoying researching it, because it starts with this sutta that I told you about last week—these seven different ways of applying appropriate attention in our life, in our practice,

and by doing so, eventually completely uproot, wither away, even the subtle tendencies, the subtle habits of our mind toward greed, toward wanting to become, toward delusion.

This is like a manual of skillful means that the Buddha is giving us here in this sutta. What I get excited about is it's not just limited to this one sutta. As I start reading it and then going to other suttas, other discourses, just sticking to what the Buddha said in the discourses, there's so much relevant, really practical material—so much that I'm indulging myself a little by bringing in more quotations from suttas than I normally would, since I would otherwise telescope this whole talk into one. So I hope you can take it. It is the Buddha's words.

Just to remind you very briefly, this first sutta—we're talking about Majjhima Nikaya number two, which is called "All the Asavas." All the asavas, translated as taints—I don't like that—but we could say the deeply underlying habit of the mind to respond or erupt into craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, really personality view, and just basic ignorance, misunderstanding what's what. These subtle underlying tendencies are what the Buddha is saying wise attention or appropriate attention is the tool that can really help us, not to violently remove, but it's as if a seed in our stream of consciousness doesn't get watered, doesn't get watered, doesn't get watered, until finally it so withers that even given the perfect conditions for greed to arise, it doesn't. So that's a possibility. As the Buddha said, if it was not possible, I would not tell you to do so.

We began in talking about the sutta, where he speaks of seven specific ways, seven specific areas of working with this. The first one being asavas or habits, subtle habits abandoned by seeing. And he says, "Bhikkhus, I say that there is an exhaustion of asavas in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see." Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. In other words, we know and understand both wise or appropriate attention and unwise or inappropriate attention. Understanding what both of these can lead to is a huge tool in our practice.

In ones abandoned by seeing, seeing really means how we pay attention. The Buddha defines wise or appropriate attention, yoniso manasikara, as basically knowing what it's appropriate to pay attention to. In other words, in paying attention to this, it leads to a decrease in greed, a decrease in hatred, in wanting to become, a decrease in delusion. Unwise attention leads to an increase in these things.

And how do we discover or know whether these things are increasing or decreasing in ourselves? Simply by mindfulness, right? Not from somebody else telling us. It's often not even by our actions. We can control our actions through sila, and that's essential.

But our mind, as you may know—you may have once or twice had the experience of looking good, so to speak, and the mind is just riddled with whatever your particular favorites are.

So the Buddha is saying, still, it's not that only good things are worth attention, only bad things are not worth attention. It's not in the thing at all—it's in how we pay attention, the quality of attention. This is what makes it wise or unwise, appropriate or inappropriate.

So remember, just in closing last week I was talking about the way we pay attention, which is of course the first aspect of this first way of abandoning the āsavas by seeing—which is of course our basic mindfulness.

I don't need to go through that all again. You all really have it down: basic mindfulness. In other words, full and total attention to just what is in this moment, without adding anything extra.

Someone asked me to repeat this, so I will. One way of paying attention in that way, from the Buddha: "Dry up the remains of your past and have nothing for your future. If you do not cling to the present, then you go from place to place in peace." Just in one moment—that's mindfulness. That totality of attention that's not dragging the whole past after us, not projecting into the future, and not analyzing or clinging to or explaining the present. It's not saying, "Yes, this is happening, therefore blah, blah, blah about me." Just pure presence.

And Thanissaro Bhikkhu had a lovely way—he's pointing to something the Buddha said—a lovely way, I thought, of expressing this: noticing just what is present and what is absent in the mind. The mind at the moment is filled with ill will. At the moment there is no mettā. That's just an example. That would be appropriate attention, seeing what's what.

And as Thanissaro points out, that is beginning to enter into emptiness. He's using a phrase from the Buddha in a particular sutta where the Buddha is talking about very gross ways of entering into emptiness, all the way to the ultimate sublime freedom of mind. By emptiness, he simply means the perception that knows this is present, but this moment is empty of that. If ill will is present, the moment is empty of mettā, for example. Just that basic, that simple.

The sutta actually starts by saying if the monk leaves the city and goes into the forest, then he realizes his perception is basically empty of city, empty of people—but it's not empty of trees and forest. That basic.

So when we're simply attending with this quality of non-judging, full attention—your whole being, but not one bit extra—that's this entering into emptiness. Knowing this is here, just this much, nothing extra. This is, again, from Thanissaro, pointing out that this is another way of saying the paragraph that comes in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Sutta right at the end of each section. After the person has gone through all the different aspects of mindfulness on that foundation—whether mindfulness of body, or feeling, or mind, or mental qualities—this is Thanissaro's translation: "There is mindfulness just to the extent that there is body, or there is feeling, or there is citta, consciousness, or there are dhammas, mental qualities. Mindfulness just that there is body is maintained simply to the extent of knowing and seeing this, and thus he rests independent, not sustained by, not clinging to anything in this world."

Just one moment of pure seeing is entering into that emptiness for a moment. This is really, perhaps, the most subtle but also very accessible to us—perfection of appropriate attention. And in that moment, not only gross or vivid manifestations of the suffering habits of mind aren't being acted out, but even these subtle tendencies are not being fed.

So you all know that. That's kind of the peak, the height of our practice—that which we aspire to every waking moment of the day, right?

But the Buddha, being the practical being it appears that he was, doesn't just say that and then walk away and say, "Okay, it's up to you." He goes on, even just in this one sutta, even in this first section of this one sutta, giving lots of different ways to work at it—all based in wise attention.

So I want to go into some other ways, just in this first part, of how the āsavas are abandoned by seeing—by seeing both wise or appropriate attention and unwise or inappropriate attention.

There's a whole way of describing how both the āsavas and the hindrances are fed by inappropriate or unwise attention that's really quite specific. Attending in the wrong way causes these very subtle tendencies, these habits of our mind, to strengthen. And we're not talking about strengthening anger on the level of going around screaming in the woods and hitting trees. That's one level that's relatively obvious. We're talking on much more subtle levels here, but these levels are very accessible to us when we're in a long, silent retreat like this, just paying attention. You start to notice it without judging.

So it's said that what causes the first of these āsavas, sense desire or desire for sensuality, to arise and increase is unwise attention to gratification in sense pleasure. Not just sense pleasure—that's one thing—but the gratification in the sense. "This really tastes

good." For who, you know? Me. "This is so beautiful." And behind it is, "It really makes me feel good." Unwise attention to the gratification in sense pleasure causes the āsava of sense desire to arise and increase.

Unwise attention to gratification in exalted states—meaning high states, meditative states—is what causes the āsava of becoming, of being, to arise and strengthen. Now you might think, "I can't even have—you know, I work all this time and I can't even have a high meditative state." But the teaching didn't say the state itself.

It is unwise attention to the gratification, the clinging, the grasping quality in it. This is really quite profound, because we can actually see this happening.

The third cause is much broader, because it addresses what causes ignorance to arise and increase: unwise attention to any mundane thing in the wrong way. What does this mean? Any mundane thing—mundane means everyday, it means basically everything. Unwise attention to any mundane thing in the wrong way causes ignorance to arise and increase.

The wrong way is, of course, very specific. It is what the Buddha calls perversions, or the turning upside down of perceptions, which we are doing constantly. The four perversions or turning upside down of perceptions are: when we perceive the impermanent as permanent (which, I don't know about you, but that's happening constantly over here); when we perceive the painful as pleasurable; when we perceive what is not-self as self; and when we perceive what is unbeautiful as beautiful.

The first three of these are the three characteristics. We perceive the impermanent as permanent—not seeing anicca, not seeing impermanence. When we perceive the painful as pleasurable, it's not really understanding dukkha. Perceiving not-self as self is not getting anatta. The fourth one, perceiving what is unbeautiful as beautiful, isn't a characteristic that covers all experience. It tends to be more relative to the body—this idea that when we're perceiving our body as this really beautiful thing, this bag of skin over the bones and the blood and the guts and the pus, we don't see all of that. We think, "Wow, isn't this beautiful?"

But I think what's really interesting is this: unwise attention is the proximate or immediate cause for ignorance to arise in a moment. Knowing this is so vital, so helpful. By knowing it, I mean just noticing in a moment how we're attending inaccurately. These upside-down perceptions, these perversions of perception—for example, seeing the impermanent as permanent—lead to a perversion of citta, of thought, of mind. Be-

cause then that's how we think about that object or ourselves. And then that leads to perversion of view. That becomes our view: "This is me" or "This is permanent." That leads to our actions in the world.

So it really starts on this most subtle level of perceiving inaccurately and not recognizing it. This is considered āyoniso manasikāra, unwise or inappropriate attention. And just by noticing how this is happening, it can change right back to wise attention. It's not like we're hapless victims, stuck with this with nothing we can do about it.

Let me turn to the five hindrances, because the Buddha speaks about them in the same way—seeing how we pay attention in an unwise or inappropriate way in the moment feeds these hindrances in our mind stream. When we see that, when we pay attention to the appropriate thing in the appropriate way, the hindrances decrease, or if they haven't arisen, they don't arise.

I think this is very useful, not just at the beginning of a retreat. We always talk about hindrances at the beginning of a retreat, and those of you who just came and we've been going on and on might have thought, "Good, now I don't have to hear about the hindrances because the retreat already began." But it's not true that the hindrances just come at the beginning of a retreat. Is that so? Those of you who've been here three months, am I lying?

What is often true is that they come in with a knockout blow at the beginning of a retreat. It's not just subtle sloth and torpor—we can't lift our head off the pillow for three days. They appear in their gross form. But the five hindrances do arise from moment to moment later in retreat as well. This is when it can surprise us, and when learning how to work with wise attention can be both fascinating (you can see I get fascinated with all this) and really liberating.

Instead of just thinking, "Oh my God, my practice was going so well and now ill will and craving are coming and all I can do is wait it out"—doesn't it feel like that sometimes? "I try to know it. It doesn't happen. I just have to wait it out, one foot in front of the other, until it finally goes away and I can keep practicing." Instead of that, we can really learn what's feeding the arising of this hindrance in this moment, or should we have missed that particular subtle moment of its arising, what's feeding its continuing? What can take away the food? What starves the hindrance, as the Buddha talks about it in another way? It doesn't mean you starve it for one second and it's gone forever, but it begins to lose its strength and gets less.

Oh bhikkhus, I will teach you the feeding and the starving of the five hindrances.

The Buddha does the same for the seven factors of awakening, but we're not going to make it there tonight.

So, feeding the hindrances. What is the food for the arising of unarisen sensual desire and for the growth and increase of sense desire once it's already here? What feeds that in the moment? Again, it's the theme of beauty—to give inappropriate attention to the sign of the beautiful, to the beautiful in something, as well as the gratification in it. This fosters the growth and increase of sense desire.

It doesn't mean we don't see anything beautiful. But just notice—someone said, "Oh, it's so beautiful here. It's so beautiful, it's hard to practice." What's happening in that moment? Notice when you walk outside: "Oh, that's beautiful." There's a way of appreciating beauty that's just pure presence, that's inspiring, that's onward leading. And there's a way of "This is so beautiful, I want more, I want more." That's fostering, increasing the habit of wanting, of craving. And we can watch that. We can watch it in a moment.

What's the food for the arising of unarisen ill will or the growth and increase of it? There is the theme of irritation—to foster inappropriate attention to it. See, he's not saying irritation should or will never arise until you're past third stage. But the inappropriate attention to it—I remember Sayadaw U Pandita saying once, it's like a cow chewing its cud. You know, it calls it up from the stomach where it's storing it and chews it over. Even the word we use in English is similar: it ruminates. And that's what we do. There's some irritation, whether it's something from the so-called past or something that happens right now. It happens, it's gone. Maybe there's unpleasant irritation, it's gone. But then we call it up. We ruminate: "I can't believe that person did that. I just can't believe that would happen in a place like this." Or "I can't believe I did that." Or "I can't believe they think the windows shouldn't be open." Whatever it is. We just chew it over and over like a cow chewing its cud. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that's unwise attention. But sometimes we don't think to look in that way—that that's fostering not just ill will in the moment, but the underlying habit for ill will to arise. And this is really what we're learning to starve: this habit.

What's the food for the arising of unarisen sloth and drowsiness and the continuance of it? There is boredom, weariness, yawning, drowsiness after a meal, and sluggishness of awareness—to give inappropriate attention to these things. To really focus, to really let your attention get sucked down into the drowsiness.

The food for the arising of unarisen restlessness and anxiety or remorse—he just says here there is non-stillness of awareness, to foster inappropriate attention to that. But I have another example from another sutta that I really like, one that is much more

of a specific example of how we give inappropriate attention to an experience that leads into this restlessness and worry of mind. The Buddha says an ordinary person who regards body as the self, or the self as being in the body—any of those views—when change occurs to this person's body, it becomes different. You're sitting, you're paying attention, some change occurs to your body. Maybe a subtle change, maybe gross. You look in the mirror after a month and it's like, "Oh my god, I can't believe how I look." Whatever it is. Because of this change and alteration in the body, the bhikkhu's consciousness becomes preoccupied with bodily change. Due to this preoccupation with bodily change, worried thoughts arise and persist, laying a firm hold on his mind.

"Oh, that tingle in my knee wasn't there yesterday. Hmm, that tingle, that twitch, it's a little stronger today. Hmm, at the end of the sitting, this tingle is actually stronger and it's spread a little more." When you get up and walk, is it there?

Is it not there? What makes it come? What makes it go? Is it something I should do about it? Can I leave it alone? Do I have to sit differently? Do I need to see a surgeon? On and on it goes—the mind lays a firm hold through this mental obsession. Through this obsession, we become fearful and distressed, and being full of desire and attachment, we become worried.

Can you relate to any of this? Unwise attention to various thoughts leading to a lack of stillness of mind, based of course on the perversion of perception regarding body as self, not expecting it to change. That's an example of unwise attention.

And then there's doubt and uncertainty, which we talked about the other night. Remember, it's in the first sutta where he says—he phrases it differently here—that there are different phenomena that act as a foothold for uncertainty, and to give inappropriate attention to them is the problem. But remember the example I read last week, where he gives examples of things that are not fit for attention, thoughts that lead to doubt: "What was I in past time? Was I in past time? Was I not? Did I exist before? What was I in the past, and what am I going to be in the future? Will I be in the future? What am I now? Having been such in the past, how will it come in the future?"

You could see this in terms of past lives and future lives. You could see it in terms of your last sitting and your next sitting. You could see it in terms of how good your concentration was yesterday and how good it's going to be tomorrow if you keep going like this. You can think, "Well, last retreat I practiced in this way and that happened. What would happen in this retreat if I practice in this way? But now I'm practicing in that way, and this is happening, but maybe this isn't as good as how it was when I practiced that way in the last retreat." This is unwise attention to various phenomena that foster uncertainty.

It's not that these thoughts arise—sure they arise. But giving unwise attention to them is giving them all the power and getting really lost in them.

And of course, what starves the hindrances is just the opposite of these things. The first, of course, is always simple mindfulness. Rather than being lost in how beautiful this is, in the gratification, in "Can I have more?"—just knowing "beautiful, pleasant." That's enough. For all the hindrances, you know that.

But you also know that at times, that just doesn't cut it. It's gone too far down the road. And at that time, the Buddha gives specific things that starve the hindrances. I'll just mention them very briefly.

Lack of food for sense desire is the theme of unattractiveness. In other words, when we're really caught up—say, let's take a vipassanā romance, and the mind invests that person with everything beautiful, with everything wonderful. So, just to be really classical Theravāda about it, try imagining that person, the thirty-two parts of their body. Just imagine their organs, their liver, their intestines. Imagine the blood, the lymph. You don't have to go too far down the road. It's not that you hate them, but the desire just falls away. It doesn't really hold any juice.

You don't have to even be that classical—just look at the basic unattractiveness, the suffering nature of the desire itself. Just don't feed that sense of gratification in the beauty, in the pleasantness. That's all.

It's the same with ill will, although of course there's also the positive turning of the mind towards mettā. When we're really lost in ill will, turning the mind towards mettā can really function as an antidote.

With sloth and torpor, drowsiness, yawning, the Buddha says to arouse energy, to give appropriate attention to energy. I've also found that simply withdrawing the unwise attention to the tiredness, the fogginess, the sloth and torpor—that actually makes a difference.

It stops feeding it.

An example. Again, we're talking about something somewhat subtle here. We're not talking about when you're so exhausted you can't get out of bed, or you're sitting in here and your head's hitting the floor and you open your mouth and it's all sloth and torpor. Then you need a little grosser intervention.

But when you're more quiet in the mind and you can sometimes either just feel it coming in like a wave, or you can notice that things are getting really fuzzy, or there's just that sense of "it's too hard"—that's actually sloth and torpor. "It's just too hard to be with this right now. I think I need a tea." That's actually, in that tone of voice when it comes in my mind, that's not compassionate, skillful means. That's giving unwise, inappropriate attention to the torpor, to the sluggishness. It's kind of letting that mind state be the veil through which the show's being run.

And I found—and believe me, I have inordinate experience with this particular hindrance; it's my old friend, in and out of retreat.

CHAPTER 307

Meeting Aversion With Kindness

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this intimate talk, Carol Wilson examines dosa—the Pāli term encompassing the full spectrum of aversive mental states from mild irritation to rage, from anxiety to self-hatred. She illuminates how these experiences arise not as personal failures but as conditioned responses rooted in our misunderstanding of the First Noble Truth and our mistaken sense of separation.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of the two darts (from SN 36.6), Wilson explains how our suffering multiplies not from the initial unpleasant experience itself, but from our reactive resistance to it—the second arrow we shoot at ourselves through self-judgment and denial. She shares personal examples, including a moment of conflict just before the talk, demonstrating how awareness of bodily sensations and the willingness to "dive into the wave" of difficulty can interrupt the cycle of escalating reactivity.*
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> *Wilson offers practical approaches for working with aversion: direct mindfulness of the triggering sense experience, attention to the physical residue of anger and fear, "stomping meditation" for overwhelming emotions, mettā practice as a means of reconnecting rather than overriding difficult feelings, and the cultivation of patience. Through the moving words of Etty Hillesum from the concentration camps and her own healing journey, she points toward the possibility of open-hearted presence even in the midst of suffering—revealing that our willingness to meet unpleasant experience directly, rather than flee from it, is itself the doorway to liberation.*

Tonight I want to pick up where Sylvia left off last night, which you may or may not remember. She was beginning to talk about the state of aversion or anger—being with that difficult state. Tonight I want to talk specifically about, in some detail, investigating together these various states of heart and mind that get lumped together under the big title of aversion.

The word in Pali—I like the Pali word just because it's broader and doesn't have all the same limiting connotations we have on aversion in English—the Pali word is *dosa*, and it covers a wide range of mental states which have in common what we would call aversion, pulling back from the experience. So I'll just read you a few of them: hatred, aversion, ill will, irritation, boredom, resistance, denial, impatience, annoyance, anger,

rage, guilt, dislike, depression, sorrow, regret, violence, aggression, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror, self-judging, self-hatred. That's not the whole list, I'm sure. But it's amazing, isn't it? What a range. And you can imagine, you can feel the underlying similarity.

What's very important in exploring this aspect of our experience is that we hold it in the larger context of the non-deluded heart and mind, that we explore these states from the understanding of truth rather than from the perspective of identification and self-referencing. One of the great difficulties many of us have in really understanding these states of heart and mind and seeing for ourselves how they continue our suffering is that we get so easily identified with them. By even acknowledging their presence, we already feel ten times worse about ourselves just because they're there. And so, of course, we don't even want to look at them. And we just get further and further from the truth.

I think it's really important as we begin looking carefully, exploring, to have a willingness to explore these experiences when they arise for you, to see that it's not personal. It's not who I am. It's not who you are. Aversion and any of these states arise due to habitual conditioning. If we can see that and not identify so strongly, then we can begin to discover how aversion functions to obstruct our connectedness to inner peace, our connectedness to wholeness, to integrity of being, how it obstructs joy and connectedness.

Aversion arises due to lawful conditionings, the root conditioning being ignorance. Aversion arises because we do not know things, we do not know ourselves in their true nature in the moment that aversion arises. We're not understanding or seeing clearly. Because of that not seeing clearly, aversion comes.

The first thing that I think we don't understand fully in a moment when we get lost in any of these states of aversion is actually the First Noble Truth—that all of our struggle with these states of anger, fear, ill will, self-judgment basically stem from not fully opening to and integrating what the Buddha stated: there is unsatisfactoriness in this life, in this mind and body. It's not all unsatisfactory, luckily. But we think it shouldn't be any unsatisfactory. And it's not just individually one or two of us who have that impression while everybody else is clued in to how things are. Really broadly—personally, in our families, in our society—our learned response to sickness, old age, disease, being separated from those we love or from what we want, not getting what we want, having to hang out with what we don't want.

I must say putting 150 people together in a room all day is a great way to begin exploring what it's like to be together with what you don't want and to be separated from what you want. You're sitting here, and you can either be exploring the truth of the

First Noble Truth, or we can be going with our normal habits: "This isn't happening; if I don't pay attention, it won't keep happening." Or "It's a mistake that it's happening, and if I get angry enough or figure out the right thing, I can fix it." Or "It's my fault that it's happening because I'm a loser or I'm not spiritual enough." When suffering comes up—and it's not just sitting here, but when you're sick, when something really hard happens in your life—it's really easy to either deny or to turn it inward into some kind of self-blame or self-judgment. In big things and little things.

Society seems to hold, underlying our relationship to the First Noble Truth, the unspoken assumption that if we get it right, suffering's going to stop. Isn't that really it, if you're honest with yourself? Don't you think if you practice right, nothing unpleasant's going to happen anymore? I catch myself in that all the time. And so the unpleasant experience itself—now not the extra suffering of hating and judging, but the unpleasant experience itself—becomes a sign that there's something wrong with us or something wrong with the world.

When we're not deeply understanding the First Noble Truth, we miss that no matter how well we understand the nature of things, no matter how good we are, sometimes bad things happen. That's just the way it is. Aversion arises in the first place because in that moment we're confronted with something unpleasant and there's that underlying tendency: if I can get away from it, everything will be okay; if I can deny it, everything will be okay. Of course, deeply somewhere, we know that's not true. It's just that we don't really know how to meet unpleasant experience wholeheartedly, openheartedly, with kind awareness, so that in that moment, that unpleasant experience can be our access to freedom.

It doesn't have to only be pleasant. But we really don't know how to do it.

And yet somewhere in us, I feel—both personally and culturally—that ability to be open-hearted and courageous in the face of suffering inspires us enormously. Doesn't it? For me, all through history, the writers I'm drawn to, the historical figures I'm drawn to, are most often people who have in some way or other been able to be in the midst of suffering I couldn't even begin to comprehend from my life, and still had the greatness of heart to be present, to be a courageous witness for society in the midst of the suffering, to be open to it without—in fact, not only without losing the beauty, but to see that the suffering, the opening to suffering itself, is our access to truth.

I think it was Jack who was quoting Martin Luther King the other night, just as an example. Incredibly inspiring. Or this woman I've read before, Etty Hillesum, who was in the concentration camps in World War II—a Dutch woman who just naturally had this ability. She wrote diaries; she died in the concentration camps. And I think it touches us so deeply because it awakens that potential in ourselves.

She says: "It is possible to suffer with dignity and without. Most of us in the West don't understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair. God knows it's only too easy to understand why. I'm in Poland every day on the battlefields, if that's what one can call them. I often see visions of poisonous green smoke. I am with the hungry, with the ill-treated, and the dying every day. But I am also with the jasmine and with that piece of sky beyond my window. There's room for everything in a single life. I sometimes bow my head under the great burden that weighs down on me. But even as I bow my head, I also feel the need, almost mechanically, to fold my hands. And so I can sit for hours and know everything and bear everything and grow stronger in the bearing of it. And at the same time, feel sure that life is beautiful and worth living and meaningful."

Somewhere, I just really trust that even if we don't know it consciously, we know that potential for such open-hearted presence in the face of seemingly unbearable suffering and conflict is the point of real liberation of heart, the point of real freedom. None of you would be sitting here hours on end if somewhere there wasn't that understanding.

But I think it's really easy for us to forget. And in the forgetting, we come back into our old habits, which is that if I can get away from this unpleasant thing, then I'll really be happy. And then we get caught in the cycle of judging when the natural habit of aversion comes up.

So we have to begin by understanding: our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. Certainly it looks as though I am separate from other people and all other phenomena. As long as we think we're separate, we're going to suffer. We feel we have to defend ourselves. We have to find something in the world that will make us happy.

The response of aversion to what is unpleasant arises exactly from this misconception that I'm separate, that somehow I can hold myself apart from this difficult experience. We don't think it out so clearly, but that's what's going on. And in fact, what happens is that in trying to hold ourselves separate, in trying to achieve happiness that way, we're actually creating the sense of separation—that needing to defend, that fear

that I might have to be united with what is difficult. So it's a cycle. From the misconception of thinking we are separate, we act in a way that continues the experience of separation and loneliness and alienation.

The Buddha said that lust—meaning just that thirst, that driven desire—hate, and delusion are each a matter of measurement. What does he mean by that? Lust or hate or delusion, in the moment it's arising in the mind or heart, imposes a sense of limitation, a sense of restriction to the heart and mind, when in actuality the heart, the mind, is limitless, boundless.

Explore this in your time here. The desert is a great way to approach that sense of the limitless heart and mind, the boundless, infinitely spacious heart and mind. If you're just walking in the desert, simply present—nothing special—lifting the foot, seeing the cholla, feeling the breath, smelling whatever, just a step, notice that in that there isn't a sense of limitation or restriction. You're not necessarily thinking, "Oh, incredible, the heart and mind is limitless, boundless." But if you were to bring in your attention, that would be the experience. And the moment that wanting something comes up, or not liking something comes up, there's a sense of limits, of walls, of restrictions coming in.

So our work is learning to understand, not to hate aversion or fear or anger—which is, I think, what we often fall into—but to really be willing to meet it wholeheartedly so that we can understand the truth of who we are. And this requires, I think, first an acceptance of the fact of any of these forms of aversion when they arise in our experience. I don't know if I can overemphasize this, because we say this all the time, but it's really rather hard to do.

I know for myself, in the last few years there was a period when something in my patterning shifted, and I really started to accept the fact that aversion frequently arises in my mind—that it's a very strongly ingrained habit and not who I was. It got to be actually very amusing. I amuse myself a lot with the way aversive thoughts come up.

I don't know if I amuse anyone else with it—that's another thing entirely—but to be able to actually be okay with these states when they come up in your experience... and that doesn't mean acting on them. I'm talking about just really seeing and being okay with these states when they arise. It's amazingly freeing because we're no longer locked in this endless cycle of fighting.

To do this, we need the tools of mindfulness, the tools of acceptance, the willingness to do just the opposite of what everything in us is screaming we need to do. Instead of turning away from the unpleasantness, instead of turning away from our fear and anger, instead of trying to pretend we don't feel it or act it out, we just turn fully into it, knowing that there is the place of peace and rest.

It's counterintuitive and it's a little hard to do. A good friend of mine was telling me how—she's kind of a big lady—her two grown sons, when they go somewhere with big waves at a beach, are always trying to tell her that when a huge wave is coming, you need to turn around and just dive right into it. You just go right under it, no problem. And intellectually, she said, "I know this, but I've only ever been able to do it once. Every other time, as soon as I see it coming, I just turn and run and it clobbers me—just rolls me all over. And they're screaming, 'Dive into it! Dive into it!' I just can't do it."

It's sort of like that. We turn and run and we're clobbered. Or we just say, "No, this isn't happening. It's not coming. I'll just sit here and it'll go away"—and wham. The next thing we know, what started as a minor irritation turns into some kind of murderous rage and we don't know how it happened.

So it begins by really accepting that in our normal state—as the Buddha said, we uneducated worldlings, we normal not-completely-awakened beings—for us, aversion, fear, aggression, irritation, that response to the unpleasant, it's part of life. It's part of our conditioning, it's part of the conditioning of every culture. And by denying it or hating ourselves for it, we're just adding more fear and aversion on top of it.

Sometimes in spiritual practice, I find it's easy to use the ideals against ourselves. You know that, for instance, freedom means the complete uprooting of greed, hatred, and delusion. And then subtly, every time greed or hatred arises, there's this subtle thing in the background: "I'm blowing it. If I were really spiritual, I wouldn't be having this reaction now." And it's really hard then to let it in.

Just as an experiment, I want to share something from Pema Chödrön, something I often read because I find it very inspiring. Just listen a minute. She talks about how every day we could think about the aggression all over the world. All over the world, everybody always strikes out at the enemy and the pain escalates forever. Every day we could reflect on this and ask ourselves, "Am I going to add to the aggression in the world?" Every day, at the moment when things get edgy, we can just ask ourselves, "Am I going to practice peace, or am I going to war?"

Now in one way I find that a wonderful and really helpful idea—when I have enough awareness that I notice I'm edgy, I notice aggression is about to come up, and I have a choice. It's a wonderful reflection: do I want to add to the aggression in the world?

But I don't know—did any of you have a feeling of, "Gee, so here today I was so furious at that person sitting nearby doing that, and all I was doing was adding to the aggression in the world. That isn't why I came here. It's another proof that by being here and allowing these thoughts to come up, I'm adding to the aggression in the world. I'm creating bad karma. I'm a bad person."

It's not so easy to just sit there and feel the shoot of aversion and say, "Oh yeah, that's aversion. That's anger. That's fear." So we have to begin by deeply accepting that it's a part of life. Although every culture deals with it differently, most of the ways we deal with it are coping mechanisms—keeping the aggression kind of under the rug, ways to contain it within the culture. I think that's a good idea; it's better that we should cope with it than just all run amok. But there's also the potential for understanding it. And the understanding is what liberates us, what frees our heart from the grip of fear and aversion.

So we have to start first by really looking at it. I just read this in the newspaper, from Tokyo:

"My intention, honest, was not to scar these Japanese kids for life. I just wanted to give them a fun game to play. It was the fifth birthday party last year for my son Gregory, and he had invited all his Japanese friends over from the Tokyo kindergarten that he attended. My wife and I explained the rules of musical chairs, and we started the music. It was not so awful for the Japanese boys. They managed to fight for seats, albeit a bit lamely, but the girls were at sea. The first time I stopped the music, Gregory's five-year-old girlfriend, Chitose-chan, was next to him right in front of a chair, but she stood politely and waited for him to be seated first. So Gregory scrambled into her seat, and Chitose-chan beamed proudly at her own good manners. Then I walked over and told her she had just lost the game. She gazed up at me, her eyes full of shocked disbelief, looking like Bambi might after a discussion of venison burgers."

"You mean I lose because I'm polite?" Cheetos-chan's eyes asked. "You mean the point of the game is to be rude?"

It's true. I guess that is the point. And he just goes on to reflect about the difference between the values of American and Japanese culture. In Japan, he asks, how else could a country the size of California with 125 million people packed into it—that's half of the U.S. in California—how else could they maintain it?

So he says, maybe that's one reason that Japan has few armed robbers, but also so few entrepreneurs. The American emphasis on winning may help explain why the United States consistently racks up Olympic gold medals, but also why its hockey players trashed their rooms in Nagano when they lost.

But every culture—it comes out in here at the end. Little Cheetos-chan, while she may be polite, shortly after the game of musical chairs, she and her friend Naoko-chan got into an argument over a party favor. Cheetos-chan slugged Naoko-chan in the mouth and grabbed the toy.

It's there, you know. It's there. It comes out one way or the other, however our culture tries to contain it. So we need the culture, but the point of resting at ease is that we really understand and can be there in the middle of losing the toy, or losing the game, or losing our best friend. And we can be there in that uncertainty and not lose our peace.

So let's begin by actually exploring the experience of any of these forms of aversion when they arise. Whenever you notice a moment of aversion, irritation, or fear, in the moment of its arising, it's always arising as a response to one of the six sense experiences that's happening here and now. We might not recognize it, but there's an unpleasant sound and a moment of irritation, or maybe there's an unpleasant memory and a stab of fear, or an unpleasant physical sensation and a moment of irritation or anger or terror. Even when we're furious at something that happened ten years ago, it was still triggered by a sense experience arising in this moment. The memory of ten years ago is a thought arising in this moment.

We of course won't always be able to see that, but one of the great things about these retreats is you can take the little things and explore how it works, because it works just the same in the big things.

So in that moment of an unpleasant sound arising and we don't like it, there's aversion or irritation or anger—what's your actual experience? Tune into the reactive experience. How does it function? It's as if internally what I feel—but look for yourself—it's almost physical, as all the attention, the mind, the heart, almost physically shrinks

back away from that experience. It really makes a gap. We don't want to touch it. We don't want to recognize it. We don't want to know it. Really trying to hold ourselves separate.

And into that gap, because wherever there's a gap the attention isn't connected, it's as if somehow that leaves room for all kinds of really fascinating stuff to come up. And since you're seeing it through the filter of aversion at that moment, what will come up is all the stories about it, the interpretations, more reaction, maybe self-judgment, and a whole cycle. What's actually happening is that we don't really know what the particular experience is that's triggering it, because we're not connected with our attention.

I mean, we give this instruction all the time: something simple and repetitive like a sound in the hall that you can keep going back to. When you find your enormous reaction, there's thoughts and feelings and emotions and they're spinning and they just seem to cycle more and more until pretty soon that person who's making that noise is somewhere equivalent to the great tyrants of the world as far as their insensitivity and the amount of suffering that they're creating. We just project everything into them, followed by a deep sense of unworthiness for having had such a horrible thought. And then we turn the whole mess back on ourselves. And we never actually meet the sound, which is just a poor little sound arising, an experience not really doing anything—and we're gone.

This can go on for hours, days, weeks. What's really interesting to observe about the quality of both anger and fear—those are sort of the two sides of aversion—is how in one moment of its arising, the physiological effects are really quite strong. Dan Goleman talks about this in his book *Emotional Intelligence*. If you have a moment of not liking something, of anger, you really feel it in your body. In fact, if you watch over time, it leaves a real residue. Even when your mind doesn't feel angry anymore, the body is still holding on to it, still buzzing.

And it leaves this real residue. What happens is the residue itself is unpleasant. And so before it's quite gone away, even though the mind might be calm again, the next unpleasant thing that arises, just the slightest aversion triggers that residue that didn't really go away. And so the physical reaction is even stronger. It can be that what starts as a very mild irritation, but we don't really bring awareness to it, ends up so furious—where just some little thing triggers you to such an extent that you explode and you're really surprised. Why did that happen?

Because we didn't really notice the residue, the physical residue building. So without our mindfulness, it's really important to see how this becomes a self-perpetuating cycle.

The first line of understanding how aversion works is this: if it's something relatively mild, see if you can notice what sense experience is triggering the aversion or fear right now. And then you dive into the wave. You bring your attention right into that experience instead of trying to get away from it. This is our place of clear seeing and peace. Everything in you will say, "No, no, no." But if you really dive in, it's like, "Oh, hearing." You can do it with this buzz in the room. When it starts to bug you, instead of moving away and pretending it doesn't happen, go into it. It's just a buzz. We can do this all the time.

Sometimes what happens is this—when Sylvia talked about a kind of grumpy mind, you know, and you're just going on all day grumbling about everything. Every little thing that comes into experience, every sight, every person, you just have some really negative reaction. And you can't really figure out why psychologically. You don't know what's going on.

This happens to me often. I've noticed on retreat, one time I was doing walking meditation and I felt really present. I was noticing all the mental experience which was moving from mildly unpleasant to extreme self-judging to running through a litany of everything wrong I ever did to anybody back to the third grade. And suddenly I kind of pulled back and said, "What's going on here?" And I noticed I wasn't paying any attention to my physical experience. When I tuned in physically, there was a really mild pain in my toe—really mild—but not noticing it. Every time I took a step, I was just pushing it slightly out of the range of awareness. And so there was a slight aversion, a pulling away. Denial is a form of aversion. And through that veil of aversion, all the thoughts that were arising were taking that color and turning into self-judgment.

I notice this a lot when I'm tired. I used to get really annoyed and cranky and irritable at everything when tired. It took me years to figure out that if I turn my attention to my body, it's really uncomfortable when I'm tired. It doesn't feel good. All I have to do is notice that. "Oh yes, unpleasant." And that's all that's happening. But because it's something going on sort of subliminally all day, whenever we move away from it and get a little off balance, a little spaced out, the aversion comes in. We don't notice it and we get involved in our reactions to something else.

A friend of mine told me once after I was talking about this, "Yeah, I tuned in. I'd been really in a nasty mood and I saw that my sweatshirt was a little too tight." And that's all that was going on. He had worked up all these stories all day and his sweatshirt was a little tight.

So sometimes when you find yourself getting into a state and you don't notice anything obvious, just open up a little bit. What's happening now? Just tune in. It can be so minor. And without our awareness of it, it can turn into a really big thing.

And then, of course, there are plenty of times when either the anger, the aversion, or the fear is not minor. It doesn't just get triggered from some little sound—or whatever triggers it, forget it, you're never going to know—because it comes rushing up in a huge wave of emotion. Sometimes that's the hardest for us to really accept, to be willing to be with. There's this sense of, "I've been going along really well, quite mindful, quite aware, cultivating metta, and suddenly from nowhere there's this wave of anger or self-loathing or aggression." Sometimes it's really hard to just accept that as another impersonal cloud.

So when it's strong like that, it's helpful just to move into the energy itself. The acceptance is so key because without it, we get back into that cycle of "this shouldn't be happening, I shouldn't be doing this," and pretty soon we're way down the road.

I'll give you a personal example from about forty-five minutes ago. Thanks to Franz, who I think deliberately planned this to give me something to talk about. He didn't do anything wrong. I was out walking in the desert just before this—really spacious, happy, open, peaceful. When we're no longer suppressing things, I think this is really key, because a lot of the way we deal with fear and strong anger is to pretend we don't feel it. So it will come up in these rushes when we're really open and spacious and not in our normal mode of suppression.

I came back in this really open, happy space. We started having a discussion about making travel plans for the future—that's really a great discussion to get into just before giving a talk. Within two minutes—"I want to do it this way," "I want to do it this way"—well, not even two minutes, ten seconds, I went from being really open and spacious to this huge uprush. We could call it aversion, or anger, or "I'm not getting what I want," or "I might not get what I want in the future." And whoosh.

And it's really amazing to just watch that come up. Okay, so I didn't, the first second it came up, say, "Wow, isn't this amazing?" I have to acknowledge it took a couple of minutes. And in that couple of minutes, you could really see how—I mean, we both started like this, and then we both said, "Okay, cool it." Because you could really see: you don't need to do this now. Cool it.

But there's that residual burning, that ash going on in the body. So we say "cool it," but then, you know, we start off again. Okay, cool it. Then the other one: "Yeah, but in fact..." Okay, really cool it. And then the recognition of it.

I know years ago I would have piled on top of that a whole layer of, "I can't believe you're still so infantile to get so upset about something like that. And just before talking you were so open, and now it's ruined, and you're never going to feel open again." And that ensures the fact that you don't feel open again. Believe me. Take it from me. You don't have to do that.

And instead, I could see that starting. We could both see the tendency to want to keep going until one of us battered the other into submission. And we just said, "Okay, you know, cool it." And he went out for a walk and I just stared at the wall for a while. And I just started doing what I'm suggesting you do. I'm here to tell you that it works.

Pay attention. And I saw that actually quite quickly it went away from my mind. I didn't really stay in this tight space. But it doesn't go away from the body nearly so quickly. So I could just feel the reverberations in my body and the tightness and the burning. So I just paid attention to that. And that's all it is, you know—just sensations in the body, tightness and burning.

And as soon as I would start spacing out—this is why the awareness, the willingness to come and be with it with kind awareness, is so important. Not figuring out who's right or wrong or anything, but just being with the sensations, it's fine. As soon as I'd stop that and kind of space out or drift back into the conversation, or "maybe this or that," whoosh—the whole thing was really ready to get triggered again, basically from the uncomfortable physical sensations. That's really what the aversion was too. Fascinating to watch.

If you don't take it personally, it doesn't have to go down that road. We're not talking about being saints here, but you can really see: ah, this is what it is. It arises not in my control, and often at the most unexpected times. Can I still bring in my awareness? And the power of our willingness to just be present and see what's what is really quite liberating.

Sometimes—I mentioned this in the last retreat—the strength of the anger or fear is way beyond any ability to just sit and notice the sensations. So then you need to move. Like I mentioned, stomping meditation, and quite a few people told me that was really helpful. You go out, you just let the energy of anger and fear move in your body. Stomping, stomping, anger, anger. Really, just let it be. Acknowledge it. We don't need to suppress it in denial, and we don't need to stomp on somebody's face. We just need to acknowledge the energy's there and let it move. We don't have to build a "me story" around it.

It's not the being with the unpleasantness that's the suffering. It's not even the anger that's the suffering. It's that sense of coagulation of "this is me and there's something wrong with me." That's really what creates the alienation and separation. Anger or fear are just clouds that move through when we notice them. They're just another aspect of unsatisfactory experience, of the First Noble Truth. When we make it me—my anger, my suffering, my self-judgment—then it's solid. Then we're in alienation and separation.

So like Joko Beck says, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the uncertainty? So in that example, could I find in myself a willingness to rest in "we didn't figure out what we're going to do, and maybe I won't get what I want"—and just rest there?

It's like, yes, it's fine for the moment. It doesn't mean it won't come back, but can we rest there? It's really hard. We don't really like to rest in pain and unpleasant experience. We're really afraid of it. We're afraid of even the thought of it.

I've noticed in myself the incredible lengths I will go to in order to avoid what I think will be an unpleasant experience in the future. You might recognize this tendency in yourselves occasionally.

I think it was last year—well, this happens all the time, but this was a particular example. A really good friend whom I hadn't seen for years wanted me to come and teach a weekend with him somewhere in Canada. The only available date would have been incredibly squeezed in my schedule. It was really clear from an impersonal point of view that it was crazy to even think about it. I would have just made myself sick and exhausted.

But it took me weeks to actually call and tell him I couldn't do it. Every time I thought about it, the unpleasant thought arose—oh, he's going to be mad at me, he's not going to like me, it's going to make him feel bad. That unpleasant thought would come, and I'd pull back from it. I couldn't just be with it.

I got so afraid of the imagined unpleasantness of the experience—telling him and having to experience him getting mad at me—that I seriously considered going to teach the retreat, never mind what it would do to me, just so I wouldn't have to call him up and hear him say he was disappointed.

Finally, when I saw that clearly, I thought, this is nuts. This is really nuts. I called him up. Of course, he was fine. He didn't really mind at all. But I was willing to make myself ill to avoid future unpleasantness that I had just made up anyway—really springing from the unpleasant thought in this moment of, oh, he might not like me anymore.

Do you ever notice yourself doing something like that? Actually creating so much more difficulty in the process than if we just said, oh yeah, right, this is how it is.

With both fear and aversion, when we are lost in them—not just their presence, but when their presence is guiding our judgments—they're not such good guides. We don't make such good judgments because we're not connecting with what's actually happening. That's the way these states function, and so our judgments are distorted, our perceptions are distorted.

Last year I read a sutta from the Buddha where he talks about the two darts—some of you may remember that, the two arrows. He's asking what's the difference between an untaught ordinary worldling, which is us, and a fully awakened being. Both experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. Do you remember that? Awakened beings also experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. It's the same.

So he asks, what's the difference? He says when an unawakened person experiences an unpleasant bodily feeling, he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of feelings—a bodily feeling and a mental feeling. It's as if a man were pierced by a dart, and following the first piercing, he is hit by a second dart. In fact, we ourselves shoot the second dart at ourselves. So he experiences feelings caused by two darts.

We have an unpleasant sensation or an unpleasant emotion, and then we shoot at ourselves the dart of "we're bad, this shouldn't be happening, I hate it, I want to get rid of it, I'm afraid of it"—and we're completely lost.

And then he says that for one who experiences the second dart, you get in the habit of resisting and resenting that painful feeling. So it's not just the one dart; we really get in the habit of shooting darts at ourselves whenever there's an unpleasant feeling.

But he doesn't stop here. He says that since the only escape an unawakened person knows from painful feelings is to go out and look for pleasant sense experience, we get caught in this cycle forever—resenting the unpleasant, going out to look for the pleasant—until we stop and just look at that first painful feeling. Which is what an awakened person does.

He is, if a man is pierced by a dart but was not hit by a second dart following the first one—so an awakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, experiences one single feeling. That's all. It's like when Jack was quoting Suzuki Roshi: you absolutely believe your eyes and ears. It's just what it is—a painful feeling, an unpleasant sound, a scary memory.

This tendency to judge ourselves for experiencing dukkha, for experiencing suffering, can really escalate. We get lost in the judgment, the second dart, rather than being able to come back to the actual experience.

I want to give another example from my life of how it can be more complicated than just an unpleasant sound. Ten years ago, I started experiencing a lot of physical symptoms of a particular condition—though I didn't know I had it then. The symptoms included a lot of physical pain and a kind of stiffening of the joints and the skin. By the time it was diagnosed, it turned out to be one of these conditions they know nothing about—the kind that could either kill you or stay as it is or get better. And who knows why you get it, and who knows what makes it better? The whole field is open for projection.

It took me a long time to realize what went on during that period of about a year or so when I first began experiencing all these escalating conditions. The normal things—pain, limitations, fear of the future, a sense of self-judging—I could pretty well watch my mind around the fear of the future and say, "Okay, I don't know what's happening, come back to here." I was so grateful for my practice for that. But the underlying self-judgment that it was happening at all slipped by. I really didn't notice that for a long time.

And that sense of feeling betrayed somehow by my body—so rather than feeling connected and compassion for the body, it was really this sense of, "You betrayed me." On an even subtler level, I felt betrayed by my mind, because of this new age belief that if you're truly spiritual and all your thoughts are correct, you can cure any illness. You know how that kind of thing sometimes seeps into the culture? It's true that a lot of our emotions and our physical experience are connected—I'm not saying they're not. But if you follow that belief to its logical conclusion, then any great spiritual master would never die, right? Because they were completely spiritual, and your body would never break down or get diseased. I didn't notice this operating in me for a while.

When I finally saw what was happening, I realized the physical sensations themselves were unpleasant but not unbearable. I wasn't in agony. But in meeting those sensations unconsciously, they would serve as a reminder or actually reinforce this sense of worthlessness, of being a spiritual failure, that my body had betrayed me, that I was no good. The first dart—the physical sensations—was unpleasant but quite workable. The second dart was so much more unpleasant that you don't even want to feel it.

After a while I realized I was completely out of touch with my body. It was like I was walking around about ten feet away from my body, because if I felt the sensations, then I would have to feel, along with them, all the sense of worthlessness and failure. So I just checked out altogether. The aversion and the fear just grew and grew until they became my worldview.

What actually changed was a combination of practice—two aspects of practice that I think are very helpful with fear and aversion: the direct connection with the sensations themselves, and metta and compassion toward them. I was actually doing a Tibetan healing practice. This old Tibetan lama, he must have been in his eighties, just showed up at IMS one day. I came back from the store or wherever, and some friend had brought him along. He was one of those great beings who just beamed, seemed filled with light. He didn't speak English. I think it was Sharon who went over and told him, "Oh, Carol's going through all this stuff. Could you do some blessing?" So, who knows what he did? He mumbled some things, bonked me on the head, and said, "Okay, say this Tibetan mantra. It's a healing mantra in Tibetan." I have no idea what it means—just two short lines—and he said to do a healing visualization.

So I was teaching a three-month course, and I'd sit there. We'd give the Vipassana instructions, and I'd be sitting there going "Bekanze, bekanze," doing my healing mantra. At first I was thinking, "This is going to cure me. This is going to make everything okay. This is going to get rid of it all." That's usually our idea of going into the difficulty, right? But that's not going into the difficulty—that's more aversion. Still, you start out that way.

What the effect of doing this practice actually was, was that it brought my attention fully into meeting the physical experience. So I was present with the unpleasant sensations, actually, for the first time in a long time. I met them with kind attention.

Kind attention just cuts through all that second dart judgment business. It's simply what it is. And then I saw—instead of taking it so personally—oh, this poor body, it's hurting. This is hard for it. And so I've been hating it when actually it's suffering.

There arose a sense of compassion, fairly impersonal, that again led into a deeper connection. And in that connection with the source of the difficulty, the other stuff really went away—maybe not completely, but almost completely. None of that self-judging, or "I did something wrong," or "my body's betrayed me"—I can really say that since then I've hardly ever had a thought like that. And I'm also, I mean, who knows why things reverse, but I'm not in that state anymore. Physically I feel fine, so I'm not in pain or anything like that. You never know why, but I saw that once I was in touch with what was happening, the extra darts fell away. I could also make much wiser decisions

about how to respond. Because as you know, there are a hundred million possibilities—everybody you know will come forward with suggestions: try this, eat this, do that, try that. It's overwhelming. But you can actually make intelligent, wise discrimination when you're not lost in fear and aversion.

So seeing this cycle of the first dart and the second dart, recognizing the second dart and understanding "I don't have to do this"—but the only way not to do it is to come fully into that first painful feeling.

This deep connectedness, diving into the wave—this is the point of liberating understanding. You don't do it once. I know this is what we'd like. We do it once, we have liberating understanding, and it's done forever. Sorry. I used to think that for years. But that's actually not a helpful thing to think, because—assuming nobody in this room has had that moment of totally liberating understanding after which you haven't experienced any moment of greed, hatred, or delusion—that assumption makes liberation into something always somewhere out there. It's a very self-defeating way to hold the idea.

The fact is, there can be hundreds, thousands, millions of moments of touching this self-liberating understanding, where you dive into the wave and meet it just as it is. In that, we can discover the sure heart's release, the place of peace, the vastness of who we really are. And your knee still hurts. And that disgusting noise is still going on. And your back is still paining you. And the heater still makes a heck of a racket. It doesn't matter.

The thing is, that moment is just that moment. In the next moment, we have to be just as awake, just as present. And when we're not, it's okay. Because then there's the next moment, where there's again this opportunity—no matter what's arising—to practice diving into the wave instead of getting lost in fear and denial and hating our aversions.

Mark Epstein says, "It's our fear of experiencing ourselves directly that creates suffering." It's not the painful thing itself. Our practice is to learn how to experience ourselves directly, and often that includes aversion.

I want to quickly list some of the things I've mentioned that really help you be present within fear and aversion when they're happening, rather than just falling into habits of reaction.

The first is what I've mostly talked about: mindfulness—meeting it directly, feeling the aversion, feeling the fear, noticing if you can come right to the sense impression that's eliciting the aversive reaction. Or if it's really big, just doing stomping meditation,

but feeling the aversion, the anger, the fear, rather than keeping it going by feeding into thoughts. The thoughts about it, the story—they're there, they're part of it. But let your attention be with the experience itself. Or when flashes of negativity and fear arise and you can't figure out why, open up and see if there's some subtle background unpleasant experience happening—being tired, your sweatshirt's too tight, something you don't notice but that's coloring your whole day.

A sense of humor also helps a lot.

Sometimes anger, rage, or fear can come up so strongly, way beyond even stomping meditation, where you feel truly overwhelmed. You can't quite bring mindfulness to it because it hits that kind of residue and cycles more and more. Even coming back to feeling your body shoots you back into the cycle of anxiety, pain, fear, and aversion. Then it's very helpful to bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy—consciously balance your perception. It's wonderful here with the desert because you can go out and just look at the space. That really helps me not take whatever's happening so seriously. It's just so vast. What difference does my little concern make?

Or Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the overwhelming suffering during the Vietnamese war and how he would tell the workers to consciously do something as minor as going to smell the herbs at night, to go out in the field and just be with nature. That doesn't deny the suffering and the pain, but it broadens our perception. It takes our mind from just being in this loop of aversion and fear and turns it elsewhere. This really helps to balance the awareness. Then you can come back and see what's what.

Or moving the body—walking faster, running. Sometimes aversion and fear, we have a big story about it, but you can experience it as simply energy. Once I woke up in this wave of fear, and I spent the day psychologizing this and that. I didn't find any good reason for it. I was visiting my sister, and she dragged me to the gym, which is not something I normally do. I was just sitting on the exercise bike, bored—exercise, exercise, exercise, watching fear, fear, exercise, exercise. And I suddenly noticed that without any story or any big psychological understanding, the energy I was calling fear just broke up and moved out.

I thought, that's really interesting. I could just go ride an exercise bike instead of years of therapy, once in a while. Not always. Sometimes it's really helpful to know why. But sometimes it really doesn't matter. It can just move out. We don't have to build so much "me" around it.

Metta practice, compassion practice. Not as we often think—"Oh, I don't want to feel anger, so let me do metta. I hate this person, may they be happy." And then we wonder why it doesn't work. When you do metta for a long period, you find yourself saying things like that. I would find myself saying, "May you be filled with suffering." Time to back off and see what's going on here.

What metta actually does is help us connect, believe it or not. It doesn't override the fear and aversion. What it does is bring us back into connection with the fearful or aversive thing. And that's where we're back in the place of wholeness, back in the place of integrity. Our separation, our dream of separation, is broken. We're back in connectedness. That's really what metta practice does—it lets us see the unity that we already are. It's not just some kind of thought control, although it seems like it.

And the last thing is patience, which is actually an aspect of metta. The willingness to just keep coming back over and over to meet what's happening as best we can, seeing there's still aversion, just being patient with meeting that. This is a huge aspect of practice. I don't think we're very good with it in this culture. I don't really think patience is a virtue that has a lot of support. If you make a long-distance call here, it rings three times and the mechanical voice comes on and says, "Well, they're not answering." I think, give them a chance! It's just so embedded in the culture. Patience is an aspect of metta. It's what helps us connect.

To close, I'll share a story of a man I met at a retreat who told me that for ten years he'd been in therapy because he was so filled with rage and anger. He held on to every slight. He had so much judgment, so much anger, so much negativity. And he said the ten years of therapy—and I don't mean to be saying therapy isn't helpful, it can be very helpful, I just realized it could sound like that—he said it didn't really quite touch the roots of it.

And then he got stomach cancer. He was telling me this while he still had the stomach cancer. And in that difficult situation, when we're finally faced with what we can't deny anymore, can't suppress, can't fix—when we're up against the wall and we have to open into it. I don't know why we wait until we're up against the wall, our heads hitting the bricks, but we do before we let go, a lot of the time.

So when he was faced with his stomach cancer, he said, "Oh my gosh, this is where I hold all that rage, all that anger, all these years. Anytime anything unpleasant happens, that's where I hold a grudge."

And then he said something so interesting—now that he couldn't hold it, he didn't. It just didn't stick. Difficult things would come and he was right there, and there was just no residue. It didn't stick because he wasn't afraid of it anymore.

So I wish for all of us that we don't have to wait till that point in our lives. We don't have to be up against the wall. We can understand the reactions of aversion and fear and anger. We don't have to be afraid of them. And when we can understand them, then we really understand the way that being caught in them obstructs our freedom. It's not the unpleasant experience itself.

This understanding is really available to us in maybe fifty percent of our moments—when we have an unpleasant experience. The other times, when it's pleasant or neutral, we have other opportunities to see through the craving. But really, any unpleasant experience that arises the rest of the night and tomorrow—think of it as a place to practice freedom. We can be really happy that these things arise.

I'm only kidding a little bit.

CHAPTER 308

Wise Attention

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this luminous talk, Carol Wilson examines the profound teaching of yoniso manasikāra —wise attention—as the gateway to what Tibetan teachers call "resting in natural great peace." She explores how moments of pure presence, characterized by an exquisite balance of vivid wakefulness and non-clinging, reveal our true nature and are accessible to everyone, whether watching leaves fall or experiencing deep concentration states.

Wilson offers a beautiful translation of the Pāli term yoniso manasikāra: "an active quality of mind that is nurturing"—from yoni (womb) suggesting protection and nurturance, combined with manasikāra (mental action). She distinguishes wise attention from unwise attention by examining how we pay attention and what we pay attention to. Unwise attention increases the torments of mind (greed, hatred, delusion), while wise attention allows them to diminish and wholesome states to arise. She explores how we get subtly seduced by pleasant experiences (mistaking pleasant for "good") and repelled by unpleasant ones (equating unpleasant with "bad"), even when we think we're being mindful.

The talk offers practical guidance for working skillfully when caught in mental torments: first returning to bare present-moment experience, then if needed directing attention elsewhere (hearing, seeing), contemplating inspiring thoughts, or simply resting. Wilson emphasizes that the motivation behind our skillful means matters greatly—whether we act from genuine wish for balanced awareness or from aversion and self-judgment. She invites practitioners to trust their capacity to rest at ease as their true home, more fulfilling than any seduction of saṃsāra.

If you remember how Steve ended his talk last night—all of 24 hours ago, or perhaps a lifetime ago—he was speaking of wisdom and the luminous nature of heart, of mind, and how wisdom really means to rest in that, just to rest. Which, at about this time in the retreat, might sound good. Just rest instead of trying so hard all the time. I want to talk a bit about that tonight. About resting.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo:

Rest in natural great peace, this exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thought, like the relentless fury of the pounding waves in the infinite ocean of samsara.

Now remember the first line: rest in natural great peace. We get lost in the other part.

This resting in natural great peace, in the luminous nature of heart or mind, is possible through an exquisite balance of innate wakefulness, of vivid wakefulness, and the heart, the mind of non-clinging. These two together. And what I want to talk about tonight—in many ways we talk about it all the time—is this balance of our practice, just one way of talking about this balance through wise attention, that can allow us again and again to rest in natural great peace, in vivid wakefulness and letting go.

Now this balance, this exquisite balance, is something that I'm sure we all experience in many moments—if you're not looking for it to last through the whole day or the whole retreat or the rest of your life. If you're content to notice a moment, they manifest really just as one of those moments of pure presence. Nothing specific, good, bad, pleasant, unpleasant need be happening.

An example from the poet Denise Levertov, just these moments—she calls the poem "Living":

The fire in leaf and grass, so green it seems each summer the last summer. The wind blowing, the leaves shivering in the sun. Each day, the last day. A red salamander, so cold and so easy to catch, dreamily moves his delicate feet and long tail. I hold my hand open for him to go. Each minute, the last minute.

Just how that exquisite sense of presence reveals the universe to us, the whole truth. And it doesn't have to be anything special. And it's nothing special we do. That's the catch, isn't it? We can't make it happen. And we spend so much time trying. But we do experience it.

Just the other day, two different people were expressing experiences like this in different ways. One describing sitting in the dining room and just being so present with hearing. And if you think of what you're hearing—you're hearing spoons crash and dishes rattle and scooping and scraping and chairs pushing. But that exquisite presence with hearing, just so here, so present, resting in the moment. And someone else describing walking down by Gaston Pond, and it was more an experience of seeing, just noticing the leaves and the water and the animals, and it just became such a moment of presence with the infinite movement of the universe. Different aspects reveal themselves.

In a moment like that, whatever it is that's happening, there's a sense—at least for me, how I would describe it—of pure presence, of real fulfillment. It's so clear there's nothing lacking and nothing to want. In those moments you don't sit there thinking, "How can I balance my concentration and energy? How can I get my awareness to be

more choiceless?" These things are important. But the point of all the skillful means is to re-recognize our natural home, the luminous nature of awareness, of pure presence. In a moment like that, skillful means are not necessary.

And we can't hold onto it. We can't make it happen. And I think—this is my opinion—that all of the skillful means and the instructions we give and the ways that we work in our practice are not to make progress toward some state like this. This isn't a state that we can hold on to. It's resting at ease in whatever arises. Our skillful means are to help us come back into this balance of vivid wakefulness and letting go on all the different, various levels of perception—from the very refined states that come from deep concentrated practice to a moment of watching movement on the lake. One isn't better than another.

This resting in natural great peace is our birthright. It's what's true for us. It's more about learning how to recognize and trust this rather than taking our refuge in all the seductions of papañca—our mind and our interpretations.

I've talked about the vivid wakefulness, the pure presence. Now I want to read an example from Dudjom Rinpoche about the letting go aspect.

"In quietly sitting, body still, speech silent, mind at peace, let thoughts and emotions, whatever rises, come and go without clinging to anything."

What does this state feel like? Dudjom Rinpoche used to say: imagine a person who comes home after a long, hard day's work in the fields and sinks into her favorite chair in front of the fire. She's been working all day and knows that she's achieved what she needed to achieve. There is nothing more to worry about, nothing left unaccomplished. She can let go completely of all her cares and concerns, content simply to be.

Just relax into your armchair in front of the fire—but don't turn on the TV, which is where we usually go with that. We think if we relax, we can't just be wakeful; we've got to dull out. And that's where we go adrift on the relaxing side of things.

So just imagine: Could you practice like that? Nothing to worry about? Nothing more to achieve? Content simply to be? Is that a possibility in mindfulness practice? It is.

When you meditate, it is essential to create the right inner environment of the mind, of the heart. Effort and struggle come from not being spacious—spaciousness meaning the non-reacting heart and mind.

These moments of equipoise, a heart and mind of non-clinging but vividly present and awake—how do we get there? How do we make it stay? We're going to try, and of course, that's what makes it go.

Most of our skillful means, as we discuss them, are ways of bringing our inner environment of mind and heart into this balance of wakefulness and letting go. That's why we talk from so many different angles—because conditions are always changing. Whether we talk about balancing the five faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom; whether we talk about balancing the seven factors of enlightenment—mindfulness, and then the three active ones of investigation, rapture, and energy, and the three calming ones of calm, concentration, and equanimity—we talk about balancing them. We might talk about wise effort. Tonight, what I'm going to talk about is wise attention.

It's easy to turn any of these into a project, into something to do perfectly, into something to get. And it's just the same old thing—we get sidetracked into the arising appearances, which in this case might be energy and concentration, instead of recognizing that the skillful means is in service of this balance of being purely present. And then we let go of skillful means.

Notice how we get caught in the idea of progress. We can turn anything into getting caught in the idea of progress, as if there's some stable place to get to. It's so easy to forget that liberation of heart and mind isn't about getting anything or getting rid of anything, but about seeing the shift in the heart and mind's relationship to experience, to ourselves. It's really about recognizing what is true—what we really are, what experience truly is—in a different way. We don't actually have to change any experience, and we can't anyway. Only our recognition of things is affected. We recognize natural great peace more readily, with more trust, with more faith, and hopefully we get less seduced by all the diversions.

Let me talk about that a bit. I'm sure you've noticed in all the various instructions that are given, both in the morning instructions and the answers to questions in the hall, how you can pick any one and within a day or two, someone will say the opposite. Be precise. Be spacious. Really note every single moment. And then you come into an interview and we say, "Would you go for a walk and stop paying attention for a while?" It's very confusing. And if you try to do all of it, you'll just explode.

How do I be precise and spacious at the same time? How do I be non-clinging but never let one arising moment of experience come without being right there noting it? How do I connect and sustain and at the same time be really receptive and non-manipulative? You try to do it all at once and you feel like you're going crazy.

Tonight I want to add another one to your arsenal.

I want to talk about something translated as "wise attention"—a reference point I'll describe in a moment. The short definition is: how we pay attention, and what we pay attention to.

Imagine a moment like I was describing before. Just a simple simplicity of presence. Nothing special, but there's really that equipoise, that balance of heart and mind that allows the resting in awareness to be so noticeable, so tangible. Whatever's arising is fine. How fulfilling that is, without our even realizing it.

And then, in the next moment, a smell can arise, or a sound, or a thought—say, an unpleasant sound. From this moment of pure presence, that sound lands: "I can't believe it. That person's opening the window again." In a moment, we're completely entranced by the particular experience, its pleasantness or unpleasantness, our reactions to it. We're entranced and seduced, and even if we know what's happening, there's a way we've completely lost sight or recognition of even the possibility of resting at ease in natural awareness—where we might be aware of the unpleasant sound, the not-liking, how it reminds us of our father, all of this—but we're really entranced by it.

How do we get so seduced? How do we get so distracted? Because what really happens isn't that somehow the luminous nature of mind and heart is gone and there's only this being lost and clinging and aversion. It's just that we've gotten distracted. We've stopped paying attention to resting at ease, and we're back into me and mine, you and yours, how things should be, and so on.

When we talk about the mind and heart that's undistracted, it's really the mind and heart that can recognize the potential of resting at ease, even when all this other mishigas is going on. Because it's going to go on. Resting at ease doesn't mean this other stuff stops. It means it goes on and we recognize just what's happening. Natural great peace doesn't care, really, what's happening.

So we lose recognition. The truth doesn't vanish, but we're taking refuge in the wrong place. This would be an example of unwise attention.

Wise attention, as the Buddha describes it, involves how we pay attention—which is largely mindfulness—and what we pay attention to: what is fit for attention and what is not.

Now, all you self-judgers, I want you to be really aware of this, because I can just sense how self-judgment immediately leads to: "That's right, all these negative things arising in my mind are bad, they're unfit for attention, and because I'm noticing them, I'm caught in unwise attention." That's not true. That's not what the Buddha was saying.

He talks about wise attention as knowing what things are fit for attention and what are not. What is not fit for attention, in this translation, is anything we pay attention to in a way that increases the torments of mind already present, or allows torments of mind that have not arisen to arise.

For example, that unpleasant sound—you notice it, but you really go into it: "Yeah, it's really unpleasant. I really can't believe it. I'm so angry." The more you pay attention in that way, the more you get lost in anger. Or it can be desire. You're sort of aware of it—you can describe later what happened—but there's a way that paying attention, just subtly paying attention in the wrong way to the wrong piece of the experience, really revs it up.

Whereas wise attention is that attention where the way we pay attention and what we attend to allows arisen torments of mind—and we all know what the torments are: greed, hatred, delusion, and all their manifestations—allows them to diminish, and allows wholesome states of mind and heart—wisdom, equanimity, calm, energy, compassion—to arise.

Now, this is the place where it's important not to hear this through the veil of self-judgment and the judging mind. If you're aware that self-judging is the strong backdrop, just know that you can't really trust your evaluations and perceptions of anything. It's true, because they're all filtered through that veil of "everything you do is wrong and not good enough." So notice that. And if that's strong right now, take in what I'm saying and don't try to evaluate it.

Things that are not fit for attention, or how we pay attention in ways that increase suffering—this is not really a value judgment on what's arising. It doesn't mean that if aversion or greed is arising and you pay attention to it, that's unwise attention. The idea that unwholesome things arising makes for more bad karma, and the more I pay attention to them the worse it gets—sometimes it's not that they're getting worse, it's that we're just seeing them more clearly and it feels worse. That's not the same thing as really getting lost and spinning.

So, how we pay attention and what we pay attention to. Starting with the how, which is mostly, as I've said, mindfulness: non-judging, kind, total attention to whatever's arising. I want to describe it in two ways.

The Pali words translated into English as "wise attention" are *yoniso manasikara*. Andy Olenski, the head of the study center and our Pali scholar, gave me his translation of it, which I really liked.

Yoniso comes from the Pali word for womb. So he translates it as "womb-like" or nurturing, held in protection—which I appreciate because mindfulness is often spoken of as our protection. *Mana* means mind, and *kara* comes from the word for action, the same root that *kamma* derives from. Putting it all together, he translates *yoniso manasikara* as "an active quality of mind that is nurturing."

To me, this really describes mindfulness. It's active, truly awake and connecting with what's happening, but in a nurturing way—not with judgment, not with liking or disliking, clinging or pushing away. Just holding experience in the arms of attention. I like that.

So that's one way to think about how we pay attention with wise attention. It gives us the ability to simply recognize what's present. We can just say, "Oh yes, this is what it is."

The second aspect is a way of describing the freshness, the beginner's mind that comes with wise attention—with meeting what's happening in this nurturing, active way. There's a sense of wonder, which is how I like to think of it.

Let me describe an example. This summer I saw a documentary on television about the well-known classical cellist Yo-Yo Ma. I had never seen him before, and he was just lovely. In this special, he was flying into Africa to meet some of the musicians of the Kalahari Bush people. He flew into the Kalahari Desert and was basically jamming with the Bushman who was the main musician.

It was really fantastic. He gets out of the helicopter with this beautiful cello—God knows how much it must have cost—and when he played it, the sounds were so resonant. The Bush musician's instrument, I remember, was literally an old oil can with a stick and a string. He's playing on this, and it's easy to feel some kind of cultural superiority. Compared to the resonance of the cello, it's just a string and a stick and an oil can. You can get some sounds out of it.

But Yo-Yo Ma was so filled with appreciation and wonder. There was no trace of "my thing is better." It was like, "Wow, listen to the sounds he gets from this instrument!" He was totally appreciating it, trading instruments, having the musicians show him how to play. He said, "Well, I can't make it sound nearly as beautiful as you can," which was true. Just that sense of absolute freshness and delight and wonder that he could bring to something one could easily write off as a stick in an old oil can.

That kind of freshness, brought in a nurturing way—can we bring that to whatever happens to be arising? When we bring that quality of attention, that's the *how* of wise attention.

When it's like that, it doesn't really matter so much *what* we're attending to, because almost anything is fit for attention when we bring that quality. There's no judging, no sense of referring back to me, no liking or disliking, no building a story. It's just what is. We could be as aware of the beauty of falling leaves as of aversion, greed, self-making, or some subtlety of rapture. It really doesn't matter, because that wonder, that nurturing active quality, brings us naturally into balanced awareness.

So remember this when you feel you're not in balanced awareness. Before you say, "Well, this thing that's happening is not fit for attention," watch out for that, please. Try shifting the *how* first. Bring back the freshness, the wonder, if you can.

Now, there are other times when we might look at *what* we're paying attention to without quite recognizing clearly *how* we're paying attention in a way that leads to an increase of the torments. One good place to examine this is with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—those experiences of feeling tone.

It's easy to believe, to really think, that there's pure mindfulness present. We feel we're really here without clinging to what's happening. And it's not that what's happening gets more intense—that's fine. It's more that we feel we're spinning deeper and deeper into some kind of wallowing sense of self, and we don't really know what's going on or how the way we're paying attention is increasing it.

I'm not about to give you a magic cure—forget that. But I want to point to a couple of ways this happens very subtly.

One way this happens is with the experience of vedana, of feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. We've talked about this a lot. It's not always the obvious aspect of experience, but more and more people are really tuning into it. You might be tuning into a sound and know it's unpleasant, or the taste of food and recognize it as pleasant, but still it feels like there's some entrancement, some seduction going on. We're somehow getting pulled in and not quite seeing why.

I'd like to point out something that has become clearer and clearer to me in my practice, more and more subtle—the subtle aspects of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, and our conditioning around them. My conditioning anyway, though I don't think I'm alone. Even when I'm aware of vedana, there can be, very subtly, almost unnoticed or actually unnoticed, a value judgment or interpretation. Even though I know something is pleasant and I'm trying not to get attached, there's this subtle belief way back there that

pleasant actually means *good*. If it's pleasant, things are going right. And of course, unpleasant means *bad*—it's going wrong, or I'm going wrong. Even as we sit here noticing unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant, we're not quite seeing what's really happening: unpleasant, it's wrong. Unpleasant, it's bad. Unpleasant, how can I change it? Very, very subtle. We don't even notice, and that's where the unwise quality of attention comes in.

Neutral, which I forgot to even mention—because that's how we relate to it—it doesn't count. If we even notice it, it doesn't count. That's why a lot of people are really uncomfortable with calm. We struggle and struggle, we finally get calm, and then it's like, "Hey, nothing's happened. Let's whip up some suffering—at least then I feel like I'm working."

I read in one of the suttas where the Buddha talks about the hindrances and how they get increased or whipped up through unwise attention to certain aspects. I really see it as this pleasant-unpleasant subtle conditioning. He's saying that sense desire arises due to unwise attention to the attractive aspect of an experience—not just noticing pleasant, but the attractive aspect, the subtle sense of gratification that comes from a pleasant experience.

I'll give you an example. One time I was on retreat, and I was eating pretty mindfully—eating, noticing pleasant, unpleasant, chewing. There was some homemade bread, and I would bite, chew. "This is really pleasant. This is really good. Liking." And then that subtle "Yeah, this is really nice." Although I thought I was mindful, the unwise attention was getting sucked into really how nice this made me feel. Can you get the slight shift? It's not just noting pleasant, pleasant. It's "Pleasant... yeah, it's *really* pleasant. Opening a bakery, getting the recipe..." Then the bite would be gone and I'd be right back—okay, chewing, pleasant, unpleasant, whatever, really mindful again. The next bite, the same thing would happen as soon as the taste hit the taste buds. After about a piece, I really started to notice that.

So you get a sense of the unwise attention—a little seduced by the gratification of it, the attractiveness of it, rather than just noticing pleasant. And often it's so subtle that we don't want to give it up. We know that if we just say "pleasant," if we're just aware of the pleasant, we don't feel that gratification quite so much. So we kind of don't want to look at it too closely sometimes. But it's hard to notice.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai meditation master and forest monk, says: look at your life, look at the decisions you make. Almost everything you do, when you come down to it, is for the sake of pleasant sensation. Look at the decisions you make and the things you do. But if you really look at pleasant sensation, how long does it last? It's gone.

I find this in my practice over and over, more and more subtle. I'll think I'm just going along, being open, wise attention, meeting whatever's happening with freshness. And at some point I see this subtlety of being seduced by the attractiveness, the gratification of the pleasant. The pleasant might just be the thought, "Oh, now it's going how it's supposed to go." You could even be suffering, and the thought is, "But this is what's supposed to happen"—and that's pleasant, and we're seduced by it.

There's a nice story from the Buddha's time about Ananda, his main attendant for twenty-five years, who was a very kind man, always taking care of the disciples and the people who came to the Buddha. It's a story about getting seduced, paying attention subtly to the wrong thing on the aspect of pleasant.

Ananda was on a mission for the Buddha, and he passed by a well in a village. One of the things monks could ask for was water, but you couldn't just go take it. There was a young woman there, a young outcast. You know, there's the caste system that existed at that time in India, and then below all the castes, there were the outcasts—people that anyone of any caste was supposed to have nothing to do with.

Ananda asked her for water, and the woman, Pataki was her name, said, "I'm too humbly born. I'm an outcast. I can't give you water. You would defile yourself."

And he said, "I'm not asking about your caste, I'm just asking for water."

That touch to her heart—she felt so touched, so joyful at that acceptance of her—that she gave Ananda the water. He thanked her and went away, and she followed him. She followed him all the way back to the Buddha.

When she got there, she went up to the Blessed One and said, "Oh, Lord, help me. Let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells so that I may see him and take care of him, because I love Ananda."

The Blessed One understood the emotions of her heart, and he said, "Pataki, your heart is full of love, but you don't understand, really, your own emotions. It's not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice towards you and practice it towards others."

I think that's very sweet. And how often we get entranced by the pleasantness, and in that entrancement we don't really see clearly what's happened. We're blinded by being pulled into the pleasantness. We can, as we know, end up doing all kinds of things in our life where we look back and think, "How did I get here?" And a lot of it was, step by step, very reasonable—this feels good so I'll do it. Down the road it doesn't feel so good.

The Buddha spoke in the same way about ill will as a hindrance. It's the same dynamic—it's the unwise attention to the repugnant aspect of things. And again, you can see this. It's good on retreat because often the thing that arouses our repugnance is so small that we somehow can't totally buy into the idea that that sound is really the cause of all our suffering. But there's a way we get so worked up—"I can't believe that person would do something like that. I can't believe how loud that sound is. I can't believe this pain in my back is still here after all the stretching I did." There's some way we might be noting unpleasant, unpleasant, but just that little bit of reactivity is in there working until we're whipping up the hindrance of ill will. Again, unwise attention—seduced by the repugnance and not seeing it. And it takes us out of knowing what's happening.

Just to quickly say, not so much for sloth and torpor, but for restlessness and worry or remorse, the Buddha says it's unwise reflection on disturbing thoughts. Which you can relate to, right? "I can't believe that. Why did I do this? What if that happened?" Over and over, unwisely reflecting on it.

And this is actually my favorite. Doubt can come about through unwisely reflecting on dubious matters. The Buddha gives us an example of dubious matters—this is an example of unwise attention from the Buddha himself, describing how one attends unwisely. We think these are dharma thoughts, but it's really unwise attention: "Was I in past time or was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what shall I be in the future? Shall I be in the future or shall I not? And what shall I be? Considering what I was in the past, how will that affect what I am in the future?" Or else one is perplexed about the present: "Am I? Am I not? What am I?"

How am I? And if I am just thoughts and emotions arising, then what are you? As some people have been saying, and it just goes on and on and on. And it feels like dharma thoughts, but it's actually unwise reflection on dubious matters leading to the hindrance of doubt.

Those are some examples from the Buddha of how unwise attention works, and you can see it can be quite subtle.

The first choice, once we recognize that somehow we've gotten sucked away and we don't quite know what's what, the first choice of wise attention is recognizing even that we *have* a choice. That's the beginning of skillful means—to recognize that there are moments in the practice when we really do have a choice where to let the mind dwell. There are moments when we absolutely don't have a choice too, and there are moments again of that exquisite balance when the question of choice doesn't even arise. But when we realize we're starting to spin in the torments, to recognize that we do have a choice is where we can use wise attention.

It's mindfulness that gives us that moment of choice. And the first choice, of course, is always mindfulness—wise attention to the bare experience that's happening now.

So, for example, in that seduction into the pleasant when I was eating the bread, the choice is not to start reflecting on what's going on and how come I'm getting seduced. It's simply to ask, "Okay, what's happening right now?" And feel the graininess of the bread in my mouth. Or notice the sweetness of the taste. Just come back into the present moment experience. Often, that's quite enough. Because a lot of the time, as we're getting really seduced, taking refuge in the wrong place so to speak, it's not always huge storms. We can really notice how it works in these subtle little experiences that are happening off and on all day long. So something like that—oh yeah, tasting, sweetness, liking—and you're right back.

Even with something a little stronger, the first choice of wise attention is to just bring that freshness of kind awareness to what's happening.

Another example, a kind of bigger torment: One time I was staying in a friend's house on an island in Washington State, and I was there alone at night. I remember I was washing up, and I heard some sound—you know, just how you'll hear a sound in a house when you're alone and immediately the mind goes, "Oh my God, somebody's breaking in. I'm out here in the middle of nowhere. I don't know the area." And the mind starts going into fear.

I really noticed, because I experimented with it, that there was a choice—wise attention or unwise attention. When I kept paying attention to the thoughts, I was paying attention to them, but really *with* them: "What if it is? No, that's probably not someone, you're just being foolish, you're just caught in fear. What could that sound have been? I don't hear it again." The more I stayed with the thoughts, the more the fear just kept amping up.

So I said, "Okay, just be with the sensations." Now, that's not denying the fear. I would feel the pounding of the heart. I was still washing my face, so then I'd just feel the sensations of the water on my face, the tension of the fear. And within really seconds, the whole thing would just calm back down again. I was at ease with what was happening, which included still some agitation, but the fear wasn't getting amped up.

And then I would see how the mind just isn't content to stay with the bare experience. It would go, "Yeah, but what if? And this could be this, and this could be that, and what was that sound? I'd better go look, and I wonder what the emergency numbers are"—the whole thing. And then I could have the choice to just feel the agitation, feel the water in my hands, and really within ten seconds, this is just what's happening.

To play with that, to see the difference—that's really where unwise attention to thoughts led to spinning in them and the increasing of an arisen torment. Or wise attention to just what's happening. The thoughts were happening too, but because of the pull of them, the attention to them wasn't really quite balanced. Whereas being with the sensations could bring me into more balanced awareness.

I find this a really fascinating moment that happens over and over—that moment of coming back into balanced awareness and seeing the mind that goes, "Yeah, but what if," and zooms back into the whole story, just whipping it up again. Knowing that peace is available, knowing I don't need to do that, knowing I have a choice.

I borrow one of Buddhadasa's phrases here. He uses it in another context, but for me, I really see this like my mind is volunteering for suffering. I have a choice, and I'm going to go towards suffering. Over and over and over.

Now see, if you're in a self-judging mode, you'll add that on top of it, but you don't need to. It's just a moment of pure fascination. Why do we do that? It's really amazing. And then to just come back again and again and again. That's not suppression.

There are also times when—take an example of fear—where the fear or the rage or the greed or whatever the particular torment is, is really strong. Either you can't even find the bare experience to come back to, or when you do come back, the thoughts of fear... sometimes when you return to feeling the body, the sensations are so intense, or the fear or greed or aversion is actually grounded in the sensations, that bringing attention to them just feeds the whole thing.

A lot of times when some suppressed memories, some previous trauma, begins to surface, it might come up physically first. You think, "Well, let me just be aware of sensations," and you touch it and you're blown away. And then wise attention can be, again, knowing we have a choice—and this is sometimes where we actively direct the attention to something else.

So you know times when we'll say, "Why don't you stop paying attention to the physical sensations and be really aware of hearing and seeing?" It's a choice, not that hearing is better than sensations, but what helps bring ourselves back into the balanced quality of awareness that can rest at ease in what's arising. When it's so strong, there is no resting at ease, and it gets to be so there's no awareness either. We're just lost in it.

So the next step is to try diverting the attention, but you're still really present. Hearing, hearing. Seeing, seeing. Hearing, hearing. Staying mindful that the motivation is to come back to that balance of awareness that lets us know what's true. It's not avoidance. It's not suppression. Those are very different. And it's still a commitment to mindful awareness. You might find that sometimes this again just opens up the window of possibility of recognizing innate wakefulness, even though there's the fear and trauma. It just opens up a little more space, another window.

Now sometimes hearing and seeing isn't going to cut it. Everything's just too strong. The Buddha, in another place, advises as a kind of wise attention to bring up some inspiring thought. This is a place where we can use wise thought, deliberately think with judiciousness. He's describing a monk, a yogi, doing the four foundations of mindfulness, basically contemplating the body, ardent, clearly aware, and mindful—these are the phrases used in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the foundations of mindfulness. "And as he thus dwells meditating, some bodily object arises, or a physical discomfort, or a mental drowsiness causes his mind to wander away to external things"—if that sounds familiar. "Then, Ānanda," he's talking to Ānanda, "attention, when you're really lost in something else, should be directed to some inspiring object of thought. And as he thus directs his mind to some inspiring object of thought, gradually delight springs up in him. And when he is delighted, then rapture comes. When he experiences rapture, his body calms down. When his body calms down, he can experience joy. Being joyful, his mind is concentrated."

Now, have you noticed that before? The conditioning factor for concentration is joy or happiness. It is not dukkha, striving, heaviness, self-judgment, or clinging. The conditioning factor for concentration is really happiness.

So it's using wise reflection on something that inspires you, inspires faith or energy. And then, when he sees that he's again calm and present, he thinks, "The aim on which I set my mind has been achieved, so let me withdraw my mind." In other words, it's time to stop thinking about this inspiring thing now and just be present with balanced attention. That's another use of wise attention—judiciously, when being mindful of anything naturally occurring just keeps spinning into more torment, bring up inspiration.

And sometimes nothing works. Those are the times we'll tell you in an interview, "It's time to take a walk and be with the lake. It's time to stop trying so hard. It's time to just go sit in that armchair by the fire and imagine everything's done and quit trying to do anything." And the mind can come back into its natural balance.

With all of these choices, these skillful means, I find the most helpful thing in working with them—whether it's with wise attention or any of the other balances—is the quality of motivation that leads to the skillful means. The examples I just gave come from the motivation of what brings me back to recognize the purity of presence, resting at ease, balance of heart and mind. The same choice could be made from aversion: "Yeah, this is kind of tormenting now. I don't really like it, so let me think of something more inspiring." Or "Fear is coming, and maybe it would be better if I just went for a walk down to the lake." But really, we could be present with it. We just don't like it.

Or the self-judgment of, "Oh no, more anger is coming up, and if I pay attention to it, that's really unskillful. It's bad karma. So I better try to do metta."

Anything can be a skillful means when it arises from the motivation of coming back to the balance that lets us rest in whatever's arising. But when the motivation shifts into project mentality—trying to fix what's arising, or even more, trying to fix yourself so you're better and these ugly things don't come up—it moves from skillful means to the same old, same old. Unpleasant is bad and pleasant is good and neutral doesn't count.

One more aspect of wise attention comes up frequently when we're working with the energy factor. When difficult things are arising, have you noticed how often there's this sense of, "This is really hard—fear, aversion, greed—so I have to push harder. I can't let up for a moment. Note, note, note, note, note." But of course it's unwise because the noting is either not quite seeing the place we're caught, or it's as if we believe that if we note this enough, it's going to go away. Or the noting is with, "I'm so bad, but I've got to note this." Push, push, push, push. You start to notice all the hindrances, and you never notice a moment when a hindrance isn't present. You think, "They talk about seven factors of enlightenment, but I haven't seen one for a single second." You're aware of greed, and if I say, "Maybe there are some moments of renunciation," you respond, "Renunciation? I don't think so."

It's really important sometimes then, with wise attention, to deliberately—similar to bringing up an inspiring thought—deliberately notice the beautiful qualities. This isn't the same as ego, as in "I'm so great." But really, when you're noticing greed, greed, greed, greed, greed, just notice a little renunciation. People have come in and said, "I did this and I gave up that. Is that renunciation?"—as if it can't count. It is. Renunciation can be so small. You walk out of here, you pass the notice board, and you say, "No, I'll just keep going." That's a moment of renunciation. You don't have to give up everything. It's just little. You're still here—that's a lot of moments of renunciation. Notice that.

Or even the thought of generosity. You didn't even give anything, but you had the thought. That's generosity. It begins with the thought. A moment of compassion toward yourself—that's compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh often talks about deliberately bringing up seeds of joy. When you're really in a dukkha phase where that's all you see, the practice isn't to pretend that's not happening, not to say, "Oh yes, I had this one generous thought, so there's no greed arising." It's to balance, to again say, "Yeah, there's some generosity, and okay, I can notice this next moment of greed without all the holding around it, the self-referencing around it."

Nature is also a wonderful way to connect back again with that simplicity of presence in the moment. We don't tend to fight so much with nature, insisting that it should be different. That's why we often say, go outside and be with seeing and hearing. We might not like the wind, but we don't really get too obstreperously upset with it. It's just wind, just air element, literally. And it can bring us back into that balance again.

Resting at ease in whatever arises, recognizing what Chögyam Trungpa liked to call our basic goodness—it doesn't matter what's happening. It's not about fixing ourselves. It's not about having our practice go in a certain way. And it's just as accessible to us whether we're in some very subtle state of rapture or we're just walking around normally, eating our muffins at tea time. It's not so important what's happening; it's more that we begin to recognize and trust the balance of being, the balance of presence that opens us. We let go of clinging, we let go of self-referencing, we're not trying to do anything, but we're really here. There's the energy. We let go of fixing ourselves and can really recognize this luminous quality, this peaceful abiding here and now—even in the midst of the chaos in the dining room, for example.

And hopefully, what begins to happen is that we don't have to create this—it's always accessible to us. We begin to trust it more. I know for me, a moment of pure presence like that, that wakefulness, becomes so much more fulfilling than any of the seeming

goodies that samsara might try to pull my mind into. You know, that piece of "Oh, what if I don't get the last chocolate chip cookie?" Who cares? This is just what it is. Maybe I'll get it and maybe I won't.

We can trust that capacity to rest at ease. That's true. That's our true potential, and it's accessible no matter what's happening—so that it becomes more our true home than all the seductions of liking and disliking and judging and getting "good practice" and everything else.

Another way of describing this moment of pure presence, from the Dalai Lama: "Why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it is the only place where you will know love."

I want to end with a short poem that describes this—the power of presence in a moment with simple things. It's called "In Memoriam" by Seamus Heaney, and it's really a memoriam to his mother:

When all the others were away at mass,
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one,
like solder weeping off the soldering iron.
Cold comforts set between us.
Things to share gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall little pleasant splashes
from each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying,
and some were responding and some crying,
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives,
never closer the whole rest of our lives.

Let's just sit a moment.

CHAPTER 309

Coming Home: Renunciation

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson reframes renunciation—often misunderstood as deprivation or penance—as an expression of wisdom and self-compassion that leads to genuine freedom and joy. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on right intention (sammā saṅkappa) as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, she explains how renunciation represents the transformation of thoughts rooted in greed into thoughts of letting go and open-heartedness.

Wilson illuminates how our constant seeking outside ourselves for completion—whether through sense pleasures, possessions, or self-identifications—is precisely what obscures our natural great peace. She shares the Buddha's vivid simile of six animals tied together, each pulling toward its own domain, to illustrate how our unrestrained senses create struggle and suffering. True restraint, she explains, is not shutting out the world but meeting sense experience with mindfulness-wisdom (satipaññā) at the point of contact, remaining neither drawn toward the pleasant nor repelled by the unpleasant.

Through personal anecdotes and teachings from masters including Huang Po, Sogyal Rinpoche, and Thich Nhat Hanh, Wilson demonstrates how the simplicity of retreat life creates space to recognize what has always been present. The greatest renunciation, she suggests, happens moment by moment when we put down our stories, self-identifications, and the habit of looking elsewhere, discovering that we are already home in the natural state of awareness.

Today, in an interview, somebody said from a very deep place in his practice, "I feel like I've come home," with a sense of real peace, of ease, of letting down. And the saying, "I feel like I've come home," had nothing to do with being here at IMS or with any particular place or location. He was really talking about the experience in his practice at that time of having let go of trying to manipulate, control experience or practice or whatever was arising—letting go of self-referencing and just being completely present with experience as it comes and goes. Just that ease of total presence that lets us come home to what is really true.

The purpose of meditation is to introduce us to that which we really are, that which underlies the whole of life and death. In the stillness and silence of meditation, we glimpse and return to that deep inner nature that we have so long ago lost sight of amidst the busyness and distraction of our minds. Meditation is bringing the mind home.

That's what I want to talk about tonight: bringing our mind, our hearts home so that we can recognize our true nature. And the way I want to talk about it is through the aspect of mind, of heart, of renunciation.

I think this is a concept that we often don't really quite understand. Renunciation is the key component. We renounce the distractedness, the clinging, the busyness, the fantasies, the attachments that keep us from resting at home in our true nature. But the word renunciation, even though we've talked about it quite a bit before—the concept doesn't play well in our culture, in our training. And you don't have to have come from a Catholic background to have that; it's pretty pervasive, I think.

Renunciation can be equated with some kind of harsh penance, with deprivation, with giving up things for our own good but in a way that's going to make us miserable, with self-mortification, rigid adherence to some outer ascetic form. But nowhere much do we hear of renunciation as actually being a source of joy, a source of freedom, an actual delight and relief to come out of this distractedness that keeps us looking elsewhere for the truth.

Renunciation also happens to be part of the second stage of the Eightfold Path: right thought or wise thought that is motivated by wisdom, the first stage. The three aspects of right thought the Buddha speaks about are these: thoughts or intentions of greed transform to thoughts or intentions of renunciation, letting go, open-handedness, open-heartedness, which then moves to generosity. The second aspect of wise thought is metta—thoughts of ill will transform to thoughts of friendliness. And the third is that thoughts of cruelty transform to intentions of compassion, of kindness. Those are the three right intentions. Tonight I want to talk about renunciation in that way.

If you remember, the Eightfold Path is the path of happiness, not the path of suffering. And so the thought or intention, the movement of heart and mind of renunciation, is an expression of wisdom. It's an expression of the pure heart and mind, as Sogyal said—that deep nature that we've so long ago lost sight of amidst the busyness and distraction.

Renunciation is actually an expression of realizing our intrinsic wholeness, of accessing inner contentment instead of this ceaseless, restless looking outside of ourselves for wholeness and contentment, which is where it can never be found. And the only way we can learn that is if we would stop looking. You know how Krishnamurti said, "To seek the truth is to deny it." And that's just what we're doing. So renunciation is a conscious choice for our own happiness and well-being.

This is from Huang Po: "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. This one mind is the Buddha and there is no distinction between Buddhas and ordinary beings except that ordinary beings are attached to forms and thus seek for Buddhahood outside of themselves. By this very seeking, they lose it."

That's the crux of our confusion, our problem, if you would put it that way. Through our attachment to forms—not just material visual forms, but also all the mental realm, thought forms, emotion forms, visual forms internally, so the five senses and the mental sense, the sixth sense—being attached to those, thinking that somewhere by holding onto or acquiring new forms we're going to make ourselves truly happy, actually complete ourselves in some way. And by continuing to look in this way, by this very seeking, we lose it.

By thinking that anything outside of absolute attention and presence, wholehearted being here and now in this moment—just the slightest movement of thinking something else outside of here can open me to inner completion—that's the exact movement of mind and heart that hides the potential for peace. And it's so hard for us to get that. So that's why renunciation as a practice comes in.

Renunciation, restraint of the senses, in its truest form, its deepest form, is a giving up of this fruitless quest for peace and completion by adding something extra to what's already here.

Now, do we really, really believe this? I mean, it would be nice if we did.

It sounds good, you know? But our conditioning is so deep, so subtly pervasive. It assaults us everywhere we go in this culture. I don't need to give you many examples. But really, how much of our sense of who we are is based on what we have, what we do, what clothes we wear? Even here in yogi land. Isn't there a certain image we present of ourselves that we're aware of—by what we're wearing, how we're eating, how we're walking? In some way, so much of what matters in the world is seeming externals, and it's just so deeply ingrained.

But in a way, when we move towards something outside of ourselves to complete us, that's the real self-abandonment. We think, "If I get the love I need, if I get the approval I need, if I get the new car I need—I don't know, whatever it is—then I'll be okay." That's the movement of moving away from completion, of abandoning your true nature. But it's so subtle, this pull towards "if I just get this, if I just do that, if I just have this comfortable feeling."

And we can end up so easily at the end of our life—or the end of a sitting—lost in some fantasy land of either make-believe happiness or real suffering because we didn't get the make-believe happiness. We can end up our whole life this way.

I read an interview with Marlon Brando in a magazine about three years ago. Actually, I didn't read it—it was in German, so my friend Franz translated it for me. Brando was saying, "I was never a good father or a good husband. I was always busy with my own life. Now I'm a guilty old man who feels ashamed of his life. Besides food, there is nothing else in the world for me. That's the only thing in my life. I know this eating will kill me, but I just can't stop." It's intense, isn't it? Hopefully he's moved on from there.

I use that example from someone like Marlon Brando on purpose, because that's someone we would think has had enormous opportunity—through having and being in so many different realms in this culture—who should really have had a good shot at happiness. It's so hard to believe that this wanting outside of ourselves is so much the way that keeps us miserable.

So renunciation is not a penance for our sins. It's a gift to ourselves of love and compassion. From Geshe Raptan: "Having great compassion for oneself is the same as renunciation, because we're renouncing the delusion, the attachment that keeps one bound to samsara. The point of renunciation is the development of love and compassion for oneself. Only then is compassion for others possible."

The point of renunciation is love and compassion for oneself—not self-punishment, not self-hatred.

So what is renunciation then? What does it look like? Really, at the heart of it, it's intention. The intention of the heart and mind that lets go in a moment of craving or clinging. It's that simple. It doesn't have a particular outer form that our behavior must match, although there can be. But so often we get caught in thinking, "If I give up this, if I give up that, if I come up to some particular standard of asceticism, or I give up the most important thing in my life—that's renunciation."

But really, renunciation is not about outer form. It's about the inner motivation of our heart. We could meet an outer form of very stringent asceticism and be completely attached to that form. I've seen it often enough in monks in Asia—more Western monks who I could talk to. "Well, you know how it is. We come here and we're really very sincere. But boy, on the good days, we're really clinging to being a good, ascetic, slow-moving yogi." That's okay. We see that. It's suffering. That's the next thing to renounce.

But it's not about form. Slow isn't necessarily more enlightened. You can't tell from the outside. It's all in the intention.

Now, at some level, of course, this form of renunciation is part of all of our lives, where we want something, but when we can expand our vision to the bigger picture, we're able to give up a particular thing in the service of something greater. If you have children, you do that all the time. You give up your sleep or you give up what you want to do in order to be with your child, to help your child grow—or with old people, or with friends, or just going to work every day when you'd much rather go to the beach in Maui, but you like to eat and have a place to live. So in service of that, we'll do something we might not particularly like.

It's simply being able to expand the big picture. When we're talking about the renunciation that opens us to freedom on our spiritual journey, we just expand to the biggest picture we can possibly imagine. And so it's really in service of being willing to recognize our natural completion, our natural purity. To be willing to recognize that, we make the commitment of the greatest renunciation of all, which is the renunciation of all seeking outside of ourselves, no matter what that seeking may be.

From the outside, that might look like you're some kind of huge ascetic. But as Anandamayi Ma, the great Indian woman saint, said one time—she lived a very simple life, and some businessmen, wealthy men, came and were praising her in awe at her asceticism. She just kept laughing and laughing. Finally they said, "What's so funny?" And she said, "I'm not the renunciate. It is you who are the renunciates, because you are giving up the great delight, the great happiness, the great joy of the divine presence."

We just need a bigger picture. That's why we like to have a few saints and masters around in the world—because they remind us there is a bigger picture than the next sitting.

So what helps us? What allows us to even let in the possibility of this great renunciation, the renunciation of all seeking outside of ourselves? Often, as I said, we can turn to very strong, harsh asceticism—it's a very common spiritual practice. I'm not saying that's a negative practice; it can be helpful. But remember, it comes from intention, and it's easy to miss that.

When we read about the Buddha's life, when he first renounced all the great indulgence of pleasure—compared to how so many people in the world live, life in this Western world can be like a big pleasure garden, even with all our sufferings—it's easy to say, "Okay, throw all of that over and get really tough. Renounce everything. Give up everything. That's the way. That's what's going to do it." But that can just as easily be an aversion trip, or an ego trip. The intention can come from fear: "God forbid I should get near anything pleasant because I'm going to be lost." Now that might be true, but we don't have to live in fear of that.

True renunciation isn't a shutting out of the world, shutting away all sense experience out of fear or aversion. That's just trading greed for fear. And it's not necessarily true that the more externals you give up, the more awake you're going to be. It might help, but it isn't a given, because it's all in the intention.

I think that's what the Buddha discovered. Luckily for us, he bequeathed us what he called the middle path—not wallowing in sense pleasures and not living a life of such mortification. As you know, he almost starved himself to death before he realized that he didn't have enough energy to really look. So he bequeathed us the middle path, which to us in this life might seem like a path of strict austerity, but it's really the middle path between what's possible.

The middle path is not of harsh mortification, but of restraint of the senses. One way of defining restraint that I like, from Buddhadasa, is that with real mindful awareness, we pay attention at the point of sense contact—at that point where I meet sense object and there's knowing. We don't try to shut out all sense contact, although we might try to restrict how much we let in. But the real restraint is paying attention at the moment of sense contact. Then it doesn't have to expand into looking elsewhere for happiness.

When we pay attention—and that's our whole practice here, is it not?—we begin to discover how much of our sense of presence, how much of our energy, as it were, just flies out the sense doors. We've talked about this a lot, and it continues to be amazing, doesn't it? It just flies out the eye door, the ear door, the mind door. And in a second, we're miles away, somehow thinking this is really where it's at, this is what's going to make things whole, complete, okay.

When we pay attention, we see that. And rather than a punishment, rather than some sense of restrictedness—"Oh my God, now I have to pay attention every time sense contact comes"—when we really do that, it doesn't lead to restriction. It leads to real presence, openness, ease in the moment of what's arising.

It opens our hearts and minds into the present and allows us to begin to touch that truth that's always here, that deepest part of ourselves, of our life.

As I said, renunciation can't be forced, because then it comes from an outer obligation and the intention isn't really one of renunciation—it's of meeting some ideal. But the inner intention, just the simple letting go of heart and mind, arises naturally from wisdom. It arises from a moment of clear seeing.

Two particular aspects are said to naturally bring about a moment of renunciation: the wise seeing of the painful nature of grasping, and the recognition of impermanence. We've hammered on that first one, and we will continue to do so, because seeing the painful nature of grasping is so ultimately freeing. And of course what helps with that is recognizing impermanence.

I won't say a whole lot about these two, just offer a couple of examples of how they really allow the heart to open.

In noticing the painful nature of grasping in little things, you've seen how that moment of craving and grasping, when it arises, is actually the grasping itself that shatters our natural great peace. You've noticed that, have you not? Really look and see. It's just the littlest things—that's what's so great about a silent retreat. You have time to explore.

I remember one time I was flying an overnight flight to Europe. I don't sleep well on planes—I don't sleep at all unless I can lie down, which pretty much never happens these days. So I was sitting on the plane as it was loading up, and about five minutes before the doors were going to close, I suddenly noticed that none of the seats in my row were filled.

In that moment, I had been perfectly peaceful just sitting there. But with the thought, "Maybe I could lie down," it was as if some kind of vice snapped shut in my heart. What had been perfectly spacious and peaceful became a source of tremendous suffering and ill will. Everyone who came through the door became my enemy after that—until they either sat down or walked past. Then I went, "Oh, okay, may you be happy." But only after they walked past.

I really watched how much the sense of separation—me and other—was created just by clinging to that thought: maybe I could lie down. It was stunning.

So just explore. In those moments, how much pain is created? Notice the futility of grasping anyway, because the grasping wasn't going to help. Either the seats were going to be empty or not. My sitting there hating everybody and urging them past really wasn't going to have much to do with it. It only made me miserable.

We miss our essential completeness, that wholeness in the situation, our own essential completeness. As soon as I saw, "I need those seats," I had distracted myself from my essential peace and wholeness. As soon as the plane took off—and as it happened, nobody sat down, so I had the seats—the essential wholeness was back. But it could have been even if someone sat next to me, because it was the grasping that was the problem.

There's something about clinging that, if we sort of look at it but don't really examine it deeply, we almost find a kind of poignancy in the clinging itself. It seems almost sweet, as if the clinging somehow makes us feel more alive or more present. It makes us feel more *me*, that's for sure, but that's not necessarily more alive.

There's a way, I think, when we don't really explore the experience of clinging, that we get a little caught in the almost sweetness of it itself. You know that haiku of Bashō? It's pretty well known: "Although I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto."

Just longing. That kind of poignancy, bittersweetness. We're entranced by it, by the pleasant feeling, by the seeming promise of happiness the clinging brings. And we forget to notice.

It's not necessarily the clinging that's bringing that happiness. It's the absence of clinging that reintroduces us to that peace that's always been here—and was here before we got so caught in the clinging in the first place.

There's a line I love from Galway Kinnell. I won't read you the whole poem, but he's talking to his little daughter, and he says: "When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard as if clinging could save us." In some way, we think clinging will save us.

I read in a newspaper in Seattle a report about something called compulsive hoarding condition. It's something that happens with elderly people—I don't know if it's just elderly people, but they're the ones who get found out. Elderly people who can't throw anything away. This is a real condition. The newspaper article was about one particular woman. The neighbors had finally called the health department because her house was smelling so bad. They went and found sixteen tons of garbage in her house—debris, newspapers, bags, cans, pieces of string. Everything that had come in, nothing could go out. The house was completely packed. All the rooms, just a little alleyway in one room

that she would use, a little corner where she could sit, and everything else completely full. The health department said it was the fourth house that week they had to come and clean out. The fourth house that week.

The article quotes a woman who is a geriatric psychiatrist saying, "I see it as a response to grief over the passing of time. It's a kind of abnormal response to getting older. You can't say goodbye to it." Can't say goodbye to anything.

Sometimes when you go back to that little back dining room and look at the food stashes—I think we all have a little bit of that in us. I know when I'm sitting, I'll keep saving the banana. I never eat it. But I just keep saving it. We all do that.

So just noticing in yourself that pain of grasping, and our somehow denial of that, our involvement in that sweetness of clinging. It isn't really sweet when you look at it. It's really painful. So look at it, please.

And the fact of impermanence—just in a moment when these come together, you don't have to say, "Oh, I think I'll renounce. It would be for my well-being." The heart just lets go. It's really, "Oh, yeah, right." Let's put the banana back. I don't need the aggravation.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says, "Real renunciation is not a matter of compelling ourselves to give up things that we inwardly cherish. It's rather a matter of changing our perspective on the things we cherish so that they no longer bind us." So we think we cherish something, but if it's binding us, is that what we mean by cherish? We're not cherishing ourselves in that moment. When we recognize this, our heart and mind naturally turns towards renunciation.

The word renunciation is most commonly used in association with the renouncing of sense pleasures. And of course, this is a big area where we look outside of ourselves. Renunciation isn't just, as I said, the flat-out giving up of all sense pleasures. We do need to cut it back a little bit. We do need to give ourselves some slack from running after so much sense pleasure—not from fear of judgment, but so that the mind and heart has some space to recognize natural great peace.

Huang Po: "Blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling, and knowing, most people don't perceive the radiance of the source." There's just too much sense desire, sense pleasures going on. We get blinded by them if we're not really aware with mindfulness wisdom, *sati-paññā*, right at the point of contact.

Just coming here on retreat is a huge renunciation, isn't it? It's not something to belittle. It's a huge amount of letting go of sense pleasures. Also letting go of sense of self and identity. And you see already how much space it allows in awareness, in the heart and mind—not space just to see the *kilesas*, but to see how we suffer from them, and then the heart naturally lets go. There can be a re-recognition of natural great peace.

So we have a huge giving up just to come here. But we do find, don't we, how sneaky this tendency to fill ourselves up by sense pleasures is.

So for each of us, we just need to pay attention as the retreat goes on—not with judgment, but with interest, with delight—to see how we've transformed going out to the movies every night into looking at the bulletin board five times a day. It might not seem like a fair trade, but look at the intention. What are the ways we're still filling up the awareness, the space of presence, from outside in some way to help ourselves feel whole?

That yearning to look—a lot of people have been talking about that. It's so amazing how you feel like you'll just die if you don't look up at the person walking by. Why? So that we can have some kind of judgment about them or us and then feel bad about ourselves. But that yearning is so strong. Or wanting different sensations in your sitting or your walking, wanting the breath to be more subtle, wanting a new sensation in the lifting or the moving, wanting some new emotion or some new subtlety of emotion, or something different to happen, or for the noting to change, or to have less change—or that subtle love of thinking.

That subtle love of analyzing all the dharmic aspects of what's going on—it's another way of filling up the space, of looking for something else to make ourselves feel whole.

I remember one time I went to Sayadaw U Pandita in an interview, sort of whining as much as one dares whine to him. Basically, "It just keeps on going, the same old thing, the same old thing, noting, noting." And he just looked at me and said, "So what do you want, different objects to note?"

You get it? Like, really—does it matter if I'm noting lifting, moving, or thinking, sensation? Does it matter if I get to note pressure instead of tingling, or if I get to note sadness instead of happiness? Does it really matter?

So conscious restraint of our senses—what we do when we come on retreat here—and then the willingness to look in an even more refined way, to bring that mindfulness wisdom at the point of contact, and also to consciously, when we can, limit how much we're going out looking. Limit the input a little bit.

When we talk about this, the sense is it feels constricting. But as someone said today in an interview—it was really great—she was talking about this looking around, this compulsive need we have to look, and how really unpleasant and distracting it is. And she finally said, "Okay, I'm just going to be looking down at the ground." And I said, "That's great. That's restraint." And she looked up and said with a sense of such innocent surprise and joy, "Yeah, restraint—but it was a relief. It was really great."

We think of restraint as like putting someone under restraint because they're out of control—a kind of holding back. But this restraint of just limiting how much we look around, it's a relief. It's a joy. It makes space to really meet ourselves and meet life more fully with joy and appreciation. It's immensely freeing.

I want to read you something from the Buddha talking about restraint of the senses. First he gives a simile—you know, he talks a lot in similes. I used to skip the similes, but then I realized I really like them.

He says, "Suppose a man catches six animals of different domains"—like they live in different areas of the world—"a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, and a monkey. And he ties them each with a strong rope and then takes those six ropes tied to those six animals and ties them together in the middle, so they're all tied to each other. Then all those animals would just be swinging around and struggling together, each trying to get back to its natural habitat. So the snake would struggle thinking, 'I want to get to the anthill,' and the crocodile thinks, 'I want to get to the water,' and the bird wants to fly up into the air, and so forth. So they're all struggling. And then when those six hungry animals grew weak and weary, then the one who was strongest would carry the day and they'd all just be dragged after the one who was strongest to wherever that was going."

"So in the same way, O bhikkhus"—now, whenever he uses six, you can pretty much guess he's talking about the six fields of sense experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, and the mind—"So in the same way, whenever a person fails to practice and develop mindfulness as to the body or the mind," and then he starts with the eye: "The eye struggles to draw him towards attractive objects while unattractive objects are repellent to him," and he runs through all the senses.

So it's as if the eye is struggling to pull us towards pleasant objects, and the ear is struggling to pull us towards pleasant sounds, and the body is struggling to pull us towards pleasant food or a nice soft sitting place or whatever—just this struggle when we're not mindful. This is lack of restraint.

And what is restraint? "Restraint is when, seeing objects with the eye, the person is not drawn towards the attractive ones and is not repelled by unattractive ones. Simply remains firmly established in mindfulness."

Just that awareness at the point of contact, not pushed and pulled to and fro by whether it's attractive or unattractive. So she remains firmly established in mindfulness and her mind is boundless. The heart is boundless, meeting sense experience with mindfulness. She knows in truth the liberation of the heart, the liberation by wisdom.

See, he's not here saying restraint means you hide away from all sense experience. Simply meeting it firmly established in mindfulness, not pulled towards the pleasant, repelled by the unpleasant, and the heart and mind is unbounded, boundless. That is really the beauty of restraint, of natural renunciation.

So the next time you feel like one of those animals is pulling you towards—I don't know what—reading all the kinds of tea there are, or listening to what that new particular sound could be, or what the person in the next room could possibly be doing with the noise they're making—the next time you feel like you're being pulled that way by clinging, stop a moment. And instead of letting the awareness go out through the eye door or the ear door or the mind door, turn it back on the clinging itself. Just make the simple experiment of landing firmly with mindfulness in the experience of the grasping, in the experience of the clinging. Stay there with it, with kindness but clear comprehension, and watch the clinging fade. It will, eventually.

If you're somewhere where you keep getting re-stimulated by seeing—say you're in the dining room and it's that third cookie you really want—it might be helpful to leave the dining room so you don't keep seeing it, because it's getting re-stimulated every moment. It's harder that way. But go somewhere and just stay with the clinging, with spaciousness and clear comprehension, until it fades, and then notice. What do you have? What's there? If you're lucky enough that a new clinging doesn't arise so quickly, there's no space—what we can notice is peace. That actually what we wanted was this peace of non-clinging. So often the third cookie doesn't actually give us that, does it? If we just hang out with the grasping and watch it vanish, we find out that that completion, that peace, that natural perfection is already here. It's the looking away that blinds us to that.

So this restraint at the sense doors is not about cultivating fear or aversion to pleasant experience. It is a fine balance to walk. I have a friend who spent some time here on retreat going around blindfolded, experimenting. I mean, that's an experiment. I don't know that I advocate it. But at some point, it's learning to meet sense experience with

sati-pañña, with mindfulness-wisdom, because we don't have to shut out the world. We learn the difference between attachment to sense pleasures and the enjoyment of a peaceful heart and mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh says this in a way I really like: When we are obsessed by sense pleasures, we lose our freedom. But we have to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. Attachment to sense pleasures brings about suffering and entanglement both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and others. But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind and heart brings neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others.

It's very important that we realize that renunciation, restraint of the sense doors, is not to shut ourselves off from the world, but to open up the space that allows us to live with great joy and appreciation of ourselves and all that the world offers us. And still, the simplicity of outer life is immensely supportive of opening our hearts to this greater appreciation.

And you know, it doesn't have to be that we're really deep in the spiritual path. Simply cultivating simplicity, even for a short time, opens the space to recognize the truth, even if we don't think we're looking for it. Today, just pure chance, I was looking for distraction and I picked up a magazine lying around our house called Men's Health —not a new age health magazine, but a really mainstream magazine for young men about looking good, feeling good, how to get the most out of life. I opened it and it just happened to open to an article about a guy who writes for the magazine, some young editor, who went to the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky for four days, where the monks live very simple lives of silence.

It was amazing. This guy, you could tell, was a fun-loving, bar-hanging-out kind of a guy. He said in the beginning, "I'm about as spiritual as a hot dog bun." That's how they write in this magazine. "The thought of disconnecting from the outside world, left alone with my tortured thoughts, seemed pretty unnerving." Within half an hour of getting there, he thought, "I've got to get the hell out of here."

But the article was actually fascinating. He stayed there four days and, almost against his intentions, it really profoundly moved him. Within two days he was saying these monks—and it could be nuns, but anyone really on the renunciate path—are actually the most revolutionary people in our whole society. And he meant it. He said, "Forget James Dean, these guys are the most revolutionary." He talked about different aspects that really touched him and said he ended up seeing a lot that would really help him in his life.

He was in awe that someone could be so radical as to choose celibacy. Just thinking of how much suffering sexuality had caused in his life, he said, "These guys are radical. It's amazing." He was truly amazed. The silence, the simplicity of life, the simplicity of their routines, not holding grudges, the metta—all of it. Just in the silence, no one was preaching at him. In fact, they would talk to him a little bit, but no one was indoctrinating him. He said they get up at three in the morning, they have a lot of quiet contemplation and short services. Four days, and it just really seeped in.

The last night, he said, on the way there he had carefully noted where all the bars were in the nearby area, because he figured he was going to need to escape at some point. And he didn't until the last night. It almost sounded like he just thought he *should* want to escape. So he said on the last night he went to a bar, was hanging out, there was all this music, and he had a Weiss beer. As it got louder and louder, he sat there thinking, "What am I doing here?" And he went back to the monastery. Went to bed, got up at three the next morning to go to the services, and then he left.

He said, "Well, I'm not ready to sign up." But it touched him, because it allows us to reconnect with the truth—whether we have a name for it or we know it or we recognize it or we have some big context for it or not. It really doesn't matter. And allowing ourselves some outer simplicity, some outer renunciation, gives us the space to begin to re-recognize this.

So just look at the ways—here, more and more subtly—we're getting caught in sense desire. And without judgment, notice the pain of it and see if we can put it down, to give ourselves more space to open to what we really are.

And it's not only sense desire we renounce. It's a lot of our self-identifications: the way we present ourselves, the stories we hold about ourselves, the ways we act—keeping busy, taking care of people, being the good yogi, being the bad yogi, being the angry yogi, whatever it is. The greatest renunciation, I think, is simply in the moment when any of these strong self-stories begin to arise and we notice it. "Oh yeah, that's me. Okay." Just feel the lifting. Just feel the sensation of this next breath. That simplicity—that's the great renunciation.

We just put down all the stories and interpretations and papañca and sense of self we're creating, and relax into the presence of whatever's arising in this next moment. That's all. In one moment, over and over—that's where we can begin to recognize that we're already home. We don't have to go anywhere. We don't need to create any better story about ourselves or others, or present ourselves in any light. Just let go and rest at ease in whatever's arising in this moment.

And we discover that we're already home.

It's the looking outside that reinforces our belief in being incomplete, that we're suffering beings, that something better needs to happen. It's the looking that reinforces it. That moment of renunciation, just letting go of the looking—we're back at home. No matter what may be arising, it really doesn't matter. If we can just rest here, we'll discover our potential to be at home.

From Jetsun Milarepa, Padampa Sangye said: "Everything is found within the natural state, so do not seek elsewhere." Buddhahood is the wisdom within us all. It is not elsewhere. It is actually our fundamental nature.

I'll end with a poem by Lalla, a fourteenth-century Kashmiri woman:

I was passionate, filled with longing.
I searched far and wide.
But the day that the truthful one found me,
I was at home.

May we each come home to our true nature.

CHAPTER 310

Compassion

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson reflects on the nature of karuṇā (compassion) as one of the brahmavihāras—the boundless, beautiful states of heart. Inspired by a gathering of Nobel Peace Prize laureates including the Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu, she examines how those who have witnessed immense suffering can still embody lightness and joy, demonstrating that compassion is not a heavy burden but an uplifting quality.*
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> *Wilson explores how compassion naturally arises from wisdom, as described in the Buddha's Eightfold Path, where karuṇā and mettā (loving-kindness) emerge as wise intentions alongside renunciation. She addresses the common fear that opening to suffering will cause us to drown in pain, showing instead how our attempts to protect ourselves by shutting down actually create isolation and separation. Through personal stories—including her experience with her father's Parkinson's disease and walking meditation at IMS—she illustrates how resistance to our own pain becomes resistance to connection with others.*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom for practitioners: by meeting our own suffering with kind, non-judging awareness, we naturally open to the suffering of all beings. Wilson shares the story of Milarepa meeting his demons with compassion, suggesting that our 'last fallback'—the heart of compassion—is actually our strongest and most freeing response. She emphasizes that we need not start with grand gestures; even opening to small discomforts like hunger can reveal our interconnectedness with all who suffer. Through steady, compassionate awareness of our moment-to-moment experience, transformation happens naturally, and in changing ourselves, we truly change the world.*

What inspired me to talk about this tonight was a short article in the Sunday paper. It was about a program at the University of Virginia on Saturday where they brought together seven Nobel Peace Prize laureates to talk with the students. The article says the university hoped to inspire its politically apathetic student body and others into turning their attention away from material concerns for more than a moment to the world's victims of war, genocide, ethnic conflict, and starvation. It's actually beautiful that they did this.

In a rare joint appearance, they had seven Nobel Peace Prize winners: the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, and Jody Williams, an American who won it together with Bobby Mueller for their campaign to end world landmines. Also there

were President Oscar Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica, Jose Ramos Horta of East Timor, Rigoberta Menchú Tum of Guatemala, and Betty Williams of Northern Ireland. Aung San Suu Kyi sent a delegate since she couldn't come herself.

Just that this even happened is so remarkable. That was the first thing—that it even happened, that there's a recognition of how apathetic and materialistic we can be. Now we know it's not just the students at the University of Virginia. I certainly can see in myself how easy it is to get caught up in my own affairs and just not quite pay attention, not quite remember that we are the world.

There are many aspects to this article. One is how just touching into the possibility of such openness and caring can really affect people. It's like we just need a touch of the truth and it really can affect us. One student said, "I feel so changed by this. You get so caught up with your life and then you see these people who are making so much of a difference."

And then what drew me in in the first place: there's a photo of the Dalai Lama standing behind Bishop Tutu, who's sitting in a chair, and he's cracking up because he's trying to pull Bishop Tutu's hat off. These two men, who together have probably seen more suffering than any of us can imagine, are clowning around. Not coming in heavy with the weight of the world. To be able to have one's heart opened in South Africa, Tibet, wherever—and they meet the world by clowning around as well as holding all this suffering. It's so beautiful.

That's what inspired me, both of those aspects of compassion. But that's really, in my mind, what we're doing here in our practice. We talk about how wisdom naturally manifests in compassion, but I still think it's easy to forget, to get even here so caught up in how's my practice going, am I advancing to the next stage, whatever you think the next stage is. We forget that it's really about understanding that we are the world and who we are affects and changes the world, and that we don't have to be so afraid of opening our hearts to our own and others' suffering. It doesn't necessarily make for a dreary person. No one would call these men dreary. More lightness than I could imagine.

Opening to the experience of compassion, really incorporating that in our practice, in our understanding—first, just recognizing that it is the natural expression of wisdom, of clear seeing. Through our practice, the natural expression of oneness or emptiness or non-self or interconnectedness, whatever way your mind wants to talk about it, the natural manifestation of that is mettā and karuṇā, love and compassion. Whether that's a manifestation just on the level of thought, later moving to speech and action.

The Buddha described this in his Eightfold Path, how natural this progression is. Last week I talked about renunciation as being one of the three wise intentions, the second step of the Eightfold Path, the first stage being understanding, wisdom. Karuṇā and mettā are the other two wise thoughts or wise intentions. As we begin to understand ourselves and the world as it truly is, quite naturally our thoughts and intentions transform to renunciation or generosity, mettā and compassion. So in some ways, all we have to do is keep looking honestly. And whenever we see, be willing to connect with that in an open-hearted way. Compassion naturally becomes stronger and stronger in our way of relating.

The koan I find in a lot of my practice, of this whole practice, as we look at the world, is: how can we continue to open, to awaken, and to remain awake and open in a world that is so painful, that does have so much suffering in it, that is so confusing? No one's saying it's easy. As you know from being here, from looking at your own lives, it requires enormous courage and persistence and kindness to ourselves, enormous patience.

But the wonderful fact of our practice is that as we're willing to continue to open to ourselves through our own experience, we necessarily open to the world. You really can't separate the two, though we certainly try.

The definition of karuṇā, compassion, is often given as that quivering of the heart in response to pain or suffering. I really like that because to me it feels like a description of the physical, emotional state of compassion when I experience it. Quivering not of fear or of suppression, but of just being so touched. And then the response of the connected heart and mind to act, if there's a way to act, to relieve or alleviate that suffering. But if there's not a way to act—so often there's nothing one can do—that quivering of the heart in connection with compassion, with pain, we stay connected even when there's nothing one can do.

That's really the trick.

When we talk about the near enemy of compassion—the thing that compassion can often slide into or be confused with—it's sometimes described as pity, or sometimes as sorrow. There's a feeling that we're caring about the pain, and it might even come with a genuine motivation to do something about it. But there's that little bit of a quality of distancing, such as, "I want to do something about this so I don't have to see it anymore." There's that little bit of "I can't take it." Whereas with true compassion, when you can't do something, you can still hang out there with it, whether it's yourself or somebody else.

It's such an interesting phenomenon, really, which we've talked about endlessly—how dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness, or just plain old pain, is a fact of life for all beings, certainly all human beings here on this planet. And yet, when we're in pain—if I'm in emotional pain or suffering, or some kind of really deep chronic physical pain—isn't it easy to feel sort of alienated or isolated instead of thinking, "Oh great, now this is a link to all beings"? Do you feel that when you hit into some of your pain? "Oh good, now I'm connecting with the world." Not too much, right?

It's more almost a shameful thing. "Oh, here I am caught in grief again." We're ashamed of it. "Here I am suffering from this chronic disease again. Here I am in lust again"—whatever it is. It's almost as if we have to hide it. And even if we don't think that, it certainly can get reinforced in the world.

We go out, especially here in America—I teach a lot in Europe and my partner's German, so I get reflected back certain aspects of culture that others see as perhaps particularly American. Franz is always telling me I'm so American it's unbearable; I could never pass for anything else. But our greeting of "Oh, how are you?"—we all know you're not supposed to really say. You're supposed to say, "Oh, fine, thank you," and then you move on. If you meet someone on the street—"Hi, how are you doing?"—well, gosh, to tell you the truth... No, they're gone. Two-thirds of the people are gone. It's not really reinforced that other people want to know if we're suffering. If you're going on vacation with friends and you're depressed, you've got to sort of hide it. You don't want to bring them down. It's in our culture to some extent.

And we're so conditioned, it's so ingrained really here, to either hide or feel ashamed of our suffering, or to try and protect ourselves from it first and others secondarily, that the thought of compassion can get linked with the thought of suffering—not in the way that compassion comes out of suffering, but that to be compassionate means we're going to drown in suffering. Compassion can be thought of as a suffering mental state. We forget it's one of the beautiful emotions. It's one of the four boundless, limitless, unfathomable openings of heart, these connections of heart. It's uplifting. It's tender. It's beautiful.

Why are we so scared of it? It's not really that we're scared of the compassion, but the only way we get there is through the pain. And that is something we have to really bring our courage to bear on—to be able to even remember and notice how much we're shutting down.

The first time I went to India, of course it was an assault on all the senses for quite some time, especially for one who has a tendency toward aversive reactions to unpleasant experience. It can take some time to settle into just being with the way things are in

a culture like India. But actually it liberated something in me, being there, and it continues to do so when I go back—because there's no pretense that everything's fine. You can't walk down the street in India and think everything's fine. It's just all out there: birth and death, disease, craziness, happiness, joy, spiritual ecstasy. It's all there. Just walking down the street is fantastic.

And I'm not trying to sentimentalize it. It's painful as hell. What's really interesting for me, always, is to see how long I can actually stay open and connected, and when does the heart shut. Two seconds sometimes, all day other times. How long can I look a beggar in the face and really connect—whether I give or not, almost immaterial.

When I shut down, it took me some time to see that it's not their pain I'm shutting to—it's my pain. And that's really the key to our whole practice here. To see how in shutting down to pain, mine or others', I'm shutting down to the world. I'm shutting down to connectedness. I'm shutting down to the richest and most beautiful part of myself, of life.

Let me give an example on a more personal level of how, by thinking we're protecting ourselves from pain, we're actually alienating ourselves from connectedness and love.

My father, in the last few years, has developed Parkinson's disease. Not real severe, but it's progressive, it's having an effect. In the first couple of years that he had it, it wasn't diagnosed, and he hadn't gone to a neurologist. And he who had always been a very bright, very sharp, very athletic person—really on the mark—started getting a little clumsy. It seemed like he was just going vacant. He would just kind of stand around, wondering what did I come here for? Now, I'm like that half the time, so I don't know why that should have bothered me. But you could just see something was going, and it was really painful for him, having always been so present.

And it was really painful for me when I'd go home to visit. But I didn't really notice that because I didn't tune into the fact that I was going through the loss of the person I'd always known as my father—the one I could rely on to be a certain way. To see that disappearing before my eyes, to see him beginning to get less sure of himself, to have his pain coming so much out into the forefront, to see his fear—basically, I hated it.

And instead of opening, instead of really even allowing myself to feel my own suffering, I found myself getting really impatient with him. And of course I beat myself up mercilessly for that. But then the next time something would happen—he'd ask me the same question for the third time, or I'd be in the middle of a book and he'd come up and say, "What are you doing?"—what do you think I'm doing?

It took me some time to see. Instead of, you know how we do this, "Okay, I will not be impatient again"—we make these resolves, right? I will be a better person. But we're just doing it out of self-hatred. We're not really looking at what's going on.

And when I really allowed myself to feel the sense of sorrow and loss that I was feeling, to kind of grieve that—that connection with my pain was the key. The sense of impatience and almost pushing him away vanished. Because it wasn't his pain I was pushing away; it was mine. And after a while, we can't really separate the two very well, if at all.

What lets us connect again to this place of oneness, this potential for compassion, for caring, for kindness, both to myself and to my father? It's just the simple willingness to open to what our experience is without judgment. It's not like I took a hammer to my heart and said, "You better open up so you can be kind to your father." It was more like, "Hey, let's look and see what's happening. Let's feel it. Let's meet experience directly and let awareness take care of the rest."

I heard a little snippet of news, I think it was last year, but it really spoke to me about how simple connection is what opens us to compassion. President Clinton was traveling in Africa, and all I heard—I didn't hear the whole story—was that he was in Rwanda and had been talking with some of the people who had survived that horrific period of massacres when millions of people were killed, people who had been wounded but survived. And you know how Clinton can be. He can sound and seem to genuinely be really touched face to face with somebody. And he was saying afterward, making a statement that regarding all those massacres in Rwanda, we—meaning we Americans, the Western world, whoever—were all part of that, that we are all responsible, that we didn't do enough.

And I reflected on that. I thought later, you know, that wasn't really new information. What made him say that two, three, four years later? And I really think it's the fact of coming face to face with a person, a living being rather than a sound bite or a talking head on television.

I remember Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh, saying back during the time of the Vietnam War—they had been so active in Vietnam with both sides—that when she was out of the country and seeing, remember how much of that war was on TV, seeing horrific things, people holding wounded and dead children, she said she'd been in the situations that she was seeing on television. And she said seeing it on TV isn't the same as really being face to face, as really opening to what's happening.

And I think it was the same thing with Clinton. It's the same thing with us. It is really scary sometimes. It can be really difficult. Just to think about letting it all in—if I open to all this, I'm going to drown.

And we can't open all at once. You can try, but we can't. We open little by little. But we can begin to explore some of the ways that we stay closed. Some of the maybe unconscious habits that we get caught in that help us block or deny the suffering in the world, the suffering in ourselves.

I'll just mention a couple of these patterns, and you can keep exploring on your own.

The first is simple ignoring, denying—just your basic, flat-out getting so involved in our own scenario that we can't see beyond what we think are our borders. Sort of like those students at the University of Virginia. We all do it, and it's good just to be aware of it. But I can also see it on retreat. It's a good place to explore how, with all sincere good intentions—and we're really all here with good intentions—we can still get so caught in our own little scenario, or big scenario. The particular stories, the routine. And somebody or something intrudes on our scenario. They sit in our space in the dining room, or they cross our walking spot too close, or whatever. There's that moment when we can't see beyond our boundaries, and that person... we can't see their suffering. We just see how it impacts us.

As soon as we see beyond our own story, the whole story restructures. It stops being me and them and becomes we.

I'll give an example from my own practice. I was walking on a retreat here, downstairs in the gym, real early in the morning. I like to get up early and practice when it's quiet. So this one morning—I just loved that time—I was walking, really concentrated. It was so still, so peaceful, for however long.

And then the wake-up bell rang. It was always—not always fun, but interesting—to watch the transition from this pristine, concentrated stillness to the doors opening and alarms going off and the toilets flushing and the showers going and people stomping up and down, back and forth to their rooms and the bathroom. I was just watching my concentration crumble, thinking, "Ah, these people are ruining my concentration."

That went on for a few minutes, and then it just let go, and the whole story restructured. It wasn't my concentration that these people were ruining. It was simply that conditions had changed. There were conditions before, and there was concentration, and now they've changed. It isn't me or them—it's just we, all doing our dance in the big picture. And then it was fine.

This leads to the second pattern I want to talk about: how we can care, or open, to so much in ourselves or in people close to us, but then everyone else somehow becomes the other—because it's too much to let it all in. When I was walking there and people started coming out and going to the bathroom, everybody was the other. Everybody in the whole of IMS was the other, because they were in the way of my concentration.

Just to watch how we do that and how powerful it can be. Like the Clinton and Rwanda thing. Even though we think we care, it's easy just to read or hear and, without meaning to, everybody in Rwanda or Bosnia or Northern Ireland or Central LA becomes the other. The people in the house next door become the other. Aspects of ourselves become the other. And it's too hard, we think, to open to that.

I was having a great conversation with someone in an interview just about this. She was talking about visiting a hospital to see a certain person and really seeing the care that brought her to the hospital for that person. Then realizing, after some visits, how she was only there to connect with that one person. Everyone else was sort of beyond the realm of what we even notice. I've done that myself, of course—both being in the hospital and visiting. It's almost as if I can handle being with this one person and their pain, but if I really look and see how many people are in this hospital, how many hospitals there are just in this little area, and on and on and on... it's like, I can't bear it. I'll drown.

Of course, it doesn't work that way. But seeing how the other is like a repository of our fears, our sense of separation.

I read a great article in some newspaper—USA Today, I think—about aggressive driving. You know how "road rage" is suddenly a tag word that's all over the place. It was a whole article about aggressive driving and how it's getting to be a real epidemic, what constitutes it, and they were talking to therapists who work with aggressive drivers, helping them calm down. Here's what one of the therapists said about how aggressive driving arises so easily: "Especially if we're in a car, if someone on the road upsets you, that individual's whole identity is encapsulated in this bad thing he did. He's not seen as a whole person. There's an urge to express your aggression on this anonymous other, to think, 'I can't let him get away with this.' The thin veneer of civilization is removed." They said it's like a car offers you anonymity, but if you were walking down the street and meeting face to face, there wouldn't be such a sense of otherness. You look each other in the eye.

It's a very common experience. Notice, as we go through our days here, how unconsciously or subconsciously, without realizing it, who here or who in the world has suddenly moved beyond the circle of kindness and become the other—either as a repository for our aggression or just because it feels like too much pain to open to.

Because when we look, even though it might feel like we're protecting ourselves by holding all that otherness at bay, it's our own potential to rest in our truest goodness that we're blocking. It's our own potential to really experience the deepest happiness and peace that we're holding away from ourselves by holding away someone else's pain.

Or by holding parts of our own experience. And that's something I think we might not always see clearly. What part of your own emotional landscape or physical experience or processes of thought somehow becomes the other that isn't okay to surface? What is the awareness afraid to open to, or doesn't even recognize as being openable to—something that we have to get rid of?

I find it helpful when I'm feeling locked, when I'm feeling like I can't, it's too much, I can't open—whether it's to the suffering in the world, one more newspaper article, or simply one more throb of the knee, one more twinge of head pressure. Thinking, I just can't do it. It's too heavy. The burden's too much. It's going to make me bent and heavy and withered. Forget it. Nobody could bear it.

And then I look again. This is a reflection, but it helps me to consider people like those seven I mentioned at the University of Virginia—to look at who really inspires me in the history of the world, or in literature, or people who are alive now. And it's the people who really have that greatness of heart to open to and bear witness to the immense pain of a particular culture or of the world. It doesn't mean they're perfect human beings. I'm sure the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu are not perfect human beings. I'm sure Aung San Suu Kyi is not a perfect human being. But the thing I see when I look at these people is a sense of at-homedness with not being perfect. And that greatness of heart that allows them to be the loving witness to so much suffering—it's remarkably inspiring.

The more one opens to, the more love and compassion, and yes, lightness, is how we begin to hold the world, our own suffering and others. It's not that the more we open to, the heavier we become until we can't pick our heads up off the floor. There's more space, there's more lightness, there's more love.

And where does such greatness of heart come from? We don't have to start out being Mother Teresa. We don't have to start out or even aspire to being Gandhi or Bishop Tutu or anybody. This summer I was teaching in Switzerland, and one of the staff people asked what was really a heartfelt question. After reading the newspaper—which is like every day, you know how the newspapers are, so much suffering in the world—bombings, wars, famines, just the usual really, which is pathetic—she said, "It's so overwhelming. It feels like it's too late. There's so much to do, and what can I do? And of what earthly use can it be to sit here and follow my breath? To sit here and bring open attention to my knee pain and my hunger and my shame and hearing the tractors out there and my aversion?" It seems sometimes so insignificant, or even self-serving, or ostrich-like—sticking our heads in the sand.

And that's where, for me, the power and the wonder, really the miracle of awareness, of the light of steady, kind awareness, pure non-judging attention to just these little things that we're each experiencing through the day—that it really reveals the truth of ourselves. And that truth is the truth of all beings, the truth of the world: our interconnectedness, how we suffer, how we hide by trying to keep ourselves from suffering and create more suffering, how by doing that we create this false sense of separation.

And as we see this little by little, without even trying, the heart, the mind, naturally transforms and responds from love and compassion. It just can't help it. That's what's so nice. You might feel like you're the most selfish, uncompassionate person who ever lived. And it doesn't matter. If you just keep paying attention to what's coming up—that feeling of how unkind you are—the truth reveals itself.

John Muir, the great naturalist, once said, "I find that if I touch anything, it is connected to everything else in the universe." If I touch anything—that little niggling pain in your back, that's anything. Your self-hatred, that's anything. It's connected to everything else in the universe. And just the power of non-judging connection can reveal the universe in anything, even a painful experience.

I want to read this poem from Mary Oliver. It's a little long, but you're not going anywhere. It's called "Singapore."

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket. A poem should always have birds in it—kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.

Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem. When the woman turned, I could not answer her face.

Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem, but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays as big as hubcaps with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life, and I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

The light that can shine out of a life. We just have to be present with kind awareness to see that. Our life, your life, anybody's life.

Where does such greatness of heart come from? It starts right here, right now, with whatever is going on in your own experience. When we open to ourselves, to our own pain, we open to the pain of the world. You don't have to get fancy or romantic about it. You don't have to have a really big, gut-wrenching pain either. It can even start with the petty, the small petty pains. As someone said, we understand the universal through the specific.

Just a little example—it might sound petty, but it was really quite profound for this person. She told me a few years ago that she was here sitting and hungry one day. Clearly not starving to death, just hungry one day before lunch. And for the first time, she really opened to the experience of being hungry. Just that. I guess it had been a fearful experience for her. In opening to that finally, really feeling it and the pain of it—not a big pain, right?—she said she had spent months of her life in India over many years, never really connecting with how hungry so many of the people she met were. She just hadn't been able to. But by sitting here, feeling her hunger, she really felt her way into an appreciation and a connection with the people she'd met in India, the hungry people in the world.

That might sound facile, easy to say. We're sitting here, we know we get three meals a day. You could say that, but please don't just talk yourself out of honoring the path to our connectedness with the world by opening to our own sufferings, however petty they are. It's where we have to start, and it's good enough as a place to start. Just in one moment of opening like that, it's like reclaiming our wholeness, reclaiming the truth of what we really are.

I was reminded today in an interview of what a teacher of mine used to say. He'd say, "One spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies." So we can stay cut off, separated, in denial, fighting, keeping something or other at bay for eons. And one moment of whole-hearted connection and all of that other is gone, because the truth is so strong. It's stronger than our denial. And we reclaim our wholeness not in spite of the pain and confusion, but through it. It becomes our avenue.

So as you go through the days and the nights and the moments, the endless sittings and the walkings and another hell realm in the dining room, really look with kindness at how you are meeting all of your demons. All of our demons come up on retreat—the petty ones and the really, really scary ones. It's actually amazing, isn't it, how it seems that we each have had the retreat personally orchestrated? Some kind of interaction with a yogi or the staff or something happens that really triggers our deepest patterns. I don't know how this works, but it does seem to happen for us. You just can't imagine it would.

So, looking at how you're meeting your demons. I've read this before, but it's my favorite story about it, from Milarepa. Milarepa was Tibet's great yogi who lived for years and years in a cave, just eating pine needles.

In Tibetan iconography, Milarepa is often depicted as green because he was simply the most fantastic yogi. So this story goes: he's been meditating for who knows how long, and his mind became blissful. He carried some wood back up to his cave, and when he arrived there, he found seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa—barley flour—and some sat performing various magical tricks.

Isn't it just like this? You go out walking, feeling so blissful, you come and sit down, and the demons are there. They've made themselves at home, and you don't know how it happened.

As soon as Milarepa saw them, he became frightened. He meditated on his deity, uttered a subjugating mantra, a controlling mantra, performed a gaze, aroused the deity's presence. You get the drift—he was trying everything to get rid of them. Then, after all that, he meditated on compassion and friendliness. It's usually the last resort. But he was unable to pacify them.

So then he thought, "You know, they may be local deities, and I've been here a long time, but I haven't praised them." Milarepa sings many poems, and I won't read the whole thing, but he sings a long poem of praise to the place, ending it with: "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. Drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone." Sound familiar? And three of the demons who were performing magic went away. But he was unable to make the other four leave.

Realizing that they were magical obstacles, he then sang another song, this time a song of confidence in his understanding. So we keep falling back on our practice. This long song of confidence ends with: "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse." It's a little more of a "catch you later." And three of them vanished like a rainbow.

The remaining demon, though, performed an imposing dance. And Milarepa thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So he sang a song of the pinnacle of his realization, the absolute peak of his understanding. This one ends with: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk out our differences."

And then he says, "I feel compassion for this spirit." He prays to Lord Vajradhara: "Grant your blessings so that this lowly one himself may have complete compassion." And then, with friendliness and compassion, without concern for his body, Milarepa placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and so vanished like a rainbow.

Internal, external—it's our last fallback, the heart of compassion. But it's actually the strongest and most freeing way of meeting all the aspects of ourselves that we try to demonize. Ask them in for tea.

And then what starts to happen is that the sense of my suffering, your suffering, my boundaries, the world's boundaries, really starts to get mushy, starts to dissolve a little bit. It's just the pain.

Pema Chödrön quotes Bernie Glassman in a wonderful way. Bernie Glassman was a Zen teacher who ran a project for the homeless in Yonkers, New York. She said she heard him say something that struck her. He said he doesn't really do this work to help others. He does it because he feels that moving into the areas of society that he had rejected is the same as working with the parts of himself that he has rejected.

It goes both ways—the parts of ourselves, the parts of society that we reject. Working with one is working with both. And the intention of compassion that allows us to meet our sufferings here with kindness, the intention of open-hearted awareness, strengthens into the natural, deeper intentions of speech and action, so that there becomes a natural purification of how we act and who we are in the world.

To the point where it might not even be viewed as compassion. I heard this great phrase once: "just doing the obvious." What's the obvious thing to do in this situation?

An example that quite moved me when I heard it on the radio was a couple of years ago. A basketball player, a rookie in his first year in the NBA—you know how it is, for someone to finally make the NBA, it's the pinnacle of someone's dream. You couldn't go any further. They were interviewing him on the radio. His sister lived in LA, I think, and she needed a kidney transplant or she was going to die. He was saying that if he was a compatible donor, of course he would give her one of his kidneys. He didn't even mention this part, but the announcer was saying, "But doesn't that mean you'd have to give up your career?" Which I guess it did—I'm not sure why, but I suppose it's too dangerous, you could damage the second kidney. The announcer was going, "Oh, that's so amazing," and the guy was like, "It's an obvious choice." He didn't say "doing the obvious," but he might as well have. "There's nothing to think about. It's my sister. If she needs a kidney, I give it to her. What's playing basketball compared to that?"

It was so beautiful because it was so unselfconscious. It wasn't, "Aren't I a great being?" He was just doing the obvious. To me that was the perfect example of a life of compassion. Not holding ourselves as special, but just the natural transformation from—as Joko Beck phrases it—a self-centered view of life and practice to a life-centered view. We're part of life, but each of us is not the central core. We can look at the whole picture. And it happens naturally.

I know each of you has seen that transformation happening naturally here. In the times when your neighbor or somebody does something that's just aggravating you—anger, anger, anger at them, anger at yourself, self-judging. And suddenly there's this openness to the whole picture and the movement of connectedness, compassion. You

see the pain that caused that behavior. You feel the pain that caused your own reaction. And there's just a putting down of the story. It's a little thing, but it's the natural purification from awareness to the heart of compassion.

And besides it happening naturally, awareness gives us a choice. The times that we see—and it's painful, isn't it, to see how much of our actions, our thoughts, come from greed, come from aversion. But again, the willingness to open to that pain gives us that moment of choice. And we begin to see that much more often than we might have thought, we do have a choice where to let the heart and mind dwell. Quite often we do have a choice which response to choose. And if we're willing to face the pain of the times we can't make the response we'd like to make, then it becomes actually easier and easier to make that response we would like to make.

From Victor Frankl: "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing—the last of his freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way."

It's not easy. We won't always make the wisest choice. But if we continue having the courage to look, we can really begin to choose our way. And in transforming ourselves, we really do transform the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh—someone asks him, "There are so many urgent problems, what should I do?" And he says, "Take one thing and do it very deeply and carefully, and you will be doing everything at the same time."

So let's do our practice very deeply and carefully. Let's meet ourselves open-heartedly, deeply, and carefully. And in changing ourselves, we're changing the world.

CHAPTER 311

Views & Opinions

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines one of the Buddha's four fields of grasping: attachment to views and opinions (diṭṭhupādāna). She observes how practitioners often shift from seeking peak experiences to seeking knowledge and understanding, wanting to grasp ultimate truth in a formula they can hold onto. Yet as Thích Nhất Hạnh reminds us, "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking."*
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> *Wilson draws on the Bāhiya Sutta to illustrate the radical simplicity of direct experience: "In the seeing, just the seeing. In the hearing, just the hearing." She explores how perception (saññā), one of the five khandhas, is colored by mental states and conditioning, leading to misperception that becomes the foundation for elaborate self-stories. Through vivid examples—from Swiss food beliefs to neurological case studies—she demonstrates how our sense of a solid, continuous self is constructed moment by moment through selective perception and habitual thinking.*
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> *The practical implications for meditation are significant. Wilson encourages practitioners to release all views about what "good practice" should look like, noting how doubt masquerades as analytical thinking when we compare our experience against fixed standards. She invites us to discover the freedom of having no resting place, no unchanging reference point—what Nisargadatta Maharaj calls abandoning all flavorings to taste pure water. Rather than living in the prison of our known world, we can open with vitality into each moment, like mountain monkeys who launch themselves into space with complete trust.*

I'd like to talk about letting go of knowledge, or attachment to views and opinions.

I notice, talking to people and in myself, how easily this happens. Perhaps at this point in the retreat it starts to become more noticeable. We begin to think of practice differently—maybe we're beginning to get it that practice isn't about a quest for experience. We sort of get it. We keep trying, but we hear it enough.

What I find it turns to, for me after that, is a quest for knowledge, a quest for understanding. We want to get it and have it and hold on to it and have somewhere really solid to stand with this knowledge. And guess what? We suffer. We suffer.

Maybe it's wanting to understand the teachings. I know for me, for years I was practicing thinking I would attain some specific set of knowledge that somehow I could think it or have it. It would explain everything. And that would be the endpoint. Fin-

ished. Got it. Now I don't have to keep doing this anymore. It would explain impermanence. It would explain non-self. It would explain the whole show. Ultimate truth in two sentences. I don't know what I thought.

But sometimes if it's not that, then we want knowledge about the technique, or how to be a perfect mindfulness machine, or what exactly one should do in every particular moment of practice in every particular situation. Have the list, pull it out: "Okay, when the breath is like this and the noting's like this, then I should do that." And we forget—we really forget, or we don't like to remember—that practice takes us in just the opposite direction from thinking we're going to attain some knowledge. It's actually taking us into the ability to live in the mystery, in the fact that we don't have a clue. And that's okay.

When it's not okay that we don't have a clue what's going to happen in the next moment, then there's a lot of suffering. We try to limit and control that through our knowledge, and practice can become another quest for it.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking." If you could just take that in, it would really save a lot of grief. Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. Understanding is the result of a long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding. But we keep trying.

I want to talk about one of the ways we easily get trapped in rigid and limiting thoughts, and that's when the thoughts form a description, a view, an opinion of anything—and we get attached to it. Rigid and limiting. That attachment really limits what we know, limits what we think we know, limits what we look for. We can only experience what's within the realm of what we might be looking for based on what we know. Anything else is either outside the realm of what should be happening, or we don't even let it in. Our lives become so constricted. Our minds and hearts are so constricted.

We go on and on about beginner's mind—that whole phrase: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few." But somehow we all want to be experts.

When we can really just look at what's presenting itself without our preconceptions—which is the whole of mindfulness practice—then what we discover over and over is the wonder of ourselves, of life, the mystery. And it's not fearsome. It's invigorating. It's amazing.

Someone was showing me a PBS science special. I think it was about something modest, like the creation of the universe. But it was very serious science. The only thing I remember from it is that they were saying, based on the theory of the Big Bang—that the universe as we know it all began as one massive explosion—that all the molecules in each of our bodies at one time came from the stars, because that's how everything started.

To think that all my molecules were once in a star kind of takes away any sense of ownership, doesn't it? It's all a mystery.

I have to read this. I've read it many times before, but it's just my perfect description of how the closer we look, the more we see we don't know. This is also a science article from The New York Times a few years ago, so maybe it's outdated—again about astronomy. They were announcing that astronomers had discovered the largest galaxy ever. It includes 100 trillion stars. 100 trillion. And it's more than 6 million light years in diameter—more than 60 times bigger than our galaxy, the Milky Way. You didn't know we owned a galaxy, did you? Sixty times bigger than our galaxy.

Now, this new galaxy, the biggest one ever discovered, is in the middle of an even larger clump—a clump of 1,000 galaxies called Abel 2029. But then comes the interesting part; that's only the buildup. The interesting part is that they hope that by studying what lets all this clumping happen in the universe, all these galaxies clumping together, why the universe is bunchy, they'll discover the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter.

This means that there doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would seem necessary to cause all this clumping. So scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to the prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this invisible missing mass. This is serious science. This is not a joke. Ninety-nine percent consists of some invisible missing mass. And we think we know what's going on.

But so often in our practice, in our explorations, when we look, it's not so comfortable—this hanging out and absolutely not knowing, not having a place to rest. Our practice is a moment-to-moment opening into this unknown, as Kamala talked about a bit last night. It takes an enormous trust and confidence.

But one of the things our mind does as a way of countering this "who knows what's going on" is to contract and congeal around explanations, thoughts, views, and opinions, somehow thinking that's giving us security. We think we know, but that idea we

are attached to without realizing it actually forms a veil over our perceptions, over the way we relate to our experience. And far from providing safety or security, it's like living in a prison.

I was thinking recently that it feels to me like living, trying to live within the realm of my views and opinions, my understandings of who I am in the world, is like living in two dimensions when three are available. You know Krishnamurti's famous saying: freedom from the known. It's really that. The known keeps us in a prison of our own devising. The possibilities are so vast, but if we limit them to what we can already think of, that's pretty puny. What about the other 99%?

So, grasping attachment to views and opinions. The Buddha considered this an extremely important area of investigation. When he speaks about the pain of grasping attachment, craving is that leaning towards, and grasping is when it hardens into "Aha, gotcha." He talked about four fields of grasping. One is sense pleasures. The second is views and opinions—and he talked about it a lot, how it limits possibilities, how it keeps us in bondage. I'm not going to talk about the others because somebody else is going to talk about them. Don't worry, you'll hear.

When we're attached to a view, it's really just a thought. The way they describe it in the commentaries is as a thought with the tendency of mind to think "this alone is true, everything else is false." Now, I wish my mind would think that when I'm attached to an opinion, because then at least I would know what was going on. But I think it's much more insidious when we don't even recognize it's an opinion—when we really do think, "Yeah, this is how it is."

I want to talk about some different ways we do that. It's obvious in the world, if we look at other people, how they get really attached to ideas, and how much suffering exists in this world through really clinging to views and opinions. Massive suffering. When you think of the famine in North Korea, which apparently is as bad or worse than ever, and how much of that could have been avoided, could continue to be avoided, if the government didn't have particular

Opinions of how they looked at themselves, how they wanted to present themselves to the world, how they think about the rest of the world—not allowing aid in, not allowing other people, not even admitting there's a famine going on. Unbelievable. But it happens all the time. Or politics—need we even mention?

What attachment to a view does, and this is what's really interesting, is that we see the world ourselves often through that veil, to the extent that we don't even consciously let in information or perceptions that challenge that particular opinion or view. We just completely dismiss them out of hand. We can see that in politics all the time. It's more interesting to see it in ourselves.

I can watch myself with particular American politicians who I just can't even stand to listen to. There's no chance they could say anything worthwhile. And if they do, they're obviously insincere. There's no way my mind wants to let it in that certain people—who will remain unnamed—could have anything useful to be adding to the way this country is being run. And I see that—I don't let anything else in.

I read somewhere that in 1988, the Soviet Union—well, it wasn't the Soviet Union anymore—but the authorities canceled history exams because they said that the national heritage had become lost among the lies and official secrets of the past. Nobody had learned the real history, I guess, so they couldn't give exams on it. At least they admitted it. It's not like that doesn't go on here.

So in those ways, it's obvious pretty much when we look out there how really insidious and dangerous attachment to views can be. But look in our own behavior and in smaller areas. What do we think? We don't think it's a view—we think it's true. It's not really open to challenge. And how much anger and fearfulness really comes up when our view is challenged.

Work meditation, if you work with a team, that's a really good place. How things should be done. Or living with somebody. How the house should be kept. How cooking should be done. How the dishes should be done. How the chores should be divided up. Little things. Or food—what is healthy and appropriate food? Now that's a huge area of dissension.

And even looking in ourselves, can we find the place where we can acknowledge, okay, some of it's preference, but this is the line where I know this is true, and everyone else is sadly confused? It's also relative, but if we can even let that in, we're making a first step. Can we even think, maybe this is an opinion? Maybe this isn't true? It's hard.

And so often—just the other day, I said something to someone about a particular situation. I was absolutely convinced I was correct. There was no question in my mind. It was something that was checkable, you know, like a fact. So I went and checked it. I was totally wrong. Totally. There was no crossing of what I said and what was true. I was totally convinced. How often do we do that?

This is from Pema Chödrön: "Opinions are opinions, nothing more or less. We can begin to notice them and label them as opinions just as we label thoughts as thoughts." Opinions are also thoughts, by the way. "Just by this simple exercise, we are introduced to the notion of egolessness. All ego really is, is our opinions, which we take to be solid, real, and the absolute truth about how things are. To have even a few seconds of doubt about the solidity and absolute truth of our own opinions, just to begin to see that we do have opinions, introduces us to the possibility of egolessness." We don't have to make the opinions go away. That's important. We don't have to make them go away, and we don't have to criticize ourselves for having them.

We could just notice what we say to ourselves and see how so much of it is just our particular take on reality—which may or may not be shared by other people. Just to let in that possibility cracks the solidity of what we perceive and think our world is.

And that's the point. We don't like it to crack, really, and so we hold on tight. But it's also relative—seeing how much of our opinions, our views, how we really look at ourselves and the world comes from our conditioning: our family, our culture, our heritage, the particular education we had, the environment we grew up in. All of that forms our take, how we actually perceive the world. And yet we still take our opinions as so solid.

Just a funny example I experienced this summer—a little one about how strong the belief in "how things are" can be, and how it can be cultural. Again, it's about food. I was in Switzerland teaching a retreat. I go there a lot. And for some reason, my two friends Fred and Ursula, whom I was teaching with, got into this joke of singing this little Swiss ditty to me. I apologize to my Swiss friends—I know that my translation won't do justice to this—but it's something from their childhood, something about, "We're so happy living in the mountains," and it would end with—and this is what would crack us up—"We have butter and cheese, and that gives us good blood."

So this is serious, you know, and they're hiking till they're ninety. Well, if you're from this culture, or this segment of this culture, somewhat cholesterol-obsessed I would say, I cannot hear that. "We have butter and cheese and that gives us good blood"—I get cross-sections of arteries clogged with cholesterol. I think, "Yeah, really good blood." Could I even say, okay, it works for them? I can't be hiking up and down the mountain like they are. Something's working. But just to see the difference—it's views, it's opinions.

So it's fine when we can recognize we're holding an opinion, a description. What about when we can't? What about when someone tells us something, or some piece of information comes in that's so outside of our realm? Can we just hold open the possibility, or do we just forget it? "Forget it, that can't be true"—even if it's your own experience.

Again, my friend Fred was telling me about a Tibetan teacher of his who was teaching a whole group of Western students some time ago. He was going on and on about this really intricate description of the Pure Land, where Amitabha Buddha hangs out in one of the Deva realms. He was going on and on—the color of the walls, what it looked like. Finally he stops and looks at the Westerners, who were becoming more and more like, "Yeah, right, buddy." And he says, "If you think I'm making it up, I've been there." What do you do with that?

So it's really to look at: what are you holding as absolute truth? What's not open to discussion? It probably won't even come to mind right away because we take it so much for granted. But when it's challenged, when perceptions arise that don't fit—we're on shaky ground, and we don't like it. It's fearful. Often we get angry. Dispute comes up, or frustration.

This is one of my favorite quotations from the Buddha: "For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world annoying people." You can relate, huh? But which side are you relating from?

Okay, now I'm getting serious. I want to talk a minute about where a thought and a view, a description of reality, arises from in the beginning of a moment. Because remember, everything's moment to moment. And it really begins with perception. Perception, as Steve talked about, is one of the five skandhas. Perception is that quality when there's sense contact—it's that quality of recognition based in memory. So when seeing, I know that's a human being, I know that's a rug, I know it's red—that's perception.

The Dalai Lama once said that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. Mistaken perception.

This is a very fascinating area of exploration, especially when you're sitting as you are now, when you're quiet, because there's a little more space to explore this. This recognition faculty, one of the five skandhas, arises with every sense contact. And it's not always accurate. It's not always correct. The memory, the recognition, occurs through

the veil of whatever mental states happen to be present at the moment, whatever mental factors are there. If we're not aware of that coloring, the perception can be a little bit off—or completely wrong.

And we don't know that. From that recognition, we build an association and a memory and a liking and a disliking and a sense of self, and on and on and on—we're way down the road. When we talk about papañca, this proliferation of thoughts and ideas and associations, that's where it starts, right at that point of perception.

Let me give you a couple of examples of how perception can be inaccurate. You know how this happens—many people have reported this—they're just in a grumpy mood, and you don't recognize it at first. Then after a while you notice that everything happening and every person who crosses your view, there's something wrong with them. And suddenly you get it: "Oh, I see. There's aversion coloring my perception of everything."

There's a way that we can literally, literally think we see something that isn't there. I remember one time I was in the hospital and quite, you know, you get kind of out of it. This nurse would always wake me up around five in the morning to weigh me. She came in the first day when I was in a kind of altered state—not drugged exactly, but just a little out of it—and I literally perceived her as somewhat demonic, kind of evil. That's really how she looked to me, not quite like a normal human being. And of course I responded in an appropriate fashion, which I felt terrible about the next day when this same lady—a nice, kind of timid-looking lady—came to wake me up to weigh me, and it was just a regular nice-looking nurse. The mental state really colors the perception.

Now, one that we often don't recognize is delusion. A lot of people have been saying, "I don't ever see delusion." Well, that's its nature—you don't recognize what's going on. I've noticed in myself that there can be a perception, a sound or a sight, and basically you don't know what it is. You don't have all the information. But the mind doesn't like that, so it makes something up. Something similar, something close. And until we can come back and really recognize—"Oh, that sound wasn't really a bomb going off, it was the radiator"—until we recognize that, we can go a long way down the road on this inaccurate perception.

One woman told me this summer—she had a lot of self-hatred and a lot of aversion, and she was really working with it in her practice and in her daily life. She said she noticed that when she'd come to work, one of her co-workers, a man, would come in frowning. Immediately she'd think he was frowning at her because he didn't like her. She'd get angry back, and she'd start going through her mind, kind of clicking through: "What have I done? What's he reacting to now?" This whole thing would get built up.

Through her continued practice, she really started to recognize: "Oh, he's frowning. I actually have no idea why. Maybe he had a fight with his wife. Maybe his shoes are too tight. I don't know." But she had been seeing his frown through the perception of her own worthlessness, her self-hatred—not just thinking maybe he didn't like her, but totally convinced that the frown was because he really disliked her. Totally convinced. And if you tried to talk her out of it, forget it.

How often do we do that? And we don't know it. That's holding a particular view, a construction of thought based on perception.

Can we just hold open the possibility? Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I don't actually know this.

It's not easy. It's not easy to do that. Because when we're not recognizing that the perception is inaccurate—which generally we don't—and the whole train of papañca, the stories, the views, the descriptions that are built on it, follows naturally, it's hard to hold open the possibility of doubt. We're saying, "No, no, this is just how it is." We don't even question.

Attachment to views really freezes our experience.

As the Buddha said, attachment to views brings us into conflict with others, but it also brings us into conflict within ourselves. When we're caught in an opinion, a construction like that, we tend to deny perceptions that don't fit our description. And because the experience is happening anyway, we find ourselves in this state of internal conflict.

A wonderful place to explore this is in how you're relating to your meditation practice. See if you notice, should it happen, that you form any views or opinions about what good practice is. Should you notice that arising in your mind, assume, please, that it's a view—no matter what you think good practice is. But really start to look and see.

We're lucky as teachers because we get to talk to so many different people. We really hear it all. Somebody will walk in and say the exact opposite of the person before, and both are really invested in their view. "This is what good practice is. My samādhi is no good because things are coming and going so quickly." The next person comes in and says, "My practice is no good because I'm not seeing beginnings and endings of things." Someone else comes in and says, "My practice is no good because I'm having so many emotions." And the next person goes, "What's the matter with me? I'm so shallow. I'm stuffing everything. I'm not having a lot of emotions."

And it just goes on and on. A really common one involves whatever "good mindfulness" means to someone—choiceless awareness, being in the flow. "Now I've finally hit deep practice. And this thing that starts to happen, this is in the way of my deep practice. Somehow I've got to fix it, get rid of it, be mindful, because if I'm really mindful, it'll go away. Then I can go back to my deep practice." Whatever that means.

The question periods in the morning are a rich field for this. Or anything we say in instructions. You notice how you'll hear the particular instruction or question that fits into your view. "I knew I wasn't doing it right. I knew I don't know what the heck I'm doing here all this time." Or if it's a person you've formed some view about based on the fact that they walk faster than you, you say, "Oh well, they don't know what they're talking about anyway, so it doesn't matter what they say."

Just watch this stuff. We suffer from it so much, and we don't let in that things are changing all the time.

Here's an example of how much we cannot let it in. Once in a retreat—I was teaching a short retreat with a lot of beginners who'd never sat before—about the fifth day, a woman in an interview, maybe in her fifties or sixties, on her first retreat ever, came to me and said kind of sheepishly that she had been basically killing herself, sitting cross-legged in the proper lotus position every sitting, in excruciating pain. It was just awful. That was her whole retreat—the resistance and reaction to this self-torture. Because that's how you have to meditate.

It was the fifth day when she looked around and said, "Wait a minute, Carol's in a chair." It's really amazing. Maybe—and she was still sort of checking it out with me—maybe you could meditate in a chair.

We build some whole construction around a view, cling to it, and then suffer enormously. We compare everything that happens in our practice to this view of what it's supposed to be. It's unbearable, isn't it? But we keep on doing it.

And that's how doubt gets going. "Wait a minute. Good practice is like XYZ, but mine is like this. How can this fit into that? Or how can I change this to make that? Or maybe that's not really good practice. Maybe I have to change my view." That's doubt masquerading as analytical thinking. It does masquerade as analytical thinking.

Try to imagine having no view whatsoever of good practice. Know nothing. Not "this is good practice" and "this is bad practice." Can you imagine just starting the walking or starting the sitting with no opinion whatsoever of what should happen? Just let it rip. It doesn't matter what comes and goes. It doesn't matter how you pay attention. It doesn't matter what it looks like.

It's just all happening. It's such a relief. But it's so hard to do. It's so hard to do.

When I say attachment to views freezes experience, at first it doesn't recognize impermanence. Because how can any one thing or two things be good practice? Conditions are changing constantly. How can we hold on to any idea as "this is always good practice"? It doesn't recognize impermanence. It doesn't recognize conditionality. It binds us in a box instead of letting us just open with vitality into whatever arises.

But it's still so kind of basic scary. We still would prefer, often, the security of some explanation or some idea or some knowledge than just, "Oh yeah, I have no idea what good practice is and I'm just practicing 100% and who cares what happens?" It's hard. We're more comfortable wanting an unchanging reference point. Even if it means we're constantly comparing ourselves detrimentally against that unchanging reference point, we'd rather have it than not.

The Buddha said once, "The desire for resting is burning. Not to need it, not to need a resting point, is cool and peaceful. Let one, calm and independent, not desire any resting place." Just not desire any resting place. It's lovely.

Now, the sense of inaccurate perception or misperception, and the descriptions, the views, the whole story that comes out of it—the basic core of our suffering, the basic misperception that comes and goes all the time, that's at the core of our wrong view, of our confusion—is the misperception that leads to the idea that we are a separate, unchanging, self-contained being.

It's not like it's some stupid, wrong idea. It's not like there's some ego we have to dig out and blast apart and break into little pieces. All we need to do is keep bringing our attention to what's actually happening. With that clear seeing of mindfulness, we begin to see through the misperception. But again, we need to have just that willingness to say, "Maybe the way I know it is isn't really that way." Just allowing that possibility.

You know the anthropologist Oliver Sacks, who does a lot of work with different people with different neurological conditions? He has this one article about a man who, I think at the time he was four or five, went blind. And in his forties they did an operation that could bring him back partial sight. And the thinking was, "Wow, he's going to be so happy. He can finally see."

And the experience was so other than that. Because when they finally took off the bandages, everyone's standing around, "Oh, great! What do you see?" Well, he saw, but nothing made any sense. Just blur. And he said something—he heard a voice and he

turned his head and said, "Well, that must be a face," because he knew voices came out of faces. But it didn't look like a face that made any sense to him the way it would to those of us born with sight.

And in fact, his whole world, which he was actually doing fine in as a blind person—his main sense of getting around was through touch, and the world made sense to him that way—it really never got so it made good sense to him through sight. In fact, it was anxiety-producing and stressful. And in times when it got really hard, he would just close his eyes so he didn't have to see. He could go back to shaving or eating or everything through touch, which was more relaxed.

But it just goes to show how we think about how we see things. We don't question that it's just a perception that may or may not have much to do with what's really there. What about the other 99% we can't see?

My father recently, in the last year, has been having a lot of eye operations. And about a year ago, in order to save the retina, they rotated one of his retinas 40 degrees—and not the other one, which he couldn't see too well out of anyway. So what that meant was that he went around from this eye seeing everything as if it was at a 40-degree slant, while from this eye it was more straight up.

So as you can see, it's just the mechanism of how our eyes are that helps us see, and then memory. It's not like, "Oh yes, everything is really the way we see it." But you can imagine how unsettling that would be, to see everything at a 40-degree slant. The idea being that the brain would gradually overcome the way the eye was and see everything straight, even though that wasn't how the information was coming in. That was the theory. He's still waiting. It's getting closer, but it's been a year, and it still isn't quite there. It's very, very unsettling.

So that's just an example of something that just seems so given, so obvious, and it's not necessarily the way we perceive it.

It's the same with us, with our body, with our feelings, with our emotions. When Steve was talking about identification with the body, we might begin by exploring what we are even calling "the body." It feels solid. This feels like the same body I had three years ago—doesn't look the same though, does it? Feels like the same body we had when we were five. Sure doesn't look the same.

And if we really begin just noticing what happens in our meditation without always referencing it to this idea—"this is my solid body"—a lot of people report times when there are perceptual distortions of the body, or there's no sense of body at all, or the body is just sensations coming and going in space. Sometimes we like it, sometimes we don't like it. Then it goes back to being solid.

Do you think, as you were sitting there, your body really completely dissolved and no one could see you and there were just little dancing molecules in space, and then you came back together again? The perceptions are just changing. It's scary when we want our world solid again. But when we can just let go into that—oh great, fine, dancing sensations. Oh great, fine, solid concrete. Oh great, fine, body of light. Oh great, fine, heavy pressure in the head. Just whatever it is, without always referencing it to some solid idea.

Technically it's said, and it really seems true, that our sense of continuity—of the body being solid—is because things are coming and going so quickly that we don't see the gaps. As the mind gets more concentrated and refined in awareness, there are times where that solidity of perception begins to break down. And then it goes away again. But just to open to the possibility that things aren't the way we assume they are in us, as us.

And just as with the body, so too with the sense of ourselves as thought, as emotion. Watch your thoughts. I know when I look at mine, even going through a retreat, how often we're telling our self-story through experience as it's going on. And unquestioned, uninvestigated, it feels like the same self-story. The story is different, but it's the same self. But if you really look, it's just as discontinuous as the physical. In fact, you can even notice it more in a way.

What I notice happening is that from any particular sense experience—hearing, seeing, thinking—there's a perception, and from that an association, a memory, a liking, another feeling, and like this, a whole self-story. And like any construction of thought, any opinion, we use selective perception to tell that particular self-story, not really getting it that the next story five minutes later could be totally the opposite. And it can start from any little sense experience.

I'll give you some examples. They're just so obvious. Hearing the rain. Hearing, hearing. Now, it could stop right there. And in fact, there's a wonderful sutta of the Buddha called the *Bāhiya Sutta*—talking to Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth, who is begging him for a quick five-minute explanation of everything that will awaken him. And as so often happens, it did.

The Buddha says—it's classically translated as "in the seen, there is just the seen." Let me give you this translation. It's from Buddhadāsa, but translated into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu, a friend of ours. This is basically the Bāhiya Sutta put in a little more accessible language:

"O Bāhiya, whenever you see a form, let there be just the seeing. Whenever you hear a sound, let there be just the hearing. When you smell an odor, let there be just the smelling. When you taste a flavor, let there be just the tasting. When a thought arises, let it be just a natural phenomenon arising in the mind. When you practice like this, there will be no self, no 'I.' When there is no self, there will be no running that way and no coming this way and no stopping anywhere"—the stopping, you know, when we try to stop everything to get secure. "That is the end of dukkha."

So any sense experience—hearing the rain—and in the hearing, let there be just the hearing. It's so simple.

It's radical, and we can't stand it. We can't stand to let it be just hearing. It has to be hearing—oh yes, the rain, it's so cozy to stay in bed on a rainy day. My childhood and poignancy and how I felt as a child and me, I'm so solid—and a whole mood of nostalgia arises, all of this in a tenth of a second of hearing.

But where would we be without our stories?

So there's a kind of hearing, and the nostalgia goes into sadness, goes into loneliness. Here I am on a gray November day looking out at those dreary pine trees, and everyone in my family is off doing what they're doing, and I'm so alone here—and on and on it goes. Only sad, lonely memories and perceptions make it through the veil. Well, maybe I better go walk. We go walk. I'm so sad. I'm so lonely. I've always been like this. I always will be.

Then something happens—someone drops a cup, you get distracted—and you go back to lifting, moving, placing. Lifting, moving, placing. Oh yes, really present, really here, really clear. This is really just all there is. Lifting, moving, placing. It's so freeing.

And then we go off somewhere else. Even if you don't go off, there's just the sense of *me* lifting, moving, placing. Then we start thinking about what a good yogi we are, how much we love this, and we're going to sign up for the next three-month course. And then—oh God, I'm thinking again. I'm hopeless. I can't do this. Then we remember all the times we failed at things, and we think all of that is some kind of continuous self going on.

But it's nothing but isolating a particular sense contact, perception—whether it's the hearing, whether it's a particular feeling in your body, whether it's a particular thought of sadness or a feeling of pleasantness as you're lifting your foot, whether it's a self-judgment when you notice you're thinking again. That could just be noted as "thinking, thinking." It doesn't have to go into "I can't do this." Whichever particular idea we grasp at, it becomes who we are. Unexamined, that feels solid and continuous. And it's all nothing but opinions and thoughts and associations arising from some sense contact.

There was a line from Lily Tomlin that I really like. She said, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific."

So inquire into this—the perception and the sense contact. Notice how when we're in a particular description of who we are, there's selective perception going on. We don't want to let in the perceptions, the memories, the experiences that don't fit that description. Just to notice this begins to break up the sense of solidity of who we are. But it also breaks up our illusion of security. And so sometimes that can be a little scary, a little shaky. It's sort of like if you've ever been in an earthquake—it's so unsettling, especially when the aftershocks keep coming, because somewhere we think the earth should be dependable. It's not supposed to move like that.

Coming back to Bahiya: in the hearing is just the hearing, in the thinking is just the thinking, in the feeling is just the feeling. As Nyoshō Kempō says, get out of the construction business. Just stay simple and easy with what's arising. We don't need to add to it.

The Buddha was so radical, because he goes on to include even views of his teaching, views of practice. Any description of the truth, at some point, has to be let go. You know the famous simile of the raft, where the teachings are the raft you build to get to the other shore, but when you get there, you don't carry the raft on your shoulder. Any of the opinions, the descriptions, the interpretations that we're holding to—they might be helpful for a while. Ideas about practice, senses of who we are. Sometimes when we get a new psychological insight into our past and why we have been doing things, that can be really helpful. And then at some point, holding on to it becomes a burden. It gets in the way, and we really have to let it go. Even the Buddhist teachings—and definitely any view or opinion about ourselves or who we are.

Any view or opinion. There's not some view you can kind of keep in reserve. The Buddha says there is no view of self we can take refuge in that will not cause anxiety, exhaustion, sorrow, and suffering. Those are powerful words. We try to take refuge in some solid sense of self, to have some sense of resting there. But remember, it's that desire for resting that's burning. *Let one, cool and independent, not desire any resting*

place. It's our holding on to explanations and opinions that keeps us locked in a limited life, a limited potential of reality, of who we are. It keeps us living on the surface, as it were. It's like a cage.

And it's scary to let go of it because we want something better to grab onto. This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj, talking about the mental habits of longing for the known past and fearing the unknown future. You know, we want to know what the future holds, if it's better than the past. He says, "But when you know these are habits of the mind only, they're just habits, you can go beyond them. As long as you have all sorts of ideas about yourself, you know yourself through the mist of these ideas. To know yourself as you truly are, give up all ideas. You cannot imagine the taste of pure water. You can only discover it by abandoning all flavorings."

So it feels scary to abandon all flavorings, to abandon all ideas, because we want to know what it's going to be. But we can't. And as scary as it might seem, when we actually put down that burden of trying to control the uncontrollable, it's such a relief. Instead of living in fear and contraction, we can just open with all our vitality to be fully alive in the present. Because it's true—we never know what's going to happen in the next moment. It could be boring. It could be incredible. It could be horrific. But trying to control that doesn't work anyway.

We really never know. It was brought home to me this summer, again in Switzerland. The first full day of the retreat, one of our friends got a phone call that her mother, who was young and quite vigorous, had had a terrible accident. She'd fallen down some stairs, broken vertebrae in her neck, completely paralyzed. And it didn't look like they could do anything. Just from one moment to the next. Of course we all know this, but it takes really coming up against it to feel it fully. We don't know.

Now hearing that, it's easy to contract in fear. *Oh my God, I'm afraid to put down my foot in the next moment. What will happen?* But it's been this way anyway. That's not some new piece of information. And when we just realize, "Yeah, I don't know," then we can live with a vitality that releases us from this prison of our minds.

We can be like the mountain monkeys some friends told me about at Mount Arunachala—the sacred mountain of Ramana Maharshi in southern India. I was there last winter, and some friends of mine would climb up to the top real early in the morning, like three a.m. Just as the mist would clear and you could see, there were monkeys. There are monkeys that live down below, but the ones up on the top are a little different. These mountain monkeys, on this very stony terrain with lots of rocks and some little bushes, would be holding on somewhere and then completely let go and catapult themselves out into the air—as if they could fly. Either complete reckless abandon or

total trust. My friend said they always did land again, on a rock or on a bush somewhere. They never just launched out and crashed all the way down three thousand feet. They always landed somewhere. But they didn't sit there thinking, "I'll aim over there." They just threw themselves out.

That kind of perfect trust, opening into the moment—that's what we're practicing. That's what mindfulness practice really is. And if we think we know where we're going, then we can't see where we are. We'll never know the truth. But as we begin to just open in that way, life becomes so much richer, so much deeper, and we can actually be open to the possibility of living in a whole different way from how we've been living, relating to who we think we are in a whole different way. We never have existed in the way we may have believed.

Nothing changes except the way we perceive ourselves. It's like coming home.

Let's close with this poem by Rilke:

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one,
but I give myself to it.
I circle around God,
around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years,
and I still don't know.
Am I a falcon, a storm, or a great song?

CHAPTER 312

Embodying Freedom

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *In this closing retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses the common anxiety practitioners feel about maintaining their practice after retreat ends. She challenges the misconception that deep mindfulness requires the precise, microscopic awareness cultivated in intensive practice, introducing the broader concept of sampajañña (clear comprehension) as an essential complement to sati (mindfulness).*
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> *Wilson explores two key aspects of clear comprehension: purpose and suitability. She encourages practitioners to identify their overarching life purpose—not as another ideal to fail at, but as a beacon for decision-making. Drawing on Aung San Suu Kyi's example of simply purifying the mind moment-to-moment without grand plans, Wilson shows how following deep intention can lead to unexpected manifestations of service. The second aspect, suitability, involves recognizing our interconnectedness and responding appropriately to each unique situation rather than acting from fixed ideas.*
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> *Through vivid stories—a practitioner facing possible death after heart surgery, a friend with Alzheimer's, Buddhist monks walking through a Vietnam War firefight—Wilson illustrates that what remains when memories and insights fade are the deeply ingrained habits of how we meet each moment. Using Bodh Gaya's chaotic pilgrimage scene as metaphor, she suggests that awakening isn't about transcending life's messiness but fully embodying freedom within it. Every action, however mundane, can serve the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion.*

It's pretty natural at this time of the retreat for various ones of you to be in a somewhat assessing mode. People come into interviews and they're thinking, has anything happened this whole retreat? What have I gained? What have I learned? How can I hold on to it? How can I possibly keep this insight for the rest of my life and apply it? How can I hold on to this precision of mindfulness?

And we know—I mean, we know those are thoughts and wantings—but it's natural that we get into them. And when you say, which is really the theme of my talk, that it does come down to the simplicity of how we meet this moment, it's not really satisfying, is it? We want something a little more to hold on to.

So when we point out, or when you tell us about just a moment of really profound peace, or ease, or happiness, and learning to trust that that's true—yeah, but what about later? What about when I'm dizzy? And when you've had moments of being in a really difficult state, you're sick or you're lost and caught in a really powerful and familiar suffering mental state, and there's a moment where one just brings full attention to it, recognizes it—oh yes, this is grief and self-hatred. Just that. Just that. And there's a moment of freedom in that. But we think, well, that was a moment. How can I replicate that always?

Or you notice yourself coming back up through the layers, sort of as the retreat gets closer to an end. And it's normal. Maybe in the beginning there were a lot of hindrances or certain personality patterns, and it seemed they receded. We hardly dared hope that they were really gone forever. And if not now, in a week or two, we'll find out they may not be. Maybe they're not gone forever. But they don't have to be the enemy. We can see that moment of meeting that mental state with mindfulness, without judgment, and without identification—that's what's possible for us. And the way we cultivate that is by how we meet this moment.

So I want to talk tonight about ways of broadening our understanding or our idea of what mindfulness is. Remembering that the word *sati* that is translated as mindfulness is more closely allied to the word for remembering. And being mindful here or not here in a bigger situation isn't difficult. It's the remembering that's the trick. And what we're cultivating here is how to remember to come home to our true nature, no matter what may be arising experientially.

So what have we been practicing? The two wings of the Buddhist practice: wisdom and compassion. And what can we take with us? What's really important? What can we take with us into the next moment?

I'll tell you a story. This spring, in the middle of a retreat I was teaching with two friends, we went to visit a friend, a teacher of mine, whose husband is in the middle stages of having Alzheimer's disease. And she's, among everything else she's doing, taking care of him. And it was really interesting in terms of this question: what can we take with us? Because this is a man who's had a really fascinating life, devoted to spiritual practice. He's hobnobbed with all kinds of important spiritual teachers and famous psychologists. He hung out with the whole Alan Watts crowd. He's a monk in a Hindu order, done all kinds of fascinating things. I don't know personally what his practice was like, but I'm sure he had lots of insights, understandings. What could he hold onto?

When we visited, he was very gentlemanly, and as long as we were just staying in the immediate present, what he said was quite appropriate. Apparently he knows his wife and all, but as far as other memories, I don't know what he has. And it really was striking: what can we hold on to? Even all our profound spiritual experiences—what's the point of trying to remember them when our whole memory goes? What about, and this could be a relief actually, when we don't even remember our story anymore? We're just relating to how the dogs are acting in the moment. What do we have left?

And I was reflecting, because I don't really know this gentleman well, but what remains is how we have cultivated the way we meet and open into ourselves and experience in the moment. The habits of our heart and mind.

It seems to me that's what's left on the most basic level. What we dedicate our life to in the inner sense—with no views and no memories and no fantastic insights to hold on to. To me it seems like it comes down to: how do I meet this next moment? And it will come from my deeply ingrained habits, not from thinking about how I ought to meet the next moment because that's the right dharmic way. It's going to come down to how I've lived my life, moment to moment. And that's what we're doing here—how we're living our life, moment to moment. That's what's left. That's what karma is.

At the moment of death, what's going to be there?

Another friend of mine told me this story a couple of years ago. I think I mentioned him before. He's an older man who's been practicing for a long time and lives in the middle of the country. He's a farmer. I said he does contemplations riding his tractor because he works thirteen hours a day. But he's one of these people—maybe you can relate—who feels like his practice has never gone anywhere, that he has no concentration and no big experiences to show.

A couple of years ago, he told us he'd had really serious heart problems and had a heart operation where they put an artificial valve into his heart, which is apparently a serious operation. He came through the operation okay, but afterward, when he was in intensive care right after the operation—tubes coming out of every orifice, if you've seen intensive care you know that state, everything hooked to a monitor—something went askew. He was lying there and the bells started ringing, the monitors started flashing, the nurses started running around, and he thought, "Oh, this could really be it. I could really be dying right now."

And in that moment of fear—"Oh my God, what should I do? This might be my last breath"—from somewhere came the thought: "Well, if it's my last breath, I guess I better be here for it." And he just took all his attention into being with his breath.

Who knows? You think your practice is going nowhere, but when it counts, that's what we need. That intention, that deeply ingrained habit to just be here in this moment. And clearly it wasn't his last breath. Now he tells all these jokes because it's a pig's valve they use, so he tells all these jokes about corn and pigs that I won't go into. I just talked to him a couple of weeks ago. He's fine.

So I thought, when we come down to it, our practice is about remembering—not ideology, not our wishes, but remembering: How can I meet myself in this moment? How can I awaken in this moment? And how can I meet myself and whatever's arising with kindness? To me, those two questions—how can I awaken in this moment, and how can I greet this moment with kindness, or whatever's arising in this moment, or whoever's arising—embody in a really simple, moment-to-moment way the two great wings of wisdom and compassion. Or in the language of that sutta: form is emptiness, emptiness is form.

In our practice here, we're exploring that on very subtle levels of experience. Due to the silence, the concentration, the period of time of exploration, the simplicity of our lives, we can explore in moments of experience the subtleties that aren't so accessible to us in our daily life. That's true. We're seeing really that form is emptiness. Over and over we experience that as we sit and notice every thought, every emotion, every sensation, every sound. Everything that arises as you sit just passes. And we've said over and over: awareness doesn't care. Just notice what's happening. And we can do that sometimes.

But we can do that when we're just sitting here. Of course we think, well, in our life—going to work, dealing with the children, driving the car, whatever we're doing—you can't just sit there and say, "Oh, form is emptiness, it doesn't matter, emotions come, emotions go." I mean, we can have that attitude of knowing it's not us, which helps. But we get involved in needing to make choices, needing to make decisions. How are we going to live our life? What direction do we want to take?

And here also we see that the flip side of emptiness is form. We live our lives in this form, in this reality. As long as we're on this plane, in this human life, we're in this form—at least as far as I've discovered so far. I shouldn't claim for everyone, but for me, until you get to the level of Dipa Ma, you can have two forms or three forms or different forms. But we're living in this form. We have to take care of the body.

We have to make decisions about how we relate to other forms. But you can see from the subtlety here that when we really understand from the level of "form is emptiness"—it's all coming and going, and none of it's me—the natural response isn't to say, "Okay, who cares about anything?" On some level, we really care about everything. Not

caring so specifically about me as the most central aspect of every experience allows the space for us to truly relate with compassion and metta. And I know you've all experienced that over and over. Talking to the people I talk to, I know you all have experienced that.

So care and respect for form, for each other, for relationships, for taking care of the environment—this arises out of our deep experience that form is emptiness. We see that at a subtle level over and over here on retreat.

And it's true, as many of you have said: "I can't be that precisely mindful in daily life." It's true. We can't. The mistake that's often made, or what leads to this sense of frustration or disappointment, this feeling of "what's the point of all this because then we just have to go back to being so busy"—the mistake sometimes made is to equate mindfulness with this precision, or with this subtlety, to believe that depth of mindfulness is only possible when we can be this precise, when we have this much concentration. It's not true.

What we need to do is remember that mindfulness, awareness, awakeness in a moment can have a much wider lens. While we've really worked a lot with the narrow lens, the microscopic lens here on retreat—and that's extremely valuable—it's not the only way or the only valid way.

The aspect that we haven't talked a whole lot about here, which probably we should have from day one, is the corollary to the microscopic precision of mindfulness: the bigger lens called clear comprehension, *sampajañña* in Pali. Often you'll hear mindfulness talked about as *sati-sampajañña*—mindfulness and clear comprehension. That clarity of knowing what's what, that's mindfulness. But knowing what's what in the bigger picture, really broadening it out. Don't confuse the starriness, that real precise subtlety that comes a lot from concentration, as being necessary for mindfulness. It isn't.

I want to talk about a couple of ways we can remember to include in our understanding of mindfulness—both here and in more complex situations—ways that we widen the focus, widen the lens. Broadening our awareness of the moment, specifically when we're involved in choices, in relations, in actions or decisions.

The two main aspects I want to talk about are bringing awareness to purpose and intention, which we've talked about somewhat but I want to broaden, and to what's called suitability or appropriateness of actions. That's remembering that we're not acting in isolation, that any particular moment includes the whole picture. What's suitable and appropriate in a particular moment?

When we talk about bringing attention to purpose, widening the lens: How can I awaken in this moment? How can I meet this moment with compassion, with kindness? That's basically the intention we've talked about. How can I awaken wise understanding? How can I meet the moment with kindness, with compassion, with generosity? That's the second step of the Eightfold Path—wise intention. We've talked about that very much on this precise moment-to-moment level, seeing our intentions, how to be mindful of intention.

That's extremely helpful in the bigger picture, in making decisions in our daily life—knowing why we're choosing to do something, or even remembering that we could pay attention to why we're choosing to do something.

The bigger picture with intention or purpose that I want to bring in is to acknowledge to ourselves that we can hold in our hearts, in our minds, a sense of that question I asked before: What's really important in my life? To look at the decisions, the choices we make, the way we're living our life, very much moment to moment, but to hold as a frame of reference the larger, overarching sense of what's really most important to you, to me, in our lives. It's called clear comprehension of purpose, or of aspiration.

You may or may not have thought of this. Some people have a real clear sense throughout their lives, or as they're practicing, of the overarching motivation. It might be seen as a direction you're heading in or a goal, or it might just be an overarching sense of what's important that informs your decisions in the moment. But some people don't really think about it too much. Or if you do begin to think about it, I've had a lot of people say to me that they're—even quietly to themselves—almost embarrassed, or in some way their personality patterns of unworthiness come in.

Say, if you sit down and really ask yourself, "What is most important in my life?" and what comes up, for example—what came up for me the first time I did this was "to love and serve the Dharma." That just kind of came. It's not like you sit and make up a list and say, "What sounds good?" It's waiting to see what's really true for you. And then seeing how, without a breath, the worthless voice comes in with, "Who do you think you are?"

So whatever your patterns are, don't listen to them if they're on the negative frame. Allow yourself to hold a space in your consciousness, in your heart, over time, to see what really comes up for you.

as the most important thing in your life—the beacon, sort of, for when you have a decision to make, when you have a choice to make—to use this as a reference point. It can be enormously empowering. It can really focus our energy and our sense of pur-

pose, even in seemingly mundane choices and decisions. And there's a way that can bring a kind of resolution to our energy and to the way that we live our life that might allow us to open, in the way that we live and in the things that we do, to live in a whole different way from anything we might have imagined.

It's not that we see the endpoint from where we are. When I first had that thought—not even "I want to," but just what was most important: somehow to serve the Dharma—I didn't have a clue what that meant or what that would look like. And I think actually that's good, because as soon as you think, "Well, that means I should start teaching," for example, that would have been some whole kind of ego idea of what to do and how to get there that would have put, as I see it now, a constraint on the decisions I made, trying to veer them in a certain direction.

But when I took the intention, the purpose of serving the Dharma, as something to hold as a reference point, then over the years—and it's been quite some years, maybe eighteen years ago or something—it served me enormously in making decisions. Already I think I was manager here when I had that thought. I guess I wasn't thinking of that as serving the Dharma. I don't know what I was thinking. I mean, I'd been working here, I'd been practicing—that's all I'd been doing. But just to have that as a clear purpose without an idea of how it should look has served me enormously.

Because what it does is, rather than thinking, "Oh, I should be a teacher"—which is really the last thing I wanted to do; the thought of getting up and talking to people like this or talking with people all day, I never thought I could do that—so it really often has nothing to do with what we think we can or want to do. That's another thing. It's not about what we think would be fun; it's about what opens into serving the Dharma. For me, I'm not saying that's what it should be for you.

So having that as a beacon, often when I've had a decision to make and I'm really not clear, and I try to look at what's my motivation for going this way or going that way—as soon as I remember, "Oh, serving the Dharma," it's almost always clear which decision I should make. I mean, I'm not talking about whether I have a chocolate ice cream cone or whether I have a piece of cake, okay? I am talking about slightly bigger decisions.

And you can make yourself crazy—which I did. I did for a while. Everything I should do should be serving the Dharma. So I would turn on the TV and get out the whip because I was not serving the Dharma; I was watching television. There's a point where you have to give yourself some slack. But in big decisions, as soon as I would look, I got this question, this thing that comes up in my mind: "Do I want to be comfortable, or do I

want to be free?" And as soon as that comes up, I go, "Oh. Well, I do want to be comfortable, but I guess that's not the way we're going right now." It's been enormously helpful. Enormously helpful.

I read somewhere that a teacher said in every moment of activity we are committing to something. It's a question of what. Are we willing to look?

So this tuning into what your overarching purpose is, then holding that—not as a way to be more wrong or bad, not another ideal that we're not living up to. I don't mean it in that way. But to have that sense of "I want to serve the Dharma," or "I want to live a compassionate life," or "I want to be kind"—the Dalai Lama's statement that "my religion is kindness," that's pretty great. "How can I be kind?" isn't a way to hate yourself every moment you're not kind. But it gives one the resolution, the vastness of determination, that we're really willing to look. What am I committing to in this moment?

And for me, if it is to comfort rather than freedom, I'm happy to see that. It's not another reason to beat myself up. It helps me look and see why. Is that really what I want? And of course it isn't, and the decision makes itself when I'm willing to really look.

And this is mindfulness—looking at the larger intention, being willing to look and see the intention of why I'm doing what I'm doing. And remember, mindfulness is nonjudgmental. So when I would say, "I really want to serve the Dharma," and instead I'm watching some stupid, totally stupid, half-hour situation comedy on television—how can I meet that without hating myself and without trying to force, "I will turn it off and read the Majjhima Nikaya"? Really? I experimented with myself. Of course I wouldn't turn it off, or if I did and I opened the Majjhima Nikaya, it would just blur, you know.

It's really to see, over time, that sometimes I just need to relax and this isn't harmful. Sometimes it's to see that amidst the vast multiplicity of choices and situations we have in this life, we're not always, every moment, every single moment, going to choose our overarching purpose.

There's a lovely poem from a Japanese woman from the year 1000 that speaks to this.

Although I try to hold the single thought of Buddha's teaching in my heart, I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well.

I love that poem. My crickets' voices are all so beautiful. But having your deep purpose as a beacon, we come back to it, and it strengthens. And we really don't know where it's going to go, and that's wonderful. We find ourselves heading in directions we never might have thought.

I've been reading recently Alan Clements' book of interviews with Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*. It's really lovely—just wide-ranging discussions he had with her over several months. The thing that I find quite inspiring in relation to what I'm talking about now is that she never had any sense she was going to return to Burma and become the leader of the democracy movement and a Nobel Peace Laureate. No sense of that at all. She was just quietly living her life.

She says she's really surprised that people think of her as an important person. "I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they can't believe it." Her beliefs, the way she meets situations—these are profound and inspiring. But the sense I got from reading these conversations was just that: very simple. No sense of her destiny being to remain in Burma all these years. It just happened that she was there taking care of her dying mother in 1988 when the peace demonstrations broke out and so many people were killed. She wasn't even part of that—she was in the hospital taking care of her mother. It wasn't until afterward that she got involved. And she said all along, never any sense of where it was going.

But at one point she said—and this is a paraphrase, I couldn't find the exact quotation—that in some way, her real purpose is to purify her mind in this life. That she's just always working to purify her heart and mind. She says, "I have very ordinary attitudes toward life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I do it. The motivation is its own reward."

I really got the sense from reading that book that just by following her deep purpose in that way, the way it's ending up manifesting right now is what she's doing—still in Burma after all these years, never knowing when she'll be arrested again, separated from her family. And she doesn't see it as anything extraordinary, or even as an endpoint. Her life is about purifying her heart and mind with deeper mettā, deeper compassion. She said at one point she sees herself, when she gets older, doing more practice.

So we never know where it's going to go. But it's having that moment-to-moment relationship to what's happening now, inspired and viewed through what's really important to us in our lives. It's not simple or easy, but it gives us enormous strength—courage, really, resolution to keep going, to meet this next moment with kindness, with awakeness, or whatever your deepest purpose is.

A big support in this—this second aspect of broadening out from the microscopic view of mindfulness—is having a sense of clear comprehension of the suitability or appropriateness of our actions and speech in the particular situation in which we find ourselves. This is very much what we've been pointing to, perhaps not quite so explicitly, when we try to talk about skillful means in meditation and having to make decisions—for example, whether to go to the breath or whether to open up. We keep saying, "Well, sometimes it's this and sometimes it's that." That's because it depends on what's appropriate to the situation.

This brings in the understanding that we're never isolated in any situation. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, we're connected to all others, affected by circumstances. We can't act in isolation.

I don't know if any of you have felt this at any time during your retreat here. Often people at different points in their practice will express this—they feel they're actually practicing very sincerely, mindfulness and concentration are good, whatever the heck that means. But there's some way they begin to feel really self-centered in their practice. I've experienced that myself. Or sort of myopic, where you really feel you're concentrated and mindful, but it's like it stops here. And you find yourself going through the food line doing something totally thoughtless.

This is embarrassing. I wasn't going to say it, but it came into my mind. One year, many years ago, I was one of those people who think they're so incredibly mindful. I'm really just walking through this room so mindfully. I was walking through the coat room with my zafu—that's how long ago it was, when people still sat on zafus. I got to the top of the stairs, put down my zafu, noting every moment, took off my shoes, so aware, picked up my zafu, and just walked off the top step. I totally forgot where I was. Lifting, moving, placing—wham. Fell into the upper walking room. Luckily, only a few people were walking.

Very embarrassing. A certain lack of broader perspective. That would seem useful in bringing mindfulness into the bigger picture—bringing awareness, broadening the awareness to the whole situation, or to quote Joko Beck, moving our practice from a self-centered view of practice to a life-centered view of practice. We're part of life, but we're not the center of it. We're only part of it.

So this is clear comprehension of situation appropriateness. Let me give you a retreat example of how we can work with this and notice the difference.

One year I was on an Upandita retreat here, and several of us friends signed up together to be veggie choppers in the morning. We figured it was a control thing—if six of us all signed up together, we could control that we wouldn't talk and that we were all in the same rhythm. And it was fun. It was really fun. And it was a great practice experience for me in this clear comprehension, bringing clear comprehension to the precision of mindfulness and concentration.

This was a very strict retreat, very much noting every moment from the moment you wake up until the moment you go to bed. And we could see how when we have that myopic view, you could be cutting a carrot incredibly mindfully, but you take fifteen minutes to cut a carrot, and there are giant tubs of carrots. You just can't do that.

So it's really about how to be mindful in the bigger perspective. You still feel your body. It's not like, "Oh my God, I've got to hurry, I'm going to cut the carrots," and you're completely disconnected. Very much in the body, but bigger. Knowing standing, knowing movement, but also seeing the whole flow. If someone finishes their task and someone else needs help, you help them. Or if someone else finishes, they see what you're doing and they help you. Very much a sense that it doesn't work if I don't see that it's not me—it's the whole situation.

Every time I would go in thinking, "Well, today, this is what I want to do"—having a preference or having decided before I walked in—it always was an obstacle. It always got in the way. If I tried to get this cutting board or get that vegetable, it would never work, and it would just be going against the flow. Even in the short space of picking up my cutting board at the end, thinking, "Now I'm going to go wash it at the sink"—something would happen before I could get to the sink, and it's only three steps. Someone else would get to the sink first, or something else would need to be done. Just seeing: give up any sense of me-me, any sense of limiting my awareness, of trying to build my concentration, or being afraid I'm going to lose it if I'm not noting precisely every moment. Just open into the entirety of the situation. I can't decide ahead of time what's appropriate, because I don't know the situation until I get there.

It was a great learning. Really wonderful. And it's not like that's lesser mindfulness. It's not like, "Okay, that was the best way to get through it, so then I could go back and practice." That was some of the deepest periods of practice, really letting go of that neater self of practice.

This aspect of suitability of mindfulness—of seeing that we're not separate, of seeing that things are always changing, that what's appropriate one day is totally not appropriate the next day—that is a really powerful aspect of mindfulness and clear comprehension that's very useful, need I say, in our daily lives. It comes in so often. Really seeing how the situation is always changing.

You've seen that here, right? When you see what really works in one sitting doesn't work in the next sitting. Or how nice the open awareness was, and you just can't get there for love or money the next day and you have to go back to the breath. You have to go down a step and go back to the breath. All these crazy ideas we get. Or seeing that when your energy is low, you relate to physical pain very differently from when the energy is strong and balanced, and one isn't right or wrong. Seeing how we're absolutely interconnected with each other, that how we are affects how the others are.

There's a great story about this that Daniel Goleman has in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, about how much our energy, our mental state, our mere presence affects one another—part of the whole situation.

The story takes place during the Vietnam War. An American platoon was hunkered down in rice paddies in the heat of a firefight with Viet Cong. Suddenly, a line of six Buddhist monks started walking along the elevated berms that separate rice paddies from each other. Perfectly calm and poised, the monks walked directly toward the line of fire. They didn't look right. They didn't look left. They walked straight through, recalls David Bush, one of the American soldiers.

It was really strange because nobody shot at them. And after they walked over the berm, suddenly all the fight was out of me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore. At least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody because everybody quit. We just stopped fighting.

Now, in a small way, we all have that effect on each other. I was just talking to someone today who's visiting for a few days. He sat a three-month course a few years ago. He said he just walked in here, walked to his old walking space and walked along it once, and he immediately felt like he'd been sitting for two months. It's not just the walking space, you know. It's the energy of all of you here. You catch it from each other. We catch it from you. And as you see toward the end of the retreat, if there starts to be a little anxiety, you catch that from each other too. It's not bad or good. It's just how it is. We're all part of the same situation, and we can't act in isolation. We don't act in isolation.

So when we're bringing in this aspect of broader mindfulness, it's to look at the whole situation. What's appropriate, given my mental state, given your mental state, given what's going on in this situation right here? We all affect each other. This is a really big piece of broadening mindfulness—seeing interrelatedness, impermanence, no separate self, and cause and effect. You don't outline it like that, of course, in every situation, but you're really seeing that the wisdom factor, non-delusion, is present. As soon as you really look at what's going on and expand your mindfulness, you get an intuitive sense of what's appropriate. And it takes us out of feeling so self-sufficient, but also out of taking so much unnecessary responsibility for everything that happens.

I don't mean we're not responsible for our actions. Of course we are, in terms of our intentions. But for example, I love seeing on a retreat—especially when I see a lot of people—how much the weather actually affects our mental states. And we often don't realize it. So we teach in Yucca Valley in the desert every year, and there's usually a period of at least two or three days when this wind starts to blow. It's strong and gusty. At first it's okay, but by the second or third day, all the yogis are cranky and irritable, not to mention the teachers and staff. But people are taking it on themselves: "What's the matter with my practice? How come this hindrance of impatience and irritability and restlessness is here?" And I say, well, look around. The whole world is restless right now, and we're just part of it. I really like that. It takes the personal out of it, but it allows us to respond more appropriately.

So seeing the whole situation allows us the flexibility and adaptability—not always doing the same thing at the same time in the same way, but really responding intuitively and flexibly to what's appropriate. And then with the clear comprehension of broader purpose, that gives us the resolution, the sense of remaining flexible in relationship to what's really important.

In these two ways, as we move out of just being able to explore our lives and our moment-to-moment experience in such a subtle way, we can begin to get the sense that we won't always have the samādhi, we won't always have the subtlety, but every act of our life can become a vehicle for waking up, can become a vehicle for learning how to respond with kindness and mettā. Every moment, every activity—it doesn't matter how mundane. We don't have to be Aung San Suu Kyi; it can just be washing the dishes. But every activity can really become the vehicle, the doorway to awakening.

This happens when we really embody, really inhabit life—this body, this mind, exactly what's happening—being fully present within it, without defining ourselves by it. I don't know if that makes sense. We're really here, but we're not saying, "This is who I am, and this is where I'm at right now in my practice."

I say that because for years, I think, I really somewhere thought that freedom was going to somehow be about lifting me out of all the grit and the hullabaloo and the mundanity, and somehow everything was going to be light-filled and special and glistening. You know how it is at the end of a retreat.

So I always thought I'd lost it when the retreat was over and it was back to the grit and the mundane life. And really, something that has served as a metaphor for me—because I see now it's not like that, it's really about getting more and more ordinary, fully embodying freedom in the midst of what's happening—has been the village of Bodh Gaya in India.

As I'm sure you know, that's the village where the Buddha supposedly sat under the Bodhi tree and came to his full awakening. It's really the peak pilgrimage spot for Buddhists. And it's actually the place where I did my first Vipassana retreat, in 1971. So in some ways it's been a very special place for me. I didn't go back there again until 1989.

How it served as a metaphor for me is this: when I went back in '89, I had much more of a sense of what Buddhism is, of the practice and freedom and how important it is to me. I'm not really a devotional type, in case you hadn't noticed—that's not really my nature. But going there and sitting... you can't actually sit under the Bodhi tree anymore, the descendant of the Bodhi tree, because there's a gate around it. But you can sit near it, on the wall, inside this park. There's a big temple and a park around it.

So I was sitting there and, really unexpectedly, I was filled with such joy, such inspiration, such devotion. Because sitting there in that real place, near that real tree, it brought home to me the fact that the Buddha was really a person—sort of just like us. A person, not a god, not someone from outside our realm. He really sat in this dusty little village and came to awakening. It's really true. And when he said that he wouldn't tell us to do it if it wasn't possible—it really is possible. It just brought home to me the human reality of the potential, for me and for all of us. It really brought tears to my eyes.

And then, looking around... if you've been to Bodh Gaya recently, you know what I mean. If you haven't—it's India. It's gotten very busy. It's still a dusty village. But sitting there, even within the park, never mind outside, there are pilgrims from all the different Buddhist countries coming in buses. Japanese people walking around in groups, someone talking through a megaphone to guide them. Tibetans sitting on the side, blowing their horns and chanting for three days straight. Hindus walking around talk-

ing at the top of their voices. Dogs wandering around starving. Cows wandering around. A mad woman kind of wandering about, talking to everybody. It's a zoo. And that's just inside the park.

Just outside the park, there are buses going by blaring and all the life of India. And as you walk down the road to get inside the gates of the park, it's lined with beggars, of course. Some of them come in rickshaws from the nearby town because that's their work for the day, and they line up there. And before you get to the line of beggars, there are little tables where guys are selling ten-paisa coins. Now, a hundred paisa make up a rupee. Currently there are about thirty rupees to the dollar. So you can imagine how much ten paisa is worth—nothing. You buy nine ten-paisa pieces for a rupee. And these guys are making ten paisa for each rupee you spend. Then you take these little nothing coins and give them out to the beggars. It's all a business. It's great.

And the thing I liked best was this: there were guys selling little plastic bags filled with water, filled with fish. You buy these because it's really good karma to take the fish and set them loose in the little pond inside the temple. So you do that. Of course, where do you think these guys got those fish to begin with? It's like a recycling operation. It's India. It's great.

You can't get upset about it. It's just how it is. It's crazy. And it's one thing to look around and think, "Oh, this is awful. All this is happening in the midst of this sacred shrine." But that's not really the feeling. The feeling is, "Oh, this really is it. This is spirituality." It's in the middle of all of it. You don't get out of it—you get into it much more fully.

And so to me, I really think more and more that awakening is about embodying our freedom in the midst of it all. How do we meet this moment? And the moment can be pretty crazy. Or sometimes it's really beautiful. But it's the habits we're cultivating of awakening—no matter how we're suffering or how joyful it is, here and now—that's what we can take with us. No memories, no experiences, but how can I meet this moment? How can I be in the middle of the grit and the craziness and still awaken with joy, with compassion, with connectedness?

It gets more and more ordinary and more and more wonderful.

Geshe Rapton says something that I really love. He says that for himself, all actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings. I love that. All actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings.

To bring that attitude to washing the dishes, to changing the diapers, to working on the stock market if that's what you do—to whatever we do. Nothing doesn't count. Nothing in our life is too ordinary or too complicated or too painful or too joyful to be excluded from the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion. Anything we do, we can meet it that way. We won't always be successful, but we can bring that intention. And every moment here that you've been present, that's what's being cultivated. It's really powerful. It's tendencies. Remember last time we talked about these underlying tendencies? Well, we've been cultivating wholesome underlying tendencies this whole three months, and in your lives previous to these three months, and we continue cultivating those when we're not in deep retreat, when we don't have deep samādhi. And that's what's really important. It doesn't, I think, matter so much how it manifests, as long as it's wholesome.

You know that poem by Rumi? I'm sure you've heard it: "Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." I love that. Whatever you do, let it be the way that you kneel and kiss the ground. Let it be the way that you manifest your awakening mind and heart of wisdom and compassion—vacuuming the floor.

This is the last talk I'll give, and I just want to express my deep gratitude to all of you. It's been a profound honor to share this time with all of you, to be with so many people—no matter what you think of yourself—to be with so many people who are so deeply committed to awakening and compassion. It's really extraordinary for all of us, all of us teachers and staff, just to know there are people dedicated to this on this planet, and that we can all spend this time together. It's an enormous blessing. I thank you all.

And I just want to close with this from Nyoshul Khenpo: "Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who overlook or ignore it are deluded. This recognition, the stability of it, is the borderline between Buddhas and other beings, and this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives."

Every moment. So if you missed this last moment, here's this moment. We're always at the great crossroads.

CHAPTER 313

Suffering, Impermanence and Freedom

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, with particular emphasis on the First Noble Truth of dukkha—the inherent unreliability and unsatisfactory nature of all conditioned experience. Drawing from the Buddha's own life after awakening, she illustrates that enlightenment doesn't mean the cessation of difficulty: the Buddha experienced physical ailments, witnessed violence among his relatives, faced division within the Saṅgha, and mourned the deaths of his chief disciples Sāriputta and Moggallāna.

Wilson explores how our suffering arises not from change itself, but from our misunderstanding of impermanence and our habitual reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experience. She points to our deep conditioning to evaluate all experience in terms of pleasure and pain, and how this keeps us perpetually restless—like six different animals tied together, each pulling toward its own habitat. Through mindfulness practice, we can recognize these patterns without judgment and discover the peace that comes from non-clinging.

The talk offers practical guidance for meditation retreats and daily life alike: learning to meet each moment fresh, without the burden of expecting permanence or taking difficulty personally. Wilson shares moving stories—including a friend's near-death experience during heart surgery and the Buddha's teaching to the outcast woman Pakati—to illustrate how resting at ease in whatever arises opens us to genuine intimacy, compassion, and freedom. This liberation, she emphasizes, is always accessible in any moment, requiring only our wholehearted presence.

A few weeks ago I was asked to give a public talk and given the title "The Possibility of Inner Contentment," which I thought is a nice title. If you think about that for yourself—the possibility of inner contentment—it sounds good, and I would imagine in some way it could cover most of the reasons most of us would come on retreat.

I'd ask you to reflect for a moment: when you personally think about what inner contentment would be, or freedom, or enlightenment, or peace, do you have some clear sense of what it is you're looking for? Or perhaps some not-so-clear, subversive notions that can actually be driving us in the wrong direction? Just begin to have a sense for yourself. What is the mind actually thinking of in terms of contentment?

There's a passage from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Meditation is to be aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our mind, and the world. Each day, 40,000 children die of hunger. The former superpowers still have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads, enough to destroy the Earth many times. Yet the sunrise is beautiful, and the rose that bloomed this morning along the wall is a miracle. Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both these aspects."

To live an awakened life is to be awake to both these aspects—here on the cushion and in our life. As a friend of mine said when we were talking about this talk, "Well, when things are going smoothly in life, anyone can experience inner contentment." So it's worth looking and seeing how much of our unspoken idea is that things are going to get better, and that this somehow is going to be a manifestation of our awakening.

Look at the Buddha's life after he was awakened. The supremely enlightened one, free of all suffering—his life wasn't that nothing happened. As Guy mentioned, he had plenty of physical problems. His back ached, he had headaches. Sometimes he'd say to Ananda, "You give a talk, I have to go rest my back." His clan, from both his mother and father's side, included people who were often at war with each other. Many people would be killed. He'd go and try to mediate. There was a lot of quarreling from time to time within the Sangha—I know, hard to believe, but even then.

Actually, if you read a lot of the Vinaya, the rules governing how the monks and nuns' rules came to be, much of it arose from monks going to the Buddha and saying, "So-and-so did such and such. What should we do about that?" It would be conduct that really wasn't so great. He'd say, "Okay, we need to make a rule." But there was this real sense of sniping. In fact, one of his cousins, Devadatta, was so jealous of him that he tried to divide the Sangha and get people to follow himself. He actually tried to kill the Buddha. The Buddha's two main disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana—Moggallana supposedly being the strongest in psychic power—was actually murdered in old age. Sariputta also died before the Buddha, and the Buddha experienced their loss. And in the end, they all died. They've all been dead for a long time, including the Buddha. All through his life, stuff happened.

Clearly the freedom and inner contentment the Buddha is talking about is something else. It's of another order altogether. And it begins by our being willing, learning how to stay awake, connected, and intimately present in the midst of the beautiful and the horrific. Both of which are difficult, actually. But the horrible stuff, the painful stuff, is generally more difficult for us to be open and present with.

This is why, when the Buddha was formulating his succinct way of describing how to awaken, what it is that keeps us caught in suffering, when he delineated his Four Noble Truths—which is what I'm talking about tonight—the first one is the truth that basically stuff happens. And it doesn't stop happening just because our hearts and minds are awakened.

I find it really interesting that of all the things the Buddha knew he could talk about, all the things he thought would free our hearts from confusion and suffering, the first thing he chooses to discuss, of only four things, is that there's a lot of anguish in this world. That our experience—our body, our mind, our feelings, other people, all experience—is basically inherently unreliable if you're looking to it for any security, any lasting happiness, any resting place whatsoever. No aspect of our experience can give us that. None. This is the first thing he chooses to tell us to free our hearts.

It's one of the reasons Buddhism sometimes superficially gets the reputation of being about suffering. But it's not—it's acknowledging the reality of things. And I think it's fascinating to look at this truth, this fact that the Buddha lays out, not conceptually or intellectually, but as a living question: how am I relating to this as a fact in my life? Never mind your whole life.

How about today? How about all those moments of sitting and walking and eating and everything that's going on today? Has anyone noticed any moments that were less than satisfying? A couple, one or two moments here and there that didn't quite meet the grade of what's expected, of the direction your practice should be going if you were making progress, of what would be possible, what is allowed within the field of experience of contentment and happiness.

If you have taken anything and put it outside of what's acceptable in the field of experience of contentment and happiness, that's the place you're lost in confusion and suffering. That's the place we're not opening to the truth. And I imagine most of us have one or two little places like that. Starting from sleepiness. We're not even talking about the big things. Starting from your knee hurting a little bit five minutes into the sitting, or a little pain in your back, or feeling kind of fearful. Not even a big thing.

So it's looking at this: even though we all know that there's disease, old age, sickness, that we die, we all know that we're going to be separated from those that we love, that we're going to be united with those that we do not love, or with experiences that we do not love—intellectually we know it. But really, just look over the days and yourself: how do you relate when that happens?

Let's just stick to the simplicity of the retreat format, because it's the same way we relate here as how we relate in our life. But the experiences are generally easier. They're a bit smaller or a bit simpler, although just as intense. I'm not saying they're not intense, but they don't tend to have the complexity of having to decide whether to keep your job or take another one. It's more, should I move or not in the sitting? Should I go to the walking or should I have a cup of tea? The amount of energy that goes into relating to those is just the same. So it's a little easier to notice: oh, maybe it's not the situation. Maybe it's how I'm relating. That could have something to do with the discomfort here, just possibly.

So look at when something difficult, even a little difficult, happens. How strong our tendency can be in many ways to deny it or to feel that it's a mistake, a sign of failure. I mean, do you usually say when you're really suffering in a sitting, "This is a good sitting because I'm paying attention to it"? If you've been practicing for years, you might. But rarely do people come out of a sitting where they're restless and sleepy and their back hurts and they can't stay present and say, "Well, that was a really good sitting." Now, if it's pleasant, it's probably a good sitting, you know, because something nice is happening.

And we tend to internalize our suffering or deny it. We had a conversation in one of the interviews today about the many different ways we try to pretend we're being mindful of suffering—whether it's pain or grief or fear—but really we're saying, "Okay, I'll be with you as long as you go away." A kind of bargaining, a kind of basic denial, a kind of superficial mindfulness, or "I look at you but not really completely open to you." All these different things.

And I think a lot of it is because we haven't quite accepted that the difficult and the beautiful are both just constantly changing parts of life. It's not a personal failure when we get sick, or when the breath gets choppy, or when we have a fantasy. It's just what's happening in that moment. The tendency to deny, to deny by trying to shut out suffering—our own or another's—is so deep that it's actually quite amazing.

I'll tell you a little story that happened to me. Some years ago, I was in the hospital, had been for a few days, and I was on IVs. You know how over time your veins kind of collapse, and so they were trying to put in a new IV and couldn't quite get it. So it's painful. You're not going to die from it, but it's not so pleasant. The nurses couldn't do it—two, three, four times they couldn't do it. So this nurse was dripping sweat, and she ran out in the hall and grabbed the doctor and brought him in to do it. And I was sort of

out of it, but enough to think, "Now I'm really in trouble." Because who does the IVs? The nurses. Doctors don't do IVs. So if they're bringing in the doctor, I'm really in trouble.

So this guy was jabbing around, trying to do it. It wasn't a good scene. And I was a bit afraid. And I didn't say anything, but little tears just kind of rolled down. And he looked at me—it was so amazing—and he said, "What's the matter with you? It doesn't hurt."

I remember that because it's classic. If he let in—now let's say this is my projection, right? Maybe he thought it didn't hurt. But if he let in that in his good intention, trying to help me, he was clearly not doing a good job of it, knowing that, seeing my pain—if he let that in, it's so painful to feel that. So really his own pain couldn't do it. It's not okay. We're afraid of it, and that fear can bring down such a barrier that we become completely out of touch with ourselves, with another.

You see how, if we want to talk about living an awake life, we can't shut down to the pain, just like we don't shut down to the joy either. But we somehow aren't allowed to shut down selectively. We shut down to one, we shut down to all.

A lot of people have mentioned that wanting really to open their heart is part of the sense of this retreat. And the corollary, which people have also mentioned—opening your heart, you're much more vulnerable. That's right. There is no way around that one. There is no way around that one. And freedom isn't a way around it either. Freedom gives us the courage and the understanding that we don't need to fear or deny or even react so much to the difficult, because we don't take it so personally and we don't take it so tragically because we know it's part of life and it isn't going to last. Nothing lasts.

That's sort of the other aspect of this First Noble Truth. Not only that there's physical pain, disease, death—there's also beauty, happiness, joy, and love. But another aspect of the dukkha, the unreliability, the unsatisfactory quality, is that nothing really lasts very long.

When I first heard the Four Noble Truths many years ago, when I first started practicing, so that I could understand what was being said—I know I didn't really get it the first time I heard it. I started practicing at about nineteen. And I had had a life that was basically kind of average, middle-class, suburban, no great suffering or trauma in my personal life. But there was that fifties culture, you know, the Donna Reed show and such, where everything was sort of nicey-nicey and you just didn't really talk about other things. The mother of my friend down the street who committed suicide—we sort of knew that happened, but it wasn't really brought out in the open.

So when I first started practicing, it was out of this deep sense of, really it was understanding on some cellular level, dukkha—that things were unreliable, that just going after some kind of sense of pleasure or status or whatever didn't quite make sense because it all just vanished. And that I was truly not happy. But I couldn't look at anything in my life to complain about. You know what I mean?

So when I first heard this truth, it wasn't depressing. It was like, ah, what a relief. I'm not crazy. It's not that one has to be miserable, but that there's an inherent unreliability in experience. As long as I'm depending on my physical health, on the health or presence of my friends and family, on other people doing what I want them to do, behaving the way I think they should behave in order to keep things copacetic, in order for there to be happiness—somehow they always fail to do that. There was this sense of things falling through, and I didn't know why.

So hearing this first truth took a real burden off my heart. It's like, oh, let's just look at things the way they really are instead of pretending that if you just live your life right, everything will be good. It's that book, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* As if underlying that is the assumption that if I do everything right, nothing bad's going to happen. I don't think so. And it doesn't mean you're bad or you did something wrong. Things are going to happen. How we meet it is the point of freedom.

So there's this sense of noticing when we're in denial, seeing how that shuts down our heart to presence with ourself, to compassion for others, to connectedness, to appreciation of life. Just noticing it, not judging it. Noticing when it's too much and we can't open to it.

The second aspect of the First Noble Truth I want to talk about is impermanence, which in itself is neither good nor bad, just how things are. And I think it's a really interesting truth because, again, conceptually it's a pretty easy one to get—that everything's changing, that nothing really stays the same. You don't find too many people who argue with that on a conceptual level. And I know for me, I know it's true on a conceptual level. But is that how we really relate to things in our life that we like when they change? When something that's really lovely, a relationship, somehow changes and falls apart—do we say, "Well, the conditions that led to the coming together of this relationship have changed. All meetings end in partings"?

Probably not. Maybe somewhere down the road we might arrive at that understanding. But in the moment, it's much easier to see what went wrong, who's to blame, what did I do wrong. And I'm not saying there aren't things to work on. But this sense that nothing should ever change, and when it does, I blew it somehow—that sense of self-judgment, or the fear of the sadness.

I find it even poignant, the fact that beautiful things end. Also, really unbeautiful things end too. But there's a kind of poignancy, a feeling of loss, and even the Buddha spoke to that. After his two main disciples died in his old age—Moggallāna and Sāriputta—he said something to the effect that it's as if the moon and the stars have gone out of the sky. A sense of loss. It's just how it is. He didn't then go away and berate himself and beat his breast and throw the second arrow at himself and wail, "What did I do wrong? Why did they have to die?" Yes, they're here, now they're gone. It's a fact of life.

And learning to really open into this flowing, changing nature, instead of holding ourselves away from it, is actually an opening into real intimacy, joy, deep appreciation of what's happening right now. Because we're not saying, "Oh no, this is happening, I have to hold on. This is good, but how can I keep it?"—in which case, we're already away from appreciating it. But rather a sense of: yes, right now, this moment, this is what there is.

There's a good friend of ours who comes to retreats often, though I haven't seen him for a couple of years. He tells a wonderful story from his life about having had open heart surgery. He must be in his sixties. They replaced a valve in his heart, and he came out of it and was in intensive care. A day or two after the surgery, something went wrong. And I don't know if you know how it is in intensive care, where all the bells and whistles are going off, you've got a tube in every opening. It seemed really serious, and he was about to lose consciousness, and he thought, "This really might be it. I might be about to die." Fear and panic arose. "This could be it. I might be about to die."

Now, this is a man who didn't consider himself an ace yogi, not someone who would come out of retreats saying, "Wow, I had this incredible, blissful, fantastic experience"—which you can then make yourself miserable for the next ten years trying to repeat. But who would come out of retreat saying, "You know, I'm just plodding along, just doing my work."

So he said to himself, "I'm about to die right now." Fear came pouring up. "Oh my God, what do I do?" And he said, "Well, if this is your last breath, why not be here for it?" And he just dropped into that breath. The fear went, and he was just fully present for that breath. And then he went unconscious. And he woke up.

I love that story. Ultimately, what else can we do? All experience—wonderful, awful—it's going to be gone. But the habits of mind, the tendency that we've learned, that all there really can be is fullness of presence, wholehearted intimacy in this moment, and the next moment will arise in its own time. You can take care of being present with that then.

That's really what we're practicing here. This is a laboratory for that. And I think the awareness of impermanence, rather than leading us to panic, depression, and despair, can actually free us to open into our life, into each moment of our life, with this attitude of wholehearted presence.

I've noticed in myself that one of the automatic or habitual responses of our heart and mind—we're not even aware of it—to the unreliability, to the fact that anywhere I try to put down my claim is a little bit shaky, isn't going to last, is at times almost like a panic. A kind of looking in different places for something that will be reliable, that will be trustworthy, that isn't going to change, in a maybe subtle, not quite conscious way. And I, and certainly many people I've talked to—look in yourself and see if it's true for you—also bring this mindset unconsciously to our meditation practice.

For years—and it's probably still lurking there unconsciously at times—but for years I was really conscious of this: I thought that if I practiced hard enough and long enough, what freedom meant was really some place where all the hoo-ha stopped. It was either a place of constant pleasant experience, because really, when I thought about living an enlightened life, I didn't think about having backaches and arthritic joints and having wars and such. You just kind of imagine living in a cloud of compassion and love. I didn't think about struggle. There was always some kind of ending point, I thought, where I'd finally understand everything and it would all be over.

Notice as you go through the day here, when something happens, how the mind responds—usually in a very subtle way. The mind doesn't say, "Aha, this is it! Now I've got it, and it's going to be this way forever." That would be too easy. You'd notice if the mind said that. But in a slightly more subtle way, it's: "Oh, now I get what mindfulness is supposed to feel like." Or: "Now I know what concentration is." Or: "I'm finally making progress. I've finally settled in, and now it's going along the way it should." Or even more subtle than that. Watch out. Just be aware of that, because the heart and mind are trying to land somewhere. This sense of being on shaky ground because everything's dissolving—the thinking mind doesn't like that too much.

We like to analyze, have you noticed? We like to analyze and figure out why, and if this happens then that'll happen, and that happened last time so I can assume it's going to happen this time. And then it's all nice and neat and tidy—finished with that one. We don't like it when we hear: "You've had the same pain in your back for five days? Every time it arises, it's new. Meet it fresh."

No, we don't want to meet it fresh. "I've been looking at this for four years. I don't want to meet it fresh. I know it. I know everything about it."

We know nothing. We need to meet it as it's arising in that moment, for the first time ever. And it's passing. And another experience is arising for the first and last time ever. And it's passing. Can we bring that quality of freshness? Then we're really alive. Then there's not that clinging, not that trying to find a resting place.

There's a lovely statement by the Buddha: "He or she abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." And in another place he says it's the search for abiding that's burning and restless. Giving up of that search is cool and freeing. To search for somewhere to take a stand, for something to hold on to—that's our lack of understanding of the First Noble Truth. And that's where the suffering, the anguish, the confusion that the Buddha is speaking to comes in.

Change is just how it is. It's not good or bad. It's just how things are. Our lack of understanding, of really living from that place—that is where we truly suffer. That second dart, that second arrow. Something happens, and then we shoot another arrow at ourselves and say, "No."

Pema Chödrön, the wonderful Tibetan teacher with quite a sense of humor, once said: "Remember, whether or not you go with the flow, the flow always goes with you." We really can't step out of it.

So while the fact of change and loss, of things going away, can be truly poignant, opening to it opens us to love, to presence. This is part of a favorite poem of mine by Galway Kinnell that speaks to that. It's called "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard, as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.

I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars, even as my broken arms heal themselves around you. I've heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down." I've stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old. Don't die." Little Maud, and yet perhaps this is the reason you cry. This the nightmare you wake crying from—being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. You cling to me hard as if clinging could save us.

And that to me is what's poignant about our understanding of impermanence. It's what's poignant to me about our whole human condition of confusion and delusion, of ignorance. It's said that what prompted the Buddha to teach after his awakening was compassion, because he could look around—and with his great psychic powers could

see what was going on in everybody in the world. And seeing that the deepest wish of each human being is to truly be happy. But in our efforts to be happy, and our lack of understanding of things as they are, of just seeing things how they are, our lack of ability to do that—the things we do to try and be happy are the very things that keep us from seeing the truth, that keep us from relaxing into things as they are.

It's so poignant because things as they are—you can't change it. It's right here. There's nowhere to go. It's always accessible. And we're so busy clinging. As if clinging could save us. And it's clinging that keeps us from noticing that we could live in peace in any moment. That to me is what's so poignant. That to me is the whole point of our practice, in all the different ways we talk about it—to really recognize cellularly the facts of life. And when we recognize it, clinging doesn't make sense anymore. We don't have to uproot every moment of clinging. When you see, "Oh yeah, this is going to go. In fact, it's already going. Before I can even enunciate what it is, it's gone"—you just open up and appreciate. Clinging stops making sense.

But we cling because we think it will make us happy. Look in your experience over the days when you find yourself suffering, frustrated, somehow unhappy. Look and see—sometimes it's clinging, sometimes it's the flip side, pushing something away, wanting it to be different. But look and see then: Do I really believe in this moment what the Buddha is teaching? That if something is impermanent, it can never give me lasting happiness? It can only give transitory pleasure, the pleasure of being with something pleasant. No, it makes sense, but when I look and see, do I really believe that? When I'm clinging, no, I don't believe it. I think if I can have this—anything from another rice cake up to something really important and beautiful, my idea of an enlightenment experience, whatever it is, a child, a grandchild, a beautiful relationship, it doesn't matter what. That claim is somewhere that arises then. Nothing else did it. But *this thing* will really bring me happiness.

So we need to look and see what our mind is doing, how we're getting caught in investing somewhere, in landing in this experience.

And this brings us to the second piece, which is, again, that the cause of this anguish, this confusion, is clinging—or really, our deeply ingrained habits of mind. Both clinging and pushing away, and confusion, basically not even noticing what's happening.

But as someone said to me on the last retreat, "So let's face it, I've noticed that I'm never clinging to an unpleasant experience when it leaves." When your knee pain goes away, you probably don't experience massive clinging and suffering about that. So it's a clue that part of our lack of understanding is rooted not just in not seeing imperman-

ence, but also in the first aspect of the First Noble Truth—that pleasant experience is basically good, and unpleasant experience is wrong or bad or a mistake, and neutral experience, well, it doesn't even exist.

In our not noticing that, and the way the Buddha describes experience—experience just meaning our sense experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling sensations of the body, and the whole mental realm, thoughts, emotions. The mind is considered the sixth sense. And that's all that's happening. Those sense experiences, over and over and over. And they're just changing really rapidly, and they're moving back and forth between pleasant and unpleasant and neutral. When you break it down like that, things stop seeming quite so exciting.

Like Sayadaw U Pandita said to me, "What do you want? Something else to note?" Because I was complaining about what was happening. "You can note this, or you can note that. What's the difference?" When I heard that, I thought, sharing things, it really doesn't matter what's happening. That's what you need. If it's not this, it's that. And this is going to change anyway.

And it'll turn to that. And if it's pleasant now, it's going to change to unpleasant. And then it'll change to pleasant. And then it'll be neutral. And then it'll be pleasant. And then it'll be neutral. And then it'll be unpleasant. Really pay attention moment to moment—that's all that's going on.

You really stop getting quite so reactive to things when you begin to notice how fast they're changing, that how much I prefer pleasant really doesn't matter, because you're going to get pleasant, you're going to get unpleasant. I can fight it or not. Those are our basic choices.

It's interesting to begin to look and see how deeply ingrained the habit of our mind is to evaluate experience in terms of how pleasant or unpleasant it is. So again, just noticing. When something's pleasant, we usually don't think there's a mistake, or that we've stopped, or started going backwards in our practice or in our life.

In a subtle way—and I see this going on more and more subtly in my practice, in my life—this whole process where I think I'm just noticing things, letting it be, it comes, it goes, I like it, I don't like it, letting it be. But then I'll notice something very, very subtle: I've started trying to aim my experience towards having some pleasant meditation experience arise. It's so subtle, this habit, to think somehow that's better.

And really, freedom is about just being aware—without identifying, without getting lost in this reactivity to whatever's happening. But if you look at it, we aim so much of our life... how many of our decisions have we made on the basis of pleasant experience, or of hoping to have more pleasant experience? It's a little shocking sometimes if you look at it.

I'll read you this story about the Buddha's attendant, Ananda. You've probably heard of Ananda. He was the Buddha's cousin, and for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life, he was his main attendant. He's a great character in all the Buddhist texts because he comes across as being very human. He's partially awakened, but not completely awakened. He's a totally generous, loving, compassionate man, and he's always the one interceding for people who come, trying to get them in to see the Buddha, trying to help people. And he's always the one who says, "I don't quite get it." There are many suttas where Ananda will say something and the Buddha will say, "Not so, Ananda," and then correct it a little bit. So one warms to Ananda.

Anyway, this is just a nice story about him. He was sent by the Buddha on a mission, and he passed by a well near a village and saw Pakati, a young outcast woman, and asked her for water to drink. Now, some background: in India at that time the caste system was very strong, and there were very strict rules about outcasts. They weren't supposed to touch people of higher castes. You couldn't even give water to someone of a higher caste. And a monk isn't allowed to ask for anything except water—that's the only thing he could ask for.

Pakati said, "O monk, I am too humbly born to give you water. Do not ask any service of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste"—meaning contaminated just because she handed him water.

And Ananda replied, "I ask not for caste but for water."

And the woman's heart leapt joyfully, and she gave Ananda water. She thanked him, and he went away, but she followed him at a distance. Having heard that Ananda was a disciple of the Buddha, the woman went to the Buddha and said, "O Lord, help me and let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells, so that I may see him and minister unto him, for I love Ananda."

So you see how easily some pleasant experience could completely guide a person's life. He was nice to me for one minute—I love him. I want to devote the rest of my life to him.

And the Buddha, being wise, understood the emotions of her heart, and he said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you don't understand your own sentiments. It is not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice towards you, and practice it towards others."

That's a nice story. But the message I get out of it is how easily we misplace our pleasure and pleasant feeling and build a whole life story around it. We think, "Oh, that's really nice."

He's kind. That feels really good. And then go and act like that to someone else. But no—I'll follow him for the rest of my life.

So noticing pleasant feeling is wonderful. Appreciate it. But it's going to go. It's nothing to build a life around. It's nothing to build a meditation around. It's just as much a part of life as unpleasant or neutral.

See if you notice anything neutral. It's getting really hard in this culture to find anything neutral. The breath once in a while, your steps—they're much more neutral than the beauty of the environment. Just see if you can notice it occasionally. That's all.

So our awareness practice is to begin noticing these habits of our mind, not with judgment. It's just how we've been conditioned. But in the noticing of them, we don't have to be like robots, driven by craving for the pleasant, driven by moving away from the unpleasant, judging our experience and our life in those terms, spacing out and looking for intensity when something neutral happens.

It's been an interesting phenomenon for me to notice over the years of teaching retreats and talking with people in the middle of them. Often on long retreats—I teach a three-month retreat every year—the same dynamics unfold, only stretched across three months. On the second day, people feel exactly how you do: "Oh my God, three months." But it changes.

There come places where the mind gets more quiet, more neutral. It's not always huge highs and lows. People come in saying, "My God, nothing's happening. I'm so bored," or "I'm afraid." Then they return the next week saying, "Oh, I get it—it's calm. I get it—it's peace." But we almost can't recognize or appreciate it when we're so hyperstimulated. That's part of the dullness of the first couple of days of retreat. The mind is either stimulated or it's bedtime. After a while, the energy returns and we can engage with more subtlety, actually coming to love the calmness and peace. But at first we don't even recognize it, because we're oriented toward pleasure. That's how we've been trained. That's what our culture constantly tells us—though not just our culture. The Buddha was teaching about this same tendency thousands of years ago.

When we don't examine our habits, we tend to think it's the change that causes our anger. Something pleasant goes away and we're stuck with something we don't like. We believe it's the pain causing our anger. But actually, when we begin to pay attention, we see that it's our misunderstanding of the way things are that creates the anger. It's our reactions to what's happening. What's happening isn't really that important.

In terms of freedom, of course, how we act and respond in our lives matters. I'm not suggesting we fall into some emptiness where nothing we do has significance. But in terms of freedom, getting what we want and getting rid of what we don't want is not the path. Being able to be really present without getting lost in reactivity—that is the place of real, intimate connection with ourselves and with life. That is the real opening into peace. A peace that's always available, but which we ignore because we're so entranced by our reactions to experience.

Really look at the stuff that goes on throughout the day—the sensations and the thoughts about them, the emotions, the future projections, the past memories. Sometimes, when I'm in a humorous mood with myself, I notice: no matter what happens, within two seconds it's turned into "How does this affect me?" Me, the center of every single thing. How everybody walks by, whether someone flushes the toilet, how everyone eats in the dining room—everything that happens all day is assessed and reacted to in terms of how it affects me. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. I like it, I don't like it.

It's really quite something when you look at it closely. But you can't take it personally.

It's just our habit.

There's an image I really like about how we're so involved in our reactions that it keeps us from recognizing the peace that's here when we stop getting so involved and just land in openness. It's as if we're in prison, and we're trying to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. You might find some relations to how it's been the last couple of days here. You're in this room and you're doing everything you can to get comfortable—fixing the furniture, turning up the heat, working out your little routines, straightening the pictures on the wall, writing notes to Lynn, finding the right time to go up to the lunch table, early, late, middle, how to avoid the lines. Believe me, I've spent a lot of time in retreats and really have seen all the angles.

We spend so much time with that, that we fail to notice that the door is wide open and we could walk out any time. We just don't even notice because the picture's a little askew and maybe there's some way I could get a more comfortable blanket and maybe

I could just adjust the heat a little bit. And this big empty space—there isn't anything really gripping to notice about it. I mean, there's nothing really there, is there? It's just space. We're more pulled to things we can react to.

So what goes on as we begin to see that everything changes? Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral are going to come and go. We don't have to fight the unpleasant. We don't have to hold on to the pleasant. Just let go. The space becomes more and more inviting—whether we experience it as space or silence, or ease, or quietness, or love, or connectedness, or unity.

There's a lovely phrase from the Buddha: "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by me, namely liberation of the heart from clinging." Just letting go of being so involved in all our assessments and reactions and interpretations and analyses and likes and dislikes. Letting go and then learning how to really be intimately present, wholly present. Not letting go and spacing out somewhere, but really being here.

It doesn't matter then if there's a headache, if your back hurts, that there's deep suffering in this world. Sometimes it's me, sometimes it's others, sometimes it's all the different kinds. It doesn't change any of that. But this peace, this heart of non-clinging, is always accessible. And it's not like we have to have some amazing meditation state. It's just those moments when we're really present and awake and the heart and mind are strong for a minute. Just stop trying to fix everything, to manipulate everything, to control everything—which doesn't work anyway, but somehow we don't get it.

A Tibetan text speaks about this peace. It's not really a state, even. If you look for a state, it's so hard to talk about, because then you look for some state and we're back on the wheel again.

"Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that this state—the Buddha mind, Buddha heart—is never impaired or improved in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease in whatever happens."

That's a mindfulness practice: liberated by resting at ease in whatever happens. We're practicing how to do that. And that's the Fourth Noble Truth, the path—really, the Eightfold Path. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, the core of it is mindfulness, the ability to be fully present, connected, resting at ease in whatever happens, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

Without mindfulness, we're just drawn by the habits of mind. With mindfulness, there's the potential to let go and really appreciate the beauty, appreciate the unity we have with others in our suffering. Just appreciate the beauty of this fleeting moment, and then be just as present for this next moment.

Without mindfulness, we're like this: There's a great sutta from the Buddha where he describes what we're like with and without mindfulness. He says, imagine six different types of animals all tied together—a snake, a crocodile, a bird like an eagle, a dog, a hyena, and a monkey. They're each tied on a rope, and then it's all tied in one big knot in the middle. You can imagine—they're all just pulling in every direction. Each tries to pull toward their own habitat. The snake pulls to the ground, the crocodile pulls to the water, the monkey pulls to the tree, and they're just being pulled in this mass back and forth. The strongest one at the moment will win.

Probably the crocodile drags them all into the water.

The Buddha is saying that for a person whose mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the mind, mindfulness of the six senses is undeveloped and unpracticed, life is just like that. Our six senses are like those six animals. The eye struggles to reach pleasing forms, and unpleasing forms are considered repulsive. The nose struggles to reach pleasing odors, and unpleasing odors are considered repulsive. The tongue struggles for pleasing flavors, the body struggles for pleasing sensations, the mind struggles for pleasing mental states—and the unpleasant ones are considered repulsive.

Without mindfulness, that's how we're living our lives. The six senses just running after pleasant and away from unpleasant, one after the other after the other. It's exhausting.

But the Buddha says that one who has established mindfulness of the body dwells with a mind and heart unlimited. Such a one understands as it really is the liberation of the heart, the liberation of mind, the liberation by wisdom. You dwell with a heart and mind unlimited.

Mindfulness is like a stake that you put in the ground. The animals can't go anywhere—they just quiet down, lie down, and come to rest. I like that image.

So that's a practice. And it is a practice—to learn how to be that presence, just for a moment, without getting so entranced by our reactions, by our fears, by being pulled hither and thither by pleasant and unpleasant. To find that place of ease and freedom, resting at ease in whatever arises.

We have some more days ahead, with many, many moments each day. And no matter what's happening—no matter what's happening—it doesn't matter. It's an opportunity to find that place of resting at ease. Really, no matter what's happening at any moment of the day. And if you miss it in this moment, that's okay. Because now there's this moment. It's always available to you.

CHAPTER 314

What Is Mettā

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this opening talk from a mettā retreat, Carol Wilson addresses a question many practitioners face during their first days of loving-kindness practice: how does this seemingly formal, repetitive technique actually cultivate genuine warmth and care? She explains that mettā—one of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes)—is not something we create but rather an expression of our fundamental interconnected nature that we learn to recognize and trust.*
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> *Wilson carefully distinguishes authentic mettā from common misconceptions. It is neither the romantic yearning portrayed in popular culture ("I need you to complete me") nor a passive, weak acceptance that lacks discernment. Drawing on teachings about the "near enemy" (attachment disguised as love) and "far enemy" (aversion and ill-will), she guides practitioners to notice when simple well-wishing slides into wanting or when judgment arises. The Buddha described mettā as "the deliverance of the heart"—liberation from our self-constructed prison of fear, separation, and reactivity.*
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> *The practical heart of this teaching lies in understanding that each repetition of the mettā phrases plants a seed of intention, gradually shifting where the mind naturally dwells. As the Buddha taught, "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." Wilson emphasizes that we need not force feelings or achieve particular states; by simply connecting with our mettā subject with open attention, we allow the truth of interconnection to reveal itself. She concludes with the insight that love, far from being blind, is "the only thing on this earth that lets us see each other with the remotest accuracy."*

The first day of a mettā retreat, especially if it's your first ever mettā retreat, can sometimes leave you wondering: Is this really being kind to myself? What's the link, again, between this practice and loving-kindness? I'm sure there were moments when that question didn't arise, but the first couple of days can really be a bit difficult—tiring, wearing, hard work.

Someone asked me at dinner what I was going to talk about tonight. I said mettā, of course. That's what we're going to talk about every night. But I would like, in broad terms, to talk about what mettā is and how I think this practice of loving-kindness, as formal as it might seem, almost rigid perhaps in the beginning, is actually one of the greatest kindnesses that we can do for ourselves and for the world.

Mettā—this state of heart or mind of loving-kindness, of boundaryless, undiscriminating connectedness and acceptance—is one of several divine abodes, states of heart and mind that are expressions of the deepest truth of who we are. These are expressions of the truth that under our obvious differences, underneath and underlying all the seeming things that separate us from one another and from life, the things that seem to create our suffering—underlying these seeming differences, we are really essentially whole, complete, connected.

Mettā is an expression coming out in our mind stream, in our heart stream, in our thoughts, speech, and actions. It's an expression of this unitive nature. And the habits of mind that we so often respond or react to life from—toward ourselves, toward others, toward situations—the habits of wanting, of fear, of aversion, of hatred, of needing to protect—those habits arise from what is really our dream of alienation, of separation. It's a dream. It's an illusion. Unfortunately, we really believe it. It's a misperception.

Listen to Joko Beck: "Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. It certainly looks as though I am separate from other people and other phenomena. And as long as we think we are separate, we're going to suffer. We feel like we have to defend ourselves, that we have to find something in the world that will make us happy."

So that misperception that we are separate leads us to look for something in the world that will make us happy. It leads us to create, to construct, moment by moment, a kind of self-prison, a fear of needing to control and manipulate our world, whether internally or externally, to make us happy, to keep us happy, to keep unpleasant things away. These actions, these habits of mind are what continue to create and extend this experience we tend to have of feeling lonely, alienated, separate, needing to protect. We are actually misperceiving and then recreating the conditions that make us feel like we need something out there to make us happy. These are being recreated over and over.

Mettā, loving-kindness, is a wise response to life, whether it's our internal experience or our external experience. It's a wise response because it arises from a deeper understanding. And it's not just an intellectual understanding. Intellectual understanding is helpful; it's part of it. But it's not enough, as I'm sure we all know.

Mettā, even in just a moment—that moment of simple acceptance of yourself, of another, of simple well-wishing—in that moment, the boundaries aren't being created. The fear isn't there. The sense of needing to keep apart or wanting something else for happiness isn't there, just in that simple moment of mettā.

It may seem like a lot of work, like we're trying to create some really nice mind state and then hold on to it so that by the end of the retreat you have unremitting moments of bliss, never to change again. I'm glad you're laughing because that means maybe your expectations are realistic. Even mettā itself isn't unremitting moments of bliss. As either Steve or Michelle said last night, it has many flavors. I'm going to talk about some of those tonight.

What is really important as we begin to explore the range of this heart-mind state of loving-kindness is to realize we are here very much creating conditions that let us recognize and come to rest in and trust the heart-mind experience of mettā. We're creating conditions that are conducive to recognizing and becoming familiar with it. But it's really not that we are creating that mental state so much as uncovering it.

A lot of the practice—you think we're trying to make mettā happen—but what really goes on is that the psychological habits of mind that are obstacles to this free-flowing, open-hearted connectedness begin to be discovered. That's what you may not have known when you signed up for this retreat, if it's your first mettā retreat.

The mettā gets stronger along the way. What allows us to rest with more trust in the loving-kindness is becoming more familiar with the psychological obstacles, the habits of mind that prevent us from recognizing our unitive nature. So there are really two aspects to the practice: recognizing this boundless state, this connectedness, this friendliness—and understanding what obscures it.

Becoming more familiar with metta until we trust, really trust, that this is an expression of our true goodness. More so that it's stronger than fear and hatred and wanting and delusion.

At first we'll have a moment or two of metta and we'll think, "Oh, that must have been a mistake. It slipped in there, but it won't last." We don't trust it. But as the course continues, as we become more and more familiar, it's much easier to not be so entranced by the obstacles and to trust—to fall back into the expression of unity.

So we recognize metta, and as I say, the practice highlights what's obstructing. And that's great. That's part of the practice. It's not a mistake.

I want to talk a little bit about both of these aspects. Trying to describe metta, as with all of this, there are many different ways. I just want to give you some sense of the flavors.

First, why do I tend to use the word metta rather than loving-kindness? Perhaps it's just because I'm so used to English—the word love, as I experience it in English, is wildly overused. I love pizza. I love your new haircut. I love it when the lilacs come out. I love it when it gets hot and the black flies go away. I don't think love really covers all of those. So when we use "loving-kindness," I don't know—that word doesn't quite have the juice for me. Metta, since I've gotten used to it, has more depth, more breadth. So that's why I'll probably keep using metta.

In the classical Buddhist tradition, let me start by saying what metta is not. First, it's not the mistaken idea about love that one can absorb from the culture. I mean, if you really listen to all the songs and the movies, the ideas of really deep love get a little—this is just my view—a little sickening at times. "I'll die for love." "I'm yearning for you." "I need you to complete me." "I am nothing without you." Is that an expression of love? "I'm nothing without you"?

Often love can be seen as—and I've experienced it internally—this sense of looking for something or someone to complete me, to make me whole, to make me happy. Now, I'm not saying a relationship can't make us happy. Of course it can. But if I'm actually saying, "I need you to be happy," the chances of that being a happy relationship are getting slimmer. The more I need that person to be a certain way to make me happy, the more trouble we're in.

But none of that is what we mean by metta. It's really quite poignant because this looking elsewhere for completion is the very thing that hides the fact that we're already whole and complete. And if we stop looking out there, we might recognize it. So it's something that is very easy to slip into in our culture—thinking love is this loneliness, this grand passion, that love always has yearning in it. "I'll miss you so much if you're not here."

And then we think that when we really feel this grand passion of love, it's a kind of unitive bliss. In the meditation, we might look for that—a total unitive bliss, tears streaming down, a total sense of oneness—and that becomes our guideline. "This is metta, and everything else is something lesser." Again, we're in trouble.

I didn't see this, but I read a newspaper article about a particular Oprah Winfrey show a few years ago. It was based on the movie Sleepless in Seattle. She had on her show five men—I think they were all widowers whose wives had died—and all five of them had young children. And they were all highly rated professionals, doctors, lawyers, plumbers, something like that. She did this kind of Sleepless in Seattle thing: "Who's looking for a mate out there who would be interested in meeting these guys?"

Then the article said that two weeks later she came on the show with a bulldozer full of letters, because the show had received 60,000 letters from women in those two weeks—women who wanted to meet these men, or even proposals of marriage. It made me kind of sad, you know.

Marriage is a great thing, but needing someone so much—that's not the way of love, of metta.

Another misconception that often comes up, particularly in retreats when we begin to talk about teaching metta, is that metta is a kind of weak, passive, deluded state. I was talking to a man a couple of years ago in Germany who was extremely resistant to even beginning to try the metta meditation. He said he felt it was passive, weak, that there was no wisdom in it, no wise discrimination.

A couple of years ago, Sharon Salzberg and I were teaching a retreat billed as being for burned-out environmentalists. Some of them had done meditation practice before, some not. Some were kind of dragged in by the man who organizes the retreats. Sharon was talking in our first group discussion—it was a Vipassana retreat, a mindfulness retreat, but we do a fair bit of loving-kindness as well. She came back after the discussion a little shaken. She said some of the people got really reactive. They were saying, "Don't give us this metta-shmetta mushy stuff. I need my anger. That's what helps me do what I do. I can't lose my edge. I don't want to lose my edge."

I don't think that's a totally uncommon reaction—the idea that if we feel loving-kindness, if we feel friendliness toward everything, it means we just accept anything anyone does. We can't tell the difference. Everything's hunky-dory. It's like those movies of lovers wandering through fields of daisies, everything in soft focus. They never get old, they never have an argument. The movie ends before you see any of that, and that's what we go out with: "Oh yes, that's love. Everything's wonderful. You don't see anything unpleasant."

Both of these views are untrue. Metta is both more simple and direct and familiar than really grand, overwhelming passion. And it's also much more courageous and profound. It is an expression of wisdom, of clear seeing—not of delusion, not of avoidance. It includes all, seeing clearly.

The Buddha described metta as the deliverance of the heart. Deliverance from what? Deliverance from just what I was speaking of before: from our prison of fear, separation, worrying, anger, anguish, loneliness. It's the deliverance of heart into happiness, into connectedness. Not the happiness that everything's always the way we want it to

be—that's not happiness, that's based on fear. The happiness that allows us to be open and connected, seeing things as they are, but not getting so separate and tight and restricted around it.

Metta does not depend on conditions, but it does not exclude any particular conditions that may arise. It spreads out and includes whatever's going on.

So what are some ways we might experience metta? First, you could say it's just a simple good wish—a feeling of happiness and well-wishing. It's completely normal if you see a little puppy running around, or a small child. If you went out and saw a small child running across the yard playing with a ball, most of us would naturally feel a sense of happiness, wanting that child to be happy. Think about it. It's not unfamiliar. It's not such a big deal. It's a generosity of the heart. You don't say, "Oh, I want that child to be happy and he should grow up and do good for the world," or "He should come over and tell me how nice I am." It's just: may you be happy. It feels great.

It's not always high ecstasy. But just in that simple moment of heart's generosity, it feels great because it's an expression of truth.

We can learn to trust that. It's not a mistake. Difficulties don't vanish. But there's still the generosity of heart toward ourself, toward another. The heart softens and becomes less reactive around difficulties or unpleasant experience. It doesn't dwell on them.

Another quality of metta is that sometimes it's simply experienced as spaciousness, inclusiveness. I get a sense of that when I go outside, even if it's not particularly directed at people—when I just go outside and look at nature. There's a sense of my whole being opening up. I don't say, "That tree's nice, but that one over there is spoiling the landscape a little bit." Or when I hear the birds in the morning—and I know some of you might have heard the birds and it was aggravating you; it's different for everybody—but when I heard the birds, I wasn't thinking, "That one's really nice, but that crow could take a hike." It's just openness, spaciousness, inclusiveness.

In fact, during walking meditation, if you walk outside and you're feeling kind of tight and pulled in, walking outside can really help. Unless, of course, there are swarms of black flies, and then there's a whole other element there. But if you walk outside and you're feeling too tight, just stop for a minute and send the four phrases to that bird flying by, or to one of the chipmunks, or a person who just happens to walk past. Begin to open to that inclusive quality, and then bring that same inclusive quality back to yourself.

So metta is not affected by conditions. And it's very simple and natural. Let me give you an example of how familiar it is to us. We don't need to make it so esoteric.

I spent some time in Hawaii this winter, on Maui, and with two friends we went to a local happening. It took place in a high school gym, and it was called "Honoring Our Kupunas"—Honoring Our Elders. People of all ages were there in the audience, from little kids to old people, families, church groups. The event featured groups of elder women—I'd say from late sixties up into their nineties—coming from different community groups or different churches. They'd all organized on their own. Each group came up and did the hula for everybody.

And I tell you, it was so fantastic. A ninety-year-old woman up there doing the hula, doing what she called the "naughty, naughty"—doing a little naughty hula. Women of all kinds—some could hardly move, some must have weighed four hundred pounds—of all ages, all makes. And there was no sense anywhere of making discrimination, of saying, "Well, she did it better than she did," or "What's she doing? She's too old, or she's too big, or she's not graceful enough"—either on the part of the women or on the part of the audience. Just complete naturalness and acceptance.

I would say it was metta—not gushy love, but total friendliness. I left there feeling so happy, just seeing that this potential exists: people, some who know each other and some who don't, just being so open-hearted and accepting. I tried to imagine my mother—never mind my mother—me, going up to a bunch of strangers and dancing a hula in the middle of a gym. I couldn't get there. It was great. I thought, that's the perfect example of metta in a way that we can all experience it. You don't have to do an eight-day intensive retreat.

I say this because once we know how metta can be experienced, we'll recognize it more in our practice. Don't look for something so high and esoteric. Notice those simple moments of openness, connectedness, friendliness.

And as simple and friendly and familiar and natural as metta is, to really come to trust in it as one of the natural expressions of truth is actually extremely radical in terms of how we're brought up in our society, in our culture. Because it comes from the radical understanding that our deepest happiness, our true happiness—in fact, our true nature, who we really are—does not depend at all on how other people treat us. It does not depend on having other people love us. It does not depend on getting what we want. Rather, love is an expression of who we really are.

For each of us, we begin to discover that the more we can trust in love rather than trusting our fear, our wanting, our craving, our anger—the more we can trust to open and connect rather than needing to keep away—the more we discover that this generosity of the heart is what truly takes us into happiness. And that we each have a boundless supply of love and connectedness.

We don't know it yet. We touch moments of this understanding and then we forget. That's okay—that's what the practice is about. But to really begin to know, radically, that no one else can prevent us from loving. No one can prevent us from being happy. No one else has that key for us. We each have it for ourselves. It's just learning how to recognize it and to trust it.

Have you ever had the simple experience where someone does something that you really feel is wrong—it makes you angry, or it hurts you? And you're quite clear that you are right and they are wrong. You're kind of closed down in anger, resentment, or hurt, unhappy, waiting for them to come and apologize. Waiting for them to realize what a stupid jerk they've been, and if they would just come and grovel a little bit and acknowledge that, then you'd be happy.

I've had that experience many times. And I know now that it would be nice if they did that, but I can't count on it. How many of you have had the experience where, at some point, you could really say, "Okay, forget them—it's up to me"? And you connect again with something about that person that reminds you they're not all just this negative thing. The heart opens again. "Oh yeah, right. Just as you are, you're not perfect. I do care. May you be happy." And the anger and the pain and the suffering is gone.

Just a little example—don't pick the most difficult one in your whole life. An example like that is where you begin to really see: the key, the secret is with me. Holding out anger against that person isn't so much hurting them as it is keeping me feeling separate. We start small. I'm not saying we should all just drop our deepest pains right away, but simply begin to explore this as a possibility.

So the metta practice is about recognizing and familiarizing ourselves with metta—not about holding on to a state of mind, staying there and never moving. Second, it's about uncovering and recognizing the obstacles that arise in our hearts and minds as we cultivate the intention of metta. You may perhaps have noticed one or two today.

I'll mention only two. There are two big ones, and we'll talk about others as we go, but these are the main ones. They're called the near enemy and the far enemy in the classical terminology of metta. They arise whether we're doing metta or not, but they come up frequently in loving-kindness practice. We tend to think of them as mistakes, rather than thinking, "Oh great, I get to see these now! How is this blocking connectedness?"

I'm serious—I'm not being Pollyanna-ish. It really can be a moment of recognition: "Oh yeah, it's good to see this." Not "I wish this would go away so I could feel metta."

The near enemy is called that because it's a state of heart or mind that we often confuse with loving-kindness, with open-hearted connectedness. And this near enemy is—guess what—attachment. Love with attachment. Just plain attachment, desire.

Did you notice that coming up at any point today?

I've actually discovered in my own practice of loving-kindness that because attachment is sort of close to metta but different, when we start to pay attention, they're wildly different when you really look. But it's as if when I'm cultivating metta—just wishing well to myself, to the benefactor—and my attention flags a little or I space out, it just slides over into wanting.

"May I be free from danger. May I be happy. I would be happy if only I didn't have this particular pattern of mind. I'd be a lot happier now if, in fact, I'd gone to Aruba this week instead of coming here."

Or when you're sending metta to the benefactor: "May you be happy." And then, "You know, if you just made these changes that I think of, you'd be a lot happier. You would be happier if you only listened to me."

Or just plain desire—to be more comfortable, for something different to happen. Desire for the pleasant feeling of metta itself.

That's the tricky one. I slip into that a lot—sending metta really wholeheartedly, very honestly, and then subtly: "Well, do I feel it? Am I doing it right? I must not be doing it right. I'm not feeling it." May you be happy... Where's the feeling? It's switched then. It's not metta anymore. It's attachment. It's desire. So it's great to see.

Play with feeling the difference—not hating it, just feeling the difference. Take your benefactor, or when we move to a dear friend, or of course people in your life pop into your mind here. We know that. Feel the difference when you can really, out of a generosity of heart, wish them happiness. And when there suddenly comes some slight condition—it can be ever so slight—a little hook comes out.

When I was doing metta for a good friend, a dear friend, and just feeling it, suddenly I noticed: "She's so great, I wish we saw each other more." Just some little condition comes in. Towards ourselves, it can be a big one. Don't judge it, but feel the difference. Attachment is called by the Buddha a "maker of limitations." Whereas a moment of generosity is just out there, as soon as some attachment comes in, some desire, there's limitations, there's conditions. This much, so far, but no further.

Sometimes "so far" just feels like that's all we're able to do. We can't suddenly really honestly send loving-kindness to all beings in the world. That's huge. That's vast. So we start really simply, kind of build up the supply of metta, the trust in the metta, and then it overflows into the next being and the next being.

That's why we ostensibly start with ourselves. And for some people, that's best. For some people, ourselves is really hard and you run into the second obstacle, the far enemy—which, guess what that is? Aversion, hatred, fear, judgment. And if the self is a hard person in that way, then maybe the benefactor is an easy person, someone that more easily evokes this generosity without the conditions.

So just play with this. When you feel the generous, open-hearted connectedness, notice—probably after it's happened a little bit—that there's suddenly some condition there. Rather than immediately going, "Oh, bad conditions," open up to that too with metta. Metta is an open-hearted connectedness. Feel what the wanting feels like. You begin to see it's very different from metta. It's not actually as similar as we think when we're not looking.

This will be highlighted. The purification Michelle mentioned last night—the way it works is by bringing up into awareness these deep-set habits and patterns of mind. So there's attachment, and there's the far enemy, the opposite, so to speak: ill will, aversion, fear, not liking. And again, I'm sure there was one or two moments when that arose today. Sometimes it arises towards ourselves or towards the metta subject, but it's not always so clear. It can just be kind of generalized aversion or generalized desire, just squirting out at anything that's going on here. And the first couple days of a retreat, that can happen anyway, as the hindrances of mind—whether you're doing vipassana, mindfulness, or metta—can get strong: attachment and aversion.

So beginning to recognize the presence of aversion or fear, rather than just letting it color our vision and thinking everything is wrong, something's bad, I'm not doing it right because I'm feeling lousy about myself—beginning to recognize it is how metta begins to surround and see what's happening without reacting to it.

Back to my friends at the environmental retreat, where I could really understand, in a way, what they were saying: "Oh, we need our edge." And anger, that real kind of passionate anger, is energizing sometimes, isn't it? I could really understand where they were coming from, feeling, "I need that energy to do the work I'm doing."

What we need to learn to see is that the energy which comes with our deep understanding and connectedness—to ourselves, to things as they are, to all life—is much more deep and profound and long-lasting than the energy of anger. Metta sees through

the concept of "the other." Instead of having to be angry, holding something at a distance, it can open up and include. Clear-eyed, it sees what's wrong, but it doesn't fall into this habit of making things "the other."

And they're talking to a psychologist who's discussing how road rage happens, what we do in our mind. He says, "It used to be there was a rule of courtesy for the road, just as for writing thank you notes. Now everything is a personal insult, especially if we're in a car. If someone on the road upsets you, that individual's whole identity is encapsulated in this bad thing he did. He's not seen as a whole person." And then there's an urge to express our aggression on this anonymous other, this bad being—to think, "I can't let him get away with this." The thin veneer of civilization is removed.

What I appreciate about this is that tendency to encapsulate one being's whole identity in this bad thing they did. That's what aversion, fear, and anger do. What metta does that's different is it sees this bad thing he did—sure, it's really clear seeing, open-eyed connectedness—and it sees the rest. So it's inclusive. It's not driven by reacting to the bad thing, and it's not blindly hurt or letting someone act on us in an inappropriate way, but it's all-inclusive.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, a wonderful American monk in the Thai tradition. He's talking about metta not in terms of this vast unity of heart, but very simply when faced with the unpleasant: "Metta does not necessarily mean liking something, or that you like everything at all. It means an attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or the faults of any situation, inside or outside of oneself. Now with metta, one isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, in a person, or in oneself, without creating anything around it."

I personally love that. Witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a person, or in ourself—with space. That's all. Not creating any reaction around it, just the spaciousness. That's an expression of metta.

He goes on to say that you simply stop the mind from thinking, "I hate it, I hate it, I don't want it." That's a huge advance in itself, isn't it? Just repeating the phrases instead of "I hate it, I hate it" is really a huge difference. Over time, I think you'll see that. Or "I want it, I want it." Some of us lean toward "hate it, hate it." Others lean toward "want it, want it." Either one—metta cuts through them both.

So witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it. And where we start on this retreat, as we've been doing today, is very directly and simply with ourselves. Noticing, without creating anything around it, how your heart and mind might have responded to some of the difficult things that came up today. Whether

you're sending metta to yourself or sending metta to the benefactor, as Stephen said, it's all coming out of us. And metta really lets us see a lot of gunk sometimes. That's great. That's what the practice is. Not just the gunk, but beginning to see what are the habits of our heart and mind. How do we respond to our sleepiness, our anger, our aversion, our pain, our sadness, our jealousy, our judgment of ourself? How are we responding to all of that? Is it with more resistance? Is it, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, do we meet our anger with more anger, trying to root it out and uproot it and tear ourselves into a battlefield? That's not compassion. That's not loving-kindness.

So we begin by seeing how we are meeting the unpleasant things, the things we don't like about ourselves. As C.G. Jung said once, those parts of yourself you do not accept will become hostile to you. But I actually think that we start by being hostile to them. So begin to notice: when that particular negative tendency comes up, when that loneliness comes up, when you remember me talking about metta not being wanting or loneliness and you find yourself lost in yearning—how do you meet that? Where do we start?

When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there, in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart? The next time you get a chance, experiment with this.

That's a perfect description of metta to ourselves. The next time, just relax. Let that pain be there. And you might touch the limitless space of our human hearts—not by getting rid of it, simply by being present, connected with spaciousness. We don't have to approve of everything. As Samaya said, we don't have to like everything, but we don't get lost in reactivity and we don't pretend it's not happening.

There's a line from the Buddha I love because I think it has very profound implications, especially in this practice. He said, "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." So with no mental training, when we come in and we sit—if this is the first time you've ever sat, or even if it's not—we all know, we come in from a busy life, and our mind doesn't really go where we tell it to very well, does it? Have you been zoomed in on the phrases and the method of feeling all day? I wouldn't believe you if you had. The mind's all over. And what we get to see is what the mind dwells upon frequently, because that's what it's naturally inclining towards.

For a long time, before I really did an intensive practice, I was a little resistant. Saying these phrases—you don't feel it a lot of the time. It feels either like wishful thinking or affirmations or some kind of rote repetition. The words all get mixed up. Maybe happy, maybe peaceful—no, no, no. I have a friend who ends up saying, "May I live with peas." It just gets all mixed up.

But when you think about what we're actually doing, we're cultivating the seed of intention. Each time we connect with our metta subject—ourselves or another—just that moment of open connectedness, that's planting the seed of connected loving-kindness. Each time in your heart you repeat the phrase, knowing what it means—feeling it or not is out of your control—just saying it and knowing what it means, that's shifting where the mind dwells.

And the amazing thing is that as we shift, we have more choice than we realize about where to let the mind dwell. It's a lot of work to begin to activate this choice, but it does get easier because the mind then begins to incline more naturally towards metta. Amazing! It really happens. I was amazed. It really happens.

And we begin to have much more choice. The Dalai Lama—I know this might seem like a big leap from where we are, but it works. He says, "Each day when we wake up, we could say to ourselves, 'Altruistic attitude.'" I get the feeling he really does wake up saying "altruistic attitude." He continues: "If we have an altruistic attitude, many favorable things will come. I practice these things and I know they are helpful. I try to be sincere to everyone, even the Chinese. If I develop some kind of ill will, anger, or hatred, who will lose? I will lose my happiness, my sleep, my appetite, but my ill feelings won't hurt the Chinese at all. If I am agitated, my physical condition will become weak, and some people I could make happy will not become happy. Some people may criticize me, and some do, but I try to remain joyful. If we want to work effectively for freedom and justice, it is best to do so without anger or ill will. If we feel calm and have a sincere motivation, we can work hard for thirty or forty years. I believe that because of my firm commitment to nonviolence, based on a genuine sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, some positive results have been produced."

One gets the sense that he really practices this. And it might come up: okay, so he's the reincarnated bodhisattva of compassion. He had a head start on some of us. But we're not aspiring to be the Dalai Lama. We can, however, make that choice from time to time—where to let the mind dwell. Even when we're caught in irritation with ourselves, how we meet that irritation is where we're choosing to let the mind dwell. That's how we begin to cultivate metta, the intention of metta.

And what is another amazing aspect of how naturally the mind and heart begin to trust and dwell in metta is, again, we don't have to work so hard to create it.

The simple openness of connected attention is really enough. Because since metta is an expression of how things really are—the interconnectedness, the oneness—if we can just open and pay attention without creating the limitations, the judgments, the wanting, the aversion, the truth reveals itself. And metta is a natural expression.

John Muir, the naturalist, once said that if he touched anything, he found it connected to everything else in the universe. Even your irritation. If you touch anything, really, with an open heart and mind, you find this to be true.

I want to read you this poem. It's a little long, but I love it because it expresses precisely this—the power of simple connectedness to open us to love and to everything in the universe. It's called "Singapore":

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it—kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled, and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem. But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life. And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

We can't force a happy, all-inclusive metta feeling. So just give up trying right now. And what we find is that by letting go of results, by not trying to force the feeling, by not needing to fix the person we're sending wishes to, letting each phrase, each connection with the metta subject simply plant the seed of intention—just being content with that as a gift, handing the phrase to yourself as a gift, opening your heart to the benefactor as a gift—each time we do that, each moment is breaking the cycle of reactivity, the habit of limitation, the habit of separation.

Each moment that we connect with the phrase is a moment of choice about where to let the heart dwell, where to let the mind dwell. And you'll see that the metta emerges all by itself, because what we're really doing is uncovering it. It's an expression of our truest self. We actually work really hard in our lives not to see it. It takes a huge amount of energy to keep constructing this illusion of separation. And so it takes a certain amount of energy to begin countering that habit. But then it takes less and less, and the metta begins to emerge.

You can't tell what's happening, really—never mind on the first day, even in a long retreat. This is a true testimonial. I was just teaching in California, and there were two women on that retreat who had sat the three-month retreat this fall, doing loving-kindness practice just like you're doing, for the entire three months. I know—you don't want to think about that right now. But it gets easier.

One of them came up to me and said that even at the end, she had enjoyed it, it was nice, but she kept saying to herself, "I'm not really concentrated. Nothing's really happening." Then she told me what occurred afterward: "I never would have believed it. I went back home. I was in a difficult situation—didn't have a place to live, was staying with friends in their living room, and they were getting divorced. It was a horrible situation. And I was just so present, so kind, so open—"

So loving. I kept going, I'm waiting for it to pop. I'm waiting for this to stop. I'm waiting for something else to come up." Not that there weren't other thoughts. And I've had the same experience. I come out of a mettā retreat thinking, "Well, that was nice... so what?" Because you feel like your normal self. But when you don't expect it, the heart and mind dwells in inclusive connectedness. We turn away from the woman in the painting and look back at the world, and we see beauty—in ourselves and in others.

So it's trusting that potential enough to let go of all need for result and just offer yourself this moment of pure intention as a gift. It's not sentimental. It's not passive or weak. In some ways, I think it's the strongest response we could have in this world.

I want to close with something I read just last night. It's a book review of a book by a woman named Martha Beck. She and her husband were both academics at Harvard, both teachers there. They had one young daughter and found out she was pregnant with another child—and that this child would be born with Down syndrome. Everyone, all their doctors, all their friends, everyone at Harvard, told them they should have an abortion. And she said, to both of their surprise, they didn't do it. And it's been absolutely wonderful in their lives, this little boy named Adam.

To give you the context, she's describing how she once spoke to an entering class at Harvard Medical School about her pregnancy and her decision. Adam, her little boy with Down syndrome, was asleep in her lap at the time, wearing a bow tie and a dreamy expression. After the speech, she was approached by an elderly professor who had just become the grandfather of a little girl with Down syndrome. As he talked to her, he stroked Adam's soft blonde hair and wept. He loved his granddaughter with inexplicable openness, and the experience had changed his whole life.

"Whoever said that love is blind was dead wrong. Love is the only thing on this earth that lets us see each other with the remotest accuracy."

CHAPTER 315

Compassion

Carol Wilson · 54 min

> *In this heartfelt talk from a mettā retreat, Carol Wilson addresses what happens when loving-kindness practice meets difficulty and pain. She explains that compassion (karuṇā) naturally arises when mettā encounters suffering—it is the "quivering of the heart in response to pain," a vibrating together rather than a pulling away. Wilson illuminates how our conditioned response to push away suffering actually creates separation and fear, while the courage to let our hearts break opens us to our fundamental connectedness with all beings.*
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> *Drawing on the First Noble Truth (dukkha), Wilson examines our cultural conditioning to hide suffering and treat difficulty as failure. Through personal stories—including her father's Parkinson's diagnosis and her own chronic illness—she demonstrates how meeting pain with compassion rather than aversion transforms our relationship to life itself. She shares the inspiring example of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, noting how those who are most present to suffering also radiate the greatest joy.*
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> *The talk offers practical insight into how mettā practice shifts our moment-to-moment relationship with unpleasant experience. Rather than the attention shrinking back from difficulty, loving-kindness flows into whatever arises without discrimination. Wilson emphasizes that this isn't passive acceptance but wise, fearless engagement—distinguishing true compassion from codependence. She encourages practitioners to trust that even when practice feels unproductive, the intention of well-wishing is strengthening our capacity to meet both beauty and suffering with an open heart.*

A metta retreat, a loving-kindness retreat, the way we're doing it here together for these eight days, is a kind of complex amalgam of different experiences that you all can go through. When there's a hundred of you, you can be going through different experiences, different ones at different times.

There's the strain of the loving-kindness that's being cultivated—the feeling of loving-kindness, the stuff that comes up around it, how you relate to the different metta subjects. There's the concentration strain, which may or may not come together with the loving-kindness. Sometimes you just feel really concentrated, no loving-kindness. Sometimes just loving-kindness, no concentration. And I know you're thinking you're in the third category, which is neither loving-kindness nor concentration, and sometimes it feels like that.

In deciding which strain to speak to tonight, after we spoke with only about half of you today, I thought maybe I'd speak to what happens in the times when there's a lot of difficulty coming up. Because what occurs when loving-kindness is turned towards difficulty, pain, suffering of any form, what arises is compassion. It's subtly different from loving-kindness, but it's really the face of loving-kindness in connection with our suffering.

In a couple of days we'll teach the specifics of compassion as another divine abode, brahmavihara, but in the meantime, we're all working with and experiencing compassion. And it's a wonderful way to begin to see that we can relate to the things we don't like, the things we're afraid of, including the fear itself, in a different way.

Compassion, just as metta is, as is empathetic joy and equanimity, is a so-called divine abode—vast, boundless, undiscriminating. In other words, compassion is another expression of our unitive nature. It's actually one of the beautiful states of heart and mind. It's a happy state, believe it or not. The heart of metta, in connection with suffering as compassion, is a beautiful expression of the truth of who we are. Not the way most of us think about our resistance, is it? Or the fear, or the pain. But it's really about unlearning our mistaken response to what is difficult in our life.

Compassion, karuna in Pali, has one definition which I really like because I'm sort of kinesthetic and that's how it feels to me: the quivering of the heart in response to suffering, in connection with pain. The quivering of the heart, sort of vibrating together—not the quivering of "get me out of here," but the quivering of vibrating together.

Instead of our conditioned response to ours or another person's strong difficulty—of "what can I do to fix it," but fix it meaning so I shouldn't have to know about it or feel it anymore, or of judgment or self-judgment or blame—it can really become a way of opening more deeply into truth and connectedness. The quivering of the heart, connectedness.

At the end of April, I was leading a retreat in Colorado and it started just a couple of days after that massacre in the high school in Littleton. Though we were a few hours away from that, there were people at the retreat from Denver. And there was also the sense that the bombing in Yugoslavia was very strong. And there were people in the retreat, of course, going through their own deep sadness and fears and pain and suffering, just as people are here.

In talking with one woman who came from the Denver area and so felt very affected by the massacre in the high school—just knowing people who went to that school—she said she'd been really questioning not only the pain in the world, but also her own pain. What's the good of sitting here and just being with my sadness and my grief? She was in a lot of grief, but it felt personal at first.

But she said—and I thought it was really a beautiful thing—that little by little she came to be able to be with her own grief, and saw that it opened into really the grief of the world. When you really resonate with your suffering, it stops being just "me" and it moves into that boundless quality that connects us with all beings. We really see through compassion that we're not separate.

What she said was, "Okay, I was really struggling with: am I just being selfish? What's the point of just being with this difficult stuff? Is it worth it? Is it useful?" And then when we were talking, she said she had really come to see that by being able to be with what she was going through then, however big or little it might seem—she said, "I really get it. That will be that much less violence, that much less anger that I'll have to put out into the world." That by simply being able to be with whatever's arising in my experience, it really translates into more compassion, more kindness in the way I am in the world.

That might seem like a little thing. I think it's really huge. It's the beginning of true compassion. Where else can it begin? Where else can it deepen but here within our own experience?

I remember when I first started in practice, I was nineteen and, of course, quite idealistic. I would practice for a while and then I'd think, "Well, okay, now I'm feeling pretty good, I have to go save the world now." You know how long that lasts. I'd go out for a little while, go back to college, get all caught up again—never mind saving the world, I just want to function again in a happy way—and go back into practice.

It doesn't have to be quite such a dichotomy, but I really see that until I can be with my own pain and suffering—the pain that's elicited in me when I'm with someone else who's in pain—I can't really be there for somebody else.

So in our practice here, in the metta, when all these difficult things come up, it's not a mistake. It's not a sign of failure. It's not a sign that you're hopeless at this practice, or that the practice is going backwards. Have you had thoughts like that, just flickering through? You know, if you're doing it right, it should be all bliss.

It's interesting—a couple of people in our group today have had retreats where it was mostly bliss. And it ain't happening now. That really can lead into the feeling of "I had it right, and now I don't anymore. Now I've got it wrong."

So I think where we have to start in beginning to see where we get so astray in our response to our suffering is really to come to a deeper understanding of the First Noble Truth of the Buddha. You remember that, most of you, right? The unsatisfactory quality of life—that there's pain, that there's old age, sickness, disease and death, that we have to spend time with what we don't like, that we get separated from what we like, that things change. That's just a fact of life. Not good, not bad. It's just a fact of life.

And what's so interesting is the way we don't quite take that in, which I think is why the Buddha made it the first noble truth. We say, "Well, you know, big deal, we know that." But do we? When we get sick, somehow it can feel like a sign of failure. If I really had it together spiritually, this wouldn't be happening. When your practice goes bad, when good practice goes bad, it's always something that you're doing wrong. And if you could just figure it out, only good things would happen from now on.

Or just in our culture—how much, when something difficult happens physically, emotionally, or you lose your job or anything, it's so easy to get into a feeling of self-blame or shame or figuring out what you did wrong or needing to hide it. It's a way we're not quite getting it—that difficulty, pain, sadness, sorrow, losing people we love, getting sick, the whole show, it's an inescapable part of our journey of awakening. Nobody gets away with it only being bliss, I'm sorry to tell you. Nobody does, because we're humans in this body. At the very least, somewhere along the way, we will die. So far, that's what seems to always happen, and it's not a sign of failure.

We're so ingrained to close down around suffering or push it away or hold back from it that to think of compassion—the quivering of the heart in response to pain—as one of several avenues into the boundlessness of our true nature, into the boundlessness of freedom, it's amazing. It's beautiful. Sure, if we had the choice between compassion and sympathetic joy, maybe we'd go for sympathetic joy, but we all have all of it.

So the suffering aspect is one of the things that we all have in common as humans. And it seems so sad to me that that's something we tend to feel like we need to hide or gloss over or move away from. That only keeps us spinning in more confusion and suffering.

Our society perpetuates this a little. Franz tells me, coming from Germany, it's a slightly different culture. Not hugely different, but some difference. And one thing he notices—okay, this is him, but there's some truth to it, right, about Americans?—is our

tendency to, first of all, "How are you?" "I'm fine." That's just what we say. And mostly you're not supposed to—if you're not fine, and someone you meet on the street says, "How are you?" do you launch into a whole thing about what's wrong with your back and your spleen? Probably not. "Oh yeah, I'm fine." Smile, smile, good, go on their way. That's what we're supposed to do. He says, "Yes, you're always smiling. How are you? Fine. I know you're feeling miserable. Why are you smiling and saying fine?"

Or, you know, if we're going on vacation and we're suffering, we'll say, "Well, don't tell anybody. You don't want to bring them down." We've got to hide it. And it's just another way of saying suffering is part of life, but we don't quite accept it.

The lengths we'll go to—this is true. Maybe you've heard of it. This kind of blew me away. Have you heard of Botox shots? This is a beauty treatment made from botulism toxin. I heard this on National Public Radio. They give you these shots in your face because what it does is temporarily paralyze—for a few months—certain facial muscles, the ones that let you frown. So if you're getting a lot of wrinkles from frowning, you simply can't frown for a few months, and you don't get those wrinkles. You can be happy, happy all the time.

And another twist that's being taken—this is true, I swear—is that because you can't frown, certain high-powered professionals like lawyers and bankers and stockbrokers have started getting shots before they go into important meetings, so their faces can't give them away when they're doing certain kinds of deals. It's scary but true.

So we come from a deep conditioning that suffering is wrong, and if we're suffering, it's shameful, or we're failing. Of course, we'd rather not be suffering. I'm not saying we're going to say, "Great! I'm so happy to be suffering—another chance to open into unity." Actually, there are times when, once you are suffering, you can say, "Okay, it's happening. At least I can use it to open into truth." But we don't have to have this shameful, fearful, keep-it-away attitude. That's what keeps us locked in separateness. That's what keeps us in this illusion of looking elsewhere for happiness.

And mettā, as we try to hold the suffering at bay, keep it away—mettā doesn't really let us do that. Because mettā is this outflowing, undiscriminating quality of heart. It doesn't say, "Yes, all of you except that piece." I mean, we try to say that, and that piece just gets bigger and bigger. And we see that by trying to hold the difficulty at bay, we're not holding the difficulty at bay—we're holding life at bay. We're denying ourselves the recognition of our wholeness, of our completeness. We're keeping ourselves artificially separate from life, from all sentient beings.

We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering, we're being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. And this separation becomes like a prison for us that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears and to caring only for the people nearest to us. Curiously enough, if we primarily try to shield ourselves from discomfort, we suffer. Yet when we don't close off and we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings.

It's really true. When we don't close off, when we're not afraid of letting our hearts break, of that sorrow—whatever it is we're afraid of—in that we find again our connectedness. In little ways and in big ways. You don't have to think in terms of the Dalai Lama. In little ways.

Just a personal example. My father, in the last four years or so, has developed Parkinson's disease. When it was first coming on for a year or two, it hadn't been diagnosed. We didn't really know what it was. I'd go home to visit for a few days, and we have a pretty good relationship. He's always been very smart, very quick, very funny, very athletic. And I'd go home to visit and he was kind of moving very carefully. There's a mental aspect of Parkinson's where it just kind of dulls you out, and he'd have this kind of vacant stare. He'd go to turn on a light switch or something and just be staring vacantly for a while.

It was so painful. But what I found myself doing was getting impatient with him. I mean, we didn't have a name to call it—Parkinson's disease—didn't know what it was. But I found myself getting impatient, saying, "Come on, what are you doing? Turn on the light," or whatever. And then, of course, when I'd go be alone, I'd feel awful about it. As I just sat and explored my impatience and what was going on, I saw—and it took some time, because it's always like, "Why can't he fix it?"

What can we do to make it better? All of that dance.

And then I really saw the place in me where it was so painful to see him going through that, to feel his pain, and also my own—losing the father I had known, which is going to happen—but it was so painful. I could see that my impatience was actually my way of not feeling my own pain.

And it's so doubly painful to see that my father, who had always been kind of quick to anger, has turned into Mr. Mellow these last few years. He's much more open and affectionate. And here I was being impatient and kind of pushing him away. Miss Vipassana, right? Miss Metta, pushing my poor loving father away because I didn't want to be with the pain. That's what we do.

Seeing it, seeing it, is often enough. Let my heart break. Let myself feel it. Over and over—once doesn't do it. But not to be afraid of that sadness. And that's really all that has to happen, because once I wasn't afraid of it, then I could be there with him. I didn't have to make some big statement. I could just be there with him. It's a wordless thing. And I have to keep relearning that as the disease develops, as he gets scared. Can I be with my scaredness enough so I can be there for him when he gets scared?

It all starts with us. I can have great ideas about how compassionate I should be, but until I can be with my own pain about it, I can't really do it.

So it's a small example. We all have lots of them. But it's a hint, I think, of the vast possibilities—the strength, the unitive nature, and the real power of compassion—once we learn that we can trust enough to let our hearts break. And it just takes doing it over and over. And it's fine to start with little things. That's what happens here on retreat. They may not feel little. They're huge. Sometimes you'll think, "Well, this is really trite. What am I so upset about this for? I know in the big picture this is small." But here, the big picture has gotten a lot smaller, and the energy that comes up around things is really deep. It's really profound. So honor it as a chance to see if you can move into this, let your heart break, just in this little instance. And we learn to trust that more.

I know one of the big fears—well, it comes up for me, and I know I'm not the only one—is saying, "Okay, my suffering is more than I can be with. If I step back and just look around the world, it's too much. We're going to drown. It's overwhelming." And from that stance, it is. And we all have moments where it's more than overwhelming. But what gives me real faith is first my own personal experience, just like that little incident with my father. And then looking out in the world, past and present, at the people—famous people, I guess, mostly—who really inspire me with their courage, with their compassion. People who have been witness to such a huge amount of suffering I can't even imagine. The Dalai Lama is a good classical example.

And looking at how some of these people are in the world, there's a lightness, there's a kind of joy. That really shows it's not a sense of being so burdened and disconnected that they're dying from it. The other flip side of compassion is the ability to really be present for joy. You're so present to life. Because we can't just hold off the pain—we hold off everything if we're shutting it out. When we're present with the pain, with that quivering heart, there are so many little moments of joy, of connectedness, because the underlying quality of our being really is love and connectedness.

I'm sure you can't really see this, but... Actually, you still probably can't see it. It's a picture of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. They both won the Nobel Peace Prize. There was a big conference at the University of Virginia last

year where they called together all the winners of the Nobel Peace Prize from the last ten years or so who could come. They had about seven or eight of these people there, to try and inspire what they talked of as the apathetic, self-involved student body to think about something other than material things for more than a moment. Really, that's what it says. And these people really did inspire them. But anyway, what I loved about this is...

The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu—these two men who together have been witness to and present for the suffering of all the Tibetan refugees and the people in Tibet, and all the apartheid in South Africa. As you know, Archbishop Tutu has been heading the Truth and Reconciliation Council that's been going on for the last year or two in South Africa, which just sounds heart-rending. People from both sides confessing the horrible things they've done and asking for amnesty—whether it's forgiveness they're asking for, I'm not sure.

But these two are clowning around. They get together, and in the picture, the Dalai Lama is trying to pull off Archbishop Tutu's cap, and Tutu is kind of holding it on, and the Dalai Lama is just cracking up, and the person behind them is laughing. It's this childlike joy. It's not this heaviness of "oh, the suffering of the world." When you're so present with the suffering, you're so present with the joy.

Looking at people like that is one of the things that really gives me the faith and the trust to dive in again. The next time I'm going along happily doing my loving-kindness practice or my vipassana practice, feeling really concentrated, and a big wave of—take your pick—aversion, loneliness, resistance, fear, self-hatred, judgment, sorrow, grief, sleepiness, pain in my big toe, whatever it might be, comes along. The next time it comes, after I fight with it for a while, it's like, "Oh yeah, right." Diving in is the way to freedom, to unity, to connectedness. It's not what we're used to, it's not how we're trained, but it's the way to real peace.

And what's so wonderful, what I truly believe, is that the greatness of heart of Archbishop Tutu, of the Dalai Lama, of any of the people through the years—Martin Luther King, whoever, people that inspire me—you see they're not perfect human beings. We don't have to think, "Well, you have to be somebody special to have that greatness of heart." It really starts right here, in how we're meeting the difficulties, the painful things that arise moment to moment, whatever comes up.

What's so fascinating to me about meditation practice, both metta practice and vipassana practice, is that you can really see, moment to moment, how the heart and mind relate to experience. As the days go on and our world shrinks, you can get very specific in little moments—noticing when a fear comes up, when a painful sensation

comes up, when that memory arises that last time led you into sorrow. We really can begin to see how the mind and heart relate. And guess what? Our whole life is only moment to moment. So the fact that it's all sort of exaggerated here gives us really useful, fascinating information to see how we can begin to shift, how the metta shifts the way our heart and mind habitually relates to difficult experience.

Let me give you an example. When in a moment of experience something unpleasant arises—say it's a physical sensation that's unpleasant, or a sound, or a thought, a smell, a taste, anything unpleasant, an emotion—it's happening right now, correct? Your knee hurts; that's an unpleasant sensation happening right now. Even if a mental memory comes up of something really sad and painful in your life two weeks ago, or fear comes up about something that's going to happen next week, that emotion, that thought is actually arising right now.

Notice what happens when we respond from aversion or fear. The aversion is that "get this away from me"—don't want to feel it, don't want to know about it, don't want to think about it, it's bad, my practice is failing, whatever—push away. And fear is kind of like imagining it into the future. "Oh my God, if I feel like this now and there's five more days to go, it's going to be absolutely unbearable." And it's not even going to be unbearable—it *is* unbearable, because we take the whole five days and put them on this moment. Or if it's just a pain, and you know at the end of the sitting when you get up that pain goes away, we might try to be doing metta, but really we're saying, "Oh no, oh no, forty more minutes, this is impossible, I can't stand to be with it." That's fear, taking it into the future.

But both aversion and fear, if you see the difference between them and metta—the aversion and the fear are as if the attention shrinks back from connecting with whatever it is, a sensation, an emotion, the sensation of fear itself. It shrinks back, it shrinks away. It's as if the mind is thinking, "Somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant or painful experience. I'll live a little ways away from it and hope that it goes away." And of course, that reinforces the experience of separation and disconnection, because that *is* the experience: disconnect. And because the attention isn't really connecting with what's happening, you can't see it clearly. We can't really respond with wise discrimination because we're not connected, so we're seeing it through a veil of aversion and fear, which tends to build on itself. We get more and more disconnected. It might manifest as stronger resistance, or as stronger aversion, or the fear goes into some other fear, and pretty soon we're in this whole huge web of all the fears of our life—and it might have started from something really little that the attention just disconnected from, flinched away from.

Look at how metta works in a moment of just friendliness. Don't think about even these vast, wonderful, unitive kinds of metta—but the friendliness, the spaciousness. It just flows as if the energy, the attention, the heart flows into whatever's arising without discrimination, without saying "yes this, no that." It just flows into, covers, includes. Compassion is the same. Although compassion would begin with the suffering aspect, it also flows out and includes everything. So there's this strong connection.

There's no flinching back, no pulling away. So every time there's a simple moment of friendly metta toward whatever is happening, that begins to shift this moment-to-moment habit of disconnecting from the difficult. And of course, when we disconnect, we feel separate. That's what the mind is doing in that moment. It's not the difficult experience itself that creates the separation, that keeps us out of peace, out of completion. It's that reaction of mind that seems to keep us separate. It makes us seem separate because we're pulling back.

The simplicity of meeting what's happening — it's the same in mindfulness, just meeting it. Metta is this flowing into. In the meeting of it, the fear can fall away. It's the holding ourselves separate that promotes the fear.

I want to read you one of my favorite stories about how simple connectedness breaks through fear. It's from Michael Crichton, a true story he tells. He was on a camping safari in Africa with his wife, tenting at night with guides. He was nervous and kept asking about lions and elephants, and the guides were kind of dismissing his concerns, saying there hadn't been any elephants or lions around — just go to sleep.

In the middle of the night, he and his wife both woke to huge crashing sounds outside. They lay there absolutely terrified, completely petrified. "It's an elephant, it's an elephant!" They were both in total panic. Finally, he said he just couldn't stand it anymore. Without thinking, he grabbed his flashlight, unzipped the tent, shone the light out — right into a huge brown eye. It was an elephant, immediately outside his little tent.

But here's what was interesting. He said, "Oh, it's an elephant." Zipped his tent up, got back in bed, and went right to sleep.

This is his musing about it, which I find fascinating. He slept well once he stopped worrying. He wrote, "I was quite impressed with the instantaneous flip in my own emotional state — from barely controlled hysteria to detached calm — once I saw the giant eye. How did that happen?"

After considering various explanations, he arrived at this insight: "We're all like that. We can all work ourselves into hysterical panic over possibilities we're afraid to look at, to really connect with. What if I have cancer? What if my job's at risk? What if my kids are on drugs? What if I'm getting bald? What if an elephant is outside my tent? What if I'm faced with some terrible thing I don't know how to deal with?"

That hysteria goes away the instant we are willing to hear the answer, even if the answer is what we feared all along. Yes, you have cancer. Yes, you're going bald. Yes, there's an elephant outside your tent. The question then becomes: what are you going to do about it? This is discriminating wisdom. Subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops.

Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on. It promotes an unwillingness to look. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that keeps us afraid.

And it's really like that in our metta practice.

It's not that everything becomes perfect, but with the outflowing, accepting, clear connection of metta or compassion, we can recognize: ah, this is what's happening. Again we're connected to the world, to ourselves, and there's wise discrimination. We can act appropriately without getting lost in the fear.

What's really interesting is that no matter how long we might spend lost in fear, no matter how long we might have spent conditioning ourselves to push away the difficult and unpleasant—it only takes a moment of real, open connectedness to cut through all of that.

We can have days of awfulness, and then we have this one moment of recognition: oh yes, it's really true, we're all connected. And that keeps us going for days more. Because the truth is so much stronger. One of my teachers used to say, "A spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies." And it's true. Truth is so strong. In that one moment we're whole, we're connected to life, and we know it's true. It keeps us going.

I'll give you a personal example of how this shift of attitude, this connectedness to suffering, changes everything—changes our life.

About ten or eleven years ago, I was developing some condition that no one could identify. Even after they diagnosed it, they still don't really know what it is—one of those situations where they can give it a name, and that's about it. At that time, I was

developing symptoms that severely restricted my activity and were quite painful. Once the condition was diagnosed, it was one of those where nothing might happen, or you could die, or anywhere in between.

It was scary, of course. It was painful. I went through all of it—resistance, and more interesting, the levels of shame and blame, the whole sense of spiritual failure. A little bit of that New Age affirmation thinking: if I could just think the right thoughts, this would go away. And all my years of meditation, I'm still not thinking the right thoughts. So somehow, subterraneanly, I felt like a spiritual failure.

Although I could watch my mind spinning into future fear—"Oh my God, I'll never take a walk again, I'll never..."—I could see that and bring myself right back. But there was still a level of really feeling that my body had let me down. It had abandoned me, failed me. There was a sense of betrayal and real difficulty with it.

At some point, I was living here, and I came home one day to find an old Tibetan lama in his eighties who happened to be visiting for the afternoon—which happens here sometimes. One of my friends grabbed me and said, "He's got to give you a blessing!" She dragged me over. He said something, bonked me on the head with his staff, and said, "Okay, say these words," some words in Tibetan that didn't mean anything to me, "and do this healing mantra."

So I said, sure, why not? What do I have to lose?

I would sit over there—that's when I started having to sit in a chair during the three-month retreat. Luckily the yogis didn't know I was sitting there saying my Tibetan mantra and doing my healing meditation. Really, I was just surrendering to it. I wasn't trying to get better. I wasn't doing anything. I was just doing it because what did I have to lose?

And I think it was actually that attitude of just being with it that allowed something to shift. What slowly began to happen was a real attitude of compassion toward my body—almost as if I were holding my body as a separate being, like a baby, instead of identifying with it so much. Instead of being annoyed with it, instead of being afraid. I realized I had been holding myself a little bit away from my body, because if I really sank into the sensations, it would trigger this whole level of fear and betrayal. So I stayed a little bit away.

It was simply the compassion of connecting. That's all. In my mind it became clear: wow, I've been so angry at you, poor body, and you're really hurting. It really isn't helping you for me to be angry. I just began to hold it with compassion, letting go. None of

this was conscious—"I should do this." But in meeting it just as it was, with kindness, just that flowing in of attention without the pulling away, a whole different level of acceptance arose.

Again I felt whole, connected to life, not separate. And the whole sense of what healing means changed. It moved from doing a healing mantra to get better—some idea of "better"—to just really letting go into the unknown. Because healing can mean anything, really.

And if I died, I died. Now, I'm not saying I still feel like that—the capacity for denial remains huge. So now that I'm feeling better, you know, that was then and this is now, and everything is hunky-dory. Watch that in your mind too.

But really, in that moment, the sense of all the shoulds fell away. There was complete connection, and through that I was reintroduced to the sense of wholeness, the sense of peace, the sense of connectedness to all of life. And so that particular time, that illness became the doorway into my kinship with all beings—not something to fear anymore.

From that place, I actually began to have better discrimination about what to do. I didn't respond or make decisions out of fear. I was telling someone today, everyone kept saying—because the cold isn't good for me now—"Oh, you should move to Arizona. You should take care of yourself. You should stop teaching. You should do this and that." And I realized that for me to have done any of that at that time would have been entirely fear-based. It wasn't necessary.

Instead, some good friends of mine were going to India for a few weeks, and I said, "Yeah, I think I'll go to India with you." They're probably the only friends who would have said, "Yeah, great!" Everyone else would have said, "Are you out of your mind, going to India?" I'd been trying to eat a really pure diet—no wheat, no dairy, no sugar. So I went to India, where you live on grease, chai, sugar, and wheat. I felt better. What can I say? So who knows? Again, we never really know. It's opening into the unknown.

But that simple meeting of whatever's happening with kindness—it's our avenue into unity. And it doesn't really matter what level the suffering is at.

Pema Chödrön writes: "Learning how to be kind to ourselves, learning how to respect ourselves, is important. The reason it's important is that fundamentally, when we look into our own hearts and begin to discover what is confused and what is brilliant, what is bitter and what is sweet, it isn't just ourselves that we're discovering—we're discovering the universe. There's an interesting transition that occurs naturally and spontaneously. We begin to find that to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves—the willingness to look, to point directly at our own hearts—and to the degree that there is

kindness towards ourselves, there's confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world. The reason that we don't open our hearts and minds to other people is that they trigger confusion in us, and we don't maybe at the moment feel brave enough to deal with it. But to the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we begin to feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes."

And so really, all this hard practice we're doing—there's no way it can only be for yourself. And don't worry if it seems like what's going on is kind of small. I've found, and I really believe it, that the specifics of our own experience that we can open to, of our own suffering, lead us into the vastness of the suffering and the unity of the world.

I imagine many of you have had the experience of sorrow, of grief, and when you really let yourself courageously open into it, the specific sorrow seems to move beyond itself. It seems as if we're crying for the pain of the world. It seems to be much more than whatever our specific story is, our specific grief. When you touch the heart of grief, you become all mothers, all fathers, all children. All people are united in that. And there's a poignant beauty to it when we're not afraid to feel that grief, to feel that sorrow.

So we start small. We start with ourselves. And I know how much time in this metta practice it can really feel like absolutely nothing is going on. You're saying the phrases, you're not feeling metta, you feel like you're suffering and just lost and spinning in it, you throw out a phrase now and again, and you think, "This is really a joke."

I just want to tell you from my own experience—and remember the woman I mentioned last time who did it for three months and found her life really different—there are changes taking place on a level we really don't know. Sharon Salzberg likes to say, and I've led retreats with her so I've heard her say it over and over: "It really doesn't matter if you don't feel anything. It really doesn't matter. The changes are happening on another level that's often beneath our consciousness." Just that willingness to make that commitment of well-wishing—that's an intention that is strengthening the ability to move into the beauty and the suffering without holding back. It's reclaiming our wholeness, starting where we are. It's being willing and courageous and kind to ourselves, feeling whatever suffering we're going through, huge or small.

It's not about being passive. It's not about so-called deluded compassion. Compassion doesn't always mean we should feel good—I hope you're getting the drift of that by now. Deluded compassion sometimes sounds like, "Well, this is really hard. I'd better leave before it even gets difficult."

There are times when absolutely the pain we're going through—the fear, the grief, the sadness, the terror—is way too strong. We can't bring metta to it. We can't bring mindfulness to it. It's overwhelming us. Absolutely, at those times, the compassionate and wise action is to back off. There's no question. When you're working with a difficult person and you get lost in anger, we say, please go to where it's easy. That's wisdom. That's compassion.

But when beginning to move into practice with a difficult person, if you think, "Oh, there's that thing I don't like. It might get really unpleasant. I better not try"—that's different. That's acting out of fear before anything happens. That's deluded compassion.

And I think what happens even more commonly is confusing compassion with codependence. This is such a small example, but it popped into my mind today for obvious reasons. Some of us are really allergic to black fly bites. Yesterday, this little incident happened to me twice. I was outside talking to two different friends, and as we talked, the swarms started to gather. First you think they're not there, then they start swarming. When I get bitten by black flies, it doesn't bother me at first, but for days afterward I swell up and itch and get kind of feverish.

I noticed in both cases that the other person wasn't so bothered—some people aren't—and there was this tendency to think, "Oh well, it's an important conversation, and I need to stay here with them and talk. That's the compassionate, friendly thing to do." And I realized that's not compassion at all. It was just codependence—not wanting to say, "You know what, I can't stand here anymore. Let's go inside." In one case, inside was literally five feet away. He was saying, "Oh no, stay here, it's so nice, we can have our tea out here on the porch." And I thought, "Oh yeah, he really needs me to be here." That's not compassion. That's codependence.

Compassion takes in the whole situation and says, "You know what, let's go inside." And if the person doesn't want to, fine—that's their choice too. Getting all bitten up to no purpose is not the same as compassion. There might be another time when that same situation would genuinely require staying. So compassion connects us and allows for wise choices—actually fearless choices. Codependence is largely based on fear. Compassion can be quite fearless.

I know this is such a small example, but I thought you could relate. I certainly did.

What compassion leads us to is the fearlessness that comes from knowing we're living in truth. We're living in our connectedness. We don't need to be afraid of fear itself. We don't need to be afraid of sorrow. Sure, we'll still tend to hold back. But as a friend of mine describes it, her grown sons are always trying to tell her how to be safe from

waves when they go to Hawaii or somewhere with big surf. When a huge wave is coming, you have to turn around and dive into it. She says, "I know it's true, but I just can't do it. Every time, I turn around and run, and the wave clobbers me."

With the fearlessness of compassion, we really learn that we can trust diving in. You come to that smooth place of peace where the wave merges into the ocean and there's no separation anymore—and we're also part of that ocean. It's a whole different way to meet the difficulties.

I don't know if this sounds a little too nice to you, but it happens to be true. So play with it. Experiment with it.

Really learn to see that even the resistance, even your loneliness, even that backache—it doesn't matter what—when met with metta, which turns to compassion in the face of suffering, is again our avenue into the boundlessness of a heart that's free and connected.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

May our sincere practice be for the benefit and happiness of all beings.

CHAPTER 316

The Facts of Life

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines how the Buddha's teachings on the facts of life offer a path to genuine freedom—not by escaping difficult experiences, but by transforming our relationship to them. Drawing from the Buddha's own life after awakening, she illustrates that even the supremely enlightened one faced physical ailments, conflict, loss, and death, demonstrating that inner peace has nothing to do with having a perfect life.*
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> *Wilson explores the First Noble Truth (dukkha) not as a philosophical concept but as a personal invitation to examine how we actually meet unpleasant experiences. She reveals our deep denial mechanisms and how mindfulness both increases our awareness of suffering and opens us to greater joy in ordinary moments. The Second Noble Truth becomes central to her teaching as she describes how our habitual reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings—craving, aversion, and delusion—create the very suffering we seek to escape. Using the Buddha's vivid simile of six animals tied together, each pulling toward its preferred habitat, she illustrates how our untrained senses constantly drag us away from presence.*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom for meditation practice, emphasizing that freedom comes through non-clinging rather than through achieving particular states. Wilson encourages practitioners to meet each moment with childlike wonder and curiosity, using the touching example of cellist Yo-Yo Ma's genuine openness when encountering unfamiliar music. This teaching reminds us that liberation is available right here, in this very moment of mindful attention.*

It came up in some of the discussions today, and I think it's by no means an unusual discovery—being a little bemused upon realizing that we come to retreat, especially if it's your first retreat, thinking we're going to get away from the hustle and bustle and pain of our lives. And as you've discovered, guess what comes with us? That's not a mistake.

What I want to talk about tonight is really the way the Buddha described the facts of life and the potential for our freedom. I think a lot of our confusion and struggle comes from our ideas—perhaps unformed even in our own minds—of what we're actually expecting freedom or happiness, inner contentment, peace, whatever word you use, to feel like, to look like, to be like. Because if you're looking for a different reality from this one, a nice, happy, safe, secure place, you're not going to find it.

When we look at the Buddha's life after he was awakened—the supremely awakened one, free from anguish, free from confusion and suffering—he spent forty-five years teaching. But if you look at his life, stuff happened. He wasn't just drifting on a cloud for forty-five years. He was walking barefoot all around northern India, begging for food.

In terms of things that happened, he had physical problems. He had headaches. He had backaches. There are suttas where he says, "Ananda, you give the talk. I have to go lie down and rest my back." He didn't give him a day's warning either.

There were wars going on between clansmen—his own clansmen from his father's and his mother's clans—and they would be killing each other over water rights. How would you like it if all your in-laws were killing each other and you had to go and try to stop it? Everything wasn't groovy.

There was quarreling within the Sangha. There are many suttas, and a lot of the monks' and nuns' rules come about from times when one of the monastics would see another one doing something and run to the Buddha and tell on them, basically. "So-and-so is doing thus and so. It doesn't seem good." Often it was appropriate, but there's definitely this little element of envy and all of that.

His two main disciples, Mahamoggalana and Mahasariputta—next to him, I guess, the most awakened, the wisest—Mahamoggalana, in his old age, was murdered. And both Sariputta and Moggallana died before the Buddha did. There's a lovely sutta where he's saying it was as if the sun and the moon had fallen out of the sky when they died. So he noticed that they were gone.

And his cousin Devadatta, who was very jealous of him, continually tried to sow seeds of discord in the Sangha and divide it, and actually tried to kill the Buddha. The Buddha's life was attempted to be taken. So it's not as if everything pleasant was in his life. And in the end, he died. They all died. Everybody died. That's what happens.

Looking to the Buddha's life—the supremely awakened, peaceful one, which he was—we have to see that inner contentment, true liberation of heart, must be about something else than having the perfect life, than having everything be the way we want it to be.

So what could that be?

The way the Buddha introduces what it could be is by having us let our hearts and minds, our vision, open to be able to live face to face with things as they are, rather than as we might wish them to be or think they ought to be if we did things right.

When he lays out his Four Noble Truths, the basic facts of life, the first one, as most of you are very familiar with, is that there is unsatisfactoriness in this world, in our bodies, in our minds. There's birth, which is suffering if you think about it. There's decay. Old age, sickness, death. There's separation from those we love and from things we like. There's having to be brought together with those we don't love and things we don't like. This is what happens.

It's not the only thing that happens. Luckily, there's beauty and joy and love and happiness within this realm of form.

But there is not a way of not having unpleasant experience arise. And if you stop and think about it—which obviously I have, a lot—you need to consider: okay, we all nod, sure, there's birth and death, we get sick, we have to be with things we don't like. But is that the way we really meet these experiences when they arise?

You don't have to think far. Just cast your mind back over today. That's as far as most of us need to go. If you're one of those for whom today was a good day, you can look at yesterday. We really don't have to go far to see that we're going to come face to face with difficult, painful, unliked experiences. And how did we relate to them?

I think the Buddha's not saying this in order to bring us down, not in order to say life is miserable, suffer. It's really to wake us up to see: how do we relate to this? The fact that things are unreliable, that they're in constant change, that there is difficulty—we think we accept it, but do we?

The denial is so amazing. Just the denial of the fact of pain, of suffering, that things happen that we don't like. How much of the unpleasantness that has come up in your body or mind or in the surroundings today has your mind greeted as a mistake, or your fault because you're not mindful enough? If you were more mindful, this unpleasant thing wouldn't be happening. Well, I've got news for you. As we get more mindful, we actually begin to notice not only more joy, but also more of the unpleasant things that we've been in total denial about. Our denial mechanism is huge. Witness Michelle's story with her ice cake the other night. It's amazing.

I'll tell you another one. I really like this story because it's just so flat-out denial. Quite some years ago, maybe twelve years ago, I was in the hospital for some days and I was on an IV. I had some big infection. And you know how after a few days, the veins sort of collapse and it gets harder and harder to keep putting in the IV. So this one time, the nurse was trying repeatedly and failing, and she's sweating. It hurts. It's not a pleas-

ant experience—you wouldn't call it that. And I could tell she started, in a little way, to panic. It's hard to know you're hurting someone, especially when your intention—her intention—is to help.

She finally kind of gave up and ran out in the hall and grabbed the nearest doctor who was passing by. And I wasn't completely cogent, but I was cogent enough to know that now I was really in trouble. Because who practices and puts in the IVs, huh? Have you ever had the doctor, the surgeon, come in and put in your IV? Not too often. So I was like, okay, right, just be cool, be calm.

And the doctor had the same problem. I wasn't my most equanimous. I didn't say anything, but just little tears trickled down. And he looked at me with such an expression and goes, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

It's just so amazing. And I could understand how hard it is to let in—if you really let in that it was hurting me—the pain of knowing that with really kind intentions, you're hurting somebody. That's so hard. It's hard for us to be connected and open-hearted in the face of painful experience, physical or emotional. It is hard for us. And so a lot of the time, we don't even know that we're blocking it out.

And that's just flat-out obvious pain. I mean, that's the most obvious, and we can deny it. So not to get down on ourselves about it, but I really think that this first truth of the Buddha's that he enunciated—certainly how it works for me—is as an invitation into my own experience. Not a philosophical point of debate. I mean, we can debate that, but for me, the point is that it brings our awareness in to look and see.

And when I first heard this years and years ago, when I first began to sort of understand—oh, like stuff happens, it's not my fault—

When I was first introduced to the Dharma, I was about nineteen, and up until that time I had lived what you might call the 1950s storybook picture of America—the middle-class, suburban, happy life. My family stayed together. My parents weren't abusive. You just didn't talk about certain things: our friend's mother who committed suicide down the road, or the divorce up the street, or my friend whose father had left when she was a kid and she never met him, or the fact that my mother never even met her own father. You didn't talk about it. Everything was happy, happy.

I actually couldn't point to anything that was really bad in my own life. And I had imbibed the idea that you grow up, do whatever you do, get a career, and then you have this happily-ever-after life—like the Donna Reed show on television, or the way all the movies end, going off into this happy cloud where nothing bad ever happens again.

I don't know if this will resonate—I'm really showing my age here—but when I was young, there was this sense that everything's good, nothing's bad. We don't talk about unhappiness. And my mother took me to see this Walt Disney movie called *Old Yeller*. I don't know if you remember it. It traumatized me for years.

It's this loving family with their golden lab, this wonderful, perfect dog. Everybody loves everybody. And in the end, the dog saves the little boy from getting attacked by a rabid squirrel. Then the father has to shoot the dog because he has rabies. Walt Disney traumatized me! Because I thought everything ends happy all the time if people are nice. And it just didn't fit with my worldview.

So when I heard about the First Noble Truth—oh yes, this is part of the facts of life: there's unhappiness, there's death, things you love go away, sometimes you have to be with things you don't like, and everything is changing all the time—I felt this huge sense of relief. *Oh, I'm not crazy.* It's okay that I'm not happy every minute, and I don't have to keep pretending. For me, being an aversive-type personality, this was an enormous relief.

So that really, I think, is the beginning of freedom—just to see, to come face to face with the truth that things aren't always the way we want them. Then it becomes a question of how do we relate, rather than *what's wrong with me? What's wrong with things? Am I crazy?* We begin to stop our lifelong habit of running and hiding from pain, or from the unpleasant, or hating ourselves when something happens that we think we should have been able to avoid.

On one retreat, a man was telling me in an interview how he'd been seeing aversion in his mind all day—aversion to experiences he was having, to feelings in his body, to thoughts. Just aversion to so many things. And he was labeling everything he was aversive to as "bad." *This is bad, this is good.* Suddenly he stopped and said, "Wow. So much of my experience has been bad today. So what I'm saying is that much of my life is bad." And then he said, "No, that just isn't true. It's just part of how it is. Sometimes unpleasant, sometimes pleasant." That realization took a huge burden of judgment and negativity off the way he was relating to his life. It's just part of life.

Someone told me—this is apocryphal, I don't know if it's true, but she said it was—that Robin Williams, the comedian, has already had his tombstone engraved, and on it it says, "I knew this was going to happen." He's a step ahead of us. When we know it, we can stop being afraid. We can start to actually live each moment as it presents itself, instead of holding on, planning for the next moment.

So there's this dimension of being together with what we don't like, and there's also the quality of unreliability, the changing nature, the fact of impermanence—which is also included in this First Noble Truth. Again, we all know everything changes. But if we really knew that, how would we live? I think we would live very differently.

On a retreat we were doing together, focused on this subject of impermanence for a week, someone said on reflection—when I asked her, "How would you live if you really understood and accepted impermanence?"—she said, "You know, I would stop being afraid." Because when we know it's going to change, while we don't fear it, we can relax into here and now. Sure, there's a poignancy to change. That's okay. But we don't have to grip so blindly.

I think one of the reasons for the denial of change on a deep level is this very poignancy, this sadness—which maybe doesn't feel quite okay to feel. But it's fine. Let the poignancy in.

This is my favorite part of a poem I love, because it touches for me that place of love and knowing things change, and the poignancy of clinging. It's by Galway Kinnell. I'm just going to read part of it. The poem is called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight."

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up,
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard,
as if clinging could save us. I think you think
I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down."
I've stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die."
Little Maud, and yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

We are forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. It's poignant. It doesn't have to be awful.

When we can relax into that moment just as it is, without needing to cling or change or look back at the last moment—there's a kind of peace there. But I think, at least I certainly notice in myself, one response to this constant change, this unreliability, these shifting sands, is to look quietly but frantically, moment after moment, for some steady,

unchanging place to abide. Whether it's a physical experience, an emotional experience—how much do we try to manage and control our lives so we get everything just so? Ah, finally!

In a small way, it's like when you finally get the house all clean. How long does it last? This used to drive me crazy. It lasts two seconds, and then it starts getting dirty again. That's a small example, but I think we're doing that all the time—always looking for some place to abide, to rest and say, "Here." And it's that very looking for an abiding place that keeps us suffering, off balance, and fearful.

The Buddha said once, "He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." It might not be what we had in mind, because our minds only know what they already know. You know Krishnamurti's famous book, *Freedom from the Known*. We can only imagine what we already know in some way. So to rest in peace—"he abides in peace who does not abide anywhere"—it really is the peace of letting go of that frantic searching.

But we won't, and we can't, let go. We can't even have a concept of it until our heart begins to understand through experience how much the searching itself is creating the suffering, the anguish, that feeling of being off balance. Because it's not the fact that things change. It's our resistance to that fact that's actually so poignant and scary and awkward.

Nyoshul Khenpo, a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said once, "Remember, whether or not you go with the flow, the flow always goes with you." We can't actually step outside of that. But we can start to just look and see, "Oh yes, that's what's happening." We can feel the poignancy. We don't have to fear it. As someone said, "Let's face it, I don't fear it when unpleasant experience is going away. It's only the pleasant ones that I'm holding on to." There's something important to notice about that.

So you might be thinking, who wants to look this closely? Maybe denial is ignorance, but it was working okay in a lot of situations. And often, on our journey, on our spiritual path, we hit moments where we say, "Oh God, I wish I could go back to not seeing quite so clearly." Because I meant it—even though you laughed and I sort of said it in a joking way—as mindfulness strengthens, as our ability to be present for whatever is strengthens, we will be so much more at ease and happy, but we will also be much more aware of the unpleasant and the changing nature. That actually brings us to freedom, believe it or not.

Knowing things the way they are is what releases our heart and mind from this fruitless clinging, this fruitless searching for steady state in a world that is totally unsteady state. But the way out is in, and we go in kicking and screaming most of the time.

So looking at this first truth, it's a wake-up call—really a wake-up call—not just something to be demoralized about. As Ajahn Chah said, "There's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering." The difference is in the way we relate to the difficult, the painful, the poignant experience.

And that's the second truth, the second fact that the Buddha describes. What is it that's the cause of the suffering? The anguish? Not the fact that there's unpleasant experience, but how our hearts and minds relate to experience—this is the place of bondage or freedom. It's the place where understanding can really begin to flower.

So how is the Buddha different from us?

He went through experiences after his awakening, and if you believe that he was a human being, then his awakening holds the same potential for us to awaken. He wasn't some kind of divine being with different factors making up his mind and body.

So in his awakening, in going through these difficult experiences, what would be a way of describing how he was different from us? Or different from me—I don't want to project onto all of you.

One simple way I want to talk about it is in how he related his understanding: that it's the clinging, the aversions, the longing for things to be different, the denial—all these reactions to the bare facts of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience—and then our total entrancement with those reactions. Look at it: we're completely entranced with how much we don't like something, or how much we like something, how involved we get. We go from an unpleasant sound to the history of our life in two seconds. Completely involved. So entranced that we don't even know it's happening—which I'll go into in detail.

So it's our reactions, our identification with them, and the total entrancement that sends us off and running with them—this is what hides the way things are from us and obscures the potential for really living in contentment, in peace, with things as they are. It obscures the potential for rediscovering, resting in, and trusting the radiant mind, our basic goodness, as Chögyam Trungpa calls it.

This is not a state that you can get and hold on to and rest in. There is no steady state of heart and mind. Rather, it's an attitude that can arise no matter what state is coming in our body or in our mind.

The peace, the freedom, the happiness of the Buddha has nothing to do with what's arising in your experience right now. Freedom has nothing to do with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. It really doesn't matter. And it's the hardest thing for us

to really believe. When you come in and you've had one of these crummy sittings, and all this stuff is coming up, and yesterday it was so clear—we say, "Oh yeah, fine. Yesterday was clear. Now it's really painful. Those are both good. Just pay attention." And you think, "Yeah, right." We don't really believe that very well. But the fact is, it's true. Freedom has nothing to do with the particular experience that's happening. It's everything to do with the relationship to it.

Someone came in and said—I think it was this retreat—she was really getting at the understanding that pleasure, the experiencing of pleasant feeling, is not the same as happiness. Pleasure is pleasure. Sure, it's nice. If we had a choice, we'd probably take pleasure over displeasure. We can tell the difference. The Buddha could tell the difference too, I think. We're not heading toward some dull neutrality. But we're also not getting into all those reactions.

And that allows us to turn away from our entrancement with our reactions and ourselves and our stories—everything—and actually come to live in this moment with total intimacy, wakefulness, a loving, awake presence that can allow us again and again to glimpse, with more or less depth, the true radiant nature of our mind, our heart. Big mind-heart, not this little heart. The radiant nature of what we truly are.

In the process of this shift from our habitual reactive mind to opening into whatever is happening this moment with totality of presence and intimacy—yes, we are more aware of the unpleasant and more aware of the beautiful, the joyful. As someone was saying today, it was really beautiful: in the midst of a very difficult day, one little experience that we normally would completely overlook—in the middle of all the difficulty she said, "You know, this doesn't seem like much of an experience," but it was giving her so much joy.

Like the flowers. Franz and I planted a couple of peony bushes last year, little new ones. Two days ago, Monday, one of them bloomed for the first time. Now, for some reason, that day hadn't been a particularly joyful day. It was really hot, I forget what was going on. But I wasn't dancing in joy through the day. And just seeing that flower open over the course of a couple of hours brought so much happiness and joy.

When we're more present, it doesn't take winning the lottery to feel joy. We can be really present for suffering and then something just lovely happens and we're really present for that. There's this immediacy, this vitality of presence—all of life becomes so much richer in the little things. In the little things.

When we're not afraid of impermanence, we're really here.

This is called "Living" by Denise Levertov:

The fire in leaf and grass, so green it seems each summer the last summer. The wind blowing, the leaves shivering in the sun, each day the last day. A red salamander, so cold and so easy to catch, dreamily moves his delicate feet and long tail. I hold my hand open for him to go, each minute the last minute.

You get a feeling of the presence in that poem. She's not saying, "Oh my God, each minute the last minute!" with panic. It's more like: if this is the last minute, let me really be here for it.

I have a story about a friend of mine, a man who's been coming to retreats on the West Coast for some years. He told us this a couple of years ago. He must be in his mid to late sixties, very hardworking. He said he'd had open heart surgery—he had to have a valve replaced. And he's one of these people, which I'm sure many of you can relate to, who felt that his practice was never going anywhere. No incredible bliss experiences, no wonderful jhanic concentrations, just kind of slogging through the days and the nights, year after year of meditation, trying to be mindful and getting nowhere. You can relate.

So he woke up in intensive care after the operation, which apparently had gone fine. His family was there telling him everything was okay. And then something went wrong. He said he was hooked up to machines from every orifice, and all of a sudden they all started blinking, sirens going off—which must be quite scary—nurses running. He didn't know what was wrong, but something serious was happening.

He said he noticed his mind start to go into total panic. "Oh my God, I'm going to die. This is really it"—which it very well could have been. And he saw his mind going into panic, his breathing got tight, and he said he doesn't know where it came from, but the thought arose: "Well, if this is going to be my last breath, I might as well be present for it." And he just came totally into that breath. The panic went away. He said he must have gone unconscious after that, and then he woke up and things were fine.

But you never know. We can't evaluate what's going on in our practice, but that's the quality of real presence. And each moment as the last moment isn't a scary thing—it's an invitation into being alive in this moment, because this moment is really all we have. We can plan a lot about all the next moments, but who knows what's going to happen? We really don't know what's going to arise in this next instant. Like that other night when the low water alarm went off in the middle of the sitting—no one knew that a moment before. We never know.

This moving out of our reactivity into open-hearted presence does not hide life situations. It allows us to live them more fully.

How do we get so sidetracked? Why is it that we get so caught in this clinging, which is so poignant? One way—we've touched on it, and Stephen and Susan spoke about it—is a habitual pattern so deep we mostly don't notice it: the habit of how our heart-mind relates when confronted with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience.

The way the Buddha described our experience is that there are six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind. So we can have any of those six sense experiences—thoughts and emotions, any of the five physical senses. And that's really all that's happening. Keep looking in your experience. As Jack Kornfield likes to say, just these six things are happening over and over. And if one of you experiences something else, please let us know.

First of all, just by beginning to reduce it to that, it takes a lot of the hoo-ha out, doesn't it? Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, thinking, emotion, thinking, emotion, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. Oh, what's the big deal?

And then each of those arising one after the other, really quickly, we experience—like a sound, for example—as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Same with touch, emotions, thoughts.

And we don't all experience things the same way, given our past conditioning and our karma. So say the sound of a crow—someone could hear it and it's pleasant for them, while it's unpleasant for me, or neutral to somebody else. And that could even be different for the same person at different times.

Now this is a relatively subtle thing, this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, and it's very fast. The habit of our mind—and in the dependent origination, the place where we can explore how suffering arises, how confusion arises—is that there's the sense contact, so there's the hearing, it's pleasant, and without awareness, immediately there's that movement: "Oh yeah, I like that, that's good," or "I want more," or "Let's keep it going." If it's unpleasant: "Oh, bad. Get away. Not good. How can we fix this?"

If it's neutral—well, have you noticed many neutral experiences? That's what happens. Neutral? Huh? I'm bored. Nothing's happening. Let's think about a really unpleasant fantasy because that's better than being neutral. God forbid. It's actually quite interesting to see how often our mind does that. I'll suffer rather than be calm and neutral.

So it happens so quickly that often we don't even know there's a difference between unpleasant and aversion. But those are two different experiences—between pleasant and clinging, between neutral and spacing out. The second is a reaction to just the bare fact of an unpleasant experience or a pleasant experience. But it's so deeply habitual in most of our minds, without mindfulness, that we not only often don't recognize it, but

we can easily evaluate our whole experience, the whole tenor of our life, on the basis of how pleasant or unpleasant or neutral it is. And this is where we really get off into being entranced.

So for example, when you're evaluating your meditation so much, the good ones are the pleasant ones, the bad ones are the unpleasant ones. And when you're having pleasant ones, not too many people come in and say, "I'm useless, I'm worthless, I can't do this." But when it's unpleasant, it jumps from unpleasant to "I'm the worst yogi, I can't do this, I'm filled with doubt, this is stupid"—and self-hatred, and all this really painful stuff, just in a moment from an unpleasant experience. Neutral, we don't even notice.

We get so entranced, and we can actually act on and base our whole life on wanting pleasant and going away from unpleasant, without seeing what we're doing. Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful Thai teacher, talks a lot about pleasant feelings. He says it's so fast, it just comes and goes so quick. And he says almost everything you do in your life, the choices you make—if you really look at it, the choices you make without awareness—we do for the sake of pleasant sensation. And how long does it really last? It's a little scary when we look at how long it really lasts.

There's a story I love from the Buddha, really about Ananda, his attendant. Ananda is a really very personable character. He's the one who's very compassionate, he's the one who's always saying things, and the Buddha's kind of going, "Not so, Ananda. It's really like this." You can really empathize with him. And he was very kind.

So in this story, he was off on a mission for the Buddha, and he passed a village well, and he was very thirsty. At the well was Pakati, a young outcast woman, and he asked her for water to drink—one of the few things a monk was allowed to ask for was water. You must remember that in India at that time, the caste system was really strong. An outcast couldn't even touch something and hand it to someone of higher caste. It was that strong.

So Pakati said, "Oh monk, I am too humbly born to give you water to drink. Do not ask any service of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste." She had so thoroughly bought into this system. And Ananda replied, "I ask not for your caste, but for water." And the woman's heart leapt joyfully and she gave Ananda water. He thanked her and went away, but she followed him at a distance.

She found out he was the Buddha's attendant, and she went to the Buddha and said, "Oh Lord, help me. Let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells so that I may see him and minister unto him for my life, because I love Ananda." And the

Buddha—he could understand her emotions and her heart—said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you don't understand your own emotions. It's not Ananda that you love, but his kindness."

Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice toward you and practice it towards others.

Sweet, isn't it? But mistaking that pleasant feeling she associated with Ananda, she was ready to follow him and take care of him for her whole life for the sake of that pleasant feeling, without being able to understand exactly what was going on. We do that from time to time, and in ways sometimes far more confusing and destructive than that.

Or with unpleasant. Again, sometimes in the whole field of experience the mind can get so fixated on the unpleasant, and so lost in aversion to it, that we build up a whole world based on reactivity rather than clear seeing.

Have you ever had a time when part of your tooth breaks off inside? It happened to me last year while I was traveling, and I had to go for a few weeks with it just broken. You notice how the tongue cannot stay away from that place. You're sitting perfectly happy, and the tongue just has to go over there, feel how rough it is, feel how unpleasant it is, get upset. What am I going to do? My teeth are falling apart. I'm getting old. A million times a day.

Now, all the rest of my teeth didn't hurt. That's neutral. Did I notice that? No. We have one thing that's wrong and a million things that are neutral, and we don't notice those at all when we get completely fixated on the negativity. Frustration, self-doubt, judgment. And neutral? We just don't notice.

So often, actually, the entrée into calm—a kind of radiant, connected peace—begins by seeming neutral. And we so much don't know what to do with that, we bounce away, fall asleep, or create a diversion.

This is from the Buddha, really describing what we do with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Someone asks him what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person—an untaught worldling, as he says. And he's very straightforward. He says, okay, here's the difference: An unawakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, worries and grieves, laments, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of unpleasant feelings—a physical unpleasant feeling and a mental unpleasant feeling. It's as if, being shot with an arrow, he shoots himself with a second arrow.

Sound familiar? That's what an untaught, unawakened person does. You experience pain from two arrows whenever you have an unpleasant feeling.

Now, it actually goes deeper than that, into how it becomes habitual. He says that when touched by painful feeling, we develop an underlying tendency to resist that—push it away, don't feel it, resist. A lot of people have talked about seeming to come up against a wall of resistance, subtle or not so subtle, in the practice. And you're right. We've cultivated an underlying tendency to resistance to the unpleasant for most of our life. And we've got to begin to see it. That's why it's coming up. It's great that it's coming up.

So what do we do? Unpleasant? No, this is bad. We shoot ourselves with another arrow again. And the Buddha goes on to say that unawakened people do not know of any other escape from painful feelings than to go after a pleasant sense experience. Isn't that right? And so they also inculcate the underlying tendency to crave the pleasant.

So we've cultivated these two habits—this ongoing resistance to unpleasant, and as soon as there's something unpleasant, leaping after something pleasant, lusting, wanting the pleasant, because that's the only way we know to bring us happiness. The only trouble is it doesn't work for more than the lasting time of the pleasant feeling.

The difference with an awakened person? When an awakened person experiences an unpleasant feeling, that's it. They don't create anything around it, to paraphrase Ajahn Sumedho. They don't get into resistance, and they don't go lusting after something pleasant to hide from it. Same with pleasant. Experience a pleasant feeling, that's it. Experience a pleasant feeling. The mind is calm, creating nothing around it. It's not that you don't know the difference. We just don't get into these reactions, being so entranced by them, with this ongoing tendency to move away from the present moment.

And that's what's so poignant. Our underlying tendency of resisting the unpleasant and moving towards the pleasant, totally ignoring the neutral—we're doing it without knowing we're doing it. But it's all in the service of our own real happiness and peace. None of us would do that if we really, really knew it was keeping us confused and suffering. But we don't. And I'm saying it, but I find myself doing this in subtle ways all the time. It's so ingrained when we're not paying attention to go after what's pleasant.

And the poignancy of it is that it's just this clinging and craving. It's just this pushing away, this checking out that hides from us our true potential. It's just this looking in the other direction that keeps us obscured from recognizing that freedom is right here. In fact, it's so right here that we're not usually right here enough to recognize it. We're always just a little bit leaning away.

The Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata"—meaning himself—"namely, liberation through non-clinging."

Now see, that doesn't sound so exciting, does it? Liberation through non-clinging. I want bells and whistles. I want some fireworks going off. Liberation through non-clinging? But that's the way into recognizing our potential for awakening. Non-clinging allows totality, intimacy of total presence.

Otherwise, the way we live our life is as this description from the Buddha of someone who does not have mindfulness established—because mindfulness is our way in to see what's really happening. In a moment of mindfulness, pure non-judging presence, there's no clinging, there's no aversion, there's no delusion, because it's connected. Just a quick moment. Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it "a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom." Not total absolute liberation where confusion never arises, but it's a moment of clarity. And that moment is what allows any experience to become a gateway into really recognizing our true potential.

Without that, a person without mindfulness established lives their life in this simile the Buddha offers. As if a person catches six creatures from different parts of life. Get it? Six. The six senses. Everything always matches. Eye, ear, nose, touch, taste, and mind. So as if you took a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a hyena, and a monkey. And you tied a rope around each of them, and then you tied a knot of all those ropes together. So these six animals are all tied together with a rope in the middle. And then what do they do? They all start struggling to go to where they want to go. The crocodile wants to go to the water. The bird tries to fly up. The dog tries to go to the village. The snake tries to go into the garden. And they're just all pulling any which way. And the strongest one pulls all the rest along after. So probably the crocodile takes them all down to the water.

You get the simile? He spells it out, don't worry about it. He says that is just like a person whose mindfulness is undeveloped and unpracticed. Each of those animals is like one of the six senses—the eye, the ear, the nose, the mind, the body, the taste—and they're all struggling to go after pleasant experience and all struggling to run away from unpleasant experience. And whichever one's the strongest wins. Moment after moment after moment. So eyes are often really strong. That's why when you're out doing walking meditation and that chipmunk runs across the path, seeing pleasant, boom—everything else is gone. It's like the crocodile running to the water.

Okay, so that's kind of an exhausting way to live, I would say.

But for one who has cultivated mindfulness and presence, when seeing a form with the eye, that mind is not attached to pleasing forms and is not repelled by unpleasing forms.

And the same with all the other senses. It knows pleasant from unpleasant, but it's just not attached to the pleasant, not repelled by the unpleasant. And so she is one who has established mindfulness of the body and dwells with an unlimited mind and heart. Unlimited mind and heart.

So mindfulness is really our tool. It's like a rattle, one of my teachers says. We're like two-year-olds just going after "I want this, I want that, take me over here, I want to do this." And he says, "I just shake the rattle and say, turn around, look back here. It's right here. Come home."

And that's all we're doing with our mindfulness. What's happening? Knee pain? Fine. Come home. What's happening? Sadness? Great. Come home. What's happening? Bliss? Fine. Come home.

Mindfulness doesn't say this is good, this is bad. It doesn't think this is more important to pay attention to than that. It doesn't say, "I've seen this before, therefore I don't need to pay attention to it again—I'd rather pay attention to that." Just noticing what's arising with a quality, as we talked about, of non-judging, total, kind attention. Coming back to the bare experience, not the reaction and the story and the hoo-ha we create around it. Not all the story about why that sound is so unpleasant, but coming back to the sound itself.

Ajahn Chah says the sound doesn't disturb us—it's we who go out and disturb the sound. Just stay with the pure hearing. And bringing to it this quality of no preconceptions, a kind of wonder, such curiosity, such willingness to discover something new instead of thinking we already know. Not "I already know what the breath is like, but I'll go to it," or "I've experienced these cramps before, I know all about them, but alright, cramping, cramping." Not that. This newness, open to discovery each moment.

I'll leave you with an image that really helps me get the feeling of this quality of open-hearted attention. In Germany, I saw a documentary about Yo-Yo Ma, the famous world cellist. He has such a lovely attitude of openness. In this documentary, he was flying to Africa with his really fancy cello—I don't know how much it would cost—going to visit a tribe of Bushmen, to share music with them.

So here he is with these Bush people, and they bring out the old man who's kind of like the village shaman musician. He brings out his instrument, and Yo-Yo Ma brings out his incredible cello, and they start trading music. Now, this man's instrument was

literally a round oil can with a stick coming out of it and one string or line of some kind. And he's playing along, and Yo-Yo Ma is saying, "Wow, this is so incredible. It's so beautiful, the sounds he gets, the music he gets out of this." And he was totally sincere.

Then he says, "Let's trade instruments." So he gives this old musician his million-dollar cello or whatever it is, and he, Yo-Yo Ma, tries to play on the old man's instrument. He's going, "I can't play this nearly as beautifully as he can."

And he had such a childlike, open-hearted sense of discovery and wonder and appreciation and newness. Meanwhile, we watching were sitting there thinking, "Oh yeah, an oil can with a string coming out of it." And he's saying, "Wow, what an instrument! What sounds he can get out of it! What beautiful music!"

It's really a different way to live with the same facts, with the same circumstances. It's just a difference in how we relate to them.

So that's really what we're practicing here. And it's okay that we blow it a lot of times, because every moment we have another opportunity to meet what's happening with the simplicity of open-hearted attention and wonder.

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Let's sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 317

Nature of Insight

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this talk, Carol Wilson examines the nature of insight (vipassanā) and the conditions that support its arising. She distinguishes true insight from conceptual understanding, describing it as a spontaneous, wordless shift in perception that cannot be controlled or held onto, yet fundamentally changes how we relate to experience. Using the metaphor of 'magic eye' images where hidden pictures suddenly emerge, she illustrates how insight reveals what has always been present but remained unseen.*
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> *Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Wilson discusses how mindfulness of body, feelings, mind states, and mental contents—practiced with open awareness free from judgment—creates the conditions for insight to arise. She emphasizes that dharmic insight specifically addresses dukkha and its cessation, showing how a practitioner's moment of recognizing restlessness as 'just physical unpleasant sensation' exemplifies the ending of suffering through non-clinging.*
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> *Wilson explores how the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa)—impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and non-self (anattā)—reveal themselves through sustained, continuous mindfulness rather than through conceptual grasping. She quotes Nisargadatta Maharaj on abandoning familiar ideas to discover pure truth, and closes with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche's teaching that Buddha nature is present in everyone, with recognition being the only difference between awakening and delusion. The talk offers practical guidance for bringing fresh, wonder-filled presence to each moment of practice.*

For those who don't know me, my name is Carol Wilson. I'm the fifth of these five second string teachers, the second half. Tonight I want to talk about the process of insight and supports for that process to arise.

So this insight, this Vipassana, is usually translated as insight meditation. What is insight, actually, anyway? We come looking for insight, obviously, or we wouldn't put ourselves through this. We eagerly, impatiently await its arising. What is it? It's easy to have some idea or to think of insight as a certain state of mind, something we can produce or hang on to. But the nearest I could come in my experience to describing true insight is a shift of perception—spontaneous, out of our control. We just suddenly have that "aha," and we see something in a different way. The situation itself doesn't actually change, but the effect of that momentary shift of perception can have quite a radical effect on the way that we relate, a whole range from very little to really huge.

A good metaphor—not complete, of course, as metaphors are not, but a good one—for the way insight works in our Dharma understanding is those magic eye photos. They have some kind of geometric designs and colors, and when you look at it, it's nothing in particular. But if you look at it long enough and unfocus your eyes in just the right way, some magic 3D picture of dinosaurs, for example, springs out from the background. And once you see it, in that moment of seeing it, it's like, "Wow, dinosaurs! How could that be there in just these orange and blue triangles?" And then it's gone. Your eyes focus again and you start thinking about it, or you look away, and it's just the triangles again.

But the seeing of that has an effect, right? Even though it's momentary, it's shifted something radically. You know there's another way of perceiving that same geometric picture. You know something else is possible, even though you can't hold on to it. And if someone were to come to you and say, "No, you're out of your mind, there are no dinosaurs in that picture"—or you know how sometimes you meet someone who cannot see it? My mother is like that. She cannot see it, and it drives her crazy. Everyone's going, "Wow, dinosaurs! Spaceships!" And she's saying, "I want to see it." The tighter you get, the more you look for it—and of course, that sounds familiar, doesn't it? Forget about it. You're not going to see anything.

The seeing of it makes the next seeing a little easier. That momentary shift of perception doesn't stay with us, but it exerts an influence on the way that we meet the next similar experience. So you get the drift, right? You get the metaphor, how that works for insights in our life, as well as in our meditation practices, as well as in our Dharma understanding.

The insight isn't of thought. We can't hold onto it. Yet the fact of our perception having shifted exerts an influence on our mind stream, on our memory, on our readiness to hold a more open sense of possibility in the next moment, in the next experience. We're never quite so fixed on thinking we know this is how it is. We're never quite so fixed. We could be pretty fixed—but there's a little teensy weensy nubbin of change that might slip in there. And that's only about seeing dinosaurs. When it comes to our life, actually, it's much more radical.

Obviously insight doesn't have to be dharmic—seeing dinosaurs or suddenly approaching a mathematical problem in a different way, seeing a different aspect of our personality, or having problems with somebody and suddenly realizing, "Oh, maybe that's what they meant." It's the same process. It changes everything.

What makes it dharmic? The type of insight we are looking for—although we'll tell you not to look for it—but the type of insight we find ourselves looking for here is the type that deals with the nature of suffering and the ending of suffering. It's the kind of shift in perception that takes us out of our lifelong habit of creating and perpetuating suffering by the way we relate to experience. Because we're perceiving ourselves, each other, the nature of life, in a way that isn't completely accurate. And often we don't even know. We not only don't know it's not accurate, half the time we don't actually know how we're perceiving or the kind of box that we're putting our experience in. The insights that arise in our practice are the kind that let us really move outside of that box, relate to ourselves and one another and life in a different way.

The Buddha said that he teaches suffering and the end of suffering. All of our practice, all of the teachings, the meditation, any so-called meditation experience, whatever goes on here—all of it is in the service of understanding suffering and experiencing moment by moment for ourselves the possibility of the ending of suffering. Or as the Buddha described it, the supreme state of sublime peace that has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging.

Non-clinging and basic awareness, totality of open connected presence—these to me are really the two sides of the same thing, really at the heart of what allows any moment of pure insight to arise.

So the insights that we talk about, the momentary experiences that allow us to open and trust that we and life are not as we thought—these are at the heart of our practice. And it's from this that we really begin to experience, to trust the fact that the freedom, the peace, the happiness that the Buddha spoke of, that we can at moments experience, isn't about fixing ourselves or achieving a certain mind state or changing our inner or outer experience. It's really about that shift of perception that changes our attitude on deeper and more lasting levels.

I'll give you what I think is a good example. A woman at a retreat this summer shared with me that she was having a lot of very restless, physically uncomfortable sittings. I had told her that one thing you can do when it's that kind of restlessness, when you want to just run screaming out of the hall, is before you do that, to stand up. Just as we say stand up for sleepiness, stand up with restlessness.

So she was standing up and thinking, "This is horrible, this is so unpleasant, this is a waste of time, I can't stand it, I'm going to run out of the hall screaming." And this went on for some time. Then suddenly, just standing there feeling restless, restless, restless,

for whatever reason, there was a moment of letting go of that story, and the shift came. "Oh, so this is just physically uncomfortable. Restlessness. So what? What's the problem? It's just physical, unpleasant, restless sensations."

And that—you can get the difference between having that thought, which does absolutely nothing useful, and the real insight, the perception of, "Oh yeah, this is just physical dukkha, so what?" In that moment, there was no problem. She was still physically restless and uncomfortable, but the sense of this being a problem was gone. That's a moment of the ending of suffering. As we know, it only lasts a moment. But that is, to me, a really good example of the power of insight and how it comes about.

From that moment that she described of seeing, "Oh, it's just physical unpleasant experience, so what?"—suffering falls away. We can extrapolate from that any number of the profound teachings of the Buddha. We could say that really points to the Four Noble Truths, and I could give a whole talk about the suffering, the craving, the ending of suffering, the path to the ending of suffering. We can see how it points to the three characteristics of impermanence, of suffering, of no-self. We can see how you can get the whole dependent origination—the relationship to pleasant and unpleasant feeling giving rise to clinging, giving rise to a sense of grasping, giving rise to a sense of being, of suffering—from a little experience like that.

All of that can be very useful, very helpful. It might be the way one thinks about that experience afterwards. But none of that is the insight itself. The insight itself is that wordless "ah." And I'm not putting down using the concepts, the constructs of the Buddha's teaching or other concepts or constructs that are useful to us to help us understand in a conceptual way, because that's one of our tools. But it's not the insight. The insight is that wordless, non-conceptual shift of the way we see and understand and experience. And it can change everything.

Now, the problem, which I'm sure you've run into, is that we can't control this process arising when we would like it to arise. I don't know if you've ever sat down or walked and said, "I really want to have an insight into impermanence now." Or, "This week I'm going to work on anatta. I really want to see anatta." Or, "This whole retreat, in fact, will be my anatta retreat." Usually that's a sign that anything else but that is going to be what comes up.

It's totally out of our control. The insight arises spontaneously, and it, of course, passes spontaneously. So, for example, that woman standing with her restlessness—probably, luckily for her, the bell rang and ended the sitting, because I would really have been surprised if she said that sense of freedom in relationship to the unpleasant-

ness persisted for forty-five complete minutes. The insight's there. It's real. It exerts an influence in our mind stream. We know things can also be otherwise than they seem. But we can't hold on to it.

The concepts help us remember. If we could stop there it would be fine, but then they help us try to make it happen again, and then we're back in suffering because we're not in open awareness at all. We're in striving.

The factors I want to drill in—and they're not new—about the arising of insight are these qualities: what we've been talking about as sati, mindfulness, the open totality of presence without assumptions, without expectations, without judgments. And this pure presence in the moment is only possible when there is non-clinging of heart, of mind. Obviously, the two go together.

Now, you can have non-clinging and not have totality of presence. We can have non-clinging and be completely zoned out. That's also possible. So non-clinging also has to have non-delusion, some sense of wakefulness, totality of presence along with it. It's these two, minimally, that are helpful.

When there is a moment where there's the clear totality of connected awareness and non-clinging—sometimes the non-clinging is obvious, you know, not clinging to wanting the restlessness to go away, not clinging to wanting the weather to be different. But sometimes the clinging that's happening in that moment is much more subtle—to an idea, a description we have of ourselves or reality that might not even be a conscious thought. For us in that moment to be able to recognize in a different way, just as in the magic eye when we can suddenly recognize the dinosaurs behind there, there has to be that moment of non-clinging to the tight focus. But in that moment, you also can't be looking for the dinosaurs or looking for impermanence. There has to be that total steadiness of purpose and connectedness and the letting go of any particular.

When the clinging that has to be let go of in a moment is to an object, to a thought, it's easier to know what I'm talking about, so I'll give that as a first example.

Take the weather. I've been here most of the first six weeks. Those of you who just arrived today, this isn't going to help you to know, but it's been really lovely. Warm, one of the warmest Octobers I can remember. And suddenly, what was it, yesterday or the day before, literally between the morning and the afternoon, the temperature dropped twenty-five degrees. It was quite amazing.

If that doesn't bother you, you're lucky. You have something else to let go of. But if you find, as I do—I'm very sensitive to cold—doing walking or being outside, and not even obsessively, but just a little bit, that pulling back, that aversion to the coldness,

that little subtle feeling: "Oh, so nice when it was warm. My practice was so much better. I could walk outside in this open, relaxed space without this contraction." This contraction of body leads to contraction of mind and contraction of heart. How are you supposed to do really open, spacious practice inside in the dark when you're all contracted and all these people are stomping around all over? It's impossible.

And it is possible to really attribute the suffering to the fact that the weather changed. It's possible to be lost in that for quite some time—or to the fact that different people are doing different things than the other people were doing four days ago. We finally got used to the other people's stuff, and now we have to start over again. And it works both ways, I want you to know. The people that just arrived have to get used to your stuff too. It goes both ways.

Anyway, I got a little sidetracked. I haven't been sitting for six weeks. You'll have to excuse me. Soon I'll get to the concentration part. Maybe that'll bring it in.

One could really be thinking one is working quite mindfully, but there's just this little clinging to it: it would be better if it was warm again. And the moment when there's simply the willingness to bring the open attention without pre-assumption to the sensations of contraction, to the coldness, to whatever it is—in that moment of mindfulness, there isn't clinging. There's just letting go into what is, and suddenly, "Oh yeah, right, unpleasant sensation again." And that shifts the whole sense of the problem. A new problem will arise, no doubt, but that particular one is seen through.

It might not be the big "aha" you're waiting for to end all sense of self, but it is an insight. It is a shift of perception that in that moment is the end of that suffering. There was really a letting go and a clear connection to just what was happening, free of extra interpretation.

And of course, this kind of shift of perception is not dependent on being in a meditation retreat. It's not dependent on continuity of mindfulness and concentration. But what is so helpful about the meditation process, and about doing it with the commitment and steadiness and intensity with which we do it here—

is that it allows us to begin to see through some of the inaccurate—and some downright wrong and confused—perceptions that overlay our moment-to-moment experience. These perceptions are either so fast or so subtle or so continuous, and we're so used to them, that we really don't notice them without a steadiness and continuity of mindful awareness and letting go.

The clarity, the stillness of the concentration, the moment-to-moment nature of the mindfulness, and the power of the moment-to-moment doingness allow us at times to begin to see through certain ideas—they might be personal ideas that you've held about yourself. You don't even put it in words: "This is my personality. I could never do XYZ. I could never really experience pure loving-kindness. Maybe anattā is true for everybody else, but for me it's not, and I'll never be able to know that." Whatever it might be—certain views of who I am, how things are, that we don't even know we're holding.

Without the steadiness and subtlety of the meditation, it's very difficult to begin to notice that, to experience that momentary shift of perception. We're so fixed on how we think things are that it doesn't even allow perceptions in sometimes that are outside of the framework, outside of the box. We don't even know there's a box—we think this is all there is.

Fred actually told me a great story in this vein this summer. I'm not completely sure it's true, but it's a great story and it illustrates the point. He was talking about Captain Cook—when Captain Cook's ships, the tall-masted ships, first sailed into harbor. He wasn't clear on which harbor it was, whether it was Australia or one of the Polynesian islands. But he said when the ships first sailed into the bay, there were many native peoples on the beach. And so the assumption of what they saw is based on the native people's behavior: that these weird, tall things sailed into the harbor, and there was absolutely no acknowledgment whatsoever that anything was there, that anything had happened. The people just kept going on completely about their everyday business.

You might have thought, well, they're just not very curious, they just don't care. But the assumption was that really it was because that was such a bizarre thing, outside of any range of experience that could be imagined, that they didn't even notice. Because as soon as the tall ships lowered their little rowboats and people got in and started rowing towards the shore—that fit into their experience, because the native peoples had boats and rowing. And so as soon as that started, they went nuts. They started running around and going wild and dropped what they were doing and ran down to the beach and started bringing gifts and rowing out to see the people rowing in.

It's really the sense that something we already know, we recognize, we know how to respond to—that fits into our world. But something so completely outside of what we've known or ever imagined, we can at times effectively not even perceive it. It's just not even happening. And we don't even know we're doing it. If someone told you, you'd think they were the nut.

That's really what's so fascinating to me in the whole process of perception—coming to discover through the meditation process that there are many, many different ways of perceiving the reality that we call mind and body, that we call this world. And who's to say this is the right one, that is the wrong one? After a while you realize you can't really grasp at any of them. "I think this is right"—I'm just shutting out other possibilities, and that's where we suffer.

When the Buddha spoke about wrong view, *diṭṭhi*, to me it's literal: wrong view. We're really perceiving in an inaccurate, incomplete way and completely grasping and constructing ourselves from that inaccurate understanding.

We can't decide from what we know what we should be looking for. If we could just extrapolate that into our meditation practice, think how much suffering we'd be saved. If you could just imagine not having an idea of what really good concentration is that you have to try and live up to, and just feel the breath—my God, what a relief that is when we can do that. Or if you have some idea or an experience—"Oh, this is open, flowing awareness. Now I know what it's supposed to be like"—it all slams shut again in that moment. Any idea of what emptiness is, of what enlightenment is, of what I'm looking for, immediately slams the box shut.

Krishnamurti's famous expression, "freedom from the known"—that's really what insight is. For that moment we're completely freed from any clinging to known thoughts, perceptions, ideas, and we're present with openness to discover, present with appreciation for the mystery. Really not even thinking, just with that openness that has no clue what's going to arise in the next moment, or what we're going to think about it, or what it means about me as a human being. Just that presence and openness to discover. It's really quite a wonderful way to live, to practice.

In many ways I find the function of our meditation to stay quite classical with the three aspects of mindfulness, wise effort, and *samādhi*—collectedness, focus, steadiness of mind. The cultivation of these qualities of our presence is in the service of allowing this total presence without expectation, without any clinging to views, to opinions, to constructs. This makes possible the opening into another way of being, another way of living, another way of perceiving ourselves altogether—a way that is ultimately much more joyful and freeing than the little boxes of suffering that we seem to write and think ourselves into.

And I know that's what goes on in a meditation retreat. Someone was saying today—and I've often had this thought myself—how amazing it is that just coming back to feeling your breath, just coming back to feeling your footsteps, just coming back to sensations in your body, it seems quite a lot of the time rather mundane, not very esoteric,

not very profound. And then there'll be a period where we're just seeing all these different things about what's going on, on different levels, and it's so amazing. And you think, how can that come about? Just from following my breath? Just from feeling pressure, pressure, pressure, and suddenly I'm seeing these subtle chains of cause and effect in my behavior that I never saw before.

Like someone was saying—just walking and suddenly realizing, feeling a little sensation of coldness, the unpleasantness of that, and seeing how immediately the mind was saying, "Oh, it's cold, it's unpleasant, I'm going to quit walking and go have some tea." And how before, we would have done that with no clue why we stopped walking. The memory of the last moment before that was really happy, really present, and suddenly we can't stand it and we're in the dining room having tea.

How did I get there? And you know, this isn't the first time in our life that that particular string of events has happened. And suddenly we see it. Oh! It's just a momentary reaction to unpleasant sensation. Wow, that's fascinating. And that comes about from the cultivation of the moment-to-moment mindfulness that develops into concentration, steadiness, collectedness of mind.

The classical description, of course, of the insights that tend to arise over and over again—the insights that cut through our unthinking, normal way of experiencing our life—are the three characteristics, which I'm sure you know: that of impermanence, the ceaseless changing nature of all experience; the characteristic of dukkha, or the unsatisfactory, unreliable nature of all phenomenal experience, including ourselves; which brings us to the third characteristic, that there is no permanent, reliable experience whatsoever that I can point to, hold on to, or think of as me or mine. Nothing whatsoever.

I want to use impermanence as I go on as an example, because I think it's a good illustration of the difference between conceptual understanding and insight. Impermanence, I think, is worth exploring in that way because conceptually, of those three characteristics, impermanence is rather accessible on a conceptual level, no? It makes sense. You usually don't have to explain much to people about impermanence, whereas when we talk about anatta, that just opens the floodgates. But impermanence—most of us can conceptually say, "Yeah, I can see that. That's true."

And then we go about our lives, as we know, as if nothing that we like is ever going to change, including ourselves, including our moods—just completely overlooking the constant impermanence, which if someone came and asked us about, we'd completely agree with. Yes, everything's impermanent. But there will be times here, of course, more and more, when the fact of constant change isn't a concept but a real experience.

It's a real sense of insight. And in those moments of insight, you're not fighting it. It isn't really scary. There's that sense of, "Right, what's the problem? Everything's changing." We let go of the struggle, and there's a real sense of harmony, of ease, of being with things as they are—an ending of the struggle in that moment. I'm sure you all know that experience.

What's interesting is how often—not always, but often—immediately afterward, or very soon afterward, when the insight has again changed, we have the memory of it, but it's not our living experience anymore. And in fact, it can have a feeling of dissonance. You know what I mean? Where you've been so in the flow, and suddenly everything's frozen solid again. Either you're clinging to something, or something unpleasant is happening, and instead of just letting it flow, you're really struggling against it. The fact that you knew a minute ago everything was changing just adds to the sense of suffering. And there's a whole struggle, a whole sense of dissonance, the friction between our actual experience and the clung-to, perceived idea of how the world is.

A great deal of the time, we might find ourselves in more or less subtle forms of this dissonance. And it can manifest in different ways. Sometimes the dissonance is that things are changing and we're clinging—we don't want it to go, and we're suffering. Other times it's that we remember that everything was changing, and we can't get there again. Then there's dissonance: "I know it's really wonderful that everything's changing, but actually I'm suffering like heck because I can't let go into it." The sense of dissonance arises because we know in one way, but we don't really quite get the strength and subtleties of the views that are keeping us bound, the views we are actually holding to.

So just using impermanence as an example—and this is all without judgment, this is just the nature of our life in these bodies on this planet—we keep getting tripped up on clinging to these ways of experiencing that don't quite match how things are. Because, for example, if impermanence is a characteristic, a fact of life, doesn't that mean it's always true? Not just when we perceive it, but always. And it doesn't mean that when we suddenly have an insight into impermanence, now things have changed—that before they weren't impermanent, but now they are. Or anatta, which is more likely to confuse us. It's not that once you have an insight into anatta there's no "I," but before there was. It's just seeing how things are in another way. But things have always been that way. We're just seeing it—like the dinosaurs. They're not only there or not there; it's just how we perceive.

So go, just taking impermanence as you go through tonight, as you go through the next couple of days, really without judging—or if you judge, just notice it, note it. Not as a way to make yourself wrong, but really out of interest. Notice all the times that the mind and the heart clench when something changes, as if it shouldn't change. All the times that we really are coming from the place of, "No, things aren't impermanent."

In practice, you know, forget about it. As soon as it gets nice—and what is nice? That's different depending on your mood anyway. But this change over days, it's really interesting. Not for everybody, but for a lot of us, one way or another, it's just settling in, just getting in the groove, just getting to this peaceful place, and now there's all this aversion, there's all this thinking, there's all this emotion, there's all this whatever. Or I had my little walking path and now that person's on it, and I know it shouldn't matter, but boy does it. And on and on and on.

Underneath that, in some way, is this sense: "I lost it. I had it, and now I lost it." I did something wrong—or more like, IMS did something wrong by even allowing this to happen. It's their fault that my meditation is now ruined. "I lost it." Underneath that, we're somewhere thinking, "I hit the right place at which I'm going to cruise from now on," even though it doesn't last for more than a second. If you really look at some experience you're having in meditation that you think is really far out and great and "now this is it"—really look. How long does it stay the same, really stay the same? I'm willing to bet not much more than a second. Maybe it gets better, but it doesn't stay the same.

So every time you find yourself thinking it should have been like that, or trying to get back to how it was, or trying to move ahead to something you've heard or something you think is about to happen—every time you find yourself starting to feel disgruntled because it's nighttime and your energy dropped, because the weather changed and your mind got fuzzy along with the day, every time you find yourself thinking you know what's going to happen in the next moment—we're clinging to the idea of permanence.

It's more amazing that this stuff happens the way we think. That I'll talk for another ten minutes or so, and then I'll ring the bell, and then you'll get up and go walking, and then the bell will ring—maybe, if someone signed up. And then you'll come back in here and sit again. The fact that sometimes that stuff does happen lulls us into complacency. But really, we have no clue that there'll even be a next moment, never mind that we know what's going to happen in it.

And every time we notice that somehow we're taking for granted, somehow we're resisting change—in that moment, we're denying the truth of impermanence. In that moment, we're coming to look for rest in an unspoken, unclear idea of permanence.

That's the function, that's the role of mindfulness and concentration. We don't have to think, "I will now see through the idea of permanence." You know, forget about that. But the steadiness and the open-heartedness of mindfulness, and the concentration, the collectedness of mind that develops through continuity of mindfulness—this allows the truth to reveal itself, if we stop looking but remain willing to really be present.

From Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Discovery cannot come as long as you cling to the familiar. As long as you have all sorts of ideas about yourself, you know yourself only through the mist of these ideas. To know yourself as you are, give up all ideas. You cannot imagine the taste of pure water. You can only discover it by abandoning all flavorings."

So we can't even sit down and say, "I need to abandon the cherry flavoring," because we don't even know it's there. We don't know what flavorings are there. And we won't know, "Oh, now I've gotten to pure water, I can stop paying attention." We won't know that either. But it's that willingness to bring that open-hearted totality of presence that allows the truth to reveal itself on more refined and more subtle levels, moment to moment to moment.

So that's the quality of mindfulness, as you know, all of you—and I know the ones who've been here the first six weeks have heard a lot about it. This connected presence that's completely free in that moment of clinging or aversion, of judgments, of assumptions, of preconceptions—that allows us to just recognize what is as it is. "Oh, okay," without a lot of hullabaloo about it.

As an example, reading from the Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta, as you know, he speaks about areas—just a way of dividing up experience so we can talk about it—areas to bring awareness to: the body, the feeling tone (that pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality), the mind (the colorings, the flavorings of mind, the mental states), and then all the contents of mind.

Just to read from a moment from the third foundation, citta, the mind, the mental states—an example of how just knowing what is, without anything extra:

"When one's mind is desiring, one is aware the mind is desiring. When one's mind is not desiring, one is aware my mind is not desiring. When one's mind is hating something, one is aware my mind is hating. When there is not hatred in the mind, one is aware there is not hatred in the mind."

Now, do you hear anything in there about saying, "My mind is hating, which is proof of what a worthless, useless meditator I am"?

I don't read that either. "My mind is not hating—I finally surmounted all aversion and I'm about to move into the deva realm of compassionate loving-kindness." No, I don't hear that.

Simply moment to moment: hating is present, hating is not present. The mind is contracted, the mind is expansive. Finished. Just notice it, let it be, and notice when it changes. Why is that so impossible for us? That's the quality of mindfulness. And that's what allows us to notice, "Oh wow, I'm putting this cherry flavoring on, and it really doesn't need it."

Dudjom Rinpoche, describing mindfulness to a room full of Westerners, said it's that state you're in when you wake up in the morning in a strange motel in a strange city, and for a moment you don't know where you are. Just no clue. Your mind is empty of information and chit-chat, and you just sit there—alert, at ease, and full of wonder. This sounds nice, doesn't it? Next time you come in and sit down, just sit down with your mind empty of chit-chat, alert, at ease, and full of wonder. No matter what comes up: alert, at ease, and full of wonder. That moment-to-moment mindfulness brings a kind of freshness, this openness to discovery that really does bring a sense of wonder.

My favorite story that conveys to me this sense of openness and wonder, this willingness to meet a situation freshly, comes from when I was in Germany. There was a documentary on television about Yo-Yo Ma, the famous classical cellist. Just the other day I heard a piece on NPR about how he had forgotten his cello in a cab on the way to a concert at Carnegie Hall or something—it's a two million dollar cello. Luckily he got it back. But this is just to let you know: he took this cello of his, and it's not nothing, and got on a little bush plane and went to visit a tribe in the Kalahari desert in Africa. He's really into comparing music across cultures.

In the documentary, he gets out with his cello and he's with this tribe of the bush people, and he asks through a translator for the main musicians. An old man comes and brings his instrument. Yo-Yo Ma seems like a really nice guy, and he's all excited. He sits down with this old bush musician to swap songs and play their instruments.

Now this man's instrument was literally a round empty oil can with a wooden stake that made a handle, and a couple of strings that went up off a little stand on it. That was it. He would pluck it or play it with a stick, but mostly he just plucked it and sang. We could hear that, and I couldn't approach it with anything like the openness that Yo-Yo Ma brought to it. I saw it, the guy was plucking it, and it sounded to me, with my tin ear, like an oil can with a couple of strings coming out of it. Plong, plong, plong. But Yo-Yo Ma—he was so happy. He goes, "Wow, that's incredible!"

After listening to the man sing and play, Yo-Yo Ma would play something, and then he says, "Let's trade instruments." He trades instruments with the guy, totally open, and the man is sawing away on this two million dollar cello. Yo-Yo Ma's plunking on the thing, saying, "I can't play this nearly as well as he can. He really makes beautiful sounds come out of it." Gives it back to him and has him play and sing some more. Totally heartfelt. It was really beautiful.

I think of that a lot in my life. It's easy to bring a kind of cynicism or "I know what this is about" to life, to experience, certainly to another sitting, to the breath, to lifting the foot, to that crunching pain in the lower abdomen that God knows I've experienced more than enough. Can we bring that quality of newness, openness to discovery? It's the first time. What a different way to live. That's the quality of mindfulness. Sure, we'll lose it. But I just think of Yo-Yo Ma, and for a moment it opens up my heart, my mind again. You're there fresh. And moment by moment is all we've got anyway. So meet this moment fresh.

That's the mindfulness piece—the continuity of mindfulness. I do assume that's been mentioned once or twice in the first six weeks. Once, years ago, a friend of mine who must have sat four three-month retreats came to me after about the fourth one and said, "Wow, you guys were really stressing continuity."

I never remembered hearing that before. So I just thought I'd check. It's another example of selective perception, and we don't know when we're doing it. That's what's so interesting.

Anyway, the continuity of mindfulness is extremely important, both because it's what allows the steadiness, the concentration, the unification of mind and attention to develop, and also because the steadiness of mindfulness is what reveals impermanence. Lack of continuity hides impermanence. Have you noticed that?

I'll give examples, but the steadiness, the continuity—mindfulness moment after moment, not just when we like it, not just when we think something's worth paying attention to—that's the biggest trap. Because the things that aren't worth paying attention to are the things that are going to reveal a lot about life and ourselves.

The continuity matters because one moment informs the next. One moment of rage makes it a lot easier to be angry the next moment. One moment of metta makes the next moment of metta a lot easier. Same with mindfulness. One moment of open, wondrous presence makes us much more likely to be in the same space in the next moment.

This leads to a stability of attention. The kind of concentration we're cultivating here—khanika samadhi, momentary concentration—the objects may always be changing. We start with the breath or with hearing or with body, but at times there's sensation, sensation, the breath, hearing, sensation, thought—things changing, but there's a steadiness of meeting each experience where the mind isn't fluttering, it's not distracted by the pleasant or unpleasant, it's just there with what is. That's a real depth of unification, non-distractedness of mind and heart.

That in itself—have you noticed how satisfying it is? Nothing special may be going on, but just that undistracted quality of presence is really quite lovely, peaceful. It is just this rest from running all over the place in the mind. So that steadiness, the moment after moment after moment, allows the concentration of samadhi to develop. And this is what allows for the recognition, that shift of perception that's insight—to see our experience in a different way.

Using impermanence again as an example: lack of continuity hides impermanence. When we pay attention only to what we think is interesting, when it's strong enough to call us or we're simply caught in it, we tend to notice both the mind states we really like and are attached to—concentration, joy, feeling so high, so peaceful—and also the ones we don't like: the heaviness, the self-judging, the sadness. And there's a real tendency to think, when you're in a grief space or a self-judging space, "I've just been so self-judging all day" or "I've been grief-stricken all day" or "I've been dull and sleepy for the last three and a half weeks." That's selective perception again. There isn't just moment after moment of one thing.

I've noticed, even in the depths of really intense grief—the kind that feels like you're completely sucked into a pit of grief—if I stay really present, somewhere in there my mind is going, "Is that pizza? I wonder if we're having pizza for lunch. I wonder if there's dessert." And then, "Oh my God, this grief is just too much to bear." Without the continuity, the undiscriminating quality of mindfulness, we just cut out that little piece. And then we think, "I am so filled with grief. It's steady, it's solid."

If you keep working with continuity, there is no way you can go on thinking that everything is permanent. There is no way. All we see is more and more how fast things are changing, whether we like it or not.

Another way the qualities we cultivate in meditation help us is not only through the steadiness, but through the depth of concentration that lets us begin to perceive experience on subtler levels than when we're really busy, when our mind is distracted. Again, to use the example someone gave in an interview: just walking, feeling really great about it, noticing a couple of moments of unpleasant cold sensation, and the mind say-

ing, "Okay, I'm going to go have some tea." That's very fast. It's quite subtle. Without the concentration that can notice the rapidity of mind and body sensations coming and going, we wouldn't catch that cause and effect. We'd just be having the tea and not quite sure how we got there.

Or the times in practice when you're feeling quite present and focused, and the sensations in the body start to seem to come faster and faster, and there are moments when there is no real perception of a solid body at all. And it's as real as feeling solid right now. In that way, you really see for that moment: it's true. There's nothing solid. There is no body. There is no me. There are only sensations arising and passing in space, like points of light. And then we go into a whole thing and we're solid again.

But in that moment, that's absolutely the truth. It's a truth that's usually not accessible to us as a perception without the steadiness of mindfulness and concentration.

And if that's not your experience, let me also hasten to say, that doesn't last either. It's one of those perceptions that lets us know, "Oh, things aren't the way I always thought." And it changes something. We're not so fixed. But that perception also doesn't last. And the next moment, or the next week, or the next year, everything is really solid and you can't get back to that other perception.

But it doesn't really matter. You never really perceive so solidly again. Just opening that space of don't-know in the heart, in the mind, allows us to bring that freshness—like Yo-Yo Ma—allows the possibility to really, deeply perceive in another way altogether. And the more often we recognize a moment—"Ah, it really isn't what I thought. I'm really not the way I thought I am"—those are the moments that can change everything. You don't have to hold on to them. It's just that totality of presence, complete nonclinging in a moment, that allows the truth to present itself.

That, to me, is the whole point of our practice. And then, of course, we can't hold on to that either. Just this moment.

I want to close with this quotation from the late Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche:

Buddha nature, the essence of awakened enlightenment itself, is present in everyone. It cannot be improved upon. It cannot be changed or degenerated. Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and ordinary beings, and this is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives.

CHAPTER 318

Devotion To The Truth

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson shares a pivotal insight from her time at Ramana Maharshi's ashram in southern India—the profound difference between practicing from devotion to truth versus wanting truth. Observing the humble president of the ashram simply walking around the samādhi before serving dinner, she recognized a quality of surrendered love that contrasted sharply with her own mindful but subtly grasping approach.*
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> *Wilson explores how wholehearted surrender differs from passive resignation—it's a vital, exhilarating presence that requires releasing our safety nets and preconceived notions moment by moment. Drawing on teachings from Ramana Maharshi, Pema Chödrön, and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, she illuminates how "in the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly." The talk examines our habitual resistance to letting go, using vivid imagery of mountain monkeys launching fearlessly through space and the story of a man clinging to a branch while God tells him to let go.*
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> *Practical guidance emerges for reconnecting with devotion: taking refuge, opening to nature, cultivating gratitude, and reflecting on bodhicitta—the awakened heart that arises when we can no longer shield ourselves from life's vulnerability. Wilson emphasizes that this love includes ourselves, our relationships, and all beings, transforming even difficult moments into opportunities for presence and freedom.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about an attitude of bringing to practice that I've been finding very helpful lately, sort of a shift at times. And that's the attitude of devotion and surrender.

This fall in August and September, I spent a few weeks in southern India in an ashram where Ramana Maharshi used to live. He died in 1950, so he's been gone a while, but he's widely considered one of the more realized beings to live in this century. I mean, who knows, but he's widely considered to be that. And still many, many people go to the ashram today, of course, with various motives, as we all come to our practice. But the ashram is really there not so much as a kind of honoring him as a person. They really try to set it up in a way that informs one with the willingness to practice, which is basically self-inquiry—to realize and rest in the truth for oneself rather than to just go out of devotion to this man who used to live there. But of course all kinds of people and all kinds of behaviors are there. It's a lovely place.

What inspired me to want to talk about this tonight was a little experience I had one night. They have, as is a very Indian custom, a big hall where every evening there's about an hour of chanting in the Tamil language. At one end of this hall is a big marble tomb. The word they use for a tomb like that in India is samadhi—his final samadhi, they call it. And it's a common practice to circumambulate it.

So we were sitting, listening to the chanting. While they're chanting, some people sit along the walls, and anyone can come and go. It's very informal. People will come in, maybe bow to the samadhi, walk around it, and sit down. Many times people come in and do full prostrations, or a little bow, or they're lying on the floor for five minutes, or just casually walking around—the whole range.

I was just sitting there practicing awareness, being with the chanting. At the end, one of the male chanters was an older man who's actually the president of the ashram. He's a very kind man. He got up, and I just happened to see him. I hadn't even noticed in all those days that he was one of the chanters. He just got up—the dinner bell rings—and he got up to go help serve the dinner, which he does for the hundred or so people who are there. They come around and serve you on banana leaves. You sit on the floor with a banana leaf, and they come and slop the food on the leaf, and you eat it. He would be one of the people who would come around serving, just very simply.

He got up and I happened to see him. There was just such an air of humbleness, of simplicity. He just walked around the samadhi. No bowing, no prostration, nothing. Just this simple walking around and then out to do his duty of serving the dinner. Somehow there was something in the way that he walked—I realize it could be total projection, but I'm aware of that, and it doesn't matter. There was something in the way that he walked that felt so humble, so simple, and so filled with devotion. Just simple devotion. Now I don't know whether it was to Ramana, to his memory, or to the truth, but the whole air of the ashram is devotion to truth rather than to Ramana as a person. There was that quality of humble, simple devotion. No big airs, no big prostrations. Just walking around and going to serve his meal.

That just went right in somehow. Because I felt the difference between myself earlier, having walked around that samadhi. It's one of the things you do mindfully, you know, doing my mindful walking the way we'd walk back and forth here. But the difference between his devotion and love, the simplicity of his love for the truth, really contrasted with my devotion to wanting the truth. And it's a vast difference. You might have once in a while noticed a subtle wanting the truth creep into our dedication to practice.

That's really all I had to say in this talk, but five minutes is a little short, so I will elaborate on this theme for some time.

It really had a profound effect on me, actually, that moment. It stayed with me for the last two months. It comes and goes, but it stayed with me. And all I need to do is remember that sense that seeing him brought up in my own heart—of practicing simply out of love for the truth. Without any "in order to's" or "so that's" or "because I want X, Y, and Z to happen" or "because what's here now isn't good enough"—or fill in your own blanks.

That wholehearted loving of the truth is a transforming approach to bring into the simplicity of our day-to-day mindfulness, our moment-to-moment mindfulness. And in order to practice even for a moment in this way requires—yes—surrender. I hate to say it. It requires, just in a moment, wholehearted, total surrender.

It doesn't have to look like anything.

For example, at the ashram, people would come in from all over and really throw themselves on the floor in front of the tomb or in the meditation hall. You could feel a sense of devotion in them. They would sit there for a little while, get up, and go on with their lives. Meanwhile, the president was just doing his chanting, walking around the tomb, going in to serve dinner, being kind to whoever came, running the place day after day after day—without any big sense of making himself somebody special. And it's so easy to do that when you're the head of something, when people come from all over the world and say, "Wow, you're the president." Yet he was one of the most simple, humble people there.

So how do we approach our practice day to day, moment to moment—our walking, our sitting? When we feel the breath, when we notice that peace and calm has suddenly changed to contraction and tightness, when we notice that quietness has suddenly given way to random scattered thoughts—or maybe not so random, maybe obsessive—what then? When the nice, calm energy that we were so aware of not getting attached to has changed, and we realize that somehow we weren't attached to the energy, but obviously it meant something really profound in our practice. And its being gone also means something missing that's really profound.

Are we able to surrender into meeting whatever's happening with our fullness of attention? Not so that we can get back to something. Not in order to finally rest in truth. But simply out of love for awareness itself, simply out of devotion to the truth in whatever way it's manifesting in this moment. Whether we like it or not really doesn't make any difference. Whether we understand it, whether we have a frame of reference, doesn't make any difference.

That level of surrender—not of giving up, but of surrendering into presence out of real devotion for the truth. Obviously, what we have to give up is all our ideas, all our desires, all our preconceptions. Only in a moment, not now forever. Just in a moment, because if we think all that way ahead, it's impossible. Then there's me having to give up all my desires. But just in the moment—can we surrender into a situation that's difficult, not difficult, confusing, or beautiful without even the slightest exception? So that there's no "I'll surrender this far, but this last piece can't go."

It's tough, isn't it?

And when we actually approach it out of love, rather than out of wanting—which is even kind of gross, but let's face it, it is wanting, it's grasping, some subtle clinging for what we're going to get—the devotion, the love, really makes the surrender already happen. But it's so easy to hold on to one last "what if."

A friend sent me this story about a man who went for a hike. While he was walking along a steep path, he slipped and started to tumble down the mountainside. At the last moment, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the mountain, but he could not get a foothold to climb back up. He became frightened and pleaded, "Lord, please help me. If you get me out of this predicament, I'll do anything you say. Please help me."

Just then the clouds parted, and a voice said, "Did you say you will do anything?"

The man answered, "Yes, Lord, I'll do anything."

And the voice said, "Okay. Let go."

And the man said, "What? Are you crazy? I'll be killed!"

Now that's our place of surrender. Real surrender. And if we could let go out of love for the truth, rather than out of getting what we want—that's a moment of devotion. Yes, it's scary. It's unnerving. It gives us nothing to hold on to. It gives us no set path that we can absolutely trust.

Of course, we know that certain things tend to happen, that other people have walked this path. And one of the reasons we're here as teachers is so that when something weird starts happening, you come in and tell us, and we almost always say, "Oh yeah, that's normal"—almost no matter what. I don't know whether you believe us or not, but we say that, and you go, "Okay." Maybe they don't believe us. But we mean it. We wouldn't lie.

Almost everything's normal at some point or other. So there's a path, but it's so vast that you can't absolutely count on anything. And that's why total surrender is necessary. It's scary, but also in that moment of opening the heart and mind and letting go into devotion and love, it's exhilarating. It's freeing. It brings in such a vitality of life, of really being present, that holding to our plans and preconceived notions just can't allow.

The image that comes to my mind is something a friend told me, again from this place in India. The ashram is at the base of a mountain, a sacred mountain. This friend climbed up to the top—a lot of people do—and they climbed in the middle of the night so they would be at the top just as dawn was breaking. There are lots of monkeys in this area, and the monkeys apparently up at the top are a little more wild. The ones at the bottom are basically craving personified—you hear a rustle, you see food, they're on you. They know. But up at the top, a little more wild.

The image this friend described really comes to me with this sense of surrendering, abandoning our toeholds in the moment and just surrendering into what's happening now. He said these monkeys, these wild mountain monkeys, they're up at the top on these rocks, on these trees, and they just launch out from whatever they're holding onto—a rock or a tree—just as if they could fly, completely trusting that they'll land on a branch or a rock. And they do. But they're not sitting there checking it out. Where's the next toehold? If I go this way, can I go that far? They just launch out and land.

To me, there's that sense of complete trust, vibrancy, total aliveness in the moment. And that's really the surrender I'm talking about. It's not the surrender of, "Okay, fine, I'll lie down and whatever happens, happens, because I can't do anything about it anyway." It's the surrender of totally vital, wholehearted presence. There's nothing like it. And it could be called love. It could be called devotion. It brings in a unity of being that allows us to transcend our identification with the personal, whatever aspect that's taking at the moment. It allows us to open into a radical acceptance of this moment right now as manifestation of truth—the only one that's available right now. And only when we can really open into it, launch into it like those monkeys, can we perceive, in a way, ultimate reality.

I think in the first talk I ever gave, I used this quotation, and I still love it, so I'm going to use it again. Talking about really taking refuge in whatever's arising right now as the truth: "Radical acceptance is the radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways."

This, in a way, is our practice. The "all"—in all forms, at all times, in all ways—is accentuated because that's the only way through, this total devotion. It's another angle of non-grasping; I'm sure you've got that by now. It's only in the totality of it that truth can reveal itself. Just that slightest holding on—"I can't let go because I'll be killed"—that slightest holding on is what blocks in that moment the perception of ultimate truth. The wholehearted surrender into it is what allows the unitive nature to reveal itself.

Obviously this isn't easy or simple; we all know that. It's such a habit, such a deeply ingrained fear, that we need some kind of safety net. We can't just launch out like those monkeys without some little sense that there's some way we're going to be able to keep ourselves safe, or familiar, or hanging on to the known in some way. But that safety net is what imprisons us. It's what keeps us roaming back and forth in the little box of the known, the little box of "me," the little box of my ideas about who I am, about what is possible, about what truth could even be. We think it's a safety net, but it's a prison. Yet it feels so safe and comfortable, and at times it's so subtle, that it's really hard to have the trust to let go of it for a moment, to venture outside of it.

For me, that's why the sense of love, of devotion, is so helpful—even more than trust in a way—because devotion or love, in my own personal experience, has an energetic power that is stronger than fear, stronger than the need for a safety net.

And the safety net here on retreat can be as simple as what's comfortable. How much sleep I need. How we're relating to food. What would happen if I ate less? What would happen if I skipped the chocolate cake? What would happen if I didn't take a nap after lunch?

Things that somehow don't enter the realm of what's possible for me.

I remember the first three-month retreat I ever sat. At that time, all the work meditations were assigned—you didn't have a choice, you didn't sign up. And about every month they rotated the assignments. So just when you settled in and had your schedule all going, suddenly you'd go in and discover you were the lunchtime dishwasher for the next month.

My safety net, my sense of comfort at that time, was that I could get through the day and do the schedule if I had my little half-hour nap after lunch. And that seemed quite acceptable—until they rotated the jobs and I had to do lunchtime cleanup. Another safety net I didn't even recognize at the time was that I had to look like a good yogi, so I wouldn't dare go in and say I couldn't do that job, that I wanted another one. I didn't even recognize that was a personality safety net. People had to like me.

So I said, "Oh no, what's going to happen? I have to do this cleaning and there's no way I can get through the day without my nap after lunch. It's just going to be hell."

And of course, you can imagine—it was amazing to find out that it didn't make any difference at all whether I had my nap after lunch. From the first day it just didn't matter. It was completely something in my mind. But I think I would have gone through that whole retreat without even thinking to question that it was necessary, that it was possible for something to be different.

It can be more subtle than that, of course, but we get a familiarity with our habits, a familiarity with aspects of our personality, things that can't change—even sometimes very suffering aspects of our personality. Who would I be if I didn't feel worthless? That's not a possibility. Losing my sense of self. We hang on.

So something that can jar that is really helpful. A friend of ours this summer told a Zen story that kind of jars that sense of seeing how we look at things. It was about a Zen master and a very wrathful samurai who came to visit him. One wonders why the samurai came to visit, because he started abusing the Zen master from the moment he arrived, calling him, "Oh, you're just a pig, you look like a pig, this zendo looks like a pig"—just abusing him.

The Zen master let him go on, and finally the Zen master said, "Well, but you are a Buddha."

This brought the samurai up short. He thought of himself many ways, but a Buddha wasn't one of them. He said, "Me, a Buddha? Why do you say that?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig only sees pig. A Buddha only sees Buddha."

So it jars our preconceived notions, what we want to hang on to, what we're comfortable with. If we want to just see pig, okay, we're welcome to do that if that's more comfortable. But the willingness to let go of that, whatever our preconceived notions are, and just surrender into this moment from love, without hoping for result—to wholeheartedly meet what's happening just because it's the truth in this moment, not as some kind of self-confirmation: "Yes, my practice is getting better." And that's so tricky. "Now I am experiencing this deep, open-hearted devotion"—just to notice when we are.

An illustration of this point, again from Ramana Maharshi: One of his devotees remarked to him that a certain fellow devotee must be very well advanced on his spiritual path because he meditated for eight to ten hours every day. So this guy would have been very impressed with all of us.

And Ramana replied, "Oh, he meditates, he eats, he sleeps. But who is meditating, eating, sleeping? What advantage is there in meditating for ten hours a day if in the end that only has the result of establishing you a little more deeply in the conviction that it is you who are meditating?"

Now, before you fall back into "I am worthless because I think I'm meditating, and that's just the proof of it"—of course there are times when we are very firmly established in the sense that I am meditating, I am developing concentration, I am feeling such open-hearted devotion, I am surrendering fully into the moment. Of course that's going to happen. That's our human condition. And there are times when we are meditating in order to develop concentration, in order to open the heart, so that I can finally rest in the pure nature of awareness and forget this whole show.

Whatever our "in order to" is, whenever there's an "in order to," I am very firmly placed behind it, so it seems.

But luckily for us, the whole gestalt of mindfulness practice is that all we have to do is have the willingness to keep looking. Look at that I who's meditating so faithfully. Look at that I who feels worthless. All we have to do is keep practicing surrender, keep practicing simply the devotion that lets us meet a moment fully. And when we practice with love, we naturally begin to see through this solid sense of I.

So please don't think, "Well, I'm meditating ten hours a day, but I still feel like I'm me, so the more I meditate, the worse that's going to be." That's not the point I was trying to make with that quotation. Just to notice when we're meditating from I, from wanting—even wanting enlightenment—and when it's just love of being present. Even when we hate what we're being present with, we can still—it's weird, but it is possible—love just awareness itself, even when what's happening we could really do without.

Seeing through this sense of me, the personality patterns, whatever our safety net is—it changes from time to time, the comfort level. Of course it's not always comfortable. Of course at times it's unsettling, confusing, takes us onto unfamiliar, uncomfortable ground. For myself, I'd say in the years of practice, it continues to be in many ways like a series of small deaths, really. And sometimes with the accompanying sense of loss, of grief that goes along with death for us humans.

And if I would try to place a rational explanation on what it is that feels like it's dying—you know, this piece of my personality feels like it's dying—it doesn't really make sense. I mean, it didn't even make sense to me. I won't even try to make it make sense to you. But it's really been over the years, over and over, that opening into a sense of real dying, of real death. And coming out the other side of it to a space of greater ease

and freedom and greater ability to love—just to love the truth, to love things as they are, not so wrapped up in some idea of who Carol is or what practice should look like or what I think is possible.

It's interesting when we run into these places in our practice, and I think we all do, though they can be different. A place just before that sense of death, that sense of real letting go of some idea we've had about ourselves, or of something that we see we're going to have to let go of to keep practicing—and this huge resistance comes up. "No. If freedom means this goes, I don't want freedom." Do you know that space?

And sometimes the "this" is something so mundane. I remember one time my teacher told me I had to start noting "pleasant." I was having some kind of rapture, some kind of pleasant experience, and I went back and went into a total temper tantrum resistance. Because I knew, really, that I liked that pleasant thing, and noting "pleasant" was really going to cut the attachment. I mean, all I had to do was note it once to know that. It was going to cut the attachment, which gave me some sense of—wow, it wasn't even that strong, but just a sense of being. And I had a total conniption, a temper tantrum, a three-year-old fit.

Before I finally said, "All right, I'll just note pleasant." Pleasant, pleasant. The whole thing falls away. And lo and behold, it's not like, "Oh, life is so gray and miserable." It's like, "Oh, yeah, right. Equanimity. It's really lovely." Peace, spaciousness, presence. It's something so small, really. And we can just go to the wall resisting. "No, if that has to go, forget about it. I want to stay in suffering."

Sometimes it's not mundane. Sometimes it's something really profound—an understanding we have of life, or we think we have. Often for me it will come up around a sense of how I feel attachment in relationship, or to family, or to friends. And it's more an idea than a reality, but the idea that if I really open into choiceless awareness or into love, then the specialness of that attachment is going to go away. And I don't want life without that.

It's a common question that comes up, more often when we're teaching at a class—not so much when we've been on a long retreat, but when people are just beginning to come to the Dharma and the idea of non-attachment. You say there's no attachment, so that means we can't have relationships? And what about love for our children? Is it some kind of cold practice that says we can't be attached to our children? All these what-ifs. And of course that's not the reality when we really open into devotion or love for all beings.

It happens to include our children, our partners, our families, ourselves.

But I'm not making light of this—it's a profound kind of wall we can come up against. No. If this goes, if freedom means I don't have this anymore, I don't want freedom. Of course, that's just another thought. Here we can notice that we keep practicing and we see it's different from what we thought. But these places of resistance, of "no, this can't go, this is who I am," or "this is what makes life worth living"—this is a very important place in practice. And this is where that true surrender, that devotion to the truth without an "in order to," comes in.

From Pema Chödrön—I think she has a great way of putting things: "To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together."

So that's not happening, is it? You're not finding every experience here is making you feel completely together. So that's good, see? Even though we say the yama mara is fear of death, actually the mara is fear of life—life meaning that holding on, having every experience congratulate and confirm us. You can feel the difference when we're practicing so that the practice can confirm us. You can feel that sense of solidity, that sense of clinging. And in the moments when we're just giving our heart to it, without holding back, you can feel the vitality, the aliveness, the spaciousness, the lack of sense of self.

Now, interestingly enough, the attitude of devotion—wholeheartedly giving one's being to, of love, which is non-clinging—it's another way of coming at non-grasping. In the heart of this attitude, it allows the true nature to shine through.

I want to read this from Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, describing this. He says, "A method for becoming quickly accustomed to the unfabricated state of awareness—unfabricated, unconditioned, uncreated state of awareness—is to have devotion for enlightened beings and compassion for unenlightened sentient beings. Devotion and compassion are both love. And in the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly."

In the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly.

He goes on to say, "If in this moment"—the moment of love, devotion, compassion, metta, whatever different words you want to put—"if in this moment one can look inwardly, it is like the sun unobscured by clouds. The nature of emptiness is nakedly manifest in the moment of devotion, in the moment of love." In fact, it's the same: devotion, love, naked empty nature manifest.

And he goes on to say, "Yet in the beginning you need developed or fabricated devotion because natural, unfabricated devotion or uncontrived compassion doesn't necessarily occur immediately"—if that happens to be your experience, that it doesn't always occur immediately.

And of course, as with devotion, as with anything, there are ways we can remind ourselves of devotion as an attitude. As with the compassion practice, as with the metta practice, sometimes people will say it does seem so contrived to cultivate the boundless quality of heart, of loving-kindness, of compassion through such a formulaic practice. It's quite common that people feel a dissonance between the method and the so-desired-for result. But it's just looking at the fact that sometimes total, unfabricated devotion and compassion don't just arise spontaneously every moment, but we can incline the mind, incline the heart. And so a lot of that is our practice here.

I'm not going to talk about—I mean, there's a whole practice of the bhakti path, of guru devotion, and I'm not talking about that at all because it's both not what we're doing here and it's also not my personal experience. So I'm really talking about aspects of love and devotion within our mindfulness practice here, including the compassion and the metta practice. I'm not discussing them specifically because Marcia talked about karuna last night and we've talked about metta, but know that those are aspects of love, of devotion.

To think of devotion in the beginning, in terms of cultivating this open-hearted love, there are ways that it can seem quite dualistic, but we can use skillful means. The whole sense of devotion or love or inspiration inspired by a teacher—as for example the Buddha—is using what starts as a sense of duality and separation as a skillful means. The Buddha or the teacher or the being, whatever being inspires us, becomes a catalyst for the open-hearted surrendering of our sense of wanting, of separation, of "what if"—a catalyst, an inspiration to really fully open into this moment.

It's commonly used in the Theravada tradition at times when people's motivation is low or they're really discouraged or dragging through practice. Often our teachers would encourage us to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha or the qualities of an awakened being who inspired one. And I found that this can be a skillful means if it's used not to create a sense of distance or separation—"Oh, the Buddha or whoever was such an amazing enlightened being and that's impossible for a poor dumb cluck like me." That's not the point.

Not to hold on to the separation, but rather, by reflecting on and tuning into the awakened aspect of the Buddha or a being we know, it ignites the awakened aspect of our own heart and mind. Instead of increasing a sense of distance, it brings us back into the unity that comes about through devotion.

A little poem from Lalla, a woman who was a mystic in the fourteenth century in northern India:

When the mirror of my consciousness became clear,
I saw that my family and others I love are the same as me.
The "you and I" thought does not occur.
The entire world is God.

The entire world is God. The "you and I" thought does not occur. That's the skillful use of devotion—to come into the sense of vastness, of unity. The love, that totality of devotion that allows for naked awareness to manifest like the brilliance of the sun. We move from the personal to completely beyond any sense of personal.

The Buddha used devotion in this way, but he was very clear that we not get stuck having our devotion fixated on a person, on a being, because that continues and creates the sense of separation, of something to gain. There's a story where one monk was quite enamored of the Buddha. He would just sit in the discourses and stare at him like he was in love with him, basically. And finally the Buddha had to snap him out of it and said, "It's not me. Stop staring at me. If you see the Dharma, you see the Buddha. It's about the Dharma, it's about the truth, it's about your own awakening. It's not about me."

So it's very clear that we can use devotion and inspiration, but if we get stuck there on the personal, then the clinging comes back in. And you can tell, because there will be more of a sense of separation, more of a sense of wanting. Love and devotion is not wanting. They're very different—vastly different.

There's a story conveying the same thing from present-day times. In India today, the whole tradition of guru devotion and guru worship is really, really strong. It's quite a kick to be in the country, actually, because that's definitely not the culture I came out of. And being in Tiruvannamalai, where Ramana Maharshi's ashram is—that's really the center of that town. As I was describing, there's a lot of devotion to him as a person. But it's also sort of a great mecca for all kinds of gurus and babas to come. They're all different. There's always conversation in town about this baba who came or that guru who arrived. It's fascinating to see this sense of guru devotion. But a lot of times, it's really in service of that sense of separation—this person is going to give it to me.

There's a story I really like that I read about Ramana himself, who very much drew devotion from people. If you read about him, he taught a lot in silence. Just his presence and his emanation of the truth would often wake that up in people's hearts and minds. But of course, people also related to him in all different ways, and there was a strong element of personal devotion.

One story I read was in a book written by one of his longtime disciples, a man who lived in the ashram from the early twenties and thirties, was one of Ramana's attendants, did a lot of the construction work, and was just very close to him, living there for years and years. Finally, at one point, Ramana just knew the moment when this man's heart and mind was beginning to open up, to awaken, to not be so fixated on him. And he basically said to him, "This being, this body—this is not the truth. This is not Bhagavan," as he would call himself. "It's not me. But it's with you always. So now it's time for you to leave and go do your practice."

And so this man, Annamalai Swami was his name, left and went about five minutes' walk away. Now there's an ashram there, Annamalai Swami's ashram—it's really just five minutes from Ramana's ashram. But he went there, stayed for the rest of his life, practiced intensively, and never saw Ramana again. Never saw him again, though he was living five minutes away. Ramana basically banished him and said, "Forget about this body, this being. The truth is always with you. Now go discover it for yourself."

And another example of when we don't quite make that transition, when we do get fixated—this summer I was in Italy for a week or two, and we went to Assisi, where St. Francis of Assisi lived and practiced. If you know anything about him at all, he's from the twelfth century, I believe, and he was renowned for his love and simplicity, his sense of brotherhood with all life, with all nature. He lived a profoundly simple, loving life—the birds landing on his finger and all of that. But really, to have this sense of sisterhood, brotherhood—he would talk about sister bird, sister death even. No sense of anything separate or shut out. That impressed me.

So we went to Assisi. And over all these centuries, his manifestation of truth is what so deeply inspires people—it still, over these centuries, deeply inspires people. But somewhere, somehow, something seems to have gone a little askew. Rather than recognizing that what he touches in people is that truth in us, some people seem to have gotten sidetracked onto a sense of veneration of the man himself. Because you go there and so many elegant, elaborate structures have been built to honor and be devoted to this man whose life was a statement of simplicity. It was really amazing to me.

We went in, and there are at least two humongous—I don't know if they're cathedrals, I don't know the exact term—but really huge structures with all kinds of artwork and many floors. The top floor with the most beautiful parts we couldn't go in because they were quite damaged in the earthquake a couple of years ago. But the one that really struck me: just on the bottom floor of this place, which was so huge you'd keep getting lost, right in the middle there's this tiny stone chapel. That is the actual chapel that St. Francis used to pray in. It's this teensy little rough stone thing from the twelfth century, lost in the middle of this gigantic cathedral built to honor St. Francis. And the place was packed, and of course there were rows and rows of souvenir stalls outside—St. Francis T-shirts and little... I didn't really get this, but it looked like little gray nun's habits for children, for girls. It was really bizarre.

And you get the sense—we often think of that as devotion, but that's not really the quality I'm speaking of as devotion. I don't mean that cynically, really. There's a love and respect that has led to all these elaborate structures being built, that draws people there. The legend, or what one has read or felt about St. Francis, is touching that spark of truth in people. But then it goes askew and gets onto him, venerating the person long gone—twelfth century, he's been gone a while. It's the simplicity.

So in our practice here as well, giving ourselves to it with devotion and knowing, it will go askew. Some wanting will come in. Some sense of looking for results, some sense of comparing—all the pitfalls, you know them all by now—will come in. That's okay. That's okay. Just remember: in the moment of love, in the moment of surrender, in the moment of devotion, the empty nature dawns nakedly.

We can become more attuned—I'm sure you have already—to really feel in our experience the difference between the moment of love and the moment of clinging. Sometimes it's subtle. But if you're feeling a little stuck, a little wanting, a little frustrated, or something's askew and you don't know what, sometimes I just try to get big with my awareness and check in attitudinally. Is my practicing from love? I don't even say the words, but really—is my practicing from love, or from wanting, or from self-aggrandizement in some way, needing to feel better about myself? Just check in and see.

And just a couple of things that are more conscious doings that sometimes can help me to reconnect with the surrender, the devotion, the love of truth rather than the wanting of truth. These are just various things. If they help you, great. If not, let them go.

Taking the refuges—taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, in the Sangha—is so powerful for me. Saying it and really meaning it in the beginning of the day, the beginning of a sitting, in the middle of a hard time in walking. Taking the refuges as a re-

minder: all right, I take refuge in the Buddha, in awakened enlightenment. I take refuge in the truth. I take refuge in the Sangha. I'm not taking refuge in this thing that I want or in having a certain result. It just opens me into surrender again. Sometimes.

Sometimes it gives enough faith, enough willingness to act, that I can jump off the mountain in that moment like the monkey and land in the middle of whatever's happening—without needing to flinch away or hold back or have an escape route or a safety net. This willingness to act comes not from forcing, but from appreciation, from love.

Carlos Castaneda wrote that for sorcerers, this willingness could be called discipline—but discipline to meet the moment. He says that for sorcerers, discipline is the art of facing infinity without flinching. Not because sorcerers are strong and tough, but because they are filled with awe.

This is the courage to fly off the mountain and land in whatever is happening now—out of awe for the mystery of the truth of the Dharma, knowing that we'll never understand all of it. We can give up trying, and that release lets us really surrender into the middle of it.

Nature can have the same effect on me. Just going outside into the woods, no matter what the day is like, and opening up the senses to nature. Letting it come in. That sense of awe and mystery, of love and devotion, often returns from that simple act.

Conscious reflections on gratitude work similarly—which to me feels very close to the awe and beauty I find in nature. Gratitude to the Dharma itself. Gratitude to the whole lineage of people over the last 2,500 years who have suffered and practiced with discipline and commitment to keep the Dharma alive in this world, so that we can all be here now. Gratitude for the circumstances in my life that have allowed me to practice the Dharma, that have even allowed me to appreciate it.

The last thing I want to mention that really helps to open me to a sense of devotion, of love and surrender, is reflection on bodhicitta. Pema Chödrön describes this very simply as the noble or awakened heart—a tenderness for life. If you think of it that way, it's not quite so grandiose. A tenderness for life that awakens when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In fact, when things are difficult, that's precisely when bodhicitta can be awakened.

I want to share what she says about it:

"It manifests as tenderness, basic compassionate warmth. When we walk around like we're expecting to be attacked, we block it. When we release the tension between this and that, the struggle between us and them, that's when bodhicitta will emerge. Bodhicitta is available in moments of caring for things, when we clean our glasses or brush our hair. It's available in moments of appreciation when we notice the blue sky or pause and listen to the rain. It's available in moments of gratitude when we recall a kindness or recognize another person's courage. It is available in music and dance, in art and in poetry. Whenever we let go of holding onto ourselves and look at the world around us, whenever we connect with sorrow, whenever we connect with joy, whenever we drop our resentment and complaint—in those moments bodhicitta is here."

I find that just the willingness to start a sitting or a walking with one moment of reflection on bodhicitta, one moment of willingness to say, "May my practice be for the benefit of all beings"—you don't have to believe it. Just have the willingness to incline the heart and mind in that direction. It's a lot like metta practice. It has an effect, a profound effect. It brings in the vastness of what we're doing beyond any mere sense of benefit for ourselves, because it takes the self out of it.

It gives us a stamina, a resoluteness, and a connectedness to life—an appreciation of life that could be called love, that could be called devotion. No matter what's happening in your experience, it makes it all worthwhile. And it gives us the courage and the willingness to open up our hearts and be here again for the next moment.

CHAPTER 319

Anattā

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson demystifies one of Buddhism's most challenging teachings: anattā, the characteristic of not-self. Rather than approaching this as abstract philosophy, she offers a practical invitation to investigate our moment-to-moment experience of 'I-ing and my-ing' (ahaṅkāra and mamaṅkāra). Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Buddhadāsa and Ajahn Sumedho, Wilson explains that the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping or clinging in the mind—nothing more.*
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> *Through vivid personal examples, including her memorable attachment to a meditation retreat mug, Wilson illustrates how the birth and death of self happens countless times each day. She guides practitioners to notice when clinging arises around the body, feeling tones (vedanā), emotions, thoughts, intentions, and even consciousness itself. The key practice is turning attention directly toward the experience of contraction and grasping rather than fighting or analyzing it.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes cultivating contentment with emptiness (suññatā)—those 'nothing special' moments when no sense of self is present. Using the metaphor of space, she encourages practitioners to recognize that liberation doesn't require destroying something that exists, but rather seeing through the misperception that was never accurate to begin with. When this is understood, compassion naturally arises alongside the recognition of emptiness.*

Tonight I want to talk about a specific aspect of the teachings, something that Steve spoke of a bit last night, and that is anattā, or the fact that there's no one here doing all of this. I really want to look at it from the perspective of deconstructing in our experience this sense of self that seems so solid.

Someone asked the Buddha once, "What is the one thing that liberated ones know that we don't, that makes them different?" And he said, "Knowing that nothing whatsoever should be clung to." Nothing. If we really knew that, we would be liberated. This whole dilemma we seem to find ourselves in—struggling with this sense of me and mine, self and no self—can be experienced very simply as the result of clinging or grasping in the moment, or not.

I know that often when we begin to talk about anattā, which is usually translated as "no self," there's a kind of inward groan, or the mind thinks, "Okay, that's not for me," and checks out. "I can never know that." Or else the mind really starts working: "Okay, let's hear this. How can there be no me? If there's no me, who decided to come here? If there's no me, who's eating dinner?"

So what I want to do tonight is hopefully not talk about this as a philosophical point, but as an invitation into investigating our own moment-to-moment experience. A lot of times we get the sense, or people talk about, how "I have to destroy the ego, I have to get rid of my ego"—as if to understand anattā means we somehow change. But it's just as with impermanence. It's not that everything's been permanent and then when you understand impermanence suddenly everything's changing. That's how it already is. Things are changing. It's the same with anattā. Nothing changes except our perception, our point of view. It's already true. I hate to tell you this, but it's not like you have to destroy something that exists in order to discover anattā. It's already true. It's the way things are.

Realizing anattā doesn't mean you cease functioning. We're all functioning more or less fine. Actually, we probably function a little better once we stop referring everything back to this concoction of experience that we cling to and call self.

That said—and I'm sure the mind's still whirring away—I want to use the model that Ajahn Buddhadasa, this Thai forest master that I think we've referred to on this retreat, uses. Rather than getting into a big deconstruction model or trying to think our way out of it, just begin to tune in to when there's a sense of me and when there's not. He calls the moments when there's no big sense of me by the Pali word suññatā, usually translated as "emptiness," or in his translator's rendering, "voidness"—moments that are, as Steve said last night, empty of any separate self.

It's interesting because when Buddhadasa was writing about becoming content with voidness, he said that when he first started teaching back in the thirties and forties in Thailand, although anattā is really one of the three characteristics, one of the core teachings of the Buddha—liberation teachings, not teachings just for the heck of it, but teachings to liberate us from suffering—even so, in Thailand, which is a Buddhist country, anattā wasn't taught very much to lay people. When he started teaching it, the monks would say, "No, no, don't teach that to lay people. They can't understand it very well." That was the held belief. And he said, "Forget it. Of course people can understand it. This is one of the liberating teachings. What are we talking about, not teaching it?"

It's really much more simple. It can be approached experientially in a way that makes it much more simple than when we get so caught in thinking about it.

As Buddhadasa talks about it, the moment when there's no particular strong sense of me or mine, a moment of emptiness so to speak, is very normal and natural. It happens many, many times in one day. We look sometimes for bells and whistles, some ecstatic explosion into unitive experience that never goes away. And until we get that, we don't really notice little nothing-special moments that are empty of grasping or clinging to me or mine. Another reason we often don't notice these moments is simply because they are nothing special. Going along, taking a step—nothing. We don't think, "Wow, a moment of no self."

We just think... Nothing's happening now. When's lunch? When's the next interesting sensation going to arise? This is just pressure. Felt this one before. We don't really notice it so much.

And what we do notice, just as Steve was talking about last night, is all the concoctions and elaborations and memories and stories that come up around any particular sense experience. We're really entranced by that. As he said, we're really just making up a dream and living in it and reacting to it, because what's happening is just this. Just this. And the mind that's living in all the concoctions thinks it wants a little more. So it keeps on spinning out the concoctions and forgets to notice. Ah. Just this.

That's, I think, why Buddhadasa talks about really cultivating a contentment with emptiness, a contentment with voidness. That's a lot of what our mindfulness practice is taking us into. Experientially, what we can begin to do, rather than thinking about, analyzing, or philosophically trying to understand anatta, what we can begin to do, moment to moment, here in practice and also in our daily life, is to examine with mindfulness, with the wisdom of mindfulness, with truth-discerning awareness, at the point of contact, when we feel the presence of a sense of I or mine. In other words, rather than just standing on the side and waiting for it to go away, we begin to explore what we're taking for granted as an ongoing sense of me, I, always in the background.

Buddhadasa uses the Pali words, which I really like: ahankara and mamankara, which means I-ing and my-ing. These are experiences that come and go, unexamined. Of course it feels like I'm always here. Doesn't it? If you don't really look closely, doesn't it feel like you're always there, here in the background—seeing, thinking, talking, eating? It feels like me. Without really exploring it, I'd say it was the same me that's always been here. And the more we think about it, the more solid it gets. How can I ever experience a sense of no self? I feel so solid. I'm never going to understand this. The more we think, that sense of I is getting stronger and stronger and stronger.

I used to feel like I was beating my head against a brick wall, and I would get into these internal torture sessions with myself about this. How can the sense of I not exist? It's clearly so strong. And of course, the more I was getting fixated on those thoughts, the stronger it got. What we need to do is turn around with our attention and explore the I-ing and my-ing itself, rather than assuming anything about that experience.

So when we turn around in a moment of I and my, what do we see? Now I'm going to tell you, of course, what I see, but I want you to look and see what you see, because my telling you won't do any good if you don't take that and turn around and look for yourself. So I really want this whole talk just to be an invitation for all of us to keep doing that, over and over and over, because it takes seeing it often.

This is Buddhadasa: "It's so simple. The sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind." That's it. That's it. Merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. We have a friend who puts it, "I want, I need, therefore I am." That's all.

This thing that feels so problematic and troublesome is a condition that arises and passes, not a steady state permanent experience. But it takes our truth-discerning awareness, our mindfulness right at the point of the sense of self arising, to see that it's a condition that comes and goes. The birth of self—it's born and dies many, many, many times in one day. Seeing that takes it out of the realm of some big steady state thing and it becomes just, oh yeah, another thing that comes and goes, just like that knee pain. Really, you don't have to get so reactive to it—or the knee pain either.

So this is a simple example, but it works. I was on a long retreat here at IMS. You know how the mugs are just all in that case there when you walk in. So I was on a retreat for a long time. I'd walk in, take a mug, get my tea, eat my meal—nothing. And after, I don't know, weeks, for some reason one morning the mug I took I'd never had before. And it just happened to be the perfect mug. I still can sort of remember this certain color green, and the grip was just right, and it just fit right on my mouth. And as I was drinking, I was appreciating what a perfect mug it was, and craving was born.

So first it's just craving. That's the beginning. There's contact, sense contact. It's pleasant. Craving arises. Sounds familiar?

Out of that craving, not really noticed, it strengthens into grasping. *Yes, this is a good mug. I want this mug other times.* And from being really quite present, just moment to moment, there was clearly the birth of me—me and my mug.

It was a very different experience from how things had been a few moments before. That was really a birth of self: me and my mug. And from what had been quite relaxed, just going along, there was suddenly a sense of complication. *What do I do about this now?* We have a situation that needs to be dealt with—me and my mug. Things aren't just free-flowing anymore.

Well, I managed to notice all that and, with quite some pride, put the mug back on the dish cart and left it alone.

So that's an example of birth of self. But putting it back on the dish cart wasn't death of self, because there was still pride. *Aren't I doing a good job letting go of my mug?* The clinging had simply moved from the mug to the emotion of pride. That's all. But that's actually two different births of self, you see, and we don't notice that. It feels like one steady state.

So that's really birth of self. That's the whole dependent origination happening right there. Sense contact, pleasant, craving turning to grasping—which is what Buddhadasa calls the I-ing and my-ing. Both came up: I and mine. And then it moves into having and being. It strengthens into: *I'm a person who has this mug, and I want to continue to be a person who has this mug. What am I going to do about it?*

Seeing that the birth of self is simply that clinging and all the concoctions that come around it.

So I did. I put it back. I went away. But the next meal, things weren't quite so simple. You see the constriction that comes into the mind and heart with the sense of self, with the craving. I was aware that in a subtle, background kind of way, I wanted that mug. And I looked for it, and it was there, and I got it. It was all a little mellower than the day before, but I was really aware of thinking, *Okay, this time I'm going to hide it.* I know everybody hides mugs. I know all the tricks—I've been here a long time. You know how a mug disappears and you don't see it for the rest of the three-month course? Somebody's nabbed it. I knew I could do that. And there were plenty of mugs.

I was just watching it all. You know how you kid yourself—you're being mindful. *I'm watching all of this.* But I really was going to do it, until I truly saw the constriction, the suffering. It's mild—this is really small suffering. But this is the suffering of the contraction of "I," the clinging. And I really saw it. I said, *Ah. I get it. I don't need this.*

And that time I really put it down. And that was it. Birth, and then a moment of death of that particular self.

So that's what I mean by really beginning to notice—not with hatred. It helps to laugh at it.

It's just another arising experience. But when there's clinging and grasping in the mind, the sense of self arises. And notice—rather than fighting it, turn the attention back onto the experience I'm calling "me," or the experience of clinging itself. That's how I could notice the restricted quality of mind and heart. Where everything had been spacious and flowing, the world had suddenly shrunk to me, the mug, and everyone else who was the enemy who might get my mug. It's a very different experience from seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting. Spaciousness. So put it down, sense of "I" disappears—death of the self in that moment.

We all experience this birth and death of self many, many times in one day, don't we? But do we notice? We might notice the birth because there's that more or less subtle sense of clinging. Sometimes we just focus on the thing clung to and we don't notice the sense of "me" so much. Turn around and notice that. But we often may not notice that moment of the death of the sense of "me." Because again, it's just—ah, that's nice. Often it's quite neutral. Those moments where that sense of self has died, nothing particular going on—that's often that neutral moment that we don't notice. So instead of generating a recognition and contentment with emptiness of self in that moment, we're kind of sitting back and going, "Well, nothing much happened," and now we wait for the next arising experience. In other words, the next something that gives us a sense of self again.

So we don't often notice the death of the self, the sense of self, and those moments of just what is without the extra. If you're waiting for something to happen very subtly, notice that, and begin to notice when the clinging opens up and there's just pure presence again.

What we can explore in our practice—not thinking about it, but whenever there's a moment like I just described with that mug, or you don't even know what it's about but you suddenly become aware that "I" and "mine" is feeling very present... or as someone mentioned today, they're just noticing the sense of self more in their practice. Rather than making a big thing about it, turn the attention around. With the investigative light of mindfulness, explore whatever the experience is in that moment that I'm calling "me" or "mine," without preconceptions. Not like, "Oh my God, me again. I've got to get rid of this. I've got to figure out who I am." That's already—you're not there anymore. We're lost in thought. It's like, "Oh, self." Turn around and see what that note is labeling.

I mentioned in the group today, I was doing that a lot one time when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. It would be about every third note, there'd be sense of self, you know, and I'd just note it. And seeing that each time, it was actually a different experience. It's not the same. There is not a self sitting back there that we're turning around and noting. It's just some experience of grasping. And that's what I want to talk about—the different experiences we grasp at and often don't notice. That's where the sense of self comes from.

But anyway, I was sitting with Sayadaw, and in the interview you're just supposed to describe very specifically what's happening in your sitting, what you're noting. So I tried to describe this, how I'm noting sense of self. Well, it didn't really make it through the translation and through the way they look at things in any kind of clear way. They got hysterical, the translator and Sayadaw. "She thinks there's a self! She's noting the self! Every third note she's noting the self! Haven't you been practicing for years? Don't you know better than that?" That wasn't my most memorable interview.

Anyway, clinging and grasping, "I-ing" and "my-ing," is simply a habit. And we can begin to explore what's actually going on with that habit just by bringing mindfulness there when we recognize it.

So, talking about a few of the experiences—which we all know—and how the clinging to that experience gives rise to the sense of "I" and "mine." The first one, obviously, is the body, our body. And what I have found most helpful—not thinking about it, but taking the attention and when we are having an experience of feeling we're clinging to our body—is to look with awareness and see: what's the actual experience that's happening right now that I'm calling "my body"? Because what I find, if you're just with the bare experience, say your knee's hurting, you know—"my knee, it's falling off, I need surgery, I'm going to the hospital." Okay, we know that's thoughts already.

You can come back to "my knee." But what's the actual experience? You're sitting there with your eyes closed, feeling sharpness. What are you actually calling "my knee" that you're so attached to? What's really happening in awareness at that particular moment?

I've noticed so often that I'll be sitting, there's sensation—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, doesn't really matter—and there's almost like a visual, very subtle visual background. I don't know, I might be seeing my whole body. I might be imagining seeing my knee from the outside or from the inside, or not even that clear, but a subtle reference back to some almost pre-verbal, almost pre-image idea of my body. And it's not actually

the sensation itself that I'm clinging to, but it's this overlay of subtle image that I'm calling "my body." So it's actually more attachment or clinging to an image or a sense or an idea.

Come back and look, in any moment, when you think, "Oh, my body, what am I going to do if I get sick? What if something happens to my kidney?" And you go down the whole thing. What's actually in that moment? Am I even connecting with my body? In that moment, for me, it's actually almost completely thought and emotion. "My body"—well, when I connect, there's nothing wrong with my kidney. I don't feel anything. That's just some idea going on. Or there's a simple unpleasant sensation.

And if you move just into the sensation, simply feeling it—twinging, burning, itching, whatever it is—how can we even think of that, if you're just with it? How can I think of that as Carol? I mean, it's not even female or male. Just sensation. Does it have an age, that sensation? Is it American? Has it gone through all the experiences I think Carol has gone through in my life? It's just an arising and passing sensation.

So it gets really interesting to come in. I might be clinging or having aversion to that sensation, but "my body"? It's a whole idea. Again, don't think about this. It won't help. Bring your attention into your actual physical experience and notice the difference.

For example, those really hot days, or today if you were hot, you notice the difference between, "Ah, I'm so hot. It's so hot. I'm just a rag. I'm all washed up. I can't function. I can't meditate. Ah, it's so hot." And just sensations you might call heat, or it might just be vibrating, or it might just be moisture. There's a huge difference. The sensations didn't really change in those two. The clinging and what we're clinging to is vastly different.

So next time you find yourself in some mode of "I am my body" or "I have this body" or "I'm saddled with this body"—I'm dragging this body through samsara—whatever way you're relating to your body, stop and bring your attention to the actual experience, the material experience itself. This is where the mindfulness and the concentration are really helpful. Then see what thoughts, emotions, and storyline around those sensations you were confusing with the physical experience itself. Just notice that without preconceptions.

The concentration can be helpful because there are times when you can really experience your body, when you're sitting or walking, as sensations arising in space. There are times that people report in practice where the sense of body shape and form falls away. It's just the perception anyway, and the perception shifts. Sometimes that's scary for people because it's unfamiliar.

Sometimes it's pleasant for people. Sometimes it's nothing special. It's just a shift in perception. But experiencing that shift in perception from time to time is very helpful because it helps us see that this sense of solid form in space, unchanging, is just that—a different perception. It's not necessarily the true perception.

So one of the things that happens with our mindfulness, when we come to the bare experience free of all the papañca, is that we can begin to experience how things are underneath. Because the sense of lasting self is really just a misperception. That's all it is. When we begin to perceive in a different way, that sense of me doesn't have such a grip. That's really what's going on in this practice a lot of the time.

Many people report having experiences that are unfamiliar, accompanied by a little bit of fear. They'll look back and say, "I don't know why—the experience wasn't actually unpleasant, but somehow there was this fear." Just the fear of the unfamiliar, of a different perception.

So of course there's the clinging to body. Look and see what you're really clinging to, what you're calling body.

The second aspect of experience where clinging arises quite easily is this feeling tone —vedanā—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. We've talked about this quite a bit. As we've said, we often don't notice the pleasant or unpleasant quality and get lost in our reaction to the experience. But with this clinging and the sense of self, I've found for myself that often in an experience there can be this clinging and the sense of me arising with the clinging, the contraction around the pleasant or unpleasant feeling tone. And you don't really notice it because we're more focused on what it is that's pleasant or unpleasant.

A simple example: when you have a good sitting. You know, the breath is just so nice and smooth, and you're so present with it, and the mindfulness is how you like it. And you're aware of it. So often it happens that we think, "Well, I know this is going to change." We're telling ourselves the whole time, "I know this is going to change. I'm not getting attached." Rising, falling, noting, noting. And often, of course, it changes. And of course, we find out that somehow we were attached because we're disappointed. It isn't quite so free-flowing.

Often the thing—not always, but sometimes—the thing we don't see is that we were noticing the experience but not quite noticing the pleasant feeling and the attachment to it. So the sense of "I" becomes: I am not getting attached to this really nice, mindful sitting. And there's the clinging, the grasping, the "I" arising in response to my pleasant feeling.

So that's another one. And as I mentioned the other night, Buddhadasa says a lot about exploring the nature of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling because they're so ephemeral, so wave-like. If we really tune in and say, "Oh, this is such a great experience, my pleasant feeling"—well, when we look at it that way, the oomph goes out of it. "Oh yeah, my pleasant feeling. Now that one's gone. Oh yeah, my next pleasant feeling. Now that one's gone." We quit identifying with it so much, the identification just being that clinging.

Now, the next area—the whole area of the mind, thoughts, emotions, concoctions, the me-story—is obviously extremely complex. It's obviously an area where a great deal of the birth and death of the self is happening. And because it's so quick and complex, it's often unnoticed.

In fact, the Buddha once said—and I'm paraphrasing—he said that if you must identify with something, if you must think the self is something, better to identify with the body because at least that's changing more slowly than the mental stuff. The mind is going so quickly. The thoughts and emotions and the whole conglomeration of thoughts and emotions happening together—the formations, the stories—it's so easy for the sense of me to come in, and so easy not to notice the impermanent nature of that birth and death of self because they're just flowing one into the other and it can seem very continuous. The continuity is an illusion, but we often don't notice that.

So I'll just give some examples. Starting with emotions, just because it's easier to talk about an emotion—though I know they often come with thoughts and with our whole life story. But just to start with emotions, I've noticed for myself: first of all, we see in the sitting here how emotions just come and go and come and go. How many emotions have you been through on this retreat?

And still, there are certain emotions that when they come—we've seen them come and go a million times in our life—but certain emotions, when they come: this is it. This is really me. This is who I am. "I've felt like this all day. I've been so sad all day." Or the worthlessness went away for a little while, but really, that's the core of my being, and it's under there all the time, whether I'm aware of it or not. And now it's surfaced again.

So there's an assumption that we don't look at. Yes, it's always here.

I just don't always notice it, but it's always here.

So to begin with, you might notice which emotions can come and go quite fine. Anicca, yes, emotions are just clouds passing through the sky. And which ones are really grasped? Which ones really give birth to a sense of me and mine? My worthlessness, my sadness, my joy, my loving-kindness—whatever it is, we can grasp at it.

Notice when there's a sense, unexamined, that "I've felt like this all day" or "This has been going on the whole retreat." And even when it's really intense—I've noticed I could be in really intense grief coming up a lot during a day—there will be moments when it's just not there and I'm suddenly bored. Moments when, in the midst of the most ecstatic sitting, you're suddenly thinking, "Well, that's nice, but when's lunch going to be? I wonder what's happening for lunch today." Oh yes, I'm about to get enlightened, right? I forgot.

Just notice those moments when the continuity of this "me-emotion" isn't there. Noticing the gaps, noticing the coming and going, really helps to let go of the grasping that gives the sense of self. Or pushing away—it's the same, you know. Grasping for it to be gone creates the same sense of me and mine as grasping for it to stay.

And then you might notice that with certain emotions, there are times when the emotion is just there. Say sadness. It's not a problem. Then we might assume it's the presence of the emotion that interferes with peace, the presence of the emotion that makes me feel so solid. But there are plenty of times when sadness has been really just coming and going, and there's no particular grasping or reaction—it's no problem. But then suddenly it turns into *my* sadness. And there's a whole birth of self in that moment that feels very different—much more solid, much more problematic, much more sense of me and my sadness, my whole life history, what to do about it. Really no different from picking up that mug and getting attached.

And then there might be another moment where it's simply, "Oh, right, there's sadness." And that moment of pure mindfulness, when it's with an emotion, very clearly feeling it but nothing extra—that's also a moment of emptiness. There's no "I" manufactured around that emotion. So explore this stuff.

Now, the whole complex of emotions and thoughts and memories and projections—this happens so quickly, so quickly that from nothing to our whole life history can happen in a tenth of a second. It's really fascinating to watch it, to look.

I can remember one time I was doing walking meditation down in the gym. Just present, no sense of self particularly, just walking, really focused. And I just ran my finger under my turtleneck. That's all. Very mindfully ran my finger under my turtleneck. And because I was so present, I could notice this whole stream happening just like that. This is nothing special, right? There was no big pain, no big desire going on. I ran my finger under my turtleneck, had the physical sensation, an image flashed in my mind—a made-up image of what I looked like walking with my turtleneck and my finger under it. The thought came, some thought about slumpy yogi attire, how it gets about two months into the three-month course and we're all just slumping around in

our sweatpants. A sense of self-image projected out, wondering what other people thought of me, and in that came a solid sense of me, around really that whole quick conglomerate of mental images, thoughts, and then memories. A feeling of contraction, feeling of clinging—ah, solidity of Carol.

It's fascinating to watch that happen. And admittedly, that's really subtle. We don't have to wait for it to be so subtle, but we can explore how the mind does that.

One of the ways that the sense of self seems so strong and continuous is that, just in that moment I described, the story of Carol starts up—slumping along in the three-month course, and what do I look like, and how I looked in the past, and how I'm going to look in the future, and how the other yogis look. We're telling ourselves our self-story all day long. We forget to notice that the self-story is constantly changing in response to clinging to different experiences.

So one moment you're the slump yogi who's just wasting their time and not doing very well and not getting anywhere. And the next moment somebody goes running by looking really distracted, and you've suddenly become ace yogi, headed for Dharamsala to consult with the Dalai Lama. It's a whole different series of thoughts and emotions and sensations that are clung to. There's nothing the same about the two series except that sense of clinging and the calling it "I."

If you turn around and look, it's just clinging arising and falling, arising and falling, thoughts and emotions arising and falling. But we don't stop and say, "Well, there's the schlump me, and then there's the ace yogi me, and then there's the wise me, and then there's the..." And if we do do that, we start to think we're really going crazy. "Oh my God, there are so many me's in there!"

None of them are. They're just arising, clinging to specific conglomerations of thoughts and emotions. And if you can just notice that.

I have commentary, self-story going on in my mind a great part of the day. You might notice that too. I don't know if everyone has it, but it goes something like: "Now she's doing the dishes. Now she's scraping the dishes so mindfully. Now she clunked them down and made a loud noise. Now she's walking, lifting, moving." I mean, it's ridiculous. But if you see it, it's just a thought. It's just a thought. It does not have to be clung to. The biggest self-story going is just more thoughts and emotions coming and going. It doesn't have to be clung to. And then it's not self. It's just thoughts.

I'll give you an example. I think this was from the same retreat, I'm not sure, but I was sitting in my room. I'd been sitting for some weeks, just sitting and noticing what was happening. I coughed a little, and I was just noticing sensations—tickling, tickling, burning, burning, coughing, coughing. This went on for some time, nothing dramatic, just sensations coming and going.

And then this thought arose: "Oh, this feels like bronchitis," which I'd had a couple of times already that winter, quite seriously. That's the thought coming and going. Then the thought: "Oh my god, this feels like bronchitis." Really strong birth of self in that moment, attachment to that thought. And from that thought, immediately panic—total panic. "Oh my god, what am I going to do? I got so sick before. I can't... I have to leave in a week. I have to teach here. I have to go there. I have no time to have bronchitis. I cannot deal with this."

Total panic. And then I thought, okay, what's happening here? Tickle, tickle. Cough, cough. Thinking, thinking. That's really all that was happening. And that whole panic completely went away. The whole sense of me—the death of the self again. Just sensations coming and going. Thoughts coming and going.

And I really saw that we have a choice where to let the mind dwell. What's so interesting is how often we choose to dwell on suffering. Because I saw that I could really just stay with the sensations and there was absolutely no problem. But my mind said, "Yeah, but bronchitis." And it would want to jump back there.

There's a line Ajahn Buddhadasa uses. He calls it "volunteering for suffering." And I thought, yes, my mind's volunteering for suffering here. I could stay with this, but no, what if it's bronchitis? Oh my god. And back into the panic.

I went back and forth, back and forth. It actually got fun because you could see it—birth of self, death of self, birth of self, death of self. And this, back to the barbershop question this morning, does not mean that if I'm not caught and clinging to "Oh my god, bronchitis"—just tickle, tickle, cough, cough—it doesn't mean I couldn't still tell if it was bronchitis.

Because actually it was. I could tell that and I could take appropriate action. All of that could happen without panic. Not the "oh my God, bronchitis, me, my past history, my future history, my whole life, what's going to happen?" Just staying with what is. The functioning just arises, doing what's obvious. It doesn't have to have all this clinging and self-story in it.

So that's an example of how quick and fast all the conglomerations of thought and feeling and memory and history and emotion can become so solid. But instead of trying to think your way out of it, you simply take your attention back to the feeling of panic, the feeling of clinging, that simple contraction itself. Don't try to think about "what am I calling self?" Turn attention to the contraction and just notice—oh yeah, grasping. It goes. Let it go. Nothing to hold on to there. It's really quite interesting.

A couple of other very subtle things we cling to that really feel like self, because they're so subtle. I just want to mention them, drop them in as something to explore in your practice. Again, please, if you notice your mind getting into a lot of thinking about it, just notice that we cling to that thinking. The sense of self gets strong and we think, "Well, of course this can't be true, because the more I think about it, the more solid I am, so that's baloney." Just notice that and come back to experience.

One is what we've talked about the last couple of days—the experience of intention. That intending to move, intending to eat a bite of food, intending to stand up. It's a subtle thing, often not noticed at all. And of course, unnoticed, if you say, "Who's standing up?" Well, I am. What kind of a stupid question is that? Who decided to come here? Who's eating?

When we can begin to have the mind quiet enough that we notice just that movement, that intention before scratching an itch, say, we can begin to see that the intention itself is a mental event that arises and passes. So you can really see the cause and effect nature of it, which takes it out of the realm of being "me."

To take a very simple example: itching when you're sitting. Unpleasant sensation gives rise to aversion. Aversion gives rise to the desire to move, to scratch the itch. It's all cause and effect. There's not some "me" in there, you know, all-seeing, having that intention. The intention arises as a result of causes. There might then be, also in that moment, mindfulness and wisdom that sees that intention and sort of has the intention not to act on it, so you don't. Another moment there's not mindfulness or wisdom, and you know how you've watched the intention ten times and suddenly you're scratching and you don't know how that happened? Or you're walking very thoroughly, very committedly, and suddenly you find yourself in the dining room having a cup of tea and you don't know how that happened. You were really committed to the walking meditation, but somehow here I am.

Intention arising unnoticed—and it feels like me. When we notice it, there's not necessarily any clinging. You can act or not, but there's not that identification, that clinging, that contraction around the intention.

Another, and this is even more subtle, is the mindfulness itself—the moments of consciousness themselves. That moment of knowing. We say the sound arises, and it's quite spontaneously known; the hearing happens. But if we think about it—well, who knows? Who? I know, obviously.

It's very easy, because the consciousness, the knowing, is so subtle. To notice that it arises and falls takes the mind to be quite quiet—even to notice consciousness at all, the mind needs to be a little quiet. So please don't try to puzzle this out. But in times when you're really aware of both the sensation and the knowing of it—if you're unconscious, the sensation can happen and we don't know it, right? If you're unconscious or asleep and there's a loud sound, you don't hear it.

So the knowing is that consciousness, that presence, that wakefulness. Prior to thought or verbalization, consciousness is simply the knowing of sound. It's not, "Oh, that's a robin calling."

That's more than consciousness. Consciousness is just that knowing quality.

When our mind is quiet, we can play with turning attention to that and begin to see also that it's not a steady state, and it's not me. But when we feel like we're noticing everything coming and going, coming and going, we're not clinging, we really feel like that—but still there's this subtle feeling of I-ing and my-ing somewhere in the background. Turn around and notice that sometimes what the contraction of self is around, what the clinging is around, is just that subtlety of knowing.

So whenever you notice the feeling of self, turn around with awareness, land on the feeling itself, the experience itself. It may be a physical kind of contraction—I feel it that way. It may be more subtle than that. But turn around and notice what it actually is in that moment, not thinking about it. And this is going to happen, this birth and death of I-ing and my-ing, many, many times in one day. There will also be many, many moments when there's not a sense of self.

So it's not so much that we have to take some dynamite and blast away this thing, self. It's more just beginning to see its impermanent, illusory nature—that a rapidly changing experience, actually many, many different rapidly changing experiences, because of our lack of investigation and our misperception, we're taking for granted a continuity that is not there.

And so then when I feel now, and I feel like really solid Carol, it's just another experience coming and going. It's not, "Oh my God, I am so strong again! It's so humiliating, what am I going to do about it?" Okay, sense of self. Just another arising experience, just

like anger, just like pain, just like hearing. And when you take away that kind of explosive reactive quality we can have around it, then we can actually explore it in a much more balanced and spacious way.

So the sense of self is merely an appearance that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. And what follows on that, as the Buddha said, as Buddhadasa elaborates on, means that nothing is worth clinging to. I mean, we'll still cling, mind you, but nothing's worth it. That means nothing. That means not any of the things I've mentioned. It means not our mindfulness. It means not clinging to wisdom. It means not clinging to views of practice. It means not clinging to any idea whatsoever of who we think we are. It's the clinging itself that creates the separation, the sense of isolation, the misperception that keeps us in this wheel of suffering over and over.

What's also true is that in many moments, we all have that potential to recognize and generate that contentment with emptiness, that contentment with no sense of self. And it's important that we also begin not to overlook these times, to realize that, again, you don't have to wait until you're in some incredibly deep state of concentration. There are sometimes very strong experiences of emptiness that really can blast away a lot of our conditioning. That's true. But you don't have to wait for that, because the fact that there's no ongoing self is true now, every moment, no matter what your experience is. And we can begin to notice those moments when that's more evident.

As I said before, I think one of the reasons it's a little difficult to notice those moments is because there's so nothing special. We get more interested in things, and it's harder in a way to be open to the spaciousness of nothing special.

In fact, I've found the metaphor of space as a way to generate contentment with emptiness can be very helpful at times. This is from Ajahn Sumedho. He's talking about space. He's saying, is knowing the unconditioned, which is a word for nibbāna—is that very interesting or fascinating? You might think, "I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be an incredibly fascinating thing to know, something blissful and ecstatic." So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close.

But he says the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Look at the space in this room. Is it very interesting to look at? It's not to me. The space in this room is like the space in the other room. The things in this room, the people in this room, may be good, bad, beautiful, ugly, interesting, uninteresting—but the space, what is it? There's nothing you can really say about it except that it's spacious.

And as there's nothing one can grasp in space, the only way one recognizes it is by not clinging to the objects in the room. That's what allows us to recognize the space. So when you let go, when you stop your absorptions, your judgments, your criticisms and evaluations of the people and the things in the room, you can begin to experience the space of it. But that takes a lot of patience and humility.

And I've noticed in my own practice at times almost a discomfort with spaciousness—spaciousness which simply means non-clinging.

I noticed one time I was doing a self-retreat somewhere in California, sitting outside with a very vast, spacious view. This is actually a nice way of inviting in that sense of spaciousness, just as we do with hearing meditation, where sounds are simply coming and going in space. There's not such a tendency to glom on.

So there was this spacious view. I was sitting with my eyes open, just being aware of space. And then I noticed there were four horses—teensy-tiny. I mean, I guess they were normal size, but they were in the distance. They looked teensy-tiny, way down in the back, moving around. You could hardly see them in proportion to the vastness of the view. But I would notice that my mind, my attention, would continually be drawn to those horses. What are they doing? Are they moving? Just fixated on the horses. And when I'd notice that, it was really a kind of grasping. Oh, right. And the next moment, the mindfulness would fall away and zoom—glommed back onto those little teensy horses.

I've often noticed a kind of uncomfortableness without this sense of relating, without this sense of fixating on something. Just as Ajahn Sumedho says, my conceptions and our points of view and all the things we think and say and do about each arising thing—just to let it be there in the space without attaching special significance to something was a little bit unsettling, a little bit uncomfortable. That's simply a habit of mind.

So playing with this sense of spaciousness, whether it's actually noticing space or being with hearing—spaciousness doesn't mean spaced out. It doesn't mean indifferent or disconnected. It's simply the quality of non-grasping. And you can be spacious and also be very precise. That's why space is only a metaphor. It's not an exact description.

If there's total, precise attention with anything—inside a sensation of breath, inside an emotion, inside what's happening—in that moment, isn't it true there's no reference back to anything else? There's just only the purity of that moment. There's no past, no future. There's no sense of anything else. That's also a quality of pure presence, non-clinging, very, very present, and nothing else. So in a way, it's total space as well, if you

get a sense of what I mean. Just to let you know, it doesn't mean you have to only look at the sky and you can't notice what's happening. It's that quality of grasping, discomfort with nothingness, with emptiness. Just begin to notice that, play with the spaciousness.

So from Ajahn Sumedho, just to end: In your meditation now, as you incline towards the emptiness of the mind, towards the spaciousness of the mind, just incline to stillness and not taking something up and making something of it. Just letting things be as they are. As you incline towards spaciousness, towards stillness, your habitual grasping, fascination, revulsions, fears, doubts, and worries—all of that stuff that we get so fascinated by about the conditions—lessens. You begin to recognize they're just things that come and go. They're not self, nothing to get excited about or depressed about. They are as they are. We can allow conditions to be just as they are because they come and go. Their nature is to go away, so we don't have to make them go away. We're free and patient enough to allow things to take their natural course. In this way, we liberate ourselves from struggle, strife, and the confusion of an ignorant mind that has to spend all its time evaluating and discriminating, trying to hold onto something, trying to get rid of something. Things are as they are. The experience of I-ing and my-ing is simply another condition that is as it is. Turn our attention to it rather than fighting with it, struggling with it, or avoiding it, and see that this too is simply a condition that arises and passes, nothing to take up and make something of.

And this leads us not into some kind of nihilistic life where nothing matters, but just the reverse. It allows for the depth of compassion and connectedness. Because really, all the suffering, all our wanting and fearing comes from this sense of an ongoing, unchanging self that I have to protect all the time.

So there's a lovely quote from Padampa Sangye: "Once you really understand emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

Thank you for your attention. Thank you for listening.

This concludes the talk.

CHAPTER 320

Wise Intention

Carol Wilson · 57 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses the challenge of transitioning from retreat practice to everyday life, emphasizing that the most demanding aspect of practice is bringing moment-to-moment awareness into our daily existence. She explores sammā saṅkappa (wise intention or right thought), the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, as a powerful tool for navigating complex life situations with mindfulness.

Wilson examines how intention serves as the crucial link between wisdom (paññā) and our actions in the world through speech, conduct, and livelihood. She explains the Buddha's specific teaching that wise intention counteracts unwholesome mental states: intention of renunciation (nekkhamma) counteracts greed, intention of non-ill will (abyāpāda) counteracts hatred, and intention of compassion (avihiṃsā) counteracts cruelty. Drawing from the suttas, she illuminates how right view naturally leads to right intention, and how these factors work together with right effort and right mindfulness.

Through vivid examples—from walking meditation to Sister Chan Khong's mindful activism to the challenges of environmentalists—Wilson demonstrates how paying attention to intention creates moments of genuine choice and transformation. She reframes renunciation as the joyful release of attachment rather than punishment, and emphasizes that difficult retreat experiences, met with kindness and satipaññā (mindfulness-wisdom), are often the most transformative for developing compassion and equanimity. The talk concludes with Pema Chödrön's insight that learning kindness toward ourselves opens us to the entire universe.

So in a few days, we'll be entering into the most challenging part of this retreat, which is the rest of your life. And I'm serious. That is the most challenging—it really is the rest of our lives.

A lot of the anxiety and expectation that starts to come up has to do with however you're feeling now, which is somehow different from how you were before you came to the retreat. Either we're projecting how it's going to stay like this in our life, or maybe we're going to get out of this and get back to something more pleasant. But really, when I say it's the most challenging part, what I mean is this: bringing the same quality, the same commitment to awakening moment to moment that we bring in a retreat is what we need to bring to our life.

While I do believe it's true that we don't need to leave our life behind to walk a path of awakening—that we don't need to go live in a nunnery or a monastery—I also think it's really important that we remember we don't need to leave the path of awakening behind in order to live our life.

In our Western dharma culture, we say, and we mean it, but it's almost become too easy to say, "My life is my practice." And we mean it, sort of. But you see how hard practice is. What makes us think it's going to be any easier when everything gets faster and more complicated?

We need to bring a quality of deep, openhearted commitment to the aspects of our life, because what seems so obvious now—it came up in some of the groups today, and I always experience it on retreat—won't stay obvious. Right now it's clear just how painful clinging is. It's obvious how everything changes. How can I ever forget that thoughts are ephemeral and have no intrinsic meaning? It's just so clear that we can't imagine it all getting so solid again. Of course it does, and then it loosens up again.

What I want to talk about tonight is one of many tools of mindfulness, a specific focus of mindfulness that has been quite helpful for me in bringing awareness to the more complex situations of everyday life. That's mindfulness of intention—right intention or wise intention or wise thought or wise aspiration, different translations of the second step of the Eightfold Path.

I want to talk about it because it's bringing the microscope into something that's such a subtle experience, as we've noticed here. But the subtleness can lead us into not respecting the fact that it's intention that gets us into both the beautiful things we do and also all the trouble that we get ourselves into. It all starts with intention. Incredibly important.

So consciously bringing mindfulness to intention, to why we're doing what we're doing in our life, in moments of choice big and small, is a key link in living a life of awareness. It's the way the Buddha placed it in delineating the Eightfold Path, which begins with wise or right understanding. Right view, remember, is the view of how things are, which leads naturally to the second step: wise thought, how we think about the world, or wise intention, the intentions that lead to the next three steps—wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood.

Intention is the link between understanding or wisdom and how we manifest with ourselves, with other beings, with this planet. A very direct, immediate link.

As with all aspects we talk about on this path, it works in two ways. On one hand, intentions naturally transform in the light of wisdom. In one way, there's nothing we have to do but pay attention. On the other hand, of course, there's the commitment to cultivate and develop and pay attention. So in one way we don't have to do anything, and on the other side we have to pay attention every minute of our lives. Somehow those two come together.

I know for myself, probably for some of you, if I just don't really take care with paying attention to why I'm doing what I'm doing, even with having a good heart—and I'd say basically all of us here have good hearts relative to some of the stuff that goes on on this planet—we see what happens when left to its own devices without any commitment to awareness. The greed, hatred, and delusion just spring up, get in their old grooves, and run the show. All we have to do is pay attention for that to begin to transform.

Intention, sometimes called right thought or wise thought, is an interesting place because it's a place where we can explore how the completely empty, ephemeral nature of a thought can suddenly become so solid that we're doing and saying something that, given a little more attention, we really wouldn't have wanted to do or say. Or vice versa—a really kind, loving thought or intention can also strengthen into intention that leads to action. Sometimes you'll find yourself surprised doing a really kind or generous thing, thinking, "Oh, is that me? I'm not used to doing something like that."

So intention is the place where emptiness comes to meet the relative nature of life as it manifests in speech and action.

You know that quotation from Padmasambhava that Joseph read the other night? "Although my view is as spacious as the sky"—the emptiness, the ephemeral nature of all experience—"my respect for karma, for action, and my respect for cause and effect is as fine as grains of barley flour." How do we hold both? They come together in right thought, right intention.

We talked about in the instructions, and many of you were looking at in your practice, that very subtle expression of intention that's almost prior to thought. Just that subtle "about to," that direction, that inclination of the mind that leads to speech and action. Sometimes it's a little stronger, a little more clear, and it actually manifests as a thought: "I'm getting out of here."

And at the broader level, sometimes wise aspiration—you could think of intention really in the macro, like the aspiration for a lifetime. Remember when Marcia talked about back in the time of the Dipankara Buddha, when the being who became Gautama

Buddha, who was a mendicant then, had the great aspiration to spend all those eons and eons of lifetimes to become a Buddha? That was one mind moment that had a lot of power. It fed into succeeding mind moments, but that's the really broadest aspect of intention.

What's interesting about intention, as with everything, is that it's simply arising as an effect of previous causes and as a cause for the next effects. In other words, it's enmeshed in a whole series of cause and effects; it doesn't arise alone. For example, there's the intention to scratch your knee. That would be arising due to previous physical sensations that are unpleasant, maybe aversion—maybe it's noticed, maybe it's not—leading to the intention to move the hand and scratch. So intentions don't arise in isolation, and they arise as a result of and together with the whole variety of mental states.

And that's what determines, in the aspect of karma, in the aspect of the psychology as the Buddha talked about it, whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome, skillful or unskillful. Karmically, it has nothing to do with the effect, with the result of the action, because that's out of our control. Which is interesting, because mostly that's what we focus on. If we get the desired result, then good—it was a good action. If it doesn't turn out, it was bad. The Buddha is saying that's out of our control. The place of karma, of wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, is in the intention. It's in what states of heart and mind are causing this intention to arise, or what it's coming together with.

So this is one reason why judging other people is so completely useless. You can't tell from the outside why someone's really doing something. And we're lucky if we can tell why we're really doing something. That's really where we could put our energy in paying attention.

Just an example: if you take the same action of saying something to somebody that's a bit difficult to say, or that's hard for them to hear, that can come from such a wide range of intentions—both wholesome and unwholesome. It could be really scary for you to say, but out of really deep compassion, because you really think it will help that person to know, you say it. That would be a really compassionate, courageous action. You could say the same thing out of knowing that it's going to be hard for them to hear and kind of being glad that it's going to be hard for them to hear. You could say it out of revenge. You could say it out of real anger—it's going to be hard for them to hear, but at least maybe they'll stop doing this thing and leave me alone. You could say it out of a kind of pride, that you're able to point out to that person their faults. You could say it out of just complete delusion, complete obliviousness to how it's going to affect that person—it just comes in your mind and you say it. Or you could say it with good intentions, really trying to help, but with an obliviousness, a neglect of whether it's a useful

and helpful time to say that to that person. So you come in, they've had a horrible day at work, they're really busy, they're cooking dinner, the kids are screaming, and you say, "I have something really important. I think you need to hear about your behavior last week." Not so helpful.

So you get the sense of what I mean. We can't evaluate even our own actions by how they look—forget about somebody else's. And so intention is the key.

The Buddha specifically described what he means by wise or right thought, right intention in several suttas. He's quite specific. Right intention counteracts the unwise intentions or thoughts of greed, of ill will, and of cruelty. So he says, "What, friends, is right intention? Intention of renunciation"—which counteracts the intention of greed.

Intention of non-ill will—you could read that as metta—counteracts intentions of ill will. And intentions of compassion, of non-cruelty, counterbalance intentions of cruelty.

You notice there's not an intention of non-delusion, because the Buddha also says that delusion, *moha*, isn't counterbalanced by an intention, but by wise seeing, by wisdom. So we can't really say, "I will now have an intention of wise seeing." Rather, simply in the connection, in the doing, in the moment of mindfulness, clear seeing is there.

So that's right intention—very specific.

And first comes right view. The Buddha again: "Right view comes first. And how does right view come first? One understands that wrong intention is wrong intention and that right intention is right intention." That sounds simplistic, but it actually isn't. That is one's right view.

I think a huge amount of what goes on in our practice here is allowing us to come to understand wrong intention or unskillful intention as wrong or unskillful. And if those words catch the mind—if it kind of echoes of "I'm bad because it's wrong, right intention means I'm good"—think of wrong or unskillful intention as meaning intention that brings suffering to oneself or to another. Take away the blame and just think: it's wrong in that it causes suffering to myself or another when I think, speak, or act with intentions of greed, ill will, or cruelty. It's that simple.

And wise intention—intention of renunciation, of metta, of compassion—doesn't bring suffering. It brings joy and peace to ourselves or another. So it's basically back in the realm of the really practical. What brings happiness in our life? What brings happiness to others, and what doesn't?

And really, that's what we've been seeing like a hundred million times every day, isn't it? Sometimes. We don't quite notice it, but if we pay attention enough, we do. When we're acting out of greed, we suffer. Sooner or later, we notice that. When we act or speak or even spin in thoughts of ill will or cruelty, we suffer. And the opposite leads to no suffering.

That's really what the Buddha means by "right view comes first"—that we get this on some level. Not totally and completely, but we get it enough to motivate us to be willing to continue to pay attention, to be willing to cultivate wise intention.

So as I said, we need to cultivate. But our intentions, our attitude to life, our attitude to moment-to-moment experience—which is all life is—also transforms naturally through right view, through understanding. When, for example, we notice that we're really suffering from the greediness of our mind, when we really see that, in that moment the heart naturally lets go. Because greediness comes from thinking it's going to make us happy. When we really notice it's making us miserable, at least for that moment, something lets go. That's wise intention of renunciation.

And at the same time it requires effort. Again, the Buddha: "One makes an effort to abandon wrong intention." He doesn't say one makes an effort to hate wrong intention. One simply makes the effort to abandon it, just let it alone, and to enter upon right intention. "This is one's right effort. Mindfully, one abandons wrong intention. Mindfully, one enters upon and abides in right intention. This is one's right mindfulness. Thus, these three states run and circle around right intention"—that is, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.

So you see right there, he's brought in the whole Eightfold Path circling around right intention: right view, right effort, right mindfulness. And of course speech and actions are the direct result of right intention. He doesn't mention samadhi, but you need that to even pay attention, to notice the intention in the first place.

What's so powerful about noticing a moment of intention—whether it's the subtle moment you might see in a sitting here or a larger intention as we're making a choice or about to act in our life—is that that moment of mindfulness can be a powerful moment of transformation. Transformation of how we're living, how we're relating, how we're going to speak and act. Because in that moment of recognizing what's leading to what I'm going to say, what I'm going to do, there's a moment there, as if a moment of choice. And that's where wise intention can either arise naturally, or we can cultivate it a little bit.

An example in the walking meditation. I think I've used this before. You're walking, and suddenly—or not so suddenly—there's an unpleasant sensation in the feet, in the back, or you're tired. And without quite noticing it, there's the thought: "I've had enough, I'm out of here." Out of here might mean a cup of tea. Out of here might mean into Barry. Out of here might be on the Greyhound bus to New York City.

It really depends how unpleasant the sensation is and how strong the thought becomes. Unnoticed, well, at least you're having the cup of tea. But noticed, there's really a moment of recognition: "Oh, I see—that's aversion. I hate this. I'm going to go have a cup of tea."

And in seeing that, without blaming or judging, one can tune in: "Oh, aversion. I don't really want to be driven by that." There's just that stepping back. Mindfulness is again present. In noticing the aversion, we're meeting that intention with satipañña—with mindfulness and wisdom. The mindfulness allows us to connect: "Oh, that's aversion"—without judgment, with honesty, with clear seeing. And the pañña, the wisdom, the right understanding, recognizes: "I really don't want to be driven by aversion. I really don't want to act out of aversion. I'll just take another step."

Two seconds later, we've completely forgotten that whole scenario and things are fine again. It's a little moment. I know it's simpler—I'm not saying it's simple, but it's simpler here in a moment like that to see how, with mindfulness of intention, we have a moment of choice.

Of course, in bigger actions, in more complex interactions in our daily life, it's a lot more complicated. But still, our whole life is nothing but this moment, this moment. Even when it seems really complicated, it can always be reduced to this moment, because really that's all there is. The rest is thoughts—past and future.

So no matter how complicated things are, what we've been practicing here—that willingness, that ability to bring satipañña to the moment of "about to" and honestly look at why—that is possible in our lives at times when we can remember. It really takes a commitment, and it takes the ability to remember to be present. And being present isn't as hard as remembering to be present. You know? That's what we've been practicing here. That comes easier. But in moments of presence, we see that we do have a choice.

It doesn't mean that the natural, wise, loving, kind, renunciate intention is always going to spontaneously arise the second we turn our attention on something. "Oh, I'm aversive. Oh yes, may I be happy"—immediately. Sometimes it does happen, and that's really amazing. But we can have the wisdom to know: "This is tough right now, but I don't want to act from this place."

One of my favorite stories about this kind of commitment comes from Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh—the nun who's been working with him since she was sixteen in Vietnam. Quite an activist person, with a deep, total commitment to mindfulness and compassionate action.

In her autobiography, she was talking about how she was in a letter-writing campaign. She and Thich Nhat Hanh both haven't been able to go back to Vietnam since the middle of the Vietnamese War. But she was on a campaign where she would write to the government whenever she heard about an arrest—this was during a period when monks and nuns and artists were all being arrested.

But she wouldn't do it from a place of anger. And that took a huge commitment to cultivate wise intention, as she says: "Every time I receive news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew that I had to do walking meditation."

Now, is that what we do when we feel angry? "Yes, I know I need to do walking meditation." It's not a bad idea.

"Sometimes I would walk several hours to regain my calm." And she's not in a three-month meditation retreat either. "Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

There are lots of examples like that. And this is after having spent thirty years at least of her life in deep commitment to peaceful activism and mindfulness. It doesn't just become totally unthinking second nature. Our commitment is to the cultivation. Our commitment is to really knowing deep in our heart what leads to happiness for ourselves and for others—and having the commitment to do the best we can to speak and act from that place.

And to know that a lot of the time we won't speak and act from that place. And be willing to pay attention then too, because each moment's a new moment.

So she's really angry, and I'm sure—although she doesn't say so—that she learned by writing from an angry place that it doesn't work, either for her or for the people listening. So it takes commitment, but we can do it.

And alternatively, if we're not willing to respect our intentions, respect the power of renunciation, of mettā, of karuṇā—if we don't want to pay attention—we can't get away with it. Because if we're not cultivating wise intention, guess what? We are cultivating. That's what's kind of scary to me. If I just let my mind run loose, we're cultivating greed, hatred, and delusion.

Says the Buddha, "O bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his or her mind." Obvious, isn't it? We talk about the grooves. Well, that's what he's saying. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire. If his mind inclines to thoughts of ill-will, thoughts of cruelty, he's abandoned the thought of non-cruelty to cultivate the thought of cruelty, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of cruelty.

And of course, just the reverse. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of renunciation, in that moment he's abandoned the thought of sensual desire to cultivate the thought—or the intention—of renunciation. And he's just talking on the level of thought here. It's really powerful.

So we know we can't control every thought. We do know that now, right? But to even get upset for a minute about a previous thought, for a minute to start berating yourself or hating yourself or blaming yourself because a previous thought wasn't good—again, you're falling into cultivating cruelty, thoughts of cruelty, thoughts of ill-will. So no matter where we can start paying attention, that's the place we start.

Can I cultivate even a thought? It doesn't even have to quite move into speech and action. There's one place where the Buddha says that. He says, "I say that even the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit." He's not even saying you're in the wholesome state. He's just saying the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit. So then what should be said of bodily and verbal acts that come from such states of mind?

So just the willingness to incline our minds to renunciation, to mettā, to compassion, is really transformative. Because the seed of intention in our hearts, in our minds, eventually flowers.

You know Ruth Denison's succinct description of karma. You must have heard it: "Karma means you don't get away with nothing, darling." The seed of intention will ultimately flower. Basically, it means we can't hide from ourselves. We can't pretend we're feeling loving when we really hate our guts. We have to see honestly what's happening.

I've taught several retreats in New Mexico that were specifically for, quote, "burned out environmentalists." And it was really quite interesting to see—not always, but often—how some of the people who would come to these retreats for ten days, really being in the forefront of the environmental movement, working really hard for years with extreme dedication... and seeing how, in whatever way they began—being lawyers or advocates or whatever—basically from quite good intentions of caring for the planet, of really sensing, feeling, living our interconnectedness with all life, really wanting to make this a better world to live in. But meeting with what seems like a very intense life, meeting with enormous greed and anger and frustration day after day after day.

For many of these people, even though what they were doing still seemed like a very wholesome thing to do, they could even express it: they were loving life on the planet but living from a place of real anger and frustration. Loving the planet, but their heart was so closed that anger was spewing out all over their family, all over their life, all over themselves.

And it just shows that even trying to do something that seems really wholesome, we can't sidestep the moment-to-moment intentionality, the attitude with which we relate. And it's tough. Nobody's saying it's easy. It's hard. But we can just step back and notice on the moment-to-moment level. That's what I think is such a great gift of an intensive retreat time like this.

I imagine most of you have seen the intensity of ill will and cruelty and greed that can come up in our minds here—about what, when you stand back and look at it, seem like pretty insignificant things in the big picture. In the little picture, though, they're not insignificant at all. As one yogi said to me, "This is how world wars start"—over whether the windows are open or closed, or whether we step on the cracks and squeaks in the upper walking room when the rest of us are sitting.

Over the little things, so much hatred and anger and greed can be engendered. Somebody's sitting in your seat in the dining room—the seat you've sat in every day for the last five weeks—and they know it. They have to be doing it on purpose. They couldn't possibly not know that's your seat. And to watch what comes up!

I wouldn't denigrate it or say it's because we're all regressed, we're all so childish, our life has shrunk to this little place. It has shrunk, but that's okay. I think that's actually a good thing. That's what lets us see. When you're really working in the environmental movement, for example, it's easier to miss the suffering and the intensity of the anger, the really destructive aspect of it, because the issue is so big and complex and powerful. It's easy to skip over the intention part and focus on the result. But here, when it's about whether you beat that person ahead of you to get the last orange, there's some way that when you step back, you can't really convince yourself about how important the issue is. And we have to turn around. It might take a couple of days, but somewhere you have to say, "Maybe I need to look at how I'm relating to the situation. Maybe that has something to do with the suffering here." In three months, we're bound to get that message. That's why long retreats are so good.

I'm serious—when this yogi said to me, "This is how world wars start," I actually don't think that's an exaggeration. When we see how strong the grooves of greed or cruelty or ill will are over little things, imagine if somebody destroyed our home, took our land, killed our relatives. I mean, imagine. I can't even imagine. So this is good. We start with little things. It's hard enough. But it's not insignificant. It's not unimportant. It's exactly the same mechanism for the difficult, complex situations that are going to come up in our life. It's where we start.

And luckily, hopefully, besides having that commitment to cultivate—as with Sister Chan Khong—hopefully we also begin to notice that as our understanding, our clear seeing, our wisdom develops, and it is developing. You can't measure it, you don't know, you're in the middle of it. We tend sometimes to see the so-called kilesas much more strongly than you can notice the wisdom. But believe me, a lot of wisdom and understanding and clear seeing is shining in all of you.

And you notice it in little things. Like someone described to me—they were having a kind of unpleasant, unhealthy experience. They didn't like it. And they noticed the mind's habit to go do something to dull out, not to feel it. And without getting into a big deal, as soon as they noticed that, another thought came and they said, "Oh, but I don't need to do that now. I can just be with this. So what if it's boring?" That's little, but it's huge, if you know what I mean. That's really a moment of the natural transformation of attitude, of intention. And it's happening here a lot.

It's really beautiful for us sitting on this side, getting to talk with everybody through all this time. Each of us when we're on retreat, we're right in the middle of it, and everything that's happening today is huge. You really can't have a very good overview, and you don't need one. Forget looking for an overview. But for us, just in the groups

today, it was so inspiring to me—and probably the people in the groups wouldn't think what we talked about was inspiring—but to me it was inspiring to see these subtle shifts in attitude.

In one group, somehow we got talking about the hell realm of the dining room at mealtimes, and how really seeing... somebody was saying how they really liked it, how with the meals that this person really liked—the really good ones, the pizza or the ice cream or whatever—that seemed to hold the promise of so much pleasure and happiness. But then paying attention while eating, and noticing how much greed and how much grasping was going on even at the time of having the pizza or the ice cream, that actually by paying attention, it's like, "Wow, this isn't even pleasant." It really isn't worth it.

Now, if you don't add on top of it, "I'm a stupid jerk because I'm caught in craving"—that's extra. And that didn't happen in this discussion. It's just, "Wow, look at this. It isn't even pleasant." That's a moment of natural renunciation. That's the moment where the habit of greed simply lets go.

And notice, you could still be eating the pizza in that moment. Renunciation is about intention. It's not really so much about the outward appearance. You could look like the biggest renunciate in the world and be totally attached to what people think of you or how you look. You might think, "I'm not going to break the eighth precept even if I'm falling on my face from low blood sugar and my medical condition clearly says I have to eat at night. It's bad for my health, but I still won't do it because then I wouldn't be a good yogi." I don't know if that's renunciation. I'd question if that's actually renunciation or a kind of conceit.

So renunciation is really the natural, joyful releasing of attachment. As Geshe Rapton used to say, renunciation is really the expression of love and compassion for ourselves, because we're renouncing the craving and attachment that keeps us in suffering. In that moment of letting go of the clinging to that pizza, you might keep eating it or you might not. It's really irrelevant. Renunciation is a relief, not a punishment.

I'm sure you've all noticed moments like this, even if you haven't thought of them as renunciation. Wise intention of renunciation is that moment of renouncing the craving, renouncing the clinging, renouncing the greed that keeps us bound to suffering. And keep it moment to moment. It's not that wise intention of renunciation means you now have to figure out how you're going to renounce pizza for the rest of your life, or how you're going to go back and live this really simple life because you've learned that craving leads to suffering—so you're going to set up a life that doesn't feed into craving. That whole approach becomes its own suffering scenario.

It's moment to moment. Wise intention of renunciation arises when you feel that clutching of wanting and the satipaññā is there. You tune into the wanting and recognize, "Oh, I really don't need this." It's the wanting we don't need. Whether you get the thing you want or not, who cares anymore? Just the wanting itself—I don't need that. And there's peace. There's ease. And incidentally, we're a lot nicer to be around, so it's good for other people too.

My favorite story about renunciation—the joy of it—is about Ananda Mayi Ma, who was regarded as a great saint in India in this century. Some businessmen were coming to her and, as is the tendency, were praising her effusively: "Oh, you're so wonderful, you live such a simple renunciate life," and on and on. She started laughing, and the more they praised her, the more she laughed. Finally they asked, "What are you laughing at?" She said, "Me the renunciate? It's you who are the renunciates. By living the way you are, you're renouncing the great joy of divine presence. I'm not renouncing anything."

That's really the spirit of wise renunciation, wise intention.

Similarly, with the wise intentions of mettā and karuṇā, counteracting ill will and cruelty—sure, there's enormous suffering in the world. And sometimes it can be easy, or one can fall into feeling, that there's been a lot of suffering here on retreat. A great deal of the retreat is coming face to face with our own demons in whatever way those manifest—physical, emotional, mental. It can just be sleepiness, whatever it is.

It's easy also, same as with greed, to fall into thinking that we're being a bit self-indulgent, so wrapped up in our own suffering. After all, there's nothing we've gone through here that can compare to the amount of cruelty, the enormous suffering going on in the world. And in a way, that's true.

But again, please don't denigrate the powerful possibilities that come from meeting whatever difficult experience you've gone through here, or are going through at this moment. Meeting it with mindfulness, with satipaññā, with wisdom—this is the place where our habitual tendencies of ill will, anger, hostility, and cruelty, whether directed at ourselves or just in our minds toward someone else, are truly transformed. Through mindfulness, through how you meet your own suffering with compassion, with mettā as friendliness and acceptance. I'm not saying you meet every moment of suffering with this beaming, suffusing sense of "I love every moment of what's happening."

And I know we can get into that—a kind of exaggeration of metta. But acceptance, simple open-hearted friendliness and patience are equally expressions of metta. And the expression of compassion is simply not exercising cruelty towards ourselves or others in the face of suffering.

It might be that the suffering seems small. Again, you didn't get that orange, or whatever. You ate too much ice cream. You can't really get behind the story. But the suffering is still the same emotions that are engendered in our life, that are engendered in other people. How we meet it here is where wisdom and understanding and our intentions begin to transform.

Sometimes I feel this really deeply, seeing it in my own experience and from talking to a lot of people. Some retreats—if you do a lot of retreats, they're all a little different, or a lot different from each other. And some retreats, when I look back, I would really dub in my mind as "that was a real dukkha retreat." That was a real struggling retreat, a real suffering retreat. And there are all different kinds of dukkha retreats. The dukkha could be that you never got into it, never got concentrated. That can be a huge dukkha retreat. That's one of the big ways we are really cruel to ourselves—because our experience didn't come up to some idea we made up of what it should come up to, and we hate ourselves for three months. Or it can be really old traumatic pain. It can be physical pain. It can be sleepiness. Whatever the range of a so-called dukkha retreat.

There are retreats that were kind of smooth sailing, really interesting, had really nice states. Of course, given the choice at the beginning of a retreat, probably most of us would go for the nice states. But when I look back at my whole history of practice—well, you can't ever really pinpoint "I learned this from that moment"—but I have a deep conviction that the retreats that were really a struggle, where a lot of hard stuff went on, those are the ones where my understanding really deepened, where the sense of equanimity and patience really got strong, and where compassion and metta were really, really developed.

It's easy to feel compassion and metta when everything's groovy, when you're shining in white light. Who wouldn't feel compassion and metta? That poor schlump over there—obviously they're not as happy as I am. But when you're having a really lousy retreat, whatever that means to you, and you can feel, really feel kindness and compassion and metta for yourself, that's real compassion and metta. That's where it's really going to come through in the crunch. That's when our intentions, our understanding, are really transforming.

And it's only the attitude, the understanding, that's going to inform our life. All the groovy experiences are gone. As Jack Kornfield says, they're all back with Cleopatra. Even the ones that happened a minute ago—gone. But the inclination of our mind and heart, the strengthening of that understanding and propensity, that's what's going to inform how we meet the next moment, how we meet this moment, how we meet a difficult situation.

So you can be really happy if you're sitting there thinking, "This is the crappiest retreat I ever did." You can be really happy because you're going to come out of it a lot deeper and stronger. You think I'm kidding. You might not notice it right away, but it'll last longer.

And really, this transformation comes from the willingness to simply meet this moment of our experience directly. It's back to mindfulness again—kindness, just as it is. I really feel deeply that in the power of the direct meeting, the satipañña in the moment, the wisdom really does transform how we relate to things.

You've all seen it—see it on the news. A couple of years ago, I think, they were talking about how Clinton had gone to Africa, gone to Rwanda. This was a couple of years after the seeming end of all those horrible massacres there. He'd gone and was saying on the news how he'd talked with a lot of people. He'd met and talked with some people who had been attacked in the massacre but had lived, though they were quite wounded. He was publicly making a speech saying he really kind of got it—that we're all responsible. You can't just say it's about Rwanda; it's about all of us in the world. Which is obvious. But still I thought, what made him say that now and not two years ago, when it was actually happening? Not to get into what he should or shouldn't have done, but what made the change that he said it then?

In reflecting, what made sense to me is that really it was coming face to face with the actual suffering—seeing and talking with someone who was really directly involved. I remember Sister Chan Khong talking about during the Vietnam War and seeing how it's like a war on television. In Rwanda, we read about it. It's not the same as being there. Sister Chan Khong was saying you'd see this stuff happening in villages—a mother holding her wounded baby or something—on TV, and it's really powerful.

It really moves us. But she says, it's nothing like being there. It just isn't the same. We don't get the immediacy of the experience.

And so when we're really face to face—and now I'm coming back to here, and again, talking about huge suffering, and then we're talking about our self-hatred about back pain. But if you don't get into comparing, if you can bring that same immediacy of kind

attention to the back pain and the self-hatred, that's the moment of potential transformation. From ill will, from cruelty, to compassion, to kindness, to the ability to be present without flinching away.

I really believe that this is the capability that allows one to go out and keep finding the inner resources to do whatever we need to do—whether it's the environmental work I was talking about, whether it's just meeting your kids day to day when they're cranky, whether it's whatever it is we do. To keep finding the resources to meet the suffering, whether it's so-called mine or so-called yours, and meet it with kindness, meet it with compassion, with friendliness, rather than ill will and cruelty. It's huge.

Pema Chödrön writes: "Learning how to be kind to ourselves, learning how to respect ourselves, is important. The reason it's important is that fundamentally, when we look into our own hearts and begin to discover what is confused and what is brilliant, what is bitter and what is sweet, it isn't just ourselves that we're discovering. We're discovering the universe. When we discover the Buddha that we are, we realize that everything and everyone is a Buddha. When we regard thoughts and emotions with humor and openness, that's how we perceive the universe."

We're not just talking about our individual liberation, but how to help the community we live in, how to help our families, our country, the whole continent—not to mention the world and the galaxy and as far as we want to go.

"There's an interesting transition that occurs naturally and spontaneously. We begin to find that, to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves—the willingness to look, to point directly at our own hearts—and to the degree that there is kindness towards ourselves, then there is confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world."

So let's sit quietly for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 321

Introducing Mettā

Carol Wilson · 1h43

> *In this foundational talk on loving-kindness meditation, Carol Wilson addresses a profound paradox: if mettā (loving-kindness) is truly our natural state, why must we work so hard to experience it? She explains that mettā is not something we create but rather uncover—it is the spontaneous response of an open heart when we are truly present, like the natural warmth we feel seeing a child at play.*
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> *Wilson clarifies common misconceptions about mettā, distinguishing it from romantic love characterized by yearning or passion, and from a 'mushy' state that ignores reality. Drawing on the Brahmavihāra teachings, she describes mettā as non-hatred, inclusiveness, and expansiveness—qualities that arise from wisdom rather than delusion. She shares the powerful story of civil rights leader Jim Lawson, who demonstrated the courage and strength of genuine mettā by connecting with someone who had just attacked his colleagues.*
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> *The talk explores how desire (the 'near enemy') and aversion (the 'far enemy') obstruct our natural connectedness, creating the illusion of separation. Wilson emphasizes that every moment of distraction or difficulty in practice is an opportunity to cultivate mettā through patient, non-reactive awareness. Rather than seeking dramatic states, practitioners learn to trust their 'basic goodness' through countless small moments of recognition, gradually seeing through the habits that perpetuate feelings of isolation and unworthiness.*

Depending on what your day was like today, some of you may be wondering how what you're doing here has much to do with loving-kindness and friendliness for yourself. Sometimes that escapes the experience on the first day, especially if you're new to it.

Another common question comes up in my mind every time I begin a mettā retreat for myself: if it's true—which it is true—that loving-kindness, this friendliness, is a natural expression of who we really are, of our truest nature; if it's more true than our experience of separation, why do we have to work so hard to try and have a fleeting moment of experiencing it? Why do we have to work so hard to learn to recognize and trust it?

I want to talk about those two things tonight.

It's true, as Sharon said, that friendliness, mettā—I will probably mostly use the word mettā just because it's easier—is a natural, spontaneous expression of the truth of the deepest nature of all of us. And it's also natural in the sense that it's not some esoteric, incredibly blissed-out experience that you can only know if you're deep in absorption. Because that wouldn't make it quite universal, would it? It would make it much more conditional than it really is.

The experience of mettā, connectedness, friendliness, is the natural response of our heart to a situation when we're really open and present. For example, if you're outside today and you see a small child running and playing and bouncing with a ball, and you're present, the natural response arises without thinking about it. You don't wonder what that kid is doing here, who his parents are, what his background is, what he's thinking about. There's just a natural sense of friendliness, non-judging happiness. We simply feel our empathetic connection to that child.

Or if kids don't do it for you, puppies or kittens or whatever particular species of being opens your heart when you're present—you don't have to try to make that happen. It happens naturally.

But not always, right? And that certainly isn't the natural spontaneous response in most situations. So why not?

Same situation: you're out walking today and there's a small child laughing, playing, having a good time, but you're in a different state, in some way self-absorbed. You're hurrying to get to lunch. You're just starting to feel maybe the tendrils of a nice concentrated state. Or you're worrying about something at home, or you're thinking about how you could have brought a better raincoat or whatever. And you either don't even notice the kid, or if you're in an aversive mood, you think, "What's he doing screaming and yelling? He's wrecking my possible concentration." Or if you're in a worrying mode, "Where the heck are his parents? What's he doing here anyway? Is he abandoned? Is he an orphan?"

We go into whatever our stories are. And those stories, that reaction stemming from our self-involved state of mind and heart at the moment, actually block the sense of connectedness. There's definitely more of a sense of separateness, of fragmentation in that case. We get locked in our mental world. And these mental worlds seem so real—never mind that you get locked in seventeen thousand different mental worlds in one day. Each of them seems so real, much more real than the underlying unity beneath all of our differences.

This sense of connectedness, this unity, is much more real and true. But we don't tend to notice that as readily. We get more involved in the seeming differences, in our habits, in our tendencies of reaction that increase the sense of separation and fragmentation.

What's interesting—and we discover this both in Vipassana or insight meditation as well as in the loving-kindness meditation we're doing here, and in any of the other three Brahmavihāras that Sharon mentioned this morning—we begin to discover that this experience we have, seemingly ongoing, however you experience it personally, whether it's fragmentation, separation, isolation, loneliness, neediness, fear, whatever, is actually due to a misperception of who we are and how things really are.

This is from Joko Beck: "Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. Certainly it looks as though I am separate from other people and other phenomena. And as long as we think we are separate, we're going to suffer. We're going to feel that we have to defend ourselves, that we have to find something in the world that will make us happy."

And by the very acts of doing this—having to defend ourselves, having to find something to make us happy—the continual making of separation in our mind strengthens and continues this illusion, this suffering state that we can so often find ourselves in.

For many of us, the illusion of separation, of the need to find something somewhere to finally make me happy, to protect and defend myself from all the bad things out there that could happen—that certainly has been more familiar.

It's more reinforced by the culture. It's the experience when I don't pay attention. It's what the mind most easily and naturally falls into. And since it's familiar, one tends to take it as real.

So the whole point of our practice, our metta practice here, is to consciously help us to not keep falling into this habit of delusion, of illusion, of separation. Each moment that we experience some metta, some connectedness, just basic friendliness—don't go out there looking for bliss, just that friendliness of all the kids playing, natural connectedness. Each moment that we experience that with awareness, that we recognize it, that's the moment where we're seeing through the idea of the fragmentation, the illusion of the separation.

It doesn't mean that I can't tell the difference between me and the child playing. We can have ideas about what unity or connectedness means that don't make sense to our rational mind and get caught in trying to think our way into it or out of it. It doesn't quite work. What our practice does is help us recognize over and over and over the vis-

ceral experience of connectedness, of unity, of simple, open-hearted friendliness, so that we begin to trust it more. And maybe we trust the illusion of our fragmentation, our isolation, maybe we begin to trust that a little less.

Maybe we won't think of ourselves as trusting fragmentation. But look at where your mind goes and look at how we make decisions and look at the conclusions we jump to just automatically. We do trust it. So we need to learn to actually trust the connectedness, to trust what Chögyam Trungpa used to call our basic goodness, a much deeper truth of who we are than all the superficial differences that we perceive with our normal seeing and hearing, smelling and tasting.

And we practice because hearing about it, believing that things are really different from how we perceive them, isn't enough. Certainly hasn't been for me. The difference between "oh yeah, that really is true, I think that makes a lot of sense," the difference between believing the idea, liking it, accepting it—the difference between that and knowing for yourself from your own experience that things are different from the seeming superficial differences—that difference between thinking it's a good idea and really knowing it is awesome. It makes all the difference in how we live our lives and how we respond to ourselves and others in any situation.

And so our metta practice is not about trying to create an artificial state of friendliness, a kind of static state, and then hold on to it for as long as we can. Probably a lot of us have done that from time to time, tried to do that. And let me tell you, it leads to enormous frustration because you cannot create a static state of heart and mind and hold on to it. You can't do it, not for long. So if you could just give that up right now, you'd save yourself a lot of grief.

What the practice is about is uncovering more the beauty of what we already are and learning to trust that a little bit more. Have a little more faith in it. Verified faith. Faith from your own experience.

For me, I've seen two basic ways that this deeper trust in my basic goodness, deeper trust that friendliness, metta, is a natural expression of who we really are—this has come about in a couple of ways in metta practice.

One way is what I was just describing: recognizing a simple moment of metta, connectedness, recognizing it when it's arising more and more so that we don't overlook it, so that we're not waiting for the big bang and overlooking the little moments of friendliness and connectedness. When you're just sitting here, it's like, ah, it's just so nice being here with everybody. An openness, a spaciousness. It's not that you should go,

"Oh, a moment of metta! Let me write it down. That's three today." I don't mean that. But it is nice just to know, oh, yes, we're all here together. Not so much me and them. Just notice it. It's important. It strengthens our trust, our familiarity with it.

And then the second way—and sometimes it seems some days, some hours, like the second way is more prevalent than the first—is that in the deliberate cultivation, as we incline our mind and heart towards loving-kindness, whether it's to ourselves or toward the benefactor, through the repetition of the phrases, this practice by its nature highlights the states of heart and mind that we're quite familiar with that actually obstruct the connectedness, the states that obstruct our recognizing friendliness, metta. I'll talk a little about them, but we basically know all too well what those states are—all the difficult states: desire, aversion, boredom, everything you can name.

But that's part of the practice. As we continue inclining towards the metta, the so-called obstructions, the states of mind that we tend to believe in when we're not paying attention, that actually keep the connectedness hidden, they just get really big sometimes. But because we're paying attention—this is really where the learning comes in. When Sharon was talking last night or this morning about how what's really important on a retreat like this isn't having some nice state you can go home and talk about, it's the learning that happens.

Well, I hate to tell you, but it does seem to work that way—that a great deal of the learning that happens is about really seeing how we get hooked in these unpleasant or difficult states of heart and mind, and really seeing, "Oh, that's how it creates separation." The wisdom that comes from that takes so much juice out of our continuing to fall back into our habitual responses that it allows the open heart to shine much more strongly, allows us to trust it more.

So let me try again to talk about some ways of understanding what metta is and is not, and then I'll speak a little about the obstructions.

Some of the nouns we might use to describe metta include loving-kindness, friendliness, and the classic one: non-hatred. In the Theravada tradition, they do tend to put things in the negative a lot, but non-hatred—that's pretty good. Non-hatred, open-hearted connection, patience, acceptance, inclusiveness, expansiveness.

That last one—inclusiveness, expansiveness—has actually been very helpful and important to me, because you can get hooked into looking for some idea of what love should feel like. And a lot of times, metta is actually this inclusiveness. When I said

earlier, "Here we are, all in the room together," it doesn't feel like what you might think of when you use the word love. But if you think of inclusiveness, expansiveness, connectedness—oh, yes, that's metta too. You can appreciate it.

The word love in this culture, anyway, in the culture I grew up in, in the popular entertainment culture—it has so many connotations that just don't have anything to do with metta. Love in the form of passion, for instance. You know, passion comes from the root word that means to suffer. Metta doesn't mean to suffer. But that kind of love—the idea that it's not real love if you're not tormented, if you're not in agony when the person you love isn't nearby—that has nothing to do with metta. Yet that is sometimes what we mean by love.

Or this sense of yearning. When I read about chivalrous love in medieval times, the whole idea was based on a knight cultivating this chivalrous love for a woman who was usually married to someone else, which meant they could never really be together. So the love was characterized, in its supposed purity, by this sense of unsatisfied yearning.

Metta is not unsatisfied yearning. It's not yearning in any sense of the word at all. Yearning signifies that there's something lacking, that we're looking somewhere for completion. And I do think a lot of the use of the word love in popular culture has that connotation in it somewhere, even in a slight way—that the presence of the other, even somewhere in the world, makes me more of a complete person. This certainly feeds into our Western propensity for feeling rather less than worthy of much of anything.

Really, of all the people we talk with on retreats, I would say over ninety percent have in some way a deep-seated sense of worthlessness, of not being good enough, of self-hatred. And it's so sad, because it's so not true, and because it's so deeply painful. Love in the form of yearning, in the form of needing someone to make me whole, really plays into that. The whole advertising industry—my God, you know, it's making billions and trillions of dollars off of that assumption: that if we buy the right thing, wear the right clothes, go to the right place, or take the right course, we'll be more lovable and somehow happier.

Metta is so much the opposite of that, because metta arises from the understanding—whether intellectual or just from the heart—that we are already complete. Metta is a springing forth from the internal knowing that everything is already here.

This is from Mark Epstein, the psychiatrist. I think it's from his book *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*. He says: "When plagued with a sense of unworthiness, it is easy to feel deficient and to see the love of another person as the only possible solution to this plight. Meditation tends to work against this assumption of deficiency by restoring

the capacity for connection from the inside. In doing this, meditation challenges the common assumption of our culture about where connection comes from. In the Buddhist view, connection is already present. We are not separate and distinct as we think we are. Connection is our natural state. We just have to learn to permit it, to allow it."

That's a great description of metta practice. We're not trying to create connection. We're learning how to permit it, to allow it, to trust it. And I'm not saying that's easy, but it's really, ultimately, the source of our living from a much deeper ease and happiness with ourselves, with one another, with the world.

I want to give another example of the spacious, inclusive aspect of metta—how it doesn't have to be directed at someone we know, but can simply be an attitude of acceptance that is itself metta. Last year I was on Maui with two friends, actually with Kamala and another friend.

One afternoon we went to a local event in a high school auditorium or civic center. It was called "Honoring Our Kupunas," which means honoring our elders. I didn't really know what it was—we just went to see.

And it was so... I really felt like the whole afternoon was permeated with the spirit of metta.

What it was: all ages were there, from small children to whole families. It centered around several groups of elderly people—some from local retirement homes, some from their local churches. Many of them knew each other, and many of the people present were their families spanning all generations. But then there were people like us who didn't know anyone there. And everyone was equally welcome.

What would happen is we would sit on the bleachers, and group by group, mostly women, would get up—some by themselves, some in groups—and do hulas. These were women ranging from early sixties to mid-nineties. They would get up, all ranges of skill level and physical type and ability, and really with such goodwill, so unselfconsciously, just getting up in front of everybody and dancing very sensuously and laughing—and everyone just loving it.

There was no sense whatsoever of judgment, no thinking, "How can she get up in front of everybody at her age?" I tried to imagine my mother getting up—of course my mother would never do the hula—but to imagine her just getting up and being able to be so at ease. Or me, never mind my mother.

To see the sense of warmth and acceptance that just flowed through this room, and the love. I thought, that's really a metta experience: the non-judging, the acceptance, the inclusiveness. And it wasn't hard. It wasn't something one had to manufacture.

So metta, whether it's toward beings or toward ourselves, has this connected, inclusive aspect.

And that leads into another misconception of metta—not so much the passion and yearning side, but the other extreme: that it's mushy, clouds and angels, a perpetual Valentine's Day, as Sharon put it. Everything's always nicey-nice. It accepts everything and you really don't look at what else is going on. If there's anything ugly or negative, you just pretend it doesn't happen. A kind of false, blind, stupid way to be in the world, basically.

Also not true.

Metta is an expression of wisdom. Wisdom really sees things as they are. The mind of metta sees things quite clearly. It's not mush-minded at all. But again, we have to experience this for ourselves.

I was teaching a retreat a few years ago specifically for environmental activists—I think it was with Sharon, this one. It was a Vipassana, an insight meditation retreat, but we would spend a session each day going through the formal metta practice, the same practice we're doing here, only condensed.

In the beginning—I did several retreats like this—many of the people, the environmental activists, had never done any meditation at all. We announced we were going to do loving-kindness meditation, and you could see the flinches or the groans. Someone actually said to Sharon, "I don't want to do that mushy practice. I don't want to lose my edge." You know, out there working every day for the environment—really tough, hot-shot lawyers and activists—"I can't afford to do this loving-kindness mush stuff and lose my edge."

I don't think that's an uncommon response. As Sharon mentioned, many people come to retreat and say, "I don't want to do this metta-shmetta stuff."

And again, it's a misconception. Invariably, on these environmental retreats, by the end of it—because the people are tough, they stick it out, grit their teeth and do it—the truth starts to shine through. Even if you hate it, it doesn't matter. Just the willingness to incline your mind, and it happens by itself.

Invariably they really appreciated the metta practices. Sometimes that was the best thing for them about the retreat.

So we begin to discover that the ability to love, for each of us, is boundless.

And that our happiness does not depend on having people love us, or even on our external conditions, but it really depends on our ability to love. And as we begin to contact that ability, as we begin to trust it, as we begin to see that you don't lose your edge —when we begin to trust the strength of boundless connectedness, it's actually far more strong and more courageous than acting from anger, acting from fear. But again, we need to begin to experience this for ourselves.

I'll tell you one story about someone I've been reading about recently who's deeply inspirational to me. I haven't met him or heard him personally, but he's a man, still alive, named Jim Lawson. He's an African-American man who in the late 1950s, early 1960s, was teaching nonviolent workshops. He's a minister, a Christian minister. He was teaching nonviolent workshops in Nashville to some young college students who began, actually, the sit-ins in Nashville and then the Freedom Rides. Together with some other students in North Carolina, they were really the beginning of the whole sit-ins and Freedom Rides, the civil rights movement, based off of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Jim Lawson was a deep believer in nonviolence based on love, on unity as human beings. He had been a conscientious objector during the Korean War and had spent time in prison for that. And he spent three years working in India because he was a very devoted disciple of Gandhi. That was really a lot of his inspiration for nonviolent activism.

I also love the threads of how you can't pin down metta or universal love to any particular path. Gandhi, of course, is a devout Hindu. And here we are, Buddhists, and Jim Lawson, a devoted disciple of Gandhi, was a devoted Christian. And it all just strings together.

This particular story takes place at the beginning of some of the marches for these sit-ins, and they hadn't turned violent yet. This is through the eyes of a young man at that time, one of the students named Bernard Lafayette. They were marching from the church to a lunch counter in downtown Nashville just to sit in and demand to be served. This is the early 1960s, so forty years ago.

Bernard was recalling it some years later. He said he hadn't really felt he'd been tested yet, and so even though he had the deep belief in the power of love and nonviolence, he really didn't know how he would respond when actually faced with violence—which is really honest. We don't know, do we? Do I really believe this? And that's our test as humans, isn't it?

Bernard was at the very end of the line when some young white toughs—like what they would have called greasers when I was a kid, with leather jackets and jeans and slicked back hair—attacked him and started beating this one man. Then the other young men, without even thinking about it, Bernard turned around and did what they'd been taught, which was to throw his own body over the body of the man who was down and being kicked, so that it diverted the attention to him. He did that without even thinking. Then they started beating on him.

At this point—and this is from Bernard—Jim Lawson comes walking up. He said Jim just walked up, not in a hurry, not upset, not as if he was going to fix something, just like he was coming to a day of work at the office. And he was so nonchalant that it really enraged one of the white guys. The white guy spat on Jim Lawson.

And this is the power then. This is the method and the connection. Jim looks at him and says, "Do you have a handkerchief?" The man was so shocked that he reached in his pocket, took out a handkerchief, and gave it to Jim, who calmly wiped his face. Then he looked at the man, saw what he was wearing, and said, "So do you have a motorcycle or do you have a souped-up car?" The guy says, "Well, a motorcycle." And they fall into this conversation about what he's done to soup up his motorcycle and what kind of motorcycle he rides, on and on.

Meanwhile, Bernard and the other man get up. They get back on the line. They all start walking. At that point, the line has moved on. So then Jim joins the line and he waves goodbye to this man. The man didn't wave back. But he also didn't do anything else.

As Bernard said, that was such a wonderful example of Christian love. To me, that's been very inspiring, because it's an example of the real courage—not thinking that nonviolence and human love is a good idea, but knowing the power of connectedness. Because that's what Jim did. He found a way to connect with that young tough, found a way they could both see each other's humanness. And that's because he so knows that we're all human, that we're all connected. It wouldn't work in every situation, but it's the power of the knowing. That's real metta.

That's the power of metta. Stronger than fear, stronger than anger, because it's really coming from truth.

So if it's so strong, how do we get so lost in the separation, in the fragmentation, in these habits of mind?

There are two main habits. Kamala's going to talk more about them tomorrow night. But what we're doing here, moment to moment—we don't have to be at the end of a line being attacked by some racist thug. All you have to do is sit here and look at your mind and heart when your knee starts to hurt, when you wish the bell would ring and you look at your watch and there's twenty-two more minutes. When you go out and it's raining again, you think, "Oh my God"—maybe you don't. You're from California, it's all good, it's raining. "We need the rain"—that's what everybody says. "Oh, I love it, we need the rain."

All you have to do is look at your mind and we see the two biggest habits. They're actually labeled in the tradition of loving-kindness practice as the near and far enemy. Enemy of metta. I know I just finished saying metta has no enemies and now we've got the near and far enemy. They're just words.

But they are desire or attachment—the near enemy in that we can confuse desire for metta, just as I was saying with that kind of yearning. We confuse it for loving-kindness. Not just sexual desire or desire for a person—I was going to say that's obvious, but actually in your practice it often isn't so obvious. It feels sort of good if you don't really look and see that it makes you feel incomplete. It feels sort of good, we really get into it, but it's not metta.

Desire is a maker of limitation, attachment. It doesn't have to be that kind of sexual yearning desire. It can simply be desire to see more of the person. Desire for a more pleasant experience of metta. Desire for the bell to ring. Or you might notice when you're thinking of yourself, you start just subtly wishing you could be a little bit different. "If only I didn't get so distracted, I'd be more filled with metta. If only a really nice state happened, if only this would keep going, then the metta would really flow."

Desire makes limitations, whereas metta is boundless. Even when we have to begin where we are—which is metta for ourselves, for benefactors, for people we know.

But a friend of mine was describing how she noticed even that real open-hearted metta for people she knew, how she could see it made limitations when you limit it. She was visiting her ex-husband who was dying in a VA hospital. They had long ago reconciled and she had a good relationship with him; she was his main support. He was

fairly old and he was going through a long sickness and death. She would go to visit him really filled with metta, with caring, with friendliness, happy to be there, just radiating peace and being with him.

And after—I don't know how long she said, whether it was weeks of going—it suddenly dawned on her that she was walking past rooms and beds filled with other men that she just didn't even notice. She was focusing all her sense of friendliness and love and compassion on her ex-husband. Which was fine, but as soon as she noticed that, she noticed that sense of limitation. Like, "I only have enough metta for this guy, and maybe the one on either side of him, but it can't go any wider than that." The sense we have of its being too hard, too limited.

So, just notice that. Notice when you're wanting something, how it shrinks our world. Notice if there's a sense of separation at that time. Do you feel really connected? Do you feel more isolated? I can tell you what to find—I mean, get the drift—but really look, because we have to get it for ourselves. "Oh, wanting keeps the illusion of separation and neediness going." Just begin to notice the difference between wanting and metta. They're not the same.

And the so-called far enemy, which is more obvious: ill-will, aversion towards people that are difficult, towards that which is unpleasant in our experience. It's more obvious how this creates separation. I mean, no one's going to say—I doubt anyway—that yes, really holding on to ill-will and anger against this person brings us closer together.

But the kind of hook in ill-will and aversion is that it's generally directed toward the things we actually don't want to be brought closer together with. Like our environmental friends who say, "I need my edge. I don't want to feel buddy-buddy with this jerk of a lawyer who's trying to cut down all the trees I've been working to save for nine years. He's a jerk, and I don't want him in my heart."

So this is where we have to really begin to experience for ourselves even the willingness to find a way to connect to that person—or to ourselves, to the things we're having difficulty with in ourselves—to connect with them. We don't have to love them in the common sense, but just not hate them. Just not push them away.

On this environmental retreat, one of the men who was most vociferous against wanting to do the metta practice was someone very dedicated who had been spending years on a particular project, working with a group of trees in northern New Mexico. A very dedicated guy, really not into metta. By the end of the retreat, it was one of the more moving experiences I've had of meeting people at the end of a retreat, seeing

what's arisen for them. It's always beautiful, actually, at the end of a retreat. You go through so much, and the truth just shines out in a different manifestation for everyone.

This man was actually filled with anger. And at the end of the retreat he was weeping, saying, "You know, I really see how the anger doesn't serve. Because I couldn't just keep the anger and direct it towards the work I was doing. It's turning into bitterness, it's leaking out on my family, on my kids, it's eating me up inside." And the metta just—it's not like everything is hunky-dory forever, but it's beginning to see there's another way. And in the connectedness we can actually act with more courage, like that story of Jim Lawson.

I saw this for myself when I was doing a loving-kindness retreat, a long retreat, and I got to the so-called difficult person. They'll tell you to start with an easy difficult person, not the worst, most horrible person in your life—just someone who gets on your nerves a little bit. That's hard enough.

So this was a person who got on my nerves a little bit. I could say the phrases easily and mean it. But then I saw what was going on. It was only if he was over there. There was a moment where I could really feel as if experientially my heart would open and the person would come in, and I saw myself say, "No, I don't want him in there. No, thank you. It's okay if he stays over there."

That was really so instructive. I said, "Oh, I'm really creating the separation. The problem's not him. The problem is me wanting to keep that out." And that's really all you can do—notice that, and boom, the separation's gone in that minute. And I really saw how a lot of the stuff about him that bothered me was just who he is. It was just him being him. He wasn't doing any horrible thing. It was my reactivity, my aversion that was creating the separation and the difficulty. It's really quite powerful to just begin to experience it to where you can trust it.

So these habits of aversion and desire are very, very strong. We'll talk more about them as we go on. But they're really some of the roots of what keeps us in this dream of separation, of illusion—creating the sense of the other, whether it's the other that we want and need, or the other that we want to go away. Whether it's another being, or whether it's the pain in your knee, whether it's the sleepiness that hits at 2:30, whether it's the boredom, whether it's "My God, if I have to say this phrase one more time, I'm going to run out of this room screaming."

It may seem like a huge leap to walk up to someone who's beating our friend and try to connect on a human level. Conceptually, it may seem beyond anything we could do or would even want to do. But we don't have to start there. We really can start not looking for perfection, but moment to moment, with what comes up when you're sitting and walking here.

The moments that you don't feel friendliness, connectedness—when you feel or notice something other, any of the difficult things: aversion, boredom, restlessness, self-hatred. You're off in worlds of desire, planning your fifteenth vacation to Bali, planning what you wish you had done on New Year's Eve. You can spend endless time in totally meaningless stuff and get completely wrapped up in it. When you notice that, how you meet that moment—that can be the cultivation of metta as well. If you meet that moment with "Yes, let's continue this, let's really get lost in Bali, the hour will go faster"—okay, we're back in separation.

If you meet the unpleasant experience with "this really does stink, I hate it, and I hate myself for hating it, and I'm never going to be able to cultivate metta, I'm a no-good, worthless jerk" — okay, what are we cultivating in that moment?

One of my favorite quotations from the Buddha is when he said that what the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that the heart will naturally incline. It's so simple, it's so obvious. Well, left to its own devices, what does the mind dwell upon frequently? It's a little scary as we start to notice.

So don't treat the moments when you get distracted or when the metta isn't happening as lost moments. Those are the places when you wake up and notice where you are and notice how you connect to that moment. Is it with spacious acceptance? Is it with desire? Is it with hatred? Notice. Those moments are really the cultivation of metta also.

There's huge potential for cultivating metta in saying, "Oh, off in Bali again, yep. May I be free from suffering. May I be happy. May I live at ease." Right back, without reaction, into the metta. That's a tremendous opportunity. Each moment that we do that — never mind if you don't feel a thing — each moment that we can offer a phrase wholeheartedly, we're inclining the heart towards metta. And we're cutting through that habit we've cultivated for so long of either desire or distractedness or aversion.

So if we can really be patient, not looking for the big results, not looking for the big states — that's desire again — but simply having that willingness, that acceptance, that spaciousness to meet this moment with kind acceptance, that's metta. Then the willingness to begin again with the next phrase — that's the concentration part. The two

strands come together really in every moment. You don't have to be doing something spectacular. Just have this willingness to meet each moment with friendliness, with clarity of seeing, and to begin again.

It's a choice, you know. And in more moments than we realize, we do have a choice where to let the mind dwell. Now there are plenty of times you don't have a choice. The mind's going to go off. You're not going to usually say, "Oh, I'm about to have a fantasy now about what's for lunch tomorrow." Usually you don't see that until you've already gone over the recipe for the dinner party fifteen times. But in that moment you wake up and notice, "Oh, right, I'm sitting in the meditation hall. I'm not really in the supermarket" — in that moment, you do have a choice. Do I want to stay in the supermarket? Do I want to get into self-recrimination? Or do I just want to say, "Okay, wanting. May I be safe"? Just that simple, that non-reactive.

We can't force results. We can't force some feeling of expansive loving-kindness. But we can be patient. We can be simple and humble and learn to trust that if we have the commitment and the willingness to simply be present, to try and be kind, to not turn against ourselves, then the truth of our connectedness with ourselves and with others will naturally begin to shine forth. And we begin to see that metta really isn't a deluded or a blind state at all. It's really the truest expression of our humanity, our common humanity.

I just want to end with one quotation I read that was really quite beautiful. This is from a review of a book by a woman — she and her husband were Harvard academics on the big career track. They wanted children, they got pregnant, and they found out before the baby was born that it was going to have Down syndrome, a form of mental retardation. All their friends were saying, "Have a therapeutic abortion." But they just didn't want to do that, so they didn't. And all their friends thought they were crazy. They had this baby.

And she said it turns out that this baby was the most wonderful thing that ever happened in their lives. They left Harvard, moved to New Mexico, so that they could step back—I mean, they still had careers, but the career wasn't the most important thing anymore.

This is the woman speaking. She's talking about how she once spoke to an entering class of Harvard Medical School students about her pregnancy and her decision to keep the baby. Adam, the baby, was asleep on her lap at the time. After the speech, she was approached by an elderly professor. He had just become the grandfather of a little girl

with Down syndrome. As he talked to her, he stroked Adam's soft blonde hair and wept. He loved his granddaughter with inexplicable openness, and the experience had changed his whole life.

Whoever said that love is blind was dead wrong. Love is the only thing on this earth that lets us see each other with the remotest accuracy.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

This afternoon we're going to get into a topic that's been on people's minds since the last time we've been together, and that is where we go from here.

I want to say hello to everyone. As most of you know, Bhante has been on retreat and has just come out to be here with us. So we're honored and really delighted to have your presence. Do you remember how to talk?

"Sure. You'd be really surprised if I didn't know."

How's it been going?

"Good. There's still a bit of construction going on around the place, so until the contractors are finished, we're just having an open routine during the day. A lot of solitary time. It's agreeable."

And Mary, you came in towards the end of the morning. Want to say hello?

"I don't think there's anything to say except hello. I'm really happy to be here and spend this last day and a half with you."

I know there's been a planning committee that's met a few times, which we'll hear from in a little while. But I thought I would share with you some thoughts I've had and maybe update you on things that have been going on regarding where we go from here.

It's been interesting hearing from the different teachers. I've been asking each of the teachers who've come and stayed with us, as they end their time, if there are any words of offering or advice for the group. A number of teachers have emphasized the importance of staying in touch—colleagues, sangha. So we have to figure out a good way to do that, one that works for the group and really supports you.

Here's been my thinking. One possibility is for the group to get together once a year. At the same time, there's another group that I'll be starting—it's not clear yet whether that will be at the end of this year or the beginning of next year. Actually, I've been more focused as far as dates and planning on this group.

What I'd like to do, and I think I put this out in an email to you, is get the larger teaching community more involved besides just the Spirit Rock teachers. One, I think it's healthy for you to have input from people outside the radical left of the Dharma teaching world. I really respect all the different Dharma perspectives, honestly. And also, I'd like this not to be so Spirit Rock-focused, which means including all the different teachers in the community. I would love to see this be something that can support Dharma communities that other teachers are involved in as well.

So what I did, I wanted to see about having a meeting for this group on the East Coast. And I think I mentioned that Tara Brach said that she would be interested in being involved and supporting in some ongoing way.

I also, ideally, had in my mind that I'd love to see you have more contact with Joseph, and him have more connection with you. Sharon, if she's open to it and interested. Carol Wilson, who perhaps many of you know is a very dear friend of mine and somebody who I respect tremendously, and who is a kind of bridge between East Coast and West Coast. She comes out here and teaches with us and is also starting to be encouraged to do some teacher training on the East Coast.

So I wanted to have something happen there, and ideally the one time that it could happen where Carol and Joseph and Sharon, if she's into it, could be involved would be before the three-month course. It could also be after the three-month course, although actually in January there's usually the staff retreat, but it starts getting cold after that. And besides, after the three-month course, the teachers are kind of burned out.

So I called and just put out some feelers to see if, one, the study center is a possibility and also if teachers would be open to it. The study center couldn't hold everyone on an accommodating basis, but they have retreats or workshops where people come and meet at the study center but stay in town at various motels and inns. I spoke with Joseph about it and Carol, and they are both open to that happening.

I want to share with you some delicacies about this as well. There are some Dharma politics to be worked out. And there are some valuable things for you to keep in mind as I explain a little bit of the Dharma politics.

By the way, I spoke with the study center and Andy Olendzki, and I had a really nice conversation. You probably all know Andy Olendzki, who's the head of the study center and a scholar of the Pali Canon and the suttas. He's quite open to us being there and would even be willing to rearrange some dates that had been planned for us to be there. So it's possible. And I invited him to participate as well.

So here's the thing, just to be straight about it. We all know this is an incredible program, right? Not just because of any one person, but because the group has manifested so beautifully and has supported each other, and because of all the great Dharma work that you've been doing around the country.

But not everybody knows what has been happening here. And different people have different concerns. Here are two main concerns from outside of our teaching community.

One: who are these guys? Who are these community Dharma leaders? Remember, that was the first question—what is a community Dharma leader? Well, now it's more, who are the community Dharma leaders? People don't know you like I know you and the teaching community knows you. Are you really qualified to be sharing the Dharma? Gina's shaking her head no. But as Hillel said, "If not me, who? If not now, when?" And for some reason, you've been invited and have been doing a beautiful job. But there is that concern: who are these people, are they qualified, and what are they doing?

And it's not just what are you doing now with your communities, but what are you doing with your practices? A number of people—Joseph and a few others—have said, and Eugene in his closing words was saying, make sure that your practice is at the forefront of your Dharma work.

I spoke with Sharon, who said just one thing that she would really hope is that you consider yourself Dharma students, even before Dharma leaders. Because as Joseph and Jack were saying today, it's so seductive, isn't it? And that identification with role, which we've been talking about since the beginning, will be an ongoing issue. Even for people who've been leading retreats for fifteen years, it's an issue. So it's really something for you to keep in mind, and also something for you to know that other teachers outside of our community are also keeping in mind and watching.

Another concern is the parameters that we have an understanding or agreement upon. When we started, it was spelled out that this was to authorize, encourage, and support people to be teaching classes, beginning classes, ongoing sitting groups, daylongs, and weekend retreats.

And obviously, there is a tremendous need and demand. Your communities might say, "Hey, let's do a two-week retreat. Let's do a month-long retreat. Let's really go for it." And there's a need there. We might, out of really caring, want to respond to that need, but that raises flags for people. It really does.

I know some people in this group, even before the group started—I can think of one who's actually no longer in the group—had been doing some teaching before coming to the program. We didn't want to exclude them or say, "No, you can't do what you were doing before." And a couple of people here were invited by teachers to teach retreats with them. But it is a very delicate and tricky subject that people are watching.

I think you should be aware of this, not just for your own sense of playing within your game—knowing what your healthy limits are—but for the whole program, this current group, and future programs as well. It's something to take quite seriously. The temptation will be there, coming from the best possible intention. But it does cast some question for some people on the program and what we're doing.

So those were some questions and concerns that have had to be addressed before the study center can just slot us in. I've done what I can to start addressing those concerns, and I'll share with you what I've done.

I wrote a letter, emailed it to everybody in the larger community whose email addresses I had, explaining what the program has been, what's happened, and talking about the next program, the next group. What I did was ask for people to give names of candidates for the next group. First, because I wanted to get as many good, qualified people as possible. And second, I wanted to have them buy into the program and realize that this is not just a Spirit Rock enterprise. This is our Vipassana community. It can be a program for all.

What I said was: please give me names for the next program, if you're interested, by the end of January. Then at the end of that time, I will post all the names that have been submitted and send them out to everybody again. If anybody has any reservations, let me know. So at least everybody will see that in the next program, people seem to be qualified.

I also said in that letter that I heard there might be some concerns people have about the program, about this program. And when I say this, I don't want to get you really paranoid. Mostly, people feel great about this program, but all the little niggling things have to be cleared up before there are no doubts.

So I said, please, if you've had any concerns, I'd like you to tell them to me, because I want to really do the best job I can in creating this program. I want to learn and have your input and your guidance, rather than having you carry some question in your mind, where we don't have the benefit of it, and it might color your whole perception of what I think is quite a good program. It's going quite well, and there's a lot of good Dharma work happening. So I've welcomed that, invited it.

One person who had some concerns sent a very nice email and also asked if I could hold seven slots for the next group. So that's the kind of thing that happens as they start feeling more connected.

This is something, again, that we've talked about in your own communities. If there are any kind of grumblings out there, although it might not be an easy thing to do, invite the feedback. Because in the long run, it's going to serve you a whole lot better anyway. The talk will be going on. You might as well hear it straight on, and then you can deal with it.

So I'm kind of figuring—and I said please contact me by the end of January—if people don't have concerns other than the ones who've shared them with me, or if they do have concerns and haven't talked about them, then they've had the opportunity to, and they just haven't moved on it. And actually, that's felt pretty good to people like Joseph and Carol, that at least we've given that space for that to happen.

So that kind of gives you a sense of the delicacies of learning a little bit about Dharma politics. I guess the essence of it is just have a smile on your face, welcome feedback, and say thank you, I really appreciate it.

By the larger community, do you basically mean the IMS, Spirit Rock community?

IMS, Gaia House, Spirit Rock. I've emailed people in Europe, in South Africa. There was a big teacher's conference in the summer and I got a lot of email addresses. So just everybody in the Vipassana community worldwide that I know.

So there's a possibility of us getting together in September if we're to be done on the East Coast. The dates that I think tentatively we were looking at were September, after a two-day sit here with the teachers, like September 12th, which is a Tuesday, and then on through maybe from Tuesday to Sunday or something like that.

So that's kind of where we're at on that end. The thing is, if that happens, then probably I will start the next program, the next CDL program in January here. And I told Marianne to save some dates for us to do that. If it doesn't happen at the Study Center, or for whatever reason that doesn't happen, then I would be more inclined to start the

next program in the fall here. And one other possibility would be that we come back here in January instead of going to the East Coast. Again, I said to Marianne, hold some dates. I don't know whether it'll be for the next group here in January or for this group in January, and we'll do something with the other group in the fall.

I would love to see ongoing contact be part of the process. I'd love to see this group having ongoing contact with each other, whether it's the listserv or website that's being discussed, and also a connection with the new group. I could see, at some point, having retreats with just CDL people, annual retreats or something like that.

Actually, I should say just on a personal level, the thought of coming and leading or being part of leading a week-long retreat here, for me, is great. I schedule a few retreats a year and this would be a wonderful retreat. It's a bit different when it involves co-ordinating teacher involvement and presentations. So I just want to put that out to you. Whether it's here or even traveling, even if it's going to the middle of the country or on the East Coast, doing a retreat, a silent retreat, I'd love to sit in silence with you, do a talk in the evening or whatever we decided to do.

So I think I'll stop here. The only other thing before the planning group goes is at some point, whether it's this afternoon or later on, I want to look at the whole issue of mentoring and what that will look like for the continuation of this group. I mentioned in that letter to the larger teacher community that when they nominate somebody as a candidate for the program, it's not just "oh yeah, this person asked me, good luck with them." It's that you feel good enough about them that you would consider being a mentor for them or take some role of active support.

Hopefully that will make it so that the people who are mentors for the current group, if there's been a good mentor relationship, don't have to take on five more people. And also, again, more involvement from the teachers outside the Spirit Rock community.

Question from participant: I certainly see the political reason for doing that, and I think it's extremely wise, but then it seems like it kind of puts the teachers in the position of recommending people that they know really well. In other words, people that are in their group.

Well, yeah, but the thing is that when a teacher recommends somebody, it's not necessarily somebody that they're in the same community with. It's people that have been on retreats whose practice they really value. That was mostly what I've been encouraging—people whose practice warrants and whose natural paramis warrant them being Dharma leaders. But as a little extra incentive, I said think about, besides that, if

there are people who could be of real support for your local community who can fill all the requests that you can't do. So there are two ways that teachers would recommend people.

And even the question of the whole mentoring here has come up. Sometimes it's worked really well and sometimes less well. We can take a look at that when we explore that issue.

So anything else that you want to ask me before the planning group goes ahead? They've asked for about an hour to explore and present.

Question from participant about getting teacher support, noting it feels like karma that people end up in places without much teacher support, and that it seems like unless you move...

What would that look like, or what are you asking? I bet if you look at who teachers nominate, the greatest number will be in the local area.

I mean, I may be wrong, but take a look. I'm not talking about this group. I'm talking about the group coming. And if you see that happening, then I would really look at what Rosemary said and see if there's some other way to stay connected to the communities that don't have a lot of people involved.

And actually, another thing is there have been a few places like Washington or New York or Colorado where there's been a benefit in having a few people work together and kind of having a critical mass. So I could see how it would be really helpful if you're kind of a lone orphan out there in the wilderness and there's somebody else in your community who's got really strong practice—you know, to consider them for the next program. Ideally, and so I'm open to those suggestions, ideally if they were people who knew, had some relationship with some teacher so that the teacher could sponsor them. But I'm still open to other possibilities. We'll continue what's going on one way or another. It's more about the East Coast branching out. There just needs to be an opportunity for anyone's concerns to be heard.

I see that now you're going to be communicating with a much larger body of people looking at you.

Well, they're looking anyway. I'd rather have them look from the inside than the outside. I mean, why not?

For this group, I sent out a letter to everyone—IMS, Gaia House, and Spirit Rock. And there were a few people that were nominated through IMS and Gaia House. There were a handful. There were a number of people who were nominated or whose names were given, and I sent applications to them and never heard from them. They just kind of put it in the waste paper basket or whatever. So that was a little statement right there. But there were some people—Claire was nominated from a few people on the East Coast. And Tamara and Sandra also. So there's been some involvement, and people have appreciated it from the outset, but I just wanted to open it up and include them on the inside.

Someone asked about my concern about the nominations for the next round of people coming via teachers—is that so that they're kind of taking care of the politics of it, so that everyone's coming through an approved channel? It's twofold. One, because I respect teachers' estimations of people's practice. And also to include them and give them a chance to have input into the program.

One person offered this perspective: there's actually quite a lot of groups here where people would recognize within their own community very worthwhile individuals who might not have been spotted by various teachers. Because if you're coming in and you're teaching a retreat for a hundred people or eighty people, when you've got a ten-minute interview every couple of days, you've got to be pretty sharp to say, "Oh, this is a good one." So I would tend to encourage more weight coming from the input from these folks to the people they're actually working with and functioning alongside, rather than having that as the primary criterion. Personally, I feel that's worth more weight.

That's good to hear. And like I said a moment ago, I'd be open to that. In so far, I've been more concerned about teacher buy-in. Can I keep getting other teachers on board? But that makes sense.

We talked about this a little bit last week. Someone in our community came up to me after I'd given a talk one night and said, "I really want to be a teacher. I want to become a teacher. How did you become a teacher?"

And I said I'd like to hear a little bit about that. My impression of the traditional way that one becomes a teacher is that a teacher says, "Go out there and teach." Not "Gee, boss or guru, I want to go and teach now." That's not really the way it goes, right? It comes from the top down.

So it seems like you're trying to use that model in a more structured way by saying, you know, make these formal recommendations and send them applications and all that. And yet I do hear this thing that there are communities where maybe even the community should nominate someone—a group out there somewhere.

I don't know how you know about that. This is a puzzling piece, because it might be that there'd be somebody in your community that you would know better than we would know. But let's assume this person has done a fair number of retreats and a lot of practice. If you brought them to the attention of a teacher—perhaps it's someplace that James has traveled to a lot—then both could make the nomination. It seems highly unlikely that there's going to be somebody whose practice is fabulous, who's done gazillions of retreats, and there's not a teacher anywhere who knows them. That just doesn't seem possible. And I would really want whoever would be doing the program to be steeped in intensive practice. So I'd say at least five years of experience and five retreats, at a minimum.

And you raise a point that actually a lot of teachers have to deal with all the time: "I want to apply for the job. Where do I sign up?" If you knew how many people asked, "I hear Jack Kornfield has a teacher training program. How do I find out more information about it? Where do I apply?" I wouldn't need Donna if I had a nickel for every time that came up.

One of the things the teachers actually asked for, because it's been awkward for them—even teachers outside of the Spirit Rock community have been saying, "I've had a number of people tell me they want to join the Dharma Leaders program." And it's a little awkward saying no. So I actually said in the letter that there's officially a limit of two slots per teacher. And if you have more than that, I'd consider it. But that'll be a simple way to say no—my slots are filled.

I may be missing something, but I don't see what the problem is with either approach, or both. It would be like inviting people here to also be submitting names, with no assurance that there are people whose names they submit who can make the final cut. And January 31st was just something I wanted to start sending out applications for new people, but it's not a hard and fast deadline.

Anyway, that's mostly about the next group, and I want to bring it back to this group as well.

My understanding of the original purpose of the group was to be able to have places all over the country where dharma would be held in their communities. I did that last time, actually. I asked specifically teachers who I knew went to certain areas to consider somebody from this area or that area. And these are the names that came through.

But yeah, I definitely have in mind—like with New York, Tamara and Sandra were just, I think, the last two people to come into the program. I really wanted to have somebody from New York, because that's my hometown. And they need it there. Then I didn't know that Gina would create that critical mass there, but that's one of the really great delights—everything that's happened in New York. That just kind of happened at the last moment, really. I certainly want to look for areas that need some support. And Soren, who started out as local, ended up in New York.

CHAPTER 322

The Possibility of Inner Contentment

Carol Wilson · 49 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's promise of inner contentment—a peace that transcends circumstances and remains available regardless of what life presents. Drawing on St. Augustine's insight that humans suffer because they are "not living in their true home," she explores how we can reconnect with what Chögyam Trungpa called our "basic goodness" through simple, moment-to-moment presence.

Wilson guides practitioners through the Four Noble Truths as "four facts of how things are," explaining how our suffering stems not from life's inherent unreliability and constant change, but from our reactive relationship to experience. She illuminates how we habitually deny difficulty, obsessively self-reference, and mistake our interpretations for actual experience—mistaking the story about neck pain for the bare sensation of tightness itself.

Through poetry by Mary Oliver and reflections on figures like the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Wilson demonstrates that authentic peace doesn't require withdrawal from the world's suffering. Rather, it emerges from the courage to be fully intimate with both the dreadful and wonderful aspects of life. She offers practical guidance on cultivating bare attention—the capacity to distinguish direct experience from our layers of interpretation—revealing how this simple practice in meditation becomes the foundation for responding to all of life with wisdom and compassion.

Tonight I wanted to offer a general overview of the possibility of inner contentment, of living in peace—the potential that was promised to us by the Buddha from his own experience, actualized by many people over the centuries, and which we can discover for ourselves over and over in a moment-to-moment way.

This contentment is a way of living in this world as it is. The Buddha once said there is no higher happiness than peace. It's not a kind of constant ecstasy or always being filled with joy, not the bubbly happiness we might think of. That happens, and it's great—it comes and goes like everything comes and goes. But the peace, the deep contentment, is a way of living as we are right now in this world as it is, highly imperfect as it is.

What the Buddha holds out to us, and what we can explore through the simplicity of this practice, is the possibility of waking up to living our lives in a different way—relating to ourselves, our experience, and the world from a different place. Living from a

contentment, an ease, a harmony with ourselves and with what's arising actually allows us to act more effectively, to be more present and more responsive. This is not at all the peace of dissociation, of needing to shut oneself away forever.

I read a quotation recently from St. Augustine: "The reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home." I love that. We are not living in our true home. And what this practice is about is helping us to rediscover it. We're not creating something new. It's not that our true home or inner peace—or what Chögyam Trungpa used to call our basic goodness, a phrase I like very much—is something non-present, something we must irrevocably alter ourselves to create, or that we must somehow leave this world in order to get elsewhere. It's not so.

Rather, through shifting the way we relate, the way we understand our experience, ourselves, and the world, we live and move and trust in a different way. We come from a different place—from our basic goodness, our true home.

This is not discoverable by going elsewhere. Somewhat paradoxically, given that this world can be so troubling and painful and unsatisfying at times—our inner world, our outer world, what's going on in the world—paradoxically, we can only rediscover and reconnect with our true home by sinking totally into whatever's presenting itself here and now, but with an open, non-judging quality of heart, of attention. By really coming alive in life, in this moment, the natural radiance of who we really are is again recognizable.

It's hard to talk about, actually, true home. It's not something tangible. It's other than thoughts. It's not our emotions. It's not our sensations, although all of that can bring us into recognition. It's indescribable, yet when you are aware of, conscious of your basic goodness—all of our basic goodness, not just mine or yours separate—it's so familiar, so simple, so obvious. Like, "Oh yeah, right." You know those moments when you think, "What's the problem? Why can't it always be like this? What was I so upset about before?" And then, of course, the next moment it's gone again.

It's so familiar that I think sometimes, especially in a meditation retreat, we're looking for something a little more far out, a little more altered, a little more fantastic, a little more definable—something you can talk about and take home and say, "This really happened and I'm advancing on my spiritual path." Rather than just this: yesterday I was walking quickly through the desert, hurrying to get to the phone to answer emails—very important stuff—and suddenly I realized I was missing the whole desert. Just a sense of presence. So simple. But in that moment there's no sense of dividedness, no me or desert, no "I should do this" or "I was being a jerk before." Just this. Not even "this moment"—just being this.

We all experience that a lot. And then it's gone. If you try to say, "Wow, this is a moment of living in my true home, of beingness," it's gone. There's nothing to make a big deal out of. But it's helpful to know it, to recognize it, and to know that it's totally trustworthy.

So a lot of our practice here is a microcosm—how many moments are there in a day? Each moment is an opportunity to again connect with fullness of presence with whatever's happening. And it doesn't matter what's happening. It doesn't matter. We don't have to like it or dislike it.

Whatever's arising can be, in that moment, the avenue to again be fully present, to recognize what another friend of mine calls "a place of no problem." Where you're just—oh, my knee is killing me, and my breath is no good, and I'm falling asleep—and there's just a moment where you stop fighting, but you're still awake. Oh, place of no problem. Then it's gone again.

So, living from our basic goodness in this world as it is. And it's hard, isn't it? I mean, this world is really painful. There's so much in our own particular lives. I talk with many, many people, and even those whose lives you could say are very fortunate—everyone has their own suffering, a lot of difficulty. And in this country, in every place I've ever been, in everything I've ever read, we don't have to say it: the injustice, the poverty, the economic imbalance, the greed, the confusion, the violence, the hatred. How can we really live with contentment and still stay open to this?

Again, it's not easy. And it comes from beginning to understand that we're defining peace and contentment in a slightly different way from our cultural norms.

A friend of mine, when I told her I was talking about inner contentment, said, "Well, anyone can have inner contentment when conditions are calm and peaceful." Think about it. That's not even true. Have you ever had a time when you went on vacation, or you finally were doing something you'd really been looking forward to, and you weren't happy? Something happened, or you had a fight with your partner, or you get there and it's too hot, or you come here and it's too cold. All the conditions seem good, but you're still miserable. So even that you can't rely on.

But our tendency, the way one generally tends to think about contentment, is to first relate it to outer conditions. We're contented if we can somehow control our environment. That's what's great about retreats—it's a microcosm of your whole life. Often people find themselves in the first day or two, if that's your particular tendency, trying to control the environment. If that's not your tendency, believe me, you have other

ones. We all do. But some people find themselves really trying to control the room, control the hall, control what they're going to wear, find their little schedule so they can walk in this way at this time to this place, and then it'll really be okay.

Controlling the environment is also a way of trying to block out the difficulty, the suffering. Some people, in living their lives and looking for happiness or contentment, are always going after pleasure and somehow avoiding—just saying, "It's too painful what's going on in this world. I don't want to know about it." Every now and then I'll talk to someone who says, "I just never read the newspapers because it's too painful." That's not what we're talking about either.

And then one can take the flip side of that, where we really are very involved in the suffering in the world, in whatever arena particularly calls us, working actively to help effect a change, but getting so involved, so over-identified, that we really start to drown in despair, in anger, in frustration—because no one can fix it all. From that place, it's really a challenge to imagine how one could live with real peace and contentment while people are still going hungry, while children are still not being educated, whatever the particular issue is that's closest to your heart.

But we're talking about something completely different. That's one of the reasons I think Buddhism has sometimes gotten the reputation of being very quiescent, very pulled back. That we go off into caves, we go off into meditation retreats, completely removed from our lives in nice places, meditate on our own for ten days, but that the peace acquired by setting up those conditions doesn't have very much to do with the rest of life. That we're just the lucky few who can do that. That Buddhism requires a removal from day-to-day suffering and is really about that removal.

It's not that either. It's true that the conditions of a retreat give us the opportunity to investigate in a much clearer way than is possible when our minds are so busy, so cluttered as they are in our daily lives. Well, I'll speak for myself. Maybe the rest of you have very quiet lives where you just do one thing at a time with a lot of space. Maybe that's possible. It's not true in mine, or anyone I know. I just read an advertisement from HBO—I didn't quite get the technicalities of it, but the drift was that they had some new thing you could get that would enable you to watch two different movies at once on two different TVs. As if this was something we should want. God forbid we should miss anything.

The Buddha's understanding of the inner contentment we're talking about here—it's very different from escapism, from avoidance. It's much more radical than what we would normally think, because this inner contentment is always available.

It's who we are. It's our birthright, and it has nothing to do with conditions—either outer or inner. Ultimately, contentment isn't dependent on our body feeling good, or on being in a good mood, or on having people love us, or on being able to effect wholesome change where we work, in our families, in our communities. All of that is important to do, but that's not the basis for the peace of the Buddha.

The shift that allows us to recognize our true home and live from peace is exactly a shift of attitude, not a shift of conditions. And oddly enough, the attitude shift isn't one of pulling away from conditions, but of opening into, sinking deeply into what's happening. It's the shift of attitude that allows us to see things as they are rather than how we think they are. And this actually is huge. It's an immediacy of presence, a wakeful intimacy that actually allows this shift of perception, this shift of attitude that opens us into a different way of being.

Let me read you this poem because I love it. It's a little long, but to me it really speaks to our tendency to pull away from the painful, the unpleasant, our wanting to change things—and how the simple immediacy of presence, loving acceptance of what is without any dialogue about it, just as it is, opens us to a whole new way of being in that moment.

It's by Mary Oliver:

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it. Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem. But first, we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She is washing the tops of airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life, and I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen, but maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. And neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So our human potential for connectedness, for harmony, for happiness, for being able to meet ourselves and the world as it is with love and compassion—it's so close. And it can seem so far in a moment when we're having difficulty with what's happening. But the shift is just one of attitude, of how we meet what's happening in that moment.

And so in this retreat, what we're doing is having many moments where we can simply practice that wholehearted meeting—and explore as well the times when we just can't do that, when we're suffering, when we're caught, when we're reactive, when we're frustrated, whether it's with ourselves, with others, with situations. When we're longing for something. When we want things to be different.

We start out with ourselves, but it isn't a self-involved, separating practice. Because as we explore our own reactivity, our own ability to open to truth, to love, to peace, that automatically takes us out into the whole world. We see that we are the world.

This is how Thich Nhat Hanh describes the four foundations of mindfulness:

Meditation is to be aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and the world. Each day, 40,000 children die of hunger. The former superpowers still have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads. Yet the sunrise is beautiful. And the rose that bloomed this morning along the wall is a miracle. Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both of these aspects.

And it's often quite challenging. It can take a lot of courage to keep being in touch with both of these aspects. You might find you have a tendency more for one than the other. No one really likes to be with difficult stuff—but some people really notice the difficult a lot and just don't quite see that there's also a lot that's pleasant, a lot of beauty. For others, it's more the reverse. They notice their happy states, they notice the beauty in the desert, and they try to shut off the difficult. Somehow it can seem hard for us to recognize that both can be true in alternation.

If we're lucky, it's in alternation.

So we begin to cultivate a recognition of this place of no problem, of our basic goodness, this sense of ease in the moment. I've tried to describe a few such moments. Again, it's nothing special. Right now, just right now, quit trying to do anything and simply feel your body sitting there. Just notice it. Without any judgment, without any story—you're just sitting there.

Now, is that so hard? Does it take a lot of time? Does it require any great skill? No, I hope the answer is no. It's not a big deal. All we're doing is remembering to do that, to appreciate the simplicity of being present.

Yet to do that moment to moment is really hard.

I want to talk a little about the way the Buddha tried to lay out the facts to help us understand why it's so hard. What I tend to notice is that if I just sit—okay, I'm sitting here, fine—pretty soon the mind goes off. Either it hits something painful or unpleasant: right now my back's hurting a little bit, it's so cold, I didn't like that noise, I don't like my breath, I'm feeling sleepy—and we're off in reactivity. Or we have a memory of something difficult, or we start to feel sad, and we have a difficult emotion. Or we go off just distracted. The mind simply doesn't quite know how to settle into a steady focus.

Again, it's what I was saying about how busy our lives are, this thirty-second attention span that seems to be cultivated by the media. Like it or not, it's so prevalent that it's easy to fall into it. Even with the best intentions, when things are relatively pleasant and there's no big problem, the mind is hopping off here and there. How many of your thoughts today have seemed totally useless? You know—why am I thinking this? It's not even interesting. It's not going anywhere. And then when that same thought comes up again for the fiftieth time: what is going on? Nothing. It's just the mind looking for distraction. It's not used to focusing.

So the Buddha talked a lot about this, and he gave us the Four Noble Truths. I'm going to speak about them briefly as the four facts of how things are. Not recognizing them, not accepting things as they are, keeps us in this mode of reactivity to what's arising rather than being able to land with full presence in the moment. When we meet a moment without reactivity, we can respond appropriately. We can respond from connectedness, from compassion.

The first truth is that life experience—everything that comes into our life, our body, our mind, other people—is basically unreliable. Unreliable in terms of being in constant change, in constant flux. We never really know what's going to happen in the next moment. Even with all of our plans, as carefully laid as they are, we never really know. Jack had been planning to come here for a year, and the night before he got really sick.

We never know. Is he going to get better tomorrow? Is he going to get sicker? Who knows? All of us sitting here—who knows how we're going to feel tomorrow? One time here, quite some years ago, in the middle of a talk, we had a big earthquake. You never really know what's going to happen in the next moment.

That level of unreliability—we really mostly don't like to live with that too much. That's not something that makes us perk up our ears and say, "Yeah, great, that really brings me a sense of peace, a sense of rest." It's much more like, "Why is she talking about that? Okay, unreliable, sure, I know. We get sick, we die, yeah, yeah, yeah. Bad things are going to happen, yeah, yeah, yeah."

That's sort of what the Buddha's saying in this first truth. He's saying: this is how things are. It's not good or bad.

It's not your fault. It's not someone else's fault. We're not talking about blame. We're simply saying, this is how things are. Everything is constantly changing. There's no state of mind you can hold onto, no state of body. We're all going to have to deal with loss, with things not being the way we want them to be, with having to be with things we'd rather not be with—situations and people both.

Watching my parents getting old and getting sick, I notice how my mind thinks, *No, not them.* And then I think, *Hey, my dad's eighty-two. What do you expect?* It's going to happen. But still, there's the resistance.

And what's our relationship to this? Without really paying attention, our knee-jerk habitual relationship is just what keeps us suffering. The first, most obvious pattern—but one we can get caught in—is just outright denial. *I'm not sick. You're not suffering. Just pull yourself together and get over it.*

You know how it is when you're really grief-stricken, or you've been sick a long time, or something really hard is happening in your family. After a while, your friends seem to only want to hear so much. And you kind of get the feeling, *Okay, better talk about something else. I'm going to spoil the luncheon.* You don't want to talk about it on vacation because it'll bring people down—as if we could somehow hold ourselves separate.

I read this article from the Associated Press. To my mind, this is the ultimate example of trying to control and deny. The mayor of a small southern city in Spain banned death. He felt the local cemetery was too crowded for a soul to get decent eternal rest. So the four thousand residents of this village in the Granada province should "remain alive" while municipal officials shop for land to build a new graveyard. Mayor

Jose Rubio, age fifty-eight, issued an edict last week ordering people—and I quote—"to take utmost care of their health so they do not die until Town Hall takes the necessary steps to acquire land suitable for our deceased to rest in glory."

Now, maybe we don't go that far. But there's something in it I could really relate to. When I have something I really want to do, I'll think, *Okay, I'll get sick later, but I can't get sick this month.* Or if I'm worried about my parents: *Okay, in November it's fine if something happens because then I can go home, but not in August because I have to be in Europe.* There's an element of denial.

Once I was in the hospital quite some years ago. I'd been there a while, and if you've ever been in the hospital getting intravenous fluids, you know that sometimes after a while the veins collapse and it gets harder to put the IV in. The nurse that particular morning was having problems. She tried it a few times, and by that point we were both stressed. She was actually more stressed than me because she hated to cause pain.

So she ran out into the corridor and collared the first doctor walking by. I thought, *Man, I'm really in trouble now,* because the nurses are the ones who put in the IVs, not the doctors. So he came in and was jabbing away. I wasn't at my most balanced, and little tears were coming down. I didn't say much, but there were tears. He looks at me and says, "What's the matter? This doesn't hurt."

And really, I could understand that. It was too painful for him to let it in—that he was hurting me, even though his intention was wholesome. He wasn't trying to hurt me; he was trying to help me. But it's so hard for us to be present and open, fully intimate with the experience of the unpleasant.

That holding ourselves away—whether through denial, through trying to change things, or through completely going after pleasure—is what keeps us confused and suffering.

So what the Buddha's saying is not that we have to live with passive resignation: *Okay, whatever bad happens, I'm a doormat. There's nothing I can do to change things.* Not at all. But simply, in the moment, if something difficult, painful, or lost is happening—that it's happening. That's all. To be able to acknowledge with an open heart: *Yes, this is happening.* From that, we might be able to respond with a lot more wisdom, with a lot more appropriateness.

So seeing the constant change, the flux—it's actually a seeing of wisdom that brings not the kind of despair that cries, *Oh my God, there's nowhere to rest, everything's changing.* What it really brings is peace.

Because if I know this beautiful thing is going to change, I actually can appreciate it more fully rather than worrying about whether it will change. I know it will change, so I can be present. When something difficult is happening, rather than blaming myself, rather than blaming others, rather than taking it really personally, it's just: okay, this is what's happening. It's a fact of life. Can I be with the bare experience rather than all my reactions?

And notice—this is one of the ways we don't quite see change clearly—that we tend sometimes to take it personally. In myself, I feel like it's an obsessive self-referencing about everything.

For example, the weather here in the desert. I love doing retreats here because the desert is such a teacher in this regard. You never know. I've been here fifteen or sixteen springs now, and you never know how the weather's going to be. But every time—sixteen years—I never pack enough warm clothes. I always remember the first year I came when it was really warm and we were sunning ourselves. Sixteen years, and I don't get it. Franz keeps saying to me, "What's the matter with you? Pack more warm clothes." Two years ago I had to go buy a down coat at a thrift store here because it was freezing.

But it's constantly changing. You can't come here and really settle into "this is how the weather is going to be." Two days ago—we got here Tuesday night—it was really pristine. It was warm. It was beautiful. The wind wasn't blowing. And even though we could say, "Oh, we know the wind's going to start blowing sometime," we didn't really mean it. When the wind started blowing, I could see my mind going, "Oh, wouldn't you know it. Just when I come to the desert, the wind starts to blow."

That's what I mean about this obsessive self-referencing. Constant change—and how does it affect me? That's all I care about. How does it affect me? That's the source of the suffering. Take the me out of it, and it's just what it is. There's no real problem. I can walk outside, and instead of pretending it's warm because I want it to be, I can notice it's cold and put on the appropriate clothes. It took me until this afternoon to put on this jacket. So yes, it really is cold and it's staying cold—put on the jacket. Just to be really present. It's out of our control.

So how much of our suffering is about trying to control what's uncontrollable? I came here to sit with Jack and he's sick. That's just a fact. What does the mind do with that? That's the suffering—if the mind does something with it.

And so the second fact that the Buddha talked about: the cause, really the cause of our discontent, of our dissatisfaction, of our dis-ease in this world, is not that difficult stuff happens—because it's going to—but it's the reactivity of our heart and mind to both the difficult and the beautiful. We hold on to what we like. We want it to stay, knowing it can't. We push away, we hate, we react, we blame ourselves, we blame each other, we try to control. All the permutations. And you have ten days to explore those permutations. That's an important part of the practice.

It really is. How do we react to the simple fact of what's arising? How do our reactions cause us suffering in this moment?

So often we're entranced by our reactions, by the cycling stories that we tell from our reactions, and we aren't even aware of what actually started off that reaction in the first place. We're long gone into reaction on top of reaction on top of reaction.

For example, this is a very simple thing, but pleasant. You could be sitting in the hall, getting a little bored with what's going on, and some pleasant smell comes by. You don't even really consciously recognize it. From that pleasant smell, you kind of get a nice feeling. There's a thought: "Ah, I wonder what's for lunch." And then you go back to that wonderful meal you had two weeks ago with so-and-so, and maybe you can do it again. And what are you doing sitting here? Because you could be having that wonderful meal with so-and-so, and actually it's freezing here. And you're completely gone—wanting and aversion and spacing out. You never even noticed just a simple nice smell coming through. And you're in worlds of discontent. Because wanting the pleasant that isn't here is also discontent. It keeps us from landing in our true home.

Just to connect with what is, recognizing it, the simplicity of a moment's experience for what it is—that's the place where our peace can begin.

This is from the great Buddhist teacher Phil Jackson. His book is actually quite good. I don't know if you've read it—*Sacred Hoops*, about his time training the Bulls. It's really quite good. He said: "In Zen it's said that the gap between accepting things the way they are and wishing them to be otherwise is the tenth of an inch of difference between heaven and hell. If we can accept whatever hand we've been dealt, no matter how unwelcome, the way to proceed eventually becomes clear. This is what is meant by right action: the capacity to observe what's happening and act appropriately without being distracted by our self-centered thoughts. If we rage and resist, our angry, fearful minds have trouble quieting down sufficiently to allow us to act in the most beneficial way for ourselves and for others."

That's really it in a nutshell: learning how to connect with the simplicity of our experience, using just the sensations of breath for the beginning. How much more simple could we get? And we'll move to sensations in the body and include our emotions and our thoughts and sounds and senses and everything that's happening in our experience—everything. Learning how to quiet the mind enough to connect with the simplicity of experience and learn how to tell the difference between what's actually happening and all our interpretations and reactions. And from that place, true compassion and peace and right action become really possible.

The end of suffering that the Buddha speaks of—we can experience it in moments. It's not by separating ourselves from life. It's not by achieving some very high state of concentration or an altered state. I mean, those are nice. Those are momentary, you could call them worldly pleasure. But it's not the end of suffering the Buddha's talking about. The end of suffering is really when we have a moment where we can experience what's happening—internal, external, whatever it is—fully, openly, without resistance, without clinging, without this self-referencing of "what does it mean to me?" Simple, total presence. Here, now, this moment. That's all. Just this moment. Free of clinging and self-referencing.

And in that moment, we see how much energy in our lives goes into resistance. How much energy is caught up in wanting things to be different, in holding on to or chasing after the pleasant, in trying to arrange things so we don't experience what we don't like. It's huge. And we recognize that when there's a moment when none of that is present. There's this vivid, wakeful totality of presence—just what is—that lets us begin to trust that maybe we really are other than this mass of emotions and reactions and thoughts and body sensations. I mean, if I'm really my emotions and my thoughts, that's a really depressing thought. If we pay attention, how many emotions and thoughts have gone through today? How can we really think we're any of them? It always amazes me that I keep thinking this emotion is *me* when I know it wasn't here five minutes ago and it's going to be gone in another half hour.

But this sense of presence, of not being so self-absorbed, is not like a grim, disconnected kind of life. That's another misconception of a mind and heart that's free from clinging, of the peace of the Buddha, so to speak—that it's somehow ethereal, floating along, disconnected, dispassionate, meaning indifferent, "who cares."

But the people that I've read about or the people I meet—I can't say someone's completely awakened, I don't know that—but you know when you're with someone who seems more free, more alive, less self-obsessed. Someone who is compassionate, who is

really able to roll with what's happening in life without getting so thrown by it. The people like that that I know or that I read about, they're actually some of the most joyful, alive people I've ever met.

I saw this one photograph—I don't know if I have it somewhere here. Oh yes, you probably can't see it, but it's the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They were at a conference in Virginia, University of Virginia I think, a couple of years ago, for Nobel Peace laureates. Seven or eight of the Nobel Peace laureates had been invited to this conference to try and jolt the students at this college into some sense of caring about the world outside of themselves, basically. That was the point of the conference.

But what I love is this: I think of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu as two men who have probably come face to face with more suffering in their respective lives than almost anyone. All the people that they work with or listen to in South Africa or among the Tibetan refugees—I can hear just one or two stories and it's unbearable suffering. And for these men, it's their whole lives. Yet in this photo, they're just clowning around, completely laughing and joking. The Dalai Lama is behind Archbishop Tutu, and he's trying to pull off his cap, like little kids. Archbishop Tutu is holding it on, and they're both just cracking up. This is obviously in front of everybody, a photo opportunity, and that's how they're acting—innocent and joyful, not weighed down with the troubles of the world.

So when we begin to explore opening here and now, meeting what's happening rather than avoiding it, it might seem counterintuitive. We think, "I don't want to dive into this. This is what's causing me problems. I want to get away from it." But the actual meeting face to face with bare attention—that's what brings us into real trust, into our true home, into the ability to meet ourselves and life with much greater compassion and kindness and connectedness. To really trust that that's who we are. And that it's possible in this confused and painful world to live from a truer, more connected place that lets us actually be more present for one another. More present for ourselves.

Our practice here may not seem like it's connecting to that, especially in the beginning. Feeling your knee pain, feeling your shoulder tension, watching your breath, falling asleep, hating it. "Don't give me that. What's that got to do with living in your true home and compassion? It's just torture." But the way our mind responds to the neck pain is the way we're going to respond to something bigger in the world.

The only other concept I want to mention is that of bare attention. In other words, use that neck pain, use the coldness of the wind to begin to see how to bring our attention into the actual experience and learn to tell the difference between that and our ideas and interpretations. Sometimes we don't even know that we're mistaking our interpretation for the actual experience.

Pain in the body is a good example. Your knee starts to hurt. Do you just notice dullness or throbbing or sharpness? Do you even have a moment of that, or is it immediately, "Oh my God, here it goes. This is bad. I'm going to have to have arthroscopic surgery. These people are nuts. They're all sitting in chairs. What happened to them? I bet they really damaged themselves somewhere down the line." You don't even get to, "Oh, it's throbbing. It's actually not even that bad." When you look at it, it isn't even hurting yet, but you're already out of here.

Or the tension in the neck—is it just tightness? Or is it a sign of your high-stress, type-A personality? A sign that you're out of control in your life? That you're driven? That you've never been able to express love to anybody?

That you're doing way too much. That you yelled at your kids before you came. That everything's wrong in life. That this whole society, this whole culture is completely messed up. And in fact, you've got that guy you met who moved to Ireland and has finally found peace—that's what you need to do.

It goes pretty far pretty quickly, doesn't it?

Can you even get out of that back to simple throbbing without it meaning anything about who you are as a person? Sometimes we can, but sometimes we really can't. And in fact, we get angry at someone who tells us that it's just throbbing. Don't tell me that. I know.

So this is our practice. Just feel the bare sensation of breath without it meaning anything. It's just a sensation. It's our avenue in that moment to awareness. Whether the sensation is beautiful or ugly or tight or loose or you can't feel it or whatever—it doesn't matter. In that sensation, in the feeling of it, we're in awareness. The sensation comes and goes, but awareness is here no matter what's happening. And sensation—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, the coldness of the wind, whatever's happening—is simply our key to open into awareness again.

And in that simplicity of awareness is where we re-recognize and learn to trust what St. Augustine called our true home.

I urge you to try to be non-judgmental about whatever's going on. Just recognize that every moment is an opportunity to dwell in peace, in contentment, in really participatory intimacy with life. This moment is all the life we've got. Let's be really here with it.

CHAPTER 323

Attachment to Views

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines one of the Buddha's key teachings on suffering: our attachment to views and opinions (diṭṭhi). Drawing from both classical Buddhist teachings and contemporary examples—from political debates to dietary beliefs to the civil rights movement—she illuminates how our tendency to think "this alone is true, everything else is false" creates conflict within ourselves and with others.

Wilson traces how suffering begins at the level of perception itself, explaining the Buddhist understanding of how contact leads to feeling, perception, and then the proliferation of thought (papañca) that can "assail and overwhelm" us. She shares the story of a woman whose entire day was ruined by misperceiving a colleague's expression, illustrating how our interpretations—colored by memory, mood, and conditioning—can spiral far from what is actually happening.

At the deepest level, Wilson points to our most fundamental misperception: the belief in a continuous, unchanging self. Through direct investigation in meditation, we can discover that what seems solid—body, emotions, thoughts, and the sense of "I"—is actually arising and passing moment to moment. Rather than finding this destabilizing, she suggests it offers profound relief: we can put down the burden of thinking we're in charge of everything. The talk concludes with an invitation to meet each moment with openness and trust, free from the preconceptions that keep us imprisoned.

When I said earlier that I really liked asking opinions from fifty people, that's actually what I want to talk about tonight—the not-so-subtle tendency of mind.

Tonight is Passover, and in the staff dining room, we had a little mini, very reduced Seder, reduced from four hours to ten minutes. But that's okay. And me not being Jewish, it's really nice to hear the metaphorical explanation that it's really a celebration of coming out of bondage into liberation, and thinking of that not in the past, but as our heritage, as what we are doing right now in this moment—coming out of bondage into freedom, to liberation.

So tonight I'd like to talk about one way that without wisdom, without understanding what's happening in the moment, we relate to experience in a way that keeps us suffering, that keeps us in bondage—and how by a simple shift of perception, the whole rela-

tionship changes. What I want to talk about is basically centered around this experience we call thinking. I don't know if you've noticed how much power that experience can have, but that's what I want to talk about tonight.

At this point in the retreat, a little over halfway through, it's pretty common for a yogi, a meditator, to find yourself at times in a sort of self-assessment. How am I doing? Has this been a complete waste of time? Am I getting anywhere? Am I making progress? What have I learned? And most of this assessment comes in the form of thinking, doesn't it? Comparing how our experience meets some ideal we've read about or heard about or just made up ourselves. And you'd be surprised how much we're just making it up ourselves.

In the realm of thought, a lot of our practice, a lot of our spiritual journey can become about acquiring knowledge. If we get some particular set of knowledge—whether it's philosophical, whether it's understanding how to do the meditation so that you know the correct response in every situation—then we'll know. We'll be free.

For years—I hate to say how many years—my practice was really, I held in the back of my mind some idea that finally on one retreat (and I always thought it would be this retreat), I would suddenly acquire the particular piece of knowledge that explained everything. And then I would understand it all. Everything would make sense, all the paradox, all the mystery, and then I would be able to rest. Forget all this hard work and this confusion that gets going in the mind and trying to put it all together. Now I know. I understand. I have the knowledge.

I guess you know what I'm leading up to: the fact that it doesn't work this way. Actually, the more we bring our attention into experience, the less hard and fast knowledge there is to hold onto. It's really about a willingness to open into the total mystery, the vastness of not knowing.

So I'll read my favorite scientific article, which I think serves as a perfect metaphor for what we really begin to discover as we inquire into our mind and body moment-to-moment experience. This is from the New York Times a few years ago about cosmology. It says, "One of the great unanswered questions of cosmology is why the universe is lumpy instead of smooth." I know you've been worrying about that in these days. Lumpy meaning why things cluster together instead of being evenly spaced out in the universe.

So these scientists discovered, in pursuit of understanding this, the largest galaxy ever detected. That galaxy has 100 trillion stars in it and is more than 6 million light years in diameter. That's big. It's sixty times bigger than the Milky Way, which they call the Earth's own galaxy. You didn't know that we, as Earthlings, own a galaxy, but we do—the Milky Way.

But this new galaxy, this huge one, is located in the center of an even larger clump of 1,000 galaxies. And this giant clump of galaxies is called by the poetic name of Abel 2029.

But that's just leading up to all this investigation to try and understand what all this matter is doing. The scientists still can't understand what holds all these galaxies together. There doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the gravitational forces that cause all these galaxies to clump together like this. So scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe is made up of this missing, invisible matter. What's generally thought of as astronomy actually concerns only a tiny subset of particles that happen to be detectable by human nervous systems.

Now I think that's a very good metaphor for our practice. The willingness to simply bring our attention to what we can observe, to meet it as clearly as possible. Sure, we'll have ideas about it, things we want to understand, interpretations—but can we put that aside and simply open into the mystery and let this experience in this moment reveal itself? All too often the answer to that question is no. But what we're learning is that it's possible.

When we talk about beginner's mind—Suzuki Roshi's fantastic phrase that we've all been using—it's really this: to bring to each moment of experience a quality of attention that is free from preconception. When we meet just a moment of life in this way, rather than saying, "Oh, I know what this is. This is the desert. This is a bell. That's Anna. What do I know about Anna? I think I know Anna because I've known her for years"—can we bring a freshness instead? We don't really know anything, absolutely. And when we can open with this wonder, life is so mysterious. Everything is so... it just brings such an aliveness, such a presence, such a connectedness.

If I look out over the desert there, just walking up here, I think, how can I think I know anything? It's so mysterious. And then when we think we know, the mind snaps shut. But this isn't normally the way we live.

One of the things I've noticed in thirty years I've spent really observing this mind and body closely is that our mind tends often not to be so comfortable with meeting every moment with this openness of "who knows?" We like to know, don't we? Do you really like thinking you're here, really working hard for ten days, and you're going to get absolutely no confirmation whatsoever whether it was worthwhile or not? Does that sit well with the mind? We like to have some sense of stability, some sense of security, of knowing where we are in comparison to yesterday and tomorrow. And I want to know where I am in comparison to Anna and Philip—we're constantly comparing. Am I better? Am I worse? Am I equal? Always wanting to have this sense of security.

The Buddha said one time, this desire for a resting place is burning in the heart and mind. Not to need a resting place is cool and peaceful. But to us, the sense of no resting place can be very unrestful, disturbing. We want some firm ground to stand on.

And one way—the way I want to talk about tonight—that this tendency of wanting to control and have security manifests is through the way we can relate to thought. As I think Jack said, and I thought it was a great line, thought is a wonderful tool and a terrible master.

Thought is great. It communicates. We use it to communicate, to describe, to explain, to encompass very complex things. We really can appreciate the power and the quality and the subtlety of thought. One way that it becomes a terrible master, that it brings us into conflict, confusion, and suffering with ourselves, with how things are, with one another, is when the descriptions or interpretations that we're putting on a moment of experience or ourselves or another harden and solidify, and that description or interpretation becomes a view or an opinion.

Even that's okay if we know it's a view and an opinion. But so often we get caught in really believing—to use the Buddhist terminology—grasping, clinging, attaching ourselves to that view, to that opinion, to that description of how things are or should be. And in that attachment, in that grasping, enormous suffering can arise in ourselves, and then we can inflict that on others and on the world.

This aspect of grasping at views the Buddha actually spoke about quite a bit, as one of the great sources of our confusion, of our not seeing things the way they are, of our not recognizing our potential for liberation.

The classical description of grasping at views is the tendency of mind to think, "This alone is true, everything else is false." Now, I always think if my mind would really say that, it would be a big help, because then I would know at least that a view is arising

and I was grasping at it. Unfortunately, it's usually much more insidious. We really do think this is true, to the exclusion of being able to admit—often even the possibility—that maybe, perhaps, things could be another way.

So attachment to views really limits our world, our heart, our mind, our experience, our ability to be open and connected with one another. When we're caught in an opinion, in a view, what's really interesting is how our perception, our mind, snaps closed. We don't even let in, or want to let in, any information that might run counter to our view, because we're so sure this is how it is.

Let me give a few obvious examples. Politics, of course, is a great one, because at least we usually know we have a view. We believe it, of course. There's nothing wrong with that. We're going to have opinions, and we're going to act on them. Hopefully we'll vote. We'll have opinions on different issues. Nothing wrong with that. But you know how on television, when election campaigns are coming up and the candidates have so-called political debates? I find those debates a joke. I've never heard one where I felt like they were really interested in listening to each other and maybe hearing, "Oh, you have something different to say about that issue. Maybe there's something useful in what you say." You know, forget about it. They're just not even talking to each other.

I've noticed—back in '92, I won't go into specifics—but during the presidential election that year, there were a couple of politicians running for various things that I literally could not stand to listen to on television, or even see. This was my real attachment to my view. I knew that they were completely—what would I say—selfish, uncaring, had no one's interest in mind but themselves and rich people, that there was nothing good whatsoever about either of these two human beings. And if anyone told me something good, I didn't want to hear it, because then I would have to loosen my view.

I read in a newspaper—maybe it was in Thailand—about the recent presidential election in Taiwan. It was describing how completely, intensely the Taiwanese people were caught up in their opinions about who they wanted elected president. To the extent that before the election, the hospitals were, on a daily basis, having people brought into the emergency room. Usually it was men, brought in by their families. They developed a name for it: a kind of pre-election mania. This is true—I read it in the newspaper. So obsessed. I know, that really means it's true, right? That's another scary thing. But these men would come in so obsessed that they were in a kind of manic state, and this kept happening over and over, every day, different people. Such a manic state that all they could talk about was their candidate and how you should vote for him, and they couldn't stop talking about it. They weren't able to work. They wouldn't even let

the doctors or nurses talk to them until they found out who they were going to vote for. It's very serious. And then after the election—I don't know if you recall—there were a lot of riots by the people whose candidate didn't win, because they were so upset.

So taking an opinion, a view of what we think is right, and attaching to it—we really want that—can lead to enormous suffering. These are minor examples. Minor examples.

A couple of others that are more personal: the views people can have about what is healthy to eat. Now, I'm from the East Coast. I don't want to cast aspersions on California, but I do notice the views are a little more strongly held here than in some parts of the world where I've been. But I'll tell a story from IMS in Massachusetts. Every summer we have a retreat for young adults, for people between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. Every year it's grown until now there are about sixty people. Stephen Smith and Michelle McDonald-Smith have been doing this for years. It's a wonderful retreat.

In the beginning, it was just parents—you know, people who had been sitting and made their kids come. But the kids got into it, and now there are plenty of kids who come whose parents have nothing to do with it. They love it, and they tell their friends. One year, there were three or four fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds from New York City who lived a very different life from a meditation center out in the country in Massachusetts, and whose diet was very different. They didn't really eat vegetarian. Tofu wasn't big on their agenda. Mostly fast food and sweets and potato chips and like that. So the cooks would—

The cooks would try to make things the kids would like, but within vegetarian limits. At this particular time, we had a group of cooks who were not into sugar—very strong views about how bad sugar is. And some of these kids, the ones from the city, really had physical difficulty with the diet. If you go off eating a lot of sweets and a lot of fat very quickly, the digestive system doesn't adjust so well. These kids were really having trouble, and Michelle told me she wanted to at least get some sweets, some sugar. But the cooks didn't want them to have it. Finally, after quite some negotiation, the cooks agreed to let these kids have sugar—but they had to hide it. My God, I thought. These kids must think we're really nuts, making them hide sugar, coming from the city.

We can get so attached.

On the other end, I was teaching a retreat in Switzerland a couple of years ago with two very good Swiss friends. Just kidding around, they kept singing to me—every day they would sing me this little Swiss German song from their childhood. Don't worry, I

cannot replicate a song in Swiss German. But the upshot of this song was: "We are so happy living in the mountains. We eat plenty of butter and cheese, and that gives us good blood." Well, that's different from what I hear over here.

We had another couple of friends from Germany who came to California for the first time, and they were reporting about their first experience in a supermarket. They just wanted to go in and buy some milk and some yogurt. And they said, "My God, what is with this country? You can't just find milk. There's 1%, 2%, no percent. There's lactaid 70%, lactaid 100%, 1% lactaid 70%, 2% lactaid 70%, skim milk lactaid." Finally they found regular milk. Then they would go to some inexpensive taco place in Palm Springs, and they said, "We're really hungry, let's order the jumbo." Franz said, "You better not." So they ordered the regular, which was, of course, gigantic—more than two people could eat. They said, "Why don't people here just eat half as much, and then they wouldn't need seventy-five different kinds of milk?"

So—views about what we eat. We can get very, very fixated on it. I've been in millions of conversations that got quite heated about what is really good to eat. Can we just let in the possibility that what we think is an opinion? It's not God's truth on this planet. It's an opinion.

And then it gets actually very painful and very scary. When we're holding an opinion and we don't know it's an opinion, really deeply—when we think it's the truth of how things are—in our personal life this causes suffering, and even more so it wreaks havoc on the social, economic, political, person-to-person, and nation-to-nation relationships on this planet.

Just look in your own relationships—in your intimate relationship or with your family. Aren't there ways that... maybe I should speak for myself. I see that my mind thinks certain people should behave in certain ways. For example, there's a certain way a house is supposed to be kept. And that's just the truth of the world. Now, the person I'm living with might think there's a different way the house is supposed to be kept. But I really notice in my mind that my way is the right way, and the other unnamed person's way is due to a woeful ignorance and lack of proper upbringing.

And it's not always funny either, right? It isn't always funny. It leads to real misunderstandings, to anger. If I come in and I'm really tired, and the house isn't the way I like it, I get really angry. But if I catch myself—all right, this is an opinion, it's an opinion—sure, I prefer it this way, and that's okay, as long as I know it's an opinion. And if it's not the way I want it, open up.

What about in the way we think the socioeconomic system should be dealt with? If you're into the environment, if you're working on any particular environmental issue, when you look at the injustices in our educational system, in the economic system, all the bigotry that goes on in this country and in other countries, the way different people, different neighbors can really hate each other just based on their cultural or family background...

A few years ago in Thailand, you meet a lot of young people traveling. We met a young guy who seemed like a lot of the young guys traveling, and he was from Croatia. This was right at the time of the big Croatian-Serbian war. He seemed like a normal guy —until he was reading the newspaper one day, and there was some article about how some Serbians had been blown up and killed on a bridge.

He started cheering, as if his football team had won. And he just said, "You know, I just hate all Serbs. Finished." And you could see there was nothing that would allow him to let in a perception of a Serbian person that would get through that barrier.

Now that's what's really scary about how, when we hold to an opinion or view and we don't know it, we shut our minds, we shut our hearts. We don't let in alternative information that might break that down. When our view is threatened, it feels frightening. Often it's scary. And so the tendency is much more to hold to it rather than to move back onto that shaky ground.

This is from the Buddha: "For one who is freed from holding to views, there is no entanglement. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no more conflicts. But those who grasp after views and opinions, they wander about in the world, annoying people." But we also suffer.

Pema Chödrön says, "Opinions are opinions, nothing more and nothing less. We can begin to notice them. We can begin to simply label them as opinions, just as we label thoughts as thoughts. By this simple exercise, we are introduced to the notion of egolessness."

And this is interesting, because it's not just that it saves us from conflict in the moment—it begins to take us right into the heart of the Buddha's teaching, into egolessness. All ego really is, is our opinions, which we take to be solid, real, and the absolute truth about how things are. To have even a few seconds of doubt about the solidity and absolute truth of our own opinions, just to begin to see that we do have opinions, introduces us to the possibility of egolessness.

We don't have to make the opinions go away, and we don't criticize ourselves for having them. We just notice what we say to ourselves and see how so much of it is just our particular take on reality, which may or may not be shared by other people. Doesn't that just open up a whole different possibility of relating? Which we may or may not like. It doesn't really matter if we like it.

So mindfulness is just cultivating this ability to see what's what—to meet an experience and tell the difference between that experience and our interpretation and our opinions about it. And this comes down to the basic level of perception. Perception is the recognition faculty in any moment of what's happening.

For example: you hear that, I'm assuming. The perception is when the mind goes, "Oh, bell." That's perception—very simple. It's based on memory, on prior experience. And from perception, we begin to think, we begin to cogitate, we begin to draw associations and interpretations and memory very, very quickly. From that, we very quickly can solidify into a view and an opinion. It's only through the willingness to see that there's a view and opinion, and to be willing to come back and have a direct perception, that we can reach out of the mental cage, the solidity, the disconnection from life and from others that getting caught in a view of someone or something creates.

The Dalai Lama said, "All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception." That's quite a statement. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge.

I want to share a life experience I read about that inspired me deeply—someone having the courage and the vision to reach outside of what could easily have been a closed view of someone else, and how that can really affect a shift. Then I want to talk about it in terms of our meditation practice here. This direct connection, this willingness to reach out of what could easily be a closed view, and how that direct experience shatters preconceptions and prejudice.

It's from a book by David Halberstam called *The Children*. He's talking about a man who really inspires me greatly. His name is Jim Lawson. This is about the sit-ins and the civil rights movement at the beginning of the 1960s. I don't know if you remember—I was quite young then—but in the 1960s in Nashville, there was a group of college students, and that's what *The Children* follows, about ten of these students who, under the tutelage of Jim Lawson, were taking a series of nonviolent workshops.

Jim Lawson was a little older, an African American man who had been a deep disciple of nonviolence for many years. He was a conscientious objector in the Korean War and went to prison for that. He was a disciple of Gandhi. He was a Christian minister,

but deeply inspired by Gandhi. After the Korean War, he spent three years in India on a mission, also studying Gandhian nonviolent philosophy. And so he was in Nashville teaching these nonviolent workshops.

In early 1960, they were beginning the demonstrations. This story is about one particular demonstration where the students were marching peaceably to sit in at lunch counters. At that time, African American people were not allowed to eat at the downtown lunch counters, although they were allowed to shop in the stores, of course—just not eat there.

It was a peaceful demonstration, just marching down the street, and some young white toughs, like motorcycle hooligans, at the end of the line attacked and knocked down two young men at the end of the peaceful demonstration line and were kicking them and beating on them—Bernard Lafayette and Solomon Gort.

Jim Lawson, who was there, just walked over. This is Bernard Lafayette describing it—he was one of the ones being beaten, but this is how he observed it: "Jim Lawson just walked over very calmly, as if every day he walked over to young white toughs who were beating up his friends." And so that brought the hooligans' attention to Jim Lawson.

And they were so enraged by his confidence and his calmness and his non-aggression—it just enraged them—that one of them spit on him. And so Jim Lawson just looked at this guy and said, "Could you give me a handkerchief?" And the guy was so stunned that he reached in his pocket, gave him a handkerchief. At which point Bernard Lafayette and Solomon Gort had gotten up, and they started getting back in line.

And then Jim Lawson—and I could see in my mind how my mind immediately tends to make divisions, tends to say, "Oh, these guys are just bad, they're stupid, they're ignorant," completely shutting them out of my heart. But Jim Lawson looked at the guy, he looked at what he was wearing, which was the prevailing uniform of the day for white toughs: black pants, black leather motorcycle jacket, that kind of greased-back haircut. And he looked at him and said, "Do you drive a motorcycle or a hot rod car?" And the guy said, "Oh, well, I drive a motorcycle."

And then they plunged into this conversation. Lawson asked him, "Well, how do you have it souped up?" He asked him a couple of technical questions. They got into this whole conversation about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. Meanwhile, the other two guys who had been attacked had gotten up, and the march had gone on. Jim Lawson just sat there talking for a while.

As Bernard Lafayette said, in that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject which they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them seem more human in the eyes of the other. As they walked away, Jim waved to the man. The man remained still. He didn't wave back. He couldn't accept the friendship, but on the other hand, neither did he reject it.

Of course, that takes enormous courage, enormous vision in a situation like that—to be able to reach beyond the fear and the limitation that stereotypical views impose, and find that there's got to be some thread of humanness in there. And it's only by reaching beyond our views that we're able to do that.

So that's a huge life experience. And it takes a really exceptional person who can do that, I think. So I want to bring it back to here, to our meditation retreat. And the examples now may seem mundane. But remember, the way our mind latches onto experience, solidifies it, forms views here in this situation is just the same way our mind does it in more complex and confusing situations. This is where we can learn about it. This is where we can begin to see that perception can be different.

Just think a minute: have you noticed any views arising about what good practice means during this time? About what good practice would look like if you—God forbid—should ever experience a moment of it?

For us, talking to all of you, it's wonderful because we get to see, one after the other, the views. We get to see that there are views because one person will come in and say, "You know, my practice stinks. I try to stay with the breath, but all this other stuff keeps happening." The next person will come in and say, "I can't see impermanence. I'm just staying with the breath. And I really want to see impermanence, because that's what good practice is about." And one person thinks if you have a lot of emotions, that's good practice. And the next person says, "I don't have emotions, I'm just shallow and superficial." Another person says, "I just can't even feel the breath—I have no practice at all." Views about how you sit, how you walk, what good samadhi is.

When someone comes in to me and says, "My concentration is no good," that is one of the most uninformative remarks as far as having any idea what the person means. By samadhi, by good concentration, by bad concentration—we have so many views. And do you notice that as soon as you maybe have achieved what you think is good practice, then another view forms? Or we say something up here and you hear part of it and make a view about it. And we get stuck there, and we suffer, and we beat ourselves up because that's not what's happening. We don't let in other perceptions.

This is true. At one retreat some years ago, it was about the fifth day. A woman came in for an interview, and she said, "I have just been in agony trying to sit cross-legged here these five days. It's been so painful, but that's what you have to do. That's what good practice is." And it had just dawned on her that morning. She looked at me—I was sitting there the whole time in a chair. She looked at me and said, "Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe that's okay." I mean, we had said it, of course, a million times.

Did we ever say you have to sit cross-legged or it's not good practice? Believe me, we never said that. And it took five days to let in that visual perception that, "Oh, maybe that's not true." We all do this, and it's so painful. I'll watch myself finally letting go—for example, just to take it that far is enough. "Oh, I don't have to sit cross-legged, I can sit in a chair. But I can't move the whole sitting." Immediately we drop one view and make another one. This is how it has to be.

Can you imagine having no view, no opinion of what good practice is? Just like I said, having no confirmation at the end and just being willing to be with what arises. Have you heard us say that before? The thing is, we really meant it. Just be with what arises. That's where it's at.

Or the views I certainly have of what an enlightened being should be like, of what a spiritual life would look like. Philip reminded me of this story. I haven't told it in years, so I get to tell it again tonight. It's always nice to remember old stories—views of what it really means to live in a spiritual way.

Quite some years ago, almost twenty years ago now, I went to Thailand to ordain as a Buddhist nun, and I spent a year in that way. When I first got there and found the temple and an abbot who would agree to ordain me—that's the whole process—it was in a temple in northern Bangkok. The abbot was very, very well-known in Thailand, very famous, an older abbot, a good friend of Ajahn Buddhadasa's, so very respected.

He had me stay there first. You can't just walk off the street and have him say, "Sure, I'll ordain you." They need to check you out a little bit. So he had me stay there for some weeks as a layperson. My first night there, in a little hut they gave me, I had very long hair at that time. You just sleep on the floor on a thin straw mat. In the middle of the night, I found out that an army of ants had suddenly altered its path. You know how they walk in a path. And the path now went through where I was sleeping, and especially through my hair.

In the middle of the night I woke up with all these little ants in my hair. We take the precepts not to kill, of course. So I sweep them away, sweep them away, they come back. I really didn't know what to do. And that was just the introduction—I mean, you spend some time in the tropics, you develop many intimate relationships with all types of insects. But I really didn't know what to do.

So the next morning I went to the abbot and thought, well, they must deal with this all the time. He'll have the answer, how you deal with this in a spiritual way. I explained my dilemma—they're in my hair, and yada yada. So he had his assistant, Maha Chachai, another monk, and said, "Oh, okay, don't worry." Maha Chachai went off and came back and handed me a big can of Raid.

I said, "Huh." Okay. I personally didn't feel good about that, but I said, "Okay, I'm on my own." That's really what it comes down to.

You want to know the truth? I can't remember. That's really the truth. I can't remember if I squirted the Raid or not. My guess would be I probably did, because I was like, "Oh, these ants." I was really freaking out. But a year later, I was in another monastery, and it was part of my morning routine. I'd get up, I'd have my shower, I'd go to have my meal, I'd come back and spend half an hour trying to sweep out the ants. That just became part of the daily routine. But I was fresh. I hadn't adjusted to that yet.

But ultimately, it comes down—no one can tell you, really. We're on our own there. What's really true for me?

So, how the whole line of thought and opinion and view begins and gets so solidified.

It starts with this process of perception I mentioned, that recognition factor. The Buddha says that at the moment of contact with any of the sense doors—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking—something arises. We feel it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We perceive it: "Oh, that's a bell, that's a rug, that's an owl baby." And then we proceed to think about it. The thinking is colored by all our memories and associations, and if we're not aware, those turn into the associations and notions that assail and overwhelm a person.

The word for this is *papañca*, which we love—it's called proliferation. The mind just proliferates and goes crazy, assails and overwhelms us.

Now what's interesting is that beginning with perception, what we perceive is often not even accurate. From that inaccurate perception, we proceed to build up all these memories and associations, and then we're really gone into opinions and views, relating to something that isn't even happening. We wonder why we feel confused and disconnected.

A simple example of misperception: when I walk around my house without my glasses on, I'll think, "Oh, everything looks really clean." And I'll feel happy. Then I put on my glasses and I go, "Oh my God, I didn't see all this." And I feel bothered. Difference in perception, colored by my desires and emotions.

Let me give you another example. A friend of mine told me about this at a retreat, and I think it's a very clear illustration. She goes to her office and she sees a co-worker come in. He looked in her direction and frowned. She thought, "Oh, he's frowning at me." Immediately she asked herself, "Why is he angry at me? We haven't even spoken today. What did I do wrong?" She spent the whole day alternating between fear, aversion, and anger. It brought up her feelings of worthlessness. She was running over everything that was going on between them—why was he angry at her? On and on. It put her in a rotten mood for the day.

The next day, she finally realized he wasn't even looking at her or frowning at her. He was having family problems and was just feeling down.

So her original perception, the original contact, was seeing somebody and an expression on his face. Her misperception was that he was frowning at her. Then that misperception was colored by her mood, by her tendency to feel worthless, and a little bit of fear. The day was spent with these notions proliferating—past, future, everything she could remember about him, all her feelings of worthlessness, the whole story—all based on something that wasn't even really happening in the first place.

Does that sound familiar to anybody? Have you ever noticed that? If you haven't, please pay attention the next few days.

There's a phenomenon we call "yogi mind," which is basically what she's describing: a particular perception happens—a desire, something we don't like, or we perceive something inaccurately—and our mind just goes to town. It really runs riot, as they say in the commentaries. We find ourselves running all over the campus, looking for something, trying to tell somebody something, trying to fix whatever. All the energy that we expend in our lives in distractedness, in all the stuff we do—because life is so simple

here at retreat—when we lose mindfulness and get caught up in this proliferation, all that energy becomes available for craziness, basically. And our mind just takes it and runs.

So that's perception, which may be inaccurate. We rarely stop to let in the fact that perhaps what we perceived isn't actually what happened, that it could be different. Then all the proliferation comes on top of that. That's where most of our views form and solidify.

It's so valuable to know: "This is what I think, this is what I believe is true. Could it be another way?"

And this is where we get to selflessness, egolessness. The actual basic misperception that we're misperceiving in many different ways, over and over—one that often, without some form of self-inquiry, goes unquestioned—is the perception that there's a continuous, unchanging "I" or "me" somewhere in here running the show.

You may not think you're your body, or you may think you're your body, but somewhere back there, doesn't it feel like you're the same you you've always been, running the show? Maybe not doing such a great job of running the show, but really trying.

It's the most subtle and unrecognized view, interpretation, opinion of ourselves and the world. And it's the one from which all the rest of our confusion and trouble can spring. We don't question our perceptions—we assume how we perceive is true.

For instance, if you can see—I think everyone here can see, so I'll use sight—we all maybe know intellectually that somehow the way sight comes in, it's turned upside down and the brain turns it around or something. But really, the way we see things, when I open my eyes and look, I really unquestioningly, if I'm not paying attention, think that's how it is. But that's just how we're trained to see.

My father recently had an eye operation because he has macular degeneration, where they rotated one of his retinas forty or fifty degrees. And they said, "Oh, don't worry, it'll compensate." But it didn't. So he was walking around and one of his eyes saw everything leaning over this way, and one saw things straight but nothing in the middle. We're so used to depending on how we see as being how it is, that he really didn't feel comfortable walking on the sidewalk. He'd kind of be leaning over and keep walking off the edge because everything was tilting. It was a good reminder to me that I take visual perception as really how it is. But like that other ninety-nine percent of the universe that's undetectable—somehow we don't see it. Something's out there, or so they think.

It's like that with our physical experience, with our emotions, with our thoughts. What this practice is helping us do is to keep meeting, moment by moment, our physical experience, emotions, thoughts, perceptions—each time fresh, rather than assuming continuity.

In the physical realm, sometimes as the mind gets quiet in meditation, the sense of solidity kind of falls away. Sometimes that's very scary. Sometimes it's very pleasant. Sometimes it's nothing special—just points of sensation arising. It's like the example they give in Asia: from a long distance you see a line of ants. From a distance it looks like one solid unbroken line. Then you come up closer and you see it's millions and millions of ants moving. But from a distance it looks solid. Our body feels solid, but as the attention gets finer, it's just sensation after sensation after sensation, arising and passing, arising and passing. Knowing that or hearing that doesn't make any difference. Experiencing it—it doesn't change everything, but it opens something: oh, maybe things are a different way. Some little clinging to "I think that's how it is" lets go.

The same with emotions, the same with thoughts. Have you noticed how thoughts tell you your self-story all day long? Now she's getting up, now she's turning around, I'm really not doing this very well, I'm not doing the walking well, other people are doing it better. And how the particular self-story is based on a perception—you might have the perception as you're walking that someone walks by looking so pure and mindful and present, and you're wobbling all over the place, looking at little bunnies and thinking about what's for lunch. And you think, "I just can't do this. I am no good."

So the perception was somebody walking slowly, colored by self-negativity, a sense of worthlessness, and comparing. And you start remembering everything you ever failed at in your life. I go back to remedial gym class in fifth grade. And now here I am, I can't even walk mindfully. Anything pleasant isn't noticed. Any other memory isn't accessed—only everything bad, until you've worked yourself into a total knot of disgust and failure. And that's me.

Then we don't notice that suddenly it changes. In the next sitting you walk in, having sort of forgotten that whole little knot. You're just walking in thinking about lunch. You sit down and—wow, the breath's right here. It's cool. It's present. I can really note every time the mind goes off. I am really something. I really am getting this. I think I have a deep, deep spiritual inclination. In fact, maybe I'm a tulku.

You know, I'm a reincarnation. I just haven't been discovered yet in some Tibetan tradition.

And then you remember everything positive, everything beautiful that ever happened. And you forget the other.

But the thing is, at the end of the day, you feel like that was one "I." It wasn't one "I." There was some positive, pleasant perception. There was all that papañca. That was the birth of "I." Then that "I" died. There was an unpleasant thing. There was all this papañca. Then that "I" died. Birth and death of self, constantly. And without examination, we think it's me.

You know Lily Tomlin's line? "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific." That's what we're doing.

Notice. Any sense experience—the sound of rain, boom, pleasant, rain in my childhood, the smell in the desert, isn't this beautiful, I'm one with nature, yada yada, all this "me," my whole life—from one hearing experience that's pleasant, from one smelling. Just notice that in the next moment. There's no judgment. But watch it come and go. And notice that it goes. It is not solid and continuous. Same with emotions. Same with sensations. Same with all experience.

And please don't believe me. Look and see.

We posit continuity through lack of inquiry, through lack of attention. Really look and see—there isn't something solid. There isn't an unchanging "me" here.

And that—it's the ultimate scary thought for that mind that's looking for security, that's looking for a resting place. But it is such a relief to put down that burden of thinking we're in charge of it all. Because frankly, if we're in charge of it all, we're not doing a very good job. We don't have to keep taking responsibility. Put it down. It's so freeing to be willing to simply meet the next moment with an air of "who knows? Let's just be here for it." I don't know if this is going to be my last breath. We really don't know that. Can I just be present?

And if that moment is a moment of interpretation, a moment of thought, fine. Thought is just thought. It doesn't have to drive us. It doesn't have to imprison us when we recognize it for what it is.

So that sense of—this is the last image I'll use—the sense of opening, throwing ourselves into the next moment, into the unknown, not with fear but with trust and faith. Because whatever happens, we can take refuge in this: that the truth is present in this moment if we can meet it free from all the baggage of what we think it is. Then the truth can reveal itself.

The image is one that Franz told me about—climbing up to the top of this mountain in India, Mount Arunachala, which is a sacred mountain for Ramana Maharshi. He climbed up to the top; it's not huge. And up at the top, there's a whole bunch of mountain monkeys that live there. It's very rocky, scraggly, with a few branches and bushes. He said these monkeys were so great to watch because they would be standing on the edge of a rock and they would just lean themselves out into space as if they thought they could fly. With total trust and total abandon, giving themselves into the moment. And they always landed on a rock, landed on a branch. But they didn't stand there first and look and go, "Okay, that one, I'm going for it," and "I don't go until I'm sure where I'm going to put my foot down." It's just—the universe will catch us.

That quality of full-hearted, open attention. Willingness to meet this moment. And you don't have to think about anything I said tonight, because it reveals itself to us when we can meet the moment free of preconceptions.

So let's just sit quietly.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 324

Freedom From Conflict

Carol Wilson · 58 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's observation that human beings are like fish writhing in shallow water, trapped in competition and conflict due to a 'dart' buried in their hearts—the dart of craving, confusion, and clinging to preferences. Drawing from various suttas, including Sakka's question about why beings continue living in hostility despite sincere wishes for peace, Wilson illuminates how our attachment to preferences and our reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences perpetuate suffering.

Wilson offers a realistic portrait of awakening by examining the Buddha's own life after enlightenment—which included illness, loss, conflict mediation, and the death of beloved disciples—demonstrating that freedom doesn't mean escape from life's difficulties but rather a profound harmony with things as they are. She explores the Buddha's teaching on the 'second arrow': how we compound unavoidable pain with layers of reactive suffering through grief, lamentation, and endless self-referencing.

The practical heart of this teaching lies in recognizing that our true home is found not in any particular experience but in awareness itself. Through the practice of sati (mindfulness), we learn to discriminate between raw sensory events and our habitual reactions to them, gradually discovering an inner stillness that remains stable regardless of changing circumstances. Wilson emphasizes that this practice doesn't distance us from life but brings us into deeper intimacy with reality, where we can rest in the grace of the world and find genuine freedom from conflict.

Last night James talked about the power and the possibility of cultivating our sincere intention to live in a contented, happy way. And we come really to practice, I would imagine most of us, with the intention to cultivate the wholesome, really delighting in the wholesome. Why else would we do this? And yet, with our sincerest intentions, wholeheartedly, it's so common, isn't it, that we still find ourselves living in confusion, dissatisfaction, with anger, discontented. So what's going on?

This is a sutta from the Buddha that I've recently been reading and really liking. He's describing here, somewhat poetically, his own experience of dismay at seeing how humans are living. He says: "Just look at how people quarrel and fight. Let me tell you now of the kind of dismay and terror that I have felt. Seeing people struggling like fish, writhing in shallow water, in competition against one another, I became afraid. At one time, I had wanted to find some place where I could take shelter, but I never saw any

such place. There is nothing in this world that is solid at base, and not a part of this world that is changeless. I have seen people trapped in mutual competition, and that is why I had felt so discontent. But then I noticed something buried deep in their hearts. I could just make it out. It's a dart. It is a dart, an arrow, that makes its victims run all over the place." He's referring to the running after sensual pleasure, the running after happiness. "But once that dart has been pulled out, all that running is finished. And so is the exhaustion that comes with it."

I really like that, first because I get a sense somehow of him as a person just really feeling this dismay at looking at all of us. I say us—we weren't around 2,500, 2,600 years ago. But it doesn't sound too different, does it? And I just like that feeling of seeing the dismay at the competition, the running around, the exhaustion that comes from that running around. And what he points to is pulling out that dart, understanding that dart.

What he's talking about here, of course, with the dart, is our old friends of confusion—of not understanding ourselves and the world as it is, as we are, of misperceiving and misconstruing what we do perceive. And that misperceiving and misconstruing is strengthened by greed and hatred, anger, wanting.

The Buddha was part of the warrior caste, brought up as a warrior and a king, and so a lot of his images are warlike images. But also, if you read the suttas, the Buddha's time had a lot of war, a lot of violence in the world. As today, there's a lot of war, a lot of violence in the world. Not only that, of course—there's also great beauty and love and compassion. But what he's pointing to is that the place to look to free ourselves from conflict, the way that we can bring freedom from conflict into the world, is by looking inside, looking into this arrow, this dart in our own hearts.

Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodian monk and peace activist who is sort of the spiritual leader of the Cambodian people, once spoke at a rally in Washington, D.C., for banning landmines. A friend told me what he said—I didn't hear it directly. He got up and said, "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts." So if we want to eradicate the landmines in the world, we must first understand, change, remove the landmines in our hearts. It's exactly the same thing that the Buddha was talking about when he's talking about these darts, these arrows.

Another sutta I like addresses this very question: if we're so seriously wanting to live in freedom, why do we keep doing stupid things, basically? It's put a little more elegantly than that, but that's what it boils down to. This is Sakka, who often appears in the suttas. He's the ruler of one of the heaven realms. In the Buddhist cosmology, there are many different realms of being—humans are only one of thirty-one or thirty-two, I forget the number. We're six from the bottom, by the way. So Sakka is the ruler of the gods,

but even he's often coming down to the Buddha for teachings. And he says to the Buddha, basically: "Dear sir, what are we chained with? Even though we—humans, gods, devas—even though we think really wholeheartedly, 'May we live free from hostility, free from violence, free from rivalry, free from ill will, free from those who are hostile,' yet still, why do we continue to live in hostility, with violence, with rivalry, with ill will?"

"What are we fettered by? What is chaining our hearts?"

And the Buddha answers, and there are many different ways that he arrives at the same answer in different suttas. He says that basically we're fettered by envy and stinginess—that's his way into it here. But that's just the surface. That envy and stinginess is caused by, and this is interesting, holding to preferences. And that holding to preferences is basically caused by craving, wanting, thirsting. This is one of these darts: I want what I want. That's holding to preferences—the cause of our continuing to act in ways that bring us into conflict with ourselves and with others, into suffering.

Now I think that's a very powerful statement, and for many of us at times an unsettling one—that holding to preferences can ultimately bring us into acting from ill will and hostility, into continuing in competition and rivalry, into continuing our inner suffering. Because most people—I don't know about you, but when I was starting my practice, if someone had said, "It's about coming to let go of all your preferences," I wouldn't have been lining up at the door. "Oh yeah, let me really get rid of all my preferences!"

But remember: he's not saying we don't have preferences, that we can't tell the difference between anything. It's that *holding* to it—"I have to have this or else everything's not okay. I'm bad, you're bad, the world is bad, whatever"—that's the cause of our suffering. That's the cause of our not perceiving ourselves and the world clearly on a very deep level.

Here on retreat, what we can practice, what we can begin to see and learn, is in small ways how we get attached to preferences. Mostly we don't even recognize that they're preferences. We think it's true, that's how it should be. We get attached to it, and then we notice the suffering inherent in that in many different ways. Because how we relate to our experience here in retreat is a microcosm of exactly how our hearts and minds relate in bigger circumstances in our life. There is absolutely no difference. You're not experiencing different conditioning, a different mind and heart here than the one you have when you're going through your daily life. Fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know, but that's the way it is.

What I really love about the retreat format is that things that in the picture of our big life are pretty minor can bring up an intensity of reaction and emotion and grief and desire—the whole show. We stand back and say, "Wait, because I didn't get an orange at breakfast, I'm a complete wreck?" But it's true. It's not about the orange. But we can explore what this holding to preferences is.

Something that I think is important to understand, so we don't fall into judging right away—"Oh, I'm so stupid"—is that even our misunderstandings, the desire, the hatred, the holding to preferences, whatever, are really arising from our deep yearning for freedom, for peace, for real happiness. In some way. And the Buddha in another place spoke about how all the foolish things we do come, in some way, out of a perhaps unconscious or misguided sense that "this is going to make me happy."

What we learn through mindfulness—mindfulness in itself is the way to begin to perceive in a different way—is not how to change the world, but how to re-understand what the possibility of living in freedom from conflict and in peace and happiness is, what peace is really about. It's really to come home to ourselves, to our truest selves. When I look at my practice, all my life, I feel that everything I've been doing has been in a way a yearning to live at home with myself, with what is really true. And not knowing what that is, we keep looking in the wrong direction—to passing experiences, to things, to objects, to moods, to people, to whatever. What our practice does is turn us back to look in another direction.

One very common misconception that I've certainly held for years and years about what happiness or freedom or awakening or enlightenment is or will be, is that in some way—it seems naive, but if I look closely I see I keep falling into this trap—full enlightenment would be about everything being basically nice all the time. No more unpleasantness. Without getting down on yourself, just examine what images or ideas or conceptions your mind is holding about what practice or freedom is going to be like. Few of us include sickness, old age, loss, dismay, unpleasant things happening. Mostly it's that our whole personality just gets better and better and nicer and nicer, and we love everybody and everybody loves us, and we're able to really effect great change in the world, and basically there's this peace that somehow is still looking outward more than inward. Everything gets better.

But if you look, even very briefly—this has been instructive to me, and it took me years to notice—look at the Buddha's life after he became the Buddha, the peaceful one, the all-awakened one, no more suffering. He said over and over, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering. That's all I teach." Yet his life had plenty of difficult things going on.

He was sick at times. He had headaches and backaches. Sometimes he'd tell Ananda, his attendant, "You give the talk. I have to go lie down. I have a headache." They didn't have Excedrin then—that's our wonderful new discovery.

He actually died from eating poisoned meat. It wasn't deliberately poisoned, but he knew it was tainted and wouldn't let anyone else eat it. He lived in a very warlike time, and there are different suttas where his clansmen on his father's side and his mother's side were at war with one another over water rights. Many, many people in his clan on both sides would be killed, and he would be called in to mediate.

He also had to mediate a lot within his own nun and monk sangha. It's kind of funny if you read all the suttas, or the Vinaya, where a lot of the rules for the monks and nuns come out of, because there's a lot of monks running to the Buddha and saying, "Well, he did this and he did that, and I don't think that's really such a good thing to do," or "He's talking to the nuns too much," or "He's hanging out and socializing too much." A lot was going on between the monks. There was a lot of competition. There was actually his cousin, Devadatta, who was extremely jealous of the Buddha. He was a monk, and he was often trying to split the Sangha, to turn them against the Buddha. He even tried to kill the Buddha at one point by throwing a huge boulder down on him, and it just grazed his heel. But there was a lot going on. It wasn't all peaches and cream. It wasn't just floating on a cloud.

The Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, both died before the Buddha died. And while he said he was the peaceful one—he didn't experience grief, he didn't wail and beat his breast, that's a common way they describe it—he did experience loss. There's somewhere in the suttas, and don't ask me where because I can't find it, but it's there somewhere. There's a lovely phrase where the Buddha describes, after the death of his two disciples, that it's as if the sun and the moon had fallen out of the heavens. He noticed they were gone. And Moggallana, who was considered the most spiritually adept of all the Buddha's disciples, was actually murdered by a gang of bandits in his old age.

So awakening doesn't mean freedom from pain, or freedom from loss, or freedom from all the dukkha that goes on with living in a group, working with a group, working with people. But how was the Buddha different from us? In that he didn't cling to preferences. He really was able to live and move in deep harmony with things as they are. Because he understood so clearly how things are, he wouldn't get caught in this holding, in this wanting things to be different.

It's not that he didn't have preferences. It's often said that if he didn't have anything else he had to do, he didn't just kind of wander around. His preference was to go off in the forest and abide in the bliss of Nibbana. He could do that at will. Clearly that was his preference. But if anybody needed anything, if anyone came calling, he would come out and be there for them. Not like, "Oh God, another wandering disciple wanting to plague me with questions." He would just come out and be there. Not clinging to preferences, not out of a "should," but as the natural response from deep understanding of oneself and of life as it is.

So how does he describe what he understood, briefly? How do we remove that dart, so to speak, of confusion, of clinging, of hatred? It's really removed by clear seeing. And Vipassana really means seeing clearly, seeing into. Just being with things as they are. It's so simple we can't stand it. We always want to figure it out and add something on top of it. That's why we have this practice, practice, practice. Practice just to be with things as they are.

What do we begin to notice? I'm not going to go through everything the Buddha said, but just a couple of things. When he came out of his awakening and began to teach, the first thing he talked to the five friends he had been practicing with about—as he sat down, out of all the things that he understood, the first thing he chooses to say is: there is change; dissatisfaction, unreliability, is a fact of life. That's the first thing he chooses to say. I think that's really interesting. It's not the only thing he chooses to say. When Buddhism gets the rap that it's really negative because it just says life is suffering—that's if you just hear this First Noble Truth and stop. "Oh yeah, things change. It hurts us. Everything's unreliable."

Difficult things happen. That's life. If you stop there, okay, it's a pretty downer of a message. But he's not saying it to take us down. He's saying it to free us.

Because what frees us is living open-hearted, fully present in life, with reality as it is. This is what frees us. Our meditation isn't going to change who we are, change the facts of life, change this whole world. What it does is free us from misconceptions and allow us to rest at ease in whatever's arising—to live wholeheartedly, open-heartedly, fully present, at peace with things as they are, and from that place be able to affect change.

So to really be willing to learn to open, just to stop resisting that difficult things happen, that there's an inherent unreliability to experience, to things, to people, if we're looking to them for permanent happiness. And the anguish or dissatisfaction or real suffering isn't because things change, or because difficult things happen and pleasant things go away. The suffering is because of our not understanding that, and so get-

ting caught in reaction—in wanting and in pushing away, getting caught in our reactions to what's happening. But that's the glitch, the little glitch, the place that we can learn to see through.

So I want to talk just a little bit about that.

This aspect of things changing, of unreliability—it doesn't mean that there's no pleasure in life. Of course there is. It doesn't mean that if we say "having no preferences," we don't love our families. We can probably have a slightly different feeling about our own child and someone we've never met, that we read about. Of course we do.

But it's knowing that you can't rely on anybody to do what you want—although God knows we try—to do what you want, to make you happy, or what you think will make them happy and then that'll make you happy, or to always be there for you. You can't rely on anything, you can't rely on any experience to do it for us. Although in the moment, it might be quite pleasant.

Now what's so interesting to me when I look at my own experience, my own mind and heart? Intellectually, I don't have a big argument with that, that things change. I mean, it's not really a secret, is it? But look at when we're struggling. Just look back on your experience today or yesterday or in the next hour. How do we actually relate to our experiences?

Just to come into this little mini world of the retreat: How do we tend to evaluate ourselves, to assess whether things are going well? How the meditation is going? I'm sure there are lots of different ways, but quite often I find in myself it's in terms of how much pleasantness there is and how long it lasts. And when something pleasant goes away and something difficult arises—it might be an unpleasant sensation, or it just might be that it doesn't meet our expectations. And that's very unpleasant. We like our expectations to be met.

When that's not happening, how often the assessment becomes: "Well, everything's gone wrong now. Meditation's gone to hell. I better try and get it back." How often people come and say, "Well, thank God the sloth and torpor is over. Now I can begin to meditate." Or, "Okay, the mind's not wandering so much. The breath has finally gotten nice and smooth and relaxed. Now I can really meditate."

We get so fixated on what's happening as the way to evaluate, and when it changes, something's wrong. Or something's right—finally I got it right. If the unpleasant goes away, that's okay. That change we don't mind; we finally got it right. When the pleasant goes away, something we haven't gotten right.

Now to me, this gives a slight hint that there's something that doesn't quite totally get it—that everything changes, and that it's not all about being pleasant. The pleasant is going to change and the unpleasant is going to come, and there is nothing we can do about it. What our choice is: do I want to suffer from this or not? But mostly we don't notice that that's our choice, that that's the place of awareness.

So mindfulness practice, sati—the word that we translate as mindfulness—it really is closer to "remembering" in literal translation. It's not about taking us away from this world, stopping this constant flow of experience, finding some experience that'll last, somehow managing to manipulate things so that the balance is more on the pleasant and less on the unpleasant.

Sati is about allowing us to recognize and experience ourselves and the world as it is in this moment. No exceptions, no pulling away, no clinging—to live in the world more wholeheartedly, more completely than we are now.

It's somewhat paradoxical, because sati is really the practice of meeting each moment of experience with clear-eyed, open-hearted recognition of things as they are right now. Living in fullness of presence in the world, with ourselves as we are. And it's a little paradoxical because retreat really looks like—and people often think a retreat is about—escaping from the world. But the truth is, with mindfulness we're diving more deeply into the reality of ourselves and the reality of the world than we ever do. Unless we're truly committed and have a lot of practice out in our daily life, there are countless ways to distract ourselves when we don't really like what's happening. Here, there aren't many. And we set it up deliberately. Even today, now you're not allowed to distract yourself at mealtime, because now we're doing mindful eating, mindful working, mindful showering, mindful going to the toilet. It's about really waking up in our life.

And that's not to suffer more. That's not the point. It's interesting, because paradoxically, what I'm saying is that really opening to the fact that unreliability and change is a fact of life—to open to that, to not let ourselves deny it so much—that's not to suffer more. Paradoxically, that opening is what allows us to let go. To really, like the Buddha, live so in harmony with how things are that we're not in this constant conflict with our experience, with what we want to happen, with not getting our preferences. So that we can really live clear-eyed, kind-hearted, and engaged with ourselves and with life.

So this truth, this fact—the word dukkha is usually translated as suffering, but it's more unsatisfactory, unreliable—this fact, rather than being something alienating or depressing, is actually one of many things that unifies us as human beings. It's one of the threads of our common experience. So also is love. So also is compassion. Dukkha isn't the only thread; I don't want to give that impression.

But when we really look at it—I heard a talk by Ajahn Sumedho that was quite lovely. He was describing how many of the abbots in Thailand would come in and begin a talk not by saying, "Dear yogis," but rather, "Dear brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." Not as a downer, but doesn't it kind of level things? It's really true, isn't it? Nobody gets away from old age, disease, and death. Well, the only way you get away from old age, of course, is if disease and death come earlier. I'm not trying to be funny. It's a leveler.

When we look through that lens, it unifies us as human beings. Instead of getting caught in seeing our differences—whether cultural or economic or societal or whatever—where we can get so caught up in seeing how we're different from each other, and difference often breeds fear and protection, this view unifies us. When we're seeing one another through this lens of being brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death, if you really think about it, it just naturally elicits the heart of compassion. Compassion being that openness to each other, that connectedness to one another in our suffering. Any suffering—the suffering of disease, the suffering of rage and anger, the suffering of loss.

And when I look around the world, I can see how a sudden natural disaster will often spontaneously bring about this sense of connectedness, this natural response of compassion. Just last week we were in Durango, Colorado, which is close to New Mexico, and those huge fires were raging in Los Alamos. Durango, which has a similar climate and topography—they were saying in the papers that it was quite possible the same conditions could easily ignite a fire there too. There was a natural, really spontaneous outpouring of compassion and support for Los Alamos. There were stations all around Durango where people could bring food and money and blankets and whatever was needed. People were just spontaneously setting this up, collecting it, and bringing it down to Los Alamos. You often read about this with earthquakes and floods, whether in Venezuela or Turkey or wherever. Our connectedness as human beings—for a while, it often brings out the best in us. We forget, of course; we go back to our lives. But that's really what I mean by this opening to our common thread of loss, of old age, of suffering. It brings out our natural humanity, the heart of compassion.

And so, paradoxically, rather than fearing or being afraid to really open to this when we notice it—to open to change, to open to pain—the recognition of it is what matters. You don't have to rip your heart open and go around drowning in suffering, but just here, notice when you're in conflict. Is there some way you're fighting with something unpleasant? Is there some way you're fighting with change? Rather than simply acknowledging, "Oh yes, that's what's happening. Things are changing."

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche said once, "Whether or not you go with the flow, remember: the flow always goes with you."

We don't really get a choice.

And again, on a personal level, bringing it down to the personal, it's really very deeply ingrained in many of us, I think, to keep looking for the thing that doesn't change—the circumstance, the situation, the person that's going to give us this sense of security, this place of rest. Whether it's a relationship, or how we grew up, or our job, or our house. The way you finally found the right way to sit in the hall so pain doesn't come. Whatever it is. Deeply ingrained. And I think that's quite natural, again—a natural effect of our yearning for happiness. And again, just not quite totally getting it: that we can't keep trying to look to something for reliability. That's going to change. And then not to get down on ourselves when we find ourselves doing it.

So, for example, my father the last three or four years has been developing Parkinson's disease. I mean, he's eighty-three. You know, something's going to happen. I say that, right? But when it's happening, do I go home and say, "Well, the conditions that allowed for a healthy and young body to be here have changed, and now disease is coming. That's just the way it is"? Maybe I can get there, but first I have to go through denial and impatience and this kind of edge of panic, seeing what's going on with someone who's always been so athletic and so bright and so strong—to see how the whole mind and body can start to break down, and it's so out of control.

I mean, we all know it, right? But just to see how—no, this can't be happening. There must be something we can do to keep this from happening. And if we don't, we've somehow failed. It's just so interesting to me. And when I can really see that and stop beating myself up, and just open to—oh, yeah, things are changing. There's a sense of loss and sadness. Totally normal. Both the change and the loss. It's fine to feel it all.

And then what had been actually a distancing from my father as I got into my franticness and trying to change everything—again, there's connection. Connection, because one can only connect with a person as they are in the moment. Not as I wish he was ten years ago, or I wish he would be tomorrow. Only as he is right now. And only by accepting this is the fact of how things are is that connection, that openheartedness, that flowing with life as it is, really possible. And in that, just for a moment, there's living in peace. There's living in contentment.

The happiness, the contentment of the Buddha isn't about having things the way we want them or the way we think they should be. It's being able to really be present and open wholeheartedly, not fighting with things as they are. That doesn't mean we can't

act appropriately—of course we can. And we can act much more appropriately when we're not fighting the facts, when we're really present. We can act from love instead of fear.

So when we notice our response to unreliability is this frantic searching for something, you might appreciate that that comes from our deep yearning for peace, but recognize we're looking in the wrong direction. The Buddha said once that the search for a resting place is burning. Not to need a resting place is cool and peaceful. He also said, "He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." In other words, who does not grasp to any "this is where I am, this is where I'm staying, this is how it is." That's what he means by abiding. Abides in peace—just present in the moment, it changes, that's fine. Present in this moment.

But the really interesting piece of this, again, is not the difficult, the unpleasant, the change that's the point of confusion, the point where we misperceive. Where we get caught is in our reactions to difficult experience or to change. It's our reactions that blind us to peace, to the potential for peace, to our truest nature. Because it really, ultimately, doesn't matter what's happening. We're not here to have a certain experience. We're here to become friends with, to trust in, awareness itself.

And awareness doesn't care how the breath is, or whether the breath is, or how much you're thinking, or whether you like what's happening, or how much your knee hurts, or how good your sitting was. Awareness can be with anything. But we tend to look past awareness and get completely involved in assessing and reacting to whatever it is that's arising.

Because we're so entranced—really entranced—by what this knee pain means, and is it going to continue into the future, and how was it yesterday, and what can I do about it, and how do I feel about it, and what's going to happen, and what is the other person experiencing, and what's the best way to be mindful... We're so entranced with our reactions that half the time—frankly, I think it's more than half the time—we don't even have a clue what's really going on. We're just completely caught up in assessing and judgment and liking and disliking.

And it all has to do ultimately with me, me, me. How does this affect me? What does this mean about me? Is this mine? Is this other person having the same experience as me? It's this continual self-referencing. Look at it. If you're caught in reaction, if you're really assessing, just see if it happens much without this little core of me, me, me. It's so fascinating to us, but I tell you, it is so exhausting. When the Buddha talks about being free from the running around and the exhaustion of it—that's the exhaustion.

We can't just experience sensation in the knee. No, it's my knee, my sensation, my yesterdays, my tomorrows, my trip to the hospital, my mother, my father, my dog. It's on and on and on. And what's really happening? Oh, some twinging or some throbbing. Maybe there's a little tick in the shoulder, a little twitch. Maybe we're having a really difficult memory. Unpleasant things do happen. But just what's happening now—that's what's happening. Everything else is our reactions, and we're so entranced by that. That's where we go off into worlds and worlds of thinking. That's where we don't recognize that peace, our true home, is right here, right now, no matter what's happening. It doesn't matter—if we can learn to look through the reactions and just land and rest with ease in whatever's arising.

Saint Augustine said once, "The reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home." Our true home. There aren't many words to say about it. But on a deep level, we know when we're recognizing, when we're touching our true home. And it doesn't have anything to do with what phenomenal experience is coming and going.

The Buddha taught that one must look for peace within oneself and not in any other place. When a person is inwardly quiet, then there is no self to be found. Inwardly quiet doesn't necessarily mean no thoughts, which is what we often think. Inwardly quiet means we're not entranced by these reactions to experience and whipping up a whole story. Just what is, coming and going. What is can be thoughts, as well as sensations, as well as sounds. Inwardly quiet means calm, present, non-reactive. That's our practice.

Now, one place where this habit—and it really is a habit—shows itself... It's not like we're deliberately trying to be foolish. It's not like we're deliberately setting out to suffer. Everyone in the world, the Buddha said this often, deeply wants to be happy. But I've come to have a very healthy respect for the strength of habits of reaction of heart and mind. You know how hard a really strong habit is to break. I think our habits of reaction to experience when we're not paying attention are perhaps the most deeply rooted habits we have, because we're not even aware we're doing it much of the time.

So just to mention briefly: one of the very simple but not always easy to notice dynamics, cause and effect relationships that the Buddha pointed out, where we get so easily caught in reaction, where we get so easily distracted from the bare experience—whatever it is—is in our habit of how the mind and heart relate to pleasant experience, unpleasant experience, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant, or neutral experience.

We don't usually think in those terms so much. We know we like something or we don't like it, or it hurts, or it feels good. Well, that's basically pleasant and unpleasant, but within a whole range. Physical sensation is pleasant or unpleasant or sort of neutral

—we don't even notice it. Emotions, sounds, smells, tastes, even thoughts become pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And the deep, deep habit—not only of reaction, but of assessing our whole life—is to move towards the pleasant.

Moving towards the pleasant seems not only a habit but logical, doesn't it? You think, well, who wouldn't move towards the pleasant? Who wouldn't move away from the unpleasant? That's just common sense.

And neutral? A lot of people say, "Neutral? I don't have any neutral experience." That's our relationship to neutral. "What? I've never seen a neutral thought." We're just gone. In this culture especially—everything is so intense, so fast. God forbid you should go to a movie and have one neutral second. It's just got to be pounding, pounding, pounding.

This is one of the reasons a retreat can seem so uncomfortable—because we're not just letting ourselves flow with this habit of whenever it's pleasant, hold on to it; whenever it's unpleasant, get up and leave; when it's neutral, bring in something else. Here, you have to sit there. If it's unpleasant, you just have to sit there with it. The most you can do is shift your knee a little bit or something. If it's pleasant, you sit there, but then it goes away and you can't go get something else pleasant. You have to notice that it went away. You can't go to the refrigerator or turn on the radio, make a phone call. If it's neutral, we tell you to keep paying attention until you finally notice something's happening.

Calm, you know, is very neutral. Sometimes it takes ages to recognize that calm is present. "Oh, calm!" And then you realize, this isn't neutral—it's actually really nice. You just had to notice it first.

This is a very deeply ingrained habit of mind. And we assess, we evaluate our whole life, often, in terms of: it's good if it's pleasant, it's bad if it's unpleasant.

There's a nice story in the suttas about the Buddha's attendant Ānanda, who was a very kind man. Many stories that are kind of very human are about Ānanda. He was walking past a well where there was a woman from the untouchable caste at that time in India—someone from whom a person of different caste wasn't allowed to take anything, any food or anything. And Ānanda asked her to give him some water from the well. Monks were allowed to ask for water.

She said, "Oh no, sir, I'm untouchable. I can't give you water."

And being very kind, he said, "I'm not really interested in your caste. I'm just asking for some water."

So she gave him the water, and she was so touched by his kindness that she secretly followed him back to where the Buddha was. She waited until Ānanda wasn't around, went up to the Buddha, and said, "Oh please, I know he's your follower. Tell me where he is because I love Ānanda and I want to follow him and serve him."

And the Buddha, who could tell what was going on with people, luckily said, "It's not Ānanda you love. It's his kindness. You don't need to follow him around. Just go back into your life and do likewise. Spread the kindness."

So that's lovely in itself. But what I like is the fact that somebody does one pleasant thing and we're ready to follow them around for the rest of our life. There's a certain lack of discrimination about what's really going on, right? And we do that. Just look and see.

With the unpleasant, we can get really fixated on what's unpleasant when everything else is fine. The mind can—have you ever had, you know, like a little chipped tooth? All your other teeth are fine.

You're sitting there feeling good, but the tongue just can't stay away from that little chipped tooth. And then the mind doesn't simply note, "Oh yes, chipped tooth"—it gets tight. "Oh no, I have to go to the dentist. Oh no, I can't afford it. This is ridiculous. I just went last week." And pretty soon you're into everything that's wrong with your whole life, just from rubbing the tongue on this little unpleasant sensation. We can get completely fixated on the unpleasant. That's being caught in reactions.

With the neutral, as I said, we zone out, space out, try to make something else happen. It's really interesting. Very often, especially in long retreats—I teach a three-month retreat every year—people will come in after a few weeks and say, "You know, I've noticed that things have been pretty calm and neutral, and my mind doesn't like it." The mind sits there and makes up really difficult suffering scenarios and gets caught in them rather than resting in calmness. It's really amazing to see.

The Buddha described this way we react to experience. The going after pleasant—that's craving, desire. The reaction to the unpleasant—that's the second root of hatred, fear, aversion. The totally missing the neutral—that's what leads to confusion, delusion, misperception.

He talked about it in terms of an arrow—again, a warlike image, but it's very to the point, and I like it. He asks, what's the difference between a completely awakened, free person and us ordinary worldlings? And he said, this is the difference: An ordinary worldling experiences a painful, unpleasant sensation—say a physical sensation, it hurts. And when he experiences that sensation, he grieves, he laments, he beats his

breast, he gets caught in judgment, he carries on a whole hoo-ha. So it's as if being shot with an arrow, he then shoots himself with another arrow as a way of relating to that first arrow. An awakened being experiences a really difficult, unpleasant sensation or emotion or whatever, and that's just what they experience. They don't add anything extra on top of it.

So just noticing through the day: how much of our real conflict and suffering comes from the first arrow—just an arising unpleasant experience—and how much is because we're blaming ourselves, or wanting it different, or blaming someone else, or trying to manipulate, or wanting to know what it means, or trying to understand it, or all the different ways that we shoot ourselves with that second dart?

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, "We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." I love that. Just take a look: How much are we missing the real by lack of attention, and creating the unreal by excess of imagination? If you can remember that, explore over the next days.

And of all the darts we shoot ourselves with—the second dart—the biggest one, the strongest confusion, the one that's really at the root of all of it, is this dart of me, me, me. I, I, I. The Buddha again: "With what manner of insight does a person become calm, cool, and no longer grasping at experience?" He accomplishes this, replied the Buddha, by seeing through the root obstacle, the root delusion—the thought of "I am." Just seeing through it. By being mindful all the time, he trains himself to let go of, to not get caught in attachment to all the preferences, all the desires. They can still come. But not getting so entranced by this constant self-referencing of me, me, me. The thoughts can still be there—"How does this affect me?"—just let them be there. We don't have to build a whole world around it.

And that's what our mindfulness practice is really a practice in doing. One of my teachers said mindfulness is like a rattle. It's as if we're two-year-olds—and really, if you look at our minds, two-year-old is sort of like a compliment, actually, half the time. It's as if a two-year-old is running along: "I want this, I don't want that, no, no, no, no, no!" And mindfulness is like the rattle. You shake it and go, "Okay, pay attention over here for a minute. Just feel the sensation, just notice the thought, just notice the emotion. What's actually happening here?"

That's what mindfulness is about. That by landing in the present moment with kindness, with honesty, we can re-recognize, remember our innate composure, our natural ease, our really natural peace. It's not about changing experience, but finding that even

in the midst of what we like and don't like, when we're not so entranced by reactions, we can rest in the peace of things as they are—looking through the reaction to what is true.

An experiential example from that famous dharma teacher, Phil Jackson: "Little by little, with regular practice, you start to discriminate raw sensory events from your reactions to them. Eventually you can begin to experience a point of stillness within. As the stillness becomes more stable, you tend to identify less with fleeting thoughts and feelings such as fear, anger, pain, wanting, and you experience more inner harmony regardless of changing circumstances. For me, meditation is a tool that allows me to stay calm and centered—well, most of the time—during the stressful highs and lows of basketball and life outside the arena."

Learning to discriminate raw sensory events from our reactions to them. And even the reactions are simply raw sensory events—they're just different events from what elicits them. They're nothing to hate, just the next thing to notice.

This practice brings us not into another place, another way away from life, but into intimacy, a closeness, meeting our life with clear-eyed, kind-hearted honesty. Not with harshness. Respecting whatever arises. Because in this moment, whatever arises is our avenue to recognize truth.

The Dalai Lama said: Why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it is the only place that we can know love.

Whatever is happening in the present moment, as soon as we want it different, we've missed the whole possibility of natural peace, of our natural great mind and heart.

I'd like to close with a poem that expresses this sense. You might be quite familiar with it, from Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I awake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water,
and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

That is actually always available to us—to rest in the grace of the world and be free.

Thank you for your kind attention.

CHAPTER 325

Closing Talk - Motivating Our Practice In Daily Life

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this closing retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses the perennial challenge of maintaining practice in daily life. She reframes the common concern about "losing the juice" for sitting practice, pointing out that this already misses the deeper purpose. Drawing on the Pāli understanding of sati as remembering—not remembering past experiences, but remembering our ineffable pure nature—she invites practitioners to recognize that awakening happens only in this present moment, regardless of circumstances.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance through two approaches: first, consciously connecting with our deepest purpose and motivation, allowing it to become a cellular knowing rather than mere intellectual concept; and second, the traditional Tibetan contemplations of the Four Mind-Turnings—reflecting on our precious human birth, the ever-presence of impermanence and death, the nature of suffering in saṃsāra, and the workings of kamma (action and intention). She illustrates these teachings with stories including her visit to Ruth Denison caring for her husband with Alzheimer's, which prompted reflection on what remains when memories fade—our habits of heart and mind.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that spiritual awakening isn't about escaping life but fully inhabiting each moment with wholehearted presence. Wilson quotes Shantideva and Pema Chödrön to illuminate how compassionate action naturally arises from wisdom, and how our individual practice opens us to the entire universe. The underlying message is one of realistic encouragement: changing deep mental habits requires sustained commitment over a lifetime, but each moment offers a fresh doorway to awakening with clarity and compassion.*

Well, here we are with the perennial question for long-time practitioners, the so-called practice in daily life question.

It's actually interesting to me that quite a few people, starting at the beginning of this retreat, came and the first thing they were saying was about their daily life practice—either "I'm not sitting every day" or "I'm losing my juice for it." Already it's implying that daily life practice is about sitting every day. That's the focus, which is already where we start to go astray. But really worrying about it, feeling the losing the juice, how to keep it fresh, how not to have it get stale, as if there's some magic answer.

So I want to talk a little tonight, not about tricks to keep our sitting interesting. Forget about that. But just how we can approach our commitment to awakening. Just maybe a couple of things that might help us to care enough to keep paying attention in our daily life. Because I think that's what it really comes down to. We have to care enough. No little trick's going to do it for us.

If this is your first retreat, maybe not, but those of you who've been on retreats before, doing mindfulness practice in this form for some time—it's no big secret that we can easily begin to think of practice in terms of our experiences on retreat. Either when we think of practice we think of the sittings on a retreat, or the particular states of mind that we might have experienced: some kind of concentration or peace or ease or silence, not so many thoughts, or some deep understanding you had. Whatever. And without even quite realizing it, that kind of search to either hold on to or repeat experience, or using experience as a reference point to evaluate whether our so-called practice in daily life is going somewhere—which is already, right, where has it got to go?—we so easily transfer this to the way we meet our daily life, to the way we "practice." I'm even not so crazy about that word as far as daily life is concerned.

So we end up relating to our spiritual life, our spiritual path, in our daily life easily as simply transferring our gaining mode from one thing to another. You know, we go from wanting to earn a lot of money or having a nice house or the best relationship to having a better practice or being more compassionate or something. A lot of what Howie was talking about, the time-bound thing.

But really, the word *sati* in Pali, which we usually translate as mindfulness, is much closer in meaning to remembering. Now, it doesn't mean to remember the great state that you had on retreat and try to repeat it. That's not the kind of remember that it means. Really what it means to remember is our ineffable pure nature. Not to remember it conceptually, because you can't remember something you don't know, can you? So mindfulness isn't about—remember doesn't mean create. It means remember that which we already know, that which we have experienced, that which we actually are.

And what the formal meditation practice of sitting and walking and formal mindfulness on retreat or in daily life—what we do in retreat—the thing that it most deeply serves is to deepen in us our trust, our faith, our recognition of what that ineffable nature is, that remembering, what it is that we're remembering, so that we can learn to trust that. It's not a state, really. It's not even an experience. It's just that which we are.

So in those moments—which many people have reported, they don't have to be anything special, and sometimes they feel special—but those times, take a pretty mundane one: suddenly getting it, so to speak, that the knee pain is killing. It's been there for the

last seven days. And suddenly there's a pristine presence. There's no more sense of aversion, no more sense of me and that, something to fix, something to manipulate, something to even do anything about. And whether the person describes it as spaciousness or peace or coming home or ease or whatever—there are all different words, the way we describe it. But realizing that that is present and accessible, even in the middle of the ache, the pain, the striving mind, or in just a little normal moment. You're walking out and you see a bird fly by, or nothing special, drinking your tea.

But what the practice does is just kind of strip away for a moment—it might only be for a moment—strip away all the gaining, all the comparing, all the aversion, all the clinging, and it's just: home. Coming home. That's the whole point.

And because it's not a state of mind that you can create and hold on to—sometimes we don't like that—but really, that's what opens us to freedom. It's nothing we can create and hold on to, and therefore it doesn't matter what situation we happen to be in; it can't get in the way.

So to me, our life practice is about remembering this ineffable essence that we are, much more truly than our aches and pains, like Ajahn Chah was talking about. He was so clear he wasn't his chicken pox. That's great. That's the perfect example.

You know, there's this emptiness and compassion—"I'm not the chicken pox. The heart isn't itching." That's such a classic, perfect example of what I'm talking about. It doesn't matter what's happening.

So if we want to talk about daily life practice, it's about—and this is all my opinions—it's about learning, having the commitment to relate to our experience moment by moment. To relate to it as: this is the moment in which I can really open, can come home again. Only this moment. Exactly this moment. Nowhere else.

And that is not easy, is it? When it happens, it's so obvious. You think, "Well, sure." And it's so easy to leave a retreat and think, "That was so clear." Either sitting was so easy—"I'm going to sit four times a day, that's no problem"—or there's just ease. "What was the problem? I just sit and whatever comes up, that's the meditation. There's no sense of struggle, there's no sense of strife. I got it." And we walk out and we go into Walmart, and that's the end of it, right there. Where did it go? I thought it was so obvious.

So the trick is knowing we don't have to leave life behind to walk on the path of awakening. We don't have to retreat for the rest of our life to a cave—although that's a viable option for some people. But it's not the only option. We don't have to leave life behind. On the other hand, we also don't have to leave our commitment to awakening behind in order to live an active, normal life.

I've said before that in my opinion, retreat is just a microcosm of our life. It's the same mind, the same reactions. You recognize that by now. And it's fascinating. The way we relate to a sense of trying to control the breathing just reverberates into seeing how we relate to everything in our life.

In the same way, if we look at our life, as complex as any activity might be, or as many things as we're doing in a day, it's still only moments. A day is made up of moment and moment and moment. Moments don't go away and suddenly there's a solid hour. As he was talking about last night, there's no past and future—there's only this moment. That's true when you walk out of here, just the same as it's true here. The laws of nature didn't change when you came through that gate and into the silent retreat.

So the trick isn't to figure out how to get really good practice from now on. It's much more: How can I awaken in this moment? This moment? How can I awaken with compassion? How can I awaken with clarity into this moment? How can I meet this moment with kindness? And if we blow it in this moment, that's okay, because now there's this moment. And it's endless, as long as we're alive. There's nothing but moments in which we can practice to awaken with clarity, with compassion.

I think it's almost a mantra sometimes, at least in the Vipassana scene: "My life is my practice." And ultimately, I think that can be true. But I actually think it's—personally speaking—extremely necessary and extremely difficult. As much energy and motivation and commitment as you put out to come and be on this retreat, to be with whatever experience is coming up, all the stuff you've gone through—I know that an intensive retreat can at times be one of the most difficult and challenging experiences in our life.

What makes us think, as I did for years, that that's all the time I had to put in? That if I then go out, it's just going to carry me on a cloud of bodhisattva-hood and love and compassion, and I don't have to keep up that same quality of willingness to awaken in the moment?

I mean, really, it's a little embarrassing, but I would say it took me close to twenty years to really understand—I probably still don't really understand—but to begin to think that maybe I could understand someday how much depth of motivation and commitment is required.

Because as I was talking some nights ago, what we're really dealing with here and in our daily life is the deeply ingrained habits of our mind. There's that famous quotation of the Buddha: "What the mind thinks upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." Now this is not to inspire fear, but to inspire a healthy respect. What does my mind think about frequently? Then why am I surprised if in a moment of inattention that's the way the mind moves?

I think seven days of a retreat, or seven years of a retreat, will counteract it, will have an effect—but completely end it? No. It's moment to moment to moment. I'm not saying this to be discouraging; I'm saying it to be realistic. Because I actually feel that one of the things that really brings discouragement to people's keeping a committed practice going in their daily life is an unrealistic expectation. "More should have happened," we think. "Here I really saw through this stuff"—yet the habits of greed, the habits of self-judgment, the habits of aversion or fear still keep coming up. So what's the point? Forget about it.

We're an impatient culture. We're an instant culture. I don't know if you caught it when listening to Ajahn Jumnian talking about how for the last six years he's really just been in emptiness. I thought, wow. This guy, how old is he? Close to sixty or more? He's been practicing really intensively—more than probably most of us could imagine—since he was seven years old, maybe five. And it's not to be discouraging; it's to be realistic. We're talking about a lifetime here, not a couple of years.

Habits are just really hard to break. Recently someone told me that she'd quit smoking twelve years ago and just recently picked it up again. It was right back, just no problem—like she'd never stopped. Well, craving in the mind, aversion and fear in the mind, spacing out when we don't like what's going on—these are really deep habits that, before we pay attention, we're unaware of.

So I want to talk about a couple of things that I think are helpful, because we need to have the interest and the energy to keep paying attention. If we're paying attention in a moment, it's really often quite easy not to get caught up in those habits. It's not always that hard. Sometimes it is, but not always. It's not always that hard to awaken into what's happening in the moment with some clarity, to meet it with some kindness. Remembering is the tricky part.

And what helps us remember, what helps us want to sit every day, what helps us want to really investigate in our life, is to consciously—this might sound obvious, but I think it's important—consciously have the motivation, the intention to do so. It has to be really important to us. Not just intellectually, but cellularly. The kind of important that if you have children, your children are important. You don't have to stop and think, "What's more important—my kids, or this movie I want to see, or maybe I want to go out for brunch? Which is more important? I don't know." You know it. It's there. It's in your cells.

That's the kind of commitment of knowing that our spiritual awakening, understanding and freeing ourselves from suffering, living a life of compassion, of understanding how things are—whichever phraseology resonates with your motivation—we have to really know that and get it. That's what's going to keep us, for example, sitting in the morning when we're tired. That's what's going to give us the confidence and the energy to bring our attention into our experience when we're feeling really scared, or blamed, or afraid, or angry, or embarrassed, or self-conscious—any of the things that we're not comfortable feeling. Underneath, there has to be the intention to care enough to want to be present, to want to come home to our true self.

So I want to talk about two ways that can be helpful for keeping in touch, for strengthening, refreshing, reawakening, enlivening your motivation, your commitment. You'll find other ones for yourself, but really to look from this level—the underlying motivation—so that it comes back up rather than from above.

The first way is getting in touch with what you might call the overarching purpose or motivation in your life. There may be more than one, but what really matters—in your heart of hearts, in your guts, in your cells—what is truly important to you? I'm not here to say what that should be. There's no should. But to really take some time to reflect on it.

Wise reflection means using the thought process to see what's important. For me, it's often been a process of just sitting quietly with vipassana, feeling into it over some days or weeks. I hold that question in the back of my mind, let it go, and just be with myself. Sometimes things will come up. And when whatever is really important to you arises, don't denigrate it or say it's not good enough or that it should be more spiritual. Just let it be what it is. Let it resonate around in you for a while and see if it's really true.

I'm talking here about what's really spiritually important—what we have in common in this room. But you might look and find that actually that's not so important to you, that what's really important is being as comfortable as possible. I'm not trying to be dismissive—that's pretty high on my list of things that are important too. But when I really

look, it's not the most important. What's interesting is that if I don't really look, something like being as comfortable as possible actually assumes primary importance. Without a sense of reference to what truly matters—not just what you intellectually think you want your life to be about, but what it really is about—comfort can quietly take over.

When I first ever did this reflection, something came up sort of out of nowhere: I want to serve the Dharma. And then the mind came in: "Oh, you stupid, what do you think you could ever do? That's so egocentric." Don't listen to all that, because that's just the habits again. It's not about knowing how you're going to achieve this purpose. It's not even about achieving. It's more about resonating with what's really alive and powerful for you.

Then it becomes useful to make it conscious, to really honor it, whatever it is, to value it in yourself. Don't get into those denigrating thoughts—"it's impossible, I could never do that." You don't know what it means. You don't know where it's going to go. You don't need to. But in times of choice, either big choices in our life or smaller ones, this can be a reference point, a kind of beacon. A sense of, "Oh yes, what's really important here?"

To use my example of wanting to be comfortable: if I'm not paying attention, if I don't sometimes consciously bring up the question of whether that's really the deepest thing in my life, a lot of my decisions—even more than already are—would incline toward what makes me comfortable. That would become almost the most important thing. It's easy to fall into patterns like that.

But when I'm faced with a difficult choice and I can't make up my mind, and I'm in my head weighing pros and cons, writing out all the considerations—that's helpful in a small way, but really, I'm disconnected when I'm doing that. Then I sit and I go, "Wait a minute, what's really going on?" And I realize, "Oh, I think if I pick the right thing, I'll be really happy and comfortable and at ease. I'm looking for the one way that's going to give me that." And then I know: forget about it. That's the wrong way to make the decision. And then the obvious thing can arise.

It's a different process for each of us. But perhaps you get a sense of what I mean—to begin to connect with this motivation, this purpose, and then do it consciously from time to time. Really feel it and honor it. It will help you make decisions. It doesn't make anything magic or easy. It's just another help. It'll keep you from mindlessly falling back into old habits. And it'll support your motivation to keep doing whatever particular activities help you stay awake in daily life—whether it's sitting every day, going to sitting groups, listening to talks, whatever works for you.

Getting in touch with your deepest purpose again and again gives us the juice to make those small choices about what's really useful. It's about looking at what our life is really about. I had an experience recently—it's funny, but it inspired me. Funny strange, not funny amusing. It wasn't what you'd call an inspiring experience, but it really touched me on this level and made me look at this question yet again.

Because your purpose can keep changing, keep renewing itself, keep shifting. A couple of years ago, we went to visit Ruth Dennison in Yucca Valley—every year I teach in Southern California, and I usually go to visit Ruth, who probably a lot of you know. She's an old teacher of mine, and she has a center about a half an hour away.

I think it was two or three years ago. I went with Jack and Guy Armstrong, and we went to visit her. She was taking care of her husband, Henry, who has Alzheimer's—very severe at that time. He's pretty sick right now. She had sold her house in Hollywood and fixed up a house out in her desert enclave and was taking care of him, along with running the retreat center, traveling around the world, teaching retreats, taking care of six little dogs and various other responsibilities. She's an amazing bundle of energy.

So we went to visit her, and she had us come in and have tea with her and Henry. What was interesting to me, in terms of this sense of really looking more carefully at what I think I'm doing with my life, what I'm trying to hold on to—here was a man who I didn't really know well, but who had apparently lived a fascinating life. Long years of practice. He and Ruth were in Burma practicing, I think in the late 50s, early 60s, then in Japan practicing, hanging out with Alan Watts and that whole group. He was in the Ramakrishna order for a while. A really intellectually fascinating life, a deeply spiritual life, all kinds of experiences, all kinds of practice, all kinds of stories.

And what's left? What are we left with at the end of our life? We can't even try to have experiences, store up experiences—for what? What good are they when we can't even remember them? We can't even remember our own stories. What's left?

And then it's like, is there any point in my trying to achieve or hang on to anything for achievement's sake? There's plenty of point in doing things when you do it out of compassion, out of love, when it's just the obvious thing to do. You do it for the moment, for the motivation. But doing something to have or achieve or be known or think better of myself—it's like, leveled, gone. What if I don't even remember who I am? What's left?

And you can see, to some extent, if there's not really a lot of physical brain damage, what's left is our habits—how we respond in the moment. We came in, and he didn't have a clue. He had a vague sense that Jack was somebody he knew. Me and Guy—not a

clue. But very courtly, very gentlemanly, very polite. "Sit down." You could tell it was just a habit. And then the mind would wander off and it wasn't there anymore. And I know there are other habits too, not always such wholesome ones.

But it really gave me pause to think: all that I feel I can cultivate most deeply is how I meet this moment. That's the habits of mine that are being formed. How can I awaken in this moment with compassion, with kindness, with clear seeing? This is just personal. I'm not saying this is what anyone else should draw from this. I'm saying this is the effect it had on me. And it was very much: what is life about except cultivating awakening, cultivating compassion, and only in this moment? First, because there is only this moment—it's the only place to do it. But that's what we're left with: our habits.

"What the mind inclines toward, what the mind dwells upon frequently, toward that it will naturally incline."

In fact, even karma—the whole round of cause and effect, birth and death—karma just means action. And action, the seed of action in Buddhist psychology, is all in the intention. The motivation with which we think, speak, and act—and that's only here, only now. So it really comes down to that's what we're left with.

You know the saying from Chögyam Trungpa, when someone was asking about rebirth and karma, and he says, "If there's no person, what's reborn?" And he said, "Your bad habits."

So the fewer bad habits we have left when we go out, the better off we are—in that frame of looking at things.

So sati is about remembering—just remembering. Not all our stories, but remembering: Can I bring presence? Can I bring acceptance and awakeness into this moment?

And holding lightly to this larger sense of purpose—to me, even though it's just momentary, it's actually a larger sense of purpose because it permeates everything for me. That's very helpful, to give us the courage to keep going, because sometimes it's really hard. And you never know where it's going to take us.

I was reading a book of interviews with Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democracy movement in Burma. Under house arrest for all those years. And she was saying at one point that it was never her intention or her idea to go be the leader of the democracy movement in Burma and to be such a famous person. She said it just all kind of happened. And she said, "I'm just a very simple person. I'm so simple, people probably can't believe it because I'm so simple." This is, to me, like an enunciation of her simplicity of purpose.

And you never know where it's going to take you. She said, "I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it. The motivation is its own reward." I just love that. She didn't say, "In the name of justice, I'm going to go to Burma, I'm going to take over." Decision after decision, out of justice or love, out of simplicity, she finds herself in this whole scene she's in.

We don't know. That's not in our control. I mean, I do have friends—it amazes me—they decide what they're going to do for the next five years, and by and large, they do it. That amazes me. I think that's actually a good quality of mind. I don't have it. But in the long run, we really don't know. We take our purpose, we try to live from as deep to what is true as we can. But if we have it too much set on where it should be going, we're out of touch with how we meet the moment.

So for me, one thing that's sort of changed—I've noticed over the years—in maybe the subtext of purpose or my understanding of daily practice, is that somehow there was some sense that spiritual awakening is really about getting myself a bit out of the grit and the hullabaloo and the craziness of everyday life. Almost physically removing myself, as if I wanted to live about a foot away from everything that was happening because it's just too intense. Never go into Walmart again, or whatever. Which, I mean, there might be a little aversion in that. I wouldn't say no. But really, the idea that spiritual awakening is some kind of Shangri-La somewhere else.

And for me personally—and this is how my trips had to go, yours might be different—it's becoming more and more about recognizing it's all right here. Awakening in the middle of everything that's going on. It's got nothing to do with the outer circumstances. This is really what Ajahn was saying today. The outer circumstances have nothing to do with the space of emptiness and the expression of compassion. I actually loved it when he said it's been six years he's been in this emptiness and it really doesn't make any difference to him if he's in the city or he's here talking to yogis or he's back in the monastery or whatever. And I really understand that not as an indifference, not as a shutting off—I don't care because I'm so in my own little world—but as an awakening in the midst of everything. So that things aren't in our way, but we don't have to get rid of them. We can be really awake and in touch with the truth, no matter what's going on.

Okay, we're not there yet, but we can have moments of it. And for me, that's really shifted from floating up somewhere and then I'd be awakened, to awakening in this life, to fully inhabiting each moment of life. Or never mind each moment—just this moment. To live this moment with wholehearted presence of heart, of mind, and freedom in the middle of it all, in the midst of life.

Each moment, any moment offers us the doorway. Some moments are a lot easier than others, you know, to go through the doorway. No blame. Of course they are.

That's why we come on retreat. It makes the moments a lot easier. It's a lot easier to do this here, isn't it, than in the middle of a traffic jam on the Bay Bridge? It's a lot easier than when you're in the middle of a major fight with your partner. So that's okay. We use the easier moments so that we can then begin to access presence in the more difficult moments.

And it is difficult. Our lives are so complex, we get so busy. As Howie was reading about last night, we go so quickly from one thing to the next to the next and fill up our attention and fill up our energy so that actually, you see, remembering just to be present is often the most difficult thing. If you remember, well, how long does it take to feel your breath? How long does it take, even in the middle of a really tense board meeting, to feel your body? It doesn't take any time. It takes almost minimal effort. It just takes that moment of, "Oh yeah, presence." That's what's tricky. And it takes real courage, because so often the presence is unpleasant or scary or difficult. And it takes great motivation to keep trying to do it.

So one other group of things that can be very helpful as a way to keep helping us remember, to re-motivate, are some traditional contemplations from the Tibetan tradition called the Four Mind-Turnings. Now by contemplation I mean really using wise reflection. This is a place where we appreciate and use the process of thinking. We never said to hate thinking. Thinking can be really useful.

The Four Mind-Turnings are just four conscious reflections that you begin by thinking about and then move more deeply into. They're nothing you haven't heard before. But they are ways to remember, when you're really feeling like, "What do I want to do this for? Why did I go to that retreat? Why do I want to pay attention?" They help when you really need to remember why it matters to pay attention. Have you ever had moments like that? It happens on retreat a lot. "Why am I lifting this foot? Remind me again, what's the point of this? The breath? Okay, already." We really lose it—never mind in life when there's so much else. "Why should I sit down when I'm so busy?"

So the four traditional contemplations, the mind-turnings, help us turn our heart towards the Dharma. Very stuff you know, but to consciously think about it.

The first one is our fortunate birth, the preciousness of our human life. To put it in very common terms, not into the Buddhist background: to appreciate all the factors that we have in our life—and everyone here has to some extent—that allow us to meet the Dharma in this life. There are so many people on this planet who don't have the

physical time, who don't have the health to even pay attention at all, who don't have the opportunity or availability to hear some spiritual practice. There are those who have to work so hard all their life just to support their family, just to get enough food to eat, who are in the middle of wars, who are in places where they're not allowed freedom to do such things. There are so many places on this planet, in this country, where life is just about barely surviving, never mind really having what seems like a luxury to sit down and explore the nature of the mind and heart.

Technically, sure. Technically it's possible no matter what you're doing. But if you don't have the teaching or some way to really access it, and you're so overwhelmed in your life, it's pretty impossible.

It's so easy for me to forget how fortunate I am, how fortunate the people I meet are. Because we all have our stories of difficulty and suffering and poor health—I mean, really serious suffering. I'm not saying this means our life is easy. But the suffering is actually part of what is considered the preciousness of our human birth, seriously. Because it's said in the God realms, in the deva realms, there is so much sensual pleasure that there's not much motivation for investigation. It's just too nice. So aren't you lucky that it's not so nice? And actually we are.

And even that we're interested—because there are many people who have plenty of opportunity and luxury and leisure and just really aren't that interested. Think of your families if you've been trying to bring them along, you know? "Yeah, thanks a lot. That's really nice."

Even when I was in Thailand as a nun, people were wonderful to me. As Mark, the translator, was explaining today, a lot of the practice of basic everyday Buddhism in Thailand is of dana, of generosity. And it's beautiful—incredibly generous, supporting the monasteries, the monks, the nuns. But when I went there to meditate for a year, people would come up to me and say, really so happy, "Oh, it's so great you're here. You meditate for me. I can't do it." It wasn't that they didn't have time or anything, but they just thought they couldn't do it, weren't interested in doing it, and were quite happy being generous and making merit. "But I can't do that. You go do it." Just really not that same interest in investigation.

So take some time to reflect when you're really getting lost in a negative whinge about how bad life is and it's impossible to practice because of X, Y, and Z. Just stop a minute and reflect on your own particular fortunate circumstances that allow investigation, that allow development of compassion and love and clear seeing, and that you care enough to even try to do it.

And then, of course, there's the suffering aspect, which is never left out for very long of any Buddhist list of contemplations. But it does start with appreciation. I want to point that out.

The next two, which I'll mix together just for purposes of time, are reflection on the ever-presence of impermanence and death, which Howie talked about a little. If you really reflect on it—not as a panic attack but as a motivator—it works. It's not like, "Well, okay, next year," which is so easy. "Next year I'm really going to put in some good practice time. I can't really deal with being awake in this particular situation because right now it's just too intense. I'll wait until it cools off a little bit and then I'll pay attention." That kind of thing. We never know. We never know. Our ability for denial is great.

I thought of this little article last night when Howie was reading one of his, the one about human growth hormone. This is from a newspaper about a small town in Spain. The mayor of this city has banned death. He feels the local cemetery is too crowded for a soul to get decent rest. So the four thousand residents of this village in Granada province have to remain alive while municipal officials shop for land for a new graveyard. The mayor, Jose Rubio, issued an edict that said people should take utmost care of their health so they do not die until Town Hall takes the necessary steps to acquire land suitable for our deceased to rest in glory.

Now there's a certain level of disconnect going on, I would say.

The ever-presence of impermanence and death. And the third contemplation is to really use the suffering, the frustration that comes with basically our day-to-day life in samsara—the unreliability of experience, the unholdability, the fact of change. The difficulties that come in this human birth are not seen as impediments. Rather, reflection on the ever-presence of impermanence and death, and being willing to meet our difficult circumstances as avenues for understanding, as motivators to pay attention—these are actually very deep contemplations.

And they work. I talked to a couple of people where it came out as we were talking that they weren't practicing so much daily anymore, and when I asked about it they said, "Well, actually things have been going pretty good, you know?" One person even said to me, "I'll probably have to start really suffering before I get back into a daily practice." And we do this, don't we? It's easier if you just contemplate on impermanence and suffering and let that motivate you, rather than waiting until it gets really bad. But waiting is pretty common.

I'm sure you've heard of the work that Jon Kabat-Zinn and the people in Worcester are doing with mindfulness-based stress reduction. Basically it's a program where people are referred by doctors because the medical community can't really do anything else for them. It might be that they have terminal diagnoses, are really sick, or it might be just a lot of pain or migraines—situations where they're in a lot of pain and suffering presently and may have a terminal diagnosis. Of course, mostly they come to this program thinking they're going to find some cure. It takes a few weeks, because all they're teaching them is just straight mindfulness meditation.

I can tell you, it's really quite amazing. Some years ago, when I was managing the meditation center in Barre at IMS, several of us went to become interns in this program. They allow a few people in each class who aren't referred by doctors to sit in, participate, and really learn and see how teaching mindfulness works with strong pain and disease. So I went with two good friends. We were all working at the meditation center, and it was an extremely busy time—we were majorly stressed out. You'd think it would be a good time for us to go to stress reduction, but we'd hop in the car in the morning, drive like an hour really fast, get to this program, stuffing down some breakfast in the cafeteria as we ran in. Then they'd start teaching mindfulness by having us lie down on the floor and do a body scan. One or another of us would invariably fall asleep.

We never really made it through the body scan. But after two or three weeks, other people in the class were saying, "I've had four migraines a week and I'm not having them anymore."

Meanwhile, the three of us would have to leave at two in the afternoon whenever the session ended, driving like mad through terrible lunch-hour traffic because we had our weekly staff meeting—which was never the most enjoyable experience. We'd arrive at our staff meeting completely fried, our heads splitting. "I can't take this meeting. I'm so stressed out from my day."

Somehow, we were supposed to be the meditators. But because we already knew how to do it, we didn't really have the motivation. We went to learn something, but we weren't at our wit's end. We weren't facing a terminal diagnosis. When I think back on it now, it was kind of pathetic.

And yet to see the effect on people in that class—not everybody clicked, of course, and that's fine—but there were really some huge transformations. It wasn't that mindfulness was some magic cure. It was just shifting the relationship, being able to actually

be with the actual experience instead of hating it and fearing it and blaming whatever happened and reliving all the past. Learning how to be with pain just as it is, without adding the extra. The results were really amazing. And we just got stressed out.

But thinking about it later, I realized it was a perfect example of how the imminence of death, the constancy of impermanence, the suffering we face in our lives can really serve as a motivator to wake up. And why should we think we can wait until we really do have a terminal diagnosis? That's even a luxury—to know you have time. We don't know. We all have suffering. Instead of just kvetching about it, we could really say, "Okay, this is the moment to wake up. How am I meeting this difficult circumstance? Can I, just for a fraction of a second, awaken with clarity, meet it with compassion?"

No, it isn't easy. It takes enormous motivation. A little reflection can sometimes help to re-inspire that motivation.

The last reflection, which I'll just touch on briefly, is on karma. Karma means basically action—cause and effect, the whole chain of cause and effect, the inevitability of karma. Action, in the way the Buddha looked at it, really has its seed in the intention, the motivation behind why we do a particular action. Speech, thought, action—but really we can look at our actions in our life. Even if something comes out looking like a great action, if what motivated us is total pettiness, that's the seed of karma. That's the effect that will at some point bloom.

Now, where karma gets very complicated—and I don't want to go into it tonight—is that it's not so linear. That's why it's very confusing. You see people having all these good things happen, and you know they're really rotten to the core, and you think, "I don't get this karma." But if we don't worry about other people and we pay attention to ourselves—which is really where the healing is and the freedom is—we have our work cut out for us. None of us are going to get too free by analyzing other people's intentions and what's happening to them.

To bring attention back and pay attention to why we're doing what we're doing, what happens—and this is where I'm skipping all the details—what you begin to notice is that when we can meet and awaken in the moment with clarity, just meet what's happening, notice why we're doing what we're doing, and pay attention to what happens after we do something out of anger, or after we do something out of love, or after we do something out of total obliviousness, or after we do something out of compassion—when we keep paying attention, the feedback we get, our own internal feedback, our experience, is that really we're so much happier when we act from our interconnectedness, when we act from compassion or friendliness, when we act from seeing clearly rather than from all our preconceptions.

Thinking about this is useful. Paying attention is where we really learn it.

So what begins to happen—it's already happening for all of us, and you see it often on retreat—is that our habits of mind, right here in intention, start to shift. This is where you can notice habits beginning to change. Not overnight, but we do notice it. Acting from greed isn't so satisfying anymore. In little things you start to notice: "Oh, I got that fifth chocolate chip cookie. It didn't really do it. And first of all, I guess I need a sixth."

Maybe it's because it's never going to do it. You can put it down. I'm making it small, but it really begins to shift.

And if you caught what Ajahn Jimnean was talking about—how his emptiness is even bigger this year—and how even when he had chicken pox, he kept just doing for people, doing for people, that actually that compassionate action is what made the emptiness seem to get bigger, is what actually gave him strength. In his way of talking, I loved it, because what I got was the sense of the emptiness, the wisdom, and the compassion as natural interplays together—the two wings of our practice of wisdom and compassion. They can't be separated.

When we're seeing clearly, our natural response in a situation is going to be more from our interrelatedness and less from our sense of small separate me that has to be totally protected, with everything else kept at bay and manipulated so that somehow I can be happy if I can control everything. It's just not even, as he was saying, this idea of being so compassionate—not that we have to be the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa—but it becomes what one teacher called "doing the obvious." You don't even think about it. But in a situation, rather than always self-referencing, we just respond by doing what's obvious. And often what's obvious is going to be the response of caring, of friendliness, of compassion.

And we start, as I said, not by some grandiose idea or service project, but by starting where we are. How do I meet this moment? Starting with ourselves, from Pema Chödrön: "When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart?" Next time you get a chance, experiment with this.

Start where we are. You don't have to have some big thing going on. You just wake up feeling crappy. We all get to do that. That's a great place to cultivate compassion and clarity. No one can say they don't have an opportunity.

And so the moments of our lives—that's plenty to start with. When you're caught in traffic, when the baby's crying and you're changing the diaper, when you're having a horrible time with your landlord, when you've been working in real estate for six months and never made any money—no matter what it is that's happening, right here. It can be mundane. Mundane's fine. Mundane's great. It's easy with mundane. Practice with the mundane so that for the really big difficult ones, we have a sense that we can trust. That if I'm really willing to meet it wholeheartedly, doing the obvious, meeting it with compassion, responding appropriately will be more natural. We don't have to figure it out all the time.

And so it's not just self-serving either—just meeting our own circumstances and somehow it doesn't affect how we meet everyone else. How we meet ourselves, how we meet each experience, it really seeps out into our relationships with everybody. And really what happens is, over time, what makes us happy really changes. Generosity makes us happy. We don't have to think about it. Kindness, friendliness, open-heartedness makes us happy. And when I get snippy, when I get impatient, when I get aversive, it's more noticeable because it's really so obviously suffering.

And the suffering is really in the sense of separation. I think in some ways the deepest suffering is our sense of separation—separation from others, and really, deeply, our sense of separation from our true home. We're not really separated, but because we're so caught in reactivity, we don't notice that we're not separated. So just the expression of kindness becomes our real, deepest happiness.

I want to read this article because I've liked it and I never have a chance to read it. So I'm reading it. It fits in.

It's an article about a man named Matt Dawson who's worked for Ford Company for fifty-nine years in Detroit. He could have retired a long time ago. He's seventy-eight years old. But he's still at it, driving a forklift, working as much overtime as possible, making about $100,000 a year. And he keeps doing it just so he can give most of it away. He first gave $50,000 to the United Negro College Fund in 1994. Since then, he's given them $180,000 more. He gave $200,000 to Louisiana State University, $112,000 to churches in Detroit and Louisiana, $20,000 to the NAACP, and $10,000 to community colleges. And he just gave $200,000 to Wayne State University.

He says, "I get joy and happiness out of this. I can go home and sleep good." And he just lives in a little apartment, drives a 1985 Ford Escort, and works constantly, doesn't take vacations, because it makes him really happy to give this money away.

Isn't that nice? Real happiness. That's real happiness. Not just saving it all so you can maybe make a hundred dollars on the stock market if the NASDAQ goes up and you sell at the right time. That's not happiness. I've been watching my friends—I cannot say that's happiness. But this is. And that comes to be happy for us.

Shantideva, the great Indian teacher, said, "When I've done something for others, no amazement or conceit arises. It's like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return." It's like having fed myself. That sense of separation, that sense of isolation isn't there. We're really happy.

And to come back to this practice, which can seem so isolating—sitting here, being with what's happening, being in silence, removing ourselves from the world to do a retreat. But really, as I know you know, it's about opening to the whole world.

I want to close with this from Pema Chödrön:

"Fundamentally, when we look into our own hearts and begin to discover what is confused and what is brilliant, what is bitter and what is sweet, it is not just ourselves that we're discovering—we're discovering the universe. When we discover the Buddha that we are, we realize that everything and everyone is Buddha. When we regard thoughts and emotions with humor and openness, that's how we perceive the universe. We're not just talking about our individual liberation, but how to help the community we live in, how to help our families, our country, the whole continent, not to mention the world and the galaxy and as far as we want to go. There is an interesting transition that occurs naturally and spontaneously. We begin to find that, to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves—the willingness to look, to point directly at our own hearts—and to the degree that there is kindness towards ourselves, there is confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world."

So that's our practice. Here, in daily life—no difference.

CHAPTER 326

Acceptance of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson examines the paradox of impermanence (anicca): while conceptually easy to grasp, truly accepting it in our bones remains profoundly challenging. Using the poignant example of her father's declining health from Parkinson's disease, she illustrates how our first reactions to change are often fear, denial, and resistance rather than the equanimity we might expect from our intellectual understanding.*
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> *Wilson explores the Buddha's teaching on vedanā (feeling tone)—how every moment of experience carries a quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensation. She explains how our unconscious reactions to these feeling tones create the chains of craving and aversion that bind us to suffering. Drawing on the Buddha's analogy of being shot with two arrows—the first being the actual experience, the second our reactive suffering—she shows how an awakened being experiences the same changing phenomena without adding layers of resistance or grasping.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for meditation, encouraging practitioners to notice where they assume permanence, evaluate experience based on pleasantness, or get entranced by reactions rather than meeting bare experience. Wilson emphasizes that freedom isn't about eliminating unpleasant experience but about non-clinging—allowing the heart to let go naturally when we truly see things as they are. This letting go, she suggests, reveals a peace that was always present, waiting to be discovered in each moment of genuine presence.*

Tonight I want to talk a bit about impermanence, the acceptance of impermanence as a doorway to liberation.

Impermanence is kind of an interesting fact to me, one of those paradoxes of our spiritual life, which is filled with paradoxes, of course. It's one of the facts of existence that conceptually is really fairly easy to comprehend. It doesn't really take a rocket scientist to say, yeah, things are changing. Impermanence, that makes sense.

But really, deep down, when I look at my life, when I really want to invite myself into an understanding of impermanence, I ask a couple of questions. One is, aside from the fact that it's so obvious, do I, do we truly believe that all phenomena are arising and passing? And not only believe, but really know. The second question is, if it were true, if I really do know that, if I do believe that, how would that look in my life? How would I live my life as a result of that knowledge?

That takes us into a lot of areas where we see, as is so often the case, our intellectual understanding, which is useful, but it can be miles ahead of our cellular understanding, so to speak. What would it mean to know in my cells that everything is arising and passing?

The way we act is that if things were really impermanent, it would be horrible. It's not like we say, oh yes, great. No, too much suffering. But the truth is that were we to live from that knowledge, we'd be living in freedom. Deep knowing is one of the gateways to liberation, to freeing our hearts and minds from clinging, from wrong view, from suffering, basically.

When I look in my own life at an example—it's both a very painful example because it's in my immediate family, but it's also one of the more obvious examples in which one would think if one had even a modicum of acceptance of impermanence, it would be active here. The example is my father, who is 83 and has been a very virile, healthy man all his life. In the last few years, he's developed Parkinson's disease. And at the same time, due to something else, he's losing his sight. The two together, it's a suffering experience, no question about that. To watch someone who's been so athletic and strong and clear in his mind be shuffling around and not able to do so much. The mind is still strong, but seeing how it gets harder and harder, and he's suffering from it.

What was my first reaction, and what is often my reaction when I think of him or go back again? Was the first reaction, well, the body decays, what is born suffers old age, sickness, and death, that's really how it is? Not in a callous way, but really that's how it is. Of course not. It took me ages to really be able to feel with some equanimity that this is how it is.

The first reaction was actually not compassion. It was a kind of fear on the edge of panic. No, this can't be happening—slight denial of how things are. This can't be happening, and then at times almost an anger at him. You're not allowed to get old. You're not allowed to be different from the person I've been used to for the last 45 years. You're not allowed to suffer. Why? Because then I have to suffer.

When I saw I could open to my own suffering around it, the natural compassion comes. And the sadness, the sense of loss, the compassion—that's fine. It's not that those won't happen when we understand impermanence. That's natural. It's that denial on the edge of panic that I was feeling, the negativity and the underlying sense that there has to be something we can do to stop this from happening. You know that feeling.

It's very interesting to me to see that I've really been able to come into much more harmony, which means greater compassion, greater connectedness with my father, more ability to be there with him as he is, rather than colluding with him in his aversion and denial. That feels a lot better. But I still have to consciously keep bringing myself back here. When I'm not really aware, it's so easy for my mind to go into, no, can't be like this.

I find that fascinating in dharmic terms. Because at 83 years old, something has to happen. It's how it is. I'm 49 years old, something has to happen. And it could be tomorrow. I don't know.

As I say, that's a poignant, strong example, but also an obvious one. How often, in even the little things, when something that we like or are comfortable with or think that's the way it ought to be changes—how often are we really able to meet that with acceptance?

equanimous? Do we truly respond with "Well, of course, whatever arises is bound to pass"?

Let's just look at our meditation experience today. We really don't usually have to go much further than that—unless you're having a day of equanimity, and may you be happy. It happens. But just to look at the little things: how did you relate to something difficult or unpleasant that arose? Was there a sense that of course unpleasant arises, and that's fine, it will change? Or was it more like, "Yes, it'll change, and it better change fast"? Or perhaps fear that it will never change?

And when something pleasant happens, that's okay. We don't worry about impermanence when something pleasant is happening—only when it's about to leave. And then we say, "Well, of course it left." Intellectually, yes, we do tell ourselves that, like I did with my father. Sure, it left. It's changing. That's natural. But what's the real response so often, not always, but so often, underneath? "What did I do wrong? How can I get it back? How can I subtly shift my practice in order for that to happen more often?" Because that's better and this is worse. It's just so ingrained.

How would it be to really be awake, connected, and at peace with coming and going, coming and going, coming and going? It's so peaceful, so connected, so much less struggle. But why are we often so afraid of it?

Of course, intellectually we know—and from experience too. That's what's even more mystifying. This isn't all intellectual. We do know this from our experience. Why do we forget it again so quickly? That's another mystery to me.

When we suffer from change, from loss, from not getting what we want—big ones or little ones—we know really that the anguish isn't in the fact of the change itself, the changing nature. That's just how it is. The anguish is in our clinging, in our fear, in our wanting things to be different, in our aversion.

Why do we cling so much? Why is it so hard for us to simply be with things as they are? Well, that's the question, isn't it, of our spiritual practice, which we approach in so many different ways. So I'll just talk about some of my takes, some of the ways I look at this.

In some ways, I feel—in looking at my own experience—that the clinging to pleasant, the fear and wanting unpleasant things to go away, this trying to stop the constant change, really is our deepest heart's response about wanting to be happy. As we know, as it's often been quoted, the Buddha said that everyone wants to be happy. We as human beings share this common bond: our deepest wish is to be happy, but we don't really know how to go about it. And I think one of the ways we keep creating suffering out of really wanting to be happy is through this clinging, trying to stop the flow of experience, trying to control.

As we continue in our practice, and as many of you are quite aware of experientially, aside from the obvious—of course everything is changing, we can see the seasons, we can see the days, we can see our bodies over time—but even on a microscopic level, there is no moment, really, that is not in constant flux. There are times when we experience this consciously, whether through concentrated meditation or just the way the mind is set. Some people on some days simply see the ending of things, the ending of things, the ending of things.

And often, not only when we first experience this but at other times too—and even when we don't experience it consciously—I think this sense can be underlying our reactions in a subconscious way. This constant flux is sensed as a deep unreliability to all phenomena. We want, at least I see that I want, my mind wants, somewhere to rest. Somewhere not subject to this constant arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing.

And in looking for someplace to rest, the habituated response of the mind and heart is to try to hold on to some particular moment of experience, whatever it may be, looking for that place of peace, that place of rest—because we tend to focus on experience. We lose sight of the fact that when we cling to this thing and it goes away and we really suffer, we forget in our daily life to look at the process and think, "Well, that thing didn't do it, but this next thing will." That particular job didn't do it, but this next one will be perfect. That particular rice gruel at breakfast didn't completely—

bring unending happiness, but maybe tomorrow's cornmeal will—you know, whatever it happens to be.

And to open with awareness to that "no place to rest" can at times be experienced—not always, but it can be experienced—as fearful, or at least wildly unsettling, to say the least.

It's like being in an earthquake. Eight years ago I was teaching a retreat in Yucca Valley in California, and we had an earthquake. Actually, it was in the middle of a talk I was giving. And that was just kind of cool—I'd never been in an earthquake before, and it wasn't a really bad one. Then later that night, a couple hours later, there was a stronger one. And even that, because I was outside just watching the ground ripple, was a little unsettling on a cellular level, but it was also kind of cool.

What wasn't so cool was the fact that for three days and nights, every five to ten minutes following that, there were aftershocks. One or two we can handle—that's cool. But every five or ten minutes, it was so profoundly unsettling, both mentally and physically. I mean, the body of the earth is supposed to support me. There's really nowhere to go.

So that experience has stayed with me very strongly as a metaphor for anicca, for impermanence—that there really is nowhere to go in this phenomenal world of appearances that isn't going to change.

And the shift that comes through our insight mind, through our wisdom mind, through our mindfulness practice that just allows us to see things as they are—the freedom, the ease—isn't about changing the fact of impermanence. It's about letting go of looking for some place, some thing that we can rest in that isn't going to change.

The Buddha said once that the search for a resting place is burning, burning. Not to need a resting place is cool and peaceful.

And so our whole practice with impermanence—opening to it, feeling it, seeing it, allowing it in more deeply—allows us to give up this search for some place to rest. And paradoxically, in that giving up, there's the peace. It was always here. We couldn't find it because we were looking for something somewhere that was going to give it to us. We just don't quite look in the right way.

Still, I say that. On some level, I know that. And still, the clinging is like second nature. It's really second nature. It isn't our first, most basic nature, although it may really feel like that a lot of the time. It isn't. But we're so used to it, and we cling because we think it'll make us happy.

It's so poignant to me. The very thing that keeps us spinning in confusion and suffering—we do it because we think it'll make us happy.

Another thing the Buddha says over and over when he's talking to monks or laypeople and bringing them into their experience—no matter what aspect of experience—he'll often say, "So you see that the body, for example, is impermanent?" And they'll always say yes, we can see it's impermanent. And then he'll say, "So what is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying." And they'll always say yes. And then: it cannot be self.

So this is another question I pose to myself and to you, to see: Do we actually believe that? Do we actually buy that, deeply, deeply in our understanding—that if something's impermanent, it cannot be inherently satisfying? Again, if we really bought that, we'd let go. The clinging would stop, because we'd know that orange, that relationship, that meditation experience, that really peaceful breath isn't going to make me lastingly happy. It can be nice for the moment—nothing wrong with that. But I think as our response to the complete unreliability, we do tend to cling to a moment of ease, a temporary moment of pleasure, a moment of respite. And there's nothing wrong with that, except that clinging doesn't work.

It's just so poignant to me. There's a fragment of a poem by Galway Kinnell that I love because to me it expresses the beauty, really, and the poignancy as well of clinging—without judgment. It's called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You cry, waking from a nightmare,
when I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight.
You cling to me hard,
as if clinging could save us.

I think you think I will never die. I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars, even as my broken arms heal themselves around you. I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down. I have stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die. And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry, this the nightmare you wake crying from, being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

And the only thing different about that is it's scary when we think we're the house, or when we think we're some steady state that needs that house to support us. But when we realize we're not the house, and there's nothing steady here that's experien-

cing change coming at it, but we let go into the change, there's just no problem. There's just no problem. When we stop trying to block the flow and things just are as they are, we wonder what all the problem ever was.

So I want to talk a little bit about this deep habit of our tendency to cling. And again, don't be discouraged by this. I think it's really important to recognize in your practice here, in our whole spiritual life, that we will have deep insight in many different ways into various forms of these truths—whether it's impermanence, no self, the unreliability, emptiness, whatever. And really, the insight is true. We are in that moment touching the truth. We're recognizing it. We're trusting it. And we'll forget again.

The conditioned habits of our mind are really strong. And just because we forget again doesn't mean it's gone, it's lost, we've failed. I think most of us—at least most of the people I talk to, and I'm including myself, especially here in the West with the speed of life these days—we have quite an incredible impatience. A sense that I've seen this already five times, so it should be over.

But if we just look at our life, and if we just stick with this lifetime—never mind the whole idea of countless lifetimes, just stick with this lifetime—how many mind moments has craving been conditioned, or aversion been conditioned, or delusion been conditioned? I'm not saying this to be discouraging, but no, really, you've got to look at things as they are. But I didn't finish. I'm not saying it to be discouraging because it's a lot, right? That's why you're laughing, I'm assuming. It's a lot.

How many moments has non-greed, non-craving, non-aversion, metta, friendliness, non-delusion been cultivated? Well, as you're practicing and as you've been practicing over your life, also quite a lot—although it's true, probably not nearly as many moments as the other. Yet it doesn't take as many moments. I think it was in an interview today with somebody, but just the power of a moment of truth. You can be suffering in something, wallowing in some knot of personality or frustration or whatever for days. And you have one moment when you just see through the whole thing and it's really gone. Really gone. And that moment sustains us, doesn't it? For really quite a long time. Hopefully it won't have to sustain us for too long before there's another moment like that.

But it does sustain us because the power of resting in the truth is so much stronger than the conditioning of greed or aversion or delusion. It's just that there are a lot more moments of those, and our mind falls into the habit. So that's why I'm saying it isn't really discouraging, but we tend to be a tad impatient. Five, six times—that should do it.

And it just isn't like that. So if we can let go of that expectation, we just keep seeing the same things more and more deeply, more and more fully. And that's how the practice seems to work.

So this tendency to cling or to push away—it basically arises because of our not seeing and understanding experience accurately. In some ways, when the Buddha talks about wrong view and right view, that translation "view"—I like it because it really is that we're viewing experience incorrectly. That's why we respond in a way that doesn't fit.

Two of the ways we view it incorrectly: we don't really let in impermanence, anicca, so we continue to respond as if something could be held. And the deep habit that feeds from this is evaluating—often unconsciously—the value or the worth of our experience moment to moment in terms of its pleasantness or its unpleasantness or its neutrality. As you know, I'm sure, this is how the Buddha described our moment-to-moment experience. And as you look in your meditation here, as things are slowed down a little bit, all that's ever happening is the arising and passing of one of our sixth sense experiences: seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing, thinking.

One after the other after the other. All the mental is also one sense experience—thinking, emotions, and everything. And in each moment of consciousness of one of those, there's awareness. With that consciousness of hearing, we experience it, each of us, as being either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. And that's just, as it were, a fact of the experience, how we experience it. It's just a passing thing. Even pleasant or unpleasant, they're neutral in themselves. It doesn't have to have any emotional reaction around it. So that's just kind of how we experience things. And don't believe me—look and see, because this is really a very fruitful and freeing area of exploration.

What's so fascinating about this is that when we don't have any awareness of the pleasant or unpleasant or neutral aspect of a moment of experience, this is where our deeply conditioned habits come in. So if it's pleasant, without thinking, we just lean towards it, want more, try to keep it going. Unpleasant? Well, that's bad. That clearly isn't what's supposed to be happening. Move away. Neutral? Have you ever noticed anything neutral? And if we do, quite often it equates to boring, or something's wrong, or let me fix it, or fall asleep.

These correlate with greed, hatred, and delusion, these three. They're not any kind of judgment. They're just habits of mind, and really fascinating to begin to pay attention to, because it's in really paying attention that we can begin to experience a different way of relating on a moment-to-moment level.

This is a little statement from Lama Yeshe, who was a Tibetan Lama who died quite some time ago. And this is from a little booklet I ran into the other day called *Becoming Your Own Therapist*. He was talking about vedana. Vedana is the Pali word for this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral sensation. It's sometimes translated as "feeling." I like "feeling tone" better, because we use, in English, "feeling" often to mean emotions.

So he says, "Many of our negative actions are reactions to feeling." Look and see for yourself. Feelings can come to see—if you really look at feelings—reactions to feelings are responsible for all the conflict in the world, whether it's two small children fighting, up to nations at war. "Without understanding the characteristic nature of your own feelings of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutrality, you will never discover the nature of your mental attitudes. And without discovering that, you'll never put an end to your emotional problems." This is Lama Yeshe.

And never mind emotional problems—without understanding the nature of these feelings in our experience, these feeling tones, and our reaction to them when we're not awake, we'll never understand the nature of clinging and aversion and delusion. But it's a wonderful place to explore, because just by looking at this, you can come right in on where experience changes from just being what it is to clinging, to aversion, and to the whole following field of suffering.

So I'll talk a little bit about just these three feeling tones. What's really interesting to me is, as I said before, how much unthinkingly, if we're not paying attention, we tend to evaluate really our whole life in terms of how much pleasant feeling there is.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who is a great Thai forest monk and meditation teacher, once said, really look in your life and the decisions you make and the things you do. He says, almost everything you do is for the sake of pleasant sensation. And how long does a pleasant sensation last? This is what's really interesting in terms of anicca. These feeling tones, they last about that long. Really. About a second. And so much of what we do is to act out of not quite understanding that what we really want is more of that quick, flying-by pleasant feeling tone. And we do all kinds of things—some are lovely and some are really stupid—in order to get more of this pleasant feeling tone.

There's a story from the Buddha's time I like a lot, and one way you can look at the story is through this lens. It's about Ananda. He was the Buddha's attendant, his cousin. For twenty-five years he was the Buddha's attendant. He was an extremely kind-hearted, compassionate person. And in many of the suttas, the discourses and stories from the time of the Buddha, Ananda is very human. He shows a lot of human qualities. It's easy to identify with Ananda when the Buddha is expounding on something. He'll often ask the questions or intercede in a way that's very kind.

So once Ananda was out walking and he passed a well, and at this well was a woman of the untouchable caste. At that time there was a very strict caste system, and someone of the untouchable caste couldn't hand or give anything to someone of a higher caste. So he went by the well, and one of the few things a monk was allowed to ask for was water.

So he just said, "Oh woman, would you give me some water?" And she said, "Oh no, oh no, reverend sir, I'm from the lower caste, you don't want water from me." And he just said in his kind way, "I'm not really asking about your caste, I just really would like some water."

So she gave him some water, but she was so touched by his kindness that she secretly followed him back and saw that he was one of the Buddha's disciples. And then she went up to the Buddha and said, "Oh, Ananda is so wonderful. I want to follow him and serve him for the rest of my life. I love Ananda because he is so wonderful."

Part of me finds this story amusing, because somebody's nice to you and you're ready to give them your whole life, simply because it feels good. The Buddha, luckily, was very wise, and he could see what was really going on. He said, "You know, it's not Ananda that you love, but his kindness." It was really the pleasantness, the happiness she felt—and he didn't say this, but this is what I'm putting into it—it was simply how pleasant it felt to be treated that way.

So he said, "You don't need to follow Ananda. Just take the lesson of his kindness and go out and treat other people in the same kind way." I think that's a lovely story, but it also shows how we can misinterpret our experience and really, for the sake of pleasant feeling, get ourselves into all kinds of situations.

There's nothing wrong with pleasant feeling. It's nice, as long as we know what it is. We see that it's coming, we see that it's going. And probably an unpleasant feeling will come next, and it's out of our control. That's the big piece—it's out of our control.

With unpleasant feeling, it's just the reverse. How often do we evaluate our experience as wrong, or a mistake, or think we've got to do something to get rid of it when it's unpleasant? It's really easy to see both of these in our meditation practice. It's rare to be having a really painful, confused sitting and think, "Fine, this is good practice." Then you come and tell us and describe it clearly, and we say, "Oh good, that was good practice"—and you think these guys are a little off.

But it's also rare for someone to come in and report a very pleasant sitting and say, "But I can see I was really spaced out. That was bad practice." Rare. But the quality of practice has got nothing to do with pleasant or unpleasant.

Just as we can get fixated on the pleasant, we can also get fixated on the unpleasant. Instead of bringing a balance of attention, sometimes we only notice the pleasant, sometimes we only notice the unpleasant. If you're eating lentils and there's a little rock in them—which, God forbid, will never happen here—but should that happen and your tooth cracks and you have a chip in your tooth, it doesn't even hurt, right? But there's that rough spot. Have you ever noticed how you can't keep your tongue away from that rough spot? All your other teeth are fine. The whole rest of your body is fine. But you go through the day just worrying that rough spot in the tooth.

This is what we do. And it can build up so that it's not just some relatively minor—or even major but singular—aspect of experience that's unpleasant. We get into reactivity, we get into comparing, we get into self-judgment, we get into thinking it should be different, and pretty soon we can be really lost in a morass of suffering and negativity, self-doubt, giving up—the whole thing. And it can all be starting from an unpleasant feeling tone that's arising that we don't quite notice.

And neutrality, as I said, we often really don't notice at all. A lot of times when things are relatively neutral, people will come in and say nothing's happening. The more we talk, it becomes clear that calm is happening, maybe even ease is happening, maybe peace is happening. But it's amazing how often, at first, we're really not comfortable with calm. We want a little more juice. Neutrality gets a little too close to not being alive somehow.

We've got to learn how to bring awareness into neutrality. Without that, we often either fall asleep or find ourselves bored, and then we get aversive to the boredom. So we manage to move from neutrality to aversion.

Other times—and people have reported this to me, not this retreat so far—they found themselves realizing they were experiencing calm. The breath, yes, they could feel the breath. It was there, kind of quiet, a little bit shallow. They were really with it.

But so what? You know, I want something else to happen here. And pretty soon the mind is off, creating even negative suffering fantasies. But we'd rather suffer than be in neutrality land. It's really an interesting phenomenon, just to notice if that happens to you.

So these three feeling tones—they're just what they are. In themselves, no problem. Pleasant arises, unpleasant arises, neutral arises. They're just constantly coming and going, coming and going. Where do they become a problem? Neutral is never a prob-

lem, but where we get lost is when we don't see the feeling tone for what it is. The reactions, the responses of conditioning, come really quickly if we're not aware. They just come quickly.

Once we see the reaction, again, no problem. So there's clinging—you just notice it. That's no problem. It's when we don't notice it, and we follow Ananda all the way home and are ready to devote our lives, that there's a problem.

When we get caught up in the reactions to experience—and this is really very common—at times you might find that you're spending most of your energy involved in your reactions. Actually, we can get entranced by our reactions to what's happening, sometimes to the point where we don't even really know what's actually happening. We're completely lost in our reactions to it—like that woman following Ananda home.

Or a friend of mine: we were sitting in a little house, and the refrigerator kept going on and off, as refrigerators will do. This friend is from Europe, and he claims that in Europe refrigerators aren't as loud as refrigerators in the States, which might be true. The refrigerator would come on in the middle of the sitting, go off, come on again, go off. He said by the end of the sitting, he just wanted to get up and kick that refrigerator. He said it was like a modern torture chamber. Just a noise—that's all it is. That's an example of getting really entranced by our reactions. We don't know what's happening.

This is one of the ways the Buddha described the difference between an awakened being and an ordinary worldling—such as ourselves. I would assume it's ourselves; I don't want to put anything on you. Such as myself.

He talks about how someone asked him the question: basically, what's the difference between an awakened person and an ordinary worldling? He says an ordinary person, if they experience an unpleasant bodily feeling, feels that feeling and then worries about it, laments, grieves, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught.

Does that strike a chord anywhere? That pain in the knee, that feeling in the chest, that arrow in the back? Weeps and is distraught. Thus, he says, it is as if being shot with an arrow, he shoots himself with another arrow. So instead of experiencing one unpleasant feeling, he experiences two—or it sounds like more than two. Once you worry and lament and beat your breast, it's escalating a bit.

What's very interesting is how the Buddha speaks to what follows from this over time, how the conditioning gets so entrenched. He says that having experienced that painful feeling and gotten involved in that lamenting, beating of the breast, and worry-

ing, there comes to underlie in that person a tendency to resist the unpleasant. In other words, each time we get lost in that lamenting aversion, it strengthens a little bit the tendency to do it again with the next unpleasant experience.

And, he says, because ordinary people do not know of any other escape from painful feelings except to experience sense pleasure—because that's all we ordinarily know, we think that's the only way out of unpleasant. So then, out of our resistance to the unpleasant feeling, we go after some sense pleasure. And then we're creating an underlying tendency to crave for sense pleasure.

It's really quite interesting. So just watch it in ourselves, not judgmentally. The cycle becomes: unpleasant, the tendency to resist, then going after the pleasant, thinking that will make us happy. The difference, the Buddha says, is that when we feel it like that, that's how we're fettered by pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. We're chained by it because we're caught in that cycle.

And an awakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, does not resist it or resent it. He's touched, shot with one arrow, and nothing happens. It's just unpleasant. And the same with pleasant. Fine, it's pleasant. There's no need to create anything else around it. It's just what it is.

In a way, this is the essence of our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice—to learn to bring our attention into the simplicity of what's arising, rather than getting lost in our reactions and interpretations of what's arising. On a simple level, to just feel the burning in the hip as opposed to all those visions of hip replacement and permanent trauma. We all do it. That's an easy, obvious example, but there are many much more subtle and complex examples. We just come back to the bare experience.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said that we miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination. That's one of my favorite quotations.

So when you notice you're all caught up in some kind of tangled reaction, the first thing is just to pull back a little and notice: what's happening? Tangle, reaction—that's fine. Just to notice that. And then see. Sometimes the triggering sense impression may actually still be going on. If that's the case, you can go right to it with awareness and see the whole chain. That's really the chain of dependent origination. Sometimes not, and then you just come in on the craving or the aversion or the boredom and simply be with that.

I'll give you an example of that chain of dependent origination. Today in the morning sitting they were scraping and painting outside. Now, that's hearing—sounds arising. And this also reveals the nature of feeling tone: it can be different for different people.

It's not that that's an intrinsically unpleasant sound. Some people told me today that it really bugged them. Other people said they actually kind of liked it because there was something to hear and it brought them back to awareness. For other people it might have been quite neutral. For the same person, different moments of that sound might have been pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

But if there was any reaction, positive or negative, if the mind was going off—"I can't believe during the three-month course they have guys come here and scrape the windows! They have the whole year, don't they? And they're doing it today, for God's sake!"—that's the moment where, if it goes too far, when you notice it, and luckily the sound's still happening, that's so fortunate, because then you can go right back to the sound. In that moment you might notice if there's a pleasant or unpleasant quality. You might not—sometimes it's subtle—but you might notice the flinching back of aversion right away. Great. You can notice that. And notice how it can change.

Thich Nhat Hanh says sometimes that even when we experience the feeling tone as unpleasant, if we know more about the bigger picture, it actually changes our relationship and we don't experience it as so unpleasant anymore. Joseph told me this—I didn't know it. He checked with the maintenance department: Why are they doing this today? And they said, you know how wood that's in the sun really rots if you don't paint it every couple of years. The contractors have been so busy this year that this is the only time they could come, and we were lucky to get them now. Otherwise, that wall would just be falling down around our ears. We should be blessing them for painting.

But anyway, you can think of mindfulness as what brings us out of our entrancement, all our stories, out of the reactivity, back to the bare experience. That's our mindfulness practice—to meet this moment, whatever's arising, in a non-preferential, non-judgmental way. The light of awareness doesn't say to only pay attention to what's pleasant or minimally neutral and try to ignore the unpleasant until it's so strong that you can't ignore it anymore.

We don't say that. We also don't say, if it's pleasant or neutral, that's okay, but it's not worth paying attention to. It only matters if it's really suffering, so go right to the suffering and stay there the whole complete sitting. There's nothing else happening but that. We don't say that either.

In other words, it's out of our control. You just sit here, or walk, or eat, and notice what's arising, and notice that it passes. And as much as we can do that—and really, you're doing it a lot in each day of practice—it's not like big fireworks going off. It's just a moment of feeling your foot lift. You might think, "So what? Big deal. What am I getting out of that?" You're being present, for a change, for what's actually happening.

We do that a lot in the day. What happens is the mindfulness gets clearer and brighter, but also more undiscriminating, in that our subtle, unconscious preferences stop running the show. So you begin to notice: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. What do you know? It keeps changing. What do you know? I'm not in control of it. What do you know? Everything keeps changing.

We start to really experience this more and more and more, on many levels. Sometimes it's intellectual. Sometimes it's so cellular it almost bypasses our conscious, mental, verbal understanding. But it's being learned in another way. And sometimes it all comes together at the same time.

As we begin to get it cellularly, impermanence becomes much more obvious. There are times in that obviousness that we see we really do have to open to that sadness, that sense of loss, that poignancy—like in that poem, "as if clinging could save us, being in the pre-trembling of a house that falls." There will be times when we experience that as solid me losing everything, and it's sad. There's loss. There's some aversion in that—we're not quite free in it—but it's okay to feel that. That's part of it.

And I actually think one of our problems with letting ourselves open into impermanence is that this unreliability, this sense of earth tremoring all the time, is generally an unpleasant experience. We don't like to be in this unsettledness. And so we're back in our habit: Unpleasant? Let's just avoid it. Let's go find something that doesn't look like it's changing.

But it's okay to hang out in unpleasant experience. We really learn that freedom, peace, real happiness—the happiness and peace of the Buddha—has nothing to do with pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. It's got nothing to do with things only being pleasant. And really look in yourself. I know when I look in me, when I'm thinking about what freedom would be like, what the unconditioned would be like, what enlightenment would be like—does it include much unpleasant experience? It's got nothing to do with pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. That all just keeps on coming, keeps on going.

If we can just begin to open into that, whether it's poignant or sad or freeing—but when you notice it, rather than hiding, let it be a wake-up call. Oh yeah, touching the edge of change. Great. This is where the letting go of clinging, the heart of non-clinging, can begin to be touched, can begin to become more familiar.

Acceptance of impermanence—it's not gloomy, or like, "Who cares about anything?" That kind of dispassion is a wrong understanding. "Well, everything's changing, so who cares anyway? It's all going to go, why get involved?"

It's not that at all.

When you're not trying to make something stay, it allows us to be so vividly present, to really appreciate this moment. The poignancy lets us really be here because we know it's not going to be the same the next moment. So instead of fighting that or grieving that or shedding tears, it's like, "Oh, this is so beautiful, just as it is now" — and now it's different.

Even the difficulties, because we're so alive in them, so present in them, can take on another context. With my father, when I'm really present in that sadness, in the poignancy of watching someone losing their faculties, when I'm present in it, there's compassion, love, a sense of aliveness. Paradoxically, it's so much sweeter than when I'm trying to make it be different.

And we never know, do we? We never really know what's going to happen next.

It's interesting to notice in your practice ways that you might find yourself assuming permanence. Because we do, don't we? I certainly find myself assuming permanence, and it's interesting to see. Usually when we're assuming permanence, we'll end up in some kind of discomfort or struggle because we're out of harmony with the way things are.

Assuming permanence might be when you find yourself getting frustrated or self-judging or filled with doubt because your practice keeps going up and down. Because you finally had some really good energy and the next day it went away. When you find yourself thinking, "How can I get it back? What did I do wrong? How can I stabilize in this?" When you have a mood filled with gratitude and the next day you wake up just as cranky as ever, and you think, "What happened? I lost it." Pleasant, unpleasant, coming, going — but we posit permanence.

Whenever you assume that what's happening now is going to continue into the next moment, we're assuming permanence. Whenever we look at this retreat and think it should be like the last one, whenever we're comparing to something we've read or experienced or to someone else we see, we're assuming some kind of permanence. Whenever you find yourself looking for perfection — like there's some perfect mindfulness, some perfect way to walk, something that once you get there, that's how it's going to be — forget about it. We're assuming permanence.

Whenever we think we know what's going to happen in the next moment... it's really quite amazing to me, actually, how much does happen as we think it's going to. That's more what's amazing than how much things change. But once we're really getting it, even for a moment, the fact of impermanence — even if the moment is a pretty awful

moment — there's a kind of letting go that really wakes us up to the truth. It's just so different from trying to hold on. And we appreciate just the simple things about not knowing what's going to happen.

Maybe some of you have read the book called *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by a French man who was the editor of *Elle* fashion magazine, a very high-flying guy. When he was about forty-one or forty-two, he got up one day feeling fine, living his life, and had a massive stroke — a cerebral hemorrhage or something. He went into a coma, and when he woke up, he was completely paralyzed except for one eyelid, and his mind was completely clear. It's called locked-in syndrome, where your mind is completely clear and you can't move at all.

He lived like this for about a year and a half before he died. During that time, with the help of a speech therapist, he wrote this book. She would point to the different letters of the French alphabet, and when it would get to the letter he wanted, he would blink the eyelid he could blink, and she'd write it down. He wrote the entire book that way.

It's really a lovely book. I just picked it up last night to look at one quote, and I found myself skimming through the whole thing. He wasn't a spiritual guy, and he didn't have some kind of spiritual transformation. But he's writing from the perspective of someone who got so hit in the face with impermanence that you can't deny it anymore. It's just a series of vignettes of his life — some horrible, some lovely — but reading it is so poignant and so filled with a love of life. I come away from it deeply touched.

The passage I wanted to read is about how being present to simple things really wakes us up. He's talking about letters he receives — people write to him and someone reads them aloud. He says: "Some letters relate the small events that punctuate the passage of time. Roses picked at dusk, the laziness of a rainy Sunday, a child crying himself to sleep. Capturing the moment, these small slices of life, these small gusts of happiness, move me more deeply than anything else."

It just hits me, that sense of total presence. Just this moment. It doesn't matter really what it is — sitting and feeling your bum hurt, drinking a cup of tea, watching my father die. Whatever is happening, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, deeply sorrowful, joyously happy — it's all just part of the show.

begin to open to that, the peace that the Buddha spoke about emerges. When he says he has discovered the true liberation of heart, the peace of non-clinging—the heart, the mind, can let go.

And in that letting go, just of clinging to little things, just in a moment—think of it in a moment, not some whole vastness of life, just in a moment—when the heart lets go of that needing to change or hold on to or manipulate or control things, peace is here. It's always here. It's so simple.

You'll lose it again. That's okay. But just to trust enough to look, to meet this moment and allow the heart to let go. You can't even make it let go. Just by connecting, seeing things the way they are, really getting impermanence, it lets go by itself.

And this, really, in a moment, is the peace the Buddha talked about. Not the peace of some lasting state of mind or heart. Not the peace of some ongoing pleasant experience. But that relationship of non-clinging that allows us to be so fully here without being caught up in being here at all.

CHAPTER 327

Self-Judgment and the First Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines self-judgment as a form of aversion rooted in our fundamental difficulty accepting the First Noble Truth—that dukkha is an inherent part of existence. She distinguishes between dukkha dukkha (the pain of pain), anicca dukkha (the suffering of impermanence), and saṅkhāra dukkha (the dissatisfaction of conditioned existence), focusing particularly on our habitual reactions to life's inevitable difficulties.*
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> *Wilson illuminates how our protection systems—whether blame, denial, fear, or self-hatred—actually prevent direct connection with our experience. Drawing from her own struggles with physical illness, she demonstrates how self-judgment creates a veil that keeps us spinning away from the present moment. She shares Sharon Salzberg's insight from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita that awakening happens in stages precisely because we can only open to so much suffering at a time.*
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> *The talk offers mettā (loving-kindness) not as a superficial overlay but as a practice that expands perception and gives the heart courage to face what is difficult. Wilson explores how the comparing mind (māna, or conceit) perpetuates separation and exhaustion, suggesting that truly present moments—free from comparison—reveal our fundamental connectedness. Through examples ranging from Oklahoma City bombing survivors meeting Kenyan embassy bombing survivors to Jim Lawson's nonviolent courage during the civil rights movement, she shows how meeting suffering directly can become an avenue into profound human connection rather than isolation.*

Tonight I want to talk mostly about the habit of mind some of us share of judging, of self-judging. There may be some of you this doesn't quite apply to, so another talk will apply for you.

Really, self-judging is an aspect of aversion. And to talk about any form of aversion, I feel like the first place we need to start is to explore, to see that—at least as far as I can see so far—at root, our basic problem with aversion is our problem with really deeply understanding the First Noble Truth.

Just a refresher, I'm sure you know: the First Noble Truth is that there is difficulty, suffering. There's the dukkha dukkha, which is the pain of pain—basically what I'll be talking about tonight—that difficult, painful, unpleasant things happen. And there's no judgment of that; that's just the way it is. There's anicca dukkha, the suffering of imper-

manence, which I talked a bit about last week. And there's the sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of just the tedious, ongoing nature of day-to-day existence. We're not talking about that tonight.

But I feel the more that I practice, the more that I explore my experience, I start to appreciate the genius in the mind of the Buddha. When he had to succinctly begin his teachings, and he laid them out in this form of the Four Noble Truths, of all the ways he could have expressed it, he starts out by saying: the first fact of life is things are tough sometimes. That's just a fact we need to deeply integrate, understand, and accept.

It's interesting to see how really deeply difficult that is. On the intellectual level, of course, the degree of suffering, of real pain, of cruelty in this world, in this time, in any country you want to choose, including this country, in any past historical time that I've ever read about—the degree and the kinds of suffering, especially the cruelty that people use against other people, is almost unbearable sometimes to even read about, never mind to witness or to experience. And so on that level, it's certainly understandable to me why we have to at some point shut it out, shut down, divert our attention, because we drown.

We get lost in the habitual reactions to suffering—and we can really get lost in them. The habitual ones of fear, of anger, rage, blame directed outwards. Of total denial, disconnection. And directed inwards, the same things: either denial, acute self-blame, acute self-hatred, depression, despair.

Of course, the Buddha wasn't talking about the fact of difficulty in order to drive us into despair. That's why I think sometimes Buddhism from outside gets the impression of being a real downer of a spiritual path. People hear: the first thing, life is suffering. You can't want anything. Wanting things is suffering. You can't have beauty. There's no self. And people say, thank you very much, I think I'll go somewhere else.

I remember Sharon telling me once that in one of her interviews with Sayadaw U Pandita, Sharon was having a maha dukkha retreat, you could say. We all have those periods, and some retreats are more that way than others. Some periods are more that way than others. If you're in one now, it doesn't mean it'll stay that way. But anyway, she went in to him and said—you know how in the Theravada way of talking about awakening, there are four stages, four classical stages, and at each stage we awaken a bit more and let go of a few more of our confusions, our kilesas, see through them—she said to Sayadaw, "Is it true that the reason there are these different stages is because we can only open to so much suffering at a time? You can't just do it all at once." And he said yes, he really thought that was true, that this was an aspect of it: to open, to integrate.

That's what's so beautiful—it's a weird word but it's true—that when we begin to be able to meet the pain, the suffering, and it can be huge ones in the world, but let's start with the little ones we go through here. When we can meet them head on, we see that dukkha—and I'll use that word because "suffering" is a little too gross somehow—we often experience dukkha as a separation, either something to get away from, something there's too much to bear. Or if it's our own suffering, often we can feel a bit alienated, almost embarrassed. Or else another kind of aversion, which is poor me, poor me, but it's still a separating kind of experience.

What's actually true, when we're with it rather than pushing it away, is that dukkha is actually one of our unifying experiences as human beings together on this planet. Instead of experiencing it as something negative—I mean, we're never going to say, great, I love it, I'm not saying that—but instead of experiencing it as something that shouldn't be happening, that if we could get it right we could get rid of, we can see that when we actually open in a moment to things as they are, and that moment's difficult, we touch in a very profound way our unity with all other human beings. It is quite ennobling. It really opens us to a much deeper, richer connection with life.

I heard a talk by Ajahn Sumedho on tape recently where he was talking about this, how dukkha is really what unifies us rather than something we should hate and push away. He said in Thailand, where he was a monk for many years, often when Thai abbots would begin a dhamma talk to the lay people who would come to the monasteries to hear talks, instead of saying "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," they would start by saying, "Dear brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death."

Kind of levels it, doesn't it? We are brothers and sisters, and it cuts through our differences.

I read an article in a newspaper, just as a human example of this. I remember the bombing in Oklahoma City—I don't know, five years ago or something. And then maybe two or three years later, there was a bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya. In both of those bombings a lot of people were killed and a lot of people were wounded, and also wounded maybe not physically but because people they loved were killed. Sometime in the last year, some of the people who had suffered from the bombing in Oklahoma City—I don't know who organized this—but some of these people from Oklahoma were flown to Kenya to meet with some of the people who had suffered in the bombing in Kenya. This article was just talking to two or three people from Oklahoma.

They struck me as very Oklahoman—this is from an East Coast person who actually hardly knows where Oklahoma is. But the people were saying that at first their expectations were that this meeting would be kind of strange and weird. They were thinking, you know, our cultures are so different. What do we have in common with people from Kenya? It's going to be really awkward. It's going to be really strange.

But when they got together and began to talk, and they started to share their experience, it became so quickly apparent that they were going through just the same thing. The sense of difference was almost obliterated. The underlying sharing of experience through the pain led to a great sense of connectedness, appreciation of each other, openness to one another. The Oklahoma people could say, "Oh yeah, what you're going through now, that's just what we went through two years after the bombing. And now it's five years later, and now it's sort of like this." And the people from Kenya could listen and understand, because there was really this connectedness of common experience.

When we are able—and of course we're not always able—to actually touch the truth of our own experience when it's difficult, so often it brings us into a wider view of ourselves, of life, of humanity. It brings out the heart of compassion, the heart of connectedness. Really, connectedness in our pain, our difficulty, rather than highlighting the differences. We experience the underlying connectedness, and it changes our relationship to ourselves and to life.

I know in my heart that I'm fearful of pain, of loss, of suffering—the big ones, but also the little ones. How often it's new treat! I do all kinds of things not to feel the anticipated pain of my knee hurting, or what if, God forbid, I get a little hungry later in the day—I better have three helpings now. The pain can be huge or it can be small, but I see how much of my life can be built around trying to keep that away.

It's interesting that this can be so much our habit, because I know for myself—and I do feel this is true—that somewhere in us, as much as we have the habit or tendency to regard difficulty as always bad or wrong, and somehow our fault if it's anything personal, when I look over my life, over my readings, at the people who have most deeply inspired me and continue to inspire me, they don't have to be people I know personally—they can be, or people I've read about—it's almost always people who have somehow had the ability to hold their hearts open in the midst of great suffering. Whether it's their personal suffering, or they happen to be historical figures who are somehow caught up in the suffering of a particular time or age.

This ability to bear witness with a greatness of heart doesn't mean always open. We don't go right away to thinking we all have to be Gandhi or something. But to be able to somehow bear witness, and the greatness of heart is that you don't completely drown in it, but can still see—in fact, even more so—the basic goodness of our human heart, of our human spirit.

I remember there was a couple of years where I voraciously read everything Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote about his time in the Gulag, or life in the Gulag. As I look back, I can see—well, even then I could see—it was horrific. I mean, horrific stuff. But somehow within what he wrote, in his experiences, there would emerge a sense of love and appreciation of humanity, an ability to recognize individual acts of goodness within just horror.

When I've read about Aung San Suu Kyi, when I've read a lot about Reverend Martin Luther King—who seems to me like one of the spiritual heroes of the age—the ability to make the choice to meet really unbearable suffering, violence, hatred, and make the choice, as I already said, that we can never let hatred become our motive. "I refuse to become bitter." It's a choice, you know. That choice is so powerful.

And not to let our hearts fall into the habit of saying, "Well, okay, he was really special. He could do that. I can't do that. Forget about it. I'm hopeless." We're all sharing the same human tendencies, and a lot of what I feel our practice can do is open up to us an understanding of the ways we get lost in our fear of suffering, or our reaction to suffering, or our going after desire—and using the small examples to see that there's really another possibility. That wanting to be present, to be alive in the midst of life, becomes more compelling than our habit or our need to deny.

I know for myself, I see this over and over, and then I forget. Well, we've talked about that before, but it keeps happening. Whenever I start to notice—it's probably been going on for a while before I notice it—that I'm feeling really disconnected, ill at ease, shut off from my heart, shut off from the world, or people will tell me beautiful things or suffering things and I can say the right words but in my heart I don't feel connected—that state. Almost always, every time I can remember, when I stop and look at my experience, there's some unpleasant thing that I'm trying to avoid. It could be something really difficult, like last year my sister was suffering a lot and it was really hard to be there and feel it. Or it could be something mundane, like I said, like a pain in the knee. But the dynamic's the same, in that trying to avoid it, the heart's closed. I'm shut off to life. I'm shut off to connection. It's like I'm living on the surface.

And when I feel, "Oh, that's what's going on—enormous sadness"—it's weird, but it's more connected again. It's more alive. The world feels whole once more.

In our practice here, what we are meeting day after day—we're meeting joys too. Because I'm talking about the First Noble Truth and our habit of judging, I just don't want to forget that that's only part of our experience. There's also plenty of experience that's pleasant, that's beautiful, that's peaceful, and that's also important to recognize.

Just as we don't want to completely avoid the way it is, which is sometimes painful and difficult, we don't want to get so fixated on "everything's painful" that if you happen to be having some calm days or some peaceful sittings or things are going well, you think something's wrong. That also arises in experience. Really, more often than you think, people will come in and say, "Well, you know, I'm not really suffering enough. I guess I'm not really getting anything from this. I'm not really learning anything." So this is just one side of the picture.

In practice here, in a thousand small ways and sometimes in big ways, we're discovering—we're being brought face to face with the whole range of this First Noble Truth. Unpleasant sensations, perhaps. Deep pain from our childhood. Really strong patterns of how we relate. Maybe physical illness or limitations. The whole range. I don't have to enumerate them all. We each have our own.

And what we discover is that in little ways, we can see how just opening to what is becomes an avenue into connection with humanity. I'll give a small example. It may sound a bit trite or too easy, but please don't discount it for that reason, because I think it truly is an avenue in.

One woman was telling me once—a woman who had spent lots and lots of time in India. She said she was on retreat here, taking the eight precepts, and in the evenings was experiencing some hunger. She said, "I'm not starving to death here. In fact, it's not even hunger with fear around it. I know I'm going to get food the next day. But just the willingness to actually feel it—I guess it was the first time in her life she really let herself feel it." She said, "In just a little way, it kind of opened me up to think: Wow, all that time I was in India, I might have been with people who were really hungry, who couldn't know for sure they'd have another meal. And I couldn't really be there with that. I couldn't even really let it in."

So just in a small way, being with how things are can be a gift to connection.

Now, on the other side—because we are again, a thousand times a day, having this wonderful opportunity to open into difficulty and connection with all beings—there's the odd, you know, once or twice when we don't jump at that opportunity. And in fact,

what we encounter is the whole range of our—I would say more or less unconscious—protection system, our denial system. All the ways that the mind has habituated itself, sometimes for survival, not to really let in the pain of what's happening.

I do want to say again: sometimes there's too much pain happening to ourselves or in another, and we really can't let it in. We would just drown. I actually think our protection systems have sometimes served us. That's their purpose—we don't need to hate our protection systems. But we need to recognize them. We need to get to know them.

All the habits of mind that come up—sometimes, as many of you have said, even before the knee starts to hurt, the mind has already gone into full gear, strategizing how to avoid it. Even before the food runs out. In fact, it's only eleven o'clock. Lunch hasn't even been served yet, and the mind has already gone into all its ways to make sure I get enough. You know what I mean?

On the aversive side, of course, there's blame, anger, rage, fear, the two-year-old tantrum mind—which gets to be funny after a while, which helps. And ill will, and turned inward: judgment, self-judgment, a sense of worthlessness or self-hatred.

Desire, of course, is also a protection system of choice. We talk about that a lot as well. I'm just not focusing on it tonight, but it's an equally effective way to avoid being with how things are.

As our protection systems become more visible—and probably we're all getting quite familiar with our particular patterns as the retreat goes on, as our practice deepens—mindfulness becomes undiscriminating. That's really one of the beauties of choiceless awareness. It simply allows awareness to notice whatever's happening. And since we stop unconsciously directing it so much, the things we haven't really seen clearly begin to pop up more and more, and we get to meet them. We get to make friends with them. First we get to meet them.

One of these is the protection system—what the mind does in reaction to pain. Sometimes, of course, that's a little wearing. We get really tired of seeing our mind in judgment. We get really sick of watching the mind run off in desire.

We start to think, "I'm much more neurotic than when I started. I'm just getting more hateful, more desiring." But really it's because we're more mindful and we're seeing what often hasn't been quite noticed before.

And if you can look at it that way—I don't know if Joseph has said this yet, he says it a lot—that when he actually sees a *kilesa* in his mind, it makes him happy because he'd rather see it than not see it. That's really true, you know, because when we see it, we're not being driven by it so much anymore.

Self-judging is one of the strong habits we have when we begin to encounter experiences in ourselves that are in some way unacceptable, that are really painful. This is why I was talking about the first noble truth. If just the fact of suffering in the world is unacceptable—I don't mean unacceptable in terms of thinking we should never do anything about it, or we should never act for compassion. Of course, whenever we can, we will. But I mean unacceptable in terms of pretending it's not even happening, or believing that if we could figure it all out and have the perfect world then it would never happen anymore.

And I see how for me the mind can get into this perfection ideal. Then when in my own experience something imperfect arises that I can't control, that I can't change, it somehow becomes my fault. And what turns inward is a kind of self-hatred, a kind of self-judgment.

It's interesting to me, anyway, just to look at that tendency of my mind to like to have everything kind of neatly delineated in little boxes. It is sort of a perfection ideal. Somebody's a saint—they're all good, the perfect person, all open to suffering, noble heart. And then if you hear anything bad about them, you don't know what to do with that. It doesn't work. Or else someone becomes all bad. How can they be good and how can they be bad? The mind just wants these nice little boxes.

This popped in my head this morning in the sitting. I hadn't thought about this for years, but when I was a kid, like eleven or twelve, I used to read about people that would go into really suffering environments and try to help. Somehow I stumbled on these books by an American physician—his name was Dr. Tom Dooley, I think. He had gone to Vietnam in the fifties, and Laos, and started all these clinics. His books were a little self-congratulatory as I remember, but about all the things he was doing to help people, and I was quite inspired when I was young.

Then in the late sixties, early seventies, I found out that he was actually a CIA agent. So that's why he was in those places. And I thought back, yeah, Vietnam in the fifties, Laos—that makes sense. And of course at that time, CIA agent in my mind meant everything that was unwholesome. I couldn't put those two together. So from being this hero, he went into—you know, totally wiped out, forget him.

When it popped in my mind today, I thought, that's so perfect. Because he still did do all that stuff. He still did go and start those clinics and do a lot of good for people. And he was a CIA agent. What can my mind do with that? It's just so perfect because I see how we do that to ourselves.

When we're having a good sitting or whatever, we're great, we're wonderful. Then we see the selfishness come out, or we get really greedy, or everything goes to heck and you can't be mindful for two minutes. All the other wholesome stuff is just blotted out, and we become this one painful, useless piece of experience. That's who we are, right?

More than one person has told me, when we say at the beginning of metta, "Think of something wholesome about yourself"—it's painful. They know it's not true, but they can't think of one thing. It's painful, isn't it? But that's our mental states—it's all good or it's all bad.

When we don't have a balanced perception, when we're experiencing the difficulty in our own experience that we somehow think we ought to be able to fix, or it's my fault—whether it's our personality patterns, whether it's behavior that we feel like we can't control, whether it's the body getting sick or being tired or being sleepy, whether it's memories of past actions that we really feel regret and remorse about, or you can fill in the blanks in your own experience—that response to that in the moment of aversion is like pushing it away, flinching away. It's so quick.

The function of aversion in the mind stream is that in a moment of something unpleasant, aversion pulls back from it and disconnects. Whether it's fear, whether it's anger, whatever it is, it disconnects. And so in that disconnection, there can't be a clear seeing, a clear experiencing of whatever's happening.

And instead, what takes over is either desire for something else, or in this case, a kind of turning back on oneself—self-judgment.

And oddly enough, you know how when you're spinning in hating yourself or self-judgment, you can't think of one good thing or one good thought you ever had in your life. Oddly enough, the self-judgment, which is generally so much more suffering than just feeling the darn thing in the first place, acts as a protection system. It keeps us spinning in it, but it actually keeps the mind away from just connecting directly with what's happening—which is, of course, where the sense of peace, the understanding of truth lies.

But when we can't connect, when we believe the self-judgment, identify with it, keep spinning in it, then the whole cycle just keeps going and going and going, doesn't it? And it becomes a veil through which every experience, for the rest of the time it's going, gets seen through.

There's a line from Carl Jung that the parts of ourselves that we do not accept will become hostile to us. It's a way we're becoming hostile to ourselves. And really, the simplicity of direct connection is the first line, I would say, in our mindfulness practice of moving out of believing the self-judgment and into the reality of how it is—the facts of life—which leads us into peace, into connectedness.

It's not always easy. I'll give an example.

Some years ago, when I was going through the onset of a particular physical condition, the body was getting more painful, symptoms were increasing, and there was also the sense of not knowing what it was or where it might go. So of course the mind gets caught up in wanting to know and getting fearful. But what was more interesting was seeing how the mind went into a whole kind of self-blame about it.

Part of it was the new age spiritual thing that if you really are spiritual and think the right thoughts, you won't get sick. I thought I was above that, but I guess I wasn't. So that was another way to judge myself because my body wasn't in good shape. And also a sense of judgment that the body was betraying me. And the mind was betraying me as well, because the mind should have kept the thing together, and in fact it didn't. It was much more weak-minded than I thought it should be.

It was an interesting cycle—now it's interesting; it wasn't so interesting then—a kind of downward spiral. And what I saw later, I'm telling you from hindsight to make my point, is that what kept the spiral of self-judgment and aversion, anger towards my body, going was the lack of direct awareness, direct connection to the actual physical experience itself.

What I saw after I softened into it was why that was. As soon as my awareness would touch, say, the stiffness in my hips or the pain somewhere in my body, it wasn't that the pain was so strong I couldn't be with it. It wasn't that kind of pain. It was that the unpleasantness of it would immediately serve as proof of the self-judgment, of the sense of failure. I failed. My body's sick. I failed as a spiritual person. And that sense of failure, actually, was harder to be with than the physical sensation. But from the physical sensation, the mind would bounce off—like when you throw water on a hot skillet, just jumping off—and then the whole spiral of self-judgment would start going.

What helped me see through it was, of course, mindfulness practice, where eventually you notice—duh—that's what's going on. But also mettā. And I'll talk a little bit in a moment about how mettā can really help our awareness open into what's happening when it's a little too strong, when the whole experience is a little too strong for simple direct connection.

I realized at that time it was like I was walking around a few inches away from my body all the time, until I finally connected with it. And of course, lo and behold, when there was just a simple sinking into—with mettā I actually turned a kind awareness onto the body itself, stopped identifying with it as a betrayer, as me, and just turned mettā and compassion onto the sensations of the body itself. It really was like that. It was like holding a little baby and saying, "Oh, oh, you're really suffering. Why am I so mad at you? You poor thing, you're really in pain here."

And that allowed a deeper direct connection of awareness. Out of that, what actually happened was—it's not the surrender of "oh well, I'll lie down and give up, whatever happens happens." Out of that comes a clear seeing that allows us to respond in a much more appropriate manner. Whereas before the clear seeing, the direct connection, my response was out of either fear or denial. For instance, people would say, "Go live in Arizona because the cold makes it worse." I'd think, "Yeah, I'll go live in Arizona. It's 120 in the summer, and I'll never have to feel any of this anymore." Totally out of fear and denial.

And once I could just be with what was happening, it's like, okay, I can be with what's happening—and what's really important to do? And one can make choices from the bigger picture. The perception gets balanced again, instead of just being on "let me do anything not to feel this, not to know this is happening."

So I'll talk about how mettā can help with that in a moment.

But to bring this sense of judging, of self-judging as a way of denying, into our practice here: over time, ask yourself as you go through the days—what particular aspect of my experience, today, yesterday, tomorrow, when you notice the sense of struggle—what particular aspect of my experience is not okay? Can I not accept? Do I find myself in real judging, discrimination, saying this particular piece has to go? The first noble truth applies, I understand it, but in this case, no.

This isn't the first noble truth, this is me blowing it big time, and I've got to get back to where it's always pleasant. Just noticing that pattern is really helpful, because once we notice it, we can often make the counterintuitive move. Instead of moving away and saying, "Yes, this does have to change, how can I fix it?" we can make the counterintuitive move of asking, "Well, actually, what is this experience? What's happening?"

A friend of mine generously gave me this image from her life, and I've used it a lot because it's so apt. She describes being in Hawaii with her sons in the surf, where the waves can be really, really big. She said she knows, and her sons would always tell her, that when a wave is getting really big and you know you can't ride it, the thing to do is turn around and dive right into it. Then you just harmlessly go under it. She said that as much as she knew that, she could hardly ever do it. She'd know it intellectually, but then she'd turn around and run like heck, and the wave would just clobber her.

What our practice leads us to do is this: when you notice that impulse—"Let me out of here, this is wrong"—turn around and dive in, just to see what is actually happening right now. Whether it's a painful sensation, whether it's the self-judgment itself, whether it's a feeling of anger, whether it's a feeling of loneliness, whatever it might be. Dive in, not to fix it, just to meet the truth in this moment. And often, under that wave, there's a lot of peace. Sometimes it's a little bumpy. Sometimes we don't quite make it under. Sometimes it really jostles us up a little bit. But it's almost always better than turning our back to it and running. It almost always clobbers us unless we're really fast.

Mark Epstein says, "It is our fear of experiencing ourselves directly that creates our suffering." It keeps us suffering. When we do experience ourselves directly, well, it's just how it is. Things are just how they are. We don't have to fight it, we don't have to fix it, but we can see clearly how to respond in a more helpful, compassionate manner.

So, metta. As we know, there are times when that wave is so big and we turn around and look at it, and there is just no way we can dive underneath it. Maybe it's too close, maybe it's too high, maybe we forgot how to dive in that moment. Whatever it is, there's just no way. So I don't want you to take what I've said and then increase self-judgment by thinking, "Oh, here's self-judgment. That means there's something going on I'm not accepting. I can't be with it. So that's a further reason for self-judgment." Believe me, I'm one of the many experts in this room on self-judgment, and it can just go into an endless spiral—judging the judging the judging the judging—instead of simply seeing it as a filter.

There are times when it's too much, when we're too tired, when direct connection just isn't possible. For a while when I was sick, I just couldn't even really see what was going on. I didn't even know what to directly connect with sometimes. It's just a big

morass and you can't quite tell. I found that at those times, the practice of metta, or compassion—I'll speak of metta, though compassion is very similar since we've been practicing it here—can be enormously helpful.

Sometimes we think of metta in a kind of superficial way. Say, for example, we're hating ourselves or we're really angry at someone else. We think, "Oh, I'll do metta for them." And as we know, that's not what I'm talking about. "Metta, metta, I hate your guts, may you be happy." We're just trying to pretend we feel something other than we do. It's a genuine attempt, but it doesn't really work when we do that. I don't mean metta as an avoidance or an end run. Rather, it's a willingness to be present with suffering. Generally, when we're in self-doubt or anger or really suffering, the best place to practice metta is towards ourselves, because who's suffering? There's one person here who's really suffering for sure that we know about, and that's a good place to start.

It's really interesting. As I said, for aversion, metta is often given as the antidote. But it's not as straightforward as it might seem. I have this mind that likes everything in nice little boxes. So, you're feeling down on yourself, you're judging yourself, so do some metta and then everything's fine, you feel loving. It's not like that. It didn't work like that at all for me. But what happened was much more profound in a more simple kind of way. What metta can do over time—the practice of just bringing kind, loving wishes to ourselves—is begin to balance out the perception.

So again, a kind of superficial sense one might have – I know I had from a distance – is, well, with metta you're deliberately tuning in to the beautiful aspects of someone. And we say, do it in the easy way. So you tune into what's good, you ignore the person's faults, and you just wish them well, and it's a kind of goody-goody, blind kind of practice. Which of course it's not.

And what happens with loving-kindness – I'm sure many or all of you have seen this for yourself – is that in the moment of the metta, just the simple friendliness, I'm not talking about gushing senses of unitive love every minute. I'm just talking about metta as connection, as simple friendliness, as simple openness. It's not always so intense. In a moment of metta, it's actually not one-sided or blind in the perception at all. It expands and includes the whole picture in a way that aversion or self-judging never can.

So, for example, back with my body and my mind spinning about it, when I began to just meet it with metta, the whole picture became much more clear. That's when I saw the pain of the body and the pain of the mind, because in the metta there's no judging. It's a softening of vastness that holds the whole thing in a field of kindness, in a field of undiscriminating connection. So I would see the whole picture – my body, my mind reacting, the pain in the mind – and just a sense of basic goodness and clear intention

beyond that, that makes it much easier. It actually gives our heart the courage to directly face what is difficult, because what is difficult is not the whole picture anymore. It's embedded more in the vastness of the human mind and heart. It's held in really our basic goodness, which in my experience is ultimately what is true and what is vast.

The self-judging, the aversion – it comes out of delusion. The delusion that we are separate beings. The delusion that somehow we can keep ourselves separate from this unpleasant experience. And that aversion, that pushing away, that self-judging, perpetuates the delusion. Metta just dissolves it. Because in metta, the sense of separation – whether I'm separating this part of me from that part of me, or me from you, or someone who's being really awful in their behavior from me who doesn't try to be so awful – metta just dissolves those separations and gives the heart and mind the courage to directly connect in the midst of it.

And we don't have to look for such grandness when we're doing metta either. That's also what's nice. We just simply wish ourselves or the other each phrase without reaching for some kind of grand courage. And it comes. It comes. The strength of metta is the strength of truth, of the vastness of our connectedness, of non-separation.

Well, this story really inspires me. It's a little long, but it really inspires me. It's about a person's courage acting from the strength of love in the face of real hatred and violence, and the power of that love and courage.

This is from a book called *The Children* by David Halberstam, and he's talking about a man who, everything I've read about him, sounds like really another spiritual hero. His name is Jim Lawson. The story is about Nashville in 1960 – and if you remember, some of us were just little kids then, and maybe some of us weren't born then – but in Nashville in 1960, when the sit-ins at the lunch counters were starting, right in the early days of the civil rights movement in this country. Jim Lawson was teaching the nonviolent workshops to all the college students who were actually the ones marching in the sit-ins, which became violent after some time.

A little synopsis of Jim Lawson: he was a Christian and very deeply committed to nonviolence his whole life, to the point that during the Korean War he went to jail as a conscientious objector because he was so strongly committed to nonviolence. He was also very inspired by Gandhi and at one point had gone to India for three years with his church, partly so that he could study Gandhi's ways. So he brought that with him and was teaching these nonviolent workshops. That is what was really fortifying the love and the courage of these young kids, really, who were marching in these demonstrations.

So this was one of the first demonstrations. I'll just read this description by Bernard Lafayette, who was one of the young students in the demonstration. They were marching in one of the early days, and at the end of the line Bernard Lafayette was marching with another man, Solomon Gort, right at the end of the line. A couple of young white toughs came and knocked Solomon down and started kicking them. Bernard saw this as his first chance to really try his nonviolent commitment, so he threw himself on top of his friend to distract the toughs, which he did, so the toughs started beating on him.

At this point, Jim Lawson walked over. He did not rush over like going to an accident. Instead, he walked over very calmly, as if to a long-standing appointment. Lawson's arrival shifted the attention of the toughs from Gort and Lafayette to Lawson. "The thing about Jim," Bernard remembered, "was that he was so utterly self-assured, so confident, as if he were accustomed to dealing with toughs beating up fallen demonstrators every day of his life."

The leader of the toughs was wearing what was the prevailing uniform of the day – black leather jacket, black pants, and the haircut they called a duck's ass. When he saw Lawson, he was enraged by Lawson's coolness, and he spat at him. Lawson looked at him and asked him for a handkerchief.

The man, stunned, reached into his pocket and handed Lawson a handkerchief. Lawson wiped the spit off himself as calmly as he could. Then he looked at the man's jacket and started talking to him. Did he have a motorcycle or a hot rod car? A motorcycle was the answer. Jim asked a technical question or two, and the young man started explaining what he had done to customize his bike.

Amazingly, Bernard thought, these two men were now talking about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. A few seconds earlier, they had seemed to be sworn enemies, ready to maul each other. By this time, both Solomon and Bernard were back up on their feet, the line was moving, and Jim and the young man were still talking about the man's motorcycle. In that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them more human in the eyes of the other.

As they walked away, Jim waved to the man, and the man remained still—neither accepting the friendship nor, for that matter, rejecting it. It had been a marvelous example of Christian love for Bernard.

That's a powerful example. But we can bring that same quality of courage into our own lives. We don't have to compare ourselves and think, "Well, I'm not that good," as I said before. We can bring that quality of willingness to humanize our own self when we're judging, when we think we're useless, when we think we're worthless, when we can't abide what's happening.

There's one other point I want to address, and I mentioned this earlier: comparing. One thing we see in judging, as in all aversion, is that it stems from ignorance—because we're trying to pretend that what's happening really isn't happening. We don't want to know the truth of it, and this perpetuates that ignorance. The underlying source of all our ignorance is that sense of separate self, of separation—the feeling that somehow I am a being isolated from everything else.

What really keeps that going, and it's a very subtle, deeply ingrained habit of mind, is the habit of comparing. I don't know if any of you have noticed the mind comparing from time to time. The word in Pali is *mana*, often translated as conceit—which is nothing to get down on ourselves about, because it's one of the most deeply ingrained and subtle patterns of mind. This comparing with anything: they're better than me, they're worse than me, they're the same as me. Even "they're the same as me." It's endless. Have you noticed how totally exhausting it is?

What's really interesting about it is how completely self-referencing it is. Everything that happens, everything anybody does, in comparing mode is experienced as how it affects me. What does it say about me? It's me, me, me—the center of the universe. In fact, we see that judging and self-referencing, even when we're down on ourselves, is a huge ego trip, because we become the center of the world.

This is a little uncouth, but it's so perfect that I have to use it. Yvonne Rand once made the statement that when we're in this mode, each of us thinks we're the little piece of shit that the whole world revolves around. That's really it, in the comparing and judging mind, right? It captures both sides so perfectly.

Just notice how we compare to everybody walking by. We compare to our past experience. We compare to something we've read. We compare to some idea we completely made up, but we think that's what's supposed to be happening. We compare to the imagined experiences of others. How often do you see someone sitting there, make up what's happening for them, compare yourself, and start feeling horrible? It's really quite endless—and so painful.

So you might just begin to notice this comparing. Just notice it. I didn't say judge it. Just notice it. Notice the state of mind it comes out of. Notice the effect of it, the experience it engenders—that kind of me-centered exhaustion, the self-referencing.

Often it arises with seeing. Not always, but a really good place to explore is to bring your awareness to seeing. For example, it's good dining room practice. When you're walking into the dining room—which is, you know, judgment city, maybe not for everybody, but it can just open the floodgates sometimes. Or walking practice can do it too, if you're walking in a room with many other people. If you simply bring your awareness to seeing, you notice how all that's happening is form and color going by.

"Wow, they really look focused. What the heck have I been doing all this time?" And then the next person walks by with hardly any food on their plate. "Oh my God, they are such a renunciate and I'm such a slob." And then the next person comes by and clatters their plates down and makes a heck of a racket, and you think, "Well, forget them. What have they been doing for five weeks? I've really got it together here."

Instead of going with all of that—it helps to laugh at it, though. I mean, a lot of times in my practice, I'm going around in my mind, letting it really say that, and just laugh. You know, just don't take it personally. Just laugh. It helps.

But come to seeing, and notice the difference between going out through the eye door all the time and just being there—seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing. You know, just back and forth, back and forth. It can be quite instructive and entertaining. Try it at your next meal.

And notice how when we're caught in comparing, it's as if—at least this is how it is for me—as if I think somehow I could compare myself into happiness. You know? That I can finally compare myself to the top of the pile, be the best around, and then everything's going to be okay. I guess I'm not totally alone in that. Until, you know, a new yogi comes who's better. Or you think you're doing good and then you go out and read about Milarepa, and you go, "Well, forget about it. I can't even start."

Instead of seeing that it doesn't make any difference. That comparing is completely deluded, senseless, and it doesn't have any bearing on reality. It just doesn't make any difference.

So just to end now, I'll simply say: remember, or notice when it happens again, a time when you're really present and there's no comparing whatsoever. It's kind of a timeless moment because there's no past or future. You're not thinking about how it was in the past or how it should be in the future. You're not reaching out to what's going on with

somebody else. There's no looking outward for self-verification, for self-justification, for a sense of being anything. In fact, there's not much sense of self at all. There's just things as they are, whatever it is.

That moment—really these timeless, pristine moments—that's the direction of the peace of heart. That's really the direction of our connectedness. Not sitting there thinking, "I feel so connected to all beings." Just that timeless moment of no separation being created. Then the vastness of the truth of things, the awareness of our connectedness, can reveal itself.

I want to end with this poem, more because it gives me the feeling of what I'm saying than the actual words, by Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me and I awake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water, and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time, I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

Let's just sit quietly for a minute.

CHAPTER 328

Wise Attention (Yoniso Manasikāra)

Carol Wilson · 1h07

> *In this comprehensive talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the Buddha's teaching on yoniso manasikāra (wise attention), which the Buddha described as the single most important internal factor for spiritual development. She explains that wise attention means understanding what is fit for attention—that which reduces craving, becoming, and ignorance—versus what increases these tendencies when we dwell upon it.*
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> *Wilson presents a practical framework of the three vattas (rounds of saṃsāra): transgression (unskillful speech and action), obsession (repetitive thoughts), and the latent level (dormant tendencies). She explores how sīla protects us at the first level, samādhi at the second, and paññā at the most subtle level. The talk examines how the five hindrances strengthen through unwise attention—sense desire through focusing on gratification, aversion through dwelling on repugnance, and doubt through speculation on dubious matters.*
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> *The teaching unfolds through six methods the Buddha taught for abandoning unwholesome tendencies: seeing (basic mindfulness practice), restraining (guarding the sense doors), wise use of requisites (relating skillfully to necessities), patient endurance (cultivating the vast mind of equanimity), avoiding (renouncing what doesn't support awakening), and removing (redirecting attention when overwhelmed). Wilson emphasizes that yoniso manasikāra—literally 'womb-like nurturing action of mind'—involves directing awareness in ways that protect us from suffering, always with the quality of mettā rather than aversion.*

Sometimes I know when I'm deep in practice and getting very involved in how the practice is going—the different techniques and the subtleties of the meditation—it can be easy to forget that even the intensive depth of meditation itself is only a tool, one of many tools, to enable our heart and mind to open to the liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging. In other words, the meditation isn't an end in itself. Hopefully we're not here only to become ace meditators, which may or may not happen. It's not in the Olympics yet as an event. We're here to bring all the conditions together to allow our hearts and minds to open to truth.

Of course the meditation is our most powerful and useful tool, but even here the work is happening on many levels in all of the things that we do throughout the day. Our journey of awakening is not a linear process on a scale, going up, up, up until it reaches some point of peak experience and that's it. It's really a constant balancing act—expansion, contraction, falling out of balance, coming back into balance. But the bal-

ance is balancing the awareness, balancing the state of our attention, of our mind and heart, so that it's exquisitely, delicately balanced, vividly awake, present, no holding back, yet at the same time not involved in any to-ing and fro-ing, any pushing and pulling, any manipulating. This delicate balance.

What I want to talk about tonight is a particular factor—it's a mental factor, a particular aspect of our experience. It's a factor that the Buddha spoke about a lot that's extremely useful, I find, and interesting to be aware of. It helps us look at all different aspects of our experience with an eye of awakening, with how to pay attention in order to awaken, how to use the experience. This aspect is called wise attention. That's the usual translation. Sometimes I've seen it translated as appropriate attention.

To give an example of one conceptual framework showing the different levels and how the way we pay attention in different areas of our experience can serve to awaken us, there's one called the three vattas, or the three rounds of saṃsāra. You thought there was only one round of saṃsāra, but in this framework there are three. I find it interesting.

The first round is that of deeds or speech. When we are not mindful—and in all of these, of course, mindfulness is always our protection—but in this first round, it's called the round of transgression. When we're unmindful and some of the torments of mind spring up—greed, hatred, confusion—in this round it's called transgression because we actually speak or act out of that unmindfulness in an unwholesome or harmful way.

To give a simple example: you go to your walking meditation spot, and everyone knows it's your walking meditation spot, but somebody got there before you. They had the nerve—after three weeks they took it. In the round of transgression, without mindfulness, we'd actually say or do something. We're protected from this by sīla. Have there been times when you can just thank the Lord for having taken the precept of noble silence? That's the thing that keeps our mouth shut. That's nothing to sneer at. That's really useful. So that's on the level of transgression.

The second, more subtle level is called the obsessive level, which we're probably also quite familiar with from time to time. This is on the level of thoughts. You go to the walking place, the person's there. It doesn't even occur to you that you're going to say or do something, but the mind just picks at that and worries at that and gets lost in thoughts of revenge and what you're going to do, how you have to write a note. When you find yourself writing a note to the staff about twenty-five times in your mind, there's a good chance you're hanging out at this level in that moment.

That's actually how I check myself for yogi mind when I'm on retreat. I find myself thinking, "Well, the cooks just really need to know this. It's for the benefit of all beings. It's not for me. I only care about the other yogis—for myself, it doesn't matter." And I just watch. If that comes up for three days running, I go, "Uh-huh." Never write the note right away. That's my advice. Because they can read your handwriting, even if you don't sign it. They know who it's from.

On this level of obsession—the repetitive, compulsive thought—it's said that samādhi, concentration, protects us. And you can see that. As the mind gets more focused, we're not as liable to get so sucked in to these obsessive thoughts. They may come up, but it's easier to come back to the breath or to the changing objects, and the obsession doesn't take hold. That's our protection.

And then the most subtle level is called the latent level.

And this is the one that I think can give rise at times to a sense of discouragement if we're not quite paying attention.

Now this is the level where the mind can be really quite focused. The greed or the hatred, the confusion isn't really coming up, but there just needs to be a little space where the conditions come together that would allow that to arise. And if there's that tendency, sort of like a seed resting in the mind stream, well then given the conditions, it could sprout.

So again, taking the example of the walking: you're going to your walking place, you're really quite mindful, you're not in obsessive thoughts. And if you stayed really present, you'd notice the person there, you'd just say okay and walk away. You may have done that and really seen that it was no effort, that was just how it happened. And another day you go, just as mindful, but just when you get there you get a little bit distracted by something, and whoosh—in rushes desire or aversion or confusion.

Quite a few people have been reporting something like this in interviews. As I say, it can seem discouraging because you think, "I'm so present and I just have one little pleasant thought that I don't pay much attention to, and the next thing I know I'm in some incredible fantasy—making up dinner parties and building houses and constructing retreat centers, or whatever your fantasy is. How did I get there? My practice was really good."

And it is. It's just that it doesn't take much space for these underlying tendencies to shoot up. Don't be discouraged by this. It's just kind of interesting to see it. It doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It means the practice is quite subtle. There's that sense of being really present, and all of a sudden, boom—out from the depths comes greed or aversion.

What really helps us move out of this is wise seeing, paññā, wisdom. In other words, understanding. The understanding that arrives at that place of non-clinging where the mind and heart naturally let go.

So in all three of these levels, in the way we're working in our practice, wise attention is a very useful and important tool. It's a concept, but we can turn to it as a tool.

"This was said by the Blessed One, so I have heard: With regard to internal factors, I don't see any other factor like wise attention that can do so much for a bhikkhu"—or a person in training. That's us. "A person who attends wisely abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful."

This is what the Buddha says: no other single internal factor can be so helpful to us. There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about several different ways—all using wise attention in one form or another—that can help us, if we pay attention, to abandon, to see wisely in such a way that these underlying tendencies, these latent seeds, begin to be abandoned, begin to lose their power. And all of these are based in wise attention.

So let me actually define what wise attention is, according to the Buddha. It's very pragmatic, as the Buddha so often was. He says that wise attention is understanding what is fit for attention and what is not fit for attention. That's how to pay attention wisely.

Now to us that can sound like a value judgment, the kind of value judgment we often put in our practice: "This particular pain is not fit for attention. This bliss state is fit for attention." Guess what? He's not talking about that. It's got nothing to do with pleasant and unpleasant. It's very practical.

Unfit for attention means that when we pay attention in a steady way to this particular experience, whatever it is, the underlying tendencies of craving, of becoming, and of ignorance arise if they're not already arisen, and get stronger if they are arisen. It's just really basic. You keep paying attention in this particular way, and craving gets stronger, becoming gets stronger, delusion and confusion get stronger.

And what is fit for attention is, of course, just the opposite: when you're paying attention, meeting with awareness, with kind awareness, this particular thing, whatever's arising, then maybe not in the first second but over some time, these three—craving, becoming (which is like grasping), and ignorance—either get less if they're already present in the mind stream, or they don't arise.

Now, our mindfulness practice is, of course, the perfect pure example of this. Do you understand that? How we've been going on and on about how a moment of mindfulness, of pure connection to the bare experience, whatever it is—how in a moment of that connected mindfulness there's no wanting it to change, there's no aversion, there's no delusion making up some story. Just meeting what is, in that moment of mindfulness—that's wise attention. The torments of mind are not increasing and they're not even arising in that moment.

So that's the basic description of wise attention. And it's at the root, the Buddha says, of wise view, of seeing things clearly, of liberation.

And so then he goes through these different areas and how we can use wise attention. I'm going to talk about some of those tonight.

The first one is really our basic mindfulness practice, never to be neglected. Sati, mindfulness, is always our protection, always our ally. So he talks about ways to abandon these tendencies, these torments of mind, the craving. And you've got to realize that within craving is also included the flip side, aversion. Because when we're wanting something, we're also wanting something to be different. So it's in a way a shorthand for both.

The first way is to abandon by seeing. That's really our mindfulness practice, seeing things as they are. And again, remembering that the fitness of what's appropriate to pay attention to is not inherent in the object and whether the object itself seems skillful or unskillful, but in how we pay attention to it.

So a simple example, the kind we always give, about where to place attention can make the difference. This is a story someone really told me a couple of years ago here. She was sitting in this hall day after day, close to the front, and some very subtle, repetitive noise began to bother her. She told me this after having gone through the whole process over a few days. But this repetitive noise—which I'm thinking might have been the ticking of the clock up here, something really soft you don't hear until your mind gets pretty quiet—she said she started to go through all kinds of aversion and anger and resentment, just really trying to focus. "This sound is ruining my samādhi. This sound is ruining my concentration."

You might be able to relate to how we do that. It seems we're paying attention to what's happening, but we're really paying attention to how annoying and inappropriate this particular sound is. And it just kept spiraling and spiraling until she was really, you know, in a state.

And then one day it struck her: "Oh, let me pay attention to the sound itself. I think I've heard that somewhere." Which she did—just went right to hearing, hearing, unpleasant—and was like, "Oh, I see. The sound wasn't bothering my concentration. My mind was bothering my concentration."

So that's a very obvious example, isn't it, of unwise attention and wise attention. Would that it were always so obvious and so easy, and even then it takes us sometimes days to get it because we get so caught up.

But sometimes we're attending to the wrong object, so to speak. Sometimes we're attending to the right object, the sound, but in a really harsh way. You're listening to the sound, but in it is thinking, "May it stop, may it go away, if I pay attention to this correctly." We do that with pain. We know sound won't stop, but "May it go away."

Another aspect of wise attention is the quality of the attention, which is what we always say with mindfulness—that quality of mettā in the mindfulness.

The Pāli term for wise attention, two words, is yoniso manasikāra. Andy gave me his own idiosyncratic translation of what this means, but I really like it, so I'm going to use it because I think it gives the sense of the quality of wise attention. Yoniso, which is usually translated as wise or appropriate, actually comes from the word for womb, yoni. So he translates that as womb-like nurturing or held in protection, which I very much like if you remember that mindfulness is our strong protection. And then manasikāra—mana is the word usually for mind, kāra comes from the verb from which kamma also comes, which means action. So it's a nurturing, protecting action of mind, the directing of the mind in a way that protects. You could put it that way.

So wise attention is directing the awareness to what's arising in a way that protects us from increasing the torments of mind, from suffering. And so obviously we can't do that by hating what we're paying attention to. We can try, but it won't work.

So this one, again, about wise seeing—something that I found very interesting is how with four of the five hindrances, the hindrances can strengthen and increase if we have slightly unwise attention. We don't quite pay attention to the right aspect.

So I'll give you these examples. With sense desire, the first hindrance, the way that the sense desire increases is if we pay attention to the experience of the sense desire—not just on the bare experience, but our emphasis is really on the gratification that we're experiencing in that particular sense pleasure. So for example, if I'm eating a piece of very tasty bread, and I'm just noting tasty, pleasant, nice, that's fine. But if there's that little bit of "Mmm, this is really tasty"—and you're noticing tasty, but the real emphasis is on the gratification, it's sort of how tasty it is for me—I get in there, definitely. And as we're paying attention to that gratification more than the bare experience, the sense desire increases, gets stronger and stronger. This might be a little subtle, but play with it.

With aversion, it's the same thing.

How we pay attention matters deeply. Like that woman with the clock, you might be sort of being with the sound, practicing what seems like wise attention, but really the attention is a little more with the repugnant nature of that unpleasant experience. "This is really so unpleasant. This really shouldn't be allowed to happen in a retreat center like this. I really shouldn't have to deal with such an unpleasant physical experience." You know, just that little tinge of "this is really disgusting." That's the place where, even though we can fool ourselves that we're being mindful, the unpleasantness feeds the aversion because we're not quite present with wise attention.

Sloth and torpor, I hate to tell you, isn't quite like that. It's more that we get overwhelmed and the energy can't match the heaviness. Or we get into boredom.

But with the other two hindrances—with restlessness and remorse, particularly the mental part—it's that we give unwise attention to spinning reflections, to painful or difficult or sorrowful reflections, and the attention really goes into thinking about them. And with doubt, that's more obvious: the attention goes to getting lost in thinking about speculative matters.

In the beginning of a retreat, doubt is a little more obvious because it can just be like, "This is stupid, I can't do it, worst practice I ever heard of," or "I'm hopeless." That you can kind of recognize. But as practice goes on, and your attention is getting more subtle, and you've also heard already so many dharma talks—you know, that one didn't match this one, and what about that other practice I did—and we're all getting so much more refined, doubt can take quite another turn. We actually think we're having profound Dhamma thoughts. And maybe we are, but with unwise attention, we're just going from this to that. "How was it? How did it used to be? What would this practice lead to? How can I really understand not-self? What did she say about wise attention? Where am I

paying attention now? Should I pay attention to this? Should I..." You know, that's doubt. Unwise attention to speculative matters, as the Buddha put it: reflecting unwisely on dubious matters. Just drop it.

Now, the way the Buddha describes the second tendency—of becoming or being—that's a little different from sense desire, and how that gets fueled is interesting. This is more when we're in exalted, or just say nice, meditative states—it doesn't have to be exalted. And we really pay attention to how nice they are, how exalted they are, how *I* am having an exalted meditative state. Now let's face it, we all do that, don't we? Especially the first few times. It's really rare to go, "Oh yes, comes and goes, nothing to do with me." Pretty hard to really believe that, though we may try. But all we need to do is see that arising—"Ah, my exalted meditative state, isn't this nice?"—just notice that, otherwise we get lost into unwise attention.

And ignorance, of course, increases through unwise attention. As the Buddha described it, ignorance arises whenever we pay attention to any aspect of experience, any mundane thing—meaning not particularly meditative states—in the wrong way, meaning through any of the inverted or incorrect perceptions. This is a whole other talk, so I could just mention them. But whenever we perceive what is impermanent as permanent, in that moment, ignorance is arising, and the more we do it, the more it increases. How often do we do that?

Or whenever we see what is painful, or what is dukkha, as pleasurable. You may think we don't do that so much, but I've observed that often when I'm not paying attention, I experience craving and even clinging as pleasurable. If I really look, of course, it's clearly dukkha. But that's wise attention—you really look. When we're kind of half looking or not quite looking, we may see what's impermanent as permanent, what's dukkha or unreliable as pleasurable, and what's not-self, which is everything, as self.

So again, not to get discouraged, just to notice that when we do that, we can redirect the attention to the bare perception. And that's really what the mindfulness practice, moment to moment, is helping us see.

I don't know if this example is helpful. I'm trying to illustrate the subtlety of how this can be—not in a discouraging way. It's actually quite interesting, I think, because it helps answer the question of why, when we've really had insights on quite deep levels into impermanence, or insights into not-self, or the suffering and futility of clinging, how does it keep happening? And it's a lot on these subtle levels of tendency that we don't quite recognize when it's happening.

So this example is just one time I was on retreat. Pretty mindful, you know, the times when you're really noticing pretty much what's going on. You're not getting caught in big stories, big reactions or anything. And I was sitting eating one day. Present, present, present—and then I would notice I'd get into a little short thought train. Like an image and a thought and an image and a thought, maybe four or five or six little quick images and thoughts. Then I'd see it and I'd come back. Eating, eating.

After a few times, I noticed there was nothing compelling or even interesting about the images and thoughts. They weren't particularly pleasant or unpleasant. And I was thinking, well, what's the hook here? What is it that kind of sucks the attention away and gets it going? Because I knew it was one of these tendencies. So I started looking really closely when the first image would arise and it would go into the next thought. And what I noticed—this is just particular for me—was that even though the image and the thoughts themselves were nothing special, something about it in the seeing, when not quite being mindful... there was a sense of me. Big surprise. Just a little subtle sense of me. And it's so familiar, you know. It has kind of the comfort of familiarity.

And I experienced that as pleasant in a very quick kind of way. Because that was pleasant and I didn't notice either the image or the pleasantness, then it would go into another thought, another thought. Each one building a little stronger sense of me, a little stronger sense of me. And then we get to the point where the sense of me is far from pleasant anymore—but we wonder how we got there. It's just all these little familiarities, building one upon another.

Okay, that's for seeing, and that's a lot of our practice that we've talked of often. I want to move to the other areas.

The second one the Buddha speaks about is abandoning these tendencies to suffering through restraining—restraint at the sense doors, restraint of our awareness at the sense doors. Now that's really... if you were in the hall this morning, this is exactly what we were speaking of. Someone asked the question or just pointed out how we talk about noticing seeing, but how quickly from seeing the mind has completely gone off into seeing and wanting and comparing and judging and me and a whole story. It happens so fast. And it's hard to just go around noting "seeing, seeing, seeing." How does it happen so quickly?

This is exactly what this area of restraint at the sense doors is talking about. It doesn't mean that we have to stop up our ears, wear a blindfold, and never let anything in through the sense doors. That doesn't exactly do it. Real restraint at the sense doors, when the mindfulness is strong enough, balanced enough, is exactly what we're talking

about when we talk about being with seeing at the point of seeing. We bring in what Ajahn Buddhadasa would call *sati-pañña*—mindfulness-wisdom—right at that moment of seeing, or of hearing, or of smelling.

So for example, there's a really pleasant smell. You recognize that the perception is, "Oh, that's pizza, maybe we're having pizza for lunch"—and you're gone, right? *Sati-pañña* would be at the moment of smelling, of recognizing pizza even, noticing: okay, smelling, pleasant, pizza. Smelling, pleasant, pizza. And that's all. Just keeping mindfulness-wisdom right there at the sense contact. As Ajahn Chah would say sometimes, when you smell an odor with the nose, let it be—just leave it at the nose.

So that's what we do. We leave our mindfulness-wisdom here at the nose, at the eye, at the ear, at the touch, at the mind. Otherwise, we're off in whirls of *papañca*, that proliferation that Steve talked about last night. And *papañca* is pretty much fed by—guess what? Clinging, sense of self, confusion, becoming. So come back to the nose, come back to the ear, come back to the eye. This doesn't have to be a struggle or a judgment, just seeing what's what.

But the other aspect of restraint, and this leads a little into the next ones as well, is that *papañca* is so quick. That was what the question was pointing to. Who has time to notice seeing? I'm already off in Bali and I don't even know I saw anything. It's so fast that restraint at the sense door actually requires a sense of not leaving all the windows and doors open, to paraphrase Thich Nhat Hanh. Give it a chance.

That's one of the reasons we come on retreat, and this gets into one of the later ones anyway—we set up certain conditions to make it a little bit easier to see what goes on, to see how fast the greed goes out through the eye door, the aversion goes out through the ear door, so to speak. I mean, it's not really—you know that, right? It's not really that there's greed and aversion inside of you shooting out your eyes or shooting out your ears. They feel like that sometimes, I know. But just so you know, it's a figure of speech. That's not who we are.

But it happens so quickly that we can give ourselves a break once in a while by, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, not sitting in the living room with all the windows open to the traffic and the neighbors yelling outside, the TV on one side and the stereo behind you, and then saying, "How come there's no quiet?" We can give ourselves a chance by restraining how much we, for example, look around.

A lot of people have been telling me—and this they've discovered on their own, I think; I don't know, maybe someone said it in a talk, but it really felt like they were discovering it on their own—that as much as they love being outside, sometimes they're finding it very helpful to walk inside, just because there was less pull to get lost through the eyes, lost through the ears, lost through smelling.

But it's important to recognize this is not from aversion. If you walk inside thinking, "I have to fear smelling the wind or seeing the leaves," and you get into some kind of aversive, fearful state—this is not wise attention. It's not sense restraint. It's just feeding aversion.

So remember in all of these that we look at what is helping to reduce in the mind stream clinging and aversion, confusion and becoming. What's helping reduce it? If you're walking inside to keep your senses restrained and over the days you turn into one tight knot of suffering, please go outside. But if you're outside or walking around the dining room and your eyes are just wide open, just greed looking for something to land on, then do yourself a favor and look down a little bit. Don't look around so much.

You can tell. We all take turns being sort of walking mental states. And we can see it in each other. It's too bad we have trouble seeing it in ourselves. But we can see when someone's the walking craving state. You just can't walk by the bulletin board. You can't walk by the toilet cleaner in the bathroom. You can't walk by anything. You just need some stimulation.

So I find it really helpful just not to look around. Feet are bad enough. You can tell a lot about everybody just from their feet, but at least it limits it a little bit. So keep it simple, but not out of tightness, not out of a should—out of what decreases suffering, what helps you be present with an open mind, with an open heart.

The third protection is called wise attention to the attitude with which we use things. And this really, as in all of these, it's not just about being on retreat. It's an attitude of wise attention that we can bring to our life. It expands the idea that cultivating freedom from clinging, freedom from confusion, freedom from sense of self doesn't have to be dependent only on deep meditation. We can pay attention.

Just like with the sense doors I was just talking about, this doesn't just have to be on retreat. Look in your life. Look when you're home. What increases your sense of desire, your sense of wanting, your sense of discontent? If I start going to movies a lot and I find I'm wanting more and feeling disconnected, guess what? I don't need to do that. We can just pay attention. So it's really a very useful thing.

Wise attention to the attitude with which we use things means paying attention to how we're relating to the basic necessities of our life—how we use our food, how we use our clothing, how we use the requisites that we have here: our room, our seat in the hall, the necessities. We all need things to be healthy. We need to eat. We need to be protected from the elements. We need to have a modicum of comfort and ease so that we can practice. But look at how we're relating to each of these things. Are we relating in a way that increases our fear and anxiety, that increases our craving and clinging? Or are we relating in a way that brings a kind of ease, a peace in the world?

I notice for myself, both on retreat and off—but we can stick to retreat since it's a microcosm for the rest of our life—I have a sense of ease, a sense of trust, a sense of peace in the environment when I know I'm using just what I need. I take what I need within a sense of how much there is for everyone else and just leave it there. But when I'm operating from a sense of fear or that scarcity model—what if there's not more later?—how does that feel? What does that engender in the heart and the mind? What is one's relationship to oneself, to the other people?

I know when I'm in scarcity model, everyone else is my competitor for whatever it is that's scarce. And what it breeds in my mind is a quality of fear and clinging that is quite a lot of suffering. It's burdensome.

Just a very simple example. When I get into saving food on a retreat—for instance, I'll be at breakfast and I'll think, "Oh, I really would like to have a banana for tea instead of an apple." And they usually don't serve bananas, so I'll take two bananas, if there's one left at the end—at least I do that—and then save it for tea. So already I'm in this clinging mode. I'm anxious. I have to kind of hang around and wait and see: when do I think everyone's done? When is it too soon to take the banana? If you take it too soon, then you feel really bad for the rest of the day. Who saw me? Can I get away with it?

You sneak back at noon and put it out on that table and write "Donna" on it, because you can't stand yourself anymore. It's so much suffering. And even if you save it and it was extra and all, then when you get it, what do you do with it? You put it back there on the shelves where there's no room, or you take it to your room, and then at tea time—do I go to my room first and get the banana, or do I take the tea and then go to the room? It's just torment. Just take the apple and forget about it. It's so much more peaceful, so much more at ease.

So you get the drift—it's really a drag. Watch what increases in the mind. If, as sometimes happens, there really is a need, a physical need, you know whether it's a physical need or you're rationalizing. If you're rationalizing for half an hour about why you

really need it, forget about it. If it's a real need, you don't have to rationalize. You know you need it. And so then it's just something you do, and you might see how this is a drag, but then you let go of it. You do it because you need to do it. It's also wise attention. You're not engendering that wanting, that anxiety, that fear. You're just doing what needs to be done.

So you notice if you're hoarding blankets, if you need two or three seats in the hall just in case. That just-in-case mind is always a sign. But don't do it out of judgment. Look and see what leads to an ease of being, what leads to freedom of heart and mind, what leads to non-clinging, and what leads to suffering. That's what's at the root of it—not what anyone else thinks about you, not who saw you take the fifth orange—just what leads to more ease, what leads to freedom.

I know a lot of you listened to that tape of Ajahn Sumedho, which I listened to before we played it, and this really quite amused me. I know it amused you. Toward the end—that was a talk given at Spirit Rock last year—do you remember toward the end when he was talking about being on eight precepts? Up until then, everyone was laughing along with him. And then he said, "All the food in the yogi fridge should be donated to the homeless." Did you notice that kind of dead silence? There was a little panicky titter and then dead silence. I thought it was a riot—like, "Oh my God, could he really do that?" So that's really noticing our attitude with which we use things for our own freedom.

Often, this is a translation of a chant that monks and nuns do before they eat, a kind of reflection. It's from some things the Buddha said, but it's a way of reminding oneself of this attitude: "May I eat this meal with mindfulness, not for pleasure nor for beautification, only for the nourishment and continuation of this body, to keep it from harm, to avoid hunger and overeating. Thus I will be free from bodily suffering and living at ease." So we're allowed to live at ease and be comfortable, free from hunger, free from overeating—just what we need to live at peace.

The next aspect is abandoning these tendencies by what is usually translated as *enduring*—enduring what is difficult. I like *patience* better, because at least for me, when I hear "enduring"—and again, I know Ajahn Sumedho used that word a lot—but for me, enduring has the connotation of a passive aversion. When I'm enduring something, I'm thinking, "Okay, I'm here, I'm enduring, knowing it'll go away." I'm sure in the way Ajahn Sumedho is using it, and also in this translation, it doesn't have that connotation. It has the connotation of patience, which is actually an aspect of mettā—that ability to

simply be with what is difficult, with a mind and heart that is non-reactive, that is present, neither pushing away nor trying to control, but really at ease. Reflecting wisely to be with difficult experience without getting caught.

This is really the heart of equanimity—the peace of equanimity leading directly into the mind of non-clinging. That we can be with what is without reacting, without needing to change it.

I don't think I need to say a whole lot about this, because we have talked about it a lot before, and it's obviously a big aspect of practice here. But it's important. It's one of the reasons there is this emphasis, when you're sitting, of not moving the first second that the sensations get unpleasant or difficult. And I know it's a delicate balance—not to get into a kind of masochistic sitting with it, or locked in aversion sitting with it, or the idea of "I have to be kind to myself" so you move immediately. But to really learn to cultivate this, the aspect of developing a mind that's like the earth, as vast as the earth and as unmoving. No matter what we put on it—something beautiful, something ugly—if we spit on the earth, if we plant a flower, the earth doesn't say, "No, I won't take this, send it away." It doesn't say, "Yes, this is nice." It accepts us all. It doesn't say, "You can stay here, you have to go." It just accepts us all.

Developing a mind with that vastness and spacious acceptance is really what this long-enduring mind, as Suzuki Roshi used to say, is about. Both to external situations—such as the noisy neighbor, the weather when you're feeling too cold and you don't have the right clothes, the bell ringing for sitting when you really could use another half hour of sleep, whatever it might be externally—and also the internal: the unpleasant mental state, the meditation that isn't going the way you like it, the unpleasant sensation in the body. Just the mind and heart that's vast enough to be with it all.

Practicing in Asia gives everybody great stories about the long-enduring mind. Like sweating through three robes while going out for alms round. You can just feel how completely grimy and wet and uncomfortable it is, and you have to do it day after day after day. A friend of mine who was a monk would wash his robes every day, but after a while he said, "I don't need to wash the robes, I'll just wear them." And one other monk finally said to him, "Are you deliberately trying to make your robes stink?" It just builds up.

But you don't have to go to Asia. I'm going to spare you Asian stories because you can start to think one has to go to a really extremely difficult situation in order to develop the heart of patience, the long-enduring mind. And you don't. Sometimes what's helpful about going to a really difficult situation is it's so difficult, you're just so up against it

that you have to find a way. There's nowhere else to go. You went to all the trouble to go to this place, and so you have this motivation to somehow find a way to be there in it. That's a lot of what practicing in Burma or Thailand or India can really do.

But guess what, folks? The same mind is going on here. Even if externally it may seem like a silly difficulty, in your experience it's really hard, isn't it? Even if it's sleepiness, or some noise, or construction workers scraping outside for days. And what is really useful—why we tell these stories, always after you've come out the other end—is discovering that after we go through the aversion and all the "how can I fix it," when we finally give up and say, "Okay, I'm really here, let me be here," you discover that you can be tremendously at peace and happy, even blissful, so happy, and the circumstances haven't changed. Really haven't changed.

When that happens and you let yourself see it, something in you just can't believe anymore that you can't bear it. It just can't believe it anymore.

When I was a nun in Thailand, from the beginning to the end was like a world of difference. I hated everything for two months. And at the end of the year, I was so happy. What changed? Well, I don't think the climate changed. I don't think any of the circumstances changed. Just the mind and heart's ability to be there and really see how superficial our preferences and our likings and dislikings are on so many levels.

So when you find yourself in a real struggle with something that you just think you cannot endure—and it's not that sometimes it isn't too much to endure, because sometimes it is, and that's the next thing. That's what's so tricky. But don't let yourself go there too soon.

When your mind is first thinking, "I can't bear this another second," two things. One, see if you can expand into the bigger picture and see: Oh really, somebody's snoring in the next room. Do I really think that this is something unendurable in this life? That I can't practice anymore because of this? Even though in the moment it feels so overwhelming, you can get bigger and go, "Okay, maybe there's a way. Maybe I can come back and try again."

And the other is to remember, when the mind's going, "Okay, that's it, I'm out of here"—as you hit that place of "if this happens one more time, I'm leaving at six weeks, I'm leaving at four weeks, I'm never coming back again"—see how much of the unbearableness is actually arising from being present with this moment's experience, and how much of it is the mind imagining into the interminable future: moment after moment after moment of this unbearable grating experience, and how it's going to be forever this way.

Is it really what's happening that you can't bear, or is it that thought you can't bear?

And a lot of times—I wouldn't say always, but a lot of times—it's that thought. Which means... oh, that's a thought. Maybe if I just come back to here... ah.

So what is it that's really causing the effect of increased clinging and aversion and confusion in that moment? Is it the presence of that difficult thing? Or is it the unwise attention to the aversion, to that thought: "If only this would stop, I would be an arahat by now"? Just notice: where's the attention? What's increasing the suffering?

And then, what I was going to say is this: when you actually come through one of these difficult things—even if it's a little thing—but you come through and you see that the thing's still happening, and you're really okay with it, really at peace, don't just go, "Oh, I was so stupid, what was that all about?" Notice the difference. Notice the peace and the spaciousness that comes from that cultivation of acceptance, from that cultivation of mindful presence, that real equanimity. That's the real power of mind and heart. Don't belittle it and think, "Oh, I was just in yogi mind." Let yourself draw confidence from that.

The next factor is avoiding. And this is what's really interesting: the Buddha actually said that through wise attention, through wise reflection, there are some things we need to avoid. Which doesn't sound like—you know, acceptance is the one we always hammer on. So it's very tricky. I see why avoidance was listed second, after acceptance, after patience.

The things the Buddha describes avoiding are what is dangerous—like a savage elephant, or a poisonous snake, or a cesspit, or a sewer. Okay, that's like a no-brainer. We would avoid those things. That's sensible. But also, we can learn to avoid what's internally dangerous—what will internally bring us to confusion and suffering.

Now, this is where we look at the motivation really carefully. That doesn't mean we avoid whatever we don't like. Not: "Oh, if I hear this unpleasant thing again I might get angry, so I better just avoid it and take a walk." Not that. Not: "If I stay on eight precepts I might experience some hunger and that would be unpleasant for me, so I better avoid that." Not that. But really looking with wise attention at what truly prevents or does not support our developing awareness, our developing mindfulness.

This is one aspect of renunciation. In fact, look at the setup of this whole retreat. We've structured it so that quite a lot of things you're having to avoid—we're avoiding them for you. And that's really as a way to support the developing awareness, as a way to increase wise attention. So we don't have TVs in the lobby with CNN on every half hour. There's a reason for that. It's not just by chance. We're here in the middle of the

country and not in Times Square. It makes it a little bit easier. We ask you not to get your mail. Those of you who are getting your mail know why we ask you not to get it—because it makes it more difficult to really just notice what's going on.

So we can avoid not only what's dangerous, but what really does not support our developing practice, our developing awareness. And I just want to point that out because sometimes we can get quite idealistic. This ties into the next factor, which is actually removing—redirecting the attention when you're really caught in something. I'll talk about these together.

We can get quite idealistic about not avoiding anything or not removing. "I should be able to be with anything, right? I should be able to be mindful in the middle of any activity in my daily life. Therefore, avoidance is the baby way out. Or avoidance is not going to support me. It's just—okay, I can be mindful if I avoid these things, but what good is that if I can't be mindful in Times Square?"

This is idealistic. What's so interesting about the Buddha is he was so practical. Look at what's true. If you can be totally mindful with CNN on every half hour in the middle of Times Square, that's great. If you can't, let's get real and do what helps us to cultivate a stronger mindfulness—to see what really increases our craving and our sense of self and our confusion, and what helps it to go away.

So the Buddha talked about, for instance, in life, avoiding unwise or unskillful companions. Now that's interesting.

It's not saying they're bad people, but just knowing that you can hang out with certain people and you end up doing things that you really don't feel good about. And if you stay alone or hang out with other people, you don't do those things. Just the power of suggestion, the power of just doing what people are doing. The Buddha saw this as a very strong influence and said, okay, avoid those unwise people for your own well-being. So that kind of avoidance—not out of aversion, but out of skillfulness.

The actual avoidance, the renunciation itself, may in the beginning be unpleasant. And actually some aversion may come up. So it's not that the first second there's aversion, that means we should avoid it because the torments are coming up. That's a trick. Just like talking about patient endurance—if you stay with something and there's a lot of aversion in that renunciation, but after a while you see that really craving is getting less, serenity is getting stronger, the heart is opening—if you can see that, then that's a sign of wise attention. But if you're paying attention, being with something, and the longer you're with it the stronger the greed gets or the fear gets or the terror gets or the sense of self gets, then that's a sign it may be something to avoid.

The last way I'll quickly mention, which goes with avoiding, is what the Buddha described as removing. This means that in reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu sees that there's an arisen thought affected by sense desire, or by ill will, or by cruelty—you see that there's any kind of arisen unwholesome, unskillful state—and you don't endure it. In other words, you don't say, "Oh, well, so what? They come, they go. I'll just let it take me until it's over." You say, "No, okay, I'm not putting up with it."

On the most obvious level, when attention is strong and balanced and the energy is balanced, that's really a point of resolution—what Joseph likes to call the sword of wisdom. When you start off in that fantasy for the tenth time and you go, "No, I don't need to do this. Not now." And you just come back. Resolution, not aversion. That's pretty clear cut. I'm just not enduring this anymore. I'm not feeding it.

But there are times, both with this removal and avoidance that kind of go together, when the arisen unskillful dhamma—whether it's a strong emotion like fear or terror or rage—is so strong you can't just go to the sense door and notice it and have it go away. You can't just say, "Okay, terror, not now," and come back to the breath. It's not possible.

So with wise attention, this is the example for removal the Buddha gives. We can actually redirect our awareness, not out of fear or running away, but in order to bring a balance, a spaciousness, a brightness back to the mind.

This is an example from the Buddha. He says, "In this, Ananda, a monk dwells contemplating"—now monk means nun, it means all of us—"dwells contemplating the body, ardent, clearly aware, and mindful, putting aside worldly desire and dejection." That is the classic way he describes the foundations of mindfulness, being aware of the body. So he's doing basically mindfulness practice on the body. "And as he dwells contemplating the body, some bodily object arises, or a physical discomfort, or a mental drowsiness, causes his mind to wander to external things." In other words, he gets completely distracted.

"Then, Ananda, that bhikkhu's attention could be directed to some inspiring object of thought." What is usually meant by an inspiring object of thought is one of the reflections on the qualities of a Buddha, on the qualities of Dhamma or Sangha. But it could also be your own virtues, whatever inspires your faith. It's the deliberate redirection of attention.

"As he thus directs his mind to an inspiring object of thought, delight springs up in him." Now these are translations of specific Pali mental states. That's *pamoja*—delight springs up in him. "When he is delighted, rapture arises"—that's *pīti*. "When he experiences rapture, his body is calmed down"—tranquility. "With his body calmed, he experiences joy"—or *sukha*. "Being joyful, his mind is concentrated."

And that's a classic delineation of some of the order of how this unfolds—going from a kind of joy in the mind, the mind gets calm, piti arises, then the mind gets calmer still, then there's sukha, then there's concentration.

At that point, the Buddha says, one reflects: "My mind is concentrated. The reason I was reflecting on this has been achieved." And then one withdraws the mind from that conscious reflection and returns to mindfulness of body.

So that's a very deliberate—you could say it's removal or avoidance—but it's a very deliberate cultivation of wise attention. Just staying lost in the thing is only increasing confusion. So you consciously reflect on some inspiring theme, just until the mind is spacious, bright, gladdened, calm, concentrated a bit, and then come back to the meditation.

Another example—not from the Buddha, this is just as we see in our practice—when you're overcome by a very strong mental state, rage or fear or anxiety, you know it, you're trying to be aware, but the energy of the mental state is just stronger than the energy of the mindfulness. They're simply out of balance at that time. You try to come to the body, but even touching with awareness the sensations of the body only highlights the anxiety. It only feeds back into the fear.

And you see, it's not so much an aversion of "I don't like this," but a recognition that this is just increasing the suffering. It's increasing the confusion. So with wise attention, we place the awareness elsewhere. You may first try going to hearing or seeing, completely out of the body. If that's not strong enough, you may then reflect on an inspiring theme. If that's not strong enough, then at that point we tell you to actually break the meditation—go outside and take your mind off it completely, go for a walk or go into the woods.

It's not out of running away. It's out of wise attention to rebalance and focus the mind and heart.

I talked last time about that idea of diving into the wave when it's difficult. But sometimes the waves are so big that all we can really do is put our toe in the water. We have no business being out there in the waves in the first place. And it's wise attention to simply recognize that and redirect rather than just get lost and overwhelmed. That's an important part of the practice.

I'll just end with a very short poem. This is from Lala, a Kashmiri mystic, a woman poet:

Some people abandon their homes.
Others abandon hermitages.
All this renunciation does nothing if you're not deeply conscious.
Day and night, be aware with each breath and live there.

CHAPTER 329

Hindrances in Mettā Practice

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this dharma talk from a mettā retreat, Carol Wilson addresses a common question that arises when practitioners encounter unexpected difficulties during loving-kindness practice. She explains how the intensive cultivation of mettā naturally brings up challenging mind states—not as obstacles to practice, but as essential aspects of the path toward recognizing our "true home" of connectedness.

Wilson offers detailed guidance on working with the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa) in the context of mettā practice. She gives particular attention to desire (kāmacchanda) as the "near enemy" of mettā—a state that can masquerade as loving-kindness through subtle wanting of pleasant feelings, concentration, or results. The "far enemy" of ill will (byāpāda) is explored through its tendency to create disconnection and self-judgment. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, she clarifies that mettā is not about liking everything or suppressing difficulties, but rather "witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it."

The talk provides practical instruction for recognizing when concentration practice leads to sleepiness, how restlessness manifests as endless tinkering with phrases, and how doubt can disguise itself as intellectual analysis comparing mettā to vipassanā. Wilson emphasizes that each phrase offered is a moment of breaking down the illusion of separation, quoting the Buddha: "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." This understanding transforms even dry periods of practice into powerful acts of kindness and wisdom.

So sometimes about the end of the second day on a mettā retreat, people will ask us, "Remind me again how this is being kind to myself?" Because certainly you're a rare person if you haven't discovered by this time that many, many things arise in our mind and body, and many of them are not mettā. Even if you've done loving-kindness retreats before, we tend to forget. But if you haven't, it would really be normal not to be expecting such a variation. And I know how much of the stuff that comes up is difficult—pain in the body, really deep emotional pain sometimes, some that's not so deep but quite painful nevertheless, just basic aversion or sleepiness or restlessness.

So I just want to reiterate that actually, we don't recognize it in the middle of the retreat, but it really is an act of deepest kindness, of ultimate kindness to ourselves, to be willing to practice in this way. Because with each phrase that you plant that seed,

that you drop the phrase into your heart, that you repeat it—each phrase is a moment of breaking down our dream, our illusion that we live in of separation, of isolation, of neediness, of loneliness. And each time that we make that intention to cultivate loving-kindness by saying the phrase, we are counteracting the habits of our mind, the habits of our heart that are keeping us confused and in delusion, that are keeping us away from our true home.

St. Augustine said once that the reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home. The context of the heart of connectedness that manifests as mettā, as compassion—that's not some weird altered state we have to create. That is our true home. And that we're not living there is sort of what Sharon was alluding to the other night. We think greed and aversion and restlessness are really who lives here. And we don't recognize that that's not our true home. The heart of kindness, the heart of non-judging, the heart of compassion really is our true home. So what we're doing really is an ultimate kindness.

However, we don't get the instant results that—I don't know what it is—I think it's so deeply inbred in us in this Western culture that even when we think we're being patient and taking the long view, we're not even close. The long view is three months, that's the long view. You read the Buddha, and he's talking about eons and eons and eons. I'm not saying that's encouraging; I'm just trying to give a comparison for what could be the long view. Three months isn't it. Seven days isn't it. That's not to be discouraging; that's so that we don't have completely unrealistic expectations and think that because anger is coming up in my mind on the third day, I'm wasting my time here, I might as well go home. These difficult states of mind and pain in the body coming up—that's normal. It's part of the practice. It's not a mistake.

One of the ways you could look at the formal practice of mettā as we're doing it here is that part of what we discover is a moment-to-moment training in seeing how we create, with our mind, the dream, the illusion of separation, of alienation, of suffering. It's not that this sense of being separate, this sense of loneliness, this sense of neediness, is some big thing in us, hanging there, that we have to chip away at. There's only this moment. And the sense of separation, the sense of distance, our sense of suffering, of fear, of neediness, is created in the moment by how the mind and heart responds or reacts to whatever particular experience is arising.

Thinking of my experience or looking at it in this moment-to-moment level is enormously freeing, because it takes a huge load off—that I somehow have to undo the whole last forty-nine years of my life and make sure I never in the future, for however long, make a mistake again, both of which is obviously impossible. I can at least pay attention

to this moment sometimes. Sometimes. But that at least seems within the range of the doable—to pay attention to how the mind and heart is reacting in this moment to whatever's arising.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of my favorite quotations, said, "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain." Sound familiar? Desire for pleasure and fear of pain—that's desire and ill will, right? Greed and aversion, the first two of the five hindrances. It's not that they're evil. But when we don't recognize those habits, when those habits basically run the show, run our life—even though we think that desiring pleasure and fearing pain is what's bringing us happiness—those tendencies are actually what's perpetuating moment to moment our sense of isolation, of neediness.

And so one of the reasons that at times the mettā practice, and vipassanā practice too, because they're working from different angles on the same thing—but one of the reasons that the mettā practice is sometimes quite uncomfortable is because we're counteracting very deep habits. And as you know, breaking a habit doesn't feel good a lot of the time, even though we know once the habit's gone or it's a lot less, we're a lot happier.

But in the meantime, the habit is what's comfortable. The habit is where our mind naturally goes.

So it's natural that as we deepen in this practice here—and I know you might not feel like you've deepened at all, but don't go there. That's a completely irrelevant judgment that the mind makes based on some made-up idea. You are deepening. You're still here. You're still doing it. It's deepening.

You say, "I'm not deepening because more aversion, more greed is coming up"? No, that's proof that it's deepening. Because as we continue strengthening the intention of loving kindness, each time we say the phrase, it's as if the obstacles get highlighted. I know I rather naively thought they would just vanish into the background, but instead they get highlighted. One of my teachers used to say that as the light of awareness shines, all the snakes come up out of their pits. And there are moments when it really feels like that.

There are plenty of moments when it's not, too—moments of goodness, connectedness, a sense of non-judging. It's important to notice those moments as well. For neither of them do you need to take credit, which makes it a whole lot easier. You only have to notice them.

It's natural that the difficult states get highlighted. One model for understanding what comes up is the five hindrances, which I know if you've done any meditation in this style before, you're quite familiar with. In metta practice, sometimes we forget to notice them. They come up in just the same way, with just as much strength as they do in vipassana practice. They might manifest in a slightly different way, and I'll talk about that at times. And because the practice is a little different, we don't always notice them as soon—if "soon" is the appropriate word—as we might in vipassana.

The challenge of our hearts, really, is how to meet these difficult emotional and physical states. In metta practice, the task is not to think, "Well, I can't do metta because they're here," or to see them as obstacles. The key is simply the recognition—of desire, for example, the first hindrance—the recognition of it rather than being driven by it, and then how we meet it with our attention. That's how the metta continues: in the recognition, and in meeting what's arising with clear, non-judging attention. That really is metta. I think Sharon said something like that last night—that connected, non-judging attention is an aspect of metta.

So when you're feeling really sleepy, or really aversive toward yourself or something that's happening, or filled with doubt, recognizing it is essential. And then notice: what's the habit of how your awareness greets that? One way is what Sharon described last night—how we think, "Oh great, come in, you live here, settle down." Suzuki Roshi once said, "In zazen, leave your front door and your back door open. Let the thoughts come and go. Just don't serve them tea."

So that's one way we greet them—"Oh sure, it's your house, it's your home."

Another way is the opposite, which in my mind is personified by an old blind swami I met in India a few years ago. I was staying in a small ashram, which was just rooms built around a kind of concrete courtyard. There was this really old swami—a renunciate dressed in orange, a little crazy—whom they had taken in off the street and were letting sleep on a bed in that courtyard. When we arrived in the afternoon, he was just lying there, seeming out of it.

In the middle of the night, around two in the morning, the whole place started reverberating with these huge banging sounds that rattled everything. It would go on for ten or fifteen minutes. You'd bounce awake, and then it would stop, and you'd fall back asleep. In another couple of hours, it would start again.

The next day, at some point, I came walking back and the swami was actually up. I saw that he was the one making those sounds. He had this huge piece of rope—like a big rope he'd made himself out of old little pieces of cloth, woven together so it was

very thick and frayed at the end. He would just be lying there, seemingly out of it, and suddenly he'd leap up and grab this rope and start whacking the floor with all his strength. He'd go at it for five or ten minutes, and then lie back down again.

After a couple of days, I asked one of the young guys who lived there, "What's he doing?" And he said, "Well, you know, he's a little..." He said, "He says when he's meditating, evil spirits come and disturb his meditation."

So he's getting rid of them.

That's the second option, which I also don't recommend.

But look and see. We often engage in either whacking the unpleasant visitor or whacking ourselves for having the unpleasant visitor. Not mettā. Definitely not mettā.

Let me speak a bit about these five hindrances in the context of a mettā retreat. Recognition is very important. The first two hindrances—desire or sense desire, and aversion or ill will—are, of course, much larger than just hindrances. They're really the key to how we keep ourselves suffering and in delusion. But in mettā practice, these two states of mind, states of heart, have a very specific relationship to the mental state of mettā.

Desire and clinging is called the near enemy of mettā. And ill will, aversion, fear, is called the far enemy. What does that mean?

Near enemy means it's a state of mind or heart that can fool us. It can look like mettā, and we can actually think that we are cultivating mettā or feeling mettā, when we're actually in wanting. Just logically hearing that, we think, "But they're not the same at all." It's really quite interesting how that happens. If you look at the two states, they're almost opposites of each other.

Because if you look at desire—look at it in your experience when you start wanting something, whether it's just some little thing like wanting the bell to ring, wanting something special for tea, or it's a huge thing like wanting a particular relationship, wanting something major to happen in your life—but looking with your attention at the state of wanting itself, the essence of desire is separation. The sense of desire is that I am somehow separate from whatever it is. And there's a sense of neediness for completion, for wholeness, for collectedness. Something is lacking and needs to be acquired or held on to. It's actually the energy of the craving or the desire itself that creates and sustains this sense of inadequacy, insufficiency, neediness. But we often don't recognize that and just think, "If I had this thing, then I'm whole again." So the whole essence of desire is separation, insufficiency.

While mettā is just the opposite. Mettā is the clear connection without judgment, without creating limitation, without creating separation. Mettā recognizes things as they are—a sense of friendliness, a sense of connectedness, a sense of no problem, really.

Here's a simple example of how desire really disturbs our essential completion, our essential peace, but we get sidetracked by it. I'm on airplanes a lot. If you've ever been on an overnight flight—I remember one flight where I was in the middle row, and about five minutes before the doors closed, I suddenly noticed no one was sitting in the rest of the row. I had just been sitting there quite peacefully, no problem, no wanting, no aversion, just at ease. Until I noticed that, and the pleasant thought of maybe I could lie down arose and was clung to.

In that moment, what had been quite peaceful became really antsy, anxious, nervous. Everybody who walked onto the plane—I was really focused on them, and I wasn't with mettā, I can tell you that—until they walked past my aisle, and then, "Ah, may you be happy." What had essentially been a very peaceful situation became one where each person was evaluated, judged as my enemy, as a threat, until they passed and they were okay.

I was really—at least I was noticing this as it happened. That's about all I can take credit for. But it was a really uncomfortable state. Contrast that to the state before, where I'm just sitting there and when people come in, it's just me, just them, no problem. Me as I am, they as they are. Nothing needs to change, nothing needs to happen. We're just right here. There's quite a sense of peace and connectedness.

That's the difference between mettā and clinging. So when we look at it that way, you think, "How could we confuse them?"

Mettā is a divine abode. When we talk about the four brahmavihāras—mettā, compassion or karuṇā, sympathetic or empathetic joy, appreciative joy, and equanimity—these are divine abodes. Limitless, boundless.

Well, I'll tell you, the state of desire is no divine abode. And I think that's one thing we can really discover for ourselves.

So how do we get confused? Because we do. It really is fascinating, if you can take the personal out of it, to explore in your mettā practice that shifting sand between the sense of friendliness and connectedness into subtle wanting, into blatant wanting.

Craving, clinging, wanting as a habit arises as a result of connection with pleasant experience. When we're not paying attention and it's really pleasant, the habit of our mind is to want more, to hold on to it, to keep it going. And in the practice of metta, to begin with, we're saying deliberately focus on the good, on the beautiful in someone. So even if you're not feeling anything you would remotely describe as metta—you're not feeling some huge upwash of beautiful, pleasant energy—but you're still focusing on the good in someone, it's very easy for that pleasantness, when we don't quite notice it in a moment, for clinging and craving to start arising.

A simple example. I noticed on one retreat, when I was with the friend category, I'd be sending metta to her. And this is a pretty happy person, so I'd be feeling happy. I'd be feeling, "Yeah, she's really nice. Gee, she's so great. Why don't we see each other more? That would be really nice, to see her more." Before I knew it, there was a whole story about when we could get together and how we could see each other, and maybe I'd go call her. And then—oh. That's not metta. That's wanting.

And that was relatively easy to notice. Sometimes it would move from one pleasant thought into another pleasant thought, into another pleasant fantasy. We don't really pick it up. And suddenly we're into a full-blown attack of wanting, where it's really the hindrance of sense desire. Nothing to do with a dear friend. Nothing to do with anything you could remotely call the metta practice. We're just gripped. How did I get here? I was so diligently sending loving-kindness to the benefactor, and here I am off in Bali, skin diving. How did that happen?

Of course, there's nothing to judge or get upset about. It's interesting. When you notice—say, when I noticed I was off in "How am I going to get to see her?"—rather than going, "Oh no, get back to the metta," just for a moment, notice the wanting. That leaning forward, the tightness, the sense of neediness, however you're experiencing it, so that we really recognize that it's not metta. We really learn to recognize it. And then, not with any harshness, put it down, gently come back and refocus. In that case, I refocused on the friend and simply offered the next phrase as a gift. So it's starting over, over and over, but noticing the difference. And then you start to notice sooner. You'll think you're in the metta and you've just a little bit slid into wanting, but you'll pick it up sooner because it really is a different experience.

When there's wanting as the hindrance, when it's just full-blown, eventually you'll notice that. You're wanting a different seat, you're wanting different food, you're wanting different weather, you're wanting different people sitting next to you. That's the classic hindrance we talk about in the first days of a retreat. With that, just notice it, really notice it, name it, recognize it without judging. You can take what I call a few

minutes of a vipassana break, a mindfulness break. If it's really strong, just bring your mindfulness to your body and your breath and be with that feeling of wanting, so that you're not pretending this elephant in the closet isn't there while in some tiny little voice saying, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful," and really you're filled with lust or something. It's like, this is what's happening—let's just feel it for a moment. And then, from within that, you can reconnect with the next phrase, with the intention of loving-kindness.

There are a couple of specific ways, particularly in the metta practice, that are a bit more subtle than this, more like what happened with my friend, where the metta gets a little co-opted by the wanting, where the wanting really is masquerading as metta. This came up in both the groups today, but we were talking about it particularly in one of them.

One way is that we are doing our practice very diligently, repeating the phrases, but subtly or not so subtly, our motivating force is really wanting the metta feeling. This is pretty hard not to fall into sometimes. We really want some kind of good feeling. I mean, why the heck would we be here if we didn't? I didn't come here to feel nothing and say this for seven days. Of course we want some metta feeling. We just need to recognize it and realize that's not the metta practice—to be sitting there going, "May I be happy... Do I feel it yet?" So if you notice that happening...

Recognize it. Come back.

Or we get into wanting concentration. And there's a way with both of these—it's almost as if after every phrase or after every set of phrases, we're subtly checking back. Am I more concentrated than before? Do I feel it a little more than before? Do I feel a little more connected than before? And if you start to feel that you're leaning forward, that's often a sign. If there is a nice feeling, which sometimes comes, you'll know that you got into wanting rather than just being with the metta feeling, because when it goes and you're really frustrated—that's always a sign that we were caught in the wanting.

None of this is with judging. This is simply to see what's what, to see where we suffer. And metta, just that simple connectedness—no particular feeling, it doesn't matter—metta is not about suffering. It can connect with suffering. It's not about hiding suffering. But when we're really in that connected, present moment of metta, it's not going to cause us suffering. Wanting, expectation, ambition, holding on—these are going to cause us suffering. And all we have to do is keep noticing to see the difference.

One other way that is subtle, and at some point pretty much most of us get into this in the metta, is in saying the phrases. Whether it's to ourselves or to the other, there's a subtle quality where we're not just saying the phrase as an offering of the heart—we're wanting something to change. I really want that person to be happy. It often comes up with phrases like "may you have physical happiness" or "may you be healthy." And if the person isn't so healthy, you often notice that dichotomy more easily. But it's quite easy to slip in. In one sitting, you can go back and forth between just the simple intention and suddenly leaning. "But if you just did this, you would be happy." Or for ourselves, of course: "may I be happy, may I be happy, may I be happy." So it's just to notice when it's moved from the simple intention of well-wishing, the simple intention of friendliness, to wanting some result.

It's also common if you've spent a few days on the benefactor, your friend—people often want to go home and see if they noticed anything, if they're feeling better, if they're feeling more happy. Just notice. Of course we're interested, but don't be doing it for that, because it gets into the wanting.

So these are some of the ways, especially in the metta, that the near enemy can masquerade. But as soon as you notice it, it's no big deal. It's so obvious once you notice it that we wonder how it ever masqueraded. Until the next time.

The far enemy—well, that's more obvious, because it's the more obvious opposite. Aversion, ill will, all the gradations of that, including fear. But again, and this is sometimes not what people expect when they begin a metta practice, because ill will and fear really are obstacles to the perception of our true being, and they are the opposite of metta, it's quite common that they begin to come up rather strongly at various periods in our loving-kindness practice.

And often, of course, the person experiencing it interprets that as they're blowing it in some way. You're not. It's an almost inevitable part of an intensive loving-kindness practice. If there are habits in our psyche of fear or ill will or irritation—and I suppose it's a rare being who doesn't have some habits of those—they're going to arise. And so again, our challenge, our practice, is not to get caught in hating them or blaming ourselves or going into a real downward spiral of self-judgment.

This is really common on all retreats. But metta sometimes seems to highlight it—sending loving-kindness to oneself and encountering the endless list of what's wrong with us. The inability to really feel loving just proves what we had always suspected. I don't need to say more. And from that, every unpleasant experience becomes further proof.

So I think it's helpful to take a moment, as we did with clinging, to see how this is experienced. In the moment, to have a sense of what ill will or aversion or fear actually is, how it really functions. In the moment. We're not talking about our big psychic patterns, but just how it arises in the moment to begin with.

And again, just as clinging or craving arises when we come in contact with something pleasant and we're not particularly paying attention, when some unpleasant thing—a sight or a sound or a thought, or a physical sensation in our body like sleepiness, which is physically unpleasant—when that unpleasant experience meets us and we're not particularly noticing, it gives rise to aversion or fear.

And what is that? It's a pulling away. So in that moment, it's a disconnect from the reality, the simplicity, of that moment's experience. Ill will or anger is sort of like "no," lashing out, "get away." Fear is more like pulling back, retreating. But it's a disconnect.

If you tune into this carefully—say you have a pain in your knee and you notice aversion to it—you can almost feel as if your attention pulls back, retreating from the experience. Sometimes our whole body pulls back like that. And of course, because of that disconnect, we're not going to see clearly what's actually happening in that moment. We're not connected.

And this is precisely the moment when sleepiness, for example, becomes something more than just sleepiness. It's unpleasant, we pull back, and that moment of disconnection, that space, is all that our patterns of mind need to run in and take over. "Yeah, you are sleepy. You are really hopeless. You know, you really slept for a week before you came here so you wouldn't be sleepy. And here you are, sleepy anyway. And that just proves..." and there you are, back on the downward spiral.

If we don't recognize that this is just aversion arising, or fear, we project it into the future. "I'm sleepy now. I've been sleepy the last sitting. It follows that for every sitting from now on, I'm going to be sleepy. And it's unbearable. There's no way I can do it." And then again, the spiral starts.

The more this happens, it's as if we're wearing colored glasses somehow. Every experience that arises, once we start to fall into whatever pattern of negativity is our common one—whether it's judging ourselves, hating ourselves, fearing the future, getting angry at everyone else, whatever our particular story is—once we start believing it and not recognizing it as aversion, we get farther and farther afield from the reality of what's going on in this moment. And each moment of fear, aversion, negativity just feeds the next.

I've learned to recognize when a worthlessness pattern is running in my mind. Any perception that comes up—a sight, a sound—when that worthlessness pattern is really strong, is interpreted in such a way that it confirms I'm worthless. It could be anything. And it gets to be funny when I notice it.

For a small example, I could come down the stairs outside and look at that row of clips where you put notes. Usually I look and think, "Oh, good, no notes. That means everyone's fine." That's a normal response, right? But when worthlessness is operating, I'll come down, see there are no notes, and look at that empty row thinking, "Oh my God, nobody likes me because I'm useless." That level. And when I see what's happening, I can just laugh. It's simply what this pattern does.

But when we don't see it, that's another unpleasant experience that we didn't recognize. We pull back, and we're completely disconnected from reality in not much time. And we wonder, looking at ourselves, "I'm not that bad of a person. How come I feel like this about myself?"

This is where metta becomes essential. With any unpleasant experience—it doesn't have to be turned inward on ourselves, though that's a significant way the hindrance of ill will arises in a metta retreat—the same dynamic applies. It could be the lashing out where you're just hating everybody who comes into your field of vision or hearing, or hating the weather. Maybe you've just picked one pet peeve, but it's really taking over.

I notice when I'm on retreat and I suddenly feel I have to write a note to the cooks "for the good of all beings." They need to hear it. They really need to know. I start paying attention to the quality of energy that's convincing me I need to write that note. And now I know enough to say, "Okay, that means you don't write that note for three days." Because by that time, of course, the urgency is gone—it was just the hindrance of ill will.

This is something you could pay attention to. If you urgently have to write a note to the maintenance people, or the snow shovelers, or you have a brilliant idea for how the place could run better, why don't you wait till the end of the retreat and see if it still feels so brilliant? Maybe it is brilliant—but then it'll still be brilliant at the end of the retreat.

Metta really is the antidote for fear and ill will. Now, the mind of ill will—and I can say this from experience—doesn't want to hear that, or doesn't believe it.

negative way of looking at things, or it's just a strong habit of mind, it will come up when you do metta. So metta becomes difficult at that time. And that's when you'll hear yourself—I've heard myself, I've heard many people say, "I hate metta. I hate practicing metta. I'm not going to do it." And that's because it's going against this strong pattern.

We often have—and again, it's this kind of habit of ill will speaking—a mistaken concept about how metta is the antidote to ill will. This is often what the resistance, the intellectual resistance, is about. We think, as Sharon alluded to the other night, of metta as being stupid. "Oh, I see these really difficult, painful, horrible things in myself, but I'll just say, 'May I be happy, may I be peaceful'"—as if just covering it over or suppressing it or pretending it's not there. Or with somebody else, it's even more problematic. They have this really harmful thing that they do, and I'm just going to say, "May you be happy, may you live with ease," and completely ignore that. That's stupid. That's naive.

But that's not metta. That's what we often think it is—just a covering over. Or the other thing we can quite fall into is almost the opposite: thinking that I have to really love that person. I have to love their stupidity. I have to love my pettiness. "Really, you're wonderful, and so is your pettiness." And that doesn't seem realistic either. So we're kind of in a quandary.

That's not metta. Metta is simply, clear-eyed and clear-heartedly, with the attention connecting with what's happening, without judgment, without expectation. Just connecting. You don't have to love it. You don't have to think anything about it. In fact, don't think anything about it. Just connect.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho. You know who Ajahn Sumedho is? He's an American man who ordained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand with Ajahn Chah, who was quite a well-known, famous forest monk and meditation teacher. Ajahn Sumedho has been a monk about thirty years, and he lives in England now. He's the head of the whole Western order of Buddhist monks and nuns in this tradition.

He's talking about metta. He's very down to earth and simple in the way he describes things. He says, "Metta does not necessarily mean liking anything at all. It means an attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or faults of any situation, inside or outside of oneself. Now with metta, one isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, a person, or oneself. You're witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it."

I love that. This witnessing, connecting with the unpleasantness, and you don't create anything around it. Just let it be in the light of awareness. You simply don't get into thinking, "I hate it, I hate it, I don't want it." This is metta.

Honestly, doesn't that seem a lot more doable than loving everything that's really hard? It's the power of non-judging, unlimited, kind attention. That's really what metta is. It's so much more simple and so much more powerful than our ideals about it might have us believe.

So really, whether it's a pleasant experience or an unpleasant experience, neutral—it doesn't matter. This is where metta leads into wisdom. The attitude, the connectedness of heart, of attention, of mind, of metta, automatically opens into wisdom. And this is something I didn't really believe until I practiced it quite intensively, but it seems to.

When we allow, as Sumedho was saying, just that connecting with the unpleasantness or the pleasantness—don't create anything around the pleasantness either, such as "Isn't this wonderful, isn't this great, how can I have more?"—just what it is.

When we really allow that, the inclusiveness, which we would call metta, that sense of acceptance, that sense of all-inclusiveness, that sense of limitlessness, naturally arises. It's not that we have to try to feel inclusive about that person, this aspect of myself, that experience, but simply by steady, connected, non-judging attention in various ways, the connectedness, the inclusiveness, the lack of limits becomes apparent.

Let me read you this poem that I really like. To me, it really expresses this—the willingness to come back and meet with unflinching kind eyes something that's a little difficult or unpleasant, and how it opens into connectedness. By Mary Oliver, it's called "Singapore."

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.

Like, let me out of here, right?

Kingfishers say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings, rivers are pleasant and, of course, trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem, but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life, and I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen, but maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't, and neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life.

I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth, the way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So much more simple and so much more vast and powerful than anything our complicated minds could make up. And we just really need the willingness, the faith really, to trust enough to just keep practicing and not be discouraged when we're caught in wanting, when we're caught in aversion, when we're caught in complete boredom because nothing is happening. We don't know. It's so much vaster than we can know. So just really an urge to keep going.

I need to mention the other three hindrances. But first I wanted to say that sometimes people feel a strong urge to stay with themselves as they're practicing metta, to stay more with themselves than going through all the categories as quickly as we are, which is fine. But it's common to feel that it's somehow wrong or selfish or greedy. We should be sending it out to all beings, and here I am just sending it to myself. Don't believe it. Because again, just like in that poem, if you can really touch your own experience with loving-kindness, it expands outward, past the limits. It doesn't stop at some made-up idea of this edge of my body with everything out there being separate.

So please trust to keep going if you feel moved to send it to yourself. And you'll see that ultimately the illusion of separation begins to break away. Even against all your best efforts, you'll find metta leaking out to other people, even when you didn't intend it.

In one of the groups, I mentioned that sometimes we use the phrase—if you're having trouble connecting with phrases to yourself, or it feels like too much wanting—something along the lines of, "I love and accept myself just as I am," rather than trying to make yourself feel something different.

The other three hindrances, just to mention: sloth and torpor or sleepiness; restlessness and agitation, that physical restlessness where you just can't sit still, and obsessive worrying spinning in the mind; and doubt. Just as in a vipassana retreat, they arise sometimes very strongly in a metta retreat.

One thing I noticed, because of the nature of metta as a concentration practice where we're not investigating so much other things that arise—you notice you're thinking, you go, "oh," and you come back to the phrases. You don't necessarily name what's happening at first if you can just come back. Sometimes that's fine. There's a little anger, a little restlessness. You notice it, you come back to the phrase, and it's gone.

But sometimes, because we didn't notice, all of a sudden it wallops us over the side of the head. And you'll just be in a frenzy of doubt, for example, and not know how you got there.

So that's just to say, if that happens to you, you're not doing something wrong. And as soon as you can recognize it, recognize it. That's the main thing.

With sleepiness, again, because this is a concentration practice—in other words, we're just coming back over and over to the object or focus of the metta phrases and the person we're sending it to—that concentration is one of the calming factors of mind. Investigation, which we're not doing as much of here, is more energizing. And so in the early days of a concentration practice, you can be really right there with your phrases, feeling quite connected, and the next thing you know, you're nodding off. You don't quite know how that happened. It's just because the calm and the concentration got stronger than the energy. That's all. No big thing.

So when you notice that, do the usual things. One is to really aim more clearly at each word in the phrase. That action of aiming, called *vitakka* in Pali, is actually the mental antidote to sloth and torpor. It's not hitting it with a sledgehammer. It's just gently aiming. "May I... be free from danger." Just that little extra energy can sometimes wake us up, balance the concentration, and you're back in business.

Sometimes, of course, it's too far gone. So the usual things: open your eyes, look at the light, stand up. Sometimes changing the speed of the phrases can help you refocus. If they've gotten into a lullaby modality and you're singing yourself to sleep, you might want to just vary the speed in how you're saying the phrases. But it's really important not to get into judging about this. It's just a natural effect of the practice at times for everyone.

The opposite, restlessness and worry, is again recognizable. Too much energy, not enough calming, not enough concentration or focus to balance it. And sometimes you feel like you need to walk more, just walk off the energy. One way we sometimes don't recognize restlessness—and I think I said something about this in the hall regarding metta—is that we find ourselves ceaselessly tinkering with the phrases or with which person to send it to. So if you find you have seventeen phrases, or your phrases have become paragraphs, or you're changing them all the time ("Well, that doesn't feel right anymore, let's try this"), or you've been through thirty-five different friends, I would at least suspect there could be some restlessness. If you can name it as restlessness rather than thinking, "Oh, the metta hasn't clicked yet," that can be really helpful. "Oh, restlessness. Okay."

Simplify. When you feel restless, don't complicate. Simplify. Go back to only four phrases, or cut down to two phrases. Go back to only one friend and just stay very steady, very simple on the phrases.

And doubt, of course, is very interesting. We know how to recognize it: "I can't do this. This is stupid." I mean, we're used to that, I assume, if you've done meditation practice before. One interesting way doubt can manifest, if you're new to metta but you're used to practicing vipassana, is that it takes the form of criticizing and analyzing the metta practice and comparing it to vipassana. "Well, what about mindfulness? What about wisdom? What's the point of this 'I' and 'you'? I thought there was no self, and here we're going, 'May I be happy, may you be happy.' All we're doing is reinforcing..." And you're thinking about all the precepts, all the things you learned from mindfulness retreats, and how metta is just the opposite, and you're completely lost in thought, analyzing the practice. This is major doubt.

It's very, very helpful to notice it and name it. You'll never think your way into deciding which is better, mindfulness or metta, or whether you're doing it right, or whether metta is really emphasizing a sense of separation by the use of these words. Thinking will never get you there. So as with any doubt, recognize the hindrance of doubt as just this spinning in the mind. The recognition of it is, "Oh, okay, that's doubt." You put it down and you simply connect your attention. That's the antidote: connected attention. You come back to the phrase, and it's sort of like, "Okay, just do it."

We're not giving up our discriminating wisdom here. It's not that we just blindly believe anything that's said for the rest of our lives.

But there's that famous sutta where the Buddha said, "Don't believe it just because I tell you—try it and see for yourself." That second line is really important: *try it and see for yourself*. And as long as we're spinning in doubt, we can't try anything, because we'll never do it.

So you have to recognize: "Oh, doubt." Okay, just do it. And at the end of the retreat, definitely evaluate. See what your experience is—of course you'll evaluate. See if it's useful. See if it's true for you. No question about that. But it's impossible to evaluate in the middle of it. You're just in doubt. So noticing it, not judging it, but having the commitment to try the practice: "Oh, that's doubt." Recognize it, center in your body again, and then just start by focusing on the next phrase.

And you might notice—I've noticed—that doubt rarely comes up when you like what's happening. It often comes up when what's happening isn't meeting your expectations. So that's just a little piece that might help you not completely believe the doubt next time it arises.

One of my favorite lines from the Buddha is: "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." That's actually, I think, a very deep statement. So what we're doing here—each moment that we are planting that seed of intention, of friendliness, of connectedness, of loving-kindness, each moment that we actually say the phrase—in that moment, that's what we're dwelling upon.

And if you think about what our mind dwells upon left to its own devices, what it naturally inclines towards left to its own devices—I don't know about your minds, but I can tell you, in my mind it's not a pretty picture. To really have the sense that we are effecting a change as to where the heart, where the mind, will naturally incline through this practice—we really are. And that helps me enormously in those dry times when it seems like nothing's going on.

So if I can just summon up the willingness to offer the next phrase, it's a very powerful act of kindness, of wisdom, and of really coming out of our dream of separation, of fear and neediness.

Let's sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 330

Cultivating Seeds of Joy

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses a common challenge in both meditation practice and daily life: becoming so focused on suffering and impermanence that we lose sight of the joy that supports awakening. She emphasizes that while understanding dukkha is essential, getting stuck in bleakness is not onward leading toward freedom.*
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> *Wilson explores multiple avenues for cultivating wholesome happiness, beginning with sense pleasure and its limitations, then moving to the deeper joys of renunciation and simplicity. She draws on her experience as a nun in Thailand to illustrate the profound happiness that arises from dāna (generosity) and sīla (ethical conduct), describing how the "bliss of blamelessness" serves as a foundation for meditative joy. She traces the Buddha's teaching from the Two Darts Sutta and other discourses, showing how each level of happiness—from sense pleasure through jhānic rapture (pīti), happiness (sukha), and vipassanā joy—leads naturally to the next when we release clinging.*
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> *The talk concludes with practical guidance on muditā (appreciative joy), one of the four brahmavihāras, as a particularly accessible way to open the heart when we're drowning in difficulty. Wilson reminds us that awakened beings like the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu demonstrate profound joy not in spite of witnessing great suffering, but because of their capacity to hold both suffering and joy with an open heart.*

I want to talk about cultivating seeds of joy, which is a phrase Thich Nhat Hanh uses, in our practice, in our life, in the service of awakening—and that's really important.

The whole path is much vaster than our meditation practice, which we can sometimes lose sight of in the middle of a retreat. The meditation practice itself is so rich and so deep and so vast that it can seem to be everything. But the breadth of the Buddha's teaching, if you read in the different suttas and discourses, covers a whole range of our experiences in life. Meditation practice is only a part of it.

Among the many different aspects of the path of our life, I want to talk about a few that we can specifically draw on as ways to cultivate a sense of happiness or joy—what is often called gladdening the heart. We sometimes lose sight of this in the depths of a meditation retreat, or in the depths of our life at times.

It's not that every moment should be a joyful, happy moment. It won't be. But there are times, as I think many of you know all too well, on retreat or in life, where the difficult, the suffering aspect is so visible, so strong, that it seems to be all we can perceive. It becomes like a veil, and the only thing we can see in our practice or in the world is suffering.

Now, of course, a very important aspect of our understanding, of coming to freedom of heart and mind, is the understanding of suffering and how we get caught—how we suffer by our really incorrect perception of experience, our inaccurate idea of what happiness really is, and the confused ways we go about, in our ordinary mind, trying to be happy. We've talked about that a lot.

What happens often, and I think it needs to happen, is that we do get sometimes, and sometimes for seemingly long periods of time, quite focused on the transitory, the unsatisfactory aspect of all experience. We need to be really kind of hit over the head with this over and over, simply because we are so conditioned and ingrained to view life as otherwise.

But there are times when we get stuck there, where all we can see, all we can project is difficulty, is endings, is falling apart—and in a way that isn't freeing, that is not onward leading. Because the whole purpose of our spiritual life is about freeing the heart, freeing the mind. As the Buddha said, there is no higher happiness than peace. That's the whole point of our practice.

But on the way to this highest happiness, there are various other kinds of happiness. And there are practical ways, even in our practice here, for those times when we're seeming to drown in the suffering—when it's not just suffering but bleakness, drabness, total negativity.

I'll give an example. I call these periods dukkha periods, whether on retreat or in life. In life, maybe there's just been a whole series of times when people you know are dying, people you know are sick. You don't see relationships coming together; you see relationships coming apart. And it just seems like the accent is on the impermanence, the transitory, the unsatisfactory. Then that starts to be the glasses we see through.

I was giving this example the other day. Years ago, when I was on staff here, a couple—two people who were on staff—got together in a relationship. They were walking down the driveway holding hands. I see it in my mind's eye. They were so happy. And I was in a dukkha period. I turned to whoever I was with next to me and said, "I give them six months."

That's the veil. That's not helpful. That wasn't coming from the freedom of a heart at ease. That's unbalanced perception. I'm happy to say they're married. They have a kid. As far as I know, they're happy—not always happy, but happy. So that was wrong. That wasn't clear seeing.

Tonight I want to talk about, hopefully not too theoretically, some practical ways we can consciously access seeds of joy. Not to pretend that difficulty doesn't happen, not to get lost in pleasant feeling, but to gladden the heart, to open the mind. It actually leads us onward to deeper understanding, to greater peace, to the real happiness—the heart of non-clinging that is not dependent on any particular mental state.

So the first thing to talk about is really what we mean by happiness. This is a word—or joy—that each of us might be interpreting very differently. It has many connotations. Even within the very precise language of Buddhist terminology, there are different words for happiness. Remember when I put up that transcendental dependent arising and there was a word for joy? There was a word for rapture, which is pīti. There's a word for happiness, which is sukha. Joy is pāmojja.

Those are referring to very specific mental states, all of which we could lump under happiness, and there are also other forms of happiness. So I'm not speaking so much tonight from the precise Abhidhamma perspective, but I think it is important for each of us, when we find ourselves reflecting or mulling over or looking for happiness, that we don't just take that word or that concept at face value. Look a little deeper and see what it is you're really wanting. And of course, as long as you're wanting it, forget about happiness—that's the other trip.

These seeds of joy are really just reflections, ways to access the happiness that's onward leading, something that can support us when we're in those really difficult phases. Rather than just passively waiting and hoping that piti arises sometime in the distant future, that some kind of sukha will come and brighten our life—and then we want it, and then we crave it, and then we compare ourselves to others who sound like they have it, although we don't even know what it is. That just leads onward to more suffering. So that's not what I'm talking about.

The guiding principle, I would say, when we're thinking or speaking about gladdening the heart—states of heart or mind that are onward leading to peace, to freedom, to giving up clinging, the heart and mind of non-clinging—the guiding principle is really this: a wholesome state of joy or happiness, which can be triggered by many things, is non-clinging in the experience of it. In other words, it's not self-referencing back to me, me, me.

A lot of these different things I'll talk about can at times be experienced just this way, in a very non-self-referential, non-clinging, onward leading way. And the same experience can also be seen as starting to refer back to me, me, me. It might be experienced as pleasant, but it isn't the same type of happiness or joy that's going to gladden the heart, bring faith, bring brightness and lightness and energy to our system. I think you get a sense of the difference, and I'll keep giving examples of it as we go along.

So let's talk about really many different kinds of pleasure, joy, and happiness that we experience, starting with—believe it or not—sense pleasure. Sense pleasure is a form of pleasure. The Buddha never said it wasn't. And he didn't actually say that pleasant sense experience in itself is bad.

But if you look at most of our common sense pleasure experiences when we're not really paying attention, the danger isn't that sense pleasure is bad and we shouldn't have it, or that it can't for a moment bring us a kind of happiness. It's that for most of us, the movement from the experience of the moment of pleasure to clinging—to trying to get it, to trying to hold on to it, referring back to me, me, me—is so quick and fast that we almost can't tell the difference. We get completely and very quickly caught up in that cycle of wanting and clinging and longing and separation and neediness, all the experiences that actually hide us from the state of deepest happiness, of peace, of non-clinging.

When we're not seeing clearly, sense pleasure can strengthen our confusion, our sense of imprisonment. I don't know if you remember earlier in the retreat when I read from a sutta called "The Two Darts," where at one point the Buddha said that for ordinary people, the only escape we know from unpleasant sensation is to crave after, to lust after some pleasant sense experience. So on the first level of pleasure, of happiness, that's what we've learned, that's what we know: go towards some pleasant sense experience. And the drawback is simply that we get caught there. Unless we have another way to look, another avenue into our experience, we just keep spinning in that cycle of going for more pleasant experience. The more subtle happiness that isn't so self-referential, that isn't dependent on sense pleasure—we actually can't even quite imagine what else could give us happiness, as long as we're in the thrall of this cycle.

I read an interesting sutta where a householder went to the Buddha and was basically saying—I'll try to shorten it—"We're householders, and we indulge in sensuality, we delight in sensuality." Now that just means sense pleasures. "We really enjoy it, we rejoice in sensuality." He's really appreciating it. And he's saying, "So for us, when we hear about renunciation, it just seems like a sheer drop-off." That's the translation—like, ugh. "Even though we see and hear about young monks and nuns whose hearts

leap at the idea of renunciation, who get really joyful, who grow confident and really see renunciation as peace—we've seen that this happens to these young monks and nuns. But for us, when we think about renunciation, it's like a sheer drop-off. Forget about it."

Which is true, isn't it? When we're first immersed in sense pleasures, even a little renunciation sounds awful, so bleak.

And I love the Buddha's response. He said, "Yeah, it's true. Even for myself, before I became awakened, when I was still an unawakened Bodhisattva, I thought renunciation is good, seclusion is good—but my heart didn't leap at the thought of it. I thought it should be good, but it wasn't really making me happy. I wasn't seeing it as peace. It wasn't bringing confidence up in me." And then he said the thought occurred to him: Why? If I think it's good, but my heart isn't leaping—why not?

And he looked at himself and he saw, oh, it's because I haven't really understood the drawbacks of sensual pleasure. So as long as I don't understand the drawbacks, I'm caught there. Once I understand the drawbacks, I'm able to—it doesn't mean you give up sense pleasure completely, but to renounce that clinging to it and then open to the joy of renunciation.

And this sutta, I won't read it, but it goes on and on. He takes that through all the different jhānic levels, through all the different kinds of deep happiness, pīti, rapture, sukha, through all the different understandings. Each one, he sees it, he appreciates it, and then something in him lets go and he moves to the next. It's not denigrating anything previous. It's just seeing it's not all there is, releasing the attachment to it.

I really like that, because to me first it made the Buddha human. I could relate. That was only the first one out of that whole list, but I could relate to that one. And I think it's why the dangers of sense pleasures get hammered on so much in the suttas, because we are so overwhelmed with the possibility of sense pleasure. It's so easy to miss the clinging in it.

But I want to point out, because it's something people have asked and I've gotten notes about it, that understanding the drawback of sense pleasures doesn't mean we turn off and don't appreciate anymore. Doesn't mean you can't appreciate how good the ice cream tasted the other day. If, on the other hand, as someone told me last year at the end of retreat in the group discussions—on one of those days, I think he had eaten either one or two whole pints of Ben and Jerry's. He said, "Don't worry, there's enough for everybody." I asked, "Did you really enjoy it?" And he said, "Not really, after a while, but you just get going."

You can get the difference. One can enjoy the taste, but you don't need to eat two pints. Or with nature, which is, I think, almost the fear—that if we see the clinging in sense pleasures, we're going to stop appreciating. It's not so at all. Part of the joy of renunciation is that when we're renouncing the clinging, we're so much more able to appreciate just what is.

There's a saying I love from the Buddha: what is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it. So looking at that sunset tonight—I looked out my window, it was pink, the whole sky, it was beautiful. Our job really is to learn to tell in ourselves the difference between that appreciation that's not referring back to me, not asking how good does it make me feel or how can I hold on to it, but that appreciation that really opens us up, takes us out of ourselves. It's onward leading. It brings in a brightness, a lightness in the mind, in the heart. It energizes.

And so it's often very skillful when you're feeling tight and drab and bleak and striving here in practice to go outside—not to try and grab some sense of happiness, but just to appreciate.

Someone else asked me, in the Buddha's time, did they ever appreciate nature or such? Or is it all this anti-body, anti-beauty? It's not at all. If you remember, the monks and nuns were living outside all the time, living under trees, living in forests, living in beautiful deer parks.

And so I looked up this one poem. This is from the monk Mahākassapa, a disciple of the Buddha. Now, he was the one most renowned for his asceticism. Even before he ever came to be a disciple of the Buddha, he was an amazing ascetic. And after the Buddha died, he was the most senior monk, the one that everyone looked to to hold the Saṅgha together. So, Mahākassapa—more ascetic than any of us, I think, could even begin to imagine.

There's a long poem, and I'll just read a few stanzas. He was asked over and over, why did he keep living in the forest and the mountains? Why didn't he come and live in the bamboo grove or somewhere a little more comfortable? And it's because he loved the nature. He said:

Spread over with kariri garlands, these regions are delightful to my heart. Resounding with elephants, so lovely—those rocky mountains give me delight.

Their lovely surfaces lashed by rain, the mountains are resorted to by seers. Echoing with the cries of peacocks, those rocky mountains give me delight.

Wild gorges are there where clear water flows, haunted by monkeys and by deer, covered by wet carpets of moss—those rocky mountains give me delight.

The music of a five-piece ensemble can never give me so much delight as I derive when with one-pointed mind I gain insight into the Dhamma.

He had to put that on the end. But that's the point.

The delight he's gaining, that he's experiencing, is onward leading—leading to really seeing into the truth. It's supportive. It's a supportive condition for awakening.

So I think it's just part of our practice to explore in yourself the difference between the joy in sense pleasures—these pleasures that keep us on the cycle of wanting and needing and self-referencing—and the joy that helps us open to appreciation and peace. And then this peace we take back into our mindfulness to simply explore whatever's arising next.

So as long as I've talked about Mahakassapa, I'll go on to appreciating the joys of renunciation. Not on that level, although you could if you want, but simply on the level of the renunciation each of us experiences being on a retreat like this. Sometimes it might take a conscious reflection, because we might lose sight of the joys of renunciation. But if you look, you can see an incredible sense of spaciousness, simplicity, and ease that can come even from a small moment of renunciation.

For instance, the times when you're drinking tea or walking outside, whatever you're doing, and there's a simple moment of pure presence where you just really appreciate the beingness of the tea or the walk or the nature or the gurgle of the water fountain. That moment is accessible to our consciousness because in that moment, even though we don't think of it as renouncing, we're not caught up in looking for sense pleasures. There's a kind of seclusion, a quietness of the mind that isn't battered by the hindrances, that isn't wanting something—and this allows the simple peace of presence to be there.

On a little more active level, consider the kind of simple renunciation when you're in line for breakfast and it's egg day, and you're a few people back, and there are three eggs left. You really want an egg. You're dying for an egg. You've been waiting six days for an egg. But in that moment of going by, you can say, "You know what? There's more people behind me. I can let it go." And it's not some self-congratulatory "Aren't I so great?" It's a real letting go. There's a sense of real joy and ease that can come with that kind of renunciation. And we see in this that the things we want or need in our mind are the things that bind us. The renunciation, even when small, can bring quite a spacious joy, a lightness, an uplifting of heart, an uplifting of energy.

People give me little examples all the time in interviews, so I want to point this out so that you can appreciate those moments for yourself. It's not that you should knock them away and say they're nothing.

I think a common misconception we can get into in our practice is that we look so hard for the *kilesas*, but we forget that when the Buddha described right effort, he gave four elements to it. The first two deal with not allowing unwholesome mental states to arise if they haven't, and if they have arisen, to abandon them, not get lost in them. But the other two are having a zeal for the arising of un-arisen wholesome factors, and for the ones that have already arisen that are wholesome, to appreciate them and allow them to continue.

That's different from ego. So in a moment of renunciation and that joy, that appreciation, let it fill your mind and body. Believe me, when it turns to "I'm so great," it'll stop being so uplifting. It'll stop filling your mind and body with joy, and you'll feel that heaviness again. So just recognize, okay, now we're back to the first two wise efforts. But I think we often tend to overlook or give short shrift to moments of wholesomeness. They don't have to be big. You don't have to renounce the whole world. But you can notice the moments here, and they're quite helpful.

In Thailand as a nun—I think I mentioned before—in the beginning of course it was quite difficult for many reasons. But a big reason was simply the level of giving up comfort, giving up the way of life I was used to: the food, the weather, sleeping on the floor, all of that. And for an aversive personality, that's what comes up when you don't get what you want—aversion. That's how it works. If it was a greedy personality, then greed would come up. Not that one's really better than the other. But anyway, there was suffering for a while.

The joy that came after some months was the simplicity of the lifestyle. I didn't really think of it as renunciation anymore, but it really was. The simplicity of the lifestyle and not having so many choices of things to do or things to go towards—sort of like here. What do you want for lunch? It doesn't matter. You get what there is. That's actually, if you can be content with it, a huge relief.

And some people have told me when they stopped eating after tea, if that's a choice they make, something that surprised them was actually this sense of ease, of lightness, of joy—just not having to deal with that whole *mishigas* in the cafeteria one more time. It's just this sense of spaciousness, ease, a joy that can come from simplicity.

We would never have the chance to appreciate this, really, if we didn't somehow, for some moments, if we weren't able to not be caught up in wanting sense pleasures.

So it's not that sense pleasures are bad, but as long as we think they represent the highest happiness, we don't know how to explore and experience and let in more subtle, more pervading, and more supportive types of happiness. That's all. The joy of simplicity, of renunciation.

Another very strong avenue that gives rise to various kinds of joy, of peace, and strong experience of our connectedness and lack of separation, is the whole area of dana, or generosity. As I'm sure you know, whenever the Buddha taught, he would always start with dana. He had a set order in which he would teach. Starting with lay people, he'd talk about dana, then he'd talk about sila, which I'll discuss next. Then he'd talk about bhavana, the whole field of mental cultivation and development through meditation.

If you look at it, generosity is really an expression of non-clinging. It's an active expression of a sense of connectedness, a sense of letting go rather than holding on, rather than self-referencing. It's a practice of letting go of self-cherishing. It's really an active opening of mind and heart to non-clinging. And because there are many forms of dana or generosity, and in the world when we're not in meditation, it's a very active thing one can do. It's a very good source of practice—both of freedom, of cultivating non-clinging, of cultivating a sense of our oneness, and also of bringing happiness to our heart, of gladdening the heart.

Have you ever noticed when you really are generous, whether it's with your time, whether it's with giving something, whether it's just with letting someone else have something you want and they don't even know it, how really happy that makes one feel when we really do it? I know sometimes it's a little grudging, and it makes us feel sort of good, but we can't quite stay happy. But it's a start.

When I was a nun, I think that's when I really began to understand—I can't say I understand it completely, of course—the depth of real joy that I could see in people from their incredible generosity. It's one of the most humbling and really profound lessons for me of living as a renunciate, as a Sangha member, because one lives completely on the generosity of others, and without even asking. You don't ask.

Even though, I must say, for nuns in Thailand it's a vastly different scene than it is for monks—they aren't supported in the same way or with the same enthusiasm by the whole group of people, the whole country—my experience in the short time I was there, only a year, was such total, loving, joyful support that it really blew me away. There was no sense of "we should do this" or "now this foreigner has come, she has more than we do, and here she comes to our country living off of us." I could imagine

myself thinking something like that. There was nothing like that. It was much more like, "Oh, we're so happy that you're here! Let us give you your robes. Let us give you your food. Please stay in the best kuti. Let me take you here. Let me take you there."

At one point my back got really bad, and I was staying in a place way out in the country, like two or three hours by a really bumpy bus. A woman who was a nurse, who would come out sometimes to sit there, took me to her house in town for a month and insisted on cooking for me every day. You can imagine, I was incredibly uncomfortable with this—which is a good lesson, because that actually blocks the kindness. She was so happy to get up at five in the morning and cook me this giant breakfast, and then come home from her job as a nurse at like ten thirty so she could cook me lunch.

To see the stuff I went through from my Western conditioning—we take care of ourselves, I'm beholden to nobody—it's so isolating, that attitude. It's so separating. It so blocks the real connection that we all share. And when I began to let in the generosity and just tune into the people as they were offering, there was a transcendent kind of joy that came about. I have to say, that was my unvarying experience in the whole year that I was there. It's really profoundly etched on my heart, the beauty and the happiness that real open-hearted generosity can bring.

I have lots of examples of this. Another example, not from Thailand but from Tibet. I was watching a video a few years ago called *Home to Tibet*. I don't know if any of you saw it. It was about a Tibetan man named Sonam who actually—I don't know if he still does—used to live in western Massachusetts and built stone walls. In this video, he managed to go back home to Tibet to visit his family, his sister, people that were still there. He hadn't been to Tibet for many years. He was saying that when he first went, he was a bit shocked by how old his sister looked, how really hard the life was, how really poor they were. So he brought all kinds of gifts and money, and he was so happy to give it. And they were so happy, the old sister—when she got the gifts and the money, you could see on the video, she just lit up with transcendent joy.

And why?

Because now they could give more to the monastery. It was so beautiful.

I share this not to enter into any kind of value judgment, but simply because the happiness, the joy of that transcendent generosity is really deeply touching to me.

So why does it make us so happy? I mean, it's kind of obvious. If we look deeply, of course, as with all actions—even actions of mind—the seed is in the intention more than in what we give. But in that intention of real giving, whether it's money or time or service—and metta is a form of generosity of the heart—in that intention of giving, it

brings us into a sense of unity, doesn't it? It's not "I'm so great, I'm giving to you." That won't bring the same kind of happiness. It might bring a little; at least we're letting go. But that real generosity of "Oh, you need this—here"—there's no self-referencing. It's coming from a sense of the big picture, the heart of non-clinging, our basic unity. And as we're acting from non-clinging, we experience the joy and the peace of non-clinging.

On retreat here, I know there's not so much you can really do. And actually—this might seem strange—I want to beg you not to go around trying to do generous things for each other. Because in some ways, the most generous thing we can each do is just let each other continue their practice. Sometimes when we talk about generosity, it does feel good. You want to ask the office to buy little things so you can go around and give them to everybody. But that's a lot of doing. You don't need to. You can just offer some metta in your heart. Or you can do little things. When you see the place you always sit in the dining room and somebody's hovering, you think, "Maybe I could let them sit there next time." There are intangible ways we can offer the heart of generosity. And it's also generous to just let people be in their own space. I know I need to say that as a proviso just for here on retreat. But you'll see there are little ways of generosity. Notice it. Notice when it's possible.

And also—and I'm going to say this about morality too—you can reflect consciously when you're in a kind of pit and you think, "What's going to get me out of here? There's not one good, wholesome, joyful thing I can imagine." Reflecting on acts of generosity, thoughts of generosity in your past—the karmic fruit ripening can actually bring joy. It's the same with reflecting on our wholesome actions, on our sila, which is again something we don't do all that much because we think it's sort of egocentric. It is egocentric if we're doing it to say, "I'm so generous, I'm so great, I'm more generous than that person." Well, that won't make us too happy. But to just hold in our heart those moments of generosity—it can bring us back into that unitive intention, into the joy. Or when we've been the recipients of generosity.

When I was talking just now about being in Thailand, the sense of happiness just washes through me. Deep gratefulness, which also opens us to happiness. Deep appreciation of generosity and being able to be the recipient—that I could finally let go of all my self-image of "No, I shouldn't take that, let me take care of myself" and just receive it. It made me tremendously happy as well.

So dana. Now sila, or our non-harming conduct. This is the second thing the Buddha would always teach. It's often talked about as the bliss of blamelessness. I like that phrase—the bliss of blamelessness—or freedom from remorse.

Now I know some of you, and maybe all of you, have at times had actions you've done in the past, or wish you'd done and didn't do, or unkind things, or just little things come up, and you experience tremendous remorse or sorrow or regret over it. And some of these things—when people would tell me about them, they're so little. Just such a small thing that you wouldn't even notice it in your daily life, really. And it's happened to me too—sitting, thinking of all the people whose letters I didn't answer, all the phone calls I didn't return, all the little things I haven't done when reaching out might have made someone happy. And you can really sink into a swamp of remorse.

Remorse is useful in seeing—not with judgment, not with self-hatred, not with guilt, but in understanding the suffering that comes from our unwholesome speech and actions. But sometimes it can also go quite too far, just little things we're really beating ourselves about.

our internal commitment, even though of course we're not perfect in it, to speak and act from that non-harming is again an actualization of our oneness with all beings. And this bliss of blamelessness, this freedom from remorse, is actually a very profound and supportive form of happiness.

At least many of the people I talk to, it's not something we consciously turn our minds to all that often. You know how in the beginning of the metta, the formal metta meditation, sometimes we'll say, consciously reflect on something wholesome you've done or some good attitude of yours. And sometimes people really can't think of anything, or you think of some little thing and you think, well, that's too stupid, that's not good enough.

But it's important. It's really important because it can bring a brightness, a confidence, a sense of gladness to our mind and heart. If nothing else—and this isn't nothing, this is big—reflect on the power and the sincerity of your intentions in pursuing a spiritual path at all. In all the moments here and in your life that you have cultivated kindness, honesty, awareness, metta, freedom, non-harming. It's vast. It's really important to see and acknowledge this in ourselves, and it can be a major source of support in difficult times.

You could consciously bring up a specific incident or a specific time where you were aware of appreciating something wholesome or non-harming that you did. And again, for us, it's difficult to know how to do this without falling into "Aren't I great?" But experiment with it.

I really got a sense of how powerful this could be, sort of by mistake, a few years ago when one day, just out of nowhere, came a memory—the kind that comes up on retreat as if you're reliving it. Just a day many years ago when I worked in a sheltered workshop in North Carolina with moderately to severely mentally handicapped adults. It was pretty intense work.

But anyway, this one day came up. We were in this windowless garage with no air conditioning in North Carolina in the summer, 105 degrees outside. It was a charming environment. But I remember this one day in particular where, for some reason—I mean, I really came to love the people in the workshop that I worked with. I can still remember a lot of them and their names. And this one day, for some reason, there were just several different little incidents of interactions where basically I was just being kind, being loving. And I was also receiving—for some reason, people were expressing in their way that sense of love and appreciation back. It was just a very beautiful half a day or whatever.

And when that memory came up, it brought with it that gladdening of the heart of wholesomeness. That's all. It wasn't like, "I'm so great." Just the wholesomeness of being kind, of doing the best I could, certainly non-harming, and of being able to receive that sense of connection with the people we were all working together. Again, it's the karmic fruits coming up in this life, in this moment. That can really just bring up some brightness and energy and confidence. It's kind of like you take a deep breath and go, "Okay. One more five minutes of lifting, moving, placing." Okay, I can come back and feel this tightness in the abdomen just as it is. It just brings in a spaciousness.

It's a great balance for self-blame and self-judgment when you're getting lost in that. And again, if no incident comes to mind, reflect on your intentions.

This freedom from remorse, which is what attention to our conduct is, this bliss of blamelessness—also called freedom from remorse—I found an interesting sutta where the Buddha is talking about how skillful virtues have freedom from remorse as their purpose, Ananda, freedom from remorse as their reward. And then it goes through this whole list again. What's the purpose of freedom from remorse? What is its reward? And he says joy is the purpose and the reward of freedom from remorse. And then from joy, he goes to rapture, to serenity, to sukha. He goes through the whole transcendent dependent arising. Exactly as I talked about the other day. Only instead of starting from faith, he's starting from skillful virtues and freedom from remorse.

So don't overlook the power of our non-harming speech and action. It is the foundation, the grounding of our whole opening into freedom. It's the grounding of the joy and rapture, serenity, sukha, concentration—which are all happinesses that come specifically in the meditative path. Onward leading to the last one: dispassion has knowledge and vision of release as its purpose, knowledge and vision of release as its reward.

So in this way, Ananda, skillful virtues lead step by step to the consummation of Arhatship.

Just in case you missed that. It's not a little thing.

This brings me to the point of how, simply by our step-by-step willingness to pay attention to each of these areas, coupled with our mindfulness practice, this whole field arises—not so much sense pleasures, but what you could call meditative joys and meditative happinesses. Those ones I specifically mentioned: the joys of the secluded mind and heart, the rapture, the sukha, the concentration, the tranquility of mind. These are specific states of happiness, of joy in the mind pervading the body, that are onward leading. They arise quite naturally in their own time through our continued attention to dāna, sīla, and our meditation practice.

As well, there is the great joy called vipassanā happiness. When a sudden insight arises, it brings a kind of happiness with it. Sometimes it's like a big release of energy, or there's more energy, or you feel happy, excited—but there's a real joy that comes with that.

These aren't so much the kind of happiness that you can decide to access when you're in a pit of despair. So I'm mentioning these, but I'm not recommending this as a practical means. Like when I saw those people walking down the driveway and all I could see was "Give them six months"—I couldn't then say, "Well, I'll go inside and access sukha." The mind wasn't in a state of seclusion at that time. It's only possible to really open to and experience these more subtle states of joy and happiness when we're not entranced by sense pleasures, when the mind is more quiet, more secluded, more at peace. And they'll come in their own time. We can trust that. But if you get caught in wanting, as you know, forget about it. It just gets in the way.

So only by the abandoning of sense pleasures can we even begin to taste these more subtle yet at the same time much more satisfying kinds of meditation pleasures, and the happiness of vipassanā.

I remember one retreat I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, and I was in one of these states of vipassanā happiness. Things were just coming and going, coming and going very quickly. It's one of those classic stages where great rapture arises, joy arises,

just from seeing everything coming and going. And I remember thinking at the time about different sense pleasures—anything you could think of. The thought of them would come up in my mind, and it was really funny because my mind would go, "That's not even appealing. That's gross." There was no sense pleasure that could even touch the happiness of this vipassanā happiness.

And even now, I don't experience that in the moment, that vipassanā happiness. But again, even in talking about it, some knowing of that peace, that happiness comes back. It doesn't mean I don't want sense pleasures again, but somewhere I know they don't really cut it in the same way—not like seeing things clearly, the joy that comes from that, the heart and mind that doesn't need to hide from suffering and doesn't need to hold on to pleasure. There's a happiness so much greater in that.

And it's onward leading, as long as we keep paying attention. Even this happiness of deep meditation, of concentration—if we stop paying attention, of course we get caught there. As I know Steve was talking about: getting caught within. "Wow, this is so great. There's no happiness greater than this. Aren't I happy? This is really making me..." It starts to refer back to me again, back to me again, and how to prolong it.

I think a little of this is inevitable, and don't worry about it as long as you keep being mindful. Mindful of the happiness. Mindful of the liking of it. Mindful of how great it is. Just notice that. And I have ultimate faith that the awareness takes care of it. You'll move through that. You don't have to say, "Oh, vipassanā happiness—better back away. I might get attached. Let me go distract myself." Don't do that. So you get caught a little bit. Keep paying attention, and the mindfulness will just take us through that place.

Now, without paying attention, we do get caught. Caught in the cycle of me and self-referencing, caught in the cycle of clinging. Or another place we might not notice is that happiness turns into—it's actually the near enemy of empathetic joy—exuberance. And it happens a lot in interviews. People will come in with some insight, and they're so happy and filled with rapture or whatever, and the energy is going up, and then suddenly you can see they just want to run all over the building being happy. All of a sudden there are all these things to do and all these expressions of it—and that's exuberance.

It's without mindfulness. The energy builds, and we're not quite paying attention to it. It stops being so connected. We run around, do all kinds of stuff. "Oh, I feel so great. I just need to run around the loop feeling this joy." And we come back with a thud sooner or later with that kind of exuberance, because the mindfulness has gone out the window. So you're happy, then you're really high, then you're really excited, then all of a sudden you're like, "Ugh. What happened?"

After you do that a couple of times, you'll learn. Maybe you can notice when the energy is really high. "This is happiness. Just keep being mindful. Don't try to hold on to it."

Now I have five minutes for my favorite topic, which will make me happy anyway. One other specific way that we can access non-clinging, non-self-referencing joy in our practice—both here and in the world—is through the conscious cultivation of one of the four Brahma Viharas, the one called mudita, appreciative joy.

All the Brahma Viharas bring us a kind of happiness, but appreciative joy is, I have found, so practical and so useful as a way to consciously open the energy field, the heart, the mind to happiness and joy when you're not particularly experiencing it yourself.

Mudita is defined as metta turned toward someone's happiness—turning toward the joy or success of another. It's said to be one of the four Brahma Viharas that's in some ways the most difficult or most unfamiliar. Perhaps it's the one we're not in such a habit of, but I've found that when I consciously turn my mind that way, it's pretty accessible, and it's really fun. That's what's so nice about it. It's light, it's bright, it's energizing—and yes, its near enemy is exuberance.

Ajahn Sumedho also talks about appreciative joy as being able to appreciate the beauty and the goodness in nature and in the things around us. It's sort of back to what I was talking about in the beginning, about appreciating beauty. If you find that you can't quite yet connect to mudita with another person, you can begin by just consciously appreciating the beauty around you, or something that makes you happy in nature, or a beautiful work of art—just something you see around here that brings you joy.

But mudita is really about turning our attention to the perceived happiness or success of another person and saying in our heart, "May your happiness continue. May your success continue." In doing that, their joy becomes something we get happy from. It stops being their joy or my joy—it just becomes joy that's accessible in the world. Instead of having to rely on our own paltry resources for joy, we suddenly have the resources of the whole world.

You know how when you read something in the newspaper about someone who's done something really generous or really good, it can bring shivers and make us really happy? That's mudita. I read about this man who works for Ford in Detroit. He's seventy-eight years old. He's been working for Ford for fifty-nine years. He makes a hundred thousand dollars a year because he works overtime all the time, and mostly he

gives all his money away. He's given over two hundred thousand dollars to the United Negro College Fund, two hundred thousand to Louisiana State University, a hundred twelve thousand to different churches, twenty thousand to the NAACP, four hundred thirty-one thousand to Wayne State University. And he says, "I get joy, happiness out of this. I can go home and sleep good." He lives in some little apartment, drives an old car. Doesn't it make you happy to hear about him? He's just this big smiling face.

That's mudita. We can consciously look for that. It's such a wonderful way, because it's not just his goodness—how does it make us happy? It's because just as we all share suffering, we all share happiness, we all share goodness. It touches that place of unity in us. It's a really important thing to tune into.

Of course, the far enemy is envy—that constant comparing mind, that sense of there being a finite amount of joy to go around. When you're in a down space and you see a yogi walking by looking really happy, do we say, "May your happiness continue"?

Or do we think, "Oh, how come they're so happy? I'm really doing even worse than I thought." We kind of take it as a way to reflect back on what a loser we are.

Notice your mind do that. You can change the channel. You can consciously try and say, "Oh, may your happiness continue." Remember, it's intention. You don't have to feel it right away. But try it. It really opens so that other people's happiness stops being a threat and becomes a source of joy, a source of connection.

You can start in very small ways. For instance, if you're really having a hard time sitting still in the hall and you're beating yourself up about it, and the person next to you comes in and sits like a rock for two and a half hours, you might not be able, quite in that moment, to feel *muditā* for that person. But you see someone else sitting outside smiling at the sunset—you can feel *muditā* for that. Or I'll think of friends who get happy when their particular tennis star wins. Now, I don't really care what tennis person wins what tennis match. But my friend gets so happy, so I can think of him and I can feel *muditā* for that.

The proviso is, of course, wholesome things. Not *muditā* for somebody who's doing something that's harmful to themselves or others. That's not really what we're talking about in wholesome joy. But just look around here and try it. It can really bring a balance to the mind and heart that's only seeing suffering. Even in compassion, where we're connecting with suffering, sometimes that's all we see. We can consciously bring in the fact of joy.

This is important because we often tend to see all one way or all another. When there's a lot of suffering in the world, to consciously look at someone who's smiling and think of joy—it almost sometimes feels like cheating, or it's shallow, or inconsequential. Sometimes when I'm listening to news on the radio about any of the difficult places around the world—so much suffering, so much torment—I think about here we are in this little *deva* realm, getting upset at the things we're all getting upset about. But we're safe. We have so much to eat. We have the opportunity to practice.

My mind can go to, "How can that be possible? How can I appreciate that when there's so much suffering?" But it's very important not to denigrate the joy, but to open the heart and mind to hold both. Because that's how it is in the world. It isn't all joy, and it isn't all suffering, and all of us experience both. *Muditā* is a conscious way to access joy when we're drowning in suffering, but it's not a way that denies the suffering.

And that's really what takes us into the highest happiness of peace—one that isn't dependent on only positive things or pleasant experience, one that isn't overwhelmed by difficulty, by suffering. Nor does the mind at peace identify with or blame oneself for the suffering either.

If you look at some of the people who seem most awakened—who can tell from outside—but people who have really exhibited great love and care for this world, they seem really joyful at the same time that they've perhaps seen and been close to more suffering than I could ever imagine.

This is my favorite little photo. It's a picture from a conference of Nobel Peace laureates. I'm sure some of you have seen it—the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. These two men together—Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama—the amount of suffering, of cruelty that they've talked to people about, that they've experienced in their two different countries of Tibet and South Africa, is mind boggling. And here they are together, yucking it up. The Dalai Lama is standing behind Archbishop Tutu trying to pull off his hat. The Archbishop is holding it on. They're both just filled with this kind of simplicity of joy that I would say isn't in spite of, but maybe because of, their ability to be with suffering—balanced with these other aspects of joy.

So thanks for listening. Let's sit quietly for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 331

Opening Talk of Vipassanā Retreat

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *This opening talk marks the beginning of a vipassanā retreat, with Carol Wilson and Sharon Salzberg welcoming practitioners to what Wilson describes as a deliberate, conscious withdrawal from daily entanglements—a modern expression of the hermit tradition found across cultures throughout history. Drawing on the example of St. Antony of Egypt and Thomas Merton's reflections on solitude, Wilson frames retreat as an act of love rather than escape, offering space to meet ourselves with kindness and courage rather than running from what we fear.*
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> *Sharon Salzberg then formally opens the retreat by introducing the Three Refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) and the Five Precepts (sīla). She explains taking refuge in the Buddha as recognizing our own capacity for awakening, the Dhamma as aligning with the truth of things as they are, and the Saṅgha as joining a stream of beings committed to liberation. The precepts—refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants—establish a foundation of care and compassion for the community.*
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> *The teachers emphasize that retreat practice mirrors real life with its inevitable ups and downs, yet offers a unique opportunity to transform our relationship to experience. Through the simple practice of mindfulness—paying kind, loving attention to each moment—practitioners can discover what Salzberg calls the 'inexhaustible treasure' of our original pure nature, a happiness that doesn't break when conditions change. The talk concludes with basic meditation instructions on breath awareness and the essential teaching of beginning again with compassion whenever attention wanders.*

We'd like to join our welcome to that of John and the staff, to those of you who've come tonight. I'll just introduce us each. My name is Carol Wilson. Sitting next to me is Sharon Salzberg, Kamala Masters, and Ryoshin Kelly. Together we'll be sharing these next nine days, this journey we're taking together.

It really is for us a privilege to be sitting here at the beginning of this period of retreat together—for most of you, at the beginning; for some of you, the continuation. I was thinking today about what an amazing thing it is that so many of you are willing to take this time to leave your daily life, to leave your families, your friends, your loved ones, your jobs, your televisions, your pizzas, whatever it is that you think makes you

happy, and come here. In this culture, such inner journeying is not always completely respected and supported. And so to think that there are so many of us willing to spend this time together is really very inspiring to me, and humbling also.

Hopefully, you're coming here from a powerful commitment not to run away from everything you hate, because you'll find out soon enough that all of that came with you. But coming here really to take a journey of discovery and rediscovery, to come back home again to your truest self, your deepest self.

It never ceases to amaze me how this relatively simple practice of giving kind, loving attention to our experience—just our moment-to-moment experience, our thoughts, our emotions, our breath, our body, just being present for whatever arises—what a profound effect this has on how we understand ourselves and how we understand life. It can really change how we live with ourselves, and thus when we return from a retreat back into our daily life, can really have a profound effect on how we live with others. By taking this conscious time to step out of the daily routine, we're committing a conscious act that will allow us to live with ourselves and with society in much greater harmony.

Because we are living a little more closely aligned with what is really true about ourselves, what is really true about the world. Instead of existing in this state where I always feel like I'm trying to fit a square peg into a round hole somehow in daily life and wondering why it doesn't work—it's because we're not really seeing ourselves as we are, we're not really meeting the world as it is. We're always wishing it was a little bit different or thinking that we're a little bit different.

This practice opens us to just being who we are, as we are, without a lot of elaboration or embellishment. To let ourselves be with ourselves as we are—not with resignation and disgust, but with real kindness, acceptance, and compassion, with a real love for the truth of who we are.

Today when I was thinking about speaking tonight, I remembered a book that I had read a couple of years ago about hermits in different cultures, in different historical traditions. I really enjoyed reading it because of being so deeply enmeshed in the retreat culture, and seeing how through all cultures where there is recorded history, there is some strain of a hermit culture embedded within it, more or less respected.

What we're doing here in our way—whether you're here for a little over two weeks, whether you're here for nine days, whether you're here for a year, whatever it is—we are, in this culture, partaking of that life of the hermit. A deliberate, conscious withdrawal from all the entanglements and enjoyments of society, a deliberate withdrawal

into solitude. I know this isn't total solitude, but a silence, an internal solitude, a simplicity of lifestyle, a real giving up of your own control of your meals, your schedule, your sleeping quarters—not just to avoid things, but to really set the conditions for deep inner discovery.

Using the conditions of the solitude, the silence, the simplicity, not just for a breather—it's not like a vacation in Bali. You might wish in a couple of days you were on vacation in Bali, but that'll pass. This is a way to really strengthen our understanding so that we can then re-emerge back into society from a deeper, more whole place.

One of the modern Western cultural examples of a hermit type, who's quite well known, is Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk. In reading about him, he really wanted to be much more of a hermit than he was mostly allowed to be by his order. He was writing and very famous and always having to live with others and travel around. But he really studied in himself the power and effects of solitude and the deep reasons for it.

One of the things he says about it is: "Withdrawal from other people can be a special form of love for them. It should never be a rejection of humans or society, but this withdrawal may well be a quiet and humble refusal to accept the myths and fictions with which our social life cannot help but be full, especially today. To despair of the illusions and facades which humans build around themselves is certainly not to despair of humanity. On the contrary, it's a sign of love for humanity. For when we love someone, we refuse to tolerate what destroys and maims their personality."

I really resonate with that. Our society—we all know it's crazy. All societies in their own way are crazy. And our deliberate choice to withdraw is really in order to love ourselves and to love other humans more deeply and more fully, by seeing what's really true rather than just being in the thrall of our habitual attitudes, of the habitual intensity of this society that we live in, of the cultivation of greed, of the cultivation of fear, of the need to protect.

To withdraw to a safe place, which Sharon will talk about more, allows us to open much more deeply to what is true. And then to emerge really in a different space.

So often people who don't understand why you're coming on retreat never really understand why one is coming on retreat. And it's pretty impossible to explain it in a way that they get it. Even a lot of people who come on retreats have a little place where they're wondering if they're just being self-indulgent and denying our common humanity. Although deep in us, we know it's not the case, because we come out different.

One of my favorite stories from this whole book is about one of the desert fathers in Egypt in the days of the early Christians. These men were really serious hermits out there in the desert, really serious. One of the most famous of them was called St. Antony of Egypt, and he was born into a very wealthy Christian family.

But at some point in his young adulthood, hearing the teachings of Jesus where he said, "Sell all you have and give to the poor," Antony took this literally, much to his parents' dismay, and sold everything he had and took off for the desert.

And he lived alone way out in some cave way down the Nile somewhere for twenty years without seeing a human face. Every six months, friends of his would come and bring food and the supplies that he needed, but he wouldn't see them. And sometimes they would hear these heart-rending horrible screams and yelling and all kinds of commotion going on behind the barrier in his cave.

Finally, after twenty years, they couldn't stand it anymore. His friends broke down the door. And it says here they expected to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. That's what they were expecting. Instead, Antony emerged healthy, sane, balanced, and full of kindness and ability to help people. And for the rest of his life, he alternated between periods of solitude and really going and giving support and advice and help to people who were in trouble.

I love that. And somewhere in the middle of this retreat, you might remember that period of the shrieks and groans. That's part of it too. As you know, having done retreats before, it's a real rollercoaster ride.

We need the seclusion. We need the support. We need the solitude and inner silence to give ourselves the space to let whatever we haven't been really comfortable with come up into the light. And the power of the mindfulness or the metta gives us the calmness of mind and the courage of heart to let it be—to really see it with a calm heart, with clear eyes, and to recognize that whatever it is we've been holding away or driven by, we don't have to be so driven by. We don't have to be so scared of. We can actually meet it with courage and kindness. And this gives us a real strength of heart and compassion for humanity that will inform the way we are with people once we leave our hermit's cave here.

Thich Nhat Hanh often says that we think we're leaving society when we come on retreat, but we find out that really society comes with us because we are society. There's no way that we are really isolating ourselves. What we find in our exploration of our own heart and mind and thoughts is our commonality with all humans. And once we realize that and meet our own stuff with compassion rather than disgust, with kindness

rather than hating ourselves for not being perfect, then we find that we don't have to only be in retreat to feel this commonality, this courage and kindness in the face of our own stuff, in the face of other people's.

I want to close with something from Pema Chödrön. People often say, "Meditation is all very well, but what does it have to do with my life?" What it has to do with your life is that perhaps through the simple practice of paying attention, giving loving kindness to your speech and your actions and the movements of your mind, you begin to realize that you're always standing in the middle of a sacred circle. And that's your whole life. It's not this room that's the sacred circle. IMS is not the sacred circle. Wherever you go for the rest of your life, you're always in the middle of the universe. And the sacred circle is always around you. Everyone who walks up to you has entered the sacred space. And it's not an accident.

So thank you for coming here into your sacred space.

Between the pizza and the television and the trip to Bali and the shrieks in the grounds, I wondered when I opened my eyes how many of you would still be here. That was great. It's great to leave it all behind.

So I'd also like to welcome you. And we'll formally begin the retreat, as is traditional, by undertaking what are known as the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts.

First, this is a quotation from a Tibetan text which says: "Beneath the pauper's house there are inexhaustible treasures, but the pauper never realizes this, and the treasures never say, 'I am here.' Likewise, the treasure of our original nature, which is naturally pure, is trapped in ordinary mind, and beings suffer in poverty."

This is something Carol just alluded to—this sense of our having an original nature that is pure. And so, as she said, we come together to an experience like this as an act of discovery and reconnection to something that is already there. Though it may be hidden from us, it is something that once we connect to, can support us tremendously through all the different kinds of experiences we have.

The wonderful thing about a retreat, also as Carol was saying, is its mirror-like reflection of real life with the ups and the downs and the changes and so many different kinds of experiences. It's not really a vacation from stuff, but it's a tremendous opportunity to radically transform our relationship to what arises in our experience—our bodies, our minds—and to connect to the world in a very different way.

So this inner treasure, this original nature, is reflected in what is called in Buddhism the Three Jewels.

That is the object of our taking refuge. We take refuge as an act of aligning our vision to what is possible, expanding our sense of what is possible, and linking our own potential to these external expressions of awakening, of freedom, of compassion.

The first of the refuges is that of the Buddha himself. The Buddha, in this tradition of teaching, has always been described as being a human being—a human being who had some very profound questions about the nature of life. He more or less asked: What does it mean to be a human being? To be born into this human body, to be helpless as an infant, so vulnerable, subject to conditions? To grow up, to grow old whether we like that or not, to die whether we like that or not?

And what does it mean to have a human mind which can careen from one feeling to another, one view to another, so that we might wake up in the morning full of doubt and then by mid-afternoon be full of faith? We're happy and sad and angry and joyful—constant movement, fluctuation. Without it being subject to our whim or wish or dictum. How successful is it to wake up and say, "Okay, I've suffered enough. I will never be afraid again. I will never fall asleep in meditation again." Things don't seem to work that way.

And yet the Buddha asked: Is there a quality of happiness that we can experience as human beings that will not break, that will not shatter as the conditions of the body and the mind change outside of our control? What is that peace or that happiness that isn't so fragile, that isn't so dependent? And how do we experience it? This was his driving quest.

What the Buddha discovered in terms of an answer or a resolution to those questions, he discovered through the power of his own awareness. And so can we. This is the capacity of the human mind—to learn, to understand, to grow, to be free.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, it's really not just an act of paying respect to a historical figure of 2,500 years ago. It's very much a reflection of what we ourselves are capable of as human beings. It's like a reminder. And taking refuge in the Buddha doesn't really have anything to do with adopting a set of beliefs or a dogma or calling oneself a Buddhist.

One of my early teachers, a man named Munindra, was quite wonderful with one-liners. One of his great comments to me, which changed a lot of things for me, was when he said, "The Buddha's enlightenment solved the Buddha's problem. Now you solve yours." It was this fantastic moment because it actually felt like maybe it was the

first time in my life somebody was looking at me with that kind of conviction: You can solve your problem. You can solve the problems that led you to want to come to India to begin with, to learn how to meditate.

So we take refuge in the Buddha really as a reminder of that fact. We can solve our problem. Our question may not be exactly the same as the Buddha's, but it's something like that. And through the power of our own awareness, we too can come to some resolution, some answer.

The second of the three jewels is the Dharma. Dharma is sometimes translated as the Buddhist teaching, the path. In more depth it means the nature of things, the laws of nature, the truth of things, things as they are. Another meaning it has is that which supports us, that which sustains us.

To take refuge in the Dharma is to align ourselves with the truth of things so that we can come close to what our actual experience is, face to face. It's the extraordinary opportunity of this kind of supportive environment—that's all we need to do. We don't have to pretend anything to ourselves or to somebody else. We use the truth of each moment's experience, whatever it is, to come closer to more fundamental underlying truths, because that's where it's found.

There's a saying in the Chinese tradition: If you want to understand the nature of water, look at the waves. So we look at the waves of all our different kinds of experiences, and there will be many different kinds, because each one of them speaks a certain truth. This is taking refuge in the Dharma—being willing just to be with the truth of change, things as they are, and see what we might discover.

It also means that it's an unfolding process. We don't have to force it. We don't have to make it happen faster. We can bring ourselves close to the truth of each moment's experience and let the rest unfold. Let the laws of nature take care of the rest.

The third of the refuges is the Sangha, which means the community. A very classical meaning of that word is the community of monks and nuns who, in the Buddhist tradition, have preserved the teaching of the Buddha through all of these centuries so that what we get to practice here now in Barre, Massachusetts, bears a direct resemblance to what the Buddha actually taught. It contains the essential teaching of his discovery of a path. And so it's a way of paying respect to that sense of tradition.

Sangha also means those beings who have made a commitment to discovery, to understanding, to finding a different quality altogether of happiness in their lives than the ordinary, conventional, and breakable happiness that we normally depend on—those beings who have taken a risk, who've had the courage to try to see more deeply, and who have discovered the truth.

And so we take refuge in the Sangha because again it means something about ourselves and what we're capable of. I know that I've always found that very inspiring when I take refuge in the Sangha, in this sense of Sangha. I feel almost like I'm joining into a stream of beings, of men and women who since the beginning of time have been daring enough to want to find a greater degree of happiness and have put forth the effort and have made that kind of discovery. So I feel encouraged and inspired by their example because I feel like I've become a part of that in my own efforts.

And Sangha also has a meaning of community very much in the sense of we who have gathered here together have created a community, we've created a world together. And we support one another. It's like an act of solidarity. Sometimes it's easier to do together. This kind of practice, even though we are very much practicing solitude and aloneness, it's in the midst of a great amount of group support.

So these are the three refuges that mark the formal beginning of the retreat. It's aligning ourselves with this vision and expanding our sense of what is possible.

And then we take what are known as the five precepts, which are the guidelines that lay the foundation for the community so that it can be a community based on kindness and self-respect, respect for others, real care, and simplicity. We undertake these precepts for the time that we are here together to define the fabric of our togetherness, the nature of being here in a way that is based on compassion.

The first of the precepts is the precept we undertake not to kill any living being, which includes small beings like bugs and insects, to see if we can use this time as a time where we are not creating that kind of sense of self and other, but are rather developing a reverence for all of life.

We undertake a precept to refrain from stealing, which means not to take that which has not been offered, that which has not been given. In a deeper meaning, it means having a certain spirit of contentment or ease with what we are offered.

We undertake a precept to refrain from sexual activity, which in normal life, outside of retreat life, is to refrain from sexual misconduct—meaning not to use our sexual energy in a way that creates harm or suffering for ourselves or for others. Here that's extended to mean no sexual activity but rather to use all of our energy in this kind of exploration.

We undertake a precept to refrain from lying, which here again is extended to a precept of maintaining silence. There are times when you'll be meeting in groups with us or individually with us where we are speaking, or there might be times when you need to speak to the staff for some reason. But in terms of conversation amongst yourselves, and that includes excessive notes and things like that, we really ask you to try to use this time to make a friend of silence.

I was saying at the beginning of the last retreat, because I had a friend sit that retreat—the metta retreat that we just finished today—and she had never done anything remotely like this before. This was very strange for her. She came the night before because she came from California and that was how her flights went, so I saw her the night before the retreat started. Every time the word silence came up, her eyes got really, really big. It was clear that it was very alarming, the thought. It also became clear that people in her life, like people at work, were astonished at the thought that she wouldn't speak for a week and somewhat contemptuous of the possibility.

I just saw her today when the retreat ended, and she said how much she was going to miss the silence, how much she was going to miss the quiet. The very thing she was most apprehensive about turned out, as is so common, to be just about the most beautiful part of the retreat.

In so many ways it's such a relief not to be so concerned with presenting ourselves to other people, making a certain kind of impression, being somebody in the eyes of others, but really to let go of that, to come back to our own experience, to turn our attention back to ourselves in a way that honors our own experience, that learns to trust it—not in reference to what someone else thinks of it. It's a beautiful thing to really come back to ourselves and to make a friend of silence.

And then we take the last of the precepts: to refrain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind or cause heedlessness. That means no recreational drugs, no alcohol, but using the power of the mind in its natural state to be able to make this kind of exploration, this kind of journey.

So it's a stepping away from the force of habit, coming into a community that is based on care. Both the refuges and the precepts are about becoming more aware and more compassionate, understanding our minds, our intentions, our limitations in a clearer and kinder light, all of the time.

It's so unusual to be able to come into this kind of situation. It's really pretty amazing when you think about it. Many of you know that this Valentine's Day will mark our 25th anniversary of when we first moved into this building. I got up here tonight and I thought, how many people have come through here in 25 years? And how many people have served here on staff? What an amazing thing that so many people will have wanted to join in this incredible adventure. And so here we are.

I want to read this quotation from the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu. He told this story:

"There was a person so displeased by the sight of their own shadow and so displeased with their own footsteps that they determined to get rid of both. The method they hit upon was to run away from them. So they got up and ran. But every time they put their foot down, there was another step, while the shadow kept up with them without the slightest difficulty. They attributed their failure to the fact that they were not running fast enough, so they ran faster and faster without stopping, till they finally dropped dead. They failed to realize that if they merely stepped into the shade, the shadow would vanish. If they sat down and stayed still, there would be no more footsteps."

So we come together here in that kind of courageous choice to be still rather than running away. We have the opportunity to establish a relationship with what is rather than living with some kind of distortion.

It's really an incredible thing. It's also a process that we undertake hopefully with a good sense of humor and a fair ease of heart—not to be heavy-hearted about it, but very much in that sense of discovery, of seeing what will unfold without a lot of expectations, without a lot of impatience.

I'm going to repeat the refuges and precepts in English, and you can repeat them silently to yourself. The refuges are traditionally done three times, and the precepts once. You can repeat them to yourself in a way that is meaningful for you, recognizing the spirit with which we undertake these.

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dharma.
I take refuge in the Sangha.

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dharma.
I take refuge in the Sangha.

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dharma.
I take refuge in the Sangha.

I undertake the precept to refrain from killing any living being.
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which has not been offered.
I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual activity.
I undertake the precept to refrain from lying.
I undertake the precept to refrain from taking intoxicants.

We'll meditate together now for just a little while. You can sit comfortably with your back erect without being strained or overarched. You can close your eyes, unless you're accustomed to meditating with your eyes open, or unless you're very sleepy—in which case it's a good idea to open your eyes.

You can begin just by listening to sound. You can listen to the sound of my voice, other sounds in the room, internal sounds. This helps create a sense of the relaxed, natural aspect of mindfulness, of awareness. You don't have to try to seize control of the sound, trying to make it last longer or cut it off or judge it. Just meet it in the moment with your awareness in a very relaxed and natural way.

Feel your body sitting with that same relaxed and natural awareness, whatever sensations you experience. And feel your breath, wherever you experience it most distinctly—the in and out movement of air at the nostrils, or the rising and falling movement of the chest or the abdomen. Let your attention rest in the sensations that you experience without trying to control them or change them. One breath at a time. That same relaxed and open awareness. Letting the breath be however it is. Letting it change.

If you find that your attention has wandered, don't worry about it. As soon as you realize you've gone to the past, you've gone to the future, you've gone to judgment, you've gone to wherever—see if in that moment of recognition you can gently let go, shepherd your attention back, come back in touch with the feeling of the breath. If you have to do that again and again and again, that's fine. Wherever the attention wanders to or however long it's been, you can always let go and begin again.

It's really like the essence of the practice. In that moment, with compassion for yourself, with forgiveness, without judgment, without rancor, see if you can let go and shepherd your attention back to feel the breath.

If by any chance you're not sleeping, this hall is always open for your practice. If you are tired, please take some rest.

The wake-up bell tomorrow morning is at 6:15, with breakfast at 6:45. We'll meet here together at 8:30 in the morning again, and I'll go much more deeply into the instructions.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 332

Acceptance

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines our deep-seated confusion about happiness and liberation. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that liberation comes through non-clinging, she reveals how our unconscious worship of comfort and pleasantness keeps us trapped on a hamster wheel of suffering. Wilson explores how we misinterpret pleasant feelings as "right" and unpleasant feelings as "wrong," bringing this same confused mind into our meditation practice where we chase after blissful states while avoiding difficulty.*
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> *Wilson illuminates the role of vedanā (feeling tone) in perpetuating suffering, explaining how our reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences strengthen the sense of separate self. She offers the radical alternative: meeting each moment with full-hearted presence rather than manipulation or avoidance. Through personal stories—including a vivid account of transforming her relationship to a pounding headache through direct mindful attention—she demonstrates how bare experience differs from interpretation, and how true acceptance means intimate connection rather than distant tolerance.*
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> *Quoting Joko Beck and Tibetan texts, Wilson emphasizes that meditation practice is meant to disturb our self-centered view of life, not simply to make us feel good. The talk concludes with the story of Kishan Singh, who mapped Tibet through 5.5 million patient footsteps, as a metaphor for practice: one step at a time, with infinite patience that arises from wisdom and compassion rather than resignation.*

Since it's really the first full day of suffering, I'd like to talk about acceptance.

We've said a few times, different ones of us in different circumstances, that we are really engaged here in a practice of liberation, whatever form or particular activity might take in a moment.

I'd like to ask you just for a moment to reflect right now on what liberation—that word, or freedom, or whatever word you use—just for a moment, please reflect on what that actually means to you. Either what your deepest motivation is, and also what concepts, what connections come up in your mind around this word of liberation.

I ask you to do that for two reasons. One, of course, as we get in touch with our deepest motivation, this is a wellspring of commitment, a wellspring of energy that we need to touch in with over and over again throughout this retreat, throughout our life, to keep us practicing, to keep us on the path. Because things do get difficult, and we need to really honor our deepest motivation.

But I also ask for another reason: to see in yourself, and to continue to explore over the time here, what concepts come up, what ideas do we hold of what liberation might feel like or look like, what that experience is or will be. It really comes down to what our expectation or idea is that we're holding, perhaps not so consciously, of happiness, of peace.

I think our ideas of liberation, happiness, and peace bear continual examination, because I've found that mostly our unexamined ideas tend to spring from not looking clearly and tend to get in our way.

I'm sure many of you have heard this famous teaching about what the Buddha saw when he was first awakened, how he could look with his all-seeing mind through the world. What aroused his compassion for beings like us was seeing that while everyone's deepest desire is to be truly happy, in our confusion—because we haven't changed much since he was around, it doesn't sound like anyway—in our confusion, in trying to be happy, we keep doing just the things that continue us in this cycle of suffering. And we bring the same confusion as to what happiness is or liberation is into our practice. Of course, it's the same mind.

I'll tell you a little story about this that to me really illustrates how we bring more suffering on ourselves by trying to be happy when we don't really pay attention.

Two friends of mine who live around here told me this. They live in a house, and in this area, as in most country areas, in the winter or summer, mice can easily get into houses. They get into the cupboards, they eat the flour and so forth. So my friends had a mouse, and being good caring beings, they got one of these have-a-heart traps that catches the mouse without hurting it, because they didn't want to hurt it.

So my friend, the woman, was telling me this story. They got up one morning, of course very rushed to go to work, and heard that there was a mouse in the trap but said, "Well, okay, it'll be okay until the evening, and then we'll take care of it," because they were rushed.

She came home in the evening, very tired, and could hear from the other room the mouse just going bonkers, going nuts in this trap—which has a lot of room, but I guess it was just sort of bouncing off the walls and sounding really frantic. Somehow the sound disturbed her so much that she didn't want to deal with it. So she thought, "Well, my husband will take care of it when he comes home," and went to bed.

He came home very late, wasn't of course thinking about the mouse, didn't hear anything, went to bed. And in the morning when they got up, the mouse had died. She felt awful, just awful—like a hundred times worse than she would have felt had she just gone and dealt with the mouse when it was kind of upset.

That's what we do. Without really paying attention, on some level, for most of us, our concept of happiness is linked to pleasant feeling. And our idea of suffering, unhappiness, things being wrong, is connected to unpleasant feeling. This is so basic, but it is so easy for us to bring this interpretation of experience into our practice, so that our commitment to liberation—which is deep, which is genuine, which is why we're here doing this peculiar thing together for three months—it becomes so limited. It becomes so conditional on having the correct circumstances, whether they're the correct external circumstances.

How many of you have already found yourself in deep manipulation, trying to organize your sitting cushion or your room or your food or something about being here so that everything is going to be just right so you can have a good retreat?

How many of you, when you think about a good retreat, does that include a lot of physical pain? Does that include your mind wandering all over? "Yeah, I really hope my mind wanders like crazy this next sitting. I hope my knees hurt like hell." Probably not.

Mostly when we think of a good retreat, we think of—we each have our own story—but some transcendent state of samādhi, some deep state of bliss, no more thoughts from tomorrow noontime until November 15th. Or if we suffer, then we really suffer in a way that is clearly purifying, getting to the bottom of our deepest wellspring of grief. How many of you are thinking, "Okay, I'll battle with sleepiness for a month, and that'll really be an enlightening experience"? Probably not.

This is from Joko Beck. I really like the way she puts this:

"What do we actually honor and pay attention to moment by moment? We might call it the god of comfort and pleasantness and security. Until we honestly see that this is what our lives are about, we will be unable to discover who we really are."

And then she gives a whole list of examples about how we do this in our lives:

"We have many ways to cope with life, many ways we worship comfort and pleasantness. All are based on the same thing: the fear of encountering any kind of unpleasantness. If we must have absolute order and control, it's because we're trying to avoid any unpleasantness. If we have to have things our way and get angry if they're not, then we think we can survive and shut out our anxiety about death. If we pursue life madly, going after any pleasant sensation, any excitement, any entertainment, perhaps we won't have to feel any pain. If we can bliss out, if we can be a mindless Buddha, we don't have to assume any responsibility for the world's unpleasantness. We can just be happy. All of these are versions of the God we actually worship: the God of no discomfort and no unpleasantness."

As we pursue it, we lose touch with what really is, and the very unpleasantness that we sought to avoid can overwhelm us.

I find it fascinating to keep exploring in my practice how, in more and more subtle ways, I find my mind inclining in the same direction. Oh, a little more pleasantness. Unpleasant—I must be doing it wrong. Let's change things around and get back to that pleasant state.

This chase after pleasantness in our life here in retreat brings up an image for me. You know when you have a pet hamster, those wheels in the cage where it just runs and runs and runs endlessly? It's like that. We get on this wheel of running after pleasantness or away from unpleasantness, and the faster we go, the faster the wheel spins, and it just seems more and more oppressive. Until we really stop and look, we don't see that all we have to do is stop. Just stop running. Get off the wheel. And that whole sense of oppressiveness vanishes.

So just to pay attention: do we bring that same mind, the same expectations—subtle expectations of a world heading towards more and more pleasant experience, less and less unpleasant experience—until we finally hit the pinnacle where pleasantness never stops and unpleasantness never raises its head in any of our sixth sense experiences? Which sounds ridiculous. But when I really look, I find that somewhere back there, there's this little unspoken belief that that's really what's going to happen. That's what liberation is.

Well, we can forget it. If we could forget it, it would save us a lot of trouble. The real happiness, the real peace is far more radical and so simple, so immediate, so continuously accessible to us that we just totally overlook it and jump back on that wheel with gay abandon, running after some pleasant experience rather than stopping and looking.

The potential for real peace—happiness that is not dependent on internal or external experience—is our natural state. It is our inherent potential to rest in this peace, in this ease with whatever is arising.

The real secret—I'll tell you this now and then maybe it'll last for the whole retreat—the secret of this whole practice is it doesn't make any difference what's happening in your experience. It makes absolutely no difference. When you come in and tell us in interviews this is going on and that's going on, and we say good, or try this or try that, we're all playing a little game in a way. We keep getting caught in thinking that it really matters what's happening in your experience. Actually, the only thing that contributes to our recognizing peace or our spinning on that wheel is how we're relating to our experience, not what the experience is.

When we really know this—and we might know it just for an instant and then forget it again; that's mostly what we do—but when we really are touching that deep knowing that it doesn't matter what's happening now, we stop all the fighting, the manipulating, the trying to hold on, the interpreting, the reactivity of mind. We let go and just totally accept this moment as it is, with wakefulness, with open-hearted connection. In that moment of resting at ease, of full presence, there is no problem. There is no further something to look for to make ourselves happy. It's possible to just stop running and open to peace and happiness.

The Buddha said that the supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata—which means himself—which is namely liberation through non-clinging. Liberation through non-clinging. Our natural state: the mind, the heart that is fully connected with whatever is arising without clinging or pushing away or reacting. Whether your knee hurts, whether you're sleepy, whether you have a headache, whether you're deeply connected to the breath, whether there's a lot of rapture, whether you're lost in discursive thought—none of these are what freedom is about. Rather, it is the liberation of the heart and mind through non-clinging. And this is accessible in any moment, no matter what our experience is. That's really the way we practice.

So in that case, it really doesn't matter what's arising. No matter what it is, we have the opportunity to meet this moment fully with a heart and mind of non-clinging. And in that is the possibility to recognize, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, our capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love. In other words, our Buddha nature is always here. Our only problem is that for some reason we don't know how to recognize this.

It's to me the great mystery of our life, of why we practice—that this, whatever you want to call Buddha nature, just the capacity to recognize peace, is always here, always accessible. And we touch it from moment to moment. In the moments we touch it, it's so obvious, so simple. So how come the next moment it's completely gone?

I remember I was sitting this winter for a few weeks—I wish it was a few months—and I had one moment like that, just sitting and looking out my window at the snow, the endless snow.

It just snowed, it seemed like, every day for weeks. And a little bird landed on a branch of the tree, which is really all I could see out of this window. And in that moment, my heart and mind was just very awake and connected—not lost in all my ruminations about how much I hate the cold and the snow and when would it end, or how gray it was, or anything. Just present.

And in that moment of seeing the bird, there was such a sense of joy, of peace, of simplicity. And it was so obvious that nothing special was happening. I wasn't in some deep jhanic state of absorption. I was just very clear and present and awake. How simple, how accessible that is. It doesn't take some fantastic experience. This is our potential to rest at ease in whatever's arising.

The great paradox and mystery to me is the next moment. The next moment some stupid thought comes up in the mind and there's immediate grasping. "Wow, I wonder what's for tea." I know what's for tea—rice cakes, crackers, and peanut butter. That's been tea every tea time for the last ten years. It probably didn't change. But that thought comes up. What's for tea? Yeah, what's for tea? And grasping—gone, gone. And it could be, you know, another lifetime before that moment of peace and simplicity returns. That's what's so amazing. Not that it's so accessible, yet we go to such lengths to keep ourselves spinning on that hamster wheel.

This is from a Tibetan text: "Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest, like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that this Buddha nature is never impaired or improved on in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very beginning. How amazing that it is liberated by simply resting at ease in whatever happens."

That's my favorite line. How amazing that it is liberated by simply resting at ease in whatever happens. How rare it is that we simply rest at ease in whatever happens—and how immediate, how close that possibility is.

In fact, this liberation of resting at ease in whatever happens requires such an immediacy of connection to experience. There's no room for the slightest moving away out of craving or aversion. Immediate deep intimacy with whatever's arising—that's all that's required. Like when I was so present noticing that bird. Just seeing. And the immediacy with all of life that can bring.

So please notice. Bring it into your conscious awareness whenever you experience this, because we all do, and I really believe we experience this many, many times in a day—this immediacy, this simplicity of wakeful resting at ease in whatever's arising. But when we don't notice the power of that, it's because we're looking for something a little more spectacular than just seeing a bird land on a branch, or just smelling the scent of fall when you walk outside, or tasting the warmth of tea, or just feeling the pressure on your foot when you take a step, or the sound of a bell, or the chill of coldness, or whatever it happens to be.

And often when we even do recognize that purity, that sense of completeness in a moment like that—we think, "Nothing more could possibly be needed. There's nothing to push away." Sometimes we'll recognize that's happening, but even so, we'll misinterpret. We're so conditioned to look outside for completion or to attribute that sense of completion to something outside. So, for example, we'll say, "Ah, the crispness of fall—it's such a perfect day." Because of this crispness, I'm experiencing this sense of presence and deep happiness. Or because I'm at the meditation center. Or because this is a very special moment with Oolong Kuan Yin tea that I brought with me, and when it runs out I'm really going to have a hard time the rest of the retreat—or whatever our story is.

Notice. Just notice that exquisiteness of presence, and then something else arises, and that's fine. But just begin to tune in when we have these moments.

And the question that keeps arising, of course, is: why? Why do we keep getting lost?

Why do we not recognize what is happening? Why, even knowing this—and I really know this on some level—why then, a minute later, am I so engrossed in the pleasantness of a thought about what's for tea? If we pull back and look, the mind says, give me a break. I don't even care about this. How do we get so seduced?

One way—the way I began with tonight—is by not seeing clearly the actuality of these experiences of pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality. As most of you know, the way the Buddha describes our experience is that moment to moment there are

simply six sense experiences arising over and over: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, sensing with the body, and then mental experience—thoughts, emotions, images—just happening rapidly over and over. That's it. There's nothing else.

First, if we could just see that, things lose a lot of their glamour. It's much easier to rest at ease when it's simply a sight, instead of "Wow, what incredible thing might we have for tea?" Oh, it's just a thought.

Secondly, whenever we experience any of these sense experiences, it comes together with what we call a feeling tone—the Pali word *vedana*—of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Very basic, just what it is. But what's so intriguing is that when we don't notice this pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality—which very often we don't, because it's quick, subtle—we interpret pleasant as being good, right, the way things should be. Why? Because of course it's pleasant; we like it. The mind immediately moves into clinging, holding on. Unpleasant, of course, the mind immediately moves into pushing away, aversion, fear. And the interpretation we put on unpleasant experience is generally that this is a mistake—something to be fixed, something to be gotten rid of, or that I'm doing something wrong in meditation if this is arising.

And neutral? Well, basically we don't even notice that neutral is happening. And if we do notice, we get bored. In fact, I've often noticed in meditation that when there's a period of calm—which actually happens to be one of the seven factors of enlightenment—very often the mind will actually whip up a huge suffering scenario rather than just sit and be calm. Just watch and see: getting completely into something that never even happened but that might happen if certain conditions came together, and if it did happen, I would be really angry. We spend an hour on that rather than be with the calmness of the breath.

Just notice in your meditation today, in your meditation tomorrow: do these interpretations of pleasant as right, unpleasant as wrong, neutral as basically not existing or boring—do these become how we evaluate our practice, how we evaluate our life? We get so involved in these evaluations, these reactions. This is how we're running on the wheel, instead of just noticing the bare sense experience itself.

It's hard to see through this habit. One reason is that it's so deeply conditioned we often don't even notice it. This is what I meant by seeing for myself more and more subtly how I get caught in trying to manipulate my practice to get back to some quietly pleasant state I was experiencing. And the more you know about practice, the more you can find a really good interpretation of why that's the appropriate thing to do.

I know that when mindfulness is strong, the sense of choiceless awareness is really open and flowing—there's no constriction, everything's expanded—which of course feels a lot better than when there's contraction, when we're caught in some kind of fear. So we try to subtly push back to that open space of choiceless awareness. And besides, that fits the instructions better, so that must be what's supposed to happen. This constriction, this tightness, is clearly wrong, and I've got to get back to the other. In some form or other. Just keep watching how we do that. It's really tricky.

The pleasant-unpleasant-neutral happens quickly. We're so used to believing the interpretation that we often don't notice we're even doing it. And another thing that makes it hard to see through is that this habit of running after pleasant and fearing unpleasant very strongly conditions and strengthens the sense of self. Because what does it all refer back to? Who is experiencing pleasant or unpleasant? Who cares? Only one person cares. Me. And when we look at our life or our practice, when I look at myself trying to manipulate in some subtle way, this sense of Carol who wants to have good practice, or Carol needs to be liberated, or whatever it is—

Carol is really a strong, separate, solid concept at that moment. We take it all so personally when we're running on this hamster wheel. My sitting, my unpleasant experience, my bliss, my enlightenment—whatever it is.

And because the sense of separate self is really our baseline, solid delusion, it's the hardest one to see through. So you put these two together—our interpretation of pleasant and unpleasant, not seeing that clearly, and the fact that this strengthens our sense of separate self—well, you see how they feed each other. Just pay attention and watch that.

It's hard from this state to touch that place where we can really trust that the way to open our hearts, to rest at ease, to touch peace, is not to get rid of what we don't like in ourselves or in our surroundings. It's much more radical, because the path of freedom is to meet whatever's arising full-heartedly. Full openness of attention, total connection, just as it is. To be with things just as they are is the path of freedom. And that's what we practice moment to moment.

This is from the Buddha. He says, "When someone sees objects with the eye and is attracted, is drawn into the things that are pleasing and is repelled, pushed away from the things that are not pleasing, that are unpleasant, that person dwells without mindfulness and her mind, her heart, is restricted. She does not experience the emancipation of heart through wisdom. But in the case when a person sees objects with the eye and is not attracted, is not pulled to things that are pleasing and is not repelled by

things that are not pleasing, she dwells with mindfulness present and her mind is unbounded. Thus she experiences the emancipation of heart through wisdom." And he goes, of course, through all the six senses.

It sounds so simple, but it also doesn't sound that exciting. And if you think about it, there's not much sense of "me" in it. It's not so juicy. Just seeing a sight, and the mind and heart are not attracted to the pleasant and not repelled by the unpleasant. And thus we dwell with mind unbounded, and the heart experiences emancipation through wisdom. Simply through being able to see through this attraction to the pleasant and fear of the unpleasant.

It's an extremely powerful place to investigate. There's a reason why the Buddha, when he described the four foundations of mindfulness, only picking four, made this aspect of vedana, of feeling tone, the second one. Because by exploring our confusion around happiness, we can really experience the mind and heart that is unbounded—unbounded, connected, a life that is at peace, that's joyful.

Joko Beck puts it in a lovely way: it's the movement from a self-centered view of life to a life-centered view of life. When we're caught in going for comfort, everything refers back to me, me, me. I'm the center of everything. When we can let go of that, when the mind is unbounded, our view of life becomes life-centered, which includes us. We're part of life. But our decisions, our choices, come from what is most nurturing to life, to all beings, to whatever surrounds us as a whole—not just what can bring me pleasantness. It's quite radical.

When we describe this, perhaps you can see why meditation practice, why a three-month retreat, can at times be so difficult. Because these habits—just the habit of preferring the pleasant, our fear of what's difficult—this habit is so strong. And the way we set up our meditation is specifically to keep us from being able to indulge this habit on a moment-to-moment basis.

Just the fact that we all sit in a room together and we tell you that you can't leave until the bell rings. And there's eighty other people who'll notice if you do. I mean, we don't say that, but you all know it. How many of us would get up and leave when we get sleepy, or our foot falls asleep, or we just get really restless? But no, because of the setup, we sit here. Just that is a really strong way that we begin to break this habit of avoiding the unpleasant and to see that we can come to a deep peace even though my foot hurts or I'm restless.

So meditation can be quite difficult because we are confronting these habits of mind over and over and over—not only the habit itself, but the interpretation that something's wrong because we're not feeling blissful and pleasant all the time.

This is Joko Beck again. She's talking about teaching in her center. She says, "The function of teaching in a center like this is to help us see the alternative and to disturb us in our selfishness. So long as we are caught in the self-centered viewpoint of life, governed by wanting to feel good or blissful or enlightened, we need to be disturbed. We need to be upset. A good center and a good teacher assist that." You thought we were here to make you feel good.

"Enlightenment is, after all, simply an absence of any concern for self. Don't come to this center to feel better. That's not what this place is about. What I want," Joko Beck says, "are lives that get bigger so that they can take care of more things and more people."

I love it.

She's so direct. It's like, let's not fool around.

So we're not here specifically to make you feel miserable either. That's not what I'm trying to say. We need to open to the difficult as well as opening and being fully present for the beautiful, for the pleasant, without clinging or pushing away either one.

But the practice is about shaking us up—shaking us up in our self-centered view of the world, shaking up any remnant you may have. Maybe you're all beyond this, but if you find anywhere in a corner of your mind any remnant of going after pleasant as the way to freedom, we're here to shake you up. The practice itself, that's what it does. It shakes us up. And the shake-up is the gift of the Dharma. It's the gift of our practice.

If we could manipulate life in a way that we could make it all comfortable and secure and happy, well, none of us would be here, that's for sure. Clearly it doesn't work. What we can also do is begin to appreciate the shaking up process.

And my friend with the mouse—the last little part of that story is that as she was telling me how badly she felt when she realized that mouse had died because she didn't want to deal with some unpleasantness, the additional anguish of that actually shook her up to the point where she became really connected again. Whereas before it was just, "This is unpleasant, push it away"—not even another living being. She really thought, "God, this mouse was a living being. It was hungry, it was thirsty, it was scared."

And although she was opening much more deeply to her own pain, again she was connected through herself and her pain and that mouse to all of life. She was, in telling me this story, very deeply awake again and connected and flowing.

Sometimes our shaking up, at least here mostly, will only affect ourselves. Sometimes in life, when we shut ourselves off out of fear of unpleasantness, it does affect other beings as well.

So our practice here is giving us the tools to meet this challenge, because it's not easy. We will be shaken up over and over, or we will be seduced by the beautiful and the lovely over and over—but then we'll get shaken up when it changes, because it will.

And the tools that our practice gives us, as we've mentioned and as we will continue to mention, are the tools of mindfulness and concentration. Not to change experience, because no amount of meditation will take away the potential for unpleasant experience. No amount of meditation saves us from loss or sickness or death. There's no way we can get out of that.

But mindfulness and concentration and our practice—our continual meeting of experience as it is—can completely transform our attitude to these experiences, and that changes everything.

So mindfulness, as Michelle mentioned very briefly last night, and of course we'll talk about this over and over, is a quality of very awake, connected attention meeting whatever's arising in a moment—a sound, a sight, a physical feeling, a thought—very directly, without reactivity, without judgment, without interpretation.

And this is the trick that I want to talk about at the moment: to be able to be with the bare experience, what we call bare attention, without confusing the bare experience with our interpretation of experience. And in this the concentration is very helpful because it helps us have a steady enough mind to go right to the sense experience.

So for example, if I ring the bell, the bare experience is just hearing. The interpretation is even "bell," what you think about the bell, how loud it is, whether you like it or not, comparing it with other bells, does it mean the end of a sitting, how many times you ring the bell, thinking about when you're going to have to ring the bell when you're a practice leader, and on and on and on. The bare experience, mindfulness, is just hearing.

And we need to practice this over and over because so easily we confuse the bare experience with our interpretation. And it's in the interpretation that we get lost in reactivity and jump back on that wheel.

An example: in a retreat this summer here, a woman told us after it was over that she'd been spending days here in the hall—she was sitting in the front row—and she said there was a sound in the hall that was completely ruining her concentration. She didn't say what this sound was, but it was very continuous. I don't know if it was another yogi or maybe this clock that you can hear ticking if you're close when it gets very quiet.

But she said this sound was ruining her concentration, really ruining her sitting, and she was getting really aggravated, really angry. Apparently she went through this for some days, until it occurred to her—or she heard one of us say, I mean we say it every day about ten times, but we hear it when we're ready—something about, "Oh, why don't you just be with the bare experience of hearing?"

And so she did that. And she said, "You know what? It was just hearing. It was just a sound. It wasn't disturbing my concentration. My mind, my reactivity—that was disturbing my concentration. The sound is just what it is." Hearing—maybe pleasant, maybe unpleasant, maybe neutral.

This is really radical, because when we can meet experience with this connected quality, this is mindfulness—connected and open, free of interpretation. It opens us to a whole different relationship with the moment, and thus the potential for resting at ease in whatever it is that's arising. We need to practice it because we're so easily confused.

We often don't even know what's an interpretation. This is one of the reasons we cultivate some samādhi, some steadiness of mind during the retreat, especially in the first days. Because without that steadiness, when there's a sound that's really bothering you, it's hard to even realize that all the thoughts and anger and "it's ruining my concentration"—that those are thoughts. It just seems like a whole gestalt. And it's hard to have the steadiness to get through to the bare experience.

So the concentration really gives us this steadiness. The mindfulness gives us the power of seeing things as they are, to then rest at ease. We can do this with sounds. We can do it with physical sensations. We can do it with emotions. And sometimes it seems counterintuitive, especially when we're in a situation of suffering, because the mindfulness says go right into the experience that seems to be the cause of the suffering rather than move away from it. That going into the experience is where peace is found. So we need to practice, so that we believe it because we know it from our own experience—not because I'm telling you, but because you really experienced it yourself.

An example: sometimes when I sleep a little bit wrong, or my pillow's a little too high, my vertebrae get thrown off, and I can have a really pounding headache that lasts a few days. Once, during a retreat I was doing this summer, I'd had that headache all day. On one level, I was sort of working at acceptance—what I call the appearance of acceptance: "Okay, here's the headache. I can live with the headache. It's okay." But that's appearances, because I'm saying the right things, trying to pretend it isn't bothering me. My attention is really not going anywhere close to the headache. It's as far out of my body as I could possibly get. And the way I was feeling was, not surprisingly, very disconnected, very cut off, not at all at ease with what was happening. Some aversion, some negativity.

Finally—and this is what's so amazing, why does it take us so long?—finally it dawned on me: why don't you try bringing attention fully into the actual physical experience itself, what I'm calling "headache"? Just move right into it. Which I did. And it's immediate, just like that. The headache—no, the headache didn't go away. The headache stayed there. It was still unpleasant. It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm so glad, I can't tell if it's pleasant or unpleasant." It was unpleasant. But the whole sense of separation, this whole sense of constriction and suffering, vanished. And in fact, you can experience that sense of the heart and the mind as unbounded. Because the boundedness is the constriction of fear, of separation, of trying to control. As soon as I was fully present with the unpleasant physical sensation, the mind and heart were unbounded. There was again a sense of appreciation. I was in a very beautiful place. The weather was beautiful. The people in the retreat were wonderful. And a great sense of happiness began to come in. I still had a headache. And I didn't like it any better. But that sense of separation and boundedness was gone.

This is the power of mindfulness. The power of acceptance, of clear seeing, of being fully present. Mindfulness is participatory. Often we get the sense that to be mindful, because it's non-reactive, it's sort of objective—that it means we're looking at something from a distance, as it were. Looking at the headache from over here—that was what I was calling a kind of false acceptance. It seemed like acceptance because I wasn't in a big reaction, but it wasn't true acceptance because there was no connecting with the experience. True mindfulness, true acceptance is a deep connection. Seeing something, being with something just as it is, right in the middle of it. And the mind, the heart, is non-reactive. The mind and the heart are unbounded. This is really the function of our practice.

This mindfulness, samadhi, and all of our practice gives us the tools to recognize this potential over and over. The only other attitude that we need is infinite patience. Infinite patience. One step at a time, over and over and over.

Because as much as we will experience the potential of liberation, when we can rest at ease, just as often again we'll lose that sense and get caught up in some reaction, some interpretation, some wanting things to be different, some trying to move away from our knee pain, some thinking, "I've been doing this long enough already—three months, three weeks, twenty-five years, isn't it enough? Don't we ever see it and just rest there?"

So we come back to this infinite patience, one step at a time.

Here is an example of infinite patience. In the middle of the 1800s, the English, who at that time were in India, felt they needed, for security reasons, to have a map of Tibet. But they weren't allowed into Tibet. No Westerners were allowed into Tibet to map it. So they devised a plan where they hired some Indian civil servants that they called pundits. They paid these men something like twenty rupees a month. They trained them for months so that no matter how they walked—uphill, downhill, any direction—the length of their stride would always be exactly the same.

Then they sent these men into Tibet to measure and map the country by counting their footsteps. They had rosaries like the Tibetan monks used, but with one hundred beads instead of one hundred and eight because they had to be in disguise. They were risking their lives to do this for twenty rupees a month. They would count on this rosary—every little bead was one hundred steps, so one round of the rosary was 5.2 miles.

One man whose name I think we should know—his name was Kishan Singh—did this for four and a half years. He walked 5.5 million steps to map out the perimeter of East Tibet. So when we say one step at a time, just think of that. And since he didn't know where he was going—there was no map, there was no way to know when he reached some goal—it was just this step, this step, this step. That's our practice here.

And to know that patience is not a form of weakness or a form of subtle aversion, of denial, of "the best I can do is grit my teeth, take one step at a time, because basically I'm a failure as a yogi, so I'll just take this next breath." Patience actually is an aspect of metta, of loving-kindness, of open-hearted connectedness, and it arises from seeing things as they truly are—knowing that life is in constant flux, that as soon as something pleasant arises it will pass and something unpleasant will come, and as soon as something unpleasant is here it will last a while and go away and something pleasant will come. All of our attempts at manipulation and controlling and self-referenced activity arise from our confusion, from not seeing things as they really are.

This deep patience, open-hearted acceptance, is not weakness. It's the incredible strength of the heart of wisdom, the heart of compassion, that sees that life is made up of the incredibly beautiful and of suffering and horror that we can hardly imagine sometimes. Our challenge is not to deny the horror and hold on to the pleasant, or to be afraid of the pleasant and think we need to dive into horror, but to find that we can hold both in our heart, hold both in our experience.

With this clear seeing comes a strength of heart and mind that allows us to know—acceptance doesn't mean you never change anything, it doesn't mean being victims. But with the strength of heart, of clear seeing, we can see which things can be changed and change them out of compassion, not out of reactivity. We can see which things cannot be changed and meet that with the great-hearted courage of mindfulness, of clear seeing, of resting at ease in whatever happens, opening to all aspects. This is really what our practice is about.

And out of this, it's really not dismal. An incredible connectedness and joy and aliveness comes from this, which I know you all know or you wouldn't be here.

I want to close with a poem. It's strong, but I love it because to me it expresses how out of the depth of suffering, when we meet it with full-heartedness, the beauty and joy and mystery of life is present. This is from Anna Akhmatova, the Russian poet, and she wrote this in 1921, in the middle of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, when there was immense death, starvation, poverty, fear:

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold.
Death's great black wing scrapes the air.
Misery gnaws to the bone.
Why then do we not despair?

By day, from the surrounding woods,
cherries blow summer into town.
At night, the deep transparent skies
glitter with new galaxies.

And the miraculous comes so close
to the ruined dirty houses—
something not known to anyone at all,
but wild in our breast for centuries.

The miraculous comes so close to the ruined dirty houses.

Let's just sit for a moment.

This article is based on a dharma talk given by the teacher.

CHAPTER 333

Opening To It All

Carol Wilson · 1h56

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson addresses one of the great paradoxes of practice and life: that in opening, we open not only to great beauty but also to great suffering. Drawing from observations of baby birds in the harsh desert and her transformative visit to Bodh Gaya, she explores how we can hold both the exquisite and the painful aspects of experience.*
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> *Wilson examines the pure qualities of mind—non-greed (generosity), non-hatred (mettā, compassion, patience), and non-delusion (clarity, insight)—and why we often fail to recognize them when present. She addresses the tendency to discount positive experiences while identifying strongly with difficulties, and how this creates unnecessary suffering. The talk draws on psychological research about self-deception and selective perception to illuminate how deeply conditioned our minds are to avoid the unpleasant and grasp the pleasant.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes that mindfulness is non-discriminating awareness that can illuminate these habitual filters of greed, hatred, and delusion. When we see these patterns clearly, they lose their power over us. Wilson concludes with a reading from Alexander Solzhenitsyn about finding spiritual growth even in the Gulag, demonstrating that incredible suffering can open to equally incredible beauty. The talk includes James Baraz's reflections on Earth Day and how our inner practice connects to global healing.*

One of the great paradoxes to me in practice and just in living life on this earth is that in opening, we open not only to great beauty but also to great suffering. Somehow there's this incredibly sublime part of experience and a real unbearable part of experience, and we often experience both of them—often together, almost at the same time.

I thought of giving a whole talk that was just examples of this because as I considered it I could come up with one after the other, but I'll give just two.

Today, two different people in interviews told me about a little nest of baby birds. James and I went out and saw it in one of those really vicious looking cholla bushes. Buried deep down inside this forbidding plant is a tiny little nest with four tiny birds. Baby birds, so vulnerable and so tender—the miracle of birth, the real beauty of that—in the harshness, the forbidding climate of this desert. And knowing that the chances they'll survive are maybe fifty-fifty.

Another example, again from the desert: back to those baby bunnies. When they first came out, just barely alive, not really knowing—is this the life that's coming out of birth really going to be new life? Or are they barely alive because they're on the point of going back into death? It was such a unique space to be in, kind of witnessing this very tender borderline between birth and death and the beauty and the pain of that. Knowing that this is something that happens all the time, everywhere in life. It turned out to be death because the mother wasn't around for whatever reason, because the climate's too harsh, because the world is the way it is.

Nature has this incredible beauty and this incredible harshness—the sublimely beautiful and the exquisitely painful. Our life encompasses both. And what our practice is about is opening very deeply to both.

Because the suffering aspect, the difficult, painful aspect of life is so unbearable, and we have been so conditioned unconsciously to avoid this, to move away from this because it's so hard to open to—that's the reason it's the first noble truth that the Buddha felt necessary to proclaim: yes, life is unsatisfactory. For that reason, it can seem a great deal of emphasis in our practice is on seeing, accepting, really being fully present for that which is difficult, that which is painful.

There's no question but that everyone here has had ample opportunity to do that, even just today—probably even just in the extension of the schedule today. It might have brought up a lot more physical pain than you had before, maybe more emotional difficulty. Maybe things got so quiet that that was really scary. There's endless variations.

It is necessary for us in our practice as in our life to really get in contact with the painful when it's what is happening in the moment. It's necessary because freedom from the suffering—not freedom from painful experience, but freedom from suffering—comes about through our directly facing, through our seeing it and understanding it for what it is.

But at times, it seems in practice, as also in life, we can get so focused on seeing these difficulties, on working with opening to the difficulties, really becoming aware of the manifestations of greed, of aversion or anger, of confusion, delusion, identification in the mind. We start to see them and we can become so aware of them that it can be really depressing, almost overwhelming, discouraging. We can lose sight of what we're doing here, lose sight of our inspiration, just seeing this seemingly endless array of painful, difficult experience.

So what I want to talk about tonight is the importance, yes, of seeing the difficult experience, but the importance of balancing it with appreciation of the pleasant, of the beautiful, of the sublime when that's what happens to be present in the moment. To be able to open to appreciation as well as open to suffering, and to see ways that we can sometimes get lost in the suffering—that our relationship to it can distort our perception of what's actually going on, even in the practice, even with our full best intentions to be present for just what is.

I think it's important to remember, it's something I reflect on, remind myself of from time to time, that these qualities of greed, of hatred, of confusion, of delusion—they are not our intrinsic nature. It's not the true inseparable nature of our mind and heart to be filled with greed and hatred and delusion. It's not an inseparable part of our experience.

The pure nature of our mind is clear and radiant, and often we lose sight of that. It's like these difficulties, these discouragements of the heart, these distortions of seeing are like clouds that come and cover the sun of the purity of our mind and heart. We get so involved in seeing the clouds, we become identified with the clouds, and we think that's all there is. In our experience sometimes that's all we're aware of, that's all we see. And so it's important not to lose track of the pure shining nature of the sun.

Our practice is about opening to both the sublimely difficult and the sublimely beautiful, and everything in between.

I want to mention some aspects of this pure nature of mind, simply so that we can recognize them when they're present, which sounds simple, but it's something we often forget to do.

In Buddhist terminology, these aspects of mind are classified as non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. It sounds kind of negative, kind of passive, but really they're much more active, experiential qualities of mind, very positive.

Non-greed encompasses the qualities of generosity, of outflowing energy of the heart, qualities of sharing, of sacrifice, even of renunciation, of non-attachment.

Non-hatred, again, is the active qualities of mettā, of non-discriminating loving-kindness, the active qualities of compassion, of forgiveness, of patience, of acceptance. All of that's non-hatred. It doesn't just mean we stop hating and go numb.

And non-delusion is when confusion is not present in the mind—there's a real brightness, a real clarity of mind, a clarity of perception. This leads to insight, to real equanimity, to real evenness with our experience, to understanding.

Now, all of these different aspects—at various times, we experience all of them. They're not highly esoteric, unobtainable qualities of mind. They're accessible to all of us. And at various moments when confusion or hatred or greed isn't present in the mind, we can experience and do experience these qualities. It's really important to recognize them when they're present. That's all. Not trying to make them happen and not looking for something, but just recognizing when—oh, clarity is present right now. Patience is present right now. Really important.

Sometimes even talking about these possibilities of clarity, of metta, of compassion, these possibilities of existing in these states—even that can sound discouraging to people. Because they think, well, yeah, that sounds really nice to have a mind of boundless metta, but I know what my mind looks like, and it's filled with boundless greed and selfishness. Forget it. It's way out of my league. And it's so easy to get into comparing—well, I could never... Now that person who is moving so slowly and mindfully, I bet they really have a lot of clarity, and I can just hang it up right now.

It can get really discouraging. It's important to remember when we're seeing a lot of clinging or anger or whatever it is that we think we're seeing in our mind, and we can't imagine the mind ever changing, ever being in a different state—that the mind can't know. The thoughts at that moment can only know what's already been experienced. They can't know what hasn't been experienced. And so those kinds of thoughts are totally unreliable, and there's nothing to base anything on. The heart can trust that it is possible and that we do have access to these qualities of mind.

I wanted to share an experience that has helped me in working in this way, because for me too, hearing about the possibility of freedom, of enlightenment, of living with a heart and mind really free from delusion and confusion seemed just too far away. Sometimes it was inspiring, but often there was a real sense of, you know, that's just so far from where I am.

Last year, I went with some friends to Bodh Gaya, which is a small village in India where the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree on the night of his complete enlightenment. I hadn't been there for about eighteen years. There's a shrine there, a tall stupa inside a little park, and a descendant, supposedly, of the original Bodhi tree with a little fence around it. We went and sat under the tree. I'm not usually a person who is very moved by shrines, but somehow the place moved me to tears.

As I sat there, I felt the reality of the Buddha as a human being and of the understanding that he had come to. It moved out of the realm of myth for me, of some distant unachievable thing, to—oh, this is real. This is a real human being who sat under this tree and came to very deep understanding and freedom. And so it is a real path and a

real possibility, and I'm also a human being. It just demythologized it and made it seem possible. Rather than feeling discouraged, I felt a great deal of energy and inspiration—not to get somewhere, actually, but just to stay on the path and really put my energy into investigating, into practice. It was very energizing and inspiring.

Being at this temple also served as a metaphor for me in another way. The thought that often comes after thinking, well, okay, so the Buddha was a human being, he could do it, fine—he was an ascetic, he spent his life as a monk. And monks and nuns can go off and really come to understanding. But what about me in the middle of the marketplace, with a family and a job, and I'm so busy?

As I say, being in Bodh Gaya was a metaphor. This shrine in the middle of this little dirty, noisy Indian village is not some sublimely peaceful place. Again, it's the sublime and the ridiculous and the excruciatingly painful all at once. The power and inspiration of this place was beautiful. It touched me very deeply. It was also somewhat ridiculous. There were hordes of tourists coming, different nationalities, shouting on loudspeakers, coming up and staring at you, just chattering and touring around the stupa. There was a group of Tibetan monks—this wasn't ridiculous, it was just noisy—sitting on the side of the hill for three days, chanting and blowing their long pipes. Actually, that was quite inspiring, but really noisy. There was a crazy Tibetan woman who would run around just ranting and raving at anyone who was sitting there. And all the noise of the village, and all the people in the village who weren't the least bit interested except to try and earn some money off the visitors who were coming.

There were, again, the sublime and the painful and the ridiculous. As you walk in, some young men would run up with plastic bags full of little fish that they'd try and sell to you.

I found out later what was happening: there's a lotus pond in the back, and because the Tibetans have such reverence for life, these young Hindu men would go and catch the fish, then sell them to the Tibetans, who would buy them back and put them back into the lotus pond because they didn't want them to die. It's so sweet. And it's so human. We're like those fish—just going back and forth. That's their life.

This place has become a metaphor in my mind for all aspects of life. The practice, the journey toward understanding, is not necessarily about removing oneself or separating from the various aspects of life. Even the Buddha, after his enlightenment, spent forty-five years until his death extremely engaged, teaching anyone who wanted to be taught, very busy. Far from withdrawing, this metaphor enables me to come back and be in life more fully engaged.

Because one knows that it's impermanent, one comes back with more wisdom, more understanding, able to see the whole play of impermanence and recognize that there's nothing solid. But that's no reason to withdraw. In fact, one can engage even more fully. You're not so fooled as to take some aspect of the show as the thing that's going to make you really happy for the rest of your life. You just know that isn't true. But in this moment, this aspect is beautiful and worth your full and total effort and energy.

In that way, going to Bodh Gaya helped me not to feel that the sense of talking about the possibility of freedom, talking about these clear, clarifying qualities of mind—rather than having that be a far distant goal and something discouraging—is actually accessible in this moment. And that's all there is: this moment.

Something I've noticed in myself and in talking to people is another thing that sometimes happens in speaking of these powerful, uplifting qualities of mind. After practicing for some time, it's almost as if we sometimes discover we're more afraid to open to qualities of deep mettā or compassion, appreciation, a deep love of the Dharma. Sometimes it's as if we'll be experiencing that, and it's harder to fully open to and trust these experiences than it is to open to pain.

Just a few things I've noticed about why that could be. In myself, sometimes there's an almost instinctive distrust that the experience is real. "This couldn't really be compassion. It must be masquerading as compassion. I can't really trust it. I can't really trust that this is joy, that this is real rapture, love of the Dharma. I'm just kidding myself." And so there's a subtle pulling away.

Watch the tendency to discount the validity of clarity of mind when it's present, thinking it's some incredible esoteric state. "This couldn't be it." We always think it's going to be something more extreme than it actually is.

Another thing I experience in holding back from opening to these qualities—maybe even stronger—is that there can be such a deep poignancy to it. In really opening, there's that part of the mind that says, "Yeah, but I'm going to get attached, and it's going to go away, and then I'm really going to suffer. So I'll just hold back altogether." It's the poignancy of life. It's the poignancy of those little birds—incredibly beautiful. But should I never go see them because I know they're just going to die there in that cholla bush? What's the point? Forget it.

We do the same thing to ourselves. "I'll just stay with the knee pain. What's the point of acknowledging this joy? It's just going to go away and I'm back with the knee pain." So we hang out with the knee pain.

Just watch that. Can we learn to trust in the experience of the moment, in our ability to deal with that experience? Yes, grasping might come in, and it definitely will go away. And if grasping is there, you might suffer. But can we trust enough to open and experiment and explore? Allow yourself. Notice the holding back. Allow yourself to experience these uplifting qualities of the mind and heart. Consciously acknowledge their presence. If attachment starts to come in, if grasping comes in, okay—notice that.

The experience has now changed, as you knew it was going to, from rapture to attachment. That's fine. Be mindful of that. And if you don't notice the attachment, at some point you'll notice the quality of the experience has changed significantly. Okay, it's gone. Be with what's happening now.

But we don't have to be afraid of fully opening to these experiences. What we can find actually in the doing of this—in the fully opening and seeing it pass—is that I have actually learned to open and appreciate much more fully something *because* I know that it will pass. Because I know that it will pass, and if there isn't that clinging, that fear, then all the energy, all the attention is just there very fully with the experience, just as it is. Nothing extra, nothing else to want, nowhere else to go with it, and okay when it goes away. It allows the appreciation to be experienced in a much deeper way. It's very sweet.

Now I'm moving from talking about the sublime back to the painful. It's always shifting back and forth.

How is it that even when we've had experiences of these strong positive qualities of mind, or deep understandings of impermanence—knowing that we really do know how we want to live, that there is another way to live, that we can have real moments where we know we're not separated from each other or from the earth—or when we really understand the pain that comes from clinging and grasping, we really know that, not just intellectually... how come then we continue to be caught in confusion? We'll see clinging really clearly, get up, walk out, and get lost in a frenzy of wanting a certain thing for lunch. How can that happen?

And this can be very discouraging. We walk out, the clouds come back again, and we immediately think that's all there is. The sun is long forgotten.

Partly, we tend to think sometimes that because we've seen something a couple of times, we ought to be able to just drop it, and then we feel very defeated when it's not quite that easy. I want to talk a little bit about the power of our conditioning, because it's enormously strong. I think we need to understand this in order to respect it—not to feel discouraged or defeated, but rather just to understand the nature of what we're

working with. And not to feel that we're doing something wrong, or there's something wrong with us, because we keep falling back into old patterns even when we think we've understood them and are ready, more than ready, to move out of them.

The conditioning I'm talking about here is really the tendency to avoid, to deny what is difficult—in other words, aversion or hatred. The tendency to cling to, grasp after, get attached to what is pleasant—that's what we call greed. Or the tendency to space out, be bored when something neutral is happening, or to get identified—that's what we call delusion or confusion.

These tendencies are so deep that a great deal of the time they're not even conscious. We're not sitting here consciously thinking, "Oh, that's nice, maybe I'll get attached." It's very deep and unconscious. That's why the Buddha said that one of his main impulses to teach, when he first came out of his deep enlightenment—he looked around and at first said, "Ah, I'm not really so inclined to teach. These people are too far gone. It would be too troublesome for me." Various beings came and begged him to teach. But one of the things that really aroused compassion in his heart was that with his eyes of wisdom he could see all around the world, and he saw that everyone—not just many people, but everyone—wants to be happy in this world. And we're so confused that we're doing just the things that will bring us more unhappiness in our efforts to be happy. This is because of the power of the conditioning of these tendencies.

I read a book a couple of years ago called *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* by Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and also a practitioner and meditator. In it he reports some scientific experiments that I found fascinating because they show the depth of this unconscious conditioning in our minds.

The psychology of self-deception is about ways that our mind can block the conscious knowing of certain stimuli in our environment—not only the conscious knowing of the stimuli, but even the conscious perceiving of certain stimuli that might be anxiety-provoking. Or also, if we have a kind of preset to see a certain thing, a kind of tunnel vision, somewhere in the recesses of the mind stimuli are blocked out and we don't even perceive them consciously.

Let me explain some of the experiments he used to demonstrate this. This is both a physical process and a mental process. He began by talking about how, on just the physical level, in situations of extraordinary danger and stress, the receptors that feel physical pain can somehow just stop working—physical pain actually goes unperceived consciously. The example he gave was of a man who was being mauled by a lion, was conscious during it, and survived. In describing it, he recounted the experience quite fully,

saying he just wasn't feeling pain at that time, though obviously his body was being ripped apart. It seemed to be some kind of survival mechanism, because he was able to stay conscious enough to somehow get away.

This same process of selectively deciding, on an unconscious level, what we're going to perceive in our environment and what we're not going to perceive operates often in ways that are supposedly meant to protect us from anxiety, or to help us move in a desired direction—tunnel vision.

One experiment involved a group of subjects who were told to watch a short video of a very fast basketball game. Their task was to count how many times the ball was passed—a very specific task requiring real focus. At some point during these few minutes, a woman in white with a white parasol went strolling through the basketball court, entering one side of the film and exiting the other, very nonchalantly.

What's so interesting is that nobody commented on it. At the end, they just reported how many times the ball was passed. When they were asked about the woman, they all said, "What do you mean? What are you talking about? That never happened." When they went back and were shown the video, of course they were astounded. How could they have possibly not seen that? It's so incongruous, so obvious. That's tunnel vision. What our expectations are can really determine what our reality is in that moment.

The other experiment demonstrated aversion—things that provoke anxiety. They had a series of tests where people looked at different drawings and later had to remember what was in each drawing and describe it. But they also had some fancy machine that could register for each person exactly where their eyeball looked in the picture. The pictures would have, say, one part that was just normal—a man reading a newspaper—and another part that was quite incongruous with that, perhaps sexually suggestive.

If the person later only described the man reading the newspaper, if he didn't remember the sexually suggestive part consciously—somehow that was an anxiety-provoking thing for him—they could also register that his eyeball had never even looked at the half of the picture that was sexually suggestive. I thought, now that's really weird. Not only did he not consciously take in the stimuli, but somehow there was some previous information so the eyeball knew not to even look there. It's really interesting to me.

Sometimes this tendency has served us in a functional way—as in blocking out pain so we can function, or as a child blocking out memories of abuse because you couldn't keep living with the same people if you remembered that. But a lot of the time it's not serving a life-supporting function. We're actually prisoners of this unconscious tendency of mind, these habits of mind.

Prisoners because what we are perceiving in a certain moment as reality, what we're taking to be what is—our experience—is often actually inaccurate, because it's seen through these distortions of mind: the distortions of wanting, the distortions of pulling away, of resisting, of denying, the distortions of confusion. We have these big blind spots sometimes in our understanding of our experience. Selective memory, selective perception, this unconscious selecting of what not to notice.

This book fascinated me because it's showing in a very data-oriented way how much our experience of what's going on can be skewed by these deep-rooted tendencies of mind—the tendency to avoid, to deny, to block any stimuli that's threatening. We can even deny the actual sight of something that we're looking at, actually deny that that's what's happening.

Once I was in the hospital and I'd been there a few days. The doctor came in and was doing a somewhat painful procedure, and I was over the edge. It was really hurting and I was crying. He looks at me and goes, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt." Just flat denial. And we do that a lot.

The filter of denial, of aversion. The filter of greed, of tunnel vision—seeing just what our mind is set on and everything else is in the way. You know when you're walking down the street and you're hungry, suddenly all you see is restaurants, whereas before you never noticed them. Or here, when you're walking in the desert and it's really beautiful, but suddenly the bell rings and you're really hungry and you want to get to lunch. What was filled with appreciation is now just ground to get over till you get somewhere else. And the people who were your brothers and sisters are now in the way. Tunnel vision—it skews our perception.

The third factor is identification: taking any facet out of our experience as being permanent and really identifying with it, making it solid. For example, the thought goes by, "I'm really stupid." We take that thought out, really identify with it, give it power, and then take in, perceive only what corroborates that experience—that I am stupid. Anything else, that I'm not stupid, that I did something really bright—it just kind of doesn't make it in through the perceptors. But anything that corroborates "I am stupid"—yeah, right, that's true, I'm really stupid. Identification.

All of this filtered, skewed perception is delusion. It's how we stay out of touch with reality. It's why we don't know what's going on sometimes. It's why we can feel so confused. As long as these filters are operating and we don't know it, as long as they're operating and we can't see them, can't know that they're there, we'll continue to live in confusion. We'll continue to suffer.

So that's why we can so easily fall back into the same old patterns. Not that we're doomed to be stuck forever, but the habits of viewing life through these filters are so strong.

They've been conditioned so deeply, they're even unconscious, so that when we're unaware, when we space out for a while, that's what springs back up again.

Here's a simple example. We can know very deeply that we're not separated from the environment, that our actions impact on the environment, that we're part of the earth, and that we really want to act in accordance with this understanding. We know it deeply. And so, for example, thinking, "Okay, there's a water crisis. I won't take long, hot showers. That's just really inappropriate and disconnected." And that can be true, and we know it.

But in a moment of inattention, when we're unaware, all of the old habits spring back up and we can find any reason—it skews our vision. So suddenly what was a long shower, well, that's not so long. That's not hurting anybody. It doesn't matter what I do. That's not going to affect anybody else. Or we just space out completely and after twenty minutes think, "Oh yeah, right, I wasn't going to take long hot showers anymore."

It's not bad. It's just how these tendencies spring up when the mindfulness isn't present and skew our perception of things.

This is where mindfulness is so powerful in working with these filters, because it's the tool that counteracts the unconscious self-deception by shining the light of awareness on whatever arises in our experience. And that's just what we're doing here. Whatever arises—not discriminating, not just going to the pleasant or just going to the unpleasant, not choosing—but shining the light of mindfulness on whatever presents itself in a strong way in our experience. We're developing the ability to be with our experience whatever it is, just as it is. And because we're not trying to change it, we're not trying to avoid it, we're not trying to turn it into something different—because we're allowing it—we begin to see in our experience how these filters themselves are working.

We begin to not only see the world through, say, a veil of confusion or anger, we start to actually be able to see the anger or the confusion or the greed itself. When we're seeing these filters, not fighting or denying them but seeing them, they're no longer so much coloring our world. We're not so much looking through them as if we're blind to them. We know them for what they are. Our perception is no longer so skewed. We know they're clouds, and we know they're clouds, and that's okay.

When these habits of mind become conscious, it cuts their power enormously. And that's just the power that mindfulness has. In a moment, it's bringing consciousness, awareness, to a veil like this, if that's what's present in that moment. It's a very powerful purifying force, mindfulness.

And it needs patience, because these tendencies of mind are strong and a couple of viewings isn't going to uproot them completely—at least for most of us. So it needs a lot of patience. But it's really helpful to know, to reflect on, that each moment of seeing is a moment when that habit isn't operating. It is a moment of weakening the tendency for it to arise in the next moment. In a way, a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom, because we're free of these patterns of mind of greed and hatred and confusion. And that moment might not seem ecstatic or really special, but it's really important.

And it's important to notice, again, these moments. Not just noticing the moments we're caught in the tendencies, the habits of mind—notice the moments when we're not caught in those, when there's mindfulness, when there's calmness. It's really important.

One other thing that sometimes happens—actually, most of the time happens with all of us—as the mindfulness gets stronger and we actually do begin to come out of our blind conditioning and we start to see these habits of mind, these filters, is they start to seem so prevalent sometimes. People often say, "Since I started meditating, I'm just so much worse. I think I'm much more neurotic than I ever was before. So much greed. I'm so aware of grasping. I'm so aware of aversion. I didn't used to be this way."

It's important to notice this. It's another way of kind of drowning in the suffering aspect, of getting lost in the clouds, seeing only the disturbances. Seeing in this way—thinking that I'm worse, that it's getting worse, that I have more greed than I ever used to have, that I'm more neurotic than I ever used to be—it's another veil, another skewing of perception, like a real identifying with the negative. It's happening because what was unseen before is now becoming conscious. Before, we didn't feel like we were filled with greed because we never saw it.

Now we're seeing it right, left, and center. And we think that if we see it, it should go away. But as I said, it's really strong, so it doesn't just disappear like that. We're seeing it, and the awareness is really lighting up the causes of suffering. This is an important, vital step in our becoming free of it. And it can seem overwhelming. It can become a veil to our experience because, again, we're identifying with it. We're identifying with "I'm such a greedy person" or "I'm more neurotic than I used to be"—identifying with seeing all the negative tendencies and not noticing when they're not present.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a great way of talking about this. He says that yes, to see and understand suffering is absolutely necessary. But we don't need to use it to create unnecessary suffering out of that. And this is what we're doing when we're going, "Oh my God, look how much greed there is in my mind." We're creating unnecessary suffering in that moment.

His example—I love his examples, they're just so simple and down to earth. If you have a really bad toothache, you're very aware of suffering in that moment. There's no denying it. You can't get away from it. And when it finally stops, it's so pleasant. It's really almost blissful. And there's a real awareness: there's no suffering, this is a happy moment. How much of our life do we not have a toothache? And how often do we appreciate that?

It's like that with these other aspects of our mind too. We focus in on the difficulty. We forget to notice when it isn't present. We think, "Well, that's just kind of blah." But actually, not having a toothache is really a nice experience. If I pay attention to it, it's not boring. It's not neutral. It's really nice.

So this is a way in life, as in practice, that we isolate the negative, the glaring, the difficult, and discount or ignore what is pleasant or positive or enjoyable.

I often notice this in myself. If I do something that people observe and ten people come up and say, "Oh, that was really good, Carol," and one person comes up and gives me some negative feedback—who do I believe? There's no question. All those first ten people are completely discounted, and the eleventh one? Well, that's an accurate description of what happened.

We do this all the time. Out of the flow of our experience—of thoughts, of emotions, of sensations—we isolate one, we identify with it, we kind of pull that one out, give it a lot of energy, and that's the one that fits our filter at the moment. That's the one we believe.

So if you're in a space today of "I'm so lazy," or "I'm really greedy," or "I can't concentrate," or "I'm just stupid"—which thoughts are drawn out and identified with? The ones that match the filter. And if we're not aware that that filter is just another thought, another feeling, we stay caught.

So today, how many thoughts and emotions have come and gone in your experience? How many? You couldn't even begin to count how many thoughts have come and gone. Which ones did you hook onto? Which thoughts and feelings are defining, right now, your perception of today's reality?

We all do this. But just to be aware that we're doing this.

So today—are you rebellious? Are you spaced out? Are you a basket-case yogi? Are you doing really terrific?

Are you scared? Which perceptions has the mind hooked onto and made a solid reality out of?

Of course, you can do this just as well with the pleasant as with the unpleasant. And once we've done it with the pleasant, we're not so aware that we're suffering from it. We're not so discouraged about practice. We think it's great when we're doing that with the pleasant. It's when things are unpleasant that we want to pack it in. So that gives us the motivation to really investigate.

When you become aware that you're holding such a self-definition—"Boy, I just can't concentrate," or "I've just been so angry today"—when you become aware of that, it's a clue to begin to look very carefully at your moment-by-moment experience. And what one usually finds is that experience really isn't nearly as solid as you think it is.

"I'm so angry. I woke up really grumpy today." Yeah, and I was grumpy for a while. And then I went out and saw that the morning was really beautiful and appreciated that for a while. And then I got kind of spacey and wondered if I should walk or sit. Went to breakfast, enjoyed that. But then the person ahead of me was really rude in the way they served themselves. "Boy, I'm really angry today."

And it goes like that. You'll see that there were various moments, maybe a lot of them, where a lot of anger came up. But also a lot of other moments where the whole range of other experiences arose—from bliss to boredom to mindfulness to concentration to sleepiness. And somehow the definition has been anger, because we isolate, identify with, kind of cling to this negative experience. We make a bridge with our thoughts between separate moments and create one solid umbrella to cover the whole day or the whole last three hours.

So just to begin to notice this. As we see that moment by moment it's changing, that what we're calling "I'm so neurotic, I'm so much worse, I'm so filled with greed" isn't so solid as we think. It's coming about because we're seeing more clearly. But as Thich Nhat Hanh says, yes, we can feel and be with the anger, but also begin to see more clearly the moments of calm, the moments of contentment, the moments of peace, the moments of just neutrality. Really, really important.

Realizing that pleasant and neutral objects are equally valid objects of attention as difficult and painful ones. Not more valid—I mean, we've spent a lot of our lives chasing the pleasant. There's a reason we're kind of afraid to fall back into that again. It is important to open to the difficult. But when the difficult isn't present, it's also important to open to what is present—if it happens to be pleasant, if it happens to be neutral.

Mindfulness is non-discriminating awareness. Totally non-discriminating. The same as the quality of mettā. In a way, that quality of soft, connected openness and acceptance that we bring to whatever object is arising in our attention in a moment—in a way, that is the quality of mettā. Nothing is shut out of it. Nothing is more important than anything else. All equally valid, because in this moment what's presenting itself is the truth of this moment. It can't be otherwise.

So that's our life experience, moment to moment. Anytime we look, it brings the excruciating, it brings the sublime. It's our experience on this earth, our experience of nature, our experience of mind and body when we just sit here for an hour. It's peace, real peace, freedom. It's being able to be with all aspects of life—the sublime, the incredibly painful, and everything in between. Appreciate the beauty, open to the suffering through our own experience. And from this can arise great compassion—great compassion for ourselves, for each other, for the earth.

Practice is not about attaining or coming to some perfect, unchanging state of bliss, some perfect place that is free from pain. That isn't here on this earth, in these bodies. It's about a process of relating to life, to all of life, to this moment of life, however it presents itself—the painful and the beautiful—with a fresh, open, and loving mind. Even incredible suffering can open to equally incredible beauty.

I just want to close by reading a quotation from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, which to me demonstrates this. He speaks a lot in his books about the Gulag archipelago, the labor camps under Stalin. It's three volumes. It goes on and on. Things that are unbearable to think about, the way people were treated and the torments and hardships that people went through in these camps. And through it, over and over and over, he re-

counts cases of people growing incredibly spiritually, of incredible beauty emerging in the human heart through being in and opening to these experiences that would seem from the outside to be completely unbearable.

I couldn't think of something that's more unbearably painful and more exquisitely beautiful than this power of love and spiritual opening and compassion that comes in a human heart that's been through immense suffering. And to me, that's what our practice is about—opening to both.

He says, and he himself spent ten years in these prison camps, so he's talking from what he knows:

"Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains an unuprooted small corner of evil. Since then, I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world. They struggle with the evil inside a human being, inside every human being. It might be impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to transcend it within each person."

So that's what we're doing here by opening to the beauty and the pain. We can learn to transcend it in our own heart, and in some ways I think that's one of the strongest gifts we can bring to the world and to each other, because from that space we can then manifest in as many different ways as there are people.

So tonight is the third day of practice for many of you and the thirteenth day for quite a few others. As is customary at this time in a retreat, at the end of this initial settling-in period, there's often a talk about difficulties—working with all the sufferings and difficult energies that come in practice.

For those who've been here for a longer time, you'll probably find that even though you went through a talk on the hindrances early in the last retreat, it will still be relevant—unless you've gotten rid of all of them. You're just perhaps dealing on a subtler level, but it's the same movements of the mind towards or away from, or getting disturbed and confused by certain emotions and moods that take you over and prevent clear seeing.

So I want to talk about that tonight and also include in this talk honoring the fact that tomorrow is Earth Day. And that's quite a thing to reflect on. The planet for one day will jointly and directly acknowledge the fact that it's suffering, and that if we can bring some compassion and wisdom, perhaps we can come to an end of that suffering, or at least move in the direction of lessening it.

The hindrances, these difficult energies which you've probably heard of before many times, show us the first noble truth of the teachings that the meditation is based on—that there is suffering. It's true, isn't it?

Someone asked Ramakrishna why there's so much suffering and confusion and evil in the world. He said, "To thicken the plot." Who knows why there is all of this suffering? It does make things interesting. It's not just boring meditation when your shoulder is screaming out or you've got confusion and heaviness. Something else is there to be dealt with.

The first time I led a retreat, a weekend retreat, I had been teaching for a while and was encouraged to lead a weekend. One of my good friends was taking part in this weekend, and I really wanted her to have a positive experience. Well, around Saturday midday, as often happens after the initial glow of excitement of coming into the practice, she was having a terrible time and came to me saying, "This is awful. Why are we doing this?"

I tried to think of how I could help her have a pleasant experience with the meditation. I suggested she might take a walk or do a few other things. But it was weighing on my mind: "Gee, I'm really putting her through some real terrible stuff, and is this right?"

After about an hour or so of this, I remembered that the first truth of this teaching is there's suffering in life. I said, "Oh yeah, there's no getting around it." You really have to see that if you're going to understand what this is about.

What we do with the suffering by our reactions, our response to the problems that come up, will either create more suffering or can lead to wisdom and growth and an opening of the heart. The more we understand these forces, the less we're run by them.

The more we understand suffering, the less we're afraid to touch it. So the meditation is taking a direct look at our difficulties, being willing to wake up to them and see them clearly, name them clearly, so that they don't get us from behind, ambushing us. Or we don't spend our time trying to run away from them, hoping that sooner or later they'll pass.

This is from *The Power of Mindfulness*. Nyanaponika says, "There is an element of truth in the word magic of primitive man. Things that could be named had lost their secret power over us—the horror of the unknown. That ancient belief in the magical power of knowing the name appears also in many fairy tales and myths where the power of a demon is broken just by facing him courageously and pronouncing his name. To know the name of a force, a being, or an object was to primitive man identical with mastery over it."

And in a way, that's what we're doing here when we bring to light these various problems that arise. We name them so that they lose their magical power over us. We see them clearly.

There's such a strong conditioning to turn away in the face of our difficulties, to find some way to make ourselves feel better. This is contrary to most of what we've been taught our whole lives: get out of the unpleasant stuff and go towards something that's a bit more fun or entertaining. But if we can open to our suffering, it deepens our compassion and our wisdom.

How do we react in our lives out in the world when we see something that's quite unsettling—an accident or a severely disabled person? You notice that clenching up of, "Ooh, I can't let that in. It's just too painful." Not that that's wrong. It's just important to see that this reaction closes us off from our connection to life, to others, and to ourselves—to the suffering in ourselves.

Yesterday, I met somebody, quite a remarkable woman. Carol and I both met her. This is the continuing saga of the bunnies. The other night, Jack mentioned that there were these baby bunnies being born. Well, it seems that the mother wasn't around, and there was a litter of four. One of them died, and then we saw a second one die. Adrienne and her partner Elliot found an animal rescue unit nearby in Morongo Valley and took one of the other bunnies over. We hadn't discovered the fourth yet. And they met this woman who they talked a bit about and said, "She's a pretty interesting person." Sounded really remarkable. I said, "Boy, I wish I would have gone." Then it turns out there was a fourth bunny. So we had our chance.

Carol and I went over and met this woman, Judith Lindley, who runs the animal rescue unit in Morongo Valley. What this is, is some space that they got which is kind of like a junkyard, filled with old beat-up trucks and machines that aren't working—really an out-of-the-way space, not a place that you'd pick for setting up your dream home. Along with all the machines and the broken-down vehicles were forty-two cats, forty-two bunnies plus the babies, twelve dogs, six chickens, two donkeys, and a pony with one eye missing.

These animals, most of which were disabled, were taken in because other people didn't want them. Some had lost legs, some were blind. They were, as Mother Teresa would say, the poorest of the poor. She took them in.

She lives there with her seventy-five-year-old husband—she's in her forties, I'd say. He wasn't there, but he's this linebacker of a guy, she says, who goes out and finds work and odd jobs and fixes beat-up cars and trucks and is really strong. He looks about fifty-five. They have three kids: an eleven-year-old, a five-year-old, and a four-year-old. She has another child, twenty-one, who's living nearby with a family of his own, plus people who are passing through whom she takes in. There were about three or four elderly people there who didn't have a home.

She hauls in fifty gallons of water each day. There's no water on the property, but it takes about fifty gallons to meet all the animals' needs. She's supported just through donations plus the odd jobs that her husband finds.

She's a very happy person. Incredible. She said, "Oh, come look at the cats."

And here's Jasper. Come on out, Jasper. And here's Justin. And here's... She named every single one of them. She's been doing this for quite a few years, living out in the desert like a bodhisattva. How she responds to the suffering around her was very inspiring to me—responding with joy. That possibility is perhaps in each of us.

Getting back to our practice today: What sufferings have you been working with? What difficulties have you been encountering? And how have you been meeting them? How have you been relating to them? Wishing they'd change? Or with somewhat of an opening, a willingness to learn from them?

In practice, there are five classical hindrances—difficult energies that color our experience and keep us from seeing clearly when we don't recognize them. That's why they're called hindrances: they hinder clear seeing. But if we can start to wake up to them with understanding and wisdom and kindness, they don't have to be difficulties or hindrances. They become the richness of our practice. They're what one teacher called manure for enlightenment.

So I'll go through them briefly as they relate to our practice, and then talk a bit more on a global scale about these hindrances at work and how we can work with them.

The first is the difficult energy of attachment—wanting in the mind. Wanting things to be more fun or different than the way they are, wanting the next bit of entertainment. It runs the gamut from a mild fantasy to a deep obsession. Whether it's lust or greed or whatever it is, your mind can find anything to latch onto when there's this feeling of incompleteness.

The problem with this wanting mind is that it keeps us looking outside of ourselves for completion. Somehow this moment isn't enough, and so if I had something out there, then that would satisfy me. But whatever it is that you can find or that you think will satisfy you, it won't do it. Has anything done it so far? Has any gourmet meal or great sexual experience or new car or new house—has anything done it to the point where you say, "I don't need anything else"? Probably not. Because when you get it, it starts to grow old and doesn't have that same attraction and novelty. The energy of wanting keeps us looking for things, and it can be any kind of strange thing.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho. I've been reading a bit from him this retreat. He says, "You'd be surprised at some of the forms that greed takes for monks. As a layman, you can spend time trying to seek out suitable objects. You can form material possessions. But because monks live a celibate life and have very few possessions, we find our greed accumulates over things like robes or alms bowls. I became obsessed with robes for the first few months—the color of the robe, believe it or not. At the monastery where I lived before, they wore robes of a bright knock-your-eyes-out kind of orange, and it just wasn't my color. When I went to Wat Pa Pong, they wore a kind of ochre yellow or brownish colored robe, and so I developed a great desire for this kind. First, they wouldn't give me one. I had to wear one of those knock-your-eyes-out orange robes, and I became very greedy to get new robes, big robes. The robes in Thailand never fitted me properly, and at Wat Pa Pong they made them to your size. You'd have tailor-made robes. Finally, after a month or so, Ajahn Chah suggested that a monk make me these robes, but then I became obsessed by the color. I did not want it too brown, and I did not want it very much red. I went through a lot of sorrow and despair trying to get the right color for the robe."

A new robe, a new piece of clothes, a sweet meditation—then everything will be okay. You think you'll get one that'll last? No way.

The second hindrance is the opposite of grasping, of wanting: aversion. Not liking. Annoyance, irritation, aggression, rage.

The whole gamut—the mind that pushes away from things. Again, it keeps us from seeing clearly because we're contracted in that state, and there's a great turbulence in our beings. Have you noticed it? What have you gotten annoyed at or irritated by today? Notice how it keeps us from being here in the moment.

In some ways, aversion is not quite as seductive as desire, as wanting, because it's painful after a while. But it is so painful that sometimes we don't even want to let go of it, just because we don't know there's another way. We're so familiar with that reaction of "this is not fair." The Buddha talked of it as holding on to a hot burning coal and not realizing that you can let it go.

The third energy—or I should say lack of energy, difficult energy—is that of sluggishness, laziness, dullness of mind, sloth and torpor as it's called classically. It's very hard these first few days especially, because we don't operate on our own energy when we first get here. It takes time. Coming from a very busy life, you start to nod out when you don't get that extra stimulation. Or when what you're looking at is pain in the mind or pain in the body, it's not so much fun, and so we can have a tendency to check out. "I don't think I want to see that." Not necessarily consciously, but the mind has a way of blanking out when things aren't so delightful.

As you have noticed, this can be very frustrating and also keep you from putting any commitment into your practice. "Well, maybe I'll just take a nap." Sometimes that can be appropriate if you feel quite depleted or exhausted. But often, if you just reinforce leaving when you're getting sluggish or you're not so clear, you won't be willing to stay with things when they're not bright and alert. So that sluggishness, that laziness or dullness of mind—it's difficult to work with.

The fourth energy is restlessness, which includes agitation, nervousness, worry, anxiety, guilt. If you're replaying old memories again and again, it creates a kind of skittishness that keeps us from being here with presence in the moment. It can be very superficial, that scatteredness of one thought to the next, jumping around, often about the future or about the past. Sometimes the energy when we first come to a retreat is still jiggling around from the busyness of our lives. We sit down and our outsides can look very still, but inside we're still just jumping around. It takes a little while for it to settle.

Then the fifth energy, which is the doubting mind. "I can't do this. This is too hard. I don't know if this practice really works. I don't know if the teachings are the real way." Again, it's very heavy. It keeps us from having the confidence to put forth the effort.

The way that we can work with these energies is to open up and experience them fully, as we will start to do formally in the instructions tomorrow. We can incorporate the qualities of wanting, of aversion, of worry and restlessness, of the doubting mind, even of dullness of mind, as objects of meditation. And the key is being willing to acknowledge that they're here, not trying to set some comfortable place up so that we don't have to touch them. Each time we can touch them that way, we're not quite as afraid of them, and we see other possibilities of working. This is a learning process. One moment at a time. One encounter at a time.

A passage that I often read about this learning process—"Autobiography in Five Short Chapters" by Portia Nelson.

Chapter one: I walk down the street. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I'm lost. I'm helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter two: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again.

I can't believe I'm in the same place, but it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter three. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in. It's a habit. My eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter four. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

Chapter five. I walk down another street.

It takes time. And what we're doing here is, little by little, living more in chapter three—where we fall in from old habits and we wake up and say, "Oh, I do have a choice." Not that I need to blame myself for falling in, but I have some options whether or not to stay in here and feel that life is unfair or feel totally overwhelmed, or to wake up and say, "Oh, this is just the confused mind. This is just the doubting mind. This is just the angry mind." Wake up to it, understand it with care, with compassion. And then, as soon as that understanding comes, not be caught by it.

There are ways you can work with each of these energies besides the basic mindfulness, but mindfulness is the key. Feeling it inside fully. How does wanting feel? Is there a tightness? Is there a clenching? Is there a disturbance that contracts? How does

hatred and anger or annoyance feel? Get to know it well. It's an old companion. And it's not just in your mind. You've got a lot of company. That's why these are classical hindrances. It's part of being human.

When we can go from the level of "my problem" to the commonality that we share in working with these difficulties, then we don't have to take it so personally. It's okay. It's just the mood coming to test us, teach us.

We practice not just for easing our own pain, because we're not separate from the rest of life. You know how easily you're influenced by someone around you. Well, we all influence all aspects—the people around us, the beings around us—by our actions. Our responses have effects on the whole of life. And the meditation starts to awaken us to the fact that we are not separate. We can't divorce ourselves from life. We can't come to a retreat and say, "Okay, well, I hope the rest of the world gets together, but I've got my own problems." You can do that for a little time, and this is a training period. But if we go with that attitude, then we cut ourselves off from opening in a much deeper way to what love is about. The love that has the barriers lifted between us and all beings.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh, from *Being Peace*. He says, "How do you expect to leave everything behind when you enter a meditation center? The kind of suffering that you carry in your heart—that is society itself. You bring that with you. You bring society with you. You bring all of us with you. When you meditate, it is not just for yourself."

You do it for the whole society. You seek solutions to your problems, not only for yourself, but for all of us. It's a wonderful way to practice. And when you see that, then you see that the suffering inside of you is not so different than the problems and the suffering that we're all dealing with.

If you're a mountain climber or someone who enjoys the countryside or the green forest, you know that the forests are our lungs outside of our bodies. Yet we have been acting in a way that has allowed two million square miles of forest land to be destroyed by acid rain. We're imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of the comfortable conditions for this small self, while we destroy our large self.

One day I suddenly saw that the sun is my heart, my heart outside of this body. If my body's heart ceases to function, I cannot survive. But if the sun, my other heart, ceases to function, I also immediately die. We should be able to be our true self. That means we should be able to be the rivers. We should be able to be the forest. We should be able to be a Soviet citizen. We must do this to understand and to have hope for the future. That is the non-dualistic way of seeing.

We're one organism, this planet—the Gaia principle. Actually, there's a beautiful book that's just come out called *Dharma Gaia: Buddhist Perspectives on Ecology*. If we think of the planet as one organism, then humanity is the consciousness of that organism, the thinking mind. We are the way that the planet knows itself. As Brian Swimme says, it is self-reflexive awareness that allows the planet to know itself, and through that self-reflexive awareness, we can understand that we are alive.

That's something quite special when we think of all the different kinds of beings on the planet. Perhaps a few of them have that capacity; it seems like many of them don't. And just as within us there can be forces of destruction or the possibility of awakening, that larger mind of humanity as a whole can be involved in forces of destruction, or we can awaken.

Like our own predicament, where we often need suffering to wake us up, this is what the planet is going through. It's unfortunate, it seems, that it has to be that way. But often it's the suffering that brings the sense of urgency, that sees we'd better wake up or else we're all going to be in a lot of trouble. The Buddha said suffering, the first noble truth, is what wakes most people up to look for an end to it—if we can process it wisely.

So again, as with our own hindrances, the way to wake up is to see how our global hindrances are causing suffering. Those same forces—desire, aversion, laziness, restlessness, doubt—they have their roots in our minds.

This is from *Staying Alive: The Psychology of Human Survival*, a book written by one of the meditators here on this retreat, a very powerful exploration:

It's no secret that we've reached a critical time in our history, a time that may decide the fate of both our species and our planet. It is a time of paradox. The evidence of human genius and inspiration is all around us, but so too is the evidence of ignorance and idiocy. On the one hand, we possess scientific, medical, and psychological resources undreamed of only decades ago. We've gone to the moon, fathomed the intricacies of the brain, and sent probes to the farthest reaches of our solar system. On the other hand, millions of people starve, our ecosystem is endangered, and nuclear arms threaten global suicide. In short, we possess unprecedented opportunities yet also face unprecedented threats.

Moreover, for the first time in millions of years of evolution, all the major threats to our survival are human-caused. Problems such as nuclear weapons, pollution, and ecological imbalance stem directly from our own behavior and can therefore be traced to psychological origins. That means the current threats to human survival and well-being

are actually symptoms—symptoms of our own individual and shared mindset. The state of the world is therefore a creation and expression of our own minds, and it is to our minds that we must look for solutions.

Looking at how these forces, these hindrances work: greed—it's not hard to see that greed is probably the main problem, because it leads to a lack of respect, a cutting off of sensitivity to the larger well-being. Whether it's the rainforest being cut down, or fuel consumption, or using up fuel that produces wastes we don't want to look at—"Oh, no problem, we'll just find a place to ship them off to"—that's a lack of acknowledgment of the fact that we're all sharing this house together.

Aversion, which also takes the form of aggression: in our relationship to the planet, we've often had a "man versus nature" stance. We will conquer nature. That's rather silly when you think about it. We're part of nature. Why would we want to conquer it? And that same aggression leads to the development of all the weapons that deplete our resources and threaten us.

Sloth and torpor, the lazy mind. We know the answers and may even have a sense of urgency, but we often don't act accordingly. Well, someone else will do it. Or we pretend that it's not really a problem. We can probably all get in touch with the ways we're lazy about waking up to the problem and doing our share.

Restlessness, worry, and fear that immobilize us—or guilt over our past actions, or blame. It's their fault. No, it's their fault. Not my fault. That worry or fear can really keep us from acting because we simply give up. Oh, forget it. We can be paralyzed by it. This is also closely connected with the doubting mind, doubting that anything can be done. Forget it, it's too late. We're just on a downward roll.

And just as within ourselves, the awareness practice needs to be turned toward these difficult energies from a more global perspective. The Tibetans talk about transmuting the energies—our neurotic energies into sane or enlightened energies—taking the basic energy that's present and, by applying awareness, wisdom, compassion, and a real intention to change, allowing transformation to occur. We can contribute in a very meaningful way.

When we look at each of these energies—attachment, the wanting, and so forth—we can see that when we bring understanding, the understanding of the suffering it causes, there can be that same energy transmuted into generosity. With the wanting mind, we begin seeing that as we take more for ourselves, there's nothing left for anybody, including ourselves. We start to wake up and see: we'd better share this wisely, or there won't be any for me either.

The aversion, the anger, the hatred, the sense of separation—little by little, we can actually see it over the last few years, miraculously starting to give way to a new way of relating. Perhaps with a bit more concern and sensitivity for others. Perhaps with a bit more compassion and loving-kindness, seeing that we'd better do something quickly, otherwise we might not have another chance.

Laziness, when we really look carefully at the choices and we're willing to touch the suffering that laziness causes, can give rise to commitment and perseverance. The restless mind that's immobilized by fear—the antidote to restlessness is focus, concentrating that energy, channeling it into meaningful, purposeful activities. The doubting mind—the antidote is faith. And it seems simple to see that if we keep on giving up hope, there is no hope. If we throw in the towel before we try, then no possibilities remain.

That's why it seems so important to find whatever way we can to be inspired and let our faith grow. Because that enables not only us to hold the vision, but to share it with others, so that it can awaken faith in them. And it can in turn affect all others. It's contagious, that kind of faith.

Earth Day tomorrow is a bit like a one-day retreat where we hold the vision—a kind of world retreat that lets us all stop and take stock, acknowledge really what our situation is, and commit, focus, align our purpose.

It's interesting looking at Time magazine this week. They've got quite a big spread on it, all these activities going on. They say that in one recent poll, some eighty percent of Americans said they would support more strenuous environmental efforts regardless of the cost.

Just to get a sense of some of the activities: A Bangkok bash, where Thailand's top rock band headlines the "We Love the Forest" concert. A Tokyo happening, where visitors to the Earth Day Festival at Yume no Shima—Dream Island, a park built on what was once a trash dump—can take in a concert or play, watch milk cartons being turned into postcards and cooking oil into soap, or tour two nearby garbage processing centers. The Kenya countdown, where the Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya will launch its campaign to plant one and a half million trees with the help of churches and schools. Peak performance: to demonstrate that the environment is a common cause, fifteen American, Soviet, and Chinese climbers hope to reach the top of Mount Everest on Earth Day. Those who get there will place satellite calls to heads of state, then pick up garbage and gear dumped by previous expeditions. In Rome, pollution protests—Rome's nature lovers plan to put their bodies on the line when they stage a sit-down,

maybe even a lie-down, along one of the Italian capital's traffic-choked central thoroughfares. Survivors can attend a concert in a nearby piazza. And just lots of television shows. It's quite far out.

Now, of course, as many of these global events sometimes can bring up this sense of skepticism: a one-day retreat is not enough, as you've probably seen in your own practice. It's just the start. Here's a commentary on Earth Day: "Instead of making hard choices, it's easier to blow off steam. April 22nd will offer people an opportunity to purge accumulated anxiety over wounds to Earth's life support systems."

Worn out by weeks of buildup and an accompanying media blitz, many people will return to business as usual on Monday, hoping not to hear the "E word" again for weeks.

And so that's the challenge to the globe and the challenge to us. Not just one encounter—"oh yeah, I saw it, okay, enough"—but each time you see it, being willing to open up to it. Just like seeing here on the retreat, each encounter is a new opportunity that we can have to wake up.

So as we practice, we can practice with the understanding that we affect and we're affected by all of life around us. We're not separate. We can see the impact that each of us has on the global community. We can acknowledge how deeply the roots of confusion are, both within us and within the collective humanity. And we can see, as we practice here, just doing our sitting and walking, our moments of mindfulness, each little moment of mindfulness as we deal with these challenges in practice—our efforts that we bring here to bring wisdom and compassion and purify ourselves for our own peace, our own inner peace—they're a contribution, they're a gift that we give to the planet.

And so let's not underestimate each moment of mindfulness. Let's be willing to open up to all the pain and the suffering. Because that is what leads us to the end of suffering.

A retreatant shares that she felt shocked about extending the sitting, that it took her over, and she felt angry.

This retreat was set up for people who've done ten-day retreats before, and that's what we want to honor. Part of deepening practice is extending sittings at times. But you can go at your own rhythm. You don't have to stay in the hall or feel that you've got to be in a prison. When you feel that you've had enough and you're losing your perspective and balance, then you can leave.

Another retreatant asks about the balance between needing to do things about the unacceptable state of the world and accepting it.

Well, it's kind of the same in our own process. When there are things inside of you that need to be changed or that are important to bring another way to, the first piece is to accept that that's there with some understanding, with some openness and compassion. But that doesn't mean sitting back and just letting them go on. It means bringing a commitment to wake up to those things.

It seems the same way with global problems, to me anyway. First there needs to be acknowledgment. Where are the roots of these problems? Can I open up to see the fear and the greed and those things? And not so much blame the perpetrators of those things, including myself, but do what I can in my way without polarizing, without making somebody evil—just seeing that the real villain is ignorance. The real villain is not seeing clearly. And so you do what you do with commitment and without attachment for fixing it up fast. You just do your part. Just like each time, each encounter with the angry mind is that one drop in the bucket. As the Buddha says, drop by drop, we do our part.

If we get too attached with fixing it up and rescuing it out of a sense of fear, then it's a very exhausting and frightening kind of task. If we can bring a sense of caring and compassion and steadfastness, then there's a possibility of a bit more effective action that can inspire others.

So, no paper napkins tomorrow.

When you're walking in the desert, if you see things that were contributed by human container disposal and so forth, you might pick them up. I joined a co-op recently, and the latest little brochure has a line of recycled paper napkins, recycled toilet paper. So you can actually get paper napkins that are made out of recycled paper. I suppose the napkins here are supplied not by us, but we could say we're bringing our own if you don't get recycled napkins.

Can you recycle them again?

I've been sticking them in my pocket and using them instead of toilet tissue.

Let's sit for a few moments.

One announcement before we do the walking, and that is just a reminder about the precepts that we all took as we started the retreat: non-harming, non-stealing, being in our own process, not communicating with others sexually—physically or verbally—honoring the silence, and refraining from intoxicants.

Please, let's make this a retreat where we bring our commitment to the practice and give it as a gift to everyone practicing together.

So there's about thirty minutes for walking. We'll ring the bell just about five minutes before, and we'll have another sitting at nine o'clock. Then there'll be a late night sitting tonight as well, with a reading.

Thank you.

Tomorrow morning the schedule is the same as usual up till nine. We'll post the new schedule and re-announce it at the sitting between eight and nine tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER 334

Aspiration and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 56 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the inseparable relationship between wisdom and compassion, describing them as two wings of a bird that cannot fly with only one. She explains how the natural expression of emptiness and non-clinging is spontaneous compassion—what Tibetan teachers call awareness being "ceaselessly responsive." Drawing on the teaching of Nyoshul Khenpo, she shows how realizing the empty nature of phenomena naturally gives rise to tenderness for all beings who continue to suffer through delusion.*
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> *Wilson explores sammā-saṅkappa (wise intention), the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, as the crucial intersection where understanding manifests as compassionate action. She emphasizes that the Buddha defined wise intention as non-greed, friendliness (mettā), and compassion—qualities that develop naturally through steady mindfulness practice. The talk distinguishes between moment-to-moment intentions and overarching aspiration, offering inspiring examples including Aung San Suu Kyi and the Cambodian monk Mahā Ghosānanda, whose radiant presence at a teachers' conference demonstrated the fruit of a life devoted to purifying heart and mind.*
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> *Practically, Wilson encourages practitioners to trust that each moment of meeting difficulty with non-judgmental awareness is itself shifting habitual patterns from greed, hatred, and delusion toward clarity and compassion. She reminds us that transformation happens in small, seemingly insignificant moments—"doing the obvious"—and that compassion must begin with tenderness toward our own experience before extending outward to all beings.*

The mind of non-clinging, the liberation of non-clinging, reveals to us the nature of mind. But it always has been, as it is now, the nature of pure awareness—empty, awake, and knowing.

There's a third aspect, you could say, in trying to talk about what is basically indescribable. As soon as we start talking, it limits. But that's our mode of communication, so we talk. This third aspect describes the nature of mind, the nature of awareness: the natural, spontaneous expression of the wisdom of emptiness, of naked awareness, is compassion—a tenderness for all life.

Joseph and I were talking earlier, and he reminded me of a Tibetan phrase that expresses this, describing awareness as being ceaselessly responsive.

So that's what I want to talk about tonight: this quality of compassion, of friendliness, of tenderness for life, which includes ourselves, as an aspect of our practice. I want to talk about some ways that the simplicity of our mindfulness practice cultivates, strengthens, and reveals to us the depths of compassion and connectedness that are possible in our hearts in this life—and that aren't really so far away from our own experience as that little judging mind in there might be saying. Just let that one roll on, but don't give it any attention for now.

Rationally, to me it makes a lot of sense that emptiness—this openness of non-clinging, of not fixating on any experience as being me or mine—would have compassion as its flip side. I know it doesn't always make sense to people. Sometimes hearing about no-self, emptiness, seems a little unsettling. But remember, that's the idea we have about it, not the actual experience.

Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a Tibetan teacher, said that someone who realizes that all phenomena are empty and who realizes the non-existence of self or ego will naturally experience spontaneous compassion for all sentient beings who do not realize this truth of emptiness and so who continue to suffer through delusion and clinging.

We don't have to wait until we are completely enlightened to experience this. Remember, our whole practice, our whole life experience is only this moment. It's only moment to moment. Anything that we talk about—any qualities we speak about developing, the seven factors of enlightenment, the qualities we speak about understanding, the five hindrances, compassion, non-clinging—it's all experienced only here and now in this moment. There's nowhere else to go.

This has been a very empowering and also comforting understanding for me. Because if I think I have to understand the complete essence of emptiness before I can experience compassion, it's a little daunting. But if I can recognize in a moment that possibility through my own experience, just in a moment, then it really opens up the sense of possibility.

You can see it at times throughout our practice. Joseph spoke again about impermanence and how really opening to the ephemeral nature of our experience—whether it's thoughts or emotions or sensations, whether it's the ephemeral nature of our outer situations—when we open to that, we really have an access into recognizing emptiness because we stop clinging. But also you can recognize how in those moments, even if they're quite brief, where we really get that sense of impermanence, when you just really feel open to it—and opening to it means we're not in that moment resisting it or hating it or trying to hold on, we really just let go and see it as it is—we both appreciate in a very deep way the fragility of life.

Not in a kind of beating-the-breast way, but with tenderness, with appreciation. Because if life is so fragile as it is, the natural response is one of presence, of openness, of connectedness, of appreciation, just for this moment of life as it is. And that naturally extends to a sense of compassion, of tenderness for the suffering of ourselves and other beings that we come into contact with. Because we're so present, we're naturally open to that.

So we experience both compassion for immediate suffering—just the pains we all go through—but also the wider level of compassion that Nyoshul Khenpo was speaking of, what's really referred to as bodhicitta: that sense of poignancy, of compassion for looking at all of us beings here, keeping running in these cycles of samsara, trying to find happiness in places that cannot offer it, looking for ease in constantly changing situations.

Out of that rises a sense of connectedness, a sharing of our mutual situation, so to speak, but with a real tenderness of heart. Not a kind of "we're just such stupid jerks" attitude. More like, "Oh, look at this situation—we're together." And that tenderness then again opens us into further letting go. It's sort of a mutually supportive thing: the emptiness leads to compassion, the compassion leads to more letting go.

Another way you might notice, just keep a little eye out in your practice, how the wisdom of letting go can open us to compassion. Just notice in those moments when you're not really clinging to anything as me or mine—my experience, my pain, my great meditation, whatever. Those moments when there's none of this me-ing or mining, none of this clinging. Notice the corollary: it's as if the movement from tight, obsessive self-referencing opens into spaciousness, connectedness with life, with beings.

Have you noticed this relentless, obsessive self-referencing? Have any of you noticed that over these days? Those times when no matter what happens, the first thought in our mind is, "What does that mean about me?" Somebody slams the door—they did it to me. They woke me up from my nap. Whatever happens, it's all about me. It's exhausting. It's relentless. It's wearing. This, to me, is really what we're talking about when we speak of sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of just the ongoing wearing nature of life—this me, me, me all the time.

Sometimes I sit here and think I would be so happy not to be absorbed in this meness anymore. What a relief.

So notice, because we all have plenty of moments when we're not absorbed in this me, me, me. Sometimes we don't notice them. Sometimes there's nothing special happening except spaciousness, except peace.

It also allows the space, again, for connectedness and caring.

Nyoshul Ken puts it in a way I really like. He says the difference between the deluded mind and the enlightened mind is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our present deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow—the more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, completely disregarding the well-being, happiness, and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha mind is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings rather than being concerned only with its own ego and individuality. Thus the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of the mind. The concept of growth is used here for the passing from a completely narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of beings.

I really like that—the concept of growth in practice is from this narrow, constricted sense of mind and heart that only focuses on oneself to a natural openness that spontaneously considers the well-being of beings. And that's important to really trust: that this compassion, this tenderness for beings, really is a spontaneous expression of our wisdom mind, a spontaneous expression of awareness of emptiness.

It's not that we can't consciously cultivate compassion. Of course we can, and we do, and the Buddha talks about that—wise intention, which is really important. But we must also really trust that if awareness is our true nature, our pure mind, then compassion, tenderness, metta, is also our true nature. And there are no exceptions to that. It's not "everybody but you." I know people say that—"Me, compassion? I don't think so." No, no. If it's how it is, it's how it is, for all of us.

So that's why often the practice, the Buddhist path, is spoken of as a bird with two wings—the wings of wisdom and compassion. You really don't have one without the other. At times in our life, in our practice, one or the other might be more obvious. One hint of awareness, so to speak, is more apparent to us, and at another time, another one. But ultimately it all comes together.

I want to talk now about really practical ways that we can begin to notice and work with and also help us trust the cultivation, the development of compassion in our life, in our actions, in our minds.

One way the Buddha spoke about this—the place where our understanding and our actions come together, the intersection—is in the second step of the Eightfold Path. I won't go into the entire Eightfold Path tonight because that's a whole talk. But it begins with wise or right understanding: how we understand ourselves, how we understand

the world. That's the first step, not the last step. And that gives rise to the second step, which is what I'm talking about: sama sankappa, the word in Pali, variously translated as wise intention, wise thought, or wise aspiration—those three different qualities.

Our intention or thought or aspiration is what gives rise to the next steps of the path, which are how we speak and act in the world—our speech, our action, our livelihood. So right here, in this step of sama sankappa, right intention, right aspiration, is the place where our wisdom manifests as compassion, as friendliness, as generosity. In fact, the Buddha's definition of wise intention is actually that: non-greed, friendliness or metta, and compassion. That's his definition of right intention.

The point I want to make is that this is what naturally develops and strengthens simply through the power of mindfulness, through the simplicity but steadiness, the committedness of our mindfulness practice.

This intention—that sense of motivation that leads to speech and action, that moment, that inclination of mind that gives rise to speech, that gives rise to action—is a really key concept, a really key experience in the whole understanding of karma. Karma, or kamma in the Pali, means action. And what's interesting for us practice-wise, in a way I find really helpful in my life: when we think about our actions, when we tend to evaluate whether that was a good or bad action—or to use more Buddhist terms, skillful or unskillful, wholesome or unwholesome—our tendency is often to evaluate by the result. How it looks. Whether whatever we wanted to happen happens. Whether everybody feels good about it. Whether we got what we wanted.

But as far as skillfulness or unskillfulness, as the seed of karma goes, all of the power of the action is actually in the intention. Because the result of the action is actually out of our control a lot of the time, isn't it? But why we do and say what we do and say, what states of mind and heart are motivating that—this is really where the power is.

This is the place where greed, hatred, and confusion manifest, leading us to speech and action that gets us in trouble one way or another. And it's also the place where metta, compassion, and generosity manifest—just here, in this movement of intention.

We can begin to notice this. Not always—God knows you'll make yourself crazy if you try to notice every intention before every word you speak, before every action you do. So please don't try. But we can begin to notice, in retreat and off retreat, before big things that we do, before big decisions.

The whole power behind skillful means—when we talk about skillful means in retreat, learning to do what helps keep your awareness balanced—the whole seed of that is in the intention. Because you can do the same action on succeeding days. Have you

noticed that? Like, "I'm really tired now. I think I need not to sit and go take a walk." Now that could be motivated by a lot of different intentions, couldn't it? And one day it might be a real clear, balanced sense.

It's not wanting, it's not aversion, it's just seeing clearly—yes, I really am tired. Taking a walk refreshes the mind, brings some energy. You take the walk, that's the experience. That was a skillful action, a skillful intention.

The next day, the same sitting, and you have the thought: yesterday it was so helpful to take a walk, and I really just don't feel like sitting, but probably taking a walk would be really good right now. But the motivation and the whole surrounding circumstances are completely different. The motivation now might be aversion, it might be avoidance, it might be desire. And so the seemingly same action really is quite a different action from the point of intention. You see what I mean? This is a very simple example, but it has many ramifications.

So it gets really interesting—and I mean really interesting, not from a point of judging. You can't be looking at your intentions with judgment. Well, you can, and you probably will, but it isn't helpful. Because we're all going to have plenty of intentions that are less than sterling—that's why we're here, to learn, to see. If we were all completely free from greed, hatred, and delusion, we wouldn't be needing to sit here like this day after day, would we?

This is a fascinating and very powerful area of exploration in our life and in our practice. What I'm describing is on the micro level—a small action, like watching scratching an itch, or when you go back for seconds at lunch, or when you write a note or don't write a note, or think about writing a note and decide not to, asking yourself why you wanted to and why you didn't. Just watching all that stuff, seeing the play of intentions.

I'll come back to the micro level a little later in the talk, when we can begin to see how the power of mindfulness really begins to naturally shift the habit of our mind, the habit of our intentions.

But I want to move for a moment to the third aspect of sammā saṅkappa I mentioned, which is often translated as wise or right aspiration. I want to talk about aspiration and bring this into compassion. I was going to do so anyway, and then I was interested that it came up in a couple of questions this morning.

For the purposes of how I'm talking about it, right aspiration can be understood not so much as that micro, about-to movement just before we do something—brush our teeth or make some small movement—but rather as an overarching intention. You

could say goal, if you will—we know that's not always a good word—but a sense of purpose, a greater sense of purpose or aspiration in our life. It's not just an automatic response to this moment, but having a clear sense of direction.

This is something I think is very helpful and supportive to take time to consciously reflect on in our lives. If you haven't already done so, if it's not something you do regularly, really tune in: What is my deepest purpose? What is my aspiration? It could be the goal or overarching intention, the conscious awareness of which we can use as a guidepost, as a reference point in the decisions we make and in how we live our life.

Now, if this overarching intention is unskillful, it might be that we become so focused on the goal that we don't use the overarching intention to come back and be present. For example, if your purpose in this life is to die with as much money as it's possible to accumulate—I don't suppose one would say it that way, but that's what could happen—if one's goal is to earn as much money as one could possibly accumulate and that's all that matters, the way that would reflect in our moment-to-moment decisions is that each decision would be about which choice earns more money. The overarching purpose would affect our moment-to-moment intentions. Hopefully we will choose something more enlightening, more supportive, more inspiring as our purpose—but that's each of our own business, isn't it?

The way this can function in our life—and it doesn't have to be particularly dharmic—is that when we have a very clear sense of commitment to what our purpose is, to what's really important to us, tuning into that in moments of difficulty or choice, in moments when we're making decisions, has the function of collecting all our random, dispersed energy. It allows us to act sometimes from a strength or a commitment or an intention of depth that we didn't really know we had. It gives us courage, a strength we might not know we possessed.

Perhaps if you have children, you can imagine how you will do things for your kids that, if it was just for you, you would never have the energy or the courage or the gumption to do. But when it's something for the well-being of your children, that hesitation doesn't even arise. You just do it.

I read a book a few years ago called *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Cheng. She was a Chinese woman who lived in Shanghai, a middle-class woman who had a pretty comfortable life. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, she, like so many others, was denounced for her bourgeois lifestyle and thrown into jail. She was pressured in many ways to sign confessions of things she hadn't done, which would have included accusing other people. She was physically abused, placed in a very uncomfortable situation.

But she had this strength of purpose around honesty—honesty was simply what was most important to her. She refused for six years to sign anything they gave her because it wasn't true. She wouldn't accuse other people of things they hadn't done because it wasn't true. She went through amazing ordeals—a woman who had never been under any kind of physical stress, someone who hadn't had any preparation for this kind of thing. Finally, after six years, she became very sick, cancer I think, and they decided to release her because she was causing trouble. She would stand up to the guards and simply refused to cooperate.

So they were finally releasing her, leading her to the door.

And just before they take her to the door, they take her into another room and say, "Just before you leave, would you sign this?" And she refused. She said, "No way. It's not true. I won't sign it." And they let her go anyway—just get her out of here. She was living in the States when she wrote this.

It was very inspiring to me, both her personal story and courage, but even more the strength of a purity, a clarity of purpose that really is bigger than the moment-to-moment experiences. It allows us to let go of needing fulfillment just in this moment. It allows us to have a much broader vision of our life, of what's important to us, of what is possible. And by using this aspiration or our purpose as a reference point, we can really make more intelligent, more courageous decisions in our life.

I see for myself, when I don't have a sense of purpose, or I'm not aware of it, I tend to respond to situations with knee-jerk reactivity—oh, that'll be nice, or no, I don't want to do that, or that'll feel good, or that'll be comfortable, or I'm in a bad mood so I say no. It's very robotic, very automatic. But when I tune into what's really important to me—which changes from time to time, so I think it's good to keep checking in with ourselves—to me, some aspect of loving and serving the Dharma, or of living an awakened life, keeps coming up as what's important. And then that really informs how and what I decide to do.

Not every minute, of course. Again, some compassion, some kindness. It's not like every time I'm going to get an ice cream I have to go into deep dharma reflection—is this going to serve the Dharma, whether I have chocolate chip or strawberry, or maybe I should have non-fat? Not like that. We can be normal human beings. But this sense of purpose can really strengthen us, support us, give us courage that we might not otherwise access. We can surprise ourselves.

Another aspect of tuning into this higher aspiration is that it's not always that we have a sense of "I want to be X, Y, Z" or "this is what I want my life to look like." Very much as with Nien Cheng, it was the sense of the importance of honesty. We often don't know where it's going to take us. When I realized quite some years ago that really I loved the Dharma as the most important thing in my life, I had no clue what that was going to mean. I never had the slightest interest in doing this teaching gig, but that's just how it manifested. It's not what I would have thought of.

Someone who also very much touches me in that way—I haven't met her personally, but whose life has been one of following what's really important to her without knowing where it would lead—is Aung San Suu Kyi. I'm sure you know who she is: the leader of the democracy movement in Burma, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Her father was the Burmese leader of democracy in the late 1940s, and he was assassinated. Aung San Suu Kyi had been living in England, married to an Englishman, with two teenage children, and came back to Burma in 1988 because her mother was really sick. She came back to take care of her dying mother.

It just happened to be at the time when there were these big student uprisings against an incredibly repressive, violent government—still in charge in Burma today, really quite cruel to the people of Burma. She happened to be there when these incredible student uprisings and demonstrations were being put down by mass shootings. And she became the focal point of the democratic movement, to the point that when this repressive government allowed a free election, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party won in a landslide. Then of course the government wouldn't let them take office and put her under house arrest. She's been there, on and off, ever since—her movements completely constricted for over ten years. They've always said she could leave, but she knows she could never come back. And she's so important to the democracy movement that she really feels she has to stay, even though her husband has since died of cancer. She sees her two sons not very often at all. Years can pass.

But what's interesting is that she really seems, from what one can tell from reading and hearing, quite an amazing woman. This is what she's said: "I never set out to be the leader of the democracy movement in Burma. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it. The motivation is its own reward." And somewhere else she said that her purpose is to purify her mind and heart.

So having a deeply felt but ultimately simple purpose, simple aspiration—we don't know where it's going to go. We never know anyway. But the power of aligning ourselves, when we can, when we can remember it, to what is really so deeply true for us, has the power to change how we live our life. And that's really what it's about: how we live our life.

The habits of mind with which we meet each moment of our life—this is where freedom manifests. This is where compassion manifests. Never mind how it looks to anybody else. Never mind achieving some goal that people can recognize.

And the good news, as I said before, the really good news, is that simply through the power of mindful presence—this awareness that is open, clear, connected, with no agenda, just what we're practicing here, moment after moment after moment—the natural fruit of this is the development of compassion, of friendliness, loving-kindness, of generosity, of letting go. If you really look in yourselves, in your practice, in your daily life, in little ways, I truly know that you'll see how our intentions, our habits of mind, do begin to purify. By purify I mean they begin to transform.

Our deep habits, the kilesas, as I know have been referred to—of greed, of hatred, aversion, fear, of confusion—that's not inevitable, although it may seem so sometimes. It's not inevitable, but they are like deeply conditioned habits in our mind. But that's all they are: habits. And as we practice, these habits really do begin to transform.

The Buddha said frequently, and I love this quotation: whatever one thinks about frequently, whatever we're in the habit of pondering on, wherever we let the mind dwell, that will become the inclination of our mind. It's simple but obvious, right? Wherever we let our mind hang out over and over and over, that becomes its natural inclination.

In one way that's a little scary. In another way it shows us how mindfulness works, as well as loving-kindness practice. I won't get into that because it's a whole other topic, but just repeating the loving-kindness phrases when you think nothing's happening—just consider what your mind might be doing otherwise. It's totally worth it. That's just a little aside, a little plug.

But through the power of mind—I was talking to someone today who was saying that over the last ten years or so of her practice, even though there are areas she doesn't feel so good about, areas where it's not good enough and all, which we can all find—she could absolutely see areas of transformation, of spaciousness, of change in how she lives her life and how she relates. This is just what I'm talking about. The habits change.

In a place where you would naturally have said, "Oh, going through the food line, there's ten people behind you and there's one muffin left—great, I'm glad I got here for that muffin"—sometimes now, just naturally, without even thinking about it, you might say, "Oh, there's only one left, well, I'll leave it for someone else." And it's not like a big "Oh, aren't I great?" moment. It's just a natural expression.

Look for it in little things, because that will really increase your trust and confidence. If you're waiting to be Gandhi before you notice it, it's going to be a lot harder. Our habits change, and at the end of our life, what are we going to have left but how we've lived our life? The habits of our heart and mind.

Last year there was a big Buddhist teachers' conference here at Spirit Rock. Buddhist teachers from all the different traditions, about 220 or so teachers, and the Dalai Lama was here. The thing that was most inspiring to me in this whole conference was a Cambodian monk named Maha Ghosananda. He's sort of the Cambodian Thich Nhat Hanh, if you know Thich Nhat Hanh. He's been a leader of the peace movement in Cambodia. He's an old man now. He spent many years really working in the refugee camps with Cambodian refugees after all the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot regime—truly unthinkable suffering.

And now, last summer, he's a little bit senile. He's not really quite knowing what's going on. Someone would be delegated to stay with him through the day to make sure he didn't wander off. He would come and sit here in the room and not really say much.

So what was inspiring about this? He was just radiating love and happiness and compassion. You just wanted to go up to him and hug him. Of course you don't—he's a monk. But anyone who would come up to him, he would bow to you with this huge grin, like you were the happiest, most important person he'd ever met, that he was so happy to see you again. You felt like he recognized you, although I'd never met him really where he would remember me. Just this sense of all-embracing love. It was so beautiful, and I never saw that break.

At the end, as a closing, he was asked to come up and give the refuges and precepts.

So first he started off in French doing metta. It's sort of like something that was in there just kind of came out. But then he caught himself—okay, English—and he went and did the refuges and precepts in English.

I just felt so much... I don't know, just sort of *who he was*. That's how he'd lived his life, and at the end, that's what came out—so pure and beautiful. It was by far, for me, the most touching and inspiring moment of the whole four days.

To me, that's a sense of how our habits can transform. It doesn't matter so much what we achieve or what our life looks like. We can really begin to trust this. And again, it's not like you sit down and say, "I will now become like Maha Ghosananda." I think to myself—because I have that same kind of judging mind—*fat chance*. But we'll each become our own person, manifesting through our own personality. Yes, I hate to tell you, it's going to be through your own personality. The sooner you get used to it, the better!

But again, as I was saying, we don't have to sit and decide, "I will now be compassionate." We learn to trust that out of the simple act of this connected attention, this letting go of our judgments, letting go of our preconceptions, overcoming our fear and holding ourselves separate—to simply connect with presence—the natural expression of that is a sense of our unity, a sense of mettā, a sense of compassion.

I want to read this poem because it really expresses this for me. It's a bit long, but it's by Mary Oliver, called "Singapore":

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it—kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled, and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem. But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life. And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So we don't have to go somewhere else or look for some special kind of situation in order to touch, to recognize, to come home to this sense of vastness, of tenderness, of compassion for others, for life, for ourselves. Really, the best place we have to start is right here, right now, with exactly whatever your own personal experience is.

We often think of compassion as so outer-directed that we forget it has to start—the only place it can start—right here in our own hearts, in our own immediate experience.

From Pema Chödrön: "When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart?"

"Next time you get a chance," she says, "experiment with this."

That's what's so great about retreats—you get lots of chances. And you might notice them more than when, in our regular life, we just kind of think, *okay, what to do about it*. But here there's not much to do. So that's a real blessing, because it gives us a chance to relax, to really touch with awareness our own experience of whatever's going on. And in that, we can discover over and over again

the limitless space of the human heart, of our own heart.

The difficulties in retreat are extremely important. I know you think we always say this, and we say it to keep you going, but really it's not just fine until you get to the pīti and the sukha and all the good stuff. Where do you think we're going to really open to tenderness and compassion? Just by having everything nicey-nice all the time? No. The difficulties that come up in retreat, and each time that we meet them face to face—this is really the place where we are touching the tenderness of our hearts, the vastness of compassion.

So really looking at it, as you go through whatever your demons are: How do you meet the pain in your body, the fear, your feelings of disappointment or discouragement, sleepiness, anger, envy, that judging mind, our irritations with others—whatever it is? We don't have to have some incredible, worthy kind of suffering. Sleepiness really will do very well if you're hating it. The pain about it, the resistance. How do we meet

these experiences? This is really the place where our deep insights into the nature of suffering, our connectedness with all beings in this field of suffering, and the deep tenderness or compassion for ourselves and all beings arise—right here in the middle of these difficulties, when we can meet them with kindness, with openness, without judging.

And one way this is really important: first, of course, by not judging, by meeting it in the moment, we're at least allowing ourselves to see what's actually happening. So we learn compassion for suffering because we see how much of our suffering is extra. For example, there's that twinge in the knee, and then there's all the fear and aversion and future projection we create around it. That part's extra—extra suffering. What Joseph said his yogi friend called "the rope burn" of holding on when we could just let go.

But another way that meeting each arising difficult experience, whenever we can, with that clarity, that complete connection, that openness—it goes back to what I quoted the Buddha as saying before: where we frequently let the mind dwell, that will become the inclination of mind.

So you're sitting here, and these judging thoughts—you know how it is, it's just so common that we're just completely one after the other after the other with these judging thoughts, and then we hate them, and then we hate ourselves for having them, and then we hate ourselves for not being kind to them, and on and on and on, infinite regression. Now the judging thoughts themselves, that they arise in a moment, is really the effect, the result of our past habits of mind. That it's arising now, you don't have a choice about it, because obviously if we had a choice, we would choose not to think that. But it's out of our control. So it's really the effect of past karma, the effect of past intentions, of past dwelling: "You're a stupid jerk, you can't do anything right, I can't believe you did that again." It's just what it is.

Now, in the moment that we meet it with "Ah, that's judging"—that's all, just "Ah, that's judging," noticing it—in that moment, what quality, what intention is being cultivated, is being developed? It's not judging. It's clear seeing and compassion. And so each moment that we meet a difficult experience, just fully and openly—you don't have to say, "Oh, may I be compassionate to this"—just meeting it with that kind, non-judging attention is in itself a moment of mindfulness. There's no greed, there's no hatred, there's no confusion. So simply each moment of mindfulness is shifting our habit, shifting the tendency of mind. Our mind is not dwelling anymore in the kilesas; it's dwelling in clarity, it's dwelling in compassion.

And so those times that you've gone through a long, drawn-out, difficult time, and you think you weren't perfectly mindful, you sometimes got caught, you think nothing's happening—mostly we can't recognize in looking back how much mindfulness, how many moments there actually were when there was just this pure meeting of it. Because we expect something to happen from that, other than just being with it. But something is happening on a level we don't notice right away. We're changing the habits, we're changing the way we relate to life. And compassion and wisdom are strengthening. It's like learning to trust that more, even if it's subconscious. So it's extremely powerful and important practice.

Once I was practicing in a long retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, and I was in a phase where I could report—he does use the word "report," very clearly. It is like a report. You go in and report: this is what's happening. And so I would just say what I was noting. I didn't give any content, but what was happening was really heavy judging thoughts. I didn't even mention that. But he has this way—I know Steve told a story the other night—he has this way of knowing what's going on, even when you don't give the content.

And so he said to me, "You know, some yogis talk to themselves on retreat. Have you ever noticed that?" He can actually be quite funny. I said, "Yeah, yeah, I've noticed that." He goes, "Well, you know, it's supposed to be a silent retreat." Yeah, I laugh too. It was just his way of saying, you know, you don't have to do that. Silence really being the nonreactive mind. It was a kind moment. He was being kind.

So on the level of our moment-to-moment awareness, clear awareness is cultivating both our trust and understanding—the essential wisdom of emptiness—as well as our familiarity and trust in the heart of compassion. And the two really can't be separated.

Pema Chödrön again: "At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness or open space." And they're both true—kinship with all beings, groundlessness or open space.

So we start where we are. Our highest aspiration, our deepest purpose, can inform our commitment, how we respond, the intentions we bring to our life, to our choices, in present moment situations. And our ordinary circumstances of life are enough.

Gandhi once said that almost everything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it. And it's not like we're suddenly going to become Shantideva, who was the ultimate expression of the bodhisattva, author of the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*—very moving. We just start where we are.

One teacher I heard once referred to compassionate action as "doing the obvious." There's a situation, and given the whole of it, you do what's obvious to be done. There's no sense of amazement or major compassion—you just respond in an appropriate way.

I heard an interview on NPR a few years ago with a young pro basketball player in his rookie year. I forget what team he was on. You can imagine how for a young guy to make it to the pros, that's got to be the biggest thing in his life, maybe the biggest chance he'd ever have. They were interviewing him because his sister needed a kidney transplant, and he was going to give her his kidney if their types matched—which meant that would effectively end his pro basketball career. I'm not sure why it would, actually, but that's what the interviewer was saying. And the interviewer was so amazed, really trying to build him up: "What an amazing thing you're doing! You're so incredible!"

And this guy just sounded so grounded. He said, "What are you talking about? It's my sister's life versus playing basketball. I mean, what's to think about?"

Just doing the obvious. At this point we don't even think about it as being a compassionate person. It's just the natural expression of clear seeing.

And it can start with these small, insignificant actions and strengthen as we have more and more trust—in the power of awareness, in the power of connectedness, in the power of clear seeing. We don't need to fall back as much into our self-referential protections of fear and desire. We can trust that we can open to the world.

And then it's as Shantideva says: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

CHAPTER 335

Mettā and Meditation

Carol Wilson · 13 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Carol Wilson leads practitioners through a comprehensive mettā (loving-kindness) practice that extends outward to encompass all beings in every direction. The session follows the traditional progression of the brahmavihāra practice, beginning with oneself, moving to a benefactor or friend, and then expanding to radiate loving-kindness directionally—north, east, south, west, above, and below.*
>
> *Carol offers practical guidance for maintaining authentic connection throughout the practice, emphasizing flexibility when attention becomes scattered or overextended. She suggests returning to easier categories—self or benefactor—whenever the energy feels lost, then reopening to all beings once recollected. The practice incorporates multiple ways of connecting: visualizing specific beings, feeling the kinesthetic sense of sending well-wishes, or simply extending energy geographically across the earth and beyond.*
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> *The meditation highlights mettā's essential quality of total inclusion—embracing humans, animals, beings in other realms, those we like, those we find difficult, and the vast majority we will never know. Carol emphasizes not leaning forward or forcing results, but rather letting phrases arise naturally from the heart as gifts offered freely. This practice cultivates the boundless quality of loving-kindness that makes no separation, extending warmth and well-wishing to all beings in all realms and conditions.*

Tonight, in the loving-kindness practice, we'll open to sending loving-kindness to all beings. There are various ways to do this, and we'll only do it one way tonight, which will be directionally.

But still, we start in the usual way. Start with yourself. After some moments, I'll suggest going to either a benefactor or friend—whatever category has been the easiest for you to connect with. And then from that, I'll guide us into all beings in the various directions.

Just a word as we get to all beings: as you're radiating directions, sending these wishes to all beings in a particular direction, moving out—if at any time you find, not just that you lose connection a little bit (of course that's normal), but that in moving into all beings, after some time you really start to feel a bit lost, almost as if the energy's

overextended—then that's a sign to just come back again to the easiest: self, benefactor, friend. Recollect the attention, the sense of well-wishing, the focus, and then again you can open up to all beings. So continuing to use this flexible approach.

As always, beginning with ourself, connecting with the sense of your body. Presence in this body, in this moment, in this space. Take a moment to recollect, to connect, turn your attention to some wholesome, some skillful or beautiful aspect of yourself—thought, word, or deed.

For some people, the forgiveness practice is a good way to start: forgiving oneself for any harm, offering forgiveness to those who have harmed us, asking forgiveness from those we have harmed.

And then in your own time, beginning the loving-kindness to yourself, using your own phrases, making sure you connect with either a felt physical sense, a feeling quality, or a mental image. Connect with yourself and then begin the loving-kindness.

Now moving to whichever has been easiest for you—either benefactor, mentor, or friend. Take a moment to connect with their wholesome, their beautiful qualities. And when you feel that sense of openness, of inclusion, begin offering one phrase at a time. Gently, steadily, not leaning forward or trying to make something happen. Just settle back. Let the phrase arise from within the heart area. And just offer it as a gift.

Now to begin radiating loving-kindness to all beings. Begin by imagining sending these waves of loving energy in the whole quadrant to the north, which is behind you, in front of me. You might find different ways your mind connects, your heart connects. For example, just imagine sending this energy widening and widening and widening behind you. Sometimes I'll imagine different beings I know to the north—animals or people. Sometimes just kinesthetically feeling the sense of sending this well-wishing in that direction. Sometimes categories of beings might pop up: all females in the north, all males. But we use the same phrases, just really kinesthetically sending the energy to the north, one phrase at a time.

May all beings in the north be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May all beings in the north be happy and peaceful. May all beings to the north be healthy and well. May all beings to the north live with ease of well-being.

You might just start small—just the people behind you—and let it widen out. Just experiment, see how it feels, what helps you connect.

Now sending loving-kindness to all beings to the east, to your left towards the forest. All beings includes humans, animals, unknown beings in other realms, those we like, those we find difficult, mostly those we don't know. You can either imagine geographically all areas to the east covering the whole earth and beyond, or various specific beings, using the phrases to anchor, connect your attention, your energy in the present moment.

Now all beings in the south, towards the altar. Beings most immediately to your south, extending infinitely through this whole earth and beyond, the whole universe. All beings in all realms, in all conditions, towards the south.

And all beings to the west, towards Pleasant Street. People in the cities to the west, in the country. People driving on roads, traveling, healthy, in hospitals. All the animals, in various stages of being born and dying. The west, here in Barre, throughout the state, and on infinitely. When you lose the thread, come back to yourself or benefactor or friend, recollect the energy, and again open up to all beings to the west.

And then all beings above. Of course that's obviously birds and insects, humans going over in airplanes, but also the infinity of unknown beings above us through the atmosphere and beyond. There's no being left out. Mettā being total inclusion, not making separation. Simple connection.

And then all beings below.

Just imagining immediately below us, through the earth, the animals that live and burrow in the earth, in the seas, all the way through the earth to the other side and beyond. May all beings below be safe and protected.

And just for the last moments, sending this radiating, this loving energy outward in all directions. Imagine it spreading out from your heart center, radiating in all directions—this warmth, this inclusion that wishes safety, happiness, health and well-being to all beings in all realms, in all conditions.

May all beings everywhere be happy.

CHAPTER 336

First Saṅgha of Nuns

Carol Wilson · 1h05

In this deeply inspiring talk, Carol Wilson explores the rich legacy of the first Buddhist nuns (bhikkhunīs), drawing from the Therīgāthā—the collection of enlightenment poems by the Buddha's female disciples. She begins with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's aunt who persistently petitioned for women's ordination despite initial refusal, ultimately establishing the bhikkhunī saṅgha. Wilson then shares stories of remarkable women teachers: Khemā, renowned for deepest insight, who awakened instantly upon witnessing impermanence; Paṭācārā, who transformed unimaginable grief into boundless compassion; and Dhammadinnā, whose Dhamma explanations the Buddha declared equal to his own.

The talk illuminates how awakening transcends all social boundaries—from slave women like Puṇṇikā who boldly spoke truth to Brahmin priests, to the courtesan Ambapālī who used her aging body as the ground for liberation. Wilson shares poems from nuns who struggled for years with restless minds and longing for pleasure, offering reassurance that the path is rarely quick or easy. She also highlights women who found freedom late in life, including those escaping oppressive marriages and elderly practitioners renowned for courageous effort.

These 2,500-year-old voices feel strikingly contemporary—women navigating grief, difficult relationships, physical decline, and spiritual doubt. Their poems consistently point to one truth: suffering itself becomes the avenue for awakening when met with presence and clear seeing. The talk invites practitioners to feel solidarity with this ancient lineage and trust that the path remains available to all.

The longer I'm involved in this practice, both sitting and teaching all the different aspects, the more appreciative I am of the sense of lineage—that we're not just hanging out here doing something that somebody made up fifty years ago and hoping that it works. There's this long, 2,500-year documented history of people going through more or less what we're going through here, believe it or not.

Of course, we think of the Buddha, perhaps, as the beginning of the lineage. But tonight I want to share some of the stories and poems of some of the first women who became nuns during the time of the Buddha. We hear about the Buddha a lot, and we hear about his chief male disciples. There are some books in the suttas that contain poems of some of the main monks and some of the main nuns from the time of the Buddha.

Reading these poems and then reading the stories of the women to whom they are attributed is really incredibly inspiring to me, because it's not at all a sense of some dry women who lived somewhere and have nothing in common with me.

Even though it's true that all the poems are written by women or men who became fully enlightened—it seems that was the criterion to get your poem published through posterity, so there are really no poems of miserable, dejected failures—some of the poems are written by women who felt like miserable, dejected failures for long periods of time during their practice.

I want to tell some of these stories and share some of their poems, because to me they seem just as real now, reading their poems, as we are. They come from all different backgrounds within the tradition of the Indian subcontinent 2,500 years ago—all economic levels and all life backgrounds. Their stories were incredibly difficult, incredibly easy, just like us.

To begin, of course, one has to begin with the woman who is credited for bringing the nun or bhikkhunī saṅgha into existence in the first place. Her name was Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. That's a long name. We'll just call her Pajāpatī. She was the aunt of the Buddha, the younger sister of his mother.

She's credited with bringing the bhikkhunī saṅgha into existence because for some years after the Buddha left home, when he came back, met his family, and began the teachings, there was a whole monk saṅgha around him. But while he had many women lay followers, there wasn't an ordained women's saṅgha for some time. So she started it.

As I said, she was the younger sister of the Buddha's mother, and both sisters were married to the same man, the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana. This is all I'll say about it, but you'll hear through all these stories a really different culture from this one. All the kings and wealthy men had numerous wives and consorts and women in their harem. There's a whole different ideal of wifely devotion—sort of forced devotion, you could say—in a marriage. It's just a very different context.

The Buddha's mother, Māyā, died when he was a week old. Pajāpatī, his aunt, brought him up. She also had two children of her own. When the Buddha, before he was the Buddha, left his kingdom, his aunt who was like his mother, his wife, and his newborn son—when he went off to do his practice and become the Buddha, leaving the whole family behind—and when he came back, his welcome was maybe a little tentative at first. But the family did welcome and listen to him. His father King Suddhodana, Pajāpatī, and also her son, who was close to the Buddha's age, all became great followers of the Buddha, though they remained lay followers.

Over the years, not really so very long, both the Buddha's son and Pajāpatī's son left home to become monks, followers of the Buddha. Soon after that, the king died. Now this left Pajāpatī—even though she was from a wealthy family and there was a whole court—in a difficult position. In that time, women's place in society was usually very much determined by the men in their lives: either their husband or their father or their son. In Pajāpatī's case, her husband had died, her father was dead, and her sons had left to become monks.

She was a very powerful woman, and many other women looked to her for guidance. At this time, as many men were joining the bhikkhu saṅgha, many other women were left alone. They came to Pajāpatī for guidance and to see what to do. Remember, Pajāpatī was very devoted to the teachings, not only to the Buddha himself.

At this time, with all these women on their own, there came another event: a small war between the kingdom of the Buddha's family and the neighboring kingdom. The Sakyans and the Koliyans had a fight over water rights, which seems like the way we're going again. In this fight, more men were killed, so more women were left alone.

They all went to the Buddha and asked him to help with this dispute. He came, being related to both sides, and gave such a rousing and inspiring Dhamma talk that many more men went and became monks. So now you have what's called "five hundred women"—five hundred is the number used in the texts to mean "many"—five hundred women, together with Pajāpatī Gotamī, sitting around saying, "Now what do we do?" But they were really very devoted. They got together and said, "Why can't we also join the homeless life? We really want to come to freedom."

This is where who Pajāpatī was really comes into play. It's her qualities of real courageous devotion, persistence, steadfastness, and humility that got the bhikkhunī saṅgha going.

Because when they first went to ask the Buddha if they could be ordained, with Pajapati at their head, the Buddha said no. She asked three times, which is the classical technique. The first time you get a no, the second time you get a no, and you're supposed to get a yes the third time. But she didn't get a yes the third time. The Buddha still said no. He said, "Enough. Don't set your heart on women being allowed to do this." No explanation. Just don't.

It's hard to look at something not through our cultural bias. But at that time, even though within the Buddha's Sangha—both nuns when they came to be and also monks—he was quite radical in that there was no sense of caste division, no sense that if a king came to become a monk he was considered better than a beggar who became a

monk. Nothing of that. He wiped it away. But still, there's a way that the Buddha didn't really go around trying to completely uproot the outer society. A lot of his important lay followers were kings and wealthy people. And while he preached the precepts and generosity, he really wasn't, at least from what we read, preaching radical politics or economics. So anyway, he wouldn't do it.

Now, another person—a woman less devoted, a woman less awakened and clear in the fact that the ordained life would be worthwhile for her—might have given up. I mean, really, it's the Buddha who said no, not his second in command. But she didn't give up.

The Buddha left with his retinue, as was his wont, and wandered some hundred and fifty miles or so away. And she, with the women, followed him. She shaved her head, put on orange robes, and barefoot they followed him all that way, and came to the hall where he was staying and just stood outside crying.

At this point, Ananda—remember Ananda, the Buddha's very devoted, kindhearted, compassionate attendant—stepped in. He saw her there, asked why she was there and what was the problem, and she said the Buddha would not permit them, the women, to enter the homeless life.

So Ananda went to the Buddha, and he said, "Pajapati is standing outside with swollen feet covered with dust. It would be good if you would allow women to enter the homeless life." And the Buddha said the same thing to Ananda three times: "Don't set your heart on allowing women to do this. Enough."

But Ananda also didn't give up. He's very persistent in the service of compassion. So it's said that he thought about it and thought, okay, let me try asking another way. And he says, "Are women able, Lord, when they have entered into homelessness, to realize the fruits of awakening, the four stages of enlightenment?"

The Buddha says, "Of course, no question. It's nothing to do with that."

And Ananda says, "Well then, if women are able to realize perfection, and since Pajapati did so much for you—she was your aunt, your nurse, your foster mother, and when your mother died she even suckled you at her own breast—it would be good if you allowed women to enter into the homeless life."

So then the Buddha said, "All right. You can enter." He did make eight special rules for women. And all through the history of the bhikkhuni order, the rules of both orders were made up as they went along. He didn't sit down and think, "Two hundred and twenty-seven rules for monks have arisen in my mind, and here they are." Rather, each

time something would go wrong, they'd make a new rule. And so the women ended up with more rules, sort of out of protection in that society. He started by making special rules for women that they had to agree to, which she did. She agreed to them, and so the Bhikkhuni Sangha was born.

And what's wonderful is that out of this Bhikkhuni Sangha—sure, they all looked to the Buddha as their teacher and listened to the Buddha's teachings—but within the bhikkhuni sangha, just as many really inspiring and courageous and great women teachers arose as within the men's sangha. In these poems, there are many verses just referring to how another nun helped to inspire awakening in the heart of the nun who's writing the poem. And so in a way, within the ordained sangha, the women really were inspirations and sisters and supports for one another. A really very rich and alive sangha.

It's very inspiring to me to get in touch with that by reading about these women. And they were all different.

You know, Pajapati was a great leader and teacher. There were several other women very well known as great teachers, each with different qualities. Other women preferred the quiet life of a recluse, just living in nature in the forest, as did many of the monks. Some had enormous struggle through years and years of practice. Some awakened right away and cruised. It's different for everyone, but the Sangha of women was very rich and very deep in understanding.

So I want to read you Pajapati's poem. This particular translation is by Andrew Olendzki, who is the director of the study center down the road.

She says:

Buddha, hero, praise be to you,
you foremost among all beings.
You who have released me from pain
and so many other folk too.

All suffering has been understood.
The source of craving has withered.
Cessation has been touched by me
on the noble eightfold path.

I've been mother and son before,
and father, brother, grandmother, too.
Not understanding what was real,
I flowed on without finding peace.

But now I've seen the Blessed One.
This is my last compounded birth.
The onflowing of birth has expired.
There's no more re-becoming now.

See the gathering of followers,
putting forth effort, self-controlled,
always with strong resolution.
This is how to honor the Buddhas.

There's that sense of how courageous practice is how we honor the Buddhas. That's really what it's about.

It's said that Mahapajapati died when she was 120 years old. And just as there's a lot of mythology around the birth and death of the Buddha, so also around Mahapajapati. It's said that at her death, and again at her cremation, all kinds of miracles occurred in the earth and in the heavens. I like that because it shows that in the mythology, there's a real honoring of her as a very important woman in the beginning and the carrying out of the teachings.

Now I want to talk about some of the other women who became very important teachers to the other nuns and also to laypeople. And then just some of the range—because it's so wonderful—the range of lives that led these women to come into the homeless life, and then the range of experience they went through after. It's just like here on retreat: it wasn't a picnic.

Women from all classes came: sisters of kings, consorts to kings, really poor beggar women, poor prostitutes, very well-to-do prostitutes, slaves, women who were actually insane at the time they met the Buddha. Just the whole range.

The first one I'll speak about, her name is Khema. She came to be known as the nun with the deepest insight. Her story is fun—it's one of the more delightful stories.

She was incredibly beautiful. And because of her great beauty, she was the chief consort of King Bimbisara. Now a consort isn't a wife. He also had a couple of wives and many other consorts, but she was the chief consort. In that time, this gave her a lot of status. She lived a life of great ease and comfort. She was very conceited about how beautiful she was. And she really liked her life of pleasure.

So it's not that she was going around looking for some teaching of renunciation. She didn't really want to know about it. But King Bimbisara was a follower of the Buddha. The Buddha often came to his palace grounds to preach. But Khema would never go hear him, because she had heard that he spoke about the dangers of sense pleasures and the need for renunciation. She thought, "I don't want to hear that."

I like that, because I can relate. The very thing that's going to free us—we think it's going to take away our pleasure. We don't want to know about it. So she was like that.

But the king tricked her. Because he knew how much she liked beauty, and the Veluvana Hermitage where the Buddha would come and teach was very beautiful, he had court poets compose poems about the great natural beauty of this hermitage. Finally Khema said, "Well, I have to go and see this."

So she did. And of course it was beautiful, and of course, she couldn't avoid seeing the Buddha. When she came within his presence, he performed what might be called one of his magical displays—a technique that appears in several other stories as well. As she came close to him, with his magical powers he created an image of a goddess, one so much more beautiful than Kema that she was utterly fascinated. She thought, "Wow, she's incredibly beautiful." And then he had this image slowly grow old and decay, moving from beauty to aged and wrinkled skin and rotting teeth, gradually falling apart completely.

And she got it. It really went in. "Oh, yes—it's the same for me."

At that moment she was so open, so deeply struck, that as is so often the case, the Buddha only had to say a few things. He spoke more about how people devoted to physical beauty are bound, how they suffer in this world, and how those who can let go of that attachment are free. It is said that this penetrated so deeply that Kema became a rare example of a lay person who was fully enlightened at that moment—all four stages at once, just from hearing those words.

So of course she went to King Bimbisara and said, "I want out. I want to become a nun." And he gave permission. She came to be considered, as I mentioned, the nun with the deepest insight. It is extremely rare that someone is completely awakened as a lay person in just one moment.

Her story, her poem—I'm sure you've heard about, if you haven't actually read, how many of the poems of the monks or teachings about sense pleasures use as a way of counteracting lust a great deal of talk about the repulsiveness of the body, or what are often framed as the dangers of women, who might get in the way of the monk's chastity and purity of purpose. Many times in reading this, I know women who feel rather offended. And I think it's important to realize that this wasn't simply something male directed toward female. Many of the nuns' poems contain the same imagery, the same sense of examining the almost repulsive nature of sense pleasures and the decaying aspects of the body. It's not that the men alone see it this way while women are all out there being dangerous. Although being in some monastic places in Thailand, it might seem like they think that.

There's one thing I perhaps shouldn't mention. At Suan Mokkh, which is actually very eclectic for a Theravadan monastery in Thailand, they have one big building called a spiritual theater with all kinds of poems and pictures—including the Zen ox herding pictures, which if you're familiar with Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, to find in a monastery is really quite amazing. But what I really remember was this one very large drawing of a woman with chains coming out of her, hooks on the ends, as if ready to snare the monks. I mention this only because the same imagery appears from the women's side as well. And I think that's genuinely interesting.

So—Kema's poem:

Pleasures of the senses are swords and stakes.
The elements of mind and body are a chopping block for them.
What you call delight is not delight for me.
Everywhere, the love of pleasure is destroyed.
The great dark is torn apart.
And death, you too are destroyed.
For myself, I honor the Enlightened One.
And best of all, in practicing his teaching, I'm completely freed from suffering.

They use this phrase often—"the great dark is torn apart"—as a kind of expression for the experience of awakening. But I love it because it's so vivid. The great dark is torn apart.

There's a lovely story that follows the account of Kema the Nun. One of the other great kings, King Pasenadi—who was actually a much more devout follower of the Buddha than Bimbisara—came to a town looking for a senior monk to instruct him. None could be found, but they said, "Here is the Bhikkhuni Kema." At that time, for a king to go and sit at the feet of a woman and take teachings would have seemed quite

outside the structure of society. But he didn't even think about it. He went straight there, bowed to her, and received teachings from her, with which he was very pleased and happy. Just a sign that the process of awakening has nothing to do with gender or age or class or anything else. And that's the radical aspect, I think, of the Buddha's teaching and of the lives of the women and men who lived with him.

Now, this next story is very different. Patachara was also one of the greatest teachers among the nuns. In fact, in all the poems of the nuns, she is referred to more than any other woman as helping to awaken the hearts of the different nuns. She came to be a nun through enormous, enormous suffering. The last time I was telling this story on a retreat, some friends told me later that it was one of those stories that goes on and on to the point where they said they were almost ready to start laughing—you simply can't believe one more thing is going to happen. But I'll try to shorten it while still giving you the full story.

Born to a wealthy banker's family in the town of Savatthi, at a time when all marriages were arranged, she fell in love with a servant—someone her parents would never allow her to marry. So they ran away to a distant village, got married, and were happy.

When she began to have her first child, the custom at the time was to return to your family to give birth. But understandably, her husband didn't really want to go. He procrastinated. They started out so late that she had the baby while they were still on the road, so then they went back to their distant village.

When she was about to have her second child, the same thing happened. The husband didn't want to go, and she finally started out without him. He caught up with her on the road, and she began to go into labor—again, not all the way home. He was with her, but just as she began to go into labor, a huge violent storm started. Thunder, pouring rain. So the husband went off to collect some branches and brush to build a shelter for her while she was having this baby.

While he's off, he's bitten by a poisonous snake and he dies. She doesn't know where he is. She thinks he's deserted her. She has the baby in this terrible storm, and then as the storm passes the next day, she has no idea where he is. But what can she do? She gathers up her first child, a couple of years old, and the baby, and says, "Well, I might as well keep going towards my parents' house." She stumbles across her husband—her dead husband. Understandably, she's crazed. But what can she do? She keeps going.

She comes to a river that's hugely swollen from the rain. This is where it really gets bad. It's so swollen she can't cross it holding on to both children. So she leaves the older child on one bank, crosses over and puts the baby on the other bank, starts crossing back—and a big hawk swoops down and takes the baby while she's in the middle of the river. She starts screaming. The other child thinks she's calling him. He starts into the river, but she can't get to him, and he's swept away and dies.

So she keeps on going towards Savatthi. She gets to the edge of town and says to the first person she sees—and she's pretty crazed by this time—asks about her family. And the man says, "Ask me anything else, but don't ask me that." And she said, "But that's all I want to know." The storm had brought down their house and it caught on fire, and both her parents and her brother were dead.

At that moment, she went insane—just literally crazed with grief. She tore off all her clothes, began walking in circles and babbling. People didn't want her around. They threw things at her, drove her out of town. And she was, for some time, like that—just walking around crazed.

At some point, and it's not clear how long—if it's days or weeks or years—she comes to the Jeta Grove, one of the places the Buddha stayed often. But as she began to come close to him while he was teaching, because she looked insane, because she didn't make sense, because she didn't have clothes on, his disciples tried to protect him, tried to drive her away. But he, of course, sensed what was happening. He made them stop and said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind."

And immediately she did. She came and sat in front of him, and a kind man gave her a cloak to wear. She told him her story and said, "Please, Lord, help me."

What the Buddha said is so powerful. It's really the power of speaking truth to suffering—how he was just so straight. Not like, "Oh, it's okay." He said, "Don't think you've come to someone who can help you with that. In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than all the water in the four oceans."

It's powerful. When someone comes to me with a story, to just be able to be that clear, that direct. And you think this is bad—all your other lives, this is how it is. And that, of course, really went in for her.

He kept talking about how when we die, no one else can help us, just as we can't help our relatives who die, and everyone is going to die. And that really opened her up to begin to just accept the truth. She became a nun.

It's not one of those stories where immediately she was awakened, but it opened her to be able to use her immense, unbelievable suffering to first awaken herself—which she did, and there's a lovely poem of her awakening. But then you can imagine how she would become such a vast reservoir of compassion and support and inspiration

for the many, many other women who joined the Sangha. There were many women who joined out of grief—their husband or their children or their families had died. And just having been through that, she became, as I said, really the greatest teacher of the women nuns and the one most often referred to by the others.

What's nice about her story—I mean her poem—is that it describes the moment when her heart awakened. And it's clear it's not just at the beginning of the time that she became a nun, because it begins with a sort of lament about what am I doing wrong, one that maybe you can relate to. She says:

I've done everything right. I followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?

Then she says:

Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope. I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell. I checked the bed and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick of the lamp down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed.

Just that simple moment. And if you notice, it's also the sense of discouragement, picking yourself up and concentrating your mind again. You just do it. And then after a period of concentration, real awareness, but also that relaxation of just being in the moment—the simple moment of patting your bed and putting down the wick of your lamp—the mind was freed. Now we're always telling you it's not just about the sitting and the walking. It's really just about that presence.

So that's Patachara.

And I'll just read you one poem by one of the women who mentions her. Chanda was one of the women in deep grief whose whole family—husband, children, parents—all died at once of an epidemic. And she, having no other family to take care of her, she didn't go crazy, but she had to become a beggar to survive. It was such a family-oriented culture. And so she was a beggar for years. This is her poem:

I was in a bad way, a widow, no children, no friends, no relations to give me food and clothes. I was a beggar with a bowl and stick and wandered house to house in the heat and cold for seven years. I met a nun who had food and drink, and I went up to her and said, take me into the homeless life. She was Patachara. Out of pity, she guided me in leaving home, encouraged me, and urged me to the highest goal. I took her advice. It wasn't wasted. There are no obsessions in my mind.

But you notice, the first thing is: I met a nun who had food and drink. It's not like she was starving and Patachara said, "Sit down, let me teach you the high dharma." She fed her. We need to be taken care of. And then she urged her to the highest goal.

The last of the really great teachers I want to mention has, again, a different story. Her name was Dhamma Dina, and she was supposed to be—everyone seems to have a label. I don't know if that's just the way they could remember to write down later who was who. But she was considered the foremost in preaching, the best in answering questions in oratory.

She was married to an important man in Rajagaha, Visaka, and they had a very happy marriage, which was lucky at that time since the marriages were arranged. But one day her husband went out and he heard the Buddha teaching, and he was awakened to some degree. And when he came home, he was so absorbed in what he had heard and in his new perspective on life that instead of greeting Dhamma Dina, sitting down, eating together as they usually did, he just ignored her and kept going.

And she, of course: What did I do wrong? Oh, my Lord, are you angry at me? How can I make you happy? You know, the whole thing. And finally he said, "Okay, let's talk." He told her about the Buddha, about his realization, and that he really wanted to renounce the world and become a monk. And he said, "I'll give you all my wealth. You can stay here. You can go back to your parents. Here's all my money. What do you want to do?"

And she thought it over and said, "Well, I'll renounce too."

And he gave her a big send-off, carried in on a litter and everything, as she went to join the bhikkhuni order. So she became a nun. She practiced intensively and, of course, awakened after some time.

Then at some point after her awakening, she found herself back in Rajagaha, where she had lived with her husband. And it turned out he'd changed his mind—he hadn't actually become a monk after all. But now she was an arahant, completely awakened. She didn't care. And really, he'd done her a big favor.

She doesn't have a poem so much, but she has actually a whole sutta in the Middle-Length Sayings where her husband Visakha is asking the lady Dhammadina all these questions. It's a very subtle and profound question-and-answer sutta with this nun. And what's really special—I just read it tonight, and it's really very subtle stuff—at the end, he keeps on asking and asking and asking, and finally she says, "Enough. You're never going to come to the end of your questions. Go ask the Buddha."

So he goes to the Buddha and reports everything Dhammadina had said, and the Buddha said, "Very good. I would have answered exactly as she did. What she says, I would have said. So that's the meaning, and you should remember it."

There's a special word for this, when the Buddha says that what a nun or monk said is exactly the same as he would have said. It's called Buddhavacana—word of the Buddha. It's basically saying their understanding, their wisdom is equal to his own. And so this is the case of his saying that about the nun Dhammadina. Again, another example that once there's awakening, gender, caste, class has nothing to do with anything—that truth can exist and does exist in all of us.

So those are some who became great teachers. There are a couple others whose stories I really like, from very different levels of society. They didn't particularly become great teachers after they entered the bhikkhuni order, but their stories are wonderful.

One is a woman named Punnika, who was a slave woman. She was a slave in the household of Anathapindika. You read his name a lot—he was the main lay supporter of the Buddha. Many of these suttas take place somewhere called the Jeta Grove, and Anathapindika actually gave the Jeta Grove to the Buddha's Sangha. And yet he had slaves. I can't put it together. It's a different culture.

But anyway, Punnika was a slave woman, and even when she was a slave she heard the Buddha teach, and she became awake in the first stage of enlightenment. In the Theravada there are four stages, and she heard the teaching and was awakened to the truth. What I love about this story is the power of truth—that she knew what was true and had so much faith and courage in that knowing that she was willing to speak that truth in a place where a slave woman could have really gotten in big trouble.

Her job was to go down to the river every day and draw water, bring it back to the house. One morning she was down there when a Brahmin man came along. Now, you know in India they had this whole caste system that you were born into, and there was nothing you could do about it. The Brahmin caste was the highest caste, so a Brahmin

man would be of the highest standing. I would imagine a slave woman would be among the lowest. And this Brahmin man came down to the river pursuing a Hindu custom of that time—washing himself in the river to wash away his past misconduct.

Punnika, taking her stand on what she knew was the truth, completely challenged him on it. Let me read you the poem, because I find it so moving—to be so sure of what is true and so unconcerned with what could happen.

She says, "I'm a water carrier. Even in the cold, I've always gone down to the water, frightened of punishment or the angry words of high-class women." It's a dialogue poem. She says, "So what are you afraid of, Brahmin, that makes you go down to the water? Your limbs are shaking with bitter cold."

And he says, "You know what I'm doing? I'm washing away my bad deeds."

And she says, "Whoever told you that you are freed from evil by washing?"

The blind leading the blind. In that case, all frogs and turtles would go to heaven.

And she said, thieves, executioners, other wrongdoers would be freed from their bad karma by washing in the water. If these streams carried away all your old evil, they would carry away your virtue too. You'd be separated from both.

And she says, just don't do that thing, the fear of which brings you down here to wash.

See how powerful it is just to speak the truth. And of course, he immediately realizes that she's right. He immediately sees into the truth and says, "You're right. I'm wrong. You've brought me back to the right road. Here, let me give you the robe I bathed in," as a gesture of gratitude.

And she says, "Keep your robe. I don't want it."

But she gives him a little lecture on sila. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, then don't do anything evil, either openly or in secret. If you're afraid of pain, if you don't like it, then take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Train in the precepts. This is good.

Can you imagine a slave woman saying this to a Brahmin man? And of course he completely takes refuge and goes to the Buddha. And then Anathapindika gave her her freedom, adopted her as a daughter, and she renounced and went and joined the bhikkhuni order.

I just love that story because the power of truth transcends all differences. And it took a lot of guts on her part.

Another very different story is that of Ambapali. Ambapali was the chief courtesan, not of a particular person, but of the whole town of Vesali. She was born really beautiful and all the princes were fighting over her. So they decided, in order not to have these fights, they would just make her the chief courtesan of the town. That means basically the head prostitute—any man could pay her. So she was really rich and had a very high status, and was really beautiful. She had a very good life.

She had a son by King Bimbisara—we've met him before. Her son went off and became a monk, and he would come back and talk to his mother about the Buddha's teachings. So she didn't actually meet the Buddha until she was pretty old.

But when she did, the first time she was going out in her carriage to the grove where the Buddha was teaching, he knew she was coming and had to give all his monks a warning to keep their senses guarded, because she was so stunningly beautiful and seductive. But she was really going just to hear the Buddha. And she got very excited, invited him and all the monks to come for lunch the next day. He came, and he gave them a little lecture—just eat your lunch and watch what you're doing. But nothing happened.

It's said that later in her life, after hearing her son preach, she renounced the world. What's interesting is that according to the commentaries, the thing that actually brought her to awakening, the thing she studied, was impermanence—using her own aging body as the subject, watching how her beautiful body, which had been her whole life, was breaking down. Just seeing this in herself, she came to complete awakening.

I wanted to read some of her poem because I find it has a real sense of humor about it. Remembering that this was her avenue—watching her body decay—something that's available to all of us:

My hair was black and curly, the color of black bees.
Now that I am old, it is like the hemp of trees.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

Fragrant as a scented oak, I wore flowers in my hair.
Now because of old age, it smells like dog's hair.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

My eyes flashed like jewels, long and black.
Now they don't make anyone look back.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

And she goes on and on through every part of her body:

My hands were beautiful, set off by rings, gold as the sun.
Now because of old age, they're like radishes or onions.
This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

My feet were beautiful, delicate, as if filled with cotton.
Now because of old age, they are cracked and rotten.

This is the teaching of one who speaks truth.

And she ends with, "This is how my body was. Now it is dilapidated, a place of pain, an old house with the plaster falling off."

If you really let that in—an old house with the plaster falling off—really coming from someone who spent her whole life engrossed in the pleasures of the body and how beautiful she was, that she can look at that not with discouragement or devastation, but that that is the seed for awakening. Really, in so many of these stories, the suffering is the seed of awakening, just what we keep saying all the time. And what I know a lot of you have discovered in your practice—it's the same now as it was then. Now when you're feeling really sick, instead of it being something wrong, it becomes the avenue for awakening.

We fall apart. More and more of us in chairs, more and more of us going through all kinds of physical difficulties. It's not a mistake. Sooner or later the plaster's going to fall off of all of us. Can we use it to awaken?

Speaking of suffering, there's a whole series of poems about women who, after they became nuns, still found it really tough. And to me, that's not discouraging. That's actually supportive, because so often you hear stories like Kema's—she heard three lines and became completely enlightened. Or we read that the Buddha gave a talk and five hundred people became completely enlightened. And we think, "Five years, ten years—what am I doing wrong?"

There are quite a few women with poems that show they had the same frustrations and struggles after they became nuns and were really seriously practicing. So just so we feel some solidarity.

The first is Utama. She was one of Patacara's disciples—remember, Patacara is the one with all the suffering. But I like this poem because it describes a moment in practice of utter frustration:

"Four or five times I left my cell. I had no peace of mind, no control over my mind."

You can get the feeling—in and out of your room, in and out, the mind going wild.

"I went to a nun I thought I could trust. She taught me the Dharma, the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, earth, water, fire, and wind. I heard what she said and sat cross-legged, seven days full of joy. When on the eighth I stretched my feet out, the great dark was torn apart."

And this is Vadesi. She was actually the nurse of Mahapajapati Gotami, the founder of the bhikkhuni order. She entered the order with Mahapajapati, but she didn't get enlightened right away. She had a long, hard struggle:

"It was twenty-five years since I left home, and I hadn't had a moment's peace."

So you think three months is long? You can just stop whining.

"Uneasy at heart, steeped in longing for pleasure, I held out my arms and cried out as I entered the monastery."

And you can really relate. It's not like some pure thing. We're just wanting pleasure—for twenty-five years.

"I went up to a nun I thought I could trust."

The commentaries say she's talking about Dhammadinna here.

"She taught me the Dharma, the elements of body and mind, the nature of perception, earth, water, fire, and wind. I heard her words and sat down beside her. I have great magic powers now and have annihilated all the obsessions of the mind. The Buddha's teaching has been done."

I love that—when they're really free, "the Buddha's teaching has been done." But it's hard work.

One other: Mitta Kali, who joined when she heard the Buddha preach the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. That teaching was so inspiring that she became a nun. But it's said that she was a very difficult person—very angry, very self-centered, very difficult to get along with. Coming into the bhikkhuni order, she had a hard time at first. But gradually, through very sincere practice, these qualities eased.

Here is her poem.

Although I left home for no home and wandered full of faith, I was still greedy for possessions and praise. I lost my way, my passions used me, and I forgot the real point of my wandering life. Then as I sat in my little cell, there was only terror.

This is another one of those moments. She thought, "This is the wrong way. A fever of longing controls me. Life is short. Age and sickness gnaw away. I have no time for carelessness before this body breaks." And as I watched the elements of mind and body rise and fall away, I saw them as they really are. I stood up. My mind was completely free. The Buddha's teaching has been done.

Again, we see that movement from feeling totally lost, filled with longing for pleasure and gripped by terror, to that willingness to come back and meet the moment. Just see what's happening. She found that sense of determination—"I have no time for carelessness"—and simply started watching the elements of mind and body rise and fall away. It just takes that moment of coming back again, no matter how hard it gets.

There are many others along similar lines. But there are also poems from women whose lives before held such suffering that joining the nunhood, renouncing the world, was actually a movement into freedom. I want to read you a few of these.

The difficulty of living in an arranged marriage with a difficult husband, where the wife is really like a slave or servant, having no freedom whatsoever—and in fact, women were not allowed to become nuns unless their husbands gave them permission. There's one poem from a woman known only as Sumangala's Mother. We don't even have her name; Sumangala was another monk. But this is her poem:

Free, I am free! How glad I am to be free from my pestle. My cooking pot seems worthless to me, and I can't even bear to look at his sun umbrella. My husband disgusts me. So I destroy greed and hate with a sizzle. And I'm the same woman who goes to the foot of a tree and says to herself, "Ah, happiness," and meditates with happiness.

Renunciation can be a great joy.

Here's another, from a woman named Muta who was in a very unhappy marriage. Her husband didn't treat her well, but she finally convinced him to let her become a nun. Again she says: Free, I am free! Free by means of the three crooked things—mortar, pestle, and my crooked husband. She doesn't say free *from* them; she says free *by* them. In other words, those very difficulties were the avenue. Seeing that suffering was itself the avenue for deliverance. "I'm free from birth and death and all that dragged me back."

And one more story of an unhappy housewife whose unhappiness led her into freedom. Another woman, an anonymous wife—we don't have her name—but her husband would not let her become a nun. So she continued to live out her obligations as a Brahmin wife, cooking and taking care of her husband. One day she was in the kitchen cooking curry, and the whole pot caught fire; all the vegetables burned up. She was so tuned in that this little mishap brought her to the third stage of enlightenment. Impermanence was just so clear. So next time you break a glass, you know...

Again, it's another example of a lay person, a lay woman, just being so present and open that a little incident really awakened her. Then she went to her husband and said, "I just can't do this anymore," and he let her go to be a nun.

Just one other group I want to mention: really old women. So many times, over the years, I've heard people of all ages say, "I wish I could have started practice earlier. Imagine if I knew about this twenty years ago, or thirty years ago, or forty years ago." But there were many women who, like these wives, could not become nuns until their husbands died. There's another woman who was taking care of her grandmother, whom she deeply loved, or her mother, and who couldn't or wouldn't ordain until she was free from her obligations. Some women were quite elderly by the time they became nuns.

And it's okay. Sometimes the feebleness of the body itself became the very point of awakening. There's one woman who actually awakened because she fell down—because she was so weak—and that's the thing that woke her up. Her name was Dhamma.

I wandered for alms. I leaned on a stick. My whole body was weak and trembled. Suddenly I fell down and could see clearly the misery of this body. My heart was freed.

Do we think of those two lines together? "I could see clearly the misery of this body. My heart was freed." I think that's amazing.

Another woman, her name is a mouthful—Bahu Pitika—had seven sons and seven daughters. Very wealthy. And she said, "Well, I'll give you children all the money now, and then you can just sort of take care of me." And they said, "Great, Ma. We'll take the money." And then they were passing her from family to family. It's sort of like a modern story. None of them wanted her. They started not treating her well. They started being sarcastic. She really felt unwanted. And finally said, "Who needs this? I'm going to go become a nun."

And this woman, quite elderly, became renowned as the nun most known for her courageous effort. Of all the nuns—not just the old nuns, of all the nuns—she was the most known for her courageous effort. She'd serve the nuns all day, and then she'd practice all night. And so, again, she became awakened. To me, that's also inspiring.

I'll just end with one story—not even a story, just a poem that I like very much from a woman named Dantika. It's another one of those moments:

As I left my daytime resting place on Vulture Peak, I saw an elephant come up on the riverbank after its bath. A man took a hook and said to the elephant, "Give me your foot." The elephant stretched out its foot, the man mounted. Seeing what was wild before gone tame under human hands, I went into the forest and concentrated my mind.

So let's sit quietly in the forest, concentrate our minds.

I have found what is vast and empty, the unborn. It is what I've longed for. I am a true daughter of the Buddha, always finding joy in peace.

CHAPTER 337

Contentment With Awareness

Carol Wilson · 51 min

> *In this opening talk for a three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses a fundamental shift in how we approach meditation practice: moving from a gaining mindset focused on particular experiences toward a simple contentment with awareness itself. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Chah, she explores how our habitual motivation—wanting results, seeking pleasant experiences, evaluating our progress—can actually obscure our connection to what she calls our "true home."*
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> *Wilson references the Sakka-pañha Sutta, where Sakka, ruler of the gods, asks the Buddha what keeps beings trapped in hostility despite good intentions. The Buddha's answer points to attachment to preferences—holding to what is dear and pushing away what is not dear—as the root of our entanglement. This teaching illuminates why the practice requires such a radical reorientation: from taking refuge in controlling our experience to taking refuge in awareness itself.*
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> *Through personal stories, including a powerful observation at Ramana Maharshi's ashram and the image of mountain monkeys launching fearlessly into space, Wilson illustrates the quality of surrender that deepens practice. She encourages practitioners to notice their "safety nets"—the comfort zones, ideas about self, and familiar patterns that limit full presence. When these begin to fray, we encounter what she calls "the wall," moments requiring small deaths of who we thought we were. Rather than obstacles, these are gateways to recognizing that our true home is available only in this moment, met with fresh, kind, reverent attention.*

Greetings to you all after your first full day of practice.

I suppose the first full day of a three-month retreat isn't really that different from the first full day of a nine-day or a weekend. The body still has to go through what it has to go through. The mind has to go through what it has to go through. And you've got three more months of it. Luckily, it keeps changing.

Tonight I want to talk in a general way about motivation—about developing a contentment with awareness.

In our retreat practice, our meditation practice, we bring the same mindset that we bring to our lives. What else could we bring? And just as in life, I'm sure you've heard the phrase from the Tibetan tradition that everything rests on the tip of motivation—that the heart, the core of our spiritual development, of our practice, rests in the motivation.

This is somewhat contrary to the way our normal mind and the everyday world tends to view and evaluate experience, isn't it? I know for me, I mostly evaluate whether something is useful or beneficial or whether I want to do it by whatever results I get, or the results that I think I'm going to get. It may be by whether they're pleasant, or it may be by whether it's something I want or something I value. But usually we're looking for a particular experience, a particular result.

I don't think for most of us it's so different when we come to a meditation retreat or even when approaching the whole path of our spiritual practice. I think it's very helpful for each of us from time to time to reflect a bit on what mindset we're bringing to our practice. What are you evaluating it by? What are you looking for? And to be really honest with oneself, because to highlight this can be really helpful—without judgment, of course.

Easily one can find oneself somehow looking for a particular set of experiences in your whole practice, or in the three months that you've come here. It might not be something that you've enunciated to yourself very clearly, but some particular thing should happen—whether it's deep practice, whatever that means; whether you suddenly become more compassionate; whether your anger goes away; you feel more at ease with yourself; you go through some particular set of stages; or your teacher finally tells you, "You've really got it, now you're enlightened." Whatever it is, there's often lurking back in our mind streams somewhere something that we're looking for, that we evaluate our practice by.

It's normal. It's the way we think. As Ajahn Chah says, the worldly way is to do things for a reason, to get some return. And it's normal. How many of you came here thinking, "Absolutely nothing is going to happen. I'm not going to get anything out of this. I just can't think of anything better to do for the next six weeks or three months, and I've got nowhere to go"? Probably not. I hope not, really. It's normal. That's how we think of things.

But Ajahn Chah goes on: in Buddhism we do things without any gaining idea.

So it's a shift that we slowly begin to discover over time, and I keep discovering new layers of subtlety in this shift—that the path, that awakening, isn't so much about what happens, about what experiences I have, even though experiences might arise in a way that helps me see more clearly. The path isn't about getting somewhere, achieving something. The path itself, the heart of it, is rooted in our motivation. Awakening itself flowers out of our motivation, not so much out of experience.

So when we look to our motivation, how does it shift? What I've noticed for myself is that it shifts from this idea of wanting, getting, gaining something, to a contentment with awareness—to a love, really, of the truth of life as it's showing itself right here and now, without my interference, having nothing to do with whether it's what I think should happen or I want to happen.

This comes about only through the letting go of all of our preferences, our notions, our ideas, how we evaluate things—all of them. The giving up of all our preferences is the opening into a contentment with truth, contentment with awareness. And obviously, it's not easy.

There's one sutta, one discourse of the Buddha, that I quite like, where Sakka, who was the ruler of the whole realm of the gods, came down to talk to the Buddha. One thing is interesting: here's the ruler of the whole realm of the gods, and basically they sound like they're working with the same things that we are.

He comes down, and his question really is—I'll put it in my own words—"Honored Sir, what is it that's chaining us, that's holding us? Even though we want to live a life free from hostility, free from conflict, even though we want to live with loving-kindness, basically we have all good intentions, but still, even so, we find ourselves living with hostility, not free from ill-will, getting caught up in violence. What is it that's chaining us in this way?"

To me, it's really a heart-rending question. We really want to live a life of love, compassion, and goodness, and we keep getting caught up in the opposite.

In this particular sutta, the Buddha could have answered it in different ways. In this one he said: the first fetter, the first chain that keeps you in ill-will and rivalry and hostility is envy and stinginess.

But underneath what fuels the envy and stinginess is when we hold to what is dear and push away what is not dear. In other words, when we are attached to our preferences, we get caught in all this confusion and suffering and hostility and ill-will. When we're attached to our preferences, and that's fed by desire, as he says.

So that's a strong statement. If one really looks in the heart, in the mind—did I come here to free myself from attachment to all preferences? Not intellectually. Intellectually we all go, "Yeah, yeah, right, I want to be free from attachment to preferences." I mean in the way we really live, in the way you really relate to your experience, moment to moment. How often do we find that place? "I just so love awareness. It's so much more satisfying to me than having my preferences, than having to be with something I prefer not to be with." How often is that actually the experience, actually the case?

Sometimes it is. And isn't it really a wonderfully freeing experience in that moment to see that awareness can be our refuge? We don't have to have what we want and be separated from what we don't want. But it's hard. It's not the way we normally live. It really takes some cultivation on very deep levels.

This is Ajahn Chah again. It's from the same teaching where he's saying the worldly way is to do things for a reason. But the Buddha teaches us to go above and beyond reason and evaluation. His wisdom was to go above cause, beyond effect. To go above happiness and beyond suffering. In other words, above happiness meaning getting what we want, suffering meaning being with what we don't want—to go beyond that. Think about it. In that case, there's nowhere to stay. We people live in a home. To leave home and go where there's no home, we don't know how to do it because we've always lived with becoming, with clinging, with clinging to what we want, to our preferences. If we can't cling, we don't know what to do.

It's sort of funny, but really just explore in your experience how often our reflexive or instinctual refuge in a situation is to fall back into clinging to our preferences or pushing away what we don't want. We take refuge in the belief that we're going to find happiness in controlling things, in controlling the environment and staying in our comfort zone. That's our rational, habitual mind.

But what happens—and it happens quite naturally through our mindfulness practice—is that this shift occurs. The shift from taking refuge in clinging, from taking refuge in attachment to our preferences, our ideas, our expectations, thinking we know what's what and what's going to happen. That motivation naturally begins to shift to a kind of reverence, I feel almost—a reverence for the Dhamma, meaning the truth, as Steve expressed it last night in talking about the refuges. The refuge of Dhamma is the refuge of the truth, the way things are in this moment, irrespective of my wishes and preferences. And that's not a threat—that's a refuge. That's the place of peace.

It really becomes such a sense of love of awareness that it doesn't matter what we're aware of. Our value judgment shifts from ticking off whether this is a good experience or a bad experience or the one that I want, to being able to appreciate the quality of

awareness itself. And the experience is our avenue into the awareness. So this is where we begin to find the harmony, the peace that we seek. And it's in this shift of motivation, this shift of relationship.

Let me give a personal example. I hope it conveys it—I'm not sure if it does, but to me it was very powerful. I was visiting an ashram in southern India. It's an ashram where Ramana Maharshi used to live. He died fifty years ago. This ashram is very well known, very well run, a very nice place, and many, many people come from all over India as well as from all over the world. There's no particular teacher there now. People come not so much to honor Ramana Maharshi's memory as to use the place to activate this inner seeking, which is really about opening to awareness and past our own personal preferences.

One of the activities that happens there—there's a big hall bigger than this, and in it is what's called a samadhi. It's different from how we use that word. It's really the tomb.

Ramana Maharshi is buried there. And there's a large platform around his tomb. One of the things people do is come in and circumambulate this samadhi, as it's called. In the evening, people sit along the sides of the wall, and some of the residents of the ashram, including the president, line up in front of the tomb and do an hour of Vedic chanting.

It's really quite a trip, as all of India is a trip, to sometimes watch and sometimes take part in the people walking around the samadhi. Just to see all the different attitudes that are brought to this essentially very simple act of walking around the tomb. There are people who come in doing full prostrations, overflowing with a kind of love, crying, praying, bowing. There are people who come in and walk around chatting away a mile a minute to each other. And there are people, often Westerners in my experience, who are very grim, really determined to do it right or to get freedom or to somehow receive a message from Ramana. You can tell there's something very serious going on in the way they walk around the tomb.

And myself too. I'd walk around it—not wanting a new car or anything like that—but certainly, often, with some sense of wanting another glimpse of freedom, wanting somehow to see what Ramana saw.

One night I was sitting along the wall while the chanting was happening. At the end, the president of the ashram, who seems to be a very simple, friendly man—and the president of this ashram is a pretty prestigious position—got up. It was just before din-

ner, and at dinner you sit eating on the floor in the dining room while some of the men who live there, including the president, come around and serve the food. That's how it's done.

So he was getting up at the end of the chanting to go do his regular serving of the food, and somehow I just happened to notice him. He got up and very simply walked around this samadhi—no bowing, no posturing, no big anything—but it was just so simple and present. Then he walked out and went and served dinner.

Something about the space I was in allowed it to go right in so deeply. I felt—and who knows, of course, this is only what I felt, who knows what he was feeling—but what I felt and perceived was such a simple, direct love of the truth, of his service. He wasn't trying to get something. I didn't feel any wanting. I didn't see any need for posturing. Just a simple: here I am, walk around the samadhi, go to the next task of service. And this is not a one-time thing—every day of his life.

In that moment, I felt so much difference, although it might be quite subtle in our experience, between walking around wanting truth, wanting freedom, and simply loving the truth as it's expressing right now—without needing something else to confirm that, to confirm me, to make me feel better, to give me even some proof that I'm free or that I understand the truth. Not wanting anything.

That, to me, is the movement our motivation begins to shift into. Not wanting anything, yet with full-hearted, open presence. That's the place our deepening freedom is going to open out of—is opening out of in that very moment. Freedom of non-clinging. Even to freedom. Even to liberation itself. Just the simplicity of presence.

And that's what our practice is. Moment after moment after moment. In the first days of a retreat, no matter how much we've practiced, it's hard not to have some moments of wishing we'd get a little bit of juice going. Some moments of thinking, "Well, it's worth it because I'm going to be there later. I've been there before and I'll be there again." How hard is it to have that simple directness of heart and mind that allows us to be aware, fully content to be here right now, no matter what's happening?

Of course we're not like that every moment—that's our practice. It takes a real surrender of all that we think we know, of all that we think should happen, of all of our ideas of how things should be, even if just for a moment. It takes a lot of trust.

So practically, just in a moment, what would that mean? It could look like this: when you're walking or sitting, the attention is relatively stable, the breath is flowing, the noticing is somewhat clear, there's a sense of well-being. And then in a moment, it all

just falls apart. The body gets tight like a knot, the breath gets choppy, the mind's all over the place, the energy drops through the floor, and it's struggle, struggle, struggle to just even know that you're walking.

Can we be just as content to be aware with that as we were five minutes before? Really not fooling ourselves: "Oh yeah, this is really fine, I'm content." I mean really being content. Knowing that the essence of the practice is taking refuge in the awareness itself, in the mindfulness itself—not falling into evaluating what the experience is.

Of course we can't always do that. That's why we're practicing. We're learning to shift where we take refuge: from the experience into the mindfulness, into the awareness.

And the question might arise—it arises for me, even though at times I know the answer. Other times, like when everything's a knot and it's all falling apart, the question arises: well, what really is so special about this present moment anyway? I mean, why do I need to be fully present for *this*? I would be much better off to take a nap and be fully present when it's more pleasant, when it's more awake.

I read somewhere that Saint Augustine said once that the reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home. The reason we behave as we do—we're not living in our true home. And as it happens, the only place that we can reconnect with, re-recognize—because we've never really left our true home, how could we?—but the only place that we're going to recognize it is right here.

How can our true home be somewhere ten years away from now? How can our true home be only in another experience, but not here? The only place we can ever recognize our true home is right here, right now, in this moment. Whatever's happening, it's the juice, it's what we have to use. We can't be somewhere else. So can we learn to trust it enough to really be present without trying to change it, without trying to control it? And it's this trying to change, trying to control, trying to manipulate that hides the truth, that hides our true home.

Ajahn Chah again, talking about our home:

This original heart-mind shines like pure, clear water. It takes us beyond all good and bad. When we understand this, it is the teaching of every Buddha that appears in the world. This is given to us, our Buddha nature. But what is this Buddha? When we see with the eye of wisdom, we know that the Buddha is timeless, unborn, unrelated to any body or any history. Buddha is the ground of all being, the truth of the unmoving mind. And this timeless Buddha is our true home, our abiding place.

This original heart-mind shines like pure, clear water, and it's our true home, our abiding place. All of this practice is to help us learn to recognize and trust and take refuge in our true home—more than we trust and take refuge in our fears, our assumptions, our explanations, our desires, our trying to hold on, our trying to push away. Basically, our habits, our habits of mind.

So how do we shift these habits from wanting, from pushing away, from trying to control, from this constant evaluating, from this obsessive self-referencing? How does every single little experience affect me, me, me? See if you notice that arising from time to time. How do we shift that?

And it's really, I think, the miracle of the simplicity of mindfulness practice—all the instructions we're giving, all this practice laid out over the days—is to help us bring a kind, loving, clear attention to whatever's happening right here, right now.

There's a Burmese saying: to make each person we meet an object of reverence. So I like to think of mindfulness practice as making each activity an object of reverence. To make each moment of experience—whether it's a breath or a footstep, tea, hearing somebody cough, a loud car going by, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, feeling—can we make each moment in that way an object of reverence? Wouldn't we approach it, bring such a different attitude to bear, if that's how we were meeting moment after moment of life?

And in some ways, to me, when I'm practicing just that simplicity of mindfulness, it really does feel like bringing a sense of reverence, of appreciation, to each moment of experience. So whether I'm reaching for the teacup, or feeling a breath, or folding my shawl, or washing my hands—no moment is more worthy of reverence than another. No moment is holding the secret of the universe more than another.

And that's what's the beauty of a period like this, to do a long retreat where you have days and nights, you can find your own schedule, and you can really begin to explore the possibility of meeting any moment of activity or inactivity in this way—to see that within this moment we can reconnect with our true home, this sense of awareness. This is the essence of our mindfulness practice.

And even though we say, no matter what we're doing, no matter what's going on, the essence of truth is right here in the kernel of everything—why is it necessary to come into such a secluded environment? Why is it necessary to have such a strict schedule, you might say? Why is it necessary to sit and look and walk and look?

And it's just because of the strength of our habits. The strength of our habits of avoiding, of wanting, of clinging, of taking refuge elsewhere are so strong that it takes quite some support to begin to be able to look through them. And on the other hand, even though this seems like such a renunciate, separate environment, it's all right here. We are the world. The world comes here with us.

Again from Ajahn Chah:

Let the knowing spread from within you, and you will be practicing rightly. If you want to see a train, just go to the central station. You don't have to go to the northern line and the southern line and go all over Thailand. Just go to the central station.

Now, some people say to me, "I want to practice, but I really don't have time to study. I don't know how to practice right. My memory is not so good anymore. I can't remember things." He says, I just tell them, look right here. Look in your heart. This is central station. Greed arises here, anger arises here, delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch all these things arise. Practice right here because right here is where you're stuck.

And as you look here, right here is where all our expectations arise, it's where our ideas about things arise, and it's also where the Dhamma is arising. Just right here.

So we have six weeks or three months to explore Central Station. It's a wonderful opportunity. The whole world really does arise as we sit, as we walk. There's nothing we're lacking. The chance to see everything. It all unfolds in this simplicity. It's amazing. It's really amazing.

So our job, no matter what's arising, is to stay really simple with it. Okay, Central Station. Can I meet this moment of experience with fresh eyes? Whether it's the breath, whether it's the pain in your knee, whether it's that same old impatient irritation that you've been sitting with year after year, hour after hour, whether it's sleepiness, whether it's ecstasy, whether it's bliss, whether it's boredom—whatever it is, our job is simply to meet it with open, kind, fresh attention. And we'll be saying a lot more about the specifics of it. This is kind of a general overview.

Can we bring that reverence to let the moment unfold itself without our jumping in and trying to evaluate, interpret, and control before we even know what's happening? This is where we get caught in our expectations if we're not aware of what they are. Where we get caught in our habit, our motivational habit of thinking experience has to mean a certain thing, go in a certain way. So when something unpleasant starts to happen—or didn't even start to happen, but there's a possibility that maybe something unpleasant is about to start to happen in your sitting—before we even get there, before

we even know it, before we've even met the experience with freshness, already our habits are in there trying to fix it. Well, let me switch how I sit and make sure this doesn't happen. If I sit up straight, if I take a couple of deep breaths, maybe if I go and do some yoga in the yoga room, I can prevent this possible pain from coming.

How can we ever see what's true if that's how we're meeting our experience? The only way that we can come to take refuge in the truth is to stop trying to change everything all the time and really surrender, let go, jump in. It's hard. It's often scary. It's not what we're used to. And it's wonderful. It changes everything.

But it's important to have a sense of appreciation and respect for yourself, for how deeply ingrained is our fear of the unknown and our sense that somehow we can control things. It's actually one of the big mysteries to me why we think we can control things when it is so clear that life is completely out of our control. We can't even control what sensation will arise in the next moment or what thought's going to come into our head. But somehow we think we can control life so that we only have pleasant experience, so that unpleasant experience stops altogether, so that things go just the way we want—flying completely in the face of all the evidence of however long we've lived. Every day has proven to us that we are not in control, and completely flying in the face of that, we keep on trying.

Well, it's exhausting. You wonder why we're tired all the time, why we're stressed? We're living completely out of touch with reality. And when we stop and surrender into the moment, it really is a huge relief.

And still, it's difficult, isn't it? We'll surrender to a point, but it's so easy to have limits—up to this point. But then I need some sign that I'm going to get what I want in order to really surrender.

A friend sent me this story, a story of a man who went for a hike. While he was walking along a steep path, he slipped and started to tumble down the mountainside. At the last moment, he grabbed a branch that was growing from the side of the mountain, but he could not get a foothold to climb back up.

So he was hanging there, really frightened, and he pleaded, "Lord, please help me. If you get me out of this predicament, I'll do anything you say. Please help me."

Just then the clouds parted and a voice said, "Did you say you'll do anything?"

The man answered, "Yes, yes, Lord, I'll do anything."

The voice said, "Okay, let go."

The man said, "What, are you crazy? I'll be killed."

Up to a point. We can go along up to a point. But we will all hit that point over and over in our practice where we think, "Oh no, this is going too far. Opening to this is not what I bargained for. Letting go of this—uh-uh. If freedom means I have to give up this, I don't want any part of it." Have you ever found your mind going there? I do. And sometimes it's just wanting another muffin or something. Sometimes it's something much more intrinsic to my sense of who I am.

But I think these are very important moments. We're all going to hit those moments when it's not easy, it's not simple to keep opening into the unknown without a safety net. We want some little safety net. Even though when we really let go without one, the experience is a tremendous relief, even exhilaration, a real aliveness that's quite unlike our sense of trying to control.

A friend told me this image. I've used it before, but I love it—the mountain monkeys at the top of Mount Arunachala, which is a mountain in India at Ramana Maharshi's ashram. There are monkeys that live down in the ashram part, and they're very much what you'd expect—very greedy. They're always coming and attacking you if you dare go outside with food in your hands. You're a target.

But these monkeys up above on the mountaintop are quite different, these mountain monkeys. My friend said he was sitting up on the top of the mountain just as dawn was beginning. It's very rocky with a few little trees and shrubs and big rocks, but not much. And he said these monkeys will stand on the edge of the rock at the top of the mountain and just launch themselves out into space. They always land somewhere—on some shrub or some branch or some rock. But the feeling as they launch is just go and let go and see what happens next.

I love that image. I really feel that is how we can practice. You sit down, you open the attention and open up. What's going to happen next? We never know. You always land somewhere. It's very different from the monkey standing there thinking, "Could I reach that branch? Maybe I should hop there and then there and then there"—thinking about it for five or ten minutes before taking a little tentative step off the mountain. No. Launch into space. It's wonderful.

And of course, we can't always do it. We want a safety net, and that safety net is a really interesting place to explore in our practice. A lot of the time, we don't know what we're relying on to be our safety net until it starts to unravel a little bit. And then you know, because you either get really resistant or kind of scared or have some sense of, "No, this is really not okay. I've had enough."

The safety net can simply be our ideas about practice, our ideas about what should be happening. It can be a sense of comfort, the habits and patterns of behavior, the comfort zone that we create around how we practice. And that can be continually changing, but most of us have, consciously or unconsciously, a comfort zone—how much we can sleep, how much we can eat, how much we can sit or walk. We can have ideas about ourselves that may not even be conscious, that completely limit us, put us in a little box.

I remember the first time I sat a long retreat, about three months. I used to be able to sit cross-legged then, and I thought, "Never in my life could I ever sit an hour without moving."

It was just this idea I couldn't do it, and I wasn't going to try, because that was an impossibility for this body and this person. And I remember when it first happened that I sat an hour and a half or two hours or something. I wasn't even thinking about it anymore. It became a completely meaningless concept—sit an hour without moving or however long. It just completely went away.

But as long as I was holding on to this idea of "this is what is possible for this body, for this mind, and there's no point even looking beyond it"—I mean, that's almost a trite example, but it sets a limitation. The safety net, the comfort zone, becomes our prison. It in itself becomes what gets in the way, what obscures our recognizing our true home.

So just notice for yourself. The comfort zone, the safety net can be an ease of familiarity with your environment. It can be having a sense of needing a certain amount of pleasant experience, or a fear of something unpleasant. "There's no way I can deal with..."—fill in the blanks, you know—that noise in the hall, this coldness in the atmosphere, not having whatever it is I like to eat, having to share a room with anybody, whatever it is. It can be ideas we have about ourselves, familiarity with certain of our own personality patterns. "Who would I be without this impatience?" Even if it's a suffering personality pattern, it's comfortable. So there's a sense of "this is who I am and I don't want to look beyond it."

And then there's how we relate to our history. I've often had people talking in interviews about almost holding themselves back from giving themselves to the practice fully because—what about my relationship? If I let go of everything, that means my relationship has to go. Or my children, or my parents, or this particular situation in my life. Or if I'm no longer identified with a sense of self, what about my memories? And none of this is what actually happens, but these are the thoughts that we're comfortable with. "I don't want to lose this. Therefore, if I let go, that means it really goes away." And we hold back from practice. We don't surrender into the moment.

And this safety net, the familiarity, what we're used to, what we're afraid to feel or what we're afraid to let go of, what we're afraid to have go away even for a moment—this is what limits us, is what keeps us from really opening into and taking refuge in the truth. Because one way of describing the truth is that we can never, with our concepts, accurately describe the facts of things. So any ideas we have of what awakening would mean, or what enlightenment is, or what letting go means—you know, "my relationship ends" or whatever—our ideas, our conceptions can't accurately convey the truth. There are even places in the suttas where the Buddha says, and I'm paraphrasing, "whatever ideas you have about it can't accurately describe the fact."

So if we're letting ourselves get caught in holding to our ideas, or fearing because of our ideas, and holding back from just surrendering into this moment, we're creating a prison for ourselves, keeping ourselves in limitation. And if we're willing to just simply keep bringing kind, full, fresh awareness to whatever the moment's presenting—you don't have to figure it all out, you don't have to evaluate what that means in terms of your concepts about yourself, just meet this moment as it is—then what happens is the safety nets begin to fray.

And we all, at different times, will hit what I call the wall. I don't know what you call it. It's like a wall where either the mind says, "That's it"—what I said before—"I can't keep going if it means getting rid of this. I didn't come in for that to go away. I didn't come into practice to lose that." That's hitting the wall.

Or it can be another kind of wall where things have gotten good enough. "This is nice. This is good enough. I'm not suffering so much anymore." This is actually a very interesting wall because it can take a while before you recognize it. You think, "Well, okay, I'm a little more compassionate. I can sit more easily. Anger doesn't come up so much. That really deep suffering from the past that I was dealing with, I'm more at ease with it. Okay, good enough."

I learned—I was just teaching a retreat in Italy, and really, there are some great gestures with the hands that have meaning. And what we learned was like, *ciao*.

"Ciao" with the suffering, and I've done enough practice. This is another comfort zone. Can we keep looking? Never be content with less than freedom.

And these are not mistakes or bad points in practice. These are great, insightful, important times—when you feel, not just that moment of "Oh, I'm so tired, I don't want to do it anymore." We all have that. I'm talking about the moment that's a little deeper. It's got... what? Really letting go of that sense of myself? Can't do it. Don't want to do it. This whatever is more important than freedom.

I really like it if I can actually put it in that phrase in my mind—that wakes me up. Oh, I'm saying that getting to go to sleep at ten o'clock at night is more important than freedom. I'm saying that being able to still be grouchy is more important than freedom, whatever it is. Then it becomes a very interesting place where the safety net's fraying, and that's going to open us to deeper levels of trust, deeper levels of taking refuge in our true home.

In fact, for me, I would say all of my practice, all my significant moments, have been like a series of small deaths. Which, if you told me when I started that's what I was getting in for, I don't think it would have really inspired me. So I hope it doesn't have that effect on you. But a series of small deaths of who I thought I was. I didn't even know that's who I thought I was until it started to die. And I would experience it as a kind of anguish, a real sense of loss. And on the other side of that, a great relief—like a burden being lifted, a sense of aliveness more intense—until the next small death or big death.

For each of us, there might be a different story about what that death is, a personality of what I'm holding on to. I keep saying relationship—that's just a big one people hold to. But the holding is what goes. It doesn't mean the relationship goes, or whatever we're holding to. It's the holding that goes. We experience it as a loss, as a death, and then that loss of attachment opens us up to connectedness with everything. It's so wonderful. We see how limiting that attachment was, that idea of ourselves, that concept of what is possible.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together."

If I'm really honest and I'm not feeling particularly connected, that's how I think of my idea of enlightenment. I'm going to get enlightened. I'm going to feel confirmed and congratulated and really together. But freedom is not a self-improvement project. We want to be perfect, but we just keep seeing our imperfections, and there's no room to get away from that—no exit, nowhere to run. That is when the sword turns into a flower. When we stick with what we see, when we feel what we feel, from that we begin to connect with our own wisdom mind.

That is really our practice—to stick with what's happening, to feel what we feel. There's nowhere to run and no need to run. And by not running, we really deeply connect, over and over, with our own wisdom mind. Grounded in our motivation not to get,

not to be something special, but simply to love awareness. A motivation to be content with awareness, with presence, with this moment—to be fully present and accepting of it just as it is.

Even when it's really hard, when we really hate this moment, when we think, "How can my true home possibly be in this moment? I don't think so. It has to be somewhere else"—can we find in ourselves enough motivation simply to take refuge again in the possibility of this wisdom mind being present here and now?

I just want to end with the close of that poem from Ajahn Chah:

Buddha is the ground of all being, the truth of the unmoving mind. So the Buddha was not enlightened in India. In fact, he was never enlightened, never born and never died. And this timeless Buddha is our true home, our abiding place. When we take refuge in this Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, all things in the world become free for us. All things in the world become our teacher, proclaiming the true nature of life.

So can we take refuge in this Buddha, this Dharma, this Sangha, this moment?

CHAPTER 338

Benefits of Mettā Practice

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this comprehensive talk, Carol Wilson addresses common doubts practitioners have about mettā (loving-kindness) meditation, particularly those coming from a Vipassanā background. She explains how mettā practice unexpectedly complements insight meditation by revealing the truth of non-separation from a different angle. While Vipassanā shows emptiness through observing arising and passing phenomena, mettā practice demonstrates how our habitual patterns of desire and aversion actively create the false sense of separation that causes suffering.*
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> *Wilson draws on her experience practicing mettā intensively for seven to eight weeks, as well as time spent in Burma experiencing a natural field of mettā among practitioners there. She clarifies that mettā is not about creating a special emotional state but rather cultivating wise intention toward connection. The practice combines this inclination of mind with samādhi (concentration), using phrases directed toward benefactors, friends, neutral persons, and eventually all beings.*
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> *The talk explores the near enemy of mettā (desire and attachment that masquerades as love) and the far enemy (ill will), showing how the practice purifies these mental habits. Wilson emphasizes that mettā does not mean blindly liking everything or approving harmful behavior—rather, it allows clearer seeing from a place of connection rather than fear. She offers practical examples for daily life, from traffic situations to supermarket lines, demonstrating how mettā is accessible in every moment of mindful awareness.*

A lot of times when we have begun introducing this formal metta practice in a Vipassana retreat, a question that many people bring up—those who have been doing Vipassana and haven't really done the metta practice much—are kinds of doubts about the usefulness or validity of the loving-kindness practice.

So some questions that come up, and they came up in my own mind before I practiced loving-kindness intensively, are: Are we just saying affirmations? Is this sort of a feel-good practice? We're trying to talk our way into a nice mental state—which, in a way, you could say that. And what does that have to do with liberation? What does that have to do with freedom?

And also, another aspect is if we talk about the fact that there is no me, no self, no separate, distinct I, what's all this "I'm sending wishes of loving-kindness to you and you"? It seems that would accentuate a sense of me and other that on the one hand you're telling us doesn't exist. So sometimes people get confused.

The confusion, of course, turns out to be not in the actual practice, but as always with confusion, in our thinking about it—rather than actually just doing the practice. Which is really the way it is with all of our confusions about greed, hatred, and delusion, or not-self, or impermanence. It's only confusing when we're thinking about it. When we're actually experiencing, it's just how things are. Not much else to say.

Anyway, I was actually quite surprised, in a way, to discover experientially when I first practiced loving-kindness for a period of seven or eight weeks. It's a practice that we do intensively in the same way that we do Vipassana intensively—in other words, saying the metta phrases to the different categories through the sittings, through the walkings, from the moment you get up until the moment you go to bed. So it's an intensive practice, just as Vipassana is. And it's a different practice from Vipassana. So we're just introducing it here.

What I was really amazed to discover through my experience is that the practice of metta seemed to me to round out the wisdom of non-separation—the fact that we're not really separate. Insight comes through our Vipassana practice in many different ways, at many different times. The fact of our essential oneness, or you could say the vast emptiness—the natural expression of which in our actions, in our speech, in our mind, the natural expressions of either emptiness or non-separation, two sides of the same coin—the natural expressions are metta, friendliness, connectedness, or compassion, or empathetic joy, sympathetic joy, or equanimity. Those are the four so-called Brahmaviharas, or divine abodes of the heart, of the mind. And while they are mental states, they are varying expressions of the truth of our non-separation, so to speak.

And I was really surprised and happy to discover through my experience that while I knew that the emptiness of not a separate self, I knew that to be true, the constantly arising and passing experience—I knew that from one level. Knowing it, not just intellectually, but from our experience, from the Vipassana—there's another way that the practice of loving-kindness rounded that out, came in with that information, that experience from another angle, so to speak.

So that in the moment of experiencing just a simple sense of metta, not thinking about it but just experiencing it, in that moment—even if it was brought about by my focus on the phrase, "May you..." I think I'm sending it to a benefactor, so I have the

sense that I'm sending to a benefactor these good wishes. In that moment of connection, the sense of me and other falls away, and there's just simple friendliness, kindness, however you experience it.

And over and over, I found that through the practice in my life as well, the sense, the false sense of separation, the habits of mind that are moment to moment creating the false sense of separation that we react out of so much—they start to be broken down through the practice of loving-kindness. It's really quite wonderful. And we don't notice that it's happening right away. That's a plug to keep doing it.

Metta is an expression of our essential oneness. We experience our essential completeness.

What I think the metta practice does on a practical level—this formal practice, the way we're teaching it here—is that it helps us not to deny the habits of mind that create our sense of separation, our sense of needing something to protect. The metta practice actually helps us see through these habits of mind. Because in practicing metta, we actually feel how these habits of mind—basically our old friends greed, aversion, and delusion—create separation when we're buying into them. And we feel how when we're not buying into those mental states, but rather tuning into connection, simple friendliness, that sense of separation just isn't there, because it isn't being created in the moment.

This, I think, is one of the most key, even liberating, ways of understanding the sense of separation or alienation, fragmentation, loneliness—whatever words might fit your own particular experience of it. The separation, the sense of someone separate here that I need to protect by getting what I want and keeping everything I don't want away—that's actually just a misperception of how things are. It's not something that's real, this separate me, that either vipassana or metta practice is somehow going to dismantle, leaving us frightened because something got taken apart and now how will we function? Rather, metta helps us see how the sense of fragmentation and separation is simply created in each moment by our habits of mind.

Our misery stems from the misconception that we're separate. Certainly it looks as though I am separate from other people and other phenomena. And as long as we think we are separate, we're going to suffer. We suffer because we feel that we have to defend ourselves. We feel that we have to find something in this world that will make us happy. And then the habits of mind—wanting, needing, thirsting desire, as well as the habit of ill will and aversion, keeping things away—arise. Whether these are turned outwards

or inwards doesn't really matter. Those habits arise out of this sense that I can find something in the world to make me happy, and I can keep away everything that's going to make me suffer.

Certainly speaking for myself, when I'm not somewhat awake, when I'm not really paying attention—when, say, I'm hurrying around from place to place—what's the habitual response? If there's something that I want and somebody's in front of me, the sense is they're in the way of what I need to make me happy. If there's something I don't want and I see someone coming that's going to cause me trouble, the sense is they're trouble—get them away, I need to protect myself. It's just the habitual response when we're not even a little bit awake.

When we're so self-absorbed, basically referring everything that happens back to me—as I said the other night, me, me, me, my, my, my, how does this affect me, how can I be happy—when we do that, each moment that we're buying into it is a moment when the sense of separation and needing to protect feels very real.

I just want to say that non-separation doesn't mean we can't tell the difference between me and you. It doesn't mean the visual field gets all blurred together and you can't tell which is the curry and which is the rice. Sometimes people think, how am I going to function? How do I know whether I should be the one sitting in meditation or the one talking? It doesn't mean that. Useful distinctions still apply. But it means we don't have to buy into the absolute separation that our minds create around it.

So one thing the metta practice helps us do is begin to recognize more consciously what the space of simple connection feels like, and to recognize how accessible it actually is. Because metta practice is not about creating some rarefied, amazing, unitive state that is different from our daily experience. That would be nice, and sometimes a state comes that's so strong it feels really different from our regular experience. But what's most important to recognize is that metta is simply about connection, and it's part of our daily experience because it's really a truer expression of how things are than greed or fear or ill will.

The metta practice is helping us consciously learn how to recognize connection, have a bit more confidence that it's actually possible to access consciously, and begin to have some faith, some trust in the experience of metta, of friendliness, of loving-kindness itself. Then we begin to experientially—even if it doesn't go through our intellect—have more consciously the experience that we're not so separate.

It's like that question someone brought up a few mornings ago during the meditation period about noticing that sense of synchronicity as a retreat goes on. I think it's quite applicable here, because when we're not lost in greed and aversion, we actually notice how much more our energies all blend together, affect each other. Actually, no one here can really do something that doesn't have some effect on other people. That's just how it is. So we start to see that more. We start to believe it, to trust it more.

And we practice simply because we're so used to looking through the lens of separation that we need to give ourselves a little oomph to trust in the other way.

This is from Nyoshul Khen, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, from a chapter of his book:

The chapter is called "Basic Buddha Dharma" – just the basics. And he says the difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our deluded state, our mind or heart – mind-heart is the same word in these languages – our mind is extremely narrow. For example, we live for ourselves and rarely consider the infinity of sentient beings. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha mind is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings rather than being solely concerned with her own ego and individuality. Thus, the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of the mind, of the heart. The concept of growth is used here: moving from a narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open, loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings.

But we start from where we are. We don't have to think that starting from here we should naturally and completely be able to open our heart and mind at all times, in all situations, completely considering the infinity of sentient beings. We need to be realistic and start where we are.

And that's the point of this practice, of the metta practice. Because as Guy mentioned last night, when we really look with the eyes of wisdom, we come upon quite deeply the essential basic goodness that you could say is the truest expression of who we are, of our nature. I know everyone here has touched that many times. We all do. It's not so esoteric. And because of that, I don't think anyone would be here on a spiritual path at all, practicing so intensively as this, if we didn't have some inner knowing of this truth on some level.

A lot of our knowing is intellectual, of course, but not all of it. What practice does is help us continually make that move from intellectually knowing something – which is the beginning – to knowing it from the gut, from our experience in ourselves. That's

very different, because that's when we can begin to respond to ourselves and respond to life and respond to situations from the deep knowing of non-separation, from knowing that the power of friendliness, of connectedness, of compassion is much stronger than the power of fear and the power of greed.

In my own mind, I think I know that. And sometimes I really know that. But there are other times when the instinctive reaction is, "No, I don't like that, get away. That's going to keep me safe." So we don't judge that, but that's why we practice. That's why I practice anyway. You find out why you practice and see – it could be for something different.

But it's not to create something new. Metta practice, like Vipassana, is not creating something new. It's simply uncovering the most natural context, the most natural expression of the truth of who we are. And then learning to trust it enough to act from that place.

So just a little bit to describe what we mean by the mental state of metta, loving-kindness itself. I think it's really simple – just friendliness, kindness in a very natural way. Take the example: if you walk outside and under normal circumstances, no big things going on for you, and there's a couple of small children just playing and laughing and throwing a ball back and forth – under normal circumstances, if it doesn't trigger some traumatic memory or something – we just normally feel a sense of friendliness, of connection with the kids. We don't have to think about it. We don't have to dredge it up: "Oh yeah, cute little kids, isn't it nice?" Or take a puppy if you hate children. Take a puppy. Take a kitten. Baby animals have that quality – it's hard to get too judgmental.

But it's natural. That's a natural expression of metta. Simple connectedness. It doesn't have any big deal around it. You don't want something back from the children or from the puppy. You don't say, "Well, they're cute, but if they had on different colored overalls, they'd be even cuter." It's just quite a natural response of the heart – a kind of generosity. You wish them well. That's really the essence of metta.

It's more a matter of learning how we can elicit metta, how to move towards connectedness, toward the natural heart and open-hearted generosity, rather than moving towards what creates in our minds and hearts the sense of fear or wanting or separation.

Metta is also inclusiveness. It includes all aspects. It doesn't just see a part of a situation, and I'll talk more about that in a minute. It also has a real spacious quality, not narrowing down. Just to see the children playing—it's really lovely. There's a sense of connectedness, of wishing them well. You don't feel tight and closed then. It's just kind of open. And in that space, in that moment, if someone else wanders into your

field of vision, it's most likely that sense of connectedness and well-wishing naturally extends to them. Just at first, before we have time to think of a reason not to. It just naturally extends. It's kind of inclusive.

I was recently in Burma, both practicing for a few weeks and also teaching up in the north. The teaching was fine—it was like a regular retreat for Westerners. But what was really a transformative experience for me was the time we spent not teaching, but hanging out with our Burmese friends: the people who were helping to run the retreat, cooking for the retreat, translating, and living in the monastery in northern Burma.

The experience was one of simple, non-judging friendliness—really metta. I felt that for the two weeks I was there, I was truly encased, surrounded in a field of metta. Just a simple friendliness that was welcoming to whoever came. It wasn't like it was specifically directed to me. I remember at one point Steve Smith, who I was teaching with and who's been there for many years, said, "Oh Carol, the people here really love you." And I said, "Yeah, well, it's my impression they really love everybody. It's got nothing specifically to do with me."

What was so nice about it is that it's just low-key, natural acceptance. Somebody comes. They're really happy to see you. And just however you are is fine. That's what's so beautiful about that friendliness. However the Burmese people were was fine. They live together. They know each other's little peccadilloes. They laugh about it. It's fine. And however you are is fine.

One man, the brother of one of the Sayadaws, one of the teachers there, was born deaf and mute, unable to speak. He must be in his fifties or sixties now. He's been living there, and his brother sort of takes care of him. But he's great because without hearing—I mean, you can see, you can get around fine—without hearing or speaking, with his hands he's like the most expressive person I ever met. He has just one little hand gesture that describes each person. If he has to talk about someone, someone has curly hair, he'll be describing the person that way. Or glasses, or if they're always frowning. Whatever it is that describes them.

And there's no sense of judgment about picking out that person. If they're really thin, if they're really fat. Whereas here, I could really imagine somehow easily getting into, "Is that what he thinks about me? Is that the main thing that he picks out about me?" All those questions. None of that there. Just this real acceptance that's actually transformative to be around—an atmosphere where it's that simple, that day-to-day and non-judging. And it feels just normal.

Like, it's, oh, this is the way we could live. This is really a possibility. And I'm not saying everyone is happy-happy. There's a lot of difficulty, a lot of suffering, a lot of problems. I'm not saying people don't have arguments. Just normal people. But there really is a deep sense of connecting, and once someone there has met you, they don't forget your name and they don't forget your face. I see how, for me, I really have to concentrate to remember names and faces. Sure, I meet a lot of names and faces, but so do they. And there's this sense of presence and connectedness that's very powerful. But it's simple. And that's the thing I want to bring out about mettā, about loving-kindness. It's just this natural, simple connectedness that we all know, that we all can begin to have more trust in.

I think I said the other day in the mettā sitting that technically, the proximate cause of mettā arising as a mental state—friendliness, connectedness, non-judging acceptance—the proximate cause, meaning the immediate preceding thing for mettā to arise, the strongest cause, is seeing the good. Seeing the wholesome or the beautiful in a being, anyone, ourselves or another.

And that's true, but it doesn't mean that we're blind, or that in seeing the good we don't see anything else—which is a lot of our intellectual or philosophical problem. We think, "Oh, this is just a diluted, mushy, soft-filter gauze on the lens, seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, and I can't trust that because there are problems, there are difficulties." Just turn it on yourself. How easy is it for us when we say, okay, sit here and really focus on the good in yourself, really let it in, do that with full commitment? It's hard, isn't it? It certainly isn't something we have a lot of practice in.

So seeing the good is the cause for this natural connectedness, this spontaneous friendliness to arise. Take the little kids again—you're just seeing their natural playfulness, the innocence of children, and boom, we're there. But it doesn't mean we can't see the whole picture. It means we actually, because of the connection, can respond more appropriately.

Say at first, the sweet kids, the innocents—we're really connected. And then we start to see that one of them is actually a major brat. One kid is really taunting the other, not actually hurting, but really being bratty. But we see that from the place of connection. It doesn't hide what's going on. From the place of connection, rather than saying, "Oh, that kid's a brat, just throw him away, forget him," we can actually, if intervention is necessary, intervene from the place of connection rather than from the place of rejection, rather than from the place of judgment.

We, if anything, see more clearly when we're connected in a non-judging way. We see more clearly the whole picture. It's in no way a one-sided blindness. Aversion is a one-sided blindness, and desire is a one-sided blindness. With desire, we only see what we want, and anything else is in the way. With aversion, we see what we don't want. And as Guy said, it can be very skillful—as someone said this morning—to actually notice that there are other things arising in the universe than what I don't like and what I don't want. It really helps to balance.

Mettā actually works in that. Mettā is brought about by tuning into the good, but it's not at all one-sided. It's very strong and very powerful. Because we don't put someone in a box. With mettā, we see the whole picture. We don't put them in a box. "Oh, they do this bad thing, that's who they are." Or, "Oh, they do this good thing, they couldn't possibly do anything bad because they're so wonderful." You see the whole picture from the place of connection rather than from the place of fear.

So the mettā practice itself, the way we're doing it here, it's not about creating and holding onto a particular emotional feeling. And this, I think, is very tricky for us to get, practice-wise, because again, we are so result- and achievement-oriented. We feel like we need a little bit of feedback that something's happening. That's fair enough, until we have some inner trust from our own experience. And if you just sat here and said these phrases from now until a month from now, and you never felt one thing ever, it would be understandable if you had some doubts about the efficacy of the practice. So I'm saying it's natural—we want some feedback.

But it isn't about that—saying these phrases and focusing so that we're going to get this one particular feeling, and then we're going to feel better and better and better, and that feeling is just going to stay stronger and stronger, and we're going to live in a cloud of metta from now on. I think you know that I'm exaggerating. But just check it out. The next time you're doing the metta practice and you're feeling frustrated, look closely. What are you looking for? What do you think ought to be happening?

In the formal practice, it doesn't matter if we have what we would call an emotional feeling at all. It really doesn't matter. Because, as I said, the essence of metta is connection. It's simply about connecting—either with ourselves, with the sense of the being that we're sending it to, the phrases, all beings, whatever. Just that connection, which means a moment without aversion, without desire, without delusion. Sounds a lot like mindfulness, doesn't it? And the two are very closely connected. Simply a moment of connection, where we are directing attention deliberately towards that connection and away from the tendencies of mind of greed and aversion that create separation.

So we're doing this deliberately. It's a deliberate direction or inclination of mind towards connection. Basically, wise intention—the second stage of the Eightfold Path, wise thought. And the Buddha, when he talks about wise thought or right thought, specifically says that the antidote or the wise thought you substitute for thoughts of ill will is thoughts of friendliness, thoughts of metta, thoughts of kindness. It's really quite useful and practical.

So what we're doing is cultivating and strengthening the inclination of mind, the intention of mind towards connection. It's not always going to feel like a lot's going on, but each time we direct it to, say, the benefactor, and we deliberately feel a sense of their good quality, offer the phrase "may you be free from inner and outer harm"—that's a sense of inclining the mind toward connection. You may feel it more or less strongly. The intention may be more or less strong. But that's not what's so important. What's so important is that cultivation of wise intention. Basically breaking the habit of seeing how we're separate.

"Oh yes, they're really so good. I could never be like them. In fact, they're so good it's almost an insult to them for me to even be offering them loving-kindness, so paltry and feeble is my loving-kindness." You can take even the good and create separation out of it. So we're just inclining towards the connection.

The way we're teaching it here also, the inclination, the cultivation of intention, is combined with a concentration or samadhi practice. Hence the focus on the image of the person and the repetition, one at a time, of each of the phrases, just coming back to that over and over. I think I mentioned last night that the samadhi aspect that begins to come in gives a real steadiness, a power, a confidence to the recognition or the intention of mind of metta, the recognition of what that connectedness feels like. It just really empowers it in a way.

So this particular form of the practice brings these two things together: the wise inclination of mind, wise intention, together with a concentration, an absorption practice. In all different aspects of Buddhism, in the different schools, there may be many different practices that also cultivate loving-kindness and compassion and the other brahmaviharas. I'm not saying one's better than another. They might bring out different aspects. This is just the way, in this Theravada tradition, we're teaching it to you as we've learned it. So it combines these two things.

Now, some of the difficulties that come up in our metta practice are the same difficulties that come up in vipassana, in terms of coming back to the breath. The mind just basically doesn't want to do it. It's like a two-year-old having a temper tantrum—it doesn't want to come back. It wants to run off and do its own thing. So we've talked about that, and it's just the same exact thing going on.

Another aspect that comes up—that we sometimes think is in the way of the metta practice but is actually part of the purification, the transformation of our confused, deluded habits into a strengthening of wise intention—is that we really deeply experience at times the habits and reactions of our mind and heart that block, that get in the way, that obstruct the experience of connectedness. Which are, guess what: desire and aversion. They basically block our experience of anything that is more deeply true.

But it's very easy to think that something's wrong because you're trying to send metta to yourself and you keep running into loathing, or anger, or just impatience with the practice. Or you're trying to send metta to a good friend and you end up fantasizing about the incredible vacation the two of you could take together when you get out of retreat. How did I get here? I'm just trying to send some kind wishes to this person.

But this is really an intrinsic aspect of the loving-kindness practice, because in cultivating, in inclining the mind towards wise intention, we will necessarily run into the habits of falling into our unwise ways of thinking—the desire, the wanting, and the ill will, the aversion. In fact, it's almost as if the purification of the metta practice highlights these habits of separation in big relief, so to speak. And instead of thinking there's something wrong with that, if we can actually recognize what's happening, then we also begin to see how these habits of mind—of desire and ill will—create suffering and separation. And this is really freeing. I'm serious.

This is really where I learned so much about freedom and non-separation through the metta practice: by seeing experientially how desire and yearning could be mistaken for metta, except that we start to suffer and feel separate, and how ill will is actually creating a separation that doesn't need to be there. So it's fascinating.

I want to say a little about those. In the classic way of teaching this practice, from the commentaries of the Theravada tradition—this isn't so much in the suttas but in the commentaries—when talking about the practice and the state of friendliness, kindness, spacious metta, they describe two mental states called the near enemy and the far enemy. Each of the Brahma Viharas has a near enemy and a far enemy. I'll just talk about metta tonight.

The far enemy is sort of obvious. We have these warrior-like terms—"enemy"—because the Buddha came from the warrior clan. And if you read the suttas, really a lot of the metaphors are very much warrior and battle prone. That was just the culture. The far enemy is the opposite, basically ill will. That makes sense. We can understand. As Guy said, if there's ill will, there's not metta, and vice versa.

The near enemy is a state that can actually be confused for metta when we're not quite paying attention. And that near enemy is sometimes called lust. I would say it's more desire—affection, but just desire in itself, a kind of yearning, craving, that oddly enough we can confuse with loving-kindness. And loving-kindness practice tends to highlight it, to bring it up.

You might notice when you're practicing, say to yourself or to a friend, and you start just connecting. You really feel the sense of their goodness, the quality about them that you can connect with. You're offering the phrases, just wishing them well. And the desire can creep in in many ways. It can creep in about wanting to feel the metta a little better, wanting to feel good, wanting them to know and feel the metta that you're sending them. Wanting the metta to somehow fix them or change them or make them happy. Have you had that? If you do it well enough, then they'll really be happy always. Sometimes people want to leave a retreat and go call up the person and say, "How are you doing the last few days? Have you noticed any difference?" This is a move from metta to wanting. It's a little subtle, but after a while, not so subtle. It feels different.

Or what's more common even is sending the wishes but suddenly you start wanting something back. I first noticed it when I was sending metta to a good friend and suddenly I started noticing how I wished she would call me a little bit more. We really ought to spend a little bit more time together. I wonder if she really feels the same for me that I'm feeling for her. And this really easily creeps in when it's family members or partners or children—the "what if" aspect. Real metta doesn't have conditions. It doesn't have that neediness that wants something back.

It doesn't have that sense of "I'll love you because you love me." It doesn't ultimately have anything to do with making ourselves feel better. In that moment, it's just an open-hearted generosity of heart. Of course, the paradox is that in that moment we feel great, but we're not doing it to feel great. That's the trick. In that moment of just really wishing someone well, it's completely spacious, non-needy, non-wanting.

Play with this. Say with someone that you're really close to—a partner is a good one—where you can subtly feel the difference when you're just wishing them well. You might see areas where they're suffering or areas that are difficult, but you really can connect to that love and wishing them well. Even when you might have something you

want to tell them, it's out of a place of metta. And then notice when it subtly changes. You might be saying the same thing. You might be wanting to share with them the same insight you had about them. But suddenly, it's so that they could treat you a little bit better. Notice the difference in how that feels. You'll get a sense of the difference between metta and wanting, between metta and yearning.

Another way we get confused is when we're feeling that sense of not being enough, of insufficiency or isolation, and the thought of metta as love becomes more a sense of needing—love as needing something to complete us. But we still think of it as love, a kind of yearning. And if we're not careful, we can call that love and equate it with metta. But it's not the same at all.

This is from Mark Epstein: "When we're plagued with a sense of unworthiness, it's easy to feel deficient, not enough, and to think that the love of another person is the only possible solution to this plight. Meditation tends to work against this assumption of deficiency by restoring the capacity for connection from the inside. In doing this, it challenges the common assumption of our culture about where connection comes from. In the Buddhist view, connection is already present. We're not as separate and distinct as we think we are. Connection is our natural state. We just have to learn to permit it, to allow it."

Desire, insufficiency, neediness—the Buddha called it a "maker of limits." It constricts and narrows our heart and mind. The friendliness, the generosity of heart, of metta, of simple connection and acceptance, opens us to spaciousness, to vastness. You can almost feel this experientially.

Aversion being the far enemy of metta, ill will being the far enemy—that's not hard to see. What can be difficult for us is to really trust that the way of connection, the power of friendliness, of acceptance, of loving-kindness, is really stronger and more of a protection for us than fear and ill will and anger are. It's easy for me to think that ill will is a natural response to something unpleasant. Of course it should be kept away from me. Who wants to connect with something that's unpleasant or scary, or somebody that I don't like?

One thing to remember is that metta doesn't necessarily mean liking, and it doesn't mean approving of harmful or difficult or unpleasant behaviors. It simply means connecting with what is unpleasant rather than fearing, and seeing in that connection a way for a more appropriate response.

I remember some years ago I was teaching a retreat that had some very active environmentalists in it. I was teaching with Sharon Salzberg, and in the early days we were in a group describing the loving-kindness practice, which we would introduce in the afternoon, much as we do here. Some people in the group, not having practiced the loving-kindness yet but just hearing about it, were saying, "Well, I don't want to—it's too mushy. I don't want to practice that. I need my anger. I don't want to lose my edge." That sense of needing anger.

But I think we can confuse anger with discrimination. Actually, when Guy talked about aversive types and greed types, the so-called flip side of the aversive type is discriminating wisdom. And myself being an aversive type, one thing about being aversive is you also think you're right. You see things clearly. It just has this tinge of negativity that's completely extra. And it doesn't always see things clearly, but it really thinks it does.

But it's quite possible to have a very incisive, discriminating wisdom together with connectedness and friendliness.

It doesn't have to be fueled by aversion. But often we think the anger is our protection—we don't want to let it go.

In this retreat, I remember one person in particular who was very strong about not wanting to do the metta practice, and who had been very active for years in environmental work. At the end of the retreat, it was one of the most... I don't know, really touching experiences of my teaching life. This person was weeping, basically, and said that through the years, anger had really been fueling him in the environmental work he had done. He felt that it had served him. But he was also seeing that he couldn't just isolate the anger to when he needed it to do the work—that it was spilling over into his family, into his life, and basically eating him up from the inside.

And that's what happens, you know. And just seeing that there's another way—how to be clear, how to be strong, without making who we don't agree with or what we don't like into "the other." We take what we don't like about someone, put them in a box, and they become the other, the enemy. That thing we don't like defines them. And it's so hard sometimes to find the courage, or even how to connect, without denying the difficult—but to also see that there's something else.

As Thich Nhat Hanh talks about, bringing up seeds of joy in the difficult doesn't deny the difficult; it just sees there's something human somewhere about this person. We start from that connection, and then we can spread out and see.

Often, that person is ourselves. That's why it's very important to just find one little kind thought you had a year and a half ago. Think about that and really let it in. It doesn't take much to make a crack in that web of otherness and begin to relate.

I read a little incident in a biography of Martin Luther King that really spoke to me—how he had this deep commitment to nonviolence, and it manifested really by not making people the other. So this incident: I think he was on a plane in the early 1960s, and a Justice Department lawyer was talking to him, trying to convince Dr. King that one of his advisors, a New York attorney who was close to him, had previously had some kind of communist connections—or maybe once he went to a communist meeting, who knows. If you remember the 1960s, the government was really paranoid about anything that had anything to do with communism.

So this Justice Department lawyer was really grabbing Dr. King's ear, telling him, "This guy's a communist, he's really bad for you, you can't keep using him as an advisor, he's going to make everything you do suspect," and on and on. Dr. King was listening very politely, taking in what he said, but clearly not agreeing.

And suddenly the lawyer got it. Just like a light went off. He said, "Oh. This is a man who is so committed to nonviolence, so committed to the path of love, to not ever choosing hatred as a motive"—which I read somewhere else Dr. King once said. That even if the worst segregationist church bomber were to come up to Dr. King in a moment of sincerity, wanting to talk to him or even shake his hand, he would never shut him away. So he's not going to make someone like that the other person. How could the lawyer expect him to say he wasn't going to have anything to do with one of his friends because the guy went to some communist meeting sometime?

I just love that—that sense that you don't make anyone the other, while doing everything you can from that place of connectedness to try to change harmful, really harmful, terrible behavior. But you don't reject the person.

So that's, to me, one of the more powerful aspects of the strength, the power that can come to our own motivations, our own actions and responses in the world—to ourselves and to others—when we can consciously access connectedness rather than believing that fear and separation is our best protection.

Try it. In little ways, you know. Don't go for the biggest one. Try it when you're in line at the supermarket and the person in front of you is in the express lane with fourteen items when you're only allowed to have ten, and you're in a hurry. How many times do you count their items and think, "Don't they know? Can't they see?" Instead, just try and connect with some aspect of them. Could be me next time.

Or when you're in traffic and you're really in a hurry, and the light is just turning orange, and the car in front of you stops—and easily three more cars could have made it through that light, but that car in front of you stopped. Can you meet that? Meet that person as a person? Or are they the other, blocking traffic, a complete nincompoop?

Just practice in little ways. And it's amazing, honestly. The first time I'll connect, the first phrase will go, "May you be free from danger." Yeah, right. Give me a break.

You know, the mind is saying, "Don't even try. You're being ridiculous." Just try again. Try again. And I often find that by the second repetition of the phrases, it's really like "us" instead of "me and them." Just for a moment. It's not a huge thing, but it is a huge thing.

Just practice it in little ways here—in the food line, when the person in front of you is going through the door so mindfully and you just want to wring their neck. See if you can feel a sense of appreciation for their mindfulness rather than thinking it means something bad about you.

So with this practice, we start where we are. And mindfulness is also a place where loving-kindness, connection, and acceptance show up. Metta, as this aspect of non-judging connectedness, is actually intrinsic to a moment of sati, a moment of mindfulness, isn't it? It's not like you're only going to experience metta if you're sitting here saying, "May I be happy." We experience it often.

Notice how you meet a moment of your experience as you go through the day. Maybe just reflecting on the difficult things that came up today—how did you meet them? Boredom, discomfort, anxiety, fear, sleepiness. How did you meet the beautiful things? Compassion, gratitude, joy, calm, peace. Did we make those unpleasant things the other? Did we make ourselves somehow bad for experiencing them? Did we set up a sense of separation when those things happened? Or did we simply meet it? "Oh yes, this too. Oh yes, awareness of discomfort is like this." That's metta in that moment.

The same with the beautiful, with the lovely, with the things that we like. We just meet it. "Oh yes, calm is like this. Joy is like this." And when it goes, that's fine. Or is there that clutching, that need to hold on to it to make ourselves feel okay? To give ourselves some sense of being somebody, or at least just being okay to ourselves.

So really seeing that a moment of metta is accessible anywhere—in that sense of friendliness and clear seeing, just with whatever's arising in the moment. And we start where we are.

Again, my friend in Burma, being held in that metta field, it gave me a really powerful experience. I was having a conversation one day with one of the men who was translating. At the end of the talks, Sayadaw would talk one day, and then either Steve Smith or I would talk another day. Steve calls them "fusion retreats," where you have the really straight Burmese-Asian teaching, and then we would modify it the way we teach here. And you don't really know how much we modify it. But as Gil said, the instructions are: you sit down, you're told how to note everything that arises, you're given a half-hour instruction, and that's it. You go do it.

And the Sayadaw would say things like, "Okay, anger arises, you note two or three times and then it's gone, and you go back to the breath." So in the questions afterward, I was talking to people and they were saying, "But in the West, you describe how to be with the anger and how to feel it in the body. You don't say it just goes away in two or three notes. And in fact, it doesn't go away in two or three notes." And we're saying, "Yes, we know it doesn't." And then we explain what you actually do—you feel it in the body, the usual approach, just like I gave you this morning.

I was talking to the translator later, and he said, "Wow, that was really interesting. That was really helpful. I'd like to hear more like that."

And I said, "Why?"

He says, "Well, you know..."

it doesn't go away for us in two or three notings either."

And I said, "Oh, I always thought maybe it did."

"Oh no, it doesn't go away for us." He said, "But then..." I asked, "So what do you do?" And he said, "Well, this is very helpful, these instructions."

I explained, "We talk about it because we Westerners get really upset with ourselves. We think we're doing something wrong. We beat ourselves up. We get really negative because it didn't go away."

And he says, "Oh, we just say, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

That's the difference. It's a huge difference.

So if we could do that—okay, so there's anger. We know that it's still going to go, "Oh well, never mind." Anger's here. And just keep on noticing it without adding any other story. We're not creating some separation about it. It's amazing.

But that's metta. Ajahn Sumedho, I love the way he describes it. He says metta does not necessarily mean liking anything. It simply means an attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or the faults inside or outside of oneself. With metta, one isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, in a person, or in oneself, but without creating anything around it. It's just this—without creating anything around it. In space.

That's what I consider to be metta. Just connecting and not creating anything around the unpleasant. The same with the pleasant—totally connecting and not creating anything around it. That allows for clear seeing. There's no sense of separation, and not even a sense of incredible unity either, because that's already a thought. It's just how things are in a moment.

It's so simple, and it's really very available, very accessible in our moment-to-moment experience—in formal metta practice, in our vipassana practice, just in walking around. Just notice that simple connectedness, that friendliness that doesn't need to create anything around experience.

So I'll just end with a little short quotation.

CHAPTER 339

The Tides of Conceiving

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching on 'the tides of conceiving'—the endless mental activity of 'I am,' 'I am this,' 'I shall be'—and how these conceptual waves exhaust us and create suffering. Drawing from the suttas, she explores how insight (vipassanā) works not as a different way of thinking, but as a fundamentally different way of perceiving, illustrated beautifully through the metaphor of Magic Eye images where a 3D picture suddenly emerges from what appeared to be random patterns.

Wilson delves into the Buddhist psychology of perception (saññā), explaining how this mental factor colors our experience based on whatever mental states—craving, fear, ignorance—are present in consciousness. She examines how papañca (mental proliferation) operates: 'What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates.' This proliferation of associations and interpretations creates notions that 'assail and overwhelm' us, all stemming from mistaken perception and sakkāyadiṭṭhi (personality view).

The practical heart of the talk addresses how we can find peace through simple mindfulness at the sense doors, referencing the Bāhiya Sutta's famous instruction: 'In the seen is only the seen, in the heard only the heard.' Rather than fighting thoughts or trying to dismantle our personality view, Wilson suggests we simply recognize thoughts as passing phenomena—like sounds or sensations—without solidifying them into elaborate self-stories. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Chah and the Zen master Bankei, she points toward the ever-present silence beneath our mental chatter, where true peace resides.

What I want to talk about tonight comes from a line in one of the suttas that I really love, where the Buddha speaks of "the tides of conceiving." He says, "When the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over a person, he is called a sage at peace."

When I read this, I could just feel that sense of conceiving, conceiving all the time—how exhausting it is. It really does wash over us like a tide. And when it's not clung to, one truly does feel at peace.

The Buddha defines conceiving as: "I am" is a conceiving. "I am this" is a conceiving. "I shall be" or "I shall not be," "I shall be possessed of form" or "I shall not be possessed of form"—and on and on, ad nauseum. You get the idea. That's conceiving, the tides of conceiving.

I want to pick up on a couple of topics from Sylvia's talk last night: the nature of insight, as well as how we can either stop and see, or we can sit and tell ourselves stories—which is basically the tides of conceiving.

So how do we see through, stop clinging to, these tides of conceiving? It's not about getting in a fight with thought—"I am, I am not this"—and trying to stop that. That's just more of the same. But how do we make that shift that recognizes reality in a whole different way?

This takes us into the nature of insight. Rather than a different way of thinking, it's a whole different way of perceiving. Insight is something that arises from who knows where. And the way it seems to work, or the effect it seems to have, is that we're suddenly perceiving our experience differently. It's not necessarily that the situation has changed, but the way we perceive and understand the situation may have changed radically.

The best metaphor I know for this—and I think it's really quite apt—is those Magic Eye graphic designs. You know the ones that come in books, with two or three different colors of graphics that don't have any particular design? They're kind of hard on the eye. But if you hold them and look at them long enough so that your gaze relaxes—a steady gaze, but relaxed, not looking for something—then the tendency of the eyes to grasp onto each of the graphic symbols sort of softens, and suddenly a 3D-looking image springs out from the middle of that page. Two guys playing hockey, or a rocket ship, or dinosaurs, or whatever it is. And it's really clear. It's the kind of "Oh! How could I not have seen this? It's so obviously here." And then when your eyes either get tired or you start looking too hard again, it goes away and the graphics are back.

This is, I think, a really good metaphor for how insight works, how our perception shifts. The 3D picture—it's always there, isn't it? Somehow hidden within the multicolored graphics. It's not that when your eyes relaxed, something that wasn't there sprang out. It was already there. The perception just shifted.

And it doesn't mean that the original flat graphics with no particular picture is false either. They're both true. They're both part of that particular experience. Once we've seen the two guys playing hockey, even when we're not seeing it again—when we're only seeing the flatness—we know that is also part of it. And we don't have to get upset if someone comes and says, "No, I don't believe you." We don't have to get upset about it. We know it's true. But you can't give anyone else that experience either. All you can do is say, "Well, it's really true. And if you relax, or cross your eyes, or hold it to your nose, or whatever works for you, maybe you can see it." And maybe they can and maybe they can't. We can't affect it.

It's a little like the Buddha saying, "I can show you the path, but I can't walk it for you. This is really what is possible, but you have to try and see for yourself."

To me, insight is really like that. We learn to recognize the same situation in a different way. And even though that particular new way of recognizing may not last—have you noticed that? It's not like everything is altered solidly forever—the knowing of that new way of perceiving affects the mind stream. It has an effect on how we understand and how we respond to similar situations in the future. And it also makes it a little bit easier to perceive in this other way again.

from time to time, although not totally in our control, exerts an influence.

And I know we've all had experiences like this, or we wouldn't still be here plowing along. It can be quite simple. The experience of having a really strong pain in your knee—solid and unrelenting. You hate it, you just can't bear another sitting with it. What are they talking about, that pain is just sensations? It's clearly killing you.

And suddenly there's a sitting where something in the mind or heart lets go, and it's clearly intense vibrating sensations, but the sense of it as being pain, or *my* pain, or a problem, or solid—it's just gone. Gone. Just vibrating intensities, points of sensation. And it's really just like that for a while.

Then it goes back. The hockey players disappear and we're back to just the solid interlocking graphics. Where did they go? I want the points of intense, non-personal sensation back. But of course, as we know, clinging makes it impossible. Yet knowing that that was an experience, that that was a different perception of the same situation, changes something. Somewhere in our mindstream, in the way we approach our physical experience, there's a knowing that it can be different. It's not only one way.

It's not that either perception is the only truth. Sometimes our bodies feel solid. And if I go around saying, "I know it's nothing but arising and passing momentary sensations, just like bubbles arising and passing in emptiness"—I mean, it's been like that sometimes. It certainly doesn't feel like that right now, not in the least. But that doesn't make the other not true, and it doesn't mean this isn't true. They're just different perceptions.

So what starts to happen in the way we understand experience—the world, our mind, our body, all the five skandhas in practice—is rather than saying "this way I'm used to, solidity of body for example, is false, and what's really true is points of sensation in the night sky," we recognize that would be just letting go of one clinging and moving into another clinging. It's going to cause just as much suffering after a while.

Rather, it's saying: Oh, sometimes the perception is like this, sometimes the perception is like that. And maybe those aren't the only ways perception can be. Maybe I have no clue, and maybe I never will.

But we hate that. We want to have a clue. We want to know what it's like. And that's where we get into trouble—wanting to know and holding on to our descriptions of reality because somehow it seems safer or more solid or more comfortable. Basically, it seems in control, right? Isn't that what it all comes down to? If I can really say and name and describe how it is, I've got it under control. Too bad it doesn't work.

So I want to remind you, to read again, a quotation from Sayadaw U Janaka that I mentioned in one of my earlier talks. Because the whole point of insight practice is these insights—which, rather than something we get or hold on to, are just shifts of perception.

U Janaka says that we practice vipassanā in order to live in happiness, to be rid of suffering. That suffering arises due to the suffering mental states we get involved in. That our suffering mental states arise because of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, because of our personality-view belief, our clinging to our idea of our personality. And that the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* arises because we have a mistaken understanding of the nature of our mental and physical experience.

So again, we're back to the point—or a point—that the way mindfulness practice works is by allowing us, moment after moment, to perhaps have a little bit more accurate perception of our mental and physical experience. This can then give rise to maybe an understanding that's a little bit closer to what's really going on than the understandings and descriptions we might be operating under without even knowing it.

Let me backtrack a little and start with a discussion of the mental factor of perception itself. In Buddhist psychology, the word *perception* is a translation of the Pāli word *saññā*. It refers to a very specific experience.

We've talked about the sense doors—I think Guy was discussing this—that there's the eye, and when there's a sense object, a sight arises, and consciousness of that sight arises. When those three come together, that's called sense contact. Seeing, basically. And in a moment of sense contact, arising with it is *saññā*, or perception.

Perception is really based largely in memory. It's our basic, instantaneous recognition of what's going on, of what's happening. So with seeing, there might be the perception of a person, for example—a woman, or "that person I know," the person's name.

Or we hear a sound, and there's the immediate perception of the frogs croaking out there. This just pretty much arises on its own. And sometimes, of course, it's accurate. Sometimes we really don't know what the sound is, and it might be perception just of not knowing. Sometimes the perception can be completely wrong. We hear a sound and think, "That's the frogs croaking," and it's not the frogs croaking at all—it's something else.

So that's one thing: there's perception, which may or may not be accurate. And then, as we all know by now, extremely rarely does it stop at perception. There's perception, and then out of that perception, just like that, there's thoughts, there's descriptions, there's interpretations. And in a moment of a simple perception, like a simple sound of the bell, the thoughts and interpretations and associations can create our whole world. Which is useful at times.

About fifteen minutes ago, when the bell rang outside, there was just that sound—gong—immediately the perception "bell ringing," and the association of the time: it means it's time for the talk, I'm a yogi, it's Spirit Rock on retreat, it's time to go in and have the talk, I know where I sit. All of that, the whole world springs into existence with the perception of that sound as the bell before the dharma talk. I mean, luckily it works a lot of the time. We all have similar associations and interpretations. It's useful. It's not like we want to get rid of that. We'd be a bit of a mess if we didn't have it: "What's that sound? What do I do now? Who am I? Where am I? What happened?" It wouldn't work.

So it's not like we're trying to throw that out. But it's helpful to see that it's not the absolute reality and truth of what's happening. It's an agreed-upon perception and description that's useful when we all know what's happening.

With our mindfulness, what we can begin to see is, first, that perception is not always accurate. And based on that inaccurate perception, descriptions and interpretations and assumptions can get really far afield. This is where we start to wonder why we're disconnected from things as they are.

An example of perception being inaccurate, distorted: in a moment of perception, that recognition is colored by whatever mental states happen to be arising in the mind, in the consciousness at that moment. The base distortion, of course, is ignorance—just not seeing clearly, not recognizing accurately. So hearing a sound, we don't really know. Have you noticed how our tendency is to make something up? The nearest thing, the closest thing.

For me, a good metaphor for inaccurate perception due to ignorance is if I take my glasses off and go around my house. I don't see very well without my glasses, and I can observe how the inaccurate perception then gives rise to mental states, associations, how we feel, and how it affects our whole state of being—based on something that isn't even true.

So if I go around without my glasses on—I really like the house to be clean and tidy—and when I don't have my glasses on and I walk around, I think, "Oh, everything looks really clean. I don't see any dust, I don't see any dirt. The windows look really clean, which is surprising since I haven't washed them in ten months. They look really good." And then I'll be reading or something, and I'll have my glasses on and walk into the same room and go, "Oh my God. I didn't see. Look at that. Look at all those spider webs. Look at all that stuff on the floor." And then I'll get really disgruntled and unhappy, whereas before I was feeling really spacious and peaceful and in harmony.

Just based on perceptions and what we do with them. If craving is in the mind, have you noticed when you're really desiring something, it looks much more attractive than after you don't want it anymore? Not only people, but food or some idea. It really colors things. Or if there's fear.

On a retreat recently, I was in Asia, and it was mostly sunny and warm during the days, but I noticed a couple of days when it was really quite cloudy—a very different atmosphere. The first day it was like that, I had been in a space where a lot of deep fear was coming up. Then I went outside to do my walking and it was cloudy, and immediately I felt that it was sinister. It felt unsafe. It's so cloudy, it's so dark, it's so sinister. I don't feel safe walking out here. I could see, oh wow, that's just the fear completely coloring the perception.

Then the next time it was cloudy, I was in a much more peaceful place, and I went outside and thought, oh, it's kind of cozy. It feels like a blanket, you know, the higher barometric pressure, and it makes all the sounds—of which there were many—much more muffled. This is really pleasant. This is really cozy.

We do that a lot. A lot.

Now, if we're aware of how the mental states in the mind are coloring the perception, and then how the mind is taking that perception and running with it into all the associations and feelings that grow from it, then that's fine. We can just see that's what's happening. Sort of like seeing, oh yeah, there's these hockey players, or there's not. When we don't realize that's what's happening—which is when we're telling ourselves

stories and our energy is caught in those stories—that's when we really start suffering. Because mostly we end up trying to fix it or manipulate things to keep it the way we like it, when it's not even that way to begin with. We're just making it up.

That's my favorite line of Joseph Goldstein's: we're making it all up. Moment after moment, really quite literally, we're making it all up. Sometimes it's quite useful. But when we're really suffering, it's helpful to know that we're making it up. Because if we can start to see through how we're making it up, we don't have to keep believing it. And then we don't have to keep suffering from a story that we're making up—based fifty percent of the time, I haven't done a research paper that it's really fifty percent, I'm making that up too—on a perception that isn't even accurate to begin with.

It's really a trip when we start to look at it this way.

There's a great word for this particular pattern in the Pali: *papañca*, one of my favorites. This is the definition of it: What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. One complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas. And then this complication, this proliferation, becomes notions that assail and overwhelm a person—just based on the complications of thinking about any particular perception of sense experience.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's quite a statement. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge.

So as I said, even having a perception and using it to describe the world doesn't have to be a problem. It's useful. Even having a perception and a description that we're not sure is accurate—that's okay. The problem is only when we're clinging to, identified with, that perception, that description, that interpretation. And mostly we don't know we're doing it. So when we think, "This is true, this is how it is," that's a clue that we're grasping or identifying with it. And that's when we start to get into conflict with ourselves, with others.

Because once we're locked into "this is what that sound is, this is what this sensation means, this is what's happening," it's as if our awareness snaps shut. We tend, out of kind of solidifying around this description of the world or ourselves, not to even notice perceptions or experiences that go against the particular description we have. It's actually amazing, I find, how the mind can do that—just completely discount perceptions that don't fit into our description, even when our description is a suffering one.

On retreats, I don't know if this has ever happened to you, it happens to me sometimes. Those of you who've been here two weeks, by now I know even in the silence, you kind of have a sense of who everyone is by the way they walk or the feel of them. You know people's routines. You always run into the same person at a certain place.

And have you ever had it happen, as I have, say in the dining room of the Insight Meditation Society—the dining room's a bit bigger—where I'll be sitting down eating, deep in retreat, and someone comes and sits near me. I don't look up. I'm just really being a good yogi. You're dying to look, but you don't look. But you know who it is anyway. You can feel it—how they sit and how they move—and so you know who it is. And from that perception of who it is, whatever associations go with it, just like that, they're there. You like the person, all those things. You don't like the person, all those things. They're eating like a slob, all those things. And you just know it.

So I remember one time I was deep in that, noting, noting, noting. But it's all going on. There's not even a flicker of a doubt that I know what's happening—until I looked up and way at the far end, the person who I knew was sitting next to me happened to walk by. And everything just comes crashing down. I watched the mind's tendency to go, "Well, that can't be them because they're here." I love that because it just makes the whole house of cards fall down. And just for a moment, I'm in that space of don't know. Just open to be present without having to know everything, without assuming already before I've even met the moment.

There's a German joke a German friend told me. Sometimes at night, if someone's out driving and has probably had a few too many beers, they can tend to get onto the Autobahn, the freeway, going the wrong way. You enter the wrong exit and you're going in the wrong direction on the freeway at night. And in Germany, that means fast in the wrong direction on the freeway. They call it, translated, a ghost driver. And when there's a ghost driver going the wrong way, sometimes it'll come on the radio: "Ghost driver at this location on the Autobahn between these two cities." And so the joke my friend told me is that the ghost driver, the person driving, is listening to the radio hearing there's a ghost driver on the Autobahn. He goes, "One ghost driver? There are many."

We so hold on to our perception, we just don't even question it. They're all going the wrong way because I'm right, no question about it.

So when we're grasping like that, it freezes perception. It really solidifies our thoughts. This is when thoughts become so solid, so real, and we're really suffering from a thought because we've really solidified our perception and our description at that point. It's basically clinging.

When there's just that shift—oh, it can't be this person because there they are—in that moment everything is open to be perceived, to be experienced in a different way. Then in that moment of not knowing, there's not really conflict. It's not a problem. It opens us up to that moment of insight where we can really just let a different way of being, of understanding, of perceiving come in. When we're so locked into how we think it is, there's no room for letting go, for that shift to come in.

So it's not that thoughts are a problem. Thoughts are really useful. Descriptions are really useful. We use them all the time. There's nothing wrong with thoughts. It's just learning to understand that they're simply tools, and they are rarely accurate descriptions of ultimate reality. And as long as we know they're tools, there's always that possibility that our description, our interpretation, isn't the only one—or even the only right, accurate one. Just that possibility that there's another way.

This is Ajahn Chah. He says, talking about how we use thoughts to construct reality, our idea of reality: "Appearances are determined into existence. Why must we determine them? Because they don't intrinsically exist. For example, suppose somebody wants to make a marker. They take a piece of wood or a rock, you place it on the ground, and you call it a marker."

Actually, it's not a marker. There isn't any marker. That's why we determine it into existence. You put it there, call it a marker, and now it's a marker.

And he says, in the same way we determine cities, we determine people, we determine cattle—we determine everything. Why must we determine these things? Because nothing originally, intrinsically exists as that. It's our way of using thought to determine it into reality, all our concepts.

Understanding that these things are simply determinations—including people, including cities—understanding that they're simply determinations, you can be at peace. It's not a problem. It's useful. But if you believe that the person, the being, the mind, the "theirs" and so on are intrinsic, self-existing realities, then you laugh and cry over them. Then there are the proliferations of conditioning factors. If we take such things to be ours, there will always be suffering. This is micchādiṭṭhi, wrong view. But when we stop clinging to them, there is peace. They don't have to go away. We just realize it's a determination. It's not how it ultimately actually is. And in that realization, there can be peace.

In my experience, personally, I've found that it's really this search of the heart, the mind, that wants some kind of resting place. Some place where it doesn't have to hang out in that "don't know," that undetermined space where "this isn't possibly the only

way." The mind wants some sense of "this is how it is—I know how it is, don't tell me otherwise." And it feels secure and safe, somehow at ease, even though that very grasping is the source of so much conflict and suffering.

I want to talk a little bit about this selective perception, because it's really amazing to me how, once the mind has landed on "this is how it is"—this description, this is a marker, this marks the boundary between my property and yours—if you move it over two feet, there's big trouble. Moving that stone from here to there creates huge conflict.

How we don't notice or accept conflicting perceptions can really bring us into conflict with ourselves and with others. For example, I remember in politics years ago—way back in the seventies with Nixon. He was, you know, the worst politician ever. And I can't remember what exactly, but I remember hearing something really positive about him, something really good he'd done. I saw my mind respond: "I don't want to hear that. There can't be anything good about Nixon because he's in this category in my mind." It's too confusing to have it open—that maybe he was a real jerk in this way, but there were also these really beautiful things. The mind doesn't like hanging out like that. We hold fast. We don't want to let go of our solid worldview.

One great place to notice this, since you're here on retreat, is to observe how your perceptions of what's happening in a particular sitting or in a particular walking shape your experience. Notice the perception, how you interpret it, what emotions and reactions and self-descriptions come out of that interpretation, all colored by whatever mood happens to be in your mind at the moment. Notice how the view of what "good practice" is gets really locked in, and how much conflict we can create with our own experience just from holding to that description, that view of good practice.

Teachers are in a really fortunate position, getting to hear so many different people, because it becomes so obvious how we each just make it up—usually to our own detriment. Usually "good practice" is something other than what's happening in my experience right now.

We'll have a string of people come through. One person will say, "Well, my practice is no good because I can't stay with anything. As soon as I feel a sensation, something else happens. As soon as I notice a thought, it goes away. I have no concentration—I can't stay with the thoughts." And we'll say, "Well, could it be that things are coming and going quickly, and that's impermanence?" "No, it couldn't be. I have no concentration."

The next person comes in, and they're just with the breath, very peaceful and soft and present. But they're saying, "You've been talking about choiceless awareness, and I should be able to open to all things coming and going, and that's not happening. It's just the breath, just really peaceful, just really quiet—which just shows that I'm dull and don't really have insight into impermanence."

Then the next person wants a lot of emotions because they're too peaceful. And the person having a lot of emotions thinks that's a waste—it's not about opening to emotions, it's about being peaceful. And on and on it goes. All of it is probably stuff that's been said here, or that you've read, or offered in response to questions. All of it.

So notice how your mind will tend to pick out the one usually that will cause us the most trouble. Because we tend to have the overview of "I'm not good enough." If you have the overview of "I'm really the best," then you'll pick out the one that confirms exactly what's happening to you and ignore the others. And that happens too. "I'm having some kind of energy release and that's the most important thing." Everything else is ignored. We all do this. It's amazing.

Once I was teaching a retreat many years ago, and I was still sitting in a chair then as I do now. Well into the retreat, like the fifth or sixth day, someone came for an interview. It was her first retreat, and she said, "You know, I've been in so much agony sitting on the zafu. My body isn't used to sitting cross-legged." She was just in agony for days. That's all her sittings were about—the agony and berating herself that she couldn't do it right. And she said, just before the interview, "But you know what? Just today I looked up and I said, 'Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe it's possible to meditate sitting in a chair.'"

Now, we had said that. Did any of us ever say you have to sit cross-legged on a zafu or you're not meditating correctly? And we didn't say it then either. Five days of not being able to let in that perception because of the mind saying the only way to do it right is to sit on the zafu cross-legged. It's amazing what we can do.

So notice how you do it with your practice. Selective perception filtered through mental state and memory—what you remember, what you don't remember, and how we suffer from trying to make our experience match or stay with a description we've basically, essentially made up.

Another place that we do this—and it's very subtle at the same time that it's so grossly obvious it's amazing we miss it, but then it's also very subtle because it's happening so fast—is in the whole realm of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, of personality view. Personality view being—it's not one solid steady-state thing—but our basic beliefs and descriptions

about ourselves. Either our personality traits, the way we define ourselves, the way we relate to certain moods and habits of mind, our view of ourselves, our memories. So familiar, so unnoticed, but it's really the veil through which we filter a lot of perceptions.

A lot of people have been mentioning this in interviews, not in these words exactly, but seeing, for example, how maybe we knew it before intellectually, but noticing it more moment to moment as it's arising. How maybe somewhere way, way back in childhood or infancy, there was some perception of great neediness, or of somehow doing something that made mother's love go away and perceiving it as "I'm completely unlovable," or "Somehow it's my fault and I have to make my parents happy." You know, whatever. All our stories, which in some way are both trite when you say them but really very profound and suffering-causing in our lives.

But really seeing how, based on whatever perception—maybe back in infancy—that perception and that interpretation, "I have to do X, Y, and Z to make the world safe for me to live in, to get love from my parents," or "I have to make myself invisible not to get anger coming from my parents," whatever it is—it might be based on an accurate perception at that time. That's not the point. That particular perception and the descriptions, the interpretations, the sense of self that comes out of it, then continues to become so ingrained, really so identified with, so clung to, that through the veil of it—we don't even see it—that becomes the way that we respond to many, many situations in our life, up to and including now, when it's not really applicable at all.

Well, a lot of us know this from therapy, and we wonder, why did that perception stay so solid? It's not as if I'm carrying around something on my back that I have to chip away at. But what we start to see through the practice here is that, simply without recognizing that particular clung-to description, we're recreating those conditions moment to moment by the way we respond to situations.

So for example, if somehow I grew up feeling that people were always pulling on me, and people were always needing me, and I somehow had to protect myself—then in some really minor situation, even here, where nobody's needing anything, but we just see someone coming toward us, and instinctively we turn away. "Oh, don't let them look at me, they're needing something from me." And we go off and we've shrunk away into ourselves, and there's a sense of separation. Just something so quick as that, and relatively minor. And then we start saying, "I feel so separate, I feel so isolated, I feel so alone."

It's sakkāya-diṭṭhi. It's not that we even have to get rid of that, but simply recognizing how in that moment, that interpretation of the perception—say, I'm making this very simple—of someone coming toward me, "Oh, they're going to need something"—total interpretation. We don't know. It's based on the view we don't even recognize that we're clinging to, and we pull back.

All we have to do is be aware of that whole process without clinging to it, without assuming it's an accurate description. And hating it is also clinging to it. So saying, "This is really bad, I have to change it. I have to be open-hearted, loving, and kind. I will go toward whoever comes near me"—

I will offer them something. That's just more of the same, only turned around in the other direction.

This is what's so great about the shift of perception that insight brings. You don't have to unpack it all. We just have to see through it. Thoughts are fine. Just because a thought arises, we don't have to make it so solid. We don't have to make it a solid reality. We don't have to fight it. We can simply see: oh, this is the perception, this is the interpretation, this is sakkāya-diṭṭhi. Anxiety feels like this. Fear of being needed feels like this. Loneliness feels like this. That's all. I mean, it's a lot. But that's all. It's a shift of perception, not tearing everything apart and starting over. Just recognizing that maybe this isn't the only description of the world that's possible.

It really is quite amazing.

This is from Bankei, a Japanese Zen master in the 1600s. He's talking basically about how our problem with thoughts, our coming into conflict in regards to our thoughts, is that we have so much preference for ourselves. He says that if you didn't have this preference for yourself, there wouldn't be any illusions. If two people next to you were quarreling, you can just listen to it and be quite balanced about it. We don't get all drawn in or upset about it. But as soon as we're one of the people quarreling, it takes on a whole other level of intensity and seriousness.

So he's basically saying all of our thoughts are as if two other people are quarreling or having some great discussion. We don't have to meet them any more than that.

And he says, even when memories arise, things about your past, reflections of your past and images—those will arise. That's just normal. But these thoughts don't really have a real substance. So when they arise, just let them arise. You don't have to make them stop. But if they do stop, let them stop. And either way, you don't have to pay any attention to them.

Can we stand that? All these thoughts and memories—I'm like this and I'm like that, and this happened because of this—just don't pay any attention to them. Don't try to stop them. Don't try to keep them going. Don't pay any attention. Just leave them alone and then all these illusions don't appear.

And since there are no illusions when you don't take note of the reflecting images, while these images, these memories are reflected in the mind, it's just the same as if they weren't reflected in the mind. You get what he means? They can be there or not. It's just the same. A thousand thoughts may arise and it's just the same as though they haven't. They won't give you a bit of trouble. You don't have any thoughts that you need to clear from your mind. You don't have to cut them off. They can arise or not arise. It doesn't make any difference.

Can we imagine that? That's just a thought. It's just passing by like a sound. It just doesn't have to make any difference.

Thoughts are only so solid when there's this clutching, this grasping of interpretation, description, and identity around them. Now, I'm not saying that's easy. But that's our whole practice. How do we cut through that?

Back to the absolute simplicity of sati, of mindfulness, of what Ajahn Buddhadasa calls sati-pañña—sati is mindfulness, pañña is wisdom—at the moment of sense contact, at the sense doors. It's another way that sense restraint, which was brought up this morning, is talked about sometimes. Not the sense restraint that means you never look around or you don't go out looking for distraction. That's one meaning of it. But sense restraint in terms of bringing mindfulness-wisdom, clear seeing, the simplicity of presence to that moment of sense contact, to the moment of perception. Just noticing what's happening as it is. Sound. The perception "bell." And that's enough. Even if a thought comes—"Oh, that bell means blah-di-di-blah-blah"—thinking. You know it's a thought. You don't have to stop it. But that's all. Not having to create whole worlds around it. Not having to believe it. Not having to do anything. It's so simple. I don't know. We just can't stand it somehow.

But this is really the heart of the famous sutta called the Bāhiya Sutta, where someone came to the Buddha begging him to just quickly tell him basically what he needed to know so he could become an arahant, completely enlightened. He was begging the Buddha, and the Buddha was saying, "I'm going on alms round now, I'll tell you later. This is not the right time." But Bāhiya was very impatient. He said, "No, you've got to tell me. You've got to tell me now." And three times Bāhiya begged the Buddha. Classically, on the third time, the Buddha would acquiesce, unless it was something he would never agree to. So he said, "Okay, I'll just give you this one little stanza."

It's this famous stanza where he says: "In the seen is only the seen. In the heard there is only the heard. In the cognized there is only the cognized. In the sensed there is only the sensed. That is all." In other words, you hear the sound, that's it. All the rest is extra—papañca. The notions that assail and overwhelm a person, complications, completely extra. It's so simple, but we're so unused to it that we really have to practice. Because it's so quick, isn't it, from one sound, one thought? A thought is just another sense experience, just like a sound or a smell or a taste. It's so quick from the sense contact to getting lost in all that proliferation that we just have to learn to come back again, come back again to the simplicity of that sense contact.

And then moment after moment, the continuity is what starts to really show us that what we thought were accurate descriptions and interpretations are actually not steady state at all—constantly changing. These interpretations about ourselves, for example, the sense of the solidity of "me," which is what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is based on. If we didn't have some sense of me being here, we wouldn't be interpreting all experience in terms of what it means about my personality. But when we're willing to just stay that simple, at the point of sense contact—bringing mindfulness as the presence, wisdom as the pañña that is just not going off into interpretation, just staying here—moment after moment, the continuity between the sitting and the walking and the movements through the day, the continuity is what begins to reveal the discontinuity of all our interpretations of reality. None of it really holds up for very long if we stay steady.

Again, I'm making these very pretty simple examples, but just look in your own experience. The sense of self and our sense of personality view, who we are—we all have a kind of basic one, you know. But say you happen to be walking and you're feeling it's going really well.

You're focused. It feels good. Let's face it, that's what "going really well" usually means—it feels good. So for whatever reason, it feels good. And someone comes by that you had previously been comparing yourself to in an unfavorable way. They're going in a hurry and they go into the dorm. But it's just the beginning of the walking period. And you think, "Huh, they're goofing off. And I'm really doing it."

From that feeling good, that perception which was basically just seeing, the comparing of me and them arises, the whole story about what they're doing—when actually we don't have a clue what they're doing. And all our sense of feeling good, what comes into that through selective perception, will be all our memories of when we were great, all our projections into the future of how great we're going to be, how good we felt in the past, how good we'll feel in the future. And that feels like me, really solid.

Then it could be five minutes later, two seconds later, or the next walking period, and it doesn't feel good anymore. In fact, it feels really lousy. You're thinking a lot, and somehow you go into the dorm. And then you realize that that person who you thought was goofing off went in because they're actually sitting much longer in their room. They're sitting three hours at a time. While you're the one who's schlepping along, not even able to lift your foot and feel two feet in a row.

And then the whole thing switches. The only memories that seem at all real are all the times you screwed up. And if you remember those times you were so great from the last walking period, well, that's baloney—that was a fluke, that doesn't count. This is really the heart of who I am, this loser. And not only that, I project onto other people my loser-ness, going around making everybody else bad. That's really me. That's true. That's an accurate perception based on real memories, and it's solid, solid thought.

And neither of them is true. Yet it feels like continuous me somehow. I don't know how we overlook the fact that it's completely different stories and completely different moments. "Yeah, that's continuous me. I'm just one solid thing. This is what I'm like." And we do this all day.

What's amazing is we can take any sense contact, any sense contact, and construct this. You hear the frogs. You can make up the whole story of your life. Back to summer camp in third grade and how everyone was mean to you, those frogs croaking by the lake, and on and on. Or the reverse. Play with it.

I used to do this on retreat. I'd do it with crickets, because crickets brought up a certain nostalgic quality when I wasn't paying attention. I'd get into a whole story. The crickets. It's so sad. Fall is coming. The ending of all life. I could die in this room. No one would know for three days. And all the moods that go with it and the solid sense of me.

Really?

And I caught it one time. I said, okay, let's just change it. I thought, really tune into the sound of the crickets and think, "Isn't that beautiful? So present, so immediate." My mind's going, "Yeah, right. So present in nature."

And within about two seconds, the relevant feelings started to arise. It was amazing. A sense of happiness, a sense of oneness with nature. I'm so lucky to have this time to practice.

It was just as real as the one before. This was within a two-minute period. They were both equally real or equally unreal, equally having anything to do with who I am—which is like nothing. We're making it all up, literally.

So just notice how any sense—a sound, a smell, somebody slurping their soup next to you—can immediately become the whole story of your life. Me, me, me. What it means about me, and all the past and the future and selective perception. It's totally amazing.

If we can just watch that without having to then jump into "I'm so stupid, I'm so wrong, I'm so unenlightened"—because that's just another one. You just sit back and watch and go, wow, this is really amazing. And we move into the space of awareness rather than being gripped by the reactions and interpretations and the story, and it stops really being a problem. It really stops being a problem.

It's so simple. Oh, hearing. Slurping. That's all. Unpleasant, pleasant, whatever. We don't have to make up anything about it. We don't have to create a whole world of thought.

It's not that we have to get rid of our personality view. It's not that we have to somehow figure out a way to think about there being no intrinsic unchanging self and think our way out of it. We just have to step outside of the box. Oh, personality view is like this. Nothing changes, but our whole perception changes. It's really this sense of peace that just arises from not getting so involved in the papañca, in the proliferations. Just the silence.

The Buddha said once that the end of papañca is the end of conflict. And it's really true. On my last retreat, when I was sitting for a few weeks, that teaching kept going through my mind because I was just seeing how, when the mind was in a state of seeing impermanence and loss—like that with the weather—I would go out on a cloudy day and it would feel completely oppressive and scary. And I could see the mind creating that, although one still feels it.

And then I remember one day—you can do this with anything, right? I went outside. I was pretty focused, pretty concentrated and calm, and there were two butterflies just playing together. And it was as if I could see, without the thoughts actually arising, I could sense all the stories the mind could go into—both on the beautiful side and on the side of "everything's dying anyway." Just everywhere the mind could go with that. But it didn't. It just didn't.

And there was a sense of just seeing, seeing, and silence. Nothing else needed to arise around it. And I still remember it because it was such a tangible experience of peace. No big deal. Just the peace of not having to create a self-story about every little thing that happens. Just seeing and silence.

The silence is always here. We could pay attention to the silence instead of all the thoughts. The thoughts don't have to stop—that's what Bankei was saying. We just don't have to pay so much attention to them. When we begin to notice how we pay attention to them—because they come so loud, associated with emotion, based on believing the description and perception—when we can notice that and just allow the possibility that maybe it's not the way I think, then we can start to notice the space, or the silence. We don't have to figure the thoughts out. Just let them run out and tune into the silence. And everything changes. Everything changes.

I just want to end with a little bit from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche about thoughts:

"It is our own mind that can lead us astray into the cycle of existences. Blind to the mind's true nature, we hold fast to our thoughts, which are nothing but manifestations of that true nature. But holding fast to the thoughts freezes awareness into solid concepts such as 'I' and 'other,' desirable and detestable, and plenty of others. This is how we create samsara. But if, instead of letting our thoughts solidify, we recognize their emptiness, then each thought that arises and disappears in the mind renders the realization of emptiness ever clearer."

Not only are thoughts not a problem, watching them arise and disappear actually strengthens our recognition of emptiness.

"All phenomena of samsara and nirvana arise like a rainbow, and like a rainbow they are devoid of any tangible existence. Once you have recognized the true nature of reality, which is both empty and at the same time appears as the phenomenal world, your mind will cease to be under the power of delusion."

So in our practice we just maintain that state of simplicity.

So let us just sit quietly for a moment.

Bell

Thank you for listening. Please check the notice board this evening for tomorrow morning's interview schedule.

CHAPTER 340

Mettā & Intention

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teachings on anger, hatred, and love through the lens of wise intention (sammā saṅkappa). Drawing from the Dhammapada and various suttas, she illuminates how the Buddha's instructions on mettā were not idealistic prescriptions but practical tools for ending suffering. Wilson emphasizes that cultivating loving-kindness is not about becoming a 'good person' but about recognizing that meeting difficulty with anger causes more suffering for ourselves.

Wilson shares personal examples of how sustained mettā practice subtly transforms our habitual mental patterns. She describes noticing her mind's tendency toward aversion—latching onto the one unpleasant thing in a field of pleasant experiences—and how mettā spontaneously arose to broaden her perspective. This shift happens not through force but through the gradual cultivation of wise intention, replacing ill-will with connection and inclusivity.

The talk explores how we create separation by making others into objects, whether on the road, in the dining hall, or within our own self-judgment. Wilson offers practical guidance on 'changing the channel' from suffering-producing thoughts to mettā phrases, even when the heart feels cynical or resistant. She draws on examples from St. Francis of Assisi and a practitioner with degenerative lung disease to illustrate how opening to difficulty with clear-eyed, loving attention transforms our relationship to pain and fear. The teaching reminds us that mettā is not about grand gestures but about how we meet each moment of experience.

In both of the groups today, it came up in slightly differing ways, but to some extent the question arose of what the Buddha was really teaching about our relationship to anger, to hatred, to love.

I want to start by reading some probably quite well-known statements of the Buddha about working with anger and hatred and the power of love. Then I'll talk a little about some of the effects of working with this practice of loving-kindness in our daily life—just some very basic, modest effects.

I want to give you a few of the Buddha's words, putting them in the context of realizing that everything he taught, according to what he said, according to what we can read, was for the purpose of freeing our hearts and minds from suffering. He said over

and over, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." What I read into that is that the motivation, the point, the guiding principle of all his different teachings is the very practical matter of how we can bring our own hearts and minds to an end of suffering.

If we take the teachings of mettā practice, of non-hatred, of meeting everything—beautiful, difficult, neutral—with clear seeing and loving-kindness, we can see this from a point of view that is not our psychological mode of thinking or our good-bad mode of thinking. You know: "I should be this loving, kind person," or "I'm bad." We make this kind of ideal, and then when we can't meet it, which so often we can't, we think, "Well, I got angry, and I shouldn't have. To be a good person, I shouldn't have gotten angry." But then we get into our whole rationalization: "How can you not be angry? How can you possibly meet these difficult things in the world and not be angry?" And anger is—well, you all know, I'm sure.

I find in myself that kind of argument. It comes partly from the difficulty of actually manifesting loving-kindness and compassion. It is difficult. Let's not kid ourselves. But it also comes from taking it as a "should"—I should do that to be a better person, to be a good person—rather than approaching it from a totally practical point of view: I'm going to suffer more if I continue to meet difficulty with anger, with fear, with craving. Not that I have to do it to prove I'm an ideal person, but because I want to suffer less.

From that practical framework, I find it gives me a lot more spaciousness of motivation to really try out and explore and listen to what the Buddha was saying with an ear for "Well, maybe it's true—let's try it," rather than immediately concluding "I can't do it and he's wrong, so forget about it." Maybe he did know something about the ending of suffering. Maybe I could keep trying.

Some of this is from the Dhammapada. As I say, I'm sure it's quite familiar to you, but just to hear his words as far as we can know them, rather than ours. This is from a new rendering of the Dhammapada by one of the monks in the Ajahn Chah tradition from Amaravati, Ajahn Munindo. I just found it in my mailbox the other day. That was nice—better than what's usually in the mailbox: bills and requests for money.

This is very famous, but it sets the tone for the whole Dhammapada, these first two verses:

"All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. Just as the wheel of the ox cart follows the hoof print of the animal that draws it, so suffering will surely follow when we speak or act impulsively from an impure state of mind."

"All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. As surely as our shadow never leaves us, so well-being will follow when we speak or act with a pure state of mind."

"When we hold fast to such thoughts as 'they abused me, mistreated me, beat me, robbed me,' we keep hatred alive. If we release ourselves from such thoughts as 'they abused me, mistreated me, beat me, robbed me,' hatred is vanquished."

"Never by hatred is hatred conquered, but by readiness to love alone. This is the eternal law."

"Those who are contentious have forgotten that we all die. For the wise who reflect on this fact, there are no quarrels."

"More than a thief, more than an enemy, a misdirected heart brings one to harm. Neither mother, father, nor any member of a family can give you the blessings generated by your own well-directed heart."

These are some of the very well-known, very basic, but quite profound statements. He's saying this not as nice little epigrams, but as absolute statements of his experience of what brings us to happiness. So then we are left with discovering how to do that, here and in our lives.

Not to be flippant, but we must not make the mistake of expecting too much too quickly, which is easy to do in our fast-paced society. Often, on leaving a retreat—or even moving from a loving-kindness retreat to a Vipassana retreat—if you've had even a few moments of either the strength of the feeling of mettā, or that sense of the barriers disappearing, or even an intimation of the possibility of power when the heart is open, when the mind is connected—that's important. As we've all talked about, as Michelle spoke about a lot last night, this gives us some inspiration, some faith, as Susan talked about, based on our own experience that yes, this is really true. The power of a connected heart does bring happiness for myself and for others.

As we leave, though, or switch practices, or just start to think about something else and lose that experience, it can be easy to think that we have to always be in that depth or that power of the heart—that emotional, mental experience of mettā—for it to be of value, or for it to even count at all.

And when, guess what, it's a little harder to access in the middle of work three weeks from now, it can be easy to think, well, what was the use? I can't always be on retreat. How can I access it? And so that, I think, is a big mistake we make.

I want to talk a lot tonight about the little ways—the moment-to-moment little ways that we can consciously bring in the sense of metta connection in our life, the little ways that we can notice when it's arising spontaneously here or in life. As well as the courage it takes, the commitment it takes to keep on looking, because a lot of what we need to do is be willing to look at the habits of mind that get in the way.

I want to give you another thing from the Buddha because it's a different kind of story. He certainly had to demonstrate often in his life how to work with anger. It's not that after he was awakened and spent forty-five years teaching, everybody who came to him was completely devoted. I mean, it was India. It sounds like India then was a lot like India now, only maybe there are a lot more people in India now. But there were many wandering ascetics, many wandering spiritual teachers, and a fair degree of contentiousness. So there are lots of examples of people coming to him and challenging him, saying "what do you know anyway?" and so forth.

So anyway, there's this one pretty well-known sutta where a Brahmin, a layman, came to the Buddha and basically was angry at him, kind of cursed him, reviled him, going on and on with rude, harsh words—basically yelling at him. And the Buddha has a famous way of responding, which first was with an example: if people come to visit you, friends or colleagues, and you serve them with delicacies and food and give them gifts and all these things, and if they don't take those, if they leave them, if they don't accept them, then who do those gifts and delicacies, the food that you offered, belong to? And the Brahmin said, "Well, then they're still mine. They stay with me." And the Buddha said, "Just so. When you offer me these anger and harsh words, if I don't accept them, then they stay with you. It's all yours."

But this wasn't the end of it, because that person actually took that as the Buddha being angry with him. And he basically said, "You're an arhat. What are you doing getting angry? An arhat isn't supposed to get angry. This proves that you're not." And the Buddha said, basically, "I'm not angry." Then he gave this little stanza on working with anger:

"You make things worse when you flare up at someone who's angry. Whoever doesn't flare up at someone who's angry wins a battle that's hard to win. You live for the good of both, your own and the other's, when, knowing that the other is provoked, you mindfully grow calm."

Very practical, really. He's not saying we're floating on a cloud and everyone will be nice to us because we're trying to practice metta. He's just saying, you know, it's for your good and the good of the other. If you see the person's angry and you can mindfully grow calm, you know. "When you work the cure of both, your own and the other's, those who think you are a fool know nothing of the Dhamma."

To me, actually, that last statement is really important because it's partly what was coming out in one of our conversations—that societally, it's not necessarily so supported that our anger is the cause of our suffering and that it's a worthy aspiration not to act from anger, to free our hearts and minds of anger. That's not always supported in this world. And often you are seen as a fool. Or we feel that we're seen as a fool or a weakling or some kind of passive person who's afraid to act, whatever. So it seems to me even in the Buddha's time, that dichotomy between what he was teaching and what some people might say to you when you try to take that stance of not returning anger for anger—seems like that was true back then as well.

So I just find that interesting. It's not that he was just saying, "Oh, be happy, be peaceful, don't get angry anymore," and he didn't have to deal with the same things. He knew. It's a difficult road. It requires from us both some verified faith—some verified faith from our own experience, which hopefully, both on and off retreat, our practice can help us recognize.

And I also find in our life, in both metta and vipassana practice, it takes a really deep commitment to ourselves, from understanding the value of cultivating loving-kindness and connection and compassion—that the value of that is worth the commitment of energy it takes to keep paying attention with care and kindness. Not only when we feel connected, but all the many times, the many, many times that we don't feel connected, or that we feel that we failed, or that we find ourselves lost in resentment again or fear again or longing again. Rather than feeling that's a failure, that's the exact place that we need to dive in with our loving-kindness, to dive in with our attention. And that's the place that we learn. That's the place that the strength of metta is developed. It's easy when everything's hunky-dory. It's when it's difficult—and a lot of the time the difficulty's in ourselves—that the strength of metta really begins to be cultivated.

So really what I've found powerful over time in my daily life is to recognize that it's just about moment to moment of experience. I think I said this the other night, but metta is very much about: how do I meet this moment of my experience?

And that's a workable piece of life—this moment. Even if I'm in the middle of a big frenzy about something, if I can remember: What's happening now? How am I meeting this moment? Even if the answer is, "I am meeting this moment with total frustration and anger and it's all your fault"—still, being able to say that already makes a shift. It's like, "Oh, that's how I'm meeting the moment. And who's suffering? Mostly me."

How we meet the moment—and what's very practical about the metta practice during all those times that we're not particularly feeling any emotion—is what I want to elaborate on tonight: the fact that we're cultivating wise intention. Intention of heart, intention of mind. Intention is what we call motivation, but it's the movement of mind and heart that can be very subtle, leading to thought, speech, and action. And intention often manifests as thought.

In terms of the way the Buddha describes and understands what really brings us suffering and what really brings us happiness in the world—what constitutes skillful action and what's unskillful action or speech—it's not so much about the result, because as we see, that's really not in our control. It's about the motivation, the intention with which we speak, with which we act.

In fact, intention was so important in his scheme of how to live an awakened life—which would be the Eightfold Noble Path, a whole talk in itself—that it comes second. The path describes our day-to-day way of living, beginning with wise understanding: how we understand ourselves, the world, what causes suffering for ourselves and others, what brings happiness. How we understand ourselves and the world leads to how we think about the world—the intentions with which we act. And the second step of the Eightfold Path is just that: wise thought or wise intention, leading to the next three steps—speech, action, and livelihood—how we manifest in the world relationally with others.

There's a sutta where the Buddha is very specific about what wise intention is. He gives three specific wise intentions: The unwise, or really the suffering intention of greed, comes to be countered with—or transforms through understanding into—renunciation, just letting go of holding on, renunciation or generosity. The unwise or suffering intention of ill will—just basic negativity, not liking, disliking, anger, hostility, the whole range—transforms with wisdom into metta. And the unwise intention of cruelty transforms into compassion, karuna.

This happens spontaneously when we understand or just naturally feel our connection with another being. You see that happen here, I'm sure. When something bugs you and you just turn your attention to the person and think, "Oh well, they're doing the

best they can. They're making a lot of noise—but maybe they're really uncomfortable." You don't have to meditate for a day for that to happen. It's just natural. Or maybe you do. But it just kind of happens quite naturally from connection. Very normal.

But also, we can cultivate it—through thought to begin with. And that's what this form of the loving-kindness practice that we've been cultivating here is about, where we're repeating these thoughts over and over. As I said the first night, it's sort of like a joke: What would we be thinking about if we weren't repeating these phrases over and over and over?

But it's not really a joke, is it? What would we be thinking about? What does the mind naturally incline towards when it's untrained, when it's unaware? It either runs on drivel—which is a good deal of the time. Maybe that's only me; the rest of you are having really wise thoughts about how to save the world. It runs on drivel, or it goes to how I can get more pleasantness, how I can get rid of unpleasantness. And how often is the pleasantness or the unpleasantness concerning another human being? At that time, that person—there's no connection. They stop being a person. They become an object, really, the carrier of our pleasure or the potential carrier of our displeasure, in which case they've got to be gotten rid of or controlled in some way.

It's good to see it in little things on retreat, but follow it to its logical expansion. And it isn't funny. It's really the source of all the craziness and the pain in this world.

And so I think what we're doing here, sitting here saying these phrases—I totally understand. So many people have said, and I've been there, completely nauseated by these phrases. "I cannot summon it up one more time." But then you find a way to. That passes, and you find a way to.

Even if you're not feeling anything, even if you're just mouthing the phrases, but you're trying at least to know what you're saying—it's very important. Because on a level that we're completely unaware of, something is happening. This is really what surprised me in my life after having done some intensive metta retreats.

We're looking for some feedback pretty regularly, aren't we? I mean, it's pretty hard to go through even a day without some kind of feedback that something good is happening. And generally that means we feel good, doesn't it? Usually. I mean, some big blow-up comes and you're overwhelmed with anger, and you come into the group and go, "Oh good, the purification's happening." How many of you really go out thinking, "Oh, really good, I'm so glad"? That's good feedback? No, we want the juicies. We want it to feel good. And a lot of the time—at least in my practice—it's not particularly feeling good.

But what really surprised me on leaving retreat and just living my life, without trying to feel like the embodiment of loving-kindness and compassion everywhere I went... I mean, let's face it, I did have that ideal in mind. Somehow we become the light of the world. And you come out of a metta retreat and everyone—I think I said this in a group—people fall at your feet going, "Oh, I can't believe you are radiating so much love and compassion. Where have you been? Let me go there too." Occasionally—honestly, occasionally—that does happen. You actually might be a lot softer, radiating something that you don't even know. I'm not kidding now. Sometimes that does happen. But when we go out trying to radiate it, well, that's a whole other story. And that's not what it's about.

But what I did notice is that on some much more modest level, that moment-to-moment shifting of intention that's happening when we're repeating the phrases and actively connecting is really having an effect. And the effect that I noticed in myself was that the natural habit of mind would still spring up, and then the metta would arise spontaneously to balance it.

Let me give you just little examples. My tendency of mind tends toward the aversive. Others might tend toward greediness. I think you've got kind of a bunch of aversives up here, except for Susan. That's just how our minds go. So that doesn't mean you're angry all the time. But I noticed—this is a little example, but it's when I really got how the habit pattern of intention, the way my aversive mind works.

I was on a day ferry in Thailand one time. And it was a beautiful day—sunny, bright, lots of people on the ferry. I was just sitting up in the sun quietly, totally pleasant. And there was a bunch of people down below, and one woman, kind of very skimpily dressed, acting out, calling a lot of attention to herself. And my mind immediately could tell she was American. And I thought, "Oh, Americans"—which of course, you know, Americans are always so obnoxious—and now everyone's going to know I'm an American, and I started shrinking in my seat. And there weren't that many Americans; there were more other nationalities.

And I saw my mind doing this. Out of the whole field of experience, of sense experience—most of which was pleasant—my mind completely latched onto the one unpleasant sense experience. I mean, it wasn't even affecting me. It was way on the other deck. And I got completely absorbed in the negativity of it.

It cracked me up. And since then, I've watched. That's what the habit of my mind does. I'll go into an experience in the dining room—I noticed this on retreat—and there'd be one person that somehow triggered something negative. They just looked unpleasant, or they were making a noise, or they were in front of me in line and slopped some food on the counter.

Doesn't mean I wouldn't slop food myself, but never mind.

My mind would just go to that one thing. What I noticed starting to happen with the metta, completely spontaneously both in retreat and out of retreat, was that the mind would do its usual habitual movement toward the negative, but then rather than sticking there, what would come in automatically was the connecting and inclusive energy of metta. This wouldn't limit the person to that one thing, but would connect with and see the whole person. "Oh, so they're a bit of a slob, but they look like a really nice person." That's the best an aversive mind can do—you don't really get a new personality. It just broadens out, becomes more inclusive. Still cynical, but it doesn't really mean it.

Another example: I would go home to the cottage where I live, which is really lovely. I like it a lot. And my mind would walk in, and if it's kind of dirty, right away the mind just starts grousing. It sees this one speck of dirt on the floor. Everything else is beautiful, the sunlight's streaming in the window, and I'm going, "Oh my God, the dirt on the floor." But then with the metta, just automatically the mind would see the rest and look around. "Oh yeah, it's really beautiful here. I'm really lucky to live here." And that wasn't a forced "I should do that"—it begins to happen spontaneously.

For someone who has more tendency toward attachment, toward wanting, who sees the good in what they don't have, the metta could do the same thing. It expands around, includes the whole picture. "I don't have this, but I do have this—this beautiful day, this quiet moment, this soft, gentle rain." A sense of appreciation. Sure, we can do that consciously, but what you might begin to notice is how it starts to show itself spontaneously, how the habits of mind and heart are indeed beginning to change. The connection becomes a little stronger. We begin to trust it unconsciously, a little more, through the power of our loving-kindness practice.

And of course we can consciously work in this way, which is one of the ways of bringing the intention of working with metta into our daily life. We don't just have to leave it at "well, okay, that's good, and maybe when I get back to the next metta retreat I can work harder and then it'll happen some more." We can also continue to pay attention in our daily life, bringing in this spaciousness, this more inclusive quality of connection.

Thich Nhat Hanh likes to say that most of us ask the question, "What is wrong?" We forget to ask what is right. Both are useful. He says, "There are many things that are not wrong. When you focus your attention only on what is wrong, you can make the situ-

ation worse. Therefore, it is wise to meditate on your capacity to enjoy peace, happiness, and joy—your capacity to be in touch with what is refreshing and healing in the present moment."

And the example he gives shows this isn't just about something small, like being annoyed at a speck of dirt on the floor and then noticing the nice light coming in the window. That's an easy one. He's talking about being in the midst of really difficult, atrocious suffering. During the Vietnam War, when he was an activist, he writes, "We were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage, so I would mention these to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

It doesn't sound like much, I grant you—in the midst of helping the wounded during a horrific war, to stop and smell the flowers. It sounds almost like a cliché. I know in my mind I can tend to evaluate that the depth of suffering is so strong that the sense of appreciating what is right has to be equally powerful. But it's not true. It's really about opening our intention from fear, hatred, and holding away, toward connection, toward inclusivity, toward not feeding that fear and hatred and longing in ourselves. That's what we're working with—not on the outer level, but on the inner level of our intention.

Often, in the midst of really strong suffering, if I can stop and get out of that mind state that's completely absorbed, long enough just to hear the birds singing outside the window, it moves into a much more spacious quality of connectedness to life rather than this complete absorption in all my troubles. The troubles come back, they don't go away, but the intention that relates to them can really change.

One of the aspects of non-metta—ill will or wanting—that I want to talk about more is how, when there's this non-inclusive, non-connected quality opposite to metta, our habits of mind, our unwise intentions, create either an experience or a person into being "the other." Really, this sense of "there's me and there's the other."

And I maybe want the other to make me happy or make it go away, but that distancing, that separation, is really the source of our own internal suffering, and then of the speech and actions from unwise intention that continue suffering on into the world.

A little example I noticed last fall—I think I talked about it in the retreat—of how wanting, in just a little amount of time, just a little thing, can create someone into such an object. I was driving up here from the study center for a sitting or something, but I wasn't late. And I was driving down the driveway of the study center, which, as you

know, is just down the road about two minutes away. They had a retreat going on there, so it was a walking period or something. And one of the people on retreat was doing very mindful, slow walking meditation right in the middle of the driveway—the exact middle of the driveway. You couldn't really get by on either side.

So I was driving down and saw this and had a little sense of wanting to get up here in a hurry, even though I wasn't late. And that wanting to get up here in a hurry—I saw that person there and immediately was like, "What's the matter with them? They're in my way." And they could, of course, hear the car. You can hear the car. So they moved over like two inches. Like, "I'll make a gesture, you know, I hear you"—but I still couldn't get by. So I had to stop and just wait until they kind of slowly, slowly, being a good yogi, you know, slowly, slowly...

And in that moment, I saw—really in the space of a finger snap—how I went from just a little thing of wanting to get up here in a hurry to this little burst of negativity. And that person became a total object in my way to be gotten rid of. It was scary. Then I noticed it immediately. And this is the power of simply kind noticing of the habits of mind that cause the separation. We don't have to hate them. We just have to notice them.

As soon as I noticed it, I was like, "Oh, wow, look at that. That's really painful." That's a moment of metta, mindfulness to oneself. And this is really how we confront the difficult, separating, painful, suffering-producing habits of our mind and heart. Not with hatred, not with blame, but with clear-eyed metta, clear seeing. "Oh, wow. That's painful. It's scary." And look, if I could do something, if I wasn't a little bit more restrained, I'd open the window and say, "What's the matter with you? Move over! What's the matter with you?" And it could escalate from there, as we all know. It could escalate.

And so seeing it—the moment I saw it with that kindness—the whole thing just evaporated. You really see, oh, there's nothing to hold on to here. This is just suffering. And it goes. The power of clear-hearted, clear-seeing connection of metta and of mindfulness is so much stronger really than our suffering habits of mind. It's just that we have spent so much time habituating, cultivating really, our suffering habits of mind. So much more time cultivating them than we have cultivating metta or clear seeing. And we get impatient that the metta isn't working all the time. But if you really look at the ratio of how much time we spend cultivating the suffering and how much time we spend cultivating the metta, well, actually, you see how much stronger the truth really is.

So that sense of how quickly we can go to make someone the other. I read a newspaper article a couple of years ago about aggressive driving, road rage. And I was really struck by it because it was talking about a survey made by the AAA Foundation about

aggressive driving. This survey was finding that there's a huge increase in the percentage of aggressive drivers. And they say what that includes, just in case you don't know: weaving in and out of traffic, excessive horn honking, running red lights, tailgating, passing on the right, making obscene gestures, screaming, and headlight flashing. Plus, I have a friend who, I think he performed one of those acts in Texas where he used to live, and the guy behind him kind of pulled him off on the side of the road with a gun. So I mean, it gets out there, right?

But the point of this article is that they go on describing, in this regular newspaper, how this manifests, how aggressive driving can be on the increase and how we engage in it. And the person writing, who is a psychologist, says that if someone on the road upsets you while you're in a car, that individual's whole identity becomes encapsulated in this bad thing they did. They're not someone with kids and a sick dog, hurrying to get to the vet. They're just that bad person who cut you off. He's not seen as a whole person, and there's an urge to express your aggression on this anonymous other—to think, "I can't let him get away with this." The thin veneer of civilization is removed because the car offers anonymity. You feel invincible. The car provides a buffer zone that makes it easier to dehumanize the other driver, much easier than if you were walking together in a hallway, seeing each other face to face. We'll do things and say things to someone in a car that we'd never do face to face.

And so the advice he gives his patients who have come to him because of their road rage is to practice compassion for other drivers by thinking of your own mistakes, and to visualize non-aggressive responses without acting out your aggression. It's actually so true that when people begin to study these things scientifically—as if that's what's needed for us to believe it—it turns out to be the same thing the Buddha was talking about. Lately, people keep sending me articles, and I keep picking them up myself, about various studies on the power of forgiveness, the healing power of forgiveness in one's own mind and body, of letting go of resentment even for horrific things that have happened. Not as a should, just scientific studies on what is more physically and psychically healthy.

So we can work on the level of aggressive driving, just looking at our mind and how it creates that sense of separation, that sense of the other. We can also consciously work in more active ways to bring our loving attention to meet head-on those aspects of ourselves that keep us locked in suffering, in separation, in negativity.

This is an example—I'm not saying we should do this, but it really struck me. It comes from St. Francis of Assisi, about whom I recently read a biography. I didn't really know much about him, except of course the common things: that he was really loving and saw all beings as his brother and sister, even speaking of death as his sister. That's all I knew about him.

But his life is quite interesting because he was born to a wealthy family in Assisi and basically spent his youth and young manhood as a kind of rowdy leader of the debauched section of young rich men in Assisian society. Apparently, somewhat secretly for a while before he actually came out as a renunciate monk, he was doing things of generosity. But the thing that struck me was that one of the first things he did was confront one of his deepest loathings and fears, one of the deepest kinds of separation he created in his mind with other people. And that was with people who had leprosy, which is now called Hansen's disease.

Apparently there were many people at that time in the Middle Ages in Assisi with leprosy. And as was the common practice, they would be removed from their family situation once diagnosed to stay in hospitals and homes for people with this disease. There were a few just below Assisi. Of course, anyone who lived in the town would constantly encounter people with leprosy begging on the roads. And Francis had an abhorrence of it. It scared him. It disgusted him. He couldn't stand to see or be around anyone who had this disease.

As the biographer explains, Francis was convinced at this point—even though he was still acting like the debauched young man—that his meditations on Christ had shown him there was really only one way of radically reducing misery in the world, and that was by persuading people to love God and their neighbors without reservation. He intuitively understood that he needed to dismantle his own selfishness before he could move into a deeper, more profound level of love and connectedness.

And so he started where he was, confronting his own disgust and fear of people with leprosy. What he did first was simply go out on the road to give alms to someone with the disease, to meet the person face to face, hand him the food or money, kiss the person's hand—to really be there open-heartedly. And in that knowing, he understood it was nothing to do with that person that was disgusting. It was his own fear, his own not wanting to be with what caused fear or unpleasantness.

After that, he saw the power of it, and then he went to the whole hospital for people with leprosy, distributing alms and spending time there. Over his life, he became one of the people who worked in these hospitals and did many loving things for people with

this disease. They weren't certain, but they thought perhaps when he died, one of the causes of his death was that he had actually contracted leprosy to some extent, which affected his lungs.

But anyway, it's a powerful image to me—going right to the source of one's creation of distance, which isn't the person with leprosy but his own fear, and meeting that with love. That's really stayed with me as a powerful possibility.

It doesn't mean, and I don't mean, that we should get ourselves back into some idealism of "Now I have to go confront the person who's hurt me the most, or the scariest thing in my life." We can start with the aspects inside ourselves that we're making into the other, that we're holding away, that we can't meet with acceptance.

It might be just the patterns of mind—of self-hatred, of self-judgment, of worthlessness, of negativity. I found, again, the conscious practice of this form of metta practice really helps me with that on a daily basis.

Like many people, I had a deeply ingrained pattern of self-judgment. And when it really gets rolling—which of course it isn't always rolling, and you need to notice that if that's a strong pattern of yours—it might not take much to get it going, but it isn't always rolling. Once it is rolling nice and strong, though, you could do anything, right? And it'll go, "Yeah, right, well, you're just doing that to try and make people think well of you. You're just doing that." It's endless.

It's important to recognize that pattern with mindfulness as judgment or self-negativity, to feel the pain of it. I don't mean to push it away or deny it. But once we're familiar with it and it starts rolling, you can actually consciously decide where to let the mind dwell. Do I want to cultivate aggression, aversion, and negativity towards myself? It's the same aggression as towards another. Or do I want to switch the channel to metta? And that's what you've been developing. You're developing a metta channel. You can really change the channel.

You start by simply saying the phrases to yourself. And if you have a cynical turn of mind, the first few times you repeat the phrases, there'll be a little punctuation after each one. "Yeah, right, metta, give me a break. You're making me sick. May I be happy—forget it." It keeps going like that. But what I found, much to my amazement, by the second or third or fourth repetition, that started to drop away. And actually, suddenly, the tune—I can't do metta without it being to a tune. It just sings in my mind, always the same tune. It starts to come in, and pretty soon the heart is meaning it. It's just a made-

up tune; I wouldn't inflict it on you. But it really has changed the channel. Those self-judging thoughts aren't running, and the metta thoughts are. It's really very powerful. It's not like, "Oh, the beauty of the universe," but it's quite a difference.

So don't be afraid to change the channel when you see we're going down a road that leads to suffering. You may not feel the emotion, but stick with it. It really does make a difference.

And then we can turn that same quality onto more difficult and painful aspects of our own experience—physical pain or physical illness, grief, loss, really strong pains that we've been living with. Not to make them go away, but simply to include this aspect of experience without making it the other.

Someone said today in a group that she'd been dealing with a lot of physical pain and suddenly got it that happiness is presence. It doesn't mean happiness means the pain goes away. But in total presence, which is metta, there's peace, there's ease. It doesn't mean we have to make the pain go away.

I'll just read a short piece. Susan reminded me of this. It's a long article; I just want to read a little bit. It was written by a man who had a degenerative lung disease. He was in the seventh year of it, a Buddhist practitioner, a student of Chögyam Trungpa's. And he was describing in this article the many different ways he was learning to open to, to come to terms with, to include the disease and the effects of it in an open heart and mind.

He says, you know, it implies a battle—that illness and death are assumed to be very bad news, perhaps a punishment of some kind. And I know personally it's easy to internalize that with illness, with sickness. That it is a punishment. It's a sign that I'm bad. I've done something wrong. So already, the other, and I'm bad.

And he said, "I would rather not have a knee-jerk reflex towards battle. Something's happening in my body. Do I have to go to war about it? Paraphrasing the words of Dylan Thomas, do I have to burn and rave and rage? Can I make another kind of response?"

And the response he chooses to make is to simply bring full, kind attention to what's happening and to the effects of what's happening, and to see.

This is another example: "Walking anywhere with friends, especially uphill, is an occasion for silence because I cannot walk, talk, and breathe at the same time. Every gram of oxygen must be used for locomotion. There's nothing left over. Superfluity must go."

This becomes an amazing metaphor. In my life, in my mind, what is superfluous? Anger that freezes into resentment. Jealousy, greed, gossip, ego clinging, pretense, embarrassment, running after pleasure, the discursive thought that maintains the storyline of me. These things are very costly in terms of the life energy that it takes to keep them going. They're what conversation is mostly about.

"I can't take in enough oxygen to support them anymore, except by holding completely still and doing nothing else. When the oxygen diminishes below a certain point, you must choose absolutely between feeding all your mental bloodsuckers and taking care of your true business. You can't afford to keep them around as pets."

So what an opening, what a discovery follows from that simple realization. Could I ever afford it? Can anyone? What made me think that I could not let go of this expensive baggage before now?

And he just goes on—not in a mushy way at all, but really seeing how by opening to and including the disease in his full connected attention, a whole other world of understanding opened up for him. He said, "How could I call this an enemy? How could I call this something to battle? It's simply what is."

Internally, externally, we can bring that quality of clear-eyed attention—which is mettā, which is also mindfulness—to whatever's arising that's painful, that's difficult, that's wanting, that's causing suffering and separation. It doesn't mean we can't act or respond appropriately. Not at all. In fact, as I said the other night, we can see so much more clearly that it's not that we even think, "Oh, I'm going to do a big mettā action." It's just what I heard one teacher call "doing the obvious." You just do what's the obvious thing to do in a situation for the benefit of beings.

My favorite story that demonstrates this I heard on NPR a couple of years ago—an interview with a basketball player. It was his first year in the NBA, his rookie year, which I would imagine would be the culmination of what would be possible for a young man—to make it to the NBA. They were interviewing him because his sister had kidney failure and needed a transplant. He was a match and was planning to donate a kidney to her. That meant the end of his career in the NBA.

The interviewer was like, "Oh God, you're so amazing, giving up your career to give a kidney to your sister." And the guy was just so... "What are you talking about? I have two kidneys. It's my sister. She needs a kidney. I can give it to her." He didn't say this, but what I'm saying is: it's the obvious thing to do.

That's really metta. Not "I am giving such a loving thing." There's no separation. There's just connection. One does what's obvious.

I'll end with this short passage from Shantideva, the great Buddhist teacher from the ninth century: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises, because it is like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

So let's feed ourselves for a little while.

Thank you for your attention. Please stay gently but sincerely with your practice tonight, through the night, through tomorrow morning. Even if you think nothing is happening, there's a lot going on that we're not able to intellectually realize at the moment.

CHAPTER 341

Awareness Is Our Refuge

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this opening retreat talk, Carol Wilson addresses the fundamental question of why we practice meditation and what we're actually seeking. Drawing on the Buddha's core teaching of dukkha and its cessation, she challenges the common assumption that happiness comes from arranging pleasant experiences and avoiding unpleasant ones. Instead, she points to awareness itself as our true refuge—something always available, utterly ordinary, yet profoundly liberating when recognized.*
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> *Wilson introduces the concept of "contentment with awareness" from Ajahn Buddhadāsa, explaining how the practice involves a subtle foreground-background shift from being immersed in experience to resting in the awareness of experience. She uses the Buddha's teaching on the two arrows to illustrate how we compound our suffering through reactivity—the first arrow being unavoidable unpleasant experience, the second being all our mental elaboration, complaint, and resistance. The awakened person, she notes, experiences the first arrow but doesn't shoot themselves with the second.*
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> *The talk weaves together practical guidance with deeper wisdom, emphasizing beginner's mind, reverence for each moment, and the counter-intuitive discovery that willingness to be present with difficulty opens into compassion. Wilson concludes with teachings from Pema Chödrön on bodhicitta, showing how refuge in awareness and tenderness for all beings are two sides of the same coin—our true home that we've simply forgotten.*

So we come to the latter part of the first hot day together. Sometimes this is a real valley period in the retreat. Sometimes the first day is really a struggle. If that's been the case for you, just know that everything's changing and it doesn't stay like this for eight days. If this has been a sublime day, unfortunately the same holds true. Things are always changing.

What I want to try to do tonight is give a context for what we're doing here. I can imagine some of you might well be thinking, "Please give me a good reason to stay here for another day." That's common, and not just on your first retreat. At the end of a long, hot day—and I've been doing this for thirty years—the mind will still think, "I need a really good reason to do this for one more day. I'm out of here."

So what I want to try and do is give the context that keeps me there. Because I stay for a good reason, not to prove something, not because I'm ashamed to leave. I mean, all those things come up because I'm recognizable, right? If I leave a retreat, there's enough people who know me—can't get away with it. But I want to put this in the context of the bigger picture, why we're doing it.

As most of you know, if you've read anything about Buddhism or what the Buddha taught, the purpose of his teaching is really very pragmatic and mundane. He says it over and over in the different texts: he's teaching suffering and the end of suffering. Basically the whole reason he devoted the last forty-five years of his life to trying to help people understand what he had discovered was simply to help us live a fuller, happier, more contented life. That's all, really basic. And at the heart of that, I would imagine that whatever specific reasons each of us might put on it, that basic wish to be happy is what draws us—not only to this, but to actually almost everything we do.

The context of our particular meditation practice, of the understanding that begins to come through from this practice, even if you don't understand it, is that for most of us, in the common way of the world, we actually misunderstand what it means to be happy and why we're suffering. So all the different things we'll talk about in this retreat are trying to come at this basic misperception, this misapprehension of who we are and what allows us to be happy, what keeps us in struggle, what keeps us suffering. We come at this misapprehension from different angles.

Of course, basically, I would say suffering is having to be with experiences that we don't like, that are unpleasant. I mean, that's a no-brainer. And happiness is not having to do that and getting to be with things we like. Makes sense. Not hurting, not being sick, having our friends and loved ones be happy, not being hot when we want to be cold, whatever it is. And because on some level that's our belief system, we can spend our whole life trying to organize and make that happen.

I would imagine many of us have devoted a great deal of our life to that pursuit. If we could arrange and manipulate and control external experience so that everything's the way we like it, then we'd be happy. And then we turn that around and do the same with internal experience—how the body feels, what emotions come up, how we react to situations. This is normal and natural. It's certainly what I learned. It's what we're taught.

So what I want to talk about tonight is that our practice isn't so much about creating a certain state or set of conditions that are going to do it for us finally, and make us happy. And then we can live happily in that state for the rest of our lives. I thought this, really. It sounds rather obviously stupid when I say it, but check out underneath what you sort of unconsciously believe.

I will just shamelessly say that for myself, I even now keep finding myself coming back to some subtle way of believing that if I do this practice or any other spiritual practice long enough and finally figure out the correct way to do it, then suddenly the world, the inner and outer world, are going to finally fall into line and I'm going to reach that final understanding, that bliss of enlightenment, that lasting peace—which I visualize as a particular state that I've created through my efforts at practice.

What we're doing here is actually not that at all, which might seem discouraging, but actually as we begin to understand it, it's a huge relief. Because what this practice is about is not so much about trying to achieve any particular state. The practice is all about attitude, about our motivation, about how we understand and relate to whatever it is that's arising—so-called internally or externally—in a moment. It's not about getting to a place where we can actually control what's arising internally or externally.

In Buddhism, the way we see things... although I'm quoting Buddhism, really whatever I'm saying comes from having discovered it's true in my own experience, or I wouldn't say it.

Everything rests on the tip of motivation.

If you look at how we tend to evaluate our successes, our failures, whether what we're doing is worthwhile, what we're trying to achieve—just keeping it to this meditation retreat—we tend to be rather result-oriented, don't we? We evaluate whether something's any good by whether we get the results we want. I evaluate my own worth, whether I'm doing well, my sense of who I am, often by the results that particular actions achieve. We evaluate ourselves by the experiences that we have.

So, for example, to stay within the meditation retreat, a sense of success might be—and look in yourselves for which ones your mind is attaching to—it could be finally getting calm, the body stops hurting, or you're able to be with ten breaths in a row. Or if you're being really unrealistic, your idea of success is that you'll be completely present with the breath for the whole sitting without your mind wandering. I just want to put out: for the first few days, completely, totally unrealistic. You could drop it and you'd be a lot freer. Or maybe you came here to open your heart, to be more compassionate, to work on your sadness—you make the list. All of which are very fine aspirations. It's not

that there's something wrong about having a higher aspiration. Of course, if we didn't, why would we be here anyway? If we thought absolutely nothing whatsoever would happen or change from being here, how many people would still be here? Certainly if it's all the same, well, let's go to the beach.

So there's nothing wrong with having a goal, an aspiration. But what's tricky, what we learn from the moment-to-momentariness of being present in this practice, is that once we have the aspiration, we let it set our path and then we really just let go of it. All of our understanding, the place of peace, the place of freedom and ease that the Buddha spoke of—that we do discover over and over and over, not a one-time thing, over and over and over in our experience on or off retreat—a place of ease actually opens up from within our attitude. The place of ease comes about from a shift in how we're relating to experience, not from making a particular experience happen.

This is so counter to our normal way of relating that it's really hard for us to get it. I never mean believing it. It's not about believing me. It's about seeing in our own experience. Because what this path is about is a shift of motivation, a shift of intention. And it comes about naturally through the mindfulness—from our motivation of trying to get something, however noble the thing we're trying to get may be, or ignoble, whatever it is. But when you come in and you sit down and in your mind is, "This time I am going to be with the breath for fifteen minutes or else," what does that set up? How is peace possible in a mind that's on that track? "I either do this or I'm a failure." That's suffering. That is the suffering. Whether you're with the breath or not is immaterial. The suffering is that setting up of leaning into, striving, trying to make something happen, looking away with all our energy from right here and now, this moment, whatever it may be that's happening.

The shift of motivation is from this comparing, striving, wanting, yearning, leaning forward—and then hating and judging and comparing and blaming when it doesn't happen. The shift is to a sense of really loving and appreciating awareness for itself. So that what begins to be generated is what Ajahn Buddhadasa—who was a wonderful Thai monk, a meditation master who ran a forest monastery for many years before he died—talked about: what we're learning is to generate a contentment with awareness.

I keep talking about it because at first I don't know if it even makes sense to us. We're so used to involving ourselves in the experience—I like this, I don't like this, what does this mean about me, how can I get this to be different, this is so difficult, how can I stand it—rather than resting in a contentment with the awareness itself. And aware-

ness is here and can be with us no matter what the experience is. This contentment with awareness manifests as a kind of love, a devotion almost, a reverence for wakefulness, for really being wholeheartedly present here and now.

Our mindfulness practice is what leads us into it, but it manifests really with a kind of reverence for life. Rather than feeling in struggle so often with whatever it is that's going on, this sense of contentment with awareness, with wakefulness here and now—it's a sense really that we've come home. There's not really another way to say it. It's not some flashy, firecrackers-going-off kind of experience. It's so normal, so everyday. It's not something we have to create. I mean, awareness—do you have to do anything to hear me talking? Other than not be in a coma.

But to really hear me, you don't have to do much. To feel your hands touching each other, it's not a huge effort. That's awareness. It's so much who we are. It's so normal, really, that mostly we don't even notice it.

And that's what's such a mystery, such a wonder to me about our whole spiritual path and about all the difficulties that we go through in meditation—because God knows, I know, it isn't easy. We talk about how normal and natural awareness is, then we sit down and just go through torment, trying to feel the breath, trying to feel the footsteps. Why the heck do we do that if it's so normal and natural and with us all the time? There's some disconnect going on here.

And that's exactly right. There is a disconnect going on here. We basically overlook awareness itself. We overlook the really freeing, easeful, happy potential of having confidence, of taking refuge in awareness itself. When Guy was speaking about the three refuges last night—we took refuge in Buddha and Dharma and Sangha—they're all different aspects of this pure awareness, which is really who we are. You're not going to find yourself ever separated from that. But what we do is ignore it. In fact, the very word *ignorance*, when we speak about the suffering and confusion that we go through around experience, we always say that at the root of it is ignorance. And ignorance is really this ignoring of the freeing potential of taking refuge in awareness.

So that's what I want to talk more about, because I know it might not make really any sense yet what I'm saying. And all I'm trying to do in this whole talk is point you back to your own experience over these next few days, to play with this, to explore.

This awareness that is our refuge, that is always available when we can remember to notice it—it's like the big open secret of spiritual life, of our whole life, not to separate spiritual out. It's not somewhere else we have to go. It's discoverable, and we

build up confidence in it only and always by bringing ourselves fully here right now. Because it can only be here right now. Where else are we going to discover our true home?

And so all of our practices—being with the breath, coming back from thinking and whatever's going on, using the breath and the sensations of the foot and leg in walking—we're using those as tools. Not that the breath is some fantastic thing. I mean, breath is great. Yeah, we'd be really in trouble if we didn't have breath, so in that case, yes, it's fantastic. So also is being able to walk—it's wonderful. But we're using those specific experiences as tools, so that when we feel a breath, when we feel a footstep, the victory, you could say, the point of practice isn't the quality of the breath or footstep. It's that we're awake again. That again we can notice that awareness. Only when we're aware can we feel the breath, can we know if it's an in or an out breath, can we feel the footstep.

I talk about this in the beginning of retreat to set the attitude with which we actually embrace all techniques of spiritual practice. The technique is embedded within the attitude or motivation of contentment, of reverence for the sense of being present itself. And we're using all our techniques to help us reconnect with that over and over. Without that understanding, we really get easily caught in our habits of doing activity for result. Breathing in order to have more breaths, or to get more quiet, or to stop thinking, or to have the breath be finer, or to get to some juicy emotion—whatever the thing is you want to happen.

It's paradoxical to us, because mostly, certainly for me, I was trained to put out tremendous effort in order to make something specific happen or to get something. I didn't really know how to be really totally present, wholeheartedly committed to being present. Not to be somewhere else, but just to be here. Just to be with this breath. Just to feel this sadness, just to feel the sensation as my foot touches the ground, or this niggling pain in my back. It's antithetical to what we're used to doing.

And the reason we practice so much is because each moment that we wake up—ah, thinking is happening—you're here, right here.

You don't have to go anywhere else for awareness. It's right here. The breath—it's right here. Each moment. You don't even have to consciously or intellectually recognize, "Oh, this is what's happening. I'm countering the habit of striving to make something happen by being present in the moment." You don't need to think that every moment. Please don't think it every moment. It happens by itself, which is what's so nice.

So all of our practice is to help us recognize and trust and have confidence in the power of awareness itself.

The Buddha, right after he awoke, after his awakening, his enlightenment, was sitting around for seven weeks, really happy, basically, seeing how he'd really freed his mind from getting caught in reactivity and suffering. And he wasn't too motivated to teach, actually. He thought, you know, the truth is so subtle and it would be hard for people to see. I don't know if I should bother. That's basically what they say he was thinking. And then a divine being, so to speak, came down and said, "No, no, there are people who can really see. Please, teach."

And there's a line he said afterwards when he decided to teach, which I really love. He said, "Okay, the doors to the deathless are open for those who hear, for those who see." The doors to the deathless. It doesn't mean this body isn't going to die. It's really speaking about the deathless quality of awareness itself. And not that we have to go somewhere else to go through those doors and be home. They're open now. We just need to see, to hear in a different way—to see what's really happening in this moment, as opposed to our habits of mind, which tend to concoct a whole lot of extra stuff on top of what's actually happening.

So having confidence in awareness—to me that's like this amazing gift that somehow has been opened up in my life. Having confidence in awareness, what does that mean? It hinges on the fact, and again, please explore this in your experience, that whatever is happening—whether it's as mundane as your breath, or lifting your foot, or a difficult emotion coming up, or you're caught in a stream of planning thoughts, or you're just feeling incredibly reactive and hot and restless and your back hurts and you just want to get the heck out of here—whatever it is that's happening, there are the physical sensations or the emotional mood or the thought in your mind. It's pleasant or it's unpleasant or it's neutral. And there can be awareness of it, can't there? You can be really angry and you can know that you're angry. You can know that anger's happening. You can be aware of what anger feels like. That makes sense?

And because that's possible, you can see that awareness, while it comes out of the anger—it's not like it's over there and the anger's over here, you're really feeling anger or tiredness or restlessness—but the awareness is not the same thing as the anger. They come together.

Mostly we look through the awareness and just get involved in the anger, or what we think about ourselves because we're angry, or how justified we are because we're angry, or how it makes us feel. We completely get involved in what that other person did that made us angry and what's the matter with them. We get completely involved in

all of that, almost entranced, so that a lot of the time all we recognize that's happening is that particular thing—the anger, the story about it, how we feel about it. We project it into the future. We go back to our third grade class. This person's just like my teacher. I can't believe it. What's my karma? She sounds just like my third grade teacher, Mrs. Jubinville. See, she just popped into my mind. She had blue hair, Mrs. Jubinville.

She sounds just like my third grade teacher. And we're like, is any of that happening? Really? Other than as a thought in the mind? But we get so involved in all of that, we don't notice the awareness.

What this practice helps us do is make a subtle foreground-background shift—from being completely submerged, immersed in whatever's going on, to coming home and relaxing into the awareness of what's going on. I know it's subtle to talk about. Play with it. It's not some fancy thing. It's simply recognizing that awareness is actually stronger, ultimately, than any experience that comes and goes.

Not always. There are moments, of course, when we really are submerged in experience and you think, "What the heck is she talking about? This is what it is and I'm really in it." But there will be other moments, and that's why we pick relatively neutral things—like breath, like walking—to start with. We don't say, "Sit down, think of the worst trauma in your life, and now notice awareness of it." That would be hard. We start where it's easy, practicing over and over and over until we start to notice: there's breath, there's sensations, there's the awareness of it. They're right like this, intimate. But we can begin to generate a sense of coming home.

Being in the awareness, trusting that, taking refuge in it—this actually allows us to be fully present with just about anything. I read somewhere that St. Augustine said the reason humans behave as we do is because we're not living in our true home. That completely resonates with me. And our true home isn't the house we're hoping to build on Maui. Our true home is awareness. It's already here. We don't have to go somewhere else. We just have to turn around our field of attention and come back into what's seeing, what's hearing, what's knowing, what's wishing it could get the heck out of here. Turn back around and notice that.

This brings, over time—recognizing over and over and over—a sense of real freedom and confidence. Confidence. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, a Burmese meditation teacher, really tough, from the school of heroic, courageous effort. That's the good way to put it. From the school of "you sit and you don't move, and if you die while practicing, well, that's a good way to die." He's not exaggerating. That's the school. But he said this to me once in an interview, and it was really helpful: when you can truly contact awareness with confidence, you don't have to be afraid of anything.

And I've really felt that. The whole show keeps coming and going. It's the internal show that actually traps us, often much more than the external one. But we don't have to be afraid of it when awareness becomes our refuge. Our practice is learning how to trust that—learning how to recognize it first, and then trust it.

So let's try a little experiment. If you would be willing, put your hand out and just move it back and forth. Don't pay any attention to it. Think about something else. Think about what you want to have for lunch tomorrow. Think about that house on Maui. Think about how hot it was. Okay, now stop a minute. Do the same thing again, but this time really let yourself wholeheartedly feel the movement. That's all.

Now first, the second one—was that hard to do? To just for that little short time feel the movement? If I kept on doing it, I know the mind would go off because that's its habituated pattern. But just in that moment of feeling it, was that too hard? Nothing really esoteric, was it? In the moment. And even in that short time, I know it could well be that your mind went off a few times. But during that time of just feeling it, was there really any big problem? Just in that moment. And it's just a little brief moment, I know. It doesn't seem like much.

But what I'd like to suggest is that you keep noticing moments like that throughout your time here—in the being with the breath, being with the walking, when you're eating, when you're taking a shower. A friend of mine calls it, and it's her word, the place of no problem. It's not really a place. But it's when we're just for that moment singleheartedly with awareness. Whatever it is that's happening is happening. It's pleasant or it's unpleasant. It's intense or it's mild. But the awareness gives us a spaciousness and a wholeheartedness of attention that ultimately, within any experience, we really can find a peace, an ease, a way of being in that moment, in that experience, where we're not in struggle or self-hatred or other-hatred or fear.

And we tend to want to project that long term and say, "I can't do that, you know. I experienced it for a second but that's meaningless. I need it for my whole life." Come back. Just be in this moment. All of our life is moment, moment, moment. As hard as we try, you can't be anywhere other than this moment. Even when all this stuff about the future and how hard it is—that's just thoughts happening right now.

So this is a second huge relief. It's been like an incredible burden lifted from me in my life. When through my practice I realized: Oh, it's always only this moment. And even when I've been in really paralyzing grief and fear, if I can get to, "Okay, can I be with it this moment?"—in this moment, I always can.

True, we forget that the next moment. We think, "I can't bear this another moment. I can't bear it." And sometimes the awareness of awareness, the mindfulness, just isn't strong enough. The energy of that isn't as strong as the energy of the difficult state or our fear or our sadness. And that's okay. So at that time we feel like we're drowning a little bit. You need a break. That's when we'd say, go take a walk. But then there's the next moment. And again, we don't say, "I couldn't be with it the last moment, so forget about it." No, now there's this moment. Again, awareness is here. Can we remember? So that's our practice, moment by moment by moment, relaxing into awareness and finding that it really is a refuge. It's a home, the place of no problem.

But our habits of looking to experience, looking to make something happen, looking basically to have things be pleasant and to get rid of what's painful and difficult—these are so strong. Our habits of interpreting almost every experience in terms of what it means about me. This can be really fun, actually. It can be amusing if you would just put that flavor on it. Notice as you go through the day how much of what happens—sound, or it's hot, or somebody burps sitting near you in the hall—how much becomes about what does that mean for me? That makes me feel like this. That makes me feel like that. It's like me, me, me, the little center of the universe. It is exhausting. It's the most exhausting, limiting thing.

Just to notice it and laugh at it is helpful. But the habit of extrapolating on experience from this point of view—how can I organize experience to make me feel better, basically—is so strong that we're gone from present moment experience just like that, without even noticing it.

So our practice is about shifting those habits. Mindfulness, this quality of just being present with experience as it is, very simply—feeling the sensations of the breath, the sensations of walking, a feeling of sadness, very simply. That's really what cuts through, what helps us recognize there's another way to be with experience: the simple presence, mindful presence.

There's a Burmese saying that brings home to me the sense of mindfulness. The saying is: make each person we meet an object of reverence. From mindfulness I extrapolate to that—can we just make each activity we meet, can we make each experience that arises in our mind, in our heart, in hearing and seeing, just for that moment an object of reverence, an object of respect? What that does isn't so much to make that experience be something special as to bring the attitude of being willing to just be fully here for it.

Someone asked about the bowing—what's the bowing about? That's not anything you need to take on, but it comes from the Asian tradition: Thailand and Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Burma, where these particular forms of practice have been passed down, and where we've all practiced at different times. It's just an expression of reverence. When I bow to the Buddha statue, I know it's a statue—I mean, I know it's just a statue. But what I'm bowing to is the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. What I'm bowing to is really the power of awareness in me and all of us. And when I do this, I'm kind of just bowing as a sense of reverence to all of you.

Bringing that sense of reverence to whatever we do—to drinking your tea, to washing the dishes when you're finished with your meal. Reverence to just do it with our full attention, wholeheartedly, not split off in ten different places, not hurrying up to get through this in order to go meditate. It doesn't matter what you're doing. Making an object of reverence is to just be wholeheartedly present without preconceptions, without a lot of assumptions. What does this mean? What's going to happen? Just wholeheartedly here. Play with this. This is really the essence of our practice.

In this wholeheartedness, this bringing a sense of reverence to whatever we're doing, that's the place where awareness becomes accessible to us, where we begin to recognize—and not only recognize, but cherish, really—to see that our refuge is this total presence, rather than feeling our refuge is somewhere out there, getting away from something unpleasant, holding onto what's pleasant.

This essence of mindfulness, sati—often we use Suzuki Roshi's phrase. He was the famous Zen master in San Francisco from Japan. He has a wonderful book, if you haven't read it: *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. It's just very pithy, to the point, just brings up this sense of presence and acceptance of things as they are in this moment, simply because in this moment that's how they are. Out of this total presence, intelligent response is possible, and it actually arises quite spontaneously.

Bringing beginner's mind—that's Suzuki Roshi's phrase—can we meet this sensation in the back, this feeling of sadness, this next breath, with beginner's mind? That means not, "Oh no, this cramp again. It's another forty-five minutes of hell I'm going to have to go through." There's no freshness in there. There's no beginner's mind. You don't even know what that feels like once we've met it like that. "Oh, this anger. I can't believe it. I'm going to be in this for the rest of the ten days." Be in what? Do we even know? We're not even touching what's happening. We're off in our reactions.

So beginner's mind is, can we just bring a freshness, here and now, meet it without bringing in all of our cultural and personal overlays? They can be there, but they're different from the experience.

My favorite example of this—I've used it before, but it fits, so I'll use it again. It's from a documentary I saw on German TV. I don't speak German, but friends were translating. It was about Yo-Yo Ma, the classical cellist. He seems like a really open, lovely guy, at least through this documentary. In the film, he was going around to different cultures just to compare music—not even compare, just to play musically with cultures that were very different. In the part that I saw, he was flying to the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa, to a tribe of what they called themselves bush people.

So they show him getting out of this little helicopter with his beautiful cello. I read later that he has a cello worth about two million dollars, so I'm thinking maybe he brought his second-string cello—but it looked really nice.

He gets down and he's meeting with the headman of the group and their head musician. The musician brought out his instrument and was singing and playing, and then Yo-Yo Ma would play on his cello. Then they showed us up close the instrument that the head musician was using, and it was literally a big oil tin. It had been a large oil can, like motor oil or something, with a strut—a pole in it—and a couple of strings. And then Yo-Yo Ma had his cello.

I saw my mind completely making comparisons, you know, evaluating what really sounds good. And then we heard them both. I could see that just because I'm attuned to that Western style of music, that's what I'm used to thinking is beautiful.

But Yo-Yo Ma was completely open. He's going, "Wow, you really—that's great! Let's trade instruments." So he gives the head musician his cello, and the musician is playing around on that. And Yo-Yo Ma is plunking on the other one, saying, "Man, I can't play this nearly as good as you can." He gives it back and was just so into it.

And I could see my mind going, "Oh, that's an oil can with a pole and some strings." My mind couldn't get past that. But Yo-Yo Ma was really seeing it for what it was—an instrument of music, and the person playing it was a master of it. Yo-Yo Ma wasn't a master of it. And he was so enthusiastic, so open, so present.

That was a huge lesson to me about the power of my preconceptions, the power of conditioning that keeps me from just meeting an experience freshly.

What our practice here is doing, and the reason the schedule is a bit stringent—sit for forty-five minutes, walk for forty-five minutes—is because all of our experience is going to come up. It's not going to be nicey-nice all the time. That's important, that it's not always nice, so we can bring a freshness and see what's really the point of difficulty, the point of real suffering here. Can I meet this experience freshly without all my preconceptions?

And maybe for a moment we can. You might discover in that moment that there's a huge shift in how difficult it is to be with something that we thought was just unbearable. Or how it's really okay that something we love changes and goes away—that that's okay too. This is really what we see: to bring a freshness rather than our overlay.

When we have our overlay, if we don't know it—and often we don't know it—we're seeing everything through that filter.

A Zen story a friend told me: A really fierce samurai warrior went to see a Zen master in ancient Japan. Really fierce, really angry. He went wanting teachings, but he was just cussing the Zen master out, calling him a pig. "You're just a pig. And everybody here is a pig." Just really out there.

The Zen master just let him go on. Then he looked at him and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

That stopped even the samurai for a moment. He said, "I? A Buddha?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

So part of what we see in the practice is: what veils are we looking through? And as soon as you see the veil, you don't have to go anywhere. As soon as you see, "Ah, I've got pig veil on"—in that moment, we're in awareness. You're not caught in it anymore. You don't have to go somewhere else. We just have to see it.

The Buddha gave a lovely teaching that I'll share very quickly because I think it really helps us see the difference between just what's happening and all the extra reactivity and story and wanting we put on top of it. Very simple. Someone came to him and said, "Hey, listen—what's the difference between someone who's really awakened, what you call free from suffering, and a normal, ordinary person?"

The Buddha said, "Well, a normal person experiences pleasant feelings in body and mind, unpleasant feelings in body and mind, and neutral ones." We don't often think in those terms, but if you consider it, that's what we have: things that are nice, things that aren't, and neutral. And so does an awakened person. That doesn't change.

For years, somewhere in my subconscious, I thought that if I could finally get enlightened, I wouldn't have anything unpleasant happen anymore. You don't get sick. Nobody you love gets sick. Things you don't like simply don't occur. I'm sorry to tell you, it isn't like that. Even the Buddha went through lots of grief in his life. Stuff happens. That's not what changes. That happens to an awakened person too.

But normal, ordinary people like most of us, when we experience an unpleasant physical or mental thing—an emotion we don't like, or you're sitting here and your knee hurts, your back hurts, it's way too hot—the Buddha's words are that we then "lament, we cry, we moan, we beat our breast, we complain, and we fall into despair."

Does that sound familiar? Does it sound exaggerated? No, it really isn't. What we don't do is see that we're doing this.

So he says it's like that first physical thing—your knee has a little twinge, it doesn't even hurt badly yet, just a little twinge—that's like getting shot with an arrow. But then what we do on top of it: "Oh my God, it's only ten minutes into the sitting. It's only the 2:15 sitting. This is unbearable. I can't believe they expect us to sit here for this long in this heat and they're not turning on the air conditioning. What the heck is the matter with them? I'm going to just stand up. I'm going to tell them what for. I'm going to write a note. As soon as I get out of here, I'm writing a note." Then you spend ten minutes composing the note. Then you spend the next ten minutes wondering where the closest hospital is because you're going to need arthroscopic surgery if this keeps up. "I thought I came here for freedom and instead I'm hurting myself. I'm going to get up. I'm not going to let them intimidate me. I'm getting up and leaving." Then you spend ten minutes hating yourself because you're such a wuss, so intimidated that you won't get up and leave until they ring the bell. Then you hate James, who's here for the 2:15 sitting—I'm sure he's not paying attention.

That's the beating. That's what the Buddha said: we shoot ourselves with a second arrow. Or in this case, a whole quiver of arrows. And he says that's completely extra. We really don't need to do that.

What's the difference with an awakened person? They experience an unpleasant physical or mental experience. And that's all that happens. They experience it and leave it there.

Ajahn Sumedho, a Thai-American monk, has a wonderful description of loving-kindness. He says you experience something unpleasant and you don't create anything around it. You just give it space to be. That's what we're actually cultivating with mindfulness. There's a twinge in the knee. Can you meet that with fresh eyes? Twinge in the knee. What does it feel like?

And when the second arrow comes—*oh my god*—then we notice that. Ah, okay, fear, aversion. And that's like a new first arrow, but you don't have to create anything around that. Awareness can know fear. Awareness can know pain. Awareness can

know self-hatred. Awareness can know anger. The awareness is always available to us, and we don't have to get so engrossed in this second arrow, in this story about basically me, me, me, me, me.

We feel that this is going to help us out of our suffering, but really, it increases our suffering. I don't think I'm exaggerating to say a hundredfold sometimes.

And this is what you'll discover from time to time, not always. That twinge in the knee—you can come back and meet it fresh. Just for a moment, it's like moving your hand. It's just twinge. And it's like, *oh, what was all that about?* And then we forget. We get caught again. That's okay. We can notice again.

The habit of really getting entranced, seduced by all our reactions and our stories is so, so strong that we can only have compassion and patience for ourselves—and for everyone else—when we see ourselves shooting ourselves with the arrow over and over again. But that recognition, and it really helps a lot of people, *oh, second arrow*—it changes the whole dynamic. Just notice that in yourself. With that tone of voice. Not "Second arrow, you stupid jerk!" No. Ah, second arrow. All right, that's what's happening. And in that moment, you're not in the second arrow anymore. Awareness is here. Awareness is our refuge. That's what we really learn to trust.

Just one more point I want to make, a short one. When I say awareness is our refuge and we can really bring this freshness, this beginner's mind, to whatever's happening and find whatever's arising in that moment—because it's our avenue to awareness—you could say whatever's happening can be a doorway to the deathless. Really.

But—and this is going to happen over and over on retreat and in our life—sometimes what's coming up, whether it's the twinge in the knee or deep sadness or aversion or just sleepiness... sleepiness can be a real torment, can't it? There are times when we think, *take refuge in being present in this moment? This is my true home? I don't think so.* And it's just beyond the imagination. Why would I want to be wholeheartedly present for this, you know, if I have an option?

Well, that's basically what we've spent our life doing. If we have an option to be present or not for something unpleasant, we will take that option. One of the things we're doing here is taking away some of your options, you may have noticed. That's one of the reasons the first day can be really tough. Whatever our particular options are, our multiple distractions, a lot of them we don't have. Just by dint of sitting for forty-five minutes, stuff's going to come up. By dint of walking. By dint of not talking.

What becomes hard to remember and to trust is that it's not the experience we're taking refuge in—the unpleasant or difficult experience. It's the awareness. But the awareness—we can only see it, recognize it, when we're willing to be fully here. We can't be in awareness if we're zoning out, spacing out, turning on the TV just not to know what's going on. Sure, sometimes those will work. But sooner or later in all of our lives, we're going to hit the thing—not necessarily here, but in our regular life—that we can't move away from. The distractions don't work. Other, again, than being in a coma, self-induced or otherwise. But even that you're going to have to come out of.

So what we're practicing here is to cultivate trust in awareness, the confidence that awareness really can be a refuge. And to do that, we have to do the counter-intuitive thing of being willing to bring beginner's mind open into the feeling, the difficult thing that's arising.

Pick your battles. Start with the little difficult thing, not the most overwhelming one, because we won't have strong enough trust at first. But what we discover—and this is the point I want to make—is that when we begin to, just for a moment, bring this openness, this freshness to our difficulty, whether it's knee pain, back pain, sadness, or fear, we find that this refuge in awareness manifests in its other form, its two-sides-of-a-coin form. The other form is compassion, connectedness.

Really seeing that in this, through this willingness to be present for this difficult thing—and it can be a minor difficult thing—we are somehow contacting the fact of our connection with all life, with all beings. Even in this silence, in this lovely protected space, in this seeming introspection and self-involvement, which meditation can certainly seem like at times—we can even get down on ourselves for being so reactive to some little pain when there's so much suffering in the world—but the amazing thing is we begin to notice that the other side of refuge in awareness is this compassion, this tenderness for life, starting with tenderness for ourselves in this moment.

I want to end by reading a few statements about this from Pema Chödrön, who's a nun in the Tibetan tradition. In the Tibetan tradition, they talk about the heart of bodhicitta, the heart of compassion, the noble or awakened heart, the heart that's really the manifestation of this tenderness for life, this connection with beings. And again, it's simply a manifestation of our basic pure awareness of who we are. It's not that we have to create this in some intellectual way. When we're willing to just open into presence, this begins to show itself, as if the obscurations that keep us from noticing it begin to be seen through.

So she says: "We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of our existence." In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world, the pain of yourself, touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

"We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering, we're being kind to ourselves. But the truth is, we become more fearful that way, more hardened, more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. And that separateness becomes like a prison for us, a prison that restricts us so that we're just involved in our personal hopes and fears and caring only for the people nearest to us. It's a narrow, limited kind of consciousness, kind of existence. Yet when we don't close off and we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings."

"Awakened heart is discovered by going into our own pain. It manifests as basic tenderness, basic compassionate warmth. When we walk around like we're expecting to be attacked, we block it." And remember, we walk around expecting to be attacked. Sometimes we're expecting to be attacked from inside. It's not always from outside, right? Just let that thing not arise. We block it.

"When we release this tension between this and that, between me and other, the struggle between us and them, that's when bodhicitta will emerge. On our relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. On the absolute level, we experience it as openness, as awareness, as groundless space." Two sides of the same coin.

"Experiencing the soft spot of bodhicitta is like returning home, as if we had had amnesia for a very long time and we awaken to remember who we really are."

The poet Rumi writes of night travelers who search the darkness instead of running from it, a companionship of people willing to know their own fear, pain, and sadness.

Bodhicitta is also available in moments of caring for things, that kind of reverence for experience I was talking about—like when we clean our glasses or brush our hair. It's available in moments of appreciation, when we notice the blue sky or pause and listen to the rain. It's available in moments of gratitude, when we recall a kindness or recognize another person's courage, another person's beauty. It's available in music and dance, in art, in poetry.

Whenever we let go of holding onto ourselves and our views and look at the world around us, whenever we connect with sorrow, whenever we connect with joy, whenever we drop our resentment and complaint—in those moments, bodhicitta is here.

So that's really the essence of our practice. Can we meet each moment of our life with reverence?

Thank you all for your attention on this long, hot night.

CHAPTER 342

Not Fearing Freedom

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson addresses a fascinating phenomenon that arises in dedicated practice: the moments when practitioners discover they may not actually want the freedom they're seeking. Using the Four Noble Truths as her framework, she explores the various ways we resist liberation—whether through subtle attachment to pleasure, fear of losing our familiar sense of identity, or the daunting prospect of opening fully to suffering.*
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> *Wilson draws on multiple teachers and traditions to illuminate the nature of nibbāna, sharing the Buddha's descriptions of this "unborn, uncreated, unconditioned" reality alongside Ajahn Buddhadāsa's accessible teaching that nibbāna is simply "the cool state of mind without any kilesa." She emphasizes that freedom isn't reserved for future lifetimes or special practitioners—it's available in every moment of pure mindfulness when greed, hatred, and delusion are absent.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for those moments when motivation collapses and practice feels impossible. Wilson suggests widening our perspective beyond personal suffering to recognize our experience as part of the universal human condition described in the First Noble Truth. This shift naturally opens the heart to compassion and transforms self-centered practice into bodhicitta—the aspiration for awakening that benefits all beings. Drawing on Paṭrul Rinpoche's teaching on transcendent patience, she encourages practitioners to develop "the patience to face the profound truth without fear," reminding us that this holy life has "unshakable deliverance of mind" as its ultimate goal.*

The subject tonight is Undaunted Courage, or Not Fearing Freedom.

I want to frame this talk, and also frame your experience—each of our experiences—using the framework of the Four Noble Truths. This isn't exactly a Four Noble Truths talk, but I want to hold what I'm discussing within that framework as a conceptual way of understanding our experience.

I'm assuming you're familiar with the Four Noble Truths. Joseph spoke about the first one last night: that painful, difficult things happen. Old age, sickness, disease, death, loss—all of that. Impermanence, the unsatisfactory nature of experience. If we try to hold on to anything to make us happy, there's the no-self of it all. But basically, it's

simply getting it—that this is part of the human condition. It's not a mistake, and it's not something that's specifically only happening to you because you messed up. The first noble truth is the framework to hold what's happening.

The second truth, of course, is the cause of suffering. Not the cause of pain, but the cause of our suffering, our confusion—that we relate to experience with clinging and aversion out of not understanding experience accurately. In other words, if we really understood the first noble truth, we would stop clinging, because it just doesn't make sense. The second noble truth tells us that the cause of our suffering, our anguish, is our clinging, our confused response or reaction to situations. It's really ignorance.

The third truth is that there is an ending of clinging, an ending of suffering. This is where I want to start broadening out a little bit tonight, because this is where it gets interesting. I mean, if there were no third truth, the first two would be a little dismal.

So the third truth—what does it mean for us? What does it mean for you experientially, not just conceptually? Do you even go there in your mind? Other than "Oh no, that's impossible for me." Other than that, or "I've got to get enlightened or I'm going to die." Other than those two extremes, how do you hold or even think about or relate to this third truth?

I want to read you a few descriptions from the Buddha, from various places—his definitions of nibbāna.

"That which is the exhaustion of greed, of hate, and of delusion is called nibbāna." The exhaustion of greed, of hate, of delusion.

"It's hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna."

And then one other, a different way he defines it: "There is an ultimate reality, unborn, uncreated, unconditioned, and unformed. If there were not, there would be no escape possible here for one who is born, created, conditioned, and formed. But since there is this ultimate reality, unborn, uncreated, unconditioned, and unformed, escape is possible for one who is born, created, conditioned, and formed."

These are different ways the Buddha described nibbāna.

There are two other ways we could think about it, describe it, or experience nibbāna. One is the idea of a moment of freedom, or momentary freedom. Sayadaw U Pandita often describes it this way: a moment of pure mindfulness, a moment of sati, is a moment

of freedom. Because in that moment of pure attention, there is no kilesa present. There is no greed, hatred, or delusion arising or being held to in a moment of mindfulness. So this is one way of describing what you could call temporary nirvana.

And then there's the arahat model, which is when the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion are completely abandoned, cut off at the root like a dead stump.

I'm not trying to feed your conceptual mind here. I just want to frame what we're talking about in terms of the Four Noble Truths without stopping at the first two. I'm not trying to get your greed going or stimulate thinking, but rather to challenge you to be conscious of what ideas or attitudes you may or may not be holding to—what expectations or descriptions you may consciously or unconsciously be trying to get to about your ideas of what freedom is. Sometimes that can get in the way.

This idea of momentary and more permanent freedom—a very famous quotation from the Buddha speaks to both, I think. You've probably heard it already ten times just this retreat; everyone always reads it, it's the favorite one: "The mind is naturally radiant and pure, but it is colored or obscured by the kilesas that visit it. The mind is radiant and free of the kilesas that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands. And so, for the noble follower, there is cultivation of the mind." Understanding that the mind is naturally radiant and pure, and that this radiance, this purity, is obscured.

It's obscured, it's colored by the defilements that visit. And when we understand that, that's why we then cultivate development of the mind. That's the fourth noble truth, right? The eightfold noble path.

And so, in a way, it's saying that because of the natural radiance—and this is my interpretation now—and our ability to touch that, to recognize it just for a moment, that is what allows us to set out on the path and to continue to cultivate awareness.

So however you're holding freedom for yourself, whether that's a deep motivation for you, whether that's your inspiration, if that's what keeps you going, it really does require of us total commitment to this path. It's not a half-hearted thing.

And at the same time—as it's not half-hearted, I'm going to be going back and forth with two sides the whole night, probably—as Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote in a great article, a talk called "Nibbana for Everyone": at the same time that the cultivation of our heart and mind to really recognize and trust that recognition of the innate purity of heart and mind, at the same time that that requires total commitment, it is the natural possibility for everyone. Nibbana for everyone.

It's a long talk, so I'll just say a little bit of what he's talking about. Ajahn Buddhadasa was very famous in Thailand. He died not quite ten years ago—a very well-respected Theravada forest monk. But at the same time, he was, for Theravada in Thailand, quite radical. Now, that's not radical by our standards, maybe, but for Theravada in Thailand, he was quite radical.

In this talk, "Nibbana for Everyone," he starts out by talking about how basically in Thailand in these days, nibbana is something, the idea of it, that's been shoved aside. And he gives a bunch of examples. He says, you know, laypeople in general have been informed that nibbana is some special place without suffering, where you can just be happy and have everything you want, and you usually get there after death. The developers of the generation view nibbana as a hindrance to economic and social development, something that should not be studied or even mentioned. Students generally put nibbana in a category for old, devout Buddhists, so they don't need to pay attention to it themselves. Young people see nibbana as something bland, with no taste, something truly awful and undesirable. And he just keeps going with different examples.

But then he goes on to say: nibbana is a natural condition. And he's very straightforward and simple sometimes in the way he describes things. He says nibbana is the cool state of mind without any kilesa. The cool state of mind without defilements present in that moment.

He goes on to differentiate between the sense of momentary or temporary coolness, which we all experience a great deal of the time, and what he calls a more permanent nibbana—when the defilements are really uprooted, when the underlying tendencies for them to arise aren't there. The permanent coolness. But he talks a lot about really recognizing that there are many moments of this natural state of coolness when defilements are not occurring.

Coolness is almost a literal translation of the word nibbana. That's what it means: cool. They use the word in Thai to say when rice, for example, has cooled. The rice has nibbana-ed, so to speak. It's just the fire going out. So it doesn't have to be something so incredibly esoteric that you can reach after ten thousand eons and not before.

I like this—he's saying anyone can see that if defilements were with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could stand them? I know some of you are thinking that's how it is, every second without ceasing. But he's saying, really look: under such conditions, living things would either die or become insane and then die anyway. So let us consider well the fact that we survive because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. Why can't we notice and appreciate these times? We're all surviving because of the nourishment from this type of nibbana.

I just like that. It's so down to earth and straightforward.

But if you think of it another way, the fact of the essential radiance and purity of mind-heart is a fact. And that is true—not ten thousand eons from now when we wake up, but it's true now. That's what nourishes us. That's what can keep us practicing. That's what allows for escape from the born and the conditioned and suffering, as the Buddha said. If there were no unborn, escape would not be possible. Now, unborn is true now, not in some other reality in some other lifetime.

So nibbana for everyone—including you, including me.

So that's the preamble.

What I want to talk about is a point that has been at times a fascination for me in my own practice and in talking with people—with some of you and with people on other retreats as well. It's how we can reach, at various times, certain points in our practice. We may reach them again and again, different points on our individual journey, where perhaps we've come up against something. It may be a point of difficulty, but it's not necessarily so.

We've come up against possibly some idea we didn't even know we had—an idea of what freedom or liberation is or should be. Or we run into some notion of what it might entail. Or we encounter something we hadn't really thought about that it does seem to entail.

And people will come in and say, with a sort of surprised or rueful or self-judging quality, on some level they say, "Oh, I'm thinking maybe I don't really want liberation. Maybe I'm not really quite practicing for that uncompromising, radical freedom from clinging. So far, and maybe that's far enough for now."

Have you ever noticed feeling like that?

That, I think, is a really fascinating and juicy and important point when we reach it in practice. There can be various reasons, and I want to talk about some of them, and about ways of reconnecting with our inspiration. Where can we find that undaunted courage that keeps us going when we've hit a place where, for any of various reasons, we're saying, "Okay, good enough. I'm out of here now." Or, "More than enough." Or, "I know this isn't freedom, but if freedom means X, Y, Z, I don't want it."

So really looking and seeing what that's about.

I think it's a rare person who doesn't come up against this. Because being the analyzing, thinking, conceptual beings that we are, you'd be pretty rare if you didn't have some conceptualization of what freedom is, or what our path is, or what it's going to feel like. And when we suddenly run into the sense, the experience—"Oh, freedom from clinging also means *that*"—I'll give some examples of what I mean—that didn't fit into our ideas of what freedom is. Or freedom from suffering means opening to some of the things Joseph talked about last night. It means really facing this stuff, not avoiding it permanently. "That's what I thought freedom was—that this stuff didn't come up anymore. Not that I have to open to it and feel it more than before I came here."

So I think it's normal that this comes up. With the best intentions and with all that we read and study and all that we've practiced, whatever we think freedom's going to be, it can't be what we think. We can only think what we know.

Krishnamurti's famous saying, "freedom from the known"—that's a really profound statement, in my humble opinion. And there's a saying from the Buddha: "In whatever way people conceive, the fact is ever other than that." Do you get that? That's one of his radical statements. Give it up. Whatever you're thinking, the fact is other than that. It just cuts through.

And now I'm going to blab all night about...

So partly we run up against this wall of, "No, either it's not what I want, or I can't do it"—which is really a common wall for us here. "It's too big a task. Me, with my particular impurities and defilements, whatever they are—I can't liberate myself. Even if there's another ten thousand incalculables and eons, I could never do it. Maybe these other people, everyone else here, but not me. Enlightenment's not for me."

How do we find the total commitment to keep practicing and not have our motivation completely deflated and ebb away in the face of this?

And by the way, this thing about "I couldn't do it with my defilements"—as if it's *me* that's getting enlightened, as if enlightenment is some kind of self-improvement project that makes me better. As if I needed a better sense of "me" that could get enlightened—when it's the whole standpoint of "me" that we see through in the first place. So your crummy, caught up, kilesa-ridden "me" is as good a one to see through as a purer one. That excuse doesn't wash. You have to keep practicing.

Joseph talked a lot last night about running up against the place of fear when we're coming into the uncomfortable, the difficult, the painful. And I'll again talk about the difficult and how that can make us think, "I can't do this. Enlightenment's not for me."

But first I want to talk about how sometimes it's not always confronting the difficult or the painful that brings us to one of these crises of motivation, one of these places where our willingness just ebbs away.

Fear of freedom—sometimes it's seeing really how subtly we delight in the pleasant, how subtly we really like craving. We really like pleasure. People talk about this often, and there's a kind of fear.

This is what Ajahn Buddhadasa was talking about—the young people say it's just this drab, gray, really boring thing. I can't tell you how many times people have said, "Who wants to give up wanting and fear?" Someone said to me once, "What am I going to do, just sit in my room all day?" As if these are the only options open to us: wanting, fear, or sitting in our room doing nothing.

But the mind can really get caught on that. One person—I hope you don't mind my using this example, it's a perfect very small example—but you can really see how if we're not paying attention, we can just hit that wall and not look more carefully.

She was talking about a bagel day, which I understand again today was a bagel day. It's a big day in the yogi world, I understand that. She was talking about seeing just how much she was loving the bagels and the taste of bagels. And then she started noting "pleasant, pleasant." And it was as if the whole taste of the bagel just turned to sawdust. Isn't that the fear? It says, "Oh..."

I remember one time I was deep in retreat and something very pleasant was going on in the walking, and Sharon said, "Well, you know you've got to know pleasant." And I went back, and the mind had a little temper tantrum. Because I knew very well—not that it would turn to sawdust, but what goes away when we're noting, just noting "pleasant, pleasant," is that subtle identification with the gratification of the pleasure. Gratification meaning "I'm really liking this bagel." And I'm even exaggerating. There's not even maybe the word "I," but the awareness or the energy is kind of coming back to me. Nice taste, mmm. Swallowing, mmm. Do you know what I mean?

The Buddha even said that unwise attention to the gratification of the pleasant is what leads to the hindrance of sense desire. So noticing pleasant—fine. What goes away is that extra "mmm, I'm liking this taste."

Now, it doesn't necessarily follow that if we notice pleasant, the actual experience of pleasant goes away. That's not necessarily true. Maybe that taste of bagel turned to sawdust, but it doesn't mean everything's just bland gray. But seeing how subtly attached we can be to that gratification of pleasure, and thinking, "No. I didn't sign up for this. I want to fill in the blanks..."

And it goes from something as simple as enjoying the taste of a bagel to my relationship. I have to give up my family. I have to give up my home. I have to give up everyone I've ever loved. I have to give up whatever. And then the mind really can go into aversion, fear, a pulling back. "No. If it means this, I don't want freedom."

And again, it's as if in that way the mind is projecting what it can't know. It's giving up the attachment. It doesn't mean we have to go out and throw away everything.

I remember for years when I'd be on long retreats, a long time ago—I don't like to say how long ago, longer ago than I wish—but at one period when I was in a relationship for a few years with someone, we were doing a lot of sitting together, and I could see the place where my mind would, just in the stillness, very quiet, there would just be a little movement of attachment towards the image or thought of that person. I mean, I wasn't talking to the person. Just this little movement of attachment. And as if, "But that's not so big. It's not really disturbing my samādhi. I don't need to really look at it. It doesn't count."

It counts.

And I could see that the fear was this: if I were to look at the attachment, that means the whole relationship has to end. You see what I mean? If I see the attachment—and often people will talk about this—"I'm so attached to my children, how can I not be?" As if by even looking at the suffering of attachment, we're somehow disowning our children, or our partner, or our family. As if we're somehow throwing these things out. And we don't even get close to simply looking at that moment of attachment to pleasure, to wanting in the mind.

That's where Munindra's famous line becomes so important: a thought of your mother is not your mother. You're sitting here feeling attached to your partner or your children, and for most of you, they're not here. It's a thought arising in the mind. And we can be afraid to even feel and look at the attachment to a thought—which is what? Nothing. The thought is gone.

So it's just finding that willingness to look without buying into our idea that it means everything goes, but also the willingness to look without trying to hold on, thinking, "Oh, but Carol said I can look and still have it all too." Just really look. Not think "this doesn't count."

Another aspect that can often bring us to that place of "not this too"—because I've seen it in myself a lot—is a feeling of familiarity with our habits. Our habits of personality, our habits of relating to life, our comfortable ways of inhabiting a sense of who I am—or uncomfortable, they're not even always comfortable, but our familiar ways. It's like, "I like life this way. I don't want to change it."

Really, what I'm talking about here is personality beliefs, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Even our suffering, uncomfortable personality beliefs—sometimes we can just run up against a point: well, who would I be if I didn't think of myself as low energy? I'm picking really simple examples here. "I'm a person who has to go to bed at ten and get up at five, otherwise I wouldn't be able to practice. It's always been that way. That's just who I am. That's just acceptance. I'm just accepting myself."

Who would I be without impatience? Who would I be if I didn't have a snippy, aversive mind? That moment of compassion—well, that wasn't me. That was just a momentary fluke coming through.

The idea of what's possible for us, our creativity, our personal memories, our whole felt sense of familiar physical, energetic, psychological presence—just noticing that sometimes a moment of experience can directly challenge that. And even the suffering ones, we tend to just stay with them because it's more comfortable, it's easier. There's a kind of fear of freedom from that, even though intellectually we all know that putting that stuff down is nothing but a relief. But that's just thinking about the thought of putting it down, the thought of even looking.

Who would I be without these precious memories of whatever happened? Without knowing my energy system? I know what I'm capable of. And that's the end of it.

Entering into, moment after moment after moment, the sense of real unknowing. Instead of coagulating a sense of mental, physical, psychic identity—a real unknowing. Okay, yesterday I fell asleep at nine o'clock p.m., just as I have every night I've ever been on retreat in twenty years. But tonight, maybe it's different. I don't know. Can I meet it fresh without holding on to the ideas of the past?

This is from Pema Chödrön: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together."

Sound familiar?

So even though we say the yama mara is fear of death, it's actually fear of life. That's just so familiar to me, that sense of wanting every experience to confirm, congratulate, and make you feel completely together. And somehow, at times, it's quite easy to have translated our sense of practicing for freedom into: we're practicing to get to that point where we feel totally and finally completely together. Right?

Instead, it's just the reverse. There's no us here to feel completely anything. Always new, radical non-clinging. The actual dissolving of this holding to experience to confirm us—it's freedom. It's a huge relief.

But the process that we can go through, that we do go through, of coming up to these moments over and over again—in myself it's really felt over the years that practice is a series of small deaths. Psychological deaths, emotional deaths. Just kind of dying. And with all the sense of loss and grief and sadness and clinging that goes along with a sense of death.

I don't mean, "Oh yes, death of that person—isn't that freeing?" No. I mean really the sense of grieving that goes along with that. Even if I had to put it in words, it would sound really stupid, because I'm grieving some really unhelpful, limiting idea I've had about who Carol is anyway. What's to grieve? But it doesn't make sense on that level. It's really a sense of grieving some sense of who I am. And it just keeps on going like that.

But it's always moving through to a broader, more alive, more connected and vibrant place of being. Along with it also goes—I feel like I'm losing more and more a sense of what freedom could actually mean, which seems to be a good thing. Because as soon as I have some idea of freedom, it's a box. It's a limitation. One starts trying for that, and already everything freezes.

So that's on the side of where we run up against this—where we really don't want to be liberated from our attachments to pleasure, to our ideas of happiness, our sense of ourselves. And I want to talk a little more on the side of the more difficult aspects as well.

There are a few different ways that I've noticed—and I'm sure you'll notice your own ways—particular experiences where we come to a place where the motivation just drops through the floor. I don't mean just for a moment. We all have these moments of "I'm out of here, this isn't for me, I can't do this." I don't mean the passing thought that comes and goes, even if not so quickly. I mean a much more pervasive sense that I've really hit a place where I don't know any more reason to keep doing this.

Sometimes it's a little humbling when we get to where we see what's been our driving motivation and we see how limited or self-serving it was. But I think for most of us, we're going to start with some kind of limited motivation. We want to suffer less. Nothing wrong with that.

Often what can happen is there's a particular suffering—maybe a personality pattern, or a knot of physical pain, or a critical mind, or so much anger—that you really are practicing to alleviate, to see through. And I have friends, I know plenty of people who, after very sincere practice over years, get to a place of more equanimity, or that particular pattern becomes much less troublesome. And actually, their motivation to practice kind of disintegrates.

I'm thinking of one very good friend at the moment. It was really a revelation to him—it was the middle of a three-month course, and suddenly the reason he'd been practicing, this particular suffering, just went away. He's going, "Well, now what do I do? Here I am on this three-month course—now what do I do?" And he kept on practicing. Of course, if you can keep on practicing in these times, our understanding opens and broadens and we find other motivations, so our motivation keeps changing. But this can be a very confusing and trying phase of practice when our limited aspiration is fulfilled. And you go, "Oh no."

I think that's one of the reasons there are a lot of people who begin practice—in this form of practice or any—but there are far, far fewer who show up at a retreat like this for three months. That's already a very deep commitment, rare in this world. Partly it's because of limited aspiration: "Okay, I'm feeling better. That's good enough."

Or—and this is what Joseph was more talking about last night—there are the times when it's just too much pain, physical or mental. You all know that. Just a grind. It's just too much. You think, "I can't face this anymore." Or it hasn't even come up yet, but there's the intimation. You have this lurking sense of something really big and unbearable that's going to come. You can just feel it's going to come, and suddenly it's enough—I'm out of here. I don't mean just the moment of "I cannot bear it anymore." Freedom from suffering is opening to *this*? I don't think so.

These are profound moments. I mean, we're laughing a little.

It's nothing to judge oneself about or get critical about or think there's something wrong with us. But it is important to treat these moments as very important times in practice. Because, as Joseph was talking about with fear, these places where motivation drops out are bringing us right up to the edge of our understanding of what's possible, of freedom. And that's our limitation—our understanding of what's possible. That's

what we don't know beyond. And that's where we have to find the place of trust and faith that simply keeps us looking. I don't mean striving or pushing. I don't even mean that we're staying steady in any particular form. I'm not talking about technique or skillful means here. Just that willingness to keep showing up. Whether the showing up means a skillful backing off—that's still showing up. It's finding what helps us be present.

But I think because this is the first noble truth—opening to how things are and discovering that heart and mind, that radiant peace that is possible for us no matter what's happening—it necessitates our being willing and able to be there no matter what's happening. And it seems like on this planet there are relatively few people who somehow have that faith, or the courage, and the time and the conditions to do what you're all doing, which means to keep showing up. And not, when it's a really nice day, think, "Well, okay, but today's nice. It would be better if I went off on a picnic."

I remember Myoshin telling me once, a few years ago, she was invited to teach at a daylong somewhere in Connecticut. The kind of thing where they beg you to come, they set it up long ahead—"Oh, we really want you to come." And then she went and it was this beautiful day, and hardly anyone showed up. They really wanted her to come, but it should rain, otherwise they'd miss something. And so where's the real commitment?

Ultimately, awakening—freedom and the compassion that comes with it—becomes more important to us than any particular aspect of our experience. More important than any aspect of our experience: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; terrifying, ecstatic, or boring. Simply the love of awakening, of freedom itself, becomes the compelling force. And we stop being so drawn and fascinated by experience itself.

So what can help us when we hit these moments of non-negotiable experience? Non-negotiable—this attachment is not negotiated, I don't give it up. Or this particular pain, this particular fear, this particular thing—it's not negotiable, I'm not going there. How can we keep going?

The suggestions I want to offer—and there are many—this is what I want to offer tonight. When we are really struggling—and again, I'm not talking about moments when it's just a little hard. I'm talking about when we've really hit that wall and we think, "I just can't muster it up again. I can't, I don't want to, and I won't." And as we know, this can last longer than a whole retreat. It can last years. But the staying with it—it changes, as does everything.

So what I want to offer: if it helps you on this retreat, use it. If not, let it go.

Generally, when we're hitting these places, as with everything, when we're really suffering, we tend to be drawn into our particulars—our particular story, our particular suffering, the particular attachment we don't want to let go, our particular feebleness and inability to ever be awakened, whatever. But it's our story, usually.

So here are a couple of ways of expanding the frame. And this is where thinking of your experience as part of the Dhamma, part of the Four Noble Truths, can really help.

First, when you realize it's hard—I mean really hard, not just a little hard, really hard, the hard of "I can never do this," and you really believe that—expand the picture beyond yourself and realize it's hard for everyone. It's not just you it's hard for. Yeah, it is hard. That's part of it, because of attachments. Even though Ajahn Buddhadasa says nibbāna is for everyone, he didn't say it's easy for everyone. It's still hard.

And even teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, who often gives a message of "peace is every step," just open to peace, notice peace even in suffering—he's not a mushy softy. He said at one point, "We're not determined enough to liberate ourselves from our deepest suffering. It takes huge determination."

Or—I've been waiting ages to use this one—from Suzuki Roshi. This is typical of how you often read Suzuki Roshi, where he's talking about zazen: "Leave your front door and your back door open. Let thoughts come and go, just don't serve them tea." That's great, isn't it? That's nice.

And you feel, yes, it's easy. It's heartwarming. Plus, I like the reference to tea. It's very *gemütlich*, very homey.

But this is also Suzuki Roshi—this comes from the biography *Crooked Cucumber*. He just suddenly seems like he lost it in this quotation. He starts saying to all his long-term followers: "Spineless! You only want a sweet pill. You never want the bitter pill. Spineless! You say you want the truth. None of you want the truth. If I told you the truth, I'd be left sitting here alone, listening to the sounds of your cars driving up the road."

I love that. You just get a sense—there are moments where that's so true for me. I see it. I sort of want the truth, to some extent. I like the tea and the open door. But that's not always how it is. So it's hard for everyone. Don't take it so personally when it's hard for you. Don't get so wrapped up in the story, and don't take it as the finality of things. It is, of course, another mental state. Maybe it seems to last for two years, but it's still a mental state.

And again, whether it's the suffering aspect that's putting us off—where we're just feeling lost in too much suffering—or we've hit that really comfortable plateau where we think, "Well, this is good enough. This must be equanimity. Great. I'm going to live the rest of my life like this"—either way, this wretched lifting, moving, placing, dragging through the day, reaching, intention to turn, touching... it's like, "Okay, enough of that." We just want to go back to the pleasure garden.

Like in the story of the Buddha before he left home as the Bodhisattva, where his father kept everything so perfect so he should never see even a dead flower. Every night he'd have servants go out and cut all the wilted flowers so the Buddha-to-be should never even see wilting, never mind old age, disease, and death. Some part of us hits a place—either from too much pain or from "okay, no pain, good enough"—where we think we can go back to the pleasure garden and just hang out there.

But there never was a pleasure garden. Even in that story—was it Joseph or Myoshin who told about Dipa Ma saying that as beautiful as the fall colors are on the lake, it's nothing compared to the deva realms? But even there, they don't get to hang out forever. They die out of there too. There is no permanent pleasure garden anywhere.

One of my very first teachers used to say—he was a little rough—"Once you've really started seeing, you can't just shut down and go back to ignorance." Even if you wanted to, we have moments, but we don't really. The teacher would say, "The velvet-gloved iron fist of the Dhamma has got you." You can't really just shut down and go back to the pleasure garden.

But what can help when you're really feeling like this pain of mine—emotional, psychic, memories, physical, or just the angst of moment after moment of samsara—is just unbearable? What I find really helpful is to move from the particular feeling to the general, to see that this isn't just my pain. This is the condition of the world. This is the Four Noble Truths. Widen the scope. Widen the lens.

You might be saying, "You mean I can't bear my own pain and I should widen the lens to see that this is part of all the suffering in the world?" But actually, that makes a huge difference, because it's the *mine* of my pain that actually makes it more unbearable.

When we see that our particular suffering—whether it's a sore toe or hunger or grief or illness or fear or trauma—whatever our suffering is, it's a representative of the suffering of the world. We are the Dhamma. We're part of it. It's not that somehow we have to try and connect ourselves. This is an example of the Four Noble Truths. This is the condition of beings in this realm, on this world.

So not only is it something we can't bypass, but also by widening the scope, what happens for me at times is it kind of busts me out of my "Oh, poor Carol," or whatever the particular way you say it to yourself is. And it's quite natural, not even looking for it. What naturally happens is it becomes this expansive link of compassion to the state of beings.

I remember one time—I think I've told this before—I was in a hospital. You can definitely get into that "oh, poor me" state. But I looked around. I was in a room with three other women. Somehow I'd been placed on the elderly women's orthopedic floor—that was the only place they had a bed. So it was really elderly women with two broken legs and arms up in traction, and I just looked around. I thought, "Oh, that's really suffering."

And it just expanded out. I wasn't trying to do a thing. It just happened. Wow, everybody—this hospital has five, six floors. There's people in all these rooms. There's so much suffering here. And all the hospitals just in this area. And you just keep going. It's unthinkable.

But it's also completely connecting, unseparating. I am the Dhamma. All of these people, all of these women are the Dhamma. And as much as it's poignant and painful and at times unbearable, there's also right with it the immense beauty of compassion—compassion that's not only just for ourselves, but that turns into the really ennobling state of heart and mind of bodhicitta, the motivation of awakening not just for myself, but for all beings.

And I find that whenever I can expand the lens, widen the focus, take the highlighting off of my own suffering—not denying or belittling one's suffering at all. It's not a matter of "oh, there's so much suffering, so I have no right to complain." That's also a denial. It's more like, "Oh, yes, this illness is a representative of all the illness in the world. We're all in this together. This is the first noble truth." And the suffering of it is about the relationship to it. It's not about somehow going back to the pleasure garden and not experiencing this anymore. This particular difficulty I might get rid of, but something else is going to come.

I remember once I was invited to talk with some women in a prison, a minimum security prison. It was just an informal talk in a room. And one of the women said something that's really stuck with me. She was talking about how in this prison it was fairly comfortable. They had a fair amount of freedom—they could do things and had activities. And she said it was easy to forget sometimes that she was in prison. She would get

so comfortable that she would forget. But then always she'd bump up against some regulation or some restriction or some painful thing, and that would remind her, "Oh yeah, I'm in prison."

That getting so comfortable we forget—she was saying that's not something she ever really wanted to do. And I think it's the same for us. That prison door is really always open. Seeing the freedom from bondage is always accessible, but we have to be willing to recognize the bondage. And the bondage isn't the fact that we're experiencing the first noble truth. That's part of our common humanity. Our bondage is thinking we can jump out of it and get back to the pleasure garden and stay there.

And so I actually find—I know this is a real Vipassana thing, and it would sound totally weird in the world—but I actually find it really deepens and inspires my motivation. It strengthens my motivation when I'm face-to-face with suffering I feel like I can't bear, to widen the scope, widen the lens, and really see, really hear, open one's heart.

The first noble truth and the second are all around us all the time. Life is always showing us difficulty, pain, loss. It's always showing us beauty, love, and happiness. Every day, every minute, just sitting here in this room—even without talking to each other. I know from things people have said, you can sense the suffering of someone else or the peace and happiness of someone else.

Just walk outside and look at the fall, which to me is such a poignant time, because there's this incredible beauty and crispness and freshness and vitality, while meanwhile everything's dying.

And the chipmunks are going wild this year—there's so many of them. I was walking down the road and could see them running on both sides, so full of life. And you know how many will make it through the winter? How many will even make it across the road? That's another question.

I make it a part of my daily practice, a few times a week, to listen to the BBC news, because it really tunes me in—not just to the big news that we all hear everywhere, but to all kinds of little pieces of news, usually of suffering but not always, from all different parts of the world. Places I just hadn't even thought about. Or just in the last two days—a man was here yesterday from Africa, describing the starvation happening right now in Zimbabwe. Just a couple of hours ago, talking with a friend who has MS. Or just going outside and hearing the stillness and the silence and the beauty of simply being awake, of being alive on this earth. Coming here to this room of people so dedicated to awakening, to goodness, to non-harming. It's a palpable force when you walk in this building.

It's all around us, all the time. If we open our eyes and our ears and our hearts, right there we're connected. And I find what happens right then is that the motivation just to stay with it—it's not just for my own sake anymore. It's awakening really for the benefit of beings. It's a much more strengthening motivation. And it's not something you have to think about. It just happens when we broaden the scope. It gives us stability. Moments of beauty, of coolness, moments of suffering, and the connectedness of all of us in this.

The Four Noble Truths are how things are. And we are the Dhamma, you know. We don't have to practice it. We are it. We're just trying to recognize what's already happening by itself.

I want to offer one other thing that has personally helped me in this same way, when the sense of suffering seems unbearable. I was doing a retreat this past winter, several weeks, and it was just one of those Maha Dukkha retreats. Some retreats are simply like that. This is something from Patrul Rinpoche, talking about cultivating patience—which Susan spoke about—patience as an enormous support for being able to come back and stay with what is, in the face of seeming unbearableness. He's talking about patience as arousing bodhicitta. Three types of transcendent patience. And this would go through my mind and give me such fortitude, such courage, really.

The first is patience when wronged. But the second is the patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma—internal hardships and external hardships. So one might say, "Grant me the patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma." And the third is granting the patience to face the profound truth without fear. I would say that over and over, and each time I'd say it, something would just stop. Just grant me the patience to face the profound truth without fear. And let it go.

I want to end with this from the Buddha—just not to be satisfied with less. He says:

"So this holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, nor the attainment of virtue for its benefit, nor the attainment of concentration for its benefit, nor knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its essence and its end."

Let's just sit quietly.

CHAPTER 343

Self-Judgement and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this intimate dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines one of our most persistent strategies for creating suffering: self-judgment. Beginning with a moment of pure presence while watching the moon rise over Mount Wachusett, she contrasts this natural ease with our habitual patterns of aversion and self-criticism.*
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> *Wilson traces self-judgment back to a fundamental resistance to the first noble truth (dukkha). She explains how our biological reflex to pull away from unpleasant experience creates a gap where aversion rushes in, manifesting as blame, anger, or fear directed at ourselves. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of the two darts from the Sallatha Sutta, she illustrates how we compound our suffering by adding judgment to already difficult experiences. The talk explores how our ideals of perfection—whether in meditation practice or daily life—set us up for inevitable self-criticism when reality doesn't match our expectations.*
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> *Practically, Wilson offers a liberating insight: when caught in self-judgment, we cannot trust our perceptions about ourselves or our practice. Rather than trying to fix or manipulate our experience, she suggests bearing witness to suffering with what Ajahn Sumedho calls mettā—simply being present without creating anything around the experience. She shares a Burmese teaching of responding to difficulty with "never mind," pointing to the spaciousness available when we stop fighting what is. The talk culminates in recognizing how comparing mind (māna) underlies self-judgment, and how moments of pure presence—free from comparison—reveal the natural peace of simply being with what is.*

There's a beautiful view of Mount Wachusett, and the moon, which looked full, was rising. It just rested me for a moment. In that moment of standing there looking at the moon and the view, which was beautiful, there was a sense of silence—though it wasn't really silence. A plane was going overhead. My body felt cold, a little tired. I was still in talk bardo. It was both beautiful and just stuff happening. But such a sense of the isness of things. Now that's a moment of perfection—not that anything in particular happening is perfect, but the perfection of total presence, total isness. A "what's the problem?" kind of moment.

So the question, of course, is how do we get so far from that so fast? That's what we're exploring together all these weeks and in all these talks. What I want to talk about tonight is one of our strategies for causing ourselves immense suffering, which is

aversion—in particular, a form it takes occasionally of judging, especially self-judging. I know for some of you this is a foreign concept. But to others of you, there might be moments when you can relate.

Really, it's similar to how I started my talk last week. Personally, I feel that the dilemma of aversion itself, of understanding how we get into aversion, is basically that we get into aversion by not deeply, cellularly knowing the first noble truth.

You remember the first noble truth? Just in case, this is from the Buddha:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of dukkha." I'm going to say dukkha instead of suffering. "Birth is dukkha. Aging is dukkha. Illness is dukkha. Death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are dukkha. Separation from what is pleasing is dukkha. Union with what is displeasing is dukkha. Not to get what one wants is dukkha." He's very precise—really quite precise. "And then in brief, the five aggregates when subject to clinging, the five khandas when subject to clinging, are dukkha."

It covers a broad range. He doesn't say some people get out of here without experiencing that. It's a noble truth, the understanding of which, the clear seeing of which, is the beginning of the road to liberation. That's the whole point of it.

I really feel personally that the struggle with aversion—and self-judging being a subset of aversion—is, on a very deep level, not getting it. That this stuff happens. And there's no way in this mind and body on this planet we're going to have a life where it doesn't happen. And it's not your fault. Get it? That's the basic drift. At least in the beginning, it's not your fault. But we add in quite a little dash of extra along with that.

We've talked often about how the first noble truth seems obvious. We've talked about impermanence as one aspect of this first truth, and I don't want to belabor this point—although I actually think it couldn't be belabored too much, because our habit, our tendency, our deep-rooted habits of somehow thinking we can figure it out, how to avoid, deny, or get away from the first noble truth. It's not really a conscious thought, but that's why I think it can't be talked about enough. Because somewhere deep down we keep hitting that place where, "If I can just somehow get around it, I'm not going to have to go through this. If I can just somehow hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience, then I should be able to." That's sort of where aversion and self-judging comes from.

I don't want to belabor it, but you can see that it's not only our personal tendency—it's in our whole society, the way that we keep the really suffering elements of society, if we can, segregated in their little private place. Nursing homes, hospitals, insane asylums, places for people who are really sick. Keep all the really poor people in the

inner city or way out in the mountains, so you don't have to run into them in the nice sections. The effects of famine or war or poverty or earthquakes—we look at it for a little while, if it's not immediately affecting us, on the news, and that's good. We need to open to it. But I can see, I've been watching in my own mind lately, because there's always something new on the news to open to, how my mind can really be with it for a minute.

And then if it feels like it might be getting too close to home—in other words, an earthquake in Gujarat, that's really intense. But after all, it is in Gujarat, and after a day or two, it can kind of recede into the background, except for the people who live in Gujarat, where it's still going on even years later.

But when it feels like something might be happening that might actually be coming too close to home, that I can't just dismiss—well, you know, it's a natural thing. We get caught up in our day-to-day. I was noticing the other day how my mind would be right with some fear of suffering. Nothing horrible is happening yet. Nothing horrible is happening. Just the day-to-day stuff, okay? So don't worry—I just thought I should reassure you. Just the Congress is bad enough.

So seeing how my mind could get caught up in things of the future—this is affecting me, what can I do—and then watching how it would hit a place where: *but it's really a beautiful fall, and it's not happening now, so let's just be here now.* You see what I mean? It's not exactly "be here now." It's "let's be here now and not think about that." It was actually a very interesting moment. It's the first time I could really feel how it happens, how I was projecting, how one could be in the midst of something really terrible.

I've been reading a biography of Anna Akhmatova, a Russian poet who lived from the early 1900s to the 1960s, through all those phases of tremendous suffering in Russia and the Soviet Union—the times of Stalinist terror—and how it affected so many people, and how the people it doesn't affect carry on. I really saw in that moment how it's possible to just keep going with your day-to-day life, not really letting in what's going on around you, because it just feels too unbearable. It was an interesting moment to see how the mind can do that.

In some ways, that's a protection. I'm not trying to put that down or criticize it. I just think it's interesting to see the powers of denial and avoidance, the patterns that are deeply ingrained in us—on a societal level, and on a personal level.

And that's what we can explore here together in our practice. Our practice is a microcosm of our whole life, of the whole society's life. So the stuff that goes on here in our mind is a great place to explore the nature of aversion—and particularly self-judgment.

Even when intellectually we agree, "Oh yeah, we know that difficult stuff happens," and we see there's a tendency to avoid and deny, and that's not so helpful—still, I think it's a deeply ingrained habit. When I look at it, it seems almost biological in its source. For example, if we don't know the stove is on and we put our hand on the burner and burn it, we don't have to think, "Unpleasant, unpleasant, the wise thing would be to remove my hand." It's just away. And if we're mindful, we just do that. It's a natural, intelligent response—a reflex really—and that's the end of it.

So that's what I mean by biological. We pull back from pain, from suffering, and that's quite useful. But what I've noticed in my own mind is that this reflex can come into play whenever attention or consciousness comes into contact with any unpleasant sense experience. And in that pulling back—which often doesn't particularly solve anything, because often the unpleasant experience just keeps on going. It's an unpleasant sound, or you're feeling physically ill, or you're feeling pain or hopelessness or boredom or whatever.

When we pull back with just that reflex action, instead of everything going away and being hunky-dory again, which is what we would like to have happen, what tends to happen is a gap—a disconnect. It's a moment when consciousness and attention are not connecting with what's happening. And in that moment, rushing in come our old friends, the *kilesas* of *dosa*, aversion. Just *boom*, it comes springing up. It can manifest, as Myoshin was talking about last night, as blame, as anger.

If it was with the stove, for example—because that makes it so obvious—it would be: "That stupid stove, I can't believe it! Who left that stove on?" And it gets going and going. Or it can manifest as anger turned toward ourselves: "You stupid jerk. What are you putting your hand on the stove for? Don't you know any better?"

Or it can turn into fear, spiraling into: the stove's on now, and what if the stove was left on for a long time? The whole house could have caught on fire. What if I'm beginning to get Alzheimer's and I'm leaving the stove on? And it goes on and on and on.

But that becomes a habit. And in that pulling back, that moment of aversion, when we're not mindful, when we don't notice it, the reaction spirals out of control. It has a life of its own, whether it's aversion, blaming—inner or outer—or fear. To the point that

the fear or the aversion takes over. And it in itself is so unpleasant that it gives rise to more of the same, until we're kind of lost in either a hysterical state of fear or aversion, but in either case almost afraid to look at what's actually happening.

For example, you know the feeling—and this is a little bit exaggerated, though I know it happens to people—where all of a sudden you feel some lump somewhere on your body, and this is a really yogi mind thing. Immediately the mind jumps to cancer or melanoma or something, and then it starts getting more and more afraid to the point where people will say, "Well, I don't want to go to the doctor because what if I find out it's cancer?" So rather than looking... and the fear just keeps on spiraling and spiraling. But when we're looking, just meeting what's happening, a wise response is possible. Plus, all that extra fear is gone. You see what I mean?

Mark Epstein puts it that it's our fear of experiencing ourselves directly—our fear of experiencing the moment directly—that actually creates the suffering. We get lost in the reaction and forget that we actually have the capability to look at the moment directly. And that's really what our practice is about. Recognizing that opening to truth, to things as they are—that's what I mean by truth, just the simple things as they are in this moment—this opening is what frees our heart from fear and selfishness.

Just like looking at the moon, it's not like it has to be some transcendent experience. It's just that moment of opening to what is, without comparison, without judgment. In that moment, the heart is freed from fear, from selfishness, from judgment, from separation. Resting at ease in whatever arises.

And so, in some ways, with aversion—and I'll get to the self-judging part—our task, if you could put it that way, that comes to us through the practice, through our devotion to wakefulness, to our devotion to presence, is to find that capacity of what you could call bearing witness to suffering. Bearing witness to dukkha in whatever aspect it's presenting itself, in the moment it's presenting itself.

I'm talking about aversion. There are many moments when dukkha is not the main thing presenting itself. Notice those too, right? That's not what I'm talking about tonight, but I just need to put it in. Dukkha, the unpleasant, arises a lot of the time. Pleasant arises a lot of the time, as does neutral. I'm just talking about aversion and self-judging tonight. It's not the whole picture, okay? Just remember that when you start to sink into a slough of despair. It's just one side of the picture.

But really that capacity, the greatness of heart that is displayed when we, or anyone, is willing—just for a moment, for a period of time—to bear witness to whatever aspect of suffering is arising, to me is, I find over history, incredibly inspiring.

The reason I'm reading that biography of Anna Akhmatova is because some of her poems have touched me very deeply, and there's this sense—she's very famous in Russia, really for being a person who was willing to stay through all the suffering and starvation and war and purges. Husbands and sons and friends were arrested and shot and starved to death and committed suicide. She could have left, along with many of the intelligentsia and the literary people at the time of the revolution or the Civil War in the late teens or early twenties. And she always chose to stay out of love for Russia, love for the Russian people, and a sense that this was her calling—to bear witness. Her life was hell in many ways. But that power, that purity of presence that lights us up to a possibility of freedom, a greatness, an ennobling aspect of heart and mind, also can shine through.

I've found that those are the people who always inspire me—in literature, in history. Things I've read about Dr. Martin Luther King. I remember one place I read a statement he made after one of the times in Birmingham when a church was bombed, if you remember that, and four young girls were killed in the bombing. It was pretty horrible. And he said—let me get this right—in the face of this, he said, "I refuse to become bitter. Hatred must never be our motive." And then with that ability to keep meeting the suffering day after day.

It doesn't necessarily mean being an activist. It might mean being a poet. It might mean just being a silent witness. And it doesn't mean we have to be the witness of the great historical movements of an age. Bearing witness to your own suffering here on this retreat, with that quality of steadfast presence, is just as ennobling, is just as freeing, because it frees us from the limitations of our small sense of separate self—holding myself separate, me, me, me. And it opens us again to the vastness of things as they are, of non-distinction, of equanimity, really.

Equanimity being that quality of mind that can simply be with, touch, not having to pull away from the unpleasant, the pleasant, the neutral, and see it clearly. It's like Myoshin was saying last night: not the deluded equanimity that's touching but doesn't really have a clue what it's touching, but one that's really there, seeing clearly, and can just hold it. A steadfastness. It really inspires me.

And I see, when I look to the people I read about, or that you meet or hear of, or the people you know in your own life, or yourself—I see that the quality we can really explore here that allows for this bearing witness, this steadfastness of heart and mind, is that we also have to be able to turn that same kind, steadfast presence back onto ourselves. Because the suffering we can't bear out there, so to speak—it's really what we're feeling in here that's so hard. So it's always bearing witness to ourselves.

And I've noticed in myself, over and over—as long as it takes me to remember—that whenever I'm going through a period in daily life, not just on retreat, where I'm feeling more alienated or dissociated somehow, disconnected, dissatisfied, that sense of something's off, something's wrong—it can be minor, it can be really major—I've always found, finally, that what's going on really deeply is that on some level I'm trying to avoid or deny or get away from something painful or something unpleasant.

It might be some difficult situation in my family that keeps coming up in my mind, and I wake up in the middle of the night anxious and worried, and the mind says, "Can't they just sort themselves out and quit bothering me?" They're fine. They're doing their thing. I'm the one waking up in the middle of the night. Where's the suffering?

And whenever I come home to, "Oh yeah, this is anxiety, this is fear, this is guilt," whatever it is, there's a sense really of coming home. I've found the refuge of the Dharma again. Because, as I said the other night, we are the Dharma. Unpleasant suffering, birth, loss, death—it all occurs in us and outside of us, no difference. So when I can come and open into it, sure I feel the sadness or the fear, whatever it is, more fully. But in that moment, there's a sense of the vitality, the beauty, the intensity of life again. There's not that separation anymore. It's just the isness. In this moment, isness happens to be grief. But there's no problem with that, really, in the moment.

And I know a lot of you have experienced this because you talk about it in the interviews. We fight, we fight, we struggle, we hit our head against the wall, and finally, because there's no other option, we surrender. "All right, I'll just feel it." And it's like, "Oh. Oh yeah." Somehow it's a relief. How could that be? Because we're so deeply ingrained to do otherwise. But opening to how it is, it ennobles us.

But the habits, the denial systems—it feels to me almost biological. It's strong. We each have our own particular flavor, our own particular personality view and personality structure, our own way of denying and avoiding dukkha. The one I want to point to tonight is this one of judging, or self-judging. It's a very prevalent system, at least in this Western culture.

You might ask, "That's a denial system? To avoid unpleasantness, to avoid suffering? It seems to create more." Well, yes, it does. It's a rather flawed denial system. Which is all the more amazing that we so stubbornly keep holding on to it, giving it so much belief and so much energy. At least I do. I speak for myself.

So one thing I've seen—there are lots of different things one could say about judging and how we get caught in it, particularly self-judging. One thing I've been noticing a lot in recent years in my own experience is that coming from the unconscious belief or

ideal, basically the denial of the validity in some way of the first noble truth, there arises this sense that sorrow, suffering, grief, loss is wrong. Wrong in the sense that it should not be happening.

I'm not here to say that we're in favor of famine or war or anything like that. Of course not. And we're here trying to purify ourselves of greed and hatred and confusion. We don't want to be a party to creating suffering in ourselves or in others. Absolutely. We're not talking moralistically here of good or bad, right or wrong. We're talking about what arises in experience. That's all.

And so if somehow we hold the belief that in the world none of this stuff should or is going to arise, then it's as if in ourselves, whenever some aspect of things that "shouldn't be out there" arises in ourselves, it also shouldn't be happening, should it? And either we should be able to control it, manipulate it, make it go away, or hold on to the right conditions so it doesn't come up anymore. Or we should just hold ourselves separate from it, not feel it.

What I've noticed this coming from a lot is the sense we can get into of the ideal of perfection. Not the perfection of just the isness of things, but our ideals of how something should be to be perfect. You know what I mean. You all do that about practice all the time. There's some idea of perfect practice. Just what Myoshin said today in the questions and answers—that someone had said to her they felt funny standing up in the hall when they were sleepy because somehow that was an admission they weren't a good yogi. If you follow that through, somewhere in there is the thread that there's such a thing as a perfect kind of yogi who either never gets sleepy or whose mindfulness is always stronger than the sleepiness. As if sleepiness shouldn't exist in the yogi universe. It's a simple example, but notice how often we're caught in that, and what's the response? Self-judging. "I am not a good yogi because some aspect of dukkha has visited my experience, and I should be able to be perfect." As if there were such a thing.

So how we get into this belief, this unconscious holding to an ideal of perfection—and then you notice, I know this is something that's often talked about, something should be perfect, and as soon as there's one flaw, the whole thing's thrown out. That's why we have that expression, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." But that's what we do.

I read quite some years ago an article I cut out of USA Today, some not particularly literary newspaper, but it was about the prevalence of road rage. For those people from overseas—because I talked about this in Switzerland and they were saying "road rage?" Not that they don't have it there; they have it there, just not that phrase. Just that getting so angry. You know what road rage is. Losing it, basically.

It was a whole long article about the psychology of it, and this is the part I wanted to quote. That if someone on the road upsets you, that individual's whole identity is encapsulated in this bad thing he did. He's not seen as a whole person. He just becomes all of it—that bad person who cut in front of you. That encapsulates their whole identity. And then there's an urge to express your aggression on this anonymous other, to think "I can't let him get away with this." The thin veneer of civilization is removed.

With self-judging, we're doing that same thing to ourselves. "I wasn't mindful in that whole lap of walking. I can't let myself get away with this."

And then the psychologist goes on to say that in a car you feel like you're invincible because in a way you're separated. It provides a buffer zone that makes it easier to dehumanize the other driver, easier than it would be, for instance, if you were walking down a crowded hallway. Face-to-face contact with others acts as a restraint, and people are much more polite.

I read that part because Sayadaw U Pandita likes to describe mindfulness as coming face to face with the moment of experience. So in a way, when there's something in your experience arising that you don't like—that suffering—there's that immediate sense of pulling back. You're not meeting it face to face at all. And in that pulling back, it's like on the road: the thin veneer of civilization—or moment-to-moment mindfulness—is removed, and all the aggression and the fear or the aversion, the judging, can come out in response to that unpleasant experience. But the only person you have to take it out on is guess who.

So it just comes right back at yourself as further proof that you're not perfect. And guess what? You're not. It's really amazing how we do this to ourselves. We do it to ourselves, to spiritual scenes, to perfect practice, to other people, to teachers, to you name it. So just beginning to notice this idea of "it should be perfect" and how judging arises when we notice that ideal isn't being met, when it's crumbling.

This denial system of whatever forms of aversion—but in particular judgment, self-judgment—will tend to arise most strongly in us when what isn't deeply accepted, either as being part of the world, arises in us. Whether it's unreliability, uncontrollability, the flux and unstoppability of constant change, or when particular aspects of our mind-body patterns arise that are most deeply painful and unacceptable to us. Sort of like the inner corollary to famine or war, you could say. On the level of mentally thinking, "It's totally unacceptable that I could be feeling this." When that level of dukkha arises, that's when our denial systems kick in most strongly.

Just noticing—probably you already have quite a list—but just noticing what those particular experiences are in you, because it can help you be aware. It can be a little flag to notice what reaction is going on.

It can be in the body. If the body is sick, or tired, or old, or painful, or weak. Or you have some mental image of the unacceptability of how you look—that's really painful. Or emotions. It could be that your emotions are volatile, or you're feeling vulnerable, or you're not feeling any emotions, or you're feeling sadness, or you're feeling self-hatred. Whatever emotions are coming are not just mentally unacceptable, but it's so deeply ingrained that it's unacceptable that somehow your attention can't even quite go there. Remorse over past actions—sometimes you get floods of memories of things you've done that were unskillful, and it can be so hard to be with it. Self-hatred, feelings of helplessness, feelings of worthlessness. The list could go on and on, whatever your particular flavor is.

And seeing that we can't control this—when our deepest, most unacceptable aspects arise in our experience, that habit, that knee-jerk reaction of pulling back, it tends to happen so quickly and feel so natural that often we don't even recognize that that's what's happened. And then the denial system, in this case the self-judging, comes in right away.

Say there's a feeling of helplessness or a feeling of self-hatred, not even quite consciously noticed, but suddenly you notice that as you're walking or eating or sitting, everything you do is followed by a vitriolic kind of self-judgment. And you may not even notice that for a while because that's also so familiar, but it keeps feeding on itself and spiraling.

In a weird way, these self-judgments—or if you're a different type, then the judgments go outward, like Joseph sitting there judging everybody else—but either way, there's judging coming. It's detracting, distracting from whatever the particular suffering was. As I said, it's a weird denial system because it's a suffering one, but the function it's serving is keeping our face-to-face attention well away from just dropping into the self-hatred or the helplessness or the sense of being a total klutz or whatever your particular thing is at that time.

Usually I've found that when it's some particular personal suffering arising on that level, that depth, the thought is "as if I would die if I had to feel this." It has that quality of intensity. And so rather than feel this, I'll just sit here and tell myself: you're lifting your fork wrong, you're chewing too noisily, you're taking too much food, you're breathing too loud, you're sitting like a schlump, you're standing up too quickly, you made a noise with your chair, you bumped into—and that's in two seconds. By the time

you get to your room after lunch, no wonder it's unbearable. And that's our way of not just feeling uncomfortable, hopeless. It's a lot easier, I tell you, to just feel totally worthless and land in the middle of it than to go through even half an hour of all that judgment. Or just to feel the judgment.

So let me suggest another alternative. I don't know if it's possible for us, but it's another way of viewing our non-perfection, even just in the meditation, even just that you didn't get up from lunch perfectly and mindfully.

I was teaching in Burma, in Chazwa, this last year. It's a retreat for Westerners with Sayadaw Lakhanah. Sayadaw Lakhanah would give a talk one day, and then Michelle or Stephen Smith usually teach it—I was teaching it with Stephen this last year—and one of us would talk the next day. When Sayadaw talks, after he gives a talk, very much a straight Burmese talk, he'll leave and we'll just take any questions or confusions or clarifications.

He'd been talking about very strict noting practice—noting if anger arises, noting "anger, anger," and then it goes away and then you come back to the breath. Someone raised his hand later and said, "I note it two or three times. It doesn't go away. I can't... I don't know what to do. What do you do?" And then we just gave the whole instructions we give here—feel it in your body and notice the sensations and how to be with it further.

After that, one of the men who was translating, a good friend, a very well-educated Burmese man, was talking to me and he said, "I never heard instructions like that. It was really so helpful." I said, "Oh, really?" He said, "Well, you know, for us, it doesn't go away in two notes either." Which actually surprised me. I said, "Oh, really? So then what?"

He said, "Well, then we say... oh, well, never mind."

I would like to suggest that as a possibility. When it doesn't go away, when the difficult experience persists, and the mind starts in: "I can't do it right. I'm not the perfect yogi. I am so riddled with anger. I am so..." — on and on it goes. And then simply: "Oh, well, never mind."

Just try to imagine how that might feel the next time you catch yourself in heavy self-judging, because of whatever it is. "Oh, this is arising. Never mind." See how much space that leaves.

Ajahn Sumedho says that one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, in a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. This is what he calls metta. Just witnessing, feeling, being with it — not from ten miles away, but face to face — without creating anything around it. You can call it metta, you can call it compassion, you can call it mindfulness, pure awareness, whichever flavor it has.

It's very much like the two darts that I read the other night, where the Buddha talks about the difference between an awakened and an unawakened person. The unawakened person feels an unpleasant physical sensation and then berates and laments and carries on and shoots themselves with a second arrow. An awakened person feels the first arrow and doesn't create anything around it. This is really the shifting of our patterns.

So whatever arises in our experience — whatever it is you're lost in judgment or self-judgment about, or not lost in but noting, "judging, judging, judging," 7,312 times — noticing it, feeling it, what's arising? Our personality patterns, the physical sensations, our loneliness, whatever it is — the self-hatred, the anger, the sleepiness. In this moment, what's arising is simply arising due to previous conditions. It's the vipaka, the result of previous kamma. It's not in our control. It's not our fault in the sense that if we could do something right, this shouldn't have happened. It is happening, and nothing can change that fact. Nothing needs to.

The question is: how is consciousness, how is awareness meeting this moment of arising experience? That's the creation of new kamma in the moment, and that's what really is changing everything. That's what's reconditioning our patterns, our habits of mind, so to speak.

So anger is arising. We're really feeling it, but we can just be there without creating anything around it. That's developing compassion. That's developing mindfulness. That's shifting the pattern from aversion and judgment to freedom. It doesn't necessarily feel good, because the thing you're feeling is still anger or unpleasantness or sorrow. And we tend to be so focused on the thing that we don't notice the response. But notice the space around it, the not creating anything around it. That's key. That's really important.

One of my favorite lines from the Buddha is: "Where the mind dwells frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." So if self-judging comes up a lot in our experience, it's because in the past our mind has dwelt there frequently. Hating it — well, somehow you think that helps. But hating it doesn't make the mind have dwelt less there in the past, does it? All it does is keep that going into the future.

Seeing it: "Oh, self-judging feels like this. Oh, worthlessness feels like this. I can't do this right. I'll never be able to do this right. I can't even feel this worthlessness. I can't do it." It feels like this. Just move into the space around it. You don't have to fix or manipulate or stop or change. Just that switch — from aversive reactivity, avoiding, denying, to being there — that is the switch. And that is actually the cultivation of compassion, or freedom.

Joko Beck asks, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness? Well, sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't, and that's okay. But just to have that possibility—oh, can I find the willingness, just for this moment, not into the endless future, just for this moment, can I find the willingness to rest in the confusion and the uncertainty? That's the dhamma. That's peace.

And it's also a crack up sometimes to see how much trouble we'll go to in order to avoid even the projected idea of how suffering something might be. We'll go to endless trouble to avoid just turning around and facing it. Have you ever noticed that?

I remember one time a friend was wanting me to go teach a retreat with them. We had to organize our schedules—I know it's in the moment, we're organizing in the moment, but for two years ahead. So you have to imagine how you're going to feel in two years. I mean, who knows? Anyway, this friend wanted me to teach this retreat with them. It would have been very crowded, really crowded my schedule. I knew physically it was too much, and there was a lot of traveling. But it was someone I hadn't taught with much, a good friend. And I could feel the fear come up that in saying no, it would be so unpleasant. They would be hurt. I would feel bad. I'd lose the friendship and all this stuff.

I went through weeks of trying to talk myself into going to do this retreat, which would have been endless suffering. And the weeks when I was trying to talk myself into it, when I was afraid to make the phone call to say no—that was also a huge amount of suffering because of imagining how unpleasant it would be to make the phone call. Which in the event, when I did it, of course it was fine. The person understood, it was no problem. To go to all these machinations not to feel something, instead of just: Oh, okay, I can't do it. I'm disappointing you. It feels like this. Nothing created around it. It's so much simpler.

That's kind of the perfection of isness—just what is. But when we're caught in the aversion, the self-judgment, the fear, we can't see clearly. We can't evaluate clearly. In fact, our whole perception is distorted.

When Joseph was talking about perception the other night, some of you even mentioned perception. A good place to observe this is with the radiator sounds here, and quite a few people have mentioned noticing the overlay—the mood the mind puts on the perception of the radiator sounds. I've noticed this. When there's real aversion in the mind, fear, and the radiator starts, someone once told me it feels like explosions going off, little harsh things. Other times I'm in some kind of peaceful place and it sounds like Russian choral music. It's really funny to watch how the mind does that.

But when we're in self-judgment, you cannot evaluate clearly. And if you hear nothing else in this talk, get this: if you recognize self-judging is happening, really not just a thought but you can tell you're really in it—you're mindful of it but you're really in it—you cannot trust any perception or evaluation that you make of your practice. Because it won't be based on seeing clearly, believe me. "I'm really in self-judging, but I can tell I'm just being lazy and I need to push a little harder"—that's the classical one. You just don't know. You have no clue.

If you can just know that, it's been a huge relief to me. I recognize self-judging coming in. I feel it as a certain physical feeling. And I say, "Okay, now I know I can't trust any of my perceptions about myself." That's a huge relief. I'll still have them: "They're angry at me. Look at how they're looking at me. I'm doing my practice wrong. What did they say? They're directing it at me."

Forget it. You just don't have a clue. Can you just be willing to rest in not knowing, as Joko Beck said? It will come and go like a cloud, as all states of mind do.

When we're in that reaction, that disconnect of aversion and self-judgment, we can't make clear decisions because we can't see clearly. So coming back and just meeting the experience—it's not about passive submission. It's about this: when we meet experience face to face—worthlessness, physical pain, sleepiness, whatever it is—we see it clearly. And when we see clearly, we can respond with discriminating wisdom. It becomes much more obvious then.

An example I often use is from quite some years ago, when I was developing what turned into an autoimmune disease that affected my joints and tissues. It was much worse years ago—that's still why I don't sit cross-legged. But when it was coming on and the doctors didn't know what it was, there was a lot more physical pain and discomfort and all kinds of weird symptoms. I could see my mind getting into all kinds of fear of the future: I'll never be able to do this again, I'll never be able to do that. At that point, I was so grateful for practice, because I could see the mind going into the future very clearly and say, "But that's not happening. Just come back." That I could do. I noticed it right away.

But for quite some time, I didn't notice a certain quality of self-blame or self-judgment—the kind of thing we can thank New Age spirituality for, which is: if you really had the proper thoughts and you were really spiritual, you wouldn't get sick. Now I can think, well, Ramana Maharshi died of cancer. I really don't aspire to be more spiritual than he was. But at the time, I didn't really notice how that belief would creep in. There was this sense—subtle, or actually not so subtle, to tell you the truth—that somehow I was a failure. I'd been meditating all my life, and now I was even teaching, and here I was sick. Pathetic. A real failure.

This stuff caused quite a lot of suffering, a heaviness, until finally I noticed—sitting, sitting, sitting—what was going on. Whenever I would touch and just feel my body, the physical pain or the tightness, it was all bound up with judgment. As soon as I felt the uncomfortableness, right away would come this judgment of spiritual failure. Never mind "what if I die from it"—just the spiritual failure. This whole spiral of negativity and self-judgment. And as a result, the attention was just never connecting with the body.

Meanwhile, people were saying, "You should just go somewhere else." Cold affects me, and this climate isn't great for that. So people were saying, "You should just go live in Arizona. Take it easy. Live a quiet life. Don't teach. Take care of yourself." I also tried a really severe diet—no wheat, no dairy, no sugar, no caffeine. That really cheered me up for a few months.

And then finally, sometime during a sitting—I remember I was over there—suddenly, for whatever reason, I just saw: Oh, I'm hating this body as if it failed me, as if it betrayed me. Let me just feel it. And there was a whole sense of compassion, as if cradling this body. It wasn't personal at all. Just: Wow, you're really suffering, and I'm sitting here hating you. That's really useful. And it didn't even have a cynical edge. It was just, "Oh wow. That hurts. May you be happy. May you be peaceful."

And then healing had nothing to do anymore with getting better or not dying or anything. It was just being with what is, and the whole dynamic changed. Out of that, I found I made much more intelligent decisions—to me, intelligent—about how to live my life, rather than acting out of fear. They may not have looked intelligent to the world at large, because the first thing I did was this: some friends were going to India, and they said, "Why don't you come?"

I said, "Oh, great. I'll go to India." And instead of a diet, I started drinking a lot of chai and eating a lot of chapatis and a lot of dairy and yogurt. And I got really happy again. And I felt better, too, to tell you the truth.

But it was really a sense of just saying, "Oh, yeah, this is possible. I can do this." I don't really know what's going to happen in the future, but I don't have to live as if three feet away from my body, in fear and self-blame. And that whole thing kind of cut. Really, it's that willingness to just dive into the wave instead of running from it—not in order to make something happen, but just to see what's what. That's the place of peace, of ease. Being with the dukkha without creating anything around it is not at all passive submission. It's the place from which discriminating wisdom and appropriate compassionate response arises.

Just one more thing I want to point out about judging, and particularly self-judging. We've talked about it before, so you know it, but I want to point to it in these terms. That's the deeply ingrained habit of comparing—*mana* in Pali, often translated as conceit. I know you all know it because you all talk about it a lot: that endless comparing. They're better than me, they're worse than me, they're the same as me. Or comparing to yourself in the past: I'm worse now than I was last year, I'm doing better now than I did three days ago. Or comparing ourselves to some made-up ideal about the future—back to that comparison. And that's never a good comparison. Or even "I'm doing the same." It's very deeply ingrained and subtle.

Of the ten fetters, the different shackles that are abandoned through the four stages of awakening, conceit is the last one to go. So you can drop judging yourself because you notice it's arising. You know, you're not an arahant. Can you live with that? And drop judging yourself about it. But notice how suffering comes whenever there's comparing. Besides the fact that it's so exhausting, isn't it? You can't just walk from here to the dining room. You've got to assess every pair of feet that goes by. And if you're trying not to look, you can't even bear not to look. You want to look so you can compare, so you can feel crappy about yourself—or good about yourself because you're better, and then you feel crappy because you were feeling like you were better and you were being conceited. There's no way out. It's a suffering state.

And the real suffering about it, if you look at it, is that it's all about me, isn't it? The root delusion of all self-judgment, of all aversion and comparing, is this incessant referencing of every single experience back to me. Even if you're judging yourself negatively—you're the worst being here—it's completely self-centered, isn't it? Totally self-cherishing in a weird kind of way.

It's also like an upside-down way of experiencing interconnectedness. It is. Every single thing that happens somehow refers back to you. So you're connected to everything. You're the center of everything. Everything everybody does is either to make you feel bad about yourself or annoy you. But the interconnectedness is there. Nothing doesn't affect us.

So you might just notice that. You can't get away from being part of everything. But just to notice how often comparing arises, how often it leads to self-judging. And then rather than get into trying to stop it, bring your attention back to just feel the suffering aspect of that. Oh, comparing feels like this. Judging feels like this.

Just with that compassionate attention that doesn't have to create anything else around it.

And then maybe, even from a moment of being totally caught in it, it can switch to a moment like when I was looking at the moon tonight. Because it could be anything. Just that there's a moment where there's no comparing whatsoever, but real presence. You're not comparing to your past. You're not comparing yourself to someone outside. You're not comparing this moment to any other moment or thought that's ever been. In fact, it's timeless.

And in that not reaching out to anything else—for good or bad, comparing or judging—there's no self, because there's no creation of other. It just doesn't apply. There's no self to get rid of. There's no special experience you have to have. It's just what it is. Simply the mind released into fullness of presence, without needing to compare to anything else.

That's all. Just that piece of is-ness.

Just for a moment, can that be enough?

CHAPTER 344

Awareness & Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential connection between emptiness (suññatā) and compassion (karuṇā), showing how these qualities are not separate but naturally co-arise in undistracted awareness. Drawing on Tibetan teachings that describe awareness as "ceaselessly responsive," she explains that the non-clinging of wisdom doesn't lead to cold indifference but rather opens into a natural tenderness for life and all beings.*
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> *Wilson shares personal examples from retreat and travel that demonstrate how the simple letting go of self-referential clinging spontaneously transforms fear and greed into inclusive compassion. She explores the Buddha's teaching on intention (cetanā) as the crucial link between understanding emptiness and compassionate response, noting that the seed of karma rests not in the results of action but in the intention that gives rise to it. Through the Eightfold Path's progression from wise understanding (sammā-diṭṭhi) to wise intention (sammā-saṅkappa), she shows how our habitual mental patterns naturally transform in the light of ongoing mindfulness.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that every moment of awareness—even meeting difficult experiences like self-judgment—is actively transforming our habits of mind. Wilson draws on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, and Pema Chödrön to illustrate how aspiration guides our moment-to-moment intentions, and how bodhicitta naturally develops from deep insight into suffering. She concludes with the beautiful simplicity that compassion becomes "doing the obvious"—a natural, effortless response that arises when we are truly present.*

Tonight I want to talk about emptiness and compassion.

As we've been exploring the wisdom of non-clinging, or as Joseph has been calling it, undistracted awareness, certain qualities emerge. It's difficult to talk about qualities of something that doesn't have qualities, but we have to use words.

For example, undistracted awareness has the quality of emptiness. In the simple hearing of a bell, if you're completely undistracted with that hearing, you couldn't really say what was the ear canal, what's the bell, what's the consciousness, what was me ringing it, what was the action. There's just the purity of the experience. It all comes together. You can't say anything is self-existent in that.

Emptiness also has the quality of spontaneous knowing, of cognizance, in that the sound was heard spontaneously. You don't plan ahead. You don't have to figure out that in three minutes there's going to be a sound and you need to organize and control undistracted awareness so you'll be able to hear it and not confuse it with seeing. And it always works, doesn't it? When we're undistracted, it's perfectly known. That's the quality—emptiness and cognizance, spontaneous knowing. These are two qualities.

But the third quality, when we're conceptualizing, that rounds out and really makes undistracted awareness complete, is what the Tibetans describe as ceaselessly responsive. You could also call this compassion or natural tenderness for life. That is the natural manifestation of empty and spontaneous knowing, of undistracted awareness.

Sometimes we have this idea of emptiness or anattā or no-self as being unattractive or a cold void, indifferent or even scary, a kind of annihilation. Or there's that sense of "Who wants it if it's just seeing?" In the seeing, there's only the seeing. So you go outside and there's a beautiful sunset and it's just seeing, seeing—a kind of disconnection from everything. And we think, "Well, who wants that?"

But that's missing the piece of the natural non-separation, a tenderness, the spontaneous response—ceaselessly responsive to whatever's appropriate. There's this natural response of awareness *because* of the fact of emptiness, not in spite of it.

In other words, non-clinging doesn't open into a cold, indifferent void. Non-clinging, instead of being the constriction of mind, of heart, of consciousness around me and mine—making you an other, leading to reactive responses—is ceaselessly responsive also. The difference is that when there's clinging, the ceaseless responses happen to be fear and greed.

The heart of non-clinging actually opens into something else. It releases energy; it encompasses everything. Non-clinging opens us from contraction into spaciousness. Ajahn Sumedho—I've heard him refer to awareness as "the point that includes." A spaciousness that encompasses everything, and in that, our constricted self-referencing releases into a natural tenderness for life, for beings, for the situation. A point that includes everything.

Let me give you two very simple examples from my own experience of how just the letting go of clinging moves from fear or greed to the natural, inclusive tenderness that's also empty of self-referencing.

One is a retreat example, very simple. I was walking on a retreat here some years ago, in the gym very early in the morning, which I loved to do before anybody was up. Deep into the retreat, in that silence, in some nice samādhi state—walking, walking, lift-

ing, moving, placing. And then at some point, deep in the walking, somebody came out of their room, slammed the door, went into the bathroom, flushed the toilet, ran the water, came out, slammed the door.

The thought was, "They are ruining my samādhi." A little bit of aversion, and it was really that immediate self-referencing. Everything's about me, the sense of separation, me and other, my samādhi down the toilet. That all happened pretty quickly.

And in the next moment, there was an "Oh." I'm putting thoughts on it later, but it wasn't really a thought at that time. It was the sense that this is just a concept. Me walking, they slamming, my samādhi being disturbed—these are just experiences arising in the space of awareness. Walking, thinking, hearing, sensing, samādhi, no samādhi—whatever is happening is just experience. There's nothing to separate out as me or my samādhi or how it should be or how it got wrecked.

That's all concepts. And just in that moment of letting go—basically of clinging to me and my samadhi—there's no problem. And that tenderness for beings... it's not that I wanted to run up and kiss the foot of the person who made the noise or something. It's just that the whole sense of problem, of separation, of aversion, or even me and other, goes away. There was no other response that needed to be made. But had there been one needed in that moment—if the person, say, needed help or something—that would have been the natural response without thought, without a sense of me doing something.

Another non-retreat example: some years ago I was traveling on an overnight Indian train in India. I was in a sleeping compartment, second class, which is like four little benches against the two walls of the compartment with a curtain pulled over it. Somehow I was in a compartment with three Indian men. I don't know why, but that's how it was.

So we're lying there on our little respective shelves trying to sleep. They weren't doing anything—they were just lying there. But I felt completely unsafe. What are they doing in my compartment? They're bothering me. Because they were just lying there staring at me. That's not rude in India; it's just normal. You can't even consider it rude. I mean, I considered it rude because I didn't want it, but they were just lying there. So I spent the whole night turned with my face to the wall, thinking, "These guys are bothering me."

Then at some point just before daylight, it suddenly occurred to me—the obvious, you know—oh, this is not *my* compartment. This is *our* compartment. That's all it was. I didn't leap up and have a group hug and say, "I'm so glad you're here." Just that shift in my mind is all that happened. I didn't actually act in any other way.

But when daylight came and we all got up—you close the top bunks and sit down on the bottom ones—they brought in, of course, their whole families and cousins and kids and wives. There were now twenty of us in the compartment. You could feel the whole energy change. They became really friendly. They were getting off at the stops and bringing me little snacks. "Oh, please taste these special treats from our country. Please try our specialty." It was really lovely. It completely changed. And all that shifted was that clinging in my mind of separation. It's really quite powerful.

Nyoshul Khen talked about describing the difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, as being a difference of narrowness and openness. In a deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow. The more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, disregarding the well-being, happiness, and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings rather than merely being concerned with his own ego and individuality. Thus, the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of the mind.

And so undistracted awareness, you could say in that way of talking, is the mind, the heart, that in that moment is completely open, free from self-referential clinging, naturally cognizant, naturally knowing, and ceaselessly responsive. Compassion, tenderness for beings.

Now on a retreat like this, where a great deal of our time is spent in the sitting, in the walking, even in moving around—noticing very carefully all the arising and passing experiences, the mental states and thoughts in particular, sensations and body—a great deal of our formal training, so to speak, is simply to watch everything come and go. It's really an emphasis on the emptiness aspect. Whatever comes, we just notice it. It goes. It doesn't matter how horrible the thought. It doesn't matter how beautiful. Horrible emotions, beautiful emotions.

Sometimes by really focusing so much on that aspect, that's how we could form a mistaken conception that emptiness means basically nothing matters. And that's how we can come out of a retreat thinking, well...

If everything's empty, you know, either on the indifferent side—who cares about anything?—or I can do whatever I want because it's all empty. Both of which are missing or lacking the tenderness, the compassion, the metta aspect of non-separation.

So how does the Buddha talk about this movement from the view, this experience of all phenomena as being intrinsically empty, nothing really of more significance than another in the light of mindfulness, to actually responding with word or action? This ceaseless responsiveness—how does nothingness, emptiness, move into a connected response or action in life?

And that's where this aspect of intention comes in. This is where, on the conceptual level, the Buddha just... he must have been so brilliant. I mean, how he could ever break all this stuff down and make his lists—it's really amazing. So the Eightfold Path, the basic path of practice: the first stage being wise understanding, really understanding the three characteristics, the Four Noble Truths, things as they are. From that understanding, the next step is variously translated as wise thought or wise intention, sometimes aspiration.

As we know, intention is just that subtle, collected movement of mind, that direction or inclination of mind that leads to action. And so that link—intention—is the link between understanding emptiness and compassionate response of word or body. This experience, this recognition and understanding in ourselves of intention, is so important.

Just as you know, intention is like the collection of mental energy in a certain direction that gives rise to action. It's not us, of course. It's simply conditioned by causes. The body hurts. There's unpleasantness. There's aversion in the mind that focuses the energy to move the arm. That's the intention.

And again, the seed of karma, of action—the seed of wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, skillfulness or unskillfulness in an action, as the Buddha spoke of it—rests not in the result of the action, not in how it looks, never mind how other people perceive it. The seed of karma is in the intention that gives rise to that action.

That's always been so fascinating to me, given how much in the world we evaluate what we've done and what other people have done, their goodness or badness or skillfulness, by the results of the action. But that's the thing that's so out of our control, isn't it? The results of action. Now I'm not going to claim that intentions are all in our control either, but we can at least affect them through cultivation of mind.

When we talk about skillful means on retreat, the whole crux, the whole kernel of skillful means is really about what are the mental factors, the mental states that give rise to the intention, that give rise to the action. That's what really determines whether it's skillful means or not.

The same action that looks the same from the outside could actually be motivated by various intentions in different people, or different intentions in you on different days. For example, taking a walk instead of going to a sitting. You all know—I don't have to tell you—the range of possible motivations for that particular action. And probably many of you have acted on that from a range of motivations.

Sometimes we'll beg somebody in an interview to not sit so much and take a walk, and the next person who walks in, we'll say stop taking so many walks, sit more. It's really about what are the conditions at the time, what would be skillful.

For you, it's about what's the motivation. You're just a little bit bored, you want some entertainment, and it's basically craving. So you go for a walk. What that's doing is cultivating craving—wouldn't call it skillful means particularly. Other times, all you want to do is sit, but in the sitting you're just forcing with willpower, getting tighter and tighter, and you're afraid not to sit. It's basically self-hatred taking you into the sitting. And in order not to sit and take a walk, it's really a letting go of some ideas you have about yourself or perfection, just a willingness to be present in the moment, seeing conditions as they are. Very different, yet the action can look the same. And it could be one way one day for you and completely different the next day.

That's why when people say they want to plan out how much to sleep, what time of every day they're going to take their walk—you can, but it's not looking at the fact that things are changing every day. Conditions are different every day. It's the motivation arising in the moment, the mental factors giving rise to that particular intention. You can't hold on to yesterday's intention. It's what's happening now.

So intention on that level of a momentary arising. And the good news—what I want to talk about for the rest of the talk—the good news is that even if all you did was mindfulness practice, never mind metta or karuna practice, through wisdom, through clear seeing, through our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice, the habits of our mind, the intentions that lead to speech and action, that just naturally spring up when you're not sitting there trying to force it, they actually transform in the light of awareness over our life of practice.

This is really one of the ways that the purification we talk about can actually be noticed. Those bad habits, just to use local language, of greed and ill will, hatred, cruelty in response to pleasant and unpleasant—those natural bad habits do begin to transform in the light of our ongoing steady awareness. The Buddha talked about three wise intentions. He has whole suttas about this. Greed naturally begins to transform to renunciation, to non-clinging, to generosity. Ill will naturally begins to transform to friendliness, connectedness, metta. And cruelty, real hatred, naturally transforms to compassion.

I'll give you a very simple example before you start down that road of, "Yeah, right." I know this wouldn't happen here because everyone is so mindful and polite, but say you're standing in the food line. Say it's bagel day, which I'm really getting the drift is a very confused and stressful time. So it's bagel day breakfast and there's the hubbub and the lines and all these decisions you have to make in the cafeteria. You're in line and someone in a wave of confusion gets in line in front of you, doesn't even notice, and goes. They not only get in line in front of you—they get the last sesame bagel that you wanted.

Now, our natural bad habit might be one of a range. If you're the greed type, you could really feel, "How could they take that away from me?" If you're the aversive type, it's more lashing out. But you get the drift—some kind of judgment, anger, upset, blame, and then blaming yourself for feeling any of those things.

But you might find this could really happen. I know it has happened in similar situations here, where you're just standing and the whole thing happens. Maybe your mind starts with a judgment, maybe it doesn't even go there. But instead, the mindfulness—you just really see the person. That spontaneous knowing without all the concepts in between. And in that seeing, you can feel either their confusion, or they're just lost in a craving moment, or their fear, or whatever. In that feeling, seeing their pain, there's the natural response of tenderness. Either renunciation—they need it more than I do today—or a kind of compassion: wow, that really must be a suffering state, needing that bagel so much, or to be so confused. And there's no patting yourself on the back, "Aren't I doing great?" It's just a natural moment of purified intention.

I know you'll notice lots of these small moments as you go through the days here, just springing up spontaneously. Of course, we can also practice it deliberately, but I just want you to notice that this transformation does begin to happen naturally through mindfulness, through presence. When awareness is undistracted, this is the natural response. It's not something we have to plan or think about.

The second step of the Eightfold Path, Sama Sankappa, is sometimes translated as broader aspiration, which we talked about quite a bit in the first weeks of the retreat—the sense of aspiration. It's intention, but it's a more broad-based intention, the overarching sense of what's really important to us, or the direction we want to go in our practice, in our life, in a day.

This sense of aspiration, which is often referred to as right intention as well, can be on the small scale, like at the beginning of a walking period. You simply have the aspiration to really be as present as possible in this walking period. Have you noticed when you do something like that? Of course you can't control that you'll be present every moment, but it brings a certain resolution, which is one of the paramis—a certain focusing of dispersed energy, a sense of more energetic commitment.

So it could be as simple as the beginning of a sitting or a walking period, or coming to a retreat, or the overarching intention for what's really important to us in our life. Or if you have the view of eons and eons and endless lifetimes, as the Bodhisatta who eventually became the Buddha did—he made the aspiration eons and countless ages ago, when he was an ascetic at the feet of the previous Buddha, to become a Buddha, to go through all these countless lifetimes of perfecting the paramis. Now that's a vast aspiration, a vast overarching intention.

But it can be very helpful to us to have a sense of how to use this broader aspiration in our practice, in our retreat, and in our life. Having the consciousness, the awareness in our heart and mind of what's really important to us as an aspiration can serve the purpose on the moment-to-moment level of collecting our dispersed energy, of giving us strength and focus and a capacity to do things we wouldn't otherwise have thought possible. You know what I mean? You may have noticed that.

I think probably you all have. You're still here, right? You've been through a lot. If you were just at home or didn't have a broader sense of purpose—whether it's freedom or whether it's just to get through the retreat, I don't know—but some broader sense keeps you here, even in the difficult times. If it was just day to day, "Do I like it or not?"—you'd almost all be out of here by now.

I read a book quite some years ago called *Life and Death in Shanghai*—maybe some of you have read it—about a Chinese woman, a middle-class woman who lived in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution in the seventies, when the whole culture was turned upside down and young people called the Red Guards were terrorizing the population. Anyone who had any money or connection with Westerners, or was too bourgeois, or part of the intelligentsia—many of them were simply taken and put in jail and accused of all kinds of things.

So this woman was basically a middle-class housewife, Chinese style, with no training for any of this, and she was thrown into jail. They told her that if she would just implicate different people whose names she was given and sign a confession, she would be released. But for some reason, her very deep commitment in life was to honesty. And she refused to sign a confession because she said, "I didn't do anything. I'm not going to confess to something I didn't do." And when they wanted her to implicate other people, even in very mild ways, she would refuse for the same reason. "This isn't true."

They kept her in prison for five or six years, interrogated her frequently, treated her quite brutally—even some forms of physical torture—always giving her the opportunity to sign these confessions and get out. And she just wouldn't do it because of her commitment to honesty, which was simply more important to her than anything.

You would think that the life she had led would have given her no preparation to go through what she went through. And yet, at least as she wrote the book, she was really gutsy. She would stand up to the guards. She didn't let herself get pushed around. Really quite amazing.

Finally, she developed cancer, I think, and they were going to let her out because she was sick. They were leading her out, about to release her, and just before they got to the final door, they said, "Just come in this room a minute. On your way out, just sign this. It doesn't mean much." And she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't do it. And they let her out anyway. She was writing this book from the States, where she was living by then.

I read that years ago, and I've carried it with me ever since—really from the sense of how a deeply held value or aspiration, really an intention, can give us a strength of purpose that guides our actions and decisions. It guides the motivation in the moment of our actions and decisions. It's not that we know what's going to come. But for her, honesty was so important that it would guide her decisions. It would become her motivation for action.

So notice that in your dharma practice—how sometimes a strength comes, a sense of motivation that we're not even consciously aware of. Suddenly you think it's time to go to bed, but something else, like the Dharma, takes over and says, "I don't think so." And you start doing walking meditation. You think, "Well, I was going to bed now." And you get to the end of the row.

This happens to me all the time. I get to the end of the row and think, "I'm just going to keep walking until I get to my room." Then I get to the end of the row and the body stops and turns around and goes back again. Nope. It's almost impersonal, but the sense of commitment to simply being awake becomes stronger. So notice that for yourself.

Both here and in daily life, if a sense of what for you is a broader aspiration is either readily accessible—you already know it—or through a little reflection you can find that deep motivation, that aspiration for yourself... Personally, I find that really useful in difficult times or confusing times. On retreat, those times you just can't imagine how you're going to get through another day or why you would want to. Or at home. To recall, even if it's just in thought at first, and then let it settle into your heart—your deepest aspiration. It can be a great source of strength and also of clarity, of collecting our dispersed energy.

So we don't just go through life like a robot, like an automaton. I feel like when I'm not paying attention, greed, hatred, and delusion are running the show. It's just like a robot, responding out of habit. But when I can tune into a deep aspiration, it can redirect things. It really gives you strength and purpose.

It doesn't mean we have a clue how it's going to look or how our life is going to look. I'm sure that woman in China never had any clue where her commitment to honesty would take her. When you read about Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the Burmese democracy movement—you all know who she is, right? Her path of becoming this symbol, the rallying point for all the democratic people in Burma, all the Burmese people wanting to liberate themselves from the horrific violence of a really cruel military government—it was never her plan.

She went back to Burma in 1988 to take care of her mother, who was dying. And it just happened to be at the time that these vast pro-democracy riots broke out. Because of who she is—she's the daughter of a man who was the leader of the Burmese movement to free themselves from the British after World War II, a true martyr who was killed right after they got their freedom—because she was his daughter, she became the natural rallying point. And then through her own grace and wisdom and purity, she's been able to carry that.

But she just happened to be there then. And because she became the focal point, she didn't feel she could leave. She was put under house arrest. All these years, she's always been told she could leave at any time, but she knew she could never come back. By being there, she didn't get to see her children very much at all. In the ten years they've grown up, occasionally they could visit. Occasionally her husband could visit, but not much. And he died of prostate cancer maybe two or three years ago, early, in his fifties. The Burmese government didn't allow him to come visit after he was diagnosed. She knew he was going to die. She didn't leave. She's been through so much—health problems and more—and she just stays because she knows it's her commitment.

But this is what she says. She said it was never her life purpose to be the leader of the Burmese democracy movement. That wasn't her motivation. She said, "I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they can't believe it. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life." I wish they were ordinary. But she said, "If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it. The motivation is its own reward."

That's really, to me, so beautiful—this sense of how powerful our aspiration is, and how the aspiration really centers on our motivation moment to moment rather than on "I'm going to get here and it's going to look like that."

So even if your aspiration is for full awakening—and that's a beautiful aspiration—I just want to say, if you feel that you have some deep aspiration like that and it comes up, honor it. Don't buy into that little personal identified mind that says, "Not possible for me." That really dishonors an aspiration that comes from the depth of truth, from our true nature.

But whatever the aspiration, it functions by informing our moment-to-moment intention. It doesn't mean we know where it's going to go. Just like in practice, our aspiration may be to get enlightened, but if you're sitting here every moment thinking, "Now am I enlightened? How close am I to being enlightened?"—it doesn't really work too well, does it? I'm sure you've all tried that. It's like, okay, come back. The motivation is to be awake in this moment, to what's happening in this moment. So the aspiration helps us align our intentions here and now.

And of course, what we discover in aligning or just noticing our motivations here and now is, yes, they do naturally transform. But I know what a lot of you are noticing at this point is what they're like prior to having naturally transformed—how much of the seemingly automatic intentions or responses that arise are those of confusion and greed and ill will and hatred. And that's okay to notice. Don't let that discourage you, because they do naturally transform in the noticing, just in the noticing.

Remember that line I read you before—it's one of my favorites from the suttas because I think it's so rich—where the Buddha said, "Whatever one frequently thinks about, whatever one frequently dwells upon in the mind or the heart, that will become the inclination of the mind."

So rather than getting discouraged because you're noticing how much your mind has been dwelling upon greed or hatred or delusion or pride or whatever the long list is—if you get discouraged, you're just still dwelling in the negative. Rather than that, notice that when we are with mindfulness aware of the habit of mind of ill will, say, or greed,

in that moment of sati, of mindfulness, of awareness, actually that unskillful habit of mind is not being reinforced. It's not being fed. In that mindfulness, we're basically disengaging from clinging to the greed or the aversion or the fear. And the mindfulness then is shifting the habit. It's shifting the inclination of mind to that of letting go, to that of seeing clearly, to that of non-hatred.

And this is really important. Every single moment of mindfulness is having that effect of transforming the habitual inclinations or intentions that arise in the mind.

These habits of how we've spent our life—it's both beautiful and a little scary to see how they can manifest as we get older, if we really have lived a very deluded life, if that's where we've taken refuge. If we've taken refuge in our life in ill will, well, what's going to come out at the end? Chögyam Trungpa's line when he's asked, "What's reborn?" And he says, "Your bad habits."

Ajahn Sumedho—I don't know if it was on one of the tapes, it's tricky to tell a story Ajahn Sumedho told because I'm not sure which tapes were playing here—but at a retreat I was sitting with him, he was talking about visiting a nursing home in England. And as you know, there's a whole range of people in nursing homes. He talked to a couple of elderly women who weren't really quite there—I don't know if they had Alzheimer's or just some kind of dementia—but not really quite there. But two of them, what was left really was their bad habits. And one woman, whatever you say to her, she'd just say, "You're not going to get my money. You're not going to get my money." And the other one—excuse my language, but this is what he said—whatever you say to her, she'd just go, "Shit. Just shit."

I thought, whoa. One does not want to discover that that's where one's taken refuge throughout one's life. All scary.

On the other hand, maybe two, two and a half years ago at a large Buddhist teachers conference—Buddhist teachers Asian and Western, all the different traditions, and the Dalai Lama was the main speaker—the thing that has stayed with me the most, I actually don't remember hardly anything the Dalai Lama said. I mean, he's far out and all. But what really moved me was Maha Ghosananda, the Cambodian monk who's been a peace activist for many years, worked in the Cambodian refugee camps after the genocide, and came back and taught metta, and has taught all over the world, led peace marches in Cambodia.

I actually don't know how he is now, but he was basically becoming senile at that point. And he was at the conference, and someone was designated part of each day to stay with him, just to make sure he stayed with us all and didn't wander off. But what

was so inspiring to me was that he would just be sitting there, and anyone who approached him out of two or three hundred people, as soon as you would get face-to-face with him, he would connect with you and just beam with metta. Talk to you, bow to you, bless you with metta. And it wasn't a disconnected sense. It was totally connected. This man just beaming metta—that's where he took his refuge in life.

It was deeply, deeply inspiring to me to think about what's going to be left when we go. Nothing we have, none of our actions in the world—really it's about who we've been, where our mind and heart has dwelt, where we've taken refuge.

And I want to emphasize again: yes, practicing metta and compassion, that is a very powerful way of transforming our habits, our intentions. But also simple, clear, direct connection of mindfulness brings out the natural response of inclusion and compassion.

I have to read this poem because I haven't read a Mary Oliver poem, and you have to read one before you're allowed to leave. But actually this is exactly what I'm saying about how simple, direct connection of awareness is all-inclusive.

In Singapore, in the airport,
A darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach,
and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together
and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled.
What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem,
but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
which is dull enough.

She is washing the tops of airport ashtrays as big as hubcaps with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird. I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life. And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. And neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

And so, simply by our willingness to be totally present, to pay attention without withholding, without judging, without prior concept, this transformation of habits of heart and mind takes place. From a simple moment of tenderness, through our continuing practice, something we can cultivate begins to grow. Even naturally, our aspiration and our sense of compassion really begin to move in the direction of the vastness of bodhicitta. The vastness of our practice at some point truly does stop being just for ourselves and becomes a sense of wanting to awaken in order to help awaken all beings.

According to a talk I heard from the Dalai Lama, how does this bodhicitta develop? Just as I was saying—from deep insight into what suffering is. And how does that arise? By focusing on our own experience. As we focus on our own experience of suffering, compassion strengthens with the sense of empathy and connectedness with all beings. This happens naturally, really. We can help it along, I'll admit, but we start where we are.

That's why the difficult times in a retreat are so important. We say this over and over, and in the middle of it you can't really get a sense of it because you're struggling so much. But the difficult times in retreat are really the places where we're gaining that deep insight into suffering and that sense of empathy with all beings. It's so important to start where we are and to honor, to see how even the most seemingly trivial experience is transforming where we take refuge, how we live our life.

In one retreat that I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, I went into an interview with him while caught in an extremely heavy bout of self-judging—very negative—which I didn't tell him. You don't go in and give him the content of your thoughts. He's not interested. You just go in and report what happens in the sitting: I noticed rising and falling, I felt these sensations, thought arose, I would note it.

But he knows what's happening. It's really quite interesting—he's such a master. So he could tell that I was in this really vicious bout of self-judging and a lot of thinking. And he said to me, "Some people talk to themselves on retreat. Have you ever noticed that?"

I said, "Yeah, yeah, I think I've noticed that."

He said, "Well, it's supposed to be a silent retreat."

People think he's not funny, but he can be really quite funny.

I said, "Yeah, I know."

He said, "Well, which do you think is better—to talk to yourself or to talk to other yogis?"

And I said, "Well, that's true. Given the way I'm talking to myself, it would probably be better to talk to other yogis. They would never be so cruel."

It was very helpful, just pointing that out. Start where you are. How we meet the difficult experiences—and I know I said this in a previous talk, so I'll just remind you again—how we meet the difficulty is what creates the transformation of intentions. All that vicious self-judging, that's the previous habit of my mind. That's old karma, results coming up. When I can meet that with simple awareness, that's the transformation. That's the cultivation of compassion and wisdom.

It doesn't even mean that vicious self-judging stops. But that ability to recognize it is very different from agreeing with it—"Oh yeah, you're right, you are the worst person that ever walked the earth"—or believing "I should be past this by now. I shouldn't be having these thoughts. This just shows what a bad..." and then spiraling into the next round. Instead, there's simply: "Ah, self-judging is like this."

I know when you come into interviews and we say that, you kind of walk out thinking, "Well, that was really helpful"—perhaps a bit skeptically. But it's huge. Every moment of awareness like that is transforming the habits of mind. We just want too much too soon. How long have we been cultivating these bad habits? And just in this life, one pales to think of it. Three months of cultivating wise intention—that's good. That's great. Luckily, wise intention, I think, is really stronger than our bad habits. I don't think we have to cultivate one moment of wisdom for every one moment of confusion. But we do need to acknowledge it.

There's a quotation from Gandhi I really like where he said, "Almost everything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." I think that's a great description of our practice here in the hall, but also in our life. Every moment of awareness, every moment of kindness, every moment of clear seeing may seem insignificant if we're looking to results, if we're looking to goals. But if we're just willing to be there in that moment for it, it's very important that we do it.

And so we don't have to think that we're cultivating bodhicitta, that we're transforming the habits of mind from confusion to non-clinging and compassion. We don't have to be the Dalai Lama or Gandhi. Just be willing to do each insignificant moment of attention. Start where we are.

And then that ceaselessly responsive aspect of emptiness manifests itself effortlessly. It's not that in life we then have to think, "What would be the appropriate compassionate response here?" It just comes. One teacher I met once called it "doing the obvious." You just do it because it's the obvious thing to do.

Once I heard an interview on public radio with a professional basketball player, a young man in his first year. To make the pros—that's got to be really the high point of a young athlete's life. And he was having a good year. They were interviewing him because his sister needed a kidney transplant, and if his blood type matched, he was going to give her his kidney. The interviewer was rather breathlessly questioning him because that would mean the end of his professional basketball career, which I'm not sure why, but it would. And the interviewer kept going, "This is so amazing! You're willing to give up your basketball career!" On and on.

And this young man was so cool. He would just say, "What are you talking about? My sister? She'll need a kidney or she'll die. I have two kidneys. It's a no-brainer." Just doing the obvious. And he just wouldn't go there about how amazing he was or that there was even another choice to make. It was really quite something. I wish I'd caught his name. It was really a beautiful thing.

Doing the obvious. And whether it's just picking up our foot and putting down the foot again, or giving a kidney, or just letting the person cut in line in front of you and have that sesame bagel and wishing them well—doing the obvious.

I want to end with something from Pema Chödrön talking about bodhicitta. At the relative level, she calls it noble heart bodhicitta: "At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings."

At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness or open space.

When we experience the soft spot of bodhicitta, it's like returning home. It's as if we had amnesia for a very long time and awakened to remember who we really are.

The poet Rumi writes of night travelers who search the darkness instead of running from it—a companionship of people willing to know their own fear. Whether it's in the small fears of a job interview or the unnameable terrors imposed by war, prejudice, and hatred, in the tenderness of the pain itself, night travelers discover the light of bodhicitta.

And then just the simplicity of it. She says bodhicitta is available in moments of caring for things, when we clean our glasses or brush our hair. It's available in moments of appreciation, when we notice the blue sky or pause and listen to the rain. It is available in moments of gratitude, when we recall a kindness or recognize another person's courage.

Whenever we let go of holding on to ourselves and look at the world around us, whenever we connect with sorrow, whenever we connect with joy, whenever we drop our resentment and complaint—in those moments bodhicitta is here.

Just doing the obvious.

CHAPTER 345

Wise Attention 1 of 3

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this first of three talks on wise attention, Carol Wilson offers an in-depth exploration of yoniso manasikāra—the Pāli term for appropriate or wise attention—which she considers a key tool for liberation both in meditation practice and daily life. Drawing primarily from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she explains how the Buddha identified wise attention as the essential factor that determines whether our experience leads toward awakening or continues the rounds of confusion and suffering.

Carol unpacks the meaning of yoniso manasikāra itself: yoni (womb) suggesting a nurturing, protective quality, and manasikāra (attention) indicating active mental engagement. This gives the felt sense of holding experience with accepting awareness while remaining totally present. She explains the āsavas—the deep underlying tendencies toward craving for sense pleasure, craving for becoming, and ignorance—that keep us bound in saṃsāra. These manifest on three levels: transgression (speech and action), obsessive defilements (repetitive mental patterns), and the latent level where seeds remain dormant until conditions ripen.

The teaching emphasizes that wise attention isn't about what objects we attend to, but how we attend. The same experience—whether anger, breath sensations, or pleasant sights—can be met with wise or unwise attention depending on whether we add clinging, aversion, or identification. Carol introduces the seven methods the Buddha taught for abandoning the āsavas, beginning with 'seeing'—total attention without adding anything extra, without past or future, without clinging to present experience.

Tonight I want to talk about the subject of wise attention, sometimes also translated as appropriate attention. It's the translation of the Pali phrase *yoniso manasikara*. I have a lot to say about this, and I'm going to indulge myself—this will be at least two talks, part tonight and part next week. I indulge myself because I'm always cutting things out when I talk about this subject.

In my opinion, wise attention, *yoniso manasikara*, is a key concept and a key tool, both in our *bhavana* practice, our meditation practice, and throughout our whole life. It's a key tool for how we can relate to our moment-to-moment experience in a way that's liberating. We can basically be in the same situation and, with wise attention, that situation can bring us to wakefulness, to waking up. Or the same situation can lead us

into continuing the rounds of confusion. The key difference is the understanding, the actualizing in our own experience, of what wise attention and appropriate attention really is.

I want to be referring at various points to one of the suttas of the Buddha, which is really the one where he talks the most about wise attention, although he mentions it in quite some other places. This sutta is the second one in the Middle Length Sayings, the *Majjhima Nikaya*. It's called the Sutta on All the Taints, or all the *āsavas*. There's no good translation in English. "Taints" is kind of old-fashioned. "Stains," "cankers," "defilements"—we already get negative connotations. But the sutta is talking about how to basically uproot all our tendencies of mind towards suffering. And the key that the Buddha talks about in the sutta is this wise attention, *yoniso manasikara*.

So what is it? Appropriate attention is probably the better translation, but I'm so used to saying wise attention that I'm going to keep slipping into saying that, and also to avoid constantly inflicting the Pali on you.

The basic definition the Buddha gives is extremely pragmatic, as pretty much everything he said was. He's talking about these *āsavas*, these subtle roots of suffering, which I'll explain more in a moment. But he says—"bhikkhus" means monks—"I say to you that there is an exhaustion of these *āsavas*, an ending of these *āsavas*, in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention."

Now that's a very bold statement, as he was wont to make. He's basically saying that one who knows and understands wise attention and unwise attention comes to the end of defilements, of *āsavas*. And he defines it experientially: when a person attends unwisely, both unarisen *āsavas* arise—unarisen suffering states arise—and arisen suffering states increase. So it's a very practical definition. When one attends wisely, both unarisen suffering states do not arise, and arisen ones are abandoned.

Then one other line I want to begin with: he says that one who knows understands what is fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Now to us, this "fit for attention" and "unfit for attention" comes through our minds in a very judgmental way. You turn it into your practice: "This anger is unfit for attention. This pain in my knee is unfit for attention. This personality pattern of pride and blame is unfit for attention. Something else should be happening." That is not what we're talking about. That is not wise attention, as I will hopefully make abundantly clear.

Just to define this word *āsava*, "taint," to describe what the Buddha is talking about: *āsava* is a word that means an influx or an outflux. It's like a pouring into our mental experience of the defilements or habits, the suffering habits of mind, from the very deepest or most subtle level. So it's the deepest habits of mind, the tendency for these deep habits to arise given the supportive conditions. These *āsavas* are what keep us spinning in the rounds of samsara, as I described how pleasant that is last week.

When the Buddha in the sutta speaks about the *āsavas*, he's actually fairly specific. Usually there are three, and in this sutta he names three specific, very subtle, pervasive, underlying habits that keep us spinning. One is the craving for sense pleasure. The second is the craving for being, the craving for becoming. And the third *āsava* is ignorance, which basically covers everything else. Ignorance, and sometimes wrong view, is also spoken about.

So wise attention—how we pay attention and what we pay attention to—means that we learn to pay attention in such a way that when we're present, paying attention, these tendencies for craving, for wanting to become something, for ignorance, for not knowing what's going on, these decrease with wise attention.

When our attention is unwise, when we're paying attention to the wrong thing in the wrong way—in the inappropriate way, better than wrong—then actually the feedback is pretty clear, because these asavas, these habits, get stronger. And we can experience this; we do experience this moment to moment. You don't have to be deep in meditation for four months to pick up on this. It does occur from time to time in all of our experience, no matter what we're doing. But the quiet and the subtleness of meditation, and for some of you who've been here quite some time, your minds are definitely noticing on this subtle level.

So the Buddha says, what's fit and unfit. But it's not that what is fit or unfit has a fixed determination—that a particular object or subject or sense experience or mind experience is in itself unfit. Take, for example, anger. It's not that anger is always unfit and that paying attention to anger is going to lead to an increase in the asavas, that it's unwise attention. No. It's indeterminate, because it's not so much what we pay attention to, but how we pay attention. And these two are, I think, the seeds of all our mindfulness and concentration practice, the seeds of all the skillful means that we employ to help us keep aware.

So how we pay attention. I want to now refer to, in terms of giving a feeling of this "how," the word that we're translating as appropriate or wise attention itself: *yoniso manasikara*. This is the way Andy Olenski, the director of the Study Center, glosses this word, how he breaks down its different meanings. And while it's not exact as to what

appropriate attention really is in our experience, I love this because it gives to me the felt sense of the quality of appropriate attention—of mindfulness, basically. What else are we ever talking about? What do you think appropriate attention is going to come down to? Mindfulness. But the quality of it.

Yoniso, he says, is from the word *yoni*, which is womb. And if you think of womb-like, he says, *yoniso*—nurturing, held in protection. You can think of *sati*, the word for mindfulness, being our protection from the arising of and getting lost in these suffering, unwholesome tendencies. So womb-like, *yoniso*, held in protection.

Manasikara is usually translated as attention. *Mana* means mind. *Kara* is from the verb meaning action—*kamma*, or karma in the Sanskrit, comes from the same word, meaning doing. So *kara* means doing or making. He puts that together as an active quality of mind, a mind that's doing something, that's action, that is present and nurturing—actively present and nurturing.

I get a sense from that, not like some driving force of mind: "Yes, it will be what I want it to be. Yes, this unpleasant thing should go away." But womb-like. Maybe it's because I'm a woman—although Andy did tell me this, I have to acknowledge. But it's a sense of holding experience with that accepting quality of attention, while being absolutely, totally present with the experience just as it is. Mindfulness.

So that's the quality of appropriate attention. And this is what we bring into our practice with that understanding, really looking in our experience. It's what we're always encouraging you to do around skillful means, so that it's not only what we pay attention to, but how.

Simple, obvious examples: the four foundations of mindfulness that Myoshin talked about last week. Bare attention to any arising experience. So take anger, since I've been using that—that's the quality of mind, the third foundation of mindfulness. In itself, it's indeterminate whether it's wise or unwise attention, appropriate or not, to really be present with the mind, with the anger, with the ill will. If the attention has this quality, this *yoniso manasikara* of sort of surrounding, seeing clearly, not feeding any other reaction or state of mind to it, just meeting that ill will with mindfulness, you can see in that moment it is wise attention. The ill will does not increase. It doesn't mean that it magically goes away either, which is what some people are looking for, or use that—"It went away, so I did it right." It's not that. Sometimes the ill will or the pain in the knee can last a long time.

But you can tell it might rise and fall within some moments. Yet overall, the sense of ill will or grasping or craving, the sense of being "I am such a horrible, angry person," or the total ignorance of getting really lost in the whole story—those do not increase. You can just be with ill will, rising and falling, a little bit caught, it lets go. And then when it ends, you really have that sense of being awake, being present. That was wise attention.

And of course, as we all know, unwise attention is either somehow meeting that ill will when there's already in the mind not that clear meeting—there's some other ill will, or there's some sense of identification, or there's some wanting, or there's just the ignorance of getting completely lost in the story about, "Yeah, well, that person is a jerk, and I should be angry," and then spiraling into "What's going to happen?" And what's the result of that? What's the effect? When we wake up from that, are we feeling really balanced and present and mindful? Probably not. Probably the tendency is that the next unpleasant thing that arises, the mind is just more ready to grab at it.

Similarly, take something like simple shamatha, just being with the sensations of breath. Rarely would we say, "Well, sensations of breath—that's got to be wise attention." It can be or not. Even that is indeterminate. So when there's this simple, full attention of mindfulness with the sensation of breath, and you see what's being strengthened, what's being cultivated is non-clinging, non-hatred, non-delusion. Any moment of mindfulness, those three are present: non-clinging, non-hatred, non-delusion. Just one moment. That's why it's so powerful.

Also, you'll notice that over time of simple attention to one breath at a time, qualities of mindfulness, of samadhi, of tranquility, of equanimity are all being cultivated. And I would venture that most, if not all of you, have had the alternate experience of being really quite closely paying attention to the breath, but with what attitude? Not so much. There can be huge clinging in the way the attention is connecting with the breath—huge clinging. Wanting to stay there, wanting to get more concentrated, or aversion: "Let me feel this breath, please God, so I don't have to get caught in that obsessive thought again." Or trying to make it meet some idea, whatever.

But again, the feedback loop—whether it's immediately or five or ten minutes or half an hour or a day down the road—is that what begins to manifest? Frustration, craving, craving for sense pleasures, craving for becoming. "I want to become a more concentrated person." That's craving for becoming. Or just ignorance: "I'm trying as hard as I can and it just keeps getting worse, so I've got to try harder."

So you get a sense. Where we're working here, this yoniso manasikara, appropriate attention, is really the key, the tool, underlying all of our skillful means. That's why, on a retreat where we're giving instructions, or answering questions, we give an instruction and then someone asks a question and we give them a totally opposite instruction from what we just said in the morning talk. And then someone else comes into an interview and they're breaking themselves trying to meet that instruction, and we say, "Oh no, no, you shouldn't do that. You should do exactly the opposite." And then three days later when they come in and say, "Well, I'm doing what you said," we say, "No, no, no, now you shouldn't do that anymore. Now you should do this." Because the conditions are always changing. Nothing's steady state.

And so, remembering that our guideline isn't "Does it feel good?" or "This just feels so right, this just feels like what I need to be doing now"—you know, staying with the breath or noticing emotions or whatever—because sometimes that's just the path of least resistance. It's not about it being pleasant or feeling good right now. It's really about keeping your kind of background attention, your sense of cause and effect, attuned to the subtle habits and inclinations of our mind. That's the level we're working on with wise attention.

So if you think you're practicing really clearly and over days you're just getting more and more and more lost and craving—I mean, we all have periods where craving comes up, that's part of practice—but I mean, over time, you see something seems to be going in the wrong direction. That's the time to look and see: Is there something I'm doing that's feeding this?

That's not wise attention. That's not skillfully inclining the mind.

Let me give a grosser example of these habits. It's gross, but it's also not. Sometimes when we talk about the āsavas on the level I'm describing—the habit of clinging, the habit of wanting to become, the habit of ignorance—it feels so subtle that we don't quite grasp what I mean. But let me offer one way it's talked about that illuminates the different levels.

There's a teaching about the three vaṭṭas, or the three rounds of saṃsāra. I got this from Beelin Sayadaw. They describe the three different levels at which these deep habits of mind manifest in our lives, and what protects us at each level.

The first level is called the level of transgression. This is where these deep habits of mind manifest in speech and action—basically, out of control. What protects us on this level is sīla, our commitment to ethical conduct. Even just the five precepts really protect us from speaking and acting out of these suffering states.

The second vaṭṭa is called the level of the obsessive defilements, the obsessive kilesas, which speaks for itself. Your mind gets really caught in obsessive thought, emotion, going over and over, and you're truly caught. What protects us there is samādhi. That's why, when we first begin to touch into it, samādhi feels so wonderful—all that stuff is suddenly at a distance. It's like, "Oh my gosh, I didn't know." It's like having such a nice bath of peace. The mind is just shutting up, even for five minutes, and you see how totally exhausting this obsessive level is.

The third level—and this is the āsava level—is called the latent level. Latent means underlying. It hasn't yet come to flower, but the potential is there. If appropriate conditions come together, then from this latent, underlying level, that kilesa will spring up. What protects us there is paññā, wisdom. They say greed, hatred, and delusion are not fully abandoned by acts, but by wise seeing.

Let me give you a simple example to hammer this in. Say you're doing your walking meditation very quietly, and someone just comes along, cuts in front of you, and bumps you into the wall—which of course would never happen here, because everyone is so sublimely aware. But in crowded retreats, it can happen.

Deeds or speech at the transgression level? Well, that's obvious. "You stupid jerk." Or even if you just said, "Excuse me," with all the venom you could summon up—that would be acting on the level of transgression. Our sīla protects us from this, never mind moving to acts stronger than speech.

The obsessive level? We don't say anything. You look like the perfect yogi. You didn't even notice them. But for the rest of the walking: "I can't believe it. I cannot believe that that person just walked in front of me. They don't respect me at all. Nobody respects me. And that really shows how nobody respects me. I'm not standing for it. I tell you, I'm not standing for it." You can take it from there—either it goes out into a long story of more suffering, or you repeat the same three thoughts over and over, which isn't nearly as interesting. You can't kid yourself that it's going somewhere. But it has that same depth of suffering.

Now, in both of these cases, if you have any awareness at all, you know you're suffering. It's scary, because sometimes you don't. Sometimes you think, "Yes, it's really right that I tell off this person."

That's appropriate.

But anyway, the latent level is really much more refined. You're walking and you're not spaced out at all. You're very present. And there could just be a moment of not quite mindful, not gross, but the person walks in front of you and the mindfulness just was

away at that moment. And that latent tendency—even though you haven't had any aversion or desire going on for quite some time, you've been really mindful—all of a sudden it comes rushing up. Have you had that experience where you go, "Wow, where did that come from? I've really been very present. Where did that come from?" That's the "give me a break" level.

But that's the level of āsava that we're talking about here, where just the seed, the potential is there, the habit of mind, given the right conditions. It's like a seed that's been under the earth forever, and when it's watered and has the right sun, it can sprout. That's the āsavas the Buddha's talking about—just that subtle tendency. Not the state itself, but the potential for it to arise. So you see we're talking on a subtle level here. And I personally think it's the genius of the Buddha that he could not only experience this level, but make it so clear, talk about it.

You know how when you've been going in life and you've seen so clearly in practice, in your daily life, you've seen so clearly the suffering of clinging, or the impermanence, or a particular personality pattern—it's really clear how empty that is. "I don't need that anymore. I'm done with that," right? Famous last words. But you really have seen through it. It's not an illusion. And then we turn around in retreat or in life, five minutes later or five months later, and there it is, pops up in all its strong glory. And you think, "How? How can this keep happening?" I would be surprised if there's someone here who hasn't had that experience. Maybe I'm the only one.

Or when you think, "I've been practicing, I've been understanding a lot in practice, but in my life I seem to be getting worse. It seems like these patterns are coming up more and more."

On a little less subtle level—because most of us don't go through thinking, "Oh, I see the potential for the habit of becoming arising now," right? That's really not so much the way you're going to think about it. Clinging to sense pleasure is okay to name. But the habit of becoming, putting it that way, maybe we don't notice it. Let me put it in a grosser way. If you want to call it sakkāya-diṭṭhi, right? Personality view.

What is our personality view but simply our clinging to or aversion towards any or all of the particular habits of our thoughts about ourself, of our memory, the habits of our emotions, the particular personality traits or habits of response, reaction in particular situations? What is the sakkāya-diṭṭhi but a kind of solidifying, a clinging to, a making permanent in our mind any sum of these patterns? And suffering from that—suffering not from the patterns, but from unwise attention.

So whether your pattern is in times of difficulty strong self-pity, or feelings of worthlessness, or feelings when things aren't going your way of blame thrown out on other people, or just being really cranky and aversive when you're tired. You know you get tired and up comes aversion when you've been so present and kind all day. Or just really getting so high when there's a lot of sense pleasure, just loving the sense pleasures and at some point getting really lost in that until you see how you're putting your whole life around having more and more. Or "I'm an athlete" or "I'm an introvert" or "this is what happens to me in this situation"—whatever. We all have our own. We all have many, many particular habits of emotion, of the descriptions of thought that we buy into and have repetitively about ourselves, particular responses.

The thing is, none of them are steady state. They're all different habits and patterns coming and going, coming and going. Have you had anyone that stayed steady all day? I mean really. Don't just say, "Oh yeah, right, it did." I mean really stayed steady all day. No breaks, no gaps, no fluctuation. I doubt it.

We actually compound our suffering through what the Flight of the Garuda, a Tibetan text, describes as "our pernicious habitual pattern of solidifying reality." We take thoughts about ourselves, patterns of emotion, habits of reaction, and completely solidify them: "Yes, this is me. This is who I am. This is what always happens in this situation."

Well, it does happen often. That's really a manifestation of this level of asava—a very deep and subtle inclination or habit of mind.

Give me a particular circumstance where I'm not very aware. I'm a cranky-at-night person when I'm tired. Give me a particular evening when I'm tired and not aware at all, and anything just mildly approaching unpleasant, and crankiness will arise. Now, for years I didn't really understand that. The crankiness would arise and I'd act on it. I'd say something unpleasant, or just feel really unpleasant and get restless and do more things, punch out more action to get away from it—which, when you're cranky, just makes everything worse.

Now that I know it much more clearly, if that situation arises—because that inclination, in the right circumstances of no mindfulness, is still there—it can still arise. But as soon as the crankiness arises, I meet it with wise attention. "Oh, crankiness. It feels like this."

At that point, it's not sakkāya-diṭṭhi anymore. There's not a sense of grasping, of making it me, of identifying with it, of turning it into becoming. "I am becoming a cranky person. I am becoming a worthless person, an athlete, an introvert"—or whatever. A good meditator, a concentrated person, whatever your sakkāya-diṭṭhi has been in the last half hour. It can come and go just like anything else.

We don't have to stop those thoughts, those emotions, those patterns. Simply the solidifying, the grasping around them—that's unwise attention. We notice it, but lightly. "Oh, crankiness feels like that." That's wise attention. That seed doesn't go any further.

So what's really inspiring to me—and I know people use this quotation from the Buddha a lot—is that he often describes or defines full awakening, or an arahant in the Theravada model, as someone who is free from all the asavas. Meaning that in such a person, even in any condition, those tendencies have been erased, basically. They've been exhausted—I think "worn out" is the better expression. So that even if I was incredibly tired and incredibly busy and something really unpleasant happened, crankiness just wouldn't arise. It couldn't arise. You see why that's the definition of an arahant.

But the inspiring thing is how often the Buddha says—and he says it in terms of this—"If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so": to apply wise attention.

I say that first because now I want to go back to the subtle level of asava, where we can really begin to play with how it works. Not getting down on ourselves or discouraged, but just playing with how strong and sudden this uprushing is. Asava really means something like "influx." And sometimes it really feels like this—just this uprushing of kilesa out of nowhere. But also, how in a moment of mindfulness, it can be gone.

An example: On one retreat I was sitting—I'd been practicing, I don't know, a couple of months. I was very deep in. Mindfulness was really pretty steady and strong. It was in between sittings, and I remember I was in my room, looking outside at a tree leaf. I was just right there noticing it. Seeing, seeing leaf. Vibrant color. Seeing pleasant. Seeing pleasant. Because by that time, the mind was just noting every moment—that was simply what it was doing. And it was so alive, you know, very connected.

And in just a moment, there was this slight—so slight—backing off of connected attention. You know, where you're going "seeing, seeing, pleasant, vibrant, seeing, pleasant..." and then just... "ahh." A kind of settling back. Delusion, for a moment.

You don't even look around, but you just kind of disconnect. You don't even have time to space out, but there's this disconnection. And it was as if—I don't want to be discouraging, it's just how I saw it happen—in this moment, it really was like this huge

influx of craving. Just wanting. "Oh, it's so beautiful! How can I have more?" And it just started going down the road of papañca, of proliferation, in that amount of time. It was really amazing. Memories, pleasant memories, desire—my whole life in about a tenth of a second. At which point I just noticed: "Oh my god. Pleasant. Memory. Seeing." And then it was gone.

But I remember that moment so vividly because it was visceral, a feeling sense of really how powerful the underlying tendency can be at certain times. Not always—but at certain times.

It's also a good example of how yoniso manasikara, appropriate attention, totally connected and non-judging and not adding anything extra—in that moment of sati, of mindfulness, with non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion present—the whole kilesa, the whole āsava of sense desire just stopped. And in that moment, it's gone.

We're talking about a habit of mind, an underlying tendency. But it's not like there's some big glob of āsava sitting there, this mass of sense desire that you have to chip away at until suddenly it's all gone. We tend to think, "I'm working on my conditioning. I have this much left to go." It's like if you have the habit of smoking. When you're not smoking, you're really not smoking, right? There's not some little smoker in there puffing away that's just going to suddenly come out and you notice it. You're either smoking or you're not. So it's the same—you're craving or you're not.

Working on these two levels of practice, obviously in daily life and at retreat, means working a lot on the level of acting and speaking and the obsessive patterns. But it's also working very much on the latent level. It's just something we don't notice or think about or pay attention to as much. But every moment of mindfulness is not only not watering—the double negative, you know what I mean? In a moment of mindfulness, we're not watering the seed of the latent tendency. It doesn't have a chance to sprout. And also, what we are doing is planting the other seeds—the seeds of the habit of non-greed, non-hatred, full attention, non-delusion. And that then becomes the stronger tendency.

Until finally, the āsavas—those little seeds of unwholesome tendency—wither away from lack of being fed, from deep seeing, understanding, insight. They stop being fed and finally wither away altogether.

And it's important, I think, to really understand and trust this. Because as your practice, not only here but in life, as your dedication to paying attention to what you're doing here and off the cushion gets stronger, you're going to start to notice—you already are—the subtle levels where these āsavas are manifesting in a much more subtle way than we would normally have noticed.

And so it seems like we're not getting any better and maybe even getting worse. We fail sometimes to notice that we're not screaming and yelling and hitting and blaming. We're just walking very peacefully and having a little spurt of, "Oh my god, I can't believe it." And then it goes away and we're back to being mindful. It feels just as jarring. We don't really realize, because we're so in it, how much more subtle a level we're working on, and how the noticing of it and the immediate bringing in of yoniso manasikara eradicates it in that moment. How really powerful that is. It's important to really give that credit.

Here, one way you might notice from time to time—because this does also happen—is that when you walk into a situation or a condition arises that is absolutely ripe, all the conditions present for your prime tendencies to emerge—blame, self-judgment, comparing, worthlessness, desire, whatever it is—and you're not trying not to have it happen. You just walk in, and the person who so far has never been able to walk across your field of vision without some nasty judging thought arising in your mind—suddenly they walk across and, without any premeditation, mettā arises. They walk across and you think, "Oh, they must be really suffering. May they be happy." Where did that come from? It must be that deva behind me saying it, because it sure didn't come from this mind and body!

Or you walk in and somebody does something that would normally send aversion flying, and there's just space. Nothing happens.

I don't know, years ago. I think it was the first three-month retreat I ever sat. I'd sat a lot before, but not in that form with these people. I didn't know who anybody was. So I was kind of just checking it out and making up my stories about people. And there was one guy who I somehow decided was some really enlightened guy. I didn't even know who he was. The reason I had this story is because he would always come to lunch really late, like twenty minutes late, and just come in and take whatever and sit down and eat. And I thought, wow, he must be so free. He must be this amazing guy. How can you come to lunch late when it's the only thing going on in the day and the food might run out? You know all the riffs.

And I remember one retreat, I don't know when, sometime later, I didn't even notice it. Halfway through the retreat, I suddenly became aware that I wasn't even thinking about the food. And I myself was coming twenty or thirty minutes late. Something would be run out. I didn't care. It wasn't any big renunciation. I really didn't care. And that was the sense of, just in that particular moment, the particular asava not arising, not being there in that moment. I'm not saying it doesn't come up other times, but you can see those conditions that just couldn't bring it up anymore. And that, for the most part, has stayed steady around that on retreats unless I'm having a really bad day.

But just to see how it's nothing to take credit for because it's so clearly not you. You can feel how that particular tendency just gets exhausted from not being fed and from insight, from understanding. So it's important to notice that in yourselves as well.

So the Buddha talked about in this particular sutta—that's why I said it might be three talks; I didn't even get to the sutta yet—he talks about seven different ways to cultivate wise attention, yoniso manasikara, and to extinguish, to uproot the asavas in our life. What I love about this sutta is that some of the seven are really fairly specific to bhavana, to meditation on the cushion like we're doing, but not all of them. Some of them are quite applicable to how we relate to situations in our life. So it's both a very precise view, but also stepping back and looking at our relationship to experience in our life, our relationship to food, our relationship to environment, our relationship to mental states—as well as in the meditation.

So that's the next thing I want to talk about. Obviously, I'm only going to talk about the first one tonight. I might not even finish the first one. But just again, to lead into that, to emphasize again that unwise attention is at the root of our spinning in the rounds of samsara. That, you could say, is the proximate cause, the reason that we keep getting catapulted into the rounds of samsara. It causes craving and ignorance and becoming to increase. Wise, appropriate attention is at the root of liberation. Unarisen asavas do not arise and arisen ones are abandoned. That's very interesting—unarisen ones don't arise and arisen ones are abandoned. That's what the Buddha talks about in this sutta.

I'll just read you the seven ways and then say a little bit about the first one for tonight. These are the seven ways. Asavas can be abandoned by seeing, by insight. The second one is asavas are abandoned by restraining, restraint at the sense doors. They are abandoned by using, by attention to how we use things, use our requisites. They're abandoned by patience, or enduring in this translation. They're abandoned by avoiding

things that are harmful. They're abandoned by removing—in other words, not allowing unskillful, harmful states to continue. And they're abandoned by developing, specifically developing the seven factors of enlightenment, the seven bojjhangas.

So those are the seven areas that he talks about that I'll go into a little tonight and the rest next week. Abandoned by seeing—I want to read you some of what he says. This is what he goes into in quite some depth in this sutta. He starts by saying that an untaught, ordinary person—is that puthujjana? Yeah, puthujjana—who has no regard for noble ones and doesn't understand the Dhamma and is undisciplined in it.

This person does not understand what dhammas—what things—are fit for attention and what are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he does not attend to the things that are fit for attention, and he attends to dhammas that are unfit for attention.

Now let me give you an example of how the Buddha speaks in this sutta. This is how one attends unwisely—and I like this because it cracks me up. He puts it in quotations: "Was I in past time, or was I not in past time? What was I before? How was I before?" Past time could be another life, or it could be the last sitting, right? "Shall I be in the future or not? How shall I be in the future? What shall I be? Having been what in the past, what shall I be in the future?" Or else he is perplexed about the presently existing time: "Am I, or am I not? How am I? How did I come to be here? Where will I be going?"

Can you relate?

When he attends unwisely in this way—and this is quite bare, but it can be anything—how was I so angry before? Am I going to be angry like this in the future? How could I have done that in the past? I can't believe I acted like that. I wonder if I'll do that again. But now that I've practiced so much, I'll probably be in the situation very differently. And we make the whole thing up. This is what the Buddha is talking about right here.

When one attends in this way, one of six kinds of view arises, and they're all different views of self. The view "Self exists in me, for me" arises as true. Or the view "No self exists for me" arises as true. Or the view "I perceive self with self" arises as true and established. Or the view "I perceive not-self with self" arises as true and established. Or the view "I perceive self with not-self" arises as true and established. Or he has some such view as "This is myself that speaks and feels, that experiences now here and now there, good and bad, the ripening of kamma," and it goes on and on.

"Now this view is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. No untaught ordinary person bound by this fetter of views is freed from aging and death, from sorrows and lamentations. He is not freed from suffering, I say."

Do you get a sense? Unwise attention leads us into the thicket of views. The thicket of views is not always quite so baldly stated as that in our minds. But just that—even if it's not put into discursive thought—the sense: "I am like this." Or "Oh, now I'm really having a good sit." Or "This is how I've always been and this is how I always will be." Or "Oh, it's like that, but now I'm going to be like this. When I leave retreat and I'm just a walking bodhisattva, it's going to feel like this."

Any of this stuff—the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, unwise attention. It doesn't mean we're bad. It just means we suffer. And the more we pay attention to that with clinging, with belief, the more we're feeding that habit, those asavas.

All we need to do is turn around. How do we pay attention wisely? How do we uproot the asavas by seeing, in this first example? You can probably guess. Mindfulness. Sati. Bare attention—in other words, paying attention to what's arising totally without adding anything extra. Nothing. Just totally present, without creating a story, without mistaking perception for something else. Just being here.

An example from Krishnamurti—I just thought I'd move out of Theravada for a minute.

This is Krishnamurti: "When you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment, and then there is no room for fear, no room for contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

When you attend totally, there's no room for asava to arise. There's no room for confusion.

This simple example I use a lot: someone told me in a long retreat there was a repetitive sound in the meditation hall. I think it was like a clock up at the teacher's place ticking. And they said, "I was really experiencing deep samadhi, long sittings, and this sound just ruined it. I got completely lost for sittings after sittings, for days, in aversion. It ruined my samadhi. I was thinking, I can't believe they let that be here in such a deep retreat." It must have been a three-month retreat.

And finally—like, duh—they thought, "Oh, what's happening? Hearing, hearing." Even that clock's ticking and making such a lot of noise—unwise attention. Total attention is not just "hearing over there, it's unpleasant." Total self-abandonment into hearing, just as it is. And then if it's unpleasant, total self-abandonment to that. If aversion arises, a thought—"I can't believe it"—total self-abandonment to that.

And then she said, "The sound wasn't ruining my samadhi. My attachment was ruining my samadhi. My mind."

This is from the Buddha, from the Sutta Nipata. Someone asked the Buddha, "What is the state of peace?" He says, "Dry up the remains of your past and have nothing for your future. If you do not then cling to the present, then you go from place to place in peace."

Total presence. Don't bring in the past, don't bring in the future, don't cling to present. And that can just be in a moment. That's not something we have to hope for down the line—just that moment of wise attention. Yoniso manasikara.

Then he goes on, kind of to the arhat level: "There is a greed that fixes on the individual body-mind"—that sense of me, sakkaya ditthi. "When that greed has completely gone, then, Brahman, there will be no more inner poison drives. And without these you are immune from death."

So we just start in the moment. Just this moment of total attention. No past, no future. No clinging to present. No descriptions of present. No interpreting present. Just this moment. Yoniso manasikara. Then you can go from place to place in peace.

So I'll stop there for tonight and continue here next week.

Dry up the remains of your past and have nothing for your future. If you do not cling to the present, then you can go from place to place in peace. That is the state of peace.

CHAPTER 346

Wise Attention III

Carol Wilson · 1h07

In this final talk of her series on wise attention (yoniso manasikāra), Carol Wilson explores the remaining practical methods the Buddha taught for abandoning the āsavas—the deep tendencies toward craving, aversion, and delusion. She begins with patience (khanti), distinguishing it from grim endurance and connecting it to mettā, offering Patrul Rinpoche's three aspects: patience when wronged, patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma, and patience to face profound truth without fear.

Wilson then examines wise avoidance, using the Buddha's parable of the quail and falcon to illustrate staying within one's appropriate territory—the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna). She addresses the skillful removal of distracting thoughts, referencing the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta's five methods: substituting wholesome thoughts, examining dangers, redirecting attention, investigating causes, and applying firm resolution.

The talk culminates with the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga): mindfulness (sati), investigation (dhammavicaya), energy (vīriya), rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā). Wilson emphasizes that these factors arise naturally through wise attention and are grounded in virtue (sīla) and good friendship (kalyāṇamittatā). She offers practical guidance for recognizing when factors are out of balance and how to cultivate each through inclining the mind with resolution and interest.

Tonight I want to continue and hopefully finish talking about the understanding and cultivation of wise or appropriate attention—really a key cultivation that the Buddha says takes us to Nibbana.

I want to point out again that wise attention, the whole concept, is rooted in the fact that we can train our minds and hearts. I know sometimes it can feel like we're the helpless victims of the waves of mental states and physical experience that go on in a retreat. Even when we've been practicing a while, suddenly out of nowhere things arise. Training doesn't mean you just want to say "okay, back" and it goes away, as we know. But it does mean that we can cultivate where we choose to let the attention dwell. And where we choose to allow the attention, the mind, mana, to dwell—that becomes the inclination, the habit of mind.

We've spent all our lives, or many of us have spent a great part of our lives—what have we been cultivating? Where has the mind been dwelling, left to its own devices? I'll just leave that question for you to look at.

So we can train the mind. And as I talked about in previous sessions, when the Buddha is speaking about this concept of appropriate attention in the sutta that we've been using as our base, it's in terms of starving to the point of the absolute uprooting of the deepest, most subtle tendencies or inclinations of our mindstream to move in the direction of craving for sensuality, of craving for becoming, for being, for ignorance. This is, by definition, the way the Buddha often describes the arhat—one in whom all these tendencies have withered away.

I'm just reminding you, in this review section, of a sense of how this moment of āsava, or this tendency, can suddenly spring up in experience. I've gotten to where I love to see it on retreat where it's relatively harmless and you don't get yourself into too much trouble.

One yogi was describing to me during a three-month retreat how she was very deep into the practice and felt that she was really quite mindful. The mind was fairly equanimous. One day after breakfast was over, she was walking past the food table at the retreat center on the way to wash her dishes. At the end of the food table was a bowl of fruit. She was completely full—not hungry, not worried about later, thought she was quite mindful. But there was this moment of just seeing the orange in the bowl. And the next thing she knew, her hand just reached out and grabbed it. Where did that come from? That's the level of āsava. It's subtle, but it can manifest not so subtly, even when it seems that we're really pretty together.

Or the aversive one—I think Sarah mentioned this in her talk, or someone did—in terms of not killing. We can very deeply intend not to kill, but when you're just on that point of sleep and there's a mosquito buzzing around, and you kind of start, and there isn't a moment to consciously think "oh yes, I'm committed to not killing," and the hand just swats. And you feel terrible, but in that moment of swatting, that was the āsava, the tendency, just shooting up.

I say I love seeing this because if we're living or practicing under the sort of delusion that quite soon and quite easily everything's going to get calm and copacetic and this stuff isn't going to arise anymore, and then this happens, we get really discouraged. No, it's like, let's get real. Let's really see how subtle the tendencies are. Then, actually, I find much more appreciation—one, for why practice can be so hard. And that gives me more courage and more energy and more willingness to keep going. If I think it's just around the corner and one more experience and I've got it, then when what's just

around the corner is a wave of greed or lust or self-hatred, we're ready to pack it in. But if we really see, oh yeah, it's just working on deeper and deeper levels—can I summon up the mindfulness, the wise attention, the energy to be here? That's how the mind is trainable. That's what we're doing.

Every moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom from cultivating or strengthening greed, hatred, and confusion. And it is a moment of cultivating and developing wise attention, the factors of awakening.

As you remember, in this sutta about the exhaustion of all these tendencies, the Buddha spoke of seven different, very practical means in our experience—not just in deep meditation—that we can use wise attention, attention in relationship to what's happening, to retrain and redevelop the heart.

We talked about how the tendencies are abandoned by seeing, by insight, by that pure entry into emptiness of just perceiving what's here with nothing extra. We talked about how these tendencies are abandoned by restraint—satipaññā, mindfulness-wisdom at the sense doors. Not fearfulness of sense contact. Not walking around with your head in a bag, although you can try that. But just that moment of pure presence where the consciousness doesn't have to expand into proliferation and papañca and feeding, basically, the hindrances. That satipaññā starves the hindrances at that moment of sense contact.

And the third was how the āsavas can be abandoned by our wise attention to the attitude with which we use things. Remember how we relate to the way we use food, clothing, shelter, medicine—and for us as lay people, for some of us, how we relate to entertainment, going out, whatever. Remember, this is all in terms of not the outer appearance, but the intention with which we meet things. How we relate to these things—what relationship increases craving, hostility, confusion in our mind? What relationship decreases those things?

So you can't just say, "I know if I use less, I'll decrease craving." You might be increasing craving or decreasing craving, but making yourself totally crazed, increasing delusion. You can't just have a list and go—as I'm sure our venerable ordained sangha can tell us. Just having a list of precepts doesn't simply clean the mind of greed and craving, does it? Or does it? But it's a formidable list to use as a guideline to see how the mind is relating when it comes up against any of the precepts. We have our five, they have their eight or ten, he has his 227. It's something to be respected, taking that on.

So those are the first three. The fourth one is how these tendencies of mind, the habits, can be abandoned by endurance. Endurance is the common translation at this point, but I prefer patience because for me in English, endurance takes on the quality of something kind of grim, aversive—"I'll get through it"—but aren't your teeth kind of clenched when you're enduring? Whereas patience is an aspect of metta.

This is the way the Buddha described it: "Here a bhikkhu"—or anyone practicing, that's you—"reflecting wisely. There's cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with flies, bugs, wind, burning and creeping things, rain, unwelcome words, and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, wracking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life." He's moving way beyond that little knee pain.

Endurance or patience is that quality of open-hearted presence within whatever the experience is—just being there with mindfulness without adding anything extra. "Unwelcome words" doesn't lead to "I can't believe this" and on down the road. Instead: "Oh, unwelcome words feels like this." Racking, piercing, distressing, menacing to life—physical sensation feels like this.

Endurance also means connectedness of attention. Otherwise, it moves into that passive aversive avoidance: "Okay, I'll put up with this. In, out, in, out. Rising, falling, rising, falling. I'm being really mindful until it goes away." And then—ah—then you really open the field of attention.

Next time that really unpleasant noise arises or pain in your body, when it first arises—not when you're already beaten down and the mindfulness is very low, but when it first arises and you notice that "oh no, another hour of this"—just notice: it feels like this. Relax. Open your attention, open your energy field, open your cells and meet with totality of attention whatever that arising experience is. Not in order to achieve anything. Simply because that's what's arising. That's life. That's truth. That's the gateway to liberation in this present moment. It can't be anywhere else.

If you're waiting for this to go away before you pay attention, that is what you are strengthening in the habit of mind—waiting till it gets better. Well, as we all know, none of us are spring chickens here. We can really wait our whole life for it to get better before we truly commit to practice. And I don't think it just keeps getting better. I hate to tell you, especially body-wise, it just doesn't keep on getting better. So where are we going to wake up?

Patience can bring in a kind of resolve simply to be here. But the being here is just to open into the midst. We all know what that is; I don't need to talk about it much more. But the patience applies to both so-called external and internal phenomena. Some person acting a way we don't like. Our body-mind acting a way we don't like. Of course, who doesn't like it—that's the other question.

I do want to read you this from Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. He's talking about arousing bodhicitta, but he mentions three aspects of patience. These three lines have stayed with me when I'm in really difficult retreat. They would come to me—not just like "okay, I can keep going," but they would totally open my heart and mind.

The first is transcendent patience, to have patience when wronged by others. The second is the patience to bear hardships for the Dharma, all the things that happen. And the third is the patience to face the profound truth without fear. Just calling up those lines when anything is going on that you don't like.

And just when you're thinking, "Oh yes, I can find the patience to bear hardships for the Dharma," and you're just there, moment to moment—in that moment of cultivating patience, what's withering? The tendency to aversion, the tendency to greed. What's strengthening? Metta, mindfulness, clear seeing, all the factors of awakening.

Now, the next one—you would think, why didn't he put this first?—is the tendencies that are abandoned by avoiding difficult situations. Of course there's an obvious reason why this isn't first: because we'd much prefer to avoid than to endure. And sometimes I think it's tricky both ways to know what's avoidable.

The Buddha says, "Reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu avoids a savage elephant, a savage bull, a savage dog, a snake, a stump, a cliff, a cesspool, a sewer. He avoids sitting on unsuitable seats, frequenting unsuitable friends"—so that wise companions in the life might believe that he would be more drawn into unwise action.

So what can be abandoned by avoiding really means using our wise discrimination to see what experiences are just plain dangerous, and what others—these are my words now, not the Buddha's—are just plain stupid, experiences we don't need to keep going back to over and over and over.

Say, for example, you're trying to sit outside because you think, "I need to be with nature," and it's lightning, and the mosquitoes are biting you, and you are filled with aversion, just filled with aversion. No mindfulness. It's getting stronger and stronger. Do you think this is helpful in that moment? What is being cultivated? We're not talking about a moment of aversion, but just feeding, feeding, feeding. There can be other

times when being outside could be totally appropriate because you're just looking at fear, and by being there and noticing the mental state, calm and acceptance and equanimity are growing. It's really about looking at what's being fed.

There's another sutta that I like very much that to me expresses this—knowing what's appropriate for deepening our understanding and practice, and what is more useful to avoid. It's a parable, really a simile, where the Buddha talks about a falcon who suddenly swooped down and caught a quail in the air. While she was carrying the quail away, the quail started moaning and saying, "Oh, stupid me, it serves me right. If I had kept to my own natural territory, the territory of my kind, today I would have been safe. But I went outside of my natural territory, and you caught me."

The falcon said—she was not particularly proud—"Well, what's your natural territory?" And the quail said, "It's a field that's been all turned up by the plow"—a bare field with many clods of earth, really bumpy and uneven. So the falcon, not out of pride or anything, let the quail go and said, "Go ahead, go to your natural territory, but I'll still be able to catch you." It wasn't boastful, just saying, "I know I can still do it."

She let the quail out. The quail went into this field and stood by a clod of earth. The falcon dove down toward the quail, but just before she got there, the quail jumped into the clod of earth and the falcon missed her, hit the ground, and killed herself.

What the Buddha is saying is: stay within your own reach, stay within appropriate territory. And of course he says that for monks or for those practicing, roaming outside of one's own pasture, one's own territory, means getting really caught in sense desire. What's staying within our territory is the four foundations of mindfulness—sati at the sense doors, rather than just spinning our gears on wanting and reacting to sense pleasures.

But I think that can actually be expanded a lot in the ways that we practice. There's a reason we come on intensive retreat to such a conducive environment. It's a choice not to have CNN going in the corner of the meditation hall. There's a reason we don't have internet access data ports in each of your rooms. What's really helpful for practice?

Sometimes I know people—all of us—can be confronted with something quite difficult in practice, internally or externally, or when we go home again, and think, "Well, I should be able to be purely mindful no matter what the conditions. It's okay, I can do whatever I want when I go home, because if I really could practice, I could be mindful in any conditions whatsoever." Completely unrealistic.

And sometimes on retreat—the Buddha doesn't so specifically speak of this, but I want to bring it up—there can be times when what we need to avoid isn't so much an outer savage elephant or a cesspool, but something that's arising internally. For example, a sudden release of old traumatic memory that we weren't familiar with. Sometimes that happens, and it comes up so sudden and so strong that basically the mindfulness does not have equal strength to the intensity of the terror, for example, that might come up with that memory.

Of course we attempt to be mindful, to be present, but what starts happening is it spirals way out of control. And by out of control—first it feels out of control, that's okay. Way out of control is really where you've lost any mindfulness, except there's a thing in the back of your mind: "I should be able to get through this."

So it's push, push, push, and the whole thing is just getting more and more into the realm of feeding fear. Usually way before that time, the teacher is begging you—begging you on hands and knees—to sit less, not to push so much. And you're thinking, "That's because they think I'm a wimp, but I'll show them. I'll just really get through this." Right?

There are times when wise avoidance really means turning your attention elsewhere. Because in the moment, what's really being strengthened by the way you're practicing is willpower, terror, anger, or fear. And you need to turn the attention elsewhere to rebalance, reconnect with mindfulness, reconnect with calm, reconnect with the wholesome energies, and then again come back and meet.

The whole field of skillful means is in many ways, I think, contained in this learning of when it's appropriate to avoid. But again, it's in the intention. You come in here and it's hotter than you like, and you think, "I can't turn on the AC, but I don't like to be with the heat, so I'm getting out of here." And the intention, if you tune in, is completely aversive. That's not skillful means. That is not abandoning the tendencies. The tendencies are running the show. That's the time to sit here and sweat.

As Ajahn Sumedho said when he talks about patience—if you listen to his talks—practicing in Asia is wonderful because you get endless talks about patience and avoidance. He was giving one talk about the endless heat in the hot season in Thailand, or the rainy season where it rains constantly but it's about twenty degrees hotter and more humid. He said he's just sweating through the robes day after day, just sweating through these thick robes. And then he said he'd finally think, "I just can't bear this. I just can't bear it." And then the next moment you'd find, well, you could really bear it a little longer.

Have you ever come up to that? "I just can't bear this." And then you go, "Oh, can't bear it. It feels like this." And then you're just there again. So patience would be the first line. Avoidance is later. But we must see what really does not contribute to practice. And of course, living much more simply, avoiding having sense pleasures hit you in the face every time you turn around—because craving is just so strong that we shouldn't expect we're suddenly going to be free of it.

Remember what Shankara said: that craving is intensified if we let our thoughts dwell upon sense objects and seek temporary satisfaction in the objective world. As Thich Nhat Hanh describes it, sometimes he would come into his house and find he had left all his windows open. The wind had come and just blown everything all over the place, topsy-turvy. Come in, close the windows, straighten up. He says we're like that. It's as if all our sense doors are the windows and we just walk around with them wide open saying, "Yes, everything, just come on in." "I should be able to be mindful of all of it." Or maybe we're not even trying to be mindful, but we just let ourselves be bombarded.

He says—and I was just reading this little section from him—that at that time in France, workers were demonstrating to have five hours less a week of work. He asks, but what are people going to do with that five hours? Go home and watch something stupid on TV that just increases agitation or boredom because we're so afraid to be alone.

So when the mindfulness isn't that strong, when the energy is low, when the mind is agitated, then we shut the windows. We come to somewhere like this where we're not continually bombarded, to cultivate the wholesome factors, to learn how to do that. And then when we go out, why is it so agitating? One of the reasons, when you leave a retreat—sure, partly it's the concentration—but partly our sense doors have gotten so cleansed, so much more purified. We're so much more sensitized to what's actually coming in. And it's appalling, the experience internally.

Once I left a retreat and stopped off in Walmart. I tell you, it was like a vortex of suffering walking into Walmart trying to buy some stupid thing. Oh, wow. Now, I'm not saying we're practicing to be unable to function in the world. No. But it's to learn how to use wise attention, to make our choices about when to open the windows—or when we have no choice but they're open, how to be mindful, how not to just let that sweep us away. And so for practice, we need to have some more protected environment, some way of avoiding, so we can learn how the mind works.

The sixth one the Buddha speaks about is tendencies, āsavas, habits of mind that can be abandoned by removing. He's speaking particularly about thought here. And again, it's interesting because we sometimes take this in an inaccurate way, one based in aversion. He says, "Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, does not endure a thought arisen that's affected by sensual desire, by ill will, or by cruelty. He abandons it." Now, this language is why we tend to take this a little unhelpfully. "He abandons it, removes it, does away with it, and annihilates it."

So that language can certainly feed all too easily into "get out the hammer and whack that thought." Bad thought, bad thought, bad me, shouldn't have it.

Now, I don't need to tell you that this is not what the Buddha is talking about. But it's very interesting, because what he is pointing to, in my understanding, is on a more subtle level of wise attention. On the level of thought, we certainly are not always so balanced in our mindfulness and concentration that we are able to see each thought just as it arises when it has no energy. There are times like that, right, where even a thought that might be the most cruel or lustful or aversive just comes up with nothing behind it. Poof. Like Joseph says, "And the sky is blue, you know, I really hate everybody and everything, and the sky is blue"—and they're equally empty. Nothing to do about that. No need to do anything.

But there are times when a thought comes laden with the intention, the motivation of ill will, cruelty, self-hatred, confusion. We may not notice it at the beginning, but whenever we notice it, this is where he's talking about wise attention. Not to endure it, not to be—what comes to mind is Larry Rosenberg, who is hysterical, mimicking a kind of New Age way of dealing with kilesas: "We must massage our kilesas. We must be kind to our kilesas." No, no, the Buddha is not saying, "Oh yes, nice ill will, you know."

There's a point where, with a balance of wisdom mind, again as satipaññā, we can summon up resolution and clear seeing in relationship to these really harmful—harmful to us—unskillful trains of thought that, left alone, are the patterns feeding the tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion. And it's really talking about resolution. We really can see that thought and go, "No, not now." Not in the beginning of a retreat when we're bombarded, no. But when there's a certain degree of mindfulness and balance—and this comes and goes, as you know—we often just sit back and wait a little more than we need to. Because we can have such a tendency to get into self-judging, sometimes I think we're a little leery of calling on resolution. And we just turn into mushy meditation.

Resolution is a powerful force in the mind. "No, not now." Like if you get into some kind of VR—Vipassana Romance or Vendetta—where every time you think of or see the person, there's craving or aversion. Or you don't even see them, you just think about them. It's so unpleasant. And it's so draining. People do often feel quite victimized by that, or fall into hatred of it. But you can really say, as soon as you notice it, at whatever point, "No, not going there." It's not "bad me, ugly me." Not going there, no.

A very clear example of this in my life: quite some years ago I came down with some autoimmune disease that was going in not a good direction. One of these things where nobody really knew how it would go or how bad it could be. It could have gotten really quite crippling. In the early days of it, when the mind would start going, "I'll never be able to take a walk again"—at that point I couldn't walk very well—"I'll never be able to blah, blah..." Fear and distress and grief. These thoughts always projecting what was going to happen or could be.

That went on a week or two, seeing all the doctors—and it doesn't help, that train of thought. Really, because they give you a list starting with the worst possibility and then going down from there. But after a while, I saw the mind doing this, and I thought, "I don't know. I have no clue." And as soon as my mind started going, "It's going to be..."—I don't know. Stay right here.

I remember once leaning down to wash out a bathtub. It was really hard to lean down, hard to reach, painful. And the mind started... No. Don't know. Right here. Just feel stiffness and patience.

That was a lifesaver. I mean, that was absolute—just this resolution. You don't need to endure or allow those thoughts to keep going when you have sufficient mindfulness to see it. But it takes that willingness to, just every single time you notice, say, "Okay, no, not now. I've got to have that orange? No, not now."

Wanting feels like this. It's not saying I don't feel wanting—it's just not going into those thoughts.

Play with it. When you notice it starting to move from balanced resolution to aversion, you may notice it right away if you're really present. It has a whole different contextual feel. If you don't notice it right away, believe me, you'll notice it soon enough, because you're feeding the aversion and you'll end up frustrated or in self-judgment or angry or lustful or whatever. Rather than judge that, you start right then: "Ah, lust feels like this." Each moment's a new moment.

But this is extremely powerful. And there's a whole sutta, a different sutta, that I wanted to talk about, but I'll never get through the factors of enlightenment, so I'm just going to mention it. It deals directly with the tendencies abandoned by removing, which is called the Removal of Distracting Thoughts. I'm sure a lot of you know it, where the Buddha lists five different methods for dealing with basically distracting thoughts—thoughts that are coming in and taking you away from meditation. And again, it's so practical. He realizes everyone isn't sitting in such sublime mindfulness that you barely have to advert attention to the thought and it goes.

I'm just going to mention the five without elaborating, in case something hits you. The first one—all of these are for when just sati, mindfulness of the thought, isn't enough. When you say, "Oh, ill will arising. Ill will arising. Ugh. Ill will arising. Ugh." And finally you really have to do something else or it's taking over.

The first is to simply move the attention away from the unwholesome by substituting a wholesome thought—in this way, substituting metta for ill will. Not the phony "yes, I pretend, I accept," but if you're in ill will, I find metta not to the person I'm feeling ill will for, but metta to myself feeling the ill will. Or if it's cruelty, compassion. Or if it's delusion, then actually reflecting on some inspiring dhammic theme can switch the train of thought. It goes into a lot of detail. So one is changing the attention, substituting the wholesome for the unwholesome. I call it changing the channel.

The second one would be with discerning wisdom—not so much thinking about, but by looking, noticing, and examining the danger in that unwholesome train of thought. So for example, anger or ill will. I remember one retreat I was sitting where somebody called me out of retreat when I was on staff at IMS to discuss some business that could definitely have waited three days. And that person definitely knew better than to do that but was just in his own little world. And it just got all this anger going, and self-righteousness, and the whole yada yada. And I kept practicing with it, tuning into the anger, until I really saw how just letting this run like this is feeding it. And it's so much suffering. And it's dangerous, because what's happening is feeding my belief in my righteousness, feeding the tendency for anger to take over, feeding all these unwholesome thoughts about a really good person. It was nothing wholesome. And whether I was right or not, who cared? What difference did it make? And in the scheme of things, it was such a little thing.

So having some reflection through experientially tuning into the dangers of just going after that pleasant fantasy every time it comes up—not the dangers of being a bad person, but actually what's being fed by doing that. And what's the ultimate outcome of feeding that craving, that ill will? That's how we're going to be in life.

The third, when these two don't work, is to just try to forget those thoughts altogether—not even substituting something wholesome that's relational, but just going to something neutral. When we say "steady the mind," just come back to the breath. Just forget it and come back to the breath, or go to hearing, or go to body sensations. Just advert your attention elsewhere.

The fourth is to give, again, some dhamma vicaya, some investigation to looking at and stilling the cause of these thoughts. So for example, you keep getting into pleasant fantasy, pleasant fantasy. You notice it and are present, but you don't see how you're getting into it. And you look a little closer with investigation and see—oh, an image.

It's pleasant. You didn't notice pleasant, and you're off. Noticing that cause with mindfulness right there—that just stills the whole thing.

Or for me, I notice with anger, when I really get to feeling it, underneath it there's some hurt. When I'm able to just feel the hurt with mindfulness, that whole train of angry thoughts just is stilled, is stopped.

And the fifth, which everyone always likes the most: "If there's still unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then with the teeth clenched and the tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush the unwholesome state of mind with a wholesome state of mind."

But what he's basically saying is you never give up. You never just go, "Okay, take me." You keep on trying—but with a wholesome state of mind. I will leave you to explore how that's possible.

And I will just end this section. This is how he ends the sutta: "This bhikkhu then is called a master of the courses of thought. He will think whatever thought he wishes to think, and he will not think any thought he does not wish to think."

Can you imagine? Wouldn't that be something? "He has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with complete penetration of conceit he has made an end of suffering." So that's a definition of arhat. Wouldn't that be nice? Just that possibility—a master of the courses of thought. And remember, everything he says: if it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so.

The last one, which is of course four talks in itself, so I can only just highlight—and I know this is a lot of information. Please don't try to remember it all. I'm just hopeful that any particular piece that is concurrent with something happening in your practice

right now or in the next days has a way of going in and popping up in our mind at the right time. So trust that. Please don't try to remember all of this, because that actually just blocks the whole process of mindfulness and the surrender into the process.

So the seventh way is the asavas, or tendencies, that can be abandoned by developing. And what he's talking about developing are the seven factors of awakening, the bojjhangas, the factors of enlightenment.

These factors of enlightenment, on one level, are spoken of as coming to full perfection in a completely awakened person. But the Buddha is also quite clear that as we practice and develop the four foundations of mindfulness, simply by steadily cultivating the four foundations of mindfulness, we cultivate and bring to perfection the seven factors of enlightenment.

These are seven factors of mind that all of you are experiencing from time to time—not just from time to time, but a lot. They can come and go in strength and in balance relative to each other. And it's a very useful kind of self-guidance in terms of your practice. If you're feeling off, just run through the seven and see if one is really low or if some are really out of balance.

So these seven are: mindfulness, of course, the balancing factor of all. And then there are three energizing factors: dhamma vicaya, or investigation of dhammas (this is not analyzing, and I'll explain each one); energy, viriya; and rapture, piti. Those are the energizing three.

And then there are three that are tranquilizing: samadhi, tranquility itself, and equanimity, upekkha.

And for those who get stuck in always evaluating your practice by samadhi, you may notice it's one of seven. All seven are equally important, and really when our practice deepens and develops is when all seven are coming into balance and strengthening together.

As the Buddha said, the proximate or immediate cause for each of these seven is wise attention, appropriate attention. And that's what's so fascinating. I want to read you a couple of things about wise attention, what all seven are based on.

He says, "Bhikkhus, whatever beings there are which assume the four postures"—in other words, whatever beings stand, walk, sit, and lie down from time to time, they're all assuming those four postures based upon the earth, established upon the earth, right? Couldn't do it without the earth.

"So just as the postures are based upon earth, a bhikkhu cultivates and develops the seven factors of enlightenment based upon virtue, established upon sila." So the very first requisite is virtue, morality, purity of action and speech.

It doesn't mean you never did anything bad, but really reflecting on this when you're practicing is the foundation for the cultivation of the seven factors.

More specifically, the Buddha speaks about wise attention as an internal factor. He says: "As to internal factors, I do not see any other factor that is so helpful for the arising of the seven factors of enlightenment as this—careful attention." No other internal factor is as important for the arising of all seven as careful attention. When a bhikkhu is accomplished in careful attention, in all the ways we're talking about, it is expected that he will develop and cultivate the seven factors of enlightenment. It just follows.

And this is also very interesting. "Bhikkhus, as to external factors, I do not see any other factor that is so helpful for the arising of the seven factors of enlightenment as this—good friendship." When a bhikkhu has a good friend, it is expected that he will develop and cultivate the seven factors. By good friend, he basically means someone wise.

For each of the seven factors, there are also lists of supporting factors in the commentaries that we need to give wise attention to in order to develop and increase each quality. In each case, one supporting factor is to avoid certain kinds of association. For concentration, for example, we avoid the company of unconcentrated, scattered, rough people and cultivate being friends with wise, calm, concentrated people. This applies to each of the seven factors. So externally he sees no other factor so helpful.

Being here, when we talk about Sangha as a refuge, we mean not only the Sangha of awakened noble ones but our friends, our colleagues on the Dhamma path. It's not good friendship like the person you call up and pour your heart out to. It's association with the wise, association with the mindful, association with the virtuous.

How fortunate are we in this world. Given the world as it is—it's the same as when you came here, not much better, not much worse, about the same—to be able to associate for such protracted periods of time with good friends is incredibly fortunate. Use that. It's the base. That and virtue is the base from which we can cultivate wise attention, from which the seven factors of awakening develop.

So I will briefly name the factors and some of the additional supporting conditions.

Mindfulness, of course, is the overbalancing factor. You can't really have too much mindfulness. Whenever you're out of balance and you don't know what's going on, you're always safe to come back to mindfulness. As you know, that's the quality of clear seeing—knowing what's happening, not superficially. There's an image of throwing a cork on a river and it bounces around on the top. You throw a rock in and it sinks. That's mindfulness. You all know mindfulness; we've talked about it a lot.

Remember when we talked about feeding and starving the hindrances with wise attention? It's just the same with the seven factors. So feeding each of these seven factors —what do we give wise attention to? The first cause for mindfulness is mindfulness itself. One moment of mindfulness is really the immediate cause for the next moment of mindfulness to arise. We give wise attention to one moment of mindfulness meeting what's happening right here, always the fallback, the most important.

Additionally, we avoid the unmindful and associate with the mindful, developing mindfulness in the broader areas. Each of the seven factors ends with this instruction: give wise attention to inclining the mind towards that quality. This really shows us that we can cultivate and train the mind. You don't just sit here and think, "Someday, some moment, I know mindfulness will arise. If I sit and walk long enough, from somewhere it will come." Inclining the mind means making mindfulness a priority. You do little things like saying, "I'm really going to try to be so mindful just this one stretch of walking," or "I'm going to be as mindful as possible as I get up from sitting and move out of the hall." Inclining the mind with that resolution and interest toward mindfulness is enormously powerful wise intention.

The second factor is Dhamma-vicaya, or investigation. This is not thinking about things. It's described as the quality where, when it's present, the mind lights up the field of awareness. It's like walking into a dark room and turning on a flashlight, and you can suddenly see what's there. It has, to me, a quality of interest that's not thinking about things, but in shining that light of mindfulness, it really allows discerning insight to arise.

For example, there's a sensation, you're struggling, you're mindful, and in that next moment—oh, tingling, coming and going, it's impermanent. That light of Dhamma-vicaya, of investigation, lets you see clearly, lights up the field of awareness, illuminates so that you can see the true nature of experience in that moment. It dissipates confusion.

It's an energizing factor. I find for myself it's one I often forget to look for, but when things are feeling flat and I think, "Well, everything's going okay, but it's so... what's the matter?" I'll look and see there's not that investigation. I'm kind of meeting experience with mindfulness, but just like, "Oh yeah, oh yeah." And you can just bring a little interest and it lights up the field in that moment.

The first cause of investigation is, guess what, mindfulness—active mindfulness that connects with the moment of experience so that there is direct perception. And this, again, requires wise attention directed towards mindfulness. So really, you see, if you're having wise attention towards mindfulness, there will be mindfulness, which will also naturally lead to dhammavicaya, investigation of states. It happens by itself.

And again, there are additional supports to which we can direct wise attention. I cannot list them all, but among them is avoiding foolish people, being with wise people, cleanliness—keeping the internal sense bases, keeping yourself clean and orderly, and keeping your environment clean and orderly. Very interesting, but it tends to help the mind light up. And again, a total commitment, inclining the mind in the direction of interest.

The third is virya, courageous effort, which has the characteristic of supporting us. Its function is to support us and give us a kind of refreshment of mind that helps us be with the difficult. Difficult pain or emotional material wears us down. Sayadaw U Pandita gives the example of a house, an old shack that's falling apart, and you prop it up with strong boards so it comes back erect and is strong again. That is how virya works. It's not just that we're a whirlwind of energy. But to bring in energy refreshes the mind so—ah yes, it's been withered, but you come back up again and can be with what is difficult.

When the energy is low, or when we're really feeling worn down and the mind is withering away, he gives a whole series of additional supports. Of course, wise attention and commitment to energy is the first cause, but he gives a series of actual reflections that can help arouse the energy that gives the mind the freshness to be with what's difficult.

Such reflections include contemplating our precious opportunity, saying how fortunate we are. Reflecting on states of misery—it's like, "Oh, this is just too hard. I don't want to do it. I just can't be with it anymore." And then you think about what the alternative is. Sometimes it's, "Okay, I think I'll pay attention now." Reflecting on noble ones, teachers, awakened ones, people that really inspire you. Reflecting on appreciation for the support that allows us to practice—the support of staff, the support of dana.

This isn't just for ordained Sangha, but for all of us. When I was a nun, I reflected on how I was fed and clothed and housed by people who loved the Dhamma and wanted me to be able to practice. We can turn that into a guilt trip in the West. It's not a guilt trip. It's a profound, energizing reflection. Like, "Yes, what an opportunity. It's so beautiful, this dana." And that brings a natural energy. Not a should, but you become filled with energy. "Okay, I can sit with this knee pain, this self-hatred, another couple of minutes"—whatever.

So there's much reflection: remembering the greatness of the Buddha, of teachers, appreciating the people we're practicing with. And again, inclining the mind towards resolution. Not just, "I can't do it. It's too hard." But really saying, "Okay, just one more step." That's all we need. One more breath. One more moment. Not the whole day. I don't know if I can ever think of a time when I couldn't have really honestly said, "I can be with this one more breath, one more step"—if I'm just willing.

And then there's piti, or rapture. Rapture is a funny word in English. Piti is a mental state. It has the characteristic of happiness, delight, satisfaction. When piti is there in your experience, you're really into it. You're interested in what's happening. There's a lot of energy. Piti actually manifests a lot as energy.

The mind feels very light and energized. The body becomes very light and agile. There was all this pain, everything felt heavy and cramped—and then all of a sudden you're just sitting there and you go, "What happened?" Same position. You can even find that same sensation that was just driving you nuts, but it just doesn't matter anymore. The body is very light.

Often piti, besides this joyous interest, manifests as physical sensations—lightness, floating, sometimes really quite bizarre physical sensations. It can be like way too much energy, out of balance. You might find yourself literally flipping all around the room. And you come to the teacher and they say, "Oh yeah, that's piti." And you think, "This is piti? Enough already!" It's out of balance, but it has a lot of physical, energetic manifestation. If you really look closely, you might initially think it's unpleasant, but when it's truly piti, it's not unpleasant. Your mind might be reacting, but if you really look, it's not unpleasant.

The proximate cause is—can you guess? Wise attention. Wise attention to wholesome feelings, wholesome thoughts associated with Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Actually, this is one of the definitions of right effort. If you read or hear the way the Buddha defines right effort, it's actually exactly the same as wise attention.

The four right efforts are: zeal or energy for the abandoning of arisen unwholesome states; zeal for the non-arising of unarisen unwholesome states—meaning an unwholesome state has not arisen, and there's a zeal to keep it that way; zeal for the arising of unarisen wholesome states; and zeal for the continuance and strengthening of arisen wholesome states.

So wise effort and wise attention isn't just about getting rid of what's unwholesome. It's about recognizing the wholesome and giving that attention. That's also wise attention. Giving attention to the wholesome when it's arising is one of the things that leads us into piti, into rapture.

Again, there are many possibilities. If you want to look up all these different supportive areas to pay wise attention to for each of the factors, Sayadaw U Pandita's book *In This Very Life* is a great resource because it's all collated there in the chapter on the seven factors of enlightenment. Trying to remember it all isn't helpful, but if you're exploring a particular factor or feeling you can't really sense a particular one in yourself, it might be helpful to read what the supporting factors are—between five and eleven for each of them—and explore those in your practice, seeing how wise attention can help cultivate them. It's really quite scientific and accessible.

So again, as with all the factors, inclining the mind towards piti—which provides the energy to be mindful, which leads to concentration. When there's some concentration and mindfulness, when the mind has to be relatively clear of kilesa, that's when piti can arise. There won't be strong piti if the mind is also wracked with greed or aversion or delusion. They just don't go together.

So those are the three energizing factors, and you can see how all of them—piti is hugely energizing, energy of course, and investigation is also energizing. They need to be balanced with the three calming factors.

I'm going to go a little bit over tonight. I won't go too much over. But if you're really hurting and can't sit anymore and want to leave, it's okay—it won't hurt my feelings. Let me briefly name the other three, since I won't be here next week to finish.

The three calming factors are tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Tranquility is very important. We often don't recognize it. It has the quality of non-agitation of body and mind, of coolness. It takes the heat out of the restlessness of mind. I think perhaps we don't quite recognize the power of restlessness. The way Sayadaw U Pandita described it—I didn't realize this, but as soon as I read it, it made total sense—restlessness, the scattered mind, is a very powerful state. It has the quality of being able to infect

other mental states that arise at the same time. He gives a specific example of samadhi, of concentration. You could be quite restless and there's samadhi, but it's infected with that restlessness. So it's not really wise samadhi. The mind can be very focused on something but jumping all over the place.

When there's this restless quality that infects other mental states, that's when we don't really quite have control of our speech and actions. This is how, as a yogi, you think you're being mindful and suddenly you say something or do something that just flirts out. Or you suddenly do something and later you wonder, "How could I have done that? I knew better." We all do that. Or you're just acting out in unskillful ways, even though it's very subtle. This is a manifestation of restlessness.

Tranquility—that cool calmness, non-agitation of mind and body—cools this out. Again, wise attention is the proximate cause: wise attention to wholesome mental states, wise effort. When you notice the mind is restless, you can give attention more to singularity of experience rather than running after the restlessness. Give attention to calmness. Just be with the breath, for example. Just feel the stillness of your body and don't let yourself move. Let that stillness of body bring in stillness of mind. Incline the mind towards peacefulness. We often don't recognize the restlessness and let it run the show.

Samadhi, which is not necessarily extended in time, has the quality of non-scatteredness—that factor of mind, of attention, which really stands on whatever is arising, just right there with that sensation of breath, that emotion, that image. It's just right there without wavering at all, even if it's just for a moment. It sinks into it, still, calm, stays there.

Samadhi can be on changing objects, so it doesn't have that sense of absorption in one thing, which is also samadhi on an unchanging object. But when there's samadhi, even though the arising and passing objects are changing, each moment of mindfulness has that steadiness, that immovable quality, that really connecting and sinking in.

One other interesting aspect of samadhi—it's sort of like restlessness in reverse—is that when samadhi is present in the mind, it has the function of collecting together whatever other mental states are arising simultaneously. When we talk about the collection of mind, the unification of mind, it's a real power of mind. This is a function of samadhi.

CHAPTER 347

Wise Attention 3 of 3

Carol Wilson · 1h12

> *In this concluding talk on wise attention (yoniso manasikāra), Carol Wilson examines the final methods the Buddha taught for abandoning the āsavas—the deep tendencies toward craving and delusion. She explores patience (khanti) as an aspect of mettā rather than grim endurance, skillful avoidance of situations that feed unwholesome states, and the active removal of distracting thoughts through resolution and wise discrimination.*
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> *The heart of this teaching centers on developing the seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅgā): mindfulness (sati), investigation of dhammas (dhamma-vicaya), energy (vīriya), rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā). Wilson explains how these factors naturally arise through the cultivation of the four foundations of mindfulness, and how wise attention serves as the proximate cause for each. She emphasizes the importance of balancing the three energizing factors with the three calming factors, using mindfulness as the central balancing element.*
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> *Drawing from the Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta on removing distracting thoughts and Paṭrul Rinpoche's teachings on three types of patience, Wilson offers practical guidance for working with difficult mental states. She highlights how virtue (sīla) and good friendship (kalyāṇa-mittatā) form the essential foundation for this cultivation, and how inclining the mind toward wholesome qualities actively trains the heart toward liberation.*

Tonight I want to continue and hopefully finish talking about the understanding and cultivation of wise or appropriate attention—really a key cultivation that the Buddha says takes us to Nibbana.

I want to point out again that wise attention, the whole concept, is rooted in the fact that we can train our minds and hearts. I know sometimes it can feel like we're the helpless victims of the waves of mental states and physical experience that arise on retreat. Even when we've been practicing a while, things can suddenly appear out of nowhere. Training doesn't mean you just once say, "Okay, back," and it goes away, as we know. But it does mean that we can cultivate where we choose to let the attention dwell. And where we choose to allow the attention—the mind, mana—to dwell, that becomes the inclination, the habit of mind.

We've spent all our lives, well, many of us have spent a great part of our lives... what have we been cultivating? Where has the mind been dwelling, left to its own devices? I'll just leave that question for you to look at.

We can train the mind. As I talked about in previous sessions, when the Buddha speaks about this concept of appropriate attention in the sutta we've been using as our base, it's in terms of starving to the point of absolute uprooting the deepest, most subtle tendencies or inclinations of our mindstream to move in the direction of craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for being, and ignorance. This is, by definition, how the Buddha often describes the arhat: one in whom all these tendencies have withered away.

I'm reminding you—this is the review section—of how this moment of asava, this tendency, can suddenly spring up in experience. I've gotten to where I love to see it on retreat, where it's relatively harmless and you don't get yourself into too much trouble. One yogi described to me during a three-month retreat how she was very deep into the practice and felt she was really quite mindful. The mind was fairly equanimous. She watched herself one day after breakfast was over, walking past the food table to get to where you wash your dishes. At the end of the food table was the bowl of fruit. She was completely full—not hungry, not worried about later, thought she was quite mindful. But there was this moment of just seeing the orange in the bowl, and the next thing she knew, her hand just reached out and grabbed it. Where did that come from? That's the level of asava. It's subtle, but it can manifest not so subtly, even when it seems that we're really quite together.

Or the aversive one—how in terms of not killing, we can very deeply intend not to kill. But when you're just on that point of sleep and there's the mosquito buzzing around, and you kind of startle, there isn't a moment to consciously think, "Oh yes, I'm committed to not killing." The hand just swats, and you feel terrible. But in that moment of swatting, that was the asava, the tendency just shooting up.

I say I love seeing it because if we're living or practicing under the delusion that quite soon and quite easily everything's going to get calm and copacetic and this stuff isn't going to arise anymore, then when this happens, we get really discouraged. No, it's like—let's get real. Let's really see how subtle the tendencies are. Actually, I find much more appreciation in myself, first, for why practice can be so hard, and that gives me more courage and more energy and more willingness to keep going. If I think, "Well, it's just around the corner, one more experience and I've got it," then when what's just around the corner is a wave of greed or lust or self-hatred, we're ready to pack it in. But

if we really see, "Oh yes, it's working on deeper and deeper levels—can I summon up the mindfulness, the wise attention, the energy to be here?" That's how the mind is trainable. That's what we're doing.

Every moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom from cultivating or strengthening greed, hatred, and confusion. And it is a moment of cultivating and developing wise attention, the factors of awakening.

As you remember in this sutta about the exhaustion of all these tendencies, the Buddha spoke of seven different, very practical means—in our experience, not just in deep meditation—that we can use wise attention in relationship to what's happening to retrain and redevelop the heart.

We talked about how the tendencies are abandoned by seeing, by insight, by that pure entry into emptiness of just perceiving what's here with nothing extra. We talked about how these tendencies are abandoned by restraint—satipañña, mindfulness and wisdom at the sense doors. Not fearfulness of sense contact, not walking around with your head in a bag (although you can try that), but just that moment of pure presence. Then consciousness doesn't have to expand into proliferation and papañca and feeding, basically, the hindrances. That satipañña starves the hindrances at that moment of sense contact.

The third was how the asavas can be abandoned by our wise attention to the attitude with which we use things. Remember how we relate to the way we use food, clothing, shelter, medicine. And for us as laypeople, how we relate to entertainment, going out, whatever. Remember, this is all in terms of not the outer appearance but the intention with which we meet things. How we relate to these things—what relationship increases craving, hostility, confusion in our mind? What relationship decreases those things?

You can't just say, "I know if I use less, I'll decrease craving." You might be increasing craving or decreasing craving but making yourself totally crazed, increasing delusion. You can't just have a list and go through it, as I'm sure our venerable ordained sangha can tell us. Just having a list of precepts doesn't clean the mind out of greed and craving, does it? But it's a formidable list to use as a guideline, to see how the mind is relating when it comes up against any of the precepts.

We have our five precepts, they have their eight or ten, he has his 227. It's something to be respected, taking that on.

So those are the first three. I really think I'm going to get through four tonight, so I'll be a little more brief with the first three.

The fourth one is how these tendencies of mine, these habits, can be abandoned by endurance—that's the common translation at this point. But I prefer patience, because for me in English, endurance takes on the quality of something grim, aversive, "I'll get through it." Aren't your teeth kind of clenched when you're enduring? Whereas patience is an aspect of mettā.

When we talk about endurance, this is how the Buddha described it: "Here a bhikkhu"—or anyone practicing, that's you—"reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with flies, bugs, wind, burning and creeping things, rain, unwelcome words, and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, wracking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life." He's moving way beyond that little knee pain.

I don't want to spend a lot of time on this because we talk about it often when we discuss mindfulness. It's that quality of open-hearted presence within whatever the experience is—just being there with mindfulness without adding anything extra. Unwelcome words? Oh, unwelcome words feels like this. Racking, piercing, distressing, menacing to life, physical sensation? It feels like this.

Endurance also means connectedness of attention. Otherwise it moves into that passive aversive avoidance: "Okay, I'll put up with this. In, out, in, out, rising, falling, rising, falling. I'm being really mindful until it goes away." And then—ah—then you really open the field of attention.

Next time a really unpleasant noise arises, or pain in your body, when it first arises—not when you're already beaten down and the mindfulness is very low, but when it first arises and you notice that "oh no, another hour of this"—just notice: it feels like this. Relax. Open your attention. Open your energy field. Open yourself and meet with the totality of attention whatever that arising experience is. Not in order to accomplish anything. Simply because that's what's arising. That's life. That's truth. That's the gateway to liberation in this present moment.

It can't be anywhere else. If you're waiting for this to go away before you pay attention, that is what you are strengthening in the habit of mind—waiting till it gets better. As we all know, none of us are spring chickens here. We can really wait our whole life for it to get better before we really commit to practice. And I don't think it just keeps getting better. I hate to tell you, especially body-wise, it just doesn't keep on getting better. Where are we going to wake up?

So patience can bring in a kind of resolve simply to be here. But the being here is just to open into the midst. We all know what that is; I don't need to talk about it a lot more. But the patience regards both so-called external and internal phenomena—some person acting a way we don't like, our body-mind acting a way we don't like. Of course, who doesn't like it is the other question.

I do want to read you this from Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. He's talking about arousing bodhicitta, but he mentions three aspects of patience. These three lines have stayed with me. When I'm in a really difficult retreat, like I was a couple of years ago, these lines would come. It's not just like, "Oh, okay, I can keep going." It would totally open my heart and mind.

This is transcendent patience: to have patience when wronged by others. The second type is the patience to bear hardships for the Dharma, all the things that happen.

And the third is the patience to face the profound truth without fear.

Just calling up those lines, one of them fits anything that's going on that you don't like. And just when you're thinking, "Oh yes, I can find the patience to bear hardships for the Dharma," you're just there, moment to moment. And in that moment of cultivating that patience, what's withering? The tendency to aversion, the tendency to greed. What's strengthening? Metta, mindfulness, clear seeing, all the factors of awakening.

Now, the next one—you would think, why didn't he put this one first?—is the tendencies that are abandoned by avoiding difficult situations. Of course, there's an obvious reason why this isn't first: because we'd much prefer to avoid than to endure. And sometimes I think it's tricky both ways to know what's actually avoidable.

The Buddha says, "Reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu avoids a savage elephant, a savage bull, a savage dog, a snake, a stump, a cliff, a cesspool, a sewer. He avoids sitting on unsuitable seats, frequenting unsuitable friends, so that wise companions in the life might believe that he would be drawn into unwise action."

So what can be abandoned by avoiding really means using our wise discrimination to see what experiences are just plain dangerous and what others—now these are my words, not the Buddha's—are just plain stupid, that we don't need to keep going back to over and over again.

Say, for example, you're trying to sit outside because you think, "I need to be with nature," and it's lightning, and the mosquitoes are biting you, and you are filled with aversion, just filled with aversion. No mindfulness. It's getting stronger and stronger. Do you think this is helpful in that moment? What is being cultivated? We're not talking about a moment of aversion, but just feeding, feeding, feeding.

There can be other times when being in difficult conditions could be totally appropriate, because you're just looking at the fear, and by being there and noticing the mental state, calm and acceptance and equanimity are growing. It's really about looking at what's being fed.

There's another sutta that I like very much that expresses this—knowing what's appropriate for deepening our understanding and practice, and what is more useful to avoid. It's really a parable, a simile, where the Buddha talks about a falcon who suddenly swooped down and caught a quail in the air. While she was carrying the quail away, the quail started moaning and saying, "Oh, stupid me, it serves me right. If I had kept to my own natural territory, the territory of my kind, today I would have been safe. But I went outside of my natural territory, and you caught me."

And the falcon said—not particularly proud—"Well, what's your natural territory?"

The quail said, "It's a field that's been all turned up by the plow, a bare field with many clods of earth, really bumpy and uneven."

So the falcon, not boastful but simply confident, let the quail go and said, "Go ahead, go to your natural territory, but I'll still be able to catch you."

The quail flew to this field and was standing by a clod of earth. The falcon went diving down toward the quail. But just before the falcon reached her, the quail jumped into the clod of earth, the falcon missed her and just hit the ground—and killed herself.

So what the Buddha is saying is: stay within your own reach, stay within appropriate territory. And he says that for monks, for those practicing, roaming outside of one's own pasture is getting really caught in sense desire. Staying within our territory is the four foundations of mindfulness, sati at the sense doors, rather than just spinning our gears on wanting and reacting to sense pleasures.

But I think this can actually be expanded in many ways we practice. There's a reason we come on intensive retreat to such a conducive environment. It's a choice not to have CNN going in the corner of the meditation hall. There's a reason we don't have internet access in each of your rooms. What's really helpful for practice?

Sometimes, I know, people can be confronted with something quite difficult in practice, internally or externally. Or when we go home again, we think, "Well, I should be able to be purely mindful no matter what the conditions are. It's okay—I can do whatever I want when I go home, because if I really could practice, I could be mindful in any conditions whatsoever." Completely unrealistic.

And sometimes on retreat—the Buddha doesn't speak of this specifically, but I want to bring it up—there can be times when what we need to avoid isn't so much an outer savage elephant or a cesspool, but something arising internally. For example, a sudden release of old traumatic memory that we weren't familiar with. Sometimes that happens, and it comes up so suddenly and so strongly that the mindfulness simply does not have equal strength to the intensity of the terror that might arise with that memory.

And of course we attempt to be mindful, to be present, but what starts happening is it just begins spiraling way out of control. And by out of control—first it feels out of control, that's okay. Way out of control is really where you've lost any mindfulness, except there's a thing in the back of your mind: "I should be able to get through this." So it's push, push, push, and the whole thing is just getting more and more into the realm of feeding fear.

Usually way before that time, the teacher is begging you—begging you on hands and knees—to sit less, not to push so much. And you're thinking, "That's because they think I'm a wimp, but I'll show them. I'll just really get through this," right?

There are times when wise avoidance really means turning your attention elsewhere. Because in the moment, what's really being strengthened by the way you're practicing is willpower, terror, anger or fear. And you need to turn the attention elsewhere to rebalance, reconnect with mindfulness, reconnect with calm, reconnect with the wholesome energies. And then again, come back and meet.

The whole field of skillful means is, in many ways, I think, contained in this learning when it's appropriate to avoid. But again, it's in the intention. You come in here and it's hotter than you like, and you think, "I can't turn on the AC but I don't like the heat, so I'm getting out of here." And the intention, if you tune in, is completely aversive. That's not skillful means. That is not abandoning the tendencies—that's the tendencies running the show. That's the time to sit here and sweat, you know?

As Ajahn Sumedho said when he talks about patience—if you listen to his talks, practicing in Asia is great because you get endless, endless teachings about patience and avoidance. He was giving one talk about the endless heat in the hot season in Thailand, or the rainy season where it rains like this but about twenty degrees hotter and more

humid. He said he was just sweating through the robes day after day, just sweating through these thick robes. And then he said he'd finally think, "I just can't bear this. I just can't bear it." And then the next moment you'd find, well, you could really bear it a little longer.

Have you ever come up to that? "I just can't bear this." And then, "Oh, 'can't bear it' feels like this," and then you're just there again.

So patience would be the first line. Avoidance is later. But seeing what really does not contribute to practice—living much more simply, avoiding having sense pleasures hit you in the face every time you turn around—because craving is just so strong that we shouldn't expect we're suddenly going to be free of it.

Remember what Shankara said: that craving is intensified if we let our thoughts dwell upon sense objects and seek temporary satisfaction in the objective world. As Thich Nhat Hanh describes it, sometimes he would come into his house and find he had left all his windows open, and the wind had come and just blown everything all over the place, topsy-turvy. Come in, close the windows, straighten up. And he says we're like that. It's as if all our sense doors are the windows and we just walk around with them wide open saying, "Yes, everything, just come on in! I should be able to be mindful of all of it." Or maybe we're not even trying to be mindful—we just let ourselves be bombarded.

I was reading this little section from him where he said that at that time in France, workers were demonstrating to have five fewer hours a week of work. He said, "But what are people going to do with those five hours? Go home and watch something stupid on TV that just increases agitation or boredom because we're so afraid to be alone?"

So when mindfulness isn't that strong, when the energy is low, when the mind is agitated—then we shut the windows. We come to somewhere like this, where we're not continually bombarded, to cultivate the wholesome factors, to learn how to do that.

And then when we go out, why is it so agitating? One of the reasons, when you leave a retreat—sure, partly it's the concentration, but partly our sense doors have gotten so cleansed, so much more purified. We're so much more sensitized to what's actually coming in. And it's appalling, you know, the experience internally. Once I left a retreat and stopped off in Walmart. I tell you, it was like a vortex of suffering walking into Walmart trying to buy some stupid thing. Oh, wow.

Now, I'm not saying we're practicing to be unable to function in the world. No. But it's to learn how to use wise attention, to make our choices—when to open the windows, or when we have no choice but they're open, how to be mindful, how not to just let that sweep us away. And so for practice, we need to have some more protected space, some way of avoiding, so we can learn how the mind works.

The sixth one the Buddha speaks about is tendencies, *āsavas*, habits of mind that can be abandoned by removing. He's speaking particularly about thought here. And again, it's interesting because we sometimes take this in an inaccurate way, one based in aversion.

does not endure a thought that is affected by sensual desire, by ill will, or by cruelty. He abandons it, removes it, does away with it, and annihilates it.

Now this language is why we tend to take this a little unhelpfully. "He abandons it, removes it, does away with it, and annihilates it." That language can certainly feed all too easily into getting out the hammer and whacking that thought—bad thought, bad thought, bad me, shouldn't have it.

I don't need to tell you that this is not what the Buddha is talking about. But it's very interesting, because what he is pointing to, in my understanding, is a more subtle level of wise attention on the level of thought. We certainly are not always so balanced in our mindfulness and concentration that we are able to see each thought just as it arises when it has no energy. There are times like that, right? A thought that might be the most cruel or lustful or aversive just comes up with nothing behind it—poof—and as Joseph says, "The sky is blue... I really hate everybody and everything... and the sky is blue," and they're equally empty. Nothing to do about that, no need to do anything.

But there are times when a thought comes laden with the intention, the motivation, of ill will, cruelty, self-hatred, confusion. We may not notice it at the beginning, but whenever we notice it, this is where he's talking about wise attention. Not to endure it, not to—what comes to my mind is Larry Rosenberg, who is hysterical, mimicking a kind of new age way of dealing with kilesas: "We must massage our kilesas. We must be kind to our kilesas." No, no, the Buddha is not saying, "Oh yes, nice ill will."

There's a point where, with a balance of wisdom mind, again as satipaññā, we can summon up resolution and clear seeing in relationship to these really harmful—harmful to us—unskillful trains of thought that, left alone, are the patterns feeding the tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion. It's really talking about resolution. We really can see that thought and go, "No, not now." Not in the beginning of a retreat when we're bombarded, no. But when there's a certain degree of mindfulness and balance—and

this comes and goes, as you know—we often just kind of sit back and wait a little more than we need to. Because we can have such a tendency to get into self-judging, sometimes I think we're a little leery of calling on resolution, and we just turn into mushy meditation.

Resolution is a powerful force in the mind. No, not now.

Like if you get into some kind of Vipassana romance or vendetta, where every time you think of or see the person, there's craving or aversion. Or you don't even see them, you just think about them. It's so unpleasant, and it's so draining. People do often feel quite victimized by that, or fall into hatred of it. But you can really say, as soon as you notice it, at whatever point: No, not going there. It's not bad me, ugly me. It's not going there, no.

A very clear example of this in my life was quite some years ago when I came down with an autoimmune disease that was going in a not good direction—one of those things that nobody really knew how it would go or how bad it could be. It could have gotten really quite crippling. In the early days of it, the mind would start going: "I'll never be able to take a walk again." At that point, I couldn't walk very well. "I'll never be able to..." Fear and distress and grief. These thoughts, always projecting what was going to happen or could be.

That went on for a week or two, seeing all the doctors. It doesn't help, that train of thought, really, because they give you a list starting with the worst possibility and then going down from there. But after a while, I saw the mind doing this. I thought, "I don't know. I have no clue." And as soon as my mind was going, "It's going to be..."—don't know. Stay right here.

I remember leaning down to wash out a bathtub. It was really hard to lean down, hard to reach, painful, and the mind started... No, don't know, right here. Just feel stiffness and impatience. And that was a lifesaver. That was absolute—just this resolution. You don't need to endure or allow those thoughts to keep going when you have sufficient mindfulness to see it. But it takes that willingness to, every single time you notice, say, "Okay, no, not now." "I've got to have that orange." No, not now.

Wanting feels like this. It's not saying I don't feel wanting. It's just not going into those thoughts.

Play with it. When you notice it starting to move from balanced resolution into aversion, you may notice it right away if you're present. It has a whole different contextual feel. If you don't notice it right away, believe me, you'll notice it soon enough because

you're feeding the aversion and you'll end up frustrated or in self-judgment or angry or lustful or whatever. Rather than judge that, you start right then. Ah, lust feels like this. Each moment's a new moment.

This is extremely powerful. And there's a whole sutta, a different one, that I wanted to talk about, but I'll never get through the factors of enlightenment, so I'm just going to mention it. It deals directly with the tendencies abandoned by removing, and it's called The Removal of Distracting Thoughts. I'm sure a lot of you know it. The Buddha lists five different methods for dealing with basically distracting thoughts—thoughts that are coming in and taking you away from meditation. And again, it's so practical. He realizes everyone isn't sitting in such sublime mindfulness that you barely have to advert attention to the thought and it goes.

I'm just going to mention the five without elaborating, in case something hits you.

All of these are for when just sati, mindfulness of the thought, isn't enough. When you say, "Oh, ill will arising, ill will arising, ooh, ill will arising," and finally you really have to do something else or it's taking over.

The first is to simply move the attention away from the unwholesome by substituting a wholesome thought—in this way, substituting mettā for ill will. Not the phony, "Yes, I pretend, I accept." But if you're in ill will, I find mettā not to the person I'm feeling ill will for, but mettā to myself, feeling the ill will. Or if it's cruelty, compassion. Or if it's delusion, then actually reflecting on some inspiring dharmic theme can switch the train of thought. So one is changing the attention, substituting the wholesome for the unwholesome. I call it changing the channel.

The second would be with discerning wisdom—not so much thinking about, but by looking, noticing, and examining the danger in that unwholesome train of thought. For example, anger or ill will. I remember one retreat I was sitting where somebody called me out of retreat when I was on staff at IMS to discuss some business that could definitely have waited three days. And that person definitely knew better than to do that, but was just in his own little world. It got all this anger going, and self-righteousness, the whole thing. I kept practicing with it, tuning into the anger, until I really saw how just letting this run was feeding it. And it's so much suffering. It's dangerous because what's happening is feeding my belief in my righteousness, feeding the tendency for anger to take over, feeding all these unwholesome thoughts about a really good person. There was nothing wholesome. And whether I was right or not, who cared? What difference did it make? In the scheme of things, it was such a little thing. So having some reflection through experientially tuning into the dangers of just going after that pleasant fantasy

every time it comes up—not the dangers of being a bad person, but what's actually being fed by doing that, what's the ultimate outcome of feeding that craving, that ill will. That's how we're going to be in life.

The third, when these two don't work, is to just try to forget those thoughts altogether. Not even substituting something wholesome that's relational, but just going to something neutral. When we say steady the mind, just come back to the breath. Just forget it and come back to the breath. Or go to hearing. Or go to body sensations. Just advert your attention elsewhere.

The fourth is to give some dhamma vicaya, some investigation, to looking at and stilling the cause of these thoughts. For example, you keep getting into pleasant fantasy, pleasant fantasy. You notice it and are present, but you don't see how you're getting into it. You look a little closer with investigation and see, oh, an image. It's pleasant. You didn't notice pleasant, and you're off. Noticing that cause with mindfulness right there—that just stills the whole thing. Or for me, I notice with anger, when I really get to feeling it, underneath it there's some hurt.

When I'm able to just feel the hurt with mindfulness, that whole train of angry thoughts is simply stilled, stopped.

And the fifth approach, which everyone always likes the most: if there are still unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then "with the teeth clenched and the tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush the unwholesome state of mind with a wholesome state of mind." The Buddha is basically saying you never give up. You never just surrender and say, "Okay, take me." You keep on trying—but with a wholesome state of mind. I will leave you to explore how that's possible.

I will end this section with how the Buddha concludes the sutta: "This bhikkhu then is called a master of the courses of thought. He will think whatever thought he wishes to think, and he will not think any thought he does not wish to think." Can you imagine? Wouldn't that be something? "Having severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with complete penetration of conceit, he has made an end of suffering." So that's a definition of an arahat. Wouldn't that be nice? Just that possibility—a master of the courses of thought. And remember, everything the Buddha says, "If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so."

The seventh way—which is of course four talks in itself, so I can only highlight the main points. I know this is a lot of information. Please don't try to remember it all. I'm just hopeful that any particular piece that is concurrent with something happening in

your practice right now or in the next days will have a way of going in and popping up in your mind at the right time. So trust that. Please don't try to remember all of this, because that actually blocks the whole process of mindfulness and the surrender into the process.

So the seventh way is the āsavas or tendencies that can be abandoned by developing. What the Buddha is talking about developing are the seven factors of awakening, the bojjhaṅgas, the factors of enlightenment. On one level, these are spoken of as coming to full perfection in a completely awakened person. But the Buddha is also quite clear that as we practice and develop the four foundations of mindfulness, simply by steadily cultivating the four foundations of mindfulness, we cultivate and bring to perfection the seven factors of enlightenment.

These are seven factors of mind that all of you are experiencing from time to time—not just from time to time, but quite a lot. However, they can come and go in strength and in balance relative to each other. It's a very useful kind of self-guidance in terms of your practice. If you're feeling off, just run through the seven and see: Is one really low? Are some really out of balance?

These seven are: mindfulness, of course, which balances all the others. Then there are three energizing factors: dhamma vicaya, or investigation of dhammas (this is not analyzing, and I'll explain each one); viriya, or energy; and pīti, or rapture. Those are the energizing three. Then there are three that are tranquilizing: samādhi; tranquility itself; and upekkhā, or equanimity. For those who get stuck always evaluating your practice by samādhi, you may notice it's one of seven. All seven are equally important, and really, when our practice deepens and develops, it's when all seven are coming into balance and strengthening together.

As the Buddha said, for each of these seven, the proximate or immediate cause is wise attention, appropriate attention. And that's what's so fascinating. I want to read you a couple of things about wise attention, which is what all seven are based upon.

He says: "Bhikkhus, whatever beings there are which assume the four postures"—in other words, whatever beings stand, walk, sit, or lie down from time to time—"they are all assuming those four postures based upon the earth, established upon the earth." They couldn't do it without the earth. "So, just as the postures are based upon earth, a bhikkhu cultivates and develops the seven factors of enlightenment based upon virtue, established upon sīla."

So the very first requisite is virtue, morality, purity of action and speech. It doesn't mean you never did anything bad, but really reflecting on this when you're practicing is the foundation for the cultivation of the seven factors.

Then, more specifically, the Buddha describes how wise attention works. He says: "As to internal factors, I do not see any other factor that is so helpful for the arising of the seven factors of enlightenment as careful attention." No other internal factor is as important for the arising of all seven as careful attention. "When a bhikkhu is accomplished in careful attention"—in all the ways we're talking about—"it is expected that he will develop and cultivate the seven factors of enlightenment." It just follows.

Now, this is also very interesting. The bhikkhus ask about external factors.

I do not see any other factor that is so helpful for the arising of the seven factors of enlightenment as this: good friendship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, it is expected that he will develop and cultivate the seven factors.

By "good friend," he basically means someone wise. And for each of the seven factors, as we'll briefly discuss, he gives not only descriptions but also, in the commentaries, lists of supporting factors that we need to give wise attention to in order to develop and increase each one. For every single factor, a key supporting condition is to avoid certain kinds of company and cultivate others. For concentration, for example, one avoids the company of unconcentrated, scattered, rough people, and cultivates being friends with wise, calm, concentrated people. This pattern holds for each of the seven factors.

So externally, the Buddha sees no other factor so helpful as good friendship. When we talk about Sangha as a refuge, we mean not only the Sangha of awakened noble ones, but our friends, our colleagues on the Dhamma path. This isn't good friendship in the sense of someone you call up to pour your heart out to. It's association with the wise, association with the mindful, association with the virtuous.

How fortunate are we in this world? Given the world as it is—it's the same as when you came here, not much better, not much worse, about the same—to be able to associate for such protracted periods of time with good friends is incredibly fortunate. Use that. It's the base. That and virtue form the foundation from which we can cultivate wise attention, from which the seven factors of awakening develop.

So let me briefly name the factors and some of the additional supporting conditions, though not all of them.

Mindfulness, of course, is the overbalancing factor. You can't really have too much mindfulness. And whenever you're out of balance and you don't know or can't tell what's going on, you're always safe to come back to mindfulness. As you know, that's the quality of clear seeing—knowing what's happening, not superficially. There's that image: you throw a cork on a river and it bounces around on the top; you throw a rock in and it sinks down deep. That's mindfulness. You all know mindfulness; we've talked about it a lot.

Remember when we talked about feeding and starving the hindrances with wise attention? It's just the same with the seven factors. So what do we give wise attention to in order to feed each of these seven factors?

Well, the first cause for mindfulness is mindfulness itself. One moment of mindfulness is really the immediate cause for the next moment of mindfulness to arise. So we give wise attention to one moment of mindfulness, meeting what's happening right here—always the fallback, the most important. That's really one of the main wise attentions for mindfulness.

Beyond that, avoiding the unmindful and associating with the mindful supports mindfulness in the broader sense. And this applies to each of the seven factors: we give wise attention to inclining the mind towards that quality. For mindfulness, we incline the mind towards being mindful. Again, this points to seeing that we can cultivate and train the mind. You don't just sit here thinking, "Someday, some moment, I know mindfulness will arise. If I sit and walk long enough, somehow it'll come." Inclining the mind is really saying, "I'm making mindfulness a priority." You do little things like resolving, "I'm going to be so mindful just this one stretch of walking," or "I'm going to be as mindful as possible as I get up from sitting and move out of the hall." Inclining the mind with that resolution and interest towards mindfulness is enormously powerful wise intention.

The second factor is *dhamma vicaya*, or investigation. This is not thinking about things. It's described as the quality whereby, when present, the mind lights up the field of awareness. It's like walking into a dark room, turning on a flashlight, and suddenly being able to see what's there. For me, it has a quality of interest that's not thinking about things, but in shining that light of mindfulness, it really allows discerning insight to arise.

For example, you suddenly notice a sensation. You're struggling, struggling, being mindful, and in that next moment—oh, tingling, coming and going, it's impermanent. That light of *dhamma vicaya*, of investigation, just lets you see clearly. It lights up the field of awareness, illuminates experience so that you can see its true nature in that moment. It dissipates confusion. It's an energizing factor.

I find for myself it's one I often forget to look for, but when things are feeling flat—when I think, "Well, everything's going okay, but it's so... what's the matter?"—I'll look and see there's not that investigation. I'm kind of meeting experience with mindfulness, but it's just like, "Oh yeah, oh yeah."

And you can just bring a little interest and it lights up the field in that moment.

The first cause of investigation is, guess what, mindfulness—active mindfulness that connects with the moment of experience so that there is direct perception. And this again requires wise attention directed towards mindfulness. So really, you see, if you're having wise attention towards mindfulness, there will be mindfulness, which will also naturally lead to dhammavicaya, investigation of states. It happens by itself.

And again, there are additional supports to which we can direct wise attention. There's no way I can name them all, but again: avoiding foolish people, being with wise people, cleanliness—keeping the internal sense bases clear, keeping yourself clean and orderly, and keeping your environment clean and orderly. Very interesting, but it tends to help the mind light up. And again, a total commitment, inclining the mind in the direction of interest.

The third is virya, courageous effort, which has the characteristic of supporting us. Its function is to support us and give us a kind of refreshment of mind that helps us be with the difficult. Difficult pain or emotional struggle wears us down. Sayadaw U Pandita gives the example of an old shack that's falling apart, and you prop it up with strong boards so it comes back erect and is strong again. That is how virya works. It's not just that we're a whirlwind of energy, but bringing in energy refreshes the mind so that—ah yes, it's been all withered, but you come back up again and can be with what is difficult.

When the energy is low, or when we're really feeling worn down, when the mind is withering away, he gives a whole series of additional supports. Of course, wise attention and commitment to energy is the first cause, but he gives a whole series of actual reflections that can help arouse the energy that gives the mind the freshness to be with what's difficult.

Such as reflecting on precious opportunity, sort of recognizing how fortunate we are. Reflecting on states of misery—when it's like, "Oh, this is just too hard. I don't want to do it. I just can't be with it anymore"—thinking about what the alternative is. Sometimes it's, "Okay, I think I'll pay attention now." Reflecting on noble ones, teachers, awakened ones, people that really inspire you. Reflecting on appreciation for the support that allows us to practice—the support of staff, the support of dana. This isn't just for ordained sangha, but for all of us.

When I was a nun, reflecting on how I was fed and clothed and housed by people who loved the Dhamma and wanted me to be able to practice—we can turn that into a guilt trip in the West. It's not a guilt trip. It's a profound, energizing reflection. Like, "Yes, what an opportunity." It's so beautiful, this dana, and that brings a natural energy. Not a "should," but you become filled with energy. "Okay, I can sit with this knee pain, this self-hatred, another couple of minutes"—whatever.

So there's a lot of reflection: remembering the greatness of the Buddha, of teachers, appreciating the people that we're practicing with. And again, inclining the mind towards resolution. Not just, "Ah, I can't do it. It's too hard." But really saying, "Okay, just one more step." That's all we need. One more breath. One more moment. Not the whole day. There's rarely—I don't know if I can ever think of a time when I couldn't have really honestly said, "I can be with this one more breath, one more step," if I'm just willing.

And then there's piti, or rapture. Rapture is a funny word in English. Piti is a mental state. It has the characteristic of happiness, delight, satisfaction. When piti is there in your experience, you're really into it. You're interested in what's happening. There's a lot of energy. Piti actually manifests a lot as energy. The mind feels very light and energized. The body is very light and agile. It was all this pain, and it was heavy and cramped, and then all of a sudden you're just sitting there and you go, "What happened?" Same position. You can even find that same sensation that was just driving you nuts, but it just doesn't matter.

The body becomes very light. Often, besides this joyous interest, piti manifests as physical sensations—lightness, floating, and sometimes, I have to say, quite bizarre physical experiences. It can feel like way too much energy, completely out of bounds. You might literally be flipping all around the room. And you come in to see the teacher and they go, "Oh yeah, that's piti." This is piti, you know—enough already, it's out of balance. But it has a lot of physical, energetic manifestation. If you really look, you might think it's unpleasant, but when it's truly piti, it's not unpleasant. Your mind might be reacting, but if you look carefully, it's not unpleasant.

The proximate cause is—guess what?—wise attention. Wise attention to wholesome feelings, wholesome thoughts associated with Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Actually, this is one of the definitions of right effort. If you read or hear the way the Buddha defines right effort, it's actually exactly the same as wise attention.

Right effort is defined as zeal or energy for the abandoning of arisen unwholesome states, zeal for the non-arising of un-arisen unwholesome states—was that too many "uns"? An unwholesome state has not arisen, and there's a zeal to keep it that way, basically. But the others are zeal for the arising of un-arisen wholesome states and for the continuance and strengthening of arisen wholesome states.

So wise effort and wise attention isn't just about getting rid of what's unwholesome. It's about recognizing the wholesome and giving that attention. That's also wise attention. Giving attention to the wholesome when it's arising is one of the things that leads us into piti, into rapture.

And again, there are many possibilities. If you want to look up all these different supportive areas to pay wise attention to for each factor, Sayadaw U Pandita's book *In This Very Life* is a great resource because it's all collated there in the chapter on the seven factors of enlightenment. Trying to remember it all isn't helpful. But if you're exploring a particular one, or feeling like you can't really sense a particular factor in yourself, it might be helpful to read what the five to eleven supporting factors are for each of them and explore those in your practice. See how wise attention can help to cultivate them. It's really quite scientific and accessible.

So again, as with all the factors, there's the inclining of the mind towards piti, which is the energy to be mindful, which leads to concentration. And when there's some concentration and mindfulness, when the mind has to be relatively clear of kilesas, that's when piti can arise. There won't be strong piti if the mind is also wracked with greed or aversion or delusion. They just don't go together.

So those are the three energizing factors. You can see how all of them—piti is hugely energizing, energy itself, and investigation as well—they need to be balanced with the three calming factors.

The three calming ones are tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Tranquility is very important. We often don't recognize it. It has the quality of non-agitation of body and mind, of coolness. It takes the heat out of the restlessness of mind.

I think perhaps we don't quite recognize the power of restlessness. Something the way Sayadaw U Pandita described it—I didn't realize this, but as soon as I read it, it makes total sense—restlessness, the scattered mind, is a very powerful state. It has the

quality of being able to infect other mental states that arise at the same time. He gives a specific example of samadhi, of concentration. You could be quite restless and there's samadhi, but it's infected with that restlessness. So it's not really wise samadhi. The mind can be very absorbed in something but jumping all over the place.

When there's this restless quality that infects other mental states, that's when we don't really have control of our speech and actions. It's how here as a yogi you think you're being mindful, and suddenly you say something or do something and it just blurts out.

Or you just suddenly do something, and later you think, "How could I have done that? I knew better." We all do that. Or you find yourself acting out in unskillful ways, even when it's very subtle. This is a manifestation of restlessness. And tranquility—a cool calmness, non-agitation of mind and body—cools this out.

Again, wise attention is the proximate cause. Wise attention to wholesome mental states. Wise effort. You can also, when you notice the mind is restless, give attention more to singularity of experience rather than running after the restlessness. Give attention to calmness. Just be with the breath, for example. Just feel the stillness of your body and don't let yourself move. Let that stillness of body bring in stillness of mind. Incline the mind towards peacefulness. We often don't recognize the restlessness and let it run the show.

Samadhi, which is not necessarily extended in time, has the quality of non-scatteredness—the factor of mind, of attention, which really stands on whatever is arising. Just right with that sensation of breath, that emotion, that image. It's just right there without wavering at all, even if it's just for a moment. It sinks into it, still, calm, stays there. Samadhi could be on changing objects, so it doesn't have that sense of absorption in one thing, which is also samadhi on an unchanging object. But when there's samadhi, even though the arising and passing objects are changing, each moment of mindfulness has that steadiness, that immovable quality, that really connecting and sinking in.

One other interesting aspect of samadhi is sort of like restlessness in reverse: when samadhi is in the mind, it has the function of collecting together whatever other mental states are arising simultaneously. When we talk about the collection of mind, the unification of mind—this is a real power of mind. This is a function of samadhi. It's one of the reasons why, when there's samadhi to whatever extent, there's such a sense of peace. We actually don't realize how distracted and scattered the mind is. Even as our practice

is being developed, as mindfulness is being cultivated, the mind is still scattered, more and more subtly. With samadhi, all of a sudden, all that's brought together just in that one moment. It's peaceful. That's why tranquility and samadhi so go together.

And the last is, of course, equanimity—the mind that isn't pulled to and fro by either clinging or aversion. Again, I like the way Sayadawji describes it. He says it's actually a state of mind in the center, a balancing of energy. It's an energetic state where it's quite alert, but the energy isn't tipping towards and away, towards and away. You know how that is—just really balanced in the center. That's the state of equanimity. And wise attention to the continuity of mindfulness is what cultivates equanimity, because the continuity is what leads to the wisdom of really seeing pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant—give it up—and the mind balances in the middle.

Obviously much more could be said about them all, but those are the seven. The Buddha himself talks about when it is useful to cultivate the arousing ones and when it is not useful.

For example—and I'm picking concentration because people really seem to get a bugaboo about it—they always think they need to cultivate concentration. Once in a while it happens, but rarely does someone come in and say, "I'm too concentrated, I need to cultivate investigation." Once in a while someone who's been practicing a lot does. But usually, no matter what's going on, we just want more concentration.

But if you're sluggish, if you're dull, if the energy's low, you might be really calm, and we'll say, "Get up, quit sitting, go walk." And you respond, "No, I'm calm, I'm peaceful, I'm concentrated." But there's absolutely no interest or clarity about what's happening. You need to really consciously bring wise attention to the energizing factors. You don't need to cultivate more calm. You don't want to get rid of the calm, but you need to bring up the energy.

And just the reverse. When you're really filled with pīti and rapture, and you're just going into rhapsodies in your mind about the beauty of the Dhamma and how exquisite it is and every new insight—guess what? When you come in and want to tell us all your insights, that's nice. But did you notice the sensation in your body? We won't go down that road with you.

It's because you need to cultivate calmness, steadiness, concentration, and equanimity. That was a nice insight. It's over. Back with Cleopatra. What's happening now? Equanimity.

And as I said, if you're ever in doubt, mindfulness is always cultivatable and useful as a balance. As you strengthen mindfulness with wise attention, you'll see more clearly how the others are out of balance.

I'll end with this one quotation from the Buddha about the seven factors, though this could be said about all of our wise attention—the image of the peaked house:

"Bhikkhus, just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too when a bhikkhu develops and cultivates the seven factors of enlightenment, he slants, slopes, and inclines towards nibbana."

And one who cultivates the four foundations of mindfulness slants, slopes, and inclines towards cultivating the seven factors of awakening.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for your patient attention.

CHAPTER 348

Dukkha

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching on dukkha and why, despite our best intentions to live peacefully, we remain fettered by envy, stinginess, and our tight grip on preferences. Drawing from a discourse where Sakka asks the Buddha what chains beings to hostility and ill will, Wilson illuminates how our habitual reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experiences—not the experiences themselves—create our suffering.*
>
> *Wilson references contemporary psychological research showing that humans consistently misjudge what will make them happy, overestimating both the intensity and duration of pleasure and pain. This scientific finding mirrors the Buddha's ancient insight: we base our life decisions on fundamentally flawed assumptions about happiness. She guides practitioners to examine the Four Noble Truths not as intellectual concepts but as invitations to investigate moment-to-moment experience directly.*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom for working with dukkha at all levels of practice—from overwhelming grief about world suffering, to difficult emotions arising in meditation, to the subtle dissatisfaction when concentration wavers. Wilson emphasizes that liberation doesn't require escaping sense experience but rather finding the courage to stop running from unpleasantness and turn toward it with clear awareness. When we take refuge in knowing itself rather than in pleasant experiences, any moment becomes a gateway to peace. As she notes from the suttas, the Buddha himself had an eye and saw forms, yet remained well released in mind because no craving arose at contact.*

I'm Carol Wilson, and it's nice to be back. A couple of you I know have come quite recently. Some of you have been here for months. Some of you have been here a few weeks. You probably hear this sometimes, but it's really remarkable walking into here. I go to lots of retreats and I'm rather blasé about walking into retreat environments because I do it all the time. But this is lovely. It feels like you are really doing it. It's palpable and very inspiring. Thank you all for being here.

And I know that as pleasant and comfortable a place as this has been created to be, there is no escape. Coming out of the interviews today and also an article that a friend sent me yesterday brought up what I want to talk about. It's really basic Dharma 101, but as far as I can see, it never stops being relevant.

This article that a friend sent was a long piece in the New York Times called "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." Hopefully we're not going to agree in the end that our pursuit of happiness is futile. But in terms of how we usually pursue happiness, the way of the world of pursuing happiness—that is futile, useless, leading onward to more suffering and more confusion. So that's a bit what I want to talk about.

There are a couple of different suttas or discourses of the Buddha I'll quote from. The beginning of one of them really speaks to the fact that with our best intentions we want to live in this world. Not only do we want to be happy, of course, but I'm assuming that those of us here would agree that we really want to live in a way that's harmless, in a way that brings about more peace, more connectedness. We don't want to create more suffering and hostility in the world or in ourselves. I could safely say that for people here, right?

But even with our best intentions—even if we just don't want to create more conflict in ourselves, even going around here with your mouths closed and hardly even interacting with people—still hostility, aversion, and conflict arise in the mind. At least, please God, you don't act it out. But it does arise with our best intentions.

In this discourse, Sakka, the deva king, came down and was talking with the Buddha. He asked the Buddha: What are we fettered with? What are we chained with? Even though we humans, as well as devas, think, "May we live free from hostility. May we live free from violence, free from rivalry, free from ill will, free from those who are hostile or from being hostile ourselves"—even though we deeply think this, why is it that we keep ending up living in hostility, with violence, with rivalry, with ill will? What is it that fetters us? What is it that chains us?

It's just one of the ways the Buddha outlines things, nothing you haven't heard before. But he begins by saying that beings are fettered by the bonds of envy and stinginess—envy wanting what others have and stinginess trying to hold on to what we have, not wanting to share. And that this is caused by holding tight to preferences, by creating in our minds and our hearts what is dear to us and what is not dear to us, and then holding tightly to that.

He doesn't stop here, and I'll go on. But I find this particular description both very useful and also unsettling. It shakes up the not-so-comfortable but we-think-it's-comfortable world or way of being that we have. How can we not have preferences? How can we live without preferences? Right away the mind can start to jump into reaction. Even the Buddha had preferences. Even the Buddha chose how he wanted to live. Can't you just hear how the mind is kind of justifying ourselves somehow?

But he says it is caused by holding to preferences, creating what is dear and not dear and holding on to that, which of course is caused by desire, which is fed and increased by thinking about our preferences and by the ensuing papañca—the proliferation that comes around that.

So I want to talk a bit about this holding to preferences, this dear and not dear. Why does that create this ongoing inability to live in a way that brings happiness and peace to ourselves and others, even though that's what we want?

I would think, at least in my own experience, that holding onto preferences—of course we have preferences—holding onto what is dear, trying to get rid of what is not dear, likes and dislikes you could say, really arises from our deep, really deep yearning to be happy. As you know, the Buddha often said that everyone wants to be happy. We just—he didn't put it quite this way—but we just don't really get how to do it.

We're just lost in delusion and not seeing clearly. Our holding to our preferences arises from our misguided attempts to find some way to really be happy in this life, to find some way to bring happiness to others. But what it comes down to is that we really don't know what true happiness is. We not only don't know how to go about living in happiness, but we don't really know what it is.

And that brings me to this article, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," which is really very fascinating. I'll spare you—it's quite long—I'll spare you all of it. But it's an article about some very serious scientific research that's been going on in recent years. A group of four professors: one who's a professor of psychology at Harvard, one's a psychologist at the University of Virginia, one's an economist at Carnegie Mellon, and one's a psychologist and Nobel laureate in economics at Princeton. So we're talking serious research, not some loopy fringe thing.

And these researchers, especially the lead one, Gilbert, started basically looking at what it is that we do to be happy—studying the question of what it takes to be happy and the decisions we make trying to bring about happiness in our lives. All very scientific with scientific method and lots of tests and lots of studies.

In a series of studies, they made a slew of observations and conclusions that undermine a number of fundamental assumptions. The assumption it undermines is namely that we humans understand what we want and are any good at improving our well-being. The studies undermine that assumption. Gilbert says that basically, as he termed it, the research leads one to wonder if everything you have ever thought about life choices and about happiness has been at the least somewhat naive and at worst greatly mistaken.

Now, this is scientific study, and they're basically saying that we base our decisions on what will make us happy, on how we think we'll feel when a certain event happens, when we get a certain thing. And he goes on to show that basically we have no clue. We completely underestimate and overestimate how happy something will make us and how unhappy something will make us. And then we make our life decisions based on these assumptions, which turn out often—usually—to be not accurate at all.

I'll read you another quotation in a minute, but he gives an example: most people, if given the choice, which would you rather have, a broken leg or a trick knee? And people think a broken leg causes much more suffering—I'd rather have a trick knee. But over time, it turns out that a trick knee, a bad knee, although the immediate suffering in each moment is less, the amount of suffering over time is much, much more than a one-time intense experience like a broken leg.

And so he says that in general, we overestimate both how happy having something pleasant will make us and how long it will last. It doesn't make us as happy as we think, and it doesn't last very long. This isn't news to us, right? And the same for difficult things. We overestimate how horrible something will be and how much it's going to ruin our life. And it also isn't nearly as intense as we imagine and it doesn't last as long as we imagine. Sure, it still hurts. It's still sad. But it doesn't have the effect we think. And this is what we base our life choices on.

So that's just a real short little beginning of what they're talking about. And essentially, I think that's what the Buddha's talking about. We base our sense of preference, of liking and disliking, of dear and not dear, on what makes us feel good in the moment—generally, what's pleasant. And what we think is going to make us feel bad, or it does make us feel bad, or even getting in the neighborhood of it makes us feel bad, and we run in the other direction. And we keep cycling our life like this.

I know I've said this often, and I keep finding it in my practice, on more and more subtle levels. And talking to people today, I can see how on really subtle levels it keeps coming in—this misunderstanding of what the happiness and peace the Buddha is talking about is, of what the happiness that's really available to us right now is. Our misunderstanding of that, based on our not seeing ourselves and the nature of life clearly, keeps us looking in practice, in life, ultimately for things to finally get okay.

And it gets more and more subtle. But it's so easy that it creeps in—somehow what we're practicing for, what we're living for, or the unspoken idea of enlightenment somehow carries the flavor of pleasantness, of happiness in the sense that we have what we like and what we don't like goes away. Or of somehow finally being in control and not

being the so-called victim of all these unexpected, unpleasant, really crazy things that happen. Or at least, at least, even if a lot of unpleasant stuff happens, we're going to really understand it all. And so in that way we're in control.

That one—I still fall into that one—but that one had me for a long time. It's okay, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, but I'm going to really understand what's going on. A sense of control, a sense of knowing, a sense of having.

And to really turn around and look at what the Buddha was talking about—when he says, "I teach the suffering and the end of suffering," the enlightened one, the peaceful one, he says, does not suffer.

And it took me years to really consciously look at his life after he was enlightened and think, oh. His life actually doesn't sound like it was any more pleasant in the experiencing of it than most of our lives. He didn't particularly have good health. He had backaches. He had headaches. As you know, he had all kinds of sorrows and aggravations and the loss of people close to him, both family and his chief disciples. He spent forty-five years of his life in tireless service to other beings. His sangha of monks was split. One of his cousins tried to kill him. His clansmen on his mother's and father's side went to war over water rights and killed a lot of each other, and he had to go and mediate. He chose a very simple life, so he certainly didn't have much physical comfort. And yet, and yet, he made it very clear to us that he no longer suffered.

When I need to keep coming back and reminding myself about having no preferences, you can look at it another way and say, well, of course he had preferences. He also had preferences, didn't he? The Buddha chose to live as a monk. He chose to live a renunciate wandering life. He's always talking about, as Marcia mentioned in her talk, choose wisely the people that you spend time with. He's not saying, do whatever you want, it doesn't make any difference. He laid out a very strict, very comprehensive path of how to live.

So having no preferences doesn't mean, ah, what the hell? I don't know the difference. Liking, disliking, pleasant, unpleasant, who knows? Not that at all. It means paying very careful attention, being fully present for all of it, the whole show. And within the field of experiencing really difficult life stuff, as the Buddha did, within the field of choosing to live as a renunciate, having no preferences means not being attached to having it any particular way.

So when there was suffering going on in his life, how was the Buddha different from us in that way? I can only project, right? I'm certainly not speaking from my own personal experience, so I don't know what the Buddha's mind was like. But it seems to me

that the difference, based on his talking about not clinging to preferences, would be that he could flow with, be with, wide awake in the midst of all of it. The difficulty, the beauty, the frustration, the exhaustion, the discomfort of the way he lived—because he could just be in harmony with whatever is arising.

Not holding to preferences means ultimately that in this moment, whatever's arising is arising, and I don't need to make it different. I can't anyway. You can't change this moment, can you? I know we try. We spend a lot of our practice, really a lot, trying to change this moment. And it's such a ridiculous and impossible thing to even try to do, because the moment's already over before we've even been able to notice what it is. And then we get engaged in throwing it into the future and trying to change it, but it's long gone. That's just a little aside.

But not clinging to preferences—the Buddha didn't awaken into some other life somewhere else. He lived a very engaged, connected, awakened life in this world as it is. And as he often said, without suffering. The suffering isn't about being able to change the external world. It's not about being able to have a better body. It's not about being able to manipulate and control our friends or the people that we're teaching. Liberation is really awakening fully into this moment without clinging to any preference whatsoever.

And I feel our whole practice is around allowing us to see and understand our moment-to-moment experience so accurately, so clearly, that our habitual, almost unconscious need to keep trying to manipulate and control and get it how we like it and avoid what scares us—that this drops away. Not because it should, not with the thought that I should get rid of this so I can finally be happy, but because it doesn't make sense anymore.

When we really experience with sati-paññā, with mindfulness-wisdom, at a moment of sense contact, when we experience in that moment things just as they are, then the need—even just for a moment—the need for our ongoing construction of self and other, of trying to explain and assess and compare and give meaning to every sense contact that comes in a way of trying to figure things out and control the world, that just falls away. The need to grasp at pleasant, the need to push away the unpleasant, the tendency to just space out and get deluded and ignore something if it isn't sufficiently intense to pull us in and say, hey, pay attention.

That drops away. We don't have to think about how we should be. It happens naturally, spontaneously, out of clear seeing.

The Buddha talked about cultivating unshakable deliverance of mind. That phrase really inspires me because I feel that all of us here—certainly everyone I've talked to at some point or other, which is almost everyone—we all know the taste of freedom of mind. Because really, it's moment to moment. It's not like we have to experience either no freedom of mind at all or total absolute arahantship, with nothing in between.

We all know a moment of freedom of mind where there's just being fully present, knowing a sight, a sound, a taste, a smell, and the knowing of it. There's no adding of story onto it. There's no referencing it back to me. There's no clinging or pushing away. There's just this. There's no mind going, "Oh, now I'm experiencing a moment of freedom of mind." It's just this. It's so natural. It's so simple.

In that moment, the need to cling, to make dear or not dear, to manipulate—it just doesn't arise, does it? It doesn't make any sense. You don't even think about it. And it's so normal and natural that we often don't even notice it. Just, "Oh yeah, this is going on fine, fine, fine"—but then this thing happened, and now I've got to fix it. And it's as if all that other stuff doesn't matter, because we get so caught, so entranced with our reactions to particular experience.

This, of course, is where the Buddha was so brilliant and so clear in his precision in the way of talking about it. Here we have to mention the Four Noble Truths, which I'm not going to go into in depth, but these were what the Buddha thought we needed to free our hearts and minds—not to know everything he knew, but just to free us from our propensity to create suffering where it's unnecessary.

The first thing he thought he needed to tell us was these facts of life. The first being, of course, dukkha: the fact that difficult, unpleasant things happen. That everything we experience is impermanent, is fleeting—and not just that it's going to go away at some point, but that it's even now, in this moment, dissolving and changing. That there's nothing reliable we can hold to. That's dukkha.

The second truth is that the cause of our anguish, of our ongoing suffering in our life, is not the dukkha itself, but the habituated reactions and responses of our mind and heart to moment-to-moment experience—the clinging and the aversion to the fact that things are constantly changing, unreliable, and sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant.

The third truth is that when we really, even just for a moment, clearly recognize things as they are, there is both momentary and, at some point altogether, a real liberation of heart and mind. A cessation of the clinging, a cessation of the aversion, a cessation of this creation of unnecessary anguish and suffering. And that can be touched by us here and now, in any moment, no matter what the particular experience is.

Our practice here is one aspect of the fourth truth—the path that the Buddha laid out of purification of heart, of mind, of cultivation of clear seeing, of insight. A heart and mind that in a moment is free of clinging, and that allows us to see clearly. And then that further frees the heart and mind from the tendency to cling.

I mention these not as an intellectual concept—not "oh yeah, the Four Noble Truths, yada yada"—but as a call to really inquire into your own experience moment by moment.

I was struck today in talking with people. I talked to ten or eleven people, and in very different ways each person is in his or her own practice, going on its own trajectory, which is appropriate for that person. There's nothing to compare with somebody else. But I was struck by how this theme of dukkha, of difficulty, of unpleasantness, and of our reactions to it, continues to be a significant thread through all levels, all aspects of our practice.

And not a thread like a mistake. Not thinking, "Oh yeah, even though I'm doing subtle practice I still have dukkha—what's wrong?" That's exactly why it's a theme. Nothing's wrong. The first truth is dukkha happens. If you think something's wrong because there's something unpleasant or difficult in your practice—well, as we were teaching Bhante the American slang, he's picked this one up: "Duh!" He said this the other day. "Duh!" Oh, what's wrong? Dukkha's coming up. Nothing's wrong. It's part of life in this body on this planet.

The difficulty is that reaction—*what's wrong?* It's so instinctive to somehow flinch back.

On all the levels that we experience the unsatisfactoriness and suffering of this world on retreat, on all different levels—talking to people today, there's the macro level, you could say, of the vastness and the unbearableness of how much suffering and cruelty and pain there is in this world. To start thinking about it is unbearable. To say, "Well, I'm just thinking, that's a thought arising now"—the mind comes in and goes, "Well, you selfish..." and then you want to get lost in it again.

Then there's the sort of mid-level: something coming up in our practice, in our personality pattern, in our deep emotional and physical pain body—whether it's deep feelings of worthlessness or old traumatic memories or some deep loneliness or anger. Not just passing through, but the times when it comes up on retreat viscerally, in your cells and in your practice. The mind says, "Why can't I just be back with lifting, moving, placing like it was yesterday? What's going wrong now? I've got to be with these waves of unpleasant emotion. I blew it." It's like—no. What's happening? What's happening now? No holding to preferences. That's another aspect of dukkha.

And then on seemingly very subtle levels, where there's no big thing going on, but just in a moment where the steadiness of awareness disconnects, so to speak, from present moment experience. You're just there, there, there, and it just disconnects. And in that can come aversion or a kind of subtle restlessness, a subtle dissatisfaction—really the subtle element of samsaric unreliability. And you connect, and it's gone again.

When it's gone, it's important to notice it's really gone. Because another thing we do is hate the dukkha, and then when the unpleasantness is gone, we carry it around with us. As one of my teachers used to say, it's like dragging a corpse around with you. "This was there when I wasn't paying attention, and as soon as I don't pay attention, it's going to come back..." And then—what's happening now?

So the thread of how our heart and mind relates to both unpleasant and pleasant, but particularly the dukkha, because it's so ingrained to flinch away, to turn away, to think something else should be happening. It's really rare—really rare—when things have been going the way you like them, which is "oh, good practice," and suddenly it changes and it gets really difficult in whatever way, gross or subtle, it doesn't matter. It's really rare for the mind to just not have any quiver of preference, not have any quiver of "what did I do wrong and how can I get it back?"

And of course, everything we say, any instructions that are given, always tend in the direction of what seems like good practice. And by the way, there'll be fear and there'll be aversion and you'll get caught. But when it's really going well, it's just note, note, note, note, note. Everything goes away really quickly. And then we think, "Yeah, that's what I'm heading towards—a world of no suffering, things just the way I want them."

But the second truth—again, it's not that the difficult stuff happens or that things change or that the way we think it should be isn't the way it is. I mean, really, how often in your life is the way you think it should be? How often does that actually happen at the same time that you still think it's the way it should be? Not very often, and it doesn't

last very long. Then finally it gets to the way you thought it should be three years ago, but now you know it shouldn't be that way anymore—it should be some other way. It's hopeless. That is the futile pursuit of happiness. That's what they're talking about.

But we can only recognize the truth of this—of the fact that the freedom, the peace, the happiness the Buddha is talking about is completely not dependent on having any particular experience be present or absent. It's absolutely about the relationship, about the clear seeing and the openheartedness that lets this mind and body just be completely open, awake, non-judging, non-resistant, non-clinging, in the midst of whatever experience arises.

That's not something we can arrive at experientially by thinking about it or by listening to it or by reading about it. All of that can help us begin to look. But we only recognize the truth of this for ourselves when we, even for a moment or so, stop our habit of running from the unpleasant and towards the pleasant. When we stop our habit of averting our attention and pretending to be here with this unpleasant thing, but really waiting for it to go away and for practice to start up again and get better. And I'm talking about practice, but I mean, this is the way we live our lives.

When we are able to be as open and present in the midst of the beautiful, in the midst of the boring—the unbearably boring—in the midst of the painful. And this arises by our simple willingness to look, to just stop our habit of running and turn around and look and see what's actually going on.

And this, of course, as you know, is the whole thrust, the whole point of mindfulness and samādhi, the whole point of our practice: to give us the tools of how to look, how to stop and look, and also to help us recognize what's actually happening. Because as you know, we're so entranced by our reactions to present moment experience—liking the pleasant, disliking the unpleasant, ignoring the neutral. And then building—I don't know if you've noticed this, I hope you have—building incredible stories about ourselves around any stupid little pleasant or unpleasant or neutral sense contact. It's really quite astounding, the creativity and fertility of the mind, of thought process, of papañca, to be able to create a whole world.

Just hearing a sound and having a moment of aversion can lead you, in no time at all, to a complete assessment of what a rotten, negative, hostile person you are—totally believed. No clue in awareness of seeing that what actually happened was simply hearing and the knowing of it, unpleasantness and the knowing of it. Well, we weren't aware of the knowing of it, were we? We were just aware of—boom—down the road.

Pleasantness works the same way. We're so entranced by these reactions and the stories we tell ourselves about them. What this means about me. What this means about practice. This unpleasant feeling in the breath means X, Y, and Z about my practice, so I have to do this and change that and make this happen so that my practice can get back on an even keel heading in the direction of nibbāna—which God knows isn't here and can't ever be in that direction as long as my breath has this heavy tightness in it. So let's fix that, and then the goal is just around the corner.

And we believe this crap over and over and over. Sense contact after sense contact after sense contact. And we wonder: Why are we so exhausted? Why are we so lost? Why is practice so hard? Why is life so hard? We just really don't have a clue. We don't even know what's really happening.

From that article again, Gilbert, the main researcher doing this investigation, says we don't even know what makes us happy. And if it's difficult to figure out what makes us happy in this moment, how can we predict what will make us happy in the future? But how much of our practice, how much of our life, is about trying to figure out what's going to make us happy or free or liberated? And how often is "liberation" just another way of saying happy—getting what I want?

So it's learning to see how we get so involved in our interpretations, our assessments of moment-to-moment simple experience. How so often the biggest enticement, the most seductive entrancement of all—and watch this in your practice, maybe I'm the only one—is that most of those assessments and interpretations somehow make every sense experience come back to revolving around me. Me, me, me. What it means about me. What my reaction to it means about me. What it's going to feel like for me in the future. How it's always been like this for me in the past. We're just the center of everything, the center of the whole world. Every sense experience is just happening to show us something about ourselves.

And because we get so enticed, it's hard to just see clearly enough to recognize: oh, that's just hearing and the knowing of it. That's just smelling and smelling consciousness. It's not quite juicy enough. If it's smelling and smelling consciousness, then yeah, that really makes me hungry. Then I can really get down on myself for being hungry because I had enough to eat and I'm on eight precepts and I shouldn't be hungry. Then I can get into a whole thing about how I can't even practice renunciation. That creates much more suffering, but in a very weird way, we find it more satisfying—because we're not looking carefully enough.

I think we don't look carefully enough partly because we need some concentration and some mindfulness, and partly because of this ingrained, instinctive pulling away from dukkha, from the unpleasant, from suffering. Because looking carefully—the part that's so hard, the reason I think dukkha runs as a thread through all of our practice—is that to really open, to see things as they are, means finding that vision, the courage, even the interest, the resolution to stay here with as calm a mind and heart as possible in the midst of difficulty, as well as in the midst of what is beautiful.

It's hard at first because we don't know any other way. The Buddha said—and I know this one by heart—when he was talking about our habit, he says: "An untaught worldling, O monks, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

That's basic. That's, I find, very profound actually. The basic untaught person not exposed to the Dhamma—the only escape they know from unpleasant experience, from painful feelings, is the enjoyment of sense happiness. So then in that person it becomes the underlying tendency, that subtle bias, that habit of mind to lust after sense pleasure. A lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind. And that's where we spend so much of our life: in an underlying subtle tendency to lust for pleasant feelings.

When we turn around and look at the essence of a pleasant feeling when it's here, it's like so nothing, isn't it? Mostly in the world we never even hear about looking at pleasant or unpleasant or neutral feelings. And so mostly, as the Buddha said, we spend our lives trying to avoid the unpleasant ones and cultivating this lust for the pleasant and this fear of the unpleasant. Just feelings.

So when we start—and continue here—to have the steadiness of mindfulness, but also the resolution and the courage to just stop running and turn around and really bring awareness to a pleasant feeling, to an unpleasant feeling, to a neutral feeling should you ever notice one—what is a pleasant feeling? It's like nothing. It's so short. It's so amazing that we spend our lives in driven pursuit of more of these. I remember reading Ajahn Buddhadasa where he says, look at your life and see how—in his opinion—ninety percent of all the decisions you've ever made have been in pursuit of pleasant feeling.

And when you really look at pleasant feeling, it's just so short. It's so ephemeral. It just comes and goes like a wave.

But when we stop and really look at this, the first moments of seeing it, there might be a moment of ease, but somehow it's not like, "Oh great, thank God, now I'm done with that, let's move on." There's some way it shakes up our world. Because we're

basing our life, we're basing our understanding of happiness, we're basing our explanations of who we are and what's valuable so much—when we don't pay attention—on this pursuit of pleasant and avoidance of unpleasant, really unconsciously.

And to turn around and just open to, "Okay, I can just be here with this fearful, unpleasant thing"—it's hard sometimes because it really means finding the stability and the greatness of heart to be present when all the suffering of the world is flashing before our eyes. Or when really strong, painful, grief-stricken memories are coming up and we're experiencing it with the intensity we felt when we were six months old. Or even the really subtle, seemingly subtle suffering of just that not-fitting discontent. Sometimes that's the worst of all because you can't even have the satisfaction in your mind of saying, "Yeah, that's really wrong. There's something horrible." It's just like, "Oh, where do I go to get away from this?"

And the untaught worldling, as the Buddha talks about, doesn't know any other way. We're so fortunate that we have a path, that we have a refuge, because without that there is nowhere else to go.

This is what this man Gilbert is saying at the end, and he's light about it. He's saying from all his studying, he really knows intellectually that what he thinks is going to make him happy isn't going to deliver in any way the way he thinks it can. But he's laughing as he says it. He says, "But I really should have learned more than I have. For instance, I'm getting married in the spring because this woman is going to make me happy forever and I know it." And he really laughs, and you can laugh at it. It's good. He says he finds it funny not because it's untrue, but because nothing could be more true. That is really how he feels. "She's going to make me happy forever and I know it." And so he says, "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations."

So something about the belief that there's the good and there's the bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the other—"I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense." Isn't that amazing? He's been doing this for years. This isn't like a one-off test. He sounds like it's actually made him really very honest in looking at himself. But without a sense of the peace of the Buddha, of a path and a refuge in awareness, without a sense that real happiness expands beyond and doesn't depend on nāma-rūpa, on sense experience, on mental experience at all—without that, when we're just caught in the world of sense pleasures and experience, there's nowhere else to go for happiness. Of course people don't want to stop and turn around and look and see that it all just vanishes the moment you touch it. Because the mind thinks, "How can I bear that?" And if there was no other happiness, how could we bear it?

And why I say it takes courage—talking to all of you and seeing it in myself, it's easier for me to see courage in others than in myself, of course—but it takes enormous courage because it's not like we just get to look once and go, "Oh yeah, that's right. Pleasant feeling vanishes. Unpleasant feeling vanishes. So no problem. I can be with this. I can just tune into the refuge in awareness and no problem." No. It takes us at times into really deep experiences of grief, of fear, of all the deep and strongly habituated defenses of the mind against having to feel certain depths of suffering—mental, physical, emotional—because we think we'll die, because we think there's nothing else there if I feel this. How can I keep going?

And of course, you all know, you've all experienced, but we have to keep learning it more and more, that the actual opening to the suffering in the particular moment is the way into that release, that peace, that refuge in awareness. Because awareness is unaffected, unbothered, by whether it's a wonderful, incredible experience, by whether it's painful, by whether it's mundane. When we can take refuge in the knowing, in the awareness, it allows anything—whatever sense experience is arising, internal, external, mental or physical—it allows that in that moment to be a gateway to liberation, a gateway to peace, a gateway to waking up. When we can just notice what's arising and the awareness of it. When we become more interested in the awareness rather than assessing and trying to take refuge in the experience.

And how often are we trying to take refuge in the experience of "Finally that horrible thing stopped and I can just relax into this peaceful breath"? And ever so subtly—ah yes—we're taking refuge, we think, "Now I've found the peace." But it's not, you know? You're still ever so subtly holding on to experience.

But we don't have to flee from pleasant either. Ah yes, now there's calm, and there's the knowing of it. Now, out of nowhere comes this surge of energy and the mind's talking a mile a minute.

What's going on? I have to figure it out. No, I don't. There's just the mind going a mile a minute and the knowing of it. We don't need to refer it back to me and make up an assessment of what it means or an evaluation. Just in that moment—what's happening and the knowing of it.

But it takes a great deal of courage, because this real letting go of clinging, the trying to use experience for refuge, for safety, for something comfortable, for something familiar—the real liberation from clinging of heart and mind comes about when we understand, not intellectually but in ourselves, when we've seen so clearly, so thoroughly, the ephemeral, unreliable nature of the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Of any sense experience. Of the fact that there's just sense experience and contact and the knowing of

it, and nothing else there. When we really get that, more and more and more, then quite naturally the tendency to clinging, the tendency to aversion, the holding to preferences doesn't arise. It falls away.

But this takes a willingness, an ability, the courage to let down our defenses against the fearsomeness and the unreliability of the world. This is the way Pema Chödrön describes it: "When we protect ourselves so we won't feel pain, that protection becomes like armor—armor that imprisons the softness of the heart. We do everything we can think of not to feel anything threatening." And I actually think—I know for me—a lot of my early years of practice was about that: somehow finding a way in practice not to feel anything threatening.

"We try to prolong feeling good about ourselves. Looking at color pictures in magazines of people having fun on the beach, many of us wish that life could be that good. When we breathe in pain, somehow it penetrates that armor. The way we guard ourselves is being softened up. This heavy, rusty, creaking armor begins to seem not so solid after all. With the in-breath, the armor begins to fall apart, and we find we can breathe deeply and relax. Kindness and tenderness begin to emerge. We don't have to tense up as if our whole life were being spent in the dentist's chair."

I can quite relate to that at times—that sense of just keeping the suffering a little bit at bay. And this tensing up, psychically tensing up, takes a huge amount of energy, psychic and even physical energy. We don't even know we're walking around so exhausted. There's so much energy available. People wonder why sometimes in concentration and mindfulness, as your practice deepens, there's so much energy that becomes available. Maybe not this time of night—it's not steady state—but it does come. It's because the armor, that walking around tensed up like we're in a dentist's chair, starts to dissolve. And the energy is available for this simplicity of total presence, of pure seeing, of pure being—of simply allowing the mystery of life to present itself without having to know ahead of time, or assess, or refer it back, or somehow control, or be ready for it before it happens.

When we can just open fully into the mystery of this next moment, of this moment, without any reference point at all—not referencing it to good practice, not referencing it to what happened yesterday or what I think should happen or what this might mean, not referencing it even back to a sense of self, not making any assessment whatsoever, but just total open presence with sati and samādhi, with concentration, just the unification of mind in that moment, and mindfulness—that's really taking refuge in awareness.

And in that moment, just for that moment, we're getting an inkling, we're getting a doorway into the peace of the Buddha, into the peace that's accessible to us all the time. We are so fortunate to even have a path laid out for us and a sense that this is true and possible and available. It gives us the courage and the faith not to cling so desperately to our search for fulfillment and sense of self in pleasant feeling—our desperate fear of the unpleasant as a sign that we're failing, as a sign that something is inherently and desperately wrong with us or the world.

We are as we are. The world is as it is. And actually, when we give up needing to understand how that is, much less explaining it to ourselves, and we give up needing to protect ourselves against how it is, but just have this trust, this willingness to just be here totally for this arising moment—no more, no less—then we begin to really touch the peace of the Buddha. To understand what he means when he says the doors of the deathless are open for those who see, for those who hear, now, in this moment.

And it doesn't mean we're fleeing from the world of the senses. It doesn't mean we want to hate sense pleasure, or say, "Yes, let's have some more suffering because that's my way to freedom." It doesn't mean we're trying to surmount living in a mind and body. It just means understanding more accurately where the chains are.

I just want to end by reading two things about this—one from the Buddha, one from a kind of New Age guy. Eckhart Tolle, the New Age guy, is saying: "It's not saying that we should no longer appreciate pleasant or beautiful things or conditions. Of course we do. But to seek something through these beautiful conditions that they cannot give—an identity, a sense of permanency and fulfillment—this is a recipe for frustration and suffering."

And from the Buddha: "The 'I' is not the fetter of forms. Forms are not the fetter of the 'I.'" In other words, the I isn't the problem; forms aren't the problem.

But whatever desire and passion arise in dependence on the two of them—on the eye, forms, and contact—whatever desire or passion or aversion arises in dependence on that contact, this is the fetter.

If the sense door or the sense object, the eye or the form, were the fetter—if those things were inherently what was keeping us in suffering—then the Buddha said, this holy life for the ending of dukkha would not be proclaimed. In other words, if the eye and forms were the problem, there's nothing you could do about it. So the holy life would not be proclaimed.

There is an eye in the Blessed One. The Blessed One sees forms with the eye. Yet no desire or passion is in the Blessed One. So the Blessed One is well released in mind.

I really like that. We don't want to hate the eye. We don't need to get rid of forms. We don't have to run from contact. There is an eye in the Blessed One. He sees forms with the eye. But no passion or desire arises, and he is well released in mind.

Just opening to the mystery of whatever this next moment brings, without needing to run from it, hold on to it, or make up a story about it. Just there is the door to the deathless.

So let's sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 349

Sakkāyadiṭṭhi: Identity View

Carol Wilson · 1h06

> *In this detailed exploration of sakkāyadiṭṭhi (identity view or personality view), Carol Wilson draws extensively from the suttas to illuminate one of Buddhism's most fundamental teachings on the nature of self. She presents the Buddha's precise definition of identity view: the twenty ways we mistakenly regard form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness as self—seeing them as identical to self, possessed by self, contained within self, or containing self.*
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> *Wilson examines how identity view serves as the root of the sixty-two speculative views described in the Brahmajāla Sutta, and how its presence leads to agitation through clinging. Drawing from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, she explains the Buddha's teaching that when any aggregate changes—as they inevitably do—consciousness becomes preoccupied with that change, giving rise to fear, distress, anxiety, and further clinging. She shares her own practice observations about the subtle hooks that maintain self-referencing even when we intellectually see through our patterns.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with sakkāyadiṭṭhi through careful attention to the six sense doors, sense contact, and vedanā (feeling tone). Wilson emphasizes how continuity of mindfulness reveals the moment-to-moment impermanence that naturally undercuts identity view. She concludes with the touching story of Anāthapiṇḍika weeping upon hearing such profound teachings, reminding practitioners of their good fortune in having access to these liberating instructions.*

Tonight I want to talk about sakkāyadiṭṭhi, which is translated variously as personality view or identity view. Identity view is how Bhikkhu Bodhi likes to translate it. I'll be drawing on a lot of information from the discourses, from the suttas. I got in a mood and got really absorbed in reading many different suttas, so I hope I don't get too detailed about it, but I was having fun with it.

Once I went to some teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and these are some notes I took. He said at one point that there are two attitudes at the core of our suffering, like twin forces at the core of our being: grasping at self-existence and the self-cherishing attitude—basically, the meanness of things. He said we've entrusted our entire well-being to the self-cherishing attitude, and so we find ourselves caught in a perpetual cycle of suffering due to this erroneous total belief in self-grasping to make us

happy. Later on he remarked that if this really worked, if self-interested thought and activity could make us truly happy, we should all have succeeded by now, because we've certainly perfected that quality of activity.

So what is this sakkāyadiṭṭhi? There's one sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya where it's said that all sixty-two speculative views—there's one whole sutta describing all the different views and all the ways we get lost in past and future, in "is that" or "isn't that"—arise from one source. Someone asks: what causes these views to come into existence, and the absence of what prevents them from arising? The key is identity view. When identity view is present, then all of these sixty-two speculative views can come to be. When there is no identity view, no personality belief, no sakkāyadiṭṭhi, then these views don't come to be. They don't arise.

Sakkāyadiṭṭhi is definitely a seed of enormous confusion and suffering. And basically, after we've been practicing for a while—to move away from such high language—we hate it. We want it to go away. But not really. We'd like the suffering part of it to go away, but other parts of it we're so familiar with. It just feels so much like me. How could it go away?

Back to the suttas. What is sakkāyadiṭṭhi? The Buddha actually describes it very precisely. He has very different words and phrases for different aspects of how the sense of self is created in a moment. Sakkāyadiṭṭhi, in some ways, is the grossest form of how we get caught in creating a sense of self, but it's also the place to start. He gives a very specific definition of what it is.

Now experientially, before I read you that definition, we all know very well the experience of being caught in the sense of identification—both the experience of being caught and also the mystery of it. When you're caught in some particular internal formation, a particular pattern of your mind, an emotional train, some reaction, or maybe just striving in meditation—something you're caught in—and you're mindful to the extent that you can actually name what's going on. You can say, "Oh, this is striving," or "This is my sense of worthlessness." You can note the sensations. You can name the emotions. It's not like you're lost on another planet or completely believing the content. And still, somewhere, you're totally identified. You sort of know that in the back of your mind, but you just can't see how.

And then it switches. Something lets go, and suddenly there's no identification anymore. The whole saṅkhāra, the whole formation, might still be there, might still be exactly the same. But somehow you're free within it. There's just not that sense of suffer-

ing from it anymore. It's a mystery, isn't it? You wonder, how did that happen? What let go? Can I do that again? Just that sense of something huge having shifted, and at the same time, you're still in the same story, but it just isn't me anymore.

We know that, don't we? That experience.

But what does the Buddha describe sakkāya-diṭṭhi as? What is it? How does the presence of sakkāya-diṭṭhi serve to create further views, further getting lost in a sense of self? How do we practice sakkāya-diṭṭhi—because we do, often. And what is the path of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification?

I want to touch on some different suttas, some different things the Buddha has said about each of these. There is one very set definition of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, and in the past, I would read it and kind of not dismiss it, but try to simplify it and think, "Oh, that's too complicated and boring." But I'm afraid I don't think that at the moment, so you're going to get the whole thing.

This is Sāriputta speaking, but that's also pretty good. And this is repeated over and over in the suttas—it's not just a one-time thing. He says: What is sakkāya-diṭṭhi? An uninstructed worldling, someone who's not completely awakened, regards form as self. Or he regards self as possessing form, or he regards form as within self, or he regards self as within form.

A metaphor is given for each of these, because I know the mind just goes, "Huh?" Regarding form as self—the metaphor is that in that moment, they're indistinguishable, the way that if you have an oil lamp, you can't tell the difference between the flame and its color. They're indistinguishable. So in that moment, we're thinking of form as self.

At other times, one might regard self as possessing form, which would mean the mind, or the formless aspects of experience, feels as though it possesses form the way that a tree has a shadow. So it's as if the mind is possessing form as self.

Form as in self means that in that moment we're positing or thinking of the formless—which could be mind experience—as a self within which the form is situated. This is like the way a scent is in the flower. So it's as if we're thinking in that moment of self as vast mental activity, and form is within it.

And self as in form means that you're thinking of form, and the self—the sense of the formless, the mind, consciousness—is within the form, the way a jewel might be in a basket.

Don't try to remember these, but it's just different ways that in a particular moment we're positing the sense of self. So that's in relation to form. Then these same four are in relation to all the other four aggregates: feeling, perception, volitional formations—actions of mind, internal formations—and consciousness.

So at any particular time, we might be regarding feeling as self, or perception as self, or some volitional internal formation as self, or consciousness as self, and each of those in any of those four ways. It's very subtle. We might think, "Well, I know this body isn't me." But there could be more subtle ways that we're relating to the body as being within a sense of self, which is consciousness, for example.

So our view—sakkāya-diṭṭhi is just a view. It's not a steady state. It's arising in relationship to experience frequently. And because it can arise in any of these twenty different ways, we don't always recognize it. We might be really familiar with two or three of those ways and we don't get caught in them anymore. But there are seventeen others that we just don't quite see.

Sāriputta goes on, taking form just as the example: The person then lives obsessed by the notions "I am form, form is mine." As he lives obsessed by these notions, that form of his changes and alters—heck of a nerve, but it does—and with the change of form there arises in him, guess what? Sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. The same for all of these. The form alters, the feeling alters, the perception, the volitional formations, any of our internal experience, and consciousness.

So this is the basic definition of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. It's clear and it's not—it's actually very subtle. Now, when Sāriputta says we think of form as me, that form changes and alters, and we get really lost in displeasure, in despair, in sorrow—that's not rocket science to see how we do that, right? I mean, that's pretty obvious to see.

The body changes—where it didn't hurt, suddenly there is pain. Vedana changes—where you had a nice, pleasant, calm breath, suddenly the whole sitting gets tight and hard, strong sensations arise, and you feel like needles are sticking into you. It's unpleasant. It's changed, you know.

Our perceptions shift and change. Sometimes, just in deep states of concentration, our perceptions of what's going on in our body, in the world, get really weird. It can be scary. It certainly is unfamiliar. That change in perception, the change in vedana, the change in form gives rise to all kinds of thoughts and conclusions and comparing—and more vedana and more thoughts and more sense of self and enormous suffering. "What

does it mean about me?" Or our perceptions can shift in how we think others here are looking at us, or thinking about us, or speaking to us—or just how they look, what's going on with them. Perceptions are unreliable, but they shift and we get really upset.

God knows our internal formations are changing all the time. From talking to people and from my own experience, that's often one of the biggest areas where, when they change, we really get lost in obsessive suffering about it, in confusion—me, me, me. Or we resist. Or we blame.

All of that, in some way, involves positing a personality belief, an identity belief, around any of these aspects of experience, or around our resistance to it, or around the conclusion: "What does this mean about me?" In that, we are practicing the path of self-identification. We're practicing the cultivation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

Which isn't to then start blaming ourselves, because you can't even claim sakkāya-diṭṭhi as yours. It's just another conditioned arising. If we hate when personality view arises, we're practicing the path of cultivating personality view again, right? But if we can just see it as another arising appearance—"Oh yeah, here's personality view. I'm totally and completely identified with this and I want it to go away. Oh yeah, that's personality view. It feels like this"—then we're not cultivating it in that moment.

Now, the Buddha elaborated in another sutta a little bit more on what Sariputta said about how we create suffering from sakkāya-diṭṭhi. He started this sutta by saying, "I will teach you agitation through clinging." You might think we don't need to be taught agitation through clinging! I think what he means is, "I will explain to you how that happens." And then he follows it with, "And I will teach you non-agitation through non-clinging."

He begins with the same set of explanations—what is an uninstructed worldling, one who regards self as form, and that whole thing. And then he says, with the change and alteration of form, of feeling, of perception, of formations, of consciousness—and I like this, it's a little subtler, it's really how it seems to happen in my experience—with the alteration of this sense of experience we're calling self, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with that change.

Even if it's a change for the so-called better, it's easy to get preoccupied with it. "Oh, now the sitting's really going well. How did I get there? How can I keep it going? What does this mean about my practice? What stage might I be at?" We become preoccupied with the change. And then agitation—even if it's a change that we like, that preoccupa-

tion leads to agitation in the mind, agitation in the energy body. Agitation and a constellation of mental states, born of preoccupation with the change of form, remain obsessing his mind, or her mind.

This can be extremely gross, where we really know it, and it can operate on very subtle levels. But the agitation can be the kind where you just have to run around in the woods for an hour because you're so preoccupied with the alteration and the constellation of mental states that have arisen. Or it can be an agitation arising from a state of quite deep tranquility—as Marcia talked about in her last talk, the tranquility in samādhi—but there's a change and some "me-ness." "Oh yeah, my consciousness is getting tranquil. What does that mean?" The agitation is on a subtler level, but it's agitation nonetheless, obsessing in the mind, a constellation of mental states. It's the same pattern.

And I think this is interesting. Because his or her mind is obsessed, he is frightened, distressed, and anxious. And through clinging, he becomes more agitated. This is really, to me, the way it happens. Gross or subtle, never mind—it's the same pattern.

It's the same way it works. Because the mind at that moment is obsessed—really from grasping to the sense of self in the change, the alteration of form or perception or consciousness or vedana, or internal formations. Because the mind is obsessed with that change, in any way you know, all these thoughts start, and in the agitation out of that obsession, fear arises, some form of distress and anxiety, and then there's more clinging and more agitation.

And this is the ongoing arising, moment after moment, of the experience of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, sense of self. Obviously, as the Buddha goes on to teach non-agitation through non-clinging, it's simply that when there is no sakkāya-diṭṭhi arising in the moment around the alteration of experience, then there's no agitation. There's no clinging to the experience and there's no agitation. So that's non-agitation through non-clinging.

The only difference is that subtle arising in the moment of some aspect of experience subtly being held as self, and then all the reactions that come from that. And sometimes it's so obvious, but sometimes it's so subtle. It does sometimes seem like—God, you know, we practice so diligently and for so many years, and we're paying such close attention, and we've seen so often how any of these particular experiences comes and goes, isn't self. I mean, we know that in some way, but then we don't. If we really knew it, we'd be arahants.

So not to get frustrated or discouraged—because that is merely obsessing, identifying with some internal formation and getting agitated and clinging—but to have a healthy respect. What I think is a healthy respect for really how deeply, how well, we have practiced in at least this lifetime sakkāya-diṭṭhi. We've really practiced it many, many mind moments, to the point that it's so familiar, so often, that we don't even notice it. That's why we have to really sharpen our mindfulness, our continuity, our samādhi, to be able to see more clearly, to see through it.

So what does it mean? I'll move away from the suttas for a moment. Practically, in our experience, I just want to share something I was noticing. I think it was the last retreat I sat. I sat here for the month of April, really exploring and experiencing the difference between being caught and identified in a particular train of internal formation, of sankhara really, and when the sakkāya-diṭṭhi—when that sense of clinging to, identifying with, any aspect of experience—is gone. Really experientially, what does that mean to us? And as I said, I know you all know it, but just to look carefully: what is it that's the hook for me? And it might be different for all of us at different times. What is the place where the sense of self is hooking on that's keeping me in this experience?

And even when we know this happens—just before I came up, I was closing the Saṃyutta Nikāya, and there was a sutta there that just popped out at me, of a monk who was very sick and had been practicing for years, a long time. And he was really upset. He went to the Buddha because he was really sick, and he said, basically—you can hear any of us saying it—"I'm used to practicing and having this real depth of samādhi and abiding in tranquility. I always could get there, and now I can't do it. Now I can't get my samādhi—what happened?" Basically. I mean, it was in slightly different language, but that was basically it.

And you can just hear the Buddha. He's kind of like, "Haven't I told you things change?" It really sounded like that. "Let me see, have I ever said anything to you about mental states being impermanent? Feeling is impermanent, conditions are impermanent..." And he runs through the whole thing. He didn't kind of say, "Don't worry, you'll get your samādhi back, it's okay." He just said, "Wake up. Everything's changing. Let it go." Okay, this is my inflection a little bit, but that was basically what he said.

And we all know that, don't we?

So what I was exploring—I mean, not consciously, but I just really started noticing it this spring when I was sitting. At times it'd be pretty clear, going along. There wasn't a lot of emotional stuff. But I noticed, I remember, it was early in the morning. I'd get up,

and when I first get up early, I'd go down and get a cup of tea, and then I'd start practicing, like 2:30 or 3 or something. And a good friend of mine, who was also sitting, would usually be down there walking.

And I've noticed for myself that when I first get up, before I've just had a moment to settle in, it's like my mind is not quite aware, and I'm more prey to identification with whatever particular patterns I have. They just kind of creep in for a moment. So between my room upstairs and walking down to the tea, even though I was noticing—it's that kind of space where you're noticing what's happening, but that kind of grip is coming along with what's happening.

I would notice that sense of comparing. "I wonder if..." And this is from way back. This is from my first years of practice. I can't believe this is still here, I was also thinking. "I wonder if I got up before her today." Who cares? But every morning: "I wonder if I'm going to get down there before her, or is she already walking?"

And I would have to watch my mind go through this as I'm going down the stairs. And some days it was just laughing. But every now and then, it would really grip me. And I'd notice the comparing and the sense of, "Oh, there she is. She's a better yogi than me." And I'd watch this whole thing going.

And it's that point where you're really, as if you're standing on the side going, "I don't believe this is still running." But there's some little hook, you know, it's not completely unidentified.

And so I was looking one morning, I was just really exploring it. And I said, "Oh, the hook isn't so much what I thought it was." We think, "Well, I really want to be free from suffering," which at that moment translates into, "I want to be free from this really stupid pattern." And so I want to see through it so it can go away.

But it just popped into my mind: the hook actually was, "Am I willing to be without self-referencing?" That the hook into the story—and I've been seeing it more and more—it's not always the hook, but the times when I'm seeing what's happening quite clearly, I can label the whole thing, I'm not a hundred percent buying in, but there's some hook. It's not about, for me at that point, believing the story at all, or having to fix it, or having to say, "No, it really doesn't matter if she's there before you. It doesn't mean you're a worthless yogi." You know how you try and pretend, "I'm really above all of this." I saw the hook was: to be completely without self-referencing. So this stuff comes, and the referencing back to "me" was actually the hook, even though it was a suffering

story. There's still a familiar sense of "me" about it. And that was actually the point of identification—just a subtle, very subtle feeling of "me who needs to see through this really stupid story." Or "me."

It's hard, I don't know if I can explain it any better, but I'm just saying explore this in yourself. It's not just the habit of mind, the times when you can really see through it, but there's a subtle sense of trying to understand it, trying to see how it comes to be in the moment. "Why is this pattern arising? It's arising out of this and this and this and that." But there's a subtle sense of "me" behind it.

If I just turn around and look at that, there's just pure awareness in that moment. You just notice thought arising, sensation arising, feeling arising, mood arising, and no referring back to "me" at all. There's no "me" in that moment who's caught in this pattern or not caught in this pattern, or walking down the stairs, or anything. It's just awareness receiving sensations, vedana, thoughts, without any constellation of "me" in it. It's all just empty space.

And in that, a feeling would suddenly come up—the subtle sense of, "I don't know if I want to be without self-referencing." Even if it's a slightly suffering story, that sense of "me" is so familiar, like a comfortable old coat that you just want to slip into, even though it's hot and you really don't need it and it's just dragging you down and making you sweat. But still, you know, like that kid in the Peanuts cartoon who used to drag around his blanket all the time because it was comfortable.

Anyway, I don't know if I'm making any sense at all, but explore that. When there's the immediacy of wakeful presence, just noticing form arising, feeling arising, sensation arising, mood arising, thoughts arising—just arising without referring back to anything—there's no problem. There's no agitation. There's nothing one has to do to change that formation, to get rid of it. It really doesn't matter if thoughts are arising: "I wonder if I got up ahead of her, or she got up ahead of me, or why is this happening?" It doesn't matter. Those thoughts are arising in empty space. Awareness is just receiving thoughts, and there's nothing to do with them. It's not a problem. Nothing needs to be fixed. One doesn't have to suddenly think, "I've got to move into awareness, I better do metta, I better..." There's just no sense of sakkaya-ditthi, no sense of self, and hence no problem.

You know that way Ajahn Sumedho talks about sakkaya-ditthi—the difference between "my sadness" and "oh, sadness is like this." Me walking down the stairs knowing "comparing, being a bad yogi, that's my pattern." Or simply, "Comparing feels like this." Just what it is. It doesn't matter if it's comparing or it's incredible bliss. It really doesn't make any difference. It's just like this.

And then for me, just to notice that more and more, I could see the hook into the sakkaya-ditthi wasn't the suffering nature of the pattern, but: am I really willing in that moment to be without self-referencing altogether?

And just a word for those of you practicing metta. In a different way, it brings us to the same place, the same experience. You may not be turning into arising sensation, arising thought, arising vedana, because it's just getting absorbed into the metta feeling, absorbed into the phrases and the image. But in that, as the absorption and the metta grows, there also stops being any sense of self-referencing. It stops being "me having metta for me or you or anyone." There's just metta. There's not the sense of me and other. And in that all-inclusive space, it doesn't feel exactly the same as emptiness, but it works the same way in which there stops being a sense of sakkaya-ditthi, no more sense of self-referencing. It's just the metta, and that's all.

Notice in those times how freeing it is. It's just like this. And how—and I'm sure you've noticed this—how easily, how tricky, especially with internal formations like these, our mind or our awareness, whatever you want to say, gets subtly seduced back into identifying in some way with the particular, especially when it's a repetitive pattern, an internal formation, a repetitive pattern or personality pattern that you get caught up and identified with.

So that ability to just go, "Oh, sadness is like this. Worthlessness is like this. Comparing is like this."

It might really be just empty space like that for a moment—just pure awareness receiving sensations. And then suddenly, it's very "me" again.

I noticed, and I'm sure there are many more, but I noticed a few ways that the attention gets tricked back into identifying again. I'll just share my ways; I'm sure you've got your own.

One, of course, is if it's a difficult or unpleasant mental formation—comparing or fear or worthlessness or blame or jealousy or you name it—we get tricked back into personality view about it, relating to it out of aversion, out of wanting it to go away, out of thinking we need to fix it.

Another way we get tricked in is out of fascination with it, which is what was happening to me walking down the stairs that morning. And it can really seem like we're being dharmic about it, trying to figure out how this is arising in the moment. What arising experience is giving rise to this comparing? We're sort of being dharmic, but there's a way we're really clinging to the fascination of wanting to understand it so I

can understand how I, great as I am, keep getting tricked back into believing comparing. How does it rise? How does it go? But there's an identification in that moment, a sakkaya-ditthi around the formation, grasping of wanting to understand.

And of course, the obvious: getting caught up over and over in any particular thought form or aspect of the story. So I'm walking down the stairs and just when I think I've got it all figured out and I'm not really identified—but this is thinking about it, trying not to identify—and you think, "Yes, it's just comparing arising due to my old patterns from when I was a child," and you think you've got it all nicely manipulated, and some new thought comes up: "But it's because it's that particular friend, and that really triggers me because..." And then you're really back in it again. Me, me, me.

Can you just let the pattern be there? No me at all.

It's very tricky. It's very tricky.

So exploring where we get caught and how the mind gets tricked back into relating to any aspect of experience as sakkaya-ditthi—those moments when there's just the pattern, just the formation, the sensations, the thoughts, the contact arising and passing, and there's no holding it together in our consciousness as a sense of me, just awareness receiving experience—that's really anatta, right? That's a moment of perceiving anatta.

And I just want to say that while in the moment anatta is really the falling away of the sense of me, of any self-referencing, anatta is not annihilation. It's liberation from a false sense of self, and it's really a moment of freedom, but anatta is not a path of annihilation. It's not that we are looking to experience anatta out of hatred, self-hatred, aversion to our experience. "Let me please just see the emptiness of this because I really hate what's happening," as if we're looking to let it just be—experience being received in awareness—because "I've got to get out of this." And sometimes that becomes, "I've got to get out of this transition. I've got to get out of this whole life. I've got to get out of this whole body-mind experience" in a negative way, in a way that's actually more identification. That's sakkaya-ditthi too—clinging to non-being.

But when there's that just seeing, really being with all the arising experience without referring any aspect of it, without making sakkaya-ditthi out of any of it—in that moment it really is the dissolving of the whole issue. The whole issue just goes away, and nothing needs to change. You don't have to get out of comparing. Whether it's a problem or not just falls away. But not if we're looking for anatta out of a sense of self-hatred or aversion to any experience. That's just more sakkaya-ditthi. That's just having ourself in reference to, reacting to a particular experience with sense of self.

So just exploring how the sense of sakkaya-ditthi—of relating to any aspect of experience as "this is mine," or "this experience is within me," or "I am within that experience"—notice how that arises. Notice the liberation from that, the freedom from that. Both are happening all the time. Just as I said, we're practicing sakkaya-ditthi a lot. But I don't want to leave it on that kind of downbeat. We also here are cultivating the path of practicing freedom from identity view, freedom from creating sense of self.

So back to the suttas. There's one sutta where someone asked the Buddha, "How should one know, how should one see, for identity view to be abandoned?" And this is really one very succinct description of our path of practice. His answer: "When one knows and sees the eye as impermanent, identity view is abandoned in that moment." But he goes on. "When one knows and sees form"—so there's the eye and there's forms, what the eye sees—"when one then knows and sees forms as impermanent, in that moment identity view is abandoned." And then eye consciousness—the eye and forms give rise to eye consciousness when knowing turns to that. "When one sees eye consciousness as impermanent, identity view is abandoned."

When those all come together—there's your eye, there's a form, there's knowing, there's consciousness in that moment—that moment of actual seeing is called contact, sense contact. So he says then, "When one knows and sees eye contact as impermanent, identity view is abandoned." And "when one knows and sees whatever feeling, whatever vedana, arises with eye contact as the condition"—so there's the seeing, it's impermanent, you don't notice that, but it's really pleasant, and you notice that that pleasantness is impermanent—"then identity view is abandoned."

And he goes, of course, through all the six sense doors: ear and sounds, ear consciousness, ear contact, the actual hearing, whatever feeling arises due to ear contact, hearing contact; smell; taste; body, body and tactile phenomena, body consciousness, the contact when you're actually aware of feeling and whatever feeling arises.

And the mind, the mind as a sense door, whatever mental phenomena arise. Subtle mental phenomena are really gross—thoughts, feelings, emotions—or subtle perceptions, whatever mental phenomena arise. The consciousness, the mental consciousness, and mind contact, which I think is really interesting, and whatever feeling arises.

I go through all those because I think this points to a very subtle and very precise way that we can bring mindfulness into our practice here. It gives us a lot of choices—whatever in a moment is particularly obvious in our experience. So say there's a loud sound. It might not be that you notice the ear first and think, "Oh yes, the ear is impermanent." You may not have even noticed the consciousness of hearing, but you could be aware of contact right at that point of hearing contact and notice that that contact is im-

permanent. It's gone already. Maybe you don't notice the contact, but you notice, "Oh, that's an unpleasant sound." Unpleasant—it's gone already. Unpleasant is impermanent. This applies to all the five physical senses.

Personally, I think to really bring this sense of noticing impermanence in at the mind door takes particular attention. I was noticing just while walking today, paying attention to that moment of contact at the mind door—mental phenomena and the point of contact. Say a little mood arises, no big deal. Can I just notice that point of contact when there's knowing of sadness, that first moment of really connecting? Oh, contact. And as soon as you notice, it's impermanent. As soon as you notice that contact, it's already changed. It doesn't mean the mood is gone, but it shifts slightly, and there's another contact. Or the vedana that comes from it—you notice, "Oh, that's slightly unpleasant." And as soon as you're noticing unpleasant, it shifted and became neutral in that moment. You notice neutral, it shifts and goes back to unpleasant.

This, of course, takes some mindfulness. It takes some continuity of mindfulness leading into samadhi. It's hard to see and notice on this level, especially of contact and vedana and impermanence, when we're so busy in daily life and so much stuff is coming in. If I were to go talk at CIMC in a couple of weeks in Cambridge, where people just come in from their daily lives, and I start talking about noticing the moment of mental contact and how it's impermanent—people are running around crazy busy. What are you talking about? They're lucky if they can notice they're furious, never mind the moment of mental contact, the moment of vedana.

But here we are able to really cultivate the mind, to use our sati, our mindfulness, and the continuity of mindfulness to begin to see through our inverted perceptions, to begin to see more clearly. When we really bring our mindfulness to the point of the sense door, to the point of sense contact or the vedana—not to change it, but just to notice its impermanence—this really begins to deeply undercut the whole habit of sakkaya-ditthi.

Because when we're really cellularly experiencing impermanence on this quick-changing level, you just can't make too much of anything. Even the strongest, most habitual story about yourself, or moods that you have, or feelings in your body—when you are noticing on that point of contact, tactile sensation and contact with awareness changing, the sense of "it's me, this form is mine, this contact is mine"—by the time you've even gotten that formed, it's already changed. And it all just starts to become so much more ephemeral, so much less solid, so much more free.

And yet, as the Buddha said, we have a tendency not to notice the impermanence of things. We know it intellectually, but he talks about the inverted perceptions, the perversions of perception, where we tend to perceive what is impermanent and changing as permanent, what is unsatisfactory and unreliable as satisfactory, what is not self as self.

On the level of anicca, impermanence—which is really what he keeps talking about in terms of seeing through sakkaya-ditthi, what I just read—to really cellularly see through our habit of assuming permanence takes continuity of mindfulness. I feel personally that it's the lack of continuity of mindfulness that hides impermanence. We all know everything's changing, but cellularly, we don't necessarily quite get it.

This is something the Dalai Lama said, I think at that same teaching. He said we think we understand long-term anicca. On some level, we all really know, sort of, that we're going to die. We know that people are born, that they get sick and they die. They. When we get sick, well, we have to go through some dharma work to say, "Oh, you're right, I know that really happens." But to me? Now?

But we all know that happens. However, he says the tendency is to think—and even with moods or even with something quicker—we think, "Well, this sensation, this unpleasant sensation, I know it's impermanent. It's going to go away." When? We tend to think it arises, it persists for a while, and then it goes away, it changes.

This is what is inaccurate. That's assuming permanence right there—in that "persists for a while." Nothing persists for a while, even that much. Nothing. He said impermanence means constant flux, and when we're thinking, "This is arising, my life is persisting for a while, and then it's going away"—we do that, right?

And when we turn in here and look: What is persisting for a while? What has persisted just exactly the same for any two mind moments in a row, if we're really looking? That's one of the distortions of perception that can happen in deep practice, one of the things that can really flip us out for a while. There's nowhere to take a stand. There's nothing staying the same. And I need something—back to even if it's a suffering sense of me, at least it's familiar. I can land there.

When we really have a continuity of mindfulness, moment after moment after moment, you really start to see—and don't believe me, you can't, it really has to come from your own experience—but there isn't anything persisting. And at first, second, and third, we might hate that. "No, I need something." But once that sense of me wanting something—that's also not persisting. It goes away. It's just how it is. No problem.

This is why the continuity of sati is so important. Because otherwise we see this pain, we pay attention to something else, we space out for a while, we go off into a daydream, and then we come back and, "Oh, there's the pain," and it's been the same. So we're assuming permanence. We don't notice that ten million things happened in there, and while you were lost in the daydream, you can't actually prove that that pain was there. You weren't aware of it. Like the tree that falls in the forest and nobody's there—do you hear it? Don't think about that. But in your experience, the experience was not pain. The experience was you were off in Sumatra somewhere, hunting orangutans. And then you come back and think, "Oh, this pain has been the same all day." But it changed in the night. "Oh, I see. There really is change. The pain went away."

That's why when we talk about continuity of mindfulness, it doesn't mean you don't space out, but it's that willingness to just notice this moment, then this moment, then this moment. That's why noting as a tool is so immensely useful, because when we're just noting, very quietly labeling—whether it's "rising and falling," or "vibrating," "thinking," "unpleasant," "contact," "vibrating," "tingling," "color"—you see that it's something different every moment. And then you realize you didn't note for a while and you come back and start noting again. It brings you in much more moment to moment.

It's possible to be that aware without noting, for sure. But it's also easy to be saying, "Oh yes, I'm really aware of this pain. I'm aware of the body. I'm aware of awareness. And I'm receiving sensations in awareness, like Carol said. And I'm just feeling the pain." And it's all the same. It's a crock. It's pleasant maybe. We're half experiencing stuff and half making it up—which is why we don't know what's going on so often. When we're making it up, we're assuming, often in that, permanence or some subtle sense of self. We're assuming something and we don't even know what.

Just noticing, noting or not, but just connecting your awareness with each moment, each experience, whatever it is—that gives the space. You might say, "What do you mean space? Noting every moment, there's no space. That's why I hate it and I don't want to do it." But it actually gives the space for us to notice what's actually happening rather than what we subtly think might be happening, or want to be happening, or how we analyze what's happening, or think it could be. We don't have a clue if we could just notice the arising experience. And this moment after moment—it actually gives huge space.

Because when that happens—when there's a sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi coming—we notice it. It's really obvious, that sense of contraction, that sense of self. And through the steadiness of mindfulness is how samādhi, how concentration, develops. That stillness,

that depth of observing power, really supports and strengthens and allows the observing power to get more and more subtle, to actually notice the moments of mind contact and how that changes as soon as you notice it.

That's why we're so fortunate, really, to have the opportunity to practice like this. It doesn't mean anyone's practice should look any particular way, but we have the opportunity to truly cultivate the stillness and the observing power, to begin noticing the changing nature of all our sense experience—the sense contact, the sense consciousness, and the vedanā that goes along with it.

I have other great stories to share. Let me offer two more.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, in the form of the definition I gave you with those twenty ways, is said in the Theravāda tradition to be dissipated at the first stage of enlightenment—personality view falls away. And of course the question then arises: how come it seems to keep going? It doesn't seem complete. It seems like if all that were gone, one would be a complete arahant.

There's a sutta I've known about for years that I find really fascinating, because even though those twenty ways of positing self or thinking some aspect of the aggregates is me can be seen through, it's still so subtle. The tendency, the residual tendency to conceit, to the sense of comparing with others—that doesn't go until one is an arahant. The tendency, the subtle sense to grasp at any aspect of experience. The underlying tendency just to have the feeling of "I am." These are so subtle and so deeply rooted that even when you're seeing clearly the impermanence of all these things we've mentioned, there can still arise some subtle sense of "I am" that you can't quite pin down.

So if that's happening to you, and you think, "But I should be past that by now"—don't lose heart.

There's this sutta where one monk, Khemaka is his name, and some other monks come to him. He's very sick—I don't know why so many of these monks were sick and old. The other monks were asking him about his experience, and he said, "I do not grasp at any of the aggregates as me or mine. I know I'm not form. I know I'm not perception. I know I'm not consciousness." He goes through all of them.

So the monks go back, saying, "Oh, he's an arahant, he's an arahant!" Then they return to him.

And he said, "No, I'm not. I'm not."

He said he still has—and this is very interesting—he said, "Even though I do not speak of feeling as 'I am' or perception as 'I am,' I don't grasp any of these as 'I am,' there still lingers in me, there is still a residual feeling of 'I am' that arises. The notion 'I am' has not vanished in my experience. The feeling, the tendency, the notion 'I am' does arise—as if this 'I am,' even though I don't say I am perception, I am form. There's still the habit of this feeling of 'I am' arising."

And he gives this example. He says, "Suppose there's the scent of a blue, red, or white lotus. Would one be speaking correctly if one said the scent of the flower belongs only to the petals? Or the scent only belongs to the stalk? Or it belongs only to the pistils?"

And the monks say, "No. You'd have to say the scent is part of the whole flower."

And he said, "It's exactly like that. I don't speak of form as 'I am,' but I can't say 'I am' is completely separate from form. I don't speak of perceptions or feeling as 'I am,' but somehow the notion of 'I am,' the underlying tendency to conceit, still tends to arise somehow within this field of mental-physical experience."

He couldn't really be clearer than that. I find that kind of heartening, actually. Because it explains why I think at times we've all practiced a lot, we've really seen deeply the impermanence of these things, and there are times when you really know, "I'm not identifying with this body. I'm not identifying with this emotion. I don't think I'm this perception." You really know it. But there's that whiff of I-ness hanging around. You really can't put your finger on it, but you can say, "Okay, I-ness is here. It feels like this."

And the practice isn't any different. It's not that we have to do something different. And again, Khemaka says: you just keep on dwelling, contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates subject to clinging.

Just keep on noticing the impermanence of all that we've discussed—the five aggregates, the six senses, the sense doors, the sense objects, contact and feeling. Just keep noticing. That's all.

With saddha, with trust, with faith that as our perception becomes clearer and clearer, we will no longer be sucked back, deluded back into believing sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And that whiff—that indefinable whiff of self that can drag us back into so much confusion and suffering—will finally dissipate completely.

I want to close with one sutta about how fortunate we are to have these teachings and this practice, to have this time.

This is a sutta to Anāthapiṇḍika. Anāthapiṇḍika was perhaps the biggest lay supporter, the most generous lay supporter of the Buddha in his lifetime—totally devoted, a layman married with family. But he was said to have attained the first stage of awakening, incredibly generous. In this sutta, he's very sick and basically dying. He asks for Sāriputta and Ānanda to come to him and give him teachings. They come and ask how he's doing, and he's in incredible pain in his body, in his head.

So Sāriputta starts teaching him. It's a long teaching—I won't give you all of it—but it's very much in line with what we've been talking about tonight. He starts out by saying, "You should train yourself: I will not cling to the ear. I will not cling to the nose. I will not cling to the eye. I will not cling to the mind." He goes through all the sense doors: "I will not cling to forms. I will not cling to eye consciousness. I will not cling to eye contact"—going through all these same things we just talked about. "I will not cling to material form, to feeling"—all the aggregates. The kind of teachings I was just sharing that we all can explore every day in our practice.

And Sāriputta ends it with: "I will not cling to what is seen, to what is heard, to what is sensed, to what is cognized, to what is encountered. I will not cling to what is sought after. I will not cling to what is examined by the mind. And my consciousness will not be dependent on that."

At this point, Anāthapiṇḍika started weeping, just weeping. Sāriputta and Ānanda actually said, "What's the matter? Are you sinking? Are you dying?"

And he says, "No." He said, "I have been waiting on the teacher and the bhikkhus for so long, for my whole life, and never have I heard such a teaching on the Dhamma as this, with such depth. It's so profound."

And Sāriputta says, "Yes, we don't give such deep talk on Dhamma to lay people"—in a way implying it's too hard for them to see. "We give it to those who have gone forth."

And Anāthapiṇḍika says, "Well, please, let such talk on Dhamma be given to lay people. There are those who can see, those who can understand." It's so profound and beautiful.

Then they leave, and he died and was reborn as a deva and came and sang praises to Sāriputta, to the Buddha.

I get chills when I think of that—his weeping at the power of that teaching, saying, "Please let it be shared with lay people."

And now, yes, almost all of us here are lay people, and we have the opportunity not just to hear the teachings but to put them into practice—at the eye door, the ear door, the nose door, the mind door, the body door, the mouth door. See the impermanence. See where we're caught. See sakkāya-diṭṭhi arise and pass without needing to change it, without needing to do anything.

And just appreciate—appreciating our great good fortune in this life.

May the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings in all realms, in all conditions. May our practice be the cause for their happiness and liberation from suffering.

CHAPTER 350

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi: Identity View

Carol Wilson · 1h05

In this comprehensive exploration of sakkāya-diṭṭhi (identity view or personality view), Carol Wilson draws deeply from the Pāli suttas to illuminate one of Buddhism's most fundamental teachings on the nature of self and suffering. She presents the Buddha's precise definition of how we create identity view through twenty different ways of relating to the five aggregates (khandhas)—regarding form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness as self, as possessing self, as within self, or as containing self.

Wilson shares personal practice insights about the subtle hooks that maintain self-identification, even when we can clearly observe our patterns. She identifies a crucial discovery: the resistance isn't always to the suffering itself, but to being without self-referencing altogether. Drawing from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, she explains how consciousness becomes preoccupied with change, leading to agitation, fear, and clinging—the pattern of "agitation through clinging" that the Buddha taught.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with sakkāya-diṭṭhi through careful attention to the six sense doors, sense contact, and vedanā (feeling tone), emphasizing that continuity of mindfulness (sati) is essential for perceiving the moment-to-moment impermanence that undercuts identity view. Wilson concludes with the touching story of Anāthapiṇḍika receiving profound teachings on non-clinging at his deathbed, reminding practitioners of the precious opportunity to receive and practice these liberating instructions.

I want to talk about Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, which is translated variously as personality view or identity view. That's how Bhikkhu Bodhi likes to translate it. Using a lot of information from the discourses, from the suttas, I found myself completely absorbed in reading many different texts—I hope I don't get too detailed about it, but I was having fun with the exploration.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, is essentially getting caught in that sense of self. Once I went to some teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and in my notes I recorded him saying that there are two attitudes at the core of our suffering, like twin forces at the core of our being. These attitudes are grasping at self-existence and the self-cherishing attitude—basically, the meanness of things. He said we've entrusted our entire well-being to the self-cherishing attitude, and so we find ourselves caught in a perpetual cycle of suffering due to this erroneous total belief that self-grasping can make us

happy. Later he observed that if this really worked, if self-interested thought and activity could make us truly happy, we should all have succeeded by now, because we've certainly perfected that quality of activity.

So what is this Sakkāya-diṭṭhi? There's one sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya where it's said that all the sixty-two speculative views—there's an entire sutta outlining the different views and all the ways we get lost in past and future and questions of existence—arise from a single source. Someone asks what causes these views to come into existence, and in the absence of what do they not arise. The key, of course, is identity view. When identity view is present, then all of these sixty-two speculative views can come to be. When there is no identity view, no personality belief, no Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, then these views don't come to be. They don't arise.

This Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is definitely a seed of enormous confusion and suffering. After we've been practicing for a while, to move away from such elevated language, we hate it. We want it to go away—but not really. We'd like the suffering part of it to go away, but other parts of it we're so familiar with. It just feels so much like me. How could it go away?

Back to the suttas. What is this Sakkāya-diṭṭhi? The Buddha actually describes it very precisely. He has very different words and phrases for different aspects of how the sense of self is created in a moment. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is, in some ways, the grossest form of how we get caught in creating a sense of self, but it's also the place to start. He gives a very specific definition of what Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is.

Now experientially, before I share that definition, we all know very well the experience of being caught in identification. Both the experience of being caught and the mystery of it. When you're caught in some particular internal formation, a particular pattern of your mind, an emotional train, some reaction, or maybe just striving in meditation—something you're caught in—and you're mindful to the extent that you can actually name what's going on. You can say, "Oh, this is striving," or "This is my sense of worthlessness." You can note the sensations, identify the emotions. It's not like you're lost on another planet or completely believing the content. And still, somewhere, you're totally identified. You sort of know that in the back of your mind, but you just can't see how.

And then it switches. Something lets go and suddenly there's no identification anymore. The whole saṅkhāra, the whole formation might still be there, might still be exactly the same, but somehow you're free within it. There's just not that sense of suffering from it anymore. And it's a mystery, isn't it? You wonder, "How did that happen?

What let go? Can I do that again?" Just that sense of something huge having shifted, and at the same time, you're still in the same story, but it just isn't me anymore. We know that experience.

You know that experience.

But what does the Buddha describe sakkāya-diṭṭhi as? What is it? How does the presence of sakkāya-diṭṭhi serve to create further views, further getting lost in a sense of self? How do we practice sakkāya-diṭṭhi? Because we do, often. And what is the path of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification?

I just want to touch on some different suttas, some different things the Buddha has said about each of these.

There is one very set definition of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. In the past, I would read it and kind of not dismiss it, but just try to simplify it and think, "Oh, that's too complicated and boring." But I'm afraid I don't think that at the moment, so you're going to get it—the whole thing.

This is Sāriputta speaking, but that's also pretty good. And this is repeated over and over in the suttas; it's not just a one-time thing.

He says: What is sakkāya-diṭṭhi? An uninstructed worldling—someone who's not completely awakened—regards form as self, or regards self as possessing form, or regards form as within self, or regards self as within form.

A metaphor is given for each of these, because I know the mind just goes, "Huh?"

Regarding form as self: the metaphor is that in that moment, they're indistinguishable, the way that if you have an oil lamp, you can't tell the difference between the flame and its color. They're indistinguishable. So in that moment, we're thinking of form as self.

At other times, one might regard self as possessing form, which would mean the mind or the formless aspects of experience feels as though it possesses form the way a tree has a shadow. So it's as if the mind is possessing form as self.

Form as in self means that in that moment, we're positing or thinking of the formless—which could be mind experience—as a self within which the form is situated. This is like the way a scent is in the flower. So it's as if we're thinking in that moment of self as vast mental activity, and form is within it.

And self as in form means that you're thinking of form, and the self—the sense of the formless, the mind, the consciousness—is within the form the way a jewel might be in a basket.

Don't try to remember these, but they're just different ways that in a particular moment we're positing a sense of self. So that's in relation to form.

And then these same four are applied in relation to all the other four aggregates: feeling, perception, volitional formations—you know, actions of mind, internal formations—and consciousness.

So at any particular time, we might be regarding feeling as self, or perception as self, or some volitional internal formation as self, or consciousness as self, and each of those in any of those four ways.

You see, it's very subtle. We might think, "Well, I know this body isn't me." But there could be more subtle ways that we're relating to the body as being within a sense of self, which is consciousness, for example.

So our view—sakkāya-diṭṭhi is just a view, it's not a steady state. It's arising in relationship to experience frequently, and because it can arise in any of these twenty different ways, we don't always recognize it. We might be really familiar with two or three of those ways and we don't get caught in them anymore. But there are seventeen others that we just don't quite see.

So then Sāriputta goes on, taking form just as the example. The person then lives obsessed by the notions: "I am form, form is mine." As he lives obsessed by these notions, that form of his changes and alters. Heck of a nerve, but it does. With the change of form, there arises in him—guess what—sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. The same for all of these: the form alters, the feeling alters, the perception, the volitional formations, any of our internal experience and consciousness.

So this is the basic definition of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. You see, I wanted to go through it all. It's clear and it's not. It's actually very subtle.

Now, when Sāriputta says we think of form as me, that form changes and alters, and we get really lost in displeasure, in despair, in sorrow—that's not rocket science to see how we do that, right?

Am I right? I mean, that's pretty obvious to see. The body changes—where it didn't hurt, suddenly there is pain. Vedana changes—where you had a nice pleasant calm breath, suddenly the whole sitting gets tight and hard, strong sensations are coming,

and you're getting like needles sticking in you, and it's unpleasant vedana. It's changed. Our perceptions shift and change. Sometimes just in deep states of concentration, our perceptions of what's going on in our body, in the world, get really weird. It can be scary. It certainly is unfamiliar.

That change in perception, the change in vedana, the change in form gives rise to all kinds of thoughts and conclusions and comparing—and more vedana and more thoughts and more sense of self and enormous suffering. What does it mean about me? Or our perceptions can shift in how we think others here are looking at us, or thinking about us, or speaking to us, or just how they look, what's going on with them. Perceptions are unreliable, but they shift and we get really upset. God knows our internal formations are changing all the time. From talking to people and from my own experience, that's often one of the biggest areas where, when they change, we really get lost in obsessive suffering about it, confusion—me, me, me. Or we resist, or we blame.

And all of that, in some way, we are depositing a personality belief, identity belief, around any of these aspects of experience, or around our resistance to it, or around the conclusion: what does this mean about me? In that, we are practicing the path of self-identification. We're practicing the cultivation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi—which isn't to then start blaming, because you can't even claim sakkāya-diṭṭhi as yours. It's just another conditioned arising. If we hate when personality view arises, we're practicing the path of cultivating personality view again.

But if we can just see it as another arising appearance—oh yeah, here's personality view, I'm totally and completely identified with this and I want it to go away—oh yeah, that's personality view, it feels like this—then we're not cultivating it in that moment.

So the Buddha elaborated in another sutta a little bit more on what Sariputta said, how we create suffering from sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And he started this sutta by saying, "I will teach you agitation through clinging." You might think we don't need to be taught agitation through clinging. I think what he means is: I will explain to you how that happens. And then he follows it with, "And I will teach you non-agitation through non-clinging."

So he begins with the same set of explanations of what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is—you know, an uninstructed worldling regards self as form, and through that whole thing. And then he says, with the change and alteration of the form, the feeling, the perception, the formations, the consciousness—I like this, it's a little subtler, but it's really how it seems to happen in my experience—with the alteration of this sense of experience we're calling self, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with that change.

Even if it's a change for the so-called better, it's easy to get preoccupied with it. Ah, now the sitting's really going good. How did I get there? How can I keep it going? What does this mean about my practice? What stage might I be at? We become preoccupied with the change, and then—agitation. See, even if it's a change that we like, that preoccupation leads to agitation in the mind, agitation in the energy body.

Agitation and a constellation of mental states, born of preoccupation with the change of form, remain obsessing his mind or her mind. And this can be extremely gross, where we really know it. And it can be on very subtle levels. Agitation can be the kind of agitation where you just have to run around in the woods for an hour because you're so preoccupied with the alteration and the constellation of mental states that have arisen. Or it can be an agitation arising from a state of quite a bit of tranquility—as Marcia talked about in her last talk, the tranquility in samādhi—but there's a change and some me-ness. Oh, yeah. My consciousness is getting tranquil. What does that mean? And the agitation is on a subtler level, but it's agitation nonetheless, obsessing in the mind, a constellation of mental states. It's the same pattern.

And I think this is interesting. Because his or her mind is obsessed, he is frightened, distressed and anxious, and through clinging he becomes more agitated. And this is really, to me, the way it happens—gross or subtle, never mind.

It's the same pattern, it's the same way it works. Because the mind at that moment is obsessed—really from grasping to the sense of self in the change, the alteration of form or perception or consciousness or vedana, or internal formations—because the mind is obsessed with that change in any way, all these thoughts start in the agitation. Out of that obsession, fear arises, some form of distress and anxiety, and then there's more clinging and more agitation. This is the ongoing arising, moment after moment, of the experience of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, sense of self.

Obviously, as he goes on to teach non-agitation through non-clinging, it's simply that when there is no sakkāya-diṭṭhi arising in the moment around the alteration of experience, then there's no agitation. There's no clinging to the experience and there's no agitation. That's non-agitation through non-clinging.

The only difference is that subtle arising in the moment of some aspect of experience being held as self, and then all the reactions that come from that. Sometimes it's so obvious, but sometimes it's so subtle. It does sometimes seem like we practice so diligently, for so many years, paying such close attention, having seen so often that any of these particular experiences comes and goes, isn't self. We know that in some way, but then we don't. If we really knew it, it would be our hoots.

So, not to get frustrated or discouraged—because that is merely obsessing, identifying with some internal formation and getting agitated and clinging. But to have a healthy respect for how deeply, how well we have practiced, in at least this lifetime, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. We've really practiced it many, many mind moments, to the point that it's so familiar, so often, that we don't even notice it. That's why we have to really sharpen our mindfulness, our continuity, our samādhi, to be able to see more clearly, to see through it.

So what does it mean? I'll move away from the suttas for a moment. Practically, in our experience, I just want to share something I was noticing. I think it was the last retreat I sat. I sat here for the month of April, really exploring and experiencing the difference between being caught and identified in a particular train of internal formation, of saṅkhāra, and when that sense of clinging to, identifying with any aspect of experience is gone.

Really experientially, what does that mean to us? And as I said, I know you all know it, but just to look carefully: what is it? That's the hook for me. And it might be different for all of us at different times. What is the place where the sense of self is hooking on that's keeping me in this experience?

Even when we know this happens—just before I came up, I was closing the Saṃyutta Nikāya, and there was a sutta there that popped out at me about a monk who was very sick and had been practicing for years, a long time, and he was really upset. He went to the Buddha because he was really sick, and he said basically what any of us might say: "I'm used to practicing and having this real depth of samādhi and abiding in tranquility, and I always could get there, and now I can't do it. Now I can't get my samādhi. What happened?"

And you can just hear the Buddha—he's kind of like, "Haven't I told you things change?" It really sounded like that. "Let me see, have I ever said anything to you about mental states being impermanent? Feeling is impermanent, conditions are impermanent..." He runs through the whole thing. He didn't say, "Don't worry, you'll get your samādhi back, it's okay." He just said, "Wake up. Everything's changing. Let it go." That's my inflection a little bit, but that was basically what he said. And we all know that, don't we?

So what I was exploring—not consciously, but I just really started noticing it this spring when I was sitting—at times it would be pretty clear going along, not a lot of emotional stuff. But I noticed, I remember, it was early in the morning. I'd get up and go down to get a cup of tea, then I'd start practicing around 2:30 or 3:00. A good friend of mine, who was also sitting, would usually be down there walking.

I've noticed for myself when I first get up, before I've had a moment to settle in, my mind is not quite aware, and I'm more prey to identification with whatever particular patterns I have. They just creep in for a moment. So between my room upstairs and walking down to the tea, even though I was noticing what's happening, that kind of grip of self is coming along with what's happening. I would notice that sense of comparing. I wonder if this is from way back, from my first years of practice. I can't believe this is still here. I'd think, "I wonder if I got up before her today." Who cares? But every morning I'd wonder if I was going to get down there before her or if she was already walking. I would have to watch my mind go through this as I was going down the stairs.

Some days it was just laughing. But every now and then, it would really grip me. I'd notice the comparing and the sense of, "Oh, there she is. She's a better yogi than me." I'd watch this whole thing going. And it's that point where you're really standing on the side, as if saying, "I don't believe this is still running." But there's some little hook—it's not completely unidentified.

So I was looking one morning, really exploring it, and I saw: oh, the hook isn't so much what I thought it was. You think, "Well, I really want to be free from suffering," which at that moment translates into "I want to be free from this really stupid pattern," and so "I want to see through it so it can go away."

But a thought just popped into my mind: oh, the hook actually was, am I willing to be without self-referencing?

The hook into the story—and I've been seeing it more and more—isn't always present, but the times when I really am seeing what's happening quite clearly, when I can label the whole thing, when I'm not 100% buying in but there's still some hook... it's not about, for me at that point, believing the story at all, or having to fix it, or having to say, "No, it really doesn't matter if she's there before you, it doesn't mean you're a worthless yogi," trying to pretend I'm really above all of this. I saw the hook was: to be completely without self-referencing.

So this stuff comes—so what? The referencing back to me was actually the hook, even though it was a suffering story. There's still a familiar sense of "me" about it. And that was actually the sense of identification. Just a subtle, very subtle feeling of me who needs to see through this really stupid story. Or me... I don't know if I can explain it any better.

But I'm just saying: explore this in yourself. It's not just the habit of mind. The times when you can really see through it, but there's a subtle sense of trying to understand it, trying to see how it comes to be in the moment—why is this pattern arising? It's arising

out of this and this and that. But there's a subtle sense of "me" behind it. If I just turn around and look at that, and there's just pure awareness in that moment, you notice thought arising, sensation arising, feeling arising, mood arising, and no referring back to me at all. There's no "me" in that moment who's caught in this pattern, or not caught in this pattern, or walking down the stairs, or anything. It's just awareness receiving sensations, vedana, thoughts, without any constellation of "me" in it. It's all just empty space.

And in that, a feeling would suddenly come up—a subtle sense of: I don't know if I want to be without self-referencing. Even if it's a slightly suffering story, that sense of "me" is so familiar, like a comfortable old coat that you want to slip into even though it's hot and you really don't need it and it's just dragging you down and making you sweat. Still, you know—like that kid in the Peanuts cartoon who had to drag around his blanket all the time because it was comfortable. Anyway, I don't know if I'm making any sense at all, but explore that.

When there's the immediacy of wakeful presence, just noticing form arising, feeling arising, sensation arising, mood arising, thoughts arising, just arising without referring back to anything—there's no problem. There's no agitation. There's nothing one has to do to change that formation, to get rid of it. It really doesn't matter if thoughts are arising like, "I wonder if I got up ahead of her, or she got up ahead of me, or why is this happening?" It doesn't matter. Those thoughts are arising in empty space. Awareness is just receiving thoughts, and there's nothing to do with them. It's not a problem. Nothing needs to be fixed. One doesn't have to suddenly think, "I've got to move into awareness, I'd better do metta, I'd better..."

There's just no sense of sakkaya-ditthi, no sense of self, and hence no problem. You know that way Ajahn Sumedho talks about sakkaya-ditthi—the difference between "my sadness" and "oh, sadness is like this." Me walking down the stairs knowing, "oh, comparing, being a bad yogi, that's my pattern"—or simply: "oh, comparing feels like this." Just what it is. It doesn't matter if it's comparing or it's incredible bliss. It really doesn't make any difference. It's just like this.

And then for me, just to notice that more and more, I could see the hook into the sakkaya-ditthi wasn't the suffering nature of the pattern, but: am I really willing in that moment to be without self-referencing altogether?

Just a word for those of you practicing metta: in a different way it brings us to the same place, the same experience. You may not be turning into arising sensation, arising thought, arising vedana, because you're just getting absorbed into the metta feeling, absorbed into the phrases and the image. But in that, as the absorption and the metta

grows, there also stops being any sense of self-referencing. It stops being me having metta for me, or you, or anyone. There's just metta. There's not this sense of me and other. And in that all-inclusive space, it doesn't feel exactly the same as emptiness, but it works the same way in which there stops being a sense of sakkaya-ditthi. No more sense of self-referencing. It's just metta and that's all.

Notice in those times how freeing it is. It's just like this. And how easily, how tricky—

especially with internal formations like this, our mind or our awareness, whatever you want to call it, gets subtly seduced back into identifying in some way with the particular. Especially when it's a repetitive pattern, an internal formation, a repetitive personality pattern—you get caught up and identified with it.

So that ability to just recognize, "Oh, sadness is like this. Worthlessness is like this. Comparing is like this"—it might really be just empty space like that for a moment, just pure awareness receiving sensations. And then suddenly, it's very "me" again.

I noticed—and I'm sure there are many more—but I noticed a few ways that the attention gets tricked back into identifying again. I'll share my ways; I'm sure you've got your own.

One, of course, is when it's a difficult or unpleasant mental formation—comparing or fear or worthlessness or blame or jealousy, you name it. Of course we get tricked back into a personality view about it, relating to it out of aversion, out of wanting it to go away, out of thinking we need to fix it.

Another way we get tricked in is out of fascination with it. This is what was happening to me walking down the stairs that morning. And it can really seem like we're being dharmic about it—trying to figure out how this is arising in the moment, what arising experience is giving rise to this comparing. We're sort of being dharmic, but there's a way we're really clinging to the fascination of wanting to understand it so that I can understand how "I," great as I am, keep getting tricked back into believing in comparing. How does it arise? How does it go? But there's an identification in that moment, a sakaya-ditti around the formation, and grasping of wanting to understand.

And of course, the obvious one: getting caught up over and over in any particular thought form or aspect of the story. So I'm walking down the stairs, and just when I think I've got it all figured out and I'm not really identified—but this is just thinking about it, trying not to identify—and you think, "Yes, it's just comparing arising due to my old patterns from when I was a child," and you think you've got it all nicely man-

aged, some new thought comes up: "But it's because it's that particular friend, and that really triggers me because..." And then you're really back in it again. Me, me, me. When can you just let the pattern be there, not about you at all? It's very tricky, very tricky.

So we explore where we get caught and how the mind gets tricked back into relating to any aspect of experience as sakaya-ditti. Those moments when there's just the pattern, just the formation, the sensations, the thoughts, the contact arising and passing, and there's no holding it together in our consciousness as a sense of me—just awareness receiving experience—that's really anatta. That's a moment of perceiving anatta.

And I just want to say this: in the moment that anatta is really the falling away of the sense of me, of any self-referencing, anatta is liberation from a false sense of self. It's really a moment of freedom.

But anatta is not a path of annihilation. It's not that we are looking to experience anatta out of hatred, self-hatred, or aversion to our experience—"Let me please just see the emptiness of this because I really hate what's happening." As if we're looking to let it just be experience being received in awareness because "I've got to get out of this." And sometimes that "I've got to get out of this" transfers into "I've got to get out of this whole life," this whole body-mind experience, in a negative way, in a way that's actually more identification. That's sakaya-ditti too—clinging to non-being.

But when there's that just seeing, really being with all the arising experience without referring any aspect of it, without making sakaya-ditti out of any of it—in that moment it really is the dissolving of the whole issue. The whole issue just goes away, and nothing needs to change. You don't have to get out of comparing. Whether it's a problem or not simply falls away.

But not if we're looking for anatta out of a sense of self-hatred or aversion to any experience. That's just more sakaya-ditti—having ourselves in reference to reacting to a particular experience with a sense of self.

So just exploring, just exploring how the sense of sakaya-ditti—relating to any aspect of experience as "this is mine," or "this experience is within me," or "I am within that experience"—notice how that arises. Notice the liberation from that, the freedom from that. Both are happening all the time. Just as I said, we're practicing sakaya-ditti a lot. But I don't want to leave it on that kind of downbeat. We also here are cultivating the path of practicing freedom from identity view, freedom from creating a sense of self.

So back to the suttas. There's one sutta where someone asked the Buddha, "How should one know, how should one see, for identity view to be abandoned?" And this is really one very succinct description of our path of practice. His answer: "Bhikkhu,

when one knows and sees the eye as impermanent, in that moment identity view is abandoned." But he goes on: "When one then knows and sees forms—so there's the eye and there's forms, what the eye sees—when one knows and sees forms as impermanent, in that moment identity view is abandoned." And then eye consciousness: the eye and forms give rise to eye consciousness. When knowing turns to that...

When one sees eye consciousness is impermanent, identity view is abandoned. When all of these come together—there's your eye, there's a form, there's knowing, there's consciousness in that moment—that moment of actual seeing is called contact, sense contact. So he says then, when one knows and sees eye contact as impermanent, identity view is abandoned. And when one knows and sees whatever feeling, whatever vedana arises with eye contact as the condition—so there's the seeing, it's impermanent, you don't notice that, but it's really pleasant, and you notice that that pleasantness is impermanent—then identity view is abandoned.

And he goes, of course, through all the six sense doors: ear, sounds, ear consciousness, ear contact, the actual hearing, whatever feeling arises due to ear contact, hearing contact. Smell, taste, body—body and tactile phenomena, body consciousness, the contact when you're actually aware of feeling and whatever feeling arises. And the mind, the mind as a sense door, whatever mental phenomena arise—subtle mental phenomena or really gross thoughts, feelings, emotions, or subtle perceptions, whatever mental phenomena arise. The consciousness, the mental consciousness, and mind contact, which I think is really interesting, and whatever feeling arises.

I go through all of those because I think this points to a very subtle and very precise way that we can bring mindfulness into our practice here. It gives us a lot of choices, whatever in a moment is particularly obvious in our experience. So say there's a loud sound. It might not be that you notice the ear first and think, "Oh yes, the ear is impermanent." You may not have even noticed the consciousness of hearing, but you could be aware of contact. Right at that point of hearing, contact. And notice that that contact is impermanent. It's gone already. Maybe you don't notice the contact, but you notice, "Oh, that's an unpleasant sound, unpleasant." It's gone already. Unpleasant is impermanent.

With all the five physical senses—and personally I think to really bring the sense of noticing the impermanence in at the mind door is especially powerful. I was noticing just walking today, taking a walk, and paying attention to that moment of contact at the mind door, mental phenomena, and the point of contact. So say a little mood arises, no big deal. Can I just notice that point of contact when there's knowing of sadness, that first moment of really connecting? Oh, contact. And as soon as you notice, it's impermanent. As soon as you notice that contact, it's already changed. It doesn't mean the

mood is gone, but it shifts slightly and there's another contact. Or the vedana that comes from it—you notice, "Oh, that's slightly unpleasant," and as soon as you're noticing unpleasant, it shifted and became neutral in that moment. You notice neutral, it shifts and went back to unpleasant.

This, of course, takes some mindfulness. It takes some continuity of mindfulness leading into samadhi. It's hard to see and notice on this level, especially of contact and vedana and impermanence, when we're so busy in daily life and so much stuff is coming in. If I were to go talk at CIMC in a couple of weeks in Cambridge, where people just come in from their daily life, and I start talking about noticing the moment of mental contact and how it's impermanent—people are running around crazy busy. What are you talking about? I'm lucky if I can notice I'm furious, never mind the moment of mental contact, the moment of vedana.

But here we are able to really cultivate the mind, to use our sati, our mindfulness, and the continuity of mindfulness to begin to see through our inverted perceptions, to begin to see more clearly. When we really bring in our mindfulness to the point of the sense door, to the point of the sense contact or the vedana, not to change it but just to notice its impermanence, this really begins to and deeply undercuts the whole habit of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. Because when we're really cellularly experiencing the impermanence on this quick-changing level, you really just can't make too much of anything. Even the strongest, most habitual story about yourself or mood that you have or feeling in your body—when you are noticing on that point of contact, tactile sensation and contact with awareness changing, the sense of "it's me, this form is mine, this contact is mine"... by the time you've even gotten that formed, it's already changed. And it all just starts to become so much more ephemeral, so much less solid, so much more free.

As the Buddha said though, we have a tendency not to notice the impermanence of things. We know it intellectually. He talks about the inverted perceptions, the perversions of perception, where we tend to perceive what is impermanent and changing as permanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is unreliable, as happiness, as satisfactory.

What is not self, we perceive as self.

And on the level of anicca, impermanence—which is really what the Buddha keeps talking about in terms of seeing through sakkāya-diṭṭhi, what I just read—to really cellularly see through our habit of assuming permanence truly does take continuity of mindfulness. I feel personally that it's the lack of continuity of mindfulness that hides impermanence.

We all know everything's changing. But cellularly, we don't necessarily quite get it. Again, this is something the Dalai Lama said—I think it was at that same teaching. He said we think we understand long-term anicca. On some level we all really know, sort of, that we're going to die. We know that people are born, that they get sick and they die. *They.* When *we* get sick, well, we have to go through some dharma work to say, "Oh, you're right, I know that really happens. But to *me*, now?" But we all know that happens.

He says the tendency is to think—even with moods, even with something quicker—we think, "Well, this sensation, this unpleasant sensation, I know it's impermanent. It's going to go away." When? We tend to think it arises, it persists for a while, and then it goes away. It changes. That is inaccurate. That's assuming permanence. Where? In that "persists for a while." Nothing persists for a while, even that much. Nothing. He said impermanence means constant flux.

When we're thinking, "This is arising, my life is persisting for a while, and then it's going away"—and we do that—when we turn in here and look, what is persisting for a while? What has persisted just exactly the same for any two mind moments in a row, if we're really looking?

That's one of the distortions of perception that can happen in deep practice—one that can really flip us out for a while. There's nowhere to take a stand. There's nothing staying the same. And I need something, back to even if it's a suffering sense of me, at least it's familiar. I can land there.

When we really have a continuity of mindfulness, moment after moment after moment, you really start to see—and don't believe me, you can't, it really has to be from our own experience—but there isn't anything persisting. And at first, second, and third, we might hate that. No, I need *something*. But once that sense of me wanting something—that's also not persisting—goes away, it's just how it is. No problem.

This is why the continuity of sati is so important. Otherwise we see this pain, we pay attention to something else, we space out for a while, we go off into a daydream, and then we come back and, oh, there's the pain, and it's been the same. So we're assuming permanence. We don't notice that ten million things happened in there, and while you were lost in the daydream, you can't actually prove that that pain was there—you weren't aware of it. Like that question: if the tree falls in the forest and nobody's there, do you hear it? Don't think about that. But in your experience, the experience was not pain. The experience was you were off in Sumatra somewhere, hunting orangutans. And then you come back and, "Oh, this pain, it's been the same all day." You know, it changed in the night. "Oh, I see, there really is change. The pain went away."

That's why when we talk about continuity of mindfulness, it doesn't mean you don't space out. It's that willingness to just notice this moment, then this moment, then this moment. That's why noting as a tool is so immensely useful. When we're just noting—very quietly labeling whether it's rising and falling, or vibrating, thinking, unpleasant, contact, vibrating, tingling, color—you see that it's something different every moment. And then you realize you didn't note for a while, and you come back and start noting again. It brings you in much more moment to moment. It's possible to be that aware without noting, for sure.

But it's also easy to be saying, "Oh yes, I'm really aware of this pain. I'm aware of the body. I'm aware of awareness. And I'm receiving sensations in awareness. And I'm just feeling the pain." And it's all the same. It's a crock. It's pleasant, maybe. We're half experiencing stuff and half making it up. Which is why we don't know what's going on so often. When we're making it up, we're assuming—often in that assuming—permanence or some subtle sense of self. We're assuming something and we don't even know what.

We're just noticing, noting or not, but just connecting your awareness with each moment, each experience, whatever it is. That gives the space. You might say, "What do you mean space? Noting every moment, there's no space—that's why I hate it and I don't want to do it." But it actually gives the space for us to notice what's actually happening, rather than what we subtly think might be happening, or want to be happening, or how we analyze what's happening. We don't have a clue. If we could just notice the arising experience, moment after moment, it actually gives huge space. Because when that happens and when there's a sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi coming, we notice it. It's really obvious—that sense of contraction, that sense of self.

And through the steadiness of mindfulness is how samādhi, how concentration, develops. That stillness, that depth of observing power, really supports and strengthens and allows the observing power to get more and more subtle, to actually notice the moments of mind contact and how that changes as soon as you notice it. That's why we're so fortunate, really, to have the opportunity to practice like this. It doesn't mean anyone's practice should look any particular way, but we just have the opportunity to really cultivate the stillness and the observing power to begin to notice the changing nature of all our sense experience—the sense contact, the sense consciousness, and the vedanā that goes along with it.

Well, I have all these other great stories. Okay, two more.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, in the form of the definition that I gave you—those twenty ways—is said in the Theravāda tradition to be dissipated at the first stage of enlightenment, personality view. And of course the question then arises: how come it seems to keep going? It doesn't seem to disappear. It seems like if that's all gone, one would be a complete arahant.

There's a sutta I've known about for years that's really fascinating, because even though those twenty ways of positing self or thinking some aspect of the aggregates is me—that can be seen through—and still it's so subtle. The tendency, the residual tendency to conceit, to the sense of comparing with others, that doesn't go until one's an arahant. The tendency, the subtle sense to grasp at any aspect of experience. The underlying tendency just to have the feeling of "I am." These are so subtle and so deeply rooted that even when you're seeing clearly the impermanence of all these things we mentioned, there can still arise some subtle sense of "I am" that you can't quite pin down.

So if that's happening to you, and you think, "But I'm past that by now"—don't lose heart.

There's this sutta where one monk, Khemaka is his name, and some other monks... he's very sick. I don't know why a lot of these monks were sick and old. Other monks came to him and they were asking him, "What's your experience?" And he said, "You know, I do not grasp at any of the aggregates as me or mine. I know I'm not form. I know I'm not perception. I know I'm not consciousness." He goes through all of them. And so they go back saying, "Oh, he's an arahant, he's an arahant." And then they come back to him. And he said, "No, I'm not."

He said, "I still have..." And this is very interesting. He said, "Even though I do not speak of feeling as 'I am,' or perception as 'I am,' I don't grasp any of these as 'I am'—there still lingers in me, there still is a residual feeling of 'I am' that arises. The notion 'I am' has not vanished in my experience. The feeling, the tendency, the notion 'I am' does arise as if this 'I am,' even though I don't say I am perception, I am form. There's still the habit of this feeling of 'I am' arising."

And as an example, he says, "Suppose there's the scent of a blue, red, or white lotus. Would one be speaking correctly if one would say the scent of the flower belongs to the petals, or the scent only belongs to the stalk, or it belongs only to the pistils?" And the monks say, "No, you'd have to say the scent is part of the whole flower."

And he said, it's exactly like that. I don't speak of form as I am, but I can't say I am is completely separate from form. I don't speak of perceptions or feeling as I am, but somehow the notion of I am, the underlying tendency to conceit, still tends to arise somehow within this field of mental and physical experience.

He couldn't really be more clear than that. I found that kind of heartening, because it explains why, I think, at times we've all practiced a lot and we've really seen deeply the impermanence of these things. There are times when you really know, I'm not identifying with this body, I'm not identifying with this emotion, I don't think I'm this perception. You really know it, but there's that whiff of I-ness hanging around. You really can't put your finger on it, but you can say, okay, I-ness is here. It feels like this.

And the practice isn't any different. It's not that we have to do something different. Again, Khemaka says, you just keep on dwelling, contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates subject to clinging. Just keep on noticing the impermanence of the things I mentioned—the five aggregates, the six senses, the sense doors, the sense objects, contact and feeling. Just keep noticing. That's all.

With saddhā, with trust, with faith, that as our perception gets clearer and clearer, we will no longer be sucked back, deluded back, into believing sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And that indefinable whiff of self that can drag us back into so much confusion and suffering will finally dissipate completely.

I want to close with one sutta about how fortunate we are to have these teachings and this practice, to have this time. This is a sutta to Anāthapiṇḍika. Anāthapiṇḍika was perhaps the biggest lay supporter, the most generous lay supporter of the Buddha in his lifetime, totally devoted—a layman, married with family. But he was said to have attained the first stage of awakening, and was incredibly generous.

In this sutta, he's very sick and basically dying. He asks for Sāriputta and Ānanda to come to him and give him teachings. They come and ask how he's doing, and he's in incredible pain in his body, in his head. So Sāriputta starts teaching him. It's a long teaching, I won't give you all of it, but it's very much in line with what we've been talking about tonight.

He starts out by saying, you should train yourself: I will not cling to the ear, I will not cling to the nose, I will not cling to the eye, I will not cling to the mind. He goes through all the sense doors. I will not cling to forms. I will not cling to eye consciousness. I will not cling to eye contact. Going through all these same things we just talked about. I will not cling to material form, to feeling, to all the aggregates—the kind of teachings that I was just sharing, that we all can explore every day in our practice.

And Sāriputta ends it with: I will not cling to what is seen, to what is heard, to what is sensed, to what is cognized, to what is encountered. I will not cling to what is sought after. I will not cling to what is examined by the mind. And my consciousness will not be dependent on that.

At this point, Anāthapiṇḍika started weeping. Sāriputta and Ānanda actually said, what's the matter? Are you sinking? Are you dying?

And he says, no. I have been waiting on the teacher and the bhikkhus for so long, for my whole life, and never have I heard such a teaching on the Dhamma as this, with such depth. It's so profound.

And Sāriputta says, yes, we don't give such deep talk on Dhamma to lay people, implying in a way that it's too hard for them to see. We give it to those who have gone forth.

And Anāthapiṇḍika says, well, please, let such talk on Dhamma be given to lay people. There are those who can see, those who can understand.

So profound and beautiful. And then they leave and he died, and of course was reborn as a deva and came and sang praises to Sāriputta and to the Buddha.

I get chills when I think of that—his weeping at the power of that teaching, saying, please let it be shared with lay people. And now, yes, almost all of us here are lay people and we have the opportunity not just to

You know, at the eye door, the ear door, the nose door, the mind door, the body door, the mouth door. See the impermanence. See where we're caught. See sakkāya-diṭṭhi arise and pass without needing to change it, without needing to do anything.

And just appreciate—appreciating our great good fortune in this life.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

May the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings, in all realms, in all conditions. May our practice be the cause for their happiness and liberation from suffering.

CHAPTER 351

Using All Experience As The Path

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this intimate closing talk from a retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the crucial transition from intensive practice to daily life, exploring how the barrier between meditation and non-meditation can be dissolved. Drawing on teachings from Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, she examines sammā saṅkappa (right intention/right attitude) as a practical framework for bringing the dharma fully into our lives.

Wilson unpacks the three aspects of right intention taught by the Buddha: renunciation (non-greed), goodwill (mettā), and harmlessness (karuṇā/compassion). She explains how renunciation isn't about enforced asceticism but about cultivating inner contentment and freedom from the craving that colors all our perceptions. She explores how mettā practice allows us to meet whatever arises—internal or external—with friendliness rather than resistance, transforming obstacles into stepping stones for growth.

The talk offers profound insight into how suffering itself becomes a gateway to compassion. When we stop resisting our pain and truly allow ourselves to feel it, we naturally connect with the suffering of all beings. Wilson emphasizes that this is ongoing practice requiring the same commitment in daily life as on retreat—moment by moment, we have the choice to incline the mind toward wholesome states. As the Buddha taught, whatever the mind frequently reflects upon becomes its inclination, gradually transforming not just our inner life but our actions in the world.

I actually never thought during tea time that any of you would make it back into the hall again tonight. I'm really quite impressed.

We say this all the time, but I really mean it. This, in my mind, is one of the most valuable and important times of the retreat. It's the time that we tend to lose it, that we tend to start to notice—or maybe not notice—the barriers that come down and now retreat is over. We're getting on with our life, and it's just in this integration period that we can really start to examine and see how it is that we make these divisions in our mind. Not consciously, of course, but divisions between what's worth paying attention to and what isn't worth paying attention to, where we'll give our effort and where we don't think to give our effort, where it doesn't even occur to us to give our attention.

I personally find this moving from retreat to daily life, this particular coming out and beginning to talk, to be the most excruciatingly painful part of any retreat I've ever done. And that includes a lot of really painful, unpleasant stuff on retreat. I'm not saying this as, "Oh, you should expect horrendous stuff," but just that as excruciatingly painful as it is, over the years I'm finding it to be so rich with learning. A lot of the learning is that I don't even remember to pay attention and forty-five minutes later I wake up and think, "Oh, I've been talking for forty-five minutes, what have I said?" But I just want to say it's really a rich time.

So that's the message that we're always putting out. Meditation and life aren't separate. Meditation is about how we live our life. And the question then always comes up: well, how? I'm not going to give you the how and then you can go home and do it, because there is no one answer. But I want to talk some about that tonight.

Thich Nhat Hanh is great for talking about mindfulness in daily life in very simple terms. He says: "While sitting we practice intensively, and while we are not sitting we do not practice intensively. In fact, we practice non-practice intensively. There is a wall which separates the practice period and the non-practice period. How can we mix the two together? We must practice in a way that removes the barrier between practice and non-practice. When we walk in the meditation hall, we make careful steps very slowly. But when we go to the airport, we are quite another person. We walk very differently, less mindfully. So how can we practice at the airport and in the market? This is engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism does not only mean to use Buddhism to solve social and political problems, protesting against the bombs and protesting against social injustice. First of all, we have to bring Buddhism into our daily lives."

I want to talk tonight about one aspect of our practice that I find very helpful in bringing practice, or Buddhism, into daily life. Just one aspect of many. And that is what is variously translated as right attitude, right intention, right thought, or right aspiration. Basically, it refers to a way of relating to our experience. As this way of relating to our experience becomes more infused into our being through attention to it, through working with it, we start to change our habit patterns and to act more from this way of being, from this relationship to our experience. We start to understand more what it means when we say that our life is becoming one with our spiritual practice. Or in other words, our life is our spiritual practice.

In and out of retreat, retreat is just, as you know, a microcosm of our daily life. It's the same mind. It's the same tendencies of grasping, the same tendencies of pushing away the unpleasant, the same tendencies of spacing out, getting confused. When we leave the protected retreat situation and go into our life, the situations are more complex, but the principles are the same.

Right attitude, right thought, can be looked at in the specific way of what that energy means in a meditation sitting on the pillow, and also in the larger context of our daily life. The Buddha talked about in his teachings an eightfold path that if we follow it will lead us to understanding, to liberation. Three steps of this path deal with our actions: right speech, right action, right livelihood. Three steps of the path deal with the actual cultivation of the mind, or meditation practice: right concentration, right effort, right mindfulness. And then two parts of the path deal with understanding: right understanding and right attitude. So that's where this concept of right attitude comes from.

When we talk about it here, it takes the form of right aim. This quality we've been talking about—of aiming the mind, the willingness to aim your attention directly at whatever arises in a moment—this is right thought, right intention, right aim. What it implies is a willingness to aim the attention directly without hesitation, without preferences. A willingness to fully meet whatever arises. Also a constancy—not, "Well, maybe I'll pay attention to this one, maybe I'll skip this one"—not giving in to preferences. Not a half-hearted kind of energy or attention, but a full meeting of whatever arises.

The implication in a larger situation, say a daily life situation, is the willingness to meet, to greet, whatever situation comes up in our life as practice, as an opportunity to learn and grow. In other words, not picking which situations we want to pay attention to and which ones we want to just try and get rid of.

A further implication of this willingness to use anything that comes our way—and everything that comes our way—as fodder for growth is a growing understanding, a really seeing, that happiness in one's life is not dependent on having a happy external situation. We're not waiting until everything around us is going smoothly and then we can be happy. Rather, happiness lies in our relationship to the situation. This is what we learn from working with right attitude.

I would imagine that almost everyone here, just during this period of practice, has had a time when you've been able to use a difficult situation as a teacher. It sounds strange when I say it, but so many times—and it never ceases to amaze me—people will come in and talk about some very unpleasant situation that's going on, either an internal emotional process, a series of memories, physical pain, or somebody that's driving them crazy, some noise that's going on, and they're really suffering from it. And either

at that interview or the next one, they say with deep, heartfelt sincerity, "I've learned so much from this situation. I'm really glad that it happened"—even from incredibly difficult and painful situations in our lives.

This is one manifestation of right attitude. Not that we only want painful situations to learn from and we're trying to get rid of the pleasant. We can learn from the pleasant as well. But we don't need pleasant situations in order to be happy. In fact, we begin to see that you can be in the most idyllic situation possible and be miserable if the mind is caught in craving or aversion or simple confusion.

I remember one summer I spent in the most idyllic setting in England that one could imagine—a boathouse on a beautiful river on an incredible fairy-tale estate with swans gliding past. I was miserable. Something in me couldn't open to being there, and I couldn't acknowledge that I couldn't open to being there. What could have been the most beautiful setting one could imagine was just... I don't want to be here, this is boring, I feel like I'm in prison. It's got nothing to do with our external surroundings. This understanding is one manifestation of right attitude.

Another development as right attitude begins to unfold in our life is that it becomes a process through which we begin to grow clear about the real values in our life—our own real internal values. What's important to us on a very deep level? What is our life about?

Rather than going through life just reacting to situations that come to us, positive or negative, reacting out of the impulse of the moment—which is often an impulse of greed or aversion or delusion if we're not really paying much attention—rather than that, we get in touch with what our life is really about for us and what's important. That clarity, that commitment, begins to shine through in our actions, in the way we relate to life. It affects the choices we make. We begin to see that actually we do have choices—choices in what we do, in how we react to certain situations.

I see this at the end of retreats, even in the go-rounds like we have today. There are always a few people who are in the middle of a major life transition. This kind of transition can be one manifestation of a person coming to really grapple with what is truly important in their life. Sometimes that leads to major changes. It doesn't have to. What we're doing right now might be absolutely appropriate. But then we come to do it with more awareness, with more commitment, rather than a feeling of just having fallen into something because that's what came our way.

This leads to a great strength of purpose in our life. It gives us the opportunity and the willingness to use situations that come our way much more consciously—as manure to grow, rather than as something to just be gotten through.

Without this strength of attitude, this growing sense of clarity in ourselves, this beginning to align with what we really feel is important in our lives, difficult situations can drag us down much more easily. We stay lost for longer periods of time. The reactions of grasping, of pushing away, of delusion—they take over, and we identify much more easily in a difficult situation with our reactions.

Consider a simple situation: someone here who's making noise in the hall. Without that interest to just look at the suffering and see what this suffering is about—why am I suffering in this situation?—without that, it's much easier to identify with the reaction. Either the anger at the person, or the self-blame for feeling angry when we want to be filled with mettā, or self-pity, or spending energy in resistance to the situation altogether, or denial of one's feelings because we don't like them. If it's an unpleasant memory, how much energy can we spend just trying to rework that memory until we get it to come around so it's not quite so painful?

With right attitude, we take that energy and use it to meet the situation constructively. Not denying or moving away from the situation, but using that quality of right aim—meeting the reaction, the situation, just as it is, full on, with full attention. With this attitude of interested investigation, that's where we begin to see where the hooks are. What's going on in this situation that I'm getting so hooked into, that I'm suffering so much from?

Right attitude is often translated as right intention—intention meaning the aim of the mind, the inclination of the mind, what the mind inclines towards. It's considered a crucial link because intention is the forerunner of action. That's one of the reasons we emphasize it in the instructions. As our understanding deepens, it informs the way the mind inclines, and this then affects our actions. The quality of our actions actually begins to change as we give attention to the inclination of the mind, to right attitude. As our understanding deepens, it's reflected in a change in the way we act, in the way we live.

The Buddha, as I've said before, was very practical. While he repeatedly said that freedom comes when the tendencies to greed, hatred, and delusion are uprooted altogether through liberating insight, through deep seeing into the nature of reality, we also don't have to just sit and wait for this to happen. We don't have to say, "Oh well, I just have to be with greed, hatred, and delusion until they're uprooted altogether, and

there's nothing I can do about it." He also recognized that we can work on the level of intention, on the level of thought. These seeds of greed, of hatred, of delusion—they surface in the inclination of mind.

They surface in the kinds of thoughts we have that then often lead to action—thoughts of really wanting something that then drive what we go to do, thoughts of anger or self-anger, thoughts of just spacing out.

At the same time that we continue to meet these thoughts with mindfulness, this is not at all a matter of saying, "These are bad, they've got to go." We meet them with clarity, with mindfulness, with acceptance. But at the same time that mindfulness is working to purify, we can also work to cultivate the wholesome counterpart of these unwholesome thoughts. And this is a very deliberate, conscious sort of practice. It's one that we can do sitting here, and it's one that is really quite helpful and strong in our daily life.

So first there's the mindfulness—being aware that, say, there's a lot of angry thoughts, and just being aware of that. Not "I'm bad, I'm angry, they've got to go." But then realizing that once there's that awareness, and the beginning of the purification that comes when there's awareness, we do often have a choice. At that moment when there's a lot of angry thoughts, we don't have to say, "Oh God, this is bad, it's got to go." Instead, we can deliberately work to cultivate the wholesome counterparts of those thoughts. And this is done with an attitude of acceptance and metta, of love—not an attitude of self-blame.

That we do have a choice is, I feel, a very powerful point of change, and one that we often don't recognize. Sometimes it feels like we don't have a choice. We're locked in the anger and that's it. But if we can acknowledge to ourselves that there is a possibility of transforming, of replacing this energy, we might find that there's much more capacity to do this, much more possibility, than we might expect.

The Buddha talked about three different ways to work with this, three specific types of right intention to cultivate. First is the intention of renunciation—cultivating thoughts of non-greed, which is basically to weaken intentions or inclinations of the mind towards greed, towards grasping. The second is intentions of goodwill, or metta, thoughts of metta. The third is intentions of harmlessness, cultivating thoughts of compassion. Both of these latter two—intentions of goodwill and harmlessness—work as antidotes to the energy of aversion or hatred. The energy of delusion is seen through more by understanding than by deliberately cultivating a different energy.

This is very practical, working on the principle that, as the Buddha said, whatever one reflects upon frequently becomes the inclination of the mind. It's very simple. If there's a lot of thoughts of anger, the more anger there is, the more that becomes the inclination of the mind. When we begin to work in ways that allow thoughts of metta or compassion to be present, the mind will begin to incline more in that direction. Just very simple and practical and direct.

I want to talk a little bit about each of these three intentions, and offer some suggestions for how to incline the mind in each direction. And I'm sure there are many other ways as well.

Renunciation—in other words, thoughts guided by non-greed. Non-greed is a positive quality, a quality of generosity, of freedom from clinging. Renunciation here does not mean enforced asceticism or being a monk. Renunciation is a word that has very strong associations in our culture. But it includes also, in this sense, a sense of inner contentment. Not necessarily that one has to live like a hermit, getting rid of everything, but more cultivating a sense of inner contentment. When we're not needing so much, when we're not so caught up in acquiring—which seems to lead only to more wanting and needing—there's space in the mind to appreciate what's present right here and now. A great ease, a great sense of happiness can come from that, a real kind of peace in the mind.

I feel it's really hard in this culture to begin to cultivate in ourselves a sense of renunciation, of non-greed, just because our culture is so geared in the other direction. It's so oriented towards having and acquiring and being something. But it was the same in the Buddha's time. He described his teaching as running contrary to the way of the world, because desire is the way of the world. Our world is organized to enhance desire.

Just look at a Sunday New York Times magazine section sometime. The first twenty pages are these incredible advertisements—in case you haven't seen them—incredible ads. I shudder to think how much they cost, these pages of ads for gold jewelry and lipstick and perfume and underwear and fur coats. I'm not particularly inclined toward any of that, but by the time I finish reading one of these sections, I'm going, "Wow, look at that dress! It's only $750 for the skirt." Oh, that's just the skirt. Well, you know, it looks really nice. The mind is easily swayed.

It's not in our culture to say, "Oh, I don't need that. That's okay, last year's skirt will do." When we talk about giving up things or working with non-greed, we tend to think of it as a form of suffering, as a kind of self-mortification. But that's not what I'm talking about at all.

This is a quotation from Lama Yeshe, a Tibetan lama who died several years ago: "Renunciation does not mean that we must give up happiness or that it is desirable to suffer. On the contrary, our aim is to achieve a state beyond suffering. But the aim of most of our daily lives is to try to satisfy each physical desire as it arises, day after day, month after month, year after year. We try to achieve happiness by perpetuating something that is essentially transitory. This expectation, stemming from a misconception, can never be fulfilled and is therefore totally irrational."

Renunciation isn't about getting rid of things so much, or withdrawing from the world and being a hermit. It's a turning away from the craving itself, not so much the objects—a turning away from the desire for gratification. And this beginning to turn away from the movement of craving can be tremendously aided by outer simplification, simply because the simplification gives us the space to see the craving.

That's exactly what is going on here in the retreat situation. You're in this situation of enforced outer simplicity. We've really taken away as much as we could possibly take away and not have a revolt on our hands. And so, look how much—a couple of people said they've been dealing so much with craving and desire in this retreat. That's great. That's part of what the setup is for, to have a chance to see it.

Working with this, the renunciation is outer and enforced, but not really, because you chose it. And that outer simplification then gives the space to look at the process of craving itself. Often one finds—I know it's my experience in retreat—at some point during the retreat, not the whole retreat, but at some point, in this simplified situation with so few things, I begin to see the craving. I begin to give up the wanting for many of the things I could have. I might quit eating so much, or say, "Well, I don't really need to go have tea today. It doesn't really matter."

And the space that opens up in the mind! I'm so much happier in this space of inner simplicity than I am when things are going fine in my life but I'm really caught up in the process of doing and having and wanting. The difference between being here, where you wear the same sweatpants for four days and finally laundry comes and then you can put them back on and no one cares and you don't care—there's just this real freedom in it. Compare that to going out where this doesn't look so nice and you need to buy something else to match with that, and what about these socks, and maybe if you had that color... It just breeds more wanting, more suffering.

So the simplicity, the renunciation of outer things, is helpful simply because it allows us to see that place inside of us where we can begin to renounce the craving itself. And this allows for appreciation of whatever is here right now to arise. This is such a powerful space—appreciation of what's here now. From Suzuki Roshi: "Renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world, but in accepting that they go away."

A couple of things have helped me in allowing the mind to begin to incline towards accepting that things of this world go away. One, of course, and always, is just this watching, this paying attention. When we pay attention to the wanting, to the things that we want, to the results of whether we get what we want or we don't get what we want, the unsatisfactoriness inherent in desire, in the wanting process, just becomes more and more clear. When you start really looking, it's almost impossible to avoid seeing this.

We see how wanting completely influences what we see, influences our relationship to the world, skews our perception completely. If you walk down a street and you're hungry, all you're going to see is pizza parlors. If you want a haircut, all you're going to see is beauty parlors. If you're feeling lonely and your relationship just ended and you go out, all you see is couples—because that's what you want. And the suffering from that is tremendous. If you go out and you're in a relationship and you're feeling really tied down, all you see is single people having a lot of fun. Two people in those situations could see the same crowd of people completely differently, colored by wanting.

When we are beginning to get more in touch with what it is that's really important in our life, what it is that we want to direct our energy and attention to, it helps us begin to sift through this maze of desire that our life often seems to be made up of—these objects of desire that arise constantly in our world. Because we're not just reacting spontaneously, going out there to desire, either getting it or not getting it, and suffering. We actually have the space in our mind to make a choice. "Well, yeah, there's that desire, but is that really where I want to spend my energy?" And we have the power of the mindfulness from the meditation practice to know that we can be with that desire without having to go crazy because we don't have to go out and get it. We can sit with it, it's unpleasant, and it will go away. We don't have to spend all our energy and all our vital force in madly satisfying desires. We don't get so sidetracked.

Working with this attitude of non-greed, this knowing that we have the space to make a choice, helps us move not just from making knee-jerk reactions, but to come out of a kind of comfort of dullness—the dullness of habit that we fall into so easily and don't even recognize we're in. It wakes us up. In each situation we can meet it on its

own terms rather than just reacting from habit. But the force of habit is very strong, so without this interest to pay attention and this commitment to our intention in life, we might not even stop to realize that we're acting out of habit.

This is my favorite little comic—I got it off a friend's refrigerator. It's called "What's Your Philosophical Outlook?"

But I call it a right attitude quiz. So, you wander alone down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle. Solitary yet surrounded, you think, "These people are..." and then this is the quiz. These people are: A, my brothers, my sisters; B, perverts, probably pickaxe murderers; C, I sure could go for a chili dog.

Two: Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse: A, I know what he feels—he feels hope, he feels fear; B, why is that pervert looking at me?; C, maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

And then it goes on and on through various situations. The last one being: Further down, construction workers are tearing the street to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of: A, the path of life; B, the highway to hell; C, rocky road, my favorite flavor.

This is the force of habit in the mind. But when we're looking at it and willing to work, we have a choice. We can see these inclinations.

Another thing that's immensely helpful in working with this aspect of inclining the mind towards non-greed—and really in all the aspects of Right Attitude—is so obvious, but the power and depth of it has just been increasing in my sense of things through the years. That's this retreat versus non-retreat attitude, looking at the commitment that we bring in retreat to be present, to pay attention, to investigate what's happening, to open to what's happening, to use what's happening to learn. It's an immense amount of effort you've all been putting in here, an immense amount of commitment.

And somehow we all want to continue to grow in the same way in our lives. Of course it's incredibly difficult to put in that type of commitment. But over the years it keeps sinking into me—oh, but that's just as necessary in daily life. It doesn't matter what wonderful insights I've had on retreat. They do open and carry over. But five months later, in the middle of a difficult situation, I have to marshal my commitment, my interest, my energy to look, to pay attention right now. The energy I put in five months ago has some fruit in that I even want to pay attention right now and have the ability and the willingness to look—but I still have to look. I still have to bring the energy to pay attention now, in this situation, because now, this situation, is where the truth is to be seen and nowhere else.

It's a deep, powerful commitment that we all share, and I just find it deepening over the years, this willingness to bring the same energy into looking in our daily life. There are so many ways that once we're making this commitment and we are just open to seeing what's happening right now, all kinds of little ordinary events can wake us up and re-inspire us to pay attention, to use the situation to learn from rather than just drown in it.

You find when you start looking around like this that the fact of impermanence, the fact of not-self, the fact of unsatisfactoriness in things, in outer situations—these just seem to pop up everywhere when our eyes are opened and looking in that way. Just noticing the seasons change, noticing winter turning to spring, noticing fall turning to winter, and knowing inherent in the fall is the coming of spring, inherent in the coming of spring is the death of fall. Seeing dead animals on the road. Seeing a baby being born. A friend just brought a little puppy over next door, and just seeing that innocence, and seeing inherent in that the whole puppy growing and dying. It's amazing, the whole dance of life. And it's everywhere that we look.

When we start to see in this way, it re-inspires us with what our purpose is and that willingness to continue to use situations. It renews our energy and interest for investigation.

So, the second type of Right Attitude: freedom from ill will, or thoughts guided by mettā. Again, it's this openness to whatever situation is happening—being more able and willing to greet it with friendliness, with openness, rather than resistance or pushing it away. Both internal, which is a lot of what our practice here is about—just can we open to the experience that's happening right now?—as well as external.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh on how to deal with thoughts of mettā with our internal experience:

"I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with non-violence. We do not need to consider anger or hatred as enemies that we have to fight, to destroy or to annihilate. Dealing with anger in that way would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself. If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate towards others."

So meeting whatever situation arises, not with judging or ill will, but with this open, friendly, caring attitude. A quality of mettā towards whatever arises in our experience. That's when different situations are no longer in our way—when something difficult happens, it's not just something to bear through until life can open up again. They are literally stepping stones for growth, opportunities to learn.

Namkhai Norbu, a Tibetan teacher, says that whatever arises in life as one's karmic vision is used as the path. Whatever arises, no exceptions. If you really think about that, that's a really powerful statement. No exceptions.

Whatever happens in our life is used as the path of understanding and freedom.

When I look back over my life—in retreat, out of retreat, it doesn't matter—I have to really honestly say that in the difficult times, the really difficult times, I've learned so much more because it inspires me to really pay attention, to really look. It hurts too much not to.

And I'm not saying that when the difficult time is there, I think, "Oh, I'm so glad this is here, now I can really learn." No, I mean it's difficult, it's suffering, it feels like one is lost. It just feels like being in the muck, and we can't wait until it's over. But when we have the willingness to look, it still feels like you're lost in the muck and can't wait until it's over—but the learning is still going on because of that commitment, that willingness to work with it as something to learn from, as our karmic vision at that time. And we can do this with anything, however minor, however seemingly overwhelming a situation we face in life.

I cut this clipping out of a local paper last year. It's a beautiful example of this. It says, "In Triumphant Return, Ex-Patient Takes Post at Mental Hospital. Forgiveness Paves Way After Misdiagnosis." It's a long article, so I'll just read a few things. Marie Balter was seventeen and clinically depressed when she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic and placed in a state mental hospital, where she remained for another seventeen years. Since her release, Balter has earned a master's degree from Harvard, worked with psychiatric patients, lectured nationwide, and written an autobiography. Now, fittingly for a woman whose antidotes to adversity are perseverance and forgiveness, Balter has returned as a full-time administrator at the same hospital.

Some of her quotes: "I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive. If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger. Forgiving is a way of reaching out from a bad past and heading out to a more positive

future." She says she doesn't bear any resentment or anger over her misdiagnosis and seventeen-year hospitalization. She says it wasn't deliberate on the part of the doctors in the hospital—not much was known about panic disorders back then.

She had a long, slow recovery, but this power of forgiveness—and not just a kind of "I'll forgive and let myself be walked on." You can see from what she's done, it's a huge strength of moving through the situation, not getting stuck there, but being willing to use it as a springboard to learn. The power comes from this working with, inclining the mind towards thoughts of mettā, thoughts of forgiveness, thoughts of love, rather than dwelling in anger and hatred.

It's not about perfection. We're not talking about expecting that now we all have to go out and forgive the most horrible thing that ever happened to us. No, that's unrealistic. It's just about this willingness to see that in a moment when there's a really painful, angry thought, we might have the choice in that moment to generate some mettā. In the next moment there might be more deep pain and anger, and that's okay—we meet that. And then again, can we generate mettā in that moment? This is a powerful force for change in our lives.

It's like Don Juan—the Carlos Castañeda Don Juan—the differentiation he makes between a warrior and an ordinary person: a warrior sees everything as a challenge, and an ordinary person sees everything as a blessing or a curse. A real difference in inner attitude, a real difference in our life.

The third form of working with intentions, right attitude, are intentions of non-harming—in other words, thoughts that are guided by compassion. The contemplation, when we contemplate compassion from an intellectual point of view, is seeing how all beings wish to be free from suffering, and yet all beings still suffer in one way or another. This deepens in our lives to a real experience of compassion, partly through our own experiences of suffering—through the suffering that we are able to open to—and then that allows us to open to that same suffering in other people.

The Dalai Lama, who is considered the embodiment of compassion, said last fall that for the development of compassion, what is necessary is deep seeing into the pervasive suffering nature of existence and feeling the unbearableness of it. Otherwise, compassion is somewhat hypocritical.

That's a heavy statement, but actually I find it quite inspiring, because when we begin to open up—I mean, what's been going on here, you're all seeing deeply into the pervasive suffering that's inherent in existence. When we open to that, that's what opens us to compassion for others.

It's also very inspiring for me to remember this in the painful times, when you think you're just sitting with this unbearable knee pain and wonder, "What's the point of that?" You can always think, "Well, I'm seeing into the pervasive suffering nature of existence." And really, we are—when we're opening to it, when we're actually allowing ourselves to be with that pain. When we're fighting it, then we're closing ourselves to the pervasive suffering nature of existence.

How do we generate this sense of compassion, this ability to exchange oneself for others? Briefly, one thing I find helpful is beginning to notice how I relate to situations. The same situation—I can relate to it in a way that evokes a sense of interrelatedness between me and the whole situation, or I can relate to it in a way that's completely separating and alienating. And you can really do this with any situation. I'll take a difficult one, but not too difficult.

There's someone here who drives you crazy, what we call a "Vipassana Vendetta"—no matter what they do, it just rubs you the wrong way. The way they walk, the way they sit, where they eat, how they eat, what they wear—anything, you know, it just somehow drives you crazy.

There are two ways you can relate to this, and I can watch in a retreat how the mode of relating shifts back and forth. There's just a sense of "that person is driving me crazy, what are they doing here, why are they doing that, I wish they'd leave." Or "I'm such a horrible person—they're just trying the best they can and here I am sending all these hateful thoughts and probably really ruining their retreat." Either way, there's this sense of real separation—me and them and this situation that's intolerable and has to change.

It's very painful. Basically, it's an attitude of resistance.

When we can actually stop resisting the situation and allow ourselves to just feel the pain of it—not trying to figure out whose pain or who's right or who's wrong, but just feel the pain of it—in that moment, that's when the shift can come. Because often for me, allowing and feeling my own pain and no longer resisting moves into being in touch with and feeling the pain of the other person. Suddenly there's not this sense of me and them and something that's got to be done or gotten rid of, but the situation as a whole, a complete gestalt. And in that there's a sense of our interrelatedness, and the thoughts naturally become ones of compassion—for the pain in this part, the pain in that part. It's not really even two separate pains.

How often has it happened for people that a particular pain you have—say a knee pain or an emotional pain—has seemed very personal and very separating, so that the one in pain feels so alone and so apart from other people, whether it's grief or physical pain or illness? And suddenly there's an opening to allowing and being with that pain rather than resisting it. So often it then moves through into something larger—a feeling where personal suffering becomes a gateway, a key into the suffering of the world. A kind of knowing on a visceral level that we're all sharing in this suffering.

Often people will come in saying, "I'm just having this memory, it doesn't seem that intense, but I feel like I'm experiencing the suffering of the world." Suffering in this way, when we open to it, is a gateway into interrelatedness, into compassion. Beginning to observe our experiences in this way—noticing when we're separated, when we're seeing it more as a whole gestalt—really helps the mind begin to incline towards thoughts of non-harming, thoughts of compassion. Because when we're all connected, the thought of harming just doesn't make any sense. It doesn't even arise.

I went on a little. I could say more about non-harming, but I'll leave it for another time.

Just to emphasize: as with everything, working with right intention, right attitude, is a very rich and full practice. We can do it no matter what the situation, and it imbues our life with a whole other way of being, a richness that it doesn't have when we're just fighting with situations and wanting them to be different.

But it is a practice. We're not going to suddenly—or even not so suddenly—be perfect at it, become beings filled with nothing but mettā and compassion. The habits of the mind to incline towards greed, towards hatred, towards confusion are very deep. The power of conditioning is very deep. We don't just dislodge a thought of anger once and have it never come back, as we all know.

But as the Buddha said, what the mind thinks about, that's what it inclines towards. So the more often we open to working with right intention, the more we realize that there is that space of choice—and that space of choice is coming up moment by moment. In one moment we don't make the choice? That's okay. The next moment we have another choice. It's endless, really.

We begin to find that the mind does actually start to incline in different ways. Where one would have just been caught in resentment, suddenly there'll be a thought of, "Oh well, they can't help it. That's just their own confusion." You kind of go, "Where did that

thought come from?" And then back in the resentment. But spaces begin to open up, and the mind really does start to change its propensity. This does begin to affect our actions.

It's hard work. It takes commitment. But what else is there to do with our life? And it's so rewarding.

The other thing one finds is that quite naturally we begin to discover we're not only working to purify and liberate our own separate being, our own separate mind. Because the more we're aware of the possibilities of working with our attitude and intention, the more we're aware that we aren't really a separate being and a separate mind. In working to liberate this being from suffering, that intention spreads more and more to all beings. We begin to touch more and more all beings with intentions of love and compassion.

I want to end with a quotation from the Dalai Lama:

"The question of real, lasting world peace concerns human beings, so basic human feelings are also at its root. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. An atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet."

And so this is what happens naturally when we're willing to give this attention and commitment to our lives.

CHAPTER 352

Spiritual Friendships

Carol Wilson · 1h01

In this talk from a long retreat at Insight Meditation Society, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching that spiritual friendship (kalyāṇamittatā) is the most important external factor supporting awakening. Drawing from the Meghiya Sutta and other discourses, she demonstrates how the Buddha emphasized that association with admirable people naturally leads to the development of virtue (sīla), generosity, wise speech, persistent effort, and discerning wisdom into impermanence (aniccā).

Wilson explores the qualities that define a true spiritual friend: giving what is difficult to give, doing what is difficult to do, patiently enduring hardship, being open-hearted while keeping confidences, and remaining loyal in times of misfortune. She contrasts the corruption exemplified by the Enron executives with the selfless compassion of a Chechen surgeon who treated all patients regardless of affiliation, illustrating how we are deeply affected by those we spend time with—and equally important, how we affect others.

The talk addresses the practical challenge of maintaining wise association after intensive retreat, including the Buddha's teaching from the Quarrel at Kosambī about six memorable qualities that create harmony: bodily, verbal, and mental acts of loving-kindness, generosity, shared virtue, and right view. Wilson emphasizes that right view includes the willingness to examine whether our own minds are obsessed by self-partiality. Drawing on the Zen master Bankei, she points to how we create our own suffering through attachment to the 'me fantasy,' and encourages practitioners to recognize themselves as sources of light and wise friendship in a world desperately in need of such qualities.

So tonight I want to talk some about wise friendship, spiritual friendship—having wise friends and also being a wise friend. I'll mostly use things that the Buddha said and some stories from the time of the Buddha to show how important this is in our path of awakening.

"This was said by the Blessed One, so I have heard. With regard to external factors, I don't envision any other single factor like friendship with admirable people as doing so much for a bhikkhu in training who has not attained the goal but remains intent on the unsurpassed safety from bondage. A bhikkhu who is a friend with admirable people abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful."

That's quite a statement. I don't see any other external factor so important as friendship with the wise, friendship with the lovely. This is a theme that runs through the suttas quite a bit, and I want to expand on it.

Partly, I bring this up tonight because as we move from the world of intensive retreat and the depth and subtlety of our intensive practice, it's all about to change. We all know intensive practice isn't the whole ball of wax, but still, it can be quite delightful, quite subtle, and we can get caught trying to think of our life in the world in terms of intensive practice. I think that all of our path really is intensive practice.

I fell into this mistake for some years in my early years of practice—thinking that the life in between retreats was just coasting on the intensive retreat until the high ultimately crashed. And I hate to tell you, it will. Then I began suffering enough to go back to a retreat to get it again. It took a while—I'm a little slow—to figure out: oh, I have to pay attention in my life. My life is also practice.

But that doesn't mean noting your way through every moment of your life. Sometimes we think that's what we mean when we say, "My life is my practice." People seriously ask, "Do you note all day, every day?" No. There are many factors that we need to bring in to widen our myopic sense of what the path of awakening is about. Kamala talked about the perfections of heart and mind the other night. Tonight I want to focus on this area of spiritual friendship.

I think it really highlights the Buddha pointing to the fact that we are not separate. We can't live, we can't practice in isolation, really. We are so affected by everyone around us, the people we spend time with, the choices we make. And what's really important is that we also affect everyone around us.

In reading different things the Buddha said about the importance of this essential quality—seeking out and paying attention to who we choose to spend time with—it doesn't mean that we get rid of everybody who isn't perfect or something like that. It's more about the choices we make. If we have a choice to go hang out with people who aren't wise or to hang out with wise people, we pick the wise choice.

But even more, I want to emphasize what I feel so deeply myself: how desperately this world is in need of lovely friends, wise people, spiritual friends—kalyāṇamittas. I think it's part of our job to really become that for our friends, for the world. Not just waiting for the good friends to come and save us, but being part of that for others. That's really what we are becoming, what you are becoming. And so I also want to point out that you should appreciate this about yourselves.

No, we're not perfect. We still need to pay attention to what we're doing, to what arises in our minds and hearts, to how we act. But we shouldn't fall into a distorted perception of ourselves. Having spent all this time looking at greed, hatred, and delusion arising, looking at conceit arising, we're really quite tuned in to how much of that keeps arising. It's so easy to think, "Oh my God, three months, and I'm more deluded. I'm more filled with greed, more filled with craving than ever before. I see sakkāya-diṭṭhi all over the place." And wait until you start talking tomorrow—you'll really see it all over the place, personality view, that is. Yours.

And then we think, "How could I possibly be a wise friend to anybody? It's hopeless." That's an inverted, distorted perception. Appreciate the qualities that have naturally been cultivated in your wisdom and purification.

With that context in mind, I want to read you a sutta from the Buddha—really a story about the importance of wise friends in our life and in our spiritual practice.

This is a sutta where a young monk named Meghiya was coming back from alms round one day, and he saw a beautiful mango grove by the river. He thought, "What a charming spot. This would be a perfect place to go and meditate"—or the way he put it, "to exert myself in meditation." So he decided to go ask the Blessed One if he might do that.

He went to the Buddha, described how he saw this beautiful spot, and said, "It occurred to me how charming it is, the perfect place. So please, if the Blessed One gives me permission, I would like to go and exert myself in meditation in the mango grove."

The Buddha said, "It would be better to stay here until there's another monk to go with you. Better not to go alone."

Meghiya asked him a second time and received the same answer. A third time he said, "Lord, you, the Blessed One, have nothing further to do, nothing further to add to what has been done. But I have something further to do, so please give me permission to go and exert myself in meditation in the mango grove."

Finally the Buddha said, "Well, if you talk about exertion, and if you talk about things to do, what can I say? Go."

So he goes, and as he's sitting there, he says that for the most part he was assailed by three kinds of unskillful thoughts: sensual thoughts, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of doing harm. The thought occurred to him, "How amazing, how awesome—even though I came here through faith, still I'm overpowered by these three kinds of unskillful thoughts."

It's really very human, isn't it? That's what I like about many of these stories—they quite humanize things.

So he got up, emerged from his seclusion, went back to the Buddha and said, "How amazing. I went with all this sincere intention and I was overwhelmed by thoughts of lust, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of cruelty."

The Buddha says, "Meghiya, in one whose mind still lacks maturity for liberation, five qualities can bring it to maturity. Which five? This is the case where a bhikkhu has admirable people as friends, as companions, as colleagues."

So in one whose mind is still lacking maturity for liberation, the first quality that brings it to maturity is having admirable or wholesome friends as colleagues, as companions. And then he says that when one has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, it is to be expected that the other four qualities will be developed.

I'll mention them briefly. The salient point here is that having and spending time with other wholesome friends would naturally—one would expect it—bring out these skillful qualities in us.

The first of these qualities is to be virtuous, to dwell with wholesome virtue. The second is that it's expected we'll get to hear at will, easily and without difficulty, talk that is truly conducive to the opening of awareness. That is, talk on having few wants, on contentment, on seclusion, on non-entanglement, on arousing persistence, on virtue, on concentration, on discernment, on freedom. There's quite a few things one can talk about other than trivialities. It's not like there's nothing else to discuss but who's going to star in the movie. There's a lot, but we just have to find other people who are interested in these same things. And sometimes we can be that person who starts the conversation.

Also, when a bhikkhu has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, the other quality that is expected to be developed is that persistence will be aroused for abandoning unskillful qualities and for taking on skillful qualities. It's really this sense that we're contagious. When we're with someone who really has a lot of skillful qualities, who manifests compassion, who manifests caring, who manifests non-greed, it inspires those qualities in us. It reminds us of them.

The last he mentions is that when a monk has admirable people as friends, it is to be expected that he will become discerning—endowed with a discernment of impermanence, of arising and passing away.

In all the different suttas I've read, where the Buddha is talking about wise friendship in one who's on the path of awakening, it's not only that it's nice or good for us. It always takes us all the way to freedom. It always starts with friendship and ends up in one form or another with discerning wisdom, with freedom. So it's really a powerful thing. It's not just about how to have a nice life. It's really about what's onward leading in our life to the path of awakening.

Then he briefly talks about ways that a person who's established with friends and with these five qualities cultivates different forms of meditation and contemplation: contemplation of the unattractive to abandon lust, goodwill to abandon ill will—that's basically metta—mindfulness of in and out breathing to cut off distractive thought, and the perception of impermanence, which uproots the conceit, the māna of "I am."

So just in this short sutta, he moves from "don't think you can just go off and do it alone, but find some wise friends to support you" all the way to liberation.

What really inspired me to talk about this—I first talked about it a few weeks ago at the Forest Refuge—was more the sense of urgency for this world. For us to really go out and share with the world who we are, who you are: the discerning wisdom, the skillful virtue, the hearts of metta and generosity, the deep faith and confidence that these are ways of being in life. Not perfectly, not one hundred percent, but really having seen the power of metta, of generosity, of wisdom, so that we don't have to automatically fall back into the train of the common day-to-day way of thinking.

What motivated me to talk about this was that I often listen to NPR in the morning, and in the space of a week I heard interviews with the authors of two different books. It really made me reflect on what makes people so different from one another.

The first was the authors of a book called *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, which is about the main people involved in Enron—the executive directors and the high-up people. This book charted how they did the whole scam. "The smartest guys in the room" refers to these people so drunk on their own success, so ambitious, so certain of their own brilliance, that they basically felt they could get away with anything. And for many years, apparently, they did—by changing the books, cooking the books, getting banks to support them. This sense of real creativity, real energy, real brilliance, completely in the service of greed and self-interest and conceit. "Everyone else is too stupid to catch on to what we're doing."

How often in the world that kind of brilliance is seen as intelligence that leads to power worth having.

And really I thought, "God, these guys had no clue of generosity or virtue, of sila, of morality, of kindness, of metta, of karma." I mean, really clueless. And if they hadn't gotten caught, they would still be thinking they were the smartest guys in the room, and everyone around agreeing with them.

And then a couple of days later, I heard the interview with the surgeon I mentioned—I think it was last week—Hassan Bayev, the Chechen surgeon who went from Moscow to work in the hospital in Chechnya for six years for nothing, the only surgeon in the city. As I said, he treated everybody—Russians, Chechens, civilians, military—even at very great risk to his own life. He was attacked and everything.

The interview was actually with him, and he just had that simplicity of a really pure heart. He tended to say, "Well, what else could one do? I took an oath as a surgeon. Of course I had to treat everybody." People would challenge him—"Yeah, people kill, but..." And he would say, "It's really important. I'm a doctor. No, you can't refuse."

And you know how it is when you're in the company of, or just hearing, somebody speaking from that level of compassion, that level of sila really in their life, that level of commitment and courage. It's incredibly inspiring. Why is it inspiring? Because it touches those qualities in ourselves. Otherwise, it wouldn't be inspiring. I don't know how these Enron guys would really think, but maybe they'd hear about him and say, "God, what a jerk. He could have kept making a lot of money in his plastic surgery practice in Moscow, and instead he goes there."

But when the qualities of compassion, of wisdom, of courageous effort, of sila, of generosity—when they're awake in us, when they're there to be touched, then it doesn't take much to touch them, to open them up, to bring them out in us. That's what's beautiful about being around, or even just reading about, or hearing about such people. We may live somewhere where we don't know anybody that is really inspiring, but we have so much available to us. We don't have to know people personally. I get tons of inspiration from books, from reading articles, from hearing on the radio—all kinds of people, so-called ordinary people. It doesn't have to be some famous person. Just the essential goodness of people brings that out in us.

That's really why I thought of talking about this. I want to share now a few different ways the Buddha talks about what a good friend is, so we can pay attention to that in others but also cultivate it in ourselves. Because surely, these qualities are here and deep in all of you, in all of us. And like everything, we have to keep paying attention. We have to keep making choices. We still have to feel drawn to virtue rather than

greed. We have to feel drawn to appreciate the discernment that comes with really knowing impermanence, rather than saying, "Ah, it's just too painful to stay open to this dharma. I wish I could just go back to delusion." Some days it's like that.

But to make the choice—anyway, you can't forget about it. It's too late; there's no point even trying. But to consciously make the choice not to is much more empowering.

Another way the Buddha describes what friendship with the lovely does is this: "I know of no one single thing of such power to cause the arising of good states not arisen, or the waning of evil states already arisen, as friendship with the lovely." That's in his very practical way of speaking about things. And of course, much of who he's talking to is monks, and often when he's talking about sila or morality, he's talking about the whole set of monks' and nuns' rules. But it's not only in that relatively rarefied realm that he's speaking.

Here's a lovely list I came across, of seven qualities of a friend: "A friend should be followed when she possesses seven factors. What seven? She gives what is difficult to give. She does what is difficult to do. She patiently endures what is difficult to endure. She reveals her own secrets—is open-hearted. She keeps one's secrets—so is trustworthy. She does not abandon one when one is in misfortune, and does not despise one because of one's loss. A friend should be followed when she possesses these seven qualities."

And those are qualities of a really good friend, aren't they? Nothing esoteric, nothing that you have to be in robes to appreciate—just very much based on kindness, friendliness, morality, and simple caring, heart-to-heart caring. That's really what the Buddha's talking about.

One other place where he's talking specifically to householders: Sometimes he would give specific discourses to householders who would come and say, "We have no interest in ordaining. We want to live a happy and wholesome household life"—basically asking him to tone it down.

And he often did. So in this particular one, he's talking about four things that lead to the welfare and happiness of a family person. And the first one, guess what? Good friendship. And then he says what entails good friendship is finding a friend who has accomplishments in faith, virtue, morality, generosity, and wisdom. So it's these basic qualities he talks about over and over.

Faith—he really means faith in Buddhadharma, but we could expand it to faith in the wholesome, faith in awakening, faith in the potential for purification of our hearts and minds from greed and hatred and delusion. Virtue, obvious. Generosity, we've

talked about a lot. And wisdom, again. When he talks about wisdom, even in household ways, the level of wisdom he talks about always reaches up to the point of seeing into and understanding the arising and passing away of things. So basically, if we come to really understand in our own experience the truth of anicca, the truth of impermanence—and sure, that can go deeper and deeper and deeper, don't start thinking, "I've got to have some state of seeing into anicca and that's it"—but just more and more seeing and understanding that truth, it will naturally continue to lead us into deeper and deeper wisdom.

So these qualities of friendship are both quite natural, and they also can be cultivated and developed to great depth. And that's, I really feel, a great part of the practice that we're called to in our daily life. Of course we continue with our formal meditation practice, and we'll talk a lot about that. But this sense of really honoring our potential as a source of light in the world, as a spiritual friend in the world, and consciously seeking out others because that supports us in the same way—it takes commitment. It takes dedication. It takes resolve. Because as the Buddha said, his way of teaching, the way of his path, runs upstream to the stream of common society. That was true then, and it's true now. It's not a judgment. It's just a statement of how things are.

Someone expressed this to me at the Forest Refuge last month, a friend who had been just coming to the end of five months of retreat at that time. She was, you know, as you all are two months in, in a very refined and pure state. And she came in one day saying how she saw so deeply how important our effect on one another is, how important who we spend time with is. She said, "I really see that there really is some purity in my mind stream, in my heart. And I can feel so deeply how much it's affected by the people I choose to be around." She said, "If I hang out with wise people, with good companions—we don't have to be arahants, just basically good people—I really see that they call out the skillful qualities in me that maybe are dormant or near the surface, but they call them out by inspiration, and I call it out in them."

But she also noticed that if she tends to, just out of inertia really, choose to go hang out with unwise companions, then not only does it not encourage the wholesome, the skillful qualities in her, but she finds that she starts to kind of fall into their train and starts—not talking about really bad stuff, but we just get more careless. We get more lazy. We start following with inertia and do things that just aren't really so helpful.

And again, remembering in this context, this isn't about judging. It's not to say if you go to work and the people you work with aren't so wise or aren't so good, you should say, "I'm quitting." It's not that. That's the place where we have to really call on our

commitment to awakening, our commitment to metta, our commitment to generosity and openheartedness to be the lovely friend at that point, rather than just abandon it and say, "Well, it's easier to go with the flow."

I remember when, after my first retreat years ago, a long time ago, I didn't really understand much about Buddhadharma. I was only nineteen. But it really changed my life. And I felt just spontaneously when I came home—I just lost all interest. I was nineteen, remember. I lost all interest in hanging out and going to bars and things like that. And it wasn't a judgment trip. It wasn't that I thought, "Oh, these are the precepts and I have to follow them to be a good Buddhist." It was nothing like that. It was just that that sense of enjoyment from that kind of activity had fallen away, and I was awake enough to be aware of that. It also meant at times I didn't hang out with my friends because that's what they wanted to do. So there were plenty of times of choice. I'd just want to sit home alone. And sometimes, yeah.

And that was actually quite peaceful and fine. It was actually a very happy year, as I remember it back in that haze of memory.

And sometimes not. Sometimes I'd think, "Oh, but I'm being stuck up or I'm being too standoffish—I'll just go out tonight." And if I paid attention—and this is the key, the reference point the Buddha gives us over and over and over—there are actions to be performed and actions to be avoided, speech to be performed and speech to be avoided, thoughts to think and thoughts to be avoided.

And what's the reference? That which increases skillful states already arisen or brings about skillful states not yet arisen—that's to be followed. Actions and speech that bring about an increase in unwholesome states or bring up unwholesome states that weren't there before—well, that's to be avoided.

It's not rocket science. It's not about adhering to some set of rules or pleasing someone else. It's very specifically and experientially tuned into what creates more peace and happiness and harmony in my heart and in my surroundings, and what creates more suffering. Here and now.

And it doesn't mean the activity is intrinsically bad. If it brings up more confusion, more greed, more anger, then it's something we have a choice about. Don't do it. That's all.

And so I would find I'd go out with my friends and go to some bar, and halfway through I'd be like, "What am I doing here?" Have you ever been in that situation? What am I doing here? And it's not their fault. They're having fun. Fine. Let them have fun.

That took a while to learn. I remember, actually, I was on staff here—I forget which time, I think it was in '78—and sometimes we as staff used to get together and go out to movies. It's like an hour drive to any movie from here. And we'd always go six in the car, the pack mentality, because we didn't have many cars then, and it was a big deal.

I remember I'd go just to be with everybody, and I liked movies. But I found that if I went out more than one night a week, I was just exhausted. I couldn't do it. And then I stopped even enjoying all that. It was just so much effort to go to some stupid movie.

And I remember when I really got it—that I could tune into what was true for me more than going with the pack. We were starting out in the car, got to the end of the driveway, and I said, "Wait a minute, stop, let me out!" I finally realized it before I got all the way to Northampton and asked, "What am I doing here?" Oh, yeah—I don't need to do this.

And it was so freeing, because nobody cared. It didn't hurt anybody's feelings. And it was a really positive commitment to what's really true—what's liberating, what's bringing about more skillfulness in my own experience, more wholesomeness. So it can just be little things.

And in little ways, we're all models for each other. But we have to commit ourselves. Really. And it's over and over and over.

I know sometimes it's a hard teaching, saying that who we choose to spend time with has such an effect on us, just as we have such an effect on others. We can so easily fall into this better-or-worse judgment, good and bad kind of thing about people. And it isn't that.

We all know in ourselves there are times when we're the deluded, aversive person and we really need a lovely friend to remind us there's another way. There are times when we might be the lovely friend and someone else is deluded and aversive. But to notice the fact that we are completely not separate, and we do have a huge effect on one another—

This is a little poem from the Buddha:

Even if you do no harm, but seek out one who does, you're suspected of harm. Your bad reputation grows. The sort of person you make a friend, the sort you seek out, that's the sort you yourself become. Where you're living together is like that.

The one associated with, the one who associates, the one who's touched, the one who touches another—like an arrow smeared with poison contaminates the quiver.

A man who wraps rotting fish in a blade of kusa grass makes the grass smelly. So it is if you seek out fools. But a person who wraps powdered incense in the leaf of a tree makes the leaf fragrant. So it is if you seek out the wise.

The Buddha goes on to say simply: seek out wise people, seek out lovely people. That sense of conditioning is so strong—we need a healthy respect for it. I think more than anything in these thirty years, every year my respect for the power of our habits of mind and heart grows. That's not meant to be discouraging. It's simply to have a healthy respect and to pay attention to all the different ways of training the Buddha offers, and to use them all in our life.

There are a couple of incidents where the Buddha gave other examples of qualities to cultivate in being a wise friend. There's one story I particularly like—another one that makes it all very human—called "The Quarrel at Kosambi."

At Kosambi, there was a large group of monks living together. What started as a very minor disagreement between two of them grew into a huge quarrel that caused a schism in the sangha, and then the whole lay community began to get involved and take sides.

I find it amusing, just because human nature often amuses me, and also because it's so recognizable. You can just hear any of us getting this petty—well, maybe I'm projecting. It was two bhikkhus, one of whom was an expert in the discipline, in the Vinaya, and the other was a teacher of the discourses. These weren't slacker bhikkhus. These were serious practicing monks.

What started the quarrel was this: the teacher of the discourses committed some very minor offense—of all the rules, some minor infraction. The scholar of discipline pointed it out, saying, "That's an offense you committed." And the second one said, "Oh, I didn't know it. Okay, I'll go and say the confession, ask forgiveness right away." No problem. But then the scholar of discipline said to him, "Well, if you didn't know it was an offense, then it's okay—it's not an offense." So the second monk went away thinking he hadn't committed an offense after all.

Very complicated, right? Basically, it's this very nitpicky thing. But then the discipline scholar went around saying, "He committed an offense and he doesn't even know when he commits offenses. He's a no-good monk." And the second monk said, "No, he told me it wasn't an offense, and now he's saying it is. He's a liar."

You see how it started from such a little thing, and it grew and grew until it was this huge argument, this fight going on, and the laypeople were getting involved, saying, "We can't respect these bhikkhus if they fight and squabble like this."

Finally the Buddha came to try to talk to these monks. At some point—I'm just picking the pithy parts—he says:

"Bhikkhus, when you take to quarreling and brawling and are deep in disputes, stabbing each other with verbal daggers, on that occasion you do not maintain acts of loving-kindness by body, speech, and mind. Misguided men, what can you possibly know? What can you see that you take to quarreling and brawling, stabbing each other with verbal daggers? You can neither convince each other nor be convinced by others. You can neither persuade each other nor be persuaded by others. Misguided men, this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time."

He's basically saying: What are you thinking? What do you see that takes you to that?

Then he gave them a list of six memorable qualities, which I'll go into in a minute. But I just want to say how this ended. It says in some of the discourses that at first these bhikkhus heard him out, and then they said, "You know, Blessed One, don't bother yourself with this. You go off and we'll deal with it."

They didn't want to hear him. Can you imagine? We're so into our views and opinions that the Buddha comes and says, "This is the way to live in concord," and they say, "Blessed One, don't bother yourself." It's said that he went off and remarked, "It's impossible to make them see. These misguided men seem obsessed." And he went away and came back another time.

So just so you know, it wasn't always easy then, and they even had a Buddha to talk to. It's no wonder we get obsessed and caught up. We do.

So: six memorable qualities that create love and respect and conduce to helpfulness, to non-dispute, to concord, and to unity. They're nothing we haven't heard a million times, but these are the six the Buddha picked, so I want to emphasize them again.

One maintains bodily acts of loving kindness, both in public and in private, towards one's companions in the holy life. One maintains verbal acts of loving kindness, both in public and in private, towards one's companions. And one maintains mental acts of loving kindness, both in public and in private. Already that's huge, right? It's not that we're going to be perfect in that, but to really take it as a practice—this is truly a way one can aspire to live.

The next quality is basically generosity: that one uses things in common with one's companions in the holy life, with friends, without reserving things for me. One shares any kind of gain that comes to one that's in accord with the Dhamma. Just sharing freely with our friends, with our companions, with our family, with whoever in the holy life.

The next one is basically sila. The Buddha says—and this is speaking to bhikkhus, but it also applies to us—one dwells both in public and in private, possessing in common with companions in the life virtues that are unbroken, unblemished, commended by the wise, not misunderstood. In other words, a commitment to sila, to non-harming.

And the sixth is dwelling both in public and in private, possessing in common with one's companions in the holy life a view that is emancipating, that leads one to practice in accordance with that view, that one will continue to practice to the destruction of suffering. This is a memorable quality.

Of course, the Buddha goes on to say that of these six qualities, the most comprehensive, the most conclusive is this quality of wise view, right view. Even here, where he's talking about the qualities that allow us to live together in unity, in concord, in helpfulness, in non-dispute—it comes to right view. Again, the view of understanding arising and passing away, of understanding that things are impermanent.

And this is the thing I love most about this sutta: he goes on to say, how does this view that is noble and emancipating lead the one who practices in accordance with it to the complete destruction of suffering?

Imagine he's talking to some people that are totally locked in recrimination and anger with each other about their conflicting views. They are sure they're right. They can't hear each other. They don't want to hear each other. And this is how the Buddha says we use wise view in this case—and this is so applicable to any of us in our lives.

One uses this view: one goes to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut—or to the little corner of your room, or if you're at work and really busy, go to the toilet. Just go somewhere for a few minutes and be quiet and consider thus: Is there some obsession unabandoned in myself that might so obsess my mind that I cannot know or see things as they actually are?

Is this what we tend to do when we're really locked in anger and sure the other person's wrong and we're right? Do we go off and sit and say, "Is there an obsession unabandoned in my mind that's preventing me from seeing things as they actually are?"

This is powerful stuff, and this is possible for us. Not so much telling the other person to go look and see what obsession is keeping their mind from seeing things as they actually are—that's more what we'd like to do. But really go and look and see for ourselves.

The Buddha gives a list of some of the things that obsess our mind. If one is obsessed by sensual lust, just wanting, the mind is obsessed. If one is obsessed by sloth and torpor, the mind is obsessed. By restlessness and remorse, by doubt. If one is absorbed in speculation about this world, the mind is obsessed. If one is absorbed in speculation about the other world, the mind is obsessed. And this encompasses quite a bit. If one takes to quarreling and brawling and is deep in disputes, stabbing others with verbal daggers, then the mind is obsessed. He didn't really give the option that maybe you're right and the other person's obsessed—not if we're that locked in.

Simply having a commitment to this wise view, we take ourselves off and go look. This is so inspiring to me. It's not about expecting to be perfect. It's about that commitment to practice, to honesty, to sincerity of intention—to really looking at what's present and what's absent in the mind stream, in the heart, right now. Is it possible that there's some obsession present that's really preventing my seeing and understanding clearly in this situation?

What's amazing is how hard it can be to notice. You all know that. And then we notice it, and it's like, "Oh my God, the elephant in the room. Oh yeah—total self-righteousness." It's possible that might slightly skew my perception in the present moment experience. It's a really powerful practice. Our mind does get obsessed so easily.

I want to read a couple of lines from Bankei, who was a Zen master in Japan in the 1600s—about how easily our mind gets obsessed in thought, in emotions. He cuts right through.

He says, "Your self-partiality is at the root of all your illusions. There aren't any illusions when you don't have this preference for yourself."

"If the men sitting next to you start quarreling, it may be quite easy for you to tell which of the disputants is in the right and which is in the wrong, because you're not involved yourself. You're a bystander, so you can keep a cool head. But what if you do have a part in it? Then you take your own side and oppose the other fellow. As you fight with each other, you transform your Buddha minds into fighting spirits."

This is when our mind and heart gets obsessed.

And then here's another, more specific example. He's talking to a monk who comes to Bankei and says, "I was born with a short temper. It's always flaring up. My master at home has told me time and again to get rid of it, but it hasn't done any good. I'm born with a bad temper. No matter how hard I try, I can't get rid of it. So I've come to you hoping that you'll cure me with your teaching, and then I can go back."

Bankei is very straightforward. He says, "That's an interesting inheritance you have. Is your temper here now? Bring it out and I'll cure it for you."

The monk says, "Well, I'm not angry now. My temper comes out unexpectedly when something provokes me."

Bankei says, "Well, then you weren't born with it, were you? You create it yourself when some pretext or other appears to happen. You work yourself into a temper because of your partiality for yourself, opposing others in order to have your own way." And he says, "Each person receives Buddha mind from his parents when he's born. His illusion is something he produces all alone by being partial to himself."

Now, this is moment to moment. It's foolish to think that it's inherent—and that's what's freeing. Not to think that our delusion, our illusion is inherent and we're stuck with it. The fact that it's being produced every moment, or many moments, means there are also moments when it's not being produced.

He says, "When you don't produce your temper, where is it? All illusions are the same. As long as you don't produce them, they don't exist. That's what everyone fails to realize."

"You create your outbursts of temper," he's now talking to this monk again, "when the organs of your six senses—vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and faculty of mind—are stimulated by some external condition and incite you to oppose other people because you desire to assert your own preciously held ideas. When you have no attachment to self, there are no illusions."

Not that we're living in the perfection of this—and not to grasp that as another idea of how it should be—but as a pointer, a direction of practice. Just to hold the possibility: when we're in conflict internally, externally, or both, to check in, to look really honestly, to trust our sincerity of attention and see—is the heart obsessed? Is the mind obsessed? Is there a partiality to myself creating illusion right now? Not something we can think through, of course, but something we can tune into.

Another statement from Bankei: "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things." So it's not even argument with another person, but that sense of—can I just be so present with things as they are in this moment, without moving to-ing or fro-ing? Then, without that illusion, that partiality of self, perhaps one can see more clearly, perceive more clearly, be more present to what's really going on.

Someone shared with me this saying from Shantideva that she was using as a kind of daily practice on retreat: "Since all fear, stress, and harm are consequences of the commitment to the me fantasy, can I afford to entertain this fantasy even for a moment?"

It's not a should. It's a sense of really seeing. Since all fear, stress, and harm are consequences of the commitment to the me fantasy in any moment, can I really afford to entertain this fantasy even for a moment?

Just explore that in these days here—not as a judgment, but noticing: when I'm really entertaining the me fantasy, is that conducive to wholesome states arising, or is it conducive to suffering states arising? And if you find it's conducive to wholesome states arising, then go for it by all means. If you find it's conducive to suffering states arising, don't get into judging it. But when we see that clearly, that's when the heart and mind begins to naturally let go.

Because we're really not stupid. We don't really want to suffer. We just need to commit, to have that sincerity of intention, that resolution to explore, to use that guideline of the Buddha: whatever thought, speech, or action leads to more suffering, to unwholesome states arising, these are to be avoided. Whatever thought, speech, or action leads to more wholesome states—

Non-greed, metta, compassion, generosity, sila, discerning wisdom—then by all means, that's to be followed. Simply a guideline. Not to judge ourselves about perfection, not to try and get upset every time we fall short.

I remember the Dalai Lama saying that when we look at whether to have faith in our practice, we can trust the sincerity of our intentions. And that sincerity of intention—we can renew that, commit to that in each new moment. "Okay, so last time I made the choice that increased my suffering." Seeing that with the mind and heart not obsessed, not partial to myself, it's like, "Oh yeah, that really didn't work, did it?" It allows for something new to emerge, for a movement towards wholesomeness, towards happiness, towards compassion, towards metta in the next moment. And that's always a possibility. We're not locked in. The habits are strong, yes, but mindfulness, generosity, sila, wisdom—it's much stronger. Much stronger.

A teacher of mine used to say, "One spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies." And you'll see that. You struggle and struggle and struggle, and then you have that one good sitting, or just one moment—a flash of insight. Have you noticed how that keeps you going for days, for weeks? It's a good thing that a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. It's so much stronger than conditioning that it doesn't take as many moments—thank the good Lord—but it takes recommitting over and over to free our hearts and minds from obsessive sufferings.

There's just time for one other story. On a more positive note, it's said in some of the commentaries for the Vinaya that actually, when the Buddha left those recalcitrant monks in Kosambi—saying, "These poor guys are obsessed, I'm out of here"—he wandered off and came to the park of the Gosinga Sala tree wood, where three very well-known monks were living together. I think these monks were Arahats at this time: Anuruddha, Nandiya, and Kimbilla. And they were living together in great harmony, in great peace. So it's like the other side, the photographic negative of the story before.

The Buddha comes and says to them, "Oh, you're living together, living in concord with mutual appreciation, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes. How do you do it, Anuruddha?"

I'll just share a few things they say. Anuruddha responds, "I think it's a gain for me, it's a great gain for me, that I am living with such companions in the holy life." So he maintains bodily, verbal, and mental acts of loving-kindness towards them, openly and privately. He says, "I consider, why should I not set aside what I wish to do and do what these venerable ones wish to do? And so then I set aside what I wish to do and I do what these ones wish to do." And then the other two say the same thing.

There's this lovely little paragraph where they're describing their daily rounds together, their life in community. I was reading this at the refuge, and a friend who was a monk—he just disrobed, had been there for some time, but had also been in Asia as a monk—he loved it because it just brought back the flavor of what life in a monastery in Asia is actually like.

So the Buddha says, "How do you abide?" And Anuruddha says, "We abide diligent, ardent, and resolute." The Buddha asks, "But Anuruddha, how do you abide thus?" And he explains: "Venerable sir, as to that, whichever of us returns first from the village with alms food prepares the seats, sets out the water for drinking and for washing, and puts the refuse bucket in its place. Whichever of us returns last eats any food left over if he wishes; otherwise, he throws it away where there is no greenery or drops it into water where there is no life. He puts away the seats and the water for drinking and for washing. He puts away the refuse bucket after washing it and he sweeps out the refectory.

Whoever notices that the pots of water for drinking, washing, or the latrine are low or empty takes care of them. If they're too heavy for him, he calls someone else by a signal of the hand and they move it by joining hands. But because of this, we do not break out into speech. But every five days, we sit together all night discussing the Dhamma. That is how we abide, diligent, ardent, and resolute."

It's lovely, isn't it?

And then there are many other things, but right at the end—and this is the point I want to close with—the Buddha goes on to draw from their example how this is a great benefit to all in the world. I want to emphasize this: really take it in that our practice and our commitment to live an awakened life, our commitment to really keep on trucking on this path, is so important. Whatever particular way we end up interacting and living in the world—whether we go off to be hermits, whether we're very socially active, whether we're having a family life—it's not so much the outer form. It's the inner qualities of wholesomeness, of goodness, of commitment to awakening that you bring. And it's of great benefit for all you come in contact with in the world.

The Buddha's words are quite long, so I'll just read the end of it. He starts by saying, "If the clan from which those three clansmen went forth from home into homelessness should remember them with confident heart, that would lead to the welfare and happiness of that clan for a long time." And he goes through, getting bigger and bigger and bigger, until he ends with: "If the world with its gods, its Maras, and its Brahmas, this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and its people, should remember those three clansmen with confident heart, that would lead to the welfare and happiness of the world for a long time. See how those three clansmen are practicing for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans."

And really, that's what we're practicing for: for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans.

So may it be so in all of your lives.

And he goes through getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And he ends with: "If the world with its gods, its Maras, and its Brahmas, this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and its people, should remember those three clansmen with confident heart, that would lead to the welfare and happiness of the world for a long time.

See how those three clansmen are practicing for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans."

And really, that's what we're practicing for—for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans.

May it be so in all of your lives.

CHAPTER 353

Compassionate Intention

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this deeply personal and practical talk, Carol Wilson illuminates the essential balance between wisdom and compassion in Buddhist practice—the two wings that allow the bird of dharma to fly. Drawing from Robert Thurman's teachings, she explains how the wisdom of emptiness can seem cool and removed, while compassion arises from connectedness, and how these qualities naturally support and complete one another.*
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> *Wilson places particular emphasis on cetanā (intention) as the crucial seed of all karma, referencing the Buddha's teaching that "mind is the forerunner of all action." She shares the sutta story of the blind arahant who unknowingly stepped on ants, illustrating how intention—not outcome—determines the ethical quality of action. Within the framework of the Noble Eightfold Path, she highlights how sammā saṅkappa (wise intention) bridges understanding and ethical conduct.*
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> *The talk offers profound reflections on opening to pain as a doorway to compassion, with Wilson sharing personal experiences of physical illness, emotional grief, and encountering suffering while traveling in India. She draws extensively from the autobiography of Sister Chân Không, demonstrating how even after thirty years of activism, conscious cultivation of compassionate intention remains essential. Wilson concludes with practical guidance on mettā meditation, the cultivation of bodhicitta, and working skillfully with self-judgment—reminding practitioners that true compassion must include oneself and that seeing and loving naturally arise together.*

When I was walking around outside just now, and we get into those states of just that open awareness—not really any thought or any sense of differentiation from the environment—it's just so peaceful. There's just no problem. I'm pointing to that state of open awareness. In that state there's no problem and there's nothing to say, nothing to talk about. It's sort of hard to talk from that state, which is why I have seven thousand notes.

But in a way that leads into what I do want to talk about. In the way that the Buddhist teachings are described, they are said to have two wings, like a bird has to have two wings to fly. The two wings of the Buddha's teaching are the wings of great wisdom and great compassion. So mostly tonight I want to talk about compassion—how it manifests, how we can work with it, and how we notice it becoming stronger through our practice in the force of intention.

I heard a talk by Robert Thurman once, who is quite a Tibetan scholar and practitioner, and he was talking about the balance of wisdom and compassion. It really struck home with me when he talked about how the wisdom of emptiness, of non-self, of impermanence, can seem by itself kind of cool and removed. We touch it in silence, in samadhi, or like when I'm ambling around outside and it's just what it is—there's nothing else to say or do. But it can seem quite removed. Whereas compassion is a movement of the heart and it arises from connectedness: connectedness with others, connectedness with ourselves, connectedness with the world.

They really balance one another. Because just as the wisdom of emptiness can seem kind of off on its own somehow, compassion without the balancing force of wisdom, of understanding, can lead us into overwhelm. As some of you probably know, you can turn from compassion to frustration—you can drown in suffering. But compassion is said to be the link between Buddhas and beings. The wisdom awareness of emptiness finds its natural expression in the actions of compassion, so that in a way the two naturally go together anyway.

It is said that compassion is the link between Buddhas and beings. Think about it: the historical Buddha, what we know about him when he was about thirty-five is when he came to his great opening and understanding, complete enlightenment. He could very well have just spent the rest of his life sitting off in the bliss of Nibbana and been very happy. He didn't have any more problems. But instead, he spent the next forty-five years tirelessly walking all around India, teaching. It's the natural expression.

How we can begin to see this manifest in our practice here—and that's really what I want to talk about tonight, our practice here—is in the expression of intention, which we've talked about a little before. When we're sitting, walking, just being, in the understanding of how things truly are, everything comes and goes. As Joseph was saying this morning, it just kind of moves through: happiness, sadness, compassion, hatred, boredom, pain, joy. It comes, it's there, it moves through. Nothing is more important than anything else.

But where what is arising does begin to have impact or effect is when it functions as the intention that leads to thought, speech, or action, which is arising all the time. That's how we live and move. What's really wonderful about this practice is, one, there are many specific things we do, many ways to work with consciously purifying our intentions. But what also happens is simply by seeing, simply by being connected, simply by letting awareness do its thing, intentions from which we speak and act naturally purify themselves. Lucky thing. And it does happen.

I know we've spoken some about intention. I just want to again describe it because it really is so key. We know that our tendency, for many of us, is to evaluate our actions or others' actions by the results or by how it appears to us, often forgetting to tune in to what the intention is, or imputing from someone else's action. It's easy to impute what we think their intention is, but we can't know.

In the Buddhist understanding of karma, of cause and effect, the seed of all effect—of all thought, speech, and action—is in the intention. It is so key, so powerful. I've personally been finding awareness of intention, the willingness, the remembering to tune into that over and over and over, to be a fantastic support in my daily life of really exploring what I'm doing and why, and effecting change in what I do and why.

This intention is like the volition, the subtle impulse that arises before a thought—well, that one's pretty hard to notice—before speech, before action. That particular volition in any moment can be accompanied by or driven by any of the whole range of mental experience.

It can be accompanied by love, by greed, by delusion, by generosity, by compassion, by hatred, by whatever.

There's a story told in the Buddhist suttas that shows the importance of intention and how we can't tell from the outside. It seems there was a monk who was practicing very diligently, doing his walking meditation, and he was blind. So he was walking in the forest, and as he walked, he was stepping on ants without knowing it and killing them. Now, he was supposed to be an arhat, which in this terminology means completely enlightened—which means delusion or hatred or greed would not be able to arise in him as an intention to action.

Some of the other monks saw this and went running to the Buddha. This actually happens a lot in the suttas; it kind of amuses me. They went running to the Buddha and said, "Well, he's supposed to be an arhat, but he's stepping on ants and killing them." There are many stories where things came out like that. And the Buddha—who supposedly had the power to see into the mind of all beings—said, "No, he is an arhat. And because he doesn't know that he's killing the ants, and there's absolutely no intention, it's not an unskillful act." Which is very interesting. Now, once the bhikkhu knows there are ants there, if he were to keep walking anyway, it's a whole different story.

That's the crux of intention, from the way the Buddha described it. It's extremely powerful, and it's not the way we sometimes tend to look at or evaluate action.

The Buddha described a path of practice, of development, that we can cultivate in our daily life and our meditative life, called the Eightfold Noble Path—kind of eight different aspects. It starts at the beginning, one to eight, but it's really more like a circle, like a mandala. The first step or path is wise understanding. We wouldn't even begin a path of purification, a path of awakening, without some degree of wise understanding—just knowing somehow that things are other than they might superficially seem.

Each of these stages informs the next. The next stage is wise aspiration or wise intention, leading to the next three, which have to do with speech and action in the world: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. Out of those eight aspects, one of them is wise intention, wise aspiration—extremely important. What this says, at least to me, is that how we understand the world informs our intentions, how we think, which then leads to our speech and actions.

For example, if we're a psychopath and the way we understand the world is that it doesn't matter what I do to anybody, that it has no effect, then we do whatever we want. If we understand the sense of cause and effect, then we'll be much more careful with our speech and actions. Or if we understood as a small child that asking questions or questioning authority would get us a slap upside the head, then that's going to affect many of the ways we speak and act later in life—until we understand that it wasn't an accurate understanding.

The Buddha says that the mind is the forerunner of all action. Incredibly powerful. But so subtle. The movement of intention and the movements of our mind are so subtle and so quick that I think that's the beauty of taking a time like this—ten days—where it seems like we're not doing much, but we're really exploring these movements and actions of the mind and how they affect our actions in our life and how we deal with ourselves. We really need to give ourselves this deep inquiry in order to begin to understand on another level.

It's said—and it's my experience and also what I deeply have faith in—that the natural expression of our understanding is compassion: intentions of compassion in our thought, speech, and action. There are many levels of this. On the biggest, vast level, of course, is that sense of the intimation, or just the brief recognition, of the ultimate truth, of our true nature. Or as Sogyal Rinpoche puts it—no description is really accurate, so this is just one I picked—"that which we really are: unchanging, pure awareness, which underlies the whole of life and death."

Just touching that, in that moment when we come upon it, the sense of no separate self, of constant change, of no lasting phenomenon to rely on—that can scare us to death. The fear of change, the fear of nothingness, the fear of emptiness: you can just start to come close to it, in or out of practice, and the mind goes, "No way, thank you, I'm checking out of here."

But what's so wonderful is the flip side of that. Just the barest instant of touching this ground of pure awareness, the knowing of no separation, of total connectedness—in that moment there's no sense of separation, and therefore nothing is lacking and nothing needs to be pushed away. The idea of wanting something or fearing something or needing something just isn't relevant. It doesn't have anything to do with what we truly are.

As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "You recognize there is no need to put something in front of you and chase after it, because you see that everything is already here in yourself." Total completeness. And the natural expression of that completeness is that it manifests as the movement of connectedness to all other beings and things, because there is no "me and them"—there is just "we are." The touching of others' pain and the natural response of compassion to it shines forth spontaneously in these moments.

And then on the other levels—and that's what I want to talk about for the rest of this talk—are other levels of practice. When we might have moments when we're not quite resting in the vast space of completeness. And as clear as our overall intentions might be, these old habits somehow tend to creep in. They tend to slip up on us. The habits of greed, of anger, of confusion.

And that's really, to me, why I practice. To keep rediscovering what is true and to keep discovering how the habits come in, to recognize them again for being as empty as they are, and to allow the natural purification of understanding and intention to again take place.

So I want to talk now on the level of working in different ways—how this practice, for me, helps with these habits in the area of intention and compassion.

To begin with, when I think about it, or in talking to people—and I teach a lot of retreats, so I talk to a lot of people in this particular mode—what's really painful and almost shocking to me, although I don't know why it should be shocking, is something I encounter often. If you look around at the world, it's kind of obvious. It's almost the way of the world. It's sort of expected, it seems to me in some ways, that the motivations for action of anger, of craving or greed, are perfectly fine motivations. I mean, they definitely get a lot done.

And sometimes people in talking to me on retreat will say, "Well, but if I don't act from craving, if I don't act from anger, what am I going to do? Just sit in my room for the rest of my life?" And that makes me so sad, because there's the underlying assumption that those are the only motivations for activity. And it's so powerful that I find myself, if I'm not paying attention, easily drawn into that myself.

But again, as intention is the crux, even though we can't judge from the outcome or the result, what I feel quite deeply and what I also notice when I look around is that at some point, when our intentions—or the intentions of the bigger picture—change somehow and do begin to come from hatred or from confusion or from greed, something that might have very powerful and significant effects begins to get a little twisted somehow. It can't quite maintain the power.

And this is really big-picture examples. Remember when the Berlin Wall went down a few years ago? I think it was in the middle of a full three-month course. We were watching it on TV, and I remember just feeling such a thrill, this feeling of, "Oh, community and love and kindness is really triumphing."

I have some friends who live in Berlin, before and after, and they told me a couple of things about it. One, that big party that it looked like they were having on top of the wall that seemed so loving and ecstatic—a woman friend of mine was there, and she said it started out nice, but it turned into this kind of drunken revelry that was really scary and unpleasant. I said, "Oh, you know, another illusion I had destroyed."

And that, again—Germany, or we can see the same thing in some ways in all of Eastern Europe and the old Soviet Union—what looked like this great moment, this regime built on fear and oppression has fallen, and now there'll be this really good-hearted sense of working together. Some of the people, West Berliners—and I have really good German friends, and they make the distinction. They can tell right away if someone was from East Germany or West Germany, even though there's not supposed to be East or West anymore. And my friend Franz told me that there's this T-shirt that says, "Bring back our wall." Because they liked it better that way.

And of course I don't even need to talk about what's going on in the former Yugoslavia and Romania and all those countries where the one fearful oppression going away just made room for other hatreds and fears and greeds to arise—the hatred of the other. And it's so painful.

And I'm not trying to be naive and say, "Oh, if we just all have loving-kindness, everything will be okay." But I'm just trying to, in this context, say that what we can work with in the context of this meditation retreat is being very honest and very clear

with our own intentions and what effect that has, and how easily we can be deluded about our own intentions. But also to begin to appreciate—which I'm sure all of you must. I mean, of course, I don't know specifically what you each do. But again, I'm convinced that the work that you do springs from compassion and real caring and interconnectedness. Or what would any of us be doing here?

So it's not to say that isn't so, but within it, to really continue to investigate on a moment-to-moment level and see how that can change. I know, looking at how compassion can be our prime motivation for something, but it can so easily—the other old habits can slip in. It can become mixed. Like, if we don't have the balance of wisdom, the equanimity of wisdom, seeing that with all our good intentions we can't control the results. And that, I know, over time can so easily lead to a shift from real open-hearted compassion to a kind of frustration, or a hardness, or a despair.

There's a story in the autobiography of Sister Phượng, or Chan Khong as she's called now, which I've just been reading, and it's inspired me a lot. Because I met her, I don't know, in 1986, spent a few weeks with her and Thich Nhat Hanh. And at the time, not knowing too much of her history, knowing they'd worked a lot in Vietnam during the war and seen enormous suffering, but just meeting her and spending time, I was so impressed by—she's a dynamo—the enormous amount of energy that she had at that time, and seems like she still has.

And at Plum Village, she was constantly doing things to help people. Everything from spraying bug spray in somebody's room who was complaining about spiders, to working with all the children, to using her free time to send parcels back to Vietnam, to trying to raise money, to giving dharma talks. Just one thing after the other.

And I really felt—and again, I can only project a little—but I really felt the sense of the power of compassion as a motivation. It is ultimately so much stronger than anger or greed or confusion. It just seems to lend so much energy. I remember thinking, I'd be sitting there: "May all beings be happy. Wouldn't it be nice to do something?" And she would have run around and done thirty-five things in the time I was just sitting there going, "Oh, you know, it's great." There's something to be said for someone really grounded in compassion.

Reading her book, I find myself learning a lot. Here is someone who's clearly constantly working with cultivating the intention of compassion—not just assuming it's going to be there, but constantly working with it.

In this field of not being able to control the outcome, can we still come back to love and compassion? She told a story from 1967 when she was in jail in Vietnam for carrying one of Thich Nhat Hanh's books. The conditions were quite wretched. After some weeks, a high-powered person interceded and she was released. She had been in a cell with many people, and among them were two twelve-year-old girls who hadn't done anything. They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and got swept up with a bunch of other so-called guerrillas.

As she was being released, she spoke to the commandant and said, "About these two girls—prison is not a good place for twelve-year-old girls, and they've done nothing. Couldn't you release them?" A totally courageous and compassionate thing to do. And the response of the commandant was, "Oh, these prisoners have been talking to each other. That isn't good." And he made the conditions harsher.

It's horrible. And you can't know in advance. Just reading it, I tighten up, I get indignant—or I could move into a space of passivity, thinking it's better not to say or do anything because it might make things worse.

So how do we continue to open, continue to cultivate compassion—which is a soft and connecting quality—in the face of all kinds of harshness and ignorance? How do we maintain the openness, the motivation to continue to act from compassion when other people, even if they think they're acting from compassion, don't do the things we think are the compassionate thing to do? How do we balance the motivation of compassion with the equanimity of wisdom—recognizing that our views, as right as we think they are, are still views? Other people will act as compassionately as they can, but from their own understanding, which might be different from ours. That might really be off—but who's to say?

I'll give an example. Once I mentioned Mother Teresa while talking about the amazing energy of compassion. Afterward, a man came up quite incensed and said, "How could you talk about her being compassionate when she must be homophobic given the way she treats AIDS patients? Not to mention her attitude on birth control in countries like India." These are valid points in a way.

Then, quite interestingly and having absolutely nothing to do with this, the next day an old friend came to visit me at the retreat. Apropos of nothing, she started talking about how she happened to be in Calcutta a few months before and had spent a day volunteering in Mother Teresa's main hospital. She described the unbelievable suffering there—something her mind and my mind in this culture can hardly take in. She gave

vivid descriptions of the sick children, the undernourished children, all the suffering. And she spoke of the beautiful, serene quality of all the nuns—not the famous Mother Teresa, but all the anonymous nuns who have devoted their lives to serving.

I thought, that's just a really interesting balance. And who's to say? Who's to say what's right?

I myself often find that when I have some idea of what compassionate action should look like, and when it doesn't happen that way, my own intentions and responses begin to harden. They turn judgmental, or angry, or despairing. And so my work is to come back to my own intention—to act as clearly as possible.

One last area I think is really most important: when we're working, especially on the front lines as you all are—working so hard, trying to do so much for the environment, for people—sometimes we forget that compassion is undiscriminating. It has a boundless aspect, which means that it includes ourselves. Sometimes we forget that.

I'm going to read this from Thomas Merton:

"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent means most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything, is to succumb to violence."

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes her work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of her own work because it can kill the root of inner wisdom that makes the work fruitful.

Again, an opinion—a powerful one. Something to keep looking at.

So in all things, and this is where we come back to this practice, which gives us, hopefully, the capacity to remember, to continue to bring mindful awareness to this aspect of intention. Without it, the old habits begin to creep in. With it, it takes a real commitment to inquiry, a commitment to awareness, and a real kind of determination to stick with it. It's not like I can make the intention, "Okay, I'm really going to be aware of intentions from now on," and have it happen. It really takes being willing to keep waking up.

From Sister Chân Không again—now she's talking about more current times, where monks and nuns and artists and intellectuals are being arrested and tortured and killed in Vietnam:

"Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry, and I knew that I had to do walking meditation. Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

She gives lots of other examples of times that she didn't do that—where she lost her calm and basically considers that she blew it, that things didn't work and people just resisted her. Very impressive. And this is after thirty years of consistent activism and consistent commitment to the path of compassion and understanding. It never just gets so automatic that we don't take responsibility for inquiring into our own intentions.

One teacher said once that our old habits of confusion don't just vanish, but they wear out slowly, like an old piece of cloth. They get thinner and thinner, and you can sort of see through them. There are some little holes. Maybe one day it's gone altogether. It's little by little.

So we do find that the intentions will begin to purify naturally. You might notice it even on retreat, in little things. And I think it's helpful just to look at little things—don't go for the biggest, most difficult situation.

I don't know, it doesn't feel like that's happening at this retreat, but at some retreats, food is like a major issue. Lunchtime becomes a very significant time of day. So, for example, someone might find that there's fear of not getting enough food. All that has to happen, say in a three-month course, is that one day there's not enough food and the last few people come and the casseroles run out. That's all that has to happen to set up this kind of mindfully quiet stampede. Everyone's trying to look nonchalant. There's this intensity five minutes before the bell rings for food.

People will often notice—and you can notice yourself—this particular example might not apply, but any other little thing—where one day you notice it come up: "Oh no, there's only five muffins and there's seven people in front of me. What's going to happen?" And then the thought arises: "That's okay. I'm glad they're getting the muffins, and I'll live." You kind of go, "Where did that come from? That doesn't sound like me." But it is. It's a little thing, but it's a natural purification of intention. It's an intention of generosity, or letting go.

Notice the little things. Sometimes we're so hard on ourselves—we want to be like this perfect, compassionate bodhisattva—and we'll just put down these small shifts: "It's about time you gave up your greed." Honor the little things. Appreciate them.

So I want to talk about a couple of ways that we consciously, in our practice, cultivate and see how our intentions begin to change—from greed, from hatred, to compassion and kindness, to love. One big one is something Joseph spoke about last night.

And that's opening to pain. Simply the willingness to be fully present for pain has the effect of opening into understanding and compassion.

I want to give three simple examples of different kinds of pain from my own experience. One is physical pain. One time I was in the hospital, quite acutely ill and in a lot of pain. As you probably know, intense pain can have the effect of being very isolating. There's this sense—however painful it is and however nice people might be—it's really clear that I'm the one in pain, not them. It somehow isn't quite shared.

I was like that for a few days and also pretty out of it, not really knowing what was going on. At some point I sort of came to and realized I was in a room with three other women, really elderly women in their eighties or so. For some reason it was an orthopedic ward, which wasn't what was wrong with me, and I saw these really old, frail women all up in casts, their arms up and their legs up, unable to move. They were moaning and crying, and it was really sad.

I came to and saw that, and it just started opening up into this sense of not just me and my pain, but all of us here. What was going on with them was really intense, much more than me. And somehow this sense spread out where I thought: How many rooms are there just in this hospital? How many hospitals just in this little area, in this state, just in this country? It just kept going and going.

Out of that came such a sense of the interconnectedness of all of us in our pain. Even the people who weren't in pain at that time will be in pain at another time. This sense of compassion is a real active sense of connectedness to pain—sometimes defined as a quivering of the heart in response to suffering. It's active and connected. It has nothing to do with pity or sympathy or "that poor person over there." It's really a sense of togetherness, of sharing. And that grew for me very strongly out of that physical pain.

Another example is our willingness to open to emotional pain. This was ten or twelve years ago. I'd been in a relationship for about five years, and it broke up. For some reason, particular relationships can somehow trigger this enormity of grief and loss and despair, and this one did.

Before we broke up there had been this huge fear and denial—I had this image that we were in this perfect relationship. As soon as we broke up, the fear went, because what I had been afraid of was already happening. I began to see how much I'd been denying. This wasn't perfect. What are you kidding? This wasn't even that hot. And even seeing that, though—no longer living in this delusion of perfection—I went into such a state of grief and despair. The kind where I would wake up in the morning with this heaviness: I just can't believe I have to live through another day.

Of course there's a lot of resistance at first, fighting and wanting to make it go away. Well, the fact is it went on for two years. At some point, really within a couple of months—I was living my life, I wasn't just doing nothing. During this period of grief, I was in England and I came back and began a two-year stint of managing our meditation center, IMS. I was actually quite busy, and also felt like I was a basket case because I was really in deep emotional pain.

One time I was talking to Joseph about it. I said I was such a basket case, that I shouldn't be managing, shouldn't be in such a position of responsibility. And his immortal advice was: "So what else are you going to do? Go sit around and mope?" It was helpful.

Anyway, the point I'm trying to get to is that somewhere within a couple of months, I really accepted that this was a process that

I had to go through. I didn't like it, but I felt—and in retrospect, I feel this even more strongly—that I really deeply opened to and accepted this depth of grief and sadness.

It's not like the minute you accept something, it goes away. It doesn't always work like that. And I could see early on that this was a grief that had to do with—I don't know—lifetimes. It wasn't just about this one incident.

The process went in phases, like peeling away layers of an onion. There would be real deep grief, and I would allow it, sit with it, and then it would open up into this sense of love and connection with all beings that was amazing—certainly not something I was looking for. I was just trying to let the grief be there.

Over the period of two years, my friends got really sick of it. They said, "Okay, it's time to move on now, Carol." I wasn't going around talking about it all the time, but they knew it was there. And then there was a point where it just went. It was gone, really, really gone, and I knew it.

Looking back, I feel that was an incredibly valuable period of my life, because the outcome was both a sense of strong love and compassion. That man and the woman he got involved with—just two weeks after we split up—they're actually two of my closest friends now. I live with them for weeks at a time when I'm in California. And when I look, there's just no trace of that old pain. It's like a whole other lifetime we're in now. I really credit that opening to suffering, which allowed everything to purify in that way.

I've also found that by really allowing myself to know how heavy grief can be, without judging it too harshly or telling myself that it wasn't really so horrible compared to what others experience—that this has led me to true compassion for the grief and pain of other people in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

I really value that time as a gift.

A third way that I consciously work with opening to pain—and this isn't such a success story—is through what's called the pain of other people. Though in my experience, it actually isn't other people; it's my own experience. I work with this consciously, often when I go to India, where we're simply confronted by so much suffering, so many beggars. Or New York City, or any of the big cities in this country nowadays—it's actually not as different as it used to be.

I just watch. How long am I able to stay really connected and compassionate? It's not really about whether I give or don't give, but more about the compassion—that touching of suffering, that touching of hearts. When I'm open, there's a connection. I can look at the person, smile, revere them.

And it's so painful, because I know I could empty my whole wallet, empty all the money I brought with me, and I wouldn't make a dent. So I observe: How long can I really stay open? And then I see myself start to shut down. If I look closely, the shutting down comes about because I don't want to feel the pain I'm feeling anymore. So I shut down.

The effect is a real separation. I'm not really able to have that eye-to-eye contact anymore. I'm looking away. I want to just get back to my hotel. And if I'm really honest, that's actually more painful.

So this is just something I work with. It's true that the suffering in this world is overwhelming, and we can definitely drown in it. In cultivating an openness to our own pain and suffering, and to the suffering in the world, it's very important to find skillful boundaries.

Whether you're on retreat here, whether you're in your work, whether you're traveling—don't expect that you have to be open all the time. If you're dealing with some painful experience here, whether it's a pain in your knee, a really difficult emotional experience, anger, grief, or just self-judgment that you're not concentrated enough—or some story you create about being sleepy—it doesn't really matter what the experience is.

This is where we come back to intention. How do we relate, moment to moment, to this difficult experience? And this is where we can consciously cultivate compassion toward ourselves.

As Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with nonviolence. We do not need to consider anger, hatred, or any other experience as enemies we have to fight or destroy. That would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield."

If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you cannot be compassionate to others. And so our whole practice here is: can we work with deep compassion toward ourselves, just in these little mundane moment-to-moment experiences? Notice how you meet that self-judgment. How do you meet that sleepiness? How do you meet that agony, or that wishing that you could experience something deeper than what is actually happening? Do you meet it with resistance? Can we just gently allow it? Feel the emotion in your body. Let it be just as it is. We don't need to make up a story about it. We can almost cradle it in the gentle, loving field of awareness.

In some ways, the practice of metta, the energy of compassion, is actually the energy of open, accepting awareness. They're really two aspects of the same thing.

Another way you can notice how you're greeting your experience is that intention often manifests as thought. Sometimes I know I'll think I'm just being with what's happening, but the little commentary—that little running commentary that comes up once in a while—can be incredibly vicious. I think I'm just being quiet, but the commentary is just one nasty comment after another.

Once I was sitting with a Burmese teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, the one Joseph was talking about, who could be quite stern. He's actually been quite kind with me, quite compassionate. And he can really tell what's going on; you don't have to tell him much. I went in one time, and I wasn't even aware that I was having this really atrociously vicious running commentary. He just looked at me and said, "Some people talk to themselves. Have you ever noticed that?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, it's supposed to be a silent retreat." Then he asked, "Which do you think is better, to talk to yourself or to talk to somebody else?"

I said, "Well, the way it's going, somebody else would probably feel a lot nicer."

It was very helpful. And that's where Joseph's mantra of "it's okay"—it might seem a little forced, but actually a deliberate thought substitution from "you stupid jerk, are you still getting lost in thought?" to "it's okay" is a huge difference. In that moment, you're developing the intention of compassion. It's just in these little things that it happens.

Again, I want to say that in very difficult experiences, compassion sometimes means backing off. That's a skillful means you learn to discern for yourself. It doesn't mean pushing relentlessly. For example, when I was going through that grief, it wouldn't have been wise to say, "I'm going to get to the bottom of it, I'm sitting here until it's gone," and push, push, push until you're just a basket case. Sometimes it means backing off, opening up, moving to hearing, going outside, refreshing your heart, refreshing your mind.

And then other times we make the mistake of saying, "Well, I'm really going to take care of myself. I'm just going to be kind to myself, so I won't look at this now." I think it was Chögyam Trungpa who talked about idiot compassion, where we say, "Just take it easy. I'm not going to push too hard." And basically what we're doing is avoiding. So I have something I say to myself often. When Joseph was talking about wanting to be comfortable last night, I really resonated, because it's one of the challenges I give myself. When I feel I'm falling into idiot compassion, I ask myself, "Do I want to be comfortable, or do I want to be free?" Sometimes you know. Not to be too hard on yourself when you choose comfort, but know what we're doing. That's all.

There are many other ways, which I want to mention briefly. Working with loving-kindness meditation, with the metta—that's actually a practice, a cultivation of intention. As we sit and bring up the wish, "May I be happy, may I be free from danger," whatever the phrases are, it's not that we somehow have this naive idea that if I say it enough, everything's going to change, or that if I wish this person happiness, then all their suffering will go away. It's not that.

It's more that we are cultivating and strengthening the power of that intention in ourselves. And it's very interesting and quite powerful how it begins to surface spontaneously in our lives.

I used to think that in practicing metta meditation, if it worked, that meant we'd be kind of bounding around, filled with this boundless ecstatic love for all beings—that kind of outpouring. And sometimes it does feel like that. But actually, the way I've ex-

perienced it is as a broadening, a real expansive quality of meeting the world. What I've found happening more and more, quite spontaneously, is that I'll enter a situation where there's something difficult, I see that quite clearly, and where the first response is aversion—it's there—but then quite spontaneously comes up, "Oh, and there's this beautiful aspect of the situation as well." And it changes everything. There's a real appreciation and a broad acceptance of things as they are that allows for much more positive and clear action. It's been very amazing to me, actually, watching this effect in my life.

I use loving-kindness or metta a lot. I use it on planes. I use it in supermarkets when I'm just standing and starting to get impatient in line. It's me and them, and I wish they would hurry up and get out of the way. And I just start to send a little metta—just those simple phrases, not trying to make anything happen. And it's amazing. Within a minute or two, there's just this sense of us doing our thing, and there's not a problem. Very, very powerful.

Working with the bodhicitta that Joseph mentioned the other night, consciously reflecting on the fact of interdependence—sometimes this can be intellectual, but it can lead, again, into a real sense of "we" in a situation together, not "me and them."

I'll just give one example of that and then close. Once I was traveling on an Indian train in a four-tier sleeper, which is just four little platforms and a curtain that sort of closes it from the rest of the train, but not really. I was traveling by myself, and I got up to my little bench, and there were three other Indian men sharing this sleeper with me. I was quite uncomfortable. The men didn't do anything. It's just that being Indian, where our tendency as Westerners would be to give someone their privacy and turn away and not look, the guy lying on the bench opposite me just lay there staring at me all night. And that's just Indian—there's nothing unusual about that. But I was, of course, acutely uncomfortable and really negative. I wish these guys would leave.

Then in the morning they brought in their whole families, and there were like fifteen of us in this little compartment meant for four people. And I was just in this space of fear and separation—me and them. I wish they'd leave me alone. I wish they'd get out of here. I wish I could have my space.

And somehow I just flipped it. I didn't do anything, but I flipped it into, "Oh, this is our compartment. This is us here in this compartment. It's not me and them." That's all I did. I didn't make any overt movement. I didn't open conversation. Just that flipped in my mind and intention.

And the whole thing changed. Whereas they hadn't been speaking to me at all, they suddenly became very friendly—not in a pushy way, just really sincerely friendly. They went out on the platform at the station, came back with little pakoras and chai, and said, "Oh, you must taste these Indian treats." And their wives were very friendly, and it was really just this sense of our little family there traveling in the compartment.

Very interesting, the sense of how the mind is the forerunner of all action—much more powerful than we might believe.

I'd like to close by reading from Thich Nhat Hanh about this: "The interdependence of all beings is not a philosophical game removed from spiritual and practical life. In bringing to light the interdependence of all phenomena, the meditator comes to see that the lives of all beings are one, and he or she is overcome with compassion for all. Seeing and loving go together. Great understanding goes with great compassion."

Let us sit together for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 354

Bias of Mind

Carol Wilson · 1h08

In this comprehensive talk, Carol Wilson examines a sutta in which the Buddha addresses both the subtle nature of our deepest mental conditioning and the practical methods for its abandonment. She introduces the concept of āsavas—the underlying biases or latent tendencies of mind toward sense desire, becoming (the sense of self), and ignorance—explaining how these potentials arise when conditions are suitable, even in moments of brief inattention.

Wilson presents the three levels at which unwholesome habits manifest: the level of transgression (protected by sīla), the obsessive level (protected by samādhi), and the latent level (protected by paññā). She then details the Buddha's seven methods for abandoning these tendencies: wise seeing (yoniso manasikāra), restraint at the sense doors, wise use of requisites, patient endurance, skillful avoidance, removal of arisen unwholesome states, and cultivation of the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅgā).

Particularly valuable is her exploration of wise attention—knowing what is fit and unfit for attention based not on the object itself but on the mode of attending. She discusses the four inverted perceptions (seeing impermanent as permanent, painful as pleasurable, not-self as self, and foul as beautiful) and how perceiving through these veils feeds ignorance. The talk offers practical guidance for daily life, from how we relate to food and possessions to skillfully working with difficult emotions, emphasizing that every moment of mindfulness conditions wholesome tendencies while cutting through unwholesome ones.

I know there are times during the practice, or when we're talking, when we speak about just resting in awareness, or as with Joseph's talk the other night, just opening to the nature of awareness. It can seem so natural and simple. It can.

Or at times when you have an insight, really understanding deeply the pain of clinging, for example, and the heart and mind let go. It seems so obvious, really. It's not nearly as mysterious as we had thought.

And then what's also so easy and simple is how quickly that's gone. How quickly it can seem a distant memory. Or if not yet, the mind projects into the future. Some of the questions today reflected this a little bit: How can I maximize the potential to remember, to rediscover, to continue to understand selflessness or the nature of awareness?

So tonight I want to talk about a specific sutta of the Buddha's where he addresses both of these aspects. He speaks about the really subtlest, most subtle aspect of ignorance—the tendency, the potential for greed, for desire for being, for ignorance to arise in the mind. We're talking on very subtle levels, which is what you see in the practice. And he gives in this sutta seven different methods, all of which will be familiar to you, for the abandoning of these most subtle tendencies.

I like this sutta. It has a lot of information in it, and this talk is going to have a lot of information. Don't try to remember it all, please. Just sit back, let it come in. Most of it will be familiar, maybe just in a different framework, and use what is useful.

Talking about these subtle tendencies, it has come for me to mean recognizing that I must view the power of conditioning with deep respect. We may think if we see through greed 150 times, we get impatient if we have to see it again. But the power of conditioning is vast.

There's one conceptual framework I have found helpful in trying to describe what I'm talking about as these subtle tendencies, this possibility, this potential for delusion to arise. It's called the three levels or the three rounds of samsara.

There are three levels at which the habits of mind manifest. The first level, where unwholesome habits—we'll talk about unwholesome here—habits of greed, hatred, and delusion manifest, the grossest level is on the level of action and speech, quite obviously. What protects us at this biggest level from acting these out is sīla, is morality. This is really the place that sīla comes in, when we're really in the grip of greed or of anger. Just remembering: I really want that last cookie, but there's someone in line behind me and I've already had two. Just remembering sīla, and you can put it down. So that's called the level of transgression—actually moving out and acting in an unwholesome way—protected by sīla.

The second level is when we don't actually act out. Say you want that cookie, you don't take it, sīla protects us. But the second level is called the obsessive level. I don't have to say any more, do I? Just caught up for the next three days in thoughts about that cookie and all the ways it goes. The protection on the obsessive level is said to be samādhi, where you can really see: okay, come back, come back, come back. The power of samādhi really cuts through that. Or when samādhi is really strong, this obsessive level doesn't arise at all.

Now the third, and this is what we're talking about tonight, could be called the latent level, the underlying level. We have to listen to this without getting discouraged. This is the level where there is the underlying potential for greed or for hatred, for a sense of

self to arise when the conditions are suitable. It's like if a seed has been planted: if the conditions are suitable—the right amount of water and sunlight, the proper soil—it will sprout. So these latent underlying tendencies will arise given the proper conditions.

Now, what we're learning is the conditions aren't too esoteric. For greed to arise, we really only need a pleasant sense object and consciousness and lack of mindfulness and—boom—there you have it. I think part of why retreats can, at times, get discouraging is because we're seeing this. In our daily life we're so busy, we don't often perceive on this level. So it's actually really good that we're seeing it, but it is important not to get discouraged.

This level, the latent level, is protected by wisdom, by paññā. The Buddha often said that greed, hatred, and delusion—especially delusion—is abandoned not by actions but by wisely seeing. Seeing these conditions, seeing how when there's not awareness greed arises given something pleasant, aversion arises given something unpleasant—seeing that is the beginning of our protection, of our uprooting it.

The Buddha spoke often about these underlying potentials. The word I'm using tonight from this particular sutta is *āsava* in Pali, often translated as "canker," which is like a sore, or "taint," or "dye."

I'm just going to call it underlying potential or bias of the mind. And the three primary ones are those I mentioned: the tendency of the mind to move into sense desire, or being—becoming, desire for being—and ignorance, which covers everything else. These tendencies are not the states themselves. It's not the state of sense desire, the state of self-identification, so much as the underlying possibility. So that's what we're talking about—that potential.

There are many places where the Buddha, giving a definition of a fully enlightened person, describes them as one in whom these āsavas, these potentials, no longer exist. That's really quite interesting to me—also to even try and imagine what that could be like. No possibility of that state arising.

That's when it's helpful to remember the statement that I know has been said before, where the Buddha often said, "If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so." It's important to remember that. He's not just talking through his hat. If it were not possible.

So to begin with, it's just noticing how these tendencies can arise—with humor, without taking it personally. Someone today gave me a great example. It happens all the time. He just got up from a rest, saw an orange sitting on his bureau. A moment of a couple of thoughts, not quite mindfulness, the hand reaches out and grabs the orange—

I'm going to eat it. And as soon as he became mindful, which was like four thoughts later, he realized, "Oh, I'm not hungry. I don't want this." He just put it down. But in the moment of pleasant sight, not much mindfulness—yeah, I want that. It happens all the time.

What's also really important to notice is that however far along it is—right at that moment or many mind moments and manifestations later—the power of presence, the power of mindfulness, cuts right through that tendency. So as pervasive as these underlying potentials may seem, it's like, "Give me a break. You mean I let up mindfulness for two seconds and greed arises, sense of self arises?" There are times on retreat where I've just felt like I can't bear it. What's the point?

But it's important to also notice that the power of simple mindfulness can just cut right through it at any point. Truth, clear seeing, is always stronger than ignorance, stronger than confusion. It's learning to trust that, learning that it really is our protection—whether it's in the acting out, the obsessive quality of mind, or just in these simple underlying tendencies.

And to recognize also that every moment of mindfulness is conditioning other tendencies as well. It's not just that in that moment of mindfulness there's no room for greed to arise, but that moment of mindfulness is also strengthening wisdom, equanimity, concentration, clear seeing—all the wholesome qualities. So every moment of mindfulness really is, on many levels that we may not be aware of at that moment, deeply changing our conditioning. Thank God.

But the conditioning is deep. The tendencies are subtle. And we won't necessarily notice the effects at once. It can take who knows how long for these seeds to sprout.

I remember, a few years ago, I got a letter from a woman who had been here quite some years earlier on a special work retreat. She'd never, to my knowledge, done Vipassana practice before. And while she was very enthusiastic, I had this sense—could be projected—that she really didn't know what she was coming to or what she'd landed in, didn't really seem to get it, in my esteemed opinion, while she was here. And I didn't really think about her again.

Years later, out of nowhere, I got a letter from her—really a beautiful letter—just thanking me for being her first teacher, and that that experience of that work retreat had really resonated in her, had changed her life, had deeply connected her to the Dharma. I was just thinking, you never know. It was very beautiful to me to see that.

And it was also a help for the judging mind. We just don't know what's going on with anybody. We don't know how the seeds are going in. Who are we to judge? The Dharma is growing in its own time.

If you could remember that about yourself, it would really help. A moment of mindfulness is very powerful. And you don't have to wait for the day when these tendencies are completely eradicated before you begin to feel some confidence. You can notice—I'm sure each of you has had at least one moment when, without thinking about it, you walk into a situation or you sit into a situation

where normally all the conditions are there for aversion to arise. You know it normally would, or for greed to arise. And you don't have to talk yourself out of it. You don't have to pretend you're really being mindful and filled with mettā. The unwholesome factor just doesn't come.

You walk up, there's only two cookies left, there's four people in line behind you, you don't even think—you just walk past it. Greed does not arise. It can seem so insignificant that we don't recognize that what's happening in that moment was a prime condition for one of these underlying āsavas to emerge into the light of day, and it wasn't there. Ignorance was not present in that moment. That's very powerful. Notice those little moments.

If it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so. And we don't start from being totally deluded and jump to being totally free from delusion. It's a whole process. So appreciating it.

That's just a little synopsis of what we're talking about with these underlying tendencies. The three specific ones that the Buddha names again are sense desire, desire for being or becoming—really the sense of "I"—and the last one being ignorance, flat-out ignorance.

In this sutta, besides describing these tendencies, he talks about seven different methods, all of which I think we've touched on in the retreat. They're all part of practice, but not just the specifics of very intense silent mindfulness practice. It's also a way of stepping back and looking at the bigger picture. Some of these methods are very practical, things that we can use in our daily life, not only on retreats.

All seven methods for abandoning these tendencies are founded on the basis of wise attention. I gave a whole talk on that however many weeks ago, and I'm not going to obviously go into it in that much detail. But for those who weren't here—because I know

all the rest of you remember it so completely clearly—wise attention can be spoken of in two ways. The Buddha speaks of it as knowing what is fit for attention and what is not fit for attention.

Now, to our minds, that implies some things are worth paying attention to—the things we like and that make us feel good—and some things are not worth paying attention to, such as all the unwholesome states and the ones that make us feel bad. That's not what he means. What is fit and not fit for attention is nothing intrinsic to the arising experience itself; it's in the mode of how we pay attention to what's arising.

For example, if anger is arising and we pay attention to it in the way of, "I am so angry. I am really such a bad person for being so angry. This anger is really unacceptable," on and on, really identified—that's unwise attention. Whereas if we bring attention to the experience of the anger itself, just what we've been saying with mindfulness the whole time, noticing it as it is arising in the moment—the experience, the thoughts, the sensations, the associations—but without identifying and without feeding it, that's wise attention. It's not that anger is intrinsically fit or unfit for attention.

Wise attention has been, I think, in some ways underrated, because the Buddha says that unwise attention is at the root of our being caught in all these rounds of saṃsāra. It's really not paying attention in the right way to what's going on that keeps us caught, whereas wise attention is really what frees us. With wise attention, these underlying tendencies do not arise. The risen ones are abandoned.

All seven of these methods require wise attention. In a way, you could think of mindfulness as wise attention. That makes it simpler. And obviously, without mindfulness, we're not even paying attention to what we're doing, so any of these methods don't work because you don't even think to use them.

Wise attention is underlying, and the first method itself is actually abandoning these tendencies by wise seeing, wise attention again. So I want to say a bit more about it to give another example of how to pay attention in a wise way. And again, this is nothing new. If you can pay attention at the bare sense experience—sound, unpleasant—as opposed to all the stories and associations and judgments about the sound, that's wise attention.

A handy way to check, if you're not really sure—if you think you're paying attention wisely to all the stories about the sound and this and that, you think it's wise—

But another way the Buddha gave to tell whether attention is wise or unwise—and this is so practical—is that wise attention means if you're paying attention to what's happening in the appropriate way, to the appropriate thing, then any unwholesome

states that are arising will diminish, and other unwholesome states will not come. So if you're paying attention to something and getting more and more and more aggravated, frustrated, angry, resistant—there's something you're not seeing wisely. You're somehow paying attention in the wrong way, or there's identification. That's unwise attention. You're paying attention, you might be really trying your best, but you're just getting more and more out of control. Either you're paying attention in the wrong way or to the wrong thing.

A lot of our advice as teachers, when we say, "Okay, you're really caught in the anger—it's time to move the attention away," that's looking at wise attention. The mindfulness isn't strong enough to be with the anger as it is, so you need to advert the attention elsewhere. This is an example of wise attention in action.

Now I'm taking a whole hour talk and putting it into five minutes here, so I'm just saying this as a reminder. But there are a couple of other things I want to say about wise attention, again from the suttas, that I didn't mention exactly in this way before—specifically how we attend in the wrong way with these three tendencies, these āsavas.

The Buddha says that what helps sense desire arise is this: when there's sense pleasure, it's not just noticing the pleasant, but your attention is really getting sucked into the gratification of that sense pleasure. This is subtle. It's not just noticing pleasantness. You might be thinking, "Oh, this is really nice, it's really pleasant, I really like it." You could even be noting that, but not quite aware of the personal gratification. That's what really allows sense desire to keep blooming up—it keeps getting bigger.

The second one is very interesting: what helps the desire for being arise and increase. I think this is a limited explanation, but it's interesting. It's when we attend to the gratification in meditative states—and that's a very subtle one. Not just that they're pleasant, but that gratification, that sense of me having this exalted meditative state. And that's even gross; it wouldn't usually be that obvious. But attending to the gratification rather than just what's happening—that's what feeds this tendency.

The last one is if we attend or pay attention to anything arising through one of what are called the four perversions of perception, the four upside-down, incorrect perceptions. When we attend looking through one of these four inverted perceptions, ignorance arises and increases.

So the four inverted perceptions are: seeing what is impermanent as permanent; seeing what is painful as pleasurable (yes, you can relate to that—the first one is obvious, and the second one, is that obvious too?); the third, seeing what is not-self as self (clearly we do this all the time); and the fourth, perceiving what is—this is our very Victorian language—perceiving what is foul as beautiful.

That last one I personally have a harder time with than the others. The others, no question, I do them all the time. But "foul" isn't a word we'd use today. I'm sure they're referring to our lovely bodies, for one thing, and really seeing them as beautiful in a way that leads to attachment.

Let me give you an example of how subtle this can be. It's really interesting. When I was sitting on retreat, I think it was last fall, I thought maybe the first three or perhaps all four of these inverted perceptions were present. But it can be very subtle. I was on retreat and at a point where I was quite mindful.

And eating, and in that state where I was really noting pretty much everything that was going on, I would notice a series of thoughts—a quick thought, a quick image, a quick story—and there would be maybe four to six really quick thoughts before I would really see it and start noting again. As soon as I saw it and noted, it would fall away. There was no real clinging, and when I looked at the thoughts themselves, there was nothing particularly in them that seemed attractive or worthy of clinging. I got really interested. I said, so what's the hook here? I'm clearly aware there is some hook that's drawing me into these little thought stories that in themselves are nothing.

And when I really looked, I saw that with each thought, starting with the first one that came—because this kept happening—there was a very subtle sense of "I." That clutching, that contraction of me, just subtly identifying with the thought. And that was pleasant. I experienced that little "me" as pleasant. Of course, I wasn't even noticing the little contraction of me, never mind that there was some kind of pleasant feeling to it, or comfortable feeling, or something. That's almost going too far. And in not seeing that, the clinging, the sense of being, would build, and it would start going into one thought, the next, the next, the next. Again, as soon as I saw it, the whole thing would vanish.

So if you can get it, it's quite subtle. But somehow there's the permanent, because there's no "me" if it's not permanent. There's really perceiving what is totally painful—the sense of me is nothing but a burden—and I was perceiving it as pleasant. "Oh yeah, nice. This nice sense of me, so comfortable with this." And not-self is self. What is foul is beautiful—I wasn't as aware of that one, but whenever we're looking, perceiving experience through the veil of one of these four inverted, upside-down perceptions, that's a moment when ignorance arises and increases.

Remembering that why seeing cuts right through. You don't have to think about it. It's like if in that moment I had stopped and said, "Well, which of the four inverted perceptions am I looking at right now?"—off into another unwise attention, which is thinking and analyzing and wondering, in the past, in the future, and at least skeptical doubt, or what the Buddha called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views. Stay out of the wilderness of views and just bring your attention back to what's actually happening right now.

Okay, that's enough about wise attention. So, wise attention: abandoning these underlying potentials through seeing. The second way is abandoning through restraint at the sense doors.

Now again, we've spoken about that a lot. I just want to refresh your memories about how that works in terms of not allowing these underlying tendencies to flower. Obviously, restraint doesn't mean we don't look, we don't see, we don't smell, we don't touch, we don't think. But it means, using Buddhadasa's term, to bring sati-pañña—mindfulness and wisdom—into the mind at the point of sense contact. So we know what's what. So that at the level of perception, there's clear awareness. You smell a pleasant smell, there's the perception "it's pizza," and it ends there. It doesn't go into whatever your whole field of proliferation in papañca is about pizza. You end up in Sicily, you're watching The Godfather. I don't know what your particular things are about pizza. It doesn't have to go that way.

Papañca is the word, and proliferation is the best definition of it. One of the commentaries describes it as the proliferations of mind that assail a person, that obsess a person, that torment a person. If we can bring mindfulness and wisdom in at the point of "pleasant smell, that's a pizza"—release. That's what we mean by restraint at the sense door. Just being right there, as Ajahn Chah says: when you smell a pleasant smell, leave it at the nose. Could we only do that?

There's one other point I find interesting. I don't know if I'm getting too detailed with this tonight, but I thought this is very interesting. As a help for understanding when we're present with our perception at the sense door, how to not let the proliferation grab hold and take over. The Buddha is talking about restraint. He says, "On seeing a form with the eye, one who is practicing restraint does not grasp at the signs and features." These are the particular words he uses, and I'll explain them. So then either desire or aversion doesn't take over.

Now what they mean by not grasping at the signs and features: say there's a form, a person that you've previously thought of as beautiful or attractive. The sign would be the most distinctive, apparent perception that one sees about that person. So, for ex-

ample, there's just visual form seeing, and immediately there's the shape of that person. Maybe that's the sign, the first distinctive thing that hits your eye, your perception. The unmindful, unrestrained sense door would be this grasping.

"Oh, that's such a beautiful form." Grasping right then. And that's where the whole proliferation begins—either going into desire, if that's the particular bent, or aversion, either at them or at yourself for not being as beautiful, or whatever comparing gets going. That's the sign.

And then the features would be, once that sign is grasped unmindfully, all the other little facets that feed it. So you start with the form, and then you go, "Yeah, they're so beautiful, and look at their hair, and the way that they dress, and they walk so gracefully," and yada, yada, yada. The whole proliferation gets grasped at and going—the details that catch the attention.

But when that first perception is met with mindfulness at the sense door, that's restraint. You're not saying, "No, make craving not arise." You're just seeing form, form, pleasant. It doesn't have to go any farther.

So the first is abandoning these tendencies through wise seeing. And again, it's not "I am going to rip out this tendency, root it up, extirpate it." It's not a sense of "I'm abandoning." It's just that they lose their potency through wise seeing, through restraint at the sense doors.

The third one I find quite interesting, and we're moving into the bigger picture here. This is wise attention to the attitude with which we use things, with which we use the requisites for our life. Now, the Buddha was talking to monks and nuns, but it's the same for us. What's the attitude with which we use food, with which we use clothing, with which we relate to shelter?

We can use whatever we need with care, with simplicity, taking just what we need for comfort—not having to be some kind of harsh ascetic, taking what we need, but not out of a kind of greed: "I better take extra in case there's not more later." Not out of fear, not out of a sense of "I need more now because there's not enough to go around, too bad for you."

You can see on this planet what's happening to the environment. If we all just related to using what we need with this wise attention, with a sense of paying attention to the attitude with which we use what we need, this planet would be a vastly different place. I don't think we'd be having all the environmental problems that we're having.

But not even looking at the really big scale—just beginning to explore here in our lives—we can see in little ways: How are we relating to the food? And this is not to get into judgment, thinking "I'm taking more than I need" when you're really in the grip of craving and you can't stop it. Pay attention. Just pay attention to that. But there are plenty of times when we're really not paying attention, and we could, to the attitude with which we use things.

When we do pay attention and just take what we need, when we don't let ourselves be run by fear and greed, it brings such an ease and simplicity into the way one relates to one's life, to the environment, to our requisites.

A little example: when I'm on retreat, usually I just take what food is there. Somehow over the years it's gotten to be not such a big deal. Every now and then I'll think, "I better take an extra banana because some mornings there's not a banana and I really like bananas better than oranges." And I'll take that banana. It's never anything but trouble. It sits in my room. I don't remember to bring it up to breakfast, or there are bananas for the next ten days, or I don't actually want the banana anyway. And then the next day I save extra peanut butter. I have to figure out what to put it in and where to keep it and should I bring it up and then what will people think of me? It balloons into so much grief. It's so much trouble.

If I just forget the banana and take what's there, there's just space. There's ease. There's going to be something to eat tomorrow. So what if it's not a banana? It's so much easier. Or saving five blankets because I know I'm sensitive to cold and it might get cold. And after three months, I haven't used four of them, but I might need one.

Shuffling them around the room and figuring out what to do with them and feeling guilty—just looking at how we use stuff.

And it might be that you have low blood sugar and you do have to save something from tea because you need a little snack at ten at night. That's fine. The Buddha, talking about the different requisites, speaks about reflecting wisely on using food—not for amusement or for vanity. That could mean not eating to look good, but also not *not* eating to look good. Not for embellishment, but for the endurance and continuing of this body, for ending discomfort, and for support of the holy life. And he says then, the person is considering, "Thus shall I terminate old, unwholesome feelings without arousing new ones"—in other words, without getting into massive craving—"and shall live in comfort and health."

There's nothing wrong with a level of basic comfort, using what we need to maintain a level of comfort and health that supports us in our path of awakening. That's useful. And whatever is true, we need wise attention to see what's true for us. What's true for me and what's true for you of what we need to eat can be vastly different, and it doesn't matter. That's why comparing is such a useless waste of time. Not that we can drop it, but it is.

Really looking at the attitude with which you use things—this wise discernment, this looking at what really supports my ease and comfort and my path of awakening—that brings such a simplicity, such a sense of trust. I don't have to save the banana. I don't need ten rice cakes back on those back shelves. There'll be something. I can let go into the Dharma and trust the arising moment. It's a very powerful way of paying attention.

When we're operating in that way, when we're paying attention to the attitude, then the underlying tendencies of greed, holding on to sense of self, the fear that comes with ignorance—they just don't have the chance to arise. Whereas saving the thing with the idea of "I won't get hungry later" is actually setting the conditions for all these unwholesome potentials to arise. So explore that while you're here. But obviously, it's the same in our life. And this is a way that we can really use our daily life to support the purification of our heart and mind—paying attention to how we use things.

The next two we've talked about quite a bit. I'll just say a little. The next one is removing these underlying tendencies through what the translation calls "enduring." I'll use patience as an aspect of mettā. But we've talked ad nauseam about this. It's basically that the patient heart and mind is the one that is present and spacious and able to be here without reacting when we don't like what's happening.

The Buddha gives examples—and you can really hear how they lived, the forest life. He gives the examples of what can be abandoned by enduring: "Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with flies, wind, burning and creeping things. He endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words, and bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life."

Enduring is not gritting our teeth with low-level aversion and saying, "I'm sitting here until the bell rings and I can move." Enduring, as we know, is really the patient quality of mind that's open, present, non-reactive. And we've talked a lot about that.

But notice the next one, and these two kind of pair together in my mind—it needs wise discernment to tell which is which. Because the next one is removal by avoiding. First there's enduring, but then there's avoiding. And this is where we need to use wise

discernment—that those things which are really unsupportive, unskillful, or downright dangerous to our practice or our life, if one can, one avoids them. This is a way of helping us to abandon the tendency for these difficult states to arise.

Now again, his examples: "Reflecting wisely, one avoids a savage elephant, a savage bull, a savage dog, a snake." We're talking a different culture here.

A stump. A chasm. A cliff. A cesspool. A sewer. Frequenting bad friends or unwholesome companions.

Here, sometimes the savage elephant might be something in your mind. It might be a person. Say, sometimes you know a little thing gets going with someone—not just that you get on each other's nerves, that happens—but sometimes you get a nice little thing going with someone here. You start kind of looking at each other, or you start joking in a silent way, something that feels good, but actually, if you pay attention, it's taking you away from being present. It's not that the person or you are bad, but that's something to avoid.

When we talk about avoidance as a skillful means to help abandon the tendency toward ignorance and greed, we can get into such a macho attitude: "I should be able to be mindful in the middle of everything. I should be able to be with the most difficult circumstances. And if I'm not, it's because I'm not good enough. I'm wimping out."

But look at the environment we've set up here. We're begging you not to get your mail, not to make phone calls, not to talk to each other. We don't have news bulletins or the BBC set up in the lobby telling you what's going on every night. It's a really protected environment. Does that mean you're all a bunch of wimps because you can't do this in the middle of Fifth Avenue in New York City? We really need to look at what supports our awareness. With wise discernment, when we can make a decision to avoid something, please do so. There will be plenty that we can't avoid, and that's when we use patience or endurance.

When I was in Thailand for about a year as a nun, these two were a really rich area of exploration—finding the wise discernment to walk the difference between what I really could avoid and what I couldn't avoid but wished I could. At first I saw that I really had to learn patience, because there's so much that's difficult. You go to Asia thinking, "I'm going to have this silent retreat in nature." Forget it. Half the time I was in Bangkok in the middle of the hot season—extremely unpleasant. Take my word for it. And I like hot weather.

When I finally got out of Bangkok, the food was really difficult for me to eat. I hadn't eaten meat in probably fifteen years, and all the food had greasy meat in it. And when I finally got to a lovely little temple in the jungle—you think the jungle is silent. Go sit in a jungle. It is so noisy. Snakes all over the place, poisonous snakes just flopping down on the roof. Incredible insect life. Not to mention the tourists who come to the temples for picnics. You're just doing walking meditation, you turn around, and there's someone with a camera right in your face the second you turn around. "Oh, let me take a picture of the cute nun." How to develop patience! I spent months cultivating aversion until I finally noticed: I think maybe I have a choice here. Did I come to cultivate aversion? No, I don't think so.

Patience—a mind like the earth that doesn't react no matter what's thrown on it—that's the way of peace. And once there is that patience, then wise discernment arises about what actually could be avoided.

For example, I didn't particularly like any of the food, but some of it really made me ill. That's appropriate to avoid if you have the choice, without making trouble. As a nun, you can't ask for something special. Or I found that I could put a sheet over the door of my kuti so tourists didn't come and just stand there staring in to see what the cute nun looked like when she was meditating. That's quite okay—avoiding something that's just going to bring up the tendencies. But when you can't avoid, there's patience. Both are very skillful and very helpful.

So we look at that here, and again, with wise seeing and skillful means, it's always arising from the intention.

Avoiding is not from the intention of hatred. It's from the intention of clear seeing. Oh, when I keep going into this situation, I get lost in anger. I go to this walking place, somebody else is there, I get lost in anger. You do that ten days in a row and you think, maybe I'll go to a different walking place. That's skillful avoidance. It's not from aversion.

So let's see if I can name these: wise seeing, restraint at the sense doors, how we use things, patience, wise avoidance. The sixth method is called removing. Again, I think we need to use different words for this. But it's when restraint at the sense door didn't quite happen and a strong, unwholesome state of mind and heart has taken hold, has taken root. It could be a strong, greedy series of thoughts, a really self-centered series of thoughts, aversive, fearful—whatever it is—that we can actually abandon continuing to feed the habit of these tendencies arising by, quote, removing the unwholesome emotion or train of thought.

Now that's not what we think about when we first start practice, which is literally removing, done with a lot of aversion. It's the basic mindfulness we've talked about all along.

I'll take anger again since we've talked about it. Bringing awareness to the anger itself, to the thoughts that are feeding it—but I am right. Isn't that one of the biggest hooks to keeping anger going? They are acting like a jerk. It isn't appropriate in this environment. Somebody really does need to do something. And no one but me is noticing, so I need to do something. The practice is to bring awareness in at the point of what is allowing these tendencies already arisen to increase.

Joseph calls this the sword of wisdom, where you can really bring in the mindfulness right at the point of those thoughts and go, okay, that's enough. Not "that's enough, I hate it," but that's enough—with great determination you just bring your mindfulness in at the point of that thought the second you notice it, and again and again. I call it in my mind, when I have some strong thought like that going or strong emotion, being really ruthless with awareness. Ruthless in that that thought, the little tendrils of it, do not get to slip by.

An image that's sometimes given, although it's slightly unwise because there's a little aversion in it, is the cat waiting at the hole for the mouse to come out. If you take away the wanting to pounce and kill, take that part away, and just have that clear attention—not hating the thought, but it's not going to slip by—the sword of wisdom, that quality of resolution, of clear mindfulness, that's removal at that point. It just doesn't keep expanding.

Now, as we all know, that takes great delicacy. And again, the intention cannot be coming from fear or hatred or self-judgment. Because first, it won't work. The fear, the hatred, the self-judgment just gets stronger. If you pay attention, you'll notice that. But every moment that we're mindful, even though it seems the thoughts or the emotion keeps going, that moment of clear recognition is actually cutting the increasing of that underlying tendency. Again, you don't always notice it right away. If we're not mindful, then it's just like a snowball getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

So that's one way of removal: not giving room to expand the unwholesome thoughts, the unwholesome mental states.

There are other ways. One approach—and this a lot of people have been asking about in interviews lately, just trying to get clear on when this is skillful—is almost like thought substitution. It's one of the ways that we can use our training in the brahma-vi-

haras. Take metta. Metta really is the wise intention, the second step of the Eightfold Path, that counteracts the unwise thought of ill will. And applied skillfully, it's really a way of, quote, removal.

Let me give you an example from my experience of skillful and unskillful application. Take ill will—the turning in on yourself kind, worthlessness, self-judging, I'm no good, the whole pattern, if you should happen to have that, however it particularly goes for you. So I see that arising in me, and using metta skillfully means first recognizing that pattern, letting myself feel it, really acknowledging it. I have been watching this pattern for close to thirty years now.

I'm really familiar with it now. I haven't had a surprise in how it works for quite a while. So when I notice it, I really acknowledge its presence, feel it fully. And then it's like saying, "You know, I really don't need to dwell here." In a very clear way, I really don't need to dwell in this pattern, this state of mind. It's like changing the channels—I think I'll change to the metta channel—and I start doing some metta.

Now, I'm not really in aversion to the state, to the self-hatred, and that's what's important. I'm just seeing it. It's what it is. I don't need to go there. And I start doing metta, and usually by about the second set of phrases, I'm really then on the metta channel. The first set of phrases feels, you know, not really true, a bit phony. But by the second set of phrases, the unworthiness isn't there, and the metta is present for that moment.

We can really do this with all the Brahma-viharas, but the key to the skillfulness is that you're not doing the metta out of a fear or hatred of the other state. And you'll know if that's the case because it won't work. If I'm really in self-hatred and it's like, "Oh God, I can't bear this, I don't want to feel this anymore—may I be happy?"—that's not going to work. Or when you're really angry at someone and you say, "Oh, may I send them metta, may they live in peace"—you know it's phony. You have to acknowledge what's really happening first. But you don't have to indulge in it. You don't have to dwell there.

I love that one line of the Buddha's: "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." And we have a choice a lot of the time where the mind will dwell. So this is a way of removal of unwholesome thoughts that is really very skillful if you can do it without the aversion or without greed—switching the channel to the Brahma-viharas.

There's a whole sutta actually, a different one from what I've been discussing, called the Removal of Distracting Thoughts. The Buddha gives five ways, and all of them assume that just being mindful and noticing the thought, it didn't poof away. We're assuming that to begin with.

The first one is just what I was describing—changing the channel. The second is for when that still doesn't work. You switch to metta, and you're still caught in "I hate myself, I hate everybody, I hate myself, I hate everybody." So you can examine the danger and the suffering of those thoughts. Or if it's clinging and you're really caught in wanting something, examining the danger and the suffering in that. Sometimes that will remove it.

The third, if the first two don't work, is to try to forget those thoughts and give your attention to something else. This is a bit like what I said under avoidance. You're really caught in desire, in lust, and you can't get away from it. Looking at it, you're just getting lost. So you move your attention elsewhere. Go back to the breath. Count the breaths. Do walking meditation and just feel the feet. Get connected to something else.

If that doesn't work, the Buddha says, then try to give attention to looking at what's causing those thoughts. This might take a little bit of active investigation, but sometimes when you get to the root of what's causing it, that causes the thought to cease—the removal of it, so to speak. For example, I know that if I'm caught in an anger loop and I'm really noting the anger, I come back, I know the sensations, I'm really there, but it keeps zooming up—I know I'm not really seeing what's at the root of it. And sometimes if I really go in, I'll find, for example, hurt.

And once I see the hurt, oh, that's at the root of it. The other story goes away. I can be with the hurt. That's an example.

And then the fifth—I'm just including this because I want you to know it wasn't easy then either. If none of these other methods work, and mindfulness of course didn't work, if there still arise unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then—and I'm quoting—"with the teeth clenched and the tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth, one should beat down, constrain, and crush the unwholesome state of mind with a wholesome state of mind."

You can tell he was from a warrior class. But I'm sure we've all been there. May a wholesome state arise. So that's removal.

And the last approach, coming full circle again back to meditation and wise attention, is developing and cultivating the seven factors of enlightenment. If you've been attending the talks by Sayadaw U Pandita, that's what his teachings have been about throughout this retreat. Obviously I can only mention them briefly, but I will mention them.

The seven factors of enlightenment, which all have to come into balance, are: mindfulness, and then the three energizing factors—investigation of dhammas, energy or courageous effort, and rapture. The three calming ones are concentration, tranquility, and equanimity.

Mindfulness you can never have too much of. It doesn't ever go out of balance. And that's the first. The proximate cause, the immediate cause for mindfulness to arise—guess what? Mindfulness. One moment of mindfulness, however weak, helps the next moment of mindfulness to arise and be a little stronger. So we just start with mindfulness.

I want to give a very brief description of each of the other six.

Investigation, dhamma vicaya, is not thinking about things. It has nothing to do with thought. It's a quality, a mental factor, that lights up the field of awareness so that whatever's arising can be seen clearly. It dissipates confusion. It illuminates whatever's arising. Sometimes actually literally as if a light, but not necessarily—it's as if everything is a fog and suddenly, ah, that's wanting. A moment of investigation. For all the other six besides mindfulness, the direct cause for their arising is wise attention. Wise attention is very powerful.

The next is viriya, or courageous effort. If you think of it in the way Joseph talked about it—as courage rather than huge energy—we can find the courage to just meet what's happening. That's courageous effort. The amount, the degree of it goes up and down. But the courage to come face to face with what is. Persistence or endurance.

And the third energizing factor is pīti, rapture. It's a mental state that has the characteristics of happiness, of a real delight in what is happening. It manifests as a genuine interest, that kind of delight. Wow, my feet are killing me—how fascinating, you know? It doesn't really matter what's going on. Delight and satisfaction. Those times when you're just really interested. There's a lightness in the mind and a lightness in the body. And it doesn't really matter what's happening if you're satisfied with it. That's part of rapture. Rapture can also color other mental states that are happening so they feel very satisfying. Oh, this sense of ease is so great. It just colors everything.

And it has a real bodily quality that goes along with it. When there's rapture in the mind, this delight, this satisfaction, the body also feels light, kind of agile, supple. It's not a problem. You don't feel like you're dragging the factors around with you. It feels like the body can do whatever it needs to do. It's not troubling you too much. And often there are a lot of physical sensations with rapture, often weird ones that you would never think of as having anything to do with rapture.

Shaking, floors undulating, or just a kind of whiteness, or bugs crawling all over—so many weird things can arise. But the mental state of rapture is this suppleness, this delight, this interest in what is happening.

Rapture then leads directly to the beginning of the calming factors, the first of which is tranquility. Tranquility or calm—cool calmness, it could be said. It really means non-agitation of mind and body. The heat that comes from restlessness and anxiety and suffering and all of that energy—tranquility takes that away. It's that state when the mind and body are just really calm and not agitated. That's all, really. It's very cool, obviously pleasant, a sense of ease.

The next calming factor is concentration, which we've talked about a lot. Again, its quality is collectedness of mind and attention, steadiness on whatever's arising. It doesn't have to be long-term concentration. If you're doing absorption practice, it stays steady on one object. In vipassanā, that steadiness is on changing objects. So there's a moment of steady concentration, attention sinking into what's happening. The next moment is a different arising appearance, but there's that same steadiness—concentration arising moment to moment to moment. It's not one continuous thing; it's arising moment to moment. But even though the objects are changing, concentration can arise steadily without a break. Steadiness of mindfulness is what leads to this steadiness of concentration.

The last of the calming factors is equanimity, or upekkhā, which we know is the non-reactive quality of mind—very connected, very non-reactive. But there's another way of thinking about it in relationship to these factors of enlightenment: it's a balance of mind that actually balances all the other energies. For example, when wisdom and faith are out of balance—this has been talked about—there's a lot of energy when faith is out of balance, but you can be so energized you don't know what's happening. When there's too much wisdom, you're thinking and analyzing and thinking about the Dharma, but you're not actually present. When they're balanced, equanimity is there—this energy that's in the middle and balances all the other factors.

What it feels like is a sense, a state of ease, when the mindfulness is just going on by itself. Everything feels balanced and easy. The mind isn't getting caught up, going to one side or the other. That's another aspect of equanimity.

So I name these factors so you recognize them. They all need to be balanced, which happens naturally through our mindfulness practice. But knowing what they are can be helpful. Occasionally, when you're feeling really out of balance and can't figure out what's going on, sometimes it helps to just mentally go through a checklist of the seven factors of enlightenment in a very calm way. Sometimes you realize, "Oh, there's no calm going on right now. There's no tranquility. I'm really alert, things are really interesting, but I'm totally agitated with it." Oh, that's interesting—and then the equanimity begins to kick in, begins to balance.

So that's the seventh method.

As for how to cultivate the seven factors, I'll close with this quote from the Buddha on how it all works together:

Mindfulness of breathing, when developed and repeatedly practiced, fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness, when developed and repeatedly practiced, perfect the seven factors of enlightenment.

It happens by itself.

The seven factors of enlightenment, when developed and cultivated, fulfill true knowledge and deliverance.

It all starts with awareness of breathing, with wise attention.

CHAPTER 355

Pursuit of Happiness

Carol Wilson · 58 min

> *In this profound retreat talk, Carol Wilson examines one of the most fundamental misunderstandings in spiritual practice: confusing pleasant experiences with true happiness. Drawing from her own early practice, she describes how even transcendent meditative states can become just another form of seeking pleasure, keeping us trapped in the same cycles of grasping and aversion.*
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> *Wilson illuminates the Buddha's teaching on the three unwholesome roots—greed, hatred, and delusion—showing how they arise moment by moment through our reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences. She explains how mindfulness practice allows us to see these deeply conditioned habits clearly, creating space to respond rather than react. Through personal examples and practical guidance, she demonstrates how bare attention held with kindness can transform our relationship to difficult experiences, opening us to unexpected joy and connection.*
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> *The talk deepens into contemplation of impermanence as the gateway to genuine peace. Wilson shares poetry and stories that illuminate how truly accepting change—not just intellectually but in our bones—liberates the heart from its constant struggle to control experience. She emphasizes that this acceptance is not resignation but rather the foundation for compassionate action, freeing tremendous energy previously consumed by resistance and fear. The teaching points toward a happiness that is independent of conditions, available in any moment through awakened presence to things exactly as they are.*

The attraction for me in the early days of my practice to Buddhism and meditation specifically was the philosophy of what the Buddha spoke of. He was always so clear that what he was teaching was the highest happiness—the ending of suffering, the sure heart's release.

In a way, and this sounds kind of crass, I didn't put it to myself that way at the time, but the sense was: well, that's what to go for in life, the highest sense of happiness, whatever will make me truly, lastingly happy. And I feel, talking to people who come on retreat, that in one way or another, this tends to be what draws us to go through this rather difficult and sometimes strange process—a kind of hope or faith, or whatever word is suitable for you, of some higher happiness, some greater sense of serenity or ease in one's life.

In first practicing, in my first retreat, and in many people's, you might touch moments of what seems like a higher happiness, or a sense that we're somehow heading in the right direction. It could be the momentary peace of concentration, that bliss of a unified mind. It might be an ecstatic sense of interconnection. It might just be the simplicity of peace, of being fully present. There's a whole range of things it can be.

For some time in my practice, it was experiences like that which kept me coming back, thinking, "Oh yes, this shows I'm heading in the right direction." And it really took a while before I began to get it on some deep level that all this was is a continuation of the search for pleasure. I was taking pleasant experience—maybe a little more transcendent, maybe a little more subtle than I experienced in my daily life—and equating that with true happiness.

What the Buddha is talking about, and what our meditation practice here is about, is finding that the true happiness the Buddha was speaking about is of a whole other order. What most of us think of as happiness is not what the Buddha was speaking about as the true source of happiness, the true heart's release. We mostly don't know what true happiness is.

A lot of what I think our practice here is about is finding out what we're doing wrong, so to speak—how we're relating to our lives and the world in a way that rather than furthering our happiness, keeps us spinning in confusion. What is it that the Buddha is talking about? What is it we're doing here that can open us into experience of real happiness?

It's a common misconception, and I find myself, when I'm not really being aware, falling into it often, that meditation practice or this process of purification is somehow going to create in ourselves or in our minds a subtler, more eternal kind of state. We're going to create some transcendent other reality in which we will live, from which we will relate to this mundane world of affairs and somehow float on a cloud somewhere, or be the serene Buddha in the midst of it. We think we've got to create something different, get away from who we are, from what we are, from what's happening now.

What we begin to awaken to—and this is a practice of awakening, Buddha really means one who is awakened—is that this is a much more radical proposition. We're not trying to get out of this reality or create some other reality from which we look back. We discover that that which we're seeking, whatever way you describe it to yourself, maybe you don't even describe it to yourself, but somehow there's an impulse for happiness or unity or completion or something that drives us on. And what's so radical

about this practice of awareness is that it allows us to begin to awaken to the fact that that which we seek is always and only accessible in the immediacy of the here and now—whatever experience happens to be represented as here and now.

We're awakening into fullness of presence, to full aliveness, connection, and acceptance of this moment. Fully, totally this moment—and in that is where true peace and happiness can be found. Never by looking to something else to somehow create another reality.

So whether it's an itch that's arising, sadness, total boredom or doubt, just the pure breath or ecstasy, pain, a footstep—it doesn't matter what. Each experience, as it arises, is like a messenger. It's like a calling to say: awaken now. I'm your gateway in this moment to the possibility to awaken to my essential inner completion. In moving away from this pain, in moving away from this happiness, in any way trying to construct something other, we're effectively bringing down the blinders and not noticing what is always accessible to us.

And that's the paradox of spiritual practice: if our truest nature, this pure awareness—as Joseph spoke about last night—a pure awareness that is absolutely untouched by any arising experience, if this pure awareness is always present and accessible to us, why don't we notice it? If it's so obvious—and this is the paradox of practice—it's said this way in one Tibetan text. I just love this little poem:

Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few of us see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that this Buddha mind is never impaired or improved on in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease in whatever happens.

Just resting at ease in whatever happens. It's so simple. Why do we have so much trouble doing this? Just resting at ease with awake intelligence and quite accepting open awareness within whatever happens. Not our natural inclination, is it?

Yet we all have moments of it. Joseph referred to a moment like that in his talk last night, and someone mentioned it to me today—a moment where there's just a sense of ease, of presence. It might be, as Joseph was talking about, when you feel so vividly awake and connected, and somehow the shimmering leaves of the tree seem so exquisite. Or someone mentioned today just really being present for eating, being with one's meal, maybe for the first time. Or it can happen just taking a footstep—there's just this

sense of such peace, such ease, such presence. It can happen no matter what we're doing. And if you're paying attention, we all experience moments of this, more or less frequently.

What these moments are pointing to is that it has nothing to do with what's actually happening in that moment. The leaves of the tree aren't suddenly more vivid. The breakfast wasn't suddenly a superior breakfast to any we've ever had in our life. That footstep wasn't somehow different from other footsteps. But we tend to take that moment, and instead of noticing just that ease, that awakeness, that vivid awareness that has nothing to do with what's happening but knows what's happening, we instead fixate on the wrong thing. We tend to keep looking to changing conditions.

So if the leaves were beautiful and it was two in the afternoon, we'll try again at two in the afternoon when the sun's a certain way, and we've had a cup of tea, to go look and see if we can hit that space again—without realizing that it's got nothing to do with those external or internal conditions. It's only that in that moment there was an awakeness, a heart and mind that was free of resistance, free of grasping or clinging, that was in no way reacting or trying to change or resist what was happening. Just total awakeness and presence. That's really what allows us to rest at ease in what is happening and to notice the potential for serenity and peace within whatever is happening.

So if you have a moment like that, see if you can just notice the whole show and not fixate on the changing conditions. Because that's our tendency, whether it's so-called external conditions—the weather, the way we're sitting, the clothes we brought, the way other people behave, the food we're eating, the schedule, whatever. We tend to focus on those conditions as what can make ease and peace possible or not. They might be more or less pleasant, and again we're confusing pleasant with true happiness, with peace. We do the same with internal conditions: our state of mind, our thoughts, the absence or presence of physical discomfort. We try to somehow arrange and manipulate these conditions, and if we can get them in the right order, in the right coming together, then—ah, this is peace, this is happiness.

And all the while we're not noticing, although it's so obvious we would all agree when it's pointed out, that there is no condition, so-called external or internal, that lasts. Everything is changing. If we're positing any sense of happiness, any sense of true peace on any changing condition whatsoever, we're in trouble. But because things change so fast, it's always easy to say, "Well, this one didn't do it," and somehow our mind leaps to the next one, or thinks we can get this one back again when it changes. We somehow don't stop and look at what's really going on.

And that's the whole purpose of our meditation. It gives us the clarity, the focus, and the tools to actually begin to look inward and see what's going on. It's said that the Buddha said upon his enlightenment that he felt so much compassion for all of us in our human state because he could feel, he could see, that most deeply at the core, every person, every one of us—and this sounds simplistic, but I really believe it's true—at our deepest core each of us truly wants to be happy. But through our not seeing what is so about ourselves, about the nature of the world, through not really understanding what is so, many of our efforts to bring happiness to ourselves and others actually only succeed in increasing our confusion, in increasing our sense of struggle, because we don't know what true happiness is.

Mark Epstein is a psychiatrist who has also been a practicing Buddhist meditator for a long time, and he writes about happiness: "My experience as a psychiatrist trained in Western medicine and in the philosophy and practice of Buddhism has given me a unique perspective. I have come to see that our problem is that we don't know what happiness is. We confuse happiness with a life uncluttered by feelings of anxiety, rage, doubt, and sadness. But happiness is something entirely different. It's the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning."

He's saying happiness is the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning. And I would actually go a step further: that non-reactivity of mind—in any one moment, we're not talking about every moment of life, just take one moment—when there's this total receptivity, non-reactivity of mind to whatever's arising, in that moment of alertness and stillness, that gives the potential, the possibility to recognize something much more true than our passing reactions. A place of awareness from which whatever arises is not a problem.

So I want to talk a little bit about this habit of grasping at the pleasant and condemning the unpleasant—a very strong and subtle habit of our mind. What we can begin to notice, using our tools of mindfulness and concentration, is how these habits of conditioning are working on a moment-to-moment basis. We can see how they arise, how they lead us to certain forms of mental, physical, and vocal behavior.

And by paying attention, we can see how those behaviors don't really work, how these habits of mind aren't actually serving us. So a great deal of our practice is beginning to observe this.

Taking it on a real moment-to-moment basis—not theoretically—you can begin to notice how this happens. When we pay attention to what we're experiencing on the basic level of bare attention, Buddhist psychology reveals six different types of experience that arise over and over: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensation, and then

the whole field of mental experience—thinking, emotions, mental images. These are what Buddhist terminology calls the six senses, with mind being the sixth sense. All that's really happening is these six things arising over and over and over. And then we make up story, which is just another mental experience arising.

As each experience comes—say a sight arises—we experience it as being either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. But when we're not really looking, this seems somehow intrinsic to the experience itself. I look out and there's seeing, and it's just this pleasant feeling. Without paying attention, the habit of mind moves to "Oh, that's nice, I like it." And it could stop there, or it could become "I really like it, I'd like to go out and really be with it and see it more"—this grasping at the pleasant. If it's unpleasant, the rain comes and it's cold, the body shrinks away, the mind contracts: "I don't like that, I don't want to feel this, let's do something to change it." And when it's neutral, most of the time we tend not to even notice it. We ignore it. And often—notice this in your own experience—we almost experience the neutral as unpleasant, and our mind will create something more stimulating to wake us up.

These are what the Buddha called the three unwholesome roots of mind that lead to suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion or confusion—based on reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. This is so important because it's happening almost every moment, and we're so accustomed to it, and it happens so fast, that we don't notice it's a habit of mind. The reactivity to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral becomes like a filter through which we judge and evaluate experience. Without paying attention, when you're sitting here and you have a pleasant sitting or pleasant conversation, it translates almost as: "This is right, this is good, this is how it's supposed to be. I've got to make it happen more." When it's unpleasant—we're restless, there's pain in the knee—it's not only unpleasant, it's wrong. It's a mistake. Something isn't happening the right way and we've got to do something to change it. And when it's neutral, forget it. We go off into daydreams. Sometimes we'll actually find our mind creating whole scenarios that are quite unpleasant, as a reaction to hanging out with neutral.

In fact, often on retreats people come in to talk about their experience and they'll say, "Oh, nothing's happening and I don't like it." "So there's calmness?" "Oh yeah," they'll say, "I guess that's calm. I don't know what to do with calm." The mind starts creating suffering scenarios. We don't know how to be with neutral. And in a way, neutral can be so pleasant, so wonderful.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about this. One example he gives: when we have a toothache, it's so painful, so unpleasant. When it stops, it's like, "Ah, how wonderful—no toothache!" But when we don't have a toothache—and most of the time we don't—do we even notice? Tune into your teeth right now. It's really quite nice if they're just neutral. It's actually quite pleasant, quite peaceful. But we don't notice that.

I was at a movie a few weeks ago—I don't even remember which one—but the coming attraction was for *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. It starts with this humongous explosion that practically blows you three feet back in your seat, and it just gets worse from there, so intense. I was thinking, "My God, that's our culture." No wonder we don't know what to do with calmness or neutral experience. We're so hyped up in this culture that everything has to keep getting more and more intense just to get our attention. That's a little aside.

But anyway, really begin noticing your experience. Have you found that this sense of pleasant becomes a basis for your whole evaluation of how your practice is going? Does it become a filter for your self-judgment? You have a really "good" sitting, meaning basically it's pleasant. How many of you have had a sitting where you were restless, where there was pain in your knee, where your mind was wandering, and you came away saying, "That was a really good sitting"? But we have to have sittings like that. There's no such thing as only pleasant. I don't know if you've noticed this in life, but there's no such thing as only pleasant. Yet somehow we tend to operate from the assumption that unpleasantness is a mistake, and we're going to fix it.

Well, a retreat is just the same way. There's no such thing as only pleasant.

When you have a sitting like the unpleasant one I described, the evaluation is so common: "This is wrong, I'm not doing it right, I'm a bad meditator." Or we reverse it outward: "This is the stupidest practice I ever heard of, and clearly they don't know what they're talking about. It's a waste of time." Either way, there's no sense of equanimity. There's no sense of peace, of spaciousness. We're making our happiness, we're making our rightness, we're making truth dependent on things being pleasant, meeting our expectations, being how we want them. That's a setup, definitely, for deep suffering.

Our practice lets us begin to see these patterns. Without the awareness, it's like we're living blindly, following these habits of mind. It's like we're in the ruts on the road here.

It makes me think of when we drove in. Joseph and I and Grove and some friends drove in two cars on Friday. It was really raining that day, and the roads were muddy and soupy. Franz and I were in a car with two friends—just a rental car, some Ford. It wasn't four-wheel drive, and it had very low clearance. We're driving behind Grove's

big Suburban, sliding all over, really muddy. The friend who was driving was really good, but he was going all over. It was tough. Each corner we'd come around would be harder than the next. And Grove kept calling back, "Get in the ruts, get in the ruts, you've got to get in the ruts!" He finally stopped us and came back and said, "Wes, you've got to get in the ruts."

So it was really funny—Wes was going, "Get in the ruts, get in the ruts, get in the ruts," and finally, bang, in the ruts. And then you're really stuck in them.

I felt like that's how we are when we're blindly following these tendencies. Because for our car, the ruts didn't necessarily work. They'd work for a little while, and then suddenly there'd be this huge hump and the whole bottom of the car felt like it was scraping off. "Oh no, the oil pan, the oil pan! Get out of the ruts, get out of the ruts!" The whole thing was just this dance. And once you're in the ruts, you can't get out of them anymore.

What our practice really lets us do is begin to see the ruts and how they're working—this rut of blindly following pleasure, of blindly moving away from the unpleasant, of totally spacing out when it's neutral. When you can see the rut, sometimes it works. As Joseph said, if your hand's in a fire, it's a good idea to follow the moving away from the unpleasant. But there are plenty of times that it just doesn't work. There are plenty of unpleasant experiences that we're not going to be able to move away from.

When we can see how those ruts work, we can also see when it's helpful to move out of the ruts. Then we have the whole field of experience available, and we can act and respond appropriately—not out of blind reactivity.

If you reflect on it, watch over these days: how much of our physical and mental activity is just to forget ourselves? How much of the time are we physically or mentally just blindly trying to move away from discomfort, trying to get away from something unpleasant?

There's a whole little practice in Vipassana that one teacher in Thailand used to teach, which is just this: every time you move throughout the day, watch why you move. Notice how much of our movement happens as a slight discomfort comes up and we move. Not that we have to stay and hurt—I'm not saying that—but just begin to see how much of our activity is a mask for slight discomfort, how much is trying to move towards pleasure.

If this scenario worked—if chasing pleasure and avoiding pain actually led to lasting happiness—none of us would be here. So it's about finding, within all of that, how we don't have to be so driven, how we don't have to be caught by this dualism.

This is where our mindfulness and concentration begin to serve us, begin to help us learn how to see through this conditioning over and over. And that seeing through gives us the space to respond appropriately.

Regarding mindfulness, there are a couple of aspects I want to emphasize. The first is this quality of attention—bringing the attention into the actual experience that's arising, whether it's a physical sensation or a sound or a sight or a thought or an emotion. Bringing the attention into the actual experience rather than confusing the interpretation with the experience. The only way we can come into the experience is when the mindfulness is held in an air of kindness, of softness, of loving-kindness and acceptance toward whatever is arising.

An experience comes up—say it's a physical sensation of pain in the knee, as Joseph was talking about in the instructions today. Mindfulness is non-discriminating. It doesn't say, "Hmm, should I pay attention to this? Should I pay attention to that?" As soon as something arises, the mindfulness moves directly to it in a non-discriminating way, meeting it with an attitude of real softness and openness.

You could say an affectionate curiosity. Just feeling: what is this? Just being with it without any preconceived notions.

And the concentration gives us the focus to stay with the actual experience—the twinging or the burning or the twisting—as distinct from, "Oh my God, I don't know how I'm going to get to a hospital in time, and what if it rains? It takes hours to get out of here." That's not the experience. It's just a twinge. It's amazing, the transformation that can happen when we use our mindfulness to be with the experience itself. It changes our whole relationship, not only to it, but to everything else.

I'll give you a little example. A couple of weeks ago I was teaching a retreat in Barre. And for some reason I was very physically tired and heavy, quite exhausted, but I couldn't find any reason for it. I wasn't particularly overworked or anything. And I lived just about two minutes down the road by car, so I was driving home. I was aware of being tired and feeling the physical heaviness, but it wasn't mindfulness. The difference being: "Oh, I'm so tired, I'm so heavy. I wonder what's going on. Maybe I must be getting sick. There must be some resurgence of disease. There's something really serious going on. I really hate it. I feel so horrible. There's eight more days of teaching. I'm so heavy." This is not mindfulness. This is really aversion and resistance.

But often we can fool ourselves, because there was also a knowing of the fact that I was heavy and I was feeling the heaviness—but not with the bare attention that just feels the heaviness alone, and not with the attitude of affectionate caring, of open patience and acceptance of what is. It's a total interpretation.

And I caught it, what I was doing. All it took was just a minute, just to say, "Oh, be with heaviness." I mean, that wasn't like, "You stupid jerk, be with heaviness." That's also not mindfulness. It was just, "Oh, right, I'm thinking about it." And it was as if I let my attention just gently drop into feeling heavy and tired in my body. That's all. I just kept driving.

And I saw that in that moment, although before I knew there was heaviness, the aversion—the way aversion works in the mind is it will keep your attention a little bit away from the experience. Like, I know it's heavy, but let's just hold it over there and not quite really sink into it. Notice that when you have a pain, you kind of hover around it. We sort of look at it, but we don't want to quite go there.

So I just dropped into it. Full surrender. Just feeling heavy and aversive and tired and fearful. No expectation of anything. It's amazing—the whole response to that changed. I just thought, "Oh yeah, heaviness, tiredness, that's okay." It was really okay. It didn't feel any different, but it was really okay, and all the other story went away. I was just being heavy and tired.

And all of a sudden, without any kind of conscious volition—and this is what happens when you really are mindfully open to what's happening, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—the whole field opened up. My heart just opened up. It was such a beautiful day. The spring was coming out, the trees were budding, and I suddenly had this burst of joy and connection with the environment, with what else was going on. That's really what happens when we open fully to whatever's presenting itself as truth in that moment.

It's just the opposite of what we might think if we don't pay attention. It seems that if I don't really let myself feel the aversion or feel the pain, if I can just a little bit keep it in the background, then things will be okay and I can kind of appreciate life more. And it's just the reverse. If we try to hold away the unpleasant, we can't open selectively. We can't ignore the unpleasant and open to beauty and connection. We need to be connected with whatever's happening. And when we soften into—"Oh yeah, unpleasantness, tiredness"—boom, the beautiful day is also suddenly apparent. A sense of self-acceptance can also be there.

It's just a moment. It's just a little thing. But that's what our life is made up of—just these little moments. And that's really what we're learning how to do: hold our attention in this attitude of open-hearted acceptance. It cuts through these deeply conditioned habits of running away from the unpleasant and our ceaseless pursuit of happiness through pleasure, which ultimately doesn't work.

So the patience, the kindness, the acceptance is what lets us come back over and over when there's a difficult experience. We also come back over and over when there's a pleasant experience too. We're not only going to the difficult. But it's important, and one of the reasons we tend to emphasize the difficult more is because our habit is much more ingrained to try to avoid it. And it's this avoidance that keeps us closed to truth, that keeps us closed to true connection with our own self, with our own hearts, and with that of all others.

There's a saying from Rumi: "Paradise is surrounded by what we dislike, and the fires of hell are surrounded by what we desire." So we tend to go towards what we desire and land in hell. And if we can just open to what we dislike, we land in paradise. It's somehow the opposite of the way we might think it is.

The more we can practice this, it's not like all of a sudden everything changes. But even one moment of coming out of the rut of following habit and just opening into what is—you can begin to see how transforming it is. It opens us into another possibility altogether for how we relate to ourselves and to life. And this is really the intimation of the potential for true serenity and peace: the possibility to be with things just as they are, to meet ourselves and our experience and others with a true kindness. Not the kindness of a kind of idiocy—idiot compassion—but the true kindness that, by being with things in totality as they are, opens our hearts and our minds to the potential for liberating understanding.

It absolutely transforms our life because we meet things with a peace that is not dependent on having a situation be a certain way—because there's no way we can control that. And it might seem like a long way to come from just noticing our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant, but this is very profound, as subtle as it is.

This is from the Buddha. It might sound a little archaic, but see if it makes sense. He says: "Someone seeing objects with the eye"—and then he goes through all the different senses, so we'll just talk about seeing—"someone who is attracted to things that are pleasing and repelled by things that are unpleasing," stuck in these ruts, "that person dwells without mindfulness and her mind is restricted. She does not experience the emancipation of heart through wisdom. But another person, seeing objects with the

eye, is not attracted to things that are pleasant and is not repelled by things that are unpleasing. So she dwells with mindfulness present and her mind is unbounded. Thus she experiences the emancipation of heart through wisdom."

Simply by being able to be so equanimous that we're not drawn helplessly into the pleasant and repelled by the unpleasant, our mind is unbounded and we experience emancipation of heart through wisdom. To me that's a really profound statement. And it's also very immediate. It's not like some impossible ideal a million years down the road. In any one moment, it's possible to see the difference between the restrictedness of heart and mind by being caught in desire and aversion, and a moment of that boundlessness of heart and mind when we're just present without needing things to change, really awake.

This is not a kind of equanimity of indifference, a kind of gray "who can tell the difference, it's pleasant, it's unpleasant, who cares, I'll take whatever comes, I can't change what happens in life, this person's mistreating me, that's okay because it's all the same anyway, there's nothing I can do." I'm not talking about a kind of acceptance of resignation or defeatism or fear, but really that sense of unbounded serenity that arises from seeing things as they are.

Actually, acceptance and patience—clearly meeting what happens—arises because of seeing things as they are. And so when we're seeing something clearly, if something is abusive or needs to change and it can be changed, there's the spaciousness in that clear seeing to know what can be done and the energy to do it. But it can come out of the intention of clarity and of caring about the whole situation, not out of just some knee-jerk reaction of fear or aversion.

So this unboundedness of heart is not just some mishmash of grayness, of dullness, of who cares. It's so connected. It's much more alive and connected in life.

The mindfulness allows us to see things as they are. On a moment-to-moment level—like, for example, seeing the way I saw the tiredness, rather than seeing this whole immensity of some horrible illness coming on that I didn't know what to do about. It's simply heaviness and aversion. And that's okay. It's just what it is. Seeing things as they are on that level, you can see how that loosens the restrictions of heart and mind.

But it's also seeing things as they are on a much deeper level: the sense of the nature of how things are in this world, of what we really are, the nature of existence. The Buddha often referred to it as the three marks of existence. But basically it can come down to the uncontrollability of things in our life, the uncontrollability of experience, the fact that everything is constantly changing.

As long as something is pleasant—something we're happy with—it's going to go away. The unpleasant is going to come, and we can't change that. We keep trying to keep things the same, and it's all totally out of our control. As long as we're not really deeply living from that understanding, as long as we're caught in some sense of trying to keep things from changing, of trying to have some kind of control, of this almost obsessive self-referencing where every experience somehow refers back to me and how it affects me—as long as we're not living from understanding the uncontrollability, we're going to be caught in suffering, in confusion.

But true acceptance comes as we begin to see this. The easiest one to talk about, and the only aspect I want to address tonight, is this fact of constant change. Which, again, we all say is obvious. I know things are changing. But looking at our experiences, do we deeply, genuinely live and respond from that knowledge? And much of the time, for many of us, probably not.

Because if you look, this wanting pleasant experience, the shying away from the unpleasant, in any way trying to manipulate and control experience—it basically arises from not deeply recognizing impermanence. When we really, really know that however wonderful this is, at some point conditions will change and it will go away, that doesn't decrease our appreciation. In fact, the appreciation is all the more poignant. We can be all the more present with it because we're not somehow grasping, trying to make it stay.

When really unpleasant, painful, sad, grief-stricken experiences arise, no matter how hard they are, often somewhere in there is the feeling that this is never going to change and I can't bear to be with this for the next forty minutes, for the next year, for the rest of my life. Again, that's not being with bare experience, but it's also not really moving from the fact that everything is changing and it's all out of our control. And we take it personally—we refer it all back to ourselves.

So, for example, the weather. Obvious. And in a place like this, it's so wonderful because the scope is so vast. Just the other day, I think it was the day before you all came, it was a pretty day, really bright and beautiful. Then suddenly, like this afternoon, rain clouds came just in a moment. It started pouring. And then just like that, it turned to hail. There was this really vicious, wild hailstorm for a while, and then just like that it stopped, the clouds cleared, and it was so silent. It was amazing. There are moments like that where you go, "Gosh, totally out of control, always changing—that's so obvious." We can just see that's how things are, and it seems absurd to try and change the weather.

But as a friend said to me last year—she's been really looking at this for years and years—she said, "You know, it's just coming as a revelation to me. All this time I'm watching everything in the world changing. The whole world is changing. And suddenly I realized: oh, it's happening to me too. It's not me here watching everything else change. What I'm calling 'me' is also a process of constant change."

And that somehow, for many of us, is the sticking point where we don't really quite open to this fact. Even with other meditation teachers who've been doing this stuff for twenty, thirty years—we sit around going, "Oh my God, my hair is getting gray! Look at my wrinkles! I have to wear reading glasses." Big surprise. You go into your forties and fifties and your body starts to decay. What else did you expect? But somehow it's amazing—it's a surprise. All of a sudden our parents are getting older and they're dying, and somehow we're the first generation this ever happened to. It's totally amazing how hard it is to really take this in.

I heard this interview on the BBC last year, very serious. They were interviewing a man who had invested, I think, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in a company in Greece that will freeze you when you die and then hold your body until they can cure whatever you died from and bring you back to life. You have the option of either freezing your whole body, or you can just have your brain frozen—that's cheaper. This is very serious. People do this. They were interviewing an English man who had done it, very serious.

But I wrote this down. This is what he said: "It seems quite a sensible idea. There's no guarantee, of course, but there's a reasonable expectation."

It's amazing. A reasonable expectation of what? You know, living forever. And it's our culture, but it's not just this time. It's the world.

In opening to the constant changing, there are times—both in formal practice and also as it goes into our lives—where as we open to it more and more, it's hard sometimes. You see why there's a resistance in our hearts and minds to really live from that, because then there really is this sense of things ending so much. And you can go through what's sort of like a phase of practice that can last a more or less amount of time, where there's a real sadness about it, a real sense of loss. And in a way that's true, but it's not the whole picture. But I see why, when I go through those times, why there's this resistance. It's because it's the not wanting to feel sadness. It's just back to the same not wanting to be with what's unpleasant, being afraid of it.

So there are times it's sad. But I know for myself that what's even more sad and more fearful is to live in that denial. Because again, we're denying ourselves the opportunity for a much deeper connection with ourselves and with all life. Because even knowing something's changing, well then I'm so much more present for it. And the opening to change is our opening to connection and real tenderness and caring for other beings too. Sometimes it's our tenderness that opens us to the truth of change.

I just want to read you part of one poem. It's by Galway Kinnell, called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down."
I've stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die,"
little Maude.
And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

Forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

But it doesn't just have to be sad and scary, because when we truly, truly see this—moment to moment in meditation practice, moment to moment in our life—when we truly see it, the clinging, the aversion to unpleasant, the trying to keep things, is so patently useless and so obviously increasing our suffering that it's not like we have to talk ourselves out of it. It just stops making sense. It opens up.

Again, this is the boundlessness of heart, the boundlessness of mind that can really be fully present for what is and can still be fully present when that changes. It gives us such a serenity and a sense of happiness and peace, and also a much deeper connection. So opening to impermanence can also be opening into great joy, a great kind of dancing, a playing in life.

There's a story—maybe you've heard it—of a Hasidic rabbi in Eastern Europe, early in the century, who was very renowned for his scholarship and his wisdom. A young student from another country came to visit him, and they were sitting in the rabbi's

house talking. The student was quite astounded by how simply the rabbi was living. He was looking around and saying, "But you've lived here so long, and you're so renowned. Where are all your things? Where are your books? Where's your furniture? Where are your clothes?"

And the rabbi said to the student, "Well, where are all yours?"

The student said, "Well, I'm just passing through."

And the rabbi said, "Well, so am I."

That kind of lightness with life.

Our practice here—even the little nudgy stuff that happens, the little twinges, the boredom, the restlessness, not to mention the obvious sadnesses and pains and difficulties we go through, or the happiness, or the boredom—it's all microcosm for what's happening in life. It *is* our life.

And the way our heart and mind is relating to these little things is exactly the way we're relating to the bigger, more complex issues in our life. This kind of tears it down and lets us begin to cut through the complexity and come into the bare experience and see the conditioning, and to give us moments of potential to move out of that conditioning, to respond in another way altogether.

So even when you think your practice is so-called bad, because nothing that you want to happen is what's happening, not only is that good practice—sometimes we say that's the *best* practice—because that's where we're going to be able to break these chains of getting lost in pleasant and unpleasant and constructing a sense of who we are out of that.

In a way, each time that you just open for a moment into a pain in your knee—you get too intense and you move, fine—but in the moment that you're just with it as it is, that's the moment where we're coming out of confusion, where we're learning not to be deluded by changing conditions, where we're learning that even for that moment, oh, there's a possibility of real ease and freedom even when something unpleasant is happening, even when something pleasant is happening, even when nothing particular is happening.

And again, this acceptance is not that of blind dullness.

It comes from clear seeing, and it gives such courage, such strength of understanding. You'll find even here that it gives us not only the courage of clear seeing but also the compassionate heart to soften into what is—not to be hard about it, not to try and push it away. It gives us the energy of compassion to respond in a way that's appropriate.

And whether it's a pain in the knee or whether it's later in our lives, some situation that comes up that we can't change, that seems beyond the bounds of endurance—whatever that is for each one of us—there might be a moment where, with the courage of clear seeing and the kindness of compassion, we'll find that even the unendurable is possible. Not only possible to endure, but to have some moment, maybe, of serenity within it. We discover that ultimately our true happiness and peace has absolutely nothing to do with what is happening internally or externally.

And all our efforts to change things—they can be useful in the world of cause and effect. They can be useful in the functional world. I'm not saying give up our work, but understand where it's coming from. It can come from the compassion that arises out of knowing that as much as we do to help people, to help the earth, to make things better—and we can have some real effect—at bottom, the true peace is going to come from being able to rest at ease in how things are. So that when we can't make a difference, when we can't change things, we don't have to give in to despair. We don't have to give in to frustration and come back to anger and confusion and pain.

When we can meet life with the serenity that that rabbi was meeting it with, then all the energy that previously goes into struggle and fear and confusion and rage—all that energy can go into action, into relating to the world, into relating to ourselves, into really dancing with whatever's happening. So much more energy is available to us from the space of wisdom and compassion.

So hang with it when your knee hurts and you're bored and you're sleepy. It's not really just a stupid, boring exercise. It has much more impact than might be apparent.

So let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 356

Explanation of the Eight Precepts

Carol Wilson · 18 min

> *In this practical talk, Carol Wilson provides a clear explanation of the eight precepts (aṭṭha sīla) commonly observed during intensive meditation retreats and on uposatha days in Asian Buddhist countries. She distinguishes between the five lay precepts used in daily life—where the third precept addresses sexual misconduct—and the eight precepts taken for retreat practice, where this precept becomes brahmacariya (celibacy).*
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> *Wilson carefully details the additional three precepts: refraining from eating after noon (vikālabhojana), abstaining from entertainment and self-adornment (including jewelry, perfumes, and excessive attention to appearance), and avoiding high or luxurious beds. She emphasizes that these guidelines are not meant as punishment or deprivation, but as supports for cultivating sense restraint, simplicity, and the energy (viriya) needed for awakening. Drawing from her own experience as a former nun, she shares how not eating in the evening can create lightness and alertness, and how letting go of beautification reveals subtle patterns of suffering around wanting to look good.*
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> *The talk offers wise counsel on working with these precepts skillfully—committing to a defined period rather than deliberating daily, recognizing when the motivation might be unhelpful self-punishment, and understanding that medical needs can be accommodated. Wilson reminds practitioners that these trainings are pointers back to intention and sincerity, inviting exploration of what we feed or starve with our attention in each moment. The session concludes with a formal chanting of the refuges and precepts.*

Some people have been asking us to speak a bit or clarify the idea of the eight precepts and what they are. I know we just mentioned it briefly in the opening of the retreat, and some of you have been sitting and practicing with eight precepts, and we really had meant to speak about it more formally. Time just slipped by, so I'm glad a few people asked. I want to describe what the other three precepts are, share a little bit about some ways it might be helpful if you're interested, and then formally offer eight precepts if there's anyone who wants to take them.

The five lay precepts that we took at the beginning of this retreat come from the five precepts that are classically taught by the Buddha and practiced in Asian Buddhist countries, with one exception. If you're a lay person just living your life and you come to a monastery, you take the five precepts. The fifth precept is actually not brah-

macharya—it's not celibacy in one's daily life. The fifth precept is really refraining from sexual misconduct. So if you hear references to the five precepts, know that the third precept addresses sexual misconduct, not brahmacharya.

When we talk about eight precepts, in Asia people will often come to the monasteries or nunneries once a week on the moon days—the quarter moon days, the full moon and new moon days—sort of like in this country one might go to synagogue or church. Often on those days, they take the eight precepts for the day. When you take eight precepts, the third precept becomes brahmacharya, celibacy. We borrow that even when we do five precepts for a retreat because it's so essential to stay with ourselves.

The other three precepts are often something that people in Asia will come and take for the day, so just know it's not a lifetime commitment you're making if you're a lay person. But you also need to make some commitment rather than going back and forth every day—should I, shouldn't I—especially with the big one, which of course is not eating after noon.

Let me go through what they are. The sixth precept is to refrain from eating at the wrong times. Classically, that means after the noon meal we don't eat solid food. The purpose of all of these is to cultivate sense restraint, to cultivate simplicity. It's not about suffering. It's about actually opening up a space of simplicity, of more time and energy for practice, of less complication. It's really worth exploring if you're interested, to see for yourself. It's not that eating is bad somehow, obviously. But two meals a day for most people with normal health is plenty. In fact, often ordained sangha live on one meal a day. I lived like that for quite a while when I was a nun, and it's fine. Especially if you're in intensive practice, we really don't need as much food.

I often find on eight precepts there's a lightness in the evening. I get tired in the evening—I don't have good night energy—but not eating in the evening actually helps me stay more awake. You have to explore for yourself. Also, there's so much more time. All that energy going into the dining room, even if you're just going to have tea, can be a distraction. So you can just stay out of there and practice. It's so much more simple, so much more pleasant.

What is allowed in the evenings is interesting. There's a range in Buddhist countries and in the Theravada ordained sanghas of what is actually permitted. In Burma, which seems to be the most strict, what's allowed is clear juice without pulp, fruit juice, clear broth or herbal tea—not caffeinated drinks or soda—sugar, honey, molasses, and oil. So you could have herbal tea with honey, or sometimes the kitchen would serve a clear fruit juice. Sometimes in Burma they'll serve little pieces of palm sugar or date sugar. Personally, if I eat that at five in the evening, I'm done for the day, but some people find

it helpful. Little hard candies are also permitted. Some places in Thailand—the monks in the Amaravati tradition, up until recently, could eat cheese and chocolate, the cheese allowance due to some translation of a particular word in Pali. But we're not going to offer that here.

Some places in Thailand where I've practiced, soy milk or regular milk was allowed. Other places, absolutely not. In Burma, that would definitely not be acceptable. So just to give you a sense, there's a range of interpretation. Here, it may be that once in a while soy milk is served—I'm not sure what the kitchen will do. And you can really choose your own interpretation. Don't beat yourself up about it, but choose your own and realize that with all of these precepts and guidelines, the guidelines are pointers back to our own intention, our own sincerity of practice, and really looking at what comes up. They're not meant as punishments, or another way to feel bad about yourself. Renunciation is not meant to be a suffering experience. It actually opens up a place of freedom in our energy, in our heart.

The seventh precept is one that, for the most part, you're already observing, which is refraining from entertainment—dancing, singing, card playing, going to shows. Hopefully that part isn't too hard. You never really know what's going on out there, but we hear stories. Not yet about this retreat, but it gets back to us sooner or later.

The other part, though, can be interesting, which is refraining from beautification, adornment, perfumes and such. It's about not wearing jewelry, not wearing things that smell good, which already we're not doing here, hopefully. It doesn't mean you don't keep yourself clean or take care of your body, of course. So mostly that's not a hard one, but sometimes on retreat it can bring up interesting things that we notice about ourselves.

Without judgment, but just to see the suffering in this—just wanting to look a little better. Seeing that you spend a little extra time fixing your hair. Or your beard, if you're a guy—trimming your beard very neatly. That's just the same thing. Or wearing earrings or little jewelry. Or you get dressed in the morning and your sweatshirt doesn't quite match your sweatpants, so you change it. This is stuff no one else is going to notice, but you notice. And just notice the energy that's going into that. It's suffering.

So with taking the seventh precept, we just let go of that needing to look good, trying to adorn our bodies, and notice what comes from that.

The eighth precept is to refrain from lying on high or luxurious beds. That's basically taken care of here, though compared to a few years ago, the beds here are high and luxurious. If you used to come and sleep on those dreadful twenty-five-year-old foam pads that used to be here, that was something else.

But this precept could also include not luxuriating in bed. The bell rings, or it doesn't ring, and you wake up wide awake, and there's that thought: "But the bell didn't ring yet, there's twenty-five more minutes." And you lie there, really wide awake, and you're just kind of... ahh. Notice what that's feeding in the mind stream. It's feeding desire, wanting to luxuriate more. It feeds a kind of dullness. I'm speaking from experience. When you finally get up, it's like, ugh.

When you wake up and get up right away, it's just a moment. You get up and you're much more present, more there. That's feeding virya, feeding the energy that Rebecca spoke about last night.

So really, wise attention is seeing what we're feeding with our attention in the moment. What are we starving? When we luxuriate in bed, what are we starving? Virya. We're feeding luxuriation. When we get up the moment we wake up, we're feeding virya. We're starving laziness and torpor.

Exploring that is really what these precepts are meant to do—bring us back to look at what's helpful for waking up in our experience.

As I mentioned, in Asia often people will come, take the precepts for one day, maybe just that day—not even that night—then go home. When you're done with it, you return to the five precepts.

No blame, no shame, no problem. So here, if you have been practicing the eight precepts and you feel it's enough, you can simply take the five precepts the next morning—no problem at all. Or if you want to experiment with the eight precepts, it doesn't mean you have to commit to them for the entire retreat.

But I would suggest that if you want to experiment, do pick a defined period—perhaps a week—so that you're not in that place I started to describe earlier, where every evening at five o'clock you're caught in "Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? Shouldn't I?" That is really dukkha, and quite unnecessary. You're just feeding doubt and wanting and judgment. Simply say, "I'm going to do it for a week and see what happens." That's the only way we really discover, really explore.

If it doesn't feel appropriate for you, it can become—in working with balanced effort—a kind of pushing that isn't helpful. Or if your intention in taking the eight precepts is because you feel you're so bad and rotten that you need to punish yourself... no. That's not a good reason. That's not a helpful motivation. So explore your intentions, and then just see how it goes.

Most retreats in Asia are conducted under the eight precepts. If you go to sit with one of the Sayadaws or visit any wat in Thailand, it's assumed that you are practicing under eight precepts. So it's quite a common thing.

There are people for whom, medically, not eating in the evening simply doesn't work. If you have hypoglycemia or something similar, you just need a little something. If that's the case, you can still take the other two precepts, and for medical reasons it's accepted that you can eat a little something in the evening.

So have a good day.

CHAPTER 357

Faith and the Illusion of Self

Carol Wilson · 1h07

> *In this profound exploration of anattā (not-self), Carol Wilson guides practitioners through the delicate territory of investigating our most fundamental assumption—the sense of a permanent, unchanging self. She begins by addressing how doubt often masquerades as analytical thinking when we encounter teachings on selflessness, and offers sustained attention as the practical antidote.*
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> *Wilson distinguishes between blind belief and what she calls 'verified faith'—confidence based on our own direct experience. This quality of trust allows us to meet each moment without needing to know what will happen, surrendering our usual reliance on knowledge and reasoning. She explores how we unconsciously use knowledge as a bastion against the fundamental insecurity of existence, clinging to the sense of self as our deepest resting place.*
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> *Drawing from classical Buddhist psychology, Wilson examines the five aggregates (khandhas)—body, feeling tone, consciousness, perception, and mental formations—as the areas where we habitually grasp at selfhood. She offers practical guidance for turning attention directly toward the experience of 'I' or 'mine' in each moment, discovering that what seems so solid is actually arising and passing phenomena with no continuity. Through both precise investigation and spacious awareness of emptiness (suññatā), practitioners can begin to see through the illusion of self, finding not loss but profound ease and freedom in this understanding.*

So now we're back from the world of just pure presence in nature to the world of concepts and ideas. Even though we sit here talking about no concepts, the whole fact of sitting here making noise and exchanging words—and it means something, hopefully—it's so amazing, but it's so conceptual.

I want to go on a little bit more from what Joseph was talking about last night, about the experience of no lasting self. I want to talk about it in a very experiential way, pointing our practice, our moment-to-moment awareness, back to this sense of self as it seems to arise and exploring what it is.

But first, I want to take a little diversion. Because when we begin to talk about concepts and what's the reality underneath the concepts—almost without fail, especially for people whose first retreat it is—if Joseph had done a question period this afternoon,

he would have been bombarded with questions about "if there's no self, fill in the blanks." Because the concept of it, in itself, in hearing about it, until it's our actual experience, until it's experiential, intuitive understanding, true or not, it's just another concept.

And what that tends to do for us—certainly I spent years in this—is we take that concept, and the concept alone isn't enough to blast through, to help us see through the inaccurate perceptions or the inaccurate concepts we've been living with all our life. And in fact, there's no real reason to believe that the idea of selflessness is any more true than what seems like our experience of being a pretty ongoing identifiable self.

What often tends to happen in this experience—it certainly happened to me often and for years—is that it sets up a sense of the mind just starting to spin. You start to think about it, try to bring it into experience, you try to analyze it, and you really can get into quite an energy, a mental energy of thinking about, analyzing, figuring out, comparing. What is this sense of no-self? Trying to figure it out with our minds, with our reason, with our logic.

And I wish my saying this would be enough. I know it won't be, but I'll say it anyway: it won't work. It will never work. We can never figure out with thinking, with our mind, with opinion, with logic—we can never somehow figure out or make sense of this idea of no-self because it can only be understood experientially. It can only be something we touch with our awareness free of previous concept.

What can start to happen is that we take really fascinating ideas like no-self, and analyzing and thinking about them can be really interesting. It can feel like we're really practicing, we're really grabbing hold of something juicy here. But what it actually can turn into is doubt.

Doubt is somewhat obvious when it manifests as a thought of "I can't do this," or "this is stupid," or "I don't think they know what they're talking about," or whatever. But another way that doubt arises in our experience is that it masquerades as analytical thinking. So we're sitting there, and we start to pay attention. "But that's not me. That can't be me. Is that pain me? Now, if there's no me, how come I feel that pain? How come I have an opinion?" And the mind just starts going and going and going.

The way doubt manifests as a hindrance—when Joseph spoke of the hindrances the other day—the way doubt manifests is just this: the mind is spinning and spinning, thoughts are going, and there is a complete inability, when doubt is present, for the at-

tention, for the mind to just land on anything. It'll keep just landing and skittering off. And when it's masquerading as analytical thought, each experience will just trigger off a whole other set of ways to think about it.

And believe me, I've spent a lot of time doing this. At first it seems somewhat fulfilling. It's a lot more interesting than all the other stupid thoughts I was sitting with for days before. "This is Dharma thoughts, so this is okay to hang out with." Just notice: if it's this sense of spinning, spinning, not able to touch anything, it's doubt, no matter what the content is.

On a level of moment-to-moment practice experience as you're sitting or walking and you notice this, the antidote to doubt is sustained attention. So, for example, you're thinking about whatever—I'm using no-self as the example since that's what I'm talking about—but you're thinking, you're analyzing, "What about this?" And you notice that. Okay, label "doubt." It's a hindrance. Simply noticing it. And then bring your attention just to something that's happening. It doesn't matter what, but hopefully not the thought because you'll get too sucked in. Come back to the breath.

If that's too subtle, come back to a sense of your body sitting, a sense of your butt on the pillow, your hands touching, any physical sensation. Sound, if that's a clear one for you. But if it's a little vague, you might get sucked back into the thought—so come back to your feet walking.

If you can get the attention just to land on something, and as soon as the thoughts start to come back again, sustain the attention, what happens is the attention deepens, lands in the present moment, and those thoughts just start to fade. You don't have to resolve them one way or the other. You're just coming out and landing in the moment. That's sustained attention. That is the momentary kind of practice-model antidote to doubt.

Of course, the big trick is recognizing it as doubt.

What gives us the energy to do that, on a bigger moment-to-moment level of practice, is that we have to come out of our usual way of trying to figure things out. And this is beyond just doubt. It's the willingness to move from our reliance on knowledge, from our reliance on reasoning, to surrender into whatever is happening without prior expectations.

In a way, you could call this faith. Faith is another strategy for being with our experience that's different from knowledge.

I'm going to give you two definitions of faith. I don't know how you all relate to the word. It depends on your different backgrounds and conditioning. For me, I didn't really have much of a religious upbringing—we were Protestant and we went to church and all, but somehow it didn't seem to stick or really have much of anything. So my associations with the word faith were secondhand. It was more of a sense of belief on demand—belief in what somebody told me, belief in a particular set of doctrines or in a particular person, without any kind of proof. Of course, my logical mind would want proof, but this was a demand to follow and believe without anything to rely on.

The faith that I'm talking about in our context of practice here is not that at all. It's not blind belief. It is definitely not anything that demands an abandoning of our own intuitive sense of wisdom or understanding. It's not like the Jim Jones kind of thing, where you follow the leader and drink poison Kool-Aid and everybody dies. That's the worst connotation of faith, and I'm not talking about anything like that.

Here are two definitions I've read in different commentaries. One is: the drive towards that which cannot be described—that kind of yearning, the drive towards truth, towards whatever you want to call it. The second one is: confidence based on verified knowledge. I might call it verified faith. And this is really where this Vipassana practice takes us.

Faith is a kind of combination of confidence and trust. Trust that lets us be willing to be with our experience without expectation, without need for payoff or justification, without knowing anything that's going to happen or having a preset idea. And confidence is the strength or the willingness, the fearlessness that lets us meet experience without any kind of promise.

It's what lets you sit here and be with an unbearable pain in your knee. There's no promise that anything wonderful is going to happen from that. But there's some confidence and some trust that allows one to do that. Hopefully it's not blind faith. Hopefully it really begins to come from our own verified experience—confidence based on verified knowledge. But again, intuitive knowledge, not the kind of knowledge that I grew up valuing as the highest truth, as the point of safety and place of finding self-worth.

I don't know about you, although I imagine many of you, given the training you've had and the jobs you do, have had to spend a lot of your life acquiring certain sets of knowledge—even just going through regular school. And I was really very good at it. I could take in whatever things I was supposed to know—reasons, facts, ways to do things, explanations for what the universe was—take it in, memorize it, internalize it, spit it out. But I was also unknowingly taking that knowledge as a view of the world, and even more, in some way, as a sort of security. It's like a resting place. If I have

knowledge, a way to describe a certain event or experience, if I can go out in the woods and name the animals and name the trees and the weather patterns and what kind of clouds and what's going on, then I feel like I have a certain kind of safety, a certain kind of security, some place to rest.

In some way, this sense of knowledge, this body of knowledge, can certainly be very useful. I'm not saying we throw out all knowledge. But it's important to see it for what it is. We can take this body of knowledge and treat it as a bastion against insecurity, against having to live and dance in what's actually true—the constancy of unknowing, the fact that we never know what's going to happen, even in the next moment.

For me, and I'm probably not the only one, certain sets of knowledge can really serve as a comfort. But it's a way to hide. And even without wanting to use it as a way to hide, with that sense of security, we can really identify with whatever the knowledge is, and it blocks our potential or our willingness to perceive other possibilities—to open to another possibility at all.

There's a story the Buddha told that illustrates this. A widower, a poor peasant, had a young son. They lived in a small village of huts. One day, the father had gone away. While he was gone, some bandits came and basically destroyed the village, burned all the huts and killed the people. But they kidnapped his son and took him away.

So the father comes back, finds everything destroyed, finds some bones he thinks are his son's. He weeps, so distraught, so upset—believing completely that this is what happened. He took the ashes and wore them in a little bag around his neck, totally unable to recover. He rebuilt his house and continued living, but was completely miserable. He had totally bought the story: this is what happened. That became knowledge. These bandits came, destroyed the village, killed my son.

At some point, his son escaped, and late at night came back to the village. He found the hut and was banging on it, calling, "Father, father, let me in!" But the father was so caught in his description of what had happened as being truth that he yelled down, "Don't mock me! My son is dead! This is so painful!" The child kept calling out, "Father, let me in!" But the father couldn't open to the possibility that maybe he was wrong—to the point that he never went down, shooed his son away, and they never saw each other again.

It's a heart-wrenching, exaggerated story, but it makes the point of how locked we can get in knowledge, in what we think is a true description. It blinds us to being able to even explore—I mean, to even stick his head out the window and say, "Oh yeah, maybe it could be my son. Let me check it out." That's what we're doing all the time with our

assumptions of who we are, what Joseph was talking about last night with our assumptions of time, our assumptions of past and future, our assumptions of body. All of that keeps us locked in.

This quality of faith—the confidence to meet what's happening with a trust to enter it unknowing, really fully—lets us meet data freshly. What I've found in my practice, and in talking with other people I know I'm not alone, is that I've approached practice wanting to find the answer, wanting to find the truth. I'm basically looking for another explanation, another set of knowledge, because that's what the mind knows how to do. I think, "Well, okay, maybe this one isn't right, but if I find another perfect explanation, then I can rest in that." But the more I look, just with the simplicity of mindfulness, looking into the knowledge we have, it seems to break apart. Instead of more answers, we find more mystery.

This is from the New York Times a couple of years ago—although I just saw an update on it recently and it hasn't changed that much—from the science section. It's talking about the largest galaxy ever detected, whose discovery was announced last week, which includes more than 100 trillion stars and measures more than 6 million light years in diameter. The galaxy is 60 times the size of Earth's galaxy, the Milky Way. Big, big.

This newfound galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump of galaxies, a cluster of some 1,000 galaxies called Abel 2029. They've had to name it. What is naming a clump of a thousand galaxies? What does that do? Do we somehow own it? Do we have it under control or something?

Anyway, this is just leading up to the point. The astronomers hope that further study will provide clues to the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter, since there doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would seem necessary to cause all this clumping of galaxies. Scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to their prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this missing mass.

It's like us. It's the same, actually. What did Joseph say? All our matter is not the size of a particle of dust. But we can't just take that at face value. I mean, it's interesting, but it doesn't mean anything until we verify it ourselves. What we need is the faith, the willingness to try, that will keep bringing our attention into our experience to really look, to really meet it, to really be willing to open into the possibility of the unknown.

Of course, since this faith is based on our verified experience, when you first come to a retreat like this—your first retreat—you can't have that kind of verified experience. The question often comes up: what got you here the first time? It comes up in my mind for anybody who comes on a first retreat. But there's a quality that's talked about before there can be verified faith, a quality of mind called bright faith.

In some way, something in us is lit up by a quality we experience in someone else. It might be someone you talk to, and either something they said or some quality in the person lights up something indefinable, indescribable in us that gets us to say, "Well, maybe that's worth a try." Or something you read, or something you observe in how certain people behave. Whatever it is, something got each one of you here.

When there's this quality of bright faith, it's like a brightness, an energetic quality of mind and a willingness to look. If you came without that, it would really be hell, because it would be so hard, especially the first few days, without something inside of us—that yearning towards what cannot be described—that keeps us looking, that keeps us coming back to the practice, beyond the reasoning intellect.

But this kind of bright faith is not sustainable. It's really based on looking outside of ourselves for verification, for strength, for confidence.

And that can't be sustained when we hit a really difficult patch. When you start a retreat and your first really difficult patch comes before any kind of bright patch has arrived, it's really hard, because there's no personal experience to give us the confidence with which to meet this—that sense that it's somehow worthwhile.

So this bright faith is going to shift. It's not sustainable. It's going to waver. It's going to fade away. When you hit that space of, "Why did I come here? It's so dreary. It's so controlled. There's so much suffering." That bright faith is really fading, and it fades fast sometimes.

But luckily—and I say luckily because I have so much real trust in just the truth of things—if we simply have enough willingness to keep meeting our experience with a freshness, it begins to open up. And in some way, we begin to experience for ourselves various aspects, not just of what we've been talking about, but of the truth of how things actually are.

So just one little experience of sitting with pain and then seeing that you can simply be with it—and all the fear and all the aversion either fades, or you see the difference between the aversion and the pain, and you see that the pain itself is not suffering. Even if it's just for a second, that is an insight, a sense that things are different from how they seem on the surface.

Even such a moment can somehow energize us for days, which is lucky because sometimes we just get a couple of little moments of insight like that, and a lot more moments of being caught in the seemingly ordinary way our mind has of relating to experience—because that seemingly ordinary, normal way has been conditioned throughout our entire lives.

What I have deep trust in is that the power of truth is so recognizable when we touch it, in whatever form. It's just so obvious somewhere in our hearts, in our beings, that *that* is what's true—that it's truer than our ordinary ways of relating. One moment of truth is more than enough to really light up days of seeming to struggle in the mire.

One of my teachers said that a spark of truth can burn up a mountain of lies. It's not like we have to have equal time somehow.

So what begins to happen—and it will happen uniquely to each person—is that you begin to have experiences that somehow show us our ordinary assumptions, assumptions we might not have even known we had, aren't exactly accurate. And this gives us the strength and the courage and the trust to keep going, to meet each new experience with a faith that doesn't need to know what's going to happen.

Gradually, this quality of faith I'm trying to describe enables us, or opens us, to much more consciously enter into each moment knowing that we're entering totally into the unknown. Maybe when you came on this retreat there was some sense of that. I try to find out from everyone what really goes on, but somewhere you knew, "I don't have a clue what's really going to happen here. It's something I've never done."

But what's actually the case is that every moment of our life, we think we know. It's funny—I'm talking about opening to the unknown when in every moment we don't know, and yet we have this incredibly rigid schedule where almost every moment of the day is planned. I could ask, "2:35, where are you going to be?" And you'd say, "Oh, I'll be in the meditation hall, sitting on my pillow." Maybe. Probably.

It actually blows me away when I come back from India, which is a wonderful place for much more consciously experiencing the fact that you never really know what's going to happen. No matter what I get up in the day and plan to do, the one thing you could be sure of is that's what *wasn't* going to happen that day. It's great for that. It keeps us off balance, but it's much truer to how things actually are.

What amazes me is coming home, and after a couple of weeks I have my day book with my hours all planned, and I look at it and mostly that's what happens. That's what really amazes me. I can tell you where I'm supposed to be on August 15th of next year, and probably there's a good chance that might happen—which is amazing. It's really amazing.

But it sustains the illusion that things are under control. Sure, we have to make plans to live in a relative reality, but it sustains the illusion that just because we make plans, they're going to happen, that somehow we can control that—when actually we don't have a clue what will happen in the next minute.

When you sit down in a sitting, you might have an idea, but actually there's no clue what's going to be the first experience that arises. A sensation in the body? A sound? A pain? The breath? An emotion? Who knows?

When we get down to that level of moment-to-moment experience through mindfulness and concentration, where we're really breaking things down and just seeing them arising and passing, we experience that much more vividly. I'll sit down and it's sort of like opening up the doors—who knows what's going to happen? It's all a show.

And really, our life is like that. How often in your work, no matter how much we have to plan and carry out specific projects, and we have a real sense of what we want to happen and a projected sense of what we really think will happen—but we don't know. It's completely out of control. And if we're so solidified around "this is what I think, this is what's going to happen," and we can't think of alternatives, we get really thrown off when something totally other happens.

Or it should be so still and silent here—and then how about when out of nowhere came that jet yesterday?

What's this doing here? It's not allowed in the wilderness. Who knows?

I used to go through phases of thinking, how long do I think I'm going to live in a country that's relatively peaceful and not at war? I mean, I just assume I'm not going to wake up to machine gun fire. And this might seem kind of crazy, but actually, I don't know. We never really know. We never really know—we could have an aneurysm and just drop dead. We never really know. And that's the truth of things.

Some part of our psyche really hates that, really doesn't want to live in this ever-present insecurity, this sense of not knowing. And I think the kind of bottom-line place that our psyche comes to rest, looking for some place of security, is this sense of self. It's the one thing that, if we don't look too closely, feels like it's always here. I know I'm me.

I mean, everything's changing—I look really different than I did when I was eight—but I know I'm me. And I feel the same. I relate from my memories. I recognize people when I see them again, usually. It's this sense of a place to rest.

There's something that can be really scary to our conditioned mind, to think that there is no place to rest, that really ultimately we don't ever know. We want to have some solidity. And when one thing falls away, immediately we fall back onto another. Watch that in your practice. If there's something that you felt was really solid—the sense of the body—and you begin to sit and experience it as just shifting energies and nothing solid, it might be far out, but watch. The mind will create another view or another description or opinion. Okay, this is how it is. I'm a sense of shifting energy, moving around. That's me. And we've just fallen back into another level—somewhere to find security, somewhere to take a rest.

When I was helping teach a retreat in Yucca Valley in the desert of Southern California, outside of Palm Springs, a few years ago—and if you live in L.A., you know this experience—while we were there on the retreat, we had a couple of earthquakes. One kind of medium in the middle of a talk, and then a stronger one a couple of hours later, like a six-point-something earthquake.

Well, the earthquake itself, since I had never been in one, was actually kind of interesting. Franz and I were standing outside and you could kind of see the ground roll—explosions in the distance and the sound. It was like, wow, scary. It does something definitely to the body, but it's sort of far out. And then it stopped. It's okay. Well, that was neat. That's fine.

But what didn't stop was a series of aftershocks, like every three minutes, every five minutes for the next—at least twenty-four hours—and then with decreasing frequency for the rest of the retreat. And where I had felt like I really handled it with great equanimity, very present, seeing things change, no attachment—by the end of the night of aftershocks every three minutes, and of course the radio always says, "Twenty-five percent chance of the big one coming in the next three days"—so that just puts that in your mind. Is this an aftershock or is this the big one? You can't just say aftershock. By the end of like twelve hours of that, my nerves were a wreck. Every time the shock would start, our heater would start really rattling, so it couldn't just kind of pass unnoticed. We'd hear rattle, rattle, rattle every two minutes.

And I came out of it really deeply feeling this sense of how unquestioningly I had relied on the earth to be there for me—to be solid, to be someplace I could just rest. The worst that can happen, you can just fall on the earth. And to viscerally get it over and over—sorry, not that one either.

It really touches into this sense of anattā, of not-self, and the fear that comes from this ongoing insecurity. Kind of, not franticness, but that the mind wants to find somewhere. It's not okay hanging out in nowhere, needing to take a stand.

But actually it's not even the movement. It's not the not being able to take a stand that's the problem.

It's not the never knowing or the unknown that creates difficulty. The problem is that sense of "I" that's there in the midst of the unknown—that I which arises, clinging to whatever it can find, positing a need for security. The aftershocks weren't the problem. What they were doing to me was the problem. "Where am I going to find security?" was the problem.

When we're just opening into the moment as it is, there's no problem. When you were out today, if you had even one moment where it was just pure beingness—maybe it was hearing, maybe it was smelling, maybe it was warmth—where there was no discursive description, no trying to figure anything out, no attempting to name the species of birds, just simple being... in that moment, where's the problem? There's no needing to know what's going to happen next. There's no referring back to someone it's happening to. There's no needing to know what happened before. It's just this moment.

Without this obsessive, ongoing referring back of every sense experience to a sense of self—with just the pure experience—there isn't any problem. And whatever needs to occur in the next moment, the next moment occurs. If there's some response that needs to happen, that also occurs. We don't need to figure it all out ahead of time.

This doesn't mean that pure being prevents action, which is one of the questions that comes up often: "If there's no self, then how am I ever going to do anything? Who's going to do things?" We can talk about this sense of pure being and someone will ask, "Well, that's really nice, but what about if it starts to rain and there's lightning and you have to get up and go inside?"

Actually, the two have nothing to do with each other. There's a sense of being, and then there's a sense of being with lightning, and then there's a sense of a thought arising: "It could kill me. I think I'll go inside." That can be done with or without clinging to a sense of self. It can just be clear seeing.

This sense of self... faith is what can over and over give us the confidence and the trust to be willing to meet experience with this quality of not knowing. And the quality of not knowing will let us investigate—not with thinking, but with presence—in a much more open way. We look at the data freshly, so to speak, without having interpreted it before we've even perceived it.

When we begin to explore the sense of I, of mine—even the thought of not clinging to something as a sense of I or mine—it can really shake up that deepest resting place. I think that's why often, in or out of formal practice, when in a space of awareness you touch a deep place where there's viscerally, intuitively getting it—"Oh, there really isn't any need"—what often comes up is fear. It's a natural response to losing something we've actually never had in the first place, but something that we think we had. A sense of fear and even terror can arise.

And that's fine. We don't like fear very much, but the fear itself doesn't mean that something's wrong. Often fear, as we touch it in our practice, is really more like a messenger saying, "Oh, we're moving into unknown territory." Rather than being afraid of the fear, with some confidence and clarity of practice, we can just meet the fear as another arising emotion, be with it, see it come, see it go. We don't have to take it as a messenger of doom. We don't have to interpret it as something going wrong.

Fear often means something is going really right. We're hitting the place of our unquestioned assumptions and they're beginning to break down. We don't always understand that rationally, but that's what's going on.

I find it fascinating to use our practice in this way. It's one of the explorations I really love on retreat: to consciously use mindfulness to explore the actual sense of me or mine when it's arising in a moment. Everything I'm about to say comes from what I've discovered in my own exploration and from others, but I'm not offering it as another explanation. Hopefully it might spark some interest for you to look and explore on your own.

Never take any answer your mind arrives at—"This is what the self is" or "This isn't"—as the final resting place. If you can keep that interest alive, keep that childlike innocence, that trust, keep meeting the data, keep exploring without stopping in any assumption that now you know what the self is or isn't, you can really begin to look.

What we begin to see—what I begin to see—is that what seems so solid and unquestioned is actually nothing. We're not destroying the ego through our practice, not getting rid of the sense of self to substitute something else. We begin to see that what seemed so solid is nothing solid at all.

In touching a sense of anattā—the Pali word for no separate self—if we lose the sense of self, we don't lose anything. It's not that something changes and we can't function, because it's not there in the first place.

This is from a man named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He was an Indian wise man, a saint who died in the last decade. He said, "My actual experience is not different from yours, but it is my evaluation and attitude that differ. I see the same world as you, but not the same way." Everybody sees the world differently, through the idea she or he has of herself. As you think yourself to be, so you think the world to be. If you imagine yourself as separate from the world, the world will appear separate from you, and you will experience desire and fear.

It really is all our perceptions, our descriptions, and our imaginings—which is so hard to believe. And when we begin to really look and see this over and over, then what's really hard to believe is how powerful these inaccurate perceptions and imaginings and descriptions are. So amazingly powerful. It really takes this willingness to keep looking.

So we look, and we see that when you have this feeling of "I," of "mine"—however it manifests—it might just be the thought "I'm really hungry," or "I'm bored now," "I wish this talk would end," "I wonder what I'm going to do tomorrow," "My knee hurts." It doesn't matter how. But when we have that sense, when you notice it there, rather than focusing on the object, see if you can—and your mind needs to be a little quiet for this, obviously—see if you can turn your attention back on that "I" or "mine." The actual experiential feeling or thought or emotion, whatever it is.

What in that moment are you calling "mine"? We might be focused on "I'm hungry." We might actually be focused on the feeling of hunger or wanting food, but that might not be the actual sense of "I who am hungry." And sometimes we're so used to that "I" feeling, it just feels like it's always there, so we overlook it.

When your mind's a little quiet, it can be really wonderful—I really love it—turning around the attention and seeing, well, what's the "I"? Who's "I"? I don't mean investigating with thought, but with this sati, this mindfulness that just lands right on that feeling of "I" to see what it is.

We begin to see that the sense of "I" or "mine," the birth of self, is arising and passing moment to moment. There isn't anything that lasts—this thing we thought was unchanging. Buddhadasa, who was quite a remarkable Thai meditation master, says the self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. That's all it is. And in my experience so far—which I've not come to the end of—so far that's really true.

So when there's that sense of "I"—I'm hungry, I want this, this hurts, I want this to go away—turn around and see what's the experience that's being grasped and clung to. And don't even assume it's being grasped and clung to because I say it. Turn around and feel and see.

Every time that sense of "I" arises, there's a moment of sense contact. Maybe there's a smell happening. There could be a grasping at that smell. There could be a thought: "Mmm, smells like pizza." And then there could be a thought: "Oh, I'm really hungry." So there's grasping arising with that sense contact. Turn the attention not to the thought of the pizza, but to "I," and see what it's landing on.

What I find is that each time I do that, it's a different actual momentary experience that is somehow being interpreted as "I." For example, when I say "I'm talking right now," there's this sense of "I." I turn toward my experience, and it's a sort of very vague physical sensation that I can't even quite locate. Sometimes it could be an image. Sometimes it could be an actual sensation of pain. Sometimes it could be a thought. I have a friend who said—not every time, but often—when he turned toward the sense of "I," it was as if he had this very subtle mental image of his face. And that was the "I," as if experience was coming out of that. I'm just giving examples. It could be anything.

But turning and looking—what's been really liberating for me is that each time, it's something different. There isn't, so far, some thing there, or some emotion, or some experience, or some anything that's "I."

And that's what gets really fascinating to begin to see. If you can sort of see it, if it's something that one can experience right away, it's an arising and passing phenomenon. There's no continuity to it. There's no ultimate validity. It's clearly not self. So just beginning to explore in this way.

Classically, and Joseph spoke about some of these last night so I just want to mention them briefly, in Buddhist psychology they talk about what makes up a person, so to speak—the different aspects of experience around which there tends to be this clutching, this identification, which is really just a contraction of grasping around an experience. There are five aspects that make up all our experience, any of which we might land on as saying "I" in a given moment.

There's the body, which Joseph said last night is obvious—sensations in the body, the whole sense of our body as a whole. What I found more subtle, which isn't actually body but if I don't look carefully I think of it as body, is the image of the body. So there

might be a sensation, and over that, subtly, there's an image of me. And there's a sense of identification, of grasping—me, my, mine. And that's "I" in that moment. It can be very subtle.

I find often as I'm sitting, there's just sensation. And there would be no sense of self, no sense of body. It's as if sensations are coming and going in a vast space of awareness. And then there's this subtle background image of my body sitting here—just an image of this body. Not seeing that, in that moment for me, becomes a sense of Carol, a sense of self. It's as if it's a container placed over an experience that has no containment and has no location, but it gives a false sense of container. Anyway, that's just something to look at.

The second aspect of experience around which we often grasp a sense of self is what's called feeling tone. I spoke the other night about how each sense experience we experience as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, which can come in quite subtly. Usually with pleasant, we move right away to wanting. With unpleasant, we move to aversion. With neutral, we tend toward spacing out. But often we don't notice that feeling tone because it's quite subtle.

This is one of the five aggregates that make up what a human is, and we easily fail to notice it yet identify with it, cling to it. Say there's a pain in the knee, and it's unpleasant. You might really be mindful of the sensations, really seeing the sensation, and there's not a sense of "I am that sensation," but somehow there's a real sense of involvement and self-identification there. You can't quite figure out where. You're clear you're not the pain, but often the clutching is around that subtle feeling of unpleasantness, of pleasantness, of neutrality. I just mention that as something else to notice—it creates that real sense of separation. Sometimes we don't notice that feeling.

The third aggregate, which Joseph mentioned last night, is consciousness—the knowing faculty, which seems ever-present and very subtle. That is easy to identify with. I think in some ways it's the last one we identify with because it's the most subtle and the most difficult to see as separate from me. I know hearing. I know that I'm paying attention. I know that there's unpleasant feeling. I know that there's awareness. It's easy to think of that as "I." So without saying whether it is or isn't, just notice if that's where this sense of I or me or mine is landing.

The fourth area is perception, which Joseph also talked about last night, and which is another really fascinating area to explore. We can really begin to see, sometimes in simple ways, how easily we identify with our perception, take it as true. And then some-

thing else can come in and we realize our perception was totally whacked out—it had nothing to do with what was actually going on. But we would have defended it to the death.

"Yes, this is how it is."

Just a little example. The other night, about two nights ago, I was sleeping with the window open for the first time. And I woke up in the middle of the night with some weird stuff going on in my body—you know, that kind of weird, vulnerable, not-quite-put-all-the-pieces-together-yet state when you wake up in the middle of the night like that.

So I was just lying there, and I gradually became aware of this really loud roaring noise, just so loud coming in. My first thought was, "Well, that must be the river." But I didn't really have too much confidence in that thought or that perception. And it just seemed to get louder and louder with all these undertones and currents. And I thought, "I've been here for five days, and this is the third year I've been here. I never heard the river sounding like that. There's no way that can be the river."

Then I remembered when I was a nun for a while in Thailand. I was staying at one place that was in the forest, on a little small river deep down in a gorge. And one night, all of a sudden, just like that, this tiny little river got huge. It came all the way to the top of the gorge. It flooded our whole area and it made so much noise—it was unbelievable. So lying there that night, I thought, "Either there's some weird mechanical kind of plane or tank coming in here, or this river is flooding and it must be totally up to the porch by now." I was absolutely convinced of that because my perception was: I have never heard the river be that loud. Impossible.

So I finally went back to sleep, checked it out in the morning, walked out. Of course, the river's really loud. I mean, it's been there all along, really loud. I just never noticed it before. Now I can't walk down the road without hearing the river babbling. It's really there. It's really loud. I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that that river never made a noise like that before.

So just that willingness to check our perceptions—to see where we can be so sure and so identified, and yet so wrong. That's what we're doing.

And the last area is everything else. I sometimes think that's kind of how the Buddha did it—all these categories, and then there's one that sort of lumps in so much. It's called mental formations. It includes what we're doing today in the instruction: intention, which is a really interesting one because you can see how subtle intention is. Intention to move, intention to do something, intention to direct the mind in a certain

way, intention to come back to the breath, intention to move to hearing. And it's so easy to feel like that's me. Well, who's meditating? Who's paying attention to the breath? Where does this intention come from, if not from me? It's a very subtle place of investigation.

So again, just look and see when you identify with the intention. If that's you, then where are you when the intention goes away? Sit there and notice the intention to scratch your eyes, like Fred was saying. If that was you, then during those ten breaths when you didn't scratch, you were gone, right? And then you come back again, if that's how intention is us. But explore it.

This is where I mean don't stop. Return to intention. It feels so much like us, and there can be a tendency to stop really looking. We move into "Of course it's me. What else could it be? And where could this intention come from?" And we're back into that spinning mind of doubt again.

So exploring intention. And the other aspect I just want to mention of mental formations is, of course, our old friend thought. And thought is a really...

Sometimes we can see thought, obviously. It's a lot of what our practice is. But because thought can come so often and we get so used to it, we sometimes don't notice that the thoughts can turn into an ongoing commentary that is actually making up our sense of self. We're kind of describing ourselves to ourselves as we go through the day, telling ourselves different stories. If you stop and look, you might be telling yourself a lot of different stories about yourself. In a way, we're making it up as we go along.

But if we don't notice thought, there's this identification with certain ones. For instance, some might go through—"Wow, I'm really doing good. I'm really a far-out person"—and those kind of go by. Maybe we don't really identify with them too much. Then another one comes up: "I am such a schlump. I'll never be able to do this right. I'm too tight. I'm too this. I'm too that. I'm a failure." Those ones we might really buy into and believe and carry around with us through everything we do. "I don't wash the dishes right. I made a big clanging noise when I was serving myself. Everybody was looking at me. I'm not working mindfully enough. I'm moving too much in the hall." Not noticing all the times in between when these thoughts aren't happening, when there's no sense of self at all, but stringing them together and telling ourselves this self-story until it gets really solid.

One time, a couple years ago, I was on a two-month retreat, and something got really clear to me. I had just seen a movie right before the retreat—and if you can avoid that, or listening to music just before a retreat, I'd advise avoiding it unless you want to

really watch the replays for a long time. So I had seen *The Fugitive*. At least it wasn't too bad of a movie; it could have been worse. But I'd be sitting there and I'd be getting flashes of scenes and dialogue from *The Fugitive*—not in order, of course, jumping forward and back in time. Then after a while it would switch and the Carol movie would come on. It would be flashes of memory and future planning and images of myself, things that happened, forward and back in time.

At some point it hit me. It wasn't like there was a correlation, like a simile. They were exactly the same. There wasn't any difference. It wasn't that the Carol story was more real at that moment than the flashes of memory from *The Fugitive*—not at all. It was just images coming up and thoughts. But there were particular ones where there was a sense of grasping, a sense of identification around them. And so I made that Carol. I didn't think I was—I can't remember his name—but I didn't think that character was who I was. I knew that was a movie. Well, guess what? So is the other. It doesn't mean that I don't know what happened in the past or that I can't relate, but in that moment, what was really happening was just images arising, thoughts arising, emotions arising and passing. And whether it was about Carol or what's-his-name, it really wasn't any different.

And that's what we're doing all the time. We're telling ourselves stories. There's thoughts. We don't notice which ones we clutch at and make a story of and which ones go by. So pay attention. See which ones there's this grasping of self around and which ones go by. Just because there's a grasping sense of self around some thoughts, that doesn't necessarily make them true. I want to point that out. In fact, often—not with everybody, but for a lot of people I talk to in retreats—the tendency can be to really identify with the negative ones, the negative self-images, the ways we're not good enough, our failings.

And if something beautiful happens or we have some beautiful experience—"I'm really a very kind person"—don't get too carried away with yourself. The "mine" will come in right away: "Remember when you did this and you didn't give that." And "Oh yeah, that's right. Thank you for bringing me back to truth." Because we're buying into a particular story. It's all just thoughts. Imagine the freedom, the spaciousness of not having to grasp and solidify around any of them.

This is another way we can come at this exploration of the sense of self. The way I've been talking is really the way of precision—being with the breath with precision, bringing your attention into the experience of "I" or "mine" with precision. We can also approach it from the way of spaciousness, sort of like being with hearing. At times we tune into whatever word you want to use—spaciousness, or awareness, or emptiness,

which is really the more classic term. Just emptiness. Things arise and pass. Emptiness doesn't mean nothing happening, but it's empty of clinging, empty of aversion and grasping, empty of self.

And in that, without looking for anything—sort of like Joseph was saying with the cars going by, you're not looking for anything—but when this sudden sense of grasping, the sense of clinging, the emergence of self arises, you really can't help but notice it when you're tuning into the emptiness.

I'll give an example. One time I was on a self-retreat in a really lovely spot in California. I was sitting high up on a hill, sort of like you were doing today, hopefully—just sitting and being really aware with my eyes open. Just spaciousness and peace, everything coming and going, really beautiful, no thoughts of me, just presence. And some turkey vultures came flying out really close because I was high up. Just another arising experience—spaciousness, peace. Of course, somewhere in it, a thought arose: "This is really far out. I'm so empty. I'm so spacious." But that came and went too.

And more turkey vultures came, and they were circling. All of a sudden, they were circling right over me and getting closer and closer. And suddenly the thought arose: "I'm the thing they're circling. They think I'm dead." I had this moment of genuine panic. It only lasted a moment, but it was really—everything I could do, I almost stood up and screamed, "I'm alive! I'm alive!"

It was really interesting. In that moment, emptiness, spaciousness, no sense of self, real freedom and ease—it vanished, just like that. Total contraction. Solid sense of me and other, fear, something to do.

That's how it is. When we're letting ourselves attune to the emptiness, when it's present, we can notice it. Sometimes we can't notice it—there's just too much going on, or there's too much clinging, too much stuff. But other times, when it's a little more quiet or there's not a particular identification with anything, just open up and let yourself tune in to the emptiness. Get comfortable with it.

Buddhadasa talks about this often as a way of practice. It's not like we're in total cessation of all suffering—I'm not talking about ultimate enlightenment—but just inclining to emptiness. As he says, we experience in our ordinary day-to-day life many, many moments of this emptiness. Often we just don't notice them, but we can begin to incline the awareness to them. Not to do anything, not to be "me," not to grasp it—just to get more comfortable and more content with that ease, with that emptiness.

And in that, when the sense of grasping at some experience arises, when the sense of self is born in a moment, it's really pretty obvious. It's not something we have to fight. It's just really interesting to see how it can go from a moment of total ease to a moment of complete panic and fear that I'm going to be attacked by turkey vultures. And the next moment, it can all go again.

So really seeing the arising and passing of this sense of self, not being content to stop anywhere, but continuing to explore, watching it come, watching it go. And in each experience of that, the old conditioning, the old assumptions begin to weaken. Without logically knowing it, we begin to experience much more ease with what comes and goes in our life, with what comes and goes in our emotions, with what comes and goes as experience. Just an ease and a dancing with things.

It's not that stuff disappears. But it's that sense of "I," that constant self-referencing, that begins to ease—that we don't take so seriously, that we see through altogether. And in that comes a real sense of joy and dancing with life.

I want to end with this from a Tibetan Lama:

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already there in relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself. There's nothing to do. Whatever arises in the mind has no importance at all because it has no reality whatsoever. Don't become attached to it. Don't pass judgment. Let the game happen on its own, springing up and falling back without changing anything, and all will vanish and reappear without end. Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you relax this grasping, space is there—open, inviting, and comfortable. Nothing to do, nothing to force, nothing to want, and everything happens by itself.

So let's just do nothing quietly for a few moments.

CHAPTER 358

Anattā Or How The Sense Of Self Is Created

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson demystifies the Buddhist teaching of anattā (non-self), drawing extensively on the insights of Ajahn Buddhadasa and his book 'Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree.' Rather than presenting anattā as an esoteric philosophical concept, she offers it as a practical investigation we can conduct in any moment of experience.*
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> *Wilson explains how the sense of self is not a solid, continuous entity but rather a condition that arises whenever there is grasping and clinging in the mind. Using vivid personal examples—from attachment to a favorite mug to reactions to cold weather and physical illness—she illustrates how we can observe the birth and death of the sense of self in ordinary experience. She explores how clinging manifests around the body (kāya), feeling tone (vedanā), thoughts, emotions, intentions, and even awareness itself.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that emptiness (suññatā) is not an otherworldly state but something we experience naturally in countless moments each day—we simply don't notice it. Wilson guides practitioners to turn attention back onto the experience of 'I' or 'mine' whenever it arises, discovering that what we call self is always just momentary appearances: sensations, mental images, thoughts, and feelings arising and passing. This investigation, practiced both on and off retreat, gradually reveals that the perception of a continuous, solid self is an illusion. True emptiness, she concludes, doesn't lead to disconnection but naturally gives rise to compassion and complete engagement with life.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about demystifying the sense of self, investigating the sense of self.

I was reminded of a poem. I'm not sure I remember it exactly correctly, but the day reminded me of it: "The winds of change blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

That's really how I felt today. The difference between the sense of self and no sense of self—which can both be present from moment to moment, either one—is this: when I was resistant and cold and pulled in and aversive, there was self, clinging, identified. And when the winds were just blowing across emptiness, there was no problem. That could change from moment to moment.

When James directed us to notice clinging, the movement of clinging or grasping, and the moments of non-clinging, of non-grasping—this is so key to our coming to live in freedom, because the ultimate clinging, the kind of core grasping if you want to think about it that way, is clinging to the sense of I and mine.

I want to talk about this not in an intellectual or philosophical way, but in a way of really directing our investigative attention into what we're calling "me," "I," or "mine" in any particular moment of experience. Just to meet that with attention rather than living in assumptions.

I want to use as a framework the way that Ajahn Buddhadasa talked about this particular issue of emptiness. In one of the suttas, someone asked the Buddha to just tell him, basically in one phrase, what is it that liberated ones know that I don't know? Just lay it out. And he said, okay, what they know is that nothing is worth clinging to. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. That's what they know and what we don't quite totally get yet.

But talking about anattā or no-self or emptiness—the usual translation of the word suññatā—doesn't have to be an esoteric philosophical experience. As a friend of mine often reminds us, the Buddha did not teach anattā or anything to create another philosophy or to make occasions for more philosophical discussions. He taught it for our freedom from suffering and confusion.

I hope that what we can do is take the fear out of the concept of anattā, out of no-self or self. Take the hatred out of the idea of self as something we have to destroy, and just bring our attention to what's actually happening. We find out it's really not such a big deal. We can explore this on a moment-to-moment basis.

I want to say a little bit about Ajahn Buddhadasa because I found him quite inspiring. He died in 1993. He was one of the most famous Thai forest monks, meditation teachers, and scholars. He founded a forest monastery in southeastern Thailand. He was really quite radical, even up until the time he died—radical for Thai Theravada Buddhism.

For example, he had in his monastery what was called a spiritual theater, sort of like a museum, and it had all different kinds of paintings and artwork. It had the ten Zen ox-herding pictures in it. I think you have to have been in Thailand and know how provincial Thai Theravada Buddhism can sometimes be to see that it was really quite unusual for a renowned abbot to have Zen material in his monastery.

In his book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*—which is a really good book, and I recommend it if you want to read more about recognizing the sense of self and emptiness—he talks about how in the 1930s, when he first began his teachings, emptiness or anattā was considered among the sangha, among the monks and nuns, something you didn't really teach to laypeople because they couldn't get it. It was sort of saved for people who were really committed and had all the time to look at it.

And he said, you know, that's baloney. Okay, maybe he didn't use the word baloney, but something to that effect. That's ridiculous.

I can see in us teaching here subtle remnants of that attitude. We kept discussing: Should I give this talk on anattā tonight, or what's the right night of the retreat? Is this too late because soon it will be over and people might get disturbed? And it's like—hey, this is the core of freedom in this teaching, and we're worried that you might get a little bit disturbed or something if you hear it? What's going on?

So I really want to talk about this, because for me this is the core point of freedom. You don't have to wait for some profound dissolution experience in meditation to begin to develop, and to continue to develop, a deep understanding that is not just of the intellect—to really experience emptiness, to experience the birth and death of the sense of self in any moment. This can be our practice on retreat, off retreat, as long as we're willing to pay attention.

That's what I want to talk about tonight.

I'm going to stick with "emptiness." Emptiness meaning that any particular moment of experience is empty of self, empty of me and mine. This is not an esoteric, out-of-body, incredibly out-there experience necessarily. It's truly natural and normal. In fact, all of us experience many, many moments of this every day. We just don't notice it most of the time.

The nature of mind—big mind, you could say, though "mind" is a hard word to use—the nature of who we are is sometimes referred to as awareness. There's no one word that can really describe or encapsulate it. But when we're not distracted, when we're not becoming involved in arising appearances with our ideas and reactions, when we're not basically clinging to whatever is happening, getting fixated on and involved in whatever is happening—when we're not distracted in that way, when we're just awake and present, there's no feeling in that moment of I or mine. It's just this. Those moments when things are just so peaceful—that is a moment like that.

And we can recognize this over and over. More often, what we recognize is the ways that we get distracted from this emptiness, if you want to call it that. Some sense experience arises and we get all involved in some concoction of liking and disliking, what it means, how I was when I was five, what's going to happen next—and it's just a sound. We get all involved in that. Or we think, "Why am I doing this? Why does this have to happen? Why can't I just be with the sound? It's so simple. It's just a sound." We notice that, but quite often we don't notice when that's not happening.

The root of all this distraction, the clinging and the pushing away (which is really the flip side of clinging), is this false view of self—this clinging to any experience as I or mine. Buddhadasa calls it "I-ing and my-ing," which I really like because it's not a solid thing. It's an arising experience in any moment. Something arises and there's I-ing it or my-ing it. I like that.

Unexamined, if we don't really look, doesn't it feel like the sense of I is pretty much usually here? And it seems pretty steady. It seems like often the one thing that does not abide by the law of impermanence. It feels pretty solid—if we don't look.

So what we can do in this practice is take our mindfulness, our wise attention, our wisdom eye, and turn it back onto the experience of I or mine itself when we notice that it's present. That's what I want to talk about tonight, hopefully in a practical way.

One way of describing the sense of I, the way Ajahn Buddhadasa speaks of it, is so simple. He says the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. That's all. Grasping and clinging arises, sense of self arises. It's a condition that arises, and if it arises, you know what that means—it also passes, as soon as there isn't grasping and clinging in the mind. Or as a friend of mine puts it, describing his experience, "I want, I need, therefore I am." Very succinct.

So with mindfulness-wisdom, satipañña, truth-discerning awareness, we can begin and continue to recognize the arising and passing of this condition we call self. It's a different condition each time. There's nothing permanent. But we can begin to explore how it arises, how it is experienced when it's present, and how it passes. It really takes a lot of the oomph out of it. It takes a lot of the fear, a lot of the solidity out of this so-called sense of self to begin to explore it, because it's just like any other arising appearance. It's just like some thought arising, some emotion arising. It just comes and goes. It's nothing in particular.

So, just an example of the birth of the sense of self in a moment. I was on retreat last year—and this is not particularly a retreat experience; this is how it happens all the time. It was at IMS in Barre, and the way the mealtimes work there is much like here.

You walk in, get your plates, and there's a whole big shelf of mugs that have been collected from all the people who leave mugs, so they're all different. For weeks I would just come in, take a mug, get my tea. But for some reason, this particular morning, the mug I picked was just really nice. It was this lovely color green, and it fit so nicely in my hand.

And in short, somewhere as I was drinking my tea and feeling, "Oh, this is really pleasant, this is really pleasant," boom—a real sense of attachment to that pleasant feeling, and then to that mug, came in. It's just this mundane. And in that was the birth of me—me and my mug. That's it. I-ing and my-ing right there.

It wasn't too much suffering at the moment. We don't really notice it then; we're just noticing the pleasure at that point. But that was the birth of the self with the birth of clinging.

This is the dependent origination that the Buddha talked about, and I'm not going to go into it fully—it's really the core of his teaching of how, with ignorance and the arising of experience, we end up in suffering in a moment. There's ignorance, and then with sense contact there's a sense door, eye. There's a sense object, the mug. There's consciousness, awareness of that. Those come together. There's contact—I'm seeing the nice green mug. There's pleasant feeling. There's craving first—I like it. There's clinging—I want it. In fact, I want it in the next meal that I have. And that leads to, boom, birth of self. Suffering. Death, because what's born has to die. That's the dependent origination. That's the birth of self in any particular moment.

Next time it happens to you—of course it's not happening to you, is it? It's just happening out of emptiness. Next time there's that birth of that feeling of self, turn your attention on and feel it. Just be with the experience. I can describe how it is in this mind and body; don't then transplant that onto you.

For example, that "me and my mug"—a sense of contraction, a sense of grasping and clinging that is a tightness, a kind of limitation. It narrows the consciousness. What had been just relaxed, open, and free was now this mug. Everything else is sort of blotted out. Other people are in the way of my getting this mug the next time I come in to the meal. And in fact, when I finished the meal, I really started thinking, "Okay, maybe I should save it." Some people save mugs, and they're all hidden behind the plants and behind the curtains and everything. And I did have the grace to say, "Okay, forget that, Carol," and I put it back.

But then you see, birth of self leads to more wanting, more activity, more plotting and scheming. And I managed to—next time I came, I really looked. And there it was, my mug, and I grabbed it. I said, "Oh good, I have it." But it wasn't really so pleasant. In

fact, the narrowness, the constriction of this sense of me, the sense of mine, was actually quite unpleasant. And I saw, "You know what? I don't need this." And I just put it down. In that moment was the death of self. And again, there was expansiveness, ease, just what is.

That's a simple example, but it happens hundreds and hundreds of times in any day. And instead of just feeling victimized, or not noticing it, or getting involved in what we can do to continue with the pleasantness, we can simply notice that process—that contact, that wanting, the birth of self, I-ing and my-ing. And when the clinging ends, as it will for that particular time—it will definitely end, it will disappear—it's really important to notice that as well, because then we begin to realize that the perception of continuity of self is an illusion.

So in that moment of putting down the mug, there's just sitting or hearing, sensation, no particular sense of self. There's just that shunyata, that emptiness at that moment. Notice that. Often we don't. Often we just kind of say, "Okay," and almost as if we dull out—

The ignorance comes in until the next birth of self arises—something else to react against or into, something to do or create, some intensity to grasp. But this emptiness is often just that. And it's easy to not really be awake there. There's no grasping in that moment. There's no aversion in that moment. But there also needs to be no delusion in that moment—delusion in the form of just dulling out and not noticing. Ah, just this. And it doesn't really matter what "this" is.

I want to talk some more about exploring this. I'm using the word "sense," but the sense or the feeling—when there comes an awareness that "I" or "mine" is being born or is present in a particular moment of experience, we can turn the awareness back onto that experience itself. Not thinking about it, not trying to analyze "what is this," but really turning the attention around: What is this "I"? What am I calling "I" in this moment? What is being clung to in this moment?

Because clinging is just a habit of mind. And with truth-discerning awareness, with mindfulness-wisdom, when we notice it—as I think was mentioned either this morning or last night—when you're aware of clinging, in that moment of mindfulness, actually clinging isn't happening. It's almost like we're observing the moment before, it's so fast. But in that moment, clinging is not being perpetuated. "I" is not being perpetuated. Turn around and see that. The habit can be seen through.

So I just want to give examples of some of the basic experiences we cling to. It's not a comprehensive list, and I hope I don't get too detailed. Some of it we can see in all times of our life, on retreat and off retreat. Some of it is a little more subtle, and the mind needs to be a little quiet to notice.

The obvious first experience we cling to in a large way is what we would call the body. But to take it into our actual experience, out of the realm of idea—when we're clinging to "my body," what is actually the experience of clinging, of what is being clung to? When you turn and look at it, it kind of deconstructs the sense of self.

Let me give you a couple of examples. You're sitting with your eyes closed and there's a pain in your knee. The attention might go there, and it's like, "a twinging pain in my knee." That's the experience. And there might be some clinging to wanting it to be better, or to the sense of "my knee." Certainly it feels like my body—whether it's "my body" or "I am the body," either one. There's some sense of I-ing and my-ing in that.

But really look: What is being called "my body," "my knee" at that moment when I turn my attention? Remember, you're sitting with your eyes closed and there's a twinge. How do you even know where it is in space? Never mind that it's a knee—what is giving you that information?

When I look at my experience, there's a twinge. And this is how it is for me; it might be different for you. I'm just inviting you to look with attention. There's a twinge, and then it's almost as if there's a mental image of my body, you know, with a little emphasis on the area of the knee. Although it's actually not here—it's like a little image placed somewhere, located down there. But it's all just mental image. It's actually nothing to do with body at all. It's mentality. And then there's a physical sensation, twinge. It might be pleasant, it might be unpleasant.

I don't know if this is too complicated, but just look the next time you're saying, "My back hurts," or "I have a headache." Even if your eyes are open, you can't see your back. You can feel a sensation, and there might be a sense of where it is. You might feel parts of your whole body, but really it's like that Big Mind meditation we did the other morning.

If you really tune in, the sensations are just floating in the space of awareness, and then there's this concept of "my body" put on top of it. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just that when we cling to that concept and don't see it, we're in this identification of "this is me, this is my body." And what's actually happening is sensation, mental image, pleasant or unpleasant, and clinging to one or all of the above.

Don't think about it. Really don't think about it. I'm just saying these things to point you back to your experience. Thinking about it completely takes you away. So as soon as you feel confused by something I'm saying, forget it. I'm serious. Let your attention come back to your actual experience. Because what keeps this sense of me and mine going is thinking about it and not realizing it's just thoughts. So just come back.

Like the wind today. When I feel, "Oh, I'm so cold. My hands are cold." I look down and my fingers have gone bone white. My body feels so contracted. I can't deal well with the cold. I'm so miserable. I'm so cold. But when I would just stop and open my attention and simply be with sensations—there was just sensations arising and passing, hearing arising and passing. That was it. Some of the sensations were pleasant. Some of them were unpleasant. And they change really rapidly. That was it. All the rest was thoughts, images, story concocted that I didn't see as thoughts and images, and there was clinging to it. That's largely how the sense of self is created moment to moment and carried on in time through thoughts and stories about it. And I'll say more about that in a minute.

Another aspect of experience that is often clung to, that feels like self and that we often don't notice because we don't look, is that quality of every sense experience that it's either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. It's called vedanā in Pali, sometimes translated as feeling tone. It's what the Buddha called the second foundation of mindfulness.

So, for instance, I was talking about the cold sensations—experiencing them as unpleasant. Or perhaps there's a really nice pleasant sensation. You have a sitting and the breath is really smooth and deep and it's pleasant. And you're sort of aware of liking it. And you're aware, you're really saying, "I know this is going to change. I'm really not attached." And we're very sincere. But then the next sitting, everything's chaos. And we find out that somehow we really were attached. And we don't quite know where the clinging was. Because often the clinging is not actually to the breath—it's to the pleasant feeling that goes along with it. Each slow breath had a pleasant feeling. It's subtle. We often don't notice that, and we get attached to the pleasantness or aversive to the unpleasantness.

That's why there's often an emphasis to notice, at times when it's obvious, that aspect of experience. Like you sit in the sun—warmth, warmth, liking. Notice just the pleasant quality. Just notice it, that's all. Then you might see how the clinging comes into the pleasantness itself.

Again, Buddhadasa speaks a great deal about what a useful practice it is in our daily life to notice the wave-like nature of pleasant feeling as we go through our daily experiences. There's so much that's pleasant. He says, how much pleasant feeling have you experienced in your life in just one day? So much. And how long has any of it lasted?

It lasts just like this. And then there's another pleasant feeling, or an unpleasant one. He asks, how much of our experience do we value by how pleasant it is? The more pleasant feeling something arouses in our experience, the better we think it is, the more we tend to value it.

Meditation is the opposite of this. That's why sometimes people say, "I don't know what I'm doing here again. I'm here for some reason, but it's been so hard." And it's really a sincere question, because generally, if something's unpleasant and difficult, we're out of here. But we keep coming back, even though it's difficult, and that doesn't sit with this general assumption that the more pleasant something is, the better it is.

But really watch this. The wave-like nature of pleasant—it comes and it goes, comes and it goes. Just to see that. Notice how often when the sense of "I" is there, when you just feel solid and here, if you turn the attention inward, quite often it's pleasant feeling that the clinging is around, even more than the actual experience that's engendering the pleasant feeling.

So we have aspects of the body, this feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Of course, a lot of clinging also arises to the aspect of our experience of mentality—thoughts and emotions. Obviously, with both thoughts and emotions, at times the clinging is so quick and subtle we don't even recognize it. How often does it just feel like "this emotion is me"? It's not that I even like this sadness or like this bliss. It often just feels like, "Well, this is just me. That's how it is." That's how close the clinging can be.

Thoughts and emotions can be difficult to notice as what the clinging is arising to because they come so quickly, they change so quickly, and they're so interconnected. Have you noticed that? How a thought gives rise to emotion, and as soon as you notice the emotion there are all these other thoughts, and then they give rise to another emotion, and it just keeps ricocheting off each other. Then there are a few sensations in there that give rise to unpleasantness and more emotions and thoughts, and it happens so fast that often it's really hard to turn your attention and ask, "Well, what is the clinging to?" or "Where is this sense of self?" It just feels like me.

But at times, when the mind is a little quiet, we can actually watch how from a very mundane experience, this sense of self is created and gets solid in just that amount of time. Very mundane.

I remember one time I was doing walking meditation. One of those times when it's just walking—nothing going on, so nice. We like it like that. Just walking along, and I had a turtleneck on, and I just ran my finger under my turtleneck. I was aware of it—sensation, sensation—and just in that moment of running my finger there, a mental image arose. You know how you see yourself as if looking out from behind your eyes but seeing your body and imagining how you look doing that? Such a little, neutral kind of experience.

But as soon as I'm doing that—that mental image, which is all fine, there was no particular clinging—then a sense of almost seeing myself through someone else's eyes, and the unspoken thought: "I wonder what I look like. Do I look like a typical yogi schlump, or am I looking kind of okay?" And in that moment—this is just a little thing, not like a huge insecurity—just like that. Clump. Clinging. Birth of "I," my image, myself, my body. So fast and so subtle.

None of those things in themselves are a problem. It's just when there's clinging to that—"What do people think of me?"—that thought and that fear, then there's a sense of self. For me, with the sense of self there comes a feeling of contraction, of solidity almost, that wasn't there the moment before. And it's all the same experiences—the image, the sensation, the thought. The sense of self is like a solidifying of that.

No experience in itself is any problem or necessarily has to be clung to or identified with. It really doesn't matter what the experience is. I'll give you an example of that—how sensations, thoughts, emotions, and the stories we tell in thoughts really coagulate the sense of self, and how in any moment we can cut through it.

I think this was a different retreat. I was sitting, pretty quiet, in an open kind of space—not super concentrated, just being with things. And just noting: hearing, hearing, tickling, tickling, sensing, sensing, coughing, coughing, tickling, tickling, tickling, tickling... "Oh my God, this is bronchitis."

And that thought—"Oh my God, this is bronchitis"—was really clung to. "I" arose strongly in that moment. I had had bronchitis quite severely about two months previously and had been quite sick. As soon as that thought was clung to, panic arose, and that was clung to—the future and my plans. "I don't have time for this. I've got things to do. I can't get sick again. And I'm on retreat! No, no, no..." It really went wild.

And then I thought: what's really happening here? Tickling, tickling. Coughing, coughing. Thinking, thinking. That was it.

And the whole thing went away. I mean, not the tickling, not the coughing—but the panic, the fear, the dreadful illness, my life falling apart. It was really just what it was.

And then I could see the thoughts arise again, the panic again. Well, what am I going to do about it? Should I go to the doctor? And all of that. Okay, just come back to the bare experience. And the whole self would subside again.

Buddhadasa has a phrase which he actually uses in a different context, but I like it here: *volunteering for suffering*. And I saw in that moment—it was almost like a choice—yes, I'm going to really go into this "oh my God, it's bronchitis" mode, and suffer. Because at any moment the attention can come back and just be with tickling, tickling, thinking, thinking, and there's no problem.

This doesn't mean that we become non-functional in the world. I know this is one of the questions that often comes up. If everything's just tickling, tickling, thinking, thinking, then how do we function? How do we take care of ourselves?

Well, actually, when the sitting ended and I could just be with what was there—tickling, tickling, kind of noticed the experience—I said, you know what? It is bronchitis. But that was just a recognition. It didn't have all the extra stuff along with it at all. You can recognize something with still no particular sense of self, just a recognition of conditions, a perception. Oh yes, these things put together make bronchitis. And I went and saw the doctor and got the antibiotics and it was fine.

So actually, the functioning is much more sane and appropriate when we're not lost in this I-ing and my-ing and we're just present with experience. Don't worry that you're somehow going to be off in the ozone, lost in emptiness when there's no sense of self. It's actually just the reverse—because there isn't any self, you can't lose it. There isn't a self here. It's not like we're getting rid of something. Nothing changes but that we begin to recognize what's actually happening anyway. So it just makes things a lot easier. It makes things a lot simpler.

Emotions are tricky because, for many of us, certain emotions somehow feel much more *me* than others. Some seem much more solid, and when they come—oh, that's that anxiety, that's really the core of my being. I may not always be anxious; once in a while I can see it go. But by golly, I know it's going to come back as soon as I'm in any particular situation, because that's really who I am. So I can be mindful of it, I can be with it, I can really accept it, but there's still some subtle clinging of I or mine to that particular emotion—whether it's judgment or love or anxiety or fear or whatever it happens to be.

As we've said over and over, it's really helpful to notice the beginnings and endings, as with everything, but particularly with the emotions that you feel are very sticky. Just notice that there are gaps. Someone will come into an interview having been in a very

painful, difficult time with particular emotions—really, really working with it very well, but it's hard. And in talking about it and describing it, they kind of realize, oh, but actually, it's not here at all right now. And it can seem a little puzzling, even as it's a relief, because it seems so solid, so much part of who we are.

One way I like to turn the attention back and explore that sense of clinging, that sense of selfing around an emotion, is to notice the difference when an emotion is just what it is—there's sadness or anxiety or judgment or happiness, just what it is. The emotion itself is not a problem. There doesn't have to be clinging or a sense of self. And then notice the difference when it's not just sadness but *my* sadness, or *I'm* sad. There's a little extra—that's the clinging. It has a slightly different quality, a different mental and physical experience.

So just explore that for yourself. You learn to tell, in a way, when sadness is just that—just moving through the space of awareness like a cloud—and when sadness has become clung to, when an I has arisen as an object, as a being in that moment. It's noticing the birth of self as emotion.

Just a couple of other aspects of experience I want to mention briefly, to explore.

They're somewhat subtle, but one that is really easily clung to, because it's often not even recognized, is this experience of intention. The intention that gives rise to speech, that gives rise to any particular action.

We've spoken about it some, especially if you were here for both retreats. But intention is—you could call it the urge that arises that lets the arm move. We couldn't move without that. It's a mental experience that, as it were, gives the signal for the arm to move, for the voice to come out, for the thoughts to form, for me to say what I want to say.

We often explore this. People will talk about it in sittings or during the walking, where somehow there's an itch and they're really aware, and all of a sudden they're scratching. They say, "I don't know how that happened. I really didn't mean to scratch, but somehow it was there. I kind of just spaced out for a moment and scratching happened." Or we're in walking meditation, feeling really present, and the next thing you know, you're in the cafeteria having a cup of tea. And you think, "How did I get here? I was really into the walking meditation." Those are intentions that weren't recognized.

This happens all the time. There are intentions arising every moment. We're never going to recognize them all—don't even try. You'll make yourself crazy. But we can notice the big ones. Some intention got you to come here. At the end of the sitting, an intention arises to stand up.

You can play with it at times. Before you stand up, feel the intention to stand up and then don't do it. Feel it again and then don't do it. It's kind of fun. Or with an itch—you're just about to scratch and then you don't. You're just about to and then you don't. It's a way to get that sense of what an intention is. And then see how just one moment of not noticing and—wham—we're up there scratching.

So that's just to get the feeling of intention. Intention is just another effect arising from a previous cause. It's just part of cause and effect. There's an itch, an unpleasant sensation. There's a thought, "I don't like this." There's the intention to scratch, which leads to the movement, which leads to the scratching, which leads to the intention to think, "Oh, I blew it. I should have been mindful." It's just all a series of cause and effect.

But it's really common that we think, "What do you mean? Who's scratching? I'm scratching. Whose idea was it to scratch? Mine." Whenever there's a talk about intention at the three-month course, or about anattā, you can almost bet money that somebody the next day will say, "If there's no self, who had the intention to come to this retreat? If there's no self, who has the intention to stand up?"

The classical answer is: nobody. Intention just arises out of causes and in itself becomes a cause for another effect. It's just a chain of appearances arising. A sensation, an intention, a movement, a sensation, a thought, an intention. They're all just cause and effect arising and passing, arising and passing.

The "I," that clinging—when clinging, which is just another effect arising from cause... we also cling to clinging. When the clinging to that intention arises—see, this is kind of subtle—but it's that feeling of, "Of course I'm the one standing up." This is another really good one not to think about. No, I'm serious.

Intention, and the next one I'm going to mention, and then I'll say a little thing about both of them regarding not thinking about it. The next piece is: who's aware? Who is mindful? Mindfulness arises in a moment. "I'm aware of the intention to stand up, the intention to scratch." Awareness happens. It's very easy for this subtle clinging of "my awareness" or "I am awareness" to arise.

And it's so subtle it won't even probably feel like clinging. But doesn't it really feel like, if I said "who's aware?" well, I am, obviously.

When I say don't think about it—either this, intention, or awareness—it's because it's the thinking about it that actually seems to solidify that birth of self. What do you mean, I'm not intention? How does that work? Well, if I'm not intention, then what is it? And if I'm not aware, then what is awareness? How can awareness just arise? And then we start thinking. And the clinging is coming in to those thoughts. The self, the "I-ing," is happening around those thoughts. And we think ourselves into a really solid sense of self.

Remember in the last retreat—and this happens every time—after the talk on anatta, a lot of people were coming in saying, "I've got to get it, I've got to get this." And just that is the clinging to thinking that makes the self seem so solid, like it's something we'll never see through. In that moment, no.

Whenever you notice that sense of self, though, rather than trying to think your way out of it, just turn the attention—never mind who's turning the attention—just let an intention arise from a memory arising of having heard these words. The intention arises, the attention turns back on the experience of, "Oh, I was thinking this," and just see what that experience is in that moment. Very simply, just explore it. Drop into that experience with wise attention.

I find that when I'm on a long retreat and using noting, this is a note I have. The note is actually "self." I tried to explain this to Sayadaw U Pandita once, and boy, it really didn't work. He just got hysterical. "Ha ha, you think there's a self! Ha ha ha, you know self!" It really didn't go anywhere.

What I actually do is when I feel that sense—that without looking one would call self—I turn the attention back on it, I note it as "self," but I connect with what the attention actually finds. What's the real experience? And guess what? It's always just one of the six sense experiences. Maybe it's pressure. Maybe it's an image. Maybe it's a thought. Maybe it's tingling. Maybe it's an emotion. Maybe it's a memory. It's usually almost always something different, but it's just an arising momentary appearance that's also passing in that moment. It's really like nothing. It's nothing special. And each time we turn our attention there, it's no big deal. You just see it. It passes. The next thing arises.

To do this over and over—it's really in activity, in our daily life, in conversation. Whenever you begin to notice that sense of self, just bring the attention there and see what's truly there. Birth and death of self many, many times in one day.

So rather than trying to get rid of self, we simply begin to see through its illusory nature over and over and over. And the heart and mind just naturally begins to incline to stillness—the stillness of not needing to get so reactively involved in experience.

So, nothing whatsoever should be clung to as I or mine. That means nothing whatsoever. It doesn't mean nothing except the teachings, or nothing except this idea I have, or nothing except views of practice, or sense of self, or anything. It means nothing. Whatever's arising in a moment, it's not worth clinging to. It's the clinging that creates the suffering.

And it's so poignant, because the clinging is really in service of wanting to find completion.

And it's the clinging that blinds us to the completion and ease that's already here—always here—when there's a heart and mind of no clinging and vivid wakefulness.

So it's also true. Buddhadasa again: "If at any moment any person has a mind empty of clinging to I and mine, in any moment, even if only for an instant, at that moment it means that the heart, the mind has realized emptiness." Even if only for an instant. And that can be very powerful.

I know for years I was waiting because I thought when the heart realizes emptiness, all these lights go off and that's it—it's realized it forever. Done. Finished. And it's not. So I'm sorry to say. But actually, once I got rid of that idea, you see that the heart can recognize emptiness, the mind can rest in emptiness, moments—many, many, many moments in any day. And it does. And so our practice is to continue to recognize this. Not necessarily anything exciting. But it's just as valid a way of recognizing emptiness, no self—this recognizing the birth of the sense of self out of the emptiness and the death of it. And then again, that emptiness. To recognize this over and over and over is just as valid; it goes just as deeply over time in our being, so that we really know emptiness, as having a really profound blowout experience.

Those intense experiences can be so strong that they cut through really quickly, and we really get it for a while. But even those, after some time, again—you're home arguing with the husband, having to do the dishes, and there's a rising of clinging, death and birth of self, even after a really intense, opening, empty experience.

So on this level of moment-to-moment awareness of practice—and this isn't just about being on retreat, this is all the time in our life—it's extremely powerful and it's absolutely freeing. Because in any moment when that sense of self is solid, if you remember to turn around and look, it's like... ugh. And sometimes you can go see, "I don't want to see that this is just clinging. I want to be right." Clinging to being right.

We've used different approaches to help us have this sense of emptiness, to be, as Buddhadasa talks about, learning to be content with these moments of emptiness. Because they're often nothing that special. Can we be content with these moments? We ac-

tually then grow to appreciate and incline more towards the stillness of these moments. But first we need to keep recognizing and being content with that—with things just as they are.

We've used here the metaphor of space a lot as a way to help us recognize the heart-mind of non-clinging. It's a metaphor; it's not a completely accurate description, but it is helpful. Because, as Buddhadasa again says, we normally don't recognize the emptiness because we're so involved with the experience and concocting our thoughts about it and our stories about it. So when we remember the space, it doesn't mean we dissociate from experience or shut it out, but we see that there's this that we're fixated on, and there's all that space.

That's why, for me, being here in the desert is such a great place to explore arising of sense of self and resting in emptiness. Because I can be caught up in any particular thing—maybe I had a difficult interview, I'm working on my talk, I had an argument with somebody, or I'm just tired. I just walk out and look at the desert and the sky, and immediately there's just a space of awareness. And the difficult thing is also still arising. It's not like, "Oh, there's space. Nothing else is here. I don't know what's happening." Just spacious emptiness. That's kind of a false emptiness that we can fall into at times—it feels really nice, but we don't have a clue in life what's arising and passing within the space. It's like walking in the desert and tripping over the cholla because we're so lost. That's not really the emptiness I'm talking about. That leads to indifference, to disconnection.

True emptiness has that spaciousness. It's not necessarily the space of spreading out. It's the space of not being fixated on whatever object's arising. We know it's there, but we also recognize the space around it—the heart and mind of non-clinging. So it might be actual space, but it also allows for an immediacy of connection to any particular experience. Exquisitely present, and there's still that spaciousness, that stillness, because there's non-clinging in it.

Someone told me about an experience on this retreat. She was sitting and just noting what was arising, and there was a really loud sudden noise—which happens here a lot. Just a really loud sudden noise; the attention noticed it. Hearing. And it really startled her into a vivid wakefulness. Hearing. And then she said, as if the mind went to go back and realized, "Oh, there's nowhere to go back to. It's just this."

And that was not fearful. That was an experience for her of such joy and lightness and freedom. Just this. And I saw her not too long after that, and she had just been in that space. Just the ants. Just the wind. Just the smell. Just the sensation. Just this.

That is like an exquisite presence in the heart and mind of non-clinging. It's spaciousness. It doesn't mean spaced out. It's spacious because there's not this fixated involvement. So when we use space as a metaphor, it's to help us recognize this quality of non-clinging. It's not to go off into outer space.

This true moment of emptiness, heart and mind of non-clinging—it doesn't really matter what experience happens to be coming and going. There's just this experience. It's exquisitely present, but it's empty of any I or mine, any separate self. And it doesn't lead us into a kind of passivity or disconnection from life or dissociation. Actually, it's the clinging, it's that I-ing and my-ing that creates the sense of separation, of fear, of me and other, of needing to protect, of needing to hold back.

When there's just that simplicity of presence without constructing an I around it, in any moment—that's what gives birth to true compassion. That's where real connectedness comes out of, because we see that's really what's true.

I just want to close with two quotations from two different Tibetans. From Padampa Sangye: "Once you realize emptiness"—and remember, realize it just for a moment, doesn't have to be the final one—"once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

It's the same thing. Emptiness of I-ing and my-ing means everything is present here in this moment. The natural expression of awareness is the flame-like heat of compassion. The flame-like heat of compassion. It doesn't mean this is kind of cooled out, floating on a cloud. There can be active, total engagement and presence because there's nothing that needs to be held back. No self that needs to be held separate.

"Let the entire game happen on its own, springing up and falling back like waves, without changing or manipulating anything, and everything vanishes and reappears magically without end."

Nothing changes and everything changes.

CHAPTER 359

Nature of Insight

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the essential nature of insight (vipassanā) and the conditions that support its arising. Drawing on Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that understanding arises not from thinking but from sustained conscious awareness, she clarifies that insight is fundamentally a shift in perception rather than intellectual knowledge we acquire and possess.*
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> *Using vivid examples—from magic eye images to practitioners' experiences with pain, fear, and anger—Wilson illustrates how insights emerge when we bring total, non-clinging attention to our moment-to-moment experience. She emphasizes that we cannot force insights to happen; we can only cultivate the supporting conditions through continuous mindfulness. The talk addresses common misconceptions practitioners hold about needing special concentrated states before insight can arise, pointing out that any experience—even restless, scattered states—provides fertile ground for awakening.*
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> *Wilson explores the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa) of existence—impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and non-self (anattā)—explaining how deeply ingrained our misperceptions are at a cellular level, even when we intellectually understand these truths. She offers the Buddha's teaching that "the search for a resting place is burning; not to need one is cool and peaceful," inviting practitioners to open to the poignancy of constant change rather than resisting it. This opening, she suggests, leads not to despair but to deeper love, appreciation, and wonder at the mystery of each moment.*

Tonight I want to talk about insight—the nature of insight and supports for insight. After all, this is called insight meditation. So you may have been wondering: when are you going to get an insight? What actually is an insight? What do we mean by insight?

In some ways, it's obvious. It's not a piece of knowledge that we somehow acquire and then have. It's not "Now I will understand impermanence, and I've got it." An insight is that kind of aha moment when we suddenly experience ourselves or a particular situation, or the way we understand a particular situation, just shifts by itself. It's nothing that we can make happen, which is, of course, endlessly frustrating to us.

The thing about insight is the situation itself doesn't necessarily change. It's not that somehow we fixed everything. It's just a sudden shift in perception that changes our whole attitude to and potential response within whatever the particular situation or issue happens to be going on. So it's not a result of thinking. Let me read from Thich Nhat Hanh:

"Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It is the result of a long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

Insight is just literally, in my experience, a shift of perception. When we translate what the Buddha talked about as understanding things in the wrong way, or wrong view, I really like that translation—wrong view—as not being metaphorical but being quite literal. We're viewing ourselves, we're viewing our moment-to-moment experience wrongly, inaccurately. And insight is when that perception, in various ways, makes a little sudden shift.

The example I use a lot for the shift of perception—it's pretty apt—is those magic eye graphic photos. They have whole books of them. You look at it and it's two or three or four colors of just different graphic design. There's no particular recognizable literal image. But the whole trick to the magic, as you know, is if you look at it steadily in a particular way, which I've found is actually sort of unfocused but steady, suddenly a 3D image of something recognizable is there. It's like it suddenly leaps out. Suddenly there's dinosaurs, where before it was just little green and red images. And you really see it. Dinosaurs. It's not a trick. And then if you look away or you start looking too hard, it's gone. Shift of perception.

Until you see it for yourself, you can be told day in, day out, up the wazoo, "There's dinosaurs there." And until you see it, you may believe it or not believe it. You may beat yourself over the head trying to see the dinosaurs, which as we know doesn't work. The more you try, the more you grasp at trying to see it, the less likely you will see it.

Once you've seen it, then the next one that comes along, you don't know what's in it, but there's a shift in the mind stream, a shift in the understanding, and you know: "Oh, this looks like it could also be a magic eye." You don't know for sure. Maybe someone's tricking you and making a little graphic image and there isn't anything in it. That's possible. But you know it's possible to have that shift of perception, and it gets easier and easier. And it's also okay that it goes back. In a way, both of those ways of perceiving are possible.

That's really the kind of shift of perception that happens over and over in life, just in regular situations, but also—and particularly what I want to talk about tonight—in our meditation practice, in the way that we perceive and then understand our mind and body process.

That shift of perception comes with the magic eye, or maybe in daily life there's some problem you're mulling over, how to fix it, or something creative. We all know how when we let go of clinging so tightly to "what do I do," and just relax the whole thing and be present, often something unexpected springs up—whether we call it intuition or whatever. That comes from the heart, the mind, that lets go, that relaxes clinging to either a particular "I've got to know this," or "this is the way it is," or "I know," or trying to see what we think we need to see.

It's in the relaxing of the clinging, but with a continuing, steady, connected attention and awareness, that the shift of perception we call insight is possible. And as we all know, we can't hold on to the insight. We can't necessarily keep that shift of perception. And while the insight is not thought itself, of course we're going to think about it.

Thoughts will arise to explain it. Back to the 3D image, just the way I described it. "Oh, okay, there's something about optical illusion and the way it's arranged and a 3D image arises." There's nothing wrong with that. Just recognizing that's our use of thought to explain or describe something. But it isn't the same thing as the insight.

And we can't get back to hold on to always be perceiving in that new insightful way by continuing to hold on to the thoughts. So it's just seeing they're two different functions. Thought isn't bad. It's useful if we recognize it for what it is. But if we think we're going to grab a hold and think and think—you know, if I start thinking, "How can I look at these things in the correct way to see the soccer players? What is it?"—no, no, no, you completely lose it.

So the insights that come in practice, they're momentary, but they affect a change in the mind stream, don't they? It's like we see things in a different way, and it's never quite the same again. And they have varying degrees of effect.

A very common example would be sitting with pain—that's very common, we know that—and really bringing the attention over and over, gently, into the pain. Just seeing all the fluctuations the mind is going through around the unbearableness: "I'll just stay with it, I'll grit my teeth, I'm going to break my leg," spacing out, going into fantasy, the suffering, the craziness, whatever. And somewhere in there, maybe somewhere down the line, there's a little moment where the whole awareness is just totally present with that pain. In that moment, it's just sensation. You're not thinking about it. You're totally

present. There's a total surrender, a letting go of trying to fix it, of trying to describe it, of trying to get away from it—of anything. Just total presence. And in that moment, it's like, oh, it's no longer suffering. You don't even think that. It's just, "Oh, okay, what's the problem?"

It doesn't last, does it? And that not lasting may just be that the attention wavers, or it may be that some thoughts start to come in, or there's a grasping of "Wow, this is great, how can I keep it?" The situation, the circumstance changes because it's always changing. And we're back in the suffering. Maybe the suffering seems worse because there's that thought in our mind: "Wait a minute. A minute ago, this was all okay. Now it's suffering. It's so much worse. I wish I never knew it could be okay. I wish I never heard of this dharma. I was much better off when I was ignorant."

But it's too late. It's not really a conscious option that we can take very well anymore—to just dull ourselves out. Even though I'm making a joke, you know, the suffering seems worse, but there's a shift in the mind stream. We've had a touch of, "Oh, right. Where is the suffering here?"

We can then think about it. You can extrapolate from an insight like that all the Buddhist teachings, really—the whole Four Noble Truths. There's suffering, which we would have said was "my knee is killing me, that's the suffering"—no surprise there. But in that shift of perception, that insight, we see that the suffering is the reactive mind. There was an ending, a cessation of that suffering. The mind let go into total presence—no more suffering. And the path out of suffering, in this case, is the path of clear awareness, not clinging, but steady, connected attention.

That's thinking. It's useful to help us understand and sort of digest what happens, and it can give us a guideline for how to meet pain the next time, but it can't hold on to that insight for us. But it's okay, because we learn to really trust that this understanding which comes from insight affects change on a cellular level—the way I like to put it. Like we're learning on a level below the level of conscious thought. And we learn to trust that.

So in that moment of insight, what really happens is we've seen through, you could say, wrong view. The wrong view that "I'm really suffering because my knee's hurting, and if the pain would stop, then everything would be okay. And it can only be okay if the pain stops." One woman on a retreat told me this little example. I love it because it's so perfect.

In the middle of a long sitting during an afternoon, it was very hot—a retreat in summer, a crowded room, kind of stifling. She was really restless, that kind of restlessness where you feel you're going to jump out of your skin. "I cannot bear this another minute." So she stood up. The hall was crowded, she was in the back, and to get out she would have been walking through people, creaking across the floor, and so on. Sometimes social pressure keeps you there. And sometimes that's good. In this case, it was good.

So she was standing there—"I can't bear this, it's so unpleasant"—the agitation, the restlessness, so unpleasant. And suddenly, just as she was about to leave, she said, she had the thought: "Oh, right. This is just uncomfortable sensation. What's the problem? I can be with uncomfortable sensation." And the whole huge thing just fell away.

Now, it continued to be uncomfortable sensation. It's not that suddenly she was floating on a cloud of bliss. But the whole sense of struggle and suffering and needing to get out was gone. And she really was awake in that shift. Sometimes it happens and we just kind of zone out and don't notice—it isn't really quite an insight then because we don't really take it in. But she really noticed. "Ah, wow." Nothing changed but the perception, almost the way of relating, the way of describing what's going on in that situation. But it changes everything.

And it was really a profound moment for her because it then affects our mind stream. It affects the habits of mind. Nothing is quite as solid the way we thought it was. And that's really what is going on in a meditation retreat—why we have so much emphasis on the moment-to-moment continuity of mindfulness throughout all the sitting and walking in the day. To really begin to allow our attention to get clear, connected, but not clinging, not holding to preconceived notions. Open for discovery. Because we can't decide, as I said, we can't make insight happen. Even when we've had it before, we can't make it happen again. All we can do is set up supporting conditions, and then pray to God some spontaneous insight arises before we get too discouraged. I'm kidding—it's just to set up supportive conditions. That's what we're doing here.

The main factors that I would say support the arising of these shifts of perception are exactly what we're doing here: learning how to bring a totality of attention together, of awareness of all our mental and physical energy, how to collect that in a moment and the next moment and bring it wholeheartedly to whatever is arising by itself. We meet it with bare attention. What Rodney talked about the other night is caring attention. It's an attention that has no preconceived notions, no preference, no underlying subtle conceptual ideas of "if I pay attention to this emotion, I will learn X, Y, Z." "If I

bring non-judging, total attention to this pain, it's bound to go away because we know how things dissolve in the light of awareness." "That happened yesterday, so that meant I was doing it right—how to get there again."

You see how quickly, how quickly the non-clinging, non-judging, non-conceptual attention gets the subtle overlay of some notion, some idea, something we think we know or want to learn. But pure awareness, open for discovery, not even trying to discover—just to meet whatever's arising, totally, totally present. And in that, there's the possibility for perception to shift. Just the possibility for something other than what we expect, or think we already know, or don't even know we think we already know, to emerge.

Some perceptions, some ways we view reality—either the reality of who we are, what a human being is, what's going on in our mind and body, or the reality of what's happening in a particular situation—some of these we hold with such certainty. Yet it's easy, if we simply pay clear attention, for that perception to shift.

Sometimes the ideas, the views, the certainties we're holding to—we don't even know they're views or certainties. We just know that's how the world is.

Let me give you an example of how perception can shift easily. A friend told me this story. She was on a retreat some years ago with Ajahn Sumedho in Switzerland. At that time, to put on a retreat in Switzerland, they would rent these really huge old houses. All over Switzerland there are these big, big houses that youth groups rent in the summer, up in the mountains—fifty, a hundred kids can come and spend a week. So they're old, old, creaky houses with no insulation. You think there are little creaks on the floors here, but every time you'd walk anywhere in those houses, enormous creaks.

So she was sitting during a sitting period, a schedule like this, and the meditation hall was upstairs. As I said, it was really creaky. She was just starting to get focused on her breath, quiet, concentrated, and then she starts hearing: creak, creak, snap, creak. Somebody's walking downstairs. The walking room was downstairs under the meditation hall.

And the aversion that can just spring up immediately from an unpleasant sound! But also the immediate reaction: How can they be walking? You know it's a sitting period. There's a reason we have a schedule so we don't bother one another. And on and on. How do they expect me to get concentrated when this jerk is walking downstairs? Creak, creak, creak.

So this went on for some time during the sitting period. And as long as you're lost in that thought, you're lost in it. There's no chance for anything else to happen. Then she really committed: okay, let me just come back and be with the breath. Just try and be

with the breath. So she came back and was feeling her breath. And lo and behold, she noticed that she was sitting with her back leaning against the wall. Every time she took a breath and her back moved out, it hit the wall and made a creak. She was hearing herself breathing against the wall and creaking—and getting completely incensed at this person walking downstairs.

That's a good example. Once you've seen that, there's no going back. But she could only see it by letting go of the story and her anger in the moment. Not even working through it, but just saying, okay, never mind, let me just come back and meet what's happening in the moment, this breath. And something completely unexpected is able to be perceived.

Okay, that's relatively easy, but it does take the same qualities of effort: the commitment to be present, the willingness to come with your full attention to whatever is, the non-clinging, the non-grasping to our ideas of things, and just the willingness to meet this moment fresh. We use the breath, we use the body, we use whatever's arising as a way to bring ourselves into the moment. But it's not really so important which thing she was meeting fresh—just something arising here and now.

So that's easier. But sometimes we can get so locked into not even knowing that we're clinging to a description of reality that we don't even notice information that shows us we're holding to some very limited idea.

Another example: some years ago I was teaching a retreat in California, about fifty people. It was like five days into the retreat, and I was meeting with a woman. It was her first retreat. There were a lot of people there whose first retreat it was. So when there are a lot of first-timers, we give a lot of very basic instructions, starting from sitting and posture and everything.

She came in, and she was just in agony sitting cross-legged on the floor. Not just some pains, not just some sittings where it hurts—but really in so much agony that nothing was happening except unbearable pain through all her sittings. Which isn't really the most helpful way to begin practice. You're just fighting with willpower.

She came in, and actually I saw her just at the end of this ordeal. She said she had spent four or five days like that because it was clear to her that's what you had to do. You couldn't meditate other than sitting cross-legged. About the fifth day, she looked up. I was sitting on a chair, like I always sit on a chair. She looked up while I was giving instructions or something, and it went in. Five days it took.

It went in. Oh. *Oh*, she's sitting in a chair. And she meditates sitting in a chair. Maybe it's possible to meditate without being cross-legged. It's amazing what our minds can do. And once that was in, of course, it changed. And I encouraged her in that, naturally.

So that's to give you a sense of how, even though we think we're really open and not bringing any baggage, we can be so sure of something—like that woman, so sure that's how you have to meditate—that we don't even have the space to notice something other. We just know this is how it is, and we don't even know we know it. We just... it *is* how it is. You'd argue to the death with someone: this is how it is.

In our practice here, one way that people can suffer a lot is in relationship to how they're evaluating or judging themselves in meditation practice. Sort of like this woman in the example I gave—"I'm not doing it right because I have to sit cross-legged and I'm dying with pain. I can't follow any of the instructions."

One of the things that people get caught up in a lot, in terms of relationship to insight in their practice, is ideas. And each of you can check for yourself: what are the ideas rolling around in there, in your mind, in your heart, that you don't recognize as ideas but that are your beliefs, your descriptions of what either good practice would look like or what kind of state you have to be having in order to have a useful, genuine, liberating insight?

And often it's, "I really want an insight into anatta, into no-self." And the imagination of that is either "I have to be so incredibly concentrated in samadhi that I can get to the eighth formless jhana of neither perception nor non-perception, and then maybe I'll have a blowaway insight into no-self, which will never go away again. It will completely and forever change the way that I perceive myself in life." No more suffering, no more unpleasant feelings, no more self-consciousness, God knows. Certainly no more greed. That's what we expect from insight.

Okay, I'm exaggerating a little. Maybe. I hope I'm exaggerating a little. But take it down however many notches and then look at your own practice and see if you're writing off what's happening now as something you've got to get through, get over, move out of—to get to a decent enough state that you can begin to really see something useful about life, about practice, about yourself, about liberation, about impermanence, about anatta.

So the thing about insight, this spontaneous shift of perception—it can happen any time, in the midst of any situation, throughout the day, whatever you're doing. I have some of my best insights in the in-between times, you know? Just walking into the toilet

booth. I'm still present, but that little bit of extra trying to get somewhere has dropped away. And you're just present without the clinging, and *ah*, something comes up into awareness that I hadn't noticed before.

So really looking—sometimes practice is very subtle. Very subtle sensations of breath, subtle sensations of body. There's not much emotion and you're just really noticing the fine movements of attention. Generally, we like that. Generally, we think it's good, unless it bores you. Unless what you think should be going on is really strong emotional release, having something interesting to talk about, or at least to look at, or at least to feed a sense of, "We're really working on something here. We're really getting to the bottom of something now. Now I'm about to have the ultimate experience of my sadness, my grief, my rage." Ultimate meaning it's going to be gone, right? And then I'm free from it. So good, let's bring it on and have an insight.

And when it doesn't come, and it's just subtle breath, sensations, and you come in and go, "But this is so boring. There's nothing useful going on here."

But it doesn't matter what's happening. Whatever you're thinking needs to be gotten through in order to get to the level where you can have insight—that's a big mistake. Big mistake. Anything that's happening, just the mind being all over the place—it's the rich field of insight. The insight's not about what's happening; it's about our relationship to it.

When you're holding to anything as me, and suddenly that shifts, and you see, "Oh, this is just conditions arising"—that's insight into anatta. Like someone told me last retreat. They were having so much fear. They'd be afraid of the people in the hall. They'd walk out into the dining room and just be afraid of that. They'd walk outside and feel afraid of the space. They'd go to their room at night and be afraid.

And, you know, having – of course it's not pleasant – so some resistance to the fear, and also a kind of focusing while trying to tell themselves there's nothing going on in this room, there's nothing to be afraid of. This is a nice place in the country, there's nothing to be afraid of. The people in the dining room are minding their own business, there's nothing to be afraid of. Like that.

And suddenly they said, "Oh, I don't have to focus on all the objects – it's just fear. Awareness can be aware of fear." Fear. And it's just fear arising in the space of awareness. And it was really fine. Still fear, but not that sense of me and other and fix it and what do I do, and each new fear being a whole new gestalt to work through. Just: ah, fear.

That's a powerful insight into anatta, into the fact that fear arises due to conditions. You don't always know what they are. Awareness can be aware of fears like this. It doesn't have to refer back to me. And in that, there's so much space and not so much suffering. You can't hold on to relating in that way permanently, but it really changes the mind stream. You know it's possible.

Or I remember someone else was saying they were filled – there was some other yogi there who was driving them crazy. I know that's not happening here with anybody, but it was a different retreat. Some yogi was just driving this person crazy, doing what they thought were inappropriate things. Anyway, the person was filled with rage and anger, really trying to work with it, trying not to buy in, but really filled with rage. And they would come to the interview and say, "I can't believe it – and they spoke to me, and they did this, and they did that. I'm trying to feel the anger," you know, underlying that sense of, "Well, really, they are being a jerk" – that kind of self-righteous meanness.

But anyway, he said all of a sudden, after some days – a couple of days of this, not steady state, that's another thing – somehow there was a moment when he wasn't holding on to either the anger or the sense of himself as righteous or the judging himself for being angry, which is also holding on, right? Just a moment of pure attention. I think he must have been working with this person; there was some reason they were in proximity. And he just looked, saw this person's face – not trying to look, but just an open, completely present, non-clinging-to-any-view moment. And in that seeing of the face, he felt such a movement of compassion for that person.

You just get an intuitive sense of their suffering, and such a movement of compassion. It was so powerful that it just blew this guy out of the water in terms of his whole belief system – not only about what was going on in relation to how completely inappropriate that person was, but his own belief system about himself. Because he never would have thought he could feel that level of compassion, which only arises through open-hearted connection. Compassion doesn't arise when we're pushing away pain, others or ourselves. It's a connection.

And it just blew him away to see, to feel that possibility, that completely other way of relating in a situation. It really showed him a whole other possibility in his own assessment of his own internal experience and what was possible for himself. He would have previously not thought that was possible for him. "I'm a person who can't feel that level of compassion." The ideas we hold about ourselves based on non-continuous attention, based on not really seeing the truth of how things are.

So we don't have the conscious power really to decide what we want to see. And some of you have even said that in a different way coming into the interviews – "I came here with the idea that I was going to work on this particular issue." Maybe it's a huge issue in your life, or maybe it's the way practice was. Like someone said, "I always want to come to retreat and pick up right where I left off at the last retreat." We do that. Good place. We forgot. We forgot the first days, right? Which is a good function of bad memory, because it gets us back... Every retreat I start, it's like, "Oh God, right – that first day. I forgot."

But anyway, people come and think, "I'm going to work on my grief" or whatever, or this situation in life. But it's not coming up. It's not coming up. And we decide, "I think I really want to work on seeing impermanence today."

We might decide, "I'm going to see impermanence wherever I look." And you can sort of do that, incline your mind in that direction. But it may be a day when judging and aversion is what's actually up. Yes, you can see the impermanence of judging and aversion—you can. But we can't control what we're going to see. We don't have that conscious power. And that wanting to control is actually a clinging that again freezes experience, that doesn't allow for the unexpected insight, the shift of perception to arise.

So, for example, we can read about emptiness, get some idea of it, and then we start looking in our practice for that. That looking alone, I can guarantee, is going to preclude noticing emptiness—whatever the heck that is—because whatever idea we have about it is already too much, and then we're looking for that idea on top of it. Looking for is the best way not to see anything.

Krishnamurti's phrase "freedom from the known" speaks to this so truly. That's what mindfulness, bare attention, just a moment of it, truly is: a total presence that's free from the known and so open for fresh discovery. Open just to meet this moment completely new and fresh, completely free from the known.

The deepest patterns or misperceptions—I would say—that the Buddha spoke of often, the ones that are hardest to see through because we misperceive so steadily, are what the Buddha often talked of as the three characteristics. We perceive what is constantly changing, what is impermanent, as permanent or lasting. We all know we do this intellectually, but this misperception is on a cellular level almost. Or we perceive what is constantly changing, what can never give us any lasting satisfaction or happiness, as satisfying, as what's going to make us happy. And we perceive what is not self, what is basically out of control, as somehow being me—a lasting, permanent me—or belonging to me, and thus in some way subject to control.

Now all of these things—what is changing, what is essentially unsatisfying because it's changing, what is out of control, not self—that's everything that we can experience, mind and body. Everything fits those three characteristics. All phenomena that come and go.

And because we don't just hold on to those perceptions—they're arising moment to moment—and we don't even notice they're arising because it's so familiar, we generally just don't even think about it. It's just how things are.

All the struggle with the sense of self, and "How can there be no self?"—as soon as we talk about anattā, the questions arise: "Well, if I'm not self, who decided to come here? If there's no self, who's eating? How would I go to work? How would I know which family to go back to if there's no self?" All that kind of questioning arises because it's such a foreign concept to us, because we're continually, unconsciously reinforcing the sense of permanence, the sense of me back here driving the show, the sense that somewhere there's some experience that is reliable and comfortable, that's going to give me ease and peace, some experience that I can hold on to for satisfaction.

That's just so much an unconscious part of us until we begin to meet our moment-to-moment experience freshly, that it's really hard to see through. And just deciding, "I know intellectually that things change, so I'm ready to see through it. I'm ready now. I get it. I'm ready to put down my misperceptions of permanence. From now on, I'm living in the now. Constant change!"—we've probably tried that. It might work for a moment or two. But then it's just so habitual that we perceive the other way.

And sometimes on retreat, this is why the continuity of attention, of awareness, is so important—because it's in the steadiness moment after moment that constant change begins to reveal itself. You can't hide from it.

The fact that things are out of control—is that a big surprise when you think about it? If you think about any sitting you've had, is it news that the experience of the sitting was out of your control? Have you ever, ever been able to sit down and totally control what happened in a sitting? But have you given up somewhere? No?

When your sitting's going really well and then suddenly it goes south—I'm not sure why that's an expression for bad; I apologize to Southerners, my parents are Southerners too—but anyway, when the sitting goes south, do we still tend to think, "What did I do wrong?" Or do we go, "Of course, everything's in constant change and flux, so it's changed. Next moment." Once in a while, maybe. But generally, the first thought is, "I should be able to control it, and I've done something wrong." Hence, the pleasantness has changed.

And so the steadiness of attention begins to allow more and more opportunities for an alternate, more accurate perception.

Sometimes that perception—say, of *anicca*—I'll use *anicca* as an example because it's a good one. Intellectually, conceptually, the fact that things are in constant change isn't really a hard concept to wrap around, is it? It's not like *anattā*. Basically, we would all agree. But cellularly, the way we actually live—what would it mean to really, really live knowing that every moment is in constant change? To really live from that, not clinging to something that we know is already changing. That would be so different.

Many experiences, many insights can come into impermanence, and they can be at times very peaceful, very energizing. Sometimes after an insight you get a lot of energy, really inspired. And sometimes it can actually be quite frightening. It can go all ways.

One example: just this last retreat I was sitting, eating and chewing very carefully. I wasn't looking for insights into impermanence or anything. I was just really present with eating and enjoying whatever it was. Chewing it, and then I swallowed it. It was just one of those moments where as soon as I swallowed, it was so clearly gone. Do you know what I mean? It was just gone. It wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere. It was gone. I know it sounds silly, but then I thought, "Well, not gone—you can feel it in the throat." No, that's a thought. That actual food taste, that moment, is totally, irrevocably gone. Can't be back.

And that's how it is with every moment. It's there, and then that moment is irrevocably gone. The next moment, maybe I could feel something here, but that's not the food that was in my mouth. That's not the taste I was tasting. It's just a thought that says, "Oh, that's the food now working with the saliva and going down into my throat." And that thought, if we don't see it as a thought arising in the moment, we don't see impermanence. We see there's the food and now it's changed and it's going down my throat, and there's this whole nice sense of continuity, and behind it all is me experiencing that.

So just that moment of gone-ness—it was great. I loved it. Wow. And without thinking a lot about it, I just naturally started to notice how one moment just falls away and the next moment falls away. It didn't last all day or anything, but it was a real insight, the kind that is just peaceful and so obviously true that we're resting. It's easy.

But often, sometimes people have an experience when there's some concentration where the sense of the form of the body falls away, and it's just sensations arising in space, or no sense of the body at all. Or some really difficult emotions are there, and it's so "me," and then it just vanishes, and it's so confusing to have it gone. Even though at first it's far out, there's such a dissonance with our normal way of being that really

quickly the normal views and opinions, the normal way of perceiving things, come back in with a vengeance. You've had this opening, and then fear, fear. Or the fear has the function of shutting the mind down, and everything's solid again right away. Nothing you can do about it. It just happens. Then you spend three weeks trying to get to that place where the body's open and it's just sensation. So what? But that kind of dissonance—because we don't really realize how subtle and deep these misperceptions are, how deeply entrained in the process of noticing.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama pointed out once, when I was listening to a teaching of his on impermanence, one of the reasons that even though on an intellectual level we get it—why is it that we still get so shocked when things change? Why is it we still keep holding on? It's that on some level, we tend to think of impermanence as: things arise, they last for a while, and then they pass away. So it can be: my life arises, lasts for a while, and passes away.

The sitting starts, lasts for a while, it passes away. Or this emotion, or my knee pain, or whatever—this day. But really, if it's something we like, it's just that the passing away happens before we were ready for it to. So I know it's going to pass, but it has this much more time it should go before it passes. Then I can let it go, but not now.

My parents are quite elderly, and when they started to really decline—my father got Parkinson's—it was such a shock. And I saw how really, on one level, I could say, well, of course, you turn eighty-three, stuff happens. But on another level, emotionally, cellularly, my body and mind wasn't quite accepting it. How can this be? It's like a kind of shock.

So his point, His Holiness's point, is that there isn't some steady state time between when something arises and when it passes. Change is momentary. Every moment is flux. Every moment of life is arising and passing, arising and passing. And like someone pointed out to me after I said this in a talk, there's nine billion plus nanoseconds in one second. That's a lot. Nine billion plus in one second. That's a lot of moments coming and going.

One of the things that happens in retreat as the mind gets quieter is that sometimes you start to see. One of the first insights is how fast the mind moves. If you're feeling overwhelmed by how many thoughts there are and how fast they're moving and how out of control they are—that's insight into impermanence, into dukkha, and into anattā. Right there. Welcome to insight. Your mind is out of control. It moves at an unbelievable rate of speed. It's changing faster than we can notice it. And that's not a mistake. That's

the way life is. Not just now, not just because your mind's a little quieter. It's always how it is. It's not that once we have an insight into impermanence, things change and get impermanent. They've always been. It's always in constant flux. It's always out of control.

That feeling we get of being a square peg in a round hole, that dissonance when we have an insight—that dissonance is because of our kind of unconscious holding on. No, no, no. Let it change, but not so fast. Let this sense of being out of control... I know there's some way I can get to a place where it's controlled.

Personally, in my own experience, I find this in terms of anicca—staying with anicca, the fact that even as much as we know it intellectually, and as much as we experience the complexity, the unceasing change, how fast things are moving. And I know that, cellularly. I've experienced it in many different ways, millions of times, on and off retreat. I know it. It's the kind of thing I know. And still, still, when something unexpected happens or something I really love goes away or changes, there's a shorter or longer period of time where I think, no, this can't go. Why?

So why do we cling? It's so poignant because it's the clinging in service of trying to be happy that's actually keeping the suffering going. It's keeping us in delusion, the confusion of seeing ourselves and the world all wrong. And it's as if we believe that if we really see how much things change, the sadness will be too unbearable. The pain is too much. But it's just the opposite, isn't it? It's the refusing, the trying to deny it, that keeps the pain going. But it's so hard.

It's so poignant. Looking in myself and talking to people, my sense is that the clinging—whether it's to sense experience, to objects, or to having a particular internal experience, or to people in our lives, or to images we hold of ourselves, even suffering ones, particularly suffering ones—we really hold on. "This is who I am. This self-conscious person, this shameful person, this aversive person. I know this is who I am. I could never feel compassion like that. Maybe that guy did, but I never could. I just beat myself up all the time."

Why do we cling? And I see that sense of really letting go into the total flux. Once we've actually totally let go into it, there's not a me resisting. It's not a problem. It's just opening to the mystery of each moment. It's wonderful. But on the way, that shaky ground, that place of unreliability—I find for myself it's so scary on some level that the clinging is like looking for somewhere to rest.

Have you ever been in an earthquake? It's strange, because you want to hold on to something to find solidity, but it's the earth that's moving. There's nothing anywhere to hold on to. It's like, "Well, this isn't supposed to happen. The earth, at least, is supposed

to be reliable. Something, somewhere." And it was really like a cellular experience of, "Oh my God, everything's all topsy-turvy." The mind doesn't like it too much. And we put so much reliance and identification into our mind, into our thoughts, into our descriptions.

So I find this grasping for something—a moment of pleasure, a description of the world, a description of myself, a view, an opinion, a sense of knowing what this means. As soon as your practice changes: "Oh, I was holding on to that, but now it's like this. Now I know what good mindfulness is like." Looking for somewhere to rest.

The Buddha said—I love this quotation—"The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful.

So we can't decide to see impermanence. But we can have the willingness to use the tools of the meditation practice and the continuity, the willingness to keep bringing that clear attention back moment after moment just to what's happening. And guess what? You can't not notice impermanence, because nothing lasts very long.

That really intense pain that's been there all day—if you really look, even if the pain seems to stay when you bring the attention into it, it's not steady state. There's changing in it. That bad mood, that anguish or that fear—if you really moment after moment look, it's there. Then it changes. The fear slides into impatience. It slides into terror. It slides into some whole story about the past, and it's not fear at all. It slides into wondering what's for lunch. It slides into boredom. It slides into—three hours later—"this fear." "Oh yes, this fear's been here all day. That's who I am, a fearful person."

Without a continuity of mindfulness, we don't notice how fast these thoughts and emotions come and go. And we just, without the steadiness of attention, don't realize how we kind of subconsciously dance away from the dissonance, the discomfort, the poignance, or the sadness of the changing nature of things, of seeing that there's nothing to hold on to.

But touching that poignance, that sadness, is what opens us up to the totality of life, to really living. I feel like it's living in three dimensions rather than in two—opening into the total mysteriousness that we never know what's going to happen in the next moment. Do we ever, really? It's more amazing that we have this schedule and ring the bells and you all show up and it sort of happens. That's actually more amazing, you know.

But really, we never know what's going to happen in the next moment. And opening to the poignance, opening to the willingness to feel the movement of things, the changing of things, the moving away of things—it actually opens us into love. Love of the moment. Love of this moment of life. Appreciation for all aspects. A real celebration of the mystery that we never know what is going to happen. Appreciation and love for each other—not the appreciation of holding on because your presence is going to make me happy, but just the appreciation of here we are, and who knows what's going to happen in the next moment.

I just want to close by reading some stanzas from a poem by Galway Kinnell, because to me it really expresses the feeling of impermanence—the sadness, the denial, and how the acceptance of it opens us to the exquisite wonder and beauty of life and love.

It's called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight."

You cry, waking from a nightmare.

When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard as if clinging could save us.

I think that you think I will never die. I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars, even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.

I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down." I have stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die," little maud. And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry, this the nightmare you wake crying from—being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

Yes, you cling because I, like you, only sooner than you, will go down the path of vanished alphabets, the roadlessness to the other side of the darkness, your arms like the shoes left behind, like the adjectives in the halting speech of very old men, which used to be able to call up the forgotten nouns.

Back you go into your crib. The last blackbird lights up his gold wings. Farewell.

Your eyes close inside your head in sleep. Already in your dreams the hours begin to sing.

Little sleep's head sprouting hair in the moonlight, when I come back, we will go out together. We will walk out together among the ten thousand things, each scratched in time with such knowledge—the wages of dying is love.

CHAPTER 360

Habits of Mind

Carol Wilson · 55 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson draws from her experience practicing and teaching in Burma to illuminate what it means to bring wise attitude to meditation practice. She reflects on how practicing within a culture that venerates the Dhamma provides a supportive container for practice, while acknowledging that Western practitioners often go against the cultural stream.

Wilson explores the Buddha's core teaching of dukkha and its cessation, emphasizing that our suffering stems not from difficult experiences themselves, but from our habitual reactions to them. She references Bhikkhu Bodhi's insight that most of our habits revolve around enjoying pleasure, avoiding pain, and preserving the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. Through Āyya Khemā's teachings, she explains how we constantly seek to fill an inner void through sense contacts—a strategy that never truly succeeds.

The heart of the teaching focuses on how mindfulness itself is the doorway to freedom. Drawing on the famous Aṅguttara Nikāya passage about the luminous mind, Wilson explains that consciousness is inherently pure but becomes colored by attachments that visit it. Rather than trying to achieve special states or perfect our technique, she encourages practitioners to simply notice what is happening as it is—whether pleasant or unpleasant—and to recognize the quality of the mind that is observing. Each moment of genuine mindfulness, she explains, is a moment of freedom, where old habits are starved rather than fed, and the luminous nature of awareness becomes recognizable.

One of the nice things for me personally about practicing meditation in Burma, and also assisting with teaching there, is that I feel held in a sense of the tradition, a sense of the culture where in that same place, meditation—just like we're doing here—has been going on for hundreds and hundreds of years. It's a culture that, for whatever its faults (and there are many), really supports and venerates the Dhamma, the Dharma, meditation practice.

It's so different, really, to be putting out this courageous effort, this sincere work—it takes a lot of effort doing what you're doing here. It's really different to be doing it in a culture where the chance cab driver you meet, when they ask, "Why are you here?" and

you say, "I come to meditate," they respond, "Wow, that's so wonderful. I really want to meditate, but I'm having to take care of my mother. But it's really what I want to do." That's more the normal response.

I don't even realize how much of what we're doing is, in some ways, going against the stream of the main culture here. Even now it's a lot different from thirty years ago, but we're still going against the mainstream. In Burma, that sense of cultural support has the effect of allowing me—and I know it's not only me—to relax into practice with a sense of greater faith, faith in terms of confidence. This isn't just some new age, airy-fairy thing. People have been doing it for ages, and somehow it works. So it just gives a little more sense of, "Okay, let me keep going," on those rare occasions when it gets a little tough.

I want to talk tonight about right attitude, or wise attitude, in practice. In the last year, I had the chance to sit two short retreats—just ten-day retreats—with two different teachers. One was Ajahn Sumedho here; one was a Burmese teacher in Burma. Very different teachers, very different techniques. But both of them, their main emphasis in how they talked about practice was to start with right attitude, before you even worry about the technique.

So what does that mean? I'll give you my spin on it. In talking about right attitude, what I'm really mixing together is our sincere motivation—the attitude is kind of the intention, our motivation, our willingness—supported by wise discernment, supported by wisdom. The right attitude we bring to our practice, whatever aspect of practice, whatever technique we're doing, is this sincere motivation held in the crucible of wisdom. Not total wisdom, certainly, but at least some beginning wisdom.

Because with all the will in the world, with total sincerity of motivation, if we don't know what we're doing and we don't really understand things as they are, the choices we make may not be grounded in reality and may not serve us so well. Our choices, our intentions, need to be guided by some wise discernment—seeing clearly things as they are, ourselves as we are, the world as it is.

This is really the beginning and the ending of our whole path of practice. Seeing things as they are with open-hearted, total presence and acceptance enables us to live in harmony with things as they are.

I'm sure most of you know the story of the Buddha when he first became the Buddha. After all his hard practice, when he awoke under the Bodhi tree, he was disinclined to teach. In a way, he said, "People aren't going to understand, and it would really be worrisome and bothersome to go around when nobody's going to get it anyway." But

when he was persuaded to survey the world—all the people in the world—with his eye of wisdom, when he could read what was in all of the people's minds, what moved him to the compassion to spend his life teaching was really seeing this one thing I'm speaking about: that deep in our hearts, everybody wants to be happy. That's our unifying motivation as human beings. We want to be happy.

What moved him to compassion, so it's said in the texts, was seeing how, with the best will in the world, most everyone goes about their whole life trying to be happy doing just the things that keep them spinning in confusion and suffering. Because we don't really understand the nature of suffering, the nature of confusion, and the nature of peace or happiness as the Buddha spoke about happiness. And so he was motivated to teach.

When I'm talking about bringing this wise attitude, some understanding to our practice, to our lives, I'm directly speaking to this: to our really sincere intentions to do what's good for our own happiness. And probably most if not everyone here is also, in some way, deeply committed to the happiness of others, or at least to not causing unhappiness to others. But without understanding ourselves, without understanding what's true, we're going to keep getting caught in confusion and suffering.

Basically, the habits of our mind that we think are going to bring us happiness don't work. It's not that they're bad. They just don't work. And don't believe me that they don't work—check and see for yourselves. I'm sure you already know, or you wouldn't be here sitting for a month, for two months, if our other ways of bringing ease and happiness to ourselves worked. Unless you just love it, which some people do. Really, some people do just love to come here and sit and watch their minds. There are some people like that. Most of us ended up here because we discovered we liked it so much that we keep coming back.

An example from the world around us. I read a small article in the International Herald Tribune about Russia, where the writer was reporting on opinion polls about forms of government—democracy versus totalitarianism, or perhaps they didn't use that word, but versus more control. The article suggested that Russians didn't necessarily want democracy. And that's okay, whatever.

But what was interesting to me was that among the questions asked was: if Stalin were running for president again, would you vote for him? Now, it's no longer a secret in Russia about how Stalin threw twenty million Russian people into prison camps. A great many of those were murdered or died in those camps. This is no longer a secret.

So even knowing that, twenty-six percent of people said yes, they would vote for Stalin if he were running again. And another nineteen percent or something said they weren't sure, but probably wouldn't.

It's amazing to me. Just a sense of—and here I'm projecting—but somehow the sense of security and order would bring more happiness than terror. It's okay if there's mass terror, as long as there's order. That's an extreme example. But it's not that extreme. It's not that extreme. It's the same way our minds are working.

So remember last night how we were talking about the habits of our mind and going against the stream? What is it that we need to know, really need to know, to begin to bring wise attitude to our practice, to our life, to begin to move out of this endless cycle of trying to make ourselves happy by increasing our confusion?

That's samsara, basically—the cycle of wanting and getting and wanting and getting and wanting and not getting and wanting and not getting, on and on, and becoming. It's exhausting. And even if we only think of one life, it's exhausting. Never mind if we go into the Buddhist cosmology of eons.

Once I was talking to my aunt, many years ago. She's been dead a long time, and we were close. She was a Christian, not fundamentalist but a real Christian, and she had been unhappy for maybe the last twenty years of her life, since my uncle died. Somehow we got into the topic of rebirth, and she was asking me to explain it. So I was explaining how it worked. And she just had this huge sigh and said, "If I thought that were true, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear to think of keeping going like this." It was so poignant.

The thing is, really the thing is, the shift from samsara to freedom is just like that. Just for a moment, not forever, but just for a moment. Just a foreground-background shift. It's not about eons and eons and eons of dreadful going like that. That's what our practice is about. That's what wise attitude serves to help our awareness open into.

So what do we need to know? What are the habits that we get lost in?

Bhikkhu Bodhi, the American Theravada monk who is probably one of the foremost translators of the Pali texts into English these days, said: "Remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes." Go back to what was said about this flow going against the current. "After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

I want to read that again. And I just want you to notice over the next days if this is true or not for you: Most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self.

And if that's true for you, the question then becomes: so what? What's wrong with that?

Again, the Buddha wasn't—and we're not—up here to say this is right, this is wrong, this is shameful. It's simply asking: what brings suffering? And what ends suffering? What works? Do these habits work?

Of course, I'm going to say no. That's what I'm here to say. And to explain why, to some extent. But really, everything I'm saying, any of us are saying, is hopefully just to point you back to your own experience and see what's really true.

Because none of this works as an intellectual concept. It might be nice or not, whatever, but that's not going to free us. It's really when we so deeply recognize, "Oh, this really isn't working"—when it doesn't make sense anymore—that something lets go. That's when right attitude begins to come in.

So what is it we need to know to shift this? The Buddha famously said, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering, or dukkha, and its end." We have a friend who says that's really two things. But anyway, that's one. He wouldn't get into metaphysical questions. He said, "I'm teaching suffering and the end of suffering." Dukkha—a better word. Suffering is too limited.

And you might wonder, why does he have to teach dukkha? You'd think we know dukkha. That's why we're here practicing. We want to know about the end of it. But in my experience, if we really knew the ramifications of dukkha and its end, if we really understood dukkha, there would be no clinging. We wouldn't keep on in this cycle.

So the Buddha's little shorthand of his teaching is, of course, our friends the Four Noble Truths. And dukkha in this case has three aspects. First, understanding in our cells, in our bones, the impermanence of all conditioned things—physical, mental, any experience, anything internally, externally—it changes. When the conditions that bring it together go away, it falls apart. That's just how it is.

Then there's dukkha dukkha—there's just pain. If you have a body, sometime, somewhere, it's going to hurt. It seems obvious. How much of our time do we spend fighting that? If we have a body, it's not only going to hurt, it's going to get sick, it's going to get old. We all know that. But we don't really. It's amazing how much we don't.

The second truth is that the cause of our anguish, our discontent, our dis-ease, isn't the fact that difficult things happen, that the body starts hurting, that everything falls apart, that there's nothing we can rely on. None of that's the reason for our suffering. It's because of the way our hearts and minds react, respond to the first truth. Basically, the word they use is clinging. We cling. But I find it more helpful to think that the real anguish, the cause of our dis-ease and what brings us to practice, is the way the mind and heart reacts or responds in the face of things not being the way we want them to be or the way we think they should be. We hold on, we get aversive, we just deny anything's going on at all, we stick our head in the sand, we distract ourselves. That's what the Buddha saw when he said everyone wants to be happy but does just the things that keep them suffering—the way we respond to the first noble truth.

And the third truth, of course, is that with wise discernment, seeing things the way they are, clear seeing, there's an ending to this anguish of heart and mind. The craving, the clinging, the trying to make things different or hold on or deny—it just lets go. Not as an act of will, but because clinging, when we see things the way they are, just doesn't make sense. And we don't have to talk ourselves out of it. That doesn't work, does it? Have you tried to talk yourself out of wanting, or talk yourself out of aversion? "I'm not really upset. It's really okay." It just doesn't work. It slips around from behind and clobbers you.

But in the moment when we really see, "Oh, it's just going away," the clinging also just evaporates. And in that moment, there's a moment of peace. Ah, just this. That's a moment of freedom.

It's a moment of cessation—cessation of suffering, cessation of clinging. That's the moment of turning, just like this. It's not so far away.

But mostly, we're so entranced by our habits, so habituated to responding in these familiar ways, that we're looking through those habits, through those colorings of mind, at whatever's happening. We don't even know what's going on. Struggle, struggle, struggle.

And so that's why there's a path. That's why there's the fourth truth, which is the path of practice—the path of non-harming conduct, of samādhi, concentration and mindfulness and effort, and of wisdom, of clear seeing. But I really like the way Ajahn Sumedho described it. He kind of summed the whole path, the whole Eightfold Path, up in one word: awareness.

And that's the way I'd like to suggest we can approach this path throughout our practice here, whatever particular technique each of you may be cultivating. Whether we're staying really closely with the breath at the nostrils, whether you're working with the breath at the abdomen, whether you're open in choiceless awareness, whether you're doing walking meditation, whether you're doing mettā meditation—all the techniques are useful in terms of recognizing the truth of things when held in the crucible of wise attitude.

So that's what I want to talk about: what that is.

It begins by seeing these habits of our mind and heart without judgment, without criticism. That's wise attitude. Just seeing what is, in the space of awareness, without adding anything extra—without adding criticism, without adding blame, without adding me, me, me. Just like this.

So it begins by seeing, recognizing the habits. And it'll be more than once or twice. In that moment of recognizing, we've stepped out of identifying and stepped into: oh, greed is like this. Aversion is like this. In that moment, what's being fed in the mind stream is the mindfulness, the awareness—awareness of greed.

When we don't notice that, when it's "Oh my God, I'm so greedy. I don't know what's the matter with me. I'm the most greedy person who ever lived"—what's being fed is aversion to the greed, identification. You don't have to get rid of the greed. It's just: oh, greed is like this. That's all.

That's the movement from identification, from being lost in the delusion of the habit, to awareness, to mindfulness, to clear seeing. Just for a moment, just for a second. That's okay. That's a moment of purification of mind and heart. That's really what the practice is about.

Once we're able to be present—just momentarily, but more and more moments in that way—all the techniques are useful to us. Without that sense of just clear seeing, accepting, we can take any technique, turn it on its head, and turn it into a complete ego trip, and suffer. And you'll know you're doing that, you'll know your mind's doing that, because you'll be suffering. That's always the tip-off. It's very useful in that way.

This is the way Ayya Khema describes dukkha: "We're looking for something other than what we have. This alone is dukkha. It means there's an emptiness within which wants to be filled. Unless we see this quite clearly, we always try to fill this void from outside through our sense contacts. But it can't be done this way. Only when we realize we must fulfill ourselves from within can we really begin to take the spiritual path."

I would say that sense of filling the void—what tricks us is that it feels like the sense contact fills it, but it's just for such a quick second. And then we don't notice that it didn't really do it because we can move to another and move to another and move to another, and that's saṃsāra. When we turn around and go, "Oh, what's going on here?"—that's the movement from saṃsāra to taking up the spiritual path in the way Ayya Khema talks about it.

And the other interesting thing about the Buddha's awakening, about the way he talks about it—and this is how Ayya Khema puts it—in that moment of freedom, suffering isn't going to go away. The dukkha doesn't go away. The one who suffers is going to go away. Just for a moment.

And don't think about that. The more we think about it, we just get all knotted up in our mind, and me, me, me gets really strong. Just let it go. But notice those moments when there's just: oh, it's like this. Later, you can say, "Oh, there was no me there then." Yes, there was no me there. Now there is. But in the moment, you don't really notice anything. It's just this—a step, a sound, feeling of greed, heat, whatever it is. Just simple, basic.

That's a moment of real purity of consciousness. It's no big fireworks. It's mostly not what we think we're looking for, because these habits of our mind are so ingrained in most of us—I wouldn't speak for everybody, but in most of us they're so ingrained. This wanting to enjoy the pleasant, avoid the difficult, the painful, the unpleasant, and to think that everything revolves around me. It's so ingrained that without even knowing these patterns are there, that's how we assess the world, and that's often the motivation behind our actions.

And we come to practice—I mean, it's not a different mind, is it? It's the same. So we can get so caught up in looking to sense contact, as I've said, to fill that seeming void, that feeling of emptiness. Without realizing we're even doing it, very subtly, it can transfer to our practice. When that's happening, you'll know it sooner or later because there'll be that sense of glitch—the sense of, "What's wrong with my practice? It isn't working." We're either looking, very subtly and sometimes not so subtly, for the pleasant experience, for the experience that matches something we've heard or read or experienced before. Or we think it'll be cool, because then not only is it pleasant, but it fills my sense of finally getting somewhere on this endless path. We're avoiding the unpleasant, or evaluating the worth of almost all of our experience by whether it's pleasant or unpleasant.

Just notice how much we do this. I talk about this all the time. There's no way my conscious mind can say it doesn't know this. But over and over, when I get quiet and I'm going through practice—or in daily life too, of course, but in practice where you can really notice more minutely the workings of the mind—I'll find that it's somehow slipped in, that I started to very subliminally assess what's going on. "Well, this can't be right because it doesn't feel good."

It's rare that someone who's had a sitting that really feels good comes in and says, "You know, my practice isn't going well." It's more common when you've had an experience that just feels like crap, and your mind was reactive. But you were aware. You were really aware of all of this. Yet it's still much more common to come in and report on that and go, "After all this time, I should be past this. It's going nowhere."

And we'll say, "Yeah, but you're really describing it well. It shows you were mindful." And you go out thinking, "Oh my God, they're just giving me a sop. Can't they see? They train them to say this." That's garbage. You don't believe it, do you, for a minute? We're so caught in this.

But you know, the Buddha's awakening—his awakening didn't change his world. When he spent those forty-five years teaching, he still had a body. There are places in the suttas where he had backaches, where he had headaches. He died from eating bad food. His kinspeople went to war over water rights. One of his cousins tried to split the sangha and kill him. He had endless dukkha with all the monks and nuns, trying to organize an organization. We all know how that is. And he had to spend forty-five years like this, when all he wanted to do, really, was just go off and hang out in the bliss of Nibbana. He could have done that. Instead, he's walking up and down India barefoot, dealing with all these people. That was his life. It didn't change the world.

So what do we expect? What do we think is going to happen? I'm kind of joking, but I ask myself that sometimes, because there's always something lurking back there, subliminal, that I really think it's going to be like. And it rarely includes pain or people not liking me or my personality. Somehow my personality should completely morph into something beatific.

Not beatific, no. I've sort of given that one up. Ajahn Sumedho had a great line. He said, you know, it's consciousness that's pure. We're not here to purify our personalities. That's like a sideline, but that's not what we're here for.

So these reactions have us. It's not that we're stupid. It's not that if we just paid a little bit of attention we could see through them. They're so ingrained.

As most of you know, the way the Buddha described our moment-to-moment experience of consciousness is very precise. In any moment of sense awareness—take seeing, for instance—you need an eye organ that's working and a visual object. When they come together and there's a moment of consciousness, there's a moment of seeing. If my eyes are closed, there wouldn't be seeing. If I'm asleep or consciousness has completely gone somewhere else, there's no seeing. When those three come together, that's called contact—a moment of seeing or hearing or feeling with the body, thinking in the mind, anything.

In that moment, it arises together with a subtle sensation, which is really mental, of its being pleasant or unpleasant or neither one. Mostly we don't notice that. And when we don't notice, the tendency, the habit, is that the pleasant we start leaning into, wanting—and that's where that evaluation comes: "Yeah, this is good, this is right, give me more." The unpleasant, we may not notice it's unpleasant, but ever so slightly or not so slightly, we lean away. That can turn into aversion: "I don't want this, this is wrong, this is bad"—the whole nine yards—and then wanting something else.

And underlying all of that, and frankly, in my experience by far the most seductive and entrancing and engaging of all the habits of mind, is that it's all about me. Me, me. I'm the center of all of it.

Sogyal Rinpoche gave a great example in one of his books about this. He said in Tibet, when they're building a house, before they lay the foundation, they start with a center point where it's going to be. They take a rope the length of the frame of the house and measure from that point out all around to get the footprint for the foundation. And he said that's what it's like—this sense of me. We start from the sense of me, not an idea but this felt sense of me here now, and from that we measure everything. I like that a lot.

Just notice, not with judgment. Just notice. In the noticing is the wise discernment, the clear seeing. But if you can do it with a sense of humor, it's a riot. It just cracks me up. Watch the mind. You're going somewhere and somebody walks by way down there and they trip. First thought: "Glad that wasn't me." There's a loud sound somewhere: "Well, don't they know that's ruining—how could they let that happen here when I came all this way to meditate?" Just anything—bird call, the deer over there—there's a moment of pure appreciation and then: "Wow, I'm seeing these deer. Maybe it'll be like Bambi and one will come over and I'm really nature girl..." Just watch it.

It really, really helps to laugh, because if you're going to get reactive to it, you're going to be suffering a lot. The moment we're watching it, we're not being it anymore. Again, it's this sense of "Oh, I'm nature girl"—notice what that feels like. Try it. We can do that with anything, anything. Awareness can be aware, mindfulness can be mindful of anything.

Sometimes the energy of mindfulness isn't as strong as the energy of the habit. True. So we don't even recognize, say, that aversion is going on for a while. But at any point: "Oh, aversion. That's why everybody looks so horribly, dreadfully ugly today. Oh, they didn't all get up and decide to look their worst. It could possibly be aversion." Yeah.

Turn around. Aversion is like this. Oh, that's aversion. Okay, the object of mindfulness at that moment has moved from breath or walking or whatever to aversion. And awareness doesn't care what the object is. Any object—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, mind—any object is a doorway to mindfulness, to the purity of consciousness, of awareness.

Mostly, our habit is focusing on objects for gratification, and we take that same habit into practice. We end up focusing on the breath—because we're supposed to focus on the breath—but we do it in a way that isn't imbued with wise attitude. We do it with wanting, with wanting practice to fulfill us in some way.

We get so focused on getting it right. How many breaths? How precise is the breath? How many sensations in the lifting? If I get more, I'm doing it better. We do that. We're so focused on the object that we don't notice the mind that's noticing the object. And this is the place of potential ease and freedom—turning around and noticing the mind that's noticing.

But these habits happen so fast that we get really entranced by them. So practice is here to help us shift the habit, shift our interest from object and self-referencing to the mind itself, to mindfulness itself, to awareness itself. Basically, we're moving toward getting more interested in the mindfulness—just in knowing what's happening and being with what's happening, whatever it is. That becomes more interesting to us, more fulfilling, more peaceful than owning or disliking or what we think about anything, all our reactions.

Doesn't it start to get boring? No? It's not boring yet? I mean, I'm really sick of myself. I don't know about you, but how many new thoughts? And if you're still having new thoughts, check in in a week. How many really useful, new, and important thoughts are

coming up? How many new reactions? Is it fulfilling, really, when we look at it? I'm not advocating aversion. I'm just advocating noticing that it's not doing it. Our habitual reactions aren't bringing fulfillment.

Now, knowing whatever's happening—that is fantastic. Knowing. You don't get tired of knowing, of awareness. It's pure, it's clean, it's not colored by whatever we're aware of. It doesn't care. And that is so liberating. Just for a moment.

Remember Howie's quotation? It's the famous quotation—everyone always uses this quotation—but it fits what I'm saying. He read it last night: "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it." The attachments, the aversions, the sense of self. "This the unlearned people"—those who haven't practiced or looked at the mind—"do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands, so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

This isn't sequential. This is both at the same time. Luminous is the mind, brightly shining, and it's colored by the attachments that visit it. At the same time, it is free of the attachments that visit it. When we're focused in on the attachments, our observations, our sense of self, that's what we notice, that's what we're entranced by. And we don't notice the luminous quality—just that pure clarity, the ability to know. We don't notice that because it's not a thing.

We're much more entranced by: "I don't like that tree. It's a little crooked. I don't like the way he walks. I don't like. I want this. Oh, wouldn't that be great if I could just really get into that third jhāna? I'd really be getting somewhere." But luminous, pure, empty awareness? That's not so exciting, is it?

When the Buddha said, "This sublime peace has been discovered by me, the Tathāgata, namely liberation through non-clinging"—

Can you even imagine that? Is that a state you can imagine—liberation through non-clinging? I can't. Because it's not a thing. It's not a state. It's not some end state we can reach and hold on to.

It's just this—moment by moment, one moment at a time, the mind that doesn't grip around or become entranced by our reactions. In that openness, that non-clinging, just for that moment, the purity of consciousness is recognizable.

And so when we talk about cultivation of the mind, it's not that consciousness gets more pure. It's more that we recognize more and more. It's not even a quality—just that. We simply recognize more and more. And mindfulness is our tool. Mindfulness is our vehicle, and mindfulness in each moment that mindfulness is present is actually a manifestation of that luminous purity of consciousness. We don't have to get somewhere else. We just turn our attention back into the mindfulness itself.

Ajahn Sumedho said that consciousness is the doorway to liberation. Don't think about it. Because as soon as we think, it's limited by our mind, which can only think of things and spaces and experiences we've had and things we've read—it's just thoughts. But you don't have to stop thinking either.

What could that mean? Consciousness is the doorway to liberation. "I want to understand that"—wanting is like this. That's all. Wanting. That's what's coloring the attention right now. Wanting.

So we learn to do our practice with sincerity, with commitment, feeling the sensations of the breath at the rise and fall or at the nose. Wholeheartedly, with full commitment, just in this moment. And from time to time, we turn around and simply notice the quality of what's going on in the mind that's observing.

This is where we begin to bring in right attitude. Right attitude allows us to notice things as they are. And as soon as we're noticing things as they are, even in just a moment, that purity of consciousness is noticeable again. Because it's only hidden from us when we're caught up in the wanting, in the aversion, in the self-referencing. It's not that it went anywhere—we just don't notice it.

One teacher said, in terms of right attitude, in terms of how we practice: you're not trying to make things turn out the way you want them to happen. You're trying to know what is happening as it is. Whether that's this half breath, whether it's the step, whether it's the sense of frustration, whether it's confusion—you're just trying to know what's happening as it is. When we want this or that to happen, thinking things should be this way or that way, that's expectation. And expectations create anxiety and can lead to aversion and wanting.

Now, if we think, "Okay, how can I not have expectation?"—you don't have to do that. "Oh, expectation is like this." And right there, there's the movement from expectation to mindfulness. That purity of mindfulness. Sayadaw U Pandita used to say that a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom. Because mindfulness is that simple attention, knowing what is, without adding wanting, without adding aversion, without adding stories.

Just: "Oh, aversion is like this. Expectation is like this. Grief feels like this. Vibrating—you don't even know the word for it—is like this. The breath in this moment is like this. Wanting it better is like this. Sleepiness is like this. Hating everything and everybody is like this."

There's nothing mindfulness can't know. A moment of freedom—because whatever the object or subject of the mindfulness is doesn't matter. That moment of pure mindfulness is free from attachment, free from the delusion of aversion, free from the delusion of self-referencing, of identification. That's really the moment of peace and freedom. It's not the final liberation, the sure heart's release. But it's a moment, an intimation, and it's real, it's true.

I think it's really important that we begin to notice—I want to say *value*. I don't mean hold on to. I don't mean build a story of "I'm doing really great" around it. But to pay more attention when these moments of simple presence happen. All you have to do is notice, "Oh, like that." Not go build a whole story across five pages in your journal. Just notice what it feels like. Notice how it changes. Notice how wanting or aversion or self-story comes back in—not with judgment, just to see how it happens. What's the trigger? What starts the pattern up again? And then, "Oh, yeah, it's like this."

What happens is that we really begin to deepen—and I think our whole life can be a deepening—in confidence in the power of mindfulness, in the purity and ubiquitous availability of pure consciousness. It's always available. Sometimes we can't get there. We can't find it, we can't think of it, we can't even remember it, we think we made the whole thing up.

And often that's what people experience in turning to this mindfulness, just this awareness of whatever: "Oh, it's like this." Whether practicing with your breath, with mettā, with choiceless awareness—whatever way you're practicing—just noticing the attitude of the mind that's observing. Something shifts. I don't know what exactly. I don't want to say you're free forever, you're liberated—not that. But something really shifts. And it's so unmeasurable. It's not measurable on a chart of stages of insight. It's not measurable on anything.

So it's really easy, then or later, for the doubting mind to come in: "No, I made that up. I was making it all up. I couldn't hold on to it. It's not bells and whistles. I didn't get a certificate. Nobody verified. I must have been making it up. It's not here now."

And so I really urge you to find that place of sincere motivation and a sense of trust and faith in your own experience—not in anything I said, not even in anything the Buddha said or that you've read, but just seeing for yourself with interest, with honesty,

with the real purity of your intention to practice for your own liberation, for your own happiness, for the happiness and well-being of others. Trust that motivation. Yes, we won't always do the wise thing because it's not always supported by wise attitude and wisdom. But it is, a lot.

And every time—every time there's just a moment of that purity of mindfulness—not only do we have a sense of being able to recognize it again, to have faith in it more, but it's also a moment of purifying our old habits. Because when we're really mindful, just for that moment, mindful of greed, greed is not being fed in the mind at that moment.

The Buddha talks a lot in terms of looking at your mind, looking at what you say and do and think, your actions—and not so much looking at the actions themselves, but at what's being fed, what qualities are being fed in the mind, what qualities are being increased, what qualities are being starved. I like that because to me it's very pragmatic and very helpful.

So take an example of working with the breath here. Very sincere. You're really dedicated. You're really trying to cultivate right effort. When you notice you're off, you come back. You're trying not to judge.

You come back. You're really trying to be precise. You're working, working, working, working. And slowly that's how it starts to feel. But we don't turn to look back at the mind. It's like, "Let me see the breath more clearly. It was clearer yesterday. Let me get it clearer." We think we're really working with clear motivation and wise intention. But what's being fed?

If you turn around and look, it's not a big secret. What's being fed is either incredible tension, frustration, self-hatred—take your pick, whatever your particular pattern is. And then on top of that, we go, "Oh my God, I'm really not doing it right. Because you're supposed to be relaxed. And if I was concentrated, I'd be happy. I am not happy. So I'm really doing it wrong." Then you're really feeding aversion even more.

Wise attitude is, "Oh, aversion is like this." Who cares if you're feeling the breath? You're noticing aversion. That's the practice. That's mindfulness. It takes a huge burden off, doesn't it? All you have to do is notice what's happening. You don't have to get it right. "Oh, aversion, like this."

Now in that moment of mindfulness, aversion is no longer being fed. Mindfulness is being fed. Aversion is being starved, to use the Buddha's terminology. And as Howie said, how much time we've practiced our habits over just one lifetime. But how many moments of mindfulness are there? I mean, it's not like one-to-one, okay? You don't even go there. We couldn't count it up anyway.

But it's really purifying our habits of mind, that ability to say, "Oh, look at that—me, me, me. Ha! Isn't that something? Me feels like this." Nowhere to go. Just like this. It's so simple that we can't really believe it. We tend not to trust it. I just want to beg you to let yourself trust it. That's all.

And then from that attitude, we can do any form of practice. Come back and be with the breath—not to get somewhere, not to get concentrated, not to be a better meditator, but simply to notice what's happening right now in this breath. Why? Just because it's so much happier to simply be with knowing what's happening than caught up in all this other stuff. We get that. We like it. We like to come back. It becomes our refuge.

And as that happens more and more, the trust naturally grows more and more. And whatever goes on in our practice—it may be easier, harder, whatever—but on some level it just doesn't matter. Because awareness becomes our refuge. More and more and more, deeper and deeper. On retreat, off retreat.

And this is really what wise attitude is about.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 361

Perception and Papañca

Carol Wilson · 55 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines the nature of insight and how it differs from intellectual understanding, using the metaphor of Magic Eye pictures to illustrate how genuine seeing requires a relaxed, allowing quality rather than grasping. She explores saññā (perception) as one of the five aggregates, showing how from simple sense contact, we rapidly construct elaborate narratives about ourselves and the world—a process the Buddha called papañca (mental proliferation).*
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> *Wilson draws on the famous teaching to Bāhiya from the Udāna, where the Buddha instructs: "In the seen, there is only the seen. In the heard, there is only the heard." She examines how our perceptions, often colored by ignorance, desire, or aversion, lead to inaccurate descriptions of reality that we then believe absolutely. Through vivid personal examples, she demonstrates how we create and recreate our sense of self hundreds of times daily, each story feeling completely real yet being utterly different from the last.*
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> *The talk identifies three classical forces that fuel papañca: diṭṭhi (wrong view or sense of self), taṇhā (craving), and māna (conceit or comparing mind). Wilson invites practitioners to notice how these forces grip awareness and solidify ephemeral thoughts into seemingly concrete reality. She concludes with teachings from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche on recognizing the empty nature of thoughts, encouraging a return to utter simplicity—"a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything."*

Tonight I want to talk about perception, papañca, and right view. And after the questions and answers this morning, I'm afraid it's just going to get all of you thinking more, but that's out of my control.

When we talk about insight, we have to ask: what is the nature of insight? What is an insight? What I was pointing to, what we point to, is that you can't get to an insight by thinking. It's not something that is a product of thought. Insight is really a function of an intuitive process—a new way of seeing a situation or an experience. Insight isn't about creating some mental state or changing what's actually going on. We suddenly, "aha," see something differently. The situation doesn't change, but our perspective on it can change because we've perceived it in a different way. And of course that can be insights into our psychological makeup, into how to deal with something in daily life, and so-called Dharma insights—all of it.

So what allows for this radical shift of perspective? Just to give a very mundane example, which I think would be familiar to most of you—it's simple, but I think it's very apt. You know those pictures, I don't know what they call them, magic eye or something, that if you look at them, they're colored sort of geometric blocks. There's no particular content in them, but if you hold it in a certain way and let your eyes relax, suddenly out pops a spaceship or dinosaurs or hockey players or whatever happens to be within that image.

So what allows for that? There's nothing different in that graphic design when you see the hockey players—there's nothing that wasn't there before. And then when your eyes go back and you only see the graphic design, it's also nothing that wasn't there before, right? It's just that somehow you suddenly could let go of the normal kind of rigid way of looking at it and see in a different way. It's a kind of combination of a relaxed letting go—not holding onto the blue and yellow geometric designs—and a steadiness of that relaxed attention. And also a sense of allowing, isn't there? Like if you hold it up and say, "Where's the dinosaurs?" you know, it doesn't work. My mother, bless her, has never been able to see anything in one of these and it drives her crazy. Once we were in a mall and they had giant ones, and everyone's looking going, "Wow, look at this, look at that." She got so frustrated.

So that's how we feel when we're looking for an insight, isn't it? "I want an insight into impermanence," you know, and you're just ready to kick yourself after a while because you're looking for it.

On the other hand, once you've recognized the spaceship or the dinosaur, even when you're not seeing it again, you know it's somehow in there. And if someone else were to come up and say, "No, there's nothing in there—you made that up," you don't get upset about it. You don't have to prove anything. You know that that's there.

So it's like that, I think, with an insight. It doesn't stay. That particular perception isn't always that way. But having perceived in that way, it makes a shift in the way that we relate. And that moment of seeing differently exerts an influence, you could say, in the mind stream or in the way that we respond in a similar situation. It loosens something up, doesn't it? And even though we're not always perceiving in that way, we know things are more than they seem. We know that stupid little geometric design has something more in it. And so that's sort of the nature of insight.

It's not a thought, although God knows we will think about it as soon as we have an insight, and that's what we do. That's our way of trying to understand it and, of course, hold on to it. But the insight itself isn't a thought. It's just having allowed it to arise, be experienced, and let go, and it exerts an influence in the way that we perceive and understand. Something has changed.

In all of our practice, in all the Dharma teachings—Joseph was talking about the mind of non-clinging last night. There were a lot of questions about, well, if it's not a state, what is it? And it's really this sense that we're not trying to create or get to someplace new other than this, but simply to see through our mind's incomplete or inaccurate or limited or confused or plain wrong way of looking at and perceiving experience. I mean, it's all of those at different times.

I actually think the translation of diṭṭhi as "wrong view" is quite literal, not judgmental. It's not "this is wrong view and you're stupid to hold that view and this is right view." It's like we really experience or see or describe things in the wrong way—wrong meaning inaccurate. And so our practice isn't so much about changing anything out there as just that letting go that allows a different perception to be received. And if we think we know what that's going to be, we're already not allowing it to be received.

So that takes us to the experience of perception itself. I want to talk a little bit about that. Perception—saññā in Pali—is one of the five aggregates, five experiences that make up what we call a human being.

And I just say that to show that perception is arising in every mind moment.

So what is it? Just very basically, perception is described as that moment when there's sense contact—you hear a sound. Perception would be that immediate arising: hands clapping. It just comes with it so often. And a lot of people in interviews have said, "You know, I hear a sound and right away my mind goes 'bird call,'" as if they want that not to happen. It's just what happens most of the time. There's a sense contact, there's perception. We recognize it. So it's a faculty that's based on recognition, discernment, based on memory. If we hear a sound we've never heard before, there won't be an immediate perception. But—and this is where it gets interesting—most likely we'll make something up. This is the whole basis where perception gets very interesting to explore in our practice.

So, a moment of perception: sound, bird call, happening all the time. What's interesting to explore when we have the luxury of this relatively simple, quiet time to watch our minds is how, through perception, through the recognition, we perceive, we describe, we explain our whole world. We sort of land ourselves in place and time starting with perception.

For example, the bell rings. Right away we know that's the bell. It's 7:30. I'm at IMS. It's time for the talk. I'm on a three-month retreat. I had a great day, a bad day, a boring day. I wonder who's talking. I like it. I don't like it. I'm tired. I'm not tired. Our whole story, our whole sense of landing in this world, in this context, can arise from that perception and the thoughts about it and the associations and the memories.

Which is fine, as long as we know what's happening, as long as we realize that's what's happening. Often the description, the context that we put together from that perception—7:30, bell ringing, talk—we're in agreement about that context, which is good. It's helpful that we're in agreement about that. But because so many of the perceptions we are in agreement about, that leads us not really to even question very much. Why would we question? It's obvious that's what's happening. The bell rings and this is what it means and this is what I do.

Now, the problem is—and don't believe me, look for yourself—even if it's not very often, even if it's only sometimes, the perception can be quite inaccurate. It might be incomplete, colored by ignorance, or it might be colored by the particular mental states that are present at the time of that sense contact, which, if we don't recognize that, can completely distort—or a little bit distort—the perception.

The basic distortion, of course, is ignorance. It's a state of mind. It's not an amorphous thing that's hovering over us that we have to somehow chip our way out of. It arises and passes, just like any other state of mind. But it's that kind of cloudy, dull, not-recognizing state of mind. I think of when I'm driving and it's foggy at night, like these early fall nights. I'll have these moments—I have them a lot, and it's not just based on the fog. I'll be driving along and suddenly I have no clue where I am. Not only what state, but what country. What time of year is it? What day is it? And I'll really, for a moment, be looking for some kind of sight, something I can recognize—oh, the pizza parlor. I'm in Barre. Barre. It must be fall. Fall, right. It's the three-month retreat. Luckily, those don't last too long—so far.

I know the day is coming when those moments last longer.

That's like your basic ignorance—not recognizing what's happening. Another way ignorance colors perception is if I go around without my glasses on. Literally, I can't tell what's happening. If I'm in my house without my glasses, and I'm a bit particular about the house being really tidy, I'll be there thinking, "Oh, it's so neat. There's no dust, there's no dirt." And I get very happy about it. Then I'm working at my desk with my glasses on, and I start walking around going, "Hey, look at this! Look at this dust! Look at this grime! I thought it was so clean!" I get very unhappy. So the sense of ignorance is like not quite perceiving things the way they are.

It can also be a mental state—say, of desire or aversion or fear. For example, a friend told me about being at work when her mind was colored with a state of worthlessness, that self-judging feeling. You know that state. Not recognizing it, of course. And somebody across the big office frowned, happened to be looking in her direction and frowned. The perception, the immediate recognition, wasn't the way I just described it. It was, "He's frowning at me." Just seeing very clearly that's what it is—she thought very clearly.

Now the problem—and this isn't the only problem, that we perceive incorrectly—but this is the classic description: what one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. This is the classic description of papañca. One complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas, by coloring it with mental states. And these turn into—in the commentary they say—these complications turn into the notions that assail and overwhelm a person. But we don't think it's the notions assailing and overwhelming us, do we? We think this is an accurate description of reality, and reality is assailing and overwhelming us. And this is where we really get into suffering.

So, for example, my poor friend didn't just stop with, "Oh, he's frowning at me, but I see that my mind state is colored with worthlessness and I'm probably perceiving inaccurately, so I'll let it go." We wish! She spent the whole day—I mean, she told me about this later, so she learned from it—the whole day: "What did I do? Why is he angry at me? He's always like that with me. What did I do wrong? I'm a nice person." The whole day she was just obsessed by this.

And the next day, coming in, a little bit cleared out of that mental state, she realized he wasn't even looking at her. He was thinking about some family problem at home. It had nothing in the world to do with her. He probably didn't even register she was there. But she spent the day obsessing about that.

This is perception, proliferation, major papañca—a description of the world that in that moment we really believe, and then we suffer from. And it happens often. It's actually kind of scary when you start to see how often it can be really, amazingly out of touch with what's actually going on, which is much more simple than we like to think. We get so far away from the facts so quickly.

So with ignorance, with the delusion and confusion in the mind, often we'll perceive—say, with sight—a kind of partial thing. We don't know what it is. And without a pause of a beat, the mind makes something up. I was walking in the woods in Switzerland years ago with Fran, and I just saw out of the corner of my eye this big yellow and white thing. And I said, "Oh, what's a circus tent doing here?" She looked at me like I was nuts because, of course, there wasn't a circus tent there. And as soon as I looked, I could see it was a huge boulder with lichen on it. Now, that's relatively harmless. Yeah, Fran said I shouldn't tell that story because it makes me look stupid. But still.

I said, that's my point. That's what ignorance does. I'm not taking it personally. That's what ignorance does. We see something, we make it up. That's an easy one. There's nowhere to go with that. You see it, okay, finished. Oh, ha, ha, ha. But what about the ones we don't see? Wasn't that funny.

We get into clinging, actually, to the stories, to the papañca, to the perception itself. Clinging because we don't even recognize that we're clinging. We just think this is how it is.

I love this when it happens on retreat because it busts it for me. You know, you're sitting in the dining room, you're dutifully not looking around, and someone comes and sits next to you. You don't look. But as you know, we know who everyone is here. We have our opinions about everyone based on very little, but they're strong and they're true, right? And so this person—you immediately know who it is based on some perception, some whiff, some color, some felt sense. And it happens to be a person that somehow either pushes your buttons or you compare yourself to or you feel self-conscious around. So through the whole meal, you're going through so much, all the emotions and the projection and the self-consciousness, and it's torment. And after twenty minutes, you happen to look up and the person you thought it was walks through, going to the dish room.

That happens to me all the time. Until I saw that person, I would have sworn to my grave that I knew who that was. Absolute certainty. Total delusion. And we build up a whole story and we suffer from it. So I like that when I see it—it really busts it. Sometimes we're so attached to our description or the perception itself that we don't actually let go of it.

So this is like a German joke that Franz told me, though it actually happens. Sometimes at night, getting on the Autobahn, someone might go on the wrong entrance and they're actually driving the wrong way on the highway. It just happens. And then on the traffic radio, they call this person a ghost driver. The traffic radio will say, "Between Augsburg on the way to Munich on the Autobahn, there's a ghost driver, so stay over to the side." And the joke is the person will tune on the radio—the person who is the ghost driver—and say, "A ghost driver? There's many ghost drivers."

So you get the drift. I think we all do that. When we're caught in clinging to some perception and the description ensuing from it, it's as if our awareness snaps shut. We don't let in any perception that challenges the way we've already decided things are. Like that ghost driver, we don't let it in. The trouble is, we usually don't know we're even doing that. We really just think that's how things are.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our problems stem from mistaken perception. That's quite a statement. All of our problems stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. In other words, our mindfulness practice, the bare attention—what's actually happening prior to all the stories we make up.

We can still notice perception, so it's not about saying there shouldn't be perception. But can we even hold that tinge of possibility that maybe the perception could possibly, just maybe, not be totally accurate? That it might be another way? Just hold the possibility. And that then the descriptions and the context that we're putting ourselves and the world in from that perception could be like that or could be different. Like the magic eye.

I would say in my experience that the most subtle and powerful description we make up of the world—and we don't often recognize it as description—is that seeming experience we have of me, of I, being some kind of solid, continuous, ongoing being, making decisions, doing things, in control of what happens, whatever our story is. And we spend a lot of energy and practice wanting to get rid of this I, because we hear that that's the way to letting go, that's the way to freedom.

But really, another way to approach it is to recognize that this story we tell ourselves of I—the physical experience, whatever that continuous solid experience is—is simply based on an inaccurate perception, a misperception, wrong view, literally. But it's reinforced so frequently, and because it's so common with us, we mostly don't question it. We don't even recognize it's there as a description. We just go along thinking that's how

it is, and it's so ingrained. We're so not used to looking into it that even when we try to look into it—like we were talking this morning, trying to understand—it's just another way of reifying the solidity of the sense of me. So we have to look in a different way.

And that's what mindfulness practice is all about—looking in a different way.

It's often difficult to have the true openness to meet experience moment to moment without already having the overlay of our description, our perception. When we don't really know, when we can't yet recognize that it is an overlay of description, we don't even think "that's how it is"—it's more like we know that's how it is. Like that guy driving against the traffic.

So the whole sense of our body as solid and continuous—even though we can intellectually, all of us, look in the mirror and say, "Well, I sure don't look like I looked when I was three years old. It's certainly changed enormously." Inside, I don't feel like I've changed. I still feel like me, the same me from when I was three years old. If you ask me what feels the same, there actually isn't anything that feels the same. It feels completely different, but I still would say that it feels like me. It's sort of unexamined.

The analogy I often use for sighted people is that of seeing. We've talked a lot here about bringing awareness to seeing, to the eye door, because for many people—not everyone, but for many of us—seeing congeals so quickly. The perceptions of sight solidify so quickly into the classic description of how things are. When I look out here, I could say "form and color," but what I see is a bunch of people, each of you distinct. I know the names of some of you, I can look at the expressions on your faces, I have associations, I'm sitting here, and it's all really solid. And for most of us, because we're in agreement, it really seems like we see things as they are.

But of course we know that different animals have vastly different fields of vision. How do we know that ours is right, more right than theirs, that this is more accurate? It works for us—that's good—but that doesn't mean it's accurate.

My father, I think I talked about this last year, is having a lot of trouble with his eye—macular degeneration, where you lose the sight in the middle. Three years ago now, the eye doctors did a new procedure called a retinal rotation, where they rotated his whole eye about forty degrees so that the part that could see was more in the right place—I don't know what the right place is. They said, "Oh, you'll see fine." Well, the thing is, he saw everything about forty degrees off-center in one eye, but the other eye wasn't off-center. I tried that—it's really confusing! Is everything now really forty degrees off-center? They said his brain would adjust, which sort of it did and sort of it didn't. But

it's as if saying it doesn't really matter if we twist it and see everything off, because the brain will compensate and take it back until it looks the way we're used to having things look. So then I thought, well, what's really out there? What are we really seeing?

If we take that into the moment-to-moment experience in our practice—which is a good place to explore—we can see how, particularly with the body, that's a good place to start. The perception of solid continuity, as the mind gets quieter, at times that's not the perception we have. We're told it seems continuous because of the rapidity of change. The classic story is that if you twirl a torch in a circle really quickly in the night, after a while it looks like a continuous circle of light, but really it's just moving so quickly.

Another way continuity is described has to do with distance. If you look at a line of ants—like marching army ants in Asia—from a distance it looks like one solid stream. When you get up close, you can see all the millions of little moving particles. It's just a shift in perception.

Oftentimes in sitting with our body, people will have different perceptions. It feels like it's all space, or the outline of what we feel as the frame of the body vanishes for a while, or it's just a lot of quickly arising and passing sensations and you couldn't really locate it somewhere, or it feels inflated or compressed, or it feels like you weigh five thousand pounds, or it feels like you're floating. Just altered perceptions. And while none of them last, it's not to say that one is more true than another.

But two things to notice. First, notice how often the quick response that comes up when a different perception arises—something different from what we're used to, what we're comfortable with—is so often fear. It's like a shot of terror: "No, I can't feel like this!" We like, in some warped way, our little boxes of description, knowing how things are, even though that's what keeps us suffering.

So many of us want the breath to be a certain way. We want the meditation to be nice and tidy. We want to be able to note everything, not have it be confusing, have it nice—one thing after another—and know what each thing is, as if that's how the world is. When was the world ever like that? When was anybody's life like that? But somehow we think we should sit down and it's all nice and tidy, controllable.

And when the way we look at the body shifts, those first moments, it's like, "Ah, no, it can't be like this!" It's breaking apart our sense of the known. But then after that, it's not so fearful. And it's not as if once one has experienced, for example, all these little arising and passing molecules in the body, that's another fear: "Oh, how am I going to function?"

If I really see I'm all space, how am I going to be able to pick up the soup ladle and eat my soup? But it doesn't affect that. It doesn't stay in that perception either. It's like the dinosaurs in The Magic Eye—it just opens up a possibility. It changes something. It has an influence. We're not quite so certain anymore that things are the way we thought they were.

And this is really helpful, starting to bust us out of our unconscious holdings, our unconscious descriptions that keep us from being able to meet experience in a fresh way. Because we already think we know how it is.

So when someone comes in for an interview and says, "I don't know what's happening," that's great. It's when you come in thinking you have to be able to know and describe and explain everything—that's caught. When we don't have a clue, we're much more likely to be able to just meet experience in that moment as it is and see what it has to reveal to us.

With our body, the Buddha said once that if you must identify with something, it's better to identify with the body because as fast as the body changes, the mind is changing so much more quickly. I think he was being tongue-in-cheek. I don't think he was saying you should identify with the body. But just that when we can see how fast the body is changing, the mind is changing a million times more quickly. Yet somehow we identify even more strongly, this kind of clinging to the perceptions and the descriptions of who we are based on mind. I'm the thinker. I'm the feeler. I'm being aware. It just feels natural, doesn't it? But can we look with beginner's mind?

So watching again, going back to perception: notice how from the point of perception—sense contact, consciousness, perception—the sense of me or I arises hundreds or thousands of times in a day. If we don't notice that, we just feel like "I have been experiencing and thinking about these things all day," instead of noticing the papañca arising, the proliferation arising from the particular sense contact and perception.

A simple example: any sense experience. There's the perception of it—it's like we isolate it, dwell on it, associations, memory, I. I was walking outside today, the smell of the autumn leaves. Just a smell. Perception: autumn leaves. That's fine. Memory immediately of my childhood autumns, raking leaves. We were allowed then to have bonfires, before pollution was an issue, and you could burn the leaves.

It didn't stop there. It goes on and on, and pretty soon my whole life is recreated. The sense of nostalgia, the sadness of autumn, the leaves are dying, the winter is coming, life is almost over.

Then I passed the bittersweet—you know, the vine with red berries with the gold around it—which I always associate with an old dear friend of mine who died last year at ninety-five. So immediately: the bittersweet, Mrs. Stenson, old age, disease, and death. It went on the same stream because that's what we do. We isolate a particular perception.

There were plenty of other perceptions. As I think back, I can see the image of the color of the sky, of the dirt path I was walking on, the sounds of the chipmunks. I was aware of all those, but I wasn't isolating and grasping onto that perception and really going off into the story. So I worked myself into quite a fall-whole-life thing. We do that so easily.

And again, it's selective. It's perceptions and associations and selectively holding on to that—not just seeing bittersweet, memory, Mrs. Stenson, smelling the air, lifting, moving, placing, moving on. Now if you watch, you'll see that we're doing this all day long. All day long. It's not bad. It's just helpful if we know what we're doing, as opposed to believing it all.

It's so exhausting, isn't it? It's just so exhausting to have to be recreating my life story with every fourth sense perception, and noticing how it can always be a different one too.

So at this point it might be helpful to look at what does the Buddha say is really going on? There's the perception, there's the association, there's the thoughts—but what's really happening?

He said: "When in the seen is only the seen, that's it. In the heard is only the heard. In what is cognized—the thought with the mind—is only what is cognized. In what is sensed is only what is sensed. That is all."

That's it. In the seen, there's only the seen. In the heard, there's only the heard.

Can we stand it? Can we stand to be that simple? I don't think so. That's our problem—we can't stand it.

But I have to tell you the rest of the story first. It says, "Through this brief Dhamma teaching of the Lord, the mind of Bahiya of the Bark-cloth was immediately freed from the taints without grasping." In other words, he became an arhat, which we like in these stories.

Then the Buddha went away on his alms round, and in the meantime, a cow with a young calf attacked Bahiya and killed him. So he had this sense of urgency—somehow he knew, right?

The Buddha came back and people said, "Oh, he's been killed," and they made a funeral pyre for him. The other monks were saying, "Tell us, tell us, where did he go?" Because the Buddha, with his divine eye, could see people's rebirths and could tell what level of awakening a person was at.

Now, I like this too. He says to the monks: "Bhikkhus, Bahiya of the Bark-cloth was a wise man. He practiced according to Dhamma and did not trouble me by disputing about Dhamma."

I like that.

And so he says Bahiya was awakened. He doesn't go into what troubling him by disputing about Dhamma would be, but we can only imagine—something other than "in the seen is only the seen" and "in the heard is only the heard." But what about this? And what about that? And what does this mean? You know, it's like complications that assail and overwhelm a person.

So from this sense of the simplicity of perception—and that doesn't knock thoughts out. Thoughts are what is cognized. We can be aware of a thought. We can use thoughts. That's very different from believing the thoughts that come through and thinking for sure that they're accurately describing ourselves and accurately describing the world. It's very different, and it's quite freeing.

So notice as you go through the day how you take a perception and run, take a perception and go to town with self-definition, self-description, creating the whole context of your world. And notice how, though it feels like the same "me," it's a different story every time. You can flip from sad—"woe is me, I've never had a happy moment in my life"—to being completely ecstatic because you had a really pleasant sitting, or a pleasant three minutes of a sitting, or you got what you wanted for lunch, or you got there before the eggs ran out for breakfast. Whatever it is, just notice that.

And notice when we're in the grip of a particular description, how the awareness snaps shut and we don't recognize conflicting perceptions.

And I have a body that—forget it. I mean, it's not even within the realm of possibility that I would ever be doing that. But they sound like they're having so much fun. So first, the perception will be a kind of "Oh, they're having fun"—mudita. That lasts a minute. Then there's a kind of "Oh, I wish I could do that." And then I flash back to the fifth

grade when I was put into the remedial gym class because I couldn't throw a softball far enough—or actually, I forget why. And I don't think of it often, but I see when I flash to it, it's warped me for life. I have this image of my physical capabilities that flashes back to that time.

In that moment, that's all the perceptions of my life that come in. I don't remember any times I was physically happy, or all the fun things I did, or traveled around the world. I only go to throwing softballs, mountain bike riding, remedial gym class, acrobatics—forget it. That's torture for a remedial gym person.

But later, I've completely forgotten about that. I'm sitting and I have a quiet sitting, or I read some inspiring dharma article, and I get completely inspired about the nature of mind and emptiness. I remember the teachers I've been with. I remember being at Ramana Maharshi's ashram. I remember being in Thailand. And I have this whole other sense—which also is me, me, me, you know, I did all these things—but they're completely different from each other.

Watch as you go through the day. It's fascinating how we take a perception, just the simplest perception, and the story could be very simple too. The sound of rain, nostalgic feeling, memories of childhood, and right there it's me again. That's all. Just notice it.

One time when I was on retreat, I was just watching how these stories of me, me, me would go, and I had seen a movie before I started the retreat. So if you've ever done that, you might know how you get replays of that movie over and over and over again. Or if you listen to music, whatever it might happen to be—sometimes it's like anything, if this would only stop.

So anyway, I was seeing Harrison Ford over and over and over again. And then later it would be me. And then all of a sudden I realized there was this fugitive story, and there was the Carol story. One wasn't more real than the other. It really—and this isn't like a metaphor—it was exactly the same. Just different images, different stories, but emotions would come up, reactions would come up, associations would come up. It was all just completely empty. Only when we hook onto it and make it real and act from it do we get confused and suffer.

But this—even the willingness to possibly come back to the simplicity of "in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard," not necessarily buying or having to have a description and a context and a meaning for everything—opens us into the unknown, really. It's stepping off the ledge of just being here and opening into the mystery. Not having everything so neatly described in nice little boxes. Not knowing what's going to happen next.

In that moment, it's just totally simple and freeing. There's not even a sense of "I'm freed from something." There's no I to refer back to. It's just a moment of is-ness. That word Stephen keeps using that I can't remember in Pali. That kind of thus-ness. This is how it is. Just this. And this can even be thoughts too. It's not like we hate thoughts. They're just another arising, cognized experience. In the heard, there's only the heard.

I have time, so I just want to mention the three forces that classically are said to fuel so strongly this papañca, this proliferation. They're nothing new, but it's sort of an explanation of why certain memories and associations zoom us off into the past, the future, outer space—while other ones we can really just see. That's fine description. Maybe it is, maybe it's not, and it doesn't grip us.

So the ones that assail and overwhelm us—papañca—are fed by, first, diṭṭhi, of course, which is wrong view or sense of self. Which is obvious, just what I was saying. Take any perception—as I said, the sound of the rain. Add to that how it relates to me, a memory of me, the feeling of me, my third grade, my past, my future. All of that papañca is fueled by a sense of self, some idea of self, however subtle it might be. And that one is kind of at the base of all of them.

That can keep us running for a long time, a very long time. One of my teachers used to say, "The I-thought arises and in the twinkling of an eye, whole universes are created." And it's true, isn't it? Different universes at different times, but in the twinkling of an eye. That's papañca.

The second force that really fuels papañca is—guess what?—craving. Big surprise. Just to give a couple of examples, one way craving actually influences perception is that it is one of the forces that can literally color perception so that we perceive something different from how it actually is. There's a Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object. It kind of pretties it up.

So if you're having a Vipassana romance about somebody, or in your life you get a crush on someone, in that state of desire, of being drawn toward, the person is so entrancing. They're beautiful, they're handsome, they're cute, they're charming. The way they dress, the way they walk—it's all so alluring, and that seems so real. And then when the crush ends, in a day or a week or a month, you come back and you're looking at the person—not in aversion, but just with clear eyes—and there's that sense of, what was that all about? There's nothing wrong with them, but what was so alluring about the way they walk? Craving can completely color just the basic perception.

And from that perception then, it fuels—you know how strong it is—a moment of craving can generate a whole flurry of thoughts and emotions and memories leading actually to action. So I call it the papañca of action. It doesn't just stop with thought, does it?

I remember one retreat I was doing walking meditation and something was going on with my parents. Suddenly the thought of my parents came up, the desire to go see them, and it just came up so strong that I literally stopped and started walking towards my car. As if I was going to drive to North Carolina! I don't think so, but the craving is just so strong. It drives us. You know those times when you're doing walking meditation with every intention of walking the whole time, until you find yourself in your room sitting there having tea. How did this happen? Papañca of craving. That tea just looks like the most wonderful thing in the world. It drives us.

And the thoughts that were ephemeral before become really solid, don't they? Like concrete. It's really clear that getting to the note board and writing this note is the thing that has to happen. I know it. It's intuitive. It's deep in my gut. This is just what has to happen. It's dharmic. It's so solid. That's what craving does.

The third force that is classically said to really fuel papañca is, again, nothing new: māna, or conceit, which is classically conceit of self. It's similar to the first. But remember, we define conceit as that comparing mind. And I don't think I need to tell anyone here how much thought and energy gets going once that comparing mind has taken root.

As we've said so much, the comparing so often starts with a perception of sight. Faster walker, slower walker, more mindful mover, less mindful mover, better dresser, better yogi. But it's just sight or hearing or smell or whatever. And as soon as that comparing enters and we believe it, a whole landslide of thoughts and emotions and reactions and sense of solidity—of the world, of how things are—is created.

What's so interesting, especially about comparing, as I think I said the other night, is that there's nothing steady-state about it. If anything, it's the one you look at that's the most in flux. With comparing, there's nothing steady to stand on. But somehow we get really caught in that, and it's a major force that feeds papañca.

So just being aware of these forces—not to judge or get down on yourself—it's more to respect the power of these particular torments of the mind. When you find that you have somehow, whether for a moment or half a day, gotten really far afield from reality

—we call it yogi mind because it's a little exaggerated, but guess what? It's not just happening in yogis' minds. It's happening in all of our minds in our daily life, a lot of the time.

When you recognize that, without getting into beating yourself up or anything, see if you can just get simple again. You might recognize if there's a force of desire in the heart or mind. You might recognize if comparing has been going on. You might recognize if suddenly you're feeling really strong and solid.

Just recognize it, not any problem. And then come back to the utter simplicity, which is what our practice is. In the seen, there's only the seen.

The Buddha says in a few places that even what the world calls self is in fact unsatisfactory. For no matter upon what we construct ideas of identity, the fact is ever other than that. He didn't say the fact is *sometimes* other than that. Whatever construction we're making of identity, the fact is ever other than that. So forget about it. And of course we can't forget about it, but at least we can say, let me come back to the simplicity. In the seen, there's only the seen. In the heard, there's only the heard. In the sensed, what is sensed. In the cognized, what is cognized.

Can we be that simple? Or to put it as T.S. Eliot says, "A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything." Not less than everything. All our ideas about ourselves, our ideas about the world. It's not that we're living like people with lobotomies who don't know what's going on. It's just that we don't grasp anymore at these ideas. We don't take them for truth. Costing not less than everything. Are we willing to be that simple?

I'm going to close with a passage from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

"To understand the uncreated nature of mind, we must go to the source and recognize the origin of our thoughts. Otherwise, one thought gives rise to a second thought, the second thought to a third, and so on forever. We are constantly assailed by memories of the past and carried away by expectations for the future and lose all awareness of the present. It is our own mind that leads us astray into the cycle of existences. Blind to the mind's true nature, we hold fast to our thoughts, which are nothing but manifestations of that true nature. This freezes awareness into solid concepts such as I and other, desirable and detestable, and plenty of others. This is how we create samsara.

But if, instead of letting our thoughts solidify, we recognize their emptiness, then each thought that arises and disappears in the mind renders the realization of that emptiness ever clearer. All phenomena arise like a rainbow, and like a rainbow they are devoid of any tangible existence. Once you have recognized the true nature of reality,

which is empty and at the same time appears in the phenomenal world, your mind will cease to be under the power of delusion. If you can leave your thoughts free to dissolve by themselves as they arise, they will cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky without leaving any trace."

Just cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky without leaving any trace. So maintain that state of simplicity. Whatever circumstances arise, do not plunge into either elation or misery, but stay free and comfortable in unshakable serenity.

A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.

CHAPTER 362

Happiness and Harmlessness

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching on how beings remain fettered by envy and stinginess—rooted in our tight grip on preferences of what is dear and not dear. Drawing from a sutta where Sakka asks the Buddha why humans cannot live free from hostility despite their best intentions, Wilson illuminates how our misguided pursuit of happiness keeps us trapped in cycles of suffering.*
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> *Wilson connects these ancient teachings to modern scientific research on happiness, citing studies showing that humans consistently misjudge what will make them happy and for how long. She unpacks the Four Noble Truths (cattāri ariyasaccāni) not as mere concepts but as an invitation to investigate our moment-to-moment experience—particularly our habitual flinching from dukkha and grasping for pleasant feelings. The Buddha taught that an untaught worldling knows no escape from painful feelings except sensual pleasure, creating an underlying tendency to lust after pleasant experiences.*
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> *The talk offers a radical reframe: the Buddha's peace came not from having pleasant experiences but from complete openness to whatever arose—illness, conflict, loss—without clinging to preferences. Wilson emphasizes that liberation is found in taking refuge in awareness itself rather than in experience, allowing each moment of sense contact to become a gateway to freedom. This requires courage to let down our armor against life's unreliability and to simply be present without assessment, story, or reference to self.*

I'm Carol Wilson, and it's nice to be back. A couple of you have come quite recently, some of you have been here for months, and some for a few weeks. I probably say this sometimes, but it's really remarkable walking in here. I go to lots of retreats and I'm rather blasé about walking into retreat environments because I do it all the time, but this is lovely. It feels like you're really doing it. It's palpable. Very inspiring. Thank you all for being here. And I know that as pleasant and comfortable a place as this has been created to be, there is no escape.

Coming out of the interviews today, and also an article that a friend sent me yesterday, brought up what I want to talk about. It's really basic Dharma 101, but as far as I can see, it never stops being relevant. This article was a long piece in the New York Times called "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." Hopefully we're not going to agree in

the end that our pursuit of happiness is futile. But in terms of how we usually pursue happiness, the way of the world of pursuing happiness—that is futile, useless, leading onward to more suffering and more confusion. So that's what I want to talk about.

There are a couple of different suttas, or discourses of the Buddha, and I'll quote from the beginning of one of them. To me, it really speaks to the fact that with our best intentions, we want to live in this world. Not only do we want to be happy, of course, but we also—and I'm assuming those of us here would agree—really want to live in a way that's harmless, in a way that brings about more peace, more connectedness. We don't want to create more suffering and hostility in the world or in ourselves. I think I could safely say that for people here.

But even with our best intentions, even if we just don't want to create more conflict in ourselves, even going around here with your mouths closed and hardly interacting with people, still hostility, aversion, and conflict arise in the mind. At least, please God, you don't act it out. But it does arise, despite our best intentions.

In this discourse, Sakka, the deva king, came down and was talking with the Buddha. He asked, "What are we fettered with? What are we chained with? Even though we humans, as well as devas, think: may we live free from hostility, may we live free from violence, free from rivalry, free from ill will, free from those who are hostile or from being hostile ourselves—even though we deeply think this, why is it that we keep ending up living in hostility, with violence, with rivalry, with ill will? What is it that fetters us? What is it that chains us?"

This is just one of the ways the Buddha outlines things, nothing you haven't heard before. But he begins by saying that beings are fettered by the bonds of envy and stinginess—envy, wanting what others have, and stinginess, trying to hold on to what we have, not wanting to share. And this is caused by holding tight to preferences, by creating in our minds and hearts what is dear to us and what is not dear to us, and then holding tightly to that.

He doesn't stop there, and I'll go on. But I find this particular description both very useful and also unsettling. It shakes up the not-so-comfortable-but-we-think-it's-comfortable world, the description or way of being that we have. How can we not have preferences? How can we live without preferences? Right away the mind can start to jump into reaction: even the Buddha had preferences, even the Buddha chose how he wanted to live. Can't you hear how the mind is justifying ourselves somehow?

But he says this is caused by holding to preferences, creating what is dear and not dear and holding on to that, which of course is caused by desire, which is fed and increased by thinking about our preferences and by the ensuing papañca—the proliferation that comes around that.

So I want to talk about this holding to preferences, this dear and not dear. Why does that create this ongoing inability to live in a way that brings happiness and peace to ourselves and others, even though that's what we want?

I would think, at least in my own experience, that holding onto preferences—of course we have preferences—holding onto what is dear, trying to get rid of what is not dear, likes and dislikes, really arises from our deep, truly deep yearning to be happy.

And as you know, the Buddha often said that everyone wants to be happy. We just—he didn't put it quite this way—but we just don't really get how to do it. We're lost in delusion and not seeing clearly. Our holding to preferences arises from our misguided attempts to find some way to really be happy in this life, to find some way to bring happiness to others. But what it comes down to is that we really don't know what true happiness is. We not only don't know how to go about living in happiness, but we don't really know what it is.

And that brings me to this article, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," which is really very fascinating. I'll spare you—it's quite long—I'll spare you all of it. But it's an article about some very serious scientific research that's been going on in recent years. A group of four professors: one who's a professor of psychology at Harvard, one's a psychologist at the University of Virginia, one's an economist at Carnegie Mellon, and one's a psychologist and Nobel laureate in economics at Princeton. So we're talking serious research, not some loopy fringe thing.

These researchers, especially the lead one, Gilbert, started basically looking at what it is that we do to be happy—studying the question of what it takes to be happy and the decisions we make trying to bring about happiness in our lives, all very scientific with scientific method and lots of tests and studies.

In a series of studies, they made a slew of observations and conclusions that undermine a number of fundamental assumptions—namely that we humans understand what we want and are any good at improving our well-being. The studies undermine that assumption. Basically, as he termed these studies, it is to wonder if everything you have ever thought about life choices and about happiness has been at the least somewhat naive and at worst greatly mistaken.

Now, these are scientific studies, and they're basically saying that we base our decisions on what will make us happy, on how we think we'll feel when a certain event happens, when we get a certain thing. And he goes on to show that basically we have no clue. We completely underestimate and overestimate how happy something will make us and how unhappy something will make us. And then we make our life decisions based on these assumptions, which turn out often—usually—to be not accurate at all.

An example: most people, if given the choice—which would you rather have, a broken leg or a trick knee?—people think a broken leg causes much more suffering. I'd rather have a trick knee. But over time, it turns out that a trick knee, a bad knee, although the immediate suffering in each moment is less, the amount of suffering over time is much, much more than a one-time intense experience like a broken leg.

And so he says, in general, we overestimate both how happy having something pleasant will make us and how long it will last. It doesn't make us as happy as we think, and it doesn't last very long. This isn't news to us, right? And the same for difficult things. We overestimate how horrible something will be and how much it's going to ruin our life. And it also isn't nearly as intense as we imagine and it doesn't last as long as we imagine. Sure, it still hurts. It's still sad. But it doesn't have the effect we think. And this is what we base our life choices on.

So that's just a real short beginning of what they're talking about. And essentially, I think that's what the Buddha's talking about. We base our sense of preference, of liking and disliking, of dear and not dear, on what makes us feel good in the moment—generally, what's pleasant. And what we think is going to make us feel bad, or it does make us feel bad, or even getting in the neighborhood of it makes us feel bad, and we run in the other direction. And we keep cycling our life like this.

And I know I've said this often, and I keep finding it in my practice on more and more subtle levels. Talking to people today, I can see how in real subtle levels it keeps coming in—that somehow this misunderstanding of what the happiness and peace the Buddha is talking about is, of what the happiness that's really available to us right now is—our misunderstanding of that, based on our not seeing ourselves and the nature of life clearly, keeps us looking in practice, in life, ultimately for things to finally get okay.

And it gets more and more subtle. But it's so easy that it creeps in—that somehow what we're practicing for, what we're living for, or the unspoken idea of enlightenment somehow carries the flavor of pleasantness, of happiness in the terms of we have what we like and what we don't like goes away. Or of somehow finally being in control and not being the so-called victim of all these unexpected, unpleasant, really crazy things that happen. Or at least—at least—even if a lot of unpleasant stuff happens, we're going

to really understand it all. And so in that way, we're in control. That one really—I still fall into that one—but that one hooked me for a long time. It's okay, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, but I'm going to really understand what's going on.

A sense of control, a sense of knowing, a sense of having.

To really turn around and look at what the Buddha was talking about when he says, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering"—the enlightened one, the peaceful one. He says he does not suffer.

It took me years to really consciously look at his life after he was enlightened and think, "Oh, his life actually doesn't sound like it was any more pleasant in the experiencing of it than most of our lives." He didn't particularly have good health. He had backaches. He had headaches. As you know, he had all kinds of sorrows and aggravations and the loss of people close to him—both family and his chief disciples. He spent forty-five years of his life in tireless service to other beings. His sangha of monks was split. One of his cousins tried to kill him. His clansmen on his mother's and father's side went to war over water rights and killed many of each other, and he had to go and mediate. He chose a very simple life, so he certainly didn't have much physical comfort.

And yet, and yet, he made it very clear to us that he no longer suffered.

So I need, in myself, to keep coming back and reminding myself: oh, having no preferences. You can look at it the other way and say, well, of course he had preferences. He chose to live as a monk. He chose to live a renunciate wandering life. He's always talking about—as Marcia mentioned in her talk—choosing wisely the people that you spend time with. He's not saying do whatever you want, it doesn't make any difference. He laid out a very strict, very comprehensive path of how to live.

So having no preferences doesn't mean, "Ah, what the hell? I don't know the difference. Liking, disliking, pleasant, unpleasant—who knows?" Not that at all. It means paying very careful attention, being fully present for all of it, the whole show. And within the field of experiencing really difficult life stuff, as the Buddha did, within the field of choosing to live as a renunciate, having no preferences means not being attached to having it any particular way.

So when there was suffering going on in his life, how is the Buddha different from us in that way? I mean, I can only project. I'm certainly not speaking from my own personal experience, so I don't know what the Buddha's mind was like. But it seems to me that the difference, based on his talking about not clinging to preferences, would be that he

could flow with, be with, wide awake in the midst of all of it. The difficulty, the beauty, the frustration, the exhaustion, the discomfort of the way he lived—because he could just be in harmony with whatever is arising.

Not holding to preferences means ultimately: in this moment, whatever's arising is arising, and I don't need to make it different. I can't anyway. You can't change this moment, can you? I know we try. We spend a lot of our practice—really a lot—trying to change this moment. And it's such a ridiculous and impossible thing to even try to do, because the moment's already over before we've even been able to notice what it is. And then we get engaged in throwing it into the future and trying to change it, but it's long gone.

But not clinging to preferences—the Buddha didn't awaken into some other life somewhere else. He lived a very engaged, connected, awakened life in this world as it is. And as he often said, without suffering.

So the suffering isn't about being able to change the external world. It's not about being able to have a better body. It's not about being able to manipulate and control our friends or the people that we're teaching. Liberation is really awakening fully into this moment without clinging to any preference whatsoever.

And I feel our whole practice is around allowing us to see and understand our moment-to-moment experience so accurately, so clearly, that our habitual or almost unconscious need to keep trying to manipulate and control and get it how we like it and avoid what scares us—that this drops away. Not because it should, not "I should get rid of this so I can finally be happy," but because it doesn't make sense anymore.

When we really experience with sati-pañña, with mindfulness wisdom, at a moment of sense contact, when we experience in that moment things just as they are, then the need—even just for a moment—the need for our ongoing construction of self and other, of trying to explain and assess and compare and give meaning to every sense contact that comes, in a way of trying to figure things out and control the world, that just falls away.

The need to grasp at the pleasant, the need to push away the unpleasant, the tendency to just space out and get deluded and ignore whatever isn't sufficiently intense to pull us in and say, "Hey, pay attention"—that drops away. We don't have to think about how we should be. It happens naturally, spontaneously, out of clear seeing.

The Buddha talked about cultivating unshakable deliverance of mind. That phrase really inspires me, because I feel that all of us here know the taste of freedom of mind. Really, it's moment to moment. It's not as if we have to experience either no freedom of

mind at all or total absolute arahantship, with nothing in between. We all know a moment of freedom of mind where there's just being fully present, knowing a sight, a sound, a taste, a smell, and the knowing of it. And there's no adding of story onto it. There's no referencing it back to me. There's no clinging or pushing away. There's nothing. It's just this. There's no mind going, "Oh, now I'm experiencing a moment of freedom of mind." It's just this. It's so natural. It's so simple.

In that moment, the need to cling, to make dear or not dear, to manipulate, just doesn't arise, does it? It doesn't make any sense. You don't even think about it. And it's so normal and natural that we often don't even notice it—just, oh yeah, this is going on fine, fine, fine. But then this thing happened, and now I've got to fix it. And it's as if all that other stuff doesn't matter, because we get so caught, so entranced with our reactions to particular experiences.

This, of course, is where the Buddha was so brilliant and so clear in his precision in the way of talking about it. Here we have to mention the Four Noble Truths, which I'm not going to go into in depth. When the Buddha tried to teach us just what we need to free our hearts and minds—not to know everything he knew, but just to free us from our propensity to create suffering where it's unnecessary—the first thing he thought he needed to tell us was these facts of life. The first being, of course, dukkha: the fact that difficult, unpleasant things happen, that everything we experience is impermanent, is fleeting. And not just that it's going to go away at some point, but that even now, in this very moment, it is dissolving and changing. There is nothing reliable we can hold to. That's dukkha.

The second truth is that the cause of our anguish, of our ongoing suffering in our lives, is not the dukkha itself, but the habituated reactions and responses of our mind and heart to moment-to-moment experience—the clinging and the aversion to the fact that things are constantly changing, unreliable, and sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant.

The third truth is that when we really, even just for a moment, clearly recognize things as they are, there is both momentary and, at some point altogether, a real liberation of heart and mind. A cessation of the clinging, a cessation of the aversion, a cessation of this creation of unnecessary anguish and suffering. And that can be touched by us here and now, in any moment, no matter what the particular experience is.

Our practice here is one aspect of the fourth truth, the path that the Buddha laid out: purification of heart, of mind, of cultivation; clear seeing; insight; a heart and mind that in a moment is free of clinging, and that freedom allows us to see clearly. And then that clear seeing further frees the heart and mind from the tendency to cling.

I mention these not as an intellectual concept—"Oh yeah, the Four Noble Truths, yada yada"—but to really take it as a call to inquire into your own experience, moment by moment. I was really struck today in talking with people. I talked to ten or eleven people, and in very different ways—each person in his or her own practice, each practice going on its own trajectory, which is appropriate for that person, with nothing to compare to somebody else—I was struck by how this theme of dukkha, of difficulty, of unpleasantness, and of our reactions to it, continues to be a significant thread through all levels, all aspects of our practice.

And not a thread like a mistake. Not thinking, "Oh yeah, even though I'm doing subtle practice, I still have dukkha—what's wrong?" That's exactly why it's a theme. Nothing's wrong. The first truth is: dukkha happens. If you think something's wrong because there's something unpleasant or difficult in your practice—well, as we were teaching Dhamma Ruh, the Sri Lankan guy, some American slang, he's got this one down. He said the other day: "Duh!"

Dukkha's coming up. Nothing's wrong. It's part of life in this body on this planet.

The difficulty is that reaction—"What's wrong?"—it's so instinctive to us to somehow flinch back. And on all the levels that we experience the unsatisfactoriness and suffering of this world on retreat, on all different levels... Talking to people today, the macro level, you could say, of the vastness and the unbearableness of how much suffering and cruelty and pain there is in this world—to start thinking about it is unbearable. To say, "Well, I'm just thinking, that's a thought arising now," the mind comes in and goes, "Well, you're selfish," and then you want to get lost in it again.

The sort of mid-level of something coming up in our practice, in our personality pattern, in our deep emotional, physical pain body—whether it's deep feelings of worthlessness or old traumatic memories or some deep loneliness or anger. Not just passing through, but the times when it comes up on retreat viscerally, in your cells and your practice. The mind says, "Why can't I just be back with lifting, moving, placing like it was yesterday? What's going wrong now? I've got to be with these waves of unpleasant emotion. I blew it." It's like, no. What's happening? What's happening now? No holding to preferences. That's another aspect of dukkha.

And then on seemingly very subtle levels where there's no big thing going on, but just in a moment where the steadiness of awareness disconnects, so to speak, from present moment experience. You're just there, there, there, and it just disconnects. And in that can come aversion or a kind of subtle restlessness, a subtle dissatisfaction—really the subtle element of samsaric unreliability. And you connect and it's gone again.

When it's gone, it's important to notice it's really gone. Because another thing we do is we hate the dukkha, and then when the unpleasantness is gone, we carry it around with us. Like one of my teachers used to say, it's like dragging a corpse around with you. "This was there when I wasn't paying attention, and as soon as I don't pay attention, it's going to come back." And then—what's happening now?

So the thread of how our heart and mind relates to both unpleasant and pleasant, but particularly the dukkha, because it's so ingrained to flinch away, to turn away, to think something else should be happening. It's really rare, really rare when things have been going the way you like them—which is "oh, good practice"—and suddenly it changes and it gets really difficult in whatever way, gross or subtle, it doesn't matter. It's really rare for the mind to just not have any quiver of preference, not have any quiver of "What did I do wrong and how can I get it back?"

And of course, everything we say, any instructions that are given, always tend in the direction of what seems like good practice. "And by the way, there'll be fear and there'll be aversion and you'll get caught." But when it's really going subtle, it's just note, note, note, note, note. Everything goes away really quickly. And then we think, "Yeah, that's what I'm heading towards—a world of no suffering, things just the way I want them."

But the second truth—again, it's not that the difficult stuff happens or that things change or that the way we think it should be isn't the way it is. I mean, really, how often in your life is the way you think it should be? How often does that actually happen at the same time that you still think it's the way it should be? Not very often, and it doesn't last very long. Then finally it gets to the way you thought it should be three years ago, but now you know it shouldn't be that way anymore. It should be some other way. It's hopeless. It is. That is the futile pursuit of happiness. That's what they're talking about.

But we can only recognize the truth of this—of the fact that the freedom, the peace, the happiness the Buddha is talking about is completely not dependent on having any particular experience be present or absent. That it's absolutely about the relationship, about the clear seeing and the openheartedness that lets this mind and body just be completely open, awake, non-judging, non-resistant, non-clinging, in the midst of whatever experience arises.

That's not something we can arrive at experientially by thinking about it or by listening to it, by reading about it. All of that can help us begin to look. But we only recognize the truth of this for ourselves when we, even for a moment or so, stop our habit of running from the unpleasant and towards the pleasant. When we stop our habit of avert-

ing our attention and pretending to be here in this unpleasant thing, but really waiting for it to go away and for practice to start up again and get better. And I'm talking about practice, but I mean, this is the way we live our lives.

When we are able to be as open and present in the midst of the beautiful, in the midst of the boring—unbearably boring—in the midst of the painful. And this arises by our simple willingness to look, to just stop our habit of running and turn around and look and see what's actually going on.

And this, of course, as you know, is the whole thrust, the whole point of mindfulness and samadhi, the whole point of our practice—to give us the tools of how to look, how to stop and look, and also to help us recognize what's actually happening. Because as you know, we're so entranced by our reactions to present moment experience: liking the pleasant, disliking the unpleasant, ignoring the neutral. And then building—I don't know if you've noticed this, I hope you have—building incredible stories about ourselves around any stupid little pleasant or unpleasant or neutral sense contact.

It's really quite astounding, the creativity and fertility of the mind, of thought process, of papañca, to be able to create a whole world. And if you're in worthlessness, just hearing a sound and having a moment of aversion can lead you in no time at all to a complete assessment of what a rotten, negative, hostile person you are—totally believed. No clue in awareness of seeing that what actually happened was just hearing and the knowing of it, unpleasantness and the knowing of it. Well, we weren't aware of the knowing of it, were we? We were just aware of—boom—down the road.

Pleasantness works the same way. We're so entranced by these reactions and the stories we tell ourselves about them. What this means about me, what this means about practice, what this unpleasant feeling in the breath means about my practice—so I have to do this and change that and make something else happen so that my practice can get back on an even keel heading in the direction of Nibbana. Which God knows isn't here and can't ever be in that direction as long as my breath has this heavy tightness in it. So let's fix that and then the goal is around the corner.

And we believe this crap over and over and over, sense contact after sense contact after sense contact. And we wonder why we're so exhausted. Why we're so lost. Why practice is so hard. Why life is so hard. We just really don't have a clue. We don't even know what's really happening.

And this is from that article again. Gilbert, the main researcher doing this investigation, says we don't even know what makes us happy. If it's difficult to figure out what makes us happy in this moment, how can we predict what will make us happy in the fu-

ture? But how much of our practice, how much of our life is about trying to figure out what's going to make us happy or free or liberated? And how often is liberation just another way of saying happy—getting what I want?

So it's learning to see how we get so involved in our interpretations, our assessments of moment-to-moment simple experience. How so often the biggest enticement, the most seductive entrancement of all—and watch this in your practice, maybe I'm the only one—is that most of those assessments and interpretations somehow make every sense experience come back to revolving around me. Me, me, me. What it means about me, what my reaction to it means about me, what it's going to feel like for me in the future, how it's always been like this for me in the past. We're just the center of everything, the center of the whole world. Every sense experience is just happening to show us something about ourselves.

And because we get so enticed, it's hard to just see clearly enough to recognize: oh, that's just hearing and the knowing of it. That's just smelling and smelling consciousness. It's not quite juicy enough. If it's smelling and smelling consciousness, then yeah, that really makes me hungry. Then I can really get down on myself for being hungry because I had enough to eat and I want to keep the precepts and I shouldn't be hungry, and then I can get into a whole thing about how I can't even practice renunciation. That is much more suffering, but in a very weird way we find it more satisfying—because we're not looking carefully enough.

And I think we don't look carefully enough partly because we need some concentration and some mindfulness, and partly because of this ingrained, instinctive pulling away from dukkha, from the unpleasant, from suffering. Because looking carefully—the part that's so hard, the reason I think dukkha runs as a thread through all of our practice—is that to really open, to see things as they are, means finding the vision, the courage, even the interest, the resolution to stay here with as calm a mind and heart as possible in the midst of difficulty, as well as in the midst of beauty.

It's hard at first because we don't know any other way. The Buddha said—and I know this by heart—when he was talking about our habit, he says: "An untaught worldling, O monks, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

That's basic. And I find it very profound, actually. The basic untaught person not exposed to the Dharma—the only escape they know from unpleasant experience, from painful feelings, is the enjoyment of sense happiness. So then in that person there becomes the underlying tendency, that subtle bias, that habit of mind to lust after sense

pleasure. A lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind. And that's where we spend so much of our life—in an underlying subtle tendency to lust for pleasant feelings.

When we turn around then and look at the essence of a pleasant feeling when it's here, it's like so nothing, isn't it? Mostly in the world we never even hear about looking at pleasant or unpleasant or neutral feelings. And so mostly, as the Buddha said, we spend our lives trying to avoid the unpleasant ones and inculcating this lust for the pleasant and this fear of the unpleasant. Just feelings.

So when we start, and continue here, to have the steadiness of mindfulness—but also the resolution and the courage to just kind of stop running and turn around and really bring awareness to a pleasant feeling, to an unpleasant feeling, to a neutral feeling, should you ever notice one—what is a pleasant feeling, really?

It's like it's nothing. It's so short. It's so amazing that we spend our lives in driven pursuit of more of these fleeting moments.

I remember reading Ajahn Buddhadasa where he says, look at your life and see how—in his opinion—ninety percent of all the decisions you've ever made have been in pursuit of pleasant feeling. And when you really look at pleasant feeling, it's just so short. It's so ephemeral. It just comes and goes like a wave.

But when we stop and really look at this, the first moments of seeing it, there might be a moment of ease—but somehow it's not like, "Oh great, thank God, now I'm done with that, let's move on." There's some way it shakes up our world. Because we're basing our life, basing our understanding of happiness, basing our explanations of who we are and what's valuable so much on this pursuit of pleasant and avoidance of unpleasant—really unconsciously, when we don't pay attention.

And to turn around and just open to, "Okay, I can just be here with this fearful, unpleasant thing"—it's hard sometimes because it really means finding the stability and the greatness of heart to be present when all the suffering of the world is flashing before our eyes. Or when really strong, painful, grief-stricken memories are coming up and we're experiencing them with the intensity we felt when we were six months old. Or even the really subtle, seemingly subtle suffering of just that not-fitting discontent. Sometimes that's the worst of all because you can't even have the satisfaction in your mind of saying, "Yeah, that's really wrong, there's something horrible." It's just like, "Where can I go to get away from this?"

And the untaught worldling, as the Buddha calls them, doesn't know any other way. We're so fortunate that we have a path, that we have a refuge, because without that there is nowhere else to go.

This is what this man Gilbert is saying at the end, and he's light about it. He's saying that from all his studying, he really knows intellectually that what he thinks is going to make him happy isn't going to deliver in any way the way he thinks it can. But he's laughing as he says it. He says, "I really should have learned more than I have. For instance, I'm getting married in the spring because this woman is going to make me happy forever and I know it." And he really laughs. You can laugh at it. It's good. He says he finds it funny, not because it's untrue, but because nothing could be more true. That is really how he feels. She's going to make me happy forever and I know it. And so he says, "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations."

So something about the belief that there's the good and there's the bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the other—he says, "I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense."

Isn't that amazing? He's been doing this for years. This isn't like a one-off test he's been doing. It sounds like it's actually made him really very honest in looking at himself. But without a sense of the peace of the Buddha, of a path and a refuge in awareness—without a sense that real happiness expands beyond and doesn't depend on nāma-rūpa, on sense experience, on mental experience at all—without that, when we're just caught in the world of sense pleasures and experience, there's nowhere else to go for happiness. Of course people don't want to stop and turn around and look and see that it all just vanishes the moment you touch it. Because the mind thinks, "How can I bear that?" And if there were no other happiness, how could we bear it?

This is why I say it takes courage—talking to all of you and seeing it in myself. It's easier for me to see courage in others than in myself, of course. But it takes enormous courage because it's not like we just get to look once and go, "Oh yeah, that's right. Pleasant feeling vanishes. Unpleasant feeling vanishes. So no problem, I can be with this. I can just tune into the refuge in awareness and no problem."

No. It takes us at times into really deep experiences of grief, of fear, of all the deep and strongly habituated defenses of the mind against having to feel certain depths of suffering—mental, physical, emotional—because we think we'll die, because we think there's nothing else there if we feel this. How can I keep going?

And of course, you all know, you've all experienced—but we have to keep learning it more and more—that the actual opening to the suffering in the particular moment is the way into that release, that peace, that refuge in awareness. Because awareness is unaffected, unbothered, by whether it's a wonderful, incredible experience, by whether it's painful, by whether it's mundane. When we can take refuge in the knowing, in the awareness, it allows anything—whatever sense experience is arising, internal, external, mental or physical—it allows that in that moment to be a gateway to liberation, a gateway to peace, a gateway to waking up. When we can just notice what's arising and the awareness of it. When we become more interested in the awareness rather than assessing and trying to take refuge in the experience.

And how often are we trying to take refuge in the experience? "Finally that horrible thing stopped and I can just relax into this peaceful breath." And ever so subtly—ah, yes—we're taking refuge in the experience.

We think, "Now I've found the peace." But we're still ever so subtly holding on to experience. We don't have to flee from pleasant either. There's calm, and there's the knowing of it. Then out of nowhere comes this surge of energy and the mind is talking a mile a minute. "What's going on? I have to figure it out." No, I don't. There's just the mind going a mile a minute and the knowing of it. We don't need to refer it back to me and make up an assessment of what it means or an evaluation. Just in that moment—what's happening and the knowing of it.

But it takes a great deal of courage, because this real letting go of the clinging, of the trying to use experience for refuge, for safety, for something comfortable, for something familiar—the real liberation from clinging of heart and mind comes about when we understand, not intellectually but in ourselves, when we've seen so clearly, so thoroughly, the ephemeral, unreliable nature of the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, of any sense experience, of the fact that there's just sense experience and contact and the knowing of it and nothing else there. When we really get that more and more, then quite naturally the tendency to clinging, the tendency to aversion, the holding to preferences doesn't arise—it falls away.

But this takes a willingness, an ability, the courage to let down our defenses against the fearsomeness and the unreliability of the world. This is the way Pema Chödrön describes it: "When we protect ourselves so we won't feel pain, that protection becomes like armor—armor that imprisons the softness of the heart. We do everything we can think of not to feel anything threatening." I actually think, and I know for me, a lot of my early years of practice was about that—somehow finding a way in practice not to feel anything threatening. We try to prolong feeling good about ourselves. Looking at

color pictures in magazines of people having fun on the beach, many of us wish that life could be that good. "When we breathe in pain, somehow it penetrates that armor. The way we guard ourselves is being softened up. This heavy, rusty, creaking armor begins to seem not so solid after all. With the in-breath, the armor begins to fall apart and we find we can breathe deeply and relax. Kindness and tenderness begin to emerge. We don't have to tense up as if our whole life were being spent in the dentist's chair."

I can quite relate to that at times—that sense of just keeping the suffering a little bit at bay. And this tensing up, psychically tensing up, takes a huge amount of energy, psychic and even physical energy. We don't even know we're walking around so exhausted. There's so much energy available. People wonder why sometimes in concentration and mindfulness, as your practice deepens, there can be so much energy available. Maybe not this time of night—it's not steady state—but it does come. It's because that armor, that walking around tensed up like we're in a dentist's chair, starts to dissolve. And the energy is available for this simplicity of total presence, of pure seeing, of pure being—of simply allowing the mystery of life to present itself without having to know ahead of time or assess or refer it back or somehow control or be ready for it before it happens.

When we can just open fully into the mystery of this next moment, of this moment, without any reference point at all—not referencing it to good practice, not referencing it to what happened yesterday or what I think should happen or what this might mean, not referencing it even back to a sense of self, not making any assessment whatsoever, but just total open presence with sati and samādhi, with concentration, with the unification of mind in that moment, and mindfulness—that's really taking refuge in awareness.

And in that moment, just for that moment, we're getting an inkling, we're getting a doorway into the peace of the Buddha, into the peace that's accessible to us all the time. We are so fortunate to even have a path laid out for us and a sense that this is true and possible and available. It gives us the courage and the faith to not cling so desperately to our search for fulfillment and sense of self in pleasant feeling, to release our desperate fear of the unpleasant as a sign that we're failing, as a sign that something is inherently and desperately wrong with us or the world.

We are as we are. The world is as it is. And actually, when we give up needing to understand how that is—much less explaining it to ourselves—and we give up needing to protect ourselves against how it is, but just have this trust, this willingness to just be

here totally for this arising moment, no more, no less, then we begin to really touch the peace of the Buddha. We begin to understand what he means when he says the doors of the deathless are open for those who see, for those who hear—now, in this moment.

And it doesn't mean we're fleeing from the world of the senses. It doesn't mean we want to hate sense pleasure, or say, "Yes, let's have some more suffering because that's my way to freedom." It doesn't mean we're trying to surmount living in a mind and body. It just means understanding more accurately where the chains are.

I want to end by reading two things about this—one from the Buddha, one from a kind of New Age guy.

So Eckhart Tolle, the New Age guy, says it's not that we should no longer appreciate pleasant or beautiful things or conditions. Of course we do. But to seek something through these beautiful conditions that they cannot give—an identity, a sense of permanency and fulfillment—this is a recipe for frustration and suffering.

And from the Buddha: "The eye is not the fetter of forms. Forms are not the fetter of the eye." In other words, the eye isn't the problem. Forms aren't the problem. But whatever desire and passion arise in dependence on the two of them—on the eye, forms, and contact—whatever desire or passion or aversion arises in dependence on that contact, this is the fetter.

If the sense door or the sense object, the eye or the form, were the fetter, if those things were inherently what was keeping us in suffering, then the Buddha said this holy life for the ending of dukkha would not be proclaimed. In other words, if the eye and forms were the problem, there's nothing you could do about it. So the holy life would not be proclaimed.

"There is an eye in the Blessed One. The Blessed One sees forms with the eye. Yet no desire or passion is in the Blessed One. So the Blessed One is well released in mind."

I really like that. We don't want to hate the eye. We don't need to get rid of forms. We don't have to run from contact. There is an eye in the Blessed One. He sees forms with the eye. But no passion or desire arises, and he is well released in mind.

Just opening to the mystery of whatever this next moment brings—without needing to run from it, hold on to it, make up a story about it. Just there is the door to the deathless.

So let's sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 363

Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching that developing and cultivating the perception of impermanence (anicca) can eliminate all sensual lust, ignorance, and conceit. She opens with the Buddha's striking image of taking a bit of dirt under his fingernail and declaring that not even this much of any of the five aggregates (khandhas) is permanent or stable—and that this very impermanence makes the complete destruction of suffering possible.

Wilson explores why, despite impermanence being the most conceptually accessible of the three characteristics, we struggle to truly perceive it. She distinguishes between intellectual understanding and the deeper cellular knowing that transforms how we relate to experience. Drawing from the suttas, she shares the touching story of Ānanda weeping when the Buddha announced his approaching death, and the account of the monk Assaji who became distressed when illness prevented him from attaining his usual concentration states. These examples illustrate how even accomplished practitioners can be caught by assumptions of permanence.

Through practical guidance, Wilson encourages practitioners to notice the "gone-ness" of experiences rather than assuming continuity, to observe how we fill gaps in awareness with assumptions of permanence, and to recognize how changing conditions naturally produce changing experiences. She describes how the perception of radical moment-to-moment change, rather than bringing fear, opens the heart to a vitality of presence—what the Buddha called "the supreme state of sublime peace, namely liberation through non-clinging." The talk concludes with Nisargadatta Maharaj's invitation to be quiet and free from the obsession with "what next."

One of the three marks of existence in the way the Buddha speaks about things is that of impermanence, *anicca* in the Pali—the fact that things change.

The Buddha spoke so often about the centrality of this insight, this understanding of the nature of conditioned existence, of the power, the freeing power, of our really coming to know this as a truth.

I want to read you a couple of quotations from him. He was talking to a monk, and he said: "Bhikkhu, there is no form, no *vedana*, no feeling tone, no perception, no volitional formation, no consciousness"—that's the five aggregates that make up a human being—"none of any of those five that is permanent, stable, eternal, that is not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself."

Then the Blessed One took up a little bit of dirt in his fingernail, a tiny little bit of dirt, and he said, "There's not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change. Not even this little bit under my fingernail of all the form in the world. If there were this much form that were stable, eternal, not subject to change, that was permanent, then this living of the holy life where the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned—it wouldn't be possible. But because there is not even this much form, and all the five aggregates, this much form, this much feeling, *vedana*, feeling tone, this much perception, mental formations, consciousness that is stable, that is permanent—then there is the living of this holy life for the complete destruction of suffering."

It's a powerful statement. Not even that much that is unchanging, that is permanent. That's quite radical.

One other statement from him: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, that perception eliminates all sensual lust, it eliminates all lust for existence, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots all conceit 'I am.'" That basically means a completely enlightened human being. Those are different ways of describing it—when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

I think that's a really interesting way to point to it: the perception of impermanence. Remember, perception, *saññā* in Pali, is that recognition of what is. It's one of the five aggregates. It's arising in every moment of contact. It's just that simple recognition. When I ring the bell, you hear the sound—"bell" just comes up in the mind. Perception.

So the perception of impermanence. Why should that be something we need to develop? If impermanence is the way it is, and that's what he's telling us, why should we have to develop and cultivate the perception of it? Why don't we, if in fact we don't, really truly know in our guts, in our cells, however you want to put it? I like to think of it as knowing it cellularly. Why don't we? And if you think you do, is that how you live? Really knowing that there's not even this much under your fingernail of something that's stable and permanent?

I think it's interesting. Of the three characteristics—*anicca*, the fact of change; *dukkha*, the unreliability or sometimes suffering aspect; and non-self—conceptually, intellectually, to me, the fact of impermanence is the easiest to comprehend. It's not so abstruse, really, is it? It's not so abstract. We can get it with our mind. And probably we wouldn't really argue about the fact that things change.

But when it comes to this level of perception, there's some way that we tend at times not to perceive the actuality of impermanence, but rather to perceive permanence—and proceed then to construct our thoughts, our views, our lives, how we relate, around this perception that things aren't really changing. At least not right now. At least, somewhere in the future they'll change, but I don't have to worry about that yet.

There's a huge amount of denial, which is not necessarily conscious. Maybe in another talk I'll explore how denial fascinates me as a power of mind. It's amazing. But I won't go too much into it other than denial of impermanence, which is big enough in itself.

The big picture—in some cultures it's not as hidden as it is here. Life and death, the change of seasons, tides coming and going—we're pretty clear that these things happen, that these changes happen. But still, when it actually happens to us or someone we're close to, there's this response: "Wait, wait, this isn't supposed to happen." There's a kind of denial, at least in the culture I grew up in, a way that these big changes aren't included as a natural part of life.

When I was in Burma this January, helping to teach a three-week retreat in Sagaing, near Mandalay, we stayed at the Chanmyay Monastery, a beautiful spot right above the Irrawaddy River. One day, the other teachers and managers—five or six of us—were taking a walk along the river. Just down from the monastery, about a five-minute walk, there was a whole bunch of people gathered, maybe a hundred people, up on the wall looking down at the river, going down into the river. There were some nuns from the neighboring nunnery that we're friends with, and they came running toward us.

We went up and asked them what was going on. One of our friends is the translator, so he speaks fluent Burmese. They explained that four or five young novice monks had been playing down in the river. A lot of young boys, from age eight or nine up to their early teens, become novice monks and live in monasteries. For some of them, it's the only way they get to go to school. So there are a lot of them, and they're always playing.

Several of them had been playing down in the river, and one of them—who it turned out had only come to this town from far away a week ago, so he wasn't used to the river—had gone under and hadn't come back up. It had been quite a while, like an hour, and they were all looking for him.

While we waited there, a small little nun named Yeti came running over. She's about six years old now, and they wear pink robes in Burma. She's so cute—she's the cutest nun in the world. We've known her for a few years, so she recognized us. She was there with some of the nuns who had gathered.

They found the boy, brought him up, and took him across the road to a big sala—a large open-air pavilion. It had been an hour; pretty clearly he was dead. They tried to revive him but couldn't. Then they brought a bed, laid him on this really nice wooden frame, brought down clean cloth to lay him on, put him in clean robes, and covered him. And monks sat there with him, chanting.

It was this very natural part of life. Yes, it was sad. People were upset. The little nun Yeti was upset—she knew him. And then some of the elder nuns came and got her and talked to her, and she was there too, chanting. His family lived about 24 hours away, so someone was going to stay there with him all night. Different people stayed and took turns through the night.

They also noticed that the other young boys who had been playing with him had, of course, gotten scared and run away. So they worried about them and went off looking for them because they knew they'd also be upset.

There was just this sense of—it was as sad as it would be for anybody. It was really sad, but it was included as part of life.

I thought about how here, if we pulled a young boy out of the water after an hour and he was clearly dead, we would still have to call 911, and there would be sirens and flashing lights and police, and they'd whisk him off. Don't let the little kids see. Such a different feeling. Whereas actually, the way that everyone stayed there for the 24 hours, taking turns and chanting, was really beautiful. It was really beautiful—the care and just the naturalness of it.

One of our friends we were with said, "You know, I'm 47 years old. I've never seen a dead person." And for some people in our culture, that's the truth. I was struck by the difference, by the way death and change could be more integrated into life. It hasn't been integrated so much in my own life.

So that's kind of the big picture. And there are, of course, finer and finer and finer pictures of the immediacy of change, and I'll talk about that too.

In my mind—I'm sure you can think of more—but two different supports for our denial system come to mind that I want to speak about tonight.

One is, especially with big-picture change like this, a kind of instinctive fear or resistance, a pulling back from sadness. The loss and death and change of things we love brings about sadness, grief, or a sense that something's wrong.

Basically, it comes back to the first noble truth that we've talked about. When things happen that we don't like, our instinctive sense is: this is wrong, how can I fix it? And if I get enlightened, then nothing wrong is ever going to happen anymore. There's this kind of shrinking back, a way of not quite even consciously recognizing—somehow it's a way of just not quite opening wholly to the fact of constant change.

Or if we feel sorrow or sadness, it's as if there's something wrong with us.

And yes, from reading the Buddha, from how he talks, if you were completely, 100% knowing the truth of impermanence, the mind wouldn't cling. There wouldn't be that sadness. But still, we don't have to judge or hate or fear the sadness. That's also simply a part of life.

In the suttas, in the stories of the Buddha, there's one place with Ananda, who is so lovable—if you could use that word for a monk who was the attendant of the Buddha for 25 years and quite austere. But he comes across as very human, very kind. In a lot of the suttas, he's the person that we can project onto: "Oh, I could imagine being like that." It kind of humanizes the suttas a little bit for me.

So Ananda, who's been with the Buddha for 25 years as his devoted attendant—when the Buddha basically announces that he's going to die within three months, he and Ananda get involved in a discussion about what to do with the funeral and such. And then Ananda kind of disappears. "He went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost: 'Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away who is so compassionate to me.'" He's basically leaning in the door crying: "My teacher's leaving, what am I going to do?"

And the Buddha, of course, with his all-knowing mind, inquired of the monks, "Where's Ananda?" Of course, he knew. And so they told him, and he said, "Please tell him to come here." Then it says, "Friend Ananda, the Buddha summons you."

So Ananda comes, and the Buddha says, "Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So how could it be, Ananda—since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away?"

This is Ananda, who's been listening to the Buddha for 25 years and remembers every single one of his sermons by heart. So take heart. It just goes so deep: "You can't leave me. What am I going to do?" It's just part of our human nature. We don't need to flinch away from that sadness sometimes, that poignancy. We can open to it, and then it allows us also to see the truth.

So the nature of insight, the perception of impermanence—actually all insight really—it's not that with insight into impermanence, things change. It's not that things don't change until you have the perception of impermanence and then things start to change. It's already like that. It's like that right now. Everything—there's not that little bit of dirt under the fingernail that's exempt. It's already like that.

It's not like if you start perceiving impermanence, everything's going to descend into chaos and you're not going to be able to function. It's already like that. It's so interesting that we kind of know, but it's too scary: "I don't want to know that. It's going to wreck everything." Actually... I mean, we're getting through life, but how well are we really functioning with our trying to hold on to things and imagining that stuff's permanent when it really isn't?

So the shift in perception that happens—that's the insight, whether it's into impermanence or non-self or whatever—is just seeing things in a different way. It doesn't change how things are. It's just like when you have a problem and you're trying to figure it out, and suddenly from left field something hits you: "Oh, I could look at it that way." That's what it's like. Just a shift in perception. The actuality doesn't change. How we understand changes, and thus how we relate to experience, to ourselves, to life—that's what changes dramatically.

That's what affects liberation of mind and heart: the way we relate to experience. We're spending all our time trying to get different experience, but we're still relating to it in the same way. We're just spinning in the same circle. If you're spending your time trying to get to that one big blowout—peaceful or concentrated or empty or whatever you're looking for—experience, and somewhere in an unspoken way back there is the belief (we're pretending we don't have it, but we really do) that "I'm going to get here and it's going to stay, it's always going to be like this," then we're just functioning in the same old way. We've just changed objects.

We're holding the possibility of permanence in that way. So looking at how we relate—that's what changes with our understanding.

Let's examine the perception of impermanence and the perception of permanence. Perception is really an interesting thing to explore. I find it fascinating. The Buddha spoke about inverted perceptions, distorted perceptions—*vipallāsa*. It's like we see things upside down or backwards.

In terms of *anicca*, he says we tend to see the permanent in what is impermanent. That's the inverted or distorted perception. We look at our whole life and think, well, we might give lip service to "it's going to end," but the way we're really relating is: I'm here now, I'm going to be here tomorrow, I have my day book for what I'm going to be doing. In fact, I've been working on the summer of 2008 this afternoon, writing it down and assuming it's going to happen. Perception of permanence.

And the Buddha says the *saññā*, the inverted perception—and it can be just that quick perception of permanence or anything else—that perception leads to *citta*, to thought. So if we perceive permanence, we tend to think in that way. And then the way we think leads to *diṭṭhi*, to view. If we're having the perception of permanence, then we'll think about the experience as if it's permanent. And then the thoughts kind of harden into a view, like a belief we hold, which may not even be that clear in our mind. This is how things are. And that can be really broad—it can be in politics, it can be your idea about your personality—and it can be very subtle, like views of impermanence.

Our mind tends to interpret our perceptions and thoughts according to what's familiar, and then we use those thoughts to describe ourselves and the world, and then we believe that description. What's so interesting about perception is that our mind will tend to just look for the familiar, for what it already knows. It doesn't really tend to like opening into the unknown every moment. Often, if there's not a ready recognition of what's going on, the mind just fills it in with what it knows. So our perception is quite often inaccurate.

It's fun to watch this on retreat. When I was sitting in Burma recently, most of the people there were from many other countries. And it's a place where it's not dead silent, so there's a lot of talking. I'd be sitting in my room or walking outside, and I'd hear a whole conversation going on. It could be in the most likely languages—Korean, Vietnamese, Burmese, or Chinese—of which I understand not a word of any of them. And people would be going on, just talking, and all of a sudden I would hear a total sentence or phrase of perfect English in the middle of this conversation. Really a very complex phrase, and this happened over and over and over. I'd think, "Oh, it must be a couple of English speakers walking out there." I'd go look, and it wasn't. It was two Vietnamese

nuns who didn't know any English. And then I'd realize they hadn't said anything in English at all. They'd said just some phrases and my perception turned it into what my mind was familiar with—some English phrase like, "Well, let's go down to the meditation hall now." All kinds of confabulation. This happened over and over. And it's not like I really heard that. I would swear that's exactly what I heard. We do this all the time. It's fascinating to see.

Have you ever had a time—this happens to me a lot—I'll be sitting in the dining room here, and by now, almost without even really looking, you kind of have a sense of who everybody is. Just have a sense of their energy as they walk past, or their feet, or their clothes, or you've run into them here or there. And if your mind is like mine, you have some little judgment going. You might not have a name for everybody, but you have some little judgment. It's just what our mind does.

So I'll be sitting there with my eyes closed, and someone comes and sits down near me, and I just know it's such and such a person. My whole story—whatever my story is, good, bad, indifferent—starts with that person. I have the reactions that go with that story. I have the self-judgment that goes with having those reactions to this poor person just living their life. And then I open my eyes. The person I thought it was is walking in at the other door. This person near me is completely different, had nothing to do with everything I'd been thinking. And I would have sworn I knew it was that person.

So just play with this possibility. The perception leads to thought, leads to view. I know it's that person, and I know my judgments about that person are accurate. I know what they did, and that's what they were feeling, and that's what they meant by it, and this is what they should have done. We believe all of that. All of us, all hundred of us, are running around making up stories like that and believing it all, from every perception.

So in terms of anicca, one of the reasons I heard the Dalai Lama giving a talk once, and he was talking about perception of impermanence. He said it's hard enough to see impermanence—to really see that things begin and things end. Even that's hard enough for us. But we think once we see that—oh, this arises, it lasts a while, it goes away—that's impermanence.

But this is the trick about perception: that it lasts for a while in the middle. No, there's no lasting for a while without changing. There's not even this much of anything that's stable, that's permanent, that's unchanging, that lasts for a while. Nothing's lasting without changing from second to second. Now that's a level of perception of impermanence that can really start to shake up our worldview.

And the idea of it isn't the same as perception of it. I'm saying it now, but it doesn't really make any difference, does it? You think whatever you think about what I'm saying, and I'm saying it. But right now, my perception isn't really in that moment-to-moment level. It's not that it has to be all the time, though. But perceiving that subtlety, that radical nature of change—which is something that can happen at times on a meditation retreat, it can happen off of meditation retreat—it's not that we stay in this moment-to-moment where you don't know what's going on, how are you going to function in the world if you can't recognize who you are from moment to moment. It's not like that.

But the perception of that radical nature of change really shifts something in how we relate to ourselves in the world, because we understand ourselves and the world differently. And when we really understand the radicalness of change, the clinging—the holding on to experience, to objects, to people, to ideas for security, for self-fulfillment, for self-confirmation—when we really are getting it, that amount of change, the holding on... it's not that we have to say "stop." It just doesn't make any sense. Like trying to hold on to sand draining through. It doesn't make sense, so we stop trying.

And instead of that being some horrible thing, it's like: oh, wow, what a lot of energy was going into trying to hold together this view of solidity, when it wasn't necessary to do that at all. So freeing. Oh, it's like this. I know, that's easy to say.

But what we can explore in retreat is the ways that we uphold and support our inverted perception. We can notice when we're perceiving permanence, when we're assuming permanence, and then that can begin to shift. That requires a willingness to see—like what I was describing about the language—how the tendency of mind, of perception, is to look for what it already knows.

Have you noticed that in your practice? You have a new experience—oh, emptiness! It's like this. A new view has been formed, perception of emptiness, thoughts about it: it's like this. And then that's our idea of what we need to strive for. All freshness, all openness to the unknown in that moment is gone, because now we know what emptiness or samadhi or mindfulness or clear comprehension or choiceless awareness or whatever the heck feels like, looks like, is like. And the impermanence, the fact of constant shifting, changing conditions—we're not seeing that. We're assuming permanence.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said: "As long as you're interested in your present way of living, as long as you're holding on to it, you won't abandon it. Discovery cannot come as long as you cling to the familiar. When you have all sorts of ideas about yourself, you

know yourself through the mist of these ideas. To know yourself as you are, give up all ideas. You cannot imagine the taste of pure water. You can only discover it by abandoning all flavorings."

So that's what we're doing—exploring the flavorings in our mind and heart. Just seeing them, seeing them. And when we stop feeding them by holding on to them, they're abandoned. We don't have to abandon them. They just naturally drop away. And we can begin to discover things in a different way.

The Buddha said over and over—it's one of the refrains in many, many of his suttas—when he's talking to someone, he would say: feelings change, form changes, the whole litany I gave before. And people would say, yes, it's impermanent. And he would then say: Is what is impermanent satisfying? Can that be seen as self? And they'd always say no.

He's basically saying whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying. Whatever is impermanent cannot be seen or held to as me or mine. He says that over and over. And in the suttas, when he says that, everyone agrees—yes, that's right.

Well, I just pose it as a question. I've put this to myself many times: Do I even believe that? Really? Not on an intellectual level, because at this point—I mean, that's a start, because the intellectual understanding helps us look. But at the level of how we're actually relating to experience: whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying, not worth clinging to as me or mine. Do we, never mind if we really *know* that—do we even *believe* that?

Just look and see if it ever happens in your experience that something you really like goes away, it's really gone, and you cling to it, wanting it to come back. Does that ever happen? Because we're still not getting it, you know? Just look and see. It's not that we're bad or stupid. It's not about judgment—just about seeing: where's the suffering in that scenario? Is there suffering in that scenario?

First of all, if you don't think there's suffering, if you like doing that, there's certainly no motivation to look more carefully. If we don't look carefully, we think the suffering is that the thing went away, and if we can get it back, we'll be okay. If we think that's the suffering, then we're motivated to keep clinging, to keep trying to get the thing back.

If we really have the perception over and over—oh, whatever arises in my experience is going to go away, probably sooner rather than later, no exception whatsoever—does that actually bring us... I mean, that's often a fearful thought when it first comes up, a fearful experience. But really, deeply seen, does that perception bring fear and

sorrow? Or does it bring a real freedom? An ease, an ability to be really here now, open to whatever might arise next—the real possibility of living a life that's so vibrant, so appreciative, so present.

The Buddha said, "The search for a resting place is burning, burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." Not to need a resting place—it is cool and peaceful.

Ajahn Chah said in one of his books, speaking about worldly knowledge and accomplishments: "Whatever worldly knowledge and accomplishments you have still leave you in this realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be—and there is happiness, sure—it comes about in dependence on external things. It's not the happiness of freedom, the happiness that does not depend on anything. What is it we depend on? We depend on possessions, on pleasure, on reputation, on praise, on wealth. We lean on all these things like leaning on a rotting old tree trunk. After we lean for too long, it breaks and falls, and we fall with it. Such is worldly happiness."

I just love that image somehow—breaks and falls, and we fall with it. He's talking about external things. But here in our meditative experience, we can have that same kind of trying to hold, trying to find a resting place with internal experiences, with beautiful meditative states. There can be that same habit of leaning on. Maybe it doesn't feel like a rotting old tree trunk—it feels like an incredibly beautiful, flowering, blissful, golden tree. We're still leaning on it. And it can still fall.

There's another sutta—I'm into the suttas tonight—where again, even a very accomplished, awakened monk still got caught in this clinging, in this not really seeing how things change. I find this inspiring, actually, that it still happens with these monks, because it says: okay, we expect so much so soon. It's so easy not to have patience for appreciating the depth and subtlety of our habits of mind, of our habit of perceiving permanence, of assuming permanence. That's a really deeply ingrained habit. So have a little compassion for ourselves, some patience.

Anyway, this is a monk named Assaji, and he was very sick.

In fact, he was about to die, and he wanted to see the Buddha. The Buddha came to see him and asked, "Well, are you getting better? Are you bearing up?" And the monk said, "No, I'm not getting better." He was basically dying.

The Buddha said, "Well, I hope you're not troubled by any remorse or regret." And the monk replied, "Actually, I have a lot of remorse and regret." The Buddha said, "Well, I hope it's not in regard to any of your actions or virtue. I hope you haven't done something horrible." The monk said, "No, no remorse about my actions, about my virtue."

The Buddha then asked, "Well, if you have nothing to reproach yourself with, why are you troubled by remorse and regret?"

And Asaji said—I'll paraphrase—"Formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was really ill, I could keep on tranquilizing." He could attain deep concentration even when ill, tranquilize the body formations, tranquilize the mind. And now he couldn't do that. Before, even when he was sick, he could reach this deep concentration. Now he couldn't, and he was filled with regret, remorse, with fear. "Let me not fall away. I cannot obtain concentration. Let me not fall away." Basically, "Let me not lose the Dhamma." He was really scared about this.

The Buddha responded, first saying, "Asaji, to regard concentration as the essence of the ascetic life is not accurate. That is not what I'm teaching as the essence of our holy life. It's about insight. It's about freedom."

Then he asked, "What do you think, Asaji? Is form permanent or impermanent? Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?" Basically he was saying, "Look, the conditions have changed. Your consciousness is impermanent, your body is impermanent, feelings are impermanent. Yes, the conditions are different and now you can't obtain concentration. So what? That's not what freedom is about."

And this was when Asaji became an arahant, just before he died. It always happens like that. So maybe if we're lucky, we'll have a Buddha come to us at the end... But again, this just shows that even with someone who was a very sincere, well-practiced monk, fear can come up. "Oh my God, I've lost this state. What am I going to do?" Equating that state with the Dhamma. Equating it with freedom.

You get the sense that "everything changes" is so radical that there's nothing—nothing—to hold on to. Not even that really beautiful state of emptiness, not even that free-flowing choiceless awareness, not even the way I feel when I'm really understanding impermanence. That's going to go away too, you know?

Can we really get it that not needing a resting place is cool and peaceful? Don't try to hold on to that understanding. Just let it go through. Let it go through. It's in the not holding on that the ease and freedom is discernible. There's not a "me" there to appreciate it. That's the thing.

So the Buddha says, cultivate and develop the perception of anicca. I just want to offer a couple of hints here. My mind goes in two directions when I give hints like this, because they're just meant for those times when it's appropriate, when this is what's coming up in your experience. Maybe the hint will just help us to notice. But sometimes impermanence isn't the thing that's showing up. So if you all go out of here thinking,

"Now, by golly, I'm going to see the beginnings and endings of everything"—please don't do that. You'll be twisted in no time. It's just like when we talk about vedanā or intentions; sometimes that's not the obvious thing.

So these hints are like something to put back there in the intelligence, in the attitude that we bring to our mindfulness practice. But in a moment of mindfulness, we let go of all referencing and just completely open with full attention into the actuality of the experience. Don't try to put an overlay of impermanence or an overlay of anattā or an overlay of anything, because that's just thinking. Does that make sense?

So, to the hints. Mindfulness versus confusing our concepts for mindfulness. Just the simplicity of attention that simply meets what's happening, just as it is. A simple sensation—burning—versus "the pain in my back that's been here since the beginning of the retreat." You see how we do that? "It's forty more minutes in this sitting. How am I going to get through this sitting with this pain?" Is that a familiar thought? That's just a thought. That doesn't have to be assuming permanence if you see that's just a thought, and that thought is now gone.

But do you see how easy it is for us to take that thought—this pain in my knee or my back and forty more minutes in this sitting—and add it up to a whole lot of dukkha for forty more minutes? That's taking the concept. The reality is: burning, thinking, fear. Just noticing—fear feels like this. Thinking is like this. Burning is like this. "She says it's like this. I can't do that. That's so—" Oh, is like this. There's really no way you can get away from it, because whatever it is, struggle is like this. And each of those is a new experience arising. If we just have that simplicity of mindfulness, we see each one as a new experience as arising. When we're caught in the concept, all of that is bundled up into one big mass of dukkha, which is about "my back hurts and this sitting has forty more minutes to go." And in fact, that was about ten different things coming and going. And that can happen in less than a minute. Incredible change. Incredible impermanence.

One thing that masks anicca, that hides anicca in our time here, is this: as diligent as you all are in really noticing moment to moment—the sitting and the walking and through the day—many of us at least have some moments in the day when we're not totally mindful. Could I fairly say that might be true for some people? Sometimes. Sometimes the gaps are bigger than others.

One of the reasons we encourage continuity—not heavy continuity, but just that willingness to be here, to show up moment after moment—is that the lack of continuity of awareness hides impermanence. We assume so much. Say there's a big emotional knot of loneliness or grief or feeling abandoned, and it comes up and you're really with it,

you're feeling it. Then the bell rings for lunch. "Oh, I wonder what's for lunch." And you go to lunch and you're going through all of that and come back to the next sitting. "Oh, here we are again. And this knot—this is really quite my day's work, at least, if not my lifetime. I reckon this is my life. This is the core of who I am."

We're pretty lot assuming permanence. And I've talked to a lot of people in interviews where I'll say, "Did you notice it really wasn't there at lunch?" "Well, I wasn't aware of it because I was eating, but—" You're laughing because you know what I'm going to say, right? "It's there underneath. It just wasn't what I was paying attention to at that time."

And isn't it often a belief you have? This core, like this pile of whatever you have in there—loneliness or greed or trauma or sadness. When we talk about purification, well, every time it comes up maybe a little chip of it's purified away, but there's this big glob of it sitting there and I've got to work it all out. And even when it's not there, we think it's there.

So I would like you to really notice when things are gone. Not "Oh, I'm not aware of it, but I know it's under there."

That's perception of permanence leading to thought of permanence, leading to a view: "I have to work out all this loneliness." Really notice the gone-ness of things—beautiful things, difficult things, neutral things. You may not notice the moment it ends, and that's okay. But what we tend to do is jump into getting involved with the next object or the next experience.

Say you have a train of thought, and finally it ends. Thank God, let's get back to the breath. But just notice for a second the space before the next thought, before the next thing. You don't have to jump to fill it up. Something will come—you don't have to do anything. Something will come quickly. But just notice: that one is over.

This sounds silly, but somehow this was a big insight for me. I was eating on retreat, kind of mindfully chewing, chewing, chewing, and then I swallowed. As I swallowed, I saw what I usually do—I feel the sensations going down my throat, I can really track it, and so that's "the food going down my throat." But this time, I was really chewing, and then I swallowed, and it was in my mouth, and then—it was really gone. I mean, the food was gone. It wasn't there anymore. It was totally gone. And yes, there were sensations here, but that wasn't the food in my mouth. That was just sensations here, and the idea that it was the food was just an idea. You know what I mean? It's really, totally gone.

So notice that. Notice that with your knee pain. When it goes away, we tend to say, "Well, I didn't notice it for that moment, but now it's back." But it was really gone. Just notice. And for this, the simplicity of continuity is what really allows us to see that.

Sometimes with something difficult, we're afraid to look and notice it's gone because we think, you know, kind of that's bad luck—it's going to make it come back. But just notice. Loneliness isn't here. What's here is hunger. I'm not feeling abandoned. What's here is real annoyance at that person who's doing X, Y, and Z across the room.

So just pay attention.

Another way is to notice how changing conditions really change things. Like with Assaji—he was really sick, he was dying, and he expected to have the same concentration he'd had other times. Well, duh! The same thing happens here. Some days the energy's not so good. Some days the weather changes. You'd be amazed—maybe you wouldn't—but how much the weather seems to affect us. When we have nice days and then suddenly it gets really stormy and oppressive, it's really quite amazing how, not everyone, but a significant percentage of yogis that come in are cranky or tired. And we take it all personally. "What's the matter with me?" It's just the weather. We're not really separate from the weather. It changes. We think we can hold on and keep it the same.

So they say notice when things are over. Also notice when something new is beginning.

That's also change. And then you might also notice how we assume permanence, which I've been giving examples of – assuming into 2008, assuming that this pain is going to last the whole sitting, assuming that anything that's happening now is going to be happening in the next sitting. Never mind assuming that you finally got it right and so now your next sitting is going to be like this sitting and it's just going to keep on going like that, right? And then when it isn't like that, you think you did something wrong. That's a complete assumption. Denying cause and effect, denying the fact that all the causes and all the conditions are changing – how can it stay the same all the time? It's actually more amazing when your sittings are similar than when they're different. Just notice, that's all, the assumption of permanence. When we assume we have any clue what's going to happen in the next moment, we're assuming permanence.

It's actually amazing to me that so much of the plans we make actually do happen. That I did two years ago plan that this summer I would be in Switzerland and Holland and here and there – and it really happened. And you send someone an email and they meet you at the airport at the right time. I mean, that's amazing. And everyone's still

alive to do it. The plane kind of went on time. They didn't change their schedule and that airline still exists. There are just so many different conditions that could change. It's amazing. So that's part of what lulls us into thinking things don't change.

Why would we want to cultivate this perception of radical, constant change? That there's nowhere to rest? That the search for a resting place is burning? I mean, that could be a valid question. Why do I want to look at life this way? Obviously I would say because the other way doesn't really work, but you have to see if that's true for you. Why would we want to perceive this radical instability in ourselves, in others, in our emotions, in our thoughts, in our bodies, in conditions, in life?

The Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace, which has been discovered by him, by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging." The supreme state of sublime peace – resting at ease in whatever arises. So we're not looking for a resting place, but each moment, each arising experience is the resting place because we don't need to look for something other or something to stay.

This sense of opening to the perception of impermanence – my experience in the times that I'm really in tune with it, when that clinging isn't happening so strongly in the mind and the heart, it opens our heart, our mind, our consciousness, just opens it to a kind of vitality of presence here and now. This looking to something to confirm ourselves, to give us a steadiness, to feel safe – it constricts the mind, it constricts the heart, it limits us. It's what breeds fear. It's what breeds needing to know, needing to control.

One or two of you have mentioned a little bit of a struggle with wanting to control everything. It's dukkha. It doesn't work. I mean, we were never in control. See, that's the thing. You're so afraid of losing control – you don't have any control. None of us has control. Why are we beating ourselves up at the thought of losing it? This is one of the mysteries, the paradoxes to me of the spiritual life.

But the supreme state of sublime peace – just that letting go, even for a moment, of needing to restrict ourselves to the known, of clinging to something for security, of needing something to stay the same to feel comfortable. And I'm a big comfort wallah, you know. I like to be comfortable. Our idea of constant change isn't comfort. But resting at ease in whatever arises allows us to meet whatever's happening now with a fullness of presence, a vitality, a tenderness, an appreciation that is so different from this kind of: Is this going to mess up the boat? Is this going to... I've got everything carefully arranged.

Is this going to mess it up? What's happening now?

A kind of flexibility becomes possible in our response to others, in our response to life, because we're really able to not drag the past with us, but to be here for whatever moment is arising now. This is not only in meditation, but in regular life.

I read a biography of Issan Dorsey. He was a Zen master in San Francisco in the eighties. He started a zendo, I think it was in the Castro district, really at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the late eighties when in that area of San Francisco so many gay men were dying. He was a gay man too, who had AIDS. And he started a zendo there with no big plans, but just being very responsive to how things happened as they happened. And so it ended up that their zendo turned into a hospice.

But he says here that it wasn't any plan that they had. He says, "We dealt with whatever came to the door. We started the hospice because death came to the door." You can deal with a complex, changing situation because you don't have to control it. You don't have to force it into an ideal pattern. You can actually allow it to be whatever it is and allow yourself to adapt to what it becomes. Because this is the way we proceed—we respond to the immediacy of the situation—and therefore we end up being very practical.

You get a sense of that. It can be in a more complex situation like that, a zendo turning into a hospice, just because of that presence, that immediacy with what's showing up right now that allows for the ceaseless responsiveness. The way the Tibetans talk about manifestation of the emptiness of heart and mind—ceaselessly responsive—because we're not holding to some preconceived notion. That can be in a complex situation like starting a hospice. That can simply be in the way you meet the next moment of your experience in the sitting, in the walking, as you go outside.

It's a kind of opening into the unknown that really frees our heart and mind from fear, from clinging. It's not that we have to uproot clinging, but clinging just doesn't make sense when we're really perceiving this fact of constant change, how much things shift. Clinging just keeps us from being totally present here and now.

And that sense of appreciation, of surrender into the immediacy of life—it's so poignant, lovely, peaceful, whatever it is for you. You all know those moments when there's just no reference to past or future. There's just no reference to how it should be or what does this mean about me. There's just that simplicity of total presence without clinging, resting at ease in whatever arises. And it doesn't really matter what it is that arises in that moment. Resting at ease, and then it's gone, and resting at ease in the next moment.

That's really the gift of the perception of *anicca*, the perception of impermanence. So far from being a fearful, destructive perception, it opens our minds, our hearts, our lives to so much more sensitivity and so much more appreciation than is otherwise possible.

I'll just end with this one line from Nisargadatta Maharaj. He says, "Be quiet, free from the obsession with 'what next.' In the silence, something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception."

So just be quiet, free from the obsession with what next.

CHAPTER 364

Opening Talk

Carol Wilson · 1h11

> *This opening talk for a nine-day silent retreat at IMS introduces the central metaphor of the practice: just as spring thaws frozen lakes, mindful awareness melts the stuck, congealed places in our hearts and minds. Guy Armstrong shares how we often become frozen in habitual states—dissatisfaction, worry, fixed self-images, or rigid stances toward life—that prevent us from flowing with changing conditions. The path to freedom lies not in avoiding these difficult places but in meeting them with interested, friendly attention.*
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> *The teachers emphasize three essential qualities for practice: relax, observe, and allow. When we bring spacious awareness to our experience without judgment, understanding naturally arises, and what seemed like obstacles become doorways to greater peace and compassion. The talk highlights how children naturally flow through emotions while adults often get stuck, and how meditation helps us recover this capacity for fluid responsiveness to life.*
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> *Carol Wilson then guides the traditional opening of retreat, explaining the Three Refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) as symbols of awakening potential, and the Five Precepts as training rules that create a container of safety and non-harming. The refuges point to our capacity for awakening, trust in truth, and the support of practicing in community. The evening concludes with Rodney Smith leading a brief meditation on the crosshairs where mind meets body, establishing the foundation of embodied presence for the days ahead.*

Good evening, and I'd like to welcome you all to IMS.

My name is Guy Armstrong, and I want to introduce the other people who will be on the teaching team this week. Just to my left is Carol Wilson. Carol lives here in Barre, so she's been here for the snowstorms and knows what you all have been through if you're local. And to her left is Rodney Smith. Rodney lives in Seattle and he knows what the rain is like—he's had some weather experience too.

I'll just say that it's really a pleasure for us to be here. We're old friends going back about thirty years together. We worked on staff here in the late seventies; that's where we first knew each other. So it's a lot of fun. This is the one time a year when we get together and get to reconnect, so we're happy to be here.

On my right is Maddie Klein, and we're also really pleased to have Maddie with us. Maddie is the Executive Director of Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, which is a very thriving and busy urban center in Cambridge, just outside of Boston. Maddie's come off a full work week and is joining us here for a little over half of our retreat. She's currently in teacher training in a program that's jointly run between IMS—with Joseph, Carol, and myself—and Spirit Rock with Jack Kornfield. So she's going through about a four-year program to become a retreat teacher. She's very well practiced, has done quite a bit of teaching already, and she'll be assisting us during this week together. We're really happy to have her support.

I flew in yesterday from California, and I love to get a window seat when I'm on these long flights because you watch the whole country sort of unfold outside the window. It's amazing to think back on what the first settlers had to go through in order to cross this continent—traveling by train, and when that ran out, getting in wagon carts. If you know California, you probably know the Donner Party, where they broke down in the snows and ended up eating the people who had not made it in order to survive. Compared to those journeys, cross-country flights are kind of a lark. You do the whole thing in five and a half hours now, and nobody gets eaten along the way.

But still, we adjust our expectations to modern travel conditions. Because I tend to fly a lot in teaching, I accumulate miles, and then they occasionally give you these things called free upgrade certificates—which, it turns out, you never get to use because somebody else has gotten in ahead of you with more miles or whatever. Yesterday I'd applied for a free upgrade from economy to first class. I had a bunch of certificates expiring March thirty-first, so I thought I would try to use them. I went through check-in and found out there was only one seat available and eighteen people ahead of me. So I wasn't able to use it, and I was stuck in economy.

I got on the plane and immediately started talking with the guy sitting on the aisle in my row, complaining about how I can never get to use these free upgrades they give us. I imagine a lot of other people are in that situation. I was starting to get into a little bit of complaining mind. And he just said, "You know, I don't mind this economy section. I've got enough leg room, it's not such a long flight, and it's not too bad."

All of a sudden, my complaining mind just went poof. That's really true—it's not so bad here. It was just a kind of indicator of how somebody who's in an accepting or contented place can shift our minds. That accepting or contented viewpoint is in all of us, but sometimes it just needs a little reminder, as this fellow reminded me yesterday.

So I settled in and really enjoyed the flight across. We crossed the Sierra, snowy, and I looked down into Yosemite as we flew through. The center of the country was quite cloudy, and then we burst into the open over the Great Lakes. Coming over Massachusetts, we flew right over the Quabbin Reservoir, which is a big source of drinking water for the eastern part of the state. It's due west of here—if you go out at sunset and look toward the setting sun, you're looking in the direction of the Quabbin.

It's a big reservoir, and flying above it, I could see that there was still a lot of ice on the surface, this kind of bluey-white color filling it up. Then all around the outside, near the land, was darker brown, and you could see that the ice was starting to melt. Across the rest of Massachusetts, little ponds and lakes showed the same thing. In fact, if you look at our little ponds around here, you'll also see that combination of ice and melt. I started to realize that this is really the first sign of spring coming to Massachusetts. So it's just a great pleasure to be here with springtime starting to unfold in this climate.

It reminded me that this metaphor of the frozen part and the melted part is an old metaphor for our minds. There are places in our minds that are stuck and frozen up, solidified or congealed, where things don't flow so easily. And then there are other parts—and this expands over the course of springtime—where the ice has receded. Then the currents in the lake or pond flow quite naturally, and the water can come in at one end and flow out at the other.

And that spring is really the period where that ice gets converted into flowing water, where the stuck places open up and it returns to its natural state, you might say, of change or flow.

This has taught me that it's actually a very good metaphor for the work we do on retreat—that we encounter both the flowing parts of ourselves. You'll experience, I think, great periods of peace and, I hope, contentment during this time. But we also experience these pockets where the mind just gets stuck. We go into some area of our being that is contracted, tight, frozen, congealed, where we don't flow so easily.

We can get stuck in a number of different ways in our lives—our busy, complicated lives that are always a mix of pleasant things happening to us and difficult things happening. Sometimes we start to notice that we get stuck in habitual states of mind or habitual ways of feeling. We may notice that very often in our life there's a feeling of dissatisfaction, or maybe loneliness, or worry and anxiety, or some kind of longing that just seems to be very present for us, a frequent companion.

Sometimes we get frozen in the way we think about ourselves. We hold a certain image of ourselves—maybe we're a happy person, maybe we think of ourselves as an unhappy person. Either way, it's a kind of frozenness that doesn't let us really flow with the changing conditions of life.

I've talked to some people about the teachings in this tradition. The meditation we'll be sharing with you comes out of the Buddhist tradition, where there's a lot of emphasis on looking at the qualities of happiness and unhappiness in our lives. The Buddha talked a great deal about this feature of unhappiness as a common experience that all people share. And sometimes the person will say, "I'm not unhappy." I'll ask, "Well, aren't there any things in your life that are difficult?" "Oh, no, not really. I'm really a happy person." I usually don't go much further unless I'm in a teaching role with them, because it tends to be a difficult conversation from there. But people who have the notion that they are happy people tend to gloss over or deny or turn away from the difficult times in life. And if we have the idea that we're not a happy person, then we miss a lot of moments where there may actually be quite a bit of peace, contentment, or joy in our lives.

In a way, I think one of the ways we get frozen, one of the ways the mind gets stuck, is that we just see what we expect to see.

There was this funny experiment, you may have heard of it, conducted by John Kabat-Zinn. John founded the institute at UMass Hospital in Worcester called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, an application of meditation principles in a non-sectarian way that has really helped a lot of people deal especially with physical pain. As part of the training, he does this experiment where he invites people to watch a video of a basketball game. He says, "Pay really close attention to what's going on on the court." So people sit down in front of the video, noticing five players on each side, the ball getting passed back and forth very quickly. They're following it in a lot of detail, quite engaged.

At the end of the video, he asks them, "Did you notice anything unusual?" About half the people say yes, and half say no. When he asks what they saw that was unusual, the people who said yes report, "Well, about halfway through the video, somebody came out on the court dressed in a gorilla suit, stood in the middle of the court, beat their fists against their chest, and then walked off." And the people who didn't notice anything say, "What? That couldn't have happened. I was watching the whole video. I never saw any gorilla." Then he plays the video again and stops it when it gets to the gorilla, and people realize there was a gorilla on the court that they didn't even see.

Our minds work like that too. If we aren't expecting to see something, it's easy to overlook it. As the thaw starts to come in our hearts and minds, we may not notice the areas that are melting unless we're thinking to look, thinking to see that those are there.

Sometimes our mind gets frozen in a stance toward life. Over many experiences, many incidents, we develop a belief about the world—that the world isn't really capable of satisfying us, that it's intrinsically frustrating, that it doesn't work very well, that the political systems are broken and it's impossible to find happiness. This stance we've adopted reveals itself in our interactions. Maybe they have a built-in sense of irritation or an expectation of disappointment. We've gotten frozen in an attitude, a belief, a view about the world.

So often, as we begin to experience our lives with some care and attention, we find these stuck places generated out of old habits of mind—ties to the past that keep us from being really fresh and alive in each new moment.

As a way to contrast our stuck state, I like to think about children. If you hang out with a child for a while, you can see that they move through so many different moods and emotions so easily. Their minds just flow from happiness and friendship and excitement right into frustration and irritation and pain and sobbing. The child is transparent to all of that. It moves in and moves right through. The whole range is there for them to feel. Children have this way of going with the flow.

I got an email this morning from a friend who said that some trip they'd been planning for a while, they'd recently decided not to take. They said, "I got the feeling that circumstances were changing and I'm going with the flow of the new situation. I'm not going to take that trip"—it was a few months abroad, checking out some monasteries in England.

I think that my time for now will be spent in lay life here.

Life is always changing, sort of under our feet. And the question always is, can we go with its flow? Can we open ourselves up to the new way that life is presenting itself in this moment? Or is one of these stuck attitudes blocking our ability to be with it the way it changes?

Sometimes after a beautiful day like today—and maybe it will continue, I don't know, I haven't looked at a weather report—but sometimes when the rain comes back, because it will come back, there can be a resistance to it. "Oh, it shouldn't be raining. The sunshine really should continue." Just like on our cushion, when we've had some peace for a while and then some movement of mind comes back, some stormy conditions, we think that shouldn't be happening. But one Thai teacher put it this way: Do you think

the clouds are wrong? Do you think that the storms are wrong when they come? Or can we have a mind that's really fluid enough to move from one to the other and not resist, not be stuck in wanting it one way or another?

In Zen, they have a saying that a wooden Buddha can't go through fire and an iron Buddha can't cross water. So is there within us the Buddha that can go through both fire and water? That can be wood when it needs to be wood and can be iron when it needs to be iron? We have that capability.

One of the things that people most often report after an extended period of meditation is a greater feeling of spaciousness in their life. Someone finished a retreat and was scheduled to visit right afterwards with her family. She had a somewhat challenging relationship with her mother from a long, long time. And she reported back after being at home for the better part of a week: "My relationship with my mother was much easier this time. She did the same things that she's done before in our relationship, but this time it just didn't bother me so much. I had so much more space around my relationship with her." And then her mother could feel that too and softened a little bit in her relationship.

So one of the great things about meditation is that we start to find more space in life—more space in our mind, more space in our heart, more space of ease and relaxation. In a way, this finding of space has a deep meaning in these teachings because our basic situation really is very spacious. When you think about it, we have all this physical space. There are things arising at our sense doors, but they're all surrounded by a deep silence if we start to listen. And as we move into the retreat and move into that habit of silence, that way of being of silence, we start to let that spaciousness hold everything that's happening in us. That spaciousness has a way of allowing all the different changes to come through and move through us, to flow in our experience. And it's really that quality of space touching the frozen parts that does the work of melting or unsticking them.

Now, this space is not just a physical space. It's really the space of paying attention. We could say the space of awareness. It's really the meeting of awareness with the places that have gotten stuck that starts to open them up.

When I was first meditating, the place where I was stuck that came a lot in my meditation practice was an experience of being afraid. I would experience it on the cushion. I'd sometimes experience it off the cushion. One time I was doing a meditation retreat in England in the summertime—very beautiful, soft summer evening. The light was kind of golden, the garden I was in was very lovely with flowers, a flowering tree, a lot of birds chirping. I was doing standing meditation out there and I noticed, "Oh, there's

fear in the mind." I felt into it—yeah, there's definitely fear in the mind. I was starting to relate to it, feel it in my body, feel it in the mind. Then I opened my eyes and I just looked out on the gardens and the green grass and the soft light, the flowering tree, the birds, and I thought, "Wow, pretty scary world, isn't it?" And just having the ability to be aware of the fear and be aware of the space in the garden, the beauty in the garden—the meeting of those two just started to calm that fear, started to soothe it and release it.

So in our meditation practice, when we come upon these places that seem stuck or frozen—an old emotional pattern, an old way of looking at things—we want to let awareness start to relate to it. Our first inclination may be, "Oh, move away quickly. I didn't come to England to be afraid." But in fact, that's what's true in this moment. So rather than trying to move away from the stuck place, we need to move into it. Because the moving away is what keeps it stuck. The moving into with this awareness is where it can open up and start to melt.

As we pay attention to these places, we find that we can learn about them. And this is one of the most exciting discoveries in all of meditation: we can learn about the way our minds and hearts work. As we start to understand them, these stuck places don't feel like they shut us down. We feel that we have the ability to hold them, know them. When we understand them, we're not controlled by them. It's really this understanding that brings the kind of space that lets us feel a new freedom in relation to them.

I wanted to mention this word freedom tonight because it's in the course title. I don't know if you noticed it. Some people just sign up for a retreat based on the dates that are available and don't care what the course is about or the teachers or anything.

But this course happens to be titled Freedom Here and Now. We called it this because we enjoy talking about this topic, and the three of us in our conversations noticed that we've been speaking about freedom more and more lately. So we thought we'd call it Freedom Here and Now, hoping that might appeal to more people than just "Insight Meditation," which we'll also be teaching this retreat. We wanted to put a special emphasis on the quality of freedom.

In fact, the numbers for the retreat went down this year. So next year, I think we'll call it Bondage or something like that.

The other curious thing we noticed in the registration numbers is that usually at our retreats there are more women than men, and at this retreat there are more men than women. So maybe something about the language had something to do with that too. I don't know. I'm curious. This is the first time we tried it. We probably won't try it again.

During the week, we want to talk about how freedom grows. One of the main places freedom grows is when we open up to these difficult areas in the mind or in the body. We give them a degree of attention that we often haven't before. We become interested. We want to learn about them. And through learning about them, they open up.

Then there's one more really important ingredient in this mixture. There's awareness, there's interest, there's understanding. And the final ingredient that's really important is a quality of friendliness. When we can bring friendliness into our looking—not a cold, scientific, detached observation, as if we've got a microscope and we're going to pin this insect to white paper—but rather a warm, living connection with what we observe, because all these experiences are part of life, part of our human life. Then that friendliness starts to make itself felt in our relationship to them.

You know how if you're consistently friendly to somebody, they can't hold a grudge against you. They can't wish you badly. They want you to be well. They want you to do well. When we're consistently friendly to these stuck places in our hearts and minds, they also get friendly back. They kind of want us to do well. And they're not felt as enemies or obstructions any longer.

Sometimes when we encounter these difficult places, it may feel like an obstacle. "I came here to get peaceful. I came here to get happy. I didn't come here to feel anxious or worried." But actually, these seeming obstacles are more like opportunities. Each of us has a certain amount of space in our hearts and minds today, a certain balance that lets us live with our personalities, live with our partners or friends or family, live with our work. But all of us can find greater space in all those relationships—greater space, greater love, greater compassion, greater wisdom. The place we find it from is this opening with friendliness to the places that are stuck in us.

One of the hidden secrets of meditation is that there's not much more we need to do to find that space than to be willing to learn from what's difficult. Just paying attention with that friendly interest in what's difficult is what unfolds it all for us, melts those stuck spaces, turns them into flowing water, turns them into love and compassion and contentment and peace.

When we think of it in this way, we might assume we came here just to get to the peace, but in fact, the way to that peace often is through what looks like an obstacle. These are the very places where the growth happens, where the mind can expand, where the love can unfold more. So the practice becomes this alternation of feeling space and then perhaps encountering something that's not so spacious, that's stuck, and then finding space there, letting this space unfold us. As the space unfolds us, there's a feeling in our lives of greater and greater freedom.

Until, it is said, there are no more obstacles—no more apparent obstacles—but the mind can open effortlessly into every experience that comes. That degree of freedom is possible. The doorway to it is being willing just to feel in our bodies, in our minds, in our hearts, these areas where it feels sticky.

As the instructions go on in the retreat, we'll spend some time collecting the mind. We'll begin with attention to simple bodily experience like breathing, expand it to more of the bodily experience, then start to relate directly with these states of mind and the capacity of thought which often generates them. As we bring more understanding into each of these areas, the whole of our momentary experience starts to open up and be included in the meditation. Although in the beginning we'll focus on the body, ultimately that's to collect our attention so we can understand how we're relating to all of our experience—where the stuck places are, and whether we can bring this soft and interested attention to those, looking at that balance of mind that lets us just be with what is in this flowing and open kind of way.

So, a few tools of the retreat to support this investigation, this exploration. We'll have instructions every morning at the sitting after breakfast that will guide and extend the ways we'll pay attention. I'd encourage everybody to please come to that sitting. At the end of it, we'll have some time for question and answer, so if there's anything in the instructions that isn't clear or any part of your experience you'd like to ask about, there will be time for that every day.

Then the days will unfold in silence, and you can see from the schedule that it's basically an alternation of sitting meditation and walking meditation. In both, we want to bring the same quality of interested, alert, caring attention—just through different postures. As the retreat progresses, we'll expand that to all the other activities in the day.

You will be meeting with us in interviews so that we can talk more personally with you about your experience here. Some may be in groups, but everyone will have at least a couple of one-to-one meetings during the week with one of us. And then every evening there will be a talk, similar to the one tonight, on different aspects of the meditation practice and the kinds of understandings that go with it. Sometimes on the schedule it just says "talk," and some people who are new come in thinking, "Oh, you mean I'm going to get to talk to people then?" Unfortunately, no. We continue to monopolize the conversation—we get to talk more then. So there will be a talk every evening. And then at the last sitting of the day, we'll have a quiet sitting with a little bit of chanting that we'll share together, sometimes a nice way to round off the day and get ready for bed.

I'm really happy to see in this group some old familiar faces. I'd love to welcome people back to IMS. And for those of you I haven't met before, I'm also really happy to see new faces, and I look forward to getting to know you over our week together. This is a journey for us as much as it is for you. There's a wonderful sense of community and connection that grows as we share this quiet together, and I look forward to going on that journey with you. It's a wonderful experience from our side as much as it is from yours. So thank you all for coming. It wouldn't be the same without you.

How many people here have never done an intensive Vipassana meditation retreat? Great, welcome. How many of you have done thirty-five? Some of you may have. Of those who haven't done an intensive Vipassana retreat, is there anyone who hasn't been familiar with this form of meditation at all? Okay, great, welcome.

In terms of what we're doing here together, which Guy explained so well—that we're here really as part of the meditation, the particular structure of sitting, walking, bringing our friendly, non-judgmental attention to whatever's arising in our mind and body through the days—this is somehow not as easy as it might seem, but it is incredibly freeing and revealing. That's the meditation in essence. That's what we're doing, and we've set up the conditions here to really support that particular aspect of the path.

But as we begin tonight, I just want to emphasize that the meditation is a part—as Guy said, it comes from the Buddhist tradition—it's a part of the whole path of opening our hearts and minds to things as they are, of learning to live from a place of understanding and connectedness rather than from neediness, resistance, and fear. But it's a whole path. It's not just about meditation.

We want to start by emphasizing this because once we move into the week, what we're doing here is the meditation. But it starts with how we understand ourselves, how we understand life. That understanding gives rise to how we think about things, to our motivation, to our intentions, to how we speak and act. How we speak, how we act, how we think in our life, how we live our lives, how we meet each moment—this expands into how we live our entire lives.

And so in going into the retreat, it's really extremely helpful as we move into the silence to move into this commitment that hopefully you're each making with yourself: to really be here for this week, to really bring this willingness to meet yourself moment by moment. It's only for yourself. No one is there every moment checking—are you paying attention now? Are you meeting yourself with kindness? Are you beating yourself up? It's up to each of us.

As we enter into this really quite unique space in this crazy world... I know other people who don't do these retreats think this is the crazy space—coming into silence, not talking, sitting and walking like zombies. They think this is really the wacko place on earth. But after you've been to some retreats and had this sense of togetherness, what we call sangha, group togetherness, and the sense of the non-harming space that we create together, the sense of support that arises through practicing like this in silence, the sense of safety—knowing we're not going to be taking things from each other, accosting each other physically or verbally—there's really this support. And the space Guy mentioned, of silence and silent kindness, friendliness, allows each one of us to feel safe enough to open so deeply into ourselves, to just let whatever's arising—beautiful, scary, boring as hell (and that'll be a lot of it)—to come up.

That's really a beautiful space. And from this space, the rest of the world can seem pretty crazy.

I think a lot of what keeps me going in my practice, and what so inspires me in sharing this path with others, is that each of us can then bring back into the world what Guy described with that woman going back to her family, to her mother—a sense of a more harmonious, kinder, more connected way to be. And just by manifesting that, it starts to ripple out.

In terms of beginning the retreat, we like to do what is a bit of a ritual, but it's deeper than ritual—it's really turning our attention inward and acknowledging for each one of us the motivation that brought you here, the intention, the commitment that brought you here. So that we don't just say, "Well, this is the next thing I'm doing on my list. Nine days at IMS, check it off. Breathing in and out, noting, noting, lifting. Okay, that's it, on to the next thing." With the same mindset, the same kind of "doing, what am I getting" mindset. Let's put that down. Let's start by really connecting, each of us, with: Why did I really come here? What is the deep motivation in my heart? Taking a moment, just silently, to acknowledge that for ourselves.

I see it as sort of like entering a doorway where I'll just put down my normal habits of mind. I mean, you don't really put them down, but at least we give the sense that we'll look at them rather than being driven by them. And that we're opening up our way of being, our hearts, our minds, to another possibility.

The way we frame that in the Buddhist tradition is by taking what we call the three refuges: the refuge in Buddha, in Dharma, and in Sangha. I'll say what they are, but I see them all as symbols of the potential for awakening to a greater peace, freedom, and compassion—in ourselves and in the world.

So when we take refuge in the Buddha, the symbol of the Buddha there is just that—a symbol. Buddha was a human being. He's gone, long gone. But he's a symbol of our human capacity to open our hearts and minds, to live from a place of awakened freedom, a place of awakened compassion. We don't just have to go through our lives like robots. The Buddha was a human being; we're human beings. It's the potential for each one of us to experience moments—and longer and longer moments—of freedom, here and now.

Taking refuge in the Buddha is like reminding ourselves, when we come to one of those places of stuckness Guy mentioned, not to just say, "Oh yeah, this is how it's always been and this is how it's always going to be. It's hopeless." Take refuge in my capacity to awaken. That's all—just a little shift of intentionality.

Refuge in the Dharma. Dharma means the truth, just how things are, the laws of nature. It also means the Buddhist teachings. But again, it's like taking refuge in, trusting in, the power of the truth of this moment. For me, taking refuge in the Dharma is like surrendering into the reality of this moment. That's not a giving up. It's a giving up of fighting and pretending things are different than they are. It's a way of waking up in the moment. When we stop fighting—oh, just as this is—I can wake up in this moment. I can trust this is how it is in this moment. Taking refuge in the Dharma. Again, it's a shift from our wanting things different, our fighting. It's like this. So we wake up in this moment with full collected presence. That's the difference.

And the Sangha, in the classic sense in the Buddhist tradition, would be the community of awakened beings. I heard someone describe it recently as the awakened mind stream. And I think that's something we all share at different moments. Any one of us could be manifesting the awakened mind stream. So in the sense of the Sangha, the community of us here practicing together, we take refuge not in our personalities or each other's personalities—please—but we take refuge in the fact that together we're cultivating and manifesting the awakened mind stream. And that's a way that, as I said earlier, we support each other. We feel that support from each other when we're practicing.

Just on a very mundane level, the fact that we're here as a group will many a time be the main thing that keeps you from running out of the hall when you don't like what happened. Many a sitting I've had over many, many years where, if there weren't other people there, I would have been gone. But I kept on sitting and everything changed. And I was so glad I didn't just get up and leave because I was having an unpleasant mo-

ment. We're tired, someone else is doing the walking—oh yeah, I can do that too. It's the space of silence, the space of support. It's really a beautiful thing that can grow in the silence.

So we take refuge, and we like to do it as a call and response chant in the Pali language, which is what the first Buddhist texts were written in, just because we like it. And I'll lead that in a moment.

The second aspect of beginning the retreat is that we agree—and we'll do this in English—that we agree together to be here in a way of speech and body action that is non-harming.

Again, that's that space of safety, giving one another what the Buddha called the gift of fearlessness.

This isn't just about making conditions nice for meditation. This sense of agreeing to live while we're here by these five rules of training—they're not lifetime vows. They're rules of training, a way of pointing us back to the deep motivation that drives our speech and action. They really are rules of training, not externally imposed laws that you follow blindly without thinking. The point is to have us wake up to why we're doing and saying what we're doing and saying, and perhaps to exercise restraint before we do and say something harmful—not only so as not to hurt others, but not to hurt ourselves.

It's deeply based in the fact that real happiness and freedom is accessible when we are moved by motivations of kindness, of compassion, of non-harming. If we're lost in vindictiveness, in cruelty, in violence, there's no way we're going to be at peace. And so it's for our own well-being and ease as well as for others.

The five training rules or precepts are pretty straightforward. The first is that we agree to take the training rule not to harm or kill living beings. It's only March—a lot easier than the middle of May, as you know, when there are black flies and mosquitoes, and then it's really something to look at our minds and hearts. But here, it's still all beings, not just each other. We undertake not to hurt or harm living beings.

The second is not to take what is not freely offered or freely given. Obviously not stealing, but it's also a way of cultivating a sense of inner contentment. You go for breakfast and you want scrambled eggs and there's oatmeal. You're obviously not going to go into the kitchen and cook yourself up an omelet—hopefully—although there have been times when a staff person came down at three in the morning to find a whole yogi egg-cooking scene going on. That would be taking what is not freely given. But anyway,

it's much more about that sense of contentment. I don't get the first-class seat; I'm sitting here in economy. That's fine. I wanted eggs, there's oatmeal. Hey, there's food to eat. I can be grateful for that.

The third—in daily life, because these five precepts in Buddhist countries are the way people practice in everyday life—the third precept is not to harm oneself or others with one's sexual activity. It's basically straightforward: not getting involved in affairs with someone who's in another relationship, or if you're in another relationship, or anything abusive involving power dynamics. On retreat, we take the precept to maintain celibacy, not to be involved in any sexual activity, and that's much more about going into the fourth precept, which is right speech. But here we have noble silence, which is really just to keep our energy with ourselves for this time.

The fourth is we undertake the training rule not to lie, not to use harsh or abusive speech, and not to get involved in divisive speech or idle chit-chat. In daily life, just check out how much of our speech is idle chit-chat. It's a lot. So this actually is a huge one. But we make it easier for you here with noble silence. It's actually much easier than trying to monitor every word. Though I would like to say, in terms of lying and abusive speech, just check out how you talk to yourself. You can work on softening the abusive speech there.

In terms of the noble silence—of course, in your work meditation, if you need to talk to the cook or the housekeeper, that's fine. In the group interviews, of course. But all other times, just really staying with ourselves. We don't need to talk. And it's not about engaging in trying to catch somebody's eye contact. We don't go around afraid to see each other. We're just letting each person have their space. And that's a real gift, as you'll find—it gives each of us our space.

The fifth is we agree not to take drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and cause carelessness while we're here. This does not include any medications you're taking—please continue taking any medications. We're talking about recreational drugs and intoxicants, which is kind of a no-brainer in terms of coming here to cultivate clarity. But that's the agreement we make.

So to begin the retreat really is a way of consciously entering into this space of safety, of bringing this kind, contemplative attitude of interest and inquiry to our experience.

We like to begin the retreat by taking the three refuges and the five precepts. This is a traditional way of consciously entering into this protected space of practice.

For the refuges, we do them in a call and response format, repeating each one three times, which is the classical formulation. I'll chant these in Pali. And then we take the precepts, which I'll offer in English.

The first line we chant together is an homage to the Buddha—this is very traditional, something you always chant before anything else. Then come the refuges themselves: *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*—I go to the Buddha for refuge. *Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*—I go to the Dhamma for refuge. *Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*—I go to the Sangha for refuge.

If you're not comfortable chanting, that's perfectly fine. We're not trying to impose anything on you. You can simply sit and listen, allowing yourself to internally move into the retreat space.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

And now the five precepts:

I undertake the training rule to refrain from harming living beings.

I undertake the training rule not to take what is not given.

I undertake the training rule to refrain from sexual activity.

I undertake the training rule not to use false or harsh speech.

I undertake the training rule not to use drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind.

So we could consider that we've entered into this sacred space together for these nine days.

We're just going to do a really short sitting together. If you'd like to stand or stretch for a moment, that's totally fine.

Carol mentioned something very important to the meditation, and that is the sense of safety. Each of us can really relax—and has to relax—if we are asked to open ourselves to our own observation. There's no other way to do this without feeling safe. So with taking the precepts and settling down with one another and having a general way of ethical conduct between us, we can relax and not feel so defensive.

Most of us will be self-observing and not spending as much time other-observing. There's a way that this gives us freedom to not feel so socially conscious or self-conscious, and that too can help us relax. It's just one of the reasons that noble silence is so important during the retreat—we're not trying to interact in the same way we do socially. We're just trying to be with ourselves in the company of others, and to bring a sense of quiet observation to ourselves throughout the day.

The meditation can really be summed up in three words, and we will spend the rest of the week elaborating on those three words. When you get confused or troubled, when you feel perhaps a little at odds about what to do, remember these three words and just apply them, and you'll be right on course. It's self-correcting.

These three words are: relax, observe, and allow.

The meditation really isn't asking much from us, is it? It's not about performance. It's not about doing something tight or tense that requires a great deal of strenuous activity. It's really just the opposite. It's about unloading. It's about releasing. It's about just seeing. And the word "relax" is at the heart of the meditation practice.

Right now, I would ask each of us to take a posture that allows maximum alertness, and yet at the same time brings forth that intoned sense of relaxation. The back should be straight. If you're on a chair, I would suggest moving your back away from the back of the chair so that you're swinging free of it. Your hands can be in your lap or folded in any comfortable way you like. Your legs, if you're in a chair, should be parallel to one another.

Just take a sigh. Allow yourself to really feel physically here. It's one thing for your body to be here; it's another for your mind to move and allow for you to mentally be here as well. Acknowledging that the body is here begins to align the mind with the body. The crosshairs of the meditation—the mind aligned with the body, that place where they meet—is really what we're looking for.

Softening the mind. It's not a pressured task, so there's no need to feel ambitious or goal-oriented. Just softening the mind, releasing the tensions of the day so that we're not carrying a conversation we had earlier into this moment. Nor are we trying to plan what we're going to do after this evening. It's really about living at that crosshair, at that point where mind and body meet.

Observe.

We will notice, when we're not looking ahead of ourselves or regretting or reminiscing about something that has occurred, there's a quiet and expansive observation that begins to notice physical sensations, because we are basing our attention in the body. It notices areas of tension, which can therefore be released and relaxed—the neck, the shoulders, the eyes, the jaw, the belly. Just notice those areas. Invite your mind into the body.

Suddenly we become very still. That sense of knowing what's arising, knowing the breath is occurring—that is the definition of meditation. If we're thinking and not being present with that knowing of what's arising, then we are quite likely lost in thought.

When that happens, relax. Don't try to run right back to the breath. Let the breath find you from that sense of relaxed response. Just relaxing.

And you'll find that the breath comes back to you. You don't have to go searching for it. This is especially important in those moments when we have lost our attention and then regain our footing—to dissipate any attitude that might have accompanied that loss of attention. Not to badger ourselves or judge ourselves. That's not what we're looking for. Rather, just release all of the verbal commentary and come back to that sense of relaxation, allowing the breath to find us.

Where we feel the breath most often—we can feel it in the belly area or the chest, sometimes at the nose tip. Wherever we feel it predominantly, sometimes it's the whole sense of the body breathing, feeling the breath as it expands our chest and our abdominal area. Knowing that breathing is occurring and allowing. Just being present without demands, without judgment.

So we will sit for just a few minutes. Staying present. Knowing the breath is arising. You can feel the energy quieting down now as we begin to move into silence together.

Meditation isn't, of course, just about sitting on our pillows and following our breath. That sense of being collected and knowing what the body is doing extends throughout the course of the day—staying in the body, knowing when the shower is being taken, the motions, the feelings of the hands and the body as they do the tasks of the day. Just

staying very much embodied. Knowing that you're there, not letting the mind rush off and move in a different direction. Keeping that crosshairs, keeping that X and Y axis at the crossing point—the mind in the body.

Tomorrow there will be a 5:15 bell. For those of you who have traveled, you have a choice this early morning whether to stay in bed because you're tired and need some additional sleep. But I will be up here at 5:45 for that first sitting. For those who would like to join, please come. And for those who need additional rest, you're welcome to stay. Breakfast will be at 6:30, and again, if you want to miss that meal, you're welcome. But I would suggest getting up sometime in that morning so as not to miss that first sitting after breakfast, which will be the time when we offer instruction and some additional guidance for the meditation.

So have a good evening. The bell is less than eight hours away, so you might want to go right to bed. We are in noble silence now, so please leave the meditation hall quietly. Collectively begin to slow down. We don't have to move at the speed of our normal pace. We have nothing to do here but follow the bells and get to the places in plenty of time.

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Have a good night's sleep.

CHAPTER 365

Seeing Through Our Mental Habits

Carol Wilson · 56 min

In this talk, Carol Wilson examines the essential attitude that supports meditation practice: not technique, but wise discernment paired with sincere motivation. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that everything rests on the tip of motivation, she explores how our deepest intentions can carry us through difficulties when we reconnect with them.

Wilson introduces Bhikkhu Bodhi's articulation of our three fundamental mental habits: the desire to enjoy pleasure, the desire to avoid pain, and the preservation of the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. These habits, she explains, become the lens through which we evaluate all experience—pleasant becomes good, unpleasant becomes bad—keeping us trapped in cycles of reactivity. Using everyday examples from medical misdiagnosis to encounters in a lab waiting room, she illustrates how these unseen patterns shape our responses and perpetuate suffering.

The talk grounds these insights in the Four Noble Truths, presenting dukkha not as 'life is suffering' but as the inherent unreliability of conditioned experience. Wilson emphasizes that liberation doesn't require changing our circumstances but rather recognizing how clinging and aversion arise moment to moment. Through Ajahn Sumedho's teaching that 'awareness' is shorthand for the entire Eightfold Path, she offers a practical approach: shifting our refuge from what's happening to the simple knowing of what's happening. This accessible practice—noticing 'sleepiness is like this' or 'thinking is like this'—reveals that peace and ease are available in any moment, not dependent on circumstances being pleasant or problems being resolved.

So you're still here after the first day. Sometimes, not always, but sometimes the first day can be a little bit arduous, a little bit fatiguing. Sometimes it's not. Nothing's always one way.

Tonight I want to talk about the essence, the attitude we need to support our practice. Really, in a way, the most important aspect of our whole meditation practice is not the technique or what's happening, but the attitude—supported by wise discernment, supported by right understanding—with which we do our meditation practice, with which we live our life. It's really right attitude and wise discernment.

There's a Tibetan saying that everything rests on the tip of motivation. So rather than looking towards external results, experience, what's happening, or how we like what's happening, or what we think should be happening, or what we want to be happening, the essence is really in the motivation, in the attitude.

Certainly, a sense for each of us in our life, in our spiritual path, and in our meditation practice here—a sense of internal connection with our deepest motivation, with why we're doing it, with our intention—is really essential. Otherwise you're not going to get through a day, you're not going to get through a sitting, never mind nine days, never mind our life. When things are going easy, it's fine, but when things get difficult or not the way we like them or we're confused, rather than fighting with what's happening, to turn our attention back inward and reconnect with the sincerity of our motivation is really what can give us the courage, the confidence, the trust to just be here for the next breath, to be here for the next step. We realign with our sincerity, with our intention when things are difficult—and when things are good also.

Part of what I want to talk about is wise attitude and sincere motivation, but also that by itself might get us going, might get us here, might keep us going, but it's not enough in isolation. Because with the most sincere motivation and intention in the world, if we don't have the right information, if we don't understand accurately, we can really be meaning to do good for ourselves and others and just not possess accurate information. We basically don't know what the heck we're doing. We get ourselves in all kinds of messes. So the wise intention and attitude needs to be supported by wise discernment, by clear understanding, by having the right information.

This is just for beginning the practice—the overview I want to talk about tonight. With the best will in the world, if we don't understand accurately, our choices may not serve us well, even if we're meaning the choice to be good for ourselves, good for others, to be for our own happiness.

The Dalai Lama said once that the purpose of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace, and that we are all equal in wishing to be happy, to be free of our suffering. He says that we all share the right and the potential to fulfill this aspiration. That makes sense to me. Of course I practice to be more happy, whether it's the meditation practice or how I live my life, and we all share in that aspiration and the potential to be happy.

But here is the rub. Here is the nub. Without accurate information, the things we do, the choices we might make in our sincere desire to be happy, could be the very habits, the very way we look at life, that keep us spinning in confusion and suffering. Without wise understanding—hence why we practice.

You can see this everywhere. For example, I read a couple of years ago in a newspaper about an opinion poll that was done in Russia in the early 1990s, a few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As you know, Russia has been in quite difficult circumstances politically and economically. Life is hard for people. In this poll—I don't have the exact figures in front of me—one of the questions was: if Stalin was running for president, would people vote for him?

Now, by the point this poll was done, remember, Stalin was basically responsible for the murder of 20 million Russians in the Gulag. And this was no longer a secret. Before, people didn't really know, but it was out in public. So would people vote for Stalin? I think it was 19% or 20% who said yes, they would vote for Stalin if he were running for president. And another hefty percentage, over 20%, said they weren't sure but they might. Because basically they were wanting some kind of security. The sense that, you know, who cares if you kill 20 million people, my life might be more secure. Some sense of going for what we think will make us happy—comfort or ease or whatever it might be.

That's a bit of an extreme example, but in a way, it's what the Buddha is said to have seen when he first awakened under the Bodhi tree, when he came to his full understanding of the causes of our suffering and how we can live, how we can relate to life through wise understanding in a way that allows us to be free from dis-ease, dissatisfaction, confusion.

After he realized this—and saw that it's possible for all of us—he also thought, you know, it's so much trouble. People aren't going to really get it. And it would be so much dukkha for me, suffering for me, discomfort for me, to be constantly trying to explain this to people, and they're not going to get it. It's said in the suttas, in the texts, that he was inclined not to teach, not to share, because he thought it's just too subtle and people won't get it.

But luckily, he was moved by compassion. He could read people's minds and survey the world of human beings and other beings with his psychic powers and see people's minds.

And what he saw moved him to compassion—to teach. What he saw was just this, what the Dalai Lama said: that everyone wants to be happy, that the choices we all make in our lives are in some way, twisted or otherwise, coming out of our motivation to be happy. But because we don't understand accurately, because we're trapped in habits of mind that we don't recognize, habits that drive our choices, the very choices

we make in our desire to be happy are the things that keep us spinning in confusion, in delusion, in this sense of dissatisfaction and things just not working. This is what moved the Buddha to compassion, to share what he had recognized.

So with the best will in the world, without the right information, we fall back into these habits of mind. They're not bad. It's not like we're saying this is bad and you should change and do the right thing. It's just that they don't work. In terms of our own happiness, in terms of bringing ease and compassion and comfort to the world, these habits don't work.

So what habits do I mean? Very basic ones. This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi. Do you know who Bhikkhu Bodhi is? He's an American from Brooklyn who's been a Theravada Buddhist monk for many years in Sri Lanka and now lives back in the States. At this point, he's probably one of the two foremost translators into English of the Buddhist texts from Pali. Here's something he said: "Remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of our habitual assumptions and attitudes. Most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

These are the habits I'm talking about. Let me read it again: Most of our habits—and these are our mental habits, how we view our world and what guides our choices—revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. Does that sound familiar? Can you relate to those?

Now, I'm not saying that these are evils. And you may think, well, of course, of course I want to enjoy pleasure. Of course I want to avoid pain. Is the Buddha saying no, you should go out and look for pain and avoid pleasure at all costs? No. But these habits are so strong that they come to be the lens through which we evaluate experience. And that's what doesn't work. All pleasant experience comes to be good through that lens. Unpleasant comes to be bad. It leads to the reactions of wanting and aversion, and to the sense that everything centers around me. I'll say more about that later. It seems obvious, but it really doesn't work. These become the lens through which we view things, through which we make decisions. We don't realize those habits. It's like wearing pink glasses—we don't even see that we're wearing them. And then the choices we make don't necessarily work.

I just read this week a review of a book called *How Doctors Think* by Jerome Groopman. I haven't read the book itself, but there was one little point worth sharing. The review discussed how many misdiagnoses there are—which of course is understandable, we're all human. They said about twenty percent of misdiagnoses are technical er-

rors or wrong readings of a CT scan or something like that. But according to this book, many more of doctors' misdiagnoses are based on how they're thinking, and how they think colors the decisions and diagnoses they make.

Here are a couple of examples. Emotions can interfere. A doctor may like a patient too much—there's a sense of liking, of pleasant—and they can't consider a worst-case scenario because it would be too unpleasant. Or they don't like a patient, and that patient is complaining, and they just have aversion to that patient's complaining, so they don't really listen. They don't really take it seriously. Interesting, isn't it? Or the kind of stereotypes doctors have about age, about gender, about race, about socioeconomic class—whatever they hold that isn't even seen—can color the diagnosis. I remember reading in the past how for a long time, many women's heart disease and heart attacks were misdiagnosed and overlooked because the common thinking was that men are the ones who are stressed and have heart attacks, not women so much.

So these are just little examples. But you see, this is how it works for us all the time when we don't recognize that these habits are present and operating. They're not bad. And we don't even have to get rid of them. We just learn to recognize that they're operating, to let our attention be more with awareness rather than so caught up in trying to feed these habits.

The habits are the stream. Without recognizing them, we just jump in. We just say it makes total sense. But with the willingness to simply notice what's happening, we can step outside of that habit and go, "Oh, maybe there's another way."

A little example: just the other day, I was having to have a blood test read, so I was going to a medical lab to give my specimen. I went into the waiting room, and there was another older man there. One of the women who was working there—the door was open into where she was working—kind of came out and looked at us. The man started to say something, I started to say something, and she just slammed the door in our faces and went away.

I was like, "Whoa, clearly not in a good mood."

And it's interesting, because I was just there. I didn't have any particular thing going on. But as soon as she did that, I noticed irritation come up, aversion. It's like, "Someone's going to act like that to me? Well, the appropriate response is to act like that back." You know, that seems to make sense. Something unpleasant happens, right away something unpleasant goes back.

The man who was there said to me—very friendly, not angry—"Yeah, she's the one. Last time I was here, she really messed up my blood test." And he went on and on. It was really interesting just to see that's sort of the way the world works. Something unpleasant happens, then we respond with more unpleasant, and it just keeps escalating.

Then I thought, what could her day be like? She's working in a lab. She's basically examining blood specimens, urine specimens, and stool specimens. That's her day. Probably when we come walking in, we're like another walking specimen to her. That's probably how she sees us. And it could be easy to just move into this feeling of "this isn't so pleasant" and "your day isn't so pleasant" and the people and—you know—just a kind of aversion coloring everything.

That's projection, right? Maybe she just had a bad morning at home before she came. But either way, that response just seems reasonable to us. Something's unpleasant, we're going to be in a bad mood—that's normal. Then we just throw that bad mood onto someone else.

But it is not inevitable. It is not necessary. We do not have to live by these habits. These habits of mind do not have to color our experience, do not have to define our life at all. And that's really what meditation, what mindfulness, can begin to help us see through, move out of, be free from. When we have the right information, we don't have to keep suffering from these habits of mind.

Another example: the first day of a retreat—and not only the first day. One of the reasons that a meditation retreat like this can be fatiguing, can be difficult... part of it is just the physical adjustment. We come from a really busy daily life, a lot of sensory input, a lot of doing, a lot of energy, maybe a lot of stress. We come here and sit down and either we're really physically fatigued and exhausted and it's just going to take a couple of days of rest—more rest—to catch up. Or we're used to a lot more sensory stimulation, and when that's taken away from the outside, the mind doesn't know what to do with itself. It kind of checks out. We're not used to sitting and walking so long. We're used to expending the body in different ways. And so just on that level, it can be uncomfortable.

But none of that has to be a problem. The level at which it becomes a problem is the level of how the mind and heart are responding, reacting to these particular circumstances. And that's the place that the meditation brings us to—to see that freedom is possible, as we said, here and now.

It doesn't mean you have to get rid of this body. It doesn't mean it'll never hurt. It doesn't mean you have to never be sleepy again. It doesn't mean you have to like what's happening.

That's a big secret you should know. We don't care if you like what's happening. And it doesn't matter one iota if you like what's happening. It doesn't matter even to you. In terms of the practice, it's not about getting better experience—that's not what's going to illumine us. That's not what's going to allow us to open to freedom. It's not about that.

It's about stepping out of believing, being driven by these habits of evaluating everything by whether it's pleasant, whether it's unpleasant, what it means about me. Those habits are what keep us spinning in samsara, in the cycle of birth and death, of suffering in a moment. Those are the habits that keep us confused.

And so when you're sitting here today or next week or next year and your back hurts a little bit, and you think, "This is useless, I'm out of here, I can't do this anymore"—that's getting caught in that pattern of "it's a little bit unpleasant, so it's bad." When you're sitting and the body doesn't hurt and the breath is light and subtle, you think, "Now I've got it. Now it's right. Now I'm doing it. I understand how to meditate. I'm doing so well." Same pattern. It's all about me. How am I doing? Is my breath getting better? Is my concentration getting better? Is my mindfulness getting better? It's all about me.

I'm not saying these are bad. I'm just saying they're ubiquitous. They are really the way we tend to look at ourselves and life. And they don't work. That's why we're here.

So what is the right information that informs our attitude, that informs our practice? The Buddha, as those of you who have practiced a lot before know, distilled what we need to know to begin to see through these habits, to be able to step aside and watch them running but not be run by them. What's the information we need that helps us meet our life, meet experience, meet ourselves and one another in a different way—in a way that's more harmonious, in a way that allows for compassion and connectedness?

As you know, he distilled this in his first teaching. When he did finally decide to teach, after his awakening, he still spent seven weeks hanging out in the bliss of Nibbana. But then he spent forty-five years teaching. So when he finally stopped this and went to teach his first teaching—the one that he repeated over and over, the really elegant distillation of what we need to know—it was the Four Noble Truths.

I'm just going to say these very simply. The first truth: the word in Pali is dukkha, which I like to translate as unreliability, unsatisfactoriness. It doesn't mean that all life is suffering and only bad things happen. That is not what it means. It means that stuff

happens. When we're born into a body, there are going to be times when this body hurts. We're all either going to die young or experience sickness, old age, and disease. We're all going to experience really beautiful things, and then we're going to be separated from those things. We're all going to have to be united with things and people that we would much rather not be united with.

There is a part of life that is what you would call unsatisfactory, unreliable. We can't depend on it for happiness in any lasting way. This seems obvious, right? It's not like he's proclaiming something we don't know. But in another way, how much of our mental energy—our psychic heart and mind energy—is spent in resisting this? Or blaming ourselves? We get sick, something goes wrong, we lose our job, someone makes a face at us, and we think, "Oh, they don't like me. I'm such a bad person."

How much of our mental energy is spent either blaming ourselves for not being perfect, or trying somehow to deny, to hide, to fix things?

Really, when you explore deeply your own ideas about what freedom would mean, what happiness would mean, what peace would mean—does it include that pain in your back? Does it mean that your migraines go away and never come back again? Does freedom include losing your job? Does it mean getting divorced? Does it mean having your friends suddenly move into some other life and losing connection with them?

When I think about happiness without being careful about it, when I notice what I'm actually imagining as ease, as freedom, as nirvana, it usually revolves around everything being really nice and pleasant—floating on a cloud with nothing bad happening anymore. It's really deeply ingrained, this sense that the bad stuff, the difficult stuff, isn't supposed to happen. But the Buddha is saying no, it's just part of life.

Another aspect is the fact that yes, beautiful things happen. There is pleasure. There is love. There are wonderful things. And it all changes. We can't keep anything constant. It's going to change. That's just another fact of life. So that's the first truth he calls dukkha—to be understood.

The second truth is that the cause of our suffering, our anguish, is not the fact of the first truth. That's just how life is. Rather, the cause of our anguish is the way our hearts and minds respond in the face of the difficult, in the face of losing what we love, in the face of having what's pleasant go away. It's not that these things happen, but the reactions, the habits of our hearts and minds in the face of this first truth—that is what really causes us the dis-ease, the sense of real suffering, of anguish, of life not working.

The Buddha uses craving as shorthand: the fact of wanting things we like to stay, wanting things we don't like to go away, wanting to be something or to be other. But really, these reactions, these responses, are the habits that Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about—those three habits. Wanting what we like, leading to aversion toward what we don't like, and thinking everything is all about me and what's going to make me feel good. So that's really the cause of the dis-ease in the face of things not being the way we want them to be.

The first two truths are simply stating how things seem to be. The third and fourth truths are that it doesn't have to be that way. The anguish described in the second truth exists simply because we misunderstand the way things are. It's not that we have to become a different person. We can simply learn to perceive ourselves and the world more accurately. And when there's accurate perception, when we have the right information even just in a moment, then the habits of mind—the clinging, the aversion—stop making sense, even just for a moment. They let go. With wise discernment, with a relaxed and really full presence, the clinging lets go.

And there can be a moment. It can be just momentary. You don't have to think about some end state that never changes, one we're never going to reach. That's just an idea that doesn't really relate to anything. But we all experience, over and over, moments when the clinging and aversion just let go. And it's possible to recognize the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of this mind and body, of life.

Take Guy's example from last night when he talked about getting on the plane. A simple example like that. As long as he was wanting to be in first class and disgruntled about not getting it—it's not huge suffering, it's little—but the way the mind works is the same whether it's something small or something enormous. He was in dis-ease, out of harmony, not happy. Suffering. Not huge suffering, but definitely not happy. And you can imagine how something little like that could work you into quite a state of aversion and negativity. And then if you really lose control, you mouth off at the flight attendant, and it just keeps escalating.

But as soon as that other person said, "Oh, I'm quite happy here," Guy's mind was open enough to recognize, "Oh yeah, right, this isn't so bad." In that moment, letting go of the wanting, letting go of the aversion—not as an act of will, because that's just more "me" wanting something—but simply recognizing, "Oh yeah, this is just what it is. What's the problem?" In that moment, there is no problem. The situation doesn't have to change. The mind that was caught in wanting, in aversion, in reactivity, simply sees: this doesn't make sense.

It lets go. We're in peace and ease, just as it is. This is really the cessation of clinging. In that moment, the cessation of suffering.

Today someone asked in the questions, you know, part of our practice seems—as Guy was talking about last night—really meeting the difficulties that arise in our mind, in our body, really meeting them with full, kind, non-judging attention, being there for them. We really learn from this. And on the other hand, there's the silence, the stillness, the peace in the room. How do these come together?

At times it really seems like we're struggling with a difficulty, then the difficulty's gone, and we can appreciate the peace, really feel what peace feels like. Because at first—and not even at first, but often—the difficulty, the reaction of our mind, which is what the difficulty actually is, not what's happening, seems so real. It so colors our perception that we know of no other way to be with it. We can only recognize peace and ease when that reaction's gone. That's right.

But what happens as we go on and on in practice is that the two come together. The thing that seems to be difficult—having to sit in steerage, or having your knee really killing you, or sitting here and having a really difficult memory come up with a lot of sadness, your mind just in chatter—you have to get rid of that to appreciate the stillness, the ease, the peace.

What happens with this third truth is that we start to begin to recognize, through the simple knowing of what's happening, through shifting our interest from what's happening or the experience and what I think about it to just the simple knowing of whatever's happening. In that knowing, we're touching. Pain is like this. Sadness is like this. Thinking is like this. None of it's a problem. None of it's a problem.

And when the reactions of mind to whatever's happening really let go, just for a moment—oh. Knee hurting, at ease. They come together. Natural peace and ease of mind and body doesn't mean the body never hurts. It doesn't mean we don't have difficult emotions. It doesn't mean that everything starts to be the way we want it to be. It means we realize more and more: hey, it's out of control. And the problem isn't that things aren't the way I want them to be. The problem is I want.

Oh, this is how it is in this moment. It doesn't mean we can't move from how it is. We can respond appropriately. It doesn't mean a kind of passive giving up, but it means a waking up with full presence. Oh, this moment is like this. Total presence. A friend of mine calls it the place of no problem. Just for a moment. That's a moment of cessation

of clinging, what the Buddha called liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. That's really the freedom. That's accessible here and now and always, just for a moment. It's not a state. And it's not some incredible, blissful experience. Just, oh.

But notice, as you go through the days here—they happen all the time, and in our daily life too, but one of the lovely things about a retreat is we have more space, we have more time, the little things you can really notice. So notice when there's a moment of that natural peace and ease. It might be that we notice it early first when nothing particular is happening. You're just sitting and drinking a sip of tea and you're really present and it's just this. Ah.

Our tendency can be to think, oh, it was the perfect cup of tea. If tomorrow at exactly the same time I make exactly the same tea, that's going to do it. And it'll take us the nine days to realize it wasn't about that.

So let's short-circuit that. When you notice that perfect moment of looking at the moon out there in the crystal air, when you notice that peace, that ease, that cessation of suffering, that wakeful presence—instead of focusing the attention out there on what the experience is, just notice that freedom from clinging, that liberation through non-clinging. Just kind of recognize what that peace and ease is like. And then we start to recognize that it's possible throughout all experience.

Not every moment, God knows. I mean, that's a possibility, I'm not saying that's what it's going to be like. It certainly isn't like that for me. But you'll find it can be accessible when you're sitting there and the person next to you is snoring and you think you just want to throttle them. Their snoring is ruining my... and suddenly it's just hearing, and there's no problem. Next minute, a problem. Moments like that are great because then you can see—wait a minute, it can't be the external experience that's the problem. It's the wanting it to be different.

Wow, isn't that fascinating? It's not bad. It's not like we're bad because we want, but it's fascinating. And it shows that peace and ease is much more accessible than we might normally think. You don't have to get to some incredibly rarefied state. So just notice as you go through the days—the sitting, the walking, the eating, taking your shower, going to the bathroom—it doesn't matter what we're doing.

And the fourth truth that the Buddha talked about is that there's a path. There's a path because mostly we don't notice that the habits are operating. Mostly when there are these moments of peace and ease, rather than seeing that it is the absence of wanting, the absence of believing in aversion, the absence of thinking it's all about me—we tend to focus outward, you know, trying to get back that perfect cup of tea. And so

there's a path so that we can practice in all aspects of our life, seeing how these habits of mind keep us spinning in confusion, recognizing over and over how when the habit just for a moment goes away, there's no problem. We can learn to shift where we take refuge. We can shift what we trust.

Ajahn Sumedho—he's an American who's been a monk in the Thai tradition for over thirty years, really quite wise, I love doing retreats with him—he says a shorthand for the whole eightfold path, which includes wise understanding leading to our motivations, our attitudes, how we speak and act in the world, how we meditate, mindfulness, energy, and concentration—a shorthand for all of that would be awareness. The whole eightfold path could be awareness. And Thich Nhat Hanh says a similar thing: mindfulness. Same thing, really.

So there's that path. We can learn to shift our refuge. The reason these habits are so strong, the reason we tend not to recognize them, is because we're believing them. We're trusting them. It's our refuge. So, for example, when that lab lady slammed the door in our face and the first thing that came up was annoyance at her—a kind of sense of "can't treat me like that," even though that wasn't the thought—that's where the habit of taking refuge is, in that aversion. The safe place is to answer it with aggression, with aversion. That's the habit.

When something really pleasant is dangled in front of us, or when you're in pain here, the deep habit that we believe is: if I can get rid of this pain, if I can go have something pleasant, I'm going to be happy. That's what we trust. That's where we place our refuge. And as long as we keep doing that, that's where we're going to stay.

So in taking awareness as the path, it's shifting our interest, shifting our refuge from what's happening to trusting that we can simply be in the knowing of what's happening. And that's actually a place of freedom. Just in a moment. And it doesn't take huge effort or huge energy.

So, for example, right now, just humor me—feel your hands, whether they're touching each other, whether they're touching your knees. Can you just feel your hands?

Just notice the sensations. Is that pretty easy to do? Can you do that? Doesn't take a lot of effort, does it? Not too hard. That's all. That's awareness. Just feeling those sensations. That's pretty accessible, isn't it? Not too esoteric.

Now, to stay just on that level of simplicity and not—"Oh, they're just sensations." Does the mind then go into, "Well, my hands are kind of warm. They're feeling kind of tight. Maybe I shouldn't have them in this position. They're kind of tense. Maybe I should change it. What's the matter?" That's like we're off of simple awareness. Then you might notice, "Oh, that's thinking," and that's awareness again.

So awareness doesn't take a huge amount of effort or energy, but it takes a steadiness through the day. Our whole practice here is really that simple quality of awareness throughout the whole day. Just coming back, coming back, coming back.

Our tendency, when we give instructions in the sitting to feel the sensations of breath, in the walking to feel the sensations of feet—our tendency from our habits is to get into evaluating what the sensations of breath are like, evaluating how clearly we're feeling the sensations when we're walking, getting really tense, trying to do it better, trying to feel them longer, trying to feel it more subtly. But none of that makes any difference. We're just setting ourselves a very simple task so that we can keep coming back to the awareness, the awareness, the awareness.

As Ajahn Sumedho says, the wonderful thing about awareness in terms of what we're aware of—awareness, he calls it the point that includes—it can be aware of anything, everything. There's nothing that awareness can't be aware of. And this is the other thing: awareness doesn't care what it's aware of. It's not like if your awareness feels a really refined, subtle breath, that's a better, cleaner, purer awareness than awareness of a rough, tight breath. It doesn't make any difference.

It's about beginning to trust, to recognize, to take refuge in just that simple knowing—the sensations as your hands touch. That's all. We hear a sound, just the awareness of hearing it. It's so simple, so nothing. There's nothing to hold, there's nothing to point to, there's not a state you can name—so we overlook it. But awareness is always available as long as we're conscious.

In a way, our practice is really to shift our interest and our evaluations from what's happening to the awareness itself. Moment after moment after moment.

It's like a Tai Chi move, I like to think. So we're sitting here fighting with sleepiness. "Oh, sleepiness is like this." That's Ajahn Sumedho's language. Nothing else to do. Let go of trying to get rid of the sleep. "Oh, sleepiness is like this." That's awareness. Trying to feel the breath and the mind's going off into past and future, thinking it shouldn't be thinking. "Oh, thinking is like this." You're sitting and your back's hurting. "Oh, tightness is like this." "Boredom is like this." "Being all caught up in thinking I should be doing something better is like this."

There's really nothing that's outside of awareness. But we keep overlooking that and getting back involved again in these habits. They're just so deeply rutted in the way we view experience.

You know how the Buddha describes our moment-to-moment experience in terms of the six sense experiences? That would be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—physical experience, physical sensations—and mental. That's the sixth sense door.

So mental experiences—emotions, thoughts. And the way the Buddha describes experience is again very, very elegant and simple.

Take any one moment: just those sixth sense experiences happening over and over and over, out of which we construct all kinds of fabulous stories and explanations. Take a physical sensation, or take a sight. If there's an eye that works—a working eye—and a form comes in front of it, and there's consciousness, when those three come together, he calls that contact. That's a moment of seeing. And every moment that there's contact, whether it's seeing or hearing or sensing, along with it there's a subtle mental experience of it being either pleasant or unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—neutral.

This is fast, fleeting, happening every time there's contact, which is basically every moment. But we mostly don't notice it; we're busy, it's happening a lot. And from that, when we're not really noticing, what's common is: it's pleasant, so right away there's the "oh yeah, more of that"—a leaning into, a wanting. Unpleasant, like that lady slamming the door in our face, and right away there's a pulling back, a "no," a not-liking, which can go all the way to aversion, to murderous rage, or to fear. The wanting could be just a little "oh, I want it," or it can lead us into years of our life trying to get something. And then neither pleasant nor unpleasant—we often don't notice it at all. We often get bored at this point.

The other habit is that we think it's all about me. And this is really, I would say, at the bottom of all of it—the thing that we don't see. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—there's a reaction of mind, and that reaction of liking, of not liking, of being bored, we're completely entranced by it. It's all about me.

Notice this. I love noticing this. You have to have a sense of humor; it helps. It's all about me. At the same time, don't take it personally that your mind makes everything about you. But notice it.

You're sitting in the dining room and somebody walks by at the far side, really slowly, looking really mindful. And you notice that, and immediately: "They're better than me." Somebody drops a fork, and right away you think, "Oh, glad that wasn't me."

Somebody is sitting next to you making noise. "How can they do that? Don't they know it's bothering me?" It can be anything. There can be just a birdsong outside, and at first it's just a moment of hearing, and then: "Ah, I'm really having a peaceful moment enjoying this birdsong. I'm really so peaceful." Or your back hurts: "I'm not doing well." Your breath is heavy: "I really can't meditate because I have such a heavy breath. I'm so stressed, I'm so self-involved." Or you start noticing how every thought's all about me, every second thought, and you think, "Well, I'm really a completely self-centered jerk. Nobody else is having thoughts like this."

I'll just tell you now: we all are. We all are. It's just what happens. It isn't personal. That's what I mean by "it isn't personal." But it's fascinating.

Mingyur Rinpoche, who is quite a fun and lively, humorous Tibetan teacher, describes how we make this all about me, making ourselves the center of the universe. He says this fascination with me, this felt sense of "me here now," he calls it the original measuring point for samsara, or the cycle of suffering.

And he uses an example. He says in Tibet, when we're going to build a house, the way we measure out the foundation is we start from a place in the middle and we get a long rope, sort of like a measuring tape. From the point in the middle, we measure out to the end and all the way around until you have the footprint for the house. And he says, in that same way, everything is measured from that felt sense of me here now. That's how we measure everything that's going on. It's our biggest entrancement.

When we're so entranced in that way, that's what keeps us spinning in these habits of mine. It's all about me, and this is unpleasant, so we've got to get rid of it. It's all about me, and this is pleasant, so we've got to have more. Until we stop taking refuge in these habits and are willing to just experiment with taking refuge in the awareness itself, we're not going to see through it.

But when we're willing to just stop a minute and say, "Oh, right—feeling like I'm so important is like this. Embarrassment that I dropped the fork is like this." You don't have to fix anything. It's just this step into awareness of it is like this. It's really very accessible.

When we have this attitude, this willingness to just step into the awareness—not to evaluate everything that's happening by whether we like it or don't like it, whether it feels good or doesn't feel good, what it means about me—not to evaluate at all. Mindfulness, awareness, is just this simple meeting of experience. Whatever is happening, just

as it is. Relaxed, without a lot of story about it, not judging. Just being here for this moment. And then this moment changes, being here for this moment. Over and over and over.

When we're able to do that, just willing to do that, our refuge begins to shift. We begin to see that there is really a possibility for a kind of ease and peace in relationship to this life, to ourselves, that we might not have expected, that we certainly didn't experience before. And it doesn't mean that the situations of our life necessarily have to change.

The Buddha, when he awoke—his awakening didn't change his world. It didn't mean that difficult stuff didn't happen. He lived a life where he had all kinds of suffering: the suffering of war, the suffering of illness, the suffering of friends dying, the suffering of relatives trying to kill him, trying to split the monks, trying to make him look bad so they could be in charge. Organizational dukkha, power politics. Monks and nuns breaking all kinds of rules, causing all kinds of trouble. All he wanted to do was go sit under the tree in the bliss of nirvana, but he had to deal with all of this because he chose to, out of compassion for the world.

His awakening didn't change that. He had headaches. He had backaches. His most beloved disciples died before him. Yet he was the peaceful one. He said he was free—free from suffering, free from confusion.

We don't have to have a different body or different circumstances in our life. It's really accessible to all of us, moment by moment. Don't look for some big blowout where everything's going to change, it's all going to be light and glitz and free from now on. You're just setting yourself up. But notice these moments when we shift from being caught in our habits, seeing the world through these habits, to the potential for simple awareness. Oh, it's like this.

Mindfulness—when we're mindful, any experience is a doorway to freedom. It doesn't matter what's happening. Without mindfulness, without the refuge in awareness, the most blissful, beatific experience just keeps feeding that sense of it's all about me.

So this is our practice here: just to learn, moment after moment, that we can really trust awareness. We can really make it our home, our true home.

CHAPTER 366

Impermanence and the Immediacy of Now

Carol Wilson · 57 min

> *In this profound exploration of one of Buddhism's central insights, Carol Wilson examines why the perception of impermanence (anicca) remains so challenging despite being intellectually accessible. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings in the suttas, she shares his radical statement that not even a speck of soil under a fingernail is permanent—and that this very instability is what makes liberation possible.*
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> *Wilson addresses our habitual resistance to impermanence: the fear of loss, the search for a resting place, and our tendency to solidify experience through concepts and storylines. She illustrates how we unconsciously deny change—whether by not noticing when emotions shift, trying to recreate pleasant experiences, or holding fixed views about who we are. The touching story of Ānanda weeping at news of the Buddha's approaching death demonstrates that grief is natural, while also pointing toward the deeper teaching.*
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> *The talk culminates in an invitation to practice what Suzuki Roshi called "beginner's mind"—meeting each moment with totality of presence, without agenda, free from the obsession with what comes next. This willingness to step into the unknown doesn't leave us bereft but opens us to appreciation, wonder, and the flexibility to respond appropriately to life as it actually unfolds. Wilson closes with Billy Collins' poem "Aimless Love," beautifully evoking the tender attention available when we release our grip on permanence.*

This practice, Vipassana meditation—the most common translation of Vipassana is insight—is called insight practice. I thought I might talk about one of the main insights that the Buddha mentions, one that arises from this practice. But first, what do we mean by insight?

Have you had any yet? Are you going to have any? How does this drudging up and down—lifting, moving, placing—have anything to do with insight?

All we mean by insight is really simply a shift of perception. We see, we recognize—I'm using "see" metaphorically for intuitive knowing, not necessarily visual seeing—we recognize an aspect of our experience, of our mind, of our body, of the way the world is. We recognize it differently from the normal way we go about, often without even consciously realizing it, interpreting ourselves and life.

In terms of insights that come in practice, it's not that if we practice hard enough, we'll be born into a different and better reality. This is it. This is the reality. We wake up from one interpretation into another, but the reality—as I said last time—the Buddha's awakening didn't transport him to another earth on another plane. He still had to walk barefoot around India, and that's just how it was.

So the insight is a simple shift of perception. But that's huge, because when we're not recognizing an experience accurately, the way we respond, the way we interpret, the way we act in relationship to that doesn't jibe. We don't have accurate information. What shifts when we recognize accurately is that our patterns—what I mentioned last time about trying to make ourselves happy and it doesn't work because we don't have the right information—those patterns change, not out of willpower, but just because it's so obvious. The main one of those patterns is clinging, of course. But when we recognize with wisdom, we see more accurately. The wisdom is the recognition, the knowing of that. And even though the old way of seeing comes back again, there's been a change, a shift in the mind stream. We know it's not only this way.

It's like those magic eye design graphics. They used to have whole books of them—just graphics of two different colors with no conceptual picture you could recognize. But if you look at them long enough with an unfocused, relaxed gaze, a 3D image springs out of it. Hockey players, or basketball players, or something like that. Then when you start staring again, or you look away and look back, it's gone. You just have the little yellow and blue graphics. But once you know that's there, something switches. You know it. Whereas someone who's never been able to see it—you can tell them about it, and they're like, "Yeah, right, sure."

My mother could never see them, and it would make her nuts. We'd go in malls—this was when they were really popular—and there'd be giant posters, and she couldn't stop looking. She'd be going nuts, and I'd say, "Don't you see the dinosaurs?" "No, I don't see the dinosaurs." Telling someone doesn't help, but you can help someone learn how to look. That's what we're doing here.

Once you know, once you've seen it—say, a flying saucer—if someone comes up and says, "No, you didn't," well, if you're clear in your knowing, if you have confidence in your understanding, he can say whatever he wants. You know you saw it. That's the shift. And we can respond differently. Really, that's all insight is. Then it shifts back, and we're moving between the two different ways of perceiving. This doesn't have to be a problem at all.

One of the most central insights that the Buddha speaks of—actually, perceptions—is that of impermanence. Anicca in the Pali: the changing, impermanent nature of all experience. All mental, all physical experience. That's the catch there—all experience. The misperception we have is that we perceive the permanent in what is not permanent, and we don't realize that's happening.

This is from the Sutta, from the Buddha. These are two different suttas where he's talking to his monks. He says, "There is no form"—meaning no matter, no solidity, our bodies, any other form. There's no form, there's no feeling tone—which is like the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feeling tone. There's no perception. Perception is simply the recognition of experience, the naming, the labeling. There are no formations of mind, volitional formations, moods, thoughts, and no consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself.

And then the Buddha took up a little bit of soil under his fingernail. He's outside. He just took up this little bit of soil and he said, "There's not even this much form, consciousness, volitional formations, perception, feeling tone that is stable, permanent, unchanging. Not even this much." He said, "If there was this much, even this much that was stable, that didn't change, that was absolutely permanent, then this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned. But because there is not even this much that is permanent, that is stable, then the living of this holy life for the complete destruction of suffering is discerned, is possible."

I find that a radical statement. Not even this much. Are we comfortable with that? Does the heart leap up and say, "Yeah, great!"?

The other quotation—I mean, there are millions of quotations throughout the suttas about impermanence—but again the Buddha is saying, "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated..." So it's part of our practice, actually, consciously recognizing the perception of impermanence. It eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit "I am." Those are code words for complete liberation in the way the Buddha spoke. So when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it basically completely liberates our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering. It leads to that depth of wisdom, of understanding, based on simply the clear recognition of how things are.

Of course, developing and cultivating that perception—that's what we're doing in the practice, and I'll point to that a bit more later in the talk, hopefully. But first I want to bring up some questions. Why is it, or should it be, so difficult to truly know, to truly perceive, to live with a cellular understanding of impermanence?

Because of all the different perceptions, the different insights that the Buddha speaks about—the others being the unreliability of all experience and the non-self nature of all—impermanence seems to me intellectually and conceptually the most accessible. I mean, when we talk about things changing, nothing really staying the same, can you sort of agree with that? We go, "Yeah, yeah, things change." On some intellectual level, that's not incredibly abstruse. We all intellectually know that our bodies are very different now from how they were twenty years ago.

But then aren't we still shocked? Shocked! When we look in the mirror in the morning and there's more gray hair, or the cellulite starts to come, or somehow—how did I get to look like this? Or we see a picture of ourselves from twenty years ago. Oh my God. Or a picture of you and all your friends from twenty years ago. I tell you, actually, it's more shocking with the friends because we think, "I didn't change as much as they did." Well, they can say the same thing, so that makes it even.

But why is it so shocking? Every moment is changing. Yet this sense of what I would call the denial of impermanence—or what the Buddha calls the upside-down perception, perceiving the permanent in what is not permanent—is so... well, it's comfortable. It's what we're used to. There are lots of reasons of habit why we don't tend to really let in, on a moment-by-moment, cellular level as opposed to just the thinking level, the fact of change.

One question I used to ask myself—well, sometimes I still do—is: Do I really know that everything, not even this much, is not stable, that everything is changing? What would it mean in my life if I really lived in and from that knowing? What would it mean? And the mind that isn't there but is thinking about what that would mean can come up with something that usually isn't the most cheery and pleasant thing. It's like, "Oh my God, everything's changing." I know that's the first noble truth—that when we're born we're going to be separated from what we love, that we're going to have sickness, old age, and death, that nothing lasts. I know that. But thinking about every minute opening to loss—that's sort of the first thing that comes up in my mind.

That's too much. Loss is too painful. And so I think that's one of the first resistances. And a lot of this is actually not so conscious—this fear of the sadness, the pain, the grief of loss.

And of course, this is where we'll be going with it: the reason there's pain and grief and this real struggle with loss is actually because we've already related to experience in a way that is not consistent with what's true. We really, really suffer when what we

want or like or are comfortable with goes away. We really suffer only when we've been clinging to it, when we've been in some way relying on holding on to that experience, that person, that job, that feeling.

In some way, and often it's below the level of conscious thought, we're relying on that for confirmation, for self-confirmation, for a sense of comfort, for pleasant feeling. And that's actually huge—that we're holding on and relying on stuff for pleasant feeling. For a sense of safety, for a sense of control. We like to know how things are and get them all nice and tidy and then have them stay that way.

Like Guy's example last night of how upset his mind got when he had to walk in a different place. He's not just a weird person, you know. Well, maybe he is, but that's another thing. But every time you came into the hall, it was a free-for-all. You don't get to hold on to which seat you sit in. Every time you come in, you just have to take what seat's there. Now, in terms of our life, that's not really a big deal, is it? But wouldn't it be a little distressing, a little upsetting? You come in and it's bad enough in the lunchroom, you know, and that's enough of a nightmare. But if we did that everywhere? What if you didn't know which room you were going to go back to at night? What if we gave you a different job every day? What if we changed the schedule? We like a little bit of consistency here—which there's nothing wrong with, but it's when we are clinging to it.

That's the problem with clinging. It's that it just doesn't work. And it really increases our suffering, keeps us suffering a lot more.

Our instinctive fear of the feelings of loss and sadness is another thing. It's just part of life. Sadness, loss is like this. In some ways, we know we're a little bit more alive. Sure, it shows there was clinging, but it also means we don't have to shut down and hide from seeing things clearly because, God forbid, we might feel some sadness of loss. It just runs through life. It's part of it.

Actually, can we just embrace that? Rather than either deny impermanence and just keep fighting and trying to pretend we can control and manipulate, or shut down altogether and pretend we're not clinging—pretend we don't care, pretend it's okay, it's pleasant, but I'm not going to really open to it because I don't want to get caught in clinging. That kind of indifference comes not from wisdom but from fear or ignorance.

Even in the suttas this comes up, and I find it quite touching. The Buddha's main attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life was a monk called Ananda. He comes through in the suttas as being a really kind person. It seems to me like he's the one who personalizes things. You hear about all the monks and nuns, and the Buddha gives a

talk and they all get enlightened at the end. But Ananda, for twenty-five years, had quite some insight, yet he wasn't completely enlightened. And he served the Buddha with total love.

He also served as the intermediary. He loved the Dhamma. He loved the Buddha's teaching. And with great compassion, he was always trying to bring anyone who wanted to hear the Buddha to hear him. Rather than what we sometimes see these days with some great master or teacher where the people close are trying to keep other people away, with Ananda it was just the reverse. He was always trying to get people to come and hear the teachings and wake up. He was very kind.

Anyway, three months before the Buddha was going to die, when he was eighty years old, he knew what was going to happen and he told Ananda. They started talking—Ananda was present with him most of the time—about what to do with his remains when he died and all these practicalities of life. Then suddenly the Buddha was sitting there talking to some other monks and he noticed Ananda had disappeared. Of course, with what they called his divine eye, he knew what was going on. He knew where Ananda was, but he said to the other monks, "Where's Ananda? Where could Ananda be? Go and find Ananda for me."

So they went off and looked for Ananda, and where Ananda was—

He went into his lodging and stood leaning on his doorpost, crying and weeping, saying, "I'm still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away—the teacher who has been so compassionate to me. What am I going to do without my teacher?" And he was just standing there weeping.

It's so human, isn't it? I find it quite touching and encouraging in a way—that it's okay. Until we're completely, always seeing things the way they are with no ignorance, when we're faced with the loss of something deeply loved, there's going to be some attachment. We're going to be sad, we're going to grieve, and that's okay. There's no reason to try and deliberately hide from things because we might feel sad.

Of course, the Buddha then called him, and in a very loving way said, "Friend Ananda, enough. You don't need to weep." He said, "How many times have I told you? Things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other. So how could it be that what has come together through conditions"—meaning this body—"will not come apart again when the conditions change?"

And then he went on to really beam kindness and love to Ananda, praising him for all his good qualities. It wasn't like he was being harsh with him. He was meeting him with tremendous love. It's a touching interaction. But after twenty-five years with the Buddha, this was simply Ananda's natural human reaction. It's okay. There can be space for it—but let's not let it shut us down.

The other aspect of impermanence that makes it harder for us to recognize—and it's this aspect that the intensity of retreat and moment-to-moment mindfulness really helps us perceive more accurately—is the constancy of change.

I heard a teaching by His Holiness the Dalai Lama some years ago, and he was talking about impermanence, as teachers are wont to do. He was describing that even though we resist it, most of us would agree: conditions come together, like a life. It starts, then it exists for a while, and then it goes away. But he said that's not accurate. This is the place where we get confused, where we don't perceive accurately. Yes, conditions come together, something arises—a being is born, or a mood arises, or a cake is made, whatever it is. But the "persisting for a while"—that's what's not accurate. Nothing is persisting for a while unchanged. The change is every moment.

Thinking about it is where we get really uncomfortable. The sense of total instability, total unsettledness, the unreliability of anything—even though we can't, with our normal senses, perceive it. Like the change in this paper: it looks steady, although even as I hold it, it's different. It's changing. The conditions are changing. But even though we don't perceive it every moment, the fact that things are so much in constant flux is something my mind isn't really comfortable with.

I think it's from this that our sense of trying to control things arises—to control the environment, to control ourselves, to control how people behave, to know what's going to happen in the future. Our obsessive planning. I'm not saying we don't plan; we need to plan. I'm talking about obsessive planning driven by fear, by control, by "it's got to be this way"—to somehow stave off the fact of constant shifting change. As if to open into that would be enormous suffering.

But of course, it's just the reverse. The cause of our suffering here is the clinging, the misperception, continuously trying to relate to any aspect of experience as if it's going to be here just the same in the next moment. If it is, okay. But if it's not, okay.

One of my favorite quotations from the Buddha: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful."

The search for a resting place is burning. And that search can be in the physical world—a house, a family, a relationship. None of this is to say there's anything wrong with those things. It's the trying to hold onto them for a security they cannot promise. That's the problem.

The search for a resting place can be just wanting to be comfortable in this moment. It can be the intensity of craving we bring to our meditation practice—to get to some deep samādhi where I can rest, to get rid of this pain or this bad emotion so I can rest, to just sit somewhere I'm not near that noisy person so I can rest, to get out of the cold so I can rest.

"He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere."

This sense of not needing a resting place—you can't will it. I'm going to say willingness, but we can't will it.

Just the willingness to open into not knowing. Each moment, who knows what's going to arise in the next moment. As we were saying in one of the interviews today, that's Krishnamurti's line: a freedom from the known. That's actually what mindfulness is. Each moment, there's just mindful awareness meeting whatever's happening. That's totality of presence, just for that moment, without bringing in any assumptions or concepts or ideas of what this is or what it should be or what it will be or what it was. Just this complete innocence, freshness—what Suzuki Roshi called beginner's mind.

We say "the breath." You sit down and say, "the breath." But you actually don't know if the sensations of breath are going to be the next thing that arises. We really don't know. Moment by moment, I sit down and think, "This sitting, I'm going to really be with the breath." And ten minutes later, I haven't felt one breath consciously. Maybe a lot of other things. Maybe really conscious, really present with mindfulness. But we never really know.

It's so ingrained in our habits to look for security, to look for steadiness, to look for something as if we can rest. This is from Pema Chödrön, whom I quoted last night: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again." From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together.

Isn't that what we're trying to do with meditation? And it just won't obey us. That's what's so great about meditation. You want it to confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together, and it just stubbornly won't do that. That's why we love it. When you come into interviews and you say, "Oh my God, it isn't working," we say, "Great." "I'm really in this heavy emotion." "Good." It's not confirming you. It's waking us up.

So even though we say yama mara is fear of death, it's actually fear of life—being continually thrown out of the nest.

Another way we can look at our life and practice is noticing the places where we are—and I say "we are," but it's not like we're consciously sitting here thinking, "I'm doing this"—but to notice when the mind, when the habits of mind, what it reaches for, what it holds onto, what it perceives as permanent, what we're holding onto to confirm us, to make us feel together, to confirm our life.

This is from Ajahn Chah, the wonderful Thai forest monk: "Worldly knowledge and accomplishments on whatever level still leave you in this realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be comes about in dependence on external things. It is a happiness, but it's not the happiness of freedom, the happiness that doesn't depend on anything."

So what is it we depend on? We depend on possessions, on pleasure, on reputation, on praise, on wealth. We lean on all these things, like leaning on a rotting old tree trunk. And after we lean for too long, it breaks and falls, and we fall with it. I love Ajahn Chah. Such is worldly happiness.

This is a delicate balance that we learn when we start to see all those things—reputation, wealth, sense pleasures, family, your job. When we realize that these are worldly happinesses and that leaning on them means at some point they're going to break and fall. But the delicate balance is that this doesn't mean these things are bad or wrong, or that pleasure and love and some kind of temporary happiness aren't available with them. They can be. And they can be very wholesome and lead to a lot of growth and a lot of good, wholesome action in the world. So it's not that we make the flip: "Well, everything's changing, so none of it's worth anything," and slide into aversion. No.

This is delicate. It's a sense of opening into, just beginning to let in the perceptions of constant change, of fluctuation, of the fact that we are continually thrown out of the nest—and to just be willing to hang out in that not knowing, in that instability. That

actually opens us up more deeply to participate in life. It doesn't shut us down. Not "Okay, who cares about that anyway?" They say if you know a beautiful day is only here for a day, you can really enjoy that day. So it's all like that.

The mind might say, "If I really open to this instability, life is just too fearful."

But we shut down ahead of time out of fear.

The reality isn't like that at all. It's actually just the reverse. There's a sense of the totality of presence, the immediacy, when we're totally here in this moment—open to it, accepting it, just being with it for what it is without dragging in all our ideas and assumptions and concepts. Without that demand that it's got to stay the same, without tightening and contracting even before it's gone. It's very, very different.

But we can't talk ourselves into it. This is really where we practice: the steadiness, moment after moment, of cultivating awareness, cultivating this simple quality of attention that's willing to be so fresh that we don't already know everything before we even start looking. I mean, we think we do. Maybe you don't. I don't think I do consciously, but then I keep noticing I really do think I do.

This mindfulness—this is from Krishnamurti, and I like this description of how a moment of just pure mindfulness can feel: "When you look totally"—and you could be looking at the breath, at a sound, at a sensation in the body, at a mood, at a thought—"when you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself. Your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment, and then there is no room for fear, no contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

It has that sense of what Guy was saying this morning: the collectedness of all the psychic energy, just for a moment. Don't extend it in time—just for a moment. So present that we're not comparing or assessing or judging or fearing into the future. It's just this. Just this. That's why I keep using Ajahn Sumedho's language: anger is like this, pain is just this, in that moment. And therefore, in that moment, there's no conflict.

This sense of mindfulness, this innocent knowing, free from—or not confused with, I would say—all the concepts and ideas that come about something. We so often confuse these for the actual experience. And it's this confusing the ideas about an experience for the experience itself that keeps us in the habit of not perceiving anicca, impermanence.

A simple example: let's use physical pain because the physical sensation is just a little more gross, a little easier to notice. There's a sensation when you're sitting, and the first awareness of it might be, "My knee is really hurting." That's already a thought. That's already a concept: knee, my knee, hurting. And I know for me, as soon as I say that, there's a visual kind of picture in my mind, almost like my whole body and my knee down there. My eyes are closed—I'm not actually seeing my knee—but there's a visual image of me, my knee down there, really hurting.

And then right away, if I don't recognize that as a concept, if I don't bring attention just back into the sensation—we might say maybe it's burning or tingling. Yes, that's also a concept, but it's a little less fraught with sense of self and storyline and past and future. We don't go as far down the road with "my burning" as we do with "my bum knee that I had arthroscopic surgery on last year, and I can't believe I'm sitting here in this stupid hall. But if I go to a chair, that's failing, so I have to sit here even though..." Way down the road.

Bare experience would just be sensation, calm mind around it. But what we do is this: there's the perception of sensation, the perception leads to thoughts about it—like I said, my knee is hurting, I have a bad knee. Those thoughts, if we don't recognize them, very quickly form a story or a view that we absolutely believe. We don't even realize it's a description, a view. And that becomes the reality.

In this example, that could be what I said: I have a bad knee, I had surgery last year, and I know if I keep sitting like this, I'm going to do X, Y, and Z to my knee. I'm not saying whether it's true or not, but that's the whole view that immediately can spring up when the attention connects with burning.

I use that example because you can kind of see the way it moves.

One of the ways we don't recognize impermanence is that we don't see this process clearly. The lack of continuity in mindfulness actually hides impermanence from us.

Take the same dynamic with an emotion. You're sitting, and a very familiar but difficult emotion arises—we each have our favorite, the one we believe is really the root of who we are. Despair or loneliness or frustration or fear or depression, whatever it might be. And it's coming. Let's say it's worry.

You're noticing, and you feel like you're really mindful. "Here's worry. This is the story about the worry." We feel we're being really fresh with it because we see the story. "That's worry. But worry feels like this. I'm not buying the story."

Then something else happens. You go through the sitting, other things arise. Then you come back and say, "Well, this is here. It's been here all day." But the worry actually went away for a while. You didn't notice it at all. Then later in the sitting, or in the next sitting, there's worry again. Whether it's about the same thing as before or something different, you notice it and think, "I'm being really fresh with this."

But the thought and the view being solidified—we may not recognize this—is that this worry is always here. And it gets complicated. I might say, "Well, didn't it go away when you were eating lunch?" And you respond, "Well, I wasn't aware of it then because I was eating, but it was there. It was there waiting. And as soon as I got quiet, there was the worry."

It's as if we have a mountain of worry or despair or whatever, sitting down there in the gut or the throat, wherever we feel it. And sometimes we're distracted and don't feel it, but we know that when we're really mindful, there it is again. And that's who I am—this despair, this worry, this whatever.

So we're not acknowledging the impermanence in our experience. We're actually consciously denying it. "I didn't notice it, but that's just because my mindfulness wasn't good enough. If my mindfulness had been continuous, I would have known this worry was here all the time."

In fact, it's just the reverse. If we're really continuous in our attention, we'll notice something quite different. As strong as that despair or whatever is—you're really in it, it's really intense—suddenly there's just a little thought that comes through: "I wonder what's for lunch." And we go, "Well, that's distraction. Back to the worry." That didn't count.

Or we do go off and wonder about lunch, and after a few minutes of "I had pizza yesterday so it can't be pizza today, it can't possibly be as good," then we think, "Boy, I'm really a lightweight. Here I am, I could really be working with this core issue, and I'm worrying about what's for lunch, when really worry is who I am." We don't even want to get back to it. And we don't acknowledge that it's completely changing, changing, changing.

Or as I mentioned, a lot of times the really wholesome, positive states—contentment comes in, some samādhi, some steadiness of mind, equanimity—and as Guy was saying, we think, "Well, that's just what's supposed to happen," so we don't acknowledge it. Many people think, "This is some fluke. It's got nothing to do with me, because I know I'm going to be back in the despair any moment." So okay, contentment arises—let's not even pay any attention to it.

That's not going to hang around. And always kind of matching some idea of who we are or what we are, really leaning on some rotting old tree trunk of some idea about ourselves, instead of recognizing the constant change.

How many thoughts do you think you've had since you got here? Any idea? Sure, a lot of them are similar—I'll grant you that. But none of them are the same. Each thought is a new thought. They may not be the most creative thoughts in the world, but each thought is a new thought. You can't have the same thought twice. Similar, yes, but the same, no.

Just really noticing how much we deny the constant change. And there's another thing we do—I think someone mentioned it in a talk—selective perception. This is why "freedom from the known" is such an important line. We recognize, or I think Rodney said in his talk, we open to what we're already comfortable with. If you have certain political views, you're open to other people with those political views, and you can't see anything good about people who don't have those views.

I've seen that with myself, with some politician that I really have strong negative views about. I don't want to perceive anything wholesome or good about that person. That person couldn't have anything good going on. My mind just likes to make these boxes. It's not open for discovery. It's not fresh. And so we have this selective perception all the time.

"I'm this kind of person. I'm a low-energy kind of person." So if I'm on retreat and I wake up in the middle of the night—well, I'm a low-energy kind of person, I know that from my life. I need nine hours of sleep. If I get up now, there's no way I'm going to make it through the day because I'm a low-energy type of person. So I force myself back to sleep.

This is sort of from my own experience, what I'm saying. It took me years to actually say, "You know what? I'm wide awake. Get up. Just get up." And I'd find when I'd get up—not only was I a little sleepy, so what? I'd get up and I love the early morning hours. I don't need as much sleep when I'm on retreat. But how am I going to find that out if I'm telling myself, "No, I'm a low-energy type of person and this is what I know and this is how it is"?

Nothing's ever the same. No two days are the same. No situation's the same.

So other ways we deny impermanence: Someone mentioned how we try to recreate an experience. Recreate that really concentrated sitting. Recreate that perfect walking. Recreate that misty early morning, so we leap out of bed and run outside at exactly the same time because we had this really nice emotion when we were there.

But this time, of course, there's no way you can have the same experience twice. The conditions are different. The day's going to be different—misty or not. Your mental states will definitely be different because the day before you walked out open, no expectations, just present. Today you're running out filled with greed and hurrying and frustration. "Oh, let me feel this nice thing again." I don't think it's going to happen. It's going to be different. There's no way the conditions are ever all the same.

So what's the suffering in that? Trying to deny the shifting, the change.

Another thing is noticing, not trying to make something go away.

That's just aversion and wanting. But noticing when something's really gone—that's different. Like, for example, a strong emotion. When it's gone and you think, "Well, I just didn't notice it." Try actually noticing: "Now I'm not feeling despair, I'm feeling hunger." Try noticing: "There was contentment and that's gone, and now there's frustration." Just notice.

I know this is going to sound silly, but somehow this was a big insight for me. I was eating on a retreat not that long ago, very mindfully. I was quite quiet and slowed down, chewing, chewing, that little burst of flavor. And if you really stay with it, you see the flavor's gone like that, and then you're just masticating kind of tasteless stuff. You want to swallow it and get another bite of flavor. But I was just staying there, and I swallowed.

Usually when I'm paying attention like that, I swallow and there's sensations here and it's going down. In my mind, the concept is "This is the food and it's going down"—a whole concept of continuity. But this time I was just staying there, and I swallowed. I was in my mouth, and I swallowed, and the food was so gone. I mean, it was really gone. There was a sensation here, but that wasn't the food. That was just sensation here. I didn't hold on to the concept. I know this sounds silly, but that sense of the complete gone-ness of it—I couldn't find the food. It was gone.

We have to take the little insights we get. But it really spread out. Just notice that kind of thing and stay there with the gone-ness.

You can also notice beginnings. Meeting experience with this freshness, this beginner's mind—that's actually what mindfulness practice is. Whether it's the breath or the steps or sensation or emotion, all the instructions are just different ways of trying to help us, in any particular moment, to drop the concepts, drop the ideas from the past and what we want from the future and what we think should happen or will happen, and just sit down. "Well, what's going to happen now?"

I know when I'm on retreat and I'm really dropping in when I sit down and just go, "Okay, let's see what happens." No prior preconceptions. Not leaning into the future or dragging the past after us.

This is from the Buddha, a particular sutta called "One Fortunate Attachment"—actually, there are three suttas with the same verse. He says: "Let not a person revive the past or on the future build her hopes. For the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached. Instead, with insight, let her see each presently arisen state. Let her know that and be sure of it, invincibly, unshakably."

One of the monks gives an exposition of what that means. It's pretty much what you'd think, but I just want to say—he asks, what does it mean to not revive the past? It doesn't mean we can't think about the past. It doesn't mean we're so in the moment that we have no idea what our name is. People say, "If everything's changing and you're just open to the moment, how are you going to find your way home? How do you remember how to get to the dining room?" That's just our mind going through its trips. It's not like that. We can remember the past—well, less and less—but we can somewhat remember.

As this monk explained, reviving the past in the way the Buddha's talking about means one's consciousness becomes bound up with desire and lust when thinking about any particular aspect. "In the past, my body was like this, or I had this mood, or I had this form"—it becomes bound up with desire and lust.

And because of that, you delight in it, your consciousness shrinks, and that's what he's calling reviving the past. We're bound to it and we suffer.

The same thing about building one's hopes on the future. It's not that we can't make plans for the future or have a thought about what's to come. That in itself is no problem—that's not suffering. But again, when one's consciousness becomes bound up with desire, with attachment about building one's hopes on what's going to be in the future, then one becomes bound to it, one becomes suffering.

And what does it mean to be invincible in regard to presently arisen states? I love that translation—*invincible*. It means one's consciousness, one's awareness, one's presence is not bound up with desire, attachment, aversion, or lust about this presently arisen state. In other words, we're simply meeting this moment totally, just as it is, with totality of presence but no agenda. No agenda.

If you try to think, "How can I live like that?"—that's too much. But if you try to simply experience that in a moment, that's not too much. That's totally experienceable, and we all experience it many, many moments. In that moment of presence with whatever it is—sadness, hearing, sensation, contentment, it doesn't matter what's hap-

pening—that moment of pure presence without being bound by reactivity or fear, we are invincible. Invincible in terms of being unshakable. It's all workable. There's no suffering. There's no problem. There's nothing else one needs to do. Invincible. That's really a very powerful statement.

So this willingness, just this willingness to begin to explore the possibility of the perception of impermanence, the possibility of instability—not thinking about it, but bringing this pure perception, this freshness, this innocence of attention and totality to just this moment, just this moment—this willingness not to know, to recognize that each moment of mindfulness is like stepping into the unknown. That's what we're practicing, really. Opening to the unknown.

That doesn't leave us feeling bereft. That doesn't leave us feeling like, "Oh my God, life is unbearable." It actually opens us to enormous appreciation of the beauty, of the wonder, of the mystery. It doesn't mean it's always beautiful or lovely, but just the wonder of life, the sensitivity to be so present. When we don't know what's going to happen, isn't it a miracle? Whatever it is. And it doesn't mean we can't respond appropriately. Actually, we can be much more flexible because we don't have all our ideas about what should be happening.

We've already decided ahead of time what we're going to say, like in the interviews, right? You know what you're going to say and what we're going to answer, and it goes back and forth. You already had a better interview before you even came to see us—that one would work better anyway. But it's never like that. Anything you've ever planned, has it ever really gone that way? I used to sit on retreat having all these fantasies of what would happen when I went home and saw my partner—this and that, they'd say this and I'd do that—and then the next sitting would be a different way, and then a different way. Then I'd realize, okay, whatever I've thought, the one thing I know is that none of that is what's going to happen. We're wasting our time. We don't know.

So when we're open and present, we just appreciate anything, and that appropriate response is much more accessible. It's really such a different way to live, just in the immediacy of now, without dragging in the past, leaning into the future.

I want to close with a poem by Billy Collins that I really like because it gives that feeling to me. It's called "Aimless Love."

This morning, as I walked along the lake shore, I fell in love with a wren, and later in the day with a mouse the cat had dropped under the dining room table. In the shadows of an autumn evening, I fell for a seamstress still at her machine in the tailor's window, and later for a bowl of broth, steam rising like smoke from a naval battle. This is the best kind

of love, I thought, without recompense, without gifts or unkind words, without suspicion or silence on the telephone. The love of the chestnut, the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel. No lust, no slam of the door. The love of the miniature orange tree, the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower, the highway that cuts across Florida. No waiting, no huffiness or rancor.

Just a twinge every now and then for the wren who had built her nest on a low branch overhanging the water, and for the dead mouse still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod, ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail to a pile of leaves in the woods, I found myself standing at the bathroom sink, gazing down affectionately at the soap, so patient and soluble, so at home in its pale green soap dish.

I could feel myself falling again as I felt its turning in my wet hands and caught the scent of lavender and stone.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

Nisargadatta Maharaj once said: "Be quiet, free from the obsession with 'what next.' In the silence, something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception."

Free from the obsession with what next.

CHAPTER 367

Mingling Our Minds with the Dhamma

Carol Wilson · 59 min

In this profound talk, Carol Wilson examines the relationship between our deepest motivations and the moment-to-moment quality of intention (cetanā) that shapes our actions. Drawing from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's teaching about "mingling our minds with the Dhamma until it permeates our whole being," she illuminates how wise understanding (sammā diṭṭhi) naturally transforms the habitual patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Wilson explores the Buddha's teaching that consciousness is naturally radiant and pure, only temporarily obscured by unwholesome mental factors. She demonstrates how simple mindfulness of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences reveals the automatic arising of clinging and aversion, and how clear seeing naturally releases these patterns without force or self-judgment. This connects to the Zen teaching that a lifetime of practice leads to "an appropriate response" - when the heart-mind is unclouded, the Brahmavihārās (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) arise spontaneously.

The talk offers practical guidance on maintaining connection with our deepest purpose amid the distractions of modern life, citing inspiring examples including the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Mahā Ghosānanda. Wilson emphasizes the contagious nature of both wholesome and unwholesome states, encouraging practitioners to seek spiritual friendship (kalyāṇa-mittatā) and environments that support awakening. She concludes with Mahā Ghosānanda's prayer for world peace, reminding us that transformation begins with the peaceful heart of each individual.

So tonight I want to talk about motivation on two levels: our deep motivation, and also the moment-to-moment quality of intention, which is really how our purified consciousness manifests.

The essence of what I want to talk about comes from a line I read in a book by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, where he talks about how we need to mingle the teachings with our minds, mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole being. I love that because it's really a little synopsis of the whole path of our life. It doesn't happen all at once, but all the different ways that we practice and work in our lives are ways of working towards mingling our minds with the Dharma until it permeates our whole beings.

In terms of the Eightfold Noble Path, the beginning of the path, the beginning of our spiritual journey—and it keeps on increasing really to the end of it—is wise understanding, right view. Each time we recognize more accurately anything—mundane, supramundane, in practice, a problem in life—when we recognize it differently, the patterns that have kept us in suffering from not seeing clearly let go. That's right view. And that can be just enough to see that something doesn't seem to be working in my life, that maybe there's some other way. That gets us started on a spiritual path. And then the right view just keeps deepening and deepening. How does that manifest in our life, in our choices? That's where intention comes in.

I want to read a passage because I love it, but also just to pique us with the possibility of a very deep expression of wise understanding. This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the most beloved and well-practiced of the Tibetan teachers in the last century. He's dead now.

"What we normally call the mind is the deluded mind, a turbulent vortex of thoughts whipped up by attachment, anger, and ignorance. This mind, unlike enlightened awareness, is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning"—can you relate to that?—"and triggered off by such circumstances as an unexpected meeting with a friend or a difficult person. And unless they are immediately seen through with proper awareness, they quickly take root and proliferate, reinforcing the habitual predominance of hatred or attachment in the mind and adding more and more karmic patterns."

So that's just a description of our normal mind.

"Yet, however strong"—this is the right view part now—"however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness. Once you recognize the intrinsic nature of the mind"—meaning the purity of consciousness—"these thoughts that seem to appear and disappear all the time can no longer fool you. Just as clouds form, last for a while, and then dissolve back into the empty sky, so deluded thoughts arise, remain for a while, and then vanish in the voidness of mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

I just love that. I'm sure in some ways you've all touched that sense of how mundane or wild a thought could be—attachment, aversion, confusion—and then it's just gone. And really, in some way, all of our mindfulness practice, our samādhi practice, all the different ways—effort, non-effort, all the million different ways we hear of practice—the essence of all of the path, all the techniques, and not just meditation practice but working with loving-kindness, working with sīla, with purity of conduct as Guy spoke of last night, with generosity: all of the path is for the releasing of these obsessive en-

trancements of attachment and aversion and all about "me." It's about our relationship to these entrancements, releasing these obsessive habits of mind. Not because they're bad, but because we see through them. And in that releasing of these habits, it allows the intrinsic nature, the natural great peace—the potential of how we can relate in life—the natural peace and ease of the heart and mind allows it to shine through.

So when we talk about these habits of greed, of aversion, of delusion, it's not like we hate them or you're evil. It's just that they hide the potential, that sense of ease that can come just when you hear Dilgo Khyentse say that all this vortex of thoughts dissolves back into emptiness and nothing at all has happened. Just nothing to get so upset about.

So that's one radical expression of wise understanding or right view.

A question that often comes up—whether it does or not, it's what I'm going to address tonight—is: how does this right view, this wisdom where we say nothing at all has happened, function in life? Often what can come is, "Well then, if nothing has happened, does that mean nothing matters? How do we function in life? Why even talk about purity of conduct? If nothing has happened, nothing matters." That way of looking is an aspect of delusion called falling into emptiness. Nothing matters, nothing's happened, I can do whatever I want. No, no, no—it's an attitude, it's not really wisdom.

So how does this right view show up in our life? This is where our motivation—both our deep purpose in life, our deep motivation, and also the moment-to-moment qualities in the mind that arouse intention to act—shows up. In terms of how the Buddha described it, the beginning of the path is wise understanding, right view—one of eight. Think of it more as a circle, but still it's in this order. The second is wise thought, wise intention, wise attitude—different translations of the same thing.

So in other words, how we think about or understand things—ourselves and experience, whatever's happening in the moment—is what gives rise to the attitude, the thought, the intention in the mind, which is what forms the third, fourth, and fifth steps of the path: our wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. In other words, how we speak and act in the world.

In terms of the link between the depth of understanding, the purity of consciousness, and how we show up in the world—the choices we make, the way we act with ourselves and others—it really comes together in this link of our motivation, our intention, our attitudes.

Guy mentioned the quality that's present in every moment of consciousness: cetana, intention, motivation. This is one way I want to refer to it. It's on the micro, moment-to-moment level. There's an intention for each movement, for each action, for a choice we make in the mind. It's a little movement of mind. And that particular intention that arises is fed by, is formed by whatever factors are present in the mind at that time.

So, for instance, if we're feeling sensations in the stomach and the mind recognizes that as hunger, there could be fear present in the mind at that time. And that fear says, "Oh my God, I'm hungry. If I don't really get to the front of the line, there might not be enough food." That fear motivates you to jump up and run out of the hall one minute before the bell rings. Or you want to, and you have to hold yourself down. Or you take three times more food than you can actually ever eat, because there's wanting in the mind.

Does that happen? You get to your plate and think, "What am I going to do with all this?" The next day you think, "I'm not going to do that." You think you're taking the right amount, but there's still wanting in the mind and it colors the perception, and we take too much.

Or there could be those same sensations and the mind is in a really quite quiet, equanimous place, and it just notices hunger. There's no wanting, there's no fear, there's calm, there's wisdom, there's concentration—and so you just keep on sitting there. Or there's calm and concentration and wanting, but the wanting is to hold on to the concentration, not the food, so you keep sitting there, but you're sitting there because you're wanting.

You get a sense of how the seed, the heart of actions in this way of looking, is not in how it looks from the outside, but in the intentions that are coloring, that are driving the choices. The habits of our mind are what show up in the intentions, and that's what naturally changes, purifies through the moment-to-moment mindfulness, the awareness, through seeing and understanding clearly.

Do you remember Guy's quotation from the Zen master? What was the question? "What's the purpose of a lifetime of practice?" And the answer was: an appropriate response.

This is exactly what it's talking about. It's incredibly powerful and it's really profound. An appropriate response implies that in any particular moment when something happens, the attention is so present and the understanding, the heart-mind, the consciousness is pure. In that moment it's not going to be colored by greed, hatred, or

confusion, and that's what allows a recognition of the situation, of what's an appropriate response. You don't have to think it through. That's why the habits of mind are so key.

Again from Dilgo Khyentse, another way of describing what happens when the habits of wanting, of aversion, of delusion—which come connected to pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, as you saw this morning—are present. Dilgo Khyentse says: "When the sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object influenced by your accumulated habits and past experiences, the process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, and what you do is in accordance with that seeing, you experience everything as primordially pure and beautiful."

So just playing with that possibility—really seeing how consciousness, the moment of knowing, awareness itself, as a friend of mine described it, is squeaky clean. It's pure. The Buddha talks about the mind, the citta, the consciousness as naturally radiant and pure. It's colored, or we don't see through it, when it's obstructed by greed being there in a moment, or hatred, aversion, confusion, and we don't recognize it. But that natural purity is never stained or touched or affected really by these things. They don't mess it up.

That's why I keep talking about how we learn to shift our refuge from believing in the habits to noticing the awareness. Just that moment is a huge shift of habit.

Today in the questions, I felt—of course, I was thinking about this—so I felt like, oh yes, this really brought it out very well. Seeing how when something unpleasant arises, the natural habit, when we're not really noticing or paying attention, can be just a subtle aversion or a pulling away, or it can go all the way to murderous rage. When it's pleasant, the subtle habit is that wanting, that leaning in, that liking. And then that can go on to color the whole world. And as someone said really perceptively, with neutral, it's like... huh?

You know, let's get something else going on here because there's nothing happening. That's delusion. And the seed of all of those reactions is that they're all referring back to me.

But did you notice—and some people mentioned this—just the simple noticing, the relaxing, observing, and accepting, allowing it to be just as it is? Not trying to change it, not saying, "I have to get rid of this habit of clinging. Either I will never cling, or I will

never let myself experience another pleasant moment. I'll do everything so that God forbid clinging should ever arise." You can hear the intention behind that is not wisdom. It's either wanting or aversion. So we're just feeding it again.

But did you notice in a moment of simple mindfulness? Oh, pleasant—look at that, the clinging comes up. Or someone described the unpleasant experience in their body and then saw the pleasantness of the thought, just how the Buddha said it somewhere: an ordinary person knows of no escape from unpleasant sensation except to lust after pleasant experience. And so that comes to be the habit of the mind. That's it—daydreaming or eating or whatever it is.

But the point is, when we just notice that, just notice it, when the mind's relatively quiet like sitting here, we just see it and go, "Oh, well, that doesn't really work. Look at that." And just for a moment—not for our whole life, unfortunately, but just for a moment—in that moment, there's the release of that habit, the release of the clinging. It's not out of a should or because it's bad. It's out of wise understanding, the clear seeing in that moment. Pleasant thought—there's nothing to cling to. It doesn't do it anyway. And we're here again. Do you get a sense of what I mean?

And that's simple. That's natural. We're not saying, "I'm going to see this in order to get rid of it." As you know, that doesn't work. So the natural shift of habits, the shift of intention from clinging to this pleasant thought to take me away—somehow shifting to just, "Oh, let it go." It's renunciation and it's just wisdom and it's just presence. That's quite spontaneous, quite natural. That's a shift of intention, a shift of attitude, and it happens by itself.

So in terms of appropriate response, as Guy said, in the moment of real presence, when the consciousness, the citta, the mind and heart is not colored, not caught in greed, hatred, or confusion—we have to be awake, not in a moment of being dulled out, because then that's delusion—the natural response, the appropriate response, can be one of the four Brahma Viharas that Guy mentioned last night. In the face of meeting someone, there's this natural connectedness, acceptance. In the face of suffering, there's a natural compassion. In the face of joy, we're open, connected—there's a natural sharing of joy. And in all things, there's an equanimity of knowing: I can't control even my own experience, never mind yours, and things are as they are.

This was expressed beautifully in a different way by Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrows of humankind become your sole concern."

Not like that's a should. It's just that when we're seeing with wise understanding, that sense of fear and separation, that sense of "it's all about me"—it goes away. And then that's the appropriate response. If there's some need, there's—right, it's my need, your need. It's just a need. It's just caring for the world. It's not at all a kind of "Oh right, nothing ever happened and so nothing matters and to heck with it all." It's not that at all. Quite connected.

I have this one page of notes I keep—oh, here it is, I keep misplacing it. But seeing once or twice, or one or two thousand times—because how many moments of that clear seeing have there been here and in our lives? There are really many moments where the habit releases itself. And each moment of that clarity, of that wisdom, of that metta, whichever it happens to be, is shifting the habit of mind. Again, that quotation Guy mentioned: what the mind frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination, the habit of the mind.

It will. That used to scare me when I would look at, you know, when I'm not really paying attention and just moving through the day without much awareness—where does my mind go? Left to its own devices, it's often not very pretty.

But how many moments there have been of pure awareness, of kindness, of generosity, of just allowing, accepting. On a retreat, it's a lot of moments. And continuing in our life, it really is shifting. But the habits—that's why there's a path. That's why it really takes this sense of moving into connecting with our deep motivation, our commitment, our sense of why, if it is, for each of us, why and how this path of awakening is important to us. And finding how we can continue to connect with that motivation and inspire ourselves, here and in our lives.

Because the habits are strong. They don't just vanish. It feels like here on retreat they might, but even more in our daily lives, it's almost like we get tricked back into the habits—either not noticing them or believing in them, or they're so familiar that they just feel like that's the way to respond in life. Someone is angry at us or does something hurtful, and the normal response is, yeah, you should get angry back.

One of the ways I feel we get tricked is that, by and large—not completely, that's why we have to look for what helps us with our motivation—but by and large, the messages we get from the greater culture reinforce these habits. Often, at least this is my experience.

Rodney was telling me yesterday—I don't know where he got this figure, but we'll assume it's accurate—that he read somewhere that in a normal week, for a normal person, whatever that means, in this culture, we are confronted with approximately 17,000

media advertisement inputs. That's billboards, things coming up on the internet, television, radio, magazines, postcards, phone calls—17,000 inputs in a week. That's a lot. And probably many of them are quick, subliminal, we don't notice them consciously. But what are those inputs telling us? You need this. You're not good enough. You should do this. You need to have this. Everyone else has it. Who are you? You need to be prettier, richer, thinner, younger. You need to be something. That's going in.

How many times—I call it a mail order catalog mind. Here we get a lot of mail order catalogs, and sometimes when I'm just tired and can't really focus at night, I like to flip through them. And how often do you end up really wanting something you didn't even know existed five minutes ago? But suddenly you've got to have it for your well-being and happiness, right? Well, 17,000 times a week we're subjected to that. Once in a while, it's going to catch us.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche said—and this is where we need to call on our motivation, our intention—when that happens, you don't hate yourself, but you notice it. He says, watch the fickleness of the mind, how easily it is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight or thought or sound into an immediate mood. Then, I would add, if I don't notice it at that point, that mood expands—we're off into a whole world, just triggered by some nice looking something in a catalog. And then there's a thought: wow, with that I could do this and that, and then we're off. Or how often are we a little bit bored and we start surfing on the internet? The next thing, I'm planning trips and looking at airlines and renting cars. I have to do that a lot anyway, but I get sidetracked off into something else. It's so easy.

So not that it's bad, but this is where, if we just let ourselves flow without resistance in the waves of society, in the stream—and this is what the Buddha said when he said practicing in his way is going against the stream of society, a quotation I read from Bhikkhu Bodhi—so it's not that we want to hate and fight, but we want to wake up.

We want to wake up. I mean, I hope we want to. I want to anyway. This is what the spiritual path is: seeing why we're doing what we're doing. What brings us happiness and peace? How can we affect others to help them have happiness and peace? What brings us into more suffering, into more feeling of neediness, of want?

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh. He says, "We've lost our taste for being quiet, for being alone. Society can take many things from us and dull us with noises, smells, sights, so many distractions. So the first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our best. This is very important. Then we need to reorganize our daily lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us. We need to be independent, to be real people, not just the victim of society and other people."

Personally, I wouldn't use the word "victim," but more like haplessly tossed about by the winds of habit. But as Rodney said, really, we're hermetically sealed. No one else is making us fall into the habits of wanting, of aversion, of delusion. It's not that, but I think it's really helpful to recognize how we're not separate from each other, from the world, from anything. We are the world. The world is ourselves.

And sometimes that's beautiful. The beautiful, wholesome emotions and ways of being are contagious. But so are the others. Wanting is very contagious. Fear is contagious. Have you ever noticed that? I remember reading about a big fire in a nightclub in Rhode Island a few years ago. People panicked, and quite a lot of people died in the fire. I read somewhere later about it, someone who survived describing it. They said when the fire first started, people were scared, but they were heading more or less okay towards the door. And then they saw one person losing themselves in panic. And that panic is what spread like wildfire, and everyone lost control and trampled each other, and people died.

Well, the beautiful, the wholesome states of heart and mind are actually even more contagious because they're really more the natural expression of the truth, of the way things are, of who we are. But if, at least as I've found, I just kind of say, "Okay, well now I've done a retreat and I know that's important and I'll just sit back and let the truth mingle with my mind and body and turn into the compassionate bodhisattva of the ages..." It's not like I have to go out and try hard. It doesn't happen that way.

But it's more that willingness to recognize the moment-to-moment creation of decisions, of intention, of response to life. And it's not that we have to make our actions always be perfect. Forget about that. But finding in ourselves on a deep level—this is a more macro way of talking about motivation, of intention—finding what one Buddhist monk, Nyanaponika Thera, who wrote the guide *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, calls "aligning ourselves with our deepest purpose" as an aspect of wider mindfulness.

And this is really something that's come up in a few of the conversations I've been having with people in different ways. First, connecting with, really honoring, finding for yourself what is deeply true and important for you in your life. And then not just saying, "Okay, now I've found it, let it do its work," but also seeing how, as we make decisions, as we live our lives, as we go through our actions, connection with that purpose helps us make choices, helps us align ourselves with what we're doing and why, with what's really important. And also finding whatever in our life supports us to continue to deepen, to continue to reconnect with our purpose.

A couple of people have said here how when going through the retreat, when they come to a time—which does happen—where they can't connect to their commitment to practice or their motivation or what it is that inspires them... Sometimes you just can't find that. And if that lasts for a while, it gets a lot harder. Whatever's going on gets a lot harder. You're sitting and walking, and "Why am I doing this?" We all have times like that.

But if that really goes on for a long time, it's helpful to find things that help us connect. And sometimes we can get a little too caught up in thinking—like Ajahn Chah says, be independent. So we think, "I just have to be independent. I have to totally, all by myself, get in touch with my deepest purpose, stay really motivated, stay really inspired, and it's all up to me." You know? No. Let's give it over. It's hard enough. The path is hard enough. But just like we can't exist in isolation, just as we affect one another, so we can also use that to find what helps us reconnect.

So just another couple of words about trusting yourself. Really, you may already know what your deep motivation is, what your commitment is, what your inspiration is, what your purpose is. You may know that. And it may change over years—different words emerge. It may not even be words; it may just be a certain sense, a certain feeling. I can't put it in words, but sometimes that's all it is for me. And when I'm touching it, everything's clear. I know. The things that I do, the choices before me, are clear. There's not all this second-guessing and self-doubt and "is it good enough" and comparing. I know. And if something comes up that's really off, I don't have to agonize—should I do it? Shouldn't I do it? Should I get involved? It's like I know. I know. It may be hard. I may want to do the thing, but I know. And there's really no question.

When I'm not in touch with that, the first step is recognizing that—the feeling of doubt and confusion—and then finding what helps us connect.

So it may change over the years. But I just want to put in a plug: if this is something that resonates with you—it may not, and doesn't have to—but if it's something that resonates with you, just in your own time, in your own way, let yourself really deeply... it's not so much thinking about it, but just see, let yourself feel whatever it is. And honor it in yourself.

Often I found when I first started tuning into this, long ago, the expressions that arose in my mind, the thoughts that would come out, sounded—from my self-judgmental, self-hating pattern of mind—really arrogant or highfalutin. You know, "Who the heck do you think you are?" That kind of thing. Like it was coming from an ego place. But the real deep purpose is not coming from an ego place. Those thoughts of "who do you think you are, you jerk"—that's coming from the ego place.

So if something comes up—I don't know, it can be just "let me be more kind in life," or "let me be loving to my family," all the way up to "let me make the commitment to go through all however many eons of lifetimes it takes to be born as a Buddha"—whatever it is. "May I serve all beings. May I serve the Dharma. May I live with compassion"—whatever it is for you. Just let that be and honor it and treat it with tenderness and care. Don't dismiss it with "not me, not this lifetime."

Because the essence of the motivation is in that seed of intention. We can't control the results in life, how it manifests, how other people perceive us. If with the clearest intention in the world it doesn't turn out the way we want—that's nothing we can control. And mostly our tendency is to evaluate whether the motivation was right by whether things turned out in a good way. But that's not necessarily in our control.

So it's really learning to trust this depth of wisdom, of purity, in our own hearts and minds. You can't fix the world. But the reference point is what's arising in my heart, in my consciousness, what's motivating this action.

We keep using the Dalai Lama—he's so quotable. But he often talks about, when people ask him, "How do you know if what you're doing is right?" And he says, "I just trust the purity of my intention."

Tibetans—the next generation of young Tibetans, energetic activists. They were basically reproaching him because his deep commitment to engaging with the Chinese who've overrun Tibet and are systematically destroying the culture is really one of nonviolence, of compassion. He's committed to that.

And this interview really touched me because these young Tibetans were saying, basically, "Old man, it's not working. You're wrong. We need to take another tack." And so this article said he was quite touched, like a little tear coming down. And he's so open. He's saying, "You know, you might be right. It could be that you're right. It could be that I've been wrong. But I cannot be otherwise." Just so committed to compassion and nonviolence that the reference point is the deep motivation and purity of heart and mind. Not, "Well, this purity didn't do it, so I'll give over to anger. That'll get the result I want." That's from outside in. And wisdom and freedom and compassion and connectedness come from inside out.

So that's really the importance of connecting with our motivation. It gives us a sense of purpose and a stability and a reference point to maybe do things we wouldn't have thought we could do. I mean, when you first came on a nine-day retreat—some of you, this is your first retreat—when you thought about it, did you think you could make it through if you knew what it was like? When I look back at my first ten-day retreat, oh

my God, I had no clue what I was getting into, which is mostly how people come. And then when you come to the next retreat, you'll find you forgot most of the bad stuff and you remember the nice moments, and then you'll start again and go, "Oh my God, I forgot about this"—but then you're here.

There's a clarity of purpose that we can come back to that keeps us going, that allows us to make choices we wouldn't have necessarily thought we could make.

One of the ways I look to keep connecting with my motivation and to keep inspiring it when it's getting a little weak or I'm getting distracted is by looking—this is one of the ways it works for me—looking to other people, like the Dalai Lama, but he's not the only one, of course, who manifest that. You can see they're ennobled by their commitment to the purity of their motivation and such a deep refuge in that.

Another person like that is Aung San Suu Kyi, the woman who's been the leader of the Burmese freedom movement. She's been under house arrest in her house for the better part of seventeen years. The place—I went by it the other month. You can't really get close, but you can kind of look over. It's all dilapidated, and no one's allowed to see her but the person who cooks for her.

Seventeen years. Her husband, who lived in England, died. She hasn't seen her kids for years now. She could leave any time, but she knows she could never come back. And even though no one can talk about her in that country—it's so repressive—she's really the focal point of so many people's hopes and sense of possibility. Anywhere you go there, as soon as people aren't around any that could be spying—because the military regime—I've been with poor nuns in little poor nunneries, and they take you upstairs, and they have her picture in little places underneath by the books, and they'd call her "the Lady." The taxi driver: "The Lady, she lives just down there." Everybody knows. She's committed to that.

But it's not—it's again, it's like the Dalai Lama—it's coming from a sincerity of her deep inner motivation, not out of an outer looking at what should happen.

This is from an interview. She said, "Just responding appropriately in each moment."

But you can see where it's taken her. What enormous courage and what enormous steadfastness and clarity of purpose. And I know from a few people who've known her and visited her that it's not like it's so clear and easy.

So really we have to reconnect with our purpose moment after moment, choice after choice. One teacher said once that every moment we're committing to something. The question is: to what?

So it takes us back into this immediacy of awareness of the moment. "So now I made a choice out of greed. Do I want to spend the next hour beating myself up about it, or do I want to see what choice I'm making in this moment? Oh yeah, right. My deep commitment is to awareness, to freedom from suffering. Okay, in this moment, can I manifest that?"

Moment after moment. What choices are we making?

Another person who really inspires me in this way—and this is just one example of how it's contagious, how we're interconnected. Because if something or someone or their behavior inspires us or touches us, what is it that's actually inspiring? It's touching that same potential in ourselves. Otherwise, we couldn't appreciate it. So when we see someone who's really so committed to compassion, like His Holiness, and if that inspires us, it's because it's touching that place of compassion in ourselves.

We're not independent in this. We use that inspiration, but not to give it all over—thinking "he's like that and I could never be." Rather, we see he's like that and that touches me. This is the potential for compassion in my heart in this moment.

Maha Ghosananda is another one who inspires me, because of seeing someone in whom the habits had really been shifted, been purified. He died on March 15th of this year, just recently. He was a Cambodian monk, very much like Thich Nhat Hanh—a real peace activist and peacemaker, a deeply realized Buddhist Cambodian monk who came out of the killing fields. His whole family was destroyed in that. In the Buddhist world, he's very famous for being so dedicated to peace and to metta, really, working in the refugee camps with all the Cambodians whose families had been killed. He led peace walks through Cambodia. He was just very inspiring.

This is from the New York Times obituary. They quoted a professor of Buddhism at the University of California who wrote that "Maha Ghosananda's ability to forgive those responsible for the murder of his entire family is incomprehensible until one heard his explanation of Buddhism." Maha Ghosananda said he does not question that loving one's oppressors—Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge—may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But then he added, "It's the law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle." Reconciliation, he continued, "means that we see ourselves as the opponent. For what is the opponent but a being in ignorance? And we ourselves are also ignorant of many things."

Powerful.

Now, that's inspiring, but this next piece is what really moved me. A few years ago, there was a conference at Spirit Rock of Buddhist teachers from all over, from all different traditions. Maha Ghosananda was there, but he was clearly in the middle stages of dementia—I don't know whether it was Alzheimer's or what. So he was there and someone would stay with him through the day. He certainly wasn't presenting or anything. He was just kind of sitting there, and someone would be with him to make sure he didn't wander off.

If you went up and spoke to him, or even if you didn't, he just beamed total metta. It was so powerful to me. At the very end, they had him come up on the platform and lead us in the refuges. It just came out of him—first it started in French, and then it went into English, and it just poured forth. Sometimes he would end retreats by passing out red strings you tie around your wrist. So they gave him strings to pass out to about two hundred people.

When he gave it to me, and I watched with others, he would hand it to you with total presence, completely beam you with metta, and then move on to the next person. But he couldn't really carry on much of a conversation. I've spent a lot of time with my parents in nursing homes. I've seen a lot of people with dementia. So when I saw this, I thought, that's the habit of his heart and mind. This is how he got there. For some reason, I thought, wow—that's a life well lived. That's an appropriate response.

It really inspires me. If I think, "Fat chance, Carol, you're not going to get there," that's not helpful, that's not inspirational. But when I just let that touch me, and I don't go into any story about Carol or what's possible or the future, but just feel the power of love, of purity of heart and mind, in a moment—in a moment—that's possible.

So for me, that really inspires me. What I'm saying, though, is not that this should be your trip or that this should be what inspires you, but to find in your life the people, the readings, the activities—whatever it is that helps you reconnect, retouch deep motivations. It even deepens them, because people say, "Oh, more is possible than I even knew."

If I just stayed in my own little experience, it would be so limited. But as Maha Ghosananda said, we're all beings with ignorance. So what is possible for one, we can touch that in ourselves.

And that's the next piece I want to mention—recognizing this contagiousness of how we manifest, of how each other manifests. Just as we can catch wholesomeness and inspiration and commitment to freedom or wisdom or compassion or non-harming from others, so also we must recognize that how we are, how we manifest in a moment, with our own understanding as best we can, also affects others in the same way.

This is why we always emphasize the importance of sangha, the importance of recognizing spiritual friendship. Sometimes we're the person through whom the light is shining and we're the spiritual friend. Other times—and it could change every five minutes—it's the other person. We're all in this together. And so no one of us has to say, "I have to be totally perfect." But to have that openness to see what choices I'm making, and the openness to recognize when someone else is acting from compassion, from love, from wisdom—and instead of getting into envy or whatever, to let it in. It's kind of like sympathetic joy, like compassion. It's sort of like sympathetic goodness, appreciative goodness. We catch it from one another. Recognize and recognize. Cultivate the wholesome.

One of the reasons I really like to go and practice and sometimes teach in Burma, even though the government is really one of the worst in the world and there's a lot of horrible stuff going on, is that there are also quite a lot of Theravada Buddhist retreat centers and places to practice. It's a culture where, for the majority of the people, it's a Buddhist culture. And so there's a sense of—yes, Buddhism as a religion, but even without that—the qualities of non-harming behavior, of generosity as a source of happiness, not as "should" but as a source of happiness, of real metta, of real friendliness as the normal way of meeting someone new, as well as a real love of and respect and support for bhavana, meditation practice. Those are really deeply in the culture.

I didn't know that. The first time I went there was about six or seven years ago to do a retreat. I'd heard that, but I didn't really get it without being there—how much being surrounded by, continuing to meet people not just in the retreat centers but taxi drivers and the people who run the little guest houses and poor women who come in and help to cook in the meditation centers. I mean, really, so many people, people that you just meet on the street, imbue this kind of quality. They ask, "What are you doing here?" My first taxi ride, the young guy goes, "Well, what are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I came to meditate." And the response—and this is more the norm than the exception—he turns around. Luckily, the cars are old and things are going slow, so it's not that scary. He turns around and goes, "You're here to meditate? That's so wonderful! I really want to meditate too, but I have to take care of my mother." And you hear all the really heartrending stories. But he's not saying, "Oh, I can't do it." He's so happy that I'm there to meditate.

And the sense of generosity—of people's time, of food, of anything they can do to support you—is so strong. And people are so happy in being generous, which is the piece I never really got intellectually. Once we were in a village, I was with some friends, and an old fisherman took us up to look at a house a friend had built. He took like two hours of his day. Then we came back and he was so generous. We wanted to give him something, but he wouldn't take it. But he wanted to give us something. And all he had was a big dried fish. So that's what he gave us, this dried fish—and so happy to be able to give.

You receive this dried fish, and our kind of Western mind goes, "What are we going to do with this?" Take it to your friend in Bangkok? We're thinking, "Yeah, right, I'm going to take this dried fish to Bangkok." But he's so sincere and happy. This is just the first thing that came to my mind; there are about a hundred different examples. You just feel so honored, so happy to receive it.

And then he leaves and we go, of course we can't bring it to Bangkok. So who can we give it to? And immediately we thought of some nuns we knew who could really use it that day. We went and gave it to them, and then we were so happy to give someone this dried fish. The more you're there, the happier you get—you just want to start giving things, giving time, doing things.

Not the way we think of it here, where it's "oh, they did this for me so I have to do it for them"—tit for tat. That's not generosity. That's like doing the right thing; it's not bad. But this real generosity is a source of happiness. You want to do things for people. You want to give. It's mixed with mettā.

I've been going for about the last four or five years. The last few years I teach a month at Spirit Rock with Guy and some other friends, and I've been showing up from Burma the day before. The first couple of times I did it, they would say, "Carol, don't you think you could give yourself a little more time? You've got to teach, you've got to get over jet lag." And all that's true—I get tired. But they stopped saying that now because they noticed, "Geez, every time you come back from Burma, you're in such a good place. You're so happy."

And that's what it is. You catch the beauty, the joy of generosity, of mettā, of love of the Dhamma. These are just normal people, and we catch it. When we come back, when we catch it, we can pass it on. Not by "I'm going to give you generosity, I'm so great." No, just by being happy. Just by sharing it. It becomes a way of being.

That's just an example. So in a world of choices and actions and relationships, really seeing that each moment we make a choice—each moment we can choose to connect with, to align with our deepest motivation. And when we don't, the next moment we can choose to just see with awareness what we're doing, not beat ourselves up. What are we feeding? What are we starving?

I'll end with two quotations. One is about a Native American elder who is teaching his grandchildren about life. He said, "A fight is going on inside me, a terrible fight, between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, ego—all those things. The other one represents joy, peace, love, generosity, friendship, kindness, compassion, faith. The same fight is going on inside you too, and inside every other person," he added.

The grandchildren thought about it for a minute, and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

The Buddha used that a lot—not that story, but the imagery—looking at what we're feeding, what we're starving in the consciousness, in the mind. Sometimes the delusion is there and we don't know. We really think our motivation is coming from the purest place, from real compassion, from caring, from mettā, from wisdom. And that's really the best we can do—it's true. We just don't know. The delusion could be manifesting and we don't see it.

But we keep paying attention. If we find over time that the way we're acting or the things we're doing leads to suffering increasing, or wanting increasing, or aversion increasing—I don't mean just a mood that's coming and moving through, but over time, over days—you can really start to sense something's feeding this ill will. That's when we stop and look. Just stop and look. What's going on? Can I align more? Find a way to connect with that inspiration, that commitment, that purpose.

So I want to end with a quotation from Howard Zinn, a historian: "To be hopeful, to be an optimist in bad times, is not just foolishly romantic.

It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents. And to live now as we believe human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Let us close with Maha Ghosananda's prayer for world peace:

The suffering of Cambodia has been deep. From this suffering comes great compassion. Great compassion makes a peaceful heart. A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful community. A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation. And a peaceful nation makes a peaceful world.

May all beings live in happiness and peace.

CHAPTER 368

The Jewel of Awareness

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this deeply practical talk, Carol Wilson invites practitioners to fall in love with awareness itself rather than endlessly seeking happiness through changing experiences. Drawing from both Theravāda and Tibetan teachers including Sogyal Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, Ajahn Sumedho, and Nisargadatta, she illuminates how our habitual patterns—pursuing pleasure, avoiding pain, and organizing everything around a felt sense of 'me'—keep us spinning in confusion even as we sincerely seek freedom.*
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> *Wilson emphasizes that awareness is not something we create or achieve; it's always already present, like a radiant jewel we hold in our hands yet overlook while searching elsewhere for happiness. Through vivid examples—from sipping tea to walking in the desert to watching Yo-Yo Ma exchange instruments with an African bush musician—she demonstrates how mindfulness practice is simply a matter of turning attention around to recognize the knowing itself. Whether the breath is smooth or ragged, whether we're experiencing pleasure or pain, the doorway to freedom is equally available.*
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> *The talk offers a liberating reframe: we don't need to get rid of wanting, aversion, or self-referencing thoughts. We simply shift our refuge from obsessing over conditions to resting in awareness, where 'wanting is like this' or 'doubt is like this' becomes the next object of knowing rather than a problem to solve. Wilson concludes with Billy Collins' poem 'Aimless Love,' evoking the tender appreciation for ordinary moments that naturally arises when we stop seeking confirmation and simply meet life with innocent, fresh awareness.*

So what I hope to talk about tonight is falling in love with awareness, recognizing our true home. Essentially, what's the point of what we're doing here, in and out, in and out? What's the breath got to do with it?

This is from Sogyal Rinpoche: "The purpose of meditation is to introduce us to that which we really are, our pure awareness, which underlies the whole of life and death. In the stillness and silence of meditation, we glimpse and return to that deep inner nature that we have so long ago lost sight of amidst the busyness and distraction of our minds. Meditation then is bringing the mind home."

I'd like to say it's not so much bringing the mind home as if it were ever somewhere else, but simply learning to recognize more frequently and trust the recognition of pure awareness as our true home.

Why? Because essentially, that's the path of happiness. That's the moment—a moment of what Mark talked about last night—the ending of suffering. Not some place in the future at the end of some long stream that we get to, but right now in this moment. When we recognize true awareness rather than getting lost in the habits that Mark spoke about last night—the habits of wanting, of aversion, of me, me, me. When we shift our attention from objects and experience, from "what am I going to get" and "what does this mean," back to the simplicity of awareness in this moment. That's essentially what I want to talk about.

I wish I could just share with you the simplicity and the amazingness of this—the sense of the simplicity of consciousness, of knowing. It's like a radiant jewel sitting here that we hold in our hands, that shines in every single moment of conscious experience. And we're so busy looking for something to make us happy, so busy trying to get rid of the things we don't like, that we miss it, miss it, miss it. And when we don't miss it, it's not fancy enough, so we don't trust it. We don't recognize it.

You don't have to be in deep absorption, in samadhi, in silence, in order to recognize this. It helps, just because part of why retreats are so difficult sometimes is because the practice goes against the habits of our mind, as Mark talked about. It really is turning around and recognizing, just resting, just trusting in the simplicity of mindfulness, of awareness, of knowing.

It's so simple, but as the Buddha said, the path of his teachings, of his practice, goes against the current of daily society. That was true 2,600 years ago, and it's true now. It goes against the current of what external society feeds us.

And then as we sit here and get quiet—well, you found out, right, in these three days, those of you for whom this is your first retreat. The others of you maybe forgot and remembered that somehow it isn't just this smooth trajectory. We come and sit down and think, "Awareness, whatever's happening, there's peace." It's like, I don't think so. And the habits that we've imbibed from the culture externally are also the ones that we either don't see or deeply trust internally. So the practice is really just to help us shift where we place our trust, how we can recognize our true home. It's really about what do we really trust? Where do we really go for refuge in default mode or when things are tough?

This is from the Dalai Lama on why we practice. He says the purpose of spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace. We are all equal in wishing to be happy and to overcome our suffering. And he believes that we all share the right and the potential to fulfill this aspiration.

It came up in one of the groups—what brings us all here. On some level, however we might express it differently for ourselves, there is this deep, really deep wish for happiness or peace or a more connected life, to live with compassion, whatever words you use for yourself. And this is, for each of us, valid. And true, as the Dalai Lama is saying. It's really an expression of something we already know, what we so long ago lost sight of but have never really completely forgotten—this really deep essence of just the potential of awakening. Something pulls us to it.

But when we don't recognize how deeply conditioned we are by these habits of mind—by how we relate to experience—the very things we do in our commitment, in our efforts to bring happiness, peace, ease, love, whatever you say, to ourselves and to others, if we don't understand accurately, if we don't perceive ourselves and experience accurately, then the things we do in the service of happiness actually just keep us spinning in confusion. It's very poignant.

In a way, this is what the Buddha saw. It is said that after his years of practice, when he first awoke under the Bodhi tree and really understood as a human being the end of suffering for himself—and through himself, the potential for everybody—at first he wasn't very inclined to teach. First of all, he was just happy in the bliss of Nibbana. That was one thing. Another thing, he thought, "This is subtle. It's hard for people to see. And it will be wearisome for me to be teaching this."

But he was prevailed upon, and because he had these great psychic powers from his awakening, it is said he could survey with his mind the minds and hearts of all beings in the world. The thing that moved him to spend the rest of his life—forty-five years—just sharing what he had learned was the great compassion of seeing just this: that everyone deeply wants happiness.

And due to our confusion, our misunderstanding, our ignorance—ignorance not in a pejorative sense, just the ignorance of not knowing accurately—due to this ignorance, even in our acts of trying to bring happiness to ourselves and to others, we're doing it from confusion, and it just keeps us spinning in cycles of confusion. That is what moved his heart to compassion. And it's really very poignant to see that.

What's also important is the fact that at any moment—just for a moment—we can step right out of that cycle of wanting and suffering and spinning and confusion. It's not like you step out of it forever, but there's only this moment, only this moment. In any moment when we turn around and look back at awareness, look back at the knowing itself, we step out of that cycle of confusion. This is not only possible; we actually experience it many, many times in a day. Often we don't notice. Maybe some of you have noticed. Sometimes we notice and attribute it to the wrong thing.

For example, you're just sitting, having a cup of tea. Nothing special. But it's one of those moments where suddenly it is special. Just peaceful, no problem. It's not like fireworks going off, not like some incredibly ecstatic experience—that's too obvious. Just that sense of peace and ease. Ajahn Amaro says that peace and ease, that is the natural peace and ease of body and mind. We just experience it. Or walking in the desert. Or suddenly in the struggle of a sitting, there's one perfect, peaceful breath.

And our tendency then is to think, "Wow, that time I had that tea yesterday, that was so perfect. What time of day was it? Let's see, it was about right after the qigong. So maybe it was the qigong. And then if I go in and walk in just the same way and have the same kind of tea and sit in the same place with the sun coming in the same way, I'll have the same experience again." Or when we have that peaceful breath, we think, "Ah, finally I got it right. Not too short, not too long, just right. How can I get the breath to be like that again?" Because we're looking outward to experience, to objects, and we're missing that simple knowing, the simple awareness itself.

But the habits of mind are so tricky. If we're not aware of them, we can have the most deep intention in the world—really sincere, really pure, just like the Dalai Lama was saying, just like His Holiness, just like the Buddha saw—that we really want happiness. And that's the sincere, appropriate intention. But the intention itself—and it really helps us to connect with our intention every day, over and over, to connect with your aspiration—we need to find that. It gives us a sense of confidence, of willingness, the energy to show up again when things get hard. Really honor that. But the intention also needs to be balanced with what we call intelligent awareness, with discerning wisdom. Not complete wisdom, but the wisdom of just recognizing how these habits, when they're present in the awareness, color our perception, our assessments, our choices—when we don't recognize them. And this is really a huge aspect of practice.

This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi. He's an American monk, one of the two most—I would say—foremost translators into English of the Pali texts, the original Buddhist texts that are alive today. He says, again, remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes. After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self.

Do you recognize any of those three? Any of those come up today?

Now, he's not saying that enjoying pleasure is bad. He's not saying that avoiding pain is wrong. To preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self—he's pretty much saying that's impossible, but we give it a heck of a good try. What he is saying is that those are the habits that, if we really look deeply, I'd say most of us—cer-

tainly me, and I know I'm not alone—when I look deeply at how I react, how my mind reacts to situations when I'm not balanced and present, that's where my mind goes for refuge. I'm not happy, something's unpleasant, when it was so cold and raining. When my mind wasn't balanced and I didn't notice, I would go for getting comfortable—that's going to make me happy. There's nothing wrong with getting comfortable. It's the thinking that that's where happiness lies.

If I'm suffering in the cold, there's the aversion to avoid discomfort, and beneath that, a deep belief—not just that I should get warm if I can, but the deep belief that my unhappiness in this moment, my separation, my discontent is *due* to the cold. It's due to exactly what Mark was talking about last night in terms of aversion. The deeply held belief that that's where freedom is going to be found—like rearranging the furniture in prison to make it more comfortable. So engaged in doing that, we don't even notice the door is open and we can walk out.

Mark talked extensively about the first two habits. The third one, which I want to explore a bit, is the sense that everything revolves around my individual self. My shorthand for that is simply: *it's all about me*. Just notice that.

But first, let me say something about how these habits, when we don't notice they're present, really color our perception, our recognition of what's happening, the choices we make.

I just read a review of a book called *How Doctors Think* by Dr. Jerome Groopman. He's talking about misdiagnoses that doctors make and what factors, based on extensive research, lead to these misdiagnoses. He says technical mistakes account for only about twenty percent of misdiagnoses. The majority result from habits of mind that cause doctors to make snap judgments and heedlessly overlook alternative possibilities. In other words, bad thinking.

Here's the example, and this is exactly what I'm talking about. First, a doctor rarely revises their initial diagnosis, and then all the specialists that diagnosis is handed to down the line tend to accept that first diagnosis simply because it comes with authority. The guess may be wrong because the doctor stereotypes—paying more attention to a patient's age or gender or race or living habits than actually being able to look freshly at the symptoms being presented.

This is precisely the quality of mindfulness: the ability to bring beginner's mind, free from assumptions, free from thinking we know. It's really hard because we don't even know the assumptions we're carrying.

A doctor may like a patient too much to consider a worst-case scenario, while dislike may cause the doctor not to listen to important complaints. It's interesting, isn't it? We're in a state of aversion, and that colors how we assess what comes in. We're in a state of liking, of wanting, and that colors what we even let in.

You can notice these are really deep habits. Notice, for example, how it is when we have something we want, some expectation. Go walking out in the desert and you want something. You want a nice walk—that could be all you want, just a nice walk. Or you want some thinking to stop. Or you want to see some wildlife. Or, like some people say, "You all keep talking about how beautiful the desert is. I'm waiting to see how beautiful it is. I don't think it's beautiful." Anyway, you go out: *Where is this damn beauty they're all talking about?*

In any way we're going out wanting. The attention is all turned outward. Let me see this, let me have this, *then* I'll be happy. Turn your attention back while that's happening and recognize, as Mark said, the wanting mind. Recognize the effect. How open are we actually to receive what's arising in this moment? How open are we to the unknown, to the mystery, to something not expected?

Not very much. Not very much unless it comes and hits us over the head.

How are we with expectation if we meet a friend and we want something from them? How open are we to see them fresh, with beginner's mind—or a stranger? When you come and sit down in the sitting, are you wanting something? How open are you to just sit and feel the first sensation that arises of breath? It's jagged. It's tight. It's constricted. You don't like it. Can it just be that that's what it is? How much does wanting color our openness to experience?

Same with aversion, only the reverse.

Really, the mindfulness practice is to turn the attention around and notice what qualities of heart and mind are coloring the consciousness in this moment, are coloring the knowing, the awareness. Not hating it—just knowing.

And it's really interesting because as soon as we move from "I want to see this, I want to have this" to "Oh, wanting is like this" - it stops being a problem. We stop being so closed in, so tunnel-visioned. "Wanting is like this. Aversion is like this." It's just the next object of awareness. It stops being a problem. We stop getting so caught up with trying to rearrange everything. We're just here. No problem. Just for that moment. It doesn't have to take a long time.

And the third hindrance - I want to talk about this more because Mark didn't explore it as much - is preserving the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. This is really, if we can not take it personally, it's actually a lot of fun. Let me say what I mean.

Sogyal Rinpoche has a great way of describing it. He talks about this fascination with "me, me, me." He's talking about the felt sense of "me here now" - not so much an idea, but you know what I mean. Just here. Close your eyes a minute. Do you have a felt sense of "me"? Just "me"? Can you feel that? It's no big deal, right? It feels like it's here all the time. It's not some big esoteric thing.

He calls it the original measuring point for samsara, for the cycle of suffering. He talks about how in Tibet, when they're starting to build a house to get the footprint, they start from a point in the middle - this felt sense of "me." Then they take a measuring rope, a measuring tape, and from that point in the middle they measure out to all the different places to get the footprint of the house. The footprint of life. The footprint of *my* life and what everything means. It all starts from this reference point right here - just the felt sense of me.

Now there's nothing wrong with this felt sense. It's just that we interpret it as being me - solid, ongoing, the center of the universe. And we don't recognize that interpretation. We misconstrue it and measure everything from that.

So for example, just notice if you see this happening in your experience. Check it out. You're just standing there and someone walks by really slowly in the distance. How soon does the thought come back to me? "Look at them walking so slow. Should I be walking slow like that?" It doesn't take long. Try it. With people - but it doesn't even have to be people.

Like today, I was walking out in the desert. Just walking. I wasn't looking for anything. I was just kind of in a state of being, really. And I had this moment of feeling really connected - a sense of rapture. And just at that moment, that exact moment, there was a tortoise. I really just... I don't know, there was something about it. I felt really happy.

And then two beats later - two beats - and the mind said, "That's the universe confirming my sense of being open."

Right? It's like that. It's like that. Everything is all about what it means about me - good, bad. You notice that in our sitting.

You know, my breath is like this. It's all about "I'm not doing it right." If it feels good, "I am doing it right." If someone else is making a noise, "They're messing up my meditation." The lights aren't right. "How can I listen to the talk with these lights? How can I give the talk with these lights?"

Just notice—it's actually hysterical. It's hysterical to see how any little thing, any little thing, a little rabbit runs by, and it's about me within a second. Within a second. Notice that.

And I say it's not personal because you notice how people are laughing? So somehow each of us is the center of the universe. Everything's all about each one of us. And how much energy goes into—not so much preserving that, I would say, because we believe it so strongly—but reacting from that. This is what makes us go after pleasure, avoid pain, think that's what happiness is.

The next thing is we think, "Okay, then I have to get rid of this, right? That's what meditation is about. That's the path of the Dharma. Get rid of the ego. Take out the pickaxe, start chipping it away. Get your notebook. Every time you have a moment that isn't about me, make a little mark and see how many. Maybe there's a couple more every day."

No. See, we don't have to do all of that. We don't. Already laughing at it—that's the shift. From "oh, it's all about me," which feels like this, to something lighter.

You see, awareness is always available, always accessible. It's not somewhere else. Nothing actually stains or colors or makes awareness inaccessible. It's just that our practice, our moment-by-moment mindfulness practice, is simply a practice of recognizing the awareness.

Awareness can be aware of anything, everything. Our job, as one of my teachers says, is shifting the direction of recognition. We're turning the direction of our recognition. Mostly we're recognizing objects—the five sense objects or mental objects. We're recognizing experience. That's fine to recognize, but that's where we're putting our sense of well-being, of organizing the world.

Turn around, like that cup of tea I was talking about. That's just so peaceful, so exquisite. We're out looking at what are all the conditions that made this happen and how can I get it back. You just turn around and go, "Oh, cup of tea, peaceful. It's like this." And it's turning around and seeing just in this moment: there's sipping and the knowing of it. Calmness and the knowing of it. Hot on the tongue and the knowing of it. Silence and the knowing of it. Raucous, loud, incredible noise, trucks going down the highway—and the knowing of it.

Does it matter? It doesn't matter one iota what's happening in terms of awareness. Of course, we don't believe that. That's our problem.

So our mindfulness practice is learning moment after moment to bring that innocence, that freshness, that beginner's mind to meet experience. And at first we're talking about experience, right? We're saying sit down and feel the breath. A lot of the questions arise: "Oh, the breath—is the breath going to get better?" And at that point, really what we need to say is forget the damn breath, because now you've just taken the breath and made it the thing we've got to fix to make us happy.

It doesn't matter about the breath. The breath is just a way to bring in enough calmness that we can actually turn around and notice: oh, awareness of breath. Awareness colored with wanting. "Get my breath." Oh, wanting. It's like this.

You know, today with Diana doing the different sensations—notice how deeply ingrained it is that unpleasant means it's a bad sensation. Pleasant or even neutral means, oh, it's going in the right direction. It's so ingrained.

When you think about really awakening, when you think about it—maybe some people don't even let themselves think because obviously, really, for them that's not possible, so don't even think about it—but let yourself think about it. Let it bring up in your mind: What would freedom from suffering look like? What would awakening be like?

I know when I'm really honest with myself, it doesn't usually include my headaches. It doesn't usually include people not liking me. It doesn't usually include the body really getting old and crapping out and decrepit. It usually doesn't include it. The freezing here—you know, I came down to the desert for the sunshine. Then the sun comes out. How many of you felt so much happier when the sun came out? I mean, I was too. I hate the cold. But how easy it is to think, "Oh, *now*. Now it's peaceful. Now the meditation's beginning to flower." Just because it's pleasant.

But the Buddha's awakening—he awoke into *this* world, not into a different world. He spent forty-five years walking around India barefoot with a begging bowl, eating one meal a day. He had headaches. He had backaches. He had all kinds of difficulties. His kinfolk and the lay people he dealt with—there were all kinds of wars and strife and dissension that he had to address. He had people in his sangha. In fact, his cousin, who wanted to take power from him, tried to kill him. He had stuff. Organizational dukkha—it's the worst. He had it. He just wanted to go sit under a tree in the bliss of nibbāna for forty-five years, but out of great compassion, he taught instead. So that was his awakening.

So what are we looking for? The jewel of mindfulness, of awareness, is that it's already here. It's right under our nose. Our practice is just hopefully helping us learn to keep recognizing this.

One of the reasons I love the desert here—it's the same reason I love being by the ocean, or why I think a lot of practitioners, or the ultimate practitioners, would go and practice in the mountains. It's the sense of space. It's metaphorical, but I also kind of literally feel it inside if I stand over at the edge and just look out. There's this vast sense of space, and there's all kinds of objects, all kinds of stuff in the space. But the sense of spaciousness—Ajahn Sumedho talks about it a lot—the way we recognize space is by not fixating, not clinging to the objects in the space.

So if I go out and there's just the spaciousness of the desert, it kind of evokes a spaciousness of heart, of mind. A spaciousness that doesn't have that moment of reference point back to me. I'm not trying to get rid of it. Just in that moment, it's not the reference point. Then it becomes me looking out at the space, and "isn't this cool," and the reference point's back again. But just play with it. Just the space.

And then notice how, just like that, you see something moving, and the mind goes right to the little thing. Then open up again. Sumedho has a way of putting it that I love: we notice space when we stop clinging to forms in the space. But the space is already here.

Silence is another way, another metaphorical way of talking about it. Not the silence of no sound. Not the silence of no thought. Not the space that needs to get rid of things. Just the letting go of the clinging. Things are all here—there's sounds, there's people, there's sensations, there's thoughts. Even wanting can arise. But when we shift from the wanting to the awareness, wanting is just another thing arising in the space.

So when we withdraw our obsession with conditions—and obsession is really a good word here, obsession with conditions—and we just notice the space, just the space of receiving whatever's arising, awareness receiving experience, receiving whatever's coming up. Just this. Just this. There's no reference point back to me, past, future. What does it mean about me? And if I can really feel it like this, then this is going to happen. Just this. Just that silence.

This is really just something to play with. Sumedho calls this consciousness, this recognition of just the presence, the doorway to liberation. It's always available.

One of my teachers says that this knowing, the simple quality of knowing, recognizing, is always happening. It's not something we do. It's not something we create. We don't have to strive.

So humor me a minute. Just put your two hands together if you don't mind. Do you feel that? Can you feel those sensations? It's not too hard, is it? Didn't really take a lot of effort. You didn't really do much of anything, did you? Except have the intention just to have awareness there. The awareness—did you make awareness happen? Could you make awareness happen if you wanted to? It's just like we noticed. Oh yeah, it's the knowing. That simple. That's mindfulness. It's not a huge, concerted effort. It's that simplicity of knowing, free in that moment.

There's no big deal going on. There probably wasn't a lot of wanting in your mind —"Oh God, I hope I can feel it right." Just, okay, I can feel it. Probably wasn't a lot of aversion, maybe a little to me telling you to do something, but just the actual sensation —probably not a lot of aversion, right? The purity. Not a lot of me. There's not a lot to say about those sensations, not a big story to make about that. I mean, we could, but you didn't have enough time.

And so in that moment, that knowing—as my teacher said, knowing is always happening. Our habit is just to keep turning around moment after moment after moment and recognizing it. That's the mindfulness. And the moment after moment part is really the key. Again, it doesn't have to be stressful or exhausting, but that's why we're sitting, sitting, sitting, and then we say notice the transition when you stand up, and then walking, walking, walking, and then we say notice when you sit down, and then we say notice when you eat. And the mind throws that ahead and it's all about me, and it's exhausting.

But it's only ever about just this moment. Touching. Just this moment, sensation. Just this moment, hearing. Just this moment, anger. Just this moment, "I am so bored," you know. Boredom's like this. Anger's like this. Sensation's like this. Raggedy breath is like this. Falling asleep on my face is like this. Aversion is like this. Hunger is like this, bubbling, bubbling. Enormous fear is like this, tightness. One, one, one, one—it's always available.

Now, if we're looking for some experience in meditation, as in life, we bring in our same habits. We're looking for a particular experience to fulfill me, to confirm me. An exaggerated way of saying it is you can go home and tell people you had this really incredible experience and feel good about yourself. But that's gross. On a really subtle level, even the littlest bit, if we're looking for the experience to confirm me, that wanting—we've moved out of noticing that simplicity of awareness.

But then, and this is what I love about the way Sayadaw talks about awareness, *is like this* applies to anything. It's like a Tai Chi move, or a Qigong move. You don't have to get rid of, "Oh, I want this sitting to be really good. I want a good experience. Oh no, I'm

wanting, and it's all about me, and how can I get..." No. Wanting is like this. You don't have to get rid of anything. We don't have to bring in something else. The awareness is already here. We don't have to create it. We simply shift our refuge, our trust, our home from "Oh my God, this experience has to change" to "Wanting is like this." I am completely caught up. I'm completely confused. I have no clue what I'm doing. It's hopeless. I'm filled with doubt. Doubt is like this.

I know, it seems too easy. And then we want something a little more juicy, something a little more flashy, something a little more confirming of me, me, me. But really, where's the room in that for the wonder, for the mystery? Where's the space in that for the incredible beauty and unknown quality of each moment of life to arise? We have no idea what's going to happen. And that is what really allows us to meet each moment with this sensitivity, this care, this innocence.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together."

How many of us—and I'm including me—meditate to confirm ourselves and congratulate ourselves and feel completely together? Did you come here to fall apart? Did you come here to realize you don't have a clue, and that's really fine? We want to be perfect, but we just keep seeing our imperfections, and there's no room to get away from that. No exit, nowhere to run. This is when the sword turns into a flower. We stay with what we see. We feel what we feel. And from that, we begin to connect with our own wisdom mind.

Another way of saying it is every experience, every object of experience—mental, physical—is a doorway to awareness, a doorway to freedom in that moment. There's nothing we need to change. It's always available. It's just if we remember to notice. It takes, at first, an enormous trust. And it takes support.

That's really why we have this set up the way we do now. That's why we're up here talking every night, just trying to encourage you to keep on meeting in this moment, in this moment, in this moment. Because if we do that often enough, and with this quality of mindfulness—this simplicity, this innocence, this willingness to explore, to bring a freshness without all our conceptions and ideas—well, the jewel of awareness gets

more and more obvious. At some point we just recognize it more and more. At some point we start getting it on a subliminal level, and then it becomes more obvious that it's not about what's happening.

And so we emphasize in the mindfulness just practicing bringing this quality of simplicity, of openness, of interest to discover, to whatever arises.

My model for this is the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He's one of my heroes. I really just love to listen to him play. But I also love, in anything I've read—I don't know him personally, but anything I've read—his whole attitude of openness to discover, of inclusivity, of meeting people in the musical world with this real freshness.

I saw a documentary on television once about him. I just got a little bit of it. It was in Germany, so it was in German, which I don't speak, so my friends were translating it. I just got this little snippet, but it has stayed with me as a real model of the wonder of awareness through mindfulness.

He was exploring different musics of different peoples. And at this part of the special I remember, he flew in by helicopter to a tribe of bush people in Africa. So he comes in, he gets out of the helicopter with his million-dollar cello, and he meets the man who's the head musician of this tribe, an old man. And this man has his instrument, which was kind of like a round, empty tin oil can with a long strut made out of a stick and a couple of strings—and that was his instrument.

So he's playing his instrument and singing, and Yo-Yo Ma is just completely enthralled, so open. And I could see my own cultural bias as I was watching. Then Yo-Yo Ma plays his cello, and I hear the rich tones of the cello, the beautiful sound, and this man's plunking on his thing. And then Yo-Yo Ma says, "Let's trade." So they trade instruments. And then Yo-Yo Ma is trying to play the man's instrument and he says, "I can't play this nearly as well as you. You show me." And he was just so fresh and present and free from dragging in the past and assumptions—really there. This sense of joy and wonder and connectedness.

To me, that's the quality we practice with mindfulness. Mindfulness of breath, mindfulness of anger, mindfulness of pain in your rear end, mindfulness of wanting, mindfulness of the space, of the desert. And eventually we see it's not about what's happening—it's about the mindfulness itself.

And then our refuge point, our trust, begins to shift. And we still call on the mindfulness. We'll lose it over and over and over. We'll find ourselves putting all our eggs into the basket of "if I could only get this situation to change, then everything would be okay." We'll all do that over and over. Beat our heads against the wall. Do that bargain-

ing. Pretend we're being mindful, really open and fresh, but really so it'll go away. All of that stuff. Until finally something in us just surrenders. Okay, let me die. I'll just be with this. And then the jewel of awareness is recognizable again. Oh, it's like this. And then we see the potential in that moment for real freedom.

It's not freedom from the world. It's not freedom from unpleasant. It's not freedom from pain. But it's freedom from confusion, from separation, from unnecessary suffering, from dis-ease. Just in a moment. Just in a moment. But that moment is available in every moment, in every experience, to every one of us. It's already here. It's always here.

So we just use this practice and find those moments when we trust enough to just never mind the wanting, never mind the aversion, never mind the me.

It's all here. It doesn't even have to go away. But it's just not where we put our trust.

In those moments—that's actually what I was feeling when I saw the tortoise. The mystery opened. And then it was the me, me, me. And then I just laughed, because it's going to come back. And it doesn't matter. None of it mattered. It really doesn't matter what's happening. Awareness is the point that includes everything, as Nisargadatta says.

And in that not mattering, the other side reveals itself: if nothing matters, everything matters. It's not like who cares. It's that each moment is equally valuable as a doorway to freedom.

This is what really opens up the possibility for—and I'm an aversive type, so I'm not a gushy, lovey type—but it really opens up the possibility of moments of life that are just so filled with beauty, with love, with appreciation. And all those are words for just the isness of things. Just the isness of the ordinary.

I want to end with a poem by Billy Collins that I love, because it expresses this to me. It's interesting because it's called "Aimless Love." A friend, maybe one of the most aversive people I know, sent me this poem. It's really touching.

This morning, as I walked along the lake shore, I fell in love with a wren. And later in the day with a mouse the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

In the shadows of an autumn evening, I fell for a seamstress still at her machine in the tailor's window, and later for a bowl of broth, steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

This is the best kind of love, I thought, without recompense, without gifts or unkind words, without suspicion or silence on the telephone.

The love of the chestnut, the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel. No lust, no slam of the door. The love of the miniature orange tree, the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower, the highway that cuts across Florida.

No waiting, no huffiness or rancor, just a twinge every now and then for the wren who had built her nest on a low branch overhanging the water, and for the dead mouse still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod, ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail to a pile of leaves in the woods, I found myself standing at the bathroom sink, gazing down affectionately at the soap, so patient and soluble, so at home in its pale green soap dish.

I could feel myself falling again as I felt its turning in my wet hands and caught the scent of lavender and stone.

Can we just sit quietly for a minute?

From Nisargadatta: *Be quiet, free from the obsession with what next. And in the silence, something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception.*

Free from the obsession with what next.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 369

Faith/Devotion

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson reflects on witnessing a simple act of devotion at Ramana Maharshi's ashram in India, where the ashram president's unassuming circumambulation of the samādhi before serving dinner revealed the everyday simplicity of genuine faith. This observation becomes a springboard for exploring how our spiritual practice can shift from wanting and needing to understand toward loving the truth, trusting awareness, and surrendering into each moment.*
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> *Wilson draws on teachings from Dōgen, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, and the Buddha's discourses to illuminate how love and devotion create the same measureless quality of mind as wisdom. She explains that lust, hate, and delusion are "makers of measurement" that impose limitations on consciousness, while in moments of genuine love or surrender, "the empty nature dawns nakedly." The felt sense of 'me' serves as the original measuring point from which all experiences of separation arise—measurements of time, space, and self versus other.*
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> *The talk addresses the challenges practitioners face when running up against deeply held patterns, views, and comfort zones. Wilson shares the story of Khemā, the pleasure-loving queen who awakened upon seeing impermanence, and reflects on Ānanda's exemplary devotion to the Buddha. She emphasizes that faith provides the courage to step into the unknown, to "die into whatever's arising in this moment," and that even fabricated devotion can open doors to genuine liberation. The session concludes with taking refuge and precepts together.*

A few years ago, I was visiting an ashram in southern India, an ashram where Ramana Maharshi lived near the sacred mountain Arunachala. There's a big hall there they call the Samadhi—they use the word differently there—it's the place where Ramana is buried. Every evening in the hour before dinner, some men and women from the ashram come and do an hour of chanting, and then everyone goes in for dinner.

At the far end of the hall is the actual samadhi, the marble structure where he's buried. It's customary for people to circumambulate, to walk around the samadhi. You can come in and spend some time doing that every day. During the chanting, people sit against the walls and listen, and from time to time they get up and walk around.

It's interesting to watch, and also to be part of, all the different ways that people walk around that samadhi. There are lots of people there—Indian people, Western people, all different kinds. And you can see, even in yourself, sometimes just walking around casually, not paying attention. Sometimes people are chatting while walking around. You can really get this sense of wanting to get what Ramana had, or wanting to feel the holiness, or wanting something. Some people go and really prostrate themselves in front. You feel the sense of supplication, of needing, or just looking spiritual. The whole range—all the stuff we see ourselves go through.

But one night, and this is the reason I'm bringing this up, there was a man who's the president of the ashram. He's lived there for many years, and every night when everyone goes in to dinner, he and the other male workers serve the food. You sit in lines on the floor with a banana leaf for your plate, and they come around with big buckets of curry and put it on the banana leaves. There's really this sense that they're serving us.

This particular night, the president was doing the chanting. Then the chanting ended, and the bell for dinner rang. He just got up, and I happened to be watching him. So simply and naturally, no big anything, just got up and with great care—but no big anything—walked around, did his three circumambulations of the samadhi, and then went in to serve the dinner.

Somehow it touched me so much. It's still in my mind. Something about attitude, about motivation, about the whole sense of spiritual practice coming from the motivations of faith, of love, of surrender—rather than from the motivation of wanting, needing to know the truth, needing to understand. You know how we can flip back and forth between those.

So I thought tonight I'd talk about another motivation, another aspect of our practice that opens us up to the same truth—because it is the same truth. Shifting from the motivations of wanting or needing to understand, to just touching on faith, and devotion even, and surrender.

What really inspired me watching the president walk around was the total everyday simplicity of faith, of devotion. No big whoop. No "I'm so filled with devotion, let me prostrate myself all the way around the ashram." Just walk around and go serve the dinner, both of those equal.

I could see for myself—it really went into my heart—how often, out of what starts with sincere motivation, my path, whether it's meditation practice or being in an ashram or cooking dinner, can slide into wanting, into either wanting or a kind of spir-

itual hubris. Trying to magnify my sense of being spiritually not attained, but getting there. At least working on it. At least I try. At least that's what my life is about. It's like wanting the truth, and that's very different from loving the truth.

That's really the shift. And what do I mean by truth? I don't mean some big explanation of something. In terms of our practice here, just the simplicity of awareness in one moment. Not ever, forever, always solid—in one moment. Do I love the truth enough to trust it so much that in this moment of awareness, this is truth revealing itself? Because where else could it be?

It's a real sense of surrender into what's happening right now. That's what awareness is. That's what mindfulness is. The opening into the unknown of whatever this moment is presenting.

And awareness and this moment are not two separate things. It only seems that way from the space of thinking.

This is from the famous Zen master Dogen. He says: "Truth is not far away. It is ever present. It is not something to be attained since not one of your steps leads away from it. When you have thrown off your ideas as to mind and body, the original truth will fully appear. Zen is simply the expression of truth. Therefore, longing and striving are not the true attitudes of Zen. If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"

Right where we are. Right with whatever's arising, right in this instant.

This quality that speaks of devotion, of faith, of trust—this is what we're practicing here. Moment after moment, we're practicing dying into whatever's arising in this moment. Not with fear, but with trust. Not trust that something we want to happen will happen, not trust in the next thing, not trust in anything in particular. Just so trusting in awareness that we don't need to hold back or hold on or keep constructing things. That sense of me, me, me.

But of course we can't make this happen. That's why it's trust. That's why it's surrender. That's why it's not "do A, B, C, and D, and then you get E." It's really, as somebody said today, radical. Just do your chanting, walk around the samadhi, go serve dinner. Just wake up in the morning, brush your teeth, eat your breakfast, come in and sit. One thing isn't better or worse or more spiritual or less spiritual than another. Every single moment of any of that, the truth is revealing itself. We surrender into the awareness in that moment.

Byron Katie has a book called *Loving What Is*. I didn't read it; I just liked the name. That's her practice: loving what is. I don't mean by loving something like, "Oh, I'm so glad that my foot hurts today and I'm feeling tired. I just love it." No. Not love in that sense. That's how we love pizza or pie. But love in the sense of surrendering our holding back, surrendering our ideas, our assumptions, our sense of "what does it mean about me"—just the willingness to be totally aware of whatever this moment is, without adding anything extra.

Does that sound familiar? It's only what we've been blabbing about the whole time. But I'm trying to shift the perspective just a little bit.

When we're in a moment like that—you all know—when the trust, the surrender into awareness, just for that moment, holds nothing back, there isn't anything separate. There's no "me" here, an object there. No "this sensation is happening and I'm being aware, I'm surrendering." In that moment, there's nothing separate. It's just the truth manifesting itself.

This poem from Izumi Shikibu:

Watching the moon at dawn,
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely,
no part left out.

Sharon likes to say that to pay attention is to love. A quality of total presence. The moon at dawn—I knew myself completely, no part left out. The aching foot, the grumpy mind, the hungry stomach, the unpleasant sound. I knew myself completely, no part left out. It doesn't matter what it is that's happening. It's just that, in that moment, that quality of surrender.

This is from Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, a wonderful Tibetan Dzogchen master. All of us—except Andrea—we all went to see him together in Nepal a couple of years before he died. He says: "The present method for becoming quickly accustomed to the unfabricated state of awareness is to have devotion to enlightened beings and compassion to sentient beings."

Devotion and compassion are both love. In the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly. That's the real line I love: in the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly. He says, if in this moment of love, of devotion, of surrender, of trust, of faith—if in this moment you can look inwardly, it is like the sun unobscured by clouds. The nature of emptiness is nakedly manifest. So remember to look inwardly.

I want to talk a little about why and how this works—how the nature of emptiness is nakedly manifest in the moment of love.

In one of his suttas, the Buddha is talking about the immeasurable deliverance of mind, of which there are, you'll be happy to know, various types. Four of them happen to be the Brahma Viharas. He's talking about these and asking: what do they all share? In some way, all these different immeasurable deliverances are all the same. How? And he says: lust is a maker of measurement, hate is a maker of measurement, delusion is a maker of measurement. In other words—and this is the note from Bhikkhu Bodhi—lust, hate, and delusion may be understood as makers of measurement in that they impose limitations upon the range and depth of the mind.

The way I would put it, the way it looks to me, is that when there's any of those—lust, hate, delusion—the experience, when we look into our mind, when we look into our experience, it is limited. It's constricted. There's self and others, or there's awareness and that, or this thing we like and everything else. The mind is limited. There are senses of separation, and that's how we live so much of our life.

In the moment of love, devotion, look into the mind, and how does he say this? The nature of emptiness is nakedly manifest. There's no measurement in that moment.

Just as with paññā, with wisdom, with insight, as Joseph was talking about last night, there's a moment when—and one of the other ways the Buddha talks about deliverance of mind is through voidness, which is through really having insight into the emptiness of self, of mere mind. So it's on a par, you could say. Equal. When we talk about it through wisdom, really in a moment of insight there's no measurement there.

But sometimes that's not accessible. For some of us at certain times, and for others of us at more times, the path of faith, of devotion, of trust might open up more naturally—at certain times, or in who we are, or just how our mind works. And they work together. So in the moment of love, deep in the Brahma Vihara, in that moment of just surrendering into the truth of this moment, in the moment of just trusting awareness completely—there's no measurement discernible in consciousness, in mind.

We can explore this understanding, or this kind of heartfelt knowing, from these various ways. This is the Buddha, continuing: "In a bhikkhu whose taints are destroyed"—so now we're talking about arhats—"these three makers of measurement are abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, done away with, so they are no longer subject to future arising. And of all the kinds of immeasurable deliverance of mind, the unshakable deliverance of mind is pronounced the best."

Now, that unshakable deliverance of mind is empty of lust, empty of hate, empty of delusion. That's the mind of an arhat, unshakable. Nothing's going to shake the measurement back in. But moment to moment, that's not—as Dogen says, that's what we're practicing. Not just putting in our time and hoping somewhere a big light goes off. That's what we're practicing moment to moment: no measurement. I'm not saying it's simple or easy. We know that. We run into the things that make it difficult—our safety nets, our comfort zones, the places where we say, "Oh, no, not this." How many times have I said, "No, if awakening means this has to go, or I have to be with this, forget it. I don't want any part of that." Notice those little moments when they come up.

But before I go to that, I want to say one more thing about measurement, coming from Joseph's talk last night—something that Mingyur Rinpoche describes in his book. I just love this. He's talking about the felt sense of "me" in a moment. Not the idea, not some concept, but actually when you're sitting here, walking around, brushing your teeth, and you tune in—there's a felt sense of "me," right? You know what I'm talking about.

You don't have a felt sense of me. I'm scratching my face. That's very basic. We all have that, right? Probably. Or you wouldn't be here, because you wouldn't feel like you had a problem.

So Rinpoche says that this felt sense of me is the original measuring point for samsara. He describes how in Tibet, when they want to make the footprint to set the foundation for building a building, they start in the middle with a rope or string. From that middle point, they measure out how far it goes, all the way around in a circle or a square. That middle point is the actual measuring point for building the house.

He says that's how the felt sense of me works. Everything in our experience in terms of measurement is measured from that, just in a moment. It's happening moment by moment, but it's quite interesting to play with. For some reason, this has been popping up in my mind during sittings lately. Just see which measurements you notice.

Measurement of time starts right here, doesn't it? Past, future, five minutes from now, yesterday, how long is this talk going to last—it all starts from here. Measurements of space: there's space all around, but usually the space all starts from here. Measurements of self and object: in a moment of meditating, there's a sense of self and the object, awareness and the object. As long as there's that sense of me, there's that sense of measurement.

And when it drops away—which it often does—people love it. They come in during interviews, or in your own experience: "Wow, it was so nice. There was just no sense of me." It is really nice. "I knew myself completely, no part left out" because she's looking at the moon and totally present, and the measurement drops away. Myself isn't really her. It's just the totality of awareness in this moment. Boom—that. No measurement of past or future. It doesn't mean this about me or you or anything.

So just play with that. Just seeing: referring back to me, referring back to me, that sense of measurement. And even though it's really a burden, it doesn't help us to intellectually hear that or think that. In fact, then there's another thing: "I'm so stupid—I keep adding this burden on top of myself." The times when measurement is gone, there's that sense of "Oh, wow, what's different?" No measurement. That's all. No measurement.

Nature, for many people, is a really inspiring support for that. You know how many awakening poems, like the one I just read, are set in nature. Many people here, when you're going through a really hard time or you're just a little tense or tight or things are just blah—going outside, even when it's not nice weather, doesn't have to be nice. There's something about being in nature that for many people, just the quietness, just nature itself, the fact that there's no one else around to get the māna, the conceit, the comparing going.

Mostly we don't compare ourselves to trees. To turkeys, I hope not. Turkeys maybe, I don't know. But not to trees, not to the stars, not to the chipmunks. And so sometimes imperceptibly, that felt sense of me isn't being recreated so strongly moment after moment. Sometimes there's just that sense of peace.

That's what it is, actually—nature supports our trusting, our settling into the simplicity of just this. We don't really usually compare this sunset to last night's sunset. I mean, sometimes we do, and then we realize we're missing it. We tend to just—oh, it's like this. Peace. No measurements.

To pay attention is to love, to the simplest of things. That's really how moment-by-moment mindfulness works. We start by learning to use our experience—sensations of breath, sensations in walking, the movements of the arms, noticing the thought, whatever sense object at the six sense doors is arising. We use that to remind us, to trigger awareness. We start with awareness of breath, awareness of this.

But then, when there's that quality of surrender into the awareness, there are those moments when it stops being awareness *of* and it's just the completeness of the moment. Just this. And the simplest things.

can trigger that.

This is a silly example, but I really noticed it the last couple of days. I have this one teacup that I really love. First, you must know, tea—like a pot of tea in the morning—is the high point of my day. I just love to sit and have tea. And I used to have three of these teacups, but two of them have gone the way of all things, and I only have one left now. And it's just perfect somehow. It fits my hand. I just love it.

I know I'm totally attached. When someone stays in my house and I'm away, I hide it so they won't break it. I know all this. I can live with that. I notice it. I know it's going to break. I've gone online. I even found I could buy more, but it's not the same. It's this teacup.

But I've noticed—I wasn't thinking about this talk, but I was just noticing—when I'm washing it every morning, I'm a little more careful. Because how do these things break? You hit it in the sink, you hit something with it in the drainer. So I'm just a little more careful.

But what I noticed the last couple of days, which was lovely, is that it starts, okay sure, it starts from greed. We can't pretend it's a highfalutin motivation. It's like I'm holding on to the cup. But I'm really paying attention. And then it really just stopped being about me and the cup and holding on. It's just the awareness. It's just what it was. Awareness, and these things were happening. And it's not awareness of or that in awareness. It's just: this is it. And the awareness gets much more interesting. And you know what you're doing. I know I'm brushing the cup. But none of that stuff matters. It doesn't matter.

Anything, anything opens us up to this recognition, this trust in awareness, this love for awareness, really. And when we start loving awareness more than we crave and hate the things that are happening, then trust and faith, devotion, surrender, start happening much more by themselves. And that only deepens our faith, deepens our trust.

So that comes by way of mindfulness. It also comes by way of actually recognizing, cultivating faith itself. At times we need to, and sometimes more than others. Some people's psychological makeup, you could say, is more one way than others. Some people are more wisdom types. Some people think of themselves as more faith types or devotion types. But I just want to say we all need all of it at different times. None of us can just do it in one way, because all the different factors arise in our minds.

I've always thought of myself as a real wisdom type—that what got me into practice was wanting to understand the nature of things, wanting to know the truth, what's going on. But just today, Sharda said to me—she knows me really well, we've known each

other for, I don't know, thirty years—she says, "Oh, you're such a devotional type." I said, "Me? Devotional? No way. I'm the least devotional person I know." That's why I'm talking about this. She was shaking her head. Because, you know, we always talk about what we need to learn ourselves, right? You've probably figured that out by now.

So anywhere along our spiritual path, in a retreat like this, but also in our whole life—whether we have a lot of tendency toward devotion and surrender or not, whether wisdom is our way—when it gets blocked, we're all going to run into, and I bet you all have already here, times when...

It's just really challenging.

Not in a way we don't like it, but either our motivation drops out or we hit this place where, like I said before, I just can't go there if that's what it's about.

Sometimes people have mentioned this to me—I won't say any particular story—but it's something I also recognize in myself. There are times when what I find my mind holding onto in a moment is some suffering mental pattern. It's not like I'm holding onto some great idea of something in my life, but some sense of seeing myself in some screwed-up way that's so familiar it feels like a comfortable old blanket or a really nice glove. No, if that has to go, who am I? Who would I be without my complete self-loathing? How can I make it through the world without this?

Never mind when it's something that we actually like. But for all of us, our views, our beliefs, our deepest commitments, all of our ideas about ourselves—not some but all—are going to be challenged. And our views are what we use to try and construct, hopelessly but we never give up, trying to construct some sense of solidity, of order out of the chaos. Knowing what's going to happen. Trying to make ourselves better.

But enlightenment is not a self-improvement project. It's not about making our personalities better, nicer, kinder. Luckily, that happens as a kind of side effect. I mean, if you're getting angrier and meaner and crueler, something isn't working—that's true. But that's not the point. We start out that way. We all do, of course, but it's going to get challenged.

Stephen Batchelor, he's quite a brilliant guy. Not that everyone always agrees with him here, but he's a brilliant guy—he's too smart for me to even know if I agree or not. He says that emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It's a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, and seeming protection. And although it is freeing, it also evokes great disconcertion, great confusion, dis-ease, fear at times—like being in no man's land.

We think we want emptiness, and yeah, we think of oceanic bliss. We don't think of how all of our strategies have to also fall apart to recognize emptiness. Again, only in a moment. Remember how the mind, from the felt sense of me, projects into the future: "Oh, everything has to fall apart forever. How will I function?" Or with oceanic bliss: "When will I get there and have it?" But just in a moment, notice when we're running up against some strategy, some view, some sense of self, some way of being, the way we're practicing our understandings—and somehow the mind goes, "No, not this. I can't do this anymore."

That's when consciously calling on faith, on surrender, on devotion—if that's helpful—compassion, devotion to enlightened beings, can be helpful. As Sayadaw U Pandita says, it could be devotion to Buddha, to Dharma, to Sangha.

One of the definitions or descriptions of saddhā, which is translated as faith, is confidence. Another one, the way U Pandita described it, is willingness to do. It gives us the energy to take another step, if you will, to show up and die into this next moment, whatever it is, to take a breath and go, "Okay, this too," and just open into it.

Without faith, we do just get stuck. "Okay, I can't do it. I'm out of here." Luckily, we all have moments like that. I mean, we really go. We all have moments. "I'm glad I don't have my car keys. Okay, I give myself until after tea time. If it still feels like this, I go home." We all make those bargains. But you're all still here.

So I'm not talking about that as a mental state. I'm talking about when we really run up against something. Without faith, we wouldn't do anything. So just recognizing that faith is really like the ground spring that gives us all the energy to keep going.

In terms of this devotion, in terms of surrender, in terms of faith—it may start externally, kind of dualistically, a little even artificially. Faith in your teachers or in the Buddha or in the teachings that you've heard, or inspiration from another being. Nothing wrong with that. That's what gets us going. That's how it starts.

We all need faith in the face of the unreliability of samsara at times. We all need something to call on just to get us moving. But it's not that the faith makes everything clear and okay. The faith just gives us that energy to be willing to open again completely into the unknown, to take a step into who knows what. That's the paradox of faith—that it gives us the courage, enormous courage, to just let go, to surrender into who knows what, to trust that the truth is right here, no matter how mundane or boring or really, truly scary "here" is.

Have you ever seen a movie that came out a couple of years ago called *Touching the Void,* about two mountain climbers? I'll tell it quickly. It was a recreation of an actual event that happened fifteen or twenty years ago. Two men were mountain climbing together in Peru, somewhere in the Andes, a very high mountain, out in the middle of nowhere, no other people around. They were roped together, coming down, and they slipped and fell. One of the men fell over the edge of a cliff. He's tied, right? And the other guy is still on the land. And they hang like that—he hangs like that for an hour or so. The one on the land is trying to get him up, and he can't. He's being pulled. He can't get the other guy up. He can't go anywhere. And his choice is either to just get pulled over the edge... Well, he made the other choice. He cut the rope.

So he cut the rope. The guy fell into a huge crevasse. He just saw his friend go, and that was it. As far as he knew, his friend was dead. So he made his way down the mountain to base camp.

The other guy who fell into the crevasse—it's like a big cut in the ice—he fell down deep, broke his leg. His leg was really shattered. And he was stuck in this crevasse. He couldn't get back up. There was nowhere to go. And he said he had a deep, deep, primal terror of these crevasses. So he was in this dark place. His friend was gone. His leg was shattered. And he stayed like that for a day and a night. No water, no food. He realized no one was going to come—this primal terror.

And then he looked, and the only other way to go was... he was on a ledge. There was another opening, and the crevasse went down even deeper and darker, way down to where there was no light at all. He said, you know, he was totally terrified, but he couldn't get up. And he said, this is the question: I have to make a choice. I may be wrong, but I can't just abdicate. I can't just stay here frozen.

So he finally worked up his courage, and basically he lowered himself down as far as he could go with his rope into this other crevasse. Total terror. This is—in a way it's a heavy example—but it's like total surrendering to the unknown. He said, I can't abdicate. I have to make a choice. The other choice is to consciously make the choice to stay here and starve to death. That was his other choice.

So he lowered himself down with no clue. And of course, it turned out that as he went down, he actually hit bottom, and there was a kind of tunnel up that he could actually get up and out. And with his broken leg, he could hardly move, and it took him another couple of days on this shattered leg.

Really, it was unbearable to watch. Every moment, he had to keep making that choice even after he got out—to keep going, to keep going, to keep going over this horrendous landscape. And so obviously he got back. His friend had just burned his clothes, was just about to leave when he arrived.

But that sense of, you know, we're in the worst possible place, in a place where everything's fallen apart, primal terror—what can I do? Where can I go? It's totally hopeless. I know that's exaggerated, but we have moments in our practice that feel like that. There are moments when we're brought up against ourselves, our patterns, our sense of self, and it can feel at that depth like there's nothing I can do.

And faith is the quality of mind and heart that simply gives us the courage, the confidence, the willingness to act. And here all it is, is: okay, this too. Awareness of this too. Loving the truth in this. That's all. Even if everything I think is me is going to go, there's enough trust to meet this moment. Not knowing where it's going to go. Because if we knew, that's already back in the limitation of the known. That's measurement.

So yes, we need to call on faith, something to help us look outside of the view of reality we've unquestioningly constructed. And sometimes we need someone else to pull us along. That's what's so great about Sangha. That's what's so great, in a way, about just being here and the schedule. Even if you don't follow the schedule exactly, there's not much else to do. And sooner or later—I know you've found things, and I'm sure you've found things we don't know about. Sometimes we don't find out for years, and I won't even tell you some of the stuff we found out. But sooner or later, all that stuff gets old, and you really feel like you're wasting your time, and you go, right, here I am. Step into this void.

There's a story I want to tell about a woman in the time of the Buddha. Somehow we don't want to know. Let me just stay in my own little suffering state and kind of practice, but just within these little limits that I already know, not outside my comfort zone.

Her name was Khema, and she was the wife of a king who was a follower of the Buddha. I mean, kings had lots of wives, and she was incredibly beautiful and very spoiled and devoted to pleasure and beauty. She lived a life of luxury, and the king was always trying to get her to come and hear the Buddha's teaching, but she never wanted to go. She said, "Well, I've heard that this guy talks about renunciation and he's not really big on sense pleasures, and I really don't—I'm not so interested in that. So I don't want to go."

So the king tricked her. The Buddha was teaching in a beautiful pleasure park, so the king hired a singer poet to stroll around and sing a song extolling the beauties of this particular park where the Buddha was teaching, so that Khema would hear it. And when she heard this song, she said, "Oh, well, let me go see this beautiful park," because she couldn't stay away from something new and beautiful.

So she went, and he tricked her because she went and was standing on the outskirts. This is just the opposite of the story I told last time about the poor, miserable wretch who sat on the outside. This is the most beautiful, pleasure-loving queen—Khema, the golden one. But also, when the Buddha looked around with his eye, asking who can hear the Dhamma, it was: "Aha, it's Khema."

And so first, to speak to her mind, he constructed with his magic powers the image of a celestial woman so beautiful, so much more beautiful than Khema. And she saw this and was taken by the beauty. Wow, incredible beauty! And then he had this image just slowly, slowly age and get old and cracked and gray and flabby and disintegrate and die.

So she was watching all of this—it's like our whole life compressed into three minutes. And she was watching all of this and said, "Wow." It went in. If that can happen to her, that's going to happen to me.

So her mind was open, and the Buddha gave the whole teaching. And she was a rare example of a laywoman who, on hearing the teaching, completely became an arahant all at once. Then, of course, she became a nun. So the king lost out. I don't think he planned on that happening. But he had one or two other women to—you know, I don't think he suffered too much.

She was considered the foremost in wisdom of all the bhikkhunis, of all the nuns, because she was so wise—one of the few examples of a lay person in one stroke becoming an arhat. But basically, up until that moment, it was like, "Don't tell me. I don't want to know. I want to stay in my pleasure palace. I want to stay in my comfort zone," even though she had the capacity to completely awaken. And of course, once she saw things as they were, free of the concepts—boom.

So this is faith. This is confidence. What helps us open to it?

In the suttas, the classic Buddha teaching when they talk about faith, it's always defined as faith in the Buddha, faith in the Dhamma, faith in the Sangha. And that may or may not be what inspires this quality of devotion or confidence in us. It may be something else, and that's fine. For me, it's really the faith in the purity of awareness, in the accessibility of awareness, in the truth of the moment. Sometimes it's the confid-

ence, the inspiration that comes from being with or reflecting on certain teachers I've had or known or read about. Or sometimes it's teaching. Sometimes it's other colleagues or friends. Sometimes it's listening to a yogi, because it's not personal—it's whatever you hear, or someone's manifesting in that moment, just kind of the Dhamma, the purity of awareness or seeing the emptiness, you catch it. Because it's true for all of us.

Faith can be triggered in many different ways when we surrender our preconceptions and open. And it can be really quite simple—it can be expressed very simply.

My favorite example of an expression of the simplicity of faith, of just living from and acting from faith in the suttas, is the example of Ananda, who I'm sure most of you are familiar with—the Buddha's attendant, his cousin. For the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life, Ananda was his attendant. And Ananda was totally devoted to the Buddha, totally devoted to the Dhamma, and a very hard worker.

He was one of the few really famous bhikkhus that you read about in all the suttas who wasn't an arhat through most of the texts. He was a stream-enterer—he wasn't just a spiritual novice. But in those days, with Kashyapa and Sariputta and Moggallana and Kema and all of these people, he was kind of in junior high school by comparison. But he was renowned for his kindness, for his devotion to the Buddha, and for his memory.

He had such total faith and devotion to the Buddha that when the Buddha—before Ananda became his attendant, he'd already been in the Bhikkhu Sangha for many years—needed a new attendant and was kind of looking around the group of monks, asking if anyone would volunteer, Ananda didn't raise his hand. Ananda didn't offer. And then the Buddha asked him, "Why didn't you volunteer?" And because he had such perfect faith in the Buddha, he said, "The Buddha knows who's going to be the best person to be his attendant. I don't need to volunteer. If I'm the right person, he'll know it. He'll ask me." Such total faith.

So he's kind, he's generous, he's inclusive. He served the Buddha just wholeheartedly for twenty-five years. He asked for some boons, some favors when he agreed to become the attendant. I'm not going to say what they were, but they were all things about setting conditions so that he wouldn't be treated special. That's what the favors he asked were—not "I'll be your attendant if you'll do this for me, if you'll do that for me." They were things so he wouldn't be special. And because he had such a good memory, he requested that if he missed any of the Buddha's suttas or sermons, they would be repeated to him later. Because Ananda's the one—when you read the suttas and they begin "Thus have I heard"—that was Ananda. After the Buddha died, he could remember every talk he'd heard by heart.

So he was that devoted. But his devotion also shows up as this generosity, this inclusion of spirit, where he's always trying to get people access to the Buddha, access to the Dharma. I've been around different spiritual scenes where it works the other way—people want to get into the in-crowd and then it's kind of like, subtly, "No, you've got to protect the teacher, keep people away. We're the in-crowd." Ananda was just the reverse. He was always trying to get people to hear the Dhamma, to get them in. And he was really kind. There are times where people would fall in love with him for his kindness.

There's one story where he was walking by a well in a village, and there was a woman at the well getting water. She was a woman from the untouchable caste, what they call the Dalit caste now. She was at the well, but in that system, they weren't allowed to actually get water for themselves. So she couldn't get water. Ananda walked by, saw what was happening, and said very kindly, "What are you doing? Can I help you?" She said, "I just need water, Venerable Sir." He said, "Oh, of course," got water, gave her water, and walked on.

And she falls in love with Ananda. She follows him back, following him around until finally the Buddha sees what's happening and asks her why. She says, "Because I love Ananda. Let me serve him. Let me take care of him." And the Buddha said, "You know, it's not Ananda you're in love with. It's his kindness." She fell in love with his kindness—really, basically, the pleasant feeling of the kindness, if we want to get down to the nub of it. But that's just one of many examples of how Ananda manifested and lived his holy life.

Devotion. Simplicity—it reminds me of the president just walking around the samadhi and going to serve dinner. That is one simple way of living with faith, of living with devotion. I said it may start seeming really dualistic for us, but I'm talking about how in the moment of love, there's no measurement. For us, it starts by looking for something to inspire faith, something to inspire this confidence.

Tulku Urgyen again: "In the beginning, you need fabricated devotion because natural, unfabricated devotion or uncontrived compassion does not occur immediately." So we're practicing karuna in a formal way. We need to cultivate, at times, fabricated devotion—calling up faith, calling up "Can I trust? Can I surrender?" That's fine. Because in the moment when the faith, the confidence, the trust really comes, in that moment it's the real thing. It doesn't matter. Like me and my teacup—it starts in a pretty banal way, but when the awareness is there, when the love is there, if you look inside, there's

no measurement. Inside what? I don't know. The body, the mind. There's no inside, outside, right? Because there's no measurement, there's no separation. It's just this. Form and formlessness.

Ajahn Sumedho says a really interesting thing. I found this on one retreat we were sitting with him. He said that in his experience—Ajahn Sumedho, you know, he's a Western, an American man who's been an ordained bhikkhu, a teacher in the Ajahn Chah tradition for over thirty years, quite wise and very funny. I think we played a talk of his here, right? Very funny. Well, at this one retreat, he said that in his mind, the biggest hindrance he's seen for Westerners in practice is self-doubt. We tend to doubt—not only our self-hatred, that's one thing—but self-doubt, where we don't have faith, we don't have confidence in our own insights, in our own experience of awareness, in our own potential for liberation, or even our own experiences in a moment of liberation from our patterns, even momentary.

And he says, in part—this is him again—he thinks it's because for many of us in the West, partly culturally also, our personalities are so strong and believable. I actually think it's that we get so caught up in our personalities, we pay so much attention to our personalities. Everyone has personalities, but I've noticed when I've been in Asia for a while, yes, people have personalities, and they're not all lovely, but it just isn't in the forefront of every moment—my personality, my personality, and your personality, and let's process our personalities. When I come back here after being in Asia, honestly, I feel like I'm falling into this culture of which I'm a part, this neurotic obsession with personality.

Okay, that's a little much. He didn't say all that.

That was me.

But he says, here in the West, our personalities are really strong, and we believe them so much that we get really caught back into them. And so then, since for many of us part of our personality is this "I'm no good, I can't be free, that insight wasn't real because if it was real it wouldn't have gone away. If I was really able to be free, then I would never be angry again. If that was really a moment of awareness, then I wouldn't be suffering now. If that was really awareness, then how come these other people are asking so much more intelligent questions and I can't come up with anything?" All that stuff. And we believe it. We believe it.

That's why we need to cultivate a little faith. It doesn't just step outside of the box of personality—you don't have to fix it, you don't have to talk back to it, you don't have to shut it up. We just don't have to set it up on the throne. The Buddha's there, not our personalities.

So yes, we have to work a little bit maybe at faith. Taking the three refuges, for me, has become a practice from spending a lot of time in Buddhist countries. Refuge in the Buddha, or refuge in the seed of awakening. Refuge in awareness. Refuge in what Dogen said: "The truth is right here, right now. Where else can you find it?" And refuge in the understanding that this is not only true for everyone else—it also includes me. Refuge in the Dhamma, the truth. Refuge in the Sangha.

The real meaning of Sangha, the classical meaning, is actually the Sangha of awakened beings, or the awakened mind stream—just knowing that's possible, inspiring ourselves. If not that, then finding, being in nature. What brings about, again, the sense of mystery, the sense of awe, the sense of stepping outside of our ideas of the possible or what the world even is.

Again, from Arunachala—I often use this image. Arunachala, it's not really a mountain, it's kind of like a big hill, but there's nothing else around so it looks like a mountain. About 3,000 feet high. A friend who had gone up to the top told me that early in the morning, two or three in the morning, there are lots of mountain monkeys up there. There are monkeys down below, which aren't tame, but they'll jump—if you have one speck of food in your hand, they'll jump on you and grab it. They're very different. The mountain monkeys up on the top are much more wild.

And he said they would just get on the edge. It's very rocky, very rocky high, rocks and boulders down below, a few trees and shrubs, not very wooded. And he said these monkeys, they just get on the edge of the mountain, and then they throw themselves off into space. And they always land somewhere—they land on a rock or they grab a bush or somewhere. But just that sense of abandon into the moment. The monkeys of Arunachala.

Can we find that willingness to surrender, to throw ourselves into the moment? It's going to happen anyway. We might as well just relax into it. There's no way to stop it.

From Carlos Castaneda, talking about his sorcerers, he said: "Discipline for sorcerers is the art of facing infinity without flinching—not because they are strong and tough, but because they are filled with awe."

Can we just meet this moment—only this moment, not even each, just this moment—filled with awe? With the possibility of loving awareness rather than hating and wanting and reacting to whatever it is that's arising together with awareness. Wow, awareness is here. How wonderful.

Let's just sit quietly for a minute.

I just want to read the last paragraph of "Ash Wednesday" by T.S. Eliot:

Blessed Sister, Holy Mother, Spirit of the Fountain, Spirit of the Garden, suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood.

Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still even among these rocks, our peace in his will. And even among these rocks, sister, mother, and spirit of the river, spirit of the sea, suffer me not to be separated, and let my cry come unto thee.

The community then joined together in taking the refuges and precepts:

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Tatiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Surāmeraya majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Vikālabhojanā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Nacca gīta vādita visūkadassanā mālā gandha vilepana dhāraṇa maṇḍana vibhūsanaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

CHAPTER 370

Dāna, Sīla, Bhāvanā: The Three Pillars as Paths of Awakening

Carol Wilson · 50 min

In this deeply personal talk, Carol Wilson challenges the common assumption that meditation (bhāvanā) is the primary path while generosity (dāna) and ethical conduct (sīla) serve merely as supportive practices. Drawing from decades of intensive retreat experience and extensive time in Burma (Myanmar), she illuminates how all three pillars of Buddhist practice are equally valid paths of awakening that transform the suffering habits of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Wilson shares vivid examples from Burmese Buddhist culture, where dāna permeates daily life through alms rounds, rice offerings, and the symbiotic joy of giving and receiving. She describes how the formal, present-moment quality of offering—before, during, and after the act—creates genuine transformation rather than obligatory charity. The Buddha taught that recollecting one's own acts of generosity purifies the mind of greed and leads toward concentration and liberation, a practice available "while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children."

The talk addresses how our habitual responses to discomfort—seeking pleasant sense experiences or falling into resistance and aversion—can be transformed through conscious acts of generosity and non-harming. Wilson concludes with a powerful reflection on her visit to Dachau, emphasizing that liberation practice matters not just for personal peace but for the countless small decisions that shape our collective humanity.

Tonight I just wanted to share some teachings that might seem quite obvious but have been awakening more and more interest in me—a growing sense of possibility in what seems like the most simple teachings of the Buddha as part of a really intrinsic path of our awakening.

I've been on this path of studying Buddhist teachings and meditation for a long time, and I've been teaching Buddhist meditation and the whole Buddhist path for also quite a long time. It's just turned out that most of the teaching I do tends to be intensive silent retreats, anywhere from a weekend to three months. We just finished the first six weeks of the three-month retreat out at the meditation center in Barre. We do that every year, just to give you a sense of where my energy has tended to go.

This is also Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, and it's often the case that the heart of the teachings we learn about, what's new to us in this culture, is the meditation piece—which is, of course, fascinating. Meditation is the part of really learning to investigate, to explore the qualities of our mind and heart. As the Buddha said, everything he taught is to free our hearts and minds from suffering, to free our hearts and minds from confusion.

When I came up in my practice and the way I learned this whole path, the meditation piece was central, but it was kind of unspoken, sent as the most important. Yet anywhere you read the talks of the Buddha, the teachings of the Buddha, he always talks about the three pillars as dāna, sīla, bhāvanā in the Pali—generosity, ethical conduct or non-harming behavior, and bhāvanā, which is mental cultivation.

What's clear is that the thread of awakening, of really seeing through the confusion that brings suffering in our lives, in our heart and mind—the place where that seemed the richest, the most interesting, has always been in the meditation. So meditation centers, city centers, intensive retreats. And dāna and sīla, generosity and moral conduct, are important, sure. We were always told in the early years that you need to have ethical conduct so that you don't have remorse, so that meditation can go deeper if you're not out there killing people, basically. Which is true. And generosity is good, yeah, generosity is good.

So this might be like a "duh" kind of a talk, but what's been more and more rich for me in the past few years is coming to understand more deeply for myself that everything the Buddha taught—as far as I can tell in my limited experience—none of it's just like, "Oh, by the way, do this so you can do something better." Every aspect of the teachings is a path of awakening. Every aspect is a way to transform the suffering habits of our heart and mind into compassion, into clear seeing, into non-ill will, into loving-kindness, into wisdom.

So I just want to talk a little bit tonight about generosity and about sīla—virtuous conduct, non-harming conduct—as aspects of our path of awakening, and in themselves as paths of joy, of happiness, of purifying. Not that we have to wait till we can get to a weekend retreat. Weekend retreats are good. Or a three-month retreat—three-month retreats are great. Or go to be a nun for a year—that's great. But we don't have to do that. We can really start and continue to open up to generosity as a way of being that transforms our heart and mind in itself. That's a path of wisdom. It's not a second-best supportive practice.

The same with ethical conduct. And in both of them, it's about how we do it—how we pay attention as we're being generous, how we notice what's going on in our hearts and minds as we're refraining from harmful behavior. So you can see why, with awareness, with investigation, with kindness, with interest, these are really important aspects of waking up.

I can only, in this short of a time, hope to point a little bit. There's no way I can cover it all. There are vast things to say about both of these topics. So my only hope is if it sparks any kind of interest to take this into your life and really include it, explore it, enjoy it—to recognize the happiness that generosity and non-harming behavior bring us. Rather than it being something we should do, rather than not being generous or not being ethical becoming another way to hate ourselves, we can really see that these are sources of great happiness.

In the last few years, I guess every few years as we continue on our path, if we had to give a summary of what we're learning or how we see the path, it would probably change from time to time. So my current synopsis—I'm not up here saying this is the truth of all time—just my current synopsis would be that really, all of our practice is about transforming the suffering habits of our mind and heart. You see this everywhere in the Buddhist teaching, when the Buddha talks about sharing what will bring each of us to understand the deepest contentment, to really learn that we can live in this world as it is.

He never said he could change the world, and he didn't change the world. But he taught that we can learn to live in this world as it is without adding—by the way we relate to ourselves and others—without creating suffering for ourselves. And from that clear seeing, we can respond more appropriately to help alleviate the suffering of others. So it starts with ourselves.

In the most basic way, he was saying that the source of our deepest confusion and suffering is that we don't recognize the way things are accurately. And that's, you know, ten million other talks—I can't totally go into it here. But we don't recognize accurately, for example, the fact that everything is in constant change. We can say, "Yeah, I get it. Everything's in constant change." But then how do we act? We hold on to what we want. We're distressed when what we love goes away, as if that shouldn't happen, right? "No, no, I don't do that." Look and see in ourselves. Because we don't recognize accurately—and this is confusion, we don't see clearly—the habits of mind that cause us great suffering are greed and aversion, ill will, anger, fear. Basically: greed, negativity, and the confusion that doesn't see accurately. This is the essence of the Buddha's teaching.

And when he talks about transforming, what's so cool to me isn't that we have to go out and with hatred say, "Look at these disgusting habits in my heart and mind. I am a horrible human being, so I better change these now." That's mostly what people come to retreats doing. "I hate how much greed I'm seeing. It's really disgusting. I have to stop that." We say, "Well, you're just changing from greed to aversion. That's not really what we're trying to do here." But that's what we know. That's what we trust. That's what's so familiar we don't even recognize there's another possibility.

And the catch-22—you understand catch-22, right? I teach a lot in Europe in English, and have you ever tried to explain to somebody what that means if they haven't read the book? So the catch-22 is this: what keeps the greed and the hatred, the fear, the aversion going is not recognizing accurately. What keeps us from recognizing accurately? Guess what? Greed and aversion in the mind. So when we're really angry at someone, if you look at them, how do they look? Do you really appreciate all their beautiful qualities as they keep on doing this horrible thing that's making you angry? Not so much.

But what's so cool about the Buddha's teaching isn't that we have to uproot this stuff with hatred and willpower. "Okay, now I'm going to stop clinging. I'm going to stop having any greed from now on." Rather, it's that through paying attention, seeing how these habits arise and how they work—if we really notice that without judgment—we start to recognize the suffering in ourselves, for ourselves. And this is the cool piece: when we see that, wisdom naturally arises. "Oh, this isn't so helpful," and it starts to drop away. It's not that we have to cultivate this huge willpower, figure it all out ahead of time, and then create the insight. I mean, it's a huge job—we can't do that. We just have to pay attention. See what qualities in our heart and mind are bringing up more suffering. See what qualities are actually bringing up more contentment, more connectedness, more happiness, more joy.

And if we're willing to just look without prejudging, without self-hatred, without fear, it's really obvious. The habits are strong, but the clear seeing of generosity, of non-harming behavior—which translates as friendliness, as compassion—these naturally lead to wisdom. It's actually quite a cool thing. It's a huge task on one hand. On the other hand, it's so much less than we think. And we just have to start paying attention.

So what I'm trying to say here tonight is that you don't have to only meditate to do this work. Yes, meditation helps us learn how to look at our minds, but also cultivating generosity, cultivating non-harming behavior—these actually purify and transform these habits of mine that lead into greed, that lead into aversion and ill will.

Because the way we are set up as humans, we cling to the habits because we think they're going to be what makes us happy. It's not like we're just perversely evil or something. We're trying our best. We just—half the time—okay, don't take offense. Maybe I'll just speak for myself. Half the time, we just don't have a clue. We're doing what we think is going to make us happy, but it just doesn't always work.

So starting to recognize these patterns accurately, but also seeing how insidiously these habits creep in, both from inside and from outside, from the external environment.

I'll give you two examples that just came up this morning in my experience. I was sitting for about half an hour, and—for myself, the one I noticed was ill will, anger. I just noticed a habit in my mind which I've noticed many times: the mood you could call resistance. Have you ever experienced that? Just whatever it is—"I just don't want to do that." No one knows what that is, right?

Whatever it's directed toward, it comes up. But I was just sitting. It wasn't even aimed at anything. It was just there. And whatever then comes up into that mood—okay, I think I'll do this or that—what does the resistance mind say? "Oh, no. I can't do that." And if you're at all intellectual, you'll find that the mind is really, really good at rationalizing. So it can come up with all kinds of good reasons why I shouldn't do whatever the heck it is.

But because I've recognized this, thank God, over all these years, I can feel that the resistance is basically aversion—a kind of anger, negativity in the mind. And then whatever choice or thought or decision needs to be made happens to come up at that time. The view of it, the way we see it, is colored by that resistance. So it becomes, "No, that wouldn't be any good. Oh no, I can't..."—whatever it is.

The resistance may have come up, and I don't even know what it was about. I was just sitting there. Maybe it's because I didn't want to sit anymore. Maybe it's because—I don't even know. But then if I had to make a decision, like if someone had called me and said, "Would you do this or that today?" I would have said, "Oh no, it's too much trouble. I couldn't do this or that." I can't see clearly.

But I notice now that when there's resistance and I just get up—"Okay, resistance is like this"—and I don't really let it drive the bus, and I just get up and do whatever needs to be done, the resistance is gone, and I can see much more clearly what to do.

So it's a familiar pattern for me, and I see I'm not the only one. It's a quality of ill will, of aversion, that then colors experience. It colors the choices I make. It's kind of self-perpetuating, you know? Like with exercise—if you don't exercise, you'll be so tired.

Unless you're an exercise junkie who can't stop, one way or the other. But if I actually exercise, I feel better. If I listen to resistance, I'll just sit there and go, "No, I can't exercise." And the more I sit there, the more tired I get, which proves I really can't exercise. It just keeps going.

So that's on that level. But it's so familiar that if we don't notice, we're caught in it.

On the greed level—maybe some of you heard this too—I was listening to NPR this morning and there was a little segment. This is an easy shot, granted. They were talking to some so-called expert about conspicuous consumption in the U.S. So this is an easy target. But just talking to someone about how much you can buy, how much is spent—I have no idea if this is true, but they were saying...

That the level of consumption in this country—just buying all kinds of things, not particularly energy—if this level of consumption were replicated across the whole world, the earth could only support 1.4 billion people at this rate, rather than 7 billion at the already horrific levels so many people currently endure.

And then they were explaining how part of the economic philosophy that gets put out suggests that when there's a slump, what would help the economy is for everyone to go shopping. I have to say I've heard that in some form or another—this idea that it's better to get out and get that money into the economy. Basically, go shopping.

This operates on the same level with greed and how it can slip in as a way to make ourselves feel good if we're not paying attention. I was reading an interview with the actress Emma Thompson, who had just spent a few weeks in Burma with a nonprofit doing aid work. I've been in Burma many times. It's very poor, and it really needs a great deal. The government does almost nothing for the people—well, nothing good anyway.

So she was actually speaking at a conference in Burma, which is already unusual. But she said one thing, just one thing according to what I'm talking about, that I found really interesting. They were asking her, you know, why are you doing this? Why do you take your spare time and come here for weeks to do this aid work? They had been going around to villages—I'm not entirely clear what they were doing. But she said, "Well, you know, there's really so much suffering here and in the world. When I hear about the suffering, when I read about how much suffering there is, I feel really badly." And we do—we feel badly when there's suffering. She said, "So I realized that when I feel badly, I could either go out and buy myself a new handbag to make myself feel better, or I could take some generous and compassionate action. That's what I'm choosing to do now."

When I first read that, I thought, yeah, yeah. It sounded kind of glib, you know—an easy thing to say. But as I've thought about it more and just watched my own mind, without putting ourselves down, I've noticed something. Often when we feel badly—and there are many reasons to feel badly, and it's not that we always have to go out and do aid work when there's suffering—but when we're suffering even internally, often going and getting something pleasant is a way to think it's going to make us feel better. Maybe I just want to go get some ice cream.

I'm not saying that's bad. Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying that's bad. I'm saying we just watch what we do. It can feed the unspoken, unrecognized assumption that when things aren't going well, I need to get more good things. That's the way out of unhappiness. And sometimes, temporarily, it may be. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, but just to see.

There's one talk of the Buddha's where he said, "The uninstructed person knows of no other escape from unpleasant feelings except to go and lust after pleasant sense experience." The uninstructed person. If you watch how often we do that, it makes me really sad to think of a life where that would be the only way we knew to find happiness, to find peace—to go get more pleasant sense experiences. It seems like such a bleak life, doesn't it? But it's deeply ingrained in our habits. Not that it's bad to have pleasant experiences, but to see that this is not the only way out.

What Emma Thompson was pointing to is that generous and compassionate action actually brings so much more happiness, so much more contentment, so much more wisdom in our own hearts and minds. Not because it's a good thing you should do—not like that at all—but because it's actually transforming the habits of greed in our minds, the habits of self-centeredness, the habits of fear, the habits of ill will or anger. It's actually strengthening the wholesome grooves in this non-existent mind, you could say, rather than the suffering grooves.

So I want to talk now a little bit about working with generosity and, as I say, just pointing to a few things about generosity and ethical conduct—non-harming conduct—as paths.

The most important thing I want to say about both, starting with generosity, is that it's not so much an external mandate that we should be generous. It's about really bringing interest and awareness to our hearts and minds, and then to the situation around us, before an act of generosity, during the act of generosity, and after the act of generosity. What's transformative about cultivating generosity is the way that we relate to it, the way it really changes our heart and mind—from the inside out.

So it's not about simply giving, giving, giving in some glib or mechanical way. Not that at all. And we're not just talking about generosity of wallets, generosity of things. It's this sense of sharing whatever we have—food, our time, willingness to listen to a friend, caring, money, whatever.

In the culture in Burma, and also in Thailand where I was a nun, generosity is kind of ingrained because they're essentially Buddhist cultures. Both with the inner heart of it and also the external institutionalization of it that kind of kills the heart of it, just like anywhere. But generosity is very deeply embedded in those cultures.

All the nunneries, the monasteries, the meditation centers run completely on dana, on generosity. You could go to sit there for a year or for months. There's no fee ever. You show up and you're welcome, if there's room. There's never anything charged. And people come—all these meditation centers are signed up a year ahead. People come from outside, Burmese families, and offer the meals. They'll pay for the meal for the day. And it's not cheap anymore. The place I was sitting last winter, there were about two hundred people meditating each day, and the meals for the day cost four hundred dollars. I want you to know, except for the wealthy, people in Burma are really poor. It's a very difficult situation. And yet people are coming, signing up, offering meals, and then they sit and watch you eat. Because the generosity isn't just about the offering. It's in the sense that this incredible joy comes in the giving and in the receiving, and in doing it in a very intentional way together. There's something very immediate and joyous and contagious about the generosity in these countries.

But it's not just in the meditation centers. It's deep, deep in the culture. I remember I was riding in a little pony cart way up in northern Burma, and the driver was a really poor guy. We were riding along talking to him—I must have been with a friend who could speak Burmese, because he couldn't speak English. We were talking about this Western monk who had been living around that area for a few years, quite a character, so everybody knew him. He always went around barefoot. This pony cart driver, a very poor guy, kind of in rags, was saying, "Oh, I feel so badly for him. He can't afford slippers. I really wish I could just save enough money to buy him some slippers." And he really meant it.

In those first years I was there, my Western conditioning would kick in: "Oh no, you don't want to give to us. We have so much more than you. We don't want to take anything from you." But we started to see how separating, how alienating that is. The wanting to give whatever one can afford, and the receiving of it in the same open-hearted way—that is really what's beautiful and joyful about the practice of generosity. You see

it's not just we people who have a lot doing something for you poor people who don't. That's a kind of minimum generosity. It's not the generosity that's really transforming our hearts.

The quality of generosity that truly transforms is the kind that, in that very moment, liberates our heart from greed. For sure, we stop hanging on to whatever it is we're offering. But also, in that open, very present giving and receiving, the sense of who's giving to whom honestly starts to break down. This might sound kind of pie in the sky, but I've been there enough times in Burma and spoken with so many other people who've had the same experience, so I know it's not just me.

After a while, you get happier and happier when people are generous, and it's contagious. You start wanting to be generous yourself. At first, with my American conditioning, it was, "Oh my God, these poor people are giving me so much. I've got to start giving back." But that doesn't feel good. That's not transforming. That's a kind of me needing to do the right thing. I mean, it's better than stealing from people, don't get me wrong. But it's not the transformation of seeing through our separation. When the heart releases from holding on, there's this sense of interconnectedness, of the joy that comes from both the giving and the receiving—something absolutely uplifting and faith-building.

Shantideva was a great Indian teacher whose work influenced many of the Tibetan teachings. He said once, "When I've done something for the sake of another, I feel no elation. I look for nothing in return. It's like having fed myself." That sense of looking for nothing in return. Or the Buddha saying never let a day go by without sharing a meal. This spirit is so embedded in the culture that we start to catch it. I start to catch it. And you can feel the heart and mind open up, become lighter, become more content, become less needy, become less wanting. The happiness of offering is really a beautiful thing.

Let me share another example. The year after the cyclone—a devastating storm much like Hurricane Katrina—hit a part of Burma not too far from Yangon, we went to our monastery in the winter. Even the villages around there had lost a great deal. The really poor villagers had lost some of their houses. The rice crops had been ruined. There wasn't enough rice. So the abbot of this monastery wanted to organize what's called a rice dāna—dāna meaning generosity—which simply meant that we bought many bags of rice. We had this huge room, maybe half the size of this one, filled with bags of rice. The villagers would come, each with a small chit for their household indicating how many people lived there, and we would give each family a bag of rice.

But they don't just say, "Okay, here's the room, go take your rice," the way I could imagine we might do it here. No. The Sayadaw—the teacher—came and insisted that we, who had brought money from our friends, participate directly. There were six of us, but we were very clear that we were just representatives of all the friends from the States and Europe and Australia who had offered the money. He said, "No, you can't just do that. You have to come." We put the rice on the table, and each person who came, we handed them a bag of rice. I have pictures of this. Narayan and I were both there, and these little ladies—these tiny little ladies—would come up. Narayan and I together could barely heave a bag of rice, and they'd plop it on their head and go walking off, some of them with children in their arms. It was unbelievable. We spent all day giving rice to the people in this village.

The next day, the monks went out early in the morning on what's called alms round. In all Buddhist countries, the monks still do this. They go out with their bowls, eyes downcast, and simply walk among the villagers. Anyone who wants to offer food can do so. The monks don't ask, they don't speak—they just walk their set route every day. Everyone knows where they're coming, and if they want to offer food, they can. This practice dates back to the time of the Buddha. In his time, it was the only way the monastics received food. Now in many monasteries, food is also cooked by lay people who come in and offer meals. So in these poor areas, like this one, the monks go out every day and all they receive is a little bit of rice. But it's really about offering the opportunity for generosity. They do this not because they actually need the rice—people come and provide the meals for the day—but because they're offering those who are poor the opportunity to give something. It's a really interesting dynamic.

So we had a friend, a guy from Mexico who was going on alms rounds. He told us—he'd been there a few months—he said they go every day, the same little route, the same villagers come every day, they know who comes. He said the day after that rice *dāna*, there were so many more people out offering rice, because now they had a little rice. And the first thing they did was to go and actually offer something back. It was just so beautiful. He said one family had all their little kids lined up, and each little kid had the chance to put rice in a bowl.

There's no pressure. No one's there saying you need to do it. It's because of the joy and the happiness and the symbiosis of that.

This is something that I've started to get more in my cells over all the years of being there. It's really become quite profound. I'm not saying that I've completely changed my mind. But I can see how this is the practice of awakening. The practice of non-clinging.

The practice of not being all about me and fear of you and needing to hold on to what I have. The practice of trust—that enough will be enough. We give now and when I need, it will come. It's been quite amazing.

Just one last little story, to show it's not just monks and nuns. I was walking on the road through the village between the two meditation centers where I was staying one afternoon by myself. A little boy, seven or eight, came walking up to me. I'd never seen him before or since. He had no clue who I was. He came up dressed in his little school uniform, very nicely dressed, and he had a tiny jasmine flower. He approached me and then very formally, with his jasmine flower, did this formal bow—that respectful way that people say hello and thank you. Really focused, he handed me this little flower. We both bowed. I said thank you in Burmese, my one word, and he went off. That was it. I was so touched by that—just this sense of connection.

It's not about what's given. There's a place where the Buddha said, even if you rinse your dirty bowl and throw that rinse water in a pond, thinking, "May whatever beings live in this pond be able to benefit, to eat or drink something from this rinse water"—that's an act of generosity. Because it's not so much what, but how.

So it's said, in the way of giving, before giving, really bring attention to the sense of volition. So it's not just this casual, "Oh yeah, you need something? Here, take it." I've done that many times. A friend was saying to me once, "Remember that casual generosity of yours at that one point? This thing I've used so much?" He didn't mean it in a bad way, but it really went in. He was right. It had been a really thoughtless kind of generosity. I just had this thing. I said, "I don't want it. Do you want this?" He said, "Oh yeah, I'd love it." And he did love it, and I didn't, but there was no real connection in that.

So it's simply bringing attention to your intention, and then when we give, really being present with it. That's all. Not like, "I'm so great, I'm giving you this," but just being present with the whole giving and the whole receiving. There's something so powerful about that.

At first I was a little shy about that, all kind of self-referencing. But again, in Burma, when you give—when we go to the nunneries, we give them money because they don't get so much as monks, to buy food or to build a new floor or to put a roof on that isn't leaking, to build toilets. Toilets are a great thing to give money for, by the way.

You know, it's very basic stuff, so you give money. Now, in Burma, the money comes in big piles because it's just not worth that much. So when you're going to give money, you do it very formally. They go and get this big tray. You pile the money up, and a hun-

dred dollars could be a big pile like this. At first it looks so crass, doesn't it? Handing over this big pile of money—you think, "Oh God, I thought it would be a little nicer than that."

But it's different. The nuns sit there. We sit there. We all put our hands on the tray—it depends how many people there are, but a few nuns, a few of the givers. Together, you hold it up. You're kneeling down with your knees back, so this can be quite agonizing if it goes on for very long. And they chant this beautiful blessing and thanks.

It's a really common thing they say: "With this gift, may this gift be a cause for your awakening from suffering. May your generosity bring you to awakening in the shortest possible time." That's a common thing to say. It's really different than when I write a check and put it in an envelope. I could still be more present for that than I am—you can still cultivate the intention and the connection—but there's not that immediacy.

Just last week, a friend, a yogi, a meditator, gave me a check to bring to Burma, which was very nice. But as she gave it to me, it just came into my mind to say that, like they do. So she's handing it to me, and I just said, "May this generosity be a cause for your quick awakening from suffering and liberation." And I could see her whole face change. We don't usually say that because it sounds so—I don't know—weird. I figured I could do it at the end of a three-month retreat. But it just came out, and I thought, "Oh, it gives it so much more power." It honors what you're doing in the generosity. It really starts to change our habits and bring us joy.

And then afterwards—and this is really important because it's not something we do very much—the Buddha talked about this with both moral conduct and with generosity. Afterwards, after you've been generous, after you've refrained—and moral conduct can simply be refraining from harmful behavior, that's an act of wholesomeness, an act of compassion, of non-harming, just refraining from taking something that isn't yours—is to actually reflect on your past acts of generosity, your past acts of non-harming behavior.

I know in my culture anyway, we think, "Well, think about how generous I've been"—it sounds like a real ego trip, right? "Oh yeah, I'm so generous." It's not that at all. Let me read this to you from the Buddha:

"Furthermore, this is the case where you recollect your own generosity: 'It is a gain, it is a great gain for me that among people who are overcome with possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleaned of the stain of possessiveness, generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous and responsive to requests.'"

And this is the key: "At any time when a disciple of the noble ones, when someone on the path, is recollecting generosity, in the moment of recollecting, her mind is not overcome with greed." There's only room for one thing in there. If we're really recollecting generosity, we're not filled with greed. It's really very simple how it works. We're not overcome with aversion. We're not overcome with delusion. Her heart, her mind heads straight based on generosity.

"And when the heart is headed straight, the disciple has a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the dhamma, of the truth, experiences joy connected with the dhamma, with the truth. And in one who is joyful, the body grows calm. One whose body is calm experiences ease. And in one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated."

And then he goes on to describe how this leads all the way up to liberation.

The exact same process unfolds when recollecting your virtuous actions—those times when you simply refrained from doing something harmful. You don't have to be Mother Teresa. Just bringing to mind the times you've restrained yourself from causing harm, the times you've done something simply generous. Perhaps a friend calls wanting to talk about their problems, and your first thought is, "I'm too tired." But then you realize, "You know what? I can listen." Recollecting moments like that heads our minds straight. It's really a way of purifying our heart and mind. This isn't about thinking, "I'm so great."

The Buddha goes on, speaking to this layperson: "You can develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children." Basically, any time. Any time at all.

I always run out of time to talk about *sila*, non-harming behavior. So I will end with something that really inspired me in an unexpected way last year—something that deepened my appreciation for both the subtlety and depth of our difficult habits of mind. This isn't to put ourselves down or be judgmental, but rather to illuminate why it is so essential for me, and hopefully for all of us, to cultivate and transform our habits of greed and fear—for our own happiness and for the happiness of the world.

Because it's so comfortable to fall back into greed, to fall back into denial, to fall back into delusion—even though these patterns bring us suffering. Without really understanding how our minds and hearts work, without genuinely looking and seeing whether it's true that these qualities bring suffering, we remain caught. Don't believe anything you read, or anything I say. Look and see for yourself. Not with judgment, but with clear seeing.

I know for myself, after all these years of practice, that what I'm saying is true for me. But you don't know it for you. You may, but don't believe me—look and see. And even knowing this, I cannot say with certainty what my mind or heart would do in the most difficult circumstances. I know what I think I'd like to do, but it's not always within our control.

A year ago last summer, I was in Germany again, and I visited Dachau, a concentration camp I had never managed to visit before. They've set it up as a museum, and I think they did a really good job with it. First I was amazed at how big it was. Then my German friends said, "Oh, Carol, that wasn't even one of the big ones."

The museum was arranged with large placards and posters describing every aspect you could think of. But they also made it personal. In each section—like the room documenting all the different groups of people who had been imprisoned there, the Roma, people from Hungary, gay people, Jewish people, Catholics—they didn't leave it impersonal. Almost always there was a name, a photograph of someone, some brief story. Stories of people who were in the concentration camp, people who worked there, people who lived in the surrounding community.

I was also watching the visitors. It was incredibly crowded—somehow I had imagined I would be wandering around there by myself, but it was packed. Observing people move through the exhibits was fascinating. You could see couples enter chatting casually, and as they progressed through, you could see them becoming genuinely touched. The museum was designed in such a way that it reached your heart. You simply couldn't remain detached.

What that experience did for me—I was already having a difficult month—was bring me even more deeply into a sense that what I'm doing, what I hope we're all doing, is profoundly important. Because this is not just something about Germany in the 1940s. We only have to read history, or read today's news. I don't even have to name places, do I? The endless atrocities and genocides in the last twenty or thirty years, throughout all of history, events happening right now in Somalia, in Sudan, the Khmer Rouge, racism in this country. It's everywhere.

What I understood from looking at all those people involved was this: it wasn't just a few monsters who came up with some bizarre idea. It was many, many people in all different situations. And it's not as though we make one big decision. I don't know what I would do if I were in a situation where my family or the people I love were threatened, and all I had to do to protect them was turn a blind eye. Not actively do something harmful, but simply turn a blind eye.

I don't know. I can say what I wish I would do, but I don't really know.

So we see that it's just a series of tiny little decisions that we each make in our lives. When I'm not at ease with greed, or I don't understand fear, or I don't see how resistance can color all my decisions, then resistance or fear or greed is going to guide my choices—even when I think, "Oh, I want to be a good person," but I don't understand how my mind works.

Somehow that realization gave me a whole other level of inspiration. It's not just about meditation, but about the little moments. And there is no right or wrong—not that you should always give or always not give. But when I pass someone on the street who says, "I'm homeless and I need money," each time it's a new decision, isn't it? Each time. Not "you always give" or "you never give," but each time: Do I just walk by? Do I give? Either way, do I know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it?

If I give, can I not be embarrassed, and just be really present in that? Not think I'm doing something good for someone else, but simply be offering. If I don't give, know why I'm not giving.

Our whole life is just little moments, little moments, little moments of decision. We can take these chances of generosity, of restraining from stealing, from hurting people, from lying, from harsh speech. Just restrain, and do that consciously, and reflect on the sense of connectedness and wholesomeness and contentment that this can truly bring us.

I really believe that both of these practices—*sīla* and *dāna*—could be practices of liberation. Even when you're sitting at home in a house crowded with children and you can't come to meditate.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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